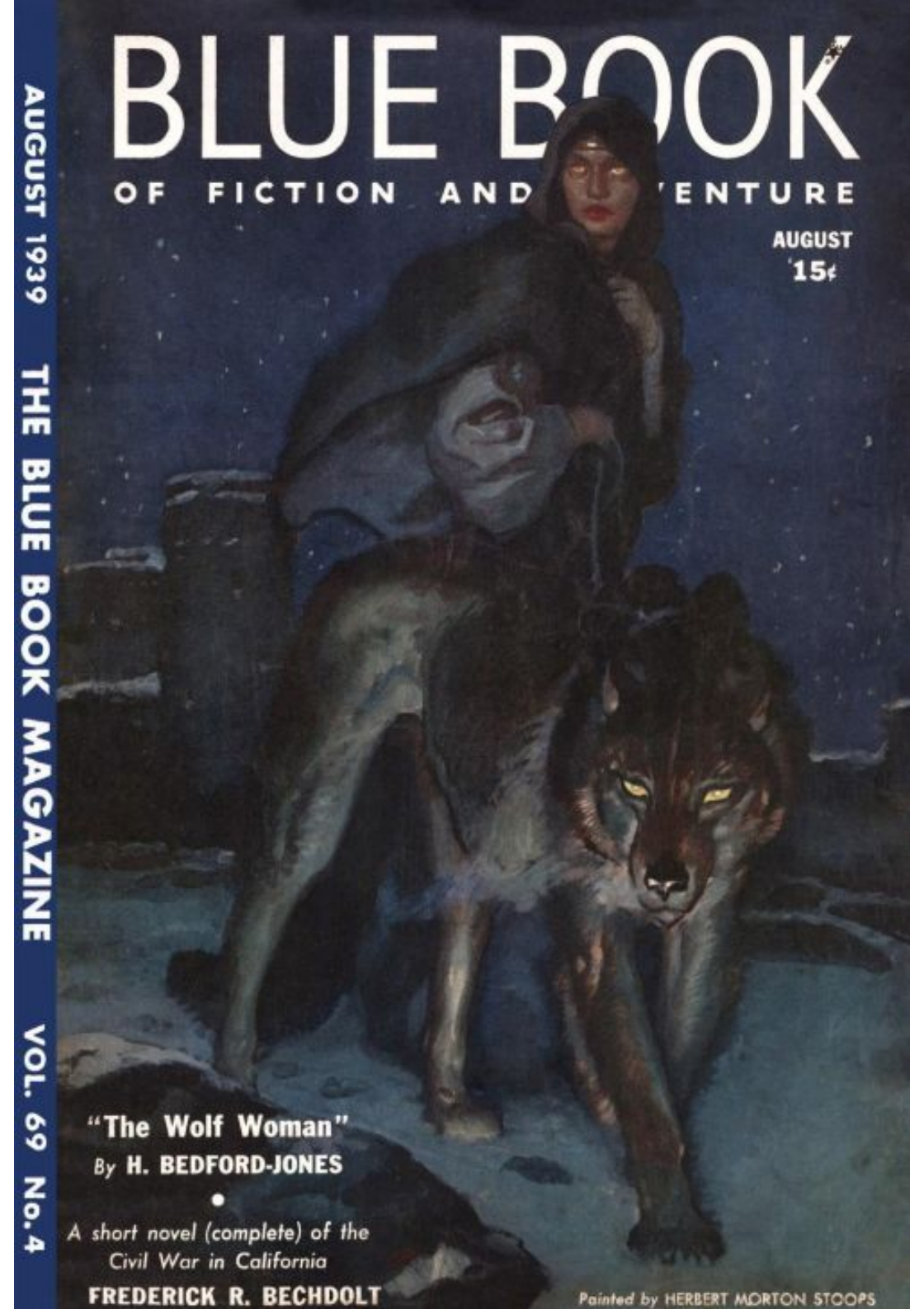
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"The Wolf Woman"
By H. BEDFORD-JONES
A short novel (complete) of the Civil War in California
FREDERICK R. BECHDOLT
Painted by HERBERT MORTON STOOPS

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Men in the Air

By MICHAEL GALLISTER.
Writing under the pseudonym Captain Michael Gallister.
Illustrated by L. R. Gustavson.

