

FRANK

WALTON

THE FLYING

MACHINE BOYS

ON DUTY

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The Flying Machine Boys on Duty

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Frank Walton

The Flying Machine Boys on Duty / The Clue Above the Clouds

CHAPTER I

ABOVE NEW YORK BAY

An aviator, swinging northward in a June twilight, found himself constantly annoyed by the driver of a machine whose only motive in life seemed to be to get in the way. Turn as he might to right or left, sail high or low, the obstinate and impertinent pursuer was always at hand to threaten him.

To the west, lay Bedloe's island, showing the Statue of Liberty, ruddy in the sunlight. To the east, Governor's island presented the battlements of Fort Columbus and Castle William. To the north, or to the northeast, to be more exact, lay Battery park, a smear of green at the lower end of Manhattan island.

For a time people on ferryboats traversing New York bay looked upward in momentary expectation of a battle in the air. Then the two flying machines passed north along the line of Broadway, crossed over Bronx park, and came to the vicinity of Pelham bay, in Westchester county.

Here the aviator who had shown such pugnacity in his dashes and swirls at the other, and who had been repulsed only by the finest skill and tact, wheeled straight to the west and was soon lost to sight in the gathering darkness.

For a moment it seemed that the aviator who had thus far acted only on the defensive was about to become the aggressor and follow in the wake of his persecutor. In fact, he was about to swing away in pursuit when the ringing of a bell at a hangar below attracted his attention. Then, with a frown showing on a boyish face, he swung to the north a short distance and volplaned to a level space in front of the hangar.

Descending from his seat, the aviator was greeted, rather anxiously it seemed, by two boys not far from his own age. Very little was said until the flying machine had been run into the great shed, and then the three turned away to a rather elaborate office building which stood in a grove of trees at the entrance to the grounds.

A chill wind was blowing off Long Island sound, and the boys found a grate fire burning brightly in a private room at the rear of the structure. They seated themselves before the leaping flames and looked expectantly into each other's faces for a moment before speaking.

Those who have read the opening volume of this series will need little introduction to James Stuart, Ben Whitcomb and Carl Nichols. Street boys of sixteen, they had, some months before, met Louis Havens, the famous millionaire aviator, and accompanied him on a trip to Mexico which had brought both fame and fortune to every member of the party.

On their return to New York from the "Burning Mountain" the boys had planned a course in college, but, at the request of Mr. Havens, they had promised to undertake a daring commission from the New York chief of police. A short time before their return to the city the night-watchman of the Buyers' Bank had been murdered, the monster safe dynamited, and thousands of dollars in currency and securities taken.

It was believed by the chief of police that the burglars—two of the craftiest and most desperate criminals on the continent—were in hiding in the wild and mountainous region south of Monterey bay, on the Pacific coast.

On the theory that the Flying Machine Boys would be able to visit every nook and corner of the region where the criminals were supposed to be, with comparative ease, in their new and up-to-date machines, and, also, that the appearance of the lads in that section would not be apt to arouse the suspicions of the hunted men, the chief of police had proposed the journey to Havens, and he had induced the boys to accept the almost princely offer made by the official.

On account of the hazardous nature of the proposed trip, and because of the long distances to be traveled, special attention had been given to the *Louise* and the *Bertha*, the two aeroplanes ordered made by the boys immediately upon their arrival at New York. These machines had been completed the previous day, and the trip over New York bay made by Jimmie Stuart that afternoon had been the first tryout for the *Louise*, a very strong aeroplane, capable of carrying, when necessity required, two passengers and at least a hundred pounds of camp equipage and provisions.

“Who’s your friend?” asked Carl Nichols, short, fat, blue of eyes and pink of skin, as the three boys sat before the open grate fire in the private room in the office building at Havens’ hangar.

“He’s no friend of mine!” Jimmie Stuart, red-headed and freckled-faced, declared. “He picked me up down on the Jersey coast and did his best to get me into a mix-up. I dodged him all the way to Bronx park because, you see, I was not quite sure of my machine.”

“Did you get a good look at the fellow?” asked Ben Whitcomb, grave-faced, athletic, and inclined to worry over troubles which had not yet materialized. “It looked to me as if you might have slapped his face, he was so near to you when you passed over Battery park.”

“Oh, yes!” Jimmie answered. “I got a view of his face from almost every angle! He’s a low-browed brute, with ears like wings, and a hunch in his shoulders which makes you think of one of the muckers at Croton dam.”

“He certainly can run a machine, though!” Carl Nichols declared, “and he has an aeroplane that can go some, too!”

“But what’s the idea?” asked Ben. “Why should he be chasing you around in that impudent way?”

“I’ve got a notion,” Jimmie replied, “that he wanted to try out the *Louise*. He resorted to every trick known to airmen to induce me to make some kind of an error in handling the machine. He’s an expert himself, and he evidently wanted to know whether I am capable of operating a peach of a flying-machine like the *Louise*.”

“I don’t believe it was just idle curiosity that made the fellow stick to you in that way,” Carl interrupted. “I’ve been thinking that the purpose of our trip to the Pacific coast may have become known to friends of Phillips and Mendosa, the men who are believed to have dynamited the safe of the Buyers’ Bank and murdered the night-watchman. The crooks may have men on guard here!”

“That seems hardly probable,” Ben suggested. “The police have a pretty good case against Phillips and Mendosa, and, so far as my knowledge goes, a crook who stands in the shadow of the electric chair has few friends willing to interest themselves in his behalf.”

“Yes, but look here,” Jimmie argued, “Phillips and Mendosa lifted thousands of dollars in currency. So far as the officers know they still have the entire proceeds of the robbery in their possession. Even murderers with so many dollars in their possession are not likely to lack capable friends.”

“I guess that’s right,” Carl put in, “and the two murderers will of course scatter money like water in order to keep out of the clutches of the law!”

“Yes,” Ben suggested, “the clues point so directly to Phillips and Mendosa that they would naturally spend every dollar they stole in order to keep away from the New York officers.”

While the boys talked, the door to the private office opened softly. Mr. Havens stood for a moment on the threshold and then stepped up to the fire. The young man was tall, slender and supple, with a dusky complexion and black hair and eyes. He was twenty-four years of age, but looked much

younger. The millions he possessed had been inherited from his father, and instead of spending them along the Great White Way, he was devoting his entire attention to aviation.

“What’s the argument, boys?” he asked, standing before the grate with a smile on his face. “Machines working all right?”

“Finely!” replied Jimmie. “I had a fine ride over the bay this afternoon. The *Louise* motor runs like a watch!”

“I saw you from Battery park,” Havens answered.

“Then you must have seen the gink chasing me up?” Jimmie asked, tentatively.

“I noticed that,” Havens replied. “What was the occasion of it?”

“That’s just what we were discussing,” Jimmie said.

“And we had about concluded,” Ben interrupted, “that our plans regarding the visit to the Pacific coast must have leaked out.”

