

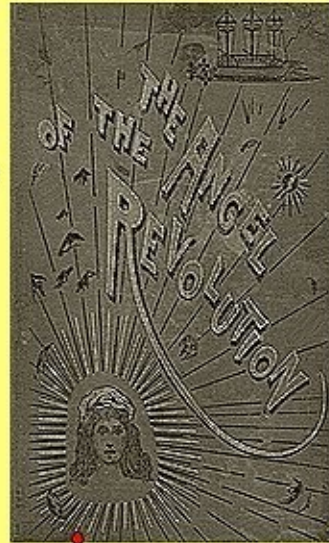
The Aerians

being the complete texts of "The Angel of the Revolution, a Tale of the Coming Terror" and "Olga Romanoff, the Syren of the Skies" in a single volume

by

George Griffith

The Angel of
the Revolution,
A Tale of the
Coming Terror



The Aerians

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Olga Romanoff,
The Syren of
the Skies

The Angel of the Revolution, a Tale of the Coming Terror

CHAPTER I. AT THE ELEVENTH HOUR.

"VICTORY! It flies! I am master of the Powers of the Air at last!"

They were strange words to be uttered, as they were, by a pale, haggard, half-starved looking young fellow in a dingy, comfortless room on the top floor of a South London tenement-house; and yet there was a triumphant ring in his voice, and a clear, bright flush on his thin cheeks that spoke at least for his own absolute belief in their truth.

Let us see how far he was justified in that belief.

To begin at the beginning, Richard Arnold was one of those men whom the world is wont to call dreamers and enthusiasts before they succeed, and heaven-born geniuses and benefactors of humanity afterwards.

He was twenty-six, and for nearly six years past he had devoted himself, soul and body, to a single idea--to the so far unsolved problem of aerial navigation.

This idea had haunted him ever since he had been able to think logically at all--first dimly at school, and then more clearly at college, where he had carried everything before him in mathematics and natural science, until it had at last become a ruling passion that crowded everything else out of his life, and made him, commercially speaking, that most useless of social units--a one-idea'd man, whose idea could not be put into working form.

He was an orphan, with hardly a blood relation in the world. He had started with plenty of friends, mostly made at college, who thought he had a brilliant future before him, and therefore looked upon him as a man whom it might be useful to know.

But as time went on, and no results came, these dropped off, and he got to be looked upon as an amiable lunatic, who was wasting his great talents and what money he had on impracticable fancies, when he might have been earning a handsome income if he had stuck to the beaten track, and gone in for practical work.

The distinctions that he had won at college, and the reputation he had gained as a wonderfully clever chemist and mechanic, had led to several offers of excellent positions in great engineering firms; but to the surprise and disgust of his friends he had declined them all. No one knew why, for he had kept his secret with the almost passionate jealousy of the true enthusiast, and so his refusals were put down to sheer foolishness, and he became numbered with the geniuses who are failures because they are not practical.

When he came of age he had inherited a couple of thousand pounds, which had been left in trust to him by his father. Had it not been for that two thousand pounds he would have been forced to employ his knowledge and his talents conventionally, and would probably have made a fortune. But it was just enough to relieve him from the necessity of earning his living for the time being, and to make it possible for him to devote himself entirely to the realisation of his life-dream--at any rate until the money was gone.

Of course he yielded to the temptation--nay, he never gave the other course a moment's thought. Two thousand pounds would last him for years; and no one could have persuaded him that with complete leisure, freedom from all other concerns, and money for the necessary experiments, he would not have succeeded long before his capital was exhausted.

So he put the money into a bank whence he could draw it out as he chose, and withdrew himself from the world to work out the ideal of his life.

Year after year passed, and still success did not come. He found practice very different from theory,

and in a hundred details he met with difficulties he had never seen on paper. Meanwhile his money melted away in costly experiments which only raised hopes that ended in bitter disappointment. His wonderful machine was a miracle of ingenuity, and was mechanically perfect in every detail save one--it would do no practical work.

Like every other inventor who had grappled with the problem, he had found himself constantly faced with that fatal ratio of weight to power. No engine that he could devise would do more than lift itself and the machine. Again and again he had made a toy that would fly, as others had done before him, but a machine that would navigate the air as a steamer or an electric vessel navigated the waters, carrying cargo and passengers, was still an impossibility while that terrible problem of weight and power remained unsolved.

In order to eke out his money to the uttermost, he had clothed and lodged himself meanly, and had denied himself everything but the barest necessities of life.

Thus he had prolonged the struggle for over five years of toil and privation and hope deferred, and now, when his last sovereign had been changed and nearly spent, success--real, tangible, practical success--had come to him, and the discovery that was to be to the twentieth century what the steam-engine had been to the nineteenth was accomplished.

He had discovered the true motive power at last.

Two liquefied gases--which, when united, exploded spontaneously--were admitted by a clockwork escapement in minute quantities into the cylinders of his engine, and worked the pistons by the expansive force of the gases generated by the explosion. There was no weight but the engine itself and the cylinders containing the liquefied gases. Furnaces, boilers, condensers, accumulators, dynamos--all the ponderous apparatus of steam and electricity--were done away with, and he had a power at command greater than either of them. There was no doubt about it. The moment that his trembling fingers set the escapement mechanism in motion, the model that embodied the thought and labour of years rose into the air as gracefully as a bird on the wing, and sailed round and round in obedience to its rudder, straining hard at the string which prevented it from striking the ceiling. It was weighted in strict proportion to the load that the full-sized air-ship would have to carry. To increase this was merely a matter of increasing the power of the engine and the size of the floats and fans.

The room was a large one, for the house had been built for a better fate than letting in tenements, and it ran from back to front with a window at each end. Out of doors there was a strong breeze blowing, and as soon as Arnold was sure that his ship was able to hold its own in still air, he threw both the windows open and let the wind blow straight through the room. Then he drew the air-ship down, straightened the rudder, and set it against the breeze. In almost agonised suspense he watched it rise from the floor, float motionless for a moment, and then slowly forge ahead in the teeth of the wind, gathering speed as it went. It was then that he had uttered that triumphant cry of "Victory!" All the long years of privation and hope deferred vanished in that one supreme moment of innocent and bloodless conquest, and he saw himself master of a kingdom as wide as the world itself.

He let the model fly the length of the room before he stopped the clockwork and cut off the motive power, allowing it to sink gently to the floor. Then came the reaction. He looked steadfastly at his handiwork for several moments in silence, and then he turned and threw himself on to a shabby little bed that stood in one corner of the room and burst into a flood of tears.

Triumph had come, but had it not come too late? He knew the boundless possibilities of his invention--but they had still to be realised. To do this would cost thousands of pounds, and he had just one half-crown and a few coppers. Even these were not really his own, for he was already a week behind with his rent, and another payment fell due the next day. That would be twelve shillings in all, and if it was not paid he would be turned into the street.

As he raised himself from the bed he looked despairingly round the bare, shabby room. No; there was nothing there that he could pawn or sell. Everything saleable had gone already to keep up the struggle of hope against despair. The bed and wash-stand, the plain deal table, and the one chair that

comprised the furniture of the room were not his. A little carpenter's bench, a few worn tools and odds and ends of scientific apparatus, and a dozen well-used books--these were all that he possessed in the world now, save the clothes on his back, and a plain painted sea-chest in which he was wont to lock up his precious model when he had to go out.

His model! No, he could not sell that. At best it would fetch but the price of an ingenious toy, and without the secret of the two gases it was useless. But was not that worth something? Yes, if he did not starve to death before he could persuade any one that there was money in it. Besides, the chest and its priceless contents would be seized for the rent next day, and then---

"God help me! What am I to do?"

The words broke from him like a cry of physical pain, and ended in a sob, and for all answer there was the silence of the room and the inarticulate murmur of the streets below coming up through the open windows. He was weak with hunger and sick with excitement, for he had lived for days on bread and cheese, and that day he had eaten nothing since the crust that had served him for breakfast. His nerves, too, were shattered by the intense strain of his final trial and triumph, and his head was getting light.

With a desperate effort he recovered himself, and the heroic resolution that had sustained him through his long struggle came to his aid again. He got up and poured some water from the ewer into a cracked cup and drank it. It refreshed him for the moment, and he poured the rest of the water over his head. That steadied his nerves and cleared his brain. He took up the model from the floor, laid it tenderly and lovingly in its usual resting-place in the chest. Then he locked the chest and sat down upon it to think the situation over.

Ten minutes later he rose to his feet and said aloud---

"It's no use. I can't think on an empty stomach. I'll go out and have one more good meal if it's the last I ever have in the world, and then perhaps some ideas will come."

So saying, he took down his hat, buttoned his shabby velveteen coat to conceal his lack of a waistcoat, and went out, locking the door behind him as he went.

Five minutes' walk brought him to the Blackfriars Road, and then he turned towards the river and crossed the bridge just as the motley stream of city workers was crossing it in the opposite direction on their homeward journey.

At Ludgate Circus he went into an eating-house and fared sumptuously on a plate of beef, some bread and butter, and a pint mug of coffee. As he was eating a paper-boy came in and laid an Echo on the table at which he was sitting. He took it up mechanically, and ran his eye carelessly over the columns. He was in no humour to be interested by the tattle of an evening paper, but in a paragraph under the heading of Foreign News a once familiar name caught his eye, and he read the paragraph through. It ran as follows:--

RAILWAY OUTRAGE IN RUSSIA.

When the Berlin-Petersburg express stopped last night at Kovno. the first stop after passing the Russian frontier, a shocking discovery was made in the smoking compartment of the palace car which has been on the train for the last few months. Colonel Dornovitch, of the Imperial Police, who is understood to have been on his return journey from a secret mission to Paris, was found stabbed to the heart and quite dead. In the centre of the forehead were two short straight cuts in the form of a T reaching to the bone. Not long ago Colonel Dornovitch was instrumental in unearthing a formidable Nihilist conspiracy, in connection with which over fifty men and women of various social ranks were exiled for life to Siberia. The whole affair is wrapped in the deepest

mystery the only clue in the hands of the police being the fact that the cross cut on the forehead of the victim indicates that the crime is the work not of the Nihilists proper, but of that unknown and mysterious society usually alluded to as the Terrorists, not one of whom has ever been seen save in his crimes. How the assassin managed to enter and leave the car unperceived while the train was going at full speed is an apparently insoluble riddle. Saving the victim and the attendants the only passengers in the car who had not retired to rest were another officer in the Russian service and Lord Alanmere, who was travelling to St. Petersburg to resume, after leave of absence, the duties of the Secretaryship to the British Embassy, to which he was appointed some two years ago.

"Why, that must be the Lord Alanmere who was at Trinity in my time, or rather Viscount Tremayne, as he was then," mused Arnold, as he laid the paper down. "We were very good friends in those days. I wonder if he'd know me now, and lend me a ten-pound note to get me out of the infernal fix I'm in? I believe he would, for he was one of the few really good-hearted men I have so far met with.

"If he were in London I really think I should take courage from my desperation, and put my case before him and ask his help. However, he's not in London, and so it's no use wishing. Well, I feel more of a man for that shillingsworth of food and drink, and I'll go and wind up my dissipation with a pipe and a quiet think on the Embankment."

CHAPTER II. AT WAR WITH SOCIETY.

WHEN Richard Arnold reached the Embankment dusk had deepened into night, so far, at least, as nature was concerned. But in London in the beginning of the twentieth century there was but little night to speak of, save in the sense of a division of time. The date of the paper which contained the account of the tragedy on the Russian railway was September 3rd, 1903, and within the last ten years enormous progress had been made in electric lighting.

The ebb and flow in the Thames had at last been turned to account, and worked huge turbines which perpetually stored up electric power that was used not only for lighting, but for cooking in hotels and private houses, and for driving machinery. At all the great centres of traffic huge electric suns cast their rays far and wide along the streets, supplementing the light of the lesser lamps with which they were lined on each side.

The Embankment from Westminster to Blackfriars was bathed in a flood of soft white light from hundreds of great lamps running along both sides, and from the centre of each bridge a million candle-power sun cast rays upon the water that were continued in one unbroken stream of light from Chelsea to the Tower.

On the north side of the river the scene was one of brilliant and splendid opulence, that contrasted strongly with the half-lighted gloom of the murky wilderness of South London, dark and forbidding in its irredeemable ugliness.

From Blackfriars Arnold walked briskly towards Westminster, bitterly contrasting as he went the lavish display of wealth around him with the sordid and seemingly hopeless poverty of his own desperate condition.

He was the maker and possessor of a far greater marvel than anything that helped to make up this splendid scene, and yet the ragged tramps who were remorselessly moved on from one seat to another by the policemen as soon as they had settled themselves down for a rest and a doze, were hardly poorer than he was.

For nearly four hours he paced backwards and forwards, every now and then stopping to lean on the parapet, and once or twice to sit down, until the chill autumn wind pierced his scanty clothing, and compelled him to resume his walk in order to get warm again.

All the time he turned his miserable situation over and over again in his mind without avail. There seemed no way out of it; no way of obtaining the few pounds that would save him from homeless beggary and his splendid invention from being lost to him and the world, certainly for years, and perhaps for ever.

And then, as hour after hour went by, and still no cheering thought came, the misery of the present pressed closer and closer upon him. He dare not go home, for that would be to bring the inevitable disaster of the morrow nearer, and, besides, it was home no longer till the rent was paid. He had two shillings, and he owed at least twelve. He was also the maker of a machine for which the Tsar of Russia had made a standing offer of a million sterling. That million might have been his if he had possessed the money necessary to bring his invention under the notice of the great Autocrat.

That was the position he had turned over and over in his mind until its horrible contradictions maddened him. With a little money, riches and fame were his; without it he was a beggar in sight of starvation.

And yet he doubted whether, even in his present dire extremity, he could, had he had the chance, sell what might be made the most terrific engine of destruction ever thought of to the head and front of a despotism that he looked upon as the worst earthly enemy of mankind.

For the twentieth time he had paused in his weary walk to and fro to lean on the parapet close by Cleopatra's Needle. The Embankment was almost deserted now, save by the tramps and a few isolated wanderers like himself. For several minutes he looked out over the brightly glittering waters below

him, wondering listlessly how long it would take him to drown if he dropped over, and whether he would be rescued before he was dead, and brought back to life, and prosecuted the next day for daring to try and leave the world save in the conventional and orthodox fashion.

Then his mind wandered back to the Tsar and his million, and he pictured to himself the awful part that a fleet of airships such as his would play in the general European war that people said could not now be put off for many months longer. As he thought of this the vision grew in distinctness, and he saw them hovering over armies and cities and fortresses, and raining irresistible death and destruction down upon them. The prospect appalled him, and he shuddered as he thought that it was now really within the possibility of realisation; and then his ideas began to translate themselves involuntarily into words which he spoke aloud, completely oblivious for the time being of his surroundings.

"No, I think I would rather destroy it, and then take my secret with me out of the world, than put such an awful power of destruction and slaughter into the hands of the Tsar, or, for the matter of that, any other of the rulers of the earth. Their subjects can butcher each other quite efficiently enough as it is. The next war will be the most frightful carnival of destruction that the world has ever seen; but what would it be like if I were to give one of the nations of Europe the power of raining death and desolation on its enemies from the skies! No, no! Such a power, if used at all, should only be used against and not for the despotisms that afflict the earth with the curse of war!"

"Then why not use it so, my friend, if you possess it, and would see mankind freed from its tyrants?" said a quiet voice at his elbow.

The sound instantly scattered his vision to the winds, and he turned round with a startled exclamation to see who had spoken. As he did so, a whiff of smoke from a very good cigar drifted past his nostrils, and the voice said again in the same quiet, even tones--

"You must forgive me for my bad manners in listening to what you were saying, and also for breaking in upon your reverie. My excuse must be the great interest that your words had for me. Your opinions would appear to be exactly my own, too, and perhaps you will accept that as another excuse for my rudeness."

It was the first really kindly, friendly voice that Richard Arnold had heard for many a long day, and the words were so well chosen and so politely uttered that it was impossible to feel any resentment, so he simply said in answer--

"There was no rudeness, sir; and, besides, why should a gentleman like you apologise for speaking to a"--

"Another gentleman," quickly interrupted his new acquaintance. "Because I transgressed the laws of politeness in doing so, and an apology was due. Your speech tells me that we are socially equals. Intellectually you look my superior. The rest is a difference only of money, and that any smart swindler can bury himself in nowadays if he chooses. But come, if you have no objection to make my better acquaintance, I have a great desire to make yours. If you will pardon my saying so, you are evidently not an ordinary man, or else, something tells me, you would be rich. Have a smoke and let us talk, since we apparently have a subject in common. Which way are you going?"

"Nowhere--and therefore anywhere," replied Arnold, with a laugh that had but little merriment in it. "I have reached a point from which all roads are one to me."

"That being the case I propose that you shall take the one that leads to my chambers in Savoy Mansions yonder. We shall find a bit of supper ready, I expect, and then I shall ask you to talk. Come along!"

There was no more mistaking the genuine kindness and sincerity of the invitation than the delicacy with which it was given. To have refused would not only have been churlish, but it would have been for a drowning man to knock aside a kindly hand held out to help him; so Arnold accepted, and the two new strangely met and strangely assorted friends walked away together in the direction of the Savoy.

The suite of rooms occupied by Arnold's new acquaintance was the beau ideal of a wealthy bachelor's abode. Small, compact, cosy, and richly furnished, yet in the best of taste withal, the rooms

looked like an indoor paradise to him after the bare squalor of the one room that had been his own home for over two years.

His host took him first into a dainty little bath-room to wash his hands, and by the time he had performed his scanty toilet supper was already on the table in the sitting-room. Nothing melts reserve like a good well-cooked meal washed down by appropriate liquids, and before supper was half over Arnold and his host were chatting together as easily as though they stood on perfectly equal terms and had known each other for years. His new friend seemed purposely to keep the conversation to general subjects until the meal was over and his pattern man-servant had removed the cloth and left them together with the wine and cigars on the table.

As soon as he had closed the door behind him his host motioned Arnold to an easy-chair on one side of the fireplace, threw himself into another on the other side, and said--

"Now, my friend, plant yourself, as they say across the water, help yourself to what there is as the spirit moves you, and talk--the more about yourself the better. But stop. I forgot that we do not even know each other's name yet. Let me introduce myself first.

"My name is Maurice Colston; I am a bachelor, as you see. For the rest, in practice I am an idler, a dilettante, and a good deal else that is pleasant and utterly useless. In theory, let me tell you, I am a Socialist, or something of the sort, with a lively conviction as to the injustice and absurdity of the social and economic conditions which enable me to have such a good time on earth without having done anything to deserve it beyond having managed to be born the son of my father."

He stopped and looked at his guest through the wreaths of his cigar smoke as much as to say: "And now who are you?"

Arnold took the silent hint, and opened his mouth and his heart at the same time. Quite apart from the good turn he had done him, there was a genial frankness about his unconventional host that chimed in so well with his own nature that he cast all reserve aside, and told plainly and simply the story of his life and its master passion, his dreams and hopes and failures, and his final triumph in the hour when triumph itself was defeat.

His host heard him through without a word, but towards the end of his story his face betrayed an interest, or rather an expectant anxiety, to hear what was coming next that no mere friendly concern of the moment for one less fortunate than himself could adequately account for. At length, when Arnold had completed his story with a brief but graphic description of the last successful trial of his model, he leant forward in his chair, and, fixing his dark, steady eyes on his guest's face, said in a voice from which every trace of his former good-humoured levity had vanished--

"A strange story, and truer, I think, than the one I told you. Now tell me on your honour as a gentleman: Were you really in earnest when I heard you say on the embankment that you would rather smash up your model and take the secret with you into the next world, than sell your discovery to the Tsar for the million that he has offered for such an air-ship as yours?"

"Absolutely in earnest," was the reply. "I have seen enough of the seamy side of this much-boasted civilisation of ours to know that it is the most awful mockery that man ever insulted his Maker with. It is based on fraud, and sustained by force--force that ruthlessly crushes all who do not bow the knee to Mammon. I am the enemy of a society that does not permit a man to be honest and live, unless he has money and can defy it. I have just two shillings in the world, and I would rather throw them into the Thames and myself after them than take that million from the Tsar in exchange for an engine of destruction that would make him master of the world."

"Those are brave words," said Colston, with a smile. "Forgive me for saying so, but I wonder whether you would repeat them if I told you that I am a servant of his Majesty the Tsar, and that you shall have that million for your model and your secret the moment that you convince me that what you have told me is true."

Before he had finished speaking Arnold had risen to his feet. He heard him out, and then he said, slowly and steadily--

"I should not take the trouble to repeat them; I should only tell you that I am sorry that I have eaten salt with a man who could take advantage of my poverty to insult me. Good night."

He was moving towards the door when Colston jumped up from his chair, strode round the table, and got in front of him. Then he put his two hands on his shoulders, and, looking straight into his eyes, said in a tone that vibrated with emotion--

"Thank God, I have found an honest man at last! Go and sit down again, my friend, my comrade, as I hope you soon will be. Forgive me for the foolishness that I spoke! I am no servant of the Tsar. He and all like him have no more devoted enemy on earth than I am. Look! I will soon prove it to you."

As he said the last words, Colston let go Arnold's shoulders, flung off his coat and waistcoat, slipped his braces off his shoulders, and pulled his shirt up to his neck. Then he turned his bare back to his guest, and said--

"That is the sign-manual of Russian tyranny--the mark of the knout!"

Arnold shrank back with a cry of horror at the sight. From waist to neck Colston's back was a mass of hideous scars and wheels, crossing each other and rising up into purple lumps, with livid blue and grey spaces between them. As he stood, there was not an inch of naturally-coloured skin to be seen. It was like the back of a man who had been flayed alive, and then flogged with a cat-o'-nine-tails.

Before Arnold had overcome his horror his host had readjusted his clothing. Then he turned to him and said--

"That was my reward for telling the governor of a petty Russian town that he was a brute-beast for flogging a poor decrepid old Jewess to death. Do you believe me now when I say that I am no servant or friend of the Tsar?"

"Yes, I do," replied Arnold, holding out his hand, "you were right to try me, and I was wrong to be so hasty. It is a failing of mine that has done me plenty of harm before now. I think I know now what you are without your telling me. Give me a piece of paper and you shall have my address, so that you can come to-morrow and see the model--only I warn you that you will have to pay my rent to keep my landlord's hands off it. And then I must be off, for I see it's past twelve."

"You are not going out again to-night, my friend, while I have a sofa and plenty of rugs at your disposal," said his host. "You will sleep here, and in the morning we will go together and see this marvel of yours. Meanwhile sit down and make yourself at home with another cigar. We have only just begun to know each other--we two enemies of Society!"

CHAPTER III. A FRIENDLY CHAT.

SOON after eight the next morning Colston came into the sitting-room where Arnold had slept on the sofa, and dreamt dreams of war and world-revolts and battles fought in mid-air between aerial navies built on the plan of his own model. When Colston came in he was just awake enough to be wondering whether the events of the previous night were a reality or part of his dreams--a doubt that was speedily set at rest by his host drawing back the curtains and pulling up the blinds.

The moment his eyes were properly open he saw that he was anywhere but in his own shabby room in Southwark, and the rest was made clear by Colston saying---

"Well, comrade Arnold, Lord High Admiral of the Air, how have you slept? I hope you found the sofa big and soft enough, and that the last cigar has left no evil effects behind it."

"Eh? Oh, good morning! I don't know whether it was the whisky or the cigars, or what it was; but do you know I have been dreaming all sorts of absurd things about battles in the air and dropping explosives on fortresses and turning them into small volcanoes. When you came in just now I hadn't the remotest idea where I was. It's time to get up, I suppose?"

"Yes, it's after eight a good bit. I've had my tub, so the bath-room is at your service. Meanwhile, Burrows will be laying the table for breakfast. When you have finished your tub, come into my dressing-room, and let me rig you out. We are about of a size, and I think I shall be able to meet your most fastidious taste. In fact, I could rig you out as anything--from a tramp to an officer of the Guards."

"It wouldn't take much change to accomplish the former, I'm afraid. But, really, I couldn't think of trespassing so far on your hospitality as to take your very clothes from you. I'm deep enough in your debt already."

"Don't talk nonsense, Richard Arnold. The tone in which those last words were said shows me that you have not duly laid to heart what I said last night. There is no such thing as private property in the Brotherhood, of which I hope, by this time to-morrow, you will be an initiate."

"What I have here is mine only for the purposes of the Cause, wherefore it is as much yours as mine, for to-day we are going on the Brotherhood's business. Why, then, should you have any scruples about wearing the Brotherhood's clothes? Now clear out and get tubbed, and wash some of those absurd ideas out of your head."

"Well, as you put it that way, I don't mind, only remember that I don't necessarily put on the principles of the Brotherhood with its clothes."

So saying, Arnold got up from the sofa, stretched himself, and went off to make his toilet.

When he sat down to breakfast with his host half an hour later, very few who had seen him on the Embankment the night before would have recognised him as the same man. The tailor after all, does a good deal to make the man, externally at least, and the change of clothes in Arnold's case had transformed him from a superior looking tramp into an aristocratic and decidedly good-looking man, in the prime of his youth, saving only for the thinness and pallor of his face, and a perceptible stoop in the shoulders.

During breakfast they chatted about their plans for the day and then drifted into generalities, chiefly of a political nature.

The better Arnold came to know Maurice Colston the more remarkable his character appeared to him; and it was his growing wonder at the contradictions that it exhibited that made him say towards the end of the meal--

"I must say you're a queer sort of conspirator, Colston. My idea of Nihilists and members of revolutionary societies has always taken the form of silent, stealthy, cautious beings, with a lively distrust and hatred of the whole human race outside their own circles. And yet here are you, an active member of the most terrible secret society in existence, pledged to the destruction of nearly every institution on earth, and carrying your life in your hand, opening your heart like a schoolboy to a man

you have literally not known for twenty-four hours.

"Suppose you had made a mistake in me. What would there be to prevent me telling the police who you are, and having you locked up with a view to extradition to Russia?"

"In the first place," replied Colston quietly, "you would not do so, because I am not mistaken in you, and because, in your heart, whether you fully know it or not, you believe as I do about the destruction that is about to fall upon Society.

"In the second place, if you did betray my confidence, I should be able to bring such an overwhelming array of the most respectable evidence to show that I was nothing like what I really am, that you would be laughed at for a madman; and, in the third place, there would be an inquest on you within twenty-four hours after you had told your story. Do you remember the death of Inspector Ainsworth, of the Criminal Investigation Department, about six months ago?"

"Yes, of course I do. Hermit and all as I was, I could hardly help hearing about that, considering what a noise it made. But I thought that was cleared up. Didn't one of that gang of garotters that was broken up in South London a couple of months later confess to strangling him in the statement that he made before he was executed?"

"Yes, and his widow is now getting ten shillings a week for life on account of that confession. Birkett no more killed Ainsworth than you did; but he had killed two or three others, and so the confession didn't do him very much harm.

"No; Ainsworth met his death in quite another way. He accepted from the Russian secret police bureau in London a bribe of £250 down and the promise of another £250 if he succeeded in manufacturing enough evidence against a member of our Outer Circle to get him extradited to Russia on a trumped-up charge of murder.

"The Inner Circle learnt of this from one of our spies in the Russian London police, and--, well, Ainsworth was found dead with the mark of the Terror upon his forehead before he had time to put his treachery into action. He was executed by two of the Brotherhood, who are members of the Metropolitan police force, and who were afterwards complimented by the magistrate for the intelligent efforts they had made in bringing the murderers to justice."

Colston told the dark story in the most careless of tones between the puffs of his after-breakfast cigarette. Arnold stifled his horror as well as he was able, but he could not help saying, when his host had done--

"This Brotherhood of yours is well named the Terror; but was not that rather a murder than an execution?"

"By no means," replied Colston, a trifle coldly. "Society hangs or beheads a man who kills another. Ainsworth knew as well as we did that if the man he tried to betray by false evidence had once set foot in Russia, the torments of a hundred deaths would have been his before he had been allowed to die.

"He betrayed his office and his faith to his English masters in order to commit this vile crime, and so he was killed as a murderous and treacherous reptile that was not fit to live. We of the Terror are not lawyers, and so we make no distinctions between deliberate plotting for money to kill and the act of killing itself. Our law is closer akin to justice than the hairsplitting fraud that is tolerated by Society."

Either from emotional or logical reasons Arnold made no reply to this reasoning, and, seeing he remained silent, Colston resumed his ordinary nonchalant, good-humoured tone, and went on---

"But come, that will be horrors enough for to-day. We have other business in hand, and we may as well get to it at once. About this wonderful invention of yours. Of course I believe all you have told me about it, but you must remember that I am only an agent, and that I am inexorably bound by certain rules, in accordance with which I must act.

"Now, to be perfectly plain with you, and in order that we may thoroughly understand each other before either of us commits himself to anything, I must tell you that I want to see this model flying ship of yours in order to be able to report on it to-night to the Executive of the Inner Circle, to whom I shall also want to introduce you. If you will not allow me to do that say so at once, and, for the present at

least, our negotiations must come to a sudden stop."

"Go on," said Arnold quietly; "so far I consent. For the rest I would rather hear you to the end."

"Very well. Then if the Executive approve of the invention, you will be asked to join the Inner Circle at once, and to devote yourself body and soul to the Society and the accomplishment of the objects that will be explained to you. If you refuse there will be an end of the matter, and you will simply be asked to give your word of honour to reveal nothing that you have seen or heard, and then allowed to depart in peace.

"If, on the other hand, you consent, in consideration of the immense importance of your secret--which there is no need to disguise from you--to the Brotherhood, the usual condition of passing through the Outer Circle will be dispensed with, and you will be trusted as absolutely as we shall expect you to trust us.

"Whatever funds you then require to manufacture an airship on the plan of your model will be placed at your disposal, and a suitable place will be selected for the works that you will have to build. When the ship is ready to take the air you will, of course, be appointed to the command of her, and you will pick your crew from among the workmen who will act under your orders in the building of the vessel.

"They will all be members of the Outer Circle, who will not understand your orders, but simply obey them blindly, even to the death. One member of the Inner Circle will act as your second in command, and he will be as perfectly trusted as you will be, so that in unforeseen emergencies you will be able to consult with him with perfect confidence. Now I think I have told you all. What do you say?"

Arnold was silent for a few minutes, too busy for speech with the rush of thoughts that had crowded through his brain as Colston was speaking. Then he looked up at his host and said--

"May I make conditions?"

"You may state them," replied he, with a smile, "but, of course, I don't undertake to accept them without consultation with my--I mean with the Executive."

"Of course not," said Arnold. "Well, the conditions that I should feel myself obliged to make with your Executive would be, briefly speaking, these: I would not reveal to any one the composition of the gases from which I derive my motive force. I should manufacture them myself in given quantities, and keep them always under my own charge.

"At the first attempt to break faith with me in this respect I would blow the air-ship and all her crew, including myself, into such fragments as it would be difficult to find one of them. I have and wish for no life apart from my invention, and I would not survive it."

"Good!" interrupted Colston. "There spoke the true enthusiast. Go on."

"Secondly, I would use the machine only in open warfare---when the Brotherhood is fighting openly for the attainment of a definite end. Once the appeal to force has been made I will employ a force such as no nation on earth can use without me, and I will use it as unsparingly as the armies and fleets engaged will employ their own engines of destruction on one another. But I will be no party to the destruction of defenceless towns and people who are not in arms against us. If I am ordered to do that I tell you candidly that I will not do it. I will blow the airship itself up first."

"The conditions are somewhat stringent, although the sentiments are excellent," replied Colston; "still, of myself I can neither accept nor reject them. That will be for the Executive to do. For my own part I think that you will be able to arrive at a basis of agreement on them. And now I think we have said all we can say for the present, and so if you are ready we'll be off and satisfy my longing to see the invention that is to make us the arbiters of war--when war comes, which I fancy will not be long now."

Something in the tone in which these last words were spoken struck Arnold with a kind of cold chill, and he shivered slightly as he said in answer to Colston--

"I am ready when you are, and no less anxious than you to set eyes on my model. I hope to goodness it is all safe! Do you know, when I am away from it I feel just like a woman away from her first baby."

A few minutes later two of the most dangerous enemies of Society alive were walking quietly along the Embankment towards Blackfriars, smoking their cigars and chatting as conventionally as though

there were no such things on earth as tyranny and oppression, and their necessarily ever-present enemies conspiracy and brooding revolution.

CHAPTER IV. THE HOUSE ON CLAPHAM COMMON.

TWENTY minutes' walk took Arnold and Colston to the door of the tenement-house in which the former had lived since his fast-dwindling store of money had convinced him of the necessity of bringing his expenses down to the lowest possible limit if he wished to keep up the struggle with fate very much longer.

As they mounted the dirty, evil-smelling staircase, Colston said--

"Phew! Verily you are a hero of science if you have brought yourself to live in a hole like this for a couple of years rather than give up your dream, and grow fat on the loaves and fishes of conventionality."

"This is a palace compared with some of the rookeries about here," replied Arnold, with a laugh.

"The march of progress seems to have left this half of London behind as hopeless. Ten years ago there were a good many thousands of highly respectable mediocrities living on this side of the river, but now I am told that the glory has departed from the very best of its localities, and given them up to various degrees of squalor. Vice, poverty, and misery seem to gravitate naturally southward in London. I don't know why, but they do. Well, here is the door of my humble den."

As he spoke he put the key in the lock, and opened the door, bidding his companion enter as he did so. Arnold's anxiety was soon relieved by finding the precious model untouched in its resting-place, and it was at once brought out. Colston was delighted beyond his powers of expression with the marvellous ingenuity with which the miracle of mechanical skill was contrived and put together; and when Arnold, after showing and explaining to him all the various parts of the mechanism and the external structure, at length set the engine working, and the air-ship rose gracefully from the floor and began to sail round the room in the wide circle to which it was confined by its mooring-line, he stared at it for several minutes in wondering silence, following it round and round with his eyes, and then he said in a voice from which he vainly strove to banish the signs of the emotion that possessed him--

"It is the last miracle of science! With a few such ships as that one could conquer the world in a month!"

"Yes, that would not be a very difficult task, seeing that neither an army nor a fleet could exist for twelve hours with two or three of them hovering above it," replied Arnold.

The trial over, Arnold set to work and took the model partly to pieces for packing up; and while he was putting it away in the old sea-chest, Colston counted out ten sovereigns and laid them on the table. Hearing the clink of the gold, Arnold looked up and said--

"What is that for? A sovereign will be quite enough to get me out of my present scrape, and then if we come to any terms to-night it will be time enough to talk about payment."

"The Brotherhood does not do business in that way," was the reply. "At present your only connection with it is a commercial one, and ten pounds is a very moderate fee for the privilege of inspecting such an invention as this. Anyhow, that is what I am ordered to hand over to you in payment for your trouble now and to-night, so you must accept it as it is given--as a matter of business."

"Very well," said Arnold, closing and locking the chest as he spoke, "if you think it worth ten pounds, the money will not come amiss to me. Now, if you will remain and guard the household gods for a minute, I will go and pay my rent and get a cab."

Half an hour later his few but priceless possessions were loaded on a four-wheeler and Arnold had bidden farewell for ever to the dingy room in which he had passed so many hours of toil and dreaming, suffering and disappointment. Before lunch time they were safely bestowed in a couple of rooms which Colston had engaged for him in the same building in which his own rooms were.

In the afternoon, among other purchases, a more convenient case was bought for the model, and in this it was packed with the plans and papers which explained its construction, ready for the evening journey. The two friends dined together at six in Colston's rooms, and at seven sharp his servant

announced that the cab was at the door. Within ten minutes they were bowling along the Embankment towards Westminster Bridge in a luxuriously appointed hansom of the newest type, with the precious case lying across their knees.

"This is a comfortable cab," said Arnold, when they had gone a hundred yards or so. "By the way, how does the man know where to go? I didn't hear you give him any directions."

"None were necessary," was the reply. "This cab, like a good many others in London, belongs to the Brotherhood, and the man who is driving is one of the Outer Circle. Our Jehus are the most useful spies that we have. Many is the secret of the enemy that we have learnt from, and many is the secret police agent who has been driven to his rendezvous by a Terrorist who has heard every word that has been spoken on the journey."

"How on earth is that managed?"

"Every one of the cabs is fitted with a telephonic arrangement communicating with the roof. The driver has only to button the wire of the transmitter up inside his coat so that the transmitter itself lies near to his ear, and he can hear even a whisper inside the cab.

"The man who is driving us, for instance, has a sort of retainer from the Russian Embassy to be on hand at certain hours on certain nights in the week. Our cabs are all better horsed, better appointed, and better driven than any others in London, and, consequently, they are favourites, especially among the young attaches, and are nearly always employed by them on their secret missions or love affairs, which, by the way, are very often the same thing. Our own Jehu has a job on to-night, from which we expect some results that will mystify the enemy not a little. We got our first suspicions of Ainsworth from a few incautious words that he spoke in one of our cabs."

"It's a splendid system, I should think, for discovering the movements of your enemies," said Arnold, not without an uncomfortable reflection on the fact that he was himself now completely in the power of this terrible organisation, which had keen eyes and ready hands in every capital of the civilised world. "But how do you guard against treachery? It is well known that all the Governments of Europe are spending money like water to unearth this mystery of the Terror. Surely all your men cannot be incorruptible."

"Practically they are so. The very mystery which enshrouds all our actions makes them so. We have had a few traitors, of course; but as none of them has ever survived his treachery by twenty-four hours, a bribe has lost its attraction for the rest."

In such conversation as this the time was passed, while the cab crossed the river and made its way rapidly and easily along Kennington Road and Clapham Road to Clapham Common. At length it turned into the drive of one of those solid abodes of pretentious respectability which front the Common, and pulled up before a big stucco portico.

"Here we are!" exclaimed Colston, as the doors of the cab automatically opened. He got out first, and Arnold handed the case to him, and then followed him.

Without a word the driver turned his horse into the road again and drove off towards town, and as they ascended the steps the front door opened, and they went in, Colston saying as they did so--

"Is Mr. Smith at home?"

"Yes, sir; you are expected, I believe. Will you step into the drawing-room?" replied the clean-shaven and immaculately respectable man-servant, in evening dress, who had opened the door for them.

They were shown into a handsomely furnished room lit with electric light. As soon as the footman had closed the door behind him, Colston said--

"Well, now, here you are in the conspirators' den, in the very headquarters of those Terrorists for whom Europe is being ransacked constantly without the slightest success. I have often wondered what the rigid respectability of Clapham Common would think if it knew the true character of this harmless-looking house. I hardly think an earthquake in Clapham Road would produce much more sensation than such a discovery would.

"And now," he continued, his tone becoming suddenly much more serious "in a few minutes you will

be in the presence of the Inner Circle of the Terrorists, that is to say, of those who practically hold the fate of Europe in their hands. You know pretty clearly what they want with you. If you have thought better of the business that we have discussed you are still at perfect liberty to retire from it, on giving your word of honour not to disclose anything that I have said to you."

"I have not the slightest intention of doing anything of the sort," replied Arnold. "You know the conditions on which I came here. I shall put them before your Council, and if they are accepted your Brotherhood will, within their limits, have no more faithful adherent than I. If not, the business will simply come to an end as far as I am concerned, and your secret will be as safe with me as though I had taken the oath of membership."

"Well said!" replied Colston, "and just what I expected you to say. Now listen to me for a minute. Whatever you may see or hear for the next few minutes say nothing till you are asked to speak. I will say all that is necessary at first. Ask no questions, but trust to anything that may seem strange being explained in due course--as it will be. A single indiscretion on your part might raise suspicions which would be as dangerous as they would be unfounded. When you are asked to speak do so without the slightest fear, and speak your mind as openly as you have done to me."

"You need have no fear for me," replied Arnold. "I think I am sensible enough to be prudent, and I am quite sure that I am desperate enough to be fearless. Little worse can happen to me than the fate that I was contemplating last night."

As he ceased speaking there was a knock at the door. It opened and the footman reappeared, saying in the most commonplace fashion--

"Mr. Smith will be happy to see you now, gentlemen. Will you kindly walk this way?"

They followed him out into the hall, and then, somewhat to Arnold's surprise, down the stairs at the back, which apparently led to the basement of the house.

The footman preceded them to the basement floor and halted before a door in a little passage that looked like the entrance to a coal cellar. On this he knocked in peculiar fashion with the knuckles of one hand, while with the other he pressed the button of an electric bell concealed under the paper on the wall. The bell sounded faintly as though some distance off, and as it rang the footman said abruptly to Colston--

"Das Wort ist Freiheit."

Arnold knew German enough to know that this meant "The word is 'Freedom'", but why it should have been spoken in a foreign language mystified him not a little.

While he was thinking about this the door opened, as if by a released spring, and he saw before him a long, narrow passage, lit by four electric arcs, and closed at the other end by a door, guarded by a sentry armed with a magazine rifle.

He followed Colston down the passage, and when within a dozen feet of the sentry, he brought his rifle to the "ready," and the following strange dialogue ensued between him and Colston--

"Quien va?"

"Zwei Freunde der Bruderschaft."

"Por la libertad?"

"Fur Freiheit Uber alles!"

"Pass, friends."

The rifle grounded as the words were spoken, and the sentry stepped back to the wall of the passage. At the same moment another bell rang beyond the door, and then the door itself opened as the other had done. They passed through, and it closed instantly behind them, leaving them in total darkness.

Colston caught Arnold by the arm, and drew him towards him, saying as he did so--

"What do you think of our system of passwords?"

"Pretty hard to get through unless one knew them, I should think. Why the different languages?"

"To make assurance doubly sure every member of the Inner Circle must be conversant with four European languages. On these the changes are rung, and even I did not know what the two languages

were to be to-night before I entered the house, and if I had asked for 'Mr. Brown' instead of 'Mr. Smith,' we should never have got beyond the drawing-room.

"When the footman told me in German that the word was 'Freedom,' I knew that I should have to answer the challenge of the sentry in German. I did not know that he would challenge in Spanish, and if I had not understood him, or had replied in any other language but German, he would have shot us both down without saying another word, and no one would ever have known what had become of us. You will be exempt from this condition, because you will always come with me. I am, in fact, responsible for you."

"H'm, there doesn't seem much chance of any one getting through on false pretences," replied Arnold, with an irrepressible shudder: "Has any one ever tried?"

"Yes, once. The two gentlemen whose disappearance made the famous 'Clapham Mystery' of about twelve months ago. They were two of the smartest detectives in the French service and the only two men who ever guessed the true nature of this house. They are buried under the floor on which you are standing at this moment."

The words were spoken with a cruel inflexible coldness, which struck Arnold like a blast of frozen air. He shivered, and was about to reply when Colston caught him by the arm again, and said hurriedly--

"H'st! We are going in. Remember what I said, and don't speak again till some one asks you to do so."

As he spoke a door opened in the wall of the dark chamber in which they had been standing for the last few minutes, and a flood of soft light flowed in upon their dazzled eyes. At the same moment a man's voice said from the room beyond in Russian--

"Who stands there?"

"Maurice Colston and the Master of the Air," replied Colston in the same language.

"You are welcome," was the reply, and then Colston, taking Arnold by the arm, led him into the room.

CHAPTER V. THE INNER CIRCLE.

AS soon as Arnold's eyes got accustomed to the light, he saw that he was in a large, lofty room with panelled walls adorned with a number of fine paintings. As he looked at these his gaze was fascinated by them, even more than by the strange company which was assembled round the long table that occupied the middle of the room.

Though they were all manifestly the products of the highest form of art, their subjects were dreary and repulsive beyond description. There was a horrible realism about them which reminded him irresistibly of the awful collection of pictorial horrors in the Musée Wiertz, in Brussels--those works of the brilliant but unhappy genius who was driven into insanity by the sheer exuberance of his own morbid imagination.

Here was a long line of men and women in chains staggering across a wilderness of snow that melted away into the horizon without a break. Beside them rode Cossacks armed with long whips that they used on men and women alike when their fainting limbs gave way beneath them, and they were like to fall by the wayside to seek the welcome rest that only death could give them.

There was a picture of a woman naked to the waist, and tied up to a triangle in a prison yard, being flogged by a soldier with willow wands, while a group of officers stood by, apparently greatly interested in the performance. Another painting showed a poor wretch being knouted to death in the market-place of a Russian town, and yet another showed a young and beautiful woman in a prison cell with her face distorted by the horrible leer of madness, and her little white hands clawing nervously at her long dishevelled hair.

Arnold stood for several minutes fascinated by the hideous realism of the pictures, and burning with rage and shame at the thought that they were all too terribly true to life, when he was startled out of his reverie by the same voice that had called them from the dark room saying to him in English--

"Well, Richard Arnold, what do you think of our little picture gallery? The paintings are good in themselves, but it may make them more interesting to you if you know that they are all faithful reproductions of scenes that have really taken place within the limits of the so-called civilised and Christian world. There are some here in this room now who have suffered the torments depicted on those canvases, and who could tell of worse horrors than even they portray. We should like to know what you think of our paintings?"

Arnold glanced towards the table in search of Colston, but he had vanished. Around the long table sat fourteen masked and shrouded forms that were absolutely indistinguishable one from the other. He could not even tell whether they were men or women, so closely were their forms and faces concealed. Seeing that he was left to his own discretion, he laid the case containing the model, which he had so far kept under his arm, down on the floor, and, facing the strange assembly, said as steadily as he could--

"My own reading tells me that they are only too true to the dreadful reality. I think that the civilised and Christian Society which permits such crimes to be committed against humanity, when it has the power to stop them by force of arms, is neither truly civilised nor truly Christian."

"And would you stop them if you could?"

"Yes, if it cost the lives of millions to do it! They would be better spent than the thirty million lives that were lost last century over a few bits of territory."

"That is true, and augurs well for our future agreement. Be kind enough to come to the table and take a seat."

The masked man who spoke was sitting in the chair at the foot of the table, and as he said this one of those sitting at the side got up and motioned to Arnold to take his place. As soon as he had done so the speaker continued--

"We are glad to see that your sentiments are so far in accord with our own, for that fact will make our negotiations all the easier."

"As you are aware, you are now in the Inner Circle of the Terrorists. Yonder empty chair at the head of the table is that of our Chief, who, though not with us in person, is ever present as a guiding influence in our councils. We act as he directs, and it was from him that we received news of you and your marvellous invention. It is also by his direction that you have been invited here to-night with an object that you are already aware of.

"I see from your face that you are about to ask how this can be, seeing that you have never confided your secret to any one until last night. It will be useless to ask me, for I myself do not know. We who sit here simply execute the Master's will. We ask no questions, and therefore we can answer none concerning him."

"I have none to ask," said Arnold, seeing that the speaker paused as though expecting him to say something. "I came at the invitation of one of your Brotherhood to lay certain terms before you, for you to accept or reject as seems good to you. How you got to know of me and my invention is, after all, a matter of indifference to me. With your perfect system of espionage you might well find out more secret things than that."

"Quite so," was the reply. "And the question that we have to settle with you is how far you will consent to assist the work of the Brotherhood with this invention of yours, and on what conditions you will do so."

"I must first know as exactly as possible what the work of the Brotherhood is."

"Under the circumstances there is no objection to your knowing that. In the first place, that which is known to the outside world as the Terror is an international secret society underlying and directing the operations of the various bodies known as Nihilists, Anarchists, Socialists--in fact, all those organisations which have for their object the reform or destruction, by peaceful or violent means, of Society as it is at present constituted.

"Its influence reaches beyond these into the various trade unions and political clubs, the moving spirits of which are all members of our Outer Circle. On the other side of Society we have agents and adherents in all the Courts of Europe, all the diplomatic bodies, and all the parliamentary assemblies throughout the world.

"We believe that Society as at present constituted is hopeless for any good thing. All kinds of nameless brutalities are practised without reproof in the names of law and order, and commercial economics. On one side human life is a splendid fabric of cloth of gold embroidered with priceless gems, and on the other it is a mass of filthy, festering rags, swarming with vermin.

"We think that such a Society--a Society which permits considerably more than the half of humanity to be sunk in poverty and misery while a very small portion of it fools away its life in perfectly ridiculous luxury--does not deserve to exist, and ought to be destroyed.

"We also know that sooner or later it will destroy itself, as every similar Society has done before it. For nearly forty years there has now been almost perfect peace in Europe. At the same time, over twenty millions of men are standing ready to take the field in a week.

"War--universal war that will shake the world to its foundations--is only a matter of a little more delay and a few diplomatic hitches. Russia and England are within rifleshoot of each other in Afghanistan, and France and Germany are flinging defiances at each other across the Rhine.

"Some one must soon fire the shot that will set the world in a blaze, and meanwhile the toilers of the earth are weary of these dreadful military and naval burdens, and would care very little if the inevitable happened to-morrow.

"It is in the power of the Terrorists to delay or precipitate that war to a certain extent. Hitherto all our efforts have been devoted to the preservation of peace, and many of the so-called outrages which have taken place in different parts of Europe, and especially in Russia, during the last few years, have been accomplished simply for the purpose of forcing the attention of the administrations to internal affairs for the time, and so putting off what would have led to a declaration of war.

"This policy has not been dictated by any hope of avoiding war altogether, for that would have been

sheer insanity. We have simply delayed war as long as possible, because we have not felt that we have been strong enough to turn the tide of battle at the right moment in favour of the oppressed ones of the earth and against the oppressors.

"But this invention of yours puts a completely different aspect on the European situation. Armed with such a tremendous engine of destruction as a navigable air-ship must necessarily be, when used in conjunction with the explosives already at our disposal, we could make war impossible to our enemies by bringing into the field a force with which no army or fleet could contend without the certainty of destruction. By these means we should ultimately compel peace and enforce a general disarmament on land and sea.

"The vast majority of those who make the wealth of the world are sick of seeing that wealth wasted in the destruction of human life, and the ruin of peaceful industries. As soon, therefore, as we are in a position to dictate terms under such tremendous penalties, all the innumerable organisations with which we are in touch all over the world will rise in arms and enforce them at all costs.

"Of course, it goes without saying that the powers that are now enthroned in the high places of the world will fight bitterly and desperately to retain the rule that they have held for so long, but in the end we shall be victorious, and then on the ruins of this civilisation a new and a better shall arise.

"That is a rough, brief outline of the policy of the Brotherhood, which we are going to ask you to-night to join. Of course, in the eyes of the world we are only a set of fiends, whose sole object is the destruction of Society, and the inauguration of a state of universal anarchy. That, however, has no concern for us. What is called popular opinion is merely manufactured by the Press according to order, and does not count in serious concerns. What I have described to you are the true objects of the Brotherhood; and now it remains for you to say, yes or no, whether you will devote yourself and your invention to carrying them out or not."

For two or three minutes after the masked spokesman of the Inner Circle had ceased speaking, there was absolute silence in the room. The calmly spoken words which deliberately sketched out the ruin of a civilisation and the establishment of a new order of things made a deep impression on Arnold's mind. He saw clearly that he was standing at the parting of the ways, and facing the most tremendous crisis that could occur in the life of a human being.

It was only natural that he should look back, as he did, to the life from which a single step would now part him for ever, without the possibility of going back. He knew that if he once put his hands to the plough, and looked back, death, swift and inevitable, would be the penalty of his wavering. This, however, he had already weighed and decided.

Most of what he had heard had found an echo in his own convictions. Moreover, the life that he had left had no charms for him, while to be one of the chief factors in a world-revolution was a destiny worthy both of himself and his invention. So the fatal resolution was taken, and he spoke the words that bound him for ever to the Brotherhood.

"As I have already told Mr. Colston," he began by saying "I will join and faithfully serve the Brotherhood if the conditions that I feel compelled to make are granted"--

"We know them already," interrupted the spokesman, "and they are freely granted. Indeed, you can hardly fail to see that we are trusting you to a far greater extent than it is possible for us to make you trust us, unless you choose to do so. The air-ship once built and afloat under your command, the game of war would to a great extent be in your own hands. True, you would not survive treachery very long; but, on the other hand, if it became necessary to kill you, the air-ship would be useless, that is, if you took your secret of the motive power with you into the next world."

"As I undoubtedly should," added Arnold quietly.

"We have no doubt that you would," was the equally quiet rejoinder. "And now I will read to you the oath of membership that you will be required to sign. Even when you have heard it, if you feel any hesitation in subscribing to it, there will still be time to withdraw, for we tolerate no unwilling or half-hearted recruits."

Arnold bowed his acquiescence, and the spokesman took a piece of paper from the table and read aloud--

"I, Richard Arnold, sign this paper in the full knowledge that in doing so I devote myself absolutely for the rest of my life to the service of the Brotherhood of Freedom, known to the world as the Terrorists. As long as I live its ends shall be my ends, and no human considerations shall weigh with me where those ends are concerned. I will take life without mercy, and yield my own without hesitation at its bidding. I will break all other laws to obey those which it obeys, and if I disobey these I shall expect death as the just penalty of my perjury."

As he finished reading the oath, he handed the paper to Arnold, saying as he did so--

"There are no theatrical formalities to be gone through. Simply sign the paper and give it back to me, or else tear it up and go in peace."

Arnold read it through slowly, and then glanced round the table. He saw the eyes of the silent figures sitting about him shining at him through the holes in their masks. He laid the paper down on the table in front of him, dipped a pen in an inkstand that stood near, and signed the oath in a firm, unfaltering hand. Then--committed for ever, for good or evil, to the new life that he had adopted--he gave the paper back again.

The President took it and read it, and then passed it to the mask on his right hand. It went from one to the other round the table, each one reading it before passing it on, until it got back to the President. When it reached him he rose from his seat, and, going to the fireplace, dropped it into the flames, and watched it until it was consumed to ashes. Then, crossing the room to where Arnold was sitting, he removed his mask with one hand, and held the other out to him in greeting, saying as he did so--

"Welcome to the Brotherhood! Thrice welcome! for your coming has brought the day of redemption nearer!"

CHAPTER VI. NEW FRIENDS.

AS Arnold returned the greeting of the President, all the other members of the Circle rose from their seats and took off their masks and the black shapeless cloaks which had so far completely covered them from head to foot.

Then, one after the other, they came forward and were formally introduced to him by the President. Nine of the fourteen were men, and five were women of ages varying from middle age almost to girlhood. The men were apparently all between twenty-five and thirty-five, and included some half-dozen nationalities among them.

All, both men and women, evidently belonged to the educated, or rather to the cultured class. Their speech, which seemed to change with perfect ease from one language to another in the course of their somewhat polyglot converse, was the easy flowing speech of men and women accustomed to the best society, not only in the social but the intellectual sense of the word.

All were keen, alert, and swift of thought, and on the face of each one there was the dignifying expression of a deep and settled purpose which at once differentiated them in Arnold's eyes from the ordinary idle or merely money-making citizens of the world.

As each one came and shook hands with the new member of the Brotherhood, he or she had some pleasant word of welcome and greeting for him; and so well were the words chosen, and so manifestly sincerely were they spoken, that by the time he had shaken hands all round Arnold felt as much at home among them as though he were in the midst of a circle of old friends.

Among the women there were two who had attracted his attention and roused his interest far more than any of the other members of the Circle. One of these was a tall and beautifully-shaped woman, whose face and figure were those of a woman in the early twenties, but whose long, thick hair was as white as though the snows of seventy winters had drifted over it. As he returned her warm, firm hand-clasp, and looked upon her dark, resolute, and yet perfectly womanly features, the young engineer gave a slight start of recognition. She noticed this at once and said, with a smile and a quick flash from her splendid grey eyes--

"Ah! I see you recognise me. No, I am not ashamed of my portrait. I am proud of the wounds that I have received in the war with tyranny, so you need not fear to confess your recognition."

It was true that Arnold had recognised her. She was the original of the central figure of the painting which depicted the woman being flogged by the Russian soldiers.

Arnold flushed hotly at the words with the sudden passionate anger that they roused within him, and replied in a low, steady voice--

"Those who would sanction such a crime as that are not fit to live. I will not leave one stone of that prison standing upon another. It is a blot on the face of the earth, and I will wipe it out utterly!"

"There are thousands of blots as black as that on earth, and I think you will find nobler game than an obscure Russian provincial prison. Russia has cities and palaces and fortresses that will make far grander ruins than that--ruins that will be worthy monuments of fallen despotism," replied the girl, who had been introduced by the President as Radna Michaelis. "But here is some one else waiting to make your acquaintance. This is Natasha. She has no other name among us, but you will soon learn why she needs none."

Natasha was the other woman who had so keenly roused Arnold's interest. Woman, however, she hardly was, for she was seemingly still in her teens, and certainly could not have been more than twenty.

He had mixed but little with women, and during the past few years not at all, and therefore the marvellous beauty of the girl who came forward as Radna spoke seemed almost unearthly to him, and confused his senses for the moment as some potent drug might have done. He took her outstretched hand in awkward silence, and for an instant so far forgot himself as to gaze blankly at her in speechless

admiration.

She could not help noticing it, for she was a woman, and for the same reason she saw that it was so absolutely honest and involuntary that it was impossible for any woman to take offence at it. A quick bright flush swept up her lovely face as his hand closed upon hers, her darkly-fringed lids fell for an instant over the most wonderful pair of sapphire-blue eyes that Arnold had ever even dreamed of, and when she raised them again the flush had gone, and she said in a sweet, frank voice--

"I am the daughter of Natas, and he has desired me to bid you welcome in his name, and I hope you will let me do so in my own as well. We are all dying to see this wonderful invention of yours. I suppose you are going to satisfy our feminine curiosity, are you not?"

The daughter of Natas! This lovely girl, in the first sweet flush of her pure and innocent womanhood, the daughter of the unknown and mysterious being whose ill-omened name caused a shudder if it was only whispered in the homes of the rich and powerful, the name with which the death-sentences of the Terrorists were invariably signed, and which had come to be an infallible guarantee that they would be carried out to the letter.

No death-warrants of the most powerful sovereigns of Europe were more certain harbingers of inevitable doom than were those which bore this dreaded name. Whether he were high or low, the man who received one of them made ready for his end. He knew not where or when the fatal blow would be struck. He only knew that the invisible hand of the Terror would strike him as surely in the uttermost ends of the earth as it would in the palace or the fortress. Never once had it missed its aim, and never once had the slightest clue been obtained to the identity of the hand that held the knife or pistol.

Some such thoughts as these flashed one after another through Arnold's brain as he stood talking with Natasha. He saw at once why she had only that one name. It was enough, and it was not long before he learnt that it was the symbol of an authority in the Circle that admitted of no question.

She was the envoy of him whose word was law, absolute and irrevocable, to every member of the Brotherhood; to disobey whom was death; and to obey whom had, so far at least, meant swift and invariable success, even where it seemed least to be hoped for.

Of course, Natasha's almost girlish question about the airship was really a command, which would have been none the less binding had she only had her own beauty to enforce it. As she spoke the President and Colston--who had only lost himself for the time behind a mask and cloak--came up to Arnold and asked him if he was prepared to give an exhibition of the powers of his model, and to explain its working and construction to the Circle at once.

He replied that everything was perfectly ready for the trial, and that he would set the model working for them in a few minutes. The President then told him that the exhibition should take place in another room, where there would be much more space than where they were, and bade him bring the box and follow him.

A door was now opened in the wall of the room remote from that by which he and Colston had entered, and through this the whole party went down a short passage, and through another door at the end which opened into a very large apartment, which, from the fact of its being windowless, Arnold rightly judged to be underground, like the Council-chamber that they had just left.

A single glance was enough to show him the chief purpose to which the chamber was devoted. The wall at one end was covered with arm-racks containing all the newest and most perfect makes of rifles and pistols; while at the other end, about twenty paces distant, were three electric signalling targets, graded, as was afterwards explained to him, to one, three, and five hundred yards range.

In a word, the chamber was an underground range for rifle and pistol practice, in which a volley could have been fired without a sound being heard ten yards away. It was here that the accuracy of the various weapons invented from time to time was tested; and here, too, every member of the Circle, man and woman, practised with rifle and pistol until an infallible aim was acquired. A register of scores was kept, and at the head of it stood the name of Radna Michaelis.

A long table ran across the end at which the arm-racks were, and on this Arnold laid the case

containing the model, he standing on one side of the table, and the members of the Circle on the other, watching his movements with a curiosity that they took no trouble to disguise.

He opened the case, feeling something like a scientific demonstrator, with an advanced and critical class before him. In a moment the man disappeared, and the mechanic and the enthusiast took his place. As each part was taken out and laid upon the table, he briefly explained its use; and then, last of all, came the hull of the air-ship.

This was three feet long and six inches broad in its midships diameter. It was made in two longitudinal sections of polished aluminium, which shone like burnished silver. It would have been cigar-shaped but for the fact that the forward end was drawn out into a long sharp ram, the point of which was on a level with the floor of the hull amidships as it lay upon the table. Two deep bilge-plates, running nearly the whole length of the hull, kept it in an upright position and prevented the blades of the propellers from touching the table. For about half its whole length the upper part of the hull was flattened and formed a deck from which rose three short strong masts each of which carried a wheel of thin metal whose spokes were six inclined fans something like the blades of a screw.

A little lower than this deck there projected on each side a broad, oblong, slightly curved sheet of metal, very thin, but strengthened by means of wire braces, till it was as rigid as a plate of solid steel, although it only weighed a few ounces. These air-planes worked on an axis amidships, and could be inclined either way through an angle of thirty degrees. At the pointed stern there revolved a powerful four-bladed propeller, and from each quarter, inclined slightly outwards from the middle line of the vessel projected a somewhat smaller screw working underneath the after end of the air-planes.

The hull contained four small double-cylinder engines, one of which actuated the stern-propeller, and the other three the fan-wheels and side-propellers. There were, of course, no furnaces, boilers, or condensers. Two slender pipes ran into each cylinder from suitably placed gas reservoirs, or power-cylinders, as the engineer called them, and that was all.

Arnold deftly and rapidly put the parts together, continuing his running description as he did so, and in a few minutes the beautiful miracle of ingenuity stood complete before the wondering eyes of the Circle, and a murmur of admiration ran from lip to lip, bringing a flush of pleasure to the cheek of its creator.

"There," said he, as he put the finishing touches to the apparatus, "you see that she is a combination of two principles--those of the Aeronef and the Aeroplane. The first reached its highest development in Jules Verne's imaginary "Clipper of the Clouds," and the second in Hiram Maxim's Aeroplane. Of course, Jules Verne's Aeronef was merely an idea, and one that could never be realised while Robur's mysterious source of electrical energy remained unknown--as it still does."

"Maxim's Aeroplane is, as you all know, also an unrealised ideal so far as any practical use is concerned. He has succeeded in making it fly, but only under the most favourable conditions, and practically without cargo. Its two fatal defects have been shown by experience to be the comparatively overwhelming weight of the engine and the fuel that he has to carry to develop sufficient power to rise from the ground and progress against the wind, and the inability of the machine to ascend perpendicularly to any required height.

"Without the power to do this no air-ship can be of any use save under very limited conditions. You cannot carry a railway about with you, or a station to get a start from every time you want to rise, and you cannot always choose a nice level plain in which to come down. Even if you could the Aeroplane would not rise again without its rails and carriage. For purposes of warfare, then, it may be dismissed as totally useless.

"In this machine, as you see, I have combined the two principles. These helices on the masts will lift the dead weight of the ship perpendicularly without the slightest help from the side-planes, which are used to regulate the vessel's flight when afloat. I will set the engines that work them in motion independently of the others which move the propellers, and then you will see what I mean."

As he spoke, he set one part of the mechanism working. Those watching saw the three helices begin

to spin round, the centre one revolving in an opposite direction to the other two, with a soft whirring sound that gradually rose to a high-pitched note.

When they attained their full speed they looked like solid wheels, and then the air-ship rose, at first slowly, and then more and more swiftly, straight up from the table, until it strained hard at the piece of cord which prevented it from reaching the roof.

A universal chorus of "bravas" greeted it as it rose, and every eye became fixed on it as it hung motionless in the air, sustained by its whirling helices. After letting it remain aloft for a few minutes Arnold pulled it down again, saying as he did so--

"That, I think, proves that the machine can rise from any position where the upward road is open, and without the slightest assistance of any apparatus. Now it shall take a voyage round the room.

"You see it is steered by this rudder-fan under the stern propeller. In the real ship it will be worked by a wheel, like the rudder of a sea-going vessel; but in the model it is done by this lever, so that I can control it by a couple of strings from the ground."

He went round to the other side of the table while he was speaking, and adjusted the steering gear, stopping the engines meanwhile. Then he put the model down on the floor, set all four engines to work, and stood behind with the guiding-strings in his hands. The spectators heard a louder and somewhat shriller whirring noise than before, and the beautiful fabric, with its shining, silvery hull and side-planes, rose slantingly from the ground and darted forward down the room, keeping Arnold at a quick run with the rudder-strings tightly strained.

Like an obedient steed, it instantly obeyed the slightest pull upon either of them, and twice made the circuit of the room before its creator pulled it down and stopped the machinery.

The experiment was a perfect and undeniable success in every respect, and not one of those who saw it had the slightest doubt as to Arnold's air-ship having at last solved the problem of Aerial navigation, and made the Brotherhood lords of a realm as wide as the atmospheric ocean that encircles the globe.

As soon as the model was once more resting on the table, the President came forward and, grasping the engineer by both hands, said in a voice from which he made but little effort to banish the emotion that he felt--

"Bravo, brother! Henceforth you shall be known to the Brotherhood as the Master of the Air, for truly you have been the first among the sons of men to fairly conquer it. Come, let us go back and talk, for there is much to be said about this, and we cannot begin too soon to make arrangements for building the first of our Aerial fleet. You can leave your model where it is in perfect safety, for no one ever enters this room save ourselves."

So saying the President led the way to the Council-chamber, and there, after the Ariel--as it had already been decided to name the first air-ship--had been christened in anticipation in twenty-year old champagne, the Circle settled down at once to business, and for a good three hours discussed the engineer's estimate and plans for building the first vessel of the Aerial fleet.

At length all the practical details were settled, and the President rose in token of the end of the conference. As he did so he said somewhat abruptly to Arnold--

"So far so good. Now there is nothing more to be done but to lay those plans before the Chief and get his authority for withdrawing out of the treasury sufficient money to commence operations. I presume you could reproduce them from memory if necessary--at any rate, in sufficient outline to make them perfectly intelligible?"

"Certainly," was the reply. "I could reproduce them in fac simile without the slightest difficulty. Why do you ask?"

"Because the Chief is in Russia, and you must go to him and place them before him from memory. They are far too precious to be trusted to any keeping, however trustworthy. There are such things as railway accidents, and other forms of sudden death, to say nothing of the Russian customs, false arrests, personal searches, and imprisonments on mere suspicion.

"We can risk none of these, and so there is nothing for it but your going to Petersburg and verbally

explaining them to the Chief. You can be ready in three days, I suppose?"

"Yes, in two, if you like," replied Arnold, not a little taken aback at the unexpected suddenness of what he knew at once to be the first order that was to test his obedience to the Brotherhood. "But as I am absolutely ignorant of Russia and the Russians, I suppose you will make such arrangements as will prevent my making any innocent but possibly awkward mistakes."

"Oh yes," replied the President, with a smile, "all arrangements have been made already, and I expect you will find them anything but unpleasant. Natasha goes to Petersburg in company with another lady member of the Circle whom you have not yet seen."

"You will go with them, and they will explain everything to you en route, if they have no opportunity of doing so before you start. Now let us go upstairs and have some supper. I am famished, and I suppose every one else is too."

Arnold simply bowed in answer to the President; but one pair of eyes at least in the room caught the quick, faint flush that rose in his cheek as he was told in whose company he was to travel. As for himself, if the journey had been to Siberia instead of Russia, he would have felt nothing but pleasure at the prospect after that.

They left the Council-chamber by the passage and the ante-room, the sentry standing to attention as they passed him, each giving the word in turn, till the President came last and closed the doors behind him. Then the sentry brought up the rear and extinguished the lights as he left the passage.

Fifteen minutes later there sat down to supper, in the solidly comfortable dining-room of the upper house, a party of ladies and gentlemen who chatted through the meal as merrily and innocently as though there were no such things as tyranny or suffering in the world, and whom not the most acute observer would have taken for the most dangerous and desperately earnest body of conspirators that ever plotted the destruction, not of an empire, but of a civilisation and a social order that it had taken twenty centuries to build up.

CHAPTER VII. THE DAUGHTER OF NATAS.

SUPPER was over about eleven, and then the party adjourned to the drawing-room, where for an hour or so Arnold sat and listened to such music and singing as he had never heard in his life before. The songs seemed to be in every language in Europe, and he did not understand anything like half of them, so far, at least, as the words were concerned.

They were, however, so far removed from the average drawing-room medley of twaddle and rattle that the music interpreted the words into its own universal language, and made them almost superfluous.

For the most part they were sad and passionate, and once or twice, especially when Radna Michaelis was singing, Arnold saw tears well up into the eyes of the women, and the brows of the men contract and their hands clench with sudden passion at the recollection of some terrible scene or story that was recalled by the song.

At last, close on midnight, the President rose from his seat and asked Natasha to sing the "Hymn of Freedom." She acknowledged the request with an inclination of her head, and then as Radna sat down to the piano, and she took her place beside it, all the rest rose to their feet like worshippers in a church.

The prelude was rather longer than usual, and as Radna played it Arnold heard running through it, as it were, echoes of all the patriotic songs of Europe from "Scots Wha Hae" and "The Shan van Voght" to the forbidden Polish National Hymn and the Swiss Republican song, which is known in England as "God Save the Queen." The prelude ended with a few bars of the "Marseillaise," and then Natasha began.

It was a marvellous performance. As the air changed from nation to nation the singer changed the language, and at the end of each verse the others took up the strain in perfect harmony, till it sounded like a chorus of the nations in miniature, each language coming in its turn until the last verse was reached.

Then there was silence for a moment, and then the opening chords of the "Marseillaise" rang out from the piano, slow and stately at first, and then quickening like the tread of an army going into battle.

Suddenly Natasha's voice soared up, as it were, out of the music, and a moment later the Song of the Revolution rolled forth in a flood of triumphant melody, above which Natasha's pure contralto thrilled sweet and strong, till to Arnold's intoxicated senses it seemed like the voice of some angel singing from the sky in the ears of men, and it was not until the hymn had been ended for some moments that he was recalled to earth by the President saying to him--

"Some day, perhaps, you will be floating in the clouds, and you will hear that hymn rising from the throats of millions gathered together from the ends of the earth, and when you hear that you will know that our work is done, and that there is peace on earth at last."

"I hope so," replied the engineer quietly, "and, what is more, I believe that some day I shall hear it."

"I believe so too," suddenly interrupted Radna, turning round on her seat at the piano, "but there will be many a battle-song sung to the accompaniment of battle-music before that happens. I wish "--

"That all Russia were a haystack, and that you were beside it with a lighted torch," said Natasha, half in jest and half in earnest.

"Yes, truly!" replied Radna, turning round and dashing fiercely into the "Marseillaise" again.

"I have no doubt of it. But, come, it is after midnight, and we have to get back to Cheyne Walk. The princess will think we have been arrested or something equally dreadful. Ah, Mr. Colston, we have a couple of seats to spare in the brougham. Will you and our Admiral of the Air condescend to accept a lift as far as Chelsea?"

"The condescension is in the offer, Natasha," replied Colston, flushing with pleasure and glancing towards Radna the while. Radna answered with an almost imperceptible sign of consent, and Colston went on: "If it were in an utterly opposite direction"--

"You would not be asked to come, sir. So don't try to pay compliments at the expense of common sense," laughed Natasha before he could finish. "If you do you shall sit beside me instead of Radna all the way."

There was a general smile at this retort, for Colston's avowed devotion to Radna and the terrible circumstances out of which it had sprung was one of the romances of the Circle.

As for Arnold, he could scarcely believe his ears when he heard that he was to ride from Clapham Common to Chelsea sitting beside this radiantly beautiful girl, behind whose innocence and gaiety there lay the shadow of her mysterious and terrible parentage.

Lovely and gentle as she seemed, he knew even now how awful a power she held in the slender little hand whose nervous clasp he could still feel upon his own, and this knowledge seemed to raise an invisible yet impassable barrier between him and the possibility of looking upon her as under other circumstances it would have been natural for a man to look upon so fair a woman.

Natasha's brougham was so far an improvement on those of the present day that it had two equally comfortable seats, and on these the four were cosily seated a few minutes after the party broke up. To Arnold, and, doubtless, to Colston also, the miles flew past at an unheard-of speed; but for all that, long before the carriage stopped at the house in Cheyne Walk, he had come to the conviction that, for good or evil, he was now bound to the Brotherhood by far stronger ties than any social or political opinions could have formed.

After they had said good-night at the door, and received an invitation to lunch for the next day to talk over the journey to Russia, he and Colston decided to walk to the Savoy, for it was a clear moonlit night, and each had a good deal to say to the other, which could be better and more safely said in the open air than in a cab. So they lit their cigars, buttoned up their coats, and started off eastward along the Embankment to Vauxhall.

"Well, my friend, tell me how you have enjoyed your evening, and what you think of the company," said Colston, by way of opening the conversation.

"Until supper I had a very pleasant time of it. I enjoyed the business part of the proceedings intensely, as any other mechanical enthusiast would have done, I suppose. But I frankly confess that after that my mind is in a state of complete chaos, in the midst of which only one figure stands out at all distinctly."

"And that figure is?"

"Natasha. Tell me--who is she?"

"I know no more as to her true identity than you do, or else I would answer you with pleasure."

"What! Do you mean to say "--

"I mean to say just what I have said. Not only do I not know who she is, but I do not believe that more than two or three members of the Circle, at the outside, know any more than I do. Those are, probably, Nicholas Roburoff, the President of the Executive, and his wife, and Radna Michaelis."

"Then, if Radna knows, how comes it that you do not know? You must forgive me if I am presuming on a too short acquaintance; but it certainly struck me to-night that you had very few secrets from each other."

"There is no presumption about it, my dear fellow," replied Colston, with a laugh. "It is no secret that Radna and I are lovers, and that she will be my wife when I have earned her."

"Now you have raised my curiosity again," interrupted Arnold, in an inquiring tone.

"And will very soon satisfy it. You saw that horrible picture in the Council-chamber? Yes. Well, I will tell you the whole story of that some day when we have more time; but for the present it will be enough for me to tell you that I have sworn not to ask Radna to come with me to the altar while a single person who was concerned in that nameless crime remains alive.

"There were five persons responsible for it to begin with--the governor of the prison, the prefect of police for the district, a spy, who informed against her, and the two soldiers who executed the infernal sentence. It happened nearly three years ago, and there are two of them alive still--the governor and the

prefect of police.

"Of course the Brotherhood would have removed them long ago had it decided to do so; but I got the circumstances laid before Natas, by the help of Natasha, and received permission to execute the sentences myself. So far I have killed three with my own hand, and the other two have not much longer to live.

"The governor has been transferred to Siberia, and will probably be the last that I shall reach. The prefect is now in command of the Russian secret police in London, and unless an accident happens he will never leave England."

Colston spoke in a cold, passionless, merciless tone, just as a lawyer might speak of a criminal condemned to die by the ordinary process of the law, and as Arnold heard him he shuddered. But at the same time the picture in the Council-chamber came up before his mental vision, and he was forced to confess that men who could so far forget their manhood as to lash a helpless woman up to a triangle and flog her till her flesh was cut to ribbons, were no longer men but wild beasts, whose very existence was a crime. So he merely said--

"They were justly slain. Now tell me more about Natasha."

"There is very little more that I can tell you, I'm afraid. All I know is that the Brotherhood of the Terror is the conception and creation of a single man, and that that man is Natas, the father of Natasha, as she is known to us. His orders come to us either directly in writing through Natasha, or indirectly through him you have heard spoken of as the Chief."

"Oh, then the Chief is not Natas?"

"No, we have all of us seen him. In fact, when he is in London he always presides at the Circle meetings. You would hardly believe it, but he is an English nobleman, and Secretary to the English Embassy at Petersburg."

"Then he is Lord Alanmere, and an old college friend of mine!" exclaimed Arnold. "I saw his name in the paper the night before last. It was mentioned in the account of the murder"--

"We don't call those murders, my friend," drily interrupted Colston; "we call them what they really are---executions."

"I beg your pardon; I was using the phraseology of the newspaper. What was his crime?"

"I don't know. But the fact that the Chief was there when he died is quite enough for me. Well, as I was saying, the Chief, as we call him, is the visible and supreme head of the Brotherhood so far as we are concerned. We know that Natas exists, and that he and the Chief admit no one save Natasha to their councils.

"They control the treasury absolutely, and apart from the contributions of those of the members who can afford to make them, they appear to provide the whole of the funds. Of course, Lord Alanmere, as you know, is enormously wealthy, and probably Natas is also rich. At any rate, there is never any want of money where the work of the Brotherhood is concerned.

"The estimates are given to Natasha when the Chief is not present, and at the next meeting she brings the money in English gold and notes, or in foreign currency as may be required, and that is all we know about the finances.

"Perhaps I ought to tell you that there is also a very considerable mystery about the Chief himself. When he presides at the Council meetings he displays a perfectly marvellous knowledge of both the members and the working of the Brotherhood.

"It would seem that nothing, however trifling, is hidden from him; and yet when any of us happen to meet him, as we often do, in Society, he treats us all as the most perfect strangers, unless we have been regularly introduced to him as ordinary acquaintances. Even then he seems utterly ignorant of his connection with the Brotherhood.

"The first time I met him outside the Circle was at a ball at the Russian Embassy. I went and spoke to him, giving the sign of the Inner Circle as I did so. To my utter amazement, he stared at me without a sign of recognition, and calmly informed me, in the usual way, that I had the advantage of him.

"Of course I apologised, and he accepted the apology with perfect good humour, but as an utter stranger would have done. A little later Natasha came in with the Princess Ornovski, whom you are going to Russia with, and who is there one of the most trusted agents of the Petersburg police. I told her what had happened.

"She looked at me for a moment rather curiously with those wonderful eyes of hers; then she laughed softly, and said, 'Come, I will set that at rest by introducing you; but mind, not a word about politics or those horrible secret societies, as you value my good opinion.'

"I understood from this that there was something behind which could not be explained there, where every other one you danced with might be a spy, and I was introduced to his lordship, and we became very good friends in the ordinary social way; but I failed to gather the slightest hint from his conversation that he even knew of the existence of the Brotherhood.

"When we left I drove home with Natasha and the Princess to supper, and on the way Natasha told me that his Lordship found it necessary to lead two entirely distinct lives, and that he adhered so rigidly to this rule that he never broke it even with her. Since then I have been most careful to respect what, after all, is a very wise, if not an absolutely necessary, precaution on his part."

"And, now," said Arnold, speaking in a tone that betrayed not a little hesitation and embarrassment, "if you can do so, answer me one more question, and do so as shortly and directly as you can. Is Natasha in love with, or betrothed to, any member of the Brotherhood as far as you know?"

Colston stopped and looked at him with a laugh in his eyes. Then he put his hand on his shoulder and said--

"As I thought, and feared! You have not escaped the common lot of all heart-whole men upon whom those terrible eyes of hers have looked. The Angel of the Revolution, as we call her among ourselves, is peerless among the daughters of men. What more natural, then, that all the sons of men should fall speedy victims to her fatal charms? So far as I know, every man who has ever seen her is more or less in love with her--and mostly more!

"As for the rest, I am as much in the dark as you are, save for the fact that I know, on the authority of Radna, that she is not betrothed to any one, and, so far as she knows, still in the blissful state of maiden fancy-freedom."

"Thank God for that!" said Arnold, with an audible sigh of relief. Then he went on in somewhat hurried confusion, "But there, of course, you think me a presumptuous ass, and so I am; wherefore"--

"There is no need for you to talk nonsense, my dear fellow. There never can be presumption in an honest man's love, no matter how exalted the object of it may be. Besides, are you not now the central hope of the Revolution, and is not yours the hand that shall hurl destruction on its enemies?"

"As for Natasha, peerless and all as she is, has not the poet of the ages said of just such as her--"

"She's beautiful, and therefore to be woo'd; She is a woman: therefore to be won?"

"And who, too, has a better chance of winning her than you will have when you are commanding the aerial fleet of the Brotherhood, and, like a very Jove, hurling your destroying bolts from the clouds, and deciding the hazard of war when the nations of Europe are locked in the death-struggle? Why, you see such a prospect makes even me poetical."

"Seriously, though, you must not consider the distance between you too great. Remember that you are a very different person now to what you were a couple of days ago. Without any offence, I may say that you were then nameless, while now you have the chance of making a name that will go down to all time as that of the solver of the greatest problem of this or any other age."

"Added to this, remember that Natasha, after all, is a woman, and, more than that, a woman devoted heart and soul to a great cause, in which great deeds are soon to be done. Great deeds are still the shortest way to a woman's heart, and that is the way you must take if you are to hope for success."

"I will!" simply replied Arnold, and the tone in which the two words were said convinced Colston that he meant all that they implied to its fullest extent.

CHAPTER VIII. LEARNING THE PART.

IT was nearly eleven the next morning by the time Arnold and Colston had finished breakfast. This was mostly due to the fact that Arnold had passed an almost entirely sleepless night, and had only begun to doze off towards morning. The events of the previous evening kept on repeating themselves in various sequences time after time, until his brain reeled in the whirl of emotions that they gave rise to.

Although of a strongly mathematical and even mechanical turn of mind, the young engineer was also an enthusiast, and therefore there was a strong colouring of romance in his nature which lifted him far above the level upon which his mere intellect was accustomed to work.

Where intellect alone was concerned--as, for instance, in the working out of a problem in engineering or mechanics--he was cool, calculating, and absolutely unemotional. His highly-disciplined mind was capable of banishing every other subject from consideration save the one which claimed the attention of the hour and of incorporating itself wholly with the work in hand until it was finished.

These qualities would have been quite sufficient to assure his success in life on conventional lines. They would have made him rich, and perhaps famous, but they would never have made him a great inventor; for no one can do anything really great who is not a dreamer as well as a worker.

It was because he was a dreamer that he had sacrificed everything to the working out of his ideal, and risked his life on the chance of success, and it was for just the same reason that the tremendous purposes of the Brotherhood had been able to fire his imagination with luridly brilliant dreams of a gigantic world-tragedy in which he, armed with almost supernatural powers, should play the central part.

This of itself would have been enough to make all other considerations of trivial moment in his eyes, and to bind him irrevocably to the Brotherhood. He saw, it is true, that a frightful amount of slaughter and suffering would be the price either of success or failure in so terrific a struggle; but he also knew that that struggle was inevitable in some form or other, and whether he took a part in it or not.

But since the last sun had set a new element had come into his life, and was working in line with both his imagination and his ambition. So far he had lived his life without any other human love than what was bound up with his recollections of his home and his boyhood. As a man he had never loved any human being. Science had been his only mistress, and had claimed his undivided devotion, engrossing his mind and intellect completely, but leaving his heart free.

And now, as it were in an instant, a new mistress had come forward out of the unknown. She had put her hand upon his heart, and, though no words of human speech had passed between them, save the merest commonplaces, her soul had said to his, "This is mine. I have called it into life, and for me it shall live until the end."

He had heard this as plainly as though it had been said to him with the lips of flesh, and he had acquiesced in the imperious claim with a glad submission which had yet to be tinged with the hope that it might some day become a mastery.

Thus, as the silent, sleepless hours went by, did he review over and over again the position in which he found himself on the threshold of his strange new life, until at last physical exhaustion brought sleep to his eyes if not to his brain, and he found himself flying over the hills and vales of dreamland in his air-ship, with the roar of battle and the smoke of ruined towns far beneath him, and Natasha at his side, sharing with him the dominion of the air that his genius had won.

At length Colston came in to tell him that the breakfast was spoiling, and that it was high time to get up if they intended to be in time for their appointment at Chelsea. This brought him out of bed with effective suddenness, and he made a hasty toilet for breakfast, leaving more important preparations until afterwards.

During the meal their conversation naturally turned chiefly on the visit that they were to pay, and Colston took the opportunity of explaining one or two things that it was necessary for him to know with

regard to the new acquaintance that he was about to make at Chelsea.

"So far as the outside world is concerned," said he, "Natasha is the niece of the Princess Ornovski. She is the daughter of a sister of hers, who married an English gentleman, named Darrel, who was drowned with his wife about twelve years ago, when the Albania was wrecked off the coast of Portugal. The Princess had a sister, who was drowned with her husband in the Albania, and she left a daughter about Natasha's then age, but who died of consumption shortly after in Nice.

"Under these circumstances, it was, of course, perfectly easy for the Princess to adopt Natasha, and introduce her into Society as her niece as soon as she reached the age of coming out.

"This has been of immense service to the Brotherhood, as the Princess is, as I told you, one of the most implicitly trusted allies of the Petersburg police. She is received at the Russian Court, and is therefore able to take Natasha into the best Russian Society, where her extraordinary beauty naturally enables her to break as many hearts as she likes and to learn secrets which are of the greatest importance to the Brotherhood.

"Her Society name is Fedora Darrel, and it will scarcely be necessary to tell you that outside our own Circle no such being as Natasha has any existence."

"I perfectly understand," replied Arnold. "The name shall never pass my lips save in privacy, and indeed it is hardly likely that it will ever do so even then, for your habit of calling each other by your Christian names is too foreign to my British insularity."

"It is a Russian habit, as you, of course, know, and added to that, we are, so far as the Cause is concerned, all brothers and sisters together, and so it comes natural to us. Anyhow, you will have to use it with Natasha, for in the Circle she has no other name, and to call her Miss Darrel there would be to produce something like an earthquake."

"Oh, in that case, I daresay I shall be able to avoid the calamity, though there will seem to be a presumption about it that will not make me very comfortable at first."

"Too much like addressing one's sweetheart, eh?"

This brought the conversation to a sudden stop, for Arnold's only reply to it was a quick flush, and a lapse into silence that was a good deal more eloquent than any verbal reply could have been. Colston noticed it with a smile, and got up and lit a pipe.

For the first time for a good few years Arnold took considerable pains with his toilet that morning. A new fit-out had just been delivered by a tailor who had promised the things within twenty-four hours, and had kept his word. The consequences were that he was able to array himself in perfect morning costume, from his hat to his boots, and that was what it had not been his to do since he left college.

Colston had recommended him in his easy friendly way to pay scrupulous attention to externals in the part that he would henceforth have to play before the world. He fully saw the wisdom of this advice, for he knew that, however well a part may be played, if it is not dressed to perfection, some sharp eyes will see that it is a part and not a reality.

The playing of his part was to begin that day, and he recognised that at least one of the purposes of his visit to Natasha was the determining of what that part was to be. He thus looked forward with no little curiosity to the events of the afternoon, quite apart from the supreme interest that centred in his hostess. They started out nearly a couple of hours before they were due at Cheyne Walk, as they had several orders to give with regard to Arnold's outfit for the journey that was before him; and this done, they reached the house about a quarter of an hour before lunch time.

They were received in the most delightful of sitting-rooms by a very handsome, aristocratic-looking woman, who might have been anywhere between forty and fifty. She shook hands very cordially with Arnold, saying as she did so--

"Welcome, Richard Arnold! The friends of the Cause are mine, and I have heard much about you already from Natasha, so that I already seem to know you. I am very sorry that I was not able to be at the Circle last night to see what you had to show. Natasha tells me that it is quite a miracle of genius."

"She is too generous in her praise," replied Arnold, speaking as quietly as he could in spite of the

delight that the words gave him. "It is no miracle, but only the logical result of thought and work. Still, I hope that it will be found to realise its promise when the time of trial comes."

"Of that I have no doubt, from all that I hear," said the Princess. "Before long I shall hope to see it for myself. Ah, here is Natasha. Come, I must introduce you afresh, for you do not know her yet as the world knows her."

Arnold heard the door open behind him as the Princess spoke, and, turning round, saw Natasha coming towards him with her hand outstretched and a smile of welcome on her beautiful face. Before their hands met the Princess moved quietly between them and said, half in jest and half in earnest--

"Fedora, permit me to present to you Mr. Richard Arnold, who is to accompany us to Russia to inspect the war-balloon offered to our Little Father the Tsar. Mr. Arnold, my niece, Fedora Darrell. There, now you know each other."

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr. Arnold," said Natasha, with mock gravity as they shook hands. "I have heard much already of your skill in connection with Aerial navigation, and I have no doubt but that your advice will be of the greatest service to his Majesty."

"That is as it may be," answered Arnold, at once entering into the somewhat grim humour of the situation. "But if it is possible I should like to hear something a little definite as to this mission with which I have been, I fear, undeservingly honoured. I have been very greatly interested in the problem of Aerial navigation for some years past, but I must confess that this is the first I have heard of these particular war-balloons."

"It is for the purpose of enlightening you on that subject that this little party has been arranged," said the Princess, turning for the moment away from Colston, with whom she was talking earnestly in a low tone. "Ha! There goes the lunch-bell. Mr. Colston, your arm. Fedora, will you show Mr. Arnold the way?"

Arnold opened the door for the Princess to go out, and then followed with Natasha on his arm. As they went out, she said in a low tone to him--

"I think, if you don't mind, you had better begin at once to call me Miss Darrel, so as to get into the way of it. A slip might be serious, you know."

"Your wishes are my laws, Miss Darrel," replied he, the name slipping as easily off his tongue as if he had known her by it for months. It may have been only fancy on his part, he thought he felt just the lightest, imaginable pressure on his arm as he spoke. At any rate, he was vain enough or audacious enough to take the impression for a reality, and walked the rest of the way to the dining-room on air.

The meal was dainty and perfectly served, but there were no servants present, for obvious reasons, and so they waited on themselves. Colston sat opposite the Princess and carved the partridges, while Arnold was vis-a-vis to Natasha, a fact which had a perceptible effect upon his appetite.

"Now," said the Princess, as soon as every one was helped, "I will enlighten you, Mr. Arnold, as to your mission to Russia. One part of the business, I presume, you are already familiar with?" Arnold bowed his assent, and she went on--

"Then the other is easily explained. Interested as you are in the question, I suppose there is no need to tell you that for several years past the Tsar has had an offer open to all the world of a million sterling for a vessel that will float in the air, and be capable of being directed in its course as a ship at sea can be directed."

"Yes, I am well aware of the fact. Pray proceed." As he said this Arnold glanced across the table at Natasha, and a swift smile and a flash from her suddenly unveiled eyes told him that she, too, was thinking of how the world's history might have been altered had the Tsar's million been paid for his invention. Then the Princess went on--

"Well, through a friend at the Russian Embassy, I have learnt that a French engineer has, so he says, perfected a balloon constructed on a new principle, which he claims will meet the conditions of the Tsar's offer.

"My friend also told me that his Majesty had decided to take an entirely disinterested opinion with

regard to this invention, and asked me if I could recommend any English engineer who had made a study of Aerial navigation, and who would be willing to go to Russia, superintend the trials of the war-balloon, and report as to their success or otherwise.

"This happened a few days ago only, and as I had happened to read an article that you will remember you wrote about six months ago in the Nineteenth, or, as it is now called, the Twentieth Century, I thought of your name, and said I would try to find some one. Two days later I got news from the Circle of your invention--never mind how; you will learn that later on--and called at the Embassy to say I had found some one whose judgment could be absolutely relied upon. Now, wasn't that kind of me, to give you such a testimonial as that to his Omnipotence the Tsar of All the Russias?"

Once more Arnold bowed his acknowledgments--this time somewhat ironically, and Natasha interrupted the narrative by saying with a spice of malice in her voice--

"No doubt the Little Father will duly recognise your kindness, Princess, when he gets quite to the bottom of the matter."

"I hope he will," replied the Princess, "but that is a matter of the future--and of considerable doubt as well." Then, turning to Arnold again, she continued--

"You will now, of course, see the immense advantage there appeared to be in getting you to examine these war-balloons. They are evidently the only possible rivals to your own invention in the field, and therefore it is of the utmost importance that you should know their strength or their weakness, as the case may be.

"Well, that is all I have to say, so far. It has been decided that you shall go, if you are willing, with us to Petersburg the day after to-morrow to see the balloon, and make your report. All your expenses will be paid on the most liberal scale, for the Tsar is no niggard in spending either his own or other people's money, and you will have a handsome fee into the bargain for your trouble."

"So far as the work is concerned, of course, I undertake it willingly," said Arnold, as the Princess stopped speaking. "But it hardly seems to me to be right that I should take even the Tsar's money under such circumstances. To tell you the truth, it looks to me rather uncomfortably like false pretences."

Again Natasha's eyes flashed approval across the table, but nevertheless she said--

"You seem to forget, my friend, that we are at war with the Tsar, and all's fair in--in love and war. Besides, if you have any scruples about keeping the fee for your professional services--which, after all, you will render as honestly as though it were the merest matter of business--you can put it into the treasury, and so ease your conscience. Remember, too," she went on more seriously, "how the enormous wealth of this same Tsar has swollen by the confiscation of fortunes whose possessors had committed no other crime than becoming obnoxious to the corrupt bureaucracy."

"I will take the fee if I fairly earn it, Miss Darrel," replied Arnold, returning the glance as he spoke, "and it shall be my first contribution to the treasury of the Brotherhood."

"Spoken like a sensible man," chimed in the Princess. "After all, it is no worse than spoiling the Egyptians, and you have scriptural authority for that. However, you can do as you like with his Majesty's money when you get it. The main fact is that you have the opportunity of going to earn it, and that Colonel Martinov is coming here to tea this afternoon to bring our passports, specially authorising us to travel without customs examination or any kind of questioning to any part of the Tsar's dominions, and that, I can assure you, is a very exceptional honour indeed."

"Who did you say? Martinov? Is that the Colonel Martinov who is the director of the secret police here?" asked Colston hurriedly.

"Yes," replied the Princess, "the same. Why do you ask?"

"Because," said Colston quietly, "he received the sentence of death nearly a month ago, and to-morrow night he will be executed, unless there is some accident. It was he who stood with the governor of Brovno in the prison-yard and watched Radna Michaelis flogged by the soldiers. I received news this morning that the arrangements are complete, and that the sentence will be carried out to-morrow night."

"Yes, that is so," added Natasha, as Colston ceased speaking. "Everything is settled. It is therefore well that he should do something useful before he meets his fate."

"How curious that it should just happen so!" said the Princess calmly, as she rose from the table and moved towards the door followed by Natasha.

As soon as the ladies had left the room, Colston and Arnold lit their cigarettes and chatted while they smoked over their last glass of claret. Arnold would have liked to have asked more about the coming tragedy, but something in Colston's manner restrained him; and so the conversation remained on the subject of the Russian journey until they returned to the sitting-room.

CHAPTER IX. THE BEGINNING OF SORROWS.

ON the 6th of March 1904, just six months after Arnold's journey to Russia, a special meeting of the Inner Circle of the Terrorists took place in the Council-chamber, at the house on Clapham Common.

Although it was only attended by twelve persons all told, and those men and women whose names were unknown outside the circle of their own Society and the records of the Russian police, it was the most momentous conference that had taken place in the history of the world since the council of war that Abdurrahman the Moslem had held with his chieftains eleven hundred and seventy-two years before, and, by taking their advice, spared the remnants of Christendom from the sword of Islam.

Then the fate of the world hung in the balance of a council of war, and the supremacy of the Cross or the Crescent depended, humanly speaking, upon the decision of a dozen warriors. Now the fate of the civilisation that was made possible by that decision, lay at the mercy of a handful of outlaws and exiles who had laboriously brought to perfection the secret schemes of a single man.

The work of the Terrorists was finally complete. Under the whole fabric of Society lay the mines which a single spark would now explode, and above this slumbering volcano the earth was trembling with the tread of millions of armed men, divided into huge hostile camps, and only waiting until Diplomacy had finished its work in the dark, and gave the long awaited signal of inevitable and universal war.

To-night that spark was to be shaken from the torch of Revolution, and to-morrow the first of the mines would explode. After that, if the course to be determined on by the Terrorist Council failed to arrive at the results which it was designed to reach, the armies of Europe would fight their way through the greatest war that the world had ever seen, the Fates would once more decide in favour of the strongest battalions, the fittest would triumph, and a new era of military despotism would begin--perhaps neither much better nor much worse than the one it would succeed.

If, on the other hand, the plans of the Terrorists were successfully worked out to their logical conclusion, it would not be war only, but utter destruction that Society would have to face. And then with dissolution would come anarchy. The thrones of the world would be overthrown, the fabric of Society would be dissolved, commerce would come to an end, the structure that it had taken twenty centuries of the discipline of war and the patient toil of peace to build up, would crumble into ruins in a few short months, and then--well, after that no man could tell what would befall the remains of the human race that had survived the deluge. The means of destruction were at hand, and they would be used without mercy, but for the rest no man could speak.

When Nicholas Roburoff, the President of the Executive, rose in his place at eight o'clock to explain the business in hand, every member present saw at a glance, by the gravity of his demeanour, that the communication that he had to make was of no ordinary nature, but even they were not prepared for the catastrophe that he announced in the first sentence that he uttered.

"Friends," he said, in a voice that was rendered deeply impressive by the emotion that he vainly tried to conceal, "it is my mournful duty to tell you that she whom any one of us would willingly shed our blood to serve or save from the slightest evil, our beautiful and beloved Angel of the Revolution, as we so fondly call her, Natasha, the daughter of the Master, has, in the performance of her duty to the Cause, fallen into the hands of Russia."

Save for a low, murmuring groan that ran round the table, the news was received in silence. It was too terrible, too hideous in the awful meaning that its few words conveyed, for any exclamations of grief, or any outburst of anger, to express the emotions that it raised.

Not one of those who heard it but had good reason to know what it meant for a revolutionist to fall into the hands of Russia. For a man it meant the last extremity of human misery that flesh and blood could bear, but for a young and beautiful woman it was a fate that no words could describe---a doom that could only be thought of in silence and despair; and so the friends of Natasha were silent, though

they did not yet despair. Roburoff bowed his head in acknowledgment of the inarticulate but eloquent endorsement of his words, and went on--

"You already know the outcome of Richard Arnold's visit to Russia; how he was present at the trial of the Tsar's war-balloon, and was compelled to pronounce it such a complete success, that the Autocrat at once gave orders for the construction of a fleet of fifty aerostats of the same pattern; and how, thanks to the warning conveyed by Anna Ornovski, he was able to prevent his special passport being stolen by a police agent, and so to foil the designs of the chief of the Third Section to stop him taking the secret of the construction of the war-balloon out of Russia. You also know that he brought back the Chief's authority to build an air-ship after the model which was exhibited to us here, and that since his return he has been prosecuting that work on Drumcraig Island, one of the possessions of the Chief in the Outer Hebrides, which he placed at his disposal for the purpose.

"You know, also, that Natasha and Anna Ornovski went to Russia partly to discover the terms of the secret treaty that we believed to exist between France and Russia, and partly to warn, and, if possible, remove from Russian soil a large number of our most valuable allies, whose names had been revealed to the Minister of the Interior, chiefly through the agency of the spy Martinov, who was executed in this room six months ago.

"The first part of the task was achieved, not without difficulty, but with complete success, and of that more anon. The second part was almost finished when Natasha and Anna Ornovski were surprised in the house of Alexei Kassatkin, a member of the Moscow Nihilist Circle, in the Bolshoi Dmitrietka. He had been betrayed by one of his own servants, and a police visit was the result.

"Added to this there is reason to believe that she had, quite apart from this, become acquainted with enough official secrets to make her removal desirable in high quarters. I need not tell you that that is the usual way in which the Tsar rewards those of his secret servants who get to know too much.

"The fact of her being found in the house of a betrayed Nihilist was taken as sufficient proof of sympathy or complicity, and she was arrested. Natasha, as Fedora Darrel, claimed to be a British subject, and, as such, to be allowed to go free in virtue of the Tsar's safe conduct, which she exhibited. Instead of that she was taken before the chief of the Moscow police, rudely interrogated, and then brutally searched. Unhappily, in the bosom of her dress was found a piece of paper bearing some of the new police cypher. That was enough. That night they were thrown into prison, and three days later taken to the convict depot under sentence of exile by administrative process to Sakhalin for life.

"You know what that means for a beautiful woman like Natasha. She will not go to Sakhalin. They do not bury beauty like hers in such an abode of desolation as that. If she cannot be rescued, she will only have two alternatives before her. She will become the slave and plaything of some brutal governor or commandant at one of the stations, or else she will kill herself. Of course, of these two she would choose the latter--if she could and when she could. Should she be driven to that last resort of despair, she shall be avenged as woman never yet was avenged; but rescue must, if possible, come before revenge.

"The information that we have received from the Moscow agent tells us that the convict train to which Natasha and Anna Ornovski are attached left the depot nearly a fortnight ago; they were to be taken by train in the usual way to Nizhni Novgorod, thence by barge on the Volga and Kama to Perm, and on by rail to Tiumen, the forwarding station for the east. Until they reach Tiumen they will be safe from anything worse than what the Russians are pleased to call 'discipline,' but once they disappear into the wilderness of Siberia they will be lost to the world, and far from all law but the will of their official slave-drivers.

"It has, therefore, been decided that the rescue shall be attempted before the chain-gang leaves Tiumen, if it can be reached in time. As nearly as we can calculate, the march will begin on the morning of Friday the 9th, that is to say, in three nights and one day from now. Happily we possess the means of making the rescue, if it can be accomplished by human means. I have received a report from Richard Arnold saying that the Ariel is complete, and that she has made a perfectly satisfactory trial trip

to the clouds. The Ariel is the only vehicle in existence that could possibly reach the frontier of Siberia in the given time, and it is fitting that her first duty should be the rescue of the Angel of the Revolution from the clutches of the Tyrant of the North.

"Alexis Mazanoff, it is the will of the Master that you shall take these instructions to Richard Arnold and accompany him on the voyage in order to show him what course to steer, and assist him in every way possible. You will find the Chief's yacht at Port Patrick ready to convey you to Drumcraig Island. When you have heard what is further necessary for you to hear, you will take the midnight express from Euston. Have you any preparations to make?"

"No," replied Mazanoff; or Colston, to call him by a name more familiar to the reader. "I can start in half an hour if necessary, and on such an errand you may, of course, depend on me not to lose much time. I presume there are full instructions here?"

"Yes, both for the rescue and for your conduct afterwards, whether you are successful or unsuccessful," said the President. Then turning to the others he continued--

"You may now rest assured that all that can be done to rescue Natasha will be done, and we must therefore turn to other matters. I said a short time ago that the conditions of the secret treaty between France and Russia had been discovered by the two brave women who are now suffering for their devotion to the cause of the Revolution. A full copy of them is in the hands of the Chief, who arrives in London to-day, and will at once lay the documents before Mr. Balfour, the Premier.

"It is extremely hostile to England, and amounts, in fact, to a compact on the part of France to declare war and seize the Suez Canal, as soon as the first shot is fired between Great Britain and Russia. In return for this, Russia is to invade Germany and Austria, destroy the eastern frontier fortresses with her fleet of war-balloons, and then cross over and do the same on the Rhine, while France at last throws herself upon her ancient foe.

"Meanwhile, the French fleet is to concentrate in the Mediterranean as quietly and rapidly as possible, before war actually breaks out, so as to be able to hold the British and Italians in check, and shut the Suez Canal, while Russia, who is pushing her troops forward to the Hindu Kush, gets ready for a dash at the passes, and a rush upon Cashmere, before Britain can get sufficient men out to India by the Cape to give her very much trouble.

"As there also exists a secret compact between Britain and the Triple Alliance, binding all four powers to declare war the moment one is threatened, the disclosure of this treaty must infallibly lead to war in a few weeks. In addition to this, measures have been taken to detach Italy from the Triple Alliance at the last moment, if possible. Success in this respect is, however, somewhat uncertain.

"To make assurance doubly sure, the Chief informs me that he has ordered Ivan Brassoff, who is in command of a large reconnoitring party on the Afghan side of the Hindu Kush, to provoke reprisals from a similar party of Indian troops who have been told off to watch their movements. Captain Brassoff is one of us, and can be depended upon to obey at all costs. He will do this in a fortnight from now, and therefore we may feel confident that Great Britain and Russia will be at war within a month.

"With the first outbreak of war our work for the present ceases, so far as active interference goes. We shall therefore withdraw from the scene of action until the arrival of the supreme moment when the nations of Europe shall be locked in the death-struggle, and the fate of the world will rest in our hands. The will of the Master now is that all the members of the Brotherhood shall at once wind up their businesses, and turn all of their possessions that are not portable and useful into money.

"A large steamer has been purchased and manned with members of the Outer Circle who are sailors by profession. She is now being loaded at Liverpool with all the machinery and materials necessary for the construction of twelve air-ships like the Ariel. This steamer, when ready for sea, will sail, ostensibly, for Rio de Janeiro with a cargo of machinery, but in reality for Drumcraig, where she will embark the workmen who will be left there by the Ariel with all the working plant on the island, and from there she will proceed to a lonely island off the West Coast of Africa, between Cape Blanco and Cape Verde, where new works will be set up and the fleet of air-ships put together as rapidly as

possible.

"The position of this island is in the instructions which Alexis Mazanoff takes to Drumcraig to-night, and the Ariel will rendezvous there when the work that is in hand for her is done. The members of the Brotherhood will, of course, go in the steamer as passengers for Rio, so that no suspicions may be aroused, and every one must be ready to embark in ten days from now.

"That is all I have to say at present in the name of the Master. And now, Alexis Mazanoff, it is time you set out. We shall remain here and discuss every detail fully so that nothing may be overlooked. You will find that everything has been provided for in the instructions you have, so go, and may the Master of Destiny be with you!"

As he spoke he held out his hand, which the young man grasped heartily, saying--

"Farewell! I will obey to the death, and if success can be earned we will earn it. If not, you shall hear of the Ariel's work in Russia before the week is out."

He then took leave of the other members of the Council, coming last to Radna. As their hands clasped she said--

"I wish I could come with you, but that is impossible. But bring Natasha back to us safe and sound, and there is nothing that you can ask of me that I will not say 'yes' to. Go, and God speed your good work. Farewell!"

For all answer he took her in his arms before them all. Their lips met in one long silent kiss, and a moment later he had gone to strike the first blow in the coming world-war, and to bring the beginning of sorrows on the Tyrant of the North.

CHAPTER X. THE "ARIEL."

ON the sixth stroke of twelve that night the Scotch express drew out of Euston Station. At half-past nine the next morning, the Lurline, Lord Alanmere's yacht, steamed out of Port Patrick Harbour, and at one o'clock precisely she dropped her anchor in the little inlet that served for a harbour at Drumcraig.

Colston had the quarter-boat lowered and pulled ashore without a moment's delay, and as his foot touched the shore Arnold grasped his hand, and, after the first words of welcome, asked for the latest news of Natasha.

Without immediately answering, Colston put his arm through his, drew him away from the men who were standing about, and told him as briefly and gently as he could the terrible news of the calamity that had befallen the Brotherhood, and the errand upon which he had come.

Arnold received the blow as a brave man should--in silence. His now bronzed face turned pale, his brows contracted, and his teeth clenched till Colston could hear them gritting upon each other. Then a great wave of agony swept over his soul as a picture too horrible for contemplation rose before his eyes, and after that came calm, the calm of rapid thought and desperate resolve.

He remembered the words that Natasha had used in a letter that she had given him when she took leave of him in Russia. "We shall trust to you to rescue us, and, if that is no longer possible, to avenge us."

Yes, and now the time had come to justify that trust and prove his own devotion. It should be proved to the letter, and if there was cause for vengeance, the proof should be written in blood and flame over all the wide dominions of the Tsar. Grief might come after, when there was time for it; but this was the hour of action, and a strange savage joy seemed to come with the knowledge that the safety of the woman he loved now depended mainly upon his own skill and daring.

Colston respected his silence, and waited until he spoke. When he did he was astonished at the difference that those few minutes had made in the young engineer. The dreamer and the enthusiast had become the man of action, prompt, stern, and decided. Colston had never before heard from his lips the voice in which he at length said to him--

"Where is this place? How far is it as the crow flies from here?"

"At a rough guess I should say about two thousand two hundred miles, almost due east, and rather less than two hundred miles on the other side of the Ourals."

"Good! That will be twenty hours' flight for us, or less if this south-west wind holds good."

"What!" exclaimed Colston. "Twenty hours, did you say? You must surely be making some mistake. Don't you mean forty hours? Think of the enormous distance. Why, even then we should have to travel over sixty miles an hour through the air."

"My dear fellow, I don't make mistakes where figures are concerned. The paradox of aerial navigation is 'the greater the speed the less the resistance.'"

"In virtue of that paradox I am able to tell you that the speed of the Ariel in moderate weather is a hundred and twenty miles an hour, and a hundred and twenty into two thousand two hundred goes eighteen times and one-third. This is Wednesday, and we have to be on the Asiatic frontier at daybreak on Friday. We shall start at dusk to-night, and you shall see to-morrow's sun set over the Ourals."

"That means from the eastern side of the range!"

"Of course. There will be no harm in being a few hours too soon. In case we may have a long cruise, I must have additional stores, and power-cylinders put on board. Come, you have not seen the Ariel yet."

"I have made several improvements on the model, as I expected to do when I came to the actual building of the ship, and, what is more important than that, I have immensely increased the motive power and economised space and weight at the same time. In fact, I don't despair now of two hundred miles an hour before very long. Come!"

The engineer and the enthusiast had now come to the fore again, and the man and the lover had

receded, put back, as it were, until the time for love, or perchance for sorrow, had come.

He put his arm through Colston's, and led him up a hill-path and through a little gorge which opened into a deep valley, completely screened on all sides by heather-clad hills. Sprinkled about the bottom of this valley were a few wooden dwelling-houses and workshops, and in the centre was a huge shed, or rather an enclosure now, for its roof had been taken off.

In this lay, like a ship in a graving-dock, a long, narrow, grey-painted vessel almost exactly like a sea-going ship, save for the fact that she had no funnel, and that her three masts, Instead of yards, each carried a horizontal fan-wheel, while from each of her sides projected, level with the deck, a plane twice the width of the deck and nearly as long as the vessel herself.

They entered the enclosure and walked round the hull. This was seventy feet long and twelve wide amidships, and save for size it was the exact counterpart of the model already described.

As soon as he had taken Colston round the hull, and roughly explained its principal features, reserving more detailed description and the inspection of the interior for the voyage, he gave the necessary orders for preparing for a lengthy journey, and the two went on board the Lurline to dinner, which Colston had deferred in order to eat it in Arnold's company.

After dinner they carefully discussed the situation in order that every possible accident might be foreseen, argued the pros and cons of the venture in all their bearings, and even went so far as to plan the vengeance they would take should, by any chance, the rescue fail or come too late.

The instructions, signed by Natas himself, were very precise on certain essential points, and in their broad outlines, but, like all wisely planned instructions to such men as these, they left ample margin for individual initiative in case of emergency.

Some of the stores of the Lurline had to be transferred to the Ariel, and these were taken ashore after dinner, and at the same time Colston made his first inspection of the interior of the air-ship, under the guidance of her creator. What struck him most at first sight was the apparent inadequacy of the machinery to the attainment of the tremendous speed at which Arnold had promised they should travel.

There were four somewhat insignificant-looking engines in all. Of these, one drove the stern propeller, one the side propellers, and two the fan-wheels on the masts. He learnt as soon as the voyage began, that, by a very simple switch arrangement, the power of the whole four engines could be concentrated on the propellers; for, once in the air, the lifting wheels were dispensed with and lowered on deck, and the ship was entirely sustained by the pressure of the air under her planes.

There was not an ounce of superfluous wood or metal about the beautifully constructed craft, but for all that she was complete in every detail, and the accommodation she had for crew and passengers was perfectly comfortable, and in some respects cosy in the extreme. Forward there was a spacious cabin with berths for six men, and aft there were separate cabins for six people, and a central saloon for common use.

On deck there were three structures, a sort of little conning tower forward, a wheel-house aft, and a deck saloon amidships. All these were, of course, so constructed as to offer the least possible resistance to the wind, or rather the current created by the vessel herself when flying through the air at a speed greater than that of the hurricane itself.

All were closely windowed with toughened glass, for it is hardly necessary to say that, but for such a protection, every one who appeared above the level of the deck would be almost instantly suffocated, if not whirled overboard, by the rush of air when the ship was going at full speed. Her armament consisted of four long, slender cannon, two pointing over the bows, and two over the stern.

The crew that Arnold had chosen for the voyage consisted, curiously enough, of men belonging to the four nationalities which would be principally concerned in the Titanic struggle which a few weeks would now see raging over Europe. Their names were Andrew Smith, Englishman, and coxswain; Ivan Petrovitch, Russian; Franz Meyer, German; and Jean Guichard, Frenchman. Diverse as they were, there never were four better workers, or four better friends.

They had no country but the world, and no law save those which governed their Brotherhood. They

conversed in assorted but perfectly intelligible English, for the very simple reason that Mr. Andrew Smith consistently refused to attempt even the rudiments of any other tongue.

While the stores were being put on board, Arnold made a careful examination of every part of the machinery, and then of the whole vessel, in order to assure himself that everything was in perfect order. This done, he gave his final instructions to those of the little community who were left behind to await the arrival of the steamer, and as the sun sank behind the western ridges of the island, he went on board the Ariel with Colston, took his place at the wheel, and ordered the fan-wheels to be set in motion.

Colston was standing by the open door of the wheel-house as Arnold communicated his order to the engine-room by pressing an electric button, one of four in a little square of mahogany in front of the wheel.

There was no vibration or grinding, as would have been the case in starting a steamer, but only a soft whirring humming sound, that rose several degrees in pitch as the engines gained speed, and the fan-wheels revolved faster and faster until they sang in the air, and the Ariel rose without a jar or a tremor from the ground, slowly at first, and then more and more swiftly, until Colston saw the ground sinking rapidly beneath him, and the island growing smaller and smaller, until it looked like a little patch on the dark grey water of the sea.

Away to the north and west he could see the innumerable islands of the Hebrides, while to the east the huge mountainous mass of the mainland of Scotland loomed dark upon the horizon.

When the barometer marked eight hundred feet above the sea-level, the Ariel passed through a stratum of light clouds and on the upper side of this the sun was still shining, shooting his almost level rays across it as though over some illimitable sea of white fleecy billows, whose crests were tipped with rosy, golden light.

Above the surface of this fairy sea rose north-eastward the black mass of Ben More on the Island of Mull, and to the southward, the lesser peaks of Jura and Islay.

While he was still wrapped in admiration of the strange beauty of this, to him, marvellous scene, the Ariel had risen to a thousand feet, still almost in a vertical line from the island. Arnold now pressed another button, and the stern propeller began to revolve swiftly and noiselessly, and Colston saw the waves of the cloud-sea begin to slip behind, although so smooth was the working of the machinery, and the motion of the airship, that, but for this, he could hardly have guessed that he was in motion.

Arnold now turned a few spokes of the wheel, and headed the Ariel due east by the compass. Then he touched a third button. The side propellers began to turn swiftly on their axes, and, at the same time the speed of the fan-wheels slackened, and gradually stopped.

Colston now began to feel the air rushing by him in a stream so rapid and strong, that he had to take hold of the side of the wheel-house doorway to steady himself.

"I think you had better come inside and shut the door," said Arnold. "We are getting up speed now, and in a few minutes you won't be able to hold yourself there. You'll be able to see just as well inside."

Colston did as he was bidden, and as soon as he was safely inside Arnold pulled a lever beside the wheel, and slightly inclined the planes from forward aft. At the same time the fan-wheels began to slide down the masts until they rested upon the deck.

"Now, you shall see her fly," said Arnold, taking a speaking-tube from the wall and whistling thrice into it. Colston felt a slight tremor in the deck beneath his feet, and then a lifting movement. He staggered a little, and said to Arnold--

"What's that? Are we going higher still?"

"Yes," replied the engineer. "She is feeling the air-planes now under the increased speed. I am going up to fifteen hundred feet, so that we shall only have the highest peaks to steer clear of in crossing Scotland. Now, use your eyes, and you will see something worth looking at."

The upper part of the wheel-house was constructed almost entirely of glass, and so Colston could see just as well as if he had been on deck outside. He did use his eyes. In fact, for some time to come, all his other senses seemed to be merged in that of sight, for the scene was one of such rare and marvellous

beauty, and the sensations that it called up were of so completely novel a nature, that, for the time being, he felt as though he had been suddenly transported into fairyland.

The cloud-sea now lay about seven hundred feet beneath them. The sun had sunk quite below the horizon, even at that elevation; but his absence was more than made up for by the nearly full moon, which had risen to the southward, as though to greet the conqueror of the air, and was spreading a flood of silvery radiance over the snowy plain beneath, through the great gaps in which they could see the darker sheen of the moving sea-waves.

Their course lay almost exactly along the fifty-sixth parallel of latitude, and took them across Argyle, Dumbarton, and Stirlingshire to the head of the Firth of Forth. As they approached the mainland, Colston saw one or two peaks rise up out of the clouds, and soon they were sweeping along in the midst of a score or so of these. To the left Ben Lomond towered into the clear sky above his attendant peaks, and to the right the lower summits of the Campsie Fells soon rose a few miles ahead.

The rapidity with which these mountain-tops rose up on either side, and were left behind, proved to Colston that the Ariel must be travelling at a tremendous speed, and yet, but for a very slight quivering of the deck, there was no motion perceptible, so smoothly did the air-ship glide through the elastic medium in which she floated.

So engrossed was he with the unearthly beauty of the new world into which he had risen, that for nearly two hours he stood without speaking a word. Arnold, wrapped in his own thoughts, maintained a like silence, and so they sped on amidst a stillness that was only broken by the soft whirring of the propellers, and the singing of the wind past the masts and stays.

At length a faint sound like the dashing of breakers on a rocky coast roused Colston from his reverie, and he turned to Arnold and said--

"What is that? Not the sea, surely!"

"Yes, those are the waves of the Firth of Forth breaking on the shores of Fife."

"What! Do you mean to tell me that we have crossed Scotland already? Why, we have not been an hour on the way yet!"

"Oh yes, we have," replied the engineer. "We have been nearly two. You have been so busy looking about you that you have not noticed how the time has passed. We have travelled a little over two hundred and forty miles. We are over the German Ocean now, and as there will be no more hills until we reach the Ourals we can go down a little."

As he spoke he moved the lever beside him about an inch, and instantly the clouds seemed to rise up toward them as the Ariel swept downwards in her flight. A hundred feet above them Arnold touched the lever again, and the air--ship at once resumed her horizontal course.

Then he put her head a little more to the northward, and called down the speaking tube for Andrew Smith to come and relieve him. A minute later Smith's head appeared at the top of the companion-ladder which led from the saloon to the wheel-house, and Arnold gave him the wheel and the course, saying at the same time to Colston--

"Now, come down and have something to eat, and then we will have a smoke and a chat and go to bed. There is nothing more to be seen until the morning, and then I will show you Petersburg as it looks from the clouds."

"If you told me you would show me the Ourals themselves, I should believe you after what I have seen," replied Colston as together they descended the companion-way from the wheelhouse to the saloon.

"Ah, I'm afraid that would be too much even for the Ariel to accomplish in the time," said Arnold. "Still, I think I can guarantee that you shall cross Europe in such time as no man ever crossed it before."

CHAPTER XI. FIRST BLOOD.

AFTER supper the two friends ascended to the deck saloon for a smoke, and to continue their discussion of the tremendous events in which they were so soon to be taking part. They found the Ariel flying through a cloudless sky over the German Ocean, whose white-crested billows, silvered by the moonlight, were travelling towards the northeast under the influence of the south-west breeze from which the engineer had promised himself assistance when they started.

"We seem to be going at a most frightful speed," said Colston, looking down at the water. "There's a strong southwest breeze blowing, and yet those white horses seem to be travelling quite the other way."

"Yes," replied Arnold, looking down. "This wind will be travelling about twenty miles an hour, and that means that we are making nearly a hundred and fifty. The German Ocean here is five hundred miles across, and we shall cross it at this rate in about three hours and a half, and if the wind holds over the land we shall sight Petersburg soon after sunrise.

"The sun will rise to-morrow morning a few minutes after five by Greenwich time, which is about two hours behind Petersburg time. Altogether we shall make, I expect, from two to two and a half hours' gain on time."

The two men talked until a few minutes after ten, and then went to bed. Colston, who had been travelling all the previous night, began to feel drowsy in spite of the excitement of the novel voyage and almost as soon as he lay down in his berth dropped off into a sound, dreamless sleep, and knew nothing more until Arnold knocked at his door and said--

"If you want to see the sun rise, you had better get up. Coffee will be ready in a quarter of an hour."

Colston pulled back the slide which covered the large oblong pane of toughened glass which was let into the side of his cabin and looked out. There was just light enough in the grey dawn to enable him to see that the Ariel was passing over a sea dotted in the distance with an immense number of islands.

"The Baltic," he said to himself as he jumped out of bed. "This is travelling with a vengeance! Why, we must have travelled a good deal over a thousand miles during the night. I suppose those islands will be off the coast of Finland. If so, we are not far from Petersburg, as the Ariel seems to count distance."

The most magnificent spectacle that Colston had ever seen in his life, or, for the matter of that, ever dreamed of, was the one that he saw from the conning-tower of the Ariel while the sun was rising over the vast plain of mingled land and water which stretched away to the eastward until it melted away into the haze of early morning.

The sky was perfectly clear and cloudless, save for a few light clouds that hung about the eastern horizon, and were blazing gold and red in the light of the newly-risen sun. The air-ship was flying at an elevation of about two thousand feet, which appeared to be her normal height for ordinary travelling. There was land upon both sides of them, but in front opened a wide bay, the northern shores of which were still fringed with ice and snow.

"That is the Gulf of Finland," said Arnold. "The winter must have been very late this year, and that probably means that we shall find the eastern side of the Ourals still snow-bound."

"So much the better," replied Colston. "They will have a much better chance of escape if there is good travelling for a sleigh."

"Yes," replied Arnold, his brows contracting as he spoke. "Do you know, if it were not for the Master's explicit orders, I should be inclined to smash up the station at Ekaterinburg a few hours beforehand, and then demand the release of the whole convict train, under penalty of laying the town in ruins."

Colston shook his head, saying--

"No, no, my friend, we must have a little more diplomacy than that. Your thirst for the life of the enemy will, no doubt, be fully gratified later on. Besides, you must remember that you would probably blow some hundreds of perfectly innocent people to pieces, and very possibly a good many friends of

the Cause among them."

"True," replied Arnold; "I didn't think of that; but I'll tell you what we can do, if you like, without transgressing our instructions or hurting any one except the soldiers of the Tsar, who, of course, are paid to slaughter and be slaughtered, and so don't count."

"What is that?" asked Colston.

"We shall be passing over Kronstadt in a little over an hour, and we might take the opportunity of showing his Majesty the Tsar what the Ariel can do with the strongest fortress in Europe. How would you like to fire the first shot in the war of the Revolution?"

Colston was silent for a few moments, and then he looked up and said--

"There is not the slightest reason why we should not take a shot at Kronstadt, if only to give the Russians a foretaste of favours to come. Still, I won't fire the first shot on any account, simply because that honour belongs to you. I'll fire the second with pleasure."

"Very good," replied Arnold. "We'll have two shots apiece, one each as we approach the fortress, and one each as we leave it. Now come and take a preparatory lesson in the new gunnery."

They went down into the chief saloon, and there Arnold showed Colston a model of the new weapon with which the Ariel was armed, and thoroughly explained the working of it. After this they went to the wheel-house, where Arnold inclined the planes at a sharper angle, and sent the Ariel flying up into the sky, until the barometer showed an elevation of three thousand feet.

Then he signalled to the engine-room, the fan-wheels rose from the deck, as if by their own volition, and, as soon as they reached their places, began to spin round faster and faster, until Colston could again hear the high-pitched singing sound that he had heard as the Ariel rose from Drumcraig Island.

At the same time the speed of the vessel rapidly decreased; the side propellers ceased working, and the stern-screw revolved more and more slowly, until the speed came down to about thirty miles an hour.

By this time the great fortress of Kronstadt could be distinctly seen lying upon its island, like some huge watch-dog crouched at the entrance to his master's house, guarding the way to St. Petersburg.

"Now," said Arnold, "we can go outside without any fear of being blown off into space." They went out and walked forward to the bow. Arrived there they found two of the men, each with a curious-looking shell in his arms. The projectiles were about two feet long and six inches in diameter, and were, as Arnold told Colston, constructed of papier-mache. There were three blades projecting from the outside, and running spirally from the point to the butt. These fitted into grooves in the inside of the cannon, which were really huge air-guns twenty feet long, including the air-chamber at the breech.

The projectiles were placed in position, the breeches of the guns closed, and a minute later the air-chambers were filled with air at a pressure of two hundred atmospheres, pumped from the forward engines through pipes leading up to the guns for the purpose.

"Now," said Arnold, "we're ready! Meanwhile you two can go and load the two after guns."

The men saluted and retired, and Arnold continued--

"Just take a look down with your glasses and see if they see us. I expect they do by this time."

Colston put his field-glass to his eyes, and looked down at the fortress, which was now only six or seven miles ahead.

"Yes," he said, "at any rate I can see a lot of little figures running about on the roof of one of the ramparts, which I suppose are soldiers. What's the range of your gun? I should say the fortress is about six miles off now."

"We can hit it from here, if you like," replied Arnold, "and if we were a thousand feet higher I could send a shell into Petersburg. See! there is the City of Palaces. Away yonder in the distance you can just see the sun shining on the houses. We could see it quite plainly if it wasn't for the haze that seems to be lying over the Neva."

While he was speaking, Arnold trained the gun according to a scale on a curved steel rod which passed through a screw socket in the breech of the piece.

"Now," he said. "Watch!"

He pressed a button on the top of the breech. There was a sharp but not very loud sound as the compressed air was released; something rushed out of the muzzle of the gun, and a few seconds later, Colston could see the missile boring its way through the air, and pursuing a slanting but perfectly direct path for the centre of the fortress.

A second later it struck. He could see a bright greenish flash as it smote the steel roof of the central fort. Then the fort seemed to crumble up and dissolve into fragments, and a few moments later a dull report floated up into the sky mingled, as he thought, with screams of human agony.

For a moment he stared in silence through the glasses, then he turned to Arnold and said in a voice that trembled with violent emotion--

"Good God, that is awful! The whole of the centre citadel is gone as though it had been swept off the face of the earth. I can hardly see even the ruins of it. Surely that's murder rather than war!"

"No more murder than the use of torpedoes in naval warfare, as far as I can see," replied Arnold coolly. "Remember, too," he continued in a sterner tone, "that fortress belongs to the power that flogged Radna and has captured Natasha. Come, let's see what execution you can do."

He crossed the deck and set the other gun by its scale, saying as he did so--

"Put your finger on the button and press when I tell you."

Colston did as he was bid, and as his finger touched the little knob his hand was as firm as though he had been making a shot at billiards.

"Now!"

He pressed the button down hard. There was the same sharp sound, and a second messenger of destruction sped on its way towards the doomed fortress.

They saw it strike, and then came the flash, and after that a huge cloud of dust mingled with flying objects that might have been blocks of masonry, guns, or human bodies, rose into the air, and then fell back again to the earth.

"There goes one of the angles of the fortification into the sea," said Arnold, as he saw the effects of the shot. "Kronstadt won't be much good when the war breaks out, it strikes me. I suppose they'll be replying soon with a few rifle shots. We'd better quicken up a bit."

He went aft to the wheel-house, followed by Colston, and signalled for the three propellers to work at their utmost speed. The order was instantly obeyed; the fan-wheels ceased revolving, and under the impetus of her propellers the Ariel leapt forwards and upwards like an eagle on its upward swoop, rose five hundred feet in the air, and then swept over Kronstadt at a speed of more than a hundred miles an hour.

As they passed over they saw a series of flashes rise from one of the untouched portions of the fortress, but no bullets came anywhere near them. In fact, they must have passed through the air two or three miles astern of the flying Ariel. No soldier who ever carried a rifle could have sent a bullet within a thousand yards of an object seventy feet long travelling over a hundred miles an hour at a height of nearly four thousand feet, and so the Russians wasted their ammunition.

As soon as they had passed over the fortress, Arnold signalled for the propellers to stop, and the fan-wheels to revolve again at half speed. The air-ship stopped within three miles, and remained suspended in air over the opening mouth of the Neva. Then the two after guns were trained upon the fortress, and Colston and Arnold fired them together.

The two shells struck at the same moment, one in each of two angles of the ramparts. Their impact was followed by a tremendous explosion, far greater than could be accounted for by the shells themselves.

"There goes one, if not two, of his powder magazines. Look! half the fortress is a wreck. I wonder which fired the lucky shot."

The man who a year before had been an inoffensive student of mechanics and an enthusiast dreaming of an unsolved problem, spoke of the frightful destruction of life and the havoc that he had

caused by just pressing a button with his finger, as coolly and quietly as a veteran officer of artillery might have spoken of shelling a fort.

There were two reasons for this almost miraculous change. One was to be found in the bitter hatred of Russian tyranny which he had imbibed during the last six months, and the other was the fact that the woman for whom he would have himself died a thousand deaths if necessary, was a captive in Russian chains, being led at that moment to slavery and degradation.

As soon as they had seen the effects of the last two shots, Arnold said with a grim, half-smile on his lips--

"I think it will be better if we don't show ourselves too plainly to Petersburg. It will take some time for the news of the destruction of Kronstadt to reach the city, and, of course, there will be the wildest rumours as to the agency by which it was done, so we may as well leave them to argue the matter out among themselves."

He signalled again to the engine-room, and with the united aid of her planes and fan-wheels the Ariel mounted up and up into the sky, driven only by the stern-propeller and with the force of the other engines concentrated on the lifting wheels, until a height of five thousand feet was reached.

At that height she would have looked, if she could have been seen at all, nothing, more than a little grey spot against the blue of the sky, and as they heard afterwards she passed over St. Petersburg without being noticed.

From St. Petersburg to Tiumen, as the crow flies, the distance is 1150 English miles, and nine hours after she had passed over the Capital of the North, the Ariel had winged her way over the Ourals and the still snow-clad forests of the eastern slopes, past the tear-washed Pillar of Farewells, and had come to a rest after her voyage of two thousand two hundred miles, including the delay at Kronstadt, in twenty hours almost to the minute, as her captain had predicted.

CHAPTER XII. IN THE MASTER'S NAME.

THE Ariel, in order to avoid being seen from the town, had made a wide circuit to the northward at a considerable elevation, and as soon as a suitable spot had been sought out by means of the field-glasses, she dropped suddenly and swiftly from the clouds into the depths of the dense forest through which the Tobolsk road runs from Tiumen to the banks of the Tobol.

From Tiumen to the Tobol is about twenty-five miles by road. The railway, which was then finished as far as Tomsk, ran to Tobolsk by a more northerly and direct route than the road, but convicts were still marched on foot along the great post road after the gangs had been divided at Tiumen according to their destinations.

The spot which had been selected for the resting-place of the Ariel was a little glade formed by the bend of a frozen stream about five miles east of the town, and at a safe distance from the road.

Painted a light whitish-grey all over, she would have been invisible even from a short distance as she lay amid the snow-laden trees, and Arnold gave strict orders that all the window-slides were to be kept closed, and no light shown on any account.

Every precaution possible was taken to obviate a discovery which should seriously endanger the success of the rescue, but, nevertheless, the fan-wheels were kept aloft, and everything was in readiness to rise into the air at a moment's notice should any emergency require them to do so.

It was a little after three o'clock on the Thursday afternoon when the Ariel settled down in her resting-place, and half an hour later Colston and Ivan Petrovitch appeared on deck completely disguised, the former as a Russian fur trader, and the latter as his servant.

All the arrangements for the rescue had been once more gone over in every detail, and just before he swung himself over the side Colston shook hands for the last time with Arnold, saying as he did so--

"Well, good-bye again, old fellow! Ivan shall come back and bring you the news, if necessary; but if he doesn't come, don't be uneasy, but possess your soul in patience till you hear the whistle from the road in the morning. I expect the train will get in sometime during the night, and in that case we shall have everything ready to make the attempt soon after daybreak, if not before.

"If we can get as far as this without being pursued we shall come right on board. If not we must trust to our horses and our pistols to keep the Cossacks at a distance till you can help us. In any case, rest assured that once clear of Tiumen, we shall never be taken alive. Those are the Master's orders, and I will shoot Natasha myself before she goes back to captivity."

"Yes, do so," replied Arnold. His lips quivered as he spoke, but there was no tremor in the hand with which he gripped Colston's in farewell. "She will prefer death to slavery, and I shall prefer it for her. But if you have to do it you will at least have the consolation of knowing that within twelve hours of your death the Tsar shall be lying buried beneath the ruins of the Peterhof Palace. I will have his life for hers if only I live to take it."

"I will tell her," said Colston simply, "and if die she must, she will die content."

So saying, he descended the little rope-ladder, followed by Ivan, and in a few moments the two were lost in the deep shadow of the trees, while Arnold went down into the saloon to await with what patience he might the moment that would decide the fate of the daughter of Natas and the man who had gone, as he would so gladly have done, to risk his life to restore her to liberty.

Rather more than half an hour's tramp through the forest brought Colston and Ivan out on the road at a point a little less than five miles from Tiumen.

Colston was provided with passports and permits to travel for himself and Ivan. These, of course, were forged on genuine forms which the Terrorists had no difficulty in obtaining through their agents in high places, who were as implicitly trusted as the Princess Ornovski had been but a few months before.

So skilfully were they executed, however, that it would have been a very keen official eye that had discovered anything wrong with them. They described him as "Stepan Bakuinin, fur merchant of

Nizhni Novgorod, travelling in pursuit of his business, with his servant, Peter Petrovitch, also of Nizhni Novgorod."

Instead of going straight into the town by the main road they made a considerable detour and entered it by a lane that led them through a collection of miserable huts occupied by the poorest class of Siberian mujiks, half peasants, half townsfolk, who cultivate their patches of ground during the brief spring and summer, and struggle through the long dreary winter as best they can on their scanty savings and what work they can get to do from the Government or their richer neighbours.

Colston had never been in Tiumen before, but Ivan had, for ten years before he had voluntarily accompanied his father, who had been condemned to five years' forced labour on the new railway works from Tiumen to Tobolsk, for giving a political fugitive shelter in his house. He had died of hard labour and hard usage, and that was one reason why Ivan was a member of the Outer Circle of the Terrorists.

He led his master through the squalid suburb to the business part of the town, which had considerably developed since the through line to Tobolsk and Tomsk had been constructed, and at length they stopped before a comfortable-looking house in the street that ends at the railway station.

They knocked, gave their names, and were at once admitted. The servant who opened the door to them led them to a room in which they found a man of about fifty in the uniform of a sub-commissioner of police. As Colston held out his hand to him he said--

"In the Master's name!"

The official took his hand, and, bending over it, replied in a low tone--

"I am his servant. What is his will?"

"That Anna Ornovski and Fedora Darrel, the English girl who was taken with her, be released as soon as may be," replied Colston. "Is the train from Ekaterinburg in yet?"

"Not yet. The snow is still deep between here and the mountains. The winter has been very severe and long. We have almost starved in Tiumen in spite of the railway. There has been a telegram from Ekaterinburg to say that the train descended the mountain safely, and one from Kannishlov to say that we expect it soon after ten to-night."

"Good! That is sooner than we expected in London. We thought it would not reach here till to-morrow morning."

"In London! What do you mean? You cannot have come from London, for there has been no train for two days."

"Nevertheless I have come from London. I left England yesterday evening."

"Yesterday evening! But, with all submission, that is impossible. If there were a railway the whole distance it could not be done."

"To the Master there is nothing impossible. Look! I received that the evening I left London."

As he spoke, Colston held out an envelope. The Russian examined it closely. It bore the Ludgate Hill post-mark, which was dated "March 7."

Colston's host bent over it with almost superstitious reverence, and handed it back, saying humbly--

"Forgive my doubts, Nobleness! It is a miracle! I ask no more. The Tsar himself could not have done it. The Master is all powerful, and I am proud to be his servant, even to the death."

Although the twentieth century had dawned, the Siberian Russians were still inclined to look even upon the railway as a miracle. This man, although he occupied a post of very considerable responsibility and authority under the Russian Government, was only a member of the Outer Circle of the Terrorists, as most of the officials were, and therefore he knew nothing of the existence of the Ariel and Colston purposely mystified him with the apparent miracle of his presence in Tiumen after so short an absence from London, in order to command his more complete obedience in the momentous work that was on hand. He allowed the official a few moments to absorb the full wonder of the seeming marvel, and then he replied--

"Yes, we are all his servants to the death. At least I know of none who have even thought of treason

to him and lived to put their thoughts into action. But tell me, are all the arrangements complete as far as you can make them? Much depends upon how you carry them out, you know, to say nothing of the two thousand roubles that I shall hand to you as soon as the two ladies are delivered into my charge."

"All is arranged, Nobleness," replied the official, bowing involuntarily at the mention of the money. "Such of the prisoners, that is to say the politicals, who can afford to pay for the privilege, may, by the new regulations, be lodged in the houses of approved persons during their sojourn in Tiumen, if it be only for a night, and so escape the common prison."

"We knew at the police bureau of the arrest of the Princess Ornovski some days ago, and I have obtained permission from the chief of police to lodge her Highness and her companion in misfortune--if they are prepared to pay what I shall ask. It has come to be looked upon as a sort of perquisite of diligent officials, and as I have been very diligent here I had no difficulty in getting the permission--which I shall have to pay for in due course."

"Just so! Nothing for nothing in Russian official circles. Very good. Now listen. If this escape is successfully accomplished you will be degraded and probably punished into the bargain for letting the prisoners slip through your fingers. But that must not happen if it can be prevented."

"Now this has been foreseen, as everything is with the Master; and his orders are that you shall take this passport--which you will find in perfect order, save for the fact that the date has been slightly altered--from me as soon as I have got the ladies safely in the troika out on the Tobolsk road, put off the livery of the Tsar, disguise yourself as effectually as may be, and take the first train back to Perm and Nizhni Novgorod as Stepan Bakuinin, fur merchant."

"The servant you can leave behind on any excuse. From Novgorod you can travel via Moscow to Konigsberg, and, if you will take my advice, you will get out of Russia as soon as the Fates will let you."

"It shall be done, Nobleness. But how will the disappearance of Dmitri Soudeikin, sub-commissioner of police, be accounted for?"

"That also has been provided for. Before you go you will pin this with a dagger to your sitting-room table."

The official took the little piece of paper which Colston held out to him as he spoke. It read thus--

Dmitri Soudeikin, sub-commissioner of police at Tiumen, has been removed for over-zeal in the service of the Tsar NATAS.

Soudeikin bowed almost to the ground as the dreaded name of the Master of the Terror met his eyes, and then he said, as he handed the paper back--

"It is so! The Master sees all, and cares for the least of his servants. My life shall be forfeited if the ladies are not released as I have said."

"It probably will be," returned Colston drily. "None of us expect to get out of this business alive if it does not succeed. Now that is all I have to say for the present. It is for you to bring the ladies here as your prisoners, to see us out of the town before daybreak, and to have the troika in readiness for us on the Tobolsk road. Then see to yourself and I will be responsible for the rest."

As it still wanted more than two hours to the expected arrival of the train, Soudeikin had the samovar, or tea-urn, brought in, and Colston and Ivan made a hearty meal after their five-mile walk through the snow. Then they and their host lit their pipes, and smoked and chatted until a distant whistle warned Soudeikin that the train was at last approaching the station, and that it was time for him to be on duty to receive his convict-lodgers.

CHAPTER XIII. FOR LIFE OR DEATH.

NO time had ever seemed so long to Colston as did the hour and a half which passed after the departure of Soudeikin until his return. He would have given anything to have accompanied him to the station, but it would have been so very unwise to have incurred the risk of being questioned, and perhaps obliged to show the passport that Soudeikin was to use, that he controlled his impatience as best he could, and let events take their course.

At length, when he had looked at his watch for the fiftieth time, and found that it indicated nearly half-past eleven, there was a heavy knock at the door. As it opened, Colston heard a rattle of arms and a clinking of chains. Then there was a sound of gruff guttural voices in the entrance-hall, and the next moment the door of the room was thrown open, and Soudeikin walked in, followed by a young man in the uniform of a lieutenant of the line, and after them came two soldiers, to one of whom was handcuffed the Princess Ornovski, and to the other Natasha.

Shocked as he was at the pitiable change that had taken place in the appearance of the two prisoners since he had last seen them in freedom, Colston was far too well trained in the school of conspiracy to let the slightest sign of surprise or recognition escape him.

He and Ivan rose as the party entered, greeted Soudeikin and saluted the officer, hardly glancing at the two pale, haggard women in their rough grey shapeless gowns and hoods as they stood beside the men to whom they were chained.

As the officer returned Colston's salute he turned to Soudeikin and said civilly enough--

"I did not know you had another guest. I hope we shall not overcrowd you."

"By no means," replied the commissioner, waving his hand toward Colston as he spoke. "This is only my nephew, Ernst Vronski, who is staying with me for a day or two on his way through to Nizhni Novgorod with his furs, and that is his servant, Ivan Arkavitch. You need not be uneasy. I have plenty of rooms, as I live almost alone, and I have set apart one for the prisoners which I think will satisfy you in every way. Would it please you to come and see it?"

"Yes, we will go now and get them put in safety for the night, if you will lead the way."

As the party left the room Colston caught one swift glance from Natasha which told him that she understood his presence in the house fully, and he felt that, despite her miserable position, he had an ally in her who could be depended upon.

The officer carefully examined the room which had been provided for the two prisoners, tried the heavy shutters with which the windows were closed, and took from Soudeikin the keys of the padlocks to the bars which ran across them. He then directed the prisoners to be released from their handcuffs and locked them in the room, stationing one of the soldiers at the door and sending the other to patrol the back of the house from which the two windows of the room looked out.

At the end of two hours the sentries were to change places and in two hours more they were to be relieved by a detachment from the night patrol. This arrangement had been foreseen by Soudeikin, and it had been settled that the rescue was to be attempted as soon as the guard had been changed.

This would give the prisoners time to get a brief but much needed rest after their long and miserable journey from Perm penned up like sheep in iron-barred cattle trucks, and it would leave the drowsiest part of the night, from four o'clock to sunrise, for the hazardous work in hand.

"That is a pretty girl you have there, captain," said Colston, as the officer returned to the sitting-room. "Is she for the mines or Sakhalin?"

"For Sakhalin by sentence, but as a matter of fact for neither, as far as I can see."

"You mean that the Little Father will pardon her or give her a lighter sentence, I suppose."

The officer grinned meaningly as he replied--

"Nu Vot! That is hardly likely. What I mean is that Captain Kharkov, who is in command of the convict train from here, has had instructions to convey her as comfortably as possible, and with no

more fatigue than is necessary, to Tshit, in the Trans-Baikal, and that he is also charged with a letter from the Governor of Perm to the Governor of Tshit.

"You know these gentlemen like to do each other a good turn when they can, and so, putting two and two together, I should say that his Excellency of Perm has concluded that our pretty prisoner will serve to beguile the dullness of that Godforsaken hole in which his Excellency of Tshit is probably dying of ennui. She will be more comfortable there than at Sakhalin, and it is a lucky thing for her that she has found favour in his Excellency's eyes."

Colston could have shot the fellow where he sat leering across the table; but though his blood was at boiling point, he controlled himself sufficiently to make a reply after the same fashion, and soon after took his leave and retired for the night.

At four o'clock the guard was changed. The new officer, after taking the keys, unlocked the door of the room in which Natasha and the Princess were confined, and roused them up to satisfy himself that they were still in safe keeping. It was a brutal formality, but perfectly characteristic of Siberian officialism.

The man who had been on guard so far joined the patrol and returned to the barracks, while the new officer made himself comfortable with a bottle of brandy, with which Soudeikin had obligingly provided him, in the sitting-room. It was a bitterly cold night, and he drank a couple of glasses of it in quick succession. Ten minutes after he had swallowed the second he rolled backwards on the couch on which he was sitting and went fast asleep. A few moments later he had ceased to breathe.

Then the door opened softly and Soudeikin and Colston slipped into the room. The former shook him by the shoulder. His eyes remained half closed, his head lolled loosely from side to side, and his arms hung heavily downwards.

"He's gone," whispered Soudeikin; and, without another word, they set to work to strip the uniform off the lifeless body. Then Colston dressed himself in it and gave his own clothes to Soudeikin.

As soon as the change was effected, Colston took the keys and went to the door at which the sentry was keeping guard. The man was already half asleep, and blinked at him with drowsy eyes as he challenged him. For all answer the Terrorist levelled his pistol at his head and fired. There was a sharp crack that could hardly have been heard on the other side of the wall, and the man tumbled down with a bullet through his brain.

Colston stepped over the corpse, unlocked the door, and found Natasha and the Princess already dressed in male attire as two peasant boys, with sheepskin coats and shapkas, and wide trousers tucked into their half boots. These disguises had been provided beforehand by Soudeikin, and hidden in the bed in which they were to sleep.

Colston grasped their hands in silence, and the three left the room. In the passage they found Ivan and Soudeikin, the former dressed in the uniform of the soldier who had been on guard outside the house, and whose half-stripped corpse was now lying buried in the snow.

"Ready?" whispered Soudeikin.

"Have you finished in there?" asked Colston, jerking his thumb towards the sitting-room.

Soudeikin nodded in reply, and the five left the house by the back door.

It was then after half-past four. Fortunately it was a dark cloudy morning, and the streets of the town were utterly deserted. By ones and twos they stole through the by-streets and lanes without meeting a soul, until Soudeikin at length stopped at a house on the eastern edge of the town about a mile from the Tobolsk road.

He tapped at one of the windows. The door was softly opened by an invisible hand, and they entered and passed through a dark passage and out into a stable-yard behind the house. Under a shed they found a troika, or three-horse sleigh, with the horses ready harnessed, in charge of a man dressed as a mujik.

