

BALLOONING WITH A MADMAN

Jules Verne, in Chicago Record-Herald

In the month of September, 185— I arrived at Frankfort-on-the-Main. My passage through the principal German cities had been brilliantly marked by balloon ascents, but as yet no German had accompanied me in my car, and the fine experiments made at Paris by MM. Green, Eugene Godard, and Poltevin had not tempted the grave Teutons to essay aerial voyages.

But scarcely had the news of my approaching ascent spread through Frankfort than three of the principal citizens begged the favor of being allowed to ascend with me. Two days afterward we were to start from the Place de la Comedie. I began at once to get my balloon ready. It was of silk, prepared with gutta percha, a substance impermeable by acids or gases, and its volume, which was 3,000 cubic yards, enabled it to ascend to the loftiest heights.

The day of the ascent was that of the great September fair, which attracts so many people to Frankfort. Lighting gas, of a perfect quality and of great lifting power, had been furnished to me in excellent condition, and about 11 o'clock the balloon was filled, but only three-quarters filled—an indispensable precaution, for, as one rises, the atmosphere diminishes in density, and the fluid inclosed within the balloon, acquiring more elasticity, might burst its sides. My calculations had furnished me with exactly the quantity of gas necessary to carry up my companions and myself.

We were to start at noon. Scarcely a breath animated the atmosphere. In such weather one might descend again upon the very spot whence he had risen. I carried 300 pounds of ballast in bags; the car, quite round, four feet in diameter, was comfortably arranged; the hempen cords which supported it stretched symmetrically over the upper hemisphere of the balloon; the compass was in place, the barometer suspended in the circle which united the supporting cords, and the anchor carefully put in order. All was now ready for the ascent.

Among those who pressed around the inclosure I remarked a young man with a pale face and agitated features. The sight of him impressed me. He was an eager spectator of my ascents, whom I had already met in several German cities. With an uneasy air, he closely watched the curious machine, as if lay motionless a few feet above the ground, and remained silent among those about him.

Twelve o'clock came. The moment had arrived, but my travelling companions did not appear.

I sent to their houses, and learnt that one had left for Hamburg, another for Vienna, and the third for London. Their courage had failed them at the moment of undertaking one of those excursions which, thanks to the ability of living aeronauts, are free from all danger.

The multitude, half-deceived, showed not a little ill humor. I did not hesitate to ascend alone. In order to re-establish the equilibrium between the specific gravity of the balloon and the weight which had thus proved wanting, I replaced my companions by more sacks of sand, and got into the car. The twelve men who held the balloon by twelve cords fastened to the equatorial circle let them slip a little between their fingers, and the balloon rose several feet higher. There was not a breath of wind, and the atmosphere was so leaden that it seemed to forbid the ascent.

"Is everything ready?" I cried.

"The men put themselves in readiness. A last glance told me that I might go.

"Attention!"

There was a movement in the crowd, which seemed to be invading the inclosure.

"Let go!"

The balloon rose slowly, but I experienced a shock which threw me to the bottom of the car.

When I got up I found myself face to face with an unexpected fellow voyager—the pale young man.

"Monsieur, I salute you," said he, with the utmost coolness.

"By what right?"

"Am I here? By the right which the impossibility of your getting rid of me confers."

I was amazed! His calmness put me out of countenance, and I had nothing to reply. I looked at the intruder, but he took no notice of my astonishment.

"Does my weight disarrange your equilibrium, monsieur?" he asked. "You will permit me—"

And without waiting for my consent he relieved the balloon of two bags, which he threw into space.

"Monsieur," said I, taking the only course now possible, "you have come; very well, you will remain, but to me alone belongs the management of the balloon."

"Monsieur," said he, "your urbanity is French all over; it comes from my own country. I morally press the hand you refuse me. Make all precautions and act as seems best to you. I will wait till you have done—"

"For what?"

"To talk with you."

The barometer had fallen to twenty-six inches. We were nearly 600 yards above the city, but nothing betrayed the horizontal displacement of the balloon, for the mass of air in which it is inclosed goes forward with it. A sort of confused glow enveloped the objects spread out under us, and unfortunately obscured their outline.

I examined my companion afresh. He was a man of 30 years, simply clad. The sharpness of his features betrayed an in-

domitable energy, and he seemed very muscular. Indifferent to the astonishment he created, he remained motionless, trying to distinguish the objects which were vaguely confused below us.

