

CHAPTER III. THE BALLOON

I

Bert Smallways was a vulgar little creature, the sort of pert, limited soul that the old civilisation of the early twentieth century produced by the million in every country of the world. He had lived all his life in narrow streets, and between mean houses he could not look over, and in a narrow circle of ideas from which there was no escape. He thought the whole duty of man was to be smarter than his fellows, get his hands, as he put it, "on the dibs," and have a good time. He was, in fact, the sort of man who had made England and America what they were. The luck had been against him so far, but that was by the way. He was a mere aggressive and acquisitive individual with no sense of the State, no habitual loyalty, no devotion, no code of honour, no code even of courage. Now by a curious accident he found himself lifted out of his marvellous modern world for a time, out of all the rush and confused appeals of it, and floating like a thing dead and disembodied between sea and sky. It was as if Heaven was experimenting with him, had picked him out as a sample from the English millions, to look at him more nearly, and to see what was happening to the soul of man. But what Heaven made of him in that case I cannot profess to imagine, for I have long since abandoned all theories about the ideals and satisfactions of Heaven.

To be alone in a balloon at a height of fourteen or fifteen thousand

feet--and to that height Bert Smallways presently rose is like nothing else in human experience. It is one of the supreme things possible to man. No flying machine can ever better it. It is to pass extraordinarily out of human things. It is to be still and alone to an unprecedented degree. It is solitude without the suggestion of intervention; it is calm without a single irrelevant murmur. It is to see the sky. No sound reaches one of all the roar and jar of humanity, the air is clear and sweet beyond the thought of defilement. No bird, no insect comes so high. No wind blows ever in a balloon, no breeze rustles, for it moves with the wind and is itself a part of the atmosphere. Once started, it does not rock nor sway; you cannot feel whether it rises or falls. Bert felt acutely cold, but he wasn't mountain-sick; he put on the coat and overcoat and gloves Butteridge had discarded--put them over the "Desert Dervish" sheet that covered his cheap best suit--and sat very still for a long, time, overawed by the new-found quiet of the world. Above him was the light, translucent, billowing globe of shining brown oiled silk and the blazing sunlight and the great deep blue dome of the sky.

Below, far below, was a torn floor of sunlit cloud slashed by enormous rents through which he saw the sea.

If you had been watching him from below, you would have seen his head, a motionless little black knob, sticking out from the car first of all for a long time on one side, and then vanishing to reappear after a time at some other point.

He wasn't in the least degree uncomfortable nor afraid. He did think that as this uncontrollable thing had thus rushed up the sky with him it might presently rush down again, but this consideration did not trouble him very much. Essentially his state was wonder. There is no fear nor trouble in balloons--until they descend.

"Gollys!" he said at last, feeling a need for talking; "it's better than a motor-bike."

"It's all right!"

"I suppose they're telegraphing about, about me."...

The second hour found him examining the equipment of the car with great particularity. Above him was the throat of the balloon bunched and tied together, but with an open lumen through which Bert could peer up into a vast, empty, quiet interior, and out of which descended two fine cords of unknown import, one white, one crimson, to pockets below the ring. The netting about the balloon-ended in cords attached to the ring, a big steel-bound hoop to which the car was slung by ropes. From it depended the trail rope and grapnel, and over the sides of the car were a number of canvas bags that Bert decided must be ballast to "chuck down" if the balloon fell. ("Not much falling just yet," said Bert.)

There were an aneroid and another box-shaped instrument hanging from the ring. The latter had an ivory plate bearing "statoscope" and other words

in French, and a little indicator quivered and waggled, between Montee and Descente. "That's all right," said Bert. "That tells if you're going up or down." On the crimson padded seat of the balloon there lay a couple of rugs and a Kodak, and in opposite corners of the bottom of the car were an empty champagne bottle and a glass. "Refreshments," said Bert meditatively, tilting the empty bottle. Then he had a brilliant idea. The two padded bed-like seats, each with blankets and mattress, he perceived, were boxes, and within he found Mr. Butteridge's conception of an adequate equipment for a balloon ascent: a hamper which included a game pie, a Roman pie, a cold fowl, tomatoes, lettuce, ham sandwiches, shrimp sandwiches, a large cake, knives and forks and paper plates, self-heating tins of coffee and cocoa, bread, butter, and marmalade, several carefully packed bottles of champagne, bottles of Perrier water, and a big jar of water for washing, a portfolio, maps, and a compass, a rucksack containing a number of conveniences, including curling-tongs and hair-pins, a cap with ear-flaps, and so forth.

