

Goldfrap John Henry

**The Boy Aviators on
Secret Service; Or, Working
with Wireless**



John Goldfrap

**The Boy Aviators on Secret
Service; Or, Working with Wireless**

«Public Domain»

Goldfrap J.

The Boy Aviators on Secret Service; Or, Working with Wireless /
J. Goldfrap — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	13
CHAPTER IV	17
CHAPTER V	20
CHAPTER VI	24
CHAPTER VII	28
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	30

Wilbur Lawton

The Boy Aviators on Secret Service / Working with Wireless

CHAPTER I

AN IMPORTANT COMMISSION

“Come in!”

The gray-haired man who uttered these words gazed sharply up at the door of the private office of the Secretary of the Navy’s Bureau, at Washington, D. C., as he spoke. He was evidently anticipating callers of more than usual importance judging from his expectant look. The old negro who had knocked opened the door and respectfully stood waiting.

“Well, Pinckney?”

“Dey have come, sah.”

“Ah; good, – show them in at once.”

The old negro bowed respectfully and withdrew. A few seconds later he reappeared and ushered in two bright looking youths of sixteen and fourteen with the announcement in a pompous tone of voice:

“Messrs. Frank and Harry Chester.”

Frank, the elder of the two brothers, was a well set up youngster with crisp, wavy brown hair and steady gray eyes. Harry, his junior by two years, had the same cool eyes but with a merrier expression in them. He, like Frank, was a well-knit, broad-shouldered youth. Both boys were tanned to an almost mahogany tinge for they had only returned a few days before from Nicaragua, where they had passed through a series of strange adventures and perils in their air-ship, the *Golden Eagle*, perhaps, before her destruction in an electric storm, the best known craft of her kind in the world and one which they had built themselves from top plane to landing wheels.

The Secretary of the Navy, for such was the office held by the gray-haired man, looked at the two youths in front of him with some perplexity for a moment.

“You are the Boy Aviators we have all heard so much of?” he inquired at length with a note of frank incredulity in his voice.

“We are, sir,” rejoined Frank, with just the ghost of a smile playing about his lips at the great man’s evident astonishment – and its equally evident cause.

“I beg your pardon,” hastily spoke up the Secretary of the Navy, who had observed Frank’s amusement; “but you seem – ”

“I know what you were thinking, sir,” interrupted Frank, “that we are very young to undertake such exacting service as Admiral Kimball outlined to us in Nicaragua.”

“You have guessed just right, my boy,” rejoined the other, with a hearty laugh at Frank’s taking his thoughts and putting them into such exact words, “but your youth has evidently not interfered with your progress if all the reports I have heard of you are true. Sit down,” he went on, “and we will talk over the proposal the Department has to make to you.”

The boys set down their straw hats and seated themselves in two chairs facing the grizzled official. Both listened attentively as he began.

“When Admiral Kimball wrote to me about you, telling me that he had found in the two sons of Planter Chester of Nicaragua the very agents we wanted for a particularly dangerous and difficult mission,” he said, “I at once sent for you to come here from New York to see for myself if his judgment was correct. I have not been disappointed – ”

The boys colored with pleasure.

“My brief observation of you has confirmed to my mind his report and I am going to entrust to you the responsibility of this undertaking. Now,” he went on impressively, “the government has been experimenting for some time in secret with Chapinite, a new explosive of terrific power, the invention – as its name makes apparent – of Lieut. Bob Chapin of the United States Navy. I say ‘has been experimenting’ advisedly. It is so no more.

“The formula of the explosive has disappeared from the archives of the department and, what is still more serious, Lieutenant Chapin himself is missing.”

“The agents of the Secret Service force have worked in vain on the case without discovering much more than the one very important fact that the government of a far Eastern power has recently been experimenting with an explosive whose effects and manifestations make it almost undoubted that the stuff is Chapinite. By a tedious process of observation and deduction the men have traced the shipments as far as the west Florida coast but there all clues have ended. Weeks of work have left us as much in the dark as ever as to the location of the source of supply of the far Eastern power. But that somewhere within the untracked wildernesses of the Everglades a plant has been set up in which Chapinite is being manufactured in large quantities is a practical certainty to my mind.

“It is useless for the secret service men to attempt to explore what is still an unmapped labyrinth of swamp and jungle and above all it would occupy time. What we have to do is to act quickly. I racked my brain for days until I happened to come across a paragraph in a newspaper calling attention to your wonderful flights in the *Golden Eagle*, and then followed Admiral Kimball’s dispatch. It struck me at once that here indeed was a way of locating these men that might prove feasible – I say ‘might’ because if you boys accept the commission I do not want to absolutely impose the condition of success upon you. All that we shall expect of you is that you will do your best.

“Will you accept the assignment?”

The blunt question almost took the boys off their feet so to speak. They exchanged glances and then Frank said:

“As you perhaps know, sir, our first aeroplane, the *Golden Eagle*– ”

“In which you rescued William Barnes, a newspaper correspondent, from a camp in which he was held prisoner,” remarked the Secretary – “you see I have followed your doings closely.”

“Exactly,” went on Frank; “that first *Golden Eagle* is at the bottom of the sea. She went down when we were driven off the land in a tropical electric storm and it was only the fact that she was equipped with wireless, with which we signaled a passing steamer, that saved us from sharing her fate.

“We might, however, construct a second one. In fact I have the designs partially drawn up. She would be a more powerful craft than the first and capable of even longer sustained flights.”

“The very thing!” exclaimed his listener enthusiastically, “then you will accept the commission?”

“I have not yet said that we would,” rejoined Frank, calmly. “As you have described the situation it looks rather like a wild-geese chase; however, I think that if my brother agrees that we might consent to try to do our best.”

“Of course I agree, Frank,” cried Harry enthusiastically. The very mention of anything that promised exciting adventures was sufficient to enlist Harry’s ardent interest.

“Then it is as good as settled,” concluded the Secretary. “The thing is now, how long will it take you to build this craft?”

“We shall require at least three weeks,” replied Frank.

The Secretary almost groaned.

“It is a long time – or at least it seems so,” he corrected, “when there is so much at stake.”

“It would be quite impossible to construct a suitable aeroplane in a lesser period,” rejoined Frank, with finality in his tones.