"Miserable mist!" said he, after a few moments.

I did not reply.

"You owe me a grudge?" he went on. "Bah! I could not pay for my journey, and it was necessary to take you by surprise."

"Nobody asks you to descend, monsieur."

"Eh, do you not know, then, that the same thing happened to the Counts of Laurencin and Dampierre when they ascended at Lyons on the 15th of January, 1784? A young merchant, named Fontaine, scaled the gallery at the risk of capsizing the machine. He accomplished the journey and nobody died of it!"

"Once on the ground we will have an explanation," replied I, piqued at the light tone in which he spoke.

"Bah! Do not let us think of our return."

"Do you think, then, that I shall not hasten to descend?"

"Descend!" said he, in surprise. "Descend? Let us begin by first ascending."

And before I could prevent it, two more bags had been thrown over the car, without even having been emptied.

"Monsieur!" cried I, in a rage.

"I know your ability," replied the unknown quietly, "and your fine ascents are famous. But if Experience is the sister of Practice, she is also a cousin of Theory, and I have studied the aerial art long. It has got into my head!" he added sadly, falling into a silent reverie.

The balloon, having risen some distance farther, now became stationary. The unknown consulted the barometer and said:

"Here we are at 800 yards. Men are like insects. See! I think we should always contemplate them from this height, to judge correctly of their proportions. The Place de la Comedie is transformed into an immense ant-hill. Observe the crowd which is gathered on the quays, and the mountains are get smaller and smaller. We are over the cathedral. The Main is only a line, cutting the city in two, and the bridge seems a thread thrown between the two banks of the river."

The atmosphere became somewhat chilly.

"There is nothing I would not do for you, my host," said the unknown. "If you are cold I will take off my coat, and lend it to you."

"Thanks," said I, dryly.

"Bah! Necessity makes law. Give me your hand. I am your fellow countryman; you will learn something in my company, and my conversation will indemnify you for the trouble I have given you."

I sat down, without replying, at the opposite extremity of the car. The young man had taken a voluminous manuscript from his great coat. It was an essay on ballooning.

"I possess," said he, "the most curious collection of engravings and caricatures extant concerning aerial manias. How people admired and scoffed at the same time at this precious discovery! We are happily no longer in the age in which Montgolfier tried to make artificial clouds with steam, or a gas having electrical properties, produced by the combustion of moist straw and chopped-up wool."

"Do you wish to depreciate the talent of the inventors?" I asked, for I had resolved to enter into the adventure. "Was it not good to have proved by experience the possibility of rising in the air?"

"Ah, Monsieur, who denies the glory of the first aerial navigators? It required immense courage to rise by means of those frail envelopes which only contained heated air. But I ask you, has the aerial science made great progress since Blanchard's ascensions—that is, since nearly a century ago? Look here, monsieur."

The unknown took an engraving from his portfolio.

"Here," said he, "is the first aerial voyage undertaken by Pilatre des Rosiers and the Marquis d'Arlandes, four months after the discovery of balloons. Louis XVI. refused to consent to the venture, and two men who were condemned to death were the first to attempt the aerial ascent. Pilatre des Rosiers became indignant at this injustice, and by means of intrigues, obtained permission to make the experiment. The car, which renders the management easy, had not been invented, and a circular gallery was placed around the lower and contracted part of the Montgolfier balloon. The two aeronauts must then remain motionless at each extremity of this gallery, for the moist straw which filled it forbade them all motion. A chafing dish with fire was suspended below the orifice of the balloon; when the aeronauts wished to rise they threw straw upon the brazier, at the risk of setting fire to the balloon, and the air, more heated, gave it fresh ascending power. The two bold travellers rose on the 21st of November, 1783, from the Muette Gardens, which the Dauphin had put at their disposal. The balloon went up majestically, passed over the Isle of Swans, crossed the Seine at the Conference barrier, and, drifting between the dome of the Invalids and the military school, approached the Church of Saint Sulpice. Then the aeronauts added to the fire, crossed the boulevard, and descended beyond the Enter barrier. As it touched the soil the balloon collapsed, and for a few moments buried Pilatre des Rosiers under its folds."

"Unlucky augury," I said, interested in the story, which affected me greatly.