They got in without a word, all but Soudeikin, who went to the horses' heads, while the other man went and opened the gates of the yard. The bells had been removed from the harness, and the horses'

feet made no sound as Soudeikin led them out through the gate. Ivan took the reins, and Colston held out his hand from the sleigh. There was a roll of notes in it, and as he gave it to Soudeikin he whispered--

"Farewell! If we succeed, the Master shall know how well you have done your part."

Soudeikin took the money with a salute and a whispered farewell, and Ivan trotted his horses quietly down the lane and swung round into the road at the end of it.

So far all had gone well, but the supreme moment of peril had yet to come. A mile away down the road was the guardhouse on the Tobolsk road leading out of the town, and this had to be passed before there was even a chance of safety.

As there was no hope of getting the sleigh past unobserved, Colston had determined to trust to a rush when the moment came. He had given Natasha and the Princess a magazine pistol apiece, and held a brace in his own hands; so among them they had a hundred shots.

Ivan kept his horses at an easy trot till they were within a hundred yards of the guard-house. Then, at a sign from Colston, he suddenly lashed them into a gallop, and the sleigh dashed forward at a headlong speed, swept round the curve past the guard-house, hurling one of the sentries on guard to the earth, and away out on to the Tobolsk road.

The next instant the notes of a bugle rang out clear and shrill just as another sounded from the other end of the town. Colston at once guessed what had happened. The inspector of the patrols, in going his rounds, had called at Soudeikin house to see if all was right, and had discovered the tragedy that had taken place. He looked back and saw a body of Cossacks galloping down the main street towards the guard-house, waving their lanterns and brandishing their spears above their heads.

"Whip up, Ivan, they will be on us in a couple of minutes!" he cried and Ivan swung his long whip out over his horses' ears, and shouted at them till they put their heads down and tore over the smooth snow in gallant style.

By the time the race for life or death really began they had a good mile start, and as they had only four more to go Ivan did not spare his cattle, but plied whip and voice with a will till the trees whirled past in a continuous dark line, and the sleigh seemed to fly over the snow almost without touching it.

Still the Cossacks gained on them yard by yard, till at the end of the fourth mile they were less than three hundred yards behind. Then Colston leant over the back of the sleigh, and taking the best aim he could, sent half a dozen shots among them. He saw a couple of the flying figures reel and fall, but their comrades galloped heedlessly over them, yelling wildly at the tops of their voices, and every moment lessening the distance between themselves and the sleigh.

Colston fired a dozen more shots into them, and had the satisfaction of seeing three or four of them roll into the snow. At the same time he put a whistle to his lips, and blew a long shrill call that sounded high and clear above the hoarse yells of the Cossacks.

Their pursuers were now within a hundred yards of them, and Natasha, speaking for the first time since the race had begun, said--

"I think I can do something now."

As she spoke she leaned out of the sleigh sideways, and began firing rapidly at the Cossacks. Shot after shot told either upon man or beast, for the daughter of Natas was one of the best shots in the Brotherhood; but before she had fired a dozen times a bright gleam of white light shot downwards over the trees, apparently from the clouds, full in the faces of their pursuers.

Involuntarily they reined up like one man, and their yells of fury changed in an instant into a general cry of terror. The Cossacks are as brave as any soldiers on earth, and they can fight any mortal foe like the fiends that they are, but here was an enemy they had never seen before, a strange, white, ghostly-looking thing that floated in the clouds and glared at them with a great blazing, blinding eye, dazzling them and making their horses plunge and rear like things possessed.

They were not long left in doubt as to the intentions of their new enemy. Something came rushing through the air and struck the ground almost at the feet of their first rank. Then there was a flash of

green light, a stunning report, and men and horses were rent into fragments and hurled into the air like dead leaves before a hurricane.

Only three or four who had turned tail at once were left alive; and these, without daring to look behind them, drove their spurs into their horses' flanks and galloped back to Tiumen, half mad with terror, to tell how a demon had come down from the skies, annihilated their comrades, and carried the fugitives away into the clouds upon its back.

When they reached the town it was a scene of the utmost panic. Soldiers were galloping and running hither and thither, bugles were sounding, and the whole population were turning out into the snow-covered streets. On every lip there were only two words---"Natas!" "The Terrorists!"

The death sentence on Soudeikin, the sub-commissioner of police, had been found pinned with a dagger to the table in the room in which lay the body of the lieutenant, with the bloody T on his forehead. Soudeikin had vanished utterly, leaving only his uniform behind him; so had the two prisoners for whom he had made himself responsible, and at the door of their room lay the corpse of the sentry with a bullet-hole clean through his head from front to back, while in the snow under one of the windows of the room lay the body of the other sentry, stabbed through the heart.

From the very midst of one of the strongholds of Russian tyranny in Siberia, two important prisoners and a police official had been spirited away as though by magic, and now upon the top of all the wonder and dismay came the fugitive Cossacks with their wild tale about the air-demon that had swooped down and destroyed their troop at a single blow. To crown all half an hour later three horses, mad with fear, came galloping up the Tobolsk road, dragging behind them an empty sleigh, to one of the seats of which was pinned a scrap of paper on which was written--

"The daughter of Natas sends greeting to the Governor of Tiumen, and thanks him for his hospitality."

CHAPTER XIV. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MOMENT.

ON the morning of Tuesday, the 9th of March 1904, the Times published the following telegram at the head of its Foreign Intelligence:--

ASTOUNDING OCCURRENCE IN RUSSIA.

Destruction of Kronstadt by an unknown Air-Ship.

(From our own Correspondent.)

St. Petersburg, March 8th, 4 P.M.

Between six and seven this morning, the fortress of Kronstadt was partially destroyed by an unknown air-ship, which was first sighted approaching from the westward at a tremendous speed.

Four shots in all were fired upon the fortress, and produced the most appalling destruction. There was no smoke or flame visible from the guns of the air-ship, and the explosives with which the missiles were charged must have been far more powerful than anything hitherto used in warfare, as in the focus of the explosion masses of iron and steel and solid masonry were instantly reduced to powder

Two shots were fired as the strange vessel approached, and two as she left the fortress. The two latter exploded over one of the powder magazines, dissolved the steel roof to dust, and ignited the whole contents of the magazine, blowing that portion of the fortification bodily into the sea. At least half the garrison has disappeared, most of the unfortunate men having been practically annihilated by the terrific force of the explosions.

The air-ship was not of the navigable balloon type, and is described by the survivors as looking more like a flying torpedo-boat than anything else. She flew no flag, and there is no clue to her origin.

After destroying the fortress, she ascended several thousand feet. and continued her eastward course at such a prodigious speed, that in less than five minutes she was lost to sight.

The excitement in St. Petersburg almost reaches the point of panic. All efforts to keep the news of the disaster secret have completely failed, and I have therefore received permission to send this telegram, which has been revised by the Censorship, and may therefore be accepted as authentic.

Within an hour of the appearance of this telegram, which appeared only in the Times, the Russian Censorship having refused to allow any more to be despatched, the astounding news was flying over the wires to every corner of the world.

The Times had a lengthy and very able article on the subject, which, although by no means alarmist in tone, told the world, in grave and weighty sentences, that there could now be no doubt but that the problem of Aerial navigation had been completely solved, and that therefore mankind stood confronted by a power that was practically irresistible, and which changed the whole aspect of warfare by land and sea.

In the face of this power, the fortresses, armies, and fleets of the world were useless and helpless.

The destruction of Kronstadt had proved that to demonstration. From a height of several thousand feet, and a distance of nearly seven miles, the unknown air-vessel had practically destroyed, with four shots from her mysterious, smokeless, and flameless guns, the strongest fortress in Europe. If it could do that, and there was not the slightest doubt but that it had done so, it could destroy armies wholesale without a chance of reprisals, sink fleets, and lay cities in ruins, at the leisure of those who commanded it.

And here arose the supreme question of the hour--a question beside which all other questions of national or international policy sank instantly into insignificance--who were those who held this new and appalling power in their hands? It was hardly to be believed that they were representatives of any regularly-constituted national Power for, although the air was full of rumours of war, there was at present unbroken peace all over the world.

Even in the hands of a recognised Power, the possession of such a frightful engine of destruction could not be viewed by the rest of the world with anything but the gravest apprehension, for that Power, however insignificant otherwise, would now be in a position to terrorise any other nation, or league of nations, however great. Manifestly those who had built the one air-vessel that had been seen, and had given such conclusive proof of her terrible powers, could construct a fleet if they chose to do so, and then the world would be at their mercy.

If, however, as seemed only too probable, the machine was in the hands of a few irresponsible individuals, or, still worse, in those of such enemies of humanity as the Nihilists, or that yet more mysterious and terrible society who were popularly known as the Terrorists, then indeed the outlook was serious beyond forecast or description. At any moment the forces of destruction and anarchy might be let loose upon the world, in such fashion that little less than the collapse of the whole fabric of Society might be expected as the result.

The above necessarily brief and imperfect digest gives only the headings of an article which filled nearly two columns of the Times and it is needless to say that such an article in the leading columns of the most serious and respectable newspaper in the world produced an intense impression wherever it was read.

Of course the telegram was instantly copied by the evening papers, which ran out special editions for the sole purpose of reproducing it, with their own comments upon it, which, after all, were not much more original than the telegram. Meanwhile the Berliner Tageblatt, the Neue Freie Presse, the Kölnische Zeitung, and the Journal des Debats had received later and somewhat similar telegrams, and had given their respective views of the catastrophe to the world.

By noon all the capitals of Europe were in a fever of expectation and apprehension. The cables had carried the news to America and India; and when the evening of the same day brought the telegraphic account of the extraordinary occurrence at Tiumen in the grey dusk of the early morning, proving almost conclusively that the rescue had been effected by the same agency that had destroyed Kronstadt, and that, worse than all, the air-vessel was at the command of Natas, the unknown Chief of the mysterious Terrorists, excitement rose almost to frenzy, and everywhere the wildest rumours were accepted as truth.

In a word, the "psychological moment" had come all over Europe, the moment in which all men were thinking of the same thing, discussing the same event, and dreading the same results. To have found a parallel state of affairs, it would have been necessary to go back more than a hundred years, to the hour when the head of Louis XVI. fell into the basket of the guillotine, and the monarchies of Europe sprang to arms to avenge his death.

Meanwhile other and not less momentous events had, unknown to the newspapers or the public, been taking place in three very different parts of the world.

On the evening of Saturday, the 6th, Lord Alanmere had called upon Mr. Balfour in Downing Street, and laid the duplicates of the secret treaty between France and Russia, and copies of all the memoranda appertaining to it, before him, and had convinced him of their authenticity. At the same time he showed

him plans of the war-balloons, of which a fleet of fifty would within a few days be at the command of the Tsar.

The result of this interview was a meeting of a Cabinet Council, and the immediate despatch of secret orders to mobilise the fleet and the army, to put every available ship into commission, and to double the strength of the Mediterranean Squadron at once. That evening three Queen's messengers left Charing Cross by the night mail, one for Berlin, one for Vienna, and one for Rome, each of them bearing a copy of the secret treaty.

On Monday morning a Council of Ministers was held at the Peterhof Palace in St. Petersburg, presided over by the Tsar, and convened to discuss the destruction of Kronstadt.

At this Council it was announced that the fleet of war-balloons would be ready to take the air in a week's time from then, and that the concentration of troops on the Afghan frontier was as complete as it could be without provoking immediate hostilities with Britain. In fact, so close were the Cossacks and the Indian troops to each other, both on the Pamirs and on the western slopes of the Hindu Kush, that a collision might be expected at any moment.

The Council of the Tsar decided to let matters take their course in the East, and to make all arrangements with France to simultaneously attack the Triple Alliance as soon as the war-balloons had been satisfactorily tested.

Soon after daybreak on Wednesday, the 10th, an affair of outposts took place near the northern end of the Sir Ulang Pass of the Hindu Kush, between two considerable bodies of Cossacks and Ghoorkhas, in which, after a stubborn fight, the Russians gave way before the magazine fire of the Indian troops, and fled, leaving nearly a fourth of their number on the field.

The news of this encounter reached London on Wednesday night, and was published in the papers on Thursday morning, together with the intelligence that the fight had been watched from a height of nearly three thousand feet by a small party of men and women in an air-ship, evidently a vessel of war, from the fact that she carried four long guns. She took no part in the fight, and as soon as it was over went off to the south-west at a speed which carried her out of sight in a few minutes.

CHAPTER XV. A VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY.

WHILE all Europe was thrilling with the apprehension of approaching war, and the excitement caused by the appearance of the strange air-ship and the news of its terrible exploits at Kronstadt and Tiumen, the Ariel herself was quietly pursuing her way in mid-air south-westerly from the scene of the skirmish outside the Sir Ulang Pass.

She was bound for a region in the midst of Africa, which, even in the first decade of the twentieth century, was still unknown to the geographer and untrodden by the explorer.

Fenced in by huge and precipitous mountains, round whose bases lay vast forests and impenetrable swamps and jungles, from whose deadly areas the boldest pioneers had turned aside as being too hopelessly inhospitable to repay the cost and toil of exploration, it had remained undiscovered and unknown save by two men, who had reached it by the only path by which it was accessible--through the air and over the mountains which shut it in on every side from the external world.

These two adventurous travellers were a wealthy and eccentric Englishman, named Louis Holt, and Thomas Jackson, his devoted retainer, and these two had taken it into their heads--or rather Louis Holt had taken it into his head--to achieve in fact the feat which Jules Verne had so graphically described in fiction, and to cross Africa in a balloon.

They had set out from Zanzibar towards the end of the last year of the nineteenth century, and, with the exception of one or two vague reports from the interior, nothing more had been heard of them until, nearly a year later, a collapsed miniature balloon had been picked up in the Gulf of Guinea by the captain of a trading steamer, who had found in the little car attached to it a hermetically sealed meat-tin, which contained a manuscript, the contents of which will become apparent in due course.

The captain of the steamer was a practical and somewhat stupid man, who read the manuscript with considerable scepticism, and then put it away, having come to the conclusion that it was no business of his, and that there was no money in it anyhow. He thought nothing more of it until he got back to Liverpool, and then he gave it to a friend of his, who was a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, and who duly laid it before that body.

It was published in the Transactions, and there was some talk of sending out an expedition under the command of an eminent explorer to rescue Louis Holt and his servant; but when that personage was approached on the subject, it was found that the glory would not be at all commensurate with the expense and risk, and so, after being the usual nine days' wonder, and being duly elaborated by several able editors in the daily and weekly press, the strange adventures of Louis Holt had been dismissed, as of doubtful authenticity, into the limbo of exhausted sensations.

One man, however, had laid the story to heart somewhat more seriously, and that was Richard Arnold, who, on reading it, had formed the resolve that, if ever his dream of Aerial navigation were realised, the first use he would make of his air-ship would be to discover and rescue the lonely travellers who were isolated from the rest of the world in the strange, inaccessible region of which the manuscript had given a brief but graphic and fascinating account. He was now carrying out that resolve, and at the same time working out a portion of a plan that was not his own, and which he had been very far from foreseeing when he made the resolution.

Louis Holt's original MS. had been purchased by the President of the Inner Circle, and the Ariel was now, in fact, on a voyage of exploration, the object of which was the discovery of this unknown region, with a view to making it the seat of a settlement from which the members of the Executive could watch in security and peace the course of the tremendous struggle which would, ere long, be shaking the world to its foundations.

In such a citadel as this, fenced in by a series of vast natural obstacles, impassable to all who did not possess the means of Aerial locomotion, they would be secure from molestation, though all the armies of Europe sought to attack them; and the Ariel could, if necessary, traverse in twenty-five hours the

three thousand odd miles which separated it from the centre of Europe.

After the rescue of Natasha and the Princess on the Tobolsk road, the Ariel, in obedience to the orders of the Council, had shaped her course southward to the western slopes of the Hindu Kush, in order to be present at the prearranged attack of the Cossacks on the British reconnoitring force.

Arnold's orders were simply to wait for the engagement, and only to watch it, unless the British were attacked in overwhelming numbers. In that case he was to have dispersed the Russian force, as the plan of the Terrorists did not allow of any advantage being gained by the soldiers of the Tsar in that part of the world just then.

As the British had defeated them unaided, the Ariel had taken no part in the affair, and, after vanishing from the sight of the astonished combatants, had proceeded upon her voyage of discovery.

As a good month would have to elapse before she could keep her rendezvous with the steamer that was to bring out the materials for the construction of the new air-ships from England, there was plenty of time to make the voyage in a leisurely and comfortable fashion. As soon, therefore, as he was out of sight of the skirmishers, he had reduced the speed of the Ariel to about forty miles an hour, using only the stern-propeller driven by one engine, and supporting the ship on the air-planes and two fan-wheels.

At this speed he would traverse the three thousand odd miles which lay between the Hindu Kush and "Aeria"--as Louis Holt had somewhat fancifully named the region that could be reached only through the air--in a little over seventy-five hours, or rather more than three days.

Those three days were the happiest that his life had so far contained. The complete success of his invention, and the absolute fulfilment of his promises to the Brotherhood, had made him a power in the world, and a power which, as he honestly believed, would be used for the highest good of mankind when the time came to finally confront and confound the warring forces of rival despotisms.

But far more than this in his eyes was the fact that he had been able to use the unique power which his invention had placed in his hands, to rescue the woman that he loved so dearly from a fate which, even now that it was past, he could not bring himself to contemplate.

When she had first greeted him in the Council-chamber of the Inner Circle, the distance that had separated her from him had seemed immeasurable, and she--the daughter of Natas and the idol of the most powerful society in the world--might well have looked down upon him--the nameless dreamer of an unrealised dream, and a pauper, who would not have known where to have looked for his next meal, had the Brotherhood not had faith in him and his invention.

But now all that was changed. The dream had become the reality, and the creation of his genius was bearing her with him swiftly and smoothly through a calm atmosphere, and under a cloudless sky, over sea and land, with more ease than a bird wings its flight through space. He had accomplished the greatest triumph in the history of human discovery. He had revolutionised the world, and ere long he would make war impossible. Surely this entitled him to approach even her on terms of equality, and to win her for his own if he could.

Natasha saw this too as clearly as he did--more clearly, perhaps; for, while he only arrived at the conclusion by a process of reasoning, she reached it intuitively at a single step. She knew that he loved her, that he had loved her from the moment that their hands had first met in greeting, and, peerless as she was among women, she was still a woman, and the homage of such a man as this was sweet to her, albeit it was still unspoken.

She knew, too, that the hopes of the Revolution, which, before all things human, claimed her whole-soured devotion, now depended mainly upon him, and the use that he might make of the power that lay in his hands, and this of itself was no light bond between them, though not necessarily having anything to do with affection.

So far she was heart-whole, and though many had attempted the task, no man had yet made her pulses beat a stroke faster for his sake. Ever since she had been old enough to know what tyranny meant, she had been trained to hate it, and prepared to work against it, and, if necessary, to sacrifice herself body and soul to destroy it.

Thus hatred rather than love had been the creed of her life and the mainspring of her actions, and, save her father and her one friend Radna, she stood aloof from mankind and its loves and friendships, rather the beautiful incarnation of an abstract principle than a woman, to whom love and motherhood were the highest aims of existence.

More than this, she was the daughter of a Jew, and therefore held herself absolutely at her father's disposal as far as marriage was concerned, and if he had given her in wedlock even to a Russian official, telling her that the Cause demanded the sacrifice, she would have obeyed, though her heart had broken in the same hour.

Although he had never hinted directly at such a thing, the conviction had been growing upon her for the last two or three years that Natas really intended her to marry Tremayne, and so, in the case of his own death, form a bond that should hold him to the Brotherhood when the chain of his own control was snapped. Though she instinctively shrank from such a union of mere policy, she would enter it without hesitation at her father's bidding, and for the sake of the Cause to which her life was devoted.

How great such a sacrifice would be, should it ever be asked of her, no one but herself could ever know, for she was perfectly well aware that in Tremayne's strange double life there were two loves, one of which, and that not the real and natural one, was hers.

Had she felt that she had the disposal of herself in her own hands, she would not, perhaps, have waited with such painful apprehension the avowal which hour after hour, now that they were brought into such close and constant relationships on board this little vessel high in mid-air, she saw trembling on the lips of her rescuer.

Arnold's life of hard, honest work, and his constant habit of facing truth in its most uncompromising forms, had made dissimulation almost impossible to him; and added to that, situated as he was, there was no necessity for it. Colston knew of his love, and the Princess had guessed it long ago. Did Natasha know his open secret? Of that he hardly dared to be sure, though something told him that the inevitable moment of knowledge was near at hand.

For the first twenty-four hours of the voyage he had seen very little of either her or the Princess, as they had mostly remained in their cabins, enjoying a complete rest after the terrible fatigue and suffering they had gone through since their capture in Moscow, but on the Thursday morning they had had breakfast in the saloon with him and Colston, and had afterwards spent a portion of the morning on deck, deeply interested in watching the fight between the British and Russians. Thanks to Radna's foresight, they had each found a trunk full of suitable clothing on board the Ariel. These had been taken to Drumcraig by Colston, and placed in the cabins intended for their use, and so they were able to discard the uncouth but useful costumes in which they had made their escape.

In the afternoon Arnold had had to perform the pleasant task of showing them over the Ariel, explaining the working of the machinery, and putting the wonderful vessel through various evolutions to show what she was capable of doing.

He rushed her at full speed through the air, took flying leaps over outlying spurs of mountain ranges that lay in their path, swooped down into valleys, and flew over level plains fifty yards from the ground, like an albatross over the surface of a smooth tropic sea. Then he soared up from the earth again, until the horizon widened out to vast extent, and they could see the mighty buttresses of "the Roof of the World" stretching out below them in an endless succession of ranges as far as the eye could reach.

Neither Natasha nor the Princess could find words to at all adequately express all that they saw and learnt during that day of wonders, and all night Natasha could hardly sleep for waking dreams of universal empire, and a world at peace equitably ruled by a power that had no need of aggression, because all the realms of earth and air belonged to those, who wielded it.

When at last she did go to sleep, it was to dream again, and this time of herself, the Angel of the Revolution, sharing the Aerial throne of the world-empire with the man who had made revolutions impossible by striking the sword from the hand of the tyrants of earth for ever.

CHAPTER XVI. A WOOING IN MID AIR.

AFTER breakfast on the Friday morning, Natasha and Arnold were standing in the bows of the Ariel, admiring the magnificent panorama that lay stretched out five thousand feet below them.

The air-ship had by this time covered a little over 2000 miles of her voyage, and was now speeding smoothly and swiftly along over the south-western shore of the Red Sea, a few miles southward of the sixteenth parallel of latitude. Eastward the bright blue waves of the sea were flashing behind them in the cloudless morning sun; the high mountains of the African coast rose to right and left and in front of them; and through the breaks in the chain they could see the huge masses of Abyssinia to the southward, and the vast plains that stretched away westward across the Blue and White Niles, away to the confines of the Libyan Desert.

"What a glorious world!" exclaimed Natasha, after gazing for many silent minutes with entranced eyes over the limitless landscape. "And to think that, after all, all this is but a little corner of it!"

"It is yours, Natasha, if you will have it," replied Arnold quietly, yet with a note in his voice that warned her that the moment which she had expected and yet dreaded, had already come. There was no use in avoiding the inevitable for a time. It would be better if they understood each other at once; and so she looked round at him with eyebrows elevated in well-simulated surprise, and said--

"Mine! What do you mean, my friend?"

There was an almost imperceptible emphasis on the last word that brought the blood to Arnold's cheek, and he answered, with a ring in his voice that gave unmistakable evidence of the effort that he was making to restrain the passion that inspired his words--

"I mean just what I say. All the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them, from pole to pole, and from east to west, shall be yours, and shall obey your lightest wish. I have conquered the air, and therefore the earth and sea. In two months from now I shall have an aerial navy afloat that will command the world, and I--is it not needless to tell you, Natasha, why I glory in the possession of that power? Surely you must know that it is because I love you more than all that a subject world can give me, and because it makes it possible for me, if not to win you, at least not to be unworthy to attempt the task?"

It was a distinctly unconventional declaration--such a one, indeed, as no woman had ever heard since Alexander the Great had whispered in the ears of Lais his dreams of universal empire, but there was a straightforward earnestness about it which convinced her beyond question that it came from no ordinary man, but from one who saw the task before him clearly, and had made up his mind to achieve it.

For a moment her heart beat faster than it had ever yet done at the bidding of a man's voice, and there was a bright flush on her cheeks, and a softer light in her eyes, as she replied in a more serious tone than Arnold had ever heard her use--

"My friend, you have forgotten something. You and I are not a man and a woman in the relationship that exists between us. We are two factors in a work such as has never been undertaken since the world began; two units in a mighty problem whose solution is the happiness or the ruin of the whole human race. It is not for us to speak of individual love while these tremendous issues hang undecided in the balance.

"One does not speak of love in the heat of war, and you and I and those who are with us are at war with the powers of the earth, and higher things than the happiness of individuals are at stake. You know my training has been one of hate and not of love, and till the hate is quenched I must not know what love is.

"Remember your oath--the oath which I have taken as well as you--'As long as I live those ends shall be my ends, and no human considerations shall weigh with me where those ends are concerned.' Is not this love of which you speak a human consideration that might clash with the purposes of the

Brotherhood whose ends you and I have solemnly sworn to hold supreme above all earthly things?

"My father has told me that when love takes possession of a human soul, reason abdicates her throne, and great aims become impossible. No, no; that great power which you hold in your hands was not given you just to win the love of a woman, and I tell you frankly that you will never win mine with it.

"More than this, if I saw you using it for such an end, I would take care that you did not use it for long. No man ever had such an awful responsibility laid upon him as the possession of this power lays upon you. It is yours to make or mar the future of the human race, of which I am but a unit. It is not the power that will ever win either my respect or my love, but the wisdom and the justice with which it may be used."

"Ah! I see you distrust me. You think that because I have the power to be a despot, that therefore I may forget my oath and become one. I forgive you for the thought, unworthy of you as it is, and also, I hope, of me. No, Natasha; I am no skilled hand at love-making, for I have never wooed any mistress but one before to-day, and she is won only by plain honesty and hard service; just what I will devote to the winning of you, whether you are to be won or not--but I must have expressed myself clumsily indeed for you to have even thought of treason to the Cause.

"You are no more devoted adherent of it than I am. You have suffered in one way and I in another from the falsehood and rottenness of present-day Society, but you do not hate it more utterly than I do, and you would not go to greater lengths than I would to destroy it. Yours is a hatred of emotion, and mine is a hatred of reason. I have proved that, as Society is constituted, it is the worst and not the best qualities of humanity that win wealth and power, and such respect as the vulgar of all classes can give. But it is not such power as this that I would lay at your feet, when I ask you to share the world-empire with me. It is an empire of peace and not of war that I shall offer to you."

"Then," said Natasha, taking a step towards him, and laying her hand on his arm as she spoke, "when you have made war impossible to the rivalry of nations and races, and have proclaimed peace on earth, then I will give myself to you, body and soul, to do with as you please, to kill or to keep alive, for then truly you will have done that which all the generations of men before you have failed to do, and it will be yours to ask and to have."

As she spoke these last words Natasha bowed her proudly-carried head as though in submission to the dictum that her own lips had pronounced; and Arnold, laying his hand on hers and holding it for a moment unresisting in his own, said--

"I accept the condition, and as you have said so shall it be. You shall hear no more words of love from my lips until the day that peace shall be proclaimed on earth and war shall be no more; and when that day comes, as it shall do, I will hold you to your words, and I will claim you and take you, body and soul, as you have said, though I break every other human tie save man's love for woman to possess you."

Natasha looked him full in the eyes as he spoke these last words. She had never heard such words before, and by their very strength and audacity they compelled her respect and even her submission. Her heart was still untamed and unconquered, and no man was its lord, yet her eyes sank before the steady gaze of his, and in a low sweet voice she answered--

"So be it! There never was a true woman yet who did not love to meet her master. When that day comes I shall have met my master, and I will do his bidding. Till then we are friends and comrades in a common Cause to which both our lives are devoted. Is it not better that it should be so?"

"Yes, I am content. I would not take the prize before I have won it. Only answer me one question frankly, and then I have done till I may speak again."

"What is that?"

"Have I a rival--not among men, for of that I am careless--but in your own heart?"

"No, none. I am heart-whole and heart-free. Win me if you can. It is a fair challenge, and I will abide by the result, be it what it may."

"That is all I ask for. If I do not win you, may Heaven do so to me that I shall have no want of the

love of woman for ever!"

So saying, he raised her hand to his lips and kissed it, in token of the compact that was made between them. Then, intuitively divining that she wished to be alone, he turned away without another word, and walked to the after end of the vessel.

Natasha remained where she was for a good half-hour, leaning on the rail that surrounded the deck, and gazing out dreamily over the splendid and ever-changing scene that lay spread out beneath her. Truly it was a glorious world, as she had said, even now, cursed as it was with war and the hateful atrocities of human selfishness, and the sordid ambition of its despots.

What would it be like in the day when the sword should lie rusting on the forgotten battle-field, and the cannon's mouth be choked with the desert dust for ever? What was now a hell of warring passions would then be a paradise of peaceful industry, and he who had the power, if any man had, to turn that hell into the paradise that it might be, had just told her that he loved her, and would create that paradise for her sake.

Could he do it? Was not this marvellous creation of his genius, that was bearing her in mid-air over land and sea, as woman had never travelled before, a sufficient earnest of his power? Truly it was. And to be won by such a man was no mean destiny, even for her, the daughter of Natas, and the peerless Angel of the Revolution.

Situated as they were, it would of course have been impossible, even if it had been in any way desirable, for Arnold and Natasha to have kept their compact secret from their fellow-travellers, who were at the same time their most intimate friends.

There was not, however, the remotest reason for attempting to do so. Although with regard to the rest of the world the members of the Brotherhood were necessarily obliged to live lives of constant dissimulation, among themselves they had no secrets from each other.

Thus, for instance, it was perfectly well known that Tremayne, during those periods of his double life in which he acted as Chief of the Inner Circle, regarded the daughter of Natas with feelings much warmer than those of friendship or brotherhood in a common cause, and until Arnold and his wonderful creation appeared on the scene, he was looked upon as the man who, if any man could, would some day win the heart of their idolised Angel.

Of the other love that was the passion of his other life, no one save Natasha, and perhaps Natas himself, knew anything; and even if they had known, they would not have considered it possible for any other woman to have held a man's heart against the peerless charms of Natasha. In fact they would have looked upon such rivalry as mere presumption that it was not at all necessary for their incomparable young Queen of the Terror to take into serious account.

In Arnold, however, they saw a worthy rival even to the Chief himself, for there was a sort of halo of romance, even in their eyes, about this serious, quiet-spoken young genius, who had come suddenly forth from the unknown obscurity of his past life to arm the Brotherhood with a power which revolutionised their tactics and virtually placed the world at their mercy. In a few months he had become alike their hero and their supreme hope, so far as all active operations went; and now that with his own hand he had snatched Natasha from a fate of unutterable misery, and so signally punished her persecutors, it seemed to be only in the fitness of things that he should love her, win her for his own, if won she was to be by any man.

This, at any rate, was the line of thought which led the Princess and Colston each to express their unqualified satisfaction with the state of affairs arrived at in the compact that had been made between Natasha and Arnold--"armed neutrality," as the former smilingly described to the Princess while she was telling her of the strange wooing of her now avowed lover. Natasha was no woman to be wooed and won in the ordinary way, and it was fitting that she should be the guerdon of such an achievement as no man had ever undertaken before, since the world began.

The voyage across Africa progressed pleasantly and almost uneventfully for the thirty-six hours after the crossing off the Red Sea. After passing over the mountains of the coast, the Ariel had travelled at a

uniform height of about 3000 feet over a magnificent country of hill and valley, forest and prairie, occasionally being obliged to rise another thousand feet or so to cross some of the ridges of mountain chains which rose into peaks and mountain knots, some of which touched the snow-line.

Several times the air-ship was sighted by the people of the various countries over which she passed, and crowds swarmed out of the villages towns, gesticulating wildly, and firing guns and beating drums to scare the flying demon away.

Once or twice they heard bullets singing through the air, but of these they took little heed, beyond quickening the speed of the air-ship for the time, knowing that there was not a chance in a hundred thousand of the Ariel being hit, and that even if she were the bullet would glance harmlessly off her smooth hull of hardened aluminium.

Once only they descended in a delightful little valley among the mountains, which appeared to be totally uninhabited, and here they renewed their store of fresh water, and laid in one of fruit, as well as taking advantage of the opportunity to stretch their legs on terra firma.

This was on the Saturday morning; and when they again rose into the air to continue their voyage, they saw that they had crossed the great mountain mass that divides the Sahara from the little-known regions of Equatorial Africa, and that in front of them to the south-west lay, as far as the eye could reach, a boundless expanse of dense forest and jungle and swamp, a gloomy and forbidding-looking region which it would be well-nigh impossible to traverse on foot.

Early in the afternoon the four voyagers were gathered in the deck-saloon, closely examining a somewhat rudely--drawn chart that was spread out on the table. It was the map that formed part of the manuscript which had been found in the car of Louis Holt's miniature balloon, and sketched out his route from Zanzibar to Aeria, and the country lying round so far as he had been able to observe it.

"This gives us, after all, very little idea of the distance we have yet to go," said Arnold; "for though Holt has got his latitude presumably right, we have very little clue to his longitude, for he says himself that his watch was stopped in a thunder-storm, and that in the same storm he lost all count of the distance he had travelled. Added to that, he admits that he was blown about for twelve days in one direction and another, so that all we really know is that somewhere across this fearful wilderness beneath us we shall find Aeria, but where is still a problem."

"What is your own idea?" asked Colston.

"Not a very clear one, I must confess. At this elevation we can see about sixty miles as the atmosphere is now, and as far as we can see to the south-west there is nothing but the same kind of country that we have under us. We have travelled rather more than 2700 miles since we left the Hindu Kush, and according to my reckoning Aeria lies somewhere between 3000 and 3200 miles south-west of where we started from on Thursday morning. That means that we are within between three and five hundred miles of Aeria, unless, indeed, our calculations are wholly at fault, and at that rate, as we only have about four and a half hours' daylight left, we shall not get there to-day at our present speed."

"Couldn't we go a bit faster?" put in Natasha. "You know I and the Princess are dying to see this mysterious unknown country that only two other people have ever seen."

"You have but to say so, Natasha, and it is already done," replied Arnold, signalling at the same moment to the engine-room by means of a similar arrangement of electric buttons to that which was in the wheel-house. "Only you must remember that you must not go out on deck now, or you will be blown away like a feather into space."

While he was speaking the three propellers had begun to revolve at full speed, and the Ariel darted forward with a velocity that caused the mountains she had just crossed to sink rapidly on the horizon. All the afternoon the Ariel flew at full speed over the seemingly interminable wilderness of swamp and jungle, until, when the equatorial sun was within a few degrees of the horizon, one of the crew, who had been stationed in the conning tower at the bows, signalled to call the attention of the man in the wheel-house. Arnold, who was in the after-saloon at the time, heard the signal, and hurried forward to the look-out. He gave one quick glance ahead, signalled "half-speed" to the engine-room, and then

went aft again to the saloon, and said--

"Aeria is in sight!"

Immediately everyone hastened to the deck saloon, from the windows of which could be seen a huge mass of mountains looming dark and distinct against the crimsoning western sky.

It rose like some vast precipitous island out of the sea of forest that lay about its base; and above the mighty rock-walls that seemed to rise sheer from the surrounding plain at least a dozen peaks towered into the sky, two of their summits covered with eternal snow, and shining like points of rosy fire in the almost level rays of the sun.

As nearly as Arnold could judge in the deceptive state of the atmosphere, they were still between thirty and forty miles from it, and as it would not be safe to approach its lofty cliffs at a high rate of speed in the half light that would so soon merge into darkness, he said to his companions--

"We shall have to find a resting-place up among the cliffs on this side to-night, for we have lost the moon, and unless it were absolutely necessary to cross the mountains in the dark, I should not care to do so with the ladies on board. Besides, there is no hurry now that we are here, and we shall get a much finer first impression of our new kingdom if we cross at sunrise. What do you think?"

All agreed that this would be the best plan, and so the Ariel ran up to within a mile of the rocks, and then the forward engine was connected with the dynamo, and the searchlight, which had so disconcerted the Cossacks on the Tobolsk road, was turned on to the cliffs, which they carefully explored, until they found a little plateau covered with luxuriant vegetation and well watered, about two thousand feet above the plain below.

Here it was decided to come to a halt for the night, and to reserve the exploration of Aeria for the morning, and so the fan-wheels were sent aloft, and the Ariel, after hovering for a few minutes over the verdant little plain seeking for a suitable spot to alight in, sank gently to the earth after her flight of more than three thousand miles.

CHAPTER XVII. AERIA FELIX.

EVERY one on board the Ariel was astir the next morning as soon as the first rays of dawn were shooting across the vast plain that stretched away to the eastward, and by the time it was fairly daylight breakfast was over and all were anxiously speculating as to what they would find on the other side of the tremendous cliffs, on an eyrie in which they had found a resting-place for the night.

As soon as all was ready for a start, Arnold said to Natasha who was standing alone with him on the after part of the deck--

"If you would like to steer the Ariel into your new kingdom, I shall be delighted to give you the lesson in steering that I promised you yesterday."

Natasha saw the inner meaning of the offer at a glance, and replied with a smile that made his blood tingle--

"That would be altogether too great a responsibility for a beginner. I might run on to some of these fearful rocks. But if you will take the helm when the dangerous part comes, I will learn all I can by watching you."

"As long as you are with me in the wheel-house for the next hour or so," said Arnold, with almost boyish frankness, "I shall be content. I need scarcely tell you why I want to be alone with you when we first sight this new home of our future empire."

"I have half a mind not to come after that very injudicious speech. Still, if only for the sake of its delightful innocence, I will forgive you this time. You really must practise the worldly art of dissimulation a little, or I shall have to get the Princess to play chaperon."

Natasha spoke these words in a bantering tone, and with a flush on her lovely cheeks, that forced Arnold to cut short the conversation for the moment, by giving an order to Andrew Smith, who at that instant put his head out of the wheel-house door to say--

"All ready, sir!"

"Very well," replied Arnold. "I will take the wheel, and do you tell every one to keep under cover."

Smith saluted, and disappeared, and then Natasha and Arnold went into the wheel-house, while Colston and the Princess took their places in the deck-saloon, the two men off duty going into the conning tower forward.

"Why every one under cover, Captain Arnold?" asked Natasha, as soon as the two were ensconced in the wheel-house and the door shut.

"Because I am going to put the Ariel through her paces, and enter Aeria in style," replied he, signalling for the fan-wheels to revolve. "The fact is that, so far as I can see, these mountains are too high for us to rise over them by means of the lifting-wheels, which are only calculated to carry the ship to a height of about five thousand feet. After that the air gets too rarefied for them to get a solid grip. Now, these mountains look to me more like seven thousand feet high."

"Then how will you get over them?"

"I shall first take a cruise and see if I can find a negotiable gap, and then leap it."

"What! Leap seven thousand feet?"

"No; you forget that we shall be over five thousand up when we take the jump, and I have no doubt that we shall find a place where a thousand feet or so more will take us over. That we shall rise easily with the planes and propellers, and you will see such a leap as man never made in the world before."

While he was speaking the Ariel had risen from the ground and was hanging a few hundred feet above the little plateau. He gave the signal for the wheels to be lowered, and the propellers to set to work at half-speed. Then he pulled the lever which moved the air-planes, and the vessel sped away forwards and upwards at about sixty miles an hour.

Arnold headed her away from the mountains until he had got an offing of a couple of miles, and then he swung her round and skirted the cliffs, rising ever higher and higher, and keeping a sharp look-out

for a depression among the ridges that still towered nearly three thousand feet above them.

When he had explored some twenty miles of the mountain wall, Arnold suddenly pointed towards it, and said--

"There is a place that I think will do. Look yonder, between those two high peaks away to the southward. That ridge is not more than six thousand feet from the earth, and the Ariel can leap that as easily as an Irish hunter would take a five-barred gate."

"It looks dreadfully high from here," said Natasha, in spite of herself turning a shade paler at the idea of taking a six thousand foot ridge at a flying leap. She had splendid nerves, but this was her first aerial voyage, and it was also the first time that she had ever been brought so closely face to face with the awful grandeur of Nature in her own secret and solitary places.

She would have faced a levelled rifle without flinching, but as she looked at that frowning mass of rocks towering up into the sky, and then down into the fearful depths below, where huge trees looked like tiny shrubs, and vast forests like black patches of heather on the earth, her heart stood still in her breast when she thought of the frightful fate that would overwhelm the Ariel and her crew should she fail to rise high enough to clear the ridge, or if anything went wrong with her machinery at the critical moment.

"Are you sure you can do it?" she asked almost involuntarily.

"Perfectly sure," replied Arnold quietly, "otherwise I should not attempt it with you on board. The Ariel contains enough explosives to reduce her and us to dust and ashes, and if we hit that ridge going over, she would go off like a dynamite shell. No, I know what she can do, and you need not have the slightest fear!"

"I am not exactly afraid, but it looks a fearful thing to attempt."

"If there were any danger I should tell you--with my usual lack of dissimulation. But really there is none, and all you have to do is to hold tight when I tell you, and keep your eyes open for the first glimpse of Aeria."

By this time the Ariel was more than ten miles away from the mountains. Arnold, having now got offing enough, swung her round again, headed her straight for the ridge between the two peaks, and signalled "full speed" to the engine-room.

In an instant the propellers redoubled their revolutions, and the Ariel gathered way until the wind sang and screamed past her masts and stays. She covered eight miles in less than four minutes, and it seemed to Natasha as though the rock-wall were rushing towards them at an appalling speed, still frowning down a thousand feet above them. For the instant she was all eyes. She could neither open her lips nor move a limb for sheer, irresistible, physical terror. Then she heard Arnold say sharply--

"Now, hold on tight!"

The nearest thing to her was his own arm, the hand of which grasped one of the spokes of the steering wheel. Instinctively she passed her own arm under it, and then clasped it with both her hands. As she did so she felt the muscles tighten and harden. Then with his other hand he pulled the lever back to the full, and inclined the planes to their utmost.

Suddenly, as though some Titan had overthrown it, the huge black wall of rock in front seemed to sink down into the earth, the horizon widened out beyond it, and the Ariel soared upwards and swept over it nearly a thousand feet to the good.

"Ah!"

The exclamation was forced from her white lips by an impulse that Natasha had no power to resist. All the pride of her nature was conquered and humbled for the moment by the marvel that she had seen, and by the something, greater and stranger than all, that she saw in the man beside her who had worked this miracle with a single touch of his hand. A moment later she had recovered her self-possession. She unclasped her hands from his arm, and as the colour came back to her cheeks she said, as he thought, more sweetly than she had ever spoken to him before--

"My friend, you have glorious nerves where physical danger is concerned, and now I freely forgive

you for fainting in the Council-chamber when Martinov was executed. But don't try mine again like that if you can help it. For the moment I thought that the end of all things had come. Oh, look! What a paradise! Truly this is a lovely kingdom that you have brought me to!"

"And one that you and I will yet reign over together," replied Arnold quietly, as he moved the lever again and allowed the Ariel to sink smoothly down the other side of the ridge over which she had taken her tremendous leap.

When she had called it a paradise, Natasha had used almost the only word that would fitly describe the scene that opened out before them as the Ariel sank down after her leap across the ridge. The interior of the mountain mass took the form of an oval valley, as nearly as they could guess about fifty miles long by perhaps thirty wide. All round it the mountains seemed to rise unbroken by a single gap or chasm to between three and four thousand feet above the lowest part of the valley, and above this again the peaks rose high into the sky, two of them to the snow-line, which in this latitude was over 15,000 feet above the sea.

Of the two peaks which reached to this altitude, one was at either end of a line drawn through the greater length of the valley, that is to say, from north to south. At least ten other peaks all round the walls of the valley rose to heights varying from eight to twelve thousand feet.

The centre of the valley was occupied by an irregularly shaped lake, plentifully dotted with islands about its shores, but quite clear of them in the middle. In its greatest length it would be about twelve miles long, while its breadth varied from five miles to a few hundred yards. Its sloping shores were covered with the most luxuriant vegetation, which reached upwards almost unbroken, but changing in character with the altitude, until there was a regular series of transitions, from the palms and bananas on the shores of the lake, to the sparse and scanty pines and firs that clung to the upper slopes of the mountains.

The lake received about a score of streams, many of which began as waterfalls far up the mountains, while two of them at least had their origin in the eternal snows of the northern and southern peaks. So far as they could see from the air-ship, the lake had no outlet, and they were therefore obliged to conclude that its surplus waters escaped by some subterranean channel, probably to reappear again as a river welling from the earth, it might be, hundreds of miles away.

Of inhabitants there were absolutely no traces to be seen, from the direction in which the Ariel was approaching. Animals and birds there seemed to be in plenty, but of man no trace was visible, until in her flight along the valley the Ariel opened up one of the many smaller valleys formed by the ribs of the encircling mountains.

There, close by a clump of magnificent tree-ferns, and nestling under a precipitous ridge, covered from base to summit with dark-green foliage and brilliantly-coloured flowers, was a well-built log-hut surrounded by an ample verandah, also almost smothered in flowers, and surmounted by a flagstaff from which fluttered the tattered remains of a Union-Jack.

In a little clearing to one side of the hut, a man, who might very well have passed for a modern edition of Robinson Crusoe, so far as his attire was concerned, was busily skinning an antelope which hung from a pole suspended from two trees. His back was turned towards them, and so swift and silent had been their approach that he did not hear the soft whirring of the propellers until they were within some three hundred yards of him.

Then, just as he looked round to see whence the sound came, Andrew Smith, who was standing in the bows near the conning tower, put his hands to his mouth and roared out a regular sailor's hail--

"Thomas Jackson, ahoy!"

The man straightened himself up, stared open-mouthed for a moment at the strange apparition, and then, with a yell either of terror or astonishment, bolted into the house as hard as he could run.

As soon as he was able to speak for laughing at the queer incident, Arnold sent the fan-wheels aloft and lowered the Ariel to within about twenty feet of the ground over a level patch of sward, across which meandered a little stream on its way to the lake. While she was hanging motionless over this, the

man who had fled into the house reappeared, almost dragging another man, somewhat similarly attired, after him, and pointing excitedly towards the Ariel.

The second comer, if he felt any astonishment at the apparition that had invaded his solitude, certainly betrayed none. On the contrary, he walked deliberately from the hut to the bit of sward over which the Ariel hung motionless, and, seeing two ladies leaning on the rail that ran round the deck, he doffed his goatskin cap with a well-bred gesture, and said, in a voice that betrayed not the slightest symptom of surprise--

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen! Good morning, and welcome to Aeria! I see that the problem of aerial navigation has been solved; I always said it would be in the first ten years of the twentieth century, though I often got laughed at by the wiseacres who know nothing until they see a thing before their noses. May I ask whether that little message that I sent to the outside world some years ago has procured me the pleasure of this visit?"

"Yes, Mr. Holt. Your little balloon was picked up about three years ago in the Gulf of Guinea, and, after various adventures and much discussion, has led to our present voyage."

"I am delighted to hear it. I suppose there were plenty of noodles who put it down to a practical joke or something of that sort? What's become of Stanley? Why didn't he come out and rescue me, as he did Emin? Not glory enough, I suppose? It would bother him, too, to get over these mountains, unless he flew over. By the way, has he got an air-ship?"

"No," replied Arnold, with a laugh. "This is the only one in existence, and she has not been a week afloat. But if you'll allow us, we'll come down and get generally acquainted, and after that we can explain things at our leisure."

"Quite so, quite so; do so by all means. Most happy, I'm sure. Ah! beautiful model. Comes down as easily as a bird. Capital mechanism. What's your motive-power? Gas, electricity--no, not steam, no funnels! Humph! Very ingenious. Always said it would be done some day. Build flying navies next, and be fighting in the clouds. Then there'll be general smash. Serve 'em right. Fools to fight. Why can't they live in peace?"

While Louis Holt was running along in this style, jerking his words out in little short snappy sentences, and fussing about round the air-ship, she had sunk gently to the earth, and her passengers had disembarked.

Arnold for the time being took no notice of the questions with regard to the motive-power, but introduced first himself, then the ladies, and then Colston, to Louis Holt, who may be described here, as elsewhere, as a little, bronzed, grizzled man, anywhere between fifty-five and seventy, with a lean, wiry, active body, a good square head, an ugly but kindly face, and keen, twinkling little grey eyes, that looked straight into those of any one he might be addressing.

The introductions over, he was invited on board the Ariel, and a few minutes later, in the deck-saloon, he was chattering away thirteen to the dozen, and drinking with unspeakable gusto the first glass of champagne he had tasted for nearly five years.

CHAPTER XVIII. A NAVY OF THE FUTURE.

ARNOLD'S instructions from the Council had been to remain in Aeria, and make a thorough exploration of the wonderful region described in Louis Holt's manuscript, until the time came for him to meet the Avondale, the steamer which was to bring out the materials for constructing the Terrorists' aerial navy.

Louis Holt and his faithful retainer, during the three years and a half that they had been shut up in it from the rest of the world, had made themselves so fully acquainted with its geography that very little of its surface was represented by blanks on the map which the former had spent several months in constructing, and so no better or more willing guides could have been placed at their service than they were.

Holt was an enthusiastic naturalist, and he descanted at great length on the strangeness of the flora and fauna that it had been his privilege to discover and classify in this isolated and hitherto unvisited region. It appeared that neither its animals nor its plants were quite like those of the rest of the continent, but seemed rather to belong to an anterior geological age.

From this fact he had come to the conclusion that at some very remote period, while the greater portion of Northern Africa was yet submerged by the waters of that ocean of which what is now the Sahara was probably the deepest part, Aeria was one of the many islands that had risen above its surface; and that, as the land rose and the waters subsided, its peculiar shape had prevented the forms of life which it contained from migrating or becoming modified in the struggle for existence with other forms, just as the flora and fauna of Australia have been shut off from those of the rest of the world.

There were no traces of human inhabitants to be found; but there were apparently two or three families of anthropoid apes, that seemed, so far as Holt had been able to judge--for they were extremely shy and cunning, and therefore difficult of approach--to be several degrees nearer to man, both in structure and intelligence, than any other members of the Simian family that had been discovered in other parts of the world.

As may well be imagined, a month passed rapidly and pleasantly away, what with exploring excursions by land and air, in the latter of which by no means the least diverting element was the keen and quaintly-expressed delight of Louis Holt at the new method of travel. Two or three times Arnold had, for his satisfaction, sent the Ariel flying over the ridge across which she had entered Aeria, but he had always been content with a glimpse of the outside world, and was always glad to get back again to the "happy valley," as he invariably called his isolated paradise.

The brief sojourn in this delightful land had brought back all the roses to Natasha's lovely cheeks, and had completely restored both her and the Princess to the perfect health that they had lost during their short but terrible experience of Russian convict life; but towards the end of the month they both began to get restless and anxious to get away to the rendezvous with the steamer that was bringing their friends and comrades out from England.

So it came about that an hour or so after sunrise on Friday, the 20th of May, the company of the Ariel bade farewell for a time to Louis Holt and his companion, leaving with them a good supply of the creature comforts of civilisation which alone were lacking in Aeria, rose into the air, and disappeared over the ridge to the north-west.

They had rather more than 2500 miles of plain and mountain and desert to cross, before they reached the sea-coast on which they expected to meet the steamer, and Arnold regulated the speed of the Ariel so that they would reach it about daybreak on the following morning.

The voyage was quite uneventful, and the course that they pursued led them westward through the Zegzeb and Nyfi countries, then north-westward along the valley of the Niger, and then westward across the desert to the desolate sandy shores of the Western Sahara, which they crossed at sunrise on the Sunday morning, in the latitude of the island which was to form their rendezvous with the steamer.

They sighted the island about an hour later, but there was no sign of any vessel for fifty miles round it. The ocean appeared totally deserted, as, indeed, it usually is, for there is no trade with this barren and savage coast, and ships going to and from the southward portions of the continent give its treacherous sandbanks as wide a berth as possible. This, in fact, was the principal reason why this rocky islet, some sixty miles from the coast, had been chosen by the Terrorists for their temporary dockyard.

According to their calculations, the steamer would not be due for another twenty-four hours at the least, and at that moment would be about three hundred miles to the northward. The Ariel was therefore headed in that direction, at a hundred miles an hour, with a view to meeting her and convoying her for the rest of her voyage, and obviating such a disaster as Natasha's apprehensions pointed to.

The air-ship was kept at a height of two thousand feet above the water, and a man was stationed in the forward conning tower to keep a bright look-out ahead. For more than three hours she sped on her way without interruption, and then, a few minutes before twelve, the man in the conning tower signalled to the wheel-house---"Steamer in sight."

The signal was at once transmitted to the saloon, where Arnold was sitting with the rest of the party; he immediately signalled "half-speed" in reply to it, and went to the conning tower to see the steamer for himself.

She was then about twelve miles to the northward. At the speed at which the Ariel was travelling a very few minutes sufficed to bring her within view of the ocean voyagers. A red flag flying from the stern of the air-ship was answered by a similar one from the mainmast of the steamer. The Ariel's engines were at once slowed down, the fan-wheels went aloft, and she sank gently down to within twenty feet of the water, and swung round the steamer's stern.

As soon as they were within hailing distance, those on board the air-ship recognised Nicholas Roburoff and his wife, Radna Michaelis, and several other members of the Inner Circle, standing on the bridge of the steamer. Handkerchiefs were waved, and cries of welcome and greeting passed and re-passed from the air to the sea, until Arnold raised his hand for silence, and, hailing Roburoff, said--

"Are you all well on board?"

"Yes, all well," was the reply, "though we have had rather a risky time of it, for war was generally declared a fortnight ago, and we have had to run the blockade for a good part of the way. That is why we are a little before our time. Can you come nearer? We have some letters for you."

"Yes," replied Arnold. "I'll come alongside. You go ahead, I'll do the rest."

So saying, he ran the Ariel up close to the quarter of the Avondale as easily as though she had been lying at anchor instead of going twenty miles an hour through the water, and went forward and shook hands with Roburoff over the rail, taking a packet of letters from him at the same time. Meanwhile Colston, who had grasped the situation at a glance, had swung himself on to the steamer's deck, and was already engaged in an animated conversation with Radna.

The first advantage that Arnold took of the leisure that was now at his disposal, was to read the letter directed to himself that was among those for Natasha, the Princess, and Colston, which had been brought out by the Avondale. He recognised the writing as Tremayne's, and when he opened the envelope he found that it contained a somewhat lengthy letter from him, and an enclosure in an unfamiliar hand, which consisted of only a few lines, and was signed "Natas."

He started as his eye fell on the terrible name, which now meant so much to him, and he naturally read the note to which it was appended first. There was neither date nor formal address, and it ran as follows:--

You have done well, and fulfilled your promises as a true man should. For the personal service that you have rendered to me I will not thank you in words, for the time may come when I shall be able to do so in deeds. What you have done for the Cause was your duty, and for that I know that you desire no thanks. You have proved that you hold in your hands such power as no single man ever wielded before. Use it well, and in the ages to come men shall remember your name with blessings, and you, if the

Master of Destiny permits, shall attain to your heart's desire. NATAS.

Arnold laid the little slip of paper down almost reverently, for, few as the words were, they were those of a man who was not only Natas, the Master of the Terror, but also the father of the woman whose love, in spite of his oath, was the object to the attainment of which he held all things else as secondary, and who therefore had the power to crown his life-work with the supreme blessing without which it would be worthless however glorious, for he knew full well that, though he might win Natasha's heart, she herself could never be his unless Natas gave her to him.

The other letter was from Tremayne, dated more than a fortnight previously, and gave him a brief resume of the course of events in Europe since his voyage of exploration had begun. It also urged him to push on the construction of the aerial navy as fast as possible, as there was now no telling where or how soon its presence might be required to determine the issue of the world-war, the first skirmishes of which had already taken place in Eastern Europe. Natas and the Chief were both in London, making the final arrangements for the direction of the various diplomatic and military agents of the Brotherhood throughout Europe. From London they were to go to Alanmere, where they would remain until all arrangements were completed. As soon as the fleet was built and the crews and commanders of the air-ships had thoroughly learned their duties, the flagship was to go to Plymouth, where the Lurline would be lying. The news of her arrival would be telegraphed to Alanmere, and Natas and Tremayne would at once come south and put to sea in her. The air-ship was to wait for them at a point two hundred miles due south-west of the Land's End, and pick them up. The yacht was then to be sunk, and the Executive of the Terrorists would for the time being vanish from the sight of men.

It is unnecessary to say that Arnold carried out the plans laid down in this letter in every detail, and with the utmost possible expedition. The Avondale arrived the next day at the island which had been chosen as a dockyard, and the shipbuilding was at once commenced.

All the material for constructing the air-ships had been brought out completely finished as far as each individual part was concerned, and so there was nothing to do but to put them together. The crew and passengers of the steamer included the members of the Executive of the Inner Circle, and sixty picked members of the Outer Circle, chiefly mechanics and sailors, destined to be first the builders and then the crews of the new vessels.

These, under Arnold's direction, worked almost day and night at the task before them. Three of the air-ships were put together at a time, twenty men working at each, and within a month from the time that the Avondale discharged her cargo, the twelve new vessels were ready to take the air.

They were all built on the same plan as the Ariel, and eleven of them were practically identical with her as regards size and speed; but the twelfth, the flagship of the aerial fleet, had been designed by Arnold on a more ambitious scale.

This vessel was larger and much more powerful than any of the others. She was a hundred feet long, with a beam of fifteen feet amidships. On her five masts she carried five fan-wheels, capable of raising her vertically to a height of ten thousand feet without the assistance of her air-planes, and her three propellers, each worked by duplex engines, were able to drive her through the air at a speed of two hundred miles an hour in a calm atmosphere. She was armed with two pneumatic guns forward and two aft, each twenty-five feet long and with a range of twelve miles at an altitude of four thousand feet; and in addition to these she carried two shorter ones on each broadside, with a range of six miles at the same elevation. She also carried a sufficient supply of power-cylinders to give her an effective range of operations of twenty thousand miles without replenishing them.

In addition to the building materials and the necessary tools and appliances for putting them together, the cargo of the Avondale had included an ample supply of stores of all kinds, not the least important part of which consisted of a quantity of power-cylinders sufficient to provide the whole fleet three times over.

The necessary chemicals and apparatus for charging them were also on board, and the last use that Arnold made of the engines of the steamer, which he had disconnected from the propeller and turned to

all kinds of uses during the building operations, was to connect them with his storage pumps and charge every available cylinder to its utmost capacity.

At length, when everything that could be carried in the airships had been taken out of the steamer, she was towed out into deep water, and then a shot from one of the flagship's broadside guns sent her to the bottom of the sea, so severing the last link which had connected the now isolated band of revolutionists with the world on which they were ere long to declare war.

The naming of the fleet was by common consent left to Natasha, and her half-oriental genius naturally led her to appropriately name the air-ships after the winged angels and air-spirits of Moslem and other Eastern mythologies. The flagship she named the Ithuriel, after the angel who was sent to seek out and confound the Powers of Darkness in that terrific conflict between the upper and nether worlds, which was a fitting antetype to the colossal struggle which was now to be waged for the empire of the earth.

Arnold's first task, as soon as the fleet finally took the air was to put the captains and crews of the vessels through a thorough drilling in management and evolution. A regular code of signals had been arranged, by means of which orders as to formation, speed, altitude, and direction could be at once transmitted from the flagship. During the day flags were used, and at night flashes from electric reflectors.

The scene of these evolutions was practically the course taken by the Ariel from Aeria to the island; and as the captains and lieutenants of the different vessels were all men of high intelligence, and carefully selected for the work, and as the mechanism of the air-ships was extremely simple, the whole fleet was well in hand by the time the mountain mass of Aeria was sighted a week after leaving the island.

Arnold in the Ithuriel led the way to a narrow defile on the south-western side, which had been discovered during his first visit, and which admitted of entrance to the valley at an elevation of about 3000 feet. Through this the fleet passed in single file soon after sunrise one lovely morning in the middle of June, and within an hour the thirteen vessels had come to rest on the shores of the lake.

Then for the first time, probably, since the beginning of the world, the beautiful valley became the scene of a busy activity in the midst of which the lean wiry figure of Louis Holt seemed to be here, there, and everywhere at once, doing the honours of Aeria as though it were a private estate to which the Terrorists had come by his special invitation.

He was more than ever delighted with the air-ships, and especially with the splendid proportions of the Ithuriel, and the brilliant lustre of her polished hull, which had been left unpainted, and shone as though her plates had been of burnished silver. Altogether he was well pleased with this invasion of a solitude which, in spite of its great beauty and his professed contempt for the world in general, had for the last few months been getting a good deal more tedious than he would have cared to admit.

In the absence of Natas and the Chief, the command of the new colony devolved, in accordance with the latter's directions, upon Nicholas Roburoff, who was a man of great administrative powers, and who set to work without an hour's delay to set his new kingdom in order, marking out sites for houses and gardens, and preparing materials for building them and the factories for which the water-power of the valley was to be utilised.

Arnold, as admiral of the fleet, had transferred the command of the Ariel to Colston, but he retained him as his lieutenant in the Ithuriel for the next voyage, partly because he wanted to have him with him on what might prove to be a momentous expedition, and partly because Natasha, who was naturally anxious to rejoin her father as soon as possible, wished to have Radna for a companion in place of the Princess, who had elected to remain in the valley. As another separation of the lovers, who, according to the laws of the Brotherhood, now only waited for the formal consent of Natas to their marriage, was not to be thought of, this arrangement gave everybody the most perfect satisfaction.

Three days sufficed to get everything into working order in the new colony, and on the morning of the fourth the Ithuriel, having on board the original crew of the Ariel, reinforced by two engineers and a

couple of sailors, rose into the air amidst the cheers of the assembled colonists, crossed the northern ridge, and vanished like a silver arrow into space.

CHAPTER XIX. THE EVE OF BATTLE.

IT will now be necessary to go back about six weeks from the day that the Ithuriel started on her northward voyage, and to lay before the reader a brief outline of the events which had transpired in Europe subsequently to the date of Tremayne's letter to Arnold.

On the evening of that day he went down to the House of Lords, to make his speech in favour of the Italian Loan. He had previously spoken some half dozen times since he had taken his seat, and, young as he was, had always commanded a respectful hearing by his sound common sense and his intimate knowledge of foreign policy, but none of his brother peers had been prepared for the magnificent speech that he had made on this momentous night.

He had never given his allegiance to any of the political parties of the day, but he was one of the foremost advocates of what was then known as the Imperial policy, and which had grown up out of what is known in the present day as Imperial Federation. To this he subordinated everything else, and held as his highest, and indeed almost his only political ideal, the consolidation of Britain and her colonies into an empire commercially and politically intact and apart from the rest of the world, self-governing in all its parts as regards local affairs, but governed as a whole by a representative Imperial Parliament, sitting in London, and composed of delegates from all portions of the empire.

This ideal--which, it is scarcely necessary to say, was still considered as "beyond the range of practical politics"--formed the keynote of such a speech as had never before been heard in the British House of Lords. He commenced by giving a rapid but minute survey of foreign policy, which astounded the most experienced of his hearers. Not only was it absolutely accurate as far as they could follow it, but it displayed an intimate knowledge of involutions of policy at which British diplomacy had only guessed.

More than this, members of the Government and the Privy Council saw, to their amazement, that the speaker knew the inmost secrets of their own policy even better than they did themselves. How he had become possessed of them was a mystery, and all that they could do was to sit and listen in silent wonder.

He drew a graphic word-picture of the nations of the earth standing full-armed on the threshold of such a war as the world had never seen before--a veritable Armageddon, which would shake the fabric of society to its foundations, even if it did not dissolve it finally in the blood of countless battlefields.

He estimated with marvellous accuracy the exact amount of force which each combatant would be able to put on to the field, and summed up the appalling mass of potential destruction that was ready to burst upon the world at a moment's notice. He showed the position of Italy, and proved to demonstration that if the loan were not immediately granted, it would be necessary either for Britain to seize her fleet as she did that of Denmark a century before--an act which the Italians would themselves resist at all hazards--or else to finance her through the war, as she had financed Germany during the Napoleonic struggle.

To grant the loan would be to save the Italian fleet and army for the Triple Alliance; to refuse it would be to detach Italy from the Alliance, and to drive her into the arms of their foes, for not only could she not stand alone amidst the shock of the contending Powers, but without an immediate supply of ready money she would not be able to keep the sea for a month.

Thus, he said in conclusion, the fate of Europe, and perhaps of the world, lay for the time being in their Lordships' hands. The Double Alliance was already numerically stronger than the Triple, and, moreover, they had at their command a new means of destruction, for the dreadful effectiveness of which he could vouch from personal experience.

The trials of the Russian war-balloons had been secret, it was true, but he had nevertheless witnessed them, no matter how, and he knew what they could accomplish. It was true that there were in existence even more formidable engines than these, but they belonged to no nation, and were in the hands of

those whose hands were against every man's, and whose designs were still wrapped in the deepest mystery.

He therefore besought his hearers not to trust too implicitly to that hitherto unconquerable valour and resource which had so far rendered Britain impregnable to her enemies. These were not the days of personal valour. They were the days of warfare by machinery, of wholesale destruction by means which men had never before been called upon to face, and which annihilated from a distance before mere valour had time to strike its blow.

If ever the Fates were on the side of the biggest battalions, they were now, and, so far as human foresight could predict the issue of the colossal struggle, the greatest and the most perfectly equipped armaments would infallibly insure the ultimate victory, quite apart from considerations of personal heroism and devotion.

No such speech had been heard in either House since Edmund Burke had fulminated against the miserable policy which severed America from Britain, and split the Anglo-Saxon race in two; but now, as then, personal feeling and class prejudice proved too strong for eloquence and logic.

Italy was the most intensely Radical State in Europe, and she was bankrupt to boot; and, added to this, there was a very strong party in the Upper House which believed that Britain needed no such ally, that with Germany and Austria at her side she could fight the world, in spite of the Tsar's new-fangled balloons, which would probably prove failures in actual war as similar inventions had done before, and even if her allies succumbed, had she not stood alone before, and could she not do it again if necessary?

She would fulfil her engagement with the Triple Alliance, and declare war the moment that one of the Powers was attacked, but she would not pour British gold in millions into the bottomless gulf of Italian bankruptcy.

Such were the main points in the speech of the Duke of Argyle, who followed Lord Alanmere, and spoke just before the division. When the figures were announced, it was found that the Loan Guarantee Bill had been negatived by a majority of seven votes.

The excitement in London that night was tremendous. The two Houses of Parliament had come into direct collision on a question which the Premier had plainly stated to be of vital importance, and a deadlock seemed inevitable. The evening papers brought out special editions giving Tremayne's speech verbatim, and the next morning the whole press of the country was talking of nothing else.

The "leading journals," according to their party bias, discussed it pro and con, and rent each other in a furious war of words, the prelude to the sterner struggle that was to come.

Unhappily the parties in Parliament were very evenly balanced, and a very strong section of the Radical Opposition was, as it always had been, bitterly opposed to the arrangement with the Triple Alliance, which every one suspected and no one admitted until Tremayne astounded the Lords by reciting its conditions in the course of his speech.

It was the avowed object of this section of the Opposition to stand out of the war at any price till the last minute, and not to fight at all if it could possibly be avoided. The immediate consequence was that, when the Government on the following day asked for an urgency vote of ten millions for the mobilisation of the Volunteers and the Naval Reserve, the Opposition led by Mr. John Morley, mustered to its last man, and defeated the motion by a majority of eleven.

The next day a Cabinet Council was held, and in the afternoon Mr. Balfour rose in a densely-crowded House, and, after a dignified allusion to the adverse vote of the previous day told the House that in view of the grave crisis which was now inevitable in European affairs, a crisis in which the fate, not only of Britain, but of the whole Western world, would probably be involved, the Ministry felt it impossible to remain in office without the hearty and unequivocal support of both Houses--a support which the two adverse votes in Lords and Commons had made it hopeless to look for as those Houses were at present constituted.

He had therefore to inform the House that, after consultation with his colleagues, he had decided to place the resignations of the Ministry in the hands of his Majesty, and appeal to the country on the plain

issue of Intervention or Non-intervention. Under the circumstances, there was nothing else to be done. The deplorable crisis which immediately followed was the logical consequence of the inherently vicious system of party government.

At the period in which the action of the narrative takes place, her Majesty Queen Victoria had abdicated in favour of the present Prince of Wales, and was living in comparative retirement at Balmoral, retaining Osborne as an alternative residence.

While the fate of the world was practically trembling in the balance, Europe, armed to the teeth in readiness for the Titanic struggle that a few weeks would now see shaking the world, was amused by the spectacle of what was really the most powerful nation on earth losing its head amidst the excitement of a general election, and frittering away on the petty issues of party strife the energies that should have been devoted with single-hearted unanimity to preparation for the conflict whose issue would involve its very existence.

For a month the nations held their hand, why, no one exactly knew, except, perhaps, two men who were now in daily consultation in a country house in Yorkshire. It may have been that the final preparations were not yet complete, or that the combatants were taking a brief breathing-space before entering the arena, or that Europe was waiting to see the decision of Britain at the ballot-boxes, or possibly the French fleet of war-balloons was not quite ready to take the air,---any of these reasons might have been sufficient to explain the strange calm before the storm; but meanwhile the British nation was busy listening to the conflicting eloquence of partisan orators from a thousand platforms throughout the land, and trying to make up its mind whether it should return a Conservative or a Radical Ministry to power.

In the end, Mr. Balfour came back with a solid hundred majority behind him, and at once set to work to, if possible, make up for lost time. The moment of Fate had, however, gone by for ever. During the precious days that had been fooled away in party strife, French gold and Russian diplomacy had done their work.

The day after the Conservative Ministry returned to power, France declared war, and Russia, who had been nominally at war with Britain for over a month, suddenly took the offensive, and poured her Asiatic troops into the passes of the Hindu Kush. Two days later, the defection of Italy from the Triple Alliance told Europe how accurately Tremayne had gauged the situation in his now historic speech, and how the month of strange quietude had been spent by the controllers of the Double Alliance.

The spell was broken at last. After forty years of peace, Europe plunged into the abyss of war; and from one end of the Continent to the other nothing was heard but the tramp of vast armies as they marshalled themselves along the threatened frontiers, and concentrated at the points of attack and defence.

On all the lines of ocean traffic, steamers were hurrying homeward or to neutral ports, in the hope of reaching a place of safety before hostilities actually broke out. Great liners were racing across the Atlantic either to Britain or America with their precious freights, while those flying the French flag on the westward voyage prepared to run the gauntlet of the British cruisers as best they might.

All along the routes to India and the East the same thing was happening, and not a day passed but saw desperate races between fleet ocean greyhounds and hostile cruisers, which, as a rule, terminated in favour of the former, thanks to the superiority of private enterprise over Government contract-work in turning out ships and engines.

In Britain the excitement was indescribable. The result of the general election had cast the final die in favour of immediate war in concert with the Triple Alliance. The defection of Italy had thoroughly awakened the popular mind to the extreme gravity of the situation, and the declaration of war by France had raised the blood of the nation to fever heat. The magic of battle had instantly quelled all party differences so far as the bulk of the people was concerned, and no one talked of anything but the war and its immediate issues. Men forgot that they belonged to parties, and only remembered that they were citizens of the same nation.

CHAPTER XX. BETWEEN TWO LIVES.

SIX weeks after he had made his speech in the House of Lords, Tremayne was sitting in his oak-panelled library at Alanmere, in deep and earnest converse with a man who was sitting in an invalid chair by a window looking out upon the lawn. The face of this man exhibited a contrast so striking and at the same time terrible, that the most careless glance cast upon it would have revealed the fact that it was the face of a man of extraordinary character, and that the story of some strange fate was indelibly stamped upon it.

The upper part of it, as far down as the mouth, was cast in a mould of the highest and most intellectual manly beauty. The forehead was high and broad and smooth, the eyebrows dark and firm but finely arched, the nose somewhat prominently aquiline, but well shaped, and with delicate, sensitive nostrils. The eyes were deep-set, large and soft, and dark as the sky of a moonless night, yet shining in the firelight with a strange magnetic glint that seemed to fasten Tremayne's gaze and hold it at will.

But the lower portion of the face was as repulsive as the upper part was attractive. The mouth was the mouth of a wild beast, and the lips and cheeks and chin were seared and seamed as though with fire, and what looked like the remains of a moustache and beard stood in black ragged patches about the heavy unsightly jaws.

When the thick, shapeless lips parted, they did so in a hideous grin, which made visible long, sharp white teeth, more like those of a wolf than those of a human being.

His body, too, exhibited no less strange a contrast than his face did. To the hips it was that of a man of well-knit, muscular frame, not massive, but strong and well-proportioned. The arms were long and muscular, and the hands white and small, but firm, well-shaped, and nervous.

But from his hips downwards, this strange being was a dwarf and a cripple. His hips were narrow and shrunken, one of his legs was some inches shorter than the other, and both were twisted and distorted, and hung helplessly down from the chair as he sat.

Such was Natas, the Master of the Terror, and the man whose wrongs, whatever they might have been, had caused him to devote his life to a work of colossal vengeance, and his incomparable powers to the overthrow of a whole civilisation.

The tremendous task to which he had addressed himself with all the force of his mighty nature for twenty years, was now at length approaching completion. The mine that he had so patiently laid, year after year, beneath the foundations of Society, was complete in every detail, the first spark had been applied, and the first rumbling of the explosion was already sounding in the ears of men, though they little knew how much it imported. The work of the master-intellect was almost done. The long days and nights of plotting and planning were over, and the hour for action had arrived at last.

For him there was little more to do, and the time was very near when he could retire from the strife, and watch in peace and confidence the reaping of the harvest of ruin and desolation that his hands had sown. Henceforth, the central figure in the world-revolution must be the young English engineer, whose genius had brought him forth out of his obscurity to take command of the subjugated powers of the air, and to arbitrate the destinies of the world.

This was why he was sitting here, in the long twilight of the June evening, talking so earnestly with the man who, under the spell of his mysterious power and master-will, had been his second self in completing the work that he had designed, and had thought and spoken and acted as he had inspired him against all the traditions of his race and station, in that strange double life that he had lived, in each portion of which he had been unconscious of all that he had been and had done in the other. The time had now come to draw aside the veil which had so far divided these two lives from each other, to show him each as it was in very truth, and to leave him free to deliberately choose between them.

Natas had been speaking without any interruption from Tremayne for nearly an hour, drawing the

parallel of the two lives before him with absolute fidelity, neither omitting nor justifying anything, and his wondering hearer had listened to him in silence, unable to speak: for the crowding emotions which were swarming through his brain. At length Natas concluded by saying--

"And now, Alan Tremayne, I have shown you faithfully the two paths which you have trodden since first I had need of you. So far you have been as clay in the hands of the potter. Now the spell is removed, and you are free to choose which of them you will follow to the end,---that of the English gentleman of fortune and high position, whose country is on the brink of a war that will tax her vast resources to the utmost, and may end in her ruin; or that of the visible and controlling head of the only organisation which can at the supreme moment be the arbiter of peace or war, order or anarchy, and which alone, if any earthly power can, will evolve order out of chaos, and bring peace on earth at last."

As Natas ceased, Tremayne passed his hand slowly over his eyes and brows, as though to clear away the mists which obscured his mental vision. Then he rose from his chair, and paced the floor with quick, uneven strides for several minutes. At length he replied, speaking as one might who was just waking from some evil dream--

"You have made a conspirator and a murderer of me. How is it possible that, knowing this, I can again become what I was before your infernal influence was cast about me?"

"What you have done at my command is nothing to you, and leaves no stain upon your honour, if you choose to put it so, for it was not your will that was working within you, but mine. As for the killing of Dornovitch, it was necessary, and you were the only instrument by which it could have been accomplished before irretrievable harm had been done.

"He alone of the outside world possessed the secret of the Terror. A woman of the Outer Circle in Paris had allowed her love for him to overcome her duty to the Brotherhood, and had betrayed what she could, in order, as she vainly thought, to shield him from its vengeance for the executive murders of the year before. He too had on him the draft of the secret treaty, the possession of which has enabled us to control the drift of European politics at the most crucial time.

"Had he escaped, not only would hundreds of lives have been sacrificed on suspicion to Russian official vengeance, but Russia and France would now be masters of the British line of communication to the East, for it would not have been possible for Mr. Balfour to have been forewarned, and therefore forearmed, in time to double the Mediterranean Squadron as he has done. Surely one Russian's life is not too great a price to pay for all that."

"I do not care for the man's life, for he was an enemy, and even then plotting the ruin of my own country in the dark. It is not the killing, but the manner of it. England does not fight her battles with the assassin's knife, and his blood is on my hands "--

"On your hands, perhaps, but not on your soul. It is on mine, and I will answer for it when we stand face to face at the Bar where all secrets are laid bare. The man deserved death, for he was plotting the death of thousands. What matter then how or by whose hands he died?

"It is time the world had done with these miserable sophistries, and these spurious distinctions between murder by wholesale and by retail, and it soon will have done with them. I, by your hand, killed Dornovitch in his sleep. That was murder, says the legal casuist. You read this morning in the Times how one of the Russian war-balloons went the night before last and hung in the darkness over a sleeping town on the Austrian frontier, and dropped dynamite shells upon it, killing and maiming hundreds who had no personal quarrel with Russia. That is war, and therefore lawful!

"Nonsense, my friend, nonsense! There is no difference. All violence is crime, if you will, but it is a question of degree only. The world is mad on this subject of war. It considers the horrible thing honourable, and gives its highest distinctions to those who shed blood most skilfully on the battlefield, and the triumphs that are won by superior force or cunning are called glorious, and those who achieve them the nations fall down and worship.

"The nations must be taught wisdom, for war has had victims enough. But men are still foolish, and to cure them a terrible lesson will be necessary. But that lesson shall be taught, even though the whole

earth be turned into a battlefield, and all the dwellings of men into charnel-houses, in order to teach it to them."

"In other words, Society is to be dissolved in order that anarchy and lawlessness may take its place. Society may not be perfect,---nay, I will grant that its sins are many and grievous, that it has forgotten its duty both to God and man in its worship of Mammon and its slavery to externals,---but you who have plotted its destruction, have you anything better to put in its place? You can destroy, perhaps, but can you build up?"

"The jungle must be cleared and the swamp drained before the habitations of men can be built in their place. It has been mine to destroy, and I will pursue the work of destruction to the end, as I have sworn to do by that Name which a Jew holds too sacred for speech. I believe myself to be the instrument of vengeance upon this generation, even as Joshua was upon Canaan, and as Khalid the Sword of God was upon Byzantium in the days of her corruption. You may hold this for an old man's fancy if you will, but it shall surely come to pass in the fullness of time, which is now at hand; and then, where I have destroyed, may you, if you will build up again!"

"What do you mean? You are speaking in parables."

"Which shall soon be made plain. You read in your newspaper this morning of a mysterious movement that is taking place throughout the Buddhist peoples of the East. They believe that Buddha has returned to earth, reincarnated, to lead them to the conquest of the world. Now, as you know, every fourth man, woman, and child in the whole human race is a Buddhist, and the meaning of this movement is that that mighty mass of humanity, pent up and stagnant for centuries, is about to burst its bounds and overflow the earth in a flood of desolation and destruction.

"The nations of the West know nothing of this, and are unsheathing the sword to destroy each other. Like a house divided against itself, their power shall be brought to confusion, and their empire be made as a wilderness. And over the starving and war-smitten lands of Europe these Eastern swarms shall sweep, innumerable as the locusts, resistless as the pestilence, and what fire and sword have spared they shall devour, and nothing shall be left of all the glory of Christendom but its name and the memory of its fall!"

Natas spoke his frightful prophecy like one entranced, and when he had finished he let his head fall forward for a moment on his breast, as though he were exhausted. Then he raised it again, and went on in a calmer voice--

"There is but one power under heaven that can stand between the Western world and this destruction, and that is the race to which you belong. It is the conquering race of earth, and the choicest fruit of all the ages until now. It is nearly two hundred million strong, and it is united by the ties of kindred blood and speech the wide world over.

"But it is also divided by petty jealousies, and mean commercial interests. But for these the world might be an Anglo-Saxon planet. Would it not be a glorious task for you, who are the flower of this splendid race, so to unite it that it should stand as a solid barrier of invincible manhood before which this impending flood of yellow barbarism should dash itself to pieces like the cloud-waves against the granite summits of the eternal hills?"

"A glorious task, truly!" exclaimed Tremayne, once more springing from his chair and beginning to pace the room again; "but the man is not yet born who could accomplish it."

"There are fifty men on earth at this moment who can accomplish it, and of them the two chief are Englishmen,---yourself and this Richard Arnold, whose genius has given the Terrorists the command of the air.

"Come, Alan Tremayne! here is a destiny such as no man ever had before revealed to him. It is not for a man of your nation and lineage to shrink from it. You have reproached me for using you to unworthy ends, as you thought them, and with pulling down where I am not able to build up again. Obey me still, this time of your own free will and with your eyes open, and, as I have pulled down by your hand, so by it will I build up again, if the Master of Destiny shall permit me; and if not, then shall

you achieve the task without me. Now give me your ears, for the words that I have to say are weighty ones.

"No human power can stop the war that has now begun, nor can any curtail it until it has run its appointed course. But we have at our command a power which, if skilfully applied at the right moment, will turn the tide of conflict in favour of Britain, and if at that moment the Mother of Nations can gather her children about her in obedience to the call of common kindred, all shall be well, and the world shall be hers.

"But before that is made possible she must pass through the fire, and be purged of that corruption which is even now poisoning her blood and clouding her eyes in the presence of her enemies. The overweening lust of gold must be burnt out of her soul in the fiery crucible of war, and she must learn to hold honour once more higher than wealth, and rich and poor and gentle and simple must be as one family, and not as master and servant.

"East and west, north and south, wherever the English tongue is spoken, men must clasp hands and forget all other things save that they are brothers of blood and speech, and that the world is theirs if they choose to take it. This is a work that cannot be done by any nation, but only by a whole race which with millions of hands and a single heart devotes itself to achieve success or perish."

"Brave words, brave words!" cried Tremayne, pausing in his walk in front of the chair in which Natas sat; "and if you could make me believe them true, I would follow you blindly to the end, no matter what the path might be. But I cannot believe them. I cannot think that you or I and a few followers, even aided by Arnold and his aerial fleet, could accomplish such a stupendous task as that. It is too great. It is superhuman! And yet it would be glorious even to fail worthily in such a task, even to fall fighting in such Titanic conflict!"

He paused, and stood silent and irresolute, as though appalled by the prospect with which he was confronted here at the parting of the ways. He glanced at the extraordinary being sitting near him, and saw his deep, dark eyes fixed upon him, as though they were reading his very soul within him. Then he took a step towards the cripple's chair, took his right hand in his, and said slowly and steadily and solemnly--

"It is a worthy destiny! I will essay it for good or evil, for life or death. I am with you to the end!"

As Tremayne spoke the fatal words which once more bound him, and this time for life and of his own free will, to Natas the Jew, this cripple who, chained to his chair, yet aspired to the throne of a world, he fancied he saw his shapeless lips move in a smile, and into his eyes there came a proud look of mingled joy and triumph as he returned the handclasp, and said in a softer, kinder voice than Tremayne had ever heard him use before--

"Well spoken! Those words were worthy of you and of your race! As your faith is, so shall your reward be. Now wheel my chair to yonder window that looks out towards the east, and you shall look past the shadows into the day which is beyond. So! that will do. Now get another chair and sit beside me. Fix your eyes on that bright star that shows above the trees, and do not speak, but think only of that star and its brightness."

Tremayne did as he was bidden in silence, and when he was seated Natas swept his hands gently downwards over his open eyes again and again, till the lids grew heavy and fell, shutting out the brightness of the star, and the dim beauty of the landscape which lay sleeping in the twilight and the June night.

Then suddenly it seemed as though they opened again of their own accord, and were endowed with an infinite power of vision. The trees and lawns of the home park of Alanmere and the dark rolling hills of heather beyond were gone, and in their place lay stretched out a continent which he saw as though from some enormous height, with its plains and lowlands and rivers, vast steppes and snowclad hills, forests and tablelands, huge mountain masses rearing lonely peaks of everlasting ice to a sunlight that had no heat; and then beyond these again more plains and forests, that stretched away southward until they merged in the all-surrounding sea.

Then he seemed to be carried forward towards the scene until he could distinguish the smallest objects upon the earth, and he saw, swarming southward and westward, vast hordes of men, that divided into long streams, and poured through mountain passes and defiles, and spread themselves again over fertile lands, like locusts over green fields of young corn. And wherever those hordes swept forward, a long line of fire and smoke went in front of them, and where they had passed the earth was a blackened wilderness.

Then, too, from the coasts and islands vast fleets of war-ships put out, pouring their clouds of smoke to the sky, and making swiftly for the southward and westward, where from other coasts and islands other vessels put out to meet them, and, meeting them, were lost with them under great clouds of grey smoke, through which flashed incessantly long livid tongues of flame.

Then, like a panorama rolled away from him, the mighty picture receded and new lands came into view, familiar lands which he had traversed often. They too were black and wasted with the tempest of war from east to west, but nevertheless those swarming streams came on, countless and undiminished, up out of the south and east, while on the western verge vast armies and fleets battled desperately with each other on sea and land, as though they heeded not those locust swarms of dusky millions coming ever nearer and nearer.

Once more the scene rolled backwards, and he saw a mighty city closely beleaguered by two vast hosts of men, who slowly pushed their batteries forward until they planted them on all the surrounding heights and poured a hail of shot and shell upon the swarming, helpless millions that were crowded within the impassable ring of fire and smoke. Above the devoted city swam in mid-air strange shapes like monstrous birds of prey, and beneath where they floated the earth seemed ever and anon to open and belch forth smoke and flame into which the crumbling houses fell and burnt in heaps of shapeless ruins. Then--

He felt a cool hand laid almost caressingly on his brow, and the voice of Natas said beside him--

"That is enough. You have seen the Field of Armageddon, and when the day of battle comes you shall be there and play the part allotted to you from the beginning. Do you believe?"

"Yes," replied Tremayne, rising wearily from his chair, "I believe; and as the task is, so may Heaven make my strength in the stress of battle!"

"Amen!" said Natas very solemnly

That night the young Lord of Alanmere went sleepless to bed, and lay awake till dawn, revolving over and over again in his mind the marvellous things that he had seen and heard and the tremendous task to which he had now irrevocably committed himself for good or evil. In all these waking dreams there was ever present before his mental vision the face of a woman whose beauty was like and yet unlike that of the daughter of Natas. It lacked the brilliance and subtle charm which in Natasha so wondrously blended the dusky beauty of the daughters of the South with the fairer loveliness of the daughters of the North; but it atoned for this by that softer grace and sweetness which is the highest charm of purely English beauty.

It was the face of the woman whom, in that portion of his strange double life which had been free from the mysterious influence of Natas, he had loved with well-assured hope that she would one day rule his house and broad domains with him. She was now Lady Muriel Penarth, the daughter of Lord Marazion, a Cornish nobleman, whose estates abutted on those which belonged to Lord Alanmere as Baron Tremayne, of Tremayne, in the county of Cornwall, as the Peerage had it. Noble alike by lineage and nature, no fairer mistress could have been found for the lands of Tremayne and Alanmere, but--what seas of blood and flame now lay between him and the realisation of his love-ideal!

He must forsake his own, and become a revolutionary and an outcast from Society. He must draw the sword upon the world and his own race, and, armed with the most awful means of destruction that the wit of man had ever devised, he must fight his way through universal war to that peace which alone he could ask her to share with him. Still much could be done before he took the final step of severance which might be perpetual, and he would lose no time in doing it.

As soon as it was fairly light, he rose and took a long, rapid walk over the home park, and when he returned to breakfast at nine he had resolved to execute forthwith a deed of gift, transferring the whole of his vast property, which was unentailed and therefore entirely at his own disposal, to the woman who was to have shared it with him in a few months as his wife. If the Fates were kind, he would come back from the world-war and reclaim both the lands and their mistress, and if not he would have the satisfaction of knowing that his broad acres at least had a worthy mistress.

At breakfast he met Natas again, and during the meal one of his footmen entered, bringing the letters that had come by the morning post.

There were several letters for each of them, those for Natas being addressed to "Herr F. Niemand," and for some time they were both employed in looking through their correspondence. Suddenly Natas looked up, and said--

"When do you expect to hear that Arnold is off the south coast?"

"Almost any day now; in fact, within the week, if everything has gone right. Here is a letter from Johnston to say that the Lurline has arrived at Plymouth, and that a bright look-out is being kept for him. He will telegraph here and to the club in London as soon as the air-ship is sighted. Twenty-four hours will then see us on board the Ariel, or whichever of the ships he comes in."

"I hope the news will come soon, for Michael Roburoff, the President's brother, who has been in command of the American Section, cables to say that he sails from New York the day after to-morrow with detailed accounts. That means that he will come with full reports of what the Section has done and will be ready to do when the time comes, and also what the enemy are doing.

"He sails in the Aurania, and as the Atlantic routes are swarming with war-ships and torpedo-boats, she will probably have to run the gauntlet, and it is of the last importance that Michael and his reports reach us safely. It will therefore be necessary for the air-ship to meet the Aurania as soon as possible on her passage, and take him off her before any harm happens to him. If he and his reports fell into the hands of the enemy, there is no telling what might happen."

"As nearly as I can calculate," said Tremayne, "the air-ship should be sighted in three days from now, perhaps in two. It will take the Aurania over four days to cross the Atlantic, and so we ought to be able to meet her somewhere in mid-ocean if she is able to get so far without being overhauled. Unfortunately she is known to be a British ship and subsidised by the British Government, so there will be very little chance of her getting through under the American flag. Still she's about the fastest steamer afloat, and will take a lot of catching."

"And if the worst comes and she falls into the hands of the enemy, we must fight our first naval battle and retake her even if we have to sink a few cruisers to do so," added Natas, "for, come what may, Michael must not be captured."

"Arnold will almost certainly come in his flagship, and if she is what he promised, she should be more than a match for a whole fleet, so I don't think there is much to fear unless the Aurania gets sunk before we reach her," said Tremayne.

Natas and his host devoted the rest of the forenoon to their correspondence, and to making the final arrangements for leaving Alanmere. Tremayne wrote full instructions to his lawyers for the drawing up of the deed, and directed them to have it ready for his signature by two o'clock on the following day. After lunch he rode over to Knaresborough himself with the post-bag, telegraphed an abstract of his instructions in advance, and ordered his private saloon carriage to be attached to the up express which passed through at eight the next morning.

CHAPTER XXI. JUST IN TIME.

AS the train drew up in King's Cross station at twelve the next day, almost the first words that Tremayne heard were--

"Special Pall Mall, sir! Appearance of the mysterious air-ship over Plymouth this morning! Great battle in Austria yesterday, defeat of the Austrians--awful slaughter with war-balloons! Special!"

The boy was selling the papers as fast as he could hand them out to the eager passengers. Tremayne secured one, shut the door of the saloon again, and, turning to the middle page, read aloud to Natas--

"We have just received a telegram from our Plymouth correspondent, to say that soon after daybreak this morning torpedo-boat No. 157 steamed into the Sound, bringing the news that she had sighted a large five-masted air-ship about ten miles from the coast, when in company with the cruiser *Ariadne*, whose commander had despatched her with the news. Hardly had the report been received when the air-ship herself passed over Mount Edgcumbe and came towards the town.

"The news spread like wildfire, and in a few minutes the streets were filled with crowds of people, who had thrown on a few clothes and rushed out to get a look at the strange visitant. At first it was thought that an attack on the arsenal was intended by the mysterious vessel, and the excitement had risen almost to the pitch of panic, when it was observed that she was flying a plain white flag, and that her intentions were apparently peaceful.

"Panic then gave place to curiosity. The air-ship crossed the town at an elevation of about 3000 feet, described a complete circle round it in the space of a few minutes, and then suddenly shot up into the air and vanished to the southwestward at an inconceivable speed. The vessel is described as being about a hundred feet long, and was apparently armed with eight guns. Her hull was of white polished metal, probably aluminium, and shone like silver in the sunlight.

"The wildest rumours are current as to the object of her visit, but of course no credence can be attached to any of them. The vessel is plainly of the same type as that which destroyed Kronstadt two months ago, but larger and more powerful. The inference is that she is one of a fleet in the hands of the Terrorists, and the profoundest uncertainty and anxiety prevail throughout naval and military circles everywhere as to the use that they may make of these appalling means of destruction should they take any share in the war."

"Humph!" said Tremayne, as he finished reading. "Johnston's telegram must have crossed us on the way, but I shall find one at the club. Well, we have no time to lose, for we ought to start for Plymouth this evening. Your men will take you straight to the Great Western Hotel, and I will hurry my business through as fast as possible, and meet you there in time to catch the 6.30. At this rate we shall meet the *Aurania* soon after she leaves New York."

Within the next six hours Tremayne transferred the whole of his vast property in a single instrument to his promised wife, thus making her the richest woman in England; handed the precious deeds to her astonished father; obtained his promise to take his wife and daughter to Alanmere at the end of the London season, and to remain there with her until he returned to reclaim her and his estates together; and said good-bye to Lady Muriel herself in an interview which was a good deal longer than that which he had with his bewildered and somewhat scandalised lawyers, who had never before been forced to rush any transaction through at such an indecent speed. Had Lord Alanmere not been the best client in the kingdom, they might have rebelled against such an outrage on the law's time-honoured delays; but he was not a man to be trifled with, and so the work was done and an unbeatable record in legal despatch accomplished, albeit very unwillingly by the men of law.

By midnight the *Lurline* ostensibly bound for Queenstown, had cleared the Sound, and, with the Eddystone Light on her port bow, headed away at full-speed to the westward. She was about the fastest yacht afloat, and at a pinch could be driven a good twenty-seven miles an hour through the water. As both Natas and Tremayne were anxious to join the air-ship as soon as possible, every ounce of steam

that her boilers would stand was put on, and she slipped along in splendid style through the long, dark seas that came rolling smoothly up Channel from the westward.

In an hour and a half after passing the Eddystone she sighted the Lizard Light, and by the time she had brought it well abeam the first interruption of her voyage occurred. A huge, dark mass loomed suddenly up out of the darkness of the moonless night, then a blinding, dazzling ray of light shot across the water from the searchlight of a battleship that was patrolling the coast, attended by a couple of cruisers and four torpedo-boats. One of these last came flying towards the yacht down the white path of the beam of light, and Tremayne, seeing that he would have to give an account of himself, stopped his engines and waited for the torpedo-boat to come within hail.

"Steamer ahoy! Who are you? and where are you going to at that speed?"

"This is the Lurline, the Earl of Alanmere's yacht, from Plymouth to Queenstown. We're only going at our usual speed."

"Oh, if it's the Lurline, you needn't say that," answered the officer who had hailed from the torpedo-boat, with a laugh. "Is Lord Alanmere on board?"

"Yes, here I am," said Tremayne, replying instead of his sailing-master. "Is that you, Selwyn? I thought I recognised your voice."

"Yes, it's I, or rather all that's left of me after two months in this buck-jumping little brute of a craft. She bobs twice in the same hole every time, and if it's a fairly deep hole she just dives right through and out on the other side; and there are such a lot of Frenchmen about that we get no rest day or night on this patrolling business."

"Very sorry for you, old man; but if you will seek glory in a torpedo-boat, I don't see that you can expect anything else. Will you come on board and have a drink?"

"No, thanks. Very sorry, but I can't stop. By the way have you heard of that air-ship that was over this way this morning? I wonder what the deuce it really is, and what it's up to?"

"I've heard of it; it was in the London papers this morning. Have you seen any more of it?"

"Oh yes; the thing was cruising about in mid-air all this morning, taking stock of us and the Frenchmen too, I suppose. She vanished during the afternoon. Where to, I don't know. It's awfully humiliating, you know, to be obliged to crawl about here on the water, at twenty-five knots at the utmost, while that fellow is flying a hundred miles an hour or so through the clouds without turning a hair, or I ought to say without as much as a puff of smoke. He seems to move of his own mere volition. I wonder what on earth he is."

"Not much on earth apparently, but something very considerable in the air, where I hope he'll stop out of sight until I get to Queenstown; and as I want to get there pretty early in the morning, perhaps you'll excuse me saying good-night and getting along, if you won't come on board."

"No, very sorry I can't. Good-night, and keep well in to the coast till you have to cross to Ireland. Good-bye?"

"Good-bye!" shouted Tremayne in reply, as the torpedo-boat swung round and headed back to the battleship, and he gave the order to go ahead again at full-speed.

In another hour they were off the Land's End, and from there they headed out due south-west into the Atlantic. They had hardly made another hundred miles before it began to grow light, and then it became necessary to keep a bright look-out for the air-ship, for according to what they had heard from the commander of the torpedo-boat she might be sighted at any moment as soon as it was light enough to see her.

Another hour passed, but there was still no sign of the airship. This of course was to be expected, for they had still another seventy-five miles or so to go before the rendezvous was reached.

"Steamer to the south'ard!" sang out the man on the forecandle, just as Tremayne came on deck after an attempt at a brief nap. He picked up his glass, and took a good look at the thin cloud of smoke away on the southern horizon.

From what he could see it was a large steamer, and was coming up very fast, almost at right angles to

the course of the Lurline. Fifteen minutes later he was able to see that the stranger was a warship, and that she was heading for Queenstown. She was therefore either a British ship attached to the Irish Squadron, or else she was an enemy with designs on the liners bound for Liverpool.

In either case it was most undesirable that the yacht should be overhauled again. Any mishap to her, even a lengthy delay, might have the most serious consequences. A single unlucky shell exploding in her engine-room would disable her, and perhaps change the future history of the world.

Tremayne therefore altered her course a little more to the northward, thus increasing the distance between her and the stranger, and at the same time ordered the engineer to keep up the utmost head of steam, and get the last possible yard out of her.

The alteration in her course appeared to be instantly detected by the warship, for she at once swerved off more to the westward, and brought herself dead astern of the Lurline. She was now near enough for Tremayne to see that she was a large cruiser, and attended by a brace of torpedo-boats, which were running along one under each of her quarters, like a couple of dogs following a hunter.

There was now no doubt but that, whatever her nationality, she was bent on overhauling the yacht, if possible, and the dense volumes of smoke that were pouring out of her funnels told Tremayne that she was stoking up vigorously for the chase.

By this time she was about seven miles away, and the Lurline, her twin screws beating the water at their utmost speed, and every plate in her trembling under the vibration of her engines, rushed through the water faster than she had ever done since the day she was launched. As far as could be seen, she was holding her own well in what had now become a dead-on stern chase.

Still the stranger showed no flag, and though Tremayne could hardly believe that a hostile cruiser and a couple of torpedo-boats would venture so near to the ground occupied by the British battle-ships, the fact that she showed no colours looked at the best suspicious. Determined to settle the question, if possible, one way or the other, he ran up the ensign of the Royal Yacht Squadron.

This brought no reply from the cruiser, but a column of bluish-white smoke shot up a moment later from the funnels of one of the torpedo-boats, telling that she had put on the forced draught, and, like a greyhound slipped from the leash, she began to draw away from the big ship, plunging through the long rollers, and half-burying herself in the foam that she threw up from her bows.

Tremayne knew that there were some of these viperish little craft in the French navy that could be driven thirty miles an hour through the water, and if this was one of them, capture was only a matter of time, unless the air-ship sighted them and came to the rescue.

Happily, although there was a considerable swell on, the water was smooth and free from short waves and this was to the advantage of the Lurline; for she went along "as dry as a bone," while the torpedo-boat, lying much lower in the water, rammed her nose into every roller, and so lost a certain amount of way. The yacht was making a good twenty-eight miles an hour under the heroic efforts of the engineers; and at this rate it would be nearly two hours before she was overhauled, provided that the torpedo-boat was not able to use the gun that she carried forward of her funnels with any dangerous effect.

There could now be no doubt as to the hostility of the pursuers. Had they been British, they would have answered the flag flying at the peak of the yacht.

"Steamer coming down from the nor'ard, sir!" suddenly sang out a man whom Tremayne had just stationed in the fore cross-trees to look out for the air-ship that was now so anxiously expected.

A dense volume of smoke was seen rising in the direction indicated, and a few minutes later a second big steamer came into view, bearing down directly on the yacht, and so approaching the torpedo-boat almost stem on. There was no doubt about her nationality. A glance through the glass showed Tremayne the white ensign floating above the horizontal stream of smoke that stretched behind her. She was a British cruiser, no doubt a scout of the Irish Squadron, and had sighted the smoke of the yacht and her pursuers, and had come to investigate.

Tremayne breathed more freely now, for he knew that his flag would procure the assistance of the

new-comer in case it was wanted, as indeed it very soon was.

Hardly had the British cruiser come well in sight than a puff of smoke rose from the deck of the other warship, and a shell came whistling through the air, and burst within a hundred yards of the Lurline. Twenty-four hours ago Tremayne had been one of the richest men in England, and just now he would have willingly given all that he had possessed to be twenty-five miles further to the south-westward than he was.

Another shell from the Frenchman passed clear over the Lurline, and plunged into the water and burst, throwing a cloud of spray high into the air. Then came one from the torpedo-boat, but she was still too far off for her light gun to do any damage, and the projectile fell spent into the sea nearly five hundred yards short.

Immediately after this came a third shell from the French cruiser, and this, by an unlucky chance, struck the forecastle of the yacht, burst, and tore away several feet of the bulwarks, and, worse than all, killed four of her crew instantly.

"First blood!" said Tremayne to himself through his clenched teeth. "That shall be an unlucky shot for you, my friend, if we reach the air-ship before you sink us."

Meanwhile the two cruisers, each approaching the other at a speed of more than twenty miles an hour, had got within shot. A puff of smoke spurted out from the side of the latest comer. The well-aimed projectile passed fifty yards astern of the Lurline, and struck the advancing torpedo-boat square on the bow.

The next instant it was plainly apparent that there was nothing more to be feared from her. The solid shot had passed clean through her two sides. Her nose went down and her stern came up. Then bang went another gun from the British cruiser. This time the messenger of death was a shell. It struck the inclined deck amidships, there was a flash of flame, a cloud of steam rose up from her bursting boilers, and then she broke in two and vanished beneath the smooth-rolling waves.

Two minutes later the duel began in deadly earnest. The tricolor ran up to the masthead of the French cruiser, and jets of mingled smoke and flame spurted one after the other from her sides, and shells began bursting in quick succession round the rapidly-advancing Englishman. Evidently the Frenchman, with his remaining torpedo-boat, thought himself a good match for the British cruiser, for he showed no disposition to shirk the combat, despite the fact that he was so near to the cruising ground of a powerful squadron.

As the two cruisers approached each other, the fire from their heavy guns was supplemented by that of their light quick-firing armament, until each of them became a floating volcano, vomiting continuous jets of smoke and flame, and hurling showers of shot and shell across the rapidly-lessening space between them.

The din of the hideous concert became little short of appalling, even to the most hardened nerves. The continuous deep booming of the heavy guns, as they belched forth their three-hundred-pound projectiles, mingled with the sharp ringing reports of the thirty and forty pound quick-firers, and the horrible grinding rattle of the machine guns in the tops that sounded clearly above all, and every few seconds came the scream and the bang of bursting shells, and the dull, crashing sound of rending and breaking steel, as the terrible missiles of death and destruction found their destined mark.

Happily the Lurline was out of the line of fire, or she would have been torn to fragments and sent to the bottom in a few seconds. She continued on her course at her utmost speed and the French cruiser was, of course, too busy to pay any further attention to her. Not so the remaining torpedo-boat however, which, leaving the two big ships to fight out their duel for the present, was pursuing the yacht at the utmost speed of her forced draught.

Capture or destruction soon only became a matter of a few minutes. Tremayne, determined to hold on till he was sunk or sighted the air-ship, kept his flag flying and his engines working to the last ounce that the quivering boilers would stand, and the Frenchman, seeing that he was determined to escape if he could, opened fire on him with his twenty--pounder.

Owing to the high speed of the two vessels, and the rolling of the torpedo-boat, not much execution was done at first; but, as the distance diminished, shell after shell crashed through the bulwarks of the Lurline ripping them longitudinally, and tearing up the deck-planks with their jagged fragments. The wheel-house and the funnel escaped by a miracle, and the yacht being end on to her pursuer, the engines and boilers were comparatively safe.

One boat had also escaped, and that was hanging ready to be lowered at a moment's notice.

At last a shell struck the funnel, burst, and shattered it to fragments. Almost at the same moment the man in the forecross-trees, who had stuck to his post in defiance of the cannonade, sang out with a triumphant shout--

"The air-ship! The air-ship!"

Hardly had the words left his lips when a shell from the torpedo-boat struck the Lurline under the quarter, and ripped one of her plates out like a sheet of paper. The next instant the engineer rushed up on deck, crying--

"The bottom's out of her! She'll go down in five minutes!"

Tremayne, who was the only man on deck save the lookout, ran out of the wheel-house, dived into the cabin, and a moment later reappeared with Natas in his arms, and followed by his two attendants. Then, without the loss of a second, but in perfect order, the quarter-boat was manned and lowered, and pulled clear of the ill-fated Lurline just as she pitched backwards into the sea and went down with a run, stern foremost.

The air-ship, coming up at a tremendous speed, swooped suddenly down from a height of two thousand feet, and slowed up within a thousand yards of the torpedo-boat. A projectile rushed through the air and landed on the deck of the Frenchman. There was a flash of greenish flame, a cloud of mingled smoke and steam, and when this had drifted away there was not a vestige of the torpedo-boat to be seen. Then a few fragments of iron splashed into the water here and there, and that was all that betokened her fate.

CHAPTER XXII. ARMED NEUTRALITY.

HARDLY had the Lurline disappeared than the air-ship was lying alongside the boat, floating on the water as easily and lightly as a seagull, and Natas and his two attendants, Tremayne, and the three men who had been saved from the yacht, were at once taken on board.

It would be useless to interrupt the progress of the narrative to describe the welcoming greetings which passed between the rescued party and the crew of the Ithuriel, or the amazement of Arnold and his companions when Natasha threw her arms round the neck of the almost helpless cripple, who was lifted over the rail by Tremayne and his two attendants, kissed him on the brow, and said so that all could hear her--

"We were in time! Thank God we were in time, my father!"

Her father! This paralytic creature, who could not move a yard without the assistance of some one else--this was Natas, the father of Natasha, and the Master of the Terror the man who had planned the ruin of a civilisation, and for all they knew might aspire to the empire of the world!

It was marvellous, inconceivable, but there was no time to think about it now, for the two cruisers were still blazing away at each other, and Tremayne had determined to punish the Frenchman for his discourtesy in not answering his flag and his inhumanity in firing on an unarmed vessel which was well known as a private pleasure-yacht all round the western and southern shores of Europe.

As soon as Natas had been conveyed into the saloon, Tremayne, after returning Arnold's hearty handclasp, said to him--

"That rascally Frenchman chased and fired on us, and then sent his torpedo-boat after us, without the slightest provocation. I purposely hoisted the Yacht Squadron flag to show that we were non-combatants, and still he sank us. I suppose he took the Lurline for a fast despatch boat, but still he ought to have had the sense and the politeness to let her alone when he saw she was a yacht, so I want you to teach him better manners."

"Certainly," replies Arnold. "I'll sink him for you in five seconds as soon as we get aloft again."

"I don't want you to do that if you can help it. She has five or six hundred men on board, who are only doing as they are told, and we have not declared war on the world yet. Can't you disable her, and force her to surrender to the British cruiser that came to our rescue? You know we must have been sunk or captured half an hour ago if she had not turned up so opportunely, in spite of your so happily coming fifty miles this side of the rendezvous. I should like to return the compliment by delivering his enemy into his hand."

"I quite see what you mean, but I'm afraid I can't guarantee success. You see, our artillery is intended for destruction, and not for disablement. Still I'll have a try with pleasure. I'll see if I can't disable his screws, only you mustn't blame me if he goes to the bottom by accident."

"Certainly not, you most capable destroyer of life and property," laughed Tremayne. "Only let him off as lightly as you can. Ah, Natasha! Good morning again! I suppose Natas has taken no harm from the unceremonious way in which I had to almost throw him on board the boat. Aerial voyaging seems to agree with you, you"--

"Must not talk nonsense, my Lord of Alanmere, especially when there is sterner work in hand," interrupted Natasha, with a laugh. "What are you going to do with those two cruisers that are battering each other to pieces down there? Sink them both, or leave them to fight it out?"

"Neither, with your permission, fair lady. The British cruiser saved us by coming on the scene at the right moment, and as the Frenchman fired upon us without due cause, I want Captain Arnold to disable her in some way and hand her over a prisoner to our rescuer."

"Ah, that would be better, of course. One good turn deserves another. What are you going to do, Captain Arnold?"

"Drop a small shell under his stern and disable his propellers, if I can do so without sinking him,

which I am afraid is rather doubtful," replied Arnold.

While they were talking, the Ithuriel had risen a thousand feet or so from the water, and had advanced to within about half a mile of the two cruisers, which were now manoeuvring round each other at a distance of about a thousand yards, blazing away without cessation, and waiting for some lucky shot to partially disable one or the other, and so give an opportunity for boarding, or ramming.

In the old days, when France and Britain had last grappled in the struggle for the mastery of the sea, the two ships would have been laid alongside each other long before this. But that was not to be thought of while those terrible machine guns were able to rain their hail of death down from the tops, and the quick-firing cannon were hurling their thirty shots a minute across the intervening space of water.

The French cruiser had so far taken no notice of the sudden annihilation of her second torpedo-boat by the air-ship, but as soon as the latter made her way astern of her she seemed to scent mischief, and turned one of her three-barrelled Nordenfeldts on to her. The shots soon came singing about the Ithuriel in somewhat unpleasant proximity, and Arnold said--

"Monsieur seems to take us for a natural enemy, and if he wants fight he shall have it. If I don't disable him with this shot I'll sink him with the next."

So saying he trained one of the broadside guns on the stern of the French cruiser, and at the right moment pressed the button. The shell bored its way through the air and down into the water until it struck and exploded against the submerged rudder.

A huge column of foam rose up under the cruiser's stern; half lifted out of the water, she plunged forward with a mighty lurch, burying her forecastle in the green water, and then she righted and lay helpless upon the sea, deprived of the power of motion and steering, and with the useless steam roaring in great clouds from her pipes. A moment later she began to settle by the stern, showing that her after plates had been badly injured, if not torn away by the explosion.

Meanwhile the Ithuriel had shot away out of range until the two cruisers looked like little toy-ships spitting fire at each other, and Arnold said to Tremayne, who was with him in the wheel-house--

"I think that has settled her, as far as any more real fighting is concerned. Look! She can't stand that sort of thing very long."

He handed Tremayne the glasses as he spoke. The French cruiser was lying motionless upon the water, with her after compartments full, and very much down by the stern. She was still blazing away gamely with all her available guns, but it was obvious at a glance that she was now no match for her antagonist, who had taken full advantage of the help rendered by her unknown ally, and was pouring a perfect hail of shot and shell point-blank into her half-disabled adversary, battering her deck-works into ruins, and piercing her hull again and again.

At length, when the splendid fabric had been reduced to little better than a floating wreck by the terrible cannonade, the fire from the British cruiser stopped, and the signal "Will you surrender?" flew from her masthead.

A few moments later the tricolor, for the first time in the war, dipped to the White Ensign, and the naval duel was over.

"Now we will leave them to talk it over," said Tremayne, shutting the glasses. "I should like to hear what they have to say about us, I must confess, but there is something more important to be done, and the sooner we are on the other side of the Atlantic the better. The Aurania started from New York this morning. How soon can you get across?"

"In about sixteen hours if we had to go all the way," replied Arnold. "It is, say, three thousand miles from here to New York, and the Ithuriel can fly two hundred miles an hour if necessary. But the Aurania, if she starts in good time, will make between four and five hundred miles during the day, and so we ought to meet her soon after sundown this evening if we are lucky."

As Arnold ceased speaking, the report of a single gun came up from the water, and a string of signal flags floated out from the masthead of the British cruiser.

"Hullo!" said Tremayne, once more turning the glasses on the two vessels, "that was a blank cartridge, and as far as I can make out that signal reads, 'We want to speak you.' And look: there goes a white flag to the fore. His intentions are evidently peaceful. What do you say, shall we go down?"

"I see no objection to it. It will only make a difference of half an hour or so, and perhaps we may learn something worth knowing from the captain about the naval force afloat in the Atlantic. I think it would be worth while. We have no need for concealment now; and besides, all Europe is talking about us, so there can be no harm in showing ourselves a bit more closely."

"Very well, then, we will go down and hear what he has to say," replied Tremayne. "But I don't think it would be well for me to show myself just now, and so I will go below."

Arnold at once signalled the necessary order from the conning tower to the engine-room. The fan-wheels revolved more slowly, and the Ithuriel sank swiftly downwards towards the two cruisers, now lying side by side.

As soon as she came to a standstill within speaking distance of the British man-of-war, discipline was for the moment forgotten on board of both victor and vanquished, under the influence of the intense excitement and curiosity aroused by seeing the mysterious and much-talked-of air-ship at such close quarters.

The French and British captains were both standing on the quarter-deck eagerly scanning the strange craft through their glasses till she came near enough to dispense with them, and every man and officer on board the two cruisers who was able to be on deck, crowded to points of 'vantage, and stared at her with all their eyes. The whole company of the Ithuriel, with the exception of Natas, Tremayne, and those whose duties kept them in the engine-room, were also on deck, and Arnold stood close by the wheel-house and the after gun, ready to give any orders that might be necessary in case the conversation took an unfriendly turn.

"May I ask the name of that wonderful craft, and to what I am indebted for the assistance you have given me?" hailed the British captain.

"Certainly. This is the Terrorist air-ship Ithuriel, and we disabled the French cruiser because her captain had the bad manners to fire upon and sink an unarmed yacht that had no quarrel with him. But for that we should have left you to fight it out."

"The Terrorists, are you? If I had known that, I confess I should not have asked to speak you, and I tell you candidly that I am sorry you did not leave us to fight it out, as you say. As I cannot look upon you as an ally or a friend, I can only regret the advantage you have given me over an honourable foe."

"There was an emphasis on the word 'honourable' which brought a flush to Arnold's cheek, as he replied--"

"What I did to the French cruiser I should have done whether you had been on the scene or not. We are as much your foes as we are those of France, that is to say, we are totally indifferent to both of you. As for honourable foes, I may say that I only disabled the French cruiser because I thought she had acted both unfairly and dishonourably. But we are wasting time. Did you merely wish to speak us in order to find out who we were?"

"Yes, that was my first object, I confess. I also wished to know whether this is the same air-ship which crossed the Mediterranean yesterday, and if not, how many of these vessels there are in existence, and what you mean to do with them?"

"Before I answer, may I ask how you know that an airship crossed the Mediterranean yesterday?" asked Arnold, thoroughly mystified by this astounding piece of news.

"We had it by telegraph at Queenstown during the night. She was going northward, when observed, by Larnaka"--

"Oh yes, that was one of our despatch boats," replied Arnold, forcing himself to speak with a calmness that he by no means felt. "I'm afraid my orders will hardly allow me to answer your other questions very fully, but I may tell you that we have a fleet of air-ships at our command, all constructed in England under the noses of your intelligent authorities, and that we mean to use them as it seems

best to us, should we at any time consider it worth our while to interfere in the game that the European Powers are playing with each other. Meanwhile we keep a position of armed neutrality. When we think the war has gone far enough we shall probably stop it when a good opportunity offers."

This was too much for a British sailor to listen to quietly on his own quarter-deck, whoever said it, and so the captain of the Andromeda forgot his prudence for the moment, and said somewhat hotly--

"Confound it, sir! you talk as if you were omnipotent and arbiters of peace and war. Don't go too far with your insolence, or I shall haul that flag of truce down and give you five minutes to get out of range of my guns or take your chance"--

For all answer there came a contemptuous laugh from the deck of the Ithuriel, the rapid ringing of an electric bell, and the disappearance of her company under cover. Then with one mighty leap she rose two thousand feet into the air, and before the astounded and disgusted captain of H.M. cruiser Andromeda very well knew what had become of her, she was a mere speck of light in the sky, speeding away at two hundred miles an hour to the westward.

As soon as she was fairly on her course, Arnold gave up the wheel to one of the crew, and went into the saloon to discuss with Tremayne and Natas the all-important scrap of news that had fallen from the lips of the captain of the British cruiser. What was the other air-ship that had been seen crossing the Mediterranean?

Surely it must be one of the Terrorist fleet, for there were no others in existence. And yet strict orders had been given that none of the fleet were to take the air until the Ithuriel returned. Was it possible that there were traitors, even in Aeria, and that the air-ship seen from Larnaka was a deserter going northward to the enemy, the worst enemy of all, the Russians?

CHAPTER XXIII. A BATTLE IN THE NIGHT.

AT half-past five on the morning of the 23rd of June, the Cunard liner *Aurania* left New York for Queenstown and Liverpool. She was the largest and swiftest passenger steamer afloat, and on her maiden voyage she had lowered the Atlantic record by no less than twelve hours; that is to say, she had performed the journey from Sandy Hook to Queenstown in four days and a half exactly. Her measurement was forty-five thousand tons, and her twin screws, driven by quadruple engines, developing sixty thousand horse-power, forced her through the water at the unparalleled speed of thirty knots, or thirty-four and a half statute miles an hour.

Since the outbreak of the war it had been found necessary to take all but the most powerful vessels off the Atlantic route, for, as had long been foreseen, the enemies of the Anglo-German Alliance were making the most determined efforts to cripple the Transatlantic trade of Britain and Germany, and swift, heavily-armed French and Italian cruisers, attended by torpedo-boats and gun-boats, and supported by battle-ships and depot vessels for coaling purposes, were swarming along the great ocean highway.

These, of course, had to be opposed by an equal or greater force of British warships. In fact, the burden of keeping the Atlantic route open fell entirely on Britain, for the German and Austrian fleets had all the work they were capable of doing nearer home in the Baltic and Mediterranean.

The terrible mistake that had been made by the House of Lords in negating the Italian Loan had already become disastrously apparent, for though the Anglo-Teutonic Alliance was putting forth every effort, its available ships were only just sufficient to keep the home waters clear and the ocean routes practically open, even for the fastest steamers.

The task, therefore, which lay before the *Aurania* when she cleared American waters was little less than running the gauntlet for nearly three thousand miles. The French cruiser which had been captured by the *Andromeda*, thanks to the assistance of the *Ithuriel*, had left Brest with the express purpose of helping to intercept the great Cunarder, for she had crossed the Atlantic five times already without a scratch since the war had begun, showing a very clean pair of heels to everything that had attempted to overhaul her, and now on her sixth passage a grand effort was to be made to capture or cripple the famous ocean greyhound.

It was by far her most important voyage in more senses than one. In the first place, her incomparable speed and good luck had made her out of sight the prime favourite with those passengers who were obliged to cross the Atlantic, war or no war, and for the same reasons she also carried more mails and specie than any other liner, and this voyage she had an enormously valuable consignment of both on board. As for passengers, every available foot of space was taken for months in advance.

Enterprising agents on both sides of the water had bought up every berth from stem to stern, and had put them up to auction, realising fabulous prices, which had little chance of being abated, even when her sister ship the *Sidonia* the construction of which was being pushed forward on the Clyde with all possible speed, was ready to take the water.

But the chief importance of this particular passage lay though barely half a dozen persons were aware of it, in the fact that among her passengers was Michael Roburoff, chief of the American Section of the Terrorists, who was bringing to the Council his report of the work of the Brotherhood in the United States, together with the information which he had collected, by means of an army of spies, as to the true intentions of the American Government with regard to the war.

These, so far as the rest of the world was concerned, were a profound secret, and he was the only man outside the President's Cabinet and the Tsar's Privy Council who had accurate information with regard to them. The *Aurania* was therefore not only carrying mails, treasure, and passengers, but, in the person of Michael Roburoff, she was carrying secrets on the revelation of which the whole issue of the war and the destiny of the world might turn.

America was the one great Power not involved in the tremendous struggle that was being waged. The most astute diplomatist in Europe had no idea what her real policy was, but every one knew that the side on which she threw the weight of her boundless wealth and vast resources must infallibly win in the long run.

The plan that had been adopted by Britain for keeping the Atlantic route open was briefly as follows:---All along the 3000 miles of the steamer track a battleship was stationed at the end of every day's run, that is to say, at intervals of about 500 miles, and patrolled within a radius of 100 miles. Each of these was attended by two heavily-armed cruisers and four torpedo-boats, while between these points swifter cruisers were constantly running to and fro convoying the liners.

Thus, when the *Aurania* left New York, she was picked up on the limit of the American water by two cruisers, which would keep pace with her as well as they could until she reached the first battleship. As she passed the ironclad these two would leave her, and the next two would take up the running, and so on until she reached the range of operations of the Irish Squadron.

No other Power in the world could have maintained such a system of ocean police, but Britain was putting forth the whole of her mighty naval strength, and so she spared neither ships nor money to keep open the American and Canadian routes, for on them nearly half her food-supply depended, as well as her chief line of communication with the far East.

On the other hand, her enemies were making desperate efforts to break the chain of steel that was thus stretched across the hemisphere, for they well knew that, this once broken, the first real triumph of the war would have been won.

Five hundred miles out from New York the *Aurania* was joined by the *Oceana*, the largest vessel on the Canadian Pacific line from Halifax to Liverpool. So far no enemy had been seen. The two great liners reached the first battleship together, and were joined by the second pair of cruisers. Before sunset the Cunarder had drawn ahead of her companions, and by nightfall was racing away alone over the water with every light carefully concealed, and keeping an eager look-out for friend or foe.

There was no moon, and the sky was so heavily overcast with clouds, that, under any other circumstances, it would have been the height of rashness to go rushing through the darkness at such a headlong speed. But the captain of the *Aurania* was aware of the state of the road, and he knew that in speed and secrecy lay his only chances of getting his magnificent vessel through in safety.

Soon after ten o'clock lights were sighted dead ahead. The course was slightly altered, and the great liner swept past one of the North German Lloyd boats in company with a cruiser. The private signal was made and answered and in half an hour she was again alone amidst the darkness.

It was nearly eleven o'clock, when Michael Roburoff, who was standing under the lee of one of the ventilators amidships, smoking a last pipe before turning in, saw a figure muffled in a huge grey Ulster creeping into the deeper shadows under the bridge. It was so dark that he could only just make out the outline of the figure, but he could see enough to rouse his ever ready suspicions in the furtive movements that the man was making.

He stole out on the starboard, that is the southward, rail of the spar-deck, and Michael, straining his eyes to the utmost, saw him take a round flat object from under his coat, and then look round stealthily to see if he was observed. As he did so Michael whipped a pistol out of his pocket, levelled it at the man, and said in a low, distinct tone--

"Put that back, or I'll shoot!"

For all answer the man raised his arm to throw the object overboard. Michael, taking the best aim he could in the darkness, fired. The bullet struck the elbow of the raised arm, the man lurched forward with a low cry of rage and pain, grasped the object with his other hand, and, as he fell to the deck, flung it into the sea.

Scarcely had it touched the water when it burst into flame, and an intensely bright blaze of bluish-white light shot up, shattering the darkness, and illuminating the great ship from the waterline to the trucks of her masts. Instantly the deck of the liner was a scene of wild excitement. In a moment the man

whom Roburoff had wounded was secured in the act of trying to throw himself overboard. Michael himself was rapidly questioned by the captain, who was immediately on the spot.

He told his story in a dozen words, and explained that he had fired to disable the man and prevent the fire-signal falling into the sea. There was no doubt about the guilt of the traitor, for he himself cut the captain's interrogation short by saying defiantly, in broken English that at once betrayed him as a Frenchman--

"Yees, I do it! I give signal to ze fleet down there. If I succeeded, I got half million francs. I fail, so shoot! C'est la fortune de la guerre! Voila, look! They come!"

As the spy said this he pointed to the south-eastern horizon. A brief bright flash of white light went up through the night and vanished. It was the answering signal from the French or Italian cruisers, which were making all speed up from the south-east to head off the Aurania before she reached the next station and gained the protection of the British battleship.

The spy's words were only too true. He had gone to America for the sole purpose of returning in the Aurania and giving the signal at this particular point on the passage. Within ten miles were four of the fleetest French and Italian cruisers, six torpedo-boats, and two battleships, which, by keeping well to the southward during the day, and then putting on all steam as soon as night fell, had managed to head off the ocean greyhound at last.

Two cruisers and a battleship with two torpedo-boats were coming up from the south-east; one cruiser, the other battleship, and two torpedo-boats were bearing down from the southwest, and the remaining cruiser and brace of torpedo-boats had managed to slip through the British line and gain a position to the northward. This large force had not been brought up without good reason. The Aurania was the biggest prize afloat, and well worth fighting for, if it came to blows, as it very probably would do; added to which there was a very good chance of one or two other liners falling victims to a well-planned and successful raid.

The French spy was at once sent below and put into safe keeping, and the signal to "stoke up" was sent to the engine-rooms. The firemen responded with a will, extra hands were put on in the stokeholes, and the furnaces taxed to their utmost capacity. The boilers palpitated under the tremendous head of steam, the engines throbbed and groaned like labouring giants, and the great ship, trembling like some live animal under the lash, rushed faster and faster over the long dark rollers under the impulse of her whirling screws.

There was no longer any need for concealment even if it had been possible. Speed and speed only afforded the sole chance of escape. Of course the captain of the Aurania had no idea of the strength or disposition of the force that had undertaken his capture. Had he known the true state of the case, his anxiety would have been a good deal greater than it was. He fully believed that he could outsteam the vessels to the south-east, and, once past these, he knew that he would be in touch with the British ships at the next station before any harm could come to him. He therefore headed a little more to the northward, and trusted with perfect confidence to his heels.

Michael Roburoff was the hero of the moment, and the captain cordially thanked him for his prompt attempt to frustrate the atrocious act of the spy which deliberately endangered the liberty and perhaps the lives of more than a thousand noncombatants. Michael, however, cut his thanks short by taking him aside and asking him what he thought of the position of affairs. He spoke so seriously that the captain thought he was frightened, and by way of reassuring him replied cheerily--

"Don't have any fear for the Aurania, Mr. Roburoff. That's only a cruiser, or perhaps a couple, down there, and the enemy haven't a ship that I can't give a good five knots and a beating to. We shall sight the British ships soon after daybreak, and by that time those fellows will be fifty miles behind us.

"I have as much confidence in the Aurania's speed as you have, Captain Frazer," replied Michael, "but I'm afraid you are underrating the enemy's strength. Do you know that within the last few days it has been almost doubled, and that a determined effort is to be made, not only to catch or sink the Aurania, but also to break the British line of posts, and cut the line of American and Canadian

communication altogether?"

"No, sir," replied the captain, looking sharply at Michael. "I don't know anything of the sort, neither do the commanders of the British warships on this side. If your information is correct, I should like to know how you came by it. You are a Russian by name "--

"But not a subject of the Tsar," quickly interrupted Michael. "I am an American citizen, and I have come by this information not as the friend of Russia, as you seem to suspect, but as her enemy, or rather as the enemy of her ruler. How I got it is my business. It is enough for you to know that it is correct, and that you are in far greater danger than you think you are. The signal given by that French spy was evidently part of a prearranged plan, and for all you know you may even now be surrounded, or steaming straight into a trap that has been laid for you. If I may advise, I would earnestly counsel you to double on your course and make every effort to rejoin the other liner and the cruisers we have passed."

"Nonsense, sir, nonsense!" answered the captain testily. "Our watch-dogs are far too wide awake to be caught napping like that. You have been deceived by one of the rumours that are filling the air just now. You can go to your berth and sleep in peace, and to-morrow you shall be half-way across the Atlantic without an enemy's ship in sight."

"Captain Frazer," said Michael very seriously, "with your leave I shall not go to my berth; and what is more, I can tell you that very few of us will get much sleep to-night, and that if you do not back I hardly think you will be flying the British flag to-morrow. Ha! look there--and there!"

Michael seized the captain's arm suddenly, and pointed rapidly to the south-east and north-east. Two thin rays of light flashed up into the sky one after the other. Then came a third from the south-west, and then darkness again. At the same instant came the hails from the look-outs announcing the lights.

Captain Frazer was wrong, and he saw that he was at a glance. The flash in the north-east could not be from a friend, for it was a plain answer to the known enemy in the southeast, and so too in all probability was the third. If so, the Aurania was almost surrounded.

The captain wasted no words in confessing his error, but ran up on to the bridge to rectify it as far as he could at once. The helm was put hard over, the port screw was reversed, and the steamer swung round in a wide sweep, and was soon speeding back westward over her own tracks. An hour's run brought her in sight of the lights of the North German and her escort. She slowed as she passed them, and told the news. Then she sped on again at full-speed to meet the Oceana and the two cruisers, which were about fifty miles behind.

By one A.M. the three cruisers and the three liners had joined forces, and were steaming westward at twenty knots an hour, the liners in single file led by a cruiser, and having one on each beam. Soon the flashes on the horizon grew more frequent, always drawing closer together.

Then those in the westward dropped from the perpendicular to the horizontal, and swept the water as though seeking something. It was not long before the darting rays of one of the searchlights fell across the track of the British flotilla. Instantly from all three points converging flashes were concentrated upon it, revealing the outline of every ship with the most perfect distinctness.

The last hope of running through the hostile fleet unperceived had now vanished. There was nothing for it but to go ahead full-speed, and trust to the chances of a running fight to get clear. With a view of finding out the strength of the enemy, the British cruisers now turned their searchlights on and swept the horizon.

A very few moments sufficed to show that an overwhelming force was closing in on them from three sides. They were completely caught in a trap, from which there was no escape save by running the gauntlet. Whichever way they headed they would have to pass through the converging fire of the enemy.

The weakest point, so far as they could see, was the one cruiser and two torpedo-boats to the northward, and so towards them they headed. At the speed at which they were travelling it needed but a few minutes to bring them within range, and the British commanders rightly decided to concentrate

their fire for the present on the single cruiser and her two attendants, in the hope of sinking them before the others could get into action.

At three thousand yards the heavy guns came into play, and a storm of shell was hurled upon the advancing foe, who lost no time in replying in the same terms. As the vessels approached each other the shooting became closer and terribly effective.

The searchlights of the British cruisers were kept full ahead, and every attempt of the torpedo-boats to get round on the flank was foiled by a hail of shot from the quick-firing guns. Within fifteen minutes of opening fire one of these was sunk and the other disabled. The French cruiser, too, suffered fearfully from the tempest of shot and shell that was rained upon her.

Had the British got within range of her half an hour sooner the plan would have been completely foiled. As it was, her fate was sealed, but it was too late. The three British warships rushed at her together, vomiting flame and smoke and iron across the rapidly-decreasing distance, until within five hundred yards of her. Then the fire from the two on either flank suddenly stopped.

The centre one, still blazing away, put on her forced draught, swerved sharply round, and then darted in on her with the ram. There was a terrific shock, a heavy, grinding crunch, and then the mighty mass of the charging vessel, hurled at nearly thirty miles an hour upon her victim, bored and ground her resistless way into her side.

Then she suddenly reversed her engines and backed out. In less than thirty seconds it was all over. The Frenchman, almost cut in half by the frightful blow, reeled once, and once only, and then went down like a stone.

But by this time the other two divisions of the enemy were within range, and through the roar of the lighter artillery now came the deep, sullen boom of the big guns on the battleships, and the great thousand-pound projectiles began to scream through the air and fling the water up into mountains of foam where they pitched.

Where one of them struck, death and destruction would follow as surely as though it were a thunderbolt from Heaven. The three liners scattered and steamed away to the northward as fast as their propellers would drive them. But what was their utmost speed to that of the projectiles cleaving through the air at more than two thousand feet a second?

See! one at length strikes the German liner square amidships, and bursts. There is a horrible explosion. The searchlight thrown on her shows a cloud of steam and smoke and flame rising up from her riven decks. Where her funnels were is a huge ragged black hole. This is visible for an instant, then her back breaks, and in two halves she follows the French cruiser to the bottom of the Atlantic.

The sinking of the German liner was the signal for the appearance of a new actor on the scene, and the commencement of a work of destruction more appalling than anything that human warfare had so far known.

Michael Roburoff, standing on the spar-deck of the flying Aurania, suddenly saw a bright stream of light shoot down from the clouds, and flash hither and thither, till it hovered over the advancing French and Italian squadron. For the moment the combat ceased, so astounded were the combatants on both sides at this mysterious apparition.

Then, without the slightest warning, with no flash or roar of guns, there came a series of frightful explosions among the ships of the pursuers. They followed each other so quickly that the darkness behind the electric lights seemed lit with a continuous blaze of livid green flame for three or four minutes.

Then there was darkness and silence. Black darkness and absolute silence. The searchlights were extinguished, and the roar of the artillery was still. The British waited in dazed silence for it to begin again, but it never did. The whole of the pursuing squadron had been annihilated.

CHAPTER XXIV. THE NEW WARFARE.

IT will now be necessary, in order to insure the continuity of the narrative, to lay before the reader a brief sketch of the course of events in Europe from the actual commencement of hostilities on a general scale between the two immense forces which may be most conveniently designated as the Anglo-Teutonic Alliance and the Franco-Slavonian League.

In order that these two terms may be fully understood, it will be well to explain their general constitution. When the two forces, into which the declaration of war ultimately divided the nations of Europe, faced each other for the struggle which was to decide the mastery of the Western world, the Anglo-Teutonic Alliance consisted primarily of Britain, Germany, and Austria, and, ranged under its banner, whether from choice or necessity, stood Holland, Belgium, and Denmark in the north-west, with Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey in the south-west.

Egypt was strongly garrisoned for the land defence of the Suez Canal and the high road to the East by British, Indian, and Turkish troops. British and Belgian troops held Antwerp and the fortresses of the Belgian Quadrilateral in force.

A powerful combined fleet of British, Danish, and Dutch war vessels of all classes held the approaches by the Sound and Kattegat to the Baltic Sea, and co-operated in touch with the German fleet; the Dutch and the German having, at any rate for the time being, and under the pressure of irresistible circumstances, laid aside their hereditary national hatred, and consented to act as allies under suitable guarantees to Holland.

The co-operation of Denmark had been secured, in spite of the family connections existing between the Danish and the Russian Courts, and the rancour still remaining from the old Schleswig-Holstein quarrel, by very much the same means that had been taken in the historic days of the Battle of the Baltic. It is true that matters had not gone so far as they went when Nelson disobeyed orders by putting his telescope to his blind eye, and engaged the Danish fleet in spite of the signals; but a demonstration of such overwhelming force had been made by sea and land on the part of Britain and Germany, that the House of Dagmar had bowed to the inevitable, and ranged itself on the side of the Anglo-Teutonic Alliance.

Marshalled against this imposing array of naval and military force stood the Franco-Slavonian League, consisting primarily of France, Russia, and Italy, supported--whether by consent or necessity--by Spain, Portugal, and Servia. The co-operation of Spain had been purchased by the promise of Gibraltar at the conclusion of the war, and that of Portugal by the guarantee of a largely increased sphere of influence on the West Coast of Africa, plus the Belgian States of the Congo.

Roumania and Switzerland remained neutral, the former to be a battlefield for the neighbouring Powers, and the latter for the present safe behind her ramparts of everlasting snow and ice. Scandinavia also remained neutral, the sport of the rival diplomacies of East and West, but not counted of sufficient importance to materially influence the colossal struggle one way or the other.

In round numbers the Anglo-Teutonic Alliance had seven millions of men on the war footing, including, of course, the Indian and Colonial forces of the British Empire, while in case of necessity urgent levies were expected to produce between two and three millions more. Opposed to these, the Franco-Slavonian League had about ten millions under arms with nearly three millions in reserve.

As regards naval strength, the Alliance was able to pit rather more than a thousand warships of all classes, and about the same number of torpedo-boats, against nearly nine hundred warships and about seven hundred torpedo--boats at the disposal of the League.

In addition to this latter armament, it is very necessary to name a fleet of a hundred war-balloons of the type mentioned in an earlier chapter, fifty of which belonged to Russia and fifty to France. No other European Power possessed any engine of destruction that was capable of being efficiently matched against the invention of M. Riboult, who was now occupying the position of Director of the Aerial fleet

in the service of the League.

It would be both a tedious repetition of sickening descriptions of scenes of bloodshed and a useless waste of space, to enumerate in detail all the series of conflicts by sea and land which resulted from the collision of the tremendous forces which were thus arrayed against each other in a conflict that was destined to be unparalleled in the history of the human race.

To do so would be to occupy pages filled with more or less technical descriptions of strategic movements, marches, and countermarches, skirmishes, reconnaissances, and battles, which followed each other with such unparalleled rapidity that the combined efforts of the war correspondents of the European press proved entirely inadequate to keep pace with them in the form of anything like a continuous narrative.

It will therefore be necessary to ask the reader to remain content with such brief summary as has been given, supplemented with the following extracts from a very lengthy resume of the leading events of the war up to date, which were published in a special War Supplement issued by the Daily Telegraph on the morning of Tuesday the 28th of June 1904--

"Although little more than a period of six weeks has elapsed since the actual outbreak of hostilities which marked the commencement of what, be its issue what it may, must indubitably prove the most colossal struggle in the history of human warfare, changes have already occurred which must infallibly mark their effect upon the future destiny of the world. Almost as soon as the first shot was fired the nations of Europe, as if by instinct or under the influence of some power higher than that of international diplomacy, automatically marshalled themselves into the two most mighty hosts that have ever trod the field of battle since man first fought with man.

"Not less than twenty millions of men are at this moment facing each other under arms throughout the area of the war. These are almost equally divided; for, although what is now known as the Franco-Slavonian League has some three millions of men more on land, it may be safely stated that the preponderance of naval strength possessed by the Anglo-Teutonic Alliance fully counterbalances this advantage.

"There is, however, another most important element which has now for the first time been introduced into warfare, and which, although it is most unhappily arrayed amongst the forces opposed to our own country and her gallant allies, it would be both idle and most imprudent to ignore. We refer of course, to the two fleets of war-balloons, or, as it would be more correct to call them, navigable aerostats, possessed by France and Russia.

"So tremendous has been the influence which these terrible inventions have exercised upon the course of the war, that we are not transgressing the bounds of sober truth when we say that they have utterly disconcerted and brought to nought the highest strategy and the most skilfully devised plans of the brilliant array of masters of the military art whose presence adorns the ranks and enlightens the councils of the Alliance.

"Since the day when the Russians crossed the German and Austrian frontiers, and the troops of France and Italy simultaneously flung themselves across the western frontiers of Germany and through the passes of the Tyrol, their progress, unparalleled in rapidity even by the marvellous marches of Napoleon, has been marked, not by what we have hitherto been accustomed to call battles, but rather by a series of colossal butcheries.

"In every case of any moment the method of procedure on the part of the attacking forces has been the same, and, with the deepest regret we confess it, it has been marked with the same unvarying success. Whenever a large army has been set in motion upon a predetermined point of attack, whether a fortress, an entrenched camp, or a strongly occupied position in the field, a squadron of aerostats has winged its way through the air under cover of the darkness of night, and silently and unperceived has marked the disposition of forces, the approximate strength of the army or the position to be attacked, and, as far as they were observable, the points upon which the attack could be most favourably delivered. Then they have returned with their priceless information, and, according to it, the assailants

have been able, in every case so far, to make their assault where least expected, and to make it, moreover, upon an already partially demoralised force.

"From the detailed descriptions which we have already published of battles and sieges, or rather of the storming of great fortresses, it will be remembered that every assault on the part of the troops of the League has been preceded by a preliminary and irresistible attack from the clouds.

"The aerostats have stationed themselves at great elevations over the ramparts of fortresses and the bivouacs of armies, and have rained down a hail of dynamite, melinite, fire-shells and cyanogen poison-grenades, which have at once put guns out of action, blown up magazines, rendered fortifications untenable, and rent masses of infantry and squadrons of cavalry into demoralised fragments, before they had the time or the opportunity to strike a blow in reply. Then upon these silenced batteries, these wrecked fortifications, and these demoralised brigades, there has poured a storm of artillery fire from the untouched enemy, advancing in perfect order, and inspired with high-spirited confidence, which has been irresistibly opposed to the demoralisation of their enemies.

"Is it any wonder, or any disgrace, to the defeated, that under such novel and appalling conditions the orderly and disciplined onslaughts of the legions of the League have in almost every case been completely successful? The sober truth is that the invention and employment of these devastating appliances have completely altered the face of the field of battle and the conditions of modern warfare. It is not in human valour, no matter how heroic or self-devoted it may be, to oppose itself with anything like confidence to an enemy which strikes from the skies, and cannot be struck in return.

"It was thus that the battles of Alexandrovo, Kalisz, and Czernowicz were won in the early stages of the war upon the Austro-German frontier. So, too, in the Rhine Provinces, were the battles of Treves, Mulhausen, and Freiburg turned by the aid of the French aerostats from battles into butcheries. It was under the assault of these irresistible engines that the great fortresses of Konigsberg, Thorn, Breslau, Strasburg, and Metz, to say nothing of many minor, but strongly fortified, places, were first reduced to a state of impotence for defence, and then battered into ruins by the siege-guns of the assailants.

"All these terrible events, forming a series of catastrophes unparalleled in the annals of war, are still fresh in the minds of our readers, for they have followed one upon the other with almost stupefying rapidity, and it is yet hardly six weeks since the Cossacks and Uhlans were engaged in their first skirmish near Gnesen.

"This is an amazingly brief space of time for the fate of empires to be decided, and yet we are forced, with the utmost sorrow and reluctance, to admit that what were two months ago the magnificently disciplined and equipped armies of Germany and Austria, are now completely shattered and broken up into fragmentary and isolated army corps, decimated as to numbers and demoralised as to discipline, gathered in and about such strong places as are left to them, and awaiting only with the courage of desperation the moment, we fear the inevitable moment, when they shall be finally crushed between the rapidly converging hosts of the victorious League.

"Within the next few days, Berlin, Hanover, Prague, Munich, and Vienna must be invested, and may possibly be destroyed or compelled to ignominious and unconditional surrender by the irresistible forces that will be arrayed against them.

"Meanwhile, with still deeper regret, we are forced to confess that those operations in the Low Countries and the east of Europe and Asia Minor in which our own gallant troops have been engaged in conjunction with their several allies, have been, if not equally disastrous, at least void of any tangible success.

"Erzeroum, Trebizond, and Scutari have fallen; the passes of the Balkans have been forced, although at immense cost to the enemy; Belgrade has been stormed; Adrianople is invested, and Constantinople is therefore most seriously threatened.

"By heroic efforts the French attack upon the Quadrilateral has been rolled back at a fearful expense of human life. Antwerp is still untouched, and the command of the Baltic is still ours. In our own waters, as well as in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, we have won victories which prove that Great

Britain is still the unconquered, and we trust unconquerable, mistress of the seas. We have kept the Dardanelles open, and the Suez Canal is still inviolate.

"Two combined attacks, delivered by the allied French and Italian squadrons on Malta and Gibraltar, have been repulsed by Admiral Beresford with heavy loss to the enemy, thanks to the timely warning delivered to Mr. Balfour by the Earl of Alanmere--upon whose mysterious disappearance we comment in another column--and the Prime Minister's prompt and statesmanlike action in doubling the strength of the Mediterranean fleet before the outbreak of hostilities.

"Thanks to the tireless activity and splendid handling of the Channel fleet, the North Sea Division, and the Irish Squadron, the enemy's flag has been practically swept from the home waters, and the shores of our beloved country are as inviolate as they have been for more than seven centuries. These brilliant achievements go far to compensate us as an individual nation for the disasters which have befallen our allies on the Continent, and, in addition, we have the satisfaction of knowing that, so far, the most complete success has attended our arms in the East, and that the repeated and determined assaults of our Russian foes have been triumphantly hurled back from the impregnable bulwarks of our Indian Empire.

"It has been pointed out, and it would be vain to ignore the fact, that not only have all our victories been won in the absence of the Aerial fleets of the League; but that we, in common with our allies, have been worsted in each of the happily few cases in which even one of these terrible aerostats has delivered its assaults upon us. Against this, however, we take leave to set our belief that these machines do not yet inspire sufficient confidence in their possessors to warrant them in undertaking operations above the sea, or at any considerable distance from their bases of manoeuvring. It is true that we are entirely ignorant of the essentials of their construction; but the fact that no attempt has yet been made to send them into action over blue water inspires us with the hope and belief that their effective range of operations is confined to the land. . . .

"It would be superfluous to say that the British Empire is now involved in a struggle in comparison with which all our former wars sink into absolute insignificance, a struggle which will tax its immense resources to the very utmost. Nothing, however, has yet occurred to warrant the belief that those resources will not prove equal to the strain, or that the greatest empire on earth will not emerge from this combat of the giants with her ancient glory enhanced by new and hitherto unequalled triumphs.

"Certainly at no period in our history have we been so splendidly prepared to face our enemies both at home and abroad. All arms of the Services are in the highest state of efficiency, and the Government dockyards and arsenals, as well as private firms, are working day and night to still further strengthen them, and provide ample supplies of munitions of war. The hearts of all the nations united under our flag are beating as that of one man, and from the highest to the lowest ranks of Society all are inspired by a spirit of whole-soured patriotism which, if necessary, will make any sacrifice to preserve the flag untarnished, and the honour of Britain without a spot.

