CHAPTER II. HOW BERT SMALLWAYS GOT INTO DIFFICULTIES

It did not occur to either Tom or Bert Smallways that this remarkable aerial performance of Mr. Butteridge was likely to affect either of their lives in any special manner, that it would in any way single them out from the millions about them; and when they had witnessed it from the crest of Bun Hill and seen the fly-like mechanism, its rotating planes a golden haze in the sunset, sink humming to the harbour of its shed again, they turned back towards the sunken green-grocery beneath the great iron standard of the London to Brighton mono-rail, and their minds reverted to the discussion that had engaged them before Mr. Butteridge's triumph had come in sight out of the London haze.

It was a difficult and unsuccessful discussions. They had to carry it on in shouts because of the moaning and roaring of the gyroscopic motor-cars that traversed the High Street, and in its nature it was contentious and private. The Grubb business was in difficulties, and Grubb in a moment of financial eloquence had given a half-share in it to Bert, whose relations with his employer had been for some time unsalaried and pallish and informal.

Bert was trying to impress Tom with the idea that the reconstructed Grubb & Smallways offered unprecedented and unparalleled opportunities to the judicious small investor. It was coming home to Bert, as though

it were an entirely new fact, that Tom was singularly impervious to ideas. In the end he put the financial issues on one side, and, making the thing entirely a matter of fraternal affection, succeeded in borrowing a sovereign on the security of his word of honour.

The firm of Grubb & Smallways, formerly Grubb, had indeed been singularly unlucky in the last year or so. For many years the business had struggled along with a flavour of romantic insecurity in a small, dissolute-looking shop in the High Street, adorned with brilliantly coloured advertisements of cycles, a display of bells, trouser-clips, oil-cans, pump-clips, frame-cases, wallets, and other accessories, and the announcement of "Bicycles on Hire," "Repairs," "Free inflation," "Petrol," and similar attractions. They were agents for several obscure makes of bicycle,--two samples constituted the stock,--and occasionally they effected a sale; they also repaired punctures and did their best--though luck was not always on their side--with any other repairing that was brought to them. They handled a line of cheap gramophones, and did a little with musical boxes.

The staple of their business was, however, the letting of bicycles on hire. It was a singular trade, obeying no known commercial or economic principles--indeed, no principles. There was a stock of ladies' and gentlemen's bicycles in a state of disrepair that passes description, and these, the hiring stock, were let to unexacting and reckless people, inexpert in the things of this world, at a nominal rate of one shilling for the first hour and sixpence per hour afterwards. But really there

were no fixed prices, and insistent boys could get bicycles and the thrill of danger for an hour for so low a sum as threepence, provided they could convince Grubb that that was all they had. The saddle and handle-bar were then sketchily adjusted by Grubb, a deposit exacted, except in the case of familiar boys, the machine lubricated, and the adventurer started upon his career. Usually he or she came back, but at times, when the accident was serious, Bert or Grubb had to go out and fetch the machine home. Hire was always charged up to the hour of return to the shop and deducted from the deposit. It was rare that a bicycle started out from their hands in a state of pedantic efficiency. Romantic possibilities of accident lurked in the worn thread of the screw that adjusted the saddle, in the precarious pedals, in the loose-knit chain, in the handle-bars, above all in the brakes and tyres. Tappings and clankings and strange rhythmic creakings awoke as the intrepid hirer pedalled out into the country. Then perhaps the bell would jam or a brake fail to act on a hill; or the seat-pillar would get loose, and the saddle drop three or four inches with a disconcerting bump; or the loose and rattling chain would jump the cogs of the chain-wheel as the machine ran downhill, and so bring the mechanism to an abrupt and disastrous stop without at the same time arresting the forward momentum of the rider; or a tyre would bang, or sigh quietly, and give up the struggle for efficiency.

When the hirer returned, a heated pedestrian, Grubb would ignore all verbal complaints, and examine the machine gravely.

"This ain't 'ad fair usage," he used to begin.

He became a mild embodiment of the spirit of reason. "You can't expect a bicycle to take you up in its arms and carry you," he used to say. "You got to show intelligence. After all--it's machinery."

Sometimes the process of liquidating the consequent claims bordered on violence. It was always a very rhetorical and often a trying affair, but in these progressive times you have to make a noise to get a living. It was often hard work, but nevertheless this hiring was a fairly steady source of profit, until one day all the panes in the window and door were broken and the stock on sale in the window greatly damaged and disordered by two over-critical hirers with no sense of rhetorical irrelevance. They were big, coarse stokers from Gravesend. One was annoyed because his left pedal had come off, and the other because his tyre had become deflated, small and indeed negligible accidents by Bun Hill standards, due entirely to the ungentle handling of the delicate machines entrusted to them--and they failed to see clearly how they put themselves in the wrong by this method of argument. It is a poor way of convincing a man that he has let you a defective machine to throw his foot-pump about his shop, and take his stock of gongs outside in order to return them through the window-panes. It carried no real conviction to the minds of either Grubb or Bert; it only irritated and vexed them. One quarrel makes many, and this unpleasantness led to a violent dispute between Grubb and the landlord upon the moral aspects of and legal responsibility for the consequent re-glazing. In the end Grubb and

Smallways were put to the expense of a strategic nocturnal removal to another position.

