The Four Day's Night

The Doom of London

by Fred Merrick White, 1859-1935

Illustrations by Warwick Goble

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I

THE weather forecast for London and the Channel was "light airs, fine generally, milder." Further down the fascinating column Hackness read that "the conditions over Europe generally favoured a continuance of the large anti-cyclonic area, the barometer steadily rising over Western Europe, sea smooth, readings

being unusually high for this time of the year." Martin Hackness, B.Sc., London, thoughtfully read all this and more. The study of the meteorological reports was part of his religion almost. In the laboratory at the back of his sitting-room were all kinds of weird-looking instruments for measuring sunshine and wind pressure, the weight of atmosphere and the like. Hackness trusted before long to be able to foretell a London fog with absolute accuracy, which, when you come to think of it, would be an exceedingly useful matter. In his queer way Hackness described himself as a fog specialist. He hoped some day to prove himself a fog-disperser, which is another word for a great public benefactor.

The chance he was waiting for seemed to have come at last. November had set in, mild and dull and heavy. Already there had been one or two of the dense fogs under which London periodically groans and does nothing to avert. Hackness was clear-sighted enough to see a danger here that might some day prove a hideous national disaster. So far as he could ascertain from his observations and readings, London was in for another dense fog within the next four-and-twenty hours.

Unless he was greatly mistaken, the next fog was going to be a particularly thick one. He could see the yellow mists gathering in Gower Street, as he sat at his breakfast.

The door flew open and a man rushed in without even an apology. He was a little man, with sharp, clean-shaven features, an interrogative nose and assertive pince-nez. He was not unlike Hackness, minus his calm ruminative manner. He fluttered a paper in his hand like a banner.

"It's come, Hackness," he cried. "It was bound to come sometime. It's all here in a late edition of the Telegraph. We must go and see it."

He flung himself into an armchair.

"Do you remember," he said, "the day in the winter of 1898, the day that petroleum ship exploded? You and I were playing golf together on the Westgate links."

Hackness nodded eagerly.

"I shall never forget it, Eldred," he said, "though I have forgotten the name of the ship. She was a big iron boat, and she caught fire about daybreak. Of her captain and her crew not one fragment was ever found."

"It was perfectly still and the effect of that immense volume of dense black smoke was marvellous. Do you recollect the scene at sunset? It was like looking at half-a-dozen Alpine ranges piled one on the top of the other. The spectacle was not only grand, it was appalling, awful. Do you happen to recollect what you said at the time?"

There was something in Eldred's manner that roused Hackness.

"Perfectly well," he cried. "I pictured that awful canopy of sooty, fatty matter suddenly shut down over a great city by a fog. A fog would have beaten it down and spread it. We tried to imagine what might happen if that ship had been in the Thames, say at Greenwich."

"Didn't you prophesy a big fog for to-day?"

"Certainly I did. And a recent examination of my instruments merely confirms my opinion. Why do you ask?"

"Because early this morning a fire broke out in the great petroleum storage tanks, down the river. Millions of gallons of oil are bound to burn themselves out—

nothing short of a miracle can quench the fire, which will probably rage all through to-day and to-morrow. The fire-brigades are absolutely powerless—in the first place the heat is too awful to allow them to approach; in the second, water would only make things worse. It's one of the biggest blazes ever known. Pray Heaven, your fog doesn't settle down on the top of the smoke."

Hackness turned away from his unfinished breakfast and struggled into an overcoat. There was a peril here that London little dreamt of. Out in the yellow streets newsboys were yelling of the conflagration down the Thames. People were talking of the disaster in a calm frame of mind between the discussion of closer personal matters.

"There's always the chance of a breeze springing up," Hackness muttered. "If it does, well and good, if not—but come along. We'll train it from Charing Cross."

A little way down the river the mist curtain lifted. A round magnified sun looked down upon a dun earth. Towards the South-east a great black column rose high in the sky. The column appeared to be absolutely motionless; it broadened from an inky base like a grotesque mushroom.

"Fancy trying to breathe that," Eldred muttered. "Just think of the poison there. I wonder what that dense mass would weigh in tons. And it's been going on for five hours now. There's enough there to suffocate all London."

Hackness made no reply. On the whole he was wishing himself well out of it. That pillar of smoke would rise for many more hours yet. At the same time here was his great opportunity. There were certain experiments that he desired to make and for which all things were ready.

They reached the scene of the catastrophe. Within a radius of five hundred yards the heat was intense. Nobody seemed to know the cause of the disaster beyond the general opinion that the oil gases had ignited.

