

FRANK WALTON

THE FLYING MACHINE
BOYS ON SECRET
SERVICE

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Boys on Secret Service**

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The Flying Machine Boys on Secret Service / The Capture in the Air

CHAPTER I. THE FALL OF THE BEAR

Two aeroplanes lay in a green basin in the heart of the Rocky mountains. To the east of the basin lay a slope of half a mile or more. At the top of the slope stretched a summit not more than half an acre in extent. Thirty miles away lifted the snowy peaks of the Continental Divide. To the west a broken country stretched to the Pacific.

The flying machines lying in the valley were the *Louise* and the *Bertha*. They had arrived from New York city that day, and the aviators, weary from their long journey, were lying about a great fire of dry jack pines and spruce. Thick porterhouse steaks, brought in from Spokane, were broiling over a nest of coals, and a great coffee-pot was sending forth its fragrance on the evening air.

Those who have read the previous books of this series will scarcely need an introduction to Ben Whitcomb, Jimmie Stuart, or Carl Nichols. Sturdy, adventurous lads of seventeen, they had entered the employ of Louis Havens, the noted millionaire aviator, a few months before, and under his direction had visited the mountains of Mexico, Southern California and Peru. While on their Peruvian trip they had assisted greatly in the capture of a cashier who had stolen several million dollars from a New York trust company. This incident had led to their visit to British Columbia.

On the very night of their return from Peru, Mr. Havens had suggested that they enter the service of the federal government and assist in the capture of a group of mail-order outlaws who were believed to have caused the abduction of a post-office inspector who had long been investigating their peculiar methods of doing business.

Although Mr. Havens had not at that time given the boys the full details of the case, they had at once joyfully accepted the mission and almost immediately taken their departure for the Pacific coast.

It was believed at the time of their departure that the inspector who had been abducted had been taken to the mountains of British Columbia for safekeeping. Just how this information had reached the secret service department no one outside of the private office of the chief knew.

All the papers collected by the inspector, many of them of great importance as supplying convincing proof against the fraudulent mail-order operators, had been removed from the inspector's office at the time of his abduction. The documents, of course, could not be replaced.

The boys had traveled directly from New York to a point in the Rocky mountains not far north of Crow's Nest, where they had crossed the great range. So far as practicable they had traveled nights and at a low altitude.

Naturally the passage of two large flying machines over the country had attracted attention, but the boys had kept away from cities so far as possible, and it was believed that no one connected with the group of mail-order operators had any intimation of the purpose of the trip.

For a portion of the distance the boys had been accompanied on the trip by Mr. Havens, riding the *Ann*, probably the largest and fastest aeroplane ever constructed. The millionaire aviator, however, had halted at Denver for the purpose of receiving definite instructions from the secret service department at Washington, while the boys had proceeded on their way. His arrival was momentarily expected.

While the steak broiled and the coffee bubbled the three boys sat looking over the great slope above. They spoke little for a time. The scene was so grand, so near to the very heart of nature, that

all the little things of life seemed inconsequential. For a space they forgot the mighty skyscrapers and canyons of New York and the level prairies over which they had journeyed. The mountain scene dominated everything in their minds.

Presently Ben Whitcomb, brown-eyed, athletic, and rather inclined at times to take little troubles to heart, sprang to his feet and pointed to the north. The others were at his side in a moment.

“Look there!” he said passing a field-glass to Jimmie.

Jimmie, red-headed, freckle-faced and shorter in stature than his companion, looked through the glass for a moment and passed it on to Carl.

“Is that an elk?” Jimmie asked in a moment.

“That’s what it is!” answered Ben. “It’s a full-grown bull elk!”

Carl, blue-eyed, broad of shoulders, and always ready to meet an emergency with a joke, handed the glass back to Ben and hastened to the broiling steaks.

Somewhat farther up on the slope of the basin where the green timber halted, crowded down by the rock, an elk walked out into the middle of an especially inviting patch of grass and looked about. He carried a good pair of antlers and looked big and beautiful. For about five minutes he grazed on the tender grass then marched to the edge of the basin and browsed on green branches. Finally he vanished in the thick green timber, and was not seen again.

“Cripes!” exclaimed Jimmie. “Wouldn’t that be a sight for the great White Way? He’d look fine down at Forty-second street, wouldn’t he?”

“Huh!” answered Carl. “I guess there’s Elks enough on Broadway now!”

“More than there are in all these mountains,” Ben suggested.

Directly Ben took the steak and coffee from the fire and Jimmie and Carl brought dishes and knives and forks from the flying machines. Then they spread a white table cloth on the turf not far from the fire and laid out their meal. Besides the meat and coffee there was plenty of bread, canned beans and tomatoes.

“I’m going hunting to-morrow!” Jimmie declared. “I’d like to know what’s the use of paying fifty dollars apiece for a hunting license and then bringing beefsteak in from Spokane.”

Ben took out one of the non-resident hunting licenses and read it over carefully.

“This gives me a right,” he said, “to slay three mountain goats; three mountain sheep rams; three deer; one bull moose, and all the grizzly bears I can come up with.”

“Are they all good to eat?” demanded Carl.

“They’re all good to eat in a way,” replied Ben, “but I don’t think the people hereabouts feast very much on mountain sheep, or grizzly bears either, when they can get anything else.”

“We ate bear in southern California!” cried Jimmie.

“Yes, and it was all right, too!” Carl declared.

“What’s the matter of going out hunting to-night?” Jimmie asked in a moment. “Then we’ll be sure to have something for breakfast.”

“I think we’d better remain in camp to-night,” Ben replied. “We’ll put up our oiled silk shelter-tents, and get the blankets and pillows out of the flying machines, and make ourselves comfortable right here until Mr. Havens comes. He may not be here for two or three days.”

“But he said he wouldn’t be ten hours behind us!” argued Carl.

“When a man’s doing business by wire with the secret service department at Washington,” Ben explained, “he doesn’t know whether he’ll be ten hours or ten days finding out what he wants to know!”

“Why didn’t he find out before he left New York?” asked Jimmie.

“He did find out all they knew regarding the whereabouts of post-office inspector Larry Colleton before we left New York!” answered Ben. “He stopped at Denver to find out if anything new had developed.”

“Are you sure this is the basin he told us to camp in?” asked Carl.

“Certain sure!” answered Ben. “He told us to cross the divide at the Crow’s Nest and keep on north between the Elk river and the mountains until we came to a large grassy valley.”

“Then this is the place all right!” Carl agreed.

After supper the boys set up their shelter-tents and prepared to pass a comfortable night. They had spent nearly two weeks crossing the continent, and had been in the air most of the nights, so they looked forward to a long sleep with pleasant anticipations.

While the boys were putting the finishing touches on the bed in one of the shelter-tents, a great rattling of stones was heard and in a moment rubble from the size of a marble to that of an apple came rattling down the long slope to the east. Startled by the unexpected shower, which pelted about the camp like hailstones in a northern blizzard, the lads rushed from the tent to ascertain the cause of the sudden commotion.

