

JOHN GOLDFRAP

THE DREADNOUGHT
BOYS ON AERO SERVICE

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CHAPTER I

SOMETHING NEW IN NAVAL LIFE

One breezy day in early June, when a fresh wind off shore was whipping the water into sparkling white caps, excitement and comment fairly hummed about the crowded foredecks of the big Dreadnought *Manhattan*.

The formidable looking sea-fighter lay with half a dozen other smaller naval vessels – battleships and cruisers – in the stretch of water known as Hampton Roads, which, sheltered by rising ground, has, from time immemorial, formed an anchorage for our fighting-ships, and is as rich in historical associations as any strip of sea within the jurisdiction of the United States.

The cause of all the turmoil, which was agitating every jackie on the vessel, was a notice which had been posted on the ship's bulletin board that morning.

It was tacked up in the midst of notices of band concerts, challenges to boxing matches, lost or found articles, and the like. At first it had not attracted much attention. But soon one jackie, and then another, had scanned it till, by means of the thought-wireless, which prevails on a man-of-war, the whole fore part of the ship was now vibrant and buzzing with the intelligence.

The notice which had excited so much attention read as follows:

"Enlisted Men and Petty Officers: You are instructed to send your volunteer applications for positions in the experimental Aero squad. All applications to be made in writing to Lieutenant De Frees in charge of the experiment station."

"Aero service, eh?" grunted more than one grizzled old shell-back, "well, I've served my time in many an old sea-going hooker, but hanged if I'd venture my precious skin on board a sky-clipper."

"Aye, aye, mate. Let the youngsters risk their lily-white necks if they want to," formed the burden of the growled responses, "but you and me 'ull smoke Uncle Sam's baccy, and take our pay with a good deck under our feet."

But this state of caution did not extend to the younger members of the ship's company. Least of all to Boatswain's Mate Herc – otherwise Hercules – Taylor and his inseparable chum, Ned Strong, the latter of whom was now chief gunner's mate of the biggest vessel in the navy.

Neither Ned nor Herc smoked. By observation of those who did indulge in the practice, they had discovered that the use of tobacco affected more senses than one, and rendered a man incapable of the highest physical proficiency. The custom of smoking not only impaired the eyesight of many a gunner, but in the athletic sports, of which both lads were so fond, it also showed its bad effects. Ned knew of more than one promising young gun-pointer who had been compelled to relinquish his laurels on account of tobacco-affected eyesight.

As a consequence, the two trim, clean-cut lads, their faces bronzed and clear from sea air and clean living, stood apart from the group about the "smoke-lamp."

"I'm going to send in my name," announced Ned with twinkling eyes. "The aero section of the navy is going to be an important one in the future. There is a good chance for a chap to advance himself in such work."

"By the great horn spoon!" muttered Herc, in his enthusiastic, whimsical way, "I'm with you, Ned. We'll be regular sky-pilots before the summer's out!"

He began to rub his shoulder-blades, while a humorous smile played over his freckled, straightforward features.

"What's the matter?" asked Ned, noting Herc's brisk rubbing of the part aforesaid.

"Oh, hum! I thought I felt my wings sprouting," replied Herc, with a broad grin.

"Tell you what, we've a few minutes yet. Let's get our ditty boxes – or 'ditto' boxes, as you used to call them – and write our applications at once."

"Let's talk a while longer," said Herc, with an odd look.

"Why, what's the matter? Surely you aren't regretting your determination already."

Herc, for reply, bent over and touched his feet.

"No; they're not cold," he said; "I thought for a minute they were." Then he looked up into the cloudless blue vault of the heavens.

"Say, Ned, it's an awful long way up there, isn't it? How far, I wonder?"

"What do you want to know for?" asked Ned, moving away.

"Oh, nothing. Only I'd like to know how far we are likely to tumble, in case we get our applications accepted, and in case we fly as high as the sky, and in case – "

"Oh, come on, Herc," urged Ned; "time enough to worry about that when we are assigned to aero duty."

"All that goes up must come down," said Herc sagely, joining Ned nevertheless, "but we've reversed the process."

"How do you make that out?"

"Well, when we were on submarine duty we explored the bottom of the sea, didn't we? And now, if all goes well, we're going to venture aloft."

Ned burst into a laugh, and they moved off arm in arm, exchanging greetings with the crowd of blue jackets lounging about at the after-dinner rest. As they threaded their way among them, Herc burst into song:

"'There's a sweet little cherub that sits up aloft!' That's me, Ned."

"First freckled cherub I ever heard of," chuckled Ned.

Leaving the two lads to write their letters, we feel that it is now our duty to let our readers know something more about Ned Strong and Herc Taylor. They are two lads worth knowing. Neither of them much over eighteen years of age, they had, during their short career in the navy, each made his mark in no uncertain fashion. In his chosen branch of the service, Ned Strong was admired by the officers and adored by the men. His advance had been rapid, and some of his more enthusiastic friends were already hinting at a commission in sight for him in the time to come.

As for the merry, light-hearted Herc Taylor, that befreckled youth had as many friends among officers and men as Ned, and was one of the youngest bos'un's mates in the navy.

As readers of the Dreadnought Boys series know, both lads had entered the navy, like so many other "likely" recruits, from a farm. From the first a measure of luck had been theirs. But dogged perseverance, and a determination to overcome all obstacles by honorable means, had, also, aided them not a little in their rapid advance.

In "*The Dreadnought Boys on Battle Practice*," we followed the early steps of their life in the navy. It was not all as pleasant as they had imagined it would be. To the boys, as "rookies," much hard, and not over-pleasant work, fell. But scrubbing decks, cleaning paint and the like, they accepted in good part. "It's helping to keep our \$5,000,000 home trim and fit," was the way Ned used to put it.

A ship's bully tried his best to make their paths thorny, but Ned, in a battle that will live long in fore-castle annals, bested him. Kennell tried to take a despicable revenge. With a gang of rascals, he concerned himself in a plot to injure the Dreadnought Boys. But his machinations came to naught. Instead, Ned became the means of saving the inventor of a new explosive and type of gun from a serious predicament. Right after this, Herc's turn came, when he displayed wonderful heroism following a disastrous "flare-back."

