

II.

The Company of Aerostiers--The Battle of Fleurus--The Balloon over the Sea--Blanchard and Jefferies--A Drama such as is rarely seen--3000 Metres--The Thunder beneath our Feet--Gavnerin at Rome--The Compass gone--The Victims of Aerostation--Pilatre--At 4000 Metres--The Barometer gone--Descents of Olivari, Mosment, Bittorf, Harris, Sadler, and Madame Blanchard--The Valve rendered useless--7000 Metres--Zambecarri--The Ballon (sic) Wrecked--Incalculable Heights--The Car Overset--Despair--Vertigo--The Fall--The Dénouement.

I shuddered! Fortunately the balloon was approaching the earth. But the danger is the same at 50 feet as at 5000 metres! The clouds were advancing.

"Remember the battle of Fleurus, and you will comprehend the utility of aerostats! Coulee, by order of the government, organized a company of aerostiers. At the siege of Maubeuge, General Jourdan found this new method of observation so serviceable, that twice a day, accompanied by the General himself, Coutelle ascended into the air; the correspondence between the aeronaut and the aerostiers who held the balloon, was carried on by means of little white, red, and yellow flags. Cannons and carbines were often aimed at the balloon at the moment of its ascension, but without effect. When Jourdan was preparing to invest Charleroi, Coutelle repaired to the neighbourhood of that place, rose from the

plain of Jumet, and remained taking observations seven or eight hours, with General Morelot. The Austrians came to deliver the city, and a battle was fought on the heights of Fleurus. General Jourdan publicly proclaimed the assistance he had received from aeronautic observations. Well! notwithstanding the services rendered on this occasion, and during the campaign with Belgium, the year which witnessed the commencement of the military career of balloons, also saw it terminate. And the school of Meuon, founded by government, was closed by Bonaparte, on his return from Egypt. 'What are we to expect from the child which has just been born?' Franklin had said. But the child was born alive! It need not have been strangled!"

The unknown hid his forehead in his hands, reflected for a few moments, then, without raising his head, said to me:

"Notwithstanding my orders, you have opened the upper valve!"

I let go the cord.

"Fortunately" continued he, "we have still two hundred pounds of ballast."

"What are your plans?" said I, with effort.

"You have never crossed the sea?"

I grew frightfully pale, terror froze my veins.

"It is a pity," said he, "that we are being wafted towards the Adriatic! That is only a streamlet. Higher! we shall find other currents!"

And without looking at me, he lightened the balloon by several bags of sand.

"I allowed you to open the valve, because the dilatation of the gas threatened to burst the balloon. But do not do it again."

I was stupified.

"You know the voyage from Dover to Calais made by Blanchard and Jefferies. It was rich in incident. On the 7th of January, 1785, in a northeast wind, their balloon was filled with gas on the Dover side; scarcely had they risen, when an error in equilibrium compelled them to throw out their ballast, retaining only thirty pounds. The wind drifted them slowly along towards the shores of France. The permeability of the tissue gradually suffered the gas to escape, and at the expiration of an hour and a half, the voyagers perceived that they were descending.

'What is to be done?' said Jefferies.--'We have passed over only three-fourths of the distance,' replied Blanchard 'and at a slight elevation. By ascending we shall expose ourselves to contrary winds. Throw out the remainder of the ballast.' The balloon regained its ascensional force, but soon re-descended. About midway of the voyage,

the aeronauts threw out their books and tools. A quarter of an hour afterwards, Blanchard said to Jefferies: 'The barometer?'--'It is rising! We are lost; and yet there are the shores of France!' A great noise was heard. 'Is the balloon rent?' asked Jefferies.--'No! the escape of the gas has collapsed the lower part of the balloon'--'But we are still descending. We are lost! Everything not indispensable must be thrown overboard!' Their provisions, oars and helm were thrown out into the sea. They were now only 100 metres in height. 'We are remounting,' said the Doctor.--' No, it is the jerk caused by the diminution of weight. There is not a ship in sight! Not a bark on the horizon! To the sea with our garments!' And the unfortunate men stripped, but the balloon continued to descend. 'Blanchard,' said Jefferies, 'you were to have made this voyage alone; you consented to take me; I will sacrifice myself to you! I will throw myself into the water, and the balloon, relieved, will re-ascend!'--' No, no, it is frightful.' The balloon collapsed more and more, and its concavity forming a parachute, forced the gas against its sides and accelerated its motion. 'Adieu, my friend,' said the Doctor. 'May God preserve you!' He was about to have taken the leap, when Blanchard detained him. 'One resource remains to us! We can cut the cords by which the car is attached, and cling to the network? perhaps the balloon will rise. Ready! But the barometer falls! We remount! The wind freshens! We are saved!' The voyagers perceived Calais! Their joy became delirium; a few moments later, they descended in the forest of Guines. I doubt not," continued the unknown, "that in similar circumstances you would follow the example of Doctor Jefferies."

