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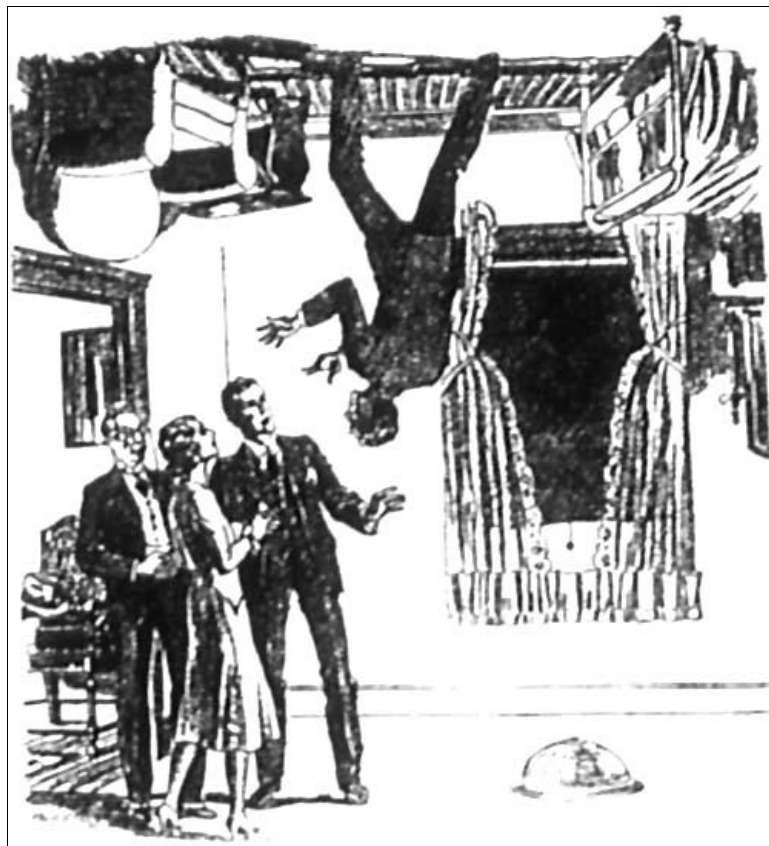
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"Wonderful! The World's Unparalleled Upside-Down Man!"

Disowned

By Victor Endersby

The sky sagged downward, bellying blackly with a sudden summer rain, giving me a vision of catching my train in sodden clothing after the short-cut across the fields, which I was taking in company with my brother Tristan and his fiancée.

The tragic misadventure of a man to whom the sky became an appalling abyss, drawing him ever upward.

The sullen atmosphere ripped apart with an electric glare; our ears quivered to the throbbing sky, while huge drops, jarred loose from the air by the thunder-impact, splattered sluggishly, heavily, about us. Little breezes swept out from the storm center, lifting the undersides of the long grass leaves to view in waves of lighter green. I complained peevishly.

"Ah, mop up!" said Tristan. "You've plenty of time, and there's the big oak! It's as dry under there as a cave!"

"I think that'll be fun!" twittered Alice. "To wait out a thunder-storm under a tree!"

"Under a tree?" I said. "Hardly! I'm not hankering to furnish myself as an exhibit on the physiological effects of a lightning stroke—no, sir!"

"Rats!" said Tristan. "All that's a fairy-tale—trees being dangerous in a thunder-storm!"

The rain now beat through our thin summer clothing, as Tristan seized Alice's hand and towed her toward the spreading shelter. I followed them at first, then began to lag with an odd unwillingness. I had been only half serious in my objection, but all at once that tree exercised an odd repulsion on me; an imaginary picture of the electric fluid coursing through my shriveling nerve-channels grew unpleasantly vivid.

Suddenly I knew I was not going under that tree. I stopped dead, pulling my hat brim down behind to divert the rivulet coursing down the back of my neck, calling to the others in a voice rather cracked from embarrassment. They looked back at me curiously, and Alice began to twit me, standing in the rain, while Tristan desired to know whether we thought we were a pair of goldfish; in his estimation, we might belong to the piscine tribe all right, but not to that decorative branch thereof. To be frank, he used the term "suckers." Feeling exceptionally foolish, I planted myself doggedly in the soaking grass as Alice turned to dash for the tree.

Then the thing happened; the thing which to this hour makes the fabric of space with its unknown forces seem an insecure and eery garment for the body of man. Over the slight rise beyond the tree, as the air crackled, roared and shook under the thunder-blasts, there appeared an object moving in long, leisurely bounds, drifting before the wind, and touching the ground lightly each time. It was about eighteen inches in diameter, globular, glowing with coruscating fires, red, green, and yellow; a thing of unearthly and wholly sinister beauty.

