One sets down these particulars and compares the points of the American and German pattern of aeroplane and navigable, but none of these facts were clearly known to any of those who fought in this monstrously confused battle above the American great lakes.

Each side went into action against it knew not what, under novel conditions and with apparatus that even without hostile attacks was capable of producing the most disconcerting surprises. Schemes of action, attempts at collective manoeuvring necessarily went to pieces directly the fight began, just as they did in almost all the early ironclad battles of the previous century. Each captain then had to fall back upon individual action and his own devices; one would see triumph in what another read as a cue for flight and despair. It is as true of the Battle of Niagara as of the Battle of Lissa that it was not a battle but a bundle of “battlettes”!

To such a spectator as Bert it presented itself as a series of incidents, some immense, some trivial, but collectively incoherent. He never had a sense of any plain issue joined, of any point struggled for and won or lost. He saw tremendous things happen and in the end his world darkened to disaster and ruin.

He saw the battle from the ground, from Prospect Park and from Goat Island, whither he fled.

But the manner in which he came to be on the ground needs explaining.

The Prince had resumed command of his fleet through wireless telegraphy long before the Zeppelin had located his encampment in Labrador. By his direction the German air-fleet, whose advance scouts had been in contact with the Japanese over the Rocky Mountains, had concentrated upon Niagara and awaited his arrival. He had rejoined his command early in the morning of the twelfth, and Bert had his first prospect of the Gorge of Niagara while he was doing net drill outside the middle gas-chamber at sunrise. The Zeppelin was flying very high at the time, and far below he saw the water in the gorge marbled with froth and then away to the west the great crescent of the Canadian Fall shining, flickering and foaming in the level sunlight and sending up a deep, incessant thudding rumble to the sky. The air-fleet was keeping station in an enormous crescent, with its horns pointing south-westward, a long array of shining monsters with tails rotating slowly and German ensigns now trailing from their bellies aft of their Marconi pendants.

Niagara city was still largely standing then, albeit its streets were empty of all life. Its bridges were intact; its hotels and restaurants still flying flags and inviting sky signs; its

power-stations running. But about it the country on both sides of the gorge might have been swept by a colossal broom. Everything that could possibly give cover to an attack upon the German position at Niagara had been levelled as ruthlessly as machinery and explosives could contrive; houses blown up and burnt, woods burnt, fences and crops destroyed. The mono-rails had been torn up, and the roads in particular cleared of all possibility of concealment or shelter. Seen from above, the effect of this wreckage was grotesque. Young woods had been destroyed whole-sale by dragging wires, and the spoilt saplings, smashed or uprooted, lay in swathes like corn after the sickle. Houses had an appearance of being flattened down by the pressure of a gigantic finger. Much burning was still going on, and large areas had been reduced to patches of smouldering and sometimes still glowing blackness.

Here and there lay the debris of belated fugitives, carts, and dead bodies of horses and men; and where houses had had water-supplies there were pools of water and running springs from the ruptured pipes. In unscorched fields horses and cattle still fed peacefully. Beyond this desolated area the countryside was still standing, but almost all the people had fled. Buffalo was on fire to an enormous extent, and there were no signs of any efforts to grapple with the flames. Niagara city itself was being rapidly converted to the needs of a military depot. A large number of skilled engineers had already been brought from the fleet and were busily at work adapting the exterior industrial apparatus of the place to the purposes of an aeronautic park. They had made a gas recharging station at the corner of the American Fall above the funicular railway, and they were, opening up a much larger area to the south for the same purpose. Over the power-houses and hotels and suchlike prominent or important points the German flag was flying.

The Zeppelin circled slowly over this scene twice while the Prince surveyed it from the swinging gallery; it then rose towards the centre of the crescent and transferred the Prince and his suite, Kurt included, to the Hohenzollern, which had been chosen as the flagship during the impending battle. They were swung up on a small cable from the forward gallery, and the men of the Zeppelin manned the outer netting as the Prince and his staff left them. The Zeppelin then came about, circled down and grounded in Prospect Park, in order to land the wounded and take aboard explosives; for she had come to Labrador with her magazines empty, it being uncertain what weight she might need to carry. She also replenished the hydrogen in one of her forward chambers which had leaked.

Bert was detailed as a bearer and helped carry the wounded one by one into the nearest of the large hotels that faced the Canadian shore. The hotel was quite empty except that there were two trained American nurses and a negro porter, and three or

four Germans awaiting them. Bert went with the Zeppelin's doctor into the main street of the place, and they broke into a drug shop and obtained various things of which they stood in need. As they returned they found an officer and two men making a rough inventory of the available material in the various stores. Except for them the wide, main street of the town was quite deserted, the people had been given three hours to clear out, and everybody, it seemed, had done so. At one corner a dead man lay against the wall—shot. Two or three dogs were visible up the empty vista, but towards its river end the passage of a string of mono-rail cars broke the stillness and the silence. They were loaded with hose, and were passing to the trainful of workers who were converting Prospect Park into an airship dock.

Bert pushed a case of medicine balanced on a bicycle taken from an adjacent shop, to the hotel, and then he was sent to load bombs into the Zeppelin magazine, a duty that called for elaborate care. From this job he was presently called off by the captain of the Zeppelin, who sent him with a note to the officer in charge of the Anglo-American Power Company, for the field telephone had still to be adjusted. Bert received his instructions in German, whose meaning he guessed, and saluted and took the note, not caring to betray his ignorance of the language. He started off with a bright air of knowing his way and turned a corner or so, and was only beginning to suspect that he did not know where he was going when his attention was recalled to the sky by the report of a gun from the Hohenzollern and celestial cheering.

He looked up and found the view obstructed by the houses on either side of the street. He hesitated, and then curiosity took him back towards the bank of the river. Here his view was inconvenienced by trees, and it was with a start that he discovered the Zeppelin, which he knew had still a quarter of her magazines to fill, was rising over Goat Island. She had not waited for her complement of ammunition. It occurred to him that he was left behind. He ducked back among the trees and bushes until he felt secure from any after-thought on the part of the Zeppelin's captain. Then his curiosity to see what the German air-fleet faced overcame him, and drew him at last halfway across the bridge to Goat Island.

From that point he had nearly a hemisphere of sky and got his first glimpse of the Asiatic airships low in the sky above the glittering tumults of the Upper Rapids.

They were far less impressive than the German ships. He could not judge the distance, and they flew edgeways to him, so as to conceal the broader aspect of their bulk.

Bert stood there in the middle of the bridge, in a place that most people who knew it remembered as a place populous with sightseers and excursionists, and he was the only human being in sight there. Above him, very high in the heavens, the contending

air-fleets manoeuvred; below him the river seethed like a sluice towards the American Fall. He was curiously dressed. His cheap blue serge trousers were thrust into German airship rubber boots, and on his head he wore an aeronaut's white cap that was a trifle too large for him. He thrust that back to reveal his staring little Cockney face, still scarred upon the brow. “Gaw!” he whispered.

He stared. He gesticulated. Once or twice he shouted and applauded.

Then at a certain point terror seized him and he took to his heels in the direction of Goat Island.

4

For a time after they were in sight of each other, neither fleet attempted to engage. The Germans numbered sixty-seven great airships and they maintained the crescent formation at a height of nearly four thousand feet. They kept a distance of about one and a half lengths, so that the horns of the crescent were nearly thirty miles apart. Closely in tow of the airships of the extreme squadrons on either wing were about thirty drachenflieger ready manned, but these were too small and distant for Bert to distinguish.

At first, only what was called the Southern fleet of the Asiatics was visible to him. It consisted of forty airships, carrying all together nearly four hundred one-man flying-machines upon their flanks, and for some time it flew slowly and at a minimum distance of perhaps a dozen miles from the Germans, eastward across their front. At first Bert could distinguish only the greater bulks, then he perceived the one-man machines as a multitude of very small objects drifting like motes in the sunshine about and beneath the larger shapes.

Bert saw nothing then of the second fleet of the Asiatics, though probably that was coming into sight of the Germans at the time, in the north-west.

The air was very still, the sky almost without a cloud, and the German fleet had risen to an immense height, so that the airships seemed no longer of any considerable size. Both ends of their crescent showed plainly. As they beat southward they passed slowly between Bert and the sunlight, and became black outlines of themselves. The drachenflieger appeared as little flecks of black on either wing of this aerial Armada.

The two fleets seemed in no hurry to engage. The Asiatics went far away into the east, quickening their pace and rising as they did so, and then tailed out into a long column and came flying back, rising towards the German left. The squadrons of the latter came about, facing this oblique advance, and suddenly little flickerings and a faint

crepitating sound told that they had opened fire. For a time no effect was visible to the watcher on the bridge. Then, like a handful of snowflakes, the drachenflieger swooped to the attack, and a multitude of red specks whirled up to meet them. It was to Bert's sense not only enormously remote but singularly inhuman. Not four hours since he had been on one of those very airships, and yet they seemed to him now not gas-bags carrying men, but strange sentient creatures that moved about and did things with a purpose of their own. The flight of the Asiatic and German flying-machines joined and dropped earthward, became like a handful of white and red rose petals flung from a distant window, grew larger, until Bert could see the overturned ones spinning through the air, and were hidden by great volumes of dark smoke that were rising in the direction of Buffalo. For a time they all were hidden, then two or three white and a number of red ones rose again into the sky, like a swarm of big butterflies, and circled fighting and drove away out of sight again towards the east.

A heavy report recalled Bert's eyes to the zenith, and behold, the great crescent had lost its dressing and burst into a disorderly long cloud of airships! One had dropped halfway down the sky. It was flaming fore and aft, and even as Bert looked it turned over and fell, spinning over and over itself and vanished into the smoke of Buffalo.

Bert's mouth opened and shut, and he clutched tighter on the rail of the bridge. For some moments—they seemed long moments—the two fleets remained without any further change flying obliquely towards each other, and making what came to Bert's ears as a midget uproar. Then suddenly from either side airships began dropping out of alignment, smitten by missiles he could neither see nor trace. The string of Asiatic ships swung round and either charged into or over (it was difficult to say from below) the shattered line of the Germans, who seemed to open out to give way to them. Some sort of manoeuvring began, but Bert could not grasp its import. The left of the battle became a confused dance of airships. For some minutes up there the two crossing lines of ships looked so close it seemed like a hand-to-hand scuffle in the sky. Then they broke up into groups and duels. The descent of German air-ships towards the lower sky increased. One of them flared down and vanished far away in the north; two dropped with something twisted and crippled in their movements; then a group of antagonists came down from the zenith in an eddying conflict, two Asiatics against one German, and were presently joined by another, and drove away eastward all together with others dropping out of the German line to join them. One Asiatic either rammed or collided with a still more gigantic German, and the two went spinning to destruction together. The northern squadron of Asiatics came into the battle unnoted by Bert, except that the multitude of ships above seemed presently increased. In a little while the fight was utter confusion, drifting on the whole to the

south-west against the wind. It became more and more a series of group encounters. Here a huge German airship flamed earthward with a dozen flat Asiatic craft about her, crushing her every attempt to recover. Here another hung with its screw fighting off the swordsman from a swarm of flying-machines. Here, again, an Asiatic aflame at either end swooped out of the battle. His attention went from incident to incident in the vast clearness overhead; these conspicuous cases of destruction caught and held his mind; it was only very slowly that any sort of scheme manifested itself between those nearer, more striking episodes.

The mass of the airships that eddied remotely above was, however, neither destroying nor destroyed. The majority of them seemed to be going at full speed and circling upward for position, exchanging ineffectual shots as they did so. Very little ramming was essayed after the first tragic downfall of rammer and rammed, and what ever attempts at boarding were made were invisible to Bert. There seemed, however, a steady attempt to isolate antagonists, to cut them off from their fellows and bear them down, causing a perpetual sailing back and interlacing of these shoaling bulks. The greater numbers of the Asiatics and their swifter heeling movements gave them the effect of persistently attacking the Germans. Overhead, and evidently endeavouring to keep itself in touch with the works of Niagara, a body of German airships drew itself together into a compact phalanx, and the Asiatics became more and more intent upon breaking this up. He was grotesquely reminded of fish in a fish-pond struggling for crumbs. He could see puny puffs of smoke and the flash of bombs, but never a sound came down to him....

A flapping shadow passed for a moment between Bert and the sun and was followed by another. A whirring of engines, click, clock, clitter clock, smote upon his ears. Instantly he forgot the zenith.

Perhaps a hundred yards above the water, out of the south, riding like Valkyries swiftly through the air on the strange steeds the engineering of Europe had begotten upon the artistic inspiration of Japan, came a long string of Asiatic swordsman. The wings flapped jerkily, click, clock, clitter clock, and the machines drove up; they spread and ceased, and the apparatus came soaring through the air. So they rose and fell and rose again. They passed so closely overhead that Bert could hear their voices calling to one another. They swooped towards Niagara city and landed one after another in a long line in a clear space before the hotel. But he did not stay to watch them land. One yellow face had craned over and looked at him, and for one enigmatical instant met his eyes....

It was then the idea came to Bert that he was altogether too conspicuous in the middle of the bridge, and that he took to his heels towards Goat Island. Thence, dodging about among the trees, with perhaps an excessive self-consciousness, he watched the rest of the struggle.

5

When Bert's sense of security was sufficiently restored for him to watch the battle again, he perceived that a brisk little fight was in progress between the Asiatic aeronauts and the German engineers for the possession of Niagara city. It was the first time in the whole course of the war that he had seen anything resembling fighting as he had studied it in the illustrated papers of his youth. It seemed to him almost as though things were coming right. He saw men carrying rifles and taking cover and running briskly from point to point in a loose attacking formation. The first batch of aeronauts had probably been under the impression that the city was deserted. They had grounded in the open near Prospect Park and approached the houses towards the power-works before they were disillusioned by a sudden fire. They had scattered back to the cover of a bank near the water—it was too far for them to reach their machines again; they were lying and firing at the men in the hotels and frame-houses about the power-works.

Then to their support came a second string of red flying-machines driving up from the east. They rose up out of the haze above the houses and came round in a long curve as if surveying the position below. The fire of the Germans rose to a roar, and one of those soaring shapes gave an abrupt jerk backward and fell among the houses. The others swooped down exactly like great birds upon the roof of the power-house. They caught upon it, and from each sprang a nimble little figure and ran towards the parapet.

Other flapping bird-shapes came into this affair, but Bert had not seen their coming. A staccato of shots came over to him, reminding him of army manoeuvres, of newspaper descriptions of fights, of all that was entirely correct in his conception of warfare. He saw quite a number of Germans running from the outlying houses towards the power-house. Two fell. One lay still, but the other wriggled and made efforts for a time. The hotel that was used as a hospital, and to which he had helped carry the wounded men from the Zeppelin earlier in the day, suddenly ran up the Geneva flag. The town that had seemed so quiet had evidently been concealing a considerable number of Germans, and they were now concentrating to hold the central power-house. He wondered what ammunition they might have. More and more of the Asiatic flying-machines came into the conflict. They had disposed of the unfortunate German

drachenflieger and were now aiming at the incipient aeronautic park,—the electric gas generators and repair stations which formed the German base. Some landed, and their aeronauts took cover and became energetic infantry soldiers. Others hovered above the fight, their men ever and again firing shots down at some chance exposure below. The firing came in paroxysms; now there would be a watchful lull and now a rapid tattoo of shots, rising to a roar. Once or twice flying machines, as they circled warily, came right overhead, and for a time Bert gave himself body and soul to cowering.

Ever and again a larger thunder mingled with the rattle and reminded him of the grapple of airships far above, but the nearer fight held his attention.

Abruptly something dropped from the zenith; something like a barrel or a huge football.

CRASH! It smashed with an immense report. It had fallen among the grounded Asiatic aeroplanes that lay among the turf and flower-beds near the river. They flew in scraps and fragments, turf, trees, and gravel leapt and fell; the aeronauts still lying along the canal bank were thrown about like sacks, catspaws flew across the foaming water. All the windows of the hotel hospital that had been shiningly reflecting blue sky and airships the moment before became vast black stars. Bang!—a second followed. Bert looked up and was filled with a sense of a number of monstrous bodies swooping down, coming down on the whole affair like a flight of bellying blankets, like a string of vast dish-covers. The central tangle of the battle above was circling down as if to come into touch with the power-house fight. He got a new effect of airships altogether, as vast things coming down upon him, growing swiftly larger and larger and more overwhelming, until the houses over the way seemed small, the American rapids narrow, the bridge flimsy, the combatants infinitesimal. As they came down they became audible as a complex of shootings and vast creakings and groanings and beatings and throbbings and shouts and shots. The fore-shortened black eagles at the fore-ends of the Germans had an effect of actual combat of flying feathers.

