



GRAY GHOST hung like a great shadow in the midst of the lumbering banks of storm-foretelling clouds—a vast shadow of luminous gray, her long, pointed nose thrust and smothered into a curling, encroaching cloud, her shining deck of steel looking like a pathway of bright light across the darker heavens.

The sun was at its zenith of early morning glory and shed a rosy brilliance on all the polished metals of the airship, on the innumerable levers, the countless buttons controlling unseen mechanism, making the narrow length of slippery deck appear a bar of glittering ore.

Gray Ghost! Alsopp Ostermann's wonderful airship *Gray Ghost!* A thing of magic, a thing of colossal power, a thing of menace and the powers of evil, but still a thing of perfect beauty and the perfect expression of a master mind!

No wonder the man himself thrilled to the very soul as he stepped up on deck from below and surveyed the work of his genius lying motionless as a resting bird upon a nest of white-tipped clouds.

No wonder he cherished resentment against the airship's enemies and that black hatred filled his heart as he thought of the two men in the cabin below whom he had caused to be abducted the night before and whom he intended to murder in cold blood as soon as they recovered their senses from the effects of the drug which had been administered to them. Two men who had been *Gray Ghost's* most active and dangerous enemies and who had schemed and plotted and striven to trap him a dozen times and once or twice all but succeeded—perilously nearly succeeded!

Yes, Algy Brett and Sir Dean Densham had been the greatest source of danger and anxiety and even now Ostermann marveled how his luck had held so long against the success of their well-planned attempts to capture. Even now he shuddered to remember the narrowness of his escape from the house behind the boarding and the hut among the sandhills at Formby; and, even as he remembered, his teeth gritted together in impotent rage at the failure of the schemes which should

have, by this time, made him the most powerful man on earth.

"But I've got them now!" he muttered grimly, his green coyote's eyes bulging from their colorless lids in triumph, a cruel, gloating, unholy joy of anticipation twisting and curling his thin, sucked-in lips. "I've got them now and this time they shall not escape me! This time *I* triumph; this time *I* call the tune for them to dance to! I've got them safe—roped hand and foot in the cabin there, and today I'll reward them for their vigilance!"

Ostermann laughed as he glanced backward over his shoulder at the steps which led to the interior of the airship and thought of the two poor men who would wake presently to the horrible reality that they were prisoners in their enemy's grip.

He went forward to a solitary figure stationed in the narrow bows.

"Gherston," he said abruptly, as the man turned and saluted, "I am going up to the wireless platform and I want you to go down every now and then and report to me how the prisoners are. The moment they are conscious I want them brought to me. Understand?"

"Quite, sir. Shall I call Andersen forward to take my watch and go below and keep constant guard? It would be unfortunate if one or both of them contrived to cut their bonds and escape."

Ostermann showed his yellow teeth in a snarling grin.

"Unfortunate? Unfortunate for the man who lets them get free! But as to escape—how could they? The only thing they could do would be to fling themselves overboard and rob us of the pleasure of doing it for them. And that, Gherston, would annoy me very much! I want to gloat over the suffering, mental and physical, they will endure when they hear the fate I have mapped out for them! It makes it sweeter to know that they will realize it all the better for having witnessed Carlile Darien's death. And that reminds me. When the time comes to treat Mr. Brett and Sir Dean Densham in the same manner as we treated Mr. Darien, see to it that they are searched thoroughly before being thrown overboard. Remember what disaster overtook us because we forgot the simple operation on that other occasion! Remember the betrayal of the 'seeds of destruction' episode and see to it that our great plans for next week are not frustrated through the agency of a scrap of paper. Understand?"

"Yes, sir. And what about Andersen?"

"Yes, send for Andersen, but not immediately. Until they recover from the drugs the prisoners are safe enough and Andersen did some hard work last night. Better keep on with your watch forward and go down every ten minutes. First of all see to it that their bonds are firm; no chance of working loose. I don't think there is, but still—I'm taking *no* chances this time."

"Good. I'll go down at once. By the way, Stoltz told me to tell you that he's got No. 3 motor running again—it was a clog of oil. He says he's ready to start at a second's notice."

"Ah, that's good hearing. Tell him to see to the others also while he has the chance. I want everything fit for this afternoon. Tell him we start about ten o'clock."

OSTERMANN turned away and mounted to the little platform where the wireless apparatus was fitted. He was some time getting an answer to his repeated calling, but at length it came, the electric flashes illuminating the tiny box-like house. "Yes, we are the *Pratzlau* wireless; who are you? Ostermann? Good. We've been wanting to get hold of you and have been trying for some hours. Have you any news?"

