

Brereton Frederick Sadleir

The Great Airship: A Tale of Adventure.



Frederick Brereton

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Brereton F. S. Frederick Sadleir

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CHAPTER I

The Fame of the Zeppelin

There are exceptions, we suppose, to almost every rule, and this particular Friday towards the end of June was such an exception. It was fine. Not a cloud flecked the sun-lit sky. A glorious blue expanse hung over a sea almost as blue, but criss-crossed in all directions by the curling white tops of tiny wavelets, all that remained to remind one of the atrocious weather which had prevailed. For the North Sea, Europe, Great Britain, everywhere in fact, had been treated to a succession of violent gales, to a continuous deluge of rain, to bitter hail, and squalls of snow in some parts. And here and now, off the mouth of the river Elbe the sun shone, the sky was a delight, a balmy breeze fanned the cheeks of the passengers crowding the decks of the Hamburg-Amerika liner.

"What a change! I began to wonder whether there was such a season as summer. Have a cigar?"

Mr. Andrew Provost drew from an inner pocket of his jacket a silver-mounted case, pulled the lid off and offered one of the contents to his nephew.

"Not that one, Joe," he said, as the young man beside him placed his long fingers on one of the weeds. "It's Dutch. Not that they're not good smokes; I like 'em sometimes. But give me a Havana, and offer one to your friends. There! That one! You'll like it."

"Thanks! I know 'em, Uncle. You always give me your best."

There was a smile on the handsome face of the young man as he obeyed the directions of his Uncle Andrew. It was obvious indeed from their smiles, the manner in which they paced the deck arm in arm, and from the intimacy of their conversation, that the two were on the best of terms. And why not? They were related, as we have stated. Then they had for long been separated. Mr. Andrew Provost had not always been the comfortable-looking individual he now appeared. For prosperous and comfortable he looked without a doubt. Florid and sunburned, with white hair and moustache which made his complexion seem to be even more ruddy, he was tall, and slight, and gracefully if not robustly built. There was something of a military air about him, and we whisper the truth when we say that he was often enough taken for an old soldier, much to his own secret gratification. Dark grey eyes looked out genially from a smiling face upon the world and his fellows. His forehead was hardly seamed. Care, in fact, seemed to have failed in its effort to reach him, or, more likely perhaps, his genial, plucky nature had caused it to fall easily from his shoulders. For the rest he was exceedingly well groomed, and looked what he was, a prosperous, healthy gentleman.

"But it wasn't always like that, Joe," he told his companion, as they paced the deck, basking in the sun. "Your Uncle Andrew wasn't always the stylish dog he looks now. Not by a long way. I've been on my beam ends."

"Ah! Exactly."

"Know what that means?"

"To a certain extent. When you came home last Christmas I was down in the dumps. Absolutely on my beam ends."

Andrew Provost turned to look with some astonishment at his nephew. He inspected him critically from the top of his glossy Homburg hat to the well-polished brown shoes which he wore. And the face finally drew all his attention.

"Impossible!" he declared politely. "Joe on his beam ends! Joe in the dumps – never!"

"True as possible, sir – I was desperate," repeated Joe, his face grave for that moment.

"Well, well, perhaps so. I'm forgetting. I was young like you when I was down. Young fellows make light of such matters. It's as well, perhaps, or the world wouldn't go along half so easily. But I'd never have thought it, Joe. You never said a word to me; you look so jolly."

No one would have denied the fact. Joe Gresson looked what he was, a handsome, jovial fellow of twenty-seven. Fair and tall, and broader than his uncle, he had deep-set eyes which gave to his smiling face an air of cleverness. And the young fellow was undoubtedly clever. An engineer by profession, he had graduated at Cambridge, had passed through the shops, the drawing office, and other departments of one of the biggest engineering concerns in England, and had finally struck out a line for himself. He had been experimenting for the past four years.

"What's the good of being miserable because things don't go right, Uncle?" he said with a smile. "I've told you how I took up engineering. Well, I thought I had a good idea. I left the shops at Barrow and worked on my own. Thanks to the few thousands I possessed I was able to carry out some important experiments."

"Ah, my boy! Well, you succeeded?"

"Yes and no; I went so far with the work that I was sure that success was possible. Then there was an accident. The whole affair was wrecked, and I woke up to find myself without funds and in a terrible condition of despair."

"On your beam ends, in fact – well, like me," said Mr. Andrew. "I'll tell you about myself; then you'll give your yarn. I'll have to hear what this work was. But my tale don't take long. Let's step up and down again and I'll give it to you. Let's see – yes, I was a fiery, unmanageable young idiot."

"Never!" interjected Joe.

"Like many other young fellows," proceeded Andrew, as if he had not been interrupted. "I bluntly refused the post which my father offered me, and cut away from home. I went to Canada, worked my way out aboard the steamer, a cockleshell in those days, and half starved for the next few months, for it was in the winter and there was no work to be had. But I learned something. In the six months which followed my landing I acted as a cook's boy, a porter, a fireman, and a clerk in a grocery store. That's where I had my eyes opened. The country was opening up. I had saved a few dollars. I set up a store of my own in one of the nearest settlements, a mere hut knocked together with the help of a hammer and some nails. But it paid. I saved all along. I built a real brick house, and the sales went up like wildfire. Then I chose a manager and opened up a second store away in the nearest settlement. It went on after that almost by itself. I got to own a hundred stores. I bought property right and left. Then I sold out. Now I'm merely an idler, come home to take a long look round. On my beam ends one day, you see; up and prosperous in the years that followed. Now, my boy, let's hear your yarn. Hallo, what's the excitement? People are crushing over to the far side of the ship."

The two had been so engaged in conversation that they had not noticed the exodus of the other passengers, and now awoke to find themselves the only tenants of that side of the deck. Arm in arm still they hurried round the long deck cabin to join their fellow passengers. They found them massed together on the starboard side, crushing towards the rails, and for the most part with their eyes cast aloft.

"Wonderful! Marvellous! Extraordinary!" were some of the remarks they overheard, emanating from the English people present. From the many foreigners there came guttural cries of delight and shouts almost of triumph.

"What is it? What's the fuss?" asked Mr. Andrew eagerly, craning his head and looking aloft. "I can see nothing to cause such excitement."

"Nothing, mein Herr! Is that nothing – no?" asked a stumpy little passenger against whom Andrew was leaning, twisting his portly frame round with an effort. He shot a short, plump arm above his head, and held a stumpy finger aloft. "Nothing?" he asked indignantly. "You call that nothing at all, mein Herr? It is marvellous! It is magnificent!"

"But – but, what is? I – I – er – beg your pardon," said Andrew politely, "but really I can't – "

"Look, Uncle," cried Joe sharply, pointing upwards himself. "It's a little hard to see perhaps. That's what they aim at, of course. But there's an airship there – a Zeppelin."

"Ah!" gasped Andrew, while the stumpy little foreigner, who had now contrived to twist himself entirely round, stared angrily at him. Then a broad, beaming smile of pride seamed his face, a fat, good-natured face to be sure, while the light of recognition danced in his eyes.

"Ah! Mr. Andrew Provost," he exclaimed in thick but urbane tones. "We have met again. This is fortunate. But you see now; you see the German triumph. You see the Zeppelin with which they have conquered the air. Ah, it is magnificent!"

Andrew had scarcely time to shake his hand and recognize this plump little person. He was vastly impressed at the sight some four thousand feet above him, and away to the left. He could have shouted with delight himself. The object, in fact, claimed his whole attention.

"A Zeppelin!" he cried. "A real Zeppelin! One of Germany's air dreadnoughts – magnificent!"

It was magnificent. Seldom yet have Englishmen had the opportunity of seeing one of those leviathans of the air. At a period when balloons have become common objects in the sky, when the whole world almost has become accustomed to aeroplanes scooping through the air, the people of most countries are still strangers to the sight of a mighty airship swimming in space. And there was one, a long, sinuous hull of neutral colour, so that even in broad daylight it was not too easily visible, floating horizontally in the sky, like some gigantic cigar, while fore and aft, immediately beneath the hull, were two boat-shaped objects, a little darker than the mass above supporting them. There was the dull hum of machinery too.

"Moving along slowly," gasped Andrew, still wonderstruck at such a sight. "What's she doing?"

"Finishing a continuous run of twenty-four hours and more," declared the little stranger, whom we will now introduce as Mr. Carl Reitberg. "Just showing us how fresh she is, and how easy the task has been," he cried in tones of the utmost pride. "See! She has more to show us. She has taken in fuel from the steamer yonder, and could sail again for another twenty-four hours. But she wishes to experiment with her bombs. Look, mein Herr! There is a float down below her. She will pulverize it. She will smash it. She will drop a bomb plumb into it, and, piff! it is gone. That, mein Herr, is the work of the latest Zeppelin."

Perhaps a thousand passengers crowded the rails and watched the monster of the air, and it was as Mr. Reitberg had so proudly announced. The Zeppelin was manoeuvring away from the Hamburg-Amerika liner. Ahead of her, some five miles to the east, was a dot upon the ocean. Andrew swung his glasses to his eyes and fixed them upon that object.

"A float of some sort – yes," he said. "She is motoring towards it. Then she will stop above it."

"No – not at all," declared Mr. Reitberg. "She will continue at her fastest pace. Yet she will strike it. Watch. See – ah! Did I not say so? It is marvellous! There!"

Was it imagination? Andrew fancied he saw a small, dark object fall from one of the boat-shaped cars beneath the long Zeppelin. In a twinkling he swung his glasses down upon the float half-immersed in the sea below. Then a loud detonation reached his ears, while the float disappeared miraculously, the sea being churned up and splashed all about it. Nor was that all. There came from the ship above a succession of sharp reports, while bullets of large size struck the sea immediately over the spot where the float had been. Then another object dropped from the airship. It burst into flames within two hundred feet of leaving the hand which had projected it, and almost at once sent out a vast, spreading mass of dense smoke, that spread and spread and spread till the sky was obscured, till the airship was utterly hidden.

Mr. Carl Reitberg chuckled aloud, and danced with delight.

"Magnificent! Cunning! The latest thing!" he declared. "You see the reason, Mr. Provost? No; then I will tell you. The ship, the air dreadnought, you understand, discovers an enemy's ship, or shall we say the enemy's war harbour, or arsenal, or magazine, or what you will? She sails above it. She drops a bomb. Then, piff! the thing is done. The ship is destroyed; the harbour is wrecked; the

magazine explodes. Men rush to and fro in panic – those who are left. For some are poisoned. Yes, some die not from the effects of the explosion, but because the airship has dropped also chemical bombs which burst and spread poisonous fumes everywhere. But men are left, we will allow. There are gunners there. They rush to the aerial guns. They load them; they attempt to take aim. But – where is the ship? Gone? No – but where? The sky is all smoke. There is no sign of her. She is invisible. *Nicht wahr?* It is too late; all the damage is done. The Zeppelin escapes to wreck more ships, more harbours, more magazines."

He puffed out his stout little chest, gazed aloft at the dense and spreading cloud of smoke, and waved his hands excitedly.

"It is magnificent!" he repeated for perhaps the tenth time. "It is a triumph! None can approach it. Many have watched and scorned the idea. Count Zeppelin has persevered. Germany has backed his efforts, and now, *voilà!* – there is the result. Triumph! The conquest of the air. Mastery of the upper element; with none to gainsay us."

"But – but there are limits to the power of these ships," suggested Andrew, his words almost faltering. "There are limits to their range of travel."

Mr. Carl Reitberg put one fat finger artfully to the side of his nose. It was perhaps a little peculiarity he had picked up in England, for we hasten to explain that he was cosmopolitan. Carl Reitberg had spent many of his fifty-three years in South Africa. There he had enjoyed the protection of the Union Jack. He had a house in London now, and one also at Brighton. It may be said that he had made his fortune, thanks to his own astuteness and the opportunities given him by our British colonies. But he was not English. He was not entirely German. He belonged to the world. One day he was resident in Berlin, a second found him in London or in Brighton, while as likely as not the following weeks saw him parading the Champs Élysées in Paris, the Boulevards of Buenos Ayres, the streets of Mexico, or Broadway, New York. In fact, and in short, he was cosmopolitan.