It was a position they had long considered. It was a small, shed-like shop with a plate-glass window and one room behind, just at the sharp bend in the road at the bottom of Bun Hill; and here they struggled along bravely, in spite of persistent annoyance from their former landlord, hoping for certain eventualities the peculiar situation of the shop seemed to promise. Here, too, they were doomed to disappointment.

The High Road from London to Brighton that ran through Bun Hill was like the British Empire or the British Constitution--a thing that had grown to its present importance. Unlike any other roads in Europe the British high roads have never been subjected to any organised attempts to grade or straighten them out, and to that no doubt their peculiar picturesqueness is to be ascribed. The old Bun Hill High Street drops at its end for perhaps eighty or a hundred feet of descent at an angle of one in five, turns at right angles to the left, runs in a curve for about thirty yards to a brick bridge over the dry ditch that had once been the Otterbourne, and then bends sharply to the right again round a dense clump of trees and goes on, a simple, straightforward, peaceful high road. There had been one or two horse-and-van and bicycle accidents in the place before the shop Bert and Grubb took was built, and, to be frank, it was the probability of others that attracted them to it.

Its possibilities had come to them first with a humorous flavour.

"Here's one of the places where a chap might get a living by keeping hens," said Grubb.

"You can't get a living by keeping hens," said Bert.

"You'd keep the hen and have it spatch-cocked," said Grubb. "The motor chaps would pay for it."

When they really came to take the place they remembered this conversation. Hens, however, were out of the question; there was no place for a run unless they had it in the shop. It would have been obviously out of place there. The shop was much more modern than their former one, and had a plate-glass front. "Sooner or later," said Bert, "we shall get a motor-car through this."

"That's all right," said Grubb. "Compensation. I don't mind when that motor-car comes along. I don't mind even if it gives me a shock to the system."

"And meanwhile," said Bert, with great artfulness, "I'm going to buy myself a dog."

He did. He bought three in succession. He surprised the people at the Dogs' Home in Battersea by demanding a deaf retriever, and rejecting every candidate that pricked up its ears. "I want a good, deaf,

slow-moving dog," he said. "A dog that doesn't put himself out for things."

They displayed inconvenient curiosity; they declared a great scarcity of deaf dogs.

"You see," they said, "dogs aren't deaf."

"Mine's got to be," said Bert. "I've HAD dogs that aren't deaf. All I want. It's like this, you see--I sell gramophones. Naturally I got to make 'em talk and tootle a bit to show 'em orf. Well, a dog that isn't deaf doesn't like it--gets excited, smells round, barks, growls. That upsets the customer. See? Then a dog that has his hearing fancies things. Makes burglars out of passing tramps. Wants to fight every motor that makes a whizz. All very well if you want livening up, but our place is lively enough. I don't want a dog of that sort. I want a quiet dog."

In the end he got three in succession, but none of them turned out well. The first strayed off into the infinite, heeding no appeals; the second was killed in the night by a fruit motor-waggon which fled before Grubb could get down; the third got itself entangled in the front wheel of a passing cyclist, who came through the plate glass, and proved to be an actor out of work and an undischarged bankrupt. He demanded compensation for some fancied injury, would hear nothing of the valuable dog he had killed or the window he had broken, obliged Grubb by sheer physical obduracy to straighten his buckled front wheel, and pestered the

struggling firm with a series of inhumanly worded solicitor's letters. Grubb answered them--stingingly, and put himself, Bert thought, in the wrong.

Affairs got more and more exasperating and strained under these pressures. The window was boarded up, and an unpleasant altercation about their delay in repairing it with the new landlord, a Bun Hill butcher--and a loud, bellowing, unreasonable person at that--served to remind them of their unsettled troubles with the old. Things were at this pitch when Bert bethought himself of creating a sort of debenture capital in the business for the benefit of Tom. But, as I have said, Tom had no enterprise in his composition. His idea of investment was the stocking; he bribed his brother not to keep the offer open.

And then ill-luck made its last lunge at their crumbling business and brought it to the ground.

2

It is a poor heart that never rejoices, and Whitsuntide had an air of coming as an agreeable break in the business complications of Grubb & Smallways. Encouraged by the practical outcome of Bert's negotiations with his brother, and by the fact that half the hiring-stock was out from Saturday to Monday, they decided to ignore the residuum of hiring-trade on Sunday and devote that day to much-needed relaxation and refreshment--to have, in fact, an unstinted good time, a beano on Whit

Sunday and return invigorated to grapple with their difficulties and the Bank Holiday repairs on the Monday. No good thing was ever done by exhausted and dispirited men. It happened that they had made the acquaintance of two young ladies in employment in Clapham, Miss Flossie Bright and Miss Edna Bunthorne, and it was resolved therefore to make a cheerful little cyclist party of four into the heart of Kent, and to picnic and spend an indolent afternoon and evening among the trees and bracken between Ashford and Maidstone.

Miss Bright could ride a bicycle, and a machine was found for her, not among the hiring stock, but specially, in the sample held for sale. Miss Bunthorne, whom Bert particularly affected, could not ride, and so with some difficulty he hired a basket-work trailer from the big business of Wray's in the Clapham Road.

