

Thrilling Stories of the Sky Trails

Air STORIES




August 20¢



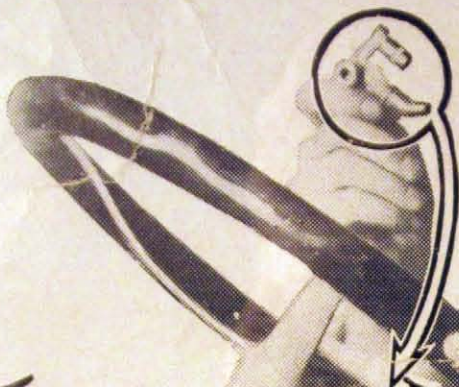
**Jerry
the Hawk**
*the gripping story
of a sky crasher*
by Arthur J. Burks

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Air STORIES



DEDICATED TO AMERICAN FLYING MEN WHO HAVE CARRIED THE STARS AND STRIPES TO THE SKY

Vol. I, No. 1

AUGUST, 1927

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Frank "My boat?"

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A NEW Magazine



"ONCE upon a time" our Stone-Age forefathers huddled about a meager fire and listened breathlessly to the returned voyager from the strange country beyond the horizon.

DOWN through the ages, the trail-blazer in every generation told his tale of gripping adventure to a new circle.

TODAY the world is the audience for the pioneers of the air-trails—the tight-lipped, stout-hearted adventurers who talk with the stars.

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WE pledge these men and our readers a story magazine that will grip and thrill; a story magazine that will be clean and honest; a story magazine that will be American from cover to cover.

VAPOR
Saves Gas

J. A. STRANSKY MFG. CO.
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The Editor

Jerry the Hawk

By
Arthur J. Burks

Jerry was a fighting fool—he cracked more crates than any pilot in the works—but how that bird could fly!



Complete Air-Adventure Novelet

“YOUR name Smutts?”
I admitted it, dropping my feet from my desk to get a good look at the man who stood in the doorway facing me. The most ungainly, the homeliest, most unprepossessing person I have ever seen—and I look at myself in the mirror three times a day. I wouldn't take any prizes for beauty, with my dearth of front teeth, my two hundred and twelve pounds of beef, and my shell-rimmed spectacles. I was an Adonis compared to this apparition. But his eyes were sort of squinty and grinny, so that you took a liking to him right off, even if you were a bit chary of strangers.

“This your Airport, here?” went on the stranger.

“A goodly share of it.”

“Well, my name is Joe Lewis, and I can fly anything!”

“Modest, ain't you?”

“Not modest,” he retorted. “But good—damned good!”

“We conduct a passenger service,” I told him, “and we can't take any chances on killing folks. But we do need a flyer who knows his groceries.”

“Then I'm hired! Where's my boat?”

Honest, the fellow simply took your breath away. I figured that if he was half as nervy with an airplane as he was about asking for a job, he might be

good, at that. But in passenger carrying it isn't nerve so much as good common-sense that counts in the long run—always provided that the flyer can fly. I can't, because of bum eyes. But I'm bugs about ships—and about crime detection. Queer mixture of hobbies, I admit; but they do mix right frequently, according to my way of thinking.

I pushed the fellow out of the door and led him to the edge of the field where one of our most dilapidated crates was being gone over to see if it were possible to get her off the ground without dynamite. This plane might easily have been called the eye-sore of Dutch Flats. It was a wreck; but I give myself credit for warning Lewis before he climbed into the cockpit.

"I don't know you," I explained; "and good DeHavilands cost money. If you smash this one up nobody will cry about it."

Lewis grinned and his fingers played lovingly over the various instruments before him. You know how some men are with horses? How they talk horse language, and the brutes whinny softly, as though they understood? Darned if I didn't think for a moment this fellow Lewis was like that with airplanes. When he eased the old gun into half speed ahead I thought of a horse whinnying softly—honest! She had a new sound to her, somehow, that made me wonder. The aged DeHaviland tugged at the blocks like a two-year-old at the barrier. Then Lewis cut the gun and yelled to the mechanic to kick the blocks. No sooner was the mechanic free than Lewis was leaning forward in the cockpit, his face almost out of sight in a helmet that was too big for him, and the old wreck was sky-hootin' down the field, into the teeth of the wind, like a young whirlwind. Her tail was up in no time, and a long trail of dust was hurtling backward to scurry across the Avenue behind the hangars into the faces of passing motorists. Then Lewis lifted her. I looked for him to circle for altitude; but not this guy! He *knew!*

He was satisfied in his own mind that there'd be no crash. He whirled that crazy crate in a wing turn that would have done credit to a little Jenny, and I swear the wing-tip didn't clear the ground more than a foot. My hair stood on end, and before he had finished and set her down again the whole blamed Avenue behind the Airport was lined with automobiles, through whose windows necks were craned as curious passersby stared, open-mouthed, at the craziest flying ever seen in San Diego. In ten minutes there were more cars on Barnett Avenue than there are on Saturday noon on Third and Broadway.

The old crate behaved nobly. Back and forth across the field, always too close to the ground, to my mind, now on one wing, now on the other, with Lewis glued in his cockpit like a leech, seeing nothing, knowing nothing, except that it was his job to keep her off the ground. Down at the far end of the field he pointed her blunt old nose at the sky and lifted her in a zoom that was terrific, and leveled her just as she would have stalled. He turned a wing-tip up there, gave her full speed back toward the Airport and, just before he would have passed over the Avenue, yanked his stick back, bringing her nose up again, clear up—up—up—and then back—and at the peak of his loop, with his undersized head pointed at the concrete pavement, he righted her in a flawless Immelman Turn. Hot dog! I'd give a year's spending money to be able to do that! Bum eyes, though—no use whining. But Lewis wasn't through yet. He banked sharply, turned when right over the road, and plunged straight as a die toward the office door before which I was standing. He couldn't miss me, I thought, and I jumped one side with a lot more speed and alacrity than my two hundred and twelve pounds usually warrant. Just when I thought he would smack into the little office it occurred to me that I hadn't thought to warn the girl inside who takes the money of passengers. Too bad! We'd have to ad-

vertise for another girl. The old plane's nose lifted just a trifle, and it looked to me as though he had just about ripped off the office roof.

I waited for the sound of his crash; but it didn't come. The old DeHaviland came back instead, and her trucks were spinning like mad! He'd touched them to the office roof. He's about through now, I thought; but he flipped over on his back for all of a hundred yards, righted himself over the road again, banked—and then dove *under* the telephone wires for a perfect landing.

He cut the gun and was rolling a cigarette as I reached him.

"Honest to God, Lewis," I said. "You're the looniest flyer I've ever seen! And you've ruined our passenger business, too. If folks think we have such fool flyers they'll never ride with us!"

"No?" It was a question, punctuated by slightly elevated eyebrows. He was looking back in the direction I had come and, honest Injun, there were more people crowding onto the field than I'd ever seen on it before since we started it. I guess I don't know folks, after all.

But, anyway, I'd given this nut a name, and he was Loony Lewis from then on—or just plain "Loony." And we dated the beginning of our magic growth as an Airport from the moment he had first stepped into that old wreck and turned her wrong side out.

Lewis, grinning all over his homely face, was watching the visitors flock out upon the field. Cars were parking all along the north side of the Avenue, and men, women and children were running toward our DeHavilands. Was it curiosity? I wondered. Or were they going to ask Lewis to do his stuff again?

I soon found out, for in three shakes the girl in the office who takes in the coin for our "Wonder Flights" over San Diego and environs had used up all of her five-dollar receipts and every DeHaviland, which carried four passengers, was warming up swiftly, each with one of our experienced pilots at the stick. Mechanics, their greasy faces wreathed

in grins, seeing no doubt a possible increase in pay, were running hither and yon like mad; bringing out new movable steps upon which passengers were to mount to the cubbies. Other mechanics were waiting at the wings to help the flyers away. One after the other our planes, of which there were five in excellent condition, shot down the field for perfect take-offs, rising into the face of the wind, circling for altitude, crossing over to Coronado and curving inland over San Diego—and enough tickets had been sold besides to assure us that every plane would be busy for two hours to come. For almost the first time since we had existed as an Airport, we were making more money than we were paying out.

"See?" said Lewis gleefully. "I've put some new life into your old Airport!"

"Your modesty," I retorted, "is overwhelming."

But I didn't mean it—then. I was overjoyed. Airplanes are like elephants. When they are idle they eat their heads off. If this new egg could pull stunts that would make visitors stop, look, and listen, I was all for him. He could brag about himself to his heart's content.

Ryan, the Airport manager, came striding across to where Lewis and I still stood beside the crazy old crate he had caused to stand up and beg for mercy.

"Fugossake's, Georgie," he cried. "What in tarnation has got into folks, all of a sudden? We're taking in money in great gobs!"

"Meet Loony Lewis," I replied; "who modestly asserts he can fly player pianos if you put wings on 'em."

They shook hands.

"I am causing all this flurry in your little Airport," says Lewis, "and your friend Smutts has sense enough to know it. If you are as wise as he is you'll see it, too—and put me on the pay-roll at a nice salary."

I saw that Ryan didn't like this much. Lewis was going too fast for us. It

was almost as though he had suddenly dropped in and, without so much as by-your-leave, taken charge of the place. Ryan's voice was a bit cool as he replied to this last outburst of Loony Lewis.

"You're hired," he said; "but you are not taking charge of the Airport. Your salary is the same as that of our experienced flyers, with a ten per cent cut of all business you bring in."

"Hot Towser!" retorted Lewis. "That's the way to talk. By the time I have been here a month this Airport will be famous from San Diego to Portland, Maine."

"It's queer," replied Ryan curiously, "that we've never heard of you before. Where are you from?"

I looked at Lewis. There was a peculiar glint in his eyes as he gazed steadfastly at Ryan.

"I can fly anything with wings," he replied slowly. "I take it that is what you want. If you are interested in the family history of your flyers you might as well pay me off now. Whatever I may have been before I reported to Georgie Smutts is my own damn business. I started new today. Understand?"

Ryan nodded stiffly, faced about smartly, and returned to the office. The first of the DeHavilands dropped back to the field, kicked around toward the office where the movable steps were, was caught by one wing by a waiting mechanic, and the four passengers, their faces flushed with excitement, climbed out—and they had to force their way through the crowd that was waiting to climb in for another hop. The other four DeHavilands were scurrying back, two of them high above the field, two of them side-slipping swiftly down. The field was in an uproar. Dust from propeller backblasts was whirling across the Avenue behind, and more cars were lining up as cars previously parked drew away. The crowd we had already attracted was attracting other crowds and the girl who takes the money, her hands full of fivers and her eyes all nutty with excitement, didn't know exactly which

end she was standing on. Only the flyers, upon whom so much depended, were at ease. They had to be. An accident, with such a turn-out as this would have been ruinous.

"Listen, Smutts," said Loony. "Why can't I take up a passenger or two in this old crate? She'll hold together."

I gave him a fishy stare, took him by the arm and led him toward the office, just as the four other DeHavilands circled about and began to discharge their passengers.

"Listen, Loony," I told him. "Stunt flying is all right when you don't risk anybody's neck but your own. We want to look you over for a few days before we let you carry passengers. We are in business, you know, and we can't take chances."

"You know, Georgie," he said, "I have an idea that Ryan doesn't especially like me."

"Ryan," I replied, "is not a fellow who shoots off his mouth, and he can fly rings around any flyer I have ever seen—not excepting myself. He has his doubts about folks who say 'I' too much."

This stopped Loony for a moment—during which I took the opportunity to tell him what we expected of him. He nodded and darted to the hangars for dungarees. Those he found were too large for him; but no one seemed to notice, and Lewis, who appeared to know everything about airplanes, was soon doing the work of two mechanics, making himself generally useful, and doing it all as though he enjoyed it thoroughly.

We counted cash after it had got too dark to fly, and for the first time in our experience, had to use an adding machine. We'd certainly knocked 'em for a loop—and tomorrow would be Saturday, when everybody goes out for a good time!

In our excitement we had practically forgotten Loony Lewis.

Came Saturday morning—but Loony Lewis did not appear. Eight o'clock.

Nine. Ten. Eleven. Noon. But no Lewis.

At about one-thirty the first of the Saturday afternoon crowd was entering the field; but the crowd was small compared to the crowd which had still been on the field yesterday when it had become so dark we had been compelled to knock off flying. Then, breaking all speed limits, there dashed along the Avenue an orange taxicab with two passengers. One of them was Loony Lewis. The other was a stranger—and I didn't like his looks. Lewis remained in the cab, talking to this fellow, while the wreck he had flown yesterday was being warmed up. Cars were drawing in and parking with greater frequency now, so that I didn't pay too much attention to Lewis and his doubtful friend.

I heard a DeHaviland break into song far down the line. I looked up. The orange taxicab still stood at the curb, with Lewis' friend in the rear seat alone, his eyes fixed intently on our string of waiting ships. I looked down the line, craning my neck. Lewis was in the cockpit of the old wreck, and a mechanic was on the wing—and even that far away I saw that the mechanic looked worried. Lewis cut the gun and shouted to the mechanic, who kicked out the blocks under the trucks. This was too much for me. Lewis was taking off without orders and without permission. I ran down the line, calling to him; but he was half way down the field, the old wreck's tail already in the air, when I reached the mechanic who had waited on him.

"What the hell, Jones?" I said to the mechanic.

"He's drunk as a lord, Mr. Smutts," said the mechanic; "but he wouldn't listen to me!"

What to do? There was nothing we could do. It would never do to let the crowd know that a drunken flyer had just taken to the air from our joint, and that he would be up there, doing his stuff, when the five DeHavilands, which already were being loaded, took off later.

There was nothing to do but sit tight and pray that nothing would happen.

Loony Lewis was certainly doing his stuff. He was all of four thousand feet in the air, doing wing-turns, barrel rolls, nose dives, falling leaves, Immelman Turns—everything in the way of stunting that aviation has evolved. Straight ahead, with the speed of a hurricane; then he would bring her nose up and over and fly straight back, up side down! Stunt! That drunken flyer certainly could do his stuff—and did it! Any minute I looked for a wing to fall off the old crate; but minute succeeded minute with monotonous regularity and the old bus remained in the air. From where I watched it looked as though Lewis were doing his stuff right above San Diego, and I knew that we'd get called good for permitting it. I might be mistaken of course, on account of my bum eyes. But even above the harbor it wasn't entirely wise to stunt, for the fleet was in and somebody besides the crazy flyer might get killed.

Ten minutes passed, with Loony turning the old buggy inside out as usual; but the crowd was coming in, even bigger than yesterday, and I decided that Lewis wouldn't crash any more gently if I worried about him, so I turned away and got busy with our customers. At intervals, though, I looked over my shoulder at the stunting plane—which, even when new, was never made for the treatment it was receiving.

The five DeHavilands were in the air now, and as though we had given the Navy and Marine Corps flyers an idea, seven hydroplanes took off from North Island, while four shiny De H.s, bearing the devices of the Marine Corps Aviation group, lifted into the air like so many birds. There were entirely too many planes in the air for a boozy flyer as crazy as Lewis to be doing his stuff. But I didn't tell Ryan, yet. Ryan's heart was wrapped up in the Airport, and all this excitement was doing him a world of good. I couldn't rob him of his sudden triumph, after all the

years of failure through which I knew he had gone. For myself it was different. I've got money, even though a dead man gave it to me—and if the whole Airport went up in smoke tomorrow I could build another one in its place. But Ryan was sensitive about taking money, even from his friends. So I held my peace and said nothing about Lewis, though I kept my eye peeled on that part of the sky which he was tearing into pieces.

Eighteen planes in the air at once! And what an uproar! Hot dog! If we hadn't been so busy taking in money I'd have had my own pet pilot busy, and been up there among them myself.

I heard a gasp behind me. I turned and looked at the spot where I had last seen Lewis. The old wreck he was flying was right above the Airport, perhaps three thousand feet in altitude, and her nose was pointed straight toward the center of the landing field, and she was plummeting downward at the rate of two hundred miles an hour! That sounds like an exaggeration, maybe; but it wouldn't sound like it if you had been there and, even from that distance, heard the whizzing of the wind through the struts and braces of that old sky-buggy which appeared to be plunging to earth out of control. I looked about for the orange taxicab and its mysterious occupant; but it had departed. I looked back at the falling plane. The people on the field were running back toward the Avenue, back from the spot where it looked as though Lewis were going to crash. He must have been angling more than I had thought, for his nose was pointed at a spot some hundred yards in advance of the blocks which lay on the field in readiness for chocking the truck of the passenger planes as they came back. Lewis brought up her nose when he was about a hundred and fifty feet from the ground, and twisted her around so that she pointed into the West, into the wind from Ocean Beach. I groaned and winced—and watched for the wings to drop off. God knows how

the old wreck ever hung together for such treatment. But Lewis set her down as nice as Ryan could have done, gave her the gun for the turn, slowed down for the mechanic who darted onto the field to catch the wing, and swung grandly into place. In the act of running her out Lewis' head sagged against the cowling, and the mechanic stepped into the footrests in time to hide Lewis from the crowd. I ran to the plane.

Lewis, his crazy flight successfully completed, had passed out. He even snored when I caught him by the hair and shook him savagely. Ryan was running toward us. I waved him back; but he came on. Keeping my eye on Ryan I shook Lewis again, pulling out a bit of his hair. I knew, however, that not one of our visitors had noticed what had happened.

A flyer, drunk, dead drunk, had passed out at the joy-stick after twenty minutes of savage stunting!

Ryan was quite close to us. I felt Lewis stir under my hand. I shook him again. He sat up stiffly as Ryan came alongside, and I swear that his voice was perfectly normal as he addressed the Airport manager.

"That straight goods about the ten per cent cut on business I bring in, Mr. Ryan?" he demanded. "If it is, I have an idea. I got it while I was doing my stuff up there. The Navy is going to do some formation flying next week, with parachute jumps and all the rest of it. Let's mimic every formation with our six planes, only let's do it better than the Navy does. I'll lead the formation—and later I'll do a parachute jump from ten thousand feet!"

For a moment not one of us had a word to say.

CHAPTER II

Scraping the Sky

It didn't take a very wise guy to see that Ryan was a bit doubtful of this fellow Lewis. Lewis talked too much,

for one thing, and didn't seem to care a tinker's dam whether he crashed with a plane or not. He'd been up twice in our worst wreck, had done everything to her except take the wings off in the air, and hadn't carried a parachute either time! Looked like he wanted to commit suicide, and was just waiting for the proper moment. Ryan was worried about our new employee, though he hated to let him go when every man jack of us at the Airport knew blamed well that the aerial antics of Lewis had given us two days of the richest business we had ever had. But Ryan watched Lewis continually. I knew, too, that he was cogitating on that matter of formation flying with our civilian planes, and that he rather cottoned to the idea. It wouldn't be difficult for our flyers. Most of them had been service flyers during and after the Great War, and a single test flight in formation would fix them up all right. While Ryan was mulling it over in his mind I, since I knew that Ryan would finally approve the plan, was promising myself that I'd somehow find a place in the formation for Georgie Smutts. I have to take a back seat when it comes to flying; but I have no intention of taking a seat *too* far back—no farther back than the after cockpit if I can help it. Unofficial observer, that's me, Georgie Smutts.

Ryan, I knew, had been an instructor at Mather Field during the war and knew his stuff. He had been a flying major, one of the youngest in the Army, and serving on what I have always believed to be the most trying and disheartening of jobs—pilot instructor, passing on the eligibility of young men who had the idea they could fly or could learn. Personally, I have no desire to take the first hop with any flyer. I'm nervous enough with a flyer who has hundreds of hours in the air to his credit. Ryan had won his spurs in more ways than one. Two days after Loony Lewis had made his proposal Ryan called all the flyers into my office, which

is just as much his as mine, and bluntly informed them that Lewis' plan would be put into effect—and that Lewis would make that parachute jump about which he had spoken. There was something of a challenge in Ryan's eyes as he looked at Loony after making this statement, as though he half expected Loony to back out. But Lewis grinned. He didn't even nod his head. Ryan, watching him carefully, paled suddenly and leaned forward, staring into the mysterious pilot's face.

"Look here, Lewis," he said suddenly, "haven't you and I met someplace before?"

"Maybe," replied Lewis. "I've been there—several times!"

There was an insult, not particularly veiled, in the reply—much more of an insult than the words would indicate. Ryan, goaded in some way that I could not understand, continued.

"And if memory serves me right your name wasn't Lewis then!"

Lewis grinned. The other flyers shifted uneasily, for in the space of four days the loony flyer had become a favorite with all of us. He was a man after our own hearts because he could fly rings around the best of us.

"Still wondering about my family history, Ryan?" said Lewis at length. "Cheese it! I'm making this blasted field of yours! I'm earning all you pay me, ten times over, even with that ten percent cut you're giving me!"

Ryan breathed loudly through his nose as he leaned back. It appeared a real effort for Ryan to draw his eyes away from the homely face of Loony Lewis. But he managed it after a time, though, at intervals, his eyes came back to the tanned face of the stunt flyer, and each time this happened thoughtful lines appeared about his eyes. Ryan, with success in his grasp, was existing under a terrific strain, and showed it. The mystery of Lewis bothered him, and even the general run of flyers are enigmas to other folks, as hard to handle as a bunch of high salaried actresses

—temperamental, superstitious and all that. I wasn't worried. Everything seemed to be going swimmingly as far as I could see.

Ryan, with his forehead still wrinkled, plunged into the details of the flight over San Diego we intended to make. The flyers listened attentively. They knew that Ryan knew his onions, and that what he said was flyers' gospel as far as the Airport was concerned.

"There'll be six planes of us, boys," he said; "counting that wreck Lewis has been flying the last four days—if it is still together then. Haley will lead the squadron. I'll be farther back, with an observer, watching progress. We'll fly over San Diego twice, over Coronado, over the three pleasure beaches, with two shifts in our formation. The shifts will occur when we are over the open country north of the Biological Gardens where, if there should be an accident, we won't kill anyone except ourselves. The shifts will be dangerous, as you all know. But, men, remember one thing—*If anything goes wrong, DIVE!* don't nose up when you know there is a plane somewhere on your blind side, and hold onto your places in the formation as though your life depended on it—which it very well may. We'll break formation at my signal. I'll be well back after we have finished our stuff, and when I drop out of the formation you will separate and fly back to the Airport singly. Is that understood?"

The flyers nodded.

There was a lot more of it, the dope on where each man belonged in the formation, and all that stuff. I'm no aerial strategist. I just like to fly. Most of what Ryan told the flyers was Greek to me. But they all got it, even to the Army Air Service terms Ryan used.

"Now—Lewis," and none of us liked the way Ryan paused over the name; "for your part of the show. You say you'll drop from ten thousand feet. Have you got nerve enough to jump right over the Airport and try to land somewhere near the line where the

planes stand when we are waiting for passengers?"

"I hope," said Lewis slowly, "that you have no doubt about my nerve—or my ability?"

But Ryan, shrugging, made no answer. Something deep here, something hidden. It made us all feel uneasy. It was the girl who takes the money of the passengers who snapped us all out of it.

"Are we open for business today, or ain't we?" she asked cockily. "The field is full of tourists, and a self-appointed spellbinder is telling 'em all that we've got a flyer here who is a world-beater as a stunt flyer. I sold a bunch of tickets. Shall I tell the crowd to get its money at the box-office? Or will you flyin' gentlemen come on out and do your stuff?"

That broke up the party and relieved the tension. The flyers, donning helmets and goggles, swarmed from the office, led by Ryan himself, with Lewis tailing them all. Did I fancy it, or was there a new, somehow appalling expression in the face of Loony Lewis as he gazed after Ryan? I'm a peacemaker myself, and then and there determined that, before that formation business was undertaken I'd find out what was wrong between Ryan and Lewis.

The roaring of the DeHavilands interrupted my peacemaking thoughts. I went to the door and watched the girl take in money, with one eye, while, with the other, I watched our sweet-singing babies take the air as though they were natural birds instead of made-to-order ones. Ryan didn't go up. His head was full of plans for publicity. The Airport could stand a lot of it, for Airports cost money. When the whole five planes were in the air, and the sixth, with Lewis in the cockpit, was tearing queer-shaped hunks out of the sky, Ryan walked thoughtfully to where I was nonchalantly standing.

"We've got to have a talk with Lewis," he said without preamble. "He's got me worried. I've seen him some-

where before; but his name wasn't Lewis then—unless my memory is horribly at fault. And the mechanic we assigned to his crate, that Jones fellow, just told me that Lewis was drunk the other day when he did all those stunts just before diving nose foremost into the field. You saw him, Smutts! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Wait a minute, Big Boy!" I retorted. "I hate to remind you of anything like this; but remember that you need my money to run this Airport, and that I own more of it than you do, legally. Don't use that tone to me. I like you, Ryan, and would give you every darned one of my shirts, with the cuff buttons thrown in; but I won't take a bawling out from you, or anything that even remotely sounds like a bawling out. Now don't get heavy, Boy, before you have a chance to cool down. Go on away without saying the nasty things you are opening your mouth to say, and we'll forget that I have, for once, exercised my prerogative and done something on my own hook. I'll answer for Lewis for the time being."

Ryan closed his lips tightly. Finally, after staring at me red-eyed for a moment, he managed a stiff grin.

"Anyway, Georgie," he managed, "I want another talk with Lewis. Let's have him in, just you and me, after quitting time tonight, and we'll see what's what."

"And I'd like to wager right now, Don," I said gently, "that when we are through talking you and Lewis will have shaken hands and called each other a couple of fools for trying to start a mare's nest of some kind."

But Ryan was gone, on the run toward the big Douglas which the mechanics were just wheeling out. Since the night when I had made a spectacular ride in her toward Tecate, a lot of things had been done to her, so that even Ryan was satisfied that she was all right to risk as a passenger carrier. Ryan intended flying her himself, with the youngest of our pilots beside him. The

Douglas carries two pilots, and twelve passengers. I wondered what the crowd would think of taking a maiden hop in her—sixty dollars' worth for each hop. But I needn't have worried. At the stick Ryan is truly himself, and his infectious grin won the crowd over, so that the cubby was full before the engines had been entirely warmed up for the hop. I breathed a sigh of relief when, the passengers securely fastened in, the Douglas went trundling down the field for a perfect take-off and, fifteen minutes later, an even more perfect landing.

In the meantime, Lewis had done his stuff, landed, run her out, and joined me in the office door. While the big Douglas was dropping into the field to complete her maiden voyage with capacity load, Lewis watched her with varying emotions visible in his face. I saw hunger there, among other things, and I knew that his fingers fairly itched to grasp the joy stick of the big crate. At the same time, by some sixth sense I didn't know I had before, I knew that he'd never go up in it with Ryan as his side-kick. But it was too deep for me.

I'd make 'em shake hands though. Peacemaker Georgie Smutts!

If I could only have looked ahead to that meeting after quitting time!

It was a big day. The three days preceding had been big days, chock-full of business; but with the big Douglas in operation this fourth day of Lewis' joining on was bigger than the other three put together, and Ryan looked almost happy as he strode into the office for the chinfest with Loony Lewis and me.

A sort of tableau, with a bit of dynamite in it. I knew that as soon as we were seated for the seance; but only the Lord Himself realized how soon the explosion was to occur.

I started it myself.

I waxed facetious.

"Don Ryan, Manager of the Dutch Flats Airport," I began; "shake hands with Loony Lewis, the craziest flyer that ever flew."

Ryan, automatically, put forth his hand.

And the fun started.

Lewis leaned forward, and the most savage expression I have ever seen on a man's face blazed from his as he gazed into the eyes of Ryan.

"Shake hands with Ryan!" he exploded. "Not if he was the last man on earth besides me! I'd rather smash him between the eyes! I might as well give you the works now, Ryan, since you have already committed yourself in such a way that you can't back out gracefully, when you know the story I can tell! You said you had seen me somewhere before—you have! You said my name wasn't Lewis then—it wasn't! Does the name of Jess Bogart mean anything to you? Have you ever heard it before?"

Ryan seemed to crumple in upon himself. For the first time since I had known him he seemed shaken. His face looked as though he had seen a ghost—and he stared at Lewis as though Lewis himself were that ghost.

"Jess Bogart!" he muttered; "Jess Bogart! Let me see—I found you unqualified, didn't I?"

"You did, damn you! And I could fly rings around you the best day you ever saw! You ruined me, Ryan, that's what you did! You were a power on that instructor job of yours, and a word from you sent me away from Mather Field in disgrace. You told our superiors that I'd never be a flyer—and made me go through the whole damned war as an infantryman! I stunk, and was lousy, with the men in the trenches, while every day I had to look up and watch poorer flyers than myself get theirs over the lines. There was Gale Irvine, for example. I could outfly him any day; but you told the Colonel differently, and Irvine came back from France a major, with three decorations, two of them from his own country! I came out as a sergeant, when I might have ranked above Irvine! You didn't have the guts yourself, Ryan! You took the stick away from me because you thought I

was diving too steep—and told the Colonel I had lost my nerve and froze onto the damned thing! I had a three-point landing all mapped out in my mind—and I've made a thousand of them since you broke me! I've made 'em right on this field of yours—one of them when I was so drunk I couldn't hit the ground with my hat, to say nothing of hitting it with that old wreck Smutts gave me to kill myself in!"

"You're wrong, Lewis," said Ryan quietly, and he was himself again. "I had you sent down because I knew you drank too much."

I breathed a sigh of relief. I liked Ryan too well to harbor the belief that he would be capable of doing a brother flyer an injustice.

But Lewis, whose hate, whose desire for revenge, had been smoldering through the war and the monotonous years that had followed, was not to be pacified so easily.

"Ryan," he said softly—too softly, I knew at once; "you are a —— liar! I told you at Mather Field that I would get you some day, and I'm going to do it! The best thing you can do is fire me—and I'll tell the papers why you did it. That fellow in the taxicab with me the other day was a snoopy reporter, and while I was drunk I let out a little of the story, just enough to whet his interest, and he'll write our story all over the front pages if I give him the word! I'm going to make this Airport the greatest in the country—and then I'm going to bust it flatter than a pancake, and you along with it! I'll let you taste success such as you never dreamed of, and then I'm going to take the cup away."

Here were two challenges, and I held my breath as I wondered how Ryan would react to them. Lewis had called Ryan a blankety-blank liar—and dared him to either fire or keep him at the Airport, threatening to break him whatever he did. I don't believe Ryan really heard all that Lewis said, or that Lewis himself really knew what his

mouth was saying—for both men were peeling off their flying coats and their helmets with maddening, inevitable deliberation. I remonstrated with them, all to no avail. Neither heard me. I ran to the office and looked out. The whole Airport was deserted. I closed and locked the door. I grasped a chair by the back and held it before me like a shield. I don't like fights, and intended to hit whichever one of 'em mistook me for the other one when they got going.

I don't remember which one struck first. I only know that before I could say Jack Robinson, Lewis had caught the desk by the edge and upset it with its top against the office wall. Then Lewis and Ryan were at it—in brutal, bitter silence.

Neither spoke a word after the first blow was struck. The two damned fools stood toe to toe where the desk had been and smashed each other in the face with both fists, and neither pulled his blows nor gave ground. I stood my ground nobly with my back to the door, and the legs of the chair sticking straight out in front of me—for all of five minutes. Lewis went crashing into the opposite wall from a blow to the button delivered with all the power in Ryan's right arm. He came back staggering. Ryan stepped aside and Lewis came on, butting his thin tummy against the chair legs. I guess he thought I was Ryan, for he swung like a pile driver. I don't know just what happened to the chair. When I woke up with my head against the end of the desk the chair was across the room from me, with two of the legs broken off—and those two fools were flailing the tar out of each other in the center of the office. They were both breathing like porpoises, now—or whatever animal or fish it is that breathes like that—and their faces looked like pounded beefsteaks. Their knees were trembling, too, and their blows lacked steam, so I must have been out for some time. I felt of my mouth to see how many teeth Lewis had knocked down my throat. I gulped with dismay. Then

I remembered that I didn't have any teeth to get knocked out—I'd lost 'em all in a crash some months before.

Ryan went down from a savage blow in the mouth. He came up swearing fiercely, and Lewis went down with a blow on the chin. Sweet papa! A pair of sweet sockers, and nobody to see the fight but me, and I had missed perhaps the best part of it because of a lazy desire to go to sleep under the overturned desk!

Meat and bone couldn't stand the gaff. Every time a blow landed somebody groaned. Five more minutes passed, while the pair clinched, blocked, and slugged. At the end of that time when a blow struck there were two groans in unison—it was hurting the fellow who slugged as badly as the fellow who got slugged, or even worse.

"Cheese it, you guys," I croaked. "The cops are coming!"

But it didn't work. They never even heard me. And there weren't any cops. That wasn't much of a bluff of mine, apparently, for the saps kept on fighting, though I, fat as I am, could have taken the hardest blow either could have landed and cried like a spoiled baby for more.

Lewis stepped back and let drive all his power. It wouldn't have killed a fly; but Ryan dropped like a poled beef, and Lewis, swaying on his feet drunkenly, stood over him, waiting for him to get up. Ryan staggered erect, after I could have counted twenty nice and slow, and pasted Lewis again. Lewis went down. There was to be no counting in this fight. They'd keep at it until one of 'em went down and stayed down, or until one of 'em said nuf! But I knew, as I saw the hate which gleamed in their eyes, that neither would give up. Lewis came up again and swung. Ryan dropped. I looked at him curiously. He rolled to his back and lay still. Lewis looked down at him through puffed lids. He opened his mouth to speak; but changed his mind and spat blood, and three teeth, all over the place.

Bravely, then, I stepped forward, heading for the water faucet. Lewis'

hand went up weakly to bar my way. I shoved him back roughly, forgetting that he staggered so tiredly. He fell and rolled over.

"That," I said loudly, just in case someone happened to look in the window at the moment, "is what you two guys get for fooling with me! Serves you right, Lewis, for hitting me with a chair when my back was turned."

I almost drowned Ryan with cold water. He came up sputtering, spitting blood, and two teeth, and thought I was Lewis. I ducked under his feeble swing, seized him under the arms, and placed him in a chair, from which place he stared stupidly at Lewis, still on the floor.

"Knocked him out, hey!" he muttered. "Knew I could whip the dashed fool!"

I didn't say anything. I got some water and threw it in Lewis' face. He came out of it; but didn't take me for Ryan. I put him in another chair I had brought from the girl's office, and righted the desk between them. Then I got what was left of the chair I had used as a shield, and raised it over my shoulder threateningly.

"There'll be no more fighting tonight, gents," I said savagely, bravely; "unless I do the fighting!"

They didn't even look at me.

They looked at each other like a couple of wildcats, though neither could have moved on his own power.

"Break me and be damned to you!" said Ryan at last to Lewis. "I'll show you what I think of you and your threats! You fly the Douglas tomorrow, with passengers, and with Haley as a seat-mate, and your pay is raised ten dollars a day—provided you've got brass enough to do that jump you bragged you would do. You haven't got the guts to break me!"

Lewis was grinning bloodily, but hate was just as evident in his eyes as before as he replied.

"I said you were a liar a while ago—and you're still a liar!"

Get it?

Things were going to be strained around this Airport from now on, even I could see that, and neither of these guys would yell nuf.

CHAPTER III

Cloud Battle

THAT was a strained week, what I mean. Loony flew the Douglas, with Haley as his seat-mate, and he played the game. No stunting this week; but the crowds turned out just the same, as though they thought there *might* be some stunting. Ryan and Lewis avoided each other, and their eyes carried veiled insults whenever they happened to clash—and Lewis didn't help matters any when he insisted on drawing his pay at the end of each day, as though he didn't trust Ryan to come through if he left it too long. Dark lines were already appearing under the eyes of either, and even our oldest flyers were beginning to get a bit strained—snarled at one another without the slightest excuse. Not at all the feeling there should have been among us with the formation flying but a few days off. But what to do? These two birds would never yell nuf, either of them.

During the week, casually, in such a way that not even the snoopiest reporters caught on, we managed to get all six planes in the air at once and practised the formations for a few minutes at a time, breaking when even one automobile on the Camp Kearney Road came to halt to watch.

Silence and bitterness. Two words that describe the atmosphere of the Airport on Dutch Flats. It was hard to figure out. Seemed to me that Ryan could have rid himself of Lewis had he so desired, without hanging him about his, Ryan's, own neck like an old man of the sea. Hard to figure flyers are, and Ryan was just about as nutty as the next one. A queer sort of pride had dictated his action in the Lewis matter,

and everyone of us knew that Hell nor high tide would change his mind.

The time for the publicity stunts was drawing close enough to suit everybody—except me. I didn't sleep well. I dreamed of airplanes falling in flames; of collisions in midair, and airplanes plummeting downward with locked horns; of men quitting after cockpits head first, fingers in the ring of the ripcord—and the chutes failing to open. Once, and I'll never forget it, I dreamed of taking a jump myself. In the dream my chute failed to open until I was fifty feet from the ground, and the blow I struck old terra firma drove my fat legs clean up into my fat stomach. All of which didn't help my peace of mind to any great extent.

Then the day came. They always do, and they come a darned sight faster when you dread them.

I have always believed that the public must have had a woman's intuition all along, for all San Diego seemed to be sleepwalking, with eyes distended as though everybody waited for the explosion of some vast powder magazine planted directly under Fourth and Broadway. Imagination, I guess, most of it; but deucedly unpleasant.

The Navy planes took off first—big seaplanes that looked like flying elephants and made so much noise you couldn't hear yourself think. About nine of 'em there were at first, circling over Coronado until they all got together, then, in formation, giving San Diego a treat and an eyeful. A reporter on one of the papers must have had a lot of drag somewhere, for a morning paper carried a full page spread of the seaplanes in flight, and every plane was right in place, as though their location in the formation had been decided by micrometer. A remarkable picture, oddly like that of a flock of thoroughbreds coming down the stretch in a dead heat. They've still got that picture in the morgue, for I saw it again the other day.

And racket! The automobiles which

scurried along Barnett Avenue didn't make a sound, and some of those big cars had engines in 'em that would have pulled the Marine Base off its base. You couldn't hear anything but those amphibians, flying just above the limit prescribed by law.

Then the flyers from the Marine Aviation Group took off, with the sun glinting gloriously from the sheeny, polished wings. I was watching from Dutch Flats, and my heart bounded. Even that far away I fancied I could see the Ace of Spades on their wings, the symbol of the Group. Hot Towser, what a show! DeHavilands, running wide open, in perfect formation. I looked at our six planes, waiting at the blocks like racehorses at the barrier, and my heart flopped again. Nothing showy about us. Peeling fabric, though serviceable—planes that were really too old for service, but that *were* serviceable because of the love and solicitude of the man who had to succeed, Don Ryan, Manager of the Airport.

The service planes held the stage, so to speak, for an hour or more—perfect flying. Then, over Coronado, after the seaplanes had dropped to the Bay and the Marine flyers had broken formation, four black specks dropped from four planes at about the same altitude, and started earthward, somersaulting over and over. From the back of one of them darted a white spurt of smoke, which spread out to become a rigid umbrella, with the jumper oscillating back and forth beneath. Two other chutes opened, with swinging parachute jumpers safely anchored among the shrouds. One still shot earthward, gaining speed, somersaulting still. I held my breath. That would be Atherton, I told myself, with his finger hooked in the ring, staying his hand to give the watching crowds their money's worth. He had almost reached the tops of the houses in Coronado, it looked to me, when his chute opened and held him. My muscles twitched in sympathy. He must have fallen all of a thousand feet.

I had never done it; but I knew something of what that drop had meant to Atherton when the chute opened—I'm a good listener wherever flyers foregather.

Then that first jumper brought a gasp of horror to my lips. He'd slipped out of his chute somehow, and the thing, like a white shroud, was settling slowly earthward, empty! How had it happened! I knew, though, when a second chute opened over his head that he had had two of 'em. *That* guy must have been Atherton. Here's hoping he always has an extra chute in reserve!

Came an excited shout from Ryan. Our six flyers were already in their cockpits, except for Ryan, and all propellers were whirling—though I hadn't heard them until now. I was to fly with Haley. I was all ready. I fastened the flaps of my helmet as I raced for my plane, and pulled my goggles over my eyes. Inside my cockpit, with Haley grinning back at me, I adjusted the straps of my parachute to my corpulent self, with the mental note:

"I won't need this—but I'll adjust it anyway!"

It was a kind of prayer, I guess.

The flyers had been well rehearsed. Ryan raised his hand. Blocks were kicked out and, regular as one, two, three, the six planes darted down the field into the wind and pointed their blunt noses at the sky, each climbing swiftly to be free of those yet to follow. Almost before I knew it, Haley and I were in the air, and circling the field at three thousand feet. I didn't know the signals, wasn't even watching for them; but I did see our planes converge, at four thousand altitude, and my eardrums seemed ready to burst with the concerted roar. From right and left the planes darted in, and as each took its place I closed my eyes and held my breath, and kept my finger in the ring of the ripcord—though I told myself that nothing less than a fire in the air would make me jump. But there were no collisions. Our flyers knew their stuff. They grinned at one another

across chasms that made me sick and faint, and we proceeded to do our stuff over San Diego and Coronado. I could imagine how the watchers must have laughed at us and our antiquated planes—but I knew that they were watching us, nevertheless, which was the main thing.

Loony Lewis was somewhere in the middle of the formation, and his head was bent low over the cowling. He was all business. I wondered what he was thinking. Ryan was right across, to the left of me, and every once in so often I saw him look at Lewis' plane intently, as though wondering just what his sworn enemy would do. But, I told myself, much as these two guys hated each other, neither would do anything that would put the rest of us in danger. Out of nowhere, as this thought came, came another one—a memory of that tense moment in the office when, with all the flyers assembled, Ryan had practically dared Lewis to do his stuff. But it was not the dare I remembered. It was the words Ryan had used when he was giving instructions to his flyers, and the peculiar emphasis he had put upon the words:

"If anything goes wrong, DIVE!"

Was it a sort of premonition? Maybe, I don't know. Flyers are queer folks, if I haven't mentioned it before, and even I am a flyer, after a fashion. That single sentence, with much mental repetition, and mulling over, began to take on a queer significance. I was beginning to wish I hadn't taken off, and praying to be back in my own cubby on Dutch Flats—and couldn't have explained my hunch to save me.

We made the first shift, north of the Botanical Gardens, over the mesa stretching between San Diego and Camp Kearney, without mishap, and came back over the town which, at this time, was a regular anthill of activity. And I guess a bunch of other folks must have had a hunch, for the Escondido road was lined with parked cars when we circled back for the next shift—after which we

were to break and Lewis was to climb to ten thousand, turn over control to the man in his after cockpit, and do a nose dive of his own.

Ryan, or somebody, must have been doping off, when we had all but finished our stuff. Somehow he got out of the formation, saw that he had muffed one of his own signals or something and, banking, came back like a whirlwind. But the formation had shifted according to schedule, and he had to cross right over Lewis to get to his own place—a combination of fatal errors, as we all knew in about two shakes. Nobody, later, could explain exactly how it had happened; but everybody agreed that Ryan had missed his cue somehow—and Lewis proceeded to gum the works completely. I saw him look around wildly for Ryan, saw him stare for a second at the hole in the formation where Ryan *should* have been—and then nose his plane *up* sharply for a better view! Ryan, coming across like a hurricane, was on his blind side for a split second—just that split second too long. I shouted, and my words choked me. The other flyers, grasping what had happened, slipped away to right and left as though at a signal, as the nose of Ryan's plane struck Lewis' bus just forward of the forward cockpit—and even above the roaring of the motors I could hear the crash as the planes seemed to melt together. They hung like that for what seemed an hour, then shot earthward, still glued together. Three of the planes were winging back toward Dutch Flats, and I knew that an ambulance would be on the mesa to pick up the pieces almost as soon as they had struck. The two planes were falling toward the Escondido road, and the sagebrush was suddenly black with darting figures as the parked cars along the right of way vomited forth their fleeing occupants. The planes turned sidewise, and in the cockpits of Lewis' plane I saw two figures seize their opportunity and somersault over the side. Lewis and his mechanic were safe, apparently, for one

parachute opened almost at once, with the jumper miraculously free of the falling planes—which now proceeded to separate with sickening slowness, falling apart on the downward plunge, discarding bits of metal and fabric. Neither of the men in Ryan's plane had, apparently, been able to jump.

Then it suddenly occurred to me that my own plane was getting to earth with terrifying speed! I hadn't noticed it before, call me a liar if you feel like it! But I wasn't in any airplane! Something must have *made* me do it, I guess! I know if I had stopped to think I'd have glued myself to my plane so that I couldn't have been pried loose with a crowbar. But here I was, plunging headfirst toward the place where those two planes would crash, and hadn't even pulled the ripcord! I swear I was fairly cool, though I have no explanation of the phenomenon; but I was a lot cooler when that parachute went slatting out over my head and my downward plunge slackened with gratifying sureness. As I say, I can't explain it. I don't even remember jumping—but it's a good thing, for Georgie Smutts, that I came to before I hit terra firma. Maybe I thought more of Ryan than I have let on.

But I had time to think a little now, for the crash had happened at five thousand feet. Ryan was still alive, for I could see him fighting the useless controls. His mechanic jumped after a bit; but he must have been dazed, for he never pulled the ripcord, and I closed my eyes and strove to keep from retching as he beat his own plane to the concrete pavement which is the Escondido road. They'd need a blotter for him! Poor chap! A fellow who was crazy about planes and flying and who was slated to do his first solo within the next few days. Oh, well—

It takes time to tell; but it happened in a dozen bats of an eyelash.

I looked around for Lewis. I didn't have to look far. He was below me, and I could tell by the movements of

his white parasol that he was pulling down on his shrouds to spill the wind out of her, so that he'd reach the ground with all speed. He was taking desperate chances, and even I knew that he was striving to get down to be right on hand at the wreck as soon as possible. I tried the same stunt; but my nerve isn't so good. I couldn't stand the way everything dropped out from under me when I pulled down on the shrouds and spilled the wind from my chute. I satisfied myself by holding on and letting nature take her course. At that, I soon saw, I wouldn't be so darn far from the wreck when she finally hit—if she was ever going to. She seemed to sing with maddening slowness which, after all, may have been in Ryan's favor. It was plain that he had no intention of jumping. Some flyers are that way. I've heard some of 'em say that before they'd take to the chute they'd ride down on the propeller!

