

HE fog had been thickening for many weeks, but now, moving like a black wall, it fell on the town. The lights that guided the world were put out—the nearest were almost as invisible as the stars; a powerful arc-lamp overhead was but a blur. Traffic ceased, for drivers could not see; screams were heard in the streets, and cries for help, where none could help themselves.

"I'm blind," said Tom Crabb, as he leant against the pillar outside the Café Français in Regent Street. He said it with a chuckle, for he, alone of a street full of the lost, did not feel lost. "I'm blind, but know my way home!"

Day by day and night by night he patrolled the street with a placard upon his breast marked in big letters, "Blind." People with eyes saw him. Out of a thousand one gave him a penny; out of ten thousand one gave him sixpence. The millionth, or some charitable madman, made it half a crown. The red-letter day of his blind life was when he found a sovereign in his palm, put there by a soft little hand that touched his. He heard a gentle girl's voice say, "Poor blind man." He had a hard life, and was a

hard and lonely man, but he remembered that voice, as he did all voices.

As he stayed by the pillar a man stumbled against him and apologized.

"That's Mr. Bentley," said Tom Crabb.

"Who are you?"

"I'm blind Crabb, sir, bless your heart. You've given me many a copper, haven't you?"

Bentley was a chauffeur and engineer. He drove for Lord Gervase North, the balloonist and motor-racer, and was for ever about the West-end and Regent Street, as Lord Gervase often dined at the Français.

"To be sure. I know your voice," said Bentley. "It's an awful night, Crabb."

"Must be," said Crabb. "But fog or none is the same for an eyeless man. To hear the folks, it might be the end of the world, sir."

"There never was such a fog," replied Bentley; "it's just awful. I can't see you; no, nor my hand before my face."

"You can't get home, then. What are you doing?"

"I've come for my boss and the lady he's to marry. They're dining here with her mother. But we'll never get home."

"Bentley!" called a voice.

"Yes, my lord," said the chauffeur.

"What are we to do?"

"Don't know, my lord."

"Can we get to an hotel?"

"They're crammed already, I hear, my lord."

Crabb put out his hand and touched Bentley.

"Where does he want to go? Perhaps I could lead you."

It was a strange notion, but then the blind know their way.

"Aye, perhaps you could. The ladies live in Eccleston Square and my lord in Pont Street."

"I don't know either of them, but I could take them and you to your place."

"My place?" said Bentley. Then his master spoke.

"Who's that with you, Bentley?"

"A blind man, my lord. He thought he might take you all home, but he doesn't know Eccleston Square. All he knows is my place."

"Better be there than in the street," said Crabb. He had a sense of power in him. All the rest of the world were blind. He alone had some sight.

"If the hotels are full we must go somewhere," said Lord Gervase. "There's no room here, nor a bed. They want to shut up now. I'll speak to the ladies."

"Good bloke that," said Crabb. "He gave me a shilling once and said a kind word."

The darkness was thicker than ever. It was incredibly thick and choking—it made the useless eyes ache. It was a threat, a terror. So might the end of the world come.

"Bentley!" said Lord Gervase once more.

"Yes, my lord."

"Come here."

Bentley found him, and his employer put his hand upon his shoulder. "Can you trust this man? If so, the ladies will come to your place till it clears, if you will take us in."

"My wife will do her best, my lord. I know this Crabb to speak to. He says you once gave him a shilling. I'm sure he'll lead us right. But what about the car?"

"You must leave it, or get him to bring you back. I want you with us. Come, Lady Semple; come, Julia."

The mother and daughter, who had been close behind him, moved timidly.

"Let me lead her ladyship," said Bentley.

"Thank you, Bentley," said Lady Semple. There was a painful note in her voice. She was never strong, and the fog alarmed her. Julia clung to her lover and did not speak.

"Crabb, take us to my place, then, if you can," said Bentley.

"I'll give you a fiver if we get there all right," said Lord Gervase.



"CRABB PUT OUT HIS HAND AND TOUCHED BENTLEY."

"You gave me a shilling once, my lord, and after that I'd take you for nothing," said Crabb. "'Tisn't often I get so much."

He led the way and Bentley took hold of his coat.

"Keep close, all of you," said Crabb. "The Circus is packed terrible, but if I can get across Piccadilly, 'twill be easy."

They were on the west side of Regent Street and went down Air Street into Piccadilly. Out of the darkness wandering folks came and met them. Some wailed, some asked for help, some seemed dazed or half mad, as all folks get in deep fog. And every now and again there was a crash of glass.

They came to Piccadilly and heard the trampling of horses. People in carriages spoke. The darkness was a visible, awful darkness, and in it a mad world was buried.

