CHAPTER VII. THE "VATERLAND" IS DISABLED

1

And then above the flames of Manhattan Island came a battle, the first battle in the air. The Americans had realised the price their waiting game must cost, and struck with all the strength they had, if haply they might still save New York from this mad Prince of Blood and Iron, and from fire and death.

They came down upon the Germans on the wings of a great gale in the twilight, amidst thunder and rain. They came from the yards of Washington and Philadelphia, full tilt in two squadrons, and but for one sentinel airship hard by Trenton, the surprise would have been complete.

The Germans, sick and weary with destruction, and half empty of ammunition, were facing up into the weather when the news of this onset reached them. New York they had left behind to the south-eastward, a darkened city with one hideous red scar of flames. All the airships rolled and staggered, bursts of hailstorm bore them down and forced them to fight their way up again; the air had become bitterly cold. The Prince was on the point of issuing orders to drop earthward and trail copper lightning chains when the news of the aeroplane attack came to him. He faced his fleet in line abreast south, had the drachenflieger manned and held ready to cast loose, and ordered a general ascent into the freezing clearness above the wet and darkness.

The news of what was imminent came slowly to Bert's perceptions. He was standing in the messroom at the time and the evening rations were being served out. He had resumed Butteridge's coat and gloves, and in addition he had wrapped his blanket about him. He was dipping his bread into his soup and was biting off big mouthfuls. His legs were wide apart, and he leant against the partition in order to steady himself amidst the pitching and oscillation of the airship. The men about him looked tired and depressed; a few talked, but most were sullen and thoughtful, and one or two were air-sick. They all seemed to share the peculiarly outcast feeling that had followed the murders of the evening, a sense of a land beneath them, and an outraged humanity grown more hostile than the Sea.

Then the news hit them. A red-faced sturdy man, a man with light eyelashes and a scar, appeared in the doorway and shouted something in German that manifestly startled every one. Bert felt the shock of the altered tone, though he could not understand a word that was said. The announcement was followed by a pause, and then a great outcry of questions and suggestions. Even the air-sick men flushed and spoke. For some minutes the mess-room was Bedlam, and then, as if it were a confirmation of the news, came the shrill ringing of the bells that called the men to their posts.

Bert with pantomime suddenness found himself alone.

"What's up?" he said, though he partly guessed.

He stayed only to gulp down the remainder of his soup, and then ran along the swaying passage and, clutching tightly, down the ladder to the little gallery. The weather hit him like cold water squirted from a hose. The airship engaged in some new feat of atmospheric Jiu-Jitsu. He drew his blanket closer about him, clutching with one straining hand. He found himself tossing in a wet twilight, with nothing to be seen but mist pouring past him. Above him the airship was warm with lights and busy with the movements of men going to their quarters. Then abruptly the lights went out, and the Vaterland with bounds and twists and strange writhings was fighting her way up the air.

He had a glimpse, as the Vaterland rolled over, of some large buildings burning close below them, a quivering acanthus of flames, and then he saw indistinctly through the driving weather another airship wallowing along like a porpoise, and also working up. Presently the clouds swallowed her again for a time, and then she came back to sight as a dark and whale-like monster, amidst streaming weather. The air was full of flappings and pipings, of void, gusty shouts and noises; it buffeted him and confused him; ever and again his attention became rigid--a blind and deaf balancing and clutching.

"Wow!"

Something fell past him out of the vast darknesses above and vanished

into the tumults below, going obliquely downward. It was a German drachenflieger. The thing was going so fast he had but an instant apprehension of the dark figure of the aeronaut crouched together clutching at his wheel. It might be a manoeuvre, but it looked like a catastrophe.

"Gaw!" said Bert.

"Pup-pup-pup" went a gun somewhere in the mirk ahead and suddenly and quite horribly the Vaterland lurched, and Bert and the sentinel were clinging to the rail for dear life. "Bang!" came a vast impact out of the zenith, followed by another huge roll, and all about him the tumbled clouds flashed red and lurid in response to flashes unseen, revealing immense gulfs. The rail went right overhead, and he was hanging loose in the air holding on to it.

For a time Bert's whole mind and being was given to clutching. "I'm going into the cabin," he said, as the airship righted again and brought back the gallery floor to his feet. He began to make his way cautiously towards the ladder. "Whee-wow!" he cried as the whole gallery reared itself up forward, and then plunged down like a desperate horse.

Crack! Bang! Bang! Bang! And then hard upon this little rattle of shots and bombs came, all about him, enveloping him, engulfing him, immense and overwhelming, a quivering white blaze of lightning and a thunder-clap that was like the bursting of a world.

Just for the instant before that explosion the universe seemed to be standing still in a shadowless glare.