"Yes," flashed back Ostermann. "We have succeeded in getting Brett and Sir Dean and they are prisoners here on the airship. They are insensible at the present moment, but I intend putting a stop to their interfering powers the instant they are reported conscious. Even as it is, they have done harm to us. They have succeeded in rousing up the War Office and the Heads generally and if I didn't have *Gray Ghost*, I should be sure to be captured before many hours had passed. As it is, however, I can afford to laugh at them. They have sent aeroplanes and balloons after me, scouring the skies for me, but they might as well save themselves the bother. They won't catch me that way! Any orders?"

"Yes. The Emperor Maximilian is anxious to come over and see you himself—and to see how the scheme is progressing, and whether everything is really as far on as you say. He intends leaving in his yacht this evening and would arrive at the cove about midnight tomorrow. Suit you?"

"Very well, indeed. I will alter my plans accordingly. Anything else? Does he approve of what I intend doing to Brett and Densham?"

“Heartily. They were the mainspring of every failure we endured. In fact I believe he would not mind giving them a helping hand to send them quicker on their way! Anyway, I hope we’ll have a turn of luck now, eh? You deserve it anyway!”

“I think I do! I want to touch some of those two millions! Good-by.”

“Good-by. Remember, twelve midnight, the cove, tomorrow! And, by the way, we shall want a chart of the entrance to the cove—will you send it to Berwick?”

The flashes and mutterings ceased and Ostermann descended once again to the deck.

Gherston was coming up the ladder from the cabin at the same moment and, saluting in military fashion, stepped up to him.

“I have just been down, sir. The prisoners are still unconscious and show no sign of coming round. The elder one is breathing strangely and looks ill. I moved him to the couch and made him a bit more comfortable as I did not think you wanted him to slip out of your hands.”

“Quite right, Gherston,” replied Ostermann grimly, sucking in his lip over his teeth as was his fashion when feeling annoyed. “Quite right. I don’t want him to slip through my hands *that way!* Is the young one all right?”

“Oh, yes, quite. I left him where he was under the table. He’s screwed up pretty tight, so even if he does come round he can’t move a hair!”

“Quite sure they’re still safely under the influence? I want you to send Lieutenant Berne to me in the cabin, but I want to be very sure those two won’t overhear our conversation.”

“Oh, I’m sure they’re dead unconscious—both of them. I took jolly good care to find out if they were fooling, I can tell you. Besides, even if they do hear a bit it won’t do them any good or you any harm, considering they are on the verge of being jettisoned! Eh, Captain?”

“Quite so, Gherston. I’m hanged if I hadn’t almost forgotten that. I’m so accustomed to that young Brett worming and twisting himself into my innermost secrets that I believe I’m frightened of him even now when he’s trussed and roped and within a few minutes of death! After all, it might be only making the pill a little more bitter if he did happen to overhear us! So send along Lieutenant Berne and you continue your watch. If you see anything of that flying-man Denton just direct the projector at him and send him a present of a bomb

to teach him sense! Not that I expect him, but they say he’s scouring the clouds for us on the occasions he manages by some fluke to leave the ground, and it would liven things up a bit in the intervals if we could come to close quarters with another airship.”

“There’s only *one* airship worth talking about, Captain, and I’m happy to have the honor to belong to her! There’s only one *Gray Ghost!*”

Ostermann looked at his junior navigating lieutenant with a gleam like a laugh in his prominent green eyes.

“Only one *Gray Ghost at present!*” he said enigmatically. “For the others you must wait and see, Gherston! You won’t have long—only till next week, I think; only till next week, if all goes well! And now send Berne to me.”

II

ALGY BRETT stirred uneasily and breathed hard, and at the same moment was conscious of wonderment as to the reason of the cramped stiffness in his chest and arms and the gnawing pains that seemed to be eating into the very bones of his legs.

He tried to sit up, but a suffocating something prevented, and his head fell back heavily on to a hard floor, while the things eating into his muscles hurt more than ever with the slight movement. An intense feeling of sickness overwhelmed him and the faint beating of his heart made him wonder whether he had been ill. A cloud wrapped his brain in shadows and he could remember nothing; he even failed to understand what had happened or to realize that anything at all had happened. Overcome by the effort to sit up, he almost went back into unconsciousness, and it was fortunate that it was the very moment Gherston had come down to inspect them. A second sooner and he would have had to report that Brett had come to. As it was, he applied the test of touching the eyeball with a fingertip, and went up to Ostermann quite satisfied that both the prisoners were still deeply drugged and, to all intents and purposes, dead to the world.

