"THE FEARFUL Adventure of Professor Steiner" was told in the St. Paul Pioneer on August 9, 1863, just eight days before Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin checked into the International Hotel in that city and made his first foray into the atmosphere with the "professor." John H. Steiner had arrived in St. Paul during the last week of July to publicize and make preparations for balloon ascensions to be held after the middle of August. The German-born aeronaut, whose English is known to have lacked polish, must have told the story of this "hair-breadth escape" to a newspaperman who wrote the version reprinted here. It is possible that the account was used by Steiner as advance publicity elsewhere. Headlined "Ballooning in a Thunder Storm: The Scene as Witnessed Above the Clouds," the article was intended by the balloonist to "interest some of your numerous readers, as few of the many adventures of the Aeronaut are ever published."

IT WAS in the summer of 1853, at the latter end of August, that I was engaged to make an ascension from the city of Camden, New Jersey. The day was beautiful; not a cloud was visible, and everything bid fair for a pleasant excursion. At three o'clock everything was ready for my departure, and stepping into my frail car, I bade adieu to my friends that surrounded me. The word was given, "let go," and the balloon mounted majestically into the boundless ocean of air, and the thousands that witnessed the ascent gave utterance to their admiration by tremendous cheers and applause.

I rose to an elevation of 8,000 feet, when the balloon became stationary; the mercury standing at 42° above zero.

From this elevation, the view presented was beautiful. . . . To the east I could behold, away over the Jerseys, the wide Atlantic ocean swelling its billows to the blue dome of heaven. . . . My attention was now drawn towards the west by sounds of distant thunder, and I could behold large banks of black clouds, piled up towering towards the heavens. Now and then a flash of lightning could be seen. . . . I had often wished that I could behold one [a thunderstorm] from above the clouds, and . . . I did not shrink from the encounter.

I threw overboard some ballast and ascended to an elevation of 12,000 feet. Here the atmosphere was very cold, the mercury sinking to 23 degrees above zero, while the storm appeared far beneath me. I was almost stationary. I looked at my watch — it was half past three o'clock, and at the rate the storm was moving it would not take twenty minutes before it would reach me. I stood erect, silently contemplating the scene. The thunder became more and more terrible, and I thought that I would descend before the storm would overtake me. I commenced to look around me to see the nature of the earth beneath, when I beheld that it was too late to descend. . . .

The next thing to do was to keep above the storm, I threw over board every thing of weight that the car contained, and so managed for a time to keep above the gale. In a few moments the whole face of the earth was covered with a boiling spray. The thunder was terrific, but no lightning could
be seen. The sun shone very bright. I was now some 5,000 feet above the storm, and 10,000 feet from the earth. ... It is impossible to describe the scene that was transpiring around me — it was terribly grand. But I was not allowed to view the scene longer. ... My balloon commenced to contract from the cold, and soon commenced to descend. Now my heart sank within me, for it was a fearful scene to behold.

I tried all means to keep my balloon above the storm ... but all in vain. Down came the balloon ... now would I have given worlds for one bag of sand; it was like going from heaven into hell — but down I came into utter darkness.

I could not see the balloon that bore me, save when the whole scene was illuminated with flashes of lightning, which occurred every few moments; so powerful was the light of those flashes that I became totally blind; the concussion of air was so terrible that blood commenced to flow out of my ears and nose; my balloon reeled and staggered like a drunken man; the car was thrown from side to side, and I was obliged to hold fast to keep myself from being thrown out. I expected every moment that the gas would take fire and that I would be precipitated to the earth. I tried to congratulate myself that science taught me that a balloon was a non-conductor of electricity, but then the words of Shakespeare would ring in my ears, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than is dreamed of in your philosophy.”

I thought of descending, but to come down in such a gale was certain destruction. I had no anchor, but I could not remain much longer in this terrible situation, for I was traveling at the rate of sixty miles per hour, and thought I must be near the Atlantic. ... At this moment I beheld the earth. The balloon was descending; the rain was pouring down in torrents. I was now just above the tops of the trees, rushing along at a speed of a mile a minute. I saw that I must strike the ground in a few moments; so I seized hold of the sides of the car, and awaited the shock, which came ... with such force that it threw me ten or fifteen feet from the car. The balloon collapsed at the same moment.

It appears that the balloon drew the electricity from the clouds to the earth, as it struck a tree not twenty yards from the spot where I struck the ground, and at the same moment. The shock was so great as to knock me insensible, and I was picked up by some persons who saw me come down, and taken to a farm-house hard by, where I remained for some time before I was able to travel. ... Since then I have had no desire to witness a thunder storm from above.

JOHN H. STEINER, Aeronaut.