First published *Blue Book*, August 1939.

"Curse or Blessing?"—the second story in this series following the conquest of the air, deals with the first flight across the English Channel.

> Mr. Tytler of Edinburgh, the first person to navigate the air in England, in August last, announces that he will endeavour to cross the Channel by air at an early date in his fire-balloon, and thus keep the honour from falling into American or French hands.
>
> —London *Chronicle*, December, 1784

Blanchard thrust the newspaper across the table, with an angry snort.

"Read that, Doctor!" he exclaimed. "There's the fellow who was prowling around last week and asking questions! I want you to get hold of him and stop this nonsense!"

The child-wife of Blanchard, the sad swarthy little peasant girl who spoke no English, looked on wonderingly. Jefferies read the item; a whimsical expression came into his pleasant features, and he gave Blanchard a smile.

"Stop him? My dear fellow, how can I stop him? We're in England; it's a free country. Who is this Tytler, anyway?"

"A fool," growled Blanchard. "He has a silk bag with a firepan, on the Montgolfier principle; he made a half-mile flight at Edinburgh in August. He's mounted a sail on the balloon. I want you to see him, buy him off, anything! You're an American, you can deal with these accursed English. Go to any lengths, do you understand?"

Jefferies nodded, compressing his lips slightly. He did not love the vehement Blanchard. No one did, even the little swarthy girl-wife. The Norman was harsh, intensely selfish; he would get ahead in the world.

"Where can this fellow be found?" asked Jefferies.

"At the farm of one Hogarth, two miles outside Dover. He told me."

"Most ill-advised of him," commented Jefferies dryly. "What do you expect me to do—kill him?"

"If necessary." Blanchard leaned forward with a torrent of passionate speech. "Look! You know very well that if I succeed in this project, I'm made for life. The first man to cross the Channel by air will be famous; it means rewards. It means that the hydrogen-gas balloon takes the place of the fire-balloon of Montgolfier. Above all, it means vast publicity! I shall be the greatest professional aëronaut in the world; I shall teach my wife to take the air—the first woman to fly! Wealth!"

Jefferies smiled. "But you permit me to accompany you!"

"I need your money, my friend," said the Norman, cynically frank. "And you're a doctor, an American; not a professional aëronaut. You'll not detract from my fame, because you don't compete with me. We've made several ascensions together. We get on. Now, I pray you, look up this fellow with the queer name, today! Buy him off. Do anything!"

Dr. Jefferies took his heavy coat, his coonskin cap, hired a nag from the innkeeper, and departed, after inquiring the way to Hogarth's farm.

"Yes," he muttered to himself, "we get on. We get on! You use my money, and I'm blind to your beautiful qualities. We get on! Why? Because you're too damned egotistic to see what I'm after. Half the honor goes to America! I'll be content with that. Under the noses of the English, under your own damned long fox-nose. You're a hard-headed, practical, shrewd Norman; all you're after is the money, and you'll get it—and too late, you'll wake up to find that a Yankee has stolen half the renown and credit for America!"

He chuckled softly; a pleasant man, shrewder than he looked.

“We’re accursed, accursed!” screamed Blanchard. “We’re done, d’ you hear?”

The air was bitter, the roads icy, for it was the second day of January. Dover Castle dipped under the horizon of wintry trees, the Channel vanished, and down a narrow lane opened the farm of Hogarth, snow-wrapped, smoke curling from chimneys of the old stead and from another building behind it.

A young woman came out to meet him, wiping her hands. Her appearance startled him: she lacked the subservience of the lower classes; she was alive with a rosy coloring, and intelligence sparkled in her eyes—she was, in a word, a charming and beautiful person.

“Good morning!” Jefferies removed his cap. “Is this Mr. Hogarth’s farm?”

“It is,” she said brightly, and paused.