Alice poised with one foot half raised, and shrieked at Tristan, half terrified, half elated at the sight. He wheeled quickly, there under the tree, and slowly backed away as the thing drifted in to keep him company in his shelter. We could not see his face, but there was a stiffness to his figure indicating something like fear. Suddenly things I had read rose into my memory. This was one of those objects variously called "fire-balls," "globe-lightning," "meteors," and the like.

I also recalled the deadly explosive potencies said to be sometimes possessed by such entities, and called out frantically:

"Tristan! Don't touch it! Get away quickly, but don't disturb the air!"

He heard me and, as the object wavered about in the comparative calm under the tree, drifting closer to him, started to obey. But it suddenly approached his face, and seized with a reckless terror, he snatched off his hat and batted at it as one would at a pestilent bee. Instantly there was a blinding glare, a stunning detonation, and a violent air-wave which threw me clear off my feet and to the ground. I sat up blindly with my vision full of opalescent lights and my ears ringing, unable to hear, see, or think.

Slowly my senses came back; I saw Alice struggling upright in the grass before me. She cast a quick glance toward the tree, then, still on her knees, covered her face and shuddered. For a long time, it seemed, I gazed toward the tree without sight conveying any mental effect whatever. Quite aside from my dazed state, the thing was too bizarre; it gave no foothold to experience for the erection of understanding.

My brother's body lay, or hung, or rested—what term could describe it?—with his stomach across the *under* side of a large limb a few feet above where he had stood. He was doubled up like a hairpin, his abdomen pressed tightly up against this bough, and his arms, legs and head extended stiffly, straightly, skyward.

Getting my scattered faculties and discoordinate limbs together, I made my way to the tree, the gruesome thought entering my mind that Tristan's body had been transfixed by some downward-pointing snag as it was blown up against the limb, and that the strange stiffness of his limbs was due to some ghastly sudden rigor mortis brought on by electric shock. Dazed with horror and grief, I reached up to his clothing and pulled gently, braced for the shock of the falling body. It remained immovable against the bough. A harder tug brought no results either. Gathering up all my courage against the vision of the supposed snag tearing its rough length out of the poor flesh, I leaped up, grasping the body about chest and hips, and hung. It came loose at once, without any tearing resistance such as I had expected, but manifesting a strong elastic pull upward, as though some one were pulling it with a rope; as I dropped back to the ground with it, the upward resistance remained unchanged. Nearly disorganized entirely by this phenomenon, it occurred to me that his belt or some of his clothing was still caught, and I jerked sidewise to pull it loose. It did not loosen, but I found myself suddenly out from under the tree, my brother dragging upward from my arms until my toes almost left the ground. And there was obviously no connection between him and the tree—or between him and anything else but myself, for that matter. At this I went weak; my arms relaxed despite my will, and an incredible fact happened: I found the body sliding skyward through my futile grasp. Desperately I got my hands clasped together about his wrist, this last grip almost lifting me from the earth; his legs and remaining arm streamed fantastically skyward. Through the haze which seemed to be finally drowning my amazed and tortured soul, I knew that my fingers were slipping through one another, and that in another instant my brother would be gone. Gone—where? Why and how?

There was a sudden shriek, and the impact of a frantic body against mine, as Alice, whom I had quite forgotten, made a skyward running jump and clasped the arm frantically to her bosom with both her own. With vast relief, I loosed my cramped fingers—only to feel her silken garments begin to slide skyward against my cheek. It was more instinct than sense which made me clutch at her legs. God, had I not done that! As it was, I held both forms anchored with only a slight pull, waiting dumbly for the next move—quite *non compos* by this time, I think.

"Quick, Jim!" she shrieked. "Quick, under the tree! I can't hold him long!"

Very glad indeed to be told what to do, I obeyed. Under her direction we got the body under a low limb and wedged up against it, where with our feet both now on the ground, we balanced it with little effort. Feverishly, once more at her initiative, we took off our belts and strapped it firmly; whereupon we collapsed in one another's arms, shuddering, beneath it.

The blasé reader may consider that we here manifested the characters of sensitive weaklings. But let him undergo the like! The supernatural, or seemingly so, has always had power to chill the hottest blood. And here was an invisible horror reaching out of the sky for its prey, without any of the ameliorating trite features which would temper an encounter with the alleged phenomena of ghostland.

For a time we sat under that fatal tree listening to the dreary drench of rain pouring off the leaves, quivering nerve-shaken to the thunderclaps. Lacking one another, we had gone mad; it was the beginning of a mutual dependence in the face of the unprecedented, which was to grow to something greater during the bizarre days to follow.

There was no need of words for each of us to know that the other was struggling frantically for a little rational light on the *outré* catastrophe in which we were entangled.