“That doesn’t seem possible!” exclaimed Havens. “Why,” he went on, “even the intimates of the chief of police at headquarters know nothing whatever of the matter. There must be some other explanation of what took place this afternoon.”

“I have known crooks to have friends among the men higher up!” laughed Jimmie. “It may be so in this case.”

“There is one sure thing about it,” Havens went on, “and that is that if any hint regarding your proposed trip in quest of the murderers has by any chance become known to the friends of the crooks, the exact tactics shown this afternoon would be likely to be resorted to.”

“Yes,” Ben agreed, “it does seem that the first thing the crooks would do would be to prevent our departure for the Pacific Coast. A group of flying machine boys certainly represents a new element in secret service work! We must watch our machines after this!”

“If the fresh aviator really belongs to the crowd of crooks connected with the murderers,” Carl broke in, “we’ll hear from him again. He’ll follow us to the coast! He wouldn’t cease his efforts after chasing the *Louise* up New York bay.”

“He will have to chase us up if he continues his surveillance, for he won’t have long to spy on us here,” Jimmie declared. “We’re to leave for the Pacific coast day after to-morrow, as I understand it!”

“How about to-night?” asked Havens.

The boys sprang to their feet excitedly.

“To-night!” shouted Carl. “That will be fine!”

“That appears to me to be a good way of dodging trouble,” Ben acknowledged.

“I’d like to go to-night, all right,” Jimmie broke in, “but I’d like to form the acquaintance of that impudent aviator before I go!”

“I have an idea that you’ll meet him before you reach Monterey bay!” Havens replied. “You would know him again?” he asked.

“Of course!” replied the boy. “He’s a low-browed brute with wing ears and a hunch in his shoulders. I’d know him anywhere.”

“Do you really think he’ll chase us up?” asked Carl hopefully.

“I certainly do!” answered Havens.

“That will be great!” exclaimed Jimmie. “A flying machine race across the continent surely appeals to me. Are you going along with us, Mr. Havens?” he asked, then.

“I hope so,” was the reply, “although I’m not quite sure of getting through with several business deals now under way. However,” he went on, “you boys can go on with the *Louise* and the *Bertha* to-night, and I can catch you somewhere on the way over with the *Mary Ann*.”

“Not me!” Jimmie laughed. “You can’t catch me with the *Mary Ann* as long as I’m on board the *Louise*!”

“We’ll decide that point on the way across!” Havens replied.

“Well,” Ben suggested, “if we’re going to start to-night, we ought to be getting our camp equipment ready.”

“Aw, never mind the camp equipment!” exclaimed Jimmie. “We don’t want to carry a load of stuff across the continent. We can carry one light silk tent, like we had in Mexico, and a few provisions, and buy all the mountain outfit after we get in Monterey.”

“That listens good to me!” Carl put in. “If Mr. Havens is going to race us for three thousand miles in the *Mary Ann*, we don’t want to carry much excess baggage.”

“How soon can you get ready, boys?” asked Havens. “My idea is,” he went on, “that you ought to get out of the hangar as soon as possible. We may be over-anxious regarding the matter, but it is my belief that you’ll be followed unless you get away secretly. Now, you boys all go to bed in the bunks in the hangar and I’ll attend to the details. When the tent and provisions are on board, with plenty of gasoline, I’ll let you know. Then you can get away at once.”

The boys objected to going to bed, declaring that they were too excited to sleep, but at last, in deference to the wishes of Mr. Havens, they sought their bunks. An hour later Jimmie awoke to a sense of suffocation. Ben and Carl were sleeping soundly not far away and the great shed was very still.

As the boy sat up and sniffed the air a burst of flame showed at the front, sweeping fast toward the *Louise* and the *Bertha*.

CHAPTER II

A SHOT IN THE NIGHT

There was a fairly efficient fire department at the Havens' hangar, and by the time Jimmie was out of his bunk, rolling his chums out on the floor, two streams of water were playing upon the flames.

Contrary to the expectation of the incendiaries, there had been several workmen busy about the office building packing provisions into the smallest space possible and tying oiled silk tents and clothing for transportation on the flying machines. Consequently when the fire burst out at the hangar there was little delay in getting out the firemen.

There were thousands of dollars' worth of property in and about the office building and hangar, and Mr. Havens not only maintained an efficient corps of fire fighters but also kept his possessions there well insured. The fire was extinguished before any damage had been done except to one wall of the hangar.

After the danger was entirely over Mr. Havens and the three boys gathered in the private room of the office building for the purpose of discussing the situation. It was easy to see that the boys were all greatly excited, and that Mr. Havens was decidedly angry.

"You see how it is, boys," the latter said, "you'll have to fight the Phillips and Mendosa gang from now until the two murderers are placed in the electric chair. I fully believe that it was the intention of their accomplices to not only destroy the aeroplanes but to cause your death. It is a desperate gang to battle with."

While the boys talked, laying plans for their guidance while journeying across the continent, Hilton, one of the night-watchmen, knocked softly on the door and then looked in with a frightened face.

"What is it?" asked Havens.

"I presume, sir," the night-watchman answered, "that you heard the shot? It might have been heard a mile, I think, sir."

"We heard nothing of the kind," replied Mr. Havens, rather anxiously. "Tell us something about it."

"It was just after the fire was extinguished," Hilton replied. "We were standing by the door of the little fire-apparatus house when we saw a man sneaking through the shrubbery to the west of the hangar. He turned and ran the minute he saw that he was discovered, but we caught him—a measly little dried up kind of a man, with a face like a monkey."

"Where is he now?" asked Havens.

"Why, that's what I came in to tell you about," Hilton continued, fumbling with his hat, which he held in front of him with both hands. "When we caught him, we took him back to the engine-house and began asking him questions, believing, of course, that it was he who had made all the trouble."

"And what did he say?" demanded Havens, excitedly.

For a moment it seemed that the solution of the fire mystery was at hand. It was probable that the man caught sneaking about the hangar had either been responsible for the blaze or had witnessed the act of incendiarism. They all waited anxiously for Hilton's reply.

"Well, sir," continued the night-watchman, "we stood him up agin' the wall by the engine-house door and tried to frighten him into answering our questions. He was scared all right!"

"But what did he say?" repeated Havens, impatiently.

"He didn't say anything," was the reply, "and I'll tell you why he didn't say anything. He was under the strong light of the electric in the ceiling of the engine-house. We were all gathered about

him, but none of us stood in front. Before he could say a word in answer to our questions, a shot came from out of the darkness and he just crumpled down on the floor. We thought he was dead.”

“Did one of my men shoot him?” asked Havens, angrily.

“No, sir,” replied Hilton. “Your men were all gathered in the engine-house. The shot came from a point south of the hangar.”

“Is the man dead?”

“That’s what we can’t exactly make out, sir,” the night-watchman answered. “He lies perfectly still, but sometimes we think we can detect a flutter of breath at his lips. No, sir, you may be sure that none of your men shot the fellow.”