Some of these fighting airships came within five hundred feet of the ground. Bert could see men on the lower galleries of the Germans, firing rifles; could see Asiatics clinging to the ropes; saw one man in aluminium diver's gear fall flashing headlong into the waters above Goat Island. For the first time he saw the Asiatic airships closely. From this aspect they reminded him more than anything else of colossal snowshoes; they had a curious patterning in black and white, in forms that reminded him of the engine-turned cover of a watch. They had no hanging galleries, but from little openings on the middle line peeped out men and the muzzles of guns. So, driving

in long, descending and ascending curves, these monsters wrestled and fought. It was like clouds fighting, like puddings trying to assassinate each other. They whirled and circled about each other, and for a time threw Goat Island and Niagara into a smoky twilight, through which the sunlight smote in shafts and beams. They spread and closed and spread and grappled and drove round over the rapids, and two miles away or more into Canada, and back over the Falls again. A German caught fire, and the whole crowd broke away from her flare and rose about her dispersing, leaving her to drop towards Canada and blow up as she dropped. Then with renewed uproar the others closed again. Once from the men in Niagara city came a sound like an ant-hill cheering. Another German burnt, and one badly deflated by the prow of an antagonist, flopped out of action southward.

It became more and more evident that the Germans were getting the worst of the unequal fight. More and more obviously were they being persecuted. Less and less did they seem to fight with any object other than escape. The Asiatics swept by them and above them, ripped their bladders, set them alight, picked off their dimly seen men in diving clothes, who struggled against fire and tear with fire extinguishers and silk ribbons in the inner netting. They answered only with ineffectual shots. Thence the battle circled back over Niagara, and then suddenly the Germans, as if at a preconcerted signal, broke and dispersed, going east, west, north, and south, in open and confused flight. The Asiatics, as they realised this, rose to fly above them and after them. Only one little knot of four Germans and perhaps a dozen Asiatics remained fighting about the Hohenzollern and the Prince as he circled in a last attempt to save Niagara.

Round they swooped once again over the Canadian Fall, over the waste of waters eastward, until they were distant and small, and then round and back, hurrying, bounding, swooping towards the one gaping spectator.

The whole struggling mass approached very swiftly, growing rapidly larger, and coming out black and featureless against the afternoon sun and above the blinding welter of the Upper Rapids. It grew like a storm cloud until once more it darkened the sky. The flat Asiatic airships kept high above the Germans and behind them, and fired unanswered bullets into their gas-chambers and upon their flanks—the one-man flying-machines hovered and alighted like a swarm of attacking bees. Nearer they came, and nearer, filling the lower heaven. Two of the Germans swooped and rose again, but the Hohenzollern had suffered too much for that. She lifted weakly, turned sharply as if to get out of the battle, burst into flames fore and aft, swept down to the water, splashed into it obliquely, and rolled over and over and came down stream rolling and smashing and writhing like a thing alive, halting and then coming on again,

with her torn and bent propeller still beating the air. The bursting flames spluttered out again in clouds of steam. It was a disaster gigantic in its dimensions. She lay across the rapids like an island, like tall cliffs, tall cliffs that came rolling, smoking, and crumpling, and collapsing, advancing with a sort of fluctuating rapidity upon Bert. One Asiatic airship—it looked to Bert from below like three hundred yards of pavement—whirled back and circled two or three times over that great overthrow, and half a dozen crimson flying-machines danced for a moment like great midges in the sunlight before they swept on after their fellows. The rest of the fight had already gone over the island, a wild crescendo of shots and yells and smashing uproar. It was hidden from Bert now by the trees of the island, and forgotten by him in the nearer spectacle of the huge advance of the defeated German airship. Something fell with a mighty smashing and splintering of boughs unheeded behind him.

It seemed for a time that the Hohenzollern must needs break her back upon the Parting of the Waters, and then for a time her propeller flopped and frothed in the river and thrust the mass of buckling, crumpled wreckage towards the American shore. Then the sweep of the torrent that foamed down to the American Fall caught her, and in another minute the immense mass of deflating wreckage, with flames spurting out in three new places, had crashed against the bridge that joined Goat Island and Niagara city, and forced a long arm, as it were, in a heaving tangle under the central span. Then the middle chambers blew up with a loud report, and in another moment the bridge had given way and the main bulk of the airship, like some grotesque cripple in rags, staggered, flapping and waving flambeaux to the crest of the Fall and hesitated there and vanished in a desperate suicidal leap.

Its detached fore-end remained jammed against that little island, Green Island it used to be called, which forms the stepping-stone between the mainland and Goat Island's patch of trees.

Bert followed this disaster from the Parting of the Waters to the bridge head. Then, regardless of cover, regardless of the Asiatic airship hovering like a huge house roof without walls above the Suspension Bridge, he sprinted along towards the north and came out for the first time upon that rocky point by Luna Island that looks sheer down upon the American Fall. There he stood breathless amidst that eternal rush of sound, breathless and staring.

Far below, and travelling rapidly down the gorge, whirled something like a huge empty sack. For him it meant—what did it not mean?—the German air-fleet, Kurt, the Prince, Europe, all things stable and familiar, the forces that had brought him, the forces that had seemed indisputably victorious. And it went down the rapids like an empty sack

and left the visible world to Asia, to yellow people beyond Christendom, to all that was terrible and strange!

Remote over Canada receded the rest of that conflict and vanished beyond the range of his vision....

CHAPTER IX. ON GOAT ISLAND

1

The whack of a bullet on the rocks beside him reminded him that he was a visible object and wearing at least portions of a German uniform. It drove him into the trees again, and for a time he dodged and dropped and sought cover like a chick hiding among reeds from imaginary hawks.

“Beaten,” he whispered. “Beaten and done for... Chinese! Yellow chaps chasing 'em!”

At last he came to rest in a clump of bushes near a locked-up and deserted refreshment shed within view of the American side. They made a sort of hole and harbour for him; they met completely overhead. He looked across the rapids, but the firing had ceased now altogether and everything seemed quiet. The Asiatic aeroplane had moved from its former position above the Suspension Bridge, was motionless now above Niagara city, shadowing all that district about the power-house which had been the scene of the land fight. The monster had an air of quiet and assured predominance, and from its stern it trailed, serene and ornamental, a long streaming flag, the red, black, and yellow of the great alliance, the Sunrise and the Dragon. Beyond, to the east, at a much higher level, hung a second consort, and Bert, presently gathering courage, wriggled out and craned his neck to find another still airship against the sunset in the south.

“Gaw!” he said. “Beaten and chased! My Gawd!”

The fighting, it seemed at first, was quite over in Niagara city, though a German flag was still flying from one shattered house. A white sheet was hoisted above the power-house, and this remained flying all through the events that followed. But presently came a sound of shots and then German soldiers running. They disappeared among the houses, and then came two engineers in blue shirts and trousers hotly pursued by three Japanese swordsman. The foremost of the two fugitives was a shapely man, and ran lightly and well; the second was a sturdy little man, and rather fat. He ran

comically in leaps and bounds, with his plump arms bent up by his side and his head thrown back. The pursuers ran with uniforms and dark thin metal and leather head-dresses. The little man stumbled, and Bert gasped, realising a new horror in war.

The foremost swordsman won three strides on him and was near enough to slash at him and miss as he spurted.

A dozen yards they ran, and then the swordsman slashed again, and Bert could hear across the waters a little sound like the moo of an elfin cow as the fat little man fell forward. Slash went the swordsman and slash at something on the ground that tried to save itself with ineffectual hands. “Oh, I carn't!” cried Bert, near blubbering, and staring with starting eyes.

The swordsman slashed a fourth time and went on as his fellows came up after the better runner. The hindmost swordsman stopped and turned back. He had perceived some movement perhaps; but at any rate he stood, and ever and again slashed at the fallen body.

“Oo-oo!” groaned Bert at every slash, and shrank closer into the bushes and became very still. Presently came a sound of shots from the town, and then everything was quiet, everything, even the hospital.

He saw presently little figures sheathing swords come out from the houses and walk to the debris of the flying-machines the bomb had destroyed. Others appeared wheeling undamaged aeroplanes upon their wheels as men might wheel bicycles, and sprang into the saddles and flapped into the air. A string of three airships appeared far away in the east and flew towards the zenith. The one that hung low above Niagara city came still lower and dropped a rope ladder to pick up men from the power-house.

For a long time he watched the further happenings in Niagara city as a rabbit might watch a meet. He saw men going from building to building, to set fire to them, as he presently realised, and he heard a series of dull detonations from the wheel pit of the power-house. Some similar business went on among the works on the Canadian side. Meanwhile more and more airships appeared, and many more flying-machines, until at last it seemed to him nearly a third of the Asiatic fleet had re-assembled. He watched them from his bush, cramped but immovable, watched them gather and range themselves and signal and pick up men, until at last they sailed away towards the glowing sunset, going to the great Asiatic rendez-vous, above the oil wells of Cleveland. They dwindled and passed away, leaving him alone, so far as he could tell, the only living man in a world of ruin and strange loneliness almost beyond describing. He watched them recede and vanish. He stood gaping after them.

“Gaw!” he said at last, like one who rouses himself from a trance.

It was far more than any personal desolation extremity that flooded his soul. It seemed to him indeed that this must be the sunset of his race.

2

He did not at first envisage his own plight in definite and comprehensible terms. Things happened to him so much of late, his own efforts had counted for so little, that he had become passive and planless. His last scheme had been to go round the coast of England as a Desert Dervish giving refined entertainment to his fellow-creatures. Fate had quashed that. Fate had seen fit to direct him to other destinies, had hurried him from point to point, and dropped him at last upon this little wedge of rock between the cataracts. It did not instantly occur to him that now it was his turn to play. He had a singular feeling that all must end as a dream ends, that presently surely he would be back in the world of Grubb and Edna and Bun Hill, that this roar, this glittering presence of incessant water, would be drawn aside as a curtain is drawn aside after a holiday lantern show, and old familiar, customary things re-assume their sway. It would be interesting to tell people how he had seen Niagara. And then Kurt's words came into his head: “People torn away from the people they care for; homes smashed, creatures full of life and memories and peculiar little gifts—torn to pieces, starved, and spoilt.”...

He wondered, half incredulous, if that was in deed true. It was so hard to realise it. Out beyond there was it possible that Tom and Jessica were also in some dire extremity? that the little green-grocer's shop was no longer standing open, with Jessica serving respectfully, warming Tom's ear in sharp asides, or punctually sending out the goods?

He tried to think what day of the week it was, and found he had lost his reckoning. Perhaps it was Sunday. If so, were they going to church or, were they hiding, perhaps in bushes? What had happened to the landlord, the butcher, and to Butteridge and all those people on Dymchurch beach? Something, he knew, had happened to London—a bombardment. But who had bombarded? Were Tom and Jessica too being chased by strange brown men with long bare swords and evil eyes? He thought of various possible aspects of affliction, but presently one phase ousted all the others. Were they getting much to eat? The question haunted him, obsessed him.

If one was very hungry would one eat rats?

It dawned upon him that a peculiar misery that oppressed him was not so much anxiety and patriotic sorrow as hunger. Of course he was hungry!

He reflected and turned his steps towards the little refreshment shed that stood near the end of the ruined bridge. “Ought to be somethin'—”

He strolled round it once or twice, and then attacked the shutters with his pocket-knife, reinforced presently by a wooden stake he found conveniently near. At last he got a shutter to give, and tore it back and stuck in his head.

“Grub,” he remarked, “anyhow. Leastways—”

He got at the inside fastening of the shutter and had presently this establishment open for his exploration. He found several sealed bottles of sterilized milk, much mineral water, two tins of biscuits and a crock of very stale cakes, cigarettes in great quantity but very dry, some rather dry oranges, nuts, some tins of canned meat and fruit, and plates and knives and forks and glasses sufficient for several score of people. There was also a zinc locker, but he was unable to negotiate the padlock of this.

“Shan't starve,” said Bert, “for a bit, anyhow.” He sat on the vendor's seat and regaled himself with biscuits and milk, and felt for a moment quite contented.

“Quite restful,” he muttered, munching and glancing about him restlessly, “after what I been through.

“Crikey! WOT a day! Oh! WOT a day!”

Wonder took possession of him. “Gaw!” he cried: “Wot a fight it's been! Smashing up the poor fellers! 'Eadlong! The airships—the fliers and all. I wonder what happened to the Zeppelin?... And that chap Kurt—I wonder what happened to 'im? 'E was a good sort of chap, was Kurt.”

Some phantom of imperial solicitude floated through his mind. “Injia,” he said....

A more practical interest arose.

“I wonder if there's anything to open one of these tins of corned beef?”

3

After he had feasted, Bert lit a cigarette and sat meditative for a time. “Wonder where Grubb is?” he said; “I do wonder that! Wonder if any of 'em wonder about me?”

He reverted to his own circumstances. “Dessay I shall 'ave to stop on this island for some time.”

He tried to feel at his ease and secure, but presently the indefinable restlessness of the social animal in solitude distressed him. He began to want to look over his shoulder, and, as a corrective, roused himself to explore the rest of the island.

It was only very slowly that he began to realise the peculiarities of his position, to perceive that the breaking down of the arch between Green Island and the mainland had cut him off completely from the world. Indeed it was only when he came back to where the fore-end of the Hohenzollern lay like a stranded ship, and was contemplating the shattered bridge, that this dawned upon him. Even then it came with no sort of shock to his mind, a fact among a number of other extraordinary and unmanageable facts. He stared at the shattered cabins of the Hohenzollern and its widow's garment of dishevelled silk for a time, but without any idea of its containing any living thing; it was all so twisted and smashed and entirely upside down. Then for a while he gazed at the evening sky. A cloud haze was now appearing and not an airship was in sight. A swallow flew by and snapped some invisible victim. “Like a dream,” he repeated.

Then for a time the rapids held his mind. “Roaring. It keeps on roaring and splashin' always and always. Keeps on....”

At last his interests became personal. “Wonder what I ought to do now?”

He reflected. “Not an idee,” he said.

He was chiefly conscious that a fortnight ago he had been in Bun Hill with no idea of travel in his mind, and that now he was between the Falls of Niagara amidst the devastation and ruins of the greatest air fight in the world, and that in the interval he had been across France, Belgium, Germany, England, Ireland, and a number of other countries. It was an interesting thought and suitable for conversation, but of no great practical utility. “Wonder 'ow I can get orf this?” he said. “Wonder if there is a way out? If not... rummy!”

Further reflection decided, “I believe I got myself in a bit of a 'ole coming over that bridge....

“Any'ow—got me out of the way of them Japanesy chaps. Wouldn't 'ave taken 'em long to cut MY froat. No. Still—”

He resolved to return to the point of Luna Island. For a long time he stood without stirring, scrutinising the Canadian shore and the wreckage of hotels and houses and the fallen trees of the Victoria Park, pink now in the light of sundown. Not a human being was perceptible in that scene of headlong destruction. Then he came back to

the American side of the island, crossed close to the crumpled aluminium wreckage of the Hohenzollern to Green Islet, and scrutinised the hopeless breach in the further bridge and the water that boiled beneath it. Towards Buffalo there was still much smoke, and near the position of the Niagara railway station the houses were burning vigorously. Everything was deserted now, everything was still. One little abandoned thing lay on a transverse path between town and road, a crumpled heap of clothes with sprawling limbs....

"'Ave a look round," said Bert, and taking a path that ran through the middle of the island he presently discovered the wreckage of the two Asiatic aeroplanes that had fallen out of the struggle that ended the Hohenzollern.

With the first he found the wreckage of an aeronaut too.

The machine had evidently dropped vertically and was badly knocked about amidst a lot of smashed branches in a clump of trees. Its bent and broken wings and shattered stays sprawled amidst new splintered wood, and its forepeak stuck into the ground. The aeronaut dangled weirdly head downward among the leaves and branches some yards away, and Bert only discovered him as he turned from the aeroplane. In the dusky evening light and stillness—for the sun had gone now and the wind had altogether fallen—this inverted yellow face was anything but a tranquilising object to discover suddenly a couple of yards away. A broken branch had run clean through the man's thorax, and he hung, so stabbed, looking limp and absurd. In his hand he still clutched, with the grip of death, a short light rifle.

For some time Bert stood very still, inspecting this thing.

Then he began to walk away from it, looking constantly back at it.

Presently in an open glade he came to a stop.

"Gaw!" he whispered, "I don' like dead bodies some'ow! I'd almost rather that chap was alive."

He would not go along the path athwart which the Chinaman hung. He felt he would rather not have trees round him any more, and that it would be more comfortable to be quite close to the sociable splash and uproar of the rapids.

He came upon the second aeroplane in a clear grassy space by the side of the streaming water, and it seemed scarcely damaged at all. It looked as though it had floated down into a position of rest. It lay on its side with one wing in the air. There was no aeronaut near it, dead or alive. There it lay abandoned, with the water lapping about its long tail.

Bert remained a little aloof from it for a long time, looking into the gathering shadows among the trees, in the expectation of another Chinaman alive or dead. Then very cautiously he approached the machine and stood regarding its widespread vans, its big steering wheel and empty saddle. He did not venture to touch it.

“I wish that other chap wasn't there,” he said. “I do wish 'e wasn't there!”

He saw a few yards away, something bobbing about in an eddy that spun within a projecting head of rock. As it went round it seemed to draw him unwillingly towards it....

What could it be?