And nothing could be done. No engine could approach near enough to do any good. Those mighty tanks and barrels filled with petroleum would have to burn themselves out.

The sheets of flame roared and sobbed. Above the flames rose the column of thick black smoke, with just the suspicion of a slight stagger to the westward. The inky vapour spread overhead like a pall. If Hackness's fog came now it meant a terrible disaster for London.

Further out in the country, where the sun was actually shining, people watched that great cloud with fearsome admiration. From a few miles beyond the radius it looked as if all the ranges of the world had been piled atop of London. The fog was gradually spreading along the South of the Thames, and away as far as Barnet to the North.

There was something in the stillness and the gloom that London did not associate with ordinary fogs.

Hackness turned away at length, conscious of his sketchy breakfast and the fact that he had been watching this thrilling spectacle for two hours.

"Have you thought of a way out?" Eldred asked. "What are you going to do?"

"Lunch," Hackness said curtly. "After that I propose to see to my arrangements in Regent's Park. I've got Grimfern's aeroplane there, and a pretty theory about high explosives. The difficulty is to get the authorities to consent to the experiments. The police have absolutely forbidden experiments with high

explosives, fired in the air above London. But perhaps I shall frighten them into it this time. Nothing would please me better than to see a breeze spring up, and yet on the other hand—"

"Then you are free to-night?" Eldred asked.

"No, I'm not. Oh, there will be plenty of time. I'm going with Sir Edgar Grimfern, and his daughter to see Irving, that is if it is possible for anyone to see Irving to-night. I've got the chance of a lifetime at hand, but I wish that it was well over, Eldred my boy. If you come round about midnight—"

"I'll be sure to," Eldred said eagerly. "I'm going to be in this thing. And I want to know all about that explosive idea."

II

MARTIN HACKNESS dressed with less than his usual care that evening. He even forgot that Miss Cynthia Grimfern had a strong prejudice in favour of black evening ties, and, usually, he paid a great deal of deference to her opinions. But he was thinking of other matters now. There was no sign of anything abnormal as Hackness drove along in the direction of Clarence Terrace. The night was more than typically yellow for the time of year, but there was no kind of trouble with the traffic, though down the river the fairway lay under a dense bank of cloud.

Hackness sniffed the air eagerly. He detected or thought he detected a certain acrid suggestion in the atmosphere. As the cab approached Trafalgar Square Hackness could hear shouts and voices raised high in protestation. Suddenly his cab seemed to be plunged into a wall of darkness.

It was so swift and unexpected that it came with the force of a blow. The horse appeared to have trotted into a bank of dense blackness. The wall had shut down so swiftly, blotting out a section of London, that Hackness could only gaze at it with mouth wide open.

Hackness hopped out of his cab hurriedly. So sheer and stark was the black wall that the horse was out of sight. Mechanically the driver reigned back. The horse came back to the cab with the dazzling swiftness of a conjuring trick. A thin stream of breeze wandered from the direction of Whitehall. It was this air finding its way up the funnel formed by the sheet that cut off the fog to a razor edge.

"Been teetotal for eighteen years," the cabman muttered, "so that's all right. And what do you please to make of it, sir?"

Hackness muttered something incoherent. As he stood there, the black wall lifted like a stage curtain, and he found himself under the lee of an omnibus. In a dazed kind of way he patted the cabhorse on the flank. He looked at his hand. It was greasy and oily and grimy as if he had been in the engine-room of a big liner.

"Get on as fast as you can," he cried. "It was fog, just a little present from the burning petroleum. Anyway, it's gone now."

True, the black curtain had lifted, but the atmosphere reeked with the odour of burning oil. The lamps and shop windows were splashed and mottled with something that might have passed for black snow. Traffic had been brought to a standstill for the moment, eager knots of pedestrians were discussing the situation

with alarm and agitation, a man in evening dress was busily engaged in a vain attempt to remove sundry black patches from his shirt front.

Sir Edgar Grimfern was glad to see his young friend. Had Grimfern been comparatively poor, and less addicted to big game shooting, he would doubtless have proved a great scientific light. Anything with a dash of adventure fascinated him. He was enthusiastic on flying machines and aeroplanes generally. There were big workshops at the back of 119, Clarence Terrace, where Hackness put in a good deal of his spare time. Those two were going to startle the world presently.

Hackness shook hands thoughtfully with Cynthia Grimfern. There was a slight frown on her pretty intellectual face as she noted his tie.