It never once occurred to us that my brother might still be alive—until a long shuddering groan sounded above us. In combined horror and joy we sprang up. He was twisting weakly in the belts, muttering deliriously. We unfastened him and pulled him to the ground, where I sat on his knees while she pressed down on his shoulders, and so kept him recumbent, both horrified at the insistent lift of his body under us.

She kissed him frantically and stroked his cheeks, I feeling utterly without resource. He grew stronger, muttered wildly, and his eyes opened, staring upward through the tree limbs. He became silent, and stiffened, gazing fixedly upward with a horror in his wild blue gaze which chilled our blood. What did he see there—what dire other-world thing dragging him into the depths of space? Shortly his eyes closed, and he ceased to mutter.

I took his legs under my arms—the storm was clearing now—and we set out for home with gruesomely buoyant steps, the insistent pull remaining steady. Would it increase? We gazed upward with terrified eyes, becoming calmer by degree as conditions remained unchanged.

When the country house loomed near across the last field, Alice faltered:

"Jim, we can't take him right in like this!"

I stopped.

"Why not?"

"Oh, because—because—it's too ridiculously awful. I don't know just how to say it—oh, can't you see it yourself?"

In a dim way, I saw it. No cultured person cares to be made a center of public interest, unless on grounds of respect. To come walking in in this fashion, buoyed balloon-like by the body of this loved one, and before the members of a frivolous, gaping house party—ah, even I could imagine the mingled horror and derision, the hysterics among the women, perhaps. Nor would it stop there. Rumors—and heaven only knows what distortions such rumors might undergo, having their source in the incredible—would range our social circle like wildfire. And the newspapers, for our families are established and known—no, it wouldn't go.

I tied Tristan to a stile and called up Jack Briggs, our host, from a neighboring house, explained briefly that Tristan had met with an accident, asked him to say nothing, and explained where to bring the machine. In ten minutes he had maneuvered the heavy sedan across the rough wet fields. And then we had another problem on our hands: to let Jack into what had happened without shocking him into uselessness. It was not until we got him to test Tristan's eery buoyancy with his own hands that we were able to make him understand the real nature of our problem. And after that, his comments remained largely gibberish for some time. However, he was even quicker than we were to see the need for secrecy—he had vivid visions of the political capital which opposing newspapers would make of any such occurrence at his party—and so we arranged a plan. According to which we drove to the back of the house, explained to the curious who rushed out that Tristan had been injured by a stroke of lightning, and rushed the closely wrapped form up to his room, feeling a great relief at having something solid between us and the sky. While Jack went downstairs to dismiss the party as courteously as possible, Alice and I tied my brother to the bed with trunk straps. Whereupon the bed and patient plumped lightly but decisively against the ceiling as soon as we removed our weight. While we gazed upward open mouthed, Jack returned. His faculties were recovering better than ours, probably because his affections were not so involved, and he gave the answer at once.

"Ah, hell!" said he. "Pull the damn bed down and spike it to the floor!" This we did. Then we held a short but intense consultation. Whatever else might be the matter, obviously Tristan was suffering severely from shock and, for all we knew, maybe from partial electrocution. So we called up Dr. Grosnoff in the nearest town.

Grosnoff after our brief but disingenuous explanation, threw off the bed covers in a business-like way, then straightened up grimly.

"And may I ask," he said with sarcastic politeness, "since when a strait-jacket has become first-aid for a case of lightning stroke?"

"He was delirious," I stammered.

"Delirious my eye! He's as quiet as a lamb. And you've tied him down so tightly that the straps are cutting right into him! Of all the—the—" He stopped, evidently feeling words futile, and before we could make an effective attempt to stop him, whipped out a knife and cut the straps. Tristan's unfortunate body instantly crashed against the ceiling, smashing the lathing and plaster, and remaining half embedded in the ruins. A low cry of pain rose from Alice. Dr. Grosnoff staggered to a chair and sat down, his eyes fixed on the ceiling with a steady stare—the odd caricature of a man coolly studying an interesting phenomenon.

My brother appeared to be aroused by the shock, struggling about in his embedment, and finally sat up. Up? *Down*, I mean. Then he *stood, on the ceiling*, and began to walk! His nose had been bruised by the impact, and I noticed with uncomprehending wonder that the blood moved slowly *upward* over his lip. He saw the window, and walked across the ceiling to it upside down. There he pushed the top of the window down and leaned out, gazing up into the sky with some sort of fascination. Instantly he crouched on the ceiling, hiding his eyes, while the house rang with shriek after shriek of mortal terror, speeding the packing of the parting guests. Alice seized my arm, her fingers cutting painfully into the flesh.

