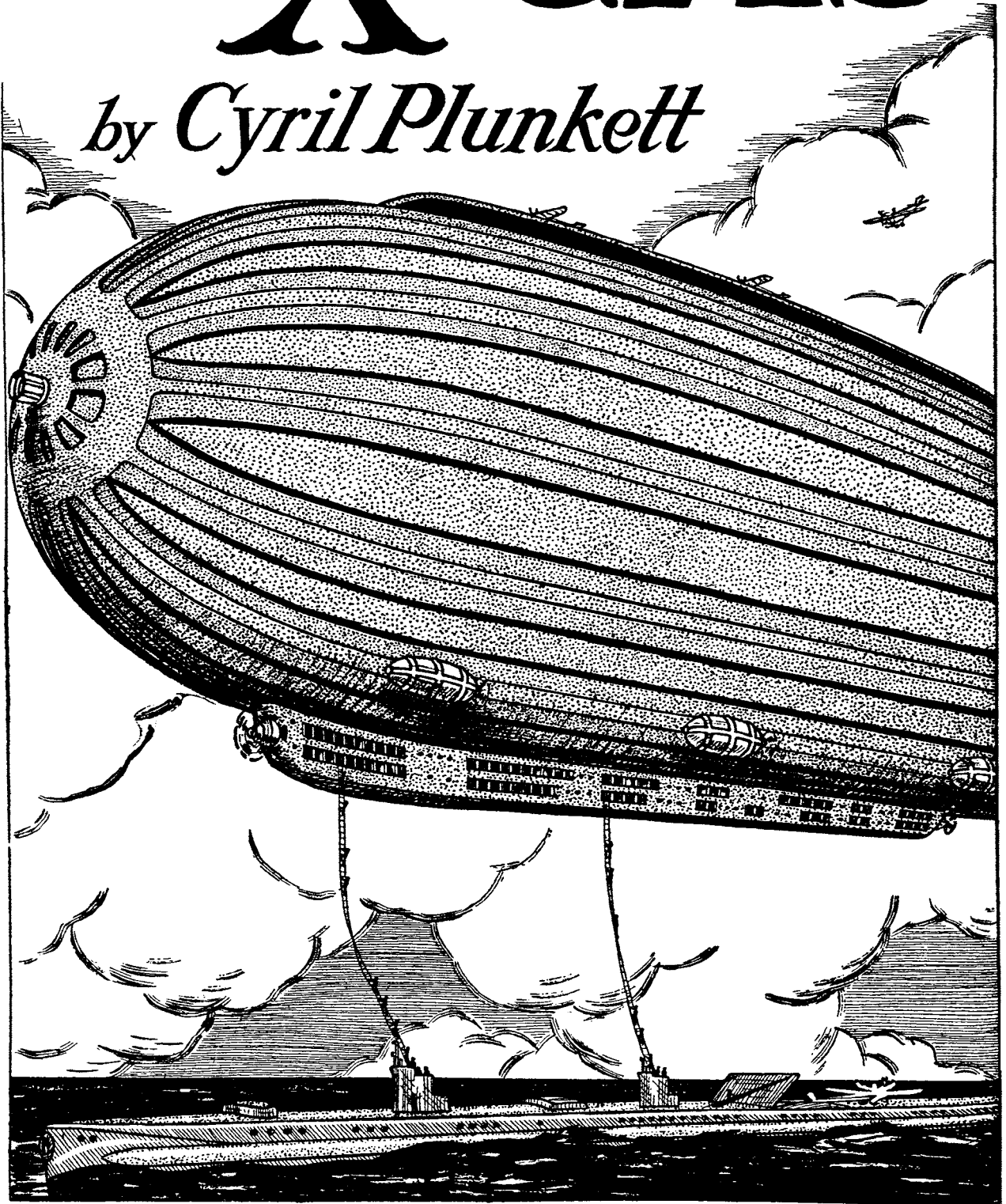


The X GAS

by Cyril Plunkett



(Illustration by Winter)

The ship drifted lower and lower. Two ladders were lowered and they swarmed upward: hard, evil-looking creatures. All were heavily armed. The lives of the entire crew were at stake.