Twenty rods up the mountain they saw what appeared to be the body of a great grizzly bear half-sliding, half-tumbling toward the valley. At times the lumbering animal retarded his fall by clinging with his claws to the uncertain slope. Again, he rolled over and over for several yards, until his claws secured another hold. The beast was uttering savage growls as he came down, and every bump he received appeared to bring forth snarls more vicious than those which had gone before.

“Cripes!” exclaimed Jimmie. “Look who’s here!”

“He’ll be here in a minute, plumb on top of the tent!” Carl declared.

“Then why don’t you do something to head him off?” asked Jimmie.

“Yes,” the other argued, “I’d like to get in front of a ton of bear meat coming down a mountain at the rate of forty miles an hour!”

It was fortunate for the boys that the descent of the bear was checked for a little by a narrow shelf which ran along the edge of the slope close to the bottom. Here the great body landed with a thud which knocked out what little breath remained.

“That saved our tents and flying machines, I reckon!” cried Ben, as the bear tipped from the shelf and landed in the grass only a few feet from the *Louise*.

“He certainly would have smashed something if he had gone on at the clip he was going when we first saw him!” agreed Carl.

“Speaking about going hunting to-night or to-morrow!” laughed Ben, “it strikes me that we don’t have to go hunting in this philanthropic country. Fresh meat seems to rain down from the skies!”

The three boys now advanced to the side of the animal and looked him over. He was not quite dead, but it was evident that he had received injuries from which he could not recover.

“We may as well put him out of his trouble,” suggested Ben, drawing an automatic revolver. “He made a fight for life and lost!”

“Wait a minute!” exclaimed Jimmie, standing now at the bear’s head, “here’s a fresh bullet wound now!”

“Do you suppose that’s what made him fall?” asked Ben.

“Of course!” returned Jimmie. “He was up on the mountain and some one shot him, and that’s why he came tumbling down in that ridiculous way.”

“Is the wound still bleeding?” asked Carl.

“Still bleeding!” replied Jimmie. “It looks like a wound about five minutes’ old. The bullet is somewhere inside the grizzly’s head, and I don’t believe he was in his right mind when he was sticking his claws into the rocks on the way down!”

The three boys looked at each other with questioning glances.

“Ask it!” grinned Jimmie.

“Ask it yourself!” Carl exclaimed.

“I’ll ask it!” Ben said with a grave face. “Who fired that shot?”

“The answer is ‘Yes’, so far as I know!” laughed Jimmie.

“No foolishness now!” Ben continued. “Some one fired that shot, and that means that some one is prowling around our camp!”

“The man who fired the shot,” suggested Carl, “may be over on the other side of the mountain!”

“Then he’d be more than half a mile away!” scoffed Jimmie.

“That’s a fact!” Carl admitted. “And, besides,” the lad went on, “a man high up on the mountain wouldn’t be apt to shoot game lower down, unless he wanted a good chase after it.”

“And all this indicates,” Ben said, “that the man who did the shooting is somewhere near this camp. Also it indicates that he has a Maxim silencer on his gun, and that’s a thing natives hereabouts don’t have. Every time we go out on a trip we seem to bump into a mystery first thing, and we’ve got one now, all right!”

“I wish Mr. Havens would come!” Carl cut in. “It may be that some one out here knows what we’re up to and intends to make trouble.”

While the boys talked a shout was heard in the distance, and two husky, roughly-dressed men made their appearance, heading directly for the camp-fire. The boys laid their hands on their automatics.

CHAPTER II. A WOBBLING AEROPLANE

The boys stepped back from the bear as the men came up. It was growing dusk now, and as the men drew nearer their faces were seen only by the dancing flames of the fire. They were not prepossessing faces, and the boys wondered if it was the illumination which produced the shifty and suspicious glances they caught.

The two bent over the bear for an instant, and then one aimed his rifle slowly and fired a bullet into the animal's head. No report followed the shot, and then it was observed that the weapon carried a Maxim silencer. This doubtless accounted for the fact that the shot which had brought the bear down had not been heard at the camp.

After talking together in whispers for a moment, as the acrid smell of powder drifted out into the sweet air of the valley, the men turned questioning looks toward the boys. From the youthful faces their eyes soon roved to the two aeroplanes not far away.

There was more whispered talk, and then the two stepped over to the *Louise* and began a careful and rather impertinent inspection of the motors. The boys looked on angrily but said nothing.

"Rather fine machines you have there," one of the fellows said, after the deliberate examination had been completed.

"We think so!" Ben answered shortly.

"Where are you from?" asked the other intruder.

Ben gave Jimmie and Carl a sly nudge to remain silent and answered the question in a manner which, while the exact truth, did not reveal the starting place.

"Denver," he said.

The fellow bent down and read the names of the machines from little silver plates screwed to the frames.

"The *Louise* and the *Bertha*," he said. "It appears to me that I have heard something of these aeroplanes before."

"The names are common enough," Ben answered.

"The machines I refer to," the visitor went on, "belong in New York. Are you sure you didn't bring these machines from a hangar on Long Island?"

Jimmie could restrain himself no longer. From the first he had felt a feeling of aversion for the men, and he had inwardly resented not only the question asked but the impudent and uncalled-for examination of the aeroplanes. In spite of a warning hand from Ben he blurted out:

"What do you care where we came from?"

The two intruders eyed the boy sharply for a moment, as if trying to look him out of countenance, and then one of them said:

"None of your lip, now, youngster!"

"Well!" exclaimed Jimmie. "You've got your nerve with you!"

The man who had spoken before seemed about to make an angry reply, but his companion drew him away, and again they talked together in whispers.

"What are you fellows doing here, anyhow?" Jimmie demanded. "If you think you're going to work the third degree on us, you've got another think coming! You're too fresh, anyway!"

Presently the men turned back to the boys again, and the light of the fire on their bearded faces showed that they were about to adopt a new course of conduct. The fellow who spoke smiled as he did so.

“I can’t blame you for resenting our supposedly unwarranted interference,” he said. “We should have informed you at first that we are in the employ of the Canadian government as mounted policemen.”

“Where’s your horses?” demanded Jimmie.

“At the other end of the valley.”

“Where’s your uniforms?”

“We rarely wear uniforms in rough mountain work.”

The fellow answered the two questions with apparent frankness, but there was a set expression on his face which showed that he was restraining a naturally vicious temper by great effort.

Ben now stepped forward and extended a hand in greeting.

“We’re glad to see you, I’m sure!” he said. “Still, I hardly think you will blame us for resenting apparently impertinent questions.”

“That’s all right, boy!” replied the other, trying his best to bring a conciliatory expression to his sullen face. “It’s part of our duty, you understand, to visit camps in the mountains and make inquiries as to the intentions of strangers.”

“We understand that, of course,” Ben answered. “We are willing to answer any questions you care to ask, now that we know who you are.”

“I hope you’ll answer my first question in a manner entirely satisfactory to myself!” laughed the other.

“I shall try,” answered Ben, “what is it?”

“Have you any coffee left?”

“You bet we have!” replied the boy. “And if you’ll sit down here by the fire, we’ll make you a quart inside of ten minutes.”