It was then he saw the American aeroplane. He saw it in the light of the flash as a thing altogether motionless. Even its screw appeared still, and its men were rigid dolls. (For it was so near he could see the men upon it quite distinctly.) Its stern was tilting down, and the whole machine was heeling over. It was of the Colt-Coburn-Langley pattern, with double up-tilted wings and the screw ahead, and the men were in a boat-like body netted over. From this very light long body, magazine guns projected on either side. One thing that was strikingly odd and wonderful in that moment of revelation was that the left upper wing was burning downward with a reddish, smoky flame. But this was not the most wonderful thing about this apparition. The most wonderful thing was that it and a German airship five hundred yards below were threaded as it were on the lightning flash, which turned out of its path as if to take them, and, that out from the corners and projecting points of its huge wings everywhere, little branching thorn-trees of lightning were streaming.

Like a picture Bert saw these things, a picture a little blurred by a thin veil of wind-torn mist.

The crash of the thunder-clap followed the flash and seemed a part of it, so that it is hard to say whether Bert was the rather deafened or

blinded in that instant.

And then darkness, utter darkness, and a heavy report and a thin small sound of voices that went wailing downward into the abyss below.

2

There followed upon these things a long, deep swaying of the airship, and then Bert began a struggle to get back to his cabin. He was drenched and cold and terrified beyond measure, and now more than a little air-sick. It seemed to him that the strength had gone out of his knees and hands, and that his feet had become icily slippery over the metal they trod upon. But that was because a thin film of ice had frozen upon the gallery.

He never knew how long his ascent of the ladder back into the airship took him, but in his dreams afterwards, when he recalled it, that experience seemed to last for hours. Below, above, around him were gulfs, monstrous gulfs of howling wind and eddies of dark, whirling snowflakes, and he was protected from it all by a little metal grating and a rail, a grating and rail that seemed madly infuriated with him, passionately eager to wrench him off and throw him into the tumult of space.

Once he had a fancy that a bullet tore by his ear, and that the clouds and snowflakes were lit by a flash, but he never even turned his head to

see what new assailant whirled past them in the void. He wanted to get into the passage! He wanted to get into the passage! He wanted to get into the passage! Would the arm by which he was clinging hold out, or would it give way and snap? A handful of hail smacked him in the face, so that for a time he was breathless and nearly insensible. Hold tight, Bert! He renewed his efforts.

He found himself, with an enormous sense of relief and warmth, in the passage. The passage was behaving like a dice-box, its disposition was evidently to rattle him about and then throw him out again. He hung on with the convulsive clutch of instinct until the passage lurched down ahead. Then he would make a short run cabin-ward, and clutch again as the fore-end rose.

Behold! He was in the cabin!

He snapped-to the door, and for a time he was not a human being, he was a case of air-sickness. He wanted to get somewhere that would fix him, that he needn't clutch. He opened the locker and got inside among the loose articles, and sprawled there helplessly, with his head sometimes bumping one side and sometimes the other. The lid shut upon him with a click. He did not care then what was happening any more. He did not care who fought who, or what bullets were fired or explosions occurred. He did not care if presently he was shot or smashed to pieces. He was full of feeble, inarticulate rage and despair. "Foolery!" he said, his one exhaustive comment on human enterprise, adventure, war, and the chapter

of accidents that had entangled him. "Foolery! Ugh!" He included the order of the universe in that comprehensive condemnation. He wished he was dead.

He saw nothing of the stars, as presently the Vaterland cleared the rush and confusion of the lower weather, nor of the duel she fought with two circling aeroplanes, how they shot her rear-most chambers through, and how she fought them off with explosive bullets and turned to run as she did so.

The rush and swoop of these wonderful night birds was all lost upon him; their heroic dash and self-sacrifice. The Vaterland was rammed, and for some moments she hung on the verge of destruction, and sinking swiftly, with the American aeroplane entangled with her smashed propeller, and the Americans trying to scramble aboard. It signified nothing to Bert. To him it conveyed itself simply as vehement swaying. Foolery! When the American airship dropped off at last, with most of its crew shot or fallen, Bert in his locker appreciated nothing but that the Vaterland had taken a hideous upward leap.

But then came infinite relief, incredibly blissful relief. The rolling, the pitching, the struggle ceased, ceased instantly and absolutely. The Vaterland was no longer fighting the gale; her smashed and exploded engines throbbed no more; she was disabled and driving before the wind as smoothly as a balloon, a huge, windspread, tattered cloud of aerial wreckage.

To Bert it was no more than the end of a series of disagreeable sensations. He was not curious to know what had happened to the airship, nor what had happened to the battle. For a long time he lay waiting apprehensively for the pitching and tossing and his qualms to return, and so, lying, boxed up in the locker, he presently fell asleep.

