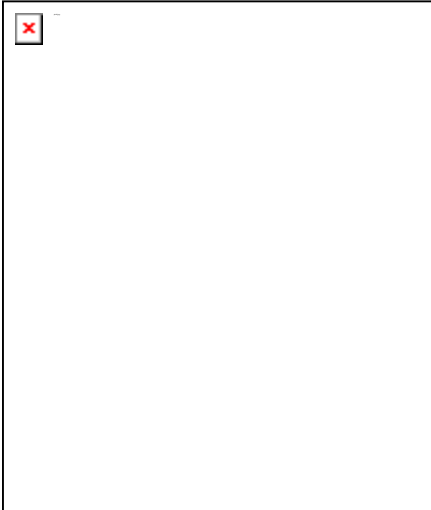


Slave of the Wind!

By

Charles Hamilton



A Startled Yell.

Bunny's chubby face was bright. He was all eager anticipation. His cousin Gilbert, on the other hand, had a nonchalant air. Gilbert was seventeen, and quite a buck; not the fellow to get excited about so simple a matter as an ascent in a captive balloon at a fair.

Gilbert, in fact, was not quite sure whether the whole affair was not a little beneath his dignity.

Bunny was quite sure that it wasn't beneath his. He was simply longing to find himself rising in the air, with Margate spread out like a map under his eyes, and the whole country unrolled to his gaze as far as the North Foreland, and farther,

Certainly he would have preferred a trip in an aeroplane. But the F balloon at the fair was available, and an aeroplane wasn't. Bunny had to cut his coat according to his cloth..

It was a bright, sunny, Saturday afternoon, with a wind from the north-west. Mr Hare, his uncle, had not yet returned from the City, and Mrs. Hare was busy with household duties, when the two cousins left Wistaria Villa and turned into the Northdown Road.

Bunny looked back at the villa, in its bright little garden, for a moment. Life at Wistaria Villa was not all roses, but Bunny had an affectionate heart, and

lie was fond of his home and fond of his relations, though his thoughts often turned to the big world outside Margate, and often to his father, who had vanished into that big world many years ago, and I'd been missing ever since.

It did not occur to Bunny's mind at that moment that he was taking his last look at Wistaria Villa for many a long day.

Bunny dreamed many daydreams of travel in far lands and voyages in strange seas. Always at the back of Bunny's mind was a project of setting forth some day into the big world to find his father. But it never occurred to him that chance was to intervene and send him forth on his travels.

As he trotted along beside Gilbert Hare he was thinking of the fair in the fields at a little distance from Merry Margate, of roundabouts and switchbacks, and, above all, of the captive balloon in which an ascent could be made for the moderate sum of five shillings.

Gilbert, tall and slim and elegant, lounged along with his nonchalant air of a man of the world. Bunny, who was only fourteen, had to trot to keep up with Gilbert. The blare of it banded greeted them as they drew near to the fair ground, and, though not exactly musical in itself, it was music to Bunny's ears.

"Isn't it jolly?" said Bunny, as they went in.

Gilbert smiled his patronising smile.

"Shall we go on the roundabout?" asked Bunny.

"Bit too kiddish for me," answered Gilbert.

"What about the switchback?"

"Give it a miss,"

"Oh, all right!" said Bunny, a little disappointed but still cheerful. Nothing at the fair was too "kid-dish" for Bunny, but he was accustomed to giving Gilbert his head. So they arrived at the enclosure where the balloon strained at its rope in the north-west wind. Rather to Bunny's surprise, nobody was patronising the captive balloon. The car accommodated six passengers, but nobody was in it. The man in charge looked round anxiously for patrons and found them not, it was true that the wind was rather fresh and the balloon likely to pitch and roll a good deal when it ascended. Perhaps that cussed the public to turn their attention in other directions. Even Gilbert seemed a little dubious now that they had arrived on the spot.

"Step in, gents!" said the man in charge breezily. "Safe as houses, and a bea-yutiful trip! 'Arf a dozen counties to be seen, and France and the Channel! Safe as houses, sir!"

Bunny's eyes shone. On clear days he had seen the far-off cliffs of France from high places in Kent. That was all he had seen, so far, of foreign lands—

of which he was destined to see so much. But to look down on a foreign country from a swaying balloon!' The thought was intoxicating to Bunny. "We shall really see France?" he exclaimed breathlessly.

