

My First Aeroplane

H. G. Wells

My first aeroplane! What vivid memories of youth that recalls!

Far back it was in the spring of 1912, that I acquired “Alauda Magna,” the great Lark, for so I christened her; and I was then a slender young man of four-and-twenty, with hair—beautiful blond hair—all over my adventurous young head. I was a dashing young fellow enough, in spite of the slight visual defect that obliged me to wear spectacles on my prominent, aquiline, but by no means shapeless nose—the typical flyer’s nose. I was a good runner and swimmer, a vegetarian as ever, an all-wooler, and an ardent advocate of the extremist views in every direction about everything. Precious little in the way of a movement got started that I wasn’t in. I owned two motor-bicycles, and an enlarged photograph of me at that remote date, in leather skull-cap, goggles, and gauntlets, still adorns my study fireplace. I was also a great flyer of war-kites, and voluntary scout-master of high repute. From the first beginnings of the boom in flying, therefore, I was naturally eager for the fray.

I chafed against the tears of my widowed mother for a time, and at last told her I could endure it no longer. “If I am not the first to fly in Mintonchester,” I said, “I leave Mintonchester. I’m your own son, mummy, and that’s me!”

And it didn’t take me a week to place my order when she agreed.

I found one of the old price-lists the other day in a drawer, full of queer woodcuts of still queerer contrivances. What a time that was! An incredulous world had at last consented to believe that it could fly, and in addition to the motor-car people and the bicycle people, and so on, a hundred new, unheard-of firms were turning out aeroplanes of every size and pattern to meet the demand. Amazing prices they got for them, too—three hundred and fifty was cheap for the things! I find four hundred and fifty, five hundred, five hundred guineas in this list of mine; and many as capable of flight as oak trees! They were sold too, without any sort of guarantee, and with merest apology for instructions. Some of the early aeroplane companies paid nearly 200 per cent on their ordinary shares in those early years.

How well I remember the dreams I had—and the doubts!

The dreams were all of wonder in the air. I saw myself raising gracefully from my mother’s paddock, clearing the hedge at the end, circling up to get over the vicar’s pear trees, and away between the church steeple and the rise of Withycombe, towards the market-place. Lord! How they would stare to see me! “Young Mr. Betts again!” they would say. “We knew he’d do it.”

I would circle and perhaps wave a handkerchief, and then I meant to go over Lupton's gardens to the grounds of Sir Digby Foster. There a certain fair denizen might glance from the window...

Ah, youth! Youth!

My doubts were all of the make I should adopt, the character of engines I should choose...

I remember my wild rush on my motor-bike to London to see the things and give my order, the day of muddy-traffic dodging as I went from one shop to another, my growing exasperation at hearing everywhere the same refrain, "Sold out! Can't undertake to deliver before the beginning of April."

Not me!

I got "Alauda Magna" at last at a little place in Blackfriars Road. She was an order thrown on the firm's hands at the eleventh hour by the death of the purchaser through another maker, and I ran my modest bank account into an overdraft to get her—to this day I won't confess the price I paid for her. Poor little Mumsy! Within a week she was in my mother's paddock, being put together after transport by a couple of not-too-intelligent mechanics.

The joy of it! And a sort of adventurous tremulousness. I'd had no lessons—all the qualified teachers were booked up at stupendous fees for months ahead; but it wasn't in my quality to stick at a thing like that! I couldn't have endured three day's delay. I assured my mother I had, had lessons, for her peace of mind—it is a poor son who will not tell a lie to keep his parent happy.

I remember the exultant turmoil of walking round the thing as it grew into a credible shape, with the consciousness of half Mintonchester peering at me though the hedge, and only deterred by our new trespass-board and the disagreeable expression of Snape, our trusted gardener, who was partly mowing the grass and partly on sentry-go with his scythe, from swarming into the meadow. I lit a cigarette and watched the workmen sagely, and we engaged an elderly unemployed named Snorticombe to keep watch all night to save the thing from meddlers. In those days, you must understand, an aeroplane was a sign and a wonder.