To see our young men, brightly dressed and cigarettes alight, wheeling off to the rendezvous, Grubb guiding the lady's machine beside him with one skilful hand and Bert teuf-teuffing steadily, was to realise how pluck may triumph even over insolvency. Their landlord, the butcher, said, "Gurr," as they passed, and shouted, "Go it!" in a loud, savage tone to their receding backs.

Much they cared!

The weather was fine, and though they were on their way southward before nine o'clock, there was already a great multitude of holiday people

abroad upon the roads. There were quantities of young men and women on bicycles and motor-bicycles, and a majority of gyroscopic motor-cars running bicycle-fashion on two wheels, mingled with old-fashioned four-wheeled traffic. Bank Holiday times always bring out old stored-away vehicles and odd people; one saw tricars and electric broughams and dilapidated old racing motors with huge pneumatic tyres. Once our holiday-makers saw a horse and cart, and once a youth riding a black horse amidst the badinage of the passersby. And there were several navigable gas air-ships, not to mention balloons, in the air. It was all immensely interesting and refreshing after the dark anxieties of the shop. Edna wore a brown straw hat with poppies, that suited her admirably, and sat in the trailer like a queen, and the eight-year-old motor-bicycle ran like a thing of yesterday.

Little it seemed to matter to Mr. Bert Smallways that a newspaper placard proclaimed:-- ---------- GERMANY DENOUNCES THE MONROE DOCTRINE.

AMBIGUOUS ATTITUDE OF JAPAN.
WHAT WILL BRITAIN DO? IS IT WAR?----------

This sort of thing was always going on, and on holidays one disregarded it as a matter of course. Week-davs, in the slack time after the midday meal, then perhaps one might worry about the Empire and international politics; but not on a sunny Sunday, with a pretty girl trailing behind one, and envious cyclists trying to race you. Nor did our young people

attach any great importance to the flitting suggestions of military activity they glimpsed ever and again. Near Maidstone they came on a string of eleven motor-guns of peculiar construction halted by the roadside, with a number of businesslike engineers grouped about them watching through field-glasses some sort of entrenchment that was going on near the crest of the downs. It signified nothing to Bert.

"What's up?" said Edna.

"Oh!--manoeuvres," said Bert.

"Oh! I thought they did them at Easter," said Edna, and troubled no more.

The last great British war, the Boer war, was over and forgotten, and the public had lost the fashion of expert military criticism.

Our four young people picnicked cheerfully, and were happy in the manner of a happiness that was an ancient mode in Nineveh. Eyes were bright, Grubb was funny and almost witty, and Bert achieved epigrams; the hedges were full of honeysuckle and dog-roses; in the woods the distant toot-toot-toot of the traffic on the dust-hazy high road might have been no more than the horns of elf-land. They laughed and gossiped and picked flowers and made love and talked, and the girls smoked cigarettes. Also they scuffled playfully. Among other things they talked aeronautics, and how thev would come for a picnic together in Bert's flying-machine

before ten years were out. The world seemed full of amusing possibilities that afternoon. They wondered what their great-grandparents would have thought of aeronautics. In the evening, about seven, the party turned homeward, expecting no disaster, and it was only on the crest of the downs between Wrotham and Kingsdown that disaster came.

They had come up the hill in the twilight; Bert was anxious to get as far as possible before he lit--or attempted to light, for the issue was a doubtful one--his lamps, and they had scorched past a number of cyclists, and by a four-wheeled motor-car of the old style lamed by a deflated tyre. Some dust had penetrated Bert's horn, and the result was a curious, amusing, wheezing sound had got into his "honk, honk." For the sake of merriment and glory he was making this sound as much as possible, and Edna was in fits of laughter in the trailer. They made a sort of rushing cheerfulness along the road that affected their fellow travellers variously, according to their temperaments. She did notice a good lot of bluish, evil-smelling smoke coming from about the bearings between his feet, but she thought this was one of the natural concomitants of motor-traction, and troubled no more about it, until abruptly it burst into a little yellow-tipped flame.

"Bert!" she screamed.

But Bert had put on the brakes with such suddenness that she found herself involved with his leg as he dismounted. She got to the side of

the road and hastily readjusted her hat, which had suffered.

"Gaw!" said Bert.

He stood for some fatal seconds watching the petrol drip and catch, and the flame, which was now beginning to smell of enamel as well as oil, spread and grew. His chief idea was the sorrowful one that he had not sold the machine second-hand a year ago, and that he ought to have done so--a good idea in its way, but not immediately helpful. He turned upon Edna sharply. "Get a lot of wet sand," he said. Then he wheeled the machine a little towards the side of the roadway, and laid it down and looked about for a supply of wet sand. The flames received this as a helpful attention, and made the most of it. They seemed to brighten and the twilight to deepen about them. The road was a flinty road in the chalk country, and ill-provided with sand.

Edna accosted a short, fat cyclist. "We want wet sand," she said, and added, "our motor's on fire." The short, fat cyclist stared blankly for a moment, then with a helpful cry began to scrabble in the road-grit. Whereupon Bert and Edna also scrabbled in the road-grit. Other cyclists arrived, dismounted and stood about, and their flame-lit faces expressed satisfaction, interest, curiosity. "Wet sand," said the short, fat man, scrabbling terribly--"wet sand." One joined him. They threw hard-earned handfuls of road-grit upon the flames, which accepted them with enthusiasm.