COMMANDER MONTFORT glanced impatiently at his watch and turned again to the three Brazilian envoys.

"My Lieutenant Commander is late. We are already due to sail. However," he looked out of the window of the control cabin and continued slowly, "I might use the waiting time showing you further around the dirigible."

The three foreigners bowed. Relvuez, their spokesman, stepped forward.

"I should enjoy hearing more of your unique X-Gas. We are vitally interested."

Montfort smiled.

"No doubt you are. I'm sorry, Relvuez, but I can give you but little information on that point. Even if I knew the properties of this gas, which I do not, I would not dare impart them to you. Two years ago, in 1947, the American chemist Dunkley announced his discovery. He naturally turned it over immediately to the United States Government and it called by the simple letter "X" to denote, intensify and publicize its mysteriousness. I might add that had we had this weapon five years ago, the war with your country would have been of much shorter duration."

Relvuez bowed again. "And perhaps you would even now be conveying a larger amount of gold back to Washington," he said.

Montfort smiled.

"A war debt is, after all, a war debt. And this trip and the transportation of part of the half billion in gold in the mighty C-49 is another gentle hint against any more foolishness on the part of your government."

The Brazilians did not reply. An officer passed the door of the cabin. Montfort hailed him.

"Has Lieutenant Grennen arrived yet?" he asked.

"No sir," replied the officer.

Montfort again looked at his watch and frowned. He was about to speak when Relvuez interrupted him.

"But the principles of the X-Gas...?"

"Ah, yes," Montfort nodded, "that I can explain. If you will follow me, gentlemen."

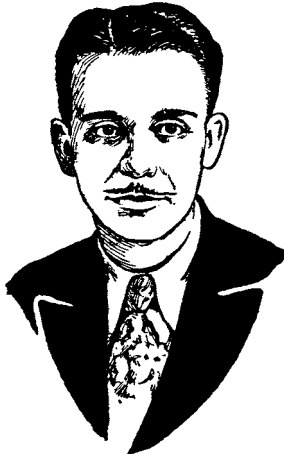
He left the cabin and walked down the narrow companion way to the observation deck.

"You will note," he began, "that we have not deviated greatly from the early Zeppelin construction. The so-called bag, however, is smaller in width, manufactured of flexible lumalloy which is proof against storm, lightning, and, in fact, everything except explosives. That is our one vulnerable point—offset by the fact that we can easily navigate at a height of ten miles, at which height shells are notoriously inaccurate. Our

vulnerability is therefore negligible. The bag is divided into compartments, ten of them. Six may be destroyed with little result. We generate our own gas, and can remain aloft one month without renewing the chemicals.

"Moreover, the gas can be, and is, burned. The special motor of this ship is the first to be used and it is similar to the Diesel engine still popularly used in airplanes. The gas is used as fuel, eliminating all sound save for a faint hissing, and guaranteeing four thousand horsepower for each engine. Since we have eight of these motors you can realize that our high speed of five hundred miles per hour is not impossible. The front and rear motors are attached to

the cabin of the ship. The others, three on each side, are set in gondolas hanging from the bag. These are armored, and so placed for two reasons: First, they protect the vital points of the ship; secondly, the vapor thrown off in



CYRIL PLUNKETT

RECENT developments have shown that there is practically no limit to the size to which dirigibles may be constructed.

The invention and use of new metal alloys with which to cover the dirigible will give it greater and greater stability, and extend by a good measure its operating possibilities.

Of course, the dirigible's field of operation in war is limited because the larger it becomes, the more of a target it makes for the enemy artillery. To offset this, the dirigible can rise to great heights and therefore remain out of range of enemy aircraft. Mr. Plunkett in his thrilling story has shown us what the menace of a dirigible might be.

