

McCLURE'S MAGAZINE

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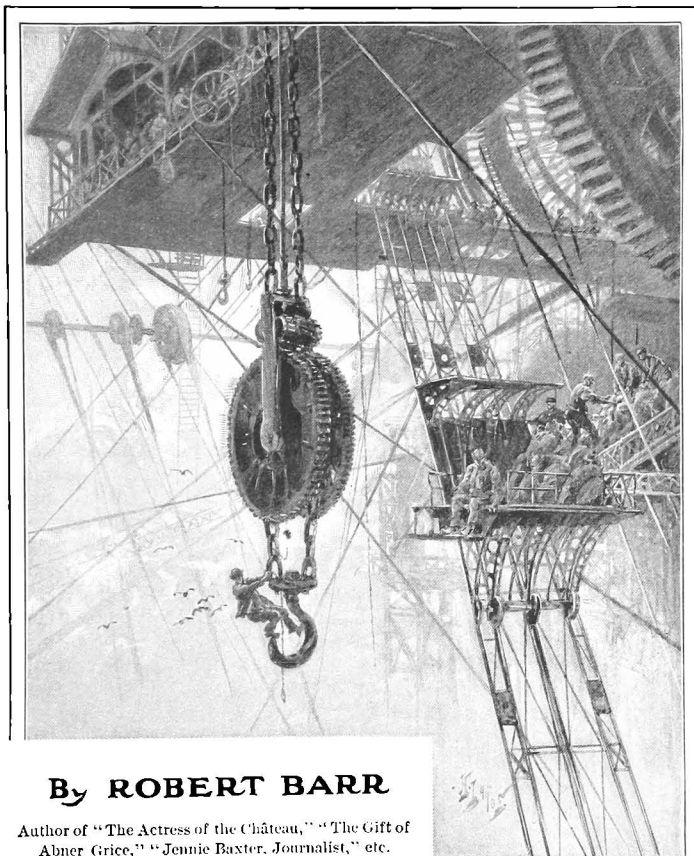
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WITHIN AN ACE OF THE END OF THE WORLD

being some account of the fearful disaster
which overtook the inhabitants of this earth
through scientific miscalculation in the year 1904



By **ROBERT BARR**

Author of "The Actress of the Château," "The Gift of
Abner Grice," "Jennie Baxter, Journalist," etc.

THE SCIENTIST'S SENSATION



HE beginning of the end was probably the address delivered by Sir William Crookes to the British Association at Bristol, on September 7, 1898, although Herbert Bon- sel, the young American experimenter, al-

leged afterward that his investigations were well on the way to their final success at the time Sir William spoke.

All records being lost in the series of terrible conflagrations which took place in 1904, it is now impossible to give any accurate statement regarding Sir William Crookes's remarkable paper; but it is known that his assertions attracted much attention

at the time, and were the cause of editorial comment in almost every newspaper and scientific journal in the world.

The sixteen survivors out of the many millions who were alive at the beginning of 1904 were so much occupied in the preservation of their own lives, a task of almost insurmountable difficulty, that they have handed down to us, their descendants, an account of the six years beginning with 1898 which is, to say the least, extremely unsatisfactory to an exact writer.

Man, in that year, seems to have been a bread-eating animal, consuming, per head, something like six bushels of wheat per annum. Sir William appears to have pointed out to his associates that the limit of the earth's production of wheat had been reached, and he predicted universal starvation, did not science step in to the aid of a famine-stricken world.

Science, however, was prepared. What was needed to increase the wheat production of the world to something like double its then amount was nitrate of soda; but nitrate of soda did not exist in the quantity required—viz., some 12,000,000 tons annually. However, a supposedly unlimited supply of nitrogen existed in the atmosphere surrounding the earth, and from this storehouse science proposed to draw, so that the multi-tude might be fed.

Nitrogen in its free state in the air was useless as applied to wheat-growing, but it could be brought into solid masses for practical purposes by means of electricity generated by the waterfalls which are so abundant in many mountainous lands. The cost of nitrates made from the air by water-power approached \$25 a ton, as compared with \$130 a ton when steam was used. Visionary people had often been accused of occupying castles in the air, but now it was calmly proposed to feed future populations from granaries in the air. Naturally, as has been said, the project excited much comment, although it can hardly be asserted that it was taken seriously.