The man gave him a cheery grin. "You'll see the Froggies a-walking about sir," he answered "Walking and talking jest us plain as if they was on the beach at Margate." "Oh, good !" exclaimed Bunny, who had the enviable faculty of always believing what he was told.

"Step in, gents! Five shillings, please !"

Gilbert glanced at the swaying balloon and then at the sky, where light clouds raced before a high wind. 'Look here. Is it safe?" he asked. "Think I'd let you go up if it wasn't safe, sir ? I've got my balloon to think of."

That was an unanswerable argument. The loss of Gilbert and Bunny the showman could perhaps have borne with fortitude, but the loss of his balloon would have been a very serious matter. Obviously, he would not have allowed the ascent had he not considered his balloon safe.

Gilbert still seemed to hesitate.

"Come on, Gilbert!" said Bunny, tugging at his sleeve.

"Nobody else is going." Said Gilbert.

"All the better for us. We shall have the car to ourselves."

With Bunny so eager, Gilbert could not confess to funk. He paid his five shillings and entered the enclosure, and Bunny eagerly followed him in. They took their seats in the car.

But the ascent was not immediate,

The balloon merchant wanted to fill the car if he could. It was adventure to Bunny, but it was business to the shaman . For half an hour and Gilbert and Bunny sat in the balloon car, while the man exerted his eloquence on passers-by and lookers-on, without result. Bunny did not mind. It was exciting to him to sit in the car, with the gas envelope swaying and bellying overhead. But Gilbert grew very impatient.

"Look here. We're not sticking here all afternoon," he exclaimed at last. "If there's nothing doing we'll get out."

"Arf a mo, sir !" said the man.

The half of a "mo" lasted some minutes. But it was clear that nobody else wanted an ascent just then, and the man made up his mind at last.

"Old on!" he said. And he let out the rope that held the balloon.

Bunny had an excited expectation of shooting up into the clouds like an arrow; instead of which the balloon rose quite gently as the rope was paid out. In ordinary circumstances the captive balloon was as safe as a railway carriage. But now the wind was strong, and it rocked considerably as it rose.

Bunny and Gilbert held on. Bunny breathed deep, and his eyes danced with delight. Gilbert was not looking delighted.

“Blessed if I half like this !” grunted Gilbert.

“It’s fine !” exclaimed Bunny.

“Nobody else was risking it,” said Gilbert uneasily.

“Well the man wouldn’t risk having his balloon blown away, you know!”

“Not if he knew it,” grunted Gilbert. “But he’s so jolly keen on business. He’s here to make money. If that rope should break—”

Bunny stared. He was so accustomed to acknowledging the superiority of his cousin Gilbert that it amazed him to see unmistakable signs of funk about that lofty youth.

“But the rope must have held this balloon lots of times “ he declared.

“The more it’s used, the more likely it is to wear out, isn’t it?” said Gilbert. - “You are a fathead, Bunny!”

“Still, they’d take proper care,” said Bunny.

“They never take proper care at these shows,” answered Gilbert.

“Accidents keep on happening. They trust to luck,”

“Well, I feel safe enough,” said Bunny.

“ Well, I don’t !” growled Gilbert.

Bunny was silent. The rope was paid out to its full length, and the ballet and rose two hundred feet over the fair ground. Bunny gazed out delightedly. Not only the fair ground, but all Margatp and Cliftonville, Westgato and Kingsgate, were spread before his eyes. On one side the green downs, on the other the shining sea. His eyes turned from one to the other, and to the winding Thames, and to the North Foreland light-house. Tiny in the distance, the motor-bus from Broadstairs crawled into view. Bunny gazed and gazed, and did not notice that Gilbert was keeping his eyes to the interior of the car, and was growing quite pale and troubled. When he looked at Gilbert at last he was surprised by the m of enjoyment in his face. “Isn’t it ripping ?” exclaimed Bunny.

“Don’t be a bigger fool than you can help. Bunny!” answered Gilbert. When the thump is that ass going to wind us down?”

A gust of the north-west wind caught the balloon. It swayed wildly, and the car rocked and spun. They held on, Bunny grinning with glee and Gilbert looking almost sick. There was a twang from the holding rope, and Gilbert fancied for a moment that it had parted.

He peered over the side at last. The man below was looking up, and Gilbert thought he detected an uneasy expression on the upturned face. He saw the man jump to the pulley that was used to wind in the rope and bring The balloon back to earth.

