



Filmer

H. G. Wells

Published: 1901

Categorie(s): Fiction, Short Stories

Source: <http://en.wikisource.org>

Filmer

H. G. Wells

Published: 1901

Category(s): Fiction, Short Stories

Source: <http://en.wikisource.org>

About Wells:

Herbert George Wells, better known as H. G. Wells, was an English writer best known for such science fiction novels as *The Time Machine*, *The War of the Worlds*, *The Invisible Man* and *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. He was a prolific writer of both fiction and non-fiction, and produced works in many different genres, including contemporary novels, history, and social commentary. He was also an outspoken socialist. His later works become increasingly political and didactic, and only his early science fiction novels are widely read today. Wells, along with Hugo Gernsback and Jules Verne, is sometimes referred to as "The Father of Science Fiction". Source: Wikipedia

Also available on Feedbooks Wells:

- *The War of the Worlds* (1898)
- *The Time Machine* (1895)
- *A Modern Utopia* (1905)
- *The Invisible Man* (1897)
- *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896)
- *Tales of Space and Time* (1900)
- *The Sleeper Awakes* (1910)
- *The Food of the Gods and How It Came to Earth* (1904)
- *The Story of the Inexperienced Ghost* (1902)
- *The First Men in the Moon* (1901)

Copyright: This work is available for countries where copyright is Life+50 or in the USA (published before 1923).

Note: This book is brought to you by Feedbooks

<http://www.feedbooks.com>

Strictly for personal use, do not use this file for commercial purposes.

In truth the mastery of flying was the work of thousands of men— this man a suggestion and that an experiment, until at last only one vigorous intellectual effort was needed to finish the work. But the inexorable injustice of the popular mind has decided that of all these thousands, one man, and that a man who never flew, should be chosen as the discoverer, just as it has chosen to honour Watt as the discoverer of steam and Stephenson of the steam-engine. And surely of all honoured names none is so grotesquely and tragically honoured as poor Filmer's, the timid, intellectual creature who solved the problem over which the world had hung perplexed and a little fearful for so many generations, the man who pressed the button that has changed peace and warfare and well-nigh every condition of human life and happiness. Never has that recurring wonder of the littleness of the scientific man in the face of the greatness of his science found such an amazing exemplification. Much concerning Filmer is, and must remain, profoundly obscure—Filmers attract no Boswells—but the essential facts and the concluding scene are clear enough, and there are letters, and notes, and casual allusions to piece the whole together. And this is the story one makes, putting this thing with that, of Filmer's life and death.

The first authentic trace of Filmer on the page of history is a document in which he applies for admission as a paid student in physics to the Government laboratories at South Kensington, and therein he describes himself as the son of a "military bootmaker" ("cobbler" in the vulgar tongue) of Dover, and lists his various examination proofs of a high proficiency in chemistry and mathematics. With a certain want of dignity he seeks to enhance these attainments by a profession of poverty and disadvantages, and he writes of the laboratory as the "gaol" of his ambitions, a slip which reinforces his claim to have devoted himself exclusively to the exact sciences. The document is endorsed in a manner that shows Filmer was admitted to this coveted opportunity; but until quite recently no traces of his success in the Government institution could be found.

It has now, however, been shown that in spite of his professed zeal for research, Filmer, before he had held this scholarship a year, was tempted, by the possibility of a small increase in his immediate income, to abandon it in order to become one of the nine-pence-an-hour computers employed by a well-known Professor in his vicarious conduct of those extensive researches of his in solar physics—researches which are still a matter of perplexity to astronomers. Afterwards, for the space of seven years, save for the pass lists of the London University, in which he is seen to climb slowly to a double first class B.Sc., in mathematics and chemistry, there is no evidence of how Filmer passed his life. No one knows how or where he lived, though it seems highly probable that he continued to support himself by teaching while he prosecuted the studies necessary for this distinction. And then, oddly enough, one finds him mentioned in the correspondence of Arthur Hicks, the poet.