It is impossible at this time, because of the absence of exact data, to pass judgment on the conflicting claims of Sir William Crookes and Mr. Herbert Bonsel; but it is perhaps not too much to say that the actual beginning of disaster was the dinner given by the Marquis of Surrey to a number of wealthy men belonging to the city of London, at which Mr. Bonsel was the guest of the evening.

THE DINNER AT THE HOTEL CECIL



EARLY in April, 1900, a young man named Herbert Bonsel sailed for England from New York. He is said to have been a native of Coldwater, Michigan, and to have served some sort of apprenticeship in the workshops of Edison at Orange, New Jersey. It seems that he did not prosper there to his satisfaction, and after trying to interest New York people in his experiments, he returned to Coldwater, where he worked for some time in a carriage-building establishment. Bonsel's expertness with all kinds of machinery drew forth the commendation of his chief, and begot a friendship between them which ultimately led to Bonsel's divulging to the other at least part of his secret. The obstacle in the way of success was chiefly scarcity of money, for the experiments were costly in their nature. Bonsel's chief, whose name is not known, seems to have got together a small syndicate, which advanced a certain amount of capital, thus enabling the young man to try his fortune once more in New York. Again his efforts to enlist capital in New York were fruitless; therefore, in April he sailed for England.

Bonsel's evil star being in the ascendant, he made the acquaintance of the wealthy Marquis of Surrey, who became much interested in the young man and his experiments. The Marquis bought out the Coldwater syndicate, returning the members tenfold the money they had invested, and took Bonsel to his estate in the country, where, with ample means now at his disposal, the youthful scientist pushed his investigations to success with marvelous rapidity. Nothing is known of him until December of that year, when the Marquis of Surrey gave a dinner in his honor at the Hotel Cecil, to which were invited twenty of the richest men in England. This festival became known as "The Millionaires' Dinner"; and although there was some curiosity excited regarding its purport, and several paragraphs appeared in the papers alluding to it, no surmise concerning it came anywhere near the truth. The Marquis of Surrey presided, with Bonsel at his right and the Lord Mayor of London at his left. Even the magnates who sat at that table, accustomed as they were to the noted dinners in the City, agreed unanimously that they had never partaken of a better meal, when, to their amazement, the chairman asked them, at the close, how they had relished it.

A STRIKING AFTER-DINNER SPEECH



HE Marquis of Surrey, before introducing the guest of the evening, said that, as they were all doubtless aware, this was not a social, but a commercial dinner. It was the intention, before the company separated, to

invite subscriptions to a corporation which would have a larger capitalization than any limited liability concern that had ever before been floated. The young American at his right would explain the discoveries he had made and the inventions he had patented, which this newly formed corporation would exploit. Thus introduced, Herbert Bonsel rose to his feet and said:

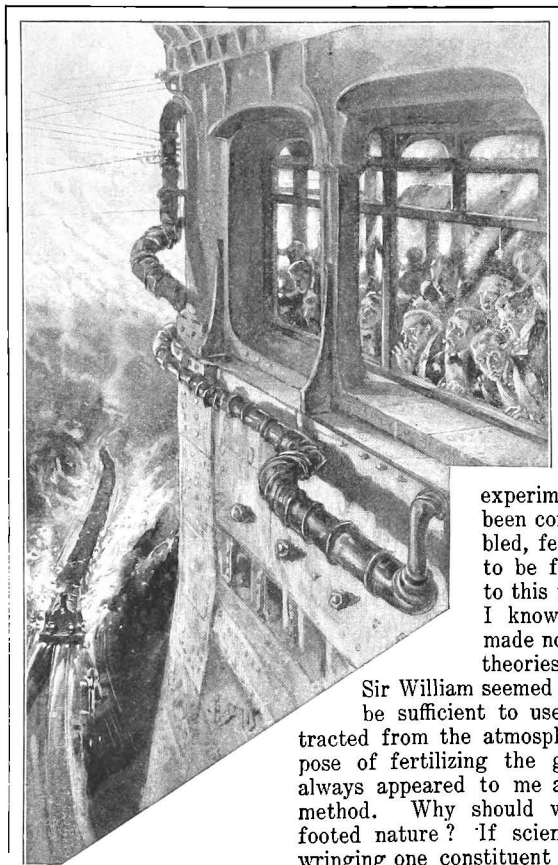
"Gentlemen, I was pleased to hear you admit that you liked the dinner which was spread before us to-night. I confess that I never tasted a better meal, but most of my life I have been poor, and therefore I am not so capable of passing an opinion on a banquet as any other here, having always been accustomed to plain fare. I have, therefore, to announce to you that all the viands you have tasted and all the liquors you have consumed were prepared by me in my laboratory. You have been dining sim-