“Who did shoot him, then?” demanded Jimmie, excitedly.

“Wait a moment,” said Havens addressing the night-watchman. “Don’t offer any theories. Tell us the facts in the case, and then go and see that the man is not permitted to escape.”

“I have told you all I know, sir,” answered Hilton. “It’s just as I tell you. He was in the strong light near the engine-room door, and a shot came out of the darkness and he dropped. Your men were all in the engine-room at the time it happened.”

“That’s all!” Havens said, abruptly. “See that the fellow is given every attention, and also that he does not escape. Perhaps you would better summon a surgeon. Use the ’phone in the engine-house.”

Hilton bowed and turned away, grumbling that workmen were always blamed for everything that took place, whether they were guilty or not. Mr. Havens and the boys sat watching each other with astonishment showing in their eyes for at least a minute after the departure of the night-watchman. Havens was the first to speak.

“What do you make of that, boys?” he asked.

“It seems to me to be a problem easy of solution,” Ben answered. “The men who planned the destruction of the building and the death of those sleeping in it employed this man to do their dirty work. He set fire to the building, but didn’t get away in time. The captured man is undoubtedly a fellow not to be trusted, so the chief incendiary shot him in order to close his lips.”

“It strikes me,” Mr. Havens said, with a laugh, “that you ought to make a pretty good detective. In my opinion, you have grasped the situation exactly.”

“Oh, Ben is the only original Sherlock Holmes,” laughed Jimmie. “Give him a piece of rock and a blade of grass and he’ll tell you how the world was made! He’s got the deduction stunt down to cases!”

“You bet he has!” laughed Carl. “Don’t you remember how he figured out the Devil’s Pool down in Mexico?”

“I guess you all had a hand in that Devil’s Pool proposition,” laughed Ben. “But, honest, now,” he continued, “don’t you think the man was shot in order to prevent his snitching on his friends?”

“He certainly was!” answered Mr. Havens. “And now,” he continued, rising from his chair and moving toward the door, “it remains for us to determine whether he is dead. If he is dead, that settles the matter so far as we’re concerned. If he isn’t, he may be induced by the use of the third degree to betray his accomplices.”

“Huh!” laughed Jimmie. “I wouldn’t put a sheep-stealing dog through the third degree! They tried it on me once,” he continued, “when they found me sleeping in a dry goods box in an alley near where a burglary had been committed. They kept me without sleep or food for two days and two nights, though they had all I knew about the case the first minute.”

“You’re right about the cops,” Carl laughed. “When I write a book descriptive of the criminal classes in the United States, I’m going to give the police the place of honor in the book. If anybody should ask you, you just say that the leading criminal class in the United States revolves around police headquarters.”

Havens smiled at the natural enmity of street boys for the police and opened the door. As he did so Hilton again made his appearance in the outer office.

“The surgeon will be here directly,” he reported.

“How’s the patient?” asked Havens.

“Still unconscious,” was the reply, “though he seems to be breathing a little easier. He’s bleeding pretty badly, though.”

“You remain here and watch the office until we come back,” directed Havens, and in company with the three boys he turned toward the building where the fire-fighting apparatus was stored.

When they reached the place they found the figure of an undersized, wrinkled-faced man of fifty or more lying on the brick floor of the room. There was a pool of blood in view, and a wound in the head showed its source.

Half a dozen men were gathered about the still figure, all looking excited and anxious. Havens bent down and lifted the head from the floor.

“That wound,” he decided, “is by no means a fatal one. In fact, I can’t understand why he should lie for such a long time in this condition. The bullet merely cut the scalp, it seems to me. Any of you people ever see him before?” he asked in a moment.

The men shook their heads.

“Have you examined his clothing for marks of identification?” asked Havens, then. “He may have letters or something about him which will disclose his name and address.”

“No, sir,” one of the men answered. “We never thought of that. At least,” he went on with a shamefaced grin, “I thought of it just as you came in but, to tell you the truth, I didn’t care to touch him.”

Jimmie bent down and ran his fingers hastily through the pockets in the clothing of the unconscious man.

“Not a thing!” he said presently. “Not even a lead pencil or a pocket knife! The fellow probably left his card case at home,” he added with a chuckle. “We’ll have to get his number in some other way.”

While they stood talking at the door of the engine-house, a surgeon residing at a village not far away came hastily into the circle of light. After speaking most respectfully to the millionaire and nodding carelessly to the boys, he proceeded to make an examination of the injured man. Havens and the lads stood by waiting anxiously for his decision.

If the man was really likely to die from his wound, that would end all hope of learning from him the names of those associated with him in the crime. If the fellow would soon recover, then a clue to the whole chain forged by the friends of the murderers for the destruction of the boys might be discovered.

“Well?” asked Havens as the surgeon lifted his face in a moment.

Instead of answering directly, the surgeon sniffed the air.

“You’ve had a fire here?” he questioned.

“Never mind the fire now,” said Havens, impatiently. “Give me your opinion of this man’s condition. Is his wound fatal?”

“It is my duty,” said the surgeon, with assumed dignity, “to report this case to the police instantly. But,” he continued, with a subservient bow in the direction of the millionaire, “I’ll give you all the information I can before sending word to the county authorities.”

“Holy smoke!” shouted Jimmie. “Why don’t you give it, then?”

“Yes, why don’t you give it?” added Carl. “What are you waiting for?”

The surgeon regarded the two boys with a glance cold enough to crack the lenses in his eye glasses and turned back to the millionaire.

“The man is not fatally injured,” he announced, with a great deal of added dignity. “In fact, I can’t understand why he lies so long in this condition. It can be accounted for, however, on the theory that the bullet in passing along the surface of the skull drove a splinter of bone into the brain. In that case, no recovery can reasonably be expected until after a delicate operation has been performed.”

“Well,” Havens decided in a moment, “do you know where there is a hospital to which the man may be taken immediately?”

“There are plenty in New York city, of course,” suggested the surgeon.

“But,” returned Havens, “I don’t want him taken to New York city, or even placed in the custody of the officers of Westchester county. My desire is that you have him placed in a private hospital and make him your special charge until you receive different instructions. I have reasons of my own, of course, for taking this course, all of which you shall know in due time. Will you do it?”

The surgeon replied that he should be most happy to oblige the millionaire, and in a short time the wounded man was reposing on a cot in a private room in a private hospital not far from Long Island sound.

“And now, boys,” Mr. Havens said after a short time, “the machines are packed, it only remains for you to take your seats and beat the friends of Phillips and Mendosa to the Pacific coast.”

CHAPTER III

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

“We can beat ’em to the Pacific coast, all right!” Jimmie laughed. “Look here,” he went on, pointing to the *Louise*, now being run out of the hangar by the workmen. “There’s a flying machine that’s going to be a world-beater. I ran fifty miles an hour this afternoon, and didn’t put on full power, at that! She’s a bird, is *Louise*!”