The rope was taut now at a slant, the strong wind endeavouring to tear the balloon away from its anchorage, and the car tilted over wildly. Gilbert clung on, white as the chalk in the cliffs that stretched along the SCA.

“Oh dear!” he gasped. “If that rope goes—

“It won’t, old chap !” said Bunny.

“What do you know about it, fathead?”

“ Well, he’s winding in now,” said Bunny, with a sigh. “It won’t last much longer.”

Bunny was mistaken on that point. There was no doubt that that rope had seen service, and that the ball and merchant would have been well advised to replace it with a new one before allowing the balloon to ascend in a strong wind. The tug of the pulley at one end, and of the north west wind at the other, proved too much for the rope.

It parted with a sudden snap.

There was a startled yell below, a gasp from Gilbert, an exclamation’ From Bunny. The fair ground became suddenly a sea of upturned faces, That was the last that Gilbert and Bunny saw of Margate, as the ball and, released and spinning dizzily, shot away on the wings of the wind !“

— —

“ Up—Up—Up!

“Oh crumbs t” gasped Bunny. Gilbert had flung himself in the bottom of the spinning car, clutching wildly. Bunny held on to a rope staring about him. Gilbert—the lofty and patronising Gilbert—lay in a state of palpitating funk. Bunny, rather to his own surprise, was not conscious of anything like fear. Rather he felt himself in a state of throbbing exhilaration.

Always had Bunny longed for adventure. Adventures had always seemed very far away from Wistaria Villa. But this was an adventure— there was no doubt about that!

The balloon was rising, and the force of the wind in the upper levels was amazing. The clumsy gasbag fairly spun along, revolving and swaying and plunging as it went.

A backward glance showed Margate a dim blur already. Fields and meadows and a railway line glimmered below. On the left was the line of cliffs bordering the sea. So far the runaway balloon was keeping over the land, but it was edging towards the sea, and Bunny’s face became serious, as he realised it. A muffled gasp came from Gilbert.

“Bunny, You silly fathead !”

“Yes, old chap,” said Bunny.

“It’s all your fault, you born idiot!

What did, you want to come up in a balloon for? See if you can find any way of letting the beastly thing down. There ought to be a cord or a valve or something.”

“I don’t see one,” said Bunny, staring up at the mass above his head.

“You silly chump!” .

“Well, you have a look, old chap.”

Gilbert did not have a look. Bunny realised that was because his cause and dared not get on his feet in the rocking car.

“It’s all right, old fellow,” said Bunny ‘It s bound to go down sooner or later.”

“Idiot !“

Bunny gave it up. Gilbert evidently was not in a reasonable mood.

Bunny stared at him in wonder. Gilbert fairly cringed with funk and Bunny was not in the least frightened. Yet he realised the danger even more clearly than Gilbert did, as he looked over the rim of the car at the cliffs which were drawing nearer. If they went out over the sea there was not much chance for them them !

Then Bunny made a sudden discovery, which he hastened to communicate.

“We’re going down !“, he shouted

“Sure?” Gilbert gasped, sitting up.

“Yes, rather! My hat! I hope we sha’n’t knock oft any chimney-pots “
chuckled Bunny.

Gilbert, holding on with both hands, dragged himself to his feet. He ventured at last to peer over the rim of the car.

The balloon was sinking.

Probably the fierce wind had found some weak spot in the gasbag. The gas at all events must have been escaping, for the balloon was slowly but surely settling down and to lower levels. Fields, and cows grazing in them, house tops and upturned staring faces were now clear to the eye.

“We’re all serene,” said Bunny.

“We’re near the cliffs—we’re drifting out to sea ! ” Gilbert yelped.

“Oh crumbs !“

“We shall land before then,” said Bunny, comfortingly. “We’re not heading straight for the sea. We’ve got to be ready to jump when she bumps”

‘ Gilbert shddered

The balloon was drifting along more slowly now, as it drew nearer and nearer to the earth. Long minutes passed, which seemed hours to Gilbert.

Slowly, terribly slowly, the balloon sank and sank, and every moment Gilbert dreaded that a sudden gust of wind might carry it beyond the cliffs, over the shining expanse of water that reflected and the sunshine.