"Limits, mein Herr!" he cried, still in those tones of pride, still dancing on his toes. "None! That ship can sail continuously over a thousand miles. Her wireless telegraph will reach within a hundred miles of that distance. She can manoeuvre easily over a ship at sea and take in further supplies. She is, in short, a cruiser. Do you wish to sail in luxury to St. Petersburg? Hire, then, a Zeppelin. Do you desire to escape *mal de mer?* Call for one of these huge airships and sail for London. Do you fancy the conquest of some island kingdom? Mr. Provost, you are rich; buy one of the air dreadnoughts and blow your enemies sky high."

Andrew took his eyes from the spreading cloud of smoke overhead and glanced at the excited orbs of the little fellow. Then he looked at his nephew. And we tell but the truth when we say that his own eyes were troubled.

"It is magnificent, but it is terrible," he said slowly. "Terrible for those who have no aerial dreadnoughts. Yes, terrible. Their danger is greater than I could ever have imagined. And you say that these Zeppelins stand alone. There are no others?"

"None. But wait. Yes, there are others, also German. There are the Parseval, the semi-rigid ships of the air," said Mr. Reitberg with a truculent smile. "There are also the Gross ships; but the Zeppelins are infinitely superior. Elsewhere there are none. France, what are her ships? Russia, poof! we will not waste breath in discussing them. England – mein Herr, she has the Alpha, the Beta, and the Gamma, mere toy airships. They do not count."

There was a wide smile on his face now. Andrew winced at his words; there were even beads of perspiration on his forehead, while lines had knit themselves across his brow.

"You say that England has no such ships. Then she can build them, must build them," he said.

"Must – yes! But can she? Impossible!" Mr. Carl Reitberg looked his pity. "Impossible!" he repeated, while Andrew wiped his perspiring brow.

"I think not – hardly impossible, mein Herr," came in quiet tones from Joe, a silent witness of all that had been passing.

"Eh! Not impossible? You think that a bigger Gamma would suffice? You think that England could build such a ship as this Zeppelin without experiment, without numerous failures – all, we will say, within a year?"

"I am sure."

"Sure! You joke. The thing cannot be done; I know England. Men are clever there, but they have not studied these airships: they are ignorant."

"Not quite – I disagree. In six months, in three, perhaps, such a ship as sails above us could be erected; but better, with more power, a wider range, and a greater capacity for destruction."

Mr. Carl Reitberg gasped; he pulled an elegant silk handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his forehead. He was beginning to get annoyed with the calm, not to say idiotic, assurance of this young man. He looked Joe Gresson superciliously up and down, and then smiled urbanely.

"You are young," he said. "When you arrive at my age you will see your error. I, who know, say that such a thing is impossible."

"And I, Herr Reitberg, while thanking you, say that it can be done. It has been done, on a smaller scale. To-morrow, or let us say within three months, England could possess an aerial dreadnought superior to any Zeppelin. I am positive."

The smile left Mr. Reitberg's face. He looked at Joe as if he thought him mad. As for Andrew, at first he had watched his nephew with every sign of surprise, if not of disapproval. But now he smacked him on the back encouragingly.

"Bravo, Joe!" he cried. "Stick to your guns. You say England could build such a ship. Well, she's tried?"

"Yes; the Admiralty tried through their contractors, and failed."

"Ah, failed, yes!" lisped Mr. Reitberg. "So did Zeppelin. But he carried on his experiments; he succeeded. Your people did no more."

"Others took on the work."

Joe returned the looks of his two companions firmly. "And succeeded," he added.

"Who? You?" demanded Andrew eagerly.

"Yes; I did."

"Then I'd back you to do as you say. You declare that you could erect such a ship as we have just lost sight of, but better, with greater powers of movement, with greater range?"

"Certainly."

"Then why has mein Herr not done so?" asked Mr. Reitberg, with a lift of his eyebrows and outspread hands. He was the essence, in fact, of polite incredulity.

"I did on a small scale; then funds failed."

"Ah, yes! they always do, fortunately, mein Herr. Then your experiments are ended. This ship is but a creation of your brain. It must remain so; for funds are done with."

There was sarcasm in the voice. Andrew Provost resented the tone. He had never liked Mr. Reitberg overmuch, though they had met in more than one country and had dined together frequently. Besides, it roused his gorge to feel that here was an example of British ineptitude. He knew his nephew well enough by now, knew him to be a young man worth trusting. If he said he could do this thing, then he could.

"By Jingo, I'll give him the opportunity!" he cried. "Joe, how much'd it cost?"

"One hundred thousand pounds, perhaps. Not more; very likely a great deal less."

"And within three months? Well, let us say, within six months?" asked Mr. Reitberg incredulously. "Impossible! The money would be wasted. A ship be built in that time, by men inexperienced in such work, a ship, moreover, of almost unlimited range! You are dreaming, sir!"

Joe Gresson might have been excused if he had lost his temper. Instead, he smiled at the little foreigner. "I am all seriousness," he said. "If I had the means I would erect this ship, and prove her capacity to you. She would sail where you wished; no part of the earth would be too far for her."

"And I back him up in what he says. What this young fellow cares to declare as in his power I feel is not impossible. Now, Mr. Reitberg," cried Andrew with no little warmth, "I'll stand by him."

Mr. Reitberg did nothing in a hurry. It was his very slowness which had sometimes proved his success. But this discussion irritated him. He liked to feel that the Zeppelin was beyond all attempts at imitation. He considered that Joe was mad, or suffering from too great a shock of confidence. In any case, it seemed to him that what he described as possible was hopelessly out of the question. He tucked his short neck deep into his collar, screwed his head on one side, and then began to smile urbanely.

"Well, well," he said at last. "One hundred thousand pounds. What is it to me, or to you, Mr. Provost? Build this airship. Prove her to be better than a Zeppelin. Sail her round the world and then return to England. If you do all this, say within nine months of this date, then I return the cost of the venture. Is that a bargain?"

"Done!" shouted Andrew. "I'll back the boy. I'll find the money for him. If we succeed within nine months, then the loss is yours. The ship remains ours, while you pay for it. Let us step into the cabin. We'll draft out a form of agreement. When that's signed we'll set to in earnest."

It took but a half-hour to complete this necessary preliminary, so that when they returned on deck again the huge cloud of smoke had disappeared, while the Zeppelin was again in sight, a mere speck in the distance.

"Like that, but better, faster, stronger, with greater range," said Andrew, pointing up at her.

"Quite so – the impossible!" smiled Mr. Reitberg. "Do not blame me if you fail, Mr. Provost. I hate taking other people's money, or running anyone into large expense. Good luck to you!"

They shook hands on leaving the steamer at Southampton and parted. Joe and his uncle took train for London, and that same evening found them seated before the window of their private room at the hotel quietly discussing the exciting future before them.

CHAPTER II

Andrew Provost's Resolution

Andrew Provost was not the man to shirk his liabilities, or to shrink from an undertaking however difficult it might appear, and however impetuous he may have been in his decision.

"No, siree," he exclaimed, sipping his after-dinner coffee, and then pulling at a big cigar. "No, my boy, I ain't the one to back out, you bet. That fellow Reitberg got my monkey up with his sneers and his crows about those German Zeppelins. Boy and man I've lived under the Union Jack, and what folks can do elsewhere, why, they can do 'em as well where I've lived. Fire in at that agreement, Joe."

For the moment he had allowed a decided Yankee drawl to betray the country from which he had so recently come, for in Canada they speak much as they do in America, though the drawl and the accent are not so accentuated. It showed that Andrew was stirred. In moments of excitement he always developed a drawl; but if excited, he was also practical.

"Read that document, Joe?" he asked again. "Mind you, I admit that there are many of my old friends who would call me a fool over this business."

"Impossible, Uncle!" his nephew interrupted.

"Fiddlesticks, my boy! No offence, mind; but look at this matter squarely. How do we stand? It's like this. We're aboard a Hamburg-Amerika liner. We see a Zeppelin, and get a fine display, all free and for nothing. We run up against a fat little fellow named Reitberg, who's neither German nor English, nor anything in particular. Anyway, he's made his money like me under the Union Jack. Well, now, he crows about that ship, says there's not another nation could build one. Gets riled too, when you say that England could, that you yourself could. Shows plainly, though with some amount of politeness, that he don't believe you, and then gets to crowing again. Isn't that enough to put up a Britisher's back? Eh?"

"Well, it wasn't very pleasant certainly, rather riling. Made one wince."

"Wince! Squirm! Look here, Joe, I never liked being beaten. If I did I'd never have got to the position I have. I'd have been still running that small store away outside Toronto, with its tin roof and its walls tintacked together. It's because I didn't like being beaten that I'm not there. And I don't like to think that Britishers are beaten. When you said that you could build an airship better than a Zeppelin I believed you."

"Awfully kind of you, too, Uncle," Joe declared, gratitude lending unusual warmth to his tones.

"It *was* mighty kind," came the half-smiling answer. "Then and there I let myself into an expenditure of a hundred thousand pounds, and all because I couldn't stand that fellow Reitberg's crowing, and, from a mighty long experience, had confidence in my own countrymen. You'd said that you could do it – that was enough for me. But it's very small reason for such an expenditure when you come to look plainly at it. No offence, Joe, mind that. You're my nephew; I've heard big things about you, and if you've said you can succeed, why you shall. Your Uncle Andrew'll help you."

They shook hands on it, exchanging a firm grip. But it must be allowed that Andrew was really only putting the true facts before his nephew. After all, what hard-headed business man – and Andrew was that if anything – would promise such a huge sum simply because a nephew had declared that he could build a ship of similar class to a Zeppelin, that is, one lighter than air, but more powerful, more perfect, in every way more desirable? Why, the fat, comfortable-looking Mr. Reitberg was even then detailing the incident to a few of his cronies who were seated in the smoking-room of his luxurious town house. There were five of them present, none of whom would again see a fiftieth birthday, comfortable-looking gentlemen, robustly built, running to fat if we were asked for a concise description. They discussed the matter in English, though all betrayed some accent. In fact, they had without exception been foreigners, only three at least were naturalized Englishmen.

"It made me laugh afterwards," declared Mr. Reitberg, sitting up, and withdrawing his cigar from between a pair of short, stumpy, fat fingers. "You've met Andrew Provost?"

They had: all nodded. "From Canada – stores," said Mr. Julius Veldtheim laconically. "Rich man – very."

"Said to be one of the wealthiest," added Mr. Herman Schloss, puffing a cloud of smoke in the direction of the table bearing decanters and glasses.

"Has a reputation for sagacity. Buys heavily from us," ventured a third, whose name is of no consequence.

"And yet laid himself open to an expenditure of a hundred thousand pounds – one hundred thousand pounds, gentlemen, on the word of a young nephew who, whatever his merits, won't languish for want of self-confidence."

"Ah! How? Why? He had a reason. Provost always has a reason. He's sharp."

The questioner looked languidly across at Mr. Reitberg, and smiled as that complacent gentleman smiled. He chuckled even. "I'll tell you," he said, turning to them all. "There was a Zeppelin overheard as we crossed from Hamburg. Well, its manoeuvring was wonderful. Provost was amazed. He began to think that he would feel queer in this country if one were to sail overhead. You see, this one dropped bombs, so we were able to watch the actual thing that will occur in war. It frightened Provost. He wondered why they hadn't any here. I told him."

"Ah! Why?"

"Because they can't build 'em. No one can."

"You are sure?" asked Mr. Veldtheim.

"Positive; I said so plainly. Provost got quite hot at the news. But his nephew declared he could build one, that he had done so. Well, you know, I could see what it was. I smiled; the young fellow's confidence was really too pronounced. But Provost was too riled to notice. 'He says he can build one. Then he can and will,' he sings out. 'I'll pay.'"

"Ah! One hundred thousand pounds," lisped Mr. Veldtheim.

"Yes, one hundred thousand pounds. 'You'll lose it all,' I told him, or rather, I intimated that as politely as was possible. 'You'll never succeed. I'm so positive, that if you do, and build a ship which can sail round the world, all within nine months of this, why, I'll pay the bill.'"

"Bravo!" cried Mr. Veldtheim. "Your money's safe. Zeppelins aren't built in nine months, even by those who know all about 'em."

That seemed to be the general opinion of the company present. In fact, one and all looking at the matter from their own point of view considered that Andrew Provost had been guilty of a species of madness.

"Better by far hand his nephew a handsome cheque and have done with the matter," observed Mr. Veldtheim. "It'd be easier and cheaper."