Grubb arrived, riding hard. He was shouting something. He sprang off and threw his bicycle into the hedge. "Don't throw water on it!" he said--"don't throw water on it!" He displayed commanding presence of mind. He became captain of the occasion. Others were glad to repeat the things he said and imitate his actions.

"Don't throw water on it!" they cried. Also there was no water.

"Beat it out, you fools!" he said.

He seized a rug from the trailer (it was an Austrian blanket, and Bert's winter coverlet) and began to beat at the burning petrol. For a wonderful minute he seemed to succeed. But he scattered burning pools of petrol on the road, and others, fired by his enthusiasm, imitated his action. Bert caught up a trailer-cushion and began to beat; there was another cushion and a table-cloth, and these also were seized. A young hero pulled off his jacket and joined the beating. For a moment there was less talking than hard breathing, and a tremendous flapping. Flossie, arriving on the outskirts of the crowd, cried, "Oh, my God!" and burst loudly into tears. "Help!" she said, and "Fire!"

The lame motor-car arrived, and stopped in consternation. A tall, goggled, grey-haired man who was driving inquired with an Oxford intonation and a clear, careful enunciation, "Can WE help at all?"

It became manifest that the rug, the table-cloth, the cushions, the

jacket, were getting smeared with petrol and burning. The soul seemed to go out of the cushion Bert was swaying, and the air was full of feathers, like a snowstorm in the still twilight.

Bert had got very dusty and sweaty and strenuous. It seemed to him his weapon had been wrested from him at the moment of victory. The fire lay like a dying thing, close to the ground and wicked; it gave a leap of anguish at every whack of the beaters. But now Grubb had gone off to stamp out the burning blanket; the others were lacking just at the moment of victory. One had dropped the cushion and was running to the motor-car. "'ERE!" cried Bert; "keep on!"

He flung the deflated burning rags of cushion aside, whipped off his jacket and sprang at the flames with a shout. He stamped into the ruin until flames ran up his boots. Edna saw him, a red-lit hero, and thought it was good to be a man.

A bystander was hit by a hot halfpenny flying out of the air. Then Bert thought of the papers in his pockets, and staggered back, trying to extinguish his burning jacket--checked, repulsed, dismayed.

Edna was struck by the benevolent appearance of an elderly spectator in a silk hat and Sabbatical garments. "Oh!" she cried to him. "Help this young man! How can you stand and see it?"

A cry of "The tarpaulin!" arose.

An earnest-looking man in a very light grey cycling-suit had suddenly appeared at the side of the lame motor-car and addressed the owner. "Have you a tarpaulin?" he said.

"Yes," said the gentlemanly man. "Yes. We've got a tarpaulin."

"That's it," said the earnest-looking man, suddenly shouting. "Let's have it, quick!"

The gentlemanly man, with feeble and deprecatory gestures, and in the manner of a hypnotised person, produced an excellent large tarpaulin.

"Here!" cried the earnest-looking man to Grubb. "Ketch holt!"

Then everybody realised that a new method was to be tried. A number of willing hands seized upon the Oxford gentleman's tarpaulin. The others stood away with approving noises. The tarpaulin was held over the burning bicycle like a canopy, and then smothered down upon it.

"We ought to have done this before," panted Grubb.

There was a moment of triumph. The flames vanished. Every one who could contrive to do so touched the edge of the tarpaulin. Bert held down a corner with two hands and a foot. The tarpaulin, bulged up in the centre, seemed to be suppressing triumphant exultation. Then its

self-approval became too much for it; it burst into a bright red smile in the centre. It was exactly like the opening of a mouth. It laughed with a gust of flames. They were reflected redly in the observant goggles of the gentleman who owned the tarpaulin. Everybody recoiled.

"Save the trailer!" cried some one, and that was the last round in the battle. But the trailer could not be detached; its wicker-work had caught, and it was the last thing to burn. A sort of hush fell upon the gathering. The petrol burnt low, the wicker-work trailer banged and crackled. The crowd divided itself into an outer circle of critics, advisers, and secondary characters, who had played undistinguished parts or no parts at all in the affair, and a central group of heated and distressed principals. A young man with an inquiring mind and a considerable knowledge of motor-bicycles fixed on to Grubb and wanted to argue that the thing could not have happened. Grubb wass short and inattentive with him, and the young man withdrew to the back of the crowd, and there told the benevolent old gentleman in the silk hat that people who went out with machines they didn't understand had only themselves to blame if things went wrong.

The old gentleman let him talk for some time, and then remarked, in a tone of rapturous enjoyment: "Stone deaf," and added, "Nasty things."

A rosy-faced man in a straw hat claimed attention. "I DID save the front wheel," he said; "you'd have had that tyre catch, too, if I hadn't kept turning it round." It became manifest that this was so. The front wheel

had retained its tyre, was intact, was still rotating slowly among the blackened and twisted ruins of the rest of the machine. It had something of that air of conscious virtue, of unimpeachable respectability, that distinguishes a rent collector in a low neighbourhood. "That wheel's worth a pound," said the rosy-faced man, making a song of it. "I kep' turning it round."

