ROWLAND WALKER

THE PHANTOM AIRMAN

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The Phantom Airman:

Содержание

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CHAPTER I
THE SECRET OF THE SCHWARZWALD

Rittmeister Heinrich von Spitzer, late flight-commander in the German Air Service, was one of the Prussian irreconcilables, who, rather than submit to the peace terms enforced by the Allies after the defeat of Germany, resolved to become an aerial brigand, an outlaw of the nations, and to wage a bitter warfare of violence and plunder against his late enemies.

His proud spirit refused to bend before the conquerors, for the iron shaft of defeat had embittered his soul, particularly against Britain, whom he had ever regarded as the evil genius of the Entente.

One day, when his plans were well matured, he unburdened his spirit to a couple of his friends, kindred souls, men after his own heart, both of them apt pupils of the great Richthofen, who was still referred to by his disciples as "the red airman." They had been engaged that day in dismantling an aerodrome on the edge of the Schwarzwald; to them, at least, a hateful job.

"Comrades," he said, "this peace has ruined us. *Germania delenda est*, but I will not sit still amid the ruins of the Fatherland. Glorious we have lived, like kings of the air; let us not inglorious die."

"I am with you, Rittmeister. I will follow you to the gulfs," exclaimed one of his companions, named Carl, who had been a famous scout pilot in the Richthofen "circus," and the lightning flashed from the young airman's eyes as he spoke.

"But what can we do against the empires of the world?" asked a Gotha pilot who had raided the English towns a score of times.

For answer the chief turned a withering look upon the last speaker and said:–

"Max, you have faced death a hundred times in the air, and over the British lines. You have thirty enemy machines to your credit, and yet you ask me what can we do?"

"What of it, Rittmeister? Tell us what is in your mind."

"Listen, then, both of you, and I will tell you what still remains for brave men to do. All is not lost while courage and hope remain," and whilst he spoke the German chief drew his two friends away from the half-dismantled aerodrome on the southern edge of the Schwarzwald, to a narrow path that led amongst the trees.

When the aerodrome was hid from view he began to speak once more, huskily at first, as though restraining some pent up excitement.

"I am in possession of a secret," he said, "which I may not tell

even to you unless you first swear to follow me on some great adventure."

They both looked at him, not a little amazed and bewildered, and neither spoke for a moment.

"I have chosen you," continued Spitzer, "because I know you to be men of daring and resource. You are both dissatisfied with the condition of things in the Fatherland. Ach Himmel! This occupation of the sacred German soil by the Britisher, the Frenchman and the American is breaking my heart. I will endure it no longer, but I will strike a blow at the enemy before I die."

As he spoke thus, he almost hissed out the words which he uttered, for his voice had now lost its strange huskiness, while his eyes gleamed like the fierce glittering orbs of the tiger about to make its spring from the hidden jungle. Nor was his present madness without its visible effect upon his two companions, for he had strange powers of magnetic influence, this Prussian Junker.

"Donner and Blitz, but you are right, Rittmeister!" exclaimed Carl, the blood mounting to his temples.

"And you, Max, what say you?" and the chief fixed the Gotha pilot with his eyes.

"Ja! ja!" he assented. "I am with you also."

"But the end of this adventure is death!" continued von Spitzer, speaking now more deliberately. "This much I must tell you in all fairness before I proceed further. However much we achieve–and we shall accomplish not a little–there can be no

other ending."

"Bah! we have looked too often into the face of that monster to be afraid," returned the scout.

"You speak truly, Carl," replied the chief. "When your machine went down in flames near Cambrai, you passed so close to me that I stalled my Fokker to let you pass, and I saw the smile upon your lips that day as you looked into the face of death. I never expected to see you alive again, but you were saved for this."

Then, amid the gloom of the dark aisles of the Schwarzwald, these two men swore to follow their chief on this last great adventure, as they had followed him during the darkest days of the war.

"And now I will tell you the secret which I hold, and which at present is known only to two other men," said the Rittmeister, and, sitting down about the gnarled roots of an upturned tree, the two airmen listened to the following story:

"You have heard me sometimes speak of a great mathematician and engineer, by name one Professor Weissmann," began von Spitzer.

"Yes, we have heard of him," replied the others.

"He is the greatest living scientist; moreover, he is a practical engineer, and during the last four years he has devoted his time entirely to designing, constructing and perfecting with his own hands, assisted by one other mechanic, a wonderful aeroplane, compared to which neither the Allies nor the Central Powers

have anything to approximate."

"Donnerwetter, but why wasn't it ready before?" exclaimed Max. "It might have turned the tide of battle in the autumn of 1918."

"It's no use crying over spilt milk," replied the chief. "It could not be completed before."

"And you say that this wonderful machine is now ready," interposed Max, who had flown every type of machine from a single-seater scout to a heavy bomber, and whose professional curiosity had now been thoroughly awakened by the words of the German ace.

"It is ready, and what is more to the point, it is at my disposal," returned the chief briefly.

"Der Teufel! But where is it?"

"I can lead you to it, for it is less than three miles from where we sit at the present moment."

"Himmel!" exclaimed both the pilots, springing to their feet. "Take us to see it, Rittmeister; we have given you our promise."

"Be calm, my friends; you shall see it to-day. But let me put you on your guard. You must not speak of it aloud, but only in whispers, for the secret of this machine is jealously guarded, and its whereabouts is unknown, save to the professor, his assistant and myself."

"Has it ever been flown?" ventured Max.

"Yes."

"Who was the pilot?"

"I was."

"You, Rittmeister?" exclaimed the amazed airmen.

"Yes."

"And you are satisfied at her performances?" asked Carl, gazing steadfastly into the eyes of his chief.

