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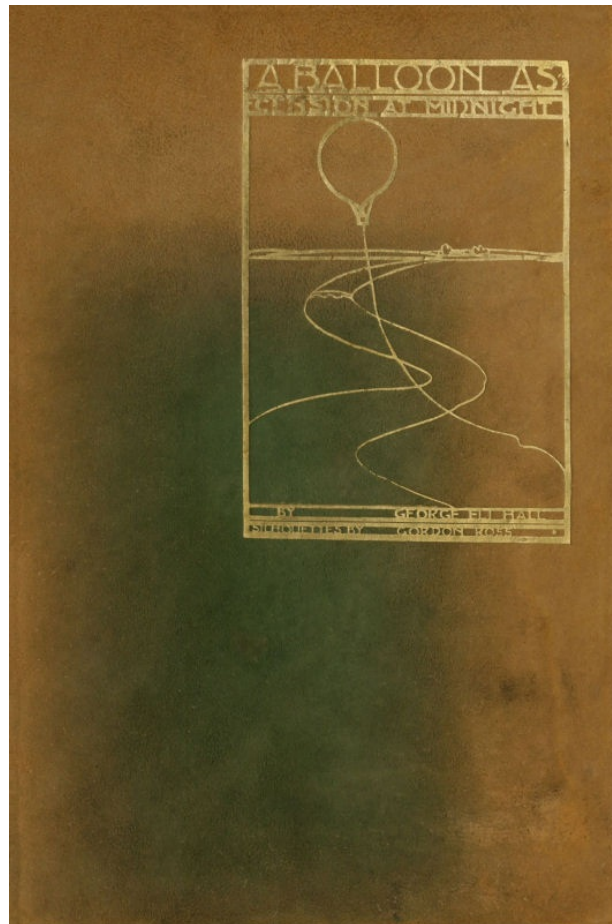
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A BALLOON ASCENSION AT MIDNIGHT ***



A BALLOON ASCENSION AT MIDNIGHT

AUTHOR'S AUTOGRAPH EDITION OF
A BALLOON ASCENSION AT MIDNIGHT

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George S. Hall



“There is no conquest to which the entire human race
aspires more ardently than the Empire of the Air.”

A. SANTOS-DUMONT:
The North American Review.

AEROSTATION

M. Etienne Giraud, l'intrépide aéronaute, et M. Georges Hall de San-Francisco, partis de Paris dans le *Rolla*, out atterri à Cézy, situé à 5 kilomètres de Joigny, après une traversée de dix heures assez mouvementée, quoique sans accident.

Le Figaro.

A BALLOON
ASCENSION AT MIDNIGHT

BY

GEORGE ELI HALL

WITH SILHOUETTES BY
GORDON ROSS



PAUL ELDER AND MORGAN SHEPARD
S a n F r a n c i s c o
1 9 0 2

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by
GEORGE ELI HALL

“Upwards of five hundred thousand two-legged animals without feathers lie around us, in horizontal positions; their heads all in night-caps, and full of the foolishest dreams.”

CARLYLE: *Sartor Resartus*.

I.

WE HAD agreed, my companion and I, that I should call for him at his house, after dinner, not later than eleven o'clock.

This athletic young Frenchman belongs to a small set of Parisian sportsmen, who have taken up “ballooning” as a pastime.

After having exhausted all the sensations that are to be found in ordinary sports, even those of “automobiling” at a breakneck speed, the members of the “Aéro Club” now seek in the air, where they indulge in all kinds of daring feats, the nerve-racking excitement that they have ceased to find on earth.

I might add that these facts were but vaguely known to me before I had been introduced, by a mutual friend, to this *nouveau siècle* young sportsman, and had accepted his invitation to accompany him in his next aerial voyage.

When we reached the vacant lot at the huge gas works of St. Denis, where our balloon was being inflated, I could not help feeling a bit alarmed at the sight of that little bubble—only a few hundred cubic metres—and the very small basket which were soon to take us up in the air.

All the *éclat*, the ceremonial, and the emotional “good-bys” that usually accompany the “let her go!” of a balloon, were totally lacking when the “Rolla” left the earth. The start was effected in a quiet and business like manner, and the act seemed so natural to the people who were helping us off, that their demeanor on this occasion had a beneficial and soothing effect on my excited nerves.

A few minutes after midnight, when the last little sacks of sand ballast had been hung out over the edge of our wicker-basket, when a final glance had been given to the ropes, the net, the valve, etc.,—with a careless *au revoir* from the foreman of the gas-works, and a parting joke from the *cocher* who had driven us there,—the dark forms, whose hands were holding us down, silently stepped back, and with a gentle and graceful swing the “Rolla” started off on its sixth ascension.