"An augury of the catastrophe which was later to cost this unfortunate man his life," replied the unknown sadly. "Have you never experienced anything like it?"

"Never."

"Bah! Misfortunes sometimes occur unforeshadowed!" added my companion.

He then remained silent.

Meanwhile we were advancing southward and Frankfort had already passed from beneath us.

"Perhaps we shall have a storm," said the young man.

"We shall descend before that," I replied.

"Indeed! It is better to ascend! We shall escape it more surely."

And two more bags of sand were hurled into space.

The balloon rose rapidly, and stopped at 1,200 yards. I became colder, and yet the sun's rays, falling upon the surface, expanded the gas within, and gave it a greater ascending force.

"Fear nothing," said the unknown. "We have still 3,500 fathoms of breathing air. Besides, do not trouble yourself about what I do."

I would have risen, but a vigorous hand held me to my seat.

"Your name?" I asked.

"My name. What matters it to you?"

"I demand your name!"

"My name is Erostratus or Empedocles, whichever you choose!"

This reply was far from reassuring.

The unknown, besides, talked with such strange coolness that I anxiously asked myself whom I had to deal with.

"Monsieur," he continued, "nothing original has been imagined since the physicist Charles. Four months after the discovery of balloons this able man had invented the valve, which permits the gas to escape when the balloon is too full, or when you wish to descend, the car, which aids the management of the machine; the netting, which holds the weight over its whole surface; the ballast, which enables you to ascend, and to choose the place of your landing; the india rubber coating, which renders the tissue impermeable; the barometer, which shows the height attained. Lastly, Charles used hydrogen, which, fourteen times lighter than air, permits you to penetrate to the highest atmospheric regions, and does not expose you to the dangers of a combustion in the air. On December 1, 1783, 300,000 spectators were crowded around the Tuilleries. Charles rose, and the soldiers presented arms to him. He travelled nine leagues in the air, conducting his balloon with an ability not surpassed by modern aeronauts. The king awarded him a pension of 2,000 livres, for then they encouraged new inventions."

The unknown now seemed to be under the influence of considerable agitation.

"Monsieur," he resumed, "I have studied this, and I am convinced that the first aeronauts guided their balloons. I, monsieur, have discovered the only means of guiding balloons; and no academy has come to my aid, no city has filled up subscriptions for me, no government has thought fit to listen to me! It is infamous!"

The unknown gesticulated fiercely, and the car underwent violent oscillations. I had much trouble in calming him.

Meanwhile the balloon had entered a more rapid current, and we advanced south at 1,500 yards above the earth.

"See, there is Darmstadt," said my companion, leaning over the car. "Do you perceive the chateau? Not very distinctly, eh? What would you have? The heat of the storm makes the outline of objects waver, and you must have a skilled eye to recognize localities."

"Are you certain it is Darmstadt?" I asked.

"I am sure of it. We are now six leagues from Frankfort."

"Then we must descend."

"Descend! You would not go down on the steeples," said the unknown, with a chuckle.

"No, but in the suburbs of the city."

"Well, let us avoid the steeples!"

So speaking, my companion seized some bags of ballast. I hastened to prevent him, but he overthrew me with one hand, and the unballasted balloon ascended to 2,000 yards.

"Rest easy," said he, "and do not forget that Brioschi, Biot, Gay-Lussac, Rixio, and Barre ascended to still greater heights to make their scientific experiments."

"Monsieur, we must descend," I resumed, trying to persuade him by gentleness. "The storm is gathering around us. It would be more prudent—"

"Bah! We will mount higher than the storm, and then we shall no longer fear it!" cried my companion. "What is nobler than to overlook the clouds which oppress the earth? Is it not an honor thus to navigate on aerial billows? The greatest men have travelled as we are doing. To approach the infinite is to comprehend it!"

The rarefaction of the air was fast expanding the hydrogen in the balloon, and I saw its lower part, purposely left empty, swell out, so that it was absolutely necessary to open the valve, but my companion did not seem to intend that I should manage the balloon as I wished. I then resolved to pull the valve cord secretly, as he was excitedly talking, for I feared to guess with whom I had to deal. It would have been too horrible! It was nearly a quarter before 1. We had been gone forty

minutes from Frankfort; heavy clouds were coming against the wind from the south, and seemed about to burst upon us.

