

The Sign From Beyond—A Short Story



MRS. HARKIN sat in her drawing-room at Hampstead waiting for the door-bell to ring, for Mr. Kingdon had a reputation for punctuality. She was dressed in a dazzling variety of blue and white, and her hair was really pretty. The fringe alone had cost thirty-five shillings, and the coil at the back was such a perfect match that it must have made a rather large gap in Mrs. Harkin's saving bank book—this, assuming that she had such a thing. Some people have no savings bank book, and they don't seem to be very much more unhappy than those who have.

Mrs. Harkin was a widow of—thirty-eight, some say fifty, but then they hadn't seen the new fringe. If a lady isn't entitled to take a year or two off her age when her hair suddenly changes from streaky grey to a rich shade of brown, when is she entitled to make the reduction? I shall not pause for a reply, as I want to do all the talking myself.

The Harkins were not rich, though most people casting a searching eye over the house at Hampstead would have concluded that there was enough money in the family to keep carking care off the front doorstep most successfully. But Mr. Kingdon was rich, if you like. It made some people nearly cry to think of a man like Kingdon having all that money, while they themselves had to rush about for a mere living. The late Mrs. Kingdon, who had died a year or so previously, had worn frocks that had been the envy of all the north of London; and when you know that her premature death had been traced to over-indulgence in rich food, you can understand how dismal her rivals felt as they sat down to mere cold mutton. To think that one should have to scramble through life on plain food while other people are able to die from the effects of high game and oysters! The social inequalities of the day are fast assuming the proportions of a public scandal.

Mr. Kingdon, on the principle that a man is as old as he feels was forty-five. He had obtained permission from Mrs. Harkin to call on a matter of great importance to his happiness; and as Mrs. Harkin read his letter over a second time she half regretted that she hadn't spent another five shillings on her fringe so as to have a kiss-curl thrown in for the extra money. For anybody could see that he was coming to ask her to marry him. No sane person could put any other construction on his letter. Miss Julia Harkin, indeed, had already told her mother that such a match would be perfectly lovely. And when a modern young lady says a thing is perfectly lovely, we know she has sounded her vocabulary of praise to its uttermost depths. Julia had told Jack Sanson about it, and had hinted that her prospective step-father would probably settle a dowry, or something comfortable like that, upon her. And when she had said good-bye to Jack at the garden gate on the previous evening, she—

but, I beg your pardon. That is really no business of ours. Mr. Kingdon came up to the house on his bicycle. Strictly speaking, this is perhaps hardly the correct way of paying an afternoon call. But, as Shakespeare says, nice customs courtesy to great kings, and Mr. Kingdon was so dreadfully rich. He could, of course, have driven up in his motor car; but a bicycle gives the impression of rollicking juvenility, and Mr. Kingdon was sure he looked more youthful in knicker-bockers. Besides, that turn-over at the top of the colored stocking gives an extra body to the calf which no one short of an Adonis dare affect to despise.

While her mother waited in the drawing-room, Miss Julia watched Mr. Kingdon's arrival from behind the curtains of one of the front bedroom windows. He came up the slight incline in the road in a rather erratic way which seemed to indicate either that he was relatively a novice at bicycling or else that he really wasn't as young as he felt, after all. As he approached the house a fine instinct seemed to inform him that he was being watched, and he stuck an arm akimbo just to show that when necessary he could steer his bicycle with one hand, just as all the other clever people do. If he had left his display of proficiency at that, all might have been well. But, as Shakespeare says (again), his vaulting ambition over-leapt itself. He decided to dismount with one hand, and a moment afterwards there was a frightful scene of disorder. A passing policeman kindly separated him from his bicycle and recovered his hat for him, and trusted he wasn't hurt. Mr. Kingdon ridiculed the suggestion that a mere fall from a bicycle could affect an active youth like himself; and he limped up to Mrs. Harkin's door and gave his machine to the maid and was then shown into the drawing room. By a stroke of good fortune he happened to look down at his right leg before he had crossed the passage, and just had time to readjust his colored stocking so that the gaping hole that had been torn in it as the result of his fall should be adroitly concealed from Mrs. Harkin's eye.