“Blow!” said Bert. “It's another of 'em.”

It held him. He told himself that it was the other aeronaut that had been shot in the fight and fallen out of the saddle as he strove to land. He tried to go away, and then it occurred to him that he might get a branch or something and push this rotating object out into the stream. That would leave him with only one dead body to worry about. Perhaps he might get along with one. He hesitated and then with a certain emotion forced himself to do this. He went towards the bushes and cut himself a wand and returned to the rocks and clambered out to a corner between the eddy and the stream, By that time the sunset was over and the bats were abroad—and he was wet with perspiration.

He prodded the floating blue-clad thing with his wand, failed, tried again successfully as it came round, and as it went out into the stream it turned over, the light gleamed on golden hair and—it was Kurt!

It was Kurt, white and dead and very calm. There was no mistaking him. There was still plenty of light for that. The stream took him and he seemed to compose himself in its swift grip as one who stretches himself to rest. White-faced he was now, and all the colour gone out of him.

A feeling of infinite distress swept over Bert as the body swept out of sight towards the fall. “Kurt!” he cried, “Kurt! I didn't mean to! Kurt! don' leave me 'ere! Don' leave me!”

Loneliness and desolation overwhelmed him. He gave way. He stood on the rock in the evening light, weeping and wailing passionately like a child. It was as though some link that had held him to all these things had broken and gone. He was afraid like a child in a lonely room, shamelessly afraid.

The twilight was closing about him. The trees were full now of strange shadows. All the things about him became strange and unfamiliar with that subtle queerness one feels oftenest in dreams. “O God! I carn' stand this,” he said, and crept back from the rocks to the grass and crouched down, and suddenly wild sorrow for the death of Kurt, Kurt the brave, Kurt the kindly, came to his help and he broke from whimpering to weeping. He ceased to crouch; he sprawled upon the grass and clenched an impotent fist.

“This war,” he cried, “this blarsted foolery of a war.

“O Kurt! Lieutenant Kurt!

“I done,” he said, “I done. I've 'ad all I want, and more than I want. The world's all rot, and there ain't no sense in it. The night's coming.... If 'E comes after me—'E can't come after me—'E can't!...

“If 'E comes after me, I'll fro' myself into the water.”...

Presently he was talking again in a low undertone.

“There ain't nothing to be afraid of reely. It's jest imagination. Poor old Kurt—he thought it would happen. Prevision like. 'E never gave me that letter or tole me who the lady was. It's like what 'e said—people tore away from everything they belonged to—everywhere. Exactly like what 'e said.... 'Ere I am cast away—thousands of miles from Edna or Grubb or any of my lot—like a plant tore up by the roots.... And every war's been like this, only I 'adn't the sense to understand it. Always. All sorts of 'oles and corners chaps 'ave died in. And people 'adn't the sense to understand, 'adn't the sense to feel it and stop it. Thought war was fine. My Gawd!...

“Dear old Edna. She was a fair bit of all right—she was. That time we 'ad a boat at Kingston....

“I bet—I'll see 'er again yet. Won't be my fault if I don't.”...

4

Suddenly, on the very verge of this heroic resolution, Bert became rigid with terror. Something was creeping towards him through the grass. Something was creeping and halting and creeping again towards him through the dim dark grass. The night was electrical with horror. For a time everything was still. Bert ceased to breathe. It could not be. No, it was too small!

It advanced suddenly upon him with a rush, with a little meawling cry and tail erect. It rubbed its head against him and purred. It was a tiny, skinny little kitten.

“Gaw, Pussy! 'ow you frightened me!” said Bert, with drops of perspiration on his brow.

5

He sat with his back to a tree stump all that night, holding the kitten in his arms. His mind was tired, and he talked or thought coherently no longer. Towards dawn he dozed.

When he awoke, he was stiff but in better heart, and the kitten slept warmly and reassuringly inside his jacket. And fear, he found, had gone from amidst the trees.

He stroked the kitten, and the little creature woke up to excessive fondness and purring. “You want some milk,” said Bert. “That's what you want. And I could do with a bit of brekker too.”

He yawned and stood up, with the kitten on his shoulder, and stared about him, recalling the circumstances of the previous day, the grey, immense happenings.

“Mus' do something,” he said.

He turned towards the trees, and was presently contemplating the dead aeronaut again. The kitten he held companionably against his neck. The body was horrible, but not nearly so horrible as it had been at twilight, and now the limbs were limper and the gun had slipped to the ground and lay half hidden in the grass.

“I suppose we ought to bury 'im, Kitty,” said Bert, and looked helplessly at the rocky soil about him. “We got to stay on the island with 'im.”

It was some time before he could turn away and go on towards that provision shed. “Brekker first,” he said, “anyhow,” stroking the kitten on his shoulder. She rubbed his cheek affectionately with her furry little face and presently nibbled at his ear. “Wan' some milk, eh?” he said, and turned his back on the dead man as though he mattered nothing.

He was puzzled to find the door of the shed open, though he had closed and latched it very carefully overnight, and he found also some dirty plates he had not noticed before on the bench. He discovered that the hinges of the tin locker were unscrewed and that it could be opened. He had not observed this overnight.

“Silly of me!” said Bert. “'Ere I was puzzlin' and whackin' away at the padlock, never noticing.” It had been used apparently as an ice-chest, but it contained nothing now but the remains of half-dozen boiled chickens, some ambiguous substance that might once have been butter, and a singularly unappetising smell. He closed the lid again carefully.

He gave the kitten some milk in a dirty plate and sat watching its busy little tongue for a time. Then he was moved to make an inventory of the provisions. There were six bottles of milk unopened and one opened, sixty bottles of mineral water and a large stock of syrups, about two thousand cigarettes and upwards of a hundred cigars, nine oranges, two unopened tins of corned beef and one opened, and five large tins California peaches. He jotted it down on a piece of paper. "'Ain't much solid food," he said. "Still—A fortnight, say!

"Anything might happen in a fortnight."

He gave the kitten a small second helping and a scrap of beef and then went down with the little creature running after him, tail erect and in high spirits, to look at the remains of the Hohenzollern.

It had shifted in the night and seemed on the whole more firmly grounded on Green Island than before. From it his eye went to the shattered bridge and then across to the still desolation of Niagara city. Nothing moved over there but a number of crows. They were busy with the engineer he had seen cut down on the previous day. He saw no dogs, but he heard one howling.

"We got to get out of this some'ow, Kitty," he said. "That milk won't last forever—not at the rate you lap it."

He regarded the sluice-like flood before him.

"Plenty of water," he said. "Won't be drink we shall want."

He decided to make a careful exploration of the island. Presently he came to a locked gate labelled "Biddle Stairs," and clambered over to discover a steep old wooden staircase leading down the face of the cliff amidst a vast and increasing uproar of waters. He left the kitten above and descended these, and discovered with a thrill of hope a path leading among the rocks at the foot of the roaring downrush of the Centre Fall. Perhaps this was a sort of way!

It led him only to the choking and deafening experience of the Cave of the Winds, and after he had spent a quarter of an hour in a partially stupefied condition flattened between solid rock and nearly as solid waterfall, he decided that this was after all no practicable route to Canada and retraced his steps. As he reascended the Biddle Stairs, he heard what he decided at last must be a sort of echo, a sound of some one walking about on the gravel paths above. When he got to the top, the place was as solitary as before.

Thence he made his way, with the kitten skirmishing along beside him in the grass, to a staircase that led to a lump of projecting rock that enfiladed the huge green majesty of the Horseshoe Fall. He stood there for some time in silence.

“You wouldn't think,” he said at last, “there was so much water.... This roarin' and splashin', it gets on one's nerves at last.... Sounds like people talking.... Sounds like people going about.... Sounds like anything you fancy.”

He retired up the staircase again. “I s'pose I shall keep on goin' round this blessed island,” he said drearily. “Round and round and round.”

He found himself presently beside the less damaged Asiatic aeroplane again. He stared at it and the kitten smelt it. “Broke!” he said.

He looked up with a convulsive start.

Advancing slowly towards him out from among the trees were two tall gaunt figures. They were blackened and tattered and bandaged; the hind-most one limped and had his head swathed in white, but the foremost one still carried himself as a Prince should do, for all that his left arm was in a sling and one side of his face scalded a livid crimson. He was the Prince Karl Albert, the War Lord, the “German Alexander,” and the man behind him was the bird-faced man whose cabin had once been taken from him and given to Bert.

6

With that apparition began a new phase of Goat Island in Bert's experience. He ceased to be a solitary representative of humanity in a vast and violent and incomprehensible universe, and became once more a social creature, a man in a world of other men. For an instant these two were terrible, then they seemed sweet and desirable as brothers. They too were in this scrape with him, marooned and puzzled. He wanted extremely to hear exactly what had happened to them. What mattered it if one was a Prince and both were foreign soldiers, if neither perhaps had adequate English? His native Cockney freedom flowed too generously for him to think of that, and surely the Asiatic fleets had purged all such trivial differences. “Ul-LO!” he said; “'ow did you get 'ere?”

“It is the Englishman who brought us the Butteridge machine,” said the bird-faced officer in German, and then in a tone of horror, as Bert advanced, “Salute!” and again louder, “SALUTE!”

“Gaw!” said Bert, and stopped with a second comment under his breath. He stared and saluted awkwardly and became at once a masked defensive thing with whom co-operation was impossible.

For a time these two perfected modern aristocrats stood regarding the difficult problem of the Anglo-Saxon citizen, that ambiguous citizen who, obeying some mysterious law in his blood, would neither drill nor be a democrat. Bert was by no means a beautiful object, but in some inexplicable way he looked resistant. He wore his cheap suit of serge, now showing many signs of wear, and its loose fit made him seem sturdier than he was; above his disengaging face was a white German cap that was altogether too big for him, and his trousers were crumpled up his legs and their ends tucked into the rubber highlows of a deceased German aeronaut. He looked an inferior, though by no means an easy inferior, and instinctively they hated him.

The Prince pointed to the flying-machine and said something in broken English that Bert took for German and failed to understand. He intimated as much.

“Dummer Kerl!” said the bird-faced officer from among his bandages.

The Prince pointed again with his undamaged hand. “You verstehen dis drachenflieger?”

Bert began to comprehend the situation. He regarded the Asiatic machine. The habits of Bun Hill returned to him. “It's a foreign make,” he said ambiguously.

The two Germans consulted. “You are an expert?” said the Prince.

“We reckon to repair,” said Bert, in the exact manner of Grubb.

The Prince sought in his vocabulary. “Is dat,” he said, “goot to fly?”

Bert reflected and scratched his cheek slowly. “I got to look at it,” he replied…. “It's 'ad rough usage!”

He made a sound with his teeth he had also acquired from Grubb, put his hands in his trouser pockets, and strolled back to the machine. Typically Grubb chewed something, but Bert could chew only imaginatively. “Three days' work in this,” he said, teething. For the first time it dawned on him that there were possibilities in this machine. It was evident that the wing that lay on the ground was badly damaged. The three stays that held it rigid had snapped across a ridge of rock and there was also a strong possibility of the engine being badly damaged. The wing hook on that side was also askew, but probably that would not affect the flight. Beyond that there probably

wasn't much the matter. Bert scratched his cheek again and contemplated the broad sunlit waste of the Upper Rapids. “We might make a job of this.... You leave it to me.”

He surveyed it intently again, and the Prince and his officer watched him. In Bun Hill Bert and Grubb had developed to a very high pitch among the hiring stock a method of repair by substituting; they substituted bits of other machines. A machine that was too utterly and obviously done for even to proffer for hire, had nevertheless still capital value. It became a sort of quarry for nuts and screws and wheels, bars and spokes, chain-links and the like; a mine of ill-fitting “parts” to replace the defects of machines still current. And back among the trees was a second Asiatic aeroplane....

The kitten caressed Bert's airship boots unheeded.

“Mend dat drachenflieger,” said the Prince.

“If I do mend it,” said Bert, struck by a new thought, “none of us ain't to be trusted to fly it.”

“*I* vill fly it,” said the Prince.

“Very likely break your neck,” said Bert, after a pause.

The Prince did not understand him and disregarded what he said. He pointed his gloved finger to the machine and turned to the bird-faced officer with some remark in German. The officer answered and the Prince responded with a sweeping gesture towards the sky. Then he spoke—it seemed eloquently. Bert watched him and guessed his meaning. “Much more likely to break your neck,” he said. “'Owever. 'Ere goes.”

He began to pry about the saddle and engine of the drachenflieger in search for tools. Also he wanted some black oily stuff for his hands and face. For the first rule in the art of repairing, as it was known to the firm of Grubb and Smallways, was to get your hands and face thoroughly and conclusively blackened. Also he took off his jacket and waistcoat and put his cap carefully to the back of his head in order to facilitate scratching.

The Prince and the officer seemed disposed to watch him, but he succeeded in making it clear to them that this would inconvenience him and that he had to “puzzle out a bit” before he could get to work. They thought him over, but his shop experience had given him something of the authoritative way of the expert with common men. And at last they went away. Thereupon he went straight to the second aeroplane, got the aeronaut's gun and ammunition and hid them in a clump of nettles close at hand. “That's all right,” said Bert, and then proceeded to a careful inspection of the debris of

the wings in the trees. Then he went back to the first aeroplane to compare the two. The Bun Hill method was quite possibly practicable if there was nothing hopeless or incomprehensible in the engine.

The Germans returned presently to find him already generously smutty and touching and testing knobs and screws and levers with an expression of profound sagacity. When the bird-faced officer addressed a remark to him, he waved him aside with, “Nong comprong. Shut it! It's no good.”

Then he had an idea. “Dead chap back there wants burying,” he said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder.

7

With the appearance of these two men Bert's whole universe had changed again. A curtain fell before the immense and terrible desolation that had overwhelmed him. He was in a world of three people, a minute human world that nevertheless filled his brain with eager speculations and schemes and cunning ideas. What were they thinking of? What did they think of him? What did they mean to do? A hundred busy threads interlaced in his mind as he pottered studiously over the Asiatic aeroplane. New ideas came up like bubbles in soda water.

“Gaw!” he said suddenly. He had just appreciated as a special aspect of this irrational injustice of fate that these two men were alive and that Kurt was dead. All the crew of the Hohenzollern were shot or burnt or smashed or drowned, and these two lurking in the padded forward cabin had escaped.

“I suppose 'e thinks it's 'is bloomin' Star,” he muttered, and found himself uncontrollably exasperated.

He stood up, facing round to the two men. They were standing side by side regarding him.

“'It's no good,” he said, “starin' at me. You only put me out.” And then seeing they did not understand, he advanced towards them, wrench in hand. It occurred to him as he did so that the Prince was really a very big and powerful and serene-looking person. But he said, nevertheless, pointing through the trees, “dead man!”

The bird-faced man intervened with a reply in German.

“Dead man!” said Bert to him. “There.”

He had great difficulty in inducing them to inspect the dead Chinaman, and at last led them to him. Then they made it evident that they proposed that he, as a common

person below the rank of officer should have the sole and undivided privilege of disposing of the body by dragging it to the water's edge. There was some heated gesticulation, and at last the bird-faced officer abased himself to help. Together they dragged the limp and now swollen Asiatic through the trees, and after a rest or so—for he trailed very heavily—dumped him into the westward rapid. Bert returned to his expert investigation of the flying-machine at last with aching arms and in a state of gloomy rebellion. “Brasted cheek!” he said. “One'd think I was one of 'is beastly German slaves!

“Prancing beggar!”

And then he fell speculating what would happen when the flying-machine, was repaired—if it could be repaired.

The two Germans went away again, and after some reflection Bert removed several nuts, resumed his jacket and vest, pocketed those nuts and his tools and hid the set of tools from the second aeroplane in the fork of a tree. “Right O,” he said, as he jumped down after the last of these precautions. The Prince and his companion reappeared as he returned to the machine by the water's edge. The Prince surveyed his progress for a time, and then went towards the Parting of the Waters and stood with folded arms gazing upstream in profound thought. The bird-faced officer came up to Bert, heavy with a sentence in English.

“Go,” he said with a helping gesture, “und eat.”

When Bert got to the refreshment shed, he found all the food had vanished except one measured ration of corned beef and three biscuits.

He regarded this with open eyes and mouth.

The kitten appeared from under the vendor's seat with an ingratiating purr. “Of course!” said Bert. “Why! where's your milk?”

He accumulated wrath for a moment or so, then seized the plate in one hand, and the biscuits in another, and went in search of the Prince, breathing vile words anent “grub” and his intimate interior. He approached without saluting.

“'Ere!” he said fiercely. “Whad the devil's this?”

An entirely unsatisfactory altercation followed. Bert expounded the Bun Hill theory of the relations of grub to efficiency in English, the bird-faced man replied with points about nations and discipline in German. The Prince, having made an estimate of Bert's quality and physique, suddenly hectored. He gripped Bert by the shoulder and shook

him, making his pockets rattle, shouted something to him, and flung him struggling back. He hit him as though he was a German private. Bert went back, white and scared, but resolved by all his Cockney standards upon one thing. He was bound in honour to “go for” the Prince. “Gaw!” he gasped, buttoning his jacket.