"At the head of affairs stands the man who of all others has proved himself to be the most fitted to direct the destinies of the empire in this tremendous crisis of her history. Party feeling for the time being has almost entirely disappeared, save amongst the few scattered bands of isolated Revolutionaries and malcontents, and Mr. Balfour possesses the absolute confidence of his Majesty on the one hand, and the undivided support of an impregnable majority in both Houses of Parliament on the other. He is admirably seconded by such lieutenants as Lord Randolph Churchill, Sir Joseph Chamberlain, and Sir George J. Goschen on his own side of the House, and by the Earls of Rosebery and Morley, Lord Brassey, and Sir Charles Dilke in what, previous to the outbreak of the war, was the opposing political camp, but which is now a party as loyal as that of the Government to the best interests of the Empire, and fully determined to give the utmost possible moral support consistent with fair and impartial criticism.

"The disastrous mistake which was made by a very small majority of the Upper House in rejecting the Government guarantee for the ill-fated Italian loan is now, of course, past repair; for Italy, as events

have proved, exasperated by what her spokesmen termed her selfish betrayal by Britain, has passionately thrown herself into the arms of the League, and the Alliance has now no more bitter enemy than she is. It is, however, only justice to those who defeated the loan to add that they have now clearly seen and frankly owned their grievous mistake, and rallied as one man to the support of the Government."

CHAPTER XXV. THE HERALDS OF DISASTER.

ANOTHER column in the same issue contained an account of the "Mysterious Disappearance of Lord Alanmere" and the doings of the Ithuriel in the Atlantic. The account concluded as follows:--

"As the enemy's squadron came up in chase it was annihilated without warning and with appalling suddenness by the air-ship, which must have crossed the Atlantic in something like sixteen hours. After this fearful achievement it descended to the Aurania, took off a saloon passenger named Michael Roburoff, evidently, from his reception, a Terrorist himself, and then vanished through the clouds. For the present, and until we have fuller information, we attempt no detailed analysis of these astounding events. We merely content ourselves with saying in the most solemn words that we can use, that, awful and disastrous as is the war that is now raging throughout the greatest part of the old world, it is our firm belief that, behind the smoke-clouds of battle, and beneath the surface of visible events, there is working a secret power, possibly greater than any which has yet been called into action, and which at an unexpected moment may suddenly put forth its strength, upheave the foundations of Society, and bury existing institutions in the ruins of Civilisation.

"One fact is quite manifest, and that is, that although the League possesses a weapon of fearful efficiency for destruction in their fleet of aerostats, the Terrorists, controlled by no law save their own, and hampered by no traditions or limitations of civilised warfare, are in command of another fleet of unknown strength, the air-ships of which are apparently as superior to the aerostats of the League as a modern battleship would be to a three-decker of the time of Nelson.

"The power represented by such a fleet as this is absolutely inconceivable. The aerostats are large, clumsy, and comparatively slow. They do not carry guns, and can only drop their projectiles vertically downwards. Moreover, their sphere of operations has so far been entirely confined to the land.

"Very different, however, would seem to be the powers of the Terrorist air-ships. They have proved conclusively that they are swift almost beyond imagination. They have crossed oceans and continents in a few hours; they can ascend to enormous heights, and they carry artillery of unknown design and tremendous range, whose projectiles excel in destructiveness the very lightnings of heaven itself.

"In the presence of such an awful and mysterious power as this even the quarrels of nations seem to shrink into unimportance, and almost to pettiness. Where and when it may strike, no man knows save those who wield it, and therefore there is nothing for the peoples of the earth, however mighty they may be, to do but to await the blow in humiliating impotence, but still with a humble trust in that Higher Power which alone can save it from accomplishing the destruction of Society and the enslavement of the human race."

It may well be imagined with what interest, and it may fairly be added with what intense anxiety, these words were read by hundreds of thousands of people throughout the British Islands. Even the news from the Seat of War began to pall in interest before such tidings as these, invested as they were with the irresistible if terrible charm of the unknown and the mysterious.

By noon it was almost impossible to get any one in London or any of the large towns to talk of anything but the disappearance of Lord Alanmere, the Terrorists, and their marvellous aerial fleet. But it goes without saying that nowhere did the news produce greater distress or more utter bewilderment than it did among the occupants of Alanmere Castle, and especially in the breast of her who had been so quickly and so strangely installed as its new owner and mistress.

Everywhere the wildest rumours passed from lip to lip, growing in sensation and absurdity as they went. A report, telegraphed by an anonymous idiot from Liverpool, to the effect that six air-ships had appeared over the Mersey, and demanded a ransom of £10,000,000 from the town, was eagerly seized on by the cheaper evening papers, which rushed out edition after edition on the strength of it, until the St. James's Gazette put an end to the excitement by publishing a telegram from the Mayor of Liverpool denouncing the report as an insane and criminal hoax.

The next edition of the St. James's, however, contained a telegram from Hiorring, in Denmark, via Newcastle, which was of almost, if not quite, as startling and disquieting a nature, and which, moreover, contained a very considerable measure of truth. The telegram ran as follows:--

NAVAL DISASTER IN THE BALTIC.

The Sound forced by a Russian Squadron, assisted by a Terrorist Air-Ship.

(From our own Correspondent.)

Hiorring, June 28th, 8 A.M.

With the deepest regret I have to record the first naval disaster to the British arms during the present war. As soon as it became dark last night heavy firing was heard from Copenhagen to the southward, and before long the sound deepened into an almost continuous roar of light and heavy guns.

Our naval force in the Baltic was so strong that it was deemed incredible that the Russian fleet, which we have held imprisoned here since the commencement of hostilities, should dream even of making an attempt to escape. The cannonade, however, was the beginning of such an attempt, and it is useless disguising the fact that it has been completely successful. That this would have been the case, or, indeed, that the attempt would ever have been made by the Russian fleet alone, cannot be for a moment credited. But, incredible as it seems, it is nevertheless true that it was assisted, and that in a practically irresistible fashion, by one of those air-ships which have hitherto been believed to belong exclusively to the Terrorists, that is to say, to the deadliest enemies that Russia possesses.

As nearly as is known the Russian fleet consisted of twelve battleships, twenty-five armoured and unarmoured cruisers, and about forty torpedo-boats. These came charging ahead at full speed into the entrance to the Sound in spite of the overwhelming force of the Allied fleets, supported by the fortresses of Copenhagen and Elsinore. The attack was so sudden and so completely unexpected, that it must be confessed the defenders were to a certain extent taken unawares. The Russians came on in the form of an elongated wedge, their most powerful vessels being at the apex and external sides.

The firing was furious and sustained from beginning to end of the rush, but the damage inflicted by the cannonade of the Russian fleet and the torpedo-boats, which every now and then darted out from between the warships as opportunity offered to employ their silent and deadly weapons, was as nothing in comparison with the frightful havoc achieved by the air-ship.

This extraordinary craft hovered over the attacking force, darting hither and thither with bewildering rapidity, and raining down shells charged with an unknown explosive of fearful power among the crowded ships of the great force which was blocking the Sound. Half a dozen of these shells were fired upon the seaward fortifications of Copenhagen in passing, and produced a perfectly paralysing effect.

On the water the results of the airship's attack were destructive almost beyond description, particularly when she stationed herself over the Allied fleet and began firing her four guns right and left, ahead and astern. Every time a shell struck either a battleship or a cruiser, the terrific explosion which resulted either sank the ship in a few minutes, or so far disabled it that it fell an easy prey to the guns and rams of the Russians. As for the torpedo-boats which were struck, they were simply scattered over the water in indistinguishable fragments.

Under these conditions maintenance of formation and effective fighting were practically impossible, and the huge iron wedge of the Russian squadron was driven almost without a check through the demoralised ranks of the Allied fleet. The Gut of Elsinore was reached in a little more than three hours after the first sounds of the cannonade were heard. Shortly before this the air-ship had stationed itself about a thousand feet above the water, and a mile from the fortifications.

From this position it commenced a brief, rapid cannonade from its smokeless and flameless guns, the effects of which on the fortress are said to have been indescribably awful. Great blocks of steel-sheathed masonry were dislodged from the ramparts and hurled bodily into the sea, carrying with them guns and men to irretrievable destruction. In less than half an hour the once impregnable fortress of Elsinore was little better than a heap of ruins. The last shell blew up the central magazine, the tremendous explosion was heard for miles along the coast, and proved to be the closing act of the briefest but most deadly great naval action in the history of war.

The Russian fleet steamed triumphantly past the silenced Cerberus of the Sound with flashing searchlights, blazing rockets, and jubilant salvos of blank cartridge in honour of their really brilliant victory.

The losses of the Allied fleet, so far as they are at present known, are distressingly heavy. We have lost the battleships Neptune, Hotspur, Anson, Superb, Black Prince, and Rodney, the armoured cruisers Narcissus, Beatrice and Mersey, the unarmoured cruisers Arethusa, Barossa, Clyde, Lais, Seagull, Grasshopper, and Nautilus, and not less than nineteen torpedo-boats of the first and second classes.

The Germans and Danes have lost the battleships Kaiser Wilhelm, Friedrich der Grosse, Danzig, Viborg, and Funen, five German and three Danish cruisers, and about a dozen torpedo-boats.

Under whatever circumstances the Russians have obtained the assistance of the air-ship, which rendered them services that have proved so disastrous to the Allies, there can be no doubt but that her arrival on the scene puts a completely different aspect on the face of affairs at sea.

I have written this telegram on board first-class torpedo-boat, No. 87, which followed the Russian fleet from the Sound round the Skaw. They passed through the Kattegat in two columns of line ahead, with the air-ship apparently resting after her flight on board one of the largest steamers. We could see her quite distinctly by the glare of the rockets and the electric light. She is a small three-masted vessel almost exactly resembling the one which partially destroyed Kronstadt in the middle of March.

After rounding the Skaw, the Russian fleet steamed away westward into the German Ocean, and we put in here to send off our despatches. This telegram has, of course, been officially revised, and my information, as far as it goes, can therefore be relied upon.

CHAPTER XXVI. AN INTERLUDE.

AT noon on the 26th, as the tropical sun was pouring down its vertical rays upon the lovely valley of Aeria, the Ithuriel crossed the Ridge which divided it from the outer world, and came to rest on the level stretch of sward on the northern shore of the lake.

Before she touched the earth Arnold glanced rapidly round and discovered his Aerial fleet resting under a series of large palm-thatched sheds which had already been erected to protect them from the burning sun, and the rare but violent tropical rain-storms. He counted them. There were only eleven, and therefore the evil tidings that they had heard from the captain of the Andromeda was true.

Even before greetings were exchanged with the colonists Natas ordered Nicholas Roburoff to be summoned on board alone. He received him in the lower saloon, on either side of which, as he went in, he found a member of the crew armed with a magazine rifle and fixed bayonet.

Seated at the cabin table were Natas, Tremayne, and Arnold. The President was received in cold and ominous silence, not even a glance of recognition was vouchsafed to him. He stood at the other end of the table with bowed head, a prisoner before his judges. Natas looked at him for some moments in dead silence, and there was a dark gleam of anger in his eyes which made Arnold tremble for the man whose life hung upon a word of a judge from whose sentence there could be no appeal.

At length Natas spoke; his voice was hard and even; there were no modulations in it that displayed the slightest feeling, whether of anger or any other emotion. It was like the voice of an impassive machine speaking the very words of Fate itself.

"You know why we have returned, and why you have been sent for?"

"Yes, Master."

Roburoff's voice was low and respectful, but there was no quaver of fear in it.

"You were left here in command of the settlement and in charge of the fleet. You were ordered to permit no vessel to leave the valley till the flagship returned. One of them was seen crossing the Mediterranean in a northerly direction three days ago. Either you are a traitor, or that vessel is in the hands of traitors. Explain."

Nicholas Roburoff remained silent for a few moments. His breast heaved once or twice convulsively, as though he were striving hard to repress some violent emotion. Then he drew himself up like a soldier coming to attention, and, looking straight in front of him, told his story briefly and calmly, though he knew that, according to the laws of the Order; its sequel might, and probably would, be his own death.

"The night of the day on which the flagship left the valley was visited by a violent storm, which raged for about four hours without cessation. We had no proper shelter but the air-ships, and so I distributed the company among them.

"When nearly all had been provided for, there was one vessel left unoccupied, and four of the unmarried men had not been accommodated. They therefore took their places in the spare vessel. They were Peter Tamboff, Amos Vornjeh, Ivan Tscheszco, and Paul Oreloff, all Russians.

"We closed the hatches of the vessels, and remained inside till the storm ceased. When we were able to open the hatches again, it was pitch dark--so dark that it was impossible to see even a yard from one's face. Suspecting no evil, we retired to rest again till sunrise. When day dawned it was found that the vessel in which the four men I have named had taken shelter had disappeared.

"I at once ordered three vessels to rise and pass through the defile. On the outside we separated and made the entire circuit of Aeria, rising as high as the fan-wheels would take us, and examining the horizon in all directions for the missing vessel.

"We failed to discover her, and were forced to the conclusion that the deserters had taken her away early in the night at full speed, and would, therefore, be far beyond the possibility of capture, as we possessed no faster vessel than the missing one. So we returned. That is all."

"Go to the forward cabin and remain there till you're sent for," said Natas.

The President instantly turned and walked mechanically through the door that was opened for him by one of the sentinels. The other went in front of him, the second behind, closing the door as he left the saloon.

A brief discussion took place between Natas and his two lieutenants, and within a quarter of an hour Nicholas Roburoff was again standing at the end of the table to hear the decision of his judges. Without any preamble it was delivered by Natas in these words--

"We have heard your story, and believe it. You have been guilty of a serious mistake, for these four men were all ordinary members of the Outer Circle, who had only been brought here on account of their mechanical skill to occupy subordinate positions. You therefore committed a grave error, amounting almost to a breach of the rule which states that no members of the Outer Circle shall be entrusted with any charge, or work, save under the supervision of a member of the Inner Circle responsible for them.

"Had such a breach been even technically committed your life would have been forfeited, and you would have been executed for breach of trust. We have considered the circumstances, and find you guilty of indiscretion and want of forethought.

"You will cease from now to be President of the Inner Circle. Your place will be taken for the time by Alan Tremayne as Chief of the Executive. You will cease also to share the Councils of the Order for a space of twelve months, during which time you will be incapable of any responsible charge or authority. Your restoration will, of course, depend upon your behaviour. I have said."

As he finished speaking Natas waved his hand towards the door. It was opened, the sentries stepped aside, and Nicholas Roburoff walked out in silence, with bowed head and a heart heavy with shame. The penalty was really the most severe that could be indicted on him, for he found himself suddenly deprived both of authority and the confidence of his chiefs at the very hour when the work of the Brotherhood was culminating to its fruition.

Yet, heavy as the punishment seemed in comparison with the fault, it was justified by the necessities of the case. Without the strictest safeguards, not only against treachery or disobedience, but even mere carelessness, it would have been impossible to have carried on the tremendous work which the Brotherhood had silently and secretly accomplished, and which was soon to produce results as momentous as they would be unexpected. No one knew this better than the late President himself, who frankly acknowledged the justice and the necessity of his punishment, and prepared to devote himself heart and soul to regaining his lost credit in the eyes of the Master.

No sooner was the sentence pronounced than the matter was instantly dismissed and never alluded to again, so far as Roburoff was concerned, by any one. No one presumed even to comment upon a word or deed of the Master. The disgraced President fell naturally, and apparently without observation into his humbler sphere of duties, and the members of the colony treated him with exactly the same friendliness and fraternity as they had done before. Natas had decided, and there was nothing more for any one to say or do in the matter.

Arnold, as soon as he had exchanged greetings with the Princess, now known simply as Anna Ornovski, and his other friends and acquaintances in the colony, not, of course, forgetting Louis Holt, at once shut himself up in his laboratory by the turbine, and for the next four hours remained invisible, preparing a large supply of his motor gases, and pumping them into the exhausted cylinders of the Ithuriel, and all the others that were available, by means of his hydraulic machinery.

Soon after four he had finished his task, and come out to take his part in a ceremony of a very different character to that at which he had been obliged to assist earlier in the day. This was the fulfilment of the promise which Radna Michaelis had made to Colston in the Council-chamber of the house on Clapham Common on the evening of his departure on the expedition which had so brilliantly proved the powers of the Ariel, and brought such confusion on the enemies of the Brotherhood.

Almost the first words that Colston had said to Radna when he boarded the Avondale were--

"Natasha is yonder, safe and sound, and you are mine at last!"

And she had replied very quietly, yet with a thrill in her voice that told her lover how gladly she accepted her own condition--

"What you have fairly won is yours to take when you will have it. Besides, you cannot do justice on Kastovitch now, for it has already been done. We had news before we left England that he had been shot through the heart by the brother of a girl whom he treated worse than he treated me."

But, as has been stated before, the laws of the Brotherhood did not permit of the marriage of any of its members without the direct sanction of Natas, and therefore it had been necessary to wait until now.

As Radna and Colston were two of the most trusted and prominent members of the Inner Circle, it was fitting that their wedding should be honoured by the presence of the Master in person. An added solemnity was also given to it by the fact that, in all human probability, it was the first time since the world began that the mighty hills which looked down upon Aeria had witnessed the plighting of the troth of a man and a woman.

Like all other formal acts of the Brotherhood, the ceremony was simple in the extreme; but, in this case at least, it was none the less impressive on that account. In a lovely glade, through which a crystal stream ran laughing on its way to the lake, Natas sat under the shade of a spreading tree-fern. In front of him was a small table covered with a white cloth, on which lay a roll of parchment and a copy of the Hebrew Scriptures.

At this table, facing Natas, stood the betrothed pair with their witnesses, Natasha for Radna, and Arnold for Colston, or Alexis Mazanoff, to give him his true name, which must, of course, be used on such an occasion. In a wide semicircle some four yards off stood all the members of the little community, Louis Holt and his faithful servitor not excepted.

In the midst of a silence broken only by the whispering of the warm, scented wind in the tree-tops, the Master of the Terror spoke in a kindly yet solemn tone--

"Alexis Mazanoff and Radna Michaelis, you stand here before Heaven, and in the presence of your comrades, to take each other for wedded wife and husband, till death shall part the hands that now are joined!

"Your mutual vows have long ago been pledged, and what you are about to do is good earnest of their fulfilment. But above the duty that you owe to each other stands your duty to that great Cause to which you have already irrevocably devoted your lives. You have already sworn that as long as you shall live its ends shall be your ends, and that no human considerations shall weigh with you where those ends are concerned. Do you take each other for husband and wife subject to that condition and all that it implies?"

"We do!" replied the lovers with one voice, and then Natas went on--

"Then by the laws of our Order, the only laws that we are permitted to obey, I pronounce you man and wife before Heaven and this company. Be faithful to each other and the Cause in the days to come as you have been in the days that are past, and if it shall please the Master of Destiny that you shall be blessed with children, see to it that you train them up in the love of truth, freedom, and justice, and in the hatred of tyranny and wrong.

"May the blessings of life be yours as you shall deserve them, and when the appointed hour shall come, may you be found ready to pass from the mystery of the things that are into the deeper mystery of the things that are to be!"

So saying, the Master raised his hands as though in blessing, and as Alexis and Radna bent their heads the slanting sunrays fell upon the thickly coiled white hair of the new-made wife, crowning her shapely head like a diadem of silver.

All that remained to do now was to sign the Marriage Roll of the Brotherhood, and when they had done this the entry stood as follows:--

"Married on the tenth day of the Month Tamuz, in the Year of the World five thousand six hundred and sixty-four, in the presence of me, Natas, and those of the Brotherhood now resident

in the Colony of Aeria:"

{ ALEXIS MAZANOFF, RADNA MICHAELIS MAZANOFF.

Witnesses RICHARD ARNOLD, NATASHA }

As Natasha laid down the pen after signing she looked up quickly, as though moved by some sudden impulse, her eyes met Arnold's, and an instant later the happy flush on Radna's cheek was rivalled by that which rose to her own. Her lips half parted in a smile, and then she turned suddenly away to be the first to offer her congratulations to the newly-wedded wife, while Arnold, his heart beating as it had never done since the model of the Ariel first rose from the door of his room in the Southwark tenement-house, grasped Mazanoff by the hand and said simply--

"God bless you both, old man!"

The whole ceremony had not taken more than fifteen minutes from beginning to end. After Arnold came Tremayne with his good wishes, and then Anna Ornovski and the rest of the friends and comrades of the newly-wedded lovers.

One usually conspicuous feature in similar ceremonies was entirely wanting. There were no wedding presents. For this there was a very sufficient reason. All the property of the members of the Inner Circle, saving only articles of personal necessity, were held in common. Articles of mere convenience or luxury were looked upon with indifference, if not with absolute contempt, and so no one had anything to give.

After all, this was not a very serious matter for a company of men and women who held in their hands the power of levying indemnities to any amount upon the wealth-centres of the world under pain of immediate destruction.

That evening the supper of the colonists took the shape of a sylvan marriage feast, eaten in the open air under the palms and tree ferns, as the sun was sinking down behind the western peaks of Aeria, and the full moon was rising over those to the eastward. The whole earth might have been searched in vain for a happier company of men and women than that which sat down to the marriage feast of Radna Michaelis and Alexis Mazanoff in the virgin groves of Aeria. For the time being the world-war and all its horrors were forgotten, and they allowed their thoughts to turn without restraint to the promise of the days when the work of the Brotherhood should be accomplished, and there should be peace on earth at last.

It had been decided that three of the air-ships would be sufficient for the chase and capture or destruction, as the case might be, of the deserters. These were the Ithuriel, under the command of Arnold; the Ariel, commanded by Mazanoff, who, of course, did not sail alone; and the Orion, in charge of Tremayne, who had already mastered the details of Aerial navigation under Arnold's tuition.

To the unspeakable satisfaction of the latter, Natas had signified his intention of accompanying him in the Ithuriel. As Natasha utterly refused to be parted so soon from her father again, one of his attendants was dispensed with and she took his place. This fact had, of course, something to do with the Admiral's satisfaction with the arrangement.

By nine o'clock the moon was high in the heavens. At that hour the fan-wheels of the little squadron rose from the decks, and at a signal from Arnold began to revolve. The three vessels ascended quietly into the air amidst the cheers and farewells of the colonists, and in single file passed slowly down the beautiful valley bathed in the brilliant moonlight. One by one they disappeared through the defile that led to the outer world, and, once clear of the mountains, the Ithuriel, with one of her consorts on either side, headed away due north at the speed of a hundred miles an hour.

CHAPTER XXVII. ON THE TRACK OF TREASON.

THE Ithuriel and her consorts crossed the northern coast of Africa soon after daybreak on the 27th, in the longitude of Alexandria, at an elevation of nearly 4000 feet. From thence they pursued almost the same course as that steered by the deserters, as Natas had rightly judged that they would first make for Russia, probably St. Petersburg, and there hand the air-ship over to the representatives of the Tsar.

There was, of course, another alternative, and that was the supposition that they had stolen the Lucifer--the "fallen Angel," as Natasha had now re-named her--for purposes of piracy and private revenge; but that was negated by the fact that Tamboff knew that he only had a certain supply of motive power which he could not renew, and which, once exhausted, left his air-ship as useless as a steamer without coal. His only reasonable course, therefore, would be to sell the vessel to the Tsar, and leave his Majesty's chemists to discover and renew the motive power if they could.

These conclusions once arrived at, it was an easy matter for the keen and subtle intellect of Natas to deduce from them almost the exact sequence of events that had actually taken place. The Lucifer had a sufficient supply of power-cylinders and shells for present use, and these would doubtless be employed at once by the Tsar, who would trust to his chemists and engineers to discover the nature of the agents employed.

For this purpose it would be absolutely necessary for him to give them one or two of the shells, and at least two of the spare power-cylinders as subjects for their experiments.

Now Natas knew that if there was one man in Russia who could discover the composition of the explosives, that man was Professor Volnow of the Imperial Arsenal Laboratory, and therefore the shells and cylinders would be sent to him at the Arsenal for examination. The whereabouts of the deserters for the present mattered nothing in comparison with the possible discovery of the secret on which the whole power of the Terrorists depended.

That once revealed, the sole empire of the air was theirs no longer. The Tsar, with millions of money at his command, could very soon build an aerial fleet, not only equal, but numerically at least, vastly superior to their own, and this would practically give him the command of the world.

Natas therefore came to the conclusion that no measures could be too extreme to be justified by such a danger as this, and so, after a consultation with the commanders of the three vessels, it was decided to, if necessary, destroy the Arsenal at St. Petersburg, on the strength of the reasoning that had led to the logical conclusion that within its precincts the priceless secret either might be or had already been discovered.

As the crow flies, St. Petersburg is thirty degrees of latitude, or eighteen hundred geographical miles, north of Alexandria, and this distance the Ithuriel and her consorts, flying at a speed of a hundred and twenty miles an hour, traversed in fifteen hours, reaching the Russian capital a few minutes after seven on the evening of the 27th.

The Rome of the North, basking in the soft evening sunlight of the incomparable Russian summer, lay vast and white and beautiful on the islands formed by the Neva and its ten tributaries; its innumerable palaces, churches, and theatres, and long straight streets of stately houses, its parks and gardens, and its green shady suburbs, making up a picture which forced an exclamation of wonder from Arnold's lips as the air-ships slowed down and he left the conning-tower of the Ithuriel to admire the magnificent view from the bows. They passed over the city at a height of four thousand feet, and so were quite near enough to see and enjoy the excitement and consternation which their sudden appearance instantly caused among the inhabitants. The streets and squares filled in an inconceivably short space of time with crowds of people, who ran about like tiny ants upon the ground, gesticulating and pointing upwards, evidently in terror lest the fate of Kronstadt was about to fall upon St. Petersburg.

The experimental department of the Arsenal had within the last two or three years been rebuilt on a

large space of waste ground outside the northern suburbs, and to this the three airships directed their course after passing over the city. It was a massive three-storey building, built in the form of a quadrangle. The three air-ships stopped within a mile of it at an elevation of two thousand feet. It had been decided that, before proceeding to extremities, which, after all, might still leave them in doubt as to whether or not they had really destroyed all means of analysing the explosives, they should make an effort to discover whether Professor Volnow had received them for experiment, and, if so, what success he had had.

Mazanoff had undertaken this delicate and dangerous task, and so, as soon as the Ithuriel and the Orion came to a standstill, and hung motionless in the air, with all their guns ready trained on different parts of the building, the Ariel sank suddenly and swiftly down, and stopped within forty feet of the heads of a crowd of soldiers and mechanics, who had rushed pell-mell out of the building, under the impression that it was about to be destroyed.

The bold manoeuvre of the Ariel took officers and men completely by surprise. So intense was the terror in which these mysterious air-ships were held, and so absolute was the belief that they were armed with perfectly irresistible means of destruction, that the sight of one of them at such close quarters paralysed all thought and action for the time being. The first shock over, the majority of the crowd took to their heels and fled incontinently. Of the remainder a few of the bolder spirits handled their rifles and looked inquiringly at their officers. Mazanoff saw this, and at once raised his hand towards the sky and shouted--

"Ground arms! If a shot is fired the Arsenal will be destroyed as Kronstadt was, and then we shall attack Petersburg."

The threat was sufficient. A grey-haired officer in undress uniform glanced up at the Ithuriel and her consort, and then at the guns of the Ariel, all four of which had been swung round and brought to bear on the side of the building near which she had descended. He was no coward, but he saw that Mazanoff had the power to do what he said, and that even if this air-ship were captured or destroyed, the other two would take a frightful vengeance. He thought of Kronstadt, and decided to parley. The rifle butts had come to the ground before Mazanoff had done speaking.

"Order arms, and keep silence!" said the officer, and then he advanced alone from the crowd and said--

"Who are you, and what is your errand?"

"Alexis Mazanoff, late prisoner of the Tsar, and now commander of the Terrorist air-ship Ariel. I have not come to destroy you unless you force me to do so, but to ask certain questions, and demand the giving up of certain property delivered into your hands by deserters and traitors."

"What are your questions?"

"First, is Professor Volnow in the building?"

"He is."

"Then I must ask you to send for him at once."

It went sorely against the grain of the servant of the Tsar to acquiesce in the demand of an outlaw, but there was nothing else for it. The outlaw could blow him and all his subordinates into space with a pressure of his finger; and so he sent an orderly with a request for the presence of the professor. Meanwhile Mazanoff continued--

"An air-ship similar to this arrived here three days ago, I believe?"

The officer bit his lips with rage at his helpless position, and bowed affirmatively.

"And certain articles were taken out of her for examination here--two gas cylinders and a projectile, I believe?"

Again the officer bowed, wondering how on earth the Terrorist could have come by such accurate information.

"And the air-ship has been sent on to the seat of war, while the Professor is trying to discover the composition of the gases and the explosive used in the shell?" went on Mazanoff, risking a last shot at

the truth.

The officer did not bow this time. Giving way at last to his rising fury, he stamped on the ground and almost screamed--

"Great God! you insolent scoundrel! Why do you ask me questions when you know the answers as well as I do, and better? Yes, we have got one of your diabolical ships of the air, and we will build a fleet like it and hunt you from the world!"

"All in good time, my dear sir," replied Mazanoff ironically. "When you have found a place in which to build them that we cannot blow off the face of the earth before you get one finished. Meanwhile, let me beg of you to keep your temper, and to remember that there is a lady present. That girl standing yonder by the gun was once stripped and flogged by Russians calling themselves men and soldiers. Her fingers are itching to make the movement that would annihilate you and every one standing near you, so pray try keep your temper; for if we fire a shot the air-ships up yonder will at once open fire, and not stop while there is a stone of that building left upon another. Ah! here comes the Professor."

As he spoke the man of science advanced, looking wonderingly at the air-ship. Mazanoff made a sign to the old officer to keep silence, and continued in the same polite tone that he had used all along--

"Good evening, Professor! I have come to ask you whether you have yet made any experiments on the contents of the shell and the two cylinders that were given to you for examination?"

"I must first ask for your authority to put such an inquiry to me on a confidential subject," replied the Professor stiffly.

"On the authority given me by the power to enforce an answer, sir," returned the Terrorist quietly. "I know that Professor Volnow will not lie to me, even at the order of the Tsar, and when I tell you that your refusal to reply will cost the lives of every one here, and possibly involve the destruction of Petersburg itself, I feel sure that, as a mere matter of humanity, you will comply with my request."

"Sir, the orders of my master are absolute secrecy on this subject, and I will obey them to the death. I have analysed the contents of one of the cylinders, but what they are I will tell to no one save by the direct command of his Majesty. That is all I have done."

"Then in that case, Professor, I must ask you to surrender yourself prisoner of war, and to come on board this vessel at once."

As Mazanoff said this the Ariel dropped to within ten feet of the ground, and a rope-ladder fell over the side.

"Come, Professor, there is no time to be lost. I shall give the order to fire in one minute from now."

He took out his watch, and began to count the seconds. Ten, twenty, thirty passed and the Professor stood irresolute. Two of the Ariel's guns pointed at the gables of the Arsenal and two swept the crowded space in front.

Konstantin Volnow knew enough to see clearly the frightful slaughter and destruction that twenty seconds more would bring if he refused to give himself up. As Mazanoff counted "forty" he threw up his hands with a gesture of despair, and cried--

"Stop! I will come. The Tsar has as good servants as I am! Colonel, tell his Majesty that I gave myself up to save the lives of better men."

Then the Professor mounted the ladder amidst a murmur of relief and applause from the crowd, and, gaining the deck of the Ariel, bowed coldly to Mazanoff and said--

"I am your prisoner, sir!"

The captain of the Ariel bowed in reply, and stamped thrice on the deck. The fan-wheels whirled round, and the air-ship rapidly ascended, at the same time moving diagonally across the quadrangle of the Arsenal.

Scarcely had she reached the other side when there was a tremendous explosion in the north-eastern angle of the building. A sheet of flame shot up through the roof, the walls split asunder, and masses of stone, wood, and iron went flying in all directions, leaving only a fiercely burning mass of ruins where the gable had been.

The Professor turned ashy pale, staggered backwards with both his hands clasped to his head, and gasped out brokenly as he stared at the conflagration--

"God have mercy on me! My laboratory! My assistant---I told him--

"What did you tell him, Professor?" said Mazanoff sternly, grasping him suddenly by the arm.

"I told him not to open the other cylinder."

"And he has done so, and paid for his disobedience with his life," said Mazanoff calmly. "Console yourself, my dear sir! He has only saved me the trouble of destroying your laboratory. I serve a sterner and more powerful master than yours. He ordered me to make your experiments impossible if it cost a thousand lives to do so, and I would have done it if necessary. Rest content with the knowledge that you have saved, not only the rest of the Arsenal, but also Petersburg, by your surrender; for sooner than that secret had been revealed, we should have laid the city in ruins to slay the man who had discovered it."

The prisoner of the Terrorists made no reply, but turned away in silence to watch the rapidly receding building, in the angle of which the flames were still raging furiously. A few minutes later the Ariel had rejoined her consorts. Her captain at once went on board the flagship to make his report and deliver up his prisoner to Natas, who looked sharply at him and said--

"Professor, will you give me your word of honour to attempt no communication with the earth while it may be found necessary to detain you? If not, I shall be compelled to keep you in strict confinement till it is beyond your power to do so."

"Sir, I give you my word that I will not do so," said the Professor, who had now somewhat regained his composure.

"Very well," replied Natas. "Then on that condition you will be made free of the vessel, and we will make you as comfortable as we can. Captain Arnold, full speed to the south-westward, if you please."

CHAPTER XXVIII. A SKIRMISH IN THE CLOUDS.

A FEW minutes after two on the following morning, that is to say on the 28th, the electric signal leading from the conning-tower of the Ithuriel to the wall of Arnold's cabin, just above his berth, sounded. As it was only permitted to be used on occasions of urgency, he knew that his presence was immediately required forward for some good reason, and so he turned out at once, threw a dressing-gown over his sleeping suit, and within three minutes was standing in the conning-tower beside Andrew Smith, whose watch it then happened to be.

"Well, Smith, what's the matter?"

"Fleet of war-balloons coming up from the south'ard, sir. You can just see 'em, sir, coming on in line under that long bank of cloud."

The captain of the Ithuriel took the night-glasses, and looked eagerly in the direction pointed out by his keen-eyed coxswain. As soon as he picked them up he had no difficulty in making out twelve small dark spots in line at regular intervals sharply defined against a band of light that lay between the earth and a long dark bank of clouds.

It was a division of the Tsar's Aerial fleet, returning from some work of death and destruction in the south to rejoin the main force before Berlin. Arnold's course was decided on in an instant. He saw a chance of turning the tables on his Majesty in a fashion that he would find as unpleasant as it would be unexpected. He turned to his coxswain and said--

"How is the wind, Smith?"

"Nor'-nor'-west, with perhaps half a point more north in it, sir. About a ten-knot breeze--at least that's the drift that Mr. Marston's allowing for."

"Yes, that's near enough. Then those fellows, if they are going full speed, are coming up at about twenty miles an hour, or not quite that. They're nearly twenty miles off, as nearly as I can judge in this light. What do you make it?"

"That's about it, sir; rather less than more, if anything, to my mind."

"Very well, then. Now signal to stop, and send up the fan-wheels; and tell the Ariel and the Orion to close up and speak."

"Ay, ay, sir," said the coxswain, as he saluted and disappeared. Arnold at once went back to his cabin and dressed, telling his second officer, Frank Marston, a young Englishman, whom he had chosen to take Mazanoff's place, to do the same as quietly as possible, as he did not wish to awaken any of his three passengers just at present.

By the time he got on deck the three air-ships had slowed down considerably, and the two consorts of the Ithuriel were within easy speaking distance. Mazanoff and Tremayne were both on deck, and to them he explained his plans as follows--

"There are a dozen of the Tsar's war-balloons coming up yonder to the southward, and I am going to head them off and capture the lot if I can. If we can do that, we can make what terms we like for the surrender of the Lucifer.

"You two take your ships and get to windward of them as fast as you can. Keep a little higher than they are, but not much. On no account let one of them get above you. If they try to descend, give each one that does so a No. 1 shell, and blow her up. If one tries to pass you, ram her in the upper part of the gas-holder, and let her down with a smash.

"I am going up above them to prevent any of them from rising too far. They can outfly us in that one direction, so I shall blow any that attempt it into little pieces. If you have to fire on any of them, don't use more than No. 1; you'll find that more than enough.

"Keep an eye on me for signals, and remember that the whole fleet must be destroyed rather than one allowed to escape. I want to give the Tsar a nice little surprise. He seems to be getting a good deal too cock-sure about these old gas-bags of his, and it's time to give him a lesson in real Aerial warfare."

There was not a great newspaper in the world that would not have given a very long price to have had the privilege of putting a special correspondent on the deck of the Ithuriel for the two hours which followed the giving of Arnold's directions to his brother commanders of the little squadron. The journal which could have published an exclusive account of the first Aerial skirmish in the history of the world would have scored a triumph which would have left its competitors a long way behind in the struggle to be "up to date."

As soon as Arnold had given his orders, the three air-ships at once separated. The Ariel and the Orion shot away to the southward on only a slightly upward course, while the Ithuriel soared up beyond the stratum of clouds which lay in thin broken masses rather more than four thousand feet above the earth.

It was still rather more than an hour before sunrise, and, as the moon had gone down, and the clouds intercepted most of the starlight, it was just "the darkest hour before the dawn," and therefore the most favourable for the carrying out of the plan that Arnold had in view.

Shortly after half-past two he knocked at Natasha's cabin-door, and said--

"If you would like to see an Aerial battle, get up and come into the conning-tower at once. We have overtaken a squadron of Russian war-balloons, and we are going either to capture or destroy them."

"Glorious!" exclaimed Natasha, wide awake in an instant at such startling news. "I'll be with you in five minutes. Tell my father, and please don't begin till I come."

"I shouldn't think of opening the ball without your ladyship's presence," laughed Arnold in reply, and then he went and called Natas and his attendant and the Professor before going to the conning-tower, where in a very few minutes he was joined by Natasha. The first words she said were--

"I have told Ivan to send us some coffee as soon as he has attended to my father. You see how thoughtful I am for your creature comforts. Now, where are the war-balloons?"

"On the other side of those clouds. There, look down through that big rift, and you will see one of them."

"Why, what a height we must be from the earth! The balloon looks like a little toy thing, but it must be a great clumsy contrivance for all that."

"The barometer gives five thousand three hundred feet. You will soon see why I have come up so high. The balloons can rise to fifteen or twenty thousand feet, if they wish to, and in that way they could easily escape us; therefore, if one of them attempts to rise through those clouds, I shall send him back to earth in little bits."

"And what are the other two air-ships doing?"

"They are below the clouds, heading the balloons off from the Russian camp, which is about fifty miles to the north-westward. Ha! look, there go the searchlights!"

As he spoke, two long converging beams of light darted across a broad space of sky that was free from cloud. They came from the Ariel and the Orion, which thus suddenly revealed themselves to the astonished and disgusted Russians, one at each end of their long line, and only a little more than half a mile ahead of it.

The searchlights flashed to and fro along the line, plainly showing the great masses of the aerostats' gas-holders, with their long slender cars beneath them. A blue light was burnt on the largest of the war-balloons, and at once the whole flotilla began to ascend towards the clouds, followed by the two air-ships.

"Here they come!" said Arnold, as he saw them rising through a cloud-rift. "Come out and watch what happens to the first one that shows herself."

He went out on deck, followed by Natasha, and took his place by one of the broadside guns. At the same time he gave the order for the Ithuriel's searchlight to be turned on, and to sweep the cloud-field below her. Presently a black rounded object appeared rising through the clouds like a whale coming to the surface of the sea. He trained the gun on to it as it came distinctly into view, and said to Natasha--

"Come, now, and fire the first shot in the warfare of the future. Put your finger on the button, and press when I tell you."

Natasha did as he told her, and at the word "Fire!" pressed the little ivory button down. The shell struck the upper envelope of the balloon, passed through, and exploded. A broad sheet of flame shot up, brilliantly illuminating the sea of cloud for an instant, and all was darkness again. A few seconds later there came another blaze, and the report of a much greater explosion from below the clouds.

"What was that?" asked Natasha.

"That was the car full of explosives striking the earth and going off promiscuously," replied Arnold. "There isn't as much of that aerostat left as would make a pocket-handkerchief or a walking-stick."

"And the crew?"

"Never knew what happened to them. In the new warfare people will not be merely killed, they will be annihilated."

"Horrible!" exclaimed Natasha, with a shudder. "I think you may do the rest of the shooting. The effects of that shot will last me for some time. Look, there's another of them coming up!"

The words were hardly out of her mouth before Arnold had crossed to the other side of the deck and sped another missile on its errand of destruction with almost exactly the same result as before. This second shot, as it was afterwards found, threw the Russian squadron into complete panic.

The terrific suddenness with which the two aerostats had been destroyed convinced those in command of the others that there was a large force of air-ships above the clouds ready to destroy them one by one as they ascended. Arnold waited for a few minutes, and then, seeing that no others cared to risk the fate that had overwhelmed the first two that had sought to cross the cloud-zone, sank rapidly through it, and then stopped again.

He found himself about six hundred feet above the rest of the squadron. The Ithuriel coming thus suddenly into view, her eight guns pointing in all directions, and her searchlight flashing hither and thither as though seeking new victims, completed the demoralisation of the Russians. For all they knew there were still more air-ships above the clouds. Even this one could not be passed while those mysterious guns of unknown range and infallible aim were sweeping the sky, ready to hurl their silent lightnings in every direction.

Ascend they dare not. To descend was to be destroyed in detail as they lay helpless upon the earth. There was only one chance of escape, and that was to scatter. The commander of the squadron at once signalled for this to be done, and the aerostats headed away to all points of the compass. But here they had reckoned without the incomparable speed of their assailants.

Before they had moved a hundred yards from their common centre the Ariel and the Orion headed away in different directions, and in an inconceivably short space of time had described a complete circle round them, and then another and another, narrowing each circle that they made. One of the aerostats, watching its opportunity, put on full speed and tried to get outside the narrowing zone. She had almost succeeded, when the Orion swerved outwards and dashed at her with the ram.

In ten seconds she was overtaken. The keen steel prow of the air-ship, driven at more than a hundred miles an hour, ripped her gas-holder from end to end as if it had been tissue paper. It collapsed like broken bubble, and the wreck, with its five occupants and its load of explosives, dropped like a stone to the earth, three thousand feet below, exploding like one huge shell as it struck.

This was the last blow struck in the first Aerial battle in the history of warfare. The Russians had no stomach for this kind of fighting. It was all very well to sail over armies and fortresses on the earth and drop shells upon them without danger of retaliation; but this was an entirely different matter.

Three of the aerostats had been destroyed in little more than as many minutes, so utterly destroyed that not a vestige of them remained, and the whole squadron had not been able to strike a blow in self-defence. They carried no guns, not even small arms, for they had no use for them in the work that they had to do. There were only two alternatives before them--surrender or piecemeal destruction.

As soon as she had destroyed the third aerostat, the Orion swerved round again, and began flying round the squadron as before in an opposite direction to the Ariel. None of the aerostats made an attempt to break the strange blockage again. As the circles narrowed they crowded closer and closer

together, like a flock of sheep surrounded by wolves.

Meanwhile the Ithuriel, floating above the centre of the disordered squadron, descended slowly until she hung a hundred feet above the highest of them. Then Arnold with his searchlight flashed a signal to the Ariel which at once slowed down, the Orion continuing, on her circular course as before. As soon as the Ariel was going slowly enough for him to make himself heard, Mazanoff shouted through a speaking trumpet--

"Will you surrender, or fight it out?"

"Nu vot! how can we fight with those devil-ships of yours? What is your pleasure?"

The answering hail came from one of the aerostats in the centre of the squadron. Mazanoff at once replied--

"Unconditional surrender for the present, under guarantee of safety to every one who surrenders. Who are you?"

"Colonel Alexei Alexandrovitch, in command of the squadron. I surrender on those terms. Who are you?"

"The captain of the Terrorist air-ship Ariel. Be good enough to come out here, Colonel Alexei Alexandrovitch."

One of the aerostats moved out of the midst of the Russian squadron and made its way towards the Ariel. As she approached Mazanoff swung his bow round and brought it level with the car of the aerostat, at the same time training one of his guns full on it. Then, with his arm resting on the breach of the gun, he said,--

"Come on board, Colonel, and bid your balloon follow me. No nonsense, mind, or I'll blow you into eternity and all your squadron after you."

The Russian did as he was bidden, and the Ariel, followed by the aerostat, ascended to the Ithuriel, while the Orion kept up her patrol round the captive war-balloons.

"Colonel Alexandrovitch, in command of the Tsar's Aerial squadron, surrenders unconditionally, save for guarantee of personal safety to himself and his men," reported Mazanoff, as he came within earshot of the flagship.

"Very good," replied Arnold from the deck of the Ithuriel. "You will keep Colonel Alexandrovitch as hostage for the good behaviour of the rest, and shoot him the moment one of the balloons attempts to escape. After that destroy the rest without mercy. They will form in line close together and you the Ariel and the Orion will convoy them on either flank, and you will follow me until you have the signal to stop. On the first suspicion of any attempt to escape you will know what to do. You have both handled your ships splendidly."

Mazanoff saluted formally, more for the sake of effect than anything else, and descended again to carry out his orders. The captured flotilla was formed in line, the balloons being closed up until there was only a couple of yards or so between any of them and her next neighbour, with the Orion and the Ariel to right and left, each with two guns trained on them, and the Ithuriel flying a couple of hundred feet above them. In this order captors and captured made their way at twenty miles an hour to the north-west towards the headquarters of the Tsar.

CHAPTER XXIX. AN EMBASSY FROM THE SKY.

BY the time the captured war-balloons had been formed in order, and the voyage fairly commenced, the eastern sky was bright with the foreglow of the coming dawn, and, as the flotilla was only floating between eight and nine hundred feet above the earth, it was not long before the light was sufficiently strong to render the landscape completely visible.

Far and wide it was a scene of desolation and destruction, of wasted, blackened fields trampled into wildernesses by the tread of countless feet, of forests of trees broken, scorched and splintered by the iron hail of artillery, and of towns and villages, reduced to heaps of ruins, still smouldering with the fires that had destroyed them.

No more eloquent object-lesson in the horrors of what is called civilised warfare could well have been found than the scene which was visible from the decks of the air-ships. The promised fruits of a whole year of patient industry had been withered in a few hours under the storm-blast of war; homes which but a few days before had sheltered stalwart, well-fed peasants and citizens, were now mere heaps of blackened brick and stone and smoking thatches.

Streets which had been the thoroughfares of peaceful industrious folk, who had no quarrel with the Powers of the earth, or with any of their kind, were now strewn with corpses and encumbered with ruins, and the few survivors, more miserable than those who had died, were crawling, haggard and starving, amidst the wrecks of their vanished prosperity, seeking for some scanty morsels of food to prolong life if only for a few more days of misery and nights of sleepless anxiety.

As the sun rose and shed its midsummer splendour, as if in sublime mockery, over the scene of suffering and desolation, hideous features of the landscape were brought into stronger and more horrifying relief; the scorched and trampled fields were seen to be strewn with unburied corpses of men and horses, and ploughed up with cannon shot and torn into great irregular gashes by shells that had buried themselves in the earth and then exploded.

It was evident that some frightful tragedy must have taken place in this region not many hours before the air-ships had arrived upon the scene. And this, in fact, had been the case. Barely three days previously the advance guard of the Russian army of the North had been met and stubbornly but unsuccessfully opposed by the remnants of the German army of the East, which, driven back from the frontier, was retreating in good order to join the main force which had concentrated about Berlin, under the command of the Emperor, there to fight out the supreme struggle, on the issue of which depended the existence of that German Empire which fifty years before had been so triumphantly built up by the master-geniuses of the last generation.

After a flight of a little over two hours the flotilla came in sight of the Russian army lying between Cestrin on the right and Frankfort-on-Spree on the left. The distance between these two towns is nearly twelve English miles, and yet the wings of the vast host under the command of the Tsar spread for a couple of miles on either side to north and south of each of them.

In spite of the colossal iniquity which it concealed, the spectacle was one of indescribable grandeur. Almost as far as the eye could reach the beams of the early morning sun were gleaming upon innumerable white tents, and flashing over a sea of glittering metal, of bare bayonets and sword scabbards, of spear points and helmets, of gold-laced uniforms and the polished accoutrements of countless batteries of field artillery.

Far away to the westward the stately city of Berlin could be seen lying upon its intersecting waters, and encircled by its fortifications bristling with guns, and in advance of it were the long serried lines of its defenders gathered to do desperate battle for home and fatherland.

As soon as the Russian army was fairly in sight the Ithuriel shot ahead, sank to the level of the flotilla, and then stopped until she was overtaken by the Orion. Tremayne was on deck, and Arnold as soon as he came alongside said--

"You must stop here for the present. I want the aerostat commanded by Colonel Alexandrovitch to come with me; meanwhile you and the Ariel will rise with the rest of the balloons to a height of four thousand feet; you will keep strict guard over the balloons, and permit no movement to be made until my return. We are going to bring his Majesty the Tsar to book, or else make things pretty lively for him if he won't listen to reason.

"Very well," replied Tremayne. "I will do as you say, and await developments with considerable interest. If there is going to be a fight, I hope you're not going to leave us out in the cold."

"Oh no," replied Arnold. "You needn't be afraid of that. If his Majesty won't come to terms, you will smash up the war-balloons and then come and join us in the general bombardment. I see, by the way, that there are ten or a dozen more of these unwieldy monsters with the Russian force moored to the ground yonder on the outskirts of Cestrin. It will be a little amusement for us if we have to come to blows to knock them to pieces before we smash up the Tsar's headquarters."

So saying, Arnold increased the speed of the Ithuriel, swept round in front of the line, and communicated the same instructions to the captain of the Ariel.

A few minutes later the Ariel and the Orion began to rise with their charges to the higher regions of the air leaving the Ithuriel and the one aerostat to carry out the plan which had been arranged by Natas and Arnold an hour previously.

As the speed of the aerostat was only about twenty miles an hour against the wind, a rope was passed from the stern of the Ithuriel to the cordage connecting the car with the gas-holder and so the aerostat was taken in tow by the air-ship, and dragged through the air at a speed of about forty miles an hour, as a wind-bound sailing vessel might have been towed by a steamer.

On the journey the elevation was increased to more than four thousand feet,---an elevation at which both the Ithuriel and her captive, and especially the former, presented practically impossible marks for the Russian riflemen. Almost immediately over Cestrin they came to a standstill, and then Colonel Alexandrovitch and Professor Volnow were summoned by Natas into the deck saloon.

He explained to them the mission which he desired them to undertake, that is to say, the conveyance of a letter from himself to the Tzar offering terms for the surrender of the Lucifer. They accepted the mission; and in order that they might fully understand the gravity of it, Natas read them the letter, which ran as follows:-

ALEXANDER ROMANOFF,--

Three days ago one of my fleet of air-ships, named the Lucifer, was delivered into your hands by traitors and deserters, whose lives are forfeit in virtue of the oaths which they took of their own free will. I have already taken measures to render abortive the analysis which you ordered to be performed in the chemical department of your Arsenal at St. Petersburg, and I have now come to make terms, if possible, for the restoration of the air-ship. Those terms are as follows--

An hour before daybreak this morning I captured nine of your war balloons, after destroying three others which attempted to escape. I have no desire to take any present part in the war which you are now carrying on with the Anglo-Teutonic Alliance, and if you will tell me where the Lucifer is now to be found, and will despatch orders both by land and through Professor Volnow, who brings this letter to you, and will return with your answer, for her to be given up to me forthwith with everything she has on board, and will surrender with her the four traitors who delivered her into your hands, I will restore the nine war-balloons to you intact, and when I have recovered the Lucifer I will take no further part in the war unless either you or your opponents proceed to unjustifiable extremities.

If you reject these terms, or if I do not receive an answer to this letter within two hours of the time that the bearer of it descends in the aerostat, I shall give orders for the immediate destruction of the war-balloons now in my hands, and I shall then proceed to destroy Cestrin and the other aerostats which are moored near the town. That done I shall, for the time being,

devote the force at my disposal to the defence of Berlin, and do my utmost to bring about the defeat and dispersal of the army which will then no longer be commanded by yourself.

In case you may doubt what I say as to the capture of the fleet of war-balloons, Professor Volnow will be accompanied by Colonel Alexei Alexandrovitch, late in command of the squadron, and now my prisoner of war.

NATAS.

The ambassadors were at once transferred to the aerostat, and with a white flag hoisted on the after stays of the balloon she began to sink rapidly towards the earth, and at the same time Natas gave orders for the Ithuriel to ascend to a height of eight thousand feet in order to frustrate any attempts that might be made, whether with or without the orders of the Tzar, to injure her by means of a volley from the earth.

Even from that elevation, those on board the Ithuriel were able with the aid of their field-glasses to see with perfect ease the commotion which the appearance of the air-ship with the captured aerostat had produced in the Russian camp. The whole of the vast host, numbering more than four millions of men, turned out into the open to watch their Aerial visitors, and everywhere throughout the whole extent of the huge camp the plainest signs of the utmost excitement were visible.

In less than half an hour they saw the aerostat touch the earth near to a large building, above which floated the imperial standard of Russia. An hour had been allowed for the interview and for the Tzar to give his decision, and half an hour for the aerostat to return and meet the air-ship.

In all the history of the world there had probably never been an hour so pregnant with tremendous consequences, not only to Europe, but to the whole civilised world, as that was; and though apparently a perfect calm reigned throughout the air-ship, the issue of the embassy was awaited with the most intense anxiety.

Another half hour passed, and hardly a word was spoken on the deck of the Ithuriel, hanging there in mid-air over the mighty Russian host, and in range of the field-glasses of the outposts of the German army of Berlin lying some ten or twelve miles away to the westward.

It was the calm before the threatening storm,---a storm which in less than an hour might break in a hail of death and destruction from the sky, and turn the fields of earth into a volcano of shot and flame. Certainly the fate of an empire, and perhaps of Europe, or indeed the world, hung in the balance over that field of possible carnage.

If the Russians regained their war-balloons and were left to themselves, nothing that the heroic Germans could do would be likely to save Berlin from the fate that had overwhelmed Strassburg and Metz, Breslau and Thorn.

On the other hand, should the aerostat not return in time with a satisfactory answer, the victorious career of the Tsar would be cut short by such a bolt from the skies as had wrecked his fortress at Kronstadt,---a blow which he could neither guard against nor return, for it would come from an unassailable vantage point, a little vessel a hundred feet long floating in the air six thousand feet from the earth, and looking a mere bright speck amidst the sunlight. She formed a mark that the most skilful rifle-shot in his army could not hit once in a thousand shots, and against whose hull of hardened aluminium, bullets, even if they struck, would simply splash and scatter, like raindrops on a rock.

The remaining minutes of the last half hour were slipping away one by one, and still no sign came from the earth. The aerostat remained moored near the building surmounted by the Russian standard, and the white flag, which, according to arrangement, had been hauled down to be re-hoisted if the answer of the Tsar was favourable, was still invisible. When only ten minutes of the allotted time were left, Arnold, moving his glass from his eyes, and looking at his watch, said to Natas--

"Ten minutes more; shall I prepare?"

"Yes," said Natas. "And let the first gun be fired with the first second of the eleventh minute. Destroy the aerostats first and then the batteries of artillery. After that send a shell into Frankfort, if you have a

gun that will carry the distance, so that they may see our range of operations; but spare the Tsar's headquarters for the present."

"Very good," replied Arnold. Then, turning to his lieutenant, he said--

"You have the guns loaded with No. 3, I presume, Mr. Marston, and the projectile stands are filled, I see. Very good. Now descend to six thousand feet and go a mile to the westward. Train one broadside gun on that patch of ground where you see those balloons, another to strike in the midst of those field-guns yonder by the ammunition--waggon, and train the starboard after-gun to throw a shell into Frankfort. The distance is a little over twelve miles, so give sufficient elevation."

By the time these orders had been executed, swiftly as the necessary evolution had been performed, only four minutes of the allotted time were left. Arnold took his stand by the broadside gun trained on the aerostats, and, with one hand on the breech of the gun and the other holding his watch, he waited for the appointed moment. Natasha stood by him with her eyes fastened to the eye-pieces of the glasses watching for the white flag in breathless suspense.

"One minute more!" said Arnold.

"Stop, there it goes!" cried Natasha as the words left his lips. "His Majesty has yielded to circumstances!"

Arnold took the glasses from her, and through them saw a tiny white speck shining against the black surface of the gas-holder of the balloon. He handed the glasses back to her, saying--

"We must not be too sure of that. His message may be one of defiance."

"True," said Natasha "We shall see."

Ten minutes later the aerostat was released from her moorings and rose swiftly and vertically into the air. As soon as it reached her own altitude the Ithuriel shot forward to meet it, and stopped within a couple of hundred yards, a gun ready trained upon the car in case of treachery. In the car stood Professor Volnow and Colonel Alexandrovitch. The former held something white in his hand, and across the intervening space came the reassuring hail: "All well!"

In five minutes he was standing on the deck of the Ithuriel presenting a folded paper to Natas. He was pale to the lips and his whole body trembled with violent emotion. As he handed him the paper, he said to Natas in a low, husky voice that was barely recognisable as his--

"Here is the answer of the Tsar. Whether you are man or fiend, I know not, but his Majesty has yielded and accepted your terms. May I never again witness such anger as was his when I presented your letter. It was not till the last moment that he yielded to my entreaties and those of his staff, and ordered the white flag to be hoisted."

"Yes," replied Natas. "He tempted his fate to the last moment. The guns were already trained upon Cestrin and thirty seconds more would have seen his headquarters in ruins. He did wisely, if he acted tardily."

So saying, Natas broke the imperial seal. On a sheet of paper bearing the imperial arms were scrawled three or four lines in the Autocrat's own handwriting--

I accept your main terms. The air-ship has joined the Baltic fleet. She will be delivered to you with all on board. The four men are my subjects, and I feel bound to protect them; they will therefore not be delivered up. Do as you like. ALEXANDER.

"A Royal answer, though it comes from a despot," said Natas as he refolded the paper. "I will waive that point, and let him protect the traitors, if he can. Colonel Alexandrovitch," he continued, turning to the Russian, who had also boarded the air-ship, "you are free. You may return to your war-balloon, and accompany us to give the order for the release of your squadron."

"Free!" suddenly screamed the Russian, his face livid and distorted with passion. "Free, yes, but disgraced! Ruined for life, and degraded to the ranks! I want no freedom from you. I will not even have my life at your hands, but I will have yours, and rid the earth of you if I die a thousand deaths!"

As he spoke he wrenched his sword from its scabbard, thrust the Professor aside, and rushed at Natas with the uplifted blade. Before it had time to descend a stream of pale flame flashed over the back of the Master's chair, accompanied by a long, sharp rattle, and the Russian's body dropped instantly to the deck riddled by a hail of bullets.

"I saw murder in that man's eyes when he began to speak," said Natasha, putting back into her pocket the magazine pistol that she had used with such terrible effect.

"I saw it too, daughter," quietly replied Natas. "But you need not have been afraid; the blow would never have reached me, for I would have paralysed him before he could have made the stroke."

"Impossible! No man could have done it!"

The exclamation burst involuntarily from the lips of Professor Volnow, who had stood by, an amazed and horrified spectator of the rapidly enacted tragedy.

"Professor," said Natas, in quick, stern tones, "I am not accustomed to say what is not true, nor yet to be contradicted by any one in human shape. Stand there till I tell you to move."

As he spoke these last words Natas made a swift, sweeping downward movement with one of his hands, and fixed his eyes upon those of the Professor. In an instant Volnow's muscles stiffened into immovable rigidity, and he stood rooted to the deck powerless to move so much as a finger.

"Captain Arnold," continued Natas, as though nothing had happened. "We will rejoin our consorts, please, and release the aerostats in accordance with the terms. This man's body will be returned in one of them to his master, and the Professor here will write an account of his death in order that it may not be believed that we have murdered him. Konstantin Volnow, go into the saloon and write that letter, and bring it to me when it is done."

Like an automaton the Professor turned and walked mechanically into the deck-saloon. Meanwhile the Ithuriel started on her way towards the captive squadron. Before she reached it Volnow returned with a sheet of paper in his hand filled with fresh writing, and signed with his name.

Natas took it from him, read it, and then fixing his eyes on his again, said--

"That will do. I give you back your will. Now, do you believe?"

The Professor's body was suddenly shaken with such a violent trembling that he almost fell to the deck. Then he recovered himself with a violent effort, and cried through his chattering teeth--

"Believe! How can I help it? Whoever and whatever you are, you are well named the Master of the Terror."

CHAPTER XXX. AT CLOSE QUARTERS.

AS soon as the captive war-balloons had been released, the Ithuriel and her consorts, without any further delay or concern for the issue of the decisive battle which would probably prove to be the death-struggle of the German Empire, headed away to the northward at the utmost speed of the two smaller vessels. Their objective point was Copenhagen, and the distance rather more than two hundred and sixty miles in a straight line.

This was covered in under two hours and a half, and by noon they had reached the Danish capital. In crossing the water from Stralsund they had sighted several war-vessels, all flying British, German, or Danish colours, and all making a northerly course like themselves. They had not attempted to speak to any of these, because, as they were all apparently bound for the same point, and, as the speed of the air-ships was more than five times as great as that of the swiftest cruiser, to do so would have been a waste of time, when every moment might be of the utmost consequence.

Off Copenhagen the Aerial travellers saw the first signs of the terrible night's work, with the details of which the reader has already been made acquainted. Wrecked fortifications, cruisers and battleships bearing every mark of a heavy engagement, some with their top-works battered into ruins, their military masts gone, and their guns dismounted; some down by the head, and some by the stern, and others evidently run ashore to save them from sinking; and the harbour crowded with others in little better condition--everywhere there were eloquent proofs of the disaster which had overtaken the Allied fleets on the previous night.

"There seems to have been some rough work going on down there within the last few hours," said Arnold to Natas as they came in sight of this scene of destruction. "The Russians could not have done this alone, for when the war began they were shut up in the Baltic by an overwhelming force, of which these seem to be the remains. And those forts yonder were never destroyed by anything but our shells."

"Yes," replied Natas. "It is easy to see what has happened. The Lucifer was sent here to help the Russian fleet to break the blockade, and it looks as though it had been done very effectually. We are just a few hours too late, I fear."

"That one victory will have an immense effect on the course of the war, for it is almost certain that the Russians will make for the Atlantic round the north of the Shetland Islands, and co-operate with the French and Italian squadrons along the British line of communication with the West. That once cut, food will go up to famine prices in Britain, and the end will not be far off."

Natas spoke without the slightest apparent personal interest in the subject; but his words brought a flush to Arnold's cheeks, and made him suddenly clench his hands and knit his brows. After all he was an Englishman, and though he owed England nothing but the accident of his birth, the knowledge that one of his own ships should be the means of bringing this disaster upon her made him forget for the moment the gulf that he had placed between himself and his native land, and long to go to her rescue. But it was only a passing emotion. He remembered that his country was now elsewhere, and that all his hopes were now alien to Britain and her fortunes.

If Natas noticed the effect of his words he made no sign that he did, and he went on in the same even tone as before--

"We must overtake the fleet, and either recapture the Lucifer or destroy her before she does any more mischief in Russian hands. The first thing to do is to find out what has happened, and what course they have taken. Hoist the Union Jack over a flag of truce on all three ships, and signal to Mazanoff to come alongside. We had better stop here till we get the news."

The Master's orders were at once executed, and as soon as the Ariel was floating beside the flagship he said to her captain--

"Go down and speak that cruiser lying at anchor off the harbour, and learn all you can of what has

happened. Tell them freely how it happened that the Lucifer assisted the Russian, if it turns out that she did so. Say that we have no hostility to Britain at present, but rather the reverse, and that our only purpose just now is to retake the air-ship and prevent her doing any more damage. If you can get any newspapers, do so."

"I understand fully," replied Mazanoff, and a minute later his vessel was sinking rapidly down towards the cruiser.

His reception was evidently friendly, for those on board the Ithuriel saw that he ran the Ariel close alongside the man-of-war, after the first hails had been exchanged, and conversed for some time with a group of officers across the rails of the two vessels. Then a large roll of newspapers was passed from the cruiser to the air-ship, salutes were exchanged, and the Ariel rose gracefully into the air to rejoin her consorts, followed by the envious glances of the crews of the battered warships.

Mazanoff presented his report, the facts of which were substantially those given in the St. James's Gazette telegram, and added that the British officers had confessed to him that the damage done was so great, both to the fleet and the shore fortifications, that the Sound was now practically as open as the Atlantic, and that it would be two or three weeks before even half the Allied force would be able to take the sea in fighting trim.

They added that there was not the slightest need to conceal their condition, as the Russians, who had steamed in triumph past their shattered ships and silenced forts, knew it just as well as they did. As regards the Russian fleet, it had been followed past the Skawe, and had headed out westward.

In their opinion it would consider itself strong enough, with the aid of the air-ship, to sweep the North Sea, and would probably attempt to force the Straits of Dover, as it has done the Sound, and effect a junction with the French squadrons at Brest and Cherbourg. This done, a combined attack might possibly be made upon Portsmouth, or the destruction of the Channel fleet attempted. The effects of the air-ship's shells upon both forts and ships had been so appalling that the Russians would no doubt think themselves strong enough for anything as long as they had possession of her.

"They were extremely polite," said Mazanoff, as he concluded his story. "They asked me to go ashore and interview the Admiral, who, they told me, would guarantee any amount of money on behalf of the British Government if we would only co-operate with their fleets for even a month. They said Britain would gladly pay a hundred thousand a month for the hire of each ship and her crew; and they looked quite puzzled when I refused point-blank, and said that a million a month would not do it.

"They evidently take us for a new sort of pirates, corsairs of the air, or something of that kind; for when I said that a few odd millions were no good to people who could levy blackmail on the whole earth if they chose, they stared at me and asked me what we did want if we didn't want money. The idea that we could have any higher aims never seemed to have entered their heads, and, of course, I didn't enlighten them."

"Quite right," said Natas, with a quiet laugh. "They will learn our aims quite soon enough. And now we must overtake the Russian fleet as soon as possible. You say they passed the Skawe soon after five this morning. That gives them nearly six hours' start, and if they are steaming twenty miles an hour, as I daresay they are, they will now be some hundred and twenty miles west of the Skawe. Captain Arnold, if we cut straight across Zeeland and Jutland, about what distance ought we to travel before we meet them?"

Arnold glanced at the chart which lay spread out on the table of the saloon in which they were sitting, and said--

"I should say a course of about two hundred miles due north-west from here ought to take us within sight of them, unless they are making for the Atlantic, and keep very close to the Swedish coast. In that case I should say two hundred and fifty in the same direction."

"Very well, then, let us take that course and make all the speed we can," said Natas; and within ten minutes the three vessels were speeding away to the north-westward at a hundred and twenty miles an hour over the verdant lowlands of the Danish peninsula.

The Ithuriel kept above five miles ahead of the others, and when the journey had lasted about an hour and three-quarters, the man who had been stationed in the conning-tower signalled, "Fleet in sight" to the saloon. The air-ships were then travelling at an elevation of 3000 feet. A good ten miles to the northward could be seen the Russian fleet steering to the westward, and, judging by the dense clouds of smoke that were pouring out of the funnels of the vessels, making all the speed they could.

Arnold, who had gone forward to the conning-tower as soon as the signal sounded, at once returned to the saloon and made his formal report to Natas.

"The Russian fleet is in sight, heading to the westward, and therefore evidently meaning to reach the Atlantic by the north of the Shetlands. There are twelve large battleships, about twenty-five cruisers of different sizes, eight of them very large, and a small swarm of torpedo-boats being towed by the larger vessels, I suppose to save their coal. I see no signs of the Lucifer at present, but from what we have learnt she will be on the deck of one of the large cruisers. What are your orders?"

"Recover the air-ship if you can," replied Natas. "Send Mazanoff with Professor Volnow to convey the Tsar's letter to the Admiral, and demand the surrender of the Lucifer. If he refuses, let the Ariel return at once, and we will decide what to do. I leave the details with you with the most perfect confidence."

Arnold bowed in silence and retired, catching, as he turned to leave the saloon, a glance from Natasha which, it must be confessed, meant more to him than even the command of the Master. From the expression of his face as he went to the wheel-house to take charge of the ship, it was evident that it would go hard with the Russian fleet if the Admiral refused to recognise the order of the Tsar.

When he got to the wheel-house the Ithuriel was almost over the fleet. He signalled "stop" to the engine-room. Immediately the propellers slowed and then ceased their rapid revolutions, and at the same time the fan-wheels went aloft and began to revolve. This was a prearranged signal to the others to do the same, and by the time they had overtaken the flagship they also came to a standstill. As soon as they were within speaking distance Arnold hailed the Orion and the Ariel to come alongside.

After communicating to Tremayne and Mazanoff the orders of Natas, he said to the latter--

"You will take Professor Volnow to present the Tsar's letter to the Admiral in command of the fleet. Fly the Russian flag over a flag of truce, and if he acknowledges it say that if the Lucifer is given up we shall allow the fleet to go on its way unmolested and without asking any question.

"The cruiser that has her on board must separate from the rest of the fleet and allow two of your men to take possession of her and bring her up here. The lives of the four traitors are safe for the present if the air-ship is given up quietly."

"And if they will not recognise the authority of the Tsar's letter, and refuse to give the air-ship up, what then?" asked Mazanoff.

"In that case haul down the Russian flag, and get aloft as quickly as you can. You can leave the rest to us," said Arnold. "Meanwhile, Tremayne, will you go down to two thousand feet or so, and keep your eye on that big cruiser a bit ahead of the rest of the fleet. I fancy I can make out the Lucifer on her deck. Train a couple of guns on her, and don't let the air-ship rise without orders. I shall stop up here for the present, and be ready to make things lively for the Admiral if he refuses to obey his master's orders."

The Ariel took the Professor on board, and hoisted the Russian colours over the flag of truce, and began to sink down towards the fleet. As she descended, the Admiral in command of the squadron, already not a little puzzled by the appearance of the three air-ships, was still more mystified by seeing the Russian ensign flying from her flagstaff.

Was this only a ruse of the Terrorists, or were they flying the Russian flag for a legitimate reason? As he knew from the experience of the previous night that the air-ships, if their intentions were hostile, could destroy his fleet in detail without troubling to parley with him, he concluded that there was a good reason for the flag of truce, and so he ordered one to be flown from his own masthead in answer to it.

The white flag at once enabled Mazanoff to single out the huge battleship on which it was flying as the Admiral's flag ship. The fleet was proceeding in four columns of line abreast. First two long lines of cruisers, each with one or two torpedo boats in tow, and with scouts thrown out on each wing, and then two lines of battleships, in the centre of the first of which was the flagship.

It was a somewhat risky matter for the Ariel to descend thus right in the middle of the whole fleet, but Mazanoff had his orders, and they had to be obeyed, and so down he went, running his bow up to within a hundred feet of the hurricane deck, on which stood the Admiral surrounded by several of his officers.

"I have a message for the Admiral of the fleet," he shouted, as soon as he came within hail.

"Who are you, and from whom is your message?" came the reply.

"Konstantin Volnow, of the Imperial Arsenal at Petersburg, brings the message from the Tsar in writing."

"His Majesty's messenger is welcome. Come alongside."

The Ariel ran ahead until her prow touched the rail of the hurricane deck, and the Professor advanced with the Tsar's letter in his hand, and gave it to the Admiral, saying--

"You are acquainted with me, Admiral Prabylov. Though I bear it unwillingly, I can vouch for the letter being authentic. I saw his Majesty write it, and he gave it into my hands."

"Then how do you come to be an unwilling bearer of it?" asked the Admiral, scowling and gnawing his moustache as he read the unwelcome letter. "What are these terms, and with whom were they made?"

"Pardon me, Admiral," interrupted Mazanoff, "that is not the question. I presume you recognise his Majesty's signature, and see that he desires the air-ship to be given up."

"His Majesty's signature can be forged, just as Nihilists' passports can be, Mr. Terrorist, for that's what I presume you are, and"--

"Admiral, I solemnly assure you that that letter is genuine, and that it is really his Majesty's wish that the air-ship should be given up," the Professor broke in before Mazanoff had time to reply. "It is to be given in exchange for nine war-balloons which these air-ships captured before daybreak this morning."

"How do you come to be the bearer of it, sir? Please answer me that first."

"I am a prisoner of war. I surrendered to save the Arsenal and perhaps Petersburg from destruction under circumstances which I cannot now explain"--

"Thank you, sir, that is quite enough! A pretty story, truly! And you ask me to believe this, and to give up that priceless air-ship on such grounds as these--a story that would hardly deceive a child? You captured nine of the Tsar's war-balloons this morning, had an interview with his Majesty, got this letter from him at Cestrin--more than five hundred miles away, and bring it here, and it is barely two in the afternoon!

"No, gentlemen, I am too old a sailor to be taken in by a yarn like that. I believe this letter to be a forgery, and I will not give the air-ship up on its authority."

"That is your last word, is it?" asked Mazanoff, white with passion, but still forcing himself to speak coolly.

"That is my last word, sir, save to tell you that if you do not haul that flag you are masquerading under down at once I will fire upon you," shouted the Admiral, tearing the Tsar's letter into fragments as he spoke.

"If I haul that flag down it will be the signal for the airships up yonder to open fire upon you, so your blood be on your own heads!" said Mazanoff, stamping thrice on the deck as he spoke. The propellers of the Ariel whirled round in a reverse direction, and she sprang swiftly back from the battleship, at the same time rising rapidly in the air.

Before she had cleared a hundred yards, and before the flag of truce was hauled down, there was a sharp, grinding report from one of the tops of the man-of-war, and a hail of bullets from a machine gun swept across, the deck. Mazanoff heard a splintering of wood and glass, and a deep groan beside him.

He looked round and saw the Professor clasp his hand to a great red wound in his breast, and fall in a heap on the deck.

This was the event of an instant. The next he had trained one of the bow-guns downwards on the centre of the deck of the Russian flagship and sent the projectile to its mark. Then quick as thought he sprang over and discharged the other gun almost at random. He saw the dazzling green flash of the explosions, then came a shaking of the atmosphere, and a roar as of a hundred thunder-claps in his ears, and he dropped senseless to the deck beside the corpse of the Professor.

CHAPTER XXXI. A RUSSIAN RAID.

MAZANOFF came to himself about ten minutes later, lying on one of the seats in the after saloon, and all that he saw when he first opened his eyes was the white anxious face of Radna bending over him.

"What is the matter? What has happened? Where am I?" he asked, as soon as his tongue obeyed his will. His voice, although broken and unsteady, was almost as strong as usual, and Radna's face immediately brightened as she heard it. A smile soon chased away her anxious look, and she said cheerily--

"Ah, come! you're not killed after all. You are still on board the Ariel, and what has happened is this as far as I can see. In your hurry to return the shot from the Russian flagship you fired your guns at too close range, and the shock of the explosion stunned you. In fact, we thought for the moment you had blown the Ariel up too, for she shook so that we all fell down; then her engines stopped, and she almost fell into the water before they could be started again.

"Is she all right now? Where's the Russian fleet, and what happened to the flagship? I must get on deck," exclaimed Mazanoff, sitting up on the seat. As he did so he put his hand to his head and said: "I feel a bit shaky still. What's that--brandy you've got there? Get me some champagne, and put the brandy into it. I shall be all right when I've had a good drink. Now I think of it, I wonder that explosion didn't blow us to bits. You haven't told me what became of the flagship," he continued, as Radna came back with a small bottle of champagne and uncorked it.

"Well, the flagship is at the bottom of the German Ocean. When Petroff told me that you had fallen dead, as he said, on deck, I ran up in defiance of your orders and saw the battleship just going down. The shells had blown the middle of her right out, and a cloud of steam and smoke and fire was rising out of a great ragged space where the funnels had been. Before I got you down here she broke right in two and went down."

"That serves that blackguard Prabylov right for saying we forged the Tsar's letter, and firing on a flag of truce. Poor Volnow's dead, I suppose?"

"Oh yes," replied Radna sadly. "He was shot almost to pieces by the volley from the machine gun. The deck saloon is riddled with bullets, and the decks badly torn up, but fortunately the hull and propellers are almost uninjured. But come, drink this, then you can go up and see for yourself."

So saying she handed him a tumbler of champagne well dashed with brandy. He drank it down at a gulp, like the Russian that he was, and said as he put the glass down--

"That's better. I feel a new man. Now give me a kiss, batiushka, and I'll be off."

When he reached the deck he found the Ariel ascending towards the Ithuriel, and about a mile astern of the Russian fleet, the vessels of which were blazing away into the air with their machine guns, in the hope of "bringing him down on the wing," as he afterwards put it. He could hear the bullets singing along underneath him; but the Ariel was rising so fast, and going at such a speed through the air, that the moment the Russians got the range they lost it again, and so merely wasted their ammunition.

Neither the Ithuriel nor the Orion seemed to have taken any part in the battle so far, or to have done anything to avenge the attack made upon the Ariel. Mazanoff wondered not a little at this, as both Arnold and Tremayne must have seen the fate of the Russian flagship. As soon as he got within speaking distance of the Ithuriel, he sang out to Arnold, who was on the deck--

"I got in rather a tight place down there. That scoundrel fired upon us with the flag of truce flying, and when I gave him a couple of shells in return I thought the end of the world was come."

"You fired at too close range, my friend. Those shells are sudden death to anything within a hundred yards of them. Are you all well on board? You've been knocked about a bit, I see."

"No; poor Volnow's dead. He was killed standing close beside me, and I wasn't touched, though the explosion of the shell knocked the senses out of me completely. However, the machinery's all right, and

I don't think the hull is hurt to speak of. But what are you doing? I should have thought you'd have blown half the fleet out of the water by this time."

"No. We saw that you had amply avenged yourself, and the Master's orders were not to do anything till you returned. You'd better come on board and consult with him."

Mazanoff did so, and when he had told his story to Natas, the latter mystified him not a little by replying--

"I am glad that none of you are injured, though, of course, I'm sorry that I sent Volnow to his death; but that is the fortune of war. If one of us fell into his master's hands his fate would be worse than that. You avenged the outrage promptly and effectively.

"I have decided not to injure the Russian fleet more than I can help. It has work to do which must not be interfered with. My only object is to recover the Lucifer, if possible, and so we shall follow the fleet for the present across the North Sea on our way to the rendezvous with the other vessels from Aeria which are to meet us on Rockall Island, and wait our opportunity. Should the opportunity not come before then, we must proceed to extremities, and destroy her and the cruiser that has her on board."

"And do you think we shall get such an opportunity?"

"I don't know," replied Natas. "But it is possible. I don't think it likely that the fleet will have coal enough for a long cruise in the Atlantic, and therefore it is possible that they will make a descent on Aberdeen, which they are quite strong enough to capture if they like, and coal up there. In that case it is extremely probable that they will make use of the air-ship to terrorise the town into surrender, and as soon as she takes the air we must make a dash for her, and either take her or blow her to pieces."

Arnold expressed his entire agreement with this idea, and, as the event proved, it was entirely correct. Instead of steering nor'-nor'-west, as they would have done had they intended to go round the Shetland Islands, or north-west, had they chosen the course between the Orkneys and the Shetlands the Russian vessels kept a due westerly course during the rest of the day, and this course could only take them to the Scotch coast near Aberdeen.

The distance from where they were was a little under five hundred miles, and at their present rate of steaming they would reach Aberdeen about four o'clock on the following afternoon. The air-ships followed them at a height of four thousand feet during the rest of the day and until shortly before dawn on the following morning.

They then put on speed, took a wide sweep to the northward, and returned southward over Banffshire, and passing Aberdeen to the west, found a secluded resting-place on the northern spur of the Kincardineshire Hills, about five miles to the southward of the Granite City.

Here the repairs which were needed by the Ariel were at once taken in hand by her own crew and that of the Ithuriel, while the Orion was sent out to sea again to keep a sharp lookout for the Russian fleet, which she would sight long before she herself became visible, and then to watch the movements of the Russians from as great a distance as possible until it was time to make the counter-attack.

As Aberdeen was then one of the coaling depots for the North Sea Squadron, it was defended by two battleships, the Ascalon and the Menelaus, three powerful coast-defence vessels, the Thunderer, the Cyclops, and the Pluto, six cruisers, and twelve torpedo-boats. The shore defences consisted of a fort on the north bank at the mouth of the Dee, mounting ten heavy guns, and the Girdleness fort, mounting twenty-four 9-inch twenty-five ton guns, in connection with which was a station for working navigable torpedoes of the Brennan type, which had been considerably improved during the last ten years.

Shortly after two o'clock on the afternoon of the 30th the Orion returned to her consorts with the news that the Russian fleet was forty miles off the land, heading straight for Aberdeen, and that there were no other warships in sight as far as could be seen to the southward. From this fact it was concluded that the Russians had escaped the notice of the North Sea Squadron, and so would only have the force defending Aberdeen to reckon with.

Even had they not possessed the air-ship, this force was so far inferior to their own that there would be little chance of successfully defending the town against them. They had eleven battleships, twenty-

five cruisers, eight of which were very large and heavily armed, and forty torpedo-boats, to pit against the little British force and the two forts.

But given the assistance of the *Lucifer*, and the town practically lay at their mercy. They evidently feared no serious opposition in their raid, for, without even waiting for nightfall, they came on at full speed, darkening the sky with their smoke, the battleships in the centre, a dozen cruisers on either side of them, and one large cruiser about a mile ahead of their centre.

When the captain of the *Ascalon*, who was in command of the port, saw the overwhelming force of the hostile fleet, he at once came to the conclusion that it would be madness for him to attempt to put to sea with his eleven ships and six torpedo-boats. The utmost that he could do was to remain inshore and assist the forts to keep the Russians at bay, if possible, until the assistance, which had already been telegraphed for to Dundee and the Firth of Forth, where the bulk of the North Sea Squadron was then stationed, could come to his aid.

Five miles off the land the Russian fleet stopped, and the *Lucifer* rose from the deck of the big cruiser and stationed herself about a mile to seaward of the mouth of the river at an elevation of three thousand feet. Then a torpedo-boat flying a flag of truce shot out from the Russian line and ran to within a mile of the shore.

The Commodore of the port sent out one of his torpedo-boats to meet her, and this craft brought back a summons to surrender the port for twelve hours, and permit six of the Russian cruisers to fill up with coal. The alternative would be bombardment of the town by the fleet and the air-ship, which alone, as the Russians said, held the fort and the ships at its mercy.

To this demand the British Commodore sent back a flat refusal, and defiance to the Russian Commander to do his worst.

Where the *Ithuriel* and her consorts were lying the hills between them and the sea completely screened them from the observation of those on board the *Lucifer*. Arnold and Tremayne had climbed to the top of a hill above their ships, and watched the movements of the Russians through their glasses. As soon as they saw the *Lucifer* rise into the air they returned to the *Ithuriel* to form their plans for their share in the conflict that they saw impending.

"I'm afraid we can't do much until it gets a good deal darker than it is now," said Arnold, in reply to a question from Natas as to his view of the situation. "If we take the air now the *Lucifer* will see us; and we must remember that she is armed with the same weapons as we have, and a shot from one of her guns would settle any of us that it struck. Even if we hit her first we should destroy her, and we could have done that easily yesterday.

"It has felt very like thunder all day, and I see there are some very black-looking clouds rolling up there over the hills to the south-west. My advice is to wait for those. I'm afraid we can't do anything to save the town under the circumstances, but in this state of the atmosphere a heavy bombardment is practically certain to bring on a severe thunderstorm, and to fetch those clouds up at the double quick."

"I don't for a moment think that the British will surrender, big and all as the Russian force is, and as they have never seen the effects of our shells they won't fear the *Lucifer* much until she commences operations, and then it will be too late. Listen! They've begun. There goes the first gun!"

A deep, dull boom came rolling up the hills from the sea as he spoke, and was almost immediately followed by a rapid series of similar reports, which quickly deepened into a continuous roar. Every one who could be spared from the air-ship at once ran up to the top of the hill to watch the progress of the fight. The Russian fleet had advanced to within three miles of the land, and had opened a furious cannonade on the British ships and the forts, which were manfully replying to it with every available gun.

By the time the watchers on the hill had focussed their glasses on the scene, the *Lucifer* discharged her first shell on the fort on Girdleness. They saw the blaze of the explosion gleam through the smoke that already hung thick over the low building. Another and another followed in quick succession, and the firing from the fort ceased. The smoke drifted slowly away, and disclosed a heap of shapeless ruins.

"That is horrible work, isn't it?" said Arnold to Tremayne through his clenched teeth. "Anywhere but on British ground would not be so bad, but the sight of that makes my blood boil. I would give my ears to take our ships into the air, and smash up that Russian fleet as we did the French Squadron in the Atlantic."

"There spoke the true Briton, Captain Arnold," said Natasha, who was standing beside him under a clump of trees. "Yes, I can quite understand how you feel watching a scene like that, for country is country after all. Even my half-English blood is pretty near boiling point; and though I wouldn't give my ears, I would give a good deal to go with you and do as you say."

"But you may rest assured that the Master's way is the best, and will prove the shortest road to the universal peace which can only come through universal war. Courage, my friend, and patience! There will be a heavy reckoning to pay for this sort of thing one day, and that before very long."

"Ha!" exclaimed Tremayne. "There goes the other fort. I suppose it will be the turn of the ships next. What a frightful scene! Twenty minutes ago it was as peaceful as these hills, and look at it now."

The second fort had been destroyed as rapidly as the first, and the cessation of the fire of both had made a very perceptible difference in the cannonade, though the great guns of the Russian fleet still roared continuously and poured a hurricane of shot and shell into the mouth of the river across which the British ships were drawn, keeping up the unequal conflict like so many bull-dogs at bay.

Over them and the river hung a dense pall of bluish-white smoke, through which the Lucifer sent projectile after projectile in the attempt to sink the British ironclads. As those on board her could only judge by the flash of the guns, the aim was very imperfect, and several projectiles were wasted, falling into the sea and exploding there, throwing up mountains of water, but not doing any further damage. At length a brilliant green flash shot up through the smoke clouds over the river mouth.

"He's hit one of the ships at last!" exclaimed Tremayne, as he saw the flash. "It'll soon be all up with poor old Aberdeen."

"I don't think so," exclaimed Arnold. "At any rate the Lucifer won't do much more harm. There comes the storm at last! Back to the ships all of you at once, it's time to go aloft!"

As he spoke a brilliant flash of lightning split the inky clouds which had now risen high over the western hills, and a deep roll of thunder came echoing up the valleys as if in answer to the roar of the cannonade on the sea. The moment every one was on board, Arnold gave the signal to ascend. As soon as the fan-wheels had raised them a hundred feet from the ground he gave the signal for full speed ahead, and the three air-ships swept upwards to the west as though to meet the coming storm.

CHAPTER XXXII. THE END OF THE CHASE.

THE flight of the Ithuriel and her consorts was so graduated, that as they rose to the level of the storm-cloud they missed it and passed diagonally beyond it at a sufficient distance to avoid disturbing the electrical balance between it and the earth. The object of doing so was not so much to escape a discharge of electricity, since all the vital parts of the machinery and the power-cylinders were carefully insulated, but rather in order not to provoke a lightning flash which might have revealed their rapid passage to the occupants of the Lucifer.

As it was, they swept upwards and westward at such a speed that they had gained the cover of the thunder-cloud, and placed a considerable area of it between themselves and the town, long before the storm broke over Aberdeen, and so they were provided with ample shelter under, or rather over, which they were to make their attack on the Lucifer.

They waited until the clouds coming up from the westward joined those which had begun to gather thick and black and threatening over the Russian fleet soon after the tremendous cannonade had begun. The shock of the meeting of the two cloud-squadrons formed a fitting counterpart to the drama of death and destruction that was being played on land and sea.

The brilliant sunshine of the midsummer afternoon was suddenly obscured by a darkness born of smoke and cloud like that of a midwinter night. The smoke of the cannonade rose heavily and mingled with the clouds, and the atmospheric concussions produced by the discharge of hundreds of heavy guns, brought down the rain in torrents. Almost continuous streams of lightning flashed from cloud to cloud, and from heaven to earth, eclipsing the spouting fire of the guns, while to the roar of the bombardment was added an almost unbroken roll of thunder.

Above all this hideous turmoil of human and elemental strife, the three air-ships floated for awhile in a serene and sunlit atmosphere. But this was only for a time. Arnold had taken the position and altitude of the Lucifer very carefully by means of his sextant and compass before he rose into the air, and as soon as his preparations were complete he made another observation of the angle of the sun's elevation, allowing, of course, for his own, and placed his three ships as nearly perpendicular as he could over the Lucifer, floating on the under side of the storm-cloud.

His preparations had been simple in the extreme. Four light strong grappling-irons hung downwards from the Ithuriel, two at the bow and two at the stern, by thin steel-wire rope; two similar ones hung from the starboard side of the Orion, which was on his left hand, and two from the port side of the Ariel, which was on his right hand. As they gained the desired position, a man was stationed at each of the ropes, with instructions how to act when the word was given. Then the fan-wheels were slowed down, and the three vessels sank swiftly through the cloud.

Through the mist and darkness underneath they saw the white shape of the Lucifer almost immediately below them, so accurately had the position been determined. They sank a hundred feet farther, and then Arnold shouted--

"Now is your time. Cast!"

Instantly the eight grappling-irons dropped and swung towards the Lucifer, hooking themselves in the stays of her masts and the railing that ran completely round her deck.

"Now, up again, and ahead!" shouted Arnold once more, and the fan-wheels of the three ships revolved at their utmost speed; the air-planes had already been inclined to the full, the nine propellers whirled round, and the recaptured Lucifer was dragged forward and upwards through the mist and darkness of the thunder-cloud into the bright sunshine above.

So suddenly had the strange manoeuvre been executed that those on board her had not time to grasp what had really happened to them before they found themselves captured and utterly helpless. As she hung below her three captors it was impossible to bring one of the Lucifer's guns to bear upon them, while four guns, two from the Ariel and two from the Orion, grinned down upon her ready to blow her

into fragments at the least sign of resistance.

Added to this, a dozen magazine rifles covered her deck, threatening sudden death to the six bewildered men who were still staring helplessly about them in wonderment at the strange thing that had happened to them.

"Who are the Russian officers in command of that airship?" hailed Mazanoff from the Ariel.

Two men in Russian uniform raised their hands in reply, and Mazanoff hailed again--

"Which will you have--surrender or death? If you surrender your lives are safe, and we will put you on to the land as soon as possible; if not you will be shot."

"We surrender!" exclaimed one of the officers, drawing his sword and dropping it on the deck. The other followed suit, and Mazanoff continued--

"Very good. Remain where you are. The first man that moves will be shot down."

Almost before the last words had left his lips half a dozen men had slid down the wire ropes and landed on the deck of the Lucifer. The moment their feet had touched the deck each whipped a magazine pistol out of his belt and covered his man.

Within a couple of minutes the captives were all disarmed; indeed, most of them had thrown their weapons down on the first summons. The arms were tossed overboard, and all but the two Russian officers were rapidly bound hand and foot. Then three of the six men descended to the engine-room, and one went to the wheel-house. In another minute the fan-wheels of the Lucifer began to spin round faster, and quickly raised her to the level of the other three ships, and so the recapture of the deserter was completed.

The two officers were at once summoned on board the Ithuriel and shut up under guard in separate cabins. The rest of the crew of the Lucifer was found to consist of the four traitors who had carried her away, and two Russian engineers who had been put on board to assist in the working of the vessel.

As soon as these had been replaced by a crew drafted from the Ithuriel and her consorts under the command of Lieutenant Marston, Arnold gave the order to go ahead at fifty miles an hour to the northward, and the four air-ships immediately sped away in that direction, leaving Aberdeen to its fate, and within a little over an hour the sounds of both storm and battle had died away in silence behind them.

When they were fairly under way Natas ordered the four deserters to be brought before him in the after saloon of the flagship. He sat at one end of the table, and they were placed in a line in front of him at the other, each with a guard behind him, and the muzzle of a pistol at his head.

"Peter Tamboff, Amos Vornjeh, Ivan Tscheszco, and Paul Oreloff! you have broken your oaths, betrayed your companions, deserted the Cause to which you devoted your lives, and placed in the hands of the Russian tyrant the means of destruction which has enabled him to break the blockade of the Baltic, and so perhaps to change the whole course of the war which he is now waging, as you well know, with the object of conquering Europe and enslaving its peoples.

"Already the lives of thousands of better men than you have been lost through this vile treason of yours, the vilest of all treason, for it was committed for love of money. By the laws of the Brotherhood your lives are forfeit, and if you had a hundred lives each they would be forfeited again by the calamities that your treason has brought, and will bring, upon the world. You will die in half an hour. If you have any preparations to make for the next world, make them. I have done with you. Go!"

Half an hour later the four deserters were taken up on to the deck of the Ithuriel. The signal was given to stop the flotilla, which was then flying three thousand feet above the waters of the Moray Firth. As soon as they came to a standstill their crews were summoned on deck. The three smaller vessels floated around the Ithuriel at a distance of about fifty yards from her. The traitors, bound hand and foot, were stood up facing the rail of the flagship, and four of her crew were stationed opposite to them on the other side of the deck with loaded rifles.

They were allowed one last look upon sun and sky, and then their eyes were bandaged. As soon as this was done Arnold raised his hand; the four rifles came up to the ready; a stream of flame shot from

the muzzles, and the bodies of the four traitors lurched forward over the rail and disappeared into the abyss beneath.

"Now, gentlemen," said Arnold in French, turning to the two Russian officers who had been spectators of the scene, "that is how we punish traitors. Your own lives are spared because we do not murder prisoners of war. You will, I hope, in due time return to your master, and you will tell him why we have been obliged to retake the air-ship which he surrendered to us by force, and therefore why we destroyed his flagship in the North Sea. If Admiral Prabylov had obeyed his orders, the Lucifer would have been surrendered to us quietly, and there would have been for the present no further trouble.

"Tell him also from me, as Admiral of the Terrorist fleet, that, so far as matters have now gone, we shall take no further part in the war; but that the moment he brings his war-balloons across the waters which separate Britain from Europe, the last hour of his empire will have struck.

"If he neglects this warning with which I now intrust you, I will bring a force against him before which he shall be as helpless as the armies of the Alliance have so far been before him and his war-balloons; and, more than this, tell him that if I conquer I will not spare. I will hold him and his advisers strictly to account for all that may happen after that moment.

"There will be no treaties with conquered enemies in the hour of our victory. We will have blood for blood, and life for life. Remember that, and bear the message to him faithfully. For the present you will be prisoners on parole; but I warn you that you will be watched night and day, and at the first suspicion of treachery you will be shot, and cast into the air as those traitors were just now.

"You will remain on board this ship. The two engineers will be placed one on board of each of two of our consorts. In twenty-four hours or so you will be landed on Spanish soil and left to your own devices. Meanwhile we shall make you as comfortable as the circumstances permit."

The two Russian officers bowed their acknowledgments, and Arnold gave the signal for the flotilla to proceed.

It was then about seven o'clock in the evening. Flying at the rate of a hundred miles an hour, the squadron crossed the mouth of the Moray Firth trending to the westward until they passed over Thurso, and then took a westerly course to Rockall Island, four hundred miles to the west. Here they met the two other air-ships which had been despatched from Aeria with extra power-cylinders and munitions of war in case they had been needed for a prolonged campaign.

The cylinders, which had been exhausted on board the Ithuriel and her three consorts, were replaced, and then the whole squadron rose into the air from one of the peaks of Rockall Island and winged its way southward to the northwestern coast of Spain. They made the Spanish land near Corunna shortly before eight on the following evening, and here the four Russian prisoners were released on the sea-shore and provided with money to take them as far as Valladolid, whence they would be able to communicate with the French military authorities at Toulouse.

The Terrorist Squadron then rose once more into the air, ascended to a height of two thousand feet, skirted the Portuguese coast, and then took a south-easterly course over Morocco through one of the passes of the Atlas Mountains, and so across the desert of Sahara and the wilds of Central Africa to Aeria.

CHAPTER XXXIII. THE BREAKING OF THE CHARM.

THE first news of the Russian attack on Aberdeen was received in London soon after five o'clock on the afternoon of the 30th, and produced an effect which it is quite beyond the power of language to describe. The first telegram containing the bare announcement of the fact fell like a bolt from the blue on the great Metropolis. It ran as follows:--

Aberdeen, 4.30 P.M.

A large fleet, supposed to be the Russian fleet which broke the blockade of the Baltic on the morning of the 28th, has appeared off the town. About forty large vessels can be made out. Our defences are quite inadequate to cope with such an immense force. but we shall do our best till help comes.

After that the wires were kept hot with messages until well into the night. The newspapers rushed out edition after edition to keep pace with them, and in all the office windows of the various journals copies of the telegrams were posted up as soon as they arrived.

As the messages multiplied in number they brought worse and worse tidings, until excitement grew to frenzy and frenzy degenerated into panic. The thousand tongues of rumour wagged faster and faster as each hour went by. The raid upon a single town was magnified into a general invasion of the whole country.

Very few people slept in London that night, and the streets were alive with anxious crowds till daybreak, waiting for the confidently-expected news of the landing of the Russian troops, in spite of the fact that the avowed and real object of the raid had been made public early in the evening. The following are the most important of the telegrams which were received, and will suffice to inform the reader of the course of events after the departure of the four air-ships from the scene of action--

5 P.M. A message has been received from the Commander of the Russian fleet demanding the surrender of the town for twelve hours to allow six of his ships to fill up with coal. The captain of the Ascalon, in command of the port, has refused this demand, and declares that he will fight while he has a ship that will float or a gun that can be fired. The Russians are accompanied by the air-ship which assisted them to break the blockade of the Sound. She is now floating over the town. The utmost terror prevails among the inhabitants, and crowds are flying into the country to escape the bombardment. Aid has been telegraphed for to Edinburgh and Dundee; but if the North Sea Squadron is still in the Firth of Forth, it cannot get here under nearly twelve hours' steaming.

5.30 P.M. The bombardment has commenced, and fearful damage has been done already. With three or four shells the air-ship has blown up and utterly destroyed the fort on Girdleness, which mounted twenty-four heavy guns. But for the ships, this leaves the town almost unprotected. News has just come from the North Shore that the batteries there have met with the same fate. The Russians are pouring a perfect storm of shot and shell into the mouth of the river where our ships are lying, but the town has so far been spared.

5.45 P.M. We have just received news from Edinburgh that the North Sea Squadron left at daybreak this morning under orders to proceed to the mouth of the Elbe to assist in protecting Hamburg from an anticipated attack by the same fleet which has attacked us. There is now no hope that the town can be successfully defended, and the Provost has called a towns-meeting to consider the advisability of surrender, though it is feared that the Russians may now make larger demands. The whole country side is in a state of the utmost panic.

7 P.M. The towns-meeting empowered the Provost to call upon Captain Marchmont, of the Ascalon, to make terms with the Russians in order to save the town from destruction. He refused point blank, although one of the coast-defence ships, the Thunderer, has been disabled by shells from the air-ship, and all his other vessels have been terribly knocked about by the incessant cannonade from the fleet, which has now advanced to within two miles of the shore, having nothing more to fear from the land batteries. A terrific thunderstorm is raging and no words can describe the horror of the scene. The air-ship ceased firing nearly an hour ago.

10 P.M. Five of our eleven ships--two battleships and three cruisers--have been sunk; the rest are little better than mere wrecks, and seven torpedo-boats have been destroyed in attempting to torpedo some of the enemy's ships. Heavy firing has been heard to the southward, and we have learnt from Dundee that four battleships and six cruisers have been sent to our relief. A portion of the Russian fleet has been detached to meet them. We cannot hope anything from them. Captain Marchmont has now only four ships capable of fighting, but refuses to strike his flag. The storm has ceased, and a strong land breeze has blown the clouds and smoke to seaward. The air-ship has disappeared. Six large Russian ironclads are heading at full speed towards the mouth of the river--

The telegram broke off short here, and no more news was received from Aberdeen for several hours. Of this there was only one possible explanation. The town was in the hands of the Russians, and they had cut the wires. The long charm was broken, and the Isle Inviolable was inviolable no more. The next telegram from the North came from Findon, and was published in London just before ten o'clock on the following morning. It ran thus--

Findon, N.B., 9.15. About ten o'clock last night the attack on Aberdeen ended in a rush of six ironclads into the river mouth. They charged down upon the four half-crippled British ships that were left, and in less than five minutes rammed and sank them. The Russians then demanded the unconditional surrender of the town, under pain of bombardment and destruction. There was no other course but to yield, and until eight o'clock this morning the town has been in the hands of the enemy.

The Russians at once landed a large force of sailors and marines, cut the telegraph wires and the railway lines, and fired without warning upon every one who attempted to leave the town. The stores of coal and ammunition were seized, and six large cruisers were taking in coal all night. The banks were also entered, and the specie taken possession of, as indemnity for the town. At eight o'clock the cruisers and battleships steamed out of the river without doing further damage. The squadron from the Tay was compelled to retire by the overwhelming force that the Russians brought to bear upon it after Aberdeen surrendered.

Half an hour ago the Russian fleet was lost sight of proceeding at full speed to the north-eastward. Our loss has been terribly heavy. The fort and batteries have been destroyed, all the ships have been sunk or disabled, and of the whole defending force scarcely three hundred men remain. Captain Marchmont went down on the Ascalon with his flag flying, and fighting to the last moment.

While the excitement caused by the news of the raid upon Aberdeen was at its height, that is to say, on the morning of the 2nd of July, intelligence was received in London of a tremendous disaster to the Anglo-Teutonic Alliance. It was nothing less, in short, than the fall of Berlin, the collapse of the German Empire, and the surrender of the Kaiser and the Crown Prince to the Tsar. After nearly sixty hours of almost continuous fighting, during which the fortifications had been wrecked by the war-balloons, the German ammunition-trains burnt and blown up by the fire-shells rained from the air, and the heroic defenders of the city disorganised by the Aerial bombardment of melinite shells and cyanogen poison-bombs, and crushed by an overwhelming

force of not less than four million assailants. So fell like a house of cards the stately fabric built up by the genius of Bismarck and Moltke; and so, after bearing his part gallantly in the death-struggle of his empire, had the grandson of the conqueror of Sedan yielded up his sword to the victorious Autocrat of the Russias.

The terrible news fell upon London like the premonitory echo of an approaching storm. The path of the triumphant Muscovites was now completely open to the forts of the Belgian Quadrilateral, under the walls of which they would form a junction, which nothing could now prevent, with the beleaguering forces of France. Would the Belgian strongholds be able to resist any more effectually than the fortifications of Berlin had done the assaults of the terrible war-balloons of the Tsar?

CHAPTER XXXIV. THE PATH OF CONQUEST.

THIS narrative does not in any sense pretend to be a detailed history of the war, but only of such phases of it as more immediately concern the working out of those deep-laid and marvellously-contrived plans designed by their author to culminate in nothing less than the collapse of the existing fabric of Society, and the upheaval of the whole basis of civilisation.

It will therefore be impossible to follow the troops of the Alliance and the League through the different campaigns which were being simultaneously carried out in different parts of Europe. The most that can be done will be to present an outline of the leading events which, operating throughout a period of nearly three months, prepared the way for the final catastrophe in which the tremendous issues of the world-war were summed up.

The fall of Berlin was the first decisive blow that had been struck during the war. Under it the federation of kingdoms and states which had formed the German Empire fell asunder almost instantly, and the whole fabric collapsed like a broken bubble. The shock was felt throughout the length and breadth of Europe, and it was immediately seen that nothing but a miracle could save the whole of Central Europe from falling into the hands of the League.

Its immediate results were the surrender of Magdeburg, Brunswick, Hanover, and Bremen. Hamburg, strongly garrisoned by British and German troops, supported by a powerful squadron in the Elbe, and defended by immense fortifications on the landward side, alone returned a flat defiance to the summons of the Tsar. The road to the westward, therefore lay entirely open to his victorious troops. As for Hamburg, it was left for the present under the observation of a corps of reconnaissance to be dealt with when its time came.

When Berlin fell the position of affairs in Europe may be briefly described as follows:---The French army had taken the field nearly five millions strong, and this immense force had been divided into an Army of the North and an Army of the East. The former, consisting of about two millions of men, had been devoted to the attack on the British and German forces holding an almost impregnable position behind the chain of huge fortresses known at present as the Belgian Quadrilateral.

This Army of the North, doubtless acting in accordance with the preconceived schemes of operations arranged by the leaders of the League, had so far contented itself with a series of harassing attacks upon different points of the Allied position and had made no forward movement in force. The Army of the East, numbering nearly three million men, and divided into fifteen army corps, had crossed the German frontier immediately on the outbreak of the war, and at the same moment that the Russian Armies of the North and South had crossed the eastern Austro-German frontier, and the Italian army had forced the passes of the Tyrol.

The whole of the French fleet of war-balloons had been attached to the Army of the East with the intention, which had been realised beyond the most sanguine expectations, of overrunning and subjugating Central Europe in the shortest possible space of time. It had swept like a destroying tempest through the Rhine Provinces, leaving nothing in its track but the ruins of towns and fortresses, and wide wastes of devastated fields and vineyards.

Before the walls of Munich it had effected a junction with the Italian army, consisting of ten army corps, numbering two million men. The ancient capital of Bavaria fell in three days under the assault of the Aerial fleet and the overwhelming numbers of the attacking force. Then the Franco-Italian armies advanced down the valley of the Danube and invested Vienna, which, in spite of the heroic efforts of what had been left of the Austrian army after the disastrous conflicts on the Eastern frontier, was stormed and sacked after three days and nights of almost continuous fighting, and the most appalling scenes of bloodshed and destruction, four days after the surrender of the German Emperor to the Tsar had announced the collapse of what had once been the Triple Alliance.

From Vienna the Franco-Italian armies continued their way down the valley of the Danube, and at

Budapest was joined by the northern division of the Russian Army of the South, and from there the mighty flood of destruction rolled south-eastward until it overflowed the Balkan peninsula, sweeping everything before it as it went, until it joined the force investing Constantinople.

The Turkish army, which had retreated before it, had concentrated upon Gallipoli, where, in conjunction with the allied British and Turkish Squadrons holding the Dardanelles, it prepared to advance to the relief of Constantinople.

The final attack upon the Turkish capital had been purposely delayed until the arrival of the French war-balloons, and as soon as these appeared upon the scene the work of destruction instantly recommenced. After four days of bombardment by sea and land, and from the air, and a rapid series of what can only be described as wholesale butcheries, the ancient capital of the Sultan shared the fate of Berlin and Vienna, and after four centuries and a half the Turkish dominion in Europe died in its first stronghold.

Meanwhile one of the wings of the Franco-Italian army had made a descent upon Gallipoli, and after forty-eight hours' incessant fighting had compelled the remnant of the Turkish army, which it thus cut off from Constantinople, to take refuge on the Turkish and British men-of-war under the protection of the guns of the fleet. In view of the overwhelming numbers of the enemy, and the terrible effectiveness of the war-balloons, it was decided that any attempt to retake Constantinople, or even to continue to hold the Dardanelles, could only result in further disaster.

The forts of the Dardanelles were therefore evacuated and blown up, and the British and Turkish fleet, with the remains of the Turkish army on board, steamed southward to Alexandria to join forces with the British Squadron that was holding the northern approaches to the Suez Canal. There the Turkish troops were landed, and the Allied fleets prepared for the naval battle which the release of the Russian Black Sea Squadron, through the opening of the Dardanelles, was considered to have rendered inevitable.

Five days later was fought a second battle of the Nile, a battle compared with which the former conflict, momentous as it had been, would have seemed but child's play. On the one side Admiral Beresford, in command of the Mediterranean Squadron, had collected every available ship and torpedo-boat to do battle for the defence of the all-important Suez Canal, and opposed to him was an immense armament formed by the junction of the Russian Black Sea Squadron with the Franco-Italian fleet, or rather those portions of it which had survived the attacks, or eluded the vigilance of the British Admiral.

The battle, fought almost on the ancient battle-ground of Nelson and Collingwood, was incomparably the greatest sea-fight in the history of war.

The fleet under Admiral Beresford's command consisted of fifty-five battleships of the first and second class, forty-six armoured and seventy-two unarmoured cruisers, fifty-four gunboats, and two hundred and seventy torpedo-boats; while the Franco-Italian Allied fleets mustered between them forty-six battleships, seventy-five armoured and sixty-three unarmoured cruisers, forty gunboats, and two hundred and fifty torpedo-boats.

The battle began soon after sundown on the 24th of August, and raged continuously for over sixty hours. The whole issue of the fight was the question of the command of the Mediterranean, and the British line of communication with India and the East via the Suez Canal.

The prize was well worthy of the tremendous struggle that the two contending forces waged for it; and from the two Admirals in command to the boys employed on the most insignificant duties about the ships, every one of the combatants seemed equally impressed with the magnitude of the momentous issues at stake.

To the League, victory meant a deadly blow inflicted upon the only enemy now seriously to be reckoned with. It meant the severing of the British Empire into two portions, and the cutting of the one remaining channel of supply upon which the heart of the Empire now depended for its nutrition. To destroy Admiral Beresford's fleet would be to achieve as great a triumph on the sea as the armies of the

League had achieved on land by the taking of Berlin, Vienna, and Constantinople. On the other hand, the defeat of the Franco-Italian fleets meant complete command of the Mediterranean, and the ability to destroy in detail all the important sea-board fortresses and arsenals of the League that were situated on its shores.

It meant the keeping open of the Suez Canal, the maintenance of communication with India and Australia by the shortest route, and, what was by no means the least important consideration, the vindication of British prestige in Egypt, the Soudan, and India. It was with these enormous gains and losses before their eyes that the two forces engaged and fought as perhaps men had never fought with each other in the world before. Everything that science and experience could suggest was done by the leaders of both sides. Human life was counted as nothing in the balance, and deeds of the most reckless heroism were performed in countless instances as the mighty struggle progressed.

With such inflexible determination was the battle waged on either side, and so appalling was the destruction accomplished by the weapons brought into play, that by sunrise on the morning of the 27th, more than half the opposing fleets had been destroyed, and of the remainder the majority were so crippled that a continuance of the fight had become a matter of physical impossibility.

What advantage remained appeared to be on the side of the remains of the Franco-Italian fleet; but this was speedily negated an hour after sunrise by the appearance of a fresh British Squadron, consisting of the five battleships, fifteen cruisers, and a large flotilla of gunboats and torpedo-boats which had passed through the Canal during the night from Aden and Suakim, and appeared on the scene just in time to turn the tide of battle decisively in favour of the British Admiral.

As soon as this new force got into action it went to work with terrible effectiveness, and in three hours there was not a single vessel that was still flying the French or Italian flag. The victory had, it is true, been bought at a tremendous price, but it was complete and decisive, and at the moment that the last of the ships of the League struck her flag, Admiral Beresford stood in the same glorious position as Sir George Rodney had done a hundred and twenty-two years before, when he saved the British Empire in the ever-memorable victory of the 12th of April 1782.

The triumph in the Mediterranean was, however, only a set-off to a disaster which had occurred more than five weeks previously in the Atlantic. The Russian fleet, which had broken the blockade of the Sound, with the assistance of the *Lucifer*, had, after coaling at Aberdeen, made its way into the Atlantic, and there, in conjunction with the Franco-Italian fleets operating along the Atlantic steamer route, had, after a series of desperate engagements, succeeded in breaking up the line of British communication with America and Canada.

This result had been achieved mainly in consequence of the contrast between the necessary methods of attack and defence. On the one hand, Britain had been compelled to maintain an extended line of ocean defence more than three thousand miles in length, and her ships had further been hampered by the absolute necessity of attending, first, to the protection of the Atlantic liners, and, secondly, to warding off isolated attacks which were directed upon different parts of the line by squadrons which could not be attacked in turn without breaking the line of convoy which it was all-essential to preserve intact.

For two or three weeks there had been a series of running fights; but at length the ocean chain had broken under the perpetual strain, and a repulse inflicted on the Irish Squadron by a superior force of French, Italian, and Spanish warships had settled the question of the command of the Atlantic in favour of the League. The immediate result of this was that food supplies from the West practically stopped.

Now and then a fleet Atlantic greyhound ran the blockade and brought her priceless cargo into a British port; but as the weeks went by these occurrences became fewer and further between, till the time news was received in London of the investment of the fortresses of the Quadrilateral by the innumerable hosts of the League, brought together by the junction of the French and Russian Armies of the North and the conquerors of Vienna and Constantinople, who had returned on their tracks after garrisoning their conquests in the East.

Food in Britain, already at war prices, now began to rise still further, and soon touched famine prices. Wheat, which in the last decade of the nineteenth century had averaged about £9 a ton, rose to over £31 a ton, its price two years before the Battle of Waterloo. Other imported food-stuffs, of course, rose in proportion with the staple commodity, and the people of Britain saw, at, first dimly, then more and more clearly, the real issue that had been involved in the depopulation of the rural districts to swell the populations of the towns, and the consequent lapse of enormous areas of land either into pasturage or unused wilderness.

In other words, Britain began to see approaching her doors an enemy before whose assault all human strength is impotent and all valour unavailing. Like Imperial Rome, she had depended for her food supply upon external sources, and now these sources were one by one being cut off.

The loss of the command of the Atlantic, the breaking of the Baltic blockade, and the consequent closing of all the continental ports save Hamburg, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Antwerp, had left her entirely dependent upon her own miserably insufficient internal resources and the Mediterranean route to India and the East.

More than this, too, only Hamburg, Antwerp, and the fortresses of the Quadrilateral now stood between her and actual invasion,---that supreme calamity which, until the raid upon Aberdeen, had been for centuries believed to be impossible.

Once let the League triumph in the Netherlands, as it had done in Central and South-Eastern Europe, and its legions would descend like an avalanche upon the shores of England and the Lion of the Seas would find himself driven to bay in the stronghold which he had held inviolate for nearly a thousand years.

CHAPTER XXXV. FROM CHAOS TO ARCADIE.

DURING the three months of incessant strife and carnage which deluged the plains and valleys of Europe with blood after the fall of Berlin, the Terrorists took no part whatever in the war. At long intervals an air-ship was seen from the earth flying at full speed through the upper regions of the atmosphere, now over Europe, now over America, and now over Australia or the Cape of Good Hope; but if they held any communication with the earth they did so secretly, and only paid the briefest of visits, the objects of which could only be guessed at.

When one was sighted the fact was mentioned in the newspapers, and vague speculations were indulged in; but there was soon little room left for these in the public attention, especially in Britain, for as the news of disaster after disaster came pouring in, and the hosts of the League drew nearer and nearer to the western shores of Europe, all eyes were turned more and more anxiously across "the silver streak" which now alone separated the peaceful hills and valleys of England and Scotland from the destroying war-storm which had so swiftly desolated the fields of Europe, and all hearts were heavy with apprehension of coming sorrows.

The rapidity of their movements had naturally led to the supposition that several of the air-ships had taken the air for some unknown purpose, but in reality there were only two of them afloat during nearly the whole of the three months.

Of these, one was the Orion, on board of which Tremayne was visiting the various centres of the Brotherhood throughout the English-speaking world, making everything ready for the carrying out at the proper time of the great project to which he had devoted himself since the memorable night at Alanmere, when he had seen the vision of the world's Armageddon. The other was under the command of Michael Roburoff, who was busy in America and Canada perfecting the preparations for checkmating the designs of the American Ring, which were described in a former chapter.

The remainder of the members of the Inner Circle and those of the Outer Circle, living in Aeria, were quietly pursuing the most peaceful avocations, building houses and water-mills, clearing fields and laying out gardens, fishing in the lake and streams, and hunting in the forests as though they had never heard of the horrors of war, and had no part or share in the Titanic strife whose final issue they would soon have to go forth and decide.

One of the hardest workers in the colony was the Admiral of the Aerial fleet. Morning after morning he shut himself up in his laboratory for three or four hours experimenting with explosives of various kinds, and especially on a new form of fire-shell which he had invented, and which he was now busy perfecting in preparation for the next, and, as he hoped, final conflict that he would have to wage with the forces of despotism and barbarism.

The afternoons he spent supervising the erection of the mills, and the construction of new machinery, and in exploring the mountain sides in search of mineral wealth, of which he was delighted to find abundant promise that was afterwards realised beyond his expectations.

On these exploring expeditions he was frequently accompanied by Natasha and Radna and her husband. Sometimes Arnold would be enticed away from his chemicals, and his designs on the lives of his enemies, and after breakfasting soon after sunrise would go off for a long day's ramble to some unknown part of their wonderful domain, in which, like children in a fairyland, they were always discovering some new wonders and beauties. And, indeed, no children could have been happier or freer from care than they were during this delightful interval in the tragedy in which they were so soon to play such conspicuous parts.

The two wedded lovers, with the dark past put far behind them for ever, found perfect happiness in each other's society, and so left, it is almost needless to add, Arnold and Natasha pretty much to their own devices. Indeed, Natasha had more than once declared that she would have to get the Princess to join the party, as Radna had proved herself a hopeless failure as a chaperone.

Every one in the valley by this time looked upon Arnold and Natasha as lovers, though their rank in the Brotherhood was so high that no one ventured to speak of them as betrothed save by implication. How Natas regarded them was known only to himself. He, of course, saw their intimacy, and since he said nothing he doubtless looked upon it with approval; but whether he regarded it as an intimacy of friends or of lovers, remained a mystery even to Natasha herself, for he never by any chance made an allusion to it.

As for Arnold, he had scrupulously observed the compact tacitly made between them on the first and only occasion that he had ever spoken words of love to her. They were the best of friends, the closest companions, and their intercourse with each other was absolutely frank and unrestrained, just as it would have been between two close friends of the same sex; but they understood each other perfectly, and by no word or deed did either cross the line that divides friendship from love.

She trusted him absolutely in all things, and he took this trust as a sacred pledge between them that until his part of their compact had been performed, love was a forbidden subject, not even to be approached.

So perfectly did Natasha play her part that though he spent hours and hours alone with her on their exploring expeditions, and in rowing and sailing on the lake, and though he spent many another hour in solitude, weighing her every word and action, he was utterly unable to truthfully congratulate himself on having made the slightest progress towards gaining that love without which, even if he held her to the compact in the day of victory, victory itself would be robbed of its crowning glory and dearest prize.

To a weaker man it would have been an impossible situation, this constant and familiar companionship with a girl whose wonderful beauty dazzled his eyes and fired his blood as he looked upon it, and whose winning charm of manner and grace of speech and action seemed to glorify her beauty until she seemed a being almost beyond the reach of merely human love--rather one of those daughters of men whom the sons of God looked upon in the early days of the world, and found so fair that they forsook heaven itself to woo them.

Trained and disciplined as he had been in the sternest of all schools, and strengthened as he was by the knowledge of the compact that existed between them, there were moments when his self-control was very sorely tried, moments when her hand would be clasped in his, or rested on his shoulder as he helped her across a stream or down some steep hillside, or when in the midst of some animated discussion she would stop short and face him, and suddenly confound his logic with a flash from her eyes and a smile on her lips that literally forced him to put forth a muscular effort to prevent himself from catching her in his arms and risking everything for just one kiss, one taste of the forbidden fruit within his reach, and yet parted from him by a sea of blood and flame that still lay between the world and that empire of peace which he had promised to win for her sweet sake.

Once, and once only, she had tried him almost too far. They had been discussing the possibility of ruling the world without the ultimate appeal to force, when the nations, weary at length of war, should have consented to disarm, and she carried away by her own eloquent pleading for the ultimate triumph of peace and goodwill on earth, had laid her hand upon his arm, and was looking up at him with her lovely face aglow with the sweetest expression even he had ever seen upon it.

Their eyes met, and there was a sudden silence between them. The eloquent words died upon her lips, and a deep flush rose to her cheeks and then faded instantly away leaving her pale and with a look almost of terror in her eyes. He took a quick step backwards, and, turning away as though he feared to look any longer upon her beauty, said in a low tone that trembled with the strength of his repressed passion--

"Natasha, for God's sake remember that I am only made of flesh and blood!"

In a moment she was by his side again, this time with her eyes downcast and her proud little head bent as though in acknowledgment of his reproof. Then she looked up again, and held out her hand and said--

"Forgive me; I have done wrong! Let us be friends again!"

There was a gentle emphasis on the word "friends" that was irresistible. He took her hand in silence, and after a pressure that was almost imperceptibly returned, let it go again, and they walked on together; but there was very little more said between them that evening.

This had happened one afternoon towards the middle of September, and two days later their delightful companionship came suddenly to an end, and the bond that existed between them was severed in a moment without warning, as a nerve thrilling with pleasure might be cut by an unexpected blow with a knife.

On the 16th of September the Orion returned from Australia. She touched the earth shortly after mid-day, and before sunset the Azrael, the vessel in which Michael Roburoff had gone to America, also returned, but without her commander. Her lieutenant, however, brought a despatch from him, which he delivered at once to Natas, who, immediately on reading it, sent for Tremayne.

It evidently contained matters of great importance, for they remained alone together discussing it for over an hour. At the end of that time Tremayne left the Master's house and went to look for Arnold. He found him just helping Natasha out of a skiff at a little landing-stage that had been built out into the lake for boating purposes. As soon as greetings had been exchanged, he said--

"Natasha, I have just left your father. He asked me, if I saw you, to tell you that he wishes to speak to you at once."

"Certainly," said Natasha. "I hope you have not brought bad news home from your travels. You are looking very serious about something," and without waiting for an answer, she was gone to obey her father's summons. As soon as she was out of earshot Tremayne put his arm through Arnold's, and, drawing him away towards a secluded portion of the shore of the lake, said--

"Arnold, old man, I have some very serious news for you. You must prepare yourself for the severest strain that, I believe, could be put on your loyalty and your honour."

"What is it? For Heaven's sake don't tell me that it has to do with Natasha!" exclaimed Arnold, stopping short and facing round, white to the lips with the sudden fear that possessed him. "You know"--

"Yes, I know everything," replied Tremayne, speaking almost as gently as a woman would have done, "and I am sorry to say that it has to do with her. I know what your hopes have been with regard to her, and no man on earth could have wished to see those hopes fulfilled more earnestly than I have done, but"--

"What do you mean, Tremayne? Speak out, and let me know the worst. If you tell me that I am to give her up, I tell you that I am"--

"That I am an English gentleman, and that I will break my heart rather than my oath'---that is what you will tell me when I tell you that you must not only give up your hopes of winning Natasha, but that it is the Master's orders that you shall have the Ithuriel ready to sail at midnight to take her to America to Michael Roburoff, who has written to Natas to ask her for his wife."

Arnold heard him out in dazed, stupefied silence. It seemed too monstrous, too horrible, to be true. The sudden blow had stunned him. He tried to speak, but the words would not come. Tremayne, still standing with his arm through his, felt his whole body trembling, as though stricken with some sudden palsy. He led him on again, saying in a sterner tone than before--

"Come, come! Play the man, and remember that the work nearest to your hand is war, and not love. Remember the tremendous issues that are gathering to their fulfilment, and the part that you have to play in working them out. This is not a question of the happiness or the hopes of one man or woman, but of millions, of the whole human race. You, and you alone, hold in your hands the power to make the defeat of the League certain."

"And I will use it, have no fear of that!" replied Arnold, stopping again and passing his hand over his eyes like a man waking from an evil dream. "What I have sworn to do I will do; I am not going from my oath. I will obey to the end, for she will do the same, and what would she think of me if I failed!"

Leave me alone for a bit now, old man. I must fight this thing out with myself, but the Ithuriel shall be ready to start at twelve."

Tremayne saw that he was himself again, and that it was better that he should do as he said; so with a word of farewell he turned away and left him alone with his thoughts. Halfway back to the settlement he met Natasha coming down towards the lake. She was deadly pale, but she walked with a firm step, and carried her head as proudly erect as ever. As they met she stopped him and said--

"Where is he?"

Tremayne's first thought was to try and persuade her to go back and leave Arnold to himself, but a look at Natasha's white set face and burning eyes warned him that she was not in a mood to take advice, and so he told her, and without another word she went on swiftly down the path that led to the lake.

The brief twilight of the tropics had passed before he reached a grove of palms on the western shore of the lake, towards which he had bent his steps when he left Tremayne. He walked with loose, aimless strides, now quickly and now slowly, and now stopping to watch the brightening moon shining upon the water.

He caught himself thinking what a lovely night it would be to take Natasha for a row, and then his mind sprang back with a jerk to the remembrance of the horrible journey that he was to begin at midnight--to take Natasha to another man, and leave her with him as his wife.

No, it could not be true. It was impossible that he should have fought and triumphed as he had done, and all for this. To give up the one woman he had ever loved in all his life, the woman he had snatched from slavery and degradation when not another man on earth could have done it.

What had this Roburoff done that she should be given to him for the mere asking? Why had he not come in person like a man to woo and win her if he could, and then he would have stood aside and bowed to her choice. But this curt order to take her away to him as though she were some piece of merchandise--no, if such things were possible, better that he had never--

"Richard!"

He felt a light touch on his arm, and turned round sharply. Natasha was standing beside him. He had been so engrossed by his dark thoughts that he had not heard her light step on the soft sward, and now he seemed to see her white face and great shining eyes looking up at him in the moonlight as though there was some mist floating between him and her. Suddenly the mist seemed to vanish. He saw tears under the long dark lashes, and the sweet red lips parted in a faint smile.

Lose her he might to-morrow, but for this one moment she was his and no other man's, let those who would say nay. That instant she was clasped helpless and unresisting in his arms, and her lips were giving his back kiss for kiss. Wreck and chaos might come now for all he cared. She loved him, and had given herself to him, if only for that one moonlit hour.

After that he could plunge into the battle again, and slay and spare not--yes, and he would slay without mercy. He would hurl his lightnings from the skies, and where they struck there should be death. If not love and life, then hate and death--it was not his choice. Let those who had chosen see to that; but for the present love and life were his, why should he not live? Then the mad, sweet delirium passed and saner thoughts came. He released her suddenly, almost brusquely, and said with a harsh ring in his voice--

"Why did you come? Have you forgotten what so nearly happened the day before yesterday?"

"No, I have not forgotten it. I have remembered it, and that is why I came to tell you--what you know now."

Her face was rosy enough now, and she looked him straight in the eyes as she spoke, proud to confess the mastery that he had won.

"Now listen," she went on, speaking in a low, quick, passionate tone. "The will of the Master must be done. There is no appeal from that, either for you or me. He can dispose of me as he chooses, and I shall obey, as I warned you I should when you first told me that you would win me if you could."

"Well, you have won me, so far as I can be won. I love you, and I have come to tell you so before the shadow falls between us. And I have come to tell you that what you have won shall belong to no one else. I will obey my father to the letter, but the spirit is my affair. Now kiss me again, dear, and say good-bye. We have had our glimpse of heaven, and this is not the only life."

For one more brief moment she surrendered herself to him again. Their lips met and parted, and in an instant she had slipped out of his arms and was gone, leaving him dazed with her beauty and her winsomeness.

CHAPTER XXXVI. LOVE AND DUTY.

AN hour later he walked back to the settlement, looking five years older than he had done a couple of hours before, but with his nerves steady and with the light of a solemn resolve burning in his eyes. He went straight to the Ithuriel, and made a minute personal inspection of the whole vessel, inside and out. He saw that every cylinder was charged, and that there was an ample supply of spare ones and ammunition on board, including a number of his new fire-shells. Then he went to Lieutenant Marston's quarters, and told him to have the crew in their places by half--past eleven; and this done, he paid a formal visit to the Master to report all ready.

Natas received him as usual, just as though nothing out of the common had happened; and if he noticed the change that had come over him, he made no sign that he did so. When Arnold had made his report, he merely said--

"Very good. You will start at twelve. The Chief has told you the nature and purpose of the voyage you are about to make, I presume?"

He bowed a silent affirmative, and Natas went on--

"The Chief and Anna Ornovski will go with you as witnesses for Michael Roburoff and Natasha, and the Chief will be provided with my sealed orders for your guidance in the immediate future. The rendezvous is a house on one of the spurs of the Alleghany Mountains. What time will it take to reach there?"

"The distance is about seven thousand miles. That will be from thirty to thirty-five hours' flight according to the wind. With a fair wind we shall reach the Alleghanies a little before sunrise on the 18th."

"Then to make sure of that, if possible, you had better start an hour earlier. Natasha is making her preparations, and will be on board at eleven."

"Very well; I will be ready to start then," replied Arnold, speaking as calmly and formally as Natas had done. Then he saluted and walked out.

When he got into the open air he drew a deep breath. His teeth came together with a sharp snap, and his hands clenched. So it was true, then, this horrible thing, this sacrilege, this ruin, that had fallen upon his life and hers. Natas had spoken of giving her to this man as quietly as though it had been the most natural proceeding possible, an understood arrangement about which there could be no question. Well, he had sworn, and he would obey, but there would be a heavy price to pay for his obedience.

He did not see Natasha again that night. When the Ithuriel rose into the air she was in her cabin with the Princess, and did not appear during the voyage save at meals, when all the others were present, and then she joined in the conversation with a composure which showed that, externally at least, she had quite regained her habitual self-control.

Arnold spent the greater part of the voyage in the deck-saloon with Tremayne, talking over the events of the war, and arranging plans of future action. By mutual consent the object of their present voyage was not mentioned. As Arnold was more than two months and a half behind the news, he found not a little relief in hearing from Tremayne of all that had taken place since the recapture of the Lucifer.

The two men, who were now to be the active leaders of the Revolution which, as they hoped, was soon to overturn the whole fabric of Society, and introduce a new social order of things, conversed in this fashion, quietly discussing the terrific tragedy in which they were to play the leading parts, and arranging all the details of their joint action, until well into the night of the 17th.

About eleven Tremayne went to his cabin, and Arnold, going to the conning-tower, told the man on the look-out to go below until he was called. Then he took his place, and remained alone with his thoughts as the Ithuriel sped on her way a thousand feet above the deserted waters of the Atlantic, until the dark mass of the American Continent loomed up in front of him to the westward.

As soon as he sighted land he went aft to the wheel-house, and slightly inclined the air-planes,

causing the Ithuriel to soar upwards until the barometer marked a height of 6000 feet. At this elevation he passed over the mouth of the Chesapeake, and across Virginia; and a little more than an hour before sunrise the Ithuriel sank to the earth on one of the spurs of the Alleghanies, in sight of a lonely weather-board house, in one of the windows of which three lights were burning in the form of a triangle.

This building was used ostensibly as a shooting and hunting-box by Michael Roburoff and a couple of his friends, and in reality as a meeting-place for the Inner Circle or Executive Council of the American Section of the Brotherhood. This Section was, numerically speaking, the most important of the four branches into which the Outer Circle of the Brotherhood was divided--that is to say, the British, Continental, American, and Colonial Sections.

All told, the Terrorists had rather more than five million adherents in America and Canada, of whom more than four millions were men in the prime of life, and nearly all of Anglo-Saxon blood and English speech. All these men were not only armed, but trained in the use of firearms to a high degree of skill; their organisation, which had gradually grown up with the Brotherhood for twenty years, was known to the world only under the guise of the different forms of industrial unionism, but behind these there was a perfect system of discipline and command which the outer world had never even suspected.

The Section was divided first into squads of ten under the command of an eleventh, who alone knew the leaders of the other squads in his neighbourhood. Ten of these squads made a company, commanded by one man, who was only known to the squad-captains, and who alone knew the captain of the regiment, which was composed of ten companies.

The next step in the organisation was the brigade, consisting of ten regiments, the captains of which alone knew the commander of the brigade, while the commanders of the brigades were alone acquainted with the members of the Inner Circle or Executive Council which managed the affairs of the whole Section, and whose Chief was the only man in the Section who could hold any communication with the Inner Circle of the Brotherhood itself, which, under the immediate command of Natas, governed the whole organisation throughout the world.

This description will serve for all the Sections, as all were modelled upon exactly the same plan. The advantages of such an organisation will at once be obvious. In the first place, no member of the rank and file could possibly betray more than ten of his fellows, including his captain; while his treachery could, if necessary, be made known in a few hours to ten thousand others, not one of whom he knew, and thus it would be impossible for him to escape the invariable death penalty. The same is, of course, equally true of the captains and the commanders.

On the other hand, the system was equally convenient for the transmission of orders from headquarters. An order given to ten commanders of brigades could, in a single night, be transmitted individually to the whole of the Section, and yet those in command of the various divisions would not know whence the orders came, save as regards their immediate superiors.

It will be necessary for the reader to bear these few particulars in mind in order to understand future developments, which, without them, might seem to border on the impossible. It is only necessary to add that the full fighting strength of the four Sections of the Brotherhood amounted to about twelve millions of men, a considerable proportion of whom were serving as soldiers in the armies of the League and the Alliance, and that in its cosmopolitan aspect it was known to the rank and file as the Red International, whose members knew each other only by the possession of a little knot of red ribbon tied into the button-hole in a peculiar fashion on occasions of meetings for instruction or drill.

The three lights burning in the form of a triangle in the window of the house were a prearranged signal to avoid mistake on the part of those on board the air-ship. When they reached the earth, Arnold, acting under the instructions of Tremayne, who was his superior on land though his voluntary subordinate when afloat, left the Ithuriel and her crew in charge of Lieutenant Marston and Andrew Smith, the coxswain.

The remainder disembarked, and then the air-ship rose from the ground and ascended out of sight through a layer of clouds that hung some eight hundred feet above the high ground of the hills.

Lieutenant Marston's orders were to remain out of sight for an hour and then return.

Arnold had not seen Natasha for several hours previous to the landing, and he noticed with wonder, by no means unmixed with something very like anger, that she looked a great deal more cheerful than she had done during the voyage. She had preserved her composure all through, but the effort of restraint had been visible. Now this had vanished, although the supreme hour of the sacrifice that her father had commanded her to make was actually at hand. When her feet touched the earth she looked round with a smile on her lips and a flush on her cheeks, and said, in a voice in which there was no perceptible trace of anxiety or suffering--

"So this is the place of my bridal, is it? Well, I must say that a more cheerful one might have been selected; yet perhaps, after all, such a gloomy spot is more suitable to the ceremony. Come along; I suppose the bridegroom will be anxiously waiting the coming of the bride. I wonder what sort of a reception I shall have. Come, my Lord of Alamnere, your arm; and you, Captain Arnold, bring the Princess. We have a good deal to do before it gets light."

These were strange words to be uttered by a girl who but a few hours before had voluntarily confessed her love for one man, and was on the eve of compulsorily giving herself up to another one. Had it been any one else but Natasha, Arnold could have felt only disgust; but his love made it impossible for him to believe her guilty of such unworthy lightness as her words bespoke, even on the plain evidence before him, so he simply choked back his anger as best he might, and followed towards the house, speechless with astonishment at the marvellous change that had come over the daughter of Natas.

Tremayne knocked in a peculiar fashion on the window, and then repeated the knock on the door, which was opened almost immediately.

"Who stands there?" asked a voice in French.

"Those who bring the expected bride," replied Tremayne in German.

"And by whose authority?" This time the question was in Spanish.

"In the Master's name," said Tremayne in English.

"Enter! you are welcome."

A second door was now opened inside the house, and through it a light shone into the passage. The four visitors entered, and, passing through the second door, found themselves in a plainly-furnished room, down the centre of which ran a long table, flanked by five chairs on each side, in each of which, save one, sat a masked and shrouded figure exactly similar to those which Arnold had seen when he was first introduced to the Council-chamber in the house on Clapham Common. In a chair at one end of the table sat another figure similarly draped.

The door was closed as they entered, and the member of the Circle who had let them in returned to his seat. No word was spoken until this was done. Then Natasha, leaving her three companions by the door, advanced alone to the lower end of the table.

As she did so, Arnold for the first time noticed that she carried her magazine pistol in a sheath at her belt. He and Tremayne were, as a matter of course, armed with a brace of these weapons, but this was the first time that he had ever seen Natasha carry her pistol openly. Wondering greatly what this strange sight might mean, he waited with breathless anxiety for the drama to begin.

As Natasha took her stand at the opposite end of the table, the figure in the chair at the top rose and unmasked, displaying the pallid countenance of the Chief of the American Section. He looked to Arnold anything but a bridegroom awaiting his bride, and the ceremony which was to unite him to her for ever. His cheeks and lips were bloodless, and his eyes wandered restlessly from Natasha to Tremayne and back again. He glanced to and fro in silence for several moments, and when he at last found his voice he said, in half-choked, broken accents--

"What is this? Why am I honoured by the presence of the Chief and the Admiral of the Air? I asked only that if the Master consented to grant my humble petition in reward for my services, the daughter of Natas should come attended simply by a sister of the Brotherhood and the messenger that I sent."

They let him finish, although it was with manifest difficulty that he stammered to the end of his speech. Arnold, still wondering at the strange turn events had taken, saw Tremayne's lips tighten and his brows contract in the effort to repress a smile. The other masked figures at the table moved restlessly in their seats, and glanced from one to another. Seeing this Tremayne stepped quickly forward to Natasha's side, and said in a stern, commanding tone--

"I am the Chief of the Central Council, and I order every one here to keep his seat and remain silent until the daughter of Natas has spoken."

The ten masked and hooded heads instantly bowed consent. Then Tremayne stepped back again, and Natasha spoke. There was a keen, angry light in her eyes, and a bright flush upon her cheek, but her voice was smooth and silvery, and in strange contrast to the words that she used, almost to the end.

"Did you think, Michael Roburoff, that the Master of the Terror would send his daughter to her bridal so poorly escorted as you say? Surely that would have been almost as much of a slight as you put upon me when, instead of coming to woo me as a true lover should have done, you contented yourself with sending a messenger as though you were some Eastern potentate despatching an envoy to demand the hand of the daughter of a vassal.

"It would seem that this sudden love which you do me the honour to profess for me has destroyed your manners as well as your reason. But since you have assumed so high a dignity, it is not seemly that you should stand to hear what I have to say; sit down, for it looks as though standing were a trouble to you."

Michael Roburoff, who by this time could scarcely support himself on his trembling limbs, sank suddenly back into his chair and covered his face with his hands.

"That is not very lover-like to cover your eyes when the bride that you have asked for is standing in front of you; but as long as you don't cover your ears as well, I will forgive you the slight. Now, listen.

"I have come, as you see, and I have brought with me the answer of the Master to your request. Until an hour ago I did not know what it was myself, for, like the rest of the faithful members of the Brotherhood, I obey the word of the Master blindly.

"You, as it would appear, maddened by what you are pleased to call your love for me, have dared to attempt to make terms where you swore to obey blindly to the death. You have dared to place me, the daughter of Natas, in the balance against the allegiance of the American Section on the eve of the supreme crisis of its work, thus imperilling the results of twenty years of labour.

"If you had not been mad you would have foreseen the results of such treachery. As it is you must learn them now. What I have said has been proved by your own hand, and the proof is here in the hand of the Chief. This is the answer of Natas to the servant who would have betrayed him in the hour of trial."

She took a folded paper from her belt as she spoke, and, unfolding it, read in clear, deliberate tones--

Michael Roburoff, late chief of the American Section of the Brotherhood. When you joined the Order, you took an oath to obey the directions of its chiefs to the death, and you acknowledged that death would be the just penalty of perjury. My orders to you were to complete the arrangements for bringing the American Section into action when you received the signal to do so. Instead of doing that, you have sought to bargain with me for the price of its allegiance. That is treachery, and the penalty of treachery is death. NATAS.

"Those are the words of the Master," continued Natasha, throwing the paper down upon the table with one hand, and drawing her pistol with the other. "It rests with the Chief to say when and where the sentence of the Master shall be carried out."

"Let it be carried out here, and now," said Tremayne, "and let him who has anything to say against it speak now, or for ever hold his peace."

The ten heads bowed once more in silence, and Natasha went on still addressing the trembling

wretch who sat huddled in the chair in front of her.

"You have asked for a bride, Michael Roburoff, and she has come to you, and I can promise you that you shall sleep soundly in her embrace. Your bride is Death, and I have chosen to bring her to you with my own hand, that all here may see how the daughter of Natas can avenge an insult to her womanhood.

"You have been guilty of treachery to the Brotherhood, and for that you might have been punished by any hand; but you would also have condemned me to the infamy of a loveless marriage, and that is an insult that no one shall punish but myself. Look up, and, if you can, die like a man."

Roburoff took his hands from his face, and with an inarticulate cry started to his feet. The same instant Natasha's hand went up, her pistol dashed, and he dropped back again into his chair with a bullet in his brain. Then she replaced the pistol in her belt, and going up to Arnold held out both her hands and said, as he clasped them in his own--

"If the Master's reply had been different, that bullet would by this time have been in my own heart."

CHAPTER XXXVII. THE CAPTURE OF A CONTINENT.

WITHIN an hour after the execution of Michael Roburoff the Ithuriel was winging her way back to Aeria, and at least two of her company were anticipating their return to the valley with feelings very different to those with which they had contemplated their departure.

When the last farewells and congratulations had been spoken, and the air-ship rose from the earth, Tremayne returned to the house to commence forthwith the great task which now developed upon him; for in addition to being Chief of the Central Executive, he now assumed the direct command of the American Section, which, after long consideration, had been selected as the nucleus of the Federation of the English-speaking peoples of the world.

For a fortnight he worked almost night and day, attending to every detail with the utmost care, and bringing into play all those rare powers of mind which in the first instance had led Natas to select him as the visible head of the Executive. In this way the chief consequence of the love-madness of Roburoff had been to place at the head of affairs in America the one man of all others most fitted by descent and ability to carry out such a work, and to this fact its complete success must in a great measure be attributed.

So perfectly were his plans laid and executed, that right up to the moment when the signal was given and the plans became actions, American society went about its daily business without the remotest suspicion that it was living on the slope of a slumbering volcano whose fires were so soon to burst forth and finally consume the social fabric which, despite its splendid exterior, was inwardly as rotten as were the social fabrics of Rome and Byzantium on the eve of their fall.

On the 1st of October the cables brought the news of the fall of the Quadrilateral; the storming of Hamburg, and the retreat of the British forces on Antwerp. Four days later came the tidings of a great battle under the walls of Antwerp, in which the British and German forces, outnumbered ten to one by the innumerable hosts of the League, had suffered a decisive defeat, which rendered it imperative for them to fall back upon the Allied fleets in the Scheldt, and to leave the Netherlands to the mercy of the Tsar and his allies, who were thus left undisputed masters of the continent of Europe.

This last and crowning victory had been achieved by exactly the same means which had accomplished all the other triumphs of the campaign, and therefore there will be no need to enter into any detailed description of it. Indeed, the fall of the Quadrilateral and the defeat of the last army of the Alliance round Antwerp would have been accomplished much more easily and speedily than it had been but for the fact that the weather, which had been fine up to the end of July, had suddenly broken, and a succession of violent storms and gales from the north and north-west had made it impossible for the war-balloons to be brought into action with any degree of effectiveness.

During the last week of September the storms had ceased, and then the work of destruction began. Not even the hitherto impregnable fortresses of Tournay, Mons, Namur, and Liege had been able to withstand the assault from the air any better than the forts of Berlin or the walls of Constantinople. A day's bombardment had sufficed to reduce them to ruins, and, the chain once broken, the armies of the League swept in wave after wave across the plains which they had guarded.

The loss of life had been unparalleled even in this the greatest of all wars, for the British and Germans had fought with a dogged resolution which, but for the vastly superior numbers and the irresistible means of destruction employed against them, must infallibly have triumphed. As it was, it was only when valour had achieved its last sacrifice, and further resistance became rather madness than devotion, that the retreat was finally sounded in time to embark the remnants of the armies of the Alliance on board the warships. Happily at the very hour when this was being done the weather broke again, and the ships of the Allied fleets were therefore able to make their way to sea through storm and darkness, unmolested by the war-balloons.

While the American press was teeming with columns of description telegraphed at enormous cost

from the seat of war, and with absolutely misleading articles as to the policy of the League and the attitude of studious neutrality that was to be observed by the United States Government, the dockyards, controlled directly and indirectly by the American Ring, were working night and day putting the finishing touches to the flotilla of dynamite cruisers and other war-vessels intended to carry out the plan revealed by Michael Roburoff on board the Ithuriel, after he had been taken off the Aurania in the Mid-Atlantic.

Briefly described, this was as follows:---Representative government in America had by this time become a complete sham. The whole political machinery and internal resources of the United States were now virtually at the command of a great Ring of capitalists who, through the medium of the huge monopolies which they controlled, and the enormous sums of money at their command, held the country in the hollow of their hand. These men were as totally devoid of all human feeling or public sentiment as it was possible for human beings to be. They had grown rich in virtue of their contempt of every principle of justice and mercy, and they had no other object in life than to still further increase their gigantic hoards of wealth, and to multiply the enormous powers which they already wielded. The then condition of affairs in Europe had presented them with such an opportunity as no other combination of circumstances could have given them, and ignoring, as such wretches would naturally do, all ties of blood and kindred speech, they had determined to take advantage of the situation to the utmost.

In the guise of the United States Government the Ring had concluded a secret treaty with the commanders of the League, in virtue of which, at a stipulated point in the struggle, America was to declare war on Britain, invade Canada by land, and send to sea an immense flotilla of swift dynamite cruisers of tremendously destructive power, which had been constructed openly in the Government dockyards, ostensibly for coast defence, and secretly in private yards belonging to the various Corporations composing the Ring.

This flotilla was to co-operate with the fleet of the League as soon as England had been invaded, and complete the blockade of the British ports. Were this once accomplished nothing could save Britain from starvation into surrender, and the British Empire from disintegration and partition between the Ring and the Commanders of the League, who would then practically divide the mastery of the world among them.

