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Another exciting Sherlockian

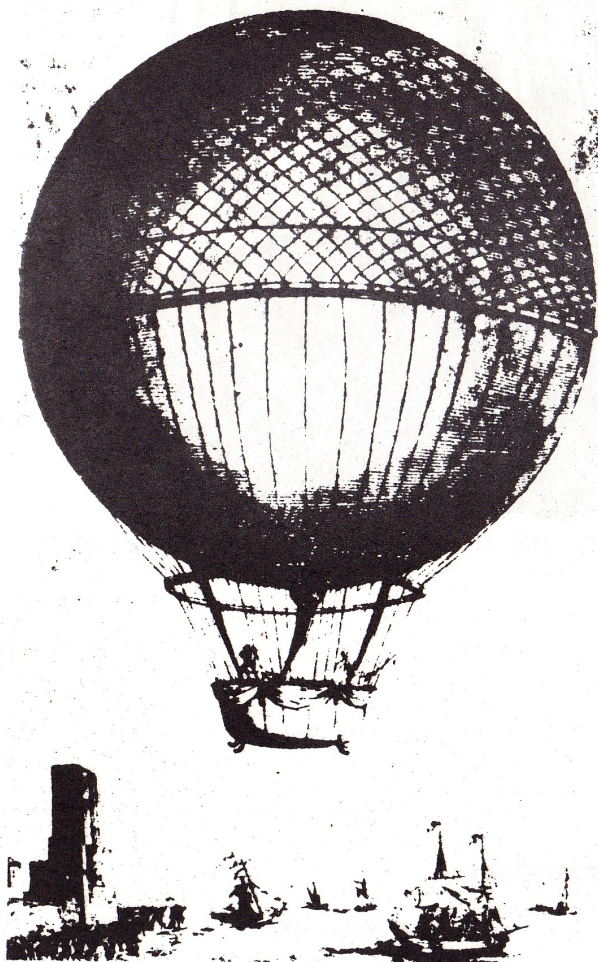
Round-Robin Pastiche

by members of

The Pleasant Places of Florida

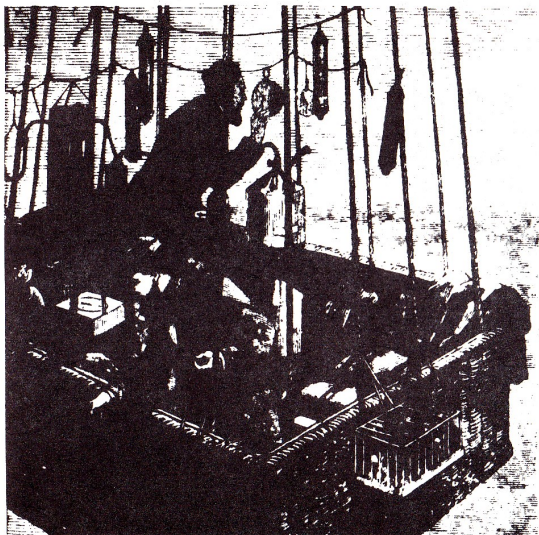


First manned balloon crossing of English Channel, 1785.



# "The Pleasant Places of Florida"





Working in the Gondola or Nacellé.

Contributors:

Tom Reesor

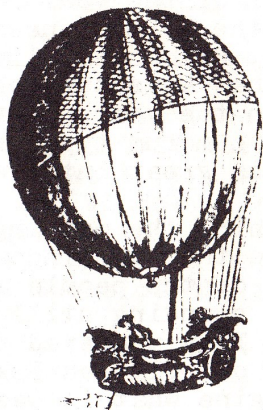
Herman 'Pat' Herst, Jr.

The Rev. Dr. Ben Wood

Caroline Everett

Dr. Mike Carroll

Dr. Tom Mitchell



The Singular Adventure of  
the Solitary Balloonist

Introduction  
by Tom Reesor.

**I**n thinking back over the many cases in which I was able to accompany my friend Sherlock Holmes, my memory is frequently drawn to one of the longest and possibly the most bizarre cases that he ever unraveled. Many readers of my writings of Holmes' cases will remember what is sometimes referred to as the "great hiatus" when Sherlock Holmes was presumably dead at the bottom of Reichenbach Fall in Switzerland. Few remember, however, the shorter hiatus of almost three years when no words were forthcoming from this pen.

Since all the persons involved in the major case of this period have now passed on to their just reward, I may now relate the details of this fantastic adventure.

