THE WAR IN THE AIR

By H. G. Wells

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PREFACE TO REPRINT EDITION

The reader should grasp clearly the date at which this book was written. It was done in 1907: it appeared in various magazines as a serial in 1908 and it was published in the Fall of that year. At that time the aeroplane was, for most people, merely a rumour and the “Sausage” held the air. The contemporary reader has all the advantage of ten years' experience since this story was imagined. He can correct his author at a dozen points and estimate the value of these warnings by the standard of a decade of realities. The book is weak on anti-aircraft guns, for example, and still more negligent of submarines. Much, no doubt, will strike the reader as quaint and limited but upon much the writer may not unreasonably plume himself. The interpretation of the German spirit must have read as a caricature in 1908. Was it a caricature? Prince Karl seemed a fantasy then. Reality has since copied Prince Carl with an astonishing faithfulness. Is it too much to hope that some democratic “Bert” may not ultimately get even with his Highness? Our author tells us in this book, as he has told us in others, more especially in The World Set Free, and as he has been telling us this year in his War and the Future, that if mankind goes on with war, the smash-up of civilization is inevitable. It is chaos or the United States of the World for mankind. There is no other choice. Ten years have but added an enormous conviction to the message of this book. It remains essentially right, a pamphlet story—in support of the League to Enforce Peace. K.

THE WAR IN THE AIR

CHAPTER I. OF PROGRESS AND THE SMALLWAYS FAMILY

1

“This here Progress,” said Mr. Tom Smallways, “it keeps on.”

“You'd hardly think it could keep on,” said Mr. Tom Smallways.

It was long before the War in the Air began that Mr. Smallways made this remark. He was sitting on the fence at the end of his garden and surveying the great Bun Hill gas-works with an eye that neither praised nor blamed. Above the clustering gasometers

three unfamiliar shapes appeared, thin, wallowing bladders that flapped and rolled about, and grew bigger and bigger and rounder and rounder—balloons in course of inflation for the South of England Aero Club's Saturday-afternoon ascent.

“They goes up every Saturday,” said his neighbour, Mr. Stringer, the milkman. “It's only yestiday, so to speak, when all London turned out to see a balloon go over, and now every little place in the country has its weekly-outings—uppings, rather. It's been the salvation of them gas companies.”

“Larst Satiday I got three barrer-loads of gravel off my petaters,” said Mr. Tom Smallways. “Three barrer-loads! What they dropped as ballase. Some of the plants was broke, and some was buried.”

“Ladies, they say, goes up!”

“I suppose we got to call 'em ladies,” said Mr. Tom Smallways.

“Still, it ain't hardly my idea of a lady—flying about in the air, and throwing gravel at people. It ain't what I been accustomed to consider ladylike, whether or no.”

Mr. Stringer nodded his head approvingly, and for a time they continued to regard the swelling bulks with expressions that had changed from indifference to disapproval.

Mr. Tom Smallways was a green-grocer by trade and a gardener by disposition; his little wife Jessica saw to the shop, and Heaven had planned him for a peaceful world. Unfortunately Heaven had not planned a peaceful world for him. He lived in a world of obstinate and incessant change, and in parts where its operations were unsparingly conspicuous. Vicissitude was in the very soil he tilled; even his garden was upon a yearly tenancy, and overshadowed by a huge board that proclaimed it not so much a garden as an eligible building site. He was horticulture under notice to quit, the last patch of country in a district flooded by new and (other) things. He did his best to console himself, to imagine matters near the turn of the tide.

“You'd hardly think it could keep on,” he said.

Mr. Smallways' aged father, could remember Bun Hill as an idyllic Kentish village. He had driven Sir Peter Bone until he was fifty and then he took to drink a little, and driving the station bus, which lasted him until he was seventy-eight. Then he retired. He sat by the fireside, a shrivelled, very, very old coachman, full charged with reminiscences, and ready for any careless stranger. He could tell you of the vanished estate of Sir Peter Bone, long since cut up for building, and how that magnate ruled the country-side when it was country-side, of shooting and hunting, and of caches along the high road, of how “where the gas-works is” was a cricket-field, and of the coming of the

Crystal Palace. The Crystal Palace was six miles away from Bun Hill, a great facade that glittered in the morning, and was a clear blue outline against the sky in the afternoon, and of a night, a source of gratuitous fireworks for all the population of Bun Hill. And then had come the railway, and then villas and villas, and then the gas-works and the water-works, and a great, ugly sea of workmen's houses, and then drainage, and the water vanished out of the Otterbourne and left it a dreadful ditch, and then a second railway station, Bun Hill South, and more houses and more, more shops, more competition, plate-glass shops, a school-board, rates, omnibuses, tramcars—going right away into London itself—bicycles, motor-cars and then more motor-cars, a Carnegie library.

“You'd hardly think it could keep on,” said Mr. Tom Smallways, growing up among these marvels.

But it kept on. Even from the first the green-grocer's shop which he had set up in one of the smallest of the old surviving village houses in the tail of the High Street had a submerged air, an air of hiding from something that was looking for it. When they had made up the pavement of the High Street, they levelled that up so that one had to go down three steps into the shop. Tom did his best to sell only his own excellent but limited range of produce; but Progress came shoving things into his window, French artichokes and aubergines, foreign apples—apples from the State of New York, apples from California, apples from Canada, apples from New Zealand, “pretty lookin' fruit, but not what I should call English apples,” said Tom—bananas, unfamiliar nuts, grape fruits, mangoes.

The motor-cars that went by northward and southward grew more and more powerful and efficient, whizzed faster and smelt worse, there appeared great clangorous petrol trolleys delivering coal and parcels in the place of vanishing horse-vans, motor-omnibuses ousted the horse-omnibuses, even the Kentish strawberries going Londonward in the night took to machinery and clattered instead of creaking, and became affected in flavour by progress and petrol.

And then young Bert Smallways got a motor bicycle....

2

Bert, it is necessary to explain, was a progressive Smallways.

Nothing speaks more eloquently of the pitiless insistence of progress and expansion in our time than that it should get into the Smallways blood. But there was something advanced and enterprising about young Smallways before he was out of short frocks. He was lost for a whole day before he was five, and nearly drowned in the reservoir of

the new water-works before he was seven. He had a real pistol taken away from him by a real policeman when he was ten. And he learnt to smoke, not with pipes and brown paper and cane as Tom had done, but with a penny packet of Boys of England American cigarettes. His language shocked his father before he was twelve, and by that age, what with touting for parcels at the station and selling the Bun Hill Weekly Express, he was making three shillings a week, or more, and spending it on Chips, Comic Cuts, Ally Sloper's Half-holiday, cigarettes, and all the concomitants of a life of pleasure and enlightenment. All of this without hindrance to his literary studies, which carried him up to the seventh standard at an exceptionally early age. I mention these things so that you may have no doubt at all concerning the sort of stuff Bert had in him.

He was six years younger than Tom, and for a time there was an attempt to utilise him in the green-grocer's shop when Tom at twenty-one married Jessica—who was thirty, and had saved a little money in service. But it was not Bert's forte to be utilised. He hated digging, and when he was given a basket of stuff to deliver, a nomadic instinct arose irresistibly, it became his pack and he did not seem to care how heavy it was nor where he took it, so long as he did not take it to its destination. Glamour filled the world, and he strayed after it, basket and all. So Tom took his goods out himself, and sought employers for Bert who did not know of this strain of poetry in his nature. And Bert touched the fringe of a number of trades in succession—draper's porter, chemist's boy, doctor's page, junior assistant gas-fitter, envelope addresser, milk-cart assistant, golf caddie, and at last helper in a bicycle shop. Here, apparently, he found the progressive quality his nature had craved. His employer was a pirate-souled young man named Grubb, with a black-smeared face by day, and a music-hall side in the evening, who dreamt of a patent lever chain; and it seemed to Bert that he was the perfect model of a gentleman of spirit. He hired out quite the dirtiest and unsafest bicycles in the whole south of England, and conducted the subsequent discussions with astonishing verve. Bert and he settled down very well together. Bert lived in, became almost a trick rider—he could ride bicycles for miles that would have come to pieces instantly under you or me—took to washing his face after business, and spent his surplus money upon remarkable ties and collars, cigarettes, and shorthand classes at the Bun Hill Institute.

He would go round to Tom at times, and look and talk so brilliantly that Tom and Jessie, who both had a natural tendency to be respectful to anybody or anything, looked up to him immensely.

“He's a go-ahead chap, is Bert,” said Tom. “He knows a thing or two.”

“Let's hope he don't know too much,” said Jessica, who had a fine sense of limitations.

“It's go-ahead Times,” said Tom. “Noo petaters, and English at that; we'll be having 'em in March if things go on as they do go. I never see such Times. See his tie last night?”

“It wasn't suited to him, Tom. It was a gentleman's tie. He wasn't up to it—not the rest of him, It wasn't becoming”...

Then presently Bert got a cyclist's suit, cap, badge, and all; and to see him and Grubb going down to Brighton (and back)—heads down, handle-bars down, backbones curved—was a revelation in the possibilities of the Smallways blood.

Go-ahead Times!

Old Smallways would sit over the fire mumbling of the greatness of other days, of old Sir Peter, who drove his coach to Brighton and back in eight-and-twenty hours, of old Sir Peter's white top-hats, of Lady Bone, who never set foot to ground except to walk in the garden, of the great, prize-fights at Crawley. He talked of pink and pig-skin breeches, of foxes at Ring's Bottom, where now the County Council pauper lunatics were enclosed, of Lady Bone's chintzes and crinolines. Nobody heeded him. The world had thrown up a new type of gentleman altogether—a gentleman of most ungentlemanly energy, a gentleman in dusty oilskins and motor goggles and a wonderful cap, a stink-making gentleman, a swift, high-class badger, who fled perpetually along high roads from the dust and stink he perpetually made. And his lady, as they were able to see her at Bun Hill, was a weather-bitten goddess, as free from refinement as a gipsy—not so much dressed as packed for transit at a high velocity.

So Bert grew up, filled with ideals of speed and enterprise, and became, so far as he became anything, a kind of bicycle engineer of the let's-have-a-look-at-it and enamel chipping variety. Even a road-racer, geared to a hundred and twenty, failed to satisfy him, and for a time he pined in vain at twenty miles an hour along roads that were continually more dusty and more crowded with mechanical traffic. But at last his savings accumulated, and his chance came. The hire-purchase system bridged a financial gap, and one bright and memorable Sunday morning he wheeled his new possession through the shop into the road, got on to it with the advice and assistance of Grubb, and teuf-teuffed off into the haze of the traffic-tortured high road, to add himself as one more voluntary public danger to the amenities of the south of England.

“Orf to Brighton!” said old Smallways, regarding his youngest son from the sitting-room window over the green-grocer's shop with something between pride and

reprobation. “When I was 'is age, I'd never been to London, never bin south of Crawley—never bin anywhere on my own where I couldn't walk. And nobody didn't go. Not unless they was gentry. Now every body's orf everywhere; the whole dratted country sims flying to pieces. Wonder they all get back. Orf to Brighton indeed! Anybody want to buy 'orses?”

“You can't say *I* bin to Brighton, father,” said Tom.

“Nor don't want to go,” said Jessica sharply; “creering about and spendin' your money.”

3

For a time the possibilities of the motor-bicycle so occupied Bert's mind that he remained regardless of the new direction in which the striving soul of man was finding exercise and refreshment. He failed to observe that the type of motor-car, like the type of bicycle, was settling-down and losing its adventurous quality. Indeed, it is as true as it is remarkable that Tom was the first to observe the new development. But his gardening made him attentive to the heavens, and the proximity of the Bun Hill gas-works and the Crystal Palace, from which ascents were continually being made, and presently the descent of ballast upon his potatoes, conspired to bear in upon his unwilling mind the fact that the Goddess of Change was turning her disturbing attention to the sky. The first great boom in aeronautics was beginning.

Grubb and Bert heard of it in a music-hall, then it was driven home to their minds by the cinematograph, then Bert's imagination was stimulated by a sixpenny edition of that aeronautic classic, Mr. George Griffith's “Clipper of the Clouds,” and so the thing really got hold of them.