Lewis' empty plane hit first, and scattered all over the place! Lewis himself wasn't far behind. Then Ryan's plane, hovered for an instant, slipped to the right and crashed alongside the road on its right wing—

And instantly took fire!

I swear that Lewis dropped that last hundred feet, and that he was free of his chute when he hit the ground! That's absurd, of course, as I look back at the whole affair; but I'm giving you my impressions at the moment. That's the way it looked to me. The spectators who had fled when the planes started down were coming back; but they were keeping well back from that inferno about Ryan's DeHaviland. There's seldom any guts in a crowd, or maybe you've noticed it.

Lewis, when I spotted him again, was racing toward Ryan's wrecked plane. I gave a lonely cheer for him; but no one looked up at me, though I was getting closer as the moments sped. Then I gulped and gasped—for Lewis, reaching the plane, never hesitated once. The fire couldn't have been as bad as I had

thought, for Lewis went right into wnar looked like the worst of it, vanishing instantly from sight. Then I struck the pavement—and didn't know until a half hour later that the impact had thrice flattened my already flat feet. I don't remember getting free of my chute. I do remember that the sky seemed, all at once, to be darkened with airplanes which had dashed to the scene from nowhere, and were circling the scene madly. It's a wonder there weren't a couple more crashes.

I ran toward Ryan's plane, just as Lewis, looking like the Devil Himself, black of face as the Ace of Spades which is the emblem of the Marine Aviation Group, came out of the smoke, dragging Ryan limply after him! I ran forward to help Lewis, and the damned fool, his white teeth showing in a snarl between blackened lips, smashed me right in my already badly maltreated mouth, knocking me on my posterior in the dirt! Can you beat it! And all I wanted to do was help him! Right then and there I promised myself that some day I'd get even with Loony Lewis. He was crazy as a bedbug, but I guess there was some excuse for his madness, at that.

He kept on dragging Ryan away. The crowd, which had come close, now that there was no need, suddenly gave back with a concerted yell of terror, just as the whole darned plane vanished in a roar of flame. Lewis hadn't been a moment too soon.

Lewis didn't look back at the plane. Ryan had been dragged free. Lewis dropped him, limply, in the dirt and knelt beside him. I jumped to my feet groggily and ran toward them. I hadn't any idea what I intended to do; but I did know that I didn't like what Lewis was doing. For he had raised Ryan to a sitting position, had hurled his enemy's helmet aside, and was slapping Ryan on either cheek with savage, stinging blows! One man in all that crowd did display a bit of sense. He must have been a farmer from the distant mountains beyond Escondido, out Warner Hot

Springs way, for he had a water bag on his car, and he ran to get it. He brought it to Lewis, pulling the cork as he ran—and Lewis spilled about half of the water on Ryan's face, and then forced the rim between Ryan's tight-clenched teeth.

I began to understand, then. I always do, after everybody else has grasped the grand idea. Ryan opened his eyes—and struck feebly at Lewis' blackened face!

"Damn you, Lewis!" he managed weakly. "I told you to dive!"

"You're a —— liar!" retorted Lewis.

Of course I picked this moment to put in my own oar. I wasn't attracting enough attention, anyway. In a few well chosen words I told Ryan how Lewis had gone through what was literally hell-fire to bring him, Ryan, out of the wreck. And Ryan replied:

"Yes, and damn him, if he had obeyed orders there wouldn't have been any wreck!"

The same farmer who had produced the waterbag put in a second appearance. He had gone back to his car—which didn't look anything like a farmer's car ought to look—and drove it around beside Ryan and Lewis.

"Might be a good idea, boys," he said quietly, "to get to a hospital or something. This buggy will do sixty on a bet, and even better if everybody keeps his mouth shut—and, for all we know, everyone of you three guys may be all smashed inside!"

Lewis knelt and lifted Ryan in his arms—and Ryan passed out.

It was a miraculous escape for Ryan all around and we discovered at the hospital that he was in fair shape, except for a few broken ribs, a smashed leg, a broken arm or two, and a gap in his head of just the right size to hold a nice silver plate—and a few burns here and there on the rest of his body. Lewis was badly burned, too—and later on they decided that they'd need somebody's skin to graft onto him, and

picked on me because I had so much of it! And after Lewis had twice smashed me in the mouth with his clenched fist! Can you beat it! And then they kept me in the hospital, too, while the places where they had used a razor on me were getting well. To make matters worse, they fairly smothered me in adhesive tape, miles more of it than was actually needed, and when the cuts and slashes from which they had taken skin to graft on Lewis were healed, they told me I'd have to pull off the adhesive tape myself—and I'm as hairy as an ape!

It took me three weeks to get the tape off, a hair at a time, pulled out by the roots!

But I managed it finally, and the chow was so good at the hospital I decided to stick around until Ryan was entirely on the road to recovery; but I had to groan every time a nurse came around to keep them from kicking me out as a fraud. You see, I wanted to see how this thing was going to come out. I was still the peacemaker, and wanted to see Ryan and Lewis shake hands!

Lewis got out first, and we didn't see him for a week, though my heart hammered every time a door opened. A dozen times a day I fancied those two coming together again, and Lewis, grinning widely, grasping Ryan's bandaged hand in a clasp of eternal friendship across a sea of coverlets. Very touching, as I saw it, sentimental enough to please even an old maid.

Then Lewis, walking on tip-toe, looking sheepish, finally came in—in flying clothes! His nerve then, apparently, was still good. He came to me first.

"Slip in and tell Ryan I want to see him. The nurse told me to come on in. I owe Ryan an apology. I *do* remember something now about him telling us to dive if anything happened."

Fine! The scene was now set for my sentimental fade-out, and I actually wiped away a tear as I hurried to Ryan's ward. He was awake, and propped up on his pillows like a mummy. He waved

a bandaged hand at me as I entered. I guess he grinned, but all I could see of him was his eyes.

"Lewis is out here, Ryan," I said, "and he wants to see you. Said something about owing you an apology."

"Georgie," mumbled Ryan through three layers of gauze, "Lewis doesn't owe me anything! Damn it, man! Don't you realize that he saved my life?"

I waited for no more. Everything was hotsy-totsy, even I could see that. I ran back to Lewis and gave him the news.

The way he took it took all the wind out of my sails.

"Why, the —— liar!" he said.

He faced about and left the hospital and didn't come back as long as Ryan was there! Now what do you make of

that? I've never been able to make it out, myself. But I do know this: Ryan has been back at Dutch Flats for six months, he and Lewis still cuss each other all over the place, and seem to be bitter enemies. Lewis still insultingly collects his pay at the end of each day, and Ryan docks him for every hour he doesn't fly; but Lewis makes no move to quit and Ryan seems to have no intention of firing him, and the Ryan Airport is becoming more widely known as the days pass.

Out of the whole peculiar mix-up this thing strikes me as the most peculiar: Of the whole crowd who heard Ryan, that fateful day, tell us all to "dive in case of trouble," I was the only one who carried out orders—and I darned near forgot to pull the ripcord!

AIRPLANE RUSTLERS

In the days when the horse-thief thrived throughout the Southwest, ranchers and cowmen banded together to form a protective association. They had their hands full in running down the criminals and their loot in the hey-day of the horse-thief. In the early fifties in Missouri the practice of rustling other people's horses became so widespread and was operated on such a successful scale that criminals flocked to the state and the Anti-Horse Thief Association resulted.

Methods of protection found effective in the Western mining camps were used by the founders of the organization, Major McKee and H. A. Stewart, who were '49ers in the gold days of California. For years after the Civil War when horse thievery flourished, the A. H. T. A. made it hot for members of the rustling clan. Tom King was one of the most notorious and most successful raiders of the period. The society and Federal government tried for some time in vain to curb the activities of this wary criminal. In three years he stole more animals than any other man. A complete puzzle to his pursuers, he evaded every trap with a marvelous intuition that left them dumfounded.

The society often protected banks and gradually drifted into a general law enforcement body, spreading through the Southwest and extending east into Illinois, Iowa, and Ohio. In 1908 the Kansas branch of the association spread its field to running down motor thieves.

But now, just as the motor thief supplanted the horse rustler, so the purloiner of airplanes is pushing out the rustler of motor cars. Several air machine robberies have been reported in the Southwest recently, and the old but nevertheless effective A. H. T. A. will soon be taking up the problem of curtailing the efforts of the newest brand of thieving criminal.

JERRY SCANLON.



North of the Stars

By John Paul Jones

A smashing saga of an air pilot's pluck, of treachery in the frigid, snow-bound Arctic wastes, and flaming romance in the skies!

Complete Air-Adventure Novel

GOLD! From the frosty fringe of the Arctic Circle the ice-wind gulped the cry and hurled it southward. Gold! the yellow gleaming lure that has fired the blood of men with delirious fever down through the ages. Gold! Into the four corners of the world screamed the cry, and from the ends of the earth came the answering hordes.

Upon the ice-bound coast a hundred ships spewed their cargo of gold-crazed humans—a heterogeneous herd from off a thousand paths of life. Before them towered the Northland's out-post: snow-mantled mountains whose pinnacles pierced and reached beyond the clouds. But straight before them, upward, onward, forward, led the path to Ophir and El Dorado. And like black

ants upon a sugar mountain, they inched upward in a squirming stream.

A thousand passions and hatreds coalesced into one dominant madness—Gold! Alone, each man must wage his own battle with the grim Northland, from whose white-robed breast he has come to tear away the yellow-spawn. Eyes that burn with greedy avarice; fingers that clutch in envious eagerness; from the mansions of the mighty, from the hovels of the lowly they come, staggering, fighting, cursing, over the trail that leads to the treasure-house of the world. Nor do they pause to give a helping hand to those who have fallen by the way and whose bones will soon lie, white and gleaming, against a background of eternal snow.

At night, trail-worn humans hover

about a hundred campfires that shower red glows into the skies; and far off in the Arctic night the eerie howl of famished wolves mingles with the snarls and wails of malemutes, baying at a frigid moon.

Here and there along the tortuous trail that twists over icy glaciers and through snow-bound mountain passes were gathered men from the four corners of the world: the strong and the weak; the good and the bad; those who had followed it across the face of the earth for a lifetime. Among them all there was but one woman.

It was no place for a woman. Jim Sanderson had pleaded; he had cursed and raged; he had sworn that his daughter should not accompany him North. But Astra Sanderson possessed, in addition to startling beauty, a will of her own. Her weapon was irresistible, not to be gainsaid: a wistful, appealing expression of deep-hurt that came into her violet eyes at will. So it was, that when Jim Sanderson guided his malemutes over the snow-trail, a slender, boyish figure, raced with lithe ease beside him.

The first few days Sanderson had traveled at a killing pace; he'd show this strong-willed daughter of his that stampeding was a man's game! But upon the third night when they stopped to make camp, this grizzled veteran of a hundred stampede trails looked at the boyishly-slender young girl with unconcealed pride and admiration.

"Honey, you're a lot more trail-hardened than some old-timers. You ought've been a man."

"A man's woman, that's me, Dad!" she laughed. "I wouldn't have missed this for a fortune. And this time, we're going to make the big strike!"

"Can't miss it, Astra," Jim replied, with the same fervid conviction in his voice that he had uttered the same words upon a hundred other occasions when he had missed it. He ate silently for a while, his eyes studying the girl covertly. "But it ain't just the hard-

ships of the trail that makes it bad for a girl," he said presently. "There'll be all kinds of men in the camp, and there'll be whiskey. Whiskey and men don't go to make things pleasant in a country like this. And if this turns out to be a big thing, there'll be gambling-dens, dance-halls, and hell-raising in general. I'd feel some better if you was back in Frisco with your aunt."

Astra laughed and threw a stick of wood into the fire, showering ruby sparks into the night. "Pshaw, Dad! It's just as safe up here for a woman as it is back in Frisco—safer! Besides, I've always been pretty much able to take care of myself!" She completed a little defiantly.

A long silence fell between them. The girl was staring into the crackling embers with far-away, dreamy eyes; Jim was lying back against the sled looking up into the starlit night.

"Purty, ain't they?" he asked suddenly.

"What, Dad?" She turned about.

"The stars," he said softly. "Lots of times I've laid on my back and looked up there, wondering what was behind them dancin' lights—" He sat upright suddenly and looked at her. "It was the stars that give me your name. Years ago, back in Kansas, I 'member seein' a motter that read: '*ad astra*.' I found out it means, 'to the stars'; that's how I happened to call you Astra—I figgered it meant stars. Your ma—" He broke off suddenly and reached for an ember to light his pipe in order that the girl could not see the expression that came into his eyes.

"A-and Mother, Dad?" One small, soft hand crept about his calloused fingers, her eyes looked at him tenderly, while a misty wistfulness filmed their violet depths. "I . . . I've always liked to think that Mother was up there behind those star-gleams, smiling and looking down upon you and me. Wouldn't you like to believe it that way, Dad?" she whispered softly.

"W-why, sure, honey!" he said husk-

ily and something caught in his throat. He got awkwardly to his feet and Astra looked at him a little startled. "Reckon I—I better get some wood!" he mumbled. He had mentioned the girl's mother before he thought. It was not likely that a woman who had run away with another man, leaving her two-year-old baby, was with the stars. But Astra had always been told that her mother was dead.

It was some minutes after her father had gone after wood that Astra heard a low chuckle behind her. She whirled and faced a swarthy, pock-marked man leering at her.

"Hello, dream-girl! Sometimes fate is kind. Beauty lost in the wilderness, alone and forsaken."

Astra sprang to her feet with an angry flash in her eyes.

"You may run back to your own fire. This one is private!" she said icily.

"What!" he chuckled. "You won't allow a weary, trail-worn Knight of the Gold Trail to warm the life-blood without which he must perish? But, ah!" His face sobered in mock-sadness. "It has ever been thus with fair maidens—not one small, glowing ember will they give from the warmth of their smile to warm a—"

"I told you to move on!" A small hand darted toward a hip-pocket of her corduroy breeches. But before she could draw the small automatic which she carried there, he was upon her. His arms were about her and she caught the foul odor of whiskey upon his breath.

"Now," she saw his leering face above her, hideous in the shadowy fire-glow, "I'll just take one little kiss and—damn you!"

Astra had managed to wrench one hand free and with all her force she crashed a small fist into his face. Caught by momentary surprise, he released his grasp. In that moment her hand darted once more toward her pocket; this time she succeeded in drawing the gun.

"I don't waste words with skunks!" she said in a cold, calm voice. "Get out, or they'll have to carry you out!"

A moment he stared at the gun and then leered into her face. "We'll be meeting again, snow-dove; and don't forget I have first claim by right of discovery!" He turned upon his heel and staggered back down the trail.

When her father returned with an armful of wood, she said nothing about the encounter. She knew that if he learned that someone had insulted his girl he would take the kind of action that had earned for him the sobriquet of Hell-fire Sanderson.

"Reckon one more load will be enough," he said. "I'll get it in a jiffy."

"Think I'll go with you, Dad," she said casually, so that he might not suspect her of having any fear of remaining alone.

"Better stick here and keep an eye open. You can't tell about some of this bunch. They might steal your eye-teeth with half a chance."

Rather than arouse any suspicion, Astra nodded acquiescence and sat down again facing the fire. After what seemed a long time to her, she got to her feet and walked a short distance in the direction taken by her father. He seemed a long time about returning. Looking back along the trail, she could see myriad sparks showered heavenward and shadowy forms hovering or moving about campfires. She decided that it would be safe for her to walk a little way from her own fire.

When she had gone a hundred yards without seeing anything of her father, some indefinable fear took possession of her and she hurried her steps. Five hundred yards from the campfire she came to an abrupt halt, a shivering chill coursing over her. From the murky shadows of the evergreens came a low groan. She uttered a terrified cry and sprang forward.

Beneath an evergreen a form lay motionless. Astra fell upon her knees

beside the prone figure of her father.

"Dad! Dad!" she cried with a sob. "What has happened?"

The head moved slowly and Jim looked at her from pain-filled eyes.

"Wait, girl!" he commanded weakly. "They ain't nothin' to go into hysterics about. I reckon I done busted my laig; it's painin' to beat hell!"

"W-why didn't you call, Dad?" she sobbed.

"'Smatter of fact," a sheepish grin overspread his pain-drawn lips, "I fainted! Just comin' around now. Go back down th' trail aways and find Bill Travis and his pardner. They'll help me back to the sled. You can't pack me, and I can't walk."

"I'll get them right away!" she cried. She sprang to her feet and raced away through the shadows like a pursued fawn.

Astra had no more than disappeared than a form flitted from the shadows of a nearby evergreen and crept toward Sanderson.

"Looks like we're meeting again, Hellfire!" A low voice spoke from above the prostrate man. "Quite a pleasure!"

At the sound of that voice an icy chill crept up the spine of the injured man.

"Stronk!" he groaned.

"Good guess, Jim!" Stronk sneered. "I've been looking for you a long time. I didn't follow this stampede for the particular purpose of finding you; but I had an idea you wouldn't be far behind the leaders. I saw your girl a little earlier tonight at the campfire; didn't know she was yours then. I just happened to stumble along here a little after she found you. In fact," he laughed evilly, "I was following her when she found you! I believe that you and I can reach a settlement of our differences without bloodshed, Jim!" And with a dry laugh, Stronk slipped away into the shadows.

For the time being, Jim forgot his paining leg. A broken leg was an in-

significant trifle beside this sudden appearance of Stronk. Stronk had seen Astra; his remarks about her, Jim understood the meaning of only too well. And against this gambler, cut-throat, ex-convict, Hellfire was helpless. Stronk knew the real story of Astra's mother. He had been present that night when Hellfire met the man who stole her; and Stronk alone knew that it had been Sanderson who had killed that man. There was only one thing to be done. Stronk *must* be killed! Grim lines came into the old prospector's pain-racked face. Stronk *would* be killed!

CHAPTER II

North of the Stars

HE sat alone at a table in a far corner of a waterfront saloon. At other tables about the room, boisterous groups of men poured rot-gut whiskey down their gullets and mingled their ribald songs and raucous guffaws with the inharmonious din of a mechanical piano. The lone man was oblivious to the others; and to the foul-odored fumes of man-sweat and whiskey that permeated the blue haze of tobacco smoke that filled the room. His eyes were fixed in a far-away expression upon a faded, fly-specked lithograph, tacked upon the opposite wall. But it was not the picture upon the wall that he was seeing; from the shadows of long-gone years there crept another picture.

A long line of khaki-clad men, four abreast; thousands of shouting, cheering people who flanked the street. Yet, more vivid than it all in his mind's eye, was a low hedge-fence and a little cottage beyond; a vine-trellised pathway, with the moonbeams showering upon a girl. The girl came slowly toward him. She was pale and her lips quivered.

"Kay—" she quavered, and then his arms were about her, crushing her to

him, his lips seeking hers. She struggled free from his embrace, her eyes stared at him affrighted. "Kay! . . . Kay! . . . you mustn't! I . . . I am married!"

The blood drained from his face and he staggered back as though a poniard had pierced his heart. She was speaking to him. Her words came haltingly, jerkily. Their meaning sank into his consciousness and he tried to smile; tried to take her hand and wish her all the happiness in the world. He failed miserably. His smile was ghastly. Terrible pain was written upon his face; pain and something more; something too awful for her to understand. He staggered a little as he turned away from her; his voice was too choked to utter the lie that was framed upon his lips: "It's all right, Lois."

"Kay! Kay!" she cried, taking a step toward him and lifting her hands in appeal. "You understand, Kay? I—I thought you would never return."

Yes, he understood! She had sold herself to the highest bidder; his wealth had been swept away while he was in France. She wanted luxury, position, the things that only wealth could give her. And she had married a man that could give it to her. Yes, he understood; but how hard it seemed to believe it true!

Blindly, he groped his way toward the gate.

"Kay!" Something she read in his eyes caused her voice to tremble in fear. "Kay! Where are you going?"

A moment he lifted his head, and their eyes met; hers flinched and hastily fell. A bitter, twisted smile came onto his lips.

"To hell!" he laughed harshly.

And he had.

It had been hard those first years; hard to tear out memories of moonlit nights and low-whispered vows of eternal love; hard to trample into the ashes of forgetfulness a vision that had been a guiding-star through the horror and suffering of shell-shattered

France. Hard—but whiskey had helped.

He was broken now; the mocking shadow of a man who was. A lurking creature who haunted the Street of Down-and-Outers. Human wreckage washed by the tides of Destiny onto the shores of broken and forgotten men.

"I am going to hell!" The words screamed into his ears, re-echoing through the corridors of buried memories. He laughed harshly and clutched the bottle that set before him. His dirt-grimed hand shook and the whiskey over-ran the glass as he poured a drink. He looked into the glass and brushed a ragged coat-sleeve across his eyes as though he would blot out a vision. He gulped the fiery liquid and struggled to his feet.

Clutching the edge of the table he swayed unsteadily. His dirty cap was pushed askew over his uncombed hair that half covered his ears; his face was unshaven, his clothes ragged.

"Well, Kay, I see you're still drunk—and drinking!"

Kay's bloodshot eyes stared at the man who had pulled out a chair and sat down at the table opposite him.

"Still drunk, Abbott." He slumped back into the chair and fastened bleared eyes upon the other. "Always drunk." He rested his unshaven chin in the palm of his hands and leered at Abbott with owlish solemnity. "Got nuzzer job, Abbott?"

Abbott was studying him with an expression of unconcealed contempt in his glittering, aloe-like eyes. Abbott prided himself upon his knowledge of men, and he was debating now as to whether or not this sodden human could be framed to substitute in the electric chair for one who was more valuable to the plans of Juan Abbott. And as he studied Kay, his slender, well-manicured fingers drummed a tattoo upon the table. In those fingers of Juan Abbott were held the threads of Destiny of more than one lurking creature who slunk through the warrens of the underworld.

"A job?" he sneered. "Hell, Kay, you've never been sober enough to handle a real job."

Kay raised his chin from his palms and nodded in slow, wobbly agreement. "Tha's right. Always drunk. Once—" he wagged a grimy finger toward the other, "was big man; plenty money, fren's was all big men. Went to war . . . was av'ator; Ace . . . gov'ment gimme medals for bein' Ace. Woman . . . Damn woman!" He glared at Abbott as though expecting defiance. Abbott was staring at him with a new, startled interest in his glittering eyes. "Yes, damn woman! I tol' her, go to hell! . . . No!—" he shook his head in grave contradiction, "Tol' her I was goin' to hell. Buy nuzzer drink ol' man—damn woman!"

"You were an aviator during the war?" There was a suppressed excitement in the voice. "I suppose you came back; found the dream-girl dreaming with someone else and you went to the dogs! And with all the women there are in the world!"

"Yes, lots woman in worl'; all no damn good! Gonna buy nuzzer li'l drink, ol' man? I'm thirsty as hell. Need nuzzer li'l drink."

With a contemptuous sneer at the sodden figure, Abbott motioned for the bartender to bring a bottle. As Kay's shaking hand reached toward the bottle with trembling eagerness, Abbott, who had been immersed in a deep study, suddenly reached forth and grasped it.

"Before you get too sodden to talk I want to ask you some questions."

"Questions?" Kay's bleared eyes stared at him hazily. "Want ash me questions? Sure, ash me anyshing!"

"You could still fly—if you were sober?"

"Shober!" A startled expression came into the bleared eyes. "Shober!" he laughed harshly. "Never gonna get sober; stay drunk!"

"You drink no more tonight, Kay!" Abbott jerked the bottle away from the

clutching fingers. "You're going to sober up, and stay that way until you finish a job for me. And, by God! you'll handle it right or I'll—" He broke off leaving the threat unfinished.

"Nuzzer job?" Kay's head lolled in a half-stupor.

"Yes, a job; and you'll handle it right or never be able to take another drink this side of hell—and there isn't any there! You're going north to fly!"

"Norsh? Norsh where?"

"North of the stars!" Abbott replied with a short laugh.

CHAPTER III *Millions in Gold!*

IN the cabin of the *Falcon*, Captain Lorngen, a squat, bull-necked man with a brutal face, was giving an attentive ear to the low-spoken words of Juan Abbott. From outside there came the searching of capstans and the roaring of a voice shouting orders to perspiring men who were loading the boat.

"See that you don't have a slip-up on this thing, Lorngen. We're playing for high stakes in this game. Tonight, before you weigh anchor, there will be a passenger come aboard. He will be the only one besides you and I who know of his coming aboard." For a moment a malevolent glitter came into the aloe eyes. "Remember, Lorngen: he's to be landed in hell, not Alaska!"

"Hell it will be!" Lorngen chuckled. "I'll see that he's chucked overboard in the deepest part of the Bering with enough lead tied to his heels to take him to the bottom, and keep him there!"

"And the man I brought aboard last night, has he sobered up? But I suppose not; he's been drunk too long to sober in a night!" Abbott studied the captain's face for a moment with shrewd eyes. "I have an idea, Captain, that you're getting curious about this game?"

Lorngen shrugged. "I'm paid to follow orders; not to be curious."

Abbott thumped the table for a moment and then looked up with a thin smile quirking at his lips.

"That's a sensible attitude, captain, but I believe that you should know something about this game. This is a game where the stakes are high. You know, of course, about the big strike that has been made in the North-country; and no doubt you've heard that it is far back?"

The captain nodded, a puzzled expression in his beady eyes. "You're figger'n on us goin' to Alaska, then?" he asked doubtfully.

"Not at all, captain!" Abbott smiled. "You will touch no port until you return to Frisco. The cargo that is being loaded into your hatches consists of gasolene, hydrogen gas under compression, and a hydro-plane." He chuckled at the expression of blank amazement upon the captain's face. "I see you don't catch on, I'll explain in more detail.

"This strike up north has turned out to be a big thing; but it is a long way from civilization. Which is our good fortune. The gold from each clean-up will be stored and kept until such time as snow falls, then it will be hauled out by dog-team. There is no fear of thieves; where could a thief drag a ton of gold to over glacier trails and through mountain passes? He wouldn't get anywhere; and if there were more than one and they reached a port, what would happen? He'd be grabbed at once. So, you see, the miners aren't losing any sleep over their gold."

"Damn!" Lorngen's ham-like fist crashed upon the table and an unfeigned light of admiration shone in his piggish eyes. "Abbott, you're a genius!"

"Not at all, captain." Abbott smiled. "I'm an opportunist. The passenger who will come aboard tonight was the originator of the scheme. He's an aviator with ideas! His only trouble was that he doesn't understand fairness in a division of spoils. My agreement with him was, that I'd furnish all trans-

portation costs, including the 'plane, and in return I would receive twenty-five per cent of all the booty. He wouldn't accept any other arrangement, so, captain, it's up to you to see that he is safely landed where he can't talk later. The man I brought aboard last night is also an aviator. He was an Ace in France. Came back and found his woman married—and went to the dogs!" He sneered.

"Hell!" Lorngen snorted disgustedly.

But he's the man we need. Keep him off the booze and get him into shape before you get to your anchorage. If he can't be gotten in shape, or he refuses—" again an evil glitter came into the black eyes, "you'll have two passengers for hell!"

"Many as you say, Abbott. Can't let little things like that stand between us and a fortune."

"I've already got one man in the gold-camp—Stronk. He'll take care of things up there. I'll give you maps, charts and full directions as to what to do; then after you get in touch with Stronk he'll handle the rest of the program. It'll be three months yet before any gold is taken out and by that time Kay will have met Stronk at a point indicated on the chart. Stronk will see that the gold is brought to a point where Kay can reach it. Stronk will be one of the party who accompanies the gold-sled out; at the right time he will place knock-out drops in the others water-supply and while they're sleeping he'll hook the gold onto the balloons."

"Balloons? I thought you said—"

"Oh, I forgot!" Abbott smiled. "We're taking the hydrogen gas to fill the balloons. Kay will only have to grab-hook the gold-carrying balloons, tow them a safe distance, cut the balloons loose and load the gold in the plane. There will be no trail in the snow going away from the sled, no clues, no tracks, nothing whatever to show where the gold went, or how. It'll just go up in thin air!"

The stupendous master-stroke of this

plan took the captain's breath away and left him speechless. He sat gaping at Abbott, open-mouthed.

"Now, about Kay, it's up to you to keep him off the booze. Don't cut him off suddenly, but don't let him get drunk! Everything depends upon him being in condition to fly once you are at your anchorage in the Bering. We are depending upon him to handle the plane and carry the gold aboard the ship. You might see if he's in shape to talk to. Drag him in here and I'll see how he stands with us."

The captain climbed to his feet and rolled through the door. It was twenty minutes later that he returned with Kay. Abbott looked up with an expression of undisguised disgust as Kay paused in the doorway, his hands gripping the door-jambes to support himself upright.

He was not a pleasant looking sight for a human. His eyes were bloodshot, his lips twitched spasmodically. He was grotesque, scarecrow like in the loose, greasy clothes that were smeared with dirt. He lurched into the cabin and sprawled into a chair facing Abbott.

"Give me a drink, for God's sake!" he croaked. "I'm damn close to the jimmies!"

Abbott nodded in disgust and the captain brought forth a bottle.

When the bottle was set before him, Kay did not pause to use the glass, but raised the pint-flask to his lips. His hand shook so that the glass bottle-neck chattered against his teeth. When he had gulped half the bottle's contents he set it down. The liquor quieted his nerves and brought him to that half-way state where he was neither drunk nor sober; but a few more drinks and he would have been drunk.

"Kay," Abbott's eyes narrowed into mere slits, "I'm going to give you a chance to brace up, make a stake, and be a man—do you want that chance?"

A slow, ironic smile quirked at the corners of Kay's mouth. He laughed harshly. "Brace up? Hell! It took me six years to put me where I am—six

years to make a drunkard! And now you ask me if I want to brace up, be a man. Why should I?" he asked bitterly. "I've about reached the end of the rope. There was a time when I had nerve—but it was a long time ago! I lack enough now to add a drop of prussic acid to my liquor and forget the whole damn rotten mess. I started out to go to hell. I've gotten there—I don't want to brace up." He reached for the bottle and lifted it toward his lips, then he lowered it and looked at Abbott curiously. "Be a man? Why?"

"Haven't you any ambition; don't you want to be somebody; do you like the filth you've wallowed in?"

"Abbott," a fleeting glint came into the bleared eyes, "I don't know what you're driving at—I don't give a damn! I don't want to be anybody; I have no ambition, except to stay drunk. Stay drunk and forget things that a sober man couldn't."

"Forget!" Abbott sneered. "Forget some damned woman that sent you to the dogs because you didn't have guts enough to be a game loser! A hell of a jack-pot you'd have won if you had gotten her! The world is full of that kind of women—the kind that give weak-spined men who lack guts to buck life an alibi for going to the dogs! Lacking guts they go to hell with scorned love as an alibi!" He paused and leaned forward, his glittering eyes fastened upon Kay scornfully.

Whatever Juan Abbott might have lacked, it was not a knowledge of men. He needed this man, he was a vital element to his plans; but before he could use him, he must save him from himself. There was no philanthropy or altruism in the make-up of the underworld king; he worked always for his own ends. And knowing men, he taunted the shadow of the man before him.

"Kay, you're a damn yellow quitter! You haven't the guts to live, nor the nerve to die!"

An angry flame flared into the blood-shot gray eyes. The sallow face set in

grim lines. Abbott, watching narrowly, exulted. For a moment it seemed as though Abbott's words had found one ember in the ashes of manhood and had stirred it into flame. Then Kay suddenly slumped down in his chair with a harsh laugh.

"Why this sudden paternal solicitude for my soul, Abbott? You talk like a reformer, not like a crooked politician and master of underworld denizens."

"I don't give a damn for your soul, Kay!" The aloe-like eyes flared. "I'm looking out for my own interests. I need an aviator. A man that can fly and leave the booze alone for six months. If you can qualify, I'll pay you enough money to buy yourself a distillery and you can go to hell on better whiskey than you've been guzzling. Six months won't change the scenery; and there'll be more there to greet you then!"

"Suppose," Kay nodded toward the bottle which Abbott had taken, "that you and me have another drink before we talk about this ticket to hell?"

Abbott sprang to his feet and with a contemptuous oath crashed the bottle into fragments against the wall. He turned upon Kay, his black eyes afire with a light of utter scorn.

"By God! Kay, they say there is always one last spark of manhood left, always one last drop of red-blood in a man; you've never been a man! You've crawled so low and deep into the slime and mud of depravity that there isn't anything left of you but a bestial depraved creature of the sewer. You've forgotten the woman that gave you birth; you've—!"

"Damn you, Abbott!" With one leap, Kay sent the table crashing to the floor, another leap and he was upon his taunter. With all of his power, he sent his fist crashing into the sardonically leering face. He fought like a wildcat unleashed, and from between his lips came gasping oaths. But whiskey had long since burned out his stamina, he sagged back weakly and would have

fallen had not Abbott caught him. He looked up into the face of the man who held him. "Damn you, Abbott! I'd kill you if I had the power!" His eyes were ablaze and beneath his unkempt beard his face was deathly pale.

Abbott picked up the over-turned table and righted it, then he dropped Kay into a chair and sat down opposite. There was a light of approval in the glittering eyes.

"Well, Kay!" he smiled into the enraged eyes, "I done my damndest to strike a spark and I guess I did; but you know that I have only spoken the truth."

The light died out of the gray eyes; his shoulders sagged and he nodded his head.

"Yes, you're right, Abbott. Forget it," he said wearily, "and for God's sake give me a drink!"

Abbott got up and returned with a bottle. He set it upon the table.

"There it is, Kay. If you've got any manhood, leave it alone and listen to my proposition."

But Kay's fingers were already clutched about the bottle, his hand shaking, his eyes burning with a greedy fire of craving. He halted the bottle halfway toward his lips and looked at Abbott. A moment he hesitated and then placed the bottle to his lips. He took a long drink and set the bottle down.

"I am ready to listen to your proposition, Abbott."

"I have no proposition for a whiskey sewer," Abbott sneered. "I need a man, not a drunkard!"

"I'll not get drunk again for six months, if I take your proposition. I can't cut it all off at once."

For a long minute the glittering eyes bored into the gray ones; then he shoved out a slender hand. "It's a bargain, Kay! You stay sober for six months and follow instructions, and I'll give you fifty thousand dollars—in gold!"

Kay stared, and then a thin smile curled at the corners of his lips. He shook his head slowly.

"I'm no fool, Abbott. You wouldn't pay that much money for the treasure-map of the Incas."

"Treasure of the Incas!" Abbott laughed. "The treasure of the Incas is chicken-feed. I'm playing for the treasure-house of the world: Millions, *in gold!*"

"And my part in this deal?" Kay was smiling in disbelief. "What do I do for this fifty thousand in gold?"

"As you're told!" Abbott snapped. "Have you any scruples about going beyond the law?"

"The law!" Kay laughed harshly. "I'd willingly stay sober for a year if I could even scores with the law. I've been thrown in their hell-holes of vermin, and had their brute fists slash my face. They've framed me, kicked me, pounded me—Hell, what's the use!"

Abbott shrugged. "Don't blame them. A man that acts like a beast and wants to remain that way has no kick coming when he's treated like a beast."

"But the proposition, Abbott? You can rest assured: I have no belief in God, no faith in Man. I'll take your proposition sight unseen. But," he added with a dry laugh, "I think I am a damn fool for doing it!"

"You'll need equipment; and you would look better with a shave and haircut. I'll stake you to that now, but remember: cut out the booze! If you get drunk and blab, I'll kill you! You know too much, little as it is."

CHAPTER IV

Honor Among Thieves

DAY after day the *Falcon* had plowed her way northward through choppy seas. Kay had not been drunk since leaving port; neither had he quit drinking. In compliance with Abbott's orders, Lorngen had supplied him with enough whiskey to quiet nerves that cried for it, but not enough to render him drunk.

Kay gave little thought to the part that he was to play in Abbott's game. Now and then something would stir within him: a desire, vague, yet real, to fight back once again into the ranks of men. But always there remained that picture of a vine-trellised arbor, and a girl in the moonlight. No, after all, those vague desires were only added agony—a fool's payment for having believed in a woman. Perhaps Abbott had been right, he lacked guts, he had said. After all what did it matter? What was there to fight back to? She had been all that he had in the world, his whole life had been centered about her and—but why think about it? Forget! With fifty thousand dollars he could go to some far-off corner of the world and—

"Well, Kay," Lorngen's voice broke into his thoughts, "we're getting close to our anchorage, where we'll lay-to."

Kay nodded shortly and turned his gaze once more back to the deserted horizon of the sea. The captain was studying him closely.

"You know," Lorngen said slowly, "I've been doing a lot of thinking the last week. Maybe you'd like to step below and listen to what I've been thinking about over a drink?"

Kay laughed dryly. "I don't give a damn what you've been thinking about, Captain; but I'll accept the drink part of your offer!"

Seated in the cabin, Lorngen looked across the table at Kay with shrewd eyes. He was a vastly different Kay than that night he had come aboard. He was clean-shaven, his eyes had lost their reddish-blear, his clothing was neat, and his face, though still hollow in the cheeks, possessed color.

"You know, Kay, me and you are the real wheels in this machinery that Abbott is running."

Kay nodded briefly and poured himself a drink.

"Now I've been thinking—"

"You need not speak, Captain! I'm a mind-reader." A slow smile crept onto Kay's lips. "I bring the gold aboard;

we up anchor and sail away to a port far removed from Frisco. Abbott is left holding—whatever there is left to hold!"

Lorngen chuckled approvingly. "That's the ticket! We sail southward where there's waving palms, brown-hued beauties, and drinks galore; where they don't ask how you got your gold, but, 'have you got it?'"

Kay nodded his head, a sardonic quirk pulling down the corners of his lips. "Yes, I heartily approve the plan, Captain. Abbott came across in that way; we may as well go a step farther in this thieves robbing thieves, there is no honor among thieves, Captain. Nor," he added vindictively, "women!"

"Here's the key to the rum locker," Lorngen threw it upon the table. "go the limit, but be sober for business."

And Kay went the limit! Two hours later he was still seated at the table, his eyes bleary, his mouth agape, his mouth twisted into a foolish, leering smile. He lolled his head about as the door opened and Lorngen entered. A contemptuous light came into the captain's eyes, but he nodded pleasantly.

"That's the ticket! One good celebration before we get down to business and then with millions in gold, we'll celebrate for the rest of our lives, eh!"

"Tha's right," Kay's head wobbled in an affirmative. He pushed out a chair and motioned toward it. "Sit down. Hav' drink Cap'n. I'm drunk's hell! Good joke on Abbott, eh?" His bleared eyes surveyed the captain with a cunning leer.

The captain sat down. He poured himself a drink and smiled to himself as he drank it. Abbott might think that he was a fool; but Lorngen was well pleased with himself. He had just returned from the cabin aft, where Abbott's aviator had been kept prisoner during the trip. The captain's interview had been entirely satisfactory. He now possessed an Ace up his sleeve. In short, the captain had explained to the prisoner that Abbott had ordered him to be

thrown overboard; that the crew was all for Abbott and if they thought the aviator was still alive they would personally attend to his demise. Therefore, explained the captain, it would be better for the prisoner to remain secluded in his cabin. Later on he would have his chance to even scores with Abbott. Undoubtedly, Stronk had been told that Kay would be the man he would work with; therefore, Kay would be permitted to make all arrangements ashore with Stronk. At the proper time Kay would be relieved of his duties—and the captain winked—and then Lorngen and the originator of the plan would split the spoil 75-25, with the captain taking the short end. In this wise the captain secured an ace-in-the-hole; aces were easily discarded in the Bering. The real picture in the captain's mind was of himself with an undivided fortune in gold.

"Better be turning in now, Kay. We lay-to tomorrow and you'll have to be in shape to make your first flight and meet Stronk next Monday."

Kay entered a voluble protest at thus being deprived of further drink, but the captain caught him under the arm-pits and half carried, half dragged him to his own cabin. The captain locked the door and put the key in his pocket. He was taking no chances on losing Kay overboard; later on he would see that Kay went over properly equipped with lead weights to keep him over. With millions in gold, the captain of the *Falcon* need fear no one.

CHAPTER V

Buccaneers of the Air

"YES, ish nice place, Stronk!" Kay nodded at his companion across the table in the Gold Lure saloon and dance hall. "Shink I'll stay while, eh?"

Stronk chuckled and poured another drink for the already drunken Kay. It had been four weeks now since he

had first met Kay at the appointed rendezvous, and after three weeks of continuous trips between the *Falcon* and the mainland, Kay had transported all of the gas tanks and balloons which had been *cached*.

There was an ironic glitter in Stronk's deep-set eyes as he studied Kay covertly. Even as Abbott, as Lorngen and Kay had plans, so had Stronk. Nor did his plans contemplate a division of the spoils with anyone.

"You know, Kay, Abbott will reap a fortune from this venture."

"Shink sho?" Kay's eyelids drooped in owlish solemnity as he looked up; and then he chuckled. "Abbott won't get nushing! Me'n cap'n has scheme. Goin' sail 'way an' take gol'."

"Huh!" Stronk sat upright with a start of surprise. He studied Kay a moment and then laughed dryly. "I never thought I might have competition."

"Abbott didn't shink so either!" Kay chuckled. "Maybe you'd like join me'n' cap'n? Goin' sail with gol' where's lots of rum, palms, women—Damn women!" He interjected suddenly, glaring at Stronk belligerently as though expecting an exception to the curse. "Woman ish no damn good, Shtronk!"

Stronk shrugged with a smile and got to his feet grasping Kay by the arm.

"I won't contradict you, old-timer. What say we take a walk; I've been thinking and I want to talk something over with you."

A ludicrous smile came onto Kay's lips and he chuckled. He drew one eyelid down in a knowing wink.

"I'm min' reader, Shtronk; don't need walk. Need nuzzer drink."

Despite Kay's remonstrances, Stronk led him through the throng of milling men and walked toward his cabin. Kay's revelation that Lorngen and he were also intending to double-cross Abbott had come as a surprise; but now that he knew it, it was up to him

to declare himself in. Later he could attend to Kay and the captain; right now, he was going to put Kay to bed to insure that he didn't babble in the presence of someone else.

He had less difficulty than he expected. Kay slumped down on the edge of the bunk, weaved to and fro for a moment and then crumpled up and began to snore. Stronk left him, after first locking the cabin from the outside, and headed back toward the camp.

Some thirty minutes later, Stronk knocked at the door of a cabin some distance removed from the others. Sanderson's voice called for him to enter.

Jim's face went slightly pale as he saw who his visitor was. One hand crept cautiously beneath his pillow where he kept a revolver. Stronk saw the movement and sneered.

"No fire-works, Jim! I've come to make you a proposition; a proposition that will settle our score without bloodshed."

Jim's first thought was of Astra. Rendered helpless by his broken leg, which under the crude surgery of the camp was healing very slowly, he must depend upon a gun as the only effective means of protecting Astra against the gambler. But already, Stronk was suspicious and he would have to be cautious. A sarcastic smile parted his lips.

"A proposition?" he asked.

Stronk nodded. "Yes. You have been appointed caretaker of the camp's gold; you arrange for me to accompany the party that takes it out, and all old scores are wiped out."

Sanderson stared at the swarthy-faced man in startled amazement.

"You ain't figger'n that you could steal th' shipment, are you?" he asked wonderingly.

"That has nothing to do with the proposition," Stronk said coldly. "Your part is to see that I am a member of the party that takes it out."

The old man looked at his visitor

from puzzled eyes. There was something strange about this. Surely, Stronk was not fool enough to try making away with the gold.

"You mean that, Stronk? You'll forget about that affair in Frisco?"

"I'll forget that I ever knew you. I'll also forget that you have a very beautiful daughter!"

A moment Jim studied him closely and then he nodded slowly.

"All right; I'll see that you're one of the party, but you can't get away with the shipment, Stronk! Not with—"

"I have said nothing about stealing or getting away, Jim," Stronk interposed curtly. "It's a bargain. I've forgotten that I ever knew you."

For a long time after the gambler left, Sanderson tried to conjecture some reason for Stronk's request. That there was a very strong—and crooked—reason, Jim had no doubt. But he did not think that he was betraying the confidence of those who had appointed him official treasurer of the camp's gold; there was no place a man could get to except a port and to do that would be impossible without being caught. Jim felt somewhat relieved when Stronk said that he would forget Astra, and he was somewhat inclined to believe him. He had shown no curiosity as to her whereabouts, nor had he looked toward the door that led to the other room. And yet, the old stamperder was troubled; he wished he knew what Stronk had up his sleeve.

* * *

Stronk had been gone from his cabin only a short time, when Kay aroused and staggered to his feet. Stronk had left the oil lamp burning upon the table, and for a moment Kay blinked in bewilderment at his strange surroundings. Then he climbed to his feet and weaved toward the door. He tried to open it, and found it locked. He stood swaying upon his feet, considering this grave obstacle. His gaze wandered toward the back of the cabin and a foxy grin came onto his lips. He

staggered his way to the window and, after many attempts, managed to get it open. Another long struggle and he raised himself to the sill and pitched head-foremost to the ground.

He climbed to his feet and stood blinking in uncertainty. A sudden thought possessed him that Stronk had put him to bed because he was drunk. He determined to return to the dance hall and confront the gambler with proof of his sobriety. He lurched forward in what he thought was the direction of the camp. Now and then his foot would catch upon a root or stone and he would sprawl upon the ground. After a long while he halted and leaned against a tree for support.

"Ish funny shing, dance hall has moved!" he announced gravely, swaying to and fro. "Need nuzzer li'l drink. Nice shoke on Shtronk!" he chuckled, and once more lurched forward.

The moon crept above the green canopy of the evergreens and swung low in the heavens. Here and there, small creatures flitted through the shadows of the night as Kay lurched blindly on. Unconsciously, he was following a well-worn trail. Time and again he would stagger and fall, and with ludicrous gravity, crawl back to his feet, brush his clothes free of clinging needles, and continue his aimless journey.