"A 'ome from 'ome," said Bert, surveying this provision as he tied the ear-flaps under his chin. He looked over the side of the car. Far below were the shining clouds. They had thickened so that the whole world was hidden. Southward they were piled in great snowy masses, so that he was half disposed to think them mountains; northward and eastward they were in wavelike levels, and blindingly sunlit.

"Wonder how long a balloon keeps up?" he said.

He imagined he was not moving, so insensibly did the monster drift with the air about it. "No good coming down till we shift a bit," he said.

He consulted the statoscope.

"Still Monty," he said.

"Wonder what would happen if you pulled a cord?"

"No," he decided. "I ain't going to mess it about."

Afterwards he did pull both the ripping- and the valve-cords, but, as Mr. Butteridge had already discovered, they had fouled a fold of silk in the throat. Nothing happened. But for that little hitch the ripping-cord would have torn the balloon open as though it had been slashed by a sword, and hurled Mr. Smallways to eternity at the rate of some thousand feet a second. "No go!" he said, giving it a final tug. Then he lunched.

He opened a bottle of champagne, which, as soon as he cut the wire, blew its cork out with incredible violence, and for the most part followed it into space. Bert, however, got about a tumblerful. "Atmospheric pressure," said Bert, finding a use at last for the elementary physiography of his seventh-standard days. "I'll have to be more careful next time. No good wastin' drink."

Then he routed about for matches to utilise Mr. Butteridge's cigars; but

here again luck was on his side, and he couldn't find any wherewith to set light to the gas above him. Or else he would have dropped in a flare, a splendid but transitory pyrotechnic display. "Eng old Grubb!" said Bert, slapping unproductive pockets. "E didn't ought to 'ave kep' my box. 'E's always sneaking matches."

He reposed for a time. Then he got up, paddled about, rearranged the ballast bags on the floor, watched the clouds for a time, and turned over the maps on the locker. Bert liked maps, and he spent some time in trying to find one of France or the Channel; but they were all British ordnance maps of English counties. That set him thinking about languages and trying to recall his seventh-standard French. "Je suis Anglais. C'est une meprise. Je suis arrive par accident ici," he decided upon as convenient phrases. Then it occurred to him that he would entertain himself by reading Mr. Butteridge's letters and examining his pocket-book, and in this manner he whiled away the afternoon.

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He sat upon the padded locker, wrapped about very carefully, for the air, though calm, was exhilaratingly cold and clear. He was wearing first a modest suit of blue serge and all the unpretending underwear of a suburban young man of fashion, with sandal-like cycling-shoes and brown stockings drawn over his trouser ends; then the perforated sheet proper to a Desert Dervish; then the coat and waistcoat and big fur-trimmed overcoat of Mr. Butteridge; then a lady's large fur cloak,

and round his knees a blanket. Over his head was a tow wig, surmounted by a large cap of Mr. Butteridge's with the flaps down over his ears. And some fur sleeping-boots of Mr. Butteridge's warmed his feet. The car of the balloon was small and neat, some bags of ballast the untidiest of its contents, and he had found a light folding-table and put it at his elbow, and on that was a glass with champagne. And about him, above and below, was space--such a clear emptiness and silence of space as only the aeronaut can experience.

He did not know where he might be drifting, or what might happen next. He accepted this state of affairs with a serenity creditable to the Smallways' courage, which one might reasonably have expected to be of a more degenerate and contemptible quality altogether. His impression was that he was bound to come down somewhere, and that then, if he wasn't smashed, some one, some "society" perhaps, would probably pack him and the balloon back to England. If not, he would ask very firmly for the British Consul.

"Le consuelo Britannique," he decided this would be. "Apportez moi a le consuelo Britannique, s'il vous plait," he would say, for he was by no means ignorant of French. In the meanwhile, he found the intimate aspects of Mr. Butteridge an interesting study.

There were letters of an entirely private character addressed to Mr. Butteridge, and among others several love-letters of a devouring sort in a large feminine hand. These are no business of ours, and one remarks

with regret that Bert read them.

When he had read them he remarked, "Gollys!" in an awestricken tone, and then, after a long interval, "I wonder if that was her?"

"Lord!"

He mused for a time.

