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OF FICTION AND ADVENTURE

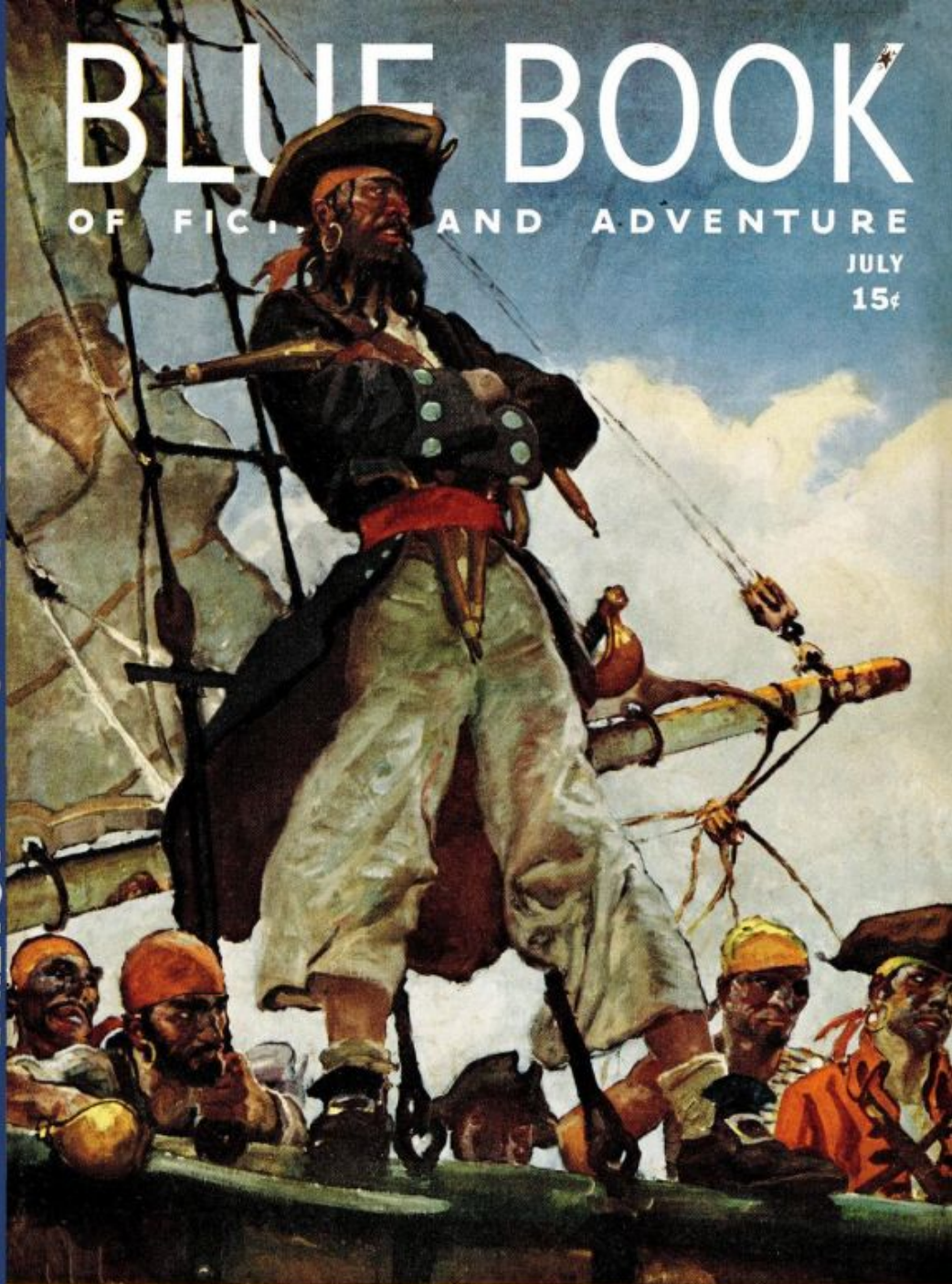
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MEIGS FROST • MICHAEL GALLISTER • ROBERT MILL
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Painted by HERBERT MORTON STOOPS to illustrate "THE DEVIL IS DEAD"

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The BAG of SMOKE

By

Henry Bedford-Jones

Writing under the pseudonym Michael Gallister.

Illustrated by L. F. Grant.

First published *Blue Book*, July 1939.