"More than satisfied. She is the most wonderful and responsive thing I have ever flown. You will say the same when you have seen her, and made a trip or two."

"Phew! take us to see her now; I would give ten years of my life to fly in her," said Max, who was getting almost feverish in his anxiety to see this wonderful thing and to handle her controls; for such is the lure of the air, especially to those who have climbed into the azure and sailed amongst the clouds in the days of their youth.

"You shall fly in her," replied Spitzer.

"When?" asked the eager youth.

"When we start our great adventure," replied the chief.

"And when will that be?"

"To-morrow, if you are willing; all our plans are laid."

"Why to-morrow?" asked the others simultaneously.

"Because delay is dangerous. There is always the danger that this secret, so jealously guarded, and hidden away in the depth of the Black Forest, may be discovered. You know that Germany, under the Peace terms, is forbidden for the present to manufacture aircraft."

"Yes, yes; we know it only too well."

"Well, even now," continued von Spitzer, "the British Air Police have got wind of the thing, and their agents are in a dozen different parts of Germany trying to fathom the mystery of this phantom aeroplane, but so far they have not succeeded. All the same, it is time for us to get away, and that is why I have confided my plans to you to-day. Do you wish to withdraw?" and there was just a faint suspicion of a sneer in the tone of the speaker's voice, as he said this.

"Withdraw? Ach Himmel, no, a thousand times no! I am ready to start to-day," flashed back the ruffled Carl as he replied.

"Gut!" grunted von Spitzer. "Then you shall see this wonderful thing to-night at sunset; I dare not take you there before, and to-morrow, ach! to-morrow, this great adventure will begin."

CHAPTER II
THE WONDER 'PLANE

The sun was sinking amongst the pines of the Schwarzwald when the three airmen, after traversing for several miles the wild unbroken solitudes of that primeval forest, emerged at length from the dark shadows of the trees on to a little open glade, a natural clearing about two hundred metres in diameter.

"Here we are at last!" exclaimed the chief.

"Himmel! what a perfect little aerodrome," cried the scout pilot.

"But where is the hangar?" asked the more observant Max.

"Hist! Let us wait for the signal," ordered the Rittmeister, waving his companions back to the fringe of the forest.

"But there is not a soul to be seen anywhere," expostulated Carl. "No one ever comes here."

"We must be careful; there is too much at stake," whispered the flight-commander, and then he gave a long, low whistle, repeated twice.

Scarcely had the last sound died away, like the sad piping tone of the woodland robin, than a similar call came in response from the opposite side of the glade.

"Follow me; the way is clear," said the chief as he strode across the clearing towards the spot whence came the signal. And

his companions followed him, silently wondering, for, somehow, they felt that they were treading on enchanted ground, and that some interesting *dénouement* would shortly take place.

As they neared the edge of the forest once more, a movement amongst the trees attracted their attention, and the next instant a solitary figure emerged from the shadows and greeted them. It was the keen, lynx-eyed professor, the great mathematician and engineer; a man about fifty, dressed in a loose working garb, wearing a battered felt hat above his shock of white, wavy hair.

"You are welcome, children of the Fatherland," he said, extending his hand, and fixing the two strangers with his piercing eyes, after this brief salutation.

"I hope we are not late," began von Spitzer, when the first salutation was over and he had introduced his companions.

"The sun is amongst the pines and the shadows of the Schwarzwald deepen," replied the professor, speaking in the language of the forest. "It was the time arranged, but"–and here he paused for a second–"there is no time for delay," and an uneasy look spread over his face.

"You don't mean that–" began the chief, but the genius forestalled him by adding:–

"Yes, strangers have crossed the clearing to-day. For the first time since I came here, I heard strange voices amongst the trees."

"But they found nothing?"

"Nothing!" ejaculated the professor.

"Good! Then my friends may view the aeroplane," said

Spitzer.

"Certainly; let them follow me," and through an opening barely fifteen feet wide, the professor led the way to a combined hangar and workshop, carefully camouflaged and hidden away amongst the trees.

The next instant the two young airmen received the greatest surprise of their lives.

"Der *Skorpion*!" announced the professor.

"Donnerwetter!" came the involuntary cry from both the strangers as their eyes fell upon a new type of aeroplane, with an angry, waspish look about it, that the Bristol Fighter used to wear during the later days of the Great War. Yet it was not a Bristol Fighter by any means, for it was twin-engined, and steel-built throughout, with a central conning-tower, tapering off to a sharp point to improve the stream-line, and a closed-in be-cabined fuselage into which four or six persons might with ease be stowed away.

"But her engines!" exclaimed Max. "How small they are."

"But how powerful!" replied Spitzer. "Each one develops anything up to 400 horsepower."

"Is it possible?" asked Carl, who was already carefully examining the starboard engine, in its covered in and stream-lined casement.

"The propellers are different, too; they're something like the Fokker's, but shorter, and they have a peculiar twist, which I have never seen before. What is that for, Rittmeister?" asked the

Gotha pilot.

"For vertical climbs, Max," replied the chief, for while the professor stood by, and looked on, interested and amused at the growing enthusiasm for his idol, the Rittmeister, who had been secretly schooled in the hidden mysteries, explained them point by point, for he was a great mechanic and mathematician was this ex-flight-commander.

"Vertical climbs?" echoed the other. "I thought it was impossible."

"Impossible? Rubbish! Nothing is impossible to the man of science. Have you never heard of the Helicopter?"

"You mean that hybrid mongrel the verdammt Yanks and the Britishers have been experimenting with of late, and which has caused so many accidents?"

"The same; only they went the wrong way about it. This propeller, with this driving power behind it, practically gives the vertical ascent, especially when once flying speed has been obtained."

