

**FRANK
WALTON**

THE FLYING
MACHINE BOYS
IN THE WILDS

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The Flying Machine Boys in the Wilds / The Mystery of the Andes

CHAPTER I. UNDER THE EQUATOR

The Flying Machine Boys were camping under the equator. The *Louise* and the *Bertha*, the splendid aeroplanes in which the lads had visited California and Mexico, lay on a great plateau some fifteen thousand feet above the level of the Pacific ocean, and two thin tents of light oiled-silk stood not far away.

Ben Whitcomb and Jimmie Stuart sat at the entrance of one of the tents shivering with cold, while Glenn Richards and Carl Nichols, in the interest of increased warmth, chased each other around a miserable little apology for a fire which alternately blazed and smoldered near the aeroplanes.

"I begin to understand now how those who freeze to death must suffer!" declared Ben, his teeth chattering like the "bones" of an end-man in a minstrel show.

"You give me a pain!" grinned Jimmie. "Here we are almost exactly under the equator, and yet you talk of being cold!"

The boy's lips were blue and he swung his arms about his body in the hope of getting a livelier circulation of blood as he spoke.

"Under the equator!" scoffed Ben. "Better say 'under the Arctic circle!' What are we camping here for, anyway?" he added impatiently, springing to his feet. "Why not drop down into a region where the equator isn't covered with ice a foot thick?"

"You wanted to pass a night up here!" laughed Carl, stopping in front of the two boys, his eyes dancing with mischief, his cheeks flushed from exercise. "You told us how you wanted to breathe the cool, sweet air of the hills! Now breathe it!"

"The cool, sweet air of the hills," Ben retorted, "reminds me of the atmosphere of the big refrigerator at home."

Glenn Richards now joined the little group and stood laughing at the disgusted expression on the face of his chum.

"Didn't I tell you," he exclaimed, "that Ecuador is the land of contradictions? When you come here, you bring a peck or two of quinine tablets, a bundle or two of mosquito netting, and a couple of bales of fans. You bring your summer clothing, and don't expect to wear much of that. Then you go on a trip up-country and freeze to death where the ice is about nine thousand feet thick!"

"I know where all the heat goes!" Jimmie declared. "It pours out of those big peaks you see off there. How do you suppose the earth is going to keep any warmth in it when it is all running out at volcanoes?"

The boys were, perhaps, twenty miles north of Quito, almost exactly under the equator. From the plateau on which they were encamped several ancient volcanoes were in plain view.

"Huh! I guess the volcanoes we see are about burned out!" Carl declared. "At any rate, I don't hear of their filling in any valleys with lava."

"I guess about all they do now is to smoke," Ben suggested.

"And that's a bad habit, too!" Glenn Richards grinned.

"Now, I'll tell you what we'd better do, boys," Glenn said, after glancing disapprovingly at the small fire. "We'd better hop on the machines and drop down about ten thousand feet. I've got enough of this high mountain business."

“All right!” Jimmie returned. “You know what you said about wanting experiences which were out of the way. If you think you’ve got one here, we’ll slide down to the green grass.”

It was late in November and the hot, dry season of the South American continent was on. Far below the boys could see the dark green of luxuriant vegetation, while all around them lay the bare brown peaks of lofty plateaus and lifting mountain cones.

As it was somewhere near the middle of the afternoon, the boys lost no time in packing their camp equipage and provisions on the aeroplanes. In order to find a suitable place for a camp lower down they might be obliged to traverse considerable country.

In describing this part of the continent a traveler once crumpled a sheet of paper in his hand and tossed it on the table, saying to a friend as he did so that that was an outline map of the northern part of South America. There were many gorges and plateaus, but only a few spots where aeroplanes might land with safety.

After quite a long flight, during which the machines soared around cliffs and slid into valleys and gorges, the boys found a green valley watered by the Esmeraldas river. Here they dropped down, and the shelter-tents were soon ready for occupancy.

“I suppose,” Carl grumbled as provisions were taken from the flying machines and brought to the vicinity of the fire, “that we’ll have to fight thousands of kinds of crawling and creeping things before morning!”

“Well,” Jimmie laughed, “you wouldn’t stay up there where the flying and creeping things don’t live!”

“My private opinion,” declared Glenn, “is that we ought to spend most of our time in the air! I wish we could sleep on the machines!”

“Where are we going, anyhow?” demanded Jimmie.

“We’re going to follow the backbone of the South American continent clear to Cape Horn!” replied Ben. “That is, if our flying machines and our tempers hold out!”

“I have an idea,” Glenn said, “that we’ll spend most of the time in Peru, which is probably the oldest country in the world so far as civilization is concerned.”

“That’s another dream!” exclaimed Carl.

“Look here,” Glenn exclaimed, “there are still temples and palaces in Peru which date back beyond the remotest reach of tradition. The earliest Incas believed that many of the fortresses, castles and temples which they found there were formed by the gods when the world was made.”

“That’s going back a long ways!” laughed Jimmie.

“There’s a lake in Peru called Titicaca on an island in the middle of which lies an ancient palace and many other structures,” Glenn went on. “Gathered about it are the remains of a civilization that was old when the people of Europe consisted of a group of semi-heathen tribes wandering from place to place. There are palaces surpassing anything to be seen on the Rhine, and castles which had fallen into decay before civilization began at the mouth of the Nile.”

“Go to it!” laughed Carl. “Make it good and old while you’re about it!”

“On the island of Titicaca,” continued Glenn, “are marvels in architecture which make the wonders of Egypt look like thirty cents! There are massive fortifications perched on the sides of almost perpendicular cliffs, and even to-day there are large stones carefully balanced on the verge of precipices, ready to be pushed off at a moment’s notice and sent crashing down on the legions of an attacking foe.”

“Those old fellows must have been fighters!” commented Ben.

“They were fighters, all right!” Glenn went on. “They ruled all that part of the world until the Spaniards came. They were very superstitious, the sun being an object of worship. The Temple of the Sun, on the island of Titicaca, was one of the most magnificent structures ever erected. Outside and inside the walls were lined with gold and precious stones. The temple was the pride of the Incas, but it was stripped of its rich covering by the Spaniards. The walls were torn down and rifled, and

the sacred sun was seized and gambled for by the covetous invaders. Nothing that could be converted into money was overlooked. And since that time the Incas have become one of the lowest races on the face of the earth.”

“I suppose we shall be able to inspect a lot of these old temples?” asked Carl.

“Undoubtedly!” Glenn answered. “Some of them are deserted; some are occupied by native Indians, and some are said to be frequented by the spirits of those who erected them.”

“Gee! That sounds good to me!” exclaimed Jimmie.

“A haunted temple might help some!” Carl exclaimed.

“There really is a temple down on Lake Titicaca!” declared Glenn, “which even Europeans declare to be inhabited by the Evil One.”

“That’s where I’m headed for!” declared Jimmie. “Any old time you show me a mystery you’ll see me on the job!”

“There’s a mystery there, all right!” Glenn insisted. “The temple stands on a winding arm of the lake, and is entirely surrounded by broken country. So difficult is it of access that for years no one attempted to visit it. Then, a few years ago, a party of Englishmen made their way to the ruins and found themselves in an atmosphere of mystery almost resembling magic.”

“What did they see?” asked Ben.