He came to a small stream and for a long while swayed upon his feet, contemplating it from bleared eyes. He extended one foot experimentally to see if he could bridge it. He lost his balance and pitched head foremost. His head struck the sharp corner of a boulder and he lay motionless.

When he opened his eyes again, it was to find someone standing over him. In the moonlight he could make out the form but vaguely. Corduroy breeches, flannel shirt and pulled-down cap. He chuckled and attempted to climb back upon his feet, but he was unable to do more than sit upright against the bole of the tree behind him.

"'Lo, son!" He looked up, his head wobbling from side to side. "Sheems like 'm losh. Must a fell, eh? Need nuzzer li'l drink an' be all right."

Astra looked down upon him with an expression of revulsion in her eyes. She had found him less than ten minutes ago lying unconscious and had dragged him from the water.

"I think," she said in disgust, "that you had better leave the drink alone."

"Leave drink 'lone? Shober up?" Kay's eyes blinked at her dim form in the moonlight. "What for? Goin' have lots drinks soon's sail 'way with gol'! Big joke on Abbott, eh?" he chuckled.

"You'd better pull yourself together and get back to camp."

"Shay—" a sudden thought occurred to him, "you know where dance hall ish? Dance hall where Shtronk is? Take me there; wanna hav' nuzzer li'l drink. Me'n Shtronk gonna shail 'way with gol'; take me to dance hall an' I'll make you partners. Damn woman! Cap'n wansh woman; I don' wansh woman, no damn good! What you shink; woman no good?" He tried to fasten his gaze upon her, but his head persisted in wobbling and his vision discovered only blurred outlines. He brushed his hand across his eyes while a ludicrous expression of incredulity came into his bleared eyes.

Watching him, a slow grin crept onto Astra's lips and then she broke into an amused laugh.

"You know," she grinned, "you're about the most amusing—and disgusting sight I've ever seen!"

"Shink so?" he asked gravely. "Shink I'm 'musing an' 'sgusting? Shay, son," his face assumed an owlsh gravity and he tried to see her, but she was only a blur in the moonlight to his bleared vision, "you take me to dance hall an' me'n Shtronk will make you partner. Lotsa gol'! Goin' shail 'way with gol' in airship."

"Do what!" Astra came closer, a startled expression coming into her

eyes. "What do you mean: 'take gold in an airship'?"

"Good shoke, eh!" Kay chuckled inanely. "Steal gol' from miners . . . fly 'way where nobody knows. Yesh, ish nice shoke on Abbott!"

"Oh!" She took a startled pace backyard. Comprehension was dawning upon her. Kay's drunken gibberish had at first merely disgusted her; she had given no attention to what he was trying to say, thinking it the meaningless jumble of a drunken man's mutterings. The mention of Stronk and reference to an airship sailing away with gold, caused her mind to conceive of a possibility that had never occurred to any of the miners. An airship was the one and only way in which thieves could get the gold from the country without being caught.

"Y-you mean you and Stronk are going to take the miners' gold away in an airship?" She came closer, a tense eagerness in her eyes as she waited the answer.

Kay raised his head and very slowly closed first one eye and then the other, then he strained them both open, trying to see her; he shook his head wonderingly and blinked, there remained only the outline of a blurred figure in corduroy, very slim and boyish.

"Ish funny thing," he shook his head puzzledly, "can't shee nushing. What say me'n you go dance hall an' get a drink? I'm gettin' shober; mus' never get shober! Tol' woman I was goin' hell . . . got to go! Woman is no damn good, son! What you think, eh?"

The moonlight came from over Astra's shoulders, and while Kay could not see her plainly, she had a good view of him. She stared at him curiously. He, apparently, had forgotten her presence; he closed his eyes and rested his head against the tree-bole. Of a sudden he began to mutter in an almost incoherent ramble. It was a mixture of maudlin self-pity and profane denunciation of women. Astra, looking at

him, felt a mingling of emotions: revulsion, disgust, pity. After a while he dropped sidewise to the ground and lay there snoring.

"But this gold!" She shook his shoulder. "Tell me about it!"

"Allow me!"

She whirled to confront the swarthy-faced gambler standing in the trail behind her. A moment she stood poised, and then, with a sudden leap she darted away. In four bounds he had overtaken her and held her wrist captive in a steel-like grasp.

"Sorry, little reindeer!" He smiled ironically. "We can't part with your company so soon. You know too much! That damn drunken fool—!"

"Lo Shtronk!" Kay half-raised and waved a wobbly hand. "Nice shoke: lockin' cabin so I can't get drink. Meet m' frien', nice boy! Goin' make 'im partner."

"You damn fool, Kay! You've raised hell! Might've known that a few drinks of booze and you'd need to be tied."

"Raish hell?" Kay struggled to his feet and succeeded in acquiring a half-stooped position, swaying to and fro. "Wha's matter?"

For reply, Stronk took a step forward, dragging Astra with him. A half-pace away from the weaving Kay, he halted and drew back his fist. He sent the blow crashing into the drunken man's face with an angry oath. Astra suppressed a little cry of horror, and Kay slumped upon the ground and lay motionless.

"Now, damn you! lay there until I come back for you."

A gasp escaped from the girl's lips and Stronk whirled upon her with a snarl.

"As for you, I'll make damn sure that you don't have the chance of getting back to camp before it's too late to hurt my plans! And maybe," he laughed harshly, "you'll never get back!"

An angry flame came into her eyes only to give way to an expression of fear. This was the first time she had met Stronk since that night upon the

trail months ago. But she had heard his name mentioned many times by the miners; there had been some talk of running him out of the camp. He owned the Gold Lure gambling hall and saloon, his whiskey was rot-gut and his games were crooked. More than one drunken miner had awakened after a night of carousal at the Gold Lure to discover the hard-earned gold-dust of a month's clean-up gone. Because Stronk had never molested, nor come near her, in the camp, Astra had grown to believe that he had forgotten the episode on the trail. She thought that he had been too drunk at the time to remember it afterward.

"Where are you going to take me?" she asked, trying to keep the fear she felt from her voice.

Stronk whirled her in front of him and his dark eyes glittered with a fire that frightened her. She cringed back.

"Do with you?" He leered at her. "Little reindeer, you're going to have a sea voyage. I'm going to take you with me!"

Astra's face went pale. She made no retort; her mind was racing to grasp some means of extricating herself from the power of Stronk. Ordinarily, she might have had some hope of help coming from the camp, but she would not be expected back that night because she had left to visit a sick squaw. Her father would not expect her to return before the following day. When she reached the squaw's cabin she had found her up and about, so Astra had started for home. It was then that she had stumbled upon the drunken Kay. At the thought of Kay, a small flame of hope sprang up within her. If only someone would come along and find him, and he would talk! Were he to talk about the airship and Stronk, whoever found him would bear the news to camp post-haste and Stronk would be sought. It was a slim chance; but it seemed the only one. Even then, could they find her? Was he going to take her away tonight? Suddenly her

blood chilled. She understood everything now; there was a ship anchored in the Bering and the airplane was to be used to transport the gold between the mainland and the ship.

"Well, snow-dove," Stronk's voice broke into her thoughts, "I'm going to get many of those kisses you refused me that night! Won't it be romantic?" A tinge of irony came into the words. "Just you and I on a moon-lit deck, sailing southward into the land of sunshine and love!"

"You dirty cur!" Astra's eyes blazed. "You'll be strung up before you get fifty miles away. When the camp hears about this—"

"They won't!" His sardonic laugh interposed. "They'll never hear of it, because there'll be no one left to tell them!"

"Please," she looked at him from frightened eyes, "let me go. I'll never mention a word of what I heard!"

"You're much too precious, my dear!" he said mockingly. "Why, I love you too much to ever allow you to leave me again—until the end of the voyage!" He completed with an evil chuckle.

She made no further retort; she realized that it was useless to hope for him to free her. Not once along the trail to his cabin, did Stronk relax his vigilance. Reaching the cabin, he pushed Astra inside, closed the door and placed his back against it, his eyes glittering evilly. Then very slowly he advanced toward her.

Her face bloodless, her body trembling, she watched him glide toward her like a hawk upon its wounded prey.

"I am not like Kay, little snow-dove. He allowed one woman to send him to the dogs; he hates 'em! While I," an evil smile parted his lips, "I love them all! Especially when they are beautiful!"

He reached out and grasped her in his arms. She struggled against his embrace and kicked at him, but he only laughed and drew her closer. His sensual lips drew closer. "Just one little kiss, song-bird!"

"Shay! Was dickens of a way—" Kay had staggered against the door and it had burst open, sprawling him upon the floor. He climbed slowly to his feet, an expression of startled wonderment in his eyes at the scene before him.

Stronk whirled upon him with an angry oath. "Thought I left you back there on the trail!"

"Nope!" Kay staggered to the table and slumped down in a chair wearily. "Say you an' nuzzer feller goin' way. Something fell on me, knocked me coo-coo. But here I am, right shide up. Want li'l drink, 'm thirsty as the deuce!"

"All right!" Stronk glared at him angrily. "We're hitting the trail. You'll sober up by the time we've walked twenty miles. You're going to take a passenger back to the ship; and when you get her aboard you're coming back!" "Her?" Kay blinked from one to the other in surprise, in the small corduroy-clad figure cringing in a corner he did not recognize a woman. "Which her? No woman, Shtronk! Don't want no woman, won't have no woman, won't take no woman on ship—women can go to grass!"

"As for you," Stronk whirled upon Astra, "make just one break and I'll make you regret it! Remember that Jim Sanderson is guardian of the camp's gold, and his life doesn't mean a thing to me. I'm going to send you aboard the ship to protect myself. When the gold is all aboard I'll see that you're brought back and safely landed ten miles from camp. You can tell them then; we'll be too far away for them to stop us. It's up to you: do I have to bind and gag you; or will you go quietly?"

"I—I'll go quietly!" she whispered in a small voice.

CHAPTER VI

Battle!

THE anchorage of the hydro-plane was in a cove at an extreme point of a small lake twenty miles from the

camp. Travel in this direction was a remote possibility.

With a drunken man who could walk only in a weaving stagger, and a girl that must be watched every moment, Stronk had his hands full. Now and then he would curse Kay with fluent wrath for insisting upon sitting down to rest. Astra was hawk-like in her vigilance; at the first opportunity she was determined that she would make a break and try to reach the camp. Once there she had no fear of Stronk. He had tied a stout cord about one of her wrists and tied the other end to his own; if only she could get loose from that cord she would take a chance upon out-running him. For this reason she offered no resistance, husbanding her energy for the moment when it might mean freedom.

Five miles from the plane's anchorage, Kay slumped down on the ground and refused to go any farther. He was not altogether sober; nor was he as drunk as he had been, the long walk had done much to kill the strength of the liquor's effect. But he had reached that stage where he was surly and defiant. He demanded a drink and Stronk refused it. Stronk intended that Kay should have the pint later on as a bracer, he would need it before he would be able to make the trip; now it would but serve to throw him back into drunkenness where he would be useless.

While Stronk debated between using his fists upon Kay or leaving him lay, Kay settled the question by falling asleep. There was little likelihood that he would awaken before Stronk could return for him. Stronk cursed the snoring Kay and moved on with Astra. Astra took hope: something might yet turn up! Stronk told her his plan. He would take her to the plane, bind her and leave her in the rear cock-pit while he returned for Kay.

But all hope fled after they reached the plane and Stronk had trussed her up. He bound her arms close to her sides and fastened her ankles together

He placed her in the rear cock-pit and covered it over with a tarpaulin that was secured and held down on all sides by snaps. In her trussed and cramped condition, she was far from comfortable; and all hope of escaping unaided fled. For the first time her thoughts centered upon Kay.

Kay had repulsed her by his drunkenness, yet, remembering the girl he had talked about in his maudlin maunderings she felt a certain degree of pity for him. Garbled though it was, Astra had been able to piece Kay's story together enough to understand that he had taken to drink because a woman had proved unfaithful to him. She had heard stories of men who had taken to drink for that reason; but Astra knew little of men. His diatribe against women, she considered the effect of the liquor, that he hated all women seemed inconceivable. But under any circumstances, it was toward Kay that she must look for aid now. If he carried her aboard the ship, her last hope would be gone. But she vowed to herself that the picture Stronk had painted of a moon-lit deck would never be a reality. Then a chagrined flush overspread her face, there was something in her back-pocket that was causing her discomfort. She had not thought of it once at a time when it might have been of service, nor had Stronk discovered it. It was her automatic.

Despite her intention to remain awake, and the uncomfortable quarters, Astra fell into a fretful slumber. That day she had worked hard upon the claim, which her father's leg prevented him from doing, and then she was worn out completely by the long hike. She was awakened by hearing voices not three feet distant from her.

"One of the things that booze does to a man, Stronk." She recognized Kay's voice. "But you say the girl is the only one I told, and since we have her there hasn't been any harm done. She can't get away from the ship."

"There's only one bad feature about

the whole thing, Kay: it isn't exactly common-sense to take that girl aboard among that crew of hyenas. It might cause trouble, and we can't afford any trouble. You'd better remain aboard the ship for a week anyway; the woods will be full of search-parties as soon as she's missed. Come back a week from today."

"The best thing to do with the woman," Astra shuddered at the hard voice, "is to dump her into the sea!"

"You're dead set against women, Kay; but I'll gamble that even you wouldn't throw this one into the sea! Take a look at her; she's sleeping."

"They're all alike!" Kay said harshly. "I wouldn't particularly care about dumping her overboard; but it would be small loss! For God's sake! Let me have another pull at that flask. I must have had an awful cargo aboard last night."

Fear, anger, horror, gripped Astra. It did not seem possible for anyone to speak of murder in the cold-blooded manner Kay had. And there had been something in his voice when he said it that convinced Astra that he was speaking his convictions. What a terrible canker there must be upon a man's soul who could speak of taking human life so cold-bloodedly! How far down in depravity must he have descended since he had become sodden with alcohol in order that he might forget a woman!

Stronk and Kay had walked beyond ear-shot and it was a long time before they moved toward her again. With a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach, she realized that Kay was climbing into the cock-pit ahead of her. She heard Stronk's voice call out and Kay's reply; then came Kay's cry of, "Contact!" and the motors roared into her ears. She was jerked forward as the plane skimmed across the lake, and then she felt herself going up . . . up, and she fainted.

To have reached a point on land opposite the *Falcon* would have required climbing high, snow-bound mountains

and crossing dangerous glacier crevasse; at the least it would have required a month's travel from the gold-camp. The hydro-plane, traveling as the crow would fly, required less than two hours. For Astra it was two hours filled with chilling horror. Any minute she expected Kay to turn-turtle and upset her into the sea. When at last she was lifted from the cock-pit, by two of the *Falcon's* crew, she was hysterical. Kay had paid no attention to her beyond ordering the two sailors to bring her aboard the boat. With the plane safely anchored a short distance from the ship, Kay went below to see Lorngen.

He found him sprawled out in a chair in his cabin, a sly grin on his coarse features.

"See you brought a little playmate along, Kay." He nodded toward the berth with a chuckle. "I never could figure how a man could hate women like you said you did. We all fall sooner or later, eh?"

Kay sat down with his back to the bunk, facing the captain. "She belongs to Stronk," he said curtly.

"How does Stronk figure that he's going to be able to join his light of love—but then he doesn't know, does he, of our little plan? Well, ignorance is bliss!"

Kay laughed shortly. "Stronk has been doing some thinking upon his own part. His mind runs in the same groove as ours."

An ugly light sprang into Lorngen's swinish eyes for a moment.

"There isn't any room for him aboard the *Falcon*. A two-way split is enough!"

"Well, Cap," Kay shrugged, "it doesn't matter to me. But for some reason or other I have a hunch that Abbott, himself, hasn't played all of his cards yet. It doesn't seem plausible that he'd send us up here on a mission like this without holding one card up his sleeve. I have an idea that he has considered the possibility of the *Falcon's* heading elsewhere than toward Frisco."

The captain shook his head sagely.

"Abbott would have come with us if he could have; but he couldn't get away from Frisco. He never figgers that we might try to double-cross him; he thinks he's second in command to the devil when it comes to putting the fear into a man. No, Abbott isn't going to lose any sleep thinking we'd double-cross him. Not until we fail to show up, and then it's too late!"

"Then he'll send his men scouring the ports of the world for us," Kay replied dryly. "We can expect a knife or a bullet in the back sooner or later."

"All wrong!" The captain smiled. "Abbott isn't going to know we ever reached a port. We're going to hit south, keep out of sight and in time the *Falcon* will be reported lost by the survivor who carries the story."

"Clever!" Kay agreed. "But for my part I believe that Abbott is a shrewder man than you're giving him credit for being."

The captain got to his feet and looked toward the bunk.

"I've got to attend to a few things about the ship," he said moving toward the door. "The crew is getting restless from this long lay-to and I've thought some of moving in closer and giving them a chance to gambol ashore. They can't go nowhere, but it'll be a change; and there'll be no desertion in these waters."

Kay nodded and reached for the flask that set upon the table. The captain looked at him with an evil smirk.

"Take care of your playmate," he leered. "She's pretty much worn out over the rough treatment you've handed her and she needs consolation."

Astra's bonds had been removed when she was brought aboard and she had been placed in the captain's berth. She had heard every word spoken by Lorn-gen and Kay, but she thought it better to feign unconsciousness. She realized now, that her only hope lay in Kay. If she failed to make him return her to the camp she was determined that

she would grasp the opportunity and make a break overland. The captain had said that he was going to move in so the men could go ashore, that would be her chance. She shuddered as she thought of the thick-lipped captain who had leered down at her when she lay, so he thought, unconscious. That it would be possible for Kay to ignore her entreaties to take her back seemed quite likely considering his attitude heretofore. Most men she had known had shown too much attention toward her; Kay had not as much as looked toward her.

With noiseless caution, she raised her head from the pillow and looked toward Kay. He was seated with his back to her, but she could see that one hand was grasping the bottle, the other a glass. But he sat as though lost in reverie or deep study, then suddenly he laughed harshly and poured himself a drink, gulping it down. A long while he remained seated and then with a quick movement he sprang to his feet. Astra lay back and closed her eyes.

She sensed that he was standing beside the berth; she could feel that his eyes were fastened upon her. After a few moments he sat down on the edge of the berth. Very slowly, Astra opened her eyes and stared at him with well-feigned dazedness that gradually grew into startled fear.

Kay's lips quirked into a bitter, harsh smile. He got to his feet.

"Do you want a drink?" he asked coldly.

"Her lips curled scornfully.

"A drink!" She spat the word contemptuously. "Save your pig-swill to keep your own filthy soul wallowing in the slime!"

"I didn't mean whiskey!" he sneered. "It's much too precious to waste on a woman."

Something suddenly snapped within her. Her violet eyes blazed into mad flame. With a leap she sprang from the berth and confronted him. Her cap

was gone, her gold-bronze hair fell about her shoulders in wild disarray, her face had grown suddenly bloodless.

"You brute!" she screamed, all of her control swept away. "I've heard your drunken curses against women; I've listened to your maudlin self-pitying excuses—now you'll fight! Fight, do you hear!" she screamed, crouching before him like a snarling tigress. "And I'll batter your whiskey-sodden face into a resemblance of the beast that you are! I'll hammer the fear of God into your depraved soul!"

Kay stared at her in speechless amazement, not unmingled with awe. She was like some beautiful goddess of wrath; or, a jungle she-cat whose young have been taken from her. Her lips were quivering, her eyes aflame. He took a backward step, and she was upon him.

Small fists crashed into his face, all of the power of her supple body behind them. He attempted to grab her arms, but she was away, and back again, like a wind-washed wave breaking against a rock. Her fists battered into his face, crashed his lips against his teeth, her voice screamed at him in fury. He managed to grasp her by the collar, but she sprang away, the shirt ripping down one shoulder. With a sudden leap he managed to grasp her in his arms, pinioning her own against her sides. She writhed in his embrace, her eyes burning into his like pools of wind-swept flame. His arms tightened about her while his breath came in labored gasps.

"Now," he gasped, "I'll pour that drink down your throat!"

"You coward!" she hissed. "You miserable, depraved coward! I could kill you! She struggled against his arms and kicked at him with all her might; then suddenly, she sank her teeth into his arm. With a cry of pain his hold relaxed and she sprang away.

She crouched a pace away from him, an unholy light in her eyes, the wild fighting blood of long-forgotten Sander-

sons coursed madly through her veins. She was a wild creature of the jungle, all vestige of civilization swept from her. She taunted him, laughed at him, and sent those small fists crashing again and again into his face. Two small streams of blood trickled from the corners of his mouth, he felt weak, dizzy; she was but a blurred figure weaving and rushing before him. He had not struck back at her—he wondered why—he was not angry, and he did not understand that.

As she rushed toward him again, her foot caught in the corner of a rug and she tripped. He sprang forward to capture her. But even as she hit the floor, on hands and knees, she was struggling to her feet. He bent over to grasp her arms and she whirled upon her back and lay flat, drawing her legs up like the half-closed blade of a jack-knife. He made a dart to catch her, and two small, moccasin-clad feet rammed into the pit of his stomach. The unexpectedness of the blow caught him off balance and sent him reeling backward. A groping hand caught at the table and grasped its edge, he stumbled and sprawled to the floor, the table crashing down with him. He lay motionless.

Astra sprang to her feet and advanced toward him warily, expecting some trick; but he did not move as she bent over him. Her face went deathly white. From his temple a thin trickle of blood coursed into a pool upon the floor. A moment she bent over him, and then she fell down beside him and took his head into her lap. She looked into the pale, blood-smearred face, at the torn lips, and suddenly she broke into hysterical sobs.

She looked up after a long time to find Lorngen standing in the doorway confronting her with an evil leer; but there was an expression of amazement in his eyes as he surveyed the disheveled girl and the man upon the floor. A sardonic smile of comprehension parted his thick lips.

"So he didn't hate you so much after

all, eh? Probably tried to play too rough."

He bent over Kay and then looked at the girl with a low whistle of amazement.

"I-is he . . . dead?" Her voice quavered in a strained whisper.

"Dead?" Lorngen bent down. "No, but I'll bet he'll wish he was when he learns what a whale of a trimmin' you give him. An' me not here to see it! Looks like you chewed him up and spit him out!"

"Please," her voice was husky with tremors of fear, "help me get him onto the bed."

Lorngen stooped down, picked up Kay and waddled to the bunk with him. He turned back to Astra with an expression in his beady eyes that caused her to cringe back.

"You're the kind I like!" His thick lips parted in what he intended for a smile of approval, but which reminded Astra of the leering smirk of a gorilla. "You and me would hook up fine!"

"Please get me some water and something to bandage his head with. D-do you think whiskey . . ."

"Sure!" The captain chuckled. "Whiskey will be the first thing he asks for; it's the only thing he ever thinks of."

After Lorngen went for water and bandage, Astra sat down upon the edge of the bunk and looked down upon the wan, blood-streaked face of Kay. He began to mutter and Astra leaned closer.

It was not the maundering of a drunken man now, it was the delirium-dream of a man carried back into other years. Astra felt hot tears course down her cheeks as Kay lived over, and gave utterance to, that parting of long ago.

He opened his eyes slowly and blinked dazedly at the vision leaning above him. A single shaft of sunlight streamed through the open port-hole and showered through gold-bronzed hair like a mist of flame-struck opal dust. Tender, tear-wet eyes were looking into his and one small hand was caressing his forehead. It was many moments before

comprehension came to him, and then he smiled wanly.

"I . . . didn't pour it down your throat . . . did I?" he said wanly. "Please, get me a drink."

She brought a bottle and glass from the locker and poured him a drink. He gulped it down and handed the glass back to her. She poured another drink and as he reached for it, she lifted it to her own lips and gulped it. As the fiery liquid ran down her throat, she gagged and went into paroxysms of strangling coughs. Her eyes met his and there was a thin veil of moisture over them.

"I-I've drank it!" she whispered. "Will you take me back? Surely you wouldn't keep me here for . . . for—" Her voice broke and she looked at him appealingly.

A long moment he looked at her, and then he got slowly from the bunk and stood swaying unsteadily before her. He nodded his head in a slow affirmative. "Yes," he said. "I'll take you to the mainland."

CHAPTER VII

Ship Ahoy!

A LARGE, cold-gleaming moon crept from beyond the horizon and laid a carpet of rippling light across the blue waters of the Bering. In the shadows on the lee side of the *Falcon*, Kay leaned upon the rail, looking off to where the moon-stream was lost amid the murk that hovered over the coast-line.

Many thoughts were passing through his mind, none of them pleasant. For six years he had been but an atom of flotsam drifting with the current. He had told Abbott that he had no scruples against crime; he had readily agreed with Lorngen and Stronk to double-cross Abbott. He would have double-crossed Lorngen and Stronk with the same lack of compunction. He had no definite object in mind for which he

would use his share of the gold; in fact, he had given little thought to the possibility of wealth. He possessed no ambition, no goal, no desire to exert an effort toward climbing back to respectability or manhood; he accepted himself for what he was, a drunkard. A faint flush overspread his face as he raised a hand and touched the bandage about his head. He wanted to feel angry, retributive toward the girl for taking advantage of him. But had she taken advantage of him? She had not expected him to remain passive; she had thought that he would fight back. Why hadn't he fought back? He held women in contempt, hated them! Perhaps a man would not strike a woman—but he had no manhood. And as all of these thoughts passed through his mind, there was a vague, indefinite undercurrent in his thought-stream that he refused to bring to the surface. There had been something in the pathetic wistfulness of the girl's eyes, something in the way that she had looked at him that had stirred memories. And he had thought those memories buried too deep to ever be resurrected. He realized that he had been a fool, a damnable fool! But the realization angered him—angered him that he should admit them. He made no resolve to forget the past and start anew. There was nothing for him to go back to; nothing to be gained in fighting back to the man that he had once been. He was thinking of the futility of the life that he was living, the utter uselessness of living longer. He was thinking many thoughts that were strange to him, and he was considering seriously, and unemotionally, the eternal rest from it all that lay beneath those blue waters that lapped at the vessel's side. He was startled by a soft foot-fall behind him and a small hand touching him upon the shoulder.

"Kay!" Astra whispered, her eyes looking at him in a frightened appeal. "I—I'm afraid down there! The captain and most of the crew are drunk and—"

"And what has that to do with me?" he asked coldly. "I haven't agreed to act as your bodyguard; I'll take you ashore tomorrow as I agreed. That's all I have promised."

She cringed away from him, an expression of horror and disbelief in her eyes.

"You wouldn't protect me from—"

"Why should I?" he asked gruffly.

"Because you're a man!"

"A man!" He laughed harshly. "There is nothing subtle about your irony!"

"You mean—" her lips grew taut and she looked at him from fear-filled eyes, "that you would leave me to protect myself against those . . . swine! Filthy beasts that are wallowing in rotten whiskey!"

"You forget," he said curtly, "that I belong to the same drove: swine who wallow in whiskey!"

"But at least you . . . you wouldn't harm me!" Her voice fell to a husky whisper.

"Harm you!" He studied her closer in the moonlight, a hard glint coming into his narrowed eyes. "I'd break your heart if I could!" he said with a tense hardness.

"Why, Kay . . . Why . . . What have I done to you?" she whispered with a catch in her voice. "I've never harmed you."

"You believe," he said in a harsh voice, "that I started drinking to forget a woman. I thought so myself, once. But it wasn't because a woman preferred money to love, that I wanted to forget her. It wasn't a woman that I lost; it was an ideal, a dream. When I saw the world turned into a slaughter house, saw men torn into atoms and their blood spattering over shell-torn fields, when I saw all this horror and hatred and thought of all the horror and misery that must come to the loved ones of those slain men—when I saw all that, there still remained a vision that inspired me to believe that not all the world was filled with hatred, murder,

and broken faith."

He paused, and Astra looking into his eyes saw a kindling flame: a passionate, hopeless appeal in mitigation of what he was; an appeal in his own defence. A moment his eyes burned into hers and then he turned away with a bitter laugh.

"And that ideal, that vision; what was it, after all?" He turned to face her fiercely. "A woman that sold herself for a pot of gold! But it wasn't that woman that I wanted to forget. I had built an idol to the goddess of all that was good and pure, and faith!" He laughed harshly. "I believed in her, worshipped her, and she—sold herself for a pot of gold!"

"B-but Kay," one small hand crept up his arm and rested upon his shoulder, "not all women are that way; not every woman would sell herself for a pot of gold."

"They'd sell their immortal souls for an ermine coat and a line in the society columns!" he said bitterly. "All of them!" And then with a sudden change in his voice he reached into his pocket and handed her a key. "Go to my cabin; lock the door upon the inside, no harm will come to you there." Then as she started away: "I'll take you ashore tomorrow."

"Oh!" she uttered in a joyous cry. "Y-you would trust me not to tell about the gold! You would trust me, Kay?"

"I would trust no woman!" he said grimly. "I said I'd take you ashore, I'll take you far enough away from the camp to insure your not reaching there before we are away from here with the gold."

"You mean—" she asked in a horror-strained voice, "that you would leave me out there alone, to find my way back?"

"I'll see that you have everything you need: provisions and directions. Or, would you rather remain here?" he asked grimly.

"No! No!" she cried. "Take me anywhere away from these . . ."

"Swine!" he completed with a dry laugh.

"Look!" she cried suddenly, pointing off toward the south. "I see a light! It's a ship!" There was a great relief in that last sentence.

Kay whirled about and stared off in the direction she pointed. He laughed shortly. "So Abbott isn't a fool! He's coming to play his own cards in this little game of ours!"

Astra's eyes were fastened upon the distant beam of light that was bobbing like a firefly upon the waters.

"Abbott?" she said with sinking heart. "But perhaps," hope sprang into her words, "it is someone else! Someone that wouldn't leave a woman to find her way over miles of deathtraps, alone."

"It might be," he agreed calmly. "I doubt it. I've always felt that Abbott was too shrewd a man to trust a thing like this to hirelings. He couldn't come at the start, but he's going to be in at the finish—which will disappoint Lorngen and Stronk!" he completed with a grim chuckle.

"Oh, but if it's only someone else!" she breathed hopefully. "Someone that isn't contaminated by rotten whiskey and the lust for gold. I pray God that it isn't Abbott!"

"And I don't give a damn, one way or the other!" said Kay as he turned upon his heel and made his way toward the companionway.

CHAPTER VIII

Now You Die!

KAY had been correct: it was Abbott! And Kay chuckled sardonically at the baffled expression of rage that overspread Lorngen's face when he went on deck and discovered that it was Abbott hailing the *Falcon*. But all was not lost yet. Much could happen, even to Abbott, before the gold was delivered in Frisco. The one thing that

bothered the captain was the fact that he had disobeyed Abbott's orders about the aviator. If Abbott was to discover that he had not followed orders there would be trouble.

"He's not such a fool, eh, cap?" Kay chuckled.

"No?" Lorngen's brutal face contorted into a malevolent grimace. "We aren't going to let Abbott snatch a fortune away from us, are we? He'll more than likely be alone."

Kay did not reply, but walked off to his own cabin. He turned the knob and then remembered that he had sent Astra there.

"It's only me," he called. "Abbott has arrived to look out for his own."

He thought he heard a sob from beyond the door, but she made no reply to him. He went back to the captain's cabin and sat down at the table.

"Well, Abbott," he looked up with a sarcastic smile as Abbott followed Lorngen into the cabin, "I see that you aren't trusting your honorable colleagues any too far."

"Hello, Kay!" Abbott dropped into the seat opposite and smiled in an amused way, his glittering eyes appraising Kay with unfeigned approval. "You're looking more like a man, Kay! No, it wasn't that I distrusted any of you. I thought perhaps I might be of some help. It's a big thing we have ahead of us—too big to risk a failure!"

Kay, looking beyond Abbott, saw the brutal face of Lorngen smirking sarcastically. The captain nodded to Kay in a meaning way and slowly closed one eyelid.

"Although," Abbott said dryly, "it's a great temptation, so much gold. Ships have been known to lose their course, go upon the rocks, sink—most anything might happen to a vessel that carries such precious cargo!" He turned to look toward the captain, but Lorngen had left the cabin. "This voyage seems to have benefited you; you look more like a human."

"Yes," Kay nodded with a satiric

smile, "I have been greatly benefited. The benefit would have been greater, though, had you postponed your visit! I had visions of waving palms, rum—just another shattered dream!" he said with mock regret.

"What do you mean?" Abbott straightened in his chair, his eyes narrowing.

"Just what I said." Kay's eyes met the other's piercing stare. "I told you at the beginning of this proposition that I had no morals, no scruples; I was seriously considering encountering one of the catastrophes you mentioned a moment ago—shipwreck!"

Abbott stared at him in dumfounded perplexity.

"You mean," he said finally, "you were going to double-cross me?"

"Exactly."

"And why are you telling me?" Abbott asked curiously.

"Why not? You knew I would, given the chance. That's why you came up here. Your claim is no better than mine. You double-crossed someone else to—"

"I'll be damned!" Abbott sprang to his feet, an angry color mounting into his cheeks. His eyes glowered at Kay menacingly. "That bull-necked ape, Lorngen, told you about the other aviator, eh? You two were going to double-cross me after what I've done for you!"

"You've done nothing for me, Abbott, except in so far as it furthered your own plans. Under the same circumstances, were you and I in reversed positions, you would do the same thing. It could hardly be called double-crossing, just taking advantage of an opportunity."

For a moment Abbott stood speechless, his aloe-like eyes fastened upon Kay searchingly. Abbott knew men, and he suspected some unspoken reason behind Kay's confession. That there was some motive behind this challenge—for challenge it was—Abbott was sure.

"Why," he said finally, keeping the

rage from his voice, "are you telling me?"

"Because I am through with your plan, Abbott! I have a better one of my own. I have become possessed of the strange and improbable hallucination that I am a man! I admit that it sounds ridiculous; it probably is, but it stands. I'll have nothing to do with your deal any longer!"

A sardonic leer twisted at Abbott's lips and he laughed.

"You need the plane to get the gold, Kay. I have a man aboard the ship that brought me that can sail the plane; I also have men that—"

"The ship that brought you is sailing southward, Abbott. Your bluff is no good. There isn't anything that you can do to stop me."

Abbott's face turned a fiery hue, his eyes narrowed to pinpoints of flame. His voice came low, hard, tense:

"You are wrong, Kay. There is something I can do; and I am going to do it—I can kill you right now!"

CHAPTER IX

It's Your Battle!

WHEN Kay had knocked upon the door and announced that the vessel had brought Abbott, Astra threw herself across the bunk and sobbed. For a moment she had dared hope that rescue was at hand; but now she faced a fate little better than throwing herself in the Bering would offer. To make her way alone over two hundred miles of glaciers, and through a strange country, seemed impossible.

After a long while she raised her head; there was a light of desperation in her eyes. She was determined to make some effort toward getting Kay to take her ashore. There was something about Kay that frightened her, repulsed her; and yet, strangely, caused her to pity him. Something in his eyes, deep down, had seemed to deny the

harshness of his words, his inhuman callousness; it was something wistful, poignant—the struggle of a soul trying to fight free from intangible bonds.

She opened the cabin door softly and looked up and down the passageway. It was deserted. From the fo'c'sle came the raucous guffaws and loud voices of the crew. Clutching her small automatic, Astra made her way stealthily up the companionway.

Keeping in the shadows, she reached a point beneath an open porthole of the captain's cabin and peered in. She saw Abbott and Kay and heard Kay tell Abbott that he was through. Incredulity and amazement overspread her face. A joyous hope sprang up in her breast; perhaps, after all, he would take her back to the camp!

When Abbott's hand jerked up with a revolver and he uttered the threat to kill Kay, Astra's small automatic was on a line with Abbott's heart, her finger pressing against the trigger. But Abbott made no effort to fire; the hand holding the revolver dropped to his side. He sat down at the table, a sardonic twist at the corners of his lips.

"And what has brought about this sudden redemption?" he sneered. "This idea that you are going to be a man?"

Astra did not hear Kay's reply, because at that moment a step sounded behind her. Before she could whirl to confront the prowler, strong arms were about her. She fought and struggled to free herself, but Lorngen's laugh mocked her efforts.

"Take it easy, little one! I'll take you in where you can hear things better." He dragged her to the cabin door and thrust her inside.

"What the—!" Abbott had whirled at the sudden commotion and now stared at Astra in blank amazement; and then an understanding light came into his eyes. "So that's the answer!" he snarled at Kay. "How in hell did she get here?" he roared at Lorngen.

"Kay brought her today. Stronk sent her."

"Stronk, eh?" Black rage came into Abbott's face. "Why did you bring her?" He whirled upon Kay.

"Had to," Kay replied. "She knew our plans."

"Stronk told her?" A dangerous gleam came into the dark eyes.

"No. I did."

"You! Damn you, Kay! If I didn't intend to kill you before, I do now! So you don't hate them so damn much after all, do you?" he sneered.

Astra's eyes were fastened upon Kay with an expression of intermingling hope and desperation. Lorngen had taken her gun away from her and retained a vise-like grip upon her wrist.

Kay looked at Abbott and there was a hard glint in his eyes.

"More, Abbott. As much as you are going to hate me when you see this gold torn from your grasp. You couldn't help but hate any man that took gold from you."

"You talk like a damn fool!" Abbott sneered, but a startled expression flitted through his eyes. In his rage he had forgotten that the gold could not be brought aboard without Kay's help. He did not know that Lorngen had not killed the other aviator.

Lorngen threw a meaning glance at Kay. He wanted Kay to start things, and then he would watch his chance and finish Abbott. That would leave the field clear for the captain to send Kay back to the mainland and make final arrangements with Stronk. Once those arrangements were made, Kay would have served his only useful function in the plans of the captain.

A thin smile quirked at Abbott's lips as he turned to face the girl. A moment he stared at her while her eyes blazed into his; then he turned to face Kay, whose gaze was fastened upon the night beyond the porthole.

"So, Kay," Abbott laughed softly, "this is the morning's-after eye-opener? One woman sends you on a six years' drunk and the other sobers you up to a

point where you begin to think you can be a man."

"We'll forget about women, Abbott." Kay's gaze came to rest upon the smirking features. "You were speaking of killing me a moment ago; it's an intriguing subject, one that I have given considerable thought to lately."

"You!" Abbott laughed scornfully. "I told you once that you lacked the guts to live and the nerve to die. I hoped I was wrong then; I know I am right now! Kay, you haven't even got the makings of a man!"

"You lie!" Astra cried, her eyes pools of blazing fire, the cords standing out against her white throat as she strained toward Abbott.

Abbott laughed with a sneer; but Kay straightened up in his chair and through his eyes flitted an expression that was hard to define. But Astra did not look toward Kay, her eyes were still fastened upon Abbott. Abbott turned away from her and spoke to Kay.

"We're going ashore, Kay. I want to see Stronk."

"You can walk, Abbott!" Kay got to his feet and started toward the door.

For a moment Abbott's eyes flamed in mad rage and then with a leap he was in front of Kay, the revolver pressed against his stomach.

"You'll do as I say or I'll—"

"Shoot?" Kay sneered contemptuously. "Why in hell don't you do it then? You've been talking about it all night." Kay thrust his hands deep into his pockets and sneered into Abbott's eyes. "I'll tell you why—you're thinking of gold! But," a sudden flame came into Kay's eyes, "I'm going to do just one thing before you have a chance to shoot, Abbott—I'm going to hammer that sneer off your face!"

Before Abbott realized what Kay intended, a fist caught him against the jaw, staggering him; another blow and Kay had knocked the gun from his hand. For a moment, Abbott stared in stupefied amazement, unable to comprehend this sudden transformation in a

man who a short few weeks ago had been a drunken sot cringing and begging for small coins with which to buy liquor. But looking into Kay's eyes, he saw that the lack-lustre, the wonted shiftiness, was gone and in its stead there was a light that blazed bitter and deadly. Then the broiling rage within Abbott surged to the surface. He made a lunge, his fist shot out and struck Kay across the mouth, reeling him backward.

"You can do it, Kay! Whip him!"

It was Astra that called out to him; Lorngen had released her, and now she stood: body half-crouched, small fists clenched close to her waist, her eyes shining, her face flushed in tense interest.

Lorngen folded his arms across his chest, an ironic smile quirking at the corners of his lips. If Kay saved him the trouble of attending to Abbott, so much the better!

A fleeting moment the eyes of Kay and Astra met; and then Abbott was upon him. But in that brief instant Kay had read an unvoiced plea in the eyes of the girl. He met Abbott's rush with a blow that sent the gambler reeling backward. There was venom, mad-hating rage in those aloe-like eyes now and there was a cruel, animal-like snarl upon the thin lips. Again and again Kay's fists crashed into the swarthy face. Abbott's blows fell upon him, jarred him, sent piercing pain into his brain, but still he kept weaving in and out. With a sudden spring Abbott clenched with him. For a moment they struggled and then crashed to the floor with Abbott on top. Quick as a flash Abbott's hand darted into his pocket and came forth with a knife, jerked from a leather sheath within the pocket. A woman's scream of horror sounded as the yellow rays of the ceiling-lamp fell upon the bare blade descending.

As though that cry were new energy revitalizing him, Kay's knee came up and rammed into Abbott's stomach with terrific force. The knife slipped from his fingers and before he could regain

his breath Kay rolled him off and sprang up and then with all the power he possessed Kay sent a blow crashing to Abbott's jaw. Abbott crawled to his hands and knees and wobbled unsteadily; Kay stood over him, waiting. Abbott looked toward the sardonic captain.

"Lorngen," he gasped. "Stop the damn fool! Hold him!"

Lorngen laughed. "It's your battle, Abbott; fight it!"

"Yes, damn you!" Kay snarled. "Fight! There isn't any makings of a man in me, eh? Damn you, Abbott, I'm going to kill you with my hands!"

Abbott came up with a spring, but as he rushed toward Kay, Kay swung his fist, pivoting upon one heel. The blow caught Abbott upon the point of the jaw and this time he crashed to the floor and lay motionless. Kay staggered back and brushed a hand across his eyes to clear away the blood that trickled from an open cut above his eye. He reeled through the door without a backward glance toward Astra or the captain.

"Kay!" Astra sprang forward. "Where are you going?"

"To get a drink!" he laughed harshly.

"Kay! Kay!" She was beside him, her small hand clutching his arm. "Don't go back to wallowing in the mire. You've taken the first step up; don't go down again!"

He brushed her off roughly and lurched down the passageway to his cabin.

Lorngen laughed sardonically as Astra turned away with a sob catching in her throat.

"It's the one thing that he can't whip, the booze! God! Imagine that drunken bum putting up such a battle! After he let you hammer hell out of him!" he sneered.

Kay slumped down upon his bunk and removed a pint flask from beneath his mattress. He raised the bottle to his lips and then paused. A long while he sat thus, and then with a dry laugh he replaced the cork and slipped the bottle

into his pocket. He heard hurried footsteps and looked up to see the excited face of Lorngen standing in the doorway.

"It's come, Kay!" he cried. "Snow! She's coming down fast, too. We'll be having that gold aboard this week. You'd better go back and see Stronk; no use taking chances that they will start with that gold before we're ready."

Kay nodded. "What about Abbott?" he asked.

Lorngen laughed sardonically. "Abbott is safely locked up. We'll give him a ticket later on—a lead ticket about his feet."

"I'll go back tonight." Kay started to remove his flying-clothes from their peg and then turned to face Lorngen. "Tell the girl to be ready in half an hour. Put a parachute on her and—"

"You're a fool, Kay!" Lorngen blazed angrily. "She'll tell the whole camp."

"Yes, when she gets there. That will be after we have the gold aboard."

"You mean," Lorngen cast a startled glance at him, "that you are going to maroon her out there?"

"No." Kay laughed grimly. "I am going to give her a compass, food and directions as to how to reach the camp. She can get there in a five-days' walk. It'll do her good."

Lorngen stared at him curiously. "You mean that you would let a girl like her go wandering off through the wilds?"

"Like her?" Kay's lips curled. "Why like her? Is she any different than others?"

"Why, she's got the looks of a beauty prize winner! You'd be a fool to take her back!" An evil gleam crept into the captain's eyes and he leered at Kay. "If you don't want her I—"

"I said I was going to take her back!" Kay snapped. "Back she goes, with me tonight."

Lorngen started to make an angry retort and then thought better of it. Why risk the gold for one woman? There were plenty just as beautiful

where the palms waved over southern seas.

"How'll you get your bearings tonight?"

"There's a moon," Kay replied. "I won't need much light to make a landing on the lake. There's a level stretch of country between here and there where I can drop the girl. It's about a hundred miles from the camp and she won't make it in less than five days, maybe longer. Tell her to get ready."

Lorngen shrugged and turned upon his heel. "You're a fool, Kay, but you're the doctor—right now, anyway!" He muttered the last under his breath. "My turn comes later!"

CHAPTER X

Winged Flame!

WHEN Kay came on deck, ready for the air, he found Astra standing by the rail, her face pale in the moonlight that bathed the night in an eerie twilight. She raised fear-filled eyes to him and her lips quivered.

"K-Kay," her voice quavered, "you aren't going to—to—"

"Do you want to stay here?" he asked brusquely. "You can do as you wish."

"B-but, I-I'm afraid!"

Ignoring her cry, Kay made his way toward the ladder that led to the hydroplane which had been drawn close alongside the *Falcon*. Ready to descend, he looked toward her.

"I'm ready to leave," he called unemotionally. "You'd better let me give you directions about pulling that release cord on the parachute."

While the girl cringed against the rail in abject fear and horror, Kay explained the manipulation of the parachute as matter-of-factly as though he were explaining it to a class in aviation.

"Oh, Kay—" a sob caught in her throat and for a moment she struggled to speak, "you couldn't leave me out there alone! Please! I'll say nothing

to anyone about what you are going to do. Take me back to camp. Please, Kay!"

She clutched his arm and looked up at him through tear-wet eyes. Kay's face turned a trifle pale and he clenched his hands until his fingers bit into the palms. He averted his face and spoke gruffly.

"No harm will come to you."

"B-but it's snowing. . . . I—I—"

Kay laughed harshly. "Snowing? I've flown when the air was full of flying steel; a little snow doesn't matter."

