

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

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

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

4

It is curious how the final boom of flying began. It was like the coming of a breeze on a quiet day, nothing started it, it came. People began to talk of flying with an air of never having for one moment dropped the subject. Pictures of flying and flying machines returned to the newspapers, articles and allusions increased and multiplied in the serious magazines. People asked in mono-rail trains, "When are we going to fly?" A new crop of inventors sprang up in a night or so like fungi. The Aero Club announced the project of a great Flying Exhibition in a large

area of ground that the removal of slums in Whitechapel had rendered available.

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

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

"They *tork*," said Bert.

"They talk—and they do," said the soldier. The thing's coming.

"It keeps *on* coming," said Bert; "I shall believe when I see it."

"That won't be long," said the soldier.

The conversation seemed degenerating into an amiable wrangle of contradiction.

"I tell you they *are* flying," the soldier insisted. "I see it myself."

"We've all seen it," said Bert.

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

"You ain't seen that!"

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

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

"I tell you they got nearly a square mile fenced in—a sort of valley. Fences of barbed wire ten feet high, and inside that they do things. Chaps about the camp—now and then we get a peep. It isn't only us

neither. There's the Japanese; you bet they got it too—and the Germans! And I never knowed anything of this sort yet that the Frencheys didn't get ahead with—after their manner! They started ironclads, they started submarines, they started navigables, and you bet they won't be far be'ind at this."

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

"Funny thing fighting'll be," he said.

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

"I read 'em a bit," said Bert.

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

"Can't say I 'ave," said Bert.

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

The soldier prepared to light his pipe.

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

"Secret society! *Naw!*"

The soldier lit his match, and drew. "Secret society," he repeated, in response to these words, with his pipe between his teeth and the match

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

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

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

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

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

5

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

It wasn't, one felt, a fresh step forward in the matter so much as a giant stride, a leap. Mr. Butteridge remained in the air altogether for about nine hours, and during that time he flew with the ease and assurance of a bird. His machine was, however, neither bird-like nor butterfly-like, nor had it the wide, lateral expansion of the ordinary aeroplane. The effect upon the observer was rather something in the nature of a bee or wasp. Parts of the apparatus were spinning very rapidly, and gave one a hazy effect of transparent wings; but parts, including two peculiarly curved

“wing-cases”—if one may borrow a figure from the flying beetles—remained expanded stiffly. In the middle was a long rounded body like the body of a moth, and on this Mr. Butteridge could be seen sitting astride, much as a man bestrides a horse. The wasp-like resemblance was increased by the fact that the apparatus flew with a deep booming hum, exactly the sound made by a wasp at a window-pane.

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

But before he had made his second circuit of the Crystal Palace towers, Fame was lifting her trumpet, she drew a deep breath as the startled tramps who sleep on the streets of Trafalgar Square were aroused by his buzz, and awoke to discover him circling the Nelson column, and

by the time he had got to Birmingham, which place he crossed about half-past ten, her deafening blast was echoing throughout the country. The despaired-of thing was done. A man was flying securely and well.

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

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

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

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

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

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

6

Tom and Bert Smallways both saw that return. They watched from the crest of Bun Hill, from which they had so often surveyed the pyrotechnics of the Crystal Palace. Bert was excited, Tom kept calm and lumpish, but neither of them realized how their own lives were to be invaded by the fruits of that beginning. "P'raps old Grubb'll mind the shop a bit now," he said, "and put his blessed model in the fire. Not that that can save us, if we don't tide over with Steinhart's account."

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

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

For it was a secret, and he kept it secret in the most elaborate fashion. He built his apparatus himself, in the safe privacy of the great Crystal Palace sheds, with the assistance of inattentive workmen, and the day next following his flight he took it to pieces single-handed, packed certain portions, and then secured unintelligent assistance in packing and dispersing the rest. Sealed packing-cases went north and east and west to various pantehnicons, and the engines were boxed with peculiar care. It became evident these precautions were not inadvisable, in view of the violent demand for any sort of photograph or impressions of his

machine. But Mr. Butteridge, having once made his demonstration, intended to keep his secret safe from any further risk of leakage. He faced the British public now with the question whether they wanted his secret or not; he was, he said perpetually, an "Imperial Englishman," and his first wish and his last was to see his invention the privilege and monopoly of the Empire. Only—

It was there the difficulty began.

Mr. Butteridge, it became evident, was a man singularly free from any false modesty—indeed, from any modesty of any kind—singularly willing to see interviewers, answer questions upon any topic except aeronautics, volunteer opinions, criticisms, and autobiography, supply portraits and photographs of himself, and generally spread his personality across the terrestrial sky. The published portraits insisted primarily upon an immense black moustache, and secondarily upon a fierceness behind the moustache. The general impression upon the public was that Butteridge was a small man. No one big, it was felt, could have so virulently aggressive an expression, though, as a matter of fact, Butteridge had a height of six feet two inches, and a weight altogether proportionate to that. Moreover, he had a love affair of large and unusual dimensions and irregular circumstances, and the still largely decorous British public learnt with reluctance and alarm that a sympathetic treatment of this affair was inseparable from the exclusive acquisition of the priceless secret of aerial stability by the British Empire. The exact particulars of the irregularity never came to light, but apparently the lady had, in a fit of high-minded inadvertence, gone through the ceremony of marriage with—one quotes the unpublished discourse of Mr. Butteridge—"a white-livered skunk," and this zoological aberration did in some legal and vexatious manner mar her social happiness. He wanted to talk about the business, to show the splendour of her nature in the light of its complications. It was really most embarrassing to a press that has always possessed a considerable turn for reticence, that wanted things personal indeed in the modern fashion, but not too personal. It was embarrassing, I say, to be inexorably confronted with Mr. Butteridge's great heart, to see it laid open in relentless self-vivisection, and its pulsating dissepiments adorned with emphatic flag labels.

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

“That’s, of course, a private affair, Mr. Butteridge,” they would object.

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

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

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

It was a strangely embarrassing thing for British journalism. Never was there a more obvious or uninteresting affair; never had the world heard the story of erratic affection with less appetite or sympathy. On the other hand, it was extremely curious about Mr. Butteridge’s invention. But when Mr. Butteridge could be deflected for a moment from the cause of the lady he championed, then he talked chiefly, and usually with tears of tenderness in his voice, about his mother and his childhood—his mother who crowned a complete encyclopædia of maternal virtue by being “largely Scotch.” She was not quite neat, but nearly so. “I owe everything in me to me mother,” he asserted—“everything. Eh!” and—“ask any man who’s done anything. You’ll hear the same story. All we have we owe to women. They are the species, sorr. Man is but a dream. He comes and goes. The woman’s soul leadeth us upward and on!”

He was always going on like that.

What in particular he wanted from the Government for his secret did not appear, nor what beyond a money payment could be expected from a modern State in such an affair. The general effect upon judicious

observers, indeed, was not that he was treating for anything, but that he was using an unexampled opportunity to bellow and show off to an attentive world. Rumours of his real identity spread abroad. It was said that he had been the landlord of an ambiguous hotel in Cape Town, and had there given shelter to, and witnessed the experiments, and finally stolen the papers and plans of an extremely shy and friendless young inventor named Palliser, who had come to South Africa from England in an advanced stage of consumption, and died there. This at any rate was the allegation of the more outspoken American press. But the proof or disproof of that never reached the public.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He shook his head portentously.

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

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

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

And presently he too was going out into a world of change and wonder, bowed beneath a load of potatoes and patriotic insecurity, that merged at last into a very definite irritation at the weight and want of style of the potatoes and a very clear conception of the entire detestableness of Jessica.