"Here's the way across to Eagle Place," said Crabb. "But can we get across?"

It was a passage of such peril as might be found in war, or upon an unknown mountain in heavy snow, or in a wreck upon a reef of sharp rocks. They heard the dreadful cry of a hurt man. Crabb's foot came upon one who lay on the pavement. He was dead, or so Crabb averred when he stooped and felt him.

"I've seen many dead when I was soldiering in India," said Crabb. Julia trembled to hear him say so.

There were many people in the street; some were drunk, and many wild, but most were fearful. Yet the darkness released some from fear and let loose their devilry. It seemed that two men in front of them smashed every window as they passed, and laughed wildly. Once Julia called out, and her lover said, "What is it?"

"Did you kiss me, Gervase?"

There was horror in her voice. He had not kissed her.

"My God!" said Gervase. "My God!"

There was a strange laugh in the darkness. He leapt at the laugh, caught it by the throat, and dashed the laughter on the pavement. And Julia's cry brought him back to her. But they crossed at Duke Street, and wondered how they did it.

"Now it's easy," said Crabb. "We're as good as there, my lord."

In St. James's Square there were few people, and they rested. Julia spoke again.

"Did you—did you hurt him?"

But Crabb heard her speak.

"Who spoke?" he said, suddenly.

"'Twas Miss Semple spoke," answered Bentley.

"Young lady, did you ever give a poor blind man a sovereign?" asked Crabb, in a strange, far-off voice.

"Yes, once, many years ago," said Julia, wondering.

"And you said, 'Poor blind man.' God bless you, miss. I knew your voice just now," said Crabb. "'Twas the fifth of July, five years ago; I never forget a voice."

He went on in silence and led them by way of Pall Mall and the Square down Whitehall and Parliament Street, going through many perils, till the Houses of Parliament were on their left and the Abbey on their right.

"We're close now," said Crabb. "'Tis strange it should be the same to me as any other night. Is it better now?"

"It's worse," said Bentley, gloomily.

But they came to the stairway of the flat that Bentley lived in.

"Is this it?" asked Bentley, in surprise. He could see nothing.

"You live here, or I'm a fool," said Crabb. "I've led you straight. Go up and see."

On the first floor his flat was, and Bentley's young wife opened the door and cried out as she took hold of him.

"A blind man led me, dear," said Bentley, "and we've brought Lord Gervase North and Lady Semple and Miss Semple. They cannot get home. We must keep them till to-morrow, when the fog goes."

So shadow spoke to shadow, and she whom they could not see spoke to them and bade them welcome in a trembling voice, and found chairs for them. But Bentley and Lord Gervase went out again to Crabb, who took his five pounds gratefully.

"Will this fog last?" asked Lord Gervase. But none could answer him. Ere Crabb went off to his solitary house close by, Bentley said to him:—

"If the fog's like this to-morrow, come in and see us, Crabb."

They shook hands, for the danger brought them close, and Crabb went off murmuring to himself. Bentley went back upstairs again, and it seemed to him that the fog was thicker still. In the room was lighted darkness, and the lamps showed the night feebly.

"There never was such a fog," he said, cheerfully. But Lady Semple moaned and shed tears, and nothing they could say consoled her. To be in her own home in such a fog would be bad enough, but to be here! Poor Mrs. Bentley, only lately married, was terrified to think she had three such folks to

deal with, but she had sense and some energy in her. She took her husband aside.

"The Thompsons are away," she began. "These people lived in the opposite flat on their landing. "Why shouldn't we break in there and take their beds for these ladies?"

"Break in!" cried Bentley. "Suppose they came back?"

"They've gone for a week, and how can they come back in this fog? Besides, what can we do?"

"It's a notion after all," said her husband. "I'll propose it to his lordship."

As a result of the proposal he and Lord Gervase put their heads and shoulders together and turned housebreakers inside five minutes. They lighted fires and lamps and mitigated the horrid darkness as much as they could, and sent Lady Semple and Julia to bed. Mrs. Bentley soon followed, and left her husband and his employer together.

"This is a queer situation, Bentley. I wonder if it will last?" said Lord Gervase.

"It's a rum start, my lord," replied Bentley; "and, to look at it, it might last for ever."

"Then what will become of London and of us?"

"We'll have to leave in your balloon, my lord," said Bentley, with a grim laugh. "But let's hope it will be better in the morning."

Lord Gervase slept in the Bentleys' spare room, and slept soundly. When he woke it was pitch-dark. He looked at his watch by the light of a match and could not discern the figures. It seemed as if he was blind. But on opening the watch and feeling the hands he found it was eight o'clock in the morning. The fog was worse than ever. The gloom that was outside settled on their hearts. They had breakfast together and hardly spoke. Lady Semple cried continually, and Julia could hardly restrain her own tears.