In this first of the "Men in the Air" series, the author has somewhat tampered with history in the interests of a good story—a very good story indeed. (The actual tragedy occurred after a second flight; the personal romance is wholly fictional.)

His Majesty, after examining M. de Rozier's proposal to cast off the ropes of the captive balloon at Versailles and mount into the air with the machine, has forbidden it and ordered the Lieutenant of Police to prevent it, as being too dangerous. His Majesty graciously permits the experiment to be made with two condemned criminals.

—*Gazette de Paris*, Oct. 20, 1783

The saucers on the table of the café jumped, as the young man banged down his fist. He was pale with chagrin and fury.

"Absurd! Let vile criminals have the glory of being the first men in the air?" he cried hotly. "Never! Not if I have to brave the King's anger!"

"And jump from the air into the Bastille? Hardly worth while," said his cynical companion. "What have you done about it?"

"What's *to* do? I've appealed to every one at court. They all laugh at me. They say the idea of flying through the air on a bag of smoke is all nonsense. Yet they've seen us go up with the captive balloon, you and me both!"

The Marquis d'Arlandes inhaled a pinch of snuff. He was a dried-up, blasé, tired little man with twinkling eyes, always in search of new experiences.

"You've not struck the right note," he observed shrewdly. "Always appeal to a woman, my friend. The most powerful person at court, for example, is the Duchess de Polignac, governess of the royal children."

"She'd laugh at me, like the rest," muttered Rozier, his eyes tragic.

"Very likely," Arlandes placidly agreed. "But not at me."

"Eh?" Rozier looked up hopefully.

"I shall see her within the hour; account the matter closed. But I want frankness from you, Pilatre." His piercing gaze checked the joy that rose in the younger man's face. He tapped his tortoise-and-gold snuffbox, choosing his words with care. "You and I are friends. We've been the first men in the air, you and I. We've done what no one else has ever done—ascended in that smoke-bag and looked down on Versailles and Paris from the length of the rope. Well, be frank! You want to cast off the rope entirely and take flight: why?"

"You can ask that?" Rozier broke out. "You, who have shared the thrill—"

"Tut-tut!" intervened Arlandes. "If you fly, I fly with you; it'll be a new sensation. But you're not weary of the world, as I am. You have some deeper reason; I can feel it. You're young, ardent, healthy; you've money and social position. You were born to be an idle waster. Why, then, take to the air? Already your name is famous because of what we've done. Yet you demand flight, demand it with a tragic frenzy. Why? You've nothing to gain by it."

Shrewd, cold, merciless words that cut deeply; Rozier flushed under them.

"Who is she?" demanded the other.

Rozier hesitated. This man was his friend, yes; that was why—

At his continued silence, Arlandes shrugged slightly. "Very well; you do not trust me. It is the sixteenth of November. I shall get the royal permission to make this experiment of flight on the 21st. Do you wish to accompany me?"

"You? Do I wish— Why, I must! I must!" broke out Rozier. "Do you hear? *I must!*"

The Marquis eyed him cynically.

"To a man of my age, only one thing matters; the future. To a young man like you, only the present matters. Well, then! You need either help, money or friendship; I offer all three at

your service.”

The blue eyes of Rozier softened and warmed. “Arlandes, you’re kind, but I can’t accept for your own sake. It would mean peril, risk, disgrace—even the Bastille.”

“Ah! An offence against royalty!” Arlandes became animated. His eyes twinkled anew. “Good! We’ve risked the air together, now let us risk the hospitality of the King! You mean to brave his anger?”

“No. His brother’s enmity,” said Rozier gloomily.

“Ha! Admirable!” And the Marquis positively sparkled with interest. “The Comte de Provence, eh? Monsieur, as he’s known to the world. My dear Pilatre, this dissolute, icy-hearted, ineffectual and effeminate Monsieur is probably the most contemptible person in France. He and his friend and confidant Baron Romain, are arrant rascals. A man is to be judged by his enemies; I congratulate you! Now I insist upon helping you, upon sharing your risks. Tell me your troubles!”

“Rather, my ambitions.” Pilatre de Rozier, yielding, threw out his hands in resignation. “Very well. I’ve warned you! But this is no time or place to talk. Let facts speak for me. Meet me at eight o’clock this evening, if you wish to know everything. Our destination is the house of Louise de Sancy, which fronts on La Muette park.”

“I’ll call for you at eight, in my coach,” said the Marquis. “Eh? Going now?”

