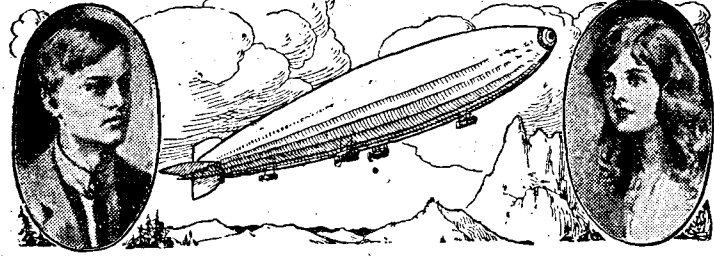


THE SKY RIDERS



A STIRRING TALE OF ADVENTURE ROUND THE WORLD

Told by T. C. Bridges, Author of "Martin Crusoe"

CHAPTER 45

The Wire

"WILL we creep along down it, and see if we can get round the end?" suggested Tim.

"It runs right into the lake," Mr. Trench told him. "And much as I should like to get inside the enclosure, I'd not trust myself in the water. There are beasts there that don't belong in the natural history books."

Cyril shivered slightly. The idea of the deep, dark water and its unknown inhabitants daunted him.

"I suppose there's not a tree left that hangs over the wire anywhere?" he asked.

"There's nothing of the sort," answered the explorer. "I have made sure of that. Kent may find these Karaleks useful as police, but he is not taking any chances of their getting inside. He'd as soon trust a pack of wolves."

"Faith, I don't blame him," said Tim. "Not from what I've seen of them. But what'll we do at all? We can't be sitting here all through the night."

"Upon my word I don't know what to suggest," said Mr. Trench. "Unless, indeed, we try to burrow under the wire."

"It seems the only thing to try," answered Cyril. "But we haven't so much as a spade, and I don't quite know how we are going to do it without one."

"There's plenty of loose wood about," said Mr. Trench. "With my knife we might hew out a couple of rough shovels. After all, the soil is not very hard."

"'Tis that we'll do," said Tim with decision. "And a pity it is that we didn't think of it before."

As he spoke he was groping about in the darkness. Sure enough, the ground was littered with branches and large splinters from the trees which Kent had felled. Much had been burnt, but there was plenty left. Very soon Tim had found a useful length, and their new friend was busy sharpening the end with the blade of his big hunting knife.

At the end of a quarter of an hour it was ready, and Tim took it and set to work. Cyril, meantime, had found a second piece, and this Mr. Trench tackled.

Soon Cyril was busy alongside Tim, and the two made the soft earth fly. Yet it was slow work, for they dared not use a light, and they had to be desperately careful not to touch the wire. From the spark drawn from it by Mr. Trench's knife blade it was quite evident that it carried a very heavy load, enough, probably, to kill, or at any rate stun, anyone who touched it.

Besides that, the soil was full of roots, and the moment they got below the surface they struck a perfect network of them. Mr. Trench had to use his knife to cut them one by one.

An hour passed, and they were not two feet down, and the roots they encountered grew thicker and heavier the farther they went.

Their hands were sore, and perspiration poured down their faces. Into the bargain this low ground by the lake swarmed with mosquitoes of a particularly venomous brand. They bit cruelly. Their hands and faces were almost covered with the detestable insects, and Cyril knew

well enough that the pain and discomfort they caused were the least of the danger, for the bite of these swamp mosquitoes brings malaria, and even worse things, in its train.

It was Tim who stopped and wiped his streaming face.

"Here's a root as thick as my leg and twice as hard," he said. "'Tis an axe we'll be needing to get through it."

"You're right, Tim," agreed Cyril gravely. "This is beyond a knife to cut, and at the present rate it will be daylight before we can finish our tunnel under the wire. What are we to do, Mr. Trench?"

Mr. Trench straightened his aching back.

"I'm very much afraid you are right, Cyril. The job is beyond us without proper tools. We must try and find some place where the ground is free from roots, and, if not, our only chance is to take to the water."

In spite of the heat, Cyril shivered again. The idea of the lake, with its strange inhabitants, was terrifying. Cyril had plenty of pluck to face any danger that he could see, but to swim in that dark water with the risk of being plucked down by some denizen of the depths was enough to terrify anyone.

"Let's try for a softer place first," he said. "If we only could have a light it would be so very much easier."

"Quite so, but a light is out of the question," returned the big man. "Let us move quietly along the wire to the right. I think that, nearer the lake, there may be more open ground."