He resumed his exploration of the Butteridge interior. It included a number of press cuttings of interviews and also several letters in German, then some in the same German handwriting, but in English.

"Hul-LO!" said Bert.

One of the latter, the first he took, began with an apology to Butteridge for not writing to him in English before, and for the inconvenience and delay that had been caused him by that, and went on to matter that Bert found exciting in, the highest degree. "We can understand entirely the difficulties of your position, and that you shall possibly be watched at the present juncture.--But, sir, we do not believe that any serious obstacles will be put in your way if you wished to endeavour to leave the country and come to us with your plans by the customary routes--either via Dover, Ostend, Boulogne, or Dieppe. We find it difficult to think you are right in supposing yourself to be in danger of murder for your invaluable invention."

"Funny!" said Bert, and meditated.

Then he went through the other letters.

"They seem to want him to come," said Bert, "but they don't seem hurting themselves to get 'im. Or else they're shamming don't care to get his prices down.

"They don't quite seem to be the gov'ment," he reflected, after an interval. "It's more like some firm's paper. All this printed stuff at the top. Drachenflieger. Drachenballons. Ballonstoffe. Kugelballons. Greek to me.

"But he was trying to sell his blessed secret abroad. That's all right. No Greek about that! Gollys! Here IS the secret!"

He tumbled off the seat, opened the locker, and had the portfolio open before him on the folding-table. It was full of drawings done in the peculiar flat style and conventional colours engineers adopt. And, in, addition there were some rather under-exposed photographs, obviously done by an amateur, at close quarters, of the actual machine's mutterings had made, in its shed near the Crystal Palace. Bert found he was trembling. "Lord" he said, "here am I and the whole blessed secret of flying--lost up here on the roof of everywhere.

"Let's see!" He fell to studying the drawings and comparing them with

the photographs. They puzzled him. Half of them seemed to be missing. He tried to imagine how they fitted together, and found the effort too great for his mind.

"It's tryin'," said Bert. "I wish I'd been brought up to the engineering. If I could only make it out!"

He went to the side of the car and remained for a time staring with unseeing eyes at a huge cluster of great clouds--a cluster of slowly dissolving Monte Rosas, sunlit below. His attention was arrested by a strange black spot that moved over them. It alarmed him. It was a black spot moving slowly with him far below, following him down there, indefatigably, over the cloud mountains. Why should such a thing follow him? What could it be?...

He had an inspiration. "Uv course!" he said. It was the shadow of the balloon. But he still watched it dubiously for a time.

He returned to the plans on the table.

He spent a long afternoon between his struggles to understand them and fits of meditation. He evolved a remarkable new sentence in French.

"Voici, Mossool!--Je suis un inventeur Anglais. Mon nom est Butteridge. Beh. oo. teh. teh. eh. arr. I. deh. geh. eh. J'avais ici pour vendre le secret de le flying-machine. Comprenez? Vendre pour l'argent tout

suite, l'argent en main. Comprenez? C'est le machine a jouer dans l'air. Comprenez? C'est le machine a faire l'oiseau. Comprenez? Balancer? Oui, exactement! Battir l'oiseau en fait, a son propre jeu. Je desire de vendre ceci a votre government national. Voulez vous me diriger la?

"Bit rummy, I expect, from the point of view of grammar," said Bert, "but they ought to get the hang of it all right.

"But then, if they arst me to explain the blessed thing?"

He returned in a worried way to the plans. "I don't believe it's all here!" he said....

He got more and more perplexed up there among the clouds as to what he should do with this wonderful find of his. At any moment, so far as he knew he might descend among he knew not what foreign people.

"It's the chance of my life!" he said.

It became more and more manifest to him that it wasn't. "Directly I come down they'll telegraph--put it in the papers. Butteridge'll know of it and come along--on my track."

Butteridge would be a terrible person to be on any one's track.

Bert thought of the great black moustaches, the triangular nose, the searching bellow and the glare. His afternoon's dream of a marvellous

seizure and sale of the great Butteridge secret crumpled up in his mind, dissolved, and vanished. He awoke to sanity again.

"Wouldn't do. What's the good of thinking of it?" He proceeded slowly and reluctantly to replace the Butteridge papers in pockets and portfolio as he had found them. He became aware of a splendid golden light upon the balloon above him, and of a new warmth in the blue dome of the sky. He stood up and beheld the sun, a great ball of blinding gold, setting upon a tumbled sea of gold-edged crimson and purple clouds, strange and wonderful beyond imagining. Eastward cloud-land stretched for ever, darkling blue, and it seemed to Bert the whole round hemisphere of the world was under his eyes.