His story is simply filled with scientific incidents; and he shows in quite a dramatic fashion how in future warfare, waged between either individuals or nations, a new scientific device may suddenly turn the tide of battle.

Mr. Plunkett is a new author and he makes his entry into the field of science fiction in a very convincing manner.

quantities by the engines is dangerous. Eight engines attached to the ship would inconvenience us to the extent of forcing us to wear masks continuously, which would detract from our efficiency. In a lesser degree, these vapors are harmless. We have, therefore, utilized the gas in small quantities within the ship. The controls, the hatches and elevator, and the disappearing guns, or rather their carriages, are automatically operated."

"You have guns?" Relvuez asked.

"Certainly, for close work with any fortified area we are equipped with light guns. Personally, I don't think these were necessary since the X-Gas may be released upon our foes with dreadful results. It causes a thin, yellowing, impenetrable haze and, contrary to ordinary principles, *does not rise!* The world is therefore pretty much at our mercy. We can release this gas at a ten mile altitude, and I know of no craft now built that can successfully remain aloft and resist us ten miles from earth."

An Unpardonable Offense

THE three looked at each other and nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Lastly," Montfort continued, "the bag is flat on the top and can receive or discharge planes. Since the surface is more than one thousand feet in length and two hundred in width we accommodate half a dozen large planes with ease. But contrary to popular thought, these planes with which we shall later be equipped will serve little purpose in warfare. Scouting is a thing of the past because of our new *teletina*, the secret of which is jealously guarded. I might add that it is entirely unaffected by nullifiers or radio or light rays such as might blind the human eye. It can, however, nullify itself, and so isolate the ship even from others of its kind. So you see, planes shall be used like the dory of old. In fact..." He stopped suddenly. There was a faint hissing from below.

A red light appeared on the auxiliary control board on the observation platform, flashed twice, and burned steadily.

"Lieutenant Grennen," Montfort said shortly. "Come, gentlemen, we will return to the cabin."

Below decks two sailors stood beside a very rumpled and disreputable looking young man. Save for their presence he could not have remained standing. His curly blond hair lay wet and matted over his forehead. His blue eyes appeared dull. As

Montfort approached he passed his hand uncertainly before them, striving it seemed to brush away some disagreeable remembrance.

"Lieutenant Grennen!" Montfort thundered.

Grennen strove desperately to stand erect. He raised his arm to salute, but it fell numbly to his side. His mouth twitched. He wet his lips.

"Have you an explanation, sir?" Montfort continued harshly.

Grennen found his tongue. His words came forth haltingly, slowly, painstakingly.

"I have been the victim of foul play, sir. I was about to return to the ship, I think three hours ago, when I was accosted by two strangers. They appeared to know me and requested that we lunch together. We entered a place and ..."

Montfort sniffed knowingly.

"And became drunk together!" he interrupted witheringly. "*Mister* Grennen, I am disappointed and disgusted with you. You are guilty of conduct unbecoming an officer and gentleman. You furthermore caused the ship's delay, which is unpardonable. You will go below, *under arrest!*"

Grennen recoiled as if struck. For the moment his shoulders drooped, his eyes seemed mutely to plead. Then he straightened. This time he saluted.

"Yes sir," he said.

Montfort turned to the three Brazilians who had stood silently watching, and shrugged, dismissing the affair. But to Grennen, his mind still hazy, his disgrace began to loom up tremendously. He entered the elevator with his escort. The car sank noiselessly downward, stopping at the lower deck. One of the sailors asked instructions of an officer and was directed to the stern. A small door was opened and Grennen shoved into an unused storeroom. The door swung shut, the latch caught, and he was alone.

He sat down on a bench and groaned. Not even to be allowed his own quarters! A virtual prison! His head throbbed and ached. He rose and walked to the tiny window, opened it and gratefully gulped in the air. The ship vibrated slightly, there was a gentle hissing and it began to rise swiftly. Grennen stood by the window as they glided gracefully out over the ocean. The land faded quickly into the distance, and with it seemed to go the last of his hopes. Soon, too soon, they would reach Washington, a court martial and dismissal from the service would inevitably follow—a stigma he could never live down. He shook his head sadly. His life would be forever ruined.

