

DONALDSON AND GRIMWOOD.



A TRUE ACCOUNT OF THEIR

LAST BALLOON VOYAGE

AND

TRAGIC DEATH ✓

IN THE

BOISTEROUS WATERS OF LAKE MICHIGAN.

FROM PAPERS PICKED UP IN THE LAKE WHICH THEY HAD THROWN
OVERBOARD PREVIOUS TO THEIR DEATH.

Wise

THE FATE
OF
DONALDSON AND GRIMWOOD,
IN A BALLOON VOYAGE FROM CHICAGO.

WRITTEN FROM THE FACTS AS DEVELOPED DURING THE PREPARATIONS AND DEPARTURE OF THE BALLOON, AND FROM THE NOTES OF GRIMWOOD, AS WELL AS FROM THE FACT OF THE BALLOON FLOUNDERING ON MIDLAKE, AS SEEN BY THE MEN ANDERSSSEN AND RASMUSSEN, THE CAPTAIN AND MATE OF THE LITTLE SCHOONER GUIDE, AND FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF FALLING INTO THE SEA AND INTO LAKES BY THE WRITER OF THIS NARRATIVE.

PHILADELPHIA:
JOHN WISE. *au. 17/75*
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INTRODUCTION.

THE great interest and anxiety manifested in the public mind concerning this unfortunate adventure has induced me to write the following narrative. No one so well as the author could conceive the feelings and conduct of two fellow-beings placed in the perilous condition and amid the surroundings of the few hours of desolation experienced while passing over a boundless waste of water. The scene most assuredly presented a gloomy aspect for a portion of the time, especially in that mournful hour of twilight in which they hovered over the schooner "Guide," when their ballast had evidently been exhausted.

To all reckless aeronauts, who run their cloud-scraping coaches with a disregard for consequences, or who, in other words, essay to fly without making due calculations and preparations to alight, this little narrative is dedicated.

"Never jump before you know
Where you're going to land."



Washington H. Donaldson

THE FATE OF DONALDSON AND GRIMWOOD.

It was a glorious day in July when I was making preparations for a balloon voyage. It was on the 15th day of that hot month, in the year 1875, and while my contemplations were running upon more pleasant things than ballooning, with all my heart and earnest devotion to the art *volante*, that I felt a misgiving, as by some mysterious providence, disturbing my thoughts during the time I was engaged in getting my balloon-traps ready for an evening sail from Chicago over Lake Michigan. As I was turning over and over the dilapidated folds of my tattered old cloud-coach, it seemed to me I should never get done finding defects in the envelope. An indescribable internal tremor pervaded my whole nervous system, and I involuntarily let the balloon drop from my hands. I became possessed of a feeling that I must get my journal, and note therein my thoughts and feelings during the few hours of the early morning occupied in preparing for the aerial voyage to come off in the evening.

When I sat down in my chamber to write, my eyes wandered over the sheet of water spread out before me. The sight caused a shudder, and, as by a stroke of

apoplexy, my mind suddenly became obscure and confused, with just sufficient reasoning power to dream, as it were, upon the duties that lay before me.

I heard a continually-repeated sound saying, "Shall I do this thing?" This perplexed me sorely. Now, while I was not affected much with superstition, I nevertheless took the premonition as no augury of good. I was afraid of making known my feelings even to my nearest companions, and this only served to enhance the perturbation of my mind. "Shall I do this thing?" was all the time ringing in my ears. All of a sudden I shouted out in a loud voice, "Yes, I *will* do this thing." "And why should I not do it?" I remarked, in a more sober mood. Casting my eyes slowly over the glassy sheet of water, it occurred to me that I was about entering upon a duty that was not very promising of a successful result.

That tattered balloon was rather a leaky vessel with which to cross Chicago Lake. "That is so, Wash," a something whispered in my ear. Now, what is to be done in this emergency? To go or not to go, that's the rub. If I go, I shall be called a fool; if I don't go, I shall be called a coward. I finally concluded that it was better to be a dead lion than a living ass. But then life is sweet, even to a jack, and more's the pity that a man must at times play the donkey.