"There's a large smut on it," she remarked, "and it serves you right."

Hackness explained. He had a flattering audience. He told of the strange happening in Trafalgar Square and the majestic scene on the river. He gave a graphic account of the theory that he had built upon it. There was an animated discussion all through dinner.

"The moral of which is that we are going to be plunged into Cimmerian darkness," Cynthia said, "that is, if the fog comes down. If you think you are going to frighten me out of my evening's entertainment you are mistaken."

All the same it had grown much darker and thicker as the trio drove off in the direction of the Lyceum Theatre. There were patches of dark acrid fog here and there like ropes of smoke into which figures passed and disappeared only to come out on the other side choking and coughing. So local were these swathes of fog that in a wide thoroughfare it was possible to partially avoid them. Festoons of vapour hung from one lampost to another, the air was filled with a fatty sickening odour.

"How nasty," Cynthia exclaimed. "Mr. Hackness, please close that window. I am almost sorry that we started. What's that?"

There was a shuffling movement under the seat of the carriage, the quick bark of a dog; Cynthia's little fox terrier had stolen into the brougham. It was a favourite trick of his, the girl explained.

"He'll go back again," she said. "Kim knows that he has done wrong."

That Kim was forgotten and discovered later on coiled up under the stall of his mistress was a mere detail. Hackness was too preoccupied to feel any uneasiness. He was only conscious that the electric lights were growing dim and yellow, and that a brown haze was coming between the auditorium and the stage. When the curtain fell on the third act it was hardly possible to see across the theatre. Two or three large heavy blots of some greasy matter fell on to the white shoulders of a lady in the stalls to be hastily wiped away by her companion. They left a long greasy smear behind.

"I can hardly breathe," Cynthia gasped. "I wish I had stopped at home. Surely those electric lights are going out."

But the lights were merely being wrapped in a filament that every moment grew more and more dense. As the curtain went up again there was just the suspicion of a draught from the back of the stage, and the whole of it was smothered in a small brown cloud that left absolutely nothing to the view. It was impossible now to make out a single word of the programme, even when it was held close to the eyes.

“Hackness was right,” Grimfern growled. “We had far better have stayed at home.”

Hackness said nothing. He had no pride in the accuracy of his forecast. Perhaps he was the only man in London who knew what the full force of this catastrophe meant. It grew so dark now that he could see no more than the mere faint suggestion of his fair companion, something was falling out of the gloom like black ragged snow. As the pall lifted just for an instant he could see the dainty dresses of the women absolutely smothered with the thick oily smuts. The reek of petroleum was stifling.

There was a frightened scream from behind, and a yell out of the ebony wall to the effect that somebody had fainted. Someone was speaking from the stage with a view to stay what might prove to be a dangerous panic. Another sombre wave filled the theatre and then it grew absolutely black, so black that a match held a foot or so from the nose could not be seen. One of the plagues of Egypt with all its horrors had fallen upon London.

“Let us try and make our way out,” Hackness suggested. “Go quietly.”

Others seemed to be moved by the same idea. It was too black and dark for anything like a rush, so that a dangerous panic was out of the question. Slowly but surely the fashionable audience reached the vestibule, the hall, and the steps.

Nothing to be seen, no glimmer of anything, no sound of traffic. The destroying angel might have passed over London and blotted out all human life. The magnitude of the disaster had frightened London’s millions as it fell.

III

A CITY of the blind! Six millions of people suddenly deprived of sight! The disaster sounds impossible—a nightmare, the wild vapourings of a diseased imagination—and yet why not? Given a favourable atmospheric condition, something colossal in the way of a fire, and there it is. And there, somewhere folded away in the book of Nature, is the simple remedy.

Such thoughts as these flashed through Hackness’s mind as he stood under the portico of the Lyceum Theatre, quite helpless and inert for the moment.

But the darkness was thicker and blacker than anything he had ever imagined. It was absolutely the darkness that could be felt. Hackness could hear the faint scratching of matches all around him, but there was no glimmer of light anywhere. And the atmosphere was thick, stifling, greasy. Yet it was not quite as stifling as perfervid imagination suggested. The very darkness suggested suffocation. Still, there was air, a sultry light breeze that set the murk in motion, and mercifully brought from some purer area the oxygen that made life possible. There was always air, thank God, to the end of the Four Days’ Night.

Nobody spoke for a time. Not a sound of any kind could be heard. It was odd to think that a few miles away the country might be sleeping under the clear stars. It was terrible to think that hundreds of thousands of people must be standing lost in the streets and yet near to home.

