



By K. E. HOWARTH.

CHAPTER I.

"If ever I distinguish myself, it shall be by doing or inventing something absolutely unique—entirely my own affair, so that no one can meddle, or share, or anything." Thus announced Tom Factor, as he lay on his back in a meadow, gazing up into the sky.

"Not particularly sociable, or generous, that," remarked his next neighbour, Will Tweedie.

"That selfishness," added the small Jerry Bouncer, sentimentally, "would recoil on your head, and you would repent it in your old age."

"You, my son, will repent scoffing in your youth," returned Factor, rolling over and regaining his feet. "Let us come on and explore 'this picturesque Surrey village,' ere we go back to the Five Bells for supper."

Our three heroes were enjoying the early hours of a three days' exeat from school, and had arranged a bicycle tour through the district of Surrey nearest to them.

They had already ridden half the distance, and on arriving at a remote village which took their fancy, as well as in view of a rising bank of dark thunder-cloud, they decided to spend their first night there, and meanwhile, make some explorations on foot as long as the coming storm held off.

"Do let us go back over the bridge to that forsaken old place balancing itself along the roadside," said Jerry. "There *must* be ghosts there, even by daylight."

The old house which had excited the boys' curiosity, certainly had very much the appearance of balancing itself, for the walls bulged here and there, and at one end, a gap showed where a chimney had fallen. Moreover, a man hanging round, whom they questioned,

informed them that it had been an inn, in the old coaching days; but now that the bridge was not strong enough for heavier traffic, and the railway station was in another part of the town, this road had only become a side lane, and the wide rambling premises, too large for a dwelling, stood empty, with doors and windows boarded up; and it *had* its ghosts, he added. Two of them. Before being an inn, it was a monastery, and two monks still lingered in their earthly home. Why, or wherefore, history could not say, or tradition either.

A wide platform of stone flags, grass-grown between the joints, extended along the front. The principal entrance showed some remains of decorative stone-work, and was closed by a pair of wide rickety doors, one fastened up with boards and nails, and the other partly unhinged, leaned back into the building.

The air now became more and more oppressive, and distant rumblings made themselves heard. The "native," as Jerry called him, retreated up the road towards the village, and the boys stood back under a high brick wall just opposite the building.

"Let's make a rush in at that door," suggested Tweedie. "There's an archway inside, and we shall be in shelter."

They did so, and found that the archway led into a large quadrangle, beyond.

"We'll remain here," said Jerry, "and sit on our heels. It's dry at all events, and—what on earth is that?"

In the midst of the evening stillness there suddenly burst upon the ears of the astonished lads, a sharp rattling roar as of dynamite blasting; so close overhead, that they rushed and gazed up at the space of sky over the quadrangle. Almost over them, they beheld

a whirling, reddish cloud, in the middle of which appeared two or three black spots, momentarily increasing in size. Before the trio could move or speak, the explosive sound changed to a roar like the blast of a furnace. A furious eddy of hot wind swept round them, accompanied by blinding dust, and followed by a terrific crash just in front of the opposite range of buildings. Factor and Tweedie rushed across the quadrangle in the direction of the sound; poor Jerry shrank back into the archway, with the rush of air in his face. Half-way across the open, Tweedie tripped and fell, but on picking himself up after a few seconds, found that he had had no injury, beyond the shake-up and a bruised knee. All was then suddenly silent, and he looked hastily round for the others. Half-a-dozen feet away from him lay Factor, on his back; his head and shoulders slightly raised against the wall, his face pallid, and his eyes staring straight up into the sky.

Tweedie sprang towards him in terrible fear that a blow on his head might have killed him in his fall. But he had scarcely knelt for a moment at his side, when Factor quietly turned his head, and said, "That was worth having lived to see!"

"In the name of goodness, what was it? A meteor?"

"Yes, an aërolite. It fell on those steps close to that door," indicating two wide door-steps up to a doorway, to their right.

"Well," gasped Tweedie, "I hope there are no more. One in a life-time will satisfy my curiosity."

"Not much fear of that," answered Factor, as he pulled himself up into a sitting posture. "We might wait a thousand years and not see the same thing happen again! But where's Jerry?"

He sprang to his feet, and Tweedie gazed round with a start, when Jerry himself answered the inquiry by emerging from the archway, with his handkerchief to his face. On examination however, he also was not seriously hurt; but the hot air had almost literally scalded him, filling his eyes and ears with dust and grit. Though Factor had come off the worst, and was still unsteady on his feet, the others could see, to their surprise, that he was nevertheless buoyed up with elation at the extraordinary accident which had satisfied one of his keenest desires. He had seen at short range—too short for his companions—the actual descent of a large specimen of one of those planetary wanderers which pepper our earth by hundreds at all times—though for the most part unknown to us—and as the boys recovered their senses, and the flying dust slowly resettled, he proceeded with the rapture of a scientist, to

examine the spot. The others joined eagerly in the search, though as Jerry remarked, the visible marks left by the celestial visitors were scarcely so extensive as might have been expected after the racket they had caused. Two or three flag-stones were split across; dents had been made in the stone-work, and pieces chipped out. After some minutes' hunting, the three comrades came to a pause, and looked at each other, Factor leaning against a stone post, and Tweedie nursing his wounded knee.

"I wonder if you two are thinking of the same thing?" exclaimed the former suddenly. "There's certainly one thing that seems rather odd," said Tweedie, looking up.

"More than one," sighed Jerry Bouncer. "And that is," continued Tweedie, with a repressive frown, "why have we seen no pieces of the things lying about? There were at least two big lumps, and they *must* have got smashed up. Were they burst or scattered into dust?"

"Now I'll tell you what I saw," said Factor, his eyes shining, and his hands clasped. "You know that I fell on my back, and then I pulled myself up just against that wall.

Then I stared up, and I saw one thing happen, beyond all doubt. The noise we heard was when the meteorite burst high up in the air. I didn't see the pieces strike the ground actually, because of the row and dust, and my own tumble. But I *did* see them rebound after the shock. *And I saw them go away again!*"

"Away again—what do you mean?" cried the others. "Why, that after striking the ground, the main pieces flew away again into space. I watched the two black spots disappear again right away into the sky!"

He spoke with such absolute certainty, that Tweedie and Jerry could only gaze in astonishment.

"How do you account for that?" at length asked Tweedie.

"Gammon!" exclaimed Jerry, "let's go and find some marines, old man, for you see, we're not in that corps."