But may I not be able to play out this piece of tomfoolery with the lion-skin over my shoulders, and possibly come out in the end heroically? Life is sweet; and if I must perish in the ill-devised adventure, I will not be alone. If my companions, who are really as innocent as children of the real danger in the matter,

persist in going, it will never do for me to tell them "there is death in the pot." Thus I reasoned the matter over in my own mind. Besides, I had determined long ago that I would stand at the head of my profession, come what might. One hundred and fifty miles of water shall never make me so faint-hearted as to back out of a balloon voyage.

No, no, I will never show the white feather in this business; besides, I am employed to do the job, as I had done it before even on the ragged edge of despair. To be sure, it is only a mountebank speculation that I am working for, but then the thing is popular, and all the world and its neighbor run to see the "Congress of Nations" and Barnum's balloon, with Washington H. Donaldson as the main figure-head of the greatest spectacle that Barnum has yet concocted from his fertile brain of shows.

I will go. I shall have company, and Misery ever loves company. The die is cast: go I will. But can I not arrange matters so as to make a tolerably good margin for a probable safe outcome? Yes, I will take only one of the three candidates; that will secure me more ballast; and then, if I rise up into the "eastern current," I can cross the lake in two or three hours, and the old rag-bag ought to float that long.

I summoned my companions to a consultation, and informed them that I could take but one. This caused a general murmur. I said, "Gentlemen, don't grumble; draw lots who is to"—I almost said, involuntarily, die, but quickly swallowed the word and said—"go." Little did those innocent reporters know the thoughts that were running through my brain.

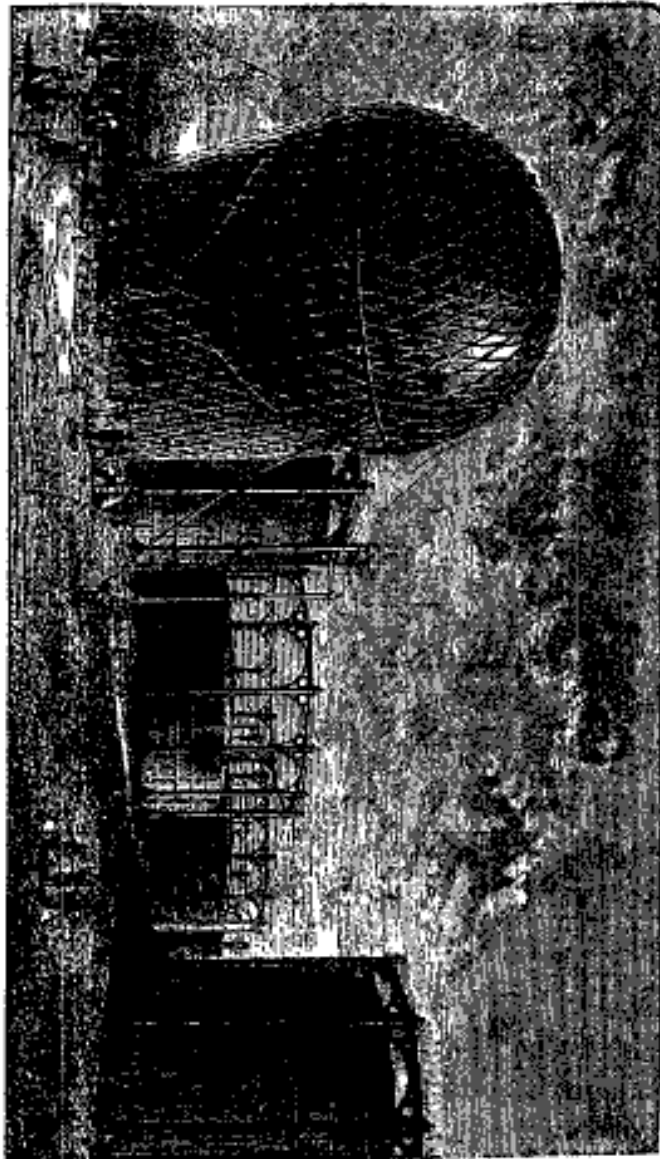
While the inflation of the balloon was going on, I began to think more seriously of the perils that seemed to present themselves on every side. The wind is a fickle element, and even the great eastern current is at times to be found only at an altitude to which my balloon could not aspire until considerable loss of gas by overflow would render it unfit for a long sail, since there would be no more ballast remaining, or at least not sufficient to compensate for leakage of gas, to which the balloon was inevitably subjected.