Jimmie turned away to the provision box of the *Louise* to bring out fresh coffee with apparent willingness, but both his companions saw an angry expression on his face.

Carl followed him back to the aeroplane and whispered as they bent over the coffee sack together:

“You don’t like ’em, eh?”

“They’re snakes!” was the reply.

“But they belong to the mounted police!”

“I don’t believe it!”

“Anyway,” warned Carl, “you’ve got to keep a civil tongue in your head and not let them know that you think they’re lying.”

“You don’t believe that mounted police story yourself!” declared Jimmie. “They don’t look like mounted policemen, either!”

“I hardly know what to believe,” Carl replied, “but I’ve got sense enough not to let them know that I’m still guessing.”

Jimmie returned to the fire with the coffee and sat down on the grass not far from the visitors. While Ben prepared supper one of the men walked out to the carcass of the grizzly and began removing the hide.

Carl rushed up to his side and stood looking down at the clumsy manner in which the fellow was operating.

“Say,” the boy proposed in a moment, “why can’t we all have bear steak for supper? We boys had supper not long ago, but I think I could eat a bear steak right now!”

The man looked up with a puzzled expression.

“Bear steak for supper?” he repeated. “You don’t eat bear meat, do you?”

“Would a duck take to the water?” asked Carl. “Of course we eat bear meat! Sometimes it’s a little tough, unless you know exactly how to cook it, but I can broil a bear steak so it’ll melt in your mouth!”

“Then do so by all means!” the visitor answered.

Carl removed several tender steaks, took them back to the fire and then called Jimmie to one side.

“You’re all right, kiddo,” he said, as the two seated themselves in the shadows some distance from the blaze.

“Have you just found that out?” demanded Jimmie.

“I mean about those imitation mounted policemen,” Carl went on. “They’re no more mounted policemen than I am!”

“Then they’re a long ways from it!” Jimmie laughed. “But why this sudden conversion to my view of the case?”

“They don’t know about eating bear meat!” was the scornful reply. “One of them just told me that he didn’t know that they ever ate bear steak!”

“That does settle it!” cried Jimmie.

“Of course, it settles it!” agreed Carl. “And now the question,” he continued, “is this: What are they doing here, and why are they posing as mounted policemen? You don’t suppose they’ve got word from New York, do you?”

“Word from New York about what?”

“About our being out looking for the post-office inspector the mail-order brigands abducted not long ago.”

“Of course not!” was the reply. “These fellows are just plain mountain bums! They came here principally to get supper!”

“Or to steal the machines!” suggested Carl.

“We’ll see that they don’t steal the machines!” Jimmie declared.

“Well, I wish Mr. Havens would come,” Carl put in, with rather a longing expression in his voice. “We don’t know anything about the case we’re handling, and we don’t know whether we’re going to remain in this camp an hour or a month. For all we know the men we are trying to find may be in Mexico before this!”

“If they’re in Mexico,” Jimmie suggested, “the United States government can go chase itself for all of me. If you don’t remember what a beautiful time we had in Mexico, I do, and I don’t want any more of it!”

Those who have read the previous volumes of this series will doubtless remember the adventures of the Flying Machine Boys at the burning mountain. During that trip, it will be understood, they suffered the loss of some of their machines, and Jimmie came near meeting his death in a mountain lake known as the Devil’s Pool.

“I’m going wherever Mr. Havens sends me,” Carl answered, “and I’m going to get all the fun out of it there is to get. What’s puzzling me now is to know exactly what we ought to do with these bums.”

“Aw, we can’t do anything with them,” Jimmie grunted. “We’ve just got to feed them and see them hanging around here, trying to steal our machines, and sit peaceful, like a wooden Indian in front of a Bowery cigar store. It makes me sick!”

However, the boys were not called upon to take action of any kind at that time. Ben broiled bear steak enough for the whole party, made some excellent coffee, and brought out a couple of loaves of bread. At the conclusion of this second meal, at least on the part of the boys, the two intruders arose, threw their rifles over their shoulders, and turned away. However, one of them stepped back in a moment.

“We haven’t seen you do any shooting yet,” he said with a smile on his face which Ben regarded as most insincere, “but we don’t know when you will be hunting big game, so you may as well show us your licenses.”

“There!” Jimmie whispered to Carl as Ben produced the three licenses from an inside pocket. “They’ve saved their important question for the last moment!”

“What do you mean by that?” asked Carl.

“Why, those fellows are not mounted policemen!” the boy answered.

“We had made up our minds to that before!”

“Then why should they want to see our licenses?”

“I know!” exclaimed Carl. “I know just why they want to see our licenses! They want to get our names!”

“That’s it!” Jimmie answered. “They never asked to see the licenses in order to make good their bluff about being officers!”

After examining the papers the two visitors left the camp and proceeded down the valley to the west. Upon their departure the boys gathered closer about the fire and seriously discussed the situation.

At first Ben was inclined to argue that the men were actually Canadian officials, but Jimmie and Carl soon reasoned him out of this.

“Why,” Jimmie said, “a mounted policeman would know how to skin a bear without cutting the hide full of holes, and he’d also know that bear steak is considered quite a luxury in British Columbia. They’re frauds all right,” and this view of the case was finally accepted by all.

Throughout the evening the boys kept their eyes open for the return of the unwelcome guests, but nothing was seen of them. At ten o’clock, when the lads were thinking of drawing lots to see who should remain on guard through the night, Jimmie caught sight of a strong light far up in the sky. Ben had his field-glass out in a moment.

“That’s the *Ann*, all right,” he decided after a long inspection. “There’s no other aeroplane in the world carries a light like that!”

“I’m glad Mr. Havens is coming,” Jimmie said with a sigh of relief.

“I said it was the *Ann*!” Ben returned after another long look. “I didn’t say Mr. Havens was flying her! It seems to me that the man on board doesn’t know as much about the aviation game as Mr. Havens does. She’s wobbling about something frightful!”

CHAPTER III. JIMMIE'S DARING FEAT

In ten minutes all doubts as to the identity of the aviator were dissipated by a signal from the sky which the boys all understood. Besides informing the boys of his presence, the signal also conveyed the intelligence that he was in need of assistance.

"I wish I had a ladder long enough to reach him!" Jimmie grumbled.

"We've got a ladder long enough to reach him!" insisted Carl.

Almost before the words were out of his chum's mouth, Jimmie was whirling the wheels of the *Louise* down the valley so as to get a good running ground, the machine having been drawn close to the fire after lighting. Understanding the boy's purpose, Carl lent a hand, and the aeroplane was soon facing a clear field.

"What are you boys going to do?" asked Ben.

"We're going up in the *Louise* to see what we can do for Mr. Havens!" Jimmie answered. "Didn't he say he needed help?"

"You can't help him after you get up there!" declared Ben.

"We can tell better about that after we get to him."

"All right, go it!" replied the other. "I'll remain here and watch the *Bertha* and the camp while you're gone. But look here," he continued, "if Mr. Havens is in bad shape, don't either one of you boys try to shift over to the *Ann*. If you do, you'll break your neck."