“My name is Jefferies,” he said. “I’ve come from Dover to see a young man named Tytler. I understand he’s here.”

Again he was startled. She flashed into hostility; but as she met his gaze, this died. She surveyed him coolly, appraisingly, and smiled.

“You’re the American physician—the friend of the Frenchman, Blanchard!”

“Companion,” said Jefferies in his whimsical way, “would be a better word, perhaps.”

She caught his meaning. He had the instant impression that he was dealing with no country lass; indeed, her very speech proved as much. She spoke impulsively.

“Come in, do! There’s no one here except Granny Hogarth, and she’s deaf. Oh, I do believe you’ll help me; you’re the very person!”

Jefferies dismounted. She held out a hand and went on before he could reply:

“I’m Julia Hogarth. This was my grandfather’s farm; my father’s a surgeon in London. Do you know James—I mean Mr. Tytler?”

“Not at all,” rejoined the American. Her face cleared. She made a hurried, imperative gesture, and he stepped into the house. The room was neat, attractive, with a tiny fire blazing

in the grate.

"You spoke of helping you," said Jefferies, throwing off his greatcoat. "Consider me at your service, I beg of you, Miss Hogarth. You say your father's a surgeon? Good! There's a bond between us."

She was gazing at him wide-eyed, her bosom rising and falling with her quick breath, a tinge of excitement in her cheeks.

"I can trust you, I know it!" she exclaimed. "It'll have to be now, now, before you see him! Or—no, wait! Better still, come and talk with him. I'm driving in to town. I'll go, and wait for you at the crossroads. We can talk there, freely."

Jefferies bowed slightly. "As you like. Secrets, perhaps?"

"Yes. Cruel secrets." Agitation showed in her eyes. "He—he's a distant relative. We hope to be married. That's why he's using this place. Oh, it's terrible, I know! But you may be the one person to help me. Come, I know he'll be glad to see you. He's out in the old cow-pen—we tore off the roof, you see."

Jefferies did not see, but he was by this time curious at her manner.

He followed her out through the kitchen, where a sharp-eyed old woman was at work, and outside past the barn to another building,—four walls, no roof,—from which smoke was ascending. The girl's voice lifted cheerily.

"James! Here's a visitor for you! An American!"

A young man appeared. At the visitor's name, his face lit up, and he clasped the hand of Jefferies warmly, eagerly. He had strong, fine features, the eyes of a dreamer, an enthusiast; he was the picture of impulsive and generous youth.

"Welcome, a thousand times welcome!" he exclaimed. "I missed you in Dover; I hadn't the heart to go back and try to find you. Mr. Blanchard is not exactly—well—"

"Not the most cordial of men, with a rival," finished Jefferies, a twinkle in his eye.

He was dragged into the workshop; the girl disappeared; Tytler plunged into a glowing exposition of his plans, his apparatus, his ambitions. He had no secrets, no jealousies. But he had determination. The American, however, was somewhat appalled by what he saw.

It was not yet two years since Montgolfier's first balloon, barely a year since the first flight of man; but the world was balloon-mad. On every hand the imagination of men had been set aflame. The most imbecile of ascensions and inventions were tried, and at the same time the wisest heads of science had gone to work. The hot-air bags of Montgolfier, kept aloft by a continual burning of straw under the bag, were already out of date.

Blanchard hoped to kill these bags forever, with the rubber-coated bag filled with hydrogen gas that the physicist Charles had invented. To the same man were due the anchor or grapnel for landing, the rip-cord, the network of cordage that surrounded the bag to equalize the strain and hold the basket below, the trailing sleeve, the use of a barometer to judge heights, the small wicker basket instead of a huge ill-balanced platform carrying a stove—and Blanchard had all these things.

Tytler had none of them.

"I've just been experimenting with straw, soaked with various fluids," he said, pointing to his blazing fire. "I want to provoke a hotter flame, since mere smoke alone will not do the work."

Jefferies repressed a shiver as he looked at the balloon, deflated but suspended from a wire high above, with its decorations of flags and gay bunting, and an enormous silk wing.