"It's like the end of the world," sobbed Lady Semple. "We—we shall die of it."

In truth Mrs. Bentley wondered where food was to come from if it continued. She had nothing left after breakfast but a loaf of bread. And they could not see each other. When they opened the window the outside fog was as thick as a black blanket. It inspired a helpless, hopeless horror. They sat about till nearly noon and said nothing. At ten Crabb came to the outer door and knocked. When they let his dark shadow in he put something on the table.

"It's grub," he said. "I thought you might want it."

He came to them from the outer world; they asked him for news.

"Things are awful, my lord," he said, quietly. But there was a strange ring in his voice. "They're awful; I can't tell you all that's going on. 'Tis madness. There are awful things being done; fires, murders, and horrible screams about. I was in Trafalgar Square and folks cried out suddenly, 'Light! Light!' Something broke in the fog overhead and a great light shone. People cried out, and then—then the fog came down again. Terror is in us all, but many have broken into liquor shops and are drunk; the whole town's mad."

"Oh, will it last?" asked Julia. "What do the papers say?"

There were no papers; there was nothing, said Crabb. The very electric lights were out; it seemed no one worked, no one could work. There was a blind mob in the streets, and all were lost. They sought to escape, and knew not which way to run. When he had finished Lady Semple fainted, falling into her daughter's arms. Julia and Mrs. Bentley took hold of her, and Crabb and Bentley and Lord Gervase went apart.

"What's to be done?" asked Lord Gervase, in a kind of despair.

"Nothing but wait, my lord," said Bentley.

"Could you lead us out of London, Crabb?" asked Lord Gervase.

"I don't know more than my beat and a bit over," said Crabb. "What I know I know like the inside of my hat, but beyond it there's a sort of blackness for me. But I'll get you food."

"How did you get what you brought?" asked Bentley.

"Out of an open shop," said Crabb. "There was a dead man in it."

They said nothing for a time.

"Folks are going mad and jumping into the river," said Crabb. "And I heard women shrieking awfully. Wicked people are about. There's fires already here and there."

"What can we do?" asked Lord Gervase.

"It can't last," said Bentley.

"Why can't it?" asked Crabb, after a pause.

"It might last a week, eh?" said Bentley; "or—or more?"

"Where's London's food to come from? Where are folks to find it?" asked Crabb. "In three days they'll be eating each other. I heard horrid things said in the dark by blind voices, my lord. They gave me the shivers and shakes."

"Where's that balloon, Bentley?" asked



"SOMETHING BROKE IN THE FOG OVERHEAD, AND A GREAT LIGHT SHONE."

Lord Gervase, in a shaken voice. "Could we—could we use it? We *must* get Lady Semple out of this; we must, or she will die!"

It was in a store close by the gas-works, but Bentley couldn't find it. Crabb said he knew the gas-works if Bentley could find the place in which the balloon was.

"But what will you do with it, my lord?"

"Go up in it and out of this, and drift away," said Lord Gervase. "It could be done."

"Will there be any gas left?" asked Bentley, and then he clapped his thigh as if he thought of something.

"What is it, Bentley?"

"There'll be none working at the gas-works, my lord!"

"No?"

"Crabb and I will go down and turn off the supply if we can," said Bentley; "turn it off before it's gone."

"Do it," said Lord Gervase; "this is horrible—my eyes ache. It's driving me mad. Poor Julia!"

"Will you help me, Crabb?" asked Bentley.

So they went out together, and passed murder in the streets, and saw the glare of fires, and heard awful things. And Bentley was blind. But Crabb had eyes in his mind. So at last they came to the works, and smote on the door to see if by happy chance there were any there. The watchman came running; he had lost his nerve, and cried as he held to them, telling how the men had left him all alone. But he lived there, and they had their homes elsewhere.

"What gas have you left?" they asked him, and when he could answer he said that one gasometer was half full, but that it went quickly.

"Come and turn it off, so that it won't waste any more," cried Bentley. And they turned it off, knowing they brought bitter darkness to many. But Crabb said he would bring food to the watchman, and he was easier in his mind.

"London's being destroyed," said the watchman. "I hear dreadful things."

"Dreadful things are being done," said Crabb. "But dreadful things are always being done, my lad. I'm not so blind I can't see that."

"This *is* blindness," said the watchman. "I can't smoke even. 'Tis dreadful. Shall we all die?"

"Some day," said Crabb. "I can see that."