“Then I suppose we shall have to exercise patience,” remarked the secretary. “You will of course need funds. How much shall you require do you suppose?”

“We cannot build a second *Golden Eagle* for less than ten thousand dollars to start with,” was the quiet reply.

“Ten thousand dollars?” repeated the secretary, in tones of amazement.

“It does sound like a good deal of money,” replied Frank, “but if you were more familiar with aeroplane construction you would see that it is not exorbitant. Everything that enters into the construction of an air craft must be of the very best and strongest material. The engine alone is a heavy item of expense and besides must be of specially prepared metals and hand machined.”

“I see,” replied the secretary. “You know best. I will see that arrangements are made to provide you with everything you require. Where do you intend to build the ship?”

“There is a place at White Plains, some miles out from the town and back in the hills,” replied Frank, “that is in every way suited for our purpose. It is off any main road and we can work there in quiet. We built the first *Golden Eagle* there and I don’t think that outside of ourselves and our workmen half a dozen people knew about it.”

“The very thing,” replied the secretary. “Of course I need not impress upon you the importance of absolute secrecy in this matter. We have almost positive proof that our every movement is watched by agents of those who have stolen the plans, and who now have Lieutenant Chapin a prisoner – that is, if they have not made away with him, poor fellow. My own idea is, however, that he has been kidnapped and forced to take charge of the work, as without his direction it would be impossible, even with the aid of the formula, to manufacture the explosive. What I fear is, that after they have made a sufficient quantity to stock up the arsenals of the far Eastern power they will destroy their plant and end Lieutenant Chapin’s life. You see the explosive is so powerful that even a small quantity would make the nation possessing it extremely formidable, therefore it is not likely that wherever they have set up their plant they are figuring on a permanent location.”

“What is the last trace you have of the plotters?” asked Frank.

For answer the secretary pressed a bell that stood on his table at his elbow. When in response the bowing old negro appeared he said sharply:

“Send Flynn here.”

Flynn turned out to be a thick-set, red-faced man with the neck of a bull and powerful physique. He was one of the most trusted men in the Secret Service Bureau.

“Flynn,” said the secretary when the detective had introduced his huge bulk, “these young men are Frank and Harry Chester, the *Boy Aviators*, they are going to take up your work where you left it off.”

“Only because we were up against a dead wall,” protested the agent.

“Quite so – quite so; I meant no offence. I know that you did all it was humanly possible to accomplish. What I want you to do now is to outline to these young men the discoveries you made following the morning on which we found the safe opened and the plans gone, – to be followed a few hours later by the discovery that Lieutenant Chapin had also vanished.”

“Well,” said Flynn, “cutting out the minor details we discovered that the very same day a big white yacht had cleared from New York without papers and had headed toward the south. We traced her up and found that she had been bought by a Mr. Brownjohn of Beaver Street. We looked him up and found he was a ship broker who had bought the craft on telegraphed instructions from Washington. We trailed up the telegram and found that it had been sent from the Hotel Willard by a Captain Mortimer Bellman, who, from what we can find out about him, was considerable of an adventurer and had at one time lived a good deal in the far East. In fact he had only recently come from there. At the Marine Basin at Ulmer Park, near Coney Island, we discovered that a nondescript sort of a crew had been hustled on board and that the yacht had sailed at night without papers a few hours after her purchase was completed.

“Ten days later the newspapers reported that a large yacht had gone ashore on one of the Ten Thousand Islands on the west coast of the Everglades, and the men we sent down there to investigate discovered that the derelict was the Mist, – the same yacht that Bellman had bought. What was most remarkable, however, was that the boat seemed to have been deliberately wrecked, for everything had been taken off her except her coal and ballast and all the boats were gone. There was no indication that she had been abandoned in a hurry and the reef on which she lay was such an obvious one that even at high water it was clearly visible. Now that the Mist’s boats went into the Everglades we are reasonably sure. If they had gone anywhere else we should have got some trace of them by this time, but from that day to this we have not had a word or sign concerning them.”

“We have heard, however, that the navy of the power we suspect has been conducting experiments with a new explosive and we have also learned that this same explosive is undoubtedly Chapinite. We have looked up Bellman’s record and find that while he was stopping at the Willard he received several letters from the government in question and that he paid twenty thousand dollars for the Mist. Now a man isn’t going to pay that much out for a boat and wreck her unless he does it purposely. Bellman didn’t have that much money anyhow. There is only one conclusion, Bellman was simply the agent for some one else and that some one has got a lot of money to spend to secure the most powerful explosive ever discovered.”

“There you have the case in a nutshell,” remarked the secretary as Flynn concluded.

“There is only one thing that is not clear to me,” objected Frank. “Why should they make the stuff in the Everglades. Why not manufacture it out and out in the country you have mentioned?”

“Such a course would have been too full of risks,” replied the secretary, “we are at peace with that power and if the stolen formula had been discovered there it would have led to a serious international breach and possibly war. By manufacturing it here and shipping it secretly in small quantities the plotters secure safety from war to their own country.”

“I see,” nodded Frank. He pulled out his watch. It was twelve o’clock. “There is a train to New York at one o’clock,” he said.

“Won’t you stop and have lunch with me?” asked the secretary.

“No, thank you,” was the boys’ reply; “you see we have a lot of work before us. Building an aeroplane in three weeks calls for some tall hustling.”

CHAPTER II

THE BOYS MEET AN OLD FRIEND, – AND AN ENEMY

As the boys hurried from the office of the Secretary of the Navy they almost collided with a plump faced, spectacled young man in an aggressively loud suit of light summer clothes who was just rushing in.

“I say, look out where you are coming, can’t you?” he was beginning when he broke off with a cry of delight.

The next minute the boys were wringing the hand of Billy Barnes the youthful newspaper reporter who had been with them in Nicaragua and whose life they had saved when he was a captive among the Nicaraguans. Boy fashion the three slapped each other on the back and went through a continuous pump-handle performance at this unexpected meeting.

“What on earth are you doing here?” asked Harry when the first enthusiasm of the greetings had worn off.

“Working,” replied Billy briefly. “I’m on the Washington Post.”

“But I thought you were going to take a holiday after you had realized your money on the sale of your share of the rubies we found in the Toltec cave;” said Frank wonderingly.