Newcomers kept arriving from the south with the question, "What's up?" until it got on Grubb's nerves. Londonward the crowd was constantly losing people; they would mount their various wheels with the satisfied manner of spectators who have had the best. Their voices would recede into the twilight; one would hear a laugh at the memory of this particularly salient incident or that.

"I'm afraid," said the gentleman of the motor-car, "my tarpaulin's a bit done for."

Grubb admitted that the owner was the best judge of that.

"Nothin, else I can do for you?" said the gentleman of the motor-car, it may be with a suspicion of irony.

Bert was roused to action. "Look here," he said. "There's my young lady. If she ain't 'ome by ten they lock her out. See? Well, all my money was in my jacket pocket, and it's all mixed up with the burnt stuff, and that's too 'ot to touch. Is Clapham out of your way?"

"All in the day's work," said the gentleman with the motor-car, and turned to Edna. "Very pleased indeed," he said, "if you'll come with us. We're late for dinner as it is, so it won't make much difference for us to go home by way of Clapham. We've got to get to Surbiton, anyhow. I'm afraid you'll find us a little slow."

"But what's Bert going to do?" said Edna.

"I don't know that we can accommodate Bert," said the motor-car gentleman, "though we're tremendously anxious to oblige."

"You couldn't take the whole lot?" said Bert, waving his hand at the deboshed and blackened ruins on the ground.

"I'm awfully afraid I can't," said the Oxford man. "Awfully sorry, you know."

"Then I'll have to stick 'ere for a bit," said Bert. "I got to see the thing through. You go on, Edna."

"Don't like leavin' you, Bert."

"You can't 'elp it, Edna."...

The last Edna saw of Bert was his figure, in charred and blackened

shirtsleeves, standing in the dusk. He was musing deeply by the mixed ironwork and ashes of his vanished motor-bicycle, a melancholy figure. His retinue of spectators had shrunk now to half a dozen figures. Flossie and Grubb were preparing to follow her desertion.

"Cheer up, old Bert!" cried Edna, with artificial cheerfulness. "So long."

"So long, Edna," said Bert.

"See you to-morrer."

"See you to-morrer," said Bert, though he was destined, as a matter of fact, to see much of the habitable globe before he saw her again.

Bert began to light matches from a borrowed boxful, and search for a half-crown that still eluded him among the charred remains.

His face was grave and melancholy.

"I WISH that 'adn't 'appened," said Flossie, riding on with Grubb....

And at last Bert was left almost alone, a sad, blackened Promethean figure, cursed by the gift of fire. He had entertained vague ideas of hiring a cart, of achieving miraculous repairs, of still snatching some residual value from his one chief possession. Now, in the darkening

night, he perceived the vanity of such intentions. Truth came to him bleakly, and laid her chill conviction upon him. He took hold of the handle-bar, stood the thing up, tried to push it forward. The tyreless hind-wheel was jammed hopelessly, even as he feared. For a minute or so he stood upholding his machine, a motionless despair. Then with a great effort he thrust the ruins from him into the ditch, kicked at it once, regarded it for a moment, and turned his face resolutely Londonward.

He did not once look back.

"That's the end of THAT game!" said Bert. "No more teuf-teuf-teuf for Bert Smallways for a year or two. Good-bye 'olidays!... Oh! I ought to 'ave sold the blasted thing when I had a chance three years ago."

3

The next morning found the firm of Grubb & Smallways in a state of profound despondency. It seemed a small matter to them that the newspaper and cigarette shop opposite displayed such placards as this:--

---------- REPORTED AMERICAN ULTIMATUM.

BRITAIN MUST FIGHT.

OUR INFATUATED WAR OFFICE STILL
REFUSES TO LISTEN TO MR. BUTTERIDGE.

GREAT MONO-RAIL DISASTER AT

TIMBUCTOO.----------

or this:-- ---------- WAR A QUESTION OF

HOURS.

NEW YORK CALM.

EXCITEMENT IN BERLIN.----------

or again:-- ---------- WASHINGTON STILL

SILENT.

WHAT WILL PARIS DO?

THE PANIC ON THE BOURSE.

THE KING'S GARDEN PARTY TO THE MASKED TWAREGS.

MR. BUTTERIDGE TAKES AN OFFER.

LATEST BETTING FROM TEHERAN.----------

or this:-- ---------- WILL AMERICA FIGHT?

ANTI-GERMAN RIOT IN BAGDAD.

THE MUNICIPAL SCANDALS AT DAMASCUS.

MR. BUTTERIDGE'S INVENTION FOR AMERICA.----------

Bert stared at these over the card of pump-clips in the pane in the door with unseeing eyes. He wore a blackened flannel shirt, and the jacketless ruins of the holiday suit of yesterday. The boarded-up shop was dark and depressing beyond words, the few scandalous hiring machines had never looked so hopelessly disreputable. He thought of their fellows who were "out," and of the approaching disputations of the afternoon. He thought of their new landlord, and of their old landlord, and of bills and claims. Life presented itself for the first time as a hopeless fight against fate....

"Grubb, o' man," he said, distilling the quintessence, "I'm fair sick of this shop."

"So'm I," said Grubb.

"I'm out of conceit with it. I don't seem to care ever to speak to a customer again."

"There's that trailer," said Grubb, after a pause.