And he and Bentley tried to find the store where the balloon was, and, in trying, Crabb once got lost and said so. Bentley's blood ran cold, for Crabb was his sight, his life, and the life of those he loved. For he loved not only his wife, but Gervase North and Julia Semple, since they were made to be loved, both of them, and Bentley was kind-hearted.

Yet Crabb found himself again, and they went back to the Square without discovering the balloon shed.

"We'll try to-morrow," said Crabb.

They tried next day and failed.

They tried the next day—and still failed. But Crabb brought them food, very fine food, wonderful things in pots and jars.

"I went up to Piccadilly and smashed a window for 'em," said Crabb. "God's truth I did. I hope they're good. Is it too dark to see?"

They, too, had no gas.

"We can taste," they answered. But they tasted fog—fog thick, inspissated, yellow, a pasty fog. And they tasted horror, for there were lamentable voices in the streets, voicing death and murder.

"What's this in the bottom of the sack?" asked Bentley, when he had taken out the jars and the fine glasses of preserved foods.

"Jewels, I think," said Crabb, in a strange voice. "I thought the ladies might like 'em. I found 'em on the pavement in an open bag, and by the feel of 'em thought they might be di'monds. And I passed another shop and smashed the window and grabbed a handful. Why not? Who wants 'em? London's dying. But you've your balloon."

Again a heavy silence fell on them. Crabb went away—he wanted news, he said. So he went lightly through the gloom, the paste of darkness and night. London was like the Pit: it was silent, but in the silence were cries. Horses lay dead; others wandered loose. There were fires in the streets, made of smashed vehicles; gloomy shadows burnt themselves and cooked horseflesh by the leaping hidden flames; some danced drunkenly and fell in the fires. Many offered golden loot for food, jewels for a mouthful, and went about hunting. They said—voices said—that the river was thick with floating corpses already, and fires increased. Out of the night came the mad shrieks of women and the wildest laughter. Dying men played with death and fell on fire and crime and the awfulest disasters. Some went madly crying for their wives and daughters, their little children and their old people who were lost. In churches they prayed; a blind organist made mad music to Heaven in a church that Crabb passed. For him a madman blew.

"'Tis an awful strange world," said Crabb. "Darkness fell on me years ago. But this city's blind."

Some he spoke to were quiet and some wild. They told him rumours—the strangest. It was wonderful how rumours went in the dark. Wild crowds were marching east and west and south and north, or trying to march. But few had any guidance. 'Twas said one man had a compass and led a thousand to the river and there fell in. The parks were full of wanderers. Rich people offered

thousands from windows, and were slain for money that the slayers could not find. One man lighted a fire with bank-notes. A voice said that men were in the Bank, in all the banks, stealing the sacks of gold. The pavements were slippery with a thick fluid, and the dead lay everywhere. Folks drank at the river and fell in. They threw themselves from windows and fell on blind wanderers.

The railways were quiet; nothing moved there. Ships were deserted in the lower river. The telegraphs were quiet; men fled from them. The telephone exchanges were empty. The outside world had deserted London and cut it off. It was sunk in a pit; it lay at the bottom of a well. And these things Crabb gathered up and, going back to his friends, told them. But he brought them food and they ate in the darkness. He took them wine and they drank in the night. And they lost count of the days and the nights. But every day (or night) Bentley and Crabb sought for the place where the balloon was stored.

On the tenth day they found it. That day Lady Semple seemed near to death.

With infinite labour, though they had the help of the watchman, they took the balloon to the gas works, and then Lord Gervase came with them, leaving Julia with her sick mother.

"It's our only chance, my darling," he said, as he left her.

He kissed her in the darkness, and kissed the dying woman—for, indeed, unless they got her out of darkness she was dead—and went away with Crabb and Bentley.

With blind eyes they worked; their eyes ached and saw nothing; their hearts laboured, for the air was thick and foul, and ever fouler and thicker, since the fires of the town grew by the folly and madness of lost men. And once again for an hour it grew lighter overhead. They saw each other. Then the darkness fell again. With the help of the watchman, now their slave and the slave of Crabb—who did the work of many and was the calmest of all—they started the inflating of the great balloon. In the blackness of things they had to use infinite care lest they should wound the gigantic ship which was to save them. Yet at last the monster commenced to grow wonderfully, like a huge toadstool in the night. As it grew it straightened out the gear, and they felt its proportions and recognised this and that and felt easier.

"We shall get out," said Lord

Gervase. He yearned to live. He was young and loved a woman, and the world was big for him and fine. But he found Bentley a bigger man than himself; and Crabb was bigger than either, though he had been no more than a soldier, wounded in a foolish fight in far-off India. He gave them courage to drink—he held up their hearts. For he loved the voice of Julia Semple, and remembered her gift, and was glad to help her and her lover.