"Alauda Magna" was a darling for her time, though nowadays I suppose she would be received with derisive laughter by every schoolboy in the land. She was a monoplane, and roughly speaking, a Bleriot, and she had the dearest, neatest seven-cylinder forty horse-power G.K.C. engine, with its G.B.S. fly-wheel, that you can possibly imagine. I spent an hour or so tuning her up—she had a deafening purr, rather like a machine-gun in action—until the vicar sent round to say that he was writing a sermon upon "Peace" and was unable

to concentrate his mind on that topic until I desisted. I took his objection in good part, and after a culminating volley and one last lingering look, started for a stroll round the town.

In spite of every endeavour to be modest I could not but feel myself the cynosure of every eye. I had rather carelessly forgotten to change my leggings and breeches I had bought for the occasion, and I was also wearing my leather skull-cap with ear-flaps carelessly adjusted, so that I could hear what people were saying. I should think I had half the population under fifteen at my heels before I was halfway down the High Street.

“You going to fly, Mr. Betts?” says one cheeky youngster.

“Like a bird!” I said.

“Don’t you fly till we comes out of school,” says another.

It was a sort of Royal progress that evening for me. I visited old Lupton, the horticulturist, and he could hardly conceal what a great honour he thought it. He took me over his new greenhouse—he had now got, he said three acres of surface under glass—and showed me all sorts of clever dodges he was adopting in way of intensive culture, and afterwards we went down to the end of his old flower-garden and looked at his bees. When I came out my retinue of kids was still waiting for me, reinforced. Then I went round by Paramors and dropped into the Bull and Horses, just as if there wasn’t anything particular up, for a lemon squash. Everybody was talking about my aeroplane. They just shut up for a moment when I came in, and then burst out with questions. It’s odd nowadays to remember all that excitement. I answered what they had to ask me and refrained from putting on any side, and afterwards Miss Flyteman and I went into the commercial-room and turned over the pages of various illustrated journals and compared the pictures with my machine in a quite, unassuming sort of way. Everybody encouraged me to go up—everybody.

I lay stress on that because, as I was soon to discover, the tides and ebbs of popular favour are among the most inexplicable and inconsistent things in the world.

I particularly remember old Cheeseman, the pork-butcher, whose pigs I killed, saying over and over again, in a tone of perfect satisfaction, “You won’t ’ave any difficulty in going up, you won’t. There won’t be any difficulty ’bout going up.” And winking and nodding to the other eminent tradesmen there assembled.

I hadn’t much difficulty in going up. “Alauda Magna” was a cheerful lifter, and the roar and spin of her engine had hardly begun behind me before she was off her wheels—snap, snap, they came up above the ski gliders—and swaying swiftly across the meadows towards the vicarage hedge. She had a sort of onward roll to her, rather like the movement of a corpulent but very buoyant woman.

I had just a glimpse of brave little mother, trying not to cry, and full of pride in me, on the veranda, with both the maids and old Snape beside her, and then I had to give all my attention to the steering-wheel if I didn't want to barge into the vicar's pear trees.

I'd felt the faintest of tugs just as I came up, and fancied I heard a resounding whack on our new Trespassers will be Prosecuted board, and I saw the crowd of people in the lane running this way and that from my loud humming approach; but it was only after the flight was all over that I realised what that fool Snorticombe had been up to. It would seem he had thought the monster needed tethering—I won't attempt to explain the mysteries of his mind—and he had tied about a dozen yards of rope to the end of either wing and fixed them firmly to a couple of iron guy-posts that belonged properly to the badminton net. Up they came at the tug of "Alauda," and they were trailing and dancing and leaping along behind me, and taking the most vicious dives and lunges at everything that came within range of them. Poor old Templecom got it hottest in the lane, I'm told—a frightful whack on his bald head; and then we ripped up the vicar's cucumber frames, killed and scattered his parrot, smashed the upper pane of his study window, and just missed the housemaid as she stuck her head out of the upper bedroom window. I didn't, of course, know anything of this at the time—it was on a lower plane altogether from my proceedings. I was steering past his vicarage—a narrow miss—and trying to come round to clear the pear trees at the end of the garden—which I did with a graze—and the trailers behind me sent leaves and branches flying this way and that. I had reason to thank Heaven for sturdy little G.K.C.'s.

