

# **A DESPERATE ADVENTURE**

Max Adeler

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WANTED, four persons who are bent upon committing suicide, to engage in a hazardous adventure. Apply, etc., to Captain Cowgill, No. , Blank Street, after nine o' clock in the morning.

CAPTAIN COWGILL inserted the above advertisement in three of the morning papers, with only a faint expectation that it would be responded to. But the result was that between nine o'clock and noon five men and two women called at his office to inquire respecting the nature of the proposed adventure, and to offer their services in the event that it should involve nothing of a criminal character. Of these seven, Captain Cowgill selected four, three men and one young woman; and when he had dismissed the others, he shut the door and said to the four applicants:

"What I wanted you for was this: I have made up my mind that the North Pole can never be reached by an exploring party travelling upon ships and sledges. The only route that is possibly practicable is through the air, and the only available vehicle, of course, is a balloon. But an attempt to reach the Pole in a balloon must expose the explorers to desperate risks, and it occurred to me that those risks had better be taken by persons who do not value their lives, than by persons who do. It has always seemed to me that a part of the sin of suicide lies in the fact that the life wantonly sacrificed might have been expended in a cause which would have conferred benefits, directly or indirectly, upon the human race. I have a large and superbly equipped balloon, which will be thoroughly stocked for a voyage to the Arctic regions, and, among other things, it will contain apparatus for making fresh supplies of hydrogen gas. Are you four persons willing to make the required attempt in this balloon?"

All four of the visitors answered, "Yes."

"Were you going to sacrifice your lives, at any rate?"

An affirmative answer was given by the four.

"Permit me to take your names," said Captain Cowgill, and he wrote them down as follows:

WILLIAM P. CRUTTER, DR. HENRY O'HAGAN, EDMOND JARNVILLE, MARY DERMOTT. Mr. Crutter was a man apparently of about sixty years, handsomely dressed, manifestly a gentleman, but with a flushed face which indicated that he had perhaps indulged to some extent in dissipation.

Dr. O'Hagan was thin, pallid, and careworn. He looked as if he were ill, and as if all joy were dead in his heart.

Mr. Jarnville appeared to be a working-man, but his countenance, sad as it was, was full of intelligence, and his manner was that of a man who had occupied a social position much above the lowest.

Miss Dermott sat, with an air of dejection, her hands in her lap, a thin and faded shawl pinned about her, and with her pale cheeks suggestive of hunger and mental suffering.

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"My hope," said Captain Cowgill, "is that you will safely reach your destination, and safely return. But you fully understand that the chances are against you. For my own protection I will ask you to certify in writing that you go with full knowledge of the risks. I will inflate the balloon to-morrow. Day after to-morrow come to this office at nine o'clock, and you shall then make the ascent at once."

On the appointed day the four volunteers appeared and Captain Cowgill drove with them, in a carriage, to a yard in the outskirts of the city, where the balloon, inflated and swaying to and fro in the wind, was held to the earth with stout ropes. The three men were supplied with warm clothing, but Miss Dermott had only her threadbare shawl, and so Captain Cowgill gave her his overcoat, and two blankets which he took from the carriage.

While the voyagers were taking their places in the commodious car attached to the balloon, a young man entered the yard and hurriedly approached Captain Cowgill.

"I am going with the balloon," he said, almost fiercely, and hardly deigning to look at the Captain.

"Impossible!" said the Captain. "The crew is made up. You don't comprehend our purpose."

"Yes I do," said the young man. "These people are would-be suicides and they are starting for the Pole. I am going along."

"But my dear sir " began the Captain in a tone of expostulation.

"I will go, or I will slay myself right here before you! These people are not any more tired of life than I am."

"Let him come," said Dr. O'Hagan, gloomily.

"But," returned Captain Cowgill, "I am afraid the balloon will be overloaded.

"I am going, anyhow," said the young man, as he leaped into the car.

Captain Cowgill sighed, and said, "Well, have your own way about it."

"My name is John Winden," remarked the intruder. "I tell you, so that you will know if any one inquires after me. But I don't imagine anybody will."

Then Captain Cowgill bade farewell to the party, the ropes were loosed, and the balloon went sailing swiftly towards the clouds.

Dr. O'Hagan was the navigator in charge. Presently a north-easterly current of wind struck the air-ship, and it began to move with great rapidity upon a horizontal line.

For a long time nobody in the car spoke. Indeed, the voyagers scarcely looked at each other; and none had enough curiosity to peer over the side upon the glorious landscape that lay beneath.