On the night of the 4th of October the five words: "The hour and the man," went flying over the wires from Washington throughout the length and breadth of the North American Continent. The next morning half the industries of the United States were paralysed; all the lines of communication by telegraph and rail between the east and west were severed, the shore ends of the Atlantic cables were cut, no newspapers appeared, and every dockyard on the eastern coast was in the hands of the Terrorists.

To complete the stupor produced by this swift succession of astounding events, when the sun rose an air-ship was seen floating high in the air over the ten arsenals of the United States--that is to say, over Portsmouth, Charlestown, Brooklyn, League Island, New London, Washington, Norfolk, Pensacola, Mare Island, and Port Royal, while two others held Chicago and St. Louis, the great railway centres for the west and south, at their mercy, and the Ithuriel, with a broad red flag flying from her stern, swept like a meteor along the eastern coast from Maine to Florida.

To attempt to describe the condition of frenzied panic into which the inhabitants of the threatened cities, and even the whole of the Eastern States were thrown by the events of that ever-memorable morning, would be to essay an utterly hopeless task. From the millionaire in his palace to the outcasts who swarmed in the slums, not a man or a woman kept a cool head save those who were in the councils of the Terrorists. The blow had fallen with such stupefying suddenness that as far as America was concerned the Revolution was practically accomplished before any one very well knew what had happened.

Out of the midst of an apparently peaceful and industrious population five millions of armed men

had sprung in a single night. Factories and workshops had opened their doors, but none entered them; ships lay idle by the wharves, offices were deserted, and the great reels of paper hung motionless beside the paralysed machines which should have converted them into newspapers.

It was not a strike, for no mere trade organisation could have accomplished such a miracle. It was the force born of the accumulation of twenty years of untiring labour striking one mighty blow which shattered the commercial fabric of a continent in a single instant. Those who had been clerks or labourers yesterday, patient, peaceful, and law-abiding, were to-day soldiers, armed and disciplined, and obeying with automatic regularity the unheard command of some unknown chief.

This of itself would have been enough to throw the United States into a panic; but, worse than all, the presence of the air-ships, holding at their mercy the arsenals and the richest cities in the Eastern States, proved that tremendous and all as it was, this was only a phase of some vast and mysterious cataclysm which might as easily involve the whole civilised world as it could overwhelm the United States of America.

By noon, almost without striking a blow, every dynamite cruiser and warship on the eastern coast had been seized and manned by the Terrorists. To the dismay of the authorities, it was found that more than half the army and navy, officers and men alike, had obeyed the mysterious summons that had gone throughout the land the night before; and matters reached a climax when, as the clocks of Washington were striking twelve, the President himself was arrested in the White House.

All the streets of Washington were in the hands of the Terrorists, and at one o'clock Tremayne, after posting guards at all the approaches, entered the Senate, and in the name of Natas proclaimed the Constitution of the United States null and void, and the Government dissolved.

Then with a copy of the Constitution in his hand he proceeded to the steps of the Capitol, and, in the presence of a vast throng of the armed members of the American Section he proclaimed the Federation of the English-speaking races of the world, in virtue of their bonds of kindred blood and speech and common interests; and amidst a scene of the wildest enthusiasm called upon all who owned those bonds to forget the artificial divisions that had separated them into hostile nations and communities, and to follow the leadership of the Brotherhood to the conquest of the earth.

Then in a few strong and simple phrases he exposed the subservience of the Government to the capitalist Ring, and described the inhuman compact that it had entered into with the arch-enemies of national freedom and personal liberty to crush the motherland of the Anglo-Saxon nations, and for the sake of sordid gain to rivet the fetters of oppression upon the limbs of the race which for a thousand Years had stood in the forefront of the battle for freedom.

As he concluded his appeal, one mighty shout of wrath and execration rose up to heaven from a million throats. He waited until this died away into silence, then, raising the copy of the Constitution above his head, he cried in clear ringing tones--

"For a hundred and fifty years this has been boasted as the bulwark of liberty, and used as the instrument of social and commercial oppression. The Republic of America has been governed, not by patriots and statesmen, but by millionaires and their hired political puppets. It is therefore a fraud and a sham, and deserves no longer to exist!"

So saying, he tore the paper into fragments and cast them into the air amidst a storm of cheers and volley after volley of musketry. While the enthusiasm was at its height the Ithuriel suddenly swept downwards from the sky in full view of the mighty assemblage that swarmed round the Capitol. She was greeted with a roar of wondering welcome, for her appearance was the fulfilment of a promise upon which the success of the Revolution in America had largely depended.

This was the promise, issued by Tremayne several days previously through the commanders of the various divisions of the Section, that as soon as the Anglo-Saxon Federation was proclaimed and accepted in America, the whole Brotherhood throughout the world would fall into line with it, and place its Aerial navy at the disposal of its leaders. Practically this was giving the empire of the world in exchange for a money-despotism, of which every one save the millionaires and their servants had

become heartily sick.

There were few who in their hearts did not believe the Republic to be a colossal fraud, and therefore there were few who regretted it.

The Ithuriel passed slowly over the heads of the wondering crowd, and came to a standstill alongside the steps on which Tremayne was standing. The crowd saw a man on her deck shake hands with Tremayne and give him a folded paper. Then the air-ship swept gracefully upward again in a spiral curve until she hung motionless over the dome of the Capitol.

Amidst a silence born of breathless interest to know the import of this message from the sky, Tremayne opened the paper, glanced at its contents, and handed it to the senior officer in command of the brigades, who stood beside him. This man, a veteran who had grown grey in the service of the Brotherhood, advanced with the open paper in his hand, and read out in a loud voice--

Natas sends greeting to the Brotherhood in America. The work has been well done, and the reward of patient labour is at hand. This is to name Alan Tremayne, Chief of the Central Executive, first President of the Anglo-Saxon Federation throughout the world and to invest him with the supreme authority for the ordering of its affairs. The Aerial navy of the Brotherhood is placed at his disposal to co-operate with the armies and fleets of the Federation. NATAS

When the mighty shout of acclamation which greeted the reading of this commission had died away, Tremayne stepped forward again and spoke the few words that now remained to be said--

"I accept the office and all that it implies. The fate of the world lies in our hands, and as we decide it so will the future lot of humanity be good or evil. The armies of the Franco-Slavonian League are now masters of the continent of Europe, and are preparing for the invasion of Britain. The first use that I shall make of the authority now vested in me will be to summon the Tsar in the name of the Federation to sheathe the sword at once, and relinquish his designs on Britain. The moment that one of his soldiers sets foot on the sacred soil of our motherland I shall declare war upon him, and it shall be a war, not of conquest, but of extermination, and we will make an end of tyranny on earth for ever.

"Now let those who are not on guard-duty go to their homes, and remember that they are now citizens of a greater realm than the United States, and endowed with more than national duties and responsibilities. Let every man's person and property be respected, and let the penalty of all violence be death. Those who have plotted against the public welfare will be dealt with in due course, and yonder air-ship will be despatched with our message to the Tsar at sundown. Long live the Federation!"

Millions of throats took up the cry as the last words left his lips until it rolled away from the Capitol in mighty waves of sound, flowing along the crowded streets and overrunning the utmost confines of the capital.

Thus, without the loss of a hundred lives, and in a space of less than twelve hours, was the Revolution in America accomplished. The triumph of the Terrorists was as complete as it had been unexpected. Menaced by air and sea and land, the great centres of population made no resistance, and, when they learnt the true object of the Revolution, wanted to make none. No one really believed in the late Government, and every one in his soul hated and despised the millionaires.

There was no bond between them and their fellow-men but money, and the moment that was snapped they were looked upon in their true nature as criminals and outcasts from the pale of humanity. By sundown, when the Ithuriel left for the seat of war, the members of the Ring and those of the late Government who refused to acknowledge the Federation were lodged in prison, and news had been received from Montreal that the simultaneous rising of the Canadian Section had been completely successful, and that all the railways and arsenals and ships of war were in the hands of the Terrorists, so completing the capture of the North American continent.

The President of the Federation and his faithful subordinates went to work, without losing an hour, to reorganise as far as was necessary the internal affairs of the continent of which they had so suddenly become the undisputed masters.

There was some trouble with the British authorities in Canada, who, from mistaken motives of duty

to the mother country, at first refused to recognise the Federation.

The consequence of this was that Tremayne went north the next day and had an interview with the Governor-General at Montreal. At the same time he ordered six air-ships and twenty-five dynamite cruisers to blockade the St. Lawrence and the eastern ports. The Canadian Pacific Railway and the telegraph lines to the west were already in the hands of the Terrorists, and a million men were under arms waiting his commands.

A very brief explanation, therefore, sufficed to show the Governor that forcible resistance would not only be the purest madness, but that it would also seriously interfere with the working of the great scheme of Federation, the object of which was, not merely to place Britain in the first place among the nations, but to make the Anglo-Saxon race the one dominant power in the whole world.

To all the Governor's objections on the score of loyalty to the British Crown, Tremayne, who heard him to the end without interruption, simply replied in a tone that precluded all further argument--

"The day of states and empires, and therefore of loyalty to sovereigns, has gone by. The history of nations is the history of intrigue, quarrelling, and bloodshed, and we are determined to put a stop to warfare for good and all. We hold in our hands the only power that can thwart the designs of the League and avert an era of tyranny and retrogression. That power we intend to use whether the British Government likes it or not.

"We shall save Britain, if necessary, in spite of her rulers. If they stand in the way, so much the worse for them. They will be called upon to resign in favour of the Federation and its Executive within the next seven days. If they consent, the forces of the League will never cross the Straits of Dover. If they refuse we shall allow Britain to taste the results of their choice, and then settle the matter in our own way."

The next day the Governor dissolved the Canadian Legislatures "under protest," and retired into private life for the present. He felt that it was no time to argue with a man who had millions of men behind him, to say nothing of an Aerial fleet which alone could reduce Montreal to ruins in twelve hours.

After arranging matters in Canada the President returned to Washington in the Ariel, which he had taken into his personal service for the present, and set about disposing of the Ring and those members of the late Government who were most deeply implicated in the secret alliance with the leaders of the League. When the facts of this scheme were made public they raised such a storm of popular indignation, that if those responsible for it had been turned loose in the streets of Washington they would have been torn to pieces like vermin.

As it was, however, they were placed upon their trial before a Commission of seven members of the Inner Circle of the American Section, presided over by the President. Their guilt was speedily proved beyond the shadow of a doubt. Documents, memoranda, and telegrams were produced by men who had seemed their most trusted servants, but had been in reality members of the Brotherhood told off to unearth their schemes.

Cyphers were translated which showed that they had practically sold the resources of the country in advance to the Tsar and his allies, and that they were only waiting the signal to declare war without warning and without cause upon Britain, blockade her ports, and starve her into surrender and acceptance of any terms that the victors might choose to impose. Last of all, the terms of the bargain between the League and the Ring were produced, signed by the late President and the Secretary of State, and countersigned by the Russian Minister at Washington.

The Court sat for three days, and reassembled on the fourth to deliver its verdict and sentence. Fifteen members of the late Government, including the President, the Vice-President, and the Secretary of State, and twenty-four great capitalists composing the Ring, were found guilty of giving and receiving bribes, directly and indirectly, and of betraying and conspiring to betray the confidence of the American people in its elected representatives, and also of conspiring to make war without due cause on a friendly Power for purely commercial reasons.

At eleven o'clock on the morning of the 9th of October the President of the Federation rose in the Senate House, amidst breathless silence, to pronounce the sentence of the Court.

"All the accused," he said, speaking in slow, deliberate tones, "have been proved guilty of such treason against their own race and the welfare of humanity as no men ever were guilty of before in all the disreputable history of state-craft. In view of the suffering and misery to millions of individuals, and the irreparable injury to the cause of civilisation that would have resulted from the success of their schemes, it would be impossible for human wit to devise any punishment which in itself would be adequate. The sentence of the Court is the extreme penalty known to human justice--Death!"

A shudder passed through the vast assembly as he pronounced the ominous word, and the accused, who but a few days before had looked upon the world as their footstool, gazed with blanched faces and terror-stricken eyes upon each other. He paused for a moment, and looked sternly upon them. Then he went on--

"But the Federation does not seek a punishment of revenge, but of justice; nor shall its first act of government be the shedding of blood, however guilty. Therefore, as President I override the sentence of death, and instead condemn you, who have been proved guilty of this unspeakable crime, to confiscation of the wealth that you have acquired so unscrupulously and used so mercilessly, and to perpetual banishment with your wives and families, who have shared the profits of your infamous traffic.

"You will be at once conveyed to Kodiak Island, off the south coast of Alaska, and landed there. Once every six months you will be visited by a steamer, which will supply you with the necessaries of life, and the original penalty of death will be the immediate punishment of any one of you who attempts to return to a world of which you from this moment cease to be citizens."

The sentence was carried out without an hour's delay. The exiles, with their wives and families, were placed under a strong guard in a special train, which conveyed them from Washington via St. Louis to San Francisco, where they were transferred to a steamer which took them to the lonely and desolate island in the frozen North which was to be their home for the rest of their lives. They were followed by the execrations of a whole people and the regrets of none save the money-worshippers who had respected them, not as men, but as incarnations of the purchasing power of wealth.

The huge fortunes which they had amassed, amounting in the aggregate to more than three hundred millions in English money, were placed in the public treasury for the immediate purposes of the war which the Federation was about to wage for the empire of the world. All their real estate property was transferred to the various municipalities in which it was situated, and their rents devoted to the relief of taxation, while the railways and other enterprises which they had controlled were declared public property, and placed in the hands of boards of management composed of their own officials.

Within a week everything was working as smoothly as though no Revolution had ever taken place. All officials whose honesty there was no reason to suspect were retained in their offices, while those who were dismissed were replaced without any friction. All the affairs of government were conducted upon purely business principles, just as though the country had been a huge commercial concern, save for the fact that the chief object was efficiency and not profit making.

Money was abundantly plentiful, and the necessaries of life were cheaper than they had ever been before. Perhaps the principal reason for this happy state of affairs was the fact that law and politics had suddenly ceased to be trades at which money could be made. People were amazed at the rapidity with which public business was transacted.

The President and his Council had at one stroke abrogated every civil and criminal law known to the old Constitution, and proclaimed in their place a simple, comprehensive code which was practically identical with the Decalogue. To this a final clause was added, stating that those who could not live without breaking any of these laws would not be considered as fit to live in civilised society, and would therefore be effectively removed from the companionship of their fellows.

While the internal affairs of the Federation in America were being thus set in order, events had been

moving rapidly in other parts of the world. The Tsar, the King of Italy, and General le Gallifet, who was now Dictator of France in all but name, were masters of the continent of Europe. The Anglo-Teutonic Alliance was a thing of the past. Germany, Austria, and Turkey were completely crushed, and the minor Powers had succumbed.

Britain, crippled by the terrible cost in ships and men of the victory of the Nile, had evacuated the Mediterranean after dismantling the fortifications of Gibraltar and Malta, and had concentrated the remains of her fleets in the home waters, to prepare for the invasion which was now inevitable as soon as fair winds and fine weather made it possible for the war-balloons of the League to cross the water and co-operate with the invading forces.

The Tsar, as had been expected, had not even deigned to reply to Tremayne's summons to disarm, and so the last arrangements for bringing the forces of the Federation into action at the proper time were pushed on with the utmost speed. The blockade of the American and Canadian coasts was rigidly maintained, and no vessels allowed to enter or leave any of the ports. All the warships of the League had been withdrawn from the Atlantic, and the great ocean highway remained unploughed by a single keel.

On the 10th of October the Ithuriel had returned from her second trip to the West, with the refusal of the British Government to recognise the Federation as a duly constituted Power, or to have any dealings with its leaders. "Great Britain," the reply concluded, "will stand or fall alone; and even in the event of ultimate defeat, the King of England will prefer to make terms with the sovereigns opposed to him rather than with those whose acts have proved them to be beyond the pale of the law of nations."

"Ah!" said Tremayne to Arnold, as he read the royal words, "the policy which lost the American Colonies for the sake of an idea still rules at Westminster, it seems. But I'm not going to let the old Lion be strangled in his den for all that.

"Natas was right when he said that Britain would have to pass through the fire before she would accept the Federation, and so I suppose she must, more's the pity. Still, perhaps it will be all for the best in the long run. You can't expect to root up a thousand-year-old oak as easily as a mushroom that only came up the day before yesterday."

CHAPTER XXXVIII. THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

IT is now time to return to Britain, to the land which the course of events had so far appeared to single out as the battle-ground upon which was to be fought the Armageddon of the Western World--that conflict of the giants, the issue of which was to decide whether the Anglo-Saxon race was still to remain in the forefront of civilisation and progress, or whether it was to fall crushed and broken, beneath the assaults of enemies descending upon the motherland of the Anglo-Saxon nations; whether the valour and personal devotion, which for a thousand years had scarcely known a defeat by flood or field, was still to pursue its course of victory, or whether it was to succumb to weight of numbers and mechanical discipline, reinforced by means of assault and destruction which so far had turned the world-war of 1904 into a succession of colossal and unparalleled butcheries, such as had never been known before in the history of human strife.

When the Allied fleets, bearing the remains of the British and German armies which had been driven out of the Netherlands, reached England, and the news of the crowning disaster of the war in Europe was published in detail in the newspapers the popular mind seemed suddenly afflicted with a paralysis of stupefaction.

Men looked back over the long series of triumphs in which British valour and British resolution had again and again proved themselves invulnerable to the assaults of overwhelming numbers. They thought of the glories of the Peninsula, of the unbreakable strength of the thin red line at Waterloo, of the magnificent madness of Balaclava, and the invincible steadiness and discipline that had made Inkermann a word to be remembered with pride as long as the English name endured.

Then their thoughts reverted to the immediate past, and they heard the shock of colossal armaments, compared with which the armies of the past appeared but pigmies in strength. They saw empires defended by millions of soldiers crushed in a few weeks, and a wave of conquest sweep in one unbroken roll from end to end of a continent in less time than it would have taken Napoleon or Wellington to have fought a single campaign. Huge fortresses, rendered, as men had believed, impregnable by the employment of every resource known to the most advanced military science, had been reduced to heaps of defenceless ruins in a few hours by a bombardment, under which their magnificent guns had lain as impotent as though they had been the culverins of three hundred years ago.

It seemed like some hideous nightmare of the nations, in which Europe had gone mad, revelling in superhuman bloodshed and destruction,---a conflict in which more than earthly forces had been let loose, accomplishing a carnage so immense that the mind could only form a dim and imperfect conception of it. And now this red tide of desolation had swept up to the western verge of the Continent, and was there gathering strength and volume day by day against the hour when it should burst and oversweep the narrow strip of water which separated the inviolate fields of England from the blackened and blood-stained waste that it had left behind it from the Russian frontier to the German Ocean.

It seemed impossible, and yet it was true. The first line of defence, the hitherto invincible fleet, magnificently as it had been managed, and heroically as it had been fought, had failed in the supreme hour of trial. It had failed, not because the sailors of Britain had done their duty less valiantly than they had done in the days of Rodney and Nelson, but simply because the conditions of naval warfare had been entirely changed, because the personal equation had been almost eliminated from the problem of battle, and because the new warfare of the seas had been waged rather with machinery than with men.

In all the war not a single battle had been fought at close quarters; there had been plenty of instances of brilliant manoeuvring, of torpedo-boats running the gauntlet and hurling their deadly missiles against the sides of battleships and cruisers, and of ships rammed and sunk in a few instants by consummately-handled opponents; but the days of boarding and cutting out, of night surprises and fire-ships, had gone

by for ever.

The irresistible artillery with which modern science had armed the warships of all nations had made these feats impossible, and so had placed the valour which achieved them out of court. Within the last few weeks scarcely a day had passed but had witnessed the return of some mighty ironclad or splendid cruiser, which had set out a miracle of offensive and defensive strength, little better than a floating ruin wrecked and shattered almost beyond recognition by the awful battle-storm through which she had passed.

The magnificent armament which had held the Atlantic route had come back represented only by a few crippled ships almost unfit for any further service. True, they and those which never returned had rendered a splendid account of themselves before the enemy, but the fact remained--they were not defeated, but they were no longer able to perform the Titanic task which had been allotted to them.

So, too, with the Mediterranean fleet, which, so far as sea-fighting was concerned, had achieved the most splendid triumph of the war. It had completely destroyed the enemy opposed to it, but the victory had been purchased at such a terrible price that, but for the squadron which had come to its aid, it would hardly have been able to reach home in safety.

In a word, the lesson of the struggle on the sea had been, that modern artillery was just as effective whether fired by Englishmen, Frenchmen, or Russians; that where a torpedo struck a warship was crippled, no matter what the nationality or the relative valour of her crew; and that where once the ram found its mark the ship that it struck went down, no matter what flag she was flying.

And then, behind and beyond all that was definitely known in England of the results of the war, there were vague rumours of calamities and catastrophes in more distant parts of the world, which seemed to promise nothing less than universal anarchy, and the submergence of civilisation under some all-devouring wave of barbarism.

All regular communications with the East had been stopped for several weeks; that India was lost, was guessed by intuition rather than known as a certainty. Australia was as isolated from Britain as though it had been on another planet, and now every one of the Atlantic cables had suddenly ceased to respond to the stimulus of the electric current. No ships came from the East, or West or South. The British ports were choked with fleets of useless merchantmen, to which the markets of the world were no longer open.

Some few venturesome craft that had set out to explore the now silent ocean had never returned, and every warship that could be made fit for service was imperatively needed to meet the now inevitable attack on the shores of the English Channel and the southern portions of the North Sea. Only one messenger had arrived from the outside world since the remains of Admiral Beresford's fleet had returned from the Mediterranean, and she had come, not by land or sea, but through the air.

On the 6th of October an air-ship had been seen flying at an incredible speed across the south of England. She had reached London, and touched the ground during the night on Hampstead Heath; the next day she had descended again in the same place, taken a single man on board, and then vanished into space again. What her errand had been is well known to the reader; but outside the members of the Cabinet Council no one in England, save the King and his Ministers, knew the object of her mission.

For fifteen days after that event the enemy across the water made no sign, although from the coast of Kent round about Deal and Dover could be seen fleets of transports and war-vessels hurrying along the French coast, and on clear days a thousand telescopes turned towards the French shore made visible the ominous clusters of moving black spots above the land, which betokened the presence of the terrible machines which had wrought such havoc on the towns and fortresses of Europe.

It was only the calm before the final outburst of the storm. The Tsar and his allies were marshalling their hosts for the invasion, and collecting transports and fleets of war-vessels to convoy them. For several days strong north-westerly gales had made the sea impassable for the war-balloons, as though to the very last the winds and waves were conspiring to defend their ancient mistress. But this could not last for ever.

Sooner or later the winds must sink or change, and then these war-hawks of the air would wing their flight across the silver streak, and Portsmouth, and Dover, and London would be as defenceless beneath their attack as Berlin, Vienna, and Hamburg had been. And after them would come the millions of the League, descending like a locust swarm upon the fields of eastern England; and after that would come the deluge.

But the old Lion of the Seas was not skulking in his lair, or trembling at the advent of his enemies, however numerous and mighty they might be. On sea not a day passed but some daring raid was made on the transports passing to and fro in the narrow seas, and all the while a running fight was kept up with cruisers and battleships that approached too near to the still inviolate shore. So surely as they did so the signals flashed along the coast; and if they escaped at all from the fierce sortie that they provoked, it was with shot-riddled sides and battered top-works, sure signs that the Lion still had claws, and could strike home with them.

On shore, from Land's End to John o' Groats, and from Holyhead to the Forelands, everything that could be done was being done to prepare for the struggle with the invader. It must, however, be confessed that, in comparison with the enormous forces of the League, the ranks of the defenders were miserably scanty. Forty years of universal military service on the Continent had borne their fruits.

Soldiers are not made in a few weeks or months; and where the League had millions in the field, Britain, even counting the remnant of her German allies, that had been brought over from Antwerp, could hardly muster hundreds of thousands. All told, there were little more than a million men available for the defence of the country; and should the landing of the invaders be successfully effected, not less than six millions of men, trained to the highest efficiency, and flushed with a rapid succession of unparalleled victories, would be hurled against them.

This was the legitimate outcome of the policy to which Britain had adhered since first she had maintained a standing army, instead of pursuing the ancient policy of making every man a soldier, which had won the triumphs of Crecy and Agincourt. She had trusted everything to her sea-line of defence. Now that was practically broken, and it seemed inevitable that her second line, by reason of its miserable inadequacy, should fail her in a trial which no one had ever dreamt it would have to endure.

A very grave aspect was given to the situation by the fact that the great mass of the industrial population seemed strangely indifferent to the impending catastrophe which was hanging over the land. It appeared to be impossible to make them believe that an invasion of Britain was really at hand, and that the hour had come when every man would be called upon to fight for the preservation of his own hearth and home.

Vague threats of "eating the Russians alive" if they ever did dare to come, were heard on every hand; but beyond this, and apart from the regular army and the volunteers, men went about their daily avocations very much as usual, grumbling at the ever-increasing price of food, and here and there breaking out into bread riots wherever it was suspected that some wealthy man was trying to corner food for his own commercial benefit, but making no serious or combined efforts to prepare for a general rising in case the threatened invasion became a fact.

Such was the general state of affairs in Britain when, on the night of the 27th of October, the north-west gales sank suddenly to a calm, and the dawn of the 28th brought the news from Dover to London that the war-balloons of the League had taken the air, and were crossing the Straits.

CHAPTER XXXIX. THE BATTLE OF DOVER.

UNTIL the war of 1904, it had been an undisputed axiom in naval warfare that a territorial attack upon an enemy's coast by a fleet was foredoomed to failure unless that enemy's fleet had been either crippled beyond effective action, or securely blockaded in distant ports. As an axiom secondary to this, it was also held that it would be impossible for an invading force, although convoyed by a powerful fleet, to make good its footing upon any portion of a hostile coast defended by forts mounting heavy long-range guns.

These principles have held good throughout the history of naval warfare from the time when Sir Walter Raleigh first laid them down in the early portion of his *History of the World*, written after the destruction of the Spanish Armada.

But now two elements had been introduced which altered the conditions of naval warfare even more radically than one of them had changed those of military warfare. Had it not been for this the attack upon the shores of England made by the commanders of the League would probably either have been a failure, or it would have stopped at a demonstration of force, as did that of the great Napoleon in 1803.

The portion of the Kentish coast selected for the attack was that stretching from Folkestone to Deal, and it would perhaps have been difficult to find in the whole world any portion of sea-coast more strongly defended than this was on the morning of October 28, 1904; and yet, as the event proved, the fortresses which lined it were as useless and impotent for defence as the old Martello towers of a hundred and fifty years before would have been.

As the war-balloons rose into the air from the heights above Boulogne, good telescopes at Dover enabled their possessors to count no less than seventy-five of them. Fifty of these were quite newly constructed, and were of a much improved type, as they had been built in view of the practical experience gained by the first fleet.

This Aerial fleet divided into three squadrons; one, numbering twenty-five, steered south-westward in the direction of Folkestone, twelve shaped their course towards Deal, and the remaining thirty-eight steered directly across the Straits to Dover. As they approached the English coast they continually rose, until by the time they had reached the land, aided by the light south-easterly breeze which was then blowing, they floated at a height of more than five thousand feet.

All this while not a warship or a transport had put to sea. The whole fleet of the League lay along the coast of France between Calais and Dieppe, under the protection of shore batteries so powerful that it would have been madness for the British fleet to have assumed the offensive with regard to them. With the exception of two squadrons reserved for a possible attack upon Portsmouth and Harwich, all that remained from the disasters and costly victories of the war of the once mighty British naval armament was massed together for the defence of that portion of the coast which would evidently have to bear the brunt of the attack of the League.

Ranged along the coast from Folkestone to Deal was an armament consisting of forty-five battleships of the first, second, and third classes, supported by fifteen coast-defence ironclads, seventy armoured and thirty-two unarmoured cruisers, forty gunboats, and a hundred and fifty torpedo-boats.

Such was the still magnificent fleet that patrolled the waters of the narrow sea,---a fleet as impotent for the time being as a flotilla of Thames steamboats would have been in face of the tactics employed against it by the League. Had the enemy's fleet but come out into the open, as it would have been compelled to do under the old conditions of warfare, to fight its way across the narrow strip of water, there is little doubt but that the issue of the day would have been very different, and that what had been left of it would have been driven back, shattered and defeated, to the shelter of the French shore batteries.

But, in accordance with the invariable tactics of the League, the first and most deadly assault was delivered from the air. The war-balloons stationed themselves above the fortifications on land, totally

ignoring the presence of the fleet, and a few minutes after ten o'clock began to rain their deadly hail of explosives down upon them. Fifteen were placed over Dover Castle, and five over the fort on the Admiralty Pier, while the rest were distributed over the town and the forts on the hills above it. In an hour everything was in a state of the most horrible confusion. The town was on fire in a hundred places from the effects of the fire-shells. The Castle hill seemed as if it had been suddenly turned into a volcano; jets of bright flame kept leaping up from its summit and sides, followed by thunderous explosions and masses of earth and masonry hurled into the air, mingled with guns and fragments of human bodies.

The end of the Admiralty Pier, with its huge blocks of stone wrenched asunder and pulverised by incessant explosions of dynamite and emmensite, collapsed and subsided into the sea, carrying fort, guns, and magazine with it; and all along the height of the Shakespeare cliff the earthworks had been blown up and scattered into dust, and a huge portion of the cliff itself had been blasted out and hurled down on to the beach.

Meanwhile the victims of this terrible assault had, in the nature of the case, been able to do nothing but keep up a vertical fire, in the hope of piercing the gas envelopes of the balloons, and so bringing them to the earth. For more than an hour this fusilade produced no effect; but at length the concentrated fire of several Maxim and Nordenfelt guns, projecting a hail of missiles into the sky, brought about a result which was even more disastrous to the town than it was to its assailants.

Four of the aerostats came within the zone swept by the bullets. Riddled through and through, their gas-holders collapsed, and their cars plunged downwards from a height of more than 5000 feet. A few seconds later four frightful explosions burst forth in different parts of the town, for the four cargoes exploded simultaneously as they struck the earth.

The emmensite and dynamite tore whole streets of houses to fragments, and hurled them far and wide into the air, to fall back again on other parts of the town, and at the same time the fire-shells ignited, and set the ruins blazing like so many furnaces. No more shots were fired into the air after that.

There was nothing for it but for British valour to bow to the inevitable, and evacuate the town and what remained of its fortifications; and so with sad and heavy hearts the remnant of the brave defenders turned their faces inland, leaving Dover to its fate. Meanwhile exactly the same havoc had been wrought upon Folkestone and Deal. Hour after hour the merciless work continued, until by three o'clock in the afternoon there was not a gun left upon the whole range of coast that was capable of firing a shot.

All this time the ammunition tenders of the Aerial fleet had been winging their way to and fro across the Strait constantly renewing the shells of the war-balloons.

As soon as it began to grow dusk the naval battle commenced. Numerically speaking the attacking force was somewhat inferior to that of the defenders, but now the second element, which so completely altered the tactics of sea fighting, was for the first time in the war brought into play.

As the battleships of the League steamed out to engage the opponents, who were thirsting to avenge the destruction that had been wrought upon the land, a small flotilla of twenty-five insignificant-looking little craft, with neither masts nor funnels, and looking more like half-submerged elongated turtles than anything else, followed in tow close under their quarters. Hardly had the furious cannonade broken out into thunder and flame along the two opposing lines, than these strange craft sank gently and silently beneath the waves. They were submarine vessels belonging to the French navy, an improved type of the Zede class, which had been in existence for more than ten years.¹

¹ The Naval Annual for 1893 mentions two types of submarine boats, the Zede and the Goubet, both belonging to the French navy, which had then been tried with success. The same work mentions no such vessels belonging to Britain, nor yet any prospect of her possessing one. The effects described here as produced by these terrible machines are little, if at all, exaggerated. Granted ten years of progress, and they will be reproduced to a certainty.---AUTHOR

These vessels were capable of sinking to a depth of twenty feet, and remaining for four hours

without returning to the surface. They were propelled by twin screws worked by electricity at a speed of twenty knots, and were provided with an electric searchlight, which enabled them to find the hulls of hostile ships in the dark.

Each carried three torpedoes, which could be launched from a tube forward so as to strike the hull of the doomed ship from beneath. As soon as the torpedo was discharged the submarine boat spun round on her heel and headed away at full speed in an opposite direction out of the area of the explosion.

The effects of such terrible and, indeed, irresistible engines of naval warfare were soon made manifest upon the ships of the British fleet. In the heat of the battle, with every gun in action, and raining a hail of shot and shell upon her adversary, a great battleship would receive an unseen blow, struck in the dark upon her most vulnerable part, a huge column of water would rise up from under her side, and a few minutes later the splendid fabric would heel over and go down like a floating volcano, to be quenched by the waves that closed over her.

But as if it were not enough that the defending fleet should be attacked from the surface of the water and the depths of the sea, the war-balloons, winging their way out from the scene of ruin that they had wrought on shore, soon began to take their part in the work of death and destruction.

Each of them was provided with a mirror set a little in front of the bow of the car, at an angle which could be varied according to the elevation. A little forward of the centre of the car was a tube fixed on a level with the centre of the mirror. The ship selected for destruction was brought under the car, and the speed of the balloon was regulated so that the ship was relatively stationary to it.

As soon as the glare from one of the funnels could be seen through the tube reflected in the centre of the mirror, a trap was sprung in the floor of the car, and a shell charged with dynamite, which, it will be remembered, explodes vertically downwards, was released, and, where the calculations were accurately made, passed down the funnel and exploded in the interior of the vessel, bursting her boilers and reducing her to a helpless wreck at a single stroke.

Every time this horribly ingenious contrivance was successfully brought into play a battleship or a cruiser was either sunk or reduced to impotence. In order to make their aim the surer, the aerostats descended to within three hundred yards of their prey, and where the missile failed to pass through the funnel it invariably struck the deck close to it, tearing up the armour sheathing, and wrecking the funnel itself so completely that the steaming-power of the vessel was very seriously reduced.

All night long the battle raged incessantly along a semicircle some twelve miles long, the centre of which was Dover. Crowds of anxious watchers on the shore watched the continuous flashes of the guns through the darkness, varied ever and anon by some tremendous explosion which told the fate of a warship that had fired her last shot.

All night long the incessant thunder of the battle rolled to and fro along the echoing coast, and when morning broke the light dawned upon a scene of desolation and destruction on sea and shore such as had never been witnessed before in the history of warfare. On land were the smoking ruins of houses, still smouldering in the remains of the fires which had consumed them; forts which twenty-four hours before had grinned defiance at the enemy were shapeless heaps of earth and stone, and armour-plating torn into great jagged fragments; and on sea were a few half-crippled wrecks, the remains of the British fleet, with their flags still flying, and such guns as were not disabled firing their last rounds at the victorious foe.

To the eastward of these about half the fleet of the League, in but little better condition, was advancing in now overwhelming force upon them, and behind these again a swarm of troopships and transports were heading out from the French shore. About an hour after dawn the Centurion, the last of the British battleships, was struck by one of the submarine torpedoes, broke in two, and went down with her flag flying and her guns blazing away to the last moment. So ended the battle of Dover, the most disastrous sea-fight in the history of the world, and the death-struggle of the Mistress of the Seas.

The last news of the tremendous tragedy reached the now panic-stricken capital half an hour before the receipt of similar tidings from Harwich, announcing the destruction of the defending fleet and forts,

and the capture of the town by exactly the same means as those employed against Dover. Nothing now lay between London and the invading forces but the utterly inadequate army and the lines of fortifications, which could not be expected to offer any more effective resistance to the assault of the war-balloons than had those of the three towns on the Kentish coast.

CHAPTER XL. BELEAGUERED LONDON.

A MONTH had passed since the battle of Dover. It had been a month of incessant fighting, of battles by day and night, of heroic defences and dearly-bought victories, but still of constant triumphs and irresistible progress for the ever-increasing legions of the League. From sunrise to sunrise the roar of artillery, the rattle of musketry, and the clash of steel had never ceased to sound to the north and south of London as, over battlefield after battlefield, the two hosts which had poured in constant streams through Harwich and Dover had fought their way, literally mile by mile, towards the capital of the modern world.

Day and night the fighting never stopped. As soon as two hostile divisions had fought each other to a standstill, and from sheer weariness of the flesh the battle died down in one part of the huge arena, the flame sprang up in another, and raged on with ever renewed fury. Outnumbered four and five to one in every engagement, and with the terrible war-balloons raining death on them from the clouds, the British armies had eclipsed all the triumphs of the long array of their former victories by the magnificent devotion that they showed in the hour of what seemed to be the death-struggle of the Empire.

The glories of Inkermann and Balaclava, of Albuera and Waterloo, paled before the achievements of the whole-souled heroism displayed by the British soldiery standing, as it were, with its back to the wall, and fighting, not so much with any hope of victory, for that was soon seen to be a physical impossibility, but with the invincible determination not to permit the invader to advance on London save over the dead bodies of its defenders.

Such a gallant defence had never been made before in the face of such irresistible odds. When the soldiers of the League first set foot on British soil the defending armies of the North and South had, with the greatest exertions, been brought up to a fighting strength of about twelve hundred thousand men. So stubborn had been the heroism with which they had disputed the progress of their enemies that by the time that the guns of the League were planted on the heights that commanded the Metropolis, more than a million and a half of men had gone down under the hail of British bullets and the rush of British bayonets.

Of all the battlefields of this the bloodiest war in the history of human strife, none had been so deeply dyed with blood as had been the fair and fertile English gardens and meadows over which the hosts of the League had fought their way to the confines of London. Only the weight of overwhelming numbers, reinforced by engines of destruction which could strike without the possibility of effective retaliation, had made their progress possible.

Had they met their heroic foes as they had met them in the days of the old warfare, their superiority of numbers would have availed them but little. They would have been hurled back and driven into the sea, and not a man of them all would have left British soil alive had it been but a question of military attack and defence.

But this was not a war of men. It was a war of machines, and those who wielded the most effective machinery for the destruction of life won battle after battle as a matter of course, just as a man armed with a repeating rifle would overcome a better man armed with a bow and arrow.

Natas had formed an entirely accurate estimate of the policy of the leaders of the League when he told Tremayne, in the library at Alanmere, that they would concentrate all their efforts on the reduction of London. The rest of the kingdom had been for the present entirely ignored.

London was the heart of the British Empire and of the English-speaking world, for the matter of that, and therefore it had been determined to strike one deadly blow at the vital centre of the whole huge organism. That paralysed, the rest must fall to pieces of necessity. The fleet was destroyed, and every soldier that Britain could put into the field had been mustered for the defence of London. Therefore the fall of London meant the conquest of Britain.

After the battles of Dover and Harwich the invading forces advanced upon London in the following order: The Army of the South had landed at Deal, Dover, and Folkestone in three divisions, and after a series of terrific conflicts had fought its way via Chatham, Maidstone, and Tunbridge to the banks of the Thames, and occupied all the commanding positions from Shooter's Hill to Richmond. These three forces were composed entirely of French and Italian army corps, and numbered from first to last nearly four million men.

On the north the invading force was almost wholly Russian, and was under the command of the Tsar in person, in whom the supreme command of the armies of the League had by common consent been now vested. A constant service of transports, plying day and night between Antwerp and Harwich, had placed at his disposal a force about equal to that of the Army of the South, although he had lost over seven hundred thousand men before he was able to occupy the line of heights from Hornsey to Hampstead, with flanking positions at Brondesbury and Harlesden to the west, and at Tottenham, Stratford, and Barking to the east.

By the 29th of November all the railways were in the hands of the invaders. A chain of war-balloons between Barking and Shooter's Hill closed the Thames. The forts at Tilbury had been destroyed by an Aerial bombardment. A flotilla of submarine torpedo-vessels had blown up the defences of the estuary of the Thames and Medway, and led to the fall of Sheerness and Chatham, and had then been docked at Sheerness, there being no further present use for them.

The other half of the squadron, supported by a few battleships and cruisers which had survived the battle of Dover, had proceeded to Portsmouth, destroyed the booms and submarine defences, while a detachment of aerostats shelled the land defences, and then in a moment of wanton revenge had blown up the venerable hulk of the Victory, which had gone down at her moorings with her flag still flying as it had done a hundred years before at the fight of Trafalgar. After this inglorious achievement they had been laid up in dock to wait for their next opportunity of destruction, should it ever occur.

London was thus cut off from all communication, not only with the outside world, but even from the rest of England. The remnants of the armies of defence had been gradually driven in upon the vast wilderness of bricks and mortar which now held more than eight millions of men, women, and children, hemmed in by long lines of batteries and entrenched camps, from which thousands of guns hurled their projectiles far and wide into the crowded masses of the houses, shattering them with bursting shells, and laying the whole streets in ruins, while overhead the war-balloons slowly circled hither and thither, dropping their fire-shells and completing the ruin and havoc wrought by the artillery of the siege-trains.

Under such circumstances surrender was really only a matter of time, and that time had very nearly come. The London and North-Western Railway, which had been the last to fall into the hands of the invaders, had been closed for over a week, and food was running very short. Eight millions of people massed together in a space of thirty or forty square miles' area can only be fed and kept healthy under the most favourable conditions. Hemmed in as London now was, from being the best ordered great city in the world, it had degenerated with frightful rapidity into a vast abode of plague and famine, a mass of human suffering and misery beyond all conception or possibility of description.

Defence there was now practically none; but still the invaders did not leave their vantage ground on the hills, and not a soldier of the League had so far set foot in London proper. Either the besiegers preferred to starve the great city into surrender at discretion, and then extort ruinous terms, or else they hesitated to plunge into that tremendous gulf of human misery, maddened by hunger and made desperate by despair. If they did so hesitate they were wise, for London was too vast to be carried by assault or by any series of assaults.

No army could have lived in its wilderness of streets swarming with enemies, who would have fought them from house to house and street to street. Once they had entered that mighty maze of streets and squares both their artillery and their war-balloons would have been useless, for they would only have buried friend and foe in common destruction. There were plenty of ways into London, but the way

out was a very different matter.

Had a general assault been attempted, not a man would ever have got out of London alive. The commanders of the League saw this clearly, and so they kept their position on the heights, wasted the city with an almost constant bombardment, and, while they drew their supplies from the fertile lands in their rear, lay on their arms and waited for the inevitable.

Within the besieged area martial law prevailed universally. Riots were of daily, almost hourly, occurrence, but they were repressed with an iron hand, and the rioters were shot down in the streets without mercy; for, though siege and famine were bad enough, anarchy breaking out amidst that vast sweltering mass of human beings would have been a thousand times worse, and so the King, who, assisted by the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Council, had assumed the control of the whole city, had directed that order was to be maintained at any price.

The remains of the army were quartered in the parks under canvas, and billeted in houses throughout the various districts, in order to support the police in repressing disorder and protecting property. Still, in spite of all that could be done, matters were rapidly coming to a terrible pass. In a week, at the latest, the horses of the cavalry would be eaten. For a fortnight London had almost lived upon horse-flesh. In the poorer quarters there was not a dog to be seen, and a sewer rat was considered a delicacy.

Eight million mouths had made short work of even the vast supplies that had been hurriedly poured into the city as soon as the invasion had become a certainty, and absolute starvation was now a matter of a few days at the outside. There were millions of money lying idle, but very soon a five-pound note would not buy even a little loaf of bread.

But famine was by no means the only horror that afflicted London during those awful days and nights. All round the heights the booming of cannon sounded incessantly. Huge shells went screaming through the air overhead to fall and burst amidst some swarming hive of humanity, scattering death and mutilation where they fell; and high up in the air the fleet of aerostats perpetually circled, dropping their fire-shells and blasting cartridges on the dense masses of houses, until a hundred conflagrations were raging at once in different parts of the city.

No help had come from outside. Indeed none was to be expected. There was only one Power in the world that was now capable of coping with the forces of the victorious League, but its overtures had been rejected, and neither the King nor any of his advisers had now the slightest idea as to how those who controlled it would now use it. No one knew the real strength of the Terrorists, or the Federation which they professed to control.

All that was known was that, if they choose, they could with their Aerial fleet sweep the war-balloons from the air in a few moments and destroy the batteries of the besiegers; but they had made no sign after the rejection of their President's offer to prevent the landing of the forces of the League on condition that the British Government accepted the Federation, and resigned its powers in favour of its Executive.

The refusal of those terms had now cost more than a million British lives, and an incalculable amount of human suffering and destruction of property. Until the news of the disaster of Dover had actually reached London, no one had really believed that it was possible for an invading force to land on British soil and exist for twenty-four hours. Now the impossible had been made possible, and the last crushing blow must fall within the next few days. After that who knew what might befall?

So far as could be seen, Britain lay helpless at the mercy of her foes. Her allies had ceased to exist as independent Powers, and the Russian and the Gaul were thundering at her gates as, fifteen hundred years before, the Goth had thundered at the gates of the Eternal City in the last days of the Roman Empire.

If the terms of the Federation could have been offered again, it is probable that the King of England would have been the first man to own his mistake and that of his advisers and accept them, for now the choice lay between utter and humiliating defeat and the breaking up of the Empire, and the recognition of the Federation. After all, the kinship of a race was a greater fact in the supreme hour of national

disaster than the maintenance of a dynasty or the perpetuation of a particular form of government.

It was not now a question of nation against nation, but of race against race. The fierce flood of war had swept away all smaller distinctions. It was necessary to rise to the altitude of the problem of the Government, not of nations, but of the world. Was the genius of the East or of the West to shape the future destinies of the human race? That was the mighty problem of which the events of the next few weeks were to work out the solution, for when the sun set on the Field of Armageddon the fate of Humanity would be fixed for centuries to come.

CHAPTER XLI. AN ENVOY OF DELIVERANCE.

FROM the time that the Tsar had received the conditional declaration of war from the President of the Anglo-Saxon Federation in America to nightfall on the 29th of November, when the surrender of the capital of the British Empire was considered to be a matter of a few days only, the Commander-in-Chief of the forces of the League was absolutely in the dark, not only as to the actual intentions of the Terrorists, if they had any, but also as to the doings of his allies in America.

According to the stipulations arranged between himself and the confidential agent of the American Government, the blockading flotilla of dynamite cruisers ought to have sailed from America as soon as the cypher message containing the news of the battle of Dover reached New York. The message had been duly sent via Queenstown and New York, and had been acknowledged in the usual way, but no definite reply had come to it, and a month had elapsed without the appearance of the promised squadron. The explanation of this will be readily guessed. The American end of the Queenstown cable had been reconnected with Washington, but it was under the absolute control of Tremayne, who permitted no one to use it save himself.

Other messages had been sent to which no reply had been received, and a swift French cruiser, which had been launched at Brest since the battle of Dover, had been despatched across the Atlantic to discover the reason of this strange silence. She had gone, but she had never returned. The Atlantic highway appeared to be barred by some invisible force. No vessels came from the westward, and those which started from the east were never heard of again.

His Majesty had treated the summons of the President of the Federation with silent contempt, just as such a victorious autocrat might have been expected to do. True, he knew the terrific power wielded by the Terrorists through their Aerial fleet, and he had an uncomfortable conviction, which refused to be entirely stifled, that in the days to come he would have to reckon with them and it.

But that a member of the Terrorist Brotherhood could by any possible means have placed himself at the head of any body of men sufficiently numerous or well-disciplined to make them a force to be seriously reckoned with in military warfare, his Majesty had never for a moment believed.

And, more than this, however disquieting might be the uncertainty due to the ominous silence on the other side of the Atlantic, and the non-arrival of the expected fleet, there stood the great and significant fact that the army of the League had been permitted, without molestation either from the Terrorists or the Federation in whose name they had presumed to declare war upon him, not only to destroy what remained of the British fleet, but to completely invest the very capital of Anglo-Saxondom itself.

All this had been done; the sacred soil of Britain itself had been violated by the invading hosts; the army of defence had been slowly, and at a tremendous sacrifice of life on both sides, forced back from line after line, and position after position, into the city itself; his batteries were raining their hail of shot and shell from the heights round London, and his aerostats were hurling ruin from the sky upon the crowded millions locked up in the beleaguered space; and yet the man who had presumed to tell him that the hour in which he set foot on British soil would be the last of his Empire, had done absolutely nothing to interrupt the march of conquest.

From this it will be seen that Alexander Romanoff was at least as completely in the dark as to the possible course of the events of the near future as was the King of England himself shut up in his capital, and cut off from all communication from the rest of the world.

On the morning of the 29th of November there was held at the Prime Minister's rooms in Downing Street a Cabinet Council, presided over by the King in person. After the Council had remained for about an hour in earnest consultation, a stranger was admitted to the room in which they were sitting.

The reader would have recognised him in a moment as Maurice Colston, otherwise Alexis Mazanoff, for he was dressed almost exactly as he had been on that memorable night, just thirteen months before, when he made the acquaintance of Richard Arnold on the Thames Embankment.

Well-dressed, well-fed, and perfectly at ease, he entered the Council Chamber without any aggressive assumption, but still with the quiet confidence of a man who knows that he is practically master of the situation. How he had even got into London, beleaguered as it was on every side in such fashion that no one could get out of it without being seen and shot by the besiegers, was a mystery; but how he could have in his possession, as he had, a despatch dated thirty-six hours previously in New York was a still deeper mystery; and upon neither of these points did he make the slightest attempt to enlighten the members of the British Cabinet.

All that he said was that he was the bearer of a message from the President of the Anglo-Saxon Federation in America, and that he was instructed to return that night to New York with such answer as the British Government might think fit to make to it. It was this message that had been the subject of the deliberations of the Council before his admission, and its net effect was as follows.

It was now practically certain, indeed proved to demonstration, that the forces at the command of the British Government were not capable of coping with those brought against them by the commanders of the League, and that therefore Britain, if left to her own resources, must inevitably succumb, and submit to such terms as her conquerors might think fit to impose upon her. The choice before the British Government thus lay between surrender to her foreign enemies, whose objects were well known to be dismemberment of the Empire and the reduction of Great Britain to the rank of a third-class Power,---to say nothing of the payment of a war indemnity which could not fail to be paralysing,---and the consent of those who controlled the destinies of the mother country to accept a Federation of the whole Anglo-Saxon race, to waive the merely national idea in favour of the racial one, and to permit the Executive Council of the Federation to assume those governmental functions which were exercised at present by the King and the British Houses of Parliament.

In a word, the choice lay between conquest by a league of foreign powers and the merging of Britain into the Federation of the English-speaking peoples of the world.

If the former choice were taken, the only prospect possible under the condition of things was a possibly enormous sacrifice of human life on the side of both Britain and its enemies, a gigantic loss in money, the crippling of British trade and commerce, and then a possible, nay probable, social revolution to which the message distinctly pointed.

If the latter choice were taken, the forces of the Federation would be at once brought into the field against those of the League, the siege of London would be raised, the power of the invaders would be effectually broken for ever, and the stigma of conquest finally wiped away.

It is only just to record the fact that in this supreme crisis of British history the man who most strongly insisted upon the acceptance of the terms which he had previously, as he now confessed in the most manly and outspoken fashion, rejected in ignorance of the true situation of affairs, was the man who believed that he would lose a crown by accepting them.

When the Ambassador of the Federation had been presented to the Council, the King rose in his place and handed to him with his own hands a sealed letter, saying as he did so--

"Mr. Mazanoff, I am still to a great extent in ignorance as to the inexplicable combination of events which has made it necessary for me to return this affirmative answer to the message of which you are the bearer. I am, however, fully aware that the Earl of Alanmere, whose name I have seen at the foot of this document with the most profound astonishment, is in a position to do what he says.

"The course of events has been exactly that which he predicted. I know, too, that whatever causes may have led him to unite himself to those known as the Terrorists, he is an English nobleman, and a man to whom falsehood or bad faith is absolutely impossible. In your marvellous Aerial feet I know also that he wields the only power capable of being successfully opposed to those terrible machines which had wrought such havoc upon the fleets and armies, not only of Britain, but of Europe.

"To a certain extent this is a surrender, but I feel that it will be better to surrender the destinies of Britain into the hands of her own blood and kindred than to the tender mercies of her alien enemies. My own personal feelings must weigh as nothing in the balance where the fate, not only of this country, but

perhaps of the whole world, is now poised.

"After all, the first duty of a Constitutional King is not to himself and his dynasty, but to his country and his people, and therefore I feel that it will be better for me and mine to be citizens of a free Federation of the English-speaking peoples, and of the nations to which Britain has given birth, than the titular sovereign and Royal family of a conquered country, holding the mockery of royalty on the sufferance of their conquerors.

"Tell Lord Alanmere from me that I now accept the terms he has offered as President of the Anglo-Saxon Federation, first, because at all hazards I would see Britain delivered from her enemies; and, secondly, because I have chosen rather to be an English gentleman without a crown, than to wear a crown which after all would only be gift from my conquerors."

Edward VII. spoke with visible emotion, but with a dignity which even Mazanoff, little and all as he respected the name of king, felt himself compelled to recognise and respect. He took the letter with a bow that was more one of reverence than of courtesy, and as he put it into his breast-pocket of his coat he said--

"The President will receive your Majesty's reply with as genuine pleasure and satisfaction as I shall give it to him. Though I am a Russian without a drop of English blood in my veins, I have always looked upon the British race as the real bulwark of freedom, and I rejoice that the King of England has not permitted either tradition or personal feeling to stand in the way of the last triumph of the Anglo-Saxon race.

"As long as the English language is spoken your Majesty's name will be held in greater honour for this sacrifice which you make to-day, than will that of any other English king for the greatest triumph of arms ever achieved in the history of your country.

"I must now take my leave, for I must be in New York to-morrow night. I have your word that I shall not be watched or followed after I leave here. Hold the city for six days more at all costs, and on the seventh at the latest the siege shall be raised and the enemies of Britain destroyed in their own entrenchments."

So saying, the envoy of the Federation bowed once more to the King and the astonished members of his Council, and was escorted to the door.

Once in the street he strode away rapidly through Parliament Street and the Strand, then up Drury Lane, until he reached the door of a mean-looking house in a squalid court and entering this with a latch-key, disappeared.

Three hours later a Russian soldier of the line, wearing an almost imperceptible knot of red ribbon in one of the buttonholes of his tunic, passed through the Russian lines on Hampstead Heath unchallenged by the sentries, and made his way northward to Northaw Wood, which he reached soon after nightfall.

Within half an hour the Ithuriel rose from the midst of a thick clump of trees like a grey shadow rising into the night and darted southward and upward at such a speed that the keenest eyes must soon have lost sight of her from the earth.

She passed over the beleaguered city at a height of nearly ten thousand feet, and then swept sharply round to the eastward. She stopped immediately over the lights of Sheerness, and descended to within a thousand feet of the dock, in which could be seen the detachment of the French submarine vessels lying waiting to be sent on their next errand of destruction.

As soon as those on board her had made out the dock clearly she ascended a thousand feet and went about half a mile to the southward. From that position she poured a rapid hail of shells into the dock, which was instantly transformed into a cavity vomiting green flame and fragments of iron and human bodies. In five minutes nothing was left of the dock or its contents but a churned-up swamp of muddy water and shattered stonework.

Then, her errand so far accomplished, the air-ship sped away to the south-westward, and within an hour she had destroyed in like fashion the submarine squadron in the Government dock at Portsmouth, and was winging her way westward to New York with the reply of the King of England to the President

of the Federation.

CHAPTER XLII. THE EVE OF ARMAGEDDON.

WHEN the news of the destruction of the two divisions of the submarine squadron reached the headquarters of the League on the night of the 29th, it would have been difficult to say whether anger or consternation most prevailed among the leaders. A council of war was hurriedly summoned to discuss an event which it was impossible to look upon as anything less than a calamity.

The destruction which had been wrought was of itself disastrous enough, for it deprived the League of the chief means by which it had destroyed the British fleet and kept command of the sea. But even more terrible than the actual destruction was the unexpected suddenness with which the blow had been delivered.

For five months, that is to say, from the recapture of the Lucifer at Aberdeen, the Tsar and his coadjutors had seen nothing of the operations of the Terrorists; and now, without a moment's warning, this apparently omnipresent and yet almost invisible force had struck once more with irresistible effect, and instantly vanished back into the mystery out of which it had come.

Who could tell when the next blow would fall, or in what shape the next assault would be delivered? In the presence of such enemies, invisible and unreachable, the commanders of the League, to their rage and disgust, felt themselves, on the eve of their supreme victory, as impotent as a man armed with a sword would have felt in front of a Gatling gun.

Consternation naturally led to divided councils. The French and Italian commanders were for an immediate general assault on London at all hazards, and the enforcement of terms of surrender at the point of the sword. The Tsar, on the other hand, insisted on the pursuance of the original policy of reduction by starvation, as he rightly considered that, great as the attacking force was, it would be practically swamped amidst the infuriated millions of the besieged, and that, even if the assault were successful, the loss of life would be so enormous that the conquest of the rest of Britain--which in such a case would almost certainly rise to a man--would be next door to impossible.

He, however, so far yielded as to agree to send a message to the King of England to arrange terms of surrender, if possible at once, in order to save further bloodshed, and then, if these terms were rejected, to prepare for a general assault on the seventh day from then.

These terms were accepted as a compromise, and the next morning the bombardment ceased both from the land batteries and the air. At daybreak on the 30th an envoy left the Tsar's headquarters in one of the war-balloons, flying a flag of truce, and descended in Hyde Park. He was received by the King in Council at Buckingham Palace, and, after a lengthy deliberation, an answer was returned to the effect that on condition the bombardment ceased for the time being, London would be surrendered at noon on the 6th of December if no help had by that time arrived from the other cities of Britain. These terms, after considerable opposition from General le Gallifet and General Cosensz, the Italian Commander-in-Chief, were adopted and ratified at noon that day, almost at the very moment that Alexis Mazanoff was presenting the reply of the King of England to the President of the Federation in New York.

As the relief expedition had been fully decided upon, whether the British Government recognised the Federation or not, everything was in readiness for an immediate start as soon as the Ithuriel brought definite news as to the acceptance or rejection of the President's second offer. For the last seven weeks the ten dockyards of the east coast of America, and at Halifax in Nova Scotia, had been thronged with shipping, and swarming with workmen and sailors.

All the vessels which had been swept off the Atlantic by the war-storm, and which were of sufficient size and speed to take part in the expedition, had been collected at these eleven ports. Whole fleets of liners of half a dozen different nationalities, which had been laid up since the establishment of the blockade, were now lying alongside the quays, taking in vast quantities of wheat and miscellaneous food-stuffs, which were being poured into their holds from the glutted markets of America and Canada. Every one of these vessels was fitted up as a troopship, and by the time all arrangements were

complete, more than a thousand vessels, carrying on an average twelve hundred men each, were ready to take the sea.

In addition to these there was a fleet of warships as yet unscathed by shot or shell, consisting of thirty battleships, a hundred and ten cruisers, and the flotilla of dynamite cruisers which had been constructed by the late Government at the expense of the capitalist Ring. There were no less than two hundred of these strange but terribly destructive craft, the lineal descendants of the Vesuvius, which, as the naval reader will remember, was commissioned in 1890.

They were double-hulled vessels built on the whale-back plan, and the compartments between the inner and outer hull could be wholly or partially filled with water. When they were entirely filled the hull sank below the surface, leaving nothing as a mark to an enemy save a platform standing ten feet above the water. This platform, constructed throughout of 6-inch nickel-steel, was of oval shape, a hundred feet long and thirty broad in its greatest diameter, and carried the heavily armoured wheel-house and conning-tower, two funnels, six ventilators, and two huge pneumatic guns, each seventy-five feet long, working on pivots nearly amidships.

These weapons, with an air-charge of three hundred atmospheres, would throw four hundred pounds of dynamite to a distance of three miles with such accuracy that the projectile would invariably fall within a space of twenty feet square. The guns could be discharged once a minute, and could thus hurl 48,000 lbs. of dynamite an hour upon a hostile fleet or fortifications.

Each cruiser also carried two under-water torpedo tubes ahead and two astern. The funnels emitted no smoke, but merely supplied draught to the petroleum furnaces, which burned with practically no waste, and developed a head of steam which drove the long submerged hulls through the water at a rate of thirty-two knots, or more than thirty-six miles an hour.

Such was the enormous naval armament, manned by nearly a hundred thousand men, which hoisted the Federation flag at one o'clock on the afternoon of the 30th of November, when orders were telegraphed north and south from Washington to get ready for sea. Two hours later the vast flotilla of warships and transports had cleared American waters, and was converging towards a point indicated by the intersection of the 41st parallel of latitude with the 40th meridian of longitude.

At this ocean rendezvous the divisions of the fleet and its convoys met and shaped their course for the mouth of the English Channel. They proceeded in column of line abreast three deep, headed by the dynamite cruisers, after which came the other warships which had formed the American Navy, and after these again came the troopships and transports properly protected by cruisers on their flanks and in their rear.

The commander of every warship and transport had the most minute instructions as to how he was to act on reaching British waters, and what these were will become apparent in due course. The weather was fairly good for the time of year, and, as there was but little danger of collision on the now deserted waters of the Atlantic, the whole flotilla kept at full speed all the way. As, however, its speed was necessarily limited by that of its slowest steamer until the scene of action was reached, it was after midnight on the 5th of December when its various detachments had reached their appointed stations on the English coast.

At the entrance of the English Channel and St. George's Channel a few scouting cruisers, flying French, Russian, and Italian colours, had been run down and sunk by the dynamite cruisers. Strict orders had been given by Tremayne to destroy everything flying a hostile flag, and not to permit any news to be taken to England of the approach of the flotilla. The Federation was waging a war, not merely of conquest and revenge, but of extermination, and no more mercy was to be shown to its enemies than they had shown in their march of victory from one end of Europe to the other.

While the Federation fleet had been crossing the Atlantic, other events no less important had been taking place in England and Scotland. The hitherto apparently inert mass of the population had suddenly awakened out of its lethargy. In town and country alike men forsook their daily avocations as if by one consent. As in America, artisans, pitmen, clerks, and tradesmen were suddenly transformed

into soldiers, who drilled, first in squads of ten, and then in hundreds and thousands, and finally in tens of thousands, all uniformed alike in rough grey breeches and tunics, with a knot of red ribbon in the buttonhole, and all armed with rifle, bayonet, and revolver, which they seemed to handle with a strange and ominous familiarity.

All the railway traffic over the island was stopped, and the rolling-stock collected at the great stations along the lines to London, and at the same time all the telegraph wires communicating with the south and east were cut. As day after day passed, signs of an intense but strongly suppressed excitement became more and more visible all over the provinces, and especially in the great towns and cities.

In London very much the same thing had happened. Hundreds of thousands of civilians vanished during that seven days of anxious waiting for the hour of deliverance, and in their place sprang up orderly regiments of grey-clad soldiers, who saw the red knot in each other's button-holes, and welcomed each other as comrades unknown before.

To the surprise of the commanders of the regular army, orders had been issued by the King that all possible assistance was to be rendered to these strange legions, which had thus so suddenly sprang into existence; and the result was that when the sun set on the 5th of December, the twenty-first day of the total blockade of London, the beleaguered space contained over two millions of armed men, hungering both for food and vengeance, who, like the five millions of their fellow-countrymen outside London, were waiting for a sign from the sky to fling themselves upon the entrapped and unsuspecting invader.

That night countless eyes were upturned throughout the length and breadth of Britain to the dun pall of wintry cloud that overspread the land. Yet so far, so perfect was the discipline of this gigantic host, not a sign of overt hostile movement had been made, and the commanders of the armies of the League looked forward with exulting confidence to the moment, now only a few hours distant, when the capital of the British Empire, cut off from all help, should be surrendered into their hands in accordance with the terms agreed upon.

When night fell the Ithuriel was floating four thousand feet above Aberdeen. Arnold and Natasha, wrapped in warm furs, were standing on deck impatiently watching the sun sinking down over the sea of clouds which lay between them and the earth.

"There it goes at last!" exclaimed Natasha, as the last of the level beams shot across the cloud-sea and the rim of the pale disc sank below the surface of the vapoury ocean. "The time that we have waited and worked for so long has come at last. This is the eve of Armageddon! Who would think it, floating up here above the clouds and beneath those cold, calmly shining stars! And yet the fate of the whole world is trembling in the balance, and the doings of the next twenty-four hours will settle the destiny of mankind for generations to come. The hour of the Revolution has struck at last"--

"And therefore it is time that the Angel of the Revolution should give the last signal with her own hand!" said Arnold, seized with a sudden fancy, "Come, you shall start the dynamo yourself."

"Yes I will, and, I hope, kindle a flame that shall purge the earth of tyranny and oppression for ever. Richard, what must my father be thinking of just now down yonder in the cabin?"

"I dare not even guess. To-morrow or the next day will be the day of reckoning, and then God help those of whom he demands payment, for they will need it. The vials of wrath are full, and before long the oppressors of the earth will have drained them to the dregs. Come, it is time we went down."

They descended together to the engine-room, and meanwhile the air-ship sank through the clouds until the lights of Aberdeen lay about a thousand feet below. A lens of red glass had been fitted to the searchlight of the Ithuriel, and all that was necessary was to connect the forward engine with the dynamo.

Arnold put Natasha's hand on a little lever. As she took hold of it she thought with a shudder of the mighty forces of destruction which her next movement would let loose. Then she thought of all that those nearest and dearest to her had suffered at the hands of Russian despotism, and of all the nameless horrors of the rule whose death-signal she was about to give.

As she did so her grip tightened on the lever, and when Arnold, having given his orders to the head

engineer as to speed and course, put his hand on her shoulder and said, "Now!" she pulled it back with a sharp, determined motion and the next instant a broad fan of blood-red light shot over the Ithuriel's bows.

At the same moment the air-ship's propellers began to spin round, and then with the flood of red light streaming in front of her, she headed southward at full speed towards Edinburgh. The signal flashed over the Scottish capital, and then the Ithuriel swerved round to the westward.

Half an hour later Glasgow saw it and then away she sped southward across the Border to Carlisle; and so through the long December night she flew hither and thither eastward and westward, flashing the red battle-signal over field and village and town; and wherever it shone armed men sprang up like the fruit of the fabled dragon's teeth, companies were mustered in streets and squares and fields and marched to railway stations; and soon long trains, one after another in endless succession, got into motion, all moving towards the south and east, all converging upon London.

Last of all, after it had made a swift circuit of northern and central and western England, the red light swept along the south coast, and then swerved northward again till it flashed thrice over London, and then it vanished into the darkness of the hour before the dawn of Armageddon.

Since the ever-memorable night of Thursday the 29th of July 1588, three hundred and sixteen years before, when "The beacon blazed upon the roof of Edgcumbe's lofty Hall," and the answering fires sprang up "From Eddystone to Berwick bounds, from Lynn to Milford Bay," to tell that the Spanish Armada was in sight, there had been no such night in England, nor had men ever dreamed that there should be.

But great as had been the deeds done by the heroes of the sixteenth century with the pigmy means at their command, they were but the merest child's play to the awful storm of devastation which, in a few hours, was to burst over southern England. Then it was England against Spain; now it was Anglo-Saxondom against the world; and the conquering race of earth, armed with the most terrific powers of destruction that human wit had ever devised, was rising in its wrath, millions strong, to wipe out the stain of invasion from the sacred soil of the motherland of the Anglo-Saxon nations.

CHAPTER XLIII. THE OLD LION AT BAY.

THE morning of the 6th of December dawned grey and cold over London and the hosts that were waiting for its surrender. Scarcely any smoke rose from the myriad chimneys of the vast city, for the coal was almost all burnt, and what was left was selling at £12 a ton. Wood was so scarce that people were tearing up the woodwork of their houses to keep a little fire going.

So the steel-grey sky remained clear, for towards daybreak the clouds had been condensed by a cold north-easter into a sharp fall of fine, icy snow, and as the sun gained power it shone chilly over the whitened landscape, the innumerable roofs of London, and the miles of tents lining the hills to the north and south of the Thames valley.

The havoc wrought by the bombardment on the public buildings of the great city had been terrible. Of the Houses of Parliament only a shapeless heap of broken stones remained, the Law Courts were in ruins, what had been the Albert Hall was now a roofless ring of blackened walls, Nelson's Column lay shattered across Trafalgar Square, and the Royal Exchange, the Bank of England, and the Mansion House mingled their fragments in the heart of the almost deserted city.

Only three of the great buildings of London had suffered no damage. These were the British Museum, Westminster Abbey and St Paul's, which had been spared in accordance with special orders issued by the commanders of the League. The two former were spared for the same reason that the Germans had spared Strasburg Cathedral in 1870--because their destruction would have been a loss, not to Britain alone, but to the world.

The great church of the metropolis had been left untouched chiefly because it had been arranged that, on the fall of London, the Tsar was to be proclaimed Emperor of Asia under its dome, and at the same time General le Gallifet was to assume the Dictatorship of France and abolish the Republic, which for more than ten years had been the plaything of unprincipled financiers, and the laughing-stock of Europe. As the sun rose the great golden cross, rising high out of the wilderness of houses, shone more and more brightly under the brightening sky, and millions of eyes looked upon it from within the city and from without with feelings far asunder as triumph and defeat.

At daybreak the last meal had been eaten by the defenders of the city. To supply it almost every animal left in London had been sacrificed, and the last drop of liquor was drunk, even to the last bottle of wine in the Royal cellars, which the King shared with his two commanders-in-chief, Lord Roberts and Lord Wolseley, in the presence of the troops on the balcony of Buckingham Palace. At nine o'clock the King and Queen attended service in St. Paul's, and when they left the Cathedral half an hour later the besiegers on the heights were astounded to hear the bells of all the steeples left standing in London ring out in a triumphant series of peals which rippled away eastward and westward from St. Paul's and Westminster Abbey, caught up and carried on by steeple after steeple, until from Highgate to Dulwich, and from Hammersmith to Canning Town, the beleaguered and starving city might have been celebrating some great triumph or deliverance.

The astonished besiegers could only put the extraordinary manifestation down to joy on the part of the citizens at the near approaching end of the siege; but before the bells of London had been ringing for half an hour this fallacious idea was dispelled from their minds in a very stern and summary fashion.

Since nightfall there had been no communication with the secret agents of the League in the various towns of England and Scotland. At ten o'clock a small company of Cossacks spurred and flogged their jaded horses up the northern slope of Muswell Hill, on which the Tsar had fixed his headquarters. Nearly every man was wounded, and the horses were in the last stages of exhaustion. Their captain was at once admitted to the presence of the Tsar, and, flinging himself on the ground before the enraged Autocrat, gasped out the dreadful tidings that his little company were the sole survivors of the army of occupation that had been left at Harwich, and which, twelve hours before, had been thirty thousand

strong.

A huge fleet of strange-looking vessels, flying a plain blood-red flag, had just before four A.M. forced the approaches to the harbour, sunk every transport and warship with guns that were fired without flame, or smoke, or report, and whose projectiles shattered everything that they struck. Immediately afterwards an immense flotilla of transports had steamed in, and, under the protection of those terrible guns, had landed a hundred thousand men, all dressed in the same plain grey uniform, with no facings or ornaments save a knot of red ribbon at the button-hole, and armed with magazine rifle and a bayonet and a brace of revolvers. All were English by their speech, and every man appeared to know exactly what to do with very few orders from his officers.

This invading force had hunted the Russians out of Harwich like rabbits out of a warren, while the ships in the harbour had hurled their shells up into the air so that they fell back to earth on the retreating army and exploded with frightful effect. The general in command had at once telegraphed to London for a detachment of war-balloons and reinforcements, but no response had been received.

After four hours' fighting the Russian army was in full retreat, while the attacking force was constantly increasing as transport after transport steamed into the harbour and landed her men. At Colchester the Russians had been met by another vast army which had apparently sprung from the earth, dressed and armed exactly as the invading force was. What its numbers were there was no possibility of telling.

By this time, too, treachery began to show itself in the Russian ranks, and whole companies suddenly appeared with the red knot of ribbon in their tunics, and instantly turned their weapons against their comrades, shooting them down without warning or mercy. No quarter had been given to those who did not show the ribbon. Most of them died fighting, but those who had thrown away their arms were shot down all the same.

Whoever commanded this strange army had manifestly given orders to take no prisoners, and it was equally certain that its movements were directed by the Terrorists, for everywhere the battle-cries had been, "In the Master's name!" and "Slay, and spare not!"

The whole of the army, save the deserters, had been destroyed, and the deserters had immediately assumed the grey uniforms of those of the Terrorist army who had fallen. The Cossack captain and his forty or fifty followers were the sole remains of a body of three thousand men who had fought their way through the second army. The whole country to the north and east seemed alive with the grey soldiery, and it was only after a hundred hair-breadth escapes that they had managed to reach the protection of the lines round London.

Such was the tale of the bringer of bad tidings to the Tsar at the moment when he was looking forward to the crowning triumph of his reign. Like the good soldier that he was, he wasted no time in thinking at a moment when everything depended on instant action.

He at once despatched a war-balloon to the French and Italian headquarters with a note containing the terrible news from Harwich, and requesting Generals le Gallifet and Cosensz to lose no time in communicating with the eastern and southern ports, and in throwing out corps of observation supported by war-balloons. Evidently the American Government had played the League false at the last monument, and had allied herself with Britain.

As soon as he had sent off this message, the Tsar ordered a fleet of forty aerostats to proceed to the north-eastward, in advance of a force of infantry and cavalry numbering three hundred thousand men, and supported by fifty batteries of field and machine guns, which he detached to stop the progress of the Federation army towards London. Before this force was in motion a reply came back from General le Gallifet to the effect that all communication with the south and east was stopped, and that an aerostat, which had been on scout duty during the night, had returned with the news that the whole country appeared to be up in arms from Portsmouth to Dover. Corps of observation and a fleet of thirty aerostats had been sent out, and three army corps were already on the march to the south and east.

Meanwhile, the hour for the surrender of London was drawing very near, and all the while the bells

were sending their mingled melody of peals and carillons up into the clear frosty air with a defiant joyousness that seemed to speak of anything but surrender. As twelve o'clock approached the guns of all the batteries on the heights were loaded and trained on different parts of the city, and the whole of the forces left after the detachment of the armies that had been sent to engage the battalions of the Federation prepared to descend upon the devoted city from all sides after the two hours' incessant bombardment that had been ordered to precede the general attack.

It had been arranged that if the city surrendered a white flag was to be hoisted on the cross of St. Paul's. Within a few minutes of twelve the Tsar ascended to the roof of the Alexandra Palace on Muswell Hill, and turned his field-glasses on the towering dome. His face and lips were bloodless with repressed but intense anxiety, but the hands that held his glasses to his eyes were as steady as though he had been watching a review of his own troops. It was the supreme moment of his victorious career. He was practically master of Europe. Only Britain held out. The relieving forces would be rent to fragments by his war-balloons, and then decimated by his troops as the legions of Germany and Austria had been. The capital of the English-speaking world lay starving at his feet, and a few minutes would see--

Ha! there goes the flag at last. A little ball of white bunting creeps up from the gallery above the dark dome. It clears the railing under the pedestal, and climbs to the apex of the shining cross. As it does so the wild chorus of the bells suddenly ceases, and out of the silence that follows come the deep booming strokes of the great bell of St. Paul's sounding the hour of twelve.

As the last stroke dies away the ball bursts, and the White Ensign of Britain crossed by the Red Cross of St. George, and with the Jack in the corner, floats out defiantly on the breeze, greeted by the reawakening clamour of the bells, and a deep hoarse cry from millions of throats, that rolls like a vast sea of sound up the slopes to the encampments of the League.

With an irrepressible cry of rage, Alexander dashed his field-glass to the ground, and shouted, in a voice broken with passion--

"So! They have tricked us. Let the bombardment begin at once, and bring that flag down with the first shots!"

But before the words were out of his mouth, the bombardment had already commenced in a very different fashion to that in which he had intended that it should begin. So intense had been the interest with which all eyes had been turned on the Cross of St. Paul's that no one had noticed twelve little points of shining light hanging high in air over the batteries of the besiegers, six to the north and six to the south.

But the moment that the Ensign of St. George coated from the summit of St. Paul's a rapid series of explosions roared out like a succession of thunder-claps along the lines of the batteries. The hills of Surrey, and Kent, and Middlesex were suddenly transformed into volcanoes spouting flame and thick black smoke, and flinging clouds of dust and fragments of darker objects high into the air.

The order of the Tsar was obeyed in part only, for by the time that the word to recommence the bombardment had been flashed round the circuit of the entrenchments, more than half the batteries had been put out of action. The twelve air-ships stationed at equal intervals round the vast ellipse, and discharging their No. 3 shell from their four guns ahead and astern, from an elevation of four thousand feet, had simultaneously wrecked half the batteries of the besiegers before their occupants had any clear idea of what was really happening.

Wherever one of those shells fell and exploded, earth and stone and iron melted into dust under the terrific force of the exploding gases, and the air-ships, moving with a velocity compared with which the utmost speed of the aerostats was as a snail's pace, flitted hither and thither wherever a battery got into action, and destroyed it before the second round had been fired.

There were still twenty-five aerostats at the command of the Tsar which had not been sent against the relieving forces, and as soon as it was realised that the Aerial bombardment of the batteries came from the air-ships of the Terrorist fleet, they were sent into the air to engage them at all hazards. They

outnumbered them two to one, but there was no comparison between the manoeuvring powers of the two Aerial squadrons.

As soon as the aerostats rose into the air, the Terrorist fleet receded northward and southward from the batteries. Their guns had a six-mile range, and it did not matter to them which side of the assailed area they lay. They could still hurl their explosives with the same deadly precision on the appointed mark. But with the aerostats it was a very different matter. They could only drop their shells vertically, and where they were not exactly above the object of attack their shells exploded with comparative harmlessness.

As a natural consequence they had to follow the air-ships, not only away from London, but over their own encampments, in order to bring them to anything like close quarters. The aerostats possessed one advantage, and one only, over the airships. They were able to rise to a much greater height. But this advantage the air-ships very soon turned into a disadvantage by reason of their immensely superior speed and ease of handling. They darted about at such a speed over the heads of the massed forces of the League on either side of London, that it was impossible to drop shells upon them without running the inevitable risk of missing the small and swiftly-moving air-ship, and so causing the shell to burst amidst friends instead of foes.

Thus the Terrorist fleet, sweeping hither and thither, in wide and ever changing curves, lured the most dangerous assailants of the beleaguered city farther and farther away from the real scene of action, at the very time when they were most urgently needed to support the attacking forces which at that moment were being poured into London.

To destroy the air-ships seemed an impossibility, since they could move at five times the speed of the swiftest aerostat, and yet to return to the bombardment of the city was to leave them free to commit what havoc they pleased upon the encampments of the armies of the League. So they were drawn farther and farther away from the beleaguered city, while their agile enemies, still keeping within their six-mile range, evaded their shells, and yet kept up a constant discharge of their own projectiles upon the salient points of the attack on London.

By four o'clock in the afternoon all the batteries of the besiegers had been put out of action by the Aerial bombardment. It was now a matter of man to man and steel to steel, and so the gage of final battle was accepted, and as dusk began to fall over the beleaguered city, the Russian, French and Italian hosts left their lines, and descended from their vantage ground to the assault on London, where the old Lion at bay was waiting for them with claws bared and teeth grinning defiance.

CHAPTER XLIV. THE TURN OF THE BATTLE-TIDE.

THE force which the Tsar had detached to operate against the Federation Army of the North left the headquarters at eleven o'clock, and proceeded in four main divisions by Edmonton, Chingford, Chigwell, and Romford. The aerostats, regulating their speed so as to keep touch with the land force, maintained a position two miles ahead of it at three thousand feet elevation.

Strict orders had been given to press on at the utmost speed, and to use every means to discover the Federationists, and bring them to an engagement with as little delay as possible; but they marched on hour after hour into the dusk of the early winter evening, with the sounds of battle growing fainter in their rear, without meeting with a sign of the enemy.

As it would have been the height of imprudence to have advanced in the dark into a hostile country occupied by an enemy of great but unknown strength, General Pralitzin, the Commander of the Russian force, decided to bring his men to a halt at nightfall, and therefore took up a series of positions between Cheshunt, Epping, Chipping Ongar, and Ingatestone. From these points squadrons of Cossacks scoured the country in all directions, north, east, and west, in search of the so far invisible army; and at the same time he sent mounted messengers back to headquarters to report that no enemy had been found, and to ask for further orders.

The aerostats slowed down their engines until their propellers just counteracted the force of the wind and they hung motionless at a height of a thousand feet, ranged in a semicircle about fifteen miles long over the heads of the columns.

All this time the motions of the Russian army had been watched by the captain of the Ithuriel from an elevation of eight thousand feet, five miles to the rear. As soon as he saw them making preparations for a halt, and had noticed the disposition of the aerostats, he left the conning-tower which he had occupied nearly all day, and went into the after saloon, where he found Natas and Natasha examining a large plan of London and its environs.

"They have come to a halt at last," he said. "And if they only remain where they are for three hours longer, we have the whole army like rats in a trap, war-balloons and all. They have not seen us so far, for if they had they would certainly have sent an aerostat aloft to reconnoitre, and, of course, I must have destroyed it. The whole forty are arranged in a semicircle over the heads of the four main columns in divisions of ten."

"And what do you propose to do with them now you have got them?" said Natasha, looking up with a welcoming smile.

"Give me a cup of coffee first, for I am cold to the marrow, and then I'll tell you," replied Arnold, seating himself at the table, on which stood a coffee-urn with a spirit lamp beneath it, something after the style of a Russian samovar.

Natasha filled a cup and passed it to him, and he went on--

"You remember what I said to Tremayne in the Princess's sitting-room at Petersburg about the eagle and the crows just before the trial of the Tsar's first war-balloon. Well, if you like to spend a couple of hours with me in the conning-tower as soon as it is dark enough for us to descend, I will show you what I meant then. I suppose the original general orders stand good?" he said, turning to Natas.

"Yes," replied the Master gravely. "They must all be destroyed. This is the day of vengeance and not of mercy. If my orders have been obeyed, all the men belonging to the International in this force will have managed to get to the rear by nightfall. They can be left to take care of themselves. Mazanoff assured me that all the members in the armies of the League fully understood what they are to do. Some of the war-balloons have been taken possession of by our men, but we don't know how many. As soon as you destroy the first of the fleet, these will rise and commence operations on the army, and they will also fly the red flag, so there will be no fear of your mistaking them."

"Very well," said Arnold, who had been quietly sipping his coffee while he listened to the utterance

of this death sentence on more than a quarter of a million of men. "If our fellows to the northward only obey orders promptly, there will not be many of the Russians left by sunrise. Now, Natasha, you had better put on your furs and come to the conning-tower; it's about time to begin."

It did not take her many moments to wrap up, and within five minutes she and Arnold were standing in the conning-tower watching the camp fires of the Russian host coming nearer and nearer as the Ithuriel sank down through the rapidly increasing darkness towards the long dotted line which marked the position of the aerostats, whose great gas-holders stood out black and distinct against the whitened earth beneath them.

By means of electric signals to the engineers the captain of the Ithuriel was able to regulate both the speed and the elevation of the air-ship as readily as though he had himself been in charge of the engine-room. Giving Natasha a pair of night-glasses, and telling her to keep a bright look-out ahead, he brought the Ithuriel round by the westward to a position about five miles west of the extremity of the line of war-balloons, and as soon as he got on a level with it he advanced comparatively slowly, until Natasha was able to make it out distinctly with the night-glass.

Then he signalled to the wheel-house aft to disconnect the after-wheel, and at the same moment he took hold of the spokes of the forward-wheel in the conning-tower. The next signal was "Full speed ahead," and as the Ithuriel gathered way and rushed forward on her errand of destruction he said hurriedly to Natasha--

"Now, don't speak till it's over. I want all my wits for this work, and you'll want all your eyes."

Without speaking, Natasha glanced up at his face, and saw on it somewhat of the same expression that she had seen at the moment when he put the Ariel at the rock-wall which barred the entrance to Aeria. His face was pale, and his lips were set, and his eyes looked straight out from under his frowning brows with an angry gleam in them that boded ill for the fate of those against whom he was about to use the irresistible engine of destruction under his command.

Twenty feet in front of them stretched out the long keen ram of the air-ship, edged and pointed like a knife. This was the sole weapon that he intended to use. It was impossible to train the guns at the tremendous speed at which the Ithuriel was travelling, but under the circumstance the ram was the deadliest weapon that could have been employed.

In four minutes from the time the Ithuriel started on her eastward course the nearest war-balloon was only fifty yards away. The air-ship, travelling at a speed of nearly two hundred miles an hour, leapt out of the dusk like a flash of white light. In ten seconds more her ram had passed completely through the gas-holder without so much as a shock being felt. The next one was only five hundred yards away. Obedient to her rudder the Ithuriel swerved, ripped her gas-holder from end to end, and then darted upon the next one even before a terrific explosion in their rear told that the car of the first one had struck the earth.

So she sped along the whole line, darting hither and thither in obedience to the guiding hand that controlled her, with such inconceivable rapidity that before any of the unwieldy machines, saving only those whose occupants had been prepared for the assault, had time to get out of the way of the destroying ram, she had rent her way through the gas-holders of twenty-eight out of the forty balloons, and flung them to the earth to explode and spread consternation and destruction all along the van of the army encamped below.

From beginning to end the attack had not lasted ten minutes. When the last of the aerostats had gone down under his terrible ram, Arnold signalled "Stop, and ascend," to the engine-room. A second signal turned on the searchlight in the bow, and from this a rapid series of flashes were sent up to the sky to the northward and eastward.

The effect was as fearful as it was instantaneous. The twelve war-balloons which had escaped by flying the red flag took up their positions above the Russian lines, and began to drop their fire-shell and cyanogen bombs upon the masses of men below. The air-ship, swerving round again to the westward, with her fan-wheels aloft, moved slowly across the wide area over which men and horses were wildly

rushing hither and thither in vain attempts to escape the rain of death that was falling upon them from the sky.

Her searchlight, turned downwards to the earth, sought out the spots where they were crowded most thickly together, and then the air-ship's guns came into play also. Arnold had given orders to use the new fire-shell exclusively, and its effects proved to be frightful beyond description. Wherever one fell a blaze of intense light shone for an instant upon the earth. Then this burst into a thousand fragments, which leapt into the air and spread themselves far and wide in all directions, burning with inextinguishable fury for several minutes, and driving men and horses mad with agony and terror.

No human fortitude or discipline could withstand the fearful rain of fire, in comparison with which even the deadly hail from the aerostats seemed insignificant. For half an hour the eight guns of the Ithuriel hurled these awful projectiles in all directions, scattering, death and hopeless confusion wherever they alighted, until the whole field of carnage seemed ablaze with them.

At the end of this time three rockets soared up from her deck into the dark sky, and burst into myriads of brilliant white stars, which for a few moments shed an unearthly light upon the scene of indescribable confusion and destruction below. But they made more than this visible, for by their momentary light could be seen seemingly interminable lines of grey-clad figures swiftly closing in from all sides, chasing the Cossack scouts before them in upon the completely disorganised Russian host.

A few minutes later a continuous roll of musketry burst out on front, and flank, and rear, and a ceaseless hail of rifle bullets began to plough its way through the helpless masses of the soldiers of the Tsar. They formed as well as they could to confront these new enemies, but the moment that the searchlight of the air-ship, constantly sweeping the field, fell upon a company in anything like order, a shell descended in the midst of it and broke it up again.

All night long the work of death and vengeance went on; the grey lines ever closing in nearer and nearer upon the dwindling remnants of the Russian army. Hour after hour the hail of bullets never slackened. There was no random firing on the part of the Federation soldiers. Every man had been trained to use his rifle rapidly but deliberately, and never to fire until he had found his mark; and the consequence was that the long nickel-tipped bullets, fired point-blank into the dense masses of men, rent their way through half a dozen bodies before they were spent.

At last the grey light began to break over an indescribably hideous scene of slaughter. Scarcely ten thousand men remained of the three hundred thousand who had started the day before in obedience to the order of the Tsar; and these were split up into formless squads and ragged companies fighting desperately amidst heaps of corpses for dear life, without any pretence at order or formation.

The cannonade from the air had ceased, and the last scene in the drama of death had come. With bayonets fixed and rifles lowered to the charge, the long grey lines closed up, and, as the bugles rang out the long-awaited order, they swept forward at the double, horses and men went down like a field of standing corn under the irresistible rush of a million bayonets, and in twenty minutes all was over. Not a man of the whole Russian army was left alive, save those whose knot of red ribbon at the button-hole proclaimed them members of the International.

As soon as it was light enough for Arnold to see clearly that the fate of the Russians was finally decided, he descended to the earth, and, after complimenting the commander and officers of the Federation troops on the splendid effectiveness of their force, and their admirable discipline and coolness, he gave orders for a two hours' rest and then a march on the Russian headquarters at Muswell Hill with every available man. The Tsar and his Staff were to be taken alive at all hazards; every other Russian who did not wear the International ribbon was to be shot down without mercy.

These orders given, the Ithuriel mounted into the air again, and disappeared in the direction of London. She passed over the now shattered and silent entrenchments of the Russians at a speed which made it possible to remain on deck without discomfort or danger, and at an elevation of two thousand feet. Natas was below in the saloon, alone with his own thoughts, the thoughts of twenty years of

waiting and working and gradual approach to the hour of vengeance which was now so near. Andrew Smith was steering in the wheel-house, Lieutenant Marston was taking his watch below, after being on deck nearly the whole of the previous night, and Arnold and Natasha, wrapped in their warm furs, were pacing up and down the deck engaged in conversation which had not altogether to do with war.

The sun had risen before the Ithuriel passed over London, and through the clear, cold air they could see with their field-glasses signs of carnage and destruction which made Natasha's soul sicken within her to gaze upon them, and even shook Arnold's now hardened nerves. All the main thoroughfares leading into London from the north and south were choked with heaps of dead bodies in Russian, French, and Italian uniforms, in the midst of which those who still survived were being forced forward by the pressure of those behind. Every house that remained standing was spouting flames upon them from its windows; and where the streets opened into squares and wider streets there were barricades manned with British and Federation troops, and from their summits and loopholes the quick-firing guns were raining an incessant hail of shot and shell upon the struggling masses pent up in the streets.

A horrible chorus of the rattle of small arms, the harsh, grinding roar of the machine guns, the hurrahs of the defenders, and the cries of rage and agony from the baffled and decimated assailants, rose unceasingly to their ears as they passed over the last battlefield of the Western nations, where the Anglo-Saxon, the Russ, and the Gaul were locked in the death struggle.

"There is some awful work going on down there," said Arnold, as they headed away towards the south, where, from behind the Surrey hills, soon came the sound of some tremendous conflict. "For the present we must leave them to fight it out. They don't seem to have had such easy work of it to the south as we have had to the north; but I didn't expect they would, for they have probably detached a very much larger force of French and Italians to attack the Army of the South than the Russian lot we had to deal with."

"Is all this frightful slaughter really necessary?" asked Natasha, slipping her arm through his, and looking up at him with eyes which for the first time were moistened by the tears of pity for her enemies.

"Necessary or not," replied Arnold, "it is the Master's orders, and I have only to obey them. This is the day of vengeance for which he has waited so long, and you can hardly expect him to show much mercy. It lies between him and Tremayne. For my part I will stay my hand only when I am ordered to do so.

"Still, if any one can influence Natas to mercy, you can. Nothing can now stop the slaughter on the north, I'm afraid, for the Russians are caught in a hopeless trap. The Londoners are enraged beyond control, and if the men spared them I believe the women would tear them to pieces. But there are two or three millions of lives or so to be saved at the south and perhaps there is still time to do it. It would be a task worthy of the Angel of the Revolution; why should you not try it?"

"I will do so," said Natasha, and without another word she turned away and walked quickly towards the entrance to the saloon.

CHAPTER XLV. ARMAGEDDON.

ON the southern side of London the struggle between the Franco-Italian armies and the troops of the Federation had been raging all night with unabated fury along a curved line extending from Bexley to Richmond.

The railways communicating with the ports of the south and east had, for their own purposes, been left intact by the commanders of the League; and so sudden and utterly unexpected had been the invasion of the force from America, and the simultaneous uprising of the British Section of the Brotherhood, that they had fallen into the hands of the Federationists almost without a struggle. This had enabled the invaders and their allies to concentrate themselves rapidly along the line of action which had been carefully predetermined upon.

Landing almost simultaneously at Southampton, Portsmouth, Shoreham, Newhaven, Hastings, Folkestone, Dover, Deal, Ramsgate, and Margate, they had been joined everywhere by their comrades of the British Section, whose first action, on receiving the signal from the sky, had been to seize the railways and shoot down, without warning or mercy, every soldier of the League who opposed them.

What had happened at Harwich had at the same time and in the same fashion happened at Dover and Chatham. The troops in occupation had been caught and crushed at a blow between overwhelming forces in front and rear. Added to this, the International was immensely stronger in France and Italy than in Russia, and therefore the defections from the ranks of the League had been far greater than they had been in the north.

Tens of thousands had donned the red ribbon as the Signal flashed over their encampments, and when the moment came to repel the assault of the mysterious grey legions that had sprung from no one knew where, the bewildered French and Italian officers found their regiments automatically splitting up into squads of tens and companies of hundreds, obeying other orders, and joining in the slaughter of their former comrades with the most perfect sang froid. By daybreak on the 6th the various divisions of the Federationists were well on their way to the French and Italian positions to the south of London. The utmost precautions had been taken to prevent any news reaching headquarters, and these, as has been seen, were almost entirely successful.

The three army corps sent southward by General le Gallifet met with a ruinous disaster long before they came face to face with the enemy. Ten of the fleet of thirty war-balloons which had been sent to co-operate with them, had been manned and commanded by men of the International. They were of the newest type and the swiftest in the fleet, and their crews were armed with the strangest weapons that had yet been used in the war. These were bows and arrows, a curious anachronism amidst the elaborate machinery of destruction evolved by the science of the twentieth century, but none the less effective on that account. The arrows, instead of being headed in the usual way, carried on the end of the shaft two little glass tubes full of liquid, bound together, and tipped with fulminate.

When the fleet had been in the air about an hour these ten aerostats had so distributed themselves that each of them, with a little manoeuvring, could get within bowshot of two others. They also rose a little higher than the rest. The flutter of a white handkerchief was the signal agreed upon, and when this was given by the man in command of the ten, each of them suddenly put on speed, and ran up close to her nearest neighbour. A flight of arrows was discharged at the gas-holder, and then she headed away for the next nearest, and discharged a flight at her.

Considering the apparent insignificance of the means employed, the effects were absolutely miraculous. The explosion of the fulminate on striking either the hard cordage of the net or one of the steel ribs used to give the gas-holder rigidity, broke the two tubes full of liquid. Then came another far more violent explosion, which tore great rents in the envelope. The imprisoned gas rushed out in torrents and the crippled balloons began to sink, at first slowly, and then more and more rapidly, till the cars, weighted with crews, machinery, and explosives, struck the earth with a crash, and exploded, like

so many huge shells, amidst the dense columns of the advancing army corps. In fifteen minutes each of the ten captured aerostats had sent two others to the earth, and then, completely masters of the position, those in charge of them began their assault on the helpless masses below them. This was kept up until the Federation troops appeared. Then they retired to the rear of the French and Italian columns, and devoted themselves to burning their stores and blowing up their ammunition trains with fire-shell.

Assailed thus in front and rear, and demoralised by the defection of the thousands who, as soon as the battle became general, showed the red ribbon and echoed the fierce battle-cry of the Federation, the splendid force sent out by General le Gallifet was practically annihilated by midnight and by daybreak the Federationists, after fifteen hours of almost continuous fighting, had stormed all the outer positions held by the French and Italians to the south of London, the batteries of which had already been destroyed by the air-ships.

Thus, when the Ithuriel passed over London on the morning of the 7th the position of affairs was as follows: The two armies which had been detached by the Tsar and General le Gallifet to stop the advance of the Federationists had been destroyed almost to a man. Of the two fleets of war-balloons there remained twenty-two aerostats in the hands of the Terrorists, while the twenty-five sent by the Tsar against the air-ships had retired at nightfall to the depot at Muswell Hill to replenish their stock of fuel and explosives. Their ammunition-tenders, slow and unwieldy machines, adapted only for carrying large cargoes of shells, had been rammed and destroyed with ease by the air-ships during the running, or rather flying, fight of the previous afternoon.

At sunset on the 6th the whole available forces of the League which could be spared from the defence of the positions, numbering more than three million men, had descended to the assault on London at nearly fifty different points.

No human words could convey any adequate conception of that night of carnage and terror. The assailants were allowed to advance far into the mighty maze of streets and byways with so little resistance, that they began to think that the great city would fall an easy prey to them after all. But as they approached the main arteries of central London they came suddenly upon barricades so skilfully disposed that it was impossible to advance without storming them, and from which, as they approached them, burst out tempests of rifle and machine gunfire, under which the heads of their columns melted away faster than they advanced.

Light, quick-firing guns, posted on the roofs of lofty buildings, rained death and mutilation upon them. The air-ships, flying hither and thither a few hundred feet above the housetops, like spirits of destruction, sent their shells into their crowded masses and wrought the most awful havoc of all with their frightful explosives, blowing hundreds of men to indistinguishable fragments at every shot, while from the windows of every house that was not in ruins came a ceaseless hail of missiles from every kind of firearm, from a magazine rifle to a shot-gun.

When morning came the Great Eastern Railway and the Thames had been cleared and opened, and the hearts of the starving citizens were gladdened by the welcome spectacle of train after train pouring in laden with provisions from Harwich, and of a fleet of steamers, flying the Federation flag, which filled the Thames below London Bridge, and was rapidly discharging its cargoes of food at the wharves and into lighters.

As fast as the food could be unloaded it was distributed first to the troops manning the barricades, and then to the markets and shops, whence it was supplied free in the poorer districts, and at the usual prices in the richer ones. All that day London feasted and made merry, for now the Thames was open there seemed to be no end to the food that was being poured into the city which twelve hours before had eaten its last scanty provisions. As soon as one vessel was discharged another took its place, and opened its hold filled with the necessaries and some of the luxuries of life.

The frightful butcheries at the barricades had stopped for the time being from sheer exhaustion on both sides. One cannot fight without food, and the defenders were half-starved when they began. Rage and the longing for revenge had lent them strength for the moment, but twelve hours of incessant street

fighting, the most wearing of all forms of battle, had exhausted them, and they were heartily glad of the tacit truce which gave them time to eat and drink.

As for the assailants, as soon as they saw conclusive proof that the blockade had been broken and the city victualled, they found themselves deserted by the ally on whose aid they had most counted. While the grip of famine remained on London they knew that its fall was only a matter of time; but now--if food could get in so could reinforcements, and they had not the remotest idea as to the number of the mysterious forces which had so suddenly sprung into existence outside their own lines.

Added to this their losses during the night had been something appalling. The streets were choked with their dead, and the houses into which they had retired were filled with their wounded. So they, too, were glad of a rest, and many spoke openly of returning to their lines and abandoning the assault. If they did so it might be possible to fight their way to the coast, and escape out of this huge death-trap into which they had fallen on the very eve of their confidently-anticipated victory.

So, during the whole of the 7th there was little or no hard fighting in London, but to the north and south the grey legions of the Federation fought their way mile by mile over the field of Armageddon, gradually driving in the two halves of the Russian and the Franco-Italian armies which had been faced about to oppose their progress while the other halves were making their assault on London.

As soon as news reached the Tsar that the blockade of the river had been broken, he had ordered twelve of his remaining war-balloons to destroy the ships that were swarming below London Bridge. Their fuel and cargoes of explosives had been renewed, and they rose into the air to execute the Autocrat's command just as Natasha had taken leave of Arnold on her errand of mercy. He fathomed their design at once, swung the Ithuriel rapidly round to the northward, and said to his lieutenant, who had just come on deck--

"Mr. Marston, those fellows mean mischief. Put a three minute time fuze on a couple of No. 3 fire-shell, and load the bow guns."

The order was at once executed. He trained one of the guns himself, giving it an elevation sufficient to throw the shell over the rising balloons. As the sixtieth second of the first minute passed, he released the projectile. It soared away through the air, and burst with a terrific explosion about fifty feet over the ascending aerostats.

The rain of fire spread out far and wide, and showered down upon the gas-holders. Then came a concussion that shook the air like a thunder-clap as the escaping gas mixed with the air, took fire, and exploded. Seven of the twelve aerostats instantly collapsed and plunged back again to the earth, spending the collective force of their explosives on the slopes of Muswell Hill. Meanwhile the second gun had been loaded and fired with the same effect on the remaining five.

Arnold then ran the Ithuriel up to within a mile of Muswell Hill, and found the remaining thirteen war-balloons in the act of making off to the northward.

"Two more time-shells, quick!" he cried. "They are off to take part in the battle to the north, and must be stopped at once. Look lively, or they'll see us and rise out of range!" Almost before the words were out of his mouth one of the guns was ready. A moment later the messenger of destruction was speeding on its way, and they saw it explode fairly in the midst of the squadron. The second followed before the glare of the first explosion had passed, and this was the last shot fired in the aerial warfare between the air-ships and the war-balloons.

The effects of these two shots were most extraordinary. The accurately-timed shells burst, not over, but amidst the aerostats, enveloping their cars in a momentary mist of fire. The intense heat evolved must have suffocated their crews instantaneously. Even if it had not done so their fate would have been scarcely less sudden or terrible, for the fire falling in the cars exploded their own shells even before it burst their gas-envelopes. With a roar and a shock as though heaven and earth were coming together, a vast dazzling mass of flame blazed out, darkening the daylight by contrast, and when it vanished again there was not a fragment of the thirteen aerostats to be seen.

"So ends the Tsar's brief empire of the air!" said Arnold, as the smoke of the explosion drifted away.

"And twenty-four hours more should see the end of his earthly Empire as well."

"I hope so," said Natasha's voice at his elbow. "This awful destruction is sickening me. I knew war was horrible, but this is more like the work of fiends than of men. There is something monstrous, something superhumanly impious, in blasting your fellow-creatures with irresistible lightnings like this, as though you were a god instead of a man. Will you not be glad when it is over, Richard?"

"Glad beyond all expression," replied her lover, the angry light of battle instantly dying out of his eyes as he looked upon her sweetly pitiful face. "But tell me, what success has my angel of mercy had in pleading for the lives of her enemies?" he continued, slipping his arm through hers, and leading her aft.

"I don't know yet, but my father told me to ask you to go to him as soon as you could leave the deck. Go now, and, Richard, remember what I said to you when you offered me the empire of the world as we were going to Aeria. No one has such influence with the Master as you have, for you have given him the victory and delivered his enemies into his hands. For my sake, and for Humanity's, let your voice be for mercy and peace--surely we have shed blood enough now!"

"It shall, angel mine! For your sweet sake I would spare even Alexander Romanoff himself and all his staff."

"You will never be asked to do that," said Natasha quietly, as Arnold disappeared down the companion-way.

It was nearly an hour before he came on deck again, and by this time the Ithuriel, constantly moving to and fro over London, so that any change in the course of events could be at once reported to Natas, had shifted her position to the southward, and was hanging in the air over Sydenham Hill, the headquarters of General le Gallifet, whence could be plainly heard the roar of the tide of battle as it rolled ever northward over the hills of Surrey.

An air-ship came speeding up from the southward as he reached the deck. He signalled to it to come alongside. It proved to be the Mercury taking a message from Tremayne, who was personally commanding the Army of the South in the Ariel, to the air-ships operating with the Army of the North.

"What is the message?" asked Arnold.

"To engage and destroy the remaining Russian war-balloons, and then come south at once," replied the captain of the Mercury. "I am sorry to say both the Lucifer and the Azrael have been disabled by chance shots striking their propellers. The Lucifer was so badly injured that she fell to the earth, and blew up with a perfectly awful explosion; but the Azrael can still use her fan-wheels and stern propeller, though her air-planes are badly broken and twisted."

Arnold frowned at the bad news, but took no further notice of it beyond saying--

"That is unfortunate; but, I suppose, some casualties were inevitable under the circumstances." Then he added: "I have already destroyed all that were left of the Tsar's war-balloons, but you can take the other part of the message. Where is the Ariel to be found?"

The captain of the Mercury gave him the necessary directions, and the two air-ships parted. Within an hour a council of war, consisting of Natas, Arnold, and Tremayne, was being held in the saloon of the Ithuriel, on the issue of which the lives of more than two millions of men depended.

CHAPTER XLVI. VICTORY.

IT was a little after three o'clock in the afternoon when Natas, Tremayne, and Arnold ended their deliberations in the saloon of the Ithuriel. At the same hour a council of war was being held by Generals le Gallifet and Cosensz at the Crystal Palace Hotel, Sydenham, where the two commanders had taken up their quarters.

Since daybreak matters had assumed a very serious, if not desperate aspect for the troops of the League to the south of London. Communication had entirely ceased with the Tsar since the night before, and this could only mean that his Majesty had lost the command of the air, through the destruction or disablement of his fleet of aerostats. News from the force which had descended upon London told only of a fearful expenditure of life that had not purchased the slightest advantage.

The blockade had been broken on the east, and, therefore, all hope of reducing the city by famine was at an end. Their own war-balloons had been either captured or destroyed, thousands of their men had deserted to the enemy, and multitudes more had been slain. Every position was dominated by the captured aerostats and the air-ships of the Terrorists. Even the building in which the council was being held might be shattered to fragments at any moment by a discharge of their irresistible artillery.

Finally, it was practically certain that within the next few hours their headquarters must be surrounded, and then their only choice would lie between unconditional surrender and swift and inevitable destruction by an aerial bombardment. Manifestly the time had come to make terms if possible, and purchase their own safety and that of their remaining troops. Both the generals and every member of their respective staffs saw clearly that victory was now a physical impossibility, and so the immediate issue of the council was that orders were given to hoist the white flag over the tricolour and the Italian standard on the summits of the two towers of the Crystal Palace, and on the flagstaffs over the headquarters.

These were at once seen by a squadron of air-ships coming from the north in obedience to Tremayne's summons, and within half an hour the same squadron was seen returning from the south headed by the flagship, also flying, to the satisfaction of the two generals, the signal of truce. The air-ships stopped over Sydenham and ranged themselves in a circle with their guns pointing down upon the headquarters, and the Ariel, with Tremayne on board, descended to within twenty feet of the ground in front of the hotel.

As she did so an officer wearing the uniform of a French General of Division came forward, saluted, and said that he had a message for the Commander-in-Chief of the Federation forces. Tremayne returned the salute, and said briefly--

"I am here. What is the message?"

"I am commissioned by General Gallifet, Commander-in-Chief of the Southern Division, to request on his behalf the honour of an audience. He awaits you with General Cosensz in the hotel," replied the Frenchman, gazing in undisguised admiration at the wonderful craft which he now for the first time saw at close quarters.

"With pleasure. I will be with you in a moment," said Tremayne, and as he spoke the Ariel settled gently down to the earth, and the gangway steps dropped from her bow.

As he entered the room in which the two generals were awaiting him, surrounded by their brilliantly-uniformed staffs, he presented a strange contrast to the men whose lives he held in the hollow of his hand. He was dressed in a dark tweed suit, with Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers, met by long shooting boots, just as though he was fresh from the Moors, instead of from the battlefield on which the fate of the world was being decided. General le Gallifet advanced to meet him with a puzzled look of half-recognition on his face, which was at once banished by Tremayne holding out his hand without the slightest ceremony, and saying--

"Ah, I see you recognise me, General!"

"I do, my Lord Alanmere, and, you will permit me to add, with the most profound astonishment," replied the General, taking the proffered hand with a hearty grasp. "May I venture to hope that with an old acquaintance our negotiations may prove all the easier?"

Tremayne bowed and said--

"Rest assured, General, that they shall be as easy as my instructions will permit me to make them."

"Your instructions! But I thought"--

"That I was in supreme command. So I am in a sense, but I am the lieutenant of Natas for all that, and in a case like this his word is law. But come, what terms do you propose?"

"That truce shall be proclaimed for twenty-four hours; that the commanders of the forces of the League shall meet this mysterious Natas, yourself, and the King of England, and arrange terms by which the armies of France, Russia, and Italy shall be permitted to evacuate the country with the honours of war."

"Then, General, I may as well tell you at once that those terms are impossible," replied the Chief of the Federation quietly, but with a note of inflexible determination in his voice. "In the first place, 'the honours of war' is a phrase which already belongs to the past. We see no honour in war, and if we can have our way this shall be the last war that shall ever be waged on earth."

"Indeed, I may tell you that we began this war as one of absolute extermination. Had it not been for the intercession of Natasha, the daughter of Natas, you would not even have been given the opportunity of making terms of peace, or even of unconditional surrender. Our orders were simply to slay, and spare not, as long as a man remained in arms on British soil. You are, of course, aware that we have taken no prisoners"--

"But, my lord, this is not war, it is murder on the most colossal scale!" exclaimed the General, utterly unable to control the agitation that these terrible words evoked, not only in his own breast, but in that of every man who heard them.

"To us war and murder are synonymous terms, differing only as wholesale and retail," replied Tremayne drily; "for the mere names we care nothing. This world-war is none of our seeking; but if war can be cured by nothing but war, then we will wage it to the point of extermination. Now here are my terms. All the troops of the League on this side of the river Thames, on laying down their arms, shall be permitted to return to their homes, not as soldiers, but as peaceful citizens of the world, to go about their natural business as men who have sworn never to draw the sword again save in defence of their own homes."

"And his Majesty the Tsar?"

"You cannot make terms for the Tsar, General, and let me beg of you not to attempt to do so. No power under heaven can save him and his advisers from the fate that awaits them."

"And if we refuse your terms, the alternative is what?"

"Annihilation to the last man!"

A dead silence followed these fearful words so calmly and yet so inflexibly spoken. General le Gallifet and the Italian Commander-in-Chief looked at one another and at the officers standing about them. A murmur of horror and indignation passed from lip to lip. Then Tremayne spoke again quickly but impressively--

"Gentlemen, don't think that I am saying what I cannot do. We are inflexibly determined to stamp the curse of war out here and now, if it cost millions of lives to do so. Your forces are surrounded, your aerostats are captured or destroyed. It is no use mincing matters at a moment like this. It is life or death with you. If you do not believe me, General le Gallifet, come with me and take a flight round London in my air-ship yonder, and your own eyes shall see how hopeless all further struggle is. I pledge my word of honour as an English gentleman that you shall return in safety. Will you come?"

"I will," said the French commander. "Gentlemen, you will await my return"; and with a bow to his companions, he followed the Chief out of the room, and embarked on the airship without further ado.

The Ariel at once rose into the air. Tremayne reported to Natas what had been done, and then took

the General into the deck saloon, and gave orders to proceed at full speed to Richmond, which was reached in what seemed to the Frenchman an inconceivably short space of time. Then the Ariel swung round to the eastward, and at half speed traversed the whole line of battle over hill and vale, at an elevation of eight hundred feet, from Richmond to Shooter's Hill.

What General le Gallifet saw more than convinced him that Tremayne had spoken without exaggeration when he said that annihilation was the only alternative to evacuation on his terms. The grey legions of the League seemed innumerable. Their long lines lapped round the broken squadrons of the League, mowing them down with incessant hailstorms of magazine fire, and overhead the air-ships and aerostats were hurling shells on them which made great dark gaps in their formations wherever they attempted anything like order. Every position of importance was either occupied or surrounded by the Federationists. There was no way open save towards London, and that way, as the General knew only too well, lay destruction.

To the east of Shooter's Hill the air-ship swerved round to the northward. The Thames was alive with steamers flying the red flag, and carrying food and men into London. To the north of the river the battle had completely ceased as far as Muswell Hill.

There the Black Eagle of Russia still floated from the roof of the Palace, and a furious battle was raging round the slopes of the hill. But the Russians were already surrounded, and manifestly outnumbered five to one, while six aerostats were circling to and fro, doing their work of death upon them with fearful effectiveness.

"You see, General, that the aerostats do not destroy the Palace and bury the Tsar in its ruins, nor do I stop and do the same, as I could do in a few minutes. Do you understand now why you could not make terms for Russia?"

"What your designs are Heaven and yourselves only know," replied the General, with quivering lips. "But I see that all is hopelessly lost. For God's sake let this carnage stop! It is not war, it is butchery, and we have deserved this retribution for employing those infernal contrivances in the first place. I always said it was not fair fighting. It is murder to drop death on defenceless men from the clouds. We will accept your terms. Let us get back to the south and save the lives of what remain of our brave fellows. If this is scientific warfare, I, for one, will fight no more!"

"Well spoken, General!" said Tremayne, laying his hand upon his shoulder. "Those words of yours have saved two millions of human lives, and by this time to-morrow war will have ceased, I hope for ever, among the nations of the West."

The Ariel now swerved southward again, crossed London at full speed, and within half an hour General le Gallifet was once more standing in front of the Crystal Palace Hotel. As it was now getting dusk the searchlights of the air-ships were turned on, and they swept along the southern line of battle flashing the signal, "Victory! Cease firing!" to the triumphant hosts of the Federation, while at the same time the French and Italian commanders set the field telegraph to work and despatched messengers into London with the news of the terms of peace. By nightfall all fighting south of the Thames had ceased, and victors and vanquished were fraternising as though they had never struck a blow at each other, for war is a matter of diplomacy and Court intrigue, and not of personal animosity. The peoples of the world would be good enough friends if their rulers and politicians would let them.

Meanwhile the battle raged with unabated fury round the headquarters of the Tsar. Here despotism was making its last stand, and making it bravely, in spite of the tremendous odds against it. But as twilight deepened into night the numbers of the assailants of the last of the Russian positions seemed to multiply miraculously.

A never-ceasing flood of grey-clad soldiery surged up from the south, overflowed the barricades to the north, and swept the last of the Russians out of the streets like so much chaff. All the hundred streams converged upon Muswell Hill, and joined the ranks of the attacking force, and so the night fell upon the last struggle of the world-war. Even the Tsar himself now saw that the gigantic game was virtually over, and that the stake of world-empire had been played for--and lost.

A powerful field searchlight had been fixed on the roof of the Palace, and, as it flashed hither and thither round the area of the battle, he saw fresh hosts of the British and Federation soldiers pouring in upon the scene of action, while his own men were being mown down by thousands under the concentrated fire of millions of rifles, and his regiments torn to fragments by the incessant storm of explosives from the sky.

Hour after hour the savage fight went on, and the grey and red lines fought their way up and up the slopes, drawing the ring of flame and steel closer and closer round the summit of the hill on which the Autocrat of the North stood waiting for the hour of his fate to strike.

The last line of the defenders of the position was reached at length. For an hour it held firm in spite of the fearful odds. Then it wavered and bent, and swayed to and fro in a last agony of desperation. The encircling lines seemed to surge backwards for a space. Then came a wild chorus of hurrahs, a swift forward rush of levelled bayonets, the clash of steel upon steel--and then butchery, vengeful and pitiless.

The red tide of slaughter surged up to the very walls of the Palace. Only a few yards separated the foremost ranks of the victorious assailants from the little group of officers, in the midst of which towered the majestic figure of the White Tsar--an emperor without an empire, a leader without an army. He strode forward towards the line of bayonets fringing the crest of the hill, drew his sword, snapped the blade as a man would break a dry stick, and threw the two pieces to the ground, saying in English as he did so--

"It is enough, I surrender!"

Then he turned on his heel, and with bowed head walked back again to his Staff.

Almost at the same moment a blaze of white light appeared in the sky, a hundred feet above the heads of the vast throng that encircled the Palace. Millions of eyes were turned up at once, and beheld a vision which no one who saw it forgot to the day of his death.

The ten air-ships of the Terrorist fleet were ranged in two curves on either side of the Ithuriel, which floated about twenty feet below them, her silvery hull bathed in a flood of light from their electric lamps. In her bow, robed in glistening white fur, stood Natasha, transfigured in the full blaze of the concentrated searchlights. A silence of wonder and expectation fell upon the millions at her feet, and in the midst of it she began to sing the Hymn of Freedom. It was like the voice of an angel singing in the night of peace after strife.

Men of every nation in Europe listened to her entranced, as she changed from language to language; and when at last the triumphant strains of the Song of the Revolution came floating down from her lips through the still night air, an irresistible impulse ran through the listening millions, and with one accord they took up the refrain in all the languages of Europe, and a mighty flood of exultant song rolled up in wave after wave from earth to heaven,---a song at once of victory and thanksgiving, for the last battle of the world-war had been lost and won, and the valour and genius of Anglo-Saxondom had triumphed over the last of the despotisms of Europe.

CHAPTER XLVII. THE JUDGEMENT OF NATAS.

THE myriad-voiced chorus of the Song of the Revolution ended in a mighty shout of jubilant hurrahs, in the midst of which the Ariel dropped lightly to the earth, and Tremayne, dressed now in the grey uniform of the Federation, with a small red rosette on the left breast of his tunic, descended from her deck to the ground with a drawn sword in his hand.

He was at once recognised by several of the leaders, and as the words, "The Chief, the Chief," ran from lip to lip, those in the front ranks brought their rifles to the present, while the captains saluted with their swords. The British regulars and volunteers followed suit as if by instinct, and the chorus of cheers broke out again. Tremayne acknowledged the salute, and raised his hand to command silence. A hush at once fell upon the assembled multitude, and in the deep silence of anticipation which followed, he said in clear, ringing tones--

"Soldiers of the Federation and the Empire! that which I hope will be the last battle of the Western nations has been fought and won. The Anglo-Saxon race has rallied to the defence of its motherland, and in the blood of its invaders has wiped out the stain of conquest. It has met the conquerors of Europe in arms, and on the field of battle it has vindicated its right to the empire of the world.

"Henceforth the destinies of the human race are in its keeping, and it will worthily discharge the responsibility. It may yet be necessary for you to fight other battles with other races; but the victory that has attended you here will wait upon your arms elsewhere, and then the curse and the shame of war will be removed from the earth, let us hope for ever. European despotism has fought its last battle and lost, and those who have appealed to the sword shall be judged by the sword."

As he said this, he pointed with his weapon towards the Tsar and his Staff, and continued, with an added sternness in his voice--

"In the Master's name, take those men prisoners! Their fate will be decided to-morrow. Forward a company of the First Division; your lives will answer for theirs!"

As the Chief ended his brief address to the victorious troops ten men, armed with revolver and sword, stepped forward, each followed by ten others armed with rifle and fixed bayonet, and immediately formed in a hollow square round the Tsar and his Staff. This summary proceeding proved too much for the outraged dignity of the fallen Autocrat, and he stepped forward and cried out passionately--

"What is this? Is not my surrender enough? Have we not fought with civilised enemies, that we are to be treated like felons in the hour of defeat?"

Tremayne raised his sword and cried sharply, "To the ready!" and instantly the prisoners were encircled by a hedge of levelled bayonets and rifle-barrels charged with death. Then he went on, in stern commanding tones--

"Silence there! We do not recognise what you call the usages of civilised warfare. You are criminals against humanity, assassins by wholesale, and as such you shall be treated."

There was nothing for it but to submit to the indignity, and within a few minutes the Tsar and those who with him had essayed the enslavement of the world were lodged in separate rooms in the building under a strong guard to await the fateful issue of the morrow.

The rest of the night was occupied in digging huge trenches for the burial of the almost innumerable dead, a task which, gigantic as it was, was made light by the work of hundreds of thousands of willing hands. Those of the invaders who had fallen in London itself were taken down the Thames on the ebb tide in fleets of lighters, towed by steamers, and were buried at sea. Happily it was midwinter, and the temperature remained some degrees below freezing point, and so the great city was saved from what in summer would infallibly have brought pestilence in the track of war.

At twelve o'clock on the following day the vast interior of St. Paul's Cathedral was thronged with the anxious spectators of the last scene in the tremendous tragedy which had commenced with the

destruction of Kronstadt by the Ariel, and which had culminated in the triumph of Anglo-Saxondom over the leagued despotism and militarism of Europe.

At a long table draped with red cloth, and placed under the dome in front of the chancel steps, sat Natas, with Tremayne and Natasha on his right hand, and Arnold and Alexis Mazanoff on his left. Radna, Anna Ornovski, and the other members of the Inner Circle of the Terrorists, including the President, Nicholas Roburoff, who had been pardoned and restored to his office at the intercession of Natasha, occupied the other seats, and behind them stood a throng of the leaders of the Federation forces.

Neither the King of England nor any of his Ministers or military officers were present, as they had no voice in the proceedings which were about to take place. It had been decided, at a consultation with them earlier in the day, that it would be better that they should be absent.

That which was to be done was unparalleled in the history of the world, and outside the recognised laws of nations; and so their prejudices were respected, and they were spared what they might have looked upon as an outrage on international policy, and the ancient but mistaken traditions of so-called civilised warfare.

In front of the table two double lines of Federation soldiers, with rifles and fixed bayonets, kept a broad clear passage down to the western doors of the Cathedral. The murmur of thousands of voices suddenly hushed as the Cathedral clock struck the first stroke of twelve. It was the knell of an empire and a despotism. At the last stroke Natas raised his hand and said--

"Bring up the prisoners!"

There was a quick rustling sound, mingled with the clink of steel, as the two grey lines stiffened up to attention. Twelve commanders of divisions marched with drawn swords down to the end of the nave, a few rapid orders were given, and then they returned heading two double files of Federation guards, between which, handcuffed like common felons, walked the once mighty Tsar and the ministers of his now departed tyranny.

The footsteps of the soldiers and their captives rang clearly upon the stones in the ominous breathless silence which greeted their appearance. The fallen Autocrat and his servants walked with downcast heads, like men in a dream, for to them it was a dream, this sudden and incomprehensible catastrophe which had overwhelmed them in the very hour of victory and on the threshold of the conquest of the world. Three days ago they had believed themselves conquerors, with the world at their feet; now they were being marched, guarded and in shackles, to a tribunal which acknowledged no law but its own, and from whose decision there was no appeal. Truly it was a dream, such a dream of disaster and calamity as no earthly despot had ever dreamt before.

Four paces from the table they were halted, the Tsar in the centre, facing his unknown judge, and his servants on either side of him. He recognised Natasha, Anna Ornovski, Arnold, and Tremayne, but the recognition only added to his bewilderment.

There was a slight flush on the face of Natas, and an angry gleam in his dark magnetic eyes, as he watched his captives approach; but when he spoke his tones were calm and passionless, the tones of the conqueror and the judge, rather than of the deeply injured man and a personal enemy. As the prisoners were halted in front of the table, and the rifle-buttocks of the guards rang sharply on the stone pavement, so deep a hush fell upon the vast throng in the Cathedral, that men seemed to hold their breath rather than break it until the Master of the Terror began to speak.

"Alexander Romanoff, late Tsar of the Russias, and now prisoner of the Executive of the Brotherhood of Freedom, otherwise known to you as the Terrorists--you have been brought here with your advisers and the ministers of your tyranny that your crimes may be recounted in the presence of this congregation, and to receive sentence of such punishment as it is possible for human justice to mete out to you"--

"I deny both your justice and your right to judge. It is you who are the criminals, conspirators, and enemies of Society. I am a crowned king, and above all earthly laws"--

Before he could say any more two bayonets crossed in front of him with a sharp clash, and he was instantly thrust back into his place.

"Silence!" said Natas, in a tone of such stern command that even he instinctively obeyed. "As for our justice, let that be decided between you and me when we stand before a more awful tribunal than this. My right to judge even a crowned king who has no longer a crown, rests, as your own authority and that of all earthly rulers has ever done, upon the power to enforce my sentence, and I can and will enforce it upon you, you heir of a usurping murderess, whose throne was founded in blood and supported by the bayonets of her hired assassins. You have appealed to the arbitration of battle, and it has decided against you; you must therefore abide by its decision.

"You have waged a war of merciless conquest at the bidding of insatiable ambition. You have posed as the peace-keeper of Europe until the train of war was laid, as you and your allies thought, in secret, and then you let loose the forces of havoc upon your fellow-men without ruth or scruple. Your path of victory has been traced in blood and flames from one end of Europe to the other; you have sacrificed the lives of millions, and the happiness of millions more, to a dream of world-wide empire, which, if realised, would have been a universal despotism.

"The blood of the uncounted slain cries out from earth to heaven against you for vengeance. The days are past when those who made war upon their kind could claim the indulgence of their conquerors. You have been conquered by those who hold that the crime of aggressive war cannot be atoned for by the transfer of territory or the payment of money.

"If this were your only crime we would have blood for blood, and life for life, as far as yours could pay the penalty. But there is more than this to be laid to our charge, and the swift and easy punishment of death would be too light an atonement for Justice to accept.

"Since you ascended your throne you have been as the visible shape of God in the eyes of a hundred million subjects. Your hands have held the power of life and death, of freedom and slavery, of happiness and misery. How have you used it, you who have arrogated to yourself the attributes of a viceregent of God on earth? As the power is, so too is the responsibility, and it will not avail you now to shelter yourself from it behind the false traditions of diplomacy and statecraft.

"Your subjects have starved, while you and yours have feasted. You have lavished millions in vain display upon your palaces, while they have died in their hovels for lack of bread; and when men have asked you for freedom and justice, you have given them the knout, the chain, and the prison.

"You have parted the wife from her husband"--

Here for the moment the voice of Natas trembled with irrepressible passion, which, before he could proceed, broke from his heaving breast in a deep sob that thrilled the vast assembly like an electric shock, and made men clench their hands and grit their teeth, and wrung an answering sob from the breast of many a woman who knew but too well the meaning of those simple yet terrible words. Then Natas recovered his outward composure and went on; but now there was an angrier gleam in his eyes, and a fiercer ring in his voice.

"You have parted the wife from her husband, the maid from her lover, the child from its parents. You have made desolate countless homes that once were happy, and broken hearts that had no thought of evil towards you--and you have done all this, and more, to maintain as vile a despotism as ever insulted the justice of man, or mocked at the mercy of God.

"In the inscrutable workings of Eternal Justice it has come to pass that your sentence shall be uttered by the lips of one of your victims. For no offence known to the laws of earth or Heaven my flesh has been galled by your chains and torn by your whips. I have toiled to win your ill-gotten wealth in your mines, and by the hands of your brutal servants the iron has entered into my soul. Yet I am but one of thousands whose undeserved agony cries out against you in this hour of judgment.

"Can you give us back what you have taken from us--the years of life and health and happiness, our wives and our children, our lovers and our kindred? You have ravished, but you cannot restore. You have smitten, but you cannot heal. You have killed, but you cannot make alive again. If you had ten

thousand lives they could not atone, though each were dragged out to the bitter end in the misery that you have meted out to others.

"But so far as you and yours can pay the debt it shall be paid to the uttermost farthing. Every pang that you have inflicted you shall endure. You shall drag your chains over Siberian snows, and when you faint by the wayside the lash shall revive you, as in the hands of your brutal Cossacks it has goaded on your fainting victims. You shall sweat in the mine and shiver in the cell, and your wives and your children shall look upon your misery and be helpless to help you, even as have been the fond ones who have followed your victims to exile and death.

"They have seen your crimes without protest, and shared in your wantonness. They have toyed with the gold and jewels which they knew were bought with the price of misery and death, and so it is just that they should see your sufferings and share in your doom.

"To the mines for life! And when the last summons comes to you and me, may Eternal Justice judge between us, and in its equal scales weigh your crimes against your punishment! Begone! for you have looked your last on freedom. You are no longer men; you are outcasts from the pale of the brotherhood of the humanity you have outraged!

"Alexis Mazanoff, you will hold yourself responsible for the lives of the prisoners, and the execution of their sentence. You will see them in safe keeping for the present, and on the thirtieth day from now you will set out for Siberia."

The sentence of Natas, the most terrible one which human lips could have uttered under the circumstances, was received with a breathless silence of awe and horror. Then Mazanoff rose from his seat, drew his sword, and saluted. As he passed round the end of the table the guards closed up round the prisoners, who were staring about them in stupefied bewilderment at the incredible horror of the fate which in a moment had hurled them from the highest pinnacle of earthly power and splendour down to the degradation and misery of the most wretched of their own Siberian convicts. No time was given for protest or appeal, for Mazanoff instantly gave the word "Forward!" and, surrounded by a hedge of bayonets, the doomed men were marched rapidly down between the two grey lines.

As they reached the bottom of the nave the great central doors swung open, and through them came a mighty roar of execration from the multitude outside as they appeared on the top of the Cathedral steps.

From St. Paul's Churchyard, down through Ludgate Hill and up the Old Bailey to the black frowning walls of Newgate, they were led through triple lines of Federation soldiers amidst a storm of angry cries from the crowd on either side,---cries which changed to a wild outburst of savage, pitiless exultation as the news of their dreadful sentence spread rapidly from lip to lip. They had shed blood like water, and had known no pity in the hour of their brief triumph, and so none was shown for them in the hour of their fall and retribution.

The hour following their disappearance from the Cathedral was spent in a brief and simple service of thanksgiving for the victory which had wiped the stain of foreign invasion from the soil of Britain in the blood of the invader, and given the control of the destinies of the Western world finally into the hands of the dominant race of earth.

The service began with a short but eloquent address from Natas, in which he pointed out the consequences of the victory and the tremendous responsibilities to the generations of men in the present and the future which it entailed upon the victors. He concluded with the following words--

"My own part in this world-revolution is played out. For more than twenty years I have lived solely for the attainment of one object, the removal of the blot of Russian tyranny upon European civilisation, and the necessary punishment of those who were guilty of the unspeakable crime of maintaining it at such a fearful expense of human life and suffering.

"That object has now been accomplished; the soldiers of freedom have met the hirelings of despotism on the field of the world's Armageddon, and the God of Battles has decided between them. Our motives may have been mistaken by those who only saw the bare outward appearance without knowing their inward intention, and our ends have naturally been misjudged by those who fancied that

their accomplishment meant their own ruin.

"Yet, as the events have proved, and will prove in the ages to come, we have been but as intelligent instruments in the hands of that eternal wisdom and justice which, though it may seem to sleep for a season, and permit the evildoer to pursue his wickedness for a space, never closes the eye of watchfulness or sheathes the sword of judgment. The empire of the earth has been given into the hands of the Anglo-Saxon race, and therefore it is fitting that the supreme control of affairs should rest in the hands of one of Anglo-Saxon blood and lineage.

"For that reason I now surrender the power which I have so far exercised as the Master of the Brotherhood of Freedom into the hands of Alan Tremayne, known in Britain as Earl of Alanmere and Baron Tremayne, and from this moment the Brotherhood of Freedom ceases to exist as such, for its ends are attained, and the objects for which it was founded have been accomplished.

"With the confidence born of intimate knowledge, I give this power into his keeping, and those who have shared his counsels and executed his commands in the past will in the future assist him as the Supreme Council, which will form the ultimate tribunal to which the disputes of nations will henceforth be submitted, instead of to the barbarous and bloody arbitration of battle.

"No such power has ever been delivered into the hands of a single body of men before; but those who will hold it have been well tried, and they may be trusted to wield it without pride and without selfishness, the twin curses that have hitherto afflicted the divided nations of the earth, because, with the fate of humanity in their hands and the wealth of earth at their disposal, it will be impossible to tempt them with bribes, either of riches or of power, from the plain course of duty which will lie before them."

As Natas finished speaking, he signed with his hand to Tremayne, who rose in his place and briefly addressed the assembly--

"I and those who will share it with me accept alike the power and the responsibility--not of choice, but rather because we are convinced that the interests of humanity demand that we should do so. Those interests have too long been the sport of kings and their courtiers, and of those who have seen in selfish profit and aggrandisement the only ends of life worth living for.

"Under the pretences of furthering civilisation and progress, and maintaining what they have been pleased to call law and order, they have perpetrated countless crimes of oppression, cruelty, and extortion, and we are determined that this shall have an end.

"Henceforth, so far as we can insure it, the world shall be ruled, not by the selfishness of individuals, or the ambitions of nations, but in accordance with the everlasting and immutable principles of truth and justice, which have hitherto been burlesqued alike by despots on their thrones and by political partisans in the senates of so-called democratic countries.

"To-morrow, at mid-day in this place, the chief rulers of Europe will meet us, and our intentions will be further explained. And now before we separate to go about the rest of the business of the day let us, as is fitting, give due thanks to Him who has given us the victory."

He ceased speaking, but remained standing; the same instant the organ of the Cathedral pealed out the opening notes of the familiar Normanton Chant, and all those at the table, saving Natas, rose to their feet. Then Natasha's voice soared up clear and strong above the organ notes, singing the first line of the old well-known chant--

The strain upraise of joy and praise.

And as she ceased the swell of the organ rolled out, and a mighty chorus of hallelujahs burst by one consent from the lips of the vast congregation, filling the huge Cathedral, and flowing out from its now wide-open doors until it was caught up and echoed by the thousands who thronged the churchyard and the streets leading into it.

As this died away Radna sang the second line, and so the Psalm of Praise was sung through, as it were in strophe and anti-strophe, interspersed with the jubilant hallelujahs of the multitude who were celebrating the greatest victory that had ever been won on earth.

That night the inhabitants of the delivered city gave themselves up to such revelry and rejoicing as had never been seen or heard in London since its foundation. The streets and squares blazed with lights and resounded with the songs and cheerings of a people delivered from an impending catastrophe which had bidden fair to overwhelm it in ruin, and bring upon it calamities which would have been felt for generations.

CHAPTER XLVIII. THE ORDERING OF EUROPE.

WHILE these events had been in progress three squadrons of air-ships had been speeding to St. Petersburg, Vienna, and Rome. Three vessels had been despatched to each city, and the instructions of those in command of the squadrons were to bring the German Emperor, the Emperor of Austria, and the King of Italy to London.

The news of the defeat of the League had preceded them by telegraph, and all three monarchs willingly obeyed the summons which they carried to attend a Conference for the ordering of affairs of Europe.

The German Emperor was at once released from his captivity, although only under a threat of the destruction of the city by the air-ships, for the Grand Duke Vladimir, who ruled at St. Petersburg as deputy of the Tsar, had first refused to believe the astounding story of the defeat of his brother and the destruction of his army. The terrible achievements of the air-ships were, however, too well and too certainly known to permit of resistance by force, and so the Kaiser was released, and made his first Aerial voyage from St. Petersburg to London, arriving there at ten o'clock on the evening of the 8th, in the midst of the jubilations of the rejoicing city.

The King of England had sent a despatch to the Emperor of Austria inviting him to the Conference, and General Cosensz had sent a similar one to the King of Italy, and so there had been no difficulty about their coming. At mid-day on the 9th the Conference was opened in St. Paul's, which was the only public building left intact in London capable of containing the vast audience that was present, an audience composed of men of every race and language in Europe.

Natas was absent, and Tremayne occupied his seat in the centre of the table; the other members of the Inner Circle, now composing the Supreme Council of the Federation, were present, with the exception of Natasha, Radna, and Anna Ornovski, and the other seats at the table were occupied by the monarchs to whom the purposes of the Conference had been explained earlier in the day. France was represented in the person of General le Gallifet.

The body of the Cathedral was filled to overflowing, with the exception of an open space kept round the table by the Federation guards.

The proceedings commenced with a brief but impressive religious service conducted by the Primate of England, who ended it with a short but earnest appeal, delivered from the altar steps, to those composing the Conference, calling upon them to conduct their deliberations with justice and moderation, and reminding them of the millions who were waiting in other parts of Europe for the blessings of peace and prosperity which it was now in their power to confer upon them. As the Archbishop concluded the prayer for the blessing of Heaven upon their deliberation, with which he ended his address, Tremayne, after a few moments of silence, rose in his place and, speaking in clear deliberate tones, began as follows:--

"Your Majesties have been called together to hear the statement of the practical issues of the conflict which has been decided between the armies of the Federation of the Anglo-Saxon peoples and those of the late Franco-Slavonian League.

"Into the motives which led myself and those who have acted with me to take the part which we have done in this tremendous struggle, there is now no need for me to enter. It is rather with results than with motives that we have to deal, and those results may be very briefly stated.

"We have demonstrated on the field of battle that we hold in our hands means of destruction against which it is absolutely impossible for any army fortress or fleet to compete with the slightest hope of victory; and more than this, we are in command of the only organised army and fleet now on land or sea. We have been compelled by the necessities of the case to use our powers unsparingly up to a certain point. That we have not used them beyond that point, as we might have done, to enslave the world, is the best proof that I can give of the honesty of our purposes with regard to the future.

"But it must never be forgotten that these powers remain with us, and can be evoked afresh should necessity ever arise.

"It is not our purpose to enter upon a war of conquest, or upon a series of internal revolutions in the different countries of Europe, the issue of which might be the subversion of all order, and the necessity for universal conquest on our part in order to restore it.

"With two exceptions the internal affairs of all the nations of Europe, saving only Russia, which for the present we shall govern directly, will be left undisturbed. The present tenure of land will be abolished, and the only rights to the possession of it that will be recognised will be occupation and cultivation. Experience has shown that the holding of land for mere purposes of luxury or speculative profit leads to untold injustices to the general population of a country. The land on which cities and towns are built will henceforth belong to the municipalities, and the rents of the buildings will be paid in lieu of taxation.

"The other exception is even more important than this. We have waged war in order that it may be waged no more, and we are determined that it shall now cease for ever. The peoples of the various nations have no interest in warfare. It has been nothing but an affliction and a curse to them, and we are convinced that if one generation grows up without drawing the sword, it will never be drawn again as long as men remain upon the earth. All existing fortifications will therefore be at once destroyed, standing armies will be disbanded, and all the warships in the world, which cannot be used for peaceful purposes, will be sent to the bottom of the deepest part of the ocean.

"For the maintenance of peace and order each nation will maintain a body of police, in which all citizens between the ages of twenty and forty will serve in rotation, and this police will be under the control, first of the Sovereign and Parliament of the country, and ultimately of an International Board, which will sit once a year in each of the capitals of Europe in turn, and from whose decision there will be no appeal.

"The possession of weapons of warfare, save by the members of this force, will be forbidden under penalty of death, as we shall presuppose that no man can possess such weapons save with intent to kill, and all killing, save execution for murder, will henceforth be treated as murder. Declaration of war by one country upon another will be held to be a national crime, and, should such an event ever occur, the forces of the Anglo-Saxon Federation will be at once armed by authority of the Supreme Council, and the guilty nation will be crushed and its territories will be divided among its neighbours.

"Such are the broad outlines of the course which we intend to pursue, and all I have now to do is to commend them to your earnest consideration in the name of those over whom you are the constituted rulers."

As the President of the Federation sat down the German Emperor rose and said in a tone which showed that he had heard the speech with but little satisfaction--

"From what we have heard it would seem that the Federation of the Anglo-Saxon peoples considers itself as having conquered the world, and as being, therefore, in a position to dictate terms to all the peoples of the earth. Am I correct in this supposition?"

Tremayne bowed in silence, and he continued--

"But this amounts to the destruction of the liberties of all peoples who are not of the Anglo-Saxon race. It seems impossible to me to believe that free-born men who have won their liberty upon the battlefield will ever consent to submit to a despotism such as this. What if they refuse to do so?"

Tremayne was on his feet in an instant. He turned half round and faced the Kaiser, with a frown on his brow and an ominous gleam in his eyes--

"Your Majesty of Germany may call it a despotism if you choose, but remember that it is a despotism of peace and not of war, and that it affects only those who would be peace-breakers and drawers of the sword upon their fellow-creatures. I regret that you have made it necessary for me to remind you that we have conquered your conquerors, and that the despotism from which we have delivered the nations of Europe would infallibly have been ten thousand times worse than that which you are pleased to

miscall by the name.

"You deplore the loss of the right and the power to draw the sword one upon another. Well, now, take that right back again for the last time! Say here, and now, that you will not acknowledge the supremacy of the Council of the Federation, and take the consequences!

"Our soldiers are still in the field, our Aerial fleet is still in the air, and our sea-navy is under steam. But, remember, if you appeal to the sword it shall be with you as it was with Alexander Romanoff and the Russian force which invaded England. We have annihilated the army to a man, and exiled the Autocrat for life. Choose now, peace or war, and let those who would choose war with you take their stand beside you, and we will fight another Armageddon!"

The pregnant and pitiless words brought the Kaiser to his senses in an instant. He remembered that his army was destroyed, his strongest fortresses dismantled, his treasury empty, and the manhood of his country decimated. He turned white to the lips and sank back into his chair, covered his face with his hands, and sobbed aloud. And so ended the last and only protest made by the spirit of militarism against the new despotism of peace.

One by one the monarchs now rose in their places, bowed to the inevitable, and gave their formal adherence to the new order of things. General le Gallifet came last. When he had affixed his signature to the written undertaking of allegiance which they had all signed, he said, speaking in French--

"I was born and bred a soldier, and my life has been passed either in warfare or the study of it. I have now drawn the sword for the last time, save to defend France from invasion. I have seen enough of modern war, or, as I should rather call it, murder by machinery, for such it only is now. They spoke truly who prophesied that the solution of the problem of Aerial navigation would make war impossible. It has made it impossible, because it has made it too unspeakably horrible for humanity to tolerate it.

"In token of the honesty of my belief I ask now that France and Germany shall bury their long blood-feud on their last battlefield, and in the persons of his German Majesty and myself shake hands in the presence of this company as a pledge of national forgiveness and perpetual peace."

As he ceased speaking, he turned and held out his hand to the Kaiser. All eyes were turned on William II., to see how he would receive this appeal. For a moment he hesitated then his manhood and chivalry conquered his pride and national prejudice, and amidst the cheers of the great assembly, he grasped the outstretched hand of his hereditary enemy, saying in a voice broken by emotion--

"So be it. Since the sword is broken for ever, let us forget that we have been enemies, and remember only that we are neighbours."

This ended the public portion of the Conference. From St. Paul's those who had composed it went to Buckingham Palace, in the grounds of which the Aerial fleet was reposing on the lawns under a strong guard of Federation soldiers. Here they embarked, and were borne swiftly through the air to Windsor Castle, where they dined together as friends and guests of the King of England, and after dinner discussed far on into the night the details of the new European Constitution which was to be drawn up and formally ratified within the next few days.

Shortly after noon on the following day the Ithuriel, with Natas, Natasha, Arnold, and Tremayne on board, rose into the air from the grounds of Buckingham Palace and headed away to the northward. The control of affairs was left for the time being to a committee of the members of what had once been the Inner Circle of the Terrorists, and which was now the Supreme Council of the Federation.

This was under the joint presidency of Alexis Mazanoff and Nicholas Roburoff, who was exerting his great and well-proved administrative abilities to the utmost in order to atone for the fault which had led to the desertion of the Lucifer, and to amply justify the intercession of Natasha which had made it possible for him to be present at the last triumph of the Federation and the accomplishment of the long and patient work of the Brotherhood. There was an immense amount of work to be got through in the interval between the pronouncement of the judgment of Natas on the Tsar and his Ministers and the execution of the sentence. After twenty-four hours in Newgate they were transferred to Wormwood Scrubs Prison, and there, under a guard of Federation soldiers, who never left them for a moment day

or night, they awaited the hour of their departure to Siberia.

Communication with all parts of the Continent and America was rapidly restored. The garrisons of the League were withdrawn from the conquered cities, gave up their arms at the depots of their respective regiments, and returned to their homes. The French and Italian troops round London were disarmed and taken to France in the Federation fleet of transports. Meanwhile three air-ships were placed temporarily at the disposal of the Emperor of Austria, the Kaiser, and the King of Italy, to convey them to their capitals, and furnish them with the means of speedy transit about their dominions, and to and from London during the drawing up of the new European Constitution.

A fleet of four air-ships and fifteen aerostats was also despatched to the Russian capital, and compelled the immediate surrender of the members of the Imperial family and the Ministers of the Government, and the instant disarmament of all troops on Russian soil, under pain of immediate destruction of St. Petersburg and Moscow, and invasion and conquest of the country by the Federation armies. The Council of State and the Ruling Senate were then dissolved, and the Executive passed automatically into the hands of the controllers of the Federation. Resistance was, of course, out of the question, and as soon as it was once known for certain that the Tsar had been taken prisoner and his army annihilated, no one thought seriously of it, as it would have been utterly impossible to have defended even Russia against the overwhelming forces of the Federation and the British Empire, assisted by the two Aerial fleets.

The Ithuriel, after a flight of a little more than an hour, stopped and descended to the earth on the broad, sloping, and now snow-covered lawn in front of Alanmere Castle. Lord Marazion and his daughter, who, as it is almost needless to say, had been kept well informed of the course of events since the Federation forces landed in England, had also been warned by telegraph of the coming of their Aerial visitors, and before the Ithuriel had touched the earth, the new mistress of Alanmere had descended the steps of the terrace that ran the whole length of the Castle front to welcome its lord and hers back to his own again.

Then there were greetings of lovers and friends, well known to each other by public report and familiar description, yet never seen in the flesh till now, and of others long parted by distance and by misconception of aims and motives. But however pleasing it might be to dwell at length upon the details of such a meeting, and its delightful contrast to the horrors of unsparing war and merciless destruction, there is now no space to do so, for the original limits of this history of the near future have already been reached and overpassed, and it is time to make ready for the curtain to descend upon the last scenes of the world-drama of the Year of Wonders--1904.

Tremayne was the first to alight, and he was followed by Natasha and Arnold at a respectful distance, which they kept until the first greeting between the two long and strangely parted lovers was over. When at length Lady Muriel got out of the arms of her future lord, she at once ran to Natasha with both her hands outstretched, a very picture of grace and health and blushing loveliness.

She was Natasha's other self, saving only for the incomparable brilliance of colouring and contrast which the daughter of Natas derived from her union of Eastern and Western blood. Yet no fairer type of purely English beauty than Muriel Penarth could have been found between the Border and the Land's End, and what she lacked of Natasha's half Oriental brilliance and fire she atoned for by an added measure of that indescribable blend of dignity and gentleness which makes the English gentlewoman perhaps the most truly lovable of all women on earth.