"Blow the trailer!" said Bert. "Anyhow, I didn't leave a deposit on it. I didn't do that. Still--"

He turned round on his friend. "Look 'ere," he said, "we aren't gettin' on here. We been losing money hand over fist. We got things tied up in fifty knots."

"What can we do?" said Grubb.

"Clear out. Sell what we can for what it will fetch, and quit. See? It's no good 'anging on to a losing concern. No sort of good. Jest foolishness."

"That's all right," said Grubb--"that's all right; but it ain't your capital been sunk in it."

"No need for us to sink after our capital," said Bert, ignoring the point.

"I'm not going to be held responsible for that trailer, anyhow. That ain't my affair."

"Nobody arst you to make it your affair. If you like to stick on here, well and good. I'm quitting. I'll see Bank Holiday through, and then I'm O-R-P-H. See?"

"Leavin' me?"

"Leavin' you. If you must be left."

Grubb looked round the shop. It certainly had become distasteful. Once upon a time it had been bright with hope and new beginnings and stock and the prospect of credit. Now--now it was failure and dust. Very likely the landlord would be round presently to go on with the row about the window.... "Where d'you think of going, Bert?" Grubb asked.

Bert turned round and regarded him. "I thought it out as I was walking 'ome, and in bed. I couldn't sleep a wink."

"What did you think out?"

"Plans."

"What plans?"

"Oh! You're for stickin, here."

"Not if anything better was to offer."

"It's only an ideer," said Bert.

"You made the girls laugh yestiday, that song you sang."

"Seems a long time ago now," said Grubb.

"And old Edna nearly cried--over that bit of mine."

"She got a fly in her eye," said Grubb; "I saw it. But what's this got to do with your plan?"

"No end," said Bert.

"'Ow?"

"Don't you see?"

"Not singing in the streets?"

"Streets! No fear! But 'ow about the Tour of the Waterin' Places of England, Grubb? Singing! Young men of family doing it for a lark? You ain't got a bad voice, you know, and mine's all right. I never see a chap singing on the beach yet that I couldn't 'ave sung into a cocked hat. And we both know how to put on the toff a bit. Eh? Well, that's my ideer. Me and you, Grubb, with a refined song and a breakdown. Like we was doing for foolery yestiday. That was what put it into my 'ead. Easy make up a programme--easy. Six choice items, and one or two for encores and patter. I'm all right for the patter anyhow."

Grubb remained regarding his darkened and disheartening shop; he thought of his former landlord and his present landlord, and of the general disgustingness of business in an age which re-echoes to The Bitter Cry of the Middle Class; and then it seemed to him that afar off he heard the twankle, twankle of a banjo, and the voice of a stranded siren singing. He had a sense of hot sunshine upon sand, of the children of at least transiently opulent holiday makers in a circle round about him, of the whisper, "They are really gentlemen," and then dollop, dollop came the coppers in the hat. Sometimes even silver. It was all income; no outgoings, no bills. "I'm on, Bert," he said.

"Right O!" said Bert, and, "Now we shan't be long."

"We needn't start without capital neither," said Grubb. "If we take the best of these machines up to the Bicycle Mart in Finsbury we'd raise six or seven pounds on 'em. We could easy do that to-morrow before anybody much was about...."

"Nice to think of old Suet-and-Bones coming round to make his usual row with us, and finding a card up 'Closed for Repairs.'"

"We'll do that," said Grubb with zest--"we'll do that. And we'll put up another notice, and jest arst all inquirers to go round to 'im and inquire. See? Then they'll know all about us."

Before the day was out the whole enterprise was planned. They decided at first that they would call themselves the Naval Mr. O's, a plagiarism, and not perhaps a very good one, from the title of the well-known troupe of "Scarlet Mr. E's," and Bert rather clung to the idea of a uniform of bright blue serge, with a lot of gold lace and cord and ornamentation, rather like a naval officer's, but more so. But that had to be abandoned as impracticable, it would have taken too much time and money to prepare. They perceived they must wear some cheaper and more readily prepared costume, and Grubb fell back on white dominoes. They entertained the notion for a time of selecting the two worst machines from the hiring-stock, painting them over with crimson enamel paint, replacing the bells by the loudest sort of motor-horn, and doing a ride about to begin and end the entertainment. They doubted the advisability of this step.

"There's people in the world," said Bert, "who wouldn't recognise us, who'd know them bicycles again like a shot, and we don't want to go on with no old stories. We want a fresh start."

"I do," said Grubb, "badly."

"We want to forget things--and cut all these rotten old worries. They ain't doin' us good."

Nevertheless, they decided to take the risk of these bicycles, and they decided their costumes should be brown stockings and sandals, and cheap

unbleached sheets with a hole cut in the middle, and wigs and beards of tow. The rest their normal selves! "The Desert Dervishes," they would call themselves, and their chief songs would be those popular ditties, "In my Trailer," and "What Price Hair-pins Now?"

They decided to begin with small seaside places, and gradually, as they gained confidence, attack larger centres. To begin with they selected Littlestone in Kent, chiefly because of its unassuming name.

So they planned, and it seemed a small and unimportant thing to them that as they clattered the governments of half the world and more were drifting into war. About midday they became aware of the first of the evening-paper placards shouting to them across the street:--

---

THE WAR-CLOUD DARKENS----------

Nothing else but that.