"How you must hate me!" she cried with a sob. "And I've never done anything to deserve it."

"Hate you!" He turned upon her fiercely and grasped her shoulders in a clutch that caused her to wince in pain. "Hate you! I—I don't hate you; I—Come on!" He broke off abruptly and started down the ladder.

A startled expression came into Astra's eyes. A moment she remained too surprised to move and then she followed him down the ladder. Kay climbed into the cockpit and said nothing as Astra took her seat beside him, instead of climbing into the rear cockpit. Kay looked up toward the deck of the *Falcon*. The captain's cabin-door opened and Lorngen stepped out.

"All right, Cap!" Kay called. "Give her a whirl."

"You're a damn fool, Kay!" Lorngen snapped as he took hold of the propeller blade and gave it a wind.

"You're wrong, Captain," Kay laughed harshly, "I have been!"

The motors took hold with a sudden roar and the hydroplane skimmed along upon the surface of the water for a hundred yards before her nose lifted into the air and she gradually climbed upward. Far off, hanging low in the northern sky, one lone star stood sentinel over a snow-capped peak of distant mountains.

Astra's face was bloodless, her eyes were fastened upon the man beside her. Kay's eyes were straight ahead; he

seemed oblivious to the terror-stricken little figure that cowered beside him. Once Astra tried to raise her voice above the roar of the motors, but it was drowned out before it passed her lips. There was no wind, yet the terrific speed of the plane drove the snow against them as though it were blizzard-driven.

How long they roared on through the night Astra never knew. To her it seemed eternity, an eternity wherein an ever-impending doom cast a nameless terror upon her. Suddenly Kay seemed to stiffen. He stooped low and studied the instrument board and then he darted a swift glance at the girl. Then he leaned toward her and placed his mouth against her ear.

"Quick!" he cried. "Climb over! Don't forget about the cord; be sure you're clear before you pull it!"

It seemed that in that moment her heart stopped. Her muscles seemed grown paralyzed. She stared at him in wide-eyed horror. She cried out in mortal dread, but her voice never reached his ears. She saw his face tense. With a quick movement he released the controls and grasped her. Another instant he was forcing her over the side. The plane wobbled dizzily and he grabbed the control stick with one hand and steadied it.

"Quick!" he screamed into her ear. "I'm almost out of gas. We'll be dropping soon . . . can't land . . . you're safe with the parachute. Drop!" And then as her terror-stricken eyes stared into his he lifted her over the side.

A scream of horror was stifled in her throat. She felt as though she were rushing downward into a bottomless void. It was like some nightmarish dream. She saw the snow-covered ground rushing up to meet her. Then, with a desperate effort, she yanked upon the metal ring about the cord. There came a mighty wrench as though her shoulders were being jerked and torn asunder. The speed of her descent slackened; the parachute had opened and she was floating down now, slowly and

safely. Then, almost beside her, came a roar and from the skies a streaming oriflamme of fire streaked earthward. Even in that moment of horror and terror she knew that Kay was crashing to death in the plane. Merciful unconsciousness came over her.

The parachute fluttered and then slowly settled over the motionless form upon the ground. A hundred yards away, a twisted heap of metal lay glowing as the last tongues of flame died out.

It was a long time before Astra stirred and slowly opened her eyes. She felt the silken heap lying on top of her and for a moment lay in dazed incomprehension; and then, the full realization of the last few minutes of horror in the air came to her. She struggled to her feet and crept from beneath the parachute. She saw the smouldering heap upon which the snowflakes fell with a hiss of steam as they touched the hot metal.

CHAPTER XI

Wrecked!

A MOMENT Astra stood staring at that mangled heap of steel. Her face was a ghastly white, her heart filled with an unspeakable dread. It was all like a delirium-hallucination, the weird moonlight filtering through the silent, feathery snowfall; the distant peaks of phantom-like mountains, and about her the eerie whiteness of the motionless world. A half-cry of hysteria came from between her bloodless lips as her eyes searched, in fascinated dread, beyond that tangled network of what had been the plane. A figure, a black blot against the snow, lay far away from the wrecked plane. Astra took a step forward and then paused. She feared to look down into the face of that motionless form. A paralysis of fright possessed her; and then, a force greater than the fear of looking into the face

of death caused her to advance slowly, step by step, as though she were stalking a phantom. She halted a few paces away from Kay, who lay face downward.

"Kay!" The cry was torn from her heart, a cry of anguish, fear. She threw herself forward beside him and sobbed. "Kay! Kay!" Her cry was hysterical, laughter and sobs mingling in uncontrollable paroxysms. A groan had come from Kay.

To fall three thousand feet in a crashing plane and not be killed would be a miracle; but in Kay's case, the miracle was that he had been able to glide to earth in a plane that was in flames. The hydroplane had not been equipped for landing on anything except water, and the moment the pontoons touched the ground they were snapped loose while Kay was catapulted through the air to strike the ground far beyond the blazing plane. He owed his life to his well-padded helmet and his heavy clothing.

She took his head in her lap. He began to mutter in broken, incoherent sentences, wild maunderings from which Astra glimpsed scenes from other days; and listening to him, the tears coursed unabashed down her cheeks. She believed Kay to be dying; any other result from the crash seemed impossible.

She raised her head and stared wildly off through the snowing night. If she could only get him where he might be taken care of properly, there might be a chance of saving him. For the first time she realized that Kay meant something to her. Back there on the ship he had been a means of her own salvation; now, her own plight seemed insignificant compared to saving Kay's life. How? She had no conception of where they were, nor how far away the camp might be.

"Through, Abbott . . ." Kay began once more to talk, "going to take her back to camp . . . don't want a drink!" He struck out violently with one hand. "No! No!" He half struggled up and reached out a restraining hand. "Don't

leave me, Astra! I don't hate you . . . I was . . ." Again he fell back weakly and lay quiet.

The girl fell into sobbing and pressed her cheek against his. "I'm not going to leave you, Kay."

As though her voice had aroused him, he brushed a hand across his eyes and blinked up at her dazedly. After a long while his lips moved and she bent close to catch his words.

"We . . . we crashed!" he said weakly. "Almost got there . . . ten miles . . . safe on lake. Tired . . . want sleep . . . lake ten miles north . . . Stronk waiting . . . wait long time!"

A sudden wild surge of hope sprang up within her. It was only ten miles to the lake! Or—and for a moment she lost hope—was Kay only speaking at random in his delirium? But anything was better than waiting out here. She must bring help if Kay was to be saved. He was probably injured internally; perhaps there were bones broken. He would not be able to walk, she could not carry him. She must get help! Stronk! Stronk would be waiting at the lake! She was thinking fast now. She would go to the lake and find Stronk. Tell him that Kay had fallen, but that the plane was uninjured. If for no other reason, Stronk would help her to get Kay in in order that the gold could be stolen. Were he to learn that the plane was destroyed he would not help her. But once she had brought him back to where Kay was, she still had the small automatic and Stronk would carry Kay in or he would never leave him alive.

Astra laid Kay back upon the snow and got to her feet looking about her. Off in the north, the same star still stood sentinel over the snow-capped peak. All else was an eerie whiteness. Ten miles! To her it seemed as though the world stretched away into endless miles. But she must act; she must try to reach the lake and bring Stronk.

She remembered the parachute and went to fetch it. From among the tangled wreckage of the plane she removed

a steel rod. She forced the rod into the ground and draped the parachute over it, forming a shelter that would protect Kay from the snow. Then she removed her heavy mackinaw and used it to cover the ground. With a great effort she lifted Kay and laid him upon the coat. He commenced muttering and Astra paused, breathless, hoping that he might revive; but he fell silent again and a little sob escaped her lips.

And then, with Kay protected from the weather as much as it was possible for her to do, she strode off through the night. Not for a moment did she discount the herculean task that lay before her; but it was the only chance and though wearied and heartsick she clenched her small fists and struggled on.

CHAPTER XII

Hang Him!

DUE to his inability to work his claim, incapacitated as he was by a broken leg, the camp had appointed Jim Sanderson official caretaker of the camp's gold. Adjoining the cabin, and entered into by a door within the cabin, they had constructed a small shed. Jim kept a record book and scales and as each man's gold was put into the storehouse its weight and owner was entered. But both Jim and Astra had staked claims adjoining those of Bill Travis, and Astra had performed a man's work in getting down to bed-rock on both claims. Now and then, she was given a helping hand by Travis or an adjoining neighbor. One of those who had rendered her much assistance was the husband of the squaw from whose cabin she was returning when she found Kay. It so happened that upon that particular night he decided to return to his own cabin instead of remaining in camp as was his custom. The following morning when he returned he went to the Sanderson cabin to ask Astra about some medicine.

"You say Astra started home last night?" Jim demanded when the half-breed had stated his mission. "My God!" The truth struck him all at once. "Send Bill Travis here!" he roared in a voice that frightened the Indian.

But it was two hours later that Travis came. He burst into the cabin like a madman; his face flushed, his eyes flaming.

"By God, Jim, we've struck it!" he cried, not noticing the drawn face of the older man. "Millions, man! And it's as good on your an' Astra's side as—"

"Hell!" Jim gave utterance to a relieved sigh. "Then that's what kept Astra! Out all night digging gold! She's worse than her old dad!"

Travis stared at him blankly.

"What you talking about, Jim? Ain't Astra been here?"

"T-then, she ain't been out on the claim?" Clammy fear clutched at Jim's heart. "Then Stronk has her! Go and find Stronk!" he roared. "Find him and bring him here; I want to kill him!"

"She might be at my cabin," Travis replied.

"She wouldn't be there all night! Stronk has her; I might have known that's what he came here for last night. Bring him here! God, if it wasn't for this leg all busted up!"

While Jim was forced to remain idle in the search for Astra, the miners were busy. Travis had passed the word along that Stronk had kidnapped the Sanderson girl. It was an angry mob that gathered in a cabin and listened to their elected leader give his instructions.

"And don't forget!" were the parting words, "we're going to divide up and scour the woods. The first party to get him will string him up. We've had enough of his rot-gut whiskey and the trouble it's been causing."

At last there was a definite and justifiable cause for stringing Stronk up! Men who had been cheated and robbed

at the Gold Lure were exulting that they could even scores and remain within the law of the camp. To hang a man for cheating at cards was one thing; to hang a man for injuring a woman was another thing altogether.

But even as the mob formed, a hireling of the gambler had raced away to Stronk's cabin. Stronk cursed as he was told about the mob; he went into a mad rage; but not for long did he tarry. Only too well did he know that the mob would carry out their intention of hanging him. Not only on account of the girl, but because there were many in that mob who held private grudges against him. And as he cursed the mob, he cursed Kay. It had been his drunken maundering that had made it necessary to kidnap the girl in the first place. Not that Stronk had not intended to kidnap her anyway; but he would have waited until the gold was safely aboard.

But even as he prepared for flight, he chuckled. It had begun to snow last night and undoubtedly Kay would return immediately instead of waiting the week as was intended. Stronk had prepared for a contingency that might prevent him from being with the gold train. He had given full instructions to a lieutenant about administering the knockout drops and there was no chance of the plan going awry. As for Kay—Stronk's eyes narrowed—he would be taken care of later.

It was still snowing heavily when Stronk reached the edge of the lake; he paused and looked back over the trail he had traveled. Suddenly he gave a surprised start and stared wide-eyed at an apparition that staggered into view. It was Kay!

Kay lurched on until he came within a few feet of Stronk. He halted and tottered to the ground. Stronk sprang forward and caught him about the shoulders.

"Good God! Kay, what has happened?"

"Crashed!" Kay replied weakly. "I

walked . . . looking for Astra. . . . She—"

"Astra!" Stronk cried. "Where is she?"

"Found her way—to camp—guess. Couldn't find—"

"She's gone to camp!" An overpowering rage took possession of the gambler. "You've let her get away to warn them! Damn you, Kay! I should have killed you a long time ago; I didn't because you were valuable. If the plane is wrecked you aren't worth a damn to me. I'm going to have that gold. I'll cache it until I'm able to get it out. Damn you, Kay, I'm going to kill you, as I should have done long ago!"

But Kay had not heard; he lay unconscious upon the snow. Stronk's hand darted to his pocket and came forth with a revolver. Then a sudden thought came to him and a sardonic smile came onto his lips. The girl would not be in camp before the mob left. It was up to him to drag Kay in and turn him over as the man who had kidnapped the girl. The girl would go direct to her cabin and Stronk believed that he could force Jim Sanderson to keep her quiet about Stronk's part in the affair. Stronk knew the story of Astra's mother and that was a powerful weapon to use against the old man. The mob would hang Kay in the hysteria of the moment and Stronk would be free to plan a successful coup of the gold.

Stronk bent over the motionless form and shook Kay roughly.

"When did it happen?" And no response coming, Stronk kicked the helpless man.

Stronk straightened up. Possibly the girl had not reached camp as yet! If they had crashed on the way back—but then, Stronk reasoned, the girl would not be with Kay had Kay been on his way back. They had never reached the boat. That meant that they had crashed yesterday and the girl had had many hours to reach the camp. Probably she was there now!

As Stronk stood debating his next move he heard voices and whirled to see the mob coming down the trail. They raised a shout at sight of him and came forward at a run. In that moment Stronk reached a decision. To stop and accuse Kay would prove foolhardy. It was not Kay they were after, it was him! Stronk darted away through the underbrush at a lope and after him came the mob. No one stopped to investigate the motionless form upon the ground.

It had been two hours after Astra had left that Kay recovered consciousness. He stared at the canopy of silk over him with uncomprehending eyes, and then as past events came back to him he struggled slowly to his feet and crawled from beneath the parachute. In vain he looked for the girl. Deciding at last that she had started off for the camp, Kay laughed a little bitterly. She had left him to his own fate! Then realizing that it had been she who had erected the canopy over him, he knew that she had not abandoned him. She had gone for help, he told himself. He found the mackinaw, her mackinaw, upon which he had been lying, and a queer catch came into his throat. She had sacrificed her coat for him. And in the pockets of the mackinaw there were bullion cubes. He had instructed the captain to give them to her along with other supplies. Kay wished now that he had told her back there on the boat that he intended to land her at the lake from where they had taken off. She, believing that he had intended marooning her, had nevertheless sacrificed her comfort to his welfare.

He ate the bullion cubes as they were; they were not pleasant to the taste, but they were nourishing. When he had discovered last night that he was out of gas he estimated that he was but a short distance from the lake—less than ten miles as the crow flies. If Astra had followed a straight course, she would even now be at the lake, or beyond. He searched for her tracks in the snow, but

they had been covered up. He struck off toward the lake, swinging to the left of the low peak that stood in the center of the mountain pass. Astra had taken the right-hand pass, but Kay did not know this.

Kay got slowly to his feet and stared about him. There was a bewildered expression in his eyes as he searched for a sign of Stronk. And then there came to his ears the sound of shouting and coming around the cove were a dozen men who held the struggling Stronk in their midst.

"There is the man who stole the girl!" Stronk cried and waved toward Kay. "I was following him."

"String 'em both up!" someone shouted, and two of the mob broke in the direction of Kay. The others followed, dragging Stronk with them.

"Yes, both of them!" the others took up the cry. "They're both of the same ilk!"

Although Kay did not fully comprehend the situation, he did sense the hostility of the mob and he realized that the noosed rope which one ran toward him with was intended for his neck. He stopped quickly and picked up a club from the ground. With the first impact of that club striking against yielding flesh, Kay went berserk. The light of a wild fever blazed in his eyes and his lips drew back in an animal snarl.

Two of the mob remained to hold Stronk; the rest rushed to the aid of their companions. It was a wild battle in which the bestial instincts of the men were unleashed; already keyed to a high pitch by the mob spirit, their reason snapped and they became a *mêlée* of kicking, slashing humans whose blows were driven in without regard to the target. In attempting to hit Kay, they were slashing at each other. But in the center of the whirlwind Kay still lashed out with his club. There was an angry gash above his eyes and blood blinded him, but still he fought and cursed.

At last he succumbed to the inevitable; it was beyond human prowess for one man to successfully battle his way through such odds. A crashing blow caught him upon the chin and he dropped to the ground. In a thrice he was caught beneath the shoulders and his hands were bound behind him.

"We'll take care of him first, damn him!" one cried. "Come on, boys, bring him over here under this limb!"

They dragged him beneath the limb and fastened the noose about his neck. As they threw the rope over the limb there came a cry from the two guarding Stronk. He had broken away and was racing toward the lake. In the mad fear of his flight, Stronk did not follow the shoreline of the lake, but plunged into the icy waters and struck out for the shore a mile away. His pursuers paused at the bank and as they watched they saw him suddenly double up and cry out.

"Saves us the trouble of hangin' him!" one of the watchers said. "He's took with cramps."

Without a backward glance they strode back to the tree under which Kay now sat.

"Come on!" the leader snarled. "Let's get this over with. Where's the girl?" he demanded, bending over Kay.

But Kay did not comprehend the question; his head was wavering dizzily and he was blinded from the blood that came from the cut above his eyes.

"Put a rope around his shoulders to draw him up with," the leader commanded.

In addition to the rope about his neck they tied a second one beneath his armpits. The second rope would be used to draw him up with; once drawn high enough, the noosed rope would be made fast and then the second rope would be released. Kay would drop eight feet before the noosed rope broke his descent—and his neck.

They hoisted him up and made fast the noosed rope so that it would break the fall three feet above the ground.

Then the two holding the hoisting rope waited, looking toward their leader.

"All right, let it go!" he cried.

"Oh, my God! Stop! Stop!" From the underbrush a small figure ran in a staggering dash. She reached the spot beneath Kay and tottered. Before she could right herself Kay's feet crashed into her. The blow sent her reeling to the ground, where she lay in a heap, but she had broken the fall that would have snapped Kay's neck.

The mob stood paralyzed. The sudden appearance of the girl and her saving of their victim stunned them. At last one of them sprang toward the struggling Kay and lifted him up while the noose was slipped from his neck.

CHAPTER XIII

To the Stars!

OLD Jim Sanderson sat beside the bunk in which Astra had lain, sleeping the sleep of complete exhaustion, for more than twenty hours. When she was brought to camp it was discovered that in breaking Kay's death-fall she had suffered four broken ribs. She opened her eyes slowly and stared at her father dazedly and then she smiled wanly.

"Feelin' better, honey?" old Jim asked anxiously.

"W-where's Kay?" she whispered weakly. "I—is he—"

"Kay!" old Jim snorted. "Say! you ain't been sayin' nothin' else in your sleep. Don't you never think to ask about your old dad?" But there was a smile in old Jim's eyes. "Wait jest a minit, honey. Kay ain't jest exactly O.K. He's got a rag around his eyes, an' he won't be able to see for a few days. Looks like him an' you must of been doin' a little lion hunting or sumpthin'!"

A footfall sounded from outside and the door opened to admit the doctor. He looked toward Astra and smiled as he saw that she had awakened.

"Jim," he spoke with a sly wink to the old prospector, "take that new crutch I brung you an' come with me. No argument!" He raised his hand admonitorily.

Astra stared after them puzzledly as her father, a crude homemade crutch supporting him, hobbled out after the doctor. And then her eyes widened. Through the doorway came another. There was a bandage across his eyes and he was groping his way cautiously by placing one hand against the wall.

"Kay!" she called to him, "Kay, where are you going?"

He paused a moment and jerked his head about to face the direction of her voice. His lips parted in a smile as he moved haltingly toward her.

"To the stars, when I find you!"

And he did.

IS FLYING DANGEROUS?

The sensational notices given by newspapers to fatalities in naval aviation produce the impression that flying is still very unsafe.

Just how unsafe is it?

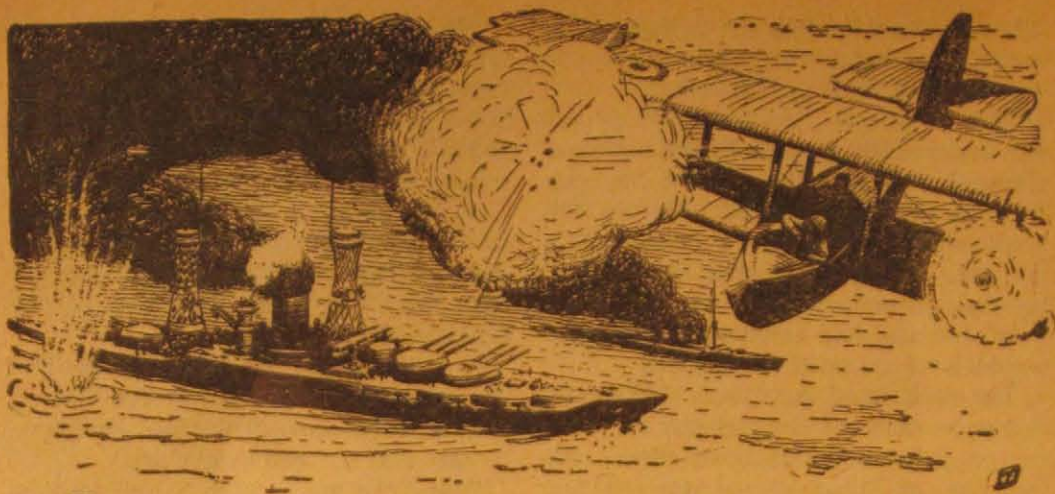
The Naval Bureau of Aeronautics has just published figures showing that in the last ten months there were twenty-six fatalities in naval aviation.

However, in those ten months naval aviators flew 84,478 hours in the air. This means a fatality every 3,249 flying hours.

Since the average rate of speed is 100 miles an hour, there is one fatality every 324,900 miles flown. This is seventeen and one-half times the distance around the earth.

Is there any means of travel by which you could go round the world seventeen and a half times without expecting to run into a serious or fatal accident, under the law of averages?

ARTHUR P. JONES.



Flaming Wings

By Frank Richardson Pierce

It started as an Irish feud, a joyous practical joke—but in the end the decks of a giant dreadnaught ran red!

THE feud between the Moriartys and the O'Sheas dated from the battle of Manila Bay. Apprentice Seaman Moriarty, enjoying his first liberty ashore after many long, cramped months aboard ship, had taken on a quantity of Beno and Hong Kong Scotch. Due to improper stowage of cargo, Moriarty listed heavily to starboard. Presently he sighted another craft steaming toward him. Alcoholic fog blurred his vision somewhat, but he hazily recalled the rules of the road in such an emergency:

When both side lights you see ahead
Port your helm and show your red.

He executed this maneuver and muttered as he checked up on the situation:

Green to green or red to red
Perfect safety—go ahead

"Let's see, the craft bearing down is Ensign Michael O'Shea. Rah for the

Irish!" Under the emboldening influence of his cargo he hurled the barriers of regulations and hailed the ensign in the most chummy manner. "It's a fine night for a murder, sir," he observed and saluted carelessly.

Dewey would have returned the salute and passed on without comment, but an ensign fresh from the Academy is steeped in tradition. Ensign O'Shea frowned. Besides he knew nothing of the potency of Beno; also the weather was very oppressive. In setting the genial seaman in his proper place he loosened a flow of language that fairly withered him.

Seaman Moriarty's alcoholic gesture was intended as a salute no doubt.

"It's all right with me, brother, only the American Navy sticks to its guns and it's the bes' dam' navy afloat or ashore. It is a fine night for a murder."

Moriarty wandered away until at length he beached himself in an aban-

done hut. He awakened the following morning in his right mind, harried by an unquenchable thirst. Thanks to the lingering powers of Beno, quantities of water served merely to create a beautiful hangover. It was during the reflective period of the hangover that he recalled an O'Shea had insulted a Moriarty.

"I'll square accounts with that fresh young 'boot' if it takes a lifetime," he vowed.

IN the years that followed Ensign O'Shea became Captain O'Shea and lost none of his youthful ideas of the fitness of things. Traditions of the Academy became unbreakable laws. His two-fisted tactics and a voice any second mate would have envied gave him the justly deserved title, "Roaring Mike."

Seaman Moriarty became Gunner Moriarty, one of the best gunnery technicians in the Navy. Many years' devotion to the work he loved had given him a practical knowledge of guns, torpedoes, shells, bombs and their intricate mechanisms that many a commissioned officer envied. The native ingenuity of many Moriartys has made the Navy what it is today.

On a balmy Spring afternoon Gunner Moriarty viewed the torpedo handling room in the depths of the dreadnaught with pardonable pride. His critical gaze wandered from racks holding slim steel torpedoes to the compressors that filled the air flasks supplying the torpedoes with motive power. Everything was in perfect order.

"Business before pleasure," he commented aloud, "and the business is over with. Now for pleasure."

The dreadnaught was slumbering in a quiet harbor, a goodly number of her crew ashore, enjoying liberty. Moriarty was alone with little prospect of intrusion by either officer or man. Even so he would be amply warned. To reach the compartment one must descend a long ladder. His immediate superior,

Lieutenant Gridley, was aboard but he was doubtless deep in some problem of gunnery or aeronautics. Besides Gridley was a mustang officer. He had come up from the ranks. His sympathetic viewpoint as regards enlisted men was something no Academy man could hope to acquire.

Moriarty opened a steel locker and removed a quart bottle containing fluid of pinkish hue. The same ingenuity that had served his country so well for nearly three decades was now to be applied to a strictly personal problem. The bottle contained grain alcohol required on shipboard for mechanical purposes. To insure its application to mechanical rather than social use a thoughtful Government had diluted it with potassium permanganate, a most effective deterrent. Shock-proof stomachs that accepted White Mule, Moonshine, or weird concoctions of the home distiller in suffering silence, broke forth in red revolution when introduced to "Pink Lady."

Moriarty connected an electric percolator to a convenient socket and poured a portion of the Pink Lady into a receptacle intended originally for orthodox coffee. A small glass was wired into position just above the liquid and above the glass he suspended a smooth glass bowl filled with ice. The vapor from the boiling fluid encountered the cold bowl, condensed and trickled into the glass—good grain alcohol fit for any man with an iron constitution. Moriarty's constitution ran heavily to iron.

The process was somewhat slow and Moriarty filled in the time humming an appealing little ditty of the Puget Sound Country:

Four and Twenty Yankees
Feeling mighty dry,
Motored to Vancouver
For a shot of rye.
When the rye was open
The Yanks began to sing
To the devil with Volstead
God save the King.

He cooled the glass with ice, then

downed the contents with an appreciative exclamation. Presently the atmosphere in the handling room became warm and genial, life for the sole occupant took on a rosy hue. Usually reserved and thoughtful, he became loquacious. The immediate outlook was viewed charitably.

"Got to give credit where credit is due," he announced thickly. "This is the best dam' Navy in the world." This was followed by a period of grave reflection. "Yes, sir, I'm here to tell yuh my ship is the best dam' ship in the best dam' Navy in the world!" He brought the palms of his hands together with a resounding crack of conviction. "My division is the best dam' division of the best dam' ship of the best dam' . . ."

He stopped suddenly as a pair of feet descended the ladder. He blinked a moment and recognized the shoes. His voiced lifted musically:

"Lieutenant Gridley came up through the hawse pipe and there's tar in his hair. He's the best dam' gun'ry officer of the best dam' ship in the . . ."

The descending feet paused at this point and rapidly ascended. That was one of the many fine qualities about Gridley, he made due allowance for the weakness and falls from grace of efficient men, if not too frequent. He managed to miss seeing a lot he was in duty bound to report if he saw.

Moriarty again glanced approvingly about the handling room. His gaze stopped at the loud speaker. By speaking in a normal tone his voice would boom forth in every compartment in the ship. His expression changed slowly from geniality to firm resolution. He stepped to the instrument, squared off and announced:

"It's a fine afternoon for a murder, sir!"

Like a voice from the mysterious beyond the words beat against Lieutenant Gridley's ear drums. He left the com-

partment hurriedly and peered down upon the culprit.

"Pipe down, Moriarty," he ordered sharply. "The captain might have heard you."

"That was my intention, sir, this being a private affair between the Moriartys and the O'Sheas' datin' back to the shindy at Manila Bay."

Moriarty stood stiffly at attention when Gridley stepped from the ladder, though it was apparent a warm friendship existed. Many an experiment in gunnery improvement devices had been worked out with Gridley's inventiveness and Moriarty's practical experience.

"I hope . . ." Gridley began. The skipper's voice on the loud speaker interrupted authoritatively.

"Gunner Moriarty report to the captain immediately!"

Hot coffee, cold water and fright combined could not have sobered Moriarty as quickly. He hopped to obey. The wardroom country seemed depressingly gloomy as he entered the sacred precincts. He progressed by a series of mental thrusts and a prayer on his lips. The prayer was answered. Respite came! Unconsciously he muttered, "Pink Lady!"

But a different sort of a lady was Kathleen O'Shea. She went in for delicate shades and tints of pink as exquisite as herself. In addition to her mother's vivid beauty she had more than a dash of Old Roaring Mike's fire and spirit in her makeup. The wills of father and daughter clashed on occasion. Ultra-feminine she might be in appearance, yet she could do a hundred yards in a swimming tank close to the record and had once swum Golden Gate. In Navy circles she proved to be a disturbing element. Ensigns hovered in the distance, lieutenants made romantic love, and captains regretted the passing of time.

It might be guessed Miss Kathleen was difficult to manage, unless she wished to be managed. She was! Roaring Michael O'Shea could manage

a dreadnaught and a thousand men, or a battleship division, but he had tough sledding with either his wife or daughter.

Gunner Moriarty steamed by the skipper's door at full speed and permitted Miss Kathleen to enter. There was no ceremony. She merely thrust her head through the opening and said, "Hello, Old Dear!"

"Old Dear" grunted.

"Be seated, Kathleen," he rumbled. "I wish to have a serious talk with you."

"Fire when ready, Gridley!" she lightly invited.

"It's concerning that damned mustang, Kathleen, that I sent for you!"

Into the word "mustang" the skipper put all the aversion an Academy man of the old school has for the officer who comes from the ranks, or the hawse pipe. There was a fine blending of contempt, indignation and rage in his tone. Except for a fleeting flash of fire in her eyes the daughter seemed unruffled.

"Them's harsh words, Dad," she said sweetly.

"Roarin' Mike hasn't got the range at all," mused Moriarty, "but she's putting him in a frame of mind that'll make it tough for me, or kill his spirit for the time being."

"Very harsh words, Dad," the girl repeated.

"Gridley's worse than a mustang. He had his chance in the Academy but was kicked out."

"I believe the Academic diagnosis of the malady was ineptitude," she replied, "but I am told the real reason was because the fires of inventive genius consumed hours intended for study. However, he came into the wardroom through the hawse pipe, thanks to the war. I believe he did a number of thrilling things with a seaplane and annexed a medal or two to wear along with his cocked hat on formal occasions."

The skipper made a brave effort to

be calm and succeeded temporarily.

"Kathleen, be serious. This is a serious matter, yet you seem utterly shameless! Don't you realize this service has traditions? Why do you flaunt yourself brazenly in public with the damned cuss, when any number of Academy men are standing by awaiting the word to come alongside?"

"Really, Dad, much as I dislike to ruffle your feelings, the traditions of service are nothing in my young life where that big boy is concerned."

"Hell's delight!" groaned the skipper. "Are you engaged?"

"No such luck. He hasn't asked me." She managed to say it without blushing, thanks to pent-up rage.

"Dam' his impudence! He's the only officer footloose and in his right mind that hasn't. Why hasn't he?" He had always known Gridley was a dreaming ass. This proved it.

"Why hasn't he?" she repeated. "How should I know? I've done my best with the few charms nature has given me, plus a moonlight night, waving palms and soft music, but he won't give me a tumble. I think perhaps I shall have to throw myself at him."

"Kathleen!" Roaring Mike stood up and paced the room. "Don't make light of this affair!"

"I'm not. Far be it from such. It is a tragedy when a girl throws her heart at a man's feet and he can't even see it."

"I've tried to approach this affair with my usual diplomacy." At this point Kathleen repressed a giggle. "Now I shall assert my authority. You can go to the dance with him tonight as you planned, but that ends it! He's through for all time. Make it plain to him. Emphatic! If he still persists, then who knows but he'll be ordered to Guam or some jungle post for extended duty?"

She caught the threat and the feminine counterpart of Old Roaring Mike's jaw hardened, then relaxed in a soft smile. Something told the skipper this

last salvo was a misfire. Following regulations he elevated his guns and waited the prescribed time before pulling the charge.

"If you weren't such a lovable old bluff," she said softly, "I should be angry at the bare suggestion of such unfair tactics as a transfer, but . . ." She again smiled as she fired a salvo of her own, every projectile of which found its mark. "Lieutenant Gridley has resigned from the Navy!"

"Resigned, eh? Boys made it too hot for him!" The skipper rubbed his hands in satisfaction.

"Quite the contrary. I rather think the feeling toward mustang officers has died down since the war. Lawrence Gridley resigned because rules and regulations cramp his style. He can't argue with superior officers very well, so he is returning to the attack as a civilian. When he has proved to certain stubborn staff and line officers that it is possible to bomb a battleship out of the water with his new type of plane and gear and his rather interesting system of range finding, I think he will then return to the service."

"He mentioned certain stubborn officers, did he? Hah! I'm one of 'em. I told him he'd better make good as a lieutenant before tackling problems a staff of veterans is working on."

"He has spent a considerable part of his private fortune in this work. There are two people who have faith in him, and the most important one is Lieutenant Gridley. Recognition is due him and he is clever enough to force it."

"Hmmm! Just let him tread on my toes with his recognition forcing and see what happens! I've never been beaten yet and I don't propose to spoil a lifetime record by yielding to a damned mustang." With this deft the skipper looked for a loophole of escape and found it. "Come here and kiss your old Dad and stop arguing with me. There, that's better. Now shove off. Can't you see I'm busy?"

Because she knew this Dad of hers

Kathleen O'Shea obeyed. She knew there would be no relenting where Gridley and his ideas were concerned. Each belonged to a school of clashing military thought, the one believing the battleship was doomed, the other regarding planes as merely valuable aids.

Roaring Mike O'Shea was silent for several moments after his daughter's departure. Then, becoming conscious of an alien presence, he glanced up.

"What the devil do you want, Moriarty?"

"You passed the word for me, sir!" Moriarty awaited the deluge.

"Huh! The devil! That girl knocked it out of my head. Get out!"

Moriarty did not wait for a second order. He silently faded away.

He found Lieutenant Gridley in dungarees working on a range-finding device that would permit a man two miles in the air to direct the fire of a battleship at a target below the horizon.

"What happened?" queried the lieutenant with keen interest. "You've been gone long enough."

"Miss O'Shea slipped in ahead of me. She was the target for the Old Man's guns, but he didn't have the range. She left him a shattered, smouldering bulk. He treated me almost decently and forgot what he wanted me for." Into Moriarty's eyes crept an expression of reproach. "You've resigned!"

"Yes, it takes effect tomorrow. I thought I told you. Don't look so glum about it, I've got it figured out. You are due to retire a month hence. Very well, retire and come work for me. Even after I have proved a number of things there will be plenty of work for you. But you've got to lay off the hooch, Moriarty."

"That's fine, sir. I swore off!"

"When?"

"About five minutes ago, when Roarin' Mike was trying to recall what he wanted me for. Terrible sensation!"

"Sweating off?"

"No, wondering if the old boy was a mind reader. I'm through for good. I've said it a couple of hundred times in my life, but this time goes. No more Pink Lady unless . . . well, I might want to celebrate some big day, but it'll have to be a bigger day than the Fourth of July or New Year's."

Moriarty, as usual, was very serious. All men are serious about swearing off. It is a serious thing at the time.

THE O'Sheas had leased a comfortable home during the period of the ship's overhaul at the Navy Yard. Lieutenant Gridley in formal dress, medals and all, stepped from his car and was duly announced. He wondered if the old skipper would be at home, but he did not care much.

The skipper was.

"Come in," he ordered, "and sit down. Kathleen will be ready in fifteen minutes."

He regarded Gridley critically and grudgingly admitted he was handsome and looked like an Academy man. Roaring Mike tapped an article he had been reading in a Navy publication.

"You're the author of this damned libel!" he shouted.

"'Aircraft vs. Seacraft,'" read Gridley. "My honest opinion, sir!"

"How the devil can the Navy Department get a decent appropriation from Congress for the improvement of yards, the elevation of guns to a par with those of foreign fleets, when stuff like this comes out? One would think the battleship was ready for the junk heap. It's piffle and bunk and you know it!"

"I . . ." Gridley began.

"You can do nothing," interrupted Roaring Mike, tapping his contentions into the younger man's knee. "Granted bombers destroyed the battleship *Virginia* and *New Jersey*; neither was manned nor attempted a defense. The Allies bombed the Zeebrugge flood gate for four years and never hit it, while

the Germans bombed the flood gate at Dunkirk with no better success. A German battle-cruiser was bombed a thousand times when she was aground, hit sixteen times, then shoved off for the Black Sea."

"Which gets us down to the matter of efficient devices in range-finding," replied Gridley calmly enough. "It is no idle boast when I say I can take my light bomber out any time and give your ship a fine old pelting. I can even give you advance warning and do it. I'll go further. You can send your airplanes up and if they can outmaneuver me I'll call it a day and not drop a bomb."

"Huh! Is that a challenge?" There was plenty of fight in Old Roaring Mike's attitude now. He was leaning forward, his gray mustache seemed to bristle, his teeth set. "Is it a challenge?"

"Most assuredly, if you wish to take it as such?"

"Hah! Then I accept! Do your damndest, and let me tell you I'll have several newspaper men aboard when we sail to join the fleet. I propose to settle this once and for all!"

"And if you lose?"

"I won't lose! You'll have to step like hell to convince me. Nothing in the way of a perfunctory demonstration goes. You've got to drive your facts home and make 'em stick. If you do all that, I'll back water. Yes, by the eternal I'll . . ."

He glanced toward Kathleen O'Shea, who stood in the doorway waiting, then back to Gridley. A flash of understanding seemed to pass between them.

"Yes," said the skipper, "if you do all you claim, you're entitled to anything in the world."

Long after the sound of Gridley's motor had died Roaring Mike puffed angrily at his pipe. Presently he chuckled.

"I'll get two of the best newspaper men I know, let 'em see what happens with their own eyes, and they'll set that chump in his place. One thing Kath-

leen can't stand is a person who makes himself ridiculous."

RED TAPE upset plans, as it frequently does, and Moriarty did not quit the dreadnaught until a day previous to sailing. Two tight-lipped, keenly observing individuals had taken quarters aboard. Moriarty recognized them as newspaper writers who would have made fine umpires. In all they did they called the play as they saw it, regardless of who might be hit by chips they scattered.

Moriarty found the hangar deserted, but Gridley's seaplane was in readiness for the test. The gunner was moved to boundless admiration as he inspected the laboratory. Everything had the stamp of the Navy about it.

In the plane itself he found dual controls and the most compact range finder he had ever seen. The service had nothing to equal it as yet. Mirrors and lenses combined to reflect what lay below. The scene appeared on a square of ground glass. There were cranks to turn and indicators that changed numbers with every movement. Altitude, drift, speed of plane, speed of target, were all taken care of. Gridley had gone straight to the heart of things and devised instruments comprehensive to even an untrained mind. The delicate combination of trained operators and complicated instruments had been eliminated.

"He's got to win," Moriarty muttered. "Those newspaper boys have got to be impressed with what's taking place over their heads. Now . . . if I hadn't taken the pledge, I'd give my mind a bit of stimulant and there'd be things doing tomorrow. A mind sure sparks when encouraged a bit. Then there's the grudge of the Moriartys against the O'Sheas. If I was a bit clever I'd tie the two together."

He indulged in a period of reflection. Five minutes later it dawned upon him this was one of the greatest days of his life. Retirement from the service

with an honorable record of duties well performed! The thought was so pleasant he unconsciously hummed a tune:

Four and twenty Yankees,
Feeling mighty dry,
Motored to Vancouver. . . .

This gave him an idea. Navy habits are difficult to shake, hence Gridley must have a bit of grain alcohol for mechanical purposes. The search was lengthy and thorough. Gridley did have grain alcohol for mechanical purposes. Incidentally it had been diluted as a matter of course.

Moriarty hesitated briefly, very briefly, then searched the Gridley apartment close at hand. He returned with a percolator, glass, bowl and cracked ice. Some minutes later he turned on the switch and awaited results. The result was held up for inspection.

"Well, as the Governor of North Carolina said to the Governor of South Carolina . . . Ahh! Here's another to the conclusion of long and honorable service in the best dam' Navy in the world. Ahh!"

A period of reflection, then:

"And still another to all officers that come up through the hawse pipe. May they never get the tar out of their hair. Ahh! Boy, you're going strong to-night."

He glanced about the hangar until he caught sight of the telephone directory. This gave him a brilliant idea. Failing to find the number, he called information and was rewarded in due time with a gruff hello.

"Gunner Moriarty, U. S. N., retired, sends his compliments to Cap'n Michael O'Shea, U. S. N., unretired, an' reminds him 't's a fine night for a murder!"

The click of the receiver on the other end of the line nearly took Moriarty's head off.

True to his prediction, the Moriarty mind commenced to spark under encouragement. With dignity born of the

occasion he inspected the practice bombs in the plane's magazine. They were designed to hit, but not harm. Moriarty shook his head.

"No good. It'll take more'n that to dent Roarin' Mike's hide. It's tougher'n the skin of a conning tower. No sense in a man like Gridley awaiting to be rewarded in heaven. I'm in favor of making the decks run red, yep, red! I'll incorp . . . incorp . . . I'll incorporate ideas of my own!"

In the gray of dawn he refilled the plane's magazine with bombs of his own choosing, then blissfully fell asleep, where Gridley found him a half-hour later. Gridley read the signs correctly and dismissed the incident with a crisp, "Might have known he'd celebrate. He'll be all right in the morning."

STIRRED into wakefulness, Moriarty licked dry lips with a tongue suggestive of a wad of cotton and looked about.

"How'd I get here?" he queried.

"Climbed there, I suppose," replied Gridley. "Found you asleep in the plane last night. Figured the way you felt you'd sleep as well there as anywhere. We're ready to shove off as soon as we eat a bite."

"I'll be ready as soon as I drink a gallon of water and spill another gallon over my head."

Swearing cheerfully, Moriarty loosened cramped joints and adjusted his clothing. The percolator reminded him in part of the night's doings, but only in part. The highest lights did not intrude just then.

The hangar was located on a quiet lake, one of thousands along the sea-coast from which a seaplane might be launched in smooth water and return to in safety after a raid. Moriarty was cold even when garbed for the flight. Somewhat hazily he recalled tucking a bottle into his overcoat pocket the previous night. He investigated and presently drained a half-filled pint flask. Hidden fires in his being kindled. He

felt warmer and cracked the palms of his hands together.

"Let's go!" he shouted. "The enemy awaits."

Gridley eyed him with a grin.

"Might have known you had an eye opener cached away. Oh, well, climb in, but don't fool with the controls until I pass the word."

The plane taxied down the mirroring waters of the lake, cleared, circled, skimmed the tree tops and shot straight seaward. Within a few minutes a range of mountains came over the horizon and vanished beneath their wings as if they remained moveless in midair while the world turned with velvet smoothness below.

It was dark in the valley when the sun caught their wings. By the time the light line had crept from crested peak to valley floor the sea was dead ahead. From their elevation it seemed placid, except where land and water met—a line of seething surf, smothering, irregular, like a swan's-down boa carelessly flung aside.

The section directly below moved in natural colors across the ground glass field of the range finder as if fed in at one edge and spilled out the other. Here and there surf-fringed rocks stood bleakly alone. Once a flock of startled ducks, dangerously close to the plane, yet indicated on the field by tiny black dots in V-formation, came and vanished.

The battleship had evidently entered fully into the spirit of the game. No tell-tale wisp of smoke drifted above the horizon to betray her position. When at last Gridley located her she was steaming full speed southward.

A reckless smile flashed across his face. A thrill akin to that he had known in the North Sea swept through him.

The world below turned rapidly and brought the great ship nearer and nearer. Like the bleak rocks, she was ringed with white. Foam spreading fanlike from her clipper bow seethed

along her beams and spread astern.

Gridley was too high for them to spot him except by sheer accident. He intended to remain so until the moment of attack. Forward, neatly toggled, swung two bombs filled with chemicals similar to those used in life buoy markers.

Contact with water started both a flare and smoke cloud. The plane swooped down. A moment later two white smudges marked the spot where the bombs had struck. He checked up on his range in a series of swift movements. The battleship blurred, then focused sharply on the ground glass field.

"Let 'em go, Gridley!" shouted Moriarty over the telephone. In his tone was repressed excitement and utter elation.

"My string has gone. We'll check up and cut yours loose," Gridley replied.

THE dreadnaught's quarterdeck had once been a joy to Captain O'Shea's eyes. It was spotless and roomy. Then the madness of planes came and yard workmen built a catapult down the center, a device that profaned the gaze of one who loved quarterdeck traditions. It was an outrage, a crime and an abomination, but an order, and that settled it. Like birds poised for flight two planes rested on either side.

The drone of Gridley's plane as it dropped from the blue sent a tingle of excitement through the battleship. Aft, the skipper peered through binoculars with skeptical eyes. He mistook the chemical bombs for misses and an exclamation of satisfaction escaped him.

No one was prepared for what took place when the plane swept back to the attack. Officers and men alike were dumfounded. Then training told and a number of things took place swiftly. Two men rushed forward and picked up a seaman knocked to the deck by a descending missile. His head and shoulders were a gory mass.

The officer of the deck swore furiously. From the ship's funnel came the dense black plumes of the smoke screen. The dreadnaught veered from its course in an effort to get out of range.

Forward a bosun's mate lay groaning, his head and white hat stained deeply. At the skipper's elbow his messenger suddenly crumpled. The skipper himself was stricken by the same blast from the blue.

A newspaper man with rare presence of mind dove headlong for a turret. In one second he had seen enough to spread through eight columns, but as dead men tell no tales he wanted to live to relate his smashing story.

High above the plane banked and returned for the final attack. The radio-telephone brought a frantic message to Gridley's ears.

"For God's sake, Gridley, cease firing!"

They came into range at that moment and Moriarty released the contents of the second magazine. A brief interval and they had cleared the smoke screen. Again, the voice:

"Gridley, are you mad?"