"Have you lost all hope of succeeding in your project?" I asked with anxious interest.

"All hope!" exclaimed the unknown in a low voice. "Wounded by slights and caricatures, these asses' kicks have finished me! It is the eternal punishment reserved for innovators! Look at these caricatures of all periods, of which my portfolio is full!"

While my companion was fumbling with his paper I had seized the valve cord without his perceiving it. I feared, however, that he might hear the hissing noise, like a water course, which the gas makes in escaping.

"How many jokes were made about the Abbe Miolan!" said he. "He was to go up with Janninet and Bredin. During the filling their balloon caught fire, and the ignorant populace tore it to pieces! Then this caricature of 'curious animals' appeared, giving each of them a nickname."

I pulled the valve cord, and the barometer began to ascend. It was time. Some far-off rumblings were heard in the south.

"Here is another engraving," resumed the unknown, not suspecting what I was doing. "It is an immense balloon carrying a ship, strong castles, houses, and so on. The caricaturists did not suspect that their follies would one day become truths. All this provoked laughter, but before long, if I am not cut off, they will see it all realized."

We were visibly descending. He did not perceive it.

"Why," said I, "you seem to have studied the science of aerostation profoundly."

"Yes, monsieur, yes! From Phaethon, Icarus, Architas, I have searched for, examined, learned everything. I could render immense services to the world in this art if God granted me life. But that will not be!"

"Why?"

"Because my name is Empedocles or Erostratus."

Meanwhile the balloon was happily approaching the earth, but when one is falling the danger is as great at 100 feet as at 5,000.

The unknown bowed his head in his hands, and reflected for some moments, then raising his head, he said:

"Despite my prohibition, monsieur, you have opened the valve."

I dropped the cord.

"Happily," he resumed, "we have still 300 pounds of ballast."

"What is your purpose?" said I.

"Have you ever crossed the sea?" he asked.

I turned pale.

"It is unfortunate," he went on, "that we are being driven toward the Adriatic. That is only a stream, but higher up we may find other currents."

And, without taking any notice of me, he threw over several bags of sand; then, in a menacing voice, he said:

"I let you open the valve because the expansion of the gas threatened to burst the balloon, but do not do it again!"

Then he went on as follows:

"You remember the voyage of Blanchard and Jeffries from Dover to Calais? It was magnificent! On the 7th of January, 1785, there being a northwest wind, their balloon was inflated with gas on the Dover coast. A mistake of equilibrium, just as they were ascending, forced them to throw out their ballast so that they might not go down again, and they only kept thirty pounds. It was too little; for, as the wind did not freshen, they only advanced very slowly toward the French coast. Besides, the permeability of the tissue served to reduce the inflation little by little, and in an hour and a half the aeronauts perceived that they were descending."

"What shall we do?" said Jeffries.

"We are only one-quarter of the way over," replied Blanchard, "and very low down. On rising we shall perhaps meet more favorable winds."

"Let us throw out the rest of the sand."

"The balloon acquired some ascending force, but it soon began to descend again. Toward the middle of the transit the aeronauts threw over their books and tools. A quarter of an hour after Blanchard said to Jeffries: 'The barometer?'"

"It is going up! We are lost, and yet there is the French coast!"

"A loud noise" was heard.

"Has the balloon burst?" asked Jeffries.

"No. The loss of the gas has reduced the inflation of the lower part of the balloon. But we are still descending. We are lost! Out with everything useless!"

"Provisions, oars, and rudder were thrown into the sea. The aeronauts were only 100 yards high."

"We are going up again," said the doctor.

"No. It is the spurt caused by the diminution of the weight, and not a ship in sight, not a barque on the horizon! To the sea with our clothing!"

"The unfortunates stripped themselves, but the balloon continued to descend."

"Blanchard," said Jeffries, "you should have made this voyage alone; you consented to take me; I will sacrifice myself! I am going to throw myself into the water, and the balloon, relieved of my weight, will mount again."

"No, no! It is frightful!"

"The balloon became less and less inflated, and as it doubled up its concavity pressed the gas against the sides and hastened its downward course."

"Adieu, my friend," said the doctor, "God preserve you!"

"He was about to throw himself over when Blanchard held him back."

"There is one more chance," said he. "We can cut the cords which hold the car, and cling to the net! Perhaps the balloon will rise. Let us hold ourselves ready. But—the barometer is going down! The wind is freshening! We are saved."