3

He awoke tranquil but very stuffy, and at the same time very cold, and quite unable to recollect where he could be. His head ached, and his breath was suffocated. He had been dreaming confusedly of Edna, and Desert Dervishes, and of riding bicycles in an extremely perilous manner through the upper air amidst a pyrotechnic display of crackers and Bengal lights--to the great annoyance of a sort of composite person made up of the Prince and Mr. Butteridge. Then for some reason Edna and he had begun to cry pitifully for each other, and he woke up with wet eye-lashes into this ill-ventilated darkness of the locker. He would never see Edna any more, never see Edna any more.

He thought he must be back in the bedroom behind the cycle shop at the bottom of Bun Hill, and he was sure the vision he had had of the destruction of a magnificent city, a city quite incredibly great and splendid, by means of bombs, was no more than a particularly vivid dream.

"Grubb!" he called, anxious to tell him.

The answering silence, and the dull resonance of the locker to his voice, supplementing the stifling quality of the air, set going a new train of ideas. He lifted up his hands and feet, and met an inflexible resistance. He was in a coffin, he thought! He had been buried alive! He gave way at once to wild panic. "'Elp!" he screamed. "'Elp!" and drummed with his feet, and kicked and struggled. "Let me out! Let me out!"

For some seconds he struggled with this intolerable horror, and then the side of his imagined coffin gave way, and he was flying out into daylight. Then he was rolling about on what seemed to be a padded floor with Kurt, and being punched and sworn at lustily.

He sat up. His head bandage had become loose and got over one eye, and he whipped the whole thing off. Kurt was also sitting up, a yard away from him, pink as ever, wrapped in blankets, and with an aluminium diver's helmet over his knee, staring at him with a severe expression, and rubbing his downy unshaven chin. They were both on a slanting floor of crimson padding, and above them was an opening like a long, low cellar flap that Bert by an effort perceived to be the cabin door in a half-inverted condition. The whole cabin had in fact turned on its side.

"What the deuce do you mean by it, Smallways?" said Kurt, "jumping out of that locker when I was certain you had gone overboard with the rest of them? Where have you been?"

"What's up?" asked Bert.

"This end of the airship is up. Most other things are down."

"Was there a battle?"

"There was."

"Who won?"

"I haven't seen the papers, Smallways. We left before the finish. We got disabled and unmanageable, and our colleagues--consorts I mean--were too busy most of them to trouble about us, and the wind blew us--Heaven knows where the wind IS blowing us. It blew us right out of action at the rate of eighty miles an hour or so. Gott! what a wind that was! What a fight! And here we are!"

"Where?"

"In the air, Smallways--in the air! When we get down on the earth again we shan't know what to do with our legs."

"But what's below us?"

"Canada, to the best of my knowledge--and a jolly bleak, empty,

inhospitable country it looks."

"But why ain't we right ways up?"

Kurt made no answer for a space.

"Last I remember was seeing a sort of flying-machine in a lightning flash," said Bert. "Gaw! that was 'orrible. Guns going off! Things explodin'! Clouds and 'ail. Pitching and tossing. I got so scared and desperate--and sick. You don't know how the fight came off?"

"Not a bit of it. I was up with my squad in those divers' dresses, inside the gas-chambers, with sheets of silk for caulking. We couldn't see a thing outside except the lightning flashes. I never saw one of those American aeroplanes. Just saw the shots flicker through the chambers and sent off men for the tears. We caught fire a bit--not much, you know. We were too wet, so the fires spluttered out before we banged. And then one of their infernal things dropped out of the air on us and rammed. Didn't you feel it?"

"I felt everything," said Bert. "I didn't notice any particular smash--"

"They must have been pretty desperate if they meant it. They slashed down on us like a knife; simply ripped the after gas-chambers like gutting herrings, crumpled up the engines and screw. Most of the engines dropped off as they fell off us--or we'd have grounded--but the rest is

sort of dangling. We just turned up our nose to the heavens and stayed there. Eleven men rolled off us from various points, and poor old Winterfeld fell through the door of the Prince's cabin into the chart-room and broke his ankle. Also we got our electric gear shot or carried away--no one knows how. That's the position, Smallways. We're driving through the air like a common aerostat, at the mercy of the elements, almost due north--probably to the North Pole. We don't know what aeroplanes the Americans have, or anything at all about it. Very likely we have finished 'em up. One fouled us, one was struck by lightning, some of the men saw a third upset, apparently just for fun. They were going cheap anyhow. Also we've lost most of our drachenflieger. They just skated off into the night. No stability in 'em. That's all. We don't know if we've won or lost. We don't know if we're at war with the British Empire yet or at peace. Consequently, we daren't get down. We don't know what we are up to or what we are going to do. Our Napoleon is alone, forward, and I suppose he's rearranging his plans. Whether New York was our Moscow or not remains to be seen. We've had a high old time and murdered no end of people! War! Noble war! I'm sick of it this morning. I like sitting in rooms rightway up and not on slippery partitions. I'm a civilised man. I keep thinking of old Albrecht and the Barbarossa.... I feel I want a wash and kind words and a quiet home. When I look at you, I KNOW I want a wash. Gott!"--he stifled a vehement yawn--"What a Cockney tadpole of a ruffian you look!"