It was on a cool clear Wednesday morning



in late November of the year 1883 as Holmes & I were reading the morning newspapers when this adventure began. Holmes had little to do lately since solving the "Adventure of the Speckled Band" earlier in the year. What few cases he had were of the humdrum type, requiring very little use of his great intellect.

After finishing the morning paper I stood up and walked to the bow window and saw a strange sight. All of the people I could see on the street were standing still and looking up toward the sky! They appeared to be gazing at something above our flat on Baker Street, but I could not imagine what it was.

"Holmes!" I cried. "Look at this. People in the street are staring at something in the sky. Could it be smoke from a nearby burning building?"

"Hardy, Watson," answered Holmes. "They are looking at a montgolfier."

"A what?" I asked.

"A montgolfier; an aerostat. A man-carrying balloon supported by the heat of burning fagots.\* The winds have caused it to drift over our area."

"Holmes, this is amazing! How are you certain?" I was sure he had not looked outside all morning.

"The morning paper," he answered, "makes note of the fact that today is the 100th anniversary\*\* of the first hot-air balloon ascension and that there will be a commemorative flight over London, although the first balloon

\*Editor Mitchell asserts that charcoal, not fagots provided the hot air for the balloon.

\*\* Redactor Tom also cites record of 1st ascent made 15 October 1783.

flight flight was over Paris a century ago."

As he walked to the window, he said, "The people in the street could not be looking at smoke from a fire, for as you see by the flag on the top of that distant building, the wind is coming from the west, and any smoke would be seen by us from our window. Since we see no smoke, logic requires that it must be something other than smoke, something very unusual, if we can judge by the looks of the people's faces."

I followed his chain of reasoning; how simple it seemed after his explanation.

About one hour after this curious event there came a knock on the door. Holmes answered it, and a familiar face appeared. "Inspector Lestrade," said Holmes. "How can I help you?"

Police Inspector Lestrade stammered for a minute; it was obvious he needed some help from my friend, although, as in the past, he did not like to admit such aid was necessary.

"There was an incident in York Place but a short while ago which may be of interest to you," he began. "A montgolfier landed in the street, having floated over the city for more than an hour. Its fuel exhausted, the balloon landed softly in the middle of the street. The young aeronaut, who piloted the craft was dead, and appears to have been so for about an hour. There are no marks on his body, nor is there any other apparent reason for his death."

"Altitude sickness?" I interrupted, having heard of this malady that sometimes affects high-flying aeronauts.

"Impossible," Lestrade replied. "He was flying barely above the buildings in full view of the public during his entire flight. He was an Army captain, the epitome of good health. He was to be married next week. We are at a total



loss as to the cause of his death."

"Asphyxiation from the fumes of his burning fuel?" asked Holmes.

"No, sir. It was fueled by ordinary wood, & he was located in such a manner that the smoke could not reach him in flight."

"I am certain there must be some reasonable explanation," I said. "This doesn't really sound as if it were a police matter."

"Well, sir," continued Lestrade, "it is a police matter, because when he ascended he had his fiancée with him. When the machine landed, she was not in it. And yet the entire flight was viewed by many spectators who saw no sign of anything amiss. She literally vanished into thin air!"



Continuation I

by Herman "Pat" Herst, Jr.

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Without any wish to quibble," Holmes replied, "I would suggest you replace 'literally' with 'apparently.'"

"As you wish," Lestrade replied, "but the fact is that the lady did indeed vanish. And if you could help us, we would certainly be grateful to you."

"Very well," Holmes replied, "but I would very much like to examine the balloon."

Lestrade explained that at the moment that was quite impossible, for while the police were removing the aeronaut's body from the nacelle, they unfastened the wires holding to the silk bag. "There was just enough hot air in it so that it took off without the wicker basket, and when last seen it was heading towards Greenwich."

"No matter," Holmes said. "It is the nacelle that I must examine. I doubt if examination of the balloon itself would tell us very much."

Holmes and I had no trouble getting a carriage, and we were soon at York Place. Several policemen were doing a fine job holding the crowd back, which was curious to see a novelty they had never seen before, part of a balloon.

"The young man's body is at the morgue," Inspector Lestrade continued, "and our experts are trying to ascertain the cause of death. They should have a report for us by nightfall. But it is the young lady we are concerned about. If she has been kidnapped, or is in need of help, we must get to her. But we are baffled. She entered the nacelle, as you call it, when the balloon ascended from Watford this morning."

"Watford in Hertfordshire?" Holmes asked. Inspector Lestrade answered affirmatively.

