CHAPTER V. THE BATTLE OF THE NORTH ATLANTIC

1

The Prince Karl Albert had made a profound impression upon Bert. He was quite the most terrifying person Bert had ever encountered. He filled the Smallways soul with passionate dread and antipathy. For a long time Bert sat alone in Kurt's cabin, doing nothing and not venturing even to open the door lest he should be by that much nearer that appalling presence.

So it came about that he was probably the last person on board to hear the news that wireless telegraphy was bringing to the airship in throbs and fragments of a great naval battle in progress in mid-Atlantic.

He learnt it at last from Kurt.

Kurt came in with a general air of ignoring Bert, but muttering to himself in English nevertheless. "Stupendous!" Bert heard him say. "Here!" he said, "get off this locker." And he proceeded to rout out two books and a case of maps. He spread them on the folding-table, and stood regarding them. For a time his Germanic discipline struggled with his English informality and his natural kindliness and talkativeness, and at last lost.

"They're at it, Smallways," he said.

"At what, sir?" said Bert, broken and respectful.

"Fighting! The American North Atlantic squadron and pretty nearly the whole of our fleet. Our Eiserne Kreuz has had a gruelling and is sinking, and their Miles Standish--she's one of their biggest--has sunk with all hands. Torpedoes, I suppose. She was a bigger ship than the Karl der Grosse, but five or six years older. Gods! I wish we could see it, Smallways; a square fight in blue water, guns or nothing, and all of 'em steaming ahead!"

He spread his maps, he had to talk, and so he delivered a lecture on the naval situation to Bert.

"Here it is," he said, "latitude 30 degrees 50 minutes N. longitude 30 degrees 50 minutes W. It's a good day off us, anyhow, and they're all going south-west by south at full pelt as hard as they can go. We shan't see a bit of it, worse luck! Not a sniff we shan't get!"

2

The naval situation in the North Atlantic at that time was a peculiar one. The United States was by far the stronger of the two powers upon the sea, but the bulk of the American fleet was still in the Pacific. It was in the direction of Asia that war had been most feared, for the situation between Asiatic and white had become unusually violent

and dangerous, and the Japanese government had shown itself quite unprecedentedly difficult. The German attack therefore found half the American strength at Manila, and what was called the Second Fleet strung out across the Pacific in wireless contact between the Asiatic station and San Francisco. The North Atlantic squadron was the sole American force on her eastern shore, it was returning from a friendly visit to France and Spain, and was pumping oil-fuel from tenders in mid-Atlantic--for most of its ships were steamships--when the international situation became acute. It was made up of four battleships and five armoured cruisers ranking almost with battleships, not one of which was of a later date than 1913. The Americans had indeed grown so accustomed to the idea that Great Britain could be trusted to keep the peace of the Atlantic that a naval attack on the eastern seaboard found them unprepared even in their imaginations. But long before the declaration of war--indeed, on Whit Monday--the whole German fleet of eighteen battleships, with a flotilla of fuel tenders and converted liners containing stores to be used in support of the air-fleet, had passed through the straits of Dover and headed boldly for New York. Not only did these German battleships outnumber the Americans two to one, but they were more heavily armed and more modern in construction--seven of them having high explosive engines built of Charlottenburg steel, and all carrying Charlottenburg steel guns.

The fleets came into contact on Wednesday before any actual declaration of war. The Americans had strung out in the modern fashion at distances of thirty miles or so, and were steaming to keep themselves between the

Germans and either the eastern states or Panama; because, vital as it was to defend the seaboard cities and particularly New York, it was still more vital to save the canal from any attack that might prevent the return of the main fleet from the Pacific. No doubt, said Kurt, this was now making records across that ocean, "unless the Japanese have had the same idea as the Germans." It was obviously beyond human possibility that the American North Atlantic fleet could hope to meet and defeat the German; but, on the other hand, with luck it might fight a delaying action and inflict such damage as to greatly weaken the attack upon the coast defences. Its duty, indeed, was not victory but devotion, the severest task in the world. Meanwhile the submarine defences of New York, Panama, and the other more vital points could be put in some sort of order.

This was the naval situation, and until Wednesday in Whit week it was the only situation the American people had realised. It was then they heard for the first time of the real scale of the Dornhof aeronautic park and the possibility of an attack coming upon them not only by sea, but by the air. But it is curious that so discredited were the newspapers of that period that a large majority of New Yorkers, for example, did not believe the most copious and circumstantial accounts of the German air-fleet until it was actually in sight of New York.

Kurt's talk was half soliloquy. He stood with a map on Mercator's projection before him, swaying to the swinging of the ship and talking of guns and tonnage, of ships and their build and powers and speed, of

strategic points, and bases of operation. A certain shyness that reduced him to the status of a listener at the officers' table no longer silenced him.

