

CHAPTER X. THE WORLD UNDER THE WAR

1

Bert spent two more days upon Goat Island, and finished all his provisions except the cigarettes and mineral water, before he brought himself to try the Asiatic flying-machine.

Even at last he did not so much go off upon it as get carried off. It had taken only an hour or so to substitute wing stays from the second flying-machine and to replace the nuts he had himself removed. The engine was in working order, and differed only very simply and obviously from that of a contemporary motor-bicycle. The rest of the time was taken up by a vast musing and delaying and hesitation. Chiefly he saw himself splashing into the rapids and whirling down them to the Fall, clutching and drowning, but also he had a vision of being hopelessly in the air, going fast and unable to ground. His mind was too concentrated upon the business of flying for him to think very much of what might happen to an indefinite-spirited Cockney without credential who arrived on an Asiatic flying-machine amidst the war-infuriated population beyond.

He still had a lingering solicitude for the bird-faced officer. He had a haunting fancy he might be lying disabled or badly smashed in some way in some nook or cranny of the Island; and it was only after a most exhaustive search that he abandoned that distressing idea. "If I found

'im," he reasoned the while, "what could I do wiv 'im? You can't blow a chap's brains out when 'e's down. And I don' see 'ow else I can 'elp 'im."

Then the kitten bothered his highly developed sense of social responsibility. "If I leave 'er, she'll starve.... Ought to catch mice for 'erself.... ARE there mice?... Birds?... She's too young.... She's like me; she's a bit too civilised."

Finally he stuck her in his side pocket and she became greatly interested in the memories of corned beef she found there. With her in his pocket, he seated himself in the saddle of the flying-machine. Big, clumsy thing it was--and not a bit like a bicycle. Still the working of it was fairly plain. You set the engine going--SO; kicked yourself up until the wheel was vertical, SO; engaged the gyroscope, SO, and then--then--you just pulled up this lever.

Rather stiff it was, but suddenly it came over--

The big curved wings on either side flapped disconcertingly, flapped again' click, clock, click, clock, clitter-clock!

Stop! The thing was heading for the water; its wheel was in the water. Bert groaned from his heart and struggled to restore the lever to its first position. Click, clock, clitter-clock, he was rising! The machine was lifting its dripping wheel out of the eddies, and he was going up!

There was no stopping now, no good in stopping now. In another moment Bert, clutching and convulsive and rigid, with staring eyes and a face pale as death, was flapping up above the Rapids, jerking to every jerk of the wings, and rising, rising.

There was no comparison in dignity and comfort between a flying-machine and a balloon. Except in its moments of descent, the balloon was a vehicle of faultless urbanity; this was a buck-jumping mule, a mule that jumped up and never came down again. Click, clock, click, clock; with each beat of the strangely shaped wings it jumped Bert upward and caught him neatly again half a second later on the saddle. And while in ballooning there is no wind, since the balloon is a part of the wind, flying is a wild perpetual creation of and plunging into wind. It was a wind that above all things sought to blind him, to force him to close his eyes. It occurred to him presently to twist his knees and legs inward and grip with them, or surely he would have been bumped into two clumsy halves. And he was going up, a hundred yards high, two hundred, three hundred, over the streaming, frothing wilderness of water below--up, up, up. That was all right, but how presently would one go horizontally? He tried to think if these things did go horizontally. No! They flapped up and then they soared down. For a time he would keep on flapping up. Tears streamed from his eyes. He wiped them with one temerarily disengaged hand.

Was it better to risk a fall over land or over water--such water?

He was flapping up above the Upper Rapids towards Buffalo. It was at any rate a comfort that the Falls and the wild swirl of waters below them were behind him. He was flying up straight. That he could see. How did one turn?