"Blitz, but it is wonderful!" concluded Max, his enthusiasm growing by leaps and bounds, as he continued his examination.

"Why, the propellers are made of steel, and so are the planes," exclaimed Carl, who was now carefully examining the material of which the aeroplane was made.

"Steel, tempered steel, every bit of it–fuselage, propellers, tail fin, rudders. There's not an ounce of wood about the *Scorpion*," returned the mentor.

"Then the danger of fire is lessened," ventured Max, whose one dread in the air had always been that of fire.

"That danger is eliminated," replied the chief, in a tone of certitude.

"Except by petrol. By the way, where are the petrol tanks?" exclaimed Carl, who had never missed them till now.

"There aren't any," replied the Rittmeister, smiling. "I was waiting for that question."

"No petrol tanks?" came the astonished cry from both the airmen at once.

"They're not necessary," returned the other; "and that's the greatest mystery of all."

"Himmel! Am I dreaming?" exclaimed Max.

"No, you're wide awake. Don't stare like that, man!"

"Der Teufel, but how is she driven?" demanded the scout, staring with wide-open eyes from Spitzer to the professor, and from the latter to his mechanic, who had stood by all this while, with arms akimbo, silently amused at the bewilderment of the two strangers.

"Listen," began the Rittmeister. "I cannot explain everything now–time will not permit–but you shall learn all these things before many days are over."

"Yes, go on!"

"The professor has spent years on this series of inventions, both in the workshop and the laboratory, and each discovery has been co-ordinated and fitted into the scheme. The greatest of all

his discoveries is the fact that he has been able to discover and to harness an unknown force to drive the motors of the *Scorpion*."

"A highly compressed gas, I suppose," interposed Max, who had taken a science degree at Bonn.

"Certainly, it is a *most* highly compressed gas, extracted at great pains and labour from the elements. The formulæ for this wonderful new element exist only in the still more wonderful brain of the professor. It has not been committed to paper even, in its final terms and ratios, so that, even should this machine be captured, which it certainly shall not be whilst I am its pilot, it could not be used, once the present supply of this Uranis, as we will call it, is used up."

"That is why the engines are so small, then?" ventured Max.

"Precisely!"

"And what is our present supply of this wonderful element?"

"Do you see this?" said the Rittmeister, pointing to a few small cylinders, each about two feet long, and six inches in diameter, which lay carefully piled upon each other on the floor near the *Scorpion*.

"Yes."

"That is the world's supply at present, excluding the two cylinders which are already fitted on the machine."

"The world's supply," ejaculated Carl, who was thinking of the huge petrol tank, which in a Fokker scout would last only three hours with the throttle wide open. "That won't last long, unless the pressure is enormous."

"The pressure is enormous, my friend; so enormous that if anything happened it would–"

"Blow a hole in the universe, I reckon," interposed Max.

"You are right, and that is the only danger connected with the *Scorpion*. The other danger you mentioned, that of fire, is altogether eliminated. There would be nothing to burn if one of these cylinders exploded, for there would be nothing left–in the vicinity."

"*Sacre bleu*!" exclaimed Carl, *sotto voce*, for, brave youth that he was, he shuddered at the thought.

Max was the more practical of the two, however, for he belonged not to the highly sensitive scouts, but to the heavy bombers, and he merely asked to satisfy his curiosity:–

"How far will one of those cylinders take us, Rittmeister?"

"Ten thousand miles," replied the chief, "that is, one fitted to either engine."

"Good! Let me see, there are ten here, and one already fitted to either motor makes a dozen. Why, they would carry us"–and here he made a rapid calculation–"they would take us twice round the world."

"Precisely, and with a little to spare, when we had completed the double trip."

"And what speed would she pick up, say at a level flight?"

For answer the chief looked at the professor, as though uncertain whether to reply to this question.

"They have taken the oath, sir," he pleaded, "They cannot

withdraw," and the great scientist nodded his acquiescence.

"Two hundred and fifty miles without being pushed," he replied at length.

"Donnerwetter! And what if she were pushed?"

"I cannot say, she has never been driven beyond that."

"What a deuce of a noise she will make–like a whole formation of Gothas, I should imagine," said Max.

The professor smiled, but left it to the Rittmeister to explain this last point.

"The engines are silent, but there is a slight hum from the propellers. That cannot be effaced at present, but it is nothing."

Then, having given all these details, the visitors made a closer inspection of the machine. They were permitted to climb into the conning-tower, to handle the controls, and the two swivel machine guns mounted there. They were shown into the little cabin, where four men might sit at the little table, or lie down at full length, but could not stand upright. The steel struts, steel folding wings, the carefully packed spares, the little mica windows in the cabin–these, and a dozen other things, were pointed out and explained to them–the stores which were already packed, comprising chronometrical instruments, maps, charts, ammunition for the guns, compressed food, etc., until their bewilderment grew, and their astonishment became unbounded.

"Why, she scarcely needs an aerodrome at all!" Carl ventured at length.

"Scarcely," replied the chief. "At any rate, not for a long time."

"She is weather proof; she is wonderfully camouflaged. She could hide in a desert, or a meadow," said Max.

"And she carries her own stores for a long, long trip," ventured Carl, who was just dying for the morrow to come.

"And if she were chased, she could make rings round anything, even a Fokker scout, or a verdammt British S.E.5," added Max.

"So you are satisfied, both of you?" asked the Rittmeister.

"Perfectly satisfied. I am only longing for to-morrow, so that I may turn aerial brigand, buccaneer, or what you like," answered Carl.

"And you, Max?"

"I am ready, chief, to follow you to the end of the world, for mine eyes have seen the wonder 'plane."