“I don’t remember exactly what they all saw,” Glenn answered. “Their stories do not agree! Some saw figures in white—the long flowing robes of priests—some saw strange lights suspended in the air; some heard the most mournful and terrifying sounds.”

“And these Englishmen were supposed to be people of average intelligence?” asked Ben.

“There were scientists in the party!” was the reply.

“There is no such word as ghost in the dictionary of the scientist!” laughed Carl.

“Following the stories told by the visitors,” Glenn went on, “a number of people visited the vicinity of the temple, and all came away with tales more vivid and more imaginative than those of the scientists. For two years now the place has been left entirely alone.”

“We might go there and camp!” suggested Carl.

“I move we take a look at it!” Jimmie cut in. “We can fly down on the roof and get away before the goblins get us.”

“I’m game for anything you boys decide on,” Glenn declared, “but my private opinion is that it will be only a waste of time for us to pay much attention to the haunted temple!”

“The ghosts wouldn’t like us if we should leave their country without making a formal call!” laughed Carl.

“Who’s going to get supper?” asked Jimmie in a moment. “I feel like I could eat one of the wild beasts which are said to flourish in this region!”

“There isn’t much supper to get!” replied Ben, with a laugh. “All we have is a couple of pounds of ham, a few eggs, and a lot of tinned provisions. There’s the river down there. Why don’t one of you boys go and catch a fish?”

“Aw, I don’t believe there’s any fish in that river!” grinned Jimmie. “If there are fish there, they’ll be tough eating for they must be acrobats!”

“Why acrobats?” asked Glenn.

“Because they must stand on their heads and turn handsprings in order to get something to eat in that swift water!”

“I believe we can get a fish for supper, just the same!” insisted Carl, “and I’m going to get out a line and an imitation minnow and go try!”

“May the luck of the hungry fisherman go with you!” laughed Ben.

“He’ll have better company than that!” Jimmie grinned. “I’m going along myself!”

While Glenn and Ben arranged the camp for the night Jimmie and Carl started away down the slope leading to the river. Directly in front of the tents the bank was clear of undergrowth, and

covered with grass almost waist high. Lower down, however, to the west, was a great thicket which seemed to extend for miles. The opposite shore of the stream was heavily wooded for some distance up. Above, the timber line showed the bare, brown slopes of mountains.

When the two boys reached the bank of the stream the prospects were not attractive, the water being broken into rapids and falls by jagged rocks which occupied the bed of the river at this point. To the west, however, where the stream entered the forest, the surface of the water appeared to be unbroken, so the lads made their way in that direction. In a few minutes their lines were out and almost instantly sharp twitches at the hooks informed the boys that they were not fishing in barren waters.

But before the first fish was landed an exciting interruption occurred.

CHAPTER II.

WHAT THE FISHERMEN CAUGHT

Seated with his back to the thicket, Jimmie heard a rustle and turned about expecting to see one of his chums.

Instead, he saw the ugly, vicious face of an Ecuadorian savage. While he looked, the fellow was joined by another, equally repulsive and equally naked. During that first moment of amazement Jimmie dropped his fish pole and it went bobbing down the river.

“Carl!” he said, in a low whisper.

The boy shouted back from lower down the stream.

“Got a fish?”

“Come up and see!” cried Jimmie.

Carl came panting through the undergrowth, and Jimmie pointed with a hand which was not quite steady at the two figures in the underbrush just back of him.

“Look what I’ve found!” he whispered.

“Did you call me up to give me my share?” asked Carl. “If you did, I don’t want it! You’re welcome to everything you find in that line!”

“Gee!” Jimmie exclaimed. “I wish we were back by the machines!”

“I wish so, too!” Carl put in. “I wonder why they stand there looking at us in that way.”

“Maybe they’re out after supper, too!” remarked Jimmie.

“Do they eat folks?” asked Carl.

“The savages who come over from the Amazon valley eat folks,” Jimmie answered, “and those fellows look as if they came from that neighborhood.”

“Let’s start on up toward camp and see if they will interfere!” suggested Carl.

“Have you got a gun with you?” asked Jimmie.

“Of course not!” was the reply. “I didn’t come out to shoot fish!”

“And I left mine at the camp, too!” Jimmie complained. “I’ll never do it again!”

“Well, let’s make a start and see what comes of it!” suggested Carl.

As the boys moved away the savages, men of medium height but apparently very strong and supple, lifted naked arms in gestures which commanded them to remain where they were.

“I wonder if they’ve got guns?” questioned Jimmie.

“They’ve got little short spears!” answered Carl. “I saw one in that fellow’s hand.”

“And I suppose they’re poisoned, too!” Jimmie asserted.

The two savages now advanced from the thicket and stood threateningly before the two boys. Except for breech-clouts, which seemed to be woven of some sort of fiber, the men were naked. In color they were almost as dark as the negro of Africa. Their features seemed to be a cross between the tribes of Asia and Africa. They were armed with short spears which they flourished with many hostile gestures.

“Good-evening!” Jimmie said.

The savages conversed together in a dialect which seemed to the boys to resemble a confidential conversation between two hogs, and then pointed down the river.

“Here’s where we get abducted!” Carl exclaimed.

“You needn’t get funny about it!” Jimmie expostulated. “This is no joke!”

“Anyhow,” Carl went on, “the ginks don’t know anything about good manners. They never answered your salutation!”

The savages were still uttering what appeared to be wordless commands, and, as they continued to point down the river, very reluctantly the boys started in that direction.

“I wonder if the brutes have captured the camp, too?” queried Jimmie.

“Oh, I suppose so!” Carl answered. “These fellows travel in droves, like wild hogs, and I guess we lit right in the middle of a large tribe.”

In spite of the impatience expressed by the gestures of their captors, the boys proceeded very slowly. As they walked they listened for some indication of trouble at the camp. They knew that Glenn and Ben were well armed, and that they would not submit to capture without first putting up a spirited defence.

“We haven’t heard any shooting yet,” Jimmie said in a moment.

“I don’t believe there’s any use of our being lugged off in this style!” Carl advised. “We ought to be able to break away from these brutes and get back to camp. The boys there are all right up to this time, for we haven’t heard any fighting, and the four of us ought to be able to induce these two savages to beat it!”

“If we can only get back to the flying machines,” Jimmie suggested, “we can get away, all right. I believe these fellows would drop dead if they saw the *Louise* or the *Bertha* slanting up into the air!”

“Well, then, let’s make a break!” Carl advised.

“All right!” Jimmie replied. “When we get to the next jungle where the bushes are so thick they can’t throw a spear very far, you duck one way and I’ll duck the other, and we’ll both make for the camp.”

The boys knew very well that they were in a perilous situation. The savages were more familiar with travel through underbrush than themselves. Besides, they would undoubtedly be able to make better time than boys reared on city streets. In addition to all this, the spears they carried might carry death on every tip.

However, to remain seemed fully as dangerous as to attempt to escape. So when they came to a particularly dense bit of jungle the boys darted away. As they did so Jimmie felt a spear whiz within an inch of his head, and Carl felt the push of one as it entered his sleeve. Dodging swiftly this way and that, uttering cries designed to bring their chums to their assistance, the boys forced their way through the undergrowth some distance in advance of their pursuers.

Every moment they expected to feel the sting of a spear, or to be seized from behind by a brown, muscular hand. After all it was their voices and not their ability as runners which brought about their rescue.