The next moment the *Louise* was in the air, her lights burning brilliantly. The *Ann* was still approaching, but staggering as if the aviator had lost all control. Below the boys saw Ben piling dry pine on the fire so as to provide a broadly-lighted landing-place for the oncoming machine.

"I don't know what we're going to do when we get up there," Jimmie shouted in Carl's ear, "but there's one thing sure, and that is that if we don't do something Mr. Havens will soon go crashing to the ground!"

The boys were now obliged to give over conversation, for the motors were in swift motion and the roar of an express train could hardly have been heard above the sparking.

When at last they came close to the *Ann* and swung about so as to move with her, they saw Mr. Havens sitting limply in the aviator's seat. His chin was lowered upon his breast, and he appeared to be too weak or too dazed in mind to look up as the *Louise* swept past him, whirled and moved along directly above him.

The boys saw that the great machine was rapidly getting beyond his control. Had he understood the nature of the ground below, he might have shut off his motors and volplaned down, but they understood, of course, that the dark surface below was unknown territory to him.

For some reason, probably because the disabled aviator had realized that he was fast reaching his objective point and shut the motors down to half power, the *Ann* was not making good speed. The *Louise* slowed down so as to keep exact step with her and Jimmie bent over in his seat and looked past the edge of the upper plane to the framework and propeller of the *Ann*. Directly he sent the *Louise* faster for a second and looked under the edge of the *Ann*'s upper wing to the vacant seat at the left of the aviator.

"Do you think," he shrilled into Carl's ear, "that I could get down into that seat?"

"Of course you can't!" answered Carl.

"I could if I had a rope!" insisted Jimmie.

"There's a rope in the box under your seat," Carl replied, "but there's no need of your attempting suicide!"

“Now, look here!” Jimmie argued, speaking very slowly and shouting to the full capacity of his lungs in order to make his chum hear his words, “if you can hold this machine steadily above the *Ann*, without varying half an inch in her pace, I can drop past the upper plane of the lower machine, light on the framework, and climb into that seat.”

“No one ever heard of such a thing being done!” declared Carl.

Before the words were out of Carl’s mouth, Jimmie had the rope in his hands. He fastened it securely to the framework of the *Louise* and dropped one end down.

“Now,” he called to Carl, “unless you hold the *Louise* exactly right, you’ll get the rope tangled in the *Ann*’s propeller, and then it will be all up with all of us!”

The boy’s face was pale as death as, motioning Carl to shift his weight as much as possible so as to prevent the *Louise* swaying when he changed his position, the boy took hold of the rope and lowered himself.

In a second he felt his body brushing against the framework of the *Ann*’s top wing. Then the rope began twisting and untwisting under his weight, and he whirled round and round like a top, until he became possessed by a feeling of dizziness.

He could see the ground, red with firelight, where the tents were and nothing else. He sensed that both machines were passing over the camp. At last, after what seemed to him an eternity, the twisting rope brought him face to the vacant seat and to the disabled aviator, whose hands were limply touching the levers.

When at last the boy’s feet touched the framework and he let go of the rope to cling to the edge of the plane, it seemed that the swaying of the machine must certainly throw him to the ground. However, he steadied himself for an instant, lowered himself at the knees and half fell forward clutching the seat when his outstretched hands came to it.

For a moment it did not seem possible that he was ever to recover his faculties again. Everything was in a whirl. The stars in the sky, the red light of the camp-fire on the cliff to the east, the dark bulk of the mountains farther away, all seemed mixed in a great jumble, in which nothing was distinct and everything seemed to be mixed with everything else.

When his mind cleared he saw that Mr. Havens’ hands were dropping from the levers. Another instant of indecision or inactivity would have brought death to them both. He seized the levers, and the *Ann* swung upward again, steady as the hands on the dial under his confident touch.

The rope which he had used still hung down from the *Louise* and, reaching forward, he gave it several quick jerks to indicate that he was safe. Then he saw the *Louise* shoot ahead, and knew that Carl was looking back toward him. The rope had been drawn up as soon as his signals had been received. The warning against permitting it to become entangled in the propellers of the *Ann* had been remembered by Carl.

Both machines were now some distance west of the camp-fire, but the boys came slowly around and dropped. During the last few yards of the slanting journey through the dark air, Jimmie was obliged to steady Mr. Havens in his seat. When at last the strain was over and the great flying machines lay on the rich grass below, the millionaire aviator fairly fell from his seat.

When Carl and Ben came forward to greet Jimmie, their faces were as white as snow. Their hands trembled as they extended them to the boy.

“He would do it!” Carl exclaimed. “I tried to get him not to!”

“Some one had to do it!” declared Jimmie, pointing significantly to the huddled figure on the ground by the side of the *Ann*.

“It’s a wonder you didn’t kill yourself and Mr. Havens and Carl also,” exclaimed Ben. “Why, look here, boys,” he went on with a trembling voice, “if that rope had swung out a few inches farther, you would have been ground to pieces in the propellers, and the *Ann* would have dropped to the ground like a stone! The rope you held would have drawn the *Louise* down with you! It was an awful risk to take!”

“If I hadn’t taken it,” Jimmie answered, “Mr. Havens would have fallen from his seat. His hands were dropping from the levers when I reached his side. Five seconds more and he would have gone down.”

“In all the history of aviation,” Ben declared, “nothing of that kind was ever done before! The wildest imagination cannot conceive of a person leaving one machine and taking a position on another while in the air! It is an unheard-of thing.”

“Well, it’s been done once!” declared Jimmie. “And it may be done again. And now, if you’ve got all the kinks out of your system, perhaps you’d better help me take Mr. Havens into one of the tents.”

“I can’t lift a pound!” declared Carl. “I thought for a second that Jimmie had been obliged to let go of the rope and drop!”

Ben and Jimmie lifted the millionaire aviator, now almost unconscious, and carried him into one of the shelter-tents. His face was very pale and his breathing was uncertain.

“I don’t see what’s the matter with him,” Jimmie exclaimed after examining the man’s head and breast. “There is no wound here that I can find!”

Then Ben pointed to the aviator’s feet.

“Strange we didn’t notice those before!” he said.

“What’s the matter?” demanded Jimmie with a shudder. “Have his feet been cut off?”

The aviator wore no shoes, and his feet were closely wrapped in bandages which had evidently been made from one of the blankets carried in the store-box of the *Ann*. The bandages were stiff with congealed blood.

Ben began to remove the cords which held the bandages in place, but Jimmie motioned him away.

“We’ll have to get hot water before we can get those off!” the boy said. “We’ll need plenty of hot water, anyway, so you’d better go and tell Carl to put on the big kettle.”

While Ben was gone, Mr. Havens opened his eyes. He glanced around the tent and smiled when his eyes encountered those of his companions.

“Did I fall?” he asked faintly.

“I should say not!” was the reply. “I guess if you’d had a tumble out of the air, you wouldn’t be lying here in this tent, able to talk, would you? You’d be all smashed up on the rocks!”

“I felt myself falling!” insisted the aviator.

“That was after the machine landed,” Jimmie explained.

“Did some one get into the seat with me?” the voice went on weakly.

“Why, sure!” replied Jimmie. “I dropped over into the seat and we came down together. Don’t you remember that?”

