

"For Heaven's sake leave out the ballast!" "There! The last sack is empty!" "Does the balloon rise?" "No!" "I hear a noise like the dashing of waves." The sea is below the car! It can't be more than 500 feet from us!" "Overboard with every weight! ... everything!" Such were the loud and startling words which resounded through the air, above the vast water yonder of the Pacific, about four o'clock in the evening of the 23rd of March, 1865.

Few can possibly have forgotten the terrible storm from the northeast, in the middle of the equinox of that year. The tempest raged without intermission from the 18th to the 26th of March. Its ravages were terrible in America, Europe, and Asia, covering a distance of eighteen hundred miles, and extending obliquely to the equator from the thirty-fifth north parallel to the fortieth south parallel. Towns were overthrown, forests uprooted, coasts devastated by the mountains of water which were precipitated upon them, vessels cast on the shore, which the published accounts numbered by hundreds, whole districts leveled by waterspouts which destroyed everything they passed over, several thousand people crushed on land or drowned at sea; such were the traces of its fury, left by this devastating tempest. It surpassed in disasters those which so frightfully ravaged Havana and Guadalupa, one on the 25th of October, 1810, the other on the 26th of July, 1825. But while so many catastrophes were taking place on land and at sea, a drama not less exciting was being enacted in the agitated air. In fact, a balloon, as a ball might be carried on the summit of a waterspout, had been taken into the circling movement of a column of air and had traversed space at the rate of ninety miles an hour, turning round and round as if seized by some aerial maelstrom. Beneath the lower point of the balloon swung a car, containing five passengers, scarcely visible in the midst of it. If the thick vapor mingled with spray which hung over the surface of the ocean. Hence, it may be asked, had come that plaything of the tempest? From what part of the world did it arise? It surely could not have started during the storm. But the storm had raged five days already, and the first symptoms were manifested on the 18th. It cannot be doubted that the balloon came from a great distance, for it could not have traveled less than two thousand miles in twenty-four hours. At any rate the passengers, destitute of all marks for their guidance, could not have possessed the means of reckoning the route traversed since their departure. It was a remarkable fact that, although in the very midst of the furious tempest, they did not suffer from it. They were thrown about in an eddy whirled round and round without feeling the rotation in the slightest degree, or being sensible that they were removed from a horizontal position. Their eyes could not perceive through the thick mist which had gathered beneath the car. Dark vapor was all around them. Such was the density of the atmosphere that they could not be certain whether it was day or night. No reflection of light, no sound from inhabited land, no roaring of the ocean could have reached them, through the obscurity, while suspended in those elevated zones. Their rapid descent alone had informed them of the dangers which they ran from the waves. However, the balloon, lightened of heavy articles, such as ammunition, arms, and provisions, had risen into the higher layers of the atmosphere, to a height of 4,500 feet. The voyagers, after having discovered that the sea extended beneath them, and thinking the dangers above less dreadful than those below, did not hesitate to throw overboard even their most useful articles, while they endeavored to lose no more of that fluid, the life of their enterprise, which sustained them above the abyss. The night passed in the midst of alarms which would have been death to less energetic souls. Again the day appeared and with it the tempest began to moderate. From the beginning of that day, the 24th of March, it showed symptoms of abating. At dawn, some of the lighter clouds had risen into the more lofty regions of the air. In a few hours the wind had changed from a hurricane to a fresh breeze, that is to say, there was a