Hearing the cries of their chums, Ben and Glenn sprang for their guns and, walking swiftly toward the river, began firing, both for the purpose of directing the boys toward the camp and with the added purpose of frightening away any hostile element, either human or animal, walking on four legs or on two. Panting, and scarcely believing in their own good fortune, Jimmie and Carl presently came to where their chums stood not far from the machines. Both boys dropped down in the long grass the instant they felt themselves under the protection of the automatics in the hands of their friends.

To say that Glenn and Ben were surprised at the sudden appearance of their chums only feebly expresses the situation. The savages had not followed the boys into the open plaza where the grass grew, and so there was no physical explanation of the incident.

“What’s doing?” demanded Glenn.

“You must be running for exercise!” Ben put in.

“For the love of Mike!” exclaimed Jimmie, panting and holding his hands to his sides. “Get back to the machines and throw the truck on board! These woods are full of head-hunters!”

“What did you see?” asked Ben.

“Savages!” answered Jimmie.

“They got us, too!” Carl put in.

“They did?” demanded Glenn. “Then how did you get away?”

“Ran away!” answered Jimmie scornfully. “You don’t suppose we flew, do you? I guess we’ve been going some!”

“Where are the savages now?” demanded Glenn.

“I don’t know!” Jimmie answered. “I don’t want to know where they are. I want to know where they ain’t!”

“Come on!” Carl urged. “Let’s get back to the machines!”

Glenn and Ben did not seem to take the incident as seriously as did their chums. In fact, they were rather inclined to make facetious remarks about little boys being frightened at black men in the woods. Ben was even in favor of advancing into the thicket on a tour of investigation, but Jimmie argued him out of the idea.

“They’re savages, all right!” the latter insisted. “They’re naked, and they’re armed with spears. Look to me like head-hunters from the Amazon valley! If you go into the thicket you’re likely to get a couple of spears into your frame!”

“Then I won’t go!” Ben grinned.

“Come on,” urged Carl, “it’s getting dark, so we’d better be getting back to camp! Perhaps the niggers have beaten us to it already!”

“I guess the two you saw are about the only ones in the vicinity,” answered Glenn.

“You’d feel pretty cheap, wouldn’t you, if you’d get back to camp and find that the savages had taken possession?” demanded Jimmie.

Thus urged, Glenn and Ben finally abandoned the idea of advancing into the forest. Instead, they turned their faces toward the camp, and all four boys advanced with ever-increasing speed as they neared the spot where the aeroplanes and the tents had been left.

About the first thing they saw as they came within sight of the broad planes of the flying machines was a naked savage inspecting the motors. He stood like a statue before the machine for an instant and then glided away. They saw him turn about as he came to a cluster of underbrush, beckon silently to some one, apparently on the other side of the camp, and then disappear.

“And that means,” Glenn whispered, “that the woods are full of ’em!”

“Oh, no,” jeered Jimmie, “the two we saw are the only ones there are in the woods! I guess you’ll think there is something in the story we told about being captured and abducted!”

The short tropical twilight had now entirely passed away. It seemed to the boys as if a curtain had been drawn between themselves and the tents and flying machines which had been so plainly in view a moment before. There was only the glimmer of the small camp-fire to direct them to their camp.

“Who’s got a searchlight?” asked Glenn.

“I have!” replied Ben. “I never leave the camp without one!”

“Then use it!” advised Glenn, “and we will make for the machines.”

“Don’t you do it!” advised Jimmie. “They’ll throw spears at us!”

“Well, we’ve got to have a light in order to get the machines away!” declared Carl. “Perhaps the niggers will run when they see the illumination. The light of a searchlight at a distance, you know, doesn’t look like anything human or divine!”

It was finally decided to advance as cautiously and silently as possible to the camp and spring at once to the machines.

“We’ll never be clear of these savages until we get up in the air!” declared Ben.

“But that will leave our tents and our provisions, and about everything we have except the machines, behind!” wailed Carl.

“It won’t leave all the provisions behind!” declared Jimmie. “I’ll snatch beans and bread if I get killed doing it!”

During their progress to the camp the boys neither saw nor heard anything whatever of the savages. They found the fire burning brightly and the provisions which had been set out for supper just as they had been left. The machines had not been molested. In fact, the statue-like savage they

had observed examining the flying machine now seemed to have come out of a dream and retreated to his world of shadows again.

“Perhaps it won’t be necessary to leave here to-night,” Glenn suggested.

“I don’t think it’s safe to remain,” Ben contended.

“You boys may stay if you want to!” Jimmie exclaimed. “But Carl and I have had enough of this neck of the woods. We’ll take the *Louise* and fly over to Quito, and you can find us there when you get ready to move on. You boys certainly take the cake for not knowing what’s good for you!” he added with a grin.

“Oh, well, perhaps we’d all better go!” Glenn advised. “I don’t see anything nourishing in this part of the country, anyway. If you boys had only brought home a couple of fish it might have been different. I’m of the opinion that a square meal at Quito wouldn’t come amiss just now.”

“It’s so blooming dark I don’t know whether we can find the town or not,” suggested Carl.

“Oh, we can find it all right!” insisted Ben.

“If the savages let us!” exclaimed Jimmie excitedly.

CHAPTER III. A MASTERLY RETREAT

"I don't see any savages!" replied Glenn.

"Can't you hear them?" demanded Jimmie.

"I think I can smell something!" Carl exclaimed.

"Don't get gay, now!" Jimmie answered. "This is no funny business! If you'll listen, you'll hear the snakes creeping through the grass."

The boys listened intently for an instant and then, without looking into the tents, sprang toward the machines. It seemed for a moment as if a thousand voices were shouting at them. They seemed to be in the center of a circle of men who were all practicing a different style of war-whoop.

To this day the boys assert that it was the whirling of the electric searchlights which kept the savages from advancing upon them. At any rate, for a time, the unseen visitors contented themselves with verbal demonstrations.

"We'll have to jump out on the machines!" advised Glenn. "We can't fight a whole army!"

"Why, there's only two!" Jimmie taunted. "You said yourself that we saw all the black men there were in this neighborhood!"

"Aw, keep still," Ben cried. "We haven't got time to listen to you boys joke each other! Come on, Jimmie! You and I for the *Louise*!"

It was now very dark, for banks of clouds lay low in the valley, but the boys knew that the machines were situated so as to run smoothly until the propellers and the planes brought them into the air. They had provided for that on landing.

With a chorus of savage yells still ringing in their ears, the boys leaped into their seats, still swinging their searchlights frantically as their only means of protection, and pressed the starters. The machines ran ahead smoothly for an instant then lifted.

The next minute there was absolute silence below. The boys were certain that if they could have looked down upon the savages who had been so threatening a moment before they would have seen them on their knees with their faces pressed to the ground.

"They'll talk about this night for a thousand years!" Jimmie screamed in Ben's ear as the *Louise* swept into and through a stratum of cloud. "They'll send it down to future generations in legends of magic."

"Little do we care what they think of us after we get out of their clutches!" Ben called back. "It seems like a miracle, our getting away at all!"

"Do you really think they are head-hunters?" shouted Jimmie.

"You saw more of them than I did," Ben answered.

After passing through the clouds the starlight showed the way, and in a very short time the lights of Quito were seen glittering twenty miles or so to the south.