Following the stirring days at Guantanamo, came a voyage on a torpedo-boat destroyer, the celebrated *Beale*. The two lads, on this cruise, found themselves plunged into the very thick of a

South American revolution. The uprising seriously affected American interests, and, by a stroke of good fortune, our lads were able to play a prominent part in bringing the situation to a successful outcome. In this book one of the many exciting adventures described was the lads' escape from a prison, when it was shelled during a hot engagement, and their subsequent daredevil dash on board a revolutionary torpedo craft.

By this time, although, of course, their participation in the revolution could not be "mentioned in the despatches," the boys had placed themselves in line for promotion. The eyes of their superiors were on them. But success did not spoil them or "swell their heads." They were still just as ready to fulfill an order promptly and cheerfully as in their apprentice days. As that is the spirit that wins in the navy, the Dreadnought Boys were singled out for some hazardous work on board a new type of submarine. Enemies of Uncle Sam nearly succeeded in sinking the diving boat for good and all with an infernal machine, but the boys providentially discovered the plot in time, and saved many lives. In that book, too, they had an interesting encounter with Sound pirates, and played a rather prominent part in the pretty romance of the diving boat's inventor.

The opening of this book finds them back on regular duty. Although the routine of battleship life in times of peace may seem tame and humdrum, the boys, nevertheless, devoted themselves to it with the same cheerful zest which had carried them through so many dashing adventures.

But the quiet and monotonous daily existence which they had enjoyed during and since the winter cruise to European stations, was not to last long. Although they did not know it, the Dreadnought Boys were on the brink of some most remarkable happenings.

"By the way," said Herc, as, their letters written and deposited in the ship's post-office, the two chums emerged on deck once more, "you haven't let this aerial business drive the recollection of tomorrow's races out of your mind, have you?"

He referred to some contests ashore, which had been arranged with enthusiasm by the officers and crews of the ships of the squadron.

"I should say not," laughed Ned. "Why?"

"Nothing, only there are a few chaps in the fleet who'd like to see us both fall down hard. You're in good trim, Ned?"

"I think so. Feel fit, anyway."

"I needn't have asked you. I know you're always in good shape."

"I can return the compliment," laughed Ned.

Just then the bugles began singing the calls for the busy afternoon's practice-work on guns and at drill. With a hasty word, the chums separated and hurried to take their places in the big machine of which they were already important cogs.

CHAPTER II

"IF HE'S A MAN, HE'LL STAND UP."

The passage of Ned and Herc from the foredeck in quest of their ditty-boxes had not gone unnoted by two men lounging at ease under the shadow of the great 13-inch guns projecting from the forward turret. The big circular steel structure acted as a wind-break, and the pair lay here smoking and talking in low tones.

"I'd give fifty dollars to know Ned Strong's secret," observed one of them, flicking the ashes from a cigar upon the spotless decks, a deliberate infraction of the ship's laws. Selden Merritt was one of the few "before the mast" men on board who smoked cigars. A pipe and a plug of black, rank tobacco usually does for your jackie, but Merritt was an exception to the rule.

"It would be worth it," agreed his companion, a heavily-set chap of about nineteen. His cap was off, and his black, bristly hair, cut pompadour, stood straight up from his rather low forehead.

Merritt was a man of about twenty-four, blonde, thin and "race-horsey" in build. He had the reputation of having been a college man and champion runner, until, losing prestige and reputation through dissipation, he had been forced to enlist. It had proved the best thing he ever did. Four years in the navy had given him a pink, clear skin, a bright eye and an erect carriage. But it had not taken a furtive sneer out of his expression, nor altered his disposition, which was mean and crafty. His bearing, however, was rather distinguished, with a certain swagger, and his talk showed that he was an educated man.

"Did you have much to do with them on their first cruise?" inquired Merritt's companion, Ray Chance.

"No, they were both enlisted men. But they managed to give a black eye, in a figurative way, to a good friend of mine."

"You mean Bill Kennel?"

"Yes. I hear that he's been pardoned from prison – political pull. But that doesn't alter the fact that they accomplished his downfall."

"Well, I never liked either of them. I heard about them by reputation before I came to the *Manhattan* from the *Dixie*. I like them still less from what I've seen of them on board here. I think this fellow Strong is a big faker."

"Yes. I'm sick and disgusted with him and the airs he gives himself. His dear chum and inseparable is almost as bad. I'd like to take a fall out of both of them."

"You'll get your chance to-morrow in the squadron's games. You can beat Ned Strong running the best day he ever stepped on a track."

"I ought to be able to, and I mean to do it, too. I don't like bluffs, and this chap Strong is a false alarm if ever there was one."

"Say, you fellows," suddenly interpolated a voice, "if you think Strong is such a bluff, why don't you tell him so?"

The interruption came from a short, stocky, little blue-jacket, lounging nearby. He had been reading a book on gunnery, but the raised voices of the Dreadnought Boy's detractors had aroused his attention. His blue eyes twinkled rather humorously, as he eyed the agile, long-limbed Merritt and his sallow, dark-haired companion.

"Hullo, Benjamin Franklin; were you rubbering on our conversation?" said Merritt, assuming an indignant expression.

"Ben Franklin" was the nickname given to the studious tar whose right name was Stephen Wynn.

"It didn't take any 'rubbering,' as you call it, to overhear you," said Wynn quietly; "if you take my advice, when you want to say mean things about Ned Strong or his chum, you'll lower your voice aboard this ship. They've got quite a few friends."

"Just the same," maintained Merritt, "the chap isn't all he sets up to be. He's got some secret, like all such fellows."

"I guess his secret is hard work and attention to duty," said Wynn rather shortly, returning to his reading.

"You don't seriously think that there is any chance of Strong's giving you a tussle for the first place?" asked Ray Chance.

"Frankly, I don't. But there is always a possibility of mistaking one's man. I'm wise enough to know that."

"But you have arranged in some way to make success certain?"

Merritt gave Chance a quizzical look.

"You know me," he said, with a knowing wink, "Chalmers of the old *Luzzy* (sailor slang for the *Louisiana*) is an old friend of mine. He dislikes Strong as much as I do. He's the next best man in the race. If things go wrong, we've got a little system arranged to pocket friend Strong. But how about you? You are pitted against Taylor in the pole vault, aren't you?"

"Yes, and I ain't worrying, you bet."