A little way off a dog whined, a child in a sweet refined voice cried that she was lost. An anxious mother called in reply. The little one had been forgotten in the

first flood of that awful darkness. By sheer good luck Hackness was enabled to locate the child. He could feel that her wraps were rich and costly, though the same fatty slime was upon them. He caught the child up in his arms and yelled that he had got her. The mother was close by, yet full five minutes elapsed before Hackness blundered upon her. Something was whining and fawning about his feet.

He called upon Grimfern, and the latter answered in his ear. Cynthia was crying pitifully and helplessly. Some women there were past that.

"For Heaven's sake tell us what we are to do," Grimfern gasped. "I flatter myself that I know London well, but I couldn't find my way home in this."

Something was licking Hackness's hand. It was the dog Kim. There was just a chance here. He tore his handkerchief in strips and knotted it together. One end he fastened to the little dog's collar.

"It's Kim," he explained. "Tell the dog 'home.' There's just a chance that he may lead you home. We're very wonderful creatures, but one sensible dog is worth a million of us to-night. Try it."

"And where are you going?" Cynthia asked. She spoke high, for a babel of voices had broken out. "What will become of you?"

"Oh, I am all right," Hackness said with an affected cheerfulness. "You see, I was fairly sure that this would happen sooner or later. So I pigeon-holed a way of dealing with the difficulty. Scotland Yard listened, but thought me a bore all the same. This is the situation where I come in."

Grimfern touched the dog and urged him forward.

Kim gave a little bark and a whine. His muscular little body strained at the leash.

"It's all right," Grimfern cried. "Kim understands. That queer little pill-box of a brain of his is worth the finest intellect in England to-night."

Cynthia whispered a faint good-night, and Hackness was alone. As he stood there in the blackness the sense of suffocation was overwhelming. He essayed to smoke a cigarette, but he hadn't the remotest idea whether the thing was alight or not. It had no taste or flavour.

But it was idle to stand there. He must fight his way along to Scotland Yard to persuade the authorities to listen to his ideas. There was not the slightest danger of belated traffic, no sane man would have driven a horse in such dense night. Hackness blundered along without the faintest idea to which point of the compass he was facing.

If he could only get his bearings he felt that he should be all right. He found his way into the Strand at length; he fumbled up against someone and asked where he was. A hoarse voice responded that the owner fancied it was somewhere in Piccadilly.

There were scores of people in the streets standing about talking desperately, absolute strangers clinging to one another for sheer craving for company to keep the frayed senses together. The most fastidious clubman there would have chummed with the toughest Hooligan rather than have his own thoughts for company.

Hackness pushed his way along. If he got out of his bearings he adopted the simple experiment of knocking at the first door he came to and asking where he

was. His reception was not invariably enthusiastic, but it was no time for nice distinctions. And a deadly fear bore everybody down.

At last he came to Scotland Yard, as the clocks proclaimed that it was half-past one. Ghostly official voices told Hackness the way to Inspector Williamson's office, stern officials grasped him by the arm and piloted him up flights of stairs. He blundered over a chair and sat down. Out of the black cavern of space Inspector Williamson spoke.

"I am thankful you have come. You are just the man I most wanted to see. I want my memory refreshed over that scheme of yours," he said. "I didn't pay very much attention to it at the time."

"Of course you didn't. Did you ever know an original prophet who wasn't laughed at? Still, I don't mind confessing that I hardly anticipated anything quite so awful as this. The very density of it makes some parts of my scheme impossible. We shall have to shut our teeth and endure it. Nothing really practical can be done so long as this fog lasts."

"But, man alive, how long will it last?"

"Perhaps an hour or perhaps a week. Do you grasp what an awful calamity faces us?"

Williamson had no reply. So long as the fog lasted, London was in a state of siege, and, not only this, but every house in it was a fort, each depending upon itself for supplies. No bread could be baked, no meal could be carried round, no milk or vegetables delivered so long as the fog remained. Given a day or two of this and thousands of families would be on the verge of starvation. It was not a pretty picture that Hackness drew, but Williamson was bound to agree with every word of it.

These two men sat in the darkness till what should hare been the dawn, whilst scores of subordinates were setting some sort of machinery in motion to preserve order.

Hackness stumbled home to his rooms about nine o'clock in the morning, without having succeeded in persuading the officials to grant him permission to experiment. Mechanically he felt for his watch to see the time. The watch was gone. Hackness smiled grimly. The predatory classes had not been quite blind to the advantages of the situation.