He was presently almost cool, and his eyes got more used to the rush of air, but he was getting very high, very high. He tilted his head forwards and surveyed the country, blinking. He could see all over Buffalo, a place with three great blackened scars of ruin, and hills and stretches beyond. He wondered if he was half a mile high, or more. There were some people among some houses near a railway station between Niagara and Buffalo, and then more people. They went like ants busily in and out of the houses. He saw two motor cars gliding along the road towards Niagara city. Then far away in the south he saw a great Asiatic airship going eastward. "Oh, Gord!" he said, and became earnest in his ineffectual attempts to alter his direction. But that airship took no notice of him, and he continued to ascend convulsively. The world got more and more extensive and maplike. Click, clock, clitter-clock. Above him and very near to him now was a hazy stratum of cloud.

He determined to disengage the wing clutch. He did so. The lever resisted his strength for a time, then over it came, and instantly the tail of the machine cocked up and the wings became rigidly spread. Instantly everything was swift and smooth and silent. He was gliding rapidly down the air against a wild gale of wind, his eyes three-quarters shut.

A little lever that had hitherto been obdurate now confessed itself mobile. He turned it over gently to the right, and whiroo!--the left wing had in some mysterious way given at its edge and he was sweeping round and downward in an immense right-handed spiral. For some moments he experienced all the helpless sensations of catastrophe. He restored the lever to its middle position with some difficulty, and the wings were equalised again.

He turned it to the left and had a sensation of being spun round backwards. "Too much!" he gasped.

He discovered that he was rushing down at a headlong pace towards a railway line and some factory buildings. They appeared to be tearing up to him to devour him. He must have dropped all that height. For a moment he had the ineffectual sensations of one whose bicycle bolts downhill. The ground had almost taken him by surprise. "Ere!" he cried; and then with a violent effort of all his being he got the beating engine at work again and set the wings flapping. He swooped down and up and resumed his quivering and pulsating ascent of the air.

He went high again, until he had a wide view of the pleasant upland country of western New York State, and then made a long coast down, and so up again, and then a coast. Then as he came swooping a quarter of a mile above a village he saw people running about, running away--evidently in relation to his hawk-like passage. He got an idea

that he had been shot at.

"Up!" he said, and attacked that lever again. It came over with remarkable docility, and suddenly the wings seemed to give way in the middle. But the engine was still! It had stopped. He flung the lever back rather by instinct than design. What to do?

Much happened in a few seconds, but also his mind was quick, he thought very quickly. He couldn't get up again, he was gliding down the air; he would have to hit something.

He was travelling at the rate of perhaps thirty miles an hour down, down.

That plantation of larches looked the softest thing--mossy almost!

Could he get it? He gave himself to the steering. Round to the right--left!

Swirroo! Crackle! He was gliding over the tops of the trees, ploughing through them, tumbling into a cloud of green sharp leaves and black twigs. There was a sudden snapping, and he fell off the saddle forward, a thud and a crashing of branches. Some twigs hit him smartly in the face....

He was between a tree-stem and the saddle, with his leg over the

steering lever and, so far as he could realise, not hurt. He tried to alter his position and free his leg, and found himself slipping and dropping through branches with everything giving way beneath him. He clutched and found himself in the lower branches of a tree beneath the flying-machine. The air was full of a pleasant resinous smell. He stared for a moment motionless, and then very carefully clambered down branch by branch to the soft needle-covered ground below.

"Good business," he said, looking up at the bent and tilted kite-wings above.

"I dropped soft!"

He rubbed his chin with his hand and meditated. "Blowed if I don't think I'm a rather lucky fellow!" he said, surveying the pleasant sun-bespattered ground under the trees. Then he became aware of a violent tumult at his side. "Lord!" he said, "You must be 'arf smothered," and extracted the kitten from his pocket-handkerchief and pocket. She was twisted and crumpled and extremely glad to see the light again. Her little tongue peeped between her teeth. He put her down, and she ran a dozen paces and shook herself and stretched and sat up and began to wash.

"Nex'?" he said, looking about him, and then with a gesture of vexation, "Desh it! I ought to 'ave brought that gun!"

He had rested it against a tree when he had seated himself in the flying-machine saddle.

He was puzzled for a time by the immense peacefulness in the quality of the world, and then he perceived that the roar of the cataract was no longer in his ears.