Mrs. Harkin gave her skirts a scientific twitch at the knee before she rose to receive her visitor. She had rather a nice ankle still, and these first impressions go such a long way. The greetings were over when Julia came into the room. She was blinking her eyes rather nervously, as if she had either been weeping a little or laughing very much. When one remembers that she had been at the window watching Mr. Kingdon's glorious sprawl, perhaps the last theory is more likely to be the correct one.

"I hope you didn't hurt yourself when you

fell," she said, with an expression of deep sympathy which looked as though it wouldn't come off. "I happened to be looking out of the window."

"Did you fall off your bicycle, Mr. Kingdon?" interrupted Mrs. Harkin in a tone of alarm.

"It was nothing," insisted Mr. Kingdon. "Just a side slip. The most expert riders get 'em you know. Perfectly scandalous the way the roads are kept in Hampstead. I shall write to the Times about it."

"Some people say it's so very unlucky to fall in front of a house where you're calling for—for a particular purpose," said Mrs. Harkin, patting her fringe down tenderly and pushing an ankle into the foreground of the picture. "But I'm not a bit superstitious. I don't even believe in ghosts or anything like that."

"Perhaps you've never seen a ghost," said Mr. Kingdon, solemnly. "But I have."

"How awfully interesting," said Julia, as she paused at the door on her way out. She had had very precise instructions to leave her mother with Mr. Kingdon at the first convenient moment.

"One doesn't like to speak too freely of such things," said Mr. Kingdon with a slight shiver. "I can only say that I was once going on a voyage, and the night before I was due to sail I was sitting alone in the drawing room. All at once the lamp went out of its own accord, and at the same moment a shadowy, white figure came to the window and motioned me back—back—back!"

"Weren't you awfully frightened?" inquired Julia, shrugging up her shoulders as Mr. Kingdon dramatically imitated the movement of the spectral hand.

"Not in the least," said Mr. Kingdon, with a nervous laugh, which belied his assumption of bravery. "But I interpreted it as a warning that I should not take that voyage. And I was right. For the ship I was to have sailed by was lost a few days later with all on board."

"Weren't you glad?" asked Julia, a little

obscurely. "Glad?" echoed Mr. Kingdon, mystified for a moment. "Oh, you mean glad I didn't sail by that ship? Oh, yes, of course." And as he turned to talk of Mrs. Harkin, Julia slipped out of the room.

About half an hour later Mr. Kingdon took his leave. Julia, who knew of his departure

instantly by that fine feminine instinct which some regard as prescience and others as a mere result of expert spying from unsuspected corners, bounced into the room.

"Well, mother?" she said expectantly.

Mrs. Harkin swallowed a lump in her throat and somewhat impatiently brushed an expensive curl back from her forehead. "He didn't come about me," she said, in a tone that implied her pity for the poor creature's taste. "He came about you, Julia."

"For me?" echoed Julia. "Why he's old enough to be my grandfather. What rot!"

"I think I have asked you before to be a little more ladylike in your remarks," replied Mrs. Harkin rather severely.

"But," insisted Julia, "you know I'm almost engaged to Jack. He's only waiting for that appointment in India and then—"

"You'll have to put all that nonsense out of your head," continued Mrs. Harkin. "I never heard such a thing! Mr. Kingdon is rich enough to marry any girl he cares to choose, and I should have thought you would have jumped at him." And Mrs. Harkin looked as if she considered that a girl who would refuse such an offer as that of Mr. Kingdon would be capable of throwing away her chances of heaven.

"Besides," the lady continued, "Mr. Kingdon knew your father's affairs pretty well. He is well aware that we can't afford to go on living here for long. We haven't the means. He has very generously proposed to settle an allowance on me, and you, of course, will be provided for most handsomely. He is going to call this evening, and you will see him here and treat him with every consideration."