The clouds were unrolling beneath our feet in glittering cascades; the balloon cast a deep shadow on this pile of clouds, and was surrounded by them as with an aureola! The thunder growled beneath our feet! All this was frightful!

"Let us descend!" exclaimed I.

"Descend, when the sun is awaiting us yonder! Down with the bags!" And he lightened the balloon of more than fifty pounds. At 3000 metres we remained stationary. The unknown talked incessantly, but I scarcely heard him; I was completely prostrated, while he seemed in his element.

"With a good wind, we shall go far, but we must especially go high!"

"We are lost!"

"In the Antilles there are currents of air which travel a hundred leagues an hour! On the occasion of Napoleon's coronation, Gavnerin let off a balloon illuminated with coloured lamps, at eleven o'clock in the evening! The wind blew from the N.N.E.; the next morning at daybreak the inhabitants of Rome saluted its passage above the dome of St. Peter's. We will go farther."

I scarcely heard him; everything was buzzing around me! There was an opening in the clouds!

"See that city, my host;" said the unknown. "It is Spire. Nothing else!"

I dared not lean over the railing of the car. Nevertheless I perceived a little black spot. This was Spire. The broad Rhine looked like a ribbon, the great roads like threads. Above our heads the sky was of a deep azure; I was benumbed with the cold. The birds had long since forsaken us; in this rarefied air their flight would have been impossible. We were alone in space, and I in the presence of a strange man!

"It is useless for you to know whither I am taking you," said he, and he threw the compass into the clouds. "A fall is a fine thing. You know that there have been a few victims from Pilatre des Rosiers down to Lieutenant Gale, and these misfortunes have always been caused by imprudence. Pilatre des Rosiers ascended in company with Remain, at Boulogne, on the 13th of June, 1785. To his balloon, inflated with gas, he had suspended a mongolfier filled with warm air, undoubtedly to save the trouble of letting off gas, or throwing out ballast. It was like putting a chafing-dish beneath a powder-cask. The imprudent men rose to a height of four hundred metres, and encountered opposing winds, which drove them over the ocean. In order to descend, Pilatre attempted to open the valve of the aerostat; but the cord of this valve caught in the balloon, and tore it so that it was emptied in an instant. It fell on the mongolfier, overturned it, and the imprudent men were dashed to pieces in a few seconds. It is frightful, is it not?" said the unknown, shaking me from my torpor.

I could reply only by these words:

"In pity, let us descend! The clouds are gathering around us in every direction, and frightful detonations reverberating from the cavity of the aerostat are multiplying around us."

"You make me impatient!" said he. "You shall no longer know whether we are ascending or descending."

And the barometer went after the compass, along with some bags of sand. We must have been at a height of four thousand metres. Some icicles were attached to the sides of the car, and a sort of fine snow penetrated to my bones. Meanwhile a terrific storm was bursting beneath our feet. We were above it.

"Do not fear," said my strange companion; "it is only imprudence that makes victims. Olivari, who perished at Orleans, ascended in a mongolfier made of paper; his car, suspended below the chafing-dish, and ballasted with combustible materials, became a prey to the flames! Olivari fell, and was killed. Mosment ascended at Lille, on a light platform; an oscillation made him lose his equilibrium. Mosment fell, and was killed. Bittorf, at Manheim, saw his paper balloon take fire in the air! Bittorf fell, and was killed. Harris ascended in a balloon badly constructed, the valve of which was too large to be closed again. Harris fell, and was killed. Sadler, deprived of ballast by his long stay in the air, was dragged over the city of Boston, and thrown against

the chimneys. Sadler fell, and was killed. Cocking descended with a convex parachute which he pretended to have perfected. Cocking fell, and was killed. Well, I love them, those noble victims of their courage! and I will die like them! Higher! higher!"