2

He had no very clear idea of what sort of people he might come upon in this country. It was, he knew, America. Americans he had always understood were the citizens of a great and powerful nation, dry and humorous in their manner, addicted to the use of the bowie-knife and revolver, and in the habit of talking through the nose like Norfolkshire, and saying "allow" and "reckon" and "calculate," after the manner of the people who live on the New Forest side of Hampshire. Also they were very rich, had rocking-chairs, and put their feet at unusual altitudes, and they chewed tobacco, gum, and other substances, with untiring industry. Commingled with them were cowboys, Red Indians, and comic, respectful niggers. This he had learnt from the fiction in his public library. Beyond that he had learnt very little. He was not surprised therefore when he met armed men.

He decided to abandon the shattered flying-machine. He wandered through the trees for some time, and then struck a road that seemed to his urban English eyes to be remarkably wide but not properly "made." Neither

hedge nor ditch nor curbed distinctive footpath separated it from the woods, and it went in that long easy curve which distinguishes the tracks of an open continent. Ahead he saw a man carrying a gun under his arm, a man in a soft black hat, a blue blouse, and black trousers, and with a broad round-fat face quite innocent of goatee. This person regarded him askance and heard him speak with a start.

"Can you tell me whereabouts I am at all?" asked Bert.

The man regarded him, and more particularly his rubber boots, with sinister suspicion. Then he replied in a strange outlandish tongue that was, as a matter of fact, Czech. He ended suddenly at the sight of Bert's blank face with "Don't spik English."

"Oh!" said Bert. He reflected gravely for a moment, and then went his way.

"Thenks," he, said as an afterthought. The man regarded his back for a moment, was struck with an idea, began an abortive gesture, sighed, gave it up, and went on also with a depressed countenance.

Presently Bert came to a big wooden house standing casually among the trees. It looked a bleak, bare box of a house to him, no creeper grew on it, no hedge nor wall nor fence parted it off from the woods about it. He stopped before the steps that led up to the door, perhaps thirty yards away. The place seemed deserted. He would have gone up to the

door and rapped, but suddenly a big black dog appeared at the side and regarded him. It was a huge heavy-jawed dog of some unfamiliar breed, and it, wore a spike-studded collar. It did not bark nor approach him, it just bristled quietly and emitted a single sound like a short, deep cough.

Bert hesitated and went on.

He stopped thirty paces away and stood peering about him among the trees. "If I 'aven't been and lef that kitten," he said.

Acute sorrow wrenched him for a time. The black dog came through the trees to get a better look at him and coughed that well-bred cough again. Bert resumed the road.

"She'll do all right," he said.... "She'll catch things.

"She'll do all right," he said presently, without conviction. But if it had not been for the black dog, he would have gone back.

When he was out of sight of the house and the black dog, he went into the woods on the other side of the way and emerged after an interval trimming a very tolerable cudgel with his pocket-knife. Presently he saw an attractive-looking rock by the track and picked it up and put it in his pocket. Then he came to three or four houses, wooden like the last, each with an ill-painted white verandah (that was his name for it) and

all standing in the same casual way upon the ground. Behind, through the woods, he saw pig-stys and a rooting black sow leading a brisk, adventurous family. A wild-looking woman with sloe-black eyes and dishevelled black hair sat upon the steps of one of the houses nursing a baby, but at the sight of Bert she got up and went inside, and he heard her bolting the door. Then a boy appeared among the pig-stys, but he would not understand Bert's hail.

"I suppose it is America!" said Bert.

The houses became more frequent down the road, and he passed two other extremely wild and dirty-looking men without addressing them. One carried a gun and the other a hatchet, and they scrutinised him and his cudgel scornfully. Then he struck a cross-road with a mono-rail at its side, and there was a notice board at the corner with "Wait here for the cars." "That's all right, any'ow," said Bert. "Wonder 'ow long I should 'ave to wait?" It occurred to him that in the present disturbed state of the country the service might be interrupted, and as there seemed more houses to the right than the left he turned to the right. He passed an old negro. "'Ullo!" said Bert. "Goo' morning!"