Had we taken with us another small sack of ballast, our balloon could not have left the earth. In other words, its ascensional force was almost balanced by the weight it was expected to carry. After rising a few hundred feet, and finding a cooler current, which slightly condensed the gas, the “Rolla” ceased to ascend. We were met by a gentle breeze from the north west, and began to cross Paris, a couple of hundred yards above the city.

It would take the pen of a Carlyle to describe our mysterious flight over Paris at midnight. The impression was so startling that for an hour we never spoke above a whisper.

Owing to the increasing coolness of the atmosphere, our balloon had a slight, though constant, tendency to descend. But we easily kept our altitude by occasionally throwing overboard a spoonful or two of ballast.

After ascertaining that we would not come in contact with the towers of Notre Dame or the sharp edges of the Eiffel Tower, we decided to keep the same distance, and let the breeze do the rest.

At our feet Paris is breathing, like a monster with a million eyes.

On the right, at the very top of Montmartre, and looming up in the glow that surrounds it, stands the white Basilica of the Sacred Heart, with its colossal marble statue of the Redeemer watching over the city.

The great boulevards roll out in every direction like ribbons of fire; we can hear, as we sail over them, the muffled rumbling of a thousand carriages, and we watch them as they dodge each other in their complicated course.

A cry, a call, from time to time, reaches our ears; but the others are lost in the mighty silence above us.

“There is the Opéra,” whispers the owner, as he points to a square silhouette, bathed in a lake of electric light.

I seem to have no fear, merely the sensation of relief that follows an irrevocable decision; with the feeling that we are tasting a forbidden fruit, breaking some divine and primeval law. All our faculties are concentrated in our eyes, and they feast on this wonderful sight.



"Those dark pits that dot the surface of Paris are gardens," explains the owner, "innumerable private parks; and most Parisians live and die without ever suspecting their existence."

We cross the Place de la Bastille, soaring above the bronze column, with its graceful statue of Liberty, whose useless wings of metal seem childish and a bit ridiculous as we pass on.

A long and purple fissure that cuts the city in twain marks the Seine, long before we reach it. The "Rolla" feels the cool current that rises above the waters. A few handfuls of sand thrown overboard, and we resume our former position.

Our eyes are now accustomed to these weird and unusual effects, and few details of the picture escape us. In the distance another bright spot, Bullier, the students' ball, in the heart of the Latin quarter. That obscure mass beyond must be the Luxembourg and its gardens.

Here we leave the dome of the Panthéon on our right. Below us the lights are gradually thinning out; we are passing over the crowded *faubourgs*, where thousands of poor and tired human beings are resting in sleep.

An ocean of darkness and silence opens up before us; we sail into it. The breeze freshens, and the glowing blaze of Paris soon fades away in the distance.

From now on the minutes drag, in the awful silence of this mysterious night, and every moment is heavy with anxiety. Those hours are endless, really hard to live, until at last the gray dawn steps out of the horizon.

Nature begins to awaken, and, with the first gleam of daylight, slowly the world comes back to life.

The first cry of a quail or the cackle of a pheasant is a delight to our ears. A dog barks and another howls. Lazy and sleepy peasants, leading huge oxen, drag themselves out of their farms, on their way to a hard day's work in the fields. The cocks crow lustily, and, in the distance, from the little town of Nemours, comes the melodious call of a bugle, arousing "Pitou," the French "Tommy Atkins," from his sleep.

The sun drives away the soft gray mist that lingers over the meadows; a few shadows here and there still mark the wooded valleys; but they soon melt away, and a glorious summer morning, in the beautiful land of Burgundy, bursts upon us from every side.

“Oh! qui n’a pas senti son cœur battre plus vite,
A l’heure où sous le ciel l’homme est seul avec Dieu!”

ALF. DE MUSSET: *Le Saule*, IV.

II.

WE ARE now passing over the little hamlet of Uri, and the voice of a cuckoo-clock tells us the hour, as it pipes up in the breeze its five double notes.

“The temperature is very even,” remarks the captain, “and there is no danger of it rising or falling unexpectedly, at least not for an hour or more. We might as well travel with the guide-rope, and skip along close to the earth.”

He slips the line overboard and lowers it carefully to the ground.

The guide-rope, though a mere cable, about two hundred feet in length, is a very delicate accessory to a balloon, and the most important after the anchor. When in operation, one end of the rope is attached to the basket, and a quarter or a fifth of its length is allowed to drag on the surface of the earth, where it regulates automatically the air-ship’s aerostatic equilibrium.