There was no breakfast for Hackness for the simple reason that it had been found impossible to light the kitchen fire. But there was a loaf of bread, some cheese, and a knife. Hackness fumbled for his bottled beer and a glass. There were many worse breakfasts in London that morning.

He woke presently, conscious that a clock was striking nine. After some elaborate thought and the asking of a question or two from another inmate of the house, Hackness found to his horror that he had slept the clock round nearly twice. It was nine o'clock in the morning, twenty-three hours since he had fallen asleep! And, so far as Hackness could judge, there were no signs of the fog's abatement.

He changed his clothes and washed the greasy slime off him so far as cold water and soap would allow. There were plenty of people in the streets, hunting for food for the most part; there were tales of people found dead in the gutters. Progression

was slow but the utter absence of traffic rendered it safe and possible. Men spoke with bated breath, the weight of the great calamity upon them.

News that came from a few miles outside the radius spoke of clear skies and bright sunshine. There was a great deal of sickness, and the doctors had more than they could manage, especially with the young and the delicate.

And the calamity looked like getting worse. Six million people were breathing what oxygen there was. Hackness returned to his chambers to find Eldred awaiting him.

"This can't go on, you know," the latter said tersely.

"Of course it can't," Hackness replied. "All the air is getting exhausted. Come with me down to Scotland Yard and help to try and persuade Williamson to test my experiment."

"What! Do you mean to say he is still obstinate?"

"Well, perhaps he feels different to-day. Come along."

Williamson was in a chastened frame of mind. He had no optimistic words when Hackness suggested that nothing less than a violent meteorological disturbance would clear the deadly peril of the fog away. It was time for drastic remedies, and if they failed things would be no worse than before.

"But can you manage it?" Williamson asked.

"I fancy so," Hackness replied. "It's a risk, of course, but everything has been ready for a long time. We could start after tomorrow midnight, or any time for that matter."

"Very well," Williamson sighed with the air of a man who realises that after all the tooth must come out. "If this produces a calamity I shall be asked to send in my resignation. If I refuse—"

"If you refuse there is more than a chance that you won't want another situation," Hackness said grimly. "Let's get the thing going, Eldred."

They crawled along through the black suffocating darkness, feeble, languid, and sweating at every pore. There was a murky closeness in the vitiated atmosphere that seemed to take all the strength and energy away. At any other time the walk to Clarence Terrace would have been a pleasure, now it was a penance. They found their objective after a deal of patience and trouble. Hackness yelled in the doorway. There was a sound of footsteps and Cynthia Grimfern spoke.

"Ah, what a relief it is to know that you are all right," she said. "I pictured all sorts of horrors happening to you. Will this never end, Martin?"

She cried softly in her distress. Hackness felt for her hand and pressed it tenderly.

"We are going to try my great theory," he said. "Eldred is with me, and we have got Williamson's permission to operate with the aeroplane. Where is Sir Edgar?"

Grimfern was in the big workshop in the garden. As best he could, he was fumbling over some machinery for the increase of power in electric lighting. Hackness took a queer-looking lamp with double reflectors from his pocket.

"Shut off that dynamo," he said, "and give me the flex. I've got a little idea here Bramley, the electrician, lent me. With that 1000-volt generator of yours I can get a light equal to 40,000 candles. There."

Flick went the switch, and the others staggered back with their hands to their eyes. The great volume of light, impossible to face under ordinary circumstances,

illuminated the workshop with a faint glow like a winter's dawn. It was sufficient for all practical purpose, but to eyes that had seen absolutely nothing for two days and nights very painful.

Illustration:
The great volume of light, impossible to face under ordinary circumstances, illuminated the workshop with a faint glow

Cynthia laughed hysterically. She saw the men grimed and dirty, blackened and greasy, as if they were fresh from a stoker's hole in a tropical sea. They saw a tall, graceful girl in the droll parody of a kitchen-maid who had wiped a tearful face with a blacklead brush.

But they could see. Along the whole floor of the workshop lay a queer, cigar-shaped instrument with grotesque wings and a tail like that of a fish, but capable of being turned in any direction. It seemed a problem to get this strange-looking monster out of the place, but as the whole of the end of the workshop was constructed to pull out, the difficulty was not great.

This was Sir Edgar Grimfern's aeroplane, built under his own eyes and with the assistance of Hackness and Eldred.

"It will be a bit of risk in the dark," Sir Edgar said thoughtfully.