"Can we get any grub?" asked Bert.

"Heaven knows!" said Kurt.

He meditated upon Bert for a time. "So far as I can judge, Smallways," he said, "the Prince will probably want to throw you overboard--next time he thinks of you. He certainly will if he sees you.... After all, you know, you came als Ballast.... And we shall have to lighten ship extensively pretty soon. Unless I'm mistaken, the Prince will wake up presently and start doing things with tremendous vigour.... I've taken a fancy to you. It's the English strain in me. You're a rum little chap. I shan't like seeing you whizz down the air.... You'd better make yourself useful, Smallways. I think I shall requisition you for my squad. You'll have to work, you know, and be infernally intelligent and all that. And you'll have to hang about upside down a bit. Still, it's the best chance you have. We shan't carry passengers much farther this trip, I fancy. Ballast goes over-board--if we don't want to ground precious soon and be taken prisoners of war. The Prince won't do that anyhow. He'll be game to the last."

4

By means of a folding chair, which was still in its place behind the door, they got to the window and looked out in turn and contemplated a sparsely wooded country below, with no railways nor roads, and only occasional signs of habitation. Then a bugle sounded, and Kurt interpreted it as a summons to food. They got through the door and clambered with some difficulty up the nearly vertical passage,

holding on desperately with toes and finger-tips, to the ventilating perforations in its floor. The mess stewards had found their fireless heating arrangements intact, and there was hot cocoa for the officers and hot soup for the men.

Bert's sense of the queerness of this experience was so keen that it blotted out any fear he might have felt. Indeed, he was far more interested now than afraid. He seemed to have touched down to the bottom of fear and abandonment overnight. He was growing accustomed to the idea that he would probably be killed presently, that this strange voyage in the air was in all probability his death journey. No human being can keep permanently afraid: fear goes at last to the back of one's mind, accepted, and shelved, and done with. He squatted over his soup, sopping it up with his bread, and contemplated his comrades. They were all rather yellow and dirty, with four-day beards, and they grouped themselves in the tired, unpremeditated manner of men on a wreck. They talked little. The situation perplexed them beyond any suggestion of ideas. Three had been hurt in the pitching up of the ship during the fight, and one had a bandaged bullet wound. It was incredible that this little band of men had committed murder and massacre on a scale beyond precedent. None of them who squatted on the sloping gas-padded partition, soup mug in hand, seemed really guilty of anything of the sort, seemed really capable of hurting a dog wantonly. They were all so manifestly built for homely chalets on the solid earth and carefully tilled fields and blond wives and cheery merrymaking. The red-faced, sturdy man with light eyelashes who had brought the first news of

the air battle to the men's mess had finished his soup, and with an expression of maternal solicitude was readjusting the bandages of a youngster whose arm had been sprained.

Bert was crumbling the last of his bread into the last of his soup, eking it out as long as possible, when suddenly he became aware that every one was looking at a pair of feet that were dangling across the downturned open doorway. Kurt appeared and squatted across the hinge. In some mysterious way he had shaved his face and smoothed down his light golden hair. He looked extraordinarily cherubic. "Der Prinz," he said.

A second pair of boots followed, making wide and magnificent gestures in their attempts to feel the door frame. Kurt guided them to a foothold, and the Prince, shaved and brushed and beeswaxed and clean and big and terrible, slid down into position astride of the door. All the men and Bert also stood up and saluted.

The Prince surveyed them with the gesture of a man who site a steed. The head of the Kapitan appeared beside him.

Then Bert had a terrible moment. The blue blaze of the Prince's eye fell upon him, the great finger pointed, a question was asked. Kurt intervened with explanations.

"So," said the Prince, and Bert was disposed of.

Then the Prince addressed the men in short, heroic sentences, steadying himself on the hinge with one hand and waving the other in a fine variety of gesture. What he said Bert could not tell, but he perceived that their demeanor changed, their backs stiffened. They began to punctuate the Prince's discourse with cries of approval. At the end their leader burst into song and all the men with him. "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott," they chanted in deep, strong tones, with an immense moral uplifting. It was glaringly inappropriate in a damaged, half-overturned, and sinking airship, which had been disabled and blown out of action after inflicting the cruellest bombardment in the world's history; but it was immensely stirring nevertheless. Bert was deeply moved. He could not sing any of the words of Luther's great hymn, but he opened his mouth and emitted loud, deep, and partially harmonious notes....