Merritt still retained a good choice of diction, a relic of his college days, but Chance's talk was more uncouth and less polished.

"Good! I don't mind telling you I've got some money out on myself. Enough to swamp a good deal of my pay, in fact. I've got to win."

"About the same thing here," grinned Chance; "if I lose, it's all up with me financially. I'm in pretty deep."

"Tell you what," said Merritt suddenly, "I hear that there will be extra pay and bonuses attaching to this aero duty. Let's send in applications, and then if we get trimmed in the races and jumps we will have a chance to get some extra coin."

"That's a good idea," agreed Chance. But as they started to carry out their intention, the same bugle calls that had hastened the steps of Ned and Herc recalled them to duty.

Stephen Wynn arose with a sigh, and thrust his book inside his loose blouse. "Ben Franklin" disliked to leave his studies for duty. But he was a smart sailor, and formed one of Ned's gun crew. Merritt and Chance were on one of the after turrets.

"Those fellows took care to sink their voices after they found out I'd overheard them," said Wynn to himself, as he fell in with the rest of the blue-jackets. "I'll bet that they were plotting some mischief to Strong and Taylor. At any rate, I'll put them on their guard at the first opportunity I get."

At three-thirty, or seven bells, the gun drills and calisthenic exercises were over, and a brief space of leisure ensued. Wynn, according to his determination, sought out Ned and Herc. He lost no time in communicating his suspicions to them. But, somewhat to his astonishment, neither of the lads seemed much impressed.

"A fellow who plots and backbites in dark corners is not one to be scared of," said Ned. "But just the same, Ben Franklin, I'm obliged to you. I guess we'll keep our eyes on our two friends, eh, Herc?"

"Not worth bothering with," observed Herc, "as the car conductor said when the fellow offered him a plugged dime. If they can win fair and square, we won't grudge it to them."

"Well, I've warned you," said "Ben Franklin." "By the way, what makes those fellows so sore at you?"

"Oh, Merritt, so I've heard, was a friend of Bill Kennell. He was the fellow, you know, who kidnapped Mr. Varian in Cuba. He naturally dislikes us for the part we played in apprehending Kennell. As for Chance, he was in my gun crew up to a few weeks ago. I had to have him up 'at the stick' for insubordination once or twice, and I guess it's stuck in his craw."

"If it hadn't been for you, Ned, he'd have gone to the brig," put in Herc.

"Oh, well, I thought that a taste of the brig would be too severe," said Ned. "I hoped a good wiggling by the 'old man' (the captain) would be sufficient, but it wasn't. Then Chance sulked and played sick. He took in the doctor for a while, but it didn't last. He was punished and restored to duty with an after gun crew following that."

"And blames you for all his troubles," said Herc indignantly, "and I guess I come in for a share of his dislike."

"Oh, life's too short to worry about Merritt and Chance," said Ned, breaking off the conversation. "It looks as if we'd have a glorious day to-morrow," he went on, adroitly turning the topic of talk. The ruse succeeded. The three shipmates fell to discussing the coming games. Others joined them, and the time passed rapidly till five-thirty, – three bells – when all hands were piped to supper, a plain but substantial meal. For the benefit of our non-seafaring reader, we will tell him that on this particular night it consisted of: – hot roast-beef hash, cold boiled ham, canned peaches, bread, butter and tea or coffee. Thus, it will be seen that Uncle Sam does not starve his blue-jackets.

Supper was in full swing when Ned, who was at the head of the table which seated his "mess," was the recipient of a surprising testimonial.

It came in the shape of a hot baked potato, flung with accuracy and speed. It struck the Dreadnought Boy in the eye, and burst, spreading its pasty contents over his features. Herc, who sat by Ned, leaped to his feet in a flash, while Ned hastily pawed the mass out of his eyes.

"I saw who threw that," cried Herc, his face aflame, the freckles looming up like spots on the sun; "if he's a man, he'll stand up."

A stir ran through the forecastle. Herc's finger pointed to a distant table and rested on the form of Merritt. Chance sat by him. Both had been laughing an instant before, but as Merritt saw that he had been found out his face assumed a rather sickly grin.

"Sit down, Herc," ordered Ned rather sternly, "I'll attend to this. Am I to understand that you threw that potato?" he demanded, fixing his gaze straight on Merritt's face.

The other's eyes sank. He looked disturbed and a bit scared. Ned's voice had held no uncertain ring.

"It – it was just a joke," he said. "You don't need to get huffy about it."

"Rather a strenuous joke, wasn't it?" asked Ned in a firm, calm voice, while the eyes of every man in the place were fixed on him in breathless attention.

"I – I didn't mean to hit you," went on Merritt. "I just wanted to give you a jump. It was just a joke – that's all."

"That being the case," resumed Ned, "I shall have to ask you to remove the consequences of your *joke*."

So saying, he deliberately threw the remains of the potato on the deck.

"Now, come here and pick that up and carry it back," he said, with a flash in his eyes. "We'll carry this joke through to its conclusion."

Merritt turned pale and hesitated. Then he caught Ned's eye. A certain glint in it seemed to galvanize him into action. Amid a roar of laughter from the entire assemblage, Merritt, red and white by turns, crossed to Ned's table and carefully picked up every scrap of the *débris*.

"What are you laughing at?" he glared at Herc, as he made his way back to his own place.

"At your joke," sputtered Herc, affecting a spasm of amusement. "Ho! ho! ho! That's one of the best jokes I've ever seen."

"It is, is it?" glowered Merritt.

"Yes, but it isn't as big a joke as it would have been if you hadn't done as Ned told you. Ho! ho! ho! It isn't every puppy that will fetch and carry at the first lesson."

The shout of laughter was taken up by the rest of the blue-jackets. Amid this storm of merriment, Merritt made his way to his seat. He reached it just as the officer of the deck entered.

"Merritt, what are you out of your place for?" demanded this dignitary, who was noted as a strict disciplinarian.

"I – I dropped a potato, sir, and was picking it up," stammered Merritt, trembling with rage and mortification.

CHAPTER III

FOR THE TROPHY OF THE FLEET

As Ned had prophesied, the next day was bright and clear. There was just enough of the coolness of early summer to give a crisp tang to the air. It stirred the blood like martial music. It was a day which challenged every athlete in the squadron to do his best. That is, so far as external conditions were concerned.