“Well,” rejoined Billy, “of course the money I got for my two rubies looked good and it feels pretty nifty to have a check-book in your inside pocket; but I guess I can’t be happy unless I’m working. I bought my mother up the state a pretty little place in Brooklyn and tried to settle down to be a young gentleman of leisure but it wouldn’t do. I wasn’t happy. Every time I saw the fire-engines go by or read a good thrilling story in the paper I wanted to be back on the job, so I just got out and hustled about for one and here I am.”

“But what are you doing at the office of the Secretary of the Navy,” demanded the boys.

“Ah, that’s just it,” rejoined Billy mysteriously, “I’m on the track of the biggest story of my career and I think it’s a scoop. Can you fellows keep a secret?”

“We can do better than that,” laughed Frank, “we can tell you one. What would you say if we could tell you your errand here?”

“That you are pretty good mind-readers,” retorted Billy promptly. “I can guess yours though. You are here to try to sell the government an air-ship.”

“Wrong,” shouted Frank triumphantly. “But you – William Barnes – ” he went on, making a mysterious pass at the other boy’s head, “you are here to find out about Lieutenant Chapin.”

“How on earth did you know that?” gasped Billy, “you are right though. Do you know anything about it?” he inquired anxiously.

“Everything,” replied Frank.

“Oh, come off, Frank,” retorted Billy, “that’s too much. How on earth can you – ?”

“That matters not, my young reporter – we do,” struck in Harry.

“Give me the story then, will you?” begged Billy.

“No, we can’t do that,” replied Frank in a graver tone.

“Oh, of course I wasn’t trying to worm it out of you,” said Billy abashed somewhat.

“We know that, Billy,” said Harry kindly. The reporter looked at him gratefully.

“I just thought you might have something to give out,” went on Billy. “I see that you are in the confidence of the naval department.”

“No, Billy,” continued Frank, “we can’t give you anything for publication. But we can do better than that, we can tell you we are about to start on what may prove the most exciting trip we have ever undertaken.”

“What do you mean?” questioned Billy seeing clearly by Frank’s manner that something very unusual was in the wind.

“That we are going to try to find Lieutenant Chapin and the men who kidnapped him,” replied Frank; “but come along, Billy, we’ve just an hour before train time and if you feel like having a bite of lunch come with us and we can talk it over as we go along.”

The young reporter gladly assented and, linked arm in arm, the three boys passed out onto the sunny avenue which was glowing in the bright light of a late May day.

Frank rapidly detailed to Billy the gist of their conversation with the Secretary of the Navy, having first called up that official on the telephone and secured his permission to enlist Billy as a member of the expedition. For Frank had made up his mind that the reporter was to come along almost as soon as the boys encountered him.

The young journalist could hardly keep from giving a “whoop,” which would have sadly startled the sedate lunchers at the Willard, as Frank talked. He resisted the temptation, however, and simply asked eagerly:

“When do you start?”

The boys told him. They could see the eager question framing itself on Billy’s lips.

“Say, Frank, couldn’t you take me along?”

Frank feigned an elaborate indifference.

“Well, I don’t know,” he replied, winking at Harry as Billy’s face fell at this apparent refusal, “we might, of course, but really I think we shall have to go ‘without a chronicler.’”

The boys might have kept the jest up but Billy’s face grew so lugubrious that they had not the heart to keep him in suspense any longer.

“If you would care to come we were sort of thinking of taking you,” laughed Harry.

“If I would care to come?” gasped Billy, “Jimminy crickets! If I’d care to come! Say, just wait a minute while I go to ‘phone my resignation.”

“What an impetuous chap you are,” laughed Frank, “we don’t start for three weeks yet and here you are in a hurry to throw up your job to-day.”

“Well,” replied Billy somewhat abashed, “I was a bit previous. But it’s so white of you chaps to take me along that I hardly know what I’m doing. How I’m to wait three weeks I don’t know.”

“How would you like to help us build the *Golden Eagle II*?” asked Frank suddenly.

“Say, Frank,” burst out Billy earnestly, “you are a trump. That was just the very thing I longed to do but I didn’t have the nerve to ask you after you were so decent about taking me with you to Florida. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“It won’t be all a picnic,” laughed Frank. “We’ve got a lot of hard work ahead of us and we’ll all have to pitch in and take a hand, share and share alike.”

“You can count on me,” exclaimed the reporter eagerly.

“I know we can,” replied Frank, “or we would not have asked you to accompany us.”

“What are your plans?” asked Billy eagerly.

“At present so far as I have thought them out,” replied Frank, “we shall sail from New York for Miami about the middle of June. I think it will be best to go by steamer as we can keep a better watch on any suspicious fellow passengers in that way than if we went by train. The key on which the Mist was wrecked is on the opposite coast from there, I understand, and the men who kidnapped Chapin and stole the plans must have entered the Everglades by one of the numerous small rivers that lead back from the coast at the Ten Thousand Island Archipelago.

“My idea, then, is to establish a permanent camp from which we can work, the location of course to depend entirely on circumstances, that may arise after we reach our destination. We are going into this thing practically blindfold you see, and so we shall have to leave the arrangement of a host of minor details till we arrive there.”

“You mean to strike right back into the wilderness?” asked Billy.

“As soon as possible after our arrival at Miami,” was the businesslike rejoinder. “Every minute of our time will be precious. Oh, there’s heaps to be done,” broke off Frank.

All the boys had to laugh heartily at the wave of the hands with which Frank accompanied his last words. But their merriment was cut short by a sharp exclamation from Billy.

“I say, Frank,” whispered the young reporter, “have you noticed that fellow at the next table?” He indicated a short dark sallow-faced man sitting at a table a few feet from them and to whom most of their conversation must have been audible.

“He’s not a beauty,” remarked Harry in the same low tone; “what about him, Billy?”

“Well,” said the reporter seriously, “I may be wrong and I may not – and I rather think I’m not, – but if he hasn’t been listening with all his ears to what we’ve been saying I’m very much mistaken.”

Frank bit his lip with vexation. In their enthusiasm the youthful adventurers had been foolishly discussing their plans in tones which any one sitting near could have overheard without much difficulty. The boys realized this and also that if the man really turned out to have been an eavesdropper that they had involuntarily furnished him with much important information about their plans.