Bert stood by, saying very little, but watching Kurt's finger on the map. "They've been saying things like this in the papers for a long time," he remarked. "Fancy it coming real!"

Kurt had a detailed knowledge of the Miles Standish. "She used to be a crack ship for gunnery--held the record. I wonder if we beat her shooting, or how? I wish I was in it. I wonder which of our ships beat her. Maybe she got a shell in her engines. It's a running fight! I wonder what the Barbarossa is doing," he went on, "She's my old ship. Not a first-rater, but good stuff. I bet she's got a shot or two home by now if old Schneider's up to form. Just think of it! There they are whacking away at each other, great guns going, shells exploding, magazines bursting, ironwork flying about like straw in a gale, all we've been dreaming of for years! I suppose we shall fly right away to New York--just as though it wasn't anything at all. I suppose we shall reckon we aren't wanted down there. It's no more than a covering fight on our side. All those tenders and store-ships of ours are going on southwest by west to New York to make a floating depot for us. See?" He dabbed his forefinger on the map. "Here we are. Our train of stores goes there, our battleships elbow the Americans out of our way there."

When Bert went down to the men's mess-room to get his evening ration,

hardly any one took notice of him except just to point him out for an instant. Every one was talking of the battle, suggesting, contradicting--at times, until the petty officers hushed them, it rose to a great uproar. There was a new bulletin, but what it said he did not gather except that it concerned the Barbarossa. Some of the men stared at him, and he heard the name of "Booteraidge" several times; but no one molested him, and there was no difficulty about his soup and bread when his turn at the end of the queue came. He had feared there might be no ration for him, and if so he did not know what he would have done.

Afterwards he ventured out upon the little hanging gallery with the solitary sentinel. The weather was still fine, but the wind was rising and the rolling swing of the airship increasing. He clutched the rail tightly and felt rather giddy. They were now out of sight of land, and over blue water rising and falling in great masses. A dingy old brigantine under the British flag rose and plunged amid the broad blue waves--the only ship in sight.

3

In the evening it began to blow and the air-ship to roll like a porpoise as it swung through the air. Kurt said that several of the men were sea-sick, but the motion did not inconvenience Bert, whose luck it was to be of that mysterious gastric disposition which constitutes a good sailor. He slept well, but in the small hours the light awoke him, and he found Kurt staggering about in search of something. He found it at

last in the locker, and held it in his hand unsteadily--a compass. Then he compared his map.

"We've changed our direction," he said, "and come into the wind. I can't make it out. We've turned away from New York to the south. Almost as if we were going to take a hand--"

He continued talking to himself for some time.

Day came, wet and windy. The window was bedewed externally, and they could see nothing through it. It was also very cold, and Bert decided to keep rolled up in his blankets on the locker until the bugle summoned him to his morning ration. That consumed, he went out on the little gallery; but he could see nothing but eddying clouds driving headlong by, and the dim outlines of the nearer airships. Only at rare intervals could he get a glimpse of grey sea through the pouring cloud-drift.

Later in the morning the Vaterland changed altitude, and soared up suddenly in a high, clear sky, going, Kurt said, to a height of nearly thirteen thousand feet.

Bert was in his cabin, and chanced to see the dew vanish from the window and caught the gleam of sunlight outside. He looked out, and saw once more that sunlit cloud floor he had seen first from the balloon, and the ships of the German air-fleet rising one by one from the white, as fish might rise and become visible from deep water. He stared for a moment

and then ran out to the little gallery to see this wonder better. Below was cloudland and storm, a great drift of tumbled weather going hard away to the north-east, and the air about him was clear and cold and serene save for the faintest chill breeze and a rare, drifting snow-flake. Throb, throb, throb, throb, went the engines in the stillness. That huge herd of airships rising one after another had an effect of strange, portentous monsters breaking into an altogether unfamiliar world.

Either there was no news of the naval battle that morning, or the Prince kept to himself whatever came until past midday. Then the bulletins came with a rush, bulletins that made the lieutenant wild with excitement.

"Barbarossa disabled and sinking," he cried. "Gott im Himmel! Der alte Barbarossa! Aber welch ein braver krieger!"

He walked about the swinging cabin, and for a time he was wholly German.

Then he became English again. "Think of it, Smallways! The old ship we kept so clean and tidy! All smashed about, and the iron flying about in fragments, and the chaps one knew--Gott!--flying about too! Scalding water squirting, fire, and the smash, smash of the guns! They smash when you're near! Like everything bursting to pieces! Wool won't stop it--nothing! And me up here--so near and so far! Der alte Barbarossa!"