The ground selected for the trying out of the championship of the squadron was a flat field, some five acres in extent, not far from the shore. It stood on slightly rising ground. Trees, fresh and green, stood in a thick mass on one side. Seaward the ground sloped gently, and beyond could be seen the grim sea-fighters, swinging at anchor; from some of the smoke-stacks vapor curled lazily. The basket-like fighting masts resembled the work of some geometrically inclined spider.

Cheering and laughing, the contingents from the various ships were landed after dinner. In their midst, guarding them jealously, as bees would their queen, each ship's company surrounded their group of athletes. And a fine showing they made when they assembled in the dressing-rooms under the grandstand. This structure was already occupied by the officers of the division, headed by Rear Admiral Cochran, a white-haired veteran of the seven seas. A sprinkling of ladies in bright costumes lent a dash of color to the scene.

The course had been laid out, and the officers who had constituted themselves a committee in charge of the sports were already busy about it, when the *Manhattan's* boats landed their laughing, singing, cheering blue-jackets. Among them were Ned and Herc. Neither of them had yet changed to their running togs. Merritt and Chance had, however, but they both wore long raincoats, which prevented Ned from sizing them up, as he was anxious to do.

Both the Dreadnought Boys were quiet and self-contained as usual. But Merritt and Chance were talking loudly and flinging remarks right and left. Atwell, Turner, Simpkins, Jessup and a dozen other *Manhattan* entries in various events formed the remainder of the athletic contingent from the big dreadnought. As they entered the dressing-rooms – or rather the big space under the grandstand – a babel of cries of welcome and jocular defiance surged about the Manhattanites.

"Here come the champions of the squadron," shouted some one.

"Say, Jack, wait till they are champions before you start giving the title to them," hailed another voice. It was that of Chalmers of the *Louisiana*. He wore dark-green running trunks with a white shirt. Across his chest was a red, white and blue sash, on which was blazoned the name of his ship. Several of the other runners and athletes affected this touch of dandyism. Ned and Herc, however, wore plain running suits: trunks and sleeveless shirts and good track shoes.

Chalmers lost no time in seeking out Merritt. The two conversed in a corner in low tones. After a time, Ned and Herc, too, succeeded in getting away from a crowd of their shipmates and found time to pass a word or two.

Merritt had cast off his long coat to adjust his trunks. Ned found his eyes riveted on the fellow. If physique were any criterion, Merritt should have been a fine runner.

Clean-cut as a race-horse, his skin was smooth and of good color, with lithe muscles playing under it. He was the beau ideal in build of a speed machine. Chance, on the other hand, was heavier-set, but he showed up well in that assemblage of athletically built men and youths. Both Ned and Herc agreed that the two whom they instinctively regarded as enemies were by no means to be rated lightly.

But a sharp bugle call cut short further observation. The games were beginning. The hundred-yard dash was third on the program, and Ned did not emerge till just before the starting time. The wind was sharp, and he did not want to contract his muscles by letting the cold air blow on his limbs. Herc, in a heavy navy coat, went to the starting line with him. He stood by his chum, giving him

some last words of advice. Ned appeared to listen, but his thoughts were actually elsewhere. He had already made up his mind to his course of action. He was going to run a waiting race, depending on a sharp spurt to win.

In a quick glance over the six entrants, he saw that Chalmers and Merritt were the only ones he had cause to fear. He noticed them whispering together, and resolved to keep a sharp lookout on their actions.

The air was filled with shouts and suggestions and greetings from blue-jackets, who were encouraging the men from their own ship. Every man in the squadron who could be spared was there. They made a big throng, lining the track on the side away from the grandstand.

"Hey, there, Springer! Do your prettiest for the *Merrimac*."

"Oh, you Polthew! Don't forget the *Massachusetts*!"

"Say, Polly, look out for that *Manhattan* bunch."

"Hi, Chalmers, you're the man. You're carrying the *Luzzy's* money."

"That's right, and don't you forget it."

"And you, Strong! My month's pay's on you."

"You'll lose, then; Merritt's the man."

"What's the matter with Carter? Guess you'll know there's a *Kansas* in the fleet."

"Stand back, please! Stand back!" cried those in charge of the course.

The line-up was quickly arranged. The starters crouched ready to dart off. Carter made a false start, and the excitement waxed furious.

"Ready?"

Lieutenant Steedforth, of the *Louisiana*, the starter, put the question.

Like greyhounds preparing to leave the leash, the contestants flexed their muscles.

The starter lifted the pistol. A puff of smoke and sharp report followed.

Merritt, Chalmers and Polthew got off at the same instant. They made a showy start, and the grandstand as well as the field buzzed with enthusiasm.

Springer, of the *Merrimac*, and Carter, of the *Kansas*, came next. Strong came last, and was almost unnoticed in the frenzy of excitement.

The pace was terrific. In the first twenty-five yards Polthew and Carter dropped behind, hopelessly out of it. Far in front, Merritt, Chalmers and Springer were fighting it grimly out. Springer hung like death on the heels of the two leaders.

Ned had crept up, and kept his pace steadily. Suddenly Springer spurted. This carried him past Chalmers and Merritt, who were about even. But the effort had been made too soon. In a second's time he dropped back again.

The Dreadnought Boy knew that the two tricksters in front were going to concentrate on stopping him if he crept up too soon. So he crawled up till he felt it would be foolish to delay longer. Then, letting out all his reserve power, Ned spurted. His burst of speed was easy and genuine. It was not forced.

In a flash he was abreast of Chalmers before the latter could "pocket" him according to prearranged plans. Merritt, as he saw this, exerted every ounce of strength in his wiry body.

The jackies went wild. It was anybody's race, for now Chalmers had recovered from his surprise. Spurting, he caught up with the leaders. Spurt followed spurt. The air vibrated with cheers, yells, whoops and every kind of noisy demonstration.

Above it all, there suddenly rang out from the throats of the *Manhattan's* crew, one ear-splitting cry of triumph.

In the midst of it, carried on its wings as it were, Ned suddenly dashed ahead of his competitors and staggered across the tape into the arms of his shipmates. Chalmers was second and Merritt a bad third. Tobacco had found the weak spot in his heart. He was almost exhausted as he reeled across the line.