“Now,” cried the Prince, “Vil you go?” and then catching the heroic gleam in Bert's eye, drew his sword.

The bird-faced officer intervened, saying something in German and pointing skyward.

Far away in the south-west appeared a Japanese airship coming fast toward them. Their conflict ended at that. The Prince was first to grasp the situation and lead the retreat. All three scuttled like rabbits for the trees, and ran to and for cover until they found a hollow in which the grass grew rank. There they all squatted within six yards of one another. They sat in this place for a long time, up to their necks in the grass and watching through the branches for the airship. Bert had dropped some of his corned beef, but he found the biscuits in his hand and ate them quietly. The monster came nearly overhead and then went away to Niagara and dropped beyond the power-works. When it was near, they all kept silence, and then presently they fell into an argument that was robbed perhaps of immediate explosive effect only by their failure to understand one another.

It was Bert began the talking and he talked on regardless of what they understood or failed to understand. But his voice must have conveyed his cantankerous intentions.

“You want that machine done,” he said first, “you better keep your 'ands off me!”

They disregarded that and he repeated it.

Then he expanded his idea and the spirit of speech took hold of him. “You think you got 'old of a chap you can kick and 'it like you do your private soldiers—you're jolly well mistaken. See? I've 'ad about enough of you and your antics. I been thinking you over, you and your war and your Empire and all the rot of it. Rot it is! It's you Germans made all the trouble in Europe first and last. And all for nothin'. Jest silly prancing! Jest because you've got the uniforms and flags! 'Ere I was—I didn't want to 'ave anything to do with you. I jest didn't care a 'eng at all about you. Then you get 'old of me—steal me practically—and 'ere I am, thousands of miles away from 'ome and everything, and all your silly fleet smashed up to rags. And you want to go on prancin' NOW! Not if 'I know it!

“Look at the mischief you done! Look at the way you smashed up New York—the people you killed, the stuff you wasted. Can't you learn?”

“Dummer Kerl!” said the bird-faced man suddenly in a tone of concentrated malignancy, glaring under his bandages. “Esel!”

“That's German for silly ass!—I know. But who's the silly ass—'im or me? When I was a kid, I used to read penny dreadfuls about 'avin adventures and bein' a great c'mander and all that rot. I stowed it. But what's 'e got in 'is head? Rot about Napoleon, rot about Alexander, rot about 'is blessed family and 'im and Gord and David and all that. Any one who wasn't a dressed-up silly fool of a Prince could 'ave told all this was goin' to 'appen. There was us in Europe all at sixes and sevens with our silly flags and our silly newspapers raggin' us up against each other and keepin' us apart, and there was China, solid as a cheese, with millions and millions of men only wantin' a bit of science and a bit of enterprise to be as good as all of us. You thought they couldn't get at you. And then they got flying-machines. And bif!—'ere we are. Why, when they didn't go on making guns and armies in China, we went and poked 'em up until they did. They 'AD to give us this lickin' they've give us. We wouldn't be happy until they did, and as I say, 'ere we are!”

The bird-faced officer shouted to him to be quiet, and then began a conversation with the Prince.

“British citizen,” said Bert. “You ain't obliged to listen, but I ain't obliged to shut up.”

And for some time he continued his dissertation upon Imperialism, militarism, and international politics. But their talking put him out, and for a time he was certainly merely repeating abusive terms, “prancin' nincompoops” and the like, old terms and new. Then suddenly he remembered his essential grievance. “'Owever, look 'ere—'ere!—the thing I started this talk about is where's that food there was in that shed? That's what I want to know. Where you put it?”

He paused. They went on talking in German. He repeated his question. They disregarded him. He asked a third time in a manner insupportably aggressive.

There fell a tense silence. For some seconds the three regarded one another. The Prince eyed Bert steadfastly, and Bert quailed under his eye. Slowly the Prince rose to his feet and the bird-faced officer jerked up beside him. Bert remained squatting.

“Be quaiat,” said the Prince.

Bert perceived this was no moment for eloquence.

The two Germans regarded him as he crouched there. Death for a moment seemed near.

Then the Prince turned away and the two of them went towards the flying-machine.

“Gaw!” whispered Bert, and then uttered under his breath one single word of abuse. He sat crouched together for perhaps three minutes, then he sprang to his feet and went off towards the Chinese aeronaut's gun hidden among the weeds.

8

There was no pretence after that moment that Bert was under the orders of the Prince or that he was going on with the repairing of the flying-machine. The two Germans took possession of that and set to work upon it. Bert, with his new weapon went off to the neighbourhood of Terrapin Rock, and there sat down to examine it. It was a short rifle with a big cartridge, and a nearly full magazine. He took out the cartridges carefully and then tried the trigger and fittings until he felt sure he had the use of it. He reloaded carefully. Then he remembered he was hungry and went off, gun under his arm, to hunt in and about the refreshment shed. He had the sense to perceive that he must not show himself with the gun to the Prince and his companion. So long as they thought him unarmed they would leave him alone, but there was no knowing what the Napoleonic person might do if he saw Bert's weapon. Also he did not go near them because he knew that within himself boiled a reservoir of rage and fear that he wanted to shoot these two men. He wanted to shoot them, and he thought that to shoot them would be a quite horrible thing to do. The two sides of his inconsistent civilisation warred within him.

Near the shed the kitten turned up again, obviously keen for milk. This greatly enhanced his own angry sense of hunger. He began to talk as he hunted about, and presently stood still, shouting insults. He talked of war and pride and Imperialism. “Any other Prince but you would have died with his men and his ship!” he cried.

The two Germans at the machine heard his voice going ever and again amidst the clamour of the waters. Their eyes met and they smiled slightly.

He was disposed for a time to sit in the refreshment shed waiting for them, but then it occurred to him that so he might get them both at close quarters. He strolled off presently to the point of Luna Island to think the situation out.

It had seemed a comparatively simple one at first, but as he turned it over in his mind its possibilities increased and multiplied. Both these men had swords,—had either a revolver?

Also, if he shot them both, he might never find the food!

So far he had been going about with this gun under his arm, and a sense of lordly security in his mind, but what if they saw the gun and decided to ambush him? Goat Island is nearly all cover, trees, rocks, thickets, and irregularities.

Why not go and murder them both now?

“I carn't,” said Bert, dismissing that. “I got to be worked up.”

But it was a mistake to get right away from them. That suddenly became clear. He ought to keep them under observation, ought to “scout” them. Then he would be able to see what they were doing, whether either of them had a revolver, where they had hidden the food. He would be better able to determine what they meant to do to him. If he didn't “scout” them, presently they would begin to “scout” him. This seemed so eminently reasonable that he acted upon it forthwith. He thought over his costume and threw his collar and the tell-tale aeronaut's white cap into the water far below. He turned his coat collar up to hide any gleam of his dirty shirt. The tools and nuts in his pockets were disposed to clank, but he rearranged them and wrapped some letters and his pocket-handkerchief about them. He started off circumspectly and noiselessly, listening and peering at every step. As he drew near his antagonists, much grunting and creaking served to locate them. He discovered them engaged in what looked like a wrestling match with the Asiatic flying-machine. Their coats were off, their swords laid aside, they were working magnificently. Apparently they were turning it round and were having a good deal of difficulty with the long tail among the trees. He dropped flat at the sight of them and wriggled into a little hollow, and so lay watching their exertions. Ever and again, to pass the time, he would cover one or other of them with his gun.

He found them quite interesting to watch, so interesting that at times he came near shouting to advise them. He perceived that when they had the machine turned round, they would then be in immediate want of the nuts and tools he carried. Then they would come after him. They would certainly conclude he had them or had hidden them. Should he hide his gun and do a deal for food with these tools? He felt he would not be able to part with the gun again now he had once felt its reassuring company. The kitten turned up again and made a great fuss with him and licked and bit his ear.

The sun clambered to midday, and once that morning he saw, though the Germans did not, an Asiatic airship very far to the south, going swiftly eastward.

At last the flying-machine was turned and stood poised on its wheel, with its hooks pointing up the Rapids. The two officers wiped their faces, resumed jackets and swords, spoke and bore themselves like men who congratulated themselves on a

good laborious morning. Then they went off briskly towards the refreshment shed, the Prince leading. Bert became active in pursuit; but he found it impossible to stalk them quickly enough and silently enough to discover the hiding-place of the food. He found them, when he came into sight of them again, seated with their backs against the shed, plates on knee, and a tin of corned beef and a plateful of biscuits between them. They seemed in fairly good spirits, and once the Prince laughed. At this vision of eating Bert's plans gave way. Fierce hunger carried him. He appeared before them suddenly at a distance of perhaps twenty yards, gun in hand.

"'Ands up!" he said in a hard, ferocious voice.

The Prince hesitated, and then up went two pairs of hands. The gun had surprised them both completely.

"Stand up," said Bert.... "Drop that fork!"

They obeyed again.

"What nex'?" said Bert to himself. "'Orf stage, I suppose. That way," he said. "Go!"

The Prince obeyed with remarkable alacrity. When he reached the head of the clearing, he said something quickly to the bird-faced man and they both, with an entire lack of dignity, RAN!

Bert was struck with an exasperating afterthought.

"Gord!" he cried with infinite vexation. "Why! I ought to 'ave took their swords! 'Ere!"

But the Germans were already out of sight, and no doubt taking cover among the trees. Bert fell back upon imprecations, then he went up to the shed, cursorily examined the possibility of a flank attack, put his gun handy, and set to work, with a convulsive listening pause before each mouthful on the Prince's plate of corned beef. He had finished that up and handed its gleanings to the kitten and he was falling-to on the second plateful, when the plate broke in his hand! He stared, with the fact slowly creeping upon him that an instant before he had heard a crack among the thickets. Then he sprang to his feet, snatched up his gun in one hand and the tin of corned beef in the other, and fled round the shed to the other side of the clearing. As he did so came a second crack from the thickets, and something went phwit! by his ear.

He didn't stop running until he was in what seemed to him a strongly defensible position near Luna Island. Then he took cover, panting, and crouched expectant.

"They got a revolver after all!" he panted....

“Wonder if they got two? If they 'ave—Gord! I'm done!

“Where's the kitten? Finishin' up that corned beef, I suppose. Little beggar!”

9

So it was that war began upon Goat Island. It lasted a day and a night, the longest day and the longest night in Bert's life. He had to lie close and listen and watch. Also he had to scheme what he should do. It was clear now that he had to kill these two men if he could, and that if they could, they would kill him. The prize was first food and then the flying-machine and the doubtful privilege of trying to ride it. If one failed, one would certainly be killed; if one succeeded, one would get away somewhere over there. For a time Bert tried to imagine what it was like over there. His mind ran over possibilities, deserts, angry Americans, Japanese, Chinese—perhaps Red Indians! (Were there still Red Indians?)

“Got to take what comes,” said Bert. “No way out of it that I can see!”

Was that voices? He realised that his attention was wandering. For a time all his senses were very alert. The uproar of the Falls was very confusing, and it mixed in all sorts of sounds, like feet walking, like voices talking, like shouts and cries.

“Silly great catarac',” said Bert. “There ain't no sense in it, fallin' and fallin'.”

Never mind that, now! What were the Germans doing?

Would they go back to the flying-machine? They couldn't do anything with it, because he had those nuts and screws and the wrench and other tools. But suppose they found the second set of tools he had hidden in a tree! He had hidden the things well, of course, but they MIGHT find them. One wasn't sure, of course—one wasn't sure. He tried to remember just exactly how he had hidden those tools. He tried to persuade himself they were certainly and surely hidden, but his memory began to play antics. Had he really left the handle of the wrench sticking out, shining out at the fork of the branch?

Ssh! What was that? Some one stirring in those bushes? Up went an expectant muzzle. No! Where was the kitten? No! It was just imagination, not even the kitten.

The Germans would certainly miss and hunt about for the tools and nuts and screws he carried in his pockets; that was clear. Then they would decide he had them and come for him. He had only to remain still under cover, therefore, and he would get them. Was there any flaw in that? Would they take off more removable parts of the flying-machine and then lie up for him? No, they wouldn't do that, because they were

two to one; they would have no apprehension of his getting off in the flying-machine, and no sound reason for supposing he would approach it, and so they would do nothing to damage or disable it. That he decided was clear. But suppose they lay up for him by the food. Well, that they wouldn't do, because they would know he had this corned beef; there was enough in this can to last, with moderation, several days. Of course they might try to tire him out instead of attacking him—

He roused himself with a start. He had just grasped the real weakness of his position. He might go to sleep!

It needed but ten minutes under the suggestion of that idea, before he realised that he was going to sleep!

He rubbed his eyes and handled his gun. He had never before realised the intensely soporific effect of the American sun, of the American air, the drowsy, sleep-compelling uproar of Niagara. Hitherto these things had on the whole seemed stimulating....

If he had not eaten so much and eaten it so fast, he would not be so heavy. Are vegetarians always bright?...

He roused himself with a jerk again.

If he didn't do something, he would fall asleep, and if he fell asleep, it was ten to one they would find him snoring, and finish him forthwith. If he sat motionless and noiseless, he would inevitably sleep. It was better, he told himself, to take even the risks of attacking than that. This sleep trouble, he felt, was going to beat him, must beat him in the end. They were all right; one could sleep and the other could watch. That, come to think of it, was what they would always do; one would do anything they wanted done, the other would lie under cover near at hand, ready to shoot. They might even trap him like that. One might act as a decoy.

That set him thinking of decoys. What a fool he had been to throw his cap away. It would have been invaluable on a stick—especially at night.

He found himself wishing for a drink. He settled that for a time by putting a pebble in his mouth. And then the sleep craving returned.

It became clear to him he must attack. Like many great generals before him, he found his baggage, that is to say his tin of corned beef, a serious impediment to mobility. At last he decided to put the beef loose in his pocket and abandon the tin. It was not perhaps an ideal arrangement, but one must make sacrifices when one is

campaigning. He crawled perhaps ten yards, and then for a time the possibilities of the situation paralysed him.

The afternoon was still. The roar of the cataract simply threw up that immense stillness in relief. He was doing his best to contrive the death of two better men than himself. Also they were doing their best to contrive his. What, behind this silence, were they doing.

Suppose he came upon them suddenly and fired, and missed?

10

He crawled, and halted listening, and crawled again until nightfall, and no doubt the German Alexander and his lieutenant did the same. A large scale map of Goat Island marked with red and blue lines to show these strategic movements would no doubt have displayed much interlacing, but as a matter of fact neither side saw anything of the other throughout that age-long day of tedious alertness. Bert never knew how near he got to them nor how far he kept from them. Night found him no longer sleepy, but athirst, and near the American Fall. He was inspired by the idea that his antagonists might be in the wreckage of the Hohenzollern cabins that was jammed against Green Island. He became enterprising, broke from any attempt to conceal himself, and went across the little bridge at the double. He found nobody. It was his first visit to these huge fragments of airships, and for a time he explored them curiously in the dim light. He discovered the forward cabin was nearly intact, with its door slanting downward and a corner under water. He crept in, drank, and then was struck by the brilliant idea of shutting the door and sleeping on it.

But now he could not sleep at all.

He nodded towards morning and woke up to find it fully day. He breakfasted on corned beef and water, and sat for a long time appreciative of the security of his position. At last he became enterprising and bold. He would, he decided, settle this business forthwith, one way or the other. He was tired of all this crawling. He set out in the morning sunshine, gun in hand, scarcely troubling to walk softly. He went round the refreshment shed without finding any one, and then through the trees towards the flying-machine. He came upon the bird-faced man sitting on the ground with his back against a tree, bent up over his folded arms, sleeping, his bandage very much over one eye.

Bert stopped abruptly and stood perhaps fifteen yards away, gun in hand ready. Where was the Prince? Then, sticking out at the side of the tree beyond, he saw a shoulder. Bert took five deliberate paces to the left. The great man became visible, leaning up

against the trunk, pistol in one hand and sword in the other, and yawning—yawning. You can't shoot a yawning man Bert found. He advanced upon his antagonist with his gun levelled, some foolish fancy of “hands up” in his mind. The Prince became aware of him, the yawning mouth shut like a trap and he stood stiffly up. Bert stopped, silent. For a moment the two regarded one another.

Had the Prince been a wise man he would, I suppose, have dodged behind the tree. Instead, he gave vent to a shout, and raised pistol and sword. At that, like an automaton, Bert pulled his trigger.

It was his first experience of an oxygen-containing bullet. A great flame spurted from the middle of the Prince, a blinding flare, and there came a thud like the firing of a gun. Something hot and wet struck Bert's face. Then through a whirl of blinding smoke and steam he saw limbs and a collapsing, burst body fling themselves to earth.

Bert was so astonished that he stood agape, and the bird-faced officer might have cut him to the earth without a struggle. But instead the bird-faced officer was running away through the undergrowth, dodging as he went. Bert roused himself to a brief ineffectual pursuit, but he had no stomach for further killing. He returned to the mangled, scattered thing that had so recently been the great Prince Karl Albert. He surveyed the scorched and splashed vegetation about it. He made some speculative identifications. He advanced gingerly and picked up the hot revolver, to find all its chambers strained and burst. He became aware of a cheerful and friendly presence. He was greatly shocked that one so young should see so frightful a scene.