"What are we going to do when we get to the town?" shouted Jimmie.

"Hire some one to watch the machines and get a square meal!" Ben replied. "And buy new tents and provisions and everything of that kind!" he went on. "I suppose those savages will have a fine time devouring our perfectly good food."

"And they'll probably use the oiled-silk tents for clothing!" laughed Jimmie. "I wonder if we can buy more at Quito."

"Of course we can!" replied Ben. "Quito has a hundred thousand inhabitants, and there are plenty of European places of business there!"

The *Bertha* with Glenn and Carl on board was some distance in advance, and directly the boys on the *Louise* saw the leading machine swing about in a circle and then gradually drop to the ground.

Ben, who was driving the *Louise*, adopted the same tactics, and very soon the two flying machines lay together in an open field, perhaps a mile distant from Quito, the capital of Ecuador, the city known throughout the world as the “City of Eternal Spring.”

It was dark at the ground level, there being only the light of the stars, faintly seen through drifting masses of clouds, many hundred feet higher here than those which had nestled over the valley.

“What next?” asked Carl as the four boys leaped from their seats and gathered in a little group.

“Supper next!” shouted Jimmie.

“But we can’t all leave the machines!” declared Glenn.

“Don’t you ever worry about the machines being left alone!” asserted Ben. “Our lights will bring about a thousand people out here within the next ten minutes. Dark as it is, our machines were undoubtedly seen before we landed, and there’ll soon be an army here asking questions. We’ll have little trouble in finding English-speaking people in the mob.”

“I guess that’s right!” Jimmie agreed. “Here comes the gang right now!”

A jumble of English, Spanish and French was now heard, and directly a dozen or more figures were seen advancing across the field to where the flying machines had landed.

“There’s some one talking United States, all right!” Jimmie declared.

Directly the visitors came up to where the boys were standing and began gazing about, some impudently, some curiously and some threateningly.

“Keep your hands off the machines!” Glenn warned, as a dusky native began handling the levers.

The fellow turned about and regarded the boy with an impudent stare. He said something in Spanish which Glenn did not understand, and then walked away to a group of natives who were whispering suspiciously together.

“Where are you from?” asked a voice in English as Glenn examined the levers to see that nothing had been removed or displaced.

“Gee!” exclaimed Jimmie. “That United States talk sounds good to me!”

The man who had spoken now turned to Jimmie and repeated his question.

“Where do you boys come from?”

“New York,” Jimmie replied.

“And you came across the Isthmus of Panama?” was the next question.

“Sure we did!” answered the boy.

“Well,” the stranger said, “my name is Bixby, Jim Bixby, and I’ve been looking for you for two days.”

“Is that so?” asked Jimmie incredulously.

“You see,” Bixby went on, “I am a dealer in automobile supplies, probably the only one doing a large business in this part of the country. Some days ago I received a telegram from Louis Havens, the millionaire aviator, saying that four pupils of his were coming this way, and advising me to take good care of you.”

“Where did Mr. Havens wire from?” asked Jimmie.

“First from New York,” was the reply, “and then from New Orleans. It seems that he started away from New York on the day following your departure, and that he has been having trouble with the *Ann* all the way down. His last telegram instructed me to ask you to wait here until his arrival. He ought to be here sometime to-morrow.”

“That’ll be fine!” exclaimed Jimmie.

“And now,” Bixby went on, “you’ll have to employ two or three fellows to watch your machines for the night. The natives would carry them away piecemeal if you left them here unguarded.”

“Perhaps you can pick out two or three trusty men,” suggested Glenn.

“I have had three men in mind ever since I received my first message from Mr. Havens!” replied Bixby. “When your machine was sighted in the air not long ago, I ’phoned to their houses and they will undoubtedly be here before long.”

“How’ll they know where to come?” asked Jimmie.

“Don’t you think that half the people in Quito don’t know where these wonders of the air lighted!” Bixby laughed. “The news went over the city like lightning when your planes showed. Your lights, of course, revealed your exact whereabouts to those on this side of the town, and telephones and messenger boys have done the rest.”

While the boys talked with this very welcome and friendly visitor, the clamor of an automobile was heard, and directly two great acetylene eyes left the highway and turned, bumping and swaying, into the field.

“There will be damages to pay for musing up this grass!” Carl suggested, as a fresh crowd of sight-seers followed the machine into the enclosure.

“Of course,” replied Bixby, “and they’ll try to make you pay ten times what the damage really amounts to. But you leave all that to me. I can handle these fellows better than you can!”

“We shall be glad to have you do so!” Glenn replied.

In a moment the automobile ran up to the planes and stopped. Of the four men it contained, three alighted and approached Bixby.

“These are the guards,” the latter said turning to the boys.

The men, who seemed both willing and efficient, drew a long rope and several steel stakes from the automobile and began enclosing the machines with the same. As the rope was strung out, the constantly increasing crowd was pushed back beyond the circle.

“Won’t they make trouble for the guards during the night?” asked Ben.

“I think not,” was the reply. “I have already arranged for a number of native policemen to assist these men.”

“Gee!” exclaimed Carl, “I guess Mr. Havens picked out the right man!”

“How did he know we were going to stop at Quito?” asked Ben.

“He didn’t know!” replied Bixby. “But he surmised that you’d be obliged to land here in order to fill your fuel tanks.”

“Well, we didn’t come here for that purpose,” laughed Glenn. “We came here because the savages chased us out of a cute little valley about twenty miles away!”

“It’s a wonder you got away at all if they saw you!” said Bixby.

“I guess they didn’t seem to understand about our motors getting into the air!” laughed Jimmie. “The minute the wheel left the ground their war-cries ceased.”

“It’s a wonder you were permitted to get to the machines at all if they caught you away from them!” said Bixby.

“Aw, we always have the luck of the Irish,” Jimmie replied. “The shooting and the display of electric searchlights kept them away until we got into the seats and our way of ascending into the sky did the rest.”

“You are very lucky boys!” insisted Bixby.

“It’s nice to hear you say so!” Ben answered, “because we’re going to follow this line of mountains down to Cape Horn, and visit every ruined temple on the route that has a ghost on its visiting list.”

“If you’ll listen to the stories you hear in the cities,” laughed Bixby, “you’ll visit a good many ruined temples.”

“Glenn was telling us about a temple down on Lake Titicaca,” Ben replied. “He says that figures in flowing white robes appear in the night-time, and are seen by the light that emanates from their own figures! He says, too, that there are illuminations of red, and green, and yellow, which come from no determinable source, and that there are noises which come out of the clear air unaccounted for!”

“There is such a temple, isn’t there, Mr. Bixby?” asked Glenn.

“There is a temple about which such stories are told,” laughed Bixby. “Are you boys thinking of going there?”

“Sure thing, we’re going there!” asserted Jimmie.

During this conversation the three men who had been employed by Bixby to guard the flying machine during the night had been standing by in listening attitudes. When the haunted temple and the proposed visit of the boys to it was mentioned, one of them whose name had been given as Doran, touched Jimmie lightly on the shoulder.

“Are you really going to that haunted temple?” he asked.

Jimmie nodded, and in a short time the four boys and Bixby left for the city in the automobile. As they entered the machine Jimmie thought that he caught a hostile expression on Doran’s face, but the impression was so faint that he said nothing of the matter to his chums.