The object of their suspicion apparently saw that they had observed him, for as they resumed their talk in lowered tones he called for his bill and having paid it with a hand that flashed with diamonds, he left the dining-room.

“Have you seen him before?” asked Frank of Billy.

“I was trying to think,” replied the reporter. “It seems to me that I have. I am almost certain of it in fact. But I can’t think where.”

“Try to think,” said Frank, “it may be very important.”

Billy cudgled his brains for a few minutes and then snapped his fingers in triumph.

“I’ve got it,” he exclaimed joyously. “I’ve seen him hanging around the Far Eastern embassy. I was up there the other day to report a reception and this fellow was wandering around as if he hadn’t got a friend in the world.”

“He might have had an object in that,” said Frank gravely. “There is no doubt that he was listening to what we were talking about.”

“And not much question that he heard every word of it,” put in Harry.

“Well, it can’t be helped,” said Frank in an annoyed tone, “we shall have to be more cautious in the future. I see that the secretary was right, this place is swarming with spies.”

“I should say it is,” replied Billy, “Washington is more full of eavesdroppers and secret-service men of various kinds than any other city in the world.”

If the boys had seen the bediamonded man hasten from the hotel direct to a Western Union telegraph office where he filed a long telegram, they would have been even more worried than they were. If in addition they had seen the contents of the message they would have been tempted, it is likely, to have abandoned the expedition or at least their present plans, for the message, which was addressed to “Mr. Job Scudder, Miami, To Be Called For,” and signed Nego, gave about as complete an account of what they intended to do as even Billy Barnes with his trained ear for catching and marshaling facts could have framed. There was a very amiable smile on Mr. Nego’s face as he left the telegraph office and drew on a pair of light chamois gloves that gave a finishing touch of fashion to his light gray spring clothes, whose every line bore evidence to the fact that they had come from one of the best tailors in Washington. He had done a good morning’s work.

The boys of course had no means of knowing that, even as they hurried to their train, the wires were rushing to Florida the news of their coming three weeks before they planned to start and even if they had been aware of it they could not then have stopped it. With Billy Barnes they dashed up to the Pennsylvania depot in a taxi-cab just as the big locomotive of the Congressional Limited was being backed up to the long train of vestibuled coaches. They had their return tickets so that there was no delay at the ticket window and they passed directly into the depot, and having found their

chair car deposited themselves and their hand-baggage in it. Billy stayed chatting with them till the conductor cried “all aboard.” As the reporter rose to leave he gave a very perceptible start. He had just time to cry to Frank:

“Look behind you,” when the wheels began to revolve and Billy only avoided being carried off by making a dash for the door almost upsetting the colored porter in his haste.

As the train gathered speed Frank glanced round as if in search of somebody. He almost started, as had Billy, as his eyes encountered the direct gaze of the very black orbs of the man whom they were certain had overheard their conversation at lunch and who had signed the telegram “Nego.”

CHAPTER III

A TRAMP WITH FIELD-GLASSES

The boys lost no time in explaining to their mother when they reached their home on Madison Avenue the nature of the enterprise in which they had enlisted their services. That she was unwilling at first for them to embark on what seemed such a dangerous commission goes without saying, but after a lot of persuasion she finally yielded and gave her consent and the delighted boys set out at once for White Plains where the large aerodrome in which they had constructed the *Golden Eagle I* was still standing. The place was equipped with every facility for the construction of air craft and so no time was lost in preliminaries and two days of hard work saw the variadium steel framework of the *Golden Eagle the Second* practically complete.

The craft was to be a larger one than the *Golden Eagle I*, which had a wing-spread of fifty-six feet. The planes of her successor were seventy feet from tip to tip and equipped with flexible spring tips that played a very important part in assuring her stability in the air. Like the first *Golden Eagle* the boys had determined that the new ship, should carry wireless and the enthusiasm of Schultz and Le Blanc, their two assistants, was unbounded as Frank placed before them his working drawings and blue prints which bore on paper the craft which they expected to eclipse anything ever seen or heard of in the aerial world for speed and stability.

The old *Golden Eagle* had been equipped with a fifty horse-power double-opposed engine with jump spark ignition. The boys for the new craft had determined to invest in a one hundred horse-power machine of similar type and equipped with the same ignition apparatus. As in the other ship they planned to have the driving power furnished by twin screws but, whereas in the first ship the propellers had been of oiled silk on braced steel frames in the new *Golden Eagle* the screws were of laminated wood, razor sharp at the edges and with a high pitch.

Except for her increased size the *Golden Eagle II* did not differ in other respects from her predecessor. Her planes were covered with the same yellow-hued balloon silk that had given the first craft her name and the arrangement of pilot-house and navigating instruments was much the same. The boys, however, planned to give her a couple of low transoms running the length of each side of the pilot-house on which the occupants could sleep on cushions stuffed with a very light grade of vegetable wool. A light aluminum framework, which could be covered in with canvas in bad weather, or mosquito netting in the tropics, forming in the former case, – a weather-tight pilot-house with a mica window in front for the steersman, was another improved feature.

Billy Barnes was astonished when a few days later, having resigned his newspaper job, he was met at the White Plains station by Frank and Harry, and found, on his arrival at the aerodrome a framework which was rapidly beginning to assume very much the look of a real air-ship. The enthusiastic reporter crawled under it and round it and pulled it and poked it from every possible angle till old Schultz, angrily exclaimed:

“Ach, vas is dis boy crazy, hein?”

Billy was nearly crazy with joy he exclaimed and the old German’s heart warmed toward him for the interest he displayed in the craft which Schultz regarded as being as much his own creation as anyone else’s.

“Well, you certainly look like business here,” exclaimed Billy as he gazed about him. What with the lathes, the work-tables, the blue prints and plans, the shaded drop-lights and the small gasoline motor, – used to test propellers and run the machinery of the shop, – Frank and Harry were indeed as Billy said, “running a young factory.”

“You picked out a private spot,” exclaimed Billy, gazing out of the tall aerodrome doors at the low, wooded hills that surrounded them.

“Well,” laughed Frank, “if we hadn’t we’d have half the population of White Plains around here trying to get on to what we were doing and spreading all sorts of reports.”