“It isn’t always the speed that counts in a flying machine,” smiled Havens. “The perfect flying machine is one that is constructed for endurance—one which will fly for days and nights without breaking down—one which can be trusted in the air as you trust a faithful horse on a country road.”

“Well,” laughed Jimmie, “I think the *Louise* has had plenty of endurance tests, that is so far as her separate parts are concerned. Every piece in her, down to the last screw, has been tested time and again, and the run yesterday afternoon showed that she worked like a full-jeweled watch.”

“And what about the *Bertha*,” laughed Havens, turning to Ben.

“Aw, the *Bertha* isn’t in it with the *Louise*!” shouted Jimmie. “I’ll race the *Bertha* to Monterey bay for a thousand dollars,” he added with a grin. “And I’ll win the money, too.”

“That will never do, boys,” Havens advised. “You’ve got to keep together and work together all the way across.”

“And now,” asked Ben, as they all turned toward the machines, glistening now in the brilliant moonlight, “where are we going to land?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t explained the details of the trip as thoroughly as I should,” answered Havens, “for the reason that I expected to go with you from the start. However, I’ll be along before you get to the Mississippi river and post you fully.”

“But suppose anything should happen that you should be delayed,” suggested Jimmie. “What then?”

“Well,” Havens went on, “south of the bay of Monterey, in Southern California, close to the Pacific coast, lies the Sierra de Santa Lucia mountains. On one side the rock runs almost vertically to the ocean, from three to five thousand feet below. On the other side there is a slope of oak and pine and sycamore to a great canyon which stretches between the mountains and the foothills to the line of the Southern Pacific railroad, sixty or seventy miles away.

“This is said by men whom I have consulted to be the wildest and most lawless region in all California. There is a government reservation there, but the forest rangers have hard work keeping fires out of the forest and cattle off the slopes.

“It is believed that Phillips and Mendosa sought this region immediately after the burglary in New York. In fact, the chief of police reports that they are known to have left San Francisco in a steamer bound south ten days after the commission of the crime.

“Now,” Havens continued, “these men are beyond the reach of telegraphic or mail service. They can be warned of the approach of officers only by messenger from Monterey, or by messengers sent through the gulches across from the Southern Pacific line.

“This situation compels us to beat the aeroplane we saw yesterday afternoon to the Pacific coast,” Havens explained.

“But,” interposed Jimmie, “the murderers’ friends might telegraph to Monterey, or to some point on the railroad, and a messenger might be despatched into the mountains. An arrangement of this sort would certainly inform the murderers in advance of our coming.”

“But there is the danger of discovery if messages and messengers are resorted to,” Havens continued. “Besides, it is very doubtful if accomplices have been stationed at any station in the vicinity of the mountains. It is more than likely that Phillips and Mendosa entered that wild region with the intention of cutting themselves off from all human kind, leaving friends in New York to look out for their interests here.”

“Then,” laughed Jimmie, “let Phillips and Mendosa watch out for a freckled-faced boy with red hair, for he’s going to cross their life line the first thing they know!”

“Why don’t you put out a sign and tell fortunes?” asked Carl, with a grin. “You ought to be able to do that!”

“Ain’t I telling the fortunes of these two murderers now?” demanded Jimmie. “The clairvoyants tell you to look out for tall, dark complected men with fierce eyes, if you go to them, and I’m telling these outlaws to look out for a freckled-faced boy with red hair who’s going to get their number directly.”

“Now there’s one more thing I want to tell you for your information in case my departure should be delayed,” Havens went on. “It appears that this man Mendosa is a sort of a crank in the matter of diamonds. He is known to possess several stones of considerable value, in addition to small trinkets set with the precious stones. On the morning following the robbery and murder, a small diamond and a tiny, triangular piece of gold were found on the rug in front of the office desk which the burglars cheekily used during the examination of the securities.

“It is believed by the officers that this stone and this piece of gold became detached from a ring worn by Mendosa on that night. The stone looks like one of a cluster, and the triangular piece of gold is unquestionably part of a claw originally used to keep the diamonds in the setting. These two constitute the only clues.”

“Are you going to take them with you?” asked Jimmie.

“Certainly,” replied Havens.

“Then you want to hustle along with them,” laughed Carl, “for we’re going to sail right out of the air and light down on top of the two murderers! So we’ll need the stone and the triangular piece of gold for comparison. We’re going to do this up quick!”

“And now, one last word,” the millionaire concluded. “In case I should not reach you before you gain the Pacific coast, my advice is that you approach the mountains from the east during the night time. Then you ought to land on one of the high summits and work out from that point, using your flying machines only for long distance work.”

“Of course,” laughed Ben, “we can’t go sailing over the mountains with our machines in broad daylight, whistling for the outlaws to come out of their hiding-places and be taken back to electric chairs in New York!”

“No, there’ll be quite a lot of mountain climbing,” advised Havens. “And now,” he continued, “that everything is understood and the provisions and tents are snugly packed on the flying machines, you would better be on your way. It is quite possible that the aviator who chased Jimmie up New York bay yesterday afternoon headed for the west immediately after leaving this vicinity.”

“In that case, we’ll have to catch him!” Jimmie grinned.

“If we can!” Carl exclaimed.

“Aw, of course we can!” Jimmie returned.

“How fast ought we to travel?” asked Ben of Mr. Havens.

“I think,” returned the millionaire, “that you ought to travel about fifty miles an hour for sixteen hours a day. That will give you eight hundred or a thousand miles a day, and also eight hours each night for sleep. That ought to be enough.”

The boys all insisted that that would be more than enough, and moved toward their machines.

“Wait a minute!” Ben cried, as he climbed into the seat on the *Bertha*, “who’s going to ride with me?”

“You’ve got most of the equipage and provisions,” Havens suggested. “You know,” the millionaire continued, “that we couldn’t trust Jimmie with the provisions! He’d be stopping in the top of every tall tree to take a snack, and that would never answer!”

“And you know, too,” Carl put in, “that we never could trust Jimmie alone in a flying machine! That’s why it’s been planned that I ride with him.”

“All right, you fellows,” grinned Jimmie, “I’ll show you who makes the winning in this murder case! Great Scott!” he added with a wrinkling of the nose, “isn’t this a wonder? Who’d ever think of sending us boys off into the mountains to do secret service work?”

Havens took out a pencil and began figuring on the back of a letter taken from a pocket.

“According to this schedule,” he said in a moment, “you boys ought to reach the bay of Monterey in four or five days. This is Monday. By Saturday morning, then, you ought to have your machines stowed away in one of the gorges facing the Pacific ocean. Can you do it?”

“You bet we can do it!” declared Jimmie.

“And when you need provisions,” Havens advised, “get one of the machines out at night and proceed to Monterey, but don’t take the aeroplanes into the town; don’t attract any attention if you can avoid it.”

“Where’re you going to meet us?” asked Ben.

“Probably at St. Louis,” was the reply. “At the post-office. Look for me there when you arrive.”

