

THE TOUGHEST TOFF IN TOWN

THE two Englishmen standing among the Hamburg crowd listened with interest to the bearded German in the checked suit as he expounded on the scientific marvels of the lighter-than-air balloon.

The balloon itself, a massive, coloured globe, swayed among the gabled roof-tops of the city, with its stout basket suspended below. The whole thing was moored to iron pegs in the ground by four stout ropes.

The two Englishmen, one dressed in a fashionable Norfolk shooting jacket, a monocle screwed firmly into one eye, and an ebony cane in his hand, the other in sober black and bowler hat pressed firmly down on his bullet head, listened to the bearded German's open-air lecture without expression while the crowd surged about them.

"And so, ladies and gentlemen, I present to you, the lighter-than-air balloon, the transport of the future. I, Professor Heinz von Erghart, have developed this balloon, and today I am going to ascend over the rooftops of this great city of Hamburg, and fly like a bird!"

The rather foolish-looking young Englishman turned his head slightly so that he could see his companion's flat-nosed face, and murmured—

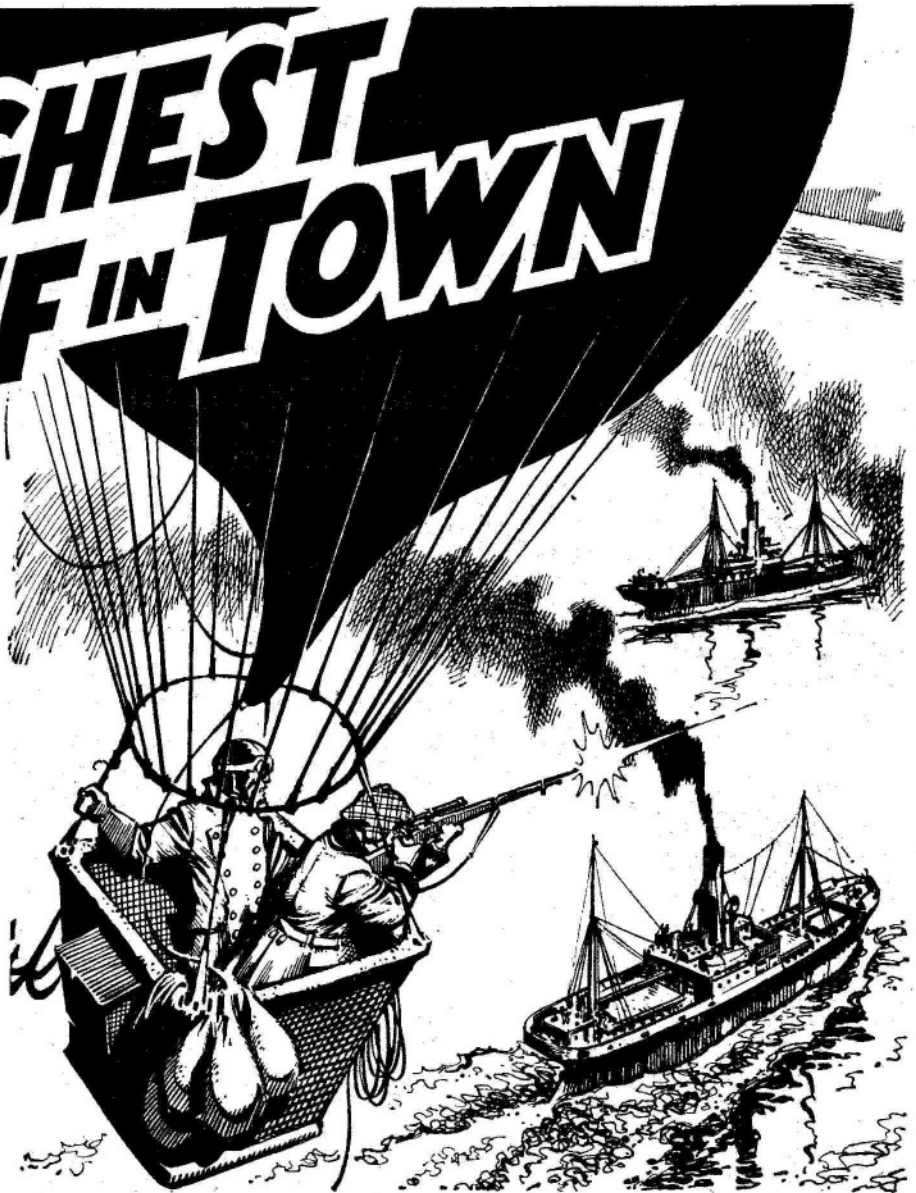
"'Fraid I don't agree with all that German chappy's saying, eh, Parsons? What about the Wright brothers and their flying machine. I think their jolly old bird's got this balloon whacked every time, what?"

Parsons coughed gently before he answered—

"I don't think much of either of 'em, me lord. But let 'im shout, as long as 'e don't expect me ter go flyin' abaht in it wiv 'im."

The young lordling laughed and brought upon himself the sour glances of the Germans round him. Lord Harry reflected that the Germans were not renowned as a race of humorists, and the laughter died on his lips.

No doubt many of them were already visualising the lighter-than-air balloon as a means of waging war on their future enemies, of shelling their armies from the



clouds, putting them to flight in their thousands.

Lord Harry shrugged away a sudden black thought. Maybe the idea was not so funny after all. A man sailing through the sky in a balloon did after all have an advantage over a man on the ground—and then, what of a man in one of those odd-looking flying machines, the sort the Wright brothers made their epic flight in last year?

The bearded German professor was appealing now for someone, some daring adventurer in the crowd who would be willing to accompany him on his great flight over the rooftops of Hamburg. Who would go?

Who among the intrepid Germans assembled in the square wished to see Hamburg from the skies, a privilege known only, up to now, to the birds?

What, no one? No one at all?

"You, mein herr, what about you? You seem to me to be a man of spirit and adventure?"

Lord Harry realised that the professor was addressing him in person. His gentleman's gentleman, Parsons, was eyeing him with some apprehension. Where Lord Harry Crandall-Smythe went, Parsons was bound to follow.

His position as personal valet to the patriotic young aristocrat had led him into some very unusual situations in the past against the enemies of Great Britain, but never flying in the sky.

Burly Parsons heaved an audible sigh of relief when Lord Harry smiled, shook his head, and declined the invitation. After all he explained to the voluble German, he was an Englishman, and could not dream of denying the right of a true German to see the sights of Hamburg from the sky.

The two men edged their way out of the crowd, and crossed the cobbled square, Parsons walking a couple of steps in the rear as befitted his position and station in life.

The traffic was heavy, and they stood on the pavement for a while while the heavy carts and lighter carriages rolled past, the hooves of the horses clip-clopping along the street, the echoes bounding from one overhanging gable to another.

A man came hurrying round the corner from the square, stood for a brief moment on the edge of the pavement at Lord Harry's side, then hurried out into the road.

He must have seen the heavy dray, probably thought he had time to cross in front of it—and thought incorrectly.