Then I was fairly up for a time.

I found it much more confusing, than I had expected; the engine made such an infernal whir-r-row for one thing, and the steering tugged and struggled like a thing alive. But I got her heading over the market-place all right. We buzzed over Stunt's the greengrocer, and my trailers hopped up his back premises and made a sanguinary mess of the tiles on his roof, and sent an avalanche of broken chimney-pot into the crowded street below. Then the thing dipped—I supposed one of the guy-posts tried to anchor for a second in Stunt's rafters—and I had the hardest job to clear the Bull and Horses stables. I didn't, as a matter of fact, completely clear them. The ski-like alighting runners touched the ridge for a moment and the left wing bent against the top of the chimney-stack and floundered over it in an awkward, destructive manner.

I'm told that my trailers whirled about the crowded market-place in the most diabolical fashion as I dipped and recovered, but I'm inclined to think all this part of the story has been greatly exaggerated. Nobody was killed, and I couldn't have been half a minute from the time I appeared over Stunt's to the time when I slid off the stable roof and among Lupton's glass. If people had taken reasonable care of themselves instead of gaping at me, they wouldn't have got hurt. I had enough to do without pointing out to people that they

were likely to be hit by an iron guy-post which had seen fit to follow me. If anyone ought to have warned them it was that fool Snorticombe. Indeed, what with the incalculable damage done to the left wing and one of the cylinders getting out of rhythm and making an ominous catch in the whirr, I was busy enough for anything on my own private personal account.

I suppose I am in manner of speaking responsible for knocking old Dudney off the station bus, but I don't see that I can be held answerable for subsequent evolutions of the bus, which ended after a charge among the market stalls in Cheeseman's shop-window, nor do I see that I am to blame because an idle and ill-disciplined crowd chose to stampede across a stock of carelessly distributed earthenware and overturn a butter stall. I was a mere excuse for all this misbehaviour.

I didn't exactly fall into Lupton's glass, and I didn't exactly drive over it. I think ricochetting describes my passage across his premises as well as any single word can.

It was the queerest sensation, being carried along by this big, buoyant thing, which had, as it were, bolted with me, and feeling myself alternately lifted up and then dropped with a scrunch upon a fresh greenhouse-roof, in spite of all my efforts to control. And the infinite relief when at last, at the fifth or sixth pounce, I rose—and kept on rising!

I seemed to forget everything disagreeable instantly. The doubt whether after all "Alauda Magna" was good for flying vanished. She was evidently very good. We whirled over the wall at the end, with my trailers still bumping behind, and beyond one of them hitting a cow, which died next day, I don't think I did the slightest damage to anything or anybody all across the breadth of Cheeseman's meadow. Then I began to rise, steadily but surely, and getting the thing well in hand, came swooping round over his piggeries to give Mintonchester a second taste of my quality.

I meant to go up in a spiral until I was clear of all the trees and things and circle about the church spire. Hitherto I had been so concentrated on plunges and tugs of the monster I was driving and so deafened by the uproar of my engine, that I had noticed little of the things that were going on below; but now I could make out a little lot of people headed by Lupton with a garden fork, rushing obliquely across the corner of Cheeseman's meadow. It puzzled me for a second to imagine what they could think they were after.

Up I went, whirring and swaying, and presently got a glimpse down the High Street of the awful tangle everything had got into in the market-place. I didn't at the time connect that extraordinary smash-up with my transit.