“An appointment with my banker,” said the younger man.

He rose; they shook hands and parted. Rozier strode away. Arlandes sank back in the chair and looked after him, with a shake of the head.

“So she’s nipped him!” he muttered. “Poor devil. He deserves a better fate. Even if she is the most beautiful woman in Paris—”

In Paris, in France, perhaps in the world!

A glittering, facile beauty, warmed and toned by the mellow glow of the countless wax tapers—so many tapers that two wiggled and powdered footmen had full-time work in tending them. She, in her flowered brocade and pearls, was a dream of beauty, as the soft glow lit her face and figure that evening, and the violins throated soft music in the alcove, and about her like butterflies flitted the nobles and ladies of the court. She was heir to beauty and wealth and a great name, and she had cast aside conventions to enjoy life’s fullness.

Arlandes saluted her in his gay, bored, casual way, murmuring the most flagrant flattery as he bowed above her slim fingers, which a thousand other lips had kissed. Rozier came, and her eyes quickened; eager laughing eyes, lips half parted, exquisitely chiseled features all aglow. The young man kissed her fingers, and she spoke, softly.

“In half an hour; the little gold salon.”

His eyes swept her, and all his heart, his soul, in them. Her voice lifted; she called others. Here was Pilatre de Rozier, of whom all the world spoke! Rozier, who had ascended above Paris in that queer bag of smoke!

The rooms buzzed. Rozier was at once the center of all interest. Arlandes, who had also ascended in the balloon, stood back with a cynical twist of his thin lips, disregarded.

The world of Paris, like most of the outside world, had suddenly gone air-mad. In June the balloon had been invented by the Montgolfier brethren: a huge bag of hot air that soared into the sky and came down again. Animals had been carried up. Then along came the Charles brothers, with an alleged improvement—a rubber varnish that would make the cloth bag hold hydrogen gas, fourteen times lighter than air. Their bag had soared too.

Everyone rushed to the new toy. An enormous bag was fabricated, by Montgolfier, gayly decorated and adorned with the royal cipher; in this, attached to long ropes, Rozier had mounted, Arlandes had mounted—and lived to tell the tale! They had even kept it in the air, by burning straw as the inside air cooled, and sending it up again as it sank.

Silly fashion was balloon-crazy. Head-dresses, gowns, ornaments—everything was after the manner of balloons. Each ascension of the captive bag drew people by thousands. The air was conquered, said everyone; soon men would be able to ascend. Even the American envoy, Dr. Franklin, religiously attended every such affair; and the craze was said to be spreading to England and even America.

Small wonder that Louise de Sancy seized on the fad and made the most of it. She was too much of an aristocrat to receive the attentions of the police; not enough of an aristocrat to receive the attentions of the court. But the lower fringe of the court glittered around her beauty like moths, and some died like singed moths, unregarded. Licentious nobles, soldiers, prelates, fine ladies—her salons were all the rage among those who liked the turn of a card or the fall of the dice.

Rozier was mad about her; he was impetuous about everything, as his ardent eyes and glowing features testified—a straight, commanding nose, thin nostrils and mobile lips, and fire in the gaze. As he waited, he trembled with the consuming emotion that mastered him. He was alone in the little gold salon, at the end of the long hall.

It was a delightful place, the walls paneled in golden brocade, a buhl escritoire and a couple of chairs, doors at the end opening upon the cool heavy-scented conservatory, where the odor of moist earth mingled with that of flowers, and thick green fronds mounted the imitation rock walls. Then she came, with a swish and a light step and a waft of perfume, hands outstretched, a smile of intimate greeting going to his heart.

“Do you know that you’re the lion of Paris?” she exclaimed gayly. “Ah, Pilatre! You never looked so handsome! Everyone’s talking about you, about your daring, to venture up into the air!”

“That takes no daring,” he laughed.

She shuddered a little. “Ah! Terrible! But there are more dangerous places, my dear; this is one. I warned you not to come tonight. He is coming; he’ll be here any minute!”

“To the devil with him!” said Rozier. “Look! I brought you something, dear Princess of Beauty! As I was up in the air, higher even than the towers of Notre Dame, I looked down into Paris and saw a jewel; and here it is for you, with my heart and love.”

She took the morocco box he handed her, and opened it. A cry of delight trembled on her lips; with the abandon of a child, she flung herself into his arms. He held her close, but her quick impulse died, and she rescued herself from his eager kisses.

