



TO RESCUE GENERAL GORDON

A Clockwork Imperium
Short Story

J.P. MEDVED

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*When the envelope's cut, and the ground's rushin' up,
And the Captain and First Mate'r bleedin',*

*When the deck shivers and cants, in a tailspinnin' dance,
And the crows'r flyin' close for the feedin',*

*Take yer last look at sky, curse wantin' to fly,
And go to yer gawd like an airman.
Go, go, go to yer gawd,
Go to yer gawd like an airman.*

--Excerpt, *A British Airman*, Rudyard Kipling, 1881

I

It wasn't Henry's idea to steal the airship. James Billingsworth had come to him with the crazy plan in the first place.

He'd flung open the tent flap and flown inside like a dust storm, bringing more than a little of the desert in with him. "Two days!"

"What the devil-?" Henry Emerson had been napping.

"The message from the boats said two days! But at this rate we won't be there for four at the least!" James had always been excitable. His ruddy cheeks, bereft of hair, gave his mouth a wide berth every time he opened it, and his unusually expressive eyebrows bounced up and down at the top of his face like a camel jockey off to the races.

"Now hold on a minute, what in the bloody hell are you on about?" Henry rubbed sleep from his eyes and swung his feet off the cot.

"We'll be too late Henry! And Wolseley is content to sit here for another day and make sure 'everything's all Sir Garnet' before we move. He's heard a conflicting report from a runner that the city has a year, not two days."

"Posh!" Henry's sky blue eyes narrowed in consternation, giving his already hawkish face a shrewd aspect, "It's already been a year, Gordon can't wait forever."

He stood up and splashed some water in his face from the washbasin, then turned suddenly, his brown pilot's mustache flinging water drops, "But James, even without a delay the column couldn't make it there in under *three* days. And the boats can't get all the way back up the river with the water so low. Nothing could make it there in just two days."

Sub-Lieutenant James Billingsworth got a dangerous glint in his eye. A glint that had presaged many a bad decision during the three years Henry had known him. "The *Pegasus* could."

Henry frowned. The army's only airship was still unproven, never before used in combat, "We're forbidden from taking her on anything but supply and scouting missions. Something this dangerous, alone and unsupported? Captain Stewart would never allow it."

Billingsworth's voice had a reckless cast to it, "He doesn't have to." He rushed on, seeing the look on Henry's face, "Now hear me out. We're scheduled to take her up in the morning for a routine out-and-over. Supposing we simply loosed the old girl a little earlier, say, tonight? It's not *technically* disobeying orders, just 'chronologically modifying' them. You can pilot her without Stewart, and I know how to run the boiler. We could be there in twenty hours. Eighteen if the wind's right."

Henry wiped off his damp mustache with the hand towel and looked at his reflection in the small shaving mirror. He had a nice neck. Moreover, he *liked* his neck. During their time together he'd developed quite a fondness for it. But it would be his neck in a noose, right next to James', if this all went to pot. Billingsworth was suggesting a Court Martial-worthy offense.

Seeing Henry wavering, James added, "If we don't at least try, and the column arrives in four days to find out we're two days too late, it'll be more than a national tragedy, it'll be *our* tragedy and a failure of our duty as Englishmen."

Though James was unaware, for Henry it would mean even more than that. He glanced at the bag by his cot. In it, he knew, was a crumpled, torn, and yellowed magazine, its faded title still read, *Adventures for Boys*. A woodcutting of Gordon graced the cover, his face, twenty years younger than the one that stared out of the current newspaper lithographs, was exuberant. The story on the inner pages of the magazine was not at all like the articles that were now appearing to accompany those recent lithographs.

In the last few weeks journalists in England and all across the Empire had related, in dark detail and with the breathless, overwrought phrasing that is the hallmark of the newspaper man, what terrible danger he was in. They'd described the daily struggle to survive with his small army, and they'd told how, any day now, the Mad Mahdi, leading his rebellion of fanatical hordes, would overwhelm the General, and the next lithograph of his visage would show it impaled on a spike outside the gates of embattled Khartoum.

But Henry's treasured copy of the old magazine hinted at no such horror. The dog-eared pages told of triumph and pluck; Gordon's successful subjugation of the Taiping rebels and the consequences of daring to defy mighty Britannia. The military stories had set young Henry Emerson's mind afire. He devoured everything like them he could get his hands on, and enlisted to serve the Queen as soon as he was able.

The well-worn pages contained something else, as well. A simple inscription, written in the clipped letters of a career military man, and signed with the initials "E.E." The ink bore a slight smudge, as if it had been exposed to a single raindrop not long after being penned. The inscription read, "To my son." The magazine had come back aboard a steamer from Bombay. The father had not.

Could Henry really leave his other childhood hero to die at the hands of savages and slave traders? Even if he had to disobey orders and throw away his career for it? Even if he had to hang for it?

He smiled. *Bugger all*. He hadn't come to Africa to sip tea in the safety of a supply depot anyhow. Henry grabbed a pair of goggles off the table and turned to his friend, "We'll need Raheem. How fast can you pack?"

Henry Emerson and his good friend James Billingsworth are officers in Her Majesty's Royal Air Navy, but the unorthodox duo has a somewhat rocky relationship with the British military hierarchy.

Their superiors call it insubordination. They like to think of it as following orders...creatively.

So when the two, accompanied by their hulking Sikh friend Raheem Aranjapour, decide to rescue General Charles "Chinese" Gordon, trapped in a city under siege by an army of religious fanatics, their methods aren't exactly "cricket."

The resulting adventure could bring them glory and fame, or doom them to a torturous, painful death at the hands of savage tribesmen.

That is, if their own commanders don't get to them first!

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