"You remember Filmer," Hicks writes to his friend Vance; "well, he hasn't altered a bit, the same hostile mumble and the nasty chin—how can a man contrive to be always three days from shaving? —and a sort of furtive air of being engaged in sneaking in front of one; even his coat and that frayed collar of his show no further signs of the passing years. He was writing in the library and I sat down beside him in the name of God's charity, whereupon he deliberately insulted me by covering up his memoranda. It seems he has some brilliant research on hand that he suspects me of all people—with a Bodley Booklet a-printing!—of stealing. He has taken remarkable honours at the University—he went through them with a sort of hasty slobber, as though he feared I might interrupt him before he had told me all—and he spoke of taking his D.Sc. as one might speak of taking a cab. And he asked what I was doing—with a sort of comparative accent, and his arm was spread nervously, positively a protecting arm, over the paper that hid the precious idea—his one hopeful idea.

"'Poetry,' he said, 'Poetry. And what do you profess to teach in it, Hicks?'

"The thing's a Provincial professorling in the very act of budding, and I thank the Lord devoutly that

but for the precious gift of indolence I also might have gone this way to D.Sc. and destruction . . . "

A curious little vignette that I am inclined to think caught Filmer in or near the very birth of his discovery. Hicks was wrong in anticipating a provincial professorship for Filmer. Our next glimpse of him is lecturing on "rubber and rubber substitutes," to the Society of Arts—he had become manager to a great plastic-substance manufactory—and at that time, it is now known, he was a member of the Aeronautical Society, albeit he contributed nothing to the discussions of that body, preferring no doubt to mature his great conception without external assistance. And within two years of that paper before the Society of Arts he was hastily taking out a number of patents and proclaiming in various undignified ways the completion of the divergent inquiries which made his flying machine possible. The first definite statement to that effect appeared in a halfpenny evening paper through the agency of a man who lodged in the same house with Filmer. His final haste after his long laborious secret patience seems to have been due to a needless panic, Bootle, the notorious American scientific quack, having made an announcement that Filmer interpreted wrongly as an anticipation of his idea.

Now what precisely was Filmer's idea? Really a very simple one. Before his time the pursuit of aeronautics had taken two divergent lines, and had developed on the one hand balloons—large apparatus lighter than air, easy in ascent, and comparatively safe in descent, but floating helplessly before any breeze that took them; and on the other, flying machines that flew only in theory—vast flat structures heavier than air, propelled and kept up by heavy engines and for the most part smashing at the first descent. But, neglecting the fact that the inevitable final collapse rendered them impossible, the weight of the flying machines gave them this theoretical advantage, that they could go through the air against a wind, a necessary condition if aerial navigation was to have any practical value. It is Filmer's particular merit that he perceived the way in which the contrasted and hitherto incompatible merits of balloon and heavy flying machine might be combined in one apparatus, which should be at choice either heavier or lighter than air. He took hints from the contractile bladders of fish and the pneumatic cavities of birds. He devised an arrangement of contractile and absolutely closed balloons which when expanded could lift the actual flying apparatus with ease, and when retracted by the complicated "musculature" he wove about them, were withdrawn almost completely into the frame; and he built the large framework which these balloons sustained, of hollow, rigid tubes, the air in which, by an ingenious contrivance, was automatically pumped out as the apparatus fell, and which then remained exhausted so long as the aeronaut desired. There were no wings or propellers to his machine, such as there had been to all previous aeroplanes, and the only engine required was the compact and powerful little appliance needed to contract the balloons. He perceived that such an apparatus as he had devised might rise with frame exhausted and balloons expanded to a considerable height, might then contract its balloons and let the air into its frame, and by an adjustment of its weights slide down the air in any desired direction. As it fell it would accumulate velocity and at the same time lose weight, and the momentum accumulated by its down-rush could be utilised by means of a shifting of its weights to drive it up in the air again as the balloons expanded. This conception, which is still the structural conception of all successful flying machines, needed, however, a vast amount of toil upon its details before it could actually be realised, and such toil Filmer—as he was accustomed to tell the numerous interviewers who crowded upon him in the heyday of his fame—"ungrudgingly and unsparingly gave." His particular difficulty was the elastic lining of the contractile balloon. He found he needed a new substance, and in the discovery and manufacture of that new substance he had, as he never failed to impress upon the interviewers, "performed a far more arduous work than even in the actual achievement of my seemingly greater discovery."