ply on various forms of nitrogen, or on articles of which nitrogen is a constituent. The free nitrogen of the air has been changed to fixed nitrogen by means of electricity, and the other components of the food placed on the board have been extracted from various soils by the same means. The champagne and the burgundy are the product of the laboratory, and not of the wine-press, the

soil used in their composition having been exported from the vine-bearing regions of France. More than a year ago, Sir William Crookes announced what the nitrogen free in the air might do for the people of this world. At the time I read his remarks I was engaged in the

experiments that have now been completed. I trembled, fearing I was about to be forestalled; but up to this moment, so far as I know, there has been made no effort to put his theories into practical use.

Sir William seemed to think it would be sufficient to use the nitrates extracted from the atmosphere for the purpose of fertilizing the ground. But this always appeared to me a most roundabout method. Why should we wait on slow-footed nature? If science is capable of wringing one constituent of our food from the air, why should it shrink from extracting the others from earth or water? In other words, why leave a job half finished? I knew of no reason; and, luckily, I succeeded in convincing our noble host that all food products may be speedily compounded in the laboratory, without waiting the progress of the tardy seasons. It is proposed, therefore, that a company be formed with a capital so large that it can control practically all the water-power available in the world. We will extract from earth, air, and water whatever we need, compound the prod-



"THE FIRST INTIMATION . . . OF IMPENDING DOOM WAS FROM THE PASSAGE OF A GREAT WESTERN TRAIN . . . BLAZING FIERCELY."

ucts in our factories, and thus feed the whole world. The moment our plant is at work, the occupations of agriculturist, horticulturist, and stock-breeder are gone. There is little need to dwell on the profit that must accrue to such a company as the one now projected. All commercial enterprises that have hitherto existed, or even any combination of them, cannot be compared in wealth-producing power to the scheme we have now in hand. There is no man so poor but he must be our customer if he is to live, and none so rich that he can do without us."

THE GREAT FOOD CORPORATION



(Limited)

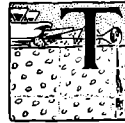


AFTER numerous questions and answers, the dinner party broke up, pledged to secrecy, and next day a special train took the twenty down to the Marquis of Surrey's country place, where they saw in operation the apparatus that transformed simple elements into palatable food. At the mansion of the Marquis was formed The Great Food Corporation (Limited), which was to have such an amazing effect upon the peoples of this earth. Although the company proved one of the most lucrative investments ever undertaken in England, still it did not succeed in maintaining the monopoly it had at first attempted. In many countries the patents did not hold, some governments refusing to sanction a monopoly on which life itself depended, others deciding that, although there were certain ingenious novelties in Bonsel's processes, still the general principles had been well known for years, and so the final patents were refused. Nevertheless, these decisions did not interfere as much as might have been expected with the prosperity of The Great Food Producing Corporation (Limited). It had been first in the field, and its tremendous capitalization enabled it to crush opposition somewhat ruthlessly, aided by the advantage of having secured most of the available water-power of the world. For a time there was reckless speculation in food-manufacturing companies, and much money was lost in consequence. Agriculture was indeed killed, as Bonsel had predicted, but the farmers of Western America, in spite of the decline of soil-tilling, continued to furnish much of the world's food. They erected wind-mills, with which electricity was gener-

ated, and, drawing on the soil and the air, they manufactured nourishment almost as cheaply as the great water-power corporation itself. This went on in every part of the world where the Bonsel patents were held invalid. In a year or two every one became accustomed to the chemically compounded food, though a few old fogies kept writing to the newspapers proclaiming that the former manner of cultivation was better, and that they would never forsake the ancient wheaten loaf for its modern equivalent; yet nobody paid any attention to these conservatives, looking on them as harmless enthusiasts; and presently even they could not get the wheaten loaf of by-gone days, as grain was no longer grown except as a curiosity in some botanist's garden.