"Good day, sah!" said the old negro, in a voice of almost incredible richness.

"What's the name of this place?" asked Bert.

"Tanooda, sah!" said the negro.

"Thenks!" said Bert.

"Thank YOU, sah!" said the negro, overwhelmingly.

Bert came to houses of the same detached, unwalled, wooden type, but adorned now with enamelled advertisements partly in English and partly in Esperanto. Then he came to what he concluded was a grocer's shop. It was the first house that professed the hospitality of an open door, and from within came a strangely familiar sound. "Gaw!" he said searching in his pockets. "Why! I 'aven't wanted money for free weeks! I wonder if I--Grubb 'ad most of it. Ah!" He produced a handful of coins and regarded it; three pennies, sixpence, and a shilling. "That's all right," he said, forgetting a very obvious consideration.

He approached the door, and as he did so a compactly built, grey-faced man in shirt sleeves appeared in it and scrutinised him and his cudgel. "Mornin'," said Bert. "Can I get anything to eat 'r drink in this shop?"

The man in the door replied, thank Heaven, in clear, good American.

"This, sir, is not A shop, it is A store."

"Oh!" said Bert, and then, "Well, can I get anything to eat?"

"You can," said the American in a tone of confident encouragement, and

led the way inside.

The shop seemed to him by his Bun Hill standards extremely roomy, well lit, and unencumbered. There was a long counter to the left of him, with drawers and miscellaneous commodities ranged behind it, a number of chairs, several tables, and two spittoons to the right, various barrels, cheeses, and bacon up the vista, and beyond, a large archway leading to more space. A little group of men was assembled round one of the tables, and a woman of perhaps five-and-thirty leant with her elbows on the counter. All the men were armed with rifles, and the barrel of a gun peeped above the counter. They were all listening idly, inattentively, to a cheap, metallic-toned gramophone that occupied a table near at hand. From its brazen throat came words that gave Bert a qualm of homesickness, that brought back in his memory a sunlit beach, a group of children, red-painted bicycles, Grubb, and an approaching balloon:--

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

A heavy-necked man in a straw hat, who was chewing something, stopped the machine with a touch, and they all turned their eyes on Bert. And all their eyes were tired eyes.

"Can we give this gentleman anything to eat, mother, or can we not?" said the proprietor.

"He kin have what he likes?" said the woman at the counter, without moving, "right up from a cracker to a square meal." She struggled with a yawn, after the manner of one who has been up all night.

"I want a meal," said Bert, "but I 'aven't very much money. I don' want to give mor'n a shillin'."

"Mor'n a WHAT?" said the proprietor, sharply.

"Mor'n a shillin'," said Bert, with a sudden disagreeable realisation coming into his mind.

"Yes," said the proprietor, startled for a moment from his courtly bearing. "But what in hell is a shilling?"

"He means a quarter," said a wise-looking, lank young man in riding gaiters.

Bert, trying to conceal his consternation, produced a coin. "That's a shilling," he said.

"He calls A store A shop," said the proprietor, "and he wants A meal for A shilling. May I ask you, sir, what part of America you hail from?"

Bert replaced the shilling in his pocket as he spoke, "Niagara," he said.

"And when did you leave Niagara?"

"'Bout an hour ago."

"Well," said the proprietor, and turned with a puzzled smile to the others. "Well!"

They asked various questions simultaneously.

Bert selected one or two for reply. "You see," he said, "I been with the German air-fleet. I got caught up by them, sort of by accident, and brought over here."

"From England?"

"Yes--from England. Way of Germany. I was in a great battle with them Asiatics, and I got lef' on a little island between the Falls."

"Goat Island?"

"I don' know what it was called. But any'ow I found a flying-machine and made a sort of fly with it and got here."

Two men stood up with incredulous eyes on him. "Where's the flying-machine?" they asked; "outside?"

"It's back in the woods here--'bout arf a mile away."

"Is it good?" said a thick-lipped man with a scar.

"I come down rather a smash--."

Everybody got up and stood about him and talked confusingly. They wanted him to take them to the flying-machine at once.