The aeronauts perceived Calais. Their joy was delicious. A few moments more and they had fallen in the forest of Guines. I do not doubt," added the unknown, "that, under similar circumstances, you would have followed Dr. Jeffries' example!"

The clouds rolled in glittering masses beneath us. The balloon threw large shadows on this heap of clouds, and was surrounded as by an aureole. The thunder rumbled below the car. All this was terrifying.

"Let us descend!" I cried.

"Descend, when the sun is up there waiting for us? Out with more bags!"

And more than fifty pounds of ballast were cast over.

At a height of 3,500 yards we remained stationary.

The unknown talked unceasingly. I was in a state of complete prostration, while he seemed to be in his element.

"With a good wind, we shall go far," he cried. "In the Antilles there are currents of air which have a speed of a hundred leagues an hour. When Napoleon was crowned, Garnerin sent up a balloon with colored lamps at 11 o'clock at night. The wind was blowing north-northwest. The next morning at day-break the inhabitants of Rome greeted its passage over the dome of St. Peter's. We shall go farther and higher!"

I scarcely heard him. Everything whirled around me. An opening appeared in the clouds.

"See that city," said the unknown. "It is Spire!"

I leaned over the car, and perceived a small blackish mass. It was Spire. The Rhine, which is so large, seemed an unrolled ribbon. The sky was a deep blue over our heads. The birds had long abandoned us, for in that rarefied air they could not have flown. We were alone in space and I in the presence of this unknown!

"It is useless for you to know whether I am leading you," he said, as he threw the compass among the clouds. "Ah! a fall is a grand thing! You know that but few victims of ballooning are to be reckoned from Pilatre des Rosiers to Lieutenant Gale, and that the accidents have always been the result of imprudence. Pilatre des Rosiers set out with Romarin of Boulogne on the 13th of June, 1785. To his gas balloon he had affixed a Montgolfier apparatus of hot air, so as to dispense, no doubt, with the necessity of losing gas or throwing out ballast. It was putting a torch under a powder barrel. When they had ascended 400 yards, and were taken by opposing winds, they were driven over the open sea. Pilatre, in order to descend, essayed to open the valve, but the valve cord became entangled in the balloon and tore it so badly that it became empty in an instant. It fell upon the Montgolfier apparatus, overturned it, and dragged down the unfortunates, who were soon shattered to pieces! It is frightful, is it not?"

I could only reply, "For pity's sake, let us descend!"

The clouds gathered around us on every side, and dreadful detonations, which reverberated in the cavity of the balloon, took place beneath us.

"You provoke me," cried the unknown, "and you shall no longer know whether we are rising or falling!"

The barometer went the way of the compass, accompanied by several more bags of sand. We must have been 5,000 yards high. Some icicles had already attached themselves to the sides of the car, and a kind of fine snow seemed to penetrate to my very bones. Meanwhile a frightful tempest was raging under us, but we were above it.

"Do not be afraid," said the unknown. "It is only the imprudent who are lost. Olivari, who perished at Orleans, rose in a paper Montgolfier; his car, suspended below the chafing dish and ballasted with combustible materials, caught fire; Olivari fell and was killed! Mosment rose at Lille, on a light tray; an oscillation disturbed his equilibrium; Mosment fell and was killed. Bittorf, at Mannheim, saw his balloon catch fire in the air, and he, too, fell and was killed! Harris rose in a badly constructed balloon, the valve of which was too large, and would not shut; Harris fell, and was killed! Sadler, deprived of ballast by his long sojourn in the air, was dragged over the town of Boston, and dashed against the chimneys; Sadler fell and was killed! Cokling descended with a convex parachute which he pretended to have perfected. Cokling fell and was killed! Well, I love them, these victims of their own imprudence, and I shall die as they did. Higher! still higher!"

All the phantoms of this necrology passed before my eyes. The rarefaction of the air on the sun's rays added to the expansion of the gas, and the balloon continued to mount. I tried mechanically to open the valve, but the unknown cut the cord several feet above my head. I was lost!

"Did you see Mme. Blanchard fall?" said he. "I saw her; yes, I saw her at Tivoli on the 6th of July, 1819. Mme. Blanchard rose in a small sized balloon to avoid the expense of filling, and she was forced to entirely inflate