Julia muttered something that sounded suspiciously like "rats!" but when her mother asked her what she had said she replied that she had said nothing. So it would be useless to pursue the matter. After she had looked out of the window long enough to satisfy herself that the garden was still in the same place, she turned to her mother and said she would go for a walk, and return in plenty of time to dress for dinner. She went upstairs and scribbled a little note to nobody in particular, and about an hour later, whom should she meet at the corner of the road but Jack Sanson. The small coincidences of life are very extraordinary when you come to think of them seriously.

The Problem of Mechanical Flight

FOLLOWING is the second of the series of articles contributed by Mr. F. M. Lancaster to the London Times on "Mechanical Flight."

The question of stability constitutes the chief factor that makes velocity desirable, so that the chief difficulty at the present time is that of supplying sufficient h.p. to attain the minimum velocity of stable flight. This difficulty is one that has scarcely yet been solved; the machines at present successfully flown need continued skilled manipulation in order to prevent their pitching to a dangerous extent, and, in some cases, the duration of the flight has been limited owing to the physical exhaustion of the aeronaut from this cause.

In order that a flying machine should be entirely successful its velocity should be but little, if anything, short of 40 miles per hour; with a properly designed machine at this speed the equilibrium ceases to give trouble and may be made automatic.

The h.p. required at this speed is as yet a serious difficulty. Thus assuming a gliding angle of 15 per cent. and allowing a margin of 5 per cent. for an actual upward gradient, the total weight, or the work done per second per foot, sustained is 1,200 ft. lb., or, with allowance for propeller efficiency is 1,800 ft. lb. representing approximately 3.3 h.p.

It is more than likely that the above figures are an under-estimate; the gliding angle will probably not be much less than 20 per cent., and it may be found necessary to the safety of the machine to have a greater margin than 5 per cent., as representing the actual rate of ascent; thus, instead of 3.3 h.p. per foot, it is desirable to provide 5 h.p. per foot—that is to say, 1 h.p. for every 20 lb. gross weight.

If, as a rough approximation, we suppose the weight of a machine to be made up of motor, 25 per cent.; chassis, including wing spread, 25 per cent.; propulsion mechanism, 15 per cent.; fuel, etc., 10 per cent.; aeronaut, 25 per cent.—"100 per cent." and, taking the weight of the latter at 150 lbs., the total machine in flying order will weigh 600 lbs., and the power of the motor will need to be from about 20 to 30 h.p. on the basis given.

To obtain the desired velocity on the lower figure, would require, unusually good design, the total weight also would probably require to be greater (until considerable experience has been gained) for a given dead-weight of aeronaut, fuel, etc. It is, therefore, evident that a motor of at least 30 h.p. should be provided when constructing a machine of the weight and proportions suggested above.

In the designs at present employed the most obvious defect is the small size and consequent inefficiency of the propellers, rendering it necessary to use motors of higher power than actually needed.

The place that the flying machine will occupy in the future is a debatable question.

Just as is the case with other kinds of locomotive appliance, it has its own peculiar limitations. The motor can needs roads, and has to be fitted with brake mechanism; the flying machine needs no roads and requires no brake, for it carves its own road in three dimensions and loss of velocity means destruction. The flying machine will require landing stages—large open level plains like a sandy foreshore or a prepared space like a "county" cricket ground—these it must have, just as the larger birds require similar but less extensive spaces from which to start their flight.

The question is sometimes asked, "What will happen if the motor stops from some mechanical failure?" This question is easily answered, the machine will come to earth, not suddenly, but by a gradual and regulated descent at its natural gliding angle. How it alights will depend upon the skill of the aeronaut, and the limitations to which he finds himself subjected. If the machine is at a height of 1,000 feet he will have a radius of approximately 5,000 feet in which to choose a place to land; if he be at a higher altitude he will have a proportionately extended radius. It is thus evident that the place for the flying machine is at a considerable altitude and not in close proximity to the earth's surface.

