

FLIGHT--1917

To begin at the end, I will say that the "landing" surprised me by a slight and very characteristically "dead" sort of shock.

I may fairly call myself an amphibious creature. A good half of my active existence has been passed in familiar contact with salt water, and I was aware, theoretically, that water is not an elastic body: but it was only then that I acquired the absolute conviction of the fact. I remember distinctly the thought flashing through my head: "By Jove! it isn't elastic!" Such is the illuminating force of a particular experience.

This landing (on the water of the North Sea) was effected in a Short biplane after one hour and twenty minutes in the air. I reckon every minute like a miser counting his hoard, for, if what I've got is mine, I am not likely now to increase the tale. That feeling is the effect of age. It strikes me as I write that, when next time I leave the surface of this globe, it won't be to soar bodily above it in the air. Quite the contrary. And I am not thinking of a submarine either. . . .

But let us drop this dismal strain and go back logically to the beginning. I must confess that I started on that flight in a state--I won't say of fury, but of a most intense irritation. I don't remember ever feeling so annoyed in my life.

It came about in this way. Two or three days before, I had been invited to lunch at an R.N.A.S. station, and was made to feel very much at home by the nicest lot of quietly interesting young men it had ever been my good fortune to meet. Then I was taken into the sheds. I walked respectfully round and round a lot of machines of all kinds, and the more I looked at them the more I felt somehow that for all the effect they produced on me they might have been so many land-vehicles of an eccentric design. So I said to Commander O., who very kindly was conducting me: "This is all very fine, but to realise what one is looking at, one must have been up."

He said at once: "I'll give you a flight to-morrow if you like."

I postulated that it should be none of those "ten minutes in the air" affairs. I wanted a real business flight. Commander O. assured me that I would get "awfully bored," but I declared that I was willing to take that risk. "Very well," he said. "Eleven o'clock to-morrow. Don't be late."

I am sorry to say I was about two minutes late, which was enough, however, for

Commander O. to greet me with a shout from a great distance: "Oh! You are coming, then!"

"Of course I am coming," I yelled indignantly.

He hurried up to me. "All right. There's your machine, and here's your pilot. Come along."

A lot of officers closed round me, rushed me into a hut: two of them began to button me into the coat, two more were ramming a cap on my head, others stood around with goggles, with binoculars. . . I couldn't understand the necessity of such haste. We weren't going to chase Fritz. There was no sign of Fritz anywhere in the blue. Those dear boys did not seem to notice my age--fifty-eight, if a day--nor my infirmities--a gouty subject for years. This disregard was very flattering, and I tried to live up to it, but the pace seemed to me terrific. They galloped me across a vast expanse of open ground to the water's edge.

The machine on its carriage seemed as big as a cottage, and much more imposing. My young pilot went up like a bird. There was an idle, able-bodied ladder loafing against a shed within fifteen feet of me, but as nobody seemed to notice it, I recommended myself mentally to Heaven and started climbing after the pilot. The close view of the real fragility of that rigid structure startled me considerably, while Commander O. discomposed me still more by shouting repeatedly: "Don't put your foot there!" I didn't know where to put my foot. There was a slight crack; I heard some swear-words below me, and then with a supreme effort I rolled in and dropped into a basket-chair, absolutely winded. A small crowd of mechanics and officers were looking up at me from the ground, and while I gasped visibly I thought to myself that they would be sure to put it down to sheer nervousness. But I hadn't breath enough in my body to stick my head out and shout down to them:

"You know, it isn't that at all!"

Generally I try not to think of my age and infirmities. They are not a cheerful subject. But I was never so angry and disgusted with them as during that minute or so before the machine took the water. As to my feelings in the air, those who will read these lines will know their own, which are so much nearer the mind and the heart than any writings of an unprofessional can be. At first all my faculties were absorbed and as if neutralised by the sheer novelty of the situation. The first to emerge was the sense of security so much more perfect than in any small boat I've ever been in; the, as it were, material, stillness, and immobility (though it was a bumpy day). I very soon ceased to hear the roar of the wind and engines--unless, indeed, some cylinders missed, when I became acutely aware of

that. Within the rigid spread of the powerful planes, so strangely motionless I had sometimes the illusion of sitting as if by enchantment in a block of suspended marble. Even while looking over at the aeroplane's shadow running prettily over land and sea, I had the impression of extreme slowness. I imagine that had she suddenly nose-dived out of control, I would have gone to the final smash without a single additional heartbeat. I am sure I would not have known. It is doubtless otherwise with the man in control.

But there was no dive, and I returned to earth (after an hour and twenty minutes) without having felt "bored" for a single second. I descended (by the ladder) thinking that I would never go flying again. No, never any more--lest its mysterious fascination, whose invisible wing had brushed my heart up there, should change to unavailing regret in a man too old for its glory.