It was the jar of my whack against the weathercock that really stopped my engines. I've never been able to make out quite how it was I hit the unfortunate vane; perhaps the twist I had given my left wing on Stunt's roof spoilt my steering; but anyhow, I hit the gaudy thing

and bent it, and for a lengthy couple of seconds I wasn't by any means sure whether I wasn't going to dive straight down into the market-place. I got her right by a supreme effort—I think the people I didn't smash might have squeezed out one drop of gratitude for that—drove pitching at the tree-tops of Withycombe, got round, and realised the engines were stopping. There wasn't any time to survey the country and arrange for suitable landing place; there wasn't any chance of clearing the course. It wasn't my fault if a quarter of the population of Mintonchester was swarming out over Cheeseman's meadows. It was the only chance I had to land without a smash, and I took it. Down I came, a steep glide, doing the best I could for myself.

Perhaps I did bowl a few people over; but progress is progress.

And I had to kill his pigs. It was a case of either dropping among the pigs and breaking my rush, or going full tilt into the corrugated iron piggeries beyond. I might have been cut to ribbons. And pigs are born to die.

I stopped, and stood up stiffly upon the framework and looked behind me. It didn't take me a moment to realise that Mintonchester meant to take my poor efforts to give it an Aviation Day all to itself in a spirit of ferocious ingratitude.

The air was full of the squealing of the two pigs I had pinned under my machine and the bawling of the nearer spectators. Lupton occupied the middle distance with a garden fork, with the evident intention of jabbing it into my stomach. I am always pretty cool and quick-witted in an emergency. I dropped off poor "Alauda Magna" like a shot, dodged through the piggery, went up by Frobisher's orchard, nipped over the yard wall of Hinks's cottages, and was into the police-station by the back way before anyone could get within fifty feet of me.

"Halloa!" said Inspector Nenton; "Smashed the thing?"

"No," I said; "but people seem to have got something the matter with them. I want to be locked in a cell..."

For a fortnight, do you know, I wasn't allowed to come near my own machine. I went home from the police-station as soon as the first excitement had blown over a little, going round by Love Lane and Chart so as not to arouse any febrile symptoms. I found mother frightfully indignant, you can be sure, at the way I had been treated. And there, as I say, was I, standing a sort of siege in the upstairs rooms, and sturdy little "Alauda Magna," away in Cheeseman's field, being walked round and stared at by everybody in the world but me. Cheeseman's theory was that he had seized her. There came a gale one night, and the dear thing was blown clean over the hedge among Lupton's greenhouses again, and then Lupton sent round a silly note to say that if we didn't remove her, she would be sold to defray expenses, going off into a long tirade about damages and his solicitor. So mother posted off

to Clamps', the furniture removers at Upnorton Corner, and they got hold of a timber-waggon, and popular feeling had allayed sufficiently before that arrived for me to go in person to superintend the removal. There she lay like a great moth above the debris of some cultural projects of Lupton's, scarcely damaged herself except for a hole or so and some bent rods and stays in the left wing and a smashed skid. But she was bespattered with pigs' blood and pretty dirty.

I went at once by instinct for the engines, and had them in perfect going order before the timber-waggon arrived.

A sort of popularity returned to me with that procession home. With the help of a swarm of men we got "Alauda Magna" poised on the waggon, and then I took my seat to see she was balanced properly, and a miscellaneous team of seven horses started to tow her home. It was nearly one o'clock when we got to that, and all the children turned out to shout and jeer. We couldn't go by Pook's Lane and the vicarage, because the walls are too high and narrow, and so we headed across Cheeseman's meadows for Stokes' Waste and the Common, to get round by that detour.

I was silly, of course, to do what I did—I see that now—but sitting up there on my triumphal car with all the multitude about me excited me. I got a kind of glory on. I really only meant to let the propellers spin as sort of hurraing, but I was carried away. Whuz-z-z-z! It was like something blowing up, and behold! I was sailing and plunging away from my wain across the common for a second flight.

"Lord!" I said.

I fully meant to run up the air a little way, come about, and take her home to our paddock, but those early aeroplanes were very uncertain things.