change in the transit of the atmospheric layers was diminished by half. It was still what sailors call "a close-reefed topsail breeze," but the commotion in the elements had none the less considerably diminished. Towards eleven o'clock, the lower region of the air was sensibly clearer. The atmosphere threw off that chilly dampness which is felt after the passage of a great meteor. The storm did not seem to have gone farther to the west. It appeared to have exhausted itself. Could it have passed away in electric sheets, as is sometimes the case with regard to the typhoons of the Indian Ocean? But at the same time, it was also evident that the balloon was again slowly descending with a regular movement. It appeared as if it were, little by little, collapsing, and that its case was lengthening and extending, passing from a spherical to an oval form. Towards midday the balloon was hovering above the sea at a height of only 2,000 feet. It contained 50,000 cubic feet of gas, and, thanks to its capacity, it could maintain itself a long time in the air, although it should reach a great altitude or might be thrown into a horizontal position. Perceiving their danger, the passengers cast away the last articles which still weighed down the car, the few provisions they had kept, everything, even to their pocket-knives, and one of them, having hoisted himself onto the circles which united the cords of the net, tried to secure more firmly the lower point of the balloon. It was, however, evident to the voyagers that the gas was failing, and that the balloon on it could no longer be sustained in the higher regions. They must infallibly perish! There was not a continent, nor even an island, visible beneath them. The watery expanse did not present a single speck of land, not a solid surface upon which their anchor could hold. It was the open sea, whose waves were still dashing with tremendous violence! It was the ocean, where without any visible limits, even for those whose gaze, from their commanding position, extended over a radius of forty miles. The vast liquid plain, lashed without mercy by the storm, never appeared as if covered with herds of furious chargers, whose white and disheveled crests were streaming in the wind. No land was in sight, not a solitary ship could be seen. It was necessary at any cost to arrest their downward course, and to prevent the balloon from being engulfed in the waves. The voyagers directed all their energies to this urgent work. Notwithstanding their efforts, the balloon still fell, and at the same time shifted with the greatest rapidly, following the direction of the wind, that is to say, from the northwest. Frightful indeed was the situation of these unfortunate men. They were evidently no longer masters of the machine. All their attempts were useless. The cause of the fall seemed hopeless and more. The gas escaped without any possibility of retaining it. Their descent was visibly accelerated, and soon after midday the car hung within 600 feet of the impossible to prevent the escape of gas, which rushed through a large rent in the silk. By lighting the car of all the articles which it contained, the passengers had been able to suspend in the air for a few hours. But the inevitable catastrophe could only be retarded, and if land did not appear before night, voyagers, car, and balloon must go down beneath the waves. They now resorted to the only remaining expedient. They were truly dauntless men, who knew how to look death in the face. Not a single murmur escaped them as they determined to struggle to the last minute, to do anything to retard their fall. The car was only a sort of willow basket, unable to float, and there was not the slightest buoyancy on the surface of the sea. Two more hours passed and the balloon was scarcely 400 feet above the water. At that moment a loud voice, the voice of a man whose name we fear, was heard. To this voice responded others not less determined. "Is everything thrown out?" "No, here are still 2,000 dollars in gold." A heavy bag immediately lay plump on the balloon rise?" "A little, but it will not be long before it falls again." "What still remains to be thrown out?" "Nothing." "Yes, the car!" "Let us catch hold of the net, and in."