"Shut up," said Factor scornfully. "I never heard of such a thing in my life; but I can only imagine that the meteorite had originally some repellant force, which was somehow sufficiently overcome by this earth's attraction, to fall here; but after that fall power carried it away again into space."

"An extraordinary idea," exclaimed Tweedie who was becoming infected with his friend's excitement.

"Well, but if that thing hit the ground and broke up, right down here in this court,"

struck in Jerry, "and we're pretty sure of *that*—some bits may have got caught, or stopped, or whatever you like to call it. We'd find some bits stuck up against anything that would stop them."

"Ah-ah, look here!" exclaimed Factor, and he sprang towards a boarded-up window, the boards of which had been smashed in. Just under the brick edge of the window-frame, he had caught sight of a dark brown object, about the size of a walnut.

As eager as his companion, Tweedie drew himself up on to the window-sill, and reached up to try and see if the pebble were loose. The boy had certainly never felt such a sense of amazement as when he found himself grasping a stone which tried to escape upwards, and had to be pulled down, as he descended to the ground again. Each of them had to feel it. They flattened out their hands, palms downwards, and the uncanny thing stuck up against them with a pressure of several pounds!

Tweedie threw it to the ground, whence it rebounded, and he caught it again as it rose. Factor darted forward.

"For goodness' sake, take care," he cried, "if it goes up and sticks somewhere higher, we shall have a job to get it again."

Tweedie handed over to him the astonishing find, and he seemed as though he would never tire of testing its extraordinary properties. So absorbed were the two, that they started and almost let it go again, when a sharp cry came from within the window beneath which they were standing.

It was Jerry's voice calling out, "Hullo, you fellows, what's that up there?"

\* \* \*  
CHAPTER II.

Will Tweedie was upon the window sill, and inside in a minute, and Factor was soon after him. They found themselves in a large empty room, rather dimly lighted, as the windows were all more or less blocked.

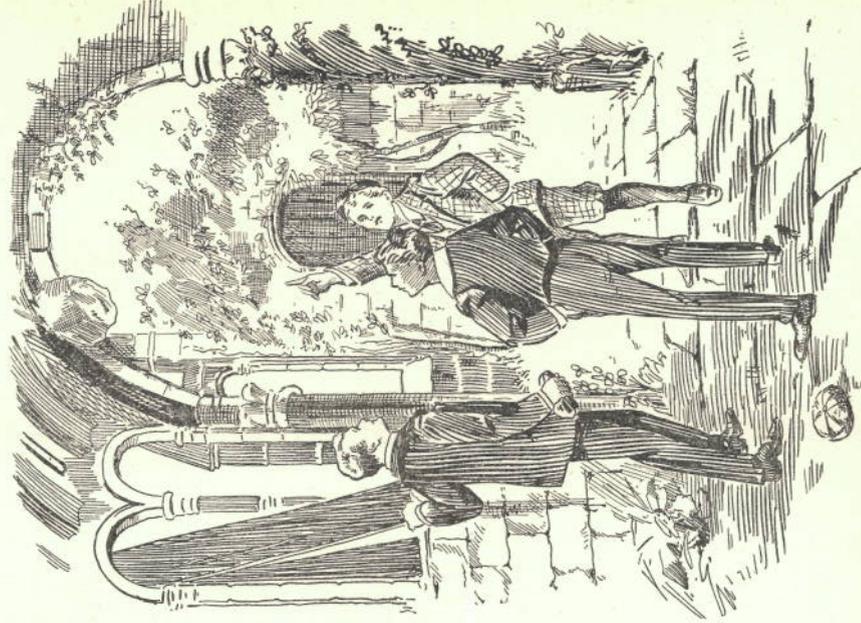
There was no ceiling to the chamber, which had evidently been a dining-room, probably in the days of the monks as well as in the time of the inn guests. The thick dusty cross beams showed

the peak of the roof above at a height of some forty feet; and it was at a point over their heads, amid the upright struts, that Jerry was pointing. Sure enough there stuck another dark brown mass—some-what larger than a man's head! Tweedie could almost have shouted in his excitement; but Factor only said in a nervous, suppressed tone, "Now we have him!"

It was now getting dark; and there was a sound of footsteps as of Jerry executing a waltz on the rotten floor, when Tweedie suggested:

"Hadn't you better secure that other creature safely? Are you carrying it, Tom?" Factor showed them, when they had scrambled out through the window again, that he had duly placed it under a loose paving stone, whence he proceeded to extract it again.

"That lump is safe enough where it is, up in the roof," said he; and now we must take this safe home to the Professor. We cannot do anything more without him, and I long to hear what he thinks. And look here, mind let us hold our tongues, whatever we do. Nobody has come down here from the village,



so they do not seem to have heard anything of it!"

However, they soon found on their return, that the whole village was in a commotion about the thunderbolts seen or heard to fall, as many declared; but fortunately for our trio, no one had been able to decide the direction in which they had fallen, everyone being seized with the fear that their own chimneys were falling in. No one even guessed at what had happened half a mile away at the deserted hostelry.

Factor now secured the innocent looking little stone in his handkerchief, twisting the ends, and tying it firmly down to a piece of furniture. The next morning they all three agreed to give up their trip and return to the school, and to the Professor; and accordingly rode back, each taking it in turn to carry the treasured handkerchief.

When the three boys presented themselves in the old scientist's laboratory; where he was preparing his experiments for a course of lectures in class, Tom Factor as spokesman, narrated the whole incident simply and briefly, only venturing modestly to add his own surmises. For some time they thought the old gentleman was never going to speak. For nearly ten minutes he handled and toyed with the buoyant little fragment without uttering a word. Then, without taking his hand or eye off it, he seemed to commence a few general remarks on aerolites as if his visitors had only come in to hear him lecture. "The meteorites," said he "as far as we know them, mostly consist of solid iron, and were believed to travel at a speed of thirty or forty miles a second. A few have been found that weighed several tons, though by far the greater number are dispersed by the heat generated on entering the earth's atmosphere, or fall into the sea, unnoted by men."

Then suddenly breaking off these remarks, the old gentleman asked:

"Whose is this?" The boys stared.

"To whom does it belong?" asked Tom Factor, at last. "Well to—to Tweedie—and me—I really don't know which of us saw it first!"

"A unique specimen of a product unknown to the world belongs primarily to the world at large," said the Professor, slowly; "but I take it that the nation may claim it!"