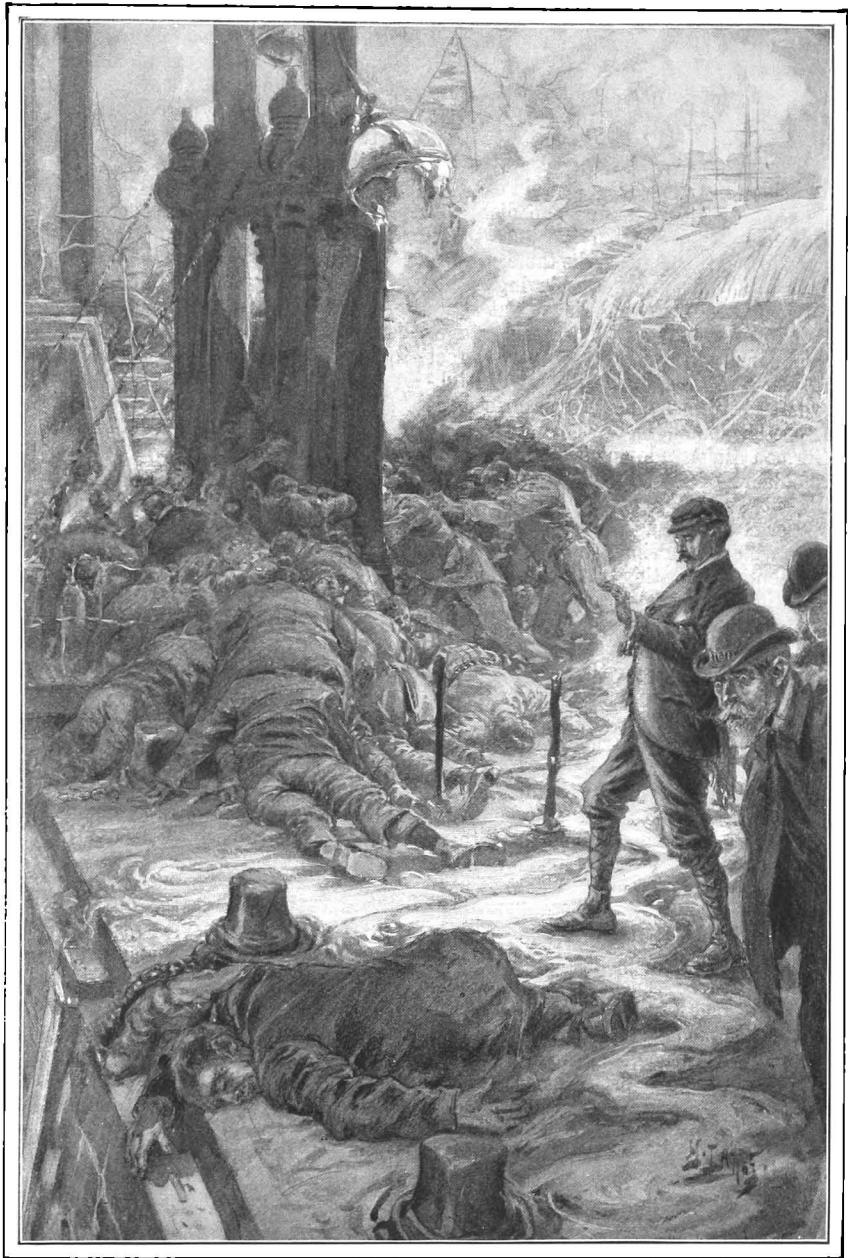
REMARKABLE SCENE IN THE

GUILDHALL



THE first three years of the twentieth century were notable for the great increase of business confidence all over the world. A reign of universal prosperity seemed to have set in. Political questions appeared easier of solution. The anxieties that hitherto had oppressed the public mind, such as the ever-present poverty problem, provision for the old age of laborers, and so forth, lifted like a rising cloud, and disappeared. There were still the usual number of poor people; but, somehow, lack of wealth had lost its terror. It was true that the death-rate increased enormously; but nobody seemed to mind that. The episode at the Guildhall dinner in 1903 should have been sufficient to awaken the people, had an awakening been possible in the circumstances; but that amazing lesson, like others equally ominous, passed unheeded. When the Prime Minister who had succeeded Lord Salisbury was called upon to speak, he said:

"My Lord Mayor, Your Royal Highnesses, Your Excellencies, Your Graces, My Lords and Gentlemen: It has been the custom of Prime Ministers from time immemorial to give at this annual banquet some indication of the trend of mind of the Government. I propose, with your kind permission, to deviate in slight measure from that ancient custom (*cheers*). I think that hitherto we have all taken the functions of government rather more seriously than their merits demanded,



"THE LANDING-STAGE WAS PACKED WITH LIFELESS HUMAN BEINGS, WHOLE MASSES STILL STANDING UP, SO TIGHTLY WERE THEY WEDGED."