"Look 'ere," said Bert, "I'll show you--only I 'aven't 'ad anything to eat since yestiday--except mineral water."

A gaunt soldierly-looking young man with long lean legs in riding gaiters and a bandolier, who had hitherto not spoken, intervened now on his behalf in a note of confident authority. "That's aw right," he said.

"Give him a feed, Mr. Logan--from me. I want to hear more of that story of his. We'll see his machine afterwards. If you ask me, I should say it's a remarkably interesting accident had dropped this gentleman here. I guess we requisition that flying-machine--if we find it--for local defence."

3

So Bert fell on his feet again, and sat eating cold meat and good bread and mustard and drinking very good beer, and telling in the roughest

outline and with the omissions and inaccuracies of statement natural to his type of mind, the simple story of his adventures. He told how he and a "gentleman friend" had been visiting the seaside for their health, how a "chep" came along in a balloon and fell out as he fell in, how he had drifted to Franconia, how the Germans had seemed to mistake him for some one and had "took him prisoner" and brought him to New York, how he had been to Labrador and back, how he had got to Goat Island and found himself there alone. He omitted the matter of the Prince and the Butteridge aspect of the affair, not out of any deep deceitfulness, but because he felt the inadequacy of his narrative powers. He wanted everything to seem easy and natural and correct, to present himself as a trustworthy and understandable Englishman in a sound mediocre position, to whom refreshment and accommodation might be given with freedom and confidence. When his fragmentary story came to New York and the battle of Niagara, they suddenly produced newspapers which had been lying about on the table, and began to check him and question him by these vehement accounts. It became evident to him that his descent had revived and roused to flames again a discussion, a topic, that had been burning continuously, that had smouldered only through sheer exhaustion of material during the temporary diversion of the gramophone, a discussion that had drawn these men together, rifle in hand, the one supreme topic of the whole world, the War and the methods of the War. He found any question of his personality and his personal adventures falling into the background, found himself taken for granted, and no more than a source of information. The ordinary affairs of life, the buying and selling of everyday necessities, the cultivation of the ground, the tending

of beasts, was going on as it were by force of routine, as the common duties of life go on in a house whose master lies under the knife of some supreme operation. The overruling interest was furnished by those great Asiatic airships that went upon incalculable missions across the sky, the crimson-clad swordsmen who might come fluttering down demanding petrol, or food, or news. These men were asking, all the continent was asking, "What are we to do? What can we try? How can we get at them?" Bert fell into his place as an item, ceased even in his own thoughts to be a central and independent thing.

After he had eaten and drunken his fill and sighed and stretched and told them how good the food seemed to him, he lit a cigarette they gave him and led the way, with some doubts and trouble, to the flying-machine amidst the larches. It became manifest that the gaunt young man, whose name, it seemed, was Laurier, was a leader both by position and natural aptitude. He knew the names and characters and capabilities of all the men who were with him, and he set them to work at once with vigour and effect to secure this precious instrument of war. They got the thing down to the ground deliberately and carefully, felling a couple of trees in the process, and they built a wide flat roof of timbers and tree boughs to guard their precious find against its chance discovery by any passing Asiatics. Long before evening they had an engineer from the next township at work upon it, and they were casting lots among the seventeen picked men who wanted to take it for its first flight. And Bert found his kitten and carried it back to Logan's store and handed it with earnest admonition to Mrs. Logan. And it was reassuringly clear to him

that in Mrs. Logan both he and the kitten had found a congenial soul.

Laurier was not only a masterful person and a wealthy property owner and employer--he was president, Bert learnt with awe, of the Tanooda Canning Corporation--but he was popular and skilful in the arts of popularity.

In the evening quite a crowd of men gathered in the store and talked of the flying-machine and of the war that was tearing the world to pieces. And presently came a man on a bicycle with an ill-printed newspaper of a single sheet which acted like fuel in a blazing furnace of talk. It was nearly all American news; the old-fashioned cables had fallen into disuse for some years, and the Marconi stations across the ocean and along the Atlantic coastline seemed to have furnished particularly tempting points of attack.