"Jim," she screamed. "I see it now—don't you? His gravity's all changed around—he weighs *up*! He thinks the sky's *under* him!"

The human mind is so constructed that merely to name a thing oddly smooths its unwonted outlines to the grasp of the mind; the conception of a simple reversal of my brother's weight, I think, saved us all from the padded cell. That made it so commonplace, such an everyday sort of thing, likely to happen to anybody. The ordinary phenomenon of gravitation is no whit more mysterious, in all truth, than that which we were now witnessing—but we are born to *it!*

Dr. Grosnoff recovered in a manner which showed considerable caliber.

"Well," he grunted, "that being the case, we'd best be looking after him. Nervous shock, possible electric shock and electric burns, psychasthenia—that's going to be a long-drawn affair—bruises, maybe a little concussion, and possibly internal injury—that was equivalent to a ten-foot unbroken fall flat on his stomach, and I'll never forgive myself if... Get me a chair!"

With infinite care and reassuring words, the big doctor with our help pulled my brother down, the latter frantically begging us not to let him "fall" again. Holding him securely on the bed and trying to reassure him, Grosnoff said:

"Straps and ropes won't do. His whole weight hangs in them—they'll cut him unmercifully. Take a sheet, tie the corners with ropes, and let him lie in that like a hammock!"

It took many reassurances as to the strength of this arrangement before Tristan was at comparative peace. Dr. Grosnoff effected an examination by slacking off the ropes until Tristan lay a couple of feet clear of the bed, then himself lay on the mattress face up, prodding the patient over.

The examination concluded, he informed us that Tristan's symptoms were simply those of a general physical shock such as would be expected in the case of a man standing close to the center of an explosion, though from our description of the affair he could not understand how my brother had survived at all. The glimmering of an explanation of this did not come until a long time afterward. So far as physical condition was concerned, Tristan might expect to recover fully in a matter of weeks. Mentally—the doctor was not so sure. The boy had gone through a terrible experience, and one which was still continuing—might continue no one knew how long. We were, said the doctor, up against a trick played by the great Sphinx, Nature, and one which, so far as he knew, had never before taken place in the history of all mankind.

"There is faintly taking shape in my mind," he said, "the beginning of a theory as to how it came about. But it is a theory having many ramifications and involving much in several lines of science, with most of which I am but little acquainted. For the present I have no more to say than that if a theory of causation can be worked out, it will be the first step toward cure. But—it may be the only step. Don't build hopes!"

Looking Alice and me over carefully, he gave us each a nerve sedative and departed, leaving us with the feeling that here was a man of considerably wider learning than might be expected of a small-town doctor. In point of fact, we learned that this was the case. The specialist has been described as a "man who knows more and more about less and less." In Dr. Grosnoff's mind, the "less and less" outweighed the "more and more."

Tristan grew stronger physically; mentally, he was intelligent enough to help us and himself by keeping his mind as much as possible off his condition, sometimes by sheer force of will. Meantime, Dr. Grosnoff, realizing that his patient could not be kept forever tied in bed, had assisted me in preparing for his permanent care at home. The device was simple; we had just taken his room, remodeled the ceiling as a floor, and fitted it with furniture upside down. Most of the problems involved in this were fairly simple. The matter of a bath rather stumped us for a while, until we hit upon a shower. The jets came up from under Tristan's feet, from the point of view of his perceptions; he told us that one of the strangest of all his experiences was to see the waste water swirl about in the pan *over* his head, and being sucked up the drain as though drawn by some mysterious magnet.

My brother and I shared a flat alone, so there was no servant problem to deal with. But he was going to need care as well as companionship, and I had to earn my living. For Alice, it was a case where the voice of the heart chimed with that of necessity; and I was best man at perhaps the weirdest marriage ceremony which ever took place on this earth. Held down in bed with the roped sheet, all betraying signs carefully concealed, Tristan was married to Alice by an unsuspecting dominie who took it all for one of those ordinary, though romantic sick-bed affairs.

From the first, Tristan felt better and more secure in his special quarters, and was now able to move about quite freely within his limits; though such were his mental reactions that for his comfort we had to refinish the floor to look like a plaster ceiling, to eliminate as far as possible the upside-down suggestions left in the room, and to keep the windows closely shaded. I soon found that the sight of me, or any one else, walking upside down—to him—was very painful; only in the case of Alice did other considerations remove the unpleasantness.