In an hour’s time Bixby and the four boys were seated at dinner in the dining-room of a hotel which might have been on Broadway, so perfect were its appointments.

“Now let me give you a little advice,” Bixby said, after the incidents of the journey had been discussed. “Never talk about prospective visits to ruined temples in South America. There is a general belief that every person who visits a ruin is in quest of gold, and many a man who set out to gratify his own curiosity has never been heard of again!”

CHAPTER IV. PLANNING A MIDNIGHT RIDE

“If the people of the country believe there is gold in the temples said to be haunted,” Glenn asked, “why don’t they hunt for it themselves, without waiting for others to come down and give them a tip?”

“Generally speaking,” replied Bixby, “every ruin in Peru has been searched time and again by natives. Millions of treasure has been found, but there is still the notion, which seems to have been born into every native of South America, that untold stores of gold, silver and precious stones are still concealed in the ruined temples.”

“What I can’t understand is this,” Glenn declared. “Why should these natives, having every facility for investigation, follow the lead of strangers who come here mostly for pleasure?”

“I can’t understand that part of it myself,” Bixby replied, “except on the theory that the natives ascribe supernatural powers to foreigners. Even the most intelligent natives who do not believe in the magic of Europeans, watch them closely when they visit ruins, doubtless on the theory that in some way the visitors have become posted as to the location of treasure.”

“Well,” Ben observed, “they can’t make much trouble for us, because we can light down on a temple, run through it before the natives can get within speaking distance, and fly away again.”

“All the same,” Bixby insisted, “I wouldn’t talk very much about visiting ruins of any kind. And here’s another thing,” he went on, “there are stories afloat in Peru that fugitives from justice sometimes hide in these ruins. And so, you see,” he added with a laugh, “you are likely to place yourself in bad company in the minds of the natives by being too inquisitive about the methods of the ancient Incas.”

“All right,” Glenn finally promised, “we’ll be careful about mentioning ruins in the future.”

After dinner the boys went to Bixby’s place of business and ordered gasoline enough to fill the tanks. They also ordered an extra supply of gasoline, which was to be stored in an auxiliary container of rubber made for that purpose.

“Now about tents and provisions?” asked Bixby.

“Confound those savages!” exclaimed Jimmie. “We carried those oiled-silk shelter-tents safely through two long journeys in the mountains of California and Mexico, and now we have to turn them over to a lot of savages in Ecuador! I believe we could have frightened the brutes away by doing a little shooting! Anyway, I wish we’d tried it!”

“Not for mine!” exclaimed Carl. “I don’t want to go through the country killing people, even if they are South American savages.”

“I may be able to get you a supply of oiled-silk in Quito,” Bixby suggested, “but I am not certain. It is very expensive, you understand, of course, and rather scarce.”

“The expense is all right,” replied Glenn, “but we felt a sort of sentimental attachment for those old shelter-tents. We can get all the provisions we need here, of course?” he added.

“Certainly,” was the reply.

“Look here!” Jimmie cut in. “What time will there be a moon to-night?”

“Probably about one o’clock,” was the reply. “By that time, however, you ought all to be sound asleep in your beds.”

“What’s the idea, Jimmie?” asked Carl.

The boys all saw by the quickening expressions in the two boys’ faces that they had arrived at an understanding as to the importance of moonlight on that particular night.

“Why, I thought—” began Jimmie. “I just thought it might not do any harm to run back to that peaceful little glade to see if the tents really have been removed or destroyed!”

“Impossible!” advised Bixby. “The tents may remain just where you left them, but, even if they are there, you may have no chance of securing them. It is a risky proposition!”

“What do you mean?” asked Ben.

“I mean that the superstition of the savages may restrain them from laying hands on the tents and provisions you left,” replied Bixby, “but, at the same time,” he continued, “they may watch the old camp for days in the hope of your return.”

“What’s the idea?” asked Glenn.

“Do they want to eat us?” asked Jimmie.

“Some of the wild tribes living near the head waters of the Amazon,” Bixby explained, “are crazy over the capture of white men. They are said to march them back to their own country in state, and to inaugurate long festivals in honor of the victory. And during the entire festival,” Bixby went on, “the white prisoners are subjected to tortures of the most brutal description!”

“Say,” giggled Jimmie, giving Carl a dig in the ribs with his elbow, “let’s take the train for Guayaquil to-morrow morning! I don’t think it’s right for us to take chances on the savages having all the fun!”

“As between taking the first train for Guayaquil and taking a trip through the air to the old camp to-night,” Bixby laughed, “I certainly advise in favor of the former.”

“Aw, that’s all talk,” Ben explained, as Bixby, after promising to look about in the morning for oiled-silk and provisions, locked his place of business and started toward the hotel with the boys.

“What do you say to it, Carl?” Jimmie asked, as the two fell in behind the others.

“I’m game!” replied Carl.

“Then I’ll tell you what we’ll do!” Jimmie explained. “You and I will get a room together and remain up until moonrise. If the sky is clear of clouds at that time, and promises to remain so until morning, we’ll load ourselves down with all the guns we can get hold of and fly out to the old camp. It’ll be a fine ride, anyway!”

“Pretty chilly, though, in high altitudes at this time of night,” suggested Carl. “I’m most frozen now!”

“So’m I,” Jimmie replied, “and I’ll tell you what we’ll do! When we start away we’ll swipe blankets off the bed. I guess they’ll keep us warm.”

“Well, we’ll have to keep Glenn and Ben from knowing anything about the old trip,” Carl suggested. “Of course they couldn’t prevent us going, but they’d put up a kick that would make it unpleasant.”

“Indeed they would!” answered Jimmie. “But, at the same time, they’d go themselves if they’d got hold of the idea first. I suggested it, you know, and that’s one reason why they would reject it.”

Arrived at the hotel, Jimmie and Carl had no difficulty in getting a double room, although their chums looked rather suspiciously at them as they all entered the elevator.

“Now,” said Ben, “don’t you boys get into any mischief to-night. Quito isn’t a town for foreigners to explore during the dark hours!”

“I’m too sleepy to think of any midnight adventures!” cried Jimmie with a wink and a yawn.

“Me, too!” declared Carl. “I’ll be asleep in about two minutes!”

It was about ten o’clock when the boys found themselves alone in a large room which faced one of the leading thoroughfares of the capital city. Quito is well lighted by electricity, and nearly all the conveniences of a city of the same size in the United States are there to be had.

The street below the room occupied by the two boys was brilliantly lighted until midnight, and the lads sat at a window looking out on the strange and to them unusual scene. When the lights which flashed from business signs and private offices were extinguished, the thoroughfare grew darker, and then the boys began seriously to plan their proposed excursion.

“What we want to do,” Jimmie suggested, “is to get out of the hotel without being discovered and make our way to a back street where a cab can be ordered. It is a mile to the field where the machines were left, and we don’t want to lose any time.”

Before leaving the room the boys saw that their automatic revolvers and searchlights were in good order. They also made neat packages of the woolen blankets which they found on the bed and carried them away.

“Now,” said Jimmie as they reached a side street and passed swiftly along in the shadow of a row of tall buildings, “we’ve got to get into a cab without attracting any attention, for we’ve stolen the hotel’s blankets, and we can’t talk Spanish, and if a cop should seize us we’d have a good many explanations to make.”

