

# 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 it 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 laden 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 also 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 Enfer barrier. As it touched the soil the balloon collapsed, and for a few moments buried Pilatre des Rosiers under its folds."

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"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 unforeseen," added my companion.

He then remained silent. Meanwhile we were advancing southward and Frankfort had already passed 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 envelope of the balloon, and divides 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.