This was a contingency that the boys had not foreseen; and Tom fired up at once.

"They may claim, if they like; they won't get it, at least not yet," he cried, remembering the store in reserve.

"I think you are undoubtedly entitled to the ownership for the present," said the Professor with a smile; "would you like to keep it here for a while?"

"By all means. We want you to examine it for us."

The Professor had in his laboratory a heavy iron mortar used for pounding up hard substances. Placing this inside a safe, he turned it over, slipped the meteoric scrap under it, and locked the door.

"At any rate," he continued good-naturedly, surveying the three eager faces through his glasses, "the nation's claim can be postponed till we think fit to tell them; and we will get through our own examination before we do so. Then, however, it must become very widely known. From a scientific point, the investigation must be one of unprecedented interest. And it is impossible to forecast to what it may lead us."

He was evidently not disposed to say more just then, and dismissed the three to their rooms, to discuss the all-absorbing topic, until interrupted by the other boys. That night, as they separated to their respective dormitories, Tweedie whispered to Factor, "your 'unique chance' may have arrived!" He said it lightly; but Factor took it seriously, and nodded his head gravely.

The following morning, on the second day of the holiday, Tom Factor did not answer to his name at breakfast-time, but the Professor stepped forward and asked the necessary leave for him. Tweedie and Bouncer escaped as soon as they could from the general assembling barn, which was empty. Here they found Tom Factor awaiting them.

"I've been counting the hours till you came," he said. "You are just in time, for we are all ready to go ahead, and I want you to come out to the old inn with the Professor and me, now. He's made such a splendid report! He got off a little chip for analysis, and says that it is not remarkably different from other meteorites, though not quite the same as any that are known as yet. And do you know, it takes nearly nine pounds weight to keep that iron walnut down. He says that if the proportion is the same between the walnut and the big piece in the roof, it will be a tough job to pull it down; but see the tool I have borrowed to clip hold of that with?"

He dragged forward, with a good deal of clinking and rattling, two of the great iron clips used for ice-blocks, and a large slip-ring, which enclosed them, so that when drawn down their shanks, it closed the claws together. The ring was prevented from sliding off the shanks by a short bar or heel at the ends, and could be pulled by a rope from below. At present, the parts were separate, and each boy undertook to carry his share, as well as he could manage, and then quietly they cycled

away to the village where the prize was awaiting them—and the Professor. When they arrived at the archway, they glanced guiltily up and down the road, and stole quickly in, cycles, hooks and all. They found the Professor seated on a broken paving stone, calmly surveying the traces of the explosion, which he had been examining; but he started forward with eagerness as juvenile and active as their own, when Jerry, vaulting on the window-sill, led the way to show him the treasure within the old chamber. Factor quickly hauled him back, only Jerry was too near for him.

"Take care," cried Tweedie, "you nearly made him fall!"

"The young rascal—I was going to show it first!"

"What does that matter?" After all, he saw it first," retorted Tweedie, in some surprise; and meanwhile, the Professor had climbed through the window and was already inside.

How they scrambled among the roof-beams! How much dust they breathed, and how warm they got in trying the ice-claws; and finally in making their way safely to the floor again!

\* \* \* \* \*

"And now boys," said the Professor, when they were safe back in his study, that afternoon. "There is nothing that we can immediately do, by ourselves. Your times at school expire, do they not, this term?"

"Not mine," said Tweedie, "I have one more term—and Jerry, too—till Christmas. Factor leaves this July."

"Very well," returned the Professor, meditatively. "There are only a few weeks to Midsummer, and you must not think of anything but your examinations till—"

"Easier said than done, sir!" said Jerry, "It's all slipping out of my head, now."

The Professor smiled at him over his spectacles.

"Better stick to your mathematics and chemistry, boy; you'll want them for your meteorite!"

"Much good Jerry's mathematics will be," grumbled Factor, "or his chemistry either."

The Professor taking no notice of this remark, went on. "Now the job of moving and keeping down the lump up there in that roof, will require at least another man's help, and a good strong winch. Then it must be taken away on some strong truck, and bestowed somewhere. I can get the things necessary, and I make all preparations quietly; and then we must spend the holidays together, somewhere that we can work out our ideas, with a look at Factor, who flushed up.

"But then, sir," he put in, "we shall have to tell other fellows, and they'll share, and—"

"A good many other fellows," said the Professor, drily. "You did not think you lads and one old man were going to make anything of a discovery like that by themselves, in a 20ft. square laboratory? Still," he went on, kindly, "we will keep it all as quiet as possible, and guard our rights and privileges as much as may be. Let me think, Factor," he went on suddenly, "where are your father's machine works?"

"At Doradee Moor, right away in Co. Donegal," said Factor. "But Lifford's the nearest town, and that's ages off. Father's office is in Dublin."

"And he has some communication for transit and goods?"

"Two single truck-lines across the moors from Lifford."

"The very place, and the very man," said the Professor. "He will find us the confidential workman we shall want, and 'Doradee' sounds like a district where we can spend our holidays in private. 'Far from the mad-ding crowd.' Go back to your books, boys, and I will write to Mr. Factor, myself."

\* \* \*

#### CHAPTER III.

The Professor succeeded in getting the "meteorite" pulled down from the roof, without anyone getting wind of his proceedings, locally, until it was safely secured on to a truck, and hauled away. Mr. Factor entered into his son's enterprise heartily, and furnished means to transport the strange load like a furniture van; shifting it on to the railways and steamer in the truck, to which it was secured. A local paper gave half a column to the "thunderbolt" and the mysterious scientific authorities who removed it, and brought down two or three reporters and scientists sniffing about. But they were a day too late, and decided from the villagers' information, that there was not much in the tales going round. Three weeks later came the break-up festival at the school, and the holidays commenced. It may be imagined that three of the scholars were even more excited, and not to say wild over the occasion, than the rest; especially Tom Factor, who, though hitherto fond enough of his school life (how often he looked back to those last weeks in after life!) now shook the collegiate dust off his feet in triumph.

Another fortnight found Tweedie and Jerry arriving on a visit at Mr. Factor's house near Lifford. Tom was there to receive them, but he and the Professor had taken up their abode in a cottage five miles away across the moors, at the gates of the Doradee Works.

The three friends were soon sitting in a verandah, watching the sunset, and discussing the topic foremost in their minds.