CHAPTER III
"TEMPEST" OF THE AERIAL POLICE

Colonel John Tempest, D.S.O., M.C., etc., late of the Royal Air Force, and now Chief Commissioner of the British Aerial Police, sat before a pile of papers in his office at Scotland Yard late one evening. He was anxious and worried, for something had gone seriously wrong with his plans.

It was his duty to investigate and track down all aerial criminals, whether brigands, smugglers or revolutionists of the Bolshevist type. For this purpose he had been appointed by the Government to the command of the British Aerial Police, whose functions included the patrolling of the routes of the great aerial liners throughout the British Isles, and the All-Red route to Egypt, India, and other British possessions, and the careful guarding and watching of the aerial gateways and ports.

Some of the best scout pilots of the war, including two famous secret service men, named Keane and Sharpe, were detailed to assist him in this important and ever-increasing task, for aerial crime of twenty different kinds was becoming more and more prevalent since the war.

So far his efforts had been conspicuously successful, and he had brought many of the offenders to justice, but at the present

moment he had to confess himself baffled–utterly baffled by a series of unfortunate occurrences which it had been beyond his power to prevent.

"There is some master-mind behind all this," he exclaimed to himself, rising suddenly from his chair, and beginning to pace the room, much in the same way that he used to pace his squadron office, in the old days, when, as commander of a squadron of scouts during the Great War, he had attempted to outwit the daring of the German airmen.

"I wonder now–I wonder what happened to that missing German professor!" and Colonel Tempest suddenly halted, and placed his left hand to his forehead, as some powerful, new idea had arrested his mental faculties.

Then, walking across the room swiftly, he switched on a shaded light which illuminated a large map of Germany, showing the aerial routes, the lines of occupation by the Allies, etc.

"It is just possible," he murmured to himself, "that the two things are connected–the disappearance of this eminent scientist and the appearance of this extraordinary flying machine." Then he switched off the light, and returned to the sheaf of papers and documents on his desk. He sorted out one and placed it on top; it was a decoded message, received some days ago from one of his agents at Constantinople. It ran as follows:–

> "Mysterious aeroplane, phantom-like in appearance, passed over here yesterday flying at terrific speed. All our signals disregarded. No navigation lights showing. Our

fast scouts gave chase but left hopelessly behind. Came from direction of Adrianople, crossed the Bosphorus, and disappeared rapidly flying south-east. Time shortly after sunset.

AERIAL, CONSTANTINOPLE."

"That is three days ago," continued the Colonel, still thinking aloud, "and here are four similar messages from other sources showing quite plainly the route taken. Great Heavens! if I were not tied to my desk in this place, I would take the fastest scout in the country and chase this infernal night-wizard myself."

A soft tap at the door startled the Commissioner, for during the last three days he had become highly nervous; this affair was getting on his mind, but he recovered himself instantly and called out in a deep voice:–

"Come in!"

The door opened softly and his confidential secretary entered, and announced:–

"Two more cables and a wireless message, sir."

"Anything from Keane or Sharpe yet?" demanded the chief.

"Nothing, sir."

"Then what are these confounded things?"

"More about that aerial brigand, sir."

"Let me see them," and Jones handed the messages to his chief.

Consternation and alarm were both visible on the face of Tempest as he read the news.

"So the devil has already got to work, Jones," he remarked, quoting from the sheets, laconic phrases such as "Oil tanks at Port Said burning for three days. Crew of mysterious aeroplane suspected." (Delayed in transit.) "Wireless station at Karachi utterly destroyed, after brief visit by strange airmen." The third was a wireless message which proved most disconcerting of all to the Commissioner. It announced that a silent aeroplane, showing no distinctive marks whatever, passed over Delhi "this afternoon" at a speed estimated at not less than three hundred miles an hour.

The chief of the aerial police leaned back in his chair and groaned.

"Three hundred miles an hour!" he gasped; "but the silent aeroplane idea is a fallacy. It is impossible with any type of internal-combustion engine. It must either have been too high up for the good people of Delhi to hear it, or its engines must have been shut off, or well throttled down. Bah! I know too much about aeroplanes to swallow that." Then rounding upon Jones, who was standing by awaiting instructions, he said sharply:–

"Did that second message go out to Keane?"

"Yes, sir."

"And there's still no reply from him?"

"Nothing whatever, sir."

"H'm. I cannot understand it. Send it out again by wireless telephone; he may be on his way back by aeroplane now, and possibly within reach."

"Right, sir," and Jones disappeared to stab the ether waves again in search of Keane. At that moment the telephone bell on the Commissioner's desk rang. It was the Home Secretary asking for Colonel Tempest, for the same messages concerning the aerial brigand had reached him.

"Hello, Tempest; is that you?"

"Yes; who is that?"

"Lord Hamilton, speaking from the Home Office."

"Oh, yes, my lord."

"I say, Tempest, what is this news just to hand about aerial highwaymen romping half round the British empire, destroying wireless stations, and burning out the big oil tanks along the All-Red Route? I thought you had all these aerial criminals well in hand. There'll be a deuce of a row about all this when Parliament meets in two days' time."

"Well, er–we're doing our best to deal with it, sir, but it will take time to lay these fellows by the heel, I fear."

"Have you got the matter in hand?"

"Yes, sir."

"What have you done? I shall be bombarded with questions shortly; in fact, the Colonial Secretary's here now. He's complaining that the routes are not sufficiently well patrolled. What steps have you taken to deal with these marauders?"

"I've wirelessed to all the aerial stations, to get their fastest scouts out all along the line at once to look for these bandits, and I'm staying on here all night expecting news every moment."

"Very well. Keep me informed of everything that happens. It's becoming very serious. You have full powers to deal effectively with these criminals, and they may be shot down at sight if they don't respond to signals."