While these things were perplexing me sorely, it came into my mind that it would have been better for me had I attempted the sensation trick of telegraphing to the Hippodrome managers at Philadelphia that I had fallen out of my balloon car in New Jersey, and was killed, had the story been true. In that case I should have passed from time to eternity as an aeronautic hero of great renown, and with the glory and reputation that I had gained in my aerial voyages in Philadelphia at the expense of one of the most favorable seasons for aeronautical success that I ever experienced. Let it be remembered that when the aeronaut meets these favorable conditions of atmosphere, the generous-minded public attributes his success to his superior skill, and, on the other hand, when the atmosphere is adverse to successful air-sailing, the ungenerous-minded public attributes his misfortunes to ignorance of the art, and to a blundering way of managing its performances.

And so with the case before me. If fortune favors, all will be well; but if it frowns, fool will I be called, and fool surely will I be.

But the time for temporizing and halting was passing

INFLATION OF THE LARGE BALLOON.



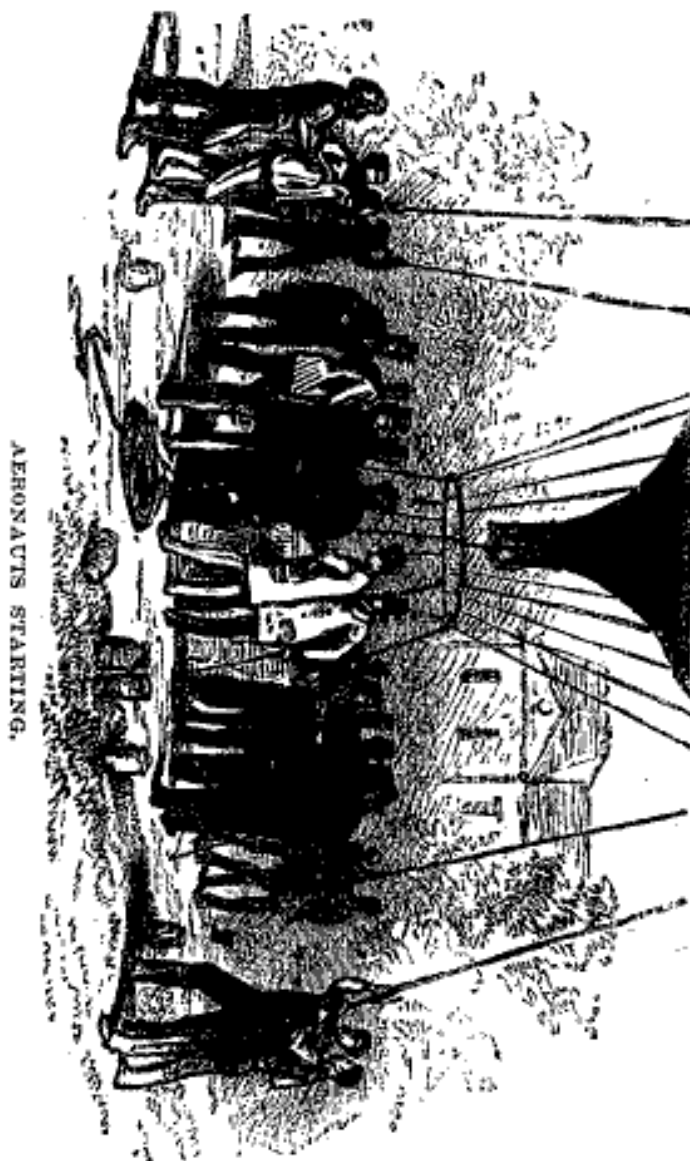
away, and my well-intentioned partner, Mr. Grimwood, was growing eager for the fray. He had drawn the death-warrant in the lot of the three candidates; and while I was strongly minded so to tell him, I did not dare to do so for fear of betraying cowardice.

The balloon had now become inflated to its fullest capacity, and, fretting and chafing to plunge into the air above, only sooner or later to dive into the water below, was waiting for the sacrifice of its victims. It bounded and rebounded, puffing out its great swollen sides with spasmodic efforts to get away, determined to give us no time for further considering the perils that must soon environ us. Onward and upward it was straining with angry surges. Ten thousand excited faces were watching my every movement, perhaps not one of them suspecting the agony of mind that was torturing me all this time. It was only the more painful to me that my unconscious companion was taking things in such a cheerful manner, and looking upon the matter as a holiday excursion.