“My powder—my patches— Oh, but it’s beautiful, Pilatre!”

There was a good deal of the child about her, in fact. And about him was something tender and gracious, as though she appealed to some oddly feminine quality in him—oddly, because to all seeming he was very masculine. Perhaps it was because he was so masculine that her infantile, witless beauty called to him. She was all one thing this moment, all another thing the next, capricious and volatile.

She took the pin from its box and held it up, admiringly. A lovely creation of pearls, shimmering and fragile.

“Fasten it for me! Here!”

He came close, stooped a little; his breath came faster as his fingers fumbled. She was close and fragrant, her bosom beneath his lips; he kissed her swiftly, passionately. She seemed about to yield, when she caught a step at the door and drew away swiftly. One of the footmen came in with a low word.

He had come—the King's brother!

“My dear, my dear, you must go!” she breathed, catching at Rozier's arm, with quick terror leaping in her eyes. “Promise me, for my sake, for my sake! Think what it would mean to me, if you had any trouble! Remember, the Baron will be with him.”



“My dear, you must go!” she breathed.

Rozier stiffened imperceptibly.

“Very well,” he said gravely. “For your sake, then. When shall I see you?”

“In four days,” she said. “On Monday. Here, at four. And tell me quickly! Are you going to travel in the air? I hear the King has forbidden it.”

“He will permit it,” said Rozier. “Yes. Will you come to see us ascend?”

“Of course! All Paris will come. On Monday, then; at four.”

A hasty touch of her lips, and she was gone, leaving the young man radiant with joy.



The Marquis d'Arlandes slipped into his greatcoat and walked away, humming a light tune as he went.

Something moved in the conservatory, from which several openings gave upon the larger rooms beyond; a step sounded; a resplendent figure appeared. It was Arlandes, in his colonel's uniform and epaulettes. He nodded unconcernedly.

"So! I thought you might be here. The royal gentleman has come, and his damned soul, Baron Romain."

Rozier scarcely heard the words.

"Arlandes, she's an angel!" he exclaimed ecstatically. "An angel! I promised her I'd leave at once and avoid trouble. She's the very soul of innocence and purity; she doesn't know what it means to have those rascals under her roof."

"Wonderful!" The Marquis regarded him with ironic admiration. "If I could be you for one month, I'd give half my estates!"

"Eh? You mean, you love her also?"

"God forbid!" said Arlandes devoutly, and he was not noted for his devotion. "Shall I deal you the blow? Reason argues against it; you'd hate me on the spot, and you'd believe nothing. Yet if I don't, another will, and with less mercy or love for you."

"What the devil are you talking about?" demanded Rozier with a bewildered air.

The Marquis took a pinch of snuff, deliberately. "You should hear the tongues clacking in there, the click of gold on the board!" said he. "Your name is everywhere. You're the talk of Paris. You wish to fly, and the King refuses to permit such mad folly. My dear fellow, you're the rage, the craze! If you fly, it's said you'll go to the moon, vanish in the heavens, crash to earth and break your neck—or catch fire and burn up, you and the bag together. Naturally, then, you're the most famous person in France at this moment. Like the fabled Dædalus of Greece, the first man to fly in the air, your name will go down the ages as the first man who did, in fact, take flight!"

Rozier's brow knitted. "Stuff and nonsense," he said sharply. "And you know it."

"Of course. But this, my dear Pilatre, is what she sees in you. Not the man, but the figure. She borrows luster from you. Jealousy is provoked in others—richer, greater than you. She urges you to the flight, to the wild burst of fame and glory—"

Now Rozier, who had become very pale, suddenly broke in upon the sardonic words.

"Enough! Don't dare utter such things!" he exclaimed in a tense, hard voice. "I know you're jesting, playing with me, in your bitter disillusioned way. If I thought you were serious, I'd kill you here and now."

The Marquis eyed him attentively, and nodded. "Yes; I believe you would." He broke into his quick, charming smile. "Forgive the jest, my dear Pilatre! I meant no harm, be assured. I'll say no more."

He extended his hand. Rozier grasped it, relaxed, hesitated.

"Why," he asked, "should you say such things, even in jest? There must be some basis for your words, some thought in your heart, some misconception of her. Tell me what it is, frankly! Tell me, so I can show you the truth about her."

"No, no!" exclaimed Arlandes. "You wear a sword; you might carry out your threat."