"Is that the apparatus you used at Edinburgh?"

"That's the darling!" With proud affection, Tytler caressed the silken folds. "I did have bad luck, I admit; the silk was so porous it would not contain the hot air, until I found a varnish that would do the work. Now it's all right. Of course, I've only been up the one time, but this Channel crossing is a certainty, with the prevailing winds steady."

A certainty of death, thought Jefferies. The bag was too small; it could not possibly carry the man, and sufficient straw to keep its fires alight. He said as much.

"No, no! I've proved otherwise!" cried Tytler, with bursting confidence. "I've been up at the end of a rope for hours—believe me, I know! Also,"—he pointed to the silk wing,—"I'm going to use this sail, to increase the speed."

Jefferies was no scientist, but he had common sense, and had made several flights with Blanchard. He tried to point out that a balloon does not sail through the air like a ship through water, that it moves only with the air, and therefore a sail was of no value whatever. Tytler heard him out, but shook his head, smiling.

"No, my dear Doctor, I've tried this out too, and I'm sure!" he exclaimed.

"What's your purpose, if I may ask, in this flight?"

"The flight itself!" Tytler said. He flung more wood on the fire to warm the place. Jefferies got out his pipe. Insensibly the two men had become friends.

"Two objects, really," confessed Tytler. "First, the flight; an Englishman should be the first to fly the Channel. Second, to show Julia and her father, to prove myself in their eyes; they think this is all nonsense, you know. I've promised them that after this flight I'll never go in the air again. We're to be married, and it wouldn't be fair. We don't need the fame, and we've no particular need of money, you see."

"Just what," asked Jefferies, "do you expect to get out of it?"

"Achievement—the flight itself—nothing else."

An odd contrast with Blanchard, who had bragged endlessly about the honors to be heaped on him if he made it—a reception by the King, a pension, Lord knows what!

"Suppose I told you," Jefferies said slowly, "that in my opinion, if you attempted this flight, you would most certainly perish?"

Tytler laughed. "I'd go ahead, of course; I'd not believe you." Then he sobered. "You don't really think that, Doctor?"

The hard jaw, the resolute eye, warned the American.

"My dear fellow, I'm no experienced aëronaut," he evaded. "Personally, I wouldn't trust myself aloft in a fire-balloon. That's why I'm going with Blanchard. We use gas."

"I know. I've heard of it," said the other. "But tell me, why are you going?"

"To win the honor for America, or a share of it. Blanchard, I imagine, is more set on the professional aspect."

"Yes; for money," said Tytler. "He intimated as much; he seems jealous. I offered him a sporting chance, proposing that we leave at the same time, but he refused point blank. I hear that a tremendous crowd is pouring down from London for a look at your apparatus."

"And none for a look at yours?"

"Mine's not on exhibition," said Tytler, chuckling. "I'm no raree show! It's good business on your part, I admit; if you succeed, your names will be on every tongue—"

"Don't, I beg of you, couple me with Blanchard," broke in the American gravely. "He's a professional. I'm not. I don't mind saying that we'll not get off for several days, perhaps a

week. We make the gas from sulphur, and haven't been able to get sufficient."

"Oh, I'll do my best to beat you, but I have much to do; the bag has some bad rips, and Julia is sewing on it," Tytler said cheerfully. "I'm setting the 7th as my starting day. I'll leave from here, quietly, with a few friends to testify, and no fuss or crowd."

Had Jefferies known then what he was soon to learn, he might have handled the talk very differently. As it was, he shook hands and rode off, vividly regretting that Tytler was not Blanchard, and leaving the young man warmed and heartened famously.

At the crossroads half a mile away, Julia Hogarth waited, sitting in a dog-cart. She greeted him gravely, intent and determined, and came straight to the point.

"Tell me, please! You've had experience. You've seen his balloon. Do you think he'll get across safely? Come, come!" she added sharply, seeing his hesitation. "I'm not asking for politeness, Dr. Jefferies. Only God knows what this means to me! Answer frankly, please!"