Holmes asked one of the constables to tip the nacelle on its side. He carefully examined the metal reinforcements at each corner. With his magnifying glass, he examined a wisp of a green stem which the nacelle had picked up somewhere. He examined the other corners of the basket. I asked Holmes what he found. He answered in two words. "Cannabis Indica".\*

\* Emendator Everett suggests "Cannabis Sativa" contending "Indica" appears in no botanical manual of the day.



"You say the balloon was in full sight of the ground the entire trip?" Holmes asked Lestrade.

"Well, we figure it was while it was over London. But there is no way of knowing how many saw it before it reached London. But a balloon flying such a short distance must have caught the attention of everyone. Now if the lady fell out, we might not know about it; in fact, if the body were not found, we might never know about it."

"But how do you know the lady was in the basket, as you call it, when the balloon took off in Watford?" Holmes inquired.

"Our telephone line to Watford is in perfect order, Mr. Holmes, and we have already checked that fact. The constable there spoke to several people who helped the balloon take off. No balloon can take off without help from assistants on the ground, and we have the word of several Watford people that the young lady and her fiancé were both in the basket when it ascended."

"Yes," Holmes said, "but what was to prevent the balloon from coming down somewhere between Watford and its final descent at York Place? It could do that very easily, without being seen, and then just as easily take off again."

Lestrade saw the opening and immediately plunged in: "Impossible, my dear Mr. Holmes. We have observed that the balloon cannot take off without help from someone on the ground. Or do you suggest that the pilot brought the balloon down at a pre-arranged clandestine spot?"

"Quite unlikely," Holmes replied. "In the air a balloon may rise or descend in order to take advantage of favourable air currents, but

there is little chance of its descending at a specific spot, such as a clearing in the woods, where its descent might escape detection."

Lestrade appeared puzzled, and I must admit that I did also. We waited for Holmes to continue.

"Balloons can be made to rise or descend by pulling a string which opens a flap at the top, which covers a large open hole," Holmes continued. "The fire below the balloon warms the air. If the pilot closes the top flap, the hot air cannot escape, and the balloon rises. If he opens it, the hot air rushes out, and the balloon descends. It is as simple as that."

I could not restrain from entering the conversation. "Then you feel that the pilot did descend, perhaps momentarily, during the flight, and he could control the altitude of the balloon so well that he need only brush against the ground without making a full descent from which he might find it difficult to rise again?"

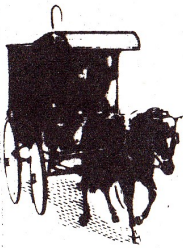
"Exactly," replied Holmes.

My enthusiasm was greatly subdued when Lestrade asked Holmes the next question. "For what purpose did the pilot come down? If he killed the girl, or wanted to dispose of her body in a deep copse, he could do that just as easily from several hundred feet up in the air,"

"He did not come down in a deep copse, and he brushed the ground when he did come down. And it was in an open field. And the crop growing there was cannabis indica."







Continuation II  
by Dr. Ben Wood.

Impatient with the verbal banter, Sherlock Holmes returned to complete his minute examination of the nacelle\*. After a few minutes of intense study, he let out a subdued but long whistle.

"Halloo. What have we here?"

He carefully extricated a small pair of precision interior calipers and proceeded to measure a small aperture in the montgolfier's passenger basket. He measured the hole again, then made a notation in his notebook. He turned the basket turtle\* and examined the aforementioned aperture again.

"Come along, Watson," Holmes commanded with a start as he strode rapidly to out waiting cab. I had to break into a jog to keep apace with his elongated stride. No sooner had I reached the hansom and had pulled myself aboard than the rig lurched forward at the driver's command and at Holmes' urging. Once adjusted to the violent motion of the racing cab, I turned to my companion, who was already in deep, meditative thought.

"Really, Holmes," I said, "what on earth..?" I was interrupted without ado.

"There is really nothing remaining to be observed or learned at this site. Back to Baker Street to await the visit of a most delightful and charming visitor, albeit a bit undone," he broke in.

\*Meaning: turned up-side-down.

"Come now, Holmes," I queried. "What is all this - back to Baker Street so soon?; a visitor?; and a woman at that? I'm, afraid you have lost me in all of this."

There was no answer forthcoming. In fact, for the next thirty-six hours Holmes was in one of his non-communicative, euphoric states aided and abetted by his usual mixture of shag and 7% solution.