Keenly Rozier's gaze searched his face. "We're friends. I'd like you to respect her as I do. Tell me!"

“The devil! You’d put all my good resolutions to flight?”

“If it would help, yes.” Rozier smiled. His court suit of sky-blue velvet trimmed with silver was very becoming. It lent him a boyish air. “You’ve heard gossip about her?”

“That’s it, yes.” The Marquis nodded, not without relief. “Even the Sancy wealth cannot provide such entertainment as is here found, such a life as she lives. So, it’s said, she profits by the gaming here! And the vile tongues of rumor, touching on the protection given her by Monsieur, on her friendship with Baron Romain—well, you can guess that it has all disturbed me, since learning your secret. You’re not angry with me for saying it?”

Rozier was angry, yes, but his anger had been disarmed.

“Gossip and rumor, vile scandal of idle envy!” he said slowly. “You should know better than to believe such things of her. That Baron Romain is a specter of evil, that he pursues her, I know very well; she is in bitter fear of him. But because he’s the friend and confidant of Monsieur, she has to make the best of it.”

“She’s in fear of him!” repeated Arlandes, as though stupefied.

Rozier nodded.

“Yes. She’s told me so. She wants no trouble between us, therefore. I’m going to take her out of all this, away from Paris, to England perhaps. In a few weeks, do you understand? We go together, she and I. There! Now do you believe me?”

The Marquis swallowed hard, and again grasped his hand, warmly.

“My dear fellow! I believe you absolutely, implicitly! Forget my words, my crediting this scandalous gossip. If you say she’s an angel, then I’ll swear to the fact. Even,” he added with his cynical twinkle, “if the Holy Scriptures make no mention of female angels.”

Rozier smiled. “Good. Wait here—I’ll find a footman and have him bring our things.”

He strode into the conservatory and vanished. Marquis d’Arlandes rolled his eyes to heaven and exhaled a deep breath.

“God forgive me, I didn’t have the heart to go through with it!” he muttered. “Angel of innocence and purity—save the mark! She’s playing him against Romain, of course. Not to mention Monsieur, who’s probably tired of her by this time. Romain’s an adventurer and a rogue, an Italian who’s insinuated himself into the friendship of Monsieur. It’s very lucky that these vile scandalous tongues never linked my name with that of the fair Louise! Faith, I played in luck and no mistake, that time! It’s a damned shame that she should have trapped the boy—”

He broke off, listening; a startled expression leaped into his face. He stepped quickly into the conservatory, then came to a halt, and bowed.

Before him, closed in by the flowers and greenery, Rozier stood facing two glittering figures. The one, Monsieur, a man still under thirty, handsome in the Bourbon way. The other, Romain, a gaunt, dark-eyed man, decorations blazing on his brocade vest, his swarthy features marked by jutting nose and jutting chin, a smolder in his dark gaze.

“Ha! You, Arlandes!” exclaimed Monsieur. “What are you doing here?”

The Marquis bowed again, respectfully. “Assisting M. de Rozier,” he said with deliberate challenge. Then he smiled and added: “Assisting him, I should say, to fly to the moon, Your Highness!”

Monsieur, not certain whether he were being mocked or flattered, grunted and looked at Rozier.

“You’re an impertinent fellow,” he said. Obviously, there had been some passages of words. “It does not please me to see you in this house. Is the hint sufficient?”

Rozier bowed. “Your Highness! Your word is my law. I regret that no one informed me you had purchased this property.”

The lips of Arlandes twitched; the Prince became pale with anger. Romain spoke, with a subtle sneer.

“Luckily for M. de Rozier, His Majesty has forbidden his proposed journey in the air, for it would assuredly end in the moon!”

“Enough!” struck in Monsieur haughtily. “You are excused, M. de Rozier.”

The young man, livid, bowed and turned.

Arlandes flung him a word.

“Wait for me in the coach. I have a request to proffer His Highness.”

Rozier departed. Monsieur shot the Marquis an angry look.

“You, M. le Marquis? A request?”

Arlandes bowed again. “The presence of that young man, Your Highness, is, shall we say, inconvenient? He is ardent, impetuous, headstrong. Now, he is resolved to journey through the air; His Majesty has forbidden it. But I have certain influences at work, and if Your Highness would graciously speak a word in the King’s ear, permission might be given to make the flight.”

Monsieur’s petulant features darkened. “Why the devil should I help the rascal?”