"Any other ships?" asked Smallways, presently.

"Gott! Yes! We've lost the Karl der Grosse, our best and biggest. Run down in the night by a British liner that blundered into the fighting in trying to blunder out. They're fighting in a gale. The liner's afloat with her nose broken, sagging about! There never was such a battle!--never before! Good ships and good men on both sides,--and a storm and the night and the dawn and all in the open ocean full steam ahead! No stabbing! No submarines! Guns and shooting! Half our ships we don't hear of any more, because their masts are shot away. Latitude, 30 degrees 40 minutes N.--longitude, 40 degrees 30 minutes W.--where's that?"

He routed out his map again, and stared at it with eyes that did not see.

"Der alte Barbarossa! I can't get it out of my head--with shells in her engine-room, and the fires flying out of her furnaces, and the stokers and engineers scalded and dead. Men I've messed with, Smallways--men I've talked to close! And they've had their day at last! And it wasn't all luck for them!

"Disabled and sinking! I suppose everybody can't have all the luck in a battle. Poor old Schneider! I bet he gave 'em something back!"

So it was the news of the battle came filtering through to them all that morning. The Americans had lost a second ship, name unknown; the Hermann

had been damaged in covering the Barbarossa.... Kurt fretted like an imprisoned animal about the airship, now going up to the forward gallery under the eagle, now down into the swinging gallery, now poring over his maps. He infected Smallways with a sense of the immediacy of this battle that was going on just over the curve of the earth. But when Bert went down to the gallery the world was empty and still, a clear inky-blue sky above and a rippled veil of still, thin sunlit cirrus below, through which one saw a racing drift of rain-cloud, and never a glimpse of sea. Throb, throb, throb, throb, went the engines, and the long, undulating wedge of airships hurried after the flagship like a flight of swans after their leader. Save for the quiver of the engines it was as noiseless as a dream. And down there, somewhere in the wind and rain, guns roared, shells crashed home, and, after the old manner of warfare, men toiled and died.

4

As the afternoon wore on the lower weather abated, and the sea became intermittently visible again. The air-fleet dropped slowly to the middle air, and towards sunset they had a glimpse of the disabled Barbarossa far away to the east. Smallways heard men hurrying along the passage, and was drawn out to the gallery, where he found nearly a dozen officers collected and scrutinising the helpless ruins of the battleship through field-glasses. Two other vessels stood by her, one an exhausted petrol tank, very high out of the water, and the other a converted liner. Kurt was at the end of the gallery, a little apart from the others.

"Gott!" he said at last, lowering his binocular, "it is like seeing an old friend with his nose cut off--waiting to be finished. Der Barbarossa!"

With a sudden impulse he handed his glass to Bert, who had peered beneath his hands, ignored by every one, seeing the three ships merely as three brown-black lines upon the sea.

Never had Bert seen the like of that magnified slightly hazy image before. It was not simply a battered ironclad that wallowed helpless, it was a mangled ironclad. It seemed wonderful she still floated. Her powerful engines had been her ruin. In the long chase of the night she had got out of line with her consorts, and nipped in between the Susquehanna and the Kansas City. They discovered her proximity, dropped back until she was nearly broadside on to the former battleship, and signalled up the Theodore Roosevelt and the little Monitor. As dawn broke she had found herself hostess of a circle. The fight had not lasted five minutes before the appearance of the Hermann to the east, and immediately after of the Furst Bismarck in the west, forced the Americans to leave her, but in that time they had smashed her iron to rags. They had vented the accumulated tensions of their hard day's retreat upon her. As Bert saw her, she seemed a mere metal-worker's fantasy of frozen metal writhings. He could not tell part from part of her, except by its position.

"Gott!" murmured Kurt, taking the glasses Bert restored to him--"Gott! Da waren Albrecht--der gute Albrecht und der alte Zimmermann--und von Rosen!"

Long after the Barbarosa had been swallowed up in the twilight and distance he remained on the gallery peering through his glasses, and when he came back to his cabin he was unusually silent and thoughtful.

"This is a rough game, Smallways," he said at last--"this war is a rough game. Somehow one sees it different after a thing like that. Many men there were worked to make that Barbarossa, and there were men in it--one does not meet the like of them every day. Albrecht--there was a man named Albrecht--played the zither and improvised; I keep on wondering what has happened to him. He and I--we were very close friends, after the German fashion."

Smallways woke the next night to discover the cabin in darkness, a draught blowing through it, and Kurt talking to himself in German. He could see him dimly by the window, which he had unscrewed and opened, peering down. That cold, clear, attenuated light which is not so much light as a going of darkness, which casts inky shadows and so often heralds the dawn in the high air, was on his face.

"What's the row?" said Bert.