At first the most obvious aspect was the multiplication of balloons. The sky of Bun Hill began to be infested by balloons. On Wednesday and Saturday afternoons particularly you could scarcely look skyward for a quarter of an hour without discovering a balloon somewhere. And then one bright day Bert, motoring toward Croydon, was arrested by the insurgence of a huge, bolster-shaped monster from the Crystal Palace grounds, and obliged to dismount and watch it. It was like a bolster with a broken nose, and below it, and comparatively small, was a stiff framework bearing a man and an engine with a screw that whizzed round in front and a sort of canvas rudder behind. The framework had an air of dragging the reluctant gas-cylinder after it like a brisk little terrier towing a shy gas-distended elephant into society. The combined monster certainly travelled and steered. It went overhead perhaps a thousand feet up (Bert heard the engine), sailed away southward, vanished over the hills, reappeared a little

blue outline far off in the east, going now very fast before a gentle south-west gale, returned above the Crystal Palace towers, circled round them, chose a position for descent, and sank down out of sight.

Bert sighed deeply, and turned to his motor-bicycle again.

And that was only the beginning of a succession of strange phenomena in the heavens—cylinders, cones, pear-shaped monsters, even at last a thing of aluminium that glittered wonderfully, and that Grubb, through some confusion of ideas about armour plates, was inclined to consider a war machine.

There followed actual flight.

This, however, was not an affair that was visible from Bun Hill; it was something that occurred in private grounds or other enclosed places and, under favourable conditions, and it was brought home to Grubb and Bert Smallways only by means of the magazine page of the half-penny newspapers or by cinematograph records. But it was brought home very insistently, and in those days if, ever one heard a man saying in a public place in a loud, reassuring, confident tone, “It's bound to come,” the chances were ten to one he was talking of flying. And Bert got a box lid and wrote out in correct window-ticket style, and Grubb put in the window this inscription, “Aeroplanes made and repaired.” It quite upset Tom—it seemed taking one's shop so lightly; but most of the neighbours, and all the sporting ones, approved of it as being very good indeed.

Everybody talked of flying, everybody repeated over and over again, “Bound to come,” and then you know it didn't come. There was a hitch. They flew—that was all right; they flew in machines heavier than air. But they smashed. Sometimes they smashed the engine, sometimes they smashed the aeronaut, usually they smashed both. Machines that made flights of three or four miles and came down safely, went up the next time to headlong disaster. There seemed no possible trusting to them. The breeze upset them, the eddies near the ground upset them, a passing thought in the mind of the aeronaut upset them. Also they upset—simply.

“It's this 'stability' does 'em,” said Grubb, repeating his newspaper. “They pitch and they pitch, till they pitch themselves to pieces.”

Experiments fell away after two expectant years of this sort of success, the public and then the newspapers tired of the expensive photographic reproductions, the optimistic reports, the perpetual sequence of triumph and disaster and silence. Flying slumped, even ballooning fell away to some extent, though it remained a fairly popular sport, and continued to lift gravel from the wharf of the Bun Hill gas-works and drop it

upon deserving people's lawns and gardens. There were half a dozen reassuring years for Tom—at least so far as flying was concerned. But that was the great time of mono-rail development, and his anxiety was only diverted from the high heavens by the most urgent threats and symptoms of change in the lower sky.

There had been talk of mono-rails for several years. But the real mischief began when Brennan sprang his gyroscopic mono-rail car upon the Royal Society. It was the leading sensation of the 1907 soirees; that celebrated demonstration-room was all too small for its exhibition. Brave soldiers, leading Zionists, deserving novelists, noble ladies, congested the narrow passage and thrust distinguished elbows into ribs the world would not willingly let break, deeming themselves fortunate if they could see “just a little bit of the rail.” Inaudible, but convincing, the great inventor expounded his discovery, and sent his obedient little model of the trains of the future up gradients, round curves, and across a sagging wire. It ran along its single rail, on its single wheels, simple and sufficient; it stopped, reversed stood still, balancing perfectly. It maintained its astounding equilibrium amidst a thunder of applause. The audience dispersed at last, discussing how far they would enjoy crossing an abyss on a wire cable. “Suppose the gyroscope stopped!” Few of them anticipated a tithe of what the Brennan mono-rail would do for their railway securities and the face of the world.

In a few, years they realised better. In a little while no one thought anything of crossing an abyss on a wire, and the mono-rail was superseding the tram-lines, railways: and indeed every form of track for mechanical locomotion. Where land was cheap the rail ran along the ground, where it was dear the rail lifted up on iron standards and passed overhead; its swift, convenient cars went everywhere and did everything that had once been done along made tracks upon the ground.

When old Smallways died, Tom could think of nothing more striking to say of him than that, “When he was a boy, there wasn't nothing higher than your chimbleys—there wasn't a wire nor a cable in the sky!”

Old Smallways went to his grave under an intricate network of wires and cables, for Bun Hill became not only a sort of minor centre of power distribution—the Home Counties Power Distribution Company set up transformers and a generating station close beside the old gas-works—but, also a junction on the suburban mono-rail system. Moreover, every tradesman in the place, and indeed nearly every house, had its own telephone.

The mono-rail cable standard became a striking fact in urban landscape, for the most part stout iron erections rather like tapering trestles, and painted a bright bluish green. One, it happened, bestrode Tom's house, which looked still more retiring and

apologetic beneath its immensity; and another giant stood just inside the corner of his garden, which was still not built upon and unchanged, except for a couple of advertisement boards, one recommending a two-and-sixpenny watch, and one a nerve restorer. These, by the bye, were placed almost horizontally to catch the eye of the passing mono-rail passengers above, and so served admirably to roof over a tool-shed and a mushroom-shed for Tom. All day and all night the fast cars from Brighton and Hastings went murmuring by overhead long, broad, comfortable-looking cars, that were brightly lit after dusk. As they flew by at night, transient flares of light and a rumbling sound of passage, they kept up a perpetual summer lightning and thunderstorm in the street below.

Presently the English Channel was bridged—a series of great iron Eiffel Tower pillars carrying mono-rail cables at a height of a hundred and fifty feet above the water, except near the middle, where they rose higher to allow the passage of the London and Antwerp shipping and the Hamburg-America liners.

Then heavy motor-cars began to run about on only a couple of wheels, one behind the other, which for some reason upset Tom dreadfully, and made him gloomy for days after the first one passed the shop...

All this gyroscopic and mono-rail development naturally absorbed a vast amount of public attention, and there was also a huge excitement consequent upon the amazing gold discoveries off the coast of Anglesea made by a submarine prospector, Miss Patricia Giddy. She had taken her degree in geology and mineralogy in the University of London, and while working upon the auriferous rocks of North Wales, after a brief holiday spent in agitating for women's suffrage, she had been struck by the possibility of these reefs cropping up again under the water. She had set herself to verify this supposition by the use of the submarine crawler invented by Doctor Alberto Cassini. By a happy mingling of reasoning and intuition peculiar to her sex she found gold at her first descent, and emerged after three hours' submersion with about two hundredweight of ore containing gold in the unparalleled quantity of seventeen ounces to the ton. But the whole story of her submarine mining, intensely interesting as it is, must be told at some other time; suffice it now to remark simply that it was during the consequent great rise of prices, confidence, and enterprise that the revival of interest in flying occurred.

4

It is curious how that revival began. It was like the coming of a breeze on a quiet day; nothing started it, it came. People began to talk of flying with an air of never having for one moment dropped the subject. Pictures of flying and flying machines returned to

the newspapers; articles and allusions increased and multiplied in the serious magazines. People asked in mono-rail trains, “When are we going to fly?” A new crop of inventors sprang up in a night or so like fungi. The Aero Club announced the project of a great Flying Exhibition in a large area of ground that the removal of slums in Whitechapel had rendered available.

The advancing wave soon produced a sympathetic ripple in the Bun Hill establishment. Grubb routed out his flying-machine model again, tried it in the yard behind the shop, got a kind of flight out of it, and broke seventeen panes of glass and nine flower-pots in the greenhouse that occupied the next yard but one.

And then, springing from nowhere, sustained one knew not how, came a persistent, disturbing rumour that the problem had been solved, that the secret was known. Bert met it one early-closing afternoon as he refreshed himself in an inn near Nutfield, whither his motor-bicycle had brought him. There smoked and meditated a person in khaki, an engineer, who presently took an interest in Bert's machine. It was a sturdy piece of apparatus, and it had acquired a kind of documentary value in these quick-changing times; it was now nearly eight years old. Its points discussed, the soldier broke into a new topic with, “My next's going to be an aeroplane, so far as I can see. I've had enough of roads and ways.”

“They TORK,” said Bert.

“They talk—and they do,” said the soldier.

“The thing's coming—”

“It keeps ON coming,” said Bert; “I shall believe when I see it.”

“That won't be long,” said the soldier.

The conversation seemed degenerating into an amiable wrangle of contradiction.

“I tell you they ARE flying,” the soldier insisted. “I see it myself.”

“We've all seen it,” said Bert.

“I don't mean flap up and smash up; I mean real, safe, steady, controlled flying, against the wind, good and right.”

“You ain't seen that!”

“I 'AVE! Aldershot. They try to keep it a secret. They got it right enough. You bet—our War Office isn't going to be caught napping this time.”

Bert's incredulity was shaken. He asked questions—and the soldier expanded.

“I tell you they got nearly a square mile fenced in—a sort of valley. Fences of barbed wire ten feet high, and inside that they do things. Chaps about the camp—now and then we get a peep. It isn't only us neither. There's the Japanese; you bet they got it too—and the Germans!”

The soldier stood with his legs very wide apart, and filled his pipe thoughtfully. Bert sat on the low wall against which his motor-bicycle was leaning.

“Funny thing fighting'll be,” he said.

“Flying's going to break out,” said the soldier. “When it DOES come, when the curtain does go up, I tell you you'll find every one on the stage—busy.... Such fighting, too!... I suppose you don't read the papers about this sort of thing?”

“I read 'em a bit,” said Bert.

“Well, have you noticed what one might call the remarkable case of the disappearing inventor—the inventor who turns up in a blaze of publicity, fires off a few successful experiments, and vanishes?”

“Can't say I 'ave,” said Bert.

“Well, I 'ave, anyhow. You get anybody come along who does anything striking in this line, and, you bet, he vanishes. Just goes off quietly out of sight. After a bit, you don't hear anything more of 'em at all. See? They disappear. Gone—no address. First—oh! it's an old story now—there was those Wright Brothers out in America. They glided—they glided miles and miles. Finally they glided off stage. Why, it must be nineteen hundred and four, or five, THEY vanished! Then there was those people in Ireland—no, I forget their names. Everybody said they could fly. THEY went. They ain't dead that I've heard tell; but you can't say they're alive. Not a feather of 'em can you see. Then that chap who flew round Paris and upset in the Seine. De Booley, was it? I forget. That was a grand fly, in spite of the accident; but where's he got to? The accident didn't hurt him. Eh? *'E*'s gone to cover.”

The soldier prepared to light his pipe.

“Looks like a secret society got hold of them,” said Bert.

“Secret society! NAW!”

The soldier lit his match, and drew. “Secret society,” he repeated, with his pipe between his teeth and the match flaring, in response to his words. “War Departments;

that's more like it." He threw his match aside, and walked to his machine. "I tell you, sir," he said, "there isn't a big Power in Europe, OR Asia, OR America, OR Africa, that hasn't got at least one or two flying machines hidden up its sleeve at the present time. Not one. Real, workable, flying machines. And the spying! The spying and manoeuvring to find out what the others have got. I tell you, sir, a foreigner, or, for the matter of that, an unaccredited native, can't get within four miles of Lydd nowadays—not to mention our little circus at Aldershot, and the experimental camp in Galway. No!"

"Well," said Bert, "I'd like to see one of them, anyhow. Jest to help believing. I'll believe when I see, that I'll promise you."

"You'll see 'em, fast enough," said the soldier, and led his machine out into the road.

He left Bert on his wall, grave and pensive, with his cap on the back of his head, and a cigarette smouldering in the corner of his mouth.