In a moment the purr of the motors cut the air. The machines ran swiftly, steadily, down the field and swept upward. Havens stood watching them for a long time. The planes glistened like silver in the moonlight, and the song of the motors came to his ears like sweet music. The millionaire loved a flying machine as track-men love a swift and beautiful horse. He finally turned away to find a uniformed messenger boy standing by his side, presenting a yellow envelope.

“What is it, kid?” he asked.

“Message from the hospital,” was the answer.

“Who sent it?” asked the millionaire, taking the envelope into his hands and tearing off the end.

“The night matron,” was the reply. “She said I had to hump myself.”

“That’s wrong!” laughed Havens. “She shouldn’t expect a messenger boy to hump himself! In fact,” he went on, whimsically, “the only time a messenger boy is permitted to make haste is when he is on his way to a baseball game. That’s right, sonny!” he continued.

The boy grinned and made trenches in the smooth earth of the field with the toe of a broken shoe.

Havens glanced casually at the message at first, thinking that perhaps the surgeon might have taken it into his head to report progress in the case of the man so recently placed in his charge. He knew very well that the surgeon would manage to prevent the escape of the prisoner should he regain consciousness, so he had put that phase of the case entirely from his mind. However, his eyes widened and an exclamation of astonishment came from his lips as he read the note which had been written by the night matron, and not by the surgeon at all.

“Mason, the injured man recently sent here on your order,” the note read, “has most mysteriously disappeared from the hospital. Doctor Bolt, the surgeon detailed, at your request, to take charge of the case, decided to watch the man for the night, and so my attendants were withdrawn. The surgeon must have fallen asleep, for in half an hour’s time he came running to my door shouting that Mason had escaped. As soon as possible I visited the room from which the man had disappeared and found the window sash raised.

“There were many footprints in the soft earth under the window—the footprints of men in coarse shoes—and a smear of blood on the window casing disclosed the fact that the injured man had been drawn through the opening. It is quite evident to me, therefore, that the man was carried from the room by some one interested in the case, to which Doctor Bolt only indirectly referred when talking with me. Your presence at the hospital is earnestly requested.”

The note was signed, as stated, by the night matron. Scarcely had Havens finished the reading of it when he heard some one stumbling through the darkness, and the next moment Surgeon Bolt, looking crestfallen and excited, stood before him, like a schoolboy anticipating censure.

“Well?” asked Havens rather angrily.

“It’s the strangest thing I ever saw!” exclaimed the surgeon. “Mindful of your interest in the man, I decided not to trust him to the care of any of the hospital attendants to-night. After doing what I could for him, I sat down by the side of his bed to read and smoke. My mind was never clearer or farther from drowsiness than it was at that time.”

“Yes,” Havens said, in a sarcastic tone, “the result seems to indicate that you were wide awake!”

“I tell you,” almost shouted Bolt, “that I was stupefied by the injection of chloroform or some other anesthetic into the room!”

“How could that be possible?” demanded Havens.

“I don’t know!” wailed Bolt. “I certainly do not know! The window was closed when I looked at it last, just before I became unconscious. When I came to my senses to find the bed empty, a cold wind was blowing on my face. That is undoubtedly what awakened me. Only for that I might have slept myself to death!”

While the two talked together a watchman from the office building approached and informed Havens that a lady was waiting there to see him.

“That, probably,” suggested Bolt, “is the night matron from the hospital. She was making investigations when I left, and promised to come here at once on the discovery of anything new in the case.”

Havens hastened to the office building and there, as the surgeon had predicted, found the night matron waiting for him.

“I can’t understand,” she said addressing the millionaire abruptly, without waiting for him to speak, “what is going on at the hospital to-night! Immediately after the departure of Doctor Bolt I sent word for every person, man or woman, connected with my service to appear in the reception room. In five minutes’ time I discovered that two men employed only three days ago were not present.

“After waiting a few moments for their appearance, I sent a messenger to their rooms. They were not there! Their beds had not been slept in, and every article of wearing apparel belonging to them had been taken from their closets.”

“One question,” Doctor Bolt said, addressing the matron. “Was any one on watch outside the door of the room in which I was so mysteriously put to sleep?”

“There was no one on watch there,” was the reply.

“Then,” declared Bolt, “the two attendants who have disappeared injected the anesthetic I have already referred to through the keyhole of the door. After I became unconscious they entered and removed the prisoner. It is all the fault of the hospital!”

The night matron turned up her nose at the surgeon.

CHAPTER IV

THE DIGNITY OF THE LAW

The two flying machines, the *Louise*, with Jimmie and Carl on board, and the *Bertha*, with Ben in charge, flew swiftly over the great city, lying before them with its lights stretching out like strings of beads, crossed the North river with its fleets of vessels, and passed on over New Jersey, heading directly for the west.

At first Jimmie and Carl tried to carry on a conversation, but the snapping of the motors and the rush of the wind in their faces effectually prevented anything of the kind. The moon was well down in the west, yet its light lay over the landscape below in a silvery radiance.

Now and then as they swept over a city or a cluster of houses far out on a country road, lights flashed about, and voices were heard calling from below. Ignoring all invitations to descend and explain their presence there, the boys swept on steadily until the moon disappeared under the rim of the sky.

At first there was the light of the stars, but this was soon shut out by a bank of clouds moving in from the ocean. By this time the boys were perhaps two hundred miles from New York. They were anxious to be on their way, yet the country was entirely new to them, and they knew that a chain of hills extended across the interior farther on, so at last Ben, who was in the lead, decided to drop down and make inquiries as to the country to the west.

Of course the boys might have lifted their machines higher into the air and proceeded on their course regardless of any undulations of the surface, but they were still comparatively new in the business of handling machines, and did not care to take high risks in the darkness.

Jimmie followed Ben's lead, and the two machines groped their way along a tolerably smooth country road and finally came to a stop only a few feet from a rough and weather-beaten barn which stood close to the side of the road.

The clatter of the motors almost immediately brought two husky farmers into the illumination caused by the aeroplane lamps.

"What you doing here?" one of the men asked.

"Came down to rest our wings," Jimmie replied, saucily.

"Where you from?" asked the other farmer.

"New York," answered Jimmie.

"We're carrying government despatches to Japan," Carl added, with a grin. "We're in the secret service!"

Ben gave the two boys a jab in the back, warning them to be more civil, and, stepping forward, began asking questions of the farmer regarding the country to the west. The two men looked at each other suspiciously.

"Is this him?" one of them asked.

The other shook his head.

"Might be, though!" insisted the first speaker.

"No," replied the other, "this is not the man!"

Ben looked at his chums significantly for a moment. He was thinking that the farmers might be referring to an aviator who had passed that way not long before. He was thinking, too, that that aviator might be the identical one who had started out to beat the *Louise* and the *Bertha* to the Pacific coast.

"When did you boys leave New York?" one of the men asked, in a moment.

"About midnight," was the reply.

“And you’ve come two hundred miles in three hours?” asked the man, incredulously. “I don’t believe it!”