To understand Grennen's feeling of inevitable

disgrace, one must recollect the change in social affairs and moral ideas that had occurred.

With the close of nineteen-forty the crime problem had seemed forever solved. Science had succeeded, through a photostatic arrangement, in detecting criminal tendencies in the brain of a person beyond the age of puberty. At first, the claims made for the new device were deemed impossible; but its proved success had caused its almost universal use these last nine years. The device was based on the idea that the brain at this age contained every incentive which might later develop into unsocial conduct, or criminal tendencies. These incentives or tendencies could be recorded, and the unusual youth or girl then carefully watched and trained until it was certain that the tendency was overcome. The theory of heredity as previously propounded was therefore agreeably changed. Hardened criminals were soon rounded up, and any deviation from the straight and narrow path gradually came to be looked upon, not with shock, but with contempt. With this change came new social ideas. To drink at all was to lose dignity ... in the service it was not tolerated. Drinking and stealing were classed as similar offenses against society. The charge which Montfort would register would mean, therefore, that he, Grennen, would be forever an outcast if he escaped a jail sentence.

He left the window and sat down. With the rush of air his head had cleared somewhat. He was able to think more clearly now, to reconstruct the events of the last few hours—at least those up to the time he had met and dined with the strangers.

They had, as he had said, appeared to know him. Rather than cause them any discomfiture, he had agreed to lunch with them. There had been a peculiar drink, having a strange taste, he remembered that now, served with the meal. Try as he would, he could remember nothing further except that he had talked much, and had finally sunk into unconsciousness. The next thing he knew he was stumbling toward the port to meet Montfort...and disgrace.

The Submarine

AN hour passed and Grennen's misery was in no way alleviated. The ship's bell rang for dinner. Soon steps sounded outside the door. It was opened and a tray was handed him. Grennen looked up

eagerly.

"Can you tell me..." he began but stopped quickly for the other's lips had curled and without a word the guard had turned and left the room.

Grennen sank back on his bench. His own men were cutting him. He sighed. He ate sparingly. The food was tasteless to him, and once again he turned to the window. The speed of the great ship had diminished by half. They were now traveling northward at but two hundred and fifty miles per hour, and much lower than usual, not more than six thousand feet. Far below he could see the ocean. Suddenly a speck caught his eye. Powerful glasses hung by the window. He grabbed them and trained them on the speck below. It was a submarine just coming to the surface. Its tower opened and men poured out onto the deck. Oddly, *they did not once raise their heads!* The *C-49* was easily distinguishable at its present height and Grennen wondered at their lack of interest. He endeavored to determine the ship's nationality, but it showed no sign or colors. He frowned. It was directly beneath them now and seemed to leap ahead at increased speed. He decided it was traveling at about seventy-five miles an hour. From the way in which it *rode* the waves containing millions of drops of water—each a natural self lubricated ball bearing—he judged it could easily attain the terrific surface speed of more than one hundred miles per hour. He was about to turn from the window when a shadow passed over him. The sun, sinking in the west, had been momentarily obscured. This time Grennen looked up. Four planes were circling over the ship.

He brought the glasses up, but as the planes were armored, he could not see within their slotted cabins. He judged them to carry four men each, and estimated their whining, nearly soundless motors capable of a speed of three hundred miles. They were equipped with the standard helicoptic propeller to facilitate their landing in a hundred foot area. They appeared to be signaling the *C-49*. Grennen's view was obstructed by the port gondolas so he could not catch the signals; but presently the dirigible slowed and a moment later he felt a thud as the first of the four planes touched the bag overhead. They were landing!