“'Ere, Kitty,” he said, “this ain't no place for you.”

He made three strides across the devastated area, captured the kitten neatly, and went his way towards the shed, with her purring loudly on his shoulder.

“YOU don't seem to mind,” he said.

For a time he fussed about the shed, and at last discovered the rest of the provisions hidden in the roof. “Seems 'ard,” he said, as he administered a saucerful of milk, “when you get three men in a 'ole like this, they can't work together. But 'im and 'is princing was jest a bit too thick!”

“Gaw!” he reflected, sitting on the counter and eating, “what a thing life is! 'Ere am I; I seen 'is picture, 'eard 'is name since I was a kid in frocks. Prince Karl Albert! And if any one 'ad tole me I was going to blow 'im to smithereens—there! I shouldn't 'ave believed it, Kitty.

“That chap at Margit ought to 'ave tole me about it. All 'e tole me was that I got a weak chess.

“That other chap, 'e ain't going to do much. Wonder what I ought to do about 'im?”

He surveyed the trees with a keen blue eye and fingered the gun on his knee. “I don't like this killing, Kitty,” he said. “It's like Kurt said about being blooded. Seems to me you got to be blooded young.... If that Prince 'ad come up to me and said, 'Shake 'ands!' I'd 'ave shook 'ands.... Now 'ere's that other chap, dodging about! 'E's got 'is 'ead 'urt already, and there's something wrong with his leg. And burns. Golly! it isn't three weeks ago I first set eyes on 'im, and then 'e was smart and set up—'ands full of 'air-brushes and things, and swearin' at me. A regular gentleman! Now 'e's 'arfway to a wild man. What am I to do with 'im? What the 'ell am I to do with 'im? I can't leave 'im 'ave that flying-machine; that's a bit too good, and if I don't kill 'im, 'e'll jest 'ang about this island and starve....

“'E's got a sword, of course”....

He resumed his philosophising after he had lit a cigarette.

“War's a silly gaim, Kitty. It's a silly gaim! We common people—we were fools. We thought those big people knew what they were up to—and they didn't. Look at that chap! 'E 'ad all Germany be'ind 'im, and what 'as 'e made of it? Smeshin' and blunderin' and destroyin', and there 'e 'is! Jest a mess of blood and boots and things! Jest an 'orrid splash! Prince Karl Albert! And all the men 'e led and the ships 'e 'ad, the airships, and the dragon-fliers—all scattered like a paper-chase between this 'ole and Germany. And fightin' going on and burnin' and killin' that 'e started, war without end all over the world!

“I suppose I shall 'ave to kill that other chap. I suppose I must. But it ain't at all the sort of job I fancy, Kitty!”

For a time he hunted about the island amidst the uproar of the waterfall, looking for the wounded officer, and at last he started him out of some bushes near the head of Biddle Stairs. But as he saw the bent and bandaged figure in limping flight before him, he found his Cockney softness too much for him again; he could neither shoot nor pursue. “I carn't,” he said, “that's flat. I 'aven't the guts for it! 'E'll 'ave to go.”

He turned his steps towards the flying-machine....

He never saw the bird-faced officer again, nor any further evidence of his presence. Towards evening he grew fearful of ambushes and hunted vigorously for an hour or so, but in vain. He slept in a good defensible position at the extremity of the rocky point

that runs out to the Canadian Fall, and in the night he woke in panic terror and fired his gun. But it was nothing. He slept no more that night. In the morning he became curiously concerned for the vanished man, and hunted for him as one might for an erring brother.

“If I knew some German,” he said, “I'd 'oller. It's jest not knowing German does it. You can't explain'”

He discovered, later, traces of an attempt to cross the gap in the broken bridge. A rope with a bolt attached had been flung across and had caught in a fenestration of a projecting fragment of railing. The end of the rope trailed in the seething water towards the fall.

But the bird-faced officer was already rubbing shoulders with certain inert matter that had once been Lieutenant Kurt and the Chinese aeronaut and a dead cow, and much other uncongenial company, in the huge circle of the Whirlpool two and a quarter miles away. Never had that great gathering place, that incessant, aimless, unprogressive hurry of waste and battered things, been so crowded with strange and melancholy derelicts. Round they went and round, and every day brought its new contributions, luckless brutes, shattered fragments of boat and flying-machine, endless citizens from the cities upon the shores of the great lakes above. Much came from Cleveland. It all gathered here, and whirled about indefinitely, and over it all gathered daily a greater abundance of birds.

CHAPTER X. THE WORLD UNDER THE WAR

1

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

Even at last he did not so much go off upon it as get carried off. It had taken only an hour or so to substitute wing stays from the second flying-machine and to replace the nuts he had himself removed. The engine was in working order, and differed only very simply and obviously from that of a contemporary motor-bicycle. The rest of the time was taken up by a vast musing and delaying and hesitation. Chiefly he saw himself splashing into the rapids and whirling down them to the Fall, clutching and drowning,

but also he had a vision of being hopelessly in the air, going fast and unable to ground. His mind was too concentrated upon the business of flying for him to think very much of what might happen to an indefinite-spirited Cockney without credential who arrived on an Asiatic flying-machine amidst the war-infuriated population beyond.

He still had a lingering solicitude for the bird-faced officer. He had a haunting fancy he might be lying disabled or badly smashed in some way in some nook or cranny of the Island; and it was only after a most exhaustive search that he abandoned that distressing idea. “If I found 'im,” he reasoned the while, “what could I do wiv 'im? You can't blow a chap's brains out when 'e's down. And I don' see 'ow else I can 'elp 'im.”

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

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

Rather stiff it was, but suddenly it came over—

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

Stop! The thing was heading for the water; its wheel was in the water. Bert groaned from his heart and struggled to restore the lever to its first position. Click, clock, clitter-clock, he was rising! The machine was lifting its dripping wheel out of the eddies, and he was going up! There was no stopping now, no good in stopping now. In another moment Bert, clutching and convulsive and rigid, with staring eyes and a face pale as death, was flapping up above the Rapids, jerking to every jerk of the wings, and rising, rising.

There was no comparison in dignity and comfort between a flying-machine and a balloon. Except in its moments of descent, the balloon was a vehicle of faultless urbanity; this was a buck-jumping mule, a mule that jumped up and never came down again. Click, clock, click, clock; with each beat of the strangely shaped wings it jumped Bert upward and caught him neatly again half a second later on the saddle. And while in ballooning there is no wind, since the balloon is a part of the wind, flying is a wild perpetual creation of and plunging into wind. It was a wind that above all

things sought to blind him, to force him to close his eyes. It occurred to him presently to twist his knees and legs inward and grip with them, or surely he would have been bumped into two clumsy halves. And he was going up, a hundred yards high, two hundred, three hundred, over the streaming, frothing wilderness of water below—up, up, up. That was all right, but how presently would one go horizontally? He tried to think if these things did go horizontally. No! They flapped up and then they soared down. For a time he would keep on flapping up. Tears streamed from his eyes. He wiped them with one temerariously disengaged hand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I dropped soft!”

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

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

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

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

2

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

He decided to abandon the shattered flying-machine. He wandered through the trees for some time, and then struck a road that seemed to his urban English eyes to be remarkably wide but not properly “made.” Neither hedge nor ditch nor curbed distinctive footpath separated it from the woods, and it went in that long easy curve which distinguishes the tracks of an open continent. Ahead he saw a man carrying a gun under his arm, a man in a soft black hat, a blue blouse, and black trousers, and

with a broad round-fat face quite innocent of goatee. This person regarded him askance and heard him speak with a start.

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

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

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

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

Presently Bert came to a big wooden house standing casually among the trees. It looked a bleak, bare box of a house to him, no creeper grew on it, no hedge nor wall nor fence parted it off from the woods about it. He stopped before the steps that led up to the door, perhaps thirty yards away. The place seemed deserted. He would have gone up to the door and rapped, but suddenly a big black dog appeared at the side and regarded him. It was a huge heavy-jawed dog of some unfamiliar breed, and it, wore a spike-studded collar. It did not bark nor approach him, it just bristled quietly and emitted a single sound like a short, deep cough.

Bert hesitated and went on.

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

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

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

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

When he was out of sight of the house and the black dog, he went into the woods on the other side of the way and emerged after an interval trimming a very tolerable cudgel with his pocket-knife. Presently he saw an attractive-looking rock by the track and picked it up and put it in his pocket. Then he came to three or four houses, wooden like the last, each with an ill-painted white verandah (that was his name for it) and all standing in the same casual way upon the ground. Behind, through the woods, he saw pig-stys and a rooting black sow leading a brisk, adventurous family. A wild-

looking woman with sloe-black eyes and dishevelled black hair sat upon the steps of one of the houses nursing a baby, but at the sight of Bert she got up and went inside, and he heard her bolting the door. Then a boy appeared among the pig-stys, but he would not understand Bert's hail.

“I suppose it is America!” said Bert.

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

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

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

“Tanooda, sah!” said the negro.

“Thenks!” said Bert.

“Thank YOU, sah!” said the negro, overwhelmingly.

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

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

The man in the door replied, thank Heaven, in clear, good American. “This, sir, is not A shop, it is A store.”

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

“You can,” said the American in a tone of confident encouragement, and led the way inside.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And when did you leave Niagara?”

“'Bout an hour ago.”

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

They asked various questions simultaneously.

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

“From England?”

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

“Goat Island?”

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

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

“It's back in the woods here—'bout arf a mile away.”

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

“I come down rather a smash—.”

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

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

A gaunt soldierly-looking young man with long lean legs in riding gaiters and a bandolier, who had hitherto not spoken, intervened now on his behalf in a note of confident authority. “That's aw right,” he said. “Give him a feed, Mr. Logan—from me. I want to hear more of that story of his. We'll see his machine afterwards. If you ask me, I should say it's a remarkably interesting accident had dropped this gentleman here. I guess we requisition that flying-machine—if we find it—for local defence.”

So Bert fell on his feet again, and sat eating cold meat and good bread and mustard and drinking very good beer, and telling in the roughest outline and with the omissions and inaccuracies of statement natural to his type of mind, the simple story of his adventures. He told how he and a “gentleman friend” had been visiting the seaside for their health, how a “chep” came along in a balloon and fell out as he fell in, how he had drifted to Franconia, how the Germans had seemed to mistake him for some one and had “took him prisoner” and brought him to New York, how he had been to Labrador and back, how he had got to Goat Island and found himself there alone. He omitted the matter of the Prince and the Butteridge aspect of the affair, not out of any deep deceitfulness, but because he felt the inadequacy of his narrative powers. He wanted everything to seem easy and natural and correct, to present himself as a trustworthy and understandable Englishman in a sound mediocre position, to whom refreshment and accommodation might be given with freedom and confidence. When his fragmentary story came to New York and the battle of Niagara, they suddenly produced newspapers which had been lying about on the table, and began to check him and question him by these vehement accounts. It became evident to him that his descent had revived and roused to flames again a discussion, a topic, that had been burning continuously, that had smouldered only through sheer exhaustion of material during the temporary diversion of the gramophone, a discussion that had drawn these men together, rifle in hand, the one supreme topic of the whole world, the War and the methods of the War. He found any question of his personality and his personal adventures falling into the background, found himself taken for granted, and no more than a source of information. The ordinary affairs of life, the buying and selling of everyday necessities, the cultivation of the ground, the tending of beasts, was going on as it were by force of routine, as the common duties of life go on in a house whose master lies under the knife of some supreme operation. The overruling interest was furnished by those great Asiatic airships that went upon incalculable missions across the sky, the crimson-clad swordsmen who might come fluttering down demanding petrol, or food, or news. These men were asking, all the continent was asking, “What are we to do? What can we try? How can we get at them?” Bert fell into his place as an item, ceased even in his own thoughts to be a central and independent thing.

After he had eaten and drunken his fill and sighed and stretched and told them how good the food seemed to him, he lit a cigarette they gave him and led the way, with some doubts and trouble, to the flying-machine amidst the larches. It became manifest that the gaunt young man, whose name, it seemed, was Laurier, was a leader both by position and natural aptitude. He knew the names and characters and

capabilities of all the men who were with him, and he set them to work at once with vigour and effect to secure this precious instrument of war. They got the thing down to the ground deliberately and carefully, felling a couple of trees in the process, and they built a wide flat roof of timbers and tree boughs to guard their precious find against its chance discovery by any passing Asiatics. Long before evening they had an engineer from the next township at work upon it, and they were casting lots among the seventeen picked men who wanted to take it for its first flight. And Bert found his kitten and carried it back to Logan's store and handed it with earnest admonition to Mrs. Logan. And it was reassuringly clear to him that in Mrs. Logan both he and the kitten had found a congenial soul.

Laurier was not only a masterful person and a wealthy property owner and employer—he was president, Bert learnt with awe, of the Tanooda Canning Corporation—but he was popular and skilful in the arts of popularity. In the evening quite a crowd of men gathered in the store and talked of the flying-machine and of the war that was tearing the world to pieces. And presently came a man on a bicycle with an ill-printed newspaper of a single sheet which acted like fuel in a blazing furnace of talk. It was nearly all American news; the old-fashioned cables had fallen into disuse for some years, and the Marconi stations across the ocean and along the Atlantic coastline seemed to have furnished particularly tempting points of attack.

But such news it was.

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

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

Slowly, broadly, invincibly, there grew upon Bert's mind realisation of the immense tragedy of humanity into which his life was flowing; the appalling and universal nature

of the epoch that had arrived; the conception of an end to security and order and habit. The whole world was at war and it could not get back to peace, it might never recover peace.

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

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

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

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

These men in the store made a minute, remote group under this immense canopy of disaster. They turned from one little aspect to another. What chiefly concerned them was defence against Asiatic raiders swooping for petrol or to destroy weapons or communications. Everywhere levies were being formed at that time to defend the plant of the railroads day and night in the hope that communication would speedily be restored. The land war was still far away. A man with a flat voice distinguished himself by a display of knowledge and cunning. He told them all with confidence just what had been wrong with the German drachenflieger and the American aeroplanes, just what advantage the Japanese flyers possessed. He launched out into a romantic description of the Butteridge machine and riveted Bert's attention. “I SEE that,” said

Bert, and was smitten silent by a thought. The man with the flat voice talked on, without heeding him, of the strange irony of Butteridge's death. At that Bert had a little twinge of relief—he would never meet Butteridge again. It appeared Butteridge had died suddenly, very suddenly.

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

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

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

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

“Well, sir,” said the flat-voiced man, “that fit of apoplexy at Dyrnchurch was the worst thing—absolutely the worst thing that ever happened to the world. For if it had not been for the death of Mr. Butteridge—”

“No one knows his secret?”

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

Pause.

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

Bert was trembling violently. He cleared his throat hoarsely.

“I say,” he said, “look here, I—”

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

“I allow—” he began.

Bert became violently excited. He stood up.

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

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

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

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

He tore open his collar and opened vest and shirt. He plunged into his interior and for an instant it seemed he was plucking forth his liver. Then as he struggled with buttons on his shoulder they perceived this flattened horror was in fact a terribly dirty flannel chest-protector. In another moment Bert, in a state of irregular decolletage, was standing over the table displaying a sheaf of papers.

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

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

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

4

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

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

Bert took them.

“Whar?” said the man in the straw hat.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And suppose we can't get a lift on a train—or anything?”

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

“Startin' now?”

“Starting now!”

“But 'ow about—We shan't be able to do much to-night.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Deyse been hanging a Chink in dose woods!”

“Hanging a Chinaman?” said Laurier.

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

“Oh!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

The girl never stirred.

And once they passed a madman singing.

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

CHAPTER XI. THE GREAT COLLAPSE

1

And now the whole fabric of civilisation was bending and giving, and dropping to pieces and melting in the furnace of the war.

The stages of the swift and universal collapse of the financial and scientific civilisation with which the twentieth century opened followed each other very swiftly, so swiftly that upon the foreshortened page of history—they seem altogether to overlap. To begin with, one sees the world nearly at a maximum wealth and prosperity. To its inhabitants indeed it seemed also at a maximum of security. When now in retrospect the thoughtful observer surveys the intellectual history of this time, when one reads its surviving fragments of literature, its scraps of political oratory, the few small voices that chance has selected out of a thousand million utterances to speak to later days, the most striking thing of all this web of wisdom and error is surely that hallucination of security. To men living in our present world state, orderly, scientific and secured, nothing seems so precarious, so giddily dangerous, as the fabric of the social order with which the men of the opening of the twentieth century were content. To us it seems that every institution and relationship was the fruit of haphazard and tradition and the manifest sport of chance, their laws each made for some separate occasion and having no relation to any future needs, their customs illogical, their education aimless and wasteful. Their method of economic exploitation indeed impresses a trained and informed mind as the most frantic and destructive scramble it is possible to conceive; their credit and monetary system resting on an unsubstantial tradition of the worthiness of gold, seems a thing almost fantastically unstable. And they lived in planless cities, for the most part dangerously congested; their rails and roads and population were distributed over the earth in the wanton confusion ten thousand irrevelant considerations had made.