Then, as the angry minister rang off, another tap was heard at the door, and the imperturbable Jones entered once more, and announced:

"Message from Keane and Sharpe came in whilst you were speaking on the telephone, sir."

"Good!" ejaculated Tempest, as he wiped the perspiration from his brow, for he had expected something much worse from the Home Secretary. "What does the message say?"

"They received my last message, sir, and are on their way home by the fastest aeroplane. They are due at Hounslow aerodrome at midnight."

"Excellent! What time is it now, Jones?"

"It wants ten minutes to midnight, sir, and I have sent out the fastest car to meet them and bring them straight here. They should be here in half an hour, sir."

"Have you told them at Hounslow?"

"Yes, sir, and they have already got out the coloured lights and the ground flares."

"You have done well, Jones, but you had better not leave the office to-night. I'm very sorry, but I may want you. This is urgent business; we're up against something this time, and unless Keane and Sharpe have found something out, we're going to be beaten."

"I'll stay, sir, but what about you? This is your third night-sitting, and you've had nothing since lunch. Shall I order supper for you?"

"Oh, thanks, Jones, but I'd forgotten. Yes, you may order me coffee and a sandwich, and get something for yourself. You're getting the strain as well, and I don't want you to break down."

When left alone, Colonel Tempest once more began to pace the soft-carpeted room, much as a captain paces the bridge when his thoughts are unduly disturbed by some untoward event during the watch of the second officer. Every other minute he consulted his watch, and wondered why the time passed so slowly. Twice he rang down to the lobby attendant and asked if Captain Keane had arrived, and twice the same answer was returned.

Then he looked at the maps on the wall, and followed with his finger the trail of the All-Red Route which the aerial liners followed, linking up the empire and half the world. Now and again he would glance shrewdly at the large map of Germany, as a skipper eyes the weather quarter when a storm is brewing. Occasionally he would murmur half aloud:–

"A silent engine … three hundred miles an hour. Gee whiz! but they have beaten us two to one. We shall never catch them."

Then a slight sound caught his ears from outside the great building. The soft purr of an approaching Rolls-Royce motor and the sharp blast of a Klaxon horn followed.

"At last!" he cried. "Here they come!"

CHAPTER IV
A MIDNIGHT CONSULTATION

The next moment the door burst open and two men in flying helmets and leathern coats entered the room, and saluted the Colonel. Without any ceremony the latter greeted them warmly, almost joyously, for their cheerful presence gave almost instant relief to his over-burdened mind.

"Good evening, Keane. Good evening, Sharpe," he exclaimed, stepping forward and gripping each of them warmly by the hand.

"Good evening, sir."

"Now, have you discovered anything?" began the chief, without waiting for them to divest themselves of their heavy gear.

Keane looked at the Commissioner for a second or two and then answered:–

"Yes, and no, Colonel."

"H'm. That means something and nothing, I presume."

"Exactly, sir," continued Keane, who acted the part of spokesman. Then, speaking more solemnly, and in lowered tones, he continued, "We are up against something abnormal; I had almost said something supernatural. When you recalled us we were hot on the trail of the man who, in my opinion, is behind this conspiracy."

"You mean this Professor Weissmann?" added the chief of

the aerial police.

Keane nodded.

"I thought so. This man is evidently an evil genius of very high mental calibre, and he has determined, out of personal revenge for the defeat of Germany, to thwart the Allies, and in particular Great Britain."

"He is a master-mind, and a highly dangerous personality; dangerous because he is so clever. And now that he has secured a few daring airmen for his tools, there is no end to the possibilities which his evil genius may accomplish before he and his crew are run to earth," replied Captain Keane.

"I know it, I know it–look here!" and the colonel handed him the batch of cables and wireless messages which showed how the *Scorpion* had already got to work.

"H'm! and there will be worse to follow," added the airman after he had glanced through the list.

"Now, tell me briefly what you have found, Keane, after which we must get to work to devise some immediate plan to thwart these aerial brigands. But first take off your flying gear, and sit by the fire, for you must be hungry, tired and numbed after that cold night ride." Then, ringing for his attendant, he ordered up more strong coffee and sandwiches.

"Thanks, Colonel, I will not refuse. It was indeed a cold ride, and we had no time to get refreshments before leaving the aerodrome at Cologne this evening," said Sharpe, as he divested himself of his heavy gear, sat by the fire and enjoyed the coffee

which soon arrived.

A few moments later, the three men were engaged in serious conversation, although the hour of midnight had long since been tolled out by Big Ben.

"You sent me," Keane was saying, "to discover the whereabouts of this great German engineer and man of science, this brain wave whose perverted genius is likely to cost us so dear."

"And you were unable to find any trace of him?" interposed the chief.

"Well, we were unable to come into contact with him, for we found that since peace was concluded he had vacated his professorial chair at Heidelberg University, where he had been engaged for some considerable time, not only on some mechanical production, but in an attempt to discover some unknown force, evidently a new kind of highly compressed gas to be used for propulsive purposes."

"Had he been successful?"

"That, it was impossible to find out during our short stay over there," replied Keane, "but I discovered from someone who had been in close touch with him just about the time peace was signed, that he had expressed himself in very hopeful terms."

"Was he a very communicative type of man, then, did you learn?"

"No; on the contrary, he seldom spoke of his work, but on this occasion, when he communicated this information, he was very

much annoyed at the defeat of Germany, and considered that his country had been betrayed into a hasty peace."

"And what happened to him after that?" asked the colonel.

"Shortly afterwards he disappeared completely, taking with him all the apparatus connected with his research work, also a highly skilled mechanic who had been specially trained by him for a number of years. But he left not a trace of himself or his work," said the captain, pausing for a moment to light a cigarette.