Grennen's forehead wrinkled in perplexity. Roughly, he decided they were about six hundred miles east of Panama, perhaps much to the south of this. The planes could conceivably belong to the U. S. Navy, except that they were in no way marked. It followed, therefore, that this might be a naval manoeuver, the orders for which had been radioed

in. Still...but Montfort would not stand by unless he had orders!

The four planes had landed, but the *C-49* did not pick up speed. Grennen paced the floor. It was in a moment such as this that his disgrace hit him acutely. He should be now in the control cabin, directing the ship while Montfort received the visitors. He should be sitting at his desk while navigator and pilot would await his orders. Instead...he was under arrest, and through no fault of his. He had not been drunk; he had been drugged. But Montfort would not believe it. An inquiry would not prove it.

His thoughts were interrupted suddenly by a rush of feet on the deck above. Grennen strained his ears. That would mean the strangers had descended in the elevator. They would walk forward to the control cabin; Montfort would receive them; they would exchange a few polite words and... He stiffened. Without warning, bedlam broke out above him; cries, hoarse, terror-stricken shouts. What could that mean? He fancied he could hear the click of the silencer guns; most certainly the repeated thuds were the spattering of flying bullets! Grennen doubled his fists and his blue eyes flashed. Could these strangers be actually capturing the ship? He rushed to the door and threw his weight against it. It held. Again and again he tried, but without success. He must break free. Every man was needed above.

He looked out of the window. The ship was settling down closer and closer to the ocean's surface. It was a bare thousand feet high now.

The outbreak ceased as quickly as it had begun. What of the motormen in the gondolas, the mechanics below decks? Could they save the ship or were they also held at bay? A passing shadow caused him again to look up. He counted five bodies being flung into the sea. These were the field men from above. Murder! Wholesale murder! Sixteen men had conquered this super-dreadnaught of the air! It was unbelievable. There was trickery here. They had, somehow, cleverly gotten around the cock-sure pompous Montfort. Even so, could sixteen men operate this great air liner? And what would they do with her? The money aboard, the millions in gold.... He could understand that, but... The *C-49* began to settle rapidly. Beneath them was the submarine they had so recently passed.

The men on its deck seemed waiting eagerly now. Two ladders were lowered and they swarmed upward; hard, evil looking creatures. All were heavily armed. The lives of the entire crew were at stake. These murderers would stop at nothing.

Montfort must have been mad not to resist attack, foresee what would happen and forestall them; or else these pirates were shrewd. Grennen could only guess how they had accomplished their mission, Montfort had, of course, received them in his cabin. The control cabin was just ahead. It was but a step to it, and, once there half their task was accomplished. Undoubtedly the *teleretina* experts and radio men had been deceived with a fake message and overpowered. Perhaps the crew had not even been armed, or within immediate reach of arms. And with the control room in the pirates' hands, the terrible gases were useless. The ship was isolated and captured.

Grennen Resolves

THE last of the men below had climbed aloft. The submarine turned westward and slipped beneath the waves. The dirigible, hissing softly, began to rise. Men were running about the companionways. There was another spatter of lead, probably the crew's last rally...and surely without success. Grennen cursed. He could do nothing, nothing. He sat down. The motors hissed. The giant ship turned and headed westward in the wake of the submerged submarine. Grennen's mind began to work swiftly. They were bound, doubtless, for Bolivia, or the wilds of Paraguay. Once over the jungle they were safe from detection. It would be hours before the Navy Department would begin to worry over the *C-49's* absence. Radio and visual communication were of course already broken, This would as yet, cause the government no fear. The duplicate set in Washington had a range of but one thousand miles. Even later, when they failed to pick up the ship, they would think the *teleretino* had been temporarily broken. They would never dream its nullifiers were at work against its own government though the ship was within range.