"You shall want nothing after this, Crabb," said Gervase.

"I shall want much, or little always," returned Crabb, in a strange exaltation. For he had never loved a woman till now, though he had kissed many. And her whom he loved he could never kiss.

The world outside was not their world. They were lost in London in the darkness, and were cut off. But the balloon grew and grew. And then it ceased to grow. There was no more gas.

That night it was a little lighter (for it was night, though they knew it not), and the four men laboured in the works, and set the retorts going and made more gas. Crabb was a man of strength, and now he grew more strong. He held them up and laboured, and made the watchman, who was a poor creature, do all that he should do. He made him feel brave. This is the gift of the strong; the gift by which men know them. And at last the balloon stood up and tugged upon its ropes, made fast to an old boiler in the open space.

"It will carry—how many?" asked Crabb. This was a thing none had asked. It was a great balloon, built for a special race and for purposes of science, but it could not carry them all, and they knew it.

Lord Gervase whispered to him.

"Five at the most, Crabb."

Including the watchman they were seven.

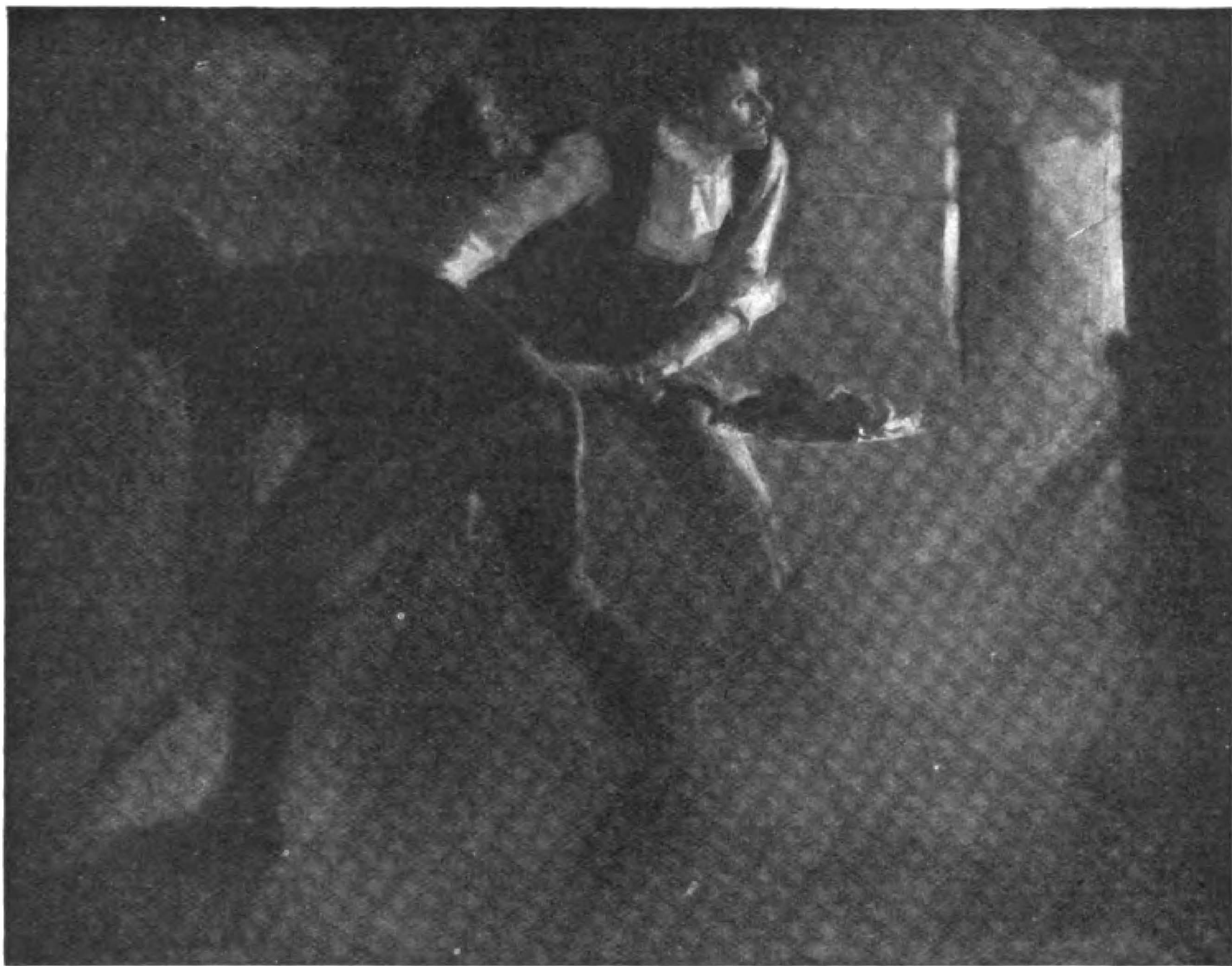
"I'll stay, my lord," said Crabb. "I can get on by myself, as you see."