He moved off slowly, and the boys, carrying their wooden shovels, followed. The ground was rough and covered with stumps, and there was always the danger of running into the wire. They had to go very slowly.

For a couple of minutes, perhaps, they crept forwards. Suddenly from the direction of the lake came a loud splashing sound, and then a deep snort.

Mr. Trench stopped short. The snort was followed by a loud crashing and trampling.

"Steady!" said the explorer. "It's a hippo coming out of the lake. We'd best look out or he may trample right over us. They're clumsy brutes, hippos."

CHAPTER 46

Unexpected Assistance

THOUGH a hippopotamus is not a ferocious animal it is a very big one, and the old bulls are apt to be very queer-tempered. It was not altogether a pleasant situation in which the three found themselves, standing there in the darkness with this monster waddling across the open ground and coming apparently straight towards them.

"We must find cover of some sort," whispered Mr. Trench in Cyril's ear. "Look out for a fallen tree."

They backed away carefully, and presently Cyril stumbled against something in the darkness.

"Here we are," he said. "It's a good big trunk. We can all get behind it."

They did so without delay. "All I wish is 'twas twice as big," muttered Tim.

"Don't trouble yourself," said Mr. Trench. "He'll hardly cross this, even if he bumps into it. In any case, he can see a great deal better than we can."

"What's he after?" asked Tim.

"The green corn they've got planted inside the enclosure. Your friend Kent has made every preparation for a long stay. He has a regular garden inside the wire."

"It must take a good fence to keep out beasts like that," said Cyril, as the trampling sounded nearer. "He must be a whacker. I say—suppose he tackles the fence?"

The words were hardly out of his mouth before a bright flash lit the gloom.

"He's touched it!" said Cyril in a sharp whisper.

No one heard what he said, for next instant came a bellow like nothing on earth, a trumpeting roar worse than that of an angry elephant. It was followed by a tremendous twanging.

"He's into it!" cried Tim. "The baste is into it!"

Into it he was, without a shadow of a doubt. The shock—and even for a beast the size of a hippo the shock must have been a heavy one—had turned his blundering good nature to sudden fury, and Master Hippo had flung the whole of his two or three tons of bone and flesh against the barbed wire fence.

Fresh flashes darted forth, but only for a second. The next, the thick wires parted with a series of resounding twangs, and a deep crunching of uprooted posts.

Tim raised his head.

"Good luck to him! The baste has done the trick. He's finished our job for us. Sure, we've nothing to do but walk right through."

Mr. Trench's heavy hand fell on Tim's shoulder.

"Down, you idiot! Don't you realise that this will bring out every soul in the place?"

He was right. Almost instantly lights flashed out from the land side of the old palace by the lake. A blinding ray came sweeping across from a doorway or window, wheeling across the garden and the open ground behind, casting a white glare on the log behind which the boys and Mr. Trench were hidden, and coming to rest upon the cause of all the disturbance.

Peeping over the rim of their refuge, Cyril was witness of the most amazing spectacle upon which his eyes had ever rested. The hippo, a monster as big as an average elephant, and probably weighing six to seven thousand pounds, had gone through the great six-strand, barbed-wire fence as if it had been so much packthread. But in doing so several strands of the wire had got wrapped around his huge body. Thick as his hide was, the bars had evidently penetrated it, and the smart of them combined with the sharp electric shock, had driven him frantic.

Now he was plunging back towards the lake, dragging half the fence behind him. With every plunge fresh posts went, breaking with cracks like pistol shots, while the coils of loose wire whipped up and down, and twisted afresh around the tortured body of the colossus.

"Keep down!" warned Mr. Trench again. "They'll be shooting in a minute."

CHAPTER 47

Taking Chances

AGAIN he was right. From the front of the palace two rifles opened at once, and a volley of bullets thudded against the mad monster.

If Kent's men had hoped to save their fence they were mistaken. The fresh wounds seemed only to drive the hippo more crazy than before. He fairly galloped towards the lake, raking the posts and wire away as easily, and far more quickly, than a tank would abolish a Hun entanglement. Twice he came down on his head with a thud that shook the ground.

And still the light followed him, the rifles cracked, and the bullets thudded on their living target.

Then he reached the edge of the lake, and with one devastating rush went over. There was a splash like the launching of a battleship, and spray glittered golden in the searchlight's glare. Dead silence followed. The monstrous beast was gone, and with him the better part of a hundred yards of Kent's carefully prepared defence.