“Oh, by the way,” asked Billy, “did you have any more manifestations from our dark-skinned friend on your way to New York?”

“No,” replied Frank, “he sat in his chair and read the papers and apparently paid no more attention to us. I really begin to think that we may have been mistaken.”

“I guess so,” said Billy lightly; “maybe he was just some rubber-neck who was surprised to hear three boys talking so glibly about invading the Everglades in an airship.”

With that the subject was dropped, for Harry, who had just entered the workshop from the small barn outside, where he had been putting the horse up, carried Billy off to show him the “camp” as the boys laughingly called it. The eating and sleeping quarters were in a small portable house, a short distance from the main aerodrome. It was divided into a dining and a sleeping room. The latter neatly furnished with three cots – a third having been added to Frank and Harry’s for Billy’s use that very morning. On its wall hung a few pictures of noted aviators, a shelf of technical books on aviation and the usual odds and ends that every boy likes to have about him. The two mechanics took their meals in the house and slept in the aerodrome. The cooking was done by Le Blanc who, like most of his countrymen, was a first-rate chef.

“Camp!” exclaimed the admiring Billy after he had been shown over the little domain, “I call it a mansion. Different from old Camp Plateau in Nicaragua, eh?”

“And you came very nearly been shaken out of even that,” put in Harry with a laugh.

“I should say so,” rejoined the reporter. “B-r-r-r! it makes my teeth chatter now when I think of the rain of stones that came from the Toltec ravine. By the way,” he broke off suddenly, “where is good old Ben Stubbs?”

The boys laughed knowingly and exchanged glances.

“Go ahead and tell him, Frank,” urged Harry.

“Well,” said Frank, “as you know, Billy, we gave Ben one of the rubies as his share of the loot of the One-eyed Quesals and as a partial recognition of his bravery in rescuing us from the White Serpents.”

Billy nodded and waited eagerly for Frank to resume. Ben Stubbs, the hardy ex-sailor, prospector and adventurer, whom they had discovered marooned in an inaccessible valley in the Nicaraguan Cordilleras, was very dear to the hearts of all the boys.

“What do you suppose he did with the money after he had sold the ruby for twelve thousand dollars?” resumed Frank.

The reporter shook his head.

“I can’t guess,” he said; “bought a farm?”

“Not much,” chorused the boys, “he invested part of the money in a tug-boat and has been doing well with it in New York harbor. We met him when we were in New York a couple of days ago and partially outlined our plans to him. Nothing would do but he must come along.”

“We couldn’t have a better camp-mate,” cried Billy.

“I agree with you,” said Frank. “So I told him we’d think it over.”

“Well, is he to come?” demanded Billy.

“Don’t be so impatient,” reproved Frank. “Listen to this. I got it this morning.”

He drew from his pocket a telegram and the boys all shouted with laughter as he read it aloud. It was characteristic of their old comrade.

“Have sold the tug and will be in White Plains to-morrow. Ben Stubbs, (skipper retired).”

“Good for him,” cried Billy, as the three boys made their way back from the living quarters to the aerodrome, “he’s a trump.”

“I don’t know of anyone I would rather have along in an emergency and on such an expedition as this, his experience and resourcefulness will be invaluable to us,” declared Frank.

The next morning Frank and Billy left the others busy at the aerodrome applying the waterproof compound to the *Golden Eagle II*'s planes and started for town behind the venerable old steed that Billy had christened "Baalbec," because, he explained, "he was a remarkably fine ruin." The first train from New York pulled into the station just as they were driving into the town of White Plains and a minute later the ears of both boys were saluted by a mighty hail of:

"Ahoy there, shipmates, lay alongside and throw us a line."

The person from whom this unceremonious greeting proceeded was a short, sun-bronzed man of about fifty. He had an unusual air of confidence and ability and his mighty muscles fairly bulged under the tight-fitting, blue serge coat he wore. He carried an ancient looking carpet bag in which as he explained he had his "duds," meaning his garments. The greetings between the three were hearty and after Frank had made a few purchases up-town and Ben had laid in a good supply of strong tobacco they started for the aerodrome.

As they drove down the street a thick-set man, with a furtive sallow face, came out of a store and as he did so saw the boys. With the agility of an eel he instantly slipped into a side street. But not so quickly that Billy's sharp eyes had not spied him and recognized him.

"Bother that fellow," he said with some irritation, "he gets on my nerves. I wish to goodness he'd keep away from where I am."

Frank looked up.

"What on earth are you talking about, Billy?" he asked.

"Why that fellow we saw at the Willard, and again on the Congressional Limited, – or his double, – just sneaked down a side street," said Billy. "I am certain he saw us and was anxious for us not to observe him."

"Meeting him a third time like this could hardly be a coincidence," mused Frank.

"Not much," struck in Billy, "that fellow means some mischief."

"I think myself that he will bear watching," replied Frank, as they emerged from the street into the open country.

"Pretty good for a week's work, eh?" remarked Harry with some pride as, after the joyous reunion with Ben Stubbs, they all stood regarding the air-skimmer which was growing like a living thing under their hands.

They all agreed enthusiastically and Frank even suggested that it might be possible, at the rate the work was progressing, to make the start in less time than he had at first thought feasible.

"Oh, by the way," said Harry suddenly, "rather a funny thing happened while you were gone, Frank!"

"Yes?" said the elder brother, "what was it?"

"Oh, nothing very exciting," replied Harry, "nothing more than a visit we had from a tramp."

"From a tramp?" asked Frank wonderingly.

"Yes, he came here to look for a job," he said.

"And you told him – ?"

"That we hadn't any work, of course, and then, apparently, he went away. But Schultz, when he went over to the house for some tools he'd left there, found that instead of going very far the fellow was up in the wood back there and watching the place with a pair of field-glasses."

"Whew!" whistled Frank with a long face, "a tramp with field-glasses? – that's a novelty."

"I sent Schultz up to tell the man that he was trespassing on private property," went on Harry, "but as soon as he saw the old fellow coming the tramp made off. He, however, dropped this bit of paper."

Harry handed his brother a crumpled sheet marked with faint lines. Frank scrutinized the paper carefully and a frown spread on his face.

"This bit of paper, as you call it, Harry," he said, "is nothing more nor less than a very creditable sketch map of the location of this aerodrome."