"Such a man might accomplish miracles! He must be stopped, at all costs!"

"Very well. That he made a half-mile flight in that contraption, looks to me like a plain unadulterated miracle," said Jefferies simply. "To start across the Channel in it, is suicide. I hinted as much, but it was breath wasted."

"Thank you," she said in a quiet, controlled voice. "He's determined to get off before you, or when you do. He's made arrangements to be informed if you leave suddenly. Nothing on earth can prevent him from trying to win this honor for England; he's rabid on the subject and __"

"What?" broke in Jefferies, smiling. "Can't you prevent him?"

"No." They were standing together, between horse and cart. She looked into his eyes for a moment, gravely. "I love him, Dr. Jefferies, and he loves me. It means everything in life to

me. I want you to help me—I feel that you will, you can! There's no one else to whom I can appeal. If he attempts this action, I'm certain it means death for him."

He saw that she was trembling, and his heart went out to her.

"It does," he assented, with a troubled frown. "He's a splendid chap; but he's one of those men who thrive on opposition. What can I do? Talk is useless."

"Perhaps. But you're an American; they say Americans can accomplish anything. Help me, I beseech you!" Anguish sat in her eyes. "I'm helping him, yes; so strong is this obsession, that if I fought against it, we might both suffer, and he would go ahead anyway. I'm helping him, but I'd do anything, give anything, to stop him! Will you help me?"

"I'll do my best," said Jefferies.

"Is that the promise of an honest man, or polite evasion?" she said desperately.

"Heaven helping me, it's a promise! You're wise, you're brave, you're beautiful; do what you can with him; and if you fail—well, I'll do something!" Jefferies bowed over her fingers. "I'm at the Castle and Keys, in case you need to reach me."

"Thank you, with all my heart!" she said, and meant the words. He could feel that she meant them. It showed in her face as she stood gazing after him.

He returned to the inn with a revulsion of feeling on meeting Blanchard. The swarthy little girl-wife, a child bought from a French peasant, admitted him to the rooms. Blanchard was in high feather. Crowds were coming down from London; a small admission fee to see the apparatus was being charged; money was rolling in.

"I've decided definitely on the 7th," he told Jefferies. "Until then, we're making money. . . . Did you see that fellow Tytler?"

"Yes." Jefferies threw off his things. With a supreme effort, he adjusted himself to this atmosphere, this environment, this accursed Norman. He knew perfectly well that he could not make this man appreciate or even understand his own feelings. "You've nothing to fear from him."

“Tie him up and gag him,” he said in a hoarse voice.

“Good! You bought him off?” cried Blanchard joyously.

“He won’t buy off, my dear fellow. He’s determined to beat us across. But there’s nothing to fear, because his balloon is a joke. It’s small. The silk is full of splits; it looked as though the varnish had rotted it.”

The Norman relaxed with a gloomy frown, and showed a streak of his racial insight and shrewd good sense.

“You should know better. Not the apparatus is to be feared, but the man. Such a man, even with perfectly absurd apparatus, might accomplish miracles! Therefore the man must be stopped, at all costs. I can’t do it. These English hate all Frenchmen, yet oddly enough they don’t seem to hate Americans. They’d lose no chance to embroil me with their accursed law, but you can manage anything with impunity.”

Jefferies laughed heartily at this rather naïve way of saddling him with the job.

“Very well. If there’s any chance of his actually starting, I’ll know it; and I’ll engage to stop him.”

“How?”

“Better, perhaps, if you know nothing about it; it’ll be safer that way.”

"True; we must not jeopardize my flight. Ah, you relieve me, my friend!" said Blanchard, embracing him warmly.

The flight was set for the 7th, and so advertised. For weeks the prevailing winds had been from the northwest; barring a sudden change, or storm, nothing would prevent. The balloon, getting a final coat of rubber paint, was in readiness. Once the sulphur arrived, there need be no delay—but Blanchard wanted the affair properly advertised. Already Dover was crowded with nobility and even royalty, and half London would be on hand to see the start. The possibility that the great bulwark of England could be crossed by man in the air, had excited all England to a tremendous extent.