“I do not!” smiled the aviator.

“We saw something was the matter with you,” Jimmie went on, “and so Carl and I went up to see what caused the *Ann* to reel along like a drunken sailor. We got there just in time!”

“I was weak from loss of blood,” replied Mr. Havens. “I camped last night in a valley occupied by hosts of yellow-haired porcupines.”

“I’ve heard of ’em,” Jimmie grinned.

“In the night,” the injured man went on, “I got out of my sleeping bag to mend the fire and stepped on a whole host of the fellows, cutting my feet into ribbons, almost.”

“Wouldn’t they get out of the way?” asked the boy.

“They never get out of the way!” was the answer. “Instead, they will walk in a man’s path, like a pet kitten, and refuse to turn aside.”

“Did you get the quills all out of your feet?”

“I don’t know whether I did or not. They bled terribly, and I am now in great pain with them. You boys will have to find out about that later on! I’m too tired now to talk.”

Ben now brought a kettle of blood-warm water while Carl appeared with a cup of strong coffee. After the aviator had swallowed the coffee, the bandages were removed and his feet carefully examined. There were many quills still in the flesh, they having worked in instead of out, as is usual in such cases. These had caused the bleeding to continue, and this in a measure accounted for Mr. Havens' weakened condition.

By midnight the aviator was able to sit up and listen to the story of the two visitors.

"I quite agree with you," he said, after Ben had concluded the recital, "there is no doubt in my mind that the men are simply mountain bums. And I'm afraid that we'll have trouble with them in future. These machines must be guarded night and day!"

"How long are we going to stay in this blooming old valley?" asked Jimmie. "I'd rather be sailing over the mountains!"

"You can go sailing over the mountains to-night if you want to," Carl chuckled, pointing, "there seems to be a beacon fire waiting for you!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF COLLETON

"I'm glad the fellows took the trouble of building a fire of their own instead of wanting to lounge around ours all night," Jimmie observed, as the boys looked at the leaping flames toward the north end of the slope. "I should think they'd freeze up there!"

"I hope they do!" cried Carl.

"I wish we had some way of finding out what they are doing here," Ben said. "They don't look like mountain men to me."

"There are probably a great many such characters in the mountains," Mr. Havens explained. "Perhaps they'll let us alone if we let them alone."

"Is there any chance of their being here to interfere with our work?" asked Carl. "It really seems that way to me."

"I don't think so," the millionaire aviator replied.

"What did you learn at Denver?" asked Ben. "Was there any indication in the messages received from Washington that the mail-order frauds were turning their attention to the west?"

"Not a word!" replied Mr. Havens. "We have a clear field here, and all we've got to do is to locate this Larry Colleton. I shall probably be laid up with sore feet for a number of days, but that won't prevent you boys flying over the country in the machines looking for camps."

"Huh!" grinned Jimmie. "They won't keep Colleton in no camp! They'll keep him in some damp old hole in the ground."

"I presume that's right, too," Mr. Havens replied. "But you boys mustn't look for camps entirely. Whenever you see people moving about, it's up to you to investigate, find out who they are and where they are stopping. You'll find that all this will keep you busy."

"We're likely to be kept busy if there are a lot of tramps in the hills!" Ben answered, "for the reason that it may take two or three days to chase down each party we discover."

"I haven't told you much about the case yet," Mr. Havens continued, "and I may as well do so now. About six months ago, letters began coming to the post-office department at Washington complaining that a certain patent medicine concern which was advertising an alleged remedy, Kuro, was defrauding its customers by sending about one cent's worth of quinine and water in return for two dollars in money."

"Keen, level-headed business men!" exclaimed Jimmie.

"Larry Colleton, one of the best inspectors in the department, was given the case. For a long time, after the investigation began, this Kuro company manufactured a remedy which really worked some of the cures described in the advertising. This was expensive, however, and at times the shipments fell back to the one-cent bottle of quinine water."

"More thrift!" laughed Ben.

"Another fraud-charge was that the Kuro company often failed to make any shipment whatever in return for money received. Colleton bought hundreds of bottles of their remedy, but the difficult point was to establish the fact that the company was not at the time of the investigation manufacturing the honest medicine. The officers of the company claimed that they were perfecting their medicine every day, and admitted that some of the bottles sent out at first were not what they should have been."

"Why didn't he pinch the whole bunch?" demanded Jimmie.

"He did!" answered Mr. Havens. "But time after time they escaped punishment by being discharged on examination by United States district court commissioners, or by having their cases flatly turned down by men employed in the laboratories at Washington."

Mr. Havens was about to continue when Ben motioned him to look in the direction of the blaze, still showing on a shelf of the slope to the north. The fire was burning green.

“What does that mean?” the boy asked.

“It means that they are talking to some person on the other side of the valley or in the valley,” Mr. Havens answered. “It struck me, when the fire was first pointed out, that no man in his right mind would be apt to set up a camp in that exposed position.”

“Just before I called your attention to the fire,” Ben remarked, “it was showing red. There, you see,” he added, in a moment, “it is turning red right now! Of course the lights mean something to some one.”

“That busts your theory about the fellows being mountain tramps!” exclaimed Jimmie. “Such wouldn’t be carrying red and green fire and rifles with Maxim silencers!”

“They may be mounted policemen after all!” suggested Mr. Havens.

“Not on your whiskers!” exclaimed Carl. “Do you think mounted policemen wouldn’t know how to skin a bear, or know how to broil a bear steak? You just bet your life these fellows know more about riding on the elevated or in the subway than they do about traveling on horseback!”

“Well,” Mr. Havens went on, “one of you boys watch the lights and the others listen to the story of how the crooks got Colleton. It may be necessary in the future that you should know exactly how the trick was turned. After a long investigation, and after bribing several men in the factory where the alleged remedy was manufactured, Mr. Colleton secured the exact formula in use during the current week. He also secured a long list of names of persons to whom the bogus remedy manufactured that week had been shipped.”

“Then, why didn’t he drop down on the concern?” asked Carl.

“He did!” was the answer. “He arrested the officers of the company and subpoenaed scores of witnesses. He also secured proof that men in the employ of the government had been bribed by the Kuro concern to retard the work of the inspector and to assist in the destruction of any proof submitted to the commissioner by him.”

“Why didn’t you say that before?” asked Jimmie. “If you’d just said that Colleton was fighting the department at Washington as well as the patent medicine concern, we would have understood what kind of a case we were getting into.”

“Well, you know it now!” laughed Mr. Havens. “At last,” he continued, “Colleton had his case ready for the grand jury, the district commissioner having placed the respondents under heavy bail to await such action.”

“And what happened then?” asked Carl.

“He lost his proof and he lost himself,” smiled the aviator. “Colleton expected a long fight before the grand jury, a fight in the district court, a fight in the circuit court, a fight in the court of appeals, and a final fight before the United States Supreme court, for he knew that the Kuro people had plenty of money and the kind of influence which counts in an emergency.”

“And then what happened?”

“Colleton knew that he had a legal fight on his hands, but he never suspected that he had a personal fight. One day he disappeared from his office in the post-office department at Washington, and his proof disappeared with him. He has never been seen by his friends since that day.”