But the second time that Algy opened his eyes the cloud had almost gone from his brain and a wave of memory rushed over him.

He remembered everything! Everything, and a bitter nausea welled up in his heart. He had gone to his uncle’s house in Whitehall the night before in

response to a telegram signed "Densham" and addressed to him at Liss. He recalled clearly the sudden feeling of dread and the touch of warning that seemed to stay him as he entered the big library where he expected his uncle to meet him. He recalled the sensation of fear that gripped him as he viewed the empty room and realized the open window, the heavy velvet curtain torn almost from the pole and dragged outward over the balcony as though a man fighting for life had clung to it in desperation; recalled the cry he strove in vain to stifle as he rushed like a reckless boy to the window, ran, ruthless of the consequences, on to the iron balcony where, hovering above, a dim shape swayed and balanced—*Gray Ghost!* He remembered the two words passing his terrified lips, "*Gray Ghost!*" and then a hand that seemed to materialize from the darkness of the balcony corner, a grip of iron fingers on his throat choking his cry for help, a sponge saturated with chloroform pressed over his mouth and nose, and then nothing—nothing—nothing till this moment!

He turned his aching eyes stiffly in their sockets and saw his uncle stretched out on the narrow bench that circled the tiny room. Was he already dead? Had death mercifully come to him while still unconscious? Or was he still drugged? Even so, that was better than the bitterness of consciousness and helplessness, waiting, waiting, waiting for the end! He thought of poor Darien and shuddered. Was his fate to be the same—smashed to an unrecognizable pulp on the stones of the streets? Again he strained his eyes in the direction of Sir Dean's body and again he hoped and prayed that all was well with the old man.

"Ostermann's got us this time!" he murmured inwardly, closing his eyes again that the tears of sheer weakness he felt rising to them would not brim over and betray his terror. If Ostermann was to gloat over their murders presently he should not also gloat over their cowardice. "He's got us this time and I suppose we ought to think ourselves lucky to have escaped his talons for so long. But if only I could have hounded him down first I could have borne this better!

"If only England believed in *Gray Ghost!* But after this perhaps they will—if it's not too late. The sacrifice of Darien was too unimportant for them to attach a meaning to it; perhaps the sacrifice of Sir Dean Densham will wake them up. But at what a cost! Poor Uncle Dean! I'd give my right hand to

save you. I'd die a dozen times if it would avail you anything. But I know Ostermann too well. He wants his pound of flesh and I go to make up the weight!"

Footsteps sounded on the deck above, metallic and echoing. They came nearer and nearer and Brett realized that someone was entering the cabin—two people. From under his eyelids he saw that one was Ostermann, and the faintness of helplessness rushed over him once more as he recognized the tall thin body, the bulging, colorless eyes, shifty and restless and watchful as a prairie wolf's, and the narrow, cruel mouth sucked in over the teeth. The man stooped and looked at him, kicking him contemptuously, believing him still insensible.

"Andersen gave them a good dose while he was at it, I must say!" he said to the man following him. "But I suppose he was afraid of them escaping during my absence. The old fellow looks like lying there for good, eh? Presently I'll send him down a dose of brandy so as to hurry things up a bit. I don't want him dying quite so comfortably as all that! But first I want to settle definitely the arrangements for the next few hours.

"Listen. I've just been speaking to the *Pratzlau* station and from the tone of their messages I don't think they are very satisfied with me. These two meddlers here have interfered with me so often that they are beginning to lose confidence in me—and I don't know that I altogether blame them. I must admit it looks like bad management on my part to let my secret plans get abroad as they have done, and they think that I should have earned their offer and reward of two million before this. However, I told them I'd got my prisoners safe and that the future would be all plain sailing and that England could be theirs for the mere asking by this time next week!"

"I expect that will satisfy them."

"I expect it will, but all the same the Emperor is making it his business to come to the cove tomorrow to see with his own eyes how I am obeying orders! It shows the way the wind is blowing, eh? Personal supervision, eh?"

"Phew! It seems to me as though we'd only got those two chaps there in the nick of time! Another failure and we'd have been given the cold shoulder! And now what's to be done?"

"Our arrangements will have to be altered. He will arrive at the cove tomorrow night at midnight;

he is coming over in his yacht and I shall have to be there to meet him and make him realize how ready everything is for the projected invasion next week. *We are ready*, Berne, and he must admit we have done our work well when he sees for himself the preparations.”