But such news it was.

Bert sat in the background--for by this time they had gauged his personal quality pretty completely--listening. Before his staggering mind passed strange vast images as they talked, of great issues at a crisis, of nations in tumultuous march, of continents overthrown, of famine and destruction beyond measure. Ever and again, in spite of his efforts to suppress them, certain personal impressions would scamper across the weltering confusion, the horrible mess of the exploded Prince, the Chinese aeronaut upside down, the limping and bandaged bird-faced officer blundering along in miserable and hopeless flight....

They spoke of fire and massacre, of cruelties and counter cruelties, of things that had been done to harmless Asiatics by race-mad men, of the wholesale burning and smashing up of towns, railway junctions, bridges, of whole populations in hiding and exodus. "Every ship they've got is in the Pacific," he heard one man exclaim. "Since the fighting began they can't have landed on the Pacific slope less than a million men. They've come to stay in these States, and they will--living or dead."

Slowly, broadly, invincibly, there grew upon Bert's mind realisation of the immense tragedy of humanity into which his life was flowing; the appalling and universal nature of the epoch that had arrived; the conception of an end to security and order and habit. The whole world was at war and it could not get back to peace, it might never recover peace.

He had thought the things he had seen had been exceptional, conclusive things, that the besieging of New York and the battle of the Atlantic were epoch-making events between long years of security. And they had been but the first warning impacts of universal cataclysm. Each day destruction and hate and disaster grew, the fissures widened between man and man, new regions of the fabric of civilisation crumbled and gave way. Below, the armies grew and the people perished; above, the airships and aeroplanes fought and fled, raining destruction.

It is difficult perhaps for the broad-minded and long-perspectived reader to understand how incredible the breaking down of the scientific

civilisation seemed to those who actually lived at this time, who in their own persons went down in that debacle. Progress had marched as it seemed invincible about the earth, never now to rest again. For three hundred years and more the long steadily accelerated diastole of Europeanised civilisation had been in progress: towns had been multiplying, populations increasing, values rising, new countries developing; thought, literature, knowledge unfolding and spreading. It seemed but a part of the process that every year the instruments of war were vaster and more powerful, and that armies and explosives outgrew all other growing things....

Three hundred years of diastole, and then came the swift and unexpected systole, like the closing of a fist. They could not understand it was systole.

They could not think of it as anything but a jolt, a hitch, a mere oscillatory indication of the swiftness of their progress. Collapse, though it happened all about them, remained incredible. Presently some falling mass smote them down, or the ground opened beneath their feet. They died incredulous....

These men in the store made a minute, remote group under this immense canopy of disaster. They turned from one little aspect to another. What chiefly concerned them was defence against Asiatic raiders swooping for petrol or to destroy weapons or communications. Everywhere levies were being formed at that time to defend the plant of the railroads day and

night in the hope that communication would speedily be restored. The land war was still far away. A man with a flat voice distinguished himself by a display of knowledge and cunning. He told them all with confidence just what had been wrong with the German drachenflieger and the American aeroplanes, just what advantage the Japanese flyers possessed. He launched out into a romantic description of the Butteridge machine and riveted Bert's attention. "I SEE that," said Bert, and was smitten silent by a thought. The man with the flat voice talked on, without heeding him, of the strange irony of Butteridge's death. At that Bert had a little twinge of relief--he would never meet Butteridge again. It appeared Butteridge had died suddenly, very suddenly.

"And his secret, sir, perished with him! When they came to look for the parts--none could find them. He had hidden them all too well."

"But couldn't he tell?" asked the man in the straw hat. "Did he die so suddenly as that?"

"Struck down, sir. Rage and apoplexy. At a place called Dymchurch in England."

"That's right," said Laurier. "I remember a page about it in the Sunday American. At the time they said it was a German spy had stolen his balloon."

"Well, sir," said the flat-voiced man, "that fit of apoplexy at

Dyrnchurch was the worst thing--absolutely the worst thing that ever happened to the world. For if it had not been for the death of Mr. Butteridge--"

"No one knows his secret?"

