

The Destroyer

by Edgar Wallace, 1875-1932

Published: 1910
in »Weekly Tale-Teller«



OVER by Voisney a heliograph made a great trembling splash of light.

„Answer,“ said the captain, and the corporal tapped the key of the little mirror which stood on a thin-edged tripod before him.

„*Le Zallach en vol*,“ he read, and monsieur the captain swore.

„Send back,“ he said briefly, and a chasseur behind him waved a flag rapidly.

So the news went back to the camp, to the tent before which the tricolour of France flew, to the stout, red-faced man who sat at a table, his head in his hands, studying a map of the country west of Nancy.

The Zallach was flying. The news went like wildfire through the lines. Men sitting in little circles about their tiny fires—it is cold in October in the open country about Nancy—rose and stared blankly and helplessly at the darkening East.

The artillerymen did not rise, for they had only just returned from a hard day's fighting, but they grabbed their food and ate rapidly, knowing that they would be required presently. The 14th Cavalry did not rise because they had been chasing the Zallach for a week, and were sore men, body and soul.

„My friend,“ said the general to the chief of staff, „my friend, this Zallach is an accursed nuisance!“ He was a fat, jolly general, and his tone was one of comical despair.

„In the great war we fought men—men who grovelled and crawled on their stomachs like worms. It was crawl for crawl with us. We saw them creeping through a field and we crept after them; we watched them wriggle round a hill and we wriggled forward to check them. But now we fight birds!“

He shook his head tragically.

On his map, veined blue and red with innumerable lines, were black squares methodically painted. They lay for the main part where blue road-vein and red railway-artery came together in a chaotic ganglion.

„Here,“ he said, and stuffed his finger upon such a square, „here Madame Zallach destroyed the line, hindering the mobilisation of the 10th Army Corps. Here she came slowly to earth and destroyed the bridge over the Loire, to my embarrassment, and now——“

Contrary to all expectations, no decisive battle had yet been fought between the opposing armies. Since the memorable day when Spain's defeat at El-Malabi had necessitated the occupation of the north of Morocco by French troops, war had been inevitable. It was precipitated by the accidental shelling of the other Power's consulate at El Malabi by a French battery.

But the one decisive battle which military experts demanded to open and close the war had not been waged. Rather the two armies sparred cautiously, making certain preparations. Chief of the instruments of preparation had been the Zallach—officially „his Majesty's airship, Zallach IV.“

A great ship this, that could rise and fall at will, go up against a gale or run before it, lower engineers on dark nights to destroy culvert and bridge, and then, before the alarm could be given—whir-r-r! She was up again, her big aluminium nose pointing to the stars, her car canted to an uncomfortable angle, but the men, clutching desperately at her cane rails safe, despite their discomfort.

Twice had the general had her within range, once at dawn, once under his searchlights; but neither field nor aerial artillery came into action as quickly as she went buzzing out of range, a monstrous yellow bee, leaving her sting behind.

„She is not yet in sight, general,“ reported the chief of staff, but the stout general sat at the table before his map, saying nothing.

„She demoralises the men—she is a nightmare,“ continued the staff officer; „she is Atropos“ (he had a passion for the classics, this chief of staff), „Lachesis, Clotho——“

„And you are Cassandra, the son of the devil,“ said the general, whose mythology was nil. „Send Monsieur Pelletier to me.“

The staff officer saluted and retired.

He came back in a few minutes with a youth who wore a Norfolk suit of unmistakable English cut but whose Parisianism was best displayed in the amplitude of his cravat.

„Monsieur Pelletier,“ said the general, „I am inclined to risk your valuable life.“

The young man smiled cheerfully.

„My friend, Madame Zallach“—the general waved his hand to the door of his tent—„causes me annoyance. Moreover, she is dangerous. She is apparently the

only thing that can move over this infernal country by night without falling into a ditch. My artillery cannot reach her, because she knows where the guns are parked and avoids the locality; also she sees us when we take our guns out and goes another way."

The young man bowed again.

"Therefore," said the general more slowly and gravely than was his wont, "I particularly desire that she should be destroyed."

He walked to one end of the tent and took up a small box. It was the size of a tea-chest and fairly light. The lid was fastened with a lock, and this he opened; and, gingerly removing the fine shavings at the top, revealed a curiously-shaped bomb. It was little larger than an orange, but from every part of its surface protruded long, thin hooks and spikes. At one side of the sphere was a light steel staple.

"I have had this made according to your directions, and you will find that it is timed for thirty seconds; you understand, mon vieux?"