"It will, sir, but I hope it will mean the saving of a great city," Hackness remarked. "We shall have no difficulty in getting up, and as to the getting down, don't forget that the atmosphere a few miles beyond the outskirts of London is quite clear. If only the explosives are strong enough!"

"Don't theorise," Eldred snapped. "We've got a good day's work before we start. And there is no time to be lost."

"Luncheon first," Sir Edgar suggested "served in here. It will be plain and cold; but, thank goodness, there is plenty of it. My word, after that awful darkness what a blessed thing light is once more!"

Two hours after midnight the doors of the workshop were pulled away and the aeroplane was dragged on its carriage into the garden. The faint glimmer of light only served to make the blackness all the thicker. The three men waved their hands silently to Cynthia and jumped in. A few seconds later and they were whirred and screwed away into the suffocating fog.

IV

LONDON was holding out doggedly and stolidly. Scores of houses watched and waited for missing ones who would never return, the streets and the river had taken their toll, in open spaces, in the parks, and on the heaths many were shrouded. But the long black night held its secret well. There had been some ruffianism and plundering at first. But what was the use of plunder to the thief who could not dispose of his booty, who could not exchange a rare diamond for so much as a mouthful of bread? Some of them could not even find their way home,

they had to remain in the streets where there was the dread of the lifting blanket and the certainty of punishment with the coming of the day.

But if certain houses mourned the loss of inmates, some had more than their share. Belated women, frightened business girls, caught in the fog had sought the first haven at hand, and there they were free to remain. There were sempstresses in Mayfair, and delicately-nurtured ladies in obscure Bloomsbury boarding-houses. Class distinction seemed to be remote as the middle ages.

Scotland Yard, the local authorities, and the County Council had worked splendidly together. Provisions were short, though a good deal of bread and milk had with greatest difficulty been imported from outside the radius of the scourge. Still the poor were suffering acutely, and the cries of frightened children were heard in every street. A few days more and the stoutest nerves must give way. Nobody could face such a blackness and retain their senses for long. London was a city of the blind. Sleep was the only panacea for the creeping madness.

There were few deeds of violence done. The most courageous, the most bloodthirsty man grew mild and gentle before the scourge. Desperate men prowled about in search of food, but they wanted nothing else. Certainly they would not have attempted violence to get it.

Alarmists predicted that in a few hours life in London would be impossible. For once they had reason on their side. Every hour the air, or what passed for air, grew more poisonous. Men fancied a city with six million corpses!

The calamity would kill big cities altogether. No great mass of people would ever dare to congregate together again where manufacturers made a hideous atmosphere overhead. It would be a great check upon the race for gold. There was much justification for this morbid condition of public feeling.

So the third long weary day dragged to an end, and people went to bed in the old mechanical fashion hoping for better signs in the morning. How many weary years since they had last seen the sunshine, colour, anything?

There was a change from the black monotony some time after dawn. Most people had nearly lost all sense of time when dawn ought to have been. People were struggling back to their senses again, trying to pierce the thick curtain that held everything in bondage. Doors were opened and restless ones passed into the street.

Suddenly there was a smiting shock from somewhere, a deafening splitting roar in the ears, and central London shivered. It was as if some mighty explosion had taken place in space, and as if the same concussion had been followed by a severe shock of earthquake.

Huge buildings shook and trembled, furniture was overturned, and from every house came the smash of glass. Was this merely a fog or some thick curtain that veiled the approaching dissolution of the world? People stood still, trembling and wondering. And before the question was answered, a strange thing, a modern miracle happened. A great arc of the blackness peeled off and stripped the daylight bare before their startled eyes.

V

THE WORK was full of a real live peril, but the aeroplane was cast loose at length. Its upward motion was slow, perhaps owing to the denseness of the atmosphere. For some time nobody spoke. Something seemed to oppress their breathing. They were barely conscious of the faint upward motion. If they only rose perfectly straight all would be well.

"That's a fine light you had in the workshop," said Eldred. "But why not have established a few hundreds of them—"

"All over London," Hackness cut in, "For the simple reason that the lamp my friend lent me is the only one in existence. It is worked at a dangerous voltage too."

The upward motion continued. The sails of the aeroplane rustled slightly. Grimfern drew a deep breath.

"Air," he gasped, "real pure fresh air! Do you notice it?"