And when, finally, suspicion did come—what could the United States do? If these men had a clearing in the jungle they could take days in removing the gold which they had doubtlessly captured the ship for. Though a navy scout should finally spot them and return with hordes of planes, the *C-49* would emerge supreme. There was not another ship built that could defeat it. Why, equipped as it was for a month's voyage, and with its high speed, it could subdue half the world! Subdue the world! Perhaps that was their goal. But

it was too fanciful, too absurd. Yet what was absurd about it? The X-Gas would place whole countries at the bandits' mercy. It would kill thousands at a stroke. Planes would fall like flies before it, and the giant would ride safely above it all. Masks were useless, except the few with which its inventor Dunkley and his aides were equipped. Dunkley was at Lakehurst, supervising the building of a sister ship which would not be finished for months. Could it be true, this wild thought? Grennen hoped profoundly it was not.

He ran his hands through his thick blond hair. His eyes glinted and his mouth became firm. Of the entire crew, he alone remained free. True, he was a prisoner but the pirates at least did not know of his presence. He turned his thoughts immediately upon a means to escape. If he succeeded in gaining his freedom it might mean death at the hands of these murderers. Yet, if he remained where he was when the *C-49* was saved, he would be court-martialed and disgraced. To a navy man death is infinitely sweeter. Disgraced for life. An outcast. Never! He would die first; but die in battle, die in an attempt to save his ship.

He slipped off his tunic and shirt. He did not wish to be hampered by clothes, for this was to be a battle to the death with all the odds against him. The storeroom in which he was locked was in the stern of the ship. The rooms just next to his contained the explosives, and the bomb magazine; both on the lower deck. If he could gain his freedom and reach the magazine... then the companionway and elevator... The crew was doubtless penned in the bow, on this same deck. The pirates would be careless now. With four or five of the crew to aid him, with his knowledge of the ship and with access to the magazine they might successfully negotiate the elevator and reach the upper deck. Hadn't the ship been captured with but sixteen men?

Once within the control cabin, they were certain of victory. The ship could be destroyed as a last resort... with the X-Gas!

He cast his eyes about the room for some kind of weapon. He spied a heavy wrench. His hands closed over it lovingly. His lips opened in a smile, but a smile of ruthless determination. He returned to the door. Listening carefully, he soon heard steps from without, the steps of a single man. He tapped softly. The steps ceased. For a moment there was no sound save the faint hissing of the motors. Grennen's nails bit deep into his hands. The man must come to the door. He thrilled suddenly. The

steps had moved toward him! The door was fitted with a latch. Anyone could open it from outside. The latch lifted. The door opened slightly. Grennen leaned far back of the door. A black, dirty head was thrust inside. The wrench descended with a dull thud. Grennen caught the body, dragged it inside hastily, and shut the door, careful not to latch it. Quickly he divested the man of his filthy garments and slipped them on over his own. Gripping the wrench tightly, he opened the door. He was for the moment free!

Like a cat he hurried forward to the magazine. The door, fortunately, was not set. In time of combat it was controlled by means of the gas, a newly-evolved principle of hydraulics. Now a latch similar to that on his recent prison was his only obstacle. He was inside in a twinkling and breathed more freely. No one had yet discovered him. Surrounding him were tons of high explosives. He chose a light demolition bomb, a recent discovery. It was small, but capable of destroying a vessel completely. He stuffed an automatic into each pocket. His heart beat strangely. Everything depended upon the next few moments.

Keeping well against the lumalloy walls, he began his perilous trip forward. He reached the elevator unnoticed. A dangerous plan suddenly presented itself. Garbed as he was, and fully acquainted with the ship, why could he not rise to the upper deck and reconnoiter? To think was to act. He stepped within the elevator, threw in the switch and rose rapidly. The red light in the control room would flash and burn but these men in command of the ship would think little of that! He left the elevator and crept cautiously down the companionway. Suddenly he stopped. In Montfort's cabin he caught the sound of voices. He listened.

"We will shortly be over the land," someone was saying.

"Is Montfort in the control cabin?" another asked shortly. Grennen recognized it as Relvuez—an official in the Brazilian government—whom he had previously met.

"Yes sir, and heavily guarded. He has resigned himself, apparently."