"Do you think he is acting under any instructions from his authorities?"

"No, certainly not; he distrusts his present Government entirely, and considers them traitors to the Fatherland."

There was another brief silence, whilst the three men, wrapt in deep thought, sat looking into the fire, or watched the rings of tobacco smoke curling upwards to the ceiling. At last, Captain Sharpe observed:–

"A powerful intellect like that did not suddenly disappear in this way without some ulterior motive, Colonel Tempest."

"Obviously not," returned the latter briefly, for he was deep in contemplation, and his mind was searching for some clue. At length he turned to the senior captain and said:–

"This silent engine theory, Keane, what do you think of it?"

Keane shook his head doubtfully, and the colonel handed to him once more the recent wireless message from Delhi, adding merely:–

"Do you think it possible?"

"Scarcely," replied Keane carefully, "but with a master mind like this, one never knows. It will be necessary for you to consult the most eminent professors of science and chemistry at once."

"I intend to visit Professor Verne at his house first thing to-morrow, or rather to-day, for it is already morning."

"But the aeroplane," added Sharpe, who had been perusing the Delhi message, "this also must have been specially built for this new gas."

"Given the one, the other would naturally follow, and would be the lesser task of the two, for this man is a great engineer as well," said Keane.

"It is a deep well of mystery," continued Tempest after another pause; "but something must be done at once. To-morrow the morning papers will be full of it. Next day Parliament meets, and questions will be asked, and it will all come upon us. I shall have to meet the Home Secretary as soon as I have interviewed Professor Verne, and Lord Hamilton will not be easily satisfied. The public will also be clamouring for information on the subject, and they will have to be appeased and calmed. The Stock Exchange will begin to talk also, and to demand compensation for the companies whose properties have been damaged. Insurance rates, marine and otherwise, will be raised, and Lloyd's underwriters will not fail to make a fuss. Now, gentlemen, what steps can we take to deal with these raiders in the immediate future?"

Send us after this mystery 'plane on fast scouts with plenty of

machine-gun ammunition," urged Sharpe.

"I cannot spare you for that, but I have already ordered strong patrols of aerial police to search for the brigands. I must have you here or somewhere within call. At any rate, I cannot let you go further than Germany. It may be necessary to send you there again."

"On what account, sir?" asked Keane.

"To find the aerodrome which this raider calls 'home,' for he must have a rendezvous somewhere if only to obtain supplies and repairs."

"And that secret aerodrome must be somewhere in Germany, hidden away in some out-of-the-way place," ventured Sharpe.

"But in what part of Germany?" asked the commissioner.

"Let me see," cried Keane, rising to his feet, and walking across the room to where the large map of Germany hung upon the wall–"why, it must be in the Schwarzwald!"

"The Schwarzwald!" exclaimed the other two.

"Yes, it is by far the best hiding-place in the whole country. One may tramp for days and never see a soul. It must be somewhere in the Schwarzwald."

"Then to the Schwarzwald you must go to-morrow, adopting whatever disguises you desire, and you must find this hidden spot where the conspiracy has been hatched," concluded the colonel.

CHAPTER V
THE AERIAL LINER

The airship liner, *Empress of India*, was preparing to leave her moorings, just outside the ancient city of Delhi, for Cairo and London. This mammoth airship was one of the finest vessels which sailed regularly from London, east and west, girdling the world, and linking up the British Empire along the All-Red Route. She had few passengers, as she carried an unusually heavy cargo of mails for Egypt and England, and a considerable amount of specie for the Bank of England. Several persons of note, however, figured amongst her saloon passengers, including the Maharajah of Bangapore, an Anglo-Indian judge, and a retired colonel of the Indian army.

She was timed to depart at mid-day, and during the morning mailplanes had been arriving from every part of India with their cargoes of mail-bags, already sorted for the western trip.

The great mammoth now rode easily with the wind, moored by three stout cables to the great tower which rose above the roof gardens of the air-station. An electric lift conveyed the passengers and mails to the summit of this lofty tower, from whence a covered-in gangway led to the long corridors which lined the interior of the rigid airship.

"Have all the engines been tested?" the captain asks of the

chief engineer, as he comes aboard with his navigating officer.

"Yes, sir."

"All the passengers aboard?" he asks next of the ground officer.

"All except the maharajah, Captain, and I expect him any moment."

"Excellent," replied the skipper. "There's a good deal of bullion aboard from the Indian banks, I hear, and the rajah himself is likely touring a lot of valuables with him, I understand, as he is to attend several court functions at St. James's Palace."

"Yes, sir. I hope you won't meet that aerial raider," replied the ground officer.

"Poof! What can he do? He can't board us in mid-air! Besides, I hear that the aerial police are on his track, and that all their fast scouts are patrolling the mail routes."

"Yes, you'll have an aerial escort with you for the first two hundred miles, Captain. They'll pick you up shortly after you leave here."

"Absolutely a waste of time. The police could be much better employed in searching for these rascals."

"Well, perhaps you're right," replied the ground official. "They certainly cannot board you in mid-air, as you observe, and they cannot set you on fire as they did the early Zeppelins, for helium won't burn."

This conversation was interrupted by shouts and cheers which reached the speakers from down below.

"Hullo! here comes the rajah. I must go down and welcome him," said the captain, as a fanfare of trumpets announced the arrival of the great Indian chief.

Then, with all the ceremonial and pomp of the East, the Maharajah of Bangapore was welcomed aboard the luxurious air-liner, and, accompanied by his personal attendants, he was shown with much obsequiousness to his private saloon. His baggage, containing treasures worth a king's ransom, was likewise transferred, under the supervision of his chamberlain, from the ground to his suite of apartments.