As to the uses of the flying machine it is more difficult to speak. In all probability when once the initial difficulties are surmounted there will be a certain number of patrons of the new mode of locomotion, men of an adventurous disposition to whom the sensation of flying will appeal and will prove as irresistible as the mountains are to the alpine climber; but, for a very considerable period at least, it is a mode of locomotion that can scarcely become general. The more probable future of aerial flight is to be found in military and naval scouting, for which purpose a machine should have a sufficient velocity to be capable of holding its own in all weathers without risk of being upset or blown away; this will naturally be the highest velocity that the aeronautical constructor can guarantee, and may be expected, before very many years have expired, to run up to perhaps 60 or 65 miles per hour, though with present motors such speeds are scarcely obtainable.

The opinion which has been freely expressed that the whole problem of mechanical flight is already solved is scarcely justifiable. The motors of the present machines are not efficiently cooled, in many cases they only run while the water is being boiled away. It may be anticipated that it will be necessary to adopt direct air cooling at an early date; the weight of the water cooling system to be effective is in itself a most serious handicap. The "radiator" alone, as commonly used on motor vehicles, weighs half as much per h.p. as the total weight reasonably disposable as motor mechanism, and we must regard such an appliance as an almost intolerable burden.

Before dressing for dinner Julia took the housemaid into her confidence. She set out a couple of sheets, a small hand-mirror, and a box of powdered chalk, and explained that Mr. Sanson would call at the back gate during the evening. This miscellaneous collection of dry goods was then to be handed to him without comment, together with the key of the bicycle shed. If, a little later in the evening, the maids should happen to see a ghost emerging from the bicycle shed and looking extremely pale, they were not to shriek or to send for the police, as the ghost would be quite tame and wouldn't hurt a fly.

Somewhere about nine o'clock Mr. Kingdon arrived. This time he came in his motor car, and he was correctly attired in evening dress. He still limped a little as the result of his fall in the afternoon, and it is singular to be heard that he was not as old as he felt at the moment, otherwise his age might have been put down as ninety at the very least. Julia received him in the drawing room, and as she noticed that he sat down very slowly and with extreme care in the arm chair facing the window, she expressed the hope that he was not still feeling the effects of the bicycle fall.

"Oh, dear no," said Mr. Kingdon, as he crossed his legs and set back with an amazing display of juvenile sprightliness. "A little thing like that doesn't worry me in the least. I daresay your mother has given you an idea of my reason for calling this evening, my dear Miss Harkin."

"Oh, yes," replied Julia. "She told me all about it, don't you know. Still, I thought—"

"Allow me," interrupted Mr. Kingdon, leaning forward suddenly and then putting his hands to his back, as though he felt a sharp twinge there. "This is a very serious step for a man to take, and it has always been my rule in life, when taking any great step, to satisfy myself that all the auguries are favorable. I am not a superstitious man by any means. Some people would say that my fall this afternoon was a bad sign. But that's all rubbish. Directly I got home, I threw a pinch of salt over my left shoulder, and—"

"Well," said Julia sweetly, "everybody knows that that's the right thing to do. You are quite safe then."

"I'm glad you look at the matter so sensibly," continued Mr. Kingdon. "It is an extra proof to me that I am making a wise

choice. I need hardly, I think, assure you that as my wife you—mercy on us! What's that?"

A low, sepulchral moan came from the window. Jack Sanson had got just the right key, and was pitching it with a fine accuracy.

"What's what, Mr. Kingdon?" inquired Julia with a charming affection of surprise.

"Did—didn't you hear anything? It seemed to come from outside the window."

"I heard nothing," said Julia, not altogether truthfully. "However, we'll soon see if anything's there." And walking to the window, she threw back the curtain and peered out. It might have been by accident that, on returning to her seat, she forgot to draw the curtain again. But as a matter of fact it was sheer, premeditated design.