“He will be a stoic if he can look on the result of the last two months’ work and not realize and pay homage to your genius, Captain! Whatever have been our failures lately, they will be compensated for in the moment when the Emperor enters the cove!”

“That moment will be one of the proudest in my life, Berne. And if, as you say, it will compensate for all my betrayals—why I almost find it in my heart to let those two fellows there live! Almost, but not quite, eh? Not quite, friend Brett! Not quite, friend Densham!”

“Indeed no; not unless we want to go on being made the laughing-stocks of the world! And now, sir, any orders for me?”

“Yes. They want the code-chart of the entrance to the cove. You will have to go to Phelps—there’s the address, Carmichael Chambers, Jermyn Street. He is doing the plans for me; tell him they are to be sent immediately to Berwick, where they will be called for by the Emperor some time tomorrow afternoon. Tell him on no account to fail. You know the address in Berwick?”

“Yes, sir. And what time shall I go? Am I to go now?”

“Let me see!” Ostermann looked at a tiny indicator hanging on the wall and measured up the markings before he spoke again. “We are just about three thousand feet above Ilford. I think if we sail immediately over London, drop down to between one and two thousand feet and get rid of our cargo, then sail back to Aldershot or thereabouts to land you without attention being drawn to us, it would be the best plan. It won’t do for you to be a marked man. Disguise as soon as possible and take the train to London the moment you are able to. You’ve plenty of time, so don’t run the risk of bungling things for the sake of a few minutes. Remember they’ll be on the lookout for us and beware.”

Berne looked considerably at the figure of Sir Dean on the narrow seat and the portion of Brett’s body sticking out from under the table over which Ostermann and he were talking.

“You don’t think it might be more advisable to dump them down in some quieter place than the

City of London, sir?” he asked, indicating the recumbent prisoners. “It’s running a big risk, sir.”

“A big risk, Berne, as you say. I admit it. But I’ve been waiting for this hour to come for months past and I’m not going to be balked of a single ounce of sweetness! I want London to ring with the news! I want Whitehall to witness the thing for themselves! I want to make England realize the strength of my power, the iron grip I’ve got them in, the kind of enemy I make! I want them to know me for what I am—the Conjuror of the Clouds! It’s my rightful title and I’m proud of it! I want those pygmy Englishmen down there to call me by it and tremble before it!

“The Conjuror of the Clouds! I *am* a conjuror, Berne, and I’m going to make them know it and worship me! They’ll call me murderer if they like, but they’ll call me conjuror, too. And if they don’t today, they will next week when the secret of the cove is visible and known to all the world. They’ve scoffed and jeered and sneered at me down there in Whitehall—when I was a struggling beginner, starving in brain and body for funds to carry out my great invention, they turned me from their doors and laughed at airships! Laughed at *Gray Ghost*! At me! Today they’ll begin to be sorry, they’ll begin to realize their mistake, they’ll begin to barter and haggle with me—not direct with me, because I’ll be a murderer in their eyes, but through spies! Through spies like that dog Brett there!

“And by this time next week they’ll be ready to fling every ounce of gold in their coffers at my feet for my secret! Too late, this time next week, too late! And that’s why I want to publicly revenge myself on my prisoners even at the risk of your liberty. It’s my revenge and I can’t renounce a drop of it!”

“I won’t ask you to, sir,” replied Berne in a subdued voice, impressed by Ostermann’s sudden baring of his feelings. “I’m not a bit anxious about myself—it was you and *Gray Ghost* I was thinking of. I’ll be all right, never fear, sir.”

“Thank you, Berne. You’ve stuck by me through thick and thin and I’ll see your share of the two millions is a pretty good one in consequence. And now you’d better get to your bunk and prepare for the journey. Tell Gherston that the others need not be disturbed for another hour yet; they are sleeping like logs after yesterday’s trip and last night’s work—and no wonder. Three thousand miles—and some of it across a frozen continent—

isn't bad work, eh? And then the capture of the two spies, eh? However, let them sleep on for a bit. I shall return here in fifteen minutes. Meet me here in that time, ready to start. If those two brutes have not come round by then, I'll wait no longer but heave them overboard as they are. It won't be sport, but they'll have to be got rid of within an hour if you're to be landed in time. Till fifteen minutes, then."

III

AS ALSOPP OSTERMANN'S footsteps died away and once again the little cabin was empty, Algy Brett ventured to stir slightly and gaze round. The stiffness was gone from his eyes and he was feeling alert and strong, with brain eager and active and all the nausea gone.