"I could not have believed that the world held two such lovely women," said Arnold to Tremayne, as the two girls met and embraced. "How marvellously alike they are, too! They might be sisters. Surely they must be some relation."

"Yes, I am sure they are," replied Tremayne; "such a resemblance cannot be accidental. I remember in that queer double life of mine, when I was your unconscious rival, I used to interchange them until they almost seemed to be the same identity to me. There is some little mystery behind the likeness which we shall have cleared up before very long now. Natas told me to take Lord Marazion to him in

the saloon, and said he would not enter the Castle till he had spoken with him alone. There he is at the door! You go and make Muriel's acquaintance, and I will take him on board at once."

So saying, Tremayne ran up the terrace steps, shook hands heartily with the old nobleman, and then came down with him towards the air-ship. As they met Lady Muriel coming up with Arnold on one side of her and Natasha on the other, Lord Marazion stopped suddenly with an exclamation of wonder. He took his arm out of Tremayne's, strode rapidly to Natasha, and, before his daughter could say a word of introduction, put his hands on her shoulders, and looked into her lovely upturned face through a sudden mist of tears that rose unbidden to his eyes.

"It is a miracle!" he said, in a low voice that trembled with emotion. "If you are the daughter of Natas, there is no need to tell me who he is, for you are Sylvia Penarth's daughter too. Is not that so, Sylvia di Murska--for I know you bear your mother's name?"

"Yes, I bear her name--and my father's. He is waiting for you in the air-ship, and he has much to say to you. You will bring him back to the Castle with you, will you not?"

Natasha spoke with a seriousness that had more weight than her words, but Lord Marazion understood her meaning. He stooped down and kissed her on the brow, saying--

"Yes, yes; the past is the past. I will go to him, and you shall see us come back together."

"And so we are cousins!" exclaimed Lady Muriel, slipping her arm round Natasha's waist as she spoke. "I was sure we must be some relation to each other; for, though I am not so beautiful"--

"Don't talk nonsense, or I shall call you 'Your Ladyship' for the rest of the day. Yes, of course we are alike, since our mothers were twin-sisters, and the very image of each other, according to their portraits."

While the girls were talking of their new-found relationship, Arnold had dropped behind to wait for Tremayne, who, after he had taken Lord Marazion into the saloon of the Ithuriel, had left him with Natas and returned to the Castle alone.

CHAPTER XLIX. THE STORY OF THE MASTER.

THAT evening, when the lamps were lit and the curtains drawn in the library at Alanmere, in the same room in which Tremayne had seen the Vision of Armageddon, Natas told the story of Israel di Murska, the Jewish Hungarian merchant, and of Sylvia Penarth, the beautiful English wife whom he had loved better than his own faith and people, and how she had been taken from him to suffer a fate which had now been avenged as no human wrongs had ever been before.

"Twenty-five years ago," he began, gazing dreamily into the great fire of pine-logs, round the hearth of which he and his listeners were sitting, "I, who am now an almost helpless, half-mutilated cripple, was a strong, active man, in the early vigour of manhood, rich, respected, happy, and prosperous even beyond the average of earthly good fortune.

"I was a merchant in London, and I had inherited a large fortune from my father, which I had more than doubled by successful trading. I was married to an English wife, a woman whose grace and beauty are faithfully reflected in her daughter"--

As Natas said this, the fierce light that had begun to shine in his eyes softened, and the hard ring left his voice, and for a little space he spoke in gentler tones, until sterner memories came and hardened them again.

"I will not deny that I bought her with my gold and fair promises of a life of ease and luxury. But that is done every day in the world in which I then lived, and I only did as my Christian neighbours about me did. Yet I loved my beautiful Christian wife very dearly,---more dearly even than my people and my ancient faith,---or I should not have married her.

"When Natasha was two years old the black pall of desolation fell suddenly on our lives, and blasted our great happiness with a misery so utter and complete that we, who were wont to count ourselves among the fortunate ones of the earth, were cast down so low that the beggar at our doors might have looked down upon us.

"It was through no fault of mine or hers, nor through any circumstance over which either of us had any control, that we fell from our serene estate. On the contrary, it was through a work of pure mercy, intended for the relief of those of our people who were groaning under the pitiless despotism of Russian officialism and superstition, that I fell, as so many thousands of my race have fallen, into that abyss of nameless misery and degradation that Russian hands have dug for the innocent in the ghastly solitudes of Siberia, and, without knowing it, dragged my sweet and loving wife into it after me.

"It came about in this wise.

"I had a large business connection in Russia, and at a time when all Europe was ringing with the story of the persecution of the Russian Jews, I, at the earnest request of a committee of the leading Jews in London, undertook a mission to St. Petersburg, to bring their sufferings, if possible, under the direct notice of the Tsar, and to obtain his consent to a scheme for the payment of a general indemnity, subscribed to by all the wealthy Jews of the world, which should secure them against persecution and official tyranny until they could be gradually and completely removed from Russia.

"I, of course, found myself thwarted at every turn by the heartless and corrupt officialism that stands between the Russian people and the man whom they still regard as the viceregent of God upon earth.

"Upon one pretext and another I was kept from the presence of the Tsar for weeks, until he left his dominions on a visit to Denmark.

"Meanwhile I travelled about, and used my eyes as well as the officials would permit me, to see whether the state of things was really as bad as the accounts that had reached England had made it out to be.

"I saw enough to convince me that no human words could describe the awful sufferings of the sons and daughters of Israel in that hateful land of bondage.

"Neither their lives nor their honour, their homes nor their property, were safe from the malice and

the lust and the rapacity of the brutal ministers of Russian officialdom.

"I conversed with families from which fathers and mothers, sons and daughters had been spirited away, either never to return, or to come back years afterwards broken in health, ruined and dishonoured, to the poor wrecks of the homes that had once been peaceful, pure, and happy.

"I saw every injury, insult, and degradation heaped upon them that patient and long-suffering humanity could bear, until my soul sickened within me, and my spirit rose in revolt against the hateful and inhuman tyranny that treated my people like vermin and wild beasts, for no offence save a difference in race and creed.

"At last the shame and horror of it all got the better of my prudence, and the righteous rage that burned within me spoke out through my pen and my lips.

"I wrote faithful accounts of all I had seen to the committee in England. They never reached their destination, for I was already a marked man, and my letters were stopped and opened by the police.

"At last I one day attended a court of law, and heard one of those travesties of justice which the Russian officials call a trial for conspiracy.

"There was not one tittle of anything that would have been called evidence, or that would not have been discredited and laughed out of court in any other country in Europe; yet two of the five prisoners, a man and a woman, were sentenced to death, and the other three, two young students and a girl who was to have been the bride of one of them in a few weeks' time, were doomed to five years in the mines of Kara, and after that, if they survived it, to ten years' exile in Sakhalin.

"So awful and so hideous did the appalling injustice seem to me, accustomed as I was to the open fairness of the English criminal courts, that, overcome with rage and horror, I rose to my feet as the judge pronounced the frightful sentence, and poured forth a flood of passionate denunciations and wild appeals to the justice of humanity to revoke the doom of the innocent."

"Of course I was hustled out of the court and flung into the street by the police attendants, and I groped my way back to my hotel with eyes blinded with tears of rage and sorrow."

"That afternoon I was requested by the proprietor of the hotel to leave before nightfall. I expostulated in vain. He simply told me that he dared not have in his house a man who had brought himself into collision with the police, and that I must find other lodgings at once. This, however, I found to be no easy matter. Wherever I went I was met with cold looks, and was refused admittance."

"Lower and lower sank my heart within me at each refusal, and the terrible conviction forced itself upon me that I was a marked man amidst all-powerful and unscrupulous enemies whom no Russian dare offend. I was a Jew and an outcast, and there was nothing left for me but to seek for refuge such as I could get among my own persecuted people."

"Far on into the night I found one, a modest lodging, in which I hoped I could remain for a day or two while waiting for my passport, and making the necessary preparations to return to England and shake the mire of Russia off my feet for ever. It would have been a thousand times better for me and my dear ones, and for those whose sympathy and kindness involved them in my ruin, if, instead of going to that ill-fated house, I had flung myself into the dark waters of the Neva, and so ended my sorrows ere they had well begun."

"I applied for my passport the next day, and was informed that it would not be ready for at least three days. The delay was, of course, purposely created, and before the time had expired a police visit was paid to the house in which I was lodging, and papers written in cypher were found within the lining of one of my hats."

"I was arrested, and a guard was placed over the house. Without any further ceremony I was thrown into a cell in the fortress of Peter and Paul to await the translation of the cypher. Three days later I was taken before the chief of police, and accused of having in my possession papers proving that I was an emissary from the Nihilist headquarters in London."

"I was told that my conduct had been so suspicious and of late so disorderly, that I had been closely watched during my stay in St. Petersburg, with the result that conclusive evidence of treason had been

found against me."

"As I was known to be wealthy, and to have powerful friends in England, the formality of a trial was dispensed with, and after eating my heart out for a month in my cell in the fortress, I was transferred to Moscow to join the next convict train for Siberia. Arrived there, I for the first time learned my sentence--ten years in the mines, and then ten in Sakhalin."

"Thus was I doomed by the trick of some police spy to pass what bade fair to be the remainder of a life that had been so bright and full of fair promise in hopeless exile, torment, and degradation--and all because I protested against injustice and made myself obnoxious to the Russian police."

"As the chain-gang that I was attached to left Moscow, I found to my intense grief that the good Jew and his wife who had given me shelter were also members of it. They had been convicted of 'harbouring a political conspirator,' and sentenced to five years' hard labour, and then exile for life, as 'political,' which, as you no doubt know, meant that, if they survived the first part of their sentence, they would be allowed to settle in an allotted part of Southern Siberia, free in everything but permission to leave the country."

"Were I to talk till this time to-morrow I could not properly describe to you all the horrors of that awful journey along the Great Siberian road, from the Pillar of Farewells that marks the boundary between Europe and Asia across the frightful snowy wastes to Kara."

"The hideous story has been told again and again without avail to the Christian nations of Europe, and they have permitted that awful crime against humanity to be committed year after year without even a protest, in obedience to the miserable principles that bade them to place policy before religion and the etiquette of nations before the everlasting laws of God."

"After two years of heartbreaking toil at the mines my health utterly broke down. One day I fell fainting under the lash of the brutal overseer, and as I lay on the ground he ran at me and kicked me twice with his heavy iron-shod boots, once on the hip, breaking the bone, and once on the lower part of the spine, crushing the spinal cord, and paralysing my lower limbs for ever."

"As this did not rouse me from my fainting-fit, the heartless fiend snatched a torch from the wall of the mine-gallery and thrust the burning end in my long thick beard, setting it on fire and scorching my flesh horribly, as you can see. I was carried out of the mine and taken to the convict hospital, where I lay for weeks between life and death, and only lived instead of died because of the quenchless spirit that was within me crying out for vengeance on my tormentors."

"When I came back to consciousness, the first thing I learnt was that I was free to return to England on condition that I did not stop on my way through Russia."

"My friends, urged on by the tireless energy of my wife's anxious love, had at last found out what had befallen me, and proceedings had been instituted to establish the innocence that had been betrayed by a common and too well-known device used by the Russian police to secure the conviction and removal of those who have become obnoxious to the bureaucracy."

"Whether my friends would ever have accomplished this of themselves is doubtful, but suddenly the evidence of a pope of the Orthodox Church, to whom the spy who had put the forged letters in my hat had confessed the crime on his deathbed, placed the matter in such a strong clear light that not even the officialism of Russia could cloud it over. The case got to the ears of the Tsar, and an order was telegraphed to the Governor of Kara to release me and send me back to St. Petersburg on the conditions I have named."

"Think of the mockery of such a pardon as that! By the unlawful brutality of an official, who was not even reprimanded for what he had done, I was maimed, crippled, and disfigured for life, and now I was free to return to the land I had left on an errand of mercy, which tyranny and corruption had wilfully misconstrued into a mission of crime, and punished with the ruin of a once happy and useful life. That was bad enough, but worse was to come before the cup of my miseries should be full."

Natas was silent for a moment, and as he gazed into the fire the spasm of a great agony passed over his face, and two great tears welled up in his eyes and overflowed and ran down his cheeks on to his

breast.

"On receiving the order the governor telegraphed back that I was sick almost to death, and not able to bear the fatigue of the long, toilsome journey, and asked for further orders. As soon as this news reached my devoted wife she at once set out, in spite of all the entreaties of her friends and advisers, to cross the wastes of Siberia, and take her place at my bedside."

"It was winter time, and from Ekaterinenburg, where the rail ended in those days, the journey would have to be performed by sledge. She, therefore, took with her only one servant and a courier, that she might travel as rapidly as possible."

"She reached Tiumen, and there all trace was lost of her and her attendants. She vanished into that great white wilderness of ice and snow as utterly as though the grave had closed upon her. I knew nothing of her journey until I reached St. Petersburg many months afterwards."

"All that money could do was done to trace her, but all to no avail. The only official news that ever came back out of that dark world of death and misery was that she had started from one of the post-stations a few hours before a great snowstorm had come on, that she had never reached the next station--and after that all was mystery."

"Five years passed. I had returned to find my little daughter well and blooming into youthful beauty, and my affairs prospering in skilful and honest hands. I was richer in wealth than I had ever been, and in happiness poorer than a beggar, while the shadow of that awful uncertainty hung over me."

"I could not believe the official story, for the search along the Siberian road had been too complete not to have revealed evidences of the catastrophe of which it told when the snows melted, and none such were ever found."

"At length one night, just as I was going to bed, I was told that a man who would not give his name insisted on seeing me on business that he would tell no one but myself. All that he would say was that he came from Russia. That was enough. I ordered him to be admitted."

"He was a stranger, ragged and careworn, and his face was stamped with the look of sullen, unspeakable misery that men's faces only wear in one part of the world."

"'You are from Siberia,' I said, stretching out my hand to him. 'Welcome, fellow-sufferer! Have you news for me?'"

"'Yes, I am from Siberia,' he replied, taking my hand; 'an escaped Nihilist convict from the mines. I have been four years getting from Kara to London, else you should have had my news sooner. I fear it is sad enough, but what else could you expect from the Russian prison-land? Here it is.'"

"As he spoke, he gave me an envelope, soiled and stained with long travel, and my heart stood still as I recognised in the blurred address the handwriting of my long-lost wife."

"With trembling fingers I opened it, and through my tears I read a letter that my dear one had written to me on her deathbed four years before."

"It has lain next my heart ever since, and every word is burnt into my brain, to stand there against the day of vengeance. But I have never told their full tale of shame and woe to mortal ears, nor ever can."

"Let it suffice to say that my wife was beautiful with a beauty that is rare among the daughters of men; that a woman's honour is held as cheaply in the wildernesses of Siberia as is the life of a man who is a convict."

"The official story of her death was false--false as are all the ten thousand other lies that have come out of that abode of oppression and misery, and she whom I mourned would have been well-favoured of heaven if she had died in the snowdrifts, as they said she did, rather than in the shame and misery to which her brutal destroyer brought her."

"He was an official of high rank, and he had had the power to cover his crime from the knowledge of his superiors in St. Petersburg."

"If it was ever known, it was hushed up for fear of the trouble that it would have brought to his masters; but two years later he visited Paris, and was found one morning in bed with a dagger in his black heart, and across his face the mark that told that he had died by order of the Nihilist Executive."

"When I read those awful tidings from the grave, sorrow became quenchless rage, and despair was swallowed up in revenge. I joined the Brotherhood, and thenceforth placed a great portion of my wealth at their disposal. I rose in their councils till I commanded their whole organisation. No brain was so subtle as mine in planning schemes of revenge upon the oppressor, or of relief for the victims of his tyranny."

"In a word, I became the brain of the Brotherhood which men used to call Nihilists, and then I organised another Society behind and above this which the world has known as the Terror, and which the great ones of the earth have for years dreaded as the most potent force that ever was arrayed against the enemies of humanity. Of this force I have been the controlling brain and the directing will. It was my creature, and it has obeyed me blindly; but ever since that fatal day in the mine at Kara I have been physically helpless, and therefore obliged to trust to others the execution of the plans that I conceived."

"It was for this reason that I had need of you, Alan Tremayne, and this is why I chose you after I had watched you for years unseen as you grew from youth to manhood, the embodiment of all that has made the Anglo-Saxon the dominant factor in the development of present-day humanity."

"I have employed a power which, as I firmly believe, was given to me when eternal justice made me the instrument of its vengeance upon a generation that had forgotten alike its God and its brother, to bend your will unconsciously to mine, and to compel you to do my bidding. How far I was justified in that let the result show."

"It was once my intention to have bound you still closer to the Brotherhood by giving Natasha to you in marriage while you were yet under the spell of my will; but the Master of Destiny willed it otherwise, and I was saved from doing a great wrong, for the intention to do which I have done my best to atone."

He paused for a moment and looked across the fireplace at Arnold and Natasha, who were sitting together on a big, low lounge that had been drawn up to the fire. Natasha raised her eyes for a moment and then dropped them. She knew what was coming, and a bright red flush rose up from her white throat to the roots of her dusky, lustrous hair.

"Richard Arnold, in the first communication I ever had with you, I told you that if you used the powers you held in your hand well and wisely, you should, in the fullness of time, attain to your heart's desire. You have proved your faith and obedience in the hour of trial, and your strength and discretion in the day of battle. Now it is yours to ask and to have."

For all answer Arnold put out his hand and took hold of Natasha's, and said quietly but clearly--

"Give me this!"

"So be it!" said Natas. "What you have worthily won you will worthily wear. May your days be long and peaceful in the world to which you have given peace!"

And so it came to pass that three days later, in the little private chapel of Alanmere Castle, the two men who held the destinies of the world in their hands, took to wife the two fairest women who ever gave their loveliness to be the crown of strength and the reward of loyal love.

For a week the Lord of Alanmere kept open house and royal state, as his ancestors had done five hundred years before him. The conventional absurdity of the honeymoon was ignored, as such brides and bridegrooms might have been expected to ignore it. Arnold and Natasha took possession of a splendid suite of rooms in the eastern wing of the Castle, and the two new-wedded couples passed the first days of their new happiness under one roof without the slightest constraint; for the Castle was vast enough for solitude when they desired it, and yet the solitude was not isolation or self-centred seclusion.

Tremayne's private wire kept them hourly informed of what was going on in London, and when necessary the Ithuriel was ready to traverse the space between Alanmere and the capital in an hour, as it did more than once to the great delight and wonderment of Tremayne's bride, to whom the marvellous vessel seemed a miracle of something more than merely human skill and genius.

So the days passed swiftly and happily until the Christmas bells of 1904 rang out over the length and

breadth of Christendom, for the first time proclaiming in very truth and fact, so far as the Western world was concerned, "Peace on earth, Goodwill to Man."

.....

On the 8th of January a swift warship, attended by two dynamite cruisers, left Portsmouth, bound for Odessa. She had on board the last of the Tsars of Russia, and those of his generals and Ministers who had been taken prisoners with him on Muswell Hill. A thousand feet overhead floated the Ariel, under the command of Alexis Mazanoff.

From Odessa the prisoners were taken by train to Moscow. There, in the Central Convict Depot, they met their families and the officials whose share in their crimes made it necessary to bring them under the sentence pronounced by Natas. They were chained together in squads, Tsar and prince, noble and official, exactly as their own countless victims had been in the past, and so they were taken with their wives and children by train to Ekaterinenburg.

Although the railway extended as far as Tomsk, Mazanoff made them disembark here, and marched them by the Great Siberian road to the Pillar of Farewells on the Asiatic frontier. There, as so many thousands of heart-broken, despairing men and women had done before them, they looked their last on Russian soil.

From here they were marched on to the first Siberian etape, one of a long series of foul and pestilential prisons which were to be the only halting-places on their long and awful journey. The next morning, as soon as the chill grey light of the winter's dawn broke over the snow-covered plains, the men were formed up in line, with the sleighs carrying the women and children in the rear. When all was ready Mazanoff gave the word: "Forward!" the whips of the Cossacks cracked, and the mournful procession moved slowly onward into the vast, white, silent wilderness, out of which none save the guards were destined ever to emerge again.

EPILOGUE. AND ON EARTH PEACE!"

THE winter and summer of 1905 passed in unbroken tranquillity all over Europe and the English-speaking world. The nations, at last utterly sickened of bloodshed by the brief but awful experience of the last six months of 1904, earnestly and gladly accepted the new order of things. From first to last of the war the slaughter had averaged more than a million of fighting men a month and fully five millions of non-combatants, men, women, and children, had fallen victims to famine and disease, or had been killed during the wholesale destruction of fortified towns by the war-balloons of the League. At the lowest calculation the invasion of England had cost four million lives.

It was an awful butcher's bill, and when the peoples of Europe awoke from the delirium of war to look back upon the frightful carnival of death and destruction, and realise that all this desolation and ruin had come to pass in little more than seven months, so deep a horror of war and all its abominations possessed them that they hailed with delight the safeguards provided against it by the new European Constitution which was made public at the end of March.

It was a singularly short and simple document considering the immense changes which it introduced. It contained only five clauses. Of these the first proclaimed the supremacy of the Anglo-Saxon Federation in all matters of international policy, and set forth the penalties to be incurred by any State that made war upon another.

The second constituted an International Board of Arbitration and Control, composed of all the Sovereigns of Europe and their Prime Ministers for the time being, with the new President of the United States, the Governor-General of Canada, and the President of the now federated Australasian Colonies. This Board was to meet in sections every year in the various capitals of Europe, and collectively every five years in London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, Rome, and New York in rotation. There was no appeal from its decision save to the Supreme Council of the Federation, and this appeal could only be made with the consent of the President of that Council, given after the facts of the matter in dispute had been laid before him in writing.

The third clause dealt with the rearrangement of the European frontiers. The Rhine from Karlsruhe to Basle was made the political as well as the natural boundary between France and Germany. The ancient kingdom of Poland was restored, with the frontiers it had possessed before the First Partition in 1773, and a descendant of Kosciusko elected by the votes of the adult citizens of the reconstituted kingdom, was placed upon the throne. Turkey in Europe ceased to exist as a political power. Constantinople was garrisoned by British and Federation troops, and the country was administered for the time being by a Provisional Government under the presidency of Lord Cromer, who was responsible only to the Supreme Council. The other States were left undisturbed.

The fourth and fifth clauses dealt with land, property, and law. All tenures of land existing before the war were cancelled at a stroke, and the soil of each country was declared to be the sole and inalienable property of the State. No occupiers were disturbed who were turning the land to profitable account, or who were making use of a reasonable area as a residential estate; but the great landowners in the country and the ground landlords in the towns ceased to exist as such, and all private incomes derived from the rent of land were declared illegal and so forfeited.

All incomes unearned by productive work of hand or brain were subjected to a progressive tax, which reached fifty per cent. when the income amounted to £10,000 a year. It is almost needless to say that these clauses raised a tremendous outcry among the limited classes they affected; but the only reply made to it by the President of the Supreme Council was "that honestly earned incomes paid no tax, and that the idle and useless classes ought to be thankful to be permitted to exist at any price. The alternative of the tax would be compulsory labour paid for at its actual value by the State." Without one exception the grumblers preferred to pay the tax.

All rents, revised according to the actual value of the produce or property, were to be paid direct to

the State. As long as he paid this rent-tax no man could be disturbed in the possession of his holding. If he did not pay it the non-payment was to be held as presumptive evidence that he was not making a proper use of it, and he was to receive a year's notice to quit; but if at the end of that time he had amended his ways the notice was to be revoked.

In all countries the Civil and Criminal Codes of Law were to be amalgamated and simplified by a committee of judges appointed directly by the Parliament with the assent of the Sovereign. The fifth clause of the Constitution plainly stated that no man was to be expected to obey a law that he could not understand, and that the Supreme Council would uphold no law which was so complicated that it needed a legal expert to explain it.

It is almost needless to say that this clause swept away at a blow that pernicious class of hired advocates who had for ages grown rich on the weakness and the dishonesty of their fellow-men. In after years it was found that the abolition of the professional lawyer had furthered the cause of peace and progress quite as efficiently as the prohibition of standing armies had done.

On the conclusion of the war the Aerial fleet was increased to twenty-five vessels exclusive of the flagship. The number of war-balloons was raised to fifty, and three millions of Federation soldiers were held ready for active service until the conclusion of the war in the East between the Moslems and Buddhists. By November the Moslems were victors all along the line, and during the last week of that month the last battle between Christian and Moslem was fought on the Southern shore of the Bosphorus.

All communications with the Asiatic and African shores of the Mediterranean were cut as soon as it became certain that Sultan Mohammed Reshad, at the head of a million and a half of victorious Moslems, and supported by Prince Abbas of Egypt at the head of seven hundred thousand more, was marching to the reconquest of Turkey. The most elaborate precautions were taken to prevent any detailed information as to the true state of things in Europe reaching the Sultan, as Tremayne and Arnold had come to the conclusion that it would be better, if he persisted in courting inevitable defeat, that it should fall upon him with crushing force and stupefying suddenness, so that he might be the more inclined to listen to reason afterwards.

The Mediterranean was patrolled from end to end by airships and dynamite cruisers, and Aerial scouts marked every movement of the victorious Sultan until it became absolutely certain that his objective point was Scutari. Meanwhile, two millions of men had been concentrated between Galata and Constantinople, while another million occupied the northern shore of the Dardanelles. An immense force of warships and dynamite cruisers swarmed between Gallipoli and the Golden Horn. Twenty airships and forty-five war-balloons lay outside Constantinople, ready to take the air at a moment's notice.

The conqueror of Northern Africa and Southern Asia had only a very general idea as to what had really happened in Europe. His march of conquest had not been interrupted by any European expedition. The Moslems of India had exterminated the British garrisons, and there had been no attempt at retaliation or vengeance, as there had been in the days of the Mutiny. England, he knew, had been invaded, but according to the reports which had reached him, none of the invaders had ever got out of the island alive, and then the English had come out and conquered Europe. Of the wonderful doings of the Aerial fleets only the vaguest rumours had come to his ears, and these had been so exaggerated and distorted, that he had but a very confused idea of the real state of affairs.

The Moslem forces were permitted to advance without the slightest molestation to Scutari and Lamsaki, and on the evening of the 28th of November the Sultan took up his quarters in Scutari. That night he received a letter from the President of the Federation, setting forth succinctly, and yet very clearly, what had actually taken place in Europe, and calling upon him to give his allegiance to the Supreme Council, as the other sovereigns had done, and to accept the overlordship of Northern Africa and Southern Asia in exchange for Turkey in Europe. The letter concluded by saying that the immediate result of refusal to accept these terms would be the destruction of the Moslem armies on the following day. Before midnight, Tremayne received the Sultan's reply. It ran thus--

In the name of the Most Merciful God. From MOHAMMED RESHAD, Commander of the Faithful, to ALAN TREMAYNE, Leader of the English.

I have come to retake the throne of my fathers, and I am not to be turned back by vain and boastful threats. What I have won with the sword I will keep with the sword, and I will own allegiance to none save God and His holy Prophet who have given me the victory. Give me back Stamboul and my ancient dominions, and we will divide the world between us. If not we must fight. Let the reply to this come before daybreak. MOHAMMED.

No reply came back; but during the night the dynamite cruisers were drawn up within half a mile of the Asiatic shore with their guns pointing southward over Scutari, while other warships patrolled the coast to detect and frustrate any attempt to transport guns or troops across the narrow strip of water. With the first glimmer of light, the two Aerial fleets took the air, the war-balloons in a long line over the van of the Moslem army, and the air-ships spread out in a semicircle to the southward. The hour of prayer was allowed to pass in peace, and then the work of death began. The war-balloons moved slowly forward in a straight line at an elevation of four thousand feet, sweeping the Moslem host from van to rear with a ceaseless hail of melinite and cyanogen bombs. Great projectiles soared silently up from the water to the north, and where they fell buildings were torn to fragments, great holes were blasted into the earth, and every human being within the radius of the explosion was blown to pieces, or hurled stunned to the ground. But more mysterious and terrible than all were the effects of the assault delivered by the air-ships, which divided into squadrons and swept hither and thither in wide curves, with the sunlight shining on their silvery hulls and their long slender guns, smokeless and flameless, hurling the most awful missiles of all far and wide, over a scene of butchery and horror that beggared all description.

In vain the gallant Moslems looked for enemies in the flesh to confront them. None appeared save a few sentinels across the Bosphorus. And still the work of slaughter went on, pitiless and passionless as the earthquake or the thunderstorm. Millions of shots were fired into the air without result, and by the time the rain of death had been falling without intermission for two hours, an irresistible panic fell upon the Moslem soldiery. They had never met enemies like these before, and brave as lions and yet simple as children, they looked upon them as something more than human, and with one accord they flung away their weapons and raised their hands in supplication to the sky. Instantly the Aerial bombardment ceased, and within an hour East and West had shaken hands, Sultan Mohammed had accepted the terms of the Federation, and the long warfare of Cross and Crescent had ceased, as men hoped, for ever.

Then the proclamation was issued disbanding the armies of Britain and the Federation and the forces of the Sultan. The warships steamed away westward on their last voyage to the South Atlantic, beneath whose waves they were soon to sink with all their guns and armaments for ever. The war-balloons were to be kept for purposes of transportation of heavy articles to Aeria, while the fleet of air-ships was to remain the sole effective fighting force in the world.

While these events were taking place in Europe, those who had been banished as outcasts from the society of civilised men by the terrible justice of Natas had been plodding their weary way, in the tracks of the thousands they had themselves sent to a living grave, along the Great Siberian Road to the hideous wilderness, in the midst of which lie the mines of Kara. From the Pillar of Farewells to Tiumen from thence to Tomsk,---where they met the first of the released political exiles returning in a joyous band to their beloved Russia,---and thence to Irkutsk, and then over the ice of Lake Baikal, and through the awful frozen desert of the Trans-Baikal Provinces, they had been driven like cattle until the remnant that had survived the horrors of the awful journey reached the desolate valley of the Kara and were finally halted at the Lower Diggings.

Of nearly three hundred strong and well-fed men who had said good-bye to liberty at the Pillar of Farewells, only a hundred and twenty pallid and emaciated wretches stood shivering in their rags and

chains when the muster was called on the morning after their arrival at Kara. Mazanoff and his escort had carried out their part of the sentence of Natas to the letter. The arctic blasts from the Tundras, the forced march, the chain and the scourge had done their work, and more than half the exile-convicts had found in nameless graves along the road respite from the long horrors of the fate which awaited the survivors.

The first name called in the last muster was Alexander Romanoff. "Here," came in a deep hollow tone from the gaunt and ragged wreck of the giant who twelve months before had been the stateliest figure in the brilliant galaxy of European Royalty.

"Your sentence is hard labour in the mines for"---The last word was never spoken, for ere it was uttered the tall and still erect form of the dethroned Autocrat suddenly shrank together, lurched forward, and fell with a choking gasp and a clash of chains upon the hard-trampled snow. A stream of blood rushed from his white, half-open lips, and when they went to raise him he was dead.

If ever son of woman died of a broken heart it was Alexander Romanoff, last of the tyrants of Russia. Never had the avenging hand of Nemesis, though long-delayed, fallen with more precise and terrible justice. On the very spot on which thousands of his subjects and fellow-creatures, innocent of all crime save a desire for progress, had worn out their lives in torturing toil to provide the gold that had gilded his luxury, he fell as the Idol fell of old in the temple of Dagon.

He had seen the blasting of his highest hopes in the hour of their apparent fruition. He had beheld the destruction of his army and the ruin of his dynasty. He had seen kindred and friends and faithful servants sink under the nameless horrors of a fate he could do nothing to alleviate, and with the knowledge that nothing but death could release them from it, and now at the last moment death had snatched from him even the poor consolation of sharing the sufferings of those nearest and dearest to him on earth.

This happened on the 1st of December 1905, at nine o'clock in the morning. At the same hour Arnold leapt the Ithuriel over the Ridge, passed down the valley of Aeria like a flash of silver light, and dropped to earth on the shores of the lake. In the same grove of palms which had witnessed their despairing betrothal he found Natasha swinging in a hammock, with a black-eyed six-weeks'-old baby nestling in her bosom, and her own loveliness softened and etherealised by the sacred grace of motherhood.

"Welcome, my lord!" she said, with a bright flush of pleasure and the sweetest smile even he had ever seen transfiguring her beauty, as she stretched out her hand in welcome at his approach. "Does the King come in peace?"

"Yes, Angel mine! the empire that you asked for is yours. There is not a regiment of men under arms in all the civilised world. The last battle has been fought and won, and so there is peace on earth at last!"

The end of "The Angel of the Revolution, a Tale of the Coming Terror"

Olga Romanoff, the Syren of the Skies

PROLOGUE. THE PROPHECY OF NATAS.

These are the last words of Israel di Murska, known in the days of strife as Natas, the Master of the Terror, given to the Children of Deliverance dwelling in the land of Aeria, in the twenty-fifth year of the Peace, which, in the reckoning of the West, is the year nineteen hundred and thirty.

* * *

MY life is lived, and the wings of the Angel of Death overshadow me as I write; but before the last summons comes, I must obey the spirit within me that bids me tell of the things that I have seen, in order that the story of them shall not die, nor be disguised by false reports, as the years multiply and the mists gather over the graves of those who, with me, have seen and wrought them.

For this reason the words that I write shall be read publicly in the ears of you and your children and your children's children, until they shall see a sign in heaven to tell them that the end is at hand. No man among you shall take away from that which I have written, nor yet add anything to it; and every fifth year, at the Festival of Deliverance, which is held on the Anniversary of Victory,¹ this writing of mine shall be read, that those who shall hear it with understanding may lay its warnings to heart, and that the lessons of the Great Deliverance may never be forgotten among you.

The 8th of December, on which day, in the year 1904, the armies of the Anglo Saxon Federation and the aerial navy of the Terrorists defeated and almost annihilated the hosts of the Franco-Slavonian League, then besieging London under the command of Alexander Romanoff, last of the Tsars of Russia, and so made possible the universal disarmament which took place the following year.--The Angel of the Revolution, chap. xlvi.

It was in the days before the beginning of peace that I, Natas the Jew, cast down and broken by the hand of the Tyrant, conceived and created that which was known as the Terror. The kings of the earth and their servants trembled before my invisible presence, for my arm was long and my hand was heavy; yet no man knew where or when I should strike--only that the blow would be death to him on whom it should fall, and that nowhere on earth should he find a safe refuge from it.

In those days the earth was ruled by force and cunning, and the nations were armed camps set one against the other. Millions of men, who had no quarrel with their neighbours, stood waiting for the word of their rulers to blast the fair fields of earth with the fires of war, and to make desolate the homes of those who had done them no wrong.

In the third year of the twentieth century, Richard Arnold, the Englishman, conquered the empire of the air, and made the first ship that flew as a bird does, of its own strength and motion. He joined the Brotherhood of Freedom, then known among men as the Terrorists, of whom I, Natas, was the Master, and then he built the aerial fleet which, in the day of Armageddon, gave us the victory over the tyrants of the earth.

At the same time, Alan Tremayne, a noble of the English people, into whose soul I had caused my spirit to enter in order that he might serve me and bring the day of deliverance nearer, caused all the nations of the Anglo-Saxon race to join hands, from the West unto the East, in a league of common blood and kindred; and they, in the appointed hour, stood between the sons and daughters of men and those who would have enslaved them afresh.

The chief of these was Alexander Romanoff, last of the Tsars, or Tyrants, of Russia, whose armies, leagued with those of France, Italy, Spain, and certain lesser Powers, and assisted by a great fleet of war-balloons that could fly, though slowly, wherever they were directed, swept like a destroying pestilence from the western frontiers of Russia to the eastern shores of Britain; and when they had gained the mastery of Europe, invaded England and laid siege to London.

But here their path of conquest was brought to an end, for Alan Tremayne and his brothers of the

Terror called upon the men of Anglo-Saxondom to save their Motherland from her enemies, and they rose in their wrath, millions strong, and fell upon them by land and sea, and would have destroyed them utterly, as I had bidden them do, but that Natasha, who was my daughter and was known in those days as the Angel of the Revolution, pleaded for the remnant of them, and they were spared.

But the Russians we slew without mercy to the last man of those who had stood in arms against us, saving only the Tyrant and his princes and the leaders of his armies. These we took prisoners and sent, with their wives and their children to die in their own prison-land in Siberia, as they had sent thousands of innocent men and women to die before them.

This was my judgment upon them for the wrong that they had done to me and mine, for in the hour of victory I spared not those who had not known how to spare. Now they are dead, and their graves are nameless. Their name is a byword among men, for they were strong and they used their strength to do evil.

So we made an end of tyranny among the nations, and when the world-war was at length brought to an end, we disbanded all the armies that were upon land and sank the warships that were left upon the sea, that men might no more fight with each other. War, that had been called honourable since the world began, we made a crime of blood-guiltiness, for which the life of him who sought to commit it should pay; and as a crime, you, the children of those who have delivered the nations from it, shall for ever hold it to be.

We leave you the command of the air, and that is the command of the world; but should it come to pass--as in the progress of knowledge it may well do--that others in the world outside Aeria shall learn to navigate the air as you do, you shall go forth to battle with them and destroy them utterly, for we have made it known through all the earth that he who seeks to build a second navy of the air shall be accounted an enemy of peace, whose purpose it is to bring war upon the earth again.

Forget not that the blood-lust is but tamed, not quenched, in the souls of men, and that long years must pass before it is purged from the world for ever. We have given peace on earth, and to you, our children, we bequeath the sacred trust of keeping it. We have won our world-empire by force, and by force you must maintain it.

In the day of battle we shed the blood of millions without ruth to win it, and so far the end has justified the means we used. Since the sun set upon Armageddon, and the right to make war was taken from the rulers of the nations, we have governed a realm of peace and prosperity which every year has seen better and happier than that which went before.

No man has dared to draw the sword upon his brother, or by force or fraud to take that which was not his by right. The soil of earth has been given back to the use of her sons and their wealth has already multiplied a hundredfold on every hand. Kings have ruled with wisdom and justice, and senates have ceased their wranglings to soberly seek out and promote the welfare of their own countries, and to win the respect and friendship of others.

Yet many of these are the same men who, but a few years ago, rent each other like wild beasts in savage strife for the meanest ends; who betrayed their brothers and slaughtered their neighbours, that the rich might be richer, and the strong stronger, in the pitiless battle for wealth and power. They have become peaceful and honest with each other, because we have compelled them to be so, and because they know that the penalty of wrong-doing in high places is destruction swift and certain as the stroke of the hand of Fate itself.

They know that no man stands so high that our hand cannot cast him down to the dust, and that no spot of earth is so secret and so distant that the transgressor of our laws can find in it a refuge from our vengeance. We stand between the few strong and cunning who would oppress, and the many weak and simple who could not resist them; and when we are gone, you will hear the voice of duty calling you to take our places.

When you stand where we do now, remember who you are and the tremendous trust that is laid upon you. You are the children of the chosen out of many nations, masters of the world, and, under Heaven,

the arbiters of human destiny. You shall rule the world as we have ruled it for a hundred years from now. If in that time men shall not have learnt the ways of wisdom and justice, you may be sure that they will never learn them, and deserve only to be left to their own foolishness. Since the world began, the path of life has never lain so fair and straight before the sons of men as it does now, and never was it so easy to do the right and so hard to do the wrong.

So, for a hundred years to come, you shall keep them in the path in which we have set them, and those that would wilfully turn aside from it you shall destroy without mercy, lest they lead others into misery and bring the evil days upon earth again.

At the twenty-fifth celebration of the Festival of Deliverance, you shall give back the sceptre of the world-empire into the hands of the children of those from whom we took it,--because they wielded it for oppression, and not for mercy. At that time you shall make it known throughout the earth that men are once more free to do good or evil, according to their choice, and that as they choose well or ill so shall they live or die.

And woe to them in those days if, knowing the good, they shall turn aside to do evil! Beyond the clouds that gather over the sunset of my earthly life, I see a sign in heaven as of a flaming sword, whose hilt is in the hand of the Master of Destiny, and whose blade is outstretched over the habitations of men.

As they shall choose to do good or evil, so shall that sword pass away from them or fall upon them, and consume them utterly in the midst of their pride. And if they, knowing the good, shall elect to do evil, it shall be with them as of old the Prophet said of the men of Babylon the Great: Their cities shall be a desolation, a dry land and a wilderness; a land wherein no man dwelleth, neither shall any son of man pass thereby.

For from among the stars of heaven, whose lore I have learned and whose voices I have heard, there shall come the messenger of Fate, and his shape shall be that of a flaming fire, and his breath as the breath of a pestilence that men shall feel and die in the hour that it breathes upon them.

Out of the depths beyond the light of the sun he shall come, and your children of the fifth generation shall behold his approach. The sister-worlds shall see him pass with fear and trembling, wondering which of them he shall smite, but if he be not restrained or turned aside by the Hand which guides the stars in their courses, it shall go hard with this world and the men of it in the hour of his passing.

Then shall the highways of the earth be waste, and the wayfaring of men cease. Earth shall languish and mourn for her children that are no more, and Death shall reign amidst the silence, sole sovereign of many lands!

But you, so long as you continue to walk in the way of wisdom, shall live in peace until the end, whether it shall come then or in the ages that shall follow. And if it shall come then, you shall await it with fortitude, knowing that this life is but a single link in the chain of existence which stretches through infinity; and that, if you shall be found worthy, you shall be taught how a chosen few among your sons and daughters shall survive the ruin of the world, to be the parents of the new race, and replenish the earth and possess it.

Out of the Valley of the Shadow of Death I stretch forth my hands in blessing to you, the children of the coming time, and pray that the peace which the men of the generation now passing away have won through strife and toil in the fiery days of the Terror, may be yours and endure unbroken unto the end.

CHAPTER I. THE SURRENDER OF THE WORLD-THRONE.

A HUNDRED years had passed since Natas, the Master of the Terror, had given into the hands of Richard Arnold his charge to the future generations of the Aerians--as the descendants of the Terrorists who had colonised the mountain-walled valley of Aeria, in Central Africa, were now called; since the man, who had planned and accomplished the greatest revolution in the history of the world, had given his last blessing to his companions-in-arms and their children, and had "turned his face to the wall and died."

It was midday, on the 8th of December 2030, and the rulers of all the civilised States of the world were gathered together in St. Paul's Cathedral to receive, from the hands of a descendant of Natas in the fourth generation, the restoration of the right of independent national rule which, on the same spot a hundred and twenty-five years before, had been taken from the sovereigns of Europe and vested in the Supreme Council of the Anglo-Saxon Federation.

The period of tutelage had passed. Under the wise and firm rule of the Council and the domination of the Anglo-Saxon race, the Golden Age had seemed to return to the world. For a hundred and twenty-five years there had been peace on earth, broken only by the outbreak and speedy suppression of a few tribal wars among the more savage races of Africa and Malaysia. Now the descendants of those who had been victors and vanquished in the world-war of 1904, had met to give back and assume the freedom and the responsibility of national independence.

The vast cathedral was thronged, as it had been on the momentous day when Natas had pronounced his judgment on the last of the Tyrants of Russia, and ended the old order of things in Europe. But it was filled by a very different assembly to that which had stood within its walls on the morrow of Armageddon.

Then the stress and horror of a mighty conflict had set its stamp on every face. Hate had looked out of eyes in which the tears were scarcely dry, and hungered fiercely for the blood of the oppressor. The clash of arms, the stern command and the pitiless words of doom had sounded then in ears which but a few hours before had listened to the roar of artillery and the thunder of battle. That had been the dawn of the morrow of strife; this was the zenith of the noon of peace.

Now, in all the vast assembly, no hand held a weapon, no face was there which showed a sign of sorrow, fear, or anger and in no heart, save only two among the thousands, was there a thought of hate or bitterness.

For three days past the Festival of Deliverance had been celebrated all over the civilised world, and now, in the centre of the city which had come to be the capital, not only of the vast domains of Anglo-Saxondom, but of the whole world, a solemn act of renunciation was to be performed, upon the issues of which the fate of all humanity would hang; for the members of the Supreme Council had come through the skies from their seat of empire in Aeria to abdicate the world-throne in obedience to the command of the dead Master, from whom their ancestors had derived it.

At a table, drawn across the front of the chancel, sat the President and the twelve men who with him had up to this hour shared the empire of the human race. Below the steps on the floor of the cathedral, sat, in a wide semicircle, the rulers of the kingdoms and republics of the earth assembled to hear the last word of their over-lords, and to receive from them the power and responsibility of maintaining or forfeiting, as the event should prove, the blessings which had multiplied under the sovereignty of the Aerians.

The President of the Council was the direct descendant not only of Alan Tremayne, its first President, but also of Richard Arnold and Natasha; for their eldest son, born in the first year of the Peace, had married the only daughter of Tremayne, and their first-born son had been his father's father.

Although the average physique of civilised man had immensely improved under the new order of

things, the Aerians, descendants of the pick of the nations of Europe, were as far superior to the rest of the assembly as the latter would have been to the men and women of the nineteenth century; but even amongst the members of the Council, the splendid stature and regal dignity of Alan Arnold, the President, stamped him as a born ruler of men, whose title rested upon something higher than election or inheritance.

At the last stroke of twelve, the President rose in his place, and, in the midst of an almost breathless silence, read the message of Natas to the great congregation. This done, he laid the parchment down on the table and, beginning from the outbreak of the world-war, rapidly and lucidly sketched out the vast and beneficent changes in the government of society that its issues had made possible.

He traced the marvellous development of the new civilisation, which, in four generations, had raised men from a state of half-barbarous strife and brutality to one of universal peace and prosperity; from inhuman and unsparing competition to friendly co-operation in public, and generous rivalry in private concerns, from horrible contrasts of wealth and misery to a social state in which the removal of all unnatural disabilities in the race of life had made them impossible.

He showed how, in the evil times which, as all men hoped, had been left behind for ever, the strong and the unscrupulous ruthlessly oppressed the weak and swindled the honest and the straightforward. Now dishonesty was dishonourable in fact as well as in name; the game of life was played fairly, and its prizes fell to all who could win them, by native genius or earnest endeavour.

There were no inequalities, save those which Nature herself had imposed upon all men from the beginning of time. There were no tyrants and no slaves. That which a man's labour of hand or brain had won was his, and no man might take toll of it. All useful work was held in honour, and there was no other road to fame or fortune save that of profitable service to humanity.

"This," said the President in conclusion, "is the splendid heritage that we of the Supreme Council, which is now to cease to exist as such, have received from our forefathers, who won it for us and for you on the field of the world's Armageddon. We have preserved their traditions intact, and obeyed their commands to the letter; and now the hour has come for us, in obedience to the last of those commands, to resign our authority and to hand over that heritage to you, the rulers of the civilised world, to hold in trust for the peoples over whom you have been appointed to reign.

"When I have done speaking I shall no longer be President of the Senate, which for a hundred and twenty-five years has ruled the world from pole to pole and east to west. You and your parliaments are henceforth free to rule as you will. We shall take no further part in the control of human affairs outside our domain, saving only in one concern.

"In the days when our command was established, the only possible basis of all rule was force, and our supremacy was based on the force that we could bring to bear upon those who might have ventured to oppose us or revolted against our rule. We commanded, and we will still command, the air, and I should not be doing my duty, either to my own people or to you, if I did not tell you that the Aerians not as the world-rulers that they have been, but as the citizens of an independent State, mean to keep that power in their own hands at all costs.

"The empire of earth and sea, saving only the valley of Aeria, is yours to do with as you will. The empire of the air is ours,--the heritage that we have received from the genius of that ancestor of mine who first conquered it.

"That we have not used it in the past to oppress you is the most perfect guarantee that we shall not do so in the future, but let all the nations of the earth clearly understand, that we shall accept any attempt to dispute it with us as a declaration of war upon us, and that those who make that attempt will either have to exterminate us or be exterminated themselves. This is not a threat, but a solemn warning; and the responsibility of once more bringing the curse of war and all its attendant desolation upon the earth, will lie heavily upon those who neglect it.

"A few more needful words and I have done. The message of the Master, which I have read to you, contains a prophecy, as to the fulfilment of which neither I nor any man here may speak with certainty.

It may be that he, with clearer eyes than ours, saw some tremendous catastrophe impending over the world, a catastrophe which no human means could avert, and beneath which human strength and genius could only bow with resignation.

"By what spirit he was inspired when he uttered the prophecy, it is not for us to say. But before you put it aside as an old man's dream, let me ask you to remember, that he who uttered it was a man who was able to plan the destruction of one civilisation, and to prepare the way for another and a better.

"Such a man, standing midway between the twin mysteries of life and death, might well see that which is hidden from our grosser sight. But whether the prophecy itself shall prove true or false, it shall be well for you and for your children's children if you and they shall receive the lesson that it teaches as true.

"If, in the days that are to come, the world shall be overwhelmed with a desolation that none shall escape, will it not be better that the end shall come and find men doing good rather than evil? As you now set the peoples whom you govern in the right or the wrong path, so shall they walk.

"This is the lesson of all the generations that have gone before us, and it shall also be true of those that are to come after us. As the seed is, so is the harvest; therefore see to it that you, who are now the free rulers of the nations, so discharge the awful trust and responsibility which is thus laid upon you, that your children's children shall not, perhaps in the hour of Humanity's last agony, rise up and curse your memory rather than bless it. I have spoken!"

CHAPTER II. A CROWNLESS KING.

LATE in the evening of the same day two of the President's audience--the only two who had heard his words with anger and hatred instead of gratitude and joy--were together in a small but luxuriously-furnished room, in an octagonal turret rose from one of the angles of a large house on the southern slope of the heights of Hampstead.

One was a very old man, whose once giant frame was wasted and shrunken by the slow siege of many years, and on whose withered, care-lined features death had already set its fatal seal. The other was a young girl, in all the pride and glory of budding womanhood, and beautiful with the dark, imperious beauty that is transmitted, like a priceless heirloom, along a line of proud descent unstained by any drop of base-born blood.

Yet in her beauty there was that which repelled as well as attracted. No sweet and gentle woman-soul looked out of the great, deep eyes, that changed from dusky-violet to the blackness of a starless night as the sun and shade of her varying moods swept over her inner being. Her straight, dark brows were almost masculine in their firmness; and the voluptuous promise of her full, red, sensuous lips was belied by the strength of her chin and the defiant poise of her splendid head on the strongly-moulded throat, whose smooth skin showed so dazzlingly white against the dark purple velvet of the collar of her dress.

It was a beauty to enslave and command rather than to woo and win; the fatal loveliness of a Cleopatra, a Lucrezia, or a Messalina; a charm to be used for evil rather than for good. In a few years she would be such a woman as would drive men mad for the love of her, and, giving no love in return, use them for her own ends, and cast them aside with a smile when they could serve her no longer.

The old man was lying on a low couch of magnificent furs against whose dark lustre the grey pallor of his skin and the pure, silvery whiteness of his still thick hair and beard showed up in strong contrast. He had been asleep for the last four hours, resting after the exertion of going to the cathedral, and the girl was sitting watching him with anxious eyes, every now and then leaning forward to catch the faint sound of his slow and even breathing, and make sure that he was still alive.

A clock in one of the corners of the room chimed a quarter to nine, as the old man raised his hand to his brow and opened his eyes. They rested for a moment on the girl's face, and then wandered inquiringly about the room, as though he expected someone else to be present. Then he said in a low, weak voice--

"What time is it? Has Serge come yet?"

"No," said the girl, glancing up at the clock; "that was only a quarter to nine, and he is not due until the hour."

"No; I remember. I don't suppose he can be here much before. Meanwhile get me the draught ready, so that I shall have strength to do what has to be done before "--

"Are you sure it is necessary for you to take that terrible drug? Why should you sacrifice what may be months or even years of life, to gain a few hours' renewed youth?"

The girl's voice trembled as she spoke, and her eyes melted in a sudden rush of tears. The one being that she loved in all the world was this old man, and he had just told her to prepare his death-draught.

"Do as I bid you, child," he said, raising his voice to a querulous cry, "and do it quickly, while there is yet time. Why do you talk to me of a few more months of life--to me, whose eyes have seen the snows of a hundred winters whitening the earth? I tell you that, drug or no drug, I shall not see the setting of to-morrow's sun. As I slept, I heard the rush of the death-angel's wings through the night, and the wind of them was cold upon my brow. Do as I bid you, quick--there is the door-telephone. Serge is here!"

As he spoke, a ring sounded in the lower part of the house. Accustomed to blind obedience from her infancy, the girl choked back her rising tears and went to a little cupboard let into the wall, out of which

she took two small vials, each containing about a fluid ounce of colourless liquid. She placed a tumbler in the old man's hand, and emptied the vials into it simultaneously.

There was a slight effervescence, and the two colourless liquids instantly changed to deep red. The moment that they did so, the dying man put the glass to his lips and emptied it at a gulp. Then he threw himself back upon his pillows, and let the glass fall from his hand upon the floor. At the same moment a little disc of silver flew out at right angles to the wall near the door, and a voice said--

"Serge Nicholaivitch is here to command."

"Serge Nicholaivitch is welcome. Let him ascend!" said the girl, walking towards the transmitter, and replacing the disc as she ceased speaking.

A few moments later there was a tap on the door. The girl opened it and admitted a tall, splendidly-built young fellow of about twenty-two, dressed, according to the winter costume of the time, in a close-fitting suit of dark-blue velvet, long boots of soft, brown leather that came a little higher than the knee, and a long, fur-lined, hooded cloak, which was now thrown back, and hung in graceful folds from his broad shoulders.

As he entered, the girl held out her hand to him in silence. A bright flush rose to her clear, pale cheeks as he instantly dropped on one knee and kissed it, as in the old days a favoured subject would have kissed the hand of a queen.

"Welcome, Serge Nicholaivitch, Prince of the House of Romanoff! Your bride and your crown are waiting for you!"

The words came clear and strong from the lips which, but a few minutes before, had barely been able to frame a coherent sentence. The strange drug had wrought a miracle of restoration. Fifty years seemed to have been lifted from the shoulders of the man who would never see another sunrise.

The light of youth shone in his eyes, and the flush of health on his cheeks. The deep furrows of age and care had vanished from his face, and, saving only for his long, white hair, if one who had seen Alexander Romanoff, the last of the Tsars of Russia, on the battlefield of Muswell Hill could have come back to earth, he would have believed that he saw him once more in the flesh.

Without any assistance he rose from the couch, and drew himself up to the full of his majestic height. As he did so the young man dropped on his knee before him, as he had done before the girl, and said in Russian--

"The honour is too great for my unworthiness. May heaven make me worthy of it!"

"Worthy you are now, and shall remain so long as you shall keep undefiled the faith and honour of the Imperial House from which you are sprung," replied the old man in the same language, raising him from his knee as he spoke. Then he laid his hands on the young man's shoulders, and, looking him straight in the eyes, went on--

"Serge Nicholaivitch, you know why I have bidden you come here to-night. Speak now, without fear or falsehood, tell me whether you come prepared to take that which I have to give you, and to do that which I shall ask of you. If there is any doubt in your soul, speak it now and go in peace; for the task that I shall lay upon you is no light one, nor may it be undertaken without a whole heart and a soul that is undivided by doubt.

The young man returned his burning gaze with a glance as clear and steady as his own, and replied--

"It is for your Majesty to give and for me to take--for you to command and for me to obey. Tell me your will, and I will do it to the death. In the hour that I fail, may heaven's mercy fail me too, and may I die as one who is not fit to live!"

"Spoken like a true son of Russia!" said the old man, taking his hands from his shoulders and beckoning the girl to his side. Then he placed them side by side before an ikon to the eastern wall, with an ever-burning lamp in front of it. He bade them kneel down and join hands, and as they did so he took his place behind them and, raising his hands as though in invocation above their heads, he said in slow, solemn tones--

"Now, Serge Nicholaivitch and Olga Romanoff; sole heirs on earth of those who once were Tsars of

Russia, swear before heaven and all its holy saints that, when this body of mine shall have been committed to the flames, you will take my ashes to Petersburg and lay them in the Church of Peter and Paul, and that when that is done, you will go to the Lossenskis at Moscow, and there, in the Uspenski Sobor, where your ancestors were crowned, take each other for wedded wife and husband, according to the ancient laws of Russia and the rites of the orthodox church."

The oath was taken by each of the now betrothed pair in turn, and then Paul Romanoff, great-grandson of Alexander, the Last of the Tsars, raised them from their knees and kissed each of them on the forehead. Then, taking from his neck a gold chain with a small key attached to it, he went to one of the oak panels, from which the walls of the room were lined, and pushed aside a portion of the apparently solid beading, disclosing a keyhole into which he inserted the key.

He turned the key and pulled, and the panel swung slowly out like a door. It was lined with three inches of solid steel, and behind it was a cavity in the wall, from which came the sheen of gold and the gleam of jewels. A cry of amazement broke at the same moment from the lips of both Olga and Serge, as they saw what the glittering object was.

Paul Romanoff took it out of the steel-lined cavity, and laid it reverently on the table, saying, as he did so--

"To-morrow I shall be dead, and this house and all that is in it will be yours. There is my most precious possession, the Imperial crown of Russia, stolen when the Kremlin was plundered in the days of the Terror, and restored secretly to my father by the faith and devotion of one of the few who remained loyal after the fall of the Empire.

"In a few hours it will be yours. I leave it to you as a sacred heritage from the past for you to hand on to the future, and with it you shall receive and hand on a heritage of hate and vengeance, which you shall keep hot in your hearts and in the hearts of your children against the day of reckoning when it comes.

"Now sit down on the divan yonder, and listen with your ears and your hearts as well, for these are the last words that I shall speak with the lips of flesh, and you must remember them, that you may tell them to your children, and perchance to their children after them, as I now tell them to you; for the hour of vengeance may not come in your day nor yet in theirs, though in the fullness of time it shall surely come, and therefore the story must never be forgotten while a Romanoff remains to remember it."

The old man, on whom the strange drug that he had taken was still exercising its wonderful effects, threw himself into an easy-chair as he spoke, and motioned them with his hand towards a second low couch against one of the walls, covered with cushions and draped with neutral-tinted, silken hangings.

Olga, moving, as it seemed, with the unconscious motion of a somnambulist, allowed her form to sink back upon the cushions until she half sat and half reclined on them; and Serge, laying one of the cushions on the floor, sat at her feet, and drew one of her hands unresistingly over his shoulder, and kept it there as though she were caressing him. Thus they waited for Paul Romanoff to teach them the lesson that they had sworn to teach in turn to the generations that were to come.

The old man regarded them in silence for a moment or two, and as he did so the angry fire died out of his eyes, and his lips parted in a faint smile as he said, rather in soliloquy to himself than to them--

"As it was in the beginning, it is now and for ever shall be until the end! Empires wax and wane, and dynasties rise and fall! Revolutions come and go, and the face of the world is changed, but the mystery of the sex, the beauty of woman, and the love of man, endure changeless as Destiny, for they are Destiny itself!"

As he spoke, the fixed, rigid look melted from Olga's face. The bright flush rose again to her cheeks, and she bowed her royal head, and looked almost tenderly at the blond, ruddy, young giant at her feet. After all, he was her fate, and she might well have had a worse one.

Then after a brief pause, Paul Romanoff began to speak again, slowly and quietly, with his eyes fixed on the glittering symbol of the vanished sovereignty of his House, as though he were addressing it, and communing with the mournful memories that it recalled from the past.

"It is a hundred and twenty-five years since the hand of Natas, the Jew, came forth out of the unknown, and struck you from the brow of the Last of the Tsars. On the day that Natas died, I was born, a hundred years ago. There are barely a score of men left on earth who have seen and spoken with the men who saw the Great Revolt and the beginning of the Terror, and I alone, of the elder line of Romanoff, remain to pass the story of our House's shame and ruin on, so that it may not be forgotten against the day of vengeance, that I have waited for in vain.

"But I have no time left for dreams or vain regrets. Listen, Children of the Present, and take my words with you into the future that it is not given to me to see."

He passed his hands upwards over his eyes and brow, and then went on, speaking now directly to Olga and Serge, in a quick, earnest tone, as though he feared that his fictitious strength would fail him before he could say what he had to say.

"When Alexander, the last of the crowned Emperors of Russia, fell down dead on the morning after he reached the mines of Kara, to which the Terrorists had exiled him as a convict for life, those who remained of his family, and who had taken no part in the war, were allowed to return to Europe, on condition that they lived the lives of private citizens and sought no share in the government of any country to which they were allied by marriage or otherwise.

"Only two of those who had survived the march to Siberia were able to avail themselves of this permission, and these were Olga, the daughter of Alexander, and Serge Nicholaivitch, the youngest son of his nephew Nicholas. These two settled at the Court of Denmark, and there, two years later, Olga married Prince Ingeborg. Her first-born son, the only one of her children who lived beyond infancy, was my father, as my own first-born son was yours, Olga Romanoff.

"Serge married Dagmar, the youngest daughter of the House of Denmark, three years later, and from him you, Serge Nicholaivitch, are descended in the fourth generation. Thus in you will be united the only two remaining branches of the once mighty House of Romanoff. May the day come when, in you or your children, its ancient glories shall be restored!"

"Amen!" said Olga and Serge in a single breath, and as she uttered the words, Olga's eyes fell on the lost crown upon the table, and for the moment they seemed to flame with the inner fires of a quenchless rage. Paul Romanoff's eyes answered hers flash for flash, for the same hatred and longing for revenge possessed them both--the old man who had carried the weight of a hundred years to the brink of the grave, and the young girl whose feet were still lingering on the dividing line between girlhood and womanhood.

Then he went on, speaking with an added tone of fierceness in his voice--

"From the day of my birth until this, the night of my death, it has been impossible to do anything to recover that which was lost in the Great Revolt. Not that stout hearts and keen brains and willing hands have been wanting for the work; but because the strong arm of the Terror has encircled the earth with unbreakable bonds; because its eye has never slept; and because its hand has hurled infallible destruction upon all who ever dared to take the first step towards freedom.

"Natas spoke truly when he said that the Terrorists had ruled the world by force, and Alan Arnold to-day spoke truly after him when he said that the supremacy of the Aerians was based upon the force that they could bring to bear upon any who revolted against them, through their possession of the empire of the air.

"It is this priceless possession that gives them the command of the world, and for a hundred years they have guarded it so jealously, that they have slain without mercy all who have ventured to take even the first step towards an independent solution of the mighty problem which Richard Arnold solved a hundred and twenty-six years ago.

"The last man who died in this cause was my only son, and your father, Olga. Remember that, for it is not the least item in the legacy of revenge that I bequeath to you to-night. He had devoted his life, as many others had done before him, to the task of discovering the secret of the motive power of the Terrorists' air-ships.

"The year you were born, success had crowned the efforts of ten years of tireless labour. Working with the utmost secrecy in a lonely hut buried in the forests of Norway, he and six others, who were, as he thought, devoted to him and the glorious cause of wresting the empire of the world from the grasp of the Terrorists, had built an air-ship that would have been swifter and more powerful than any of their aerial fleet.

"Two days before she was ready to take the air, one of his men deserted. The traitor was never seen again, but the next night a Terrorist vessel descended from the clouds, and in a few minutes not a vestige of our air-ship or her creators remained. Only a blackened waste in the midst of the forest was left to show the scene of their labours. Within forty-eight hours, it was known all over the civilised world that Vladimir Romanoff and his associates had been killed by order of the Supreme Council, for endeavouring to build an air-ship in defiance of its commands.

"Such are the enemies against whom you will have to contend. They are still virtually the masters of the world, and the task before you is to wrest that mastery from them. It is no light task, but it is not impossible; for these Aerians are, after all, but men and women as you are, and what they have done, other men and women can surely do.

"The Great Secret cannot always remain theirs alone. While they actively controlled the nations, nothing could be done against them, for their hand was everywhere and their eyes saw everything. But now they have abdicated the throne of the world, and left the nations to rule themselves as they can. For a time things will go on in their present grooves, but that will not be for long.

"I, who am their bitterest enemy on earth, am forced to confess that the Terrorists have proved themselves to be the wisest as well as the strongest of despots. Under their rule the world has become a paradise--for the canaille and the multitude. But they have curbed the mob as well as the king, and abolished the demagogue as well as the despot. Now the strong hand is lifted and the bridle loosed; and before many years have passed, the brute strength of the multitude will have begun to assert itself.

"The so-called kings of the earth, who rule now in a mockery of royalty, will speedily find that the real kings of the old days ruled because, in the last resource, they had armies and navies at their command and could enforce obedience. These are but the puppets of the popular will, and now that the moral and physical support of the Supreme Council and its aerial fleet is taken from them, they will see democracy run rampant, and, having no strength to stem the tide, they will have to float with it or be submerged by it.

"In another generation the voice of the majority, the blind, brute force of numbers, will rule everything on earth. What government there may be, will be a mere matter of counting heads. Individual freedom will by swift degrees vanish from the earth, and human society will become a huge machine grinding all men down to the same level until the monotony of life becomes unendurable.

"Hitherto all democracies in the history of the world have been ended by military despotisms, but now military despotism has been made impossible, and so democracy will run riot, until it plunges the world into social chaos.

"This may come in your time or in your children's, but it is the opportunity for which you must work and wait. Even now you will find in every nation, thousands of men and women who are chafing against the limitations imposed on individual aspirations and ambition; and as the rule of democracy spreads and becomes heavier, the number of these will increase, until at last revolt will become possible, nay, inevitable.

"Of this revolt you must make yourselves the guiding-spirits. The work will be long and arduous, but you have all your lives before you, and the reward of success will be glorious beyond all description.

"Not only will you restore the House of Romanoff to its ancient glories in yourselves and your children, but you will enthrone it in an even higher place than that which your ancestor had almost won for it, when these thrice-cursed Terrorists turned the tide of battle against him on the threshold of the conquest of the world.

"Do not shrink from the task, or despair because you are now only two against the world. Think of

Natas and the mighty work that he did, and remember that he was once only one against the world which in the day of battle he fought and conquered.

"Above all things, never let your eyes wander from the land of the Aerians. That once conquered and the world is yours to do with as you will. To do that, you must first conquer the air as they have done. Aeria itself, by all reports, is such a paradise as the sun nowhere else shines upon. Some day, whether by force or cunning, it may be yours; and when it is, the world also will be yours to be your footstool and your plaything, and all the peoples of the earth shall be your servants to do your bidding.

"Yes, I can see, through the mists of the coming years and beyond the grave that opens at my feet, aerial navies, flying the Eagle of Russia and scaling the mighty battlements of Aeria, hurling their lightnings far and wide in the work of vengeance long delayed! Behind the battle, I see darkness that my weak eyes cannot pierce, but yours shall see clearly where mine are clouded with the falling mists of death.

"The shadows are closing round me, and the sands in the glass are almost run out. Yet one thing remains to be done. Since Alexander Romanoff died at the mines of Kara, no Tsar of Russia has been crowned. Now I, Paul Romanoff, his rightful heir, will crown myself after the fashion of my ancestors, and then I will crown you, the daughter of my murdered son, and you will place the diadem on your husband's brow when God has made you one!"

So saying, the old man rose from his seat, with his face flushed and his eyes aglow with the light of ecstasy. Olga and Serge rose to their feet, half in fear and half in wonder, as they looked upon his transfigured countenance.

He lifted the Imperial crown from the table, and then, drawing himself up to the full height of his majestic stature, raised it high above his head, and lowered it slowly down towards his brow.

The jewelled circlet of gold had almost touched the silver of his snowy hair when the light suddenly died out of his eyes, leaving the glaze of death behind it. He gasped once for breath, and then his mighty form shrank together and pitched forward in a huddled heap at their feet, flinging the crown with a dull crash to the floor, and sending it rolling away into a corner of the room.

"God grant that may not be an omen, Olga!" said Serge, covering his eyes with his hands to shut out the sudden horror of the sight.

"Omen or not, I will do his bidding to the end," said the girl slowly and solemnly. Then her pent-up passion of grief burst forth in a long, wailing cry, and she flung herself down on the prostrate form of the only friend she had ever known and loved, and laid her cheek upon his, and let the welling tears run from her eyes over those that had for ever ceased to weep.

CHAPTER III. TSARINA OLGA.

THREE days after his death, the body of Paul Romanoff was reduced to ashes in the Highgate Crematorium, a magnificent building, in the sombre yet splendid architecture of ancient Egypt, which stood in the midst of what had once been Highgate Cemetery, and what was now a beautiful garden, shaded by noble trees, and in summer ablaze with myriads of flowers.

Not a grave or a headstone was to be seen, for burial in the earth had been abolished throughout the civilised world for nearly a century. In the vast galleries of the central building, thousands of urns, containing the ashes of the dead, reposed in niches inscribed with the name and date of death, but these mostly belonged to the poorer classes, for the wealthy as a rule devoted a chamber in their own houses to this purpose.

The body was registered in the great Book of the Dead at the Crematorium as that of Paul Ivanitch, and the only two mourners signed their names, "Serge Ivanitch and Olga Ivanitch, grand-children of the deceased." The reason for this was, that for more than a century the name of Romanoff had been proscribed in all the nations of Europe. It was believed that the Vladimir Romanoff who had been executed by the Supreme Council, for attempting to solve the forbidden problem, was the last of his race, and Paul had taken great pains not to disturb this belief.

Long before his son had met with his end, he had called himself Paul Ivanitch, and settled in London and practised his profession as a sculptor, in which he had won both fame and fortune. Olga had lived with him since her father's death, and Serge, who at the time the narrative opens had just completed his studies at the Art University of Rome, had passed as her brother.

They took the urn containing the ashes of the old man back with them to the house, which now belonged, with all its contents, to Olga and Serge. On the morning after his death, a notice, accompanied by an abstract of his will, had been inserted in *The Official Gazette*, the journal devoted exclusively to matters of law and government.

Paul Romanoff had, however, left two wills behind him, one which had to be made public in compliance with the law, and one which was intended only for the eyes of Olga and Serge. This second will reposed, with the crown of Russia, in the secret recess in the wall of the octagonal chamber; and the instructions endorsed upon it stated that it was to be opened by Serge in the presence of Olga, after they had brought his ashes back to the house and had been legally confirmed in their possession of his property.

Consequently, on the evening of the 11th, the two shut themselves into the room, and Olga, who since her grandfather's death had worn the key of the recess on a chain round her neck, unlocked the secret door and gave the will to Serge. As she did so, a sudden fancy seized her. She took the crown from its resting-place, and, standing in front of a long mirror which occupied one of the eight sides of the room from roof to floor, poised it above the lustrous coils of her hair with both hands, and said, half to Serge and half to herself--

"What age could not accomplish, youth shall do! By my own right, and with my own hands, I am crowned Tsarina Empress of the Russias in Europe and Asia. As the great Catherine was, so will I be--and more, for I will be Mistress of the West and the East. I will have kings for my vassals and senates for my servants, and I will rule as no other woman has ruled before me since Semiramis!"

As she uttered the daring words, whose fulfilment seemed beyond the dreams of the wildest imagination, she placed the crown upon her brow and stood, clothed in imperial purple from head to foot, the very incarnation of loveliness and royal majesty. Serge looked up as she spoke, and gazed for a moment entranced upon her. Then he threw himself upon his knees before her, and, raising the hem of her robe to his lips, said in a voice half choked with love and passion--

"And I, who am also of the imperial blood, will be the first to salute you Tsarina and mistress! You have taken me as your lover, let me also be the first of your subjects. I will serve you as woman never

was served before. You shall be my mistress--my goddess, and your words shall be my laws before all other laws. If you bid me do evil, it shall be to me as good, and I will do it. I will kill or leave alive according to your pleasure, and I will hold my own life as cheap as any other in your service; for I love you, and my life is yours!"

Olga looked down upon him with the light of triumph in her eyes. No woman ever breathed to whom such words would not have been sweet; but to her they were doubly sweet, because they were a spontaneous tribute to the power of her beauty and the strength of her royal nature, and an earnest of her future sway over other men.

More than this, too, they had been won without an effort, from the lips of the man whom she had always been taught to look upon as higher than other men, in virtue of his descent from her own ancestry, and the blood-right that he shared with her to that throne which it was to be their joint life-task to re-establish.

If she did not love him, it was rather because ambition and the inborn lust of power engrossed her whole being, than from any lack of worthiness on his part. Of all the men she had ever seen, none compared with him in strength and manliness save one--and he, bitter beyond expression as the thought was to her, was so far above her as she was now, that he seemed to belong to another world and to another order of beings.

As their eyes met, a thrill that was almost akin to love passed through her soul, and, acting on the impulse of the moment, she took the crown from her own head and held it above his as he knelt at her feet, and said--

"Not as my subject or my servant, but as my co-ruler and helpmate, you shall keep that oath of yours, Serge Nicholaivitch. We have exchanged our vows, and in a few days I shall be your wife. We will wed as equals; and so now I crown you, as it is my right to do. Rise, my lord the Tsar, and take your crown!"

Serge put up his hands and took the crown from hers at the moment that she placed it on his brow. He rose to his feet, holding it on his head as he said solemnly--

"So be it, and may the God of our fathers help me to wear it worthily with you, and to restore to it the glory that has been taken from it by our enemies!"

Then he laid it reverently down on the table and turned to Olga, who was still standing before the mirror looking at her own lovely image, as though in a dream of future glory. He took her unresisting in his arms, and kissed her passionately again and again, bringing the bright blood to her cheeks and the light of a kindred passion to her eyes, and murmuring between the kisses--

"But you, darling, are worth all the crowns of earth, and I am still your slave, because your beauty and your sweetness make me so."

"Then slave you shall be!" she said, giving him back kiss for kiss, well knowing that with every pressure of her intoxicating lips she riveted the chains of his bondage closer upon his soul.

To an outside observer, what had taken place would have seemed but little better than boy-and-girl's play, the phantasy of two young and ardent souls dreaming a romantic and impossible dream of power and glory that had vanished, never to be brought back again. And yet, if such a one had been able to look forward though more than a single lustrum, he would have seen that, in the mysterious revolutions of human affairs, it is usually the seemingly impossible that becomes possible, and the most unexpected that comes to pass.

The secret will of Paul Romanoff, to the study of which the two lovers addressed themselves when they awoke from the dream of love and empire into which Olga's phantasy had plunged them both, would, if it had been made public, have given a by no means indefinite shape to such vague dreams of world-revolution as were inspired in thoughtful minds, even in the thirty-first year of the twenty-first century.

It was a voluminous document of many pages, embodying the result of nearly eighty years of tireless scheming and patient research in the field of science as well as in that of politics. Paul Romanoff had

lived his life with but one object, and that was, to prepare the way for the accomplishment of a revolution which should culminate in the subversion of the state of society inaugurated by the Terrorists, and the re-establishment, at any rate in the east of Europe, of autocratic rule in the person of a scion of the House of Romanoff. All that he had been able to do towards the attainment of this seemingly impossible project was crystallised in the document bequeathed to Olga and Serge.

It was divided into three sections. The first of these was mostly of a personal nature, and contained details which it would serve no purpose of use or interest to reproduce here. It will therefore suffice to say, that it contained a list of the names and addresses of four hundred men and women scattered throughout Europe and America, each of whom was the descendant of some prince or noble, some great landowner or millionaire, who had suffered degradation or ruin at the hands of the Terrorists during the reorganisation of society, after the final triumph of the Anglo-Saxon Federation in 1904.

The second section of the will was of a purely scientific and technical character. It was a theoretical arsenal of weapons for the arming of those who, if they were to succeed at all, could only do so by bringing back that which it had cost such an awful expenditure of blood and suffering to banish from the earth in the days of the Terror. The designs of Paul Romanoff, and the vast aspirations of those to whom he had bequeathed the crown of the great Catherine, could have but one result if they ever passed from the realm of fancy to that of deeds.

If the clock was to be put back, only the armed hand could do it, and that hand must be so armed that it could strike at first secretly, and yet with paralysing effect. The few would have to array themselves against the many, and if they triumphed, it would have to be by the possession of some such means of terrorism and irresistible destruction as those who had accomplished the revolution of 1904 had wielded in their aerial fleet.

By far the most important part of this section of the will consisted of plans and diagrams of various descriptions of airships and submarine vessels, accompanied by minute directions for building and working them. Most of these were from the hand of Vladimir Romanoff, Olga's father; but of infinitely more importance even than all these was a detailed description, on the last page but two of the section, of the solution of a problem which had been attempted in the last decade of the nineteenth century, but which was still unsolved so far as the world at large was concerned.

This was the direct transformation of the solar energy locked up in coal into electrical energy, without loss either by waste or transference. How vast and yet easily controlled a power this would be in the hands of those who were able to wield it, may be guessed from the fact that, in the present day, less than ten per cent. of the latent energy of coal is developed as electrical power even in the most perfect systems of conversion.

All the rest is wasted between the furnace of the steam-engine and the dynamo. It was to electrical power, obtained direct from coal and petroleum, that Vladimir Romanoff trusted for the motive force of his air-ships and submarine vessels, and which he had already employed with experimental success as regards the former, when his career was cut short by the swift and pitiless execution of the sentence of the Supreme Council.

The remainder of this section was occupied by a list of chemical formula for the most powerful explosives then known to science, and minute instructions for their preparation. At the bottom of the page which contained these, there was a little strip of parchment, fastened by one end to the binding of the other sheets, and covered with very small writing.

Olga's eyes, wandering down over the maze of figures which crowded the page, reached it before Serge's did. One quick glance told her that it was something very different to the rest. She laid one hand carelessly over it, and with the other softly caressed Serge's crisp, golden curls. As he looked round in response to the caress, their eyes met, and she said in her sweet, low, witching voice--

"Dearest, I have a favour to ask of you."

"Not a favour to ask, but a command to give, you mean. Speak, and you are obeyed. Have I not sworn obedience?" he replied, laying his hand upon her shoulder and drawing her lovely face closer to

his as he spoke.

"No, it is only a favour," she said, with such a smile as Antony might have seen on the lips of Cleopatra. "I want you to leave me alone for a little time--for half an hour--and then come back and finish reading this with me. You know my brain is not as strong as yours, and I feel a little bewildered with all the wonderful things that there are in this legacy of my father's father.

"Before we go any further, I should like, to read it all through again by myself, so as to understand it thoroughly. So suppose you go to your smoking-room for a little, and leave me to do so. I shall not take very long, and then we will go over the rest together."

"But we have only a couple more pages to read, sweet one, and then I will go over it all again with you, and explain anything that you have not understood."

As he spoke, Serge's eyes never wavered for a moment from hers. Could he but have broken their spell, he might have seen that she was hiding something from him under her little, white hand and shapely arm. She brought her red, smiling lips still nearer to his as she almost whispered in reply--

"Well, it is only a girl's whim, after all, but still I am a girl. Come, now, I will give you a kiss for twenty minutes' solitude, and when you come back, and we have finished our task, you shall have as many more as you like."

The sweet, tempting lips came closer still, and the witching spell of her great dusky eyes grew stronger as she spoke. How was he to know what was hanging in the balance in that fateful moment? He was but a hot-blooded youth of twenty, and he worshipped this lovely, girlish temptress, who had not yet seen seventeen summers, with an adoration that blinded him to all else but her and her intoxicating beauty.

He drew her yielding form to him until he could feel her heart beating against his, and as their lips met, the promised kiss came from hers to his. He returned it threefold, and then his arm slipped from her shoulder to her waist, and he lifted her like a child from her chair, and carried her, half laughing and half protesting, to the door, claimed and took another kiss before he released her, and then put her down and left her alone without another word.

"Alas, poor Serge!" she said, as the door closed behind him; "you are not the first man who has lost the empire of the world for a woman's kiss. Before, I saw that you were my equal and helpmate, now you and all other men--yes, not even excepting he who seems so far above me now--shall be my slaves and do my bidding, so blindly that they shall not even know they are doing it.

"Yes, the weapons of war are worth much, but what are they in comparison with the souls of the men who will have to use them!"

In half an hour Serge came back to finish the reading of the will with her. The little slip of paper had been removed so skilfully that it would have been impossible for him to have even guessed that it had ever been attached to the parchment or that it was now lying hidden in the bosom of the girl who would have killed him without the slightest scruple to gain the unsuspected possession of it.

CHAPTER IV. A SON OF THE GODS.

ON the day but one following the reading of Paul Romanoff's secret will, Olga and Serge set out for St. Petersburg, to convey his ashes to their last resting-place in the Cathedral of SS. Peter and Paul in the Fortress of Petropaulovski, where reposed the dust of the Tyrants of Russia, from Peter the Great to Alexander II. of Russia, now only remembered as the chief characters in the dark tragedy of the days before the Revolution.

The intense love of the Russians for their country had survived the tremendous change that had passed over the face of society, and it was still the custom to bring the ashes of those who claimed noble descent and deposit them in one of their national churches, even when they had died in distant countries.

The station from which they started was a splendid structure of marble, glass, and aluminium steel, standing in the midst of a vast, abundantly-wooded garden, which occupied the region that had once been made hideous by the slums and sweating-dens of Southwark. The ground floor was occupied by waiting-rooms, dining-saloons, conservatories, and winter-gardens, for the convenience and enjoyment of travellers; and from these lifts rose to the upper storey, where the platforms and lines lay under an immense crystal arch.

Twelve lines ran out of the station, divided into three sets of four each. Of these, the centre set was entirely devoted to continental traffic, and the lines of this system stretched without a break from London to Pekin.

The cars ran suspended on a single rail upheld by light, graceful arches of a practically unbreakable alloy of aluminium, steel, and zinc, while about a fifth of their weight was borne by another single insulating rail of forged glass,—the rediscovery of the lost art of making which had opened up immense possibilities to the engineers of the twenty-first century.

Along this lower line the train ran, not on wheels, but on lubricated bearings, which glided over it with no more friction than that of a steel skate on ice. On the upper rail ran double-flanged wheels with ball-bearings, and this line also conducted the electric current from which the motive-power was derived.

The two inner lines of each set were devoted to long-distance, express traffic, and the two outer to intermediate transit, corresponding to the ordinary trains of the present day. Thus, for example, the train by which Olga and Serge were about to travel, stopped only at Brussels, Berlin, Konigsberg, Moscow, Nijni Novgorod, Tomsk, Tobolsk, Irkutsk, and Pekin, which was reached by a line running through the Salenga valley and across the great desert of Shamoo, while from Irkutsk another branch of the line ran north-eastward via Yakutsk to the East Cape, where the Behring Bridge united the systems of the Old World and the New.

The usual speed of the expresses was a hundred and fifty miles an hour, rising to two hundred on the long runs; and that of the ordinary trains, from a hundred to a hundred and fifty. Higher speeds could of course be attained on emergencies, but these had been found to be quite sufficient for all practical purposes.

The cars were not unlike the Pullmans of the present day, save that they were wider and roomier, and were built not of wood and iron, but of aluminium and forged glass. Their interiors were, of course, absolutely impervious to wind and dust, even at the highest speed of the train, although a perfect system of ventilation kept their atmosphere perfectly fresh.

The long-distance trains were fitted up exactly as moving hotels, and the traveller, from London to Pekin or Montreal, was not under the slightest necessity of leaving the train, unless he chose to do so, from end to end of the journey.

One more advantage of railway travelling in the twenty-first century may be mentioned here. It was entirely free, both for passengers and baggage. Easy and rapid transit being considered an absolute

necessity of a high state of civilisation, just as armies and navies had once been thought to be, every self-supporting person paid a small travelling tax, in return for which he or she was entitled to the freedom of all the lines in the area of the Federation.

In addition to this tax, the municipality of every city or town through which the lines passed, set apart a portion of their rent-tax for the maintenance of the railways, in return for the advantages they derived from them.

Under this reasonable condition of affairs, therefore, all that an intending traveller had to do was to signify the date of his departure and his destination to the superintendent of the nearest station, and send his heavier baggage on in advance by one of the trains devoted to the carriage of freight. A place was then allotted to him, and all he had to do was to go and take possession of it.

The Continental Station was comfortably full of passengers when Olga and Serge reached it, about fifteen minutes before the departure of the Eastern express; for people were leaving the Capital of the World in thousands just then, to spend Christmas and New Year with friends in the other cities of Europe, and especially to attend the great Winter Festival that was held every year in St. Petersburg in celebration of the anniversary of Russian freedom.

Ten minutes before the express started, they ascended in one of the lifts to the platform, and went to find their seats. As they walked along the train, Olga suddenly stopped and said, almost with a gasp--

"Look, Serge! There are two Aerians, and one of them is"--

"Who?" said Serge, almost roughly. "I didn't know you had any acquaintances among the Masters of the World."

The son of the Romanoffs hated the very name of the Aerians, so bitterly that even the mere suspicion that his idolised betrothed should have so much as spoken to one of them was enough to rouse his anger.

"No, I haven't," she replied quietly, ignoring the sudden change in his manner; "but both you and I have very good reason for wishing to make their distinguished acquaintance. I recognise one of these because he sat beside Alan Arnold, the President of the Council, in St. Paul's, when they were foolish enough to relinquish the throne of the world in obedience to an old man's whim.

"The taller of the two standing there by the pillar is the younger counterpart of the President, and if his looks don't belie him, he can be no one but the son of Alan Arnold, and therefore the future ruler of Aeria, and the present or future possessor of the Great Secret. Do you see now why it is necessary that we should--well, I will say, make friends of those two handsome lads?"

Olga spoke rapidly and in Russian, a tongue then scarcely ever heard and very little understood even among educated people, who, whatever their nationality, made English their language of general intercourse. The words "handsome lads" had grated harshly upon Serge's ears, but he saw the force of Olga's question at once, and strove hard to stifle the waking demon of jealousy that had been roused more by her tone and the quick bright flush on her cheek than by her words, as he answered--

"Forgive me, darling, for speaking roughly! Their hundred years of peace have not tamed my Russian blood enough to let me look upon my enemies without anger. Of course, you are right; and if they are going by the express, as they seem to be, we should be friendly enough by the time we reach Konigsberg."

"I am glad you agree with me," said Olga, "for the destinies of the world may turn on the events of the next few hours. Ah, the Fates are kind! Look! There is Alderman (1) Heatherstone talking to them. I suppose he has come to see them off; for no doubt they have been the guests of the City during the Festival. Come, he will very soon make us known to each other."

(1) *The good old word had now regained its ancient and uncorrupted meaning.*

A couple of minutes later the Alderman, who had been an old friend of Paul Ivanitch, the famous sculptor, had cordially greeted them and introduced them to the two Aerians, whose names he gave as Alan Arnoldson, the son of the President of the late Supreme Council, and Alexis Masarov, a descendant of the Alexis Mazanoff who had played such a conspicuous part in the war of the Terror.

They were just starting on the tour of the world, and were bound for St. Petersburg to witness the Winter Festival.

Olga had been more than justified in speaking of them as she had done. Both in face and form, they were the very ideal of youthful manhood. Both of them stood over six feet in the long, soft, white leather boots which rose above their knees meeting their close-fitting, grey tunics of silk-embroidered cloth, confined at the waist by belts curiously fashioned of flat links of several different metals, and fastened in front by heavy buckles of gold studded with great, flashing gems.

From their broad shoulders hung travelling-cloaks of fine, blue cloth, lined with silver fur and kept in place across the breast by silver chains and clasps of a strange, blue metal whose lustre seemed to come from within like that of a diamond or a sapphire.

On their heads they wore no other covering than their own thick, curling hair, which they wore somewhat in the picturesque style of the fourteenth century, and a plain, broad band of the gleaming blue metal, from which rose above the temples a pair of marvellously-chased, golden wings about four inches high--the insignia of the Empire of the Air, and the sign which distinguished the Aerians from all the other peoples of the earth.

As Olga shook hands with Alan, she looked up into his dark-blue eyes, with a glance such as he had never received from a woman before--a glance in which he seemed instinctively to read at once love and hate, frank admiration and equally undisguised defiance. Their eyes held each other for a moment of mutual fascination which neither could resist, and then the dark-fringed lids fell over hers, and a faint flush rose to her cheeks as she replied to his words of salutation--

"Surely the pleasure will rather be on our side, with travelling companions from the other world! For my own part, I seem to remind myself somewhat of one of the daughters of men whom the Sons of the Gods"--

She stopped short in the middle of her daring speech, and looked up at him again as much as to say--

"So much for the present. Let the Fates finish it!" and then, appearing to correct himself, she went on, with a half--saucy, half-deprecating smile on her dangerously-mobile lips--

"You know what I mean; not exactly that, but something of the sort."

"More true, I fancy, of the daughter of men than of the supposed Sons of the Gods," retorted Alan, with a laugh, half startled by her words, and wholly charmed by the indescribable fascination of the way in which she said them; "for the daughters of men were so fair that the Sons of the Gods lost heaven itself for their sakes."

"Even so!" said Olga, looking him full in the eyes, and at that moment the signal sounded for them to take their places in the cars.

A couple of minutes after they had taken their seats, the train drew out of the station with an imperceptible, gliding motion, so smooth and frictionless that it seemed rather as though the people standing on the platform were sliding backwards than that the train was moving forward. The speed increased rapidly, but so evenly that, almost before they were well aware of it, the passengers were flying over the snow-covered landscape, under the bright, heatless sun and pale, steel-blue sky of a perfect winter's morning, at a hundred miles an hour, the speed ever increasing as they sped onward.

The line followed the general direction of the present route to Dover, which was reached in about half an hour. Without pausing for a moment in its rapid flight, the express swept out from the land over the Channel Bridge, which spanned the Straits from Dover to Calais at a height of 200 feet above the water.

Travelling at a speed of three miles a minute, seven minutes sufficed for the express to leap, as it were, from land to land. As they swept along in mid-air over the waves, Olga pointed down to them and said to Alan, who was sitting in the armchair next her own--

"Imagine the time when people had to take a couple of hours getting across here in a little, dirty, smoky steamboat, mingling their sorrows and their sea-sickness in one common misery! I really think this Channel Bridge is worthy even of your admiration. Come now, you have not admired anything

yet"--

"Pardon me," said Alan, with a look and a laugh that set Serge's teeth gritting against each other, and brought the ready blood to Olga's cheeks; "on the contrary, I have been absorbed in admiration ever since we started."

"But not apparently of our engineering triumphs," replied Olga frankly, taking the compliment to herself, and seeming in no way displeased with it. "It would seem that the polite art of flattery is studied to some purpose in Aeria."

"There you are quite wrong," returned Alan, still speaking in the same half-jocular, half-serious vein. "Before all things, we Aerians are taught to tell the absolute truth under all circumstance, no matter whether it pleases or offends; so, you see, what is usually known as flattery could hardly be one of our arts, since, as often as not, it is a lie told in the guise of truth, for the sake of serving some hidden and perhaps dishonest end."

The blow so unconsciously delivered struck straight home, and the flush died from Olga's cheek, leaving her for the moment so white that her companion anxiously asked if she was unwell.

"No," she said, recovering her self-possession under the impulse of sudden anger at the weakness she had betrayed. "It is nothing. This is the first time for a year or so that I have travelled by one of these very fast trains, and the speed made me a little giddy just for the instant. I am quite well, really, so please go on."

"You know, that wonderful fairyland of yours is a subject of everlasting interest and curiosity to us poor outsiders who are denied a glimpse of its glories, and it is so very rarely that one of us enjoys the privilege that is mine just now, that I hope you will indulge my feminine curiosity as far as your good nature is able to temper your reserve."

As she uttered her request, Alan's smiling face suddenly became grave almost to sternness. The laughing light died out of his eyes, and she saw them darken in a fashion that at once convinced her that she had begun by making a serious mistake.

He looked up at her, with a shadow in his eyes and a slight frown on his brow. He spoke slowly and steadily, but with a manifest reluctance which he seemed to take little or no trouble to conceal.

"I am sorry that you have asked me to talk on what is a forbidden subject to every Aerian, save when he is speaking with one of his own nation. I see you have been looking at these two golden wings on the band round my head. I will tell you what they mean, and then you will understand why I cannot say all that I know you would like me to say."

"They are to us what the toga virilis was to the Romans of old, the insignia of manhood and responsibility. When a youth of Aeria reaches the age of twenty he is entitled to wear these wings as a sign that he is invested with all the rights and duties of a citizen of the nation which has conquered and commands the Empire of the Air."

"One of these duties is, that in all the more serious relations of life he shall remain apart from all the peoples of the world save his own, and shall say nothing that will do anything to lift the veil which it has pleased our forefathers in their wisdom to draw round the realm of Aeria. Before we assume the citizenship of which these wings are the symbol we never visit the outside world save to make air voyages, for the purpose of learning the physical facts of the earth's shape and the geography of land and sea."

"Immediately after we have assumed it we do as Alexis and I are now doing--travel for a year or so through the different countries of the outside world, in order to get our knowledge of men and things as they exist beyond the limits of our own country."

"The fact that we do so,--under a pledge solemnly and publicly given, of never revealing anything which could lead even to a possibility of other peoples of the earth overtaking us in the progress which we have made in the arts and sciences,--is my excuse for refusing to tell you what your very natural curiosity has asked."

Olga saw instantly that she had struck a false note, and was not slow to make good her mistake. She

laid her hand upon his arm, with that pretty gesture which Serge knew so well, and watched now with much bitter feelings, and said, in a tone that betrayed no trace of the consuming passion within her--

"Forgive me! Of course, you will see that I did not know I was trenching on forbidden grounds. I can well understand why such secrets as yours must be, should be kept. You have been masters of the world for more than a century, and even now, although you have formally abdicated the throne of the world, it would be absurd to deny that you still hold the destinies of humanity in your hands.

"The secrets which guard so tremendous a power as that may well be religiously kept and held more sacred than anything else on earth. Still, you have mistaken me if you thought I asked for any of these. All I really wanted was, that you should tell me something that would give me just a glimpse of what human life is like in that enchanted land of yours"--

Alan laid his hands upon hers, which was still resting upon his arm, and interrupted her even more earnestly than before.

"Even that I cannot tell you. With us, the man who gives a pledge and breaks it, even in the spirit though not in the letter, is not considered worthy to live, and therefore I must be silent."

Instead of answering with her lips, Olga turned her hand palm upwards, and clasped his with a pressure which he returned before he very well knew what he was doing; and while the magic of her clasp was still stealing along his nerves, Serge broke in, with a harsh ring in his voice--

"But pardon me for interrupting what seems a very pleasant conversation with my--my sister, I should like to ask, with all due deference to the infinitely superior wisdom of the rulers of Aeria, whether it is not rather a risky thing for you to travel thus about the world, possessing secrets which any man or woman would almost be willing to die even to know for a few minutes, when, after all, you are but human even as the rest of humanity are?

"You, for instance, are only two among millions; how would you protect yourselves against the superior force of numbers? Supposing you were taken unawares under circumstances which make your superior knowledge unavailing, You know, human nature is the same yesterday to-day, and to-morrow, despite the superficial varnish of civilisation.

"The passions of men are only curbed, not dead. There may be men on earth to-day who, to gain such knowledge as you possess, would even resort to the tortures used by the Inquisition in the sixteenth century. Suppose you found yourself in the power of such men as that, what then? Would you still preserve your secret intact, do you think?"

Alan heard him to the end without moving a muscle of his face, and without even withdrawing his hand from Olga's clasp. But at the last sentence he snatched it suddenly away, half-turned in his seat, and faced him. Then, looking him straight in the eyes, he said in a tone as cold and measured as might have been used by a judge sentencing a criminal to death--

"We do not fear anything of the sort, simply because each one of us holds the power of life and death in his hands. If you laid a hand on me now in anger, or with an intent to do me harm, you would be struck dead before you could raise a finger in your own defence.

"Do you think that we, who are as far in advance of you as you are in advance of the men of a hundred years ago, would trust ourselves amongst those who might be our enemies were we not amply protected against you? Tell me, have you ever read a book, written nearly two hundred years ago in the Victorian Age, called *The Coming Race*?"

"Yes," said Serge, thinking, as he spoke, of the possibilities contained in the secret will of Paul Romanoff, "I have read it, and so has Olga. What of it?"

"Well," said Alan quietly, without moving his eyes from those of Serge. "I had better tell you at once that we have realised, to all intents and purposes, the dream that Lytton dreamt when he wrote that book. I can tell you so much without breaking the pledge of which I have spoken. All that the Vrili-Ya did in his dream we have accomplished in reality, and more than that.

"Our empire is not bounded by the roofs of subterranean caverns, but only by the limits of the planet's atmosphere. We can soar beyond the clouds and dive beneath the seas. We have realised what

he called the Vril force as a sober, scientific fact; and if I thought that you, for instance, were my enemy, I could strike you dead without so much as laying a hand on you. And if a dozen like you tried to overcome me by superior brute force, they would all meet with the same fate.

"I'm afraid this sounds somewhat like boasting," he continued in a more gentle tone, and dropping his eyes to the floor of the car, "but the turn the conversation has taken obliged me to say what I have done. Suppose we give it another turn and change the subject. We have unintentionally got upon rather uncomfortable ground."

Serge and Olga were not slow to take the pointed hint, and of the talk drifted into general and more harmless channels.

CHAPTER V. A VISION FROM THE CLOUDS.

AT Konigsberg, which was reached in nine hours after leaving London, that is to say, soon after seven o'clock in the evening, the Eastern express divided: five of the cars went northward to St. Petersburg, carrying those passengers who were going to participate in the Winter Festival, while the other five which made up the train went on to Moscow and the East.

During the twenty minutes' stop at Berlin, Olga had found an opportunity of having a few words in private with Serge, and had succeeded in persuading him, much against his will, of the necessity of postponing their marriage, and therefore their visit to Moscow, for the execution of a daring and suddenly-conceived plan which she had thought out, but which she had then no time to explain to him.

Serge, though very loath to postpone even for a day or two the consummation of his hopes and the hour which should make Olga irrevocably his, so far as human laws could bind her to him, was so far under the domination of her imperious will that, as soon as he saw that she had determined to have her own way, he yielded with the best grace he could.

Olga chided him gently and yet earnestly for his outbreak of temper towards Alan, and told him plainly that, where such tremendous issues were concerned as those which were involved in the struggle which sooner or later they must wage with the Aerians, no personal considerations whatever could be permitted a moment's serious thought. If she could sacrifice her own feelings, and disguise her hatred of the tyrants of the world under the mask of friendliness, for the sake of the ends to which both their lives were devoted, surely he, if he were at all worthy of her love, could so far trust her as to restrain the unreasoning jealousy of which he had already been guilty.

Either, she told him, he must trust to her absolutely for the present, or he must take the management of affairs into his own hands; and, as she said in conclusion, he must find some influence stronger than hers in their dealings with him who would one day be the ruler of Aeria, and, therefore, the real master of the world, should it ever be possible to dispute the empire of Earth with the Aerians.

From the influence which she exercised over himself, Serge knew only too well that he could not hope to rival her in this regard where a man was concerned, and so he perforce agreed to her proposal, and for the present left the conduct of affairs in her hands.

A telephonic message was therefore sent from Konigsberg to the friends who expected them at Vorobiv, near Moscow, to tell them of the change in their plans; and when the train once more glided out over the frozen plains of the North, the four were once more seated together in the brilliantly-lighted car, which flashed like a meteor through the gathering darkness of the winter's night.

About half an hour after they had passed what had once been the jealously-guarded Russian frontier, a dazzling gleam of light suddenly blazed down from the black darkness overhead, and Olga, who was sitting by one of the windows of the car, bent forward and said--

"Look there! What is that? There is a bright light shining down out of the clouds on the train."

Alan saw the flash across the window, and, without even troubling to look up at its source, said--

"Oh, I suppose that'll be the air-ship that was ordered to meet us at St. Petersburg. You know, we usually have one of them in attendance, when we trust ourselves alone among our possible enemies of the outer world."

The last sentence was spoken with a quiet irony, which brought home both to Olga and Serge the not very pleasant conviction that their previous conversation had by no means been forgotten. Serge, perhaps fearing to give utterance to his thoughts, remained silent, but Olga looked at Alan with a half-saucy smile, and said almost mockingly--

"Your Majesties of Aeria may well esteem yourselves impregnable, while you have such a bodyguard as that at your beck and call. I suppose that air-ship would not have the slightest difficulty in blowing this train, and all it contains, off the face of the earth at a moment's notice, if it had orders to do so?"

"Not the slightest," said Alan quietly. "But in proof of the fact that it has no such hostile intentions, you shall, if you please, take a voyage beyond the clouds in it the day after tomorrow, from St. Petersburg."

"What!" said Olga, her cheeks flushing and her eyes lighting up at the very idea of such an experience. "Do you really mean to say that you would permit a daughter of the earth, as I am told you call the women who have not the good fortune to be born in Aeria, to go on board one of those wonderful airships of yours, and taste the forbidden delights of spurning the earth and sharing, even for an hour, your Empire of the Air?"

"Why not?" replied Alan, with a laugh. "What harm would be done by taking you for a trip beyond the clouds? We are not so selfish as all that; and if the novel experience would give you any pleasure, we have a perfect right to ask you to enjoy it. Will you come?"

"Surely there is scarcely any need for me to say 'yes.' Why, do you know, I believe I would give five years of my life for as many hours on board that air-ship of yours," said Olga; "and if you will do as you say, you will make me your debtor for ever. Indeed, how could a poor earth-dweller such as I am repay a favour like that."

"Ah, if only you were an Aerial, I should not have much difficulty in telling you how you could do that," retorted Alan with almost boyish candour. "As it is, I am afraid I must be satisfied for my reward with the pleasure of knowing that I have given you a pleasurable experience."

"Your Majesty has put that so prettily, that it almost atones for the sense of hopeless inferiority which, I need hardly tell you, is just a trifle bitter to my feminine pride," said Olga, in the same half-bantering tone she had used all along. Before a reply had risen to Alan's lips, the conversation was interrupted by the air-ship suddenly swooping down from the clouds to the level of the windows of the train, which was now flying along over a wide, treeless plain at a speed of fully two hundred miles an hour.

As the search-lights of the aerial vessel flashed along the windows of the cars, the blinds, which had been drawn down at nightfall, were sprung up again by the passengers, who were all eager to get a glimpse of one of the marvellous vessels which so rarely came within close view of the dwellers upon earth.

The air-ship, on which all eyes were now bent with such intense curiosity, was a beautifully-proportioned vessel built chiefly of some unknown metal, which shone with a brilliant pale-blue lustre. Her hull was about two hundred feet from stem to stern, not counting a long, ramlike projection which stretched some twenty-five feet in front of the stem, with its point level with the keel, or rather, with the three keels,--the centre one shallow and the two others very deep,--which were obviously shaped so as to enable the craft either to stand upright on land or to sail upon the water if desired.

From each of her sides spread out two great wings, not unlike palm-leaves in shape, measuring some hundred feet from point to point, and about twice the width of the vessel's deck which was, as nearly as could be judged, twenty feet amidships.

These wings were made of some white lustrous material, which shone with a somewhat more metallic sheen than silk would have done, and were divided into a vast number of sections by transverse ribs. These sections vibrated and undulated rhythmically from front to rear with enormous rapidity, and evidently not only sustained the vessel in the air, but also aided in her propulsion.

Three seemingly solid discs, which glittered brilliantly in the light from the train, marked the positions of the air-ship's propellers, of which one revolved on a shaft in a straight line with the centre of the deck, while the shafts of the other two were inclined outwards at a slight angle from the middle line. From the deck rose three slender, raking masts, apparently placed there for ornament rather than use, unless indeed they were employed for signalling purposes.

The whole deck was covered completely from end to end by a curved roof of glass, and formed a spacious chamber pervaded by a soft, diffused light, the origin of which was invisible, and which showed about half a dozen figures clad in the graceful costume of the Aerials, and all wearing the

headdress with golden wings. From under the domed, crystal roof projected ten long, slender guns,-- two over the bows, two over the stern, and three over each side, at equal intervals.

Such was the wonderful craft which swept down from the darkness of the wintry sky, in full view of the passengers in the cars, and lighted up the snowy landscape for three or four miles ahead and astern with the dazzling rays of her two searchlights.

Although, as has been said, the express was moving at quite two hundred miles an hour, the air-ship swept up alongside it with as much apparent ease as though it had been stationary. Amid the murmurs of irrepressible admiration which greeted it from the passengers, it glided smoothly nearer and nearer, until the side of one of its wings was within ten feet of the car windows.

Alan and Alexis stood up and saluted their comrades on the deck, then a few rapid, unintelligible signals made with the hand passed between them, a parting salute was waved from the airship to the express; and then, with a speed that seemed to rival that of the lightning-bolt, the cruiser of the air darted forward and upward, and in ten seconds was lost beyond the clouds.

"Well, now that you have seen one of our aerial fleet at close quarters," said Alan, turning to Olga and Serge, "what do you think of her?"

"A miracle!" they both exclaimed in one breath; and then Olga went on, her voice trembling with an irresistible agitation--

"I can hardly believe that such a marvel is the creation of merely human genius. There is something appalling in the very idea of the awful power lying in the hands of those who can create and command such a vessel as that. You Aerians may well look down on us poor earth-dwellers, for truly you have made yourselves as gods."

She spoke earnestly, and for once with absolute honesty, for the vision of the air-ship had awed her completely for the time being. Alan appeared for the moment as a god in her eyes, until she saw his lips curve in a very human smile, and heard his voice say, without the slightest assumption of superiority in its tone--

"No, not as gods; but only as men who have developed under the most favourable circumstances possible, and who have known how to make the best of their advantages."

"God or man," said Olga in her soul, while her lips were smiling acknowledgment of his modesty, "by this time tomorrow you shall be my slave, and I will be mistress both of you and your air-ship!"

CHAPTER VI. DEED AND DREAM.

WHEN Olga went to her room that night in St. Petersburg, instead of going to bed, she unpacked from her valise a series of articles which seemed strange possessions for a young girl of not quite seventeen to travel with on her wedding journey.

First came a tiny spirit furnace from which, by the aid of an arrangement something like the modern blow-pipe, an intense heat could be obtained. Then a delicate pair of scales, a glass pestle and mortar, and a couple of glass liquid-measures and lastly, half a dozen little phials filled with variously-coloured liquids, and as many little packets of powders, that looked like herbs ground very finely.

When she had placed these out on the table, after having carefully locked the door of her room, and seen that the windows were completely shuttered and curtained, she drew from the bosom of her dress a gold chain, at the end of which was fastened, together with the key of the secret recess in the wall of the turret chamber of the house at Hampstead, a small bag of silk, out of which she took a little roll of parchment,--the slip which she had abstracted from Paul Romanoff's secret will after she had persuaded Serge, with her false kisses, to leave her alone for a while.

She seated herself at the table, drew the electric reading lamp which stood on it close to her, laid the slip down in front of her, keeping it unrolled by means of a couple of little weights, and studied it intently for several minutes. Then she made a series of calculations on another sheet of paper and compared the result carefully with some figures on the slip.

She made them three times over before she was satisfied that they were absolutely correct, and then, with all the care and deliberation of a chemical analyst performing, a delicate and important experiment, she proceeded to weigh out tiny quantities of the powders, and to mix them very carefully in the little glass mortar. This done, she emptied the mixture into a little platinum crucible, which she placed on the furnace at the same time applying a gentle heat.

Then she turned her attention to the phials, measuring off quantities of their contents with the most scrupulous exactitude, mixing them two and two, and adding this mixture to a third, and so on, in a certain order which was evidently prearranged, as she constantly referred to the slip of parchment and her own calculations as she was mixing them.

By the time she finished this part of her work, she had obtained from the various coloured liquids one perfectly colourless and odourless, of a specific gravity apparently considerably in excess of that of water, although, at the same time, it was extremely mobile and refractive. She held it up to the light looking at it with her eyelids somewhat screwed up, and with a cruel smile on her pretty lips.

"So far, so good," she said in a voice little higher than a whisper. "The lives of fifty strong men in that couple of ounces of harmless looking fluid! If anyone could see me just now, I fancy they would take me rather for a witch or a poisoner of the fifteenth century than for a girl of the twenty-first.

"Well, my friend Alan, your mysterious power may kill more quickly, but not more surely than this; and this, too, will take a man out of the world so easily that not even he himself will know that he is going,--not even when he sinks into the sleep from which he will awake on the other side of the shadows.

"So much for the bodies of our enemies, and now for their souls! I don't want to kill wholesale, at least, not just yet; and as for you, my Alan, you are far too splendid, too glorious a man to be killed, to say nothing of your being so much more useful alive. No, I have a very much pleasanter fate in store for you."

Just then a little cloud as of incense smoke began to rise from the crucible in which were the mixed powders, and a faint, pleasant perfume began to diffuse itself. She stopped her soliloquy, measured off exactly half of the liquid, and patiently poured it, drop by drop, into the crucible, at the same time gradually increasing the heat.

The vapour gradually disappeared, and the perfume died away. When she had poured in the last drop,

she began slowly stirring the mixture with a glass rod. It gradually assumed the consistency of thick syrup, and after stirring it for three minutes by her watch, which lay on the table beside her, she extinguished the electric lamp and waited.

In a few seconds a pale, orange-coloured flame appeared hovering over the crucible. As its ghostly light fell upon her anxious features, she caught sight of herself in a mirror let into the wall on the opposite side of the table. She started back in her chair with an irrepressible shudder. For the first time in her life she saw herself as she really was.

The weird, unearthly light of the flame changed the clear, pale olive of her skin into a sallow red, and cast what looked like a mist of vapour tinged with blood across the dark lustre of her dusky eyes. It seemed as though the light that she had called forth from the darkness had melted the beautiful mask which hid her inner self from the eyes of men, and revealed her naked soul incarnate in the evil shape that should have belonged to it.

Suddenly the flame vanished, she turned on the switch of the lamp, placed a platinum cover over the crucible with a pair of light, curved tongs, and, with a quick half-turn, screwed it hermetically down. Then she turned the heat of the furnace on to the full, rose from her chair, and stretched herself, with her linked hands above her head, till her lithe, girlish form was drawn up to its full height in front of the mirror.

She looked dreamily from under her half-closed lids at the perfect picture presented by the reflection, and then her tightly-closed lips melted into a smile, and she said softly to herself--

"Ah, that is a different sort of picture. I wonder what Alan would have thought if he could have seen that one? I don't think I should have taken my trip in the air-ship tomorrow if he had done. Well, I have seen myself as I am--what four generations of inherited hate and longing for revenge have made me.

"In the light of that horrible flame I might have sat for the portrait of the lost soul of Lucrezia Borghia. Ah, well, if mine is lost, it shall be lost for something worth the exchange. 'Better to rule in Hell than serve in Heaven,' as old Milton said, and after all--who knows?

"Bah! that is enough of dreaming, when the time for doing is so near. I must get some sleep to-night, or my eyes will have lost some of their brightness by to-morrow."

So saying, she busied herself putting away her phials, and powders, and apparatus. The half of the colourless liquid she had left she carefully decanted into a tiny flask, over the stopper of which she screwed a silver cap that had a little ring on the top, and this she hung on the chain round her neck. She replaced the slip of parchment in its silken bag, and carefully burnt the paper on which she had made her calculations.

By this time the bottom of the crucible was glowing red hot. She noted the time that had elapsed since she had screwed the cap down, waited five minutes longer, and then extinguished the furnace, undressed, and got into bed, and in half an hour was sleeping as quietly as a little child. She had set the chime of her repeating watch to sound at six, and hung the watch close above her head.

Calm as her sleep was at first, it was by no means dreamless and her dreams were well fitted to be those of a guilty soul slumbering after a work of death.

She saw herself standing with Alan on the glass-domed deck of the air-ship, beneath the light of a clear, white moon sailing high in the heavens, and a host of brilliant stars glittering out of the deep-blue depths beyond it. Far below them lay an unbroken cloud-sea of dazzling whiteness, which stretched away into the infinite distance on all sides, until it seemed to blend with the moonlight and melt into the sky.

Then the scene changed, and the air-ship swept downwards in a wide, spiral curve, and plunged through the noiseless billows of the shadowy sea. As she did so, a fearful chorus of sounds rose up from the earth below.

The moonlight and starlight were gone, and in their place the lurid glare of burning cities and blazing forests cast a fearful radiance up through the great eddying waves of smoke, and reflected itself on the under surface of the clouds; now the airship swept hither and thither with bewildering rapidity, like the

incarnation of some fearful spirit of destruction. Alan had vanished, and she was giving orders rapidly, and men were working the long, slender guns in a grim silence that contrasted weirdly with the horrible din that rose from the earth.

She saw neither smoke nor flame from the guns, nor heard any sound as they were discharged, but every time she raised her hand, the motion was followed within a few seconds by a shaking of the atmosphere, a dull roar from the earth, and the outburst of vast, dazzling masses of flame, before which the blaze of the conflagration paled.

She looked down with fierce exultation upon the scene of carnage and destruction; and as she gazed upon it, the fires died away, the roar of the explosions began to sound like echoes in the distance, and when the landscape of her dreamland took definite shape again, the air-ship was hovering, over a vast, oval valley, walled in by mighty mountain masses, surmounted by towering peaks, on some of which crests of everlasting snow and ice shone undissolved in the rays of the tropical sun.

The valley itself was of such incomparable and fairy-like beauty, that it seemed to belong rather to the realm of imagination than to the world of reality. A great lake lay in the centre, its emerald shores lined with groves of palms and orange-trees, and fringed with verdant islets spangled with many coloured flowers.

On the northern shore of the lake lay a splendid city of marble palaces, surrounded by shady gardens, and divided from each other by broad, straight streets, smooth as ivory and spotless as snow, and lined with double rows of wide-spreading trees, which cast a pleasant shade along their sides.

In the midst of a vast square, in the centre of the city, rose an immense building of marble of perfect whiteness surmounted by a great golden dome, which in turn was crowned by the silver shape of a woman with great spreading wings, which blazed and scintillated in the sunlight as though they had been fashioned of sheets of crystal, pure and translucent as diamonds.

All over the valley, villas and palaces of marble were scattered in cool ravines and on shaded, wooded slopes; and as far as her eye could reach, vast expanses of garden and emerald pastures, and golden corn fields stretched away over hill and vale, until the most remote were met by the cool, dark forests which clothed the middle slopes of the all-encircling mountains, and themselves gave place higher up to dark, frowning precipices, vast walls of living rock, rising thousands of feet sheer upwards, and ending in the mighty peaks which stood like eternal sentinels guarding this enchanted realm.

If she had had her will, she would have gazed for ever upon this delightful scene; but the spirit of the dream was not to be controlled, and it faded from her sight just as the picture of death and desolation had done. As it faded away, Alan, who had now come back to her side, laid his hand upon her shoulder and, looking at her with mournful eyes, said wearily--

"That was your first and last glimpse of heaven. Now comes the judgment!"

As he spoke, the air-ship soared upwards again, and was instantly enveloped in a cloud of impenetrable darkness. She sped on and on in utter silence through the gloom, which was so dense that it seemed to cast the rays of the ship's electric lights back upon her as she floated amidst it. Presently the deathlike silence was broken by a low, weird sound, that seemed like a wail of universal agony rising up from the earth beneath.

Then, far ahead and high up in the sky, appeared a faint light, which grew and brightened until the darkness melted away before it; and Olga saw the air-ship floating near enough to the earth for her to see that all its vegetation was withered and yellow, and the beds of its streams almost dry, with only little, thin rivulets trickling sluggishly along them.

Millions of people seemed wandering listlessly and aimlessly about the streets of the cities and the parched fields of the open country, ever and anon stretching their hands as though in appeal up to the dark, moonless sky, in which the fearful shape of light and fiery mist was growing every moment brighter and vaster.

It grew and grew until it arched half the horizon with its tremendous curve; and then out of the midst

of it came a huge, dazzling globe of fire, from the rim of which shot forth great flames of every colour, some of which seemed to descend to the surface of the earth like long fiery tongues that licked up the seething lakes in wreathing clouds of steam, which hissed and roared as they rose like ascending cataracts.

She looked down between them at the earth. The myriads of figures were there still, but now they lay prone and lifeless on the ground, as though the last agony of mankind were past. The light of the blazing globe grew more and more dazzling, and the heat more and more intense. The speed of the air-ship slackened visibly, although the wings and propellers were working at their utmost speed, and it was falling rapidly, as though there was no longer any air to support it.

She gasped for breath in the choking, burning atmosphere of the deck chamber, and then a swift, vivid wave of light seemed to sweep through her brain, and she woke with a choking gasp of terror, with the chimes of her watch ringing sweetly in her ears, telling her that the vision had been but a dream of a night had passed.

Wide awake in an instant, she got out of bed and turned on the electric lamp. As the room had been perfectly warmed all night by the electric conduction-stoves, which were then in almost universal use, she only stopped to throw a fur-lined cloak round her shoulders before she went to remove the cap of the crucible.

She peered anxiously into the vessel, and saw about two fluid ounces of a dark, glittering liquid, from the surface of which the light of the lamp was reflected as though from a mirror. With hands that trembled slightly, in spite of the great effort she made to keep her nerves in check, she poured the precious fluid into one of the glass measures that she had used the night before.

Seen through the glass, its colour was a deep, brilliant blue and, like the white liquid first prepared, shone as though with an inherent, light-giving power of its own. She held it up admiringly to the light, and said to herself, with the same cruel smile that had curved her lips when she had contemplated the other fluid--

"How beautiful it is! It might be made of sapphires dissolved in some potent essence. In reality, it is an elixir capable of dissolving the souls of men. Ah, my proud Masters of the World, we shall soon see how much your boasted powers avail you against this and a woman's wit and hatred!

"And you, my splendid Alan, before to-morrow night you shall be at my feet! Two drops of this, and that proud, strong soul of yours shall melt away like a snowflake under warm rain, and you shall be my slave and do my bidding, and never know that you are not as free as you are now.

"The days have gone by when men sought the Elixir of Life, but Paul Romanoff sought and found the Elixir of Death,--death of the body or of the soul, as the possessor of it shall will; and he is gone, and I, alone of all the children of men, possess it!" (2)

(2) Such a poison as this is no figment of the imagination. It has been known to Oriental adepts in poisoning for many centuries, and the Borghias were certainly familiar with it. A kindred drug was used by the Russian agents who kidnapped the late Prince Alexander of Bulgaria, though in his case the injury was permanent. It reduced him from one of the most able and daring princes in Europe to a mental and moral cripple, who was perfectly content to live in the obscurity to which his enemies had consigned him.

She set the measure down on the table, and took out of her valise a similar little flask to the one which held the white liquid. In this she carefully poured the contents of the measure, screwed the cap on as before, and hung it with the other on the chain round her neck. Then, woman-like, she turned to the mirror, threw back her cloak a little, and gazed at the reflection of the two flasks, which shone like two great gems upon her white skin.

"There is such a necklace as woman never wore before, since woman first delighted in gems,--a necklace that all the jewels in the world could not buy. How pretty they look!"

So saying, she turned away from the mirror and carefully put away all traces of the work she had been engaged in, then she threw off her cloak and turned the lamp out and got into bed again, to wait until the attendant called her at eight o'clock as she had directed.

She did not go to sleep again, but lay with wide-open eyes looking at the darkness, and conjuring out of it visions of love and war, and the world-wide empire which she believed to be now almost within her grasp. In all these visions, two figures stood out prominently--those of Serge and Alan, her lover that had been and the lover that was to be,--if only the elixir did its work as its discoverer had said it would.

As such thoughts as these passed through her brain, a new and perhaps a nobler conception of her mission of revenge took possession of her. In the past, Natasha had won the love of the man whose genius had made possible, nay, irresistible, the triumph of that revolution which had subverted the throne of her ancestors, and sent the last of the Tsars of Russia to die like a felon in chains amidst the snows of Siberia.

What more magnificent vengeance could she, the last surviving daughter of the Romanoffs, win than the enslavement of the man descended not only from Natasha and Richard Arnold, but also from that Alan Tremayne whose name he bore, and who, as first President of the Anglo-Saxon Federation, had ensured the victory of the Western races over the Eastern?

The empire of freedom and peace, which Richard Arnold had won for Natasha's sake, this son of the line of Natas should convert, at her bidding, into an empire such as she longed to rule over, an empire in which men should be her slaves and women her handmaidens. For her sake the wave of Destiny should flow back again; she would be the Semiramis of a new despotism.

What was the freedom or the happiness of the mass of mankind to her? If she could raise herself above them, and put her foot upon their necks, why should she not do so? By force the leaders of the Terror had overthrown the despotisms of the Old World; why should not she employ the self-same force to seat herself, with the man she loved in spite of all her hereditary hatred, upon the throne of the world, and reign with him in that glorious land whose beauties had been revealed to her in the vision which surely had been something more than a dream?

Thus thinking and dreaming, and illumining the darkness with her own visions of glories to come, she lay in a kind of ecstasy, until a knock at the door warned her that the time for dreaming had passed and the hour for action had arrived.

A brief half-hour sufficed for her toilet, and she entered the room of the hotel, in which Serge was awaiting her, dressed to perfection in her plain, clinging robe of royal purple, and self-composed as though she had passed the night in the most innocent and dreamless of slumbers. She submitted to his greeting kiss with as good a grace as possible, and yet with an inward shrinking which almost amounted to loathing, born of the visions which were still floating in her mind.

She shuddered almost invisibly as he released her from his embrace, and then the bright blood rose to her cheeks, and a sudden light shone in her eyes, as the thought possessed her, that not many hours would pass before a far nobler lover would take her in his arms, and would press sweeter kisses upon her lips,--the lips which had sworn fealty and devotion to the enemies of his race.

Serge, with the true egotism of the lover, took the blush to himself, and said, with a laugh of boyish frankness--

"Travelling and Russian air seem to agree with your Majesty. Evidently you have slept well your first night on Russian soil. I was half afraid that what happened yesterday, and your conversation with that golden-winged braggart from Aeria, would have sufficiently disturbed you to give you a more or less sleepless night, but you look as fresh and as lovely as though you had slept in the most perfect peace at home."

The anger that these unthinking words awoke in her soul, brought back the bright flush to Olga's cheeks and the light into her eyes, and again Serge mistook the sign, as indeed he might well have done; and so he entirely mistook the meaning of her words when she replied, with a laugh, of the true

significance of which he had not the remotest conception--

"On the contrary, how was it possible that I could have anything but the sweetest sleep and the most pleasant dreams, after such a delightful journey and the making of such pleasant acquaintances? Do you not think the Fates have favoured us beyond our wildest expectations, in thus bringing our enemies so unconsciously across our path at the very outset of our campaign against them?

"But really, these Aerians are delightful fellows. No, don't frown at me like that, because you know as well as I do, that in that chivalrous good-nature of theirs lies our best hope of success."

As she spoke she went up to him, and laid her two hands upon his shoulder, and went on looking up into his eyes with a seductive softness in hers.

"I am afraid I made you terribly jealous yesterday; but really, Serge, you must remember that in diplomacy, and diplomacy alone, lies our only chance of advantage in the circumstances which the kindly Fates appear to have specially created for our benefit.

"The time for you to act will come later on, and when it comes, I know you will acquit yourself like the true Romanoff that you are; but for the present--well, you know these Aerians are men, and where diplomacy alone is in the question it is better that a woman should deal with them. You will trust me for the present,--won't you, Serge?"

For all answer, he took her face between his hands, put her head back, and kissed her, saying as he released her--

"Yes, darling; I will trust you not only now, but for ever. You are wiser than I am in these things. Do as you please; I will obey."

As he spoke, the door opened, and an attendant came in with two little cups of coffee on a silver salver. He placed it on the table, told them that breakfast would be ready for them in the morning-room in ten minutes, and retired. As they sipped their coffee, Olga said to Serge--

"Now, we shall meet our enemies at breakfast, and I want you to be a great deal more cordial and friendly than you were yesterday. Our own feelings concern ourselves alone, but in our outward conduct we owe something to the sacred cause which we both have at heart. You can imagine how great a sacrifice I am making in my relations with those whom I have been taught to hate from my cradle.

"I can see as well as you do, perhaps better, that this future ruler of Aeria admires me in his own boyish way. If I can bring myself to appear complaisant, surely it is not too much to ask you to look upon it with indifference, or even with interest,--a brotherly interest, you know; for you must remember that he knows me only as your sister.

"Now, I want you to ask them to come and have breakfast with us at our table, and to exert yourself to appear agreeable to them, even as I shall; and above all things, promise me that you will fall in with any suggestions that I may make as regards our trip in this wonderful air-ship which we are to make to-morrow.

"There is no time now to explain to you what I mean, but I swear to you, by the blood that flows in both our veins, that if I can only carry through, without any let or hindrance, the plans that I have already formed--that before forty-eight hours have passed that air-ship shall no longer be under Alan Arnoldson's command."

He looked at her for a moment with almost incredulous admiration. She returned his inquiring glance with a steady, unwavering gaze, which made suspicion impossible. All his life he had grown up to look upon her as sharing with him the one hope that was left of restoring the ancient fortunes of their family. More than this they had been lovers ever since either of them knew the meaning of love.

How then could he have dreamt that behind so fair an appearance lay as dark and treacherous a design as the brain of an ambitious woman had ever conceived? Intoxicated by her beauty and the memory of his lifelong love, he took a couple of steps towards her, took her unresisting into his arms again, and said passionately--

"Give me another kiss, darling, and on your lips I will swear to trust you always and do your bidding

even to the death."

She returned his kiss with a passion so admirably simulated that his resolve was thrice strengthened by it, and then she released herself gently from his embrace, saying--

"Even so, unto the death if needs be,--as I shall serve our sacred cause to the end, cost what it may! Come, it is time that we went down to breakfast."

CHAPTER VII. THE SPELL OF CIRCE.

BREAKFAST passed off very pleasantly, and by the time it was over Serge was upon much better terms with the two Aerians than he had been on the previous day. He had taken Olga's warning and appeal to heart, and he had done so all the more easily for the reason that he felt somewhat ashamed of himself for the ill-temper and bad manners of which he had been guilty, and which their two new acquaintances had repaid with such dignified courtesy and good humour.

His frankly-expressed apology was accepted with such perfect good nature, unmixed with even a suspicion of condescension, that he felt at ease with them at once, and even began to regret that his destiny made it impossible for him to be their friend instead of their enemy.

The discussion of their plans for the day occupied the rest of the meal. They had a whole twenty-four hours before them, for the Ithuriel would not be back from San Francisco, where she was going when she passed the train, until ten o'clock on the following morning, so it was arranged that they would begin the day with a sleigh drive--a luxury which not even Aeria could afford,--then the two Aerians were to see the sights of the city under the guidance of Olga and Serge, and perform the chief of the duties that brought them to St. Petersburg.

After luncheon they were to have a couple of hours on the ice in the park, into which the Yusupoff Gardens of the nineteenth century had been expanded, after which they would see the ice palaces illuminated at dusk, then dine, and finish the day at the opera. When the air-ship arrived, a rapid flight was to be taken across Europe over the Alps and back to Moscow, across Italy, Greece, and the Black Sea, which would enable Alan and Alexis to deposit their guests with their Moscow friends soon after nightfall.

The sleigh drive took the form of a race, on the plain stretching towards Lake Ladoga, between the two troikas driven by Serge and Olga, who had so managed matters that she had Alan for a companion, and who, not a little to Serge's disgust, won it, after a desperate struggle, by a head. The race was a revelation to the two Aerians, and when Alan handed Olga out of the sleigh after they had trotted quietly back to the city, the interest which she had excited in him during the railway journey had already begun to deepen into a sentiment much more pleasing and dangerous.

The rest of the morning was devoted to driving about the city, and to paying a visit to the ancient fortress of Peter and Paul, which alone of all the fortress prisons of Russia had been preserved intact as a fitting monument of fallen despotism and a warning to all future generations. Once at least in his life every man in Aeria visited this fortress, as good Moslems visit Mecca, and this was the duty which Alan and Alexis were now performing.

In one of the horrible dungeons deep down in the foundations of the fortress, under the waters of the Neva, they were shown a massive gold plate riveted on to the rough, damp, stone wall. Its surface was kept brightly polished, and it looked strangely incongruous with the gloom and squalor of the cell. On it stood an inscription in platinum letters let into the gold:

"In this cell Israel d'Murska, afterwards known as Natas, the Master of the Terror, was imprisoned in the year 1881, previous to his exile to Siberia by order of Alexander Romanoff the last of the Tyrants of Russia."

With feelings wide asunder as love and hate, or gratitude and revenge, the descendant of Natas and the daughter of the Romanoffs stood in front of this memorial plate, and read the simple and yet pregnant words. Alan and Alexis both bent their heads as if in reverence for a moment, but Olga and Serge gazed at it with heads erect and eyes glowing with the fires of anger, in a silence that was broken by Alan saying--

"Liberty surely never had a stranger temple than this, and yet this dungeon is to us what the Tomb of the Prophet is to the Moslems. I wonder what the Last of the Tsars would have thought if he could have foreseen even a little part of all that sprang from the tragedy that was begun in this dismal cell?"

"He would have killed him," said Olga, carried away for the moment by an irrepressible burst of passion, "and then there would have been no Natas, no Terror, and no Terrorist air-fleet, and Alexander Romanoff would have died master of the world instead of a chained felon in Siberia! Your ancestor, Richard Arnold, would have starved in his garret, or killed himself in despair, as many other geniuses did before him, and"--

"And the world would have remained the slave-market of tyrants and the shambles of murderous men. Let us thank God that Natas lived to do his work!" said Alan in a tone of solemn reverence, wondering not a little at Olga's strange outburst, and yet not having the remotest idea of its true cause.

Neither Olga nor Serge could reply to this speech. They would have bitten their tongues through rather than say "Amen" to it, and anything else they dare not have said. After a moment more of somewhat constrained silence, Olga turned towards the door and said--

"Come! Let us go, the air of this place poisons me!"

When they got on the ice after lunch, Olga was not a little astonished to find that, perfect as she and Serge were in skating, the two Aerians were little inferior to them, despite the fact that they had just left their tropical home for the first time.

"How is this?" said Olga to Alan, as, hand in hand, they went sweeping over the ice in long, easy curves. "I suppose you manufacture your ice for skating purposes in Aeria?"

"No," he said. "Some of our mountains rise above the snow-line, and in their upper valleys they have little lakes, so, when we want a skating surface, we just pump the water up and flood them and let it freeze. Besides this--I don't think there is any harm in my telling you that we have a sort of wheel-skate which runs quite as easily as steel does on ice."

"Ah," said Olga, possessed by a sudden thought. "Then I suppose that is why the streets of your splendid city are so broad, and white, and smooth?"

Quietly as the words were spoken, Alan's hand tightened upon hers as he heard them with a grip that almost made her cry out with pain. It was some moments before he recovered from his astonishment sufficiently to ask her the meaning of her unexpected and amazing question. She greeted his question with a saucy smile and a mocking, upward glance, and said quietly--

"Simply because I have seen them!"

It was a bow drawn at a venture. She had suddenly determined to test the truth of her vision and hazard a description from it of the unknown land.

"You have seen them?" cried Alan, now more amazed than ever. "But, pardon me, even at the risk of contradicting you I must tell you that that is impossible. No one not a born Aerian has set eyes on Aeria for more than a hundred years."

"So you think perhaps," she said in the same quiet, half-mocking tone. "Well now, listen and tell me whether this description is entirely incorrect. If it is correct you need say nothing, if it is not you can tell me so."

And then she began, while he listened in a silence of utter stupefaction, and described the valley and city of Aeria as she had seen them in her dream-vision. When she had finished he was silent for several moments, and then said in a voice that told her that she had really seen it as though with the eyes of flesh--

"What are you? A sorceress, or--No, you cannot be an Aerian girl in disguise, for none ever leaves the country till she is married."

"Then as I cannot be the latter," said Olga, "you must, I suppose, consider me the former. Now I shall take my revenge for your reticence in the train yesterday, and tell you no more. We are quits to that extent at least, and now we will go back to my brother, if you please."

With this Alan was forced to be content. Indeed, he could not have pursued the subject without breaking his oath, and so a few minutes later it came about that Olga and Serge were skating together in an unfrequented part of the lake, and here Olga took an opportunity that she might not have again of telling him as much as she thought fit for him to know of her plans for capturing the air-ship on the

following day.

"I needn't tell you," said she, "that this air-ship is worth everything to us, and that therefore we must be ready to go to any extremities to get possession of it. It is the first step to the command of the world, for you heard Alan say to-day that she is the swiftest vessel in the whole Aerial fleet."

"But to do that we must first overcome the crew," said Serge, looking anxiously about to see if there was anyone within earshot. "How are we going to do that--two of us against ten or a dozen, armed with powers we know nothing about?"

"We must find means to drug them--to poison them, if necessary, during to-morrow's voyage," came the reply, in a whisper that made his heart stand still for the moment with utter horror.

"Good God! is that really necessary? It seems a horrible thing to do, when they are trusting us and taking us as their guests," he said in a low, trembling tone.

"Yes," she replied, with a well simulated shudder; "it is horrible, I know, but it is necessary. Remember that we have solemnly sworn war to the knife against this people, and that, armed as they are, all open assault is impossible; therefore they must be struck in secret, or not at all.

"Now listen. I have brought with me a flask which my grandfather gave me a day or two before he died. It contains enough of a tasteless, powerful narcotic to send twenty people to sleep so that nothing will wake them for several hours. I will give you half of this to-night and keep half myself, and one of us must find an opportunity to get the crew to take it in their wine, or whatever they may drink, for they are sure to have one or two meals while we are on board.

"To-night I will send instructions in cypher to the Lossenskis in Vorobiv to tell them that as many as possible of the Friends must be ready for action by eight to-morrow night, and must wait, if necessary, night after night till we come. If all goes well we shall select the new crew of the Ithuriel from them before we see two more sunrises. In fact, by the time we return from our voyage we must have absolute control of the vessel.

"Such an opportunity as this will never offer itself again, and I, for my part, am determined to risk anything, not excepting life itself, to take the best advantage of it. It would be madness to allow any scruples to stand in our way when the Empire of the Air is almost within our grasp."

"And none shall, so far as I am concerned," replied Serge in a low, steady voice that showed that his horror at the deed they contemplated had succumbed, at least for the moment, to the tremendous temptation offered by the prospect of success.

"Spoken like a true Romanoff!" said Olga, looking up at him with a sweet smile of approval. "As the deed is so shall the reward be. Now we must get back to our friends. We will find a means to get an hour together before to-night to arrange matters further, and we will have Alan and Alexis to supper with us after the opera, and then I will begin my share of the work. Once the air-ship is ours, we can hide her in one of the ravines of the Caucasus, hold a council of war in the villa at Vorobiv, and set about the work of the Revolution in regular fashion."

The rest of the day was spent in accordance with the plans already agreed on. Olga and Serge had tea together in their private room before going to the theatre, and put the finishing touches to their plans for the momentous venture of the following day; and Alan and Alexis, all unsuspecting, accepted their invitation to supper after their return from the opera-house.

The seemingly innocent and pleasant little supper, which passed off so merrily in the private sitting-room occupied by Olga and Serge, had but one incident which calls for description here, and even that was unnoticed not only by the two guests, but by Serge himself.

Just before midnight, Olga proposed that, in accordance with the ancient custom of Russia, they should drink a glass of punch, brewed in the Russian style; and as she volunteered to brew it herself, it is needless to say that the invitation was at once accepted.

The apparatus stood upon a little table in one corner of the room. For a single minute her back was turned to the three sitting at the table in the centre; her share in the conversation was not interrupted for an instant, and no one saw a couple of drops of sparkling, blue liquid fall into each of three of the

glasses from the little flask that she held concealed in the palm of her hand, and when she turned round with the little silver tray on which the glasses stood, the flask was resting at the bottom of her dress-pocket.

She handed a glass to each of them, and then took her own up from the side-table where she had left it. She went to her place, and, holding her glass up, said simply--

"Here's to that which each of us has nearest at heart!" and drank.

All followed suit, and as the clock chimed twelve a few minutes later, the two Aerians took their leave, and left Olga and Serge alone.

"You said you would begin your share of the work to-night," said he, as soon as they were alone. "Have you done so?"

"If you do your work to-morrow as successfully as I have done mine to-night," replied Olga, looking steadily into his eyes as she spoke, "the Empire of the Air will no longer be theirs."

Serge returned her glance in silence. He wanted to speak, but some superior power seemed to have laid a spell upon his will, and as long as Olga's burning eyes were fixed on his, his tongue was paralysed, nay, more than this, his mind even refused to shape the sentences that he would have liked to speak. Olga held him mute before her for several minutes, and then she said quietly, still keeping her eyes fixed on his--

"Now speak, and tell me what you would do if I told you that I preferred Alan as a lover to you, and that I would rather a thousand times be his slave and plaything than your wife."

"I should say that you are the mistress of my destiny, that I have no law but your will, and that it is for you to give me joy or pain, as seems good to you."

Serge spoke the unnatural words in a calm, passionless tone, rather as though he were speaking in a sort of hypnotic trance than in full command of his senses. A strange, subtle influence had been stealing through his veins and over his nerves ever since he had drunk the liquor which Olga had prepared.

He seemed perfectly incapable of resisting any suggestion that might have been made to him. His will was paralysed, but even the consciousness of this fact was fading from his mind. All his passions were absolutely in abeyance. Even his love for Olga failed to inspire him with any jealous resentment of words which half an hour before would have goaded him to frenzy. He heard them as though they concerned someone else.

The ruin of his life's hopes, which they implied so distinctly, had no meaning for him; so far as his volition was concerned he was an automaton, ready to obey without question the dictates of her imperious will.

"That will do," said Olga, in the tone of a mistress addressing a servant. "Now go to bed and sleep well, and remember the work that lies before you to-morrow."

"I will," said Serge, and without another word, without attempting to take his customary good-night kiss, he walked out of the room, leaving her to the enjoyment of her victory and the contemplation of triumphs that now seemed almost certain to her.

Punctual to its appointed time, the air-ship appeared in mid-air over the city a few minutes before ten the next morning. It sank slowly and gracefully to within a hundred feet of the ground over the garden of the hotel in which the two Aerians and their new friends were staying.

Signals were rapidly exchanged as before between Alan and one of the crew standing on the afterpart of the deck. Then it sank down on to one of the snow-covered lawns of the garden, a door opened in the glass covering of the deck, a short, light, folding ladder with hand-rails dropped out of it to the ground, and Alan, springing up three or four of the steps, held out his hand to Olga, saying--

"Come along! we shall have a crowd round us in another minute."

This was true, for the appearance of the air-ship had already attracted hundreds of people in the streets, and many of them had already made their way into the gardens of the hotel in order to get a closer view of her.

Olga, feeling not a little like a queen ascending a throne, ran lightly up the steps, followed by Serge

and Alexis. The moment they got on to the deck the ladder was drawn up, the glass door slid noiselessly to, and Alan at once presented them to his friends on deck.

While the introductions were taking place, the wings of the air-ship began to vibrate and undulate with a wavy motion from forward aft, at first slowly, and then more and more swiftly, her propeller whirled round, and the wonderful craft rose without a jar or a tremor from the earth. Then the propellers began to revolve faster and faster, and she shot forward and upward over the trees amid the admiring murmurs of the crowds in the streets about the hotel. But little did those light-hearted sightseers dream, any more than did the captain and crew of the Ithuriel, that this aerial pleasure-cruise was destined to mark the beginning of a tragedy that would involve the whole of civilised humanity in a catastrophe so colossal that the like of it had never been seen or even dreamt of on earth before. From the wit of a woman and the weakness of a man were now to be evolved the elements of destruction that ere long should lay the world in ruins.

CHAPTER VIII. THE NEW TERROR.

FIVE years had passed since the Ithuriel had vanished like a cloud from the sky, leaving, so far as the air-ship itself was concerned, no more trace than if she had soared into space beyond the sphere of the earth's attraction and departed to another planet.

All the rest of the winter of 2030-1, tidings had been sought most anxiously, but in vain, by the kindred and friends of those who had formed her crew during the ill-fated voyage on which she had disappeared into the unknown. The earth had been ransacked east and west, north and south, by the aerial fleet in search of the missing Ithuriel, but without result.

She had been traced to St. Petersburg and Vorobieve, but there, like the phantom craft of the Flying Dutchman, she had melted into thin air so far as any result of the search could show. But when the snows thawed on the mountains of Norway, and the bodies of eight Aerians who had formed her crew on her last fatal voyage were discovered by a couple of foresters in a melting snowdrift on the very spot on which Vladimir Romanoff had been killed with his companions by order of the Supreme Council, a thrill both of horror and excitement ran through the whole civilised world.

That their death was intimately connected with the disappearance of the air-ship was instantly plain to everyone, and the only inference which could be drawn from such a conclusion was that at last some power, silent, mysterious, and intangible, had come into existence prepared to dispute the empire of the world with the Aerians, and, more than this, had already struck them a deadly blow which it was utterly beyond their power to return.

The effects of this discovery were exactly what Olga had anticipated. From the first time since their ancestors had conquered the earth and made war impossible, the supreme authority of the Aerians was called into question. It was quite beyond their power to conceal the fact that their flagship had either deserted or been captured, incredible as either alternative seemed. The Central Council therefore wisely accepted the situation, and immediately after the discovery of the bodies the President published a full account of her last voyage, as far as was known, in the columns of *The European Review*, the leading newspaper of the day in the Old World.

The only clue to the fate of the air-ship seemed to lie in the fact that at St. Petersburg a youth and young girl with whom Alan and Alexis had made friends on their journey from London had gone on board the Ithuriel for a trip to the clouds. But this led to nothing. Who was to recognise the daughter of the Tsar and the last male scion of the House of Romanoff in Olga and Serge Ivanitch, who had never been known as anything but the orphan grandchildren of Paul Ivanitch, the sculptor.

More than this, even to entertain for a moment the supposition that this boy and girl--for they were known to be little more--could by any possible means have overcome the ten Aerians, armed as they were with their terrible death-power, and then have vanished into space with the air-ship would have been to shatter the supremacy of the Aerians at a blow.

Even as it was, the wildest and most dangerous rumours began to fly from lip to lip and nation to nation all round the world, and for the first time since the days of the Terror the "Earth Folk" began to think of the Aerians rather as men like themselves than as the superior race which they had hitherto regarded them.

The President of Aeria at once issued a proclamation asking, in the interests of peace and public security, for the assistance of all the civilised peoples of the earth in his efforts to discover the lost air-ship, and also conditionally declaring a war of extermination on any Power or nation which either concealed the whereabouts of the Ithuriel or gave any assistance to those who might be in possession of her. This proclamation was published simultaneously in all the newspapers of the world, and produced a most profound sensation wherever it was read.

The terrible magic of the ominous word "war" roused at once the deathless spirit of combativeness that had lain dormant for all these years. It was impossible not to recognise the fact that this mysterious

power, which had come unseen into existence and had snatched the finest vessel in the Aerial navy from the possession of the Council with such daring and skill that not a trace of her was to be found, could have but one object in view, and that was to dispute the Empire of the Air with the descendants of the Terrorists.

This could mean nothing else than the outbreak, sooner or later, of a strife that would be a veritable battle of the gods, a struggle which would shake the world and convulse human society throughout its whole extent. The general sense of peace and security in which men had lived for four generations was shattered at a stroke by the universal apprehension of the blow that all men felt to be inevitable, but which would be struck no man knew when or how.

A year passed, and nothing happened. The world went on its way in peace, the Aerial patrols circled the earth with a moving girdle of aerial cruisers, ready to give instantaneous warning of the first reappearance of the lost Ithuriel; but nothing was discovered. If she still existed, she was so skilfully concealed as to be practically beyond the reach of human search.

Then without the slightest warning, while Anglo-Saxondom was in the midst of the hundred and thirtieth celebration of the Festival of Deliverance, the civilised world was started out of the sense of security into which it had once more begun to fall by the publication, in *The European Review*, of the following piece of intelligence--

A MYSTERY OF THE SEA. DISAPPEARANCE OF THREE TRANSPORTS.

It is our duty to chronicle the astounding and disquieting fact that the three transports, *Massilia*, *Ceres*, and *Astrua*, belonging respectively to the Eastern, Southern, and Western Services, have disappeared.

The first left New York for Southampton four days ago, and should have arrived yesterday. The Central Atlantic signalling station reported her "All well" at midday on Tuesday, and this is the last news that has been heard of her. The second was reported from Cape Verd Station on her voyage from Cape Town to Marseilles, and there all trace of her is lost, as she never reached the Canary Station.

The third was last heard of from Station No. 2 in the Indian Ocean, which is situated at the intersection of the 80th meridian of east longitude with the 20th parallel of south latitude, she was on her way from Melbourne to Alexandria, and should have touched at Aden two days ago.

The disappearance of these three magnificent vessels, filled as they were with passengers and loaded with cargoes of enormous value both in money and material, can only be described as a calamity of world-wide importance. Unhappily, too, the mystery which surrounds their fate invests it with a sinister aspect which it is impossible to ignore.

That their loss is the result of accident or shipwreck it is almost impossible to believe. They represented the latest triumphs of modern shipbuilding. All were over forty thousand tons in measurement, and had engines capable of driving them at a speed of fifty nautical miles an hour through the water.

For fifty years no ocean transport has suffered shipwreck or even serious injury, so completely has modern engineering skill triumphed over the now conquered elements. Added to this, no storms of even ordinary violence have occurred along their routes.

After passing the stations at which they were last reported, they vanished, and that is all that is known about them.

The President of Aeria has desired us to state that he has ordered his submarine squadrons stationed at Zanzibar, Ascension, and Fayal, to explore the ocean beds along the routes pursued by the transports. Until we receive news of the result of their investigation it will be well to refrain from further comment on this mysterious misfortune which has suddenly and unexpectedly fallen upon the world, and in doing so we shall only express the fervent desire of all civilised men and women when we express the hope that this calamity, grievous as it is, may not be the precursor of even greater misfortunes to come.