"I think you must have been mistaken, Mr. Kingdon," she said as she sat down near the piano and struck a note three times with apparent aimlessness.

"Perhaps I was," assented Mr. Kingdon, wiping his forehead with his handkerchief. "I am not at all superstitious, but naturally one accepts the evidence of one's senses."

"Naturally," concurred Julia.

Mr. Kingdon looked a little nervously at the window. He evidently did not like to see it uncovered. When you've got a curtain over a window at night, you're safe from harm; but when it glares at you, naked and unashamed as it were, anything might suddenly appear on the other side of it—especially the things that aren't really there. And everybody knows that those are the worst things of all to contend with.

"You were saying, Mr. Kingdon?" said Julia, by way of diverting his attention from the window.

"I beg your pardon; yes, of course," said Mr. Kingdon. "I was talking about spirit voices—no, no. I was explaining my position, wasn't I? To put the matter briefly, Miss Harkin—may I say Julia?—I have come to ask you—"

Mr. Kingdon stopped short, clutched the arms of his chair and drew himself back. He had been unable to resist the temptation of giving a nervous glance at the window, and his worst fears had been realized. A tall, ghostly figure, with half-closed eyes and suffering apparently from acute anaemia, stood there in the semi-darkness, swaying itself mournfully to and fro. All at once it slowly raised a hand as marble white as its face, and motioned Mr. Kingdon back—back—back.

"Is anything the matter, Mr. Kingdon?"

"Don't you see it?"

"See what?" asked Julia, with her handkerchief conveniently near to her lips for fear her amusement should betray her.

Mr. Kingdon turned to her and said in an anxious tone, "Don't you see a dim, white figure on the other side of the window? Now it's going back. Now it's gone."

"I really don't see anything," said Julia, staring hard at the phenomenon in question.

Mr. Kingdon passed his hand over his eyes, and then he gave a nervous laugh. "It—it was only a little joke of mine," he said, keeping his eye fixed on the window. "I—I pretended there was a ghost there—just to see how you would take it. Of course, I didn't see anything, either. But some people are so superstitious, and it's always amusing to see—er—how they take things."

"Oh, I'm not a bit superstitious," said Julia airily. "I thought you must be joking, because I was looking at the window all the time, and I couldn't see anything."

"Naturally," concurred Mr. Kingdon. "There was nothing there to see. But if you would excuse me," he added, rising and holding on to the back of a chair with a trembling hand on his way to the door, "I should like to get back home. I'm not quite myself—if you'll make my excuse to Mrs. Harkin—and—"

By this time Mr. Kingdon had got to the hall, and before Julia could make any arrangements for letting him out he had torn open the hall door and bolted. Julia subsequently explained to her mother that the reason why she hadn't accepted Mr. Kingdon was because he hadn't proposed to her. Which, in its way, was a fairly good and sufficient excuse.

On the following morning, Mrs. Harkin received a note of apology and explanation. "The fact is," Mr. Kingdon wrote, "I was just about to ask for your daughter's consent to our arrangement, when I heard a strange noise like the moan of a spirit in pain. Your daughter assured me she heard nothing, and I am therefore satisfied that the sign was intended for my ears alone. It was a hint that I was taking a wrong step. A moment afterwards there appeared at the window the identical apparition that came to warn me before; I recognized it at once. I asked your daughter if she saw anything, and she replied in the negative. I was not altogether surprised, as it convinced me that only my eyes were intended to look upon it. One does not like to speak of these things too freely, but although I am not, as you know, a foolishly superstitious person, I accept the evidence of my senses. It is not given to everybody to understand these things, and we who know are not always at liberty to explain. I shall proceed no further with my suit for your daughter's hand, and beg you believe that nothing but a sense of my duty prompts me to this course."

Later in the day, Julia showed the letter to Jack Sanson in the summer house and they laughed over it together, and then—but, as I think we agreed before, it is no business of ours.—Arnold Golsworthy, in M.A.P.