The aerial monster being now harnessed to its car and ready for a start, it was cut loose from its trammels, and soon we passed over the sea of faces turned upward with expressive misgivings as to our fate.

I had often been excited in my feats of rope-walking, but never before did I feel my heart sinking into such despondency as it did when the aerial ship loomed up and out over the lake. It was a dreary sight over the desert of water.

I quickly turned my face to the land as my thoughts reverted to the one on earth most dear to me. Shall I ever see that loving and beloved face again? "I will



come back, my dear," were the last words I spoke to her as we parted.

"Yes, I know you will come back," was her response, and she sealed it with a parting kiss. Oh that I had only formed the resolution and said, "No, I will not go out to sea in a leaky boat"! I felt the life oozing from my finger ends as the ragged air-ship was exhaling its precious gas through the cracks and fissures that time and hard usage had carved in the thin muslin fabric. All this was still unknown to my friend and companion, Grimwood. He remarked, however, a few moments before we started, that I seemed to be rather moody and preoccupied for so interesting a display, of which we were the figure-heads. Under more favorable circumstances I could well have partaken of his cheerful humor as he exclaimed: "Now we are sailing over the vasty deep!" as the old leaking gas-bubble was sluggishly cleaving its way into the heavens above. While he was running his nimble pencil over the leaves of his memorandum-book, he exclaimed: "Now we are monarchs of all we survey!" "Yes," I replied, "but the survey is a monarchy poorer than the swamp-lands sold by the government at a shilling an acre. Besides, our reign may be of short duration." "What is the matter, Donaldson? Anything wrong?" I could no longer keep up appearances, and would fain tell my companion the worst of the situation; but my tongue stuck fast in my mouth. "Wrong!" at length burst from my lips—"wrong, did you say, Grimwood?" Again I essayed to let out the whole truth, but again my pride held me back from an expression of apprehension that might, in the end, sub-

ject me to the insinuation that I showed a faint heart while in a critical situation.

I, who had thus far won the reputation of having undaunted bravery, and of being one of the most skillful aeronauts living,—I, who announced to the world that I would sail across the Atlantic Ocean with a balloon, and who now quailed before the danger of a fresh-water fish-pond, a span of a hundred miles,—I could not bear to say to Grimwood, "It looks rather blue as regards our safety."

By a kind of instinctive arithmetic I could still figure out another hour's sail and a reach of dry land. Again Grimwood hailed me from the car below while I was sitting in my perch in the lookout above, busily engaged writing out my experience, that I had more than an hour ago resolved to transmit to the waves below, so that I might leave a memoir of my last voyage in the event of a fatal termination.

Grimwood now inquired of me: "How far are we from the Michigan shore?" And he added: "Our ballast is nearly spun out." "God only knows," was my reply.

Balloon-sailing has in it the peculiarity of keeping one entirely unconscious of the speed the balloon is making, or the direction in which it is moving when you are among the clouds, and the clouds are sailing with you, and at the same time nothing but a monotonous waste of water is underneath. It is singular that so limited a sheet of water as Lake Michigan should present to view so few vessels to the eye of the aeronaut.

Well, it is about 350 miles long and 100 miles broad, and this gives us an area of 35,000 square miles. Now,

if 1000 sailing-vessels were spread over the lake at any one time, it would present, on an average, only one vessel for every 35 square miles, or, in other words, one vessel on every plot of 6 miles square.

Professor Wise told me that in his sail down the middle of Lake Erie from one end to the other he did not see half a dozen vessels, and in crossing 90 miles of Lake Ontario only one vessel was intercepted. I fully realized this fact in my own experience over the lakes, and the sparseness of sea-craft visible below gave the situation an intensified dreary aspect.

I now turned my face to Grimwood, and requested him to look out for some lake-craft, since we could not expect to remain afloat much longer, as the ballast was so nearly exhausted.

"Won't the balloon hold out all night?" said my companion. "You frequently let your balloon stand out all night and re-ascend with it the next morning," hopefully ejaculated my cheerful partner. "Yes," was the response—"that is, when the balloon is new and in perfect order; but remember this is a leaky old tub." "You don't pretend to intimate that we are going to be soused into the lake for want of the balloon holding out to reach the land?" "Why, certainly," I said; "if we don't discover land very shortly, we shall be compelled to take to the water and trust to Providence." "Donaldson, ain't you joking?" said Grimwood. "No," was my reply. "Then if I fall—fall through these clouds—I may exclaim with the poet, 'How wretched is that poor man that hangs on aerial favors! . . . When he falls, he falls like Lucifer, never to rise again.'"