There was a crashing sound as the balloon's car, only a few feet up now, dragged away a fence in its career. A man and with a plough stood and stared at it blankly, and shouted something that was lost in the wind. Bump ! The car touched the earth and at the contact shot up again a dozen feet.

"Ow!" gasped Gilbert.

"We'd better hang on outside," suggested Bunny. "Then we can let go next time she bumps, what?"

Gilbert stared at him.. "You mad idiot !" was his reply.

"But it's the best way—"

"Shut up, you dummy !"

Not to save his life would Gilbert Hare have ventured to clamber outside the rocking car, His knees were knockin together.

"You got us into this," he muttered thickly. "You potty clown!

You were always the fool of the family! Now you've got us both killed, you dummy"

"We're not killed yet,' urged Bunny, " and if we hang on outside the——" ,
"Shut up !" shrieked Gilbert,

Bunny shut up. His plan was really a good one, given the required nerve.

Bunny had the nerve, but unfortunately Gilbert had not.

It was born in upon Jack Hare's mind that his cousin was a helpless burden on his hands, and that if Gilbert was to be saved, he, Bunny, had to save him. And Bunny, if he was an ass in some respects, had a way of getting his teeth into a problem and worrying it till he pulled through. He had to save Gilbert, and for the moment he did not think of himself. Which was just like Bunny! It did not occur to Bunny to be angry or resentful or scornful. His only idea was to soothe and reassure Gilbert and get him safely to land.

"Look here, old chap,' he said. "There's a rope here—"

"What's the good?" moaned Gilbert.

"I can tie it to you," said Bunny, "and hold on to it. With me holding the rope you can hang on outside the car, and let go when you feel your feet on the ground. If you make a miss I shall have hold of the rope, and you'll be all right."

Gilbert shuddered. The balloon touched earth again, and bounded off. The edge of the cliffs was terribly near now, and at each bump the balloon drew nearer to the sea.

" I—I can't !" gasped Gilbert.



angry or resentful or scornful. His only idea was to soothe and reassure Gilbert and get him safely to land.

"Look here, old chap," he said. "There's a rope here—"

Bunny's dragging feet established contact with the back of a waiter's neck!

"It's the only way, old chap, if we're not to be carried out to sea," said Bunny soothingly, as if he were speaking to a child. "You've only got to hold on, and the rope will be there, with me holding to it. It's that or jumping out when she bumps."

Gilbert groaned. He had not the nerve to jump out when the balloon bumped. A jump mistimed by a fraction of a second would be fatal.

Bunny picked up the coil of rope, uncoiled it, and began to knot the end round his cousin, under the armpits. Gilbert allowed him to proceed. He was making up his mind to the effort of saving himself. In his concern for himself he was not thinking of Bunny.

And neither was Bunny, for that matter.

"Now, old fellow—" murmured Bunny.

"Hold on, then, for goodness' sake!" muttered Gilbert, between chattering teeth.

"I'm holding on."

Gilbert shut his eyes as he climbed out on the rim of the car. He hung

outside, holding on convulsively. Only the taut rope, held fast by Bunny, gave him the courage to make the attempt. The balloon settled down slowly on the green expanse of grass over the cliffs, and Gilbert's feet dangled only a yard or so above the grass.

“Ready, old chap ! Bunny was watching with a steady eye. “You're only three feet up now— only two feet—another second—”

Gilbert felt his feet dragging on grass.

“Let go !” shouted Bunny.

Gilbert let go, his feet on the earth, and sprawled on the ground. Bunny let go the rope instantly, and it whisked over the rim of the car and fell beside Gilbert.

The balloon, relieved of Gilbert's weight, shot up like an arrow. So sudden and swift was its ascent that Bunny fell backwards in the car.

Bunny had not calculated on the result of the balloon being relieved of the weight of one of its passengers. He had been thinking only of saving Gilbert, and had given no thought to what would follow. What followed was a dizzy flight upwards almost to the clouds.

The car rocked wildly. Bunny clung to a rope and stared dizzily down. He had a glimpse of Gilbert scrambling to his feet in the grass and below. And then Gilbert vanished and the grass was a blur. Up and up and up went the balloon, and all below was blurred to the sight.

“Oh crumbs !” panted Bunny.

He held on and waited. Sooner or later the balloon would settle down again, and then Bunny would jump. But the balloon was long in settling down this time! And when at last the descent commenced Bunny's gaze rested no longer on green land and white cliffs. The cliffs were a white line far away to his right, and below him rolled the waters of the North Sea.