The clock in the palace of the Great Mogul in the old city of Delhi strikes twelve, and the captain's voice is heard once more, as he speaks from the rear gondola:–

"All ready?"

"Yes, sir, all clear!"

A button is pressed and the water ballast tanks discharge their cargo to lighten the ship, and then swiftly comes the final order:–

"Let go!"

And as the cables are slipped from the mooring tower, the light gangway is drawn back, the crowd down below cheer, and the giant airship backs out, carried by the force of the wind alone till she is well clear of the station. Then her engines open up gradually. She turns until her nose points almost due west, then slips away on her four thousand miles' journey over many a classic land, desert, forest and sea towards the centre of the world's greatest empire.

About four o'clock that afternoon, as Judge Jefferson sat and talked with his friend Colonel Wilson in one of the rear gondolas where smoking was permitted, he remarked that this was his seventh trip home to England by the aerial route, and declared that he could well spend the rest of his lifetime in such a pleasant mode of travel.

"There's no fatigue whatever," he added; "nothing of the jolt and jar which you get in the railway carriage. As for the journey by sea, I was so ill during my last voyage that I simply couldn't face the sea again. A storm at sea is of all things the most uncomfortable. If we meet with a storm on the air-route we can either go above it or pass on one side, as most storms are only local affairs."

"Not to speak of the time that is wasted by land or sea-travel," added the colonel.

"Exactly," replied the judge.

"Only to think that in forty-eight hours we shall be in London, even allowing for a two hours' stay in Cairo to pick up further mails and passengers."

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" agreed his companion.

"And the absence of heat is some consideration, when travelling in a land like India," continued the colonel as he flicked off the end of his cigar.

"Yes. The stifling heat, particularly in May, June and July, when you get the hot dry winds, is altogether insufferable in those stuffy railway carriages, while up here it is delightfully cool and

bracing, and the view is magnificent."

"Hullo! what is that fine river down there?" asked the judge, as he looked down through the clear, tropical atmosphere on to the delightful landscape of river, plain and forest three thousand feet below.

"Oh, that must be the Indus, the King River of Vedic poetry, a wonderful stream, two thousand miles in length," said the colonel, consulting his pocket map.

"Can it really be the Indus?"

"It is indeed."

"Then we have already travelled four hundred miles since noon across the burning plains of India, and we have reached the confines of this wonderful land," replied Jefferson.

"Yes, we have indeed. We shall soon enter the native state of Baluchistan. See yonder, right ahead of us, I can already make out the highest peaks of the Sulaiman Mountains. We are already rising to cross them."

"And this evening we shall cross the troubled territory of Afghanistan."

"Yes," replied the colonel, "and by midnight, if all goes well, we shall be sailing over Persia."

"Persia, the land of enchantment," mused the judge.

"And of the *Arabian Nights*, those wonderful tales which charmed our boyhood–the land of Aladdin, of the wonderful lamp, and the magic carpet."

"The magic carpet," laughed the judge. "This is the real magic

carpet. The author of that wonderful story never dreamt that the day would really come when the traveller from other lands, reclining in luxury, would be carried through the air across his native land, by day or by night, at twice the flight of a bird."

And so these two men talked about these wonderful classic lands over which they were sailing so serenely, of Zoroaster, the great Persian teacher of other days, of Ahura Mazda, the All-Wise, and the Cobbler of Baghdad, until the tea-bell startled them.

Then, finding they were hungry because the bracing air had made them so, they passed on to the snug little tea-room, where, amid the palm-trees and the orchids, they listened to soft dulcet notes from a small Indian orchestra which accompanied the maharajah. Here, they sipped delicious china tea from dainty Persian cups, and appeased their hunger, as best they could, from the tiny portions of alluring *patisserie* which usually accompany afternoon tea.

But, later that evening, they did ample justice to a fuller and nobler banquet, which had been prepared for them in the gilded and lofty dining saloon; for they were the honoured guests of the Maharajah of Bangapore. And he entertained them right royally as befitted one of his princely rank.

And in all the wondrous folk-lore and tradition of the ancient Persian kings, was there ever a more regal banquet, or one more conspicuous by the splendour of its oriental wealth than this long-protracted feast? Rich emblazoned goblets of gold, bejewelled

with rare and precious gems, adorned the table, for the prince had brought his household treasures; they were to him his household gods, and heirlooms of priceless worth.

Never the Lydian flute played sweeter music than these soft native airs which wandered amid the eastern skies, as, under the silver moon, the long, glistening, pearl-like airship sailed on beneath the stars, while down, far down below, lay the ruins of Persepolis, where the ancient kings of Persia slept their last long sleep.

CHAPTER VI
AN UP-TO-DATE CABIN BOY

While the great, mammoth air-liner is racing like a meteor across the eastern skies, on its way to Cairo and London, it is necessary to introduce to the reader a chirpy, little fellow called Gadget. In fact, this cute little chap, who stood a matter of four feet two inches in his stockinged feet, deserves a chapter or two all to himself.

Now Gadget did not belong to the passengers, nor did his name appear at all in that distinguished list. Neither did he rightly belong to the crew, except in the matter of his own opinion–on which subject he held very pronounced views. But he certainly did belong to the airship, and appeared to be part of the apparatus, or maybe the fixtures and effects. He certainly knew the run of that great liner, every nook and corner of it, better even than the purser or the navigating officer.

To tell the truth, this insignificant but perky little bit of humanity was a stowaway, who had determined, at twelve years of age, to see the world, at the expense of somebody else. How he came aboard, and hid himself amongst the mail-bags, until the airship had sailed a thousand miles over land and sea, still remains a mystery. But it happened that, when the *Empress of India* was crossing the blue waters of the Adriatic sea, on her

outward voyage, there came a tap at the captain's door one afternoon when the latter had just retired for a brief spell.