"We found that the lump lifted the scale in the yard at two ton, fifteen pounds," Tom explained, "so that it is able to get away with anything less than that."

"Then," said Tweedie, "with something to manage it with, and a car to go with it, you could use it as a balloon!"

Factor looked at him with a queer smile. "You have anticipated my plan—partly. But—"

"But how," chimed in Bouncer, "how are we going to stop when we want to? Even the Professor won't want to explore outside the atmosphere!"

"I think," said Tom, "that the Professor is finding the solution of the riddle, and will tell us in a day or two."

"Why then," went on the irrepressible Jerry, "we could take our meteorite on the grand tour—Tom here would boss it. Will would open and shut the valves, and I would be showman, to talk, and take the money! We'd make our fortunes first trip."

"Do shut up," grumbled Factor. "What do we want all the world in the matter for? No, my idea would be to cruise about in a way that no one else could control, and explore and all that, without bothering to explain the machine, or 'use it for the human race,' or anything stupid of that sort."

"Well, but," remarked Tweedie, "you can't boss the thing entirely, you know. After all, we, at all events Jerry, discovered the thing as much as you did, and the Professor is showing us how to use it."

"He has said the ideas were mine," said Tom, proudly.

In truth, the boy had great talent, and had showed the promise which had elicited the Professor's commendation.

"Well, but you could hardly have made them practical without him and Mr. Factor. And it does seem rather grubby to keep a secret like that all to one's self."

"Other folk could benefit by our explorations," returned Tom; but fancy having the sole use of a power which no one else, even the leading men, could understand or control! Would not that be worth living for?"

"Rather lonely," said Jerry, "and you wouldn't make half so much money."

"I'll make money enough," replied Tom, "to buy up your share and make your fortune, and then sail away on my own tack."

The following day the boys rode across the moors to the Doradee yards, looked in at the cottage where the Professor lodged, found he was out, and tracked him to the special shed where Tom's car was being built. Here they found him in, for him, quite excited conversation with Mr. Factor sen., and they heard

his last remark as he turned and saw the boys coming.

"We are all entering on a new field of knowledge!" he was saying. "Ah, Tom, my lad, we have hit upon the point I have been working to find, at length. I made up my mind yesterday to try the effect of the electric current, and I put the small piece in a circuit with a very slight current, and the *repulsive force was reduced instantly*; was it not so, Mr. Factor?" That gentleman nodded. "Then we tried it a bit stronger with three cells, and it fell down and lay on the table as inert as any other bit of iron; but as soon as the wire was disconnected, up it flew again." Mr. Factor again nodded emphatically. "Now boys, this means that with the help of a small battery we can control the *ascending power as we please*."

"Neither more nor less," confirmed Mr. Factor, "and if you please, Tom, I want a word with you."

The result of a short interview with his father, was that Tom had full permission if he liked to use a sum of money left to him by a relation, for the purpose of assisting the Professor to carry out his experiments. Tom was exultant over this, and claimed the car as his own, but he was rather damped by his father's warning that it might not suffice.

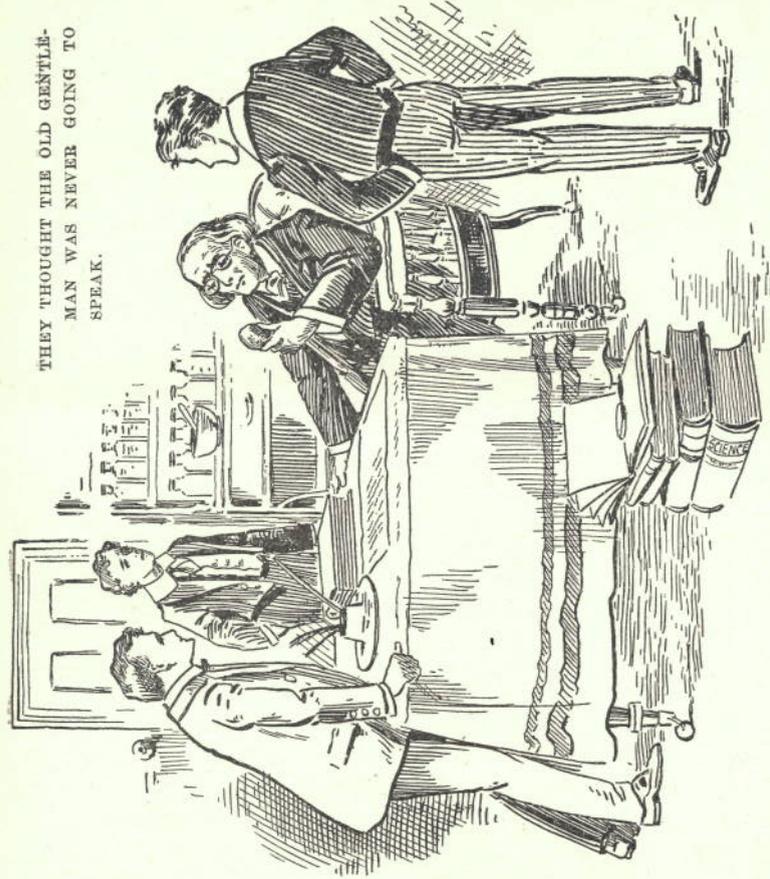
"Never mind, Tom, old man," said Jerry eagerly, "go on and prosper, and I know my father will aid more. He is perfectly 'gone' on anything inventive."

"The Professor can have the shed and ground as my contribution," said Mr. Factor, cordially, "so you will have no rent or taxes, and I will lend you an extra man when you want him, Tom, for your first enterprise in life."

After this, the building of Factor's balloon car—if it can be so called—proceeded rapidly. A separate small workshop had been set aside for it at the Doradee works, to which only those concerned, as well as the workmen, were admitted.

Will Tweedie had only once had the opportunity of making his way across Ireland to the remote spot, and had then only seen a curious cage of light steel girders, somewhat like the frame of a small ship with an arched roof, and a number of steel plates which were being prepared to cover it. Tweedie rather wondered how Factor proposed to keep the thing right end up when he made his ascents, and how he would cart it about with him if it were ever to leave Lifford. In the evening, however, he went to see Tom in his lodging close to his dear workshop, to inquire what progress he and the Professor were making. He found his friend kneeling before a small table with plans spread before him, his face

THEY THOUGHT THE OLD GENTLE-  
MAN WAS NEVER GOING TO  
SPEAK.



resting on his clenched hands, and his thoughts apparently so absorbing that he scarcely noticed Tweedie's entrance. Presently he looked up and said half-absently, "I was just coming round to your inn. I have great news for you and Jerry. I feel as if I were losing my wits, only the Professor confirms my ideas."