Between Sky and Sea.

BUNNY stared about him with wide eyes. The white cliffs of England were sinking to a low line far away. Beneath the swinging car the North c rolled, its wide waters heaving under the summer sunshine. Far in the distance, Bunny made out a blur of smoke from a steamer. Close to the shore was a little yawl with a patched brown sail—a man standing in it, steering at the drifting balloon. But the yawl quickly dropped out of sight under the chalk cliffs. And the smoke of the steamer was too far off for Bunny to hope for help from that quarter.

“Oh crumbs !” said Bunny once again.

Gilbert Hare had been saved. Bunny was glad of that, even as his own

deadly peril rushed into his mind. With the thought of Gilbert came a thought of Wistaria Villa—of his uncle and aunt. They would be sorry if he did not come back. But, thank goodness—was Bunny's thought—that their son would return safe. It was a great relief to know that Gilbert must be even then, on his homeward way, safe and sound. While Bunny was drifting out to death in deep waters!

For Bunny knew there was little hope. But he was not afraid. Fear seemed to have been left out of Jack Hare's composition. With a cool, clear head he considered his chances, realised that they amounted to next to nothing, and yet remained perfectly calm, and somehow kept hopeful. The balloon was still settling down, but very slowly. Sometimes a rush of wind caught it and swept it upward. But on the whole it was settling. And when it settled down into the water, as must happen sooner or later— Bunny was a good swimmer, but he was too far from land for swimming to be of any avail. His only hope lay in being picked up by a ship, or by some boat that chanced to be far out from the shore. He scanned the wide sea and failed to discern a boat: And he saw no sign of a ship save that trail of dim smoke that was disappearing northward, the and difference of Gilbert's weight doubtless accounted for the slowness with which the balloon was settling. But whatever was the cause, the descent was so slow as to be almost an imperceptible. It would be a long time before it touched the waves that heaved below, and while there was life, there was hope. If it remained and afloat long enough, there were shores beyond the sea that he might reach. Bunny tried hard to recall his geography and make out to what coast. The north-west wind was bearing him. France, or perhaps Belgium—the wind would have to be direct west to carry him to Holland, and it was more north than west. And as he gave his attention to the wind, Bunny found that it was veering more and more to the north, and, consequently, the flight of the balloon—the slave of the wind—was more and more direct to the south. It would be France that he reached, if he lived to reach land. But it was not likely. He knew that it was not likely. Yet he dwelt on the thought, and his eyes sparkled at the thought of treading a foreign shore. It would be rather a catch to land among the Froggies, and Bunny's mind immediately switched off to an effort to remember the French he had learned—which was little enough. Mr. Hare had not been able to afford to send Bunny to an expensive school, and what French he knew he had picked up from Gilbert. Who had studied it from a commercial point of view. The wind was still veering. On Bunny's right of the land came out of a dim blur into clear site and again, white cliffs shining in the sun, topped by grass. Then he made out a line of buildings, and a great building that

seemed familiar to his eye— and he remembered that he had seen it on picture and postcards. It was Dover Castle.

He was passing Dover, though at a great distance. And, still the wind veered from north to east, and as the land faded away again. Bunny knew that he was drifting over the Channel. The water was twenty feet below him now the balloon was settling down by inches, slowly. Bunny recalled that there were—or should be— plenty of craft in the narrow seas, He might, with luck, sight the cross-Channel steamer.

And now there were other white cliffs, other than those of his own country, in sight; cliffs that he had seen from an high Kentish downs—the white cliffs of France. Both shores of the Channel were in Bunny's sight as he was drifting on and in the runaway balloon.

But it was towards the southern shore, the shore of France, that the wind was carrying the helpless gas monster. It seemed to have settled down now in the north-east, and it was blowing harder. The sea was heaving in and frothy billows, and the spindrift blew and blue.

A boat with a brown sail danced into Bunny's sight. His face brightened and and he waved and shouted.

Two men in the boat, men in jerseys and woollen caps, with olive faces, and they were staring at Bunny, while one steered and they other handled the sail. The boat looked like a fishing craft, rigged as a cutter, and it was running before the wind for the French coast— Calais or Boulogne, Bunny could guess. Whether it was a French or English boat he could not tell, but the two seamen in it had a foreign Look to his eyes.