“Our machines,” Ben answered, very civilly indeed, “are capable of making the distance in two hours.”

“Well,” the farmer went on, “the other fellow said he left New York about dark, and he didn’t get here until something like an hour ago. He lit right about where you are now.”

“Where is he now?” asked Ben.

“Why, he went on just as soon as he tinkered up his machine.”

The boys glanced at each other significantly, and then Ben asked:

“What kind of a looking man was he?”

“He looked like a pickpocket!” burst out the farmer, “with his little black face, and big ears, and hunched up shoulders. And he was, I guess,” he continued, “for we heard him sneaking around the barn before we came out of the house.”

“What did he say for himself?” asked Ben, now satisfied that the man described was the one who had pursued the *Louise* on the previous afternoon.

The two farmers looked at each other a moment and broke into hearty laughter. The boys regarded them in wonder.

“He said,” one of the men explained, in a moment, “that he was a messenger of the government, taking despatches to the Pacific coast. If he didn’t say almost the same thing you said, you may have my head for a pumpkin.”

“And that,” added the other man, “is what makes us suspect that you chaps are in cahoots. Mighty funny about you fellows both landing down here by our barn, and both telling the same story! I’m a constable,” he went on, “and I’ve a good mind to arrest you all and take you before the squire as suspicious persons. I really ought to.”

“What are we doing that looks suspicious?” demanded Jimmie.

“You’re wandering about in the night time in them consarned contraptions!” declared the other. “That looks suspicious!”

Daylight was now showing in the east, and the sun would be up in a little more than an hour. The boys were positive, from information received from the farmer, that the aviator who had made his appearance on New York bay the previous afternoon was only an hour or so in advance of them. By following on at once they might be able to pass him.

It was their intention now to wheel farther to the south, and so keep out of the path taken by the other. It was their idea to reach the coast, if possible, without the man who was winging his way toward the murderers knowing anything about it.

Of course the fellow would suspect. There was no doubt that he fully understood that the *Louise* and the *Bertha* were to be used in a race to the Pacific. Had he been entirely ignorant regarding the plans of the boys, he would never have found it necessary to follow the *Louise* over New York bay and Manhattan island for the purpose of ascertaining her capability as a flier.

“Well,” Jimmie said, after a moment, “We may as well be on our way. We stopped here because we were afraid of butting into some wrinkle in the old earth if we proceeded in the darkness.”

“I don’t know about letting you go on!” broke in the constable.

There was greed in the man’s eyes. There was also an assumption of official severity as he glanced over the three youngsters. The machines were standing in the middle of a fairly smooth road running directly east and west.

To the right of the thoroughfare stood the shabby barns referred to before. To the left ran a ditch which had been cut through a bit of swamp lying on the other side of the road. As the farmer concluded his threatening sentence, Jimmie and Carl sprang to the *Louise* and pressed the button which set the motors in motion. For a moment the farmers were too dazed to do more than follow the swiftly departing machine with their eyes.

When they did recover their understanding of the situation, they both sprang at Ben in order to prevent his departure. This, doubtless, on the theory that one boy was better than none. If they couldn't get three prisoners, they did not intend to lose the opportunity of taking one.

In carrying out this resolve, the men made a serious mistake in not seizing the machine. Had they thrown their muscular arms across the planes at one end it would have been impossible for the machine to have proceeded down the road in a straight course.

Instead of doing this, they both made an effort to seize Ben. Now Ben had been in many a rough-and-tumble skirmish on the lower East Side, and knew how to protect himself against such clumsy assaults. One of the farmers cut a circle over the shoulder of the boy as he fell from a hip-lock, and the other went down from as neat a jolt on the jaw, as was ever delivered in the prize ring.

While this remarkable contest was in progress, Jimmie was whirling the machine, he had mounted, into the air. When he saw one of the farmers land in the ditch he came swiftly about with a jeer of defiance and thrust an insulting face toward the ground.

"Say, you feller!" he shouted. "That's Billy Burley, the Bruiser. Don't you go to getting into a mix-up with him!"

The man who had tumbled into the soft muck of the trench clambered slowly out and shook his fist at the freckled, scornful face bent above him.

"I'll show you!" he shouted. "I'll show you!"

By this time Ben had taken possession of the *Bertha*, and the motors were clattering down the road. In a second almost the flying machine was in the air, and the boys were off on their journey, leaving the two farmers chasing down the road after them, shouting and waving pitchforks desperately in the air.

It was now almost broad daylight, and the boys sent their machines up so as to attract as little attention as possible from the country below. A few miles from the scene of their encounter they shot off straight to the south, resolved to reach the Pacific coast by way of Kansas and lower California. It seemed to them that the aviator who had preceded them had purposely lingered in order that they might come up with him. This looked like trouble.

If it meant anything at all, it meant that if possible they were to be interfered with on their way across the continent. This prospect was not at all to their liking. They wanted to get to the Pacific coast as soon as possible and begin the quest in the mountains.

Shortly after five o'clock they saw the city of Baltimore stretched out below them. Deciding that it would be much better to land some distance from the city and prepare breakfast out in the open country than to attract universal attention by dropping down in the city, Ben volplaned down on a macadamized highway some distance out of the town. Jimmie followed his example at once, and before long a small alcohol stove was in action, sending the fragrance of bubbling coffee out into the fresh morning air. Even at that early hour half a dozen loungers gathered about the machines, gazing with wondering eyes at the youthful aviators.

The boys explained the object of their journey in the first words which came to their lips, which, it is unnecessary to state, were highly imaginative, and the loungers stood about watching the boys eat and drink and asking questions concerning the mechanism of the motors.

After eating and inspecting the machines the boys started away again. At the time of their departure there was at least half a hundred people standing around, hands in pockets, mouths half open.

The boys passed over Washington in a short time and glanced down at the great dome of the capitol and at the towering shaft of the Washington monument. The machines, however, were going at a swift pace, and the many points of interest at the capital of the nation soon faded from view.

About every two hours all through the day and early evening the boys came to the surface at some convenient point and rested and examined their machines. The motors were working splendidly,

and the lads were certain that if it should become necessary they could make five hundred miles without a halt. This was at least encouraging.

When night fell they found themselves not far from St. Louis. They dropped down in a lonely field about sunset and built a roaring camp-fire. There was not a house in sight, and the field where the machines lay was surrounded by a fringe of small trees. Ten or fifteen miles to the west rolled the Mississippi river and beyond lay the paved streets of St. Louis, where they were to meet Havens.

The day's journey had been a most successful one. Jimmie was certain that at times the *Louise* had traveled at the rate of a hundred miles an hour. There had been no accidents of any kind.

"From New York to the Mississippi in one day appears to me to be going some!" declared Jimmie, "and I never was so tired in my life. We can't go on to-night if we are to meet Havens in St. Louis to-morrow, and so I'm going to get out one of the oiled silk shelter tents and go to bed."

While the boys planned a long night's rest the whirr of motors came dully from the sky off to the north.