“By jove, so it is,” exclaimed Harry, “how stupid of me not to have realized that. What does it all mean do you suppose?”

“It means,” replied Frank, “that we will not leave the aerodrome unguarded for a minute day or night till we are ready to make our start for Florida.”

CHAPTER IV

A PLOT DISCOVERED

In accordance with Frank's resolution the three young members of the party and Ben Stubbs divided the night into four watches which were religiously kept, but rather to Frank's surprise nothing occurred to excite suspicion. The next morning Le Blanc, who had driven into town, returned shortly before noon with a letter from the Secretary of War which contained information of much interest to every member of the projected expedition.

"I have arranged with the Department," it read in part, "to have the torpedo destroyer *Tarantula* detailed to duty along the Florida coast and you can keep in touch with her by wireless. For this purpose, besides the apparatus attached to your air-ship, I have ordered a complete field outfit to be forwarded to you, – of the kind with which several western posts have been experimenting of late and which has proved entirely satisfactory.

"The instrumental part of the outfit – i. e., the keys, detector, condenser, tuning-coil, etc., are permanently fastened into or carried in a steel-bound trunk, but little bigger than an ordinary steamer trunk, and weighing about one hundred and fifty pounds. Two storage batteries, both sufficient for ten hours of continuous sending, accompany the outfit, and come in wooden cases which form supports for the trunk when the outfit is in use.

"A mast of ten six-foot sections, which can be jointed together and set up in a few minutes, forms your aerial pole and each section is coppered so as to provide a continuous conductor. In another box are packed the aerial wires, extra rope, wire-pegs, etc., as well as a waterproof tent to protect the outfit from the weather. Of course a charging station is a necessity and another case contains a small, but powerful gasoline motor and generator. Another attachment for use with the appliance is a combination Malay and box kite carrying a cord of phosphor bronze, wire-woven about a hemp center. There are eight hundred feet of this wire wound on a reel. If for any reason the work of setting up and attaching the pole and its aeriels is considered to be too lengthy an occupation it is a simple matter to send up the kite, its wire rope acting as an aerial in itself."

The boys grew enthusiastic over this description. The outfits seemed from the account to possess the merits of portability and efficiency and in the country into which they were going portability was a strong feature in itself. It was this very question that had caused Frank, when designing the new *Golden Eagle*, to so construct her that she could be taken apart and the various sections boxed in a very small capacity each box weighing not more than fifty pounds with the exception of that containing the engine which weighed one hundred and fifty without the base.

That afternoon the boys worked like Trojans on the *Golden Eagle II* with the result that shortly before sundown they had progressed to a point where the air-ship was ready for the attachment of the engine. They were all surprised, and somewhat startled, when their solitude was invaded, just as they were thinking of knocking off work for the day, by a loud rap at the doors of the aerodrome. Frank opened the small flap cut in the big door and stepped out to see who the intruder might be.

He was greeted by a boy of about his own years smartly – too smartly – dressed, and with a confident overbearing manner.

"Why, hello, Lathrop Beasley," exclaimed Frank, with all the cordiality he could muster at seeing who their visitor was, – and that was none too much, "what are you doing here?"

"I guess you're surprised to see me," rejoined the other.

"I certainly am," replied Frank.

"Why don't you ask me to come in," went on the other, "you're a hospitable sort of fellow – not."

"I beg your pardon, Lathrop," apologized Frank, "won't you come over to the house and sit down awhile?"

An unpleasant sort of smile broke on the other's face.

"Oh, so you're afraid to let me see your aeroplane are you? Well, I don't know that I care so much to anyway. Since you fellows left New York I have been made president of the Junior Aero Club and have designed a 'plane that can beat anything you ever saw into a cocked hat," he exclaimed.

Frank smiled. He was used to Lathrop's boasting ways and at the Agassiz High School which they had both attended had frequently seen the other humbled. Now when Lathrop said that he didn't care about seeing the *Golden Eagle II*, of course he was not telling the truth. He would have given a great deal to have even caught a glimpse of her. In fact, when that morning he had heard that the boys' aerodrome was once more occupied, he had determined to walk over from his home, which was a splendid mansion standing on a hill-top not far away, and take a look at her for himself. That Frank should have objected to showing him the craft was an obstacle that never entered his head.

"Oh, come, Frank," he went on, changing his tone, "let me take a look at her, I won't tell anyone about it. What are you so secretive for?"

"I myself should be glad to let you see the successor to the *Golden Eagle* that we are building," replied Frank, "but my employers might not like it."

Lathrop pricked up his ears at this. He was an ambitious boy and had designed several air-ships and planes but he had never been able to speak of his "employer." The word must mean that Frank was building the craft for some rich man. Although Lathrop had plenty of it the idea that Frank and Harry were making money out of their enterprise roused him to a sullen sort of anger.

"Oh your employers mightn't like it," sneered Lathrop, "I tell you what it is, Frank, I don't believe you have any 'employers' as you call it, and that all this about a new air-ship is a bluff."

This was a move intended to irritate Frank and make him offer to show the air-ship as proof positive that he was really at work on such a craft, but if Lathrop had meant it in this way it was a failure. Frank was quite unruffled.

"You are welcome to believe what you like, Lathrop," he rejoined, "and now, as we are very busy, I shall have to ask you to excuse me. I've got too much work to do to stand talking here."

"That's just like you, Frank Chester," burst out the other boy angrily, his temper quite gone now that he saw that there was to be no opportunity of his seeing the air-ship.

"Maybe you'll be sorry that you wouldn't show me the ship – and before very long too."

As Frank, not caring to listen to more of this sort of talk, re-entered the aerodrome the Beasley boy, almost beside himself with anger, shouted after him.

"I'll remember this, Frank Chester, so look out."

He strode angrily off through the woods making a short cut for home. Lathrop was not a bad boy at heart, but he was an intensely jealous one, and the idea that the Boy Aviators were constructing an air-ship that they refused to let him see irritated him almost past bearing. When he shouted at Frank his last words they were dictated by his anger, more than by any real intention of carrying out any plan of revenge for the fancied slight; but, as he strode along through the woods, he suddenly heard voices that, after a few minutes of listening, convinced him that he was not the only person in the world who even momentarily wished harm to the Chester boys.