But, after awhile, Mr. Crutter, gazing at Miss Dermott, said:

"Are you fully resolved upon self-destruction?"

"Yes," she replied.

"So am I," said Mr. Crutter.

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"So am I," remarked Mr. Winden.

"So am I," observed Mr. Jarnville.

"And I, also," added Dr. O'Hagan.

"Even if we reach the Pole safely, and return, I shall not want to live," said Mr. Crutter.

"Neither shall I," said Miss Dermott.

"Nor I," remarked Mr. Winden.

"Nor I," added Dr. O'Hagan and Mr. Jarnville in a breath.

Then there was silence for the space of half an hour or more.

Mr. Crutter then remarked: "Do you know, I find this to be rather a pleasant experience, sailing along here through the ether, calmly, far above the distractions of the world? If I were not so miserable I think I should really enjoy it!"

"I am too unhappy to enjoy anything," said Miss Dermott; "but this, I confess, is not unpleasant."

"Pleasant enough," remarked Mr. Winden, "if a man had no anguish in his soul."

"I had no idea that there was so much exhilaration in the upper regions of the atmosphere," said Dr. O'Hagan, rather cheerily.

"I think I feel better, myself," said Mr. Jarnville.

"It is very strange," observed Mr. Crutter, addressing Miss Dermott, "that young people, like you and Mr. Winden here, should be weary of life. That an old man like me should long for death is comprehensible. But why do you wish to die?"

Neither Mr. Winden nor Miss Dermott made any response.

"I'll tell you," said Dr. O'Hagan, throwing a bag of ballast overboard, to check the descent of the balloon. "We are all going to destruction together; and why should we not, as companions in misery, unfold our griefs to each other?"

"It would be very proper, I think," said Mr. Crutter; "and I will begin if the rest will consent to follow."

The other four travellers agreed to do so.

"Well, I haven't much to tell," said Mr. Crutter. "The fact is, I have always had plenty of money with which to live in idleness and luxury, and I have so lived. I have tried every kind of pleasure life can afford and money buy, and I have reached a condition of satiety. Moreover, I have ruined my digestion, and I am now a sufferer from chronic dyspepsia of a horrible kind. This makes existence a burden. I am eager to quit it. That is the whole story."

"How strange the difference between us!" said Dr. O'Hagan. "I have been deeply engaged in the practice of my profession for many years; and I am utterly worn-out and broken-down with overwork. I am nervous, exhausted, irritable, and wretched, but I have lost my savings in a speculative venture, and cannot rest. I must either work or

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die."

"That is partly my case," said Miss Dermott. "I am friendless and poor. I cannot earn enough by sewing to buy sufficient food, and I can no longer face the misery that I have endured for so many years. I prefer death a thousand times."

"And I," said Mr. Jarnville, "am a disappointed inventor. I have for years laboured upon the construction of a smoke-consumer, but now that it is done, I have not money enough to pay for a patent; and I am starving. After trying everywhere to obtain assistance, I have resolved to give up the struggle and to find refuge in the grave."

Mr. Winden cleared his throat once or twice before beginning his story. He seemed to labour under some embarrassment. "The truth is," he said, "I was rejected last night by a young lady whom I love, and I made up my mind that life without her would not be worth having."

Nobody spoke for some time, and then Dr. O'Hagan said: "The balloon is falling, and, instead of throwing out ballast, I think it might be better, perhaps, to let it come down and to tie it to a tree, and make a fresh start with additional gas in the morning."

The other aeronauts gave their approval to this plan, and Dr. O'Hagan threw out the grapnel. It caught upon a tree top, and after some difficulty the balloon was brought down and tied fast, while the whole party stepped out of the car.

It was a wild and desolate place, but the four men soon started a fire, and while Mr. Winden and Mr. Jarnville prepared supper, Dr. O'Hagan and Mr. Crutter went to work to arrange some kind of shelter for Miss Dermott for the night.

After supper the five people gathered about the fire, and there really seemed to be a growth of cheerfulness in the party.

"I've been thinking," said Mr. Crutter, "what an outrageous shame it is that this poor child here," pointing to Miss Dermott should actually be in want of food, while I have more money than I know what to do with. I'll tell you what, Miss Dermott, if you will agree to go back you can have my whole fortune. I've left it to an asylum, but I'll write a new will now, and tell you where you can find the other one, so as to tear it up."

"I don't want to go back," said Miss Dermott.

"I would if I were you," said Mr. Winden. "It's a shame for you to go upon such an awful journey as this. And I've been thinking Mr. Jarnville, since you spoke about your smoke-consumer, that my father, who is a wealthy iron-mill owner, has offered a large reward for a perfect contrivance of that sort. If yours is a good one, he will help you to a fortune."