"You're a brave man," said Lord Gervase.

He was more than a brave man, this poor blind fellow. But for him what would they have done? By now they would have been dead. Through him they had one chance.

But if Crabb stayed, who was the other to be? They fought it out that night in the flat among the three—Lord Gervase, Crabb, and Bentley. The women stayed apart in another room, where some feared Lady Semple was dying.

"I'll stay with those who can't go," said Crabb. They understood him. He could



"THE FOUR MEN LABOURED IN THE WORKS, AND SET THE RETORTS GOING AND MADE MORE GAS."

live. For him it was not dark. He had, as he said, eyes, and his strong and quiet mind could endure the horrors of which he told them. They knew he never told half, but their minds told them the rest.

"Let it be so, Crabb. You've saved us," said Lord Gervase. "When this is over, ask what you like and you shall have it."

"I'll stay with Crabb, sir," said Bentley. He too was brave, but his heart sank as he spoke.

"Your wife must go, then!"

"She must," said Bentley.

"What about the watchman?" asked Crabb.

"If I stay he can go," said Bentley. "He has helped; but for him we couldn't have filled the balloon. Let him go."

Bentley called to his wife. She came from the other flat and went to his voice, and leant upon him while he told her what they meant to do. She was a young girl still, no more than nineteen, and her soul was her husband's in this hour.

"I'll stay with you, Will."

They could not move her. For when they spoke urgently she laughed at them in scorn. Every reason they urged for her safety was one for her man's.

"I'd rather die with him. Don't say any more. Let the watchman go," said she. Bentley kissed her in the darkness, which was lighted for him by her faith and love, and she wept upon his heart.

"Take poor Lady Semple out of this place quickly," she said, "or she will die."

They knew it was the truth. Lord Gervase spoke.

"Then it's Lady Semple and Miss Semple, myself and the watchman. Yet the balloon might carry five. It's a pity."

"So much the better chance for you, my lord," said Bentley.

The higher they could rise the greater chance there was of getting an air-current to carry them away from London. But they knew there might be none.

"Lose no time," said Crabb. He was the strongest there.

They needed a strong man, for if the fog could be worse it was now worse indeed. The heavy smoke of many fires ran along the ground; nothing but the calm that destroyed them kept them from being destroyed.

"Let's go now," said Crabb. He carried Lady Semple to the works in his arms, and as they went she spoke to him.

"Save my daughter, Crabb. I shall never get out alive."

"We'll save you both, and all of you, my lady," said Crabb, cheerfully.

"Oh, it's dreadful," she moaned. "Am I blind, Crabb? I see nothing—nothing! I choke!"

"You'll be in sunlight, God's sunlight, in half an hour, my lady," said Crabb. "Up above this there's light—there must be; think of it—fine sunlight shining such as I've not seen these ten years, since I saw it out in India. 'Tis a sun there, my lady. I remember shining temples, gold and marble. Oh, yes, there's sunlight up above."

They came to the works and entered. The watchman greeted them nervously.

"You must take me, gentlemen; you must take me," he cried, fearfully.

"Shut up," said Crabb. "You're going to be taken. Don't act the cur."

But the watchman was half mad. There were thousands mad that hour in London, and tens of thousands would be. Yes, there was sunlight up above, said Crabb. Oh, the brave man he was! Could there be sunlight, or had the sun been put out?

They laid the sick woman in the car, and she rested her head upon Julia's knees. The watchman held to the basket-work and leapt in hurriedly. But Gervase North spoke with Crabb and Bentley.

"Stay here if you can, Crabb. You, Bentley, go back to your wife. She'll be lonely. You're both brave men—the bravest. I feel a cur to leave you. But you stay, Crabb. If there's no wind up aloft we shall come down *here*—here! You understand?"

They understood and shook hands.

"I'd like to shake hands with Miss Julia, my lord," said Crabb, in a queer, strained voice.

"Yes, yes," said Lord Gervase.

So Crabb spoke to the girl.

"Will you shake hands, miss?"

Julia cried softly.

"Oh, yes; you're a brave man."

"You said years ago, 'Poor blind man,'" said Crabb. He kissed her hand gently.

"Good-bye, miss."

Gervase was in the car.

"You can let go, Crabb," he said. "Good-bye, Bentley; good-bye, Crabb."