Far below, this deep chanting struck on the ears of a little camp of Christianised half-breeds who were lumbering. They were breakfasting, but they rushed out cheerfully, quite prepared for the Second Advent. They stared at the shattered and twisted Vaterland driving before the gale, amazed beyond words. In so many respects it was like their idea of the Second Advent, and then again in so many respects it wasn't. They stared at its passage, awe-stricken and perplexed beyond their power of words. The hymn ceased. Then after a long interval a voice came out of heaven. "Vat id diss blace here galled itself; vat?"

They made no answer. Indeed they did not understand, though the question

repeated itself.

And at last the monster drove away northward over a crest of pine woods and was no more seen. They fell into a hot and long disputation....

The hymn ended. The Prince's legs dangled up the passage again, and every one was briskly prepared for heroic exertion and triumphant acts. "Smallways!" cried Kurt, "come here!"

5

Then Bert, under Kurt's direction, had his first experience of the work of an air-sailor.

The immediate task before the captain of the Vaterland was a very simple one. He had to keep afloat. The wind, though it had fallen from its earlier violence, was still blowing strongly enough to render the grounding of so clumsy a mass extremely dangerous, even if it had been desirable for the Prince to land in inhabited country, and so risk capture. It was necessary to keep the airship up until the wind fell and then, if possible, to descend in some lonely district of the Territory where there would be a chance of repair or rescue by some searching consort. In order to do this weight had to be dropped, and Kurt was detailed with a dozen men to climb down among the wreckage of the deflated air-chambers and cut the stuff clear, portion by portion, as the airship sank. So Bert, armed with a sharp cutlass, found himself

clambering about upon netting four thousand feet up in the air, trying to understand Kurt when he spoke in English and to divine him when he used German.

It was giddy work, but not nearly so giddy as a rather overnourished reader sitting in a warm room might imagine. Bert found it quite possible to look down and contemplate the wild sub-arctic landscape below, now devoid of any sign of habitation, a land of rocky cliffs and cascades and broad swirling desolate rivers, and of trees and thickets that grew more stunted and scrubby as the day wore on. Here and there on the hills were patches and pockets of snow. And over all this he worked, hacking away at the tough and slippery oiled silk and clinging stoutly to the netting. Presently they cleared and dropped a tangle of bent steel rods and wires from the frame, and a big chunk of silk bladder. That was trying. The airship flew up at once as this loose hamper parted. It seemed almost as though they were dropping all Canada. The stuff spread out in the air and floated down and hit and twisted up in a nasty fashion on the lip of a gorge. Bert clung like a frozen monkey to his ropes and did not move a muscle for five minutes.

But there was something very exhilarating, he found, in this dangerous work, and above every thing else, there was the sense of fellowship. He was no longer an isolated and distrustful stranger among these others, he had now a common object with them, he worked with a friendly rivalry to get through with his share before them. And he developed a great respect and affection for Kurt, which had hitherto been only latent

in him. Kurt with a job to direct was altogether admirable; he was resourceful, helpful, considerate, swift. He seemed to be everywhere. One forgot his pinkness, his light cheerfulness of manner. Directly one had trouble he was at hand with sound and confident advice. He was like an elder brother to his men.

All together they cleared three considerable chunks of wreckage, and then Bert was glad to clamber up into the cabins again and give place to a second squad. He and his companions were given hot coffee, and indeed, even gloved as they were, the job had been a cold one. They sat drinking it and regarding each other with satisfaction. One man spoke to Bert amiably in German, and Bert nodded and smiled. Through Kurt, Bert, whose ankles were almost frozen, succeeded in getting a pair of top-boots from one of the disabled men.

In the afternoon the wind abated greatly, and small, infrequent snowflakes came drifting by. Snow also spread more abundantly below, and the only trees were clumps of pine and spruce in the lower valleys. Kurt went with three men into the still intact gas-chambers, let out a certain quantity of gas from them, and prepared a series of ripping panels for the descent. Also the residue of the bombs and explosives in the magazine were thrown overboard and fell, detonating loudly, in the wilderness below. And about four o'clock in the afternoon upon a wide and rocky plain within sight of snow-crested cliffs, the Vaterland ripped and grounded.

It was necessarily a difficult and violent affair, for the Vaterland had not been planned for the necessities of a balloon. The captain got one panel ripped too soon and the others not soon enough. She dropped heavily, bounced clumsily, and smashed the hanging gallery into the fore-part, mortally injuring Von Winterfeld, and then came down in a collapsing heap after dragging for some moments. The forward shield and its machine gun tumbled in upon the things below. Two men were hurt badly--one got a broken leg and one was internally injured--by flying rods and wires, and Bert was pinned for a time under the side. When at last he got clear and could take a view of the situation, the great black eagle that had started so splendidly from Franconia six evenings ago, sprawled deflated over the cabins of the airship and the frost-bitten rocks of this desolate place and looked a most unfortunate bird--as though some one had caught it and wrung its neck and cast it aside. Several of the crew of the airship were standing about in silence, contemplating the wreckage and the empty wilderness into which they had fallen. Others were busy under the imromptu tent made by the empty gas-chambers. The Prince had gone a little way off and was scrutinising the distant heights through his field-glass. They had the appearance of old sea cliffs; here and there were small clumps of conifers, and in two places tall cascades. The nearer ground was strewn with glaciated boulders and supported nothing but a stunted Alpine vegetation of compact clustering stems and stalkless flowers. No river was visible, but the air was full of the rush and babble of a torrent close at hand. A bleak and biting wind was blowing. Ever and again a snowflake drifted past. The springless frozen earth under Bert's feet

felt strangely dead and heavy after the buoyant airship.