If the balloon has a tendency to fall, an additional portion of the guide-rope drops upon the ground. Instantly the “Rolla” is relieved of that much weight, and soon resumes its former altitude.

On the other hand, should its tendency be to rise, the extra amount of rope that it hauls up with it means for the “Rolla” a few pounds more to carry, and it gradually falls back to its original position.

It has also the serious advantage of saving gas, and sand ballast as well.

“That modest young fellow you met at dinner the other night,” remarks the captain, “uses the guide-rope with great success as part of the steering-gear of his new *aeronef*, the ‘Santos-Dumont V.’ We all expect to hear within a few weeks that Santos-Dumont has solved the great problem of aerial navigation.”

The farmers who can not understand this new method of locomotion are all eager to tug at the guide-rope, thinking we have decided to land.

“*Mais non! Laissez donc!*” shouts the owner; “*nous nous promenons, tout simplement.*”

The children, who are playing scarecrow with the ravenous birds in the orchards, scream with astonishment and delight. An old woman folds her hands over her mouth like a megaphone, and asks:

“*Ou diable allez-vous donc?*”

“*A la lune!*”

“*Ha! Ha! Bon Voyage!*”

A flock of sheep stampedes at the sight of our shadow moving upon the earth, and disappears in a cloud of dust.

We glide peacefully over meadows and swamps, clearing hedges and trees, dragging the guide-rope behind us. As we pass over a lake in the park of an ideal country seat, we see the “Rolla” reflected in the clear waters below.

Even at this moderate height, the farms look like children’s playhouses, with their curly little lambs, their wooden horses, and painted cows; and as we approach a curve on the railroad track, a train puffs by like a mechanical toy, and whistles a friendly salute.

Here the captain calls my attention to a dark line of clouds in the north west.

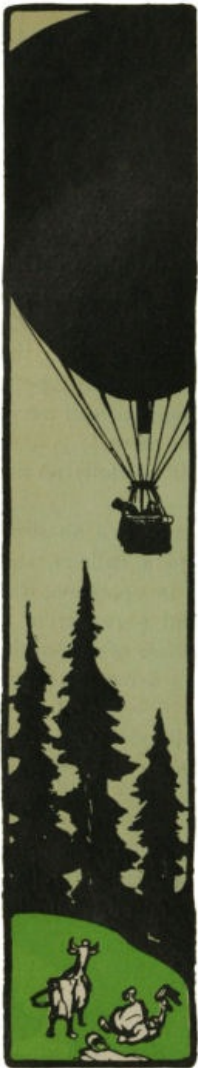
Yesterday’s *Herald* predicted a depression within the next twenty-four hours; evidently a storm is creeping up behind us. But the same wind is driving us on, and we hope to keep out of its reach, even if we have to rise up in the heavens above it.

“If our balloon obeys as it should, we will soon have some fun,” says the captain, as we reach the first trees of a thick forest.

The “Rolla” is so sensitive that by merely hauling in a few yards of the guide-rope, we gently descend on the tops of the trees, lightly skipping from one to the other; we brush by an elm, a poplar, or an ash, and as we pass, pick their fresh green leaves.

This weird performance is fascinating beyond words. I have never heard of a “promenade” on the crest of a forest, and I wonder now and then if I am dreaming.

Such accuracy of movement is only possible with a very small balloon, in the early hours of the day, and with a perfectly even temperature. Of course, it is always dangerous, as a slight mistake would instantly lead to a hopeless disaster.



Suddenly, while crossing a deep ravine, the coolness of the air drags us down. The rocky banks of the torrent are upon us.

As I open my mouth to offer a mild objection; a hatful of ballast goes overboard; we instantly shoot up in the air, and, before I can realize what has occurred, the barometer marks six and seven thousand feet.

“C’est d’en haut qu’on apprécie bien les choses humaines et il faut avoir passé sur les points élevés pour connaître la petitesse de celles que nous voyons grandes.”

ALF. DE VIGNY.

III.

I SHALL never forget this first and sudden leap to such terrifying altitudes. I thought we would never stop rising, and stood breathless as I saw the earth leave us, sink in at the centre, and swell out at the horizon like a bowl.

How often have we not followed with delighted eyes the majestic flight of the clouds, and longed for their liberty and the freedom of their voyages in the skies?