But, as we have intimated already, Andrew Provost was made of stubborn material. Also, he had seen sufficient of Joe during their travels on the Continent since his coming from Canada to assure him that he was not overstocked with confidence. Or rather, to assure him that he was a clever, painstaking fellow, who seldom declared his powers, but who, when induced to do so, never overshot the mark. Consequently, when he said that Mr. Reitberg was misinformed, Andrew Provost believed him. But a statement was one thing; hard facts another.

"Just get to and read that agreement between Reitberg and myself," he said again. "Then tell me all about this ship of yours. Recollect, I've never seen it, nor heard of it either."

"Pardon, you've heard of it," said Joe shortly.

"Eh, heard of it? Come!"

"A year ago. There was a scare in England," Joe reminded him. "There was even an airship scare in Germany. The papers were full of reports. Brilliant lights had been seen in the sky. The

noise of aerial motors was heard. It was feared in England that a foreign spy was manœuvring over our magazines and arsenals."

Andrew looked sharply at his nephew over the rim of his cup. "Airship scare? Yes, I remember; the papers in Canada were full of it – well?"

"That was my ship. People said that a mistake had been made; that folks had imagined the ship. They said the same in Germany. But it wasn't imagination: it was a real ship, the one I had built."

"And – and what became of it?" gasped Andrew – for this was news – "Why didn't you sell it to the War Office authorities?"

Joe smiled. "War Office authorities! Know 'em?" he asked.

"Never met them – why?"

"They're too slow for words," declared Joe, laughing. "I'll tell you about them. I went there, to the War Office. I got lost in the place, it's so vast and has such huge lengths of corridor. And I'm inclined to believe that the folks who work there get lost. Anyway, they couldn't for an hour or more direct me to the department likely to have some knowledge of airships. But I reached it at last and told my tale."

"Ah! You got home. Then, what happened! They sent right off to investigate."

"The official who interviewed me, and who had, I imagine, as much knowledge of airships as I have of turnips, informed me that he was vastly interested and would put the matter before the authorities and communicate with me. I left my address; I waited; I got tired of waiting."

"What! How many days?"

"Six weeks. I wrote reminding them of my visit."

"Gosh! Six weeks! Then, what happened?"

"They sent a formal acknowledgment – the matter was having their consideration."

Andrew Provost leaped from his chair and stood facing Joe, biting his cigar fiercely. "You mean to tell me that that's the treatment you received? That I might expect the same to-morrow if I went to the War Office with a brilliant invention?" he demanded hotly. "Do you mean to say that I'd as likely as not be interviewed by a fellow who knew next to nothing about the matter, and that weeks would elapse before I heard from 'em again, and then only after sending 'em a reminder?"

Joe laughed. "That was my experience," he said. "I dare say others meet with the same. Tantalizing, eh, Uncle?"

"Tantalizing be hanged! If that's the sort of thing that happens, then the sooner the crowd inside that office is hauled out and booted the better. Guess live men are wanted – folks who can earn their pay – not dolls and dullards. But let's leave 'em. Tell me about the ship – go on."

"She was wrecked; a violent gale sprang up."

"Ah! Usual thing. That's the weak part about those Zeppelins," said Andrew. "They're unmanageable in a wind. A half-dozen and more of them have been wrecked; so you suffered in the same way."

"No! The gale wrecked my hangar; it was flimsily put together. That was the fault of having small funds. As to Zeppelins, I know that they have that particular weakness. Wait till you see my designs. I'm not afraid of a gale, and can manœuvre into my hangar when gusts are blowing at fifty miles an hour. Fact, Uncle! You'll see when we've finished."

Andrew Provost strode backwards and forwards before the wide-open window of the hotel. He was thinking deeply, and more than once he cast a shrewd, sharp glance at his nephew. This long-headed man was a little uneasy. And who can blame him? For, in the first place, solely on the strength of Joe's assertion, and because Mr. Reitberg had riled him, he had taken up a challenge. And now he heard his nephew declare that a fifty-mile gale was of no consequence, though to a Zeppelin airship it would prove easily disastrous. Was Joe romancing? Or was he so carried away by this work of his that his imagination made successes where they did not exist?

"No; certainly not. He looks and is clever. If he says gusts don't matter, they don't," thought Andrew, after another sharp look at his nephew. "What appears difficult to believe may very well be simple when one has seen his designs. Here, Joe," he cried. "We get drifting on; do read that document, then show me your plans. I'll pay a cheque for ten thousand pounds into your account tomorrow, and then you'll be able to go ahead. Now, the document."

Joe picked it up from the table on which it was resting. Unfolding the sheet, he disclosed at the top the arms of the Hamburg-Amerika Steamship Company, and in the right-hand corner the name of the ship they had so recently left. The date was scrawled in a firm hand beneath it, and then there appeared the following words: "I, Andrew Provost, of Park St., Toronto, Canada, and of 29 Fenchurch St., London, England, guarantee to build with the help of my nephew, Joseph Gresson, and others whom I may appoint, an airship similar to the well-known Zeppelin; that is to say, when inflated with gas the said ship shall be lighter than air. It shall be capable of lifting not less than thirty tons, of progressing against a wind at more than sixty miles an hour, and of traversing the world in any direction, keeping in the air for that purpose as long as shall be necessary, though she may be allowed to descend to the land for necessary supplies, renewals, and repairs. Should I succeed with the help abovementioned in building a ship capable of all this, and of circling the world, and should that voyage be completed within nine months of this date, then Carl Eugene Reitberg, of 42 Park Lane, London, England, guarantees to pay the full cost of the building of the said ship, and of her voyage, but not exceeding in all one hundred thousand pounds. It is further agreed that a special form of passport shall be obtained from the Foreign Office, and that the same having been initialled by the various authorities of the countries over which the ship may pass in her voyage shall be held to be proof of her voyage."

"Clear as crystal. And you can do it?" asked Andrew.

"Certainly."

"Then let's have the designs. How does your ship beat the Zeppelin? What's she made of? Tell me everything; remember I'm ignorant. I just know that an aeroplane is a heavier-than-air machine, and a Zeppelin's a lighter-than-air; that is, once she's inflated with gas. Fire away. I'm dying to get in at the actual building."

Joe was a practical young fellow, and was not to be hastened. He unlocked a leather bag lying near his feet and abstracted a sheet of glistening paper. Spreading it out on the table, he showed his uncle a big detail drawing of the machine he proposed to construct.

"It's not easy to follow the outline here," he said. "Wait till the ship's finished. But you can see this much. She's long and pointed at either end, and looks like a flattened cigar. That's how she differs from the Zeppelins. She's built very flat, and extends on either side till the top and bottom half come together in what may be called a lateral keel."

"Why? Where's the reason?"

"To protect her against gusts of wind and gales. A Zeppelin can't escape. Every breath plays on her big lateral bulk. In my ship the wind strikes a thin keel on whichever side it comes, is divided there, and passes over and under the ship, sliding as it were upwards and downwards away from the gradually-sloping surfaces which lead from those keels. In fact, the ship is almost as flat as a tortoise, and as wide comparatively, though she's very much longer."

"And – and this flattening of the ship makes her laugh at gales?" asked Andrew, staring at the plans before him.

"Certainly – her shape, and other fittings. Now, let's return to the Zeppelin. It's a huge framework of aluminium, built very light and covered with a material of neutral tint."

"Which holds the necessary gas."

"No, Uncle. Which merely covers the aluminium skeleton. Inside the frame there are twenty or more balloonettes, inflated with gas. Thus if one bursts, or two, or more even, the ship still floats."

"Canny that! Smart!" declared Andrew. "Well, yours? It's a similar framework, I suppose? The same balloonettes? Where does the difference come?"

Joe bent again to his bag and produced a parcel, which he rapidly opened. He drew from the interior a sheet of shining material, which might have been glass but for the fact that it was folded half a dozen times. Placing it on the table, this sheet opened to its full capacity as soon as the weight of his fingers was removed.

"Flexible and elastic, you see, Uncle," said Joe. "And yet not extensible. See – it does not stretch. Transparent, of course – one of its least advantages – but yet one of great value in the construction of an airship."

"What! You don't mean to tell me you build the ship of that? How? What part does it form? I – look here, Joe, you're romancing."

Joe smiled; his deep-sunk eyes took on the clever expression, to which his uncle had become familiar. He placed two long objects on the table, and stood leaning the tips of his strong fingers upon them. He might have been a lecturer, and his uncle a student about to absorb his wisdom. As for the objects he had placed on the table, one was a long piece of the same transparent material, an eighth of an inch thick, perhaps, two inches wide before it was bent, and now bent all the way down its length into a right angle. In fact, composed of iron it would be known simply as "angle iron". The other object was a tube, perhaps half an inch in diameter, two feet in length, and of thinner material. Both were transparent, and exceedingly light in weight, as Andrew assured himself instantly.

"Go on," he said huskily. "What is the stuff? Not talc – that I can tell easily. Not celluloid either – you'd never be such a fool as to build a ship of such a highly inflammable material. That stuff's lighter, also. What is it?"

But Joe was not yet to be persuaded into an answer. He spread the thin transparent sheet out, caught the four corners, and taking a jug of water, poured some of the contents into the centre of the sheet. Not a drop penetrated it. Joe demonstrated the fact quietly and without show of haste. Then he stepped to the window and cast the water out. A moment later he was striking a match.

"Stop! Stop! How do I know that it isn't like celluloid?" cried Andrew in some alarm. "Supposing it fires. Supposing there's an explosion."

Joe smiled. "It won't," he said curtly. "Look there."

The flame was licking round one of the corners of this thin sheet of material. It blackened the surface above, while that below, immersed in the flame, gradually changed colour. It became a dull red, then got redder and redder till it was glowing. Slowly it changed its form, the corner curled up into a globule. The latter separated itself from the sheet and tumbled on to the glass-topped table, where it broke into a number of smaller drops.

"Glass! No – too light by far. Not celluloid. Not talc. Then what is it?" demanded Andrew impatiently, taking the various articles and examining them. "Why, this angle piece is strong – as strong as aluminium!" he cried.

"Stronger – stronger and tougher," asserted Joe. "You can bend it; it's flexible. You can bend it double, and still it comes back to its original formation. Aluminium would crack at once; even steel would. Now, try the tube. See, it kinks when you bend it, though it requires some strength to do that. Now, set it on its end on the floor; we'll put a book on the top end. Sit on the book, Uncle."

Andrew did so – gingerly it must be confessed – for this transparent tube with its small diameter and its walls less than an eighth of an inch in thickness looked as if it would at once succumb to his avoirdupois. But it did not. He sat boldly upon the book now. He balanced himself upon the frail support and jerked his feet from the ground.

"Jingo!" he cried. "What in thunder is the stuff? It's strong, strong as possible. Surprisingly powerful stuff. It bends if you use sufficient force, yet doesn't break. It's tough; you've shown me that, for a knife edge bites into it with difficulty. Then it softens and melts at a fairly high temperature, proving that it can be easily treated and moulded. Well?"

"I call it celludine," said Joe, not without some trace of pride in his tuneful voice." I dropped upon the stuff quite by accident, for at the 'Varsity' I was fond of working in a laboratory. Asbestos enters into its composition, that I can tell you. It is easily manufactured, the materials of which it is composed are inexpensive. It can be rolled into plates and bars and drawn into tubes. Better than all, perhaps, when bars and tubes and angle pieces are being built into a framework rivet holes can be punched with the simplest pneumatic tool, while the joins and the rivets can be instantly and securely welded together with an electric heating iron. Thus every joint becomes a solid piece."

Andrew wiped his forehead – this was something – he even chuckled.

"Reitberg'd have fits," he laughed. "He'd be beginning to get anxious about that money if he heard what you were saying. But get along. This stuffs fine. I can see that, and I'm quite a child in such matters."

"Then it is hardly necessary for me to explain that I build my framework of this celludine. That frame is wonderfully strong, stronger a great deal than if composed of aluminium, and constructed far more rapidly and at less cost. It has another advantage Zeppelins have broken up before now, simply because certain portions of their frames have fractured under great strain. With this material the flexibility is such that the frame gives before a strain, grudgingly it is true, but gives without receiving damage, and instantly returns to its former shape once the strain is removed. Now let us proceed. I cover the frame with the same material. It is waterproof and gas-proof. Note that, Uncle. I fashion partitions of the same material. Thus my balloonettes are formed. There is no need for the twenty and more balloonettes. All that weight is removed. There are merely the partitions and the outer covering, and since celludine is the lightest material of any that I have yet discovered, you can follow that here I have a material with which I can make a ship at once lighter than a Zeppelin, though of equal size, while it is stronger and more flexible. Add the important fact that the whole thing is transparent."