If only his hands and feet weren't tied so firmly! He wrenched his shoulders violently and tried vainly to burst the rope bound round his shoulders. The memory that in fifteen short and flying moments Ostermann would again enter that narrow, steel-walled chamber was like molten fire in his brain and stirred him up to wild endeavor. A frenzy of determination flooded him and he swore thickly to get free. A demon of strength seemed to come to him; an unnatural power swelled his muscles and made his fingers iron.

Like a man possessed, a man with the sinews of the Ancients, he wrenched and stretched and tore at the bonds that held him.

And at last they gave! His hands were free—swelled and bleeding and purple, but free. He felt in his coat and all but shouted with glee to find they had not searched him, that still his knife was there and his revolver. In two minutes he was rid of the last rope and staggered to his feet, drunk with the joy of freedom and the knowledge that at least he would not die trussed up like a pigeon! Let Ostermann come in now; let the airship's crew come in! They would not take him alive while there was a shot in the Colt!

He crept slowly to the bench where his uncle lay and stooped over him. Sir Dean was very white and very still and a look of perfect happiness had settled on his face. Algy put a trembling hand over his heart and bent his ear to the pale lips. Then he straightened himself suddenly and found himself praying.

Sir Dean had cheated Ostermann even of his

revenge.

And then a step on the stair above warned Brett of the approach of someone and he sprang back behind the table, crouching down so that the newcomer would be absolutely in the cabin before he would notice that the prisoner had risen from the floor.

The man was Berne and he carried a valise in his hand as though prepared and ready for the immediate journey. He saw Brett the instant he entered the chamber, but astonishment robbed him for the moment of his senses, and before he recovered them and could call out for help, Algy had sprung upon him and stunned him with the butt-end of the Colt. As he fell he was dragged under the table and the rope flung over him; only his legs projected from the table, and a person looking into the cabin from the steps would be just able to see the protruding feet and satisfy himself that Brett was still safe and sound and helpless beneath the table.

A piece of thin steel wall, forming a lazarette, abutted from the main wall by the door and it made a screen serviceable enough for a man to hide behind. Algy squeezed in behind it and tried to think.

The only certain thing was that within a very few minutes Ostermann would be coming down into the cabin and the instant he stepped into it Algy would have to act. Could he trust his revolver again to be so clean and quick in its work as it had been with Berne? He was aware that his arm was stiff and shaking, and a fear that he might bungle filled him with nervousness. If there were only something else! Thank heaven there was! In the nick of time he remembered it. Sir Dean always carried a bottle of a certain drug on him which he was in the habit of taking for a weak heart. The drug, Algy knew, would, if applied under the same conditions, act in the precise capacity of chloroform. A few drops inhaled from a handkerchief was enough to send a man into a state of unconsciousness lasting some considerable time.

With barely one minute to spare, Algy ran noiselessly across the cabin and felt for the bottle. In the inner pocket of the dead man's coat he found it and drew it out. It was quite a biggish bottle and was almost full. He slipped behind the screen again just in time. A tread sounded on the step of the dwarf companion-ladder and Ostermann's thin body came into view—Algy could see the feet first,

long and narrow and shod in rubber overshoes; then the limp, lean, yellow fingers swinging aimlessly at his sides, then the gray, clay-colored face and virile, working mouth.

Algy could see that Ostermann's cold, hard eyes were fixed on Sir Dean's face almost as though the thought had struck him at last that perhaps, after all, the man had escaped him and was dead. He walked within an inch of Brett, but was so arrested by the conviction and fear that Sir Dean had checkmated him that he had thought for nothing else.

Even the strong and pungent odor of the drug poured out by Brett escaped him. Perhaps it was because the narrow cabin already reeked of chloroform that the new smell was unnoticed.

He had passed a yard in front of the screen when Algy leaped upon him like a panther of the forest leaping on his prey. The thick handkerchief, folded into a pad and saturated with the drug, was pressed over his nose with the same sudden gift of strength that had come to Algy when he struggled to be free from the ropes that bound him. Ostermann never even struggled. The drug overcame him almost the instant it was applied. Brett's powerful grip was an agony to endure, and, before Algy could bring himself to believe his senses, the man was stretched out limp and unconscious at his feet.

Scarcely crediting his luck, Algy slipped to the door and closed it. Then he made two thick pads from his own handkerchief and Ostermann's and strapped them tightly over his victims' mouths.

"That will ensure my safety till they are discovered, at least!" he muttered, giving Ostermann's pad a vicious thrust as he remembered the kick administered in a like temper upon himself. "And now to work! First, Mr. Ostermann, I want to borrow your cap. Thanks; and now your coat. Thank goodness, it's a fit and has a high collar. Now your goggles. What a fortunate thing it is you seem to be in the habit of wearing them! Now, am I ready?"