But it must not be imagined that these interviews followed hard upon Filmer's proclamation of his

invention. An interval of nearly five years elapsed during which he timidly remained at his rubber factory—he seems to have been entirely dependent on his small income from this source—making misdirected attempts to assure a quite indifferent public that he really had invented what he had invented. He occupied the greater part of his leisure in the composition of letters to the scientific and daily press, and so forth, stating precisely the net result of his contrivances, and demanding financial aid. That alone would have sufficed for the suppression of his letters. He spent such holidays as he could arrange in unsatisfactory interviews with the door-keepers of leading London papers—he was singularly not adapted for inspiring hall-porters with confidence—and he positively attempted to induce the War Office to take up his work with him. There remains a confidential letter from Major-General Volleyfire to the Earl of Frogs. "The man's a crank and a bounder to boot," says the Major-General in his bluff, sensible, army way, and so left it open for the Japanese to secure, as they subsequently did, the priority in this side of warfare—a priority they still to our great discomfort retain.

And then by a stroke of luck the membrane Filmer had invented for his contractile balloon was discovered to be useful for the valves of a new oil-engine, and he obtained the means for making a trial model of his invention. He threw up his rubber factory appointment, desisted from all further writing, and, with a certain secrecy that seems to have been an inseparable characteristic of all his proceedings, set to work upon the apparatus. He seems to have directed the making of its parts and collected most of it in a room in Shoreditch, but its final putting together was done at Dymchurch, in Kent. He did not make the affair large enough to carry a man, but he made an extremely ingenious use of what were then called the Marconi rays to control its flight. The first flight of this first practicable flying machine took place over some fields near Burford Bridge, near Hythe, in Kent, and Filmer followed and controlled its flight upon a specially constructed motor tricycle.

The flight was, considering all things, an amazing success. The apparatus was brought in a cart from Dymchurch to Burford Bridge, ascended there to a height of nearly three hundred feet, swooped thence very nearly back to Dymchurch, came about in its sweep, rose again, circled, and finally sank uninjured in a field behind the Burford Bridge Inn. At its descent a curious thing happened. Filmer got off his tricycle, scrambled over the intervening dyke, advanced perhaps twenty yards towards his triumph, threw out his arms in a strange gesticulation, and fell down in a dead faint. Every one could then recall the ghastliness of his features and all the evidences of extreme excitement they had observed throughout the trial, things they might otherwise have forgotten. Afterwards in the inn he had an unaccountable gust of hysterical weeping.

Altogether there were not twenty witnesses of this affair, and those for the most part uneducated men. The New Romney doctor saw the ascent but not the descent, his horse being frightened by the electrical apparatus on Filmer's tricycle and giving him a nasty spill. Two members of the Kent constabulary watched the affair from a cart in an unofficial spirit, and a grocer calling round the Marsh for orders and two lady cyclists seem almost to complete the list of educated people. There were two reporters present, one representing a Folkestone paper and the other being a fourth-class interviewer and "symposium" journalist, whose expenses down, Filmer, anxious as ever for adequate advertisement—and now quite realising the way in which adequate advertisement may be obtained—had paid. The latter was one of those writers who can throw a convincing air of unreality over the most credible events, and his half-facetious account of the affair appeared in the magazine page of a popular journal. But, happily for Filmer, this person's colloquial methods were more convincing. He went to offer some further screed upon the subject to Banghurst, the proprietor of the New Paper, and one of the ablest and most unscrupulous men in London journalism, and Banghurst instantly seized

upon the situation. The interviewer vanishes from the narrative, no doubt very doubtfully remunerated, and Banghurst, Banghurst himself, double chin, grey twill suit, abdomen, voice, gestures and all, appears at Dymchurch, following his large, unrivalled journalistic nose. He had seen the whole thing at a glance, just what it was and what it might be.