Yet they thought confidently that this was a secure and permanent progressive system, and on the strength of some three hundred years of change and irregular improvement answered the doubter with, “Things always have gone well. We'll worry through!”

But when we contrast the state of man in the opening of the twentieth century with the condition of any previous period in his history, then perhaps we may begin to understand something of that blind confidence. It was not so much a reasoned confidence as the inevitable consequence of sustained good fortune. By such standards as they possessed, things HAD gone amazingly well for them. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that for the first time in history whole populations found themselves regularly supplied with more than enough to eat, and the vital statistics of the time witness to an amelioration of hygienic conditions rapid beyond all precedent, and to a vast development of intelligence and ability in all the arts that make life

wholesome. The level and quality of the average education had risen tremendously; and at the dawn of the twentieth century comparatively few people in Western Europe or America were unable to read or write. Never before had there been such reading masses. There was wide social security. A common man might travel safely over three-quarters of the habitable globe, could go round the earth at a cost of less than the annual earnings of a skilled artisan. Compared with the liberality and comfort of the ordinary life of the time, the order of the Roman Empire under the Antonines was local and limited. And every year, every month, came some new increment to human achievement, a new country opened up, new mines, new scientific discoveries, a new machine!

For those three hundred years, indeed, the movement of the world seemed wholly beneficial to mankind. Men said, indeed, that moral organisation was not keeping pace with physical progress, but few attached any meaning to these phrases, the understanding of which lies at the basis of our present safety. Sustaining and constructive forces did indeed for a time more than balance the malign drift of chance and the natural ignorance, prejudice, blind passion, and wasteful self-seeking of mankind.

The accidental balance on the side of Progress was far slighter and infinitely more complex and delicate in its adjustments than the people of that time suspected; but that did not alter the fact that it was an effective balance. They did not realise that this age of relative good fortune was an age of immense but temporary opportunity for their kind. They complacently assumed a necessary progress towards which they had no moral responsibility. They did not realise that this security of progress was a thing still to be won—or lost, and that the time to win it was a time that passed. They went about their affairs energetically enough and yet with a curious idleness towards those threatening things. No one troubled over the real dangers of mankind. They, saw their armies and navies grow larger and more portentous; some of their ironclads at the last cost as much as the whole annual expenditure upon advanced education; they accumulated explosives and the machinery of destruction; they allowed their national traditions and jealousies to accumulate; they contemplated a steady enhancement of race hostility as the races drew closer without concern or understanding, and they permitted the growth in their midst of an evil-spirited press, mercenary and unscrupulous, incapable of good, and powerful for evil. The State had practically no control over the press at all. Quite heedlessly they allowed this torch-paper to lie at the door of their war magazine for any spark to fire. The precedents of history were all one tale of the collapse of civilisations, the dangers of the time were manifest. One is incredulous now to believe they could not see.

Could mankind have prevented this disaster of the War in the Air?

An idle question that, as idle as to ask could mankind have prevented the decay that turned Assyria and Babylon to empty deserts or the slow decline and fall, the gradual social disorganisation, phase by phase, that closed the chapter of the Empire of the West! They could not, because they did not, they had not the will to arrest it. What mankind could achieve with a different will is a speculation as idle as it is magnificent. And this was no slow decadence that came to the Europeanised world; those other civilisations rotted and crumbled down, the Europeanised civilisation was, as it were, blown up. Within the space of five years it was altogether disintegrated and destroyed. Up to the very eve of the War in the Air one sees a spacious spectacle of incessant advance, a world-wide security, enormous areas with highly organised industry and settled populations, gigantic cities spreading gigantically, the seas and oceans dotted with shipping, the land netted with rails, and open ways. Then suddenly the German air-fleets sweep across the scene, and we are in the beginning of the end.

2

This story has already told of the swift rush upon New York of the first German air-fleet and of the wild, inevitable orgy of inconclusive destruction that ensued. Behind it a second air-fleet was already swelling at its gasometers when England and France and Spain and Italy showed their hands. None of these countries had prepared for aeronautic warfare on the magnificent scale of the Germans, but each guarded secrets, each in a measure was making ready, and a common dread of German vigour and that aggressive spirit Prince Karl Albert embodied, had long been drawing these powers together in secret anticipation of some such attack. This rendered their prompt co-operation possible, and they certainly co-operated promptly. The second aerial power in Europe at this time was France; the British, nervous for their Asiatic empire, and sensible of the immense moral effect of the airship upon half-educated populations, had placed their aeronautic parks in North India, and were able to play but a subordinate part in the European conflict. Still, even in England they had nine or ten big navigables, twenty or thirty smaller ones, and a variety of experimental aeroplanes. Before the fleet of Prince Karl Albert had crossed England, while Bert was still surveying Manchester in bird's-eye view, the diplomatic exchanges were going on that led to an attack upon Germany. A heterogeneous collection of navigable balloons of all sizes and types gathered over the Bernese Oberland, crushed and burnt the twenty-five Swiss air-ships that unexpectedly resisted this concentration in the battle of the Alps, and then, leaving the Alpine glaciers and valleys strewn with strange wreckage, divided into two fleets and set itself to terrorise Berlin and destroy the Franconian Park, seeking to do this before the second air-fleet could be inflated.

Both over Berlin and Franconia the assailants with their modern explosives effected great damage before they were driven off. In Franconia twelve fully distended and five partially filled and manned giants were able to make head against and at last, with the help of a squadron of drachenflieger from Hamburg, defeat and pursue the attack and to relieve Berlin, and the Germans were straining every nerve to get an overwhelming fleet in the air, and were already raiding London and Paris when the advance fleets from the Asiatic air-parks, the first intimation of a new factor in the conflict, were reported from Burmah and Armenia.

Already the whole financial fabric of the world was staggering when that occurred. With the destruction of the American fleet in the North Atlantic, and the smashing conflict that ended the naval existence of Germany in the North Sea, with the burning and wrecking of billions of pounds' worth of property in the four cardinal cities of the world, the fact of the hopeless costliness of war came home for the first time, came, like a blow in the face, to the consciousness of mankind. Credit went down in a wild whirl of selling. Everywhere appeared a phenomenon that had already in a mild degree manifested itself in preceding periods of panic; a desire to SECURE AND HOARD GOLD before prices reached bottom. But now it spread like wild-fire, it became universal. Above was visible conflict and destruction; below something was happening far more deadly and incurable to the flimsy fabric of finance and commercialism in which men had so blindly put their trust. As the airships fought above, the visible gold supply of the world vanished below. An epidemic of private cornering and universal distrust swept the world. In a few weeks, money, except for depreciated paper, vanished into vaults, into holes, into the walls of houses, into ten million hiding-places. Money vanished, and at its disappearance trade and industry came to an end. The economic world staggered and fell dead. It was like the stroke of some disease it was like the water vanishing out of the blood of a living creature; it was a sudden, universal coagulation of intercourse....

And as the credit system, that had been the living fortress of the scientific civilisation, reeled and fell upon the millions it had held together in economic relationship, as these people, perplexed and helpless, faced this marvel of credit utterly destroyed, the airships of Asia, countless and relentless, poured across the heavens, swooped eastward to America and westward to Europe. The page of history becomes a long crescendo of battle. The main body of the British-Indian air-fleet perished upon a pyre of blazing antagonists in Burmah; the Germans were scattered in the great battle of the Carpathians; the vast peninsula of India burst into insurrection and civil war from end to end, and from Gobi to Morocco rose the standards of the “Jehad.” For some weeks of warfare and destruction it seemed as though the Confederation of Eastern

Asia must needs conquer the world, and then the jerry-built “modern” civilisation of China too gave way under the strain. The teeming and peaceful population of China had been “westernised” during the opening years of the twentieth century with the deepest resentment and reluctance; they had been dragooned and disciplined under Japanese and European influence into an acquiescence with sanitary methods, police controls, military service, and wholesale process of exploitation against which their whole tradition rebelled. Under the stresses of the war their endurance reached the breaking point, the whole of China rose in incoherent revolt, and the practical destruction of the central government at Pekin by a handful of British and German airships that had escaped from the main battles rendered that revolt invincible. In Yokohama appeared barricades, the black flag and the social revolution. With that the whole world became a welter of conflict.

So that a universal social collapse followed, as it were a logical consequence, upon world-wide war. Wherever there were great populations, great masses of people found themselves without work, without money, and unable to get food. Famine was in every working-class quarter in the world within three weeks of the beginning of the war. Within a month there was not a city anywhere in which the ordinary law and social procedure had not been replaced by some form of emergency control, in which firearms and military executions were not being used to keep order and prevent violence. And still in the poorer quarters, and in the populous districts, and even here and there already among those who had been wealthy, famine spread.

3

So what historians have come to call the Phase of the Emergency Committees sprang from the opening phase and from the phase of social collapse. Then followed a period of vehement and passionate conflict against disintegration; everywhere the struggle to keep order and to keep fighting went on. And at the same time the character of the war altered through the replacement of the huge gas-filled airships by flying-machines as the instruments of war. So soon as the big fleet engagements were over, the Asiatics endeavoured to establish in close proximity to the more vulnerable points of the countries against which they were acting, fortified centres from which flying-machine raids could be made. For a time they had everything their own way in this, and then, as this story has told, the lost secret of the Butteridge machine came to light, and the conflict became equalized and less conclusive than ever. For these small flying-machines, ineffectual for any large expedition or conclusive attack, were horribly convenient for guerilla warfare, rapidly and cheaply made, easily used, easily hidden. The design of them was hastily copied and printed in Pinkerville and scattered broadcast over the United States and copies were sent to Europe, and there

reproduced. Every man, every town, every parish that could, was exhorted to make and use them. In a little while they were being constructed not only by governments and local authorities, but by robber bands, by insurgent committees, by every type of private person. The peculiar social destructiveness of the Butteridge machine lay in its complete simplicity. It was nearly as simple as a motor-bicycle. The broad outlines of the earlier stages of the war disappeared under its influence, the spacious antagonism of nations and empires and races vanished in a seething mass of detailed conflict. The world passed at a stride from a unity and simplicity broader than that of the Roman Empire at its best, to as social fragmentation as complete as the robber-baron period of the Middle Ages. But this time, for a long descent down gradual slopes of disintegration, comes a fall like a fall over a cliff. Everywhere were men and women perceiving this and struggling desperately to keep as it were a hold upon the edge of the cliff.

A fourth phase follows. Through the struggle against Chaos, in the wake of the Famine, came now another old enemy of humanity—the Pestilence, the Purple Death. But the war does not pause. The flags still fly. Fresh air-fleets rise, new forms of airship, and beneath their swooping struggles the world darkens—scarcely heeded by history.

It is not within the design of this book to tell what further story, to tell how the War in the Air kept on through the sheer inability of any authorities to meet and agree and end it, until every organised government in the world was as shattered and broken as a heap of china beaten with a stick. With every week of those terrible years history becomes more detailed and confused, more crowded and uncertain. Not without great and heroic resistance was civilisation borne down. Out of the bitter social conflict below rose patriotic associations, brotherhoods of order, city mayors, princes, provisional committees, trying to establish an order below and to keep the sky above. The double effort destroyed them. And as the exhaustion of the mechanical resources of civilisation clears the heavens of airships at last altogether, Anarchy, Famine and Pestilence are discovered triumphant below. The great nations and empires have become but names in the mouths of men. Everywhere there are ruins and unburied dead, and shrunken, yellow-faced survivors in a mortal apathy. Here there are robbers, here vigilance committees, and here guerilla bands ruling patches of exhausted territory, strange federations and brotherhoods form and dissolve, and religious fanaticisms begotten of despair gleam in famine-bright eyes. It is a universal dissolution. The fine order and welfare of the earth have crumpled like an exploded bladder. In five short years the world and the scope of human life have undergone a retrogressive change as great as that between the age of the Antonines and the Europe of the ninth century....

Across this sombre spectacle of disaster goes a minute and insignificant person for whom perhaps the readers of this story have now some slight solicitude. Of him there remains to be told just one single and miraculous thing. Through a world darkened and lost, through a civilisation in its death agony, our little Cockney errant went and found his Edna! He found his Edna!

He got back across the Atlantic partly by means of an order from the President and partly through his own good luck. He contrived to get himself aboard a British brig in the timber trade that put out from Boston without cargo, chiefly, it would seem, because its captain had a vague idea of “getting home” to South Shields. Bert was able to ship himself upon her mainly because of the seamanlike appearance of his rubber boots. They had a long, eventful voyage; they were chased, or imagined themselves to be chased, for some hours by an Asiatic ironclad, which was presently engaged by a British cruiser. The two ships fought for three hours, circling and driving southward as they fought, until the twilight and the cloud-drift of a rising gale swallowed them up. A few days later Bert's ship lost her rudder and mainmast in a gale. The crew ran out of food and subsisted on fish. They saw strange air-ships going eastward near the Azores and landed to get provisions and repair the rudder at Teneriffe. There they found the town destroyed and two big liners, with dead still aboard, sunken in the harbour. From there they got canned food and material for repairs, but their operations were greatly impeded by the hostility of a band of men amidst the ruins of the town, who sniped them and tried to drive them away.

At Mogador, they stayed and sent a boat ashore for water, and were nearly captured by an Arab ruse. Here too they got the Purple Death aboard, and sailed with it incubating in their blood. The cook sickened first, and then the mate, and presently every one was down and three in the forecastle were dead. It chanced to be calm weather, and they drifted helplessly and indeed careless of their fate backwards towards the Equator. The captain doctored them all with rum. Nine died all together, and of the four survivors none understood navigation; when at last they took heart again and could handle a sail, they made a course by the stars roughly northward and were already short of food once more when they fell in with a petrol-driven ship from Rio to Cardiff, shorthanded by reason of the Purple Death and glad to take them aboard. So at last, after a year of wandering Bert reached England. He landed in bright June weather, and found the Purple Death was there just beginning its ravages.

The people were in a state of panic in Cardiff and many had fled to the hills, and directly the steamer came to the harbour she was boarded and her residue of food

impounded by some unauthenticated Provisional Committee. Bert tramped through a country disorganised by pestilence, foodless, and shaken to the very base of its immemorial order. He came near death and starvation many times, and once he was drawn into scenes of violence that might have ended his career. But the Bert Smallways who tramped from Cardiff to London vaguely “going home,” vaguely seeking something of his own that had no tangible form but Edna, was a very different person from the Desert Dervish who was swept out of England in Mr. Butteridge's balloon a year before. He was brown and lean and enduring, steady-eyed and pestilence-salted, and his mouth, which had once hung open, shut now like a steel trap. Across his brow ran a white scar that he had got in a fight on the brig. In Cardiff he had felt the need of new clothes and a weapon, and had, by means that would have shocked him a year ago, secured a flannel shirt, a corduroy suit, and a revolver and fifty cartridges from an abandoned pawnbroker's. He also got some soap and had his first real wash for thirteen months in a stream outside the town. The Vigilance bands that had at first shot plunderers very freely were now either entirely dispersed by the plague, or busy between town and cemetery in a vain attempt to keep pace with it. He prowled on the outskirts of the town for three or four days, starving, and then went back to join the Hospital Corps for a week, and so fortified himself with a few square meals before he started eastward.

The Welsh and English countryside at that time presented the strangest mingling of the assurance and wealth of the opening twentieth century with a sort of Dureresque mediaevalism. All the gear, the houses and mono-rails, the farm hedges and power cables, the roads and pavements, the sign-posts and advertisements of the former order were still for the most part intact. Bankruptcy, social collapse, famine, and pestilence had done nothing to damage these, and it was only to the great capitals and ganglionic centres, as it were, of this State, that positive destruction had come. Any one dropped suddenly into the country would have noticed very little difference. He would have remarked first, perhaps, that all the hedges needed clipping, that the roadside grass grew rank, that the road-tracks were unusually rainworn, and that the cottages by the wayside seemed in many cases shut up, that a telephone wire had dropped here, and that a cart stood abandoned by the wayside. But he would still find his hunger whetted by the bright assurance that Wilder's Canned Peaches were excellent, or that there was nothing so good for the breakfast table as Gobble's Sausages. And then suddenly would come the Dureresque element; the skeleton of a horse, or some crumpled mass of rags in the ditch, with gaunt extended feet and a yellow, purple-blotched skin and face, or what had been a face, gaunt and glaring and devastated. Then here would be a field that had been ploughed and not sown, and

here a field of corn carelessly trampled by beasts, and here a hoarding torn down across the road to make a fire.