He paused a moment, thinking. Ostermann's cap, a close-fitting fur, covered his head and ears and proved an excellent concealment for his face. Ostermann's great coat of skin, with its high storm-collar, enveloped him in its generous folds, and Ostermann's gloves and shoes of rubber hid his hands and telltale feet.

Then, though adding by it to the risk of

discovery by the delay of precious time, Algy went again to his uncle's side and with his knife freed the thin white hands and poor body from the indignity of a traitor's bonds.

UP ON DECK all was silent and peaceful. The clouds that had been threatening storm had passed over and now a thin haze, chilly and wet and enveloping, wrapped the airship in a shroud-like vapor.

Gherston, on the lookout in the narrow bows, could barely be observed and Brett's heart thrilled within him as he understood what the fog meant to him. It was as though a kind Providence had come to his aid, and he saw in the opportune, wraith-like mist a promise of victory and escape.

The grayness and the closeness of the encroaching clouds hid the beauty and power of the motionless ship from him, but he could see enough to admit himself afraid of the genius that had brought into being such a wondrous achievement; such a perfect machine; a thing almost rivaling the very birds of the air. No wonder the man called himself with such colossal pride the Conjuror of the Air! For so he was. He was something more than ordinary man. He was superman! He had the brain of a superman—and this was its product! The boy shivered even as he admired. For there was always about *Gray Ghost* that feeling of slumbering enmity, of hidden menace, of suggestive power to send down death and havoc and destruction. And now that it had claimed his uncle as another victim it was more than ever a thing of evil and a vampire of steel.

Shuddering, devoured with the one idea of escaping from the feel of the thin steel decks and the presence of those silent propellers, Algy roused himself and walked along into the bows.

He touched Gherston on the shoulder. "Berne is going to land immediately. I want to go with him. You can see to the prisoners in my absence. Make for London—somewhere near Whitehall. Call me when I'm wanted."

Gherston wheeled round with a suddenness which betrayed his suspicions. He peered into Brett's face and his hand flew to his belt.

"You're not Ostermann!" he cried, fear touching him. "You're not the Captain!"

His fingers had fumbled for his revolver, but Brett was too quick for him. "No, I'm not," he said, his pistol at the other's head. "I'm not, but you've

got to act as though I were! One move on your part is death. I mean it! I've killed, or almost killed, one man down there, and your precious master is as good as dead, and I'd as soon put a bullet through you as a rat. Now then, understand. I've got to land safely and you've got to see to it!"

Gherston was but a boy and the whip in Brett's voice was serious.

"I cannot! They'd be suspicious—they'd spot you in a moment. I cannot!"

"It was arranged for Lieutenant Berne to be landed and the same orders will do for me. See to it, or I'll treat you as I've treated them. Give the orders at once!"

Gherston, deadly white, struggling for self-possession but conscious of the pressure of the cold steel of the revolver against his cheek, picked up the tube of the telephone and called up the engineer.

"One false word—one word too much—one warning, and remember you are a dead man! Whatever happens to me, I'll see that you precede me. Remember that and play fair! Even if you cough I'll take it as the signal for me to pull this trigger. Now, then, fire away!"

IV

MOTIONLESS and silent in the shroud of mist and wrapping of crowding clouds, *Gray Ghost* still hovered, but a faint murmuring, a distant muttering was becoming louder and louder as every moment passed and Algy knew that the engineer had started the motors. Once again his heart began to cherish hope.

If Gherston had not played him false by mingling a code-warning into the brief orders he had telephoned down below then there was a chance! But there was also the risk that someone might enter the cabin! If they did, not all the bullets in the world could save him. He listened to the humming and the throbbing of the starting motors with an intensity which seemed to make the waiting drag like a hundred years.

Then the muttering became regular, the great propellers thrummed and sang and the banks of clouds seemed to sail past them, slowly at first, then faster and faster, till the wet mist drove like a sheet of solid rain against them and the cutting wind whistled and shrieked and yelled mocking, angry diatribes in their ears. Then a sudden dip, a

sweeping, downward flight that sent Algy sick and helpless against the rail. And for this Gherston had been waiting. He sprang forward, revolver in hand and a half-uttered shout on his lips. But Brett recovered instantly and with an oath he knocked the other's weapon from him over the side, down, down into the abyss of cloud below them.

"And you'll follow, you fool!" said he. "Send those fellows about their business or it will be the worse for you! Do you hear? Order that man back!"