"Shut up!" said the lieutenant. "Can't you hear?"

Into the stillness came the repeated heavy thud of guns, one, two, a pause, then three in quick succession.

"Gaw!" said Bert--"guns!" and was instantly at the lieutenant's side. The airship was still very high and the sea below was masked by a thin veil of clouds. The wind had fallen, and Bert, following Kurt's pointing finger, saw dimly through the colourless veil first a red glow, then a quick red flash, and then at a little distance from it another. They were, it seemed for a while, silent flashes, and seconds after, when one had ceased to expect them, came the belated thuds--thud, thud. Kurt spoke in German, very quickly.

A bugle call rang through the airship.

Kurt sprang to his feet, saying something in an excited tone, still using German, and went to the door.

"I say! What's up?" cried Bert. "What's that?"

The lieutenant stopped for an instant in the doorway, dark against the light passage. "You stay where you are, Smallways. You keep there and do nothing. We're going into action," he explained, and vanished.

Bert's heart began to beat rapidly. He felt himself poised over the fighting vessels far below. In a moment, were they to drop like a hawk

striking a bird? "Gaw!" he whispered at last, in awestricken tones.

Thud!... thud! He discovered far away a second ruddy flare flashing guns back at the first. He perceived some difference on the Vaterland for which he could not account, and then he realised that the engines had slowed to an almost inaudible beat. He stuck his head out of the window--it was a tight fit--and saw in the bleak air the other airships slowed down to a scarcely perceptible motion.

A second bugle sounded, was taken up faintly from ship to ship. Out went the lights; the fleet became dim, dark bulks against an intense blue sky that still retained an occasional star. For a long time they hung, for an interminable time it seemed to him, and then began the sound of air being pumped into the balloonette, and slowly, slowly the Vaterland sank down towards the clouds.

He craned his neck, but he could not see if the rest of the fleet was following them; the overhang of the gas-chambers intervened. There was something that stirred his imagination deeply in that stealthy, noiseless descent. The obscurity deepened for a time, the last fading star on the horizon vanished, and he felt the cold presence of cloud. Then suddenly the glow beneath assumed distinct outlines, became flames, and the Vaterland ceased to descend and hung observant, and it would seem unobserved, just beneath a drifting stratum of cloud, a thousand feet, perhaps, over the battle below.

In the night the struggling naval battle and retreat had entered upon a new phase. The Americans had drawn together the ends of the flying line skilfully and dexterously, until at last it was a column and well to the south of the lax sweeping pursuit of the Germans. Then in the darkness before the dawn they had come about and steamed northward in close order with the idea of passing through the German battle-line and falling upon the flotilla that was making for New York in support of the German air-fleet. Much had altered since the first contact of the fleets. By this time the American admiral, O'Connor, was fully informed of the existence of the airships, and he was no longer vitally concerned for Panama, since the submarine flotilla was reported arrived there from Key West, and the Delaware and Abraham Lincoln, two powerful and entirely modern ships, were already at Rio Grande, on the Pacific side of the canal. His manoeuvre was, however, delayed by a boiler explosion on board the Susquehanna, and dawn found this ship in sight of and indeed so close to the Bremen and Weimar that they instantly engaged. There was no alternative to her abandonment but a fleet engagement. O'Connor chose the latter course. It was by no means a hopeless fight. The Germans, though much more numerous and powerful than the Americans, were in a dispersed line measuring nearly forty-five miles from end to end, and there were many chances that before they could gather in for the fight the column of seven Americans would have ripped them from end to end.

The day broke dim and overcast, and neither the Bremen nor the Weimar realised they had to deal with more than the Susquehanna until the whole column drew out from behind her at a distance of a mile or less and

bore down on them. This was the position of affairs when the Vaterland appeared in the sky. The red glow Bert had seen through the column of clouds came from the luckless Susquehanna; she lay almost immediately below, burning fore and aft, but still fighting two of her guns and steaming slowly southward. The Bremen and the Weimar, both hit in several places, were going west by south and away from her. The American fleet, headed by the Theodore Roosevelt, was crossing behind them, pounding them in succession, steaming in between them and the big modern Furst Bismarck, which was coming up from the west. To Bert, however, the names of all these ships were unknown, and for a considerable time indeed, misled by the direction in which the combatants were moving, he imagined the Germans to be Americans and the Americans Germans. He saw what appeared to him to be a column of six battleships pursuing three others who were supported by a newcomer, until the fact that the Bremen and Weimar were firing into the Susquehanna upset his calculations. Then for a time he was hopelessly at a loss. The noise of the guns, too, confused him, they no longer seemed to boom; they went whack, whack, whack, whack, and each faint flash made his heart jump in anticipation of the instant impact. He saw these ironclads, too, not in profile, as he was accustomed to see ironclads in pictures, but in plan and curiously foreshortened. For the most part they presented empty decks, but here and there little knots of men sheltered behind steel bulwarks. The long, agitated noses of their big guns, jetting thin transparent flashes and the broadside activity of the quick-firers, were the chief facts in this bird's-eye view. The Americans being steam-turbine ships, had from two to four blast funnels each; the Germans lay lower in the