It would be almost impossible for us of the present day to form any adequate estimate of the thrill of horror and consternation which this brief and temperately-worded narration of the mysterious loss of the three transports sent through the world of the twenty-first Century. Not only was it the first event of the kind that had occurred within the memory of living men, but, saving the loss of the Ithuriel, it was the first dark cloud that had appeared in the clear heaven of peace and prosperity for more than a hundred and twenty years.

But terrible as was the state of excitement and anxiety into which it threw the nations of the world, it gave place to a still deeper horror and bewilderment when day after day passed and no tidings were received of the three submarine squadrons, consisting of three vessels each, which had been sent to inquire into the fate of the transports. They dived beneath the waves of the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic, and that was the last that was ever seen of them.

Month after month went by, every week bringing news of some fresh calamity at sea--of the disappearance of transport after transport along the great routes of ocean travel, of squadron after squadron of submarine cruisers which plunged into the abysses of the sea to discover and attack the mysterious enemy of mankind that lay hidden in the depths, and which never reappeared on the surface. Whether they were captured or destroyed it was impossible to say, simply because no member of their crews ever returned to tell the tale.

Whatever doubt there had been as to the existence or hostile nature of this ocean terror that was paralysing the trade of the world was speedily set at rest by a discovery made in the spring of the year 2032 by a party of divers who descended to repair a fault in one of the Atlantic cables about two hundred miles west of Ireland.

There, lying in the Atlantic ooze, they found the shattered fragments of the Sirius, a transport which had disappeared about a month before. The great hull of the splendid vessel had been torn asunder by some explosive of tremendous power, and, more than this, her hold had been rifled of all its treasure and the most valuable portions of its cargo. After this there no longer remained any doubt that the depths of the ocean were the hunting-ground of some foe of society, one at least of whose objects was plunder.

The President and Council of Aeria found themselves at last confronted and baffled by an enemy who could neither be seen nor reached in his hiding-place, wherever it might be, beneath the surface of the waters. Thousands of lives had been sacrificed, and treasure in millions had been lost by the end of the first year of what men had now come to call the New Terror.

New fleets of submarine cruisers were built and held in readiness in all the great ports of the world, and these scoured the ocean depths in all directions with no further result than the swift and silent annihilation of vessel after vessel by some power which struck irresistibly out of the darkness and then vanished the moment that the blow had been delivered.

As yet, however, no enemy appeared on land or in the air, nor were any tidings heard of the lost

Ithuriel, or her captain and lieutenant. The Aerians had replaced her with ten almost identical vessels and had raised the strength of their navy to two hundred and fifty vessels, one hundred of which were kept in readiness in Aeria, while the other hundred and fifty were distributed in small squadrons at twenty-four stations, half of which were in the Western hemisphere and half in the Eastern.

The submarine warfare had now practically ceased. Nearly two hundred vessels belonging to Aeria, Britain, and America, had been captured or destroyed by an enemy which at the period at which this portion of the narrative opens was as supreme throughout the realm of the waters as the Aerians were in the air. To the menace of the air-ships this hidden foe replied by severing all the oceanic cables and paralysing the communication of the world save overland and through the air.

Thus, at the end of six years after the capture of the Ithuriel by Olga Romanoff more than half the work of those who had brought peace on earth after the Armageddon of 1904 had been undone. All over the world, not even excepting in Aeria, men lived in a state of constant anxiety and apprehension, not knowing where or how their invisible enemy would strike them next.

The Masters of the World were supreme no longer, for a new power had arisen which, within the limits of the seas, had proved itself stronger than they were. Communication between continent and continent had almost ceased, save where the Aerian air-ships were employed. In six short years the peace of the world had been destroyed and the stability of society shaken.

Among the nations of Anglo-Saxondom the change had manifested itself by a swift decadence into the worst forms of unbridled democracy. Men's minds were unhinged, and the most extravagant opinions found acceptance.

Parliaments had already been made annual and were fast sinking into machines for registering the ever-changing opinions of rival factions and their leaders. Sovereigns and presidents were little better than popular puppets existing on sufferance. In short, all that Paul Romanoff had prophesied was coming to pass more rapidly than even he had expected so far as the area of the Anglo-Saxon Federation was concerned.

In the Moslem Empire affairs were different, but no less threatening. The Sultan Khalid the Magnificent, as he was justly styled by his admirers, saw clearly that the time must come when this mysterious enemy would emerge from the waters and attempt the conquest of the land, and for three years past he had been manufacturing weapons and forming armies against the day of battle which he considered inevitable, and which he longed for rather than dreaded.

Thus, while Anglo-Saxondom was lapsing into the anarchy of unrestrained democracy, the Moslem monarch was preparing to take advantage of the issue of events which, skilfully turned to account, might one day make him master of the world.

Such was the condition of affairs throughout the world on the 1st of May 2036, and then the long-expected came in strange and terrible shape. At midnight a blaze of light was seen far up in the sky over the city of Aeria. A moment later something that must have been a small block of metal fell from a tremendous height in the square in the centre of the city, and was shattered to fragments by the force of its fall.

On the splintered pavement where it fell was found a little roll of parchment addressed to the President. It was taken to him, and he opened it and read these words:--

To Alan Arnold, President of Aeria.

If you want your son Alan and his friend Alexis, go and look for them on an island which you will find near the intersection of the 40th parallel of south latitude and the 120th meridian of west longitude in the South Pacific. They have served my turn and I have done with them. Perhaps they will be able to tell you how I have conquered the Empire of the Sea. Before long I shall have wrested the Empire of the Air from you as well.

OLGA ROMANOFF.

CHAPTER IX. THE FLIGHT OF THE "REVENGE".

ASTOUNDING, almost stupefying, as were the tidings conveyed by this letter, which had dropped like a veritable bolt from the blue, the challenge contained in the last sentence and the ominous name with which it was signed were matters of infinitely greater and more instant importance.

Alan Arnold was the responsible President of Aeria first and a father afterwards. He lost not a moment in speculating upon the strange fate of his son and first-born. The safety not only of Aeria, but of the world, demanded his first attention, and he gave it.

Crushing the missive in his hand he took two swift strides to a telephone in the wall of the room in which he had received the message from the skies and delivered several rapid orders through it. If they had been the words of a demi-god instead of those of a man their effects could scarcely have been more instantaneous or marvellous.

On a hundred mountain-peaks all round the great valley of Aeria enormous lights blazed out simultaneously, flinging long streams of radiance, dazzling and intense, for miles into the sky towards all points of the compass, and at the same moment fifty air-ships soared up from their stations all round the mountains, flashing their search-lights ahead and astern in all directions.

It was a scene of unearthly wonder and magnificence, a scene such as could only have been made possible by the triumphant genius of a race of men, heirs of all the best that earth could give them, who had turned the favour of circumstance to the utmost advantage.

Three minutes sufficed for the aerial cruisers to clear the mountains, and as they did so the wide-sweeping rays of fifty search-lights, assisted by the blazing orbs which crowned every mountain-peak, illuminated the darkness for many miles outside the valley. In the midst of the sea of light thus projected through the semi-darkness of the starlit heavens the flying shape of an air-ship was detected speeding away to the south-eastward.

Instantly the prows of the whole squadron were turned towards her, and the first aerial race in the history of the world began. The pursuing air-ships spread themselves out in a huge semicircle, at the extremities of which were the two swiftest vessels in the fleet, almost exact counterparts of the lost Ithuriel. One of these bore the same name as the stolen flag-ship, and the other had been named the Ariel, after the first vessel built by Richard Arnold, the conqueror of the air, a hundred and thirty-two years before.

These two vessels carried ten guns each and were capable of a maximum speed of five hundred miles an hour, the highest velocity that it had so far been found possible to attain. The others were somewhat smaller craft, mounting eight guns each, and capable of a speed of about four hundred miles an hour. The chase, either because she could not travel faster or for some hidden reason, allowed the pursuing squadron to gain upon her until she was only some five miles ahead of its two foremost vessels, which were travelling at the highest speed attainable by the whole flotilla.

She showed no lights, and so in order to keep her in view it was necessary for her pursuers to keep their search-lights constantly sweeping the skies ahead of them, lest they should lose sight of her in the semi-darkness.

This placed the Aerian fleet at a serious disadvantage, which very soon became apparent, for before the pursuit had lasted an hour the chase opened fire with her stern guns and shell after shell charged with some terrific explosive began bursting along the line of the pursuing squadron, producing fearful concussions in the atmosphere, and causing the pursuers to rock and toss in the shaken air like ships on a stormy sea.

The Ithuriel and the Ariel, at the two extremities of the semicircle, replied with a rapid converging fire from their bow guns in the hope of reaching the now invisible chase. All the projectiles were, of course, time-shells, but the speed at which the vessels were travelling not only made the aim hopeless, but caused such an in-rush of air into the muzzles of the guns that the projectiles, checked in their

course through the barrels, flew wild and exploded at random, often in dangerous proximity to the vessels themselves.

Hence, after about a dozen shots had been fired, the commanders of the two vessels found themselves compelled to cease firing, and to trust to speed alone to overtake the enemy. On the other hand, this disadvantage to them was all in favour of the chase, which was able to work her two stern guns without the slightest impediment. Before long she got the range of her pursuers, and at last a shell burst fairly under one of the smaller vessels. A brilliant flash of light, blue as the lightning-bolt, illuminated her for an instant, and in that instant her companions saw her stop and shiver like a stricken bird in mid-air, and then plunge downwards like a stone to the earth.

Olga Romanoff, standing on the deck of what had once been the Ithuriel, flag-ship of the Aerial fleet, and now renamed the Revenge, saw this catastrophe, as the others had done, through her night-glasses. She lowered them from her eyes, and said to a dark-eyed, black-haired young fellow, who was commanding the gun that had done the execution--

"Bravo, Boris Lossenski! Did you sight that gun?"

Boris drew himself up and saluted, saying--

"Yes, Majesty, I did."

"Then for that you shall be a Prince henceforth, and if you can bring another down you shall command an air-ship of your own when this fight is over."

Boris saluted again, and ordered the gun to be reloaded. Before it could be discharged a shell from the port gun, which had been fired as Olga spoke, struck another of the Aerial vessels square on the fore-quarter. The flash of the exploding projectile was almost instantaneously followed by the outburst of a vast dazzling mass of flame which illumined for the instant the whole scene of the aerial battle.

The air-ship with all its cargo of explosives blew up like one huge shell, and the frightful concussion of the atmosphere induced by the explosion hurled the two vessels that were close on either side of her like feathers into space, turning them completely over and flinging them to the earth six thousand feet below. A few moments later they struck the ground simultaneously, two great spouts of flame shot up from the spots where they struck, and when the darkness closed over them again four of the pursuing squadron had been annihilated.

"Better still, Levin Ostroff!" cried Olga, as she saw the awful effects of this last shot. "For that you too shall be a Prince of the Empire and command an air-ship on our next expedition. Now, Boris, let us see if you can beat that!"

"Yes, Majesty," said Boris again, knitting his brows and clenching his teeth in anger at his rival's superior success. He glanced along the line of the pursuers and saw four of the Aerial squadron flying close together. He brought the gun to bear upon the two inner ones, took careful aim, and despatched the projectile on its errand of destruction. The moment he had released it he said to the two men who were working under him--

"Load again, quickly!"

The command was instantly obeyed, and scarcely had the explosion of the first blazed out than a second shell was sent after it. The very firmament seemed split in twain by the frightful results of the two well-aimed shots, each of which had found its mark on the two inner vessels with fatal accuracy.

Great sheets of flame leapt out in all directions from the focus of the explosion, and in the midst of their dazzling radiance those on board the Revenge saw the two outside airships of the four roll over and dive head foremost into the dark abyss below them. They struck the earth as the others had done, and vanished into annihilation in the midst of the momentary mist of fire.

This last catastrophe made it plain to the commanders of the Ithuriel and the Ariel that to continue the chase under such conditions meant the destruction in detail of all the smaller ships of the squadron. Those on board the Revenge saw signals rapidly flash from one end of the line, and instantaneously answered from the other end.

"Ah!" said Olga. "My Lords of the Air seem to have had enough of it for the present. Look, the small

fry are falling to the rear; our reception has been a little too hot for them. I wonder what they are going to do now. Cease firing, and let us watch them. You two gunners have done gloriously and earned quite enough laurels for your first battle."

It soon became evident that the Aerians had decided to send their smaller craft back. From the speed of the Revenge, and the terrible accuracy and destructiveness of her guns, the commanders of the squadron were now convinced that she was either the lost Ithuriel, or some vessel even superior to her, built upon the same plan.

This being so, to have continued the pursuit under such conditions with the smaller craft would simply have been to court destruction for them in detail. It was impossible for them to use their guns effectively at the speed at which they were travelling, while, as had been so terribly proved, the chase could use hers with perfect ease.

The flying fight could thus only result under present conditions in the ignominious defeat of the squadron by the single vessel as long as she was able to keep ahead. The only hope of success lay, therefore, in a trial of speed and manoeuvring skill between her and the Ithuriel and Ariel, so orders were flashed to the smaller vessels to return to Aeria with the mournful tidings of the destruction of eight of their number.

As they vanished into the darkness behind, Olga divined instantly the tactics that were to be adopted. She saw the converging search-lights of the two remaining air-ships begin to glow brighter and brighter in the rear of the Revenge, proving that they had increased their speed.

"So, it is going to be a race, is it!" she said, half to herself. "Well, we will see if we can lead them into the trap. How fast are we going, Boris?"

He went to the engine-room, and returned saying--

"Four hundred miles an hour, Majesty."

"Make it five," replied Olga.

He saluted, and transmitted the order to the engineer. The lights of the pursuers immediately began to recede again, then they seemed to stop.

"That will do!" said Olga. "They have reached the limit of their speed. Keep to the southward, and see that they come no nearer."

The three air-ships were, in fact, now travelling at their utmost speed. If anything, the advantage was slightly in favour of the Revenge, thanks to the high efficiency of the motive-power which had been applied to her in accordance with the directions left by Olga's father, and transmitted in the will of Paul Romanoff.

So all the rest of the night and on into the next day pursuers and pursued sped on with fearful velocity through the air. They passed over Africa and out above the ocean, and still on and on they swept until the Southern Sea was crossed and the mighty ice-barrier that fences in the South Pole gleamed out white upon the horizon.

This was passed, and still they rushed on over the dreary wastes of Antarctica. The pole was crossed along the 40th meridian, and then they swept northward until the smoke-cloud that crowned the crest of Mount Erebus rose above the snow-clouds that hid the earth. The Revenge headed straight towards this and swept over it, followed at a distance of about ten miles by her pursuers.

Then with a mighty upward sweep she leapt two thousand feet higher still, came to equilibrium, and discharged a shell downwards on to the ice. The explosion was answered by the rising of a flotilla of air-ships, which seemed to have sprung out of the bowels of the earth.

Thirty vessels as large as herself rose simultaneously through the clouds and spread themselves out in a wide circle round the two Aerial vessels, which thus found themselves surrounded by an overwhelming force and dominated by the Revenge floating far above them with her ten guns pointed down upon them.

To an observer so placed as to be able to command a view of the situation it would have seemed that nothing short of the surrender or annihilation of the Ithuriel and the Ariel could have been the outcome

of it.

So evidently thought Olga and those in command of the Russian aerial fleet, for, although for one brief instant the two Aerial vessels lay at their mercy, they failed to take advantage of it, and in losing this one precious moment they reckoned without the superior skill and perfect control of their air-ships possessed by those of whom they thought to make an easy prey.

What really happened took place with such stupefying suddenness that they were taken completely off their guard. The Ithuriel and the Ariel lay end on to each other in the midst of the circle of their enemies. Each mounted ten guns, and of these every one was available. The crews of both vessels, trained by constant practice to the highest point of efficiency, knew exactly what to do without so much as an order being given.

Automatically the twenty guns were trained in the twinkling of an eye, each on a Russian vessel, and discharged simultaneously. A moment later the two vessels sank like stones through the thick clouds below them; and while the heavens above were shaken with the combined explosions of the twenty projectiles, each of which had found its mark with unerring accuracy, they had regained their equilibrium a thousand feet from the surface of the ice, and darted away full speed northward.

To such a fearful pitch of efficiency had their guns and projectiles been brought that, while the aim was unerring if once a fair sight was obtained, nothing shaped by human hands could withstand the impact of their shells without destruction. Twenty out of the thirty vessels of the Russian fleet collapsed, and, as it were, shrivelled up under the frightful energy of the Aerial projectiles. Twenty masses of flame blazed out over the grey surface of the cloud-sea, and in another moment the fragments of the vessels it had taken so many months of labour and such wondrous skill to construct were lying scattered far and wide over the snow and ice of the Antarctic desert.

The awful suddenness with which this destruction had been accomplished deprived Olga and her subordinates of all power of thought for the moment. They heard the roar of the explosions, and saw a mist of flame burst out round them as though all the fires of Mount Erebus had broken loose at once and then came the silence of speechless horror and stupefaction. It was more like the work of omnipotent fiends than of men. The bolts of heaven themselves could have done nothing like it.

Then the moment of the shock passed, and those who survived remembered what they ought never to have forgotten--that, armed as they were with weapons which under favourable circumstances were absolutely irresistible, the first shot meant victory for those who fired it, and destruction for their enemies. Odds of mere numbers went for nothing, for each air-ship was equal to ten others provided she could send her ten projectiles home first, and this is just what had happened.

All this had passed in a twentieth of the time that it has taken to describe it, and by the time Olga and her subordinates grasped the extent of the calamity that had overtaken them the two Aerial vessels, darting through the air at five hundred miles an hour, had swept far out of range of their guns, and were moreover so hidden by the cloud-sea, that they had no idea which course they had taken.

Olga stamped her foot upon the deck, and, in a paroxysm of unrestrained passion, literally screamed with rage as she ordered the Revenge to sink below the clouds. Less than two minutes sufficed for the remains of the fleet, that had been thirty-one strong five minutes before and now only numbered eleven vessels, to sink through the clouds.

A rapid glance round showed them the Ithuriel and the Ariel, tiny specks far out over the waste of snow and ice, speeding away to the northward. To give chase was out of the question, for scarcely had they sighted them than they vanished as completely as though they had melted into the atmosphere; and so Olga signalled for her remaining vessels to proceed to their secret haven in the snowy solitudes of the South, while the Ithuriel and her consort sped onward on their homeward voyage, to carry the news of the terrible vengeance that they had taken for the destruction of the eight air-ships which had been annihilated by the guns of the Revenge.

Twenty hours sufficed for the two Aerial vessels to pass over a quarter of the earth's circumference, and carry their tidings of vengeance and victory to Aeria, and shortly after noon on the day but one

after Olga had dropped her challenge from the skies, a meeting of the Ruling Council was held at the President's house in order to consider the startling and pregnant events which had taken place, and to determine the plan of the war which, after a hundred and thirty years of unquestioned supremacy, they were now called upon to wage not only for the mastery of the world, but for the very lives and liberties of the citizens of Aeria.

It had of course been impossible to conceal from the inhabitants of the valley the gravity of the startling events which had taken place in such rapid succession, nor did the President and Council consider any such concealment desirable. There were no demagogues and no politics in Aeria, and therefore there was no need for any State secrets save those which contained the essentials of aerial navigation.

There was also no fear of panic in a community which contained no ignorant or criminal classes, and so, while the Council was sitting, the strange tidings were promulgated throughout the length and breadth of the valley. Marvellous and disquieting as they were they yet gave rise to very few external signs of excitement. They were gravely, earnestly, and even anxiously discussed, for they brought with them a prophecy of calamities to come, the probability of whose realisation was too plain to be ignored.

But ever since the days of the Terror each generation of Aerians had been carefully trained to recognise the fact that the progress of science and the restlessness of human invention in the world outside their borders must, sooner or later, produce some challenge to their supremacy and some attempt to dispute with them the Empire of the Air. Now, after four generations--in spite of all the elaborate precautions that had been taken, the stringent laws that had been enacted and more than once mercilessly enforced--the crisis had come.

It was now impossible to doubt that by some means, which so far seemed almost superhuman, the flag-ship of their fleet had been stolen, and the son of the President kidnapped with his greatest friend. More than this, the news brought back by the Ithuriel and the Ariel proved beyond all doubt that means had been found to build a large fleet of aerial warships without even arousing the suspicions of the Council. And, worst and most sinister sign of all, there was also the fact, proved by Olga's letter to the President, that the moving spirit in this defiant revolt against the supremacy of Aeria was one who bore the ill-omened and still hated name of Romanoff.

As has been said, there was no panic that night in Aeria, but still many a man and woman anxiously asked, either aloud or in his or her own soul, whether in the mysterious revolution of human affairs it might not be about to come to pass that she who had wrought this apparent miracle might not yet be able to avenge the terrible fate of her ancestor, the Last of the Tsars. Then, with this thought came a universal revulsion of horror at the prospect of such a crime against humanity and a deep resolve to exact the penalty for it to the uttermost.

If war was to be brought once more upon the earth, those who brought it would find Aeria worthy of its splendid traditions and ready, if necessary, to reconquer the earth as the founders of its empire had done in the Armageddon of 1904. Fierce as that mighty struggle had been, its horrors would pale before those of a conflict in which conquest would mean extermination, for if Aeria was forced once more to draw the sword it would not be sheathed until there was peace again on earth, even if that peace were to be but the silence of universal desolation.

CHAPTER X. STRANGE TIDINGS TO AERIA.

THE sitting of the Council lasted until nightfall, and just as the western mountains were throwing their huge shadows over the lovely valley, two more air-ships passed between two of the southward peaks and alighted in the great square in the centre of the city. They were the two vessels which had been sent to the island indicated in Olga's letter to bring back the long-lost Alan and Alexis.

It would be vain to attempt to describe the feelings with which the President and the father of Alexis went, as they thought, to receive their sons, but the air-ships had returned without them, and in their stead they brought a written message which conveyed tidings no less strange and startling than those brought from Antarctica by the Ithuriel and her consort.

It was a letter from Alan to his father, and as soon as he received it from the captain of one of the air-ships, who had found it nailed to a tree on the island, he took his friend into his library, and there the two fathers read it together.

After briefly but circumstantially recounting the capture of the flag-ship by Olga by means of her subtle drugs, and showing how, by using the power they gave her, she had kept them in mental slavery for years, forcing them to employ their skill and knowledge in aiding her to build her aerial and submarine fleets out of the spoils of the destroyed ocean transports, from which the latter had taken an incalculable amount of treasure, Alan's letter concluded thus:--

I will now tell you the reason why Alexis and myself have not waited for the air-ship which we knew you would send for us as soon as you received the message which Olga Romanoff told us she would despatch to you. We consider that by our weakness and folly --or, in truth, I should rather say mine, for it was I who invited these treacherous guests on board the Ithuriel--we have not only brought endless calamities upon the world, but we have also forfeited our right to the citizenship of Aeria. What the judgment of the Council would be upon us I don't know. but we are resolved that, whatever it might have been, you and Alexis's father shall be spared the sorrow of pronouncing sentence upon your own sons. Some day perhaps we may win at least the right to plead our cause before you. At present we have none, and until we have won it you shall not see us again unless you capture us by force.

We were sent here in the Narwhal, the swiftest and most powerful vessel of the Russian submarine fleet. Only a few days ago an accident revealed to Alexis for the first time during our long mental slavery the means which this woman, who is as beautiful as an angel and as merciless as a fiend, had used to keep us in subjection. We took the utmost care to give her no suspicion of his discovery, and although we drank no more of her poison we acted exactly as though we were still under its influence.

In what could only have been mockery she gave us back our belts and coronets, bidding us wear them "when we returned to our kingdom," as she put it. We shall never wear the winged circlets again till we have regained the right to do so, but the belts and a couple of brace of magazine pistols which we took before we left her stronghold in Antarctica stood us in good stead.

We have killed the crew of the Narwhal, and taken possession of her. She is far swifter and more powerful than any vessel in our submarine navy, for she can be driven at a hundred and fifty miles an hour through the water, and can destroy anything that floats in or on the sea with a blow of her ram, and, more than this, she carries a torpedo battery which has an effective range of two miles and can strike and destroy anything within that distance without giving the slightest warning of her presence.

There are fifty vessels of this type in the Russian fleet, but the Narwhal is at least thirty miles an hour faster than any of them. An attack will probably be made by the Russians on our station at Kerguelen Island within a week by submarine vessels and a small squadron of air-ships, and there we shall begin our operations against the enemy. If you have any reply to make to this letter we will wait for it at sea off Kerguelen, and then begin the campaign we have planned. We shall never rest until we have either destroyed the Russian fleet in detail or have died in the attempt to do so.

If we ever return it will be to restore to you the supremacy of the sea, and then, and not till then, we will ask you to pardon our fault and will willingly submit to such further conditions as you may see fit to impose upon us before you give us back--if ever you do--the rights which we have lost.

With all love and duty to yourself, and loving remembrances to the dear ones in Aeria, your son
ALAN.

At the foot of the letter was a postscript signed by Alexis, indorsing all that Alan had said, save with regard to his sole responsibility for the calamity that had ensued from the admission of Olga and Serge on board the Ithuriel.

The two fathers discussed the strange, and, to them, most affecting communication for nearly an hour in private, and then another meeting of the Council was called to consider it and pronounce authoritatively upon it. The President read the letter aloud in a voice which betrayed no trace of the deep emotion that moved his inmost being, and then left the Council chamber with Maurice Masarov, so that their presence might not embarrass their colleagues.

The simple, manly straightforwardness of Alan's letter appealed far more eloquently to the Council than excuses or prayers for forgiveness would have done. It was plain, too, that after the first indiscretion of taking the strangers on board the air-ship, no moral responsibility or blame could be laid on Alan and Alexis for what they had done under the influence of a drug which had paralysed their moral sense.

The Council, therefore, not only accepted the conditions of the letter, but without a dissentient voice, agreed to confer the first and second commands of the Aerian submarine fleets and stations for the time being upon Alan and Alexis, with permission to call in the aid of the nearest aerial squadron when necessary. This decision was despatched forthwith by an airship to Kerguelen, and within an hour all Aeria was talking of nothing, else than the strange fate of the two youths who for five years had been mourned as dead.

Later on that evening, when the twin snow-clad peaks which towered high above the city of Aeria had lost the pink afterglow of the departed sunlight, and were beginning to gleam with a whiter radiance in the level beams of the newly-risen moon, a girl was standing on the spacious terrace of a

marble villa which stood on the summit of a rounded eminence a couple of miles from the western verge of the city.

She had just crossed the threshold of womanhood. The next sun that would rise would be that of her twentieth birthday. Yet for two years she had worn the silver circle and crystal wings, for in Aeria a girl became of legal age at eighteen, though she took no share in the civil life of the community until she was married, an event which, as a rule, took place not long after she was invested with the symbol of citizenship.

It was an exceedingly rare event for an Aerian girl to reach the eve of her twentieth year unmarried, for the sexes in the Central-African paradise were very evenly balanced, and, as was natural in a very high state of civilisation, where families seldom exceeded three or four children, celibacy in either sex was looked upon as a public misfortune and a private reproach.

But Alma Tremayne, the girl who was standing on the terrace of her father's house on this most eventful evening, had become an exception to the rule through circumstances so sad and strange that her loneliness was an honour rather than a reproach. There were many of the wearers of the golden wings who had sought long and ardently to win her from the allegiance which forbade her to look with favouring eyes upon any of them.

She was beautiful in a land where all women were fair, a land where, under the most favourable conditions that could be conceived, a race of almost more than human strength and beauty had been evolved, and she came of a family scarcely second in honour even to that of the President, for she was the direct descendant in the fifth generation of Alan Tremayne, first President of the Anglo-Saxon Federation, through his son Cyril born two years after the daughter who had married the firstborn son of Natasha and Richard Arnold.

More than five years before she and Alan had plighted their boy-and-girl troth on the eve of his departure on the fateful voyage from which he had never returned, and of which no tidings had reached Aeria until a few hours before. To the simple vow which her girlish lips had then spoken she had remained steadfast even when, as the years went by and still no tidings came of her lost lover, she, in common with her own kindred, had begun to mourn him as dead.

It is true that she was in love rather with a memory than with a man, yet with some natures such a love as this is stronger than any other, more ideal and more lasting, and exempt from the danger of growing cold in fruition. So strong was the hold that this ideal love had taken upon her being that the idea of even accepting the love and homage of any other man appeared as sacrilegious to her as the embrace of an earthly lover would have seemed to a nun of the Middle Ages.

And so, with a single companion in her solitary state, she stood aside and watched with patient, unregretful eyes the wedded happiness of her more fortunate friends. This companion was Isma Arnold, Alan's sister, who had a double reason for doing as Alma had done.

Not only had she resolved never to marry while her brother's fate remained uncertain, but she, too, had also made her choice among the youths of Aeria, and in such matters an Aerian girl seldom chose twice. So she waited for Alexis as Alma did for Alan, hoping even against her convictions, and keeping his memory undefiled in the sacred shrine of her maiden soul.

No artist could have dreamed of a fairer picture than Alma standing there on the terrace overlooking the stately city and the dark shining lake at her feet. She was clad in soft, clinging garments of whitest linen and finest silk of shimmering, pearly grey, edged with a dainty embroidery of gold and silver thread.

Her dress, confined at the waist with a girdle of interlinked azurine and gold, clothed without concealing the beauties of her perfect form, and her hair, crowned by her crystal-winged coronet, flowed unrestrained, after the custom of the maidens of Aeria, over her shoulders in long and lustrous waves of dusky brown. There was a shadow in the great deep grey eyes which looked up as though in mute appeal to the starlight, the shadow of a sorrow which can never come to a woman more than once.

All these years she had loved in cheerful patience and perfect faith the man for whose memory she

had lived in maiden widowhood--and now, who could measure the depth of the darkness, darker than the shadow of death itself, that had fallen across her life, severing the past from the present with a chasm that seemed impassable, and leaving the future but a barren, loveless waste to be trodden by her in weariness and loneliness until the end!

All these years she had loved an ideal man, one of her own splendid race, the very chosen of the earth, as pure in his unblemished manhood as she was in the stainless maidenhood that she had held so sacred for his sake even while she thought him dead--and, lo! the years had passed, and he had come back to life, but how? Hers was not the false innocence of ignorance. She knew the evil and the good, and because she knew both shrank from contamination with the horror born of knowledge.

She had seen both Olga's letter and Alan's, and those two terrible sentences, "They have served my turn, and I have done with them," and "She is as beautiful as an angel and as merciless as a fiend," kept ringing their fatal changes through her brain in pitiless succession, forcing all the revolting possibilities of their meaning into her tortured soul till her reason seemed to reel under their insupportable stress.

Mocking voices spoke to her out of the night, and told her of the unholy love that such a woman would, in the plenitude of her unnatural power, have for such a man; how she would subdue him, and make him not only her lover but her slave; how she would humble his splendid manhood, and play with him until her evil fancy was sated, and then cast him aside--as she had done--like a toy of which she had tired.

Better a thousand times that he had died as his murdered comrades had died--in the northern snowdrift into which this Syren of the Skies had cast them, to sleep the sleep that knew neither dreams nor waking! Better for him and her that he had gone before her into the shadows, and had remained her ideal love until, hand in hand, they could begin their lives anew upon a higher plane of existence.

As these thoughts passed and repassed through her mind with pitiless persistence, her lovely face grew rigid and white under the starlight, and, but for the nervous twining and untwining of her fingers as her hands clasped and unclasped behind her, her motionless form might have been carved out of stone. For the first time since peace had been proclaimed on earth, a hundred and thirty-two years ago, the flames of war had burst forth again, and for the first time in the story of her race the snake had entered the now no longer enchanted Eden of Aeria.

It was hers to suffer the first real agony of soul that any woman of her people had passed through since Natasha, in the palm-grove down yonder by the lake, had told Richard Arnold of her love on the night that he had received the Master's command to take her to another man to be his wife.

There were no tears in the fixed, wide-open eyes that stared almost sightlessly up to the skies, in which the stars were now paling in the growing light of the moon. The torment of her torturing thoughts was too great for that.

She was growing blind and dizzy under the merciless stress of them, when--it might have been just in time to save her from the madness that seemed the only outcome of her misery--the sweet, silvery tones of a girl's voice floated through the still, scented air uttering her name--

"Alma!"

The sound mercifully recalled her wandering senses in an instant. It was the voice of her friend, of the sister of her now doubly-lost lover, and it reproved the selfishness of her great sorrow by reminding her that she was not suffering alone. As the sound of her name reached her ear the rigidity of her form relaxed, the light came back to her eyes, and turning her head she looked in the direction whence it came.

There was a soft whirring of wings in the still air of the tropic night, and out of the half-darkness floated a shape that looked like a realisation of one of the Old-World fairy-tales. It was a vessel some twenty-five feet long by five wide, built of white, polished metal, and shaped something like an old Norse galley, with its high, arching prow fashioned like the breast and neck of a swan.

From the sides projected a pair of wide, rapidly-undulating wings, and in the open space between these stood on the floor of the boat the figure of a girl whose loose, golden hair floated out behind her

with the rapid motion of her fairy craft.

There was no need for words of greeting between the two girl friends. Alma knew the kindly errand on which Isma had come, and as she stepped out she went towards her with hands outstretched in silent welcome.

As their hands met, and the two girls stood face to face, motionless for a moment, they made an exquisite contrast of opposite types of womanly beauty--Alma tall and stately, with a proudly-carried head, clear, pale skin, grey eyes, and perfectly regular features, and Isma, a year younger and a good inch shorter, slender of form yet strong and lithe of limb, with golden, silky hair and sunny-blue eyes, fresh, rosy skin, and mobile features which scarcely ever seemed to wear the same expression for a couple of minutes together--as sweet a daughter of delight as ever man could look upon with eyes of love and longing.

But she was grave enough now, for her friend's sorrow was hers too, and its shadow lay with equal darkness upon her. The ready tears welled up under her dark lashes as she looked upon Alma's white, drawn face and dry, burning eyes, and her low, sweet voice was broken by a sob as, passing her arm round her waist, she drew her towards the boat and said--

"Come, dear, this sorrow belongs to me as well as you and we must help each other to bear it. I have brought my new boat so that we can take a flight round the valley and talk about it quietly. If two heads are better than one, so are two hearts."

Alma's only reply to the invitation was a sad, sweet smile and a gentle caress, but the welcome, loving sympathy had come when it was most sorely needed, and so she got into the aerial boat with Isma, and a few moments later the beautiful craft was bearing them at an easy speed southward down the valley.

CHAPTER XI. THE SNAKE IN EDEN.

NO more perfect place could have been imagined for an exchange of confidences and sympathy between two girls situated as Alma and Isma were than the oval, daintily-cushioned interior of the Cygna, as Isma had called her swan-prowed craft.

Skirting the mountains, at a distance of about five hundred yards from them, and at a height of about as many feet from the summits of the undulating foothills below, the Cygna sped quietly along at a speed of some twenty-five miles an hour. The temperature of the tropic night was so soft and warm, and the air was so dry that it was not even necessary for them to make use of the light wraps that lay in the stern of the boat.

Isma reclined in the after part of the broad, low seat which ran round the inside, with one hand resting lightly upon a little silver lever which could be used for working the rudder-fan, in addition to the tiller-ropes, which she held in her hands while standing up. Alma sat almost upright amidships, with one hand clasped on the rail of polished satin-wood which ran round the well of the boat, her head turned away from Isma and her eyes fixed upon two dim points of light far away to the southward, which marked the position of the two moonlit, snowy peaks which guarded the southern confines of the valley.

For several minutes they proceeded thus in silence, which neither seemed inclined to break. At length Isma looked up at a planet that was shining redly over the northern mountains, and, possessed by a sudden inspiration, said--

"Look, Alma, there is Mars returning to our skies!"

"Yes," said Alma, turning round and gazing from beneath her slightly-frowning brows at the ruddy planet; "it is a fitting time for him to come back now that, after all these years of peace and happiness, human wickedness and ambition have brought the curse of war back again on earth."

"Yes," said Isma. "If there were anything in what the old astrologers used to say we could look upon his rising as an omen. And yet we have very little reason surely for taking as an emblem of war a world in which wars have been unheard of for thousands of years."

"I wonder then that time will come on earth?" said Alma bitterly. "If ever it does! We terrestrials seem to be too hopelessly wicked and foolish for such wisdom as that."

"Mankind will never have a fairer opportunity of working out its redemption than it had after the Terror, and yet here, after four generations of peaceful happiness and prosperity, the wickedness of one woman is able to set the world ablaze again. Our forefathers were wise, but they would have been wiser still if they had stamped that vile brood out utterly. Their evil blood has been the one drop of venom that has poisoned the whole world's cup of happiness!"

As Alma spoke these last words her grey eyes grew dark with sudden passion under her straight-drawn brows. Her breast heaved with a sudden wave of emotion, and the sentences came quickly and fiercely from the lips which Isma had never heard speak in anger before.

"Yes," she replied, rather sadly than angrily, "perhaps it would have been better for the world if they had done so, or, at and rate, if they had shut them up for life, as they did the criminals and the insane in the middle of the last century. But we must remember, even in our own sorrow and anger, that this Olga Romanoff is in her way not altogether unlike our own Angel was in hers."

"Surely you're speaking sacrilege now!" interrupted Alma.

"How can the evil be like the good under any circumstances?"

"No, I am not," said Isma, with a smile. "Remember how Natasha was trained up by the Master in undying hate of Russian tyranny, and how she inherited the legacy of revenge from her mother and him. No doubt this Olga has done the same, and she has been taught to look upon us as the Terrorists looked upon the Tsar and his family."

"We are the descendants of those who flung her ancestor from his throne, extinguished his dynasty,

and sent him to die in Siberia. I would kill her with my own hand if I could, and believe that I was ridding the world of a curse, but surely we two daughters of Aeria are wise enough to be just even to such an enemy as she is."

"But she has done worse than kill us," Alma almost hissed between her clenched teeth. "If she had a thousand lives and we took them one by one they would not expiate her crime against us, or equal the hopeless misery that she has brought upon us.

"What is mere death, the swift transition from one stage of existence to another, compared with the hopeless death-in-life to which her wanton wickedness has condemned you and me, or to the calamities which she has brought upon the world?"

"It is nothing, I grant you," said Isma. "But still I do not agree with you about that hopeless death-in-life, as you call it. Our present sorrow is great and heavy enough, God knows, but for me at least it is not hopeless, nor will it be for you when the first stress of the storm is over."

"What do you mean?" cried Alma, almost as fiercely as before, and leaning forward and looking through the dusk into her face as though she hardly credited her ears. "Do you mean to say that either you or I could ever"--

"Yes," said Isma, interrupting her, and speaking now with eager animation. "Yes, I mean just what you were going to say. And some day, I believe, you will think as I do."

Alma shook her head in mournful incredulity, and Isma noticing the gesture went on--

"Yes, you will! The reason that you do not agree with me now is that yours is a deeper and stronger nature than mine. You are like the sea, and I am like the lake. Your grief and anger struck you dumb at first.

"You were in a stupor when I found you on the terrace, and now the depths of your nature are broken up and the storm is raging, and until it is over you will see nothing but your own sorrow and anger.

"But with me the storm broke out at once, and I ran to my room and threw myself upon my bed and sobbed and wailed until my mother thought I was going mad. You have not wept yet, and it will be well for you when you do. Your nature is prouder than mine, and it will take longer to melt, but it must melt some time, for we are both women, after all, and then you will see hope through your tears, as I did."

Alma shook her head again, and said in a low, sad, steady voice--

"I can never see hope until I can see Alan as he was when he left me, and you know that is impossible."

"You will never see him again as he was," replied Isma gently. "But that is no reason why you should not see him better than he was."

"Better?" exclaimed Alma, with an involuntary note of scorn in her voice, which brought a quick flush to Isma's cheek, and a flash into her eyes for her brother's sake. "Better! How can that be?"

"Just as the man who has fallen and risen again of his own native strength, is better and stronger than the man who has never been tempted," replied Isma almost hotly.

"Remember the lessons we have learnt from the people of Mars since we learnt to communicate with them. You know how they have gone through civilisation after civilisation until they have refined everything out of human nature that makes it human except their animal existence and their intellectual faculties.

"They have no passions and they make no mistakes. What we call love they call sexual suitability, the mechanical arrangement into which they have refined our ruling passion. Do you remember how almost impossible Vassilis, after he had perfected the code of signals, found it to make even their brightest and most advanced intellects understand the meaning of jealousy?"

The skilfully-aimed shot struck home instantly. A bright wave of colour swept from Alma's throat up to her brow. Her eyes shone like two pale fires in the dusk, and her hand grasped the rail on which it was resting till the bones and sinews stood out distinct in it. She seemed to gasp for breath a moment before she found her voice, but when she spoke her tone seemed to ring and vibrate like a bell in the sudden strength of her unloosed passion.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, you innocent-looking little Isma! You are wiser than I am after all. I did not know the meaning of that word till Olga's letter fell from the sky, but I know it now. My God, how I hate that woman!"

"She is not a woman," replied Isma, speaking in the unconscious pride of her pure descent. "She is a baseborn animal, for she has used her beauty for the vilest ends, yet I am glad to hear you say that you hate her for Alan's sake, as I do, and--and for Alexis's. While you can hate you can love, and some day you will love Alan--the real Alan, not your ideal lover--all the better because you have hated Olga for his sake."

"What?" almost wailed Alma, in the intensity of her anger and misery. "After he has held her in his arms--after his lips have kissed hers--after"--

"Yes, even after that. When your first bitterness has passed, as mine has, you will be more just, and remember the influence under which he did so--if he did. Do you hold yourself responsible for what you think or do in your dreams, or do you not believe what Alan said in his letter about the drug? You know too much about chemistry not to know that such horrible poisons have existed for centuries."

"Yes, yes, I know that, and I know that he has no share in the moral guilt; but how can I ever forget he has been what those cruel words of Olga's told us she had made of him?" replied Alma, her face growing cold and hard again as she spoke.

"Alma," said Isma, with gentle dignity, yet with a note of keen reproach in her voice, "surely you are forgetting that you are speaking of my brother as well as of your lover. No, I am not angry, for I am too sad myself not to understand your sorrow. But I want you to remember that I who have lost both a lover and a brother am asking you to be patient and to hope with me.

"We have never seen Alan and Alexis as they are. We only remember them as two handsome boys who had never seen or known evil. When we meet them again, as I firmly believe we shall, they will be men who have passed through the fire; for if they do not pass through it and come out stronger and better than they were, rest assured we shall never meet on earth again.

"Alan would no more come to you now than you would go to him. When he believes himself worthy of you he will come for you as Alexis will come for me, and then"--

She stopped short in her eloquent pleading, for Alma, at last melted and overcome by her sweet unselfishness and loving logic, had felt the springs of her own woman's nature unloosed and with a low, wailing cry had sunk down upon the cushions towards her, and was sobbing out her sorrow on her lap. Isma said nothing more, for her end was achieved. She laid her left hand caressingly on Alma's hair, and with her right she pulled the steering-lever back and swung the Cygna round until her prow pointed towards home again.

When they reached the villa they found the President's private yacht resting on the terrace, for Alan's father and mother had come over after the Council meeting to discuss with Alma's parents the more intimate family aspect of the strange events which had cleared up in such terrible fashion the mystery which had so long shrouded the fate of the sons of the two chief families in Aeria.

So revolting was the idea of their mental servitude to such an enemy of the human race as they could not but believe Olga Romanoff to be, and so frightful were the consequences that must infallibly befall humanity in consequence of it, that their parents would rather have known them dead than living under such degrading circumstances. To the Aerians, far advanced as they were beyond the standards of the present day, both in religion and philosophy, the conception of death was one which included no terrors and no more regret than was natural and common to all humanity at parting with a kinsman or a friend.

As they were destined to prove, when face to face with a crisis unparalleled in the history of humanity, they regarded death merely as a natural and necessary transition from one state of existence to another, which would be higher or lower according to the preponderance of good or evil done in this life.

If, therefore, the parents and kinsmen of those who were now exiles and wanderers upon the ocean wastes could have chosen, they would infinitely rather have known that Alan and Alexis had shared the

fate of their companions in the Norwegian snowdrift than they would have learnt that for six years they had been the slaves and playthings of a woman who, as they guessed from Alan's letter, combined the ambition of a Semiramis with the vices of a Messalina, and who had used the skill and knowledge which they had acquired and inherited as Princes of the Air with the avowed purpose of subverting the dominion of Aeria, undoing all that their ancestors had done, and bringing back the evil era of strife, bloodshed, and political slavery.

So, too, with Alma. As she had told Isma, she would a thousand times rather have seen her lover dead than degraded to such base uses. Although she, like everyone else in Aeria, admitted that the strange circumstances absolved both Alan and Alexis from all moral blame and responsibility, she, in common with her own father and mother, and perhaps, also, with others not less intimately concerned, found it impossible to forget or ignore the taint of such an association, and to look upon it as a stain that might never be washed away.

Indeed, the only member of the family council who openly proclaimed her belief that the two exiles would, if ever they returned, come back to Aeria better and stronger men than those who had known no evil was Isma, who repeated, with all the winning eloquence at her command, all the arguments that she had used to Alma during their cruise together. Whether Alma and the others would ever come round to her view could of course only be proved by time, but it is nevertheless certain that when the family council at last separated the hearts of its members were less sore than they would have been had Alan and Alexis not possessed such an advocate as the girl who had so good a double reason for pleading their causes.

CHAPTER XII. THE BATTLE OF KERGUELEN.

THE Council of Aeria possessed, as has already been said, four-and-twenty stations, scattered over the oceans of the world, which it used as depots for the submarine fleets, by means of which, acting in co-operation with its aerial squadrons, it had made any attempt at naval warfare hopeless until the disasters described at the beginning of this book proved that an enemy, in this respect at least, more powerful than itself, had successfully challenged its empire of the sea.

Of these stations the most important in the Southern hemisphere was that on Kerguelen Island, or Desolation Land, situated at the intersection of the 49th parallel of south latitude with the 69th meridian of east longitude. This lonely fragment of land in the midst of the ocean, barren of surface, and swept by the almost constant storms of long winters, had been chosen, first, because of its situation on the southern limits of the Indian Ocean, equidistant between Africa and Australia and, secondarily, because of its numerous and sheltered deep-water harbours, so admirably adapted for vessels which were perfectly independent of storm.

Added to this, the island contained large supplies of coal, from which the motive-power of both the submarine vessels and the air-ships was now derived by direct conversion of its solar energy into electrical force through the secret processes known only to the President and two members of the Council.

So far the Russians had not ventured to make any attack upon this stronghold, so strongly was it defended, not only by its submarine squadrons and systems of mines, guarding the entrances to all the harbours, but also by the large force of air-ships which had been stationed there since the new naval warfare had broken out.

The warning which Alan had conveyed in his letter to his father was based on the knowledge that a general attack was soon to be made upon it both by air and sea, with the object of crippling the power of the Aerians in the Southern Ocean. No time had been lost in acting upon this warning. The aerial squadron was increased to forty, with the Ariel as flagship, and twenty new submarine vessels, the largest and best possessed by the Aerians, had been despatched from Port Natal to reinforce the fleet of thirty-five already at Kerguelen Island. With these must of course be counted the Narwhal, under the command of Alan and Alexis.

The strength of the attacking force could only be guessed at, as even Alan did not know it, but it was not expected that, however strong a force the Russians might bring up by sea, they would be able, after the disaster of Antarctica, to muster more than a dozen air-ships.

The Aerian headquarters was at Christmas Harbour, on the northern shore of the island. This is an admirably-sheltered inlet running westward into the land between Cape Francois and Arch Point, and its upper and narrower half forms an oval basin nearly a mile long by a quarter of a mile broad, walled in by high perpendicular basaltic cliffs, and containing a depth of water varying from two to sixteen fathoms, as compared with twenty-five to thirty fathoms in its outer half.

North of the harbour, Table Mount rises to a height of thirteen hundred feet, and to the south is a huge mass of basalt over eleven hundred feet high. On both of these elevations were mounted batteries of guns capable of throwing projectiles of great size and enormous explosive energy to a distance of several miles. There were altogether twelve of these batteries placed on various heights about the island, and the guns composing them were mounted on swivels, which enabled them to be trained so as to throw the projectile either into the sea or high up into the air.

Soon after daybreak on the fourth day after Alan's letter had been received the outlook on Cape Francois, a bold mass of basalt to the north of the outer bay, telephoned "Narwhal in sight" to the settlement at the head of the harbour. Immediately on this message being received the commander of the station, named Max Ernstein, a man of about thirty-four, and the most daring and skilful submarine navigator and engineer in the service of the Council, went on board his own vessel, the Cachalot, and

set out to welcome the long-lost son of the President and convey to him the commission which had been sent out by air-ship from Aeria.

The Cachalot, which may as well be described here as elsewhere as a type of the submarine warship of the time, was a double-pointed cylinder, built of plates of nickelised aluminium steel, not riveted, but electrically fused at the joints, so that they formed a continuous mass equally impervious all over, and presenting no seams or overlaps.

The cylinder was a hundred and fifty feet from point to point, with a midship's diameter of forty feet. The forward end was armed with a sheathing of azurine, the metal peculiar to the mines of Aeria, which would cut and pierce steel as a diamond cuts glass. This sheathing formed a ram, which was by no means the least formidable portion of the warship's armament.

The upper part of the cylinder was flattened so as to form an oval deck forty feet long by fifteen wide. A centre section of this deck, three feet wide, could be opened by means of a lateral slide which allowed of the elevation of a gun twenty-five feet long, which could be used either for discharging torpedoes by water or for throwing projectiles through the air.

It could be aimed and fired from below the deck without the artillerists even seeing the objects aimed at, save in an arrangement of mirrors, so adjusted that when the object appeared in the centre of the lowest of them, the gun could be fired with the certainty of the projectile reaching its mark. Four underwater torpedo tubes, two ahead and two astern, completed the armament of the submarine warship.

When under water the deck could be hermetically closed, and sliding plates could be drawn over the opening of the torpedo tubes, so that from stem to stern of the cylinder there were no excrescences to impede the progress of the vessel through the water with the sole exception of a dome of thick forged glass just forward of the deck, under which stood the helmsman, who gave place to the commander of the vessel when she went into action. Her powerful four-bladed screw, driven by engines almost precisely similar to those of the airships, gave her a maximum speed of a hundred miles an hour.

The Cachalot ran at twenty-five miles an hour down the harbour, and as soon as he got abreast of Cape Francois Captain Ernstein, who was standing on deck, saw a small red flag apparently rising from the waves about a mile to seaward. A similar flag was soon flying from a movable flagstaff on the Cachalot, and a few minutes later she was lying alongside the Narwhal.

This vessel was a very leviathan of the deep, and as she lay three parts submerged in the water Captain Ernstein calculated that she could hardly be less than two hundred feet in length and forty-five in diameter amidships. She appeared to be built on very much the same plan as the Cachalot and of the same materials, saving only, of course, the ram of azurine, which was replaced by one of nickel steel.

As the Cachalot got alongside, a slide was drawn back in the deck of the Narwhal and the head and shoulders of a man dressed in close-fitting seal-fur appeared. It was Alan, little changed in physical appearance since the fatal day that he invited Olga Romanoff on board the Ithuriel, save that he had grown a moustache and beard, which he wore trimmed somewhat in the Elizabethan style, and that the frank, open expression of the boy had given place to a grave, almost sad, sternness, which marked the man who had lived and suffered.

Max Ernstein recognised him at once and saluted as though greeting a superior officer, for, although all the Aerians were friends and comrades, the etiquette of rank and discipline was scrupulously observed amongst them when on active service.

"What do you salute me for?" said Alan gravely, as he reached the deck and came to the side on which the Cachalot lay. "Do you not see that I am no longer wearing the golden wings? Are you the officer in command of the station?"

"Yes, Admiral Arnold," returned the other, in the same formal tone and at the same time presenting the letter from the Council. "I suppose you have forgotten me. I am Max Ernstein, in command of the naval fleet at Kerguelen. That letter will explain why I saluted and why I have come to hand over my command to you."

Before he replied Alan ran his eye rapidly over the letter. As he did so the pale bronze, of his face flushed crimson for a moment, and he turned his head away from Ernstein, brushed his hand quickly across his eyes, and then read the letter again more deliberately. Then he turned and said in a voice that he vainly strove to keep steady--

"This is more than I have deserved or could expect, but obedience is the first duty, so I accept the command. Come on board, Ernstein; of course I recognised you, but until I knew how I stood with the Council I looked upon myself as an outlaw, and therefore no friend or comrade for you."

The captain of the Cachalot had a gangway-plank brought up and passed from one vessel to the other, and in another moment he was standing beside Alan on the deck of the Narwhal, and their hands were joined in a firm clasp.

"That's the first honest hand that I have grasped for six years, except Alexis'," said Alan, as he returned the clasp with a grip that showed his physical forces had been by no means impaired by his long mental servitude. "Come down into the cabin, we shall find him there."

He led the way below, and as soon as Alexis had been told the unexpected good news, which seemed to affect him even more deeply than it had Alan, the three sat down at the table in the saloon of the Narwhal, a plain but comfortably furnished room, about twenty-five feet long by fifteen broad and ten high, to discuss a plan of operations in view of the expected attack on the station.

Alan at once assumed the authority with which he had been invested by the Council, and made minute inquiries into the nature and extent of the defending force at his disposal.

"I think that ought to be quite sufficient, not only to defeat, but pretty well destroy any force that the Russians can bring against us," said Alan, as soon as Ernstein had finished his description. "We have much more to fear from the air-ships than from the submarine boats, because the Narwhal would give a very good account of them, even by herself. Have any more vessels of the type of the Ithuriel been built since the old Ithuriel was lost?"

"Yes," replied Ernstein; "but only ten, I am sorry to say. One of them is here, as I told you just now, but we have forty of the others, and I don't suppose the Russians can bring more than a dozen against us."

"What do you mean?" said Alan. "They have fifty, every one of them as fast and as powerful as the old Ithuriel. I ought to know," he continued grimly, "for they were every one of them built under my own eyes."

"I beg your pardon," said Ernstein. "I ought to have told you before now that we have already won our first victory, and that though we lost eight vessels we destroyed twenty of the Russians'." And then he went on to give Alan and Alexis a rapid description of the pursuit of the Revenge, and the havoc wrought at the end of it by the Ithuriel and the Ariel.

"That is glorious news!" said Alan. "But they have thirty ships at their disposal still, and I expect they will bring at least twenty of these against us, and they are all swifter than ours saving only the Ariel. Of course my command ends with the shore, but I think it will be as well if the captain of the Ariel were to come on board the Narwhal so that we could arrange our plans of defence together--I for the sea, and he for the air."

"But why not come ashore and see him?" said Ernstein. "He and all of us will be delighted to see you on the island."

"No," said Alan, shaking his head. "Alexis and I have promised each other never to leave the Narwhal until the Russian sea power is crippled. The day that we set foot on dry land again will be the day that we give back the supremacy of the sea to the Council, so if we two Admirals of the Sea and Air are to meet, the commander of the Ariel must come here."

"Very well," said Ernstein. "I understand you. Write a note and I will send the Cachalot back with it. She will bring him back in under half an hour, for he was up at the settlement when I left."

Alan wrote the letter forthwith, and the Cachalot departed, returning, as her captain had said, in less than half an hour, with Edward Forrest, the commander of the Ariel. He was a lean, wiry, active man of

about forty-five, of mixed English, Scotch, and Aerial descent, with short, crisp, curly black hair and smooth-shaven face, rather sharp, regular features, and a pair of keen grey eyes which seemed to look into the very brain of the person he was talking to--a man of prompt decisions and few words, and one of the most able aerial navigators that Aeria could boast of.

He held the rank of admiral, and was responsible for the station of Kerguelen, and the command of the southern seas. He greeted Alan and Alexis courteously, but a trifle stiffly, as though he thought that their indiscretion had been somewhat lightly dealt with by the Council. This, however, was no business of his, for the first law of Aeria was that the decisions of the President and Council were not open to criticism by any private or official citizen whatever his rank or experience.

Therefore, after reading, as a matter of form, the commission sent to Alan and Alexis, he addressed himself at once to the business of the moment, and before they had been discussing the plan of defence for many minutes he was forced to admit to himself that the President's son, young as he was, was more than his master both in aerial and naval tactics.

For the greater part of the morning plan after plan was suggested, thrashed out, and either accepted or thrown aside, and when he took his leave he shook hands with both Alan and Alexis far more cordially than he had done in greeting, and said with brief, blunt candour--

"This is not the first time that a woman has used a man to upset the peace of the world, and I tell you honestly that I once thought you had both turned traitors. I don't think so now, and I am heartily glad you are back. If you could only have returned three years ago a lot of trouble might have been saved, but I must confess that you have both learnt more in five years than I have in twenty. I will follow your instructions to the letter."

"What is done is done," said Alan, smiling, and yet with a rare dignity that showed Admiral Forrest that, despite all that had happened, he was standing in the presence of his master. "The work in hand now is to regain what we have lost, and if every man does his duty we shall do so. I think everything is arranged now, and as we have no time to lose I will say good-morning."

He held out his hand as he spoke, and Admiral Forrest took his dismissal and his leave at the same time.

Captain Ernstein took six men out of the Cachalot and placed them at the disposal of Alan and Alexis, for the working of the Narwhal, and then took his leave to execute his part of the plan of defence.

It was a bitterly cold day, for the southern winter had already set in in all its severity. The sea to the north of the island was comparatively smooth, but swept every now and then with violent gusts of wind from the southward. The sky was entirely covered by thick masses of cold grey cloud, every now and then torn up into great rolling masses by the sudden blasts of icy wind from the pole, which drove fierce storms of hard frozen snow across the bare and desolate island.

But the roughness of the elements was a matter of small concern to the crews of the air-ships and the submarine cruisers, for both were independent alike of sea and storm. The former could literally ride upon the wings of the fiercest gale that ever blew. Their interiors were warm and windproof, and their machinery was powerful enough to drive them four and five times as fast as the air-currents in which they floated, while the latter had only to sink a few feet below the level of the waves to find perfect calm.

The days, in short, were past when men had been at the mercy of the elements, and so the atmospheric conditions which would have made a modern naval attack upon a rocky and exposed coast almost impossible were not even taken into account in preparing to meet the threatened assault on Kerguelen Island.

No one knew when or how the first assault would be delivered. All that was known was that, unless Olga and her advisers had completely altered their plans, the attack would take place either that day or the next, and consequently ceaseless vigilance was necessary on sea and land and in the air.

In accordance with the plan arranged on board the Narwhal, ten air-ships rose above the clouds to an

altitude of five thousand feet, and from each of these an electric thread hung down to as many signal-stations on the island, all of which were connected with the headquarters at the top of Christmas Harbour.

Twenty cruisers patrolled the coast at a distance of a mile from the land, and two miles outside these the Narwhal ran to and fro along the northern shore. All the more important inlets which had sufficient depth of water for submarine attack were guarded with mines and chains of torpedoes, so disposed that no vessel could possibly enter without firing them, and so giving warning of the locality of the attack.

The afternoon passed without any alarm, and at nightfall the clouds sent down a blinding storm of snow, which, added to the intense darkness, made vision impossible both on land and sea, although high above the clouds the ten air-ships floated in a calm, clear atmosphere, under the brilliant constellations of the southern hemisphere.

No attack seemed possible without warning, either by sea or above the clouds, for the hostile air-ships could not approach without being seen from a great distance through the clear, starlit sky, and without their lights, which would instantly betray their presence, it was impossible for the submarine vessels even to find the coast.

Hour after hour passed, and still no hostile sign rewarded the vigilance of the defenders. No one of the present day could have guessed that all the preparations had been made for such a battle as had never been fought before on sea or land, or in the air.

Nothing was visible but the snow-covered earth and the storm-swept sea, for the sentinel ships, floating far above the clouds, were beyond the reach of vision. And yet, if the combined fleets of the modern world had attacked Kerguelen that night, not a ship would have escaped to tell the tale of annihilation, so terrible were the engines of destruction which waited but the signal of battle to strike their swift and irresistible blows.

It was about half-past six o'clock the next morning when Alexis, who was on watch in the conning-tower of the Narwhal, saw a faint beam of light illuminating the water a long way ahead. He instantly signalled to Alan--"Enemy in sight. Back. I am going to ram."

Alan, unwilling to leave the new crew, who were not yet perfectly acquainted with the working of the machinery, had taken command of the engine-room alternately with Alexis, who was now taking his four hours' watch in the conning-tower, and to whom the fortune of war had given the honour of striking the first blow. The Narwhal backed rapidly, and as she did so Alexis turned a small wheel in the side of the conning-tower, and the whole chamber sank into the hull of the vessel.

As soon as it stopped he pulled a lever and a heavy steel sheet slid over the opening where the glass dome had been. In front of him as he stood at the steering-wheel was a long, very slender needle hung with extreme delicacy on a pivot, up which an electric current constantly passed.

This needle was terrestrially insulated by a magnet which always swung opposite to the magnetic pole, and when acted upon only by the steel of the vessel's fabric, swung indifferently as long as there was no other vessel within a thousand yards of the Narwhal. But the moment one came within that distance the needle pointed towards it with unerring accuracy, as it was doing at the present moment.

Alexis allowed the vessel to back until he saw the needle begin to waver. Then he knew that the thousand-yard limit had been reached, and signalled--

"Full speed ahead."

The next moment the engines were reversed and the Narwhal bore down on her invisible prey. The needle became rigid again. Alexis kept it pointing dead ahead as the Narwhal gathered way and rushed silently but with irresistible force upon her victim.

She passed over the thousand yards in forty seconds. Then came a dull, rending crash, a slight shiver of the mighty fabric, and then she swept on her way as though she had passed through a couple of inches of planking instead of the steel hull of a submarine warship more than two-thirds her own size.

And so in silence and darkness, without the discharge of a gun or the flash of a shot or an audible cry of human pain, the work of death and destruction began and ended. In the passing of an instant a

warship had been destroyed which could have annihilated a fleet of modern battleships in detail without once appearing above the surface of the water.

The moment that the shock told Alexis that the ram of the Narwhal had done its work, he signalled "Stop," and as the vessel slowed down he watched the momentous fluctuations of the needle in front of him. It oscillated for an instant, and then became still again, pointing to another victim hidden away somewhere under the dark waters. He brought the vessel round until it pointed ahead again, and then once more the leviathan plunged forward at full speed on her errand of destruction.

Thirty seconds later a rasping tearing sound, told him that he had ripped the side out of a second Russian vessel; and again he stopped, and again the fatal tell-tale needle pointed to a mark on which he hulled his irresistible ram. So the work went on, and vessel after vessel was torn to pieces and sunk in the midst of the darkness and silence of the wintry sea, without even a warning having been given either to the consorts of the destroyed vessels or to those nearer in shore, all of which were, of course, outside the range of the needle's indication. But for this fact Alexis would have been unable to do his work, for he would not have known whether he was ramming friend or foe.

When the ram had found its mark for the twelfth time, the needle oscillated vaguely to and fro, showing that within a thousand-yards radius at least there were no more victims to be found. Then the Narwhal rose to the surface of the water, and Alexis resumed his watch as the vessel patrolled the coast again at a speed of fifty miles an hour.

Alan now came and relieved Alexis from his watch. As he entered the conning-tower he said--

"How many is that you've settled? A dozen, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Alexis, "but I can hardly think they can have been anything but scouts, and so we shall have the main fleet to tackle yet."

"Do you think any of them have got through?" said Alan. "You know they may have approached from east and west as well, and if so they are lying inside of us."

"No," replied Alexis, "I don't think they would do that. You see we have the advantage of them in this way. They can't see ten yards in front of them unless there is bright sunshine on the water, or unless they turn their lights on to the full, in which case they would betray their presence at once."

"Then they don't know what has become of the Narwhal and probably think that she has been attacked by an overwhelming force, or blown up by some lucky torpedo. They daren't go inshore in force for fear of springing a mine, and so you may depend upon it the twelve we have destroyed were scouts, prowling about very slowly and waiting for daylight to examine the coast and find a way into Christmas Harbour."

"They must have been in single line, and we had the luck to catch one of the end ones first, and so we sank the lot in the order in which they were floating. I don't think we can do anything more till daylight except run up and down the coast and keep a sharp look-out to seaward and on the needle."

"I suppose you're right," said Alan. "You'd better go and get an hour's sleep if you can."

"There won't be much sleep for any of us till to night," said Alexis quickly, pointing to the clouds over the island. "Look! The row has begun in the air already."

Alan glanced up and saw a series of intensely bright flashes stream through the clouds, which at the same moment were rent and rolled up into vast shadowy billows by some tremendous concussion of the atmosphere above them. There could be only one explanation of this. The attack on the island had begun from the air, and the flashes were those of the first shots of the aerial bombardment.

What had really happened was this.

A fleet of fifty submarine warships, under the command of Michael Lossenski, the eldest son of Orloff Lossenski, who was now Olga Romanoff's chief adviser in the conduct of the war that she had commenced with the Aerians, had reached the northern coast of Kerguelen Island about four o'clock in the morning in order to co-operate with an aerial squadron of fifteen vessels led by the Revenge, under the command, nominally, of Lossenski's second son Boris, but really of Olga herself.

As Alexis had surmised, the twelve vessels destroyed by the Narwhal were scouts sent out to, if

possible, feel their way to the entrance of Christmas Harbour, which was known to be the headquarters of the station.

These were to have returned to the fleet with all the intelligence they could get as to bearings and soundings, and the position of mines and the defending fleet. Then at daybreak, that is to say about eight o'clock, the whole squadron was to have advanced to the entrance to the harbour, ramming any of the defenders who barred their way, and then, after sending a swarm of torpedoes into the mouth of the bay to explode the mines and blow up any submarine defences that might exist, to have made a rush for the inner bay at the same time that the air-ships engaged the land defences.

The naval portion of the programme was completely frustrated by the destruction of the scouts, while the aerial attack was foiled by the look-outs stationed above the clouds. Soon after seven it became light enough at their altitude for the powerful glasses of their commanders to make out the fifteen Russian air-ships coming up from the southward at a distance of about twenty miles.

A few minutes later they were themselves discovered by the Russians, and Olga, to her intense chagrin, saw at a glance that all hope of a surprise was gone. By some means or other the Aerians had received intelligence of the attack, and were ready for it.

The terrible experience taught by the disaster of Antarctica warned her and her lieutenants that any approach, now that they were seen, must be made with the utmost caution, for they had no precise knowledge as to the range of the Aerial guns. All they knew was that it was very great, and that where one of their projectiles found its mark destruction followed instantly.

Added to this, there was another difficulty. The dense masses of cloud completely hid both sea and land from their view, and made accurate shooting at the land defences impossible. Consequently there was nothing for it but to fight the battle out in the upper regions of the air, against a force of whose actual strength they were ignorant. They dare not attempt to surround the ten air-ships, which hung stationary over the island, for this meant bringing all their guns into play, while they could only use half of their own.

While they were debating on a plan of operations, two new factors in the coming struggle were swiftly and unexpectedly brought into play. As soon as the news of their arrival had been telegraphed to headquarters, the Ariel took the air and passed under the clouds to the rear of the Russian squadron. Ten miles behind them, she swept round sharply, and with her wings inclined to the utmost, and her engines working at the fullest capacity, she took a mighty upward swoop, passed through the clouds like a flash of light, and before the Russians knew what had happened, she was floating three thousand feet above them, out of reach of their guns, and hurling projectile after projectile into their midst. Three of their ships, struck almost simultaneously, were torn into a thousand fragments, and vanished through the clouds.

It was the glare and shock of this explosion that Alexis had seen from the conning-tower of the Narwhal. The remaining Russian ships instantly scattered and sank through the clouds to seek a refuge from the foe whose deadly blows they were completely unable to return.

But the moment they appeared on the under-side of the cloud-sea, all the guns of the land batteries opened fire in all directions with time-shells, and so rapid were the discharges, and so terrible the energy of the explosives, that the whole firmament above the island seemed ablaze with them, while the concussions of the nether atmosphere were so tremendous and continuous, that it would have been madness for the Russian air-ships to have approached within the zone of fire with which the Aerials had covered and encircled their positions.

The clouds were torn and broken up into vast whirling masses, which completely obscured the view of the Russians, and rendered anything like accurate shooting in the direction of the island impossible. Worse than this, the range of the great land guns, fired at an elevation of forty-five degrees, was so enormous that they were forced by the incessantly exploding projectiles, which were hurled up into the air in all directions, to retire to a distance which, beyond the most random shooting, the results of which were spent upon the rocks of the island and the sea, rendered their own guns useless.

Rise up through the clouds they dare not, for they knew the Ariel was still there, and that the first ship that showed herself would be an almost helpless mark for one of the ten guns which, for the time being, commanded the heavens. There seemed nothing for it but an ignominious retreat, for, as Boris Lossenski said to Olga when, furious with rage and mortification, she reproached him with a lack both of skill and courage, an attack upon a volcano in full eruption would have been child's play to an assault at close quarters on Kerguelen Island.

Their one hope of success had lain in a surprise, and that, by some unaccountable means, had been made impossible. They had reckoned only on the air-ships and the submarine defences, and even these they had expected to take unawares. The terrible power of the battery guns, which were able to spread their seas of fire through the air and to shake the very firmament itself with their projectiles, had been a revelation to them.

They could not train their own guns without seeing their mark, and neither flame nor smoke betrayed the position of the batteries, while on the other hand the artillerists on the island had simply to surround the station with a zone of fire and a continuous series of atmospheric convulsions through which no air-ship could have passed without the risk of overturning or completely collapsing.

So Olga was at last convinced that her choice lay between abandonment of the attack or running the gauntlet of fire in the almost forlorn hope of engaging the land batteries and an aerial fleet of unknown strength at close quarters.

Baffled and defeated, and yet convinced that to continue the unequal contest under its present conditions would be merely to court still more disastrous defeat, and even probable destruction, Olga at last allowed Lossenski to give the signal for retreat, and the Russian squadron withdrew to a position twelve miles northward of the island. Its departure was seen both from the air and the land, and the cannonade immediately stopped.

Meanwhile Alan had run the Narwhal into the mouth of Christmas Harbour flying his red flag. He was met by the Cachalot, and, after telling Captain Ernstein what he had done, and learning of the repulse of the Russians in the aerial battle, he directed forty of the submarine vessels to follow him out to sea to look for the Russian flotilla.

All the craft were furnished with tell-tale needles similar to the one on board the Narwhal, for it is impossible to see a sufficient distance under water to effectively attack an enemy as agile as the submarine warships were, and this fact had led to the universal employment of the needles.

As it was now quite light, the whole Aerial squadron, with the exception of five vessels whose duty it was to act as scouts under water, proceeded seaward on the surface of the waves, keeping a sharp look-out for the remains of the Russian fleet, which they soon discovered lying about five miles off the island. They could make out thirty-five of the long, black, half-submerged hulls lying together like a school of whales with the waves breaking over them as over sunken rocks.

Alan immediately signalled from his conning-tower in the manual sign-language, used by the Aerials to communicate between their air-ships, to his consorts, and ordered them to scatter and form a wide circle round the Russian squadron at a distance of a mile, and a depth of two fathoms, but on no account to approach within a thousand yards of them. When they had reached their positions they were to rise to the surface and each was to discharge a couple of torpedoes towards the centre of the circle. After that they were to retire and leave the rest to him.

The moment the order had been passed through the fleet, everyone of the vessels disappeared and proceeded to her station. The Narwhal sank at the same time until nothing but the glass dome of her conning-tower remained above the water.

By carefully noting the course steered by the compass, and accurately measuring the distance travelled by the number of revolutions of the propeller, each captain was able to place his craft in the desired position.

So perfectly, indeed, was the manoeuvre performed that when the vessels rose to the surface they formed a circle two miles in diameter, in the centre of which lay, within a space of about two hundred

yards square, the Russian flotilla, the commanders of which, afraid to advance nearer to the shore without the intelligence which they still awaited from their scouts, and confounded by the awful spectacle presented by the aerial battle, of the issue of which they were utterly ignorant, were waiting in bewilderment and indecision the issue of the events which had taken such a marvellous and unexpected turn.

The manoeuvre ordered by Alan had been executed so promptly and secretly that the Russians were not even aware that they were surrounded until torpedo after torpedo, coming in from all points of the compass, began exploding in their midst, hurling vast masses of water and foam up into the air, tearing their plates and crippling their propellers, and disabling half their number before they had time to recover from the confusion into which the sudden attack had thrown them.

To communicate signals from one vessel to another under such circumstances was impossible, and so united action was out of the question. All that the captains of the vessels could see was that there were enemies upon all sides of them. The explosion of the eighty torpedoes had churned the water up into a mass of seething foam, in the midst of which fifteen vessels were lying crippled and helpless on the surface, while six more had been sent to the bottom.

This was bad enough, but while the captains of those which had escaped were recovering from the stupefaction into which this sudden disaster had thrown them Alan saw his chance, and as soon as the last torpedo had exploded headed the Narwhal full speed into the midst of them. Then followed a scene which would have beggared all description.

The great ship, moving at a speed of nearly three miles a minute, tore her way through the half-crippled squadron, hurling everything she struck to the bottom of the sea. Every Russian vessel that was able to do so after the first assault sank out of the way of the terrible ram of the Narwhal and headed off at full speed into the open sea.

But for those that were partially or wholly disabled there was no escape. Alan standing in his conning-tower, his teeth clenched and his blue eyes almost black with the fierce passion of battle and revenge, whirled his steering-wheel this way and that, and as the steel monster swung round in rapid curves in obedience to the rudder, he hurled her again and again upon his practically helpless victims, piercing them through and through as though their plates had been cardboard instead of steel.

When the last one had gone down he left the conning-tower, hoisted his flagstaff, and flew a signal to his consorts to return to harbour. What had become of the Russian vessels that had escaped he neither knew nor, for the present, cared.

The victory of the Aerials both at sea and in the air was complete, and he was certain that the Russians had received such a lesson as would convince them that Kerguelen Island was impregnable to any assault that they could make upon it, unless they were able to take its defenders by surprise--a contingency which was justly considered impossible.

CHAPTER XIII. THE SYREN'S STRONGHOLD.

AS soon as the first pitched battle in the world-war was over, a lengthy and detailed report of the attack on Kerguelen and its repulse was drawn up by Alan, Captain Ernstein, and Admiral Forrest for presentation to the Council. To this report Alan added a supplement, which is here reproduced in his own words.

"From what I know of the designs of Olga Romanoff and her advisers I am convinced that the defeats which have been inflicted upon them will merely have the effect of checking, and not putting a stop to, their operations against the peace and freedom of the world.

"I have seen and heard enough during the last five years to feel satisfied that there exists a very widespread conspiracy, the object of which is the restoration of the Romanoff dynasty, in the person of Olga, the breaking up of the Anglo-Saxon Federation, and the inauguration of an era of personal despotism and popular slavery.

"As far as we have been able to learn, this conspiracy embraces practically all the descendants of those families who lost their rank, official position, or property during the reconstitution of Russia after the fall of the Romanoffs. These people have, of course, everything to gain and not much to lose by the destruction of the present order of things, and Olga has promised them, no doubt quite sincerely, that in the event of her triumph they shall be restored to all that their ancestors lost.

"As a matter of fact, the greater part of Russia will be divided amongst them should she ever accomplish her designs. The old order of things, as it existed before the days of Alexander II., is to be completely reinstated. The lower orders of the people are to be reduced once more to serfdom, and the trading classes to a condition very little better.

"If they resist they are to be terrorised into submission by the air-ships, and all who raise their voices for freedom are to be banished to Siberia, which is once more to be the prison-land of the Russian Empire. A large standing army is to be kept constantly on the war-footing, while the sea navy and the aerial fleet are to be kept up to such a strength as to be able to hold the rest of the Continent in practical subjection.

"In short, Olga aspires to nothing less than the throne of an empire which shall stretch from the Yellow Sea to the Atlantic Ocean. I am afraid, too, that there can be no doubt but that this conspiracy is not only favoured, but actually assisted, by large numbers of people throughout the Federation area.

"In fact, during the latter part of our stay at Mount Terror, the stronghold was visited by men of all nations, who, of course, came and went away in the submarine vessels, and who openly promised to do everything they could to further what they called the cause of the New Revolution in their own countries, on the understanding that the old evils of capitalism and private ownership of land by which their ancestors had grown wealthy are to be restored.

"This will, I trust, be enough to show you that the triumph of Olga Romanoff means nothing less than the complete undoing of all the work that was done in the days of the Terror.

"We have proved so far that Kerguelen, and, therefore, Aeria, is impregnable to attack save by surprise, which will now, of course, be impossible. But, on the other hand, the force at the disposal of Olga and her allies is still so strong that all our present resources will have to be kept constantly employed to protect ourselves, and this leaves the world at the mercy of any Power which can obtain the assistance of the Russians' aerial navy, which still numbers twenty-seven vessels, all equal to our best ships.

"In addition to these they possess a submarine navy of at least forty vessels, all of which are swifter and more powerful than ours, with the exception of the Narwhal. I therefore suggest that the whole of the resources at the command of the Council shall at once be devoted to the building of at least fifty air-ships of the Ithuriel type, and the same number of submarine battleships like the Narwhal, complete plans of which I enclose.

"Until this additional force is at our command, I think it would be useless to attempt the destruction of the Russian stronghold in Antarctica, and until this is destroyed there can be no hope of peace. This stronghold, which I will now attempt to describe for the information of the Council, is one of the most marvellous places on earth.

"It lies in and about Mount Terror and the Parry Mountains, which run from it towards the pole behind the ice-barrier of Antarctica. Nearly ten years ago a Russian explorer named Kishenov reached the ice-barrier and made the discoveries which have enabled the Russian revolutionists to create their stronghold. In addition to his ship, he took with him three aerostats, which were chiefly constructed during his voyage, and also a small submarine vessel, which he took out in sections and put together at sea.

"He skirted the coast of Victoria Land, and was stopped by the ice in latitude 78 $\frac{1}{2}$, as all other Antarctic explorers by sea have been since the voyage of Sir James Ross. The season was a singularly fine and open one, and two days after his arrival he inflated one of his aerostats and crossed the great barrier, to make a thorough exploration of the unknown land. Kishenov was the first man, not an Aerial, who had ever seen what there was on the other side of the Antarctic ice-wall.

"But he discovered far more than our explorers did, for while he was in the neighbourhood of Mount Terror an earthquake, accompanying a violent eruption of Mount Erebus, made a huge fissure in the south side of Mount Terror. After waiting three days to make sure that the earthquake had subsided, he and two of his officers entered the crevice, which they found to be over two hundred feet wide at the level of the land ice.

"Furnished with storage batteries and electric lights, they penetrated into the interior of the mountain and found that it was pierced in all directions with great galleries and enormous chambers, hollowed out by volcanic forces during the period of Mount Terror's activity. Four days were spent altogether in exploring this subterranean region, the existence of which was kept a profound secret by Kishenov and his officers.

"Not the least strange and, as it has proved, one of the most valuable portions of his discovery was the finding of a subterranean lake in the heart of Mount Terror, the temperature of which was kept far above the freezing point by the heat which the interior of the mountain derived from the neighbouring fires of Mount Erebus. Finding the lake to be salt water, he concluded that it must have some connection with the open sea, and so the next day he and the same two officers entered the submarine boat and penetrated underneath the ice-barrier.

"After a search of five hours, the search-lights of the boat revealed a huge tunnel leading south-west into the land, that is to say, direct for Mount Terror. They followed this tunnel up for a distance of nearly five miles, and then struck the end. They now rose, and finally found themselves floating on the surface of the lake in the interior of the mountain.

"One of Kishenov's officers, a man named Louis Khemski, was a member of the Russian Revolutionary Society, whose existence only became known five years ago. After the capture of the Ithuriel the heads of this society met, and to them this man communicated the secret of Mount Terror. Kishenov and the other officer refused to join the revolutionists, and were assassinated.

"Khemski was at once taken on board the Ithuriel, now renamed the Revenge, and guided her to the fissure leading into Mount Terror. Its outer portion was of course filled and covered with ice and snow, but as soon as Khemski had found its position by his landmarks, a couple of shells speedily reopened it, and it was here that the Revenge lay hidden while you were ransacking the world for her.

"Olga inherited from her grandfather, the father of the Vladimir Romanoff who was executed for disobeying the order of the Council, all the plans and directions necessary for the building both of air-ships and submarine vessels, and as soon as this perfect stronghold and hiding-place was discovered, her accomplices in the conspiracy for the restoration of the Russian monarchy at once devoted their fortunes to the supply of money and materials. The Revenge made one more voyage to Russia, and by travelling at full speed at a great elevation managed to make it unobserved.

"The services of the cleverest engineers and most skilful craftsmen among the revolutionists were secured. Transports were chartered and sent out to Antarctica loaded with materials. On the shores of the subterranean lake the first squadron of submarine vessels was built, and then began the system of ocean terrorism which soon paralysed the trade of the world.

"Piracy was carried on with utter ruthlessness. Transports were sunk by the vessels, and then plundered by divers of the treasure which they carried, and which was employed to purchase new materials and to repay those who had furnished the first funds.

"Alexis and myself were kept by Olga, as I said in my first letter, under the influence of a drug which completely paralysed our volitional power, and were compelled to reveal all we knew concerning our own air-ships, submarine vessels, guns, and explosives. And in this manner was created and equipped the force which will be employed to dispute with us the empire of the world unless we are able to extirpate it utterly."

While the despatch to the Council was being drawn up, the Narwhal had been lying in the inner basin of Christmas Harbour, renewing her store of motive power from the generating station ashore. As soon as the engineer in charge reported that her power-reservoirs were full, and Alan had delivered the despatch for conveyance to Aeria by air-ship, Alexis, who had been apparently buried in a brown study for the last two hours or so, asked Alan to come with him into his private cabin, and as soon as the two friends were alone together he said to him--

"Look here, old man! While you fellows have been drawing up that despatch, and talking about the impossibility of attacking the stronghold at Mount Terror, I've been doing some thinking, and I've come to the conclusion that as far as an under-sea attack is concerned, it isn't quite so hopeless as you've made out."

"I shall be only too delighted to hear you prove us wrong," replied Alan, his eyes brightening at the prospect, for he knew Alexis too well not to be sure that he would not have spoken in this way unless he had pretty solid reasons for doing so. "Say on, my friend; I am all attention."

"Get out to sea, then, as fast as ever you can," said Alexis, "for there's not an hour to be lost if you adopt my plan, and if you don't we can just come back."

"Very well," said Alan. "What's the course?"

"Clear the islands and head away southward as hard as you can go," replied Alexis briefly.

The excitement of the battle in which he had played such a terrible part had left Alan in just the frame of mind to listen to the project of a desperate adventure, such as he instinctively knew was now in his friend's mind. Without hesitating further he went into the saloon, summoned the crew of the Narwhal, and said to them--

"Alexis and I have decided upon an enterprise which will end either in very great injury to our enemies or our own destruction. You have seen enough to-day to know that in the warfare we are engaged in there are only two choices: victory or destruction. We don't want to take anyone against his will to what may be certain death. Those who care to go ashore may do so."

Not a man moved. An athletic sailor named George Cosmo, who held the post of chief engineer, saluted, and said briefly--

"We shall all go, sir. What are the orders?"

"Get out of the harbour as fast as you can, and as soon as you are clear of the islands sink two fathoms, steer a straight course due south-east, and put her through the water as hard as she'll go," replied Alan.

Cosmo saluted again, and left the room with his comrades to execute the order.

"Now, my friend," said Alan, turning to Alexis as soon as they were alone again, "what is your plan?"

"Simply this," replied Alexis. "Mount Terror, or at any rate the mouth of the submarine tunnel, is in round numbers three thousand geographical miles from here. Our speed is thirty miles an hour faster than that of Olga's squadron. That means that even if they go back at once and at full speed we shall be

there four or five hours before them.

"They, I think, have had quite enough fighting for to-day, and I don't believe they'll attack the island again--first, because they know that they can't take our sea defences by surprise, and, second, because they think the Narwhal will remain on guard.

"Either they will go off on a raiding expedition somewhere else with the air-ships--in which case we can't follow them, for we don't know where they're going--or they will return to Mount Terror at an easy speed of fifty or sixty miles an hour. They will never dream that you and I will venture to attack the stronghold single-handed, and, therefore, that is just what I propose to do."

"That will be odds of about forty to one against the Narwhal," replied Allan, somewhat gravely. "Unless we can destroy it completely before they get back. But go on. Let's hear the rest. I don't think you can propose anything too desperate for me now that I have really tasted the blood of the enemy."

"Well, what I propose is not to destroy the stronghold, simply because it would be impossible to do that by sea. I merely propose to get quietly into the tunnel, go to that narrow part about two miles from the entrance, fix a dozen torpedoes with time-fuses up against the roof of the tunnel, and then clear out into the open water.

"When those twelve torpedoes go off if they don't bring a few thousand tons of rock down into the tunnel and block it pretty securely I'll grant I know very little about explosives."

"Good so far, very good!" said Alan. "I confess I envy you that idea. What next?"

"Well, after that," replied Alexis. "You see we shall have shut in the vessels that are inside and shut out those that are outside. The ones inside will be no use for some time, for it will take the divers a good many days to open the tunnel again, even if they ever do.

"As for those outside, we can lie in wait for them if they return, and trust to the Narwhal's speed and strength to sink as many of them as we can, or else, if they don't put in an appearance, we can come home with the consciousness that we have done about all the damage in our power. Now, what do you think?"

Alan was silent for a few moments, weighing the pros and cons of the desperate venture--for desperate it was, in spite of the incomparable speed and strength of the splendid vessel he commanded.

It was easy enough, always supposing that it could be accomplished without interruption; but to be caught in the tunnel, as was quite possible, between a force inside and one outside meant almost certain destruction, for if the Narwhal was not rammed and sunk in a space too narrow for her to turn she would be certain to be blown up by the torpedoes which would be launched against her.

In the end, the very character of the desperate venture, combined with the magnitude of the injury it would do to the enemy, overcame the scruples of his prudence. He put his hand on Alexis' shoulder, and giving him a gentle shake, said with a laugh--

"Bravo, old philosopher! You've done more with your thinking than we have with our talking and writing. We'll do it, if there isn't a square foot of the Narwhal left when the business is over."

"I knew you'd say that," said Alexis. "Now let's have some dinner and go to sleep, for we shall want it."

It was then very nearly midday, and the Narwhal had cleared the islands, and, with her prow pointed direct for the north-eastern extremity of Wilkes's Land, was rushing at full speed through the water about twelve feet below the surface of the sea. For twenty hours she sped silently and swiftly and unseen on her way, swept round the ice-barrier that fences the northern promontory of Victoria Land and into the bay dominated by the fiery crest of Mount Erebus.

CHAPTER XIV. FROM THE SEA TO THE AIR.

TWENTY-FOUR hours after she had reached Mount Terror the Narwhal came into the inner basin of Christmas Harbour, running easily along the surface, with the red flag flying at her flag-staff. The news spread rapidly through the little settlement, the dwellers in which had been wondering greatly at her sudden disappearance, and there was quite a crowd on the jetty as she ran alongside. Max Ernstein was among it, and as the battleship came to a standstill he saw to his amazement Alan spring ashore and come towards him with outstretched hands.

"Why, what does this mean?" he said, as he grasped his hand. "I thought you told me you were never going to leave the Narwhal until"--

"Until we had done what we have done," said Alan with a laugh, as he returned his hand-clasp with a grip that made the bones crack. "We have destroyed a good half of what remained of the Russian sea navy, and, what's more, we've blown up the entrance to their submarine dockyard, and completely crippled them as far as building or equipping new vessels is concerned until they can find a new harbour."

"Magnificent!" exclaimed Ernstein. "Glorious! You'll be wearing the golden wings again in forty-eight hours."

"If I am," said Alan, flushing with pleasure at the thought, "the credit will be due to Alexis, and not to me. It was his idea entirely. But never mind that now. We've suffered rather badly, and only just escaped with our lives. Five out of six of the Narwhal's crew are disabled, and I want you to get them out and send them away to Aeria as soon as possible. Meanwhile Alexis and I will write our despatch to the Council."

His instructions were obeyed at once, and the invalids were transferred to the Vega, the air-ship that was to convey them to Aeria, and in her luxurious state-rooms their hurts were attended to by the best skill on the island while the despatch was being drawn up.

It was brief, plain, almost formal in language, and confined entirely to statement of bare fact, and in little more than an hour after the arrival of the Narwhal at Christmas Harbour the Vega had risen into the air, and was speeding on her way towards Aeria.

Meanwhile the news of the daring venture and brilliant exploits of Alan and Alexis and their comrades spread like wildfire through the island, and everyone who was not engaged on duties that could not be left came to the settlement to see and congratulate the two heroes of the hour, whose strange and romantic fate, so well known to every Aerian, had thus suddenly been glorified by the triumph of the genius and daring which had proved capable of wresting victory from defeat and glory from misfortune.

Although some were more demonstrative, none were heartier or more sincere in their congratulations than Edward Forrest, the admiral of the station, and, unknown to Alan and Alexis, he and Ernstein had sent a joint despatch by the Vega, strongly urging both the justice and the policy of at once restoring to the full rights of citizenship the two men who had proved themselves possessed of such extraordinary ability.

If the battle for the empire of the world was to be fought over again, the command of the forces of Aeria could not be entrusted to any hands so able and so daring as those of the President's son and his friend and companion in misfortune and victory. The triumphs at Kerguelen and Antarctica had really been due to them alone. They had given warning of the attack on the station, and it was due to the skill and boldness of their strategy that it had been foiled with such disaster to the enemy.

This of itself was much, but it had not satisfied either their ambition or their devotion, for, after it had been accomplished, they had carried the war almost single-handed in the Russian stronghold, and there, under circumstances of unparalleled danger to themselves, they had struck a blow which could not fail to cripple the sea-power of the enemy, and so influence to an incalculable extent the ultimate

issue of the war which, ere long, might be raging over the whole world.

That night, while the almost constant storms of the southern winter were sweeping over the barren surface of Desolation Land, a feast was held in the central hall of the headquarters at Christmas Harbour in honour of the double victory and the return of the two chief heroes of it from their long captivity. The next day was spent in a rigorous inspection of all the defences of the island and the machinery and ammunition of the air-ships and submarine vessels. At six o'clock in the evening, twenty-six hours after she had started, the Vega returned from Aeria, bringing the reply of the Council to the despatches which she had taken.

The Council has heard with great satisfaction of the repulse of the attack on the station at Kerguelen and of the distinguished services rendered by Alan Arnold and Alexis Mazarov, both at Kerguelen and Mount Terror.

In recognition of the great skill and devotion they have displayed, the Council invites them to assume the command of the air-ship Ithuriel, and to make use of that vessel to execute such plans and purposes as in their discretion will best serve the interests of the State of Aeria for a period of one year from the present date. They will be supplied with motive power and all stores and materials of war at any of the oceanic stations.

The Council accepts the recommendation contained in the supplement to the first despatch, and has given orders for the immediate building of a hundred air-ships of the Ithuriel class and the same number of submarine battleships of the Narwhal type. These are expected to be ready for service at the end of the year, by which time the Council Hopes to be able to call upon Alan Arnold and Alexis Mazarov to assume the duties of admiral and vice-admiral of the aerial navies, and at the same time to restore to them full privileges of citizenship in Aeria.

The admiral and officers of Kerguelen will give all assistance in the carrying out of these directions, and will make and transmit all necessary reports in connection with them. No further hostilities are to be undertaken for the present by the aerial or sea forces, but they will maintain a strict watch against all possible surprises on the part of the enemy, and be ready to repel any assault which may be made. This order does not apply to the air-ship Ithuriel.

Given in the Council Hall of Aeria on the Eleventh day of May in the hundred and thirty-second year of the Deliverance.

ALAN ARNOLD, President.

FRANCIS TREMAYNE, Vice-President

To Edward Forrest

Admiral in Command at the Station of Kerguelen.

Such was the reply of the Council to the news of the daring foray made by the Narwhal upon the stronghold of Mount Terror, and the suggestions of Admiral Forrest and Captain Earnstein. Although it did not precisely adopt the latter, which, indeed, the Council was well justified in looking upon as inspired rather by enthusiasm than the judicial spirit proper to the occasion, it was even more

satisfactory both to Alan and Alexis than an immediate recall would have been.

True, they had done great and brilliant service in the first few days of their return to freedom. They had virtually crippled the Russian sea-power by the blows which they had so skilfully, so swiftly, and so daringly struck, but neither of them felt that this was a sufficient achievement to warrant their full restoration to all that they had lost through the fatal error that they had made on board the old Ithuriel.

Both, indeed, longed ardently for just such further opportunity of devoting themselves to the service of their race and country as this order offered them. In command of the new Ithuriel, one of the swiftest and most formidable aerial warships in existence, there was no telling the damage that they might do to the enemy or what service they might render to their friends.

They knew that, as regarded the Russian force, the odds against them were about twenty-four to one, and they also knew that Olga and her lieutenants would lose no time in increasing their navy to the utmost extent in their power in preparation for the war of extermination that was now inevitable.

They had a year before them during which they would have an absolutely free hand, and all the supplies that the resources of Aeria could give them. True, it was a year of exile and probation, but they gladly welcomed the test of fidelity and devotion which it offered, and which, worthily passed through, would mean restoration of all they had lost, and a return to their friends and kindred in their beloved valley of Aeria armed with powers and responsibilities which would make them practically the arbiters of the destinies of their people, and perhaps of the whole human race.

But the Vega had brought something more to the two friends and exiles than the reply of the Council to their despatches, for immediately he landed her captain handed to Alan a small sealed packet addressed to him in the handwriting of his sister Isma. When he opened it, as he did at the first opportunity that found him alone, he found that it contained two letters and two chromatic photographs.

The letters were from his parents and sister. His father's was, as may well be imagined, very different from the cold and formal despatch that he had signed as President of the Council. It was full of tender and loving sympathy for him in the strange fate that had overtaken him, and, while it entirely absolved them of all moral blame for the loss of the flagship and the lives of his companions, it exhorted him earnestly to apply himself without useless regrets to the work of the year of probation which the Council had seen fit to impose upon him, and it ended with an assurance that the happiest day that had been known in Aeria within the memory of its citizens would be that on which the golden wings would be replaced on their foreheads in the Council Hall of the city.

To this letter was added another, written by Alan's mother, and written as only a mother can write to her son. Strong and well tried as he was, there were tears in Alan's eyes when he had finished reading these two letters, but they did not remain there long after he had begun the one from his sister.

Isma, proud beyond measure of the exploits of her brother and the man she still looked upon as her lover, and absolutely assured that when the time came both would return covered with honour, wrote in the highest spirits. As it was an invariable rule of life among the Aerians to be perfectly frank with one another, and to take every precaution to avoid those misunderstandings which in a less perfect state of society had produced so much personal and social suffering, she told him in plain yet tender language exactly what had passed between her and Alma on the night that his first letter had been received.

Yet she said nothing that in any way committed either Alma or himself to a renewal of the troth which had been broken by the designs of Olga Romanoff, and though she sent her remembrances to Alexis, she sent them as though to a friend, tacitly giving both to understand that no words of love must pass between the two exiles and their former sweethearts until they met again upon equal terms.

But there was another message not contained in the letter, or written in any words, which said more than all that she had written, and this was conveyed by the photographs, which she sent without a word of allusion to them. As Alan looked upon them the six years of mental slavery and degrading servitude to the daughter of the enemies of his race passed away for the moment, and he saw himself standing with Alma in one of the groves of Aeria plighting his boyish troth on the night before he started on his fatal voyage in the Ithuriel.

The face that looked at him with such marvellous lifelikeness, with all its perfection of form and exquisite colouring, reproduced with the most absolute fidelity, was the same face that had been upturned to his to receive his kisses on that never-to-be-forgotten night. And yet, in another sense, it was not the same.

That had been the sunny, smiling face of a girl to whom sorrow and evil were as absolutely unknown as they would be to an angel in heaven, but this was the face of a woman who had lived and thought and suffered.

And when he remembered that whatever of sorrow or suffering she had known had been on his account, the last lingering traces of the vile spells of the evilly beautiful Syren of the Skies, who had so fatally bewitched him, vanished from his soul, and the old love revived within him pure and strong, and intensified tenfold by the knowledge of the great reparation that he owed to the girl upon whose life he had brought the only shadow it had ever known.

He knew that their hands would never meet again until all that had been lost was regained, at whatever cost of labour or devotion that might be necessary on his part, but he also knew that in all these years no other man had been found worthy to fill the place that he had once occupied, and which he was resolved to win back or die in the attempt, and this knowledge made him look forward to the mighty struggle which lay before him with an eagerness that augured well for its issue.

He had gone into his own cabin on board the Ithuriel, which was being rapidly prepared for her roving commission, to read his letters in solitude. He put Alma's photograph on the table, and sat before it with his eyes fixed upon it until every line of form and tint of colour was indelibly impressed anew upon his memory.

Then he kissed it as reverently as a devotee of old might have kissed a sacred relic, and then he attached the oval miniature to a chain of alternate links of azurine and gold, and hung it round his neck inside his tunic, registering a mental vow that if death came before he once more wore the golden wings, it should find it lying nearest his heart.

"This," he said, speaking to himself, as he took Isma's photograph up from the table, and looked fondly upon the radiantly lovely face that looked out from its frame, "is evidently not intended for me. Isma doesn't say who it's for, but I fancy that there is some one on board the Ithuriel who has a very much better right to it than I have. I wonder if Alexis is in his room?"

So saying, he left his cabin and found his friend still deep in the perusal of two lengthy letters from his father and mother.

"So you have had letters from home as well, old man? I hope they've been as pleasant reading as mine have," he said, going to the couch on which Alexis was sitting, and holding one hand behind his back.

"Yes, they're from my father and mother, and so they can scarcely be anything else, so far as what they do say. It's what they don't say that gives me the only cause to find fault with them. But still that, I suppose, would be expecting too much under the circumstances."

He ended with something very like a sigh, and Alan replied as gravely as he could--

"And what might that be, my knight of the rueful countenance? Don't you think the Council have treated us splendidly, and given us a glorious opportunity of winning back all that the daughter of the Tsar has robbed us of?"

"Of course, I do," replied Alexis, looking up at him with a flush on his cheeks. "But for all that there is one thing still, something that I am not ashamed to say I value above everything else that I have lost or can regain."

"And that is--?"

"Well, to put it plainly," replied Alexis, the flush deepening as he spoke, "these two letters don't contain one single word about Isma. Now you know what I mean. Of course, I am ready to do everything that the Council may call upon us to do, and the moment that I know I have won back the right to wear the golden wings will be the proudest of my life, but it will be far from the happiest if I

only go back to Aeria to find Isma another man's wife, and what else can I think when they don't so much as mention her name?"

"Be of good cheer, my friend," replied Alan with a laugh, putting one hand on his shoulder, and taking the other from behind his back. "You will never find that, I can promise you. I am the bringer of good tidings. There, take those and feast your eyes and your heart on them in solitude as I have just been doing on something else."

So saying he put Isma's letter and photograph into Alexis' hand, and without another word left him to gather courage and comfort from them as he had himself done.

CHAPTER XV. OLGA IN COUNCIL.

THE remains of the Russian submarine squadron, numbering now only seventeen vessels, headed out northward into the open sea, after leaving their disabled consorts to their fate. In the brief space occupied by her first rush they had recognised the Narwhal both by her size and speed, and one of the captains avowed that he had recognised Alan Arnold, Olga's late captive, standing under the glass dome of the conning-tower, steering the great vessel upon her devastating course.

Twenty miles out from the island they rose to the surface and made out the aerial fleet some five miles to the southward, hovering at an elevation of about a thousand feet, and evidently on the look-out for them. Michael Lossenski, who had escaped the ram of the Narwhal, ran up his flagstaff, and flew a signal which soon brought the air-ships bearing down upon them. The Revenge sank down to the surface of the water, and took Lossenski off his ship in order that he might report himself.

Olga and his father received the first news of the defeat of their naval forces with cold displeasure; but when Michael told them that more than half the fleet had been destroyed by the Narwhal, and that it was believed that Alan was in command of her, Olga's anger blazed out into fury, and she cried passionately--

"You fools and cowards to have fled like that from one ship and one man! Could not seventeen of you have overcome that one vessel? Had you no rams, no torpedoes, that you fled before this single foe?"

He took the bitter rebuke in silence. He knew that he had failed both in duty and courage, and that a reply would only make matters worse. Olga looked at him for a moment, with eyes burning with scorn and anger. Then she rose from her seat, and, pointing to the door of the saloon, said--

"Go! You have disgraced yourself and us. Take your ships back to Mount Terror, and await our further commands."

With bowed head and face flushed with shame, the disgraced man walked in silence out of the saloon and left Olga alone with his father. As soon as he had gone Olga began striding up and down the saloon, her hands clenched and her eyes, black with passion, glittering fiercely under her straight-drawn brows.

Orloff Lossenski knew her too well not to let her anger take its course uninterrupted, so he sat and watched her, and waited for her to speak first. At last she stopped in front of him, and said in a low fierce voice, that was almost hoarse with the strength of her passion--

"So! you were right, my friend. I was a fool, an idiot, to let those two escape. I ought to have killed them, as you advised. They were of no further use to us, and we could have done without them. Yes, truly I was a fool, such a fool as love makes of every woman!"

"Not of every woman, Majesty," replied Lossenski in a low soothing tone, that was not without a trace of irony. "If I may say it without disrespect, your ancestress, the great Catherine, knew how to combine love and wisdom. When she wearied of a lover, or had no further use for a man, she never left him the power of revenging his dismissal."

"Yes, yes," she replied. "I know that; but I did not weary of this man, this king among men, for whose love I would have sold my soul. I only wearied of my own attempts to win it. You know what I mean, Lossenski, and you can understand me, for you have confessed that he was well worthy of the sacrifice."

"You know that when he seemed my lover he was only my slave--that I could not compel the man to love me, but only the passive machine that I had made of him, and you know, too, that the moment I had let him regain his freedom of will he would have loathed and cursed me, as no doubt he is doing now."

"Why did I not kill him? How could I, when I loved him better than my own life, and all my dreams of empire? Why, I could not even kill the other one because he was Alan's friend, and because he would

have hated me still more for doing so.

"But, after all," she continued, speaking somewhat more calmly, "it is not setting them free that has done the mischief. It is the treason or the miracle that enabled them to capture the Narwhal. I would give a good deal to know how that was done. They cannot have done it themselves, for I had given them enough of the drug to deprive them of all will-power for at least twenty-four hours, and I told that traitor, Turgenieff, who must have betrayed the attack on Kerguelen, to give them more when he landed them on the island."

"But is your Majesty sure that they took the drug?" said Lossenski, interrupting her for the first time. "Did you give it with your own hand, or see them take it with your own eyes?"

"No!" said Olga, with a start. "I did not. I sent it to them by my maid, Anna, but she swore that she put it in their wine, and when they had finished their last meal the decanter was empty."

"That was a grave mistake, Majesty," said Lossenski, in a tone of respectful reproof, "and one which may yet cost you the empire of the world. It is such trifles as that which destroy the grandest schemes."

"I know! I know!" said Olga impatiently. "You may think me a fool and a weakling, but I could not bring myself to see or speak to Alan again after I had at last resolved to give up the hopeless task of winning him, and send him away."

"But for that mistake the Narwhal would still have been ours, and we should have taken Kerguelen unawares. He could have told his people nothing else that would have harmed us for the more he tells them about Mount Terror the more impossible they will see any attack upon it to be. No, no, it was all that one fatal mistake! But there, it tortures me to talk about it! Tell me, my old friend and counsellor, what we are to do to repair the damage?"

Exhausted by her fierce and sudden outburst of passion, and the bitterness of her regret, Olga threw herself into a chair and sat waiting for Lossenski to speak. He remained silent for several moments, buried in thought, and then he began speaking in the low, deliberate tone of a man who has weighty counsels to impart.

"We cannot deny, Majesty, that we have been worsted in our two first encounters with these Aerians, but we must learn wisdom and patience from defeat. It seems plain to me that the Aerians are too strong for us as we are."

"When we attacked them we forgot that, while we are children in warfare, they are perfect masters of it. They have preserved the traditions of their fathers, and for four generations they have been trained in the use of the weapons which we have only just learnt to use. Therefore my advice is that we do not attack them again for the present."

"But," interrupted Olga, "in any case, they will attack us, and we shall still have to fight."

"Not of necessity, your Highness," replied Lossenski. "You see they have not pursued us, and the reason for this is that they know that both our air-ships and our submarine vessels are swifter and more powerful than theirs, with two or three exceptions."

"They will not attack us till they can do so on equal terms, and we must take care that they never do that. You have plenty of treasure and plenty of men at your command. Let us retire to our stronghold again and devote ourselves to increasing our strength both by sea and in the air, until we have made ourselves invulnerable."

"And remember, too, Majesty," he continued with an added meaning in his tone, "Aeria is not the world. There are vast possibilities before you in other directions. I am convinced now that we have made a mistake in attacking the Aerians first. Russia is ripe for revolt, and great quantities of arms have already been manufactured. The tribes of Western Asia need only a leader to take the field, and the Sultan Khalid could put an army millions strong into the field within a few months."

"On the other hand, Anglo-Saxondom is a babel of conflicting opinions, and the mob rules throughout its length and breadth. Where everyone is master there can be no leaders, and those who are without leaders are the natural prey of the strong hand."

"They are wealthy and weak, and divided among themselves. The Aerians have given them over to

their own devices. Why should you not, when we have repaired the damage we have suffered, take your aerial squadron to Moscow, proclaim the new revolution, and crown yourself Tsarina in the Kremlin?"

In speaking thus Orloff Lossenski was really only putting into formal shape the project which it had all along, been the aim of Olga and her adherents to carry out. There was nothing new in the suggestion save the proposition that the revolution should be proclaimed in Russia, and that Olga should crown herself Tsarina before, instead of after, the attempted subjugation of Aeria.

Up to the present it had been believed that nothing could possibly be done until the power of the Aerians was either crushed or crippled, but the battle of Kerguelen had clearly shown that this was a task far beyond their present resources. Even the mastery of the sea was now no longer theirs, thanks to the two fatal mistakes which Olga had made, first in setting Alan and Alexis free, and second in sending them away from Mount Terror in the swiftest and most powerful vessel in their sea-navy.

Why she had been guilty of this last imprudence she could not even explain to herself. It was one of those mistakes, made in pure thoughtlessness, which again and again have marred the greatest schemes of conquest. Another vessel would have done just as well, save that she would not have performed the errand quite so quickly; but the Narwhal happened to be in readiness at the moment, and as Peter Turgenieff, her commander, was one of Olga's most trusted sea-captains, she had given him the order to convey Alan and Alexis to the island, and so the fatal error had been committed.

It must, however, be remembered that when she made it, it was impossible for her to foresee its disastrous outcome. She implicitly believed that the two Aerians were completely under the influence of the will-poison, and so utterly unable to think or act independently, or to form and execute the daring design which they had so successfully accomplished.

But now that the mistake had been made, Orloff Lossenski saw that the course he suggested to his mistress offered the only hope of counteracting it. His advice pointed out the shortest road to the attainment of the designs of Olga and her followers; and he gave it in all sincerity, for he was absolutely devoted to Olga's person and fortune, and the realisation of her ambition was the dearest dream of his own life.

It meant, too, the restoration of his own order to all its ancient rights and privileges with the added wealth and dignity that would be won by conquest. It meant the establishment of a Russian empire far greater and more powerful than that of the last of the Tsars, for its power would extend from the Pacific coast of Asia to the Atlantic coast of Europe.

Olga heard him with flushed cheeks and shining eyes, and, when he had done speaking, she rose to her feet again and faced him, looking every inch a queen, in the ripe beauty of her perfect womanhood, and said, in tones from which every trace of her former anger and sorrow had vanished--

"Well spoken, Orloff Lossenski! That is worthy counsel for you to give and for me to hear. I will follow it, for it is wise as well as bold, and the day that I crown myself in the Kremlin you shall be the first noble in Russia. But, stop--what of the Sultan? Surely he and his armies will have to be reckoned with?"

"True," said Lossenski. "But if he will not listen to reason, cannot your air-ships destroy his armies like swarms of locusts, lay his cities in ruins, and sweep him and his dynasty from the face of the earth?"

"Yes, that is true again," replied Olga. "Provided that the Aerians did not come to his aid."

"They would not do that, I think," he replied.

"But to make that impossible why should you not make an alliance with him and offer to help him with your air-ships and submarine navy to the conquest of the world, on the condition of the restoration of the Russian Empire and the division of the world between you? Remember that as long as you kept the command of your navies of the air and the sea you could always keep him to the terms when once made."

As the old man ceased speaking Olga laid her hand upon his shoulder, and said in a low, clear, steady

voice that spoke of a great resolution finally taken--

"My friend, you are the wisest of counsellors, and when I regain my throne you shall be the first Minister of the Empire. I will pardon your son for his failure to-day for the sake of his father's wisdom, and we will say no more about disaster and defeat. We will look forward only to victory and the empire that it will bring us!"

But when the defeated squadrons arrived at Mount Terror Olga was rudely awakened from her dreams of empire by the tidings of the disaster that had occurred during her absence.

The damage inflicted by the Narwhal was speedily proved to be irreparable. For a distance of nearly a mile the roof of the tunnel had sunk bodily down, blocking it for ever. Millions of tons of rock and earth had fallen into the submarine channel, and all hope of clearing it again was out of the question.

The explosion of the twelve torpedoes had not only brought down all the rocks in their vicinity, but it had so shaken the earth in both directions that a general subsidence had taken place, forming a barrier which was so vast and massive that its removal, even if possible, would have taken many months of labour; and so there was no avoiding the dismal conclusion that their submarine dockyard was useless, and, for the present at least, their sea-power crippled.

The effects of the explosion in the interior of the mountain, though bad enough, were much less serious. Nearly seventy men, or more than half the total garrison that had been left behind, had been either killed or maimed for life. The six submarine warships that had been lying in the lake were, of course, useless now that their way to the sea was barred, and five of the twelve air-ships which had been lying in the vast cavern whose floor formed the shores of the subterranean lake were so seriously injured that considerable repairs would be necessary for them.

The whole of the lower level of the vast system of chambers and galleries which pierced the interior of the mountain in all directions had been flooded by the volumes of water projected from the lake by the explosion. Workshops, laboratories, and building-slips had been wrecked or thrown into complete confusion, and the appearance of the whole of the level was that of a place which had been swept by a tornado.

As soon as the amount of the damage done had been estimated, Olga called a council of war, composed of twelve of her most skilled and trusted adherents, in a chamber which was led up to by a path sloping steeply up from the shores of the lake. This chamber was an almost perfect oval, about sixty feet long by twenty wide, and about thirty high.

Neither its temperature nor its internal appointments would have given any idea of the fact that it was situated at the uttermost end of the earth, and buried under the eternal snows of Antarctica. The rough rock walls had been smoothed and hung with silken hangings, against which statues of the purest marble gleamed white, and pictures, some of vast size and exquisite execution, brought the scenes of sunnier lands to the eyes of the occupants.

Electric light-globes hung in festoons all around, shedding a mild diffused lustre over the luxurious furniture of the chamber. The floor of lava, smoothed and polished, was covered with priceless carpets into whose thick pile the foot sank noiseless, as though into soft, shallow snow.

Treasures, both of art and luxury, which had been plundered from ocean transports that had fallen victims to the rams of the submarine cruisers were scattered about in lavish profusion that was barbaric in its excess. Behind the hangings of the walls ran an elaborate system of pipes which circulated fresh air drawn from the exterior of the mountain and, heated by passing through electric furnaces, at once warmed and ventilated this council-chamber of the extraordinary woman who, in virtue of her strange conquest of the air, had come to be known among her followers as the Syren of the Skies.

Human art and science had completely conquered both the ruggedness of Nature and the inclemency of the elements, and had transformed these gloomy caverns, excavated by the volcanic fires of former ages out of the heart of Mount Terror, into warm, well-lighted, and airy abodes, capable of sheltering several hundred human beings from the rigours even of the Antarctic winter.

This subterranean retreat and stronghold was roughly divided into two levels, on the lower of which

were situated the chambers and galleries which served for the performance of all the work necessary for the building of the air-ships and submarine vessels, while the upper was devoted to store-rooms and dwelling-places for the followers and assistants of the Queen of this strange realm.

No other region could have presented such a marvellous contrast to the sunlit and flower-scented paradise which was the home of their mortal enemies, the race with which they had dared to dispute the empire of the world. The powers of darkness and of light could hardly have been better typified than were these two contending forces by the different characters of their respective strongholds.

When the Council of War, summoned at Olga's bidding by Orloff Lossenski, had assembled in the Central Chamber, a pair of heavy purple velvet curtains parted, and the Syren entered from the gallery, which had been hewn through the solid rock and which communicated with her private suite of apartments. The members of the Council rose as she entered and greeted her as subjects were wont to greet their sovereigns in the days before the Terror.

She acknowledged their reverence with a royal condescension, and took her seat on a raised divan at the inner end of the chamber. Beckoning Lossenski to her side, she exchanged a few words with him in an undertone, and then called upon Andrei Levin, the Secretary of the Council, to enumerate the nature and extent of the losses they had sustained in their brief but disastrous first attempt to cope with the mighty race which had dominated the world for nearly a century and a half.

When Levin had finished, it was found that, in addition to the irreparable damage done to the submarine dockyard, no less than thirty-five submarine cruisers had been destroyed or rendered useless, while twenty-three air-ships had been annihilated by the projectiles of the Aerians. This left an available fighting force of twenty-eight submarine and twenty-four aerial warships fit for service.

It had been calculated that it would take at least a month of hard work to get the subterranean arsenal into such working order as would enable them to repair their losses, and after this at least twelve months would have to elapse before they had brought their fighting force up to the strength it had possessed but five short days before.

In addition to their losses in ships and war materials, more than a hundred of Olga's chosen and most devoted followers had lost their lives in the terrible warfare which knew no sparing of life, and it would be necessary to draft more men from Russia to replace them before the work could be carried on upon an adequate scale.

Olga listened to the catalogue of disasters with frowning brows and eyes gleaming with hardly-suppressed fury. When it was over, she rose and spoke in a voice whose wonderful music and witchery seemed to charm all sense of misfortune for the time being out of the hearts of her listeners. A born queen of men, she knew when to wither with her scorn or to charm with her sweetness, and she was well aware that this hour of defeat and disaster was no time for reproaches or rebuke.

So her voice was low and sweet, and almost pleading, as she reviewed the situation, which, for the moment, seemed so dark, and appealed to her followers, through those who commanded them, not to yield before a sudden and temporary misfortune, but to learn from defeat the lessons of victory. She reminded them of all that their ancestors and hers had lost at the hands of the Terrorists, the forefathers of the hated and arrogant Aerians, and she painted in glowing colours the glory and the boundless wealth that would be the reward of victory.

Heavy as their losses had been, there was no reason why they should not repair them. She reminded them how, five years before, they had possessed but a single air-ship, and were only a weak and scattered body of revolutionaries. Now they possessed, even after all they had lost, an aerial fleet superior to all the vessels of the Aerial navies save two, and submarine cruisers swifter and more powerful than any that floated, save only the stolen Narwhal. More than this, they were now supported by a vast organisation numbering thousands of devoted men and women, any one of whom would give his or her life for the cause for which they were fighting.

She only spoke for a quarter of an hour or so, but every word went home, and when she concluded with an appeal to their loyalty and devotion, the twelve members of the Council rose with one accord to

their feet, and there and then spontaneously renewed the oaths of fealty to her person and dynasty which they had taken when they enlisted in her service. Every man of them was a scion of some once noble Russian house, and her cause was theirs in virtue of personal interest as well as that sentiment of blind, unreasoning loyalty which even four generations of freedom had failed to eradicate from the Russian blood.

Olga thanked them with a tremor in her voice which, whether it was real or not, spoke to them with far greater eloquence than words, and then she bade Lossenski lay before the Council the plans which she had already discussed with him for the future conduct of the vast enterprise which had opened so inauspiciously.

Lossenski rose at once, and for over two hours unfolded a vast and subtly conceived scheme, which has been very briefly outlined in a previous chapter, and the results of the working out of which will become apparent in due course.

At the end of the discussion which followed it was decided that a transport should be purchased as soon as possible in a Russian port and sent out to Antarctica with fresh supplies of men and materials.

A flotilla of twelve marine cruisers was told off to convoy her on her voyage, and protect her from possible attack in case the Aerians should suspect or discover the purpose to which she was devoted.

As no more submarine vessels could be built in Antarctica--for the fearful cold of the outside waters made such work totally impossible--all efforts were to be concentrated upon the increase of the aerial navy, and a hundred air-ships, in addition to those already in existence, was fixed upon as the minimum strength that it would be safe to depend upon, when the hour for the final struggle came.

No force was to be wasted, if possible, upon minor attacks or isolated engagements, for the Russians, like the Aerians, had learnt that, under the conditions of the new warfare, skirmishes only meant destruction in detail and loss of strength entirely disproportionate to the advantage gained.

Thus virtually the same decisions were arrived at in Aeria and Antarctica. Both sides resolved to husband their resources and increase their strength, and then to risk everything upon the issue of one mighty conflict, a veritable struggle of the gods, in which both equally recognised that the defeated would be annihilated and the victors would remain undisputed masters of the world.

Finally, it was decided that Orloff Lossenski should depart at once with a formal offer of alliance to the Sultan of the Moslem Empire, and that a day later Olga should follow with a squadron of twenty air-ships and give him the alternative of alliance or immediate war.

If, as was confidently expected, he chose alliance, five submarine cruisers were to be given to him, so that he might use them as models for the construction of a fleet which should be powerful enough to sweep the Aerian warships from the seas, and which would be supplied with the secret motive power at a station to be established at Larnaka under Russian control.

Then, when all was in readiness for the world-war, Olga was to be proclaimed Tsarina in Moscow, and the standard of absolute monarchy once more reared over the re-erected throne of the House of Romanoff. Anglo-Saxondom was to be invaded and conquered, and Aeria itself attacked and either subdued or depopulated and laid waste.

CHAPTER XVI. KHALID THE MAGNIFICENT.

A FEW minutes before midnight on the fifteenth of May, in the year 2036, Khalid the Magnificent, lord and master of the greatest and most splendid realm that had ever been ruled over by a single man since the world began, stood alone on the spacious terrace of his palace in Alexandria, gazing up at the myriads of stars that shone in the cloudless firmament above him, and dreaming one of those dreams of world-wide empire which had haunted the soul of such men as he from the days of Rameses the Great until his own.

He was a man of thirty-four, tall, swarthy, and athletic, with the proud aquiline features of the Arab, the dark, alternately flashing and melting eyes of the Circassian, and the strong, reposeful dignity of the Turk--a man whom women looked upon with love and men with respect that was often akin to dread.

The lord of seven hundred million subjects who, even in those days, so strong was still the faith and loyalty of the Moslem, looked upon him only as something less than Allah and the Prophet whose sacred blood flowed in his veins, his soaring ambition was not content even with the splendid inheritance that he had received from his ancestors.

In his being were closely blended those elements of religious enthusiasm and worldly ambition which had made the men of the Golden Age of Islam such irresistible conquerors and such mighty rulers of men. He had pondered over the past history of his faith and his people from the times of the Prophet down to his own, until he had come to believe himself the man chosen by Destiny to subjugate the world, and to compel all men, from pole to pole, and east to west, to accept the rule and faith of Islam, and to confess the unity of God and the apostleship of Mohammed.

He saw in the vast area of the Anglo-Saxon Federation, which now, in name at least, dominated Europe, America, and Australasia, only a collection of democratic and ill-governed States in which the mob ruled by blind counting of heads, and in which religion had been refined into a mere philosophy of life and morals, the last word of which seemed to him to be: Make the best of to-day, lest to-morrow should never come.

In his own breast the flame of the fierce, uncompromising faith of Islam burnt, undimmed by the mists of the centuries that had passed since the first Moslem armies had emerged from the deserts of Arabia to conquer the greater part of the Roman world.

Why should he not send forth his armies, as the Khalifs of old had done, to plant the banner of the Crescent over the subjugated realms of Christendom, and rule, the greatest of the Commanders of the Faithful, sovereign lord of a Moslem world?

It was a splendid destiny, but there was a power in the world, located in one tiny spot of earth, and yet, so far as he knew, universal and irresistible, before which the armies which he had called into existence would be as helpless as a swarm of locusts before a forest fire.

This power possessed the empire of the air, and therefore of the earth. In the days of the Terror it had led the Anglo-Saxon race to the conquest of the world. Would it sit idly now behind the bulwarks of Aeria and watch his armies conquering the domains of Anglo-Saxondom?

Was it not far more likely that those terrible air-ships would be sent forth to hurl their destroying lightnings from the skies and overwhelm his armies and his cities in irretrievable ruin? These Aerians had ruled the world for a hundred and twenty-five years, and yet had committed no act of aggression upon the rightful liberties of any nation. How, therefore, could he believe that they would hold their mighty hand while he carried fire and sword through the habitations of their blood and kindred?

If he gave the word for war, within forty-eight hours after he had spoken more than ten millions of men, armed with weapons of fearful precision and destructive power, would stand ready to do his bidding and to carry the banner of the Crescent to the uttermost ends of the earth; but of what use would be their numbers, their valour, or their devotion with a squadron of aerial cruisers wheeling above them and hurling death and destruction upon them from the inaccessible heights of the sky?

He remembered how his ancestor Mohammed Reshad had been stopped in his career of conquest, and how his victorious armies had been decimated and thrown into confusion by a flotilla of air-ships and war-balloons which a dozen cruisers of the present Aerial navy would have swept from the skies in a few minutes. Intolerable as the thought was to his haughty soul, the truth remained that, in the midst of all his power and splendour, he was as helpless as a child before the real masters of the world. He had armies and fleets, but he could not make war without their permission or the assurance of their neutrality, save with the certainty of disaster and defeat.

What would he not give for a squadron of these aerial battleships? Half his empire, willingly, and yet he knew that even an attempt to build a single air-ship would be the signal for his own death and the end of the dominion of his dynasty.

He had no knowledge of the momentous events which had just been taking place on the other side of the world. He still believed implicitly in the unquestioned supremacy of the Aerials throughout the domain of the skies, although he was well aware that some mysterious power had successfully disputed with them the command of the seas, and he remembered the stern threat of immediate war and annihilation that the President of Aerialia had promulgated against any who should even help in the concealment of the air-ship that had been lost six years before, and, so far as the world at large was concerned, had never been heard of since.

Anglo-Saxondom, and therefore Christendom, lay at his mercy but for this guardian power of the air. Its millions were unarmed and its wealth unprotected. Its indolent and luxurious democracies, occupied solely with social experiments and the increase of their material magnificence, would be crushed almost without resistance by his splendidly armed and disciplined legions.

The Crescent would replace the Cross above their temples, and the world would be a Moslem planet but for this empire of the air, universal and unconquerable, which barred his way to the dominion of the world and the final triumph of his faith.

For the hundredth time he had revolved the hopeless dilemma in his mind, alternately looking upon the conquests he longed for, and on the splendid but useless forces at his command, when a huge, strange shape dropped swiftly and silently out of the sky overhead, and, as though in answer to the unspoken call of his intense longing, one of those very air-ships of which he had been thinking with such angry despair swept with a majestic downward sloping curve out of the dusk of the night, and ran up close alongside the low parapet of the terrace on which he was standing.

It was the first time he had ever seen one of these marvellous vessels, which were the talk and the wonder of the world, at such close quarters. Paralysed for the moment by mingled curiosity and amazement, he recoiled with a startled invocation to the Prophet on his lips, and then stood staring at it in silence, wondering whether the strange apparition meant the visit of a friend or an enemy.

While he was standing thus the air-ship drifted as silently as a shadow over the parapet, and sank gently down until it rested on the marble floor of the vast terrace. Then a sliding door opened in the after-part of the glass dome which covered the deck from stem to stern, a light metal stairway fell from it, and three men richly and yet simply dressed descended to the terrace and advanced to where he stood.

Two of them halted at a respectful distance, and the third, a man whose dignity of bearing was enhanced by the snowy whiteness of his hair and beard, advanced alone, and with a grave and courteous gesture of salute said in English, the language of universal intercourse--

"Am I right in believing this to be the palace of his Majesty the Sultan?"

It was some moments before Khalid recovered his composure sufficiently to answer the question, simple as it was. His wonder was increased tenfold when he saw that his visitor from the skies did not wear the golden wings which were the insignia of the Aerials.

Was it possible that some other inhabitants of the earth had, in spite of the rigid prohibition of the Supreme Council, managed to build an aerial navy? His heart leapt with exultation at the thought. Obeying the impulse of the moment, he took a stride forward and held out his hand, saying--

"I know not who you are, or whence you come, but if you come in friendship there is my hand in welcome. This is the palace, and I am Khalid, the Commander of the Faithful. What is your errand?"

His visitor took the outstretched hand, and, bending low over it, replied in a tone of the deepest respect--

"I am honoured and fortunate beyond measure! I trust your Majesty will pardon the strangeness of my coming for the importance of the mission that brings me."

"Say on, sir, and tell me freely who you are and what your mission is, for I am all impatience to know," said the Sultan, speaking even more cordially than before.

"I am Orloff Lossenski," replied the ambassador from the skies, "and I am the bearer of a message from my mistress, Olga Romanoff, by right of descent Tsarina of the Russias, and deprived of her lawful rights of rule by the Terrorists who reign in Aeria."

"Then you are enemies of the Aerians?" broke in the Sultan, "and you possess air-ships like that marvellous craft yonder! How have you--but pardon me, I have interrupted you. You can satisfy my curiosity later on."

"Her Majesty, my mistress, possesses a large fleet of airships, of which this is one," replied Lossenski, "and she has sent me as her envoy to give your Majesty this letter which will explain my mission in full. At this hour to-morrow night the Tsarina will come in person to receive your answer to it."

As he spoke he presented a letter to the Sultan, and then drew back a pace. Khalid took the missive without a word and walked towards one of the electric lamps with which the terrace was lighted, breaking the seal as he went. This is what he read--

To Khalid the Magnificent.

Sultan of the Moslems.

You have dreams of world-wide conquest, but the fear of the power of the Aerians restrains you from putting them into action. You command armies and fleets, but they are useless and helpless because you cannot fight in the air as well as on land and sea I can give you the power of doing this, and I will help you to the conquest of the world if you will help me to regain the dominions that were stolen from my ancestors in the days of the Terror.

Twenty-four hours after you receive this I will come for your answer to it. If you agree to the general terms I have no fear but that the details will be easily arranged between us. This is brought to you by Orloff Lossenski, my chief counsellor and responsible minister, who, at your Majesty's desire, will lay the particulars of my proposals before you in full.

OLGA ROMANOFF.

Tsarina of the Russias.

Hardly had the Sultan finished the perusal of this strangely curt and yet all-pregnant letter when a cry from Lossenski's two attendants caused him to look up. If what he had seen but a few minutes before had amazed him, what he saw now fairly stupefied him. A second air-ship, similar in size and shape to the first, but with a hull of a strangely lustrous blue metal, had dropped without sign or sound out of space, and was hovering exactly above Lossenski's vessel with her ten long slender guns pointing in all directions.

A moment later she seemed to drop bodily on to the Russian air-ship, splintering her thin steel masts with the weight of her hull, and yet stopping in her descent before she crushed in the glass dome of the deck. The next instant a score of men slipped swiftly over the side and gained the open door of the

Russians' deck-chamber. Then there came a sound of fierce cries and oaths, and the quick crackling reports of repeating pistols.

The envoy's two companions turned as though to fly, but two shots fired in quick succession brought them down before they had made a couple of strides. Then a dozen men leapt down upon the terrace and covered Lossenski and the Sultan with their pistols before they had time to recover from the stupefaction into which the suddenness of the attack had thrown them.

The next moment a man, whose splendid stature raised him a good head above the Russian and the Moslem, came down the steps from the deck of the now captured air-ship. As he advanced towards them Khalid, brave and haughty as he was, looked up at him almost as he might have looked upon the visible shape of one of the angels of his faith.

He was dressed in the Aeria costume, save for the fact that, instead of azurine and gold, his winged coronet was black and lustrous as polished jet. In his left hand he carried a magazine pistol, and in his right a long slender rapier with a blade of azurine that gleamed with an intense blue radiance in the light of the electric lamps.

"Orloff Lossenski, you are our prisoner! Go back to your ship or you will be shot where you stand. Sultan Khalid, have you received that letter in your hand from this man?"

Alan's words came quick and stern, but before they were spoken the Sultan had put a golden whistle to his lips and blown a shrill call, in instant obedience to which a stream of armed guards issued from a door of the palace opening on to the terrace, spread out into a semi-circle, and in turn Alan and his companions were covered by a hundred rifles.

"Now, sir, whoever you are," exclaimed the Sultan, recovering at once his courage and his composure, "you are my prisoner! Throw down your arms, or"--

"Stop!" cried Alan, in a voice that rang clearly over the whole terrace. "Don't you see that your palace is under our guns? Fire a shot, and in an hour it shall be a heap of ruins."

Khalid had forgotten the air-ships for the moment. He glanced up at the two rows of guns, and saw in the lighted interiors of the deck-chambers men standing ready to rain death and ruin in every direction.

Lossenski, too, grasped the suddenly changed situation in an instant. He knew far better than the Sultan did what would be the effect of a discharge of that awful artillery upon the palace and the city, and more than this, he saw the hopeless ruin of his mistress's plans that would follow the death of the Sultan. He turned to him with an appealing gesture, and said--

"Your Majesty, for the sake of all you hold dear, send back your guards! I surrender to save you!" and then, with a glare of impotent hate at Alan, he turned and walked quickly towards the air-ships.

Nothing could have brought the terrible power of the Aerians home to the mind of Khalid the Magnificent more convincingly than the position in which he now stood. Absolute master of the greatest empire on earth, he stood on the terrace of his own palace, in the midst of his own capital, and with thousands of soldiers within call, as helpless as a child.

But before he could force the words of surrender from his reluctant lips an event occurred which, brave as he was, struck terror to his heart. Alan had raised his rapier to command the attention of his men at the guns, and the captain of the Sultan's guards, thinking he was going to strike his master, rushed forward and struck at the uplifted blade with his scimitar. As the steel rang upon the azurine the Damascus blade splintered to the hilt.

With a cry half of rage and half of fear the Moslem whipped a pistol out of his sash, but before he could level it the bright blue blade descended swiftly, and when its point was within a foot of his assailant's eyes Alan dropped his own pistol and pressed a jewel in the centre of his belt-clasp. As he did so a pale blue flame leapt from the point of his sword, and the Moslem, without as much as a sigh, dropped dead on the floor of the terrace.

"Mashallah!" cried the Sultan, recoiling in ungovernable terror. "What are you, man or fiend, that you carry the lightnings in your hand?"

"A man like yourself, Sultan, and one who wishes your Majesty no evil," replied Alan. "I am Alan

Arnold, the son of the President of Aeria, and therefore your friend, unless you choose to make me your enemy. I am at present in command of the cruiser Ithuriel, and we have followed that Russian vessel for over five thousand miles to find out what his errand was. When he landed on your palace we guessed it, I think, pretty nearly. Lossenski came to propose an alliance between your Majesty and his mistress, Olga Romanoff, did he not?"

Before he replied the Sultan, seeing some of his guards advancing again, and being now convinced that resistance was both unnecessary and impossible, ordered them to take away the body of their comrade and those of the two Russians who had been shot. Then he turned to Alan, and said with politeness that was perhaps more Oriental than sincere--

"Pardon my ignorance, Prince of the Air! I did not know that I was speaking to the son of one who is above all the kings of the earth. That slave deserved his death for raising his arm against your Highness. Yes, you are right. The Russian came to me with such a proposal from her you name. Here is her letter. She styles herself Tsarina of the Russias, but I have never heard her name before. Who is she?"

"I will tell your Majesty," said Alan, taking the letter which the Sultan now held out to him without hesitation, "for no one can tell you better than I can. She is the last living child of the House of Romanoff. She is beautiful beyond description, and evil beyond comprehension. She aspires to rule in fact as what she styles herself in name, and to bring back the gloom of despotism and oppression on the earth.

"She and her accomplices are responsible for that terrorism of the seas which has paralysed international commerce for more than five years, and they are also in possession of a fleet of about thirty air-ships. How they were enabled to construct them there is now no time to explain. Suffice it to say that they have them, that they have dared to challenge the forces of Aeria to a contest for the empire of the world, and that during the fortnight they have been fighting they have had very much the worst of it.

"We have practically crippled their sea-power, blown up their submarine dockyard, and destroyed about half of their aerial fleet. I tell you this in order that you may receive her proposals with your eyes open. The course of events has made your Majesty to a great extent the arbiter of the destinies of humanity.

"Olga Romanoff knows that you have a splendid army at command, that you have illimitable wealth to spend on war material, and that an alliance between you would be irresistible. As an independent sovereign it is, of course, within your right, as it is within your power, to conclude this alliance if you think fit. Do so if you choose; but remember that if you do you must assume the tremendous responsibility of plunging the whole world into war, and bringing inconceivable desolation upon your fellow-creatures. You will be allying yourself with the worst enemies of humanity--nay, with the only enemies that humanity has on earth.

"This Olga Romanoff is called by her followers the Syren of the Skies, and the name is an apt one, for she is a very syren, armed with arts that can charm a man's heart out of his breast, make him forget his duty to himself and his loyalty to his race, and, like Circe of old, reduce him to an animal that exists only for the execution of her will and the gratification of her desires. I speak with knowledge; for I have felt, and through me the world will feel, the terrible force of her spells, and I tell you frankly, as man speaking honestly with man, that if you make this alliance there will be war between your people and mine to the death.

"As far as a single man can do so, you hold the fate of mankind in your hand, and within the next forty-eight hours you will decide it. Now I have done my duty, and given you such warning as I can. You will answer for your decision at the bar of God, and it is not for me to say more.

"Whether we meet again as enemies or not, let us part friends, and let me implore you, for the love of God and your kind, to rest content with what the Fates have already given you. You have raised the Moslem power to a pitch of splendour and dominion far beyond all its former glories. You have all that

man could ask for"--

"Yes, as a man," interrupted the Sultan, who up to this point had listened with silent attention to Alan's quick, earnest words. "But not all that the Commander of the Faithful may be content with. I know not what the religion of your people is, but you know that the laws of mine command me, as they command every true Moslem, to plant the banner of the Prophet over the habitations of the infidel and to give the enemies of the Faith the choice between the sword and the Koran.

"It is not for mere conquest that I have created my armies and my fleet. It is in obedience to the commands of Heaven, which has given me the means of conquering the earth for Islam."

Khalid spoke rapidly and fiercely with heaving breast and eyes blazing with the lurid light of fanaticism. Alan heard him out in silence. Then his hand fell heavily on the Moslem's shoulder, and holding him at arm's length he looked him straight in the eyes and said, slowly and deliberately--

"Sultan, a man's faith, by whatever name it may be called, is no concern of ours. He is responsible for it to his God, and there is an end of it. But when you tell me that your faith commands you to force it with fire and sword upon the consciences of those who hold another creed, then I tell you to your face that you are a fanatic and a persecutor.

"Blood enough and to spare has been shed in the wars of creeds, and if I believed that you meant to revive the warfare between Cross and Crescent, I would strike you dead where you stand, as I struck your slave down just now. But I cannot believe it either of you or any other enlightened man.

"I am not in any mood to utter empty threats, but I am speaking no idle words when I tell you that the hour in which you make war on Christendom, either for political or religious conquest, shall be the hour in which you will hear the voice of Destiny speaking your own doom.

"More than that, I ask you now to pledge me your word as an honest man and a ruling King that for twelve months from now, at the very least, you will neither draw a sword nor fire a shot either against Anglo-Saxondom or any other Power."

He stopped, and took his hand from the Sultan's shoulder. Khalid recoiled and drew himself up to the full height of his royal stature as he replied--

"Prince of the Air--demi-god almost as you are--you must learn that the Commander of the Faithful is not to be dictated to on the roof of his own palace, even by you. Am I your slave that you should lay these commands upon me?"

Before he made any reply in words Alan communicated a few rapid orders to those in command of the two air-ships in the Aerial sign-language. The Ithuriel rose from above the Vindaya, as the Russian air-ship was named, and both vessels ranged themselves alongside the front of the terrace. The Sultan watched this manoeuvre in helpless silence, well knowing that whatever it imported he was powerless to resist. Then Alan went on--

"Not my slave, Sultan, but my fellow-man, and as such I will, if I can, and by any means within my power, prevent you from committing such a colossal crime as that which I am afraid I must now believe you are contemplating. Now listen well, for my words mean much.

"Those two air-ships could lay your capital, vast and splendid as it is, in ruins before to-morrow's sun rises, and as surely as those stars are shining above us they shall do so unless you give me the pledge I ask for. I ask it in the name of all humanity, and I will not spare a few thousands of lives to enforce it."

"If you could!" ejaculated the Sultan, half involuntarily. "I have heard much of your wonderful air-ships, but do you know that I have a hundred thousand soldiers in the city, and that I have hundreds of guns which will hurl their projectiles for miles into the air? If only one of the hundreds struck either of those vessels of yours, she would fall like a stone and be dashed to pieces on the earth. The fighting would not be all on one side."

His tone grew more and more defiant as he went on, and Alan saw that some stern lesson would be necessary to induce him to give the pledge upon which the safety of millions depended. In quiet, even tones, that contrasted strongly with those of the Moslem, he said--

"We of Aeria are not accustomed to boast our prowess lightly, and I am threatening nothing that I

cannot do. Still, I do not wish you to give the pledge I ask save in the fullest knowledge. If you will trust yourself with me on board the Ithuriel for an hour under my pledge of your safe return I will prove to you to demonstration that your city would be as defenceless beneath our guns as a collection of tents would be. The moon is high enough now to give us plenty of light for the experiment if you think fit to make it."

The Sultan hesitated for a few moments, as though in doubt whether he would be permitted to return if he once allowed the Ithuriel to carry him away from the earth. Then he remembered that no man had ever known the Aerial who had broken his word. He looked into Alan's strong, frank face, and read there an absolute assurance that his safety would be respected. Then, with a slight inclination of his head, he said--

"Your words are wise. I will come, and if you convince me that you can do as you say I will swear by the holy name of the Prophet that I will make no war upon any man for a year from now."

Alan signalled to the Ithuriel, which ran in close to the terrace. The door of the deck-chamber opened, a gangway was run out, and for the first time in his life Sultan Khalid trod the deck of a cruiser of the air. The Ithuriel and the Vindaya at once mounted up into the now brightly moonlit atmosphere.

The Sultan saw the myriad lights of his splendid capital sink swiftly down into a vast abyss that seemed to open beneath him. The dim horizon widened out until it enclosed an immense expanse of pale grey desert to the south, while to the north a dark stretch of sea spread out farther than the eye could reach. Up and up the air-ships soared until the lights of Alexandria glimmered like a faint white mist at the bottom of a seemingly unfathomable gulf. At length Alan, who was standing beside him, pointed down and said--

"There is your city. If I gave the word, a hundred shells a minute would be rained on to it from here. Do you think your guns could reach us?"

"No," said the Sultan, striving in vain to repress a shudder at the fearful prospect disclosed by Alan's words. "But how could your shells strike that little patch of light which is miles away, and thousands of feet below us?"

"That, too, I will prove to you, but not at the expense of your city."

He sent an order to the engine-room, and the Ithuriel swerved round to the northward and, followed by the Vindaya, swept out over the Mediterranean, in the direction of Crete.

Half an hour's flight at full speed brought them in sight of a small rocky islet which showed like a black spot on the surface of the moonlit sea. The two air-ships were stopped six thousand feet above the water, and about four miles from the heap of rocks. Alan then gave orders for each of the ships to train four guns upon it.

"Now," he said to the Sultan, "fix your glass on that mass of rocks down yonder and watch what happens."

As he spoke he raised his hand and the eight guns were discharged simultaneously. The Sultan heard no report and saw no flash, but a few seconds later he saw through the night glasses that Alan had given him a vast mass of flame of dazzling brilliancy burst out over the islet, covering it completely, for the moment, with a mist of fire.

"Now you shall see the effects of our shells," said Alan. The two vessels sank rapidly down in a slanting direction towards the spot where the projectiles had struck. A hundred feet from the surface of the water they stopped, and Alan said--

"Now look for the island."

Khalid swept the sea with his glass. The islet had vanished, the waves were breaking over what seemed to be a sunken reef, and that was all. With hands that trembled, in spite of all that he could do to keep them steady, he took the glass from his eyes, saying in a voice that was shaken by irresistible emotion--

"God is great, and I am but a man, while you are as demigods. It is enough! I will give the pledge you ask for."

CHAPTER XVII. AN UNHOLY ALLIANCE.

WITHIN a couple of hours after the destruction of the islet Sultan Khalid was back in his palace, and the Ithuriel and the Vindaya had departed with their prisoners of war for Kerguelen.

Alan, quite content with the advantage he had gained by obtaining the Sultan's pledge of peace for a year, in comparison with which even the capture of one of the Russian air-ships was of trifling importance, had determined not to run the needless risk of an encounter with Olga's fleet, for he had learnt the strength of it from Lossenski, and saw that it would be madness to attack it.

Added to this there was far more important work in hand for him to do, for it was absolutely imperative that a full report of what he had discovered with regard to the proposed alliance between Olga and the Sultan should be laid before the Council with as little delay as possible, for if it ever became an accomplished fact it could not fail to enormously complicate the coming struggle for the mastery of the world.

Therefore, as soon as he had placed a prize crew on board the Vindaya, under the command of Alexis, he gave orders for the two air-ships to proceed southward at full speed, having bidden the Sultan farewell on the terrace of his palace, and left him to draw what moral he could from the brief but startling experience that the midnight hours had brought him.

A few minutes before twelve on the following night the inhabitants of Alexandria were thrown into a state of the most intense excitement by a marvellous appearance in the southern heavens. Long streams of light, which in power and brilliancy excelled even the great electric suns with which the city was lighted, shot down out of the skies, flashing hither and thither, and sweeping the earth below it in vast curves of radiance.

Now they streamed out in a huge fan of endless horizontal rays which seemed to reach to the horizon, and now they crossed each other in a network of beams, changing their positions with a rapidity which dazzled and bewildered the beholders. Then they were projected vertically to the zenith as though challenging the stars, and then they blazed straight down upon the earth, bringing into strong relief of light and shadow everything they fell upon.

Instantly the spacious streets were crowded with excited throngs of people, and millions of eyes were cast heavenwards watching the approach of the Syren and her aerial squadron.

The twenty air-ships swept up out of the south at a speed of about a hundred miles an hour in the form of a wide crescent, with the Revenge in the centre. They slowed down as they neared the city, and the concentrated blaze of their lights soon fell upon the Sultan's palace, the magnificent proportions of which distinguished it conspicuously even from the thousands of splendid edifices which adorned the Moslem metropolis.

Then, still keeping their relative positions with perfect accuracy, the winged vessels sank downwards and wheeled round until they faced the eastern terrace on which stood the Sultan with his Grand Vizier and the chief officers of his household, awaiting the coming of his aerial visitors.

The flotilla stopped a hundred feet from the terrace. Its search-lights were extinguished, but the strange and beautiful shapes of the cruisers of the air stood out sharply defined against the bright background formed by the myriad lights of the city.

The Revenge, flying the long vanished Imperial Standard of Russia, with its crowned black eagle on a broad ground of gold, at the mizzen, the white flag of peace at the main, and the Star and Crescent of the Moslem Empire at the fore, floated slowly forward till her shining ram projected over the parapet and her three keels rested lightly upon it.

Then one of the forward doors of the deck-chamber was drawn back by some invisible agency, and the Sultan saw standing in the opening such a vision of loveliness as he had never imagined even in his dreams of the houris of Paradise. Clothed, according to her invariable custom, in a plain clinging robe of royal purple, with no other ornament than a coronet, consisting of a plain broad band of gold from

which rose above her temples two wings of silver filigree thickly encrusted with diamonds, Olga Romanoff stood upon the deck of her flagship the perfect incarnation of royal dignity and womanly beauty.

Khalid, who had advanced to the parapet as the squadron approached, saw instantly that this could be none other than the woman whom Alan Arnold had described as beautiful beyond description and evil beyond comprehension. Few men had seen so many beautiful women as he had, and there were scores of them waiting in his harem for the favouring glance that none could win from him; but no sooner did his upward glance rest upon the vision that was looking down upon him from the doorway of the deck-chamber of the *Revenge* than his eyes fell and his head bowed in the involuntary homage that the supreme beauty of such a woman has always claimed from such a man.

Evil she might be, but evil in such a shape might be something more than good in the eyes of some men, and of these Khalid the Magnificent was one. His hot Arab blood was aflame the instant that he looked upon her intoxicating loveliness, and half her errand was accomplished before a word had passed between them.

She returned his greeting with a gracious inclination of her wing-crowned head, and as she did so he said--

"The Tsarina is welcome! My house and all that is in it is hers if she will honour me by entering it, for she will make it more beautiful by her presence."

"Your Majesty's welcome is sweet in my ears," she answered, almost insensibly adopting his Oriental style of speech, "for I come as a friend and I hope to go as an ally."

The gangway stairs dropped as she spoke, and as they did so the Sultan made a sign and a pair of attendants brought forward some steps covered with crimson velvet, which they placed so that she could descend from the parapet, to which the Sultan himself ascended to meet her as she came down. Taking her hand on the parapet, he led her down to the terrace with the grace of a king and the deference of a courtier. Then he bent low over her hand and kissed it, and as he did so the attendant officers of his empire bowed in silent and respectful salutation.

Olga was at once conducted to one of the state apartments of the palace in which the Sultan was wont to receive his most distinguished guests. She was treated with even more respect than would have been accorded to one of the crowned monarchs of the earth, for not only her wonderful beauty and royal carriage, but the marvellous manner of her coming and the tremendous power represented by the flotilla of air-ships inspired both the Sultan and his subjects with a deference that amounted almost to homage.

