

## The Free Press Short Story

## THE BLIZZARD BASKET

By JOHN SCOTT DOUGLAS

"We have about one chance in ten of getting out of this storm alive!" shouted Dale Prosser, attempting to raise his voice above the shrieking wind which spanked their eddying balloon.

The words were whipped past Stanberry Martin's ringing ears in a vague blur. The young man caught the gist of his fellow pilot's meaning, however, and nodded uncomfortably. The big bag they had entered in the National Balloon Races was whirling and spinning in foaming cross currents. The blue teeth of lightning ripped through the black thunder heads tumbling about them.

Slashing rain cut their faces to painful rawness as the two youths tried to navigate the balloon through the maw of the storm. Before the take-off of the race at Bell's Field, Pittsburgh, Dale and Stanberry had selected the balloon basket in a rubberized fabric envelope, so that, in the event mishap should force them to land in some body of water, they might hope to remain afloat until rescued. Instead of keeping out water, it was having the reverse effect, acting as a catch-all. Over four hundred pounds of rain water swished about their ankles with the twisting of the bag.

Starting from Pittsburgh at eight miles an hour, the storm and the wind had accelerated their speed to nearly twenty. They dared not climb through it because the balloon would be rendered a blazing inferno if it were struck by lightning. For over ten minutes they had been "valving" or spilling gas in an effort to counteract the rising convection current which fed the cloud.

Dale's thin, aquiline face was gauged-like in the bluish light of a flash. "We're going to be hit!" he screamed hoarsely. "Let's spill all the gas from the appendix and quit this race. I've had enough!"

Stanberry set his firm young jaw stubbornly as he thought of Dad Houston, designer of the balloon in which they rode. He shook his head. "We can't betray Mr. Houston's trust," he shouted back.

His only reply was a savage grunt as Dale splashed to the other side of the basket. Stanberry grasped his arm as a blade of lightning ripped open the skies, to be followed almost instantly by its shadow accompaniment of thunder. "We can't quit, Dale," he said, "but we have a good chance of getting hit! Let us take some precautions. If we sit on the edge of the basket and have a string tied to our rip-cords, it may open our parachutes even if we are knocked unconscious by lightning."

Dale saw the wisdom of his companion's reasoning. He fished around among their possessions for some cord, and finally found some which Stanberry cut into two yard-long pieces with his sheath knife. These they tied to a rope which supported the basket of their lighter-than-air craft and to their rip-cords so that the rings of their chutes would automatically be opened if they were thrown free by striking lightning. They then perched themselves on the rim of the basket, clinging to support ropes. It was dangerous in its way, and there was the possibility that they would tumble into space and make a forced landing even if their bag was not struck. It was better, however, than risking being roasted alive in a burning balloon. They continued riding the storm while the blackness grew with approaching night. The thunder claps finally became less violent. Objects on the earth appeared in shadowy relief. They had lost considerable gas in fighting rising wind currents. Stanberry was about to suggest that they released ballast to give them more altitude when the instant wind current caused the balloon to fall rapidly.

He jumped down from the edge of the basket, and hurled a sandbag into space; but his decision had come too late. The basket of the balloon struck earth with a staggering impact, and Stanberry was hurled forcibly against the hard basket.

Dale was meanwhile hurling sandbags out of the basket to give the balloon lift. The bags were so sudden it was difficult to raise them over the edge. Stanberry clambered unsteadily to his feet to assist his companion. They threw overboard ten bags while the wind, having them in its clutches, swung them alone at forty miles an hour. Every three or four hundred yards they struck earth, only to bounce fifty or a hundred feet into the air.

Suddenly his heart stood still as Stanberry saw the greatest menace of free-ballooning rushing at them through the gathering dusk: a high-tension power line! Something checked up within him as he realized their danger. There was 30,000 cubic feet of highly inflammable hydrogen gas a scant ten feet above their heads. They were speeding toward six power lines at nearly fifty miles an hour now. Each of those lines carried approximately 50,000 volts of electricity. The instant they hit, probably just above their head-ribs, any two short-circuited wires would cause a large enough spark

could have identified important landmarks in almost all parts of America.