6

So it came about that that great and powerful Prince Karl Albert was for a time thrust out of the stupendous conflict he chiefly had been instrumental in provoking. The chances of battle and the weather conspired to maroon him in Labrador, and there he raged for six long days, while war and wonder swept the world. Nation rose against nation and air-fleet grappled air-fleet, cities blazed and men died in multitudes; but in Labrador one might have dreamt that, except for a little noise of hammering, the world was at peace.

There the encampment lay; from a distance the cabins, covered over with the silk of the balloon part, looked like a gipsy's tent on a rather exceptional scale, and all the available hands were busy in building out of the steel of the framework a mast from which the Vaterland's electricians might hang the long conductors of the apparatus for wireless telegraphy that was to link the Prince to the world again. There were times when it seemed they would never rig that mast. From the outset the party suffered hardship. They were not too abundantly provisioned, and they were put on short rations, and for all the thick garments they had, they were but ill-equipped against the piercing wind and inhospitable violence of this wilderness. The first night was spent in darkness and without fires. The engines that had supplied power were smashed and dropped far away to the south, and there was never a

match among the company. It had been death to carry matches. All the explosives had been thrown out of the magazine, and it was only towards morning that the bird-faced man whose cabin Bert had taken in the beginning confessed to a brace of duelling pistols and cartridges, with which a fire could be started. Afterwards the lockers of the machine gun were found to contain a supply of unused ammunition.

The night was a distressing one and seemed almost interminable. Hardly any one slept. There were seven wounded men aboard, and Von Winterfeld's head had been injured, and he was shivering and in delirium, struggling with his attendant and shouting strange things about the burning of New York. The men crept together in the mess-room in the darkling, wrapped in what they could find and drank cocoa from the fireless heaters and listened to his cries. In the morning the Prince made them a speech about Destiny, and the God of his Fathers and the pleasure and glory of giving one's life for his dynasty, and a number of similar considerations that might otherwise have been neglected in that bleak wilderness. The men cheered without enthusiasm, and far away a wolf howled.

Then they set to work, and for a week they toiled to put up a mast of steel, and hang from it a gridiron of copper wires two hundred feet by twelve. The theme of all that time was work, work continually, straining and toilsome work, and all the rest was grim hardship and evil chances, save for a certain wild splendour in the sunset and sunrise in the torrents and drifting weather, in the wilderness about them. They built

and tended a ring of perpetual fires, gangs roamed for brushwood and met with wolves, and the wounded men and their beds were brought out from the airship cabins, and put in shelters about the fires. There old Von Winterfeld raved and became quiet and presently died, and three of the other wounded sickened for want of good food, while their fellows mended. These things happened, as it were, in the wings; the central facts before Bert's consciousness were always firstly the perpetual toil, the holding and lifting, and lugging at heavy and clumsy masses, the tedious filing and winding of wires, and secondly, the Prince, urgent and threatening whenever a man relaxed. He would stand over them, and point over their heads, southward into the empty sky. "The world there," he said in German, "is waiting for us! Fifty Centuries come to their Consummation." Bert did not understand the words, but he read the gesture. Several times the Prince grew angry; once with a man who was working slowly, once with a man who stole a comrade's ration. The first he scolded and set to a more tedious task; the second he struck in the face and ill-used. He did no work himself. There was a clear space near the fires in which he would walk up and down, sometimes for two hours together, with arms folded, muttering to himself of Patience and his destiny. At times these mutterings broke out into rhetoric, into shouts and gestures that would arrest the workers; they would stare at him until they perceived that his blue eyes glared and his waving hand addressed itself always to the southward hills. On Sunday the work ceased for half an hour, and the Prince preached on faith and God's friendship for David, and afterwards they all sang: "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott."

In an improvised hovel lay Von Winterfeld, and all one morning he raved of the greatness of Germany. "Blut und Eisen!" he shouted, and then, as if in derision, "Welt-Politik--ha, ha!" Then he would explain complicated questions of polity to imaginary hearers, in low, wily tones. The other sick men kept still, listening to him. Bert's distracted attention would be recalled by Kurt. "Smallways, take that end. So!"