"Not a soul. It's gone. His balloon, it appears, was lost at sea, with all the plans. Down it went, and they went with it."

Pause.

"With machines such as he made we could fight these Asiatic fliers on more than equal terms. We could outfly and beat down those scarlet humming-birds wherever they appeared. But it's gone, it's gone, and there's no time to reinvent it now. We got to fight with what we got--and the odds are against us. THAT won't stop us fightin'. No! but just think of it!"

Bert was trembling violently. He cleared his throat hoarsely.

"I say," he said, "look here, I--"

Nobody regarded him. The man with the flat voice was opening a new branch of the subject.

"I allow--" he began.

Bert became violently excited. He stood up.

He made clawing motions with his hands. "I say!" he exclaimed, "Mr. Laurier. Look 'ere--I want--about that Butteridge machine--."

Mr. Laurier, sitting on an adjacent table, with a magnificent gesture, arrested the discourse of the flat-voiced man. "What's HE saying?" said he.

Then the whole company realised that something was happening to Bert; either he was suffocating or going mad. He was spluttering.

"Look 'ere! I say! 'Old on a bit!" and trembling and eagerly unbuttoning himself.

He tore open his collar and opened vest and shirt. He plunged into his interior and for an instant it seemed he was plucking forth his liver.

Then as he struggled with buttons on his shoulder they perceived this flattened horror was in fact a terribly dirty flannel chest-protector.

In an other moment Bert, in a state of irregular decolletage, was standing over the table displaying a sheaf of papers.

"These!" he gasped. "These are the plans!... You know! Mr. Butteridge--his machine! What died! I was the chap that went off in that balloon!"

For some seconds every one was silent. They stared from these papers to Bert's white face and blazing eyes, and back to the papers on the table. Nobody moved. Then the man with the flat voice spoke.

"Irony!" he said, with a note of satisfaction. "Real rightdown Irony! When it's too late to think of making 'em any more!"

4

They would all no doubt have been eager to hear Bert's story over again, but it was at this point that Laurier showed his quality. "No, SIR," he said, and slid from off his table.

He impounded the dispersing Butteridge plans with one comprehensive sweep of his arm, rescuing them even from the expository finger-marks of the man with the flat voice, and handed them to Bert. "Put those back," he said, "where you had 'em. We have a journey before us."

Bert took them.

"Whar?" said the man in the straw hat.

"Why, sir, we are going to find the President of these States and give these plans over to him. I decline to believe, sir, we are too late."

"Where is the President?" asked Bert weakly in that pause that followed.

"Logan," said Laurier, disregarding that feeble inquiry, "you must help us in this."

It seemed only a matter of a few minutes before Bert and Laurier and the storekeeper were examining a number of bicycles that were stowed in the hinder room of the store. Bert didn't like any of them very much. They had wood rims and an experience of wood rims in the English climate had taught him to hate them. That, however, and one or two other objections to an immediate start were overruled by Laurier. "But where IS the President?" Bert repeated as they stood behind Logan while he pumped up a deflated tyre.

Laurier looked down on him. "He is reported in the neighbourhood of Albany--out towards the Berkshire Hills. He is moving from place to place and, as far as he can, organising the defence by telegraph and telephones The Asiatic air-fleet is trying to locate him. When they think they have located the seat of government, they throw bombs. This inconveniences him, but so far they have not come within ten miles of him. The Asiatic air-fleet is at present scattered all over the Eastern States, seeking out and destroying gas-works and whatever seems conducive to the building of airships or the transport of troops. Our retaliatory measures are slight in the extreme. But with these machines--Sir, this ride of ours will count among the historical rides of the world!"

He came near to striking an attitude. "We shan't get to him to-night?" asked Bert.

"No, sir!" said Laurier. "We shall have to ride some days, sure!"

"And suppose we can't get a lift on a train--or anything?"

"No, sir! There's been no transit by Tanooda for three days. It is no good waiting. We shall have to get on as well as we can."

"Startin' now?"

"Starting now!"