During these days, Jefferies passed from anxiety to acute alarm. One morning he met Tytler in the street; the young man greeted him with exuberant delight, and drew him aside to display a packet.

"I've solved the great question!" he declared, opening his package. "Look! A brick of compressed straw! Soaked in spirits just before the flight, it will burn indefinitely. Half a dozen such bricks, and the problem of fuel will no longer exist!"

"Nor will you," said Jefferies bluntly. "See here! Suppose I can induce Blanchard to take you in my place, will you accept?"

"And be indebted to a Frenchman for what I can't perform? Never!" cried Tytler heatedly. He frowned at Jefferies in perplexity. "You'd do that? Why?"

"To save you from certain death."

"Upon my word!" The other broke into a laugh. "My friend, you're generous, but I fear you underestimate my abilities. The first man to cross the Channel in the air will be an Englishman, I promise you! And he'll fly alone. I hear you're definitely going on the 7th."

"Definitely."

"Very well. I too leave on the 7th!" declared Tytler, slapping him jovially on the shoulder. "I'll take no advantage. I'll leave at precisely the hour you leave, and the minute! With my sail, with my lighter weight—you'll see!"

"Man, it's rank suicide!" groaned Jefferies desperately. "You'll burn at the first gust of wind! A brick of straw soaked in spirits—good Lord, man! It can't be done!"

"They've always said men couldn't travel through the air, too," said Tytler, and went off down the street laughing, a splendid confident figure.

Obsession? No other word would serve. As Jefferies well knew, nothing is so mad as the courage of ignorance; nothing so deaf, so blind, so obdurate. And he had undertaken to combat this quality! He was tempted to let the whole thing go by default, promise or no promise. That was the road of cowardly inaction, yet, left to himself, he might have pursued it.

On the afternoon of the 6th, he tested all, with Blanchard, in the privacy of the guarded space atop the cliff. The ascent was to be at noon on the morrow; the weather was cold but fine, the wind fair. To fight a way through the enormous crowd was difficult, and Blanchard was irritated, nervous, testy.

"What about that fellow Tytler?" he growled as they got clear of the throngs.

"Be assured; he'll make no flight."

Luckily, Blanchard did not press the matter, for Jefferies was himself on edge, and close to an explosion. But when he got back to his own lodgings, close to sunset, he walked in to find Julia Hogarth sitting there, with her old deaf granny for chaperon.

He foresaw what was coming, and braced himself; those clear, fine eyes of hers took hold of him. He ordered up tea, with a dash of cognac for Granny, but the moment came when Julia looked him in the eye and went to the point.

"James said he saw you this morning; he told me all you said."

"Did it have any effect?" parried Jefferies.

"You know it didn't. You're going at noon tomorrow. He's leaving then, too. Four men whom he knows are coming in the morning, to help him get the balloon inflated and to serve as witnesses."

"Well?" asked Jefferies, as her gaze dwelt upon him.

"A promise—or idle politeness?"

He flung out his hands. "Confound it, what can I do? I'm helpless. You should get the law to stop him."

"This is England. He's a free man. I've done everything possible, short of wrecking our lives and our future; even that would effect nothing."

"What do you expect me to do?"

"Something—anything!" Her voice broke. "I'm desperate, truly. I'd give my life, if it would just save him."

Anything! Jefferies drew a deep breath. The terror in her eyes went through him like a knife. He leaned forward, took her hand, pressed it.

"Anything! Very well. You'll not blame me—even if it's cruel?"

"I'll bless you, bless you all my life!"

"I think," he said quietly, "such a blessing would be worth much. Very well; account it done. Where does he sleep?"

"In the back room, downstairs." Her eyes widened. "But you—you'll not hurt him?"

Jefferies smiled, wondering if she realized in this moment what he must do.

"Not too badly, my dear; I'll hurt him, but I'll trust you to cure that hurt."

The look she gave him was almost a blessing in itself.