At his touch, as it were, Filmer's long-pent investigations exploded into fame. He instantly and most magnificently was a Boom. One turns over the files of the journals of the year 1907 with a quite incredulous recognition of how swift and flaming the boom of those days could be. The July papers know nothing of flying, see nothing in flying, state by a most effective silence that men never would, could or should fly. In August flying and Filmer and flying and parachutes and aerial tactics and the Japanese Government and Filmer and again flying, shouldered the war in Yunnan and the gold mines of Upper Greenland off the leading page. And Banghurst had given ten thousand pounds, and, further, Banghurst was giving five thousand pounds, and Banghurst had devoted his well-known, magnificent (but hitherto sterile) private laboratories and several acres of land near his private residence on the Surrey hills to the strenuous and violent completion—Banghurst fashion—of the life-size practicable flying machine. Meanwhile, in the sight of privileged multitudes in the walled-garden of the Banghurst town residence in Fulham, Filmer was exhibited at weekly garden parties putting the working model through its paces. At enormous initial cost, but with a final profit, the New Paper presented its readers with a beautiful photographic souvenir of the first of these occasions.

Here again the correspondence of Arthur Hicks and his friend Vance comes to our aid.

"I saw Filmer in his glory," he writes, with just the touch of envy natural to his position as a poet passe. "The man is brushed and shaved, dressed in the fashion of a Royal-Institution-Afternoon Lecturer, the very newest shape in frock-coats and long patent shoes, and altogether in a state of extraordinary streakiness between an owlish great man and a scared abashed self-conscious boulder cruelly exposed. He hasn't a touch of colour in the skin of his face, his head juts forward, and those queer little dark amber eyes of his watch furtively round him for his fame. His clothes fit perfectly and yet sit upon him as though he had bought them ready-made. He speaks in a mumble still, but he says, you perceive indistinctly, enormous self-assertive things, he backs into the rear of groups by instinct if Banghurst drops the line for a minute, and when he walks across Banghurst's lawn one perceives him a little out of breath and going jerky, and that his weak white hands are clenched. His is a state of tension—horrible tension. And he is the Greatest Discoverer of This or Any Age—the Greatest Discoverer of This or Any Age! What strikes one so forcibly about him is that he didn't somehow quite expect it ever, at any rate, not at all like this. Banghurst is about everywhere, the energetic M.C. of his great little catch, and I swear he will have every one down on his lawn there before he has finished with the engine; he had bagged the prime minister yesterday, and he, bless his heart! didn't look particularly outsize, on the very first occasion. Conceive it! Filmer! Our obscure unwashed Filmer, the Glory of British science! Duchesses crowd upon him, beautiful, bold peeresses say in their beautiful, clear loud voices—have you noticed how penetrating the great lady is becoming nowadays?—'Oh, Mr. Filmer, how did you do it?'

"Common men on the edge of things are too remote for the answer. One imagines something in the way of that interview, 'toil ungrudgingly and unsparingly given, Madam, and, perhaps—I don't know—but perhaps a little special aptitude.'"

So far Hicks, and the photographic supplement to the New Paper is in sufficient harmony with the description. In one picture the machine swings down towards the river, and the tower of Fulham church appears below it through a gap in the elms, and in another, Filmer sits at his guiding batteries, and the great and beautiful of the earth stand around him, with Banghurst massed modestly but

resolutely in the rear. The grouping is oddly apposite. Occluding much of Banghurst, and looking with a pensive, speculative expression at Filmer, stands the Lady Mary Elkinghorn, still beautiful, in spite of the breath of scandal and her eight-and-thirty years, the only person whose face does not admit a perception of the camera that was in the act of snapping them all.

So much for the exterior facts of the story, but, after all, they are very exterior facts. About the real interest of the business one is necessarily very much in the dark. How was Filmer feeling at the time? How much was a certain unpleasant anticipation present inside that very new and fashionable frock-coat? He was in the halfpenny, penny, six-penny, and more expensive papers alike, and acknowledged by the whole world as "the Greatest Discoverer of This or Any Age." He had invented a practicable flying machine, and every day down among the Surrey hills the life-sized model was getting ready. And when it was ready, it followed as a clear inevitable consequence of his having invented and made it—everybody in the world, indeed, seemed to take it for granted; there wasn't a gap anywhere in that serried front of anticipation—that he would proudly and cheerfully get aboard it, ascend with it, and fly.