water, having explosive engines, which now for some reason made an unwonted muttering roar. Because of their steam propulsion, the American ships were larger and with a more graceful outline. He saw all these foreshortened ships rolling considerably and fighting their guns over a sea of huge low waves and under the cold, explicit light of dawn. The whole spectacle waved slowly with the long rhythmic rising and beat of the airship.

At first only the Vaterland of all the flying fleet appeared upon the scene below. She hovered high, over the Theodore Roosevelt, keeping pace with the full speed of that ship. From that ship she must have been intermittently visible through the drifting clouds. The rest of the German fleet remained above the cloud canopy at a height of six or seven thousand feet, communicating with the flagship by wireless telegraphy, but risking no exposure to the artillery below.

It is doubtful at what particular time the unlucky Americans realised the presence of this new factor in the fight. No account now survives of their experience. We have to imagine as well as we can what it must have been to a battled-strained sailor suddenly glancing upward to discover that huge long silent shape overhead, vaster than any battleship, and trailing now from its hinder quarter a big German flag. Presently, as the sky cleared, more of such ships appeared in the blue through the dissolving clouds, and more, all disdainfully free of guns or armour, all flying fast to keep pace with the running fight below.

From first to last no gun whatever was fired at the Vaterland, and only a few rifle shots. It was a mere adverse stroke of chance that she had a man killed aboard her. Nor did she take any direct share in the fight until the end. She flew above the doomed American fleet while the Prince by wireless telegraphy directed the movements of her consorts. Meanwhile the Vogel-stern and Preussen, each with half a dozen drachenflieger in tow, went full speed ahead and then dropped through the clouds, perhaps five miles ahead of the Americans. The Theodore Roosevelt let fly at once with the big guns in her forward barbette, but the shells burst far below the Vogel-stern, and forthwith a dozen single-man drachenflieger were swooping down to make their attack.

Bert, craning his neck through the cabin port-hole, saw the whole of that incident, that first encounter of aeroplane and ironclad. He saw the queer German drachenflieger, with their wide flat wings and square box-shaped heads, their wheeled bodies, and their single-man riders, soar down the air like a flight of birds. "Gaw!" he said. One to the right pitched extravagantly, shot steeply up into the air, burst with a loud report, and flamed down into the sea; another plunged nose forward into the water and seemed to fly to pieces as it hit the waves. He saw little men on the deck of the Theodore Roosevelt below, men foreshortened in plan into mere heads and feet, running out preparing to shoot at the others. Then the foremost flying-machine was rushing between Bert and the American's deck, and then bang! came the thunder of its bomb flung neatly at the forward barbette, and a thin little crackling of rifle shots in reply. Whack, whack, whack, went the

quick-firing guns of the Americans' battery, and smash came an answering shell from the Furst Bismarck. Then a second and third flying-machine passed between Bert and the American ironclad, dropping bombs also, and a fourth, its rider hit by a bullet, reeled down and dashed itself to pieces and exploded between the shot-torn funnels, blowing them apart. Bert had a momentary glimpse of a little black creature jumping from the crumpling frame of the flying-machine, hitting the funnel, and falling limply, to be instantly caught and driven to nothingness by the blaze and rush of the explosion.

Smash! came a vast explosion in the forward part of the flagship, and a huge piece of metalwork seemed to lift out of her and dump itself into the sea, dropping men and leaving a gap into which a prompt drachenflieger planted a flaring bomb. And then for an instant Bert perceived only too clearly in the growing, pitiless light a number of minute, convulsively active animalcula scorched and struggling in the Theodore Roosevelt's foaming wake. What were they? Not men--surely not men? Those drowning, mangled little creatures tore with their clutching fingers at Bert's soul. "Oh, Gord!" he cried, "Oh, Gord!" almost whimpering. He looked again and they had gone, and the black stem of the Andrew Jackson, a little disfigured by the sinking Bremen's last shot, was parting the water that had swallowed them into two neatly symmetrical waves. For some moments sheer blank horror blinded Bert to the destruction below.

Then, with an immense rushing sound, bearing as it were a straggling

volley of crashing minor explosions on its back, the Susquehanna, three miles and more now to the east, blew up and vanished abruptly in a boiling, steaming welter. For a moment nothing was to be seen but tumbled water, and--then there came belching up from below, with immense gulping noises, eructations of steam and air and petrol and fragments of canvas and woodwork and men.