Stanberry had arrived at Bell's Field in Pittsburgh in answer to a telegram from his employer, a few hours after Mr. Houston had received the compound fracture of the wrist. He had learned that a balloon race was like no other race on earth. The winner is determined by measuring the farthest point from the take-off, this distance being noted on the arc of a great circle between the starting point and the point of landing.

Dale and Stanberry, seventh in position among the eighteen balloons lined up at the take-off point, had started to fly low, heading slightly north of east, toward New England. The higher flying balloons headed slightly south of east.

Almost at the start, Stanberry had found Dale lacking in the nerve necessary to win a free balloon race. He had insisted on climbing above the clouds, which lay some ten miles directly ahead of them. Stanberry had demurred, knowing that the velocity of the wind largely determined their speed and that the wind velocity would be greatest in the storm area. They had almost come to blows before Dale had finally begrudgingly given his consent to continue low into the storm-stricken region.

Almost simultaneously with Dale's startled cry, announcing that they were going to hit, they did so. The basket of the balloon shuddered violently, and Stanberry was hurled backward with staggering force. Good fortune was with them. They clipped through the wires as if they had been the tape at the end of a hundred-yard track. There was not the slightest spark, perhaps due to the speed with which they struck.

Almost instantly Stanberry saw a twelve-wire telegraph line across a railroad track over which they were passing. He breathed a heavy sigh of relief. A telegraph line was tame compared to that high-power tension line! He proved stronger, however. There was a tremendous crack as they collided with the cross-arm of the telegraph pole, a grating and pounding of something heavy on the ground below, and then the balloon was brought to an abrupt stop, quivering as it hung on the pole. "We're lucky to be out of that alive!" muttered Dale Prosser grimly. "Now that we're stopped, we can empty this bag and get to earth safely."

"What about our promise to Mr. Houston that we'd do our best?" demanded Stanberry, a slight edge on his voice. "Dad Houston would have run this race himself, fractured wrist and all, if he'd thought there was a possibility of our betraying his trust!" snapped Stanberry. "You can climb down that pole and get to earth if you want to so badly."

A few minutes before, Stanberry had cast overboard his drag rope with the hope of it catching in something to hold them until they could drop out sufficient ballast to rise. It was now badly tangled in the pole. He turned to freeing their basket, paying no attention to his disgruntled partner. Working for some minutes to jerk the rope free, he finally lost patience, cutting it with his sheath knife.

"Well, are you going to quit here?" he demanded.

"And let you have the ten-thousand-dollar prize which goes to the winning balloon? Not much! If you won't quit, I won't. But we'll probably both be killed."

Stanberry said nothing, peering down into the blackness below to see why their balloon would not rise. It did not seem to be caught anywhere. Perhaps, more lightening of their load would give it life. He felt about in the swishing water, and arose with a cry of dismay. "Our sandbags are all too open and the bottom's covered with sand. Now we haven't any more ballast!"

"Then we'll have to quit!" Stanberry shook his head. "Not if I can think of some alternative!"

The icy water in which he stood gave him his idea. There was, he knew, nearly four hundred pounds of it by rough calculation. Freed of part of the

water, they would rise: freed of all of it, the sky would be their limit. How was it to be managed? There was nothing with which to bail out the water.

He then saw how it might be done. He cut a hole in the side of the rubber envelope sheathing the basket. He motioned Dale to that side, and they tipped the basket, permitting the water to spill out of the hole in the side. The basket and balloon rose almost immediately. When he had lost what he estimated was half the water, Stanberry moved to the other side of the basket so that they could keep the remaining two hundred pounds for future ballast.

They rose swiftly into the chill upper strata of air. Dale continued to fall, but they were out of the storm area proper.

Dale grumbled repeatedly at the cold, his soaked clothing, at his companion for continuing against what he considered insurmountable obstacles. Stanberry said nothing.