Then presently he would meet a man or a woman, yellow-faced and probably negligently dressed and armed—prowling for food. These people would have the complexions and eyes and expressions of tramps or criminals, and often the clothing of prosperous middle-class or upper-class people. Many of these would be eager for news, and willing to give help and even scraps of queer meat, or crusts of grey and doughy bread, in return for it. They would listen to Bert's story with avidity, and attempt to keep him with them for a day or so. The virtual cessation of postal distribution and the collapse of all newspaper enterprise had left an immense and aching gap in the mental life of this time. Men had suddenly lost sight of the ends of the earth and had still to recover the rumour-spreading habits of the Middle Ages. In their eyes, in their bearing, in their talk, was the quality of lost and deoriented souls.

As Bert travelled from parish to parish, and from district to district, avoiding as far as possible those festering centres of violence and despair, the larger towns, he found the condition of affairs varying widely. In one parish he would find the large house burnt, the vicarage wrecked, evidently in violent conflict for some suspected and perhaps imaginary store of food, unburied dead everywhere, and the whole mechanism of the community at a standstill. In another he would find organising forces stoutly at work, newly-painted notice boards warning off vagrants, the roads and still cultivated fields policed by armed men, the pestilence under control, even nursing going on, a store of food husbanded, the cattle and sheep well guarded, and a group of two or three justices, the village doctor or a farmer, dominating the whole place; a reversion, in fact, to the autonomous community of the fifteenth century. But at any time such a village would be liable to a raid of Asiatics or Africans or such-like air-pirates, demanding petrol and alcohol or provisions. The price of its order was an almost intolerable watchfulness and tension.

Then the approach to the confused problems of some larger centre of population and the presence of a more intricate conflict would be marked by roughly smeared notices of “Quarantine” or “Strangers Shot,” or by a string of decaying plunderers dangling from the telephone poles at the roadside. About Oxford big boards were put on the roofs warning all air wanderers off with the single word, “Guns.”

Taking their risks amidst these things, cyclists still kept abroad, and once or twice during Bert's long tramp powerful motor cars containing masked and goggled figures went tearing past him. There were few police in evidence, but ever and again squads of gaunt and tattered soldier-cyclists would come drifting along, and such encounters

became more frequent as he got out of Wales into England. Amidst all this wreckage they were still campaigning. He had had some idea of resorting to the workhouses for the night if hunger pressed him too closely, but some of these were closed and others converted into temporary hospitals, and one he came up to at twilight near a village in Gloucestershire stood with all its doors and windows open, silent as the grave, and, as he found to his horror by stumbling along evil-smelling corridors, full of unburied dead.

From Gloucestershire Bert went northward to the British aeronautic park outside Birmingham, in the hope that he might be taken on and given food, for there the Government, or at any rate the War Office, still existed as an energetic fact, concentrated amidst collapse and social disaster upon the effort to keep the British flag still flying in the air, and trying to brisk up mayor and mayor and magistrate and magistrate in a new effort of organisation. They had brought together all the best of the surviving artisans from that region, they had provisioned the park for a siege, and they were urgently building a larger type of Butteridge machine. Bert could get no footing at this work: he was not sufficiently skilled, and he had drifted to Oxford when the great fight occurred in which these works were finally wrecked. He saw something, but not very much, of the battle from a place called Boar Hill. He saw the Asiatic squadron coming up across the hills to the south-west, and he saw one of their airships circling southward again chased by two aeroplanes, the one that was ultimately overtaken, wrecked and burnt at Edge Hill. But he never learnt the issue of the combat as a whole.

He crossed the Thames from Eton to Windsor and made his way round the south of London to Bun Hill, and there he found his brother Tom, looking like some dark, defensive animal in the old shop, just recovering from the Purple Death, and Jessica upstairs delirious, and, as it seemed to him, dying grimly. She raved of sending out orders to customers, and scolded Tom perpetually lest he should be late with Mrs. Thompson's potatoes and Mrs. Hopkins' cauliflower, though all business had long since ceased and Tom had developed a quite uncanny skill in the snaring of rats and sparrows and the concealment of certain stores of cereals and biscuits from plundered grocers' shops. Tom received his brother with a sort of guarded warmth.

“Lor!” he said, “it's Bert. I thought you'd be coming back some day, and I'm glad to see you. But I carn't arst you to eat anything, because I 'aven't got anything to eat.... Where you been, Bert, all this time?”

Bert reassured his brother by a glimpse of a partly eaten swede, and was still telling his story in fragments and parentheses, when he discovered behind the counter a

yellow and forgotten note addressed to himself. “What's this?” he said, and found it was a year-old note from Edna. “She came 'ere,” said Tom, like one who recalls a trivial thing, “arstin' for you and arstin' us to take 'er in. That was after the battle and settin' Clapham Rise afire. I was for takin' 'er in, but Jessica wouldn't 'ave it—and so she borrowed five shillings of me quiet like and went on. I dessay she's tole you—”

She had, Bert found. She had gone on, she said in her note, to an aunt and uncle who had a brickfield near Horsham. And there at last, after another fortnight of adventurous journeying, Bert found her.

5

When Bert and Edna set eyes on one another, they stared and laughed foolishly, so changed they were, and so ragged and surprised. And then they both fell weeping.

“Oh! Bertie, boy!” she cried. “You've come—you've come!” and put out her arms and staggered. “I told 'im. He said he'd kill me if I didn't marry him.”

But Edna was not married, and when presently Bert could get talk from her, she explained the task before him. That little patch of lonely agricultural country had fallen under the power of a band of bullies led by a chief called Bill Gore who had begun life as a butcher boy and developed into a prize-fighter and a professional sport. They had been organised by a local nobleman of former eminence upon the turf, but after a time he had disappeared, no one quite knew how and Bill had succeeded to the leadership of the countryside, and had developed his teacher's methods with considerable vigour. There had been a strain of advanced philosophy about the local nobleman, and his mind ran to “improving the race” and producing the Over-Man, which in practice took the form of himself especially and his little band in moderation marrying with some frequency. Bill followed up the idea with an enthusiasm that even trenched upon his popularity with his followers. One day he had happened upon Edna tending her pigs, and had at once fallen a-wooing with great urgency among the troughs of slush. Edna had made a gallant resistance, but he was still vigorously about and extraordinarily impatient. He might, she said, come at any time, and she looked Bert in the eyes. They were back already in the barbaric stage when a man must fight for his love.

And here one deplores the conflicts of truth with the chivalrous tradition. One would like to tell of Bert sallying forth to challenge his rival, of a ring formed and a spirited encounter, and Bert by some miracle of pluck and love and good fortune winning. But indeed nothing of the sort occurred. Instead, he reloaded his revolver very carefully, and then sat in the best room of the cottage by the derelict brickfield, looking anxious

and perplexed, and listening to talk about Bill and his ways, and thinking, thinking. Then suddenly Edna's aunt, with a thrill in her voice, announced the appearance of that individual. He was coming with two others of his gang through the garden gate. Bert got up, put the woman aside, and looked out. They presented remarkable figures. They wore a sort of uniform of red golfing jackets and white sweaters, football singlet, and stockings and boots and each had let his fancy play about his head-dress. Bill had a woman's hat full of cock's feathers, and all had wild, slouching cowboy brims.

Bert sighed and stood up, deeply thoughtful, and Edna watched him, marvelling. The women stood quite still. He left the window, and went out into the passage rather slowly, and with the careworn expression of a man who gives his mind to a complex and uncertain business. “Edna!” he called, and when she came he opened the front door.

He asked very simply, and pointing to the foremost of the three, “That 'im?... Sure?”... and being told that it was, shot his rival instantly and very accurately through the chest. He then shot Bill's best man much less tidily in the head, and then shot at and winged the third man as he fled. The third gentleman yelped, and continued running with a comical end-on twist.

Then Bert stood still meditating, with the pistol in his hand, and quite regardless of the women behind him.

So far things had gone well.

It became evident to him that if he did not go into politics at once, he would be hanged as an assassin and accordingly, and without a word to the women, he went down to the village public-house he had passed an hour before on his way to Edna, entered it from the rear, and confronted the little band of ambiguous roughs, who were drinking in the tap-room and discussing matrimony and Bill's affection in a facetious but envious manner, with a casually held but carefully reloaded revolver, and an invitation to join what he called, I regret to say, a “Vigilance Committee” under his direction. “It's wanted about 'ere, and some of us are gettin' it up.” He presented himself as one having friends outside, though indeed, he had no friends at all in the world but Edna and her aunt and two female cousins.

There was a quick but entirely respectful discussion of the situation. They thought him a lunatic who had tramped into, this neighbourhood ignorant of Bill. They desired to temporise until their leader came. Bill would settle him. Some one spoke of Bill.

“Bill's dead, I jest shot 'im,” said Bert. “We don't need reckon with '*im*. '*e's* shot, and a red-'aired chap with a squint, 'E'S shot. We've settled up all that. There ain't going to

be no more Bill, ever. 'E'd got wrong ideas about marriage and things. It's 'is sort of chap we're after."

That carried the meeting.

Bill was perfunctorily buried, and Bert's Vigilance Committee (for so it continued to be called) reigned in his stead.

That is the end of this story so far as Bert Smallways is concerned. We leave him with his Edna to become squatters among the clay and oak thickets of the Weald, far away from the stream of events. From that time forth life became a succession of peasant encounters, an affair of pigs and hens and small needs and little economies and children, until Clapham and Bun Hill and all the life of the Scientific Age became to Bert no more than the fading memory of a dream. He never knew how the War in the Air went on, nor whether it still went on. There were rumours of airships going and coming, and of happenings Londonward. Once or twice their shadows fell on him as he worked, but whence they came or whither they went he could not tell. Even his desire to tell died out for want of food. At times came robbers and thieves, at times came diseases among the beasts and shortness of food, once the country was worried by a pack of boar-hounds he helped to kill; he went through many inconsecutive, irrelevant adventures. He survived them all.

Accident and death came near them both ever and again and passed them by, and they loved and suffered and were happy, and she bore him many children—eleven children—one after the other, of whom only four succumbed to the necessary hardships of their simple life. They lived and did well, as well was understood in those days. They went the way of all flesh, year by year.

THE EPILOGUE

It happened that one bright summer's morning exactly thirty years after the launching of the first German air-fleet, an old man took a small boy to look for a missing hen through the ruins of Bun Hill and out towards the splintered pinnacles of the Crystal Palace. He was not a very old man; he was, as a matter of fact, still within a few weeks of sixty-three, but constant stooping over spades and forks and the carrying of roots and manure, and exposure to the damps of life in the open-air without a change of clothing, had bent him into the form of a sickle. Moreover, he had lost most of his teeth and that had affected his digestion and through that his skin and temper. In face

and expression he was curiously like that old Thomas Smallways who had once been coachman to Sir Peter Bone, and this was just as it should be, for he was Tom Smallways the son, who formerly kept the little green-grocer's shop under the straddle of the mono-rail viaduct in the High Street of Bun Hill. But now there were no green-grocer's shops, and Tom was living in one of the derelict villas hard by that unoccupied building site that had been and was still the scene of his daily horticulture. He and his wife lived upstairs, and in the drawing and dining rooms, which had each French windows opening on the lawn, and all about the ground floor generally, Jessica, who was now a lean and lined and baldish but still very efficient and energetic old woman, kept her three cows and a multitude of gawky hens. These two were part of a little community of stragglers and returned fugitives, perhaps a hundred and fifty souls of them all together, that had settled down to the new conditions of things after the Panic and Famine and Pestilence that followed in the wake of the War. They had come back from strange refuges and hiding-places and had squatted down among the familiar houses and begun that hard struggle against nature for food which was now the chief interest of their lives. They were by sheer preoccupation with that a peaceful people, more particularly after Wilkes, the house agent, driven by some obsolete dream of acquisition, had been drowned in the pool by the ruined gas-works for making inquiries into title and displaying a litigious turn of mind. (He had not been murdered, you understand, but the people had carried an exemplary ducking ten minutes or so beyond its healthy limits.)

This little community had returned from its original habits of suburban parasitism to what no doubt had been the normal life of humanity for nearly immemorial years, a life of homely economies in the most intimate contact with cows and hens and patches of ground, a life that breathes and exhales the scent of cows and finds the need for stimulants satisfied by the activity of the bacteria and vermin it engenders. Such had been the life of the European peasant from the dawn of history to the beginning of the Scientific Era, so it was the large majority of the people of Asia and Africa had always been wont to live. For a time it had seemed that, by virtue of machines, and scientific civilisation, Europe was to be lifted out of this perpetual round of animal drudgery, and that America was to evade it very largely from the outset. And with the smash of the high and dangerous and splendid edifice of mechanical civilisation that had arisen so marvellously, back to the land came the common man, back to the manure.

The little communities, still haunted by ten thousand memories of a greater state, gathered and developed almost tacitly a customary law and fell under the guidance of a medicine man or a priest. The world rediscovered religion and the need of

something to hold its communities together. At Bun Hill this function was entrusted to an old Baptist minister. He taught a simple but adequate faith. In his teaching a good principle called the Word fought perpetually against a diabolical female influence called the Scarlet Woman and an evil being called Alcohol. This Alcohol had long since become a purely spiritualised conception deprived of any element of material application; it had no relation to the occasional finds of whiskey and wine in Londoners' cellars that gave Bun Hill its only holidays. He taught this doctrine on Sundays, and on weekdays he was an amiable and kindly old man, distinguished by his quaint disposition to wash his hands, and if possible his face, daily, and with a wonderful genius for cutting up pigs. He held his Sunday services in the old church in the Beckenham Road, and then the countryside came out in a curious reminiscence of the urban dress of Edwardian times. All the men without exception wore frock coats, top hats, and white shirts, though many had no boots. Tom was particularly distinguished on these occasions because he wore a top hat with gold lace about it and a green coat and trousers that he had found upon a skeleton in the basement of the Urban and District Bank. The women, even Jessica, came in jackets and immense hats extravagantly trimmed with artificial flowers and exotic birds' feather's—of which there were abundant supplies in the shops to the north—and the children (there were not many children, because a large proportion of the babies born in Bun Hill died in a few days' time of inexplicable maladies) had similar clothes cut down to accommodate them; even Stringer's little grandson of four wore a large top hat.

That was the Sunday costume of the Bun Hill district, a curious and interesting survival of the genteel traditions of the Scientific Age. On a weekday the folk were dingily and curiously hung about with dirty rags of housecloth and scarlet flannel, sacking, curtain serge, and patches of old carpet, and went either bare-footed or on rude wooden sandals. These people, the reader must understand, were an urban population sunken back to the state of a barbaric peasantry, and so without any of the simple arts a barbaric peasantry would possess. In many ways they were curiously degenerate and incompetent. They had lost any idea of making textiles, they could hardly make up clothes when they had material, and they were forced to plunder the continually dwindling supplies of the ruins about them for cover.

All the simple arts they had ever known they had lost, and with the breakdown of modern drainage, modern water supply, shopping, and the like, their civilised methods were useless. Their cooking was worse than primitive. It was a feeble muddling with food over wood fires in rusty drawing-room fireplaces; for the kitcheners burnt too much. Among them all no sense of baking or brewing or metal-working was to be found.

Their employment of sacking and such-like coarse material for work-a-day clothing, and their habit of tying it on with string and of thrusting wadding and straw inside it for warmth, gave these people an odd, “packed” appearance, and as it was a week-day when Tom took his little nephew for the hen-seeking excursion, so it was they were attired.

“So you've really got to Bun Hill at last, Teddy,” said old Tom, beginning to talk and slackening his pace so soon as they were out of range of old Jessica. “You're the last of Bert's boys for me to see. Wat I've seen, young Bert I've seen, Sissie and Matt, Tom what's called after me, and Peter. The traveller people brought you along all right, eh?”

“I managed,” said Teddy, who was a dry little boy.

“Didn't want to eat you on the way?”

“They was all right,” said Teddy, “and on the way near Leatherhead we saw a man riding on a bicycle.”

“My word!” said Tom, “there ain't many of those about nowadays. Where was he going?”

“Said 'e was going to Dorking if the High Road was good enough. But I doubt if he got there. All about Burford it was flooded. We came over the hill, uncle—what they call the Roman Road. That's high and safe.”

“Don't know it,” said old Tom. “But a bicycle! You're sure it was a bicycle? Had two wheels?”

“It was a bicycle right enough.”

“Why! I remember a time, Teddy, where there was bicycles no end, when you could stand just here—the road was as smooth as a board then—and see twenty or thirty coming and going at the same time, bicycles and moty-bicycles; moty cars, all sorts of whirly things.”

“No!” said Teddy.

“I do. They'd keep on going by all day,—'undreds and 'undreds.”

“But where was they all going?” asked Teddy.

“Tearin' off to Brighton—you never seen Brighton, I expect—it's down by the sea, used to be a moce 'mazing place—and coming and going from London.”

“Why?”

“They did.”

“But why?”

“Lord knows why, Teddy. They did. Then you see that great thing there like a great big rusty nail sticking up higher than all the houses, and that one yonder, and that, and how something's fell in between 'em among the houses. They was parts of the mono-rail. They went down to Brighton too and all day and night there was people going, great cars as big as 'ouses full of people.”

The little boy regarded the rusty evidences acrosss the narrow muddy ditch of cow-droppings that had once been a High Street. He was clearly disposed to be sceptical, and yet there the ruins were! He grappled with ideas beyond the strength of his imagination.