At the sound of Gherston's half-articulated cry two men who had been working aft came running up, and if Gherston had valued his life a little less, Brett's chance of escape was gone for good. But Gherston was young and life was dear and Algy's eyes were red with passion. He waved the men away and strode to the far end of the little bridge spanning the deck, his face dark with ill-suppressed rage against the man who now so completely had the mastery over him; his cowardly brain trying desperately to think of some way of revenging himself and saving his master and at the same time running no serious risk of putting his own life in danger.

For the impostor was deadly in earnest; one had only to look at his set teeth and snapping, red-flushed eyes to know that. And it was one thing to be brave when armed and prepared, but quite another to have had one's revolver sent spinning overboard and to know that there was only strategy left. So he remained sulking and silent in the corner and kept a watch on Brett's every movement like a cat waiting to pounce on a wary mouse.

The ship had dropped down to between one and two thousand feet and Algy could occasionally see the dotted villages and townships marking the earth below them when the fog lifted at intervals. He longed with wild intensity to be able to step over to the navigator in charge of the airship and order him to make the descent then and there regardless of locality, but it was certain that Ostermann must have mentioned that Berne was to be landed on the lonely plains around Aldershot, and not to do so would rouse suspicion. Therefore he would have to endure the suspense as best he could till the flat wastes of Laffans Plain appeared beneath them.

Yet the danger of landing in such a place revealed itself very plainly to him. He knew that the instant he left the airship Gherston's hands would be free and that he would muster the entire ship's company with one call. And what chance

would there be for him? He would be a very visible and distinct target for them and the possibility of escaping or finding shelter from their attack was something he was too wise to believe in. The more he thought over it the plainer it became that the one hope of his escaping with his life would be to insist upon their landing him in a populated spot where opportunity for safe shelter offered itself readily. So, having made up his mind, he decided to act without further loss of time.

He called Gherston over to him and the fellow came slowly, his face betraying the helpless resentment he felt.

"You must land me in London," Brett whispered determinedly. "It's no use to tell me it will make 'em suspicious. I'll have to risk that. Tell the chap at the steering wheel to make for London; tell him I've changed my mind since this fog's come on, and will chance London. Do you hear? And remember I shall be exactly behind you and at the smallest sign I fire! Remember!"

"It is madness. It may mean capture and death for us all. They will be on the lookout for us since your disappearance last night. You ask too much."

"I ask what I intend to have, and no more. I ask a safe landing and you will see that I get it. Now, go!"

Gherston scowled for answer and turned on his heel. The man at the wheel was but a few feet away and it took Gherston barely a moment to reach him. Brett followed closely, yet managed to keep hidden and indistinct in the thickening fog. The three of them—the man at the wheel, Gherston and Brett—were alone on the deck of *Gray Ghost*; they might have been alone in an empty world, so wrapped in silence and solitude were they, with only the beating of the mammoth wings cleaving the air, the race of the propellers stirring the fast following clouds, the throb and roar of the motors as they registered almost full speed, sounding in the mist-clogged space.

Even though he knew that Ostermann lay unconscious and perhaps dead behind the cabin door, Brett felt again the wave of superstitious awe of him he had felt when he realized the magnitude and power of *Gray Ghost*. It was incredible that he, Algy Brett, a mere boy, had conquered and made captive the superman who had wrenched the secret of the air from the gods and called himself the Conjuror of the Clouds! It was foolhardy to dare hope to escape, and yet—and yet he did hope.

Gherston reached the steersman and was speaking to him. Algy tried to hear his words, but the fog muffled them and he was afraid to venture too near. But he waited and watched and his revolver was aimed dead true at Gherston's head.

AND then the moment came. He saw the man at the wheel start and felt the great swerve *Gray Ghost* took as the wheel swung round for a brief instant. Gherston had told the other man! Gherston had warned him! In the winking of an eye the revolver spat and Gherston fell sprawling forward in a heap on the wet deck.

Brett sprang across him to the steersman. "One word—one movement and you are lying there with that fool! Obey me and you're safe. Understand?"

"What do you want?" the man asked, his voice weakening on the words, his fingers trembling as he gripped the wheel. "What do you want? You are not the Captain!"

"No, I'm not Ostermann. I want to be landed immediately, *immediately*, do you hear? If I'm not safe and sound on the earth inside ten minutes, I'll make this little thing speak again! Understand?"

The man nodded dazedly and altered the course without comment.