"Good luck and God's sunlight to you all," said the blind man.

He and Bentley let the rope run slowly, easing it off round a heavy pipe of iron that lay by the big boiler.

"I'm at the end of the rope," said Crabb.

"Stand clear, Bentley. Good-bye, sir. Good-bye, miss."

The balloon was invisible, the car unseen; the world was blank and awful.

"Let go," said Gervase.

He heard a far dim voice below him cry "Good-bye," and knew the earth had dropped away. He grasped Julia's hand. Lady Semple fainted and was quiet. The watchman laughed. But Gervase looked up—up!

Above him he saw something—a dimness, a blur, a space. It was almost black, but visible; it was brown, it was yellow, and then grey. There was a dash of wonderful blue in it, and then they shot out into a magic and intolerable day of noon! The sun shone upon them, and far below lay a wonderful cloud with sunlight on it.

And the watchman giggled strangely. Julia shrank from him and held out her hand to her lover. They saw each other once more—their sight was their own again. But Gervase was grimed with the labour he had done; she hardly knew him. Even his voice was strange.

"Thank God! It's wonderful!" she said. He bent and kissed her.

"My dearest!" he answered. And Lady Semple moaned and woke.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"In the daylight," said Gervase.

"The poor men who were left!" cried Julia. She had never seen this Crabb with her eyes; she only knew him as a big shadow, a voice that was strong and yet trembled when he spoke to her. She knew he was a hero, and knew, as women must know, that he loved her. He was in the darkness beneath them.

But how wonderful the world was! The sun was glorious, the heaven above a perfect blue. The far cloud below was white, and yet in places a strange dun colour. It heaved and moved and rose and sank. Out of it came strange pillars of yellow clouds.

"What are they?" asked Julia, pointing into the void.

"Fires," said her lover. He wondered if the balloon moved, and could not see that it did. There was no speck of cloud above them to say if the air moved.

Far away from the city, to the east and west, they saw a shining gleam of the river. The great cloud rested only on the town. They saw far off blue hills, and the far, far country adorned with happy little towns. Wrath lay only on the city; far away was peace. The lower river was full of ships. The outer world wondered at the end of things.

They rose no farther. And they did not move. Gervase grasped Julia's hand.

"You're brave, my dear?"

It was a question, and she knew it.

"What is it, Gervase?"

"We don't move, Julia. Neither up nor away from here."

"What does that mean?"

She saw how grave he looked.

"What does it mean?"

"You're brave and will be," he said.

So she understood. He knew the balloon was slowly sinking. Perhaps there was a little leak in it.

They came slowly, very slowly, from the heights. But still the watchman chuckled, for he watched no longer. The golden cloud heaved close beneath them.

"We're going down, down," said the lovers. It was as though a ship sank in a turbid sea. A little grey cloud gathered about them. The sun lost its golden clear sharpness. And the watchman saw it and watched, and ceased to laugh.

"Do we go down again, sir?" he asked.

"Aye," said Gervase. Lady Semple heard him, but saw nothing. The light of day grew dim. It was as though night fell about them. The sun went out and darkness gathered where they sank. They breathed uneasily and sank into utter blackness.

Down below Crabb waited, quietly wondering. He had taken Bentley home and had come back to the works by himself. He sat quiet as a stone—hoping, happy and unhappy. She was, at any rate, in sunshine. He thanked what gods there were for that. The time went. Perhaps a wind blew high up in the sunlight!

As he waited he heard a little sharp cry like that of a bat, and then a sudden rushing sound, and the flat sound of something striking earth not many yards from him. It



"'WHAT ARE THEY?' ASKED JULIA, POINTING INTO THE VOID."

was very horrible, for what fell was soft—humanly soft—and he knew it. He groped his way to where the thing fell, and his hands were wet when he touched it, and his heart failed him. But he felt again, and knew it was a man, or had been one, and not a woman. He felt a beard. It was the watchman. He sat by the body—by the wreck of the body—and wondered. Had Lord Gervase thrown him out? That was possible. Anything was possible. Or perhaps the man had gone mad. He knew he was unbalanced. There were few wholly sane in the great city. But if the balloon had been coming down, it must have ascended again.

"I'll wait," said Crabb. How long he waited he did not know. No clocks chimed. He had no sense of the hours; there was no light for him or for any. But at last—at last

—he heard a far dim voice. It was not in the street, for now none came there, or if they came they cried lamentably. It was far above him. The next moment he heard the faint light impact of the car; heard it rebound lightly and come down again, not twenty yards from where it had ascended.

"Is that you, my lord?" he asked.

A voice within two yards of him answered, "Yes, Crabb."