Scarcely had they departed, when Blanchard came bursting in, all aflame. He had just received a letter from friends in Calais, across the channel. If he succeeded, if he got there, Calais was going to grant him a pension, would buy his balloon and preserve it as a memorial!

"And now, my friend," he hurried on, blandly, "it has occurred to me that the voyage would be much less dangerous for one than for two. Not, you understand, that I wish to back out of our agreement—no, no! But since I owe you so much, it might be safer—"

His voice died, as Jefferies turned away and went to the bag on the chair. From the bag he took a long and heavy pistol of brass, a very handsome weapon, and came back to the Norman. His face was drawn and livid; his voice was harsh.

"I know all that's in your heart, Blanchard," he said. "You'd give much to be off without me—eh? Listen: Tonight I have work to do on your account. I'm risking life, liberty, honor, to stop that Englishman. You understand? I'll do it."

Blanchard took a step back, wet his lips, tried to speak.

Jefferies went on:

"Tomorrow at noon, I'm leaving with you. And if anything prevents me—*anything*, understand me—well, I'll put a bullet into your black heart with this pistol. Either I'll do it before you leave, or if prevented, I'll come across to France and hunt you down. Now, try any tricks if you dare!"

Blanchard, protesting it was all a terrible misconstruction put upon his words, took his departure in haste. The look in his face, as he went, brought a grim smile to the lips of the American.

"Thought you'd bilk me at the last minute, eh? You'll be a good boy now. Once we land in France, take your damned rewards and money! America flies the Channel tomorrow, despite hell or high water."

He regarded the pistol thoughtfully, then stuck it into his greatcoat pocket.

That evening Dr. Jefferies of America, without his famous coonskin cap, visited some questionable places. They were not hard to find in Dover. Seamen of the fleet, smugglers, hard-bitten gentry from near and far, abounded; and just now, with the crowds on hand from London for the great sight, quite a few rascals had come down from the metropolis for the pickings.

For one as shrewd as Jefferies, with the clink of sovereigns in his hand, it was no trick at all to get a couple of men willing to risk the gallows for a bit of pay.

At four in the morning, with a cold wan moon hanging over against the dawn, a coach came creaking and squeaking down the lane and halted before the Hogarth farmstead. There were no dogs on the place, as Jefferies already knew; a steady barking from some farm over the hill made no alarm here.

The three men—all of whom were masked—crunched around the house, and Jefferies pointed to the back entrance.

"He'll come bolting out there. Grab him when he comes; no damage, mind! Hit him over the head if you must, but not too hard. Remember my warnings."

"Aye, Guv'nor," was the gruff response. "Then wot?"

"A cow-pen yonder, behind the barn. You'll see the light presently. Bring him. We'll tie him up there."

He tramped down the beaten path to the roofless structure, and there unhooded a dark lantern. The beam showed the balloon hanging limply from the high wire, which could be removed at will, and attached to its crazy platform. Going to the open fireplace of brick, Jefferies set down his lantern, got straw and sticks, and fell to work making a fire. When he had a blaze going, he picked up a strand of twisted straw, and then hesitated.

"A horrible thing to do!" he muttered. "A damnable thing—to destroy a man's dreams! Yet here, if ever, the end justifies the means. And this man is fool enough to neglect the greater vision for the lesser. Better to destroy his dreams, than allow him to break her heart. He'll soon mend."

He fired the straw twist. Two steps, and he was at the balloon, holding the flame to it.

The blaze caught the varnished silk instantly. There was a sudden swift roar; a spout of fire shot heavenward, lighting the stone walls, the snow, the buildings. For an instant, the shape of the balloon bellied out as though it were about to go up in air. Jefferies, leaping and stumbling back from that rush of intense heat, let fall the straw twist.

"Cakes of straw—soaked in spirits!" he grunted, shielding his face from the flames. "Good Lord! The first puff of wind would have set this thing off!"

Already the flames were dying, flickering upon the cordage and the platform, for the balloon had vanished, when he was aware of a shout, a clamor, a frantic agonized voice. In one corner were a few strips of silk; the American caught them up and stood waiting. Steps

came crunching, and Tytler appeared, half dressed, disheveled, his face contorted. The two masked men held him firmly, each by an arm.