Then, too, the mystery and romance which invested her name and family and fortune distinguished her as a woman apart from all other women in the world. It might be, as Alan had told the Sultan, that she was really the enemy of the human race, that her true object was to destroy the peace of the world, and rekindle the fires of war on earth, but still the present romance was stronger than the future, and possibly problematical, reality, and so it would hardly be too much to say that Olga had succeeded in removing the impression left by Alan on Khalid's mind before she had been an hour under his roof.

She naturally expected that one of the first to receive her would be the ambassador who had preceded her, but, after looking anxiously for him and not finding him either on the terrace or in the reception-room, she turned to Khalid and said--

"I do not see my ambassador here, and yet he must have arrived, since your Majesty tells me that you have been expecting me."

The Sultan's face darkened, and his brows slightly contracted, as he replied--

"Tsarina, I have been waiting for an opportunity to tell you what cannot but be unwelcome news. Your ambassador, Orloff Lossenski, is not here"--

"What!" cried Olga, half rising from her seat, "not here! Surely he has not presumed to leave before my arrival? I can hardly believe that of him."

"He has gone, nevertheless," said the Sultan, "though not by his will or mine, I can assure you."

Scarcely had his vessel alighted on the terrace yonder, and he had disembarked, when an Aerial cruiser dropped down as silently as a shadow from the skies.

"Whence it came I know not, but it would seem that these Aerials see everything, and that their hands reach everywhere. In a moment she had dropped upon your ambassador's vessel, splintering her masts, and yet so softly did she alight that the glass dome was not broken. Then her crew streamed out of the doors of the deck-chamber, and the next I knew was that your ambassador and I were covered by half a score of pistols and rifles and commanded to stand still on pain of death.

"Then Alan Arnold alighted, forced your envoy to surrender, struck one of my guards dead by some mysterious lightning that flashed from his sword, and, after carrying me away into the air over the sea and blasting a rock out of the waters to prove to me the power of his guns, brought me back honourably and in safety to await your coming. Truly these Aerials are more as gods than men!"

Furious as the unexpected tidings made her, Olga yet managed to restrain her anger sufficiently to reply with wonderful coolness--

"Your Majesty gives me sad and bitter news; but it is the fortune of war, and I must not complain. The air-ship that is taken by surprise is lost, and Orloff Lossenski fell a victim to his own carelessness."

Then her mood changed swiftly, and a soft and musical laugh came from her smiling lips as she went on--

"But it is a poor revenge, after all. That same Alan Arnold, the son of the great President of Aeria, was my would-be lover and slave for over five years. For my sake he turned traitor to his name and race, gave up the Revenge to me and told me all the jealously-guarded secrets of aerial navigation. He killed my brother in a quarrel, but he was useful, so I let him live--a prisoner of war, till I had done with him. Then I set him free, when, perhaps, I ought to have kept him safe, to go and tell his people what a fool I had made of him. I suppose he did not tell your Majesty that?"

"No," laughed Khalid in reply, wondering what magic she had used to accomplish so marvellous a charm, "he did not. But such a miracle proves that you have been truly named the Syren of the Skies, as he said you are, for no other woman could have worked such a wonder and disputed the empire of the air with the masters of the world."

"That is true," replied Olga, lowering her voice to a tone of intense earnestness, "and the fact that I did it singlehanded proves, I hope, that with good friends and true allies I can do more than dispute that empire with the Aerials these despots of peace who have made the world a paradise of the commonplace, and fettered all strongest and most aspiring spirits so that they might be equal with the coward and the fool.

"But those are matters which I would discuss with your Majesty in private, and it is too late in the night to go into them now. You tell me that Alan Arnold has shown you what his air-ships can do. If your Majesty will honour the Revenge by being my guest for to-morrow I will show you that mine are in no wise inferior to them.

"Indeed, as I have told you, the Revenge is an Aerial ship, built in the enchanted land of Aeria, and if you will to-morrow she shall carry you over the whole of your dominions, and after that over those other dominions that shall be yours if you approve the plans that I will lay before you."

She paused and looked at Khalid with cheeks glowing and eyes shining with enthusiasm and passion. He returned her glance with one no less fiery and passionate as he replied--

"I will be your guest, as you say, but the honour and the favour will be to me, your Majesty--for Majesty you are, crowned by the hand of favouring Nature with that which makes all men your subjects. Your air-ships shall rest in the garden of my palace to-night, and an hour after sunrise you shall find me ready for another journey to the skies, for my first experience has given me a taste for more. Till then farewell. The memory of your eyes will make me dream of Paradise to-night!"

There was that in his tone which told Olga that his words meant more than a neatly turned Oriental compliment, and as he stooped and kissed her hand in leave-taking she said half in jest and half in earnest--

"And I shall dream of the nearer glories of the world-empire which your Majesty and I may in the not very distant future divide between us."

"Or share together!" said Khalid in his soul, as he raised his head again and their eyes met.

At the appointed time the next morning the squadron rose into the air from the palace gardens. In order to produce as widespread an effect as possible, Olga had extended her invitation to the Grand Vizier and about a score of the Sultan's highest officials, including the commanders of his armies and fleets who happened to be in Alexandria at the time. These were distributed among the twenty air-ships, but Olga took care to arrange matters so that only the Grand Vizier should accompany the Sultan on board the Revenge.

In order that the Vizier, who was a cool-headed, wary, far-seeing man of nearly seventy, and therefore beyond the power of her own personal spells, might not interfere with her designs upon his master, she lost no time in placing him under the power of the drug which she had already used with such disastrous results to the world.

Although he had said nothing about it, she felt certain that Khalid must have been warned by Alan of the danger of taking anything to eat or drink from her hands, and therefore she had decided to make no attempt upon his liberty of will, unless it became absolutely necessary to do so; but the Vizier was easily taken unawares, and she had little difficulty in causing him to drink a cup of coffee while her chief engineer was explaining the working of the machinery to the Sultan in the engine-room.

The coffee, of course, contained a sufficient quantity of the drug to deprive the Vizier of all power of opposing her will or resisting her suggestions for many hours to come. So far as all independent advice was concerned, he was safely disposed of.

The air-ships rose to an elevation of some two thousand feet, and at a speed of two hundred miles an hour ran first along the valley of the Nile to the southward. At Khartoum they swerved to the eastward, crossed the mountains of the Red Sea littoral at a height of nine thousand feet, then sank again and skirted the Arabian coast until Mecca, the sacred city of Islam, came in sight.

The ancient temple of the Kaaba, containing the tomb of the Prophet, still stood, almost unchanged by the hand of time, amid the splendid buildings, verdant gardens, and long groves of palms with which the new Mecca of the twenty-first century was adorned. Pointing down towards it, Olga said to the Sultan, who was standing by her side on the deck, dazzled by the splendours of the swiftly-changing prospects of the scene below--

"There is the Holy City, which your Majesty may some day make the religious capital of the world. That would be an achievement worthy of the Commander of the Faithful and the descendant of the Prophet, would it not?"

Khalid looked down at the city, over which they were now speeding in the direction of Medinah, and was silent for a few moments; then he raised his eyes to hers and said--

"Even so; but have you counted the cost of achieving it to me and my people? Before the banner of the Crescent could float over a world-wide empire of Islam we should have to triumph in a war which would involve the whole human race, and this means that we should first have to destroy those who have been lords of the earth and of the air for more than a century."

"The Aerians are but men," said Olga, a trifle coldly. "Why should your Majesty fear them if you are armed with the same weapons that they wield? I suppose Alan Arnold has threatened you and your people with nothing less than annihilation should you conclude this alliance with me? But why should you fear? I have met the Aerians in battle, and you see I am not annihilated."

"I do not fear them as personal enemies," replied Khalid proudly, "but only as the possible destroyers of my people, who would be defenceless against them. Think of the destruction you could rain upon the sacred city down yonder, while it could strike no blow in return. That would be the fate of Alexandria and all the capitals of my empire, and while my armies were marching to the conquest of Christendom our homes would be laid in ruins and our wives and children slain without mercy.

"Show me," he continued, speaking more earnestly and rapidly, "how they are to be protected against

this, and our alliance may become possible."

"It is purely a matter of relative strength," replied Olga. Do you know why this squadron of mine is allowed to pursue its way unmolested, although the Aerians know of its existence? It is because, although, as Alan Arnold truly told you, by superior skill and experience in handling their ships they have been able to destroy about half my fleet, I am still stronger in the air than they are, and they know that we have now gained the experience which we lacked.

"They have only three vessels, counting the one you saw captured, as swift and powerful as this, while I have twenty-six. None of their smaller vessels dare venture within reach of my guns, for to do so would be to meet certain destruction. They are doubtless building others as strong and swift as these in preparation for the struggle which they know must come. But if we join hands against them we shall be stronger than they will be when the year of your truce is ended.

"My engineers shall teach yours how to build air-ships in all respects equal to these, and submarine cruisers, a dozen of which could destroy your present navies in a day. With all the resources of your empire at command, you could possess in a year from now an aerial navy of a thousand ships and a sea fleet of equal strength.

"Then you would be strong enough to sweep the seas from pole to pole, and to storm the mountain battlements of Aeria itself. You must not forget that what the Aerians could do to your cities you could do to Aeria and to all the capitals of Christendom. City for city, you could take your revenge, until"--

"Until the whole earth was laid waste and the habitations of men were desolate," broke in Khalid, overwhelmed by the horror of the prospect. "It is too great a price to pay, even for the empire of the world and the supremacy of Islam, even if we survived the ruin that we should have brought upon the world."

"Too great if there were any need to pay it," said Olga quickly, seeing that her lust of conquest and revenge had carried her too far. "But matters will never come to such a pass as that.

"Our battlefields will be the countries that we shall invade and conquer, not our own, and enough air-ships can be devoted to the defence of your cities to repel any attack the Aerians may make upon them. Your Majesty must not forget, too, that they will not dare to send any very large force away from Aeria, for they well know that the final battle for the possession of the earth will have to be fought out round the summits of its mountains."

"You are right and I was wrong, Tsarina," said the Sultan in an altered tone, "and the Prophet has said of the infidel, 'Such as are stubborn and refuse the true faith ye shall slay without mercy. Kill them wherever ye find them'--but alas"--

He stopped suddenly and looked at her, and she could see a smile moving his lips under his black beard and moustache. She divined instantly what was passing in his mind, and saw the opportunity for a stroke of diplomacy which, base as it was, she made without a moment's hesitation. Before he could continue, she turned and faced him, looking into his eyes with a glance that dazzled him, and said in a low, quick, earnest tone--

"I know what you would say, Sultan Khalid. You would say that I and my people are infidels in your eyes, and therefore worthy of destruction. I have thought of that--but the deck is too public a place for the discussion of such a matter. Call your Vizier and we will retire to my own saloon and talk of it there."

Khalid obeyed, wondering what was coming next from the lips of the Syren whose fatal beauty of person and subtlety of mind were luring him on to plunge into an ocean of blood of which no human eyes could see the further shore--if it had one at all--and as soon as the three were seated in the room which had once been Alan's, Olga, addressing the Vizier first, rapidly but very clearly sketched out the project that had been suggested to her by Lossenski, and then, turning to the Sultan, she said--

"There seems now but one real bar to such an alliance, and that is the difference in our faiths, or, I should rather say, in our creeds. I have not ignored this; nay, I have pondered it deeply and earnestly. Creeds change with times, and Russia, like the rest of Europe, has now no real, living faith like yours.

But you shall give it to them if you wish, and the day that I am proclaimed Empress of the Russias the Crescent shall shine on the towers of the Kremlin."

"What do I hear?" cried Khalid, springing to his feet in amazement at her astounding words; "you and your people will accept the Koran and acknowledge the Prophet?"

"I will and they shall," said Olga calmly and firmly, committing herself to the huge apostasy without a tremor in her voice. "Remember, too, that millions who should by right be my subjects in Asia are already good Moslems. If the Russians refuse to obey me in this they will be rebels, and you shall do with them as you will do with the other peoples of Christendom if they remain stubborn. Let your Majesty's chief minister and favourite counsellor speak and say whether or not I have spoken fairly."

"Speak, Musa al Ghazi!" said the Sultan, in a voice that betrayed intense emotion, "and weigh your words well, for many and great issues may depend upon them."

"Commander of the Faithful!" said the old man, speaking slowly and with some hesitation, as though he were repeating a lesson hardly yet learnt, "I can speak but the words that my soul echoes from without. A strange power has seemed to take possession of me, and I speak as one to whom another has taught what he should say.

"Yet the words seem wise to me, and I will speak them, lest, not doing so, I should have to answer for my negligence. If it is written that you shall be the one chosen of Heaven to plant the Crescent where now falls the shadow of the Cross, and reign supreme, sole lord of a Moslem world, then have the means been sent to you by the hand of her who gives you the means of measuring strength with the masters of the nations, by whose pleasure we possess that which we have, and without whose countenance your Majesty would not much longer remain Commander of the Faithful.

"I would not willingly speak words of offence, but it is necessary to recognise that the Moslem practises his faith only by permission of those who, if they hold any, hold another."

"By the Beard of the Prophet, thou hast said it, Musa! I am a King by permission, a High Priest of Islam by sufferance of the infidel!" exclaimed Khalid, as the hot blood rushed to his swarthy cheeks and the fire of fanaticism leapt into his eyes.

"But I will be so mean a thing no longer than the time of the truce to which I have pledged my word. In the blood of the infidel I will wipe out this shame on Islam, yea, though the whole earth shall be drenched with the blood and tears that shall be licked up by the fires of war. It is my destiny, and I will do it, or my name shall perish from the earth for ever!

"Tsarina Olga, I have seen and heard enough. Let us return to my palace and arrange the terms of our alliance; and when you have sworn upon the Koran that you will take Allah for your God and Mohammed for your Prophet, I will sign them, and together we will conquer the world for Islam. It is kismet, and that which is written shall be done!"

Olga looked upon the splendid figure of the Sultan as he stood before her, his athletic form dilated and his face glorified by the passion of religious fervour that was burning within him, and as she did so a new light dawned upon her. She saw that this strong, fiery soul might some day conquer even hers, and fuse it into itself.

It would be an unholy union, a love bought with apostasy from her faith and sealed with treachery to her people and the trust that she had inherited from her forefathers; but what were apostasy and treachery to her now that the love she had stained her soul with blood and untold crime to win was lost to her for ever?

Earthly pomp and power, the pomp of imperial rule and the power of life and death, of happiness and misery, over millions of her fellow-creatures were well worth living for, and with them might come love again, or if not love, then passion, fierce and all-consuming, for this one king of earth who dared to be a king in fact as well as in name, and then--Before she could make any reply to the Sultan's words, the slow, measured tones of the Vizier sounded again, saying--

"If I may speak again, Majesties"--

"Say on, good Musa!" said the Sultan, "for so far thou hast spoken the words of wisdom."

"I would say," continued the old man, "that even as the winged steed Alborak bore the Prophet from earth to the Seventh Heaven, so may it be written that the winged ship of Tsarina Olga shall bear thee, my Master, into that Paradise of love which so far thou hast sought and not found."

"What say you, well-named Syren of the Skies, to that?" said Khalid, taking a step towards the couch on which Olga was sitting, and making a half-appealing gesture with both his hands.

She rose to her feet and faced him. One look into his passion-lighted eyes told her that the victory was already won, and that strength could now give place to softness. She dropped her eyes before his burning gaze, and, crossing her hands upon her bosom with a pretty semblance of submission, said, in a low, sweet tone that he heard now for the first time--

"All things are possible, and if this be possible, then more than Cleopatra lost for Antony I will win for you, and you shall reign sole Caesar of a subject world. As for me, when that comes to pass, let it be to me as it shall seem good in the eyes of my lord the King!"

And so saying she bowed slightly before him and turned and passed out of the saloon, seeing the vision of him whom she had loved in vain through the mist of tears which rose in that instant to her eyes.

CHAPTER XVIII. A MOMENTOUS COMMISSION.

TWELVE hours after they had left the Sultan on the terrace of his palace, the Ithuriel and the Vindaya dropped through the clouds on to the snow-covered surface of Kerguelen Island, and within an hour the despatch-vessel Vega was speeding away north-westward to Aeria with a full account of the results achieved by the first cruise of the Ithuriel.

The twenty-four hours which would have to elapse before the reply of the Council could be received were employed in repairing the damage done to the Vindaya and in renewing the motive-power and ammunition of both vessels. Sundry small but effective improvements in the mechanism and appointments of the Vindaya were also made, and last, but by no means least important, the name of the prize was changed.

"You are henceforth her commander, old fellow," said Alan to Alexis when the question of the new name came up, "and therefore it is for you to say what her name shall be."

"I knew you would say that," replied Alexis, his grave, thoughtful face lighting up with a quick flush and an almost boyish smile, "and, of course, I needn't tell you what name I should like above all things to give her, but, then, you see"--

"I see nothing but a quite unaccountable embarrassment written largely upon those ingenuous features of yours, my blushing Achates," interrupted Alan, with a laugh that deepened the colour on his friend's cheeks.

"Well, you see, I'm not quite sure whether she would like it under the circumstances," said Alexis hesitatingly.

"I didn't know that air-ships had any choice in the question of their names any more than children have," said Alan, gravely stroking his beard and looking at his friend with a laugh in his eyes.

"Don't assume a density that the gods have not given you," laughed Alexis in return. "You know very well who she is to whom I refer. Now, suppose you were going to name and command the Vindaya, what would you call her?"

"I would do as you want to do, my friend," said Alan, laughing outright now, "although, I fear, with more chance of getting snubbed for my temerity, and trust to winning forgiveness from the lips of her name-mother by good service and hard hitting."

"Perfectly reasoned!" exclaimed Alexis, "and so henceforth, until I have express orders to call her something else--the Forlorn Hope, for instance--she shall be the Isma, and on her decks I will win the right to ask--I mean to wear the golden wings again, or else she will never cross the confines of Aeria."

"You will win more than the golden wings, I hope and believe," said Alan, now very serious again, "for you evidently have a better chance of forgiveness than I have, though I don't despair, mind you, for I am determined never to go back to Aeria unless I feel that I can fairly ask Alma to forgive what is past. And if she refuses I will hunt Olga Romanoff to the ends of the earth till I take her alive, and then I will carry her to Aeria, and at Alma's feet I will strike her dead with my own hand so that she may know the truth!"

"Amen," said Alexis, striding forward and taking his hand. "And if Alma says 'No' to you I will never see Isma's face again till I have helped you to clip the Syren's wings, and take her to meet her just reward. It is a bargain! Between us we will bring these proud damozels to sweet reasonableness. Now let us go and get a bottle of sparkling Aerian, and rename the Vindaya in proper form."

Thus it came to pass that when the Ithuriel next took the air her consort bore the name that was dearest to her commander's heart.

The anxiously-expected Vega did not return till nearly thirty hours after her departure. The delay proved that the Council had considered the tidings that she had brought of great importance, and had therefore taken some time to deliberate over them. This turned out to be the case, and the decision arrived at by the rulers of Aeria showed that they looked upon the crisis as grave in the last degree.

The return despatch stated that within twenty-four hours after the arrival of the Vega at Kerguelen a fleet of fifty airships would be at the disposal of Alan and Alexis, who were ordered to place themselves at the head of it and proceed with all speed to Alexandria, taking Orloff Lossenski and the other Russian prisoners with them.

Alan was to be the bearer of an ultimatum to the Sultan confirming, in the name of the President and Council of Aeria, the provisional declaration of war which he had threatened as the result of an alliance with Olga Romanoff, and stating that at sunrise on the 16th of May in the following year, hostilities would be commenced against him, and continued to the point of extermination so far as all men who bore arms were concerned.

He was also called upon to order the Russian squadron to leave his capital, should it still be there, within two hours. If he refused, or if Olga declined to remove her ships, they were to be engaged there and then, and, if possible, destroyed at all costs. This latter part of the message was to be conveyed to Olga in a different form by the hands of Lossenski, who was then to be set at liberty with his fellow-prisoners.

If Olga consented to go within the given time, it would be necessary to allow her to depart unmolested, as the superior speed of her ships would place the bulk of the Aerial fleet at a hopeless disadvantage in a pursuit, and expose it to certain destruction. If she insisted on fighting, then, of course, the hazard of battle must be taken, and the Council relied upon the commanders of its fleet to do their duty as their judgment should point it out to them. No specific terms were to be made with Olga and her adherents, but hostilities were, if possible, to be avoided until the Sultan's year of truce had expired, and the new Aerial fleet was ready to take the air.

If no fighting took place Alan was to proceed with his squadron to London with a third despatch to the King of Britain, as head of the Anglo-Saxon Federation, advising him, in the face of the threatening danger, to call together the rulers of Anglo-Saxondom and take immediate measures for mutual defence against the Moslems in case they should invade Europe when the year of truce was up. For this purpose arms in any quantities that might be needed would be sent out from Aeria, and the Aerials would undertake the task of drilling the newly-formed armies and instructing them in the use of the weapons.

In addition to this the necessary works and power-stations for building and equipping at least a thousand of the largest air-ships were to be established under Aerial control in England, and at the same time dockyards were to be set up for the construction of an equal number of submarine vessels of the Narwhal type. It was, however, to be made an absolute condition of this assistance and protection that the armies and aerial and sea navies were to be entirely officered by Aerials, and were to be under the unquestioned control of the President of Aeria.

This condition was, for obvious reasons, held by the Council to be absolutely essential to success. Divided commands in the face of a foe which would obey blindly the orders of a single chief who had already shown that he could create armies and fleets of high efficiency, would mean inevitable failure and disaster. Therefore the absolute control of Anglo-Saxondom must once more be placed in the hands of the Supreme Council until the danger was passed and peace was restored, or Aeria would fight the battle alone and leave the nations of Anglo-Saxondom to their fate.

The immediate effect of the orders brought by the Vega was to throw the station of Kerguelen into a state of the most intense activity. Alan at once assumed command by common consent, and, assisted by Alexis, Admiral Forrest, and Captain Ernstein, got everything in readiness for the reception of the coming squadron from Aeria. All the defences of the station were also thoroughly inspected, from the air-ships floating above the clouds to the submarine mines which guarded the entrances to the harbours, and a general plan of the now inevitable campaign was sketched out at a council of war held on the evening of the Vega's return.

It is scarcely necessary to say that the orders from headquarters put both Alan and Alexis into the highest spirits. They had already vindicated their claim to the confidence of the Council and their fellow-countrymen, and the claim had been allowed without stint or hesitation.

Though their year of probation had only just begun they found themselves intrusted with a mission, dangerous it is true, but also of the most supreme importance, and Alan in particular felt his pulses thrill with justifiable pride when he found himself charged with the glorious task of doing almost exactly what his great ancestor, Alan Tremayne, had done a hundred and thirty years before, when he marshalled the millions of Anglo-Saxondom against the leagued despotisms of Europe and overthrew them in the mighty conflict which had given peace on earth for nearly five generations.

Whether he would succeed as the Chief of the Terror had done depended not upon himself so much as on Anglo-Saxondom itself. If the once conquering race of earth had kept intact its old martial strength and imperial spirit through the long years of peace and prosperity as its kindred in Aeria had done, all would be well, and the disturbers of the welfare of humanity would pay dearly and bitterly for their tremendous crime.

But if, like the Romans of old, they had allowed the tropical atmosphere of material luxury to relax the fibres of their once sturdy nature and weaken the arms which had once enclosed the world in their embrace, then his mission would fail, however eloquently he might urge it. A desolation infinitely greater than that which overwhelmed Rome or Byzantium would fall upon Anglo-Saxondom, and its name would be the only monument of its vanished glory.

But the Vega brought something more to Alan and Alexis than the despatches and orders of the Council. This was a letter from Isma to Alan, filled with the tenderest expressions of delight at the triumphs which he and his "companion in arms" had already achieved, and of brave and hopeful confidence in them, despite the terrible dangers that they were going forth to confront.

The letter concluded with the significant sentence--"When you come back in triumph, as I know you will, there will not be one heart in Aeria that will not beat more gladly for your sakes, not one hand that will not be stretched out to greet you either in friendship or in love. Remember this against the day of battle, and in the day of peace you shall see how true my words are."

Although the letter made no mention of Alma, save as one of the intimate friends who sent their "loving greetings" to the two men who were going to lead the navy of Aeria to what might be the first battle of a war that would be the most colossal and unsparing struggle ever waged on earth, Alan was able to read enough between the lines to give him hope.

He knew enough of Alma's proud and sensitive nature to fully understand why no word had come directly from her to him, and also to recognise that the task of winning her back from her estrangement would be no light one. Indeed, of the two tasks which lay before him, the conquest of the world and the reconquest of Alma's heart, he looked with less misgiving upon the former than he did upon the latter. Still he by no means despaired, and what he had said to Alexis was justified in his mind by the belief that in Isma he had the most eloquent of advocates always at Alma's side, pleading his cause even better than he could do it himself; at any rate for the present.

As for Alexis, his lover's eyes and more sanguine temperament found in the letter ample justification for the re-naming of the Vindaya, and if he forgot to return the precious sheet of paper to Alan after he had read its contents, it was because he honestly felt that he had the better right to it, and his companion in love and war apparently recognised this, for he carefully refrained from asking him for it. Thus well comforted with new-born hope, and impatiently longing to begin the momentous work in hand, whether it was to be war or diplomacy, they awaited the arrival of the promised fleet from Aeria, which was expected to alight on the surface of Kerguelen about noon on the day after the arrival of the Vega.

A few minutes before twelve o'clock on the 19th of May one of the look-out vessels floating five thousand feet above the clouds which overhung Desolation Land telephoned, "Fleet from Aeria in sight," and half an hour after the receipt of the anxiously-expected news at headquarters the fifty air-ships were grouped round the power-station at the head of Christmas Harbour, renewing the motive power which had been expended on the voyage from Aeria.

When this operation was completed the fleet was equipped for a voyage of thirty thousand miles if necessary. As every vessel was completely furnished with all stores and munitions of war, no further

preparations had been made, and Alan was able to give the signal for the flotilla to take the air in little more than an hour after its arrival at Kerguelen.

It was divided into two divisions of twenty-five ships each one led by the Ithuriel and the other by the Isma, and these rose into the air, formed in two straight lines each about a quarter of a mile long. The two flagships flew one on either flank, and slightly ahead and above the main body. This formation enabled any signals made from either of them to be instantly seen by every ship in the fleet.

The distance to be traversed was five thousand eight hundred geographical miles, and the voyage was performed at a speed of four hundred miles an hour without incident.

At daybreak on the 20th, the two divisions were floating in a wide circle six thousand feet above Alexandria at a sufficient distance to be practically invisible from the city, which nevertheless lay completely at the mercy of the four hundred guns which were trained upon it, and which, if the terms of the Council's ultimatum were not accepted by the Sultan and Olga, would reduce it to a wilderness of ruins within an hour from the signal to fire being given.

That the Russians were still the guests of the Sultan was made apparent as soon as the light became strong enough for their squadron to be seen resting on the earth in the gardens of the palace, with one look-out ship stationed about fifteen hundred feet above the roof of the palace. When all the ships were in their stations the Ithuriel and the Isma ran up close to each other, and Alexis boarded the flagship to receive his final instructions from Alan, who had undertaken the perilous duty of conveying the ultimatum to the Sultan and his possible ally.

Orloff Lossenski was on board the Ithuriel, and Alan requested him to be present when Alexis received his orders. As he shook hands with the Vice-Admiral, Alan said--

"I have asked Orloff Lossenski to hear our last arrangements made so that he may recognise as well as we do that this is a matter of life and death for all of us. For my own part, I am determined that the wishes of the Council shall be obeyed, or the Ithuriel and her crew shall be buried with our enemies in the ruins of Alexandria.

"We have not been seen yet from the Russian look-out ship, but they will of course see the Ithuriel going down. I shall descend flying a flag of truce, and I feel certain that the Sultan will recognise it himself and compel his allies to do so. But if not, if a single shot is fired, or if the Russian squadron attempts to rise in the air until my return, you are to give the signal to open fire upon the city, and the fleet is not to cease firing until it is destroyed.

"You are to forget that you are destroying friends as well as foes, for I and all on board the Ithuriel recognise that the honour of Aeria and the safety of the world demand the sacrifice; and we are resolved to make it.

"I not only order this as your superior in command, I ask it as a friend and brother in arms. I know you would gladly die in the same cause if necessary, and so you must not hesitate to kill me and destroy the Ithuriel if the fortune of war compels you to do so."

Alan's speech, spoken with the perfect steadiness of an unalterable resolve, found a fitting response in the breast of his companion in arms. Still holding his friend's hand in what might be a farewell clasp, Alexis simply replied--

"I see the necessity, and I will obey to the letter! God grant that you may all return safe and sound; but if you don't, you shall have such a tomb as no man ever had before. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," said Alan in the same steady tone, and then their hands parted, and Alexis returned to his ship.

"Now, Orloff Lossenski," said Alan, turning to the Russian, "you have heard my instructions, and you know that they will be obeyed. Neither you nor your mistress have any right to expect mercy at my hands, and you shall have none. Obey my orders to the letter, and see that your mistress does the same, or Alexandria will be in ruins before that sun reaches the zenith."

"I have heard and I will obey, for the fortune of war is with you and I must" replied Lossenski, completely overmastered by the heroic devotion displayed by Alan in what bade fair to be a crisis in the

fate of the world.

A broad white flag of truce was now flown from the aftermast of the Ithuriel. At the fore flew as a greeting to the Sultan the Star and Crescent of Islam, while above both at the main floated the sky-blue banner of Aeria, emblazoned with the golden wings united by a mailed hand armed with a dagger. With every man at his station and every gun ready for instant use, the flagship dropped swiftly down towards the Russian vessel floating over the palace.

Within a mile of her the signal, "We bring despatches to the Sultan," flew from the signal staff at the stern. The captain of the Russian scout-ship read the signal and at once telephoned to the palace, with which his ship was connected by an electric thread, for instructions.

The Ithuriel then flew a second signal, "If you rise we shall fire," and this he was forced to obey as the Aerian vessel was too far above him for his guns to come into play. He therefore replied with the signal, "I have asked for instructions. Wait for reply." A few minutes later Alan, keeping the Russian well under his guns, saw her drop down to the earth and alight on the flat roof of the palace, on which several figures could be seen moving about and scanning the skies with glasses, which were speedily centred on the Ithuriel.

Then a white flag was run up to the top of a flagstaff on one of the minarets of the palace, a similar one was hoisted by the Russian air-ship, and she rose towards the Ithuriel. Alan, feeling now sure that the flag of truce would be respected for the Sultan's sake, allowed the ship to come stern on to the Ithuriel until the two were within speaking distance.

As she approached, the Russian swung her stern guns out laterally, and Alan did the same with his, so that for the time being neither ship could injure the other. The stern doors were then opened, and the Russian captain delivered a message to the effect that the Sultan had just risen for morning prayers, and would receive the captain of the Ithuriel in hall an hour. The Aerian vessel could therefore descend without fear.

"There is no question of fear," replied Alan shortly. "I have not come alone. Use your glasses and you will see that the city is surrounded, but we shall respect the truce if you do."

The Russian stepped back with a hurried gesture and seized his glasses. It was now quite light enough for him to see at that elevation a wide circle of points of flashing blue light reflected from the hulls of the Aerian fleet. He put down his glasses and replied--

"So I see! You would not have got here if patrols had been sent out as I advised."

"Or else your patrols would not have come back," said Alan, turning on his heel and walking forward.

Half an hour later the white flag on the minaret was dipped three times as an invitation for the Ithuriel to descend, and Alan, determined to guard against any possible treachery on the part of the Russian scout-ship, signalled to it to precede him, and so the two vessels sank down and alighted almost together on the roof of the palace.

The Sultan surrounded by his ministers was awaiting them, and as soon as salutes had been exchanged Alan handed him the ultimatum of the Council. As Khalid read the brief but pregnant message his brows contracted, and an angry flush showed through the bronze of his skin.

He read it twice over, stroking his beard slowly and deliberately as he did so. Then he looked up and said to Alan in a tone from which he made no effort to banish the accents of anger--

"Was not my word enough? Have I not promised that I would make no war for a year? By what right do you order me to compel my friend and ally to leave my city within two hours?"

At the word "ally" Alan's face assumed an expression of wrathful sternness, and he replied--

"By the right which has always governed the issues of war--the power to compel obedience."

"To compel!" cried the Sultan, in a still angrier tone. "What! with one air-ship against twenty? Not even a Prince of the Air could do that."

"No Prince of the Air would be mad enough to make the attempt" replied Alan coldly. "Ask the captain of your scout-ship, and he will tell you that your city is surrounded; and I can tell you that four

hundred guns are trained upon it at this moment, and that the firing of a shot, or the rising of any air-ship but my own from the ground, will be the signal for them all to be discharged. I need not tell your Majesty what the result of that would be."

Khalid recoiled with a cry that was almost one of fear. He knew instinctively that Alan was speaking the literal truth, without the confirmation given by the captain of the scout-ship. He saw, too, that Olga had deceived him, or at any rate had been grievously mistaken, when she had said that the Aerians would not send a fleet after her squadron. They had done so, and so skilfully had its movements been ordered, that the city had been taken by surprise, and lay at its mercy.

Brave as he was, the strange terrors of the situation sent a thrill of fear through his soul. There he stood, the proudest king on earth, on the roof of his palace, beneath the smiling sky of an Egyptian summer morning; and yet that smiling sky was charged with death and destruction a hundredfold greater than if the thunder-clouds were lowering on it, ready to hurl their lightnings upon the earth.

He could see nothing but the blue heavens and the eastern sunlight shining over the roofs of his capital; and yet he knew that the man standing before him could, with a single signal, reduce the splendid city to heaps of shattered, shapeless ruins and bury its inhabitants and its guests in one common tomb.

Then what seemed to be a saving thought flashed through his mind, and he said, almost in a tone of banter--

"But in that case we should not die alone, unless you have taught those unsparing guns of yours to distinguish between friend and foe--the signal for our destruction would be the signal for yours as well."

"Even so!" replied Alan gravely. "That is a contingency which I have foreseen. Orloff Lossenski, tell his Majesty what my last orders to the fleet were."

The Russian stepped forward, and after saluting the Sultan said--

"I heard the orders given, Majesty, and they were to that effect. Friends and foes are to be destroyed alike, and nothing is to be left of Alexandria but its ruins.

"I am also charged with a message to my mistress, the Tsarina, which tells her that if she does not leave within two hours her ships will be attacked in the city, and that, too, would be disaster; and if my words have still any weight with her I shall advise compliance with the order of the Council. Will your Majesty permit me to be conducted to my mistress in order that I may deliver my message in due form?"

The Sultan did not seem to hear the request at all. The idea that Alan and his crew should thus deliberately devote themselves and their beautiful vessel to annihilation in the event of their orders being disobeyed appalled and unnerved him. He knew nothing, save by tradition, of the heights of heroism to which men can rise under the stimulus of war, and he looked upon the man who had so calmly pronounced the provisional death sentence of himself and his companions as something more than human, as beings of a higher order, to fight against whom would be impious rashness rather than courage.

It was a situation that would have shaken the nerves of the sternest and most experienced soldier of the nineteenth century, and so it was no wonder that his spirit, unbraced by the discipline of war, shrank from facing its terrors. He saw, too, that there was literally no choice save between submission and destruction. To save, not only the lives of himself and his people, but also those of his guests and allies, he and they must submit and obey this imperious mandate.

"It is the will of God!" he said, bowing his head slightly towards Alan as he spoke. "They who cannot fight must yield. Hereafter we may meet upon more equal terms, and then to-day's humiliation shall not be forgotten."

Alan inclined his head in reply, and said--

"So be it! As your Majesty has seemingly decided to involve the world in the horrors of war, it is not for me to say any more. When the day of battle comes, let the fortune of war decide between us.

Meanwhile, Orloff Lossenski, it is time that you took the Council's message to your mistress."

"Give it to me," said the Sultan, stepping forward with outstretched hands, "and I will take it to her, if she has risen yet."

"There is no need for that," said a voice a few yards beyond Alan. "I am here, and I will take it."

As the sweet, low, even tones, now so hatefully familiar, reached Alan's ears he turned sharply round, with a blaze of ungovernable anger in his eyes, and saw Olga, calm and self-possessed in all the pride of her imperial beauty, walking towards the group from an arched doorway that led up from the interior of the palace.

CHAPTER XIX. FACE TO FACE AGAIN.

SMILING and self-possessed as Olga appeared when she gained the roof of the palace, she had passed through a perfect purgatory of conflicting and agonising emotions since the news of the arrival of the Ithuriel had reached her in her room. Her tremendous and, but for the fact of her strange, hopeless love, incomprehensible blunder in setting Alan and Alexis free, instead of either killing them or keeping them in life-long captivity, had already borne terrible fruit; but this visit, made at the very moment when her plans were apparently crowned with success, seemed to threaten nothing less than the complete ruin of all her schemes.

She knew instinctively that the city must be surrounded by an overwhelming force of Aerial ships, for a single one to venture thus into the midst of her own squadron, and, judging by her own tactics, she expected nothing less than immediate annihilation as the alternative to surrender. But even more bitter than this was the thought of meeting, not only as a freeman, but as the commander of the Aerial navy, the man who but a few days ago had been her docile, unresisting slave, robbed of the highest attribute of his manhood by the Circe-spell that she had cast over him, and which she now knew was broken for ever.

And, more than this, she must now meet as an implacable enemy the man whom, in spite of herself, she still loved with all the passion of her fiery nature, and who, now that he was free again, could but look upon her not only with hatred, but with disgust. This, so far as her own feelings were concerned, was the miserable end of her scheming, but there was no help for it. She had deliberately sown the wind, and now the time was approaching for her to reap the whirlwind.

She thought of her dream in St. Petersburg, and a new and awful meaning was made apparent to her in those few minutes of mental torture before she went to meet her well-beloved enemy face to face. She saw herself mistress of a conquered world, seated on a lonely throne, wailing over her own broken heart in the midst of a desolation that she had brought upon the earth--for nothing.

This, it seemed, was to be the penalty of the unspeakable crime she had committed to gain possession of the air-ship, a hopeless love that should turn all the fruits of conquest, if she ever won them, into the bitter ashes of the Dead Sea apples in her mouth, a love not only unrequited, but repaid with righteous horror and almost divine disgust.

And yet, despite all this, her marvellous fortitude and royal pride came to her aid to help her to bear herself bravely before her enemies, and so, with a smile on her lips and a hell of raging passions in her bosom, she ascended to take her part in the debate, big with the destiny of a world, that was being held on the palace roof.

As Alan turned and confronted her in all the strength and splendour of the manhood that not even her almost superhuman arts had been able to tarnish or weaken, and looked at her with the stern, steady gaze without one sign of recognition in the eyes that shone blue-black beneath his straight-drawn brows, her heart stood still and seemed turned to ice in her breast, and for one brief moment her foot faltered and the light died out of her eyes and the colour from her cheeks.

Then she caught the Sultan's gaze turned inquiringly upon her; her indomitable spirit rose to the emergency, and her self-possession returned. Passing Alan by with a slight inclination of her head which did not conceal the mocking, smile which curled her dainty lips, she went to Khalid and, holding out her hand, said in steady, musical tones which, do what he would to resist it, sent a thrill to Alan's heart--

"Where is the message that my faithless servant brings from the tyrants of the world?"

The Sultan gave it to her, and as she read it Lossenski stood silent like the rest, but with head bowed down in shame and sorrow. When she reached the last word of the despatch the crimson deepened on her cheeks and her hands closed convulsively on the paper. Then with a quick movement she tore it in twain, flung the two fragments to the ground, and then, looking up with eyes blazing with passion, she

cried--

"I should be a slave to obey! Lossenski, signal to the squadron to rise. Boris, train a gun on that ship and blow her to pieces if a man moves on board of her. Out of the way there, Alan Arnold. If you lift a hand I will shoot you like a dog!"

As she spoke she snatched a pistol out of her belt and had almost levelled it at Alan's heart, when, like a flash of lightning, his rapier leapt from its sheath, and as the pistol came up it was dashed from her hand.

"I could have killed you with less trouble," he said, in quick stern accents, raising the glittering blue blade to a level with her eyes, and keeping it outstretched towards her. "Have you forgotten what I told you, or that I am no longer under your vile spell? If those orders are obeyed I will kill you now, though you do wear a woman's shape. The city is surrounded, and if one vessel rises from the earth, Alexandria will be in ruins in an hour. Now, give the signal for its destruction if you dare, and let the earth be rid of you!"

"And of you, my gallant Knight of the Air, who draws his sword upon a woman!" she almost hissed at him in her fury. "Yes, I dare and I will. Lossenski"--

In another moment the fate of the world would have been changed; but, before the order could be repeated, the Sultan strode forward and placed himself between Alan and Olga with outstretched arms--

"No, Tsarina! that order shall not be given on my palace or in my hearing. You have forgotten our agreement and my oath. I have sworn on the Koran that there shall be no war between Islam and Aeria for a year, and by the glory of Allah there shall be none!"

"What have I and my people done that you should bring this destruction upon them? Your servant shall be shot if he opens his lips, and if you must fight, go into the desert and do it; but that will end our alliance, for you will have broken the peace to which I have sworn, and made me a liar. It is enough! Let us talk like reasonable beings, and not quarrel like children."

Olga was conquered for the time being, and she saw it. Few as had been the moments of the Sultan's speech, they were enough to allow her agile intellect to get the better of her anger, and to convince her that it would have led her to suicide in another minute.

Her manner changed with a swiftness that was almost miraculous. Her long, thick lashes fell, hiding the still burning fires of her eyes. Her attitude changed from one of defiance to one of deference, and as she stepped back a pace or two, she said in a totally altered voice--

"Your Majesty has justly rebuked me. My anger overcame my reason for the moment. My hatred of these tyrants of the air is not a thing of to-day or of yesterday, as you know, but the legacy of generations of wrong and robbery, and the arrogance of this man, who but a few days ago was my slave, and now ventures to dictate terms of war or peace to me, was more than my patience or my temper could bear. I have done wrong, and in atonement I will promise, on the honour of a Romanoff, to be bound absolutely by such engagement as your Majesty may make until the period of your truce is expired."

So saying, she retired to a distant part of the terrace, beckoning Lossenski to follow her. Throwing herself on seat in full view but out of earshot of the group she had left she bade him tell her the story of the loss of the Vindaya, and how he came to be the bearer of the message of the Council of Aeria to her.

Lossenski told the story simply and truthfully, and as he finished, the Grand Vizier approached, and after an obeisance, made with Oriental reverence, said--

"Tsarina, my master commands me to inform you that he has settled all matters with the Prince of the Air save one, and to settle that he craves your assistance. Will it please you to come and speak with him?"

"I will come," said Olga, rising and following him with the words of Lossenski fresh in her ears.

"Tsarina Olga," said the Sultan, coming to meet her as she approached the group amidst which Alan was still standing, "I have come to an agreement with Alan Arnold upon all points but one, and that one only you can decide."

"He asserts that six years ago he took you and your brother as guests on board the air-ship, which you now call the Revenge, that you drugged the wine drunk by him and his comrades, and, sparing only him and his friend Alexis Masarov, you poisoned the rest of the crew, and threw them out on to the snows of Norway, after which you kept him and Alexis under your influence by means of a drug, which deprived them of their will-power and forced them to reveal the secrets of the air-ship to you and assist you in building your fleet."

"And has your Majesty given credence to such a monstrous story, or do you only wish to hear me give it the contradiction which its absurdity and falsity deserve? If the former, the sooner I and my ships leave your city, never to return save as enemies, the better. If the latter, you shall soon be satisfied."

Olga spoke with an air of angered innocence which completely deceived the Sultan, anxious as he was to find the extraordinary story false, and he hastily replied--

"It is the latter that I desire, of course. I was obliged to say that if you were unable to deny the accusation it would be impossible for me to continue an alliance with one who had been guilty of a crime which my faith and the customs of my race denounce as vile beyond all human measure. But I refused to believe it against you until your own lips had confessed it, or undeniable evidence had proved it, and therefore I have asked you to come and let us know the truth."

"I thank you, Sultan Khalid, for your confidence and your chivalry," she said, looking up into his eyes with a glance that rendered all denial from her once and for ever unnecessary. "You shall hear me deny the foul falsehood to my traducer's face."

Stung to fresh fury by the knowledge that Alan had sought to expose her in her true nature to the man whom she sought to make her slave in his place, she strode forward to within three paces of where he was standing, and, drawing herself up to the full height of her royal stature, she faced him with pale cheeks and blazing eyes, her beauty so transfigured by anger that the Moslems standing about her instinctively shrank back, awe-stricken by such an incarnation of wrath and loveliness as no man of them had ever dreamed of before. Even Alan himself forgot his hate and disgust for the moment in the contemplation of her almost miraculous beauty and the indescribable dignity with which her anger invested her, and waited in silence that was almost respectful for the tempest of wrath and reproach which he saw was about to be let loose on him.

Her lips trembled mutely for a moment or two before any sound came from them, but when she spoke her tone was low and clear, though almost hoarse with passion, and shaken by the manifest effort she made to keep it under control.

"So this is the return that your chivalry makes for my generosity in giving you life and liberty when you were lost to the world; when I might have killed you, as I see now that I should have done, without a single soul among your people knowing anything of your fate!

"I expected that you would false up arms against me, for your people and mine are enemies to the death; and I knew, too, that the love which I had spurned would not be long in turning to active hate. But you excelled my expectations--you, one of the Princes of the Air, the scion of a race that holds itself above all the other races of the earth, the son of a man who but a few years ago was lord and master of the world! You come in the guise of open and honourable warfare to smirch with your foul lies the fame of a woman for whose sake you made yourself a traitor to your people and a murderer of your own comrades. A pretty story, forsooth, to tell in the ears of my friends and allies. Do you take them for children or fools that you expect them to believe it?

"Imagine such a miracle, your Majesty," she continued, turning, with the clear ring of a mocking laugh in her voice, to the Sultan, "imagine this Alan Arnold, son of the President of Aeria, with his friend and lieutenant, Alexis Masarov, and a crew of eight Aerians on board their flagship, armed with the most tremendous means of destruction ever invented by human genius, and each man of them, moreover, possessing in his own person the power of life and death, as he himself has proved before your own eyes.

"These kings among men invite two casual acquaintances for a trip to the clouds, and these two guests, a youth of twenty and a girl not seventeen, unarmed and without assistance, seize their ship, kill eight of their invincibly armed comrades and lead the captain and his lieutenant away captive. And how? By means of some mysterious drugs, subtle and irresistible poisons, of which such a boy and girl could not possibly have known either the composition or the use, and which they would have been afraid to employ if they had done.

"But let me come to the facts as they are," she went on, turning again to Alan, who stood literally dumbfounded before her, amazed beyond power of thought or speech by the audacity of her words. "It is you who are the liar, the traitor, and the murderer. It is you who killed my brother before my eyes because he sought to protect me from your violence; and it is you and your friend Alexis who, of your own free will, struck your comrades dead, threw them out of the air-ship upon the Norwegian snows, and then, in the hope of gaining my favour, took the Ithuriel to Vorobivo, near Moscow, and delivered her into the hands of my friends.

"I have fifty men within call at this moment who will swear that this is true. Orloff Lossenski, you are one of them. Were you not at the villa at Vorobivo when these two came with me in the Ithuriel and delivered her into your hands; and did you not find the corpse of my brother Serge in one of the state rooms with his neck bruised and blackened by the grip of his murderer?"

"Yes, Majesty," replied Lossenski, stepping forward as he was addressed. "That is true, though they told us at the time that your brother had been killed in a struggle with their comrades."

"And is it true," continued Olga, "that they accompanied me into your villa and had supper with us as friends, and did not I forgive the death of my brother for the sake of the advantages which the possession of the air-ship, which they consented to surrender to us, would be to the cause of the revolution in Russia to which we were pledged?"

"That is also true, Majesty; and there are several here now with the squadron who can also testify to the fact."

"And also," interrupted Olga, "to the fact that these two traitors worked willingly to help us to secrete the air-ship, and finally to take her to Mount Terror, and there explained the working of her machinery to us and helped us to build other air-ships and submarine vessels, and commanded these in their attacks upon the commerce of our enemies. Is that true, also?"

"It is, Majesty," again replied Lossenski. "Shall I summon the crews of our ships that they also may testify to it lest my word should not be enough?"

"Is it your Majesty's wish that they shall be called?" asked Olga again turning to the Sultan, who all this time had been standing shifting his gaze from her face to Alan's, and from Alan's back again to hers, horrified by the fearful accusations with which she had replied to the story, of the falsity of which he was already thoroughly convinced.

"They can be called if Alan Arnold desires it," he said, in grave, deliberate tones. "But would it not be better that he should speak first? At present we have two words against one. Has he any proof that what you say is false?" he continued, looking inquiringly towards Alan.

"I have none but my own word and that of Alexis, up yonder in the skies, and him I cannot--and if I could, under the circumstances, I would not--call," said Alan, who by this time had recovered his self-possession. "If your Majesty proposes to judge between us according to spoken testimony, I say at once that I will accept no such tests, for I well know that this woman could produce a hundred of her accomplices who would swear anything she bade them swear.

"She has given me the lie with equal skill and audacity. I can only give her the lie in return, if not as skilfully, at least as boldly, and with a knowledge that I am telling the truth. Your Majesty can believe her story or mine, as you choose. If you believe hers, I am willing to do you the justice of confessing that you will be judging according to the weight of testimony, such as it is, for that is certainly against me."

"And so I must judge," replied the Sultan coldly. "I cannot believe your story, for it seems to be

impossible, while the Tsarina's has every appearance of truth. Into your motives I have neither the right nor the wish to inquire, and all that is left for me to say is that what I have heard has finally decided me to espouse the cause of the Tsarina and her friends against those who have wronged and slandered her, be the cost to me and my people what it may.

"We shall keep the truce if you do, and in the day of strife let the God of Battles decide between us. My answer to your Council's message shall be ready for you in half an hour. Farewell!"

So saying, Khalid the Magnificent turned his back upon Alan, and walked, followed by his Vizier and his ministers, to the doorway leading to the interior of the palace. Olga, pausing for a moment to cast one glance of triumphant hatred at her discredited foe, beckoned to Lossenski, and followed the Sultan without a word.

Alan, amazed and enraged beyond measure by the unexpected turn that affairs had taken, and yet confident in his own knowledge of the truth, turned on his heel, and went back on board the Ithuriel where he went into his own cabin and sat down to write his directions for enforcing the order of the Council with regard to the evacuation of the city by the Russian squadron.

He bitterly regretted that the orders of the Council did not permit him to destroy the Russian air-ships there and then while they lay at his mercy. But the orders were explicit, and forbade him even to pursue them after they had left Alexandria, unless they committed an act of hostility against him.

If he could have done so, he would have fought them at all hazards, and then, if he had conquered, he would have been able to enforce the general prohibition of the Council against building air-ships upon the Sultan; but as disobedience was not to be thought of, he could only carry out his orders, and hope that the judgment of the Council might prove in the end superior to his own.

At the end of the half-hour he was summoned to meet the Grand Vizier, who brought the reply of his master. This ran as follows:--

In the Name of the Most Merciful God!

Khalid, Commander of the Faithful, to Alan Arnold, President of Aeria.

I have received your message from the hands of your son. I shall faithfully observe the terms of the truce I promised to him, and of which he has told you.

As my city lies for the time being at the mercy of your fleet, I can only save my people and my guests from destruction by agreeing to your demands. The Russian air-ships shall leave Alexandria within an hour of the delivery of this to your son. But this is to tell you that I have made alliance with Olga Romanoff, rightful Tsarina of the Russias, and that when the year of truce has expired, I will no longer be a king merely in name and hold my power and dignity at your pleasure.

At the end of the year of truce there shall be war between you and me and your people and mine unless before then you shall recognise my independence in due form and my right to create such armaments as I think fit for the protection of my dominions against yourself or any other Power, and unless you consent to restore Olga Romanoff to the throne and dignity which is hers by right, and of which your ancestors robbed her in the days of the Terror.

If you do this there shall be peace between us, but if not, there shall be war, and we will fight until the God of Battles has decided between us, and given to you or to me the dominion of the world.

Alan's brows contracted slightly as he read this defiant missive, but there was a half-pitying smile on his lips when he said to the Vizier as he handed him the instructions he had just written--

"I am deeply sorry--sorry for him and his people, and, indeed, for the whole human race--that he has been misled into writing words which in a year's time will set the world in a blaze. Our reply to this will be written in blood and fire, and the smoking ruins of cities throughout the length and breadth of his dominions. But he has chosen, and he and you must abide by his choice. I cannot believe that he knows what he is doing and if you are a faithful friend and servant you will counsel peace and moderation."

"My master," said the Vizier haughtily, "does not seek advice from his enemies; more than ever would it be impossible for him to do so when their lips are fresh-stained with lies."

Alan's hand instinctively sprang to the hilt of his rapier, and in another moment the Vizier's life would have paid for the insult, but when the blade was half out of its sheath his self-control returned, and he thrust it back again, saying--

"You are an old man and an ambassador, so you are safe. You shall live so that you may some day find out for yourself where the truth in this matter lies. Who knows but that the Syren may before long put you or your master under her spell. If she does you will drink something from her hand, and when you have drunk it you will have no will but hers; you will obey her blindly, and the thoughts that you speak shall be only those she suggests to you."

Later on that day, when the excitement of the hour had passed, Musa al Ghazi remembered these words, and the strange acquiescence which he had given to Olga's plans in the saloon of the Revenge. If he had remembered it while Alan was speaking, millions of innocent lives might possibly have been saved, and the curse of war averted from the world for many more generations, perhaps for ever. But he did not, and so events took their logical course. As it was, he made no direct reply to Alan's words, but handed him another paper, saying--

"I have been commissioned also to give you this. The instructions agreed upon shall be obeyed, and now I have only to remind you that you are no longer my master's guest."

With that he saluted with frigid dignity and turned away towards the palace door.

Alan looked after him for a moment with a smile half of contempt and half of pity, then he opened the paper in his hand. As he expected, it was from Olga, and, beginning without any form of address, it ran thus--

I shall obey your orders and leave the city, not because I will.
but because I must, in order to save the Sultan and his people
from destruction. I will also undertake to refrain from
hostilities until the Sultan's truce expires, provided you do not
molest me. If you do, or if the Sultan is subjected to any
unreasonable commands or acts of oppression, I will consider the
truce at an end, and I will not only recommence my submarine
attacks upon the world's commerce but I will send out my air-ships
and scatter death and destruction far and wide over the earth.
without mercy and without discrimination between enemies or
neutrals; it is therefore for you to choose whether the issue
between us shall be fought out when the time comes, and in fair
and honourable warfare or whether the dogs of war shall be let
loose at once. I have still thirty air-ships, and as many
submarine cruisers, and I can do what I say.
OLGA ROMANOFF.

"No doubt," said Alan to himself. "I'm afraid we shall have to accept your terms. I didn't think that even you would be capable of such a colossal crime as that; but now I know something like the full capacity of your wickedness, and if you threaten it you will do it."

"With those thirty ships, if you have as many as that, and I suppose you must have twenty-four or twenty-five at least you could wreck half the great cities of the world in six months, and we could do little or nothing to stop you. We have only eleven ships equal in speed to yours, and most of those must be kept in call of Aeria."

"I would give my life and my ship willingly for permission to fight it out here and now, and yet, after all, that would be frightful cruelty and injustice to the unoffending thousands who would lose their lives by the destruction of the city, so I suppose it must be peace for a year, and then--ah, what then?"

His soliloquy began on the terrace and ended on the deck of the Ithuriel. He gave the order to rise into the air, and the aerial cruiser soared slowly upwards, still flying the flag of truce as a signal to her consorts that the mission had been successfully accomplished. As he felt certain that the Sultan would carry out the directions agreed upon to the letter, he left the city without any misgivings, and in a few minutes the Ithuriel was floating alongside her consort the Isma, and Alan and Alexis had clasped hands once more.

CHAPTER XX. THE CALL TO ARMS.

WITHIN an hour the wondering inhabitants of Alexandria saw the Russian fleet rise a thousand feet into the air and form in two columns of line ahead. Then the Aerial fleet ranged itself in two long lines five hundred feet outside them and a thousand feet above them. A time-shell from the Ithuriel gave the signal to start, and the two fleets leapt forward to the south-east at a speed of a hundred miles an hour, and in a few minutes had vanished over the desert. The speed was quickly increased to two hundred miles, and so they sped on all day and through the next night--the Russian ships being forced to show their lights while the Aerials remained in darkness--until, when morning dawned and Olga and her captains looked for Alan's fleet they found that it had vanished, and that they were floating alone over the solitudes of the Southern Ocean.

They had been escorted like offending school children out of harm's way, and then left to their own devices. It was a bitterly humiliating ending to an expedition which had really produced such important results, but there was no possibility of present revenge, and so Olga gave the order to proceed straight to Mount Terror, intending to begin there and then the working out of her part of the compact that she had made with the Sultan.

This arrangement was briefly to the following effect:--Olga placed at Khalid's disposal all the necessary plans for the construction of both air-ships and submarine vessels, and also supplied members of her own immediate retinue, well skilled in the work, to supervise the building, which was, of course, to be carried out with the utmost secrecy and speed, so as to guard, as far as practicable, against the possible destruction of the factories and dockyards by the Aerials.

The Sultan had engaged to find money and material for building a thousand air-ships, and the same number of submarine cruisers, within the year, and these were to be supplied with motive power at conversion-stations established at the dockyards under the exclusive control of certain of Olga's lieutenants.

The secret of this motive power, which was identical save for slight differences in the process of conversion with that possessed by the Aerials--that is to say, electrical energy derived directly from atomised carbon and vaporised petroleum--was retained in her own keeping by Olga, who had simply promised that an unlimited supply of it should be forthcoming as it was wanted.

She had insisted on a strict engagement that no one not authorised by her should even approach the conversion-stations, and she had given the Sultan and his ministers distinctly to understand that any attempt to discover the secret of the process would terminate the alliance, and expose the cities of the Moslem empire to destruction.

At the expiration of the year of truce, the Sultan's army and navy, supported by the immense aerial fleet that would then be in existence, was to be in complete readiness for any emergencies. Olga was to be proclaimed Tsarina in Moscow, and the House of Romanoff formally restored in her person. If any portions of Russia refused to receive her, they were to be terrorised into submission by the air-ships.

The tribesmen of Western and Central Asia were to be armed as rapidly as possible, so as to be ready to form a reserve force for compelling the submission of the Russians if they resisted the new order of things, and to participate in the invasion of Europe, which was to take place at several points as soon as the Holy War of Islam was proclaimed, and Cross and Crescent once more confronted each other on the battlefield.

Meanwhile, too, the resources of the dockyard at Mount Terror were to be strained to the utmost, and the conspiracy in Russia for the restoration of Olga to the throne of the Romanoffs was to be developed by every means that money could purchase or skill devise.

The scheme of defence arranged by the Council of Aeria had already been completed, and it was to execute this that the Aerial fleet had left the Russian squadron during the night. Indeed, the Russians had been travelling southward alone for more than eight hours before they had discovered the fact. As

soon as it became impossible for them to see the Aerial vessels these had stopped, in accordance with a prearranged plan, and had wheeled round and steered for London across the African continent at a height of about ten thousand feet.

Flying at the full speed of the smaller vessels, a twenty-hour flight carried the fleet over the eight thousand miles which separated its starting-point from the capital of the world, and about six o'clock in the evening of the 21st of May the fifty-two vessels, flying the Aerial and British flags, appeared in the air over the open space which is now called Hyde Park, and, to the amazement of the astonished citizens, dropped quietly to the earth and lay open to the unrestricted inspection of the thousands who speedily gathered in the park to avail themselves of the unwonted spectacle, and to learn, if possible, the reason of the unexpected visit.

No attempt was made by the crews of the ships to prevent the sightseers from seeing all they could of the exteriors of the vessels, which were arranged on the sward in two long lines, so that they could walk down between them and admire their beautiful shape and wonderful construction at their leisure. A sentry was stationed by each vessel to warn the sightseers not to approach too close to the wings and propellers, and that was the only precaution taken.

Alan learnt soon after landing that King Albert the Second, the fourth in descent from Edward VII., who was King during the War of the Terror, was at Windsor, and that the House of Commons and the Senate, which for over a hundred years had filled the place of the old House of Lords, had dissolved for the spring recess, and would not meet again until after the General Election, which was held every 1st of June.

He therefore caused a message to be sent to His Majesty at Windsor, requesting him to name a time for an interview on the following day, and then, sufficient watches having been set on all the vessels, he and Alexis, with the majority of the crews, took a few hours' leave, not a little glad of the opportunity of stretching their legs on terra firma, after their three days' confinement to the air-ships.

The reply which he received from the King fixed eleven o'clock in the morning of the 22nd as the time of the interview for which he had asked, and, just as the castle clock was beginning to sound the strokes of the hour, the Ithuriel swept up out of the distance towards Windsor Castle, and, after hovering for a moment in mid-air, sank quietly down until she rested on that portion of the terrace which overlooks the Home Park. Her arrival had been announced to the King as soon as she hove in sight, and he was on the terrace ready to receive his visitors when she alighted.

Albert II., King of England, Emperor of Britain, and President of the Anglo-Saxon Federation, was a monarch only in name. Nothing but the trappings of sovereignty remained to himself or his station, and he would not even have retained these had it not been for the fact that, during its hundred years of actual rule, the Supreme Council had insisted upon the maintenance of the monarchical principle in those countries where it had obtained at the end of the nineteenth century.

The first formal greetings over, the King caused Alan to be escorted to his private apartments in the castle, and as soon as they were alone together in the room which he reserved for his own special use, he motioned Alan to a seat and, throwing himself back upon a lounge with an air of weariness which accorded but ill with the hour of the day, he said in a somewhat querulous tone--

"We are quite alone now and you can speak with perfect freedom. I am sure it must be important business that has brought you here with a whole fleet of your air-ships, and I shall be glad if you will tell me at once what it is. I hope nothing has occurred to imperil our peace and safety?"

"On the contrary, your Majesty," replied Alan. "I regret to say that my errand is to tell you that, not only is that the case, but that it is a practical certainty that within twelve months from now the whole world will be plunged into war."

"What! what!" exclaimed the King, jerking himself up to a sitting posture. "Surely you don't mean that? I thought that no war would be possible without the permission of your Council. Surely you would not allow the nations of the world to go to war with each other again, and repeat all the horrors that happened a hundred and thirty years ago?"

"Your Majesty forgets that when we renounced the control of the world six years ago we gave back to the nations the right of making war upon each other, although we hardly believed that they would be foolish enough and wicked enough to exercise it. That, however, is beside the question, because war is now inevitable, and, what is even more important, the Council of Aeria is unhappily powerless to prevent it."

"Eh! what is that?" exclaimed the King, this time rising to his feet and facing Alan with an air of petulant reproach. "Powerless to prevent it? You, with all your fleets of airships and submarine vessels? You, who have called yourselves the masters of the world for nearly a century and a half--you cannot stop war?"

"We cannot do so, your Majesty," said Alan, also rising to his feet, "simply because I regret to say that we no longer possess the undisputed empire of the air, and therefore, in a measure at least, we have lost the command of the world."

"As for the responsibility which your words impute to us, I must tell you at once that it does not exist. The rulers of the world, and yourself among them, voluntarily and with full knowledge accepted perfect freedom, and therefore the individual responsibility that is inseparable from it. You knew that from the time we resigned the world-throne you were free to make war upon each other, on land and by sea."

"It is your fault and not ours that you are now so defenceless that you have cause to fear the war against which you ask us to protect you. You have known for nearly four years that the Sultan of Islam has been creating armies and fleets and diligently training millions of his subjects in that art of war which we hoped was to be forgotten for ever among men."

"Did you suppose, you Kings and Princes of the Anglo-Saxon Federation, that Khalid the Magnificent, a man of boundless ambition, was creating these armies and fleets simply to play with them? Could you not see that nothing but some dream of world-wide conquest could be inspiring him to do this, and do you need to be told that the realms of Christendom offered him the only possible area of conquest in the world?"

"What have you done to defend yourselves, or to prepare against a possible day of battle? You have done nothing. Saving your international police, now little more than an ornamental body of officials, the Federation does not possess a single soldier. You have seen the Sultan building battleships and arming them with the deadliest weapons that skill and science could devise, and you, with all your wealth, and skill, and knowledge, have not built a single vessel that would be of use in time of war."

"I understand that the Council has warned you again and again that the Sultan's designs could not have been peaceable, and yet your Parliaments have not voted a single pound for the defence of your homes and your riches."

"Ah, yes!" broke in the King, now in an apologetic tone, for he was completely cowed by the direct, earnest force of Alan's reproving words. "That is it! You must not blame myself or my fellow-monarchs, you must blame the Parliaments. We can do nothing without them; they have usurped all the power that formerly belonged to Kings. It is this democracy that has weakened us and left us defenceless. Every man thinks himself a ruler, and so there are no rulers, except in name. Every man has a vote, therefore every man must be consulted about everything, and so nothing can be done but what the multitude wishes. They want only riches, splendid buildings and cities, light work, and comfortable lives. That is all they have cared about, and so that is all they have got. If we, their Kings and duly appointed rulers, could have done as we wished to do affairs would have been very different; but it is impossible to rule where every man fancies himself a king!"

"That is but a poor excuse, King Albert," replied Alan sternly and yet somewhat sadly. "It is the old story of Greece and Rome and Byzantium over again. The weakness of the rulers has been the strength of the demagogues, and that has always spelt national decay from the days of Cleon until now."

"I might ask you how it comes that Sultan Khalid has been able to keep his millions of subjects in hand and to be to-day the sole actual ruler of the greatest empire the world has ever seen; but neither

you nor I have any more time to waste, either in reproaching each other or regretting what cannot now be helped."

"No, no!" said the King, almost appealingly. "That is quite right--quite right. Tell me, if you please, what has really happened to bring about this terrible danger which threatens us, and let us see if we cannot yet protect ourselves."

"You can yet make such preparations as will at least enable you to meet your enemies on equal terms," replied Alan, following the King's example, and seating himself again, "and it is to put before you a necessary scheme of defence that I have come here, and when I have described it you will see that we Aerians have not forgotten that our ancestors once led Anglo-Saxondom to the conquest of the world."

"Pray proceed," said the King, sitting up on his lounge again. "I can assure you that I am all attention."

Alan then began, and told in detail all that was necessary for the King to know of what had happened during the last six years, concluding with a graphic narrative of startling vividness of the marvellous and momentous events that had been crowded so thickly into the last twenty-one days.

It would not be saying too much to state that the close of the recital, which he had listened to with the most anxious attention, left King Albert in a state of nervous excitement that bordered closely upon absolute panic. He had heard enough to show him that the splendid fabric of Anglo-Saxon civilisation would, if left in its present defenceless state, totter and fall like a house of cards at the first onslaught of its powerful and disciplined enemies.

He saw that its wealth and splendour, like those of the effete empires of old, were a source of weakness and not of strength, a temptation to its foes and an encumbrance to itself.

Then, as Alan went on to describe the scheme of defence proposed by the Council of Aeria, he seemed to find support and consolation in the quiet, masterful tones of the man who, without a tremor in his voice, could calmly discuss the prospect of a war which would involve the whole of humanity in one colossal struggle, which could have no other result than an indescribably appalling loss of human life and the complete subjection, if not destruction, of those who were vanquished in it.

Yet when he had finished King Albert shook his head sadly and doubtfully, and said--

"Yes, yes, it is a splendid scheme, a scheme worthy of you and your wonderful race, but it can only be accomplished if our Parliaments agree together to sanction it and support it. I hope with all my heart that they will do so, but I sadly fear that not even your influence, and the fearful danger which threatens them, will make them agree one with another.

"Of late years, since the power of the democracy has increased so enormously, they wrangle for weeks over the smallest matters of municipal government. As for national policy, they seem to have forgotten what it means. I may be wrong, and with all my soul I hope I am, but I sadly fear they will never consent to what they will call a military despotism, even to save themselves. The elections take place during the last four days of this month, and by that time the news that you have brought me shall be published everywhere, so that the people may know what is before them, but everything will depend upon the men and women whom they return to Parliament."

"Ah," interrupted Alan, stroking his beard to conceal a smile, "I had forgotten for the moment. You have lady legislators now as well as male ones. We were ungallant enough to refuse them admittance to the Parliament during our period of control."

"Yes," said the King, with a smile that had but little mirth in it. "But we have progressed fast since then. In our Parliament men and women were almost equally balanced in both Chambers, and scarcely any business was done during the year."

"Which proves," said Alan, "that what was called our discourtesy and unfairness was not so very unwise after all."

The interview ended shortly after this remark, for the time for action had already arrived. Alan had learnt enough from the King's own lips to see that he was merely a crowned puppet in the hands of the

rival parties, which contended in both Chambers for the favour of the democracy and the continuance of office. He therefore saw further that, if anything was to be done in working out the scheme of international defence, he would have to take the initiative.

As full discretion had been given to him in his commission from the Council of Aeria, he did not scruple to half-persuade and half-frighten the King into investing him with such authority as he could give, and, armed with this, he went to work that very day with a vigour and promptness which amazed the feeble monarch, and raised a storm of indignation among the members of the two Chambers who were seeking re-election.

A very short experience of these people proved to him that nothing must be hoped from them. Day after day he met committees and deputations of them, who argued with him and wrangled among themselves until he was utterly disgusted and out of patience with them.

At last, on the evening of the 27th, after he had spent the whole day in striving to convince a joint-committee, consisting of twenty members of each Chamber, of the tremendous danger which threatened the Federation, and the immediate and urgent necessity of united action in preparing to meet it, he lost the last remnants of his temper, and, springing to his feet, he faced them with anger in his eyes and scorn on his lips, and said--

"We have talked enough, ladies and gentlemen! I came here expecting to find the old spirit of Anglo-Saxondom still alive, and so far as you are concerned I find it dead. You are not patriots or competent rulers. You are simply members of a noisy and verbose debating society! When absolute destruction at the hands of a well-armed and implacable foe is threatening your country and your allies, you talk of averting the calamity by discussion and arbitration, instead of armed resistance. By all means discuss and arbitrate, if you can, but also prepare for battle in case it proves, as I am certain it will prove, to be inevitable. Do you suppose that the lamb can argue with the wolf, or that the rich and defenceless man can save his wealth from the armed plunderer by mere force of argument or an appeal to his moral sense? If you do, you are something worse than simple, you are guilty of a folly which is a crime against those who have committed their affairs to your keeping.

"But I, like most of my people, have Anglo-Saxon blood in my veins, and I will not leave my kindred defenceless. I bear an English name, and that name and my descent shall be my title to do what I now tell you I am going to do. In my own person, and with the full authority and sanction of the Council of Aeria and your own lawful monarch, I here and now reassert the supremacy over the realms of Anglo-Saxondom which my father resigned in St. Paul's Cathedral six years and a half ago! Hold your elections if you choose, and conduct your noisy pretence at government according to your own tastes, but do not expect me to be guided or bound by any enactments that you may choose to make. You may call this a revolution if you will. So it is, but remember that your foolishness has made it necessary! I can make Anglo-Saxondom ready to meet its enemies on equal terms when the day of battle comes, as come it surely will in less than twelve months from now, and, God helping me, I will do it! You either cannot or will not do this, but I will take good care that you do not prevent it being done.

"I believe that the old spirit which won the Armageddon of 1904 still survives in Anglo-Saxon breasts, and I believe that it will respond to the call to arms which shall be heard throughout the length and breadth of the Federation before another sun has set. To-morrow I shall take possession of the means of intercommunication, and I warn you that you will oppose me at your peril.

"You know that I have a force at command before which you are as helpless as the worms that crawl in the earth, and as there is a heaven above me I will use it without ruth or scruple if I see that the interests of Anglo-Saxondom require me to do so. You have your choice, to act with me or to remain neutral. Oppose me, and I will destroy you as traitors and enemies to your country and your race!"

So saying, Alan turned his back upon the committees, and strode out of the room in which he had met them, leaving them speechless with anger and dismay.

CHAPTER XXI. THE HOME-COMING.

THE eastern mountains were still casting their long shadows over the dawns and fields, the vineyards and the gardens of Aeria on the morning of the eleventh of May in the year 2037 of the Christian Era and the hundred and thirty-third year of the Peace, but the whole population of the lovely valley were already afoot and abroad, for this was the most momentous day that had been in the history of the colony since Richard Arnold had first crossed the Northern Ridge with Natasha beside him in the conning-tower of the little Ariel, in those days the only air-ship that existed in the world, to lay the foundations of that throne from which their descendants had ruled the nations of the earth for a century and a quarter.

To-day the year of probation imposed by the Council upon Alan Arnoldson and his companion in misfortune, in exile, and in victory, was to expire, and the long-lost wanderers were to return to their home and kindred.

Very soon after it became light hundreds of aerial boats and yachts of every variety of design and ornamentation that the taste and skill of the most highly-cultivated race of people the world had ever seen could devise, came floating in towards the vast city of Aeria from the marble palaces and villas which were scattered throughout the length and breadth of the central African Paradise.

Along the broad, smooth white roads, too, which led from the southern portions of the valley, round the lake to the northern shore on which the city stood, groups of people, with here and there husbands and wives and pairs of yet unwedded lovers, were gliding in long, swift, easy curves on noiseless wheel-skates over the polished marble of the pavements.

Bright with the gayest and yet most perfectly-harmonised colours, blazing with jewels and precious metals, from their gold or crystal-winged coronets to the burnished silver framework of their skates, splendid in stature, and glowing with perfect health--if some man of the present day could have beheld these dwellers in Aeria on their way to hold high festival in their capital, he would have thought that he had strayed into some other and higher sphere, inhabited by some glorified race of beings who had left the toils and cares and pollutions of earth far behind them on some lower plane of existence.

Doubtless, indeed, from some such sphere the reincarnated spirits of those who, a hundred and thirty-three years before, had passed through the tremendous ordeal of the Terror, and in their hour of well-won triumph had made such a splendid future possible for their descendants, looked down with approving eyes, not undarkened by a shade of sorrow for woes to come, upon this glorious scene of the fruition of the harvest that they had sown, this realisation of the long-sought ideal of human brotherhood, where there was no evil because men had learnt at last that good was better than evil.

Vast as was the stately city, which was at once the capital and the only town of Aeria, it was soon comfortably filled by the brilliant throngs of visitors that came pouring into it by road and through the air. The broad white streets, lined with their double groves of palms and tree-ferns, soon blazed with colour, and became vocal with greetings and laughter, and all the houses which lined them were thrown open to all visitors who chose to come and claim hospitality for the day of rejoicing.

On the terrace in front of her father's villa, on the slopes that rose to the west of the city, Alma stood with Isma watching the brilliant scene below and around them, and speculating on the coming events of the day which for them had a supreme interest, such as no other inhabitant of the valley could feel.

"It will be a right royal home-coming for our two heroes, won't it, Alma?" said Isma, slipping her little hand through her friend's arm; "almost worthy of the great deeds that they have done to regain what will be given back to them to-day--and yet, alas! there is to be a spot on the sun of happiness for all that. Alma, are you still quite sure that poor Alan will have to come back and not find that which above all other things he comes to seek?"

A faint flush rose to Alma's cheeks as she replied, in a low, steady tone--

"Yes, Isma, alas! as you say, I am still sure of that, supposing always that he really does come to seek

what you mean. I know that no man ever lived more worthy the love of woman than he is. Yet, God help me, I cannot give mine.

"I know, too, that he will come back to-day crowned with more honour than any Aerial, save Alexis, ever won before him since the days of our ancestors--and yet whenever I permit myself even to dream of him as a lover, a dark, beautiful, cruel face looks with black, burning eyes into mine, and two sweet, scornfully-smiling lips say in a whisper that sounds almost like a serpent's hiss--'You may take him now, for I have done with him. Take him and ask him to tell you how well he and I loved when my spell was strong upon him and he forgot both you and all his kindred for sake of me.'

"It is horrible, horrible beyond all thought or speech, but it is so, Isma, and I, of all the thousands of Aeria who will make merry to-day, shall be sad at heart and praying for the night to come."

"I don't believe it, Alma, however sincerely you may do so--as, of course, you do," replied Isma impatiently. "It is not your true and loving self that is speaking. It is the woman who has been brooding over a shattered idol that never really was a man of flesh and blood.

"I tell you again--and before that sun has set you will confess in your own heart that I am right--that you have never known the Alan who is coming home to-day any more than I have known the Alexis who is coming home with him. Neither you nor I have ever seen two such men as they will be--men who have passed through such experiences as no other Aerials ever had, who have suffered and conquered, dared and done, like them.

"You must put away those morbid fancies of yours, dearest; they are not worthy of you any more than Olga Romanoff is worthy to cause you an hour's unhappiness. Never mind thinking about Alan as a lover now. I tell you you have never seen him, therefore it will be time enough for you to begin to do that when you do see him.

"For my own part, I don't mind telling you--of course strictly between ourselves--that though I can hardly say that I love Alexis as he is now, since I do not know what he is like, I am quite prepared to fall in love with him all over again on the slightest provocation. And now, after that confession, I think we had better close the discussion and get ready to go over to the city."

This frank avowal, uttered as it was with a delightful candour quite irresistible in its charm, brought a smile to Alma's lips in spite of her own sombre thoughts. She slipped her arm round Isma's waist, and led her towards one of the long windows which opened out on to the terrace under the pillared portico which ran the whole length of the front of the villa.

"I quite agree with you," she said. "If that tell-tale face of yours is no better masked than it is now, when you meet your Alexis I don't think you will have long to wait for the provocation. Ah, well, I suppose--in fact, I am sure--that you take by far the wiser view, and I would give anything to be able to look upon Alan as you are ready to do on Alexis.

"But no, it's no use; do what I will I cannot think of him apart from that Syren who has held him in the bondage of her spells all these years. I know it is unreasonable, and yet he seems, even now that he has regained his freedom, to belong to her more than he ever did to me."

"That, my dear Alma," replied Isma, half seriously and half in jest, "is as nearly absurd as anything that such a serious and cultivated person as yourself could say. If I could give you a share of my more trivial temperament you would just say that you are still so desperately jealous of Olga Romanoff that you cannot bring yourself to think of Alan as a possible lover until you feel quite sure that he hates her as intensely as you do. That may not be a very heroic way of putting it, but I think we shall find it pretty near the truth before you have known the new Alan very long."

Alma laughed more musically than mirthfully at this sally, but made no reply to it in words. There was, perhaps, more truth in the half-bantering, half-reproachful words than she would have cared to admit, even to her best-beloved and most confidential friend, and so she took a wise refuge in silence, from which Isma, in the gladness of her own heart, drew her own conclusions.

It might have been that there were depths in Alma's nature which not even their life-long friendship and their common sorrow had enabled her to fathom, but for the present she was quite satisfied that

jealousy of Olga and anger at the advantage which Alma believed her to have taken of her power were the sole reasons that prevented her from regarding Alan as she had confessed herself ready and willing to regard Alexis.

When they left the terrace the two girls had breakfast together in Alma's own room in a privacy which the other members of the family tacitly respected, knowing as they did that the events of the day would bear a totally different significance for them to that which they would have for all the other inhabitants of the valley.

By the time the sun began to show his disc above the ridges of the eastern mountains they were on their way to the city with Alma's mother and father in one of the aerial boats that were used for transit about the interior of the valley.

They alighted on the flat roof of the President's official residence, a splendid palace of the purest white marble, which stood on the northern side of the great square, from the centre of which rose the golden-domed building which served the Aerians as a meeting-place on all public occasions. It was here that the decrees of the Council were promulgated, and here, too, on every seventh day were held the simply impressive religious services prescribed by the Aerial form of worship.

Soon after they had arrived at the President's house a great mellow-toned bell sounded the hour of six from the cupola above the dome, and, as the last stroke died away, a chorus of silvery chimes rose up from a hundred towers in different parts of the city, and went floating across the lake and down the valley to the southward, caught up and echoed as it went by peals from the thousand palaces and villas scattered about the lower slopes of the mountains.

This was the signal for the commencement of the first ceremony of the day, and the gaily-dressed, smiling throngs of visitors to the city began to file in orderly, leisurely fashion into the eight wide-open doors which led to the interior of the vast temple in the middle of the central square.

In the midst of the immense open area under the dome was a space about twenty feet square, enclosed by low railings of massive gold, and in this stood three tall pillars of marble without a single flaw or vein to mar their perfect whiteness from base to capital. On each of them stood an urn of exquisite shape, each carved out of a solid block of crystal, and each containing a small quantity of ashes.

Each pillar bore an inscription in letters of gold let into the marble. The centre one was slightly higher than the other two, and its inscription consisted of the single word:

"NATAS."

The urns on the other two pillars contained a larger quantity of ashes. On the pillar to the right hand, facing the main entrance to the temple, were the words--

RICHARD ARNOLD.

First Conqueror of the Air.

NATASHA.

The Angel of the Revolution.

And on that to the left--

ALAN TREMAYNE.

First President of the Anglo-Saxon Federation.

MURIEL TREMAYNE.

His Wife.

The square in which these pillars stood was the most sacred spot on all the earth in the eyes of the Aerians, sanctified as it was by the ashes of those who had made possible the Great Deliverance, and brought peace on earth after countless ages of strife. Every tongue was silent, and every head was bowed in reverence as those who entered the temple first caught sight of the pillars and their priceless burdens.

Then the vast and ever-swelling congregation ranged itself in orderly files, all fronting towards an elevated rostrum which stood at one of the angles of the great square under the dome, formed by the junction of the four naves, with their long pillared aisles which ran towards the four points of the compass.

Suddenly all the carillons that were still ringing out over the city ceased, and in the midst of the perfect silence the President ascended the rostrum to address the expectant assembly. Although he spoke but a little above his ordinary tone, every word could be heard with perfect distinctness throughout the immense interior of the building, for a system of electric transmitters, a development of the modern telephone, carried his voice simultaneously to a hundred parts of the walls, so that those who were standing farthest from him heard quite as distinctly as those who were close to the rostrum.

He began by a brief narration of all that had happened to Aeria and the world since the fatal day on which Olga Romanoff had set foot on the deck of the Ithuriel to the present moment, and made no attempt to conceal or to minimise the tremendous and disastrous consequences that had flowed from that fatal and yet innocent mistake on the part of his son.

He confessed that the empire of the air, that priceless legacy which they had received from its first conqueror, had been lost, and that, not only the outside nations of the earth, but even Aeria itself stood upon the eve of a conflict in comparison with which even the War of the Terror itself would prove almost insignificant. All that had been won then had now to be fought for over again, and fought for with weapons the destructiveness of which made impossible any estimate of the carnage and desolation that were about to burst upon the world.

Then he described how Alan and Alexis, acting under the orders of the Council, had, after vainly trying to arouse the rulers and senates of Anglo-Saxondom to a sense of their danger and responsibility, proclaimed martial law throughout the whole area of the Federation, reasserted the supremacy which the Council had resigned nearly seven years before, and taken the direct conduct of affairs into their own hands.

He told how the manhood of Europe, America, Southern Africa, and Australia had, under the influence of their appeals, roused itself from the sloth of prosperity and the vain dreams of democracy, and under their leadership had mustered millions upon millions strong to oppose those who determined to rivet the chains of despotism once more upon the limbs of free men.

The energy and devotion of the two men whose exile was to end that day had accomplished this miracle in less than a twelvemonth. All the mechanical resources of the Federation had been simultaneously devoted to the building of an aerial navy, which already numbered nearly a thousand vessels, and more than a hundred dockyards had achieved the construction of a navy of over a thousand submarine warships, while millions of small-arms had been sent out from Aeria, or manufactured in the arsenals of the Federation for the equipment of the newly-created armies.

What the issue would be of the mighty struggle which would begin in six days, no man could tell, but all that could be done to give the victory to Aeria and the Federation had been done, and the rest lay in the hands of the God of Battles, who had given their ancestors the victory in the days of the Terror. The President concluded his address by saying--

"Those through whom, if not by whom, this calamity has undoubtedly fallen upon the world, have been recalled to Aeria by the Council, after nearly seven years of exile, to receive reinstatement in their long-forfeited rights of citizenship, but even now they will not reassume those rights unless their welcome home is unanimous. Therefore, while their ships are still outside our mountains, if any citizen of Aeria has, even at this eleventh hour, any reason to give why they should not be permitted to recross the barriers which separate us from the rest of the world, let him or her come forward now and state it."

He ceased, and for a few moments there was perfect silence throughout the vast congregation. Not a man or woman moved or spoke, and all eyes were turned on the President, waiting for him to speak, again. In a voice whose now unrestrained emotion contrasted strongly with the former impassiveness of his tones he said--

"Then their welcome shall be unmarred by any voice of dissent! As the father of one of the exiles I thank you for endorsing the sanction which, as President of the Council, I have believed it my duty to give to the return of my son Alan and his friend and companion, Alexis Masarov, who fell with him and with him has risen again."

Hardly had the last word left his lips when salvo after salvo of aerial artillery roared out from mid-air all round the mountains, and came echoing down the upper gorges and ravines to tell the people of Aeria that the fleet which had been sent out to escort the returning exiles was already in sight.

So spacious were the approaches to the vast building that in less than ten minutes from the time the President had left the rostrum on hearing the salutes from the sky not a soul remained within its precincts.

Outside the Council Hall the scene was such as to baffle all attempts at adequate description. Hundreds of aerial craft, fashioned in every conceivable variety of design that the educated fancy of their owners could suggest, soared up from various parts of the city and its environs, and made towards the Ridge to the north of the valley.

The summit was about four thousand feet above the slope on which the city stood, and it was quite within the capacity of the pleasure-craft to scale this height. So their glittering wings beat the cool, fresh air of the morning with rapid strokes, and the whole flotilla of them soared upwards until their occupants were able to see over the mighty rock-wall, and the illimitable landscape beyond opened out before their expectant gaze.

The President, the Vice-President, and the twelve members of the Council with their families had embarked on one of the new aerial battleships, two hundred and fifty of which had been constructed during the past year. The Avenger, as she had been named, in view of the fact that she was henceforth to be placed under Alan's immediate command as flagship of the combined Aerial and Federation fleets, was the largest aerial cruiser then in existence, and embodied the highest structural skill to which the engineers of Aeria had attained.

From the stern to the point of her ram she was two hundred and seventy-five feet in length, with a midships beam of thirty feet. She was sustained in the air on two pairs of wings, one working under the other. Of these, the lower and larger pair measured two hundred feet from point to point and fifty feet in their greatest breadth, while the upper pair, working nearly flush with the deck, were two-thirds of their size. She carried ten guns on each broadside, and two bow and two stern chasers of a range limited only by the possibility of taking aim at the object to be destroyed, and her propellers were capable of driving her through the air at the hitherto unheard-of speed of six hundred miles an hour.¹

¹ Those readers who may be inclined to think this speed extravagant or impossible are requested to remember that the most recent experiments in aerodynamics have proved that the higher the speed of an aerial machine the less is the power required to support and propel it, or, to quote the words of Professor Langley, of the Smithsonian Institute, "One horse-power will transport a larger weight at twenty miles an hour than at ten, a still larger at forty miles an hour than at twenty, and so on with increasing economy of power with each higher speed up to some remote limit not yet attained in experiment." Granted therefore the practically illimitable energy of the motive power supposed to be at the command of the Aerians, there is no reason why a ship of the dimensions of the Avenger should not be propelled at the enormous speed mentioned in the text.

The Avenger, attended by an escort of fifty cruisers of somewhat smaller dimensions than her own, rapidly out-distanced the flotilla of pleasure-craft, and passing over the Ridge at a speed of sixty miles an hour, stopped at an elevation of a thousand feet above it.

From here those on her deck could see the vast oval of the valley encircled by the sentinel ships which now constantly patrolled the mountain bulwarks of Aeria, and which were launching hundreds of time-shells up into the air from their outer broadsides and producing a continuous roar of explosions which formed such a greeting salute as had never been heard on earth or in the air before.

Presently an answering roll of thunder was heard far away to the north, growing every moment louder and louder.

"There they come at last!" cried Isma, who was standing with Alma in the bow of the Avenger, eagerly scanning the northern heavens through a pair of field-glasses. "I can see the flashes of the shells quite distinctly."

As she spoke she handed the glasses to Alma, and noticed, not without a little smile of satisfaction, that her hands trembled slightly as she raised them to her eyes.

"Yes, they are coming," said Alma, in a tone that might have been a good deal steadier than it was. "I can see the sun shining upon the hulls of the ships. They are coming up very fast, evidently."

"Of course they are!" laughed Isma. "After the poor fellows have been shut out all this time from the delights of Aeria, it is only natural that they should hasten their home-coming. Look, look! you can see them without the glasses now. What a swarm of them there seems to be!"

As she spoke an immense fleet, numbering nearly five hundred vessels spread out in the form of a vast crescent, the arc of which was turned towards Aeria, swept up out of the blue distance, their polished hulls glittering in the bright sunlight. In the centre of the arc and slightly elevated above the rest, shone the blue hull and the white glistening wings of the Ithuriel, and close in her wake followed the Isma.

When the advancing fleet was within five miles of the mountains it slowed down from four hundred to about fifty miles an hour. At the same instant the other fleet ran up the Aerial and Federation flags and the simply eloquent signal, "welcome Home!" flew from the lofty foremast of the Avenger. It was instantly acknowledged by the Ithuriel, and then on all the five hundred vessels the Aerial and Federation flags were run to the mastheads and dipped three times in greeting.

Then the two points of the vast crescent that they formed swung slowly and regularly forward until the arc was inverted and the Ithuriel and the Isma came along side by side midway between the two horns.

When the two fleets were within half a mile of each other the Avenger, with twenty-five of her consorts on each side, swung round into line with their prows pointing towards the mountains, and in this order, at fifty miles an hour and an elevation of a thousand feet above the Ridge, the combined squadrons swept across the mountain barrier, and Alan and Alexis, each steering his own vessel in the conning-tower, saw for the first time, after nearly seven years of exile, the incomparable beauties of the Aerial landscape opening out before their eyes.

Following the movements of the leading squadron, they dipped as soon as they had passed over the Ridge, and were met on their downward flight by the hundreds of pleasure-craft which were waiting for them in mid-air.

Thousands of gaily-coloured handkerchiefs were waved in welcome to them, and many a greeting in the sign-language passed from the crews of the warships to the occupants of the pleasure-craft and back again, for some of the former had been on foreign service for nearly a year, and there were many pleasant relationships to be renewed which had been interrupted by the calls of duty.

Far below the home-comers could see the spacious streets of the great city, brilliant with the gaily attired throngs who had come to welcome them, and heard the greeting chorus of thousands of bells chiming in gladsome peals from hundreds of towers and minarets scattered over the city and its environs.

Signals were now flown from the Avenger directing the whole of Alan's fleet, excepting the Ithuriel and the Isma, to alight on a great sloping plain to the northward of the city, where their crews were to disembark and then proceed to the central hall of the Temple. Acting on previous orders, the consorts of

the Avenger did the same. The pleasure-craft pattered downwards on to the housetops, and so the three battleships were left alone in the air, the Ithuriel now floating on the right of the Avenger and the Isma on the left.

Amid the welcoming cheers of the throngs which now filled the great square they sank slowly down, and at length alighted on the roof of the President's palace. Then the doors of the deck-chambers opened and a last and loudest cheer of all rose up as, in full view of the assembled thousands in the square, the President and Maurice Masarov once more clasped hands with their long-exiled sons.

Then they descended into the interior of the palace, followed by the Council and the other guests on board the Avenger.

In the President's room, the same in which he had received Olga Romanoff's challenge from the skies, Alan and Alexis were welcomed home again by those who were nearest and dearest to them. Only their immediate kindred were present, for, in the nature of the case, the occasion could have been nothing but a private one. Nor could mere words of description do justice to the tender pathos of the scene that was enacted in that inner chamber, for but few words were spoken even by the actors in it. The emotions of such a moment were too intense and overpowering for speech, and so heart spoke to heart almost in silence.

Alma, who had, of course, remained outside in the reception-room of the palace with the Council and her parents, felt even more keenly than she had expected the truth of the prophecy that she had uttered to Isma an hour or so before. Amidst all the thousands of Aeria she was the only one whose heart was heavy on that day of universal rejoicing.

Once, and once only, her eyes had met Alan's, but the single swift glance had been more than enough to tell her how far they now stood apart. She had seen the light of pleasure and triumph suddenly die out of his eyes and the bright flush on his cheek pale as he looked at her.

There had not even been a greeting smile on his lips as he bowed his cold, grave salutation to her and then turned away to look down upon the city and the splendid prospect of the valley that was opening before him. This had happened up in mid-air, just as the ships had crossed the Ridge in close order, and she had not been able to trust herself to look at him again even when they had disembarked on the roof of the palace.

The swift telegraphy of that one glance had been enough to tell her that it was not the fond, light-hearted lover of her girlhood that had come back, but a strong, stern, and prematurely grave man, who knew all and more than she knew of the new relation between them, and who knew also that they could not meet as they had parted, and so accepted the changed conditions with a proud reserve that drew a sharp dividing line between them which, for all she knew, might never be crossed.

Though outwardly she was calm and perfectly self-possessed, she waited in a suspense that almost amounted to mental agony for the moment when the greetings in the President's room would be over and Alan and Alexis would be brought out to be formally presented to the Council. Then their hands would have to meet and words would have to pass between them.

Meet as strangers they could not, for everyone knew--even he knew--why she had refused all these years to wed with any other man, nor yet could they meet as lovers, as Isma and Alexis had perhaps done by this time, for between them the shadow had fallen, and even if there was love in their hearts there could be none upon their lips.

If Olga Romanoff could have looked into Alma's soul at that moment, she would have seen something very like a fulfilment of a prophecy she had made on board the old Ithuriel six years and a half before to Alan, when she first heard of her rival--"By your hand I will wring her heart dry, and cast it aside to wither like an apple shaken from the tree!" In those moments of suspense it seemed to Alma that even now her heart was withering under the blight of this great sorrow that had fallen upon her life after all her years of loving and patient waiting.

At last she heard footsteps and voices in the corridor that led from the private apartments of the palace. They were coming, and almost mechanically she turned her eyes towards the curtains which

screened the doorway through which they would enter. They parted, and Alan came in walking by his father's side and with Isma hanging laughing on his arm.

She shrank back a little as she saw Isma look at her for a moment and then say something to Alan. But he appeared to take no notice, and walked forward with his father to where the members of the Council were waiting to receive him. She heard the President say the formal words of presentation, and saw the rulers of Aeria one after another grasp his hands, and then those of Alexis, greeting them heartily as they did so.

Then the little group opened, and she saw, as in a waking dream, Alan's tall form striding towards her with both hands outstretched, and heard a voice that was his, and yet not his, so deep a ring of unwonted gravity was there in it, say--

"Are you going to be the only one who has no greeting for the prodigal, Alma? Have you forgotten that we were sweet-hearts once, and therefore surely may be friends now?"

There was an emphasis on the word "friends" that was perhaps imperceptible to all ears but hers, but she caught it, and took her cue from it instantly. With admirable tact he had, in that one word, shown her the only basis on which it would be possible for them to take part together in the society of the valley.

As man and woman they must be to one another as friends whose friendship was sweetened by the recollection that long ago, as boy and girl, they had been lovers. She accepted the situation with a sense of thankfulness and infinite relief, and, frankly placing her hands in his and summoning all her self-command to her aid, she looked steadily up into his bronzed bearded face, and said gravely and sweetly--

"You know that that is not so, Alan, and if my welcome is a little tardy it is none the less sincere for that reason. There were others who had a prior claim, and so I waited, for it is only right that friends should come after kindred. Welcome home! I suppose we are going to the Council Hall now, to see what we are all longing so much to see--the Golden Wings once more upon your brows."

"Yes," replied Alan colouring slightly, as he noticed her upward glance at his sable head-gear, "we are going there immediately, I believe, but," he continued in a lower tone and still holding her hand in his, "long and anxiously as I have looked forward to to-day and its promise, half of that promise will be betrayed unless you tell me first that you believe I have fairly won the right to wear the Golden Wings again. Tell me, now, do you in your heart think so?"

"If you have not done so," she replied, only keeping her voice steady by a supreme effort, "then it would be hopeless for any man to look for forgiveness on earth. You have fallen and you have risen again, and to-day there are no two men in Aeria more worthy of honour than you and Alexis are."

He looked down into the clear depths of her soft grey eyes as she spoke, and in another instant he might have forgotten that which sealed his lips to all words of love, and all the reserve to which he had been schooling himself for so long, but at that moment Alma's mother came towards them saying that the President was ready to take Alan to the Council Hall, and--this with a smile--that thousands should not be kept waiting for the sake of one. Her words recalled him to himself, and, with an inclination of his black-plumed head, he said--

"That is enough, for now I know that I have heard the truth from the lips of my severest judge, and I am well content with it. I have not lost everything if you believe that I have regained my honour."

"We all believe that, Alan," said Alma's mother before her daughter could reply; "and, more than that, I know of no one in Aeria who thinks that you ever really lost it. Now go to your father. He is thinking of the thousands who are waiting anxiously for you in the Council Hall. You can finish this conversation later on."

He accepted the dismissal with a smile, and as he went back he saw Isma slip away from Alexis' side with a tell-tale blush on her lovely face, and, giving him a saucy, laughing glance as she passed him, run lightly across the room to Alma's side.

"Well," she said, reading too swiftly and not very correctly the altered expression of her friend's face,

"have you made friends, then, after all? I thought you would, and--oh, Alma, I am so happy!"

"Yes," replied Alma gravely, though she could not repress a smile at the radiant face that looked up at hers, "we have made friends. But you seem to have done something more than that. Your explanations"--

"There were no explanations at all," interrupted Isma, rosy red from neck to brow. "When we met in the room he picked me up in his arms before everybody and kissed me--and after that of course there was nothing to be said."

CHAPTER XXII. THE EVE OF BATTLE.

AN irregular procession was now formed, at the head of which walked the two returned exiles, each with his father by his side, and followed by the rest of the company. They passed out of the reception-room, down the wide entrance-hall, and out of the great arched portal which opened on to the square.

As they appeared at the top of the spacious flight of marble steps which led from it down to the pavement, a mighty cheer of welcome went up from a hundred thousand throats, the peals of bells in the four towers which rose from the angles of the Council Hall sent forth the signal to all the other belfries of the city, and, amidst the jubilant chorus that instantly burst forth, the scene of the reinvestiture was reached. Then the great bell in the dome tolled out one sonorous warning note, and instantly there was silence on the earth and in the air.

This was at the moment that the procession, after passing half round the square along the broad path left for it by the cheering throng, halted in front of the main entrance to the Temple of Aeria, which faced towards the south, in the middle of the magnificent facade fronting a marble-paved avenue of double rows of palms and tree-ferns which ran in a straight line for three miles down to the shores of the lake.

The Aerians had progressed far beyond the stage of semi-barbaric pomp and display, and so the ceremony of restoring to Alan and Alexis the rights of citizenship, of which the Golden Wings were the symbol, solemn as it was, was also simple in the extreme.

As the vast curtains which hung over the main doors of the Temple swung aside to admit them, they fell out of the procession and doffed their sable head-gear. The President and his fellow Councillors went on and took up their position in front of the three pillars under the centre of the dome.

Then a guard of honour, composed of a hundred of their shipmates and companions-in-arms from Kerguelen, marched up to the door and formed into two files, between which Alan and Alexis walked down the aisle through the space left by the orderly throng that filled the vast building, from the floor to the topmost tier of the rows of seats which rose half-way up the lofty walls, and so came in front of the President and the Council.

Here their guard halted and formed a semicircle, leaving them in the open space within it. A breathless silence fell upon the assembled thousands as they dropped on one knee before the President. Then, in a voice whose every accent rang distinctly to the farthest corners of the huge building, he said--

"Alan Arnold and Alexis Masarov, the year of your probation ended with the rising of this morning's sun. You have been tried and you have not been found wanting, and that of which the arch-enemy of our race robbed you for a time you have regained by manly valour and patient devotion.

"Therefore, by command of the Supreme Council, and with the consent of all the citizens of Aeria, I restore to you the symbols of those rights which you lost and have regained.

"In the presence of God and this assembly, and on the holy ground that is sanctified by the ashes of those mighty ancestors of ours who bequeathed to us the empire of the world, I replace the Golden Wings upon your brows, in the full belief that from the higher and happier sphere they now inhabit they are looking down with approval upon the act.

"Rise now, recrowned Princes of the Air, and in the near approaching day of battle go forth with fearless hearts and stainless honour to do that which the voice of duty and the needs of humanity shall bid you do!"

As he ceased speaking he held out a hand to each of them, and so they rose to their feet again, once more wearing the Golden Wings, once more free and equal amidst their peers of the Royal race of Aeria. As they did so a burst of jubilant melody rolled out, apparently from all parts of the Temple at once.

It was the opening chorus of a triumphal march which the greatest living musician of Aeria, and

therefore of the world, had composed in honour of the day and the event, and as its splendid harmonies rolled out from the hidden organ through the vast interior, and through the open portals into the square beyond, the great assembly filed out in four streams from the Temple, and all Aeria made ready to give itself up to feasting and merry-making for the rest of the day.

For three days Aeria kept high festival in honour of the home-coming of the son of the President and his companion in exile, but for all that there was sterner business in hand than merry-making for those in authority. Save in the almost impossible event of overtures of peace being received from the Sultan, war which, in the nature of the circumstances, could hardly fail to be universal, would actually begin at daybreak on the 16th of May, that is to say in five days after the return of Alan and Alexis.

The greater part, therefore, even of the days of rejoicing was really spent in hard work by those upon whom had devolved the tremendous responsibility of counteracting as far as was possible the designs of conquest and oppression to which Olga Romanoff, by means of her fatal beauty and subtle diplomacy, had succeeded in irrevocably committing Khalid the Magnificent.

Early on the morning of the day following the reinvestiture of Alan and Alexis with the symbols of Aerial citizenship a council of war was held in the President's palace, which was attended by all the members of the ruling Council, the chief engineers of the settlement, and the admirals in command of the aerial and sea navies and the squadrons posted at the various stations throughout the world.

Before this assembly Alan, who had already entered upon the active discharge of his duties as Commander-in-Chief of all the forces of Aeria and the Federation, laid the details of his plans of attack and defence, and invited criticism upon them.

The same day Alan transferred his flag and his crew from the Ithuriel to the Avenger, while Alexis took possession of a splendid vessel of the same type, to which the name Orion had been given, after that of the air-ship commanded by Alan Tremayne in the battle of Armageddon. Alexis, however, had very little difficulty in obtaining the consent of the Council to his substituting another name for this, with the consequence that the prize taken from the enemy resumed her Russian name, and remained in Aeria as a trophy of the skill of her captors.

Perhaps in his heart Alan would have dearly liked to have made a similar change in the name of the Avenger, but it was impossible for him to propose it, situated as he was with regard to Alma.

Alexis and Isma had taken the shortest, and therefore the wisest, course out of the terribly delicate and embarrassing position which had been created by the unholy passions and ruthless treachery of Olga Romanoff. They had tacitly agreed to ignore it in toto, and to begin again where they had left off nearly seven years before, and thus it came to pass that Isma's own pretty hands spilled the christening wine over the shapely bows of her formidable namesake.

The first use that Alan made of his new ship was to test her immense capabilities to the utmost, so that he might know what demands he might safely make upon her in possible emergencies. He rushed her at full speed round the mountain bulwarks of Aeria, a distance of two hundred and fifty miles and found that she completed the circuit in just twenty-five minutes, which gave a speed of six hundred miles an hour. Alexis followed, and covered the same distance in twenty-seven minutes and a half in the Isma.

These trials proved that the new Aerial vessels were from fifty to seventy-five miles an hour faster than the models on which their enemies had been building their new fleets--a fact which, unless Olga and her ally had made a corresponding improvement in their battleships, might be expected to have a considerable effect on the issue of the coming war.

After the speed-trials the soaring powers of the two vessels were tried, and it was demonstrated that their machinery was sufficiently powerful to carry them to altitudes beyond which it was not possible for human beings to breathe. After this all the defences of Aeria were visited and examined in detail, and then on the second day after their arrival in the valley Alan and Alexis divided all the air-ships at their disposal into two squadrons, each numbering nearly four hundred vessels, one of which, commanded by Alan, guarded the valley, while the other, under Alexis, constituted an attacking force,

the duty of which was to find out, if possible, any weak point in the defensive organisation.

From noon to midnight the mimic battle went on in strict accordance with the accepted rules of aerial warfare, but though Alexis and the captains of his fleet tried everything that skill or daring could suggest, the defence proved too strong for them, and during the whole twelve hours they were unable to bring a single vessel into such a position that she could send a shell into Aeria without previously exposing herself to a fire that must have annihilated her in an instant.

This aerial review was the concluding spectacle of the festivities, and it was watched by the occupants of thousands of pleasure-craft, whose interest in it was sharpened by the knowledge that before many days a conflict such as it portrayed might be raging in deadly earnest round the mountain bulwarks of their hitherto inviolate domain.

So consummate was the skill displayed by Alan in this defence that as soon as the Avenger touched ground after the review was over he was summoned to the Council Chamber in the President's palace to receive the thanks of the Senate and cordial expression of the perfect confidence that the people of Aeria would feel, whatever the magnitude of the war might prove to be, while the conduct of the campaign was in his hands and those of Alexis, whose tactics had also been so perfect that, without once putting a single ship in danger, he had made it impossible for Alan to do anything more than remain strictly on the defensive.

On the following day, the 14th, the motive power of all the vessels was renewed, ammunition laid in, and all the guns and engines minutely inspected, so that there might be no chance of failure when the moment of trial came. Then the final arrangements for the defence of Aeria itself were perfected, and when that was done, the Vale of Paradise, as its inhabitants fondly called their lovely land, was a vast fortress compared with which the strongholds of the present day would be as harmless and defenceless as molehills.

Four hundred aerial battleships of what were now called the first and second classes, ranging in speed from four to five hundred and fifty miles an hour and mounting from ten to twenty guns each, were to patrol the outer walls of the mountains, at distances of five and ten miles from them and at elevations varying from two to ten thousand feet. These were divided into two fleets of two hundred each which relieved each other every six hours, so that their supply of motive power might be constantly renewed.

In addition to these, two squadrons of twenty-five of the most powerful warships of the newest type alternately kept watch and ward against surprise in the upper regions of the air from fifteen to twenty thousand feet above the valley, while all round the great circuit of the mountains were planted in the most favourable positions nearly a thousand land batteries mounting three, five, and ten guns each, which, if necessary, would be able to surround Aeria with a zone of storm and flame which nothing living could pass and still live.

By day the range of vision from the decks of the sentinel ships would make surprise impossible, and at night the great electric suns on the summits of the mountains, aided by hundreds of search-lights flashing through the darkness in every direction, made an attack under cover of the darkness almost equally hopeless.

The news of the alliance between Olga and the Sultan had acted like a trumpet-call to battle on the proud and martial spirit of the Aerians. Generation after generation their young men had been trained in the arts of war as well as in those of peace, for the wisdom of their ancestors had foreseen that, in the ordinary progress of science, it was impossible for many generations to pass without some independent solution of the problem of aerial navigation, which must, sooner or later, result in a challenge of their supremacy.

Consequently, all through the years of profound peace which the outside world had enjoyed under their rule, their vigilance had never slept for a moment, and their men and ships and materials of war were kept in the highest possible state of efficiency. Thus, though the Aerial nation numbered little more than a million souls, inhabiting a territory of some two hundred and fifty square miles, the

amount of effective strength that it was able to put forth on an emergency was totally disproportionate to its size.

Living in a region of inexhaustible fertility and boundless mineral wealth, with no idle or mere consuming classes, no politics, and no laws that a child of ten could not understand, they led simple, natural, and busy lives, accumulating immense public and private riches, which were as constantly expended in increasing the splendour and power of the State, which, as a whole, was the expression of the wealth and patriotism of its citizens.

No sooner had the alliance of their enemies become an accomplished fact than they devoted the whole of their vast resources to increasing their offensive and defensive armaments to the utmost of their power. Reserves of material that had been stored up year after year had been drawn upon, the mighty natural forces that they had brought into subjection laboured night and day for them, and ships and machinery and guns came into existence as though at the bidding of some race of magicians.

Magazines were filled with immense stores of ammunition, potential death and destruction such as had never been wielded by human hands before--and commanders and officers for all the battleships of the Federation had been sent out as each squadron of vessels was completed.

In a word, Aeria had donned her panoply of war, and stood armed at all points, ready to fight the world if necessary in defence of the priceless heritage which its citizens had received from their fathers, the giants who in the days of the Terror had taken despotism and oppression by the throat and flung them headlong out of the world.

The defences of Aeria were to be under the immediate command of the President. All the oceanic stations, save Kerguelen, Teneriffe, Bermuda, and Hawaii, had been abandoned so as to permit of greater concentration of forces, while fifty new ones had been established in different parts of Europe and the British Islands, for here the brunt of the attack was to be expected, and here the enemy must be met and crushed if Anglo-Saxon civilisation was to be saved from a new era of militarism and personal oppression.

Alan and Alexis were to take command of the Western and Eastern fleets into which the aerial forces were to be divided, Alan in the West with Britain as his chief base of operation, and Alexis in the East with the Balkan Peninsula as his base between the Russian and Moslem headquarters.

The naval fleets, in three divisions, the Atlantic, Mediterranean, and Pacific squadrons, had already received their general instructions, and were waiting at their various rendezvous for the outbreak of hostilities. The Atlantic squadron blocked the Straits of Gibraltar, the Narrow Seas of Britain, and the approaches to the Baltic, the Mediterranean division patrolled the Inland Sea from Gibraltar to Cyprus, and the Pacific fleet were blockading the southern approach to the Red Sea, ready to operate against any junction of the Indian and African sea forces of the Sultan.

At midnight, on the 14th, Alan and Alexis were to set out for their respective fields of operation, and that evening there was a farewell banquet given by the Council in the President's palace in honour of them and the commanders of their ships. Many a hearty toast was given and drunk in the sparkling golden wine of Aeria, and many a hearty God-speed and loving farewell passed between those who remained at home and those who were going forth to do battle for them and for the peace of the world in distant skies, and to pass through the fiery storm of such warfare as had never been waged in the world before.

Just before twelve, when the fleets were ready to take the air, and the last farewells were being said, the Avenger and the Isma were lying on the roof of the President's palace, and their commanders were standing by the gangway steps which hung down from the deck-chambers, the centres of two little groups of grave, silent men and sorrowing women, their nearest and dearest in a land where all were friends.

The last blessings of fathers and mothers had been given and taken, and then came the hardest farewells of all. Isma and Alexis parted as declared lovers will part as long as the Fates are cruel, but when Alan took Alma's hands in his for the last time, and looked down upon the pale loveliness of her

perfect face and into the clear calm depths of her eyes, the word that he had been longing to say ever since his return died upon his lips.

The contrast between her stainless purity and the darkness of the blot that Olga's unholy passion had placed upon his life rose up in all its horror for the hundredth time before him, and once more the impassable gulf opened between them. All that he could say was--

"Good-bye, Alma! You, too, will wish me God-speed, won't you?"

"With all my heart, yes, Allan," she replied in low, sweet, steady tones. "God guard you in your good work and send you back in safety to us. You will come back rich in honours and followed by the blessings of the world you are going to rescue from the oppressors"--

"Or I shall never come! Good-bye, Alma, good-bye, all!" he said, breaking upon her speech, for he could bear to hear no more, and as he spoke he stooped and kissed her forehead as he had kissed Isma's a few moments before. Then he turned and ran up the steps just as Alexis took his last kiss and did the same.

As they gained the decks of their ships the great bell in the dome of the Temple boomed out the first stroke of twelve. At the sixth stroke the electric suns on the summits of the mountains blazed out simultaneously at a hundred points, a long, deep roar of thunder rolled round the bulwarks of Aeria and with search-lights flashing out ahead and astern, the four hundred battleships of the two squadrons rose into the air and swept up towards the Ridge.

A thousand feet above it they stopped and hung for a moment motionless in mid-air. Then the roar of a thousand shells exploding far up in the quaking sky answered the salutes from the sentinel ships, and then, still signalling farewells with their search-lights, the squadrons swept out into the ocean of darkness that loomed round the light-girdled realm of Aeria.

CHAPTER XXIII. THE FIRST BLOW.

THE night of the 15th of May 2037 was passed in an agony of apprehension by nearly the whole of civilised humanity. The long threatened and universally feared thunder-cloud of war had at last loomed up over the serene horizon of peace in full view of the whole world.

Although the events of the last six years had to some extent prepared the minds of men for the impending disaster, now that the last hour of the long peace was really about to strike there were very, very few among the millions of noncombatants who were able to rise superior to the universal panic.

The ocean terrorism which had paralysed the commerce of the world five years and a half before, fearful as it had been, was, so far as the bulk of humanity was concerned, a terror of the unseen. Ships had gone out to sea and had vanished into the depths, leaving no trace behind them, but the hand that struck the blow had remained invisible.

Now, however, this same terror, magnified a thousandfold, was to come close up to the shores of lands whose inhabitants had never known what it was for man to raise his hand against his brother. Tomorrow the sun would rise as usual, the earth would smile, the sea would dance, and the air grow bright and warm under his beams, yet air and earth and sea would be wholly strange to the eyes of men, for they would be invested with terrors hitherto only pictured by the fears of panic.

The air would be charged with death. Beneath the laughing waves great battleships would be speeding swiftly, silently, and invisibly on their errands of destruction, and the fair face of earth would be scarred by the harrow of battle, and seared with the fires of murderous passion.

The ocean traffic of the world had been almost wholly at a standstill for nearly a month. Transports which could complete their voyages before the end of the truce had done so; but since the 1st of May only short voyages had been attempted, for it was known that escape from the attack of a submarine battleship would be absolutely impossible for any vessels that floated on the surface of the water.

The immediate results of this had of course been the dislocation of trade and commerce and ever-increasing scarcity of food in the great centres of population. Impossible, absurd even, as it still seemed to those who had not thoroughly recognised the tremendous gravity of the situation, the inhabitants of the magnificent cities of the old and new worlds were actually within measurable distance, even before a blow had been struck, of seeing the spectre of Famine cross the threshold of their palaces.

In a few days communications by land would be as difficult and as dangerous as those by sea, for, swift as the trains were, their speed was far excelled by that of the slowest air-ship, which could wreck them with a single shot. Bridges would be destroyed, stations blown up, and lines cut in a hundred places at once, till railway travelling would have to cease all over the world.

Thus the most splendid civilisation of all the ages stood trembling on the verge of destruction at the moment when the sleepless eyes of the inhabitants of Alexandria saw the first faint glow of the dawn brightening the eastern sky. No one knew where or how the first blow would be struck in the strange and terrible warfare for the commencement of which the rising of that morning's sun gave the signal.

There were scarcely any elements in common with the war of the nineteenth century save the slaughter and destruction that it would entail. There could be no marshalling of fleets or warships on the sea, for to be detected by an enemy would be coming very near to being destroyed. Every blow would have to be struck swiftly, silently, and without warning, for only one could be struck, and to fail would be to be lost.

So, too, in the air, as had been proved at Kerguelen and Mount Terror. Everything would depend upon the supreme strategy which enabled the first fatal shot to be sent home that would decide battle after battle without hope for the vanquished to recover from their defeat.

But after all it would be on land that the terrors of the new warfare would be most fearfully manifested. It needed but little effort of the highly-strung imaginations of those who were waiting for the world-tragedy to begin to picture vast armies, magnificent in their strength and splendid in their

equipments, marching to grapple with each other on some field of Titanic strife. Suddenly and without warning they would be smitten by an invisible foe floating far above the clouds, or perhaps visible only as a tiny speck of light high in the central blue.

Their battalions would be torn to pieces, their regiments decimated and thrown into confusion, their commanders--the brains of the huge organisms--would have no such protection as they had in the wars of former times, for the aerial artillery would reach everywhere, and the Commander-in-Chief in his headquarters would be as much exposed as the private in his bivouac.

Thus the brain would be destroyed and the body reduced to impotence; disciplined armies would become lawless and unregulated hordes in a few days or weeks, and the organised slaughter of the battlefield would be exchanged for the butchery and plunder of the city carried by assault.

It was little wonder, then, that the world watched the ending of its last night of peace and the dawning of its first day of battle with feelings such as men had not felt for five generations, if, indeed, ever before in the history of man.

It was not a mere war of nations with which men were confronted. The evil genius of a single woman had achieved the unheard-of feat of dividing the human race into two hostile forces so nearly balanced in strength that mutual destruction seemed a not improbable issue of what might after all prove to be the death-struggle of humanity, the collapse of civilisation and the sinking of a remnant of mankind back to the level of barbarians whose children would wander amidst the ruins of their forefathers' habitations, and wonder what race of demigods had created the wondrous fabrics whose very fragments were splendid.

As the dawn flew round the world on that momentous morning every eye was turned towards the heavens, on every lip there was but one question: Where will the first blow be struck? and in every heart there was but one thought: Will it reach me or my dear ones?

The focus of all human interest was for a moment Alexandria, for it was known that from there the main expeditionary force was to be sent out to, if possible, effect a landing on the shores of Italy, while other expeditions were to start from Tripoli, Tunis, and Oran to effect landings in France and Spain. The bridge across the Straits of Gibraltar from Point Cires to Gualdamesi was to all intents and purposes neutral, since it would have been madness to send trains conveying troops across it when a single shot from the British battery at Gibraltar would have shattered the bridge to fragments.

The forces destined by the Sultan for the invasion of Europe would, therefore, either have to be conveyed in swift transports by sea, protected by squadrons of air-ships and flotillas of submarine battleships, or else they would have to go by land round the Levant by Syria, and so through Asia Minor to the shores of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus.

As the European shores of these two straits were known to be defended by concealed batteries mounting guns a single shot from which would blow the biggest transport afloat out of the water, the Sultan had decided to make the attempt to invade Italy, France, and Spain by sea, while the Russian forces, with their Asiatic allies, were to attack the central nations from the east.

So far, therefore, as could be foreseen, the Mediterranean would once more be the arena of strife, and on some part of its shores or its waters the first blow of the war would be struck. Every possible preparation for the attack upon Europe had been finally completed immediately after the return of Khalid from the coronation of Olga on the 11th, but beyond the fact that the coasts of Europe, from the Straits of Dover to the Golden Horn, were patrolled by Federation battleships, nothing was known of the dispositions which had been made for the defence of Europe.

Gibraltar, Minorca, Cape Spartivento, Mount Ida in Candia and Olympus in Cyprus formed a chain of Federation posts which, while they had been made impregnable to all attack save long-sustained bombardment from the air, rendered any attempt on the part of large fleets to cross the Mediterranean an extremely hazardous venture.

These stations were connected from Gibraltar to Cyprus by telephonic cables, buried beneath the floor of the sea to hide them from the enemy's cruisers, and also by patrols of battleships constantly

moving to and fro in touch with each other along the whole line, and this was the first barrier through which the Moslem Sultan had to force his way before he could land his armies upon the shores of Southern Europe.

This, too, formed what may be termed the first line of defence of the Federation and of Christendom, and although neither the Sultan nor the Tsarina was wholly aware of the fact, it had been strengthened to such a degree that it was expected to prove unbreakable even under the impact of the immense forces that would be brought to bear upon it.

When the sun at last rose over the hills of Syria and Sinai, and the watchers in the streets and on the housetops of Alexandria heard the voice of the Muezzin calling the first hour of prayer and the last hour of the world's peace, the bright blue waves of the Inland Sea lay smiling and sparkling in its earliest beams, betraying not a trace of the hidden forces which waited but for the signal that might come either from land or sea or sky to begin the work of desolation.

The harbours of the city were thronged with shipping, great transports lined the miles of quays whose network fronted the seaward verge of the Moslem capital. Some of the basins swarmed with the half-submerged hulls of scores of battleships waiting to take up their position as convoys to the flotilla which, if the Sultan's plans succeeded, would, within the next twelve hours, land nearly four million troops on European soil.

In the air, at elevations varying from five hundred to ten thousand feet, a squadron of two hundred aerial cruisers kept watch and ward against a surprise from the upper regions of the air. By the time the day had fully dawned, land and sea and sky had been scanned in vain for a sign of an enemy's presence.

The sailing of the flotilla of transports had been fixed for six o'clock by Alexandrian time, and already the battleships were moving out into the open to take up their places in advance of the fleet of transports. Fifty air-ships had ranged themselves in a long line to seaward at an elevation of two thousand feet to protect the transports from an aerial assault, and the transports themselves were moving out to form in the basin behind the breakwater, whence they were to commence their voyage.

Sultan Khalid, on board his aerial flagship Al Borak--named after the winged steed which, according to the old legend, had borne the Prophet from earth to the threshold of the Seventh Heaven--superintended in person the last preparations for the departure of his great armament. Flying hither and thither, now soaring and now sinking, he inspected first the cruisers of the air and then the flotillas of the seas, and at last, when all was ready, he took his place by one of the bow guns of the Al Borak to fire the shot that was to be the signal for the expedition to start.

But a higher intelligence and a greater tactical ability than his had already determined that the signal should be given in very different fashion. Fifty miles to the south towards the Lybian desert, high in air, fifteen thousand feet above the earth, a solitary air-ship hung suspended in the central blue.

As the sun rose she had moved slowly forward towards the city. As she came within sight of it, Alan Arnold standing in her conning-tower saw through a telescope that commanded a range of a hundred miles the disposition of the aerial fleet above Alexandria. He marked down a group of five air-ships floating some five thousand feet above the centre of the city, and singled them out as the first victims of the war.

He was, of course, far out of range of gun-fire, and to have gone within range and fired on them would have been to expose his single ship to a concentrated hail of projectiles which would have scattered her in dust through the sky. So he determined to open the game of death and destruction by a stroke as dramatic as it was terrible.

He remembered how his ancestor, Richard Arnold, in the first Ithuriel, had rammed the Russian war-balloons to the north of Muswell Hill, and resolved to eclipse even that marvellous stroke of tactics. Obeying his will like a living creature, the mighty fabric under his control sank five thousand feet and then began to gather way on a slanting course towards the Moslem air-ships.

The propellers whirled faster and faster, and the quadruple wings undulated with ever-increasing velocity until the crowds in the streets of Alexandria saw something like a swift flash of blue light

stream downward from the southern sky, and heard a long screaming roar as though the firmament was being rent in twain above them.

Then three of the air-ships floating in line above their heads seemed to break up and roll over. The crowds held their breath and pointed upwards with one accord in sudden horror, as the crippled air-ships dropped like stones towards the earth. In another moment they struck it, and then, as though the central fires of the earth had burst through in the heart of the great city, there came a crash and a shock that shook the ground like an earthquake spasm.

A vast dazzling volume of flame shot up from amidst a wide circle of blackened ruin, towers fell and roofs collapsed all round the focus of the explosion, the whole atmosphere above the city was convulsed, and the very sea itself seemed to writhe under the stress of the mighty shock, and so, leaving death and ruin and consternation behind her, the Avenger swept out over the Mediterranean at a speed that the eye could scarcely follow, after striking the first blow in the world-war of the twenty-first century.

To say that this sudden and unexpected catastrophe spread panic through the Moslem capital would be but a very inadequate description of the Avenger's first blow in the world-war. Consternation, wild and unbounded, blanched every cheek, and made every heart stand still as the mighty roar of the explosion burst upon the deafened ears of the inhabitants and then instantly died into silence, broken only by the crash of falling ruins and the screams and groans of the wounded and dying.

The red spectre of war in its most frightful form had suddenly appeared to the terrified and horror-stricken vision of millions of men and women, scarce one of whom had ever seen a deed of violence done.

Khalid, like a wise leader, did all he could to prevent the panic spreading to the troops on board the transports by issuing peremptory orders for the expedition to start at once. At the same time he signalled for half a dozen air-ships to ascend as far as possible and attempt to discover the source from which the inexplicable attack had come, an errand destined to be entirely fruitless.

In orderly succession the hundred huge transports, each carrying from eight to ten thousand men, left the outer basin in two long lines in the rear of the fifty air-ships already in position.

A hundred submarine battleships took up their stations five hundred yards in advance of the first line of transports. Fifty of these sank to a depth of thirty feet, and shot two thousand yards ahead as soon as the whole flotilla was in motion, while the other fifty ran along the surface of the water with their conning-towers just showing above the waves, ready to sink in obedience to any signal that their commanders might receive from the air-ships, which commanded an immense range of vision over the waters.

To all appearance the enemy was content with the one terrible blow that had already been struck. The smooth, sunlit sea betrayed no trace of a hostile vessel, and as far as the glasses of those on board the air-ships could sweep the sky nothing but the blue atmosphere, flecked here and there with white, fleecy clouds, could be seen.

But the Moslem commanders were far from being deceived by these peaceful appearances. From Sultan Khalid, who was commanding the expedition in person, to the engineers who worked the transports, all knew that the invisible line of the Federation patrols had to be passed somewhere in the depths of the sea before the shores of Italy could be reached.

The speed of the three flotillas was limited to twenty-five miles an hour, in order that there might be no headlong running into danger, and the commander of each of the submerged battleships had orders to rise to the surface the instant that his tell-tale needle denoted the presence of an enemy, and signal the fact to the rest of the squadron. The transports were then to stop, and were not to resume their passage until the battleships had cleared the way for them. The first division was to engage the enemy, while the second was to remain on the surface ready to defend the transports in case of need.

For six hours the expedition proceeded on its way northwest by west from Alexandria without interruption. The intention was to pass about a hundred miles to the south of the Federation post at

Candia, between which island and the Cape Spartivento the ocean patrol would most likely be met with.

Soon after twelve those on board the Sultan's flagship detected half a dozen little points of light shining amidst the waves to the north-westward. They could be nothing else but the scout-ships of the patrol; and although they were nearly ten miles away, a couple of shells were discharged at them from the Al Borak's bow gun, more as a warning to the Moslem flotilla than in the hope of doing any damage. Whether they did or not was never known, for before the explosion of the shells was seen in the water the points of light had vanished.

Signals were at once made from the flagship ordering the transports to stop, and the second division of battleships to stand by to protect them. A dozen remained on the surface of the water, running round and round the now stationary troopships in concentric circles. The others sank to varying depths, and scattered until the vague fluctuations of their needles showed that they were more than a thousand yards from each other and the transports.

As the first division had orders to keep more than two miles in advance as soon as an enemy was discovered, there would be no danger of ramming friend instead of foe. It ran on for seven miles after the main body stopped. It was moving in a single line, the vessels being at an equal distance apart, so that with the exception of the two ships at the extremities of the line, the attraction of the steel hulls on the needles should be neutralised, and therefore only give indications of vessels ahead.

At the end of the seventh mile the tell-tales ceased their wavering motions and began to point steadily, in slightly varying directions, ahead. The moment they did so the engines were stopped and the flotilla rose to the surface of the water. Their commanders found themselves out of sight of the transports, but the Al Borak, attended by ten other air-ships, was floating about a thousand feet above them. From the flagship's mainmast-head flew the signal--"Fleet eight miles to the rear. Enemy ahead. Sink and ram."

The order was instantly obeyed by the whole division, and the fifty battleships simultaneously sank out of sight to engage the invisible enemy, while the Sultan and his companions on board the air-ships waited in intense anxiety to see what the next few fateful minutes would bring forth.

No human eye could see what work of death might be going on down in the depths of the sea. Even those who took part in it would know it only by its results, and of these only the victors would know anything. They would reappear on the surface of the waves, but the vanquished would never rise again.

Minute after minute passed and still the anxious watchers on the air-ships saw nothing. The bright, sunlit waves rippled on over the abyss in which the conflict must by this time be almost over. Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed, and still no sign. Had Khalid been a mile or two farther on and closer down to the surface of the sea, he would have seen streams of air-bubbles rising swiftly here and there and instantly breaking. But from where he was he could see nothing.

Five more minutes went by and suspense gave place to apprehension. Had the whole of the first division simply sunk to its destruction into some invisible trap that had been laid for it deep down in the watery abyss? If not, how came it that not even one of the battleships had risen to the surface to tell the tale of victory or defeat?

Khalid knew that the squadron would obey orders and hurl itself at full speed, that is to say, at some hundred and fifty miles an hour, upon the enemy the moment the tell-tales found their mark. In two or three minutes--five at the outside--their rams must either have done their work or failed to do it. If they had done it they would have risen to the surface; if they had failed and themselves escaped destruction they would still have risen.

Now twenty minutes had passed and not one of the fifty battleships had reappeared. What could this mean but disaster?

And disaster it did mean, but great as it was it was as nothing compared with the frightful catastrophe which followed close upon it. All eyes on board the air-ships were so intently fixed upon that portion of the sea where the squadron was expected to rise again that no one thought for the

moment of looking back towards the transports until the dull rumbling roar of a series of explosions came rolling up out of the distance.

Instantly every glass was turned in the direction whence the sound came, and Khalid saw his great fleet of troopships tossing about in the midst of a wild commotion of the waves, out of which vast masses of white water spouted as if from the depths of the sea, and amidst these ship after ship heeled over and sank into the white seething waters.

Uttering a cry of rage and despair, he headed the Al Borak at full speed towards the scene of the disaster. In three minutes he was floating over it, helpless to do anything to avert or even delay the swift destruction that was overwhelming the splendid fleet. Distracted by impotent rage and passionate sorrow for the fate of his soldiers and sailors, who were being slain hopelessly and by wholesale beneath his eyes, he watched the awful submarine storm rage on, wrecking ship after ship and swallowing them up with all the thousands on board in the boiling gulfs which opened ever and anon amidst the waves.

When the first panic passed, the transports which were still uninjured scattered and headed away as fast as their engines would drive them to the southward, where the only chance of safety seemed to lie. But there was no escape for them from their invisible and merciless enemies.

The fate of one magnificent transport, the flagship of the fleet, may be described as an illustration of the general disaster. She was a vessel of fifty thousand tons measurement, and her crew and complement of troops numbered together nearly twenty-five thousand. She escaped the first discharge from the submarine torpedoes unharmed, and heading southward with her triple propellers revolving at their utmost velocity, rushed through the water at a speed of more than forty nautical miles an hour.

She had scarcely gained a mile on her course when the glass-domed conning-tower of a battleship appeared for an instant above the waves. Before Khalid, not knowing whether it was friend or foe, could make up his mind to fire on it, it disappeared again.

A few seconds later the great ship stopped and shuddered with some mighty shock, as though she had run head-on to a sunken reef, and heeled over to one side. Then came a dull roar, a huge column of white foaming water rose up under her side amidships, and she broke in two and vanished in the midst of a white space of swirling eddies.

Such scenes as this were occurring simultaneously in twenty different parts of the naval battlefield. The foe never showed himself save for an instant. Then came the blow that meant destruction, and the victim vanished. There was none of the pomp and pageantry of modern naval warfare; no splendid armaments of mighty ironclads and stately cruisers vomiting thunder and flame and storms of shot and shell at each other nor were there any rolling masses of battle smoke to darken the brightness of the sky.

The occupants of an open boat five miles away would not have known that the most deadly sea-fight ever waged since men had first gone down to the sea in ships was being fought out under that smiling May-day sky.

One after another the flying transports were overtaken, rammed, or blown up and sunk by the pitiless monsters which unceasingly darted hither and thither a few feet below the surface of the water, and in less than two hours after the first alarm had been given the last of the hundred transports which had sailed that morning from Alexandria had gone down a shattered wreck into the abysses of the Inland Sea.

There was no chance of saving the drowning wretches who managed to escape from the eddies of the sinking ships, as there would have been in a naval battle of to-day. The air-ships could not do so without sinking to the waves, and so making themselves marks for the irresistible rams and torpedoes of their enemies, who themselves could not be merciful, even if they would, shut up as they were in the steel leviathans whose only use was destruction.

Khalid the Magnificent, with a heart well-nigh breaking with rage and shame and sorrow, watched in passionate helplessness the destruction of his splendid fleet and the drowning, like rats in a pond, of the

soldiers who were to have borne the banner of the Crescent over the conquered fields of Christendom.

More than a million men had perished beneath his eyes, and he had not been able to fire a shot to help them, although he was in command of an aerial fleet which could have dispersed an army or wrecked a city between sunrise and noon.

But the strangest part of the strange battle was yet to come. After the last of the transports had disappeared, the attack ceased and the assailants vanished. In a few minutes the sea was as calm and bright as ever, and only a few bits of broken wooden wreckage floating here and there betrayed the fact that anything out of the common had happened.

The remnant of the Moslem squadron rose to the surface and signalled for instructions. Only twenty of them remained uninjured out of the hundred that had gone into the fight. Before the signals could be returned there was a loud hiss and a swirling noise as of some huge body rushing at a furious speed through the water, and a great battleship leapt up out of the nether waters, and hurled herself at a speed of nearly two hundred miles an hour into the midst of the floating squadron.

Her gleaming ram of azurine tore its way through the sides of three vessels in such swift succession that, almost before their fragments had time to sink, her huge bulk vanished under the waves again. But hardly was her work done than a second battleship charged into the paralysed squadron, sending two of its members to the bottom and crippling three more before she, too, vanished into the safe obscurity of the depths.

A third was met by a storm of shells from the air-ships, which burst round her and under her just as she came to the surface, and blew her out of the water in fragments. Heedless of this, a fourth plunged fiercely through the foaming area of the explosion, and had wrecked two more Moslem vessels before a shell smashed her propeller and laid her helpless on the water. Two of the Moslems instantly backed out and rushed at her, tearing two great ragged holes in her side and sinking her instantly, only to be sunk themselves in turn by a fifth charge from below.

Scarcely had this last foe disappeared in safety than a swarm of torpedoes, converging from all sides, encircled the remaining Moslem battleships. Some plunged beneath the waves to escape them, but these never reappeared. The remainder, torn and twisted and shattered by a series of explosions that flung the water mountains high all round them, sank like stones, and when the sea once more settled down, the grim work of death had been completed.

The fate which had so swiftly overwhelmed the expedition that had set out from Alexandria had almost simultaneously befallen four other expeditions which had started at the same hour from Tripoli, Tunis, Algiers, and Oran. The one disaster had been an almost exact reproduction of the others.

The same order, formation, and tactics had been observed in each of the five cases, and each of the five squadrons of transports and fleets of submarine battleships had been overwhelmed and completely destroyed by the same mysterious fate. Of five hundred transports and the same number of battleships which Sultan Khalid had possessed at sunrise on that fatal 16th of May not a single one remained by sundown, and of the more than three million souls who had manned the five fleets not one man survived.

Of the strength or the losses of the enemy that had wrought this appalling and unheard-of destruction within such a brief space of time nothing could, in the nature of the case, be known by those who had seen only some of its effects from the decks of the air-ships which floated almost helplessly over the waves which were engulfing their naval consorts. The work of annihilation had for the most part been done in the dim and silent depths of the sea, and all that they knew was the number of those of their own comrades who had gone to battle and never returned.

And yet to all practical intents and purposes these five stupendous blows which had simultaneously crushed the Moslem sea-power and half crippled the military strength of the Sultan had been struck by one hand. In other words, the victory of the Mediterranean was due to two inventions which had been made and perfected by Max Erstein, who had been transferred from Kerguelen and appointed Admiral in Command of the whole Mediterranean forces of the federation.

One of these was a highly improved form of an apparatus which had just come into use on board battleships and cruisers when the War of the Terror broke out. This was an electrical contrivance which gave warning, more or less reliable, of the approach of torpedoes, by translating the aqueous vibrations set up by them into sound-waves, which increased in intensity as the hidden destroyer came nearer.

This invention had been lost sight of when all the warships of the world were sunk in the South Atlantic after the proclamation of the Universal Peace. Earnstein's was therefore a new discovery, or rediscovery, but the advantages of his position, far ahead of the scientific skill of the nineteenth century, had enabled him to produce a much more perfect instrument, and his apparatus, which was attached to all the battleships of the Federation, not only gave warning of the approach of an enemy, but indicated his direction, the number of revolutions at which his propellers were working, and his distance at any given moment.

This not only enabled the commander of a Federation battleship to detect the presence of an enemy, but it enabled him to distinguish between friend and foe. As soon as the phonetic indicator showed that another ship was approaching he stopped his own propellers, started them, and stopped them again.

The vibrations thus set up and interrupted would be conveyed to the indicator of the approaching ship, if she had one, and she would at once return the signal. If the signal was not returned it was safe to conclude that the coming vessel was an enemy and could be rammed accordingly.

When this invention replaced the tell-tale needle that had been in use a year before, an alteration in tactics became necessary, and the fighting order became more extended. A mile instead of a thousand yards was now the limit within which the Federation battleships were not permitted to approach each other, save under special circumstances. Every vessel acted as an independent unit, subject only to the general instructions.

Earnstein's second invention was of a simpler but none the less effective character. Knowing that the Moslem and Russian squadrons would be forced to trust entirely to their tell-tale magnetised needles, he had devised a plan for making these worse than useless. As soon as the phonetic indicator told him that an enemy was coming, the commander of each of his battleships dropped a thin rope of insulated wire down thirty or forty feet into the water below him.

The lower end of this cable was a powerful electro-magnet, through which a current of electricity was kept passing along the wires. The attraction of this magnet was far stronger than that of the hull of the vessel, and consequently the needles of the enemy were deflected downwards, and gave a totally erroneous idea as to the depth at which the Federation ship was floating.

Thus when the first division of the Moslem submarine squadron charged at what its commanders thought were the hulls of their enemies, their rams passed harmlessly underneath them, merely striking the magnet and knocking it aside. The moment they had passed the magnet, its attraction swung their needles back, and showed that some mysterious mistake had been committed, but before they had time to turn and seek the mark afresh the Federation ships were upon them, and their rams had rent their way into their sides.

In this manner every ship of the first division had been destroyed within three minutes after it had made its first and last charge. Then the Federationists had risen to the surface for an instant to reconnoitre by means of the arrangement of mirrors previously described, and sinking again had worked their way back towards the transports, formed in a huge circle round them, and had sent torpedo after torpedo into their midst.

As soon as the flotilla had been thrown into confusion they had converged until they could communicate with each other by means of their submarine signals, and after that they had attacked the enemy singly. Ship after ship charged into the melee, did her work, and retired, if she escaped destruction, to give place to another.

Only twenty Federation ships had been engaged in each of the five battles, and of these forty in all had been destroyed, a loss utterly disproportionate to the gigantic damage that had been done to the enemy.

Khalid the Magnificent divined intuitively that the disaster which had overwhelmed the expedition which he had commanded in person was only a portion of a result achieved by some elaborate and consummately-conceived scheme of defence which must have been simultaneously put into operation against his other expeditions. What had succeeded against his own might well have been expected to have succeeded against them.

He at once despatched four squadrons of ten air-ships each to Tripoli and Tunis, Algiers and Oran, with orders to collect all attainable information, and to return to Alexandria as soon after sunset as possible. Then he turned the prows of the remainder of his fleet towards his capital, and gave the signal for full speed ahead.

CHAPTER XXIV. WAR AT ITS WORST.

WITHOUT even pausing to see the effects of his charge upon the three air-ships above Alexandria, Alan kept the Avenger going at full speed, soaring up into the higher regions of the atmosphere with her prow pointed to the north-east. About three hours later she was floating at an elevation of nearly five miles above Moscow, not stationary, but sweeping round and round in vast circles on her quadruple wings after the manner of the condors of the Andes, which thus sustain themselves on almost motionless wings at vast elevations and very small expenditure of force.

Below an immense expanse of country lay in unclouded clearness under the glasses of the captain of the ship and George Cosmo, late engineer of the Narwhal, who was now chief engineer of the Aerial flagship.

Not only Moscow, but a dozen other towns lay at the mercy of the Avenger's twenty-four guns, and yet no shot was fired, for Alan, despite the tremendous debt of vengeance that he owed to her who now, at last in very fact crowned Tsarina of the Russias, held her court at Moscow, was yet extremely loth to involve non-combatants in the destruction which he knew must follow the discharge of his guns.

Added to this, his present designs were rather to reconnoitre than to destroy. He was in command of the fastest and most powerful air-ship in the world, and the task that he had set himself was to supervise the whole of the complicated arrangements that had been made for repelling the coming attack upon the Federation by the Moslems and Russians.

Thus he had started soon after midnight from Gibraltar, one of the chief power-stations and depots in Europe. Thence he had run along the African coast over Oran, Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli, noting the sleepless activity of the brilliantly-lighted towns, the swarming transports and battleships in their harbours, and the crowds of anxious watchers in their streets. Then he had got round to the south of Alexandria, as has been seen, and there struck the first blow in the war.

Now, his object was to discover what disposition of troops were being made for the invasion of Austria and Germany. Another scout-ship would be by this time floating over St. Petersburg, and another over Odessa, and these were to report to him at noon.

He had kept the Avenger moving with sufficient rapidity to make it extremely difficult for her to be seen from the earth, as he wanted to see without being seen, and he remained undiscovered until nearly noon. All this time trains had been seen running in swift succession into Moscow from the east and out to the west, evidently conveying troops to the frontier.

A large fleet of air-ships, numbering apparently between two and three hundred vessels, were seen lying in four squadrons on the open space about the Kremlin, and others were constantly flying into and out of the city in all directions.

A few minutes after half-past eleven, Cosmo, after a long look through his glasses, called to Alan, who was looking out from the other side of the deck--

"I fancy they must have seen us at last. Three ships are coming up on this side as if they wanted to investigate."

Alan crossed over and soon picked out the Russian vessels rising in long spiral sweeps from the earth about three miles to the northward and coming up very fast.

"They seem to have learned something in tactics during the year," he said. "They evidently know better than to rise perpendicularly while they suspect we are up here. They think they'll be much more difficult to hit coming up like that."

"Yes," said Cosmo. "But we can soon show them the mistake in that idea. What are you going to do with them?"

"Destroy them, of course," replied Alan. "It doesn't matter about giving the alarm now. I think it's pretty certain that the Russians are going to concentrate at Kieff, Vitebsk, Dinaburg, and Vilna, and those four squadrons down there are intended to cover them. We'd better let them concentrate, and

make the fighting as short and sharp as possible. It would be a waste of time to destroy them here in detail, and the moral effect wouldn't be anything like as good. What do you think?"

"I don't think there'll be any fighting," replied Cosmo, "unless between the air-ships. The most hardened troops of the nineteenth century would have broken and run like a lot of sheep under our shells, and these poor fellows, who have never seen a battle in their lives, will do the same.

"I don't believe we shall have any land fighting at all to speak of during the whole war. There will be nothing but massacres from the air on both sides. Still, I think you're both wise and merciful in waiting until you can hit hard, though perhaps from the strictly military point of view we ought to have Moscow in ruins by sundown."

"I won't do that," said Alan, shaking his head decisively. "There are three or four millions of women and children in it who have done no harm, and I'll shed no more blood than I'm obliged to. We had better destroy those fellows, however, before they get too close. You know what to do."

"Very well," said Cosmo. "You'll take the deck, I suppose?"

Alan nodded, and Cosmo saluted and went into the conning-tower. The Avenger now altered her course, so that her circling flight took her to the northward, above the three Russian air-ships that were sweeping round and round so fast that it would have been impossible to train a gun upon them.

As soon as she got over them the Avenger quickened her course until she was flying round in the same circles and at the same speed as the Russians. This, of course, made her relatively stationary with regard to them, and it was now possible to take aim. Two of the broadside guns, one on each side, were much shorter than the others, and had been specially constructed for firing almost vertically downwards.

Alan stood by one of these and trained it on the first of the Russian vessels, which were coming up in a spiral line. At the right moment he pressed the button in the breech and released the projectile. The shot struck the Russian amidships. They saw the glass deck of the roof splinter, then the blaze of the explosion flashed out, the air quaked, and the next moment the fragments of the Russian warship were falling back upon the earth.

A second and a third shot followed as the other two came into position, and when Alan looked down towards the city again he saw that the four squadrons had taken the alarm, and were rising from the earth and scattering in all directions. This was just what he wanted, for it relieved him of the scruples which had prevented him from firing on them while they lay within the precincts of the city.

In an instant the crew of the Avenger were at their guns, and shell after shell sped on its downward way after the flying ships. Although, under the circumstances, the aim was necessarily hurried, for the captains of the Russian vessels, seeing the terrible disadvantage at which they were placed, had put on their utmost speed, the guns of the Avenger were so smartly handled that nearly a score of the Russians were either blown to fragments or crippled before the squadron escaped out of range.

"Well done!" said Alan. "That will teach them to keep a little smarter look-out next time." And then he went on to himself--"I wonder whether she was on board one of those that are lying in little pieces down there? I suppose that would be too good luck to hope for, and yet I don't know, I think her end ought to be something different to that. I wonder what it really will be?"

He ordered his men to cease firing now, and placed the Avenger once more in her old position over Moscow, keeping her at a great elevation to guard against surprise from the squadron he had scattered. A few minutes later two airships were reported coming from the south and north. The flash of the sun on their blue hulls proclaimed them friends.

They were the vessels bringing the reports from St. Petersburg and Odessa, and these reports were to the effect that during the whole of the morning trains had been pouring through from the eastward and all the surrounding country towards the Austro-German frontier. Other reports from the westward had been received by the commanders of these two vessels to the effect that the Russian troops were massing along the frontier and seemingly preparing to invade the Federation area from the four points already selected by Alan.

He at once despatched orders by these two courier-vessels to the depots at Konigsberg, Thorn, Breslau, and Budapesth to assemble four squadrons of fifty vessels each, which were to be over the points of concentration at daybreak on the following morning.