CHAPTER IV

THE AERO SQUAD

One by one the other contests were decided. The hammer throw was won by Melvin, of the *Idaho*, a giant of a man. Smithers, of the *Manhattan*, was second in this event. So the Dreadnought's crew continued to keep up their spirits. The half-mile was captured by Remington, of the *Louisiana*, while the mile went to Hickey, of the *Manhattan*, a man with hair of right good fighting red, and a great chest development.

Then came the pole jump. As usual, this picturesque event excited great interest.

Chance came first, and set a mark that made the other contestants gasp.

"You'll have to be a grasshopper to beat that, Herc," whispered Ned.

Herc nodded. "I'll do my best," he said simply.

"That's the stuff, shipmate," said "Ben Franklin," who happened to be close at hand, "as poor Richard said:

"You'll beat the rest;
If you do your best."

"I never saw that in 'Poor Richard' that I can recollect," said Ned, with a laugh.

Steve Wynn looked pained, as he usually did when any of his quotations was questioned as to its accuracy.

"It's in the book some place," he said confidently.

"Well, maybe it is," agreed Ned. "It's good advice, anyhow."

At last came Herc's turn.

Merritt had now been joined by Chance. With set teeth, they stood watching the agile lad from the farm prepare for his preliminary run.

"You want to watch closely now," said Chance, with an unholy grin, "you're going to see something."

"What? You've – "

But a horrified cry from the spectators interrupted the words. Herc had risen gracefully at the bar, and had seemed about to sail over it. Instantly bedlam had seethed about the field.

"Taylor, of the *Manhattan*, wins!"

"Good boy, red-top!"

"Go to it, freckles!"

But in a flash the cries of enthusiasm had been changed to that peculiar sighing gasp that runs through a crowd at a sudden turn to the tragic in their emotions.

As Herc had lifted his body outward to sail over the bar, the pole had suddenly snapped beneath him.

The horrified spectators saw the lad's body hurtled downward. Herc, as he fell, narrowly missed impalement on the jagged, broken end of the pole. But the lad's muscles were under prime control. Even as he fell, he seemed to make a marvelous twist.

The cheers broke forth anew as Herc, instead of landing in a heap, came to earth gracefully on his feet. He had not sustained the least injury, a fact which he soon demonstrated to the judges and other officials of the track who crowded about him.

"I tell you, it's that blamed secret of theirs," growled Chance, turning pale.

"We'd better get out of here," warned Merritt hastily. "Look, they are examining the pole. I imagine that they'll find it was cut."

"I imagine so, too," said Chance, in a low, rather frightened tone, as the unworthy two hastened off. "But they can't prove anything on me," he added defiantly.

In the meantime Herc had selected another pole. He examined it carefully and found it perfect. Bracing himself for the effort of his life, he essayed the jump once more.

He sailed over the bar as gracefully as a soaring sea gull.

"Chance is tied! Taylor's tied him!" yelled the crowd.

"Good boy, Herc," whispered Ned, as Herc prepared for a fresh effort. "Now this time beat him, and beat him good."

Herc set his teeth grimly. His usually good-natured face held an expression very foreign to it.

"I'll do it," he said. "And then," he added significantly, "I've got another job to attend to."

Flexing his muscles, Herc crouched for an instant. Then he hurled himself at the bar. He cleared it with almost six inches to spare above Chance's hitherto unapproached record.

If the field had known enthusiasm before, it was pandemonium that broke loose now. Like wild-fire, the word had gone about that Herc's pole had been tampered with. The spirit of the Yankee blue-jacket is keen for fair play. A foul trick stirs his blood as nothing else will. If Ned or Herc had breathed their suspicions at that instant, it is likely that, in spite of discipline, it would have gone hard with Merritt and Chance. But Herc sought another way.

That night word ran through the fleet that Hercules Taylor, of the *Manhattan*, had challenged Chance, of the same ship, to a boxing match, and that Chance had refused. Possibly he anticipated that Herc might lose control of himself and strike out a little harder than is consistent with "sparring." At any rate, from that time on, Chance was rated as "a flunker," which, in the navy, is a very undesirable appellation.

Herc, however, was the idol of the *Manhattan*. His winning of the pole jump had captured the athletic supremacy pennant for the *Manhattan*. It had been the climax of a day of triumphs for the lads of the Dreadnought. From thenceforth the big fighting craft was entitled to float both the athletic pennant and the coveted "Meat Ball," the latter the red flag for the best gunnery. How the meat ball was won at Guantanamo, readers of "*The Dreadnought Boys on Battle Practice*" are aware.

It was on a Monday, a week after the sports, that a line of trim, athletic looking, young blue-jackets were lined up in a field, some ten miles out of Hampton, and in the heart of a rural community. Off, at one side of the meadow, was a row of barn-like structures, painted a dull gray color and numbered. There were six of them.

These sheds housed the aeroplanes with which the experiments for the purpose of selecting a naval "aerial-scout class" were to be conducted. The eyes of the row of aspirants, who had been winnowed from a perfect crop of such applicants, were fixed longingly on the gray barns. They housed, not only the aeroplanes, but the ambitions and hopes of that row of young men – the pick of the squadron.

But there were more than twenty candidates for the scout corps lined up, and only nine would be selected. No wonder that there was anxiety reflected in their eyes, as Lieutenant De Frees and his assistants, Ensigns Walters and Jackson, paced down the row of blue-jackets, putting questions here and there, and weeding out those who were either too heavy or cumbersome for aero work, or else did not give evidence of the keen, hawk-like intellectual faculties that an airman must have. These include the power of instant decision in an emergency, courage of a high order, but not recklessness, and a mind capable of grasping the mechanical qualities of the craft with which they have to deal. As may be imagined, then, the task of the officers was not a simple one.

One by one, the eager applicants were sorted and sifted, till finally, the chosen nine stood shoulder to shoulder. Ned and Herc had both passed, although, for a time, the fate of the latter had hung in the balance. His heavy frame was against him. But the naval officers had decided that the lad's quick intelligence and bulldog tenacity made him desirable in other ways. For the present Herc

Taylor would be held in reserve. There was a certain grim suggestiveness in this – a hint of the dangers of aerial navigation which might result in the ranks being thinned before long.