"I'm sorry, sorry, my lord."

"It can't be helped," said Gervase. "Did you hear anything fall, Crabb?"

"Aye, my lord."

"The watchman went mad and jumped out. We rose again, but sank once more. There's no wind up there, Crabb. And Lady Semple's dead, Crabb."

Crabb heard Julia Semple weeping quietly, but he found a sheet of iron and dragged it over the hollow in which the watchman's body lay before he went to the car.

"Make the ropes fast, Crabb," said Lord Gervase.

Then they lifted Julia and her dead mother from the car. They laid the body apart.

"God help us," said Gervase. "Where's Bentley?"

"With his wife," said Crabb.

"We must keep the balloon full and try again," said Gervase. Crabb brought Bentley, and his wife came with him. The men fired the retorts and made more gas with infinite labour. Once more the balloon, which had become limp and flaccid, stood up boldly. There were five of them left. The car could carry five, but even with four they had done nothing. Before they did anything else they buried Lady Semple, and heaped earth upon the battered watchman. They thought then that it was day.

"We must go," said Gervase.

Crabb stood apart once more, but Julia Semple spoke.

"Let Crabb come."

"Oh, no, miss."

"You must come, or I will not go."

She took the blind man by the arm.

"Yes; come, Crabb. We owe everything to you," said Gervase.

"I'll come, then," said Crabb. His voice was strained. They remembered it afterwards. Some folks have gifts in their voices: they mark the power of their nature, the strength of them.

Before they went up they lightened the car of every superfluous thing and cut away the guide-rope. They took little food with them, and even cast away their boots.

"It's our last chance, Bentley," said Lord Gervase. "We can't make more gas, Crabb says."

They got into the car again.

"I'll cut the rope, my lord," said Crabb.

"Aye," said Gervase.

"Are we ready?"

"Yes."

Crabb cut the rope, and they rose. But overhead the darkness was intense.

"We came through black and dun and yellow and grey before," said Gervase. "And then the light—the light!"

Now they breathed again and saw a faint greyness, and then stars sparkling suddenly in deep dark blue, and far away to the west a thin, thin moon. It was night, the dark hour before the dawn. Towns shone with lights far below them, sparkling on the horizon.

"It's night still," they said.

Even as they spoke they saw in the east a little grey flame of dawn, a faint whiteness, a growth as of a lily opened.

"There's the day!"

"I wish I could see it," said Crabb.

"Poor blind man," said Julia, and she pressed his big hand.

"That's better than gold, missy. Oh, if I could see your face!" said Crabb.

"I've never seen yours," she said, softly.

But the dawn rose like a magic palm in a desert. There was gold in the flame of it, and a heart of gold, and the upper limb of the sun grew out of the east, and she saw Crabb at last. Grimed though he was by labour she saw a strangely carved face, which was very calm and strong. The lids upon his sightless eyes were full and hid them. His mouth was like that of some strange Egyptian. It had power in it, and resolution.

"I see you now, Crabb," she said to him.

The others looked at the dawn. Mrs. Bentley wept softly.

"If I could only see you! May I touch your face, missy?"

She raised his hand to it and he felt its sweet, soft contours.

"You must be very beautiful," he murmured. Then he said to Lord Gervase:—

"Do we still rise, my lord?"

"I think so, Crabb," Gervase answered.

"Look up, my lord. Is there a cloud above us?"

High in the zenith there was a faint wisp of vapour in a cool current.

"That cloud above moves, my lord," said Bentley.

"We don't move," said Gervase, dully.
 "'Tis a thousand feet above us."

"Can we cast out anything?" said Crabb, in an eager voice.

They cast out some clothes—aye, and some food and water.

"It's not enough," said Gervase. "But there's a strong current high above us."

"Oh, there's enough," said Crabb.

But they only stared at him.

"You're blind, Crabb."

"I can see things," said Crabb. "I see if we go down we shall not rise again. I see that—and more."

He bent his head to Julia.

"You see me, missy? Will you remember me?"

"Oh, yes, Crabb."

He stood up and held the edge of the car.

"Sit down, man!" cried Bentley.

But he stared at the warmth of the sun, which he felt upon his pallid cheek.

"Oh, the sun's good, though I cannot see it! And I've a sense of light in me! Good-bye, missy."

He said that to Julia, and ere they knew what he did he threw himself from the car.

They saw his body fall, and Julia shrieked vainly. He fell into the cloud, but the balloon rose and entered the great wind of the upper air. And the heavy cloud below them slipped to the east.



"HE FELL INTO THE CLOUD, BUT THE BALLOON ROSE AND ENTERED THE GREAT WIND OF THE UPPER AIR."