On Friday morning, after a bracing breakfast at the hand of our incomparable Mrs. Hudson and the morning papers thoroughly perused, there came a rather timid rapping at the door of our digs at 221B.

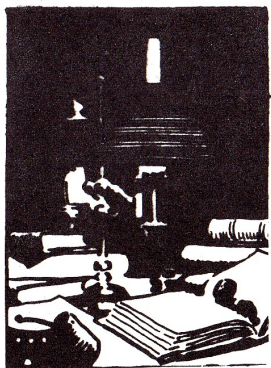
Almost as if a pall had been lifted, a sharp, lucid, and bright-eyed Sherlock Holmes jumped up from his chair and strode to the door. As he opened the door, he greeted a frightened, disheveled young lady.

"Ah! Miss Newbury, I presume. Won't you come in, please?" Holmes said in a reassuring manner.

"Thank you, Mr. Holmes," the young lady replied, "but how in the name of St. Bridget did you know who I...?"

Ignoring her query, Holmes called across the room, "Dr. Watson, I would like you to meet Miss Edna Newbury, fiancée of our late demented aeronaut, Capt. William Haslett. Miss Newbury, may I present my colleague, Dr. John Watson?"





### Continuation III

by Caroline Everett

66 **M**iss Newbury!" I cried in amazement. "But how did you get here? All England is searching for you!"

"Alas!" she replied. "Mine is a long, strange story."

"Pray sit down at once," said Sherlock Holmes, indicating a comfortable arm-chair. The young woman immediately sank with a sigh into its depths.

"Watson! Have Mrs. Hudson bring some refreshment for our client," ordered Holmes. "She must not be questioned until she has recovered somewhat."

I hastened to secure some strong tea and sandwiches from our landlady while Holmes poured some brandy for our visitor. When she had regained her composure, she turned to the detective and said, "Thank heavens I was able to get to you at last, Mr. Holmes. It has been a wearisome two days for me!"

"I quite understand," replied Holmes, "but perhaps now you will be able to tell us something of your ordeal."

"It started out so well," began Edna Newbury. "Will and I had planned this voyage as a kind of pre-honeymoon. We had a lovely send-off from our friends, and Will's colleagues among the Aeronaut Pioneers - indeed it was not till we were over St. Alban's did I realize how far the prevailing wind from the southeast had carried us away from London. However, as we approached Stevenage, where my father's estate lies,



I perceived that we could perhaps make a landing and, with a new supply of fuel, try again for London in time for the centenary celebration. Will was agreeable to this plan and it was decided that since we could not descend to the ground and reascend without assistance, I would be lowered onto a field adjacent to the house and would go for help. Oddly enough, the field we chose was one my father had planted in his attempt to develop the hemp industry in this country."

"Ah, yes," said Holmes, "your father is General Sir Aubrey Newbury, late of the Indian Army."

"Yes," she agreed, "and he has, since his retirement, experimented with many crops he saw successful grown during his career which ranged all over Asia. At any rate, no sooner had I landed with comparative ease among the tall plants, than unfortunately there was an accident with our remaining fuel supply. For when Will was helping to lower me to the ground, the nacelle tipped so far over that several burning fagots fell among the crop. While I was trying to put them out, lest they should start a fire, I was overcome by a strong vapour which arose around me."

"Of course," interjected Holmes. "You were affected by the tetrahydrocannabinol released by the smoke from the hemp. It is said that in Africa the natives throw the flowers of the plant on the fire, and, by breathing the fumes, become stupified like a lascar upon hashish, which, indeed, derives from the same source!"

"I was truly overcome and filled with a great euphoria," she continued, "but the initial exhilaration was followed by extreme lethargy, and I confess I lay down among the plants and dozed off without regard to Will in his peril above me."

"This is a natural effect of the drug produced by the cannabis plant," I offered. "It has many medicinal applications. My own colleague, Dr. C. W. Suckling, has recommended it for sufferers of migraine,\* and the Queen's physician, Dr. J. Russell Reynolds, has prescribed it for 20 years." \*\*

"Indeed. We can understand the situation in which you were placed," said Holmes, "but tell us of your awakening and what transpired thereafter."

"When I awoke, I was alone. The balloon, despite its lack of fuel, was no longer visible. I was in a dreamy, carefree condition and, not wanting to approach my father at home, wandered away among the fields for I know not how long. Eventually, I met a farmer's wife whom I knew, and she, surprised at my condition, led me to her own cottage where I collapsed. When I awoke the family told me that Will was dead in London. Mr. Furrow drove me here himself in his farm cart as I feared my father's wrath if I went home without an explanation, as he was always set against my marrying Will in the first place. As for accompanying him in his balloon - I will say no more!" She commenced to weep holding her handkerchief over her face.