"Always rottin' about war now," said Bert.

"They'll get it in the neck in real earnest one of these days, if they ain't precious careful."

4

So you will understand the sudden apparition that surprised rather than delighted the quiet informality of Dymchurch sands. Dymchurch was one of the last places on the coast of England to be reached by the mono-rail, and so its spacious sands were still, at the time of this story, the secret and delight of quite a limited number of people. They went there to flee vulgarity and extravagances, and to bathe and sit and talk and play with their children in peace, and the Desert Dervishes did not please them at all.

The two white figures on scarlet wheels came upon them out of the infinite along the sands from Littlestone, grew nearer and larger and more audible, honk-honking and emitting weird cries, and generally threatening liveliness of the most aggressive type. "Good heavens!" said Dymchurch, "what's this?"

Then our young men, according to a preconcerted plan, wheeled round from file to line, dismounted and stood it attention. "Ladies and gentlemen," they said, "we beg to present ourselves--the Desert Dervishes." They bowed profoundly.

The few scattered groups upon the beach regarded them with horror for the most part, but some of the children and young people were interested and drew nearer. "There ain't a bob on the beach," said Grubb in an undertone, and the Desert Dervishes plied their bicycles with comic "business," that got a laugh from one very unsophisticated little boy. Then they took a deep breath and struck into the cheerful strain of

"What Price Hair-pins Now?" Grubb sang the song, Bert did his best to make the chorus a rousing one, and it the end of each verse they danced certain steps, skirts in hand, that they had carefully rehearsed.

"Ting-a-ling-a-ting-a-ling-a-ting-a-ling-a-tang...
What Price Hair-pins Now?"

So they chanted and danced their steps in the sunshine on Dymchurch beach, and the children drew near these foolish young men, marvelling that they should behave in this way, and the older people looked cold and unfriendly.

All round the coasts of Europe that morning banjos were ringing, voices were bawling and singing, children were playing in the sun, pleasure-boats went to and fro; the common abundant life of the time, unsuspicious of all dangers that gathered darkly against it, flowed on its cheerful aimless way. In the cities men fussed about their businesses and engagements. The newspaper placards that had cried "wolf!" so often, cried "wolf!" now in vain.

5

Now as Bert and Grubb bawled their chorus for the third time, they became aware of a very big, golden-brown balloon low in the sky to the north-west, and coming rapidly towards them. "Jest as we're gettin' hold of 'em," muttered Grubb, "up comes a counter-attraction. Go it, Bert!"

"Ting-a-ling-a-ting-a-ling-a-ting-a-ling-a-tang
What Price Hair-pins Now?"

The balloon rose and fell, went out of sight--"landed, thank goodness," said Grubb--re-appeared with a leap. "'ENG!" said Grubb. "Step it, Bert, or they'll see it!"

They finished their dance, and then stood frankly staring.

"There's something wrong with that balloon," said Bert.

Everybody now was looking at the balloon, drawing rapidly nearer before a brisk north-westerly breeze. The song and dance were a "dead frost." Nobody thought any more about it. Even Bert and Grubb forgot it, and ignored the next item on the programme altogether. The balloon was bumping as though its occupants were trying to land; it would approach, sinking slowly, touch the ground, and instantly jump fifty feet or so in the air and immediately begin to fall again. Its car touched a clump of trees, and the black figure that had been struggling in the ropes fell back, or jumped back, into the car. In another moment it was quite close. It seemed a huge affair, as big as a house, and it floated down swiftly towards the sands; a long rope trailed behind it, and enormous shouts came from the man in the car. He seemed to be taking off his clothes, then his head came over the side of the car. "Catch hold of the rope!" they heard, quite plain.

"Salvage, Bert!" cried Grubb, and started to head off the rope.

Bert followed him, and collided, without upsetting, with a fisherman bent upon a similar errand. A woman carrying a baby in her arms, two small boys with toy spades, and a stout gentleman in flannels all got to the trailing rope at about the same time, and began to dance over it in their attempts to secure it. Bert came up to this wriggling, elusive serpent and got his foot on it, went down on all fours and achieved a grip. In half a dozen seconds the whole diffused population of the beach had, as it were, crystallised on the rope, and was pulling against the balloon under the vehement and stimulating directions of the man in the car. "Pull, I tell you!" said the man in the car--"pull!"

For a second or so the balloon obeyed its momentum and the wind and tugged its human anchor seaward. It dropped, touched the water, and made a flat, silvery splash, and recoiled as one's finger recoils when one touches anything hot. "Pull her in," said the man in the car. "SHE'S FAINTED!"

He occupied himself with some unseen object while the people on the rope pulled him in. Bert was nearest the balloon, and much excited and interested. He kept stumbling over the tail of the Dervish costume in his zeal. He had never imagined before what a big, light, wallowing thing a balloon was. The car was of brown coarse wicker-work, and comparatively small. The rope he tugged at was fastened to a

stout-looking ring, four or five feet above the car. At each tug he drew in a yard or so of rope, and the waggling wicker-work was drawn so much nearer. Out of the car came wrathful bellowings: "Fainted, she has!" and then: "It's her heart--broken with all she's had to go through."