"If what he says is true," said Bert, "me and Grubb, we been wasting our blessed old time. Besides incurring expense with that green-'ouse."

5

It was while this mysterious talk with the soldier still stirred in Bert Smallways' imagination that the most astounding incident in the whole of that dramatic chapter of human history, the coming of flying, occurred. People talk glibly enough of epoch-making events; this was an epoch-making event. It was the unanticipated and entirely successful flight of Mr. Alfred Butteridge from the Crystal Palace to Glasgow and back in a small businesslike-looking machine heavier than air—an entirely manageable and controllable machine that could fly as well as a pigeon.

It wasn't, one felt, a fresh step forward in the matter so much as a giant stride, a leap. Mr. Butteridge remained in the air altogether for about nine hours, and during that time he flew with the ease and assurance of a bird. His machine was, however neither bird-like nor butterfly-like, nor had it the wide, lateral expansion of the ordinary aeroplane. The effect upon the observer was rather something in the nature of a bee or wasp. Parts of the apparatus were spinning very rapidly, and gave one a hazy effect of transparent wings; but parts, including two peculiarly curved "wing-cases"—if one may borrow a figure from the flying beetles—remained expanded stiffly. In the middle was a long rounded body like the body of a moth, and on this Mr. Butteridge could be seen sitting astride, much as a man bestrides a horse. The wasp-like resemblance was increased by the fact that the apparatus flew with a deep booming hum, exactly the sound made by a wasp at a windowpane.

Mr. Butteridge took the world by surprise. He was one of those gentlemen from nowhere Fate still succeeds in producing for the stimulation of mankind. He came, it was variously said, from Australia and America and the South of France. He was also described quite incorrectly as the son of a man who had amassed a comfortable fortune in the manufacture of gold nibs and the Butteridge fountain pens. But this was an entirely different strain of Butteridges. For some years, in spite of a loud voice, a large presence, an aggressive swagger, and an implacable manner, he had been an undistinguished member of most of the existing aeronautical associations. Then one day he wrote to all the London papers to announce that he had made arrangements for an ascent from the Crystal Palace of a machine that would demonstrate satisfactorily that the outstanding difficulties in the way of flying were finally solved. Few of the papers printed his letter, still fewer were the people who believed in his claim. No one was excited even when a fracas on the steps of a leading hotel in Piccadilly, in which he tried to horse-whip a prominent German musician upon some personal account, delayed his promised ascent. The quarrel was inadequately reported, and his name spelt variously Betteridge and Betridge. Until his flight indeed, he did not and could not contrive to exist in the public mind. There were scarcely thirty people on the look-out for him, in spite of all his clamour, when about six o'clock one summer morning the doors of the big shed in which he had been putting together his apparatus opened—it was near the big model of a megatherium in the Crystal Palace grounds—and his giant insect came droning out into a negligent and incredulous world.

But before he had made his second circuit of the Crystal Palace towers, Fame was lifting her trumpet, she drew a deep breath as the startled tramps who sleep on the seats of Trafalgar Square were roused by his buzz and awoke to discover him circling the Nelson column, and by the time he had got to Birmingham, which place he crossed about half-past ten, her deafening blast was echoing throughout the country. The despaired-of thing was done.

A man was flying securely and well.

Scotland was agape for his coming. Glasgow he reached by one o'clock, and it is related that scarcely a ship-yard or factory in that busy hive of industry resumed work before half-past two. The public mind was just sufficiently educated in the impossibility of flying to appreciate Mr. Butteridge at his proper value. He circled the University buildings, and dropped to within shouting distance of the crowds in West End Park and on the slope of Gilmorehill. The thing flew quite steadily at a pace of about three miles an hour, in a wide circle, making a deep hum that, would have drowned his full, rich voice completely had he not provided himself with a

megaphone. He avoided churches, buildings, and mono-rail cables with consummate ease as he conversed.

“Me name's Butteridge,” he shouted; “B-U-T-T-E-R-I-D-G-E.—Got it? Me mother was Scotch.”

And having assured himself that he had been understood, he rose amidst cheers and shouting and patriotic cries, and then flew up very swiftly and easily into the south-eastern sky, rising and falling with long, easy undulations in an extraordinarily wasp-like manner.

His return to London—he visited and hovered over Manchester and Liverpool and Oxford on his way, and spelt his name out to each place—was an occasion of unparalleled excitement. Every one was staring heavenward. More people were run over in the streets upon that one day, than in the previous three months, and a County Council steamboat, the Isaac Walton, collided with a pier of Westminster Bridge, and narrowly escaped disaster by running ashore—it was low water—on the mud on the south side. He returned to the Crystal Palace grounds, that classic starting-point of aeronautical adventure, about sunset, re-entered his shed without disaster, and had the doors locked immediately upon the photographers and journalists who been waiting his return.

“Look here, you chaps,” he said, as his assistant did so, “I'm tired to death, and saddle sore. I can't give you a word of talk. I'm too—done. My name's Butteridge. B-U-T-T-E-R-I-D-G-E. Get that right. I'm an Imperial Englishman. I'll talk to you all to-morrow.”

Foggy snapshots still survive to record that incident. His assistant struggles in a sea of aggressive young men carrying note-books or upholding cameras and wearing bowler hats and enterprising ties. He himself towers up in the doorway, a big figure with a mouth—an eloquent cavity beneath a vast black moustache—distorted by his shout to these relentless agents of publicity. He towers there, the most famous man in the country.

Almost symbolically he holds and gesticulates with a megaphone in his left hand.

6

Tom and Bert Smallways both saw that return. They watched from the crest of Bun Hill, from which they had so often surveyed the pyrotechnics of the Crystal Palace. Bert was excited, Tom kept calm and lumpish, but neither of them realised how their own lives were to be invaded by the fruits of that beginning. “P'raps old Grubb'll mind

the shop a bit now," he said, "and put his blessed model in the fire. Not that that can save us, if we don't tide over with Steinhart's account."

Bert knew enough of things and the problem of aeronautics to realise that this gigantic imitation of a bee would, to use his own idiom, "give the newspapers fits." The next day it was clear the fits had been given even as he said: their magazine pages were black with hasty photographs, their prose was convulsive, they foamed at the headline. The next day they were worse. Before the week was out they were not so much published as carried screaming into the street.

The dominant fact in the uproar was the exceptional personality of Mr. Butteridge, and the extraordinary terms he demanded for the secret of his machine.

For it was a secret and he kept it secret in the most elaborate fashion. He built his apparatus himself in the safe privacy of the great Crystal Palace sheds, with the assistance of inattentive workmen, and the day next following his flight he took it to pieces single handed, packed certain portions, and then secured unintelligent assistance in packing and dispersing the rest. Sealed packing-cases went north and east and west to various pantechnicons, and the engines were boxed with peculiar care. It became evident these precautions were not inadvisable in view of the violent demand for any sort of photograph or impressions of his machine. But Mr. Butteridge, having once made his demonstration, intended to keep his secret safe from any further risk of leakage. He faced the British public now with the question whether they wanted his secret or not; he was, he said perpetually, an "Imperial Englishman," and his first wish and his last was to see his invention the privilege and monopoly of the Empire. Only—

It was there the difficulty began.

Mr. Butteridge, it became evident, was a man singularly free from any false modesty—indeed, from any modesty of any kind—singularly willing to see interviewers, answer questions upon any topic except aeronautics, volunteer opinions, criticisms, and autobiography, supply portraits and photographs of himself, and generally spread his personality across the terrestrial sky. The published portraits insisted primarily upon an immense black moustache, and secondarily upon a fierceness behind the moustache. The general impression upon the public was that Butteridge, was a small man. No one big, it was felt, could have so virulently aggressive an expression, though, as a matter of fact, Butteridge had a height of six feet two inches, and a weight altogether proportionate to that. Moreover, he had a love affair of large and unusual dimensions and irregular circumstances and the still largely decorous British public learnt with reluctance and alarm that a sympathetic treatment of this affair was

inseparable from the exclusive acquisition of the priceless secret of aerial stability by the British Empire. The exact particulars of the similarity never came to light, but apparently the lady had, in a fit of high-minded inadvertence, had gone through the ceremony of marriage with, one quotes the unpublished discourse of Mr. Butteridge—"a white-livered skunk," and this zoological aberration did in some legal and vexatious manner mar her social happiness. He wanted to talk about the business, to show the splendour of her nature in the light of its complications. It was really most embarrassing to a press that has always possessed a considerable turn for reticence, that wanted things personal indeed in the modern fashion. Yet not too personal. It was embarrassing, I say, to be inexorably confronted with Mr. Butteridge's great heart, to see it laid open in relentlesss self-vivisection, and its pulsating dissepiments adorned with emphatic flag labels.

Confronted they were, and there was no getting away from it. He would make this appalling viscus beat and throb before the shrinking journalists—no uncle with a big watch and a little baby ever harped upon it so relentlessly; whatever evasion they attempted he set aside. He "gloried in his love," he said, and compelled them to write it down.

"That's of course a private affair, Mr. Butteridge," they would object.

"The injustice, sorr, is public. I do not care either I am up against institutions or individuals. I do not care if I am up against the universal All. I am pleading the cause of a woman, a woman I lurve, sorr—a noble woman—misunderstood. I intend to vindicate her, sorr, to the four winds of heaven!"

"I lurve England," he used to say—"lurve England, but Puritanism, sorr, I abhor. It fills me with loathing. It raises my gorge. Take my own case."

He insisted relentlessly upon his heart, and upon seeing proofs of the interview. If they had not done justice to his erotic bellowings and gesticulations, he stuck in, in a large inky scrawl, all and more than they had omitted.

It was a strangely embarrassing thing for British journalism. Never was there a more obvious or uninteresting affair; never had the world heard the story of erratic affection with less appetite or sympathy. On the other hand it was extremely curious about Mr. Butteridge's invention. But when Mr. Butteridge could be deflected for a moment from the cause of the lady he championed, then he talked chiefly, and usually with tears of tenderness in his voice, about his mother and his childhood—his mother who crowned a complete encyclopedia of maternal virtue by being "largely Scotch." She was not quite neat, but nearly so. "I owe everything in me to me mother," he

asserted—“everything. Eh!” and—“ask any man who's done anything. You'll hear the same story. All we have we owe to women. They are the species, sorr. Man is but a dream. He comes and goes. The woman's soul leadeth us upward and on!”

He was always going on like that.

What in particular he wanted from the Government for his secret did not appear, nor what beyond a money payment could be expected from a modern state in such an affair. The general effect upon judicious observers, indeed, was not that he was treating for anything, but that he was using an unexampled opportunity to bellow and show off to an attentive world. Rumours of his real identity spread abroad. It was said that he had been the landlord of an ambiguous hotel in Cape Town, and had there given shelter to, and witnessed, the experiments and finally stolen the papers and plans of, an extremely shy and friendless young inventor named Palliser, who had come to South Africa from England in an advanced stage of consumption, and died there. This, at any rate, was the allegation of the more outspoken American press. But the proof or disproof of that never reached the public.

Mr. Butteridge also involved himself passionately in a tangle of disputes for the possession of a great number of valuable money prizes. Some of these had been offered so long ago as 1906 for successful mechanical flight. By the time of Mr. Butteridge's success a really very considerable number of newspapers, tempted by the impunity of the pioneers in this direction, had pledged themselves to pay in some cases, quite overwhelming sums to the first person to fly from Manchester to Glasgow, from London to Manchester, one hundred miles, two hundred miles in England, and the like. Most had hedged a little with ambiguous conditions, and now offered resistance; one or two paid at once, and vehemently called attention to the fact; and Mr. Butteridge plunged into litigation with the more recalcitrant, while at the same time sustaining a vigorous agitation and canvass to induce the Government to purchase his invention.

One fact, however, remained permanent throughout all the developments of this affair behind Butteridge's preposterous love interest, his politics and personality, and all his shouting and boasting, and that was that, so far as the mass of people knew, he was in sole possession of the secret of the practicable aeroplane in which, for all one could tell to the contrary, the key of the future empire of the world resided. And presently, to the great consternation of innumerable people, including among others Mr. Bert Smallways, it became apparent that whatever negotiations were in progress for the acquisition of this precious secret by the British Government were in danger of

falling through. The London Daily Requiem first voiced the universal alarm, and published an interview under the terrific caption of, “Mr. Butteridge Speaks his Mind.”