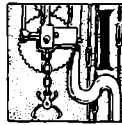
and a festive occasion like this should not be marred by the introduction of debatable subjects (*renewed cheering*). If, therefore, the band will be good enough to strike up that excellent tune, 'There will be a hot time in the old town to-night,' I shall have the pleasure of exhibiting to you a quick-step I have invented to the rhythm of that lively composition (*enthusiastic acclaim*)."

The Prime Minister, with the aid of some of the waiters, cleared away the dishes in front of him, stepped from the floor to his chair, and from the chair to the table, where, accompanied by the energetic playing of the band, he indulged in a break-down that would have done credit to any music-hall stage. All the applauding diners rose to their feet in the wildest excitement. His Royal Highness the Crown Prince of Alluria placed his hands on the shoulders of the Lord Mayor, the German Ambassador placed his hands on the shoulders of the Crown Prince, and so on down the table, until the distinguished guests formed a connected ring around the board on which the Prime Minister was dancing. Then all, imitating the quick-step, and keeping time with the music, began circling round the table, one after the other, shouting and hurraing at the top of their voices. There were loud calls for the American Ambassador, a celebrated man, universally popular; and the Prime Minister, reaching out a hand, helped him up on the table. Amidst vociferous cheering, he said that he took the selection of the tune as a special compliment to his countrymen, the American troops having recently entered a conquered city to its melodious strains. His Excellency hoped that this hilarious evening would cement still further the union of the English-speaking races, which in fact it really did, though not in the manner the honorable gentleman anticipated at the time of speaking. The company, headed by the band and the Prime Minister, then made their way to the street, marched up Cheapside, past St. Paul's, and along Fleet Street and the Strand, until they came to Westminster. Every one along the route joined the processional dance, and upward of 50,000 persons were assembled in the square next to the Abbey and in the adjoining streets. The mob was exuberant in its approval of the proceedings. The Prime Minister, waving his hands toward the Houses of Parliament, cried, "Three cheers for the good old House of Commons!" These being given with a tiger appended, a workingman roared, "Three cheers for 'is Lordship and the old duffers what sits with 'im in the

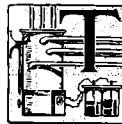
'Ouse of Lords.'" This was also cheered—until the echoes reached the Mansion House.

The "Times" next morning, in a jocular leading article, congratulated the people of England on the fact that at last politics were viewed in the correct light. There had been, as the Prime Minister truly said, too much solidity in the discussion of public affairs; but, linked with song and dance, it was now possible for the ordinary man in the street to take some interest in them, etc., etc. Foreign comment, as cabled from various countries, was entirely sympathetic to the view taken of the occurrence by all the English newspapers, which was that we had entered a new era of jollity and good will.

A WARNING FROM OXFORD



HAVE now to speak of my great-grandfather, John Rule, who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, was a science student at Balliol College, Oxford, aged twenty-four. It is from the notes written by him and the newspaper clippings which he preserved that I am enabled to compile this imperfect account of the disaster of 1904 and the events leading to it. I append, without alteration or comment, his letter to the "Times," which appeared the day after that paper's flippant references to the conduct of the Prime Minister and his colleagues:



O THE EDITOR OF THE 'TIMES':
 "Sir,—The levity of the Prime Minister's recent conduct; the levity of your own leading article thereon; the levity of foreign reference to the deplorable episode, indicate but too clearly the crisis which mankind is called upon to face, and to face, alas, under conditions which make the averting of the greatest calamity well-nigh impossible. To put it plainly, every man, woman, and child on this earth, with the exception of eight persons in the United States and eight in England, are drunk—not with wine, but with oxygen. The numerous factories all over the world which are working night and day, making fixed nitrates from the air, are rapidly depleting the atmosphere of its nitrogen. When this disastrous manufacture was be-

gun, 100 parts of air, roughly speaking, contained 76.9 parts of nitrogen and 23.1 parts of oxygen. At the beginning of this year, the atmosphere round Oxford was composed of nitrogen 53.218, oxygen 46.782. And here we have the explanation of the largely increased death-rate. Man is simply burning up. To-day the normal proportions of the two gases in the air is nearly reversed, standing nitrogen, 27.319, oxygen 72.681, a state of things simply appalling: due in a great measure to the insane folly of Russia, Germany, and France competing with each other in raising mountain ranges of food products as a reserve in case of war, just as the same fear of a conflict brought their armies to such enormous proportions a few years ago. The nitrogen factories must be destroyed instantly, if the people of this earth are to remain alive. If this is done, the atmosphere will gradually become nitrogenized once more. I invite the editor of the 'Times' to come to Oxford and live for a few days with us in our iron building, erected on Port Meadow, where a machine supplies us with nitrogen and keeps the atmosphere within the hut similar to that which once surrounded the earth. If he will direct the policy of the 'Times' from this spot, he may bring an insane people to their senses. Oxford yesterday bestowed a degree of D.C.L. on a man who walked the whole length of the High on his hands; so it will be seen that it is time something was done.