Slowly, tediously, the great mast was rigged and hoisted foot by foot into place. The electricians had contrived a catchment pool and a wheel in the torrent close at hand--for the little Mulhausen dynamo with its turbinal volute used by the telegraphists was quite adaptable to water driving, and on the sixth day in the evening the apparatus was in working order and the Prince was calling--weakly, indeed, but calling--to his air-fleet across the empty spaces of the world. For a time he called unheeded.

The effect of that evening was to linger long in Bert's memory. A red fire spluttered and blazed close by the electricians at their work, and red gleams xan up the vertical steel mast and threads of copper wire towards the zenith. The Prince sat on a rock close by, with his chin on his hand, waiting. Beyond and to the northward was the cairn that covered Von Winterfeld, surmounted by a cross of steel, and from among the tumbled rocks in the distance the eyes of a wolf gleamed redly. On the other hand was the wreckage of the great airship and the men

bivouacked about a second ruddy flare. They were all keeping very still, as if waiting to hear what news might presently be given them. Far away, across many hundreds of miles of desolation, other wireless masts would be clicking, and snapping, and waking into responsive vibration. Perhaps they were not. Perhaps those throbs upon the ethers wasted themselves upon a regardless world. When the men spoke, they spoke in low tones. Now and then a bird shrieked remotely, and once a wolf howled. All these things were set in the immense cold spaciousness of the wild.

7

Bert got the news last, and chiefly in broken English, from a linguist among his mates. It was only far on in the night that the weary telegraphist got an answer to his calls, but then the messages came clear and strong. And such news it was!

"I say," said Bert at his breakfast, amidst a great clamour, "tell us a bit."

"All de vorlt is at vor!" said the linguist, waving his cocoa in an illustrative manner, "all de vorlt is at vor!"

Bert stared southward into the dawn. It did not seem so.

"All de vorlt is at vor! They haf burn' Berlin; they haf burn' London; they haf burn' Hamburg and Paris. Chapan hass burn San Francisco. We haf

mate a camp at Niagara. Dat is whad they are telling us. China has cot drachenflieger and luftschiffe beyont counting. All de vorlt is at vor!"

"Gaw!" said Bert.

"Yess," said the linguist, drinking his cocoa.

"Burnt up London, 'ave they? Like we did New York?"

"It wass a bombardment."

"They don't say anything about a place called Clapham, or Bun Hill, do they?"

"I haf heard noding," said the linguist.

That was all Bert could get for a time. But the excitement of all the men about him was contagious, and presently he saw Kurt standing alone, hands behind him, and looking at one of the distant waterfalls very steadfastly. He went up and saluted, soldier-fashion. "Beg pardon, lieutenant," he said.

Kurt turned his face. It was unusually grave that morning. "I was just thinking I would like to see that waterfall closer," he said. "It reminds me--what do you want?"

"I can't make 'ead or tail of what they're saying, sir. Would you mind telling me the news?"

"Damn the news," said Kurt. "You'll get news enough before the day's out. It's the end of the world. They're sending the Graf Zeppelin for us. She'll be here by the morning, and we ought to be at Niagara--or eternal smash--within eight and forty hours.... I want to look at that waterfall. You'd better come with me. Have you had your rations?"

"Yessir."

"Very well. Come."

And musing profoundly, Kurt led the way across the rocks towards the distant waterfall.

For a time Bert walked behind him in the character of an escort; then as they passed out of the atmosphere of the encampment, Kurt lagged for him to come alongside.

"We shall be back in it all in two days' time," he said. "And it's a devil of a war to go back to. That's the news. The world's gone mad. Our fleet beat the Americans the night we got disabled, that's clear. We lost eleven--eleven airships certain, and all their aeroplanes got smashed. God knows how much we smashed or how many we killed. But that was only the beginning. Our start's been like firing a magazine. Every

country was hiding flying-machines. They're fighting in the air all over Europe--all over the world. The Japanese and Chinese have joined in. That's the great fact. That's the supreme fact. They've pounced into our little quarrels.... The Yellow Peril was a peril after all! They've got thousands of airships. They're all over the world. We bombarded London and Paris, and now the French and English have smashed up Berlin. And now Asia is at us all, and on the top of us all.... It's mania. China on the top. And they don't know where to stop. It's limitless. It's the last confusion. They're bombarding capitals, smashing up dockyards and factories, mines and fleets."

"Did they do much to London, sir?" asked Bert.

"Heaven knows...."

He said no more for a time.

"This Labrador seems a quiet place," he resumed at last. "I'm half a mind to stay here. Can't do that. No! I've got to see it through. I've got to see it through. You've got to, too. Every one.... But why?... I tell you--our world's gone to pieces. There's no way out of it, no way back. Here we are! We're like mice caught in a house on fire, we're like cattle overtaken by a flood. Presently we shall be picked up, and back we shall go into the fighting. We shall kill and smash again--perhaps. It's a Chino-Japanese air-fleet this time, and the odds are against us. Our turns will come. What will happen to you I don't know, but for

myself, I know quite well; I shall be killed."