"Parfaitement, mon general," said the boy.

"I have decided," the commander went on, "that you shall take with you Monsieur Le Brun."

The youth turned with a stare of blank astonishment.

"But, general," he protested. "Monsieur Le Brun! It is impossible! Monsieur Le Brun! He is a biplane man—we are not agreed—general, you embarrass me."

"Nevertheless," said the general, with a gesture to the world at large, "nevertheless—for the glory of France—besides which," he added thoughtfully, "there is no other aeroplanist in the camp."

The young man drew himself up, bowed, and departed to change. After all, he reflected, it might be worse. But for Le Brun breaking his crankshaft, the task might have been his; and he, Pelletier, might have been obliged to ride a passenger on a preposterous biplane.

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"ARE you all right?" Pelletier spoke coldly over his shoulder at the man behind him. Le Brun, of the Engineers, himself a famous aeroplanist, was crouching behind him in the boat-like body of the monoplane, and between his knees was the little box no bigger than a small tea-chest.

"All right," he said dubiously; "though, Monsieur Pelletier, you understand that I do not approve of monoplanes; to me, for the ultimate conquest of the air, we must look only to the biplane. Every—"

"I will spare you, monsieur," said the young man with ominous calm, "a lecture on aeronautics, more especially since my own experiments have not been without result."

"In the matter of stability—" began Le Brun.

"Monsieur," said the other, his voice trembling, "you are on the subject most tender to me."

He looked down at the circle of curious soldiers and reached his hand to the general.

"I can just see her," he said, and pointed ahead to where, on the skyline, like a black pencil-mark in the blue-black east, the Zallach hovered.

"Bon voyage, mes braves," said the general, and Pelletier started the motor.

"Hold on!" he said, and six men gripped the light framework of the machine.

"Whir-r-r!" roared the engines, and the thin propeller at the bow whistled round, a blue haze marking its presence.

„Let go!“

The machine leapt forward, running along the level plain at thirty miles an hour, gathering speed as it moved. Pelletier's hands were on the two wheels at his side, his feet on the rudder treads, his eyes fixed ahead.

„Bump, bump, bump!“ rushed the monoplane over the uneven ground, then Pelletier cautiously turned his wheels forward, and the two planes at the side of the ship rose obediently. The bumping ceased, there was only a slight swaying from side to side, otherwise the boat seemed to be stationary. Over the side the world was slipping past; the camp was already far behind, and Pelletier pressed the rudder tread and brought the planes back over the camp again.

Twice he circled, ever rising, the camp beneath him growing smaller and smaller till the lines of the bivouacked troops spread beneath him like a gridiron.

„We are now?“ he asked, and Le Brun consulted the tiny barometer before him.

„Two hundred metres,“ he said grudgingly. „Had this been a biplane of the Voison-Farman type, we should—“

„Thank you, monsieur,“ said Pelletier with elaborate politeness.

„It is very cold,“ grumbled the man at his back.

„It would be colder on a biplane,“ said the other, and grinned into the darkness.

Le Brun said nothing; but, after a while, he asked:

„Shall I put out the bomb, m'sieur?“

„Wait until we are clear of the camp, I pray you,“ said the pilot, and headed the monoplane due north.

All the time the Mignonette was rising, and in the thinner atmosphere she slowed to forty kilometres an hour.

Pelletier was taking a sweep that would bring him up on the blind side of the Zallach. To go flying straight out to the enemy with the afterglow of sunset at his back would be courting calamity. Silhouetted against the evening sky, he would be a fair mark for the riflemen of Madame.

„If monsieur will hang out the bomb,“ he suggested as the plane cleared the outlying pickets—tiny black dots moving slowly below. Le Brun opened the box, lifted the little black orange carefully, clipped the trailing line to the staple, and lowered it through the bottomless „floor“ of the car.

Slowly, slowly, he lowered it, and as slowly Pelletier brought the planes a fraction higher to compensate the disturbed balance.

Le Brun watched the operation with professional interest. He was impressed. He said as much with characteristic generosity.

„I had no idea that a monoplane—“ he said; „yet, if you will pardon me, my friend, I should have thought that your great ingenuity would be better employed on a machine of a more—“

„M. Le Brun,“ said Pelletier, „I am overwhelmed by your praise and appalled by your judgment.“

The tiny barometer before Le Brun showed 500 metres, and Pelletier chuckled ruefully.