This was, in fact, the last and only mode of lightening the balloon. The ropes which held the car were cut, and the balloon, after its fall, mounted 2,000 feet. The five voyagers clung to the net, and plunged into the meshes, gazing at the abyss. The delicate sensibility of balloons is well known. It is sufficient to throw out the lightest article to produce considerable displacement. The apparatus in the air is like a balance of mathematical precision. It can be thus easily understood that when it is lightened of any considerable weights suddenly and so happened on this occasion. But after being suspended for an instant aloft, the balloon began to redescend, the gas escaping by the rent which it made in the eodone had all that men could do. No human efforts could save them now. They must trust to the mercy of Him who rules the elements. At four o'clock the balloon was on the edge of the water. A loud barking was heard. A dog accompanied the voyagers, and was held pressed close to his master in the meshes of the net. Top has seen something immediately a loud voice shouted,—"Land! land!"

The balloon, which the wind still drove towards the southwest, had since daylight borne a considerable distance toward the eastward, and a tolerably high land had, in fact, appeared in that direction. But this land was still thirty miles off. It would not take less than an hour to get to the coast of falling to leeward. An hour! Might not the balloon before that be emptied of all the fluid it yet retained? Such was the terrible question! The voyagers could do nothing but wait until they must reach at any cost. They were ignorant of what it was, whether an island or a continent, for they did not know to what part of the world the hurricane had descended, whether uninhabited or desolate, whether hospitable or not. It was evident that the balloon could no longer support itself! Several times already had the crests of tom of the net, making it still heavier, and the balloon only half rose, like a bird with a wounded wing. Half an hour later the land was not more than a mile off, but bulged out again, and the wind, taking it, drove it along like a vessel. Might it not possibly thus reach the land? But, when only two fathoms off, cries repeated themselves, the balloon, which had appeared as if it would never again rise, suddenly made an unexpected bound, after having been struck by the tremendous sea. As if it had touched obliquely, and finally fell on a sandy beach, out of the reach of the waves. The voyagers, aiding each other, managed to disentangle themselves from the entanglement of their weight, was taken by the wind, and like a wounded bird which revives for an instant, disappeared into space. But the car had continued flying past the shore. The missing person had evidently been swept off by the sea, which had just struck the net, and it was owing to this circumstance that the survivors, soon after reaching the land. Scarcely had the four castaways set foot on firm ground, than they all, thinking of the absent ones simultaneously exclaimed, "Save him! let us save him!" Chapter 2 Those whom the hurricane had just thrown on this coast were neither aeronauts by profession nor amateurs. They had induced them to escape in this extraordinary manner. A hundred times they had almost perished! A hundred times had they almost fallen en masse. But Heaven had reserved them for a strange destiny, and after having, on the 20th of March, escaped from Richmond, besieged by the troops of seven thousands miles from the capital of Virginia, which was the principal stronghold of the South, during the terrible War of Secession. Their circumstances which led to the escape of the prisoners were as follows: That same year, in the month of February, 1865, in one of the coup de main, to possess himself of Richmond, several of his officers left into the power of the enemy and were detained in the town. One of the most notable of Massachusetts, a first-class engineer, to whom the government had confided, during the war, the direction of the railways, which he had spent nearly ten years of age; his close-cut hair and his beard, of which he only kept a thick mustache, were a ready getting gray head, lean, about forty-five years of age, piercing eyes, a serious mouth, the physiognomy of a clever man of the military school. He was once offered a commission in the army, but declined it because he considered mental power, he also possessed great manual dexterity. His muscles exhibited evidence of thought, all he did was without effort to one of his vigorous and sanguine temperaments. Learned, clear-headed, and practical, he sought to insure human success—a victory of mind and body, impetuous wishes, and powerful will. He might have taken for his motto:

"Persevere even without hope of success." Cyrus Harding was courageous personified. He had been in all the battles of that war. Grant, he fought at Paducah, Belmont, Pittsburg Landing, at the siege of Corinth, Port Gibson, Black River, Chattanooga, Fort Mifflin, Fort Fisher, and elsewhere. He was worthy of the general who said, "I never count my dead!" And he underwent of times Captain Harding had almost become a martyr among comrades where he never spared himself, fortune favored him till the moment when he was wounded and taken prisoner on the morning another important personage fell into the hands of the Southerners. This was no other than Gideon Spilett, a republican hero of the war in the midst of the Northern armistice. Gideon Spilett was one of that race of indomitable Englishmen, men to be reckoned with. Gideon Spilett ranked as a perfect treasure of knowledge on all sorts of things—of arms, bullets, and to whom ever gave notice of fatigue—the wires which incessantly telegraphed to his journal the result of the battle, telegraphic intelligence. Gideon Spilett was tall, elegant, intelligent. It was the eye of a man accustomed to report. For ten years Gideon Spilett had been ill as of the pen. When he was captured under arms has just taken aim at me, but—"

Captain Harding and Gideon Spilett, who did not condescend that he made acquaintance with Grant's army, and fighting followed to wander at liberty in the towns devoted to him in life and in death. He was an Abolitionist from conviction and habit. He was a man of about thirty-eight years old, dark complexion, but he only answered hesitatingly an instant, arrived before Richmond. The pleasure of finding oneself in Richmond, it was quite another thing to see any chance of success, and this opportunity was dearly bought. His forces, united to those of the captivity did not offer a single incident worth mentioning. It had been made attempt, but was stopped by the Southern army invested it. The Governor of Richmond for a long time had been in the idea of rising in a rebellion, so as to pass over the besiegement of the city, and in that way reach the secessionist camp. The governor accordingly conceived the idea of raising in a rebellion, so as to pass over the besiegement of the city, and in that way reach the secessionist camp. The governor accordingly conceived the idea of raising in a rebellion, so as to pass over the besiegement of the city, and in that way reach the secessionist camp.

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