Then far, away over the blue he caught sight of three long, dark shapes like hurrying fish that drove one after the other, as porpoises follow one another in the water. They were very fish-like indeed--with tails. It was an unconvincing impression in that light. He blinked his eyes, stared again, and they had vanished. For a long time he scrutinised those remote blue levels and saw no more....

"Wonder if I ever saw anything," he said, and then: "There ain't such things...."

Down went the sun and down, not diving steeply, but passing northward as it sank, and then suddenly daylight and the expansive warmth of daylight had gone altogether, and the index of the statoscope quivered over to

Descente.

3

"NOW what's going to 'appen?" said Bert.

He found the cold, grey cloud wilderness rising towards him with a wide, slow steadiness. As he sank down among them the clouds ceased to seem the snowclad mountain-slopes they had resembled heretofore, became unsubstantial, confessed an immense silent drift and eddy in their substance. For a moment, when he was nearly among their twilight masses, his descent was checked. Then abruptly the sky was hidden, the last vestiges of daylight gone, and he was falling rapidly in an evening twilight through a whirl of fine snowflakes that streamed past him towards the zenith, that drifted in upon the things about him and melted, that touched his face with ghostly fingers. He shivered. His breath came smoking from his lips, and everything was instantly bedewed and wet.

He had an impression of a snowstorm pouring with unexampled and increasing fury UPWARD; then he realised that he was falling faster and faster.

Imperceptibly a sound grew upon his ears. The great silence of the world was at an end. What was this confused sound?

He craned his head over the side, concerned, perplexed.

First he seemed to see, and then not to see. Then he saw clearly little edges of foam pursuing each other, and a wide waste of weltering waters below him. Far away was a pilot boat with a big sail bearing dim black letters, and a little pinkish-yellow light, and it was rolling and pitching, rolling and pitching in a gale, while he could feel no wind at, all. Soon the sound of waters was loud and near. He was dropping, dropping--into the sea!

He became convulsively active.

"Ballast!" he cried, and seized a little sack from the floor, and heaved it overboard. He did not wait for the effect of that, but sent another after it. He looked over in time to see a minute white splash in the dim waters below him, and then he was back in the snow and clouds again.

He sent out quite needlessly a third sack of ballast and a fourth, and presently had the immense satisfaction of soaring up out of the damp and chill into the clear, cold, upper air in which the day still lingered.

"Thang-God!" he said, with all his heart.

A few stars now had pierced the blue, and in the east there shone brightly a prolate moon.

That first downward plunge filled Bert with a haunting sense of boundless waters below. It was a summer's night, but it seemed to him, nevertheless, extraordinarily long. He had a feeling of insecurity that he fancied quite irrationally the sunrise would dispel. Also he was hungry. He felt, in the dark, in the locker, put his fingers in the Roman pie, and got some sandwiches, and he also opened rather successfully a half-bottle of champagne. That warmed and restored him, he grumbled at Grubb about the matches, wrapped himself up warmly on the locker, and dozed for a time. He got up once or twice to make sure that he was still securely high above the sea. The first time the moonlit clouds were white and dense, and the shadow of the balloon ran athwart them like a dog that followed; afterwards they seemed thinner. As he lay still, staring up at the huge dark balloon above, he made a discovery. His--or rather Mr. Butteridge's--waistcoat rustled as he breathed. It was lined with papers. But Bert could not see to get them out or examine them, much as he wished to do so....

He was awakened by the crowing of cocks, the barking of dogs, and a clamour of birds. He was driving slowly at a low level over a broad land lit golden by sunrise under a clear sky. He stared out upon hedgeless, well-cultivated fields intersected by roads, each lined with cable-bearing red poles. He had just passed over a compact, whitewashed, village with a straight church tower and steep red-tiled roofs. A number of peasants, men and women, in shiny blouses and lumpish footwear, stood regarding him, arrested on their way to work. He was so low that the end

of his rope was trailing.

He stared out at these people. "I wonder how you land," he thought.

"S'pose I OUGHT to land?"

He found himself drifting down towards a mono-rail line, and hastily flung out two or three handfuls of ballast to clear it.