“And now we’ve got to find him!” exclaimed Jimmie.

“That’s what we’ve got to do!” echoed Carl.

“But, I don’t understand how they got him out of his own room, and got his proof out of the building without attracting attention!” Ben suggested. “They must have had several operatives at work.”

“They certainly did!” was the reply. “Colleton was sitting in his office at three:fifteen one Monday afternoon. The safe in which his papers were kept was locked. The desk in which his memoranda were stored was also locked. When last seen sitting at his desk, he was making

memoranda concerning a case not at all connected with the Kuro matter. These papers were not taken.”

“That was bad editing!” Ben laughed. “They should have taken all the papers in sight in order not to disclose the real object of the robbery. The rascals slipped a cog there!”

“The first error in the whole case,” Mr. Havens went on. “Only for the fact that Kuro papers were taken exclusively, it might have been claimed that the respondents in some of the other criminal cases being handled by Colleton had committed the outrage.”

“Where did Colleton go when he left his office?” asked Ben.

“That’s exactly what we don’t know.”

“Who saw him leave his office?”

“No one.”

“Well, then, who saw any one enter his office?”

“No one.”

“Well,” laughed Ben, “how could Colleton get out of his office without being seen? Perhaps he went out unobserved and took the proof with him! You haven’t said whether the safe and desk were opened.”

“They were opened,” was the reply, “by some one knowing the combination to the safe, and some one having a key to the desk. All the proof collected by Colleton disappeared that day.”

“And the patent medicine men finally got up to his price!” grinned Jimmie. “I guess it’s the old story!”

“That’s what makes it so provoking,” said Mr. Havens, impatiently. “A good many people in Washington are saying the same thing. It is unjust to the inspector and very annoying to his friends.”

“And no one went into his office that afternoon?” asked Carl.

“Not that we know of.”

“And no one went near his office door?” asked Jimmie.

“I didn’t say that!” replied Mr. Havens. “His office door opens on a wide corridor, at that time being used as desk space by an overflow of clerks. At three:ten that afternoon two men stopped at Colleton’s door, but did not enter.”

“How do you know they didn’t enter?” Carl broke in.

“No one saw them enter or come out. No one heard the door open or close. One of the men, a heavily-built, bearded fellow, seemed to be urging the other to enter Colleton’s room. The man who was being urged was younger, thinner, and appeared to be greatly excited.”

“Were they the only men seen at that door about that time?” asked Ben.

“So it is said,” was the reply.

“And Colleton was at his desk just before the men were seen at his door?” asked Jimmie.

“Five minutes before!”

“And the person who entered his room after the two men departed found it vacant?”

“That’s the idea exactly!”

“Did you say the young thin man was excited?”

“Perhaps excited is not the correct word,” was Mr. Havens’ reply. “He seemed to be dazed with fear. The clerk sitting near the door received the idea that the man had nerved himself up to the point of confessing a crime or a dereliction of duty, and had lost his courage when he reached the door of the inspector’s room.”

“Did this young man look like Colleton?” asked Ben.

“Not at all. Colleton wore a light moustache only. This man wore a full beard. Colleton’s eyes are bright, snappy, far-seeing. This man’s eyes looked dull and lifeless under the glasses he wore. Colleton is straight, alert, confident. This man dragged his feet as he walked and his shoulders hunched together.”

“Where did the two men go after they left Colleton’s door?” asked Ben. “Did no one watch them?”

“No further attention was paid to them.”

“Would any of the clerks in the corridor know the big fellow again?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t think they paid enough attention to know whether his eyes were blue or black or brown.”

“Then they didn’t notice the other fellow very particularly, did they?”

“No, in fact, except for his dazed and dejected manner and his odd dress they probably wouldn’t have noticed the young man particularly. But why are you asking these questions,” Mr. Havens answered with a laugh. “Are you boys going to solve, off-hand, a mystery over which Washington detectives have been puzzling for many weeks?”

“No,” Ben answered, “but I know when Colleton left his room.”

CHAPTER V. A MIDNIGHT FLIGHT

“Then you know more about the case than the detectives at Washington!” smiled Mr. Havens. “When do you think he left his room?”

“I don’t think, I know!”

“Well, get it out of your system!” exclaimed Jimmie.

“He left his room,” Ben chuckled, “about one second before those two men appeared in the corridor outside his door!”

“I suppose you happened to be coming out of another office, just across the corridor, and happened to see him coming out, didn’t you?” jeered Carl. “You always were the wise little boy!”

“Now, look here,” Ben said, more seriously, “me for the Brainy Bowers act in this little play. In time the truth of the matter will be known, and when that time comes you just remember your Uncle Dudley’s forecast.”

“You haven’t made any forecast yet!”

“I’ll make a guess then,” Ben answered. “I’ll just call it a guess. I’ll guess that Colleton came out of his room with the big man, and that he was doped stiff, and that he had the proofs in his inside pocket, and that the big man got him away under the eyes of a dozen clerks, and probably passed a score of detectives before he got out of the building.”

“But look here,” Mr. Havens began.

“Please, Mr. Havens,” Jimmie broke in, “don’t wake him up. Let him go on dreaming! He’ll feel all the better for it in the morning!”

“I don’t care what you say!” Ben argued. “The big man took Colleton out of his room. If you want to know whom to look for in this case, just you look for the big man. And if you want to get a sure case against him, find some one of the clerks who can identify him as the man who stood at Colleton’s door that afternoon.”

“I half believe you are right!” Havens declared.

“It listens good to me,” Jimmie agreed.

“I want to withdraw everything I said against the theory,” Carl cut in.

“Look here!” Ben said rather excitedly. “Those fellows who claimed to be mounted policemen are both big men, and they both wear full beards. Now it seems to me that the man who took Colleton out of his office would be the man to keep him under duress until the excitement of the case dies down.”

“For the love of Mike!” Jimmie exclaimed. “Don’t go to materializing the man with the alfalfa on his face right here in the mountains.”

“That’s the man we’re looking for,” suggested Ben.

“Well, let’s don’t find him until we’ve had a little more fun flying over British Columbia!”

“Say, Mr. Havens,” Ben proposed. “You ought to send word to Washington to have one or two of the most intelligent of those clerks sent out here. When we get the man with the full beard we’ll want some one to tell us whether we’re right or not.”

“I’ll do that the first time I reach a telegraph office,” the aviator replied. “That ought to have been thought of long ago.”

“It strikes me that you won’t get to a telegraph office very soon!” laughed Jimmie. “You’ll have a mess of feet that look like bread dough by morning! Those porcupine quills often poison as well as wound.”

“Well, you boys can send the message then,” returned Mr. Havens.

“And you can watch camp!” laughed Carl.

“I’m afraid that’s what I’ll have to do.”

“What has been done with the case against the Kuro company?” Ben asked after a short silence.

“Still pending in the courts. Of course, the government can’t proceed to trial in the absence of inspector Colleton.”

“Then if Colleton should be murdered, the case might never be tried?”

“It certainly never would be tried!”