CHAPTER V

A CHANGE OF SCENE

“What we ought to do now,” Doctor Bolt declared, as the night matron, indignant chin in air, turned toward the door of the private room, “is to notify the officers of Westchester county.”

“I don’t see the necessity for that,” Havens replied. “One may as well look for a pearl in a train-load of oysters as to look for that fellow in Westchester county to-night. Depend upon it, the men who sought employment at the hospital a few days ago were sent here because the hospital happened to be near my home.”

The night matron shrugged her shoulders and passed a scornful glance at the surgeon. The surgeon turned angrily away.

“That relieves me of a great responsibility,” she said. “Ordinarily one becomes responsible for the actions of employes, but when men are sent into your service by a criminal gang for a criminal purpose, responsibility ought to end there.”

“I don’t agree with your reasoning at all!” declared the surgeon. “One should know better than to employ strangers in positions of trust.”

“And when,” continued the night matron, glaring at the surgeon, “a country doctor takes it upon himself to override the rules of a hospital and keeps watch beside a patient to the exclusion of the regular attendants, one certainly should not be held accountable for the safety of that patient. And that’s all I have to say,” she added.

“Settle the responsibility as you will,” Havens broke in. “I have nothing to do with that. What I want now is a promise from each of you that nothing whatever shall be said regarding the matter until private detectives shall have an opportunity to recapture the escaped prisoner.”

“But why the secrecy?” asked the night matron.

“It is my duty as a surgeon to report the entire matter to the police,” shouted Bolt. “I shall do so at once.”

Havens argued with the two for a long time, and finally secured a promise that nothing would be said either of the capture or the escape for three days. The millionaire’s idea was to get the prisoner into his own hands if possible. He knew that the fellow would have a hundred chances of escaping without ever revealing the story of the crime he had committed that night with the police, where he would have not one if guarded by private detectives.

He was well satisfied from the incidents of the night that some person high up in the councils of the police department had leaked in the matter of the employment of the boys on the murder case. He believed, too, that the same influence which had been able to secure the carefully guarded information would be powerful enough to protect the escaped prisoner in case he should regain consciousness and, on promise of immunity, threaten to disclose the names of his accomplices in the incendiary act.

After exacting the promise from the surgeon and the night matron, Havens ordered every workman about the place to remain on guard until morning and, calling his chauffeur, departed for New York in a high-powered touring car. Worn out with the anxiety and exertions of the night, he fell asleep on the soft cushions of the machine, and awoke only when the chauffeur shook him gently by the shoulder and announced that they were at the Grand Central station.

“And I’d like to ask you a question, sir,” the chauffeur said, as Havens stepped out of the car. “It’s about what took place on the way down.”

“What took place on the way down!” laughed the young millionaire. “It has all been a blank to me. I must have slept very soundly.”

“Indeed you did, sir,” replied the chauffeur, “and that’s why I didn’t wake you. You seemed to need the sleep very much, sir.”

“Well, tell me what happened?” Havens said impatiently.

“Why, sir,” the chauffeur went on, “a big car picked us up half a mile this side of the hangar and followed on down to within three blocks of this place. When I drove fast, they drove fast; when I slowed up, they slowed up, too. Very strange, sir.”

“Why didn’t you investigate?” asked Havens angrily.

“You see that marble column at the corner of the building,” declared the chauffeur, pointing. “Well, I stopped once to ask questions of the chauffeur in the other car, and that marble column I’m pointing out, sir, would be just as communicative as that other chauffeur was. He only grunted when I asked questions and kept right on as before.”

Havens thanked the man for the information and went on about the business which had brought him to the city. He was busy all day with lawyers and brokers and real estate managers, and was very tired and sleepy when night fell. It had been his intention to take an afternoon train for St. Louis, but his business had not permitted of so sudden a departure from the city.

He regretted extremely that he had not arranged with the boys to wire their address in the Missouri city. However, he thought, the boys would wait at least twenty-four hours at the point selected, and this delay would enable him to overtake them by train at Denver. He was positive that he could do so if he could catch the Overland Limited at Chicago.

Eight o’clock found him sound asleep in the stateroom of a Pullman car due to start for the west in an hour. He was so tired that the noises of the station; the arrival and departure of trains; the calls of the train starters; the rattling of the couplings under vestibules, soon died away into a dull blur, and then he passed into a dreamless sleep.

His last memory was of a powerful light shining through a slender crack in the drawn blind of a stateroom window. When he awoke again the slender finger of light had become a deep red glow the size of a pail, and the perfumed air of the stateroom had, somehow, taken on the close and unsavory smell of a riverside basement.

Havens made an effort to lift his hands to his head, but found that he was unable to do so. The great red light was staring viciously into his smarting eyes so he closed them, turned his head aside, and lay for a moment in silent thought.

He had no idea as to where he was, or how, or how long ago he had been transported to that villainous place. He knew that violence had been used, for there was a trickle of moisture on his forehead which could not be the result of heat or exertion. There was a smart there, too, and so the moisture must be blood.

The air was thick and damp, bearing the odor of long confinement in filthy quarters. Opening his eyes, directly, he saw that the walls were dark, but not with paint or paper. They were stained with the mold and unsavory accumulations of many years.

The light which shone in his face came from an electric contrivance which seemed at that moment to be a long distance off. Finally, after much study and many smarting examinations, he saw that it was a light nodding and swaying on a mast, and that it shone through the dirty panes of a window before entering the gloom where he lay.

It was plain to the millionaire, then, that, in some mysterious manner, he had been taken from the stateroom and conveyed to one of the disreputable resorts on the river front. He had no idea as to whether he was looking out on the East river or the North river. All he knew was that his hands and feet were tied; that his head ached furiously, and that his lips and tongue were parched with thirst. In a moment he heard a door open and then an old woman, toothless and shrunken of shoulders, stood before him, bearing in her hand a smoking kerosene lamp.

“Well, dearie,” she said with a wicked leer in her watery old eyes.

Havens indicated by motions of his lips and tongue that he needed a drink of water. The old woman had undoubtedly been prepared for this, for she drew a flask of spirits from a capacious pocket in her clothing and held it exultantly before the eyes of the captive.

Havens shook his head.

“It will give you strength,” pleaded the hag. “Strength for what you’ve got to endure. Better take a drop or two!”

In a moment the young millionaire managed to say that he wanted water, and the old hag, with the air of one who considered that a weak-minded man was turning away a blessed boon, restored the bottle to her pocket and brought water in as filthy a tin cup as Havens had ever set eyes on.

The woman eyed him curiously as she held the cup to his lips.

After draining the cup Havens found strength to ask:

“How did I come here?”

“The boys brought you,” was the reply.

“The boys?” repeated Havens. “What boys?”

“The boys always will be having their sport!” the old woman answered indefinitely. “Very bad boys, I’m sure.”

“Why?” demanded the millionaire.

“Oh, my, oh, my!” exclaimed the old hag. “You mustn’t ask so many questions. I’m not here to answer questions.”