“I don’t think it’s good sense to take the blankets,” Carl objected.

“Aw, you’ll think so when we get a couple of thousand feet up in the air on the *Louise!*” laughed Jimmie.

After walking perhaps ten minutes, the boys came upon a creaking old cab drawn by a couple of the sorriest-looking horses they had ever seen. The driver, who sat half asleep on the seat, jumped down to the pavement and eyed the boys suspiciously as they requested to be taken out to where the machines had been left.

The lads were expecting a long tussle between the English and the Spanish languages, but the cabman surprised them by answering their request in excellent English.

“So?” exclaimed Jimmie. “You talk United States, too, do you? Where did you come from?”

“You want to go out to the machines, do you?” asked the cabman, without appearing to notice the question.

“That’s where we want to go!” replied Carl.

“What for?” asked the cabman.

“None of your business!” replied Jimmie.

“I’ve been out there once to-night!” said the cabman, “and the party I drew beat me out of my fare.”

“That’s got nothing to do with us!” replied Carl.

“It’ll cost you ten dollars!” growled the cabman.

“Say, look here!” Jimmie exclaimed. “You’re a bigger robber than the New York cabmen! It’s only a mile to the field, and we’ll walk just to show you that we don’t have to use your rickety old cab.”

With a snarl and a frown the cabman climbed back up on his seat and gave every appearance of dropping into sound slumber.

“Now what do you think of that for a thief?” asked Carl, as the boys hastened away toward the field. “I’d walk ten miles before I’d give that fellow a quarter!”

“We’ve got plenty of time,” Jimmie answered. “The moon won’t be up for an hour yet. Perhaps we’d better walk up anyway, for then we can enter the field quietly and see what’s going on.”

On the way out the lads met several parties returning from the field, and when they reached the opening in the fence they saw that many curious persons were still present. There were at least half a dozen vehicles of different kinds gathered close about the roped-off circle.

“Say,” Carl exclaimed as the boys passed into the field, “look at that old rattletrap on the right. Isn’t that the same vehicle the cabman pretended to go asleep on as we came away?”

“Sure it is!” answered Jimmie. “I don’t remember the appearance of the cab so well, but I know just how the horses looked.”

“He must have found a ten-dollar fare out here!” Carl suggested.

“Yes, and he must have come out by a roundabout way in order to prevent our seeing him. Now what do you think he did that for? Why should he care whether we see him or not?”

As the boy asked the question the rig which they had been discussing was driven slowly away, not in the direction of the road, but toward the back end of the field.

“Something mighty funny going on here!” Jimmie declared. “I guess it’s a good thing we came out.”

When the boys came up to where the machines were lying, Doran was the first one to approach.

“Little nervous about your machines, eh?” he asked.

“Rather,” replied Jimmie. “We came out with the idea of taking a short trip to see if they still are in working order.”

“Well,” Doran said with a scowl, “of course you know that you can’t take the machines out without an order from Mr. Bixby!”

CHAPTER V. A WAIF AND A STRAY

“Bixby doesn’t own these machines!” exclaimed Carl angrily.

“Who does own them?” demanded Doran.

“We four boys own them!” was the reply.

“Well, you’ve got to show me!” insisted Doran, insolently.

“I’ll tell you what we’ll do!” Jimmie announced. “We’ll go right back to Bixby and put you off the job!”

“Go as far as you like,” answered Doran. “I was put here to guard these machines and I intend to do it. You can’t bluff me!”

While the boys stood talking with the impertinent guard they saw two figures moving stealthily about the aeroplanes. Jimmie hastened over to the *Louise* and saw a man fumbling in the tool-box.

“What are you doing here?” demanded the boy.

The intruder turned a startled face for an instant and then darted away, taking the direction the cab had taken.

Carl and Doran now came running up and Jimmie turned to the latter.

“Nice old guard you are!” he almost shouted. “Here you stand talking with us while men are sneaking around the machines!”

“Was there some one here?” asked Doran in assumed amazement.

“There surely was!” replied Jimmie. “Where are the other guards?”

“Why,” replied Doran hesitatingly, “they got tired of standing around doing nothing and went home. It’s pretty dull out here.”

“Well,” Jimmie answered, “I’m going to see if this machine has been tampered with! Get up on one of the seats, Carl,” he said with a wink, “and we’ll soon find out if any of the fastenings have been loosened.”

The boy was permitted to follow instructions without any opposition or comment from Doran, and in a moment Jimmie was in the other seat with the wheels in motion.

Seeing too late the trick which had been played upon him, Doran uttered an exclamation of anger and sprang for one of the planes. His fingers just scraped the edge of the wing as the machine, gathering momentum every instant, lifted from the ground, and he fell flat.

He arose instantly to shake a threatening fist at the disappearing aeroplane. Jimmie turned back with a grin on his freckled face.

“Catch on behind,” he said, “and I’ll give you a ride!”

“Did you see some one fumbling around the machine?” asked Carl, as Jimmie slowed the motors down a trifle in order to give a chance for conversation.

“Sure, I did!” was the reply. “He ducked away when he saw me coming, and ran away into the field in the direction taken by the cab.”

“Gee!” exclaimed Carl. “Do you think the cabman brought that man out to work some mischief with the flying machines?”

“I don’t think much about it,” Jimmie answered, “because I don’t know much about it! He might have done something to the machine which will cause us to take a drop in the air directly, but I don’t think so. Anyhow, it’s running smoothly now.”

“Still we’re taking chances!” insisted Carl.

The moon now stood well up in the eastern sky, a round, red ball of fire which looked to the lads large enough to shadow half the sky a little later on. Below, the surface of the earth was clearly revealed in its light.

“We’ll have to hurry!” Carl suggested, “if we get back to the hotel before daylight, so I’ll quit talking and you turn on more power.”

“I may not be able to find this blooming old valley where we left the tents,” Jimmie grumbled. “If you remember, son, we left that locality in something of a hurry!”

“I certainly remember something which looked to me like a jungle scene in a comic opera!” grinned Carl. “And the noise sounded not unlike some of the choruses I have heard in little old New York!”

Jimmie drove straight north for an hour, and then began circling to left and right in search of the little valley from which they had fled so precipitously. At last the gleam of running water caught his eyes and he began volplaning down.

“Are you sure that’s the place?” asked Carl, almost screaming the words into Jimmie’s ears. “I don’t see any tents down there, do you?”

“I see something that looks like a tent,” Jimmie answered. “We are so high up now that we couldn’t distinguish one of them anyhow.”

As the aeroplane drove nearer to the earth, a blaze flared up from below. In its red light they saw the two shelter-tents standing in exactly the same position in which they had been left.

“There!” cried Jimmie. “I had an idea we’d find them!”

“But look at the fire!” cautioned Carl. “There’s some one there keeping up that blaze!”

“That’s a funny proposition, too!” exclaimed Jimmie. “It doesn’t seem as if the savages would remain on the ground after our departure.”

“And it doesn’t seem as if they would go away without taking everything they could carry with them, either!” laughed Carl.

“We can’t guess it out up here,” Jimmie argued. “We may as well light and find out what it means. Have your guns ready, and shoot the first savage who comes within range.”