That made a distinct pause in the fight. It seemed a long pause to Bert. He found himself looking for the drachenflieger. The flattened ruin of one was floating abeam of the Monitor, the rest had passed, dropping bombs down the American column; several were in the water and apparently uninjured, and three or four were still in the air and coming round now in a wide circle to return to their mother airships. The American ironclads were no longer in column formation; the Theodore Roosevelt, badly damaged, had turned to the southeast, and the Andrew Jackson, greatly battered but uninjured in any fighting part was passing between her and the still fresh and vigorous Furst Bismarck to intercept and meet the latter's fire. Away to the west the Hermann and the Germanicus had appeared and were coming into action.

In the pause, after the Susquehanna's disaster Bert became aware of a trivial sound like the noise of an ill-greased, ill-hung door that falls ajar--the sound of the men in the Furst Bismarck cheering.

And in that pause in the uproar too, the sun rose, the dark waters became luminously blue, and a torrent of golden light irradiated the

world. It came like a sudden smile in a scene of hate and terror. The cloud veil had vanished as if by magic, and the whole immensity of the German air-fleet was revealed in the sky; the air-fleet stooping now upon its prey.

"Whack-bang, whack-bang," the guns resumed, but ironclads were not built to fight the zenith, and the only hits the Americans scored were a few lucky chances in a generally ineffectual rifle fire. Their column was now badly broken, the Susquehanna had gone, the Theodore Roosevelt had fallen astern out of the line, with her forward guns disabled, in a heap of wreckage, and the Monitor was in some grave trouble. These two had ceased fire altogether, and so had the Bremen and Weimar, all four ships lying within shot of each other in an involuntary truce and with their respective flags still displayed. Only four American ships now, with the Andrew Jackson leading, kept to the south-easterly course. And the Furst Bismarck, the Hermann, and the Germanicus steamed parallel to them and drew ahead of them, fighting heavily. The Vaterland rose slowly in the air in preparation for the concluding act of the drama.

Then, falling into place one behind the other, a string of a dozen airships dropped with unhurrying swiftness down the air in pursuit of the American fleet. They kept at a height of two thousand feet or more until they were over and a little in advance of the rearmost ironclad, and then stooped swiftly down into a fountain of bullets, and going just a little faster than the ship below, pelted her thinly protected decks with bombs until they became sheets of detonating flame. So the airships

passed one after the other along the American column as it sought to keep up its fight with the Furst Bismarck, the Hermann, and the Germanicus, and each airship added to the destruction and confusion its predecessor had made. The American gunfire ceased, except for a few heroic shots, but they still steamed on, obstinately unsubdued, bloody, battered, and wrathfully resistant, spitting bullets at the airships and unmercifully pounded by the German ironclads. But now Bert had but intermittent glimpses of them between the nearer bulks of the airships that assailed them....

It struck Bert suddenly that the whole battle was receding and growing small and less thunderously noisy. The Vaterland was rising in the air, steadily and silently, until the impact of the guns no longer smote upon the heart but came to the ear dulled by distance, until the four silenced ships to the eastward were little distant things: but were there four? Bert now could see only three of those floating, blackened, and smoking rafts of ruin against the sun. But the Bremen had two boats out; the Theodore Roosevelt was also dropping boats to where the drift of minute objects struggled, rising and falling on the big, broad Atlantic waves.... The Vaterland was no longer following the fight. The whole of that hurrying tumult drove away to the south-eastward, growing smaller and less audible as it passed. One of the airships lay on the water burning, a remote monstrous fount of flames, and far in the south-west appeared first one and then three other German ironclads hurrying in support of their consorts....

5

Steadily the Vaterland soared, and the air-fleet soared with her and came round to head for New York, and the battle became a little thing far away, an incident before the breakfast. It dwindled to a string of dark shapes and one smoking yellow flare that presently became a mere indistinct smear upon the vast horizon and the bright new day, that was at last altogether lost to sight...

So it was that Bert Smallways saw the first fight of the airship and the last fight of those strangest things in the whole history of war: the ironclad battleships, which began their career with the floating batteries of the Emperor Napoleon III in the Crimean war and lasted, with an enormous expenditure of human energy and resources, for seventy years. In that space of time the world produced over twelve thousand five hundred of these strange monsters, in schools, in types, in series, each larger and heavier and more deadly than its predecessors. Each in its turn was hailed as the last birth of time, most in their turn were sold for old iron. Only about five per cent of them ever fought in a battle. Some foundered, some went ashore, and broke up, several rammed one another by accident and sank. The lives of countless men were spent in their service, the splendid genius, and patience of thousands of engineers and inventors, wealth and material beyond estimating; to their account we must put, stunted and starved lives on land, millions of children sent to toil unduly, innumerable opportunities of fine living undeveloped and lost. Money had to be found for them at any cost--that

was the law of a nation's existence during that strange time. Surely they were the weirdest, most destructive and wasteful megatheria in the whole history of mechanical invention.