But we know now pretty clearly that simple pride and cheerfulness in such an act were singularly out of harmony with Filmer's private constitution. It occurred to no one at the time, but there the fact is. We can guess with some confidence now that it must have been drifting about in his mind a great deal during the day, and, from a little note to his physician complaining of persistent insomnia, we have the soundest reason for supposing it dominated his nights, —the idea that it would be after all, in spite of his theoretical security, an abominably sickening, uncomfortable, and dangerous thing for him to flap about in nothingness a thousand feet or so in the air. It must have dawned upon him quite early in the period of being the Greatest Discoverer of This or Any Age, the vision of doing this and that with an extensive void below. Perhaps somewhen in his youth he had looked down a great height or fallen down in some excessively uncomfortable way; perhaps some habit of sleeping on the wrong side had resulted in that disagreeable falling nightmare one knows, and given him his horror; of the strength of that horror there remains now not a particle of doubt.

Apparently he had never weighed this duty of flying in his earlier days of research; the machine had been his end, but now things were opening out beyond his end, and particularly this giddy whirl up above there. He was a Discoverer and he had Discovered. But he was not a Flying Man, and it was only now that he was beginning to perceive clearly that he was expected to fly. Yet, however much the thing was present in his mind he gave no expression to it until the very end, and meanwhile he went to and fro from Banghurst's magnificent laboratories, and was interviewed and lionised, and wore good clothes, and ate good food, and lived in an elegant flat, enjoying a very abundant feast of such good, coarse, wholesome Fame and Success as a man, starved for all his years as he had been starved, might be reasonably expected to enjoy.

After a time, the weekly gatherings in Fulham ceased. The model had failed one day just for a moment to respond to Filmer's guidance, or he had been distracted by the compliments of an archbishop. At any rate, it suddenly dug its nose into the air just a little too steeply as the archbishop was sailing through a Latin quotation for all the world like an archbishop in a book, and it came down in the Fulham Road within three yards of a 'bus horse. It stood for a second perhaps, astonishing and in its attitude astonished, then it crumpled, shivered into pieces, and the 'bus horse was incidentally killed.

Filmer lost the end of the archiepiscopal compliment. He stood up and stared as his invention swooped out of sight and reach of him. His long, white hands still gripped his useless apparatus. The archbishop followed his skyward stare with an apprehension unbecoming in an archbishop.

Then came the crash and the shouts and uproar from the road to relieve Filmer's tension. "My God!" he whispered, and sat down.

Every one else almost was staring to see where the machine had vanished, or rushing into the house.

The making of the big machine progressed all the more rapidly for this. Over its making presided Filmer, always a little slow and very careful in his manner, always with a growing preoccupation in his mind. His care over the strength and soundness of the apparatus was prodigious. The slightest doubt, and he delayed everything until the doubtful part could be replaced. Wilkinson, his senior assistant, fumed at some of these delays, which, he insisted, were for the most part unnecessary. Banghurst magnified the patient certitude of Filmer in the New Paper, and reviled it bitterly to his wife, and MacAndrew, the second assistant, approved Filmer's wisdom. "We're not wanting a fiasco, man," said MacAndrew. "He's perfectly well advised."

And whenever an opportunity arose Filmer would expound to Wilkinson and MacAndrew just exactly how every part of the flying machine was to be controlled and worked, so that in effect they would be just as capable, and even more capable, when at last the time came, of guiding it through the skies.

Now I should imagine that if Filmer had seen fit at this stage to define just what he was feeling, and to take a definite line in the matter of his ascent, he might have escaped that painful ordeal quite easily. If he had had it clearly in his mind he could have done endless things. He would surely have found no difficulty with a specialist to demonstrate a weak heart, or something gastric or pulmonary, to stand in his way—that is the line I am astonished he did not take,—or he might, had he been man enough, have declared simply and finally that he did not intend to do the thing. But the fact is, though the dread was hugely present in his mind, the thing was by no means sharp and clear. I fancy that all through this period he kept telling himself that when the occasion came he would find himself equal to it. He was like a man just gripped by a great illness, who says he feels a little out of sorts, and expects to be better presently. Meanwhile he delayed the completion of the machine, and let the assumption that he was going to fly it take root and flourish exceedingly about him. He even accepted anticipatory compliments on his courage. And, barring this secret squeamishness, there can be no doubt he found all the praise and distinction and fuss he got a delightful and even intoxicating draught.