After all, it wasn't such a very bad shot to land in the vicarage garden, and that practically is what I did. And I don't see that it was my fault that all the vicarage and a lot of his friends should be having lunch on the lawn. They were doing that, of course, so as to be on the spot without having to rush out of the house when "Alauda Magna" came home again. Quiet exultation—that was their game. They wanted to gloat over every particular of my ignominious return. You can see that from the way they had arranged the table. I can't help it if Fate decided that my return wasn't to be so ignominious as all that, and swooped me down on the lot of them.

They were having their soup. They had calculated on me for the dessert, I suppose.

To this day I can't understand how I didn't kill the vicar. The forward edge of the left wing got him just under the chin and carried him back a dozen yards. He must have had neck

vertebrae like steel; and even then I was amazed his head didn't come off. Perhaps he was holding on underneath; but I can't imagine where. If it hadn't been for the fascination of his staring face I think I could have avoided the veranda, but as it was, that took me by surprise. That was a fair crumple up. The wood must have just rotted away under its green paint; but anyhow, it and the climbing roses and shingles above and everything snapped and came down like stage scenery, and I and the engines and the middle part drove clean through the French windows on to the drawing-room floor. It was jolly luck for me, I think, that the French windows weren't shut. There's no unpleasanter way of getting hurt in the world than flying suddenly through thin window-glass; and I think I ought to know. There was a frightful jawbation, but the vicar was out of action, that was one good thing. Those deep, sonorous sentences! But perhaps they would have calmed things...

That was the end of "Alauda Magna," my first aeroplane. I never even troubled to take her away. I hadn't the heart to...

And then the storm burst.

The idea seems to have been to make mother and me pay for everything that had ever tumbled down or got broken in Mintonchester since the beginning of things. Oh! And for any animal that had died a sudden death in the memory of the oldest inhabitant. The tariff ruled high, too. Cows were twenty-five to thirty pounds and upward; pigs about a pound each, with no reduction for killing a quantity; verandas—verandas were steady at forty-five guineas. Dinner services, too, were up, and so were tilting and branches of the building trade. It seemed to certain persons in Mintonchester, I believe, that an era of unexampled prosperity had dawned upon the place—only limited, in fact by the solvency of me and mother. The vicar tried the old "sold to defray expenses" racket, but I told him he might sell.

I pleaded defective machinery and the hand of God, did my best to shift the responsibility on to the firm in Blackfriars Road, and as additional precaution, filed my petition in bankruptcy. I really hadn't any property in the world, thanks to mother's goodness, except my two motor-bicycles, which the brutes took, my photographic dark-room, and a lot of bound books on aeronautics and progress generally. Mother, of course, wasn't responsible. She hadn't lifted a wing.

Well, for all that, disagreeables piled up so heavily on me, what with being shouted after by a rag-tag and bobtail of schoolboys and golf caddies and hobbledehoys when I went out doors, threatened with personal violence by stupid people like old Lupton, who wouldn't understand that a man can't pay what he hasn't got, pestered by the wives of various gentlemen who saw fit to become out-of-works on the strength of alleged injuries, and served with all sorts of silly summonses for all sorts of fancy offences, such as mischievous mischief and manslaughter and wilful damage and trespass, that I simply had to go away

from Mintonchester to Italy, and leave poor little mother to manage them in her own solid, undemonstrative way. Which she did, I must admit, like a brick.

They didn't get much out of her, anyhow but she had to break up our little home at Mintonchester and join me at Arosa, in spite of her dislike of Italian cooking. She found me already a bit of a celebrity because I had made a record, so it seemed, by falling down three separate crevasses on three successive days. But that's another story altogether.

From start to finish I reckon that first aeroplane cost my mother over nine hundred pounds. If I hadn't put my foot down, and she had stuck to her original intention of paying all the damage, it would have cost her three thousand...But it was worth it. It was worth it. I wish I could live it all over again; and many an old codger like me sits at home now and deplores those happy, vanished, adventurous times, when any lad of spirit was free to fly—and go anywhere—and smashed anything—and discuss the question afterwards of just what the damages amounted to and what his legal liability might be.

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