Rolled in heavy masses by the winds that drive them on, they move peacefully in the sunlight like a fleet of sombre ships, with prows of solid gold. Now bunched together in small and graceful groups, thin and sleek like birds of passage, they fly swiftly with the breeze, iridescent and translucent, like huge opals picked from the treasures of heaven, or sparkling with immaculate candor, like the snow the winds harvest on the crest of inaccessible *sierras*, and carry off on their invisible wings.

They have seen, perhaps in a single day, the countries and the homes we love, and cherish in remembrance or in hope. They have passed over spots that have beaten time to our happiest hours; they have looked down upon places that have witnessed our deepest sorrows.

Up to their glittering realm we rise, and cutting through the impalpable vapor, we reach the upper spheres of everlasting starlight and sunshine, where the limits of the empyrean begin, that mysterious zone, visited only by the queen bee, once in her lifetime, on the day of her “nuptial flight.”

Followed by ten thousand lovers, each with ten thousand eyes to watch her, she ascends like a prayer in the sweet-scented freshness of the morning.

The amorous horde, like the moving tail of a comet, devours the space beneath her.

Never before has she breathed the dew-laden breeze, never has she felt the blinding rays of the sun.

But she has heard the eternal voice of nature; and drunk with the perfume of a million flowers, staggered by the riotous cries and plaintive wails of her wooing drones, transfixed by the ocean of divine light above her, she rises to heights unknown. One by one, her exhausted lovers have given up the chase and fallen like so many stones in the depths of the abyss below: strange and mystic manifestation of the survival of the fittest.

Now a mere handful, with throbbing flanks and starting eyeballs, strives to follow her to the mysterious sacrifice of royal love and death.

One, the last one, the Chosen one reaches his Queen; her arms are open to receive him, and he falls in their mortal embrace. He lives his whole life in a second, and gives up the ghost in one gasp of ineffable ecstasy.

The varied emotions of our trip above the clouds are simply superhuman, but the owner does not seem to enjoy them:

“On ne s’amuse pas ici—descendons.”

I know he is longing to play with the trees again; but before I can answer, the valve-rope is jerked, and we drop two or three thousand feet.

Looking up through the open appendix, I can see the interior of the balloon, the valve-rope hanging in the centre, and watch the valve open and close at the top.

We are now traveling with the wind at a speed of forty miles an hour, but we feel no motion whatever. The hills, the meadows, the hamlets, rush toward us in a mad race, as if driven by the mighty hand of God.

The world looks like a painted atlas, with every little detail carefully marked. As I compare it with the military map in my hands, I can not tell which is the better of the two; and, moreover, at this altitude, they both seem the same size.

The captain is throwing out ballast,—quite a lot it seems to me. But the barometer is still falling. Down we go, and in a moment we are close to earth again. Half a dozen peasants are harvesting in the grain fields.

“Captain! we are dead birds this time!”

“Pas encore,” replies the owner, “but be sure before we touch ground to swing up on the hoop above you or the



shock might break your legs.”

The advice is worth following. No sooner said than done, and the basket after kicking off the top of a haystack, drops in the midst of the dumfounded farmers.

Relieved for a second of its weight, the “Rolla” bounds ahead. More ballast flies out, and we are off on another trip to the clouds.

Exposed, as it is, alternately to the burning rays of the sun and the numerous cool currents that we meet on our way, the “Rolla” soon becomes flighty and hard to control. A few minutes later we are not two hundred feet over the meadows.

Another rise, without apparently any cause for it, and soon we are falling again; this time over the ancient city of Sens, with its beautiful cathedral, around which the quaint old houses are huddled, and held close together by a belt of green boulevards.

As I wonder how we would look impaled on that sharp gothic steeple, a dozen pounds of ballast sends us skyward like a rocket.

"It's not the distance, it's the pace that kills."

L. A. ROBERTSON: *The Dead Calypso*.

IV.

IT WAS then ten o'clock. We had traveled by actual measurement on the map, one hundred and eighty kilometers. The heat was increasing rapidly and the sensitive bubble over our heads had become more erratic than ever. Down it would drop a few thousand feet, if a cloud happened to darken the sun, and then up three or four thousand, as soon as the cloud had passed on.

This constant "bobbing" up and down at a terrific pace, added to the heat and lack of sleep, was gradually telling on our nerves. Ten hours in a basket, under such circumstances, is about as much as any ordinary man can stand. Without wasting any time in idle discussion, we decided to *atterrir*—in other words, to land, as soon as the necessary arrangements for this important operation had been completed.

The "Rolla" was then at nine thousand feet; we had lost the wind on our way up, and below, in the west, the storm was rapidly gaining on us.