Little by little the accumulation of experience brought to my mind the full and vivid horror of what the poor lad had suffered and was suffering. Why, when he had looked out of that window into the sky, he was looking *down* into a bottomless abyss, from which he was sustained only by the frail plaster and planking under his feet! The whole earth, with its trees and buildings, was suspended over his head, seemingly about to fall at any moment with him into the depths; the sun at noon glared *upward* from the depths of an inferno, lighting from *below* the somber earth

suspended overhead! Thus the warm comfort of the sun, which has cheered the heart of man from time immemorial, now took on an unearthly, unnatural semblance. I learned that he could never quite shake off the feeling that the houses were anchored into the earth, suspended only by the embedment of their foundations in the soil; that trees were suspended from their roots, which groaned with the strain; that soil was held to the bedrock only by its cohesion. He even dreaded lest, during storms, the grip of the muddy soil be loosened, and the fields fall into the blue! It was only when clasped tight in Alice's arms that the horrors wholly left him.

All the reasoning we might use on his mind, or that he himself could bring to bear on it, was useless. We found that the sense of up and down is ineradicably fixed by the balancing apparatus of the body.

Meanwhile, his psychology was undergoing strange alterations; the more I came to appreciate the actual conditions he was living under, the more apparent it seemed to me that he must have a cast-iron mental stamina to maintain sanity at all. But he not only did that; he began to recover normal strength, and to be irked unbearably by his constant confinement. So it came about that he began to venture a little at a time from his room, wandering about on the ceiling of the rest of the house. However, he could not yet look out of windows, but sidled up to them with averted face to draw any blinds that were up.

As he grew increasingly restless, we all felt more and more that the thing could not continue as it was; some way out must be found. We had many a talk with Grosnoff, at last inducing him to speak about the still half-formed theory which he had dimly conceived at the first.

"For a good many decades," he said, "there have been a few who regarded the close analogies between magnetism and gravitational action as symptomatic of a concealed identity between them. Einstein's 'Field Theory' practically proves it on the mathematical side. Now it is obvious that if gravitation is a form of magnetism—and if so it belongs to another plane of magnetic forces than that which we know and use—then the objects on a planet must have the opposite polarity from that of the planet itself. Since the globe is itself a magnet, with a positive and negative pole, its attraction power is not that of a magnet on any plane, because then the human race would be divided into two species, each polarized in the sign opposite to its own pole; when an individual of either race reached the equator, he would become weightless, and when he crossed it, would be repelled into space."

"Lord!" I said. "There would be a plot for one of your scientific fiction writers!"

"I can present you with another," said Dr. Grosnoff. "How do we know whether another planet would have the opposite sign to our own bodies?"

"Well," I chuckled, "they'll find that out soon enough when the first interplanetary expedition tries to land on on of 'em!"

"Hmf!" grunted the medico. "That'll be the least of their troubles!"

"But you said the polarity couldn't be that of a magnet; then what?"

"Don't you remember the common pith ball of your high school physics days? An accumulation of positive electricity repels an accumulation of negative—if indeed we can correctly use 'accumulation' for a negativity—and it is my idea that the earth is the container of a gigantic accumulation of this meta—or hyper-electricity which we are postulating; and our bodies contain a charge of the opposite sign."

"But, Doctor, the retention of a charge of static electricity by a body in the presence of one of the opposite sign requires insulation of the containing bodies; for instance, lightning is a breaking down of the air insulation between the ground and a cloud. In our case we are constantly in contact with the earth, and the charges would equalize."

"Please bear in mind, Jim, that we are not talking about electricity as now handled by man, but about some form of it as yet hypothetical. We don't know what kind of insulation it would require. We may be *constitutionally* insulated."

"And you think the fire-ball broke down that insulation by the shock to Tristan's system?" I asked. The logic of the thing was shaping up hazily, but unmistakably. "But, then, why don't we frequently see people kiting off the earth as the result of explosions?"

"*How do you know they haven't?* Don't we have plenty of mysterious disappearances as the result of explosions, and particularly, strangely large numbers of missing in a major war?"

My blood chilled. The world was beginning to seem a pretty awful place.

Grosnoff saw my disturbance, and placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder.

"I'm afraid," he said, smiling, "that I rather yielded to the temptation to get a rise out of you. That suggestion *might* be unpleasantly true under special circumstances. But I particularly have an eye out for the special capacities of that weird and rare phenomenon, the fire-ball. It isn't impossible that the energy of the fire-ball went into the re-polarization rather than into a destructive concussion—hence Tristan's escape."

"You mean its effect is *qualitatively* different from that of any other explosion?"

"It may be so. It is known to be an electric conglomeration of some kind—but that's all."

Meantime circumstances were not going well with us; the financial burden of Tristan's support, added to the strain of the situation, was becoming overwhelming. Tristan knew this and felt it keenly; this brought him to a momentous decision. He looked down at us from the ceiling one day with an expression of unusual tenseness, and announced that he was going out permanently, and to take part in the world again.