Therein the inventor—if he was an inventor—poured out his heart.

“I came from the end of the earth,” he said, which rather seemed to confirm the Cape Town story, “bringing me Motherland the secret that would give her the empire of the world. And what do I get?” He paused. “I am sniffed at by elderly mandarins!... And the woman I love is treated like a leper!”

“I am an Imperial Englishman,” he went on in a splendid outburst, subsequently written into the interview by his own hand; “but there there are limits to the human heart! There are younger nations—living nations! Nations that do not snore and gurgle helplessly in paroxysms of plethora upon beds of formality and red tape! There are nations that will not fling away the empire of earth in order to slight an unknown man and insult a noble woman whose boots they are not fitted to unlatch. There are nations not blinded to Science, not given over hand and foot to effete snobocracies and Degenerate Decadents. In short, mark my words—THERE ARE OTHER NATIONS!”

This speech it was that particularly impressed Bert Smallways. “If them Germans or them Americans get hold of this,” he said impressively to his brother, “the British Empire's done. It's U-P. The Union Jack, so to speak, won't be worth the paper it's written on, Tom.”

“I suppose you couldn't lend us a hand this morning,” said Jessica, in his impressive pause. “Everybody in Bun Hill seems wanting early potatoes at once. Tom can't carry half of them.”

“We're living on a volcano,” said Bert, disregarding the suggestion. “At any moment war may come—such a war!”

He shook his head portentously.

“You'd better take this lot first, Tom,” said Jessica. She turned briskly on Bert. “Can you spare us a morning?” she asked.

“I dessay I can,” said Bert. “The shop's very quiet s'morning. Though all this danger to the Empire worries me something frightful.”

“Work'll take it off your mind,” said Jessica.

And presently he too was going out into a world of change and wonder, bowed beneath a load of potatoes and patriotic insecurity, that merged at last into a very

definite irritation at the weight and want of style of the potatoes and a very clear conception of the entire detestableness of Jessica.

CHAPTER II. HOW BERT SMALLWAYS GOT INTO DIFFICULTIES

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

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

Bert was trying to impress Tom with the idea that the reconstructed Grubb & Smallways offered unprecedented and unparalleled opportunities to the judicious small investor. It was coming home to Bert, as though it were an entirely new fact, that Tom was singularly impervious to ideas. In the end he put the financial issues on one side, and, making the thing entirely a matter of fraternal affection, succeeded in borrowing a sovereign on the security of his word of honour.

The firm of Grubb & Smallways, formerly Grubb, had indeed been singularly unlucky in the last year or so. For many years the business had struggled along with a flavour of romantic insecurity in a small, dissolute-looking shop in the High Street, adorned with brilliantly coloured advertisements of cycles, a display of bells, trouser-clips, oil-cans, pump-clips, frame-cases, wallets, and other accessories, and the announcement of “Bicycles on Hire,” “Repairs,” “Free inflation,” “Petrol,” and similar attractions. They were agents for several obscure makes of bicycle,—two samples constituted the stock,—and occasionally they effected a sale; they also repaired punctures and did

their best—though luck was not always on their side—with any other repairing that was brought to them. They handled a line of cheap gramophones, and did a little with musical boxes.

The staple of their business was, however, the letting of bicycles on hire. It was a singular trade, obeying no known commercial or economic principles—indeed, no principles. There was a stock of ladies' and gentlemen's bicycles in a state of disrepair that passes description, and these, the hiring stock, were let to unexacting and reckless people, inexpert in the things of this world, at a nominal rate of one shilling for the first hour and sixpence per hour afterwards. But really there were no fixed prices, and insistent boys could get bicycles and the thrill of danger for an hour for so low a sum as threepence, provided they could convince Grubb that that was all they had. The saddle and handle-bar were then sketchily adjusted by Grubb, a deposit exacted, except in the case of familiar boys, the machine lubricated, and the adventurer started upon his career. Usually he or she came back, but at times, when the accident was serious, Bert or Grubb had to go out and fetch the machine home. Hire was always charged up to the hour of return to the shop and deducted from the deposit. It was rare that a bicycle started out from their hands in a state of pedantic efficiency. Romantic possibilities of accident lurked in the worn thread of the screw that adjusted the saddle, in the precarious pedals, in the loose-knit chain, in the handle-bars, above all in the brakes and tyres. Tappings and clankings and strange rhythmic creakings awoke as the intrepid hirer pedalled out into the country. Then perhaps the bell would jam or a brake fail to act on a hill; or the seat-pillar would get loose, and the saddle drop three or four inches with a disconcerting bump; or the loose and rattling chain would jump the cogs of the chain-wheel as the machine ran downhill, and so bring the mechanism to an abrupt and disastrous stop without at the same time arresting the forward momentum of the rider; or a tyre would bang, or sigh quietly, and give up the struggle for efficiency.

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

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

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

Sometimes the process of liquidating the consequent claims bordered on violence. It was always a very rhetorical and often a trying affair, but in these progressive times you have to make a noise to get a living. It was often hard work, but nevertheless this

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He did. He bought three in succession. He surprised the people at the Dogs' Home in Battersea by demanding a deaf retriever, and rejecting every candidate that pricked up its ears. “I want a good, deaf, slow-moving dog,” he said. “A dog that doesn't put himself out for things.”

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

“You see,” they said, “dogs aren't deaf.”

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

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

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

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

2

It is a poor heart that never rejoices, and Whitsuntide had an air of coming as an agreeable break in the business complications of Grubb & Smallways. Encouraged by the practical outcome of Bert's negotiations with his brother, and by the fact that half the hiring-stock was out from Saturday to Monday, they decided to ignore the residuum of hiring-trade on Sunday and devote that day to much-needed relaxation and refreshment—to have, in fact, an unstinted good time, a beano on Whit Sunday and return invigorated to grapple with their difficulties and the Bank Holiday repairs on the Monday. No good thing was ever done by exhausted and dispirited men. It happened that they had made the acquaintance of two young ladies in employment in Clapham, Miss Flossie Bright and Miss Edna Bunthorne, and it was resolved therefore to make a cheerful little cyclist party of four into the heart of Kent, and to picnic and spend an indolent afternoon and evening among the trees and bracken between Ashford and Maidstone.

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

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

Much they cared!

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

Little it seemed to matter to Mr. Bert Smallways that a newspaper

placard proclaimed:— ————————————————————- GERMANY

DENOUNCES THE MONROE DOCTRINE.

AMBIGUOUS ATTITUDE OF JAPAN.

WHAT WILL BRITAIN DO? IS IT WAR?————————————————————-

This sort of thing was always going on, and on holidays one disregarded it as a matter of course. Week-days, in the slack time after the midday meal, then perhaps one might worry about the Empire and international politics; but not on a sunny Sunday, with a pretty girl trailing behind one, and envious cyclists trying to race you. Nor did our young people attach any great importance to the flitting suggestions of military activity they glimpsed ever and again. Near Maidstone they came on a string of eleven motor-guns of peculiar construction halted by the roadside, with a number of businesslike engineers grouped about them watching through field-glasses some sort of entrenchment that was going on near the crest of the downs. It signified nothing to Bert.

“What's up?” said Edna.

“Oh!—manoeuvres,” said Bert.

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

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

Our four young people picnicked cheerfully, and were happy in the manner of a happiness that was an ancient mode in Nineveh. Eyes were bright, Grubb was funny and almost witty, and Bert achieved epigrams; the hedges were full of honeysuckle and dog-roses; in the woods the distant toot-toot-toot of the traffic on the dust-hazy high road might have been no more than the horns of elf-land. They laughed and gossiped and picked flowers and made love and talked, and the girls smoked cigarettes. Also they scuffled playfully. Among other things they talked aeronautics, and how they would come for a picnic together in Bert's flying-machine before ten years were out. The world seemed full of amusing possibilities that afternoon. They wondered what their great-grandparents would have thought of aeronautics. In the evening, about seven, the party turned homeward, expecting no disaster, and it was only on the crest of the downs between Wrotham and Kingsdown that disaster came.

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

“Bert!” she screamed.

But Bert had put on the brakes with such suddenness that she found herself involved with his leg as he dismounted. She got to the side of the road and hastily readjusted her hat, which had suffered.

“Gaw!” said Bert.

He stood for some fatal seconds watching the petrol drip and catch, and the flame, which was now beginning to smell of enamel as well as oil, spread and grew. His chief idea was the sorrowful one that he had not sold the machine second-hand a year ago, and that he ought to have done so—a good idea in its way, but not immediately

helpful. He turned upon Edna sharply. “Get a lot of wet sand,” he said. Then he wheeled the machine a little towards the side of the roadway, and laid it down and looked about for a supply of wet sand. The flames received this as a helpful attention, and made the most of it. They seemed to brighten and the twilight to deepen about them. The road was a flinty road in the chalk country, and ill-provided with sand.

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

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

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

“Beat it out, you fools!” he said.

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

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

It became manifest that the rug, the table-cloth, the cushions, the jacket, were getting smeared with petrol and burning. The soul seemed to go out of the cushion Bert was swaying, and the air was full of feathers, like a snowstorm in the still twilight.

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

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

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

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

A cry of "The tarpaulin!" arose.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was a moment of triumph. The flames vanished. Every one who could contrive to do so touched the edge of the tarpaulin. Bert held down a corner with two hands and a foot. The tarpaulin, bulged up in the centre, seemed to be suppressing triumphant exultation. Then its self-approval became too much for it; it burst into a

bright red smile in the centre. It was exactly like the opening of a mouth. It laughed with a gust of flames. They were reflected redly in the observant goggles of the gentleman who owned the tarpaulin. Everybody recoiled.

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

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

A rosy-faced man in a straw hat claimed attention. “I DID save the front wheel,” he said; “you'd have had that tyre catch, too, if I hadn't kept turning it round.” It became manifest that this was so. The front wheel had retained its tyre, was intact, was still rotating slowly among the blackened and twisted ruins of the rest of the machine. It had something of that air of conscious virtue, of unimpeachable respectability, that distinguishes a rent collector in a low neighbourhood. “That wheel's worth a pound,” said the rosy-faced man, making a song of it. “I kep' turning it round.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Don't like leavin' you, Bert.”

“You can't 'elp it, Edna.”...

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

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

“So long, Edna,” said Bert.

“See you to-morrer.”

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

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

His face was grave and melancholy.

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

And at last Bert was left almost alone, a sad, blackened Promethean figure, cursed by the gift of fire. He had entertained vague ideas of hiring a cart, of achieving miraculous repairs, of still snatching some residual value from his one chief possession. Now, in the darkening night, he perceived the vanity of such intentions. Truth came to him bleakly, and laid her chill conviction upon him. He took hold of the handle-bar, stood the thing up, tried to push it forward. The tyreless hind-wheel was jammed hopelessly, even as he feared. For a minute or so he stood upholding his machine, a motionless despair. Then with a great effort he thrust the ruins from him into the ditch, kicked at it once, regarded it for a moment, and turned his face resolutely Londonward.

He did not once look back.

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

3

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

BRITAIN MUST FIGHT.

OUR INFATUATED WAR OFFICE STILL

REFUSES TO LISTEN TO MR. BUTTERIDGE.

GREAT MONO-RAIL DISASTER AT TIMBUCTOO.————————————————-

or this:— ————————————————- WAR A QUESTION OF HOURS.

NEW YORK CALM.

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

or again:— ————————————————- WASHINGTON STILL SILENT.

WHAT WILL PARIS DO?

THE PANIC ON THE BOURSE.

THE KING'S GARDEN PARTY TO THE MASKED TWAREGS. MR. BUTTERIDGE TAKES AN OFFER. LATEST BETTING FROM TEHERAN.————————————————————————-

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

ANTI-GERMAN RIOT IN BAGDAD.

THE MUNICIPAL SCANDALS AT DAMASCUS.

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

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

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

“So'm I,” said Grubb.

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

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

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

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

“What can we do?” said Grubb.

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

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

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

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

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

“Leavin' me?”