„This is nearly a record, mon ami,“ he said, „but there is no prix d'altitude for our little Mignonette.“

„It is very cold,“ grumbled Le Brun, evading responsive praise.

Pelletier brought the plane slowly round to the east; all the time he had been watching the faint outlines of the big dirigible, and judged it to be three miles away, and flying at 300 metres, its favourite height.

It was moving slowly northward at right angles to him, and judging that he had crossed its track he turned southward, so that it would pass him on his right.

He was, he knew, well out of sight, for the monoplane, with its flat surfaces, offered no bulk, and besides, darkness had fallen on the world, save for the pearl-grey glow in the west.

„We are much higher than she,“ he said. „I hope she is moving.“

His only danger lay in the dirigible remaining stationary, for then, with her engines stopped, the whirring of his propeller would be plainly audible. Nearer and nearer the Mignonette crept, and the progress seemed slow though she was moving at thirty miles an hour, and through his night-glasses Le Brun watched.

„She’s moving,“ he said, „and if I’m any judge of perspective we’re about 100 metres too high.“

Her „deck“ was visible now, but it was too dark to see the figures of her crew. Pelletier put his helm over to starboard and brought the Mignonette directly in the track of the balloon, then—

„She’s higher than I thought,“ said Le Brun quickly. „Look! there goes her searchlight—she wouldn’t dare use that under four hundred metres.“

From the deck shot a long white beam that moved downward. Le Brun saw a little round patch of the green earth appear at the end of the ray, saw the glitter of a thread of river, and a grain of humanity on a white road.

„One of our cavalry outposts,“ he said. „So long as they keep the light down we are safe.“

He glued his glasses to his eyes and watched in silence.

Nearer and nearer swept the little destroyer through the air.

„They’ve stopped!“ whispered Le Brun fiercely; „plane, plane, for God’s sake!“

Pelletier’s hand went out to shut off the engine. He could plane down to his victim without risk, but he was too late.

The white beam jerked up from its survey of the world below, and began searching the heavens. Left and right, up and down it waved with fierce energy.

„Now!“ said Pelletier between his teeth, and dipped his planes. Gathering speed as it slipped down the velvet path of air, the Mignonette came hurtling through space. 200 metres, a hundred, then the searchlight found her, and the white light glared in Pelletier’s face. But he was prepared. Swiftly he adjusted the smoked glasses that were on his forehead.

„Zipp—zipp—zizz!“

„Air-guns,“ muttered Le Brun. „I thought the devils wouldn’t risk the rifle at this altitude.“

He steadied the swaying bomb that hung between his knees, drew it gently up until it was flush with his foot-rest.

Then the light went out; they were in the upward-cast shadow of the balloon.

„Wait, wait!“ screamed Pelletier over his shoulder; „we have overshot them.“

„A biplane,“ muttered Le Brun, „would not have over-shot them.“

The mono’ tilted alarmingly as it swung round again; the searchlight was thrusting into the darkness in a vain search; it found the monoplane for the second time as it came flying backward to the attack.

„Zip! zip!“

Le Brun felt something slap the side of his head, and shook it like a dog. He felt something warm on his face.

„Now!“ yelled Pelletier, and Le Brun slipped a catch and dropped the bomb.

„Zip! zip!“

The searchlight was on them, but the Mignonette was flying at hurricane speed to safety.

Away, away she flew, lower and lower, until looking backward Le Brun saw the big body of the dirigible was above him, and two hundred metres in rear.

„We’ve failed!“ he whispered, and cursed—mainly he cursed human stupidity that put its faith in a boat with wings.

„If it struck the bag it will hold,“ Pelletier shouted. „We’ve got about ten more seconds to get out of hell!“

One, two, three!

They were well clear of danger now, for the searchlight had gone out, but there was the risk of wind from the explosion.

„Crash!“

The very heavens seemed to burst into flame and fall; a mighty wind swept the monoplane over to its side, lifted it and threw it through space.

„Hold on!“ yelled Pelletier.

* * * * *

HALF an hour later he planed down before the general’s tent, a white-faced, dishevelled youth, with lines about his eyes.

„Finished,“ he said sleepily, and tumbled out of his seat like a log. Le Brun descended slowly after him. He seemed to be considering something, then, as Pelletier turned to direct the soldiers who were handling the airship, he said:

„Monsieur, it is due to you to say that nothing but a monoplane could have turned two somersaults in the air, and righted itself at the end. I would add,“ he said sleepily reflective, „that the biplane would not have turned the somersault, but that is beside the point.“