Brett searched him hurriedly and relieved him of a sinister-looking knife and a small pistol. Then he stood by him, alert, ears pricked for the approach of newcomers, eyes directed constantly to the big map fixed to the stanchion before the wheel, and with a revolver now in each hand, ready to fight till the last breath rather than be taken alive again.

The engines were going beautifully, *Gray Ghost* flying as easily and as smoothly as a clipper in a flat-calm sea. Even in those moments of anguished anxiety and with the knowledge that he had killed a man eating into his soul, Algy could not help a feeling of exaltation sweeping over him, compelling the old admiration for the brain of the man who had solved the great problem. In spite of the clinging mists and thickening fog, the towers and spires and bulks of buildings were becoming plain and once, when the sun burst through and dispelled the clouds for an instant, Brett could see the winding Thames glistening and sparkling in the sunshine. He turned to the man beside him.

"Where are we?" he asked sharply, seeing that the fellow's eyes were filled with a kind of lurid triumph and excitement. "Where are we? Why

don't you descend here?"

"We are just over Mortlake. I will make the descent now—now—"

His eyes betrayed him! They strayed again to the cabin door, which was scarcely abaft the wheel and only a stride away. But they betrayed him!

As though a live wire passed from his brain to Brett's the knowledge was flashed to Algy that *someone was coming through the door!*

Who was it? Ostermann? Berne? Who was it? Brett's eyes were stiff with sudden fear and scarcely had the power to turn in the direction of the door to see who came. His heart turned sick and a wave of abject misery overwhelmed him. Was this the end after all? Oh, was it Ostermann?

Yes, it was! Ah, no, no, no! Thank heaven, no! Not Ostermann, but Berne! Berne, bleeding and weak, but alive and dangerous! Berne, mad with anger and revenge and about to summon the sleeping crew! And behind Berne? What was that tall shadow swaying at the foot of the companion-ladder? *That was Ostermann!*

Ostermann, too weak yet to climb the tiny flight of steps; Ostermann, reeling and swaying and summoning all his powers of endurance and virile strength, but as weak still as a rabbit.

At the sight of his weakness new strength came to Algy and he leaped forward. At least he would not give in without a struggle and they were almost within hailing distance of the earth. If he could hold out for another three minutes, if he could beat them back through that steel door, could he win through? If he could!

To the man at the wheel he yelled an order to descend immediately or suffer death on the spot, and then dashed behind him and across the deck to the cabin door.

Berne was still leaning against the wall, the sudden freshness of the air almost depriving him of his senses for the first minute and causing the whistle he had intended to call the crew with to drop from his limp fingers. Ostermann had climbed up two steps and was struggling to reach the third. It was as if they had been intoxicated with the drug and were still under its influence.

Even as Algy leaped across the narrow space, Berne had found the whistle again and had it between his teeth. But just as he was about to blow it Algy sprang at him and flung him backward. He

went down helplessly, crashing over the steps, carrying Ostermann with him with horrible force—and then Algy could hear them struggling on the cabin floor.

Without waiting for anything save to slam the door and shoot the bolts above and below the handles, Algy raced back to the wheel.

"I give you five seconds to reach land!" he threatened the man.

"We are just down," said the fellow insolently, giving the wheel a vicious jerk and signaling down to the engineer. "And if it had not been that, had I let go the wheel, we would *all* have lost our lives; I would have warned the engineers and chanced your bullet, my young dare-devil Englishman! My neck's not so precious as all that, let me tell you! But I believe the Captain would sooner I let you escape than hurt a rivet of *Gray Ghost!*"

"Chance is a fine thing, my brave-after-the-event fellow, and you never had one! I had one eye on you, don't you worry. Ah, here we are!"

Like a gull settling on the water the airship took the earth; not a jolt, not a quiver shook her; she glided down and rested on the green field.

Reluctantly Algy reversed the big revolver in his hand and drew his arm up. Then he brought it down heavily on the man's head and saw him double up and sink down in a heap beside Gherston's body.

"I had to stun him!" he muttered in extenuation. "I had to do it or I should never have got away!"

He was running as he spoke, running at top speed, racing and running for dear life!

A big motor-car was coming down the hill toward him and he called madly for them to stop, begged them to take him in, and then, when speeding on again, dashing to London, he broke down and told these strangers, with childish tears, of his escape, of his uncle's death and the man he had killed deliberately.

They did not believe him for one moment, but they humored him and poured brandy down his quivering throat and did their best to quiet him, looking at each other with raised brows over his bowed head and heaving shoulders.

Until one of them looked up.

Flying high, rapidly disappearing into the mists above the lower blue, a long gray airship crept like a specter into view and like a specter vanished.