"Eh? Why? Where does the advantage come?"

It was natural, perhaps, that Andrew should not follow his reasoning so quickly.

"Imagine the ship to be inflated and in the air," said Joe. "Well, gas is transparent. So's the framework of the ship. She is invisible almost, except for engines and gear of a similar description."

This time his uncle mopped his forehead busily. He was glad that he had taken up that challenge. He was beginning to hope that some day it might be his turn to gloat over Mr. Reitberg. He could even conjure up the huge airship which Joe Gresson would build. Facts were in his case far easier of digestion than any amount of theorizing, and here his nephew was providing him with facts. As a practical man Andrew could decide that this celludine was essentially suitable for the building of a vessel to sail the air. Now he could realize better than ever that success was possible. But a few hours ago he had been content to take Joe's mere word for it. His own common sense now supported that belief. He drew in a series of deep breaths, while he handled the samples before him. Unconsciously it seemed his hand sought his handkerchief and he mopped his fevered brow. Then he drew a cheque book from an inner pocket, seated himself at a desk, and took up a pen.

"Pay Joseph Gresson ten thousand pounds," he wrote, and attached his signature.

"There," he said, with a beaming smile, smacking his nephew heartily on the back, "get to at the work, Joe. Call for more when you want it. Don't stint yourself; spend freely if necessary, for there's no time to waste. We've got to be up and doing. I'll teach Mr. Reitberg to have a better respect for Britishers. What others can do, we can. Gosh! We'll have that ship sailing before he's finished chuckling at our helplessness."

We leave him then for the moment, filled to the brim with enthusiasm, while we step aside to introduce a person of no little importance, namely, Mr. Midshipman Hamshaw, R.N., Dick Hamshaw, lately out of Dartmouth Naval College, and already known by officers and men as simple and plain Dicky.

CHAPTER III

Dicky Hamshaw, Midshipman

"Of all the little bantams 'e's it," quoth Able Seaman Hawkins of H.M.S. *Inflexible* in a deep, hoarse whisper, leaning over the tiller of the steam pinnacle he was steering to place his thick lips close to the huge ear of his comrade. "That 'ere shaver's just it all the time and no mistake about it."

A long tongue of flame shooting out through the stumpy funnel of the vessel at that precise moment lit up the afterpart, disclosing the fact that Seaman Hawkins's face was divided by an expansive grin, while Able Seaman Hurst's rugged and none-too-handsome features seemed to be made up mostly of two rows of irregular teeth. The short stem of an extremely black pipe was gripped between those same teeth, while smoke was issuing from the nostrils. But a second later the pipe was dragged from its position and found its way with extreme rapidity into a pocket.

"Stop that talking, men! One can't hear. Silence aft!"

The command came in quick, decisive tones, and yet in a voice that betrayed the youth of the officer. For Dicky Hamshaw was young, painfully young, we must admit. When he stepped the decks of His Majesty's battleships no one deplored that fact more than Mr. Midshipman Hamshaw. It was a defect which time would undoubtedly eradicate, but for the moment it was annoying, to say the least of it. For ever on the faces of the tars beneath his immediate command there lurked a queer demureness, an indefinite something which he could never actually fathom, but which told him as plainly as words that he was almost an object of amusement. Not of ridicule, let us explain. No other officer's orders were obeyed more smartly than those of Mr. Midshipman Hamshaw, while your British tar is far too jealous of his good name to ridicule an officer, even if such a thing were not decidedly contrary to discipline. No; Dicky Hamshaw was very young, and looked younger than his seventeen and a half years. Not a hair yet adorned his upper lip, and there was not even a suspicious down budding from the square chin of which he boasted. He was merely disgustingly young in appearance, tall and slim and active, and full of a dash and jollity which had long since captivated the tars.

"Just it – nothing more," repeated Hawkins in a hoarse whisper to Hurst. "A bantam that's full of fight, and don't you make no mistake about it."

Precisely what "it" meant on this occasion the burly Hawkins did not stoop to explain, and apparently Hurst needed no enlightenment. He nodded, expanded his capacious jaws again, and then slowly introduced the stem of his clay between his strong teeth.

"Stop that smoking aft! There's someone smoking."

Once more the order rang out crisp and clear, and in those very juvenile tones. Let us say at once that it was Dick's boyish voice, perhaps more than his youthful appearance, which excited the smiles of his men. But in any case the crisp tones meant business. Hurst slid his pipe back into its receptacle with alacrity and grimaced through the gloom at his comrade.

"And 'e's got a nose," he ventured to Hawkins when a few moments had elapsed. "Here are we away aft, and you'd have said as all the smoke was blowed clear away behind us. But Dicky's got a nose for it. Blest if he couldn't tell you what 'bacca it was. Not ship's I can tell you, mate, but a bit of cake bought ashore at a place I knows of. What's he up to?"

"Keep her away a point to starboard," suddenly came from the midshipman. "That'll do. Hold her so and keep her steady on that course. I fancy we must be somewhere near the spot Anyone hear anything?"

"Nothing, sir?" came from Hurst, while Hawkins opened his thick lips to cry "Aye! aye! sir," in recognition of the order given him. "Steady it is, sir. Fancied I heard a cry away over here a minute or more ago, but I ain't sure. There's no sayin'."

"Then keep your ears open, men, and – Hawkins."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"As we're away from the ship and it's dark I've no particular objection to Hurst's smoking. All you men can smoke; but please don't forget to listen carefully."

Had it not been dark expansive grins could have been seen on the faces of the half-dozen tars manning this steam pinnace. For here was a privilege granted without the asking, and one, too, which every one of the men could fully appreciate. It was just one of those thoughtful actions for which Dicky had become almost famous since he became a full-fledged midshipman, and which added so much to his popularity. As for Hurst, the mention of his own name caused him to bring one broad palm with a resounding smack against his thigh. Hawkins could hear him gurgling, and then listened to his low-toned whisper.

"Did you hear that? Spotted who was smoking. Spotted it was me," he said hoarsely, his tones betraying delight if anything. "If that don't beat me handsome! Here's he away for'ard a-listening for shouts and cries, while the pinnace steams against the wind. He spots as someone's smoking. And he says as sure as he can make it that it's me. That's smart, mate, ain't it?"

"It's jest common sense, that's all," came the rejoinder. "Dicky ain't asleep, not by a long way. He knows his men better perhaps than a sight of the orfficers. And he knows you, Bill, and the smell of that 'ere pipe. That's where his smartness comes in. He puts things together quick, same as he'll clear up this here little business that's brought us away from the ship at a time when we ought to be turnin' down and alookin' forward to our suppers. Did you hear what it is exactly? They was mighty quick in pipin' us away. It's something particular."

"Someone lost away out beyond the Needles, that's all I heard," came Hurst's answer. "Anyways, there ain't much chance of our being able to help. It's blowing hardish out here, and if a boat has foundered and left her crew in the water, why, they'll stay there I'm afeard. It don't take long to drown a man, even with the little sea there's running."

A sudden order had in fact disturbed the peace of shipboard life late that evening. Mr. Midshipman Hamshaw, in all the glory of his mess kit, was on the point of making his way to the gunroom, there to sit down to an appetizing dinner, when he received an unexpected order.

"Mr. Hamshaw! Mr. Hamshaw!" he heard someone calling. "Pass the word to Mr. Hamshaw, please. Ask him to step up on deck at once, bringing oilskins with him."

Dicky's servant conveyed the tidings to him. Dicky himself tore off his mess jacket with no very pleasant expression, dived into a workaday costume, and grumbling at the ill fortune which had befallen him stumbled up on deck.

"Yes, sir," he cried, halting before the officer of the watch and displaying that smartness for which he was notorious. "Here, sir."

"Ah, Mr. Hamshaw, there's a Marconi in to say that someone's been lost just outside the Needles. I can't get further information, and don't know what sort of a craft it is that has foundered, nor how many were aboard. But it's urgent. Tumble into the pinnace and get out as fast as you can steam. Don't return till you have thoroughly searched the water out there."

"Yes, sir." Dicky's youthful heart leaped with delight. True, he longed for that dinner which he was leaving. But this order entailed an independent command, and Dicky loved that more than anything. "Yes, sir!" he repeated.

"And keep a lookout for another pinnace. The Admiral's sending one from another ship. There, off you go. I'll send down to the mess steward to tell him to keep things going hot for you. Smartly does it."

Smartly was always the way aboard that ship, and particularly when Dicky Hamshaw was the officer. He tumbled down into the pinnace with the rapidity almost of lightning. An active monkey would have been hard put to to beat him.

"Push off there for'ard!" he shouted. "Now, ahead. Give her steam, Perkins!"

The low-built pinnacle went away from the ship's side into the night like a sleuthhound, and but for the light she carried at her bow was quickly invisible. They steamed out to the Needles at their fastest pace, and then began slowly and thoroughly to circle the water outside, searching every yard of it as far as they were capable. And had they heard a cry?

"Sartin," declared Hawkins, when Dicky appealed to him after the space of a few minutes, and when the red glow from half a dozen pipes told that the men were taking advantage of the privilege of smoking. "I heard one a moment ago, faint-like, sir. Someone almost drowned already."

"Then give 'em a call. Perhaps that'll rouse an answer," said Dicky anxiously. "Now, all together!"

A deep gruff call was sent up by the crew of the pinnacle, Dicky's shrill treble merging with the bass of the men. Then all listened, while Perkins shut off steam and silenced his throbbing engines. Ah! A faint cry reached their ears.

"Starboard, sir, starboard," called Hawkins. "I'm certain."

"Sure," grunted Hurst, snatching his pipe from between his teeth. "There again, sir – listen."

There could be no doubt that Mr. Midshipman Hamshaw and his men had heard a call for help, and the sound, faint though it was, set them in a fever. At a command from the officer, Perkins sent steam whizzing and hissing into his cylinders. Flames roared up the stumpy funnel of the pinnacle, while the propeller thrashed the water into white foam at the stern, foam that could easily be seen in spite of the surrounding darkness.

"Keep her away a couple of points then," shouted Dicky, leaning with both hands on the gunwale of the craft and staring into the darkness. "Keep a bright lookout forward there, and give me a shout if you see anything. One thing's in our favour. There isn't another craft about here, so we can plug along at our fastest."

Perkins had no hesitation in giving all the available steam to his engines. By then, the pinnacle having been the better part of an hour on her journey, there was a fine head of steam, the gauge showing a pressure which promised something approaching full power. It was not to be wondered at, therefore, that the whole pinnacle vibrated. The engine roared. The propeller behind even threw white foam into the after portion of the vessel. And so, for perhaps five minutes, they continued plunging into darkness, each man of the crew straining his eyes to detect something.

"Stop her! Let's listen again. Wait though – give another shout," directed Dicky, and at the command once more a hoarse growl was sent across the heaving water.

"Nothing, sir – not a sound," cried Hawkins, when they had listened a full two minutes. "Whoever it was who answered us before is drowned."

"No – I heard something. Silence!" called Dicky. "There! Hear it, any of you men?"

"Yes, sir. There it is again," cried Hurst, now filled with eagerness. "Listen, sir – there again! Well, I'm blistered!"

It was one of the seaman's choicest expressions, reserved for moments of unusual excitement. He let his still-smouldering pipe drop into a pocket and scratched his head with one rugged forefinger. And no wonder that he was puzzled. A moment before he and Hawkins, and Dicky Hamshaw and the remaining members of his crew would one and all have declared that they heard a shout come from a point almost directly ahead. They felt sure of the fact, could have made an oath upon it. And now it came from aloft, from the sky in fact.

"I'm blistered!" repeated Hurst, stupefied at such a strange occurrence. "Must be a sort of echo, sir."

"Hardly likely. Why, there it comes again, and from the sea this time without doubt. Dead ahead, too. Put her at it, Perkins."

Once more the process of giving steam to the engine was repeated, and presently the pinnacle was tearing along through the water. Then of a sudden her onward progress was arrested. She struck some object heavily, canted to one side till the water poured in over the gunwale, and righted all in

a moment. There was a tearing, grating noise for'ard, followed almost instantly by the hiss of water meeting something intensely hot, and by dense clouds of vapour.

"Holed, sir!" shouted Perkins. "There's water pouring in and flooding the furnace. I'm up to my knees in it already."

"Stand by there! Get hold of that light, Seaton, and let's see what's the damage. Stand by there, men. This looks like a bad business."