"I've gotten now so that I can bear to look out of the windows quite well. It's only a matter of time and practise until I can stand the open. After all, it isn't any worse than being a steel worker or steeplejack. Even if the worst came to the worst, I'd rather be burst open by the frozen vacuum of interstellar space than to splash upon a sidewalk before an admiring populace—and people do *that* every day!"

Dr. Grosnoff, who was present, expressed great delight. His patient was coming along well mentally, at least. Alice sat down, trembling.

"But, good Lord, Tristan," I said, "what possible occupation could you follow?"

"Oh, I've brooded over that for weeks, and I've crossed the Rubicon. I think we're a long way past such petty things as personal pride. Did it ever occur to you that what from one point of view is a monstrous catastrophe, from another is an asset?"

"What in the dickens are you talking about?" I asked.

"I'm talking about the—the—" he gulped painfully—"the stage."

Alice wrung her hands, crying bitterly:

"Wonderful! Splendid! Tristan LeHuber, The World's Unparalleled Upside-Down Man! He Doesn't Know Whether He's On His Head Or His Heels. He's Always Up In The Air About Something, But You Can't Upset Him! Vaudeville To-night—The Bodongo Brothers, Brilliant Burmese Balancers—Arctic Annie, the Prima Donna of Sealdom, and Tristan LeHuber, The Balloon Man—He Uses An Anchor For A Parachute!" At last indeed the LeHuber family will have arrived sensationally in the public eye!

"There are," Alice raved, "two billion people on the earth to-day. Counting three generations per century, there have been about twelve billion of us in the last two hundred years. And out of all those, and all the millions and billions before that, we had to be picked for this loathsome cosmic joke—just little us for all that distinction! Why, oh, why? If our romance *had* to be spoiled by a tragedy smeared across the billboards of notoriety, why couldn't it have been in some decent, human sort of way? Why this ghastly absurdity?"

"From time immemorial," said Grosnoff, "there have been men who sought to excite the admiration of their fellows, to get themselves worshiped, to dominate, to collect perquisites, by developing some wonderful personal power or another. From Icarus on down, levitation or its equivalent has been a favorite. The ecstasies of medieval times, the Hindu Yogis, even the day-dreaming schoolboy, have had visions of floating in air before the astounding multitudes by a mere act of will. The frequency of 'flying dreams' may indicate such a thing as a possibility in nature. Tradition says many have accomplished it. If so, it was by a reversal of polarity through *an act of will*. Those who did it—Yogis—believed in successive lives on earth. If they were right about the one, why not the other? Suppose one who had developed that power of will, carried it to another birth, where it lay dormant in the subconscious until set off uncontrolled by some special shock?"

Alice paled.

"Then Tristan might have been—"

"He might. Then again, maybe my brain is addled by this thing. In any case, the moral is: don't monkey with Nature! She's particular."

Tristan's vaudeville scheme was not as easily realized as said. The first manager to whom we applied was stubbornly skeptical in spite of Tristan's appearance standing upside down in stilts heavily weighted at the ground ends; and even after his resistance was broken down in a manner

which left him gasping and a little woozy, began to reason unfavorably in a hard-headed way. Audiences, he explained, were off levitation acts. Too old. No matter what you did, they'd lay it to concealed wires, and yawn. Even if you called a committee from the audience, the committee itself would merely be sore at not being able to solve the trick; the audience would consider the committee a fake or merely dumb. And all that would take too much time for an act of that kind.

"Oh, yeh, I know! It's got me goin', all right. But I can't think like me about this sorta thing. I got to think like the audience does—or go outa business!"

After which solid but unprofitable lesson in psychology, we dropped the last vestige of pride and tried a circus sideshow. But the results were similar.

"Nah, the rubes don't wear celluloid collars any more. Ya can't slip any wire tricks over on 'em!"

"But he can do this in a big topless tent, or even out in an open field, if you like."

"Nope—steel rods run up the middle of a rope has been done before."

"Steel rods in a rope which the people see uncoil from the ground in front of their eyes?"

"Well, they'd think of somethin' else, then. I'm tellin' ya, it won't go! Sure, people like to be fooled, but they want it to be done *right!*"

"Yes!" I sneered. "And a hell of a lot of people have fooled themselves *right* about this matter, too!"

He looked at me curiously.

"Say, have ya really got somethin' up y'r sleeve?"

"You'd be surprised!"

Thus he grudgingly gave us a chance for a tryout; and he was surprised indeed. But on thinking it over, he decided like the vaudeville man.

"Listen!" said Tristan suddenly, in a voice of desperation. "I'll do a parachute jump into the sky, and land on an airplane!"

"Tristan!" shrieked Alice, in horror.

The circus man nearly lost his cigar, then bit it in two.