When the rubber-tired wheels of the machine struck the ground which they had occupied only a short time before, the boys found a great surprise awaiting them. As if awakened from slumber by the clatter of the motors, a figure dressed in nondescript European costume arose from the fire, yawning and rubbing his eyes, and advanced to meet them.

It was the figure of a young man of perhaps eighteen, though the ragged and soiled clothing he wore, the unwashed face, the long hair, made it difficult for one to give any accurate estimate as to the years of his life. He certainly looked like a tramp, but he came forward with an air of assurance which could not have been improved upon by a millionaire hotel-keeper, or a haughty three-dollar-a-week clerk in a ten-cent store.

“Je-rusalem!” exclaimed Jimmie. “Now what do you think of this?”

“I saw him first!” declared Carl.

“All right, you may have him!”

The intruder came forward and stood for a moment without speaking, regarding the boys curiously in the meantime.

“Well,” Jimmie said in a moment, “what about it?”

“I thought you’d be back,” said the other.

“Where are the savages?” asked Carl. “Didn’t you bump into a war party here?”

The stranger smiled and pointed to the tents.

“I am a truthful man,” he said. “I wouldn’t tell a lie for a dollar. I might tell six for five dollars, but I wouldn’t tell one lie for any small sum. My name is Sam Weller, and I’m a tramp.”

“That’s no lie!” exclaimed Jimmie. “Unless appearances are deceiving!”

“Perhaps,” Carl suggested, “we’d better be getting out of here. The natives may return.”

“As soon as you have given me time to relate a chapter of my life,” Sam Weller continued, “you’ll understand why the savages won’t be back here to-night.”

“Go on!” Jimmie grunted. “Tell us the story of your life, beginning with the poor but dishonest parents and the statement that you were never understood when you were a baby!”

“This chapter of my life,” Sam went on, without seeming to notice the interruption, “begins shortly after sunset of the evening just passed.”

“Go ahead!” Carl exclaimed. “Get a move on!”

“While walking leisurely from the Isthmus of Panama to Cape Horn,” Sam began, “I saw your two flying machines drop down into this valley. At that time,” he continued, “I was in need of sustenance. I am happy to state, however,” he added with a significant look in the direction of half a dozen empty tin cans, “that at the present moment I feel no such need. For the present I am well supplied.”

“Holy Mackerel!” exclaimed Carl. “But you’ve got your nerve.”

“My nerve is my fortune!” replied Sam whimsically. “But, to continue my narrative,” he went on. “It seemed to me a dispensation of providence in my favor when you boys landed in the valley. In my mind’s eye, I saw plenty to eat and unexceptionable companionship. You were so thoroughly interested in landing that I thought it advisable to wait for a more receptive mood in which to present my petition for—for—well, not to put too fine a point upon it, as Micawber would say—for grub.”

“Say!” laughed Carl. “It’s a sure thing you’ve panhandled in every state in the union.”

Sam smiled grimly but continued without comment.

“So I hid myself back there in the tall grass and waited for you to get supper. Don’t you see,” he went on, “that when a boy’s hungry he doesn’t radiate that sympathy for the unfortunate which naturally comes with a full stomach. Therefore, I waited for you boys to eat your supper before I asked for mine.”

“You’re all right, anyhow!” shouted Jimmie.

“But it seems that your meal was long-delayed,” Sam went on, with a little shrug of disgust. “I lay there in the long grass and waited, hoping against hope. Then you two went after fish. Then in a short time I heard cries of terror and supplication. Then your two friends rushed out to your assistance. Then, being entirely under the influence of hunger and not responsible for my acts, I crawled into one of the tents and began helping myself to the provisions.”

“And you were there when the savages flocked down upon us?” asked Carl. “You saw what took place after that?”

“I was there and I saw,” was the reply. “When you boys came running back to the machines I stood ready to defend you with my life and two automatic revolvers which I had found while searching through the provisions. When you sprang into the machines and slipped away, leaving the savages still hungry, I felt that my last hour had come. However, I clung to the guns and a can of a superior brand of beans put up at Battle Creek, Michigan.”

“How did you come out with the Indians?” asked Carl. “Did you tell them the story of your life?”

“Hardly!” was the laughing reply. “I appeared at the door of the tent in a chastened mood, it is true, ready for peace or war, but when I saw the savages lying upon their hands and elbows, faces bowed to the tall grass, I reached the conclusion that I had them—well Buffaloed!”

“The machines did it?” asked Jimmie.

“The machines did it!” replied Sam. “The Indians bowed their heads for a long time, and then gazed in awe at the disappearing aeroplanes. As I said a moment ago, they were Buffaloed. When they saw me standing at the door of the tent, they looked about for another machine. So did I for a matter of fact, for I thought I needed one just about then!”

“Can you run a machine?” asked Carl.

“Sure I can run a machine!” was the reply. “I can run anything from a railroad train to a race with a township constable. Well, when the machines disappeared, the savages vanished. Not a thing about the camp was touched. I appointed myself custodian, and decided to remain here until you came back after your tents.”

“Then where are you going?” asked Carl.

“With your permission, I will place three days’ provisions under my belt and be on my way.”

“Not three days’ supplies all at once?” questioned Jimmie.

“All at once!” replied Sam.

The two boys consulted together for a moment, and then Jimmie said:

“If you’ll help us pack the tents and provisions on the machine, we’ll take you back to Quito with us. That is, if the *Louise* will carry so much weight. I think she will, but ain’t sure.”

“It surely will be a treat to ride in the air again!” declared the tramp. “It has been a long time since Louis Havens kicked me out of his hangar on Long Island for getting intoxicated and filling one of the tanks with beer instead of gasoline.”

The boys smiled at each other significantly, for they well remembered Mr. Havens’ story of the tramp’s rather humorous experience at the Long Island establishment. However, they said nothing to Sam of this.

“And, in the meantime,” the tramp said, pointing upward, “we may as well wait here until we ascertain what that other machine is doing in the air at this time of night!”

CHAPTER VI.

AUTOMOBILE VS. AEROPLANE

Shortly after midnight Ben was awakened by a noise which seemed to come from the door of his room. Half asleep as he was, it came to his consciousness like the sparkling of a motor. There was the same sharp tick, tick, tick, with regular pauses between.

As he sat up in bed and listened, however, the sounds resolved themselves into the rattle of one metal against another. In a minute he knew that some one unfamiliar with the lock of his door was moving the stem of a key against the metal plate which surrounded the key-hole.

Then he heard the bolt shoot back and the door opened. There was an electric switch on the wall within reach of his hand, and in a second the room was flooded with light. The person who stood in the center of the floor, halfway between the doorway and the bed, was an entire stranger to the boy. He was dressed in clothing which would not have been rejected by the head waiter of one of the lobster palaces on Broadway, and his manner was pleasing and friendly.

He smiled and dropped into a chair, holding out both hands when he saw Ben's eyes traveling from himself to an automatic revolver which lay on a stand at the head of the bed.

"Of course," he said, then, as Ben sat down on the edge of the bed, "you want to know what I'm doing here."

"Naturally!" replied the boy.

The man, who appeared to be somewhere near the age of twenty-five, drew a yellow envelope from his pocket and tossed it over to Ben.

"I am manager at the Quito telegraph office!" he said. "And I received this despatch for you just before twelve o'clock. In addition to this I received a personal message from Mr. Havens. Read your message and then I will show you mine!"