"I am, sir, yours, etc.,

"JOHN RULE.

"BALLIOL COLLEGE, OXFORD."

The "Times" in an editorial note said that the world had always been well provided with alarmists, and that their correspondent, Mr. Rule, was a good example of the class. That newspaper, it added, had been for some time edited in Printing House Square, and it would continue to be conducted in that quarter of London, despite the attractions of the sheet-iron house near Oxford.

THE TWO NITROGEN COLONIES



HE coterie in the iron house consisted of the Rev. Mr. Hepburn, who was a clergyman and tutor; two divinity students, two science students, and three other undergraduates, all of whom had withdrawn from their colleges, awaiting with anxiety the catas-

trophe they were powerless to avert. Some years before, when the proposal to admit women to the Oxford colleges was defeated, the Rev. Mr. Hepburn and John Rule visited the United States to study the working of co-education in that country. There Mr. Rule became acquainted with Miss Sadie Armour of Vassar College on the Hudson, and the acquaintance speedily ripened into friendship, with a promise of the closer relationship that was yet to come. John and Sadie kept up a regular correspondence after his return to Oxford, and naturally he wrote to her regarding his fears for the future of mankind, should the diminution of the nitrogen in the air continue. He told her of the precautions he and his seven comrades had taken, and implored her to inaugurate a similar colony near Vassar. For a long time the English Nitrogenists, as they were called, hoped to be able to awaken the world to the danger that threatened; and by the time they recognized that their efforts were futile, it was too late to attempt the journey to America which had long been in John Rule's mind.

Parties of students were in the habit of coming to the iron house and jeering at the inmates. Apprehending violence one day, the Rev. Mr. Hepburn went outside to expostulate with them. He began seriously, then paused, a comical smile lighting up his usually sedate face, and finally broke out into roars of laughter, inviting those he had left to come out and enjoy themselves. A moment later he began to turn somersaults round the iron house, all the students outside hilariously following his example, and screaming that he was a jolly good fellow. John Rule and one of the most stalwart of the divinity students rushed outside, captured the clergyman, and dragged him into the house by main force, the whirling students being too much occupied with their evolutions to notice the abduction. One of the students proposed that the party should return to Carfax by hand-springs, and thus they all set off, progressing like jumping-jacks across the meadow, the last human beings other than themselves that those within the iron house were to see for many a day. Rule and his companions had followed the example set by continental countries, and had, while there was yet time, accumulated a small mountain of food products inside and outside of their dwelling. The last letter Rule received from America informed him that the girls of Vassar had done likewise.

THE GREAT CATASTROPHE



HE first intimation that the Nitrogenists had of impending doom was from the passage of a Great Western train running northward from Oxford.

As they watched it, the engine suddenly burst into a brilliant flame, which was followed shortly by an explosion, and a moment later the wrecked train lay along the line blazing fiercely. As evening drew on, they saw that Oxford was on fire, even the stonework of the colleges seeming to burn as if it had been made of wax. Communication with the outside world ceased, and an ominous silence held the earth. They did not know then that London, New York, Paris, and many other cities had been consumed by fire; but they surmised as much. Curiously enough, the carbon dioxide evolved by these numerous and widespread conflagrations made the outside air more breathable, notwithstanding the poisonous nature of this mitigant of oxygenic energy. For days they watched for any sign of human life outside their own dwelling, but no one approached. As a matter of fact, all the inhabitants of the world were dead except themselves and the little colony in America, although it was long after that those left alive became aware of the full extent of the calamity that had befallen their fellows. Day by day they tested the outside air, and were overjoyed to note that it was gradually resuming its former quality. This process, however, was so slow that the young men became impatient, and endeavored to make their house movable, so that they might journey with it, like a snail, to Liverpool, for the one desire of each was to reach America and learn the fate of the Vassar girls. The moving of the house proved impracticable, and thus they were compelled to remain where they were until it became safe to venture into the outside air, which they did some time before it had reached its normal condition.