“Leavin' you. If you must be left.”

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

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

“What did you think out?”

“Plans.”

“What plans?”

“Oh! You're for stickin, here.”

“Not if anything better was to offer.”

“It's only an ideer,” said Bert.

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

“Seems a long time ago now,” said Grubb.

“And old Edna nearly cried—over that bit of mine.”

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

“No end,” said Bert.

“'Ow?”

“Don't you see?”

“Not singing in the streets?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

with crimson enamel paint, replacing the bells by the loudest sort of motor-horn, and doing a ride about to begin and end the entertainment. They doubted the advisability of this step.

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

“I do,” said Grubb, “badly.”

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

Nevertheless, they decided to take the risk of these bicycles, and they decided their costumes should be brown stockings and sandals, and cheap unbleached sheets with a hole cut in the middle, and wigs and beards of tow. The rest their normal selves! “The Desert Dervishes,” they would call themselves, and their chief songs would be those popular ditties, “In my Trailer,” and “What Price Hair-pins Now?”

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

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

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

Nothing else but that.

“Always rottin' about war now,” said Bert.

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

4

So you will understand the sudden apparition that surprised rather than delighted the quiet informality of Dymchurch sands. Dymchurch was one of the last places on the coast of England to be reached by the mono-rail, and so its spacious sands were still, at the time of this story, the secret and delight of quite a limited number of people.

They went there to flee vulgarity and extravagances, and to bathe and sit and talk and play with their children in peace, and the Desert Dervishes did not please them at all.

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

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

The few scattered groups upon the beach regarded them with horror for the most part, but some of the children and young people were interested and drew nearer. “There ain't a bob on the beach,” said Grubb in an undertone, and the Desert Dervishes plied their bicycles with comic “business,” that got a laugh from one very unsophisticated little boy. Then they took a deep breath and struck into the cheerful strain of “What Price Hair-pins Now?” Grubb sang the song, Bert did his best to make the chorus a rousing one, and it the end of each verse they danced certain steps, skirts in hand, that they had carefully rehearsed.

> *“Ting-a-ling-a-ting-a-ling-a-ting-a-ling-a-tang…*
> *What Price Hair-pins Now?”*

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

All round the coasts of Europe that morning banjos were ringing, voices were bawling and singing, children were playing in the sun, pleasure-boats went to and fro; the common abundant life of the time, unsuspicious of all dangers that gathered darkly against it, flowed on its cheerful aimless way. In the cities men fussed about their

businesses and engagements. The newspaper placards that had cried “wolf!” so often, cried “wolf!” now in vain.

5

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

“Ting-a-ling-a-ting-a-ling-a-ting-a-ling-a-tang

What Price Hair-pins Now?”

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

They finished their dance, and then stood frankly staring.

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

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

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

Bert followed him, and collided, without upsetting, with a fisherman bent upon a similar errand. A woman carrying a baby in her arms, two small boys with toy spades, and a stout gentleman in flannels all got to the trailing rope at about the same time,

and began to dance over it in their attempts to secure it. Bert came up to this wriggling, elusive serpent and got his foot on it, went down on all fours and achieved a grip. In half a dozen seconds the whole diffused population of the beach had, as it were, crystallised on the rope, and was pulling against the balloon under the vehement and stimulating directions of the man in the car. “Pull, I tell you!” said the man in the car—“pull!”

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

He occupied himself with some unseen object while the people on the rope pulled him in. Bert was nearest the balloon, and much excited and interested. He kept stumbling over the tail of the Dervish costume in his zeal. He had never imagined before what a big, light, wallowing thing a balloon was. The car was of brown coarse wicker-work, and comparatively small. The rope he tugged at was fastened to a stout-looking ring, four or five feet above the car. At each tug he drew in a yard or so of rope, and the waggling wicker-work was drawn so much nearer. Out of the car came wrathful bellowings: “Fainted, she has!” and then: “It's her heart—broken with all she's had to go through.”

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

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

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

head lolled back against the padded corner of the car, and her eyes were shut and her mouth open. “Me dear!” said Mr. Butteridge, in a common, loud voice, “we're safe!”

She gave no sign.

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

She was still quite impassive.

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

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

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

“Are you ready?” said Mr. Butteridge.

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

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

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

“Confound it!” he said.

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

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

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

He looked down with a pinched face at the receding beach, and reflected that he wasn't giddy; then he made a superficial survey of the cords and ropes about him with a vague idea of “doing something.” “I'm not going to mess about with the thing,” he said at last, and sat down upon the mattress. “I'm not going to touch it.... I wonder what one ought to do?”

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

CHAPTER III. THE BALLOON

I

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It's all right!”

“I suppose they're telegraphing about, about me.”...

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

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

conveniences, including curling-tongs and hair-pins, a cap with ear-flaps, and so forth.

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

“Wonder how long a balloon keeps up?” he said.

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

He consulted the statoscope.

“Still Monty,” he said.

“Wonder what would happen if you pulled a cord?”

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

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

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

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

He reposed for a time. Then he got up, paddled about, rearranged the ballast bags on the floor, watched the clouds for a time, and turned over the maps on the locker. Bert liked maps, and he spent some time in trying to find one of France or the Channel; but they were all British ordnance maps of English counties. That set him thinking about

languages and trying to recall his seventh-standard French. “Je suis Anglais. C'est une meprise. Je suis arrive par accident ici,” he decided upon as convenient phrases. Then it occurred to him that he would entertain himself by reading Mr. Butteridge's letters and examining his pocket-book, and in this manner he whiled away the afternoon.

2

He sat upon the padded locker, wrapped about very carefully, for the air, though calm, was exhilaratingly cold and clear. He was wearing first a modest suit of blue serge and all the unpretending underwear of a suburban young man of fashion, with sandal-like cycling-shoes and brown stockings drawn over his trouser ends; then the perforated sheet proper to a Desert Dervish; then the coat and waistcoat and big fur-trimmed overcoat of Mr. Butteridge; then a lady's large fur cloak, and round his knees a blanket. Over his head was a tow wig, surmounted by a large cap of Mr. Butteridge's with the flaps down over his ears. And some fur sleeping-boots of Mr. Butteridge's warmed his feet. The car of the balloon was small and neat, some bags of ballast the untidiest of its contents, and he had found a light folding-table and put it at his elbow, and on that was a glass with champagne. And about him, above and below, was space—such a clear emptiness and silence of space as only the aeronaut can experience.

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

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

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

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

“Lord!”

He mused for a time.

He resumed his exploration of the Butteridge interior. It included a number of press cuttings of interviews and also several letters in German, then some in the same German handwriting, but in English. “Hul-LO!” said Bert.

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

“Funny!” said Bert, and meditated.

Then he went through the other letters.

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

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

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

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

“Let's see!” He fell to studying the drawings and comparing them with the photographs. They puzzled him. Half of them seemed to be missing. He tried to imagine how they fitted together, and found the effort too great for his mind.

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

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

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

He returned to the plans on the table.

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

“Voici, Mossoo!—Je suis un inventeur Anglais. Mon nom est Butteridge. Beh. oo. teh. teh. eh. arr. I. deh. geh. eh. J'avais ici pour vendre le secret de le flying-machine. Comprenez? Vendre pour l'argent tout suite, l'argent en main. Comprenez? C'est le machine a jouer dans l'air. Comprenez? C'est le machine a faire l'oiseau. Comprenez? Balancer? Oui, exactement! Battir l'oiseau en fait, a son propre jeu. Je desire de vendre ceci a votre government national. Voulez vous me directer la?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Butteridge would be a terrible person to be on any one's track. Bert thought of the great black moustaches, the triangular nose, the searching bellow and the glare. His afternoon's dream of a marvellous seizure and sale of the great Butteridge secret crumpled up in his mind, dissolved, and vanished. He awoke to sanity again.

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

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

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

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

3

“NOW what's going to 'appen?” said Bert.

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

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

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

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

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

He became convulsively active.

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

He sent out quite needlessly a third sack of ballast and a fourth, and presently had the immense satisfaction of soaring up out of the damp and chill into the clear, cold, upper air in which the day still lingered. “Thang-God!” he said, with all his heart.

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

4

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

He was awakened by the crowing of cocks, the barking of dogs, and a clamour of birds. He was driving slowly at a low level over a broad land lit golden by sunrise under a clear sky. He stared out upon hedgeless, well-cultivated fields intersected by roads, each lined with cable-bearing red poles. He had just passed over a compact, whitewashed, village with a straight church tower and steep red-tiled roofs. A number

of peasants, men and women, in shiny blouses and lumpish footwear, stood regarding him, arrested on their way to work. He was so low that the end of his rope was trailing.

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

“S'pose I OUGHT to land?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Blow!” said Mr. Smallways. “I've over-done the ballast trick.... Wonder when I shall get down again?... brekfus' on board, anyhow.”

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

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

Then he took off his overcoat, for the sunshine was now inclined to be hot, and that reminded him of the rustling he had heard in the night. He took off the waistcoat and

examined it. “Old Butteridge won't like me unpicking this.” He hesitated, and finally proceeded to unpick it. He found the missing drawings of the lateral rotating planes, on which the whole stability of the flying machine depended.

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

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

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

The air was at its utmost clearness and except to the south and south-west there was not a cloud in the sky. The country was hilly, with occasional fir plantations and bleak upland spaces, but also with numerous farms, and the hills were deeply intersected by the gorges of several winding rivers interrupted at intervals by the banked-up ponds and weirs of electric generating wheels. It was dotted with bright-looking, steep-roofed, villages, and each showed a distinctive and interesting church beside its

wireless telegraph steeple; here and there were large chateaux and parks and white roads, and paths lined with red and white cable posts were extremely conspicuous in the landscape. There were walled enclosures like gardens and rickyards and great roofs of barns and many electric dairy centres. The uplands were mottled with cattle. At places he would see the track of one of the old railroads (converted now to mono-rails) dodging through tunnels and crossing embankments, and a rushing hum would mark the passing of a train. Everything was extraordinarily clear as well as minute. Once or twice he saw guns and soldiers, and was reminded of the stir of military preparations he had witnessed on the Bank Holiday in England; but there was nothing to tell him that these military preparations were abnormal or to explain an occasional faint irregular firing of guns that drifted up to him....

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

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

From the first this attempt was unfortunate, perhaps because the place for descent was ill-chosen. A balloon should come down in an empty open space, and he chose a crowd. He made his decision suddenly, and without proper reflection. As he trailed, Bert saw ahead of him one of the most attractive little towns in the world—a cluster of steep gables surmounted by a high church tower and diversified with trees, walled, and with a fine, large gateway opening out upon a tree-lined high road. All the wires and cables of the countryside converged upon it like guests to entertainment. It had a most home-like and comfortable quality, and it was made gayer by abundant flags. Along the road a quantity of peasant folk, in big pair-wheeled carts and afoot, were coming and going, besides an occasional mono-rail car; and at the car-junction, under the trees outside the town, was a busy little fair of booths. It seemed a warm,

human, well-rooted, and altogether delightful place to Bert. He came low over the tree-tops, with his grapnel ready to throw and so anchor him—a curious, interested, and interesting guest, so his imagination figured it, in the very middle of it all.

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

And then the chapter of adverse accidents began.

The rope made itself unpopular long before the crowd had fully realised his advent over the trees. An elderly and apparently intoxicated peasant in a shiny black hat, and carrying a large crimson umbrella, caught sight of it first as it trailed past him, and was seized with a discreditable ambition to kill it. He pursued it, briskly with unpleasant cries. It crossed the road obliquely, splashed into a pail of milk upon a stall, and slapped its milky tail athwart a motor-car load of factory girls halted outside the town gates. They screamed loudly. People looked up and saw Bert making what he meant to be genial salutations, but what they considered, in view of the feminine outcry, to be insulting gestures. Then the car hit the roof of the gatehouse smartly, snapped a flag staff, played a tune upon some telegraph wires, and sent a broken wire like a whip-lash to do its share in accumulating unpopularity. Bert, by clutching convulsively, just escaped being pitched headlong. Two young soldiers and several peasants shouted things up to him and shook fists at him and began to run in pursuit as he disappeared over the wall into the town.

