

far more pressing."

"More pressing! what do you mean? are we not fully prepared?"

"Yes, fully prepared, as far at least as we have been able to foresee. But we may still, I think, possibly increase the number of precautions to be taken against the terrible shock that we are so soon to experience."

"What? Have you any doubts whatever of the effectiveness of your brilliant and extremely original idea? Don't you think that the layers of water, regularly disposed in easily-ruptured partitions beneath this floor, will afford us sufficient protection by their elasticity?"

"I hope so, indeed, my dear friend, but I am by no means confident."

"He hopes! He is by no means confident! Listen to that, Mac! Pretty time to tell us so! Let me out of here!"

"Too late!" observed the Captain quietly. "The trap-hole alone would take ten or fifteen minutes to open."

"Oh then I suppose I must make the best of it," said Ardan, laughing. "All aboard, gentlemen! The train starts in twenty minutes!"

"In nineteen minutes and eighteen seconds," said the Captain, who never took his eye off the chronometer.

The three travellers looked at each other for a little while, during which even Ardan appeared to become serious. After another careful glance at the several objects lying around them, Barbican said, quietly:

"Everything is in its place, except ourselves. What we have now to do is to decide on the position we must take in order to neutralize the shock as much as possible. We must be particularly careful to guard against a rush of blood to the head."

"Correct!" said the Captain.

"Suppose we stood on our heads, like the circus tumblers!" cried Ardan, ready to suit the action to the word.

"Better than that," said Barbican; "we can lie on our side. Keep clearly in mind, dear friends, that at the instant of departure it makes very little