“Then we’ve got to get a move on!” cried Jimmie. “If these fellows know that special effort is being made to locate him, they won’t take any chances. The nearer we get to Colleton, the nearer he will be to his death. At least that’s the way I look at it.”

“That’s the way it looks to me, too,” Ben agreed.

Carl now caught Jimmie by the arm and pointed to the fire burning on the mountain to the north.

“It burns green now,” he said.

While they looked the flame turned red again.

“I wouldn’t mind going over there to-night!” Jimmie declared.

“Then let’s go,” advised Carl.

“Huh! I didn’t say anything about your going!”

“You know very well you always have to have me with you,” Carl chuckled. “You get into trouble when you go alone.”

“Here,” Ben called from the tent where Mr. Havens lay, “what are you boys planning now? No one leaves the camp to-night, understand!”

“Of course not,” grinned Jimmie.

“I should say not!” echoed Carl.

“Now, this is on the level,” Ben argued. “If you boys are planning anything for to-night, you want to quit it, right now! If those fellows around that other fire are watching us, you couldn’t do a thing that would please them more than to wander off in the darkness.”

“Who said anything about wandering off in the darkness?” demanded Jimmie. “You’re always seeing things that are not present.”

“Anyway,” Carl said with a yawn, “it’s time we were all in bed!”

“I’ll watch to-night,” Ben proposed, with a significant glance in the direction of the aviator.

“And look here,” Jimmie suggested, “suppose you keep a record of the changes of color over on the mountain. I believe those people are saying something with those green and red lights!”

“All right,” Ben replied, “I’ll do that.”

“I don’t suppose I’ll sleep very much to-night, anyway,” Mr. Havens said, after a pause, “so you may as well go to bed, every one of you, and I’ll wake you if anything unusual occurs.”

“I think I’d better keep awake,” Ben insisted.

Jimmie and Carl stepped to one side, ostensibly in search of dry pine for use during the night, but really to discuss this unexpected opposition to the excursion they had planned.

“We can’t go if they make such a noise about it!” Carl complained.

“Sure we can!” returned Jimmie.

“I don’t know how!” Carl grumbled.

“I can fix up a scheme to get away in the machine with the advice and consent of the multitude,” laughed the other.

“In your mind!” returned Carl.

“Watch me!” advised Jimmie.

The boys went back to the camp-fire and stood for some moments watching the changing lights on the mountain.

“I’d like to know if some one is really talking back to that fellow,” Jimmie said, turning to Mr. Havens.

“I presume some one is answering the signals,” the millionaire answered, “only we can’t see the answers given.”

“Perhaps we could learn what they’re saying if we could see the answers. They may be talking in a code we could get next to.”

“Well, you don’t see anything that looks like a return signal, do you?” asked Ben. “They’ll take good care that we don’t see both ends of the conversation.”

“Look here,” proposed Jimmie, “why don’t we send Ben up in a machine to look over the landscape. The return signals may come from some point not to be seen from this end of the valley.”

“That’s the idea!” exclaimed Carl, understanding in a minute why his chum had suggested that Ben make the midnight flight.

“Not for me!” answered Ben. “I don’t care about going up into the sky refrigerator this time of night!”

“Then you go, Carl,” Jimmie said turning to the other.

“Not so you could notice it!” Carl declared.

“All right!” Jimmie said with an injured air. “I made one exhausting flight to-night and I suppose I could make another. We certainly ought to know whether those people are signaling to others in the mountains. Don’t you think so, Mr. Havens?” he added turning to the millionaire.

“It would enable us to understand the situation better,” was the reply.

“Then I’ll go,” Jimmie said, putting on an unwilling manner. “I’ll go up far enough to see what’s doing and come right back. While I’m gone you fellows get up a supper. It’s most daylight and we haven’t had anything to eat since last night.”

“You had only two suppers last night!” Ben laughed.

“I don’t care if I had nine,” Jimmie answered, “I’m hungry just the same, and when I come back from my little trip, I’ll be about famished!”

“I guess I’ll go with you,” suggested Carl.

“No, you don’t,” declared Jimmie, with a sly wink. “You wouldn’t go when I wanted you to, and now you can’t go with me!”

“Do you think they ought to go, Mr. Havens?” asked Ben.

“If they can go without getting into any scrape, yes!”

“But they’ll be sure to get into trouble,” Ben complained.

“Trouble yourself!” cried Jimmie. “I guess we can swing around this little old valley without it being necessary for you to send out a relief expedition! You act like I never saw a flying machine before!”

“Perhaps they’ll be good to-night,” Mr. Havens laughed.

The millionaire saw how set the boys were on taking the trip in the aeroplane. He rather suspected that Jimmie had mapped out the exact course to be pursued in getting permission, and laughed at the tact displayed by the little fellow. He remembered, however, the great risk the boy had taken in order to be of service to him that very night, and so decided in his favor.

“Do I go?” demanded Carl.

“Well, come along if you want to,” Jimmie answered, with apparent reluctance. “If you break your neck, don’t blame me!”

The boys passed out of the circle of light about the fire and drew the *Louise* out to level ground. Jimmie could hear his chum chuckling softly as they pushed and pulled together.

“Didn’t I tell you I could fix it up all right?” the boy asked.

“You’re the foxy little kid!” exclaimed Carl. “What are we going to do when we get up in the air?” he continued.

“We’re going to circle the valley,” Jimmie answered, “and see if we can catch sight of another camp-fire. Then we’re going to climb up until we can look over the ridges in this vicinity. If there is a collection of mail-order pirates anywhere in this country we want to know it to-night.”

“Then we want to put on lots of warm clothing,” Carl suggested, “and take automatics and searchlights with us.”

“Of course!” answered Jimmie. “We want to go prepared for zero weather. It’s always cold up on the top of the Continental Divide!”

“And that’s all you’re going to do?” asked Carl. “Just fly around the camp and locate the other camp-fires and then go to bed?”

“Well, of course,” Jimmie said hesitatingly, “if we find a camp that looks in any way suspicious, we ought to investigate it a little. We can’t get very close with the motors, you know, without attracting a whole lot of attention, so we may have to land and sneak up to find out what’s going on. We can’t learn much by sailing a thousand feet over a camp!”

“That’s just what I thought!” laughed Carl. “Just as quick as you get away in a machine you want to take a lot of risks that no one else would think of taking.”

Jimmie’s only reply was a confident chuckle, and the boys were soon in the air. As the pneumatic tires left the ground Ben waved them “Good-bye” and shouted for them to be careful if they couldn’t be good.

In ten minutes the *Louise* was over the camp-fire, which had been observed all night. Nothing was to be seen but the springing flames. There was no human being in sight.

“Well,” Jimmie said, as they circled the spot for the second time and darted away to the east, “we’ll have to light and creep up!”

CHAPTER VI.

THE LOSS OF THE LOUISE

"I'd like to see you find a place where you can land," Carl shouted in his chum's ear. "There's nothing here but ridges and canyons, and rocks and rivers at the bottom!"

"Oh, we can find a place all right," Jimmie answered.