Dicky did not plunge into hysterics. On the contrary he was as cool as one could possibly have wished. That the matter was serious he guessed at once, though his inexperience left him doubting what had actually happened. However, the rapidly rising water within the pinnacle, the fact that he already stood knee deep himself, went a long way to convince him that his little command had met with an unfortunate accident. But he was hardly prepared for the amazing swiftness of its termination. Hardly had one of his men seized the light for'ard and held it aloft when, as if that was the prearranged signal, the pinnacle filled, waves washed in over the gunwale while clouds of steam were shot from the furnace. Then, with a heave and a wriggle and an almost audible sob the pinnacle shot away from beneath the feet of the crew who had manned her. Perhaps one half-minute later Dicky's head appeared from beneath the water which had submerged him. He opened his mouth and shouted:

"Stand by there, men! There's wreckage here. Hold on to it."

"Aye, aye, sir," came from Hawkins, his deep tones easily recognizable. "Now, lads, answer to your names as I call 'em. Hurst."

"Here, sir."

"Perkins."

"Here, sir."

The answer was given with a gulp. Perkins was endeavouring to eject the volume of water which he had so recently swallowed.

"Seaton, Carew, Tomkins."

"Here, sir! here, sir! here, sir!" came with varying degrees of quickness, and for the most part in distinctly gasping fashion.

"All present and aboard, sir," cried Hawkins, using that formula by force of habit. "All clinging tight, sir."

"But to what? And there's that shout again. This is getting beyond me," declared the youthful Dicky, not in despondent tones it must be declared, for never was there a lighter-hearted nor more courageous individual. But in a manner which showed that the speaker was sorely puzzled. No wonder, too, for that elusive call sounded now as if it came from the sky again. It made the bulky Hurst actually tremble. He was shivering already, for the water was cold, and this sudden immersion was no joke under the circumstances. But now that call, three times repeated, sent a cold shiver down his back, as if someone had suddenly added a huge block of ice to the water.

"I'm jiggered," he stuttered, his strong teeth chattering. "From away up aloft. Why, there's a man here, sir, tied up to this here wreckage."

It was too dark to see more than an inch in front of one's nose, but Hurst could feel, and rapidly ran his fingers over the form of a man supported on the wreckage to which he and his companions were clinging. Was that wreckage the remains of a boat? Undoubtedly no. Then what was it? Both Hawkins and Hurst endeavoured to elucidate what had become a mystery. They ran their hands far and wide over spars and timber. They stretched as far as they were able, while Dicky Hamshaw did likewise, puzzled beyond expression by the strangeness of his immediate surroundings. And then that far-away cry again fell on his ear.

"Silence, men," he commanded, in his most peremptory manner. "Now, give 'em a call – all together!"

The bellow which the half-submerged members of the crew sent out must have penetrated some considerable distance. They waited for an answering cry, and then were more completely bewildered.

For of a sudden the darkness overhead was split in twain by a beam of brilliant light, which shot from a point far above them, a point so brilliant that they dared not gaze at it. A moment before they were struggling in the water surrounded by the densest darkness. Now, they and a huge circle about them were brilliantly illuminated, showing seven forlorn figures bobbing in the ocean about a mass of wreckage of curious formation secured to which was the body of a man more forlorn than themselves. Dicky Hamshaw wondered whether he were dreaming. He stretched out a hand and pulled at the sleeve of that unconscious figure. And then he gazed aloft, wondering from whence that light came, who could have cast it upon them, and what manner of ship it was that floated there, invisible and stationary yet a ship for all that; for a man or men were aboard it. Cries had come from that direction, while their own shouts had been followed by the sudden jet of light which now played about them. Was he dreaming indeed? or could that actually be the figure of a man descending through the very centre of the beam towards them, descending at a speed which made him giddy, treading steps which there was no seeing?

"Jingo!" he gasped. "This is getting too hot for anything. Why – why, the man's on a rope. Now, what in the dickens supports him?"

What indeed? Not one of the men clinging to that strange wreckage in the water illuminated so wonderfully could guess to what class of vessel that rope could be attached. For nothing was visible aloft save that one penetrating eye, that brilliant orb which shot down upon them its dazzling beams. Hurst shivered yet again. Even Mr. Midshipman Hamshaw was decidedly disconcerted and nonplussed by the uncanniness of the situation. For that man, dangling from a rope, turning like a spider hanging by a single thread, and swaying from side to side as the wind caught him, appeared to be supported by nothing in particular. And yet he was descending towards them at an amazing rate, and that too with no effort on his own part. Someone above must be paying out the rope to which he was attached. But who? Where was the spot from which he had started? What sort of vessel hovered aloft?

"I'm hanged," ventured Dicky.

"It's just the queerest thing as ever I seed, sir," admitted Hawkins. "But there's one thing I'm sure of. This here wreckage is what's left of a waterplane. See there – one of the floats is on the top of the water. There's generally two, so one can guess that the other's foundered, and if it wasn't for this here one the whole affair would have sunk. It's lucky for us and lucky for the man here. French, sir."

"Yes," agreed the young officer. "Looks it. Hallo!"

His last exclamation had been drawn from him by the sudden discovery that the man at the end of that strange rope was now within a matter of ten feet of him, swaying just overhead. In fact, in those few seconds during which Dicky had turned to inspect the wreckage to which he was clinging, the newcomer, descending as it were from the sky, had dropped to within speaking distance. Who was he? Of what nationality?

"Ahoy!" shouted Dicky, nothing daunted. "Where do you come from?"

A face looked down upon him, a face cast into shadow by that brilliant beam from above, and yet distinguishable to some extent by reason of the reflection from the water. It was a bearded face, that of a man in his early prime, strong, reliant, and dauntless, and bearing an expression familiar to the young officer. Did he know this man? Impossible.

"Who's that?" came in stentorian tones.

"Mr. Midshipman Hamshaw, sir," bellowed Hawkins, taking upon himself to answer; "he and the crew of the steam pinnace away from the Solent. We've struck against the wreck of a waterplane, and the pinnace has foundered."

"All present, I hope?"

"Aye, aye, sir!" shouted Dicky, for without a doubt the man above was a naval officer. He had the cut of a nautical man from head to foot, while whoever saw a man hang so comfortably in midair at the end of but a single rope but a sailor?

"And you can stick tight for a while?"

"Certainly," answered Dicky.

"Then hang on; I'll be down again in a minute."

The man waved his hand. There came a cry from far up aloft, and then the dangling figure was whisked upward at express speed, for all the world as if he were seated in an elevator going aloft in a New York skyscraper.

"I'm jiggered!" gasped Hurst, silenced up till now by the novelty of the situation. "Why, look what's coming."

Down through the very centre of the beam, appearing once more to have actually no point of support, there dropped a wide platform, over one edge of which a man's head protruded. At lightning speed it fell towards the wreckage, halting abruptly within two feet of the water as the man signalled. Then it dropped a few inches lower, while a hand was stretched out to Hawkins.

"Come aboard," that same cheerful, brisk voice commanded. "Where's the officer?"

"Here, sir," shouted Dicky.

"How many men are you responsible for?"

"Six, sir; and this fellow lashed to the wreckage."

"Good! Then we'll soon finish this business. Now, on you come."

Very rapidly was the crew of the pinnacle transferred to this strange platform, and following them the unconscious figure of the man they had come out to rescue.

"Hold tight!" came the order.

"Tight it is, sir," responded Hawkins.

"Then hoist."

The stranger signalled. Dicky felt the platform move upward. Then it shot towards the sky, while of a sudden the beam died out, leaving them all in darkness. It sent a chill down his back. Even the jovial and careless midshipman was impressed by the uncouthness of this adventure. Where was this stranger bearing them? What was to be the end of this amazing rescue?

CHAPTER IV

The Great Airship

"Hold tight all! Don't move or you will make the platform sway, and then it will be a job to keep your footing. Ah – up we go!"

The cheery individual, who had dropped so suddenly as if from the sky, bringing help to Dicky and his crew, called out loudly, once he had contrived with their help to cut asunder the lashings that bound the unconscious figure of the man they had come to rescue, and had lifted him aboard the platform which had borne him from aloft. He signalled at once, and then, as we have recorded, the platform shot upward at tremendous speed, while the brilliant light shedding its beams upon them went out of a sudden.

"I'd as soon be aloft in a gale on a dirty dark night, so I would," the bulky Hurst began to grumble, while he clutched at the smooth floor of the platform, and finding no hold there, sought for the edge and gripped it. For all had sunk upon their knees, standing being almost out of the question, and in any case hardly a position to attract any of the company. "There ain't no sayin' where this here platform ends and where it begins, and if you was to fall where'd you go to!"

"Where? Davy Jones's locker!" laughed Hawkins, though his hoarse tones told how the situation impressed him. "Right slick down to Davy Jones. Just you quit grumblin', my lad, and get a hold on with your eyebrows."

"Silence, men!" came sharply from Dicky. The precarious position in which he found himself, his unusual surroundings, and the uncertainty of the future making him quite irritable. "Now, sir, will you kindly explain where you are taking us. And first, let me thank you for turning up just in the nick of time."

"Not at all! Not at all! Delighted to be able to lend a helping hand to some of my own service."

"Navy, sir?" asked Dicky, though he felt sure of that fact from the very first.

"What else, my lad? Commander Jackson, at present engaged in experimental work."

"Aeronautics?" ventured Dicky.

"Perhaps; you'll see. Hold tight! Now that the light has been switched off it makes this platform none too safe. That is, for anyone not a sailor. Ah! They're slowing down the motor. We'll be aboard in a jiffy."

Their upward flight had indeed taken but a matter of a minute, and already they were hundreds of feet above the sea. Not that they could tell that for certain. But every one of the rescued crew had the uncomfortable feeling that they were poised high in the air, with but this flimsy platform between them and destruction. However, a few seconds later they became aware of a dull, droning noise, hitherto inaudible, while the speed of their strange lift had slowed considerably.

"Keep your hands off the edge of the platform!" shouted their rescuer. "Ah! Here we are! Come aboard, Mr. Provost."

The change from darkness to brilliant light was positively stupefying, even more than it had been in the reverse direction. For now, as Dicky and his crew crouched on the platform, fearful of moving to right or left lest they should lose their footing, there was a gentle bump, a flooring above their heads lifted, and in an instant they found themselves in a wide gallery blazing with light and occupied by three individuals. Another second and the platform came to a rest on a level with the flooring of this gallery, while a well-groomed, white-headed man stepped forward to greet them.

"Welcome!" he cried. "Well done, Commander Jackson! I was in a fever till I saw you had them all on board. Gentlemen, allow me to welcome you on your arrival."

It was Andrew Provost, well set up, thin and spare, and exceedingly well dressed. More than that it was Andrew Provost with a new light in his eye. He was almost truculent, and none who took

the trouble to look at him could doubt the fact that if ever there were a successful and a contented man it was Andrew Provost.

"Permit me," he said, "to introduce my nephew, Mr. Joseph Gresson, the inventor and builder of this wonderful ship. Step in, gentlemen, and let us provide you with dry clothing and refreshment."

"And allow me to introduce Mr. Midshipman Hamshaw," cried Commander Jackson, beaming upon the party. "Now, Mr. Provost, I think we had better do something for this poor fellow who was lashed to the waterplane. Let Alec take care of our guests for the moment."

"Alec! Alec! Of course; where is the fellow? Ah! There you are! Come here, sir," cried Andrew, in mock tones of severity, beckoning to a youth who till now had stood in the background. "This is Mr. Midshipman Hamshaw, in command of the rescued party. Take him along to your cabin and provide him with clothes. Hand the six men over to Sergeant Evans, and ask him to see at once to their wants. There! I leave it to you. We'll see what can be done for this poor fellow."

With his head still in a curious whirl, and his eyes turning from one strange object to another Dicky obediently followed the young fellow who had just been introduced as Alec, while Hawkins and the remainder of the crew stepped along the curiously smooth, elastic floor of the gallery after them. They reached a door, opened it and passed through, finding themselves in a second wide gallery. But this was different from the other; for it had doors on either side, while a railed-in square of flooring near the centre showed a hatchway, leading by a shallow flight of steps to a deck below, from which came the low hum of a motor.

"Sergeant Evans!" shouted Alec, and repeated the call.

"Here, sir!"

One of the many doors opened, and a tall, soldierly man appeared dressed in the smart livery of a mess waiter. "Got something hot, sir," he said brusquely. "I guessed food would be wanted, and so I set the cook to work to prepare it. But they're wet, sir."