I now resolved, at all hazards, to state the situation

fairly to Grimwood, as certain destruction seemed to be staring me in the face, and tell him to prepare for a doom that had foreshadowed itself to my mind all day long. I had been sailing under false colors long enough. It only made my anguish of mind greater as I pretended to assume composure, and thought that I had taken along with me a gentleman of culture and talents, to be lost to the world, and for the simple benefit of a show spectacle, that had so little real merit in it as to be compelled to hang its financial success on the miserable attraction of acrobatic ballooning, and thus, through me, to commit a moral homicide. My heart was throbbing with emotion as I contemplated the whole situation. Perhaps Grimwood will grow desperate if I let out the whole truth. He may become revengeful, and grapple with me for the decision as to who is to take the last chance for life; for what will a man not do to save his own life? One or the other of us must in a very short time leave the balloon, or both of us perish together in the angry waves.

How shall I arrange this matter now? Better one should be spared, if possible, than that both should perish, and in the event of my history submitted to the waves never drifting to shore, no tidings of our voyage or its consequences ever be learned.

It is solemn to think of making one's exit in that way—to go to that unknown world from whose bourne no traveler returns.

I had now fully resolved to be a man in every sense of the word, and give Grimwood the little remaining time for a last autobiographical sketch in the event of his going overboard, mine being to the present extent

ready for a doubtful transmission in the like contingency.

"Grimwood, are you prepared to hear the worst of our situation?"

"I am always ready for an item, Donaldson, good or bad, *high or low, up or down*; pitch in, Donaldson, and give us the news."

This good-tempered response rallied my drooping spirits again, and I began to hope against hope. I strained my eyes to the east and the west and the north and the south, in the hope of espying something that should promise a rock of safety for two wandering spirits of the air. Really, I began to feel more like a dreaming spirit than a living man. Grimwood was all this time writing down rapidly our words and the scenes around us, seemingly reliant on a safe ending to the perilous voyage.

"Ships seem to be as scarce as land, Donaldson," he muttered, "but we have life-preservers; and if it must come to that, we will battle for life in the waves."

I now proposed to him, inasmuch as our time was wellnigh spent, that we draw lots for the chance of one of us remaining with the balloon, while the other should take to the water with a life-preserver, so that we should be prepared for the emergency when our ballast should come entirely to an end.

"I am agreed," was the ready reply of Grimwood; "prepare the drafts; and as I was never lucky enough to draw a prize in a lottery, I am sure to draw one in this, either of wind or water. Besides," said he, "the prize may be a ship, so let us hold up to the last grain of sand, in the hope of intercepting a craft below; and

in the event of falling in with one, we will pounce down upon it like a hawk upon a sparrow."

Full of life to the bitter end was my jocular companion. And now I began to feel that it was better to take things in a good humor, since Destiny shapes our course, rough hew it as we may. If we are born to be drowned, we shall never be hanged, though hanging like bob-tails to a kite at the present moment.

I prepared a dozen sticks of matches I had in my pocket, all of different lengths, and handed them to Grimwood to dispose of the game as he desired. He said,

"Never mind, Donaldson; keep them in your own hands. I will draw one, you another, and he who draws the longest shall have the choice; and I do not care much about the choice, because it is a Hobson to me at best, since I would be as badly off in the crazy old balloon without ballast, without experience and without knowledge in the art of air-sailing, as I shall be in the water with a life-preserver. If the choice falls to me, I will sell out cheap, anyhow; should Providence send a vessel in sight, and near us, in that event I would sooner take to the 'water lot' than the 'air plot.'"

As he reached out his hand to draw his lot, he remarked, "Your hand trembles;" and so it did—a thing that seldom occurred to me.

"Never mind, Donaldson, all is not lost that is in danger; and if lost we must be, I have prepared a bottle that will hand us down to posterity, as is handed down the history of two other equally foolish fellows, named Icarus and Dædalus, who went out on a similar expedition and were doused in the Ægean Sea. If I

mistake not, they belonged to the Grecian hippodrome, run by an old stager named Jason, who was as great an old humbug as our noted showman Barnum."