An AA gun suddenly let go and a shell burst near enough to rock them. This was the real thing. Gridley tensed with excitement and utter joy. Of course they wouldn't hit him, but they intended to give him some real action, perhaps frighten him into descending alongside to be laughed at, then hauled aboard.

A shift in the breeze cleared the battleship's stern. One plane had been shot from the catapult, the second was preparing to follow. Gridley banked and watched the result. The plane left the ship perfectly and winged its way swiftly aloft.

"That puts a crust on the whole thing," said Moriarty. "We can show 'em the getaway now."

Gridley fled, the other plane in hot pursuit. Twenty miles down the coast he alighted in a protected cove and

taxied to the beach. Within two minutes the pursuing plane came alongside. When the pilot stepped ashore he carried a service pistol in his hand. On his face was written lingering amazement and present determination. Here was a young man who meant business.

He covered the pair without hesitation.

"Are you crazy, Gridley?" he cried, watching them narrowly. "You've convinced the world of your ability to hit a ship, but man, oh, man, our decks ran red with brave American blood! From bow to stern they died like flies. They were carrying the captain below when I left."

"What do you mean, Stuart?" Gridley realized the other was in deadly earnest. In some way his experiment had resulted in horrible tragedy.

"What do I mean? Man alive you bombed us with those infernal bombs of yours and scored hit after hit. The ship is a shambles." He came closer. "You are under arrest, of course!"

Gridley ignored the pilot and his pistol. He recalled the empty bottles of Pink Lady, the damning percolator and . . . Moriarty. He whirled on his assistant furiously.

"Moriarty, did you tamper with my bombs?"

Moriarty seemed suddenly to realize that he had, and inwardly he thanked God for the American sense of humor.

"Aye-aye, Sir, now that you mention it, I did. I wanted you to score hits they'd remember, hits the higher ups couldn't pigeonhole when reported, and I loaded the magazines with the biggest bombs I could get of their kind."

"Go on man. What were they?" Both officers looked at Moriarty with drawn faces.

"Mr. Stuart, will you present the Moriarty compliments to the O'Sheas on your return to the ship, and just mention this was a fine day for a murder? The bombs were very red, over-ripe tomatoes."

COLLEGE FLYERS ON THE JOB!

The Harvard Flying Club has got its ship in the air, and the Travel Air is now flying daily. The story of the club is an interesting one:

On March 12, 1925, Rodney Jackson organized a group of students in Harvard under the title of "The Harvard Flying Club." At that time, twenty-five men were members of the club, and all but nine have been graduated up to the present time. Much amusement was derived by some individuals at that time because of the fact that the flying club had no means of flying. Last fall Billings came to the rescue, and offered the boys a Travel Air that had been used considerably, at a reduced price. Fred Ames loaned the money to purchase the plane. The ship was taken down, and housed in Gordon McKay laboratory, through the courtesy of Prof. Lionel S. Marks and the Engineering School. In February it was transferred to a garage, and Murray N. Fairbanks began to overhaul it. Crocker Snow gave the ship ten coats of Duco and W. N. Bump re-upholstered the cockpits. Frank Sproul did his part by grinding the valves. On March 9th Sproul and Marks towed the plane to the airport, and Eddie O'Toole rigged her. Billings flight-tested the ship, and pronounced it O. K.

Ten hours of solo time are necessary in order to be elected to the flight committee.



The Sky Horse

By
Owen Atkinson

Peter Crisp, disgraced Birdman, calls on his faltering manhood for a last grim clash with winged mystery.

"I WANT you!"

A heavy hand fell on Peter Crisp's shoulder. A feeling of panic surged through his slender body. His muscles cringed. He poised on his toes as if for flight.

Then he steadied. His hands clamped themselves into fists, his shoulders stiffened, his teeth came together with a snap as he whirled on his heels to face the man behind him.

Cold grey steel eyes stabbed into his. He got an impression of a thin-lipped mouth and an iron jaw.

"You've got nothing on me!" he muttered through dry lips.

The man dropped his hand from Peter's shoulder, and he smiled. "No,

I've got nothing on you. But I may have something *for* you."

"You know—who I am?" Peter stammered, gazing with puzzled frown into the cold eyes still probing into his.

"Don't I though!" the man snapped. "You're Peter Crisp, one-time flying ace of the A. E. F. After the war you came here to Los Angeles as an instructor at a civilian flying school. Then you did stunts for the World Famous people. And then—one afternoon you took the beautiful Gilda Moon up in your plane—and crashed."

A look of pain flashed over Peter's face. Fear and hunger were written there. Not the hunger of the belly kind—although that, too, was troubling Peter

right now—but the spiritual hunger of the grounded airman, and bitter disappointment. He recalled that terrible afternoon when his ship had come spinning down out of control, to crash in a roar of splintered wings before the very eyes of the motion-picture directors. Peter had aged ten years that single afternoon. Something of his old boyish eagerness had gone from him then. His brown eyes had taken on a look of hardness, his mouth had frozen in a cynical smile. The old, laughing, reckless, daredevil birdman of the war and of civilian flying days had given place to a sober, reflective, disappointed man.

"They said I was drunk," he stated soberly. "That I had endangered their most famous movie star. But she froze to the controls. She'd been begging me to let her fly the ship—I was a fool, I guess, to let her try."

"Exactly! And now you're done as far as flying here on the Coast is concerned."

"I—I suppose so."

Peter's shoulders slumped and he turned to stare into the brightly lighted window of the restaurant before which they were standing. The man's eyes followed Peter's longing gaze, which was directed at the fragrant food displays. He smiled grimly to himself.

"Broke, blacklisted, down and out," he whispered softly.

"I may be broke," Peter turned quickly, "but I'm a damned long way from being down and out!"

"That's all right," soothed the stranger. "I've got a proposition to offer that may interest you. You like flying, don't you?"

An expression of longing appeared for a second on Peter's face. "I live for it."

"All right," said the stranger. "You're the man I want. I've got a little flying job down over the border that will pay a top salary. If you'll come with me, we'll go somewhere and talk it over."

"Just a minute." Peter's eyes hard-

ened. "I've had offers like that before. What is it, dope—or booze? I might as well save you trouble by telling you right now that I don't go in for that kind of stuff. As you mentioned a moment ago, I was an ace during the war. I've served Uncle Sam, fought for him, would have died for him. And I'm not interested in any of your cheap smuggling schemes now. I went overseas with the flag, carried it into foreign territory, and I know what it means. If you're looking for someone to pilot your damned outlaw planes across the border you can just drift on down the street! I'm not interested."

The stranger's smile spread into a grin. He thrust one hand into his pocket and exhibited something that flashed golden in the light from the restaurant window. Holding it cupped in his palm, he extended it for Peter to see.

"Don't get excited, boy," he said in a friendly voice. "I'm working for Uncle Sam, too. But I've got to be mighty quiet about it. There's folks right here in California that'd be interested to know that Jim Donovan had come all the way out from Washington, and that he's planning on making a little flying trip down over the Border."

Peter Crisp extended his hand. "Mr. Donovan, I'm glad to know you. Now we can talk business. What do you want me to do?"

"Come inside and let's eat," Donovan suggested. "I can tell by the looks of you that a good steak under your belt wouldn't do you any harm."

"This is a ticklish kind of job," the federal man went on when they were seated in the restaurant and the waitress had gone to fill their order. "I can't tell you very much about it because I don't know myself. But something mighty queer is going on along the Border. It ain't dope and it ain't booze, as far as we can figure out. We don't know what it is. Planes have been seen there, big planes, painted black. And there are smaller fighting planes, too. American Army flyers have reported being fired on

several times lately. It seems like there was a kind of battle going on down there—for the supremacy of the air.”

Peter took a deep breath. His young face glowed with eagerness.

“Fighting planes convoying a bomber,” he mused. “Must be something big. I’ve heard of smuggling before, but never of anything on such a large scale.”

The older man shook his head. “It beats me,” he admitted. “We don’t get this at all. We know about where they cross the Border, but we don’t know where their landing fields on either side are located. That’s our mission—as you’d call it in the army. We don’t want to go looking for a fight. We want to locate those flying fields. After that we can use the army and the marines to mop up with if we want to. Of course,” he added quickly, seeing the look of disappointment on Peter’s face, “if we run into anybody that acts rough we’ve got to be ready to scrap with them. We’ll be armed all right. You make arrangements to buy a plane; I’ll see that it is equipped with machine guns and all that. I can get just about what I want from the army air stations. We won’t be exactly defenseless when we go over the Bad Lands, son.”

“Sounds good to me,” Peter grinned, eyeing the great platter of steak which the girl put down before him. “I haven’t had such a chance since we went up to battle the old Boche in the Meuse-Argonne scrap.”

“Fall to on that steak,” grunted Donovan. “We’ll talk about this some more after a while.”

FOUR days later, in the mists of early morning, a two-seater army Jenny stood before the hangar doors of the Air-line Aircraft Corporation, ready to take off. Her prop hummed slowly as the mechanics warmed up the engine. From her forward cockpit protruded the blunt nose of a machine gun. Another, covered with canvas, nestled on its mountings before the pilot’s seat.

Two men in flying coveralls, their

heads grotesque in leather helmets, stood nearby, idly smoking cigarettes.

“Head straight for the flying field at San Diego first,” Donovan instructed. “We’ll fuel there, take on supplies and ammunition, then make for the Border.”

“Right,” agreed Peter. “God, it feels good to be around ships again!”

His eyes were sparkling with a new light, his shoulders were thrown back with a new confidence. He seemed alert, eager, youthful—no longer the cringing individual Jim Donovan had picked up in front of the restaurant a few short days before. The sight of a ship and the feel of the controls always did that for Peter. And this was his chance to come back, to establish himself in the eyes of the world again.

As a boy Peter had made toy models of airplanes—and flown them successfully. The war had given him his chance to become a flyer. It was in his blood now. No other profession or occupation would ever interest him. And that one fatal slip had almost brought about his ruin.

He grinned ruefully as he remembered the biting words of the motion-picture director. Well, all that was ancient history. He was going over the Border with Jim Donovan to find—what? He didn’t know and he didn’t care. To be in the air again—with the stick in his hands and feel the lurch and roll of the plane under him, that was enough!

“Ready to go, sir,” announced one of the mechanics.

Peter Crisp and Jim Donovan climbed into their seats and strapped down the safety belts. Peter jazzed the motor and felt it smooth and sweet under his throttle. He nodded, and the mechanics pulled the chocks from the front wheels. Peter taxied the plane out into the field, headed her into the wind and gave her the gun. She sailed evenly over the smooth grass.

He felt her tail lift, and pulled back on the joy-stick. The Jenny bounded into the air like a bird released from a

cage and went roaring away into the air—headed south.

Los Angeles fell away behind them as they climbed in a long, straight slope into the clouds. The sea appeared on their right, and a great steamer plowing out to Hawaii looked like a child's toy boat below them.

"Look at that." Peter pointed overhead.

Far up in the heavens hovered a tiny plane. It flew in circles, searching the air below. Then, as if it had sighted them, it straightened out and went into a dive. Peter heard the engine roar as it came charging down with throttle open.

Donovan motioned frantically, a signal that Peter could not understand.

The fabric on the right wing of the Jenny ruffled as if it were being ripped with tiny knives. Something tugged at the control bar under Peter's feet. He felt the ship lurch and slide off to one side.

He knew what was happening. He had experienced things like this before—over the Argonne. A machine gun was being fired through the propeller of that advancing ship. They were using no tracer bullets; the roar of the engine drowned all sound.

Peter jerked back on his stick and gave the plane the gun. She zoomed beautifully, coming over on her back and sliding off into a spin. As he turned Peter caught a flashing glimpse of a black, menacing plane, two hooded, hawk-like heads peering up at him from the fuselage.

Wires screaming, wings complaining, engine roaring, Peter's ship rushed for earth in a headlong spin that looked like certain death. He was playing an old trick learned during the war. The plane fell; it spun dizzily down to earth. The enemy went sailing away, thinking that it had been shot down.

A thousand feet from the brown earth below, Peter dragged back on the stick, clamped down on the rudder-bar and brought ship, shuddering and howling

from every strut and wire, out of the spin and flattened her out. Looking back over his shoulder he saw the white, strained face of Jim Donovan. He nodded and grinned reassuringly to his companion, all that was possible because of the roar of the motor, then banked away in a long glide toward San Diego.

When the ship settled like a bird on the flying field, it was a stiff and frowning federal agent who climbed out of his seat. He mopped his face with a red bandanna and scowled across at his pilot.

"The dirty, sneakin' bums!" he rumbled grimly. "Can you beat that? We thought we were putting one over on them, and they knew about us all the time! From now on we fly with both guns oiled and loaded. Let them try that stunt again if they want to. We'll be ready for 'em!"

"Looks like a fight all right," Peter agreed, examining the damaged fabric of his wing. "A little to the left and we'd have ended our trip almost before we got going."

"We start in the morning," said Donovan grimly. "These people here will fix you up with whatever you need. Tomorrow we go over the Line and see what we can find. They must be mighty anxious down there about us. I'll tell you there's something big going on, or they wouldn't go to all that trouble to get us before we even cross the Border."

NEXT morning they began the last lap of the journey. Both machine guns were loaded, and Peter and Donovan each carried a heavy automatic pistol. There were supplies for two weeks stored in the fuselage of the ship, and the tanks carried enough gasoline and oil for ten hours in the air.

"No use trying for any particular spot," said Donovan just before they took off. "We don't know where to head for. Just go over the Border and cruise around, and we'll see what we can see."

It was a fine clear morning, with a

light mist still clinging close to earth.

"An ideal flying day," Peter told himself. "Visibility very high, good air, and a whole lonesome sky to move in."

As he listened to the sweet roar of the motor, the hum of the wires, the steady, reliable surge of the ship as she rode the air, he felt for the first time in months that he was really living again.

He looked down and realized that they were flying over Lower California. The brown earth, the blue haze of the mountains in the distance, the gray stretches of desert spread out below him like a map of some desolate, sun-scorched wasteland. Somewhere, down below them, was a landing field, hangars, mechanics, flyers and several planes. At least the big bomber and the convoy ships that the army flyers had reported. Perhaps more.

He scanned the country with searching eyes, but only brown plain and rugged mountain stretched away into the distance.

Peter glanced at his passenger for some sign that would tell him where to go. Donovan was peering ahead along the fringe of white puff ball clouds which hung like an awning from the sky overhead. Following his direction, Peter saw a great black bird of the air, winging her solitary way South. It was a plane of enormous size, broad of wing and heavy of body. As he watched, she dipped and slid into a long dive.

Donovan motioned excitedly. Follow that plane, that was the idea. Go after that big soaring bird and bring it to earth!

Peter opened wide the throttle and shot his bus through the air at full speed. He reached for his gun and fired a clip to warn her. Then he settled down to the chase.

The big black ship, still a speck in the distance, hovered lower and lower over the parched desert. Peter could see her steady descent, and wondered where she could be headed for. At the

speed he was traveling he would soon overtake her. Perhaps there would be another fight, this time with his gun in action.

The big black ship settled slowly over a rise in the ground and disappeared.

"Landed!" Peter hissed through his teeth. "Now we've got her!"

It was only a matter of seconds until the Jenny roared over the low hill where the leading ship had disappeared. Below stretched a broad, brown desert—empty.

Peter rubbed his eyes and stared again. There was nothing there. The black ship had disappeared as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed it.

Jim Donovan turned and pointed down, indicating that they were to descend at once. Peter put the plane into a slow glide and slid toward the plain. He flattened out, felt the tail skid touch, and cut the motor. The ship bounced along for a hundred yards and stopped.

"Look at those tracks!" He pointed excitedly to the dust of the field. Two broad marks showed where the other ship had taxied. "There's something damn strange about this business!"

Donovan leaped to the ground and peered at the plane tracks. He pulled his gun from its holster and examined it carefully.

"Come on, son! Here's where we find out about this. We'll follow the tracks until we get to the plane."

"Right," agreed Peter, swinging himself to the ground. "Can't hide a big ship like that in a bush. Must be around here somewhere."

The two men trudged side by side across the dusty field. The ground rose just ahead in a low hill, then dipped away to the blue horizon. Peter felt as if he were walking in a nightmare. That big black ship *had* to be somewhere. It had not gone up again, he was sure of that. And yet, there on the ground before him were the twin tracks,

with the ragged mark where the tail skid had cut into the hard alkali, which showed that it had landed here.

A rifle cracked and a bullet seared a red hot furrow across Peter's shoulder under his leather coat. Again the gun barked in the still desert air. He saw Jim Donovan drop to the ground, reaching for his heavy automatic as he fell.

"Down, Peter, down!" Donovan hissed.

From the ground the flyer gazed anxiously about him for the source of the shot. The plain lay deserted and barren before his eyes.

"Where the hell are they?" growled Donovan, gun in hand. "If there wasn't two of us here I'd say I'd gone plumb crazy!"

Again the rifle barked and the bullet threw dust not five feet from Donovan's head.

"I see 'em," yelled Peter. "Over by that rock! A kind of a door opened in the ground, and the rifle barrel came through it."

"Door?" grunted Donovan, shifting his position until his gun trained on the rock. "Where the hell is any door out here? Now I know one of us is nuts!"

"I get it now!" Peter cried. "It's an old German trick. Underground hangars. They've dug under that hill and keep the planes there. We've stumbled on the base of the gang, sure as hell! They have doors painted like rocks and covered with earth."

"By God, I believe you're right!" Donovan peered cautiously ahead at the hill. At first it appeared to be like any other rolling hummock of dirt and stone; then, as his eyes adjusted themselves to the dancing heat waves, he saw that half the hill was not solid at all, but composed of two wide canvas doors, painted in exact copy of the surrounding desert. He could see tracks going up to these doors and ending suddenly against their base.

"Let's get out of here," he called to Peter. "Can you run? We've got what we want now. No use staying and

letting that gang come out after us. And our plane! We'd better get to it and get into the air before they start after us."

"I'll try." Peter gritted his teeth. "But I'd like a crack at the bird who plugged me through the shoulder first."

"No time for that," warned Donovan. "Let's get goin' while we've got the chance. Come on, run for it!"

Peter swayed dizzily on his feet. His wound was not serious but it was painful, and blood matted his shirt under the flying coat. He set out at a lumbering gait for the plane, followed by Donovan, gun in hand, who covered the retreat.

"Can you fly her?" the federal man asked anxiously, as they came up to the plane.

"Try to," Peter agreed, reaching for the switch.

Donovan blocked the wheels with stones, then swung his weight on the propeller. The engine coughed, spat fire, and stopped. Again he reached for the varnished wooden blades and jerked them over. The engine roared. The plane bucked and leaped lightly over the improvised chocks.

"Hang on!" yelled Peter, throttling down the motor.

"Got it," grunted Donovan, dragging and ducking under a wing, and swinging himself over the side of the fuselage.

They roared across the plain with the engine wide open. The tail skid lifted and Peter gave her the gun. As they sailed up over the underground hangars, a door opened and a volley of shots came thundering after them. More doors in the hillside opened. The place sprang into feverish activity.

Peter, looking down as they gained altitude, saw the great black plane being wheeled out into the field. Presently two smaller planes joined it, and all three stood coughing and roaring ready for flight.

"We ought to stay and fight," he grumbled to himself. "That's what we came over here for. Why the hell are

we running? Those birds will all get away now. And God only knows where they'll head after this!"

Donovan, in the front seat, had evidently been thinking the same thing, for he turned and motioned for Peter to go back. He reached for his machine gun and fired a clip to warm it, then grinned wickedly over his shoulder.

Peter swung his own gun around and ran his hand lovingly over its heavy grip. He fired a burst in answer to Donovan's, and swung the ship around in a sharp turn. Far below them the three black ships were just taking the air, the big bomber winging its slow, awkward way South, with the two smaller planes buzzing and circling about it like protecting hornets.

Donovan motioned with his thumb that he wanted the planes ahead brought down. Peter nodded that he understood and reached for the throttle. The Jenny leaped through the air, her wires humming joyously, her motor roaring steadily, her sleek bulk rising and falling like a ship at sea.

Peter maneuvered until he had the sun behind him. Far below he could see the big ship with her two convoys. Then, throttle wide open, engine roaring, the plane humming, he dived.

As he swooped like a hawk on its prey he felt again that joyous surge of battle that had come to him during the war. There below him was the enemy.

He reached for the gun and swung it over with a grin. He could see Donovan, both hands grasping the machine gun, peering eagerly ahead at the three black shapes which seemed to come rushing up to meet them.

Peter jerked the trigger, and could feel the gun jump under his hand. One of the small planes went over into a dive and slid out of sight. The other rolled over on its side, then came roaring up in a beautiful climb that brought it high over Peter's back. Bullets whined and rattled through the wire as it opened fire from its position of advantage.

Peter pulled the nose of the ship up

and roared over in a wide loop. The belly of the fighting ship flashed before his sight and he jerked the triggers again. Wisps of smoke trailed away from the outlaw's engine and she faltered in her stride.

"Got it!" Peter grunted, as he watched the single-seater crumple into a whirling cloud of smoke and flame. She fell, turning slowly like a leaf, slipping off into a spin, only to come tumbling out into a glide as the controls threshed about unchecked in her cockpit.

Something roared in Peter's ears and a black shape was upon him. He caught one flashing glimpse of a whirling propeller, heard the spitting thunder of a motor, and saw a black-hooded figure leaning out of the cockpit, sighting along the top of an ugly gun.

Deadly fingers tugged at the fabric of the Jenny's wings and trailed along the body of the plane. The engine coughed once, stuttered, and then took up its steady drone again.

Peter, reaching for his gun, saw that Donovan was in action. The machine gun stood on its base and barked frenzily at the swooping black shape roaring down from above.

Something smashed against the gun under his hands and Peter felt his weapon go suddenly dead. He clamped down on the rudder-bar with his feet, pulled back on the stick, and felt his ship rise suddenly on its tail.

There was a blinding crash, a rending of wood, and canvas and a flash of flame. A shock went trembling from propeller to rudder of the Jenny and she stood still in the air, quivering like a stricken bird, her landing gear twisted and entwined about the stump of the propeller and the crushed fuselage of the black outlaw.

For an instant the two planes, locked together, hung motionless in midair. Then the black ship fell away, twisted over on her back, and plunged screaming and fluttering toward the ground.

The joy-stick crashed in Peter's

hands as his plane rocked from side to side like a wounded animal, then tilted forward with the weight of the engine and went into a deadly, headlong rush for the brown, whirling earth below.

As he fought the controls, battling desperately to right the ship, Peter saw the white, strained face of Donovan peering back at him from the forward cockpit. Donovan knew what was happening. He knew their chances for life or death hung in the balance now.

With arms that seemed helpless and numb, Peter grasped the stick and hauled back with all his strength. The rudder-bar jerked under his feet and the brown earth rushed up to meet him.

The engine burst into sound again, roaring mightily, and the plane leveled out with a shrieking of canvas and wires—bumped over invisible rough spots in the air and settled down to an even flight, with one wing hanging slightly lower than the other and ribbons of fabric trailing, after her like a bullet-torn battle flag.

From somewhere in the distance Peter heard the pound of another gun and wondered vaguely where it could be. Then he saw that Donovan was firing at something that moved below them. Glancing over the side, Peter found himself staring directly down at the broad body and great wings of the black ship. She had turned North during the flight, and was now winging her way steadily into California, toward some mysterious destination known only to those hooded men who crouched in her wide cockpit between the roaring twin motors.

Donovan, his face a question mark, glanced back at the pilot. His jaw was set, his mouth grim, and the joy of battle blazed in his gray eyes. Peter knew what Donovan was asking him; he knew the question written on the white face ahead. Could he go on and fight the big ship? Did he have the strength and the courage to pilot his crippled plane into another attack?

Peter set his teeth and nodded. He could. With his own gun jammed, his landing gear smashed to splinters, one wing wobbling flabbily, he was ready to go in and finish the job.

Donovan nodded his approval and turned again to his gun. Peter nosed the plane down and dived.

The men in the big ship below had located their enemy and were making desperate effort to get away. The twin motors roared furiously. From the rear cockpit came the steady pounding of a gun.

Peter grinned as he heard the familiar sound of bullets ripping through the wings. Rotten shots, those men in the big plane, he reflected. But he must stick to his job, pilot the Jenny to the last. They must bring that black ship down, hang on its tail and fight it until it was either driven to earth or the pilots were killed. That ship had the precious cargo they were after. In it lay the hope of solving the mystery of the Border smugglers.

Donovan poured a stream of fire into the body of the big ship as they flashed by. Peter turned, banked, and came roaring back to the attack again.

He noticed the big plane was losing altitude steadily. The ground below, getting greener now, appeared much nearer.

Again and again he dived and heard Donovan's gun thunder, banked, and came over to gain altitude and dive again.

The tops of trees flashed by underneath, now, and he could see fields and wooded parks and on the right a highway, with a long line of motor cars moving peacefully along. The roar from Tijuana to San Diego, he guessed numbly, turning the nose of the plane again to the attack.

He saw the big ship falter, tilt rakishly over on its side, and go plunging toward the ground. Men tumbled frantically about the cockpit trying to right her, but evidently the shots from Donovan's gun had severed some of her con-

trol wires. She fell awkwardly, her tail making wide circles in the air.

Donovan was motioning over his shoulder, Peter saw, signaling for him to follow the big ship down to land. He nodded and set himself for the ordeal ahead.

Peter saw a puff of smoke and heard the faint crash as the black outlaw plowed into the ground. He saw small black figures climbing from her fuselage.

The ground rushed up to meet him. He gripped the stick grimly and held on. He knew that he must keep the Jenny's nose up; land with the tail first to break the force of the fall if he wanted to avoid a fatal crash. That thought kept whirling through his mind—hold the nose up—*hold the nose up*; bank and let her down easy.

He felt the tail touch, and lurched forward as the skid bit into the soft grass. The body struck with a crash. The plane bounded into the air and fluttered like a cirrpled hawk. Then it nosed forward. The propeller struck and flew into splinters, and the body tilted slowly over.

The Jenny stood on her nose like a trained seal in a circus. The injured wing gave way at last and ripped off to act as a breaker. The plane fell forward on her back, leaving Donovan and Peter suspended upside down like bats under her bullet-riddled body.

Donovan was the first to hit the ground. He loosened his safety belt and tumbled out, gun in hand, to fall in a heap on the grass below. Peter saw him running toward the wreck of the black outlaw. The automobiles along the highway had stopped, and a crowd of men were running from the road toward the two planes.

Peter unsnapped his belt and fell to the ground. He sat up, felt of his shoulder, and gazed vaguely across at the other plane. Three men had climbed out of the cockpit. A fourth slumped like a sodden bundle of leather against the seat inside.

Donovan was talking, his heavy automatic pressed against the stomach of the nearest flyer.

"Now come through!" he barked. "What were you up to? What kind of cargo are you carrying in this bus, anyway?"

One of the pilots waved his hand toward the fuselage of the black plane. He had his other hand tucked into his flying coat as a sling, and blood oozed from a puncture in his right shoulder.

Donovan reached over and jerked open the trap door in the body of the plane. A frightened yellow face appeared in the opening, and a thin voice chattered in Chinese.

"Well, I'll be damned!" roared Donovan. "So this is the game! Runnin' Chinks across the border. Well, I'll be damned!"

Seven cringing, trembling, frightened Chinese came crawling out the body of the plane, to huddle in a pathetic group under the commanding eye of Jim Donovan.

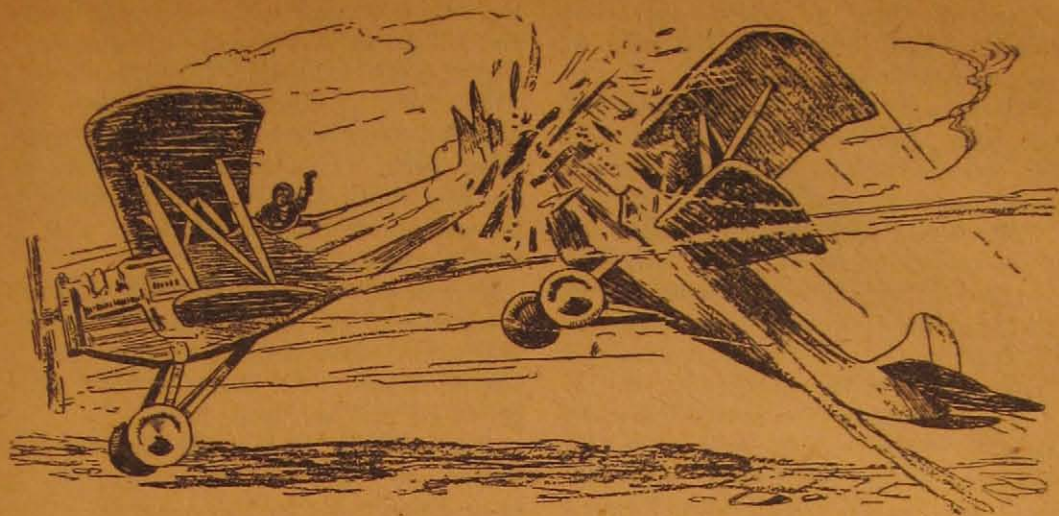
The motorists, whose morning ride had been so suddenly interrupted by the air battle overhead, arrived on the scene now and swarmed about the captured plane and its passengers.

Jim Donovan, after turning them all over to a motorcycle policeman who arrived breathless and excited, turned back to Peter Crisp. He dropped a friendly hand on Peter's shoulder.

"Boy, you're some flyer!" he said slowly. "After I get through talking with the World Famous Picture people they're going to take you back as their crack stunt pilot. You can count on that. I knew you had guts from the first. You've proved yourself today. From now on you can count old Jim Donovan as your friend!"

"Thanks, Jim," said Peter weakly. "Damn fine of you to speak to the World Famous people for me. But, Jim, what I want right now more than anything else is—a cigarette."

And Peter Crisp slid slowly forward to the grass, unconscious.



Crashing to Glory

By *Richard A. Martinsen*

Two daredevil young pilots—a glorious girl—and bitter rivalry in the blue depths of the skies!

THE BLIND SPOT of the old Gussie death-traps, you may remember, was about nine-tenths of the entire horizon. So when Cadet Burns wiggled his joy-stick, and shot her up under the ark Cadet Manning was trying to wrestle in a straight line between the pilons, fifteen instructors and about ninety other cadets got a keen hunch as to what was going to happen next.

"The blithering ass!" snapped Captain Crocker—only he didn't exactly say "blithering." "Don't he know it's Manning's first trip alone?"

"Hell's bells!" Pollock, the senior instructor, retorted impolitely, without removing his eyes from the azure heavens. "Burns is in the same boat! His first hop, too—and it sure looks as though it were going to be his last!"

There was reasonable grounds for this pessimistic statement. Manning had

been coasting along, serenely unaware that anyone was within a dozen miles of him. A fraction of a second after Pollock's last word he hit a bump, and a big one. His ship dropped like a plummet about forty feet. Burns' prop chewed into its tail like an auger, sheering away great chunks of it—including rudder, elevator, and skid. Then, having inflicted enough damage for one afternoon, the prop itself splintered to matchwood, and there were two nice young cadets strung out on a wide, wide limb. Fortunately the limb was as high up as it was wide, a good twenty-five hundred. Fortunately, also, when Manning did come to life, he reacted with gratifying dispatch. His rudderless ship turned a couple of flip-flops and a somersault, then whizzed into a final plunge. Before it had gathered much momentum, however, a dark object shot over its side. Well below it suddenly

blossomed into a white carnation. Manning had jumped in the nick of time, and pulled his 'chute.

"Glory be!" sighed Crocker, who had just been appointed C.O. of the field and was anxious to hold down casualties as much as possible.

Pollock had seen the 'chute open out of the corner of an eye. He was now absorbed in the fate of Cadet Burns, rocking about up there without prop and still less control. Burns had craved a real tryout, and he was getting it. If his fingers froze to the stick—the usual failing of half-baked pilots in an emergency—his sorrowing comrades would say the next verse with flowers.

After a few spasms of informal sky writing, the Gussie paused to catch its breath, shivered in diabolic anticipation, and whanged into a blistering nose-dive.

"Good night!" grunted Lieutenant Pollock.

"Ambulance!" rapped Captain Crocker over his shoulder to an orderly.

But, whether by a stroke of genius or blind luck, Burns fooled them both. Two hundred feet from the ground he pulled her out of it as neatly as though the whole thing had been innocent fun, coasted, came up in a stall and pancaked, settling on one wheel with all the stunning impact of a feather!

"God protects children," Pollock vouchsafed, with a short, dry laugh.

"Yeh. But *I* won't!" averred the C.O. grimly, and set out at a double for the crippled ship.

The other argosy had crashed in a thicket outside the field, blazing merrily, as was the habit of Gussies on the slightest provocation. Manning's 'chute, however, had dumped him roughly about the same time Burns landed, and not more than fifty yards away.

The C.O. saw his stocky figure disentangle itself from the maze of cordage and gallop madly forward. A tall, slender figure hopped out of the cockpit of the propless plane. The two men met halfway. They stood upon no ceremony. A flurry of erratic punches,

then each settled back upon his heels and cut loose in a vicious slugging-bee. Right, left—right, left—right, left—

The slender figure collided with an especially accurate pile-driver, and staggered back. The stocky man closed in on him with a rush. They clinched, hammering at back and kidneys with a wild abandon.

It was at this point Captain Crocker injected himself into the action picture. He landed upon both combatants like a ton of bricks. All three bit dust in a confused and writhing heap.

The captain was a big man and a husky one. He heaved up dragging a spluttering cadet by the collar in either hand.

"Attention, you blankety-blankety fools!" he roared. And when they had in some measure obeyed him: "Don't you think you've done enough damage, without attempting murder?"

"My first hop!" spat Manning apoplectically. "And he had to go and ruin it!"

"Ruin hell!" yowled Burns, with appropriate gestures. "There was plenty of room! You came down ninety miles to get me, you lantern-jawed sap!"

"Shut up! Key down!" the captain adjured them in no uncertain tones. "I'll do the talking now, every dash-blank word of it! You're both under arrest. Hike back to barracks and stay there until I send for you. And if there's any more scrapping, or even a sign of it, I'll clamp you in the guard-house for fifty years!"

"**YEH**, they've got spirit, all right," Captain Crocker conceded to Lieutenant Pollock at headquarters after supper that night. "Too doggone much, I'd say. It was a crime to stop that battle. But there was more than just an accident behind it, Jim. It looked to me more like the climax of a private feud. Have you got any low-down on those two?"

The lieutenant nodded and grinned. "Uh-huh. I'm summat older, but we

all three hail from the same village in dear old Maine. Neil Burns—he's the stocky, hatchet-faced one—is the son of our respected postmaster. Dave Manning acknowledges our leading grocer as his pa. You know how small towns are generally split up into cliques? Well, Manning, senior, is a stanch Republican. Burns, senior, is an equally stanch Democrat. The kids are both good boys, but they've been rivals of one sort or another ever since they kicked off diapers. It's in the blood, I guess. Whatever one tackles, t'other dives in, too, and tries to go him better."

"But how'd they both land here at Lovejoy?"

"Search me!" shrugged Pollock. "Manning passed his tests, and reported here in April. Burns wasn't two weeks behind. Manning was scheduled to take the first test for his commission this afternoon. Burns asked to go up, too." He lit a cigaret and puffed it thoughtfully. "They both have the makings of good flyers—if it wasn't for their childish, everlasting competition."

"It won't be everlasting. It's going to stop right now," the C.O. promised. He pressed a buzzer. "Sergeant, send for Cadets Manning and Burns."

The pair came to him at headquarters in physical company, but with spirits a few dozen stars apart. Burns' rather solemn, heavy features were set and stern. A slight flush tinted Manning's more comely, alert face. The eyes of both cadets were focused resolutely straight ahead of them.

"I understand you birds have brought your private differences to Lovejoy field," the captain brusquely began. "I don't know how much they played a part in what transpired this afternoon, but I do know there'll be no more of it. You're in the army now. Also, you're both skating on darned thin ice. Do I make myself quite plain?"

"Yes, sir," answered Manning gravely. Burns merely nodded.

"All right. So much for that," said Captain Crocker. "As for the smash-

up—well, Burns, I don't think you crowded Manning with malicious intent. If I did I wouldn't stop to argue. But just the same it was a damn fool stunt. D'you want a formal court?"

Burns gulped. "Not—not if it's all the same to you, sir."

"Then I'll pass judgment myself. You're on the ground for thirty days—an' dash-blank lucky at that! In the meantime, Manning, you're to take the final tests. Lieutenant Pollock, please see to it that by the time Burns' ground term expires Manning is either in the infantry, or a gentleman and pilot by act of Congress—and three full flying days away from here!"

Emerging from headquarters, Burns turned on Manning with an irate sparkle in his chill, black eyes.

"You've got your wish, you lucky stiff!"

"What wish is that, Neil?" Manning asked with a deceptive suavity.

"To put me on the ground so you can get your bars, and pass the good word to the folks at home!"

"You're goofy, fella. I wouldn't bother to stave-up even a Gussie crate for that. I'd of beat you to it anyway—just like I always have."

Manning spoke lightly, and his lips were parted in an impulsive, amiable grin, which Burns ignored.

"Always? Always?" he rumbled angrily. "You're a gosh-darn liar, Dave!" He doubled his fists, but as the other made no move went on: "I beat you out in swimming, football an' track! I can beat the spots out of you in anything! Yeh, flying, too!"

Manning's grin had faded, but he still persisted in his effort at conciliation.

"Looky, Neil, we're not children any longer. Also, we're heading for over yonder, and only God knows what then. We might as well call off the fireworks and part as friends. What say?"

Burns' chin thrust up and out. He looked away.

"You go to grass!" he rumbled sullenly at last. "You've got me where

you want me, but my turn will come some day. Yeh, some day, Dave Manning, I'll show you what real flying is. I'll take your ornery carcass apart, an' scatter it from hell to breakfast all over the deep blue sky!"

"Okay," retorted Manning shortly. "Since that's the way you feel about it——"

He bit off the hot words welling up in him, turned and strode away.

IT'S an offense against the legislature for it to rain in Hawaii except during January, but then Jupe Pluvius certainly does spread himself. The water pours with all the pep and vinegar of the fine spray in the family shower-bath, and the globules are about the size of marbles.

Lieutenant Dave Manning stood in the doorway of the army flyers' club on Ford Island, and peered through the sizzling curtain of the torrential deluge in the general direction of Pearl Harbor. All things considered, his clean-clipped face was pretty cheerful. Dave had won the reputation of being a pretty cheerful lad in every way, which made his brother shavetails cotton to him like molasses.

"What-ho!" he shot over his shoulder, in the direction of a desultory five-handed poker game. "Darned if it don't look like the *Chateau Thierry* stickin' her old nose into port!"

"The transport? Snap to attention, then, you long-legged G.I. can!" retorted a flippant voice. "Colonel Matthias Oliver, the new C.O., will be aboard!"

"Gosh! Glad I ain't a member of the reception committee." Dave gingerly extended a hand from under the roof of the veranda, and the rain slapped down on it like a faucet. "I guess I know when I'm well off. The old boy means nothing whatever in my young life!"

But he was dead wrong, as he was subsequently to discover. The field gave Colonel Oliver and the commissioned

replacements who had arrived with him a welcome dinner that night, Young Manning, assigned a distant table with the other juniors, didn't get a good look at the guest of honor until the meal was well under way. Then he froze goggle-eyed, and almost choked on a spoonful of hot soup.

It wasn't on the slender colonel with the iron-gray mustaches that Dave's orbs clamped so frenziedly, however, but the golden-haired damsel demurely seated at his side. If ever a radiant fragment had tumbled out of heaven, she sure was it! Her lips were priceless rubies, her teeth were pearls, her eyes were glowing—

"Hey! Hey!" cried Stuffey Luchens, jabbing Dave with a sharp elbow. "Come to life, you bloomin' idol!"

"Who—how—" muttered the idol vaguely.

"Molly-O, the darlin' daughter of our new C.O."

"Oh!"

"Yeh, Molly-O! Now, snap out of it! D'you crave to get in bad right off the bat?"

"Er—no," said Dave, staring all the harder. And it so happened that Molly-O's glance, roving aimlessly, chanced on the shavetail's gaping map, which drew an amused smile from her—and ruined Dave completely for the rest of the evening. He didn't notice what he ate, even when Stuffey dumped most of the salt-cellar on his ice-cream, and the various speeches drummed like dim gibberish in his ears. Even for an army sub he was decidedly well smitten.

Shock number two, and a somewhat less pleasant one, came no later than the following morning. Jupe Pluvius had called it off for a few hours. Dave, sauntering leisurely along officers' row, caught the distant flutter of a pink silk skirt and threw his gears in high. Half-way to the girl he pulled up with a sudden grunt. The square-cut jib of the officer with Miss Oliver was painfully familiar. Neil Burns! And hanged if

the pair of them weren't thick as axle-grease!

Burns and the divine enchantment drifted in laughing intimacy out to the flying field, where a few planes were doing their daily dozen. Dave trailed them thoughtfully. All at once he chuckled, and increased his pace. Abreast of Burns he saluted snappily.

"Well, well, lieutenant! How *do* you do?" he warbled with a cheerful grin. "Fancy our meeting here!"

Burns's face remained stonily cold as he returned the salute.

"How-do, Mr. Manning."

He swung elaborately back to the girl. Dave flushed, but there was nothing for it. He had to amble on.

Other officials began to materialize in the close neighborhood of Miss Oliver's dainty form. Soon she was the center of a chattering group, among them Captain Carter, the dapper adjutant. Dave circled and found an opportunity to twick the captain's sleeve.

"Introduce me, like a good guy."

"Hum! D'ye think I'd better? Molly-O is dynamite," quoth Captain Carver. But presently the deed was done, and dainty Miss Oliver wiped away all Dave's irritation and his remaining brains with another of her flashing smiles—an extra-special.

Captain Carver talked, and Chick Meehan talked, and Stuffy Luchens talked, and the stony-faced Burns talked, but what they were saying didn't percolate. It was a quarter of an hour before Dave abruptly snapped to life. Molly-O herself had the floor, then, and her discourse seemed directed straight at him, although her perky nose was turned toward Carver.

"Oh, I'm a flying fool, I guess! It's in the blood. If there's anything that gets under my skin, it's a top-hole pilot, hitting the roof and knocking holes in it. I just worship stunting!" Her hand fluttered to her heart, and her eyes sparkled bewitchingly. "I'm just a silly, romantic flapper, I suppose—but if any Lochinvar sneaks me away,

he'll come a-swooping through the air!"

Dave found himself staring intently at Neil Burns, who returned his gaze with interest. Sparks seemed to fly. Two souls with but a single thought, they were, too self-engrossed to see the shadow of the wings of fate fluttering darkly in the background.

That night at the club Dave braced a shavetail who had accompanied the colonel on the transport.

"Burns? Oh, Neil Burns. Yes, he came on with us," replied the newcomer. "Before then we were together at Mitchell Field. D'you know him well?"

"So-so."

The new arrival regarded Dave curiously. "Strikes me that he's a sorta sullen cuss. But boy! He surely packs a drag with fair Miss Oliver! She's plain nutty over circus flyin', y' know. Burns landed at Mitchell too late to show what he can do, but when the colonel was ordered to Hawaii, Burns broke a leg to get a transfer out here with him—and Molly-O. If he can fly as well as he can talk, he *must* be good!"

Dave nodded without answering. To himself he muttered grimly: "Neil beat me out at tennis, track, and football. Looks like we're going to have another game—an' this one'll sure be tougher!"

LIEUTENANT MANNING devoted every faculty to rushing Molly Oliver off her feet. Since Lieutenant Burns had a fairish edge on him, and clung to it doggedly, the competition became fast and furious. Ford Island chuckled broadly, gave the youngsters leeway, and sat back to watch the fun. Both shavetails had joined the army to make war on Germany. The powers that be at Washington had juggled the strings and chevied them about ten thousand miles from that particular country, but they were making war all right, with everything they had!

Nobody got more of a kick out of the proceedings than the officers who had been stationed with Colonel Oliver

back in the States. They knew the potentialities of mixing the pet obsession of incurably romantic Molly-O with the wild ardor of two love-smitten birdmen. The way to Molly's heart was through supremacy in the air. She made that plain to both of her young gallants from the very first.

To complicate matters still further, Colonel Oliver had most emphatic notions about army pilots who took unnecessary risks. This was brought home to the rivals quite promptly the morning Dave tried to steal a march on Burns by a little informal hippodroming. Neil had escorted Molly to the flying field. Dave grasped the opportunity to hop off in his greased lightning, single-seater SX scout. He started at five thousand and knocked off twenty-seven loops. The last one was well below the dead-line of one thousand. In fact, it all but scraped the engine off the gleaming racer's nose.

Molly clapped her hands in beatific ecstasy. Her father reacted, too, but somewhat differently. Five minutes later Dave was facing the flushed and fuming colonel across his H. Q. desk.

Oliver's first few hundred words were oratorical—spoken for effect, and requiring no answer whatsoever.

"How in the name of Beelzebub d'ye get that way?" he ended presently, mainly to catch his breath.

"I—I—"

"This ain't the navy! Keep your ayes for the blinkin' marines!" the colonel thundered, on his toes again. "And, anyway, that's enough out of you, young man! Now listen closely! I don't care a tinker's damn about *you*! If you want to cash in on your war risk insurance, that's your private funeral. Hop to it in your own blistering, assinine way. But don't you dare do it in government property, you hear me? Those S. X. scouts cost money—more than you'll ever earn. Good God! And you set out deliberately to crack one! . . ."

With which the colonel again lapsed into a semi-coherency. But all in all,

he made himself quite plain, not only to Manning, but to everyone within a radius of a good half-mile. Dave left headquarters a sadder if not altogether a wiser man.

Thereafter, for several weeks, competition for Miss Oliver was conducted on prosaic ground, much to that alluring maid's discomfiture. What little flying Burns and Manning did was strictly in line of duty, and—under the colonel's frowning, eagle eye—their practise stunting was safe, sane, orthodox, and high above the fleecy clouds.