The Lady Mary Elkinghorn made things a little more complicated for him.

How that began was a subject of inexhaustible speculation to Hicks. Probably in the beginning she was just a little "nice" to him with that impartial partiality of hers, and it may be that to her eyes, standing out conspicuously as he did ruling his monster in the upper air, he had a distinction that Hicks was not disposed to find. And somehow they must have had a moment of sufficient isolation, and the great Discoverer a moment of sufficient courage for something just a little personal to be mumbled or blurted. However it began, there is no doubt that it did begin, and presently became quite perceptible to a world accustomed to find in the proceedings of the Lady Mary Elkinghorn a matter of entertainment. It complicated things, because the state of love in such a virgin mind as Filmer's would brace his resolution, if not sufficiently, at any rate considerably towards facing a danger he feared, and hampered him in such attempts at evasion as would otherwise be natural and congenial.

It remains a matter for speculation just how the Lady Mary felt for Filmer and just what she thought of him. At thirty-eight one may have gathered much wisdom and still be not altogether wise, and the imagination still functions actively enough in creating glammers and effecting the impossible. He came before her eyes as a very central man, and that always counts, and he had powers, unique powers as it seemed, at any rate in the air. The performance with the model had just a touch of the quality of a

potent incantation, and women have ever displayed an unreasonable disposition to imagine that when a man has powers he must necessarily have Power. Given so much, and what was not good in Filmer's manner and appearance became an added merit. He was modest, he hated display, but given an occasion where true qualities are needed, then—then one would see!

The late Mrs. Bampton thought it wise to convey to Lady Mary her opinion that Filmer, all things considered, was rather a "grub." "He's certainly not a sort of man I have ever met before," said the Lady Mary, with a quite unruffled serenity. And Mrs. Bampton, after a swift, imperceptible glance at that serenity, decided that so far as saying anything to Lady Mary went, she had done as much as could be expected of her. But she said a great deal to other people.

And at last, without any undue haste or unseemliness, the day dawned, the great day, when Banghurst had promised his public—the world in fact—that flying should be finally attained and overcome. Filmer saw it dawn, watched even in the darkness before it dawned, watched its stars fade and the grey and pearly pinks give place at last to the clear blue sky of a sunny, cloudless day. He watched it from the window of his bedroom in the new-built wing of Banghurst's Tudor house. And as the stars were overwhelmed and the shapes and substances of things grew into being out of the amorphous dark, he must have seen more and more distinctly the festive preparations beyond the beech clumps near the green pavilion in the outer park, the three stands for the privileged spectators, the raw, new fencing of the enclosure, the sheds and workshops, the Venetian masts and fluttering flags that Banghurst had considered essential, black and limp in the breezeless dawn, and amidst all these things a great shape covered with tarpauling. A strange and terrible portent for humanity was that shape, a beginning that must surely spread and widen and change and dominate all the affairs of men, but to Filmer it is very doubtful whether it appeared in anything but a narrow and personal light. Several people heard him pacing in the small hours—for the vast place was packed with guests by a proprietor editor who, before all understood compression. And about five o'clock, if not before, Filmer left his room and wandered out of the sleeping house into the park, alive by that time with sunlight and birds and squirrels and the fallow deer. MacAndrew, who was also an early riser, met him near the machine, and they went and had a look at it together.

It is doubtful if Filmer took any breakfast, in spite of the urgency of Banghurst. So soon as the guests began to be about in some number he seems to have retreated to his room. Thence about ten he went into the shrubbery, very probably because he had seen the Lady Mary Elkinghorn there. She was walking up and down, engaged in conversation with her old school friend, Mrs. Brewis-Craven, and although Filmer had never met the latter lady before, he joined them and walked beside them for some time. There were several silences in spite of the Lady Mary's brilliance. The situation was a difficult one, and Mrs. Brewis-Craven did not master its difficulty. "He struck me," she said afterwards with a luminous self-contradiction, "as a very unhappy person who had something to say, and wanted before all things to be helped to say it. But how was one to help him when one didn't know what it was?"