“Oh! Why not—since he’d certainly end in the moon?” Arlandes waved his lace handkerchief airily. “Or else with a broken neck. The quick wit of Your Highness will perceive—”

“Ha!” exclaimed the Prince. “Upon my word, an excellent idea! Let the fellow do it, eh? Yes, yes! I’ll speak to my brother in the morning. Excellent, excellent!”

A light step, a peal of laughing welcome; Louise de Sancy appeared. The two saluted her; she curtsied to Monsieur, accepted his arm, and departed with him, looking into his eyes and laughing gayly. Baron Romain glanced after them, speculatively, darkly.

“You are not, by any chance, jealous of the blood royal?” came the mocking voice of Arlandes.

The Baron swung around quickly.

“You address me, M. le Marquis?”

“La, no!” Arlandes waved his handkerchief again. “I address myself, my poor unworthy *alter ego*—” He broke off, as his handkerchief flipped the Baron’s face. “A thousand apologies! Ten thousand, my dear Baron—” His hand, this time, slapping the swarthy features hard. His mocking voice went on. “Oh! A hundred thousand, by all means!”

And once more his fingers lashed. This time, a ring on his hand drew blood.

Romain stepped back, hand on sword, a murderous expression convulsing his face. Words drove from him in fury.

“You’ll answer to me for that! You’ll answer tomorrow!”

“Impossible, my dear Baron!” Arlandes dusted his uniform lapels. “I’m on duty for the next four days—until noon of the fourth day, to be exact—at the palace. At noon of Monday, then, I’m free. Shall we say sunset of Monday, in the little park of the Bois by the Neuilly gate?”

“There are laws against dueling,” snapped the Italian, wiping a drop of blood from his cheek.

“Yes, assassination would be safer,” the Marquis rejoined, with a pert nod. “Within half an hour, however, all the world will know how you got that scratch. So you might find assassination unwise. You might have the police on hand to interfere with our rendezvous; in that case, all Paris will know you for a poltroon, a coward, and in fact the arrant rascal that you really are! No, my dear Baron; meet me alone, on the Monday. You have no other course, I assure you!”

Laughing, he departed, humming a gay air.



“Jump!” said Arlandes, and leaped. But the balloon, swinging down, enveloped Rozier.

Baron Romain actually had no choice in the matter. Italians were not loved; favorites of Monsieur were not loved; unless he did precisely as he was told, he could well imagine himself hissed out of France. Being an adept at fencing, however, Baron Romain speedily recovered his good humor; to do him justice, he was no coward at all. . . .

Two days later the news broke like a bombshell over Paris; the King had given his consent to the experiment! The Marquis d’Arlandes had permission to attempt an aerial voyage in the new Montgolfier balloon; and Pilatre de Rozier was going with him, being expert in handling the bag of smoke!

The Academy of Sciences was to oversee the experiment, with Dr. Franklin and others in nominal charge. From royalty down to the gutter was a fever of excitement. If a mere gas-bag soaring in the air could stir the imagination of everyone, the idea of men going into the air with that bag conveyed a supreme thrill.

Arguments raged. They would disappear forever; they would conquer the realm of the air; they would break their necks. Montgolfier gave the use of the balloon, but said the thing was perilous. . . . Discussions raged near and far. Amid it all, Arlandes remained cool and aloof: he was on duty; therefore all arrangements were in Rozier’s hands.

On the Monday morning, early, Rozier sought him out, blazing with eagerness.

“My friend! It’s all arranged. The balloon’s being installed now!”

“Where?”

“In La Muette park, just opposite her house.”

The eyes of Arlandes flew wide with astonishment, then twinkled.

“Name of the devil! You’re serious?”

“Of course,” said Rozier. “The police are keeping an open space for the Academy, the court; your regiment is to be on guard and keep the crowds back. The first men in the air—do you understand? Dependent on the weather, of course.”

“Good!” exclaimed the Marquis, laughing. “You’ll be in charge; you’re the captain. I’ll be crew, and stoke the fires. I insist! My dear fellow, it’s the first chance in my life to do something useful. Don’t deprive me of the honor. By the way, have you seen her again?”

“No. I’ve been busy. I’m to see her at four this afternoon.”

The eyes of the Marquis sparkled; his thin lips twisted with ironic humor. Suddenly Rozier turned to him, recollecting.