“How much do they want?” demanded Havens, coming at once to the point, as there was no doubt whatever in his mind that he had been abducted purely as a financial speculation. “How much?”

The old hag shook her head gravely.

“After a few days,” she said, “the boys will listen to talk of money. Just now,” she went on, “your society is what they desire.”

Then, for the first time since his rude awakening, the events of the night before flashed across the brain of the millionaire. He remembered the pursuit of the *Louise*, the act of arson at the hangar, the shooting of the stranger, and the escape from the hospital. To his mind, also, came with double force and meaning of the story the chauffeur had told of the pursuing car. With all these memories in his mind he had little difficulty in associating his present situation with the efforts which had been made to prevent the departure of the boys for the Pacific coast.

“How long do you intend to keep me here?” he asked in a moment.

Again the old woman shook her head.

“I’ll give you ten thousand dollars,” he said, “if you’ll set me down at the Grand Central station in an hour.”

“Not near enough, dearie,” the old hag replied, a greedy gleam coming into her watery eyes. “Not near enough, dearie!”

“Twenty thousand!” exclaimed Havens.

The old woman glanced about the apartment cautiously.

CHAPTER VI

A SMALL EXPLOSION

“Now,” suggested Ben as the purr of the motors came softly on the evening air, “do you suppose Havens has really caught up with us?”

“Impossible!” cried Jimmie, “we’ve stopped a good many times on the route, but he couldn’t overtake us, for all that, for the reason that he wouldn’t leave New York before afternoon. According to that we would have at least ten hours the start of him.”

“That’s right!” Ben agreed. “Perhaps the motors we hear belong to the flying machine of some sport out for a twilight ride. There are a good many aeroplanes passing between St. Louis and the east at this time of the year. We may hear other machines before morning.”

“Suppose,” Carl suggested, with a startled expression in his eyes, “that the clatter in the sky is caused by the flying machine operated by the fellow who chased Jimmie up New York bay?”

“Then that would mean trouble,” Jimmie grinned. “But, say!” he went on in a moment. “I wouldn’t mind meeting that fellow where the going was good. I’d show him that his machine is a back number.”

The boys searched the sky eagerly for a light which would indicate the position of the aeroplane. After a long time they saw a faint gleam almost directly overhead. The airship seemed to be descending.

“I wish we hadn’t built this fire,” Ben suggested.

“Suppose we put it out!” Carl advised.

“No use now,” Ben put in. “The fellow knows exactly where we are. Besides,” he went on, “if we should attempt to leave our present location, the clatter of the motors would show him exactly where we landed.”

“Then all we’ve got to do,” Jimmie explained, “is to remain right here and watch our machines all night. That’s what I call a downright shame!”

“We don’t have to all watch at the same time,” Ben advised. “You boys go to sleep after we get our supper and I’ll stick around until midnight. Then one of you can go on guard until four in the morning and the other watch until we get ready to leave.”

“That’s about the way we’ll have to do it,” Jimmie responded, “only,” he went on, “if the fellow makes his appearance at the camp and tries any funny business, the one on watch must wake the rest of us.”

This being agreed to, the boys ate a hearty supper and Jimmie and Carl crawled into a hastily set up shelter-tent and were soon sound asleep. Ben did not remain by the camp-fire after that. Instead, he took a position beyond the circle of light, from which the machines were in full view, and watched and listened for the appearance of the mysterious aviator.

Directly the whirr of the motors came louder, and the boy saw the bulk of an aeroplane outlined against the field of stars above.

It was quite evident that the stranger was seeking a place to land, and Ben, resolving to take the initiative, hastened out into the field swinging an electric searchlight.

“Now,” he thought, “we’ll see if this fellow wants to meet us face to face, or whether he wants to sneak about in the darkness in order to work mischief to our machines.”

After the boy had waved his searchlight for a moment a shout came from above, and a machine every bit as large and as finely finished as the *Louise* came volplaning down to the field.

The rubber-tired wheels had scarcely ceased revolving in the soft earth when Ben stood by the side of the machine, from which a man of about thirty years—a tall, slender man, with very blue eyes and a very blond head—was alighting.

“Hello, son!” the man exclaimed, as he came up to where the boy was standing, “are you out on a trip for your health, too?”

“That’s about the size of it,” answered Ben.

“Where from?” was the next question asked.

“New York city,” was the reply.

“Good old town!” exclaimed the stranger, walking toward the fire as if inclined to make himself quite at home.

“You bet it is!” answered Ben, following along close by his side and watching his every move with suspicion.

The boy regretted now that he had not awakened his chums before giving the signal to the stranger. There was no knowing what the man might attempt to do. Ben did not fear physical violence for he considered himself more than a match for the intruder. But he knew that a stick of dynamite or some other destructive explosive tossed into the mechanism of the machines would render them absolutely useless.

For this reason he watched the visitor closely, never taking his eyes from the rather large and ham-like hands which swung pendulously at his sides. The stranger did not appear to notice the attention he was receiving.

“What I came down for,” he said as he approached the camp-fire and stood warming his hands before the blaze, “was to ask questions.”

He smiled brightly as he spoke and gave a searching glance at the shelter-tent where Jimmie and Carl were sleeping.

“It’s easy enough to ask questions,” suggested Ben.

“Easier than to get them answered,” responded the other. “I found that out this afternoon.”

Ben eyed the stranger in wonder but asked no questions.

“About the middle of the afternoon,” the man went on, “I came upon a machine lying in a little dell back in Indiana. I shot down with something like the nerve I exercised in visiting you, and began talking with the aviator. He certainly was about the most insignificant looking specimen of humanity I ever saw.”

“Wait a minute,” smiled Ben. “He had a small, weazened face, large, wing-like ears, and hunchy shoulders—shoulders which give one the impression that he has spent the most of his life at the end of a mucker’s shovel in the subway. Is that a good description?”

“A better one than I could have given!” answered the stranger. “You must have seen him somewhere. I hope your experience with him was not so unfortunate as mine.”

“He made you trouble, did he?” asked Ben.

“He stole a pocketful of spark plugs,” was the reply.

“Yet you seem to be traveling all right,” suggested the boy.

“Oh, he didn’t get all I had,” was the answer. “I volplaned down to him, and he invited me to partake of a lunch he was serving himself on the grass. Just for form’s sake, I sat down with him. Then he began asking questions. He wanted to know where I came from, if I had seen any other machines in the air that afternoon, and if I had heard anything of two aeroplanes starting out on a journey across continent to the Pacific coast. After a time his questions became personal.”

“And you answered them, I suppose!” laughed the boy.

“No, I didn’t,” returned the stranger. “I closed up like a clam in a short time, and then he arose and, without my permission, began examining my machine. To make a long story short, he got the spark plugs out of a box under the seat without my knowing it. I never discovered the loss until I was some distance away.”

“You left him there in the dell you speak of?” asked Ben.
“Yes, I left him there in a little hollow between two hills.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

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