"Sa-ay—what the—I'll call that right now! I'll get ya the plane and chute if y'll put up a deposit to cover the cost. If ya do it, we'll have the best money in the tents; if ya don't, I keep the money!"

"If I don't," said Tristan distinctly, "I'll have not the slightest need for the money."

But the airplane idea was out; we could think of no way for him to make the landing on such a swiftly-moving vehicle.

Again Alice solved it.

"If you absolutely must break my heart and put me in a sanitarium," she sobbed, "get a blimp!"

Of course! And that is what we did—on the first attempt coming unpleasantly close to doing just that to Alice.

The blimp captain was obviously skeptical, and betrayed signs of a peeve at having his machine hired for a hoax; but money was money and he agreed to obey our instructions meticulously. His tone was perfunctory, however, despite my desperate attempts to impress him with the seriousness of the matter; and that nonchalance of his came near to having dire consequences.

The captain was supplied with a sort of boat-hook with instructions to steer his course to reach the parachute ropes as it passed him on its upward flight. And he was seriously warned of the fact that, after the chute reached two or three thousand feet, its speed would increase because of the rarefaction of the air; and in case of a miss, it would become constantly harder to overtake. These directions he received with a scornful half smile; obviously he never expected to see the chute open.

We got all set, the blimp circling overhead, Tristan upside down in his seat suspended skyward, a desperately grim look on his face; and Alice almost in collapse. We were all spared the agony of several hundred feet of unbroken fall; the parachute was open on the ground, and rose at a leisurely speed, but too fast at that for the comfort of any of us. I don't think the wondering crowd and the dumbfounded circus people ever saw a stranger sight than that chute drifting upward into the blue. We heard nothing of "hidden wires," then or ever after! The white circle grew pitifully small and forlorn against the fathomless azure; and suddenly we noticed that the blimp seemed to be merely drifting with the wind, making no attempt to get under—or over—Tristan. Our hearts labored painfully. Had the engines broken down? Alice buried her face against my sleeve with a moan.

"I can't look ... tell me!"

I tried to—in a voice which I vainly tried to make steady.

All at once the blimp went into frenzied activity—we learned afterwards that its crew of three, captain included, had been so completely paralyzed by the reality of the event that they had forgotten what they were there for until almost too late. Now we heard the high note of its overdriven engines as it rolled and rocked toward the rising chute. For a moment the white spot showed against its gray side, then tossed and pitched wildly in the wake of the propellers as, driven too hastily and frenziedly, the ship overshot its mark and the captain missed his grab.

I could only squeeze Alice tightly and choke as the aerial objects parted company and the blue gap between them widened. Instantly, avid to retrieve his mistake, the captain swung his craft in a wild careen around and a spiral upward. But he tried to do too many things at a time—make too much altitude and headway both at once. The blimp pitched steeply upward to a standstill, barely moving toward the parachute. Quickly it sloped downward again and gathered speed, nearing the chute, and then making a desperate zoom upward on its momentum. Mistake number three! He had waited too long before using his elevator; and the chute fled hopelessly away just ahead of the uptilted nose of the blimp. I could only moan, and Alice made no sound or movement.

Next we saw the blimp's water ballast streaming earthward in the sun, and it was put into a long, steady spiral in pursuit of the parachute, whose speed—or so it seemed to my agonized gaze—was now noticeably on the increase. The altitude seemed appallingly great; the blimp's ceiling, I knew, was only about twenty thousand; and my brother, even if not frozen to death by that time, would be traveling far faster than any climbing speed the blimp could make; as his fall increased in speed, the climb of the bag decreased.

At last, with a quiver of renewed hope, I saw the blimp narrowing down its spirals—it was overtaking! Smaller and smaller grew both objects—but so did the gap between them! At last they merged, the tiny white dot and the little gray minnow. In one long agony I waited to see whether the gap would open out again. Lord of Hosts—the blimp was slanting steeply downward; the parachute had vanished!

Then at last I paid some attention to the totally limp form in my arms; and a few minutes later, amid an insane crowd, a pitifully embarrassed and nerve-shaken dirigible navigator was helping me lift my heavily-wrapped, shivering brother from the gondola, while the mechanics turned their attention to the overdriven engines and wracked framing. Did I say "helping me lift?" Such is the force of habit—but verily, a new nomenclature would have to come into being to deal adequately with such a life as my poor brother's!

Tristan seized my hand.

"Jim!" he said through chattering teeth, "I'm cured—cured of the awful fear! That second time he missed, I just gave up entirely; I didn't care any longer. And then somehow I felt such a sense of peace and freedom—there weren't any upside-down things around to torture me, no sense of insecurity. I just was, in a great blue quiet; it wasn't like falling at all; no awful shock to meet, no sickness or pain—just quietly floating along from Here to There, with no particular dividing line between, anywhere. The cold hurt, of course, but somehow it didn't seem to matter, and was getting better when they caught me. But now—I can do things you never even imagined!"