"Console yourself, Miss Newbury," Holmes said reassuringly, "we will soon solve this mystery. For now, you must retire to a discreet hotel nearby where single gentlewomen are provided for. Watson! Call a cab."

I complied, and as we saw the young woman bowling away down Baker Street, I was amazed to hear Holmes behind me. "Go at once and follow

\* British Medical Journal, 1881.

\*\* vide, The Lancet, 1890

her! She is not what she seems!"

"But Holmes!" I demurred. "How can you say that after all her sufferings?"

"Faugh!" said Holmes. "She is not Edna Newbury at all, but Violet O'Neill, the anarchist. Did you not hear her invoke St. Bridget? What well-born English lady would do so? She, it is, who accompanied the Irish-American terrorists that attempted to blow up the Times office and the Local Government Board last Ides of March and has been in hiding ever since.

"She was evidently using Haslett to get out of the country, for she had a ticket in her pocket for the Orient Express, the new Paris to Constantinople train which made its initial journey last month!"

I hesitated no longer but leaped into a passing hansom to follow the illusive Violet O'Neill, whose cab was just then entering Oxford Street.



#### Continuation IV

by Dr. Mike Carroll

I followed the elusive (as I found her to be) Miss O'Neill, alias Newbury, down Oxford St. to New Bond Street, and thence into Bruton Street, Berkeley Square, Mount Street, Park Lane, & so to the Edgware Road and into Paddington Station. There, I must confess, my hitherto depend-



able cabbie lost her in the station traffic, and I was forced to return to Baker Street with the news that my quarry had eluded me.

But alas! when I arrived at our digs I found that Holmes had gone. It was not until late that evening he returned, dressed in one of his ingenious disguises, this time that of a soldier of the Queen, newly-retained from duty in India.

I apologized to him for allowing myself to be thrown off the trail, but he was gracious and consoling as usual.

"Nothing lost, Watson! It is possible that the ticket for Constantinople was merely a ruse. In any event, she is not about to leave England for the Near East from Paddington Station, so we have a little time. At the moment that is not the question that is troubling me most.

"Do you recall, Watson, Miss O'Neill's tale that they had left Watford on Wednesday morning? And that an unexpected southeast wind had driven them towards Stevenage, whereas their previous destination had been London? That much of her story, I think, may be considered truthful. Then, by the most wonderful kind of circumstance, a northerly wind drives the balloon more than twenty-five miles to the south, in the direction of their intended goal, and through circumstances not yet clear, it comes to rest in York Place, only some six miles short of their intended goal!"

"And what was that, Holmes?" I said, almost fearing his reply.

"The Crystal Palace in Sydenham, Watson," he replied. "It was towards the Crystal Palace that they had originally plotted their itinerary. Probably they planned to destroy it in some spectacular fashion. That much seems probable."

"But why, Holmes, why?"

"That, Watson, is still to be discovered. But it is only one of several facts which must be found out. Why was Violet O'Neill using Haslett as a cover? What was to be gained by their destruction, or at least injury, of our glorious national monument of glass and iron? Indeed, is Capt. Haslett really what he seems to be, or is he, like O'Neill, a false character? My work today has only made the answers to those questions more urgent; it has not produced the solution to any one of them."



### Conclusion

by Dr. Tom Mitchell

66 **W**atson," Holmes asked, "would you be free to go with me tomorrow morning to visit General Sir Aubrey Newbury at Stevenage? We may stay the night at the inn and return Sunday."

I hastened to reply that I would be happy to go with him. While in San Francisco I had often thought of our excursions out of London, and, since my return, Holmes had mentioned several times how my scientific training would have been helpful to him in a number of such cases.

"But Holmes, dear friend," I said, "is there really a Sir Aubrey? I thought that he was simply a figment of Violet O'Neill's criminal imagination."

"No, no, Watson! he cried. "Glance into the index of my commonplace books under 'Newbury'; then turn to the account of the engagement in September of one Captain William Haslett and Miss Edna Newbury. Oh yes, there is a Miss Newbury, and I believe I know why she has not come forward in spite of the publicity."

"You will find," he continued, "that Capt. Haslett served with, although not under, Sir Aubrey in India. By the way, you will find that Sir Aubrey's rank of brigadier was local and temporary, his permanent rank being lieutenant-colonel. Certainly, I think we shall discover that the captain was acquainted with the young lady in India."