"Lemme see! One might say just 'Pre'nez!' Wish I knew the French for take hold of the rope!... I suppose they are French?"

He surveyed the country again. "Might be Holland. Or Luxembourg. Or Lorraine 's far as I know. Wonder what those big affairs over there are? Some sort of kiln. Prosperous-looking country..."

The respectability of the country's appearance awakened answering chords in his nature.

"Make myself a bit ship-shape first," he said.

He resolved to rise a little and get rid of his wig (which now felt hot on his head), and so forth. He threw out a bag of ballast, and was astonished to find himself careering up through the air very rapidly.

"Blow!" said Mr. Smallways. "I've over-done the ballast trick.... Wonder

when I shall get down again?... brekfus' on board, anyhow."

He removed his cap and wig, for the air was warm, and an improvident impulse made him cast the latter object overboard. The statoscope responded with a vigorous swing to Monte.

"The blessed thing goes up if you only LOOK overboard," he remarked, and assailed the locker. He found among other items several tins of liquid cocoa containing explicit directions for opening that he followed with minute care. He pierced the bottom with the key provided in the holes indicated, and forthwith the can grew from cold to hotter and hotter, until at last he could scarcely touch it, and then he opened the can at the other end, and there was his cocoa smoking, without the use of match or flame of any sort. It was an old invention, but new to Bert. There was also ham and marmalade and bread, so that he had a really very tolerable breakfast indeed.

Then he took off his overcoat, for the sunshine was now inclined to be hot, and that reminded him of the rustling he had heard in the night. He took off the waistcoat and examined it. "Old Butteridge won't like me unpicking this." He hesitated, and finally proceeded to unpick it. He found the missing drawings of the lateral rotating planes, on which the whole stability of the flying machine depended.

An observant angel would have seen Bert sitting for a long time after this discovery in a state of intense meditation. Then at last he rose

with an air of inspiration, took Mr. Butteridge's ripped, demolished, and ransacked waistcoat, and hurled it from the balloon whence it fluttered down slowly and eddyingly until at last it came to rest with a contented flop upon the face of German tourist sleeping peacefully beside the Hohenweg near Wildbad. Also this sent the balloon higher, and so into a position still more convenient for observation by our imaginary angel who would next have seen Mr. Smallways tear open his own jacket and waistcoat, remove his collar, open his shirt, thrust his hand into his bosom, and tear his heart out--or at least, if not his heart, some large bright scarlet object. If the observer, overcoming a thrill of celestial horror, had scrutinised this scarlet object more narrowly, one of Bert's most cherished secrets, one of his essential weaknesses, would have been laid bare. It was a red-flannel chest-protector, one of those large quasi-hygienic objects that with pills and medicines take the place of beneficial relics and images among the Protestant peoples of Christendom. Always Bert wore this thing; it was his cherished delusion, based on the advice of a shilling fortune-teller at Margate, that he was weak in the lungs.

He now proceeded to unbutton his fetish, to attack it with a penknife, and to thrust the new-found plans between the two layers of imitation Saxony flannel of which it was made. Then with the help of Mr. Butteridge's small shaving mirror and his folding canvas basin he readjusted his costume with the gravity of a man who has taken an irrevocable step in life, buttoned up his jacket, cast the white sheet of the Desert Dervish on one side, washed temperately, shaved,

resumed the big cap and the fur overcoat, and, much refreshed by these exercises, surveyed the country below him.

It was indeed a spectacle of incredible magnificence. If perhaps it was not so strange and magnificent as the sunlit cloudland of the previous day, it was at any rate infinitely more interesting.

The air was at its utmost clearness and except to the south and south-west there was not a cloud in the sky. The country was hilly, with occasional fir plantations and bleak upland spaces, but also with numerous farms, and the hills were deeply intersected by the gorges of several winding rivers interrupted at intervals by the banked-up ponds and weirs of electric generating wheels. It was dotted with bright-looking, steep-roofed, villages, and each showed a distinctive and interesting church beside its wireless telegraph steeple; here and there were large chateaux and parks and white roads, and paths lined with red and white cable posts were extremely conspicuous in the landscape. There were walled enclosures like gardens and rickyards and great roofs of barns and many electric dairy centres. The uplands were mottled with cattle. At places he would see the track of one of the old railroads (converted now to mono-rails) dodging through tunnels and crossing embankments, and a rushing hum would mark the passing of a train. Everything was extraordinarily clear as well as minute. Once or twice he saw guns and soldiers, and was reminded of the stir of military preparations he had witnessed on the Bank Holiday in England; but there was nothing to tell him that these military preparations were abnormal

or to explain an occasional faint irregular firing Of guns that drifted up to him....