“I’ve heard rumors of some trouble between you and Romain. Word’s going around that you slapped his face. It’s not true?”

“An exaggeration, I assure you,” said the Marquis, who had himself spread those rumors. “I flicked his face with my handkerchief, and apologized for it.”

“Really?”

“Upon my word of honor.”

“Oh! I’m relieved; I heard a blow had been given.” Rozier brightened. “If that jackal intrudes upon me again, I intend to chastise him myself.”

“I thought you would,” said the Marquis. “I shall expect the honor of serving as your second, when the time comes. When do we start for the moon?”

“Tomorrow noon, if that suits you.”

So agreed. Rozier posted off to the Murette gardens, and for the rest of the day had his hands full; he was, as predicted, the most famous person in all Paris. Buoyant, gay, alive with eagerness, he saw to every preparation himself, was cheered by the crowds, already gathering, and by the many notables who came to watch the proceedings.

At four o'clock he borrowed a riding-coat, crammed a hat over his eyes, got through the masses of people unrecognized, and made his way to the house opposite the park. A lackey admitted him and took him to the little gold salon, to await Louise de Sancy.

And there the destiny which Arlandes was trying so carefully to avert, or at least to postpone, overtook him.

With the wan sun quivering at the horizon, Arlandes left his coach in the Bois and walked briskly to the little park near the Neuilly barrier. The evening was cool but clear. Among the trees he found Baron Romain pacing up and down. The Baron turned to him as he approached, with an impatient word.

"M. le Marquis, this is all absurd. Even by the code, it is illegal without seconds—"

"You're right," broke in the Marquis. "But it's the height of wisdom, not of folly, my dear Baron. Seconds are witnesses to what's a crime in the eyes of the law. As it is, we're alone; no one is in sight—we may kill each other with impunity."

"A truce to your jesting," exclaimed Romain savagely. "I've no desire to kill you!"

"But I, M. le Baron, have a most damnable determination to kill you!" Arlandes threw off his greatcoat, threw off coat and vest, and drew his sword. "Ready?"

"Then, you fool, you'll be the one to perish," said Romain. "*En garde!*"

The blades clicked. . . .

In a matter of minutes—three, to be exact—the Marquis d'Arlandes donned his waistcoat and coat, slipped into his greatcoat and walked away briskly, humming a light tune as he went. At this hour, the spot was quite deserted. It was even more deserted, in fact, than when he had arrived.

Two hours later Arlandes knew the worst. He sat staring at Pilatre de Rozier—wordless, deeply alarmed in his cynical soul; yet in a way relieved that the crisis had come and gone again.

Rozier was pale as death itself; he had aged ten years; his dress was disheveled; his blue eyes looked stricken.

"It was for this!" he mumbled. "It was for this! For this I gave her everything, money, honor, loyalty, devotion!"

"I comprehend that your eyes have been opened," said Arlandes, rallying. "But I don't understand why. Who told you? Not she herself, surely?"

A bitter laugh shook the younger man.

"She herself, yes! I was waiting in the gold salon; there was a letter half-written on the *escritoire*. Her own writing. I did not mean to read it, but a name caught my eye; I could not help myself; it drew me like an accursed magnet! Dishonorable? If you like. It matters not. A letter to Baron Romain. It told me everything; what no one would have dared to utter in my presence—everything! Now I must find Romain tonight and kill him."

"Ah!" murmured Arlandes, brightening. "Decidedly, my efforts have not been wasted, after all!"

"What did you say?" asked Rozier.

“My efforts are all to help you, my dear Pilatre. I have news. Some one told me, as I was on the way here, that Romain was just found dead, supposedly in a duel. No details. To tell the truth, I feared you might have been responsible.”

“Dead!” echoed Rozier dazedly, and wet his lips. “Romain—dead!” He stared at Arlandes. “You knew all this, about her! You tried to tell me!”

“Yes,” replied the other simply. “It’s no secret. She loves no one; she’s incapable of love, an infinitely shallow and superficial person. Now let me advise you to dine well, drink deeply, and think on the morrow. We’ll dine together. The Dauphin of France, the child who’ll one day be king, is to see us off tomorrow! No protests; silence, I beseech you, commend yourself to my hands! The future is all wrecked, yes; but remember that I depend on you to manage that accursed balloon tomorrow.” . . .