Stuffy Luchens, in the club one night, delivered a summary of the situation to his grinning cronies:

"Round six. Breaks are even. Molly-O thinks more of either fair charmer when t'other is away—and that ain't often, what I mean! Duke and Luke, the mucilage kids! There'll be a sure'nough explosion some day, though. Sort of an aerial climax, wot? You can't keep good men down!" He guffawed at his own witticism, then added reflectively: "Dave Manning is a right good scout. I hope he makes the grade."

"Me, too," announced Chick Meehan, "but I have my doubts."

"Yeh? Why?" a dozen voices queried.

"Well—" Chick hesitated, then went on reluctantly, "I think that as a flyer Burns has the edge on him. Not much—but—" He wagged a dubious head. "Those fish-eyed lads are hard to lick when they make up their minds to anything. Alas, how well I know!"

"Humph! Looks like a perpetual stale-mate to me," grunted Lieutenant Bob Badham from a far corner. "Long as Colonel Oliver sticks around there'll be no cloud clownishness whatever, and from present indications he's sitting on the lid for life."

Bob's conclusion was logical enough, save that fate had again chosen to flutter its portentous wings. Even at that moment a starry-eyed damsel, snuggled beside Neil Burns on a sofa in Colonel

Oliver's living-room, was whispering excitedly:

"Can you keep a secret, Neil? Well, then—Daddy has been invited by Admiral Pierce to take a cruise around Maui. An inspection, or something. Anyway, he leaves day after tomorrow, and may be gone a week. Isn't that glorious? I'll have some nice long rides with you and Dave, and see what each of you can really do!"

"Aw!" Neil protested uneasily. "I wouldn't want to take a chance with you along, Molly, I—"

"Is that so?" She stamped a foot imperiously. "Well, then, I'll talk to Dave! I'm sure *he* won't refuse!"

"If that's the way you feel about it, the broad sky is the limit, kid!" the square-jawed youth assured her hastily. "I can fly rings around *that* fella, any day!"

The news of Colonel Oliver's impending journey was publicly proclaimed the following afternoon, whereat Ford Island, which knew that Molly could twist the adjutant about her little finger, perked up and gurgled with a world of meaning:

"Ah!"

GOLD and blue combined in one of those glorious sunlit mornings the Islanders swear by the pink-toed prophet can be witnessed nowhere else in this sad world. Nevertheless, not so much as one solitary wing-tip flecked the inviting sky. All of which, considering the fact that every blessed air hawk and mechanic in the outfit had found business near the hangars, was passing strange—unless you happen to know army flyers; they'll breeze through a howling hell of Archie in a state of bored indifference, then sit down a-wriggle with the wildest excitement before a Punch-and-Judy show!

The show Ford Island was anticipating this morning, however, was not entirely slapstick comedy. It was, in fact, a show-down between two very resolute and reckless young men. Ford Island

fully sensed the underlying current of gravity. So, despite their untroubled faces, did Lieutenants Manning and Burns. So, too, despite a steady stream of animated chatter, did Molly-O.

The only officer not in the immediate distance when Molly led her two victims into the arena was Captain Carver, the dapper adjutant. After escorting Colonel Oliver to Admiral Pierce's flagship, Carver had adjourned to the deepest storm-cellar in the flyers' club, there to propitiate his official conscience with a few shots of Three Star Hennessy. It was on his shoulders that responsibility would rest if any trouble developed while the colonel was away.

"Good hunting!" exclaimed Molly-O, sniffing the dulcet breeze. "Gee! I've waited a thousand years for such a gorgeous opportunity! Who's going to take me up first?"

They matched for it, and Manning won. Two minutes later the girl had clambered gracefully into the fore cockpit of a gleaming, powerful RV.

"Oh, I'm just thrilled to death!" she cooed ecstatically, as Manning fastened her belt.

"She's liable to be, no foolin' before it's over!" Stuffey Luchens remarked somberly to Bob Badham by the hangar doors. He spat, and added unexpectedly: "Aw! The little sap!" And even gallant Kentucky Robert failed to disagree.

The RV taxied smoothly. Manning lifted her, circled once to gather power, then zoomed in a steep crawl to the upper atmosphere. His face was still inscrutable, but there was a hint of bitter inward turmoil in his eyes.

Presently Molly-O flung up a hand and turned toward him. She was flushed with a gay excitement. Dave nosed down and cut the motor so he could catch her words:

"Hi! What's the big idea, Sir Lancelot? We going to loaf around up here all day? Get busy and strut your stuff!"

He nodded. His perplexity had sud-

denly been succeeded by definite decision. He bored the RV down until the wind whined like a devil's chorus through her quivering struts, then pulled her up again and over until she seemed to be standing on the extreme tip of her right wing.

Around, down, and up again the RV banked dizzily in a great figure eight. This looks astounding and hazardous from the ground, but in reality it's no such thing.

For five full minutes Dave kept her twirling, first on one wing then the other—but he wasn't fooling Molly-O. Her eyebrows puckered in an ominous frown. Emphatically she waved her hand again:

"Back to the kindergarten, old dear! What d'you think you're doing, kidding me? I came up here to *fly*! Any darned cadet could pull this baby stuff, and go to sleep at that. I'm getting awfully disappointed, Dave. Do snap me out of it!"

Lines of regret bit deep in Manning's forehead as he bent over the stick. He redoubled his exertions. The plane wove intricate figures all over the place, giving every symptom of an abandoned sky-mania, but doing nothing really dangerous. Dave was not going to cast the life of the girl he loved on the uncertain altar of the air gods. It hurt to see the storm clouds of disfavor gathering so swiftly on her childish face, but he had made his bet, and he stuck to it doggedly.

A third and last time Molly-O flung up her arm, trembling with the violence of her emotions.

"I've had enough of this!" she cried. "As a stunt flyer, Dave Manning, you're a false alarm! Take me down! No argument! There's a real pilot waiting for me down below!"

Dave leveled the plane, swung lazily back across the harbor, and glided in a long, whistling incline to the landing field. His heart was heavy. His brain, however, seethed with helpless anger. What was the use of being so darned

virtuous, when it just made you a first-class goat?

The RV's wheels hit dirt, and the tail settled lightly. Dave cut off the motor a few feet from the hangar doors. Neil Burns rushed up in the van of half a dozen officers. They helped Molly from the cockpit and escorted her across to Neil's waiting ship, another powerful RV.

Still Manning didn't move. He was too busy fighting down that helpless, blinding rage. A false alarm, she'd called him—just because he wouldn't risk her neck. Oh, hell . . .!

The spitting roar of Burns' motor cut the air. Neil might be sullen upon occasion, but he was no one's fool. He had witnessed Dave's performance with a shrewd and calculating relish. Now he was going to show the poor boob up. Neil wanted Molly-O with every fiber of his being. If the only way to get her was to tear holes in the deep blue sky—well, that was that!

Neil ran a couple of hundred yards, and lifted her as gently as a cradle rocking in a summer breeze. Back in the other RV Dave Manning stiffened, and beckoned some loitering mechanics.

"Contact!" he roared.

The big prop whirled and caught. Dave opened the gun and raced the RV madly across the field in the wake of the other plane. It didn't take him any two hundred yards to make the air. He jerked his stick and fairly flung her off the ground.

A fraction of a second before she lifted, the RV hit a bump—the edge of a deep-buried boulder. The impact was scarcely perceptible, yet enough to snap a loosened angle-cleat on the landing gear. The startled watchers saw the RV take the air, her left wheel crumpled and dragging like the foot of a wounded bird.

"Great Gosh!" cried Stuffey Luchens anguishedly. "He's gone and done it! And—say, Bob! He doesn't know!"

"Then it's kinda up to us to advertise the happy fact," Bob Badham muttered,

and set off for the nearest hangar at a run.

Absorbed in fiery emotions, Manning hadn't even felt that tell-tale jar. So Molly-O believed he was a false alarm, eh? This thrust had stung Dave harder than all the rest. Impetuously he set out to disprove it. He drove the plane past Burns' ship like a belated tornado, noting with grim satisfaction the surprised look on Molly's face. Up, up he climbed, until the RV was no bigger than a speck against the brilliant sun. Then Dave cut loose with every circus stunt in his extensive repertoire. Loops, Immelmans, fluttering leafs—on his back—wing-tips—nose—tail. He mixed old stunts with an amazing variety of new ones, coined for the occasion, and all hair-raising to the *n*th degree.

A false alarm, eh? Dave put on still more speed. It seemed at any moment that the overtaxed plane would splatter in a thousand pieces. Still Dave drove on in a mad orgy of sky rioting.

THE Army Flying Field had suddenly become a hotbed of activity. Soldiers darted about, waving their arms like madmen. Luchens and Badham, hindered rather than helped by a flock of crowding mechanics, began to tear a wheel from a shop dolly. Chick Meehan and a half-dozen other officers shouted conflicting instructions at a squad spreading a square of canvas in the center of the landing field. This was intended to attract the attention of the crippled plane.

Dave Manning was far too busy with his thundering acrobatics to spare attention for any other thing. Molly-O watched him with a fascinated, swiftly mounting wonder, in her shining eyes.

It was a startled shout from Neil Burns, audible above the engine's roar, that recalled her to more immediate surroundings. Burns was leaning rigidly over the side of the ship, glance riveted on the landing field. Molly looked down, too. Uneasily she grasped the unusual bustle and stir. In addition to

the erratic swarming of two hundred men, cars were now dashing back and forth at express speed.

"Look!" cried Molly excitedly, extending her arm; and, as Burns cut the engine: "An ambulance! What's wrong down there?"

"It ain't down there!" groaned Neil abysmally. "It's right up here, with us! See those fellers on the canvas, waving something? We must have smacked a rock or timber in the take-off. They're signaling we've lost a wheel!"

The gravity of the situation dawned slowly on the wide-eyed girl. Then she swung anxiously back to Burns. She wanted him to laugh, to soothe away her fears. One glance at his set face, however, told her Neil had no sympathy to waste. He wore the expression of a haunted man.

"Well—what's to be done about it?" she shouted at last.

Burns wriggled from his life belt and hung far over the side of the cockpit, craning his neck in an effort to gauge the damage, but the wheel trucks were beyond his range of vision.

The plane lurched drunkenly. He almost fell back into his seat, and re-adjusted the life belt hastily.

"Can't do anything," he told her with a glum shake of his head. "We're sunk, that's all!"

"You mean—we're going to crash?" Molly's voice was shrill with apprehension. "How dreadful! Neil, if you're any good at all you'll get us out of this!"

He glared at her disgustedly. The ignorant little fool! Then his glance again fixed darkly on the ground below.

"Gawd! Why'n hell don't they stop waving that cursed wheel?" he snarled to himself. "They trying to rub it in? We know it! We *know* it, you gosh-darned idiots!"

As if his sentiments had carried, the wild excitement on the field abruptly ceased. Men hastily rolled up the canvas, and removed every obstacle that might block an easy landing. Then all and sundry withdrew to the sidelines,

to await the voice of fate with true flyers' stoicism. Only the white ambulance, drawn up conveniently at one side, remained a mute reminder of what was expected to ensue.

Dave Manning had managed to wear out his fury flirting with the topmost fleecy clouds. He actually felt serene again. After an instant of leisurely idling, he jammed down the RV's nose, and slid from the ceiling at a wild and giddy clip. Passing Neil's ship he waved half-derisively, and his white teeth flashed a flippant grin.

"Damn you!" shrieked Neil in a blaze of uncontrollable fury, shaking his fist at his rival's rapidly dwindling back. "You lucky stiff! I had you stopped six ways from Sunday. But now you've got me where you want me, haven't you—you yellow-bellied farmer! Go ahead and laugh!"

Molly did not hear the words, but she caught his furious gestures.

"I bet *Dave* would get me down, all right!" she cried.

Neil read her lips enough to catch her meaning.

"You go to grass!" he shouted savagely. And with that he proceeded to forget her, devoting himself entirely to his own emergency.

Dave Manning crackled down toward the landing field, mildly wondering why the other RV was cruising so sedately, instead of flipping handsprings across the sky.

"I guess Neil's just prolonging things at my expense, the old *sonuvagun*," he concluded. "He'll begin to show me up to Molly pretty soon."

The thought induced a frown, which was suddenly supplanted by a reflective grin.

"Well, anyway, Molly-O's discovered I'm not a false alarm," he told himself. "Outside of that, who cares?"

Dave didn't, and proceeded to demonstrate. He gave his plane the gun and shot within ten feet of the ground like a hurtling catapult. One last stunt, Dave had decided, wouldn't do him any

harm. He leveled off, pulled back the stick as far as it would go, and cut out the motor.

It was an awe-inspiring stall. The RV stood on her tail like an intoxicated sardine. For a brief instant she hung there, shivering—then trembled on the verge of a back-slip.

Per-r-r-r-r! The engine roared again, as Dave hauled the big plane out of it, apparently by sheer main force. Down came the RV's nose in an erratic arc, almost scraping the ground, and up again as the young dare-devil pancaked.

The ship seemed almost to freeze in space, settle, and float to the ground—as pretty a landing as one could ask to see. Both wheels bit dirt together. It was the merest split-second before the left one gave, bending at a sharp angle from the vertical, but that split-second was enough. The pancake had practically killed all forward momentum. The RV's tail settled as lightly as a whispering breeze, and the ship stood motionless.

Dave opened the gun again, to taxi to the hangars, and felt the RV pull in a series of rough jerks, like a ship tugging at its anchor chains. The left wing began to swing in a wide circle.

"What the hell?" thought Dave. He cut the engine, unhooked his belt, and scrambled blithely from the cockpit to investigate. "Well, wouldn't that plaster you? I've gone and broke a wheel!"

MOLLY-O'S face was pale, but the girl, after all, was of a valiant fighting breed. She waved at Neil until she managed to break his dour abstraction, and he coasted.

"Let's go on down and get it over with!" she cried.

Burns' eyes glinted with an unpleasant light.

"All right!" he bit out curtly. "But, remember, you asked for it!"

He tilted the plane's nose downward in a wavering, uncertain arc. Those on the ground were too engrossed discussing Dave's impossible feat to spare a glance for the uninjured ship. Other-

wise they might have wondered what had struck its cocky pilot.

Neil wasn't a quitter. He would have faced war's perils—even dark uncertainty—without a qualm. But here was no uncertainty at all. The ship was doomed. The only question was how badly they would crash.

The last two minutes were a nightmare. Neil wallowed in the throes of a black, numbing apathy which heightened as he neared the ground. A frenzied gesture by Molly passed unnoticed. She turned, drumming the fuselage madly with her clenched fists.

"Neil! Neil! Wake up!"

He raised lack-lustre eyes. The girl's drawn face beat into his morbid consciousness. Huh! Manning wasn't such a lucky stiff after all, the grim thought flashed. Neil wouldn't take a radiant Molly to the altar, certainly—but neither would Dave!

The ground swept dizzily up to meet them. At the instant when it seemed that they must crash nose on, some measure of his faculties returned to Neil. There was one chance in a million, and he took it. Leveling the ship, he pulled up her nose and stalled her, in a desperate effort to pancake and kill his fatal speed.

It was the stunt Dave Manning had pulled as his finale. Ordinarily, Neil would have had a fighting chance to make it, too, but that stark apathy—the knowledge that the plane was crippled and doomed—had blunted the fine edge of his skill. The plane back-slipped. With a convulsive effort Neil strove to pull her out of it—and the engine failed to catch.

Death staring them in the face, Neil Burns fought furiously. With the weight of his straining body he succeeded partially in righting the ship. But there was a point beyond which mortal resources proved futile. The back-slip changed into a fluttering side-

slip. The RV's left wing struck the ground heavily, and crumpled.

Struts snapped with a sinister whang. There was the rip of tearing fabric. As though writhing in a final, dying shudder, the RV flopped slowly over on her back . . .

STUFFY LUCHENS, Bob Badham, Chick Meehan, and a score of others, racing up at a dead run, found the girl unconscious, though uninjured, and Neil struggling, with savage curses, at his tangled safety belt.

"What the blazes was the big idea, coming down thataway?" bawled Stuff, as a dozen hands lifted Molly gently to the ground.

"How'n blazes did you *expect* me to come down—" Neil shot furiously back at him—"with a crippled landing gear?"

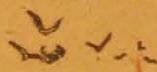
"Crippled landing gear?" repeated Stuff amazedly. "What the dickens! Did you have one, too?"

"*Too?*" Neil tried his weight on a swelling right ankle, and dropped with a wry grimace. "*Too?* Luchens, what the devil are you driving at?"

By this time Stuff had seen a ray of light. He was hard put to it to repress a caustic grin.

"Why, you poor fish! You must have seen the signals we intended for Dave Manning. He cracked his left wheel in the take-off. But *yours* is perfectly all right! *Was*, I mean," he added hastily, viewing the sad remnants of the big RV. "What a gorgeous mess you've made of her, old top!"

"I'll tell the world!" It was Molly-O's voice, weak but vibrant with a note of passionate intensity. "And there was nothing wrong with our plane at all! Good night!" She sighed, and looked eagerly in the direction of a slender, advancing form. "Dave! Oh, David Manning! . . . Won't somebody tell the best darn pilot west of Boston that I'm calling him?"



Riders of the Clouds

By
Thomson Burtis

Beginning a smashing novel of grinning gringo Air Hawks, mile-high battle, and reckless romance on the lawless Rio Grande.

A LONG the border, from the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of California, stretches a land which has been the setting for uncounted songs and stories and the scene of numberless life-and-death dramas more romantic, more deadly, more human than words on paper can convey. In the days of the old West the Rio Grande, the Pecos, the Big Bend, the deserts—all were names fraught with meaning, because they brought with them associations of a pioneer country where men of the outdoors fought their way against nature and each other by the rudimentary law of the individual.

And only the hardiest among men and animals could survive for long, whether in the primitive warfare

against heat and storm and desert waste or in the flashing battle of six-gun and knife.

Today, in the twentieth century, that same land still stubbornly resists the march of cities and factories and blossoming farms. There are hundreds of miles of mesquite wilderness where a man can wander for days without food or water. The Big Bend, vast and forbidding, still harbors men whom a none too particular country has outlawed. The flaming deserts of the far Southwest are deadly as of yore. And the struggle of the border is going on as it was fifty years ago—not so open a struggle, perhaps, but still raw and elemental.

There are still men along the border who prize their ability to draw and shoot and ride as priceless, because those

things mean life to them. The smuggler, the bandit, the gunman, the outlaw—they are still there, and a handful of men who represent the law of a great country fight them oftentimes hand to hand or gun to gun.

And yet that same land, last outpost of the old pioneer days, is spanned by a thread that represents the peak of civilization's accomplishment. For hundreds of miles there are stretches of desert and wilderness and mountains that are now as they were a hundred years ago, but above them, twice a day from Gulf to Gulf, the airplanes of the Army Air Service border patrol keep watchful eyes on the tempestuous land below.

Civilization has sent the fruits of its most recent conquest to span the border, and the Army's youngest branch of the service has sent its best to man them. Whether the airdromes of the patrol lie in the heart of the Big Bend, like Marfa and Sanderson, or whether they be near Douglas or El Paso, the airplanes and the men who fly them have but one duty—to watch unceasingly the seething border country.

The McMullen flight of the patrol counted themselves unusually fortunate. McMullen was a live, progressive town which was proud that the flight was located there, and showed it. And in recent months their pride had been justified to an unusual extent, if notoriety counted for anything. The McMullen flight had become very prominent, largely through the instrumentality of one Lieutenant Lee MacDowell, better known as "Tex," who was a young man possessed of a boundless facility for getting into scraps that was only exceeded by his ability to get out of them with much credit.

This particular afternoon he was engaged in one of his favorite devices for passing leisure moments pleasantly: namely, arousing the ire of "Pop" Cravath, adjutant of the flight.

Cravath was older than the other officers of the group, by several years, and his years had not taught him to dis-

semble wrath. At the slightest provocation he would burst forth into a series of crackling remarks and blistering expressions of a distinctly blasphemous trend that caused his comrades to sit back in open-mouthed admiration. Withal he was much the most conscientious and precise member of the group, the C. O. included.

Recently he had taken a notion to learn something about meteorology. McMullen was equipped with instruments and a few trained enlisted men wherewith to gain information in advance about the weather. One of the meteorological section's daily duties was to send up large hot-air balloons, which they studied through a theodolite as they sailed aloft, thereby figuring the direction and velocity of the wind at different altitudes. By these data the flyers were able to know the exact altitude at which the wind would help them most or hinder them least. Cravath had been diligently studying the intricacies of meteorology of late, and today he was going to make the balloon observations himself.

The shack used by the weather experts faced the rear of the recreation building. Tex MacDowell, armed with an ordinary slingshot and some BB shot, watched the door of the shack closely from the recreation hall. The window curtains screened him. A half-dozen airmen were with him, waiting with much anticipation.

Cravath appeared at the door of the shack, tenderly holding a large red balloon, completely inflated. Tex quickly stooped and sighted his slingshot through a convenient knot-hole. Taking careful aim, he let go and a satisfying smack from without was the result.

"Damn it!" yelled Cravath, surveying the tattered remains in his hands with much disgust.

He disappeared into the shack once more for another balloon.

He reappeared shortly, his new balloon bobbing about as he held it with meticulous care. Once again Tex fired,

and was rewarded with another loud report of bursting rubber and a truly remarkable series of expletives from the adjutant.

The men inside strangled their laughter with their hands until Pop had disappeared once more into the weather sanctum.

"The next time he comes out he's going to have a stroke!" chuckled Binder. "I'll bet he swears for half an hour and never says the same thing twice!"

"Pop sure hasn't learned to guard what his tongue saith," remarked Tex, keeping a wary eye on the door opposite.

Little Pete Miller suddenly exploded without warning into a loud laugh, expelling clouds of cigaret smoke which caused him to cough and laugh at the same time.

"I was just thinking of how Pop bawled out Sergeant Roper the other day when three defective balloons burst in succession," he explained.

Captain Kennard, C. O. of the flight, strolled into the room.

"What's the excitement?" he enquired as he surveyed the group.

"Sh-h-h!" cautioned big George Hickman with uplifted hand.

Cravath was once more emerging into the sunlight, walking as if on eggs and holding the balloon as if it were the most precious of possessions. Tex allowed him to take three or four steps toward the observation tower before he shot once more.

This time the bursting balloon stung Cravath's fingers. His comrades, weak with suppressed mirth, listened delightedly while the fiery adjutant launched into a comprehensive survey of balloons, meteorology and anything or anybody connected with the same. He soared to truly awe-inspiring heights of verbiage.

Captain Kennard finally composed himself sufficiently to ask—

"Who conceived this idea—you, Tex?"

Tex looked down from his six-foot-

two into the twinkling eyes of the stocky captain.

"I admit it, with pride," he grinned. "Boy, did you see him hop when the last one hit him?"

"I heard it, anyway," laughed the C. O. "Well, it's time for officers' meeting."

The little company filed out of the room and across into the captain's office. The remainder of the dozen officers who composed the flight were awaiting them there—all except Cravath.

"Go to the meteorological shack and get Lieutenant Cravath," ordered the C. O., and the orderly departed.

While he was gone Tex explained the reason for the mirth of the recent arrivals. Cravath entered in a moment, his face still red with wrath, and seated himself behind his desk.

"Captain," he began unceremoniously, "I want to make a kick about those damn balloons. Three of them—"

He did not get any farther. When the officers recovered and Cravath comprehended what had happened, the dignified adjutant decided to laugh with them. He gazed at Tex, lounging easily against the wall, with twinkling eyes belying his contemptuous expression.

"If you found time hanging heavy on your hands, Tex, you'd play with a rattle!" he observed.

MacDowell was a continual puzzle to Cravath—even Captain Kennard sometimes wondered whether he understood Tex, and the captain knew human nature. The tall young flyer was such a curious combination of boyishness and ability to take care of himself under any circumstances or in any company that he sometimes seemed like two separate individuals in one.

"Well, let's get to business and get this thing over," said the C. O. "Cravath, are there any orders to read?"

The adjutant read a couple of War Department circulars which had been received that day, and then indicated that he was through. The captain settled back in the swivel chair behind his desk

and lit a cigaret. His mouth stretched in a broad grin that made the big scar on his cheek wrinkle deeply as he surveyed his staff of flyers and observers. He ran his hand through the short, bristly pompadour that stuck up on his head and then shook his head sadly.

"I've got bad news for you," he began. "Not so bad for you, maybe, as for the boys at Donovan Field. It's about booze."

He quickly shuffled through the papers on his desk, finally drawing out a letter which he glanced over as if to refresh his memory.

"It seems that a few days ago a representative of the law in San Antonio, acting presumably at the instigation of some San Antonio reformers, came out to Donovan Field and raised hell with Colonel Mills about the liquor being carried from the border to Donovan Field. The last dance they had was pretty well oiled with *tequila, agudiente* and whisky, I guess. This minion of the State likewise made some cracks about there being some suspicion that maybe some of the boys were carrying opium up to make a little kale.

"Of course that's ridiculous. Perhaps a border flyer, now and then, packs a bottle in his suitcase, and offers a drink to some of his friends who are parching up at Donovan Field, but that's all."

A chuckle ran around the circle of flyers.

"Well, anyhow," the captain resumed, cocking a contemplative eye at the last smoke-ring, "they're squawking about it up around effete San Antonio, and orders from headquarters are that every ship coming in from—or back to Donovan Field from—the border, will be thoroughly searched and severe disciplinary action taken on the pilot of any ship carrying any of the demon rum. I imagine the civilian authorities may swoop down at any moment, likewise, for a little private search."

He grinned as a thought struck him.

"The boys at Donovan are out of luck," he remarked.

"And we're not going to be near as popular as we were," drawled Tex. "The last time I landed at Donovan it looked as if they were having an officers' review in my honor."

"Well, when you and George fly up there tomorrow you'll have a chance to see it at first hand," replied the C. O.

His face became serious again.

"All kidding aside, fellows, orders are orders and we'll live up to them. The rest of the border had better do it too, because it's a damned cinch that hell is going to pop when they catch somebody, especially if any civilian official pokes his nose in. Don't any of you get mixed up. That's all.

CHAPTER II

Under Arrest

NEXT morning the sun rose in a cloudless sky, giving promise of a terrifically hot day, so Tex and George Hickman, his observer, decided to get an early start for Donovan Field before the mounting sun made the flying bumpy. Consequently it was only seven-thirty when Sergeant Cary, chief mechanic of the flight, started to warm up the big four hundred and fifty horsepower Liberty motor in MacDowell's DeHaviland plane.

Tex, who was engineer officer and test pilot of the flight, was to test a new DeHaviland at Donovan Field and fly it back to McMullen, leaving the old ship there for overhaul and repair, it having had its allotted number of hours in the air. Big, blondly handsome Hickman was going along just to take a look at San Antonio and see a show. Early as it was, Pete Mills and Wallace had started on the eastern morning patrol, and Binder and Cravath were fifty miles on their way westward along the Rio Grande.

MacDowell and Hickman, swinging their helmets and goggles in their hands, strolled from the mess-hall toward the

ship, which had been started and was idling gently. The air was quiet, for it was too early for the Gulf breeze to be stirring. The airdrome, four hundred yards square, was bounded on three sides by hangars, frame barracks, mess-halls and storehouses. Their ship was on the line in front of the hangars.

The roar of the motor increased as Cary slid the throttle forward a trifle. The wheels began to press against the blocks that held them, and the two mechanics who were holding each wing set themselves to hold the ship. Little by little the throttle crept forward under the sergeant's careful hand, until the man sitting on the tail to keep the ship from nosing up was compelled to turn his back and lean against the propeller blast. For a few seconds the noise of twelve mighty cylinders firing in rotation was almost deafening, and then as slowly as the motor had been turned on it was cut down to idling.

Tex and Hickman fastened their helmet straps and adjusted their goggles as Cary climbed out of the cockpit. The pilot adjusted his belt, tried both switches, and studied air, oil, and temperature gages briefly. He turned around and Hickman nodded that he was ready. Tex signalled the mechanics, who pulled the wheel blocks. There being no wind, he slowly pushed the throttle and spark ahead until both were wide open. A little pressure on the stick and the tail came up. For a hundred yards they roared across the ground, and then the hard-packed sand dropped away beneath them.

Tex hunched down further behind the windshield, as they circled the field, to escape the terrific pressure of air which was the result of their whirring propeller and a hundred miles an hour of airspeed. Two circles of the field brought them up to two thousand feet and assured him that the motor was running well. He banked around and headed north for the two hundred and fifty mile grind to Donovan Field.

There being no particular hurry, he

followed the railroad. It was thirty miles shorter to fly an airline straight across the mesquite, but along the railroad there were a few fields which might be possible landing places if the motor cut out. To the border patrol flyer, accustomed to gamble his life against his motor as he flew for hours over trackless mesquite, it seemed very comfortable to have any cleared places at all below him.

It was thoroughly characteristic of Tex to take the railroad course instead of the airline, although the average person who knew him would expect him to take a chance on the shorter but more dangerous route. He had won his reputation as the premier pilot of the border by a succession of brilliant, often reckless, flying achievements. A dozen times his fellow pilots had watched him stall down in a DeHaviland, than which there is no more ticklish or expert bit of flying, and gasped at the chance he was taking. But in doing that he was depending on his ability to handle the ship.

Should he take the airline to San Antonio, no skill of his could save a crackup, perhaps death to both passengers, in the event of a forced landing in the thick mesquite. Consequently, inasmuch as there was no need for haste, he did the safest thing.

Tex possessed, unconsciously perhaps, a great confidence in himself that was the result of experience and self-knowledge, minus conceit. Nine out of ten people who knew him only by reputation would have rubbed their eyes with wonder that he should take the safest course. When Tex became reckless, it was a calculating recklessness that depended little on the infallibility of an airplane motor and much on the flying ability of Tex MacDowell.

A half-hour, and the ship had climbed gradually to five thousand feet. The edge of the mesquite wilderness, a hundred and fifty miles long, slipped behind them. To the left, as far as the eye could see, the scrubby forest of

grayish-green billowed away to the skyline. The ship was slightly right-wing heavy, but nevertheless the sturdy motor drew it through the air at a hundred miles an hour, even though it was throttled down to fifteen hundred revolutions a minute. Once in a while Tex was compelled to pump the air, which failed to hold up to three pounds, but otherwise the old ship seemed to have escaped the effects of age.

The last fifty miles of the trip, which were over more open country, were rather bumpy, as the rapidly heating atmosphere started currents of warm and cold air that reached even to five thousand feet. Both airmen were glad to see the level expanse of Donovan Field come into view, the mile-long rows of hangars, barracks and machine shops standing out vividly white against the green. Tex started to dive when he was still ten miles from the field, throttling his motor to twelve hundred. By taking a long, gradual dive with motor partly on, overfast cooling was prevented, and the sparkplugs would not foul. Right to the last the great Liberty did its duty—every gage read correctly as the big ship shot over the southern edge of Donovan Field and the motor went full on again.

Tex circled the field at five hundred feet to look at the landing T. It was pointing southeast. He sideslipped over the hangars and with instinctive judgment leveled out less than two feet above the ground. The speed dropped to seventy-five, then to seventy miles an hour. For just an instant the ship seemed to hover and the pilot jerked back on the stick. The tail came down and they landed smoothly.

AS they taxied to the line opposite hangar 11, where visiting ships were always taken care of, the two border pilots looked around them appreciatively. After the small, difficult air-drome at McMullen it was almost imposing even to them to watch a dozen ships at a time landing and taking off

all around the mile-square field about them.

They found a niche on the line between a little S. E. 5 and a low-hung, wicked-looking Le Père. As they climbed out Lieutenant Harrow, one of the assistant adjutants, and two civilians approached quickly. They were standing beside the border ship before mechanics had a chance to get blocks under the wheels. Tex nodded to Harrow, and then shut off his gas flow. After a half-minute the motor gurgled and spit, and then the propeller gradually stopped. He snapped off the switches—he had run the gas out to prevent back-firing—and crawled out.

"Hello, Harrow," he greeted the Donovan Field man, who had already shaken hands with Hickman.

"'Lo, Tex. Just got Captain Kennard's wire that you were on the way a few minutes ago. Good trip?"

"Came by the railroad—2:45," returned Tex, expertly rolling a cigaret with one hand while he replaced the makings in his pocket with the other.

"Meet Mr. Snow and Mr. Crillon—Lieutenant MacDowell and Lieutenant Hickman."

Both the civilians, who were middle-aged men of commonplace appearance, looked at the airmen with considerable interest.

"Heard a lot about you two—in fact, saw you in the movies," stated the stouter of the two, who had a red face and a jovial smile.

"Yes, when George hung out on the wing so we could land without a wheel he sure made us matinee idols," grinned Tex, referring to an incident that had been caught by the camera man of a news-weekly.

"Well, did you bring in any booze, Tex?" inquired Harrow, his blue eyes twinkling. "I hope you didn't, because these two chaps are from the Department of Justice in San Antonio."

"What? Liquor?" asked Tex in horrified tones.

The stout man—Crillon—looked up

at the broad-shouldered, tanned pilot apologetically. MacDowell's mouth, which ordinarily had a whimsically humorous quirk at the corners, stretched into a grin and the crinkles around the keen gray eyes deepened.

"George, are you a bootlegger?" he asked.

Hickman shook his head.

"Not enough money in it," he replied confidentially.

"I don't know what got the chief started, but 'orders is orders' and we'll have to pry around a little, lieutenant," said Crillon.

"Help yourself," replied Tex, with a wave at the ship.

Their suitcases were wired on the wings, one on each side of the fuselage.

Snow, who had a pair of cold blue eyes and a cigar clamped in his mouth, immediately climbed up on the wing for a look at the cockpits. He had not said a word thus far except to acknowledge the introductions.

"What are you, an Army sleuth now?" Hickman asked Harrow.

"Representing headquarters," returned Harrow genially. "Get those suitcases unwired, will you, sergeant?"

Two of the mechanics, at a word from the sergeant in charge of the hangar, unwired the bags. Tex and Hickman smoked contentedly, watching the busy field idly. Scouts, bombers and training-planes were all discernible landing and taking off, and down the line the noise of many motors warming up filled the air with a low drone.

The two operatives, with Harrow watching them, took a brief look at the suitcases and then closed them.

"Guess you get a clean bill of health, lieutenant," said Crillon.

"Why the sudden access of virtue around these parts?" asked Tex.

Harrow shrugged his shoulders.

"Search me."

"And me," added Crillon. "This is my first shot at it, and the chief told me nothing."

"We might take this off," said Snow

suddenly, his hands on the turtleback which forms the top of the fuselage.

"All right," replied Harrow.

At a word from him the mechanics started knocking out the pins that held the turtleback to the fuselage itself. In a moment, with Hickman helping them, they lifted the wood-and-linen cover off.

"Well, for the love of Mike" said Hickman in surprised tones. "What's this bag doing here?"

Crillon and Harrow, suddenly serious, untied a small canvas bag that was hung from one of the top cross-braces of the fuselage. Tex, as surprised as his observer, watched Snow untie the string around the mouth of the bag and turned it upside down. A dozen tins rolled out on the ground.

"Opium!"

IT was a chorus—almost ludicrous in the different gradations of surprise and, in the cases of Harrow and Hickman, horror. A curious swarm of mechanics encircled the group and a few passing officers stopped to find out what was the matter.

Snow and Crillon quickly weighted the cans. They were all heavy. The top was pried off one, and the dark, sticky substance inside told its own story. With one accord everyone looked at the two men from McMullen. Tex and George glanced at each other quickly. In the eyes of each was an unspoken question—and the swiftly flashed answer was satisfactory.

"Well, I'll be damned!"

MacDowell's words were slow, almost gentle, but there was a curious change in his appearance. He lounged against the fuselage as easily as ever, cigaret in hand. The half-mocking twist at the corners of his mouth was still there, but the widerset gray eyes, slightly narrowed, were blazing with what seemed like the reflection of some inner fire. There was a lot of recklessness—a kind of fierce joy of battle there. Hickman's face was merely a

still-life illustration of horrified surprise.

Harrow touched the two flyers lightly on the shoulder.

"I'm sorry, but you will consider yourselves under arrest," he said, his lined face very serious.

Tex grinned, although his eyes were still shining with that savage delight in pitting himself against he knew not what.

"Don't cry about it, pardner," he said slowly. "Of course those damn cans are news to us as well as to you, but you can't do anything else. Where do we go from here?"

"To the old man, I guess," replied Harrow. "Do you gentlemen wish to accompany us?"

Crillon and Snow shook their heads.

"We've got no jurisdiction here. We're just nosing around to help out. Of course you understand that a full report will be made, and that if the civilian authorities wish to press the matter, providing they are not satisfied with the action taken by the military, it will be taken up later," replied Crillon.

The curious crowd of officers and men watched Harrow and the two border men start for the C. O.'s office. Harrow carried the opium, repacked in the bag. In some way the news had spread ahead of them, and as they traversed the wide concrete highway which ran between the row of hangars and the barracks and officers' quarters excited knots of officers and men met them every few yards.

"Good God, Tex, I'm afraid you boys are in a mess!" Harrow told them as they approached headquarters.

"Looks that way," replied George moodily. "Of course there is only one explanation, Tex."

Tex nodded. Harrow looked at them questioningly.

"You mean?"

"Fitzpatrick. It would have been easy for one of his men to get in the hangar last night and plant the stuff."

Harrow nodded.

"I thought as much. Of course we don't know much about what is happening down there, but a few seepings of gossip about the little tiffs you've been having with that old bird have filtered up this way. I hope you can convince the old man, Tex."

"I'm trying," Tex returned gently. "George, we sure are the prominent boys around Donovan. Look at that reception committee!"

Twenty-five or thirty officers were grouped around headquarters building. That Tex MacDowell, who in a few months had become the most talked-of pilot in the South, should be caught smuggling opium was an event not lightly to be overlooked. Hickman, the Texan's chief aid in his most widely known flying achievement, was likewise a famous character around Donovan, although few of the Donovan airmen except the older group knew either one of the border men.

Major Schaffer, operations officer of the field, hurried down the walk to meet Harrow and his charges.

"For the love of Heaven, Tex, what the hell have you been doing?"

"Carrying opium, they tell me, but I'll be damned if they didn't have to tell me before I knew it," grinned Tex.

"Going in to the colonel?"

"Yes, sir," replied Harrow.

The tall, lanky young major, who had a distinguished overseas record, put his mouth close to MacDowell's ears.

"Tex, tell me straight, as man to man. Do you know anything about this?"

Tex, his blazing gray eyes belying the easy carelessness of his manner, met the major's eyes squarely.

"Not a damn' thing, major."

"Then you think that Dave Fitzpatrick is behind it?"

"I know it!" interjected Hickman as they mounted the steps.

The group of officers parted silently. A few who knew these two flyers spoke to them in half-embarrassed tones. All of them saluted the major.

"Harrow, when you see the old man

tell him that I would like to see him on this matter—that I have something of importance to say concerning it," said the major in suddenly crisp phrases.

"Yes, sir."

Harrow disappeared into the adjutant's office, and in a few seconds came to the door of his own office, where he had left the three.

"The colonel wants to see you right away," he said. "Major Schaffer, he wishes you to come in at the same time."

The four officers, Major Schaffer in the lead, filed silently into the office of Colonel Mills. He was sitting at his desk, signing papers. He was a stocky, gray-headed man with a strong, square-jawed countenance and keen blue eyes that years in the Philippines and the Southwest had surrounded with a multitude of wrinkles.

The four came to salute, which the colonel returned negligently.

"Sit down, gentlemen," he said, and went on signing papers.

He stole frequent glimpses at MacDowell from under lowered lids as he automatically spread his signature on document after document. For months gossip from the border had indirectly reached his ears about the man who was now lounging easily before him, shirt open around his tanned throat and thick brown hair tousled from the wind. Both Tex and Hickman were oil-grimed and dirty, just as they had climbed out of their ship. They carried helmets and goggles in their hands.

Finally the colonel finished and leaned back in his chair, his eyes meeting MacDowell's squarely for the first time. The C. O. lit a cigaret, the while he appraised the Texan with puckered eyes.

"All right, Harrow," he said at length, his eyes shifting to the assistant adjutant's face.

Harrow told the story briefly and presented the bag of opium cans as evidence. A hum of conversation from the veranda of the small building reached the ears of the men in the colonel's office, and two or three times the C. O. glanced

up irritably. As soon as Harrow had finished he rung a bell, and Captain Peele, his adjutant, entered.

"Tell that bunch of damn gossips on the porch to get to hell away from here," he ordered. "Headquarters is no officers' club on this field!"

The captain departed, and the colonel looked speculatively at Tex and Hickman.

"You flew with the English during the war, didn't you?" he inquired suddenly.

"From 1914 on, sir," replied the flyer.

"Got three boche, somebody told me, Am I right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Hum. Well, what have you and your movie partner got to say about this opium deal? It would have been bad enough if it had been only whisky. Did you people at McMullen get the orders from Colonel Feldmore about carrying liquor?"

"Yes, sir," stated Hickman. "And neither MacDowell nor I know any more about how that opium got in our ship than you do!"

There was no mistaking the sincerity of the big observer's vigorous statement. Major Schaffer got the colonel's eye.

"Will the colonel give me permission to say a word?" he asked.

"Go ahead. I was wondering what in hell you were horning in on this deal for, anyway," commented the colonel dryly.

The major smiled.

"Here is what I wanted to say, sir, in a nutshell. You may or may not know that Lieutenant MacDowell here has twice come up against Dave Fitzpatrick. Anyhow, you know Fitzpatrick for the most powerful, unscrupulous man in the Southwest. Am I right?"

The colonel nodded.

"Well, for reasons dating from years back, this uncrowned king of the border is out to get MacDowell. Captain Kennard, a very close friend of mine, has told me the whole story. What I was

going to suggest, sir, was that Captain Kennard be brought to Donovan Field to present the case—I am sure it would carry more weight than if Tex—I should say Lieutenant MacDowell—told it himself. Personally, I have known these men some time, and through their C. O. I know them very well. I believe they are innocent. With Captain Kennard to give all the dope about how Fitzpatrick has tried to frame MacDowell before, I believe that we can convince you or a court martial of their innocence.”

The colonel smoked contemplatively for a moment and then made his decision.

“This case is open and shut. If for no other reason than the complaints which have come to us from San Antonio—rather mysterious the way they suddenly started, too—we must take every step to apprehend and severely punish any lawbreaker in the service. Nevertheless, I know Fitzpatrick, and I know good men—”

He broke off for a moment, his thoughts evidently far away. He threw away his cigaret impatiently.

“My mind is open on the subject. I’ll have Captain Kennard wired to fly up here this afternoon. Unless the matter is satisfactorily cleared up, of course a general court martial is inevitable. As matters stand now, you must be tried. You men will consider yourselves under arrest. You will report to me at ten o’clock tomorrow morning in this office. Harrow, fix up quarters for them and notify the provost marshal. That’s all.”

CHAPTER III

“That Skunk Fitzpatrick!”

THAT evening, obeying an order from Colonel Mills through one of his orderlies, Tex and Hickman reported to headquarters. They found there the colonel himself and Captain Kennard, who had flown in from McMullen during the afternoon. With them was Col-

onel Feldmore, Department Air Service Officer. He was a tall, spare man of middle age with a rough-hewn face and a wide reputation throughout the army. He was known as one of the fairest men in the Army—but a bad *hombre* if somebody ran foul of him. And he never set out to accomplish the complete and lasting subjugation of a man unless he had good reason for so doing. He knew his own mind, and changed it for neither man nor devil.

The two flyers saluted their three superiors, and waited silently. Both were now in full uniform, from stock to boots. Underlining the double-wing on MacDowell’s blouse was a row of ribbons—the Croix de Guerre with three palms, the ribbon with a rosette representing the Legion of Honor, and the British D. S. O.

“Sit down, gentlemen. We have called you here for a complete discussion of the incident of this morning.”

Colonel Mills stopped a moment as the noise of an automobile motor stopping in front of headquarters reached his ears.

“It is rapidly growing in importance. The newspapers tonight are full of it. It is something which for the good of the service—and I hope for your own good as well—must be plumbed to the bottom quickly. You realize, of course, what a blot on the service it has become already.”

Heavy steps sounded in the hall.

“No, never mind, son. I’ll just mosey right in,” somebody said to the orderly outside, and then the door was thrown open unceremoniously.

Tex leaped to his feet as if he had been shot.

“Dad. How in the world—”

The gray-bearded giant in the doorway grasped his son’s hand and pumped it enthusiastically.

“Just dropped in for a social call,” he replied with a rumbling laugh.

His twinkling blue eyes, set in a face the color of mahogany, looked the flyer up and down affectionately. The other

four men were on their feet. For some reason none of them, except Hickman, appeared greatly surprised.

"Now, what in hell have you been up to, you limb of the devil?" asked Mr. MacDowell, still holding his stalwart's son's hand.

Tex was big, but his father dwarfed him. He was six four as he stood, and must have weighed two hundred and fifty pounds without being fat. His huge black sombrero was pushed back on his head. His gray suit, soft white shirt and black tie were all of conventional cut, although a discerning eye might have noted that the shirt was silk and that the suit could not have been purchased for a cent less than a hundred dollars.

"Limb of the devil?" inquired Tex with a grin. "I've heard other people call you—"

"Don't get disrespectful," warned the old ranchman with his rumbling laugh. "What these here generals could do to you wouldn't be a patch on what your old daddy would accomplish when he got started."

"Excuse me. Colonel Feldmore, Colonel Mills, Captain Kennard, and George Hickman—my father."

Mr. MacDowell shook hands with them all. When he got to Hickman he stopped for a moment, twisting his plentiful gray mustache while he took a good look at the observer.

"Boy, I'll swear I get weak-like every time I remember seein' those movies o' you climbing around one of these damn airplanes. I don't know what this mess o' Lee's is that the captain wired about, but are you in it?"

George grinned.

"Up to the neck, sir," he admitted ruefully.

Tex glanced at the captain quickly. So *he* had got in touch with MacDowell, senior, had he?