Ned had had no trouble in getting by. Lieutenant De Frees had said with a pleasant nod:

"I've heard of you, Strong. We want you. You are, of course, willing to sign a paper absolving the navy from responsibility in case of your death or serious injury?"

This question had been put to all the applicants in turn. They had all signified their willingness to do this. It was understood, of course, that the contract, or pledge, did not in any way affect their pensions or "disability" money.

When Ned's turn came, he thought a moment. Such was his habit. Then he spoke.

"If I'd thought only of the risks, sir, I wouldn't be here," he said, in a respectful but decisive manner.

Among the others who passed the ordeal were Merritt and Chance; a slender, greyhound-like chap from the *Kansas*, named Terry Mulligan; a bos'un's mate from the *Louisiana*, called Sim Yeemans, a typical Yankee from Vermont, or "Vairmont," as he called it; a comical German blue-jacket from the *Idaho*, Hans Dunderblitz, and some others whom we shall probably become acquainted with as our narrative progresses.

The disappointed ones were spun back to the ships in a big auto chartered for the purpose. The successful candidates and the defeated ones parted without animosity.

"Better luck next time," hailed the chosen nine, as their shipmates drove off.

"Oh, your ranks will thin out quick enough," cried one of the departing ones, with sinister humor.

The men selected for the aviation "classes," as they may be called, were, they soon found out, to board at a big stone farmhouse not far from the aviation field. Little more was done that day than to pay a series of visits to the different sheds – or "hangars," in airmen's parlance. In each of these the embryo airmen listened to a short talk on the type of machine they were viewing and heard its qualities discussed. In addition, that night, each of the ambitious ones received a set of books on the science of mastering the air, with instructions to study them carefully. It was implied that those who failed to pass certain examinations at a future date would not be allowed to partake further in the experiments.

"Well, talk about your ease and luxury," said Herc that night when the Dreadnought Boys were in the room assigned to them at the farmhouse, "we're as well off here as middies at Annapolis. What a contrast to the fore-castle! I feel like a millionaire already."

"Umph!" grunted Ned, who was already deep in his books. "You'd better get to work and study. We've lots of hard work ahead of us."

"And excitement too, I guess," said Herc, dragging a bulky volume toward him.

Neither of the two lads at the time fully appreciated how much of both was shortly to be crowded into their lives.

CHAPTER V

UNCLE SAM'S MEN-BIRDS

"Py golly, dot feller Neddie he fly like vun birdt, alretty, ain'd it?" exclaimed Hans Dunderblitz one day two weeks later.

He was standing by the side of Herc Taylor, watching the evolutions of the bi-plane of Bright-Sturgess model, which Ned Strong was manipulating far above them.

"You're pretty good yourself, Hans," encouraged Herc.

"Ach nein! Efferey time I gedt oop midt der air I schneeze. Undt den – down I go tumble, alretty."

"You'll have to learn to stop sneezing," commented Herc; "maybe the engine doesn't like it – see a doctor."

"Phwat's thot about docthors?" asked Mulligan, coming up. "Shure talkin' uv doctors reminds me uv one we had at home in Galway. He was a successful docthor, understan', but whin he wos a young mon he was not so well-to-do. In fact, the only ornament he had in his parlor was Patience on a Monument, a stathoo, ye understan'. Wun day a frind calls ter see him in the days whin the doc was prosperous.

"'Doc,' says he, 'you ain't got Patience on a Monument any more.'

"'No,' says the docthor, says he, 'shure I've got monumints on all my patients now, begob!'"

"Puts me in mind of what I once read in a paper up in the Catskills," laughed Herc. "The item read: 'Dr. Jones was called, and under his prompt and skilful treatment Hiram Scroggs died Wednesday night.'"

"By Chermany, dere vos a docthor vunce – " began Hans.

But what the doctor "by Chermany" did or said, was destined not to be known, for an order came to the group to resume their practice. Immediately they hastened off to get their machines in trim once more.

Lieutenant De Frees' system of instruction had proved effectual. By this time almost all of his squad had learned to fly. Some of them could only take "grasshopper jumps," but others, Ned, Merritt and Chance among them, had proven themselves really capable airmen. They had learned with wonderful aptitude.

Ned would never forget his first day in an aeroplane. The officer had taken up a biplane and given a daring exhibition. Then he descended and announced that instruction would begin. His assistants took up Herc and Merritt, while Ned was ordered to seat himself on the narrow little place beside the officer. The Dreadnought Boy experienced then, not exactly fear, but a curious sort of sinking feeling born of his initiation into a hitherto unknown experience. He braced his feet against the slender struts of the machine, as he was instructed, and held tightly to the handholds provided for the purpose. Then he stole a glance at Lieutenant De Frees. The officer's face was as calm as that of a man who was about to take an afternoon's drive behind a favorite horse.

Suddenly the officer twitched a brass contrivance attached to a quadrant on his steering handle, which was not unlike that of an automobile. He pressed a pedal with his foot and a mighty roar and vibration began at once as the motor opened up.

The acrid reek of castor oil, which is used to lubricate aeroplanes, filled the air. The stuff was expelled from the cylinder vents in blue clouds, shot with lambent smoky flame. The mighty power exerted by the eight cylinders shook the frail fabric of the aeroplane as an earthquake might.

"Hold on tight now!" shouted the officer to the pupils, who were gripping the machine tightly, grasping on to the rear structure. Had they not done so, it would have darted off at once before the two propellers gained top speed and driving power.

"Now!" shouted the officer suddenly.

Instantly they let go, as they had been instructed. Ned felt as if he had suddenly been plunged into a runaway express train that was careening over a newly ploughed field. The shocks and vibration of the machine, as it rushed straight forward, like a scared jackrabbit, over the uneven surface of the field, made it hard to hold on.

Just as Ned felt that he must inevitably be hurled from his seat, the motion suddenly changed. The contrast was violent. From the jouncing, rattling, bumping onrush of a second before, the novice seemed to have been suddenly transported to the softest of feather-beds. The aeroplane glided upward without any apparent effort. It appeared to Ned as if the land was dropping from under his feet, rather than that they were rising from the earth.

Higher they soared and higher. Suddenly their pleasant drifting, as it seemed, though the aeroplane was making sixty miles an hour, changed to a terrifying drop.