Admiring rustics, indeed!

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

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

The grapnel smashed down a steeply sloping roof, followed by an avalanche of broken tiles, jumped the street amidst shrieks and cries, and smashed into a plate-glass window with an immense and sickening impact. The balloon rolled nauseatingly, and the car pitched. But the grapnel had not held. It emerged at once bearing on one fluke, with a ridiculous air of fastidious selection, a small child's chair, and pursued by a maddened shopman. It lifted its catch, swung about with an appearance of painful indecision amidst a roar of wrath, and dropped it at last neatly, and as if by inspiration,

over the head of a peasant woman in charge of an assortment of cabbages in the market-place.

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

For some seconds he stood staggering in the car, which now swayed sickeningly, surveying the exasperated crowd below him and trying to collect his mind. He was extraordinarily astonished at this run of mishaps. Were the people really so annoyed? Everybody seemed angry with him. No one seemed interested or amused by his arrival. A disproportionate amount of the outcry had the flavour of imprecation—had, indeed a strong flavour of riot. Several greatly uniformed officials in cocked hats struggled in vain to control the crowd. Fists and sticks were shaken. And when Bert saw a man on the outskirts of the crowd run to a haycart and get a brightly pronged pitch-fork, and a blue-clad soldier unbuckle his belt, his rising doubt whether this little town was after all such a good place for a landing became a certainty.

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

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

In another second he was cowering in the bottom of the car, and released from the weight of the grapnel and the two ropes, rushing up once more through the air. For a time he remained crouching, and when at last he looked out again the little town was

very small and travelling, with the rest of lower Germany, in a circular orbit round and round the car—or at least it appeared to be doing that. When he got used to it, he found this rotation of the balloon rather convenient; it saved moving about in the car.

5

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

He was now very distinctly aware that the world below him, so far from being the naive countryside of his earlier imaginings that day, sleepily unconscious of him and capable of being amazed and nearly reverential at his descent, was acutely irritated by his career, and extremely impatient with the course he was taking.—But indeed it was not he who took that course, but his masters, the winds of heaven. Mysterious voices spoke to him in his ear, jerking the words up to him by means of megaphones, in a weird and startling manner, in a great variety of languages. Official-looking persons had signalled to him by means of flag flapping and arm waving. On the whole a guttural variant of English prevailed in the sentences that alighted upon the balloon; chiefly he was told to “gome down or you will be shot.”

“All very well,” said Bert, “but 'ow?”

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

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

town, but now he was beginning to realise that the military rather than the civil arm was concerned about him.

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

Later, just before they shot him down altogether, Bert saw that great area of passionate work, warm lit in the evening light, a great area of upland on which the airships lay like a herd of grazing monsters at their feed. It was a vast busy space stretching away northward as far as he could see, methodically cut up into numbered sheds, gasometers, squad encampments, storage areas, interlaced with the omnipresent mono-rail lines, and altogether free from overhead wires or cables. Everywhere was the white, black and yellow of Imperial Germany, everywhere the black eagles spread their wings. Even without these indications, the large vigorous neatness of everything would have marked it German. Vast multitudes of men went to and fro, many in white and drab fatigue uniforms busy about the balloons, others drilling in sensible drab. Here and there a full uniform glittered. The airships chiefly engaged his attention, and he knew at once it was three of these he had seen on the previous night, taking advantage of the cloud welkin to manoeuvre unobserved. They were altogether fish-like. For the great airships with which Germany attacked New York in her last gigantic effort for world supremacy—before humanity realized that world supremacy was a dream—were the lineal descendants of the Zeppelin airship that flew over Lake Constance in 1906, and of the Lebaudy navigables that made their memorable excursions over Paris in 1907 and 1908.

These German airships were held together by rib-like skeletons of steel and aluminium and a stout inelastic canvas outer-skin, within which was an impervious rubber gas-bag, cut up by transverse dissepiments into from fifty to a hundred compartments. These were all absolutely gas tight and filled with hydrogen, and the entire aerostat was kept at any level by means of a long internal balloonette of oiled and toughened silk canvas, into which air could be forced and from which it could be pumped. So the airship could be made either heavier or lighter than air, and losses of weight through the consumption of fuel, the casting of bombs and so forth, could also be compensated by admitting air to sections of the general gas-bag. Ultimately that

made a highly explosive mixture; but in all these matters risks must be taken and guarded against. There was a steel axis to the whole affair, a central backbone which terminated in the engine and propeller, and the men and magazines were forward in a series of cabins under the expanded headlike forepart. The engine, which was of the extraordinarily powerful Pforzheim type, that supreme triumph of German invention, was worked by wires from this forepart, which was indeed the only really habitable part of the ship. If anything went wrong, the engineers went aft along a rope ladder beneath the frame. The tendency of the whole affair to roll was partly corrected by a horizontal lateral fin on either side, and steering was chiefly effected by two vertical fins, which normally lay back like gill-flaps on either side of the head. It was indeed a most complete adaptation of the fish form to aerial conditions, the position of swimming bladder, eyes, and brain being, however, below instead of above. A striking, and unfish-like feature was the apparatus for wireless telegraphy that dangled from the forward cabin—that is to say, under the chin of the fish.

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

But the Drachenflieger were away in the second great aeronautic park east of Hamburg, and Bert Smallways saw nothing of them in the bird's-eye view he took of the Franconian establishment before they shot him down very neatly. The bullet tore past him and made a sort of pop as it pierced his balloon—a pop that was followed by a rustling sigh and a steady downward movement. And when in the confusion of the moment he dropped a bag of ballast, the Germans, very politely but firmly overcame his scruples by shooting his balloon again twice.

CHAPTER IV. THE GERMAN AIR-FLEET

1

Of all the productions of the human imagination that make the world in which Mr. Bert Smallways lived confusingly wonderful, there was none quite so strange, so headlong and disturbing, so noisy and persuasive and dangerous, as the modernisations of patriotism produced by imperial and international politics. In the soul of all men is a liking for kind, a pride in one's own atmosphere, a tenderness for one's Mother speech and one's familiar land. Before the coming of the Scientific Age this group of gentle and noble emotions had been a fine factor in the equipment of every worthy human being, a fine factor that had its less amiable aspect in a usually harmless hostility to strange people, and a usually harmless detraction of strange lands. But with the wild rush of change in the pace, scope, materials, scale, and possibilities of human life that then occurred, the old boundaries, the old seclusions and separations were violently broken down. All the old settled mental habits and traditions of men found themselves not simply confronted by new conditions, but by constantly renewed and changing new conditions. They had no chance of adapting themselves. They were annihilated or perverted or inflamed beyond recognition.

Bert Smallways' grandfather, in the days when Bun Hill was a village under the sway of Sir Peter Bone's parent, had “known his place” to the uttermost farthing, touched his hat to his betters, despised and condescended to his inferiors, and hadn't changed an idea from the cradle to the grave. He was Kentish and English, and that meant hops, beer, dog-roses, and the sort of sunshine that was best in the world. Newspapers and politics and visits to “Lunnon” weren't for the likes of him. Then came the change. These earlier chapters have given an idea of what happened to Bun Hill, and how the flood of novel things had poured over its devoted rusticity. Bert Smallways was only one of countless millions in Europe and America and Asia who, instead of being born rooted in the soil, were born struggling in a torrent they never clearly understood. All the faiths of their fathers had been taken by surprise, and startled into the strangest forms and reactions. Particularly did the fine old tradition of patriotism get perverted and distorted in the rush of the new times. Instead of the sturdy establishment in prejudice of Bert's grandfather, to whom the word “Frenchified” was the ultimate term of contempt, there flowed through Bert's brain a squittering succession of thinly violent ideas about German competition, about the Yellow Danger, about the Black Peril, about the White Man's Burthen—that is to say, Bert's preposterous right to muddle further the naturally very muddled politics of the entirely similar little cads to himself (except for a smear of brown) who smoked cigarettes and rode bicycles in Buluwayo, Kingston (Jamaica), or Bombay. These were Bert's “Subject Races,” and he was ready to die—by proxy in the person of any one who cared to enlist—to maintain his hold upon that right. It kept him awake at nights to think that he might lose it.

The essential fact of the politics of the age in which Bert Smallways lived—the age that blundered at last into the catastrophe of the War in the Air—was a very simple one, if only people had had the intelligence to be simple about it. The development of Science had altered the scale of human affairs. By means of rapid mechanical traction, it had brought men nearer together, so much nearer socially, economically, physically, that the old separations into nations and kingdoms were no longer possible, a newer, wider synthesis was not only needed, but imperatively demanded. Just as the once independent dukedoms of France had to fuse into a nation, so now the nations had to adapt themselves to a wider coalescence, they had to keep what was precious and possible, and concede what was obsolete and dangerous. A saner world would have perceived this patent need for a reasonable synthesis, would have discussed it temperately, achieved and gone on to organise the great civilisation that was manifestly possible to mankind. The world of Bert Smallways did nothing of the sort. Its national governments, its national interests, would not hear of anything so obvious; they were too suspicious of each other, too wanting in generous imaginations. They began to behave like ill-bred people in a crowded public car, to squeeze against one another, elbow, thrust, dispute and quarrel. Vain to point out to them that they had only to rearrange themselves to be comfortable. Everywhere, all over the world, the historian of the early twentieth century finds the same thing, the flow and rearrangement of human affairs inextricably entangled by the old areas, the old prejudices and a sort of heated irascible stupidity, and everywhere congested nations in inconvenient areas, slopping population and produce into each other, annoying each other with tariffs, and every possible commercial vexation, and threatening each other with navies and armies that grew every year more portentous.

It is impossible now to estimate how much of the intellectual and physical energy of the world was wasted in military preparation and equipment, but it was an enormous proportion. Great Britain spent upon army and navy money and capacity, that directed into the channels of physical culture and education would have made the British the aristocracy of the world. Her rulers could have kept the whole population learning and exercising up to the age of eighteen and made a broad-chested and intelligent man of every Bert Smallways in the islands, had they given the resources they spent in war material to the making of men. Instead of which they waggled flags at him until he was fourteen, incited him to cheer, and then turned him out of school to begin that career of private enterprise we have compactly recorded. France achieved similar imbecilities; Germany was, if possible worse; Russia under the waste and stresses of militarism festered towards bankruptcy and decay. All Europe was producing big guns and countless swarms of little Smallways. The Asiatic peoples had been forced in

self-defence into a like diversion of the new powers science had brought them. On the eve of the outbreak of the war there were six great powers in the world and a cluster of smaller ones, each armed to the teeth and straining every nerve to get ahead of the others in deadliness of equipment and military efficiency. The great powers were first the United States, a nation addicted to commerce, but roused to military necessities by the efforts of Germany to expand into South America, and by the natural consequences of her own unwary annexations of land in the very teeth of Japan. She maintained two immense fleets east and west, and internally she was in violent conflict between Federal and State governments upon the question of universal service in a defensive militia. Next came the great alliance of Eastern Asia, a close-knit coalescence of China and Japan, advancing with rapid strides year by year to predominance in the world's affairs. Then the German alliance still struggled to achieve its dream of imperial expansion, and its imposition of the German language upon a forcibly united Europe. These were the three most spirited and aggressive powers in the world. Far more pacific was the British Empire, perilously scattered over the globe, and distracted now by insurrectionary movements in Ireland and among all its Subject Races. It had given these subject races cigarettes, boots, bowler hats, cricket, race meetings, cheap revolvers, petroleum, the factory system of industry, halfpenny newspapers in both English and the vernacular, inexpensive university degrees, motor-bicycles and electric trams; it had produced a considerable literature expressing contempt for the Subject Races, and rendered it freely accessible to them, and it had been content to believe that nothing would result from these stimulants because somebody once wrote “the immemorial east”; and also, in the inspired words of Kipling—

> *East is east and west is west,*
>
> *And never the twain shall meet*.