"Let's hear them," returned Tweedie, with calmness.

"You know," Factor went on, speaking slowly and carefully, "that the ascensional force of our meteorite is two ton odd. It varies a little at times, and the Professor thinks it is with the magnetism of the earth. At all events the variation is practically very small. Now the dead weight of our car with two people in it fully equipped, and provisioned for a month, will scarcely be a ton and a quarter."

"Provisioned for a month!" exclaimed Tweedie, "why, are you off to the moon, after all?"

"No, indeed, I hope not. That is one contingency we have to provide against; but you will be surprised to hear where we shall be able to go. But now, follow me. That is the lifting power. The balance of this has to be restrained and controlled by the electric current. We have been thinking almost from

the first whether it might be possible to divert this surplus of power so as to utilise it for propelling the car horizontally. We have experimented for weeks past, and now the Professor and I have hit it!"

"You mean that the stone will both lift and propel it?"

"Under perfect control," he answered, slightly flushing. "There will not be a spot on the surface of this earth which we shall not be able to visit!"

Tweedie was silent for a minute, trying to realise the amazing power thus placed in the hands of an individual.

"And what speed do you expect to attain?" he asked.

"Ah, that is past all reckoning until we have tried. With only the friction of the air to meet, I think it may be quite considerable. But we shall have to be cautious at first."

"Indeed, we shall!" said Will, "before you allow me or Jerry to come; we shall not breathe freely till we see you down to mother earth again. It strikes me though," he added presently, "that you will encounter an unusual share of the glorification you don't like!" Factor laughed.

"Ah, but there is the beauty of it! I shall not be obliged to meet a bit more publicity

than I like. We shall have unlimited power of getting out of sight, and keeping there!"

"Well, don't go and live in the middle of the Sahara, old fellow; and I am heartily glad that you have found an aim in life so much more wonderfully 'unique' than anyone could anticipate!"

It was well within the time promised by the Professor and his pupil, or rather, his co-worker, when a few weeks later they notified Tweedie and Bouncer that the strange meteoric vehicle on which their hopes—likewise their fears—had been centred, would be in readiness for a preliminary trial on the following day.

"We don't want to attract public attention at present," wrote Factor, "so I only propose to take a turn or two over the Doradee yards. We have a full moon just now, so it's had better be done, if you can keep awake, at midnight."

Never did a more excited though silent gathering take place at the witching hour than that of the little party at the Doradee Works. It consisted of the Professor, Tom Factor and Mr. Moss Factor, pater, with Will Tweedie and Jerry Bouncer, and pledged to secrecy at the risk of dire penalties, by Factor senior, the confidential foreman, John Packer. There lay in the moonlight the little car, with its mystic power duly trained and controlled, for exercise. The yard gates were quietly closed and secured by Packer, and Factor stepped forward at once to the car. It was mounted on four small wheels, with the lightest springs that would bear its weight,

"On coming to the ground," said Tom, "it may not always be possible to avoid some forward impetus, especially before a wind, so that the car must be able to run a little way without being liable to turn a somersault on landing. There is a brake on them to pull her up with."

In shape the car was like a small ship, with sharp bows and slightly rounded stern, the door being in the hinder end. The light girders of the roof were all in one piece, and overlaid with steel plates. Four short chains depended from the base at the corners, each ending with a kind of anchor, and by these it was now held down, as well as by the electric current which controlled the lifting power. There was a double bottom to the car, forming a sort of tank.

"Water-ballast," explained Tom to his father; "helps to keep her right end up, and also furnishes a reserve supply of fresh water in case we cannot get any for a time."

Then the whole party explored the interior, in turn, and duly admired the fittings and cosy appearance of the little chamber within. First and foremost, they noticed in the centre

of the roof a cage, or guard of crossed bars enclosing the moving spirit—the Flying Stone. It was of irregular shape, roddish-brown in colour, and pitted on the surface, as meteorites usually are. At the opposite ends were connected a pair of insulated wires, and these were carried down the side of the car to the batteries supplying the restraining force. The bow end of the vehicle was occupied by a mahogany counter on which were fixed two short levers working in notched guides, so that they could be set at any point required.

The space below the counter was enclosed with wood-work, and contained the gist of the whole affair, the apparatus devised by the Professor for controlling and propelling the lifting power, with the electric power. It was directed by one of the levers above, while the other worked the switch adjusting the electric current.

Along the sides of the car were to be fitted two long couches, and cupboards were being constructed to hold the batteries, and with room for provisions and necessaries.

"If all goes well to-night," exclaimed Tom, "we can get the whole thing ready for active service by the time you two fellows leave next Christmas!"

"Three cheers," cried Jerry; "and then we'll throw up all our books, and skim about the world in this Banshee of a car!" And his name, the Banshee Car, stuck to it, as it wanted a name.

\* \* \*

#### CHAPTER IV.

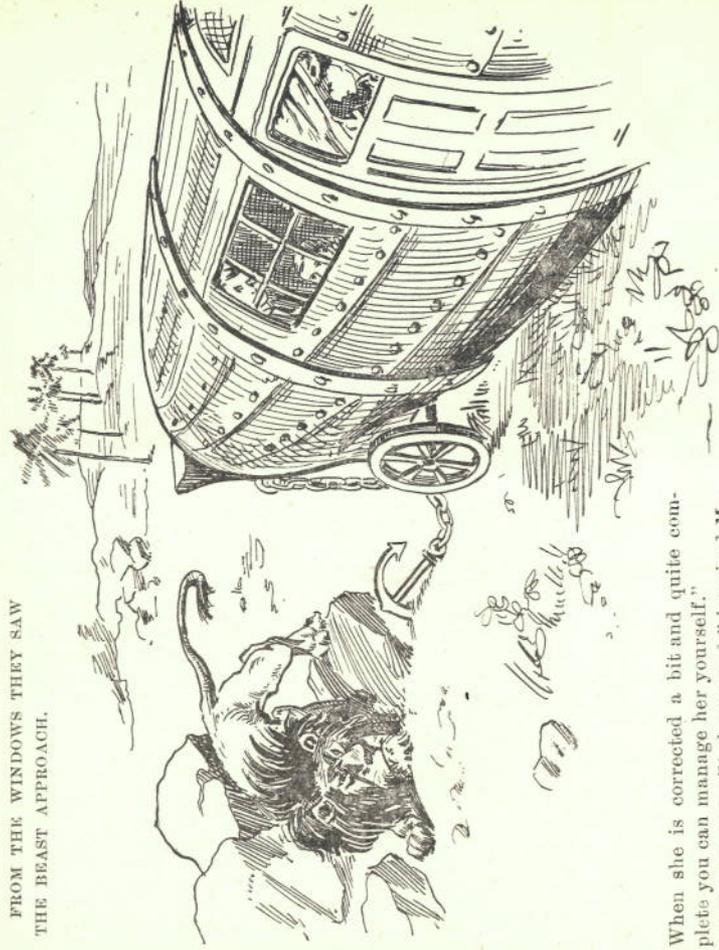
"Are you quite ready?" demanded the Professor, almost in a whisper; and they all stood back, except himself and Tom.