All the phantoms of this necrology were passing before my eyes! The rarefaction of the air and the rays of the sun increased the dilatation of the gas; the balloon continued to ascend! I mechanically attempted to open the valve; but the unknown cut the cord a few feet above my head. I was lost!

"Did you see Madame Blanchard fall?" said he to me. "I saw her, I--yes, I was at Tivoli on the 6th of July, 1819. Madame Blanchard ascended in a balloon of small size, to save the expense of filling; she was therefore obliged to inflate it entirely, and the gas escaped by the lower orifice, leaving on its route a train of hydrogen. She carried, suspended above her car, by an iron wire, a kind of firework, forming an aureola, which she was to kindle. She had often repeated this experiment. On this occasion she carried, besides, a little parachute, ballasted by a firework terminating in a ball with silver rain. She was to launch this apparatus, after having lighted it with a lance à feu, prepared for the purpose. She ascended. The night was dark. At the moment of lighting the firework, she was so imprudent as to let the lance pass beneath the column of hydrogen, which was escaping from the balloon. My eyes were fixed on her. Suddenly an unexpected flash illuminated the darkness. I thought it a surprise of the skilful

aeronaut. The flame increased, suddenly disappeared, and re-appeared at the top of the aerostat under the form of an immense jet of burning gas. This sinister light projected over the Boulevard, and over the quarter Montmartre. Then I saw the unfortunate woman rise, twice attempt to compress the orifice of the balloon, to extinguish the fire, then seat herself in the car and seek to direct its descent; for she did not fall. The combustion of the gas lasted several minutes. The balloon, diminishing by degrees, continued to descend, but this was not a fall! The wind blew from the northeast, and drove her over Paris. There were, at that time, in the neighbourhood of the house No. 16 Rue de Provence, immense gardens. The aeronaut might have fallen there without danger. But unhappily the balloon and the car alighted on the roof of the house. The shock was slight. 'Help!' cried the unfortunate woman. I arrived in the street at that moment. The car slid along the roof, and encountered an iron hook. At this shock, Madame Blanchard was thrown out of the car, and precipitated on the pavement! She was killed!"

These histories of fatal augury froze me with horror. The unknown was standing upright, with bare head, bristling hair, haggard eyes.

Illusion was no longer possible. I saw at last the horrible truth. I had to deal with a madman!

He threw out half the ballast, and we must have been borne to a height of 7000 metres! Blood spouted from my nose and mouth.

"What a fine thing it is to be martyrs to science! They are canonized by posterity!"

I heard no more. The unknown looked around him with horror, and knelt at my ear.

"On the 7th of October, 1804, the weather had began to clear up a little; for several days preceding, the wind and rain had been incessant. But the ascension announced by Zambecarri could not be postponed! His idiot enemies already scoffed at him. To save himself and science from public ridicule, it became necessary for him to ascend. It was at Bologna! No one aided him in filling his balloon; he rose at midnight, accompanied by Andreoli and Grossetti. The balloon ascended slowly; it had been rent by the wind, and the gas escaped. The three intrepid voyagers could observe the state of the barometer only by the aid of a dark lantern. Zambecarri had not eaten during twenty-four hours; Grossetti was also fasting.

"'My friends,' said Zambecarri, 'I am benumbed with the cold; I am exhausted; I must die;' and he fell senseless in the gallery.

"It was the same with Grossetti. Andreoli alone remained awake. After long efforts he succeeded in arousing Zambecarri from his stupor.

"'What is there new? Where are we going? In which direction is the wind? What time is it?'

" It is two o'clock!"

" Where is the compass?"

"It has fallen out."

" Great God! the lamp is extinguished!"

" It could not burn longer in this rarefied air!" said Zambecarri.

"The moon had not risen; the atmosphere was plunged in horrible darkness.

" I am cold, I am cold, Andreoli! What shall we do?"

"The unfortunate men slowly descended through a layer of white clouds.

"Hush!" said Andreoli; 'do you hear--'

" What?" replied Zambecarri.