"Wish I knew how to get down," said Bert, ten thousand feet or so above it all, and gave himself to much futile tugging at the red and white cords. Afterwards he made a sort of inventory of the provisions. Life in the high air was giving him an appalling appetite, and it seemed to him discreet at this stage to portion out his supply into rations. So far as he could see he might pass a week in the air.

At first all the vast panorama below had been as silent as a painted picture. But as the day wore on and the gas diffused slowly from the balloon, it sank earthward again, details increased, men became more visible, and he began to hear the whistle and moan of trains and cars, sounds of cattle, bugles and kettle drums, and presently even men's voices. And at last his guide-rope was trailing again, and he found it possible to attempt a landing. Once or twice as the rope dragged over cables he found his hair erect with electricity, and once he had a slight shock, and sparks snapped about the car. He took these things among the chances of the voyage. He had one idea now very clear in his mind, and that was to drop the iron grapnel that hung from the ring.

From the first this attempt was unfortunate, perhaps because the place for descent was ill-chosen. A balloon should come down in an empty open space, and he chose a crowd. He made his decision suddenly, and without proper reflection. As he trailed, Bert saw ahead of him one of the

most attractive little towns in the world--a cluster of steep gables surmounted by a high church tower and diversified with trees, walled, and with a fine, large gateway opening out upon a tree-lined high road. All the wires and cables of the countryside converged upon it like guests to entertainment. It had a most home-like and comfortable quality, and it was made gayer by abundant flags. Along the road a quantity of peasant folk, in big pair-wheeled carts and afoot, were coming and going, besides an occasional mono-rail car; and at the car-junction, under the trees outside the town, was a busy little fair of booths. It seemed a warm, human, well-rooted, and altogether delightful place to Bert. He came low over the tree-tops, with his grapnel ready to throw and so anchor him--a curious, interested, and interesting guest, so his imagination figured it, in the very middle of it all.

He thought of himself performing feats with the sign language and chance linguistics amidst a circle of admiring rustics....

And then the chapter of adverse accidents began.

The rope made itself unpopular long before the crowd had fully realised his advent over the trees. An elderly and apparently intoxicated peasant in a shiny black hat, and carrying a large crimson umbrella, caught sight of it first as it trailed past him, and was seized with a discreditable ambition to kill it. He pursued it, briskly with unpleasant cries. It crossed the road obliquely, splashed into a pail of

milk upon a stall, and slapped its milky tail athwart a motor-car load of factory girls halted outside the town gates. They screamed loudly. People looked up and saw Bert making what he meant to be genial salutations, but what they considered, in view of the feminine outcry, to be insulting gestures. Then the car hit the roof of the gatehouse smartly, snapped a flag staff, played a tune upon some telegraph wires, and sent a broken wire like a whip-lash to do its share in accumulating unpopularity. Bert, by clutching convulsively, just escaped being pitched headlong. Two young soldiers and several peasants shouted things up to him and shook fists at him and began to run in pursuit as he disappeared over the wall into the town.

Admiring rustics, indeed!

The balloon leapt at once, in the manner of balloons when part of their weight is released by touching down, with a sort of flippancy, and in another moment Bert was over a street crowded with peasants and soldiers, that opened into a busy market-square. The wave of unfriendliness pursued him.

"Grapnel," said Bert, and then with an afterthought shouted, "TETES there, you! I say! I say! TETES. 'Eng it!"

The grapnel smashed down a steeply sloping roof, followed by an avalanche of broken tiles, jumped the street amidst shrieks and cries, and smashed into a plate-glass window with an immense and sickening

impact. The balloon rolled nauseatingly, and the car pitched. But the grapnel had not held. It emerged at once bearing on one fluke, with a ridiculous air of fastidious selection, a small child's chair, and pursued by a maddened shopman. It lifted its catch, swung about with an appearance of painful indecision amidst a roar of wrath, and dropped it at last neatly, and as if by inspiration, over the head of a peasant woman in charge of an assortment of cabbages in the market-place.