These two entered the machine, closed the door, and threw back the front windows. Through these, Tom could be seen to push forward cautiously the right-hand lever. Instantly the car rose steadily and gently from the ground, ascended to a height of about 50 feet, and then paused. The surrounding workshops and buildings were of only one storey, so that it rose clear of them. Then it traversed slowly forward, swept round in a graceful curve, and returned to a point nearly over the yard. Breathlessly the group below watched it swerve and twist a little, and then it descended within a few feet of the place whence it had started. The alighting was managed so carefully that it scarcely moved a yard after touching the ground. They all pressed round with congratulations as Factor opened the door again, and the two came out.

"Good, for a first attempt," cried he; "but there'll be a lot to find out in managing her; and there is a good deal more to do."

"The propulsion is all right, anyhow," said the Professor, "but that must do for to-night.

FROM THE WINDOWS THEY SAW  
THE BEAST APPROACH.



When she is corrected a bit and quite complete you can manage her yourself."

"How many will she carry?" inquired Mr. Factor, who had been more anxious on his son's account, than his placid manner showed.

"Oh, never more than three," said Tom, "and everybody who goes up will have to practise balancing a bit."

And then they turned to the Professor and congratulated the master mind which had achieved this amazing adaptation.

"Like many other problems; seems easy when one has done it. I think now we shall have to give some particulars to the scientific world. I will prepare my first report to-morrow."

\* \* \* \* \*

On a bright night, in the following spring, the Banshee Car rose from the Doradee yards to the height of a few hundred feet, and started on a south-easterly course. She had on board the three friends—Factor, Tweedie, and Jerry, making their first trip on their own responsibility. Factor, standing at the counter with a hand on each lever, seemed literally to revel in the splendid control which he held over the movements of the machine. Tweedie and Jerry had taken their places at the forward end of the car, for the window space occupied the whole of the bows, and the prospect was uninterrupted.

"Now we'll realise our plan of last autumn and go down into the Sahara for a night or two!" exclaimed Factor, as they sailed along over the dark ranges and plains of Ireland.

"We can be back in three or four days."

His companions eagerly consented; and they hardly seemed to have County Donegal behind them, ere 'the wrinkled sea beneath them crawled' of the Irish Channel—though with no risk happily of following out Tennyson's word-picture by 'falling like a thunder-bolt.'

So they travelled on till in the whitening daylight they distinguished the lines of the French coasts, and soon after the waters of the Bay of Biscay rolled beneath them; and as the day wore on, the wide dreary Sierras of Spain were spread out before them, looking strangely flat and moving along below like a dissolving view. Then they ascended to a thousand feet, and Tom put on increased speed, saying, "Take care you don't open a window now, or we should be all over the place!"

And now they came in sight of the Mediterranean, crossed it, and sailed along towards the Riff Mountains, between Morocco and Algeria. Then came in view a wide stretch of sandy plain lined with a tracery of small stream beds dotted with a few clumps of dark foliage, and at enormous intervals, to their British eyes, a cluster of white buildings indicating a village.

Then Tweedie exclaimed: "Look, oh! look—what is that?"

Along the furthest limit of the southern horizon there rose like fairy land, a line of glistening snow-crowned peaks, swiftly ex-

tending itself as they advanced, clearer and more brilliant in detail at every mile. It was the Great Atlas range, the bulwark of the vast desert beyond; every higher peak throughout its vast extent touching a snow-line at twelve or thirteen thousand feet. As the little car approached, the gradual rise of these summits until they seemed to hang over the heads of the adventurous travellers, was the most wondrous unfolding of nature's scenery that they could ever behold.

As they swept forward, Factor now reduced the speed, and setting the electric lever forward notch by notch, they gradually ascended keeping some feet above the foot-hills and mountain spurs.

"We shall have to cross both ranges this afternoon," said he, "and may have to go up 10,000 feet, unless we can see the passes. And we must land for to-night."

They agreed to this, for it was their second night on the journey, and even keeping watch turn and turn about, they could not keep the car going longer without thorough rest.

"But why both ranges?" asked Tweedie.

"There will be the Anti-Atlas running parallel, and we must cross the Sus Valley between. The desert is beyond."

"The Geographical Societies will be ready to eat us up when we go home," said Jerry.

"I think," continued Factor, peering down over his counter, "that that must be Tarudant down there," pointing out a patch of white amid masses of green.

An hour later, proceeding at an easy pace, the car passed between two magnificent summits eight thousand feet high. Then again descending among endless ridges of foot-hills, there opened out the more fertile district of the Sus Valley, bounded again by the rugged Anti-Atlas range. Over this they sped, until the mighty wastes of Sahara came into view, perhaps even more impressive in its vast desolation, than the mountains.

"How far shall we go now?" asked Tweedie rather anxiously.

"Let us get away from the mountains" said Factor. "I fancy we are drifting a bit with a westerly breeze."

How he guessed this, the others could not have said. Any movement was quite imperceptible to them; but their young skipper seemed to be rapidly acquiring a sort of instinct in this novel voyaging, which only practice could develop.

The sun was lowering now in a blaze of glory, which threw tints across the expanse below them. As the huge globe was cut in twain by the western horizon, the car sank down to rest upon the sand ocean border, where a last out-lying spring of water showed a green track among the rocks. The travellers

soon found themselves in shadow, and by the time the anchors were secured, darkness was falling rapidly. Jerry lighted up two swinging lamps, Tweedie set a folding table for supper, and there were the lads in the midst of the space of the desert—alone.