"A singular noise!"

"You are mistaken!"

"No!--Do you see those midnight travellers, listening to that incomprehensible sound? Have they struck against a rower? Are they about to be precipitated on the roofs? Do you hear it? It is like the sound of the ocean!"

"Impossible!"

" It is the roaring of the waves!"

" That is true!--Light! light!"

"After five fruitless attempts, Andreoli obtained it. It was three o'clock. The sound of the waves was heard with violence; they almost touched the surface of the sea.

" We are lost!" exclaimed Zambecarri, seizing a bag of ballast.

" Help!" cried Andreoli.

"The car touched the water, and the waves covered them breast high. To the sea with instruments, garments, money! The aeronauts stripped entirely. The lightened balloon rose with frightful rapidity. Zambecarri was seized with violent vomiting. Grossetti bled freely. The unhappy men could not speak; their respiration was short. They were seized with cold, and in a moment covered with a coat of ice. The moon appeared to them red as blood. After having traversed these high regions during half

an hour, the machine again fell into the sea. It was four o'clock in the morning: the bodies of the wretched aeronauts were half in the water, and the balloon, acting as a sail, dragged them about during several hours. At daybreak, they found themselves opposite Pesaro, five miles from the shore; they were about to land, when a sudden flaw of wind drove them back to the open sea. They were lost! The affrighted barks fled at their approach. Fortunately, a more intelligent navigator hailed them, took them on board; and they landed at Ferrara. That was frightful! Zambecarri was a brave man. Scarcely recovered from his sufferings, he recommenced his ascensions. In one of them, he struck against a tree; his lamp, filled with spirits of wine, was spilled over his clothes, and they caught fire; he was covered with flame his machine was beginning to kindle, when he descended, half burned. The 21st September, 1812, he made another ascension at Bologna; his balloon caught in a tree; his lamp set fire to it. Zambecarri fell, and was killed! And in presence of these high facts, shall we still hesitate? No! The higher we go the more glorious will be our death"

The balloon, entirely unballasted, we were borne to incredible heights. The aerostat vibrated in the atmosphere; the slightest sound re-echoed through the celestial vaults; the globe, the only object which struck my sight in immensity, seemed about to be annihilated, and above us the heights of heaven lost themselves in the profound darkness!

I saw the unknown rise before me.

"This is the hour!" said he to me. "We must die! We are rejected by men! They despise us! let us crush them!"

"Mercy!" exclaimed I.

"Let us cut the cords! let this car be abandoned in space! The attractive force will change its direction, and we shall land in the sun!"

Despair gave me strength! I precipitated myself upon the madman, and a frightful struggle took place! But I was thrown down! and while he held me beneath his knee, he cut the cords of the car!

"One!" said he.

"Mercy! O, God!"

"Two! three!"

One cord more, and the car was sustained only on one side. I made a superhuman effort, rose, and violently repulsed this insensate.

"Four!" said he.

The car was upset. I instinctively clung to the cords which held it, and climbed up the outside.

The unknown had disappeared in space!

In a twinkling the balloon ascended to an immeasurable height! A horrible crash was heard. The dilated gas had burst its envelope! I closed my eyes. A few moments afterwards, a moist warmth reanimated me; I was in the midst of fiery clouds! The balloon was whirling with fearful rapidity! I felt myself swooning! Driven by the wind, I travelled a hundred leagues an hour in my horizontal course; the lightnings flashed around me!

Meanwhile my fall was not rapid. When I opened my eyes, I perceived the country. I was two miles from the sea, the hurricane urging me on with great force. I was lost, when a sudden shock made me let go; my hands opened, a cord slipped rapidly between my fingers, and I found myself on the ground. It was the cord of the anchor, which, sweeping the surface of the ground, had caught in a crevice! I fainted, and my lightened balloon, resuming its flight, was lost beyond the sea.

When I recovered my senses, I was in the house of a peasant, at Harderwick, a little town of Gueldre, fifteen leagues from Amsterdam, on the banks of the Zuyderzée.

A miracle had saved me. But my voyage had been but a series of imprudences against which I had been unable to defend myself.

May this terrific recital, while it instructs those who read it, not discourage the explorers of the routes of air.