It was like rushing downward in a runaway elevator. Ned choked, caught his breath, and turned faint and dizzy. Without wishing to do so, he found himself compelled to close his eyes. The qualms of incipient nausea began to rack him. His head pained, too.

"Gracious," he thought impatiently, "what's the matter with me, anyway? Am I a baby or a girl? If the lieutenant can stand it, I can."

With a supreme effort of will, the Dreadnought Boy compelled himself to open his eyes. He stole a side glance at his companion. Lieutenant De Frees was as cool as an iceberg.

"I must be, too," thought Ned, steeling himself. As he did so, the alarming downward motion ceased. They began to rise once more, swinging upward and climbing the sky in long, lazy circles.

It was then and there that Ned's attack of air fever left him, never to return. Compared to the experiences of his companions, he learned later he had had a comparatively mild attack.

Ned now began to look about him. The other two aeroplanes were soaring below them, like big birds of the buzzard kind. He felt a wild desire suddenly gripping his heart to go higher – right up among the fleecy clouds that hung above them. Perhaps the officer read his thoughts. At any rate, they continued to climb the aerial staircase. At a height of four thousand feet, they plunged into a fog. The sudden change from the bright sunlight was bewildering.

"We are passing through one of those clouds that you saw from below," volunteered the officer. He glanced at the barograph and read off to Ned the height to which they had arisen.

"Good gracious," thought the lad, "four thousand feet above the earth, and nothing between me and it but the soles of my shoes!"

But Ned's terror had gone. He began to take a real interest in the operation of the aeroplane now. It was fascinating to a degree. All at once they emerged from the wet fog bank and glided into the sunlight. Condensed moisture covered the planes. Drops of water, turned to miniature rainbows by the sunlight, slid down the wire stays and supports.

"Want to go higher?" asked the officer presently.

"If you want to, sir," said Ned.

"We might as well. You are standing it splendidly, Strong."

Ned felt himself glow with pleasure. Words of praise from an officer are not plentiful in our or any other navy. But, as we have seen, the discipline on the aviation squad was not exactly as rigid as on board a battleship.

But presently Ned's pleasant glow gave way to a shivering sensation. It was growing bitterly cold. His teeth chattered and his hands turned a beautiful plum color. The moisture from the cloud began to freeze on the machine.

"Enough for to-day," decided the officer, and he started to descend.

The drop was rapid, yet now that Ned was more used to it, he felt no particular alarm. In an incredibly short time, so it seemed, the earth rushed up to meet them, and they landed on the aviation field as lightly as a wind-wafted feather.

The next day Ned and the two other most proficient pupils – Merritt and Chance – were given a chance to handle the levers alone. They acquitted themselves well. Their advancement proved rapid, living up to the promise of their first efforts. On the day which we described at the beginning of this chapter, Ned, as we have seen, was capable of handling an aeroplane alone. So were Merritt and Chance. Herc was a fair airman, and the others were progressing favorably.

But the real rivals of the air were, at present, Ned, Merritt and Chance.

CHAPTER VI

NED INVENTS SOMETHING

"What are you so busy over, my lad?" inquired Lieutenant De Frees one morning, stopping in front of the Dreadnought Boys' hangar.

Ned looked up from the sheet of paper over which he had been poring. It was covered with figures and geometrical scrawlings made by a stumpy lead pencil.

The lad was a bit abashed. Herc was busy tuning up his aeroplane, and Ned, by this time, should have been busy on his machine, for it was a clear, calm day, ideal for a flight. But Ned had not yet even donned his aviation togs. Instead, he had been putting in the best part of an hour on his figuring, bending over it with a puckered brow. A moment before the officer had poked his head in at the door, the boy had started up with a glad cry:

"Herc, I've got it!"

"Catching?" inquired Herc, as he tightened the turnbuckle of a slack stay-wire.

"I hope so," laughed Ned. "I hope it proves catching enough for Uncle Sam to adopt. You see, an aeroplane fitted with pontoons –"

"Oh, choke it off. I've heard it all a hundred times," began Herc, and then, dropping his bantering expression, the freckled lad went on:

"It's a great thing, Ned, not a doubt of it. But are you sure you've got it at last?"

"Certain sure," smiled Ned confidently; "it was to attain cubic capacity, combined with strength and lightness, that bothered me. But I think I've figured it out now so that it will work."

So saying, he had resumed his calculations and had been engaged on them but a few seconds when the interruption occurred.

"Why, it's an idea I've been working out for some time, sir," said Ned modestly, in reply to the officer's question. "I'd rather like to have your opinion on it, sir, if it isn't too much to ask. You see, it's a scheme to attach pontoons to an aeroplane, making the machine practicable for both air and water. Inasmuch as our experiments are to select a naval type, it seemed to me that –"

"A machine that could fly and swim, too, if necessary, would be a great thing," broke in the officer enthusiastically. "Well, my boy, if you really have such an idea in practicable shape, I think I can encourage you to hope great things for it. Any one of a hundred manufacturers would be willing to buy your secret and pay you well for it, too."

Ned flushed. A flicker of something akin to indignation crossed his face.

"If it's any good, sir," he said quietly, "I intended that our navy should have it."

The officer brought down his hand with a hearty slap on Ned's broad shoulder.

"Good for you," he said. "I spoke as I did to test your motives in working on this invention, and I am not disappointed in you. If you will visit me at my quarters to-night, we'll talk more of the matter."

"Thank you, sir," rejoined Ned, flushing gratefully, and his eyes shining, "at what time, sir?"

"About nine o'clock. I've some friends coming over this evening and shall not be at liberty before that time."

Ned saluted, and Herc likewise clicked his heels together and raised his hand, as the officer left the hangar to resume his morning tour of inspection.

The tall form of their superior had hardly vanished from the doorway before Herc, who had turned to search for some tool, gave a sudden sharp outcry.

There was a small window, high up in the rear of the shed, which had been left open for ventilation. As Herc turned, he was as certain as he was that it was daylight, that he had seen a face vanish quickly from the casement. Its owner had evidently dropped from the opening through which he had chosen to spy on the Dreadnought Boys.

"What's up, Herc?" asked Ned, as he caught his chum's smothered exclamation.

"Why – why," exclaimed Herc, "I could be almost certain that I saw the face of Chance vanish from that window as I turned round."