We had still four sacks of sand ballast of the nine we had taken up with us. Every knot that held them to the basket was carefully examined; a precaution of vital importance, as we would soon be above the clouds again, if any of them escaped us in the varied incidents that might attend our descent. The lunch-basket and our coats were also securely fastened, and the anchor partly unlashd and made ready to be dropped.

I held the barometer, with eyes glued upon its face, ready to call out our future altitudes. My companion, with the valve-rope in his right and the ballast-spoon within reach, was still gazing earnestly at the fields in the distance, where we hoped we might stand alive a few minutes later.

Not a word had been spoken for some time, when the captain said:

"Our landing, I think, will be a hard one. I dislike the way those trees are scattered beyond that narrow valley. We never should have allowed the storm to reach our heels,—but it has to go now —," and his hand gives the valve-rope a long and heavy pull.

We can hear the gas sputter as it leaves the creaking silk.

Instantly the barometer drops. We have started on our final descent.

The captain's fondness for "valving" had set us falling again at an awful speed, and the sand he was throwing out was rising around the "Rolla" in little thin clouds, and dropping like hail on the silk above us.

I looked down. The earth was rising!—rising to meet us, like a fabulous mother eager to receive her children in her outstretched arms.

I stood hypnotized and cold, until called back to my barometer. I saw that the captain's teeth were set, but his eye was clear and serene.

We now realize to its full extent the *gravity* of the situation.

The needle is jumping in my hands. "Twenty-two hundred metres—twenty-one-fifty—twenty-one —!" The storm is not a mile behind us, and the heavy wind that precedes it rolls in graceful waves over the wheat and barley fields.

"Seventeen hundred and fifty metres—seventeen hundred—sixteen hundred—!"

We are falling at an angle of thirty or forty degrees. Everything below us is moving at lightning speed.

"Twelve hundred and fifty—twelve hundred—eleven hundred metres—!"

My voice is slightly hoarse, but I call out the numbers as fast as I see them, and they follow each other in rapid succession.

"Nine hundred—eight hundred and fifty—eight hundred metres—!"

The sudden change of altitude makes us both very deaf; but I can still hear the captain say:

"Haul in the other sack of sand!—We must keep up long enough to clear that forest and land in the field beyond, this side of the large clump of trees."

The ballast is doing better work, and we are not falling so rapidly; but only half of the treacherous forest has been cleared: there is more and enough of it, that stands threatening below us.

"We shall never sail over it," mutters the owner.



At this moment we swing into a violent gale, forerunner of the storm behind us. The "Rolla" quivers in its net, seems to hesitate for a mere second, and bravely leaps ahead.

"Too much of a good thing—," and above us the valve is roaring furiously.

"Whatever happens, don't jump!" cries the captain.

Of course, had I done so at any time, he would have shot up in the air ten or fifteen thousand feet.

"Attention! Voici le moment psychologique—."

Like a hawk swooping down on its prey, and with the same graceful curve, the "Rolla" clears, with ten feet to spare, the crest of the last trees.

We hear the guide-rope dragging in the branches.

As quick as a flash the captain has the anchor overboard.

But the gale is driving us on, and the iron teeth fail to bite the sod.

We clutch at the hoop and the rigging above, and with a crash, the basket strikes the earth.

The shock throws us back into it.

The balloon bounds on several hundred feet, rolling like a huge football. We are dragged, tossed, bumped, and bruised. Everything in the basket is smashed, and the claret on the captain's face looks like blood.

I barely have time to disengage my neck from a couple of slender and wiry net ropes that are doing their best to strangle me.

A peasant, mowing near by, hears our cries; he drops his scythe, and kicking off his wooden shoes, tugs at the guide-rope lustily.

The anchor has found a soft spot, suddenly the cable tightens, and our aerial trip is ended.

By this time a few excited villagers have come to the rescue from the neighboring fields.

As we crawl from under the tangled mass of net-work and rigging, a terrorized child falls in a fit at the sight of this unusual performance, rolling in the grass and screaming with fright.

We are both rather pale and a bit weak in the knees; but, oh! the exquisite sensation to feel the good old Earth under our feet again!

A few steps away, "Rolla" lies panting in the sunshine.

With every gust of wind he seems to exhale his life.

His quivering form is sinking rapidly; we hear his heavy sighs and watch his quivering skin.

The plucky little fellow makes another desperate effort to rise up to the spheres he has conquered; but his strength at last betrays him, and he falls back on the green, empty, motionless, dead.

PARIS, June, 1901.



“In the pilgrimage many things happen that are not to the taste of the pilgrim.”

SHEIK ALI MOHAMMED: *The Rose of Bagdad.*

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