Instead of which, Egypt, India, and the subject countries generally had produced new generations in a state of passionate indignation and the utmost energy, activity and modernity. The governing class in Great Britain was slowly adapting itself to a new conception, of the Subject Races as waking peoples, and finding its efforts to keep the Empire together under these strains and changing ideas greatly impeded by the entirely sporting spirit with which Bert Smallways at home (by the million) cast his vote, and by the tendency of his more highly coloured equivalents to be disrespectful to irascible officials. Their impertinence was excessive; it was no mere stone-throwing and shouting. They would quote Burns at them and Mill and Darwin and confute them in arguments.

Even more pacific than the British Empire were France and its allies, the Latin powers, heavily armed states indeed, but reluctant warriors, and in many ways socially and politically leading western civilisation. Russia was a pacific power perforce, divided within itself, torn between revolutionaries and reactionaries who were equally incapable of social reconstruction, and so sinking towards a tragic disorder of chronic political vendetta. Wedged in among these portentous larger bulks, swayed and threatened by them, the smaller states of the world maintained a precarious independence, each keeping itself armed as dangerously as its utmost ability could contrive.

So it came about that in every country a great and growing body of energetic and inventive men was busied either for offensive or defensive ends, in elaborating the apparatus of war, until the accumulating tensions should reach the breaking-point. Each power sought to keep its preparations secret, to hold new weapons in reserve, to anticipate and learn the preparations of its rivals. The feeling of danger from fresh discoveries affected the patriotic imagination of every people in the world. Now it was rumoured the British had an overwhelming gun, now the French an invincible rifle, now the Japanese a new explosive, now the Americans a submarine that would drive every ironclad from the seas. Each time there would be a war panic.

The strength and heart of the nations was given to the thought of war, and yet the mass of their citizens was a teeming democracy as heedless of and unfitted for fighting, mentally, morally, physically, as any population has ever been—or, one ventures to add, could ever be. That was the paradox of the time. It was a period altogether unique in the world's history. The apparatus of warfare, the art and method of fighting, changed absolutely every dozen years in a stupendous progress towards perfection, and people grew less and less warlike, and there was no war.

And then at last it came. It came as a surprise to all the world because its real causes were hidden. Relations were strained between Germany and the United States because of the intense exasperation of a tariff conflict and the ambiguous attitude of the former power towards the Monroe Doctrine, and they were strained between the United States and Japan because of the perennial citizenship question. But in both cases these were standing causes of offence. The real deciding cause, it is now known, was the perfecting of the Pforzheim engine by Germany and the consequent possibility of a rapid and entirely practicable airship. At that time Germany was by far the most efficient power in the world, better organised for swift and secret action, better equipped with the resources of modern science, and with her official and administrative classes at a higher level of education and training. These things she knew, and she exaggerated that knowledge to the pitch of contempt for the secret

counsels of her neighbours. It may be that with the habit of self-confidence her spying upon them had grown less thorough. Moreover, she had a tradition of unsentimental and unscrupulous action that vitiated her international outlook profoundly. With the coming of these new weapons her collective intelligence thrilled with the sense that now her moment had come. Once again in the history of progress it seemed she held the decisive weapon. Now she might strike and conquer—before the others had anything but experiments in the air.

Particularly she must strike America, swiftly, because there, if anywhere, lay the chance of an aerial rival. It was known that America possessed a flying-machine of considerable practical value, developed out of the Wright model; but it was not supposed that the Washington War Office had made any wholesale attempts to create an aerial navy. It was necessary to strike before they could do so. France had a fleet of slow navigables, several dating from 1908, that could make no possible headway against the new type. They had been built solely for reconnoitring purposes on the eastern frontier, they were mostly too small to carry more than a couple of dozen men without arms or provisions, and not one could do forty miles an hour. Great Britain, it seemed, in an access of meanness, temporised and wrangled with the imperial spirited Butteridge and his extraordinary invention. That also was not in play—and could not be for some months at the earliest. From Asia there came no sign. The Germans explained this by saying the yellow peoples were without invention. No other competitor was worth considering. “Now or never,” said the Germans—“now or never we may seize the air—as once the British seized the seas! While all the other powers are still experimenting.”

Swift and systematic and secret were their preparations, and their plan most excellent. So far as their knowledge went, America was the only dangerous possibility; America, which was also now the leading trade rival of Germany and one of the chief barriers to her Imperial expansion. So at once they would strike at America. They would fling a great force across the Atlantic heavens and bear America down unwarned and unprepared.

Altogether it was a well-imagined and most hopeful and spirited enterprise, having regard to the information in the possession of the German government. The chances of it being a successful surprise were very great. The airship and the flying-machine were very different things from ironclads, which take a couple of years to build. Given hands, given plant, they could be made innumerably in a few weeks. Once the needful parks and foundries were organised, air-ships and Drachenflieger could be poured into the sky. Indeed, when the time came, they did pour into the sky like, as a bitter French writer put it, flies roused from filth.

The attack upon America was to be the first move in this tremendous game. But no sooner had it started than instantly the aeronautic parks were to proceed to put together and inflate the second fleet which was to dominate Europe and manoeuvre significantly over London, Paris, Rome, St. Petersburg, or wherever else its moral effect was required. A World Surprise it was to be—no less a World Conquest; and it is wonderful how near the calmly adventurous minds that planned it came to succeeding in their colossal design.

Von Sternberg was the Moltke of this War in the Air, but it was the curious hard romanticism of Prince Karl Albert that won over the hesitating Emperor to the scheme. Prince Karl Albert was indeed the central figure of the world drama. He was the darling of the Imperialist spirit in German, and the ideal of the new aristocratic feeling—the new Chivalry, as it was called—that followed the overthrow of Socialism through its internal divisions and lack of discipline, and the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few great families. He was compared by obsequious flatterers to the Black Prince, to Alcibiades, to the young Caesar. To many he seemed Nietzsche's Overman revealed. He was big and blond and virile, and splendidly non-moral. The first great feat that startled Europe, and almost brought about a new Trojan war, was his abduction of the Princess Helena of Norway and his blank refusal to marry her. Then followed his marriage with Gretchen Krass, a Swiss girl of peerless beauty. Then came the gallant rescue, which almost cost him his life, of three drowning sailors whose boat had upset in the sea near Heligoland. For that and his victory over the American yacht Defender, C.C.I., the Emperor forgave him and placed him in control of the new aeronautic arm of the German forces. This he developed with marvellous energy and ability, being resolved, as he said, to give to Germany land and sea and sky. The national passion for aggression found in him its supreme exponent, and achieved through him its realisation in this astounding war. But his fascination was more than national; all over the world his ruthless strength dominated minds as the Napoleonic legend had dominated minds. Englishmen turned in disgust from the slow, complex, civilised methods of their national politics to this uncompromising, forceful figure. Frenchmen believed in him. Poems were written to him in American.

He made the war.

Quite equally with the rest of the world, the general German population was taken by surprise by the swift vigour of the Imperial government. A considerable literature of military forecasts, beginning as early as 1906 with Rudolf Martin, the author not merely of a brilliant book of anticipations, but of a proverb, “The future of Germany lies in the air,” had, however, partially prepared the German imagination for some such enterprise.

Of all these world-forces and gigantic designs Bert Smallways knew nothing until he found himself in the very focus of it all and gaped down amazed on the spectacle of that giant herd of air-ships. Each one seemed as long as the Strand, and as big about as Trafalgar Square. Some must have been a third of a mile in length. He had never before seen anything so vast and disciplined as this tremendous park. For the first time in his life he really had an intimation of the extraordinary and quite important things of which a contemporary may go in ignorance. He had always clung to the illusion that Germans were fat, absurd men, who smoked china pipes, and were addicted to knowledge and horseflesh and sauerkraut and indigestible things generally.

His bird's-eye view was quite transitory. He ducked at the first shot; and directly his balloon began to drop, his mind ran confusedly upon how he might explain himself, and whether he should pretend to be Butteridge or not. “O Lord!” he groaned, in an agony of indecision. Then his eye caught his sandals, and he felt a spasm of self-disgust. “They'll think I'm a bloomin' idiot,” he said, and then it was he rose up desperately and threw over the sand-bag and provoked the second and third shots.

It flashed into his head, as he cowered in the bottom of the car, that he might avoid all sorts of disagreeable and complicated explanations by pretending to be mad.

That was his last idea before the airships seemed to rush up about him as if to look at him, and his car hit the ground and bounded and pitched him out on his head....

He awoke to find himself famous, and to hear a voice crying, “Booteraidge! Ja! Ja! Herr Booteraidge! Selbst!”

He was lying on a little patch of grass beside one of the main avenues of the aeronautic park. The airships receded down a great vista, an immense perspective, and the blunt prow of each was adorned with a black eagle of a hundred feet or so spread. Down the other side of the avenue ran a series of gas generators, and big hose-pipes trailed everywhere across the intervening space. Close at hand was his now nearly deflated balloon and the car on its side looking minutely small, a mere broken toy, a shrivelled bubble, in contrast with the gigantic bulk of the nearer airship. This he saw almost end-on, rising like a cliff and sloping forward towards its fellow on the other side so as to overshadow the alley between them. There was a crowd of excited people about him, big men mostly in tight uniforms. Everybody was talking, and several were shouting, in German; he knew that because they splashed and aspirated sounds like startled kittens.

Only one phrase, repeated again and again could he recognize—the name of “Herr Booteraidge.”

“Gollys!” said Bert. “They've spotted it.”

“Besser,” said some one, and some rapid German followed.

He perceived that close at hand was a field telephone, and that a tall officer in blue was talking thereat about him. Another stood close beside him with the portfolio of drawings and photographs in his hand. They looked round at him.

“Do you spik Cherman, Herr Booteraidge?”

Bert decided that he had better be dazed. He did his best to seem thoroughly dazed. “Where AM I?” he asked.

Volubility prevailed. “Der Prinz,” was mentioned. A bugle sounded far away, and its call was taken up by one nearer, and then by one close at hand. This seemed to increase the excitement greatly. A mono-rail car bumbled past. The telephone bell rang passionately, and the tall officer seemed to engage in a heated altercation. Then he approached the group about Bert, calling out something about “mitbringen.”

An earnest-faced, emaciated man with a white moustache appealed to Bert. “Herr Booteraidge, sir, we are chust to start!”

“Where am I?” Bert repeated.

Some one shook him by the other shoulder. “Are you Herr Booteraidge?” he asked.

“Herr Booteraidge, we are chust to start!” repeated the white moustache, and then helplessly, “What is de goot? What can we do?”

The officer from the telephone repeated his sentence about “Der Prinz” and “mitbringen.” The man with the moustache stared for a moment, grasped an idea and became violently energetic, stood up and bawled directions at unseen people. Questions were asked, and the doctor at Bert's side answered, “Ja! Ja!” several times, also something about “Kopf.” With a certain urgency he got Bert rather unwillingly to his feet. Two huge soldiers in grey advanced upon Bert and seized hold of him. “'Ullo!” said Bert, startled. “What's up?”

“It is all right,” the doctor explained; “they are to carry you.”

“Where?” asked Bert, unanswered.

“Put your arms roundt their—hals—round them!”

“Yes! but where?”

“Hold tight!”

Before Bert could decide to say anything more he was whisked up by the two soldiers. They joined hands to seat him, and his arms were put about their necks. “Vorwarts!” Some one ran before him with the portfolio, and he was borne rapidly along the broad avenue between the gas generators and the airships, rapidly and on the whole smoothly except that once or twice his bearers stumbled over hose-pipes and nearly let him down.

He was wearing Mr. Butteridge's Alpine cap, and his little shoulders were in Mr. Butteridge's fur-lined overcoat, and he had responded to Mr. Butteridge's name. The sandals dangled helplessly. Gaw! Everybody seemed in a devil of a hurry. Why? He was carried joggling and gaping through the twilight, marvelling beyond measure.

The systematic arrangement of wide convenient spaces, the quantities of business-like soldiers everywhere, the occasional neat piles of material, the ubiquitous mono-rail lines, and the towering ship-like hulls about him, reminded him a little of impressions he had got as a boy on a visit to Woolwich Dockyard. The whole camp reflected the colossal power of modern science that had created it. A peculiar strangeness was produced by the lowness of the electric light, which lay upon the ground, casting all shadows upwards and making a grotesque shadow figure of himself and his bearers on the airship sides, fusing all three of them into a monstrous animal with attenuated legs and an immense fan-like humped body. The lights were on the ground because as far as possible all poles and standards had been dispensed with to prevent complications when the airships rose.