"Eavesdropping, eh?"

"Looks like it. I guess he saw Lieutenant De Frees come in here and remain longer than ordinarily. It must have aroused their curiosity."

"What do you mean by 'they'?"

"Merritt and Chance, of course. You know how much love they bear us. I guess they felt afraid we were stealing a march of some kind on them."

"It's a mean trick!" continued Herc. "If I'd only caught him before I'd – I'd have bust his face."

"Let's go round to the back of the shed. We can soon find out if anyone was really there, or if your imagination played you a trick."

Herc readily agreed. He was fairly boiling with anger. But, on investigation, the fresh paint at the rear of the shed proved not to be scratched, as must have been the case had any one clambered up to the window.

"Looks to me as if you're seeing things," teased Ned.

"Does look rather like it," confessed Herc. "It seems as if – hullo, what – what's that? I guess that's how he reached the window without scratching the paint."

He pointed to a short ladder, evidently left behind by the workmen who had fitted up the hangars. It lay in some tall grass, a short distance from where the Dreadnought Boys stood. A hasty attempt seemed to have been made to hide it, but if this had been the case, it was unsuccessful.

"Just as I thought," declared Herc, after a minute. "The grass here is freshly trampled by the chap who threw the ladder back."

Ned was silent a minute. Then he spoke.

"I wonder how much they overheard?" he said slowly.

"All our conversation, I guess, if they arrived in time. Why?"

"Because I wanted to keep my pontoon idea secret till I'd tried it out. It isn't exactly for general publication – yet."

Herc seemed to catch a deeper meaning in the words.

"You're thinking of that chap who's been snooping around here for the last week posing as a newspaper photographer?" he asked quickly.

"Yes. I'm convinced, somehow, that he is nothing of the sort. For one thing, he's far too curious about the mechanical details of the aeroplanes, and the results of the experiments so far as we've conducted them. Another thing is, that he seems unusually well supplied with money, and he also appears to be a man of far greater ability than his supposed job would indicate."

"Gee whillakers!" gasped Herc. "You're not after thinking he's a foreign spy?"

"That's just what I am," rejoined Ned firmly.

"He won't get much information here."

"Not if he depended on most of us for it. But there's Chance and Merritt. It's a mean thing to say, Herc, but I wouldn't trust those fellows any farther than I could see them, and not so far as that."

"We-el!" whistled Herc, with huge assumed surprise, "you don't say so? I was always under the delusion that they were honest, above-board sports, who wouldn't do a mean thing for all the wealth on Wall Street."

But just then the assembly bugle rang out sharply, summoning the aero squad to its labors. The lads hastened to get their machines out on the field. As they trundled them forth, assisted by some of the men employed about the grounds for such jobs, Ned's machine almost collided with a short, rather thick-set man, with a huge pair of moustaches and luxuriant blonde hair. The latter hung in a tangle from under a battered derby hat. The rest of the man's garments were in keeping with

his disreputable head-gear. They consisted of a long, and very greasy-looking frock coat, a pair of checked trousers, badly frayed at the bottoms, broken boots and a soiled shirt and collar.

Over his back was strapped a black leather box, which evidently contained a camera, for under his arm he bore a folded tripod. But, despite his disreputable appearance, Sigmund Muller, freelance photographer, as he termed himself, bore an indescribable air of being something other than he pretended to be. Ned was skilled in reading human faces, and the first time he had set eyes on Herr Muller, he had decided that under the battered exterior and slouching gait lay hidden a keen, lance-like intellect, and an unscrupulous daring. The lad was impressed with the conviction that here was a man to be reckoned with.

As the advancing aeroplane almost knocked him down, Herr Muller jumped nimbly to one side. Then he assumed what was meant to be a free-and-easy sort of manner.

"Chust for dot," he exclaimed, "I dakes me a picdgure of your aeromoplane. Yes – no?"

He began to unsling his camera, but Ned stopped him in a flash.

"Don't bother yourself," he said sharply. "You recollect that I told you the other day that it was against the rules to take pictures of any of the aeroplanes on the grounds."

"Undt I voss ordered off, too," chuckled Herr Muller, without displaying the slightest trace of irritation, "budt, you see, mein young friendt, I coom back – yah."

"Do you mind standing out of the way?" cut in Herc suddenly. "I'd hate to run you down, but if you stand in the road any longer I'll have to."

Once more Herr Muller jumped nimbly aside.

"Dot'll be all rightd," he said amicably, "go on! Go ahead! Some day you break your neck, undt den I take picdgure of you – yes, no?"

He fixed the freckled-faced boy with a glance[Pg 67][Pg 68][Pg 69] as he spoke. Herc, despite his usual equanimity, felt a shudder run through him, as he encountered the look. It seemed to penetrate like the white-hot flame of a blow-pipe.

"Whoof!" he exclaimed, as he hastened along, "that chap's about as pleasant a thing to have around as a rattlesnake. He gives me the shivers."

As the Dreadnought Boys hastened to the assembling place, Merritt and Chance, with their machines, emerged. They passed close to Herr Muller, and as they went by he overheard every word they said.

"So Ned Strong is trying to sneak into favor again, eh?" snarled Merritt, who had just been listening to Chance's account of what he had overheard at the hangar window.

"Yes, confound him. I wish we could find some way to put them both out of business. If it wasn't for them, we'd be –"

A soft touch on Chance's arm interrupted him. He faced round and was rather startled to see the shambling figure of Sigmund Muller at his elbow. The man's face bore a peculiar, searching look. Chance felt a sort of shiver run through him as he faced him. But he shook it off.

"Well, what is it?" he demanded gruffly.

"You were talking about Ned Strong and Herc Taylor and some plans they had?" said the photographer in quiet tones.

"Why, y-y-y-yes," stammered Chance, rather taken aback. But then, with a return to his former bravado: "What business have you eavesdropping, anyhow? What business is it of yours, eh?"

The other paid no attention to this outburst.

"You don't like Ned Strong or Herc Taylor?" he said in the same even tone.

"Like them," repeated Chance indignantly, "I should say not, I hate – but what do you want to know for?"

"Because I don't like them either," was the reply. "If you'll meet me at eight o'clock to-night at the old barn, the other side of the stone bridge on the Medford Road, I'll have a proposition of interest to make to you."

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