Sir Aubrey took us to his pleasant cottage at the edge of town within a stone's throw of one of Stevenage's noted Romano-British burial mounds. His daughter neither made an appearance upon our arrival nor at any time during our two-hour interview; however, his Indian servant hovered over us with tea and biscuits.

Even with all his probing skills it was not easy for Holmes to limit his investigation because of Sir Aubrey's tendency to relate stories of his life on the frontier. A name, a place, a skirmish or a battle would evoke memories of his long service to the Queen. Surely, if it had been I instead of Holmes doing the questioning, I must admit that I would have found myself listening happily to the tales of this noble soldier whose experiences, like mine, could rarely be shared with those who had remained in England.

Although it soon became evident that the general was reluctant to discuss Capt. Haslett,



it was not difficult for Holmes to take advantage of his natural garrulity to evoke responses.

Yes, of course, they had known Captain Haslett in India. Posted there when only twenty years old he had served meritoriously against the Afrids, Utman Khels, Mohmands, Zaimukhts and Bhitannis. At the age of twenty-eight he had received the Victoria Cross. Yes, in spite of the fact that his family is not a prominent one - his father is an undistinguished vicar - and that he had almost no income beyond his army pay, he had been noted frequently by his superiors for bravery and leadership.

"When we came home two years ago," he said, "I had no reservations about the plans he and my daughter had made to become engaged upon his return to England this summer. The marriage would have given me the son I never had and of whom I could be proud. But..." His face became hard.

He continued, "His arrival in England was a joyful one. Within a month the engagement was announced." He lowered his head and seemed unable to say more.

Holmes, with a few soft words, encouraged the general to continue.

"Hardly had the announcement appeared," he said bitterly, "than I began to hear from old comrades who had observed or heard things that they had been reluctant to tell me earlier. After our departure he had begun to gamble heavily, even neglecting his amateur enthusiasm for ballooning. He had incurred debts which, since he was unable to pay them, reflected on his honor as an officer. Friends, even those from whom he had drifted away, came forward and, evidently, paid those creditors who were the most demanding, but, of course, his reputation

was soiled."

"When I heard this sordid tale," he went on, "I notified him that the engagement was broken. Since then, my daughter, normally a dutiful and obedient child, has not spoken to me. She obeyed me in that she did not see him. Since the news of his death I have seen a look in her eyes that tells me that along with the son I had hoped to have I have also lost a daughter."

Both Holmes and I understood this simple & direct man and soldier who had remained silent when the newspapers' reported that his daughter had been on the balloon flight. He knew that she had not been there, and he did not feel that he owed an explanation to anyone. Lestrade had come away still thinking that Miss Newbury had been kidnapped and, in some way, had made her way home. Yet the general's defenses had fallen before Holmes whose tactical skills matched his.

A man less steeled might have asked us if he had followed the proper course. He, however, sought neither sympathy nor understanding. The conversation ended, we walked back to the inn, each alone with his thoughts.

That evening Holmes told me what he had discovered earlier when he had left Baker St. in the uniform of a soldier. Evidently, he had gone to several places frequented by soldiers and easily pieced together much of the story we had heard at Stevenage. In addition, he had discovered that much of Capt. Haslett's gambling had been with that scum of the Empire who can always be found on the fringe of the army world. Actually, his behaviour had been more disgraceful than the general believed, for these gambling acquaintances were men of known, unsavory reputations.

"Watson," confided Holmes, "we may never



know the full extent of his involvement with these ruthless creatures. It is clear to me, however, that they soon exerted a hold over him which would inevitably drag him down. Since there is virtually an international brotherhood of these rogues, they or their nefarious colleagues here could continue to tighten their hold upon him, and, of course, he must have felt that there was no place to turn for help."

Holmes lit his pipe and continued, "Here he was in England. His follies had caught up with him. Seemingly, he had lost the woman he loved, and his army career was in jeopardy. Bereaved and desperate, his gambler's optimism caused him to be susceptible to the offer made by those villains to complete one task for them which, I am sure they told him, would cancel all his obligations."

"In his defense," continued Holmes, "I am sure that when they asked him to allow the counterfeit Miss Newbury to accompany him on the flight, he must have been relieved to find that they hadn't asked him to perform a criminal act. Clinging desperately to hope, he, no doubt, forced himself to overlook the fact that such a lawless lot would not hesitate to stoop to the basest crimes and would use any means or anyone to accomplish those crimes."