The cool sweetness of it filled their lungs. The sudden effect was almost intoxicating. A wild desire to laugh and shout and sing came over them. Then gradually three human faces and a ghostly shaped aeroplane emerged out of nothingness. They could see one another plainly now; they felt the upward rush; they were passing through a misty envelope that twisted and curled like live ropes. Another minute and they were beyond the fog belt.

They looked at one another and laughed. All three of them were blackened and grimed and greasy, smothered from head to foot in fatty soot flakes. Three more disreputable looking ruffians it would have been hard to imagine. There was something grotesque in the reflection that every Londoner was the same.

It was light now, broad daylight, with a round globe of sun climbing up out of the pearly mists in the East. They revelled in the brightness and the light. Below them lay the thick layers of fog that would be a shroud in earnest if nothing came to dispel it.

"We're a thousand feet above the city," Eldred said presently. "We had better pay out five hundred feet of cable."

To a hook at the end of a flexible wire Hackness attached a large bomb filled with a certain high explosive. Through the eye of the hook another wire—an electric one—was attached. The whole thing was carefully lowered to the full extent of the cable. Two anxious faces peered from the car. Grimfern appeared to be playing carelessly with a polished switch spliced into the wire. But his hands were shaking.

Eldred nodded. He had no words to spare just then.

Grimfern's forefinger pressed the polished button, there was a snap and almost immediately a roar and a rush of air that set the aeroplane rocking violently. All about them the clouds were spinning, below the foggy envelope was twisted and torn as smoke is blown away from a huge stack by a high wind.

"Look," Hackness yelled. "Look at that!"

He pointed downwards. The force of the explosion had literally torn a hole in the dense foggy curtain. The brilliant light of day shone through down into London as from a gigantic skylight.

Illustration:
The brilliant light of day shone through down

into London as from a gigantic skylight

This is what the amazed inhabitants of central London saw as they rushed out of their houses after what they imagined to be a shock of earthquake. The effect was weird, wonderful, one never to be forgotten. From a radius of half a mile from St. Paul's, London was flooded with brilliant light. People rubbed their eyes, unable to face the sudden and blinding glare. They gasped and thrilled with exultation as a column of fresh sweet air rushed to fill the vacuum. As yet they knew nothing of the cause.

That brilliant shaft of light showed strange things. Every pavement was black as ink, the fronts of the houses looked as if they had been daubed over with pitch. The roads were dark with fatty soot. On Ludgate Hill were dozens of vehicles from which the horses had been detached. There were numerous motor cars apparently lacking owners. A pickpocket sat in the gutter with a pile of costly trinkets about him, gems that glittered in the mud. These things had been collected before the fog grew beyond endurance. Now they were about as useful to the thief as an elephant might have been.

At the end of five minutes the curtain fell again. The flying, panic- stricken pickpocket huddled down once more with a frightened curse.

But London was no longer alarmed. A passing glimpse of the aeroplane had been seen, and better informed folks knew what was taking place. Presently another explosion followed, tearing the curtain away over Hampstead; for the next two hours the explosions continued at short intervals. There were tremendous outbursts of cheering whenever the relief came.

Presently a little light seemed to be coming. Ever and again it was possible for a man to see his hands before his face. Above the fog banks a wrack of cloud had gathered, the aeroplane was coated with a glittering mist. An hour before it had been perfectly fair overhead. Then it began to rain in earnest. The constant explosions had summoned up and brought down the rain as the heavy discharge of artillery used to do in the days of the Boer War.

It came down in a drenching stream that wetted the occupants of the aeroplane to the skin. They did not seem to mind. The exhilaration of the fresh sweet air was still in their veins, they worked on at their bombs till the last ounce of the high explosives was exhausted.

Illustration:
Wherever a hole was torn in the curtain,
the rain was seen to fall

And the rain was falling over London. Wherever a hole was torn in the curtain, the rain was seen to fall—black rain as thick as ink and quite as disfiguring. The whole city wore a suit of mourning.

"The cloud is passing away," Eldred cried. "I can see the top of St. Paul's."

Surely enough, the cross seemed to lift skyward. Bit by bit and inch by inch the panorama of London slowly unfolded itself. Despite the sooty flood—a flood gradually growing cleaner and sweeter every moment—the streets were filled with people gazing up in fascination at the aeroplane.

The tumult of their cheers came upwards. It was their thanks for the forethought and scientific knowledge that had proved to be the salvation of London. As a matter of fact, the high explosives had only been the indirect means of preserving countless lives. The conjuring up of that heavy rain had been the real salvation. It had condensed the fog and beaten it down to earth in a sooty flow of water. It was a heavy, sloppy, gloomy day, such as London ever enjoys the privilege of grumbling over, but nobody grumbled now. The blessed daylight had come back, it was possible to fill the lungs with something like pure air once more, and to realise the simple delight of living.