"Watch him carefully," Relvuez ordered. "He must supervise but not touch anything. Fortunately I have learned enough of the ship to guard against all surprise." He chuckled. "He never suspected us. And you, Rempoti, you have served us well also, in delaying the ship to give the submarine a start and in..." he laughed, "in pumping the young Lieutenant."

"We were successful," Rempoti agreed. Grennen stopped breathing. It was the voice of one of the men he had met in Rio, one of those who had been responsible for his downfall. "The Pophilian drug has never been known to fail," Rempoti was going on. "It causes one to talk and leaves no knowledge of what one has said."

Battle in the Corridors

GRENZEN shuddered. So because of him the ship had been lost. He had failed his country, his sacred charge, the *C-49*. His fingers itched to get around this smug Rempoti's throat, to crush his life away; to render lifeless the scheming Relvuez. He restrained himself with an effort and listened.

"We are perfectly safe now," Relvuez drawled. "The nullifiers prevent the ship from being sighted by television. We are cruising at a height of eight miles; no one below can see us. We will therefore proceed to our destination, unload the gold, acquaint ourselves perfectly with the ship and its use and then..." he paused and sucked in his breath, "Washington and Lakehurst first, to capture Dunkley. If not..." he shrugged, "we will destroy the country."

"And what of Brazil?" Rempoti asked laughing.

"She has served her purpose in giving me authority to enter this ship. We are through with her... unless we get Dunkley. Then she will fall like the rest. The gold means a beginning. It will enable us to build other ships. Within two years we will own the world. It is a pleasant prospect."

Grennen shuddered again. So his fanciful idea had not been wrong! These men actually did aspire to world dominion! And with ships such as the *C-49* equipped with its terrible gases, that dream could become actuality! He backed away cautiously. He must not fail. More than his satisfaction—people, millions—depended upon it now. As the elevator shot downward he drew one of the Colts, modern, hard hitting, and nearly soundless, from his pocket. The elevator stopped, The door flew open. Grennen stiffened in amazement! Two men stood questioningly before it, their faces blank with surprise.

Grennen's pistol flew upward, his finger contracted on the trigger and with a purring of the whirling mechanism bullets spurted forth soundlessly. But the men were fully alert. They fell

to the floor and their weapons poured out lead. One crumbled, the other wavered and scrambled away, crying out as he went. There was no time for delay now. Already others from the stern were rushing forward. Grennen backed away shooting as he went. The bomb he could use only as a last resort. It was to be the deciding factor above, and success was not yet out of his grasp. He only hoped Relvuez and his companions had not heard the cries below. Three men now opposed him. Grennen discarded his empty pistol and began on the second. He felt a thud in his shoulder, in the fleshy part of his leg. A bullet creased his cheek. Desperately he fought back. One, then two fell before his withering fire. The third took to his heels. For an agonizing moment Grennen waited breathlessly. If the fellow caught the elevator and went above all was lost. But fear caused him to fly onward.

Grennen whirled, ran toward the crew's quarters and burst within. A dozen bound men lay on the floor. He worked feverishly, loosened one, armed him, ordered him to the magazine for guns, and then turned to the next. Five he freed. They followed him to the elevator. A savage horde, having regained their courage, met them creeping up the companionway. With a flash of shots Grennen's men flung them backward. Then they were in the elevator shooting upward. He jammed it at the top. Those below must use the stairs and they could be guarded.

Accompanied by three of his party Grennen turned to Montfort's cabin. All was suddenly still within. The navy men halted uncertainly. If Relvuez and that part of his gang who were with him had heard, had knowledge of this attempt... The control cabin was beyond Montfort's. To gain access there, Relvuez must be passed. Grennen weighed his chances swiftly, threw back his shoulders and motioned his men forward. They were beside the door when it was flung open. Relvuez stood outlined, gun in hand.