These ships were to maintain their greatest possible elevation--that is to say, about three miles and a half--until the sun rose, then if the sky were clear they were to bombard the towns at once from that height; if not they were to use all precautions against surprise in passing through the clouds, and then the commanders were to use their own discretion as to the plan of operation, but Odessa, Kieff, Vitebsk, and Dinaburg were to be destroyed at all hazards as soon as it was certain that the invading forces were concentrated there, and preparing to march eastward.

As soon as these orders had been despatched the Avenger left Moscow, and started at full speed for Gibraltar, where she arrived about four o'clock in the afternoon.

Here Alan, after once more inspecting the land batteries and the aerial defences of this important outpost of the Federation, received news of the annihilation of the four Moslem expeditions, and heartily congratulated Admiral Ernstein on the complete success of his operations.

It was at once apparent that the Sultan would not risk a second loss so enormous as this even if he had sufficient transports left and could persuade any more of his people to brave the terrors of such another sea-fight. This being so, only two alternatives would be open to him, either he must give up all idea of invading Europe by land or sea, or else he must attempt to force the bridges across the Dardanelles and the Straits of Gibraltar, and cross into Europe via Turkey and Spain.

Both these bridges, the main highways between Europe, Africa, and Asia Minor, were guarded on the European side by batteries of enormous strength, similar to those which guarded the Federation posts in the Mediterranean. They were magnificent structures, each four hundred feet broad, carrying twelve lines of railway as well as carriage drives and promenades, and, once in the hands of the enemy, troops could be poured across them in tens of thousands every hour.

Alan, after a brief conference with Ernstein, decided to pursue the same tactics here as he was going to make use of on the Russian frontier. The bridges were to be left completely open, but their supporting pillars were to be mined with torpedoes, connected by electric wires with the batteries.

If the Sultan attempted to force them, his men were to be allowed to concentrate on the African and Asiatic shores and to occupy the bridges, then the bridges were to be blown up and the forces on the opposite side to be dispersed by the batteries and the air-ships.

The message to the Dardanelles bridge was despatched by telephone over the cables connecting Gibraltar with Candia and Gallipoli, and similar instructions were sent on from Gallipoli to Constantinople, in case any attempt should be made to force the bridge which spanned the Bosphorus.

The Mediterranean patrol was to be maintained as before, and three air-ships were sent out to reconnoitre the African coast from Ceuta to Port Said during the night, and learn what they could of the Sultan's intentions.

The rest of the evening and the greater part of the night were spent by Alan receiving and answering reports from the northern coast of the Mediterranean, the Russian frontier, and the principal cities of Europe, and in assuring himself that everything was ready, so far as was possible, to meet the storm that must infallibly burst over the Continent within the next few days.

What would have been in the nineteenth century a matter of weeks was now only one of days and hours. The enormously-developed system of intercommunication made transit even for very large numbers of men and between very distant points, rapid to a degree undreamt of in the present century.

Trains could travel at two hundred miles an hour along the hundreds of quadruple lines which covered the Continent with their gigantic network, aerial cruisers could fly at more than twice this speed, and squadrons of submarine battleships could cleave their silent and invisible way through the ocean depths at a hundred and fifty miles an hour.

It was, therefore, almost impossible to tell without certain information where and how the blows of the enemy would be struck, or from how many points the European area of the Federation might be

assailed at once, and vast indeed were the responsibilities and anxieties which weighed upon the man whose single brain was the centre of this vast and complicated system of defence, and on whose decisions would depend the safety or the destruction of millions of human beings.

Alan had managed to get four hours' sleep in the afternoon between Moscow and Gibraltar, and he snatched two hours more before midnight. Then he was called, and the Avenger was just about to take the air to return to the Russian frontier, so that he might supervise the operations there, when the lookout on the summit of the Rock of Gibraltar saw and answered the Aerial private signal from the sky, and a few minutes later a fleet of more than a hundred air-ships dropped down out of the darkness and hovered over what is now called the neutral ground between the Rock and Spain.

One of these alighted at the signal station itself. It was the Isma, and within three minutes after she had touched the ground Alan was shaking hands with Alexis and asking him what brought him back so soon from the East.

"I have come back because there is nothing much more to do there," said Alexis. "Have you had any fighting here?"

"Yes," said Alan; "or, at any rate, a big massacre."

And then he described what had befallen the Sultan's expeditions.

"Horrible but necessary, I suppose!" replied Alexis, not without a shudder at the news. "I have been doing my damage on land. I didn't wait for the enemy to begin hostilities, so as soon as day broke we got to work. We have wrecked Ekaterinburg, Slatonsk, Orenburg, and Uralsk, and blocked the four roads into Russia from Asia.

"The Tsarina's Asiatic forces had concentrated there in large numbers ready to come into Europe. We found some air-ships intended to cover them, but we had the best of the elevation, and smashed them up. The slaughter has been something perfectly frightful. I had a hundred and fifty ships in action, and there isn't a man left of the Asiatic troops that is not getting back to where he came from as fast as he can go.

"The towns are mere heaps of ruins and the railways utterly useless. I left twenty ships to patrol the frontier and stop any further movements into Russia, and twenty more are strung out in a line from the Caspian to the head of the Red Sea to cut communications between Asia and Africa.

"We came westward over Odessa this afternoon, and had a skirmish, in which, I am sorry to say, I lost five ships, but we destroyed twenty Russians, blew up the dockyard, and shelled the city by way of punishment. And now I've got myself and a hundred and thirty ships to place at your disposal for the present. There is nothing more to be feared from the East, for by to-morrow night, I think, the Asiatics will be thoroughly terrorised."

"You have done more than I have in the way of slaughter and destruction," said Alan. "But there will be some fearful work along the Russian frontier tomorrow morning. The Tsarina, as you call her, is concentrating her forces at Kieff, Vitebsk, Dinaburg, and Vilna for a descent upon Germany. I have ordered those four places to be destroyed as soon as possible after sunrise, and I am just starting now, so you had better come with me and order your ships to follow us."

Both the commanders felt, as their combined squadrons were winging their way towards the Russian frontier, that the events of the next twenty-four hours or so would go far towards deciding the issues of the war, and therefore the fate of the world.

Alexis had given up the command of the Isma for the night to his first lieutenant, and was travelling on board the Avenger, in order that he and Alan might finally arrange their plans for the terrible deeds that were to be done on the following day. Both of them were serious almost to depression, for it must be remembered that neither possessed that love of fighting and slaughter which distinguishes the professional soldier of the nineteenth century.

Armed with the most awful weapons ever wielded by human hands, they had already, within the space of a few hours, hurled millions of their fellow-creatures into eternity and made thousands of homes desolate which a couple of days ago were happy. Now they were going to repeat the tragedy, on

how vast a scale neither of them knew. Before the next sunset a red line of blood and flame would mark the frontier between Russia and Germany.

All the horrors of months of the older warfare would be concentrated into those few fatal hours. Those who were to do battle in the air would hurl their irresistible lightnings at each other more as gods than as men, while on earth the unresisting swarms could only stand in helpless agony of suspense waiting for the death from which there was no possibility of flying.

Within a hundred miles of the frontier the two fleets stopped, and Alexis went on board his own vessel. It was then a few minutes after three in the morning, that is to say, about an hour before sunrise, and the warships were floating in a serene and cloudless atmosphere at an elevation of nearly four miles, or about twenty thousand feet. It was already quite light enough at that elevation for signals to be plainly seen, and a rapid interchange of these took place, communicating the final instructions from the flagships to the commanders of the smaller squadrons into which the fleets were to be divided.

Just as the last signal had been answered, and the vessels were about to separate, a tiny speck of light was seen far away to the westward. A hundred powerful field-glasses were instantly turned upon it, and soon showed it to be a hostile air-ship coming up very fast at an elevation of about three miles. The silvery sheen of her hull instantly betrayed the fact that she was neither an Aerial nor a Federation vessel, for the former were blue and the latter painted dull grey. A moment's reflection showed that she must have sighted the Aerial fleet, and if she got past would take tidings of its presence to the frontier and destroy all hope of a surprise.

Within twenty seconds of her true nature being made out a signal was flying from the mizzenmast of the Isma, which read, "Shall I stop her?" "Yes. Cripple her if you can. Don't fire unless necessary," came the reply from the Avenger, and the Isma at once darted away on her errand.

Alexis, of course, understood that if he struck the enemy with a shell her fragments would fall to the earth, and might probably give the impression that a battle was being fought in the air, and, as they were now so near to the Russian frontier, this was to be avoided if possible. He therefore determined to cripple her without destroying her, and, if he could manage it, to capture her in mid-air, a feat that had never been performed before under similar conditions.

He descended until the Isma was only floating about a thousand feet higher than the enemy, and then began to fly round and round in a wide circle, at a speed which made it practically impossible for her to be hit with a shell, save by the merest chance. The stranger, on sighting the fleet, slowed down and swung round to the northward, so as to have the advantage of being able to present her stern chasers to the enemy.

This gave Alexis the opportunity he wanted. The instant that her stern was visible, the Isma swooped down, and rushed at her at such a speed that she looked more like a stream of blue light flashing through the sky than a solid material body. Those on board her saw this flash dart past their stern. Their ship shivered from stem to stern with some shock that came so swiftly that not until the Isma was almost out of sight did they realise the damage that had been done.

The ram of the Aerial had cut through the barrels of the two stern guns and the shafts of the three propellers as cleanly as a razor would have divided so many straws. Sustained and propelled only by her wings, she dropped from two hundred miles an hour to about twenty-five, and then the Isma reappeared in the sky above her, flying the signal, "Will you surrender?"

Her commander saw that the brilliant and almost miraculous manoeuvre of the Isma had placed him utterly at her mercy. If he refused, a single shell would send him and his ship and crew in fragments to the earth, while none of his guns could touch the Aerial, floating as she did a thousand feet above him, so he bowed to necessity and sent the white flag to his masthead. Alexis then signalled again, ordering him to unload all his guns and leave the breeches open, and when he had seen this done he sank down to a level with her, passed a steel-wire rope on board her, and towed her away in triumph to the fleet.

The brilliant achievement delighted the Aerials as much as it confounded the crew of the captured vessel, especially when it was discovered that she was the Haroun, a Moslem warship taking a message

from the Sultan to the Tsarina at Moscow.

Khalid's letter, which had been despatched the night before from Algiers, informed Olga of the disaster that had overtaken the Crescent in the Mediterranean, and of his determination to avenge it by storming the bridges of Gibraltar, the Dardanelles, and the Bosphorus, and pouring his remaining troops over them into Europe as soon as he could concentrate them.

Far more important than this, however, was a notification of his intention to at once lead a fleet of two hundred and fifty air-ships to the west of Europe, and there destroy city after city on his eastward course until they joined forces and proceeded, if necessary, to devastate the rest of the Continent.

The Moslem's guns were now rendered useless, and she was left to her own devices to fall an easy prey to the first enemy that might attack her. The Aerial fleet then divided into fifty squadrons of five vessels each, and these winged their way towards the Russian frontier, ever soaring higher and higher, until their wings were beating the rarefied air at an altitude of over three miles.

Odessa, Kieff, Gomel, Vitebsk, Dinaburg, and Riga were all covered by the time the sun rose. Scores of Russian air-ships were seen by the various squadrons darting about hither and thither along the frontier at varying elevations, evidently on the look-out for an enemy.

It was not many minutes before the Aerial squadrons were discovered by these, and they instantly got away out of range, and then swerving round sought to rise to a similar altitude so as to place themselves on equal terms with the Aerials.

But long before this attempt could be made the work of death had begun, and two thousand guns were raining their projectiles, charged with inevitable destruction, upon the devoted cities. They were swarming with men who had come through the interior of Russia during the night for the invasion of Europe, but there were no troops on land to oppose them, for Alan had seen that there would be no need for these.

Within an hour the six cities were so many vast shambles, and still the relentless rain of death kept falling from the skies. Houses and public buildings crumbled into dust under the terrific impact of the explosions.

The streets were torn up as if by earthquakes, the railways running in and out were utterly wrecked, and the victims of the pitiless attack, panic-stricken and mad with fear and agony, rushed aimlessly hither and thither through the bloody, fire-scorched streets and amidst the falling ruins until inevitable death overtook them and ended their tortures of mind and body.

There was no escape even as there was no mercy. Thousands fled out into the country only to find the same rain of death falling upon the villages. It seemed as though the unclouded heavens of that May morning were raining fire and death from every point upon the devoted earth, and yet no source of destruction was to be seen.

But ere long new horrors were added to the desolation which had already befallen the cities. Terrific explosions burst out high up in the air, vast dazzling masses of flame blazed out, mocking the sunlight with their brightness, and then vanishing in an instant, and after them came showers of bits of metal and ragged fragments of human bodies, all that remained of some great cruiser of the air and her crew.

The Russian squadrons, numbering in all about three hundred warships, by flying several miles to the eastward and then doubling on a constantly ascending course had by this time gained a sufficient elevation to train their guns upon the Aerials, and as soon as they had done this the aerial battle became general along a curved line more than a thousand miles in length, extending from Odessa to Riga.

George Cosmo had been right when he said that there would be little or no land fighting, for along that line, from the Baltic to the Black Sea, there was scarcely a man left alive by midday who was not mad with fear and horror at the frightful effects of the aerial assault.

On land as well as on sea fighting was impossible. Armies and fleet could exist only in the absence of the air-ships, and they were everywhere. Cities lay utterly at their mercy, and nothing shaped by the hand of man could withstand the impact of their projectiles.

But all day long the fight went on in the skies above the Russian frontier, yet not at all after the

fashion imagined by the poet of the nineteenth century, who wrote, as he thought prophetically, of: F
Airy navies grappling in the central blue.

The first and chief endeavour of the captain of every vessel was to avoid the shots of his opponents and to get his own home. It was brains and machinery pitted against brains and machinery, and grappling was never thought of.

The air-ship which could gain and maintain a greater elevation than her opponent infallibly destroyed her, and so, too, did the one that could fly unhurt at full speed along the line of battle and use her stern guns upon those which became relatively stationary enough for her to take aim at them.

It would have been a magnificent spectacle for an observer who could have followed the contending squadrons in their swift and complicated evolutions. He would have seen the blue and the silver hulls flashing to and fro as though apparently engaged in some harmless trial of speed, then, without the slightest warning, without a puff of smoke or the faintest sound of a report, the long, deadly guns would do their work.

The moment of vantage would come, and the silent and invisible messengers of annihilation would be sped upon their way; then, with a roar and a shock that convulsed the firmament, a mist of flame would envelop the ship that had been struck, and when it vanished she would have vanished too, falling in a rain of fragments towards the earth nearly twenty thousand feet below.

It was a battle not so much for victory as for destruction. There could be no victory save to those who survived after having annihilated their enemies, and this was the sole object of the struggle. High in air above the contending squadrons, the Avenger and the Isma swept to and fro along the line, raised by their superior soaring powers beyond the zone of battle, and from their decks the two admirals commanded the fight, and, like very Joves above the tempest, hurled their destroying bolts from their terrible guns far and wide over the scene of strife.

From morning to night both Alan and Alexis sought in vain for the blue hull of the Revenge among the Russian squadron. Unless Olga was on board one of the other ships she was either engaged in some work of destruction elsewhere or was directing the operations of her forces and learning the disasters that had overtaken them in her palace in Moscow or St. Petersburg.

It had been previously ordered that, as soon as it became too dark to take accurate aim with the guns, those vessels of the Aerial fleet which had survived the battle were to fly westward and rendezvous at midnight on the summit of the Schneekoppe, one of the peaks of the Giant Mountains to the north-east of Bohemia, whence, as soon as the amount of damage had been ascertained, the remainder of it, if strong enough, was to set out and if possible intercept the Moslem fleet before it could form a junction with the Russians.

When the last vessel had alighted on the summit of the mountain it was found that out of a fleet numbering two hundred and fifty warships only a hundred and eighty remained--the rest were scattered in undistinguishable fragments along the Russian frontier. As for the amount of damage that had been done to the enemy as a set-off to this heavy loss, the Aerial commanders could form no even approximate estimate of it.

All they knew was that the six frontier cities, and a score or so of smaller towns and villages, were now mere heaps of ruins, vast charnel-houses choked with unnumbered corpses. The Russian army of invasion must have been practically annihilated, and certainly its remnants would be too hopelessly demoralised by the unspeakable horrors it had survived to be of the slightest use for further fighting.

As soon as the roll had been called, the fleet, in two squadrons of ninety vessels each, took the air and crossed the mountains to Górlitz, which had been selected a year before as a convenient spot for the establishment of an arsenal and power-station, standing as it does at the angle of intersection of two great mountains which form the natural bulwarks of Bohemia.

Here the stock of motive-power and the ammunition of all the vessels were renewed, and at daybreak the squadrons were just about to take the air when a telephonic message was received from Paris that a large fleet of air-ships had appeared above the city and had begun to bombard it. This message had

been sent in compliance with a system of intercommunication which Alan had instituted between all the great cities of Europe, and all the power-stations and rendezvous throughout the Continent.

The moment an enemy appeared over any town messages were to be sent to all the stations simultaneously, and detachments of warships were to be despatched to the threatened point as soon as the warning was received.

It will be seen that this system would enable a very large force to be concentrated upon any threatened point, and, in fact, before the sun was two degrees above the horizon of Paris, eight squadrons of Federation warships, including the two under the command of Alan and Alexis, were flying at full speed from all four points of the compass towards the city which for over half a century had been the acknowledged capital of the Continent.

Little more than an hour sufficed for the Avenger and the Isma to pass over the six hundred miles which separated Gorlitz from Paris. Flying at their utmost speed they left their squadrons to follow the two admirals, knowing that every captain could be implicitly trusted to do the work allotted to his ship without further orders.

The object of Alan and Alexis was to get first to the scene of action, and to avail themselves of the superior soaring powers of their two vessels to deliver an assault upon the Moslems which they could not reply to.

A fearful scene unfolded itself before them as they swept up out of the eastward over Paris. The vast and splendid city was surrounded by a huge circle formed of at least two hundred Moslem warships floating at an elevation of some three miles, and pouring a tempest of projectiles from hundreds of guns indiscriminately into the area crowded with stately buildings and nearly ten millions of inhabitants.

Nearly three miles above the centre of the city floated a solitary scout-ship ready to signal warning of the approach of an enemy. Fires were already raging in hundreds of places all over the city. The streets were swarming with terrified throngs of citizens who had rushed out to escape the flames and the falling buildings, only to meet the hundreds of shells that were constantly bursting among them, rending their bodies to fragments by scores at a time.

Such was the beginning of Khalid the Magnificent's revenge for the disaster of the Mediterranean--a vengeance which proved that, in his breast at least, the savage spirit of the ancient warfare was still untamed.

The Avenger and the Isma gained an altitude of four miles above the doomed city, half a dozen shells from their guns struck the scout-ship and reduced her to dust before she had time to make a signal in warning, and then the forty-four guns began to send a radiating hail of projectiles upon the Moslem fleet. Shell after shell found its mark in spite of the vast range, and ship after ship collapsed and dropped in fragments or blew up like a huge shell.

But before the fifth round had been fired a strange thing happened. A single Aerial warship rushed up at full speed out of the south, and as soon as she sighted the Avenger signalled, "Orders from the Council. Come alongside." The new-comer soared upwards as they sank to meet her, and the three ships met and stopped some three miles and a half above the earth. The stern of the Azrael, as the messenger-ship was named, was brought close up to that of the Avenger, the deck doors were opened, a gangway thrown across, and the captain boarded the flagship and placed a sealed despatch in Alan's hand.

He opened it, and to his unspeakable astonishment read--

AERIA, May 16th, 6 P.M.

All Aerials are to return at once with their ships to Aeria, and take no further part in the fighting. The Federation fleets may be left in the hands of foreign crews and commanders, to whom the power stations and batteries are to be given up. This order is to be obeyed with the least possible delay.

ALAN ARNOLD President.

To the Admirals in command of the Federation Fleets.

CHAPTER XXV. A MESSAGE FROM MARS.

IN order to adequately explain the origin of the peremptory recall which, although of course he obeyed it without question, seemed so incomprehensible to Alan, it will be necessary to go back to the night of the 12th of May.

While all Aeria was rejoicing over the return of the exiles and their restoration to the rights of citizenship, there was one of the inhabitants of the Valley who took little or no part in the festivities. This was Vassilis Cosmo, a man of between forty-six and forty-seven, and elder brother of the George Cosmo who had been chief engineer of the Narwhal, and was now first officer of the Avenger.

A striking distinction of personality and temperament had, ever since he had reached a thinking age, marked him as one apart from the rest of his fellow-countrymen.

He had little or none of the gaiety of disposition and social cordiality that were the salient characteristics of the Aerians as a people. He was serious almost to taciturnity, solitary and studious, and wholly engrossed in a single pursuit--the study of astronomy in its bearing on the great problem of interplanetary communication.

After twenty years of constant labour, assisted by all the knowledge and inventive progress which had placed the Aerians so far ahead of the rest of the world, he had at length solved this problem and realised the dream of ages six years before Olga Romanoff had dropped her defiance from the skies.

As yet, however, his success had been confined to one planet, and this, as will have been learnt from the conversation between Alma and Isma on that memorable night on which Alan's letter had been received from the island, was the planet Mars.

After infinite toil and innumerable failures, he had at length succeeded in establishing an intelligible system of what may here be described as photo-telegraphy, in which the rays of light passing between the earth and Mars were made to perform the functions of the electric wires in modern telegraphy.

His alphabet, so to speak, consisted of a hundred great electric suns disposed at equal intervals on the mountain peaks round the great oval of the Valley. These were in direct communication with the observatory of Aeria, which was situated at a height of sixteen thousand feet on Mount Austral, the highest of the two snow-capped peaks which stood at the southern end of the Valley.

A single switch key enabled him, when sitting by the huge telescope which embodied all the highest optical science of Aeria, to light and extinguish these brilliant globes as he chose, and it was by lighting and extinguishing them at certain intervals that he was able to transmit his signals to the Martian astronomer, who was waiting to receive them, and to reply to them by similar means across the gulf of thirty-four million miles which separates the two planets at their nearest approach to each other.

Momentous as were the events of the last few days, they were dwarfed to utter insignificance by the irregular and apparently meaningless recurrences of a tiny point of light in the centre of a great concave mirror situated at the base of the huge barrel of the telescope, through the side aperture of which Vassilis Cosmo was looking a few minutes before midnight on that memorable 12th of May.

The point of light appeared and vanished, and reappeared again at irregular intervals, which the astronomer noted on an automatic registering instrument beside him. The moment the flash appeared he pressed a button, which he held down till it disappeared, then he released it, waited till the flash reappeared, and repeated the operation so long as the signals came.

For nearly five hours he received and registered the signals recorded by his reflector in silence, broken only by the monotonous ticking of the clockwork which, working synchronously with the movements of the two orbs, kept the image of Mars exactly in the centre of the object-glass, and by the soft whirring of the registering instrument.

Never before had human eyes read such a message as he read, sitting that night in silence and solitude in his observatory amid the snows, far above the lovely valley in which his countrymen were still holding high revel.

Well might his hands tremble and his eyes grow dim with something more than long watching when he reversed the mechanism of the register and a narrow slip of paper, divided by cross-lines into equal spaces a tenth of an inch long, issued from a slit in one end, and began to run slowly over a revolving drum.

On the tape was a series of straight black lines running longitudinally along it. They were of unequal length, and divided from each other by unequal spaces. Before the exact import of the message could be gained the length of each of these lines, and that of the space which separated it from the next, had to be accurately measured, but Vassilis knew his own code so perfectly that he had been able to read the general drift of the communication that had been sent along the light-rays from the sister world by approximately guessing the duration of the flashes and the intervals between them.

Day was beginning to dawn by the time the long tape had been unrolled and pinned down in equal lengths on a board for measuring. For more than five hours he had not uttered a syllable or even an exclamation, although he had received from another world what appeared to be tantamount, not only to his own death-sentence, but to that of the whole human race.

But when the slips were at length pinned out and he had run his practised eye deliberately over the fatal marks, his white lips parted and a deep groan broke from his chest. He was alone in the observatory, or perhaps not even this sign of emotion would have escaped him.

With his hands pressed to his temples as though his brain were reeling under the frightful intelligence that had just been conveyed to it, he stood in front of the board and gasped in short, broken sentences--

"God of mercy, can that be really true! Has the world only four months more to live? Surely I have made some mistake--and yet everything has worked as usual. There has been no hitch. It has been a splendid night for transmission and they--no, they had not made a mistake for a thousand years, they are past it. It must--but no, I can do nothing more this morning. I should go mad if I did. I must think of it quietly and sleep a little if I can, and then I will transcribe it."

He left the telescope tower and went out on to a little platform at the rear of the observatory which commanded a view of the whole Valley. He looked out over the lovely landscape lying calm and silent beneath the paling stars, and involuntarily exclaimed aloud--

"Is it for this that we have conquered the earth and bridged the abysses of space--for this that we have made ourselves as gods among men and throned ourselves here in this lovely land, lords of the world and masters of the nations?"

"How shall I tell them down yonder? And yet, has not the Master told them already: 'His shape shall be that of a flaming fire.' 'Your children of the fifth generation shall behold his approach'? Yes, the two exiles we welcomed back last night are the fifth generation from the Angel, and that will truly be a flaming fire, and truly it will go hard with this world and the men of it in the hour of its passing, as the Master has said."

After a vain attempt to seek refuge from his thoughts in sleep he boarded his aerial yacht and went to the city to mingle with the merry-makers, more for appearance' sake than from inclination, but he kept his own counsel strictly, for more reasons than one. The next night, as soon as Mars was high enough in the heavens, about half-past ten, the dwellers in the Valley saw the great lights on the mountain tops flash out and darken at irregular intervals time after time and hour after hour, until all but those in the sentinel ships went to rest, saying--

"Vassilis is talking to our neighbours in Mars. He will have something to tell us to-morrow."

But when the next day came he had nothing to tell. He had spent the night repeating the message, sign for sign and word for word, and asking for confirmation lest he should have made any mistake in receiving it. Then in agonised anxiety he had waited for the reply on which he now felt the fate of mankind depended. It came with a terrible clearness and brevity, which left no room for doubt--

"Message read correctly. There is no error in our calculations. Terrestrial humanity is doomed, and must prepare to meet its fate."

So far as he was concerned he was satisfied. He knew that a mistake was impossible to the finished science of the Martian astronomers, compared with whom he was but as a little child in knowledge. But still he kept his own counsel, for there was no need for him to cast the sudden shadow of death over the rejoicings of his countrymen.

At length the fleets departed, and Aeria, armed at all points, was awaiting the possible onslaught of her foes. These she would doubtless hurl back in triumphant disdain from her bulwarks, but far, far away in the depths of space, beyond even the range of the great equatorial on Mount Austral, there was approaching an enemy whose assault men could only meet with resignation or despair, as the case might be. Resistance was as much out of the question as escape.

Early on the morning of the 16th, soon after the Avenger had struck the first blow in the world-war, Vassilis presented himself at the President's palace and asked for an interview with him.

The President received him a few minutes later in his private room. It was the first time in his life that the silent, reserved astronomer had ever asked for an official interview, and as the President entered the room he held out his hand, saying--

"Good morning, Vassilis. We have seen very little of you lately, even less than usual. Have you come to see me about the work which has kept you from joining in the general rejoicings? I'm sure it must have been very important."

"Yes, President, it was--the most important that a terrestrial student of astronomy could be engaged upon," replied Vassilis, speaking slowly and very gravely.

The President looked curiously for a moment into his clear, thoughtful eyes, and noticed the lines of care on his pale, worn features, so different to those of the rest of his countrymen. Then he said, with an anxious ring in his voice--

"What is the matter, Vassilis? You look worn and ill, as though you had just passed through some great sorrow. Have you been keeping too long vigils with the stars? Tell me, what is it?"

Vassilis was silent for a moment as though he might have been wondering whether the President, strong as he was would have strength to bear the blow that he must strike in his next sentence. The awful news had come to him slowly, sign by sign and word by word, and so he had been in a measure prepared for it when its full meaning became clear. But upon Alan Arnold it must fall at a single stroke. Still the words had to be spoken, and after a good minute's pause he said--

"President, I bring you the most terrible news that one man can bring to another. The Master's prophecy is about to be fulfilled. Three nights ago I received through the photo-telegraph what I believe to be the death-sentence of humanity upon earth. Here is the transcript of the message."

Save for a sudden pallor and a quick uplifting of the eyelids, Alan Arnold betrayed no more emotion as he took the roll of paper which Vassilis handed to him, than he had done when he received his son's letter from the island.

"It does not come to me unexpected," he said in his firm quiet tones. "Your children and mine, Vassilis, are of the fifth generation, and it was foretold that they should see the sign in the sky. And so the threatened doom is not to pass us by?"

"No," replied Vassilis "Not unless some miracle happens, and there are no miracles in the astronomy or the mathematics of Mars. The Martians are long past the age of miracles or mistakes. These are the data and the calculations upon which the conclusion is based. I have repeated them back to Mars and received confirmation of them.

"I have also verified the times and distances and velocities myself, and have been unable to find the slightest error. As far as I can see, there is not the remotest chance of escape. The human race has only four months, five days, and twenty-three hours to live from midnight to-night."

"It is the will of God!" said the President solemnly, slightly bending his head as he spoke. "It is not for us to question the designs of Eternal Wisdom, save in so far as we may strive to understand them. Death has always been inevitable to all of us, and this will only be dying together instead of alone. Do you wish anything done with these calculations?"

"Yes," said Vassilis. "I would suggest that you appoint a committee of our best mathematicians and astronomers to examine and verify them once more, detail by detail, so that assurance may, if possible, be made surer. I shall receive another message from Mars to-night, and it will be well for the committee to be with me in the observatory. With the public aspect of the question I have, of course, nothing to do, that lies in the hands of yourself and the Council."

"Very well," said the President, "what you wish shall be done at once, and the Council will meet this morning to consider what public steps are to be taken."

Within half an hour after the conclusion of the momentous interview the Council had met, and the most immediate result of its deliberations on the tremendous tidings that had come from the sister world was the issue of the order for the instant return of all Aerians who were abroad which had been delivered to Alan on the deck of the Avenger on the morning of the 18th.

Immediately on receiving his father's letter, Alan signalled, "Cease firing and follow," to the Isma, and the three Aerial vessels started southward towards Gibraltar, leaving Paris to its fate. At Gibraltar, which was reached in two hours and a half, he found that, in accordance with the orders of the Council, messages had already been sent out to all the stations within the European area of the Federation for all Aerians to rendezvous at the Rock as soon as possible.

The same orders had been transmitted along the telephonic cables which connected the marine stations of the Mediterranean for all the battleships on service to go into their respective harbours, so that their crews might land and be picked up by air-ships which had already been despatched for them.

Before the evening Aerial vessels had begun to come in from all parts of Europe, where they had been stationed, and their crews brought terrible descriptions of the scenes of carnage and destruction they had left to obey the summons. The Federation leaders were in despair at their apparent desertion by their potent allies, while their enemies were already rejoicing at the disappearance of the Aerial warships from all points of the scene of war.

By midnight the last Aerial vessel had come in, and, after the command of the Rock, the last station of which the Aerians retained command, had been handed over to the British forces, the flotilla, numbering nearly four hundred warships, rose into the air just as two large Moslem squadrons, one fresh from the destruction of Paris, and the other from Alexandria and the east of Europe, converged upon the Rock, and, without warning, opened a furious fire of shells upon it. The great guns from the batteries replied, and the fleets, under the command of Alan and Alexis, after sending a rapid hail of shells among the Moslem vessels as a parting salute, soared into the upper regions of the air and headed southward for home, leaving a fiery chaos of death and destruction behind them.

Two hours after daybreak on the 19th the fleet crossed the Northern Ridge, and sank to earth on the sloping plateau behind the city. Alan at once disembarked, and went to his father's palace to report himself.

The sudden and unexpected return of the fleet, which had left to do battle for the empire of the world but three days and a half before, filled all the inhabitants of the Valley with amazement, for no one outside the Council and the committee appointed to verify the message received from Mars yet knew of the doom that was menacing the world.

Alan was received at the door of his palace by his father, who, after their greetings had been exchanged, took him at once to the room in which the Council were already assembled, and there in the presence of his colleagues made him acquainted with the reason for his recall.

Inured as he was to the unsparing warfare in which human life had to be counted as almost a negligible quantity, a warfare in which there was no middle course between life and death, Alan, after the first shock of surprise and horror had passed, faced the tremendous crisis with a calmness and resignation worthy of the traditions of his family and his race.

For years he had carried his life in his hands, and now that the end of all things seemed near he was prepared to look inevitable death calmly in the face. He heard the reading of the message in silence, and then, when he saw that they were waiting for him to speak, he said quietly--

"What is to be must be! We cannot argue with the workings of the universe." Then he paused for a moment, and went on--"I have come back with my comrades in obedience to orders. May I now ask why, if death is coming to the whole human race, we were not permitted to die in battle for the right against the wrong rather than to wait here in inaction and suspense until we are burnt to death on the funeral pyre of the world?"

He spoke the last words almost hotly, for the first thought that had risen in his mind after hearing the doom that was about to overtake humanity was that the debt he owed to Olga Romanoff must now for ever remain unpaid at his hands. This thought was so unbearable to him that before any reply could be made to his question he broke out again, this time speaking rapidly and almost angrily--

"If, as you tell me, the world has only a few weeks to live, why should I wait here for death when I have work to do elsewhere? What does it matter whether I die scorched to a cinder in the fire-mist or am blown to pieces by a Russian shell? I have a debt to pay, a stain upon my honour and my manhood to wipe out before I die.

"And so, too, has Alexis. Will you not give us an air-ship and let us find a crew of volunteers that we may go back to the war and hunt our enemy, and the enemy of humanity, down, and either destroy her or find an honourable death in the attempt to do so?"

As he ended his impassioned appeal his father rose from his seat, and laid his hand upon his shoulder and said gravely, and yet not without a note of admiration in his voice--

"My son, those are brave and honourable words, and they prove that you are no unworthy son of the race you belong to. But they are still the words of passion rather than reason. Remember that in the presence of the universal doom that now overhangs the human race not only private vengeance but even the strife of nations sinks into utter insignificance. A heavier hand than yours will punish the sin for which she who has wronged you will soon have to answer at the bar of Eternal Justice. Remember how it was said of old, 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord. I will repay.'"

"That is true, father," replied Alan, now speaking in his habitual tone of respect. "But why should not the instrument of that vengeance be the hand of him whom she has so bitterly wronged? You know what I mean, and so do all in this room.

"Has she not so polluted my manhood and stained my honour that I must meet, apart from Alma, the fate that I could have shared with her with no more regret than that we had to die instead of live together? Is it not better that she should know I died in the attempt to wipe that stain away than see me waiting for death with it still upon me?"

"That is for Alma as well as for you to decide," said Francis Tremayne, rising from his seat as he spoke. "How do you know that she is unwilling to meet her end hand-in-hand with you?"

"I have looked into her eyes and seen no love in them," replied Alan, flushing to his temples with shame and anger. "Her old love for me is dead, as it may well be. How could I expect her purity to mate with my"--

"Stop, Alan!" exclaimed his father before he had time to utter the shameful word that was on his lips. "Those are no words for you to speak or for me to hear, especially at such a time as this. If any stain ever rested upon you you have more than purged it already. The man who is found worthy the confidence of the rulers of Aeria is worthy the respect, if not the love, of any woman in the State. Whether Alma loves you still or not is a question for her own heart to answer, but you must not call yourself unworthy in my hearing."

"Nor yet in mine," said Alma's father warmly. "If the shadow of death had not fallen across all our life-ways as it has done, there is no man who wears the Golden Wings that I would so willingly see Alma join hands with as yourself. If I, her father, hold you worthy to live with her, surely you cannot hold yourself unworthy to die with her."

As he spoke he held out his hand to Alan, and he, unable to find words to answer him, grasped it in silence, broken only by a murmur of approval from the assembled members of the Council.

"Thank you, my friend, for saying that!" said the President to Tremayne. "Alan can ask no better

assurance unless he has it from Alma's own lips. But now I have something more to say, something that will give the true reason for my recall of all the Aerians who were beyond our borders. Let the words you are now going to hear be heard with all respect, for they are not mine but those of the Master himself."

Amidst an expectant silence he now resumed his place at the head of the Council table, and bidding Alan and the Vice-President to be seated, took a long parchment envelope brown with age from the breast of his tunic and said--

"This contains the last words of him who prophesied the doom with humanity now stands confronted, and who thus speaks to us from the past, and gives us good counsel and comfort in the hour of our perplexity and sorrow. It has been handed down with its seal unbroken from father to son for four generations, and now it has fallen to me to break the seal and read what no eyes but those of Natas and my own have ever seen. This is the endorsement upon the cover--

"To the son or daughter of my line who shall be the head of the House of Arnold in the fifth generation from me:--When the world is threatened with the final ruin that I have foreshadowed, open this and read my words to all who are then dwelling in Aeria.
NATAS."

The President paused, and everyone waited with most anxious expectation as he opened the envelope and took from it four square sheets of parchment. He unfolded them and went on--

"When Vassilis Cosmo brought me the transcription of the message from Mars I saw that the time had come to obey the injunction endorsed on this envelope. I opened it, and this is what I read:--"

'The interpretation of the prophecy concerning the possible destruction of the world in the fifth generation from now, written by me in the twenty-fifth year of the Peace, and commanded to be read every fifth year in the ears of the descendants of those now dwelling in Aeria.'

'When the War of the Terror was over, and there was peace on earth, I devoted the declining years of my life to the study of that noblest of all sciences which teaches the lore of the stars and the constitution of the universe. In the fifteenth year of the Peace, that is to say, in the year of the Christian Era 1920, a new star appeared towards the constellation of Andromeda, which shone with great brilliancy for thirty-five nights, and then faded gradually away into the abysses of space.'

'Seeking into the causes of this phenomenon, I found that it was due to the collision of two opaque bodies beyond the bounds of the solar system, which doubtless had been travelling towards each other for centuries through space. So enormous was the heat evolved by the conversion of the motion of the two bodies, that their materials were resolved into their component elements, and what had been two bodies as solid as the earth, though immensely larger, now became an enormous fire-mist, a chaos of blazing storms and burning billows of incandescent matter.'

'I observed it closely from the time of its first appearance until the most powerful telescope at my command could no longer detect it. I found that vastly remote as it was, the course which it

pursued until it was lost to view proved that it was still within the sphere of the sun's attraction, and that therefore a time must come when it would reach its point of greatest distance, and return.'

'Such calculations as I was able to make during the brief period of my observation, showed that it would re-enter the confines of the solar system in one hundred and twelve years from then, and, travelling with constantly accelerated motion, would become visible to the inhabitants of the earth five years later. I learnt, too, that unless it should be deflected from its path by the attraction of bodies unknown to terrestrial astronomers it would cross the orbit of the earth in the month of September in the year 2037, that is to say, in the fifth generation of men from my own day.'

'If my calculations are correct, the earth will during that month pass through an ocean of fire that will destroy all living things upon its surface, both plants and animals.'

'For the space of ten hours, or, it may well be, more, while the planet is passing through the fire-mist, there will be no water upon the face of the earth but the whole globe will be surrounded with a vast nebulous mantle of steam. At the end of this time it will emerge from the fiery sea, the steam-cloud will be recondensed and fall in a deluge upon the land, and the world, with a changed face, with new oceans and new continents, will pursue her impassive way lifeless, through space.'

'But even in the face of so tremendous a cataclysm as this, it is not for human genius to despair or human faith to be confounded. The new earth may be repeopled, and you may be the parents of the new humanity. Though innumerable millions shall die, yet the chosen few will be saved if the Master of Destiny shall permit. and from among you the chosen few shall come.'

'The caverns of Mount Austral are deep and cool, and enclosed by walls of living rock, deep rooted in the foundations of the world. In those days, if you shall have made good use of the heritage we leave you, you shall be almost as gods in skill and knowledge, and you shall find a means to make this a fortress whose strength shall defy the convulsions of the elements and preserve a remnant of human life upon the earth.'

'When you have done this, you that remain shall prepare to meet the inevitable end, for only a few among your many thousands can be saved. Yet, if you have grown in wisdom and faith as well as in knowledge and skill, you shall not disquiet yourselves about this. for sooner or later death is certain to all and you will but pass together through the shadows instead of singly.'

'When the final hour comes, and the breath of the blazing firmament is hot upon your brows, may He in whose Hand the fate of worlds and races lies, give you strength and wisdom to compose yourselves for death as men who know that it is but the dreamless sleep that parts to-morrow from to-day.'

"Those are the words of the Master," said the President, reverently laying down the parchment sheets on the table before him. "And it is for us to hear and obey. You will now see why it was necessary for all our sons that had gone forth to battle to be recalled, for among them there are many who can justly lay claim to be of the flower of Aerial manhood.

"To-morrow I will read the message from Mars and the commands of the Master, in the temple, to a congregation of all the fathers and mothers in Aeria, and then it shall be their task to prepare their children for the doom which awaits them in common with the rest of humanity. The remainder of to-day we will devote to the task of considering how the commands of the Master may be best obeyed."

CHAPTER XXVI. SENTENCE OF DEATH.

AT ten o'clock on the following morning the great temple of Aeria was filled by a congregation of men and matrons who had been summoned together to hear what may, without exaggeration, be described as the death-sentence of the world and the funeral oration of the human race.

As had been previously decided by the President and Council, only the heads of families were present. Of these, some had but just welcomed their first-born into the world, while others, standing almost on the brink of the grave, could see their children of the fourth generation growing up from infancy to youth.

When the President commenced his address by reading in solemnly impressive tones the prophecy of Natas, those present knew instinctively what they had been called together to hear. The possibility of the world being overwhelmed by some tremendous catastrophe in the fifth generation from the year of the Peace was no new or unawaited prospect to the Aerians.

Therefore there was no panic, no sudden outburst of sorrow or dismay, among the grave, earnest congregation assembled in the temple when the President, having read the prophecy, went on to say--

"It is now my solemn duty as Chief Magistrate of Aeria to tell you, the heads of the families of our race, that, in the mysterious workings of destiny, which we can only accept with reverence and resignation, the time has come for us to prepare to meet, with the fortitude worthy of our position among the races of mankind, the doom which is as inevitable as it is universal. The confirmation of the prophecy of Natas has come to us across the abysses of space from one of those sister worlds which, as the Master said, should see with fear and trembling the passing of the messenger of Fate.

"On the night of Tuesday last, Vassilis Cosmo received from the planet Mars a photogrammic message, the transcription of which into our language reads thus--

'A cometary body, primarily formed by the meeting of two extinguished astral spheres at 10 hrs. 38 min. 42 sec. on the night of the 13th of October, in the year 1920, terrestrial reckoning, will cross the orbit of the earth at 11 hrs. 55 min. 22 sec. on the night of the 23rd of September next, time corrected to the meridian of Aeria.

'At this hour the earth will arrive at the point of intersection. and will pass obliquely through the central portion or nucleus of the body. This portion is composed of incandescent metallic gases interspersed with semi-fluid masses which on contact with the earth's atmosphere will probably be vaporised.

'The constituents of the incandescent nucleus are iron, gold. tellurium, chromium, oxygen, nitrogen, and carbon with smaller quantities of many other substances which spectrum analysis will disclose to you on the appearance of the comet which will become visible from Aeria at 8 hrs. 13 min. P.M. on the 15th of July. when its right ascension will be 15 hrs. 24 min. 17 sec., and its declination north 10 deg. 42 min. 17 sec. Here follow the detailed calculations upon which the foregoing conclusions are based.'

"With these calculations," continued the President, "this is neither the time nor the place to deal, for I know that all here will be satisfied when I say that for the last three days they have been submitted to the critical examination of our best astronomers and mathematicians, and that not the slightest flaw has been found in them.

"This being so, the only course left open to us as reasonable beings is to prepare to look the inevitable in the face, and to play our part in the closing scene of the life-drama of humanity as men and women who believe that the life we are living here is but a stage on our journey through infinity, and that the fiery sign which will soon appear in the heavens will be to us but a beacon light on the ultimate shore of Time casting a guiding ray over the ocean of Eternity."

He paused for a moment and looked down upon the hushed throng at his feet. The instantaneous silence was broken by a long, low, inarticulate murmur. Thousands of pale faces were upturned towards him, from thousands of eyes there came one appealing upward glance, and then every head in the great assembly was bowed in silence and resignation.

The death-sentence had been passed. There was no appeal from it, and there was no rebellion against it. The voice of Fate had spoken, and it was not for such men as the Aerians to sacrifice their reason or their dignity by cavilling at it.

The President bent his head with the rest, and for several moments there was silence throughout the vast area of the temple. Then he took up from the desk in front of the rostrum the four sheets of parchment which contained the last message and commands of Natas, and read them out to the assembly.

The perusal was listened to in breathless silence. It was like his voice speaking across the generations from the urn containing his ashes and standing there in their midst. When the President had finished, he laid the sheets down again and said--

"Thus the eye of the Master, looking across the years which separated his day from ours, has seen one gleam of light, one ray of hope piercing the black pall of desolation which is about to fall upon the world, and it is for us to follow where he has pointed the way.

"I have now discharged the first part of the solemn and terrible duty which has devolved upon me. It is now for you to communicate the tidings you have heard to your families, a task which, however awful it may be for loving parents to be charged with, you will yet find strength to perform, even as your children shall find strength to hear their inevitable doom from those lips which will best know how to soften the tidings of death to them.

"When you have done this we will set about making the choice of those who, if it shall please the Master of Destiny, shall be the Children of Deliverance and the parents of the new race that shall repeople the earth when cosmos once more succeeds to chaos.

"If that shall be permitted, then we, who shall never see the new world, may yet go down to the grave knowing that we shall live again in our children, for these will be the children, not only of a few families among us, but sons and daughters of Aeria, the most perfect flower of our race, and in them, if we choose them wisely, the world, purged by fire of the dross of human wickedness, will find a new destiny, and the Golden Age shall return to earth once more."

As the President finished speaking, he held up his hands as though in blessing, and once more every head was bent. Then the great doors of the temple swung open, the assembly divided into four streams, and passed silently as a congregation of shadows out of the building.

That night the story of the world's approaching doom was told in every home in Aeria. Children on the threshold of youth learnt that for them youth would never come; youths and maidens on the verge of manhood and womanhood learnt that the bright promise of their lives could now never be fulfilled; and lovers just about to join hands for life saw the grave opening at their feet, and parting them in their earthly personalities for ever. That they would meet again upon a higher plane of existence was the first and most firmly held article of their faith, but so far as the affairs of this world were concerned the end was in sight.

In a less highly developed, a less perfectly organised, state of society, the almost immediate result would have been the end of all control, and the dissolution of all but the most elementary bonds of interest or affection that exist between men and men.

But in Aeria this was not possible. The firm belief, ingrained into the very being of all who had

reached the age of thought, that where men left off here, whether in good or evil, they would begin their lives again hereafter, precluded even the thought of such a lapse into social anarchy and individual sin.

For, happily for them, the union of true religion with true philosophy had now been accomplished in a national faith, and the result was that even the terrors of the universal end which was so near failed to shake the fortitude that was founded on a basis firmer than that of the world itself.

Though every home in the valley had its tragedy that night, a tragedy too sacred in its unspeakable solemnity for any mere words to describe it, when the next morning came the first bitterness of death had already passed.

Saving only the little children, who, too young to understand, laughed and played and sang in the sunlight as usual, in happy unconsciousness of their coming fate, the dwellers in Aeria rose with the next sunrise from their sleepless couches and went about their daily associations much as they had done the day before.

They did so rather as a matter of routine and discipline than of necessity, for now nothing more was necessary on earth. They had ample supplies of food to last them beyond the time when they would have no more need of it. It was of no use to dress the gardens and vineyards, or to till the fields that would be blasted into wildernesses before the harvest could be reaped.

There was no need to pursue further the triumphs of creative art and science which had transfigured Aeria into a paradise and a fairyland, for in a few weeks all these would be crumbled to dust with their own sepulchres--and yet they took up the work that lay nearest to their hands and went on with it as though they believed that there were still ages of life before humanity, and that the empire of Aeria was to endure for ever.

They knew that in work only lay the refuge from the torment of apprehension which might in the end drive even their highly disciplined minds into the delirium of despair and transform their orderly paradise into a pandemonium of anarchy and terror.

As soon as the first shock of inevitable horror had passed, as it did during that first terrible night when the death-sentence went from lip to lip throughout the land, their proud spirits rose superior to their physical fears and conquered them, and they resolved that, until the fatal hour came, nothing short of the dissolution of the world should put an end to social order in Aeria.

They were the royal race of earth, and when death came they would meet it crowned and sceptred in the gates of their palaces, and die as men who had solved the secret of life and death and so had no fear.

With the war that was raging beyond their borders they had now no personal concern. The quarrels of men and nations were as the bickerings of children in the presence of the fate that would so soon involve the world in ruin. And yet the rulers of Aeria were not willing that this fate should overtake their fellow-men in the delirium of blood-drunkenness.

They recognised that their duty to the nations bade them send the warning of the world's approaching fate far and wide through the earth and call for the cessation of strife, so that humanity might set its house in order and prepare to meet its end.

Whether the warning would be received or not was another matter. It was possible that both the Tsarina and the Sultan would laugh it to scorn, and pursue their path of now certain conquest through carnage and devastation to the end. That, however, was their concern.

As soon as the Council decided to despatch an envoy to summon the warring nations to cease their strife for the now more than ever worthless prizes of earthly empire, and to prepare for the cataclysm which would so soon dissolve all empires and kingdoms to nothing in the fiery crucible of the coming chaos, Alan at once renewed his petition and asked to be allowed to man the Avenger with a crew of volunteers and convey the warning to the Sultan and the Tsarina.

Since his second return to Aeria no word of love had passed between him and Alma. He was still too proud to become a suitor even to her, knowing as he did that she had looked upon him as polluted by his involuntary relations with Olga. As before, they had met as friends whose friendship was warmed

by the memory of an early but bygone love.

They had talked calmly and dispassionately of the coming end of earthly things, but neither of them had let fall any hint of a desire to meet it hand and hand with the other. His lips were sealed by the pride and anger of humiliation and hers by a spiritual exaltation which in the presence of approaching death raised her above the consideration of earthly love to the contemplation of even more solemn and holier things.

Then there happened an entirely unexpected event, which completely changed their relationship in an instant. On the third day after the delivery of the message in the temple a company composed of twenty old men, the heads of the noblest families in Aeria, presented to the President in Council, a petition, signed by every father and mother in the nation, praying that all in whose veins flowed the blood of Natas Richard Arnold, and Alan Tremayne should, irrespective of all other considerations, be included among those who were destined to seek in the caverns of Mount Austral the one chance of escape from the universal doom.

So obvious and so weighty were the reasons advanced in support of the petition that when, like all other matters of State, it was put to the vote of the Council, the only dissentient voices were those of the President and the Vice--President.

The immediate effect of this decision--from which, by the laws of Aeria, there was no appeal--was that Alma, Isma, and Alan were exempted from the ordeal of selection and numbered beforehand among the Children of Deliverance.

The President took upon himself the duty of communicating this decision to those whom it so deeply concerned. He told Alan first, and this was the half-expected reply that he received--

"No, father, I have never disobeyed you or the Council, as you know, but I tell you now frankly that I will not take advantage of what is after all only the accident of birth to save my life in such a crisis as this.

"Not only are there thousands of others in Aeria as good as I am, but I have already told you that, save under one condition, which you know as well as I do can never be realised, I have not the slightest desire to survive the ruin of the world. You may call this disobedience, rebellion, if you will, but it is my last resolve, and in such a time as this one does not make resolves lightly."

Alan said this standing facing his father in his private study. The President looked at him for a moment or two with eyes which, though grave, were neither reproving nor reproachful. Then he said with the shadow of a smile upon his lips--

"It is both disobedience and rebellion, my son, but though the Chief Magistrate must condemn it, your father cannot. I know, too, that not even the Council of Aeria can now enforce its commands. After all, the last penalty is but death, and that is a mockery now.

"I fully understand, too, the spirit in which you refuse the reprieve from the general doom, and prefer instead a mission which can scarcely end save in honourable death. It is the most noble one that you can choose, and you of all other men are the man to perform it.

"You have shown our enemies that you can strike hard in battle, so if they believe anyone they will believe you when you go to them with a message of peace enforced by such a solemn warning as you will take."

"Thank you, father," replied Alan simply, "not for what you say of me, but for the consent that your words imply. But what about the air-ship and her crew? I can do nothing without them, yet I cannot have them without the consent of the Council. Can you get that for me?"

"I believe so," said the President. "And if I can I will, since you are resolved to go, and since the honour of our name compels me to consent. But I must tell you that I feel sure that it will only be given conditionally."

"And what will the condition be?"

"That if you survive your mission you will return to Aeria before the end comes. They will have a right to demand that, for it is no part of your duty to deprive your companions of the chance of life,

slender though it may be, that will remain for those who may be among the chosen."

"That is true," replied Alan, bending his head in acquiescence. "If we escape with our lives they shall return, though I shall not"--

"You will not return, Alan? Why, where are you going? Surely you are not going to leave Aeria again, and at such a time as this; you, who are already one of the chosen, a firstborn son of the Master's line!"

It was Alan's mother who spoke. She had entered the room just as he had uttered the last sentence, and the ominous words struck a sudden chill to her heart. She came towards him with her eyes full of tears of apprehension and her hands stretched out pleadingly towards him.

Now that the first terror of the crisis was past, and there was one definite, however slender, hope of safety, she clung to it passionately for Alan's sake with a faith that made light of all the fearful difficulties which lay in the way of its realisation. In the sublime egotism of her mother-love the fate of a world shrank into insignificance in comparison with the one chance of safety for her only son.

"Yes, mother," replied Alan, taking her hands in his and bending down until his lips touched her upturned brow. "I am going to leave Aeria again to proclaim the Truce of God against the hour of His judgment, and I have just told my father that I shall not return"--

"No, no, my boy, you must not say that. You must not rob us of the one ray of light in this awful darkness that is falling upon us--of our one hope in all the world's despair!" cried his mother, letting go his hands and laying her own upon his shoulders as she looked up into his face with eyes that were now overflowing with tears.

"You will not leave us now, surely, for if we lost you we could not even take the chance of life ourselves, for it would not be worth having."

"Nor would it be worth having, my mother, either to you or to me," he replied, gently laying his hand on hers, "if I lived and left untried the attempt that it is my plain duty to make. You would see me a lonely and unmated man among the parents of the new race, a man with a shadow upon his name, and the memory of an unfulfilled duty behind him.

"Remember that it is I who have brought the guilt of blood back again upon earth. Would you have me outlive all the millions of my fellow-creatures with the knowledge that I had not made one effort to bring back that peace on earth which was lost through me before the last summons comes to all humanity?"

"Alan is right, wife," interrupted the President, before she could make any reply to her son's appeal. "It is his duty to save, if he can, his fellow-creatures from being overwhelmed in the midst of their madness and their sin. Remember that according to our faith, as all these millions, who are now drunk with battle and slaughter, and mad with the rage of conquest and revenge, end this life, so they must begin the next.

"There is time for him to speak and for them to hear, but whether they hear him or not, if he has spoken he has done his duty. Is it not better that if needs be he should die doing it than live and leave it undone?"

The weighty words, spoken as they were in a tone of blended affection and authority, found a fitting echo in his wife's breast. She stood for a moment between her husband and her son, looking from the one to the other. Then she dried her tears, and replied in a tone of gentle dignity and resignation--

"Yes, I see. You are right and I was wrong. It is his duty to go, and he must go. But," she continued, turning to Alan with the sudden light of a new hope in her eyes, "if I bid you 'God-speed,' my son, you will promise one thing, won't you?"

"Yes, mother, I will--whatever it is."

"Then promise me that if it shall be proved possible for you to live in happiness as well as in honour, you will come back."

"Yes," he replied, smiling gravely as he once more took her outstretched hands. "I will promise that as gladly as I would promise to enter Heaven if I saw the gates open before me."

"Then you shall go, and God go with you and bring you back in safety to us!" she said. Then, turning abruptly, she went out of the room, leaving them both wondering at her words.

This took place early on the morning of the 21st of May. An hour later the President had applied in Alan's name for the permission of the Council for him to select a crew of twenty volunteers and to take the Avenger to Europe on his mission to the warring peoples and to proclaim peace on earth and breathing space for humanity to prepare for its end. But then a new difficulty presented itself. Alexis, in spite of all Alan's remonstrances to the contrary, declared that he should never leave Aeria without him.

"I have shared in your exile and your return," he said, in answer to all arguments, "and, by the honour of the Golden Wings, I swear that I will either go with you now or you shall see me fall dead the moment that you leave the earth!"

This was the only oath that ever was heard upon the lips of an Aerial, and it was irrevocable, so, as there was no choice, Alan was forced to consent, and Alexis made ready to bid a last farewell to Aeria and all its dear associations.

CHAPTER XXVII. ALMA SPEAKS.

THAT night Alan, with his heart too full even for the society of his own home, went out of the city a little before midnight and walked down towards the western shore of the lake, where there still stood the same grove of palms in which, more than a hundred and thirty years before, Natasha and Richard Arnold had plighted their despairing troth and under the shadow of what threatened to be an eternal separation spoken the first words of love that had ever passed their lips.

It was not altogether accident that guided his steps in this direction, for all day he had been reviewing the strange chain of events which united the fate of his ancestors with his own and it was natural that the most romantic episode in their lives should inspire him with a desire to see the scene of it once more.

So it came about that he stood, on what he believed to be his last night in Aeria, beneath the self-same ancient palms which five generations before had heard Natasha confess her love for the man who had sworn to give her in exchange for it that empire of peace which he, their descendant, had been the means of losing.

The story was, of course, familiar to him in its minutest details, and as he stood there, his own heart heavy with a hopeless sorrow, he pictured his great ancestor standing on the same spot, holding the means of universal conquest in his hands, and yet accounting all things as worthless because the empire within his grasp must lack the supreme crown of a woman's love.

Then, looking back through the mists of the years that had gone by since then, he seemed to see the very shape of the Angel moving over the soft green sward where now the broad marble-paved roadway gleamed white beneath the trees, and to hear the musical murmur of her voice even as Richard Arnold had heard it on that eventful night.

"Alan!"

Was he dreaming, or was it the voice of his ancestress speaking to his soul in that hour of his lonely sorrow? A pale, shimmering, ghostly shape flitted across the quivering plumes of the palm-trees, dropped softly to the ground, and Alma stood before him in the well of her aerial boat.

Before his amazement had permitted him to utter a word she had stepped out and was coming towards him with outstretched hands, saying--

"They told me I should find you here. Alan, I have come to ask you to forgive me if you--before you go upon this mission of yours, if go you must."

"To forgive you, Alma!" he exclaimed, recoiling a pace in sheer astonishment at her presence and her words. "What can I have to forgive you? Is it not rather "--

"No, Alan, it is not," she said quickly, still holding out her hands to him and looking up at him with faintly flushed cheeks and shining eyes. "I see it all clearly now. Isma was right. It is I who have sinned against you, and it is for me to ask forgiveness."

"How can you ask that of me, Alma? How have you harmed me?" he asked, still bewildered by her beauty and the enigmas that she spoke in, yet taking her hands, and, as if by instinct, drawing her towards him.

"I will answer that afterwards," she said quickly, as though inspired by some sudden thought. "But tell me, first, are you quite resolved to go upon this mission?"

"Yes," he said with an almost imperceptible quiver in his voice. "Have I not had a great, if not a guilty, share in bringing this curse upon the world, and is it not fitting that I should give my last days to the task, however hopeless, of bringing back peace on earth so that men may die sane and not mad?"

"But, Alan, is that a higher duty than you owe to your family and your people? You know that in you centre all their hopes for the future, if there is to be one. With you would die the name of Arnold, and the direct line of Natas and Natasha."

"And with me they would die even if I went with the Children of Deliverance into the caverns of

Mount Austral and survived the ruin of the world. How can you mock me like that, Alma? Have I not suffered enough for my weakness and my folly that you would condemn me to wander an exile in the wilderness that the world will be when it has passed through its baptism of fire?

"What is the swift death of battle or the short agony of the conflagration of the world compared with the long death-in-life that I should drag out alone in the new world that may arise from the ruins of this one?"

"And why alone, Alan?"

"Why alone? Can you ask me that, Alma? Surely you are mocking me now. Can you ask why I should be alone if I survived with the remnant of our people? Do you not even yet know why I choose the certainty of death rather than the chance of life?"

"But, Alan, what if I were to tell you that you would not go alone to the caverns, and that if the chosen few survive you will not wander alone on the wilderness of the new world?"

"I should tell you, Alma, that you meant to sacrifice yourself to save me, and that I would not accept the sacrifice even at your hands."

"Sacrifice! No, Alan, I would not outlive the world, even with you, on those terms. A woman of Aeria does not sell herself even for sentiment. This is no time for secrets or false shame, and I tell you frankly that if you had accepted the order of the Council, you should have lived and I would have died.

"But your rebellion proved to me that Isma was right when she rebuked my false pride by saying that the man who has fallen and risen again is better and stronger than he who has never suffered"--

"But, Alma, remember "--

"No, you must not interrupt me now, or what ought to be said may never be spoken. I know what you were going to say. You were going to tell me to remember that Olga Romanoff is still alive. Let her live--and let God judge her for her sins in the judgment that is so soon to come! What have we to do with her?"

"Nothing, Alma, after you have said that, for it tells me that in your eyes the stain is purged and the fault forgiven. I will take the message to her as to the rest of the world. If she receives it in peace then there shall be peace, and God shall judge between us"--

"And if not?"

"Then I will pit any single ship against hers and her fleet and only one of us, if either, shall see the end."

"And if that is you--what then?"

"Then it will be for you--under Heaven--to speak the words of life or death, for only you can bid me live, Alma."

As he spoke the great lights on the mountain tops suddenly blazed out, shone for a few moments, and were extinguished again. It was the answering signal to one from Mars; but it joined two souls as well as two worlds, for by its light Alan saw on Alma's face and in her eyes the one reprieve from death that honour would permit him to accept.

Without waiting for the words that her now smiling lips were opening to utter, he took her unresisting in his arms. Then her proudly carried, wing-crowned head drooped at last in sweet submission, and rested on his heart; and as he turned her face up to his to take his kiss of re-betrothal, he said--

"That tells me that I may live. Now we are immortal, you and I, for this kiss is our eternity!"

Then their lips met, and for the instant Time had no more beginning or end. The impending ruin of the world was forgotten; for Love had spoken, and the very voice of Doom itself was silent amidst the happiness of their heedless souls.

CHAPTER XXVIII. THE SIGN IN THE SKY.

WHEN the news of what had happened at midnight in the palm grove was published the next morning far and wide through the valley of Aeria it would have been impossible to imagine that an irrevocable sentence of death was overhanging the land and all its inhabitants, save those who were to be selected to take the one chance that remained of surviving the chaos that was to come.

There was no one in the valley to whom Alan's story was not familiar in all its details, there was not a single heart that had not in the midst of its own happiness sympathised with him and Alma in their sorrow, and so, when that sorrow was at last turned into joy, everyone forgot for the moment the fate whose approach was so near and so certain, and rejoiced with them in the happiness that was great enough to raise them above the gloom that was already stealing over the world.

But in the midst of the general rejoicing came the decision of the Council upon the request which Alan had submitted to his father, and this, though he was forced to confess it wise and just, was by no means what, in his enthusiasm, he could have wished. The rulers of Aeria absolutely refused to permit any of the air-ships to leave the valley for at least two months to come.

They recognised with perfect approval the nobility of the resolve which Alan had taken to carry the message of the world's approaching end to those nations which he had been partially at least, responsible for plunging into the horrors of war, but they insisted that the concerns of Aeria must, in their eyes, take precedence of those of the outside world.

There was much to do, and the time for doing it was short. What was perhaps the greatest engineering task in the history of the world had to be conceived and completed within the next four months, and as Alan and Alexis were admittedly the two most skilful practical engineers in the State, the Council declined to allow them to run the almost certain risk of death at the hands of their enemies when their knowledge and skill ought to be devoted to the work of ensuring, as far as possible, the preservation of that remnant of the human race who should be destined to seek safety in the caverns of Mount Austral.

When the completion of that work was made certain, then permission would be freely given to them and their companions to go forth and proclaim their warning to the world, subject only to the condition that they were to take every precaution consistent with the honour of their race to return while there was yet time for them to take their places among the Children of Deliverance should the selection fall upon them.

Meanwhile, telephonic messages were to be sent to all those portions of the world with which Aeria was still in communication, conveying the exact terms of the warning that had been received from Mars, and calling upon the astronomers in all the observatories on the globe to verify the calculations for themselves, and publish their conclusions to their respective nations as quickly as possible.

With these terms Alan was of necessity obliged to be content. Indeed, when he came to review them in sober thought, he saw that, while nothing was to be lost, much was to be gained by submission to them.

Though he still refused, even in spite of the knowledge that he would share with Alma the future if there was to be one, to obey the order of the Council which exempted him from the ordeal of selection, he thought and worked with just as much ardour as though the safety of the whole of the dwellers in Aeria, as well as his own, hung upon his efforts.

The caverns of Mount Austral, like those of other limestone formations in various parts of the world, had been formed in some remote geological period by the solvent action of water charged with carbonic gas upon the limestone rocks.

The entrance to them, discovered very soon after the valley had been colonised by the Terrorists in the first decade of the twentieth century, was situated on the inner slopes of the mountain about eight hundred feet above the level of the lake, which occupied the central portion of the valley.

This lake, although fed by hundreds of streams from the surrounding mountains, always preserved the same level, in spite of the fact that it had no visible outlet. Those who first explored the caverns found the explanation of this phenomenon.

Below the floors of the vast chambers which penetrated the heart of the mountain for a distance of nearly three miles there ran a deep chasm, through which rushed in a black, swift, silent stream the surplus waters of the lake. This stream was nearly a thousand feet below the entrance to the caverns and half that distance below the floor of the lowest chambers and galleries.

The scheme conceived by Alan and Alexis and their fellow-workers was in fact nothing less than the damming of this subterranean stream by a mighty sluice-gate composed of one huge sheet of metal which, running down into grooves cut in the solid rock and metal-sheathed, should completely close the inner mouth of the tunnel by which the waters entered the caverns.

This, once successfully fixed in its place, would deprive the lake of its only known outlet. The streams would go on flowing from the mountains and the waters of the lake would rise. The upper entrance would, when the fatal moment came, also be closed, not by one such door, but by three that would slide down one behind the other in the upper tunnel, which, with a diameter of about thirty feet and a height of almost fifty, ran for nearly a quarter of a mile from the side of the mountain to the first of the chambers.

The spaces between these doors would be filled with ice artificially frozen, and shafts to allow for expansion should the ice melt and the water boil would run from them vertically, piercing the mountain-side. When the waters rose to the level of the entrance the doors would be lowered and the space filled with water and frozen. Then the waters would go on rising, the entrance would be submerged, and the defences of the fortress in which the remnant of humanity was to make its last stand for life would be complete.

But in addition to these outer defences there was an enormous amount of work to be done in fitting the interior of the caverns to receive those for whom they were to form an asylum.

They were already lighted by myriads of electric lamps, but the source of light was outside, and this had to be replaced by power-stations inside. Provision had to be made for keeping the air pure and vital, for supplying food and drink for an almost indefinite time, and for storing up a sufficiency of seeds and roots and treasures of art and creative skill, so that the new world might be clothed again with verdure and nothing essential of the splendid civilisation of Aeria be lost.

Such, in the briefest outline, was the momentous task to which the Aerians devoted all their splendid genius and unconquerable energies, and day by day and week by week they toiled at it, while the fatal hour which was to witness the last agony of man upon earth swiftly drew nearer and nearer.

The messages to the outside world had been sent and replied to. Those to the astronomers and to the governments of the Federation had been acknowledged in formal terms which thinly concealed the incredulity with which they had been received.

Olga had treated the message with the silent disdain of a conquering autocrat--such, as in sober truth, she now was. The Sultan had replied to it in a despatch in which the dignity of a victorious despot and the fatalism of the religious fanatic were characteristically blended. Then one by one the telephonic communications with the various parts of the world ceased; messages were sent out and repeated, but no answer came back.

First Europe, then Britain, then South Africa, America, and Australia, ceased to respond to the signals; and by the beginning of July Aeria was completely isolated from the rest of the world--probably the only stronghold that now remained unsubdued by the conquering fleets of the Sultan and the Tsarina.

Still the sentinel ships, hanging high in air over the valley, and constantly patrolling the outer slopes of the mountains, saw no sign of hostile approach. The last messages that had been received from the great cities of the Federation had told brief but fearful stories of the desolation that was following in the path of Moslem and Russian conquest.

The bridges of Gibraltar and the Bosphorus had been forced, and thousands after thousands of Moslem troops had been poured into Europe. Frenzied by fanaticism and the new-born lust of battle and conquest, the hordes of Asiatic tribesmen who had escaped the one terrific onslaught of the fleet under the command of Alexis had, now that the guardian ships were withdrawn, been hurried through Russia, and hurled upon the wealthy and almost defenceless cities of Western Europe.

The Federation was on the point of utter collapse, divided in its counsels, confused in its plans of defence, its armies undisciplined, and its fleets disorganised and daily diminishing in number and effectiveness.

In America, Australia, and Southern Africa there was anarchy on earth and terror in the air. Cities had been terrorised into capitulation by aerial squadrons, and then looted and burnt, and their ruins given up to be the miserable prey of the revolutionaries who now, as ever, had taken advantage of the universal panic to revolt against all government, and deny all rights but that which they claimed to prey upon the helpless, all liberty that was not license, and all property that was not plunder.

The last tidings of all that came from Europe were received from Britain, and, after recounting the destruction of London and the collapse of the Government, concluded with the news that Olga had publicly embraced the faith of Islam, and, in conjunction with the Sultan, whom she was to marry as soon as the conquest of Europe was finally complete, was forcibly converting her Russian subjects to the creed of the Koran.

So the affairs of the world stood when the sun went down on the 15th of July. On the meridian of Aeria it set at nine minutes to eight; at thirteen minutes past eight, according to the calculations made by the Martian and verified by the Aerian astronomers, the herald of Fate would approach within the range of terrestrial vision.

Before the brief period of tropical twilight had passed every telescope in the valley was turned to that spot in the constellation of Andromeda at which it was predicted to become visible. As the revolving earth swept Aeria into the shadow of night every light was extinguished, for it was known that the astronomers of Mars would be anxiously watching for a signal that would announce the correctness or the error of their calculations.

Vassilis Cosmo, seated at the eye-piece of the great equatorial telescope on Mount Austral, with his hand on the switch which controlled the electric currents that were waiting to do his bidding, watched the fields of space darken, and the stars of Andromeda shine out. Just a little below the line which joins the Square of Pegasus with the constellation of Cassiopeia, he saw, as usual, the oval, luminous cloud of the great nebula in Andromeda.

Four degrees towards the zenith, above the centre of the star-cloud, a tiny fan-shaped spray, faint and pale as a dissolving puff of white smoke, was floating in the black abyss of space. Precisely at the thirteenth minute of the hour he turned the switch, and the great suns on the mountain-tops blazed out and flashed the signal to the sister-world to tell its inhabitants that their prediction had been fulfilled to the second.

CHAPTER XXIX. THE TRUCE OF GOD.

BY the 30th of July the work in the caverns was so far advanced that the Council was able to authorise the departure of Alan and his companions for the outside world. The great vertical sluice-door, a huge sheet of steel forty feet long, twenty wide, and eighteen inches thick, and footed with a great indiarubber pad, was in its place, suspended at the top of the steel-lined grooves, which had been sunk three feet into each of the rock walls of the chasm into which the water-tunnel from the lake opened.

On the morning of the 30th it was sent down into its final position. The momentous experiment proved completely successful. The huge mass of metal descended slowly over the mouth of the tunnel into the black, swift stream at the bottom of the chasm. As its enormous weight crushed the indiarubber pad down into all the inequalities of the floor the outrush of the waters instantly stopped, and the channel ran dry save for the fierce jets of water which spouted out over the top of the plate.

The crevices through which these came were easily plugged, and when this was done it was found that the waters of the lake were rising at the rate of three feet an hour. This proved that, whether the lake had another outlet or not, the damming of the subterranean channels would be quite sufficient to flood the whole valley.

The gate was then raised again, and the waters permitted to flow as before. The triple doors at the entrance to the cavern were already in position when this was done, as the task of placing them had necessarily been much easier than the construction of the water-gate. Nothing but details now remained to be completed, and there was therefore no reason for any further postponement of Alan's mission.

Alexis had also succeeded in carrying his point, and getting permission to accompany Alan in the Isma. He had had no difficulty in satisfying the Council that the risk would be enormously diminished by sending two air-ships instead of one, for while Alan descended to the earth to convey his message to a hostile city, he would be able to remain in the air, dominating it with his guns, and ready to lay it in ruins if the flag of truce were not respected.

But the two friends had gained even more than this, for in answer to their earnest pleadings, in which it may be suspected they were not altogether unsupported by those as vitally concerned as themselves, a joint family council had decided that, under the unparalleled circumstances of the case, there was no valid reason for refusing consent to their immediate union with the two faithful brides who had waited so long and so patiently for their lords.

Therefore, on the morning of the 31st, it came to pass that they stood upon the spot sanctified by the ashes of their great ancestors, and took each other for man and wife, for life or death, as the hazard of the world's fate might decide, in the presence of a vast congregation of those who stood with feet already touching the brink of the valley of the shadow of death.

No bridal so strange or solemn had ever been celebrated in the world before. It was human love and hope and genius, serene and confident in the presence of the most awful catastrophe that had ever befallen humanity, defying the fate that was about to overwhelm a world in destruction.

That evening, as the sun was touching the tops of the western mountains, the last preparations for the voyage were completed, the last farewells exchanged, and the Isma and the Avenger, now renamed the Alma by the hands of her name-mother, rose into the air amid salvoes of aerial artillery, and winged their way northward over the Ridge.

As they sped out over the plains of Northern Africa the sun sank, and out of the north-western heavens shone the luminous haze of the Fire-Cloud, which had now grown in visible magnitude until the two fan-like wings which spread out from its central nucleus spanned an arc of twenty degrees in the heavens.

As the two air-ships sped on their northward course towards Alexandria, where Alan had decided to make his first attempt to stay the progress of the world-war, the two pairs of new-wedded lovers

watched with anxious eyes from the decks of their flying craft the terrible portent in the skies whose meaning they above all others on earth were so well qualified to read.

There could be no doubt now, even apart from all the elaborate calculations which had been made, that the prediction of the Martian astronomers was far more likely to be fulfilled than contradicted by the event.

Yet, so great was the happiness they found in this strange fulfilment of the faint hopes of years of almost hopeless waiting that, even as they journeyed on through the night with this threatening sign of approaching ruin pouring its angry light out of the skies, their talk was still rather of love and life and hope than of the death and desolation which they knew to be overhanging their race with such remorseless certainty.

They had lived and loved, and their love had found fruition. What more could they have asked of Fate than this, even if they could have prolonged their lives indefinitely by a mere effort of will? As Alan had said to Alma at the moment of their re-betrothal in the palm-grove, they were immortal now, and for them the death of a world was but an accident on the onward progress of an evolution in which such souls as theirs, veritable sparks of the divine fire itself, were the dominating factors.

As the Fire-Cloud paled in the West, and the eastern heavens brightened with the fore-glow of the coming dawn, the captains of the two vessels were roused by the signals from the conning-towers which told them that Alexandria was in sight.

As soon as he got on deck Alan signalled to the Isma to come close alongside. As she did so and the morning greetings were exchanged, Alma appeared on deck, and suggested that Alexis and Isma should come and have breakfast on board the flagship, so that the two captains could discuss their final plans before descending to the city.

The invitation was of course accepted, and an hour later the Alma commenced her descent towards the Sultan's palace, above which, from a lofty flagstaff, the banner of Islam was floating lazily in the early morning breeze. She flew no other ensign save a broad white flag of truce that streamed out from the signal-mast at her stern.

The whole city seemed asleep, secure in the conquests that had already been won. A single air-ship floated two thousand feet above the palace, and as he approached her Alan, keeping her well under his guns, flew from his mainmast the signal--"We come in peace. Will you respect the flag?"

The Moslem captain saw at a glance that a single shell would annihilate his vessel, and that the Alma was perfectly protected by her consort, circling two thousand feet above him, so he signalled, "Yes, come alongside." The Alma descended and swung round until she came on a level with the Moslem vessel, then she ran alongside within speaking distance, the doors of the deck-chambers were opened, and Alan, after exchanging salutes, asked her captain whether the Sultan was in his capital.

"Yes," replied the Moslem. "He is down yonder in his palace awaiting the coming of the Tsarina, for they are to join hands to-day and reign lord and mistress of the world they have conquered."

"Is the world, then, conquered?" asked Alan, with a smile on his lips and a note of scornful pity in his voice.

"Yes," said the Moslem. "East and west, north and south, the world is ours, saving only your own little land, and for that, I suppose, you have come to make terms of peace."

"I have not come to make terms of peace for Aeria, but for the world," replied Alan gravely. "But of that I must speak with your master. When will he be able to give me an audience?"

"That I cannot say," was the reply, "or even that he will hear you at all. But, pardon! I did not know that the angels of Paradise accompanied the Aerians on their voyages. Descend in peace, my master will receive you."

As he was speaking Alma, crowned with her crystal wings, and radiant with a beauty which, to the Moslem's eyes, seemed something superhuman, had come from the after part of the vessel to Alan's side. It was the first time that he had ever seen a woman of Aeria; and, with the innate chivalry of his race, he paid his involuntary homage to her as he would have done to an incarnation of one of the

poetic dreams of his faith.

Then salutes were exchanged again between the two captains and the Alma sank swiftly downwards until she hovered twenty feet above the terrace on which Alan had first spoken with the Sultan on the night that he captured the Vindaya.

The approach of the Aerial warship had already summoned a party of guards to the roof, and after a brief parley a message was carried to the Sultan from Alan. A few minutes later Khalid stepped out of the doorway leading from the interior of the palace, magnificently attired as though for some great ceremonial.

He looked up and saw Alan standing with Alma by his side on the after-deck of his ship. He saw, too, that the flag of truce was flying from the stern and that the guns were laid alongside instead of being pointed down upon the city. He raised his hand in salute and said--

"I see you come in the guise of peace. If that is so you are welcome."

"It is peace if your Majesty will have it so," replied Alan, returning his salute, and at the same time making a sign for the Alma to descend to the roof of the palace. As her keels touched the floor of the terrace, the steps fell from the after doorway, and he came down, leaving Alma standing on deck by the open door.

"Will not your companion honour my palace by touching its roof with her foot?" said Khalid, looking up at Alma as he exchanged greetings with Alan.

"My companion, Sultan, is the wife of the man whom you turned your back upon on this very spot as a liar, a traitor, and a murderer," said Alan, looking him straight in the eyes. "How, then, could she honour your palace by setting foot on its roof?"

For a moment the Sultan was abashed into silence by the directness of the rebuke, and then his Oriental subtlety and quickness of thought came to his aid, and, bending his head with royal dignity, he said--

"The angels do not mate with such men as that. The Tsarina must have been misled by appearances, perhaps, indeed, carried away by her hereditary hatred of your people. It is impossible that any but a true man could have won the love of such a woman. You tell me that you come as friends and not as enemies, so, for the hour, let there be peace, not war, between us. While you are my guests my city is yours, and all that it contains. I pledge my honour for your safety, so let the Daughter of the Air descend that I may hear from her lips the music of her voice."

Turning aside, half to hide a smile at the Oriental metaphor of the Sultan's speech, Alan went to the foot of the steps and held out his hand to Alma. As she alighted on the terrace he led her towards him, saying--

"This is my wife. Yesterday morning she was Alma Tremayne, a daughter in the fifth generation of the first President of the Federation. Her ancestor and yours made terms of peace after the War of the Terror. It is, therefore, more fitting that you should hear from her lips than from mine the message that we bring."

"My ears are waiting," said Khalid, bending low over the hand that Alma held out to him as Alan spoke. "It would be a strange message that would not be welcome from such lips."

From one whom she could have looked upon as an equal such language as this would have jarred sorely upon Alma, accustomed as she was to the frank directness of her own people's speech. But from Khalid she tolerated it as she would have tolerated the extravagance of a child, and as he raised his head again she looked at him with eyes that dazzled him afresh, intoxicated as he already was with her, to him, strange and almost unearthly beauty, and said in a voice such as he had never heard before--

"Thank you, Sultan, for your welcome, but surely there is little need for me to tell you what message we bring. Last night you saw it written in letters of fire across the heavens. Has not the voice of God spoken bidding you and your people to cease the cruel warfare that you are waging upon the world and to prepare for the end of which that is a sign?"

As she spoke she raised her hand and pointed to where the shape of the Fire-Cloud now hung in the

sky like a white mist paling before the light of the rising sun.

"You rejected our first warning, as perhaps was natural, but now that you have seen the confirmation of it shining among the stars, surely you will no longer reject it."

The last words were spoken in a gentle, pleading tone, which no man could have heard without being moved by them.

"Daughter of the Air," replied the Sultan, following her hand with his eyes, "I have seen, and in a measure I believe, your message, though my interpretation of it may be other than yours. If the end of the world is at hand, the Commander of the Faithful will know how to meet it as a true believer should. It is not impossible that there may be peace between us yet in the last hours of earthly life, for I would not willingly make war on a people that has daughters such as you."

"Not for our sake, Sultan, but for the sake of all who have survived this terrible warfare of yours we are come to plead with you for peace," said Alma. "This is no time for hate and strife and bloodshed. There will be horrors enough upon earth before long without any made by the fury of man. It is in your power to give peace to the world and breathing space to meet its end. Why will you not give?"

"You forget it is not I alone who can give peace," replied Khalid. "If that were so"--

Before he could speak another word a salvo of aerial artillery shook the air above the city. All looked up towards the northern sky, whence the sound proceeded, and saw a squadron of twenty silvery-hulled air-ships flying the Moslem and Russian flags, and escorting in two divisions a warship, from whose flagstaff flew the imperial standard of Russia, and whose shining hull of azurine proclaimed her the lost Ithuriel.

Alan grasped the perilous situation in an instant, and was just about to tell Alma to go back on board their own ship when the Sultan, divining his intention, took a step forward and said--

"Do you think that Khalid cannot protect his guests or that his ally will not respect the hospitality of his house? You are safe. If a hair of your head were harmed the Tsarina and I would be enemies and she would come to her death instead of her bridal, for that is what brings her here. There is truce between us for this day at least, and she shall not break it."

As he ceased speaking the twenty air-ships opened out into a long line and remained suspended five hundred feet above the palace, while the Revenge continued her downward flight and alighted at the farther end of the terrace from where they were standing.

The after door of the deck-chamber opened as she touched the marble pavement, the steps dropped down, and Olga descended, attired as usual in a plain robe of royal purple, over which hung a travelling mantle of pearl-grey cloth as fine and soft as silk and lined with the then almost priceless fur of the silver fox.

Her head was uncovered save for a plain golden fillet, from which rose a pair of slender silver wings so thickly encrusted with diamonds that they seemed entirely fashioned of the flashing gems. The golden fillet shone out brightly yellow against the lustrous black of her thickly-coiled hair, and the diamond wings blazed and scintillated in the sunlight with every movement of her head.

As she descended the steps she was followed by Orloff Lossenski and a guard of honour of twelve of her officers, splendidly dressed and armed to the teeth, who, as soon as they landed, drew their swords, which were now only used as ornamental insignia of rank, and ranged themselves in two lines, one on either side of her.

Before the Revenge had alighted the Sultan had made a sign to one of the sentries, who blew a long, clear blast on a silver bugle, which was instantly answered by a hundred others from various parts of the city. At the sound the Moslem metropolis seemed to wake from sleep into universal activity.

Thousands of soldiers in brilliant uniforms poured into the empty streets, the Moslem and Russian flags ran up to a thousand flagstaffs, squadron after squadron of aerial cruisers soared up from the earth and saluted with salvoes of artillery, which shook the very firmament and brought Alexis down to within three thousand feet of the palace roof in the belief that Alan and Alma had fallen victims to some treachery, and that the time had come for him to avenge them by laying the city in ruins, as he had

promised to do in such an event.

A single glance through his field-glasses showed him the true state of affairs, so he contented himself with keeping his crew at quarters with every gun trained on a Russian or a Moslem air-ship and ready to spread death and ruin far and wide should any harm happen to the Alma or her crew.

While this was taking place the Sultan's bodyguard had filed out on to the terrace resplendent with gorgeous uniforms and glittering weapons, and between the two long lines that they formed Khalid advanced to meet his bride, leaving Alan and Alma interested and not unanxious spectators of the strange and unexpected scene.

They met half-way down the double line, and as Olga held out the hand over which Khalid bowed low as he raised it to his lips, she said, with a glance of undisguised hate towards Alan and Alma and a mocking smile on her lips--

"Your Majesty's generosity is unbounded! I see that you have invited to our wedding-feast the only enemies with whom we have yet to measure swords!"

"They have not come as enemies, Tsarina," replied Khalid, as he raised his head and looked with but half-restrained ardour on the beauty that was so soon to be his. "Nor yet have they come at my invitation. Alan Arnold and his wife"--

"His what!" interrupted Olga, her cheeks burning and her eyes flashing with a sudden blaze of uncontrollable anger.

"His wife, Tsarina," replied Khalid, somewhat coldly. "The son of Natasha and Richard Arnold has mated with the daughter of Alan Tremayne, and they have come in the fifth generation to warn you, the daughter of the House of Romanoff, and me, the son of the line of Mohammed Reshad, to cease our warfare upon the nations and prepare for the universal end which, they tell us, is at hand."

Khalid spoke, as Olga thought, half in jest and half in earnest, so she continued in the same mocking tone in which she had first spoken--

"Then if that is so, if all human enmities are soon to be purged by the all-destroying fires, we may as well meet in peace for the moment. Will your Majesty honour me by presenting me to your uninvited guests?"

"Uninvited, but still my guests, Tsarina," replied Khalid gravely, "and therefore I need not ask you"--

"No, Sultan," said Olga, interrupting him, "you need ask me nothing. You need not fear that I shall not respect the hospitality of your house, even when extended to them."

As she spoke she gave him her hand again and he led her between the silent, rigid ranks of his guards to where Alan and Alma were standing.

Since men and women had learned to love and hate there had been no such strange meeting between two women as that which now took place between Alma and Olga. It was the first time that Olga had ever seen a woman of the race to which Alan belonged, and Alma, for the first time confronted with a daughter of the "earth-folk," saw in Olga Romanoff at once the most beautiful woman outside the confines of Aeria and the incarnation of everything that she had been trained to look upon as evil.

While the Sultan was speaking the words of presentation their eyes met, and Alma thought of that sentence in Alan's letter to his father, "She is as beautiful as an angel and as merciless as a fiend," while Olga looked back to the time when she first heard Alma's name and hated her for the sake of him who now stood beside her, her lover and her husband--the man she had held in bondage for years without winning one voluntary caress from him.

Alma's first emotion was one of wonder. Hitherto, she had seen nothing beautiful that was not at the same time good, for in Aeria the conceptions of beauty and goodness were inseparable. But here was a woman of almost perfect physical loveliness, after her own type, who was beyond all doubt guilty of the most colossal crime that a human soul had conceived or a human hand had carried out since men first learned to sin.

The world, which ten years before had been a paradise of peace, prosperity, and enlightened progress, was now a wilderness of misery and an inferno of strife, fast lapsing back into barbarism--and

all this was her doing.

As this thought came to Alma's mind, standing out distinct among all the others that were forcing themselves upon her, wonder gave place to unspeakable horror, and as Olga approached, with the light of hate still burning in her eyes and the same mocking smile upon her lips, she instinctively shrank back as though to avoid contact with some unclean thing. As she did so her hand slipped through Alan's arm and a visible shudder ran through her form.

Marvellous as Olga's power of self-control and dissimulation was, she failed entirely to restrain the passion which such a reception aroused within her. It was the first time in her life that she had ever stood in the presence of a woman untainted by a spot of sin or shame, and this woman recoiled from her in visible loathing, beautiful and mighty as she was, at the very zenith of her conquering career and on the morning of her promised union with the man who, as she believed, would before many days share the empire of the world with her.

Hardened as she was, the mute rebuke cut her to the quick. The flush on her cheeks died out and left her so pale for the moment that her face looked almost ghastly with its grey lips and black burning eyes. This daughter of a higher race had at a single glance pierced the splendid mask which covered the fearful deformity of her true nature. She thought of the night long ago in the bedroom at St. Petersburg when by the light of the unearthly flame hovering above her poison-still she had seen her image in the mirror.

Then pride and anger came to her rescue. The blood returned to her cheeks and lips, she drew herself up to the full height of her queenly stature, and as the Sultan spoke the words of presentation she slightly inclined her head, and then raising it again said, in low, even tones, whose wonderful music sent a chill to Alma's heart--

"This is a pleasant surprise, Alan Arnold. I little thought that after our last parting we should meet again, save in battle, much less did I think that you would honour my bridal by bringing your own bride to it. Still, as the Sultan tells me, there is truce for to-day, and, so far as to my enemy, you are welcome."

"We have not come as guests to your bridal, Tsarina," said Alan coldly and gravely, "nor have we come to make truce as between mortal enemies. The enmities of men and nations are but as child's-play now. We have come to proclaim the Truce of God against the hour of His final judgment."

CHAPTER XXX. THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

"AH, I see," said Olga. "You have come to tell us this wonderful story about the comet, and the message you say you have received from Mars, over again. You are not the first who have prophesied the end of the world by such means, nor will you be the last to be discredited by the event.

"Once for all, then, let me save misunderstanding by telling you that I don't believe a word of it, and therefore nothing that you can say will have any effect on the course of action that I have determined upon. You are of course at liberty to preach your truce elsewhere and at your own risk, though I fear it will be but the voice of one crying in the wilderness."

"Yes, truly in the wilderness," said Alma before Alan could reply, "but a wilderness that you have made with your own hand, Tsarina. You who have been the evil genius of the world, have you not done harm enough, now that the world has only a few more weeks to live?"

"According to the idle tale you bring us," interrupted Olga, repressing with a barely successful effort the anger aroused afresh within her by the serene tone in which Alma spoke. It sounded rather like the voice of an angel speaking to a mortal than of one woman addressing another, and even to herself Olga was forced to admit that there could be no question of equality between this daughter of the air and herself.

"It is no idle tale," replied Alma, almost in the same tone which she might have used in reproving a wayward child, "it is not even a prophecy, it is a mathematical certainty, and if you understood you would believe."

"You are wasting time and your own breath," said Olga scornfully. "You are not my guests but the Sultan's, yet he may allow me to say that we have other demands upon our attention more important than listening to such sentimentalism as this."

Before Alma could answer, Alan turned to the Sultan as though not deigning to reply to Olga's insulting speech.

"Your Majesty, I see that this is no time to perform the mission upon which I came. We did not expect the presence of the Tsarina here. Had we done so we should not have come, for I know how vain it would be to reason with her. I came prepared to satisfy the most skilful astronomers in your kingdom that what I say is absolutely true, and I ventured to hope that you, if satisfied by their assurances, would give peace to the world for the remnant of its days.

"But even so it is not for us to interrupt or even to introduce an unpleasant element into the doings of to-day, so, with your Majesty's permission, I will leave the calculations with your minister and relieve you and the Tsarina of our unwelcome presence."

All this time the Grand Vizier, Musa al Ghazi, had been standing a little to the rear of the group stroking his beard nervously and looking anxiously from one to the other. He seemed about to speak, when Khalid said to Alan with a courtesy which contrasted strongly with Olga's contemptuous demeanour--

"I thank you, Prince of the Air. As matters stand I think that will be the most reasonable as well as the most convenient course. Though I am far from convinced that you are not mistaken, yet I can assure you that the best skill in my domains shall examine what you leave us. Musa!"

The old man turned pale as his master pronounced his name, and stepped forward with a visible agitation, which was by no means accounted for by the circumstances of the strange situation. Instead of waiting for Khalid's commands he said as he made his obeisance before him--

"Commander of the Faithful, I am here; but before your Majesty bids me take these papers from the hands of Alan Arnold I would ask permission to say a word that must be said in private."

"In private, Musa?" said Khalid, frowning slightly and passing his hand down his beard. "This is hardly a time for State secrets."

"It is but my duty to my master that bids me speak," replied the old man, again bending before him.

"A moment will suffice for the speaking of what I have to say."

Musa's tone was so earnest and his anxiety so palpable that Khalid without more ado made his excuses to the Tsarina and his unexpected guests and stepped aside out of earshot with his Vizier.

"Well, Musa, what is it that is so pressing and yet so private?" he asked, a trifle impatiently.

"My master," replied the old minister, in a voice that now trembled with emotion, "there is no need to examine the calculations from Aeria. An hour before daybreak Hakem ben Amru, your chief astronomer at the observatory of Memphis, came to me and told me that he had completed his own calculations of the curve and period of the comet and that, allowing for difference in longitude between our meridian and that of Aeria, the prediction from Mars will be fulfilled beyond all doubt at midnight on the 23rd of September."

This was testimony which it was impossible for Khalid to question. Musa's sincerity was beyond all question and Hakem ben Amru was the most renowned astronomer in the world outside Aeria. Khalid recoiled a pace as though he had been struck, and said in a voice hoarse with sudden emotion--

"Why did you not tell me this before, Musa?"

"Because I would not mar my master's happiness for this day at least," replied Musa. "If it be true that the end of earthly things is at hand a day is of but small account. To tell you would neither hasten nor delay the end. But Alan Arnold's words forced me to speak, for I knew that Hakem would speak if I did not."

Khalid laid his hand upon the old man's shoulder and said gravely but kindly--

"It was well thought, Musa, and I thank you for your consideration, evil as your news is. It is Kismet, and the will of Allah must be done!"

So saying he turned away and walked with slow steps and downcast eyes to where Olga was standing talking to Orloff Lossenski with her back turned in open contempt upon Alma and Alan. A single glance at his face told her that Musa had had no pleasant tidings to impart.

"Your Majesty looks grave," she said. "Has Musa given you news of some disaster to our forces?"

"More than that, Tsarina," replied Khalid. "He has brought me confirmation that I cannot doubt of the truth of the message from Aeria."

"What!" exclaimed Olga in a quick passionate tone that all standing near could hear. "The confirmation of that thrice-told tale with which these people are trying to impose on our fears! Surely your Majesty is jesting now?"

"No, Tsarina, it is no subject for jesting but only for earnest and solemn thought," answered Khalid seriously.

"I neither can nor will believe it!" cried Olga passionately, her long-restrained anger completely overcoming her prudence and her whole soul rising in ungovernable revolt. "Believe or not as you will, I will not. It cannot be possible; it is too monstrous for all credence!"

"Why, one would think the very Fates themselves were fighting against us if that were true, and were bringing the world to an end just as we have conquered it for our own!"

"As for these Aerians," she continued, turning upon Alan and Alma and taking a couple of steps towards them, "they have come here with this wild story to cover an attempt to make terms with us before it is too late. It is a trick to deceive you, but it shall not succeed in my presence. Do you not remember how, upon this very spot little more than a year ago, I showed you this same Alan Arnold, who now comes preaching about his Truce of God, as the shameless liar and traitor that he is."

She had thrown off all disguise and all restraint now. Hatred was shining out of her eyes and open scorn was upon her lips. She waved her hand with a contemptuous gesture towards them and went on--

"If you have come to ask for terms of peace, be honest and say so. You need not fear to speak, for there may be conditions on which we will let you live."

Khalid was about to utter some reproof, and Alan's hand had gone instinctively to the hilt of his rapier, when Alma stepped forward and faced Olga, her own eyes now burning dark with anger and her cheeks flushed with the hot blood which Olga's insult had called to them.

"Make terms with you!" she said, looking down upon her from the height of her splendid stature. "With you, who have laid the earth waste and made the habitations of men desolate--with you, whom I could strike dead at my feet without staining my hand by laying it upon you! It is for you to make terms, if you can, not with us but with the Heaven whose justice you have outraged and whose patience you have scorned!"

"Cease this idle talk of battle and conquest, this impious defiance of the decrees of Fate! Can you make terms with God? If so, then when you see His sign blazing in the heavens to-night cause it to change its path and pass aside from the earth. If not kneel down and pray, not for your life, for that would be useless, but for strength to meet your end in the midst of the desolation that you have created!"

Olga heard her in silence to the end, her whole being shaken with the tempest of passion that Alma's words set raging in her breast. For a moment she stood speechless, white to the lips, and trembling in every limb from very rage. Then she suddenly stepped back a pace, and cried in a voice more like the cry of a wild animal in pain than human speech--

"Whether the world lives or not you shall not, whatever comes!" and as she spoke she snatched a pistol out of her girdle and levelled it at Alma's heart. Before she could spring the lock Alan had snatched Alma up in his arms and Khalid, with a cry of horror and anger, had sprung forward and grasped Olga's wrist.

The bullet flew high, cutting one of the wings off Alan's coronet in its flight. Half a dozen strides took him alongside his ship, and in another instant he was standing on her deck, his left arm round Alma's waist holding her behind him and his right hand grasping one of his pistols.

He raised his arm and the pistol flashed. At the same moment he stamped on the deck and the Alma leapt a thousand feet obliquely into the air. The second before the pistol flashed Olga turned her head as though she were going to fire again, and the motion saved her life, for Alan's bullet, instead of piercing her brain, as it was meant to do, cut a straight red gash across her forehead from temple to temple and buried itself in the breast of Orloff Lossenski as he sprang forward to snatch his mistress out of the line of fire.

He pitched forward and dropped, and Khalid, forgetting everything else in the horror of the moment, caught Olga in his arms as a rain of blood streamed down over her face and a shrill scream of pain and rage burst from her lips.

Although there were nearly three hundred warships floating in the air above Alexandria, and though the rapidly-enacted tragedy on the roof of the palace could be distinctly seen from their decks, the Alma escaped scathless, for the simple reason that, so terrible was the energy developed by the projectiles in use, that had one struck her as she left the terrace the palace itself would have been wrecked, and every living being within a radius of two hundred yards from the focus of the explosion would have been instantly killed.

Consequently, the captains of the Russian and Moslem ships had to look on in angry impotence as she leapt out of range, joined her consort, and with her soared away westward until a height of fifteen thousand feet was reached, and so vanished from the sight of their discomfited enemies.

From Alexandria they crossed the Mediterranean and Europe to Britain by way of Italy, the Valley of the Rhone, and Paris, at a height of some five thousand feet from the land. What they saw more than justified the reports which had reached Aeria. The fairest countries of Europe were now only blackened deserts and wasted wildernesses.

They flew all day over deserted fields and towns and cities that were little better than heaps of blackened ruins, and when night fell and the Fire-Cloud blazed out of the sky, its glare was answered by flames rising from the earth, and huge patches of mingled smoke and flame which marked the sites of other towns which were only now falling victims to the destroyers.

Society had practically come to an end. People who a few weeks before had been wealthy watched almost with apathy the plunder of their homes and the burning of their palaces by the armed bands of

robbers which sprang up everywhere. There was no longer any protection for life and property. If anarchists on the earth did not burn and slay and plunder their enemies in the air would, and even if they did not, what did it matter if friends and foes, plunderers and plundered were to be consumed together in the fire that was about to fall from heaven?

Amidst the universal terror Alma, with her almost unearthly beauty, the calm dignity of her bearing, and the sweetness and gentleness of her loving counsels, passed through the devastated lands rather like an angel of mercy than a woman of the same flesh and blood as the distracted panic-stricken crowds through which she moved by Alan's side, speaking her message in a voice that seemed to be an echo from some other world.

When the Alma and the Isma reached London ten days after leaving Alexandria, they found the vast and once splendid metropolis of the world a wide waste of broken, blackened, and in some places still smoking ruins. Of its fifteen millions of inhabitants barely three millions remained to people its fragments. All the rest had either fled soon after the first assault, or had fallen in the pitiless carnage that had been let loose upon them.

They remained three days amidst the ruins of London, listening to the most heartrending tales of suffering and cruelty, and giving in return such consolation as they could. Then they took the air again, and journeyed on westward over the once fair and smiling English land that was now a wilderness amidst which plague and famine, anarchy and destruction, stalked triumphant, while the few who listened to their message waited in despairing terror for the fate that could hardly be worse than what they had passed through since the fatal 16th of May.

From England they crossed the Atlantic to America, and from America they sped over the Pacific to Australia, finding everywhere the same desolation upon the face of the earth, and the same terror and despair in the minds of men. But for the awful reality before their eyes, it would have been impossible for them to believe that the civilisation which had seemed so strong and splendid four months before, could have collapsed as it had done into such utter chaos.

In those four short months the whole tragedy of human life on earth seemed to have been re-enacted. The frenzy and panic of war had degenerated into a universal delirium. Men, women, and children had gone mad by millions. Religious fanatics, impostors, and enthusiasts, if possible more insane than their hearers, preached the wildest and most blasphemous doctrines, and uttered the most hideous prophecies, not only as to the approaching end of the world, but of the imaginary eternal horrors that were to follow it.

The art and science and culture of five hundred years had been forgotten in those few weeks of madness, and mankind had sunk back wholesale into the grossest superstitions of the Dark Ages. Every night, when the flaming shape of the Fire-Cloud blazed out the stars, millions fell down on their knees and greeted it with prayers and invocations, as savages had once been wont to worship their fetishes.

By the end of August, when the fiery arc overarched more than two-thirds of the heavens and rivalled the sunlight itself in brightness, the degeneration of humanity had advanced to such a fearful stage of intellectual and moral depravity, that even human sacrifices were offered to appease the wrath of the deity who was believed to have taken the shape of the Fire-Cloud. Under the influence of delirium the human mind had gone back through twenty-five centuries, and the worship of Baal and Moloch had returned upon earth.

Only a small minority of men and women preserved their senses amidst the universal madness. These greeted the Aerians as friends, and heard their message, and promised to remain steadfast to the end, but as day after day went by and the terror grew and the nations plunged deeper and deeper into the saturnalia of frenzy and despair, the task undertaken by Alan and Alma grew more and more hopeless, and when the last day of August came, they at length confessed to themselves that it was useless to pursue it any further.

This, too, was the day on which the term of absence granted by the Council expired, and so at nightfall, after having carried their message round the whole world and passed it, by the mouths of

those who were willing to listen, through many lands, they at length reluctantly turned their prows homeward, and, with hearts sickened by all the unspeakable horrors they had witnessed, soared upward into the luridly-lighted heavens, leaving the world to the fate which in twenty-three days more would overwhelm the conquerors and the conquered, the few sane and the many mad, in universal and inevitable destruction.

Alan timed his arrival so that the Alma and her consort crossed the Ridge a few minutes after sunrise on the 1st of September. As they alighted in the central square of the city and disembarked to greet the group of friends and kindred who were waiting to receive them, a strange stillness struck their ears and sent a mysterious chill to their hearts.

The splendid capital of Aeria seemed like a city of the dead. Its broad white streets and squares were empty, there were no boats on the lake, and no aerial yachts in the air as there were wont to be at sunrise. The gardens were deserted and silent, even the songs of birds which had welled up from them in a chorus of greeting to the coming sun were now hushed, and the birds themselves were flying restlessly from branch to branch, twittering and calling to each other, frightened sharers in the universal fear. It was not long before Alan learnt from his father the explanation of this strange and mournful change in the life of the valley. A few days after their departure a mysterious epidemic had appeared among the people of Aeria. First the old, then the middle-aged, and then the young had been silently and swiftly stricken down, first in hundreds and then in thousands.

There was no sign of physical disease, no apparent source of physical infection, and none of the horrors which characterised the plagues that were decimating the outside world. Those attacked by it went to bed in apparently robust health, and in the morning they were found dead with an expression of perfect peace upon their features and no marks of disease upon their bodies.

That was all that was publicly known. There had been, and, as the President told his son, there would be no inquiry into the cause or origin of the epidemic. Whether those who died died voluntarily, or whether the visitation was a merciful release from the torment and terror of the general doom, it was not for those who survived to ask.

It was enough for them that the Shadow of Death had begun to steal silently and swiftly over the land of the royal race who had raised the dignity of humanity to a height untouched before in the story of man. They were content to know that their friends and kindred were permitted to die in painless peace rather than forced to writhe out their last hours in torture amidst the conflagration of the world.

All day and all night for nearly a month the fires of a hundred crematoria had burned, and day and night the funeral processions had never ceased passing through their gates. The population of Aeria, which had been over a million at the end of July, was now little more than a hundred thousand, and these were hourly dwindling under the mysterious epidemic.

Those who had returned in the Alma and the Isma accepted all without question and applied themselves with all their energy to the performance of the solemn duties that remained to them.

The work in the caverns of Mount Austral was now almost completed, and the minute calculations which had been made had shown that it would be possible for two hundred and fifty souls to find a refuge in them for ten days if necessary.

Sufficient supplies of food had been already stored, the machinery for lighting the caverns was complete, and solid oxygen had been enclosed in steel reservoirs to supply what would be consumed by respiration, while provision had also been made for continually abstracting the carbonic acid and other injurious constituents from the respired air.

Everything that human genius and skill at their best could do to ensure the preservation of this remnant of humanity, had been done, and by the 15th of September the caverns were finally ready for occupation. Only one more task now remained to be completed, and this was the selection of those who were to survive, provided that the precautions taken proved adequate. Unspeakably pathetic as this work of selection was, it was performed with a calm and apparently passionless precision worthy of the unparalleled solemnity of the occasion and the splendid traditions of those who accomplished it.

The field of selection was first narrowed by confining it to those who had been regularly betrothed when the first message was received from Mars. From these first the physically perfect were chosen, then the strongest and the fairest of these, and finally those who to their physical perfections added the highest intellectual and moral qualities.

The work was performed by the Ruling Council assisted by a council of an equal number of matrons who had what had once been accounted the misfortune to be childless. Neither joy nor sorrow was shown, at least in public, either by those who were chosen or by those upon whom the joint Council was forced to pronounce sentence of death by rejecting them.

The natural joy of the chosen was lost in the universal sorrow of the now inevitable parting, and those who were destined not to survive, satisfied with the perfect justice with which the selection had been made, consoled each other with the knowledge that they would die hand in hand and be spared the sorrow of surviving all who were nearest and dearest to them.

On the morning of the 18th, the temple of Aeria witnessed the last ceremony that would ever take place within its walls. This was the marriage of those who, unless their last refuge shared in the destruction that was about to bring chaos upon earth, were to be the parents of the new race that was to repeople the world.

The survivors of the whole nation now barely filled the vast interior of the temple. The solemn words which bound youth and maid together as man and wife to face side by side the last ordeal that humanity would ever have to pass through were spoken in the midst of a silence which reigned not only in the temple but now throughout the whole valley.

All the sentinel ships had now been withdrawn save one, which, from a height of fifteen thousand feet, still kept watch and ward against the coming of the foe that was even yet expected. But this was the only sign of life within the confines of Aeria, and when the solemn ceremony was ended and the assembly filed out of the doors, the members of it betook themselves almost in silence to their homes, there to make their final preparations for life or death as Destiny had selected them to live or die.

CHAPTER XXXI. THE LAST BATTLE.

AT sunset on the 15th the sluice-door had been finally lowered into its place and the pent-up waters of the lake of Aeria had risen nearly forty feet by the next morning. Only the upper parts of the villas on its banks were visible and its area was so enormously increased that the whole appearance of the valley was altered.

Rising at first at the rate of three feet an hour, a rate which of course decreased as the area became greater, the waters would reach the entrance to the caverns soon after sunset on the evening of the fatal 23rd.

A little before midnight on the 21st the Orion, the sentinel ship that was on guard at the time, sank swiftly down with the news that she had made out by the light of the Fire-Cloud which, lurid and ghastly as it was, was as brilliant and penetrating as that of the sun at noonday, a large fleet of air-ships approaching from the northwards. The city was by this time almost entirely submerged. Only a few minarets and towers and the top of the great golden dome of the temple surmounted by its crystal-winged figure, showed above the surface.

The remnant of the people of Aeria, now reduced to less than seven thousand souls, including those chosen to take refuge in the caverns, were occupying the villas on the slopes of Mount Austral about the entrance to the caverns. Six thousand of them were men who had lived solely in the hope of such an attack as was now about to be made and which would enable them to die fighting the common enemy of mankind to the last in defence of their beloved native land.

Not even now, when the hand of Destiny had set a definite limit to all human hopes and fears, and when the remainder of their own lives could be counted by hours, could this faithful remnant of the Aerians endure the thought that what had been their paradise and their home should be violated and polluted by the appearance of their foes.

Therefore they had lived for this last battle, and five hundred air-ships were waiting to carry them into the air to engage in the last fight that ever would be fought on earth. All their friends and kindred, saving only the Children of Deliverance, as in fond fancy they had called the little band of the chosen ones, were now dead, and the few hours of life that were left to them had nothing more to give them.

So they received with a grim joy the summons to battle which had been so long expected. Four thousand of them manned the air-ships, the rest occupied the mountain batteries, and within a quarter of an hour of the bringing of the news the war-ships had mounted into the air, and the great guns of the batteries were ready to hurl their projectiles upon the advancing foe.

It was a spectacle to make angels weep and devils laugh, this last marshalling of the forces of human hate and hostility in the closing hours of the life of humanity and on the threshold of eternity. It seemed that the Tragedy of Man was to be played out to the bitter end, and that human strife was only to cease on earth with the destruction of the world. This, too, was the work of a single woman inspired by quenchless hatred and insatiable ambition and a pride of spirit which, in its haughty incredulity, still refused to believe that the end of her conquering career had come.

Pitiless and without scruple to the end, Olga, while she was recovering from her wound under the shelter of the Sultan's roof, had managed, with the aid of her waiting-woman Anna, not only to poison the Grand Vizier Musa and Hakem the astronomer, but also to bring Khalid himself into the same state of moral slavery in which she had so long held Alan and Alexis.

It was she who had brought this fleet from Alexandria to Aeria. Once under the fatal spell of her will-poison, she had commanded Khalid to revoke the orders that he had given for peace, and he had obeyed. A fleet of more than five hundred airships had been collected, and, taking Khalid with her on board the Revenge, so that there should be no chance of his recovering his volition, she had come to fulfil the prophecy which Paul Romanoff uttered when in the last hour of his life he had declared that one day the Eagle of Russia should fly over the battlements of Aeria.

All the materials for constructing ten air-ships had been taken into the caverns, so that in the event of the remnant surviving the empire of the air should still be theirs, but the Alma and the Isma still lay outside the entrance when the other ships had risen into the air.

At the supreme moment a controversy had arisen as to whether or not Alan and Alexis--the latter of whom had been placed without question among the chosen, not only because of his unequalled engineering skill, but also because without him a daughter of the House of Arnold would have died of her own will--should or should not take part with their companions in the near approaching conflict.

This dispute was brought to a sudden close by Alan, who, with a sudden inspiration, cut short all the loving entreaties that were being made to him to take refuge in the caverns and avoid the chance which in the heat of the conflict might destroy with him the male line of the descendants of the first conqueror of the air.

"Do you not see," he said, "that it is quite possible that their fleet may be twice as strong as ours, and that in spite of all our gallant forlorn hope can do they may cross the mountains and send their shells into the valley?"

"What if one of them exploded here and wrecked the outworks and the entrance to the caverns? All hope, even for us, would then be lost, the doors could not be lowered, and we should either have to let the waters of the lake flow out or they would flow into the caverns by the upper entrance and ruin all our labours.

"We have proved that the Alma and the Isma are the two best air-ships in existence. They can soar higher and travel faster than any others. Would it not be madness to deprive our defending force of them, and would it not be cowardice in us not to do all we can to save all that is left for us to hope for on earth? I for one shall go, and I don't believe that I shall go alone."

"If the Alma goes the Isma goes too," said Alexis. "Alan is right. We should be cowards to turn our backs on the enemy at the last moment."

"And if you go, we go," said Alma and Isma in a breath. "If you live we will live with you, but we will not live without you."

There was no answer to such reasoning as this, nor was there any longer any law on earth save that of individual will. The first motive power that had swayed the world was the last that survived and would be the last to die. Those of the old crews of the two air-ships who were found among the chosen at once came forward to take their places, and with them came too those who had elected to take the hazard of life or death with them.

"There shall be no widows in the new world," said they. And so every man who rose into the air on board the two great warships carried with him the woman without whom the one last chance of life would not have been worth taking.

As they left the earth the remainder of the little company retired into the caverns, leaving two sentinels posted at the outer door ready to give the alarm in case it should be necessary to lower the doors. As they did so a long, dull, distant roar came from the northward telling that the last battle of man with man had begun.

In accordance with a plan hastily arranged before they rose, the Alma was to guard the northern end of the valley, while the Isma kept watch over the southern. They soared up and up until the peaks of the mountains were a good five thousand feet below them.

From this elevation those on board the Alma could see the enemy's fleet stretching out in a huge crescent, made up of tiny points of light which shone in the unnatural glare that illumined the earth and sky, and ever and anon they saw enormous spheres of flame blaze out along the line as the projectiles from the land batteries burst in front of them. The gunners were only trying their range and the enemy were still beyond it.

The explosion of the projectiles told the assailants that Aeria was on the alert, still prepared for battle and still, for all they knew, as impregnable as ever. Seeing this, they ceased their advance and a battle of tactics preceded the pitiless struggle which only the victors would survive.

Hour after hour the Moslem and Russian air-ships strove to out-soar the Aerians, or to make a rush in twos and threes that would bring them within range of the charmed circle of the mountains. But no sooner did one of them sweep up at full speed out of the distance and slow down sufficiently to train her guns than the atmosphere about her was convulsed with a mighty shock and changed instantly into a mist of fire, and when this vanished she had vanished too, shattered to fragments which dropped in a rain of molten metal thousands of feet to the earth below.

Morning came, the flaming arch of the Fire-Cloud sank lower and lower in the heavens until it stretched a broad band of lurid light round the western horizon, and an unclouded sun brought the last dawn but one that the terror-maddened myriads of earth would ever see. Still the fight went on at long ranges; still ship after ship of the hostile fleet made its desperate effort to cross the invisible barrier which was drawn all round Aeria by the range of its protecting guns, only to be overturned and hurled to the earth by the shock of an exploding projectile or to be fairly struck and dissolved to dust.

No matter how high they attempted to soar, the Alma and the Isma were still above them, and if the shells from the land batteries failed to do their work the guns of the air-ships did it for them and the result was the same--annihilation.

The night of the 22nd was spent in incessant attack and defence. The crews of the Aerian ships, grown desperate in their supreme despair, now left the mountains and sallied forth into the open, engaging the enemy ship for ship and gun for gun in a last determined effort to destroy them, or be destroyed, and far out from the still untouched battlements of Aeria the fight raged fast and furious.

There now was no thought of safety in the hearts of the Aerians. They had come forth to kill and be killed. The rules of aerial tactics were utterly neglected. They laid their guns alongside and, rushing through the air at their utmost speed, they hurled themselves with the ram upon every Moslem or Russian vessel that they could meet or overtake, crashing into her with irresistible force and going with her into annihilation as their two cargoes of shells exploded under the shock.

The last sun rose and saw the fight still going on. What had begun as the greatest battle in the history of war had now dwindled down to a series of single combats. At length the end came. It was a few minutes after midday that the last blow in the battle was struck. Ten Russian and Moslem air-ships, all that remained of the great fleet that Olga had brought against Aeria, formed in line ten miles from the Ridge and made a last attempt to break through the defences.

Flying through a storm of shells from the land batteries, seven of them were torn to pieces and the other three, just as they reached the Ridge, were met obliquely by the five remaining vessels of the Aerian fleet. The same moment the Alma's broadside was discharged upon them, friend and foe vanished together in a mist of flame--and so ended the assault and defence of Aeria.

"We can go down now!" said Alan in a broken voice to Alma, who was standing white and speechless with horror at his side in the bows of the air-ship. "It is all over! God rest their gallant souls, for they left the world like brave men and true Aerians!"

"Amen!" sighed Alma. Then, after a brief pause, she said--"I wonder whether Olga Romanoff is alive or dead?"

The two air-ships now sank together and alighted close to the entrance to the caverns.

There the splendid fabrics were reluctantly abandoned, their crews disembarked, taking with them everything they wished to preserve, and a minute inspection was made for the last time of the triple doors and the machinery for lowering them and filling the spaces between them with water to be frozen as soon as they were in their places.

This occupied the time until the evening, and then all went once more into the open air to take what might be their last look at the sun. The waters of the lake were now within a few feet of the entrance, creeping more and more slowly upwards, and across the vast expanse of water, lying unruffled by the lightest breeze, fell the mingled rays of the sinking sun and the brightening Fire-Cloud.

There was not a cloud in the heavens and no breath of wind relieved the almost suffocating heat of the inert and sultry air. It seemed as though all terrestrial nature lay paralysed in a stupor of terror,

waiting for the fire-blast that would wither it into death and ruin.

As the sun sank down behind the veil of flame his disc loomed redly and dully through it. Long streams of fire, blue and green and orange, darted across the disc and leapt and played round its circumference until it sank finally out of sight. The little group on the shore of the lake gazed at each other in silence as it disappeared.

Their faces looked wan and ghastly in the awful light that now reigned supreme in the heavens. Most of them turned away in grief and horror too deep for words, and with one last look at earth and sky, crept into the caverns, unable any longer to support the terror of the scene.

But a few remained, determined to see the fearful drama played out to the end, if they could, and among these were Alan and Alexis, whose duty kept them by the doors, the President and Francis Tremayne, and Alma and Isma, whom nothing could persuade to leave their husbands' sides.

No human eyes had ever beheld so magnificent or so awful a display of celestial splendours as they beheld during the three hours that they stood in the doorway after sunset. The Fire-Cloud now covered almost the whole heavens, and its enormous nucleus blazed like a gigantic sun down out of the zenith with a heat and radiance that were almost insupportable.

Huge masses of flame leapt out continuously, as though hurled from its fiery heart, and were projected far beyond its circumference, while the incandescent cloud-mass which surrounded it was torn and convulsed by internal commotions which spread out and out in enormous waves of many-coloured fires until they disappeared below the horizon.

Still there was neither sound nor breath of wind upon earth, only the awful stillness in which the world waited for the hour of its doom to strike. At last, towards ten o'clock, the water began to lap the threshold of the entrance, and Alan, pointing to it, said--

"Come, we must take our last look at the world. It is time to lower the doors."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth before a low dull booming sound came echoing down the gorges of Mount Austral. They looked up and saw huge masses of snow and ice loosened from its upper heights gliding, at first slowly and then more and more swiftly, down towards the valley beneath, a mighty avalanche which in a few minutes more would carry irresistible ruin in its path.

"In with you all!" cried Alan. "Quick! That is the beginning of the end; the snows are melting and the waters will be over us in another hour."

All but he and Alexis hurried in, and they, grasping the levers on either side of the door, pulled them, and the enormous sheet of steel descended quickly along its grooves and shut them in from the outer world, upon which chaos was about to fall.

CHAPTER XXXII. THE SHE-WOLF TO HER LAIR.

IN the mysterious revolution of human things it came about that the only spectator of the closing scene of the tragedy of humanity who endured and survived its final terrors was the woman to whom it had been due that the fire from heaven had fallen upon a world mad with the frenzy and agony of war instead of sane and calm with the sanity and calmness of peace and reason.

On the issue of the Battle of Aeria, Olga and, under her unnaturally acquired influence, the Sultan, had staked the empire of the world and lost it. Before the fight had been raging many hours even she was forced to admit that Aeria was impregnable to any assault that she could deliver. But when the Aerians began to practise the desperate tactics of the second day it became manifest that nothing but annihilation awaited the invading fleet, out-matched as it was in speed and gun-power by the new Aerial warships and the land batteries.

With eyes burning with rage and envy she had watched through her glasses the incomparable Alma floating serenely at her unattainable altitude far above the battle-storm, and she had pictured Alan, her former slave, standing upon her deck perhaps--bitterest thought of all--with his wedded love beside him, and like a very arbiter of war hurling his destroying lightnings far and wide upon her ships until the supreme moment came in which he would descend like a very god from the upper air, and, hand in hand with Alma, strike the last terrible blow which would end the last conflict of man with man and leave neither friend nor foe alive to tell what the issue had been.

It would be a glorious end, worthy of him and the splendid traditions of his race, and she loathed herself for the craven fear that had seized upon her in the fateful hour of battle, and made her incapable of challenging the same fate at his hands. Khalid himself would have done so without hesitation, but she had robbed him of his manhood and debased him, as she had debased every other human being that had fallen under her influence.

She had spent nearly the whole of the night of the 22nd on deck, and when the awful radiance of the Fire-Cloud was for the last time succeeded by the light of day, even her haughty spirit had at last bowed before the supernatural terrors that were multiplying about her. For the first time since she had brought bloodshed back into the world a thrill of panic shuddered through her soul, and, for the first time, she learnt the meaning of fear.

Then, too, came a longing which for the time being overmastered all other considerations. The elementary animal instinct of self-preservation rose up within her with irresistible force and conquered the hate and the ambition whose objects would have vanished when another sun had risen.

Her thoughts went back to her old stronghold in the snowy solitudes of Antarctica, to the deep dark caverns of Mount Terror. Surely those mighty walls of living rock, shrouded in eternal ice and snow, would give her an asylum in which she could defy the fate that was about to overwhelm humanity--and what then? For a moment an awful vision of the unspeakable loneliness of such a survival amidst the ruins of the world struck such terror to her heart that she almost resolved to head the Revenge into the thick of the fight that was still raging round Aeria, and die rather than face it. Then the vision passed, and the terrors of the present blotted out the fear of the future.

The last sun that the human race would ever see was just rising when she sent for Boris Lossenski, who was still commanding the Revenge under her, and said abruptly, and without even consulting Khalid, who was standing by her side--

"There is nothing but death to be found here. We will escape if we can. Head the ship for Mount Terror and make her fly as she has never flown before. Don't spare either the engines or the power. We must be there before nightfall if possible."

Boris saluted and obeyed in silence, and Olga turned to Khalid and said in a tone of weariness and almost of despair--

"It is no use fighting any longer. The Fates themselves are against us, and I--yes, I have been

frightened into belief at last. A shameful confession is it not?"

"Not shameful but only reasonable," he replied. "All I regret is that you did not believe sooner, and save this last slaughter of these gallant people."

"What is done, is done!" she said with a half-regretful glance at the mountains of Aeria, which were now rapidly fading away into the blue distance; "it is only a question of sooner instead of later. Indeed, it seems hardly worth while even for us to attempt to live when, even if we survive, only the ruins of the world can be ours. And yet"--

"Yet sweeter would be life with you even in a wilderness of death than destruction that might be eternal parting," replied Khalid in low tones that thrilled with passion. "Nay, what dearer destiny could man desire than to be the Adam of a new world of which you were the Eve?"

The words of her husband--for Khalid was her husband now as well as her slave--brought a sudden flush to Olga's face, and this was succeeded by an almost deathly pallor. She put up her hand to the broadened circlet of gold which concealed the terrible scar of the wound made by Alan's bullet, and said almost in a whisper--

"You and I--yes, you and I may live. We will! But if we do we must save ourselves alone."

And with that she left him abruptly and went to her own room with the plan of her last crime already shaped in her mind.

She was the only woman on board the Revenge. Her maid Anna had been left behind at Alexandria, a maniac driven mad by the universal terror. What of Boris and the twenty-five men who formed the air-ship's crew? If they were permitted to survive to the time when there would be no law but might, she would be the one woman in the world--one woman, beautiful and almost defenceless, among those who, though now her servants, would then be ready to slay each other in the dispute as to which of them should be her master.

Such a thought in such a mind as hers could have but one outcome. When the hour for the midday meal arrived, she bade Boris invite the whole crew into the main saloon, saying that, as this might be the last meal that any of them would eat, they would take it together. Then, as though moved by some sudden gracious fancy, she filled for every man with her own hands a glass of the best and oldest wine that had been reserved for her own use.

Khalid, rigid Moslem as he was, refused it, and she only touched it with her lips, but the others drained their glasses and drank death at her hands, even as the Aerians had drunk it in the same fashion and at the same table seven years before.

But this time it was fated that her sin should find her out more quickly. Later on in the afternoon Boris, to his amazement and alarm, found every man of his crew succumbing to an irresistible drowsiness, and soon this began to affect himself. A terrible thought at once flashed into his ever-suspicious mind. Fighting against the stupor that was stealing over his senses, he took a deep draught of strong spirit.

This conquered the poison for a time and cleared his intellect sufficiently for him to see what his pitiless mistress had done, and then there rose up in his mind a desperate longing for vengeance on the murderess who had used him and his companions as long as they were useful and then poisoned them like so many rats.

He took out his pistol and examined it to see if it was charged, and then, with the poison and the spirit fighting in his brain for mastery, he made his way from the engine-room to the quarter-deck, where Olga and Khalid were standing, watching with strained, fascinated eyes and faces that looked livid and corpse-like in the unnatural light of the Fire-Cloud, the long tongues of many-coloured flame that were shooting like so many gigantic serpents down from the zenith, as though they would lick the life-blood out of the world that now lay panting for breath and paralysed with fear beneath them.

Just as he reached the top of the companion-way a mist swam before Boris's eyes, his brain reeled, and he stumbled forward on to the deck, discharging his pistol aimlessly as he did so. The bullet struck and broke to fragments against the bulwarks. Khalid and Olga turned round to see him lying on his side

with savagely-gleaming eyes, livid face, and foam-flecked lips, trying to raise himself on one hand and take aim at them with the other.

As Khalid sprang forward Olga's ever-ready pistol came out of her belt. She cried to Khalid to get out of the line of fire, but just as she spoke Boris made his last effort, and, talking what aim he could, pulled the trigger. Khalid stopped short and clasped his hand to his right side. Then Olga, with a low cry of fury breaking from her white lips through her clenched teeth, sent a bullet through Boris's brain just as he was struggling to bring his pistol up again.

"Are you hurt, Khalid?" she asked with a deadly fear at her heart as she crossed the deck to where he was standing with his hand still pressed to his side.

"Yes," he gasped. "He has shot me through the lung."

Then he coughed, and Olga saw drops of blood on his black beard and moustache. Without wasting any time in useless words she helped him down into the saloon and set herself at once to examine and dress his wound. The bullet had entered between the fourth and fifth ribs on the right side, drilled a clean hole through the lower lobe of the right lung, and passed out at the back without touching any bone.

With perfect rest and quiet there was nothing to prevent recovery from such a wound, but Olga shuddered as she thought of its consequences in their present situation. If Khalid succumbed, as he well might do under the unknown terrors and dangers of the night that was now so near, she would have to choose between killing herself beside him, or, if the rock-chambers of Mount Terror proved a safe asylum, living mateless and alone until she starved to death on the wilderness that the world would be when it had passed through its baptism of fire.

She satisfied Khalid's whispered request for an explanation of Boris's attempt on their lives by saying that he had probably made himself drunk in an attempt to fortify himself against the terrors that were multiplying around him. Then she went through the ship and in a few minutes came back and said--

"I shall have to take the ship to Mount Terror myself. It was not only Boris, for every man of the crew is dead drunk. Think of them making such brutes of themselves at such a time!

"No," she continued, putting her hand on his shoulder as she saw him make an attempt to rise. "You must not move yet; you will want all your strength when we get there, for you will have to regulate the engines while I am in the conning-tower. As for these animals, we will leave them to their fate."

A couple of hours later she went on deck to see whether Mount Terror, or at any rate the smoke-crest of Mount Erebus, was in sight, for the Revenge had now been flying almost long enough to have reached the confines of Antarctica. The speed was, however, so great that nothing was distinctly visible. There was only the flaming heaven above and a grey blur beneath, so she went to the engine-room and slowed down to a hundred miles an hour.

Then she helped Khalid to the engineer's seat in front of the controlling levers and took her place in the conning-tower. She had scarcely been at her post half an hour before she saw the huge white cones of the twin mountains of Antarctica shining against the dull grey sky beyond, one of them crowned as she had last seen it by a long stream of smoke that rose almost vertically in the windless air.

She signalled to Khalid to reduce the speed, first to fifty and then to thirty miles an hour, allowing the Revenge at the same time to sink gently down towards the ice-covered continent. She crossed the well-remembered bay in which the Narwhal had performed her terrible exploit, swept over the ice-wall at an elevation of a hundred feet, swung the ship round and stopped her in front of the great cleft in the side of Mount Terror.

No human foot seemed to have trodden the Antarctic solitude from the day she left it to crown herself Tsarina of the Russias to this one on which she brought her flagship back with its crew of murdered men to seek her last chance of life amidst the general doom which she could now almost bring herself to believe she had directly brought upon the world.

She ran the Revenge slowly into the vast portal that yawned black and deep before her between the snow slopes of the mountain, and then, turning on the search-light, took her along the great gallery

which led to the shore of the subterranean lake, and there lowered her for the last time to the earth. Then she and Khalid disembarked, he moving slowly and painfully, and she supporting him as well as she was able, and watching him with the intense anxiety of a supreme selfishness which had now centred itself upon him as the one possibility of making her life endurable.

Thus did Tsarina Olga and Khalid the Magnificent, conquerors of the earth and sharers of the world-throne, come back, one wounded almost to death, and the other half distraught with fear and perplexity, to take refuge at the uttermost ends of the earth from the assault of the foe that had confounded all their schemes of conquest.

Leaving the Revenge in the great gallery, she led him to the council chamber and laid him on the cushions of the luxurious divan on which she had been wont to hold her audiences. There she examined and redressed his wound, and then for the next three hours she busied herself bringing supplies of food and drink from the ship and preparing for the final siege which their last stronghold would so soon have to endure.

Then the fancy took her to go once more into the air to take one more look at the world and the splendours of the fate that was menacing it. Nineteen hours had passed since she gave the order to head the Revenge for Mount Terror. Sixteen of these had been consumed in the most rapid flight that the air-ship had ever accomplished. So fast had the Revenge flown westward and southward that the sun had almost seemed to stand still waiting for her journey to be accomplished, but still it had slowly sunk farther and farther down into the luminous mist that now seemed to fill the whole sky.

The difference between the longitude of Aeria and Mount Terror had lengthened the last fateful day by nearly five hours, but now the end was very near at hand, and here even, on the very confines of the world, life had little more than four hours to live. To the north the whole sky was flaming out into indescribable splendours, and the long fire-streams radiating from the nucleus now seemed to be literally holding the planet in their clasp. Enormous meteors were bursting out from the heart of the flaming cloud and exploding without a sound in the ever-silent abysses of space.

She stood rooted to the spot by the weird and awful glories of the spectacle, and for the time being seemed to forget even Khalid and the indescribable dangers that were threatening them both. Instead of being daunted, her spirit rose as though in response to the splendours before her. She felt that she was standing upon Nature's funeral pyre watching the conflagration of the world she had ruined. Saving only Khalid there was not another human being within thousands of miles of her, and in her loneliness her soul seemed to expand and rise to a nobility that it had never known before.

She saw the utter insignificance and contemptibility of the human strife which had been superseded and silenced by this majestic assault of the primal forces of Nature, and for the first time in her life she thought of herself and her sins with a disgust and shame that humbled her in her own eyes to the dust.

So she stood and watched, oblivious of everything but the celestial glories above and around her, until a rapid series of frightful explosions seemed to run roaring round the whole horizon. She looked up with shaded eyes towards the zenith. The central mass had suddenly become convulsed and expanded until it looked as though the whole sky had been transformed into an ocean of fire torn by incessant storms.

Huge masses of many-coloured flame were falling from it in all directions on the devoted earth, and as each of these entered the atmosphere it burst into myriads of fragments which fell in swarms until the blazing sky was literally raining fire over sea and land.

The Fire-Cloud had at last invaded the outer confines of the earth's atmosphere.

All this while there had been no change in the Antarctic cold of the air, but soon after the first storm of explosions roared out Olga felt a puff of warm tainted air blow across her face. Then came another and another, and then she heard what had never been heard before on the slopes of Mount Terror--the sound of running water. The snows were melting, and soon there would come avalanche and deluge.

She hurried back into the council chamber, convinced that it was no longer safe to remain in the open air. She made the great bronze doors fast and covered them with layer after layer of thick heavy

curtains. Every other opening into the chamber she closed up as tightly as possible. In the nature of the case they were compelled to trust to the supply of air already in it to last them through the ordeal.

Then she went and sat down on the divan by Khalid's side, and, taking his hand in hers, bent over him and kissed him on the lips, saying--

"Now we must wait for life or death together!"

And so they waited--waited while the ages-old snow and ice melted from the bare black rocks under the fierce breath of the fire-storm; while the ocean of flame seethed and roared and eddied about them, licking up the seas and melted snows and fighting with them as fire and water have fought since the world began; while the foundations of the Southern Pole quivered and rocked beneath their feet, and the walls of their refuge quaked and cracked with the throes of the writhing earth, and cosmos was dissolved into chaos once more.

EILOGUE. VENGEANCE IS MINE.

"THE temperature has been normal now for three hours. Don't you think we may venture to raise the sluice-gate?"

"I see nothing against it. If the world is not habitable again now it never will be. It is a good two days since the contact now, and if the atmosphere had been burnt up or carried away by the attraction of the comet it would either be much colder or much hotter than that."

"Very well then, up it comes, and then we shall get our last question answered."

It was Alan who thus questioned and answered his father. All had gone well with the refugees of Mount Austral and the remnant of the Aerial race. Their science and their faith in themselves had been triumphantly justified by the event and had carried them safely through the sternest ordeal that man had ever been called upon to face.

And now there was only one more chance to be met, one more problem to be solved. The temperature showed that the earth still possessed an atmosphere, but was that atmosphere capable of supporting human life? If yes, all would be well and they could go forth into the wasted world and possess and replenish it. If no, then all their labour would have been in vain and they might as well have died in battle or with those friends and kin who had taken their silent and dignified farewell of the world in the last days of the State of Aeria.

They had a calorimeter and a pressure-gauge communicating with the outer world to tell the temperature and the height of the water in the valley. The former, after rising for a few hours to over a thousand degrees, had now sunk back to normal, while the latter stood at thirty feet above the entrance doors to the cavern.

The machinery for raising the sluice-gate was put into motion and they watched it with almost breathless anxiety lest the straining or shifting of the rocks, which had been very perceptible during the terrific convulsions which had apparently lasted for nearly ten hours, should have so dislocated the grooves that the gate could not be raised.

There were a few preliminary creaks and groans, a hitch and an increased strain on the lifting chains, and then the great sheet of steel rose easily and smoothly to the top of the channel and the pent-up waters rushed forth in a black boiling flood through the narrow opening and roared away, foaming and tossing along the bottom of the crevasse, once more on their way to their unknown destination.

Very soon after this it was discovered that the waters were subsiding much more rapidly than could be accounted for by the volume that escaped through the subterranean channel. It was therefore necessary to conclude that there must have been some convulsion in another part of the mountains which had opened a fresh channel from the lake to the outer world.

The next step was to raise the two inner of the three doors which guarded the entrance to the caverns. The raising of the first one showed the ice still intact between it and the second, and this had to be broken up and removed before the second could be reached. Then the middle door was raised an inch or so and the water spurted out from beneath it.

Was this the water of the melted ice or was it that which filled the valley? Had their outer door stood firm or had it cracked or shrivelled up under the heat of the furnace through which the earth had passed? It flowed for ten minutes and then slackened and stopped. The outer door had held fast. Then, in case of accidents, the middle one was lowered again and they waited until the waters should have sufficiently subsided to enable them to challenge the last hazard on which their fate depended.

The sluice-gate had been raised at what would be four o'clock on the morning of the 26th of September, if the cataclysm through which the earth had passed had not so far affected the terrestrial economy as to alter the relations of day and night. Twelve hours later the pressure-gauge ceased to act, showing that the rapidly-sinking waters of the lake had reached the threshold of the outer door. The time had now come to ask the question on the answer to which the lives of the remnant of humanity

depended--was the atmosphere breathable or not?

That was the one question which occupied, to the momentary exclusion of all others, the mind of every Aerian who was in the caverns. The middle gate was lifted, and every heart stood still as Alan and Alexis strode forward into the dark passage and grasped the levers which actuated the lifting mechanism of the outer one.

They took one glance back at the anxious faces which showed so white in the gleam of the electric lamps, and then they pulled. The machinery creaked and groaned as the power was applied. Then came a rending sound and a dull crash. The door lifted a little, quivered and dropped again, and remained immovable.

"The machinery has broken down!" said Alan, going back into the gallery. "There must have been a land-slip over the doorway."

"What will you do then?" said Alma. "Surely we have not escaped the conflagration of the world to be buried alive after all!"

"No," he said, looking down at her with a reassuring smile. "It can hardly be as bad as that. Unless a whole mountain has fallen in front of the door, we shall soon find a way out."

The first thing to be done was to get rid of the door, and this Alan accomplished in summary fashion by undermining it with drills, and then, after he had sent everyone into the inner recesses of the caverns, tearing it to fragments with a small quantity of the explosive used in the shells.

A mass of earth and stones came rolling into the gallery immediately after the explosion, then an excavating machine was run up on hastily-laid rails and was soon boring its way into the obstructing mass. A distance of ten yards was tunnelled and then there was a rattle and whirl in front of the machine, which told that the work was done. There was a cloud of dust from pulverised stones and earth and then came a rush of fresh warm air and a gleam of sunlight through the opening.

"Thank God the atmosphere is still there and the sun is still shining!" cried Alan, as he drew the machine back and ran out into the open air.

He looked about him for a few moments and then turned and walked back to his companions, who were already crowding towards the opening with faces glad with new hope and drawing deep breaths of the life-giving air, which the mysterious alchemy of Nature had restored unchanged to the earth. He stopped them with a gesture and said--

"Don't go out yet till we have made the tunnel safe. You will find an awful change out yonder. Aeria is no longer a paradise. It is only a swamp surrounded by naked rocks!"

And so they found it to be when they at length passed out through the tunnel and stood upon the black oozy shores of the dreary lake which still half filled what had once been the lovely land of Aeria.

The once verdure-clad mountains rose up bare and gaunt and blackened, a vast circle of ragged rock, unrelieved by a blade of grass or a single tree of all the myriads that had clothed their slopes three days before. It seemed as though the clock of Time had been put back through countless ages and the world was once more as it had been before the first forms of life appeared upon it.

But still the air that fanned their cheeks was fresh and warm and sweet, and the afternoon sun was shining across the western peaks out of a cloudless sky of purest blue. The calm had come after the storm and the world was waiting to begin its life anew. The Alma and the Isma had utterly vanished, and were probably buried deep in the black slimy mud. Of the city of Aeria not a vestige was visible.

The first thing that Alan did as soon as the last momentous question had thus been asked and answered was to ask his father to order one of the smaller air-ships, which had been stored in sections in the cavern, to be put together and charged with motive-power as rapidly as possible.

"Certainly if you wish it," he replied; "but what is your reason for being in such a hurry to reassert your empire of the air?"

"I can tell you now," said Alan in reply, "what there would have been no need to tell you if, well, if we had not been able to leave the caverns. Just after sunrise on the last day of the battle Bruno Vincent brought the Orion as near as he could to the Alma and told me by signal that he had seen the Revenge

leave the fight and head away at full speed to the southward and westward. That means, I think, that Olga's courage failed her at the last and that she meant to try the forlorn hope of saving herself in her old stronghold at Mount Terror. I am going to see whether she is alive or dead."

"And suppose by a miracle you should find her alive. What then?" said Alma, who had overheard his request, coming up to him and looking up into his face with melting eyes as she slipped her hand caressingly through his arm.

"The world is beginning its life anew in us, dear," he replied with tenderness in his eyes but none in his voice, "and there shall be no snake in our Eden if I--"

"If you have to be the Cain of the new world to prevent it!" interrupted Alma, reading his dark meaning at a glance, and interpreting it with a directness and force that startled him. "No, Alan, that must not be! If she has escaped the vengeance of God you may well forego yours. I can hardly think that she is still alive, but it is right that we should go and see"--

"We!" echoed Alan before she could finish. "Do you mean that you will come with me? No, Alma, you must not do that. Remember that if she has by any chance escaped, the crew of the Revenge may be alive too, and then we may have to fight"--

"No, no, Alan, not that! not that!" she cried with a gesture of horror. "The world has done with fighting, for there is nothing left to fight about. We will go as friends with open hands to them, and the new life of the world shall be begun with the forgiveness of our enemies. Who are we that we should judge after the Voice of God has spoken?"

In the end she had her way, and so it came to pass that soon after sunrise on the following day an air-ship, which a hundred skilled and willing hands had toiled all night in fitting together and equipping for her voyage, rose into the air above the ghastly wilderness that had once been Aeria, and winged her way towards the southern pole.

Twenty hours later she sank down on to the ice that had already re-covered the rocks in front of the fissure in the side of Mount Terror, and as she did so a figure came forth out in the darkness into the half light of the polar morning.

"Look! There she is!" said Alma in an awe-stricken whisper to Alan. "Alone in this awful place! Come, let us go to her."

As she spoke the gangway steps were lowered and she descended them first, followed by Alan, his father, Alexis, and Isma. Some strange influence held the others back as she advanced with outstretched hands and words of kindly greeting on her lips towards the piteous wreck of womanhood that slowly emerged from the gloom of the chasm.

Olga Romanoff had survived the doom of the world, but the hand of a just vengeance had fallen heavily upon her. Her once splendid form was shrunken as though three score years had passed over her in as many hours. Her left side was half paralysed and her shaking limbs hung loosely as she tottered along.

Her golden fillet and jewelled wings had been cast away, leaving bare the great livid scar that crossed her forehead; her white, drawn face was seamed with deep lines marked by agony and terror, and the thick masses of the once glorious hair that hung about her head and shoulders were streaked with grey and clotted with blood.

The fire had died out of her eyes and the red from her shrivelled lips, and the weak broken voice in which she answered Alma's greeting quavered like that of an old woman in her dotage.

"I have been expecting you," she said as Alma took her trembling hands in hers. "I thought you would come. You have come for Alan, haven't you? He is yonder, but he is dead. I kept him alive as long as I could but he was wounded, and when the world was changed to hell for my sins the fire choked him.

"I tried to die too, but it wouldn't kill me. There was air enough for me and I wanted to give it to him to breathe but he wouldn't take it. I suppose you have been dead and are an angel now like those others behind you. Come, I will take you to him. It is dark but I know the way."

The moment she began to speak Alma saw the awful calamity that had befallen her. The haughty daring spirit that had essayed and almost achieved the conquest of the world was dissolved in the bitter waters of the Marah of Madness. The soul that had quailed before no human fear had collapsed into imbecility under the superhuman terrors which she alone had witnessed and survived. Without a word she suffered her to lead her into the gloom, beckoning to the others to follow. They turned on the electric lamps they had brought with them and entered the chasm.

They reached the black ash-strewn floor of the gloomy subterranean lake in the heart of the mountain, and Alan, pausing for a moment, flashed the light of his lamp round the vast chamber that had once been so terribly familiar to him. The walls were burnt and blackened, and here and there masses of rock and boulders had been calcined to dust as though the long pent-up lava that had once flowed in fiery torrents over them had again been let loose.

Then the light fell upon something that was not rock and which gave back a dull metallic sheen. He took a few strides towards it and soon recognised it as all that was left of the once shapely and beautiful Ithuriel, the old flagship of the Aerial fleet with which he had lost the mastery of his own manhood and his people the empire of the air.

The crystal dome of the roof was gone and lay in patches of congealed glass about the blackened and shrivelled-up deck. The wings were burnt away and the transverse ribs of azurine stood out bare and twisted like the bones of a skeleton, and in the fore part of the hull a great gap showed where her magazine had taken fire and burnt with such terrific heat that it had melted even the azurine plates of which she was built.

"The poor old Ithuriel has flown her last flight!" he said to himself with a sigh as he turned away and followed the others, thinking sadly of all that had come to pass since he had last trodden her deck.

Olga, holding Alma by the hand, led the way from the lower gallery to the council chamber. As she pulled the curtain aside from the doorway a puff of foul air that seemed to bear a faint smell of blood was wafted in their faces. Alan called Alma back, fearing that she would faint in the sickening atmosphere, and at the sound of his voice Olga stopped short and looked back with a reawakened gleam in her eyes.

"Who is that?" she cried, pressing her hand to her brow. "Why, it is Alan! But no, Alan is here--here. He has been with me all the time since Khalid shot him. My God, can he have come to life again?"

Her voice rose to a shrill wavering scream as she said this. She dropped Alma's hand and ran with faltering, stumbling steps towards a divan on which lay the form of a man whose black beard and moustache were thickly clotted with blood. She stopped and bent over it for a moment, then she raised herself and faced them with her hands locked in her hair and the light of frenzied insanity blazing in her eyes.

"No! No!" she cried in a voice, half a scream and half a wail, that rang weirdly through the great chamber. "He is dead still and that is only his ghost. Oh, Alan, my love, Alan! Why could I not die with you? Curse the hand that wounded you. Curse"--

In the one syllable her voice died away from a scream to a whisper, and at the same instant the paralysis, which had already smitten her once, laid its swift icy hand on her heart and brain. She swayed to and fro for a moment and then fell forward across the corpse of the man whose love for her had plunged the world into madness on the eve of its doom.

"What an awful end!" gasped Alma, shuddering in the close embrace she had sought in Alan's arms. "And yet, Alan, she loved you to the end through all. That love for you was the one true thing in her life, and for its sake I will say God forgive her! Come, let us go!"

The end "Olga Romanoff, the Syren of the Skies"

The end of “The Aerians”

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Ralph Waldo Emerson