It seems to have been fortunate that they did so, for the difficulties they had to face might have proved insurmountable had they not been exhilarated by the excess of oxygen in the atmosphere. The diary which John Rule wrote showed that within the iron house his state of depression was extreme when he remembered that all communication between countries was cut off, and that the girl to whom he was betrothed was separated from him by 3,000 miles of ocean, whitened by no sail. After the eight set out, the whole

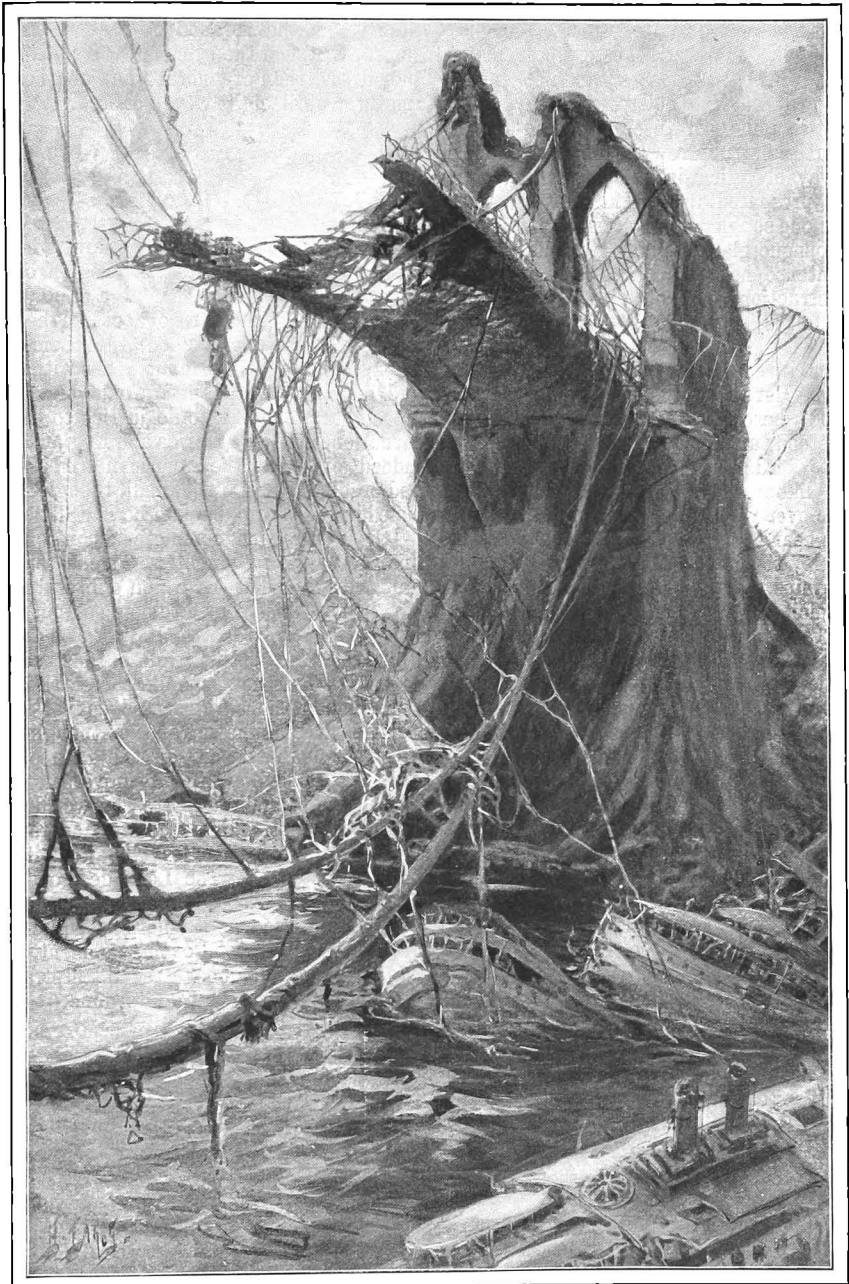
tone of his notes changed, an optimism scarcely justified by the circumstances taking the place of his former dismay. It is not my purpose here to dwell on the appalling nature of the foot journey to Liverpool over a corpse-strewn land. They found, as they feared, that Liverpool also had been destroyed by fire, only a fringe of the river front escaping the general conflagration. So enthusiastic were the young men, according to my great-grandfather's notes, that on the journey to the seaport they had resolved to walk to America by way of Behring Straits, crossing the English Channel in a row-boat, should they find that the shipping at Liverpool was destroyed. This seems to indicate a state of oxygen intoxication hardly less intense than that which had caused the Prime Minister to dance on the table.