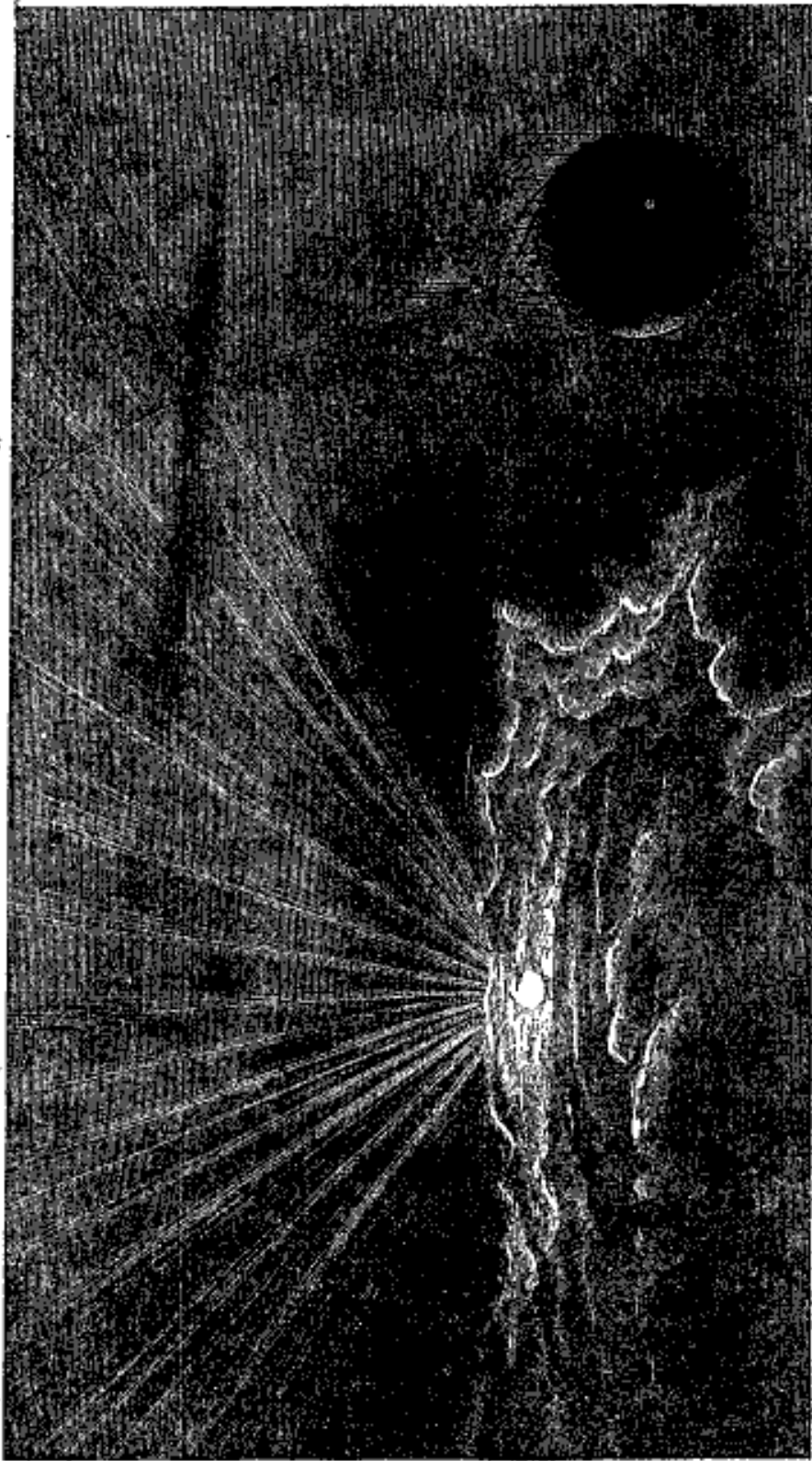
"Grimwood, you are ahead of me in that, as I never studied the classics beyond gymnastics of the ring, such as they performed in the old amphitheatres of Greece, where they played leap-frog and the like; and before long we may have to try our luck in some aquatic gymnastics of the same sort. But since you are in such good humor, I will sing with you 'Never Die' and abide peacefully by the result, though we should both sing like the dying swan."