The flickering fire lit up the scene. Beholding it, a low groan burst from Tytler; one glance showed him that the balloon was destroyed. He seemed about to slump down, then rallied and swung his distended eyes on the figure of Jefferies.

"You—who are you?" he blurted out.

Without responding Jefferies held out the strips of silk to the nearer man.

"Here you are. Tie him up, lads—"

"Jefferies!" The word burst from Tytler. Even the disguised voice was not sufficient to deceive him. "Good God, Jefferies! You can't have done this despicable thing!"

So terrible was his agony of incredulity, that Jefferies involuntarily took a backward step. Tytler strained to loose his arms; his contorted face was livid.

"False friend, false friend!" he panted out, interspersing his words with bitter oaths. "I might have expected this from an American! Oh, you devil! And you played so fair, with your fine ways and words! You knew I'd beat you, and this is your answer—put me out of the race, you and your damned French friend!"

Jefferies handed over the silken strips.

"Tie him up and gag him," he said in a hoarse voice. "Quick about it."

"Gag me? By God, you'll not!" screamed out Tytler in a sudden passionate outburst of frenzy. "I'll have the law on you! I'll stop you—I'll do it myself, you unspeakable scoundrel —"

Busied with the silk strips and the frenzied man, the two captors had small chance. One slipped. Tytler kicked the leg at his other side, burst free, and hurled himself forward. He caught up a shovel and flung himself at Jefferies, all in an instant, with a sweep of his weapon that spelled murder.

"A curse on you! Neither of you will ever reach France—neither of you!" he screamed.

He dropped limply. Jefferies, with one nimble duck and spring, was inside the murderous blow; the brass pistol struck Tytler over the head. Sobbing, he fell and lay quiet.

The American stepped back. The two masked men were staring at him.

"Wot's this?" said one. "Lumme, Guv'nor! You bean't no Amurrican?"

"Don't be silly, lads; this poor fellow is out of his head," said Jefferies calmly. "Besides, you're in for it now—your best chance is to go ahead. Tie his arms, and take him out to the coach. Mind, drive up-country fast and far. Don't let him loose until eleven of the clock at least. Here, put this silver in his pocket, give him this coat of mine, and let him go. Somewhere in the country, mind. And here's your pay."

Gold clinked. Silver and the greatcoat, for Tytler. The two lugged him out to the coach. One took the box; the other went inside with the prisoner. A gruff farewell, and the coach trundled away.

Jefferies walked back the two miles to Dover, and when he got there in the sunrise his face was white and strained.

At noon, as a gun boomed out from the castle, the vast crowd roared acclaim; and the majestic balloon, two figures in the car, soared up and away on the wind, out over the water from the cliffs, out toward France.

And as though a curse were upon it, the balloon bore ever downward toward the Channel waves. Up, as ballast went out, then down again. An hour later, the last of the ballast was gone, the waves were not twenty feet below, and the coast of France was still two miles away.

"We're accursed, accursed!" screamed Blanchard, though he knew nothing of that morning's work. Frantically, he pitched overboard food, instruments, anchor. A bound up, and then down again. The shore was a mile distant.

Blanchard looked at his imperturbable, silent companion.

"We're done, d'you hear? One last hope! Cut loose the basket, and cling to the ropes. We may ride with the bag to the shore. Ready?"

His knife was poised. Suddenly Jefferies checked him, pointed. The waves were receding. The balloon, for no apparent cause, was going up and up! A sudden gust of wind caught it and took it toward France. It was actually rising!

Jefferies looked back at the English sky. A sigh broke from him; joy was in his eyes. Blanchard yelled excitedly that they were over Calais, were safe!

"Aye, safe," said Jefferies. "A blessing's stronger than a curse, any day!"

And perhaps it was—who knows?

[The end of *Men in the Air 2—Curse or Blessing?* by Henry Bedford-Jones (as Captain Michael Gallister)]