He nodded to the young naval officer and his men, and looked at them with interest.

"Drenched," said Alec. "Pass the men along to Peters. Tell him to ferret out clothing for 'em, and give 'em a meal. I'll take the officer to my cabin, and we'll be in the saloon in five minutes."

The sergeant went off at once along the gallery, motioning to Hawkins and his comrades to follow; while Alec dived in through an adjacent door and ushered Dicky into as nice a cabin as he had ever seen. Indeed, it contrasted more than favourably with his own quarters aboard the vessel from which he had so recently parted. It was flooded with light from a couple of electric burners, and heated by a stove fitted in the far corner which was also operated by electricity. There were pictures on the walls, secured in a manner which he had never observed before, while the walls themselves were of a milky-white colour.

"Sit down over here," cried Alec, doing the honours with obvious pride. "You see, this cabin communicates with the next, and there's a common bathroom. That'll be the place in which to pull off your wet togs. Hop into a hot bath as soon as you've got 'em off. By then I'll have a complete rig-out for you. We're about the same height and size, eh?"

He had been looking his guest up and down sharply, admiring his uniform, in spite of its drenched condition. And short though his scrutiny had been Alec had come to the conclusion that Mr. Midshipman Hamshaw was a right good fellow. As for Dicky himself, the novelty of his surroundings and the strange adventure through which he had passed had altogether kept his attention from his new comrade. He had merely noticed that Alec was a straight, active-looking fellow, with a pleasant smile and a jolly manner about him. Now, as he thanked him for his kind attention he gave the young man a quick, frank glance, which missed very little.

"I say, thanks awfully," he began. "What's – what's your other name?"

"Jardine – Alec Jardine. But Alec's good enough. Yours is Hamshaw, isn't it, Dicky?"

"Yes, Dicky," grinned the midshipman. "It's stuck to me ever since I was at Osborne. I hate it, I can tell you. Makes one think one is a girl. It's an awful nuisance looking so frightfully young, ain't it?"

They could condole with one another there, for Alec Jardine suffered from the same infliction. To be precise, he was within two months of the midshipman's age, no longer a boy, and not yet a man. And as is often enough the case with youth, he resented the position, found his age embarrassing, and his obvious juvenility a nuisance to say the least of it. But he did not allow it to damp his good spirits.

"We'll get over it, that's one good thing," he laughed. "I say, this is simply a ripping ship. You'll have an eye opener. But pull those togs off; I was thinking that mine would about fit you."

"To a T. Tell me about the ship – an airship I suppose? Something like a Zeppelin?"

"A Zeppelin! Why, that type of ship can't hold a candle to this one!" declared Alec loftily. "I've seen 'em. They're fine to look at, fast, and have big lifting capacity. But see how they behave. Let it blow just a little hard, and they're done for, that is if they happen to be outside their sheds and run out of petrol. It's only a week or more ago since one of them lost her way in a fog, ran out of spirit, and was forced to descend. She dropped into the hands of the French, my boy, and they soon had every one of her cherished secrets laid bare. Don't you make any mistake. This ship's not a Zeppelin. She's in a different street; she's just splendid."

The unstinted praise of a vessel with which he was as yet unacquainted whetted Dicky's appetite for a complete inspection. But not yet. He was wet and cold, and decidedly hungry. The news that Sergeant Evans had imparted had made his mouth water. Dicky reminded himself that there was a hot meal in prospect, and so that it might not be delayed he dragged off his wet clothes, and immersed himself in a bath of steaming hot water that Alec had made ready for him. In about ten minutes he announced that he was fully dressed.

"And as hungry as a hunter," he told his new friend. "You wait and try the same experience. I was almost in our gunroom. In any case I could tell you what we were to have for dinner, because in a ship you can't keep all galley smells away from your messroom. Then they passed the word for Mr. Hamshaw. Of course I had to go, leaving the other fellows to sit down to a meal which I really wanted. An hour's steaming made me ravenous, and then came our ducking. I say, lead the way there's a good fellow. But I'd like to see my men before I take a bite myself. Eh?"

"Quite right. Look to your command first, then to number one. Follow down the passage."

Dressed in Alec's clothing, and looking spruce and smart, Dicky followed his friend down the gallery, through the door by which Hawkins and his comrades had departed, and so into the quarters of the crew of this strange vessel. Nor did there seem to be need for anxiety for the welfare of the gallant fellows who had accompanied him upon the steam pinnace. Already they were changed and dressed in clothing hurriedly dragged from lockers. Surrounded by swinging bunks on either side, with one huge electric lamp shedding its light upon them, they were seated about a long table with half a dozen strangers amongst them.

"All aboard and comfortable, sir," grinned Hawkins, standing as his officer appeared. "We've fallen amongst friends, and liberal ones too, sir."

"And have got a meal here what ain't supplied every day of the week by the Admiralty, sir," gurgled Hurst. "Not by a long way."

Dicky grinned his delight; and then, suddenly recollecting that it was not exactly the thing for an officer to listen to what might be construed as abuse of the Admiralty, he turned on his heel and motioned to Alec to lead the way.

"And you mean to tell me that we're high up in the air, floating in space!" he cried.

"One moment. Here we are – three thousand two hundred feet up," said Alec, stopping just outside the door of the men's quarters to inspect a barometer affixed to the wall. "That high enough?"

Dicky was at once conscious of a creepy feeling down his back. "What!" he gasped. "Three thousand feet?"

"Every inch of it. As safe as if you were on land; safer, perhaps, because you never know what's going to pass overhead nowadays, do you? What with airships and aeroplanes, the land's beginning to be a dangerous place to inhabit. Come along. You wait till it's daylight and you can see below. You'll

get used to the height in a jiffy, and you'll agree that flying's magnificent. Here we are. Sergeant Evans!"

He dived in through a doorway, ushering his friend into a large saloon, in the centre of which stood a table laid ready for dinner. And here again we record but the bare fact when we say that Mr. Midshipman Hamshaw positively gasped. He was dumbfounded at the luxury he found here, at the brilliant lights, at the huge table groaning with silver and glassware, at the laden sideboard, and at the richness of the decorations. Whoever heard of such things aboard a ship sailing in the air?

"Wonderful!" he cried. "Why, I imagined there would be nothing but machinery – huge, oily engines thumping and thudding away at one's side, with just an odd corner for the captain and crew to rest in. This is magnificent; there's nothing better in all London."

It was at least flattering to Andrew Provost's taste, since he had been the designer of all this magnificence. But who could expect Dicky Hamshaw to take notice of rich carpets, of glittering silver, of famous pictures clinging to silk-brocaded walls, when there was food before him? He was ravenous. Had Alec had any doubts about the matter before, this smart and jolly young sailor soon set them at rest. He tackled that meal with the same dash and energy with which he had undertaken the task that had sent him post haste away in the steam pinnace. It was, perhaps, half an hour later when, having eaten to his own and Alec's content, he leaned back in his chair, accepted with a wonderful assumption of coolness the cigarette which Sergeant Evans offered him, and setting a flaming match to the weed, tossed his head back and sent a cloud of smoke upward. A moment later he had leaped to his feet with an exclamation of amazement. He might have suddenly come upon a pin-point by the cry he gave. But undoubtedly something of real importance had created this excitement. He stood with his head tossed back, his eyes fixed upward, and his lips parted.

"What's that?" he asked. "It startled me. I – I've never seen anything like it. One appears to be looking through an enormous window into space. What's the meaning of it?"

His excitement caused Alec to smile, though he, too, looked his admiration as he gazed upward.

"Wait a moment," he said. "I'll switch off the light here and then the effect will be greater. Now, how's that?"

Well might Dicky give vent to exclamations of surprise and even of admiration, for, as he said, he had never seen anything nearly like this before. Up till now he had been far too busy with his meal to take note of anything but his immediate surroundings. But now, when he quite by chance cast his eyes upward, it was to become aware of the fact that this saloon apparently boasted of no ceiling. If it had one, then it was transparent; while, more wonderful than all, the supporting gas bag of this airship, which he imagined must be above, had all the appearance of being non-existent. Far overhead there burned one single electric lamp, casting its rays far and wide, illuminating the interior of the saloon brightly. But it appeared to hang to nothing, to be supported by no beam or rod, while the saloon itself in which he stood was, so far as he could see, attached to nothing. It was merely floating in the air, riding in space in the most uncanny and inexplicable fashion.

"Jingo!" he cried, feeling that strange, creepy sensation down his back again. "We're – we're safe, I hope?"

"As a house," laughed Alec. "But it does give one the creeps, don't it? The first night we were aboard and I looked upward it gave me quite a turn, even though I knew all the ins and outs of this wonderful vessel. Looks as if we were hanging here from nothing, eh?"

Dicky admitted the fact, with something approaching a gasp.

"And yet you're as sure as sure can be that such a thing is out of the question, absolutely impossible?"

"Well, yes," admitted the young officer, not too enthusiastically, for that uncanny feeling that he was high in the air, and might easily find himself falling with terrible rapidity, assailed him. And who can blame the midshipman? Who that has found himself suddenly at the edge of a tall cliff and looked over has not been assailed by a sensation of uneasiness, by the natural desire to reach

firmer and more secure ground, to retire from a spot which might easily be filled with perils? Then think of Dicky Hamshaw high above the sea, aboard a ship the size and shape and contour of which were unknown to him, standing in a gilded saloon to all appearances open to the sky, with no ropes, no beams – nothing, in fact, to show him how it was supported. No wonder he shivered. Even Alec forebore to smile. The situation was unpleasant and uncanny to say the least of it.

"Place your two hands together and look between them," said Alec, suiting the action to the word. "Don't stare at the light up there, for it's so bright that it half blinds you. Look well to one side. Now. Eh?"

He expected an answer, but Dicky failed to give it. Gasps of astonishment escaped his wide-parted lips, gasps denoting pleasure and admiration. For up above, now that he had shielded his eyes from the glare and looked away from the light, he could dimly make out huge girders stretching from left to right, criss-crossing and interlacing with one another. Here and there they ended apparently in nothing. Elsewhere they could be traced to their junction with other girders. And on beyond them, far overhead, he could even see stars, blurred a trifle by the material through which he observed them.

"Well, of all the wonderful things of which I have ever heard, this beats all!" he gasped at last. "What's the thing made of? There are girders above there heavy enough to carry a 'Dreadnought'. There's a huge framework that looks as if it were constructed of solid bars of steel; and yet, to look at them in a half light, which just throws out their outline, one realizes that they are made of something else, something transparent – yes, that's the term – for when one stares direct at the light, knowing full well that there are more girders in that direction, none of them can be detected. George, this beats everything! What's the meaning of it all?"

"The meaning of it all! Why, that Joe Gresson is about the smartest fellow you ever heard of, that he's had the courage to employ a substance for the framework, and almost every part of this ship, which the average engineer would treat with scorn. In short, he's the discoverer of a substance which he calls celludine, which isn't celluloid, nor common glass, nor talc, and yet which is wonderfully like all three substances. You'll hear more about it, my boy. You'll get the same idea of Joe that I and all the others have. Look here! Just rap your knuckles against the wall of the saloon."

Dicky did as he was bidden, though he was still so astonished at the news given him that he did not even trouble to ask the reason.

"Well, how does it feel? Of course, there's a silk covering. Under that is the celludine. There's the same stuff here under the carpet."

"Hard, and yet it gives," said Dicky. "Appears to be very thin, and yet, I imagine, is very strong."

"That's celludine," cried Alec triumphantly. "Every wall, every door and frame is composed of it. Only here, where there are cabins – and one doesn't want to be stared at all day long – it's coloured a milky white, and so isn't transparent. But the ceiling is, that's why you can look aloft and see the stars floating overhead. But come along. We'll take a breather. I'll lead you to a spot that'll raise your hair, but will give you a better idea of this airship than you can possibly have imagined."

They left the saloon at once, and passing along the gallery paused to look into a room on the far side. There they found Commander Jackson, Andrew, and Joe comfortably seated, smoking and chatting quietly.

"Ah, comfortably dressed and fed, my lad?" sang out the Commander.

"Yes, thank you, sir," smiled Dicky. "And, I say, sir, what a ship we've got to!"

"You'll say so to-morrow, when you've looked over her," came the answer. "Where are you two youngsters off to?"

"Aloft," sang out Alec. "I'm going to give him a scare, and get him used to the situation. But how's the foreigner, please?"