It was some time before the boy found a spot which appeared to be in any way suitable for a landing. This was some distance to the east of the ridge which shut in the valley. The shelf he selected was rather high up, and that suited his purpose well, for, as he explained to Carl, they would have less mountain to climb in order to get a look into the camp.

The aeroplane landed with a bump which nearly threw the boys out of their seats, and when Jimmie sprang off and looked about he saw that one of the wheels was actually whirling round and round in the air, having passed off the rock. Below, five hundred feet down, the murmur of running water could be heard.

"Gee-whiz!" exclaimed Carl, when the position of the wheel was pointed out to him. "That was a close call! If the other wheel had run two feet farther, we'd have been dumped into the canyon."

"But it didn't run two feet farther!" Jimmie insisted. "I never saw any advantage in raising a mess of ifs," he went on. "If the sun should drop down some night, the world would drop, too. But it doesn't, so what's the use?"

"What next?" asked Carl.

"You stay here and watch the machine and I'll sneak over the ridge and crawl down to the camp. I'm curious to know why those fellows are showing those colored lights."

"If you get too close to them, you may find out things that won't do you any good."

"Don't croak!" advised Jimmie. "I'll just go down there and see how many there are in the camp, and what they're doing, and what they're saying, and come right back!"

"I've got a picture of your doing that! Now look here," Carl went on, "you want to remember that I'm staying here by this machine in zero weather, or worse, so you don't want to go poking about until daylight. My fingers are frozen stiff now!"

"Run up and down and keep warm, little one!" laughed Jimmie.

Before Carl could reply the boy was off, scrambling up the rocky face of the slope which led to the summit. It was stinging cold, and the boy needed all the exercise he was getting in order to keep his blood in circulation. Although not on the main ridge of the Great Divide, the boy was pretty high up.

Before he came to a position from which the valley to the west might be seen, Jimmie found that he was wading in snow. There was no moon, but stars shone down from a clear sky.

When he reached the crest he saw the camp-fire two or three hundred feet below, built on a shelf of rock which seemed to afford no protection whatever from the cold winds swirling around the peaks.

"I don't believe that's any camp at all!" the boy mused. "It's just a signal station, and the operator is probably wrapped up in fur overcoats a foot thick. I guess about all I can do here," he went on, "is to see if there is another fire in sight."

The western slope of the ridge was much steeper than the one he had already ascended, so at times the lad approached the hostile camp-fire a great deal faster than he wanted to. He tried to proceed cautiously, without making any noise, but now and then when his feet slipped and he rolled half a dozen paces, to be caught at last by a little crevice or a narrow shelf, small rocks became dislodged and went thundering down.

"Might just as well take a band," Jimmie mused disgustedly.

When the boy came to within a few yards of the fire he saw that only one figure was in sight. As he had predicted he would be, the lone guardian of the fire was well bundled up in furs. If the motors had attracted his attention his manner gave no indication of the fact.

“Looks like a wooden Indian,” chuckled Jimmie.

There was no place for the boy to secrete himself in the vicinity of the fire, so he crouched down on the slope and looked over the landscape beyond. He could see his own camp-fire quite distinctly, but no other light was in sight for several moments.

Then what seemed like the blood-red light of an early August moon showed on a level of rock far off on the west side of the valley.

“They’re burning red fire over there, too,” he mused as the situation became clearer in his mind.

The boy climbed back up the slope for a few yards and looked again, but the fire itself was not in sight and only the reflection showed on a slender surface of rock beyond. While he looked the color changed to green, which showed indistinctly under the stars.

From his new position Jimmie could see his own camp to better advantage than from the one lower down. He sat watching it for some moments, wondering why Ben was moving around the blaze so actively and why Mr. Havens had left the tent.

There certainly were two figures outlined against the blaze. The lad studied the puzzle intently for a moment and then started back. He understood that it would be of no use for him to try to get nearer to the fire below. The man on watch there would be conscious of his approach before he was within a hundred feet.

From the ridge the boy looked back to his camp again. There were now four figures outlined against the blaze, and all appeared to be moving about as if acting under great excitement.

Jimmie tried his best to discover whether any of the figures were those of Mr. Havens and Ben, but the distance was too great. He could only see the figures moving about. As he looked and studied over the proposition he blamed himself for not bringing his field-glass, but his self-reproach was, of course, unavailing.

Knowing that he ought to be making his way back to the camp, the boy still remained gazing downward as if fascinated. He had no reason to believe that the visitors he saw were at the camp with friendly intent. He knew that his friends might be in great danger. Still, he sat and watched the fire like one dazed.

There had been no sound of motors, yet the intruders at the camp had penetrated the valley since nightfall. Or had they been hiding there at the time the boys landed? While the boy puzzled over the situation a mass of rocks left the summit not far to the north and went racing down the slope, making sufficient noise, as Jimmie believed, to incite a riot a hundred miles away!

“Now there’s some one sleuthing in that direction,” the boy mused. “Of course, he was at the camp-fire when he heard the motors and ducked. Now he’s up there watching me, I presume.”

The lad turned toward the snow-capped summit once more, resolved to get away to his own camp as soon as possible. When he reached the top the clatter of motors came to his ears. He looked down in dismay to see the *Louise* lifting into the air.

“Now, what’s that fool Carl doing?” he muttered.

The aeroplane left the shelf with a little dip over the precipice and struck out for the west, passing nearly over the wondering boy’s head. The acetylene lamp which had been arranged on the forward framework was burning brightly, and Jimmie could see that both seats were occupied. The lamp had been turned low just before his departure.

The boy paused at the summit and looked back into the valley. There was no need now for him to cross to the eastern slope. He had no doubt that the *Louise* had been stolen, and that Carl was driving her away under duress. In order to reach the camp he would be obliged to pass down the steep slope which led to the bottom of the valley.

Blaming himself for leaving the machine even for a moment, yet by no means disheartened at the calamity which had overtaken him, the boy turned his face to the south resolved to pass along the broken summit until he had passed the vicinity of the camp below and then work his way diagonally down the slope. As he took his first step downward he heard a voice softly calling his name.

“Jimmie!” the voice said. “Hello, Jimmie.”

Jimmie stopped and looked back. A figure was approaching him from the north, crouching down close to the slope of the rocks.

“Carl!” he called. “Is that you?”

“Sure!” was the reply. “I thought you had gone off in the machine.”

“Then you went away and left her, did you?” demanded Jimmie.

“Of course I did. I wanted to see what was going on!”

“Did you see the people who took the machine away?” asked Jimmie.

“I saw two figures—no faces,” was the reply.

“Well,” Jimmie grunted, “we’ve got a nice little walk back to camp!”

“I hope we don’t freeze to death on the way down,” Carl cut in.

The boys walked steadily for a few moments, and then Jimmie stopped and regarded his companion with a questioning look.

“Are you game?” he finally asked.

“I’m game!” Carl answered. “We’ve lost the machine, and it doesn’t make any difference what happens now.”

“That’s the way I look at it!” Jimmie returned.

“What do you want to do?”

“Now, look here,” Jimmie explained. “There’s only one person at the fire from which the signals were sent. He sits there like a wooden Indian, probably three-fourths asleep. The two men who went away on the *Louise*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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