"Do not be hasty, gentlemen," he said softly. "You are covered from the windows, from the companion-way in your rear and," he nodded toward the other side, "from your left." Even as he spoke a square on the side of the ship opened noiselessly and trained on them from the motor gondola were two ugly looking automatics held by stern men. Grennen cursed softly. He had not reckoned on this. He had indeed, forgotten the emergency exit with its catwalk to the forward motor.

"You did not think," Relvuez continued

purringly, "Lieutenant Grennen. In fact you are notoriously impulsive. How could you forget that visual telephonic communication is so wonderful a part of this ship? Your brief success below was, I confess, worth an honorable mention, but once it was reported we watched your progress on the screen."

How could he have been so dense, Grennen thought, as to forget the ship's internal television? To have gained the upper deck and be so easily caught! And Relvuez smiling, deriding him! It was damnable. Was he to go down in defeat after coming so close to his goal? It was unthinkable, armed as he was, an eager automatic in his hand, another resting in his pocket, and the demolition bomb.... He had for the moment forgotten that! With studied carelessness he looked downward, let the pistol clatter to the deck. He backed away out of range of those stern motormen.

"I guess you win, Relvuez," he said ruefully. He put his hand in his pocket as though ready to shrug dismally. His eyes lighted as Relvuez smiled with satisfaction.

"It is useless to oppose us," Relvuez was saying smugly. "We have absolute control. In fact..." His face blanched suddenly, for Grennen had drawn forth the bomb.

"Not a move," he cried "If you, any of you, as much as twitch an eye, I'll blow you all to hell. These things work fast." He turned to his comrades. "One of you come with me. The others stay as they are so as to cover me from the guns behind." He backed away, reached the control cabin, stopped at the door.

"Come out, pilot," he ordered, "and with your hands up."

"Grennen!" came Montfort's joyful voice. "Thank heaven!"

Grennen spoke rapidly to his aide.

"Free the Commander and both of you remain at the controls. Keep your hand on the gas release. With that in your power they can do nothing but surrender."

He waited a moment, and was rewarded by Montfort's eager exclamations as he regained his freedom.

"All right, Lieutenant," Montfort called. "We have everything under control."

Grennen's heart sang. He walked back slowly

toward the raging Relvuez.

"You might as well surrender," he said softly. "Unless you do there can be but one result. We have the X-Gas under our control. To storm the cabin will mean your death for, as you no doubt know, the gas can be released instantly."

Relvuez shrugged this time. Grennen put the bomb back in his pocket, brought forth his extra pistol. He waved it at Relvuez's men.

"Come forward to be searched and relieved of your gu..." He stopped and whirled like a top. He had walked into range of the motormen, who, either not hearing or caring, had opened fire. Grennen's gun spat. His left arm hung useless. Blood streamed down his face. One of the motormen slumped forward. Over the body the other raised his gun. Simultaneously he and Grennen shot. The pirate doubled over but Grennen whirled again. He dropped his gun and grasped for his left pocket within which nestled the bomb. He tugged at it. Equipped with cap-like fuses, these bombs, when the cap released, explode within fifteen seconds. But Grennen's injured left arm was useless. In vain he sought with his right hand to free himself of the death-dealing bomb. His thoughts moved with the speed of light. He jumped free of the companionway, out on the narrow catwalk leading to the gondola. Five seconds, ten were gone, for the cap had been shot miraculously away with the last bullet! Five seconds more and the ship and all its men would be blown to bits!

Grennen made one more last desperate effort. He saw his future, a picture-like flash. Court-martial, disgrace. Only one thing could clear his record. He had set out to save his ship. That he must do though he forfeited his life. He waved his arm in farewell and jumped. A cry behind him, floating, despairing! A moment through space! A thunderous report! The ship rocked and swayed. It seemed to buckle, then eased itself. It was safe.

Pirates and crew sighed with relief. Montfort stood by the control cabin doorway.

"Men," he said to his followers, "Lieutenant Grennen has given his life for us. He has rescued us and prevented destruction and loss to the government. But the government repays all favors. His one mistake must never become known. He has died an officer and a gentleman."