"Well, let's hear the lay," demanded the old man finally, easing himself into the biggest chair in the office.

In concise sentences Colonel Mills told

of what happened that morning. While he was speaking MacDowell senior drew a package of brown cigaret papers from a capacious pocket, filled one of them with tobacco, and rolled it in the twinkle of an eye. He lit it deliberately. It was almost ludicrous to see so huge a man with so diminutive a smoke tucked underneath the flowing gray mustache.

"I sent for you for a reason that I will explain in a moment," said Captain Kennard when the colonel had finished. "I didn't tell Tex because I was afraid he'd object. I did it on my own responsibility, because I've heard a lot about 'Roaring Bill' MacDowell and I knew you could help us clear your son."

Mr. MacDowell removed the sombrero thoughtfully and placed it on the floor. His thick, iron gray hair stood up in terrifying disorder after he had run his fingers through it a few times. Holding the stub of his cigaret between his fingers, he turned and looked at Tex, who was sitting beside him.

"How about it, son?" he asked quietly.

Tex, his expression thoroughly serious for once, met his father's eyes squarely.

"I saw that stuff for the first time out here on the field, dad," he replied.

"Of course. Just asked you to have it on record."

He lifted himself to his feet, the other men watching him closely.

"Gentlemen, the idea of Lee's doing that is ridiculous on the face of it. I am not in the habit o' bragging about how much I'm worth, but I rise to remark that I can sign a check for a lot of money, and every nickel of it is this boy's whenever he wants it. He has always had all the money he wanted and could have had a damn sight more if he hadn't been too independent to take it. Taking all personal considerations out of it, why in hell would he bother around with a couple of hundred dollars' worth of opium?"

The old man looked around the circle belligerently. Colonel Feldmore, smoking quietly with his chair tipped back

against the wall, smiled to himself. He had heard much of Roaring Bill MacDowell.

"Now, George Hickman—"

"The same thing goes for him," stated Tex quickly. "We've turned down movie contracts as high as a thousand dollars a week, and George of course would have got most of it."

Captain Kennard nodded. He had seen the letters.

"It being settled in our own minds that these boys, not being complete and total idiots, wouldn't mess around and smuggle opium for what few dollars they could get—"

Roaring Bill interrupted himself suddenly and looked at the two colonels questioningly.

"Or maybe you don't agree. Speak up, colonel. What do you think?"

Tex was on his feet, the old half-humorous, half-mocking twist at the corners of his mouth.

"Dad, you're a helluva good rancher and cattleman, but you don't know the Army. If we have the colonel's permission, Hickman and I will go."

"Very well," assented Colonel Mills. "Stay in your quarters for a while so that we can get you by telephone if we need you."

THE two flyers saluted and went out. Mr. MacDowell watched them, his eyes twinkling. Colonel Feldmore nodded slightly, as if in approval at the tact displayed by Tex in withdrawing.

"Now, gentlemen, what is your open opinion about this deal?"

The ranchman was not to be dissuaded from the point at issue for even a moment. For the first time Colonel Feldmore joined the conversation.

"It is the opinion of both Mills and myself that the boys are innocent. In fact, we have stronger reasons for believing so than you will have until you hear what Captain Kennard has got to say, unless your son has written you regarding his dealings with Dave Fitzpatrick."

"Mammy Hannah! Has that son-of-a-gun of a boy o' mine been mixed up with Dave Fitzpatrick?" roared the old man in a surprised bellow.

"He sure has," stated the captain. "And—"

"Excuse me, captain. Before we tell you, Mr. MacDowell, the very peculiar status of affairs, I want to have you thoroughly understand this. No matter how firmly we, as men or Army officers, believe in the innocence of those two fellows, we can not fail to press the charges unless they are quashed by incontrovertible evidence. We can not simply say they are innocent—that they have been framed by a powerful enemy. The Army men may have been lax about liquor. Civilians in San Antonio—a few of them—have raised a howl. A couple of ministers have mentioned it vaguely from the pulpit. The Evening Post, in its report of our last dance, grossly exaggerated the illumination of the participants, for humorous purposes. To make things worse, a complaint to the commanding general of the Department was made, and strict orders issued. Finally, through some pressure, the Department of Justice horned in to help us out. They were on hand this morning when the ship from McMullen came in."

"If that skunk Dave Fitzpatrick is after Lee, he's got the power to start wheels turning in San Antone," declared the ranchman, the wrinkles between his eyes deepening until the bushy white eyebrows almost met over his prominent nose. "Probably that bird Snow was in the plot. He'd bear investigating."

"I don't doubt that. But you see where we stand. We've got to put up or shut up!" said Colonel Mills, taking up the thread of his chief's remarks. "Unless we can prove the innocence of the two lieutenants, it's bound to be a nasty mess."

"You're right, colonel. Now let's get the lay on this Fitzpatrick stuff. Twenty years ago, gentlemen, when that cold, brainy crook was a cattleman, I caught

him cheating in a stud-poker game at Palestine, Texas, and drove him out of the country. Since then he's become rich, I know, by every means known to man or devil. I've kind of lost track of his operations, but I know for a fact that he pulls wires down in that little Mexican joint he hangs out at that make at least one weak-backed, jelly-hearted, water-blooded nincompoop in Washington jump. Now, what about him and the boy?"

"Well, Mr. MacDowell," began the captain, "it's really a case of the deeds of the father being visited on the children, according to the dope old-timers like Sheriff Bill Trowbridge down at McMullen and Ayres of the Texas Rangers gave me. One time when Tex was bound for El Paso on a flying trip Ayres met him and gave him the news that Fitzpatrick was out to get him. Just what channels the news got to Ayres through I don't know. When Ayres found out that Tex was the son of 'Roaring Bill' MacDowell he figured right away that Fitzpatrick wanted to get back at the man who had been the means of his own disgrace by trying to run his son out of the country under a cloud.

"His actions have borne this out. He could have had Tex killed a hundred times, of course, by one of his gunmen. But there is nothing he has against Tex himself—there can be nothing. He tried one of his usual methods on him in El Paso—what he has done before to men whom he wanted to ruin. Three of his men—a Mexican, and two others named Searles and Beers—"

"Searles, eh?" interrupted MacDowell. "A damn good man gone wrong, let me tell you."

"Well, they got Tex into a poker game. Tex, through Ayres' warning, suspected the lay, but that infernal disposition of his to pit himself deliberately against heavy odds for the pure joy of taking a chance made him consent to play. He was watching closely for crooked work, and caught a switch in

the decks. He got four aces pat, and figured that one of the others would have a straight flush to beat him. Everybody dropped out but him and Beers. Beers urged him to put in a couple of thousand dollars' worth of I.O.U.'s, so that he could demand payment at once and prosecute when they weren't paid, I suppose. Well, Tex took a chance that Beers' straight flush would not be pat—he figured that would be too raw—stayed in the pot, and finally threw away one of his four aces and drew two cards, thus spoiling Beers' draw if he had an open end straight-flush which the two top cards on the deck would fill—either one of them, I mean. You see no one would figure Tex to do anything but draw one or stand pat."

A roar of laughter burst from the old ranchman.

"Did Lee do that? How much did he win?"

"Around twenty-five hundred, I think," grinned Captain Kennard. "Ransom, one of my observers, was there and helped Tex gather up the money at the point of a gun before the three crooks could squeal. You see what Fitzpatrick was probably figuring—to get Tex into debt, demand full payment, and perhaps through holding a club over his head drive him into doing something through which Fitzpatrick could drive him out of the border country and out of the Army in disgrace. Sort of crooked justice for what you did to him, Mr. MacDowell."

"Dave sure got it plenty up around Palestine," agreed MacDowell. "Great Jemimah, but I'll bet that two thousand hurt the old snake worse than taking his right eye, long's he knew who the boy was."

The old man was still smiling delightfully as he digested the full perfection of his son's achievement. He looked at Colonel Feldmore with twinkling eyes.

"I taught that young sprig to play the great game of draw poker when he was eight years old, colonel, but damned if I

don't believe the child is father to the man!"

"Apparently he's no sucker at the game," laughed the colonel.

"Not by a long shot—never was!" declared the ranchman. "He raised a lot of hell when he was around the ranch, but I couldn't very well object, havin' been somewhat of a poor church-member myself when young. I reckon it taught him something—nothing like experience."

He rolled another brown paper smoke, and his seamed and lined face gradually became serious.

"What you've told me, captain, is news to me," he resumed at length, speaking slowly as if carefully considering his words, "and in spite of the boy havin' come out on the big end of the horn once or twice, it's a damn serious thing for any man to have Dave Fitzpatrick out to get him!"

The three Army men nodded agreement.

"It was easy for Fitzpatrick to work this deal, too," said Captain Kennard. "By getting acquainted with some enlisted man his own employee could easily find out stuff, and slip in the hangar at night to plant the opium."

Mr. MacDowell nodded.

"Just what has happened, probably. Of course everybody that's been around Texas much knows that he's in cahoots with every bandit from Villa to Rentaria, and that he's got a gang of outlaws of every breed workin' for him up and down the border on his smuggling deals, but I'd give a pretty penny to know how many prominent judges, bankers and Government men are under his thumb."

The old Texan's eyes were on the glowing tip of his cigaret, and there was a reminiscent gleam in them as he continued:

"It worries me about the boy, because if there's any man in the world Fitzpatrick has reason to hate, it's me, gentlemen. And if he's planning to get back at me through Lee, it's time for the old man to get busy, pronto. There's

nothing too low and sneaking for Fitzpatrick, and likewise nothing too bold or bloody."

"I personally knew three men—two Army officers and a customs man—who got something on Fitzpatrick and bucked him. They didn't get anywhere, and furthermore they all left the country, in disgrace."

Colonel Feldmore nodded agreement with Mills' words.

Mr. MacDowell got to his feet as if he had come to a decision.

"I'm getting to work tomorrow to try and clear this opium deal up. Not only that, but to clean Fitzpatrick up. He's been allowed to get away too long as it is. Funny thing how those things'll happen—a city will sit back and let a gang of crooks run it for years and never get up gumption enough to throw 'em out. Makes me laugh to have New York and those towns laugh at Texas. Difference in circumstances, that's all. I've got a little influence around this part of the country, and I'm starting to use it. A hundred of Fitzpatrick's men have been caught, but never a time has the old rattlesnake himself been burnt. Now, gentlemen, how long are you going to give me to work on this before the boy is court-martialed? Hell! I wish he'd 'a' told me about this before!"

"That's the trouble with him," opined Captain Kennard. "Why, Mr. MacDowell, that young fool actually enjoys being in a mess! If there's anything in the world he'll go miles to live through it's a scrap of any kind. He's—"

"Chip off the old block," laughed his father. "Never got out o' hot water myself till I got married. There's nothing better than a good scrap, but when the boy goes up against Dave Fitzpatrick it's a cold deck right from the go."

"I know it, and I've got something to suggest," said the Captain. "Tex is our engineer officer down at McMullen, and it would be a good thing for him to take the course at the Mechanics School, anyway. Inasmuch as this happening today shows clearly that Fitzpatrick is

in deadly earnest about framing Tex, why wouldn't it be a good thing to order him up here, colonel, for that course, while he is awaiting trial? It would appear better in San Antonio, too, to have him right on the ground up here. Inasmuch as I think we all believe that it was Fitzpatrick who planted the whole deal, it's a dead cinch that he'll find ways to stimulate a continuous and loud bunch of protests if it appears that the case isn't being pressed. Tex will be away from the border, where Fitzpatrick's power is most absolute and where he would have every opportunity to plunge him still further into trouble, and his father here can start the wheels turning with a free mind. The idea won't appeal to Tex, but damn it, colonel, I think the world of that fellow and I know damned well that Fitzpatrick'll get him just as sure as hell unless we forget we're Army officers and look at it like men!"

The captain's plea was vehement and sincere, and both the other officers knew the truth of his words. Before they left the office that night it had been decided that Tex and George Hickman were to remain at Donovan Field, under orders, and that the time of their trial would be delayed as long as possible to give Mr. MacDowell a chance to use his wide power and influence to start things in motion to clear them from the charges.

"Understand, Mr. MacDowell," were Colonel Mills' parting words to the Texan. "As men we are behind you in what you believe; as Army officers, unless proof can be obtained to present to the court-martial, we must press those charges and there isn't a chance in the world of the two boys' escaping, I'm afraid, unless we can find something that will convince others of what we are already convinced of. If they got by the Army court-martial, you know that a civilian jury will be waiting for them."

"I understand perfectly, colonel," stated MacDowell senior. "Leave things

to me. I'll trim Fitzpatrick again like I did twenty years ago, or my name isn't MacDowell. Now let's forget it. Listen!"

With exaggerated care he tiptoed from one to the other, whispering a few words in each man's ear. Broad smiles spread over the faces of the three as they listened.

"Twenty-year-old stuff, gentlemen!" he said aloud. "So shall we take Colonel Mills' suggestion here and adjourn to his quarters? I've still got that car out here—it's in a bag. I crave to moisten up!"

CHAPTER IV

Trouble Ahead

IT was two weeks later when Tex, working busily in grimy overalls, was told that Major Stratton, commanding officer of the Mechanics School, wanted to see him immediately. Carruthers, officer in charge of the course for engineer officers, brought Tex the message, MacDowell was hard at work putting together the internal workings of a torn-down Liberty motor. The Mechanics School believed that for every lecture on the theory of motors there should be many hours devoted to getting the hands dirty and learning by actual experience.

"Good Lord, Carruthers, have I got to mosey down and clean up right now?" inquired Tex disgustedly.

"Unless you want to interview the Major in that spiffy suit of coveralls," replied Carruthers, who was a slight, good-looking fellow with a pair of sparkling brown eyes and a flashing smile that helped to make him one of the most popular men on the field.

He had been a senior in a prominent engineering school at the start of the war, and incidentally held one or two New England Intercollegiate records on the track.

"They may not be the glass of fashi-

ion," agreed Tex, carefully wiping and then wrapping up his tools, "but they're cool."

"I don't see why. They're so stiff with dirt you might as well be wearing a tin suit," retorted Carruthers. "I've got to report along with you, by the way."

"It's no hardship for you fashion plates in boots and breeches. Now we who labor with our hands—"

"Shut up and let's get started. I'll take you down to the quarters on the motorcycle so you can change."

Tex locked up his tools in a chest and then with Carruthers at his side walked down the long hangar, where dozens of students—commissioned and enlisted—were working busily under the guidance of instructors. Two lecture rooms at the far end were filled to overflowing with classes which were getting lecture periods. The Mechanics School was the mechanic-factory of the Air Service, and Major Stratton saw to it that production was fast and thorough.

Carruthers started the motorcycle and Tex folded up his long legs and eased himself into the sidecar. He showed no effects in his manner or face of the difficult two weeks that had passed since the discovery of opium in his ship.

In the Mechanics School itself, after the first day or two, Tex had effortlessly established himself as a "real guy." His whimsical humor, lack of conceit, and above all his refusal to allow the fact that he was in confinement for an important crime to affect either his sense of humor or his attitude toward his work, speedily convinced the busy young officers of the School that regardless of the fact that he might be guilty he was an addition to the gang. He won their money at poker, flew their scout ships as they had seldom been flown before and refused absolutely to discuss the charges against him in any way. Furthermore, no amount of pumping could persuade him to launch forth into tales of his achievements overseas or on the border. As a result, the attitude of the

School's young men was expressed by "Slim" Evans a few days after they had all come to know the man of whom they had heard so much.

"He may be guilty, or he may not," stated Slim around the mess-table one night when Tex was absent, "and personally I don't give a damn whether he is or not!"

Which attitude Tex must have noticed, but if he did he gave no indication that he realized his peculiar position among his brother officers. Right now he was wondering whether the wheels were beginning to move. Had MacDowell, senior, accomplished anything?

Carruthers sat and smoked while Tex quickly bathed and dressed. The young engineer, only a fair pilot himself through lack of opportunity to make flying his chief business in the Army, was secretly a profound admirer of the seasoned veteran who was one of his motor students. Being of a sensitive disposition, he realized better than most of the others just how much poise and cold nerve it took for the Texan to conduct himself naturally, and carve a niche for himself in the Mechanics School under the circumstances. Jack Carruthers was for Tex, hook, line and sinker, and as they sped toward headquarters for the interview with the major he was almost hoping that it would be of such a nature as would give him an opportunity to demonstrate his loyalty.

Both men waited with interest for the major to bring up the subject of the interview. For a moment, however, he insisted on discussing with Tex the advantages of a sideslip landing. He had seen him make a beauty that morning, and, unlike most high-ranking officers, the major was a real flyer himself, which meant that he was ready to discuss flying at all times when a kindred soul was around to discuss it with him.

Finally he came to the reason for asking the two men to report.

"Captain Barrett, from Washington, took a ship from here to fly to the Cor-

bett Ranch two days ago," he said. "We sent old Sergeant Correll along with him. Well, the captain got lost in a fog and landed near a town called Ausman, Texas, down on the Gulf of Mexico. It was muddy and he turned over on his back. Broke the prop, a wheel, jimmied up the rudder and various other minor injuries. The captain had to get back to Washington, so he left Correll with the plane.

"We've got to send down a ship with the needed supplies, and two pilots, one to fly each ship back. Our officers are pretty busy, so I figured it would help us out if we could pull you out of school for a week—you would just drop down a class, you see—and send you as one of the pilots, MacDowell."

"I'd sure like to go, major, but being a criminal—" drawled Tex with a rising inflection at the end.

The young major grinned.

"I know. Colonel Mills was a little afraid of doing it, but Colonel Feldmore said he was getting fed up on all the lambasting San Antonio was giving the Air Service in general and you in particular, and that I could send you and be damned to what anybody thought. However, we are going to make a concession to public opinion and appoint the other pilot—Carruthers if he wants to go—technically your guard while you're away."

Tex shook his head doubtfully.

"He's so little, major. My God, think what a temptation I'd be under to escape!"

"Get tough with me and I'll show you," threatened Carruthers. "I'd sure like to go, sir," he added to the major.

"I thought you would—your job doesn't give you much chance for cross-country work, and in addition your knowledge of motors may help Correll in fixing up the ship. It's been out there in the mud too long to be in good shape."

He reached over his desk and handed Tex a slip of paper.

"Here are all the directions for finding the field which Correll has picked

out as suitable for you to land on. It's practically next to the place where the captain cracked up, and about a mile out of town. Ausman isn't on most maps—it's just a little place, I guess, but a branch line of the railroad that goes through Barnes City has just recently been put through, according to Correll. You can follow that railroad to Acacia, and from there the branch line to Ausman, which isn't on our maps. It's right on the Gulf."

"When do you wish us to start, sir?" asked Tex, folding up the paper and putting it in his pocket.

"Tomorrow morning. Johnson will give you a ship. Better take a Jenny with an H motor—no use of taking chances with one of these overbalanced DHs on a short trip. You can land at the Government field at Barnes City for gas."

The young major watched the two flyers go out, with a satisfied smile. He wondered whether Tex suspected that his C.O. had deliberately pulled wires to give him the trip. Mrs. Stratton was a Texas girl, and familiar with what the name MacDowell had meant in Texas since old Roaring Bill had first become a cattleman back in the eighties. Not that Mrs. Stratton could remember the eighties, but her father had many a tale to tell of the old days when he and MacDowell, senior, and a few other hardy souls had fought their way by main strength to a commanding position in the Lone Star State.

The major himself was not in charge of the most important single activity of the Air Service for nothing—he knew men and he agreed thoroughly with his wife that in all probability Tex was a most unfortunate victim of circumstances. The C.O. turned back to his work in a righteous glow—that assignment would mean something to MacDowell in more ways than one.

It did, and in more ways than even the major could possibly have in mind.

(To be Continued)

Flyers of Fortune

By
Frederick Lewis Nebel

Gales and McGill, free lances of the air, stamp merrily on a Chinese dragon's tail—and backfire to the Siam Coast!



IF you'd been on the coast that year, anywhere between Shanghai and the Malay States, you'd have heard lurid, unsavory tales anent two soldiers of fortune—Gales and McGill, one-time lieutenants in the American air service. It began when these two birdmen, flying a battered hydroairplane, aided in manipulating the escape of a native prince from a vile dungeon in the neighborhood of Canton. They did it for a price, of course, and it was most unfortunate that during the rescue certain well-laid plans went to pot, calling for the immediate use of automatic pistols and resulting in a number of casualties for the other side.

Thereafter they were suspected of various outrages ranging from theft to kidnapping and on up to rank, raw mur-

der. On the Yangtse two attempts were made to blow up the plane, and one night in a black back-alley of Chinkiang McGill, carrying more liquor under his belt than was good for any man—especially in Chinkiang—got a flung knife in the ribs and almost passed out of the picture.

Then on a hot, sultry day, brassy with the glare of the equatorial sun, the populace of Bangkok, that maudlin, wicked, colorful city, looked up to see a silver-winged monster droning down out of the blue. A yellow-robed monk in a dug-out canoe, bent on collecting alms from the river craft, looked once and then headed for shore, where he took up a watchful position under a sacred Bo-tree. Sampans, house-boats and canoes scattered from the face of the

Menam River and drove to hug the protection of the wharves and the wooded banks.

The plane circled the city, its wings flashing in the sunlight, its motor roaring even above the din and clamor of the most turbulent of Eastern cities. Then it was over the river again, and suddenly it slanted. The motor died. Like a graceful bird, the plane descended. Its pontoons kissed the water, skimmed along free for an instant, then touched again and threw aside ribbons of milky foam. It missed hitting a sampan by no more than a foot, passed perilously between two anchored schooners, and glided to a stop in the lee of a dumpy river packet.

Bill Gales pulled off his goggles and turned to grin his youthful dare-devil grin at his older partner.

"Well, Mike, pretty nifty, that landing, eh?"

"Couldn't have done better myself, Bill. Got a butt?"

"Sure." Gales passed back a packet of cigarettes and chuckled. "That guy in the sampan we almost hit has made the shore and is still running. Well, here we are in Bangkok, just about out of gas."

"And not enough dough to get drunk on," supplemented McGill. "What a tough break!"

"Never mind, Mike. We'll get some somehow. We've been recognized by this time, and if it comes to the worst, these officials here will supply us with gas just to get rid of us."

"Ten to one they'll pitch us in jail and stick the old boat in a museum. Bill, this country is getting too damned hot for us and I don't mean the climate either."

"Cheer up, Mike!" Gales chuckled. "I know you miss your liquor, but cheer up. We'll anchor here and I'll get a native to row me ashore."

As a matter of fact, it was some little time before Gales managed to convince Bangkok's port dignitaries that he had no intentions of robbing the crown

jewels, murdering the King of Siam, or plundering Wat Phra Keo, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha.

But he did land, a long, rangy, bronzed young man, with twinkling blue eyes, a slow, engaging smile, and a devil-may-care tilt to his lean, hard jaw. Word that he had landed traveled rapidly, from mouth to mouth, from shop to shop, all the way from the European section downtown, through the reeking brothels and opium joints of the Sampaeng, on northward to the boulevards of the nobility. The houseboat-cluttered canals buzzed with wonderment at the arrival of the winged monster, and many white men along New Road shook their heads dourly and suspected the worst. For the flyers of fortune—Gales and McGill—had a past crimsoned by the broad brush of gossip and ill-founded rumor.

Gales, roving the city aimlessly, wandered presently into a gaming house in the raw maw of the Sampaeng. He was not there five minutes when a fat, heavy-lidded Chinese approached him and in a very direct manner asked him how much he would charge to drop a bomb on a certain gaming house at the other end of the district.

Gales laughed. His eyes twinkled merrily. He said:

"You've been misinformed, my friend. We don't go in for that sort of stuff. Sorry!"

He wandered out of the dive, weaved his way through the crooked, evil streets, and before dusk settled he had turned down three similar offers. When he returned to the waterfront he found McGill pacing up and down a rickety wharf in sight of the plane.

"No luck, Mike," he greeted. "It seems all these birds go in for nothing short of murder."

McGill, who was short and spare and nervously alert, with keen little eyes, stopped his pacing and jammed his hands to his hips.

"Bill," he said, "you should have hung around, dammit. About an hour

after you left a stranger came down to the wharf here and motioned me to come ashore. Maybe we've got a job."

Gales snapped a match to a cigarette and clipped:

"Shoot, my boy!"

"Sure. A white man, Bill, tall and skinny and not so healthy-looking, what I mean. But he must have dough all right. Looks and speaks that way."

"Mike, get to the point!"

"Gimme time. Here's the idea. We're to take him in our bus and head for the Gulf of Siam and look for a ship called the *Bangkok Belle*, which is bound for Saigon. All right. We're to land on the water near the ship and make signs that we want her to pick up our passenger. We can say he's sick or something."

"What else?"

"That's all, so far as details are concerned. He won't tell any more. Well, what the hell? Who cares? There's a thousand dollars in it. With that money we can stock up on provisions and fuel later on and run arms from Singapore to the insurgent tribes in the Celebes."

"Where is this angel?" asked Gales, interested.

"Be here at five o'clock. Told him to. I said everything would be O. K. with me, but I'd have to speak to you, too."

"O. K. by me," chuckled Gales, blowing smoke through his nostrils. "We'll shove off at dawn. He pays in advance and we load our tanks this evening."

At precisely five o'clock the slim, well-dressed stranger arrived at the wharf. He was in his forties, perhaps; a sallow, bony man, with large, pale eyes and a bad set of nerves.

"So you are Mr. Gales?" he smiled wanly at the younger of the two partners.

"Yes, I'm Gales. We'll be very glad to fly you."

"Call me—well, Smith. What does it matter?"

"Good as any," chuckled Gales lightly.

"All right, Mr. Smith. Tomorrow at daybreak. Of course, the payment in advance, you know."

"To be sure," agreed Smith, and turned away to cough brokenly. "If you'll come to my hotel I shall be glad to settle the matter." He sighed. "And we must get away as soon as possible. It is very, very urgent, I assure you. Someone . . . Well, to my hotel then," he ended.

G ALES and McGill worked most of the night on their plane. They loaded the gasoline tanks to capacity, put in fresh motor oil, and time and again drew a wondering crowd when they roared and tested their engine. When they both agreed that the motor was in perfect shape, McGill perched on the edge of the forward cockpit and rubbed his grimy face with a grimy hand.

"Bill," he said. "I think I'll just drop ashore for a little while and tuck a few drinks away."

"Go to it, partner, but don't get lost," was the hearty rejoinder.

So McGill set out to tuck away a few drinks. How many drinks he did tuck away remains matter for conjecture, but he returned to the wharf well after midnight singing a bawdy song and steering a wobbly course. He refused the offer of a sampan, fell overboard and decided to swim out to the plane. Gales hauled him out of the river, piled him into the rear cockpit and left him to sleep it off. At daybreak McGill was perfectly sober and primed for action.

"I feel like a new man," he explained, chafing his hands gingerly. "I needed that. Honest, Bill, you can get some good liquor in this here burg."

"Ready for anything, eh, Mike?" grinned Gales.

"Ready for anything, Bill!"

Both partners were in fine spirits when the man called Smith joined them. Gales was enthusiastic, eager to be off, and his boyish, reckless grin was

contagious. McGill was alert, crawling around the plane, giving a final and thorough inspection. Then Smith was helped into one of Gales' spare flying outfits and stowed in the front cockpit which he was to share with McGill.

It is pretty safe to say that no one in Bangkok expected them to leave so suddenly. Hence there was not much of a crowd to witness their departure. The roar of the engine did draw a few, however, and more came running down to the wharves.

Hooded and goggled, Gales sat in the after cockpit at the controls, a duplicate set of which was likewise in the front cockpit. He smiled to himself as his eyes roamed over the instrument board and the engine thundered. He saw McGill turn and arch inquisitive eyebrows, then pull on his goggles. Gales grinned back and nodded.

He was happy, eager, tingling all over. The thrill of the game never deserted him. He was a natural flyer, and fear in the air was something he did not know. As his plane began to slide over the surface of the water, gathering speed, he turned his head to watch the city of Bangkok sweep by. He waved joyously to the watchers on the shore.

Then he was in the air, driving for altitude. Soon the city of domes and spires and dank canals was below and behind. Ahead of him stretched the jungle and the Menam River winding toward the Gulf of Siam. The wind hummed by his ears, twanged and rattled in the struts. Smith had said that they should sight the *Bangkok Belle* in the vicinity of Cambodia Point. That would be four hundred-odd miles from Bangkok, and about five hours of flying.

When Gales' altimeter registered three-thousand feet he rattled the controls and saw McGill lean forward to take over the flying. Then he removed his hands from the joy-stick and his feet from the rudder bar and doubled in the cockpit to light a cigarette.

McGill took the boat up another thou-

sand feet and for the sake of variety volplaned, banked sharply and then zoomed up to six thousand feet, when he shoved the control stick forward almost to the instrument board and leveled the plane's flight. He looked around at Gales and grinned. Gales blew smoke through his nostrils and grinned back. Smith was white-faced and silent.

Neither of the birdmen had pressed Smith for other details than he had freely given. In fact, they had not even speculated between themselves as to the object of the stranger's mission. They were well used to mysteries. They were being paid to fly Smith over the Gulf of Siam, locate the *Bangkok Belle*, and get him on board. Right there their services were to end.

It looked easy. Nothing to it. Smith certainly wanted to get aboard the ship pretty badly, to pay their price. Well, that was his business, and it was their's to fly him there. After that—Singapore, and a fling at gun-smuggling.

McGill shook the controls and Gales took over the flying, dropping to three thousand feet and passing over a freighter that was plowing sluggishly through the waters of the broad Gulf. Directly ahead of him was the newly risen sun. He dropped lower, way down to five hundred feet, on down to three hundred and still lower, until he was fairly skimming along the wave crests.

McGill turned and shook his head and pointed his finger upward. Gales grinned his reckless grin, banked and zoomed. He drove up toward the clouds—up—up—and still up to ten and then twelve thousand feet and beyond. Then he volplaned to five thousand feet and drove on at an even keel, chuckling to himself.

It was a few minutes later that he noticed Smith rising in the forward cockpit. He saw McGill yank him back into the seat, and then he saw Smith writhing in what appeared to be nothing less than agony. McGill had

twisted and after throwing a puzzled glance at Gales, put an arm about Smith and shouted something near his ear. Then suddenly Smith was quiet.

A moment later McGill, his face twisted in a grimace, turned and tried to say something to Gales. Gales throttled down and leaned forward, cocking an ear.

"Cripes, Bill," McGill was yelling, "he's dead!"

Gales was abruptly serious. He was losing altitude and soared up to eight thousand feet before he throttled down and again leaned forward.

"Yeah!" shouted McGill. "Guess his heart was bum, Bill. Just before he passed out . . . shoved this in my hand."

Gales reached out and received a small square of cardboard about the size of a poker card. One look revealed that it was the photograph of a young woman—a dark-haired, dark-eyed, beautiful young woman.

"What the hell!" he exclaimed under his breath.

He bent a puzzled, quizzical glance on McGill, and McGill shrugged his own puzzlement and spat disconsolately over-side. Gales shook the controls, and McGill handled the flying, feeling not so almighty comfortable with a dead man beside him.

Gales looked at the photograph again, wondering what Smith's motive had been in thrusting the picture into McGill's hand. This was something they had not bargained for. Yet Gales was well used to meeting the unexpected. You get that way after you've flown for ten years. He leaned forward and tapped his partner on the head. McGill twisted around and throttled down to listen.

"Keep heading for Cambodia Point," Gales shouted. "See if we can pick up the *Bangkok Belle*. I've got an idea."

McGill, who had become used to relying on Gales' ideas, nodded and climbed another thousand feet. They were heading southeast down the coast

of Cambodia. Point Samit was on their left and Koh Rong lay ahead. Below them creamed the waters of the Gulf, and a barkentine was beating down the wind.

Clouds were gathering in the east and trooping across the face of the sun and huge rollers were breaking on the jungle shore far below. Off Phu Quog Island Gales, who was at the controls, sighting a steamer, bore down and shot close by with his binoculars pressed to his eyes. He could see an officer on the bridge wave. It was not the *Bangkok Belle*, however, and Gales zoomed and soon was tearing along at eight thousand feet.

McGill turned and swung a suggestive arm toward the dull clouds that were rolling out of the east. Gales nodded. The sun was obscured and the waters below were being piled high. The plane was driving into strong headwinds, high over Rach Gia Bay. Twice more Gales flew low to peer at outward-bound ships, but neither of them was the *Bangkok Belle*.

It was off Obi Island that he sighted a small vessel belching forth black clouds of smoke from a single funnel and heading northward on a heaving, foam-mottled sea. He indicated it to his partner, who was at the controls, and McGill swooped down and roared by in the lee of the rakish yacht, while Gales peered hard through his binoculars. Then McGill zoomed for altitude and throttled down at five thousand feet to shoot Gales an inquiring glance.

"It's it!" shouted Gales.

"But, hell, Bill," roared back McGill, "we can't land in a sea like that!"

"Know we can't. Say, Mike, search Smith's pockets and see what you can find."

McGill nodded, and Gales took over the flying, circling high above the *Bangkok Belle*. In a few minutes McGill thrust a handful of odds and ends back to Gales and indicated that he would handle the plane. Gales released the controls and examined Smith's

belongings. For one thing he discovered that Smith's real name was John T. Warren, a member of a Singapore club. Also there was a packet of blank checks bearing the crest of a Singapore bank. There were a few personal letters from friends in Yokohama, and some baggage stubs, but nothing that might reveal the man's business or mission.

Gales leaned forward and McGill, looking around, quieted the engine.

"Mike," yelled Gales, "I'm going to jump with the parachute and have that yacht pick me up. Meet me in Saigon."

"What's the idea, Bill?"

"Can't explain all now," trumpeted Gales.

That was all the explanation necessary between these two birdmen.

Gales began stuffing Warren's papers into an oiled, waterproof pouch along with an automatic pistol, some money and the photograph. His parachute, of course, was already strapped on, but he removed it temporarily so that he might wriggle out of his flying suit. Also, he removed his leather boots. Then he replaced the parachute, fastened the waterproof pouch to his belt and touched McGill on the head, motioning that he was ready to make the drop.

McGill nodded, took a look at the yacht and then shot off to the eastward so that Gales, when he jumped, would get the wind drift and be carried toward the lee of the yacht.

Gales climbed out of the cockpit and crawled out over the left wing. McGill was watching him out of the corner of his eye. Gales turned, the wind drumming in his ears and clattering his clothes. He waved a hand and grinned recklessly. McGill waved back and grinned too. These men had long ago learned to cover their inner emotions with a brazen, hard-boiled grin.

Then — suddenly — Gales was off, dropping plummet-like. A small bit of white ballooned out and an instant later the big parachute sprang open with a boom.

McGill was circling the yacht again and watching the descent of his partner. He grinned and spat sharply and climbed high up into the cloudy, windy sky.

Gales swung pendulum-like as he drifted down toward the creaming water. He kept up this motion, swinging his body back and forth so that when he landed the spread of the parachute would not envelop him. He struck well off the lee bow of the yacht and fought clear of the parachute, unfastening the straps with one hand while he swam with the other.

Free, he began swimming in a world of flying sea-spray and vaguely was aware that the yacht had altered her course and was bearing down to pick him up. Two seaman were standing in the lee bow—Malays, they were, scantily clad. The yacht drew closer, and one of the Malays braced himself to heave a line. Then the line snaked out and Gales grabbed at it, caught it in one hand and hung on grimly.

The first thing he did when he was hauled on deck was to look up and wave toward McGill who was still circling the craft. Then the plane spiraled downward, well astern of the yacht, straightened out and roared by. McGill flung up an arm as he passed and then zoomed away, heading north.

A moment later Gales was confronted by a short, stocky, blowzy-faced man who wore the braid of rank.

"Well," droned the captain, "what's the bloomin' idea of leavin' a perfectly good plane an' makin' us pick you up?"

"Just got tired of the air, captain," grinned Gales, wringing out his wet shirt. "Sorry if I've taken you out of your way, but I'll pay my passage to wherever you're going."

"This, mister," replied the captain, "is not a passenger ship. It's a private yacht."

At this point a tall, beady-eyed man dressed in spotless whites and smoking a long, mellow cigar, strolled down the deck and joined the skipper.

"Hello," he said without smiling. "You fellows will try stunts in the most unseemly places. What do you want?"

"Just passage to wherever you're going," replied Gales. "I'll pay you."

"I've been intending to drop in at Saigon."

"Suits me," nodded Gales. "I'd like to go into the engine room, if you don't mind, and dry up."

The owner of the *Bangkok Belle* eyed him stonily. He said:

"You puzzle me. Really, now, why did you drop from that plane and have us pick you up?"

Gales chuckled.

"I just couldn't get along with the pilot. He insisted on heading for the Philippines, and I wanted to hit the coast. I took a chance and dropped, thinking you might be able to land me."

"What's your name?"

"Gales."

The man's lips tightened.

"I've heard of you, and your partner, McGill. Well, Gales, I don't like your story. My name is Halsey, and this is my yacht, as you know. You will have to undergo a search. Captain, please," he said to the blowzy-faced man. "You know there are two gunboats hunting this man."

Gales stepped back, his hands knotting. The captain advanced toward him and two seamen closed in behind him. Recklessness was ingrained in Gales. No conservative man would have dropped from a plane in order to be picked up by a yacht on the supposition that he might find thereon some clue concerning the photograph of a strange girl.

Even now he made a reckless move. He dodged sidewise, leaped across the deck and sped aft on the weather side, tearing open the waterproof pouch as he ran. From it he yanked his pistol, spun sharply hard by the saloon wall and faced the two Malay seamen who had chased him from forward. The captain came lumbering after them, and Halsey was close behind the captain. All of them

brought up short when they saw the pistol in Gales' hand.

"You put away that damned gun!" snapped Halsey, dark with rage.

"You come forward!" flung back Gales. "Snappy, mister!"

Halsey advanced, biting his lips.

"Now," clipped Gales, "move fast! Lead to your room! My gun will be in your back. The first man makes a move I'll riddle *you*! Move, with your hands up!"

Halsey muttered an oath behind clenched teeth and entered the saloon with Gales close beside him. Quickly Gales turned the lock in the saloon door. He prodded Halsey, and the latter led the way through a carpeted corridor and paused before a door at the end. Here he half-turned, black anger in his eyes.

"You'll regret this" he choked.

"Open that door—fast!" clipped Gales and jabbed the muzzle of his gun so sharply into Halsey's ribs that the man grunted.

But he drew some keys from his pocket, inserted one in the lock, turned it and pushed open the door. Gales shoved him in not too gently, pulled the keys from the lock, entered quickly and, kicking shut the door, snapped the lock from the inside.

Then he saw a girl crouching in one corner of the elaborately appointed room, and he was instantly aware that she was the original of the one on the photograph. To her he said:

"Draw the curtains on the ports—quick!"

For a moment she stood petrified, surprise and anguish storming in her eyes. Then with a catch in her breath she hurried to draw the curtains on the ports of the three rooms that constituted the quarters.

"Now," went on Gales, "run through his pockets and see if there's a gun."

She did this, nervously, but found no weapon.

"All right," nodded Gales; then to Halsey: "You sit down and see if we can get this straight."

Halsey dropped into a wicker easy chair, the girl sat down on a plush settee built in against the starboard bulkhead, and Gales, his clothes still dripping, stood in the center of the room. He bent his gaze on the girl and asked:

"What relation are you to John T. Warren?"

She started forward, her eyes dilating.

"I—I am his daughter," she whispered hoarsely.

Gales bit his lip. What he had to say would hurt, but this was no time to beat about the bush.

"Miss Warren," he went on, "your father hired my plane in Bangkok. My partner and I were to fly him over the Gulf and put him aboard this yacht. That is all the information he gave us." He paused, steeling himself. "When we were two hours in the air your father died—possibly of heart failure."

A low moan escaped her lips and she wilted, covering her face with her hands.

"Brace up." Gales told her. "It's hard, but you've got to brace up. Before he died your father pressed a photograph of you in my partner's hand. It was the only clue. I had a hunch that he and the yacht and you were somehow related. I carried on where he left off. Now what can I do?"

She uncovered her face and sat erect with a brave effort.

"I—I don't see how you can do anything. I've been literally a prisoner aboard this yacht since it left Saigon. Just before sailing time I know my father was on board and in his stateroom. That night he was drugged and put off on the Menam River in a sampan. Both of us had considered this man"—she nodded toward Halsey—"a friend and had accepted his offer of a passage to Saigon. But—" she broke off in a sob.

"I see," nodded Gales, a little bitterly. He turned to Halsey. "So that's your game, eh?"

Halsey scowled.

"What about it? What can you do?"

Gales heard feet tramping about the

deck, and excited voices, and hands knocking at the ports. True, what could he do? The outlook was, indeed, anything but cheerful. Here he was playing a lone hand against overwhelming odds. His first move had been successful, but luck had been with him. Still, there was a chance . . .

He remembered that Halsey had said two gunboats were scouring the coast for him. Probably French gunboats. Indeed, as McGill had said in Bangkok, the country was getting hot for them—too hot. If the French got their hands on him, Gales realized that they would frame up something and no doubt give him a taste of a colonial prison.

He was in a tight predicament. Here was a girl in danger. She meant nothing to him in a personal way. He had no amorous designs on her, nor intended to have any. Yet she was a woman in jeopardy, and the old protective instinct was strong within the reckless, devil-may-care heart of Gales. He would try his best to save her. As for himself, he'd take a long chance and face a prison sentence.

"Halsey," he said, "I'm in a pinch and it isn't going to take much for me to blow your brains out if you don't move the way I tell you to. Get that! And listen. You write out a message to your wireless operator and explain that you wrote it by degrees while I wasn't looking. All right. Now tell him to get in communication with one or the other of these gunboats and tell him to make it plain in the communication that you've got on board Bill Gales, the well-known cut-throat of the China coast. Watch how fast they'll get here."

Halsey frowned and shook his head.

"Get started," warned Gales, and there was an edge on his voice now. "Write that message or as sure I'm headed for jail I'll kill you!"

The girl shrank back in awe. Possibly she too had heard of Gales and McGill and was a little frightened.

Slowly Halsey rose and crossed to the bamboo table. He sat down, picked

up a pen reluctantly wrote on a wireless blank as Gales directed.

"And add," pursued Gales, "that your men aboard should quiet down and stop breaking up the doors."

When the entire message was written Gales picked it up, scanned it quickly, and slid it under the door leading into the corridor. Then he helped himself to a cigarette from a humidor on the table and blew smoke streams through his nostrils.

A few minutes later there was a rush outside the door. But it suddenly calmed down, and a moment later Gales heard receding footsteps. They had no doubt found the message.

"You are doing this for me," came the girl's voice, tenderly.

The old sparkle came back to Gales' eyes. His weather-bronzed face crinkled in a broad, boyish grin.

"It's the only way," he said lightly, rocking on his feet.

The girl fell to sobbing again, and half-reclined on the settee. Her own predicament, the death of her father, was certainly enough to wilt anybody.

Gales sat down facing Halsey.

"We'll both wait now till the French navy arrives," he chuckled. "Your men on deck are probably having a great laugh over the fact that my doom is impending."

"You damned meddler," ground out Halsey, "I'll try my best to see you stuffed in the lousiest prison imaginable!"

"Pretty sore, aren't you? We both lose, Halsey. We've both played games, though you'll have to admit that my game calls for guts, while yours . . . Ho!" he ended derisively.

Thus they sat facing each other while the hours dragged by. The sea grew calm in late afternoon, as they could determine by the even motion of the yacht, and needles of sunlight pierced the curtains over the ports. It was hot and stuffy in the rooms, but Gales refused to open a single port.

Presently the girl rose from the set-

tee, brushing a hand across her forehead, and started for the water-cooler which stood in the opposite corner. She reeled, however, before she reached it, and Gales instinctively started to catch her.

Halsey, every nerve tense, saw his opportunity and catapulted from his chair. The girl caught her balance but her position prevented Gales from bringing his gun into action. Halsey was upon him with the agility of a cat, catching his gun-hand and swinging it aloft and bearing Gales back across the room in a mad rush.

Gales stopped short against the forward bulkhead, gritted his teeth and swung away. In close grips, they spun across the room, fell over a chair and crashed down to the floor. Gales' gun flew from his hand and slid across the floor. The girl, still seeming on the verge of a collapse, tottered toward it and picked it up.

The two men scrambled to their feet and began lambasting each other at close quarters. Gales was the quicker at this game, and in short time he had Halsey staggering blindly. The owner of the yacht fell away, breathing thickly, running perspiration. His hand closed over a whisky bottle on the table, and in desperation he hurled it. Gales ducked, but it caught him a glancing blow over the left ear and staggered him. Halsey cackled gloatingly and started for him, but the girl flashed:

"Don't! I'll shoot!"

He sagged to a standstill, his face twisted in chagrin.

Gales swung toward the girl and hastily relieved her of the gun.

"If there's any killing," he said, "let me." Then to Halsey: "Now sit down, you swine!"

Halsey dropped limply into a chair and Gales sat down on the settee. The girl brought him a drink and said:

"It was all my fault. I shouldn't have staggered like that, but I was a little faint—from the—strain."

"I understand," Gales smiled.

Night wore on. Gales snapped on a single electric light and then returned to the settee.

It must have been about eight o'clock when the three in the room heard a low drone from somewhere in the darkness. Then there was a roar increasing with the seconds, passing close at hand, and then diminishing. A few minutes later it grew again, then ceased suddenly. The engines of the yacht reduced speed.

Five minutes later there were footsteps in the corridor. Then the captain's voice:

"There's a French naval flyer here, a Cap'n de Armand, with orders from the Saigon base t' take off William Gales. They shot down his partner, McGill, off Cape St. Jacques."

"Poor old Mike!" muttered Gales grimly. Then he stiffened, and his hand tightened on his automatic. "Miss Warren," he said, "you'll walk out and go aboard the French plane. No argument, please. Get ready." He turned to Halsey. "I'll keep my gun on you for three minutes and then walk out to give myself up."