When they had climbed to a little over seven thousand feet, Dale began to form on their rigging. Their clothing had increased to slightly over thirty miles an hour, however, which was encouraging to Stanberry. Like the higher balloons at the take-off, they were now moving in a slightly southeasterly direction.

A blizzard raged about them, whipping them with icy blasts which chilled to the bone. Hailstones as large as marbles slashed their numb faces. The basket shook as though it were a live thing shuddering in the cold.

Gradually the gas in their bag contracting from the cold and the ice forming on their rigging drove them down to lower altitudes. The cold was less bitter, but they were so thoroughly miserable that they noticed little difference. Dale spilled more gas from the appendix, although they had already lost one-third of their supply, and they approached earth again. A dark mass of trees appeared in silhouette perhaps fifteen hundred feet below.

"Here's where I'm quitting the race," said Dale savagely. "Put the balloon down the first cleared space you see."

"If we touch earth once, we're disqualified. That doesn't mean a strike with terra firma; the rules say any complete stop."

"Who'll know?" demanded Dale.

"I'll know," answered Stanberry with asperity. "There's your chance if you want it. A meadow below. But I think you'll do better to stick. The race is over at five o'clock."

"We won't win it, anyway," snapped the other. He swung over the side, gripped the ring of his rip-cord, and dropped into space. The chute blossomed into a white carnation and went drifting away toward the field. Stanberry could dimly see Dale make a safe landing before he passed out of sight to the southeast.

All night long, Stanberry would rise

into the chill, moonlit night above the clouds, and then, "valving" to lose gas, sink into the despairing darkness beneath the black canopies of sullen clouds. Many times he was sorely tempted to spill his gas and seek a landing. Remembrance of Mr. Houston's dependence on him, however, made such thought seem cheap.

Just as dawn broke, he saw the broad sweep of the Rappahannock River below him with the broader arm of Chesapeake Bay ahead. Beyond that glimmered in the distance the rolling gray of the Atlantic. He studied his wet maps incredulously, scarcely believing he could have travelled from Pittsburgh, over Maryland, and to the coast of Virginia in one night. His maps, however, upheld his own knowledge of the country. A town glittered below in the early morning sunlight, and he opened his appendix full, filling the air with the nauseous fumes of hydrogen gas. The balloon dropped rapidly as it deflated, and finally came to rest on a small, round aeroplane landing field. Some early mechanics came running up to meet him.

"Where am I?" demanded Stanberry. "Weems, Virginia," one mechanic told him. "Where'd you come from in that contraption?"

Stanberry told him. The mechanic whistled softly.

The mechanics helped him empty the last of the gas from the bag and roll it for shipping. A truck carried it to the train. He telegraphed the committee in charge of the race of his destination, and took the train for Pittsburgh.

Dad Houston met him at the train, his kindly old face wreathed in smiles. "I knew my balloon could win the race," he cried exuberantly. "But I guess the greatest credit goes to the pilots. Orders have been flowing into the plant all morning since the paper came out with the news. And a congressman telegraphed me that he thinks my balloons will be used in observation work in spotting forest fires. Isn't that great?"

"Did I really win?"

"Haven't you read the papers?" asked Dad Houston in surprise.

Stanberry shook his head, smiling. "I've been making up lost sleep."

"Where's Dale?"

Stanberry explained, trying to make it as easy as he could for the deserter.

Dad Houston's face was grim, however, when he had completed his recital. "Stan, I'm making you production manager instead of Dale," said the old man.

"It isn't just this race. It's an attitude of mind with Dale. Several times I've been on the point of firing him for losing his courage when things get rough."

"Well," said Stanberry after a thoughtful pause, "I'm going to give

Dale half of the prize money, anyway. He helped me get through the hardest half of the race with his knowledge of navigation."

Dad Houston eyed his new production manager for a moment in silence. "You are under no obligation to give Dale anything," he said, watching the other's face. "He forfeits all rights to the prize when he quits."

"Perhaps," said Stanberry; "but I don't like to do things that way."

Dad laughed softly. "You wouldn't be the man I thought you were if you did."

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