The balloon ceased to struggle, and sank downward. Bert dropped the rope, and ran forward to catch it in a new place. In another moment he had his hand on the car. "Lay hold of it," said the man in the car, and his face appeared close to Bert's--a strangely familiar face, fierce eyebrows, a flattish nose, a huge black moustache. He had discarded coat and waistcoat--perhaps with some idea of presently having to swim for his life--and his black hair was extraordinarily disordered. "Will all you people get hold round the car?" he said. "There's a lady here fainted--or got failure of the heart. Heaven alone knows which! My name is Butteridge. Butteridge, my name is--in a balloon. Now please, all on to the edge. This is the last time I trust myself to one of these paleolithic contrivances. The ripping-cord failed, and the valve wouldn't act. If ever I meet the scoundrel who ought to have seen--"

He stuck his head out between the ropes abruptly, and said, in a note of earnest expostulation: "Get some brandy!--some neat brandy!" Some one went up the beach for it.

In the car, sprawling upon a sort of bed-bench, in an attitude of elaborate self-abandonment, was a large, blond lady, wearing a fur coat and a big floriferous hat. Her head lolled back against the padded

corner of the car, and her eyes were shut and her mouth open. "Me dear!" said Mr. Butteridge, in a common, loud voice, "we're safe!"

She gave no sign.

"Me dear!" said Mr. Butteridge, in a greatly intensified loud voice, "we're safe!"

She was still quite impassive.

Then Mr. Butteridge showed the fiery core of his soul. "If she is dead," he said, slowly lifting a fist towards the balloon above him, and speaking in an immense tremulous bellow--"if she is dead, I will r-r-rend the heavens like a garment! I must get her out," he cried, his nostrils dilated with emotion--"I must get her out. I cannot have her die in a wicker-work basket nine feet square--she who was made for kings' palaces! Keep holt of this car! Is there a strong man among ye to take her if I hand her out?"

He swept the lady together by a powerful movement of his arms, and lifted her. "Keep the car from jumping," he said to those who clustered about him. "Keep your weight on it. She is no light woman, and when she is out of it--it will be relieved."

Bert leapt lightly into a sitting position on the edge of the car. The others took a firmer grip upon the ropes and ring.

"Are you ready?" said Mr. Butteridge.

He stood upon the bed-bench and lifted the lady carefully. Then he sat down on the wicker edge opposite to Bert, and put one leg over to dangle outside. A rope or so seemed to incommode him. "Will some one assist me?" he said. "If they would take this lady?"

It was just at this moment, with Mr. Butteridge and the lady balanced finely on the basket brim, that she came-to. She came-to suddenly and violently with a loud, heart-rending cry of "Alfred! Save me!" And she waved her arms searchingly, and then clasped Mr. Butteridge about.

It seemed to Bert that the car swayed for a moment and then buck-jumped and kicked him. Also he saw the boots of the lady and the right leg of the gentleman describing arcs through the air, preparatory to vanishing over the side of the car. His impressions were complex, but they also comprehended the fact that he had lost his balance, and was going to stand on his head inside this creaking basket. He spread out clutching arms. He did stand on his head, more or less, his tow-beard came off and got in his mouth, and his cheek slid along against padding. His nose buried itself in a bag of sand. The car gave a violent lurch, and became still.

"Confound it!" he said.

He had an impression he must be stunned because of a surging in his ears, and because all the voices of the people about him had become small and remote. They were shouting like elves inside a hill.

He found it a little difficult to get on his feet. His limbs were mixed up with the garments Mr. Butteridge had discarded when that gentleman had thought he must needs plunge into the sea. Bert bawled out half angry, half rueful, "You might have said you were going to tip the basket." Then he stood up and clutched the ropes of the car convulsively.

Below him, far below him, shining blue, were the waters of the English Channel. Far off, a little thing in the sunshine, and rushing down as if some one was bending it hollow, was the beach and the irregular cluster of houses that constitutes Dymchurch. He could see the little crowd of people he had so abruptly left. Grubb, in the white wrapper of a Desert Dervish, was running along the edge of the sea. Mr. Butteridge was knee-deep in the water, bawling immensely. The lady was sitting up with her floriferous hat in her lap, shockingly neglected. The beach, east and west, was dotted with little people--they seemed all heads and feet--looking up. And the balloon, released from the twenty-five stone or so of Mr. Butteridge and his lady, was rushing up into the sky at the pace of a racing motor-car. "My crikey!" said Bert; "here's a go!"

He looked down with a pinched face at the receding beach, and reflected that he wasn't giddy; then he made a superficial survey of the cords and

ropes about him with a vague idea of "doing something." "I'm not going to mess about with the thing," he said at last, and sat down upon the mattress. "I'm not going to touch it.... I wonder what one ought to do?"

Soon he got up again and stared for a long time it the sinking world below, at white cliffs to the east and flattening marsh to the left, at a minute wide prospect of weald and downland, at dim towns and harbours and rivers and ribbon-like roads, at ships and ships, decks and foreshortened funnels upon the ever-widening sea, and at the great mono-rail bridge that straddled the Channel from Folkestone to Boulogne, until at last, first little wisps and then a veil of filmy cloud hid the prospect from his eyes. He wasn't at all giddy nor very much frightened, only in a state of enormous consternation.