"But 'ow about--We shan't be able to do much to-night."

"May as well ride till we're fagged and sleep then. So much clear gain. Our road is eastward."

"Of course," began Bert, with memories of the dawn upon Goat Island, and left his sentence unfinished.

He gave his attention to the more scientific packing of the chest-protector, for several of the plans flapped beyond his vest.

For a week Bert led a life of mixed sensations. Amidst these fatigue in the legs predominated. Mostly he rode, rode with Laurier's back inexorably ahead, through a land like a larger England, with bigger hills and wider valleys, larger fields, wider roads, fewer hedges, and wooden houses with commodious piazzas. He rode. Laurier made inquiries, Laurier chose the turnings, Laurier doubted, Laurier decided. Now it seemed they were in telephonic touch with the President; now something had happened and he was lost again. But always they had to go on, and always Bert rode. A tyre was deflated. Still he rode. He grew saddle sore. Laurier declared that unimportant. Asiatic flying ships passed overhead, the two cyclists made a dash for cover until the sky was clear. Once a red Asiatic flying-machine came fluttering after them, so low they could distinguish the aeronaut's head. He followed them for a mile. Now they came to regions of panic, now to regions of destruction; here people were fighting for food, here they seemed hardly stirred from the countryside routine. They spent a day in a deserted and damaged Albany. The Asiatics had descended and cut every wire and made a cinder-heap of the Junction, and our travellers pushed on eastward. They passed a hundred half-heeded incidents, and always Bert was toiling after Laurier's indefatigable back....

Things struck upon Bert's attention and perplexed him, and then he passed on with unanswered questionings fading from his mind.

He saw a large house on fire on a hillside to the right, and no man heeding it....

They came to a narrow railroad bridge and presently to a mono-rail train standing in the track on its safety feet. It was a remarkably sumptuous train, the Last Word Trans-Continental Express, and the passengers were all playing cards or sleeping or preparing a picnic meal on a grassy slope near at hand. They had been there six days....

At one point ten dark-complexioned men were hanging in a string from the trees along the roadside. Bert wondered why....

At one peaceful-looking village where they stopped off to get Bert's tyre mended and found beer and biscuits, they were approached by an extremely dirty little boy without boots, who spoke as follows:--

"Deyse been hanging a Chink in dose woods!"

"Hanging a Chinaman?" said Laurier.

"Sure. Der sleuths got him rubberin' der rail-road sheds!"

"Oh!"

"Dose guys done wase cartridges. Deyse hung him and dey pulled his legs. Deyse doin' all der Chinks dey can fine dat weh! Dey ain't takin' no

risks. All der Chinks dey can fine."

Neither Bert nor Laurier made any reply, and presently, after a little skilful expectoration, the young gentleman was attracted by the appearance of two of his friends down the road and shuffled off, whooping weirdly....

That afternoon they almost ran over a man shot through the body and partly decomposed, lying near the middle of the road, just outside Albany. He must have been lying there for some days....

Beyond Albany they came upon a motor car with a tyre burst and a young woman sitting absolutely passive beside the driver's seat. An old man was under the car trying to effect some impossible repairs. Beyond, sitting with a rifle across his knees, with his back to the car, and staring into the woods, was a young man.

The old man crawled out at their approach and still on all-fours accosted Bert and Laurier. The car had broken down overnight. The old man, said he could not understand what was wrong, but he was trying to puzzle it out. Neither he nor his son-in-law had any mechanical aptitude. They had been assured this was a fool-proof car. It was dangerous to have to stop in this place. The party had been attacked by tramps and had had to fight. It was known they had provisions. He mentioned a great name in the world of finance. Would Laurier and Bert stop and help him? He proposed it first hopefully, then urgently, at

last in tears and terror.

"No!" said Laurier inexorable. "We must go on! We have something more than a woman to save. We have to save America!"

The girl never stirred.

And once they passed a madman singing.

And at last they found the President hiding in a small saloon upon the outskirts of a place called Pinkerville on the Hudson, and gave the plans of the Butteridge machine into his hands.