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 extreme 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 wabkites, and a 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'm 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 the merest apology for instruction. 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 rising 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 the engines I should choose.

I remember my wild rush on my motorbike 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 days' 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 through 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 Snortcombe 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 Blériot, and she had the dearest, neatest seven-cylinder forty horse-power G.K.C. engine, with its G.B.S. flywheel, 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 the 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 half-way 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 the 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 quiet, 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 lifer, 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 realized what
that fool Snortcombe 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
now 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 screech—and
the trailers behind me sent leaves and
branches flying this way and that. I had
reason to thank Heaven for my 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
whirr-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 greengrocer’s, 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 suppose
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, destruc-
tive 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 into Upton’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 Snortcombe.
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 a manner of speaking
responsible for knocking old Dundy off the
station bus, but I don’t see that I can be
held answerable for the 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 stam-
pede across a stock of carelessly-distributed
earthenware and overturned a butter stall. I
was a mere excuse for all this misbehaviour.

I didn’t exactly fall into Upton’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 get 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 whirred 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 the 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 pre-
sently 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, any-
how, 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 Withcombe, got round, and realized the engines were stopping. There wasn't any time to survey the country and arrange for a 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 realize 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 Frohisher'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 the 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 fields, being walked round and stared at by
everybody in the world but me. Cheese-
man'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 Clamp's, the furniture removers
at Upmpton Corner, and they got hold of a
timber-wagon, and popular feeling had alayed
sufficiently before that arrived for me to go in
person to superintend the removal. There
she lay like a great moth above the débris
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-wagon 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 wagon, and then I took my
seat to see she 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 détour.

I was silly, of course, to do what I did—
I see that now—but sitting 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 a sort of hurrahing, but I was carried
away. Whuz-z-z-zz! 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 prac-
tically is what I did. And I don't see that
it was my fault that all the vicarage and a lot
of 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 Pat
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
translated on me for the dessert, I suppose.

To this day I can't understand how it is 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 his 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 the
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 lucky 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 Minton-
chester since the beginning of things. Oh!
and for any animal that had ever 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 tiling and
all 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 an 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 hobbledehoy when I went out of 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 smash anything—and discuss the question afterwards of just what the damages amounted to and what his legal liability might be.