"Come in!" called the air-skipper, in rather surly tones, wondering what had happened to occasion this interruption.

The next instant, the chief officer entered the little state-room, leading by a bit of string, attached to one of his nether garments, the most tattered-looking, diminutive, but perky little street Arab the captain had ever beheld.

"What in the name of goodness have you got there, Crabtree?" exclaimed the skipper, starting up from his comfortable bunk, at this apparition.

"Stowaway, sir!" replied the officer briefly.

"Stowaway?" echoed the captain.

"Yes, sir."

"Where did you find him?"

"Didn't find him, sir. He gave himself up just now. Says he's been hiding amongst the mail-bags. What shall I do with him, sir?"

"Tie him to a parachute and drop him overboard as soon as we are over the land again," shouted the captain in angry tones. "I won't have any stowaways aboard my ship."

This was said more to frighten the little imp than with real intent, though the air-skipper spoke in angry tones, as if he meant what he said. He was evidently very much annoyed at this discovery.

"He's half-frozen, sir," interposed the chief officer in more

kindly tones.

"Humph! Of course he is," added the captain. "This keen, biting wind at three thousand feet above the sea must have turned his marrow cold. Besides, he hasn't enough clothes to cover a rabbit decently. Just look at him!"

The little chap's eyes sparkled, and his face flushed a little at this reference to his scant wardrobe. But he knew by the changed tone in the captain's voice that the worst was now over. He had not even heard a reference to the proverbial rope's-end, a vision which he had always associated in his mind with stowaways.

"My word, he's a plucky little urchin, Crabtree!" declared the air-skipper at length, his anger settling down, and his admiration for the adventurous little gamin asserting itself as he gazed at the ragged but sharp-eyed little fellow.

"What is your name, Sonny?" he asked at length.

"Gadget, sir," whipped out the stowaway.

"Good enough!" returned the captain smiling. "We've plenty of gadgets aboard the airship, and I guess another won't make much difference. What do you say, Crabtree?"

"Oh, we'll find something for him to do, sir. And we'll make him earn his keep. He's an intelligent little shrimp, anyhow."

"How old are you, Gadget?" asked the captain.

"Twelve, sir!" replied the gamin.

"Father and mother dead, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir."

"Been left to look after yourself, Gadget, I reckon, haven't

you?" said the skipper kindly, as he gave one more searching glance at the small urchin, and noted how the little blue lips quivered, despite the brave young heart behind them.

There was no reply this time, for even the poor, ill-treated lad could not bring himself to speak of his up-bringing.

"Never mind, Gadget…!" interposed the skipper, changing the subject. "So you determined to see the world, did you, my boy?"

"Yessir!" came the reply, and again the sharp eyes twinkled.

"Well, you shall go round the world with me, if you are a good boy. But, if you don't behave, mark my words"–and here the captain raised his voice as if in anger–"I'll drop you overboard by parachute, and leave you behind! Do you understand?"

The urchin promised to behave himself, and, in language redolent of Whitechapel, began to thank the captain effusively.

"There, that will do! Take him away, and get him a proper rig-out, Crabtree," said the skipper impatiently. "I never saw such a tatterdemalion in all my life."

"Come along, now, Gadget," ordered the chief officer, giving a little tug at the frayed rope, which he had been holding all this while, and, which, in some unaccountable way, seemed to hold the urchin's wardrobe together.

This little tug, however, had dire results, in-so-far as the above mentioned wardrobe was concerned. It immediately became obvious that it not only served as braces to the little gamin, but also as a girdle, which kept in a sort of suspended animation

Gadget's circulating library and commissariat. For, even as the janitor and his prisoner turned, the rope became undone, and, though Gadget by a rapid movement retained the nether part of his tattered apparel in position, yet his library–which consisted of a dirty, grease-stained, much worn volume–and his commissariat–composed of sundry fragments of dry crusts of bread wrapped in half a newspaper–immediately became dislodged by the movement, and showered themselves in a dozen fragments at the captain's feet.

"Snakes alive! what have we here?" demanded that august person, as he stooped and picked up the book. Then he laughed outright, as he read aloud from the grubby, much-thumbed title page:–

Five weeks in a Balloon … by Jules Verne.

The mate grinned too. He remembered how that same book had thrilled him, not so long ago either. And, perhaps, after all, it was the same with Captain Rogers.

"Where did you get this, Gadget?" asked the captain, reopening the conversation, after this little accident.

"Bought it of Jimmy Dale, sir," replied the boy readily.

"And how much did you pay for it?"

"Gev 'im my braces, an' a piece o' tar band for it, sir."

The captain ceased to laugh, and looked at the boy's earnest face. And something suspiciously like a tear glistened in the eyes of the airman, as he replied:–

"You actually gave away to another urchin an important part

of your scanty wardrobe to get possession of this book?"

"Oh, it wur a fair bargen, sir. Jimmy found the book on a dust heap, but I wasn't takin' it fur nothin'. And then Jimmy never had any braces."

"I see. Very well, you can go now, Gadget. Mr. Crabtree will find you some better clothes, and get you some food. Then you shall report to me to-morrow. See, here is your treasured book," said the skipper, dismissing the urchin once more.

"Thank you, sir," returned the boy, pulling a lock of unkempt hair which hung over his forehead, by way of salute. "I'll lend you the book, sir, if you'll take care of it," and the chief officer smiled as he led the little chap away.

So that was how Gadget became part of the fixtures and apparatus of the air liner. He was more than an adventurer, was Gadget. He might even have been an inventor or a discoverer, if he had met with better fortune in the choice of his parents. His sharp, young brain was full of great ideas.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.