And then cheap things of gas and basket-work made an end of them altogether, smiting out of the sky!...

Never before had Bert Smallways seen pure destruction, never had he realised the mischief and waste of war. His startled mind rose to the conception; this also is in life. Out of all this fierce torrent of sensation one impression rose and became cardinal--the impression of the men of the Theodore Roosevelt who had struggled in the water after the explosion of the first bomb. "Gaw!" he said at the memory; "it might 'ave been me and Grubb!... I suppose you kick about and get the water in your mouf. I don't suppose it lasts long."

He became anxious to see how Kurt was affected by these things. Also he perceived he was hungry. He hesitated towards the door of the cabin and peeped out into the passage. Down forward, near the gangway to the men's mess, stood a little group of air sailors looking at something that was hidden from him in a recess. One of them was in the light diver's costume Bert had already seen in the gas chamber turret, and he was moved to walk along and look at this person more closely and examine the helmet he carried under his arm. But he forgot about the helmet when he got to the recess, because there he found lying on the floor the dead body of the boy who had been killed by a bullet from the Theodore

Roosevelt.

Bert had not observed that any bullets at all had reached the Vaterland or, indeed, imagined himself under fire. He could not understand for a time what had killed the lad, and no one explained to him.

The boy lay just as he had fallen and died, with his jacket torn and scorched, his shoulder-blade smashed and burst away from his body and all the left side of his body ripped and rent. There was much blood. The sailors stood listening to the man with the helmet, who made explanations and pointed to the round bullet hole in the floor and the smash in the panel of the passage upon which the still vicious missile had spent the residue of its energy. All the faces were grave and earnest: they were the faces of sober, blond, blue-eyed men accustomed to obedience and an orderly life, to whom this waste, wet, painful thing that had been a comrade came almost as strangely as it did to Bert.

A peal of wild laughter sounded down the passage in the direction of the little gallery and something spoke--almost shouted--in German, in tones of exultation.

Other voices at a lower, more respectful pitch replied.

"Der Prinz," said a voice, and all the men became stiffer and less natural. Down the passage appeared a group of figures, Lieutenant Kurt walking in front carrying a packet of papers.

He stopped point blank when he saw the thing in the recess, and his ruddy face went white.

"So!" said he in surprise.

The Prince was following him, talking over his shoulder to Von Winterfeld and the Kapitan.

"Eh?" he said to Kurt, stopping in mid-sentence, and followed the gesture of Kurt's hand. He glared at the crumpled object in the recess and seemed to think for a moment.

He made a slight, careless gesture towards the boy's body and turned to the Kapitan.

"Dispose of that," he said in German, and passed on, finishing his sentence to Von Winterfeld in the same cheerful tone in which it had begun.

6

The deep impression of helplessly drowning men that Bert had brought from the actual fight in the Atlantic mixed itself up inextricably with that of the lordly figure of Prince Karl Albert gesturing aside the dead body of the Vaterland sailor. Hitherto he had rather liked the idea of

war as being a jolly, smashing, exciting affair, something like a Bank Holiday rag on a large scale, and on the whole agreeable and exhilarating. Now he knew it a little better.

The next day there was added to his growing disillusionment a third ugly impression, trivial indeed to describe, a mere necessary everyday incident of a state of war, but very distressing to his urbanised imagination. One writes "urbanised" to express the distinctive gentleness of the period. It was quite peculiar to the crowded townsmen of that time, and different altogether from the normal experience of any preceding age, that they never saw anything killed, never encountered, save through the mitigating media of book or picture, the fact of lethal violence that underlies all life. Three times in his existence, and three times only, had Bert seen a dead human being, and he had never assisted at the killing of anything bigger than a new-born kitten.

The incident that gave him his third shock was the execution of one of the men on the Adler for carrying a box of matches. The case was a flagrant one. The man had forgotten he had it upon him when coming aboard. Ample notice had been given to every one of the gravity of this offence, and notices appeared at numerous points all over the airships. The man's defence was that he had grown so used to the notices and had been so preoccupied with his work that he hadn't applied them to himself; he pleaded, in his defence, what is indeed in military affairs another serious crime, inadvertency. He was tried by his captain, and the sentence confirmed by wireless telegraphy by the Prince, and it was

decided to make his death an example to the whole fleet. "The Germans," the Prince declared, "hadn't crossed the Atlantic to go wool gathering." And in order that this lesson in discipline and obedience might be visible to every one, it was determined not to electrocute or drown but hang the offender.