He waved his cap and shouted. The boat was ahead of him, and he calculated that the wind would carry his voice to the seamen.

“Help !“ shouted Bunny. “Stop for me, will you ? Help !”

They stared at turn and shouted back, but the wind carried their words away from him. The balloon, slanting before the wind, was moving faster than the boat, and Bunny feared that the swinging car might foul the sail. But the man at the tiller saw the danger and shifted his course. For some minutes the balloon drifted along by the fleeting boat, and Bunny, reaching out, could almost have touched the brown, patched sail. He shouted to the men below, who continued to stare at him; and now he caught their voices.

“Voyez ! C'est un garçon !“

“D'ou venez vous, petit?”

Evidently they were French. Apparently they did not realise that the voyager was in danger, but supposed simply that he was crossing the Channel in a balloon. Bunny made a desperate effort to recall his French.

“A moi!” he shouted. “A l'aide!”

That was the way to call for help in an French. Though even as he called Bunny could not help thinking that it was a queer way of putting it, for the men in and the boat certainly could not come to his aid, though no doubt they would pick him up when he fell.

He saw that he was understood.

One of them waved a brown hand to him and shouted.

Bunny looked down and drew a deep breath. He was fifteen feet now from the water, tossing and turning in white foam. The boat danced on the sea like a cork. If he dropped, could they pick him up before he went down like a stone? It was dubious, and Bunny gave a look towards the French cliffs, growing larger and white are to the south. Already he could make out buildings on the shore—a hilly town, with a great white building close to the sea—, ships and boats in a harbour—

To jump or take his chance of drifting ashore, that was the question for Bunny. It was resolved for him by the wind, which gave a sudden terrific gust and bore the balloon away from the vicinity of the boat. Bunny clung to the car as it heeled over, almost on its side. And for some minutes he had to hold on for his life. When he was able to look down again the boat was distant. But it was following the balloon, the seamen evidently intending to stand by, if they could, and pick him up when he fell.

But the balloon, whirling in the wind, fled on faster than the fishing-boat could follow. The brown sail grew tiny astern, and the men in the boat became tiny figures to Bunny's eyes. That chance was gone. If the balloon sank now, the boat would be too far astern for the French seamen to pick him up.

Bunny set his teeth. The gusty wind carried the balloon higher, but only for a space. It settled down again, lower and lower. The gas was escaping faster now. The gas envelope was never intended, or planned, for a voyage such as this. The fierce wind beating on it had found many weak spots.

It seemed to the hapless Bunny that the sea was rushing up to meet him. He stared away towards the shore, The coast of England was lost to his sight now; but the French shore was near. But the balloon would never reach it. Bunny stared round the car for something to throw out to lighten it. But there was nothing detachable—nothing to help him,

There came a sudden swishing of water. The crest of a mounting wave had struck the car. It was a matter of minutes now, and the French shore, near as it looked, was still terribly far off. A few minutes— and then a plunge into the heaving Channel. Bunny could see figures on the shore and on the cliffs, their faces staring towards him.

There was still a chance, and he was still cool and clear-headed, ready to

make the most of it. He took out his pocket-knife and opened the largest blade. He clambered into the network that held the gasbag, and slashed fast and hard at the ropes that held the car.

The knife was sharp, and Bunny's hand was strong—and desperate.

Rope after rope parted under his slashes.

The car was dragging in the sea. Now it held on by a single rope, like an anchor to the sagging, whirling mass to which Bunny hung. He cut desperately at the rope.

It parted. The car slid into the water and vanished from Bunny's eyes, as the gasbag, relieved of its weight, shot upwards on the wind. Bunny, clinging to the ropes, was

carried up from the sea -- higher and higher, spinning breathlessly as the balloon spun upward and onward.

Stranded!

With hands and arms and legs Bunny held on, his brain in a whirl, his breath and coming and going in spasmodic gasps.

The upward rush ceased at last. A hundred feet below him now the sea heaved and frothed and billowed. Over him and the gasbag sagged and wallowed. Great hollows were in its sides as the gas escaped faster.