Everybody now was aware of the balloon. Everybody was either trying to dodge the grapnel or catch the trail rope. With a pendulum-like swoop through the crowd, that sent people flying right and left the grapnel came to earth again, tried for and missed a stout gentleman in a blue suit and a straw hat, smacked away a trestle from under a stall of haberdashery, made a cyclist soldier in knickerbockers leap like a chamois, and secured itself uncertainly among the hind-legs of a sheep--which made convulsive, ungenerous efforts to free itself, and was dragged into a position of rest against a stone cross in the middle of the place. The balloon pulled up with a jerk. In another moment a score of willing hands were tugging it earthward. At the same instant Bert became aware for the first time of a fresh breeze blowing about him.

For some seconds he stood staggering in the car, which now swayed sickeningly, surveying the exasperated crowd below him and trying to collect his mind. He was extraordinarily astonished at this run of mishaps. Were the people really so annoyed? Everybody seemed angry with him. No one seemed interested or amused by his arrival.

A disproportionate amount of the outcry had the flavour of imprecation--had, indeed a strong flavour of riot. Several greatly uniformed officials in cocked hats struggled in vain to control the crowd. Fists and sticks were shaken. And when Bert saw a man on the outskirts of the crowd run to a haycart and get a brightly pronged pitch-fork, and a blue-clad soldier unbuckle his belt, his rising doubt whether this little town was after all such a good place for a landing became a certainty.

He had clung to the fancy that they would make something of a hero of him. Now he knew that he was mistaken.

He was perhaps ten feet above the people when he made his decision. His paralysis ceased. He leapt up on the seat, and, at imminent risk of falling headlong, released the grapnel-rope from the toggle that held it, sprang on to the trail rope and disengaged that also. A hoarse shout of disgust greeted the descent of the grapnel-rope and the swift leap of the balloon, and something--he fancied afterwards it was a turnip--whizzed by his head. The trail-rope followed its fellow. The crowd seemed to jump away from him. With an immense and horrifying rustle the balloon brushed against a telephone pole, and for a tense instant he anticipated either an electric explosion or a bursting of the oiled silk, or both. But fortune was with him.

In another second he was cowering in the bottom of the car, and released from the weight of the grapnel and the two ropes, rushing up once more

through the air. For a time he remained crouching, and when at last he looked out again the little town was very small and travelling, with the rest of lower Germany, in a circular orbit round and round the car--or at least it appeared to be doing that. When he got used to it, he found this rotation of the balloon rather convenient; it saved moving about in the car.

5

Late in the afternoon of a pleasant summer day in the year 191-, if one may borrow a mode of phrasing that once found favour with the readers of the late G. P. R. James, a solitary balloonist--replacing the solitary horseman of the classic romances--might have been observed wending his way across Franconia in a north-easterly direction, and at a height of about eleven thousand feet above the sea and still spindling slowly. His head was craned over the side of the car, and he surveyed the country below with an expression of profound perplexity; ever and again his lips shaped inaudible words. "Shootin' at a chap," for example, and "I'll come down right enough soon as I find out 'ow." Over the side of the basket the robe of the Desert Dervish was hanging, an appeal for consideration, an ineffectual white flag.

He was now very distinctly aware that the world below him, so far from being the naive countryside of his earlier imaginings that day, sleepily unconscious of him and capable of being amazed and nearly reverential at his descent, was acutely irritated by his career, and extremely

impatient with the course he was taking.--But indeed it was not he who took that course, but his masters, the winds of heaven. Mysterious voices spoke to him in his ear, jerking the words up to him by means of megaphones, in a weird and startling manner, in a great variety of languages. Official-looking persons had signalled to him by means of flag flapping and arm waving. On the whole a guttural variant of English prevailed in the sentences that alighted upon the balloon; chiefly he was told to "come down or you will be shot."

"All very well," said Bert, "but 'ow?"

Then they shot a little wide of the car. Latterly he had been shot at six or seven times, and once the bullet had gone by with a sound so persuasively like the tearing of silk that he had resigned himself to the prospect of a headlong fall. But either they were aiming near him or they had missed, and as yet nothing was torn but the air about him--and his anxious soul.

He was now enjoying a respite from these attentions, but he felt it was at best an interlude, and he was doing what he could to appreciate his position. Incidentally he was having some hot coffee and pie in an untidy inadvertent manner, with an eye fluttering nervously over the side of the car. At first he had ascribed the growing interest in his career to his ill-conceived attempt to land in the bright little upland town, but now he was beginning to realise that the military rather than the civil arm was concerned about him.