At half-past eleven the enclosures for the public in the outer park were crammed, there was an intermittent stream of equipages along the belt which circles the outer park, and the house party was dotted over the lawn and shrubbery and the corner of the inner park, in a series of brilliantly attired knots, all making for the flying machine. Filmer walked in a group of three with Banghurst, who was supremely and conspicuously happy, and Sir Theodore Hickle, the president of the Aeronautical Society. Mrs. Banghurst was close behind with the Lady Mary Elkinghorn, Georgina Hickle, and the Dean of Stays. Banghurst was large and copious in speech, and such interstices as he left were filled in by Hickle with complimentary remarks to Filmer. And Filmer walked between them saying not a word except by way of unavoidable reply. Behind, Mrs. Banghurst listened to the admirably suitable

and shapely conversation of the Dean with that fluttered attention to the ampler clergy ten years of social ascent and ascendancy had not cured in her; and the Lady Mary watched, no doubt with an entire confidence in the world's disillusionment, the drooping shoulders of the sort of man she had never met before.

There was some cheering as the central party came into view of the enclosures, but it was not very unanimous nor invigorating cheering. They were within fifty yards of the apparatus when Filmer took a hasty glance over his shoulder to measure the distance of the ladies behind them, and decided to make the first remark he had initiated since the house had been left. His voice was just a little hoarse, and he cut in on Banghurst in mid-sentence on Progress.

"I say, Banghurst," he said, and stopped.

"Yes," said Banghurst.

"I wish—" He moistened his lips. "I'm not feeling well."

Banghurst stopped dead. "Eh?" he shouted.

"A queer feeling." Filmer made to move on, but Banghurst was immovable. "I don't know. I may be better in a minute. If not—perhaps ... MacAndrew—"

"You're not feeling well?" said Banghurst, and stared at his white face.

"My dear!" he said, as Mrs. Banghurst came up with them, "Filmer says he isn't feeling well."

"A little queer," exclaimed Filmer, avoiding the Lady Mary's eyes. "It may pass off—"

There was a pause.

It came to Filmer that he was the most isolated person in the world.

"In any case," said Banghurst, "the ascent must be made. Perhaps if you were to sit down somewhere for a moment—"

"It's the crowd, I think," said Filmer.

There was a second pause. Banghurst's eye rested in scrutiny on Filmer, and then swept the sample of public in the enclosure.

"It's unfortunate," said Sir Theodore Hickle; but still—I suppose— Your assistants—Of course, if you feel out of condition and disinclined—"

"I don't think Mr. Filmer would permit that for a moment," said Lady Mary.

"But if Mr. Filmer's nerve is run—It might even be dangerous for him to attempt—" Hickle coughed.

"It's just because it's dangerous," began the Lady Mary, and felt she had made her point of view and Filmer's plain enough.

Conflicting motives struggled for Filmer.

"I feel I ought to go up," he said, regarding the ground. He looked up and met the Lady Mary's eyes. "I want to go up," he said, and smiled whitely at her. He turned towards Banghurst. "If I could just sit down somewhere for a moment out of the crowd and sun—"

Banghurst, at least, was beginning to understand the case. "Come into my little room in the green pavilion," he said. "It's quite cool there." He took Filmer by the arm.

Filmer turned his face to the Lady Mary Elkinghorn again. "I shall be all right in five minutes," he said. "I'm tremendously sorry—"

The Lady Mary Elkinghorn smiled at him. "I couldn't think—" he said to Hickle, and obeyed the compulsion of Banghurst's pull.

The rest remained watching the two recede.

"He is so fragile," said the Lady Mary.

"He's certainly a highly nervous type," said the Dean, whose weakness it was to regard the whole

world, except married clergymen with enormous families, as "neurotic."

"Of course," said Hickie, "it isn't absolutely necessary for him to go up because he has invented—"

"How could he avoid it?" asked the Lady Mary, with the faintest shadow of scorn.

"It's certainly most unfortunate if he's going to be ill now," said Mrs. Banghurst a little severely.

"He's not going to be ill," said the Lady Mary, and certainly she had met Filmer's eye.

"You'll be all right," said Banghurst, as they went towards the pavilion. "All you want is a nip of brandy. It ought to be you, you know. You'll be—you'd get it rough, you know, if you let another man —"

"Oh, I want to go," said Filmer. "I shall be all right. As a matter of fact I'm almost inclined now—. No! I think I'll have that nip of brandy first."