It was deep twilight now, a tranquil blue-skyed evening; everything rose out from the splashes of light upon the ground into dim translucent tall masses; within the cavities of the airships small inspecting lamps glowed like cloud-veiled stars, and made them seem marvellously unsubstantial. Each airship had its name in black letters on white on either flank, and forward the Imperial eagle sprawled, an overwhelming bird in the dimness.

Bugles sounded, mono-rail cars of quiet soldiers slithered burbling by. The cabins under the heads of the airships were being lit up; doors opened in them, and revealed padded passages.

Now and then a voice gave directions to workers indistinctly seen.

There was a matter of sentinels, gangways and a long narrow passage, a scramble over a disorder of baggage, and then Bert found himself lowered to the ground and standing in the doorway of a spacious cabin—it was perhaps ten feet square and eight high, furnished with crimson padding and aluminium. A tall, bird-like young man with a small head, a long nose, and very pale hair, with his hands full of things like shaving-strops, boot-trees, hair-brushes, and toilet tidies, was saying things about Gott and thunder and Dummer Booteraidge as Bert entered. He was apparently an evicted occupant. Then he vanished, and Bert was lying back on a couch in the corner with a pillow under his head and the door of the cabin shut upon him. He was alone. Everybody had hurried out again astonishingly.

“Gollys!” said Bert. “What next?”

He stared about him at the room.

“Butteridge! Shall I try to keep it up, or shan't I?”

The room he was in puzzled him. “'Tisn't a prison and 'tisn't a norfis?” Then the old trouble came uppermost. “I wish to 'eaven I 'adn't these silly sandals on,” he cried querulously to the universe. “They give the whole blessed show away.”

3

His door was flung open, and a compact young man in uniform appeared, carrying Mr. Butteridge's portfolio, rucksac, and shaving-glass.

“I say!” he said in faultless English as he entered. He had a beaming face, and a sort of pinkish blond hair. “Fancy you being Butteridge.” He slapped Bert's meagre luggage down.

“We'd have started,” he said, “in another half-hour! You didn't give yourself much time!”

He surveyed Bert curiously. His gaze rested for a fraction of a moment on the sandals. “You ought to have come on your flying-machine, Mr. Butteridge.”

He didn't wait for an answer. “The Prince says I've got to look after you. Naturally he can't see you now, but he thinks your coming's providential. Last grace of Heaven. Like a sign. Hullo!”

He stood still and listened.

Outside there was a going to and fro of feet, a sound of distant bugles suddenly taken up and echoed close at hand, men called out in loud tones short, sharp, seemingly

vital things, and were answered distantly. A bell jangled, and feet went down the corridor. Then came a stillness more distracting than sound, and then a great gurgling and rushing and splashing of water. The young man's eyebrows lifted. He hesitated, and dashed out of the room. Presently came a stupendous bang to vary the noises without, then a distant cheering. The young man re-appeared.

“They're running the water out of the ballonette already.”

“What water?” asked Bert.

“The water that anchored us. Artful dodge. Eh?”

Bert tried to take it in.

“Of course!” said the compact young man. “You don't understand.”

A gentle quivering crept upon Bert's senses. “That's the engine,” said the compact young man approvingly. “Now we shan't be long.”

Another long listening interval.

The cabin swayed. “By Jove! we're starting already;” he cried. “We're starting!”

“Starting!” cried Bert, sitting up. “Where?”

But the young man was out of the room again. There were noises of German in the passage, and other nerve-shaking sounds.

The swaying increased. The young man reappeared. “We're off, right enough!”

“I say!” said Bert, “where are we starting? I wish you'd explain. What's this place? I don't understand.”

“What!” cried the young man, “you don't understand?”

“No. I'm all dazed-like from that crack on the nob I got. Where ARE we? WHERE are we starting?”

“Don't you know where you are—what this is?”

“Not a bit of it! What's all the swaying and the row?”

“What a lark!” cried the young man. “I say! What a thundering lark! Don't you know? We're off to America, and you haven't realised. You've just caught us by a neck. You're on the blessed old flagship with the Prince. You won't miss anything. Whatever's on, you bet the Vaterland will be there.”

“Us!—off to America?”

“Ra—ther!”

“In an airship?”

“What do YOU think?”

“Me! going to America on an airship! After that balloon! 'Ere! I say—I don't want to go! I want to walk about on my legs. Let me get out! I didn't understand.”

He made a dive for the door.

The young man arrested Bert with a gesture, took hold of a strap, lifted up a panel in the padded wall, and a window appeared. “Look!” he said. Side by side they looked out.

“Gaw!” said Bert. “We're going up!”

“We are!” said the young man, cheerfully; “fast!”

They were rising in the air smoothly and quietly, and moving slowly to the throb of the engine athwart the aeronautic park. Down below it stretched, dimly geometrical in the darkness, picked out at regular intervals by glow-worm spangles of light. One black gap in the long line of grey, round-backed airships marked the position from which the Vaterland had come. Beside it a second monster now rose softly, released from its bonds and cables into the air. Then, taking a beautifully exact distance, a third ascended, and then a fourth.

“Too late, Mr. Butteridge!” the young man remarked. “We're off! I daresay it is a bit of a shock to you, but there you are! The Prince said you'd have to come.”

“Look 'ere,” said Bert. “I really am dazed. What's this thing? Where are we going?”

“This, Mr. Butteridge,” said the young man, taking pains to be explicit, “is an airship. It's the flagship of Prince Karl Albert. This is the German air-fleet, and it is going over to America, to give that spirited people 'what for.' The only thing we were at all uneasy about was your invention. And here you are!”

“But!—you a German?” asked Bert.

“Lieutenant Kurt. Luft-lieutenant Kurt, at your service.”

“But you speak English!”

“Mother was English—went to school in England. Afterwards, Rhodes scholar. German none the less for that. Detailed for the present, Mr. Butteridge, to look after you. You're shaken by your fall. It's all right, really. They're going to buy your machine and everything. You sit down, and take it quite calmly. You'll soon get the hang of the position.”

4

Bert sat down on the locker, collecting his mind, and the young man talked to him about the airship.

He was really a very tactful young man indeed, in a natural sort of way. “Daresay all this is new to you,” he said; “not your sort of machine. These cabins aren't half bad.”

He got up and walked round the little apartment, showing its points.

“Here is the bed,” he said, whipping down a couch from the wall and throwing it back again with a click. “Here are toilet things,” and he opened a neatly arranged cupboard. “Not much washing. No water we've got; no water at all except for drinking. No baths or anything until we get to America and land. Rub over with loofah. One pint of hot for shaving. That's all. In the locker below you are rugs and blankets; you will need them presently. They say it gets cold. I don't know. Never been up before. Except a little work with gliders—which is mostly going down. Three-quarters of the chaps in the fleet haven't. Here's a folding-chair and table behind the door. Compact, eh?”

He took the chair and balanced it on his little finger. “Pretty light, eh? Aluminium and magnesium alloy and a vacuum inside. All these cushions stuffed with hydrogen. Foxy! The whole ship's like that. And not a man in the fleet, except the Prince and one or two others, over eleven stone. Couldn't sweat the Prince, you know. We'll go all over the thing to-morrow. I'm frightfully keen on it.”

He beamed at Bert. “You DO look young,” he remarked. “I always thought you'd be an old man with a beard—a sort of philosopher. I don't know why one should expect clever people always to be old. I do.”

Bert parried that compliment a little awkwardly, and then the lieutenant was struck with the riddle why Herr Butteridge had not come in his own flying machine.

“It's a long story,” said Bert. “Look here!” he said abruptly, “I wish you'd lend me a pair of slippers, or something. I'm regular sick of these sandals. They're rotten things. I've been trying them for a friend.”

“Right O!”

The ex-Rhodes scholar whisked out of the room and reappeared with a considerable choice of footwear—pumps, cloth bath-slippers, and a purple pair adorned with golden sun-flowers.

But these he repented of at the last moment.

“I don't even wear them myself,” he said. “Only brought 'em in the zeal of the moment.” He laughed confidentially. “Had 'em worked for me—in Oxford. By a friend. Take 'em everywhere.”

So Bert chose the pumps.

The lieutenant broke into a cheerful snigger. “Here we are trying on slippers,” he said, “and the world going by like a panorama below. Rather a lark, eh? Look!”

Bert peeped with him out of the window, looking from the bright pettiness of the red-and-silver cabin into a dark immensity. The land below, except for a lake, was black and featureless, and the other airships were hidden. “See more outside,” said the lieutenant. “Let's go! There's a sort of little gallery.”

He led the way into the long passage, which was lit by one small electric light, past some notices in German, to an open balcony and a light ladder and gallery of metal lattice overhanging, empty space. Bert followed his leader down to the gallery slowly and cautiously. From it he was able to watch the wonderful spectacle of the first air-fleet flying through the night. They flew in a wedge-shaped formation, the Vaterland highest and leading, the tail receding into the corners of the sky. They flew in long, regular undulations, great dark fish-like shapes, showing hardly any light at all, the engines making a throb-throb-throbbing sound that was very audible out on the gallery. They were going at a level of five or six thousand feet, and rising steadily. Below, the country lay silent, a clear darkness dotted and lined out with clusters of furnaces, and the lit streets of a group of big towns. The world seemed to lie in a bowl; the overhanging bulk of the airship above hid all but the lowest levels of the sky.

They watched the landscape for a space.

“Jolly it must be to invent things,” said the lieutenant suddenly. “How did you come to think of your machine first?”

“Worked it out,” said Bert, after a pause. “Jest ground away at it.”

“Our people are frightfully keen on you. They thought the British had got you. Weren't the British keen?”

“In a way,” said Bert. “Still—it's a long story.”

“I think it's an immense thing—to invent. I couldn't invent a thing to save my life.”

They both fell silent, watching the darkened world and following their thoughts until a bugle summoned them to a belated dinner. Bert was suddenly alarmed. “Don't you 'ave to dress and things?” he said. “I've always been too hard at Science and things to go into Society and all that.”

“No fear,” said Kurt. “Nobody's got more than the clothes they wear. We're travelling light. You might perhaps take your overcoat off. They've an electric radiator each end of the room.”

And so presently Bert found himself sitting to eat in the presence of the “German Alexander”—that great and puissant Prince, Prince Karl Albert, the War Lord, the hero of two hemispheres. He was a handsome, blond man, with deep-set eyes, a snub nose, upturned moustache, and long white hands, a strange-looking man. He sat higher than the others, under a black eagle with widespread wings and the German Imperial flags; he was, as it were, enthroned, and it struck Bert greatly that as he ate he did not look at people, but over their heads like one who sees visions. Twenty officers of various ranks stood about the table—and Bert. They all seemed extremely curious to see the famous Butteridge, and their astonishment at his appearance was ill-controlled. The Prince gave him a dignified salutation, to which, by an inspiration, he bowed. Standing next the Prince was a brown-faced, wrinkled man with silver spectacles and fluffy, dingy-grey side-whiskers, who regarded Bert with a peculiar and disconcerting attention. The company sat after ceremonies Bert could not understand. At the other end of the table was the bird-faced officer Bert had dispossessed, still looking hostile and whispering about Bert to his neighbour. Two soldiers waited. The dinner was a plain one—a soup, some fresh mutton, and cheese—and there was very little talk.

A curious solemnity indeed brooded over every one. Partly this was reaction after the intense toil and restrained excitement of starting; partly it was the overwhelming sense of strange new experiences, of portentous adventure. The Prince was lost in thought. He roused himself to drink to the Emperor in champagne, and the company cried “Hoch!” like men repeating responses in church.

No smoking was permitted, but some of the officers went down to the little open gallery to chew tobacco. No lights whatever were safe amidst that bundle of inflammable things. Bert suddenly fell yawning and shivering. He was overwhelmed by a sense of his own insignificance amidst these great rushing monsters of the air. He felt life was too big for him—too much for him altogether.

He said something to Kurt about his head, went up the steep ladder from the swaying little gallery into the airship again, and so, as if it were a refuge, to bed.