He was quite involuntarily playing that weird mysterious part--the part of an International Spy. He was seeing secret things. He had, in fact, crossed the designs of no less a power than the German Empire, he had blundered into the hot focus of Welt-Politik, he was drifting helplessly towards the great Imperial secret, the immense aeronautic park that had been established at a headlong pace in Franconia to develop silently, swiftly, and on an immense scale the great discoveries of Hunstedt and Stossel, and so to give Germany before all other nations a fleet of airships, the air power and the Empire of the world.

Later, just before they shot him down altogether, Bert saw that great area of passionate work, warm lit in the evening light, a great area of upland on which the airships lay like a herd of grazing monsters at their feed. It was a vast busy space stretching away northward as far as he could see, methodically cut up into numbered sheds, gasometers, squad encampments, storage areas, interlaced with the omnipresent mono-rail lines, and altogether free from overhead wires or cables. Everywhere was the white, black and yellow of Imperial Germany, everywhere the black eagles spread their wings. Even without these indications, the large vigorous neatness of everything would have marked it German. Vast multitudes of men went to and fro, many in white and drab fatigue uniforms busy about the balloons, others drilling in sensible drab. Here and there a full uniform glittered. The airships chiefly engaged his attention, and he knew at once it was three of these he had seen on the previous night, taking advantage of the cloud welkin to manoeuvre

unobserved. They were altogether fish-like. For the great airships with which Germany attacked New York in her last gigantic effort for world supremacy--before humanity realized that world supremacy was a dream--were the lineal descendants of the Zeppelin airship that flew over Lake Constance in 1906, and of the Lebaudy navigables that made their memorable excursions over Paris in 1907 and 1908.

These German airships were held together by rib-like skeletons of steel and aluminium and a stout inelastic canvas outer-skin, within which was an impervious rubber gas-bag, cut up by transverse dissepiments into from fifty to a hundred compartments. These were all absolutely gas tight and filled with hydrogen, and the entire aerostat was kept at any level by means of a long internal balloonette of oiled and toughened silk canvas, into which air could be forced and from which it could be pumped. So the airship could be made either heavier or lighter than air, and losses of weight through the consumption of fuel, the casting of bombs and so forth, could also be compensated by admitting air to sections of the general gas-bag. Ultimately that made a highly explosive mixture; but in all these matters risks must be taken and guarded against. There was a steel axis to the whole affair, a central backbone which terminated in the engine and propeller, and the men and magazines were forward in a series of cabins under the expanded headlike forepart. The engine, which was of the extraordinarily powerful Pforzheim type, that supreme triumph of German invention, was worked by wires from this forepart, which was indeed the only really habitable part of the ship. If anything went wrong, the engineers went aft along a rope ladder

beneath the frame. The tendency of the whole affair to roll was partly corrected by a horizontal lateral fin on either side, and steering was chiefly effected by two vertical fins, which normally lay back like gill-flaps on either side of the head. It was indeed a most complete adaptation of the fish form to aerial conditions, the position of swimming bladder, eyes, and brain being, however, below instead of above. A striking, and unfish-like feature was the apparatus for wireless telegraphy that dangled from the forward cabin--that is to say, under the chin of the fish.

These monsters were capable of ninety miles an hour in a calm, so that they could face and make headway against nearly everything except the fiercest tornado. They varied in length from eight hundred to two thousand feet, and they had a carrying power of from seventy to two hundred tons. How many Germany possessed history does not record, but Bert counted nearly eighty great bulks receding in perspective during his brief inspection. Such were the instruments on which she chiefly relied to sustain her in her repudiation of the Monroe Doctrine and her bold bid for a share in the empire of the New World. But not altogether did she rely on these; she had also a one-man bomb-throwing Drachenflieger of unknown value among the resources.

But the Drachenflieger were away in the second great aeronautic park east of Hamburg, and Bert Smallways saw nothing of them in the bird's-eye view he took of the Franconian establishment before they shot him down very neatly. The bullet tore past him and made a sort of pop as

it pierced his balloon--a pop that was followed by a rustling sigh and a steady downward movement. And when in the confusion of the moment he dropped a bag of ballast, the Germans, very politely but firmly overcame his scruples by shooting his balloon again twice.