Noon. A vast, surging crowd, tumultuous and hoarse, massed outside the lines of soldiers that kept the Muette gardens clear. Inside, nobility, ladies of the court, the little Dauphin himself; members of the Academy watched from the terrace of Dr. Franklin’s house in nearby Passy. The balloon, a huge gaudy thing decorated with gay bunting, the wicker basket poorly balanced, tugged at its mooring-lines.

Rozier, stripped to his shirt, worked like a madman, and Arlandes helped. Packets of straw were fed into the iron pan whose funnel carried the hot air into the bag above. Suddenly a gust of wind doubled over the bag. There was a ripping noise. Rents appeared.

Women to the rescue! Fine court ladies rushed to aid; pins and stitches closed the rents. Rozier worked harder. An hour of delay, and all was ready once more. Trumpets blew; drums rolled.

“Cast off everything!” shouted Rozier.

The ropes were cast off. The great bag rose; Arlandes, waving his lace handkerchief to the crowd, saw the whole mass of people dumb with awe and wonder. The balloon hung in air, and Rozier cried out savagely:

“You’re doing nothing! Get to work! We’re not going up!”

“Pardon,” said the Marquis, and put up his handkerchief. “Look! There’s no motion—the earth is moving; we’re standing still!”

He plunged at the task, stuffing straw into the iron fire-pan. Bunting and decorations hung all around, closing him in. More straw, and more, until Rozier was satisfied. Then, joining his companion, Arlandes looked down. The balloon was over two thousand feet up.



“What good is a newborn child?”

“We’re moving—look!” he cried, excitement banishing his weary boredom. “There’s the Oise and Conflans! I recognize St. Denis, St. Germain! And directly under us, is the Visitation!”

“Also the river,” responded Rozier, who, worn and haggard, showed no elation, no excitement. “Fire! More fire!”

They both pitched in this time, shaking out the straw to make it burn better. The bag mounted, stayed high. They paused for observations.

“We started to cross the river, but we’re not crossing,” exclaimed Arlandes. “Look! We’re moving along the river. . . . What’s that?”

The bag above them emitted a ripping snort, and another. Arlandes darted to the other side, looked upward and called sharply. Rozier joined him, and he pointed to half a dozen holes in the bag.

“More straw,” said Rozier with perfect calmness, and fell to work.

Again they mounted. Now the fitful wind changed, swept them hither and thither; they drifted across the very roofs of Paris, mounted once more, and then began an inexorable descent. The holes were increasing in number; the bag was coming apart at the bottom.

Down and down—ahead, open country, windmills, trees. They were coming down, but not rapidly.

“Ready to jump for it,” said Rozier, and climbed to the edge of the wicker basket, holding by the cordage. Arlandes, on the opposite side, to keep the basket balanced, did the same. The ground swept nearer; the movement was slow, majestic; there was no danger.

“Jump!” said Arlandes, and leaped.

The basket was almost touching the ground. He did not even fall to the earth, but—recovering balance, turned. A cry broke from him.

The balloon had leaped up, with his weight gone; and it had turned over, the bag swinging down and doubling, enveloping Rozier and hiding him from sight. For Rozier had failed to jump.

The bag doubled farther. Then, like a plummet, bag and basket suddenly rushed at the ground. Smoke went up from the débris; the thought of fire in his brain, Arlandes leaped for the ruins, stamped out the straw, kicked aside the firepot, frantically called Rozier.

He pulled his companion clear at last—only to lower him gently to the earth and to support on his arm the dying head.

The blue eyes flickered open and met the pitying, anguished gaze of Arlandes.

“What no one—ever did before!” faintly murmured Rozier. He smiled. “After all, I still love her. Tell her—”

His voice fluttered out. Still smiling, his eyes settled steadily upon vacancy.

After a moment, Arlandes came to his feet and drew his greatcoat over the battered figure. He made the sign of the Cross. A sigh, a deep breath, shook him.

“Too brave, too noble, too devoted!” he said sadly. “No wonder the gods were jealous.”

Upon the terrace of Dr. Franklin’s house in Passy, the gentlemen who were watching the balloon drift from sight turned to their host with a burst of excited comments. One voice was lifted in frank scorn.

“What’s the use of such things? I ask you, monsieur, what good are these balloons?”

Dr. Franklin regarded the speaker a moment; then he smiled his gentle, ineffable smile.

“My friend, I answer your question with another. What good is a newborn child?”

[The end of *The Bag of Smoke* by Henry Bedford-Jones (as Captain Michael Gallister)]