Back in Baker Street Holmes was less communicative. I, from long experience, did not press him but, rather, waited, albeit somewhat impatiently, for him to rouse from his deep thoughts.

"Well, Watson," he began, and his eyes



twinkled, "Have you solved this case yet?"

Matching his mood I said, "Almost, Holmes. I do have a few questions."

"Ah, roared Holmes, "I might have known that your logical mind would have been putting things into order. Shall we begin?"

Without waiting for me to say a word, Holmes began to speak, "As you know, Watson, there has been much about this case which intentionally or by chance could have led us astray. There has been a tendency to picture the balloon as propelled by capricious winds of some 40 or 50 miles per hour - I, too, have been somewhat guilty of this aberation - which first drove it to the northeast for seven miles, then nearly straight north for twelve miles, then nearly straight south for over 30 miles to land softly in the middle of the street, and, finally, when the balloon was released, to cause it to sail merrily on its way to Greenwich."

Holmes shook his head and continued, "Is this the same balloon that 'floated,' as Lestrade said, over the city for more than an hour. Didn't Lestrade say, 'He was flying barely above the buildings in full view of the public during his entire flight.' Even if the good Inspector led us believe that the balloon was over the buildings of London during the entire flight, he probably meant that it was in full view of people from Watford to London and over London itself. Does this sound like a balloon which landed at Stevenage in the field of hemp which you saw at Sir Aubrey's? Could all of this have happened between the time the balloon ascended at Watford and the moment you looked up from your morning papers?"

"Why, I see it now, Holmes. There must have been two balloons!" I cried.

"Yes, Watson," he said reflectively, "that possibility was certainly worth persuing; in

fact, at first, it seemed to be the only possibility. But as undependable as eyewitnesses of any occurrence can be, we must admit that no-one has come forward to say that he saw a balloon lazing or racing through the sky from Watford to St. Alban's, to Stevenage and the south to London. Lestrade's men have carefully checked this. There was, Watson, only one balloon in this case. Generally, it drifted from Watford, some 15 miles northwest of Marble Arch, to London and then began its gradual descent over the chimney pots to York Place, a total of less than 20 miles, a long distance for a balloon of this type."

"Do you mean to say that it never landed, even to permit Miss O'Neill to disembark? Or are you saying that she was never in the basket with Capt. Haslett?" I asked.

"Oh, she was aboard," answered Holmes. "That we do know. After all, the Aeronaut Pioneers did give them a send-off on their so-called pre-honeymoon flight. By the way, the pre-honeymoon adventure was not mentioned in the newspaper announcement of the anniversary flight."

"But they did descend in midcourse somewhere, didn't they? How was it accomplished without deflating the bag which would have caused considerable time to be expended in reheating the air?" I asked in bewilderment.

"That is not difficult to explain," answered Holmes. "I'm sure that Violet O'Neill had a revolver aimed at the captain's head immediately after the ascent. Lestrade's investigators at Watford confirmed my theory that the balloon, unexpectedly overloaded with the addition of Miss O'Neill, did not spring into the heavens like a hawk; rather, it remained only a few feet above the ground as it drifted eastward from Watford, wafted along the path accurately forecast by the knowledgeable Aeronaut Pioneers. Barely passing over a low hill and a little



woods it disappeared from sight almost immediately, making a pinpoint landing which could not have been accomplished if the balloon truly had sailed aloft, but, in this case, it landed near or at a specific spot where, of course, Miss O'Neill's gang was waiting."

"And then I suppose they killed the captain. How did they accomplish it?" I asked. "Lestrade did not seem to know." As a medical man I had given considerable thought to this problem. "Was it the burning hemp?"

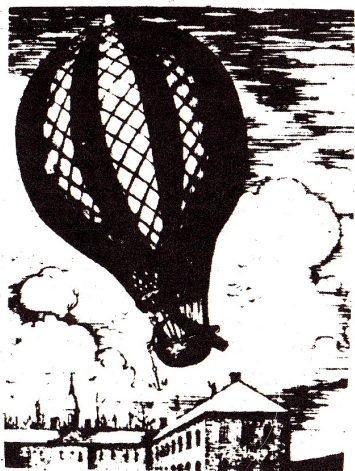
"No, Watson," he replied, "the solitary stem of hemp I found on the basket was placed there by Miss O'Neill's fellow rascals to direct our thoughts toward Stevenge and away from themselves."

"Then what killed the captain, Holmes?" I snapped.

"Watson, Watson," he said, matching my impatience with patience, "you are a medical man. Under the circumstances what would you have looked for as the cause of death?"