Banghurst took him into the little room and routed out an empty decanter. He departed in search of a supply. He was gone perhaps five minutes.

The history of those five minutes cannot be written. At intervals Filmer's face could be seen by the people on the easternmost of the stands erected for spectators, against the window pane peering out, and then it would recede and fade. Banghurst vanished shouting behind the grand stand, and presently the butler appeared going pavilionward with a tray.

The apartment in which Filmer came to his last solution was a pleasant little room very simply furnished with green furniture and an old bureau—for Banghurst was simple in all his private ways. It was hung with little engravings after Morland and it had a shelf of books. But as it happened, Banghurst had left a rook rifle he sometimes played with on the top of the desk, and on the corner of the mantelshelf was a tin with three or four cartridges remaining in it. As Filmer went up and down that room wrestling with his intolerable dilemma he went first towards the neat little rifle athwart the blotting-pad and then towards the neat little red label

".22 LONG."

The thing must have jumped into his mind in a moment.

Nobody seems to have connected the report with him, though the gun, being fired in a confined space, must have sounded loud, and there were several people in the billiard-room, separated from him only by a lath-and-plaster partition. But directly Banghurst's butler opened the door and smelt the sour smell of the smoke, he knew, he says, what had happened. For the servants at least of Banghurst's household had guessed something of what was going on in Filmer's mind.

All through that trying afternoon Banghurst behaved as he held a man should behave in the presence of hopeless disaster, and his guests for the most part succeeded in not insisting upon the fact—though to conceal their perception of it altogether was impossible—that Banghurst had been pretty elaborately and completely swindled by the deceased. The public in the enclosure, Hicks told me, dispersed "like a party that has been ducking a welsher," and there wasn't a soul in the train to London, it seems, who hadn't known all along that flying was a quite impossible thing for man. "But he might have tried it," said many, "after carrying the thing so far."

In the evening, when he was comparatively alone, Banghurst broke down and went on like a man of clay. I have been told he wept, which must have made an imposing scene, and he certainly said Filmer had ruined his life, and offered and sold the whole apparatus to MacAndrew for half-a-crown. "I've been thinking—" said MacAndrew at the conclusion of the bargain, and stopped.

The next morning the name of Filmer was, for the first time, less conspicuous in the New Paper than in any other daily paper in the world. The rest of the world's instructors, with varying emphasis, according to their dignity and the degree of competition between themselves and the New Paper, proclaimed the "Entire Failure of the New Flying Machine," and "Suicide of the Impostor." But in the

district of North Surrey the reception of the news was tempered by a perception of unusual aerial phenomena.

Overnight Wilkinson and MacAndrew had fallen into violent argument on the exact motives of their principal's rash act.

"The man was certainly a poor, cowardly body, but so far as his science went he was no impostor," said MacAndrew, "and I'm prepared to give that proposition a very practical demonstration, Mr. Wilkinson, so soon as we've got the place a little more to ourselves. For I've no faith in all this publicity for experimental trials."

And to that end, while all the world was reading of the certain failure of the new flying machine, MacAndrew was soaring and curvetting with great amplitude and dignity over the Epsom and Wimbledon divisions; and Banghurst, restored once more to hope and energy, and regardless of public security and the Board of Trade, was pursuing his gyrations and trying to attract his attention, on a motor car and in his pyjamas—he had caught sight of the ascent when pulling up the blind of his bedroom window—equipped, among other things, with a film camera that was subsequently discovered to be jammed. And Filmer was lying on the billiard table in the green pavilion with a sheet about his body.

Loved this book ?
Similar users also downloaded

H. G. Wells

The Plattner Story

H. G. Wells

The Story of the Late Mr. Elvesham

H. G. Wells

The Stolen Bacillus

H. G. Wells

The Lord of the Dynamos

H. G. Wells

The Stolen Body

H. G. Wells

Æpyornis Island

H. G. Wells

The Treasure in the Forest

H. G. Wells

The Jilting of Jane

H. G. Wells

The Flowering of the Strange Orchid

H. G. Wells

The Beautiful Suit



www.feedbooks.com

Food for the mind