Thus began my brother's real public career—he had arrived. After that he was able to name his own compensation, and shortly during his tours, began to sport a private dirigible of his own, which he often used for jumps between stands. He told me jokingly that it was very fitting transportation for him, as his hundred and sixty pound lift saved quite a bit of expense for helium!

He developed an astonishing set of tricks. After the jump, he would arrive on the field suspended above the dirigible doing trapeze tricks. After that, in the show tent, he would go through some more of them, with a few hair raisers of his own invention, one of which consisted of apparently letting go the rope by accident and shooting skyward with a wild shriek, only to be caught at the end of a fine, especially woven piano wire cable attached to a spring safety belt, the cable being in turn fastened into the end of the rope.

Needless to say, Alice was unable to wax enthusiastic about any of these feats, though she loyally accompanied him in his travels. She would sit in the tent gazing at him with a horrible fascination, and month by month grew thinner and more strained. Tristan felt her stress deeply; but was making money so fast that we all felt that in a short time, if not able to finance the discovery of a cure, at least he could retire and live a safer life. And he found his ideal haven of rest—in a Pennsylvania coal mine! Thus, the project grew in his mind, of buying an abandoned mine and fitting it with comfortable and spacious inverted quarters, environed with fungus gardens, air ferns and the like, plants which could be trained to grow upside down; he emerging

only for necessary sun baths.

As time went on, I really grew accustomed to the situation, though seeing less and less of Tristan and Alice; during summers they were on tour, and in winter were quartered in Tristan's coal mine, which had become a reality.

So one summer day when the circus stopped at a small town where I was taking vacation, I was overjoyed at the opportunity to see them. I timed myself to get there as the afternoon performance was over, but arrived a little early, and went on into the untopped tent.

Tristan waved an inverted greeting at me from his poise on his trapeze, and I watched for a few minutes. There was an odd mood about the crowd that day, largely due to a group of loud-mouthed hill-billies from the back country—the sort which is so ignorant as to live in perpetual fear of getting "something slipped over," and so disbelieves everything it is told, looking for something ulterior behind every exterior. Having duly exposed to their own satisfaction the strong man's "wooden dumbbells," the snake charmer's rubber serpents, the fat woman's pillows, and the bearded lady's false whiskers (I don't know what they did about the living skeleton), these fellows were now gaping before Tristan's platform, and growing hostile as their rather inadequate brains failed to cook up any damaging explanation.

"Yah!" yelled a long-necked, flap-eared youth, suddenly. "He's got an iron bar in that rope!" They had come too late to see the parachute drop. Tristan grinned and pulled himself down the rope, which of course fell limp behind him. At this, the crowd jeered and booed the too-hasty youth, who became so resentfully abusive of Tristan that one of the attendants pushed him out of the tent. As he passed me, I caught fragments of wrathful words:

"Wisht I had a ... Show'm whether it's a fake...."

Tristan closed his act by dropping full-length to the end of his invisible wire, then pulled himself down, got into his stilts, and was unfastening the belt, when the manager rushed in with a request that he repeat, for the benefit of a special party just arrived on a delayed train.

"Go on and look at the animals, old man." Tristan called to me. "I'll be with you in about half an hour!"

I strolled out idly, meeting on the way the flap-eared youth, who seemed bent on making his way back into the tent, wearing a mingled air of furtiveness, of triumph, and anticipation. Wondering casually just what kind of fool the lad was planning to make of himself next, I wandered on toward the main entrance—only to be stopped by an appalling uproar behind me. There was a raucous, gurgling shriek of mortal terror; the loud composite "O-o-o!" of a shocked or astonished crowd; a set of fervent curses directed at some one; loud confused babbling, and then a woman's voice raised in a seemingly endless succession of hysterical shrieks. Thinking that an animal had gotten loose, or something of that kind, I wheeled. Unmistakably the racket came from Tristan's own tent.

Cold dread clutching at my heart, and with lead on my boot soles, I rushed frantically back. At the entrance I was held by a mad onrush of humanity for some moments. When I reached the platform, Tristan was not in sight. Then I noticed the long-necked boy sitting on the platform with his face in his hands, shrieking:

"I didn't mean to! I didn't mean to! Damn it, don't touch me! I thought sure it was a fake!"

I saw a new, glittering jack-knife lying on the platform beside the limp, foot-long stub of Tristan's rope. Slowly, frozenly, I raised my eyes. The blue abyss was traceless of any object....

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