Most of my tentative theories had been eliminated by investigations subsequent to the finding of the body; however, we had not discussed a number of esoteric possibilities; for example, could he have died from the bite of some deadly Indian serpent? Had such a serpent bitten the captain and then slipped away through the small hole in the basket? Had the captain died of fright from the sight of such a serpent? Could he have ingested or been injected with some other elusive poison? I posed these theories to Holmes.

"Right, Watson," cried Holmes, "each of





those was a possibility worth investigation, but each such investigation led nowhere. Let me put my question another way. How would you, with a physician's skills, have killed him had you been so inclined?"

"Well, Holmes," I said, "I think that I might have used chloroform. Fresh air and the passage of time would have made its detection very difficult."

"Good!" said an excited Holmes. "You are on the right track."

I smiled.

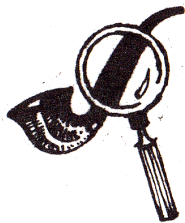
"But," continued Holmes, "in this case, the villains could not use him if he were dead or even asleep, for they would then have no trained aeronaut."

My theory demolished, I thought a moment and then said, "Perhaps they smothered him, but, then as you say, why kill the captain? Holmes, I am at a loss."

"No, Watson," he said and placed his hand on my shoulder. "They did smother him! Unfortunately for him and for them, they had no intention of killing him. Sensibly, Haslett did not resist when, at the point of a gun, he was ordered from the basket, nor did he resist while they tied his hands and placed a cloth sack over his head to prevent him from seeing them make a small hole in the basket and attach an infernal machine or bomb below the basket where he would be unlikely to see it, one which could be released by a few turns of the bolt. Oh yes, Lestrade's men found at the site the quilted sack which had been used to cover the captain's head."

"While they were holding the basket and preparing the bomb he must have felt that he was alone, so, brave man that he was, he attempted to escape. Hardly had he turned to run than the

heavy arms of one of these brutish oafs encircled him from the rear, one covering his nose and mouth. In this vise his struggles were minimal. By the time the slow-witted ape released him, the captain was motionless. When the rest of the gang returned from their tasks, they found, to their horror, that the captain was dead."



"Yes," said Holmes, "his death was a stupid accident which destroyed their dastardly plan. Now they were left without an aeronaut, for the professional saboteur who would have replaced Miss O'Neill as a passenger was not qualified to pilot the balloon. They then turned loose the balloon to float silently over London, to be found as it was in York Place, a silent mystery, far from the scene of their dastardly deed."

"I see that now," I said, "but I still do not understand what they had intended to do when they reached London."



"Ah," said Holmes, "as I suggested earlier I believe that they intended to drop a powerful explosive device on the Crystal Palace which, to militant Irishmen everywhere, distorted with hatred for Queen and Empire, is a symbol of the political and economic power which they believe has enslaved the Irish. If the balloon failed to pass over the Palace, I am sure that they had alternate targets which, although less vulnerable, would scarcely have been less symbolic if damaged."

"Good work, Holmes," I said, "but I am still at a loss to understand why Violet O'Neill came to see us."

"There are probably several reasons," said

Holmes."In the two days which had elapsed since the flight and her visit, she and her comrades had no doubt discovered that they were working with Lestrade, and they wanted to know what we had discovered. I am sure we convinced her that we knew little and accepted her as Miss Newbury, all of which must have heightened her contempt for us.

"Even though you lost her in traffic, I doubt if she really knew you were following her. Rogues, such as she, use such evasive tactics as a matter of course. Also, she must have felt that her involved tale about herself as Miss Newbury would be so convincing that we would look no further.

"The whole technique is one the gang must frequently follow to cover up its often-mad schemes. It is this kind of thinking, naturally, which keeps them from being effective. Their goals and their attempts to reach their goals are so simplistic that most schemes such as this are often abortive, not frustrated by their own ineptitude. We certainly have not seen the last of them. I am sure that Miss O'Neill and her compatriots are in some dank dark cellar right now hatching their next plot. In time, Lestrade will apprehend one or two or more of the gang, and maybe even the murderer of Captain Haslett, but there, increasingly, will always be more of them to twist the lion's tail."

"Poor Capt. Haslett," I rejoined, "his punishment was all too harsh. He was, no doubt, a good man in spite of a certain lapse incurred during a long period of loneliness far from his beloved, and he was certainly a brave soldier of Her Majesty. I hope that it is the way he will be remembered."

FINIS





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