“What did they go for?” he asked, “all of 'em?”

“They '*ad* to. Everything was on the go those days—everything.”

“Yes, but where did they come from?”

“All round 'ere, Teddy, there was people living in those 'ouses, and up the road more 'ouses and more people. You'd 'ardly believe me, Teddy, but it's Bible truth. You can go on that way for ever and ever, and keep on coming on 'ouses, more 'ouses, and more. There's no end to 'em. No end. They get bigger and bigger.” His voice dropped as though he named strange names.

“It's *London*,” he said.

“And it's all empty now and left alone. All day it's left alone. You don't find 'ardly a man, you won't find nothing but dogs and cats after the rats until you get round by Bromley and Beckenham, and there you find the Kentish men herding swine. (Nice rough lot they are too!) I tell you that so long as the sun is up it's as still as the grave. I been about by day—orfen and orfen.” He paused.

“And all those 'ouses and streets and ways used to be full of people before the War in the Air and the Famine and the Purple Death. They used to be full of people, Teddy, and then came a time when they was full of corpses, when you couldn't go a mile that way before the stink of 'em drove you back. It was the Purple Death 'ad killed 'em every one. The cats and dogs and 'ens and vermin caught it. Everything and every one 'ad it. Jest a few of us 'appened to live. I pulled through, and your aunt, though it made 'er lose 'er 'air. Why, you find the skeletons in the 'ouses now. This way we been into all the 'ouses and took what we wanted and buried moce of the people, but up that way,

Norwood way, there's 'ouses with the glass in the windows still, and the furniture not touched—all dusty and falling to pieces—and the bones of the people lying, some in bed, some about the 'ouse, jest as the Purple Death left 'em five-and-twenty years ago. I went into one—me and old Higgins las' year—and there was a room with books, Teddy—you know what I mean by books, Teddy?"

"I seen 'em. I seen 'em with pictures."

"Well, books all round, Teddy, 'undreds of books, beyond-rhyme or reason, as the saying goes, green-mouldy and dry. I was for leaven' 'em alone—I was never much for reading—but ole Higgins he must touch em. 'I believe I could read one of 'em *NOW*,' 'e says.

"'Not it,' I says.

"'I could,' 'e says, laughing and takes one out and opens it.

"I looked, and there, Teddy, was a cullud picture, oh, so lovely! It was a picture of women and serpents in a garden. I never see anything like it.

"'This suits me,' said old Higgins, 'to rights.'

"And then kind of friendly he gave the book a pat—

Old Tom Smallways paused impressively.

"And then?" said Teddy.

"It all fell to dus'. White dus'!" He became still more impressive. "We didn't touch no more of them books that day. Not after that."

For a long time both were silent. Then Tom, playing with a subject that attracted him with a fatal fascination, repeated, "All day long they lie—still as the grave."

Teddy took the point at last. "Don't they lie o' nights?" he asked.

Old Tom shook his head. "Nobody knows, boy, nobody knows."

"But what could they do?"

"Nobody knows. Nobody ain't seen to tell not nobody."

"Nobody?"

"They tell tales," said old Tom. "They tell tales, but there ain't no believing 'em. I gets 'ome about sundown, and keeps indoors, so I can't say nothing, can I? But there's

them that thinks some things and them as thinks others. I've 'eard it's unlucky to take clo'es off of 'em unless they got white bones. There's stories—”

The boy watched his uncle sharply. “*WOT* stories?” he said.

“Stories of moonlight nights and things walking about. But I take no stock in 'em. I keeps in bed. If you listen to stories—Lord! You'll get afraid of yourself in a field at midday.”

The little boy looked round and ceased his questions for a space.

“They say there's a 'og man in Beck'n'am what was lost in London three days and three nights. 'E went up after whiskey to Cheapside, and lorst 'is way among the ruins and wandered. Three days and three nights 'e wandered about and the streets kep' changing so's he couldn't get 'ome. If 'e 'adn't remembered some words out of the Bible 'e might 'ave been there now. All day 'e went and all night—and all day long it was still. It was as still as death all day long, until the sunset came and the twilight thickened, and then it began to rustle and whisper and go pit-a-pat with a sound like 'urrying feet.”

He paused.

“Yes,” said the little boy breathlessly. “Go on. What then?”

“A sound of carts and 'orses there was, and a sound of cabs and omnibuses, and then a lot of whistling, shrill whistles, whistles that froze 'is marrer. And directly the whistles began things begun to show, people in the streets 'urrying, people in the 'ouses and shops busying themselves, moty cars in the streets, a sort of moonlight in all the lamps and winders. People, I say, Teddy, but they wasn't people. They was the ghosts of them that was overtook, the ghosts of them that used to crowd those streets. And they went past 'im and through 'im and never 'eeded 'im, went by like fogs and vapours, Teddy. And sometimes they was cheerful and sometimes they was 'orrible, 'orrible beyond words. And once 'e come to a place called Piccadilly, Teddy, and there was lights blazing like daylight and ladies and gentlemen in splendid clo'es crowding the pavement, and taxicabs follering along the road. And as 'e looked, they all went evil—evil in the face, Teddy. And it seemed to 'im suddenly *they saw 'im*, and the women began to look at 'im and say things to 'im—'orrible—wicked things. One come very near 'im, Teddy, right up to 'im, and looked into 'is face—close. And she 'adn't got a face to look with, only a painted skull, and then 'e see; they was all painted skulls. And one after another they crowded on 'im saying 'orrible things, and catchin' at 'im and threatenin' and coaxing 'im, so that 'is 'eart near left 'is body for fear.”

“Yes,” gasped Teddy in an unendurable pause.

“Then it was he remembered the words of Scripture and saved himself alive. 'The Lord is my 'Elper, 'e says, 'therefore I will fear nothing,' and straightaway there came a cock-crowing and the street was empty from end to end. And after that the Lord was good to 'im and guided 'im 'ome.”

Teddy stared and caught at another question. “But who was the people,” he asked, “who lived in all these 'ouses? What was they?”

“Gent'men in business, people with money—leastways we thought it was money till everything smashed up, and then seemingly it was jes' paper—all sorts. Why, there was 'undreds of thousands of them. There was millions. I've seen that 'I Street there regular so's you couldn't walk along the pavements, shoppin' time, with women and people shoppin'.”

“But where'd they get their food and things?”

“Bort 'em in shops like I used to 'ave. I'll show you the place, Teddy, if we go back. People nowadays 'aven't no idee of a shop—no idee. Plate-glass winders—it's all Greek to them. Why, I've 'ad as much as a ton and a 'arf of petaties to 'andle all at one time. You'd open your eyes till they dropped out to see jes' what I used to 'ave in my shop. Baskets of pears 'eaped up, marrers, apples and pears, d'licious great nuts.” His voice became luscious—“Benanas, oranges.”

“What's benanas?” asked the boy, “and oranges?”

“Fruits they was. Sweet, juicy, d'licious fruits. Foreign fruits. They brought 'em from Spain and N' York and places. In ships and things. They brought 'em to me from all over the world, and I sold 'em in my shop. *I* sold 'em, Teddy! me what goes about now with you, dressed up in old sacks and looking for lost 'ens. People used to come into my shop, great beautiful ladies like you'd 'ardly dream of now, dressed up to the nines, and say, 'Well, Mr. Smallways, what you got 'smorning?' and I'd say, 'Well, I got some very nice C'nadian apples, 'or p'raps I got custed marrers. See? And they'd buy 'em. Right off they'd say, 'Send me some up.' Lord! what a life that was. The business of it, the bussel, the smart things you saw, moty cars going by, kerridges, people, organ-grinders, German bands. Always something going past—always. If it wasn't for those empty 'ouses, I'd think it all a dream.”

“But what killed all the people, uncle?” asked Teddy.

“It was a smash-up,” said old Tom. “Everything was going right until they started that War. Everything was going like clock-work. Everybody was busy and everybody was 'appy and everybody got a good square meal every day.”

He met incredulous eyes. “Everybody,” he said firmly. “If you couldn't get it anywhere else, you could get it in the workhuss, a nice 'ot bowl of soup called skilly, and bread better'n any one knows 'ow to make now, reg'lar *white* bread, gov'ment bread.”

Teddy marvelled, but said nothing. It made him feel deep longings that he found it wisest to fight down.

For a time the old man resigned himself to the pleasures of gustatory reminiscence. His lips moved. “Pickled Sammin!” he whispered, “an' vinegar.... Dutch cheese, _beer_! A pipe of terbakker.”

“But 'OW did the people get killed?” asked Teddy presently.

“There was the War. The War was the beginning of it. The War banged and flummocked about, but it didn't really KILL many people. But it upset things. They came and set fire to London and burnt and sank all the ships there used to be in the Thames—we could see the smoke and steam for weeks—and they threw a bomb into the Crystal Palace and made a bust-up, and broke down the rail lines and things like that. But as for killin' people, it was just accidental if they did. They killed each other more. There was a great fight all hereabout one day, Teddy—up in the air. Great things bigger than fifty 'ouses, bigger than the Crystal Palace—bigger, bigger than anything, flying about up in the air and whacking at each other and dead men fallin' off 'em. T'riffic! But, it wasn't so much the people they killed as the business they stopped. There wasn't any business doin', Teddy, there wasn't any money about, and nothin' to buy if you 'ad it.”

“But '*ow* did the people get killed?” said the little boy in the pause.

“I'm tellin' you, Teddy,” said the old man. “It was the stoppin' of business come next. Suddenly there didn't seem to be any money. There was cheques—they was a bit of paper written on, and they was jes' as good as money—jes' as good if they come from customers you knew. Then all of a sudden they wasn't. I was left with three of 'em and two I'd given' change. Then it got about that five-pun' notes were no good, and then the silver sort of went off. Gold you 'couldn't get for love or—anything. The banks in London 'ad got it, and the banks was all smashed up. Everybody went bankrup'. Everybody was thrown out of work. Everybody!”

He paused, and scrutinised his hearer. The small boy's intelligent face expressed hopeless perplexity.

“That's 'ow it 'appened,” said old Tom. He sought for some means of expression. “It was like stoppin' a clock,” he said. “Things were quiet for a bit, deadly quiet, except for the air-ships fighting about in the sky, and then people begun to get excited. I remember my lars' customer, the very lars' customer that ever I 'ad. He was a Mr. Moses Gluckstein, a city gent and very pleasant and fond of sparrowgrass and chokes, and 'e cut in—there 'adn't been no customers for days—and began to talk very fast, offerin' me for anything I 'ad, anything, petaties or anything, its weight in gold. 'E said it was a little speculation 'e wanted to try. 'E said it was a sort of bet reely, and very likely 'e'd lose; but never mind that, 'e wanted to try. 'E always 'ad been a gambler, 'e said. 'E said I'd only got to weigh it out and 'e'd give me 'is cheque right away. Well, that led to a bit of a argument, perfect respectful it was, but a argument about whether a cheque was still good, and while 'e was explaining there come by a lot of these here unemployed with a great banner they 'ad for every one to read—every one could read those days—'We want Food.' Three or four of 'em suddenly turns and comes into my shop.

“'Got any food?' says one.

“'No,' I says, 'not to sell. I wish I 'ad. But if I 'ad, I'm afraid I couldn't let you have it. This gent, 'e's been offerin' me—'

“Mr. Gluckstein 'e tried to stop me, but it was too late.

“'What's 'e been offerin' you?' says a great big chap with a 'atchet; 'what's 'e been offerin you?' I 'ad to tell.

“'Boys,' 'e said, ''ere's another feenancier!' and they took 'im out there and then, and 'ung 'im on a lam'pose down the street. 'E never lifted a finger to resist. After I tole on 'im 'e never said a word....”

Tom meditated for a space. “First chap I ever sin 'ung!” he said.

“Ow old was you?” asked Teddy.

“'Bout thirty,” said old Tom.

“Why! I saw free pig-stealers 'ung before I was six,” said Teddy. “Father took me because of my birfday being near. Said I ought to be blooded....”

“Well, you never saw no-one killed by a moty car, any'ow,” said old Tom after a moment of chagrin. “And you never saw no dead men carried into a chemis' shop.”

Teddy's momentary triumph faded. “No,” he said, “I 'aven't.”

“Nor won't. Nor won't. You'll never see the things I've seen, never. Not if you live to be a 'undred... Well, as I was saying, that's how the Famine and Riotin' began. Then there was strikes and Socialism, things I never did 'old with, worse and worse. There was fightin' and shootin' down, and burnin' and plundering. They broke up the banks up in London and got the gold, but they couldn't make food out of gold. 'Ow did _we_ get on? Well, we kep' quiet. We didn't interfere with no-one and no-one didn't interfere with us. We 'ad some old 'tatoes about, but mocely we lived on rats. Ours was a old 'ouse, full of rats, and the famine never seemed to bother 'em. Orfen we got a rat. Orfen. But moce of the people who lived hereabouts was too tender stummicked for rats. Didn't seem to fancy 'em. They'd been used to all sorts of fallals, and they didn't take to 'onest feeding, not till it was too late. Died rather.

“It was the famine began to kill people. Even before the Purple Death came along they was dying like flies at the end of the summer. 'Ow I remember it all! I was one of the first to 'ave it. I was out, seein' if I mightn't get 'old of a cat or somethin', and then I went round to my bit of ground to see whether I couldn't get up some young turnips I'd forgot, and I was took something awful. You've no idee the pain, Teddy—it doubled me up pretty near. I jes' lay down by 'at there corner, and your aunt come along to look for me and dragged me 'ome like a sack.

“I'd never 'ave got better if it 'adn't been for your aunt. 'Tom,' she says to me, 'you got to get well,' and I '*ad* to. Then *she* sickened. She sickened but there ain't much dyin' about your aunt. 'Lor!' she says, 'as if I'd leave you to go muddlin' along alone!' That's what she says. She's got a tongue, 'as your aunt. But it took 'er 'air off—and arst though I might, she's never cared for the wig I got 'er—orf the old lady what was in the vicarage garden.

“Well, this 'ere Purple Death,—it jes' wiped people out, Teddy. You couldn't bury 'em. And it took the dogs and the cats too, and the rats and 'orses. At last every house and garden was full of dead bodies. London way, you couldn't go for the smell of there, and we 'ad to move out of the 'I street into that villa we got. And all the water run short that way. The drains and underground tunnels took it. Gor' knows where the Purple Death come from; some say one thing and some another. Some said it come from eatin' rats and some from eatin' nothin'. Some say the Asiatics brought it from some 'I place, Thibet, I think, where it never did nobody much 'arm. All I know is it come after the Famine. And the Famine come after the Penic and the Penic come after the War.”

Teddy thought. “What made the Purple Death?” he asked.

“'Aven't I tole you!”

“But why did they 'ave a Penic?”

“They 'ad it.”

“But why did they start the War?”

“They couldn't stop theirselves. 'Aving them airships made 'em.”

“And 'ow did the War end?”

“Lord knows if it's ended, boy,” said old Tom. “Lord knows if it's ended. There's been travellers through 'ere—there was a chap only two summers ago—say it's goin' on still. They say there's bands of people up north who keep on with it and people in Germany and China and 'Merica and places. 'E said they still got flying-machines and gas and things. But we 'aven't seen nothin' in the air now for seven years, and nobody 'asn't come nigh of us. Last we saw was a crumpled sort of airship going away—over there. It was a littleish-sized thing and lopsided, as though it 'ad something the matter with it.”

He pointed, and came to a stop at a gap in the fence, the vestiges of the old fence from which, in the company of his neighbour Mr. Stringer the milkman, he had once watched the South of England Aero Club's Saturday afternoon ascents. Dim memories, it may be, of that particular afternoon returned to him.

“There, down there, where all that rus' looks so red and bright, that's the gas-works.”

“What's gas?” asked the little boy.

“Oh, a hairy sort of nothin' what you put in balloons to make 'em go up. And you used to burn it till the 'lectricity come.”

The little boy tried vainly to imagine gas on the basis of these particulars. Then his thoughts reverted to a previous topic.

“But why didn't they end the War?”

“Obstinacy. Everybody was getting 'urt, but everybody was 'urtin' and everybody was 'igh-spirited and patriotic, and so they smeshed up things instead. They jes' went on smeshin'. And afterwards they jes' got desp'rite and savige.”

“It ought to 'ave ended,” said the little boy.

“It didn't ought to 'ave begun,” said old Tom, “But people was proud. People was la-dy-da-ish and uppish and proud. Too much meat and drink they 'ad. Give in—not them! And after a bit nobody arst 'em to give in. Nobody arst 'em....”

He sucked his old gums thoughtfully, and his gaze strayed away across the valley to where the shattered glass of the Crystal Palace glittered in the sun. A dim large sense of waste and irrevocable lost opportunities pervaded his mind. He repeated his ultimate judgment upon all these things, obstinately, slowly, and conclusively, his final saying upon the matter.

“You can say what you like,” he said. “It didn't ought ever to 'ave begun.”

He said it simply—somebody somewhere ought to have stopped something, but who or how or why were all beyond his ken.