They stepped out from the car, and stood grazing round, only conversing occasionally in low tones. Presently, a sound caught their ears—a short cough or snort.

"Come inside," said Tweedie, who felt more at home on terra firma than in the air. "It is an animal, but we are quite safe."

They re-entered the car, secured the entrance and lowered the lights, so as to see, without being seen. From the windows they saw the beast approach, alternately crawling and halting, until it was near enough for the feeble lamp-light to be reflected in two coppery-coloured eyes. It was a solitary lion. Coming to his usual drinking place, his keen senses had been attracted by a whiff of something new. As the trio inside remained motionless, the creature crept close alongside and gave the car a pat with his paw, which made the girder vibrate. Then he lay down on his side and began, like a giant cat, to play with the slack chain of one of the anchors; but getting tired of this, began to cruise round on a tour of sniffing inspection.

"I'm afraid we shall have to shut up," murmured Tweedie. "His nocturnal stroll has put an end to ours."

Factor nodded, and he and Jerry pushed to the slides of steel plate which protected the windows inside.

"We're safe enough now," remarked Jerry, "but it's not a pleasant idea to have his inquisitive majesty about us all night. Let's sail away a mile or two."

"All right," answered Tweedie, "but how? Will you just go outside and clear those anchors for us?"

They laughed at Jerry's oversight, though they realised at the same time that they were pro tem. prisoners in the open desert; so they put themselves to bed, listening at first to the "sniff" of the animal outside the walls.

"We have a rifle," said Factor, from between the sheets, "but I don't care to shoot him."

"No," said Tweedie, "let him prow!." The next morning, the boys ascertained that their undesirable visitor had given up any further investigation as unprofitable; and his tracks showed that he had betaken himself to happier hunting grounds; and after an early breakfast, the explorers floated aloft once more, and headed for the north-west. In the course of the following day, they landed in safety once more on Doradee Moor.

## CHAPTER V.

For the next three years, Tom Factor led the kind of life for which he had most sighed. He persuaded his father to let him give up any further education, either at the University, or elsewhere. He refused the contracts and offers made to him by the Geographical and other societies. The Professor shook his head over the neglect of the first; Will Tweedie and Jerry, especially the former, resented at last, the other refusals. But Tom was now first mechanician, and the others could hardly, even if they would, have used or controlled the Banshee and her affairs without him.

Not however, that he was idle. He took scientific men with him—any who cared to trust themselves with him—and other stories may some day be written, of the places they explored, and the adventures they met with.

He visited the Death Valley in California. He rescued some tourists trying to scale a Mexican volcano. He turned Don Quixote when the fancy took him, and conveyed a young American damsel from a convent in the South, where she was being tyrannized over, back to her relations in the north. But apart from his own sweet will, to say the truth, he did little or nothing. He quarrelled with Tweedie, and even with the willing, admiring, Jerry, over claims to some of the large sums of money he could earn, and more seriously over his treatment of the Professor; and Tweedie mortally offended him by reminding him that he could have done little or nothing with the meteorite, without his old friend, who pleaded in vain for more scientific and systematic researches, more "services to the human race," as Factor scornfully called his plans.

But an offer came at last, which, with his love of adventure and novelty, he accepted at once, and Tweedie and Jerry being the only two he could trust with the Banshee, he had to make up his friendship with them and ask them to accompany him. This was nothing less than an offer from the War Office, to employ the Banshee for a special reconnoitering expedition on the Afghan frontier of India, in the midst of a tribal war.

Mr. Factor and the Professor were assured by the authorities that there would be no risk incurred if the youths kept strictly to their instructions; that they should never be out of touch with military aid at their headquarters, and that the British troops were not likely to be engaged at all, as the outbreak was a religious war among outlying tribes. At the same time, the information required was all-important. All three lads pledged themselves to the hilt to be discreet and steady, and at length sailed in triumph for

the northern Indian frontier. After a week at Amritsar, they started one brilliant moonlight night for the outermost British post, over which they found themselves shortly after daybreak.

They descended to pay the lieutenant in command, a morning call, who received them with open arms, and a substantial breakfast; and from his little fort, they overlooked the foot-hills and lower passes away to the unexplored plains beyond. They re-studied their instructions, partly to report events, but chiefly to make sketches and maps of the district; and arranged for their communications by heliograph, which Factor had studied and practised for some time past.

"We cannot imagine that those folk yonder can have any long range fire-arms," remarked the officer, "so you can easily keep out of their hostility." He also fixed a spot known to his native soldiers, to which two or three guides and hill ponies should be sent; and by mid-day the Banshee Car was hovering over a wide plain, several miles in extent, with three large villages, or small cities, within sight. They observed bodies of men on the move; and were hard at work themselves making notes and drawings; but so far from being regarded with enmity, or even alarm, they found that the Banshee was being worshipped as a new and unexpected Spirit in the air, to be propitiated by the opposing camps.

After dark, the three selected a spot in the thicket of a wood; but they did not anchor, though the Banshee rested on the ground. At daybreak they were roused by hearing the most unearthly sounds and trumpeting in the distance; and on rising into the air till they again surveyed the country, they could overlook the tribes advancing to attack each other. Large bodies of priests or "fanatics gone mad," as Jerry called them, led the van, blowing enormous horns, shouting, and dancing round some idols which were being carried out for the occasion. All that morning, the aerial spectators watched a fiercely fought action; and the dispersal as well as later on, the secret re-assembling of the defeated tribes. But the results of the battle, as well as the direction taken by the victorious bands, were unexpected; and after a hurried consultation, the voyagers decided that the Banshee should convey Tweedie and Jerry back to where the ponies were ready, and that they should ride back to the frontier with the information, and to obtain fresh instructions, while Factor should return in the car to watch the doings in the plain, and fetch his companions again when signalled by heliograph.

"I shall be safer alone with the car, than either of you alone up that pass," which was true. "And then when you are back here and

our job is done," he added, "hey for Thibet and the mysteries of Central Asia."

But upon this some discussion arose. Jerry pleaded their promises to the home authorities, both domestic and official, and did not think it sufficient only to report themselves at the frontier post, or Amritsar. Tweedie represented that it would be a waste of opportunity not to return, and make a more useful expedition with a scientific assistant or two, as they had done before.