The sun was now going down behind the cloud-bank of a golden-fringed horizon. All nature was still as death. I imagined that the gold and purple-colored drapery that appeared to curtain the chamber behind it represented the mausoleum of our approaching resting-place.

Grimwood sat motionless in the car, his hand resting on his notebook, his countenance indicative of deep thought, his face fixed as that of a statue. For the first time he seemed to realize the solemnity of the occasion. He refused to measure lots with me. He said in a very serious mood, "Donaldson, it is all for the best; I am ready; God be with us." And his chin sank slowly upon his breast. The scene unnerved me. I turned my eyes once more to the setting sun, and there I saw depicted in the cloud formation an old man with a sickle in his hand.

Oh, what a solemn scene was before me! I was ready to sink down with grief, for now were flitting through my mind the scenes of my childhood—the happy days of

"THE SCENE AT THIS TIME WAS A SOLEMN ONE."



youth, the pangs of despised love, thoughts of the two little offsprings of my own flesh and blood, of the one whom I had won and to whom I was betrothed. All these, and a thousand other things, were flitting through my brain.

I never before felt such a horror over an approaching calamity. No one can imagine what a desolate wilderness it seems to be where you can see nothing but water underneath you, and that surging and foaming as it were with internal convulsions. To be hemmed in, with such faint prospects of escape, and to be fixed, as it were, in the middle of creation, pinned fast in the ethereal vault, as if some invisible power was holding you there, ready to drop you at any moment, down, down, into the seething, yawning gulf of water, there to drown, and then to become food for fish, and all that without the solace of an attendant and friend, almost drove me to desperation, and made me think it would be better for me to die first, and let my deluded companion have the last thread of safety that was available under the circumstances.

Oh, what a calamity a man can bring upon himself! We had now sunk low enough to hear the dreadful murmuring of the troubled waters. It was the Aeronaut's Dead March, I thought. Again I rallied my spirits as Grimwood sang out, "Here it comes!" "What comes, friend Grimwood?" "A sail, a craft! Cheer up, Donaldson." With trembling fingers and doubting muscle I pulled the valve. Down, down, we came; we plunged car deep into the water! Not a moment was to be lost; night was cloaking its sable mantle around us.

Grimwood thrust his life-preserver over his shoulders,

"WE WERE BETWEEN TWO BOISTEROUS ELEMENTS."



threw his sealed bottle overboard and plunged into the lake, never looking whether he had drawn long or short in the lot. But, alas! the vessel had vanished from our sight. In another moment the car was slowly emerging from the ruffled water, and lazily the old leaky hulk was lifting itself up in the sombre twilight. I now looked over the car into the water, and there I beheld Grimwood buffeting the waves that were tossing him up and down. I shouted out, "Good-bye, Grimwood! God bless you!" and he must have heard me, for he raised his hand above his head and swung it around in recognition of my call. I felt like jumping overboard and making an end of my troubles, but my journal must be disposed of first. I do not want to go to Hades and leave no record behind; I will continue to write until the last gleam of hope forsakes me. And now, as the balloon rises, it is getting lighter, so that I can again see to write. I looked out again for my struggling companion, but the shades of night had now so obscured the surface of the water that I could not see anything on its face. Poor Grimwood, as well as the vessel, had vanished from my sight, and I could see his manly form no more. I will now finish my journal, and submit myself to the waves that must sooner or later swallow me up, unless some miraculous escape should await me. I will, of course, not be able to chronicle the final result of this adventure should I be doomed to die here, so I may as well close up this narrative, seal it up in the water-proof case and drop it overboard, as I am sinking down fast now, from gas leakage and the cooling atmosphere of the evening. May God have mercy on my two bereft children, and lead them through the storms of life safely! And finally, may it never be

the lot of any aeronaut to undertake that which reason teaches him should not be undertaken, although the crowd may clamor, and the ignorant cry out, "Coward!" since it is better to have the approbation of one sensible person than the shouts and huzzas of the herd, who ever applaud most when your feats promise self-immolation.

In the end I ask the world to deal charitably with me. Should my body be found, give it decent burial, and write for an epitaph, "Here lies the body of a man whose reckless ambition and fear of being accused of want of nerve has sacrificed his own life and betrayed another fellow-mortal into the snares of death, with no higher object than to serve the interests of a scheme which, to say the best of it, is but a poor thing in the progress of art and refinement."

Sealed and delivered. Amen!

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