Accordingly the air-fleet came clustering round the flagship like carp in a pond at feeding time. The Adler hung at the zenith immediately alongside the flagship. The whole crew of the Vaterland assembled upon the hanging gallery; the crews of the other airships manned the air-chambers, that is to say, clambered up the outer netting to the upper sides. The officers appeared upon the machine-gun platforms. Bert thought it an altogether stupendous sight, looking down, as he was, upon the entire fleet. Far off below two steamers on the rippled blue water, one British and the other flying the American flag, seemed the minutest objects, and marked the scale. They were immensely distant. Bert stood on the gallery, curious to see the execution, but uncomfortable, because that terrible blond Prince was within a dozen feet of him, glaring terribly, with his arms folded, and his heels together in military fashion.

They hung the man from the Adler. They gave him sixty feet of rope, so, that he should hang and dangle in the sight of all evil-doers who might be hiding matches or contemplating any kindred disobedience. Bert saw the man standing, a living, reluctant man, no doubt scared and rebellious enough in his heart, but outwardly erect and obedient, on

the lower gallery of the Adler about a hundred yards away. Then they had thrust him overboard.

Down he fell, hands and feet extending, until with a jerk he was at the end of the rope. Then he ought to have died and swung edifyingly, but instead a more terrible thing happened; his head came right off, and down the body went spinning to the sea, feeble, grotesque, fantastic, with the head racing it in its fall.

"Ugh!" said Bert, clutching the rail before him, and a sympathetic grunt came from several of the men beside him.

"So!" said the Prince, stiffer and sterner, glared for some seconds, then turned to the gang way up into the airship.

For a long time Bert remained clinging to the railing of the gallery. He was almost physically sick with the horror of this trifling incident. He found it far more dreadful than the battle. He was indeed a very degenerate, latter-day, civilised person.

Late that afternoon Kurt came into the cabin and found him curled up on his locker, and looking very white and miserable. Kurt had also lost something of his pristine freshness.

"Sea-sick?" he asked.

"No!"

"We ought to reach New York this evening. There's a good breeze coming up under our tails. Then we shall see things."

Bert did not answer.

Kurt opened out folding chair and table, and rustled for a time with his maps. Then he fell thinking darkly. He roused himself presently, and looked at his companion. "What's the matter?" he said.

"Nothing!"

Kurt stared threateningly. "What's the matter?"

"I saw them kill that chap. I saw that flying-machine man hit the funnels of the big ironclad. I saw that dead chap in the passage. I seen too much smashing and killing lately. That's the matter. I don't like it. I didn't know war was this sort of thing. I'm a civilian. I don't like it."

"_I_ don't like it," said Kurt. "By Jove, no!"

"I've read about war, and all that, but when you see it it's different. And I'm gettin' giddy. I'm gettin' giddy. I didn't mind a bit being up in that balloon at first, but all this looking down and floating over

things and smashing up people, it's getting on my nerves. See?"

"It'll have to get off again...."

Kurt thought. "You're not the only one. The men are all getting strung up. The flying--that's just flying. Naturally it makes one a little swimmy in the head at first. As for the killing, we've got to be blooded; that's all. We're tame, civilised men. And we've got to get blooded. I suppose there's not a dozen men on the ship who've really seen bloodshed. Nice, quiet, law-abiding Germans they've been so far.... Here they are--in for it. They're a bit squeamy now, but you wait till they've got their hands in."

He reflected. "Everybody's getting a bit strung up," he said.

He turned again to his maps. Bert sat crumpled up in the corner, apparently heedless of him. For some time both kept silence.

"What did the Prince want to go and 'ang that chap for?" asked Bert, suddenly.

"That was all right," said Kurt, "that was all right. QUITE right. Here were the orders, plain as the nose on your face, and here was that fool going about with matches--"

"Gaw! I shan't forget that bit in a 'urry," said Bert irrelevantly.

Kurt did not answer him. He was measuring their distance from New York and speculating. "Wonder what the American aeroplanes are like?" he said. "Something like our drachenflieger.... We shall know by this time to-morrow.... I wonder what we shall know? I wonder. Suppose, after all, they put up a fight.... Rum sort of fight!"

He whistled softly and mused. Presently he fretted out of the cabin, and later Bert found him in the twilight upon the swinging platform, staring ahead, and speculating about the things that might happen on the morrow. Clouds veiled the sea again, and the long straggling wedge of air-ships rising and falling as they flew seemed like a flock of strange new births in a Chaos that had neither earth nor water but only mist and sky.