He gave the keys to the girl, and with a catch in her throat she went to the door and opened it. Halsey was standing now, and Gales was directly behind him with his gun against the man's back. The captain of the yacht started to enter, but Gales said:

"Not yet! Stay where you are!"

The girl passed out unmolested.

Three minutes later Gales lowered his gun.

"All right, Halsey. Perhaps you'd care to see me go aboard the Frenchman."

With that he strode out on deck, and Halsey followed.

In the lee of the yacht a big French seaplane was rising and falling with the gentle motion of the calm sea. A machine gun bristled under the white moonlight.

"Ah!" called a voice. "You have heem, *oui?* Be sure he have no gun, so! And ze ma'mzelle. I am astoneesh!"

Gales strode to the rail and with a hard little chuckle dropped his gun overside.

"Well, Halsey, the game's up. Without my partner, no use."

He went down the companion ladder, stepped to the wing of the big seaplane and crossed to the front cockpit. He dropped in it beside the girl.

Then the plane was off into the night, skimming along the moonlit water and finally lifting its nose and rising into the air. The big motor roared and the plane zoomed and climbed up toward the pale clouds. Then it was suddenly throttled down.

"Say, Bill," sounded a voice in Gales' ear, "didn't I act like a Frenchman all right?"

Gales spun around and looked into the grinning face of McGill.

"Mike!" he exclaimed. "What the devil are you doing in this official plane?"

"I was shot down off Cape St. Jacques by this same plane. I started swimming, and the Frenchman—de Armand—picked me up. Say, they were after us strong. Well, I got in a tussle with him. It was him or me, and I did him in. He had orders to get us. Started from Saigon on a wireless tip that you were aboard the *Bangkok Belle*. Had the wire on him." He was fairly roaring the information. "Smith went down with our poor old boat. I'm heading for British North Borneo. All right?"

"Good as any," shouted back Gales. "We'll see the lady aboard a ship at Saudakan."

"And then what?" bellowed McGill. "Who knows?" shouted Gales, grinning.

And McGill boomed:

"What the hell!"

Patrols of Peril

By

Frederick C. Davis

Tragedy and spitting lead fly swiftly in the wake of a joke with a startling climax on the brink of Eternity.



As he sat on the steps of the recreation house, Lieutenant "Farry" Fareton gripped the imaginary "stick" of an imaginary DeHaviland and rushed to the climax of his narrative:

"Then I saw it wasn't a bird, either. It was a kite! More than a thousand feet up, but down where the San Angela patrol would miss it. On the end of the tail was swinging a little box. I suspected right away the box was full of cocaine, but I was thinking then about the old air hack I was driving.

"Straight ahead and close, I saw a long, thin flash, reflection of the sun, and I knew the kite was being flown on a steel wire. Gosh! If I buzzed into that wire—zing!—it would maybe split

the propeller or at least upset the control connections. Quick as lightning I zoomed over it, with the propeller missing the wire by inches, and when I stalled into the field here, that funny kite was hanging onto the undercarriage, where it'd got tangled, like I'd wanted. I'd thought I ought to bring it along, you see. After that, it wasn't anything for the Cap to figure out where and how the smugglers had been getting their cocaine across the Rio Grande—"

A snore interrupted. Other flyers on the "rec" building steps, likewise members of the Cantilla flight of the United States Army Air Service, were catching after-lunch naps. Fareton's recital was on for the twentieth time, and they

knew it by heart. The event itself, in fact, was not yet months old. From the mouth of one Porky Stevens issued a yawn.

"And to prove it," Fareton hurried on, "I'll go get—"

"Throttle her!" Stevens' bark halted Fareton's stride away. "Stay where you are, Farry. I swear, I never knew another man like you, with a past composed one hundred per cent of narrow escapes, who takes along with him everywhere he goes a boxful of souvenirs from each and every one of said narrow escapes, just to prove he had 'em. You're a museum, all in yourself. And it's just my luck that I can't sleep through your chatter, like the other boys do, on account of my damn' insomnia."

"I've got to get the old stories off my chest," Fareton excused himself calmly, sitting again, "because I've got new ones coming along all the time. Hello!" he exclaimed. "Hope nothing's wrong with the morning patrol!"

Across the way the radio sergeant had burst out of the shack and run quickly toward Headquarters building. At the door he met Captain Horder and rattled out his message. For a moment the two men talked fast. Then the Captain hurried out.

On the field a reassembled D. H. had been warmed up for a test by the mechanics, and several flying shavetails were about. The Captain spoke briskly to them. They began to move excitedly.

"That's no check ride," Fareton declared to Stevens. "Come along, Porky."

The pair hastened toward the ship. Its propeller was already spinning, the four-hundred-horsepower engine roaring. The plane taxied off, inclined over the fence and deadheaded east. The sting of flying grit still on his face, Fareton turned to Captain Horder.

"Trouble, sir?"

"Something's gone wrong with McKeever and Thompson on the Silver Lode patrol," the Captain answered.

"Reports have been coming in regularly until the last one, a moment ago. The last report said that a strange plane had come out of a cloudbank, Mexico-ward. The plane opened fire on them—"

"Opened fire!"

"—opened fire with a machine gun—"

"Machine gun!"

"—And the message stopped there. The rest we'll know when Clark and Johnson get back," Captain Horder went on, his face pasty. "They've gone to hunt for McKeever and Thompson in the mesquite."

As the Captain strode away, Fareton and Stevens exchanged dazed glances.

"Porky, this is 1927, not 1917, any more. And this is the Rio Grande territory, not the Argonne—"

"I don't get it!" Stevens cut in. "I haven't even thought of a machine gun for more'n five years. Lord, I hope there's a mistake, and the boys get back safe."

Statistics with which flying service men are familiar say that every eighth man in the service is killed every year. The government insurance bureau is not instituted for no purpose; the Border Patrol understand that. To the dangers of the sky their nerves are immune, until the eighth man leaves his crate and keeps on arching straight into the stars, forever; then emotional and alcoholic orgies come.

Fareton and Stevens tramped back toward the rec house silently, until Fareton spoke.

"It reminds me, Porky. Did I ever tell you about the time I glided down in No Man's Land, forced down, and saw a Boche coming straight at me with his hog-sticker all honed and stropped? All I had was one hand grenade I'd picked off a buddy who didn't have any further use for it; and in the excitement I forgot to bite the plug off. There it went sailing straight at that Boche just the same!

"All he had to do was catch it and toss it back right, and I'd have blown away on the breeze. My subconscious

mind must have been working, however, because that grenade happened to hit the Boche right between the eyes, and down he went—to stay, I saw to it. That was a close shave! It happens I've got that grenade yet. I saved it. I'll go get it and show—"

"Don't do it!" Stevens roared. "Just try to show it to me, and I'll use it proper—at you!"

"What's the matter with you lately, Porky?" Fareton came back. "You act as though you'd been looping on a full stomach."

The question touched Stevens' depths. The change which blended through him was profound. The eyes he turned up at Fareton were sad.

"You and me, we understand each other," he admitted. "We both have felt the same ever since pretty Lieutenant Twombly was assigned to the flight two months ago—except that I feel worse than you do. At least, Julie had you up to tea once."

"Just once," Fareton nodded. "And Twombly has tea with her every day in the week!"

"I haven't never been at all," Porky repeated, "and I've got no prospects, either. I've got sense enough to know I haven't any chance with her. And anyway, I promised Minnie, back in Tulsa, that I'd marry her. I guess I just naturally hate to see a lady's man like Twombly get away with all his smooth stuff."

"My hopes are dying fast," Fareton observed, "but fighting for life. Speak of the devil, and also of angels—"

The sleek official touring-car eased to a stop before Headquarters building under the guidance of Miss Juliet Horder, the Captain's daughter. At once a uniformed man sped across the space from the rec building and received a cordial greeting from the girl. Fareton and Stevens looked away, their eyes smarting with the sight, but they heard the girl say:

"I'm sorry we can't have tea together today, Lieutenant Twombly—"

Fareton grinned in spite of himself and Stevens audibly giggled.

"—But if you'll come up at six for dinner, we can spend the evening together instead."

Fareton and Stevens cursed softly.

"Oh, good afternoon, Lieutenant Fareton!"

Fareton whirled, his face aglow. "Afternoon, Miss Juliet! Well, well, I've been wondering where you've been keeping yourself. I used to see you come down to bring the Captain home around four or five in the afternoon, but I notice lately the Captain's been going home alone, and—"

Fareton realized that he had stumbled into a conversational bog and hastily strove to extricate himself.

"I—I was just telling my friend, Porky Stevens, about the time back in 1917 when a Boche—"

"Oh, yes," said the girl sweetly. "I'm sure he was interested. I'll see you at six, then, Lieutenant Twombly."

Fareton came away dazedly as Stevens pulled his arm. Stevens exploded.

"You big fool! That's what queered you with her—your chatter. Do you think a girl invites a man to tea to hear terrible stories of how he rounded up a bandit gang with a nigger-shooter—and have him show her the very pea he did it with? Nix!"

"I guess I can't help it, Porky," Fareton sighed.

"And tonight it's dinner for that slick Twombly. Curse the day that brought him to the flight! I wish I could—I wish I could—" Stevens paused, meditating. "Sometimes I think I'd—"

Abruptly he turned and walked away, leaving Fareton puzzled.

THE exhaust of a powerful Lincoln motor had been beating through the air more loudly with each passing second. Now the plane stalled into the field from due east. It taxied to a stop while the mechanics mobbed around it.

Captain Horder hurried out of Headquarters, and close behind followed Warren, the flight surgeon.

The two men in the D.H., who had been searching the mesquite for McKeever and Thompson, did not at once jump out. They had burdens to lower. Others reached up to assist. Stretchers were brought, and, sheet-covered, two bodies carried away. Fareton sidled close while Clark and Johnson reported to the Captain.

"The D.H. they took out on patrol this morning is a wreck, sir. We found it in the mesquite, in pieces. We looked at the motor. The cylinders are cracked, by steel-jacketed bullets. We found one inside. There are twenty-odd bullet holes through the fuselage, sir. McKeever and Thompson—by some miracle, Captain, there was something of them to bring back. Riddled, sir—riddled!"

The Captain strode away, his face beet-red. Fareton whirled, and with the others pushed questions at the two scouts. Porky Stevens and the immaculate Twombly joined the circle together. Theories grew.

"There's only one explanation for it," Fareton asserted. "It's been only a few weeks since the cocaine smugglers were rounded up, and we know we didn't get them all. It looked like a family affair, that smuggling, and family affairs in Mexico get damn' serious. The Velenzos are hot-blooded, anyway. Now that the old man is in the pen, one of his sons might be gunning for us out of sheer revenge. Ever hear of a vendetta—?"

"Against the whole Border Patrol?" Twombly asked skeptically.

"Certainly! When Mexicans hate, I tell you, they hate. What's left of that little crowd hates us for breaking up the dope ring. Why shouldn't the smugglers be addicts themselves? Hate, dope, *tequila*—somebody crazy enough to unlimber a machine gun at us—and there you are!"

"It sounds im—"

Fareton sliced into Twombly's comment. "Does it? Well, how do you explain it? With help from all the tea you've drunk recently you ought to get up a nice lavender-scented theory about it!"

Fists would have flown at that moment, had not timely interruption taken away the possibility.

The buzzing of a motor was again disturbing the air. All eyes turned upward in the direction of the approaching craft. It was smaller than a DeHaviland. It was not preparing to stall into the field, but coming down with motor roaring in a full power drive. Its nose was pointed straight at the group on the field.

"That's not a service plane. It hasn't the markings."

"It looks like—my God above!" Fareton's voice shouted the warning: "Run!"

The plane was close now, and Fareton's startled eyes had seen a mechanical device mounted in the rear cockpit. Then a helmeted and goggled head had risen and, swung around, straight at them, was the bore of a machine-gun!

Like frightened chickens below a swooping hawk, the men on the ground scattered. In comparison with the dynamic sweep of the plane, their movements were far too slow.

Pr-r-r-r-r! Pr-r-r-r-r!

The machine-gun spat fiery death out at them!

Window-panes shattered. Bullets planked through the corrugated tin roofs of the hangars. Little spurts of dust jumped up from the ground in even rows.

And men fell!

Pr-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r!

Instantly the unknown plane zoomed up, climbing again into the blue at a steep angle. For a moment more it sprayed the ground with deadly slugs; then the sputter stopped. With incredible rapidity the plane receded.

On the ground three men lay still. Two others were writhing in agony. A

few muffled curses were audible in the tense silence. One of those only wounded waved wildly, as those unhurt rushed instinctively toward them, and shouted:

"Get that crate!"

Then came the squeak and rumble of hangar doors. Mechanics fluttered around. Two DeHavilands rolled out. Men climbed into the cockpits, two into each plane. In an instant the propellers were humming in a grim rhythm.

One and then the other taxied off, banked south in pursuit of the death-dealing craft, and crabbed after that mere speck in the sky.

Lieutenant Fareton stood backed against the door of Headquarters. As the hostile plane had darted down, his move had been to block the instinctive rush outward of the persons inside—particularly Miss Juliet. As he stepped aside, the rush came; and he hastened to aid the men who had fallen.

He threw his arm around Porky Stevens' shoulder.

"Thank Heaven, Porky, they didn't get you!"

"Damn it, Farry, they didn't get Twombly, either!"

The field was in a hubbub. The flight surgeon moved frantically. Those uninjured carried into the little board-floored tents the injured and the dead.

Under stern direction of her father, Juliet Horder drove the official car off the field.

After the first hysterical outburst, an enforced calm came into the air.

These names and others came from the lips of Captain Horder like so many shots:

"Lieutenants Twombly—Fareton—Stevens—Jackson—Rich—!"

Alertly the men ducked from the tents and responded. To them the Captain stated in crackling syllables:

"Three more men are dead. Five in all today! The two D.H.'s which have chased the armed ship stand very little chance. The most they can hope to do is locate the field from which the armed ship came. They may not succeed at

that. I'll be glad if they come back at all.

"We will stand as prepared as possible, under the circumstances," the Captain went on sharply, "if another attack should come. In the meanwhile the routine of patrol confronts us. Orders are to fly the patrols if flying is possible. It is not impossible yet by any means. The afternoon patrol between Bitter Creek and San Angelo will fly as usual."

"But—" Twombly cut in. Sharp eyes turned at him.

"It happens," the Captain went on more slowly, "that both Hennings and Fulton, who were to take the eastward this afternoon, are dead. King, who was going west with Harper, is injured. Harper will take the west alone. I will send only one man up for the east. I ask for a volunteer for the east patrol—"

A chorus answered.

"One man only. And understand that the machine-gun craft may still be up."

Twombly stepped out. "A moment ago I was about to state that I knew Hennings and Fulton can't take their patrol, sir. Some men—" his eyes shifted toward Fareton, who grew red of face—"some men might think I was objecting to the usual flight in the face of such danger. In order to offset all such suspicions, I ask to be allowed to take the east to Bitter Creek."

"Wait a second!" This time the treble of Porky Stevens interrupted. "Lieutenant Twombly is a newer man with the flight than I am. He doesn't know the patrol as well as I do, sir. I ask to be allowed to take the east—"

"Twombly will go," Captain Horder interrupted.

"I—I ask again—"

"That'll do, Stevens!"

"Captain Horder, I—I demand—" At a murderous glare from the Captain, Porky Stevens stepped back, his face wet with sweat. "I beg pardon, sir!"

Dapper Twombly turned briskly on his heel toward the tents. A D.H. had

been tugged from the hangars by the feverish mechanics and already warmed up. Twombly ran into his tent and loped back jacketed and helmeted, adjusting his goggles.

An instant after he was in the cockpit the propeller was singing. Then the plane taxied, lifted, stalled into the wind, crabbed off south, and deadheaded east. Until it became a dark star on a white sky all eyes kept to it.

Then relaxation came, and men dragged themselves wearily to their tents.

In Fareton's tent Stevens lay on the cot, and Fareton sighed.

"This man Twombly is a dude, but he knows the stick. Also, he has guts. He knows how to fly and—how to make love." Fareton slumped down in his chair. "If he was a rotter, I'd feel that I had some last chance with Miss Juliet, but he's a pretty good guy, and my chance with the girl isn't worth a plugged nickle."

Stevens moaned.

"What's wrong, Porky?"

"God, Farry—you know—ah, God, I couldn't have done a more damn' fool stunt than—what I did—"

"What're you talking about? Not your insisting on going up?"

"No!" Stevens opened eyes heavy with misery. "Farry, just before they brought McKeever and Thompson back, I took Twombly into my tent, friendly like, and gave him a glass of my ginger-ale. Well, I guess I was just naturally sore at his lording it over us so much that he stands in so good with Julie—Anyway, I thought it would be a good joke—just a good joke, understand—"

Fareton frowned. "What're you driving at, Porky?"

"Wait a minute! Wait till I get the nerve to tell you what a rotten fool I've been—that's all."

"Take your time," Fareton bade him laconically.

The purring of a ship's exhaust came faintly on the air. Fareton craned out of the tent. In the southwest two D.H.

planes were approaching, almost side by side. They stepped down to the landing space and stalled in. The pilots hopped out of the cock-pits. Captain Horder had come out of Headquarters again, and now received their report.

Crowding close, Fareton and Stevens heard.

"We lost it, sir. There are heavy cloudbanks down over the mountains, and the ship sneaked into them. We couldn't follow too close on account of the gun-fire. Also a little short of gas, sir. Sorry!"

"Be glad you're still breathing!" Horder grunted; and turned on his heel.

When they were together again in their tent, Fareton observed to Stevens: "Whoever it is in that Mexican plane, he's a flying wild man!"

Stevens again turned worried eyes on Fareton. "You think there's a chance they might try to fire on Twombly on patrol?"

"Sure there's a chance. Twombly knew it when he went up. We all did."

Stevens flung his feet off the cot. "Farry, we've got to do something, fast! I told you I wanted to play a joke on the dude. I didn't know all this was coming up. I thought it would be sweet revenge if I could make him miss that dinner-date. Well, you know about how I can't sleep at night, always, and have to take powders. Farry, by Heaven, I put two powders in Twombly's drink. It'll put him to sleep in the ship, Farry, as sure as you're cursing me now!"

FARETON stared. "Good God, Porky! That stuff's powerful! You mean to tell me he couldn't stay awake if he tried?"

"Nothing would keep him awake with those two shots in him! It's almost sure death for him, Farry! I—I tried to keep him from going up—you heard me!"

Farry jumped up. "Come along!"

They hastened to the radio shack and put their heads in.

"Sarge," Fareton demanded of the operator, "Twombly's reports are coming in regular?"

"One is overdue. It ought to be in any minute—if that machine gun lunatic isn't chasing him."

Fareton and Stevens, both paler, turned away swiftly.

"Porky, is it too soon for that stuff to be working on him now?"

"It is not!" Stevens answered tightly. "Right this minute Twombly may be—" and he finished with a shudder.

Fareton ran toward one of the D.H.'s which was still in the field, and signaled to the mechanic to warm it. They hastened out for themselves in caps and goggles. Fareton gestured Stevens into the fore cock-pit. Into the rear one he climbed himself. Before the motor caught, Stevens turned to demand:

"Farry, what's on your mind?"

"We're going after Twombly the fastest way possible!"

"But what can we do now?"

"If there's anything special to be done, little man, I'll do it. You keep your hand on the stick and do as I say!" Then came a word like an explosion: "Wait!"

He poised thoughtfully, then leaped to the ground. Running straightly for his tent, he ducked under the flap. In the plane Stevens fidgeted anxiously. No matter what could or could not be done, every second was precious now. In a moment Fareton dodged out of the tent again, ran back to the plane, and legged into the rear cock-pit.

Stevens froze his eyes to the controls.

K-k-rrrrrr!

Combined with the staccato notes of the motor came the ground rumble of the ship as it taxied around and nosed into the wind. Then with a gentle tilt the D.H. was skimming over the fence and fast leaving the patchwork of tents and hangar roofs below.

Stevens paralleled into the usual trail of the afternoon patrol to Bitter Creek. At two thousand feet Fareton's eyes

scanned the ground below, spotted, clumped with mesquite, the band of the Rio Grand curling across it. Scudding southward and northward at intervals, the ship went up to five thousand feet as the search went on. Then Stevens waved toward the northeast, where a plane was spinning evenly along toward them.

For minutes Fareton eyed the plane, half believing it an illusion. It was, however, real. As it came closer, Fareton saw that it was navigating uncertainly. It swerved and veered, and was not maneuvering in a usual manner. It seemed out of control.

Stevens glanced back and through the glass of the goggles. Fareton saw the horror in his eyes.

The plane, they knew, was running itself. No hand was on the controls! They knew that a ship which is accurately aligned and balanced will, if it is driven at the correct speed, fly on by itself so long as the air is smooth and the gas holds out. Both men realized that Twombly, feeling the drowsiness coming upon him, had set the controls to this nice adjustment. As they arched up they could see Twombly in the pit of the other ship, head hanging forward, but, even in sleep, braced back to keep himself from unconsciously pushing against the stick and so driving himself to death on the earth below. The credit for his still being in the sky was due to mechanical perfection and the grace of God.

The self-flying plane passed them, and Stevens banked to the left to chase it. When he leveled off Fareton bent forward, tapped Stevens' shoulder and signaled that he had something to say. Stevens throttled back and let the plane mush out into a glide.

"Porky, how long will Twombly sleep?"

"Hours!"

"Thought so! There's only one thing can be done. I've got to get onto his plane."

"What! You're crazy! You're no

wing-walker. You couldn't do it. You've got too much imagination. You'd slip off—and we're up six thousand."

"Under the circumstances, you're doing what I say! Listen to me! I've got to land on Twombly's tail. Give her the gun!"

The motor roared again. Stevens banked right and carefully crowded his plane closer to that of the free-flying D.H. As the two planes straightened out, Fareton divested himself of his jacket and climbed out of the rear cockpit.

More than a mile down, the crust of the earth was rocking giddily, floating on the sea of eternity. Hanging onto the struts and wires as he went, Fareton toed outward on the wing until he was hanging at the verge of space, at the tip of the wing.

Stevens, his face a pasty white beneath the leather of his goggles, complied. He caught Fareton's signal to close in.

The checkboard of the earth was careening. The fragile bodies of the planes and their death-flashing propellers were appallingly close together. A wind racing at more than a hundred miles an hour tore at Fareton.

Still Fareton kept his eyes on the tail of the loose plane as it swung closer. Sometimes many feet, sometimes only a few, separated the wing of the one plane from the tail of the other, while Fareton's leg stretched out, waiting for his chance.

In the cockpit Stevens gazed on it all as in a dream. A shaky move, a sloppy adjustment, a turn-out at the wrong instant and Fareton would go hurtling a mile down to death. Soon after Twombly's plane would also crash. Delicately Stevens moved the controls, and the planes weaved closer—while Fareton waited, leg outstretched.

Then a moment came when the tail of Twombly's ship levelled with the wing which was carrying Fareton; and Fareton swung out. Both his feet left

the wing. His hands still clung to the strut. Stevens grew frigid. The under plane bumped. Fareton all but dangled. Stevens gently swung over; and Fareton whirled off, falling astride the tail and punching his fingers through the linen for a hold.

Stevens frantically banked his plane away.

Fareton crawled rapidly up the tail of Twombly's crate, and fell inside the cockpit. Sitting on Twombly's lap, grotesquely high, he shot on the gas and the plane bored ahead steadily.

As Stevens arched to the other plane's level, Fareton waved broadly to him.

"Get out of the way!" this gesture plainly said. "Go back home!"

Stevens was too shaken to question. Gladly he complied; he banked right and bee-lined.

As Twombly's plane eased down again, Fareton strove to get himself in a position whereby he could work the stick more easily. Having done this he tried to arouse Twombly. But Twombly was not to be aroused. The man was as though dead.

Fareton leveled off again and headed into the wind.

Fareton's compass straightened him. By the time he had found the bearings for the plane, Stevens' own D.H. was almost out of sight. Taking it easy, Fareton throttled back.

Now an avalanche of emotion, in contrast with his coldness of a few moments back, came upon him. He shuddered, air-sick for the first time. He had never done a plane-change stunt before in his life and he had no desire to repeat it. His one wish, now that he was steadied again, was to get back to his tent and take a rest.

The ironic thought struck him that perhaps, if the man could be revived, Twombly could keep that dinner date with Miss Juliet after all!

He heard, close behind him, suddenly, the drone of another motor merging into the whirr of his own ship. He

glanced back—and the blood in his veins became as ice.

In the rear cockpit of the ship which was streaming straight toward him a leather-encased head was rising; and the bore of the machine-gun was leveling straight at him.

P-p-pr-rrrrrr!

WITH insane suddenness, even before the rattle broke out, Fareton dove. The earth tilted straight up before the nose of his plane. Through the haze he saw the Rio Grande full ahead! Fareton braced himself madly upon every possible support; he was loose in the cock-pit, without a strap, without a parachute! Downward he went like a shot, until he skimmed off to the south, banked east steeply, and climbed directly below the other plane.

Some of the bullets had penetrated the fuselage in the rear. Luckily the propeller was unhit; one bullet would have splintered it. Twombly was untouched; Fareton's fast drop had saved them both.

Pr-r-r-rrr!

Again a parade of steel-jacketed bullets raced across space at Fareton. He heard the slugs rip through the linen. Madly he stomped on the gas and drove the D.H. upward at a steeper angle.

Fareton knew that if he kept close under the other plane, the machine gun operator could not reach him. The barrel could not drop many degrees below the cowling of the pit. The other plane swerved and veered to get at Fareton, but Fareton, keeping his eyes always on it, duplicated its every move. His life depended on keeping the bottom of the other plane close above him.

This was a strange game of hide-and-seek with Death in the sky!

The gun-bearing plane swooped, and Fareton swooped likewise. Then the Mexican plane leveled off and Fareton, like a pilot fish on a shark, followed.

"I see! You're trying to make me ease up—think you'll catch me napping,

eh? You babies have got something coming you're not expecting!"

His hand dove into his pocket and brought out something black and pear-shaped. It was his precious souvenir hand-grenade, the one which he had forgotten, that memorable time in No Man's Land, to bite off, which had knocked the Boche out cold! On a wild notion, Fareton had run back to fish it out of his box of mementoes, just before taking off the field, on a wild chance that he might need it. Now he gripped it tightly.

He inclined his plane straight up at the other. Directly under it and very close he put the hand-grenade to his mouth, bit it off, and tossed it upward. At the same instant he dove, and the earth swung again before his eyes.

The shock of the explosion shook his own plane. Dimly Fareton saw flashing fragments streaking across his field of vision. The sudden push in the air made one of the wings of his ship crackle and the linen rip slightly.

In answer to Fareton's prayer, the linen held as he put the sky back where it belonged. The ground was very close again now. Then—

Ka-wewewewewee!

Another short crash, and the Lincoln motor screamed out like a dying thing. "Propeller's gone!"

A weighty fragment from the other plane had struck it and splintered it.

Desperately Fareton tried to glide down the remaining distance. He gave one glance at Twombly—still asleep. He shot a look toward the one right wing, which was crumbling. And then, all at once, Fareton passed from daylight into a darkness which seemed to reach into the depths of his soul.

He was glad, for he was tired. He thought, as he fell, that he would like to have a cup of tea.

FARETON heard Porky Stevens talking, and feminine voices answered. He blinked, but could see nothing. And at that instant something

warm trickled between his lips. He almost choked. It was tea!

He opened his eyes again, determined to see. On the other bed lay Twombly, patched with plaster, and at his side Miss Juliet Horder was giving him tea in a spoon. Fareton's eyes turned puzzledly to the girl sitting on the edge of his own bed.

The girl's blue eyes were straight into his. She was almost the double of Miss Juliet; except that she was prettier. Yes, bewitching as Julie was, this girl possessed an even more exquisite charm. As Fareton stared, he gulped down another spoonful of the tea which she was giving him.

"Also," Porky Stevens was saying, irreverently, "Minnie is coming all the way from Tulsa to see me, right away."

Fareton said bluntly, "Who're you?"

"Mariet—Julie's sister. I just came

in on the train today, for a visit—indefinitely."

Fareton swallowed more tea. "Do you ever serve tea—at home? You do? Well, may I come up, please—if I promise not to tell you about the time when I forgot to bite off a hand-grenade and saved it, and took it along up there just on the chance I might need it, and—Go-osh! I'm telling you already. Well, if I promise not to—"

"You may come to tea," Mariet said, "if you promise to tell me every detail of it." Her smile was dazzling. "You see," she added, "I'm a newspaper feature writer, and that's copy."

Fareton sank back contentedly. Then he blinked worriedly. He looked at Stevens.

"Porky!" he exclaimed. "Did you remember to bring back a piece of that machine gun for me—as a souvenir?"

PLANES UNITE ALASKA

Everyone recalls the epic drive of the staunch Gunnar Kasson and his great lead dog, Balto, in their soul-wrenching fight to carry the serum to disease-infested Nome. It was a wonderful battle, with a man and a fighting lead dog pitting their indomitable hearts against the fiercest blizzards of the northern tundra. They well earned the Red Badge of Courage. But such a man-killing, tearing battle will never be necessary again. The airplane has firmly established itself in the snowlands.

The human-driven hawks of the air have not supplanted the dog teams altogether for ordinary purposes, but where speed is expedient, the planes are in a class alone. Never again will the menace of a fast-spreading epidemic claim a staggering death toll because medical aid is not at hand. Never again will whole communities be besieged by a scourge of disease that runs rampant for weeks before proper preventatives can be had.

Much of the interior of Alaska has been opened up to air flight by the establishment of landing fields which stretch from Fort Yukon to Nome. Within another six months twenty-five air bases will be constructed with appropriations made by the last territorial legislation.

Fairbanks, the operating base of many planes that fly to the outlying districts, is but nine days travel from Seattle by rail and water. Most of the interior mining camps are inaccessible by mean of ordinary travel in the summer. In the winter, they are reached by comparatively slow-moving dog teams. But the plane has cut the distance in half and brought every section of America's great Northland closer together.

How to Get



An Air Job

By Jack Byrne

If you have the nerve and ambition to become a cloudman, this will tell you where to go to bat—and how.

BACK in the days when the clipper ships spread their great, white sails from Hudson's Bay clear down around the Horn, the youth of America heard the call of the sea—the whistle of a hurricane through the shrouds, the *boom, boom, boom* of the surf pounding a coral shore. They heard the call and they answered it; and with their youth and their strength and their undying courage they toiled till their new flag ruled the seas.

Then came the call of the West. The pioneer spirit that was Kit Carson's, that was Boone's, reached out through the land. Clerks put down their pens and joined the wagon trains; farmers gave up the plows to strap on their muskets. From every walk in life they came to battle with their wilderness. And they stretched their homes from coast to coast to rule the land.

The sea, first; then the land. And now they have come to that last great frontier—the air!

The advance man has made toward his conquest of the air is common knowledge. The development of heavier-

than-air craft from a purely experimental stage to its present place in the commercial world has been a part of our lives; in a sense, we have all grown up with it. We have come naturally to recognize aviation as one of the prime factors of the future—and the same pioneer spirit that conquered the land and the sea is impelling our young men to ask questions about it.

"Does aviation offer *me* an opportunity?" they want to know. And then they ask, "How can I take advantage of this opportunity? How can I learn aviation and get a job in the air?"

The answer to the first question is emphatically, YES! American aviation today has reached a good sound beginning. The countries of Europe may boast more widespread routes, may point to their greater number of planes and a greater volume of business, but experts now declare unanimously that this condition is only temporary. The United States has solved its air problem in typical Yankee style—and our unsubsidized, privately-owned companies form a solid basis upon which to build.

You, if you have certain definite qualifications, can help in the building.

The qualifications are simple and concise. They are:

- (1) *Good health and a strong body.*
- (2) *A common-school education, or better.*
- (3) *An interest in mechanics and a flair for adventure.*

If you have these things, and with them an impelling desire to pioneer in a virgin field, aviation offers you an opportunity to get in on the ground floor. Of course, everyone cannot be a pilot or a flyer any more than every man on the baseball team can be the pitcher. For every person in the air there must be at least ten men doing work on the ground, and many of you will find your opportunity there.

Aircraft companies will need Aeronautical Engineers, Mechanics, Motor Experts, Airplane Builders and Designers, Assemblers, Salesmen—and as the industry develops the need for men trained in this field will increase, just as it did in the automotive industry. And aviation is growing by leaps and bounds.

The second question—how to learn aviation and get a job in the flying game—is more complex and more difficult to answer. It would be best to divide the answer in two parts: (1) for the fellow who can afford to take a course in aviation instruction; and (2) for the fellow who has to make his way while he learns.

If you have between \$500.00 and \$1,000.00 dollars to spend, you can take a complete training in the theory and practice of aviation; and with this training you should be able to get a job that will repay your investment—and with interest. There are hundreds of schools and private operators who can teach you the business of flying. Several of our leading colleges offer technical courses for more advanced students. There are even organizations that offer courses in aeronautics by correspondence. The

prospective student has a wide choice.

Air Stories will be glad to help you in the selection of a school to meet your own requirements if you say the word.

If you have to make your way while you learn, you might well consider the chance that is offered young men interested in aviation by the United States Army Air Corps.

The soldiers of the Army Air Corps are offered intensive courses which not only qualify them for specialists' ratings and higher non-commissioned officer grades, but also give them a training that should enable them to make their way in commercial aviation after their enlistment is expired. There is also the opportunity for soldiers to gain appointment as Flying Cadets. The Flying Cadet's course qualifies the student as an expert pilot. At the conclusion of this course the student is honorably discharged from the Army and becomes eligible to take examination for an officer's commission in the Reserve Corps.

A typical example of the aeronautical training the Air Corps offers are the courses given by the Air Service Technical School at Chanute Field, Illinois. These courses are given to specially selected enlisted men and to recruits who are sent to the school before they are assigned to units. There are no hard and fast rules governing the entrance requirements, except, perhaps, the three primary qualifications we mentioned before. The School is divided in three departments: one of photography, one of communication, and one of mechanics.

The department of photography has been in operation for five years and is conducted under the most advanced methods. Opportunities in aerial photography are unlimited, both in the military and commercial sense. The work is interesting, varying as it does from the operation of motion picture cameras to photographing large sections of the United States and assembling the hun-

dreds of pictures thus taken into maps. Men trained in this work are needed in war times to map enemy territory in the same manner. In times of peace the aerial photographer is offered many chances for employment by the fact that these aerial maps are displacing blueprints in a great number of engineering projects. An aerial survey was recently taken of Chicago's lake front. Stretches of land that are heavily covered with undergrowth are practically all being surveyed from the air.

The course in the communications department consists of training for radio mechanics and operators. The use of radio in connection with aviation is gradually assuming greater importance in the commercial field since machines capable of making long ocean flights have been developed. It has always been of prime importance in warfare. Candidates for this course should be interested in radio work, have at least three years in high school or its equivalent, and, though not necessary, training or experience in any of the following lines is desirable:—radio operator, commercial telegrapher or electrician.

The department of mechanics offers training in a number of subjects, such as airplane and auto mechanics, aircraft armorers, and in the construction, repair and inspection of airplanes. This is considered the most important course since airplanes depend on their mechanical well-being. Requirements are a common school education or its equivalent and some experience in a line similar to the course taken.

These three courses all last about twenty-four weeks. In the first two courses, new classes begin every month; in the mechanics course, every second month. Chanute Field is located at Rantoul, Illinois, 114 miles south of Chicago. The training offered at this field is just an example of the training offered at the many other Air Corps schools. *Air Stories* will furnish further information in regard to these schools at your request.

If you can't afford the aviation school and the Army Air Corps doesn't appeal to you, then the only thing left to do is to hunt a job with an air-transport company or with some organization engaged in the manufacture of airplane parts and accessories. This way might be called the "back-door to aviation."

The "back-door" isn't the pleasantest way in the world to get in, but the fact that some of the biggest names in present-day aviation made their start this way, proves that it can be done. They learned the game from the ground up, started at the very bottom of the ladder—and what one man has done can be done again, if you've got the stuff.

When you consider the number of organizations operating commercial air routes, the increasing number of companies engaged in the manufacture of airplane parts, the widespread number of smaller companies engaged in aviation, it is easy to understand that there is a chance at the bottom of the ladder *now*. And the industry is growing so rapidly that every day sees that chance assuming larger proportions.

You want to appreciate right now, though, that getting a job in the air is a mighty tough proposition for the inexperienced man—the same tough proposition that the inexperienced man faces in *any* line of work. The only solution is to keep on trying and keep on fighting until you do get a job.

Go to some airplane manufacturing company or to some company engaged in commercial flying and try to break in with them. Take anything. Start as a janitor or a painter or an office boy—start at anything as long as you *start!* If you have the qualifications we noted before, and you have the desire to get in the air, you can *make* your job take you wherever you want to go.

Men aren't born into bank presidents' jobs; they fight their way up to them. It's the same in aviation as it is in any other game.

Air Hawks



True Adventures of the Sky Men

Jump! And He Did!

DEAR EDITOR:

The closest call I've had? That's pretty hard to say. Flying's like any other business. After a year or so, it all seems like part of a day's work. And the first half dozen smashes are the worst. Still, there was one episode in my army training in which it seemed as though "yours truly" had shouted his last "contact."

Was up in a Martin bomber, practicing bombing formations. I was flying No. 5 in the unit. Two of the other planes dropped out of position and I pulled up to No. 2. Our altitude was about 3,200 feet, well over the clouds. The leader signaled for a right-hand turn. I banked her and started over toward the ship next in line, all set to follow the leader on the turn.

Everything seemed fine when the plane in front banked up suddenly. His controls were all set for the turn when he struck that air bump. The controls simply didn't take and he came up with a jerk. To prevent a jam I gave her the throttle and started for elevation. Just as we began to climb I felt a big jolt and knew we'd been socked in the rear. Looked around and saw the aileron on the lower right wing was gone. In case you don't know, an aileron is a smaller wing or plane for

lateral balance; use them for banking on a turn.

I shoved the aileron controls to the left and jammed on my second motor to try and lift the right wing into position. No luck! The bomber went into a nasty spin and though I worked like the devil I couldn't bring her out. When we were losing altitude like a plummet I tapped my buddy on the shoulder and signaled him to jump.

As I climbed out of the cockpit myself I stole a last glance at my altitude meter, but couldn't read it. Working back on the fuselage. I let go with my hands, waited until I'd turned over once in the air and jerked the ring.

Landed O. K. in a patch of mesquite with a sprained ankle, about five miles from the flying field. That's about the nastiest one I ever was in and I don't want to try it again. Just doing nice, safe stunt flying now.

THEODORE HASSNER,
Newark, N. J.

Pulling a "Chamberlin"

DEAR EDITOR:

As an ex-army officer I was appointed to test a big twin-motored Fokker for a commercial air line. When I got to the airdrome and saw that big, cantilever-winged bird being towed out of the hangar I felt mighty proud. With a

confident roar I answered the mechanic's "contact." Those two 250 horsepower motors sounded pretty. We got off nicely into the wind and I taxied her easily across the field. Of course there's always some slight bumping before she takes the air, but I began to notice a regular thump from one of the wheels. Thought nothing of it and began to give her the gun to get up when she listed to the left and tore across a hummock on the edge of the grounds.

Got her up and was seeing how fast she'd climb when I noticed one of the single-seaters climbing on our tail. He veered off, reached our level, and began to signal frantically. My assistant officer spoke to me through the telephone and said it was probably the running gear. I held an even course while he snaked out on the wing and checked up. When he spoke through that phone again I began to feel damn shaky. Here I was with several thousand dollars' worth of air-machine in the air and a dangling running gear.

We had to come down some time, so I worked her around to the other end of the field, circling until I was into the wind. Just before I dropped I saw the ambulance draw up outside the enclosure. Cheerful sight. Flying low, banking heavily on alternate wings, I brought her running straight across the lot, almost on a level plane and losing altitude slowly. I heard a shouted "great stuff" through the ear phones. Then I brought her down, banking heavily on the left. There was a lurch, a sharp scrape, a couple of bumps, and the big baby was limping ahead across the turf, absolutely all right except for a crippled landing gear. And I fear it was mostly luck.

TOM SLATTERY,
Detroit.

A Duel in the Air

DEAR EDITOR:

Was performing with an air circus over San Diego when I thought my

time had come. We were going through a game of exhibition squadron maneuvers for the benefit of several thousand people below. We had fallen into the regulation V scout formation when the boss, who was piloting the lead plane signaled for a complete turn. I was in a Curtiss two-seater, an ancient hack that had seen its best days. The man at the throttle was an irresponsible cuss, a newcomer to the company, with a bitter grudge against one of our regular fliers. They were both crack stunt performers and their rivalry had become more than friendly competition. They were out to get each other.

As I watched the squadron wheel, I discovered that my pilot's opponent was on our direct left, and crowding us closely. My pilot refused to give an inch. I could see his eyes glint behind the goggles as he watched that other plane. As they swung into the turn, the wing tips were almost overlapping. Maybe it looked great from below, but that's bad business three thousand feet up, minus parachutes.

Too late they both pulled out of it. My pilot swept into a dive with the Curtiss. The other chap climbed. There was a scraping crunch, guy wires snapped, and there we were, half way to heaven, with a crippled left wing. I've always had a good deal of admiration for that lad when he got her down with nothing more than a pile-up in a ditch. But never again with these fight-to-a-finish boys who like to do their dueling in the air.

FRANK CONNORS,
Chicago, Ill.

He Couldn't Land!

DEAR EDITOR:

I've had a few close calls around a flying field, but it's always been something like tripping over a monkey-wrench or missing out on the mess call. But we had one good story down in Texas. There was a New York man down there, trying to learn flying at the

Government's expense, during the war. We'll call him Smith.

In the air Smith was all kinds of an aviator. Loop the loops, Immelmans, nose dives, tail spins, all were soup for this baby. But when it came to bringing a plane back to earth, it was another matter. In the air Smith looked like an ace. Few mechanics or observers wanted to go up with him. He just seemed to go crazy when he got up among the clouds with a joy stick in his hands. And he got away with that.

But when it came to bringing a bus down, Smith took all-comers' trophy for two-point landings on the wing and nose. He showed those air officers more ways of bringing a plane to the landing field than they'd ever imagined.

He'd a weakness for turning her up on her nose and cracking a fresh propeller. And he just couldn't seem to help laying her down on either wing. It wasn't because he didn't try, either.

Finally, the day he brought a new pursuit plane down and tore off the tail on a hangar, Smith was christened the "Great German Ace." He'd wrecked more planes than their crack airmen combined—"Two-Point" Smith.

LIEUT. HAL MCGREGOR,
Washington, D. C.

A Storm Stunter

DEAR EDITOR:

Tightest pinch I was ever in was at a time when there were about two thousand other lives in danger besides my own. Had picked up an old army De Haviland and was doing exhibition flying about the country. Signed a contract to do a three-day run for a county fair out in Ohio. First two days everything went off O. K. The old De Haviland limped across the fair grounds, staggered up into the sky and I proceeded to do my stuff to the tune of groaning struts and shrieking guy wires. But the fun came the third day.

Just before I warmed up the bus a

slight drizzle began to fall. I called one of the fair officials over and asked him about postponing the flight until the drizzle stopped. The visibility was poor and I knew just what my old taxi was capable of doing. But the fair committee wouldn't hear of such a thing. They couldn't see how rain would hurt and they wanted the stuff pulled off—or forfeit the contract.

I made up my mind I wouldn't die alone so I told them I'd go up if one of them went with me. After a lot of argument one fellow climbed into the cockpit. We got off all right and I eased her up gently, circling across the fair grounds. After the meter showed 2,000 feet I went into my first loop. Looked around as we came out of it and that passenger was green. Anything was worth it after that. Banked and turned a couple of times and went into a double loop.

Came out of that and I looked down at the crowd. They were gone. A heavy blanket of mist had blown in and I could feel the motor laboring in the wind. Just as I decided to climb above it, the old De Haviland coughed, choked, sputtered a few times, and quit. I caught it once and she began missing again.

Climbing was out of the question and I eased her along, unable to see the tip of my own wing, not alone the field. It was impossible to measure the wind drift. When she missed again and we'd gone into a nasty spin, I didn't even know whether we were flying right side up.

Was peering over the side, watching for that field. Suddenly a blob of red swam by, a concession tent almost under the running gear. Right behind it was a mass of heads, the crowd. Zooming open that throttle, I brought her around, swung into the wind and made a perfect three-point landing, not fifty yards from the line of onlookers. Never again!

CARL F. BISBEE,
Kansas City.

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Bonuses too! Carltonians are given extra rewards with regularly paid bonuses in units up to \$300.00. Your daily earnings are thereby given a real boost. Full details of the liberal Cash Bonus Plan are outlined in your sales outfit.

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- 3rd Prize 100
- 4th Prize 50
- 5th to 8th Prizes
(\$25 each) 100

Here's fun for every member of the family. This picture needs a title. Perhaps chewing Black Jack and enjoying its good old licorice flavor, although not a condition of this contest, will help you to find the winning title that fully expresses the story this picture tells. Everybody residing in the United States or Canada is eligible except employees of the manufacturers of Black Jack Chewing Gum.

• RULES •

1: Each entry must contain a title suggestion in 20 words or less and the name and address of the sender. 2: Contestants may submit as many answers as they wish. When sending in suggested titles white paper cut the size of a Black Jack wrapper (2 3/4" x 3 3/8"), or the reverse side of Black Jack wrappers may be used. Use one piece of paper or one wrapper for each title suggested. 3: All entries for this contest must be sent to "Black Jack Titles", Dept. 7, American Chicle Company, Long Island City, New York, and must be in before midnight, Aug. 22, 1927. Winners to be announced as soon thereafter as possible. 4: Titles must be sent first class mail, postage prepaid. 5: Originality of thought, cleverness of idea, and clearness of expression and neatness will count. 6: The judges will be a committee appointed by the makers of Black Jack and their decisions will be final. If there are ties, each tying contestant will be awarded the prize tied for. Study the picture. Think of Black Jack's delicious licorice flavor. Then send in your title or titles. Contest closes at midnight, Aug. 22, 1927.



WALTER BEACH HUPHREY

Give this picture a title. \$1000 in prizes