A VOYAGE TO RUINED NEW YORK



HEY found the immense steamship "Teutonic" moored at the landing-stage, not apparently having had time to go to her dock when the universal catastrophe culminated.

It is probable that the city was on fire when the steamer came in, and perhaps an attempt was made to board her, the ignorant people thinking to escape the fate that they felt overtaking them by putting out to sea. The landing-stage was packed with lifeless human beings, whole masses still standing up, so tightly were they wedged. Some stood stiffly with upright arms above their heads, and death seemed to have come to many in a form like suffocation. The eight at first resolved to take the "Teutonic" across the Atlantic, but her coal bunkers proved nearly empty, and they had no way of filling them. Not one of them knew anything of navigation, and Rule alone was acquainted with the rudiments of steam-engineering. They selected a small steam yacht, and loaded her with the coal that was left in the "Teutonic's" bunkers. Thus they started for the West, the Rev. Mr. Hepburn acting as captain and John Rule as engineer. It was fourteen days before they sighted the coast of Maine, having kept much too far north. They went ashore at the ruins of Portland; but embarked again, resolved to trust rather to their yacht than undertake a long land journey through an unknown and desolated country. They skirted the silent shores of America until they came to New York, and



“BROOKLYN BRIDGE WAS NOT ENTIRELY CONSUMED, AND THE COLLAPSED REMAINS HUNG FROM TWO PILLARS OF FUSED STONE.”

steamed down the bay. My great-grandfather describes the scene as somber in the extreme. The Statue of Liberty seemed to be all of the handiwork of man that remained intact. Brooklyn Bridge was not entirely consumed, and the collapsed remains hung from two pillars of fused stone, the ragged ends of the structure which once formed the roadway dragging in the water. The city itself presented a remarkable appearance. It was one conglomerate mass of gray-toned, semi-opaque glass, giving some indication of the intense heat that had been evolved in its destruction. The outlines of its principal thoroughfares were still faintly indicated, although the melting buildings had flowed into the streets like lava, partly obliterating them. Here and there a dome of glass showed where an abnormally high structure once stood, and thus the contour of the city bore a weird resemblance to its former self—the likeness that the grim outlines of a corpse over which a sheet has been thrown might bear to a living man. All along the shore lay the gaunt skeletons of half-fused steamships. The young men passed this dismal calcined graveyard in deep silence, keeping straight up the broad Hudson. No sign of life greeted them until they neared Poughkeepsie, when they saw, flying above a house situated on the top of a hill, that brilliant fluttering flag, the Stars and Stripes. Somehow its very motion in the wind gave promise that the vital spark had not been altogether extinguished in America. The great sadness which had oppressed the voyagers was lifted, and they burst forth into cheer after cheer. One of the young men rushed into the chart-room, and brought out the Union Jack, which was quickly hauled up to the mast-head, and the reverend captain pulled the cord that, for the first time during the voyage, let loose the roar of the

steam whistle, rousing the echoes of the hills on either side of the noble stream. Instantly, on the veranda of the flag-covered house, was seen the glimmer of a white summer dress, then of another and another and another, until eight were counted.

AND FINALLY



THE events that followed belong rather to the region of romance than to a staid, sober narrative of fact like the present; indeed, the theme has been a favorite one with poets and novelists, whose pens would have been more able than mine to do justice to this international idyl. • America and England were indeed joined, as the American Ambassador had predicted at the Guildhall, though at the time his words were spoken he had little idea of the nature and complete accord of that union. While it cannot be denied that the unprecedented disaster which obliterated human life in 1904 seemed to be a calamity, yet it is possible to trace the design of a beneficent providence in this wholesale destruction. The race which now inhabits the earth is one that includes no savages and no war lords. Armies are unknown and unthought of. There is no battleship on the face of the waters. It is doubtful if universal peace could have been brought to the world short of the annihilation of the jealous, cantankerous, quarrelsome peoples who inhabited it previous to 1904. The Lord destroyed humanity once by flood, and again by fire; but whether the race, as it enlarges, will deteriorate after its second extinguishment, as it appears to have done after its first, must remain for the future to determine.