"Conscious and tucked up in a warm bed," answered Andrew. "There, cut along, you two. But no mischief, mind. I don't care if I'm responsible for Alec, but I'll not be having the Admiralty pouring all their indignation upon my unprotected head because of the loss of a midshipman."

That set Dicky flushing, while the Commander laughed loudly.

"There, off you get," he cried. "Trust a midshipman to look out for himself."

They closed the door, hastened along the gallery, and passing through a second door found themselves in the gallery upon which Dicky had first set foot. Alec led him to the precise spot where the lift had finally halted, and pointed to an opening overhead.

"It's the main hoist," he explained. "If we want to pick something up from down below we lower that platform, just as we did to fetch your party. If we desire to get aloft to the top of the ship we step aboard the platform, now provided with rails; just so, Dicky, my boy, see that all's secure and safe, and then touch a button. Whiz! Up we go!"

It was a case of whiz with a vengeance. Dick had obediently followed his guide on to this lift, and now he felt his knees bend beneath him, while the smooth, elastic floor on which he stood shot upward at terrific speed, flashing through an oblong opening in the framework overhead, a framework quite transparent for the most part, with that arc light flashing down upon them without the smallest hindrance.

"Saves climbing, don't it?" shouted Alec, for the noise of a motor drowned the ordinary voice. "But if the thing refuses to work you can mount to the top of the ship by a stairway erected round the lift. Ah! Here we are. Hang on to your hat; it's blowing."

Dick felt a fresh gale of wind fanning his cheek, which alone told him that he was now in the open. He followed his friend across a flat, smooth deck and found himself clutching to a railing. And now for the first time he began to gather some information as to the contour and size of this amazing vessel. He might have been upon the upper deck of a second *Lusitania*, only this deck shelved off gradually on either side till it was lost in the darkness. That arc lamp, however, helped him wonderfully, and pacing beside Alec he began soon to wonder at the length of the ship as well as at her breadth. She was immense. It was hard indeed to believe that she was actually floating in space. And yet that must be so, for Alec bade him look downward.

"See for yourself," he said. "We're right forward, close to her nose, and there are no cabins beneath us. You can see clear through the ship down to the ocean. See the beacon lights along the shore, the lights of the vessels, and the blaze away there in the distance. That's where your ship is lying."

Even at night-time the sight was an amazing one, and left Dick stupefied. But what would it be in the morning, when there was no darkness to hinder his sight, and when he would be able to gaze directly downward from that terrific height?

"Let's go down," he said after a while. "I feel positively silly out here. I suppose it's because I'm not used to such a sight. How did you feel when you first attempted it?"

Alec laughed outright. "Feel? Awful!" he cried. "Everyone does at first, and wonders whether they're funkng. Wait for the day. You'll get to love the view, particularly when you've learned how safe this vessel is. Come along; to-morrow there'll be a heap to show you."

They turned back toward the lift again and paused there for a moment. For beyond doubt there was at every turn something to attract the attention. A minute before it had been the lights about the Needles, the lamps on the shipping, the blaze from the Solent, where the warships were lying at anchor. Now it was the interior of the ship, seen through her transparent upper casing. Yes, there was the saloon, with Sergeant Evans and a helper clearing the table. Nearer at hand were Andrew Provost, Joe Gresson, and Commander Jackson, still smoking and chatting as they lolled in their chairs. While away aft, in the men's quarters, the figures of Hawkins and Hurst and his shipmates were distinctly visible. They were smoking heavily, and between the clouds of smoke Hawkins's arm could be seen moving with some animation.

"He's just it," he was reiterating, "that there midshipmite is as artful as a bag o' monkeys, and if he was to be left aboard this ship, why, there'd be mischief brewing, particularly with the young gent that's joined him."

And how Dick Hamshaw wished that he might remain. The first glimpse of this amazing vessel made him long for the day to come, so that he might investigate every corner. Then, he supposed, he'd have to depart. He and his men would take their places on that platform again and be lowered to terra firma. But the most unlikely things happen. He found that to be the case when he and Alec again joined their elders.

"Read that," said Commander Jackson, tossing a sheet of paper towards him. "We sent a wireless to your ship, and told 'em of your rescue. It seems they'd just heard of this airship through the Admiralty, and had orders to detail a party for her working. We've saved 'em the trouble. Read it."

Dick did, with flushing cheeks and beating heart. "Glad hear safety Midshipman Hamshaw and crew of pinnace," he read. "Have received orders from Admiralty to detail an officer and party for work aboard the airship. Keep Mr. Hamshaw and party if considered suitable."

"Hooray!" shouted Dick, filled with delight.

"One moment," interrupted the Commander with a quizzing grin. "If considered suitable, I think. Well, now, one has to consider."

"Don't scare the young fellow," cried Andrew jovially. "There, Dick, we'll take you. Just go along and tell your men, and then turn in. You've had enough adventure and excitement for the evening."

When, ten minutes later, Dick laid his head upon a soft pillow and pulled the clothes about him he could not believe that he was really aboard a flying vessel, could not credit the fact that he and his men were resting three thousand feet above the ocean.

CHAPTER V

A Tour of Inspection

"Hallo there! Turn out! It's a grand morning and there are things worth seeing."

It was the cheery Alec who aroused Dick Hamshaw on the day after his rescue outside the Needles and his introduction to the airship. Dick wakened with a start, rolled over comfortably, and blinked at his new friend.

"Eh! My watch. Not it," he grumbled sleepily. "I was off late last night and have had the dickens of a nightmare since. Fancied I was aloft in a big airship. Leave a fellow alone to sleep, do."

Alec shook him, laughing loudly. "So you call our airship a nightmare!" he cried. "That's a nice thing to do when the Admiralty have offered you and your men as part of our crew and Mr. Provost has accepted you. I'll tell the Commander. You'd better be getting back to your ship, for there are dozens of fellows who'd be only too glad to come aboard here."

That brought the great Dicky to his senses. He sat up on an elbow, still blinking at Alec with half-open eyes. Then those sharp orbs of his opened widely, the light of full understanding returned to them, and in an instant he was out of bed.

"My word, but I've been dreaming the whole affair over again, and couldn't think it could be true. And it's real? Eh? Actually a fact that I'm on board an airship high in the air. How high did you say?"

Alec made no answer. He stepped across the carpeted floor of this roomy cabin, with its milk-white walls and furniture, and its pictures secured to those same walls by tiny cleats of transparent material, and turning back some hangings exposed a window three times the size of an ordinary porthole, and provided with a pane of what one would have imagined was glass. But it bent with the force of the wind. Half open, the frame projected into the room at an angle to Dick, and glancing at it he caught a reflection of the sun, now bright, and a second later blurred as the pane bent and the surface was altered. The simple fact brought him bounding after Alec. He ran his fingers over both sides of the pane, bent the material backward and forward, and then tapped it with his knuckles. That done he suddenly gazed upward, only to find himself disappointed.

"You don't expect to have transparent roofs to your cabins too, do you?" laughed Alec. "A fellow couldn't undress without half the crew seeing him. No, the ceilings of the dressing-rooms, cabins, and so forth are made opaque. But this window gives you a good idea of the stuff of which the ship's made. Now, take a squint below."

Dick did as he was bidden, and instantly clutched tight to the frame of the window. For down below, down a terrible distance, was a smooth, oily surface which he guessed was the ocean. And on it were a number of minute dots at irregular intervals, while away to the right was a blurred patch of white, which might be land or anything else. The sight made him absolutely giddy. A glance away to his right showed him the under-surface of this enormous ship, transparent, it is true, but of a bluish-grey colour owing to the shadows cast upon it. It was immense. It stretched away from him in an easily-curving line till it was lost in the distance. And beneath it there was nothing, nothing but thin elusive air, and far, far below that muddy ocean.

"Jingo!" he gasped.

Alec grinned. "Makes a chap feel queer at first," he said. "But, as I've told you before, it's as safe as houses. Here, tumble into a tub. It'll buck you up, and when you've been on top with me and had a general look round you'll feel as right as a trivet. Shave?"

"Eh?" asked Dick.

"Do you shave?"

"Er, no – that is to say, not always."

"Lucky beggar! I have to. A beast of a job, and takes half the morning. You pop into the tub. We've a bath between us, and I dare say by the time you've finished I shall have managed to get rid of this growth. Awful bore I find it."

Dicky couldn't help but grin. He stepped across to Alec, forgetful now of the strange sight he had witnessed outside, placed himself directly in front of him, and closely scrutinized his features, maintaining a gravity there was no fathoming.

"Poor beggar!" he said at last. "Awful hard lines, ain't it? You'll find it difficult to get down to breakfast."

To be perfectly truthful, there was not so much as a single hair on Alec's chin or lip, any more than there was on Mr. Midshipman Hamshaw's. And the gravity of his guest, his candour, and those twinkling eyes quite made up to Alec for any soreness he may have felt at this somewhat personal declaration. He flushed a rosy red, and then burst into loud laughter.

"Oh well, perhaps I imagined it a bit," he said. "If I stick to the razor things'll come along in time. There, into the tub. I'll be along in a jiffy."

Ten minutes later, in fact, they were dressed and ready to leave the cabin, Dick having found his own clothes dried, brushed, and neatly folded beside his bed.

"I say," he began, "how do you come to be aboard? Tell me."

"Cousin of Joe's: going to be an engineer one of these days. Accepted his invitation in a jiffy. Come on. Breakfast'll be ready in half an hour, so we've time to make a round of the ship. Now, up we go to the top deck of all; it'll give you a good impression of the vessel."

They stepped into that strange lift again and were whisked on high. A minute later they were in the open, with a brisk breeze blowing about them and the genial rays of the sun pouring down upon them. Gazing in every direction Dick found himself stepping upon a flat deck of transparent material, immediately beneath which he could easily see the beams that supported it. Down lower still, beneath a deep space, which common sense told him must be filled with gas, were more beams, curving neatly to complete the shape of this ship, and beneath them again, stretching on either side of a central gallery a number of cabins, some with transparent roofs, others with opaque material let into the ceilings. And yet deeper, forming the lowest portion of the ship, was one long compartment, through the roof of which he could see engines, with a couple of men attending to them.

"Let's get along aft, then we'll make forward," said Alec, showing the various parts of the ship with pride. "I'll tell you something about her. She's longer than the latest Zeppelin, and equally deep from top to bottom. You can see that her shape is flattened from above downward, which makes her very much wider than a Zeppelin. Care to come out to one of the side keels?"

Dick hesitated. Then catching sight of a rail passing from this main deck down the easily-sloping side of the vessel he nodded. After all, he wasn't going to be beaten by Alec.

"Right," he said. "Get ahead."

They clambered over the main rail to find themselves on a narrow way provided with very shallow steps. This brought them after a minute right out to the farthest lateral edge of the ship, to that lateral keel, in fact, which Joe Gresson had made such a point of. And there the rail ended abruptly. Alec leaned over it and invited Dick to join him.

"Ripping, eh?" he asked. "Getting your balance at last, I expect. Don't seem so dreadful now, does it?"

It did not by a great deal. The midshipman was bound to confess that he was becoming accustomed to his surroundings. More than that, the huge bulk of this floating monster, the fact that she never even trembled, while the weight of himself and his comrade now brought right out to the farthest edge caused no sign of heeling, impressed him vastly with the stability of the vessel. He was beginning to catch some of Alec's enthusiasm. He was longing to peep into every corner, to get to understand every detail. And we must remember that Mr. Midshipman Hamshaw was not unacquainted with things mechanical. What naval officer can be in these days, indeed, when the old

wooden walls have long since departed, and when your modern ship is composed of steel, while almost every movement aboard her, however trivial, is, where possible, carried out by some cleverly-contrived mechanical means? No, Dick had a fondness for mechanics. And here, aboard the airship, he guessed that his fondness was to be gratified to the utmost.

"Let's get back to the deck again," he said at last, when they had gazed below at the muddy ocean. "I'm dying to see more. Now, what are these rails for? It beats me your having a deck on top of the ship. But I suppose it's necessary. Why rails on the deck? That's what I can't fathom."

But he saw the reason a little later, for Alec took him to a sunken deck house, which, seeing that its roof was dead level with the deck, might be expected to offer no resistance whatever to the air. Opening a trap, he ushered his new friend in, though the contents were plainly to be seen without that manœuvre. And there, anchored to the floor, was a pair of spreading planes, as transparent as glass, strong and flexible, attached at their centre to a boat constructed of the same material.