Very soon it was settling down again, and the shore was close. And as he hung and spun, Bunny glimpsed the white cliffs, and the hilly town, and the great white building, and the staring crowd. People seemed to have swarmed from everywhere to stare at the wreck of the balloon, with the boy clinging to it.

he swung on, hanging to the cops and balloon — fearing every moment that it would totally collapse and drop, enveloping him and in its folds. But the wind drove it on shoreward, slanting down from a height that promised to carry Bunny safely over the cliffs. Sometimes the shore, and the buildings, and the gazilig crowd, disappeared from his sight—then he would see them again, closer and closer. Half Boulogne seemed to have turned out to greet this strange voyager.

Spinning and whirling, onward he went. He was sinking— sinking—but there was land below him now—land amid a forest of hats and upturned faces. And still the wind carried him on, whirling over the heads of an excited, shouting French crowd.

His feet brushed something. It was a hat. The hat went west, and a startled face stared up, and Bunny heard an ejaculation.

“Mon Dieu! Mon chapeau !” gasped the Frenchman.

Bunny passed on, leaving the excited Gaul jumping after his hat. Hands grabbed at Bunny, with friendly intent, and missed him. Just when it seemed practicable to drop, the wind lifted the balloon again, and Bunny was glad that he had not let go. Up he went—followed by a roar of voices.

Then Bunny was coming down again. That lift on the wind was the last effort of the expiring balloon. Once more Bunny's dragging feet established contact—this time with the back of a waiter's neck, on an explanade overlooking the sea. There were little tables set about, with people round them taking coffee or smoking, and a waiter emerged—in an unfortunate moment for himself—from a door with a tray of coffee cups. It was the terrace of the casino, if Bunny had known it, which he did not.

The waiter caught both Bunny's feet with the back of his neck, plunged forward in great surprise, and crashed. He rolled in coffee and smashed cups and, and roared.

People were on their feet on all sides. There was a roar of voices, in French and English. Bunny dropped:

The balloon shot away as he dropped, once more relieved of weight and given a new lease of life. It sailed away on the wind over the roof of the casino, vanished from Bunny's eyes and Bunny's knowledge and, and where it finally came down, or whether it ever came down at all, never knew and never cared.

Bunny knew where he came down himself— on a coffee-table, which crumpled under him and landed him on the terrace in a sitting posture. He sat and gasped for breath. He had landed at last.

People gathered round him in a staring circle. The man who had been drinking coffee at the crumpled table, and who had had a narrow escape of being crumpled himself, spoke in English.

“You thundering young fool, what sort of a game do you call this?”

“Oh crumbs !” said Bunny.

French voices buzzed round him, in every tone of astonishment. Through the excited circle a man in uniform pushed his way. Way was made for him, with the respect that in France a uniform always commands.

It was a gendarme. He stopped in front of Bunny, and stared at him.

“Vous arrivez d'Angleterre?” he demanded.

“Eh?” said Bunny. He stood up, made a mental effort, and grasped the question.

“Yes; I've arrived from England,” he answered.

“You young ass !” exclaimed the man whose table Bunny had wrecked, and Bunny glanced at him. He saw a rather tall, slim, well-dressed man, with a thin, keen face. “The bobby doesn't understand you.”

“Is ha a bobby?” asked Bunny.

“Yes—a gendarme.”

“Ecoutez !” said the gendarme, tapping money and on the shoulder. “Vous venez ici d’Angleterre, n’est ce-pas ?”

“Say oui, you young ass !” said the Englishman.

“Oui !” said Bunny. “Yes, old bean. Oni! Oui! Ouit”

“Montrez votre passeport, alors !”

‘ The bobby wants to see your passport, kid,” said the tall Englishman.

“Oh, my hat!” said Bunny. “I haven’t any passport, old thing . I hadn’t time to get a passport before I was blown away in that balloon !”

The tall Englishman intervened.

“You were blown away in that balloon, kid?”

“Yes,” said Bunny, “from Margate.”

“It’s clear that there’s such a thing as fool’s luck,” said the Englishman.

“Leave this to me—I’ll explain to the gendarme.”

He turned to the officer, and fluent French streamed from him. Fluent French streamed also from the gendarme. Alternately they poured out words. And then the Englishman raised his hat, and the gendarme saluted, and with mutual smiles and politeness they parted.

Then the Englishman turned to Bunny again and scanned his chubby face with a very curious look.

“I’ve made it all right for you,” he said. “Know anybody in Boulogne?”

° No.”

“ Then you’re stranded here?”

“Yes.”

“Then you’d better come with me.”

And Bunny, as there seemed nothing else to be done, was of the same opinion. He went!

THE END