Nobody minded the rain, nobody cared an atom for the knowledge that he was a little worse and a little more grimy than the dirtiest sweep alive. What did it matter so long as everybody was alike? Looking down, the trio in the aeroplane could see London grow mad, grave men skipping about in the rain like schoolboys at the first fall of snow.

"We had better get down," said Grimfern. "Otherwise we shall have an ovation ready for us, and, personally, I should prefer a breakfast. In a calm like this we need not have any difficulty in making Regent's Park safely."

The valve was opened and the great car dropped like a flashing bird. They saw the rush in the streets, they could hear the tramp of feet now. They dropped at length in what looked like a yelling crowd of demented Hottentots.

VI

THE AEROPLANE was safely housed once more, the yelling mob had departed. London was bent upon one of its occasional insane holidays. The pouring rain did not matter one jot—had not the rain proved to be the salvation of the great city? What did it matter that the streets were black and the people blacker still? The danger was averted. "We will go out and explore presently," said Grimfern. "Meanwhile, breakfast. A thing like this must never occur again, Hackness." Hackness sincerely hoped not. Cynthia Grimfern came out to meet them. A liberal application of soap and water had rendered her sweet and fair, but it was impossible to keep clean for long. Everywhere lay evidences of the fog.

"It's lovely to be able to see and breathe once more," she said. "Last night every moment I felt as if I must be suffocated. To-day it is like suddenly finding Paradise."

"A sooty paradise," Grimfern growled.

Cynthia laughed a little hopelessly.

"It's dreadful," she said. "I have had no table-cloth laid, it is useless. But the table itself is clean, and that is something. I don't think London will ever be perfectly clean again."

The reek was still upon the great city, the taint of it hung upon the air. By one o'clock it had ceased raining and the sky cleared A startled sun looked down on strange things. There was a curious thickness about the trees in Regent's Park, they were as black as if they had been painted. The pavements were greasy and dangerous to pedestrians in a hurry.

There was a certain jubilation still to be observed, but the black melancholy desolation was bound to depress the most exuberant spirits. For the last three days everything had been at a standstill.

In the thickly populated districts the mortality amongst little children had been alarmingly high. Those who had any tendency to lung or throat or chest troubles died like flies before the first breath of frost. The evening papers, coming out as usual, a little late in the day, had many a gruesome story to tell. It was the harvest of the scare-line journalist, and he lost no chance. He scented his gloomy copy and tracked it down unerringly.

Over two thousand children—to say nothing of elderly people—had died in the East End. The very small infants had had no chance at all.

The Lord Mayor promptly started a Mansion House fund. There would be work and to spare presently. Meanwhile tons upon tons of machinery stood idle until it could be cleaned; all the trade of London was disorganised.

The river and the docks had taken a dreadful toll. Scores of labourers and sailors overtaken by the sudden scourge, had blundered into the water to be seen no more. The cutting off of the railways and other communications that brought London its daily bread had produced a temporary, but no less painful lack of provisions.

"It's a lamentable state of things," Grimfern said moodily as the two trudged back to Regent's Park later in the evening. It was impossible to get a cab for the simple reason that there was not one in London fit to be used. "But I don't see how we are going to better it. We can dispel the fogs, but not before they have done terrible damage."

"There is an easy way out of the difficulty," Eldred said quietly.

The others turned eagerly to listen. As a rule Eldred did not speak until he had thought the matter deliberately out.

"Abolish all fires throughout the Metropolitan area," he said. "In time it will have to be done. All London must warm itself and cook its food and drive all its machinery by electric power. Then it will be one of the healthiest towns in the universe. Everything done by electric power. No thousands of chimneys belching forth black poisonous smoke, but a clear, pure atmosphere. In towns like Brighton, where the local authorities have grappled the question in earnest, electric power is half the cost of gas.

"If only London combined it would be less than that. No dirt, no dust, no smell, no smoke! The magnificent system at Brighton never cost the ratepayers anything, indeed a deal of the profit has gone to the relief of the local burdens. Perhaps this dire calamity will rouse London to a sense of its dangers—but I doubt it."

Eldred shook his head despondingly at the dark chaos of the park. Perhaps he was thinking of the victims that the disaster had claimed. The others had followed sadly, and Grimfern, leading the way into his house banged the door on the darkening night.