"I wish I had known that yesterday," said Mr. Jarnville

"Yes," said Dr. O'Hagan, "and if I had known that Mr. Crutter here was being driven to suicide by dyspepsia, I could have helped him, for I have been very successful in treating that complaint. Let me examine you, Mr. Crutter. Yes," said the doctor, after expending a few moments looking at and talking to Mr. Crutter, "I feel certain I can cure you."

"I would have given you half my fortune yesterday for such an assurance," said Mr. Crutter. "But it is now too late."

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"If I had met you then," said the Doctor, "I should not have been here now."

"Can't we all go back again?" asked Mr. Jarnville.

"Impossible!" said Dr. O'Hagan.

"I've got nothing to go back for," said Mr. Winden. "There is no remedy for my trouble, that I can perceive."

"There are other young ladies who could make good wives," said Mr. Crutter.

"Oh, I know, but " said Mr. Winden hesitating, and looking furtively at Miss Dermott. Miss Dermott blushed.

"Suppose we rest for the night and sleep on the matter," said Dr. O'Hagan. "There's no use being in a hurry."

Miss Dermott retired to sleep beneath a shelter of boughs where were strewn some pine and hemlock branches. Dr. O'Hagan covered her carefully with the blankets, and then the four men stretched themselves by the fire and fell asleep.

The conversation between the travellers must inevitably have had a good effect. The surest remedy for a morbid propensity to brood over our own troubles is to have our sympathy excited for the troubles of other people. After breakfast in the morning Mr. Crutter:

"I have solemnly considered all that was said last night, and I have a proposition to make. Dr. O'Hagan, if you will return with Miss Dermott and Mr. Jarnville, you three may divide my fortune between you, and Mr. Winden can give a letter to his father to Mr. Jarnville, about the smoke-consumer; and dear Mr. Winden and I will continue this journey together. How will that do?"

"I am willing to drop off and return," said Mr. Jarnville.

"I will go only on condition you will go also," said Dr. O'Hagan. "I will make you a well man if you agree."

"But," said Mr. Crutter, "it would be a shame to leave Winden here alone with this balloon. No; I have had enough of life. I'll proceed on the voyage."

"There is a good deal of force in what the Doctor says, though," remarked Mr. Winden.

"Why, you are not thinking about backing out, too, are you?" inquired Mr. Crutter.

"Well, I don't know," said Mr. Winden, looking half ashamed. "It seemed to me last night, when I got to thinking about it, that a woman's scorn is hardly worth a man's life, and I "

"You're right!" said Mr. Crutter. "It isn't. Suppose we put the matter in this way: If Dr. O'Hagan cures me, I will pay him fifty thousand dollars in cash, and I will go into partnership with Mr. Jarnville in his invention. We can see your father about it, and you can return to him while I adopt Miss Dermott as my daughter!"

"I had thought," said Mr. Winden, "of a slightly different plan, but possibly it could not be carried out."

"What was that?" asked Dr. O'Hagan.

"Why," said Mr. Winden, "I thought, perhaps But, no! there is no use of mentioning it."

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"Out with it," said Mr. Crutter. "We want the opinions of all hands."

"I did think," said Mr. Winden, "that possibly Miss Dermott instead of becoming your daughter would consent to become my wife. Would you entertain such a proposition, Miss Dermott?"

Miss Dermott hung her head, and seemed to be covered with confusion. "I will think about it," she said.

"That means she will give her consent," said Mr. Crutter, smiling. "Let her come with me while she is thinking the matter over. Are you all agreed to my plan?" Everybody expressed assent to it, and everybody seemed very happy.

"Why, what is that?" suddenly exclaimed Miss Dermott, pointing to a distant object above them.

"I verily believe that is our balloon," said Dr. O'Hagan. "Yes, it is gone! it must have broken loose while we were at breakfast."

"Oh, well," said Mr. Crutter, "let it go! Who cares! I'll pay Captain Cowgill for his losses. And now let us see about getting home."

Mr. Winden and Mr. Jarnville started to hunt for a conveyance, and in about two hours they returned with one. The nearest railway station was thirteen miles away, but in two more hours the party reached it, and while Mr. Crutter purchased tickets for the coming train, Dr. O'Hagan went into the telegraph office and sent the following despatch:

"Captain W.A. Cowgill.

Balloon escaped. Party all safe perfectly happy.  
Will reach home to-morrow morning.

(Signed) HENRY O'HAGAN."