"An aeroplane!" he gasped. "Here, on an airship? Why?"

"For scouting. To act as a messenger. To take passengers to and fro when it's necessary."

Alec spoke loftily, watching Dick's amazement with secret delight. "That's why there are rails on the deck outside," he explained. "She starts from 'em."

"But – but how does she return?" asked Dick, somewhat bewildered, for whoever heard of an aeroplane flying towards an airship and settling upon it? But Alec dismissed the question with a shrug of his shoulders, and a wave of his hands.

"Ain't there enough deck to please you?" he asked. "Do you want to provide a drill ground? You just operate a motor; this sunken hangar rises with the aeroplane, and there you are, ain't you?"

Dick felt the truth of the words. The huge monster on which he had found refuge presented a deck wide enough and long enough to provide safe landing for any aviator. As for this plane upon which he looked, it was obviously meant to float in the water, in fact, it was a waterplane, though the long, centrally-placed boat, to which the planes were immediately attached, was provided with wheels also, to enable it to roll upon the rails, and also to land either on this deck or on terra firma. It was, without shadow of doubt, the last word in the science and manufacture of a heavier-than-air machine.

"Ripping!" exclaimed Dick. "You've been in her?" he asked admiringly, with just a suspicion of jealousy in his voice.

"Once: I'm going again. You'll come too."

"From here? At this height?"

The possibilities of a swoop away from the broad deck of the airship, till a little while ago seeming to be so insecure, and now, compared with the machine he was inspecting, so broad and strong and trustworthy, was almost appalling. Dick wondered whether he could really screw his courage up to board this aeroplane, to sit in that flimsy boat and wait for the machine to move along the rails, to gather speed, and then to hurl herself over the side of the vessel. It made that old, creepy sensation return. Dick was one of those fellows gifted with an acute imagination, and consequently suffered on occasions. Here, then, was an occasion, and he was bold and open enough to admit the fact that he hardly viewed the prospect with enthusiasm.

He grinned a wicked grin at Dick and went racing away from him. As for the young sailor, he gave chase on the instant, so that presently the ship rang with their merry cries. And indeed, they made a race of it, for Alec made for the gangway built around the lift, racing down the steep stairs as fast as active legs could carry him. Dick, however, proved his salt and his training. Finding a smooth, central girder of that strange and transparent material, he wrapped his legs round it, and went shooting like a descending rocket to the deck below where he arrived with a resounding bump, to find himself directly facing Commander Jackson.

"'Mornin', sir!" he gasped, drawing himself up and touching the peak of his hat. "Fine weather, sir."

"For monkey tricks, yes," laughed the Commander. "Well, lad, how do you like the vessel? Seen the aeroplane? Eh? Like a trip aboard her? I'm the coxswain."

"Rather, sir," gasped Dick. "This is the finest thing I've had to do since I joined the Navy."

"Indeed! You've been an officer a long while I take it," smiled his senior. "Quite one of the older ones, Dick, eh? Come; I'll stop quizzing. Let's get along to the engines; Joe Gresson has gone there. There's no keeping him away from them. Come; you'll see the height of simplicity combined with the uttermost efficiency that has yet been attained."

Dick did indeed inspect a machine which, with its components, gave extraordinary power to the ship. To put the description with the utmost plainness, he found when he descended to the engine-room three sets of engines, of moderate size, and of the internal-combustion variety. There was nothing remarkable, perhaps, about the engines themselves, except that they were a modification of the Diesel.

"You see, a Diesel uses extremely high compression," Joe Gresson explained, leaning one hand affectionately on an engine which happened not to be working. "That can be managed easily ashore, and in the air also. But compressors are required in addition to the engine, for the explosive charge, consisting of the crudest oil, must be injected into the cylinders by pneumatic power at a critical moment, and that power must be at higher pressure than the contents of the cylinder. To me the most important question was the one of fuel. I barred petrol."

"Why?" Dick ventured to ask. "It's used on other airships."

"And other ships suffer from explosions and from fire. Petrol is too inflammable, particularly upon a ship which is lifted by a huge volume of gas. So I chose crude paraffin oil, the sort of oil that you can obtain in any part of Europe, almost in any part of the world. To discover a carburettor which would vaporize this crude oil was difficult. But a friend came to my help, and here you see the result. Our engines run steadily and strongly."

He pointed to the other two, which, as he said, were turning over noiselessly and with a rhythm that told its tale plainly. Even Dick had sufficient experience of this class of engine to know that the running was excellent. But beyond that he was somewhat fogged. For besides some machinery housed in at the end of each motor, and a certain number of switches and levers common to any engine-room, there was nothing to indicate in what manner the power of the engines was conveyed, nor in what direction. Where was the propeller? How did these motors operate it? By electricity? Perhaps, for he could see a large dynamo revolving at the far end of the cabin. But he was by no means certain. He asked the question instantly, causing Joe to raise his head, open a port at the far end of the cabin, and invite him to look through it.

"We're a little aft of amidships here," he explained, "and form the lowest attachment to the vessel. We're dead in the central line, and the weight of these motors and of other accessories housed in what compares with the keel of an ordinary ship, keeps her perfectly steady. Now, look yonder. That is the tail end of the ship. You can see the propeller, and as it is revolving and you cannot, therefore, distinguish its outline I had better tell you something about it. To begin, it's both propeller and rudder. See, I wish to turn the vessel. I press this lever to the right and at once the propeller swings in the same way, driving the tail of the ship to the left. See, I reverse the motion. Or, perhaps, I wish to descend or rise – hold tight, please, gentlemen, while I give our friend here a little demonstration! But first, let me say that the propeller itself is forty feet in diameter, presents half a dozen blades, the pitch of which can be instantly altered, while the blades are encircled by a tube some twenty feet in depth from back to front. Thus the air drawn into this revolving tube cannot escape to either side, and the blades lose no efficiency, while one can readily understand that when the ship is travelling quickly, particularly against a head wind, the alteration in the pitch of the blades makes for greater speed and more effectual use of the power. Now, hold tight, please. We'll show our friend of what we are capable."

At a touch upon a lever the propeller that Dick was watching, and which was rotating very slowly, suddenly gathered speed, till it was but a mere haze in the distance. He felt the whole ship move forward, while a touch on another lever bent the propeller downward, and to his consternation the deck he stood on canted badly, the vessel headed downward and went hurtling towards that muddy ocean which he could see below him. The sensation was in fact paralysing. It was worse, perhaps, when it was reversed, and the nose of the ship shot upward, setting the deck at such an angle that Dick had to cling hard to the railings fending the motors. But a moment later, at a touch from the inventor, she came to an even keel, the propeller ceased to rotate, while the vessel came to a halt.

"Now, see how we rise at will," said Joe, watching Dick's face with delight, for it pleased the young inventor to notice the open admiration with which the youthful sailor regarded everything. "Now, I pull this handle. We fall. I reverse the movement. We shoot upward, but always keeping the horizontal position."

It was really remarkable, for the mere touch of the inventor sent the ship up and down, for all the world as if she were suspended in space, and his fingers controlled the switch of some hoisting machinery.

"How's it done?" asked Dick eagerly. "How does the power get to that propeller, for instance? Your motors are here. There are no chains, no shafts, nothing save these cased-in things at the end of each motor, which might be pumps for all I know."

"And happen to be exactly what you have mentioned. They are pumps, of the rotary variety, and the material they deal with is that same common, crude paraffin on which our motors run. See those pipes. They are of the best, cold-drawn steel. They convey the oil from our pumps to the various propellers, to the lift and to any part where we have need for power. No corner is too sharp for them. They run anywhere, and, as you can imagine, convey the power of these engines with a certainty there is no gainsaying. Of course, at the far end we have other rotary motors. The oil pumped at this point, and under high pressure, is unable to escape from the steel pipes. At will we pass it into our distant motors, allowing some to escape back in this direction through a bypass. If the bypass is pulled wide open, the motors beyond do not turn; for the oil fails to reach them. If it is closed, there is no escape for the oil. It reaches the motors at its highest pressure, and operates them at full power, as powerfully, in fact, as if this engine down here driving the pumps was away up there close to the propeller with the shaft directly coupled to it. In short, and as an interesting fact, our propellers and other gear are operated by hydraulic power, applied after the latest principle."

"Which is a lesson that will keep you for a while," smiled the Commander. "Ah, there's our host, and I hear the breakfast gong sounding. Come, Dick, my lad, you could eat, you think? the great height at which we fly does not rob you of your appetite?"

Not by a long way. The young fellow was beginning to revel in his strange surroundings, and to quite like this residence at a height. More than all, he was vastly interested in the intricacies of the vessel. And we record only the fact when we say that he and Alec spent the whole of the morning in a close and thorough investigation, an investigation which disclosed, among other matters, the interesting fact that centrally-placed propellers, operating in tubes built transversely at either end of the ship, controlled her sideways movements, making entrance to a hangar easy, while she could be caused to descend or rise by others, located fore and aft likewise, with their tubes built in the vertical direction. As for the huge framework that held the gas, it was divided into twenty compartments, to each of which pipes of that strange transparent material led. These latter ended in one large branch which was attached to a machine at one end of the engine-room. Joe explained its action with a gusto that showed it to be one of his pet items, one on which he prided himself not a little.

"What's the good of a ship which has to constantly return to land for gas supplies?" he said. "We take ours with us. Not compressed and in steel cylinders. Anyone can do that. But in the form of fuel. We carry a matter of seven tons, and can get a further supply in any part of the world. A gas producer of my own designing deals with the stuff, and at desire we can supply gas to replace

leakages. Not that we experience those. Otherwise it would not be safe to smoke. But each one of our compartments aboard the ship contains a proportion of air. When we want to go higher, or lift a bigger weight, we simply set the producer going, and by means of one of our motors pump gas to the top of the compartments. Simple, isn't it? But it makes us wonderfully independent. That's why we've undertaken to make a trip round the world."

"Round the world? When?"

"Now – to-morrow, that is to say."

"And – and I go with you?" gasped Dick.

"Of course; you've been detailed by the Admiralty."

The shout which the midshipman gave might have been heard at the far end of the vessel. The prospect filled him with delight, so that he was simply boiling over with enthusiasm and anticipation. Nor did his excitement evaporate as the day advanced. For the ship manœuvred over the ocean, and was put through her paces. Towards evening, however, her nose was turned to the north-east, and as night fell she hovered over England. Slowly she descended, obscured in darkness, till her pilot was able to pick up his bearings. A distant light of curious colour caught his eye and he sent the ship towards it. Then, when directly overhead that same brilliant light suddenly shot from the ship and flooded the buildings beneath. Dick found himself looking down upon a huge shed, placed in a wide-open place, and – could he believe his eyes? – the shed was moving, revolving, actually turning. It made him giddy. Or was it this wonderful ship which was turning?

"It's the revolving hangar, of course," Alec told him, with a laugh. "You see, if the wind's blowing, we head up to it. The hangar opens away from the point from which the gale comes. We manœuvre opposite it, and enter easily. You watch. No one is wanted to hang on to ropes. Our pilot can manage the ship in any direction. See, we've dropped opposite the shed; but we're not quite head on. We're getting near it, however, for those propellers located in the cross tubes are being set to work. Ah! that's better. See, we're creeping in. Now our huge lateral keels run into wide slots built into the sides of the hangar. They engage and run in farther. Right! We're home. Welcome to our kennel."

And what of the trip promised by Joe Gresson, and of the adventures it might and certainly should bring in its train?

"Jingo!" cried Dick, as he hastened to the post office to send a telegram requesting that his full kit might be sent to him. "Jingo, if we don't have a cruise worth talking about, well – well, my name ain't Dicky."

CHAPTER VI

Carl Reitberg, Sportsman

It may be imagined that the manufacture of an airship such as Dick Hamshaw had been introduced to, the child of Joe Gresson's clever brain, was not the work of a day. Four months had slipped by since that eventful day on which the young inventor and his uncle, Andrew Provost, had witnessed the flight of the Zeppelin outside Hamburg, and had accepted Carl Reitberg's somewhat arrogant challenge.

Nor did the trial flights of this wonderful vessel escape public notice, though, it is true, her hull was practically invisible. But the rescue of a naval party sent to help a foundered aviator was bound to be reported, so that on the very morning after Andrew and his friends reached their hangar, the journals were filled with this new mystery, while columns, indeed, were devoted to this new airship.

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