"We'll wreck the aerodrome to-night;" were the words, – coming from within a clump of bushes that grew to one side of the trail, – that attracted his attention. The boy halted in his tracks as they were uttered and then crept cautiously through the undergrowth till he reached a spot from which he could both see and hear without being seen. The man who had uttered the threat that had brought him to a standstill was a person bearing every evidence of being of the genus – tramp, that is so far as his clothes went. But his white hands and carefully kept nails showed that he had assumed the rags he wore as a disguise. His companion was a man of very different appearance. He was in fact the natty person whom the boys had seen at the Hotel Willard, and who had since been on their track, as Frank had guessed when Billy had spied his escaping figure in White Plains the day before. With a beating heart the concealed boy listened as the two plotters went on.

“Do you think they have the machine finished yet?” asked the better dressed of the two.

“Confound them, they were too sharp to let me go to work for them or I might have had the plans of it by this time,” rejoined the other. “I think, though,” he resumed, “that it must be so far advanced that if we can wreck it now we will delay their departure for Florida till we have been able to destroy the plant and escape.”

“I owe them a debt of gratitude for the loud way they talked at the Hotel Willard,” said the other. “Thank goodness we are now in possession of their plans at any event. Don’t you think we might head them off without destroying the aerodrome? It’s risky, and means jail for us if we are caught.”

The other gave a short laugh.

“No, we’ll hit them a body blow,” he said. “If I could blow them up along with their air-ship I’d gladly do it. I’d like to treat them as we mean to do with that white-livered Lieutenant when we get through with his services.”

“Are they going to kill him?” demanded the other with something like awe in his tones.

“No,” replied the man in the tramp’s rags, “not unless he gives too much trouble. They are going to put him to work in the sulphur mines of Ojahyama and let him slave for his living.”

Even from where he was the concealed boy could see the other shudder.

“It is a terrible place,” he said.

“It is the best place for men of his caliber,” retorted the other.

“Perhaps it would be as happy a fate for him as being compelled to slave for Foyashi.”

“I hear that he would not have anything to do with their schemes and defied them to kill him before he would aid them to manufacture his explosive until he was influenced by Foyashi,” said the first speaker.

“I guess you’re right,” replied the other worthy, “but he’s passive enough now, I fancy.”

They both laughed and arose to go. As for Lathrop he lay almost paralyzed with fear. Of course much of what he had heard had been meaningless to him, but he did understand that a plan was on foot to blow up the boys’ aerodrome, destroy their ship and possibly injure themselves. As the men’s footsteps died out, as they walked off down the path through the woods, the boy, who a minute before had been seriously pondering some sort of harm to Frank and Harry felt conscience-stricken.

What he had just heard had changed him from a possible enemy into a fellow-schoolmate and he determined to warn the boys of their peril. With this end in view he was hurrying down the path, retracing his steps towards the aerodrome, when he was seized roughly from behind and whirled about. The man who had seized him was the one who had assumed the costume of a tramp. His eyes blazed with rage. He had hurried back to get his knife, – which had dropped from his pocket as he sat talking, – a few seconds after Lathrop had left his place of concealment. As luck would have it, in pushing through the bushes he had discovered the depression in the grass where the boy had lain. A brief investigation showed him that it had been recently occupied and that whoever had crouched there must have heard every word they said. Calling his comrade the two had set out at full speed in pursuit of Lathrop.

As his captor gripped the boy in a hold that clutched like a vice, Lathrop realized that he had fallen into bad hands.

CHAPTER V

TWO RASCALS GET A SHOCK

The boy was startled but his presence of mind did not desert him. Lathrop, although, as has been said, a hectoring, dictatorial sort of youth possessed plenty of courage of a certain kind, and was no coward. He therefore exclaimed angrily:

“Take your hand off me. What do you want?”

At the same moment he gave an adroit twist, an old football trick, and in a shake had freed himself from the other’s detaining hand.

“You needn’t crow quite so loudly, my young rooster,” exclaimed the man in the tramp’s dress, “I merely wanted to ask you a few questions.”

“Well,” demanded the boy.

“What were you doing up there in the woods while we were talking?”

Lathrop didn’t know whether or not the men were armed, so that he decided that it would be folly to tell them the facts; he therefore took refuge in strategy.

“What do you mean?” he asked with an expression of blank amazement.

“Oh, come,” said the other, but there was a note of indecision in his tones, that showed that he was not as sure of his ground as he had been, “you don’t mean to say that you weren’t lying hidden while we were talking up yonder and heard every word?”

“As I told you,” replied Lathrop, “I don’t know what you are talking about. I am on my way home through these woods and you have stopped me in this unceremonious fashion. If there was a constable within call I would have you arrested.”

“Oh, come on, Bill,” struck in the nattily dressed one of the pair, who had hitherto remained silent, “the kid doesn’t know anything – that’s evident, and we are wasting time here.”

“I’m not sure of that,” retorted the tramp-like man, still unconvinced, “if I thought,” he added with a vicious leer, “that he overheard us, I – ”

The sentence was not completed for the reason that at the moment a lusty voice was heard coming up the path from the aerodrome singing at the pitch of its lungs:

“Three times round went the gallant ship;
Three times round spun she,
Three times round spun the gallant ship
Then down to the bottom of the sea, – the sea, – the sea.
Then down to the bottom of the sea.”

As the singer came upon the scene in front of him he broke off abruptly and the two men who had intercepted Lathrop took to their heels.

“Hullo, there, my hearty,” cried Ben Stubbs, for he was the vocalist, as his eyes took in the situation, “what’s all this?”

His voice held a sharp note of interrogation, for he had immediately recognized one of the two men who had made off as the fellow who had sneaked up the by-street in White Plains the day before.

“Who are you?” demanded the boy suspiciously, not certain whether in the newcomer he had a friend or a fresh source of danger.

“Me? oh, I’m Ben Stubbs, formerly skipper of the tug Mary and Ann, but now one of the crew of the *Golden Eagle II*, sky clipper. And you, my young midgy, I recognize as the chap who was down at the aerodrome a short while ago, and got all het up because Frank Chester wouldn’t let you see the

air-ship – now the question is what were you doing with those two fellows, who are as bad a looking pair of cruisers as I ever laid eyes on?”