Angry voices broke the stillness, and two men came running out to inspect the scene of the damage. The light was no longer on the log, and Cyril ventured to peep over.

They were white men, but hard-faced, ruffianly-looking fellows, dressed in workman's blue overalls. One had a rifle, the other carried a heavy pistol.

"Here's a nice job!" snarled one. "We'll have them blacks in here, a-cutting our throats, next thing we knows. Pretty taking the boss will be in!"

"Tain't our fault, anyway!" returned the other. "So he can't say nothing to us about it."

"Can't he?" retorted number one, who was evidently very much upset. "He'll say we'd ought to have shot the brute afore it started the job. See here, Jonas, we'll have to mend this up some way."

"What—tonight?"

"Yes, tonight!" snapped the other. "There's plenty o' wire inside. We'll run two strands across and connect 'em up with the dynamo. I ain't a-going to have them niggers inside the place, not if I knows it. And there ain't nothing to stop 'em once they get into the garden."

"All right," said the man called Jonas, in a sulky tone. "Tell Ben to keep the light on. I'll come along and help you get out the wire."

The pair turned, and went back towards the pillared doorway of the palace.

Cyril was on his feet in a flash. "Now's our chance, Mr. Trench!" he whispered sharply.

"To get in, you mean?"

"Yes, they'll be some minutes getting that wire. We shall have plenty of time to slip through into the garden before they come out again."

"I believe you are right," replied the big man quietly. "Come along then. But if the searchlight shifts drop quickly."

Rising to his feet, he stepped over the log, and led the way. Cyril followed, and, close behind, Tim. Cyril's heart was thumping, but with excitement, not fright.

TO BE CONTINUED

NOTES AND QUERIES

What does K.B. mean? The initials K.B. after a man's name mean that he is a Knight of the Order of the Bath.

What is a Fabian? A Fabian is one who in a contest seeks to wear out his opponent by dilatory tactics, just as Fabius Maximus, the Roman general, weakened and harassed Hannibal by marches and counter-marches without any fixed battles. The Fabian Society is an English Socialist organisation.

What is the Pax Americana? The Pax Americana is a term used for the peace which it is believed President Wilson would have arranged if he had had an absolutely free hand and had not had to consider the English, French, and other claims.

What is the Board of Green Cloth? It is a committee, with the Lord Steward as chief, which controls the King's household and passes all accounts. It formerly sat round a table covered with green cloth.

Five-Minute Story

THE MUFF

"WHAT a muff he is!" "Always mugging away at maths!"

"I believe he'd rather read history than play footer!"

"I hate a fellow that isn't a sport!"

These remarks were made by a group of boys coming out of school one summer afternoon, and the object of their scorn was walking in front of them—a slight, pale boy, with a pile of school books under his arm.

"Let's give him a ducking. It will soak some of the learning out of him!"

It was little Miggs who spoke; and he was not one who wasted much time in learning.

"Good idea!" cried half-a-dozen voices. "We have to pass the river, and so does Miss Muff."

"It won't be much sport for us if he drowns," remonstrated Adams minor.

"Drown!—why, it's not two feet deep near the edge where we'll dump him."

No sooner was the plan made than they began to put it into execution. The conspirators followed their victims' footsteps stealthily, for when he reached the narrow path on the river bank they meant to fall on him with horrid war-cries, and toss him and his hated school-books into the muddy water.

There was an old stone bridge over the river—a favourite place for anglers, and naughty little boys who often climbed the stone parapet at the risk of their lives.

There were children on this bridge at the very moment they all came round the narrow path, and suddenly a piercing cry rang out, and there was a heavy splash into the deep water.

One of the little boys had fallen in at last. Everybody stood still for a second, and then the boy who could only "mug at maths," threw his books on to the ground, tore off his coat, and plunged into the deep, black river, swimming with bold, swift strokes to the sinking child.

His persecutors stood watching breathlessly, and a cheer rose from a group of old men on the bridge as the swimmer grasped the drowning child, and began to return more slowly.

It was then that the watching schoolboys waded deeply into the water, cheering loudly, and stretching out helping hands.

"Well!" they gasped. "So you can swim!"

"Swim! I could swim before I could talk, youngster. And I'll give you fellows some lessons when I'm through with this scholarship. Nice for that kid if he'd been left to drown!" He looked ruefully at his books. "Anyway, I've got to work first. I'm not so rich as some of you chaps!"

He turned homewards, but a dozen hands seized him.

"I say, old fellow, you've got to be chaired home on our shoulders, for we're proud to know such a jolly good sport!"