Ben opened the envelope and read:

"Be sure and wait for me at the point where this message is delivered. Complications which can only be explained in person!"

The manager then passed his own despatch over to the boy. It read as follows:

"Mr. Charles Mellen, Manager: Spare no expense in the delivery of the message to Ben Whitcomb. If necessary, wire all stations on your circuit for information regarding aeroplanes. If Whitcomb is at Quito, kindly deliver this message in person, and warn him to be on the watch for trouble. I hope to reach your town within twenty-four hours."

"Now for an explanation regarding my surreptitious entrance into your sleeping room," Mellen went on. "My room is next to yours, and in order not to awaken other sleepers, and at the same time make certain that you understood the situation thoroughly, I tried my hand at burglary."

"I am glad you did!" replied Ben. "For if there is anything serious in the air it is quite important that no stir be created in the hotel at this hour of the night."

"That was just my idea!" Mellen answered. "I knew that if I asked the clerk to send a page to your room every person in the hotel would know all about the midnight visit in the morning. So far as I know, understand, the complications hinted at by Mr. Havens may have had their origin in Quito—perhaps in this very hotel."

"It was very thoughtful of you," answered Ben. "You know Mr. Havens personally?" he asked then.

"Certainly!" was the reply. "He is a heavy stock-holder in the company I represent; and it was partly through his influence that I secured my present position."

"After all," smiled Ben, "this is a small world, isn't it? The idea of finding a friend of a friend up near the roof of the world!"

“Yes, it’s a small world,” replied Mellen. “Now tell me this,” he went on, “have you any idea as to what Mr. Havens refers in his two rather mysterious messages?”

“Not the slightest!” was the reply.

“I wish we knew where to find Havens at this time,” mused Mellen.

“I don’t think it will be possible to reach him until he wires again,” Ben answered, “because, unless I am greatly mistaken, he is somewhere between New Orleans and this point in his airship, the *Ann*.”

“I gathered as much from his messages to Bixby,” replied Mellen. “You see,” the manager went on, “I got in touch with Havens to-night through the despatches he sent to Bixby yesterday, I say ‘yesterday’ because it is now ‘to-morrow’,” he added with a smile.

“Then you knew we were here?” asked Ben. “That is,” he corrected himself, “you knew Bixby was expecting us?”

“When Bixby left you at the hotel,” Mellen laughed, “he came direct to the telegraph office, so you see I knew all about it before I burglarized your room.”

“Bixby strikes me as being a very straightforward kind of a man,” Ben suggested. “I rather like his appearance.”

“He’s all right!” replied Mellen.

“And now,” Ben continued, “I’d like to have you remain here a short time until I can call the other boys and get a general expression of opinion.”

“Of course you’ll wait for Mr. Havens?” suggested Mellen.

“Of course,” answered Ben. “However,” he continued, “I’d like to have the other members of the party talk this matter over with you. To tell the truth, I’m all at sea over this suggestion of trouble.”

“I shall be pleased to meet the other members of your party,” replied Mellen. “I have already heard something of them through my correspondence with Mr. Havens.”

Ben drew on his clothes and hurried to Glenn’s room. The boy was awake and opened the door at the first light knock. Ben merely told him to go to the room where Mr. Mellen had been left and passed on to the apartment which had been taken by Jimmie and Carl.

He knocked softly on the door several times but received no answer. Believing that the boys were sound asleep he tried the door, and to his great surprise found that it was unlocked.

As the reader will understand, he found the room unoccupied. The bed had not been disturbed except that some of the upper blankets were missing.

He hastened back to his own room, where he found Glenn and Mellen engaged in conversation. Both looked very blank when informed of the disappearance of Jimmie and Carl.

“What do you make of it?” asked Mellen.

“I don’t know what to make of it!” replied Glenn.

“I think I can explain it!” Ben cried, walking nervously up and down the room. “Don’t you remember, Glenn,” he went on, “that Jimmie and Carl suggested the advisability of going back to the old camp after moonrise and getting the valuable tents, arms and provisions we left there?”

“Sure I remember that!” answered Glenn. “But do you really think they had the nerve to try a scheme like that?”

“I haven’t the least doubt of it!” declared Ben.

“It’s just one of their tricks,” agreed Glenn.

“They must be rather lively young fellows!” suggested Mellen.

“They certainly are!” answered Ben. “And now the question is this,” he continued, “what ought we to do?”

“I’m afraid they’ll get into trouble,” Glenn suggested.

“It was a foolhardy thing to do!” Mellen declared. “The idea of their going back into the heart of that savage tribe is certainly preposterous! I’m afraid they’re already in trouble.”

“Perhaps we ought to get the *Bertha* and take a trip out there!” suggested Glenn. “They may be in need of assistance.”

“That’s just my idea!” Ben agreed.

“It seems to me that the suggested course is the correct one to pursue,” Mellen said.

“Perhaps we can get to the field before they leave for the valley,” Ben interposed. “They spoke of going after the moon came up, and that was only a short time ago.”

“Well,” said Mellen, “the quicker we act the more certain we shall be of success. You boys get downstairs, if you can, without attracting much attention, and I’ll go out and get a carriage.”

“Will you go with us to the field?” asked Ben.

“I should be glad to,” was the reply.

When the boys reached the corner of the next cross street, in ten minutes’ time, they found Mellen waiting for them with a high-power automobile. He was already in the seat with the chauffeur.

“I captured a machine belonging to a friend of mine,” he said, with a smile, “and so we shall be able to make quick time.”

As soon as the party came within sight of the field they saw that something unusual was taking place there, for people were massing from different parts of the plain to a common center, and people standing in the highway, evidently about to seek their homes, turned and ran back.

“Can you see the flying machines?” asked Ben.

“I can see one of them!” answered Mellen in the front seat. “And it seems to be mounting into the air!”

“I guess the little rascals have got off in spite of us!” declared Ben. “Perhaps we’d better hold up a minute and follow the direction it takes. It may not head for the valley.”

“It’s heading for the valley, all right!” Glenn exclaimed.

“Yes, and there’s something going on in the field below,” Mellen declared. “There are people running about, evidently in great excitement, and the second machine is being pushed forward.”

“Do you think the little rascals have taken a machine apiece?” demanded Ben. “There’s no knowing what they will do!”

“No, I don’t,” replied Glenn. “They’d be sure to stick together.”

“Then we’d better hustle up and find who’s taking out the second machine!” exclaimed Ben. “This does look like trouble, doesn’t it?”

“Oh, it may be all right,” smiled Mellen. “The boys may have taken a machine apiece.”

When the party reached the field the second flying machine was some distance away. The driver, however, seemed to be wavering about in the air as if uncertain of his control of the levers. Once or twice in an uncertain current of air the *Bertha* came near dropping to the ground. In time, however, he gained better control.

One of the native policemen secured by Bixby rushed up to the automobile as it came to a stop. He recognized Mellen in the car and addressed him in Spanish, speaking as if laboring under great excitement.

The boys listened to the conversation very impatiently, noting with no little apprehension the look of anxiety growing on the face of the manager as he listened to the story of the policeman. At length Mellen turned to the boys and began translating what he had heard.

The story told by the policeman was virtually the story told in the last chapter, with the exception that it included the departure of Doran and another in pursuit of the *Louise*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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