"You'll be all right," said Bert, after a queer pause.

"No!" said Kurt, "I'm going to be killed. I didn't know it before, but this morning, at dawn, I knew it--as though I'd been told."

"'Ow?"

"I tell you I know."

"But 'ow COULD you know?"

"I know."

"Like being told?"

"Like being certain.

"I know," he repeated, and for a time they walked in silence towards the waterfall.

Kurt, wrapped in his thoughts, walked heedlessly, and at last broke out again. "I've always felt young before, Smallways, but this morning I feel old--old. So old! Nearer to death than old men feel. And I've always thought life was a lark. It isn't.... This sort of thing has

always been happening, I suppose--these things, wars and earthquakes, that sweep across all the decency of life. It's just as though I had woke up to it all for the first time. Every night since we were at New York I've dreamt of it.... And it's always been so--it's the way of life. People are torn away from the people they care for; homes are smashed, creatures full of life, and memories, and little peculiar gifts are scalded and smashed, and torn to pieces, and starved, and spoilt. London! Berlin! San Francisco! Think of all the human histories we ended in New York!... And the others go on again as though such things weren't possible. As I went on! Like animals! Just like animals."

He said nothing for a long time, and then he dropped out, "The Prince is a lunatic!"

They came to a place where they had to climb, and then to a long peat level beside a rivulet. There a quantity of delicate little pink flowers caught Bert's eye. "Gaw!" he said, and stooped to pick one. "In a place like this."

Kurt stopped and half turned. His face winced.

"I never see such a flower," said Bert. "It's so delicate."

"Pick some more if you want to," said Kurt.

Bert did so, while Kurt stood and watched him.

"Funny 'ow one always wants to pick flowers," said Bert.

Kurt had nothing to add to that.

They went on again, without talking, for a long time.

At last they came to a rocky hummock, from which the view of the waterfall opened out. There Kurt stopped and seated himself on a rock.

"That's as much as I wanted to see," he explained. "It isn't very like, but it's like enough."

"Like what?"

"Another waterfall I knew."

He asked a question abruptly. "Got a girl, Smallways?"

"Funny thing," said Bert, "those flowers, I suppose.--I was jes' thinking of 'er."

"So was I."

"WHAT! Edna?"

"No. I was thinking of MY Edna. We've all got Ednas, I suppose, for our imaginations to play about. This was a girl. But all that's past for ever. It's hard to think I can't see her just for a minute--just let her know I'm thinking of her."

"Very likely," said Bert, "you'll see 'er all right."

"No," said Kurt with decision, "I KNOW."

"I met her," he went on, "in a place like this--in the Alps--Engstlen Alp. There's a waterfall rather like this one--a broad waterfall down towards Innertkirchen. That's why I came here this morning. We slipped away and had half a day together beside it. And we picked flowers. Just such flowers as you picked. The same for all I know. And gentian."

"I know" said Bert, "me and Edna--we done things like that. Flowers. And all that. Seems years off now."

"She was beautiful and daring and shy, Mein Gott! I can hardly hold myself for the desire to see her and hear her voice again before I die. Where is she?... Look here, Smallways, I shall write a sort of letter--And there's her portrait." He touched his breast pocket.

"You'll see 'er again all right," said Bert.

"No! I shall never see her again.... I don't understand why people

should meet just to be torn apart. But I know she and I will never meet again. That I know as surely as that the sun will rise, and that cascade come shining over the rocks after I am dead and done.... Oh! It's all foolishness and haste and violence and cruel folly, stupidity and blundering hate and selfish ambition--all the things that men have done--all the things they will ever do. Gott! Smallways, what a muddle and confusion life has always been--the battles and massacres and disasters, the hates and harsh acts, the murders and sweatings, the lynchings and cheatings. This morning I am tired of it all, as though I'd just found it out for the first time. I HAVE found it out. When a man is tired of life, I suppose it is time for him to die. I've lost heart, and death is over me. Death is close to me, and I know I have got to end. But think of all the hopes I had only a little time ago, the sense of fine beginnings!... It was all a sham. There were no beginnings.... We're just ants in ant-hill cities, in a world that doesn't matter; that goes on and rambles into nothingness. New York--New York doesn't even strike me as horrible. New York was nothing but an ant-hill kicked to pieces by a fool!

"Think of it, Smallways: there's war everywhere! They're smashing up their civilisation before they have made it. The sort of thing the English did at Alexandria, the Japanese at Port Arthur, the French at Casablanca, is going on everywhere. Everywhere! Down in South America even they are fighting among themselves! No place is safe--no place is at peace. There is no place where a woman and her daughter can hide and be at peace. The war comes through the air, bombs drop in the night.

Quiet people go out in the morning, and see air-fleets passing overhead--dripping death--dripping death!"