However, though the dispute waxed warm, there was no time to settle it then and there. They had to sail quickly back to where the guide and ponies were stationed, and Factor saw the little party start safely back to the fort, where they should arrive during the following day; while he himself returned to the hidden place in the forest, where they had spent the previous night. As he was now alone, and had no one to share watch with him, Factor secured the Banshee with her anchors, and turned in. *How little he thought that never again would he loose them!*"

He passed a peaceful night, and was standing outside the car, watching the sun rise over the trees, and truth to say, in a sulky humour at the idea of giving up his scheme "on account of that mean old War Office," when suddenly without sound or warning, two tall fantastically dressed men stood before him, as if they dropped from a tree. Factor started, and instinctively stepped back nearer the car entrance. His visitors, however, politely enough, almost abjectly, and one of them, rather timidly advancing, explained in broken English, that he could interpret, if, as he judged by his dress and appearance, the priest in charge of the God of the Air was an "English foreigner."

As Factor saw that they both regarded the Banshee with awe, he felt pretty safe, provided there were no more of their kind lurking round; and after some parley, he made out that they were asking where the masters of the Air-God were, as they evidently judged him, only a human being, to be an attendant priest. He wished in his own mind, nevertheless, that his anchors had been cleared and the Banshee ready for action; and was meditating what cautious reply to make, and how to avoid provoking their wrath on the foreigner invading their country, and alone, when an idea struck him, and before resisting the temptation, or indeed thinking twice about it, he described the direction and pass by which his companions had departed. Now was his opportunity. There was no possible danger of the little party being overtaken: they would by now be almost at the post; but the men would report the news to their tribe, and occupy the pass and road

between the fort and the point where he was to meet them again, so that they could not attempt to return. And then—and then—why he could sail off on his own account, wander whither he would, return when he chose, and would be free meanwhile from all ties, claims, or interference, until he had doubled his fortune, with sole right to it, and could wander home at his own time. Then he would be reconciled to everyone, and share the Banshee, and do what anyone pleased—provided he had done what he pleased, first. This dream swept through his brain, as the men stood talking to themselves. Then the interpreter, still almost reverently, intimated to him that he should come with them to the nearest height, indicating the brow of a hill about a quarter of a mile away, to show them the route that "his gods had taken, that they might meet them on their return, and obtain from them the promise of victory for the following day, and the help of the Air-god."

Factor turned pale, even though he knew his friends must assuredly be almost at the frontier by now; and that the officer's native troopers would keep him well informed as to the tribesmen's movements. He glanced back at the Banshee, and felt glad now that she *was* securely anchored; then as there was no help for it, he started off to accompany his undesired escort up the hill.

"Let the worst come to the worst," he thought "I *could* manage to get start enough from the fat fellows, I should think, to run back to the Banshee and start her!"

The two priests, as they appeared to be, were stout men, and heavily cumbered with their dress and accoutrements; and they took time even to climb that distance.

From this point of view Factor could show them the broad track winding up to the pass by which the others had gone, and then quietly and respectfully, rather to his surprise, and greatly to his relief, they departed down the further side of the hill, and vanished in the woods below. Tom breathed more freely, and stayed up, partly watching to see them re-appear below, partly thinking out his plan. Would Tweedie and Jerry expect him to sail back to the fort for them? He could swear it was dangerous—any pretext would do—and besides, he *need* not explain, for another year or two! Then he could start, not rising too high, directly northwards from here . . . the gruesome tones of the sacred war horns startled him, and he gazed once more eagerly towards the distant pass. The sound ceased again: then again rang out nearer, and *behind him!* He turned, and a deadly cold grip as of paralysis, seized him.

He could neither move, nor cry out, yet he could mark every detail, count every man, as he looked. Nearly fifty of these devil priests and warriors were formed up around the Banshee herself! And even as he looked, the blows of clubs smote upon his ear, rapid, more rapid, frantic.

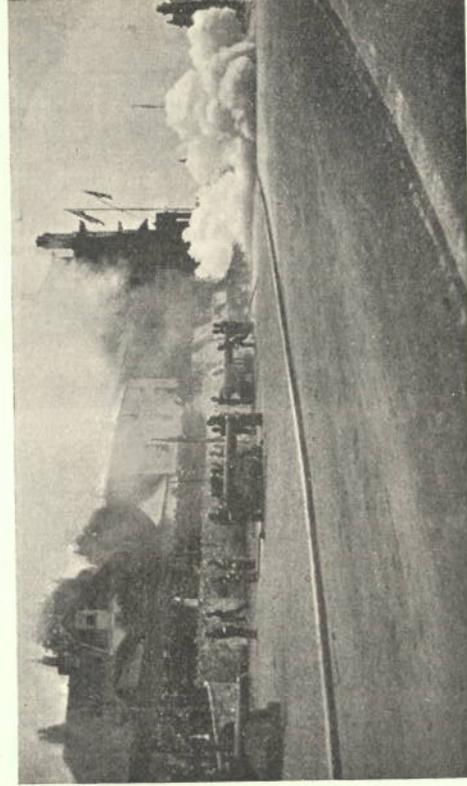
The tribesmen, attributing their defeat of the preceding day, to the strange being which had appeared in the sky, having ascertained that no priest attendant spirits were about, to exercise their power or protect their god's earthly form, had sprung upon it to destroy it, or drive it away. They soon succeeded in doing the latter. As Tom Factor gazed in full consciousness of what must happen, there came a loud shout from the centre of the struggling group—they fell back in dread—a small brown mass—with some wires and other *débris* hanging about it, shot up out of the confusion, and flew up, steadily upwards, into the vault of the sky. And Factor lay on

the hillside, watching the speck as it vanished just as he had watched the other pieces vanish above the roofs of the old quadrangle.

\* \* \* \* \*  
Slowly but safely, Tom Factor made his way during that day, to the meeting-place appointed—on foot.

The principal task was completed; Tweedie and Jerry had carried back the rough drafts and sketches with them. In truth, during these few years, young Factor had made and fairly, a small fortune.

At first, he entered upon his father's profession of mechanical engineer, chiefly marine; but, alas, after the Banshee, all improvements and patents only worried him. He had by him endless material still, from his unique travels; and later on, the prime of his life was given to carrying out exploring and scientific expeditions with his two devoted friend, Will and Jerry, on the lines shown to him by the "Banshee Car."



FIRING A SALUTE.