Lathrop saw at once that unless he told the truth he would be a fair object of suspicion, and at any rate he had made up his mind to warn the boys of the danger that threatened. He therefore in a straight-forward way told of the afternoon's happenings.

“You come along with me,” exclaimed Ben, as the boy finished his narrative, “we’ve got no time to lose.”

They hurried down the path to the aerodrome and Lathrop repeated his story to the boys.

“Well, forewarned is forearmed,” remarked Frank, “and thank you, Lathrop, for doing the square thing.”

“Oh, that’s all right, Frank,” Lathrop replied awkwardly, recollecting his fiery threats of a short time before. To tell the truth, Lathrop was thoroughly ashamed of himself, and declining the boys’ hearty invitation to supper, hurried home to the house on the hill.

He had learned a lesson he never forgot.

“Now,” said Frank, as soon as he had gone, “we’ll give these fellows a surprise if they come around here to-night that will stick in their minds for a good many years.”

Under his directions everyone got busy for the rest of the afternoon driving wooden posts at six foot intervals all round the aerodrome. When the posts were all in position a copper wire of medium thickness was strung from one post top to another and the ends connected with the dynamo ultimately destined to supply the *Golden Eagle II*’s searchlight and wireless equipment. By the time Ben Stubbs, who had quite ousted Le Blanc as cook, announced by a clarion summons, beaten on a tin wash-pan, with a big ladle, that a supper, consisting of his famous baked beans, chops, spinach and coffee was ready – not to forget Ben’s masterpiece, a huge strawberry pie, – Frank pronounced his preparations also complete.

After supper everybody sat around the stove in the portable house, for the nights were still chilly, till about ten o’clock. They had all made as much noise as possible early in the evening with the ultimate motive of accentuating the quietness later on.

Frank and Harry stood at the door of the portable house as Schultz and Le Blanc started for the aerodrome and shouted out “good-night” till the echoes rang back from the hills. Then one by one the lights in the two houses went out and all was quiet. That is, all seemed so to two watchers concealed in a thick mass of brush up on the hill, but in reality no sooner had the houses been plunged in darkness than the boys and Ben Stubbs had crept quietly into the aerodrome and sat down to wait for the crisis they felt sure was coming.

Harry and Billy each carried a long thin package that might have contained anything from dynamite to a pistol. Ben Stubbs, with a grim expression on his rugged face, grasped a stout club he had cut that afternoon. It was pitchy dark in the aerodrome and as they waited, in the absolute silence Frank had enjoined, the watchers could hear one another breathing. Upstairs only the rhythmic snores of Schultz and Le Blanc, who were not in the secret, disturbed the silence.

Frank sat with his hand on the switch that would shoot a current of 500 volts through the copper wires surrounding the aerodrome when he connected it. A hole, bored earlier in the afternoon in the wooden wall of the aerodrome gave the boy a command of the view outside in the direction of the woods. So dark was it, however, that even his keen eyes could detect little in the black murk. He saw they would have to judge of their enemies’ whereabouts solely by sound.

They must have sat there in the darkness for an hour or more, with no sound being borne to their ears but the unmelodious snoring of the two mechanics in the loft when, suddenly, and without any further warning there came a sharp “crack” from up on the hillside as a branch snapped under a heavy foot.

“Here they come,” whispered Frank to the boys, whom he knew were there; but couldn’t see any more than if they were in the antipodes.

“Get outside now, you fellows, and when I give the word, let go!”

Silently as cats Billy Barnes, Harry and Ben Stubbs slipped off their shoes and tiptoed out through the door of the aerodrome, which had been left open to allow for the noiseless exit. Frank was left alone in the barn-like aerodrome save for the two sleepers upstairs. The tension in the silence grew painful. When would the persons who had crackled the broken branch on the hillside recover their courage enough to make a further advance?

All at once, close at hand, Frank heard a loud whisper of:

“Well, they are all asleep, evidently.”

“Yes,” replied another hoarse whisper, “that kid you suspected evidently didn’t hear anything.”

“Confound it, it’s dark as a pit,” came from the first speaker.

“It might be lighter,” replied the other, “but the blacker it is the better for us.”

“Hark at those fellows snoring,” was the next thing Frank heard. The remark was accompanied by a smothered laugh.

“Yes, they are sound asleep as run-down tops,” was the reply.

Frank inwardly blessed the stalwart lungs of Schultz and Le Blanc. All unconsciously the sleepers were helping on their plans.

“Do you think that’s the boys snoring?” asked one of the two men who were cautiously creeping nearer to the aerodrome.

“I hope so,” was the response, “I’d like to see them go skywards with their infernal air-ship.”

“Scudder will have reason to thank us for a good night’s work,” was the next remark of the prowlers.

There was silence for a few seconds and then a jangling sound. One of the men who had the destruction of the *Golden Eagle II* at heart had collided with Frank’s wire fence.

“Confound it, what’s that?” angrily hissed his companion.

“A wire fence,” replied the other.

“Well, it will take more than that to stop us,” was the angry answer, “come on, grab the top wire and over we go.”

“Now!” shouted Frank, as he threw in the switch and 500 volts coursed through the copper wire both men were grasping.

At the same instant Billy and Harry outside pressed the electric buttons that ignited the Coston navy signal lights they both carried and the whole scene was illuminated in a white glare as light as noonday. And what a scene it was!

On the ground by the fence sprawled the marauders yelling till the air rang with their cries of mingled pain and amazement at the surprise of the powerful shock that had knocked them off their feet.

Above them stood the stout figure of Ben Stubbs belaboring them impartially with the heavy club he had cut for that special purpose.

“Take that, you lubbers, you longshore loafers!” he shouted as his blows fell with the rapidity of a drumstick on the two prostrate carcasses.

The two men, however, had laid their plans better than the boys knew. They were prepared for a surprise, but not one of the kind they had run into.

Without a second’s warning there was a sudden flash from the hill behind them, followed by a sharp report. Ben Stubbs threw up his hands and rolled over with a yell more of surprise than of anything else.

“Put out those lights!” shouted Frank, realizing that in the white glare the group outside presented fine targets for the hidden marksman on the hill, whoever he might be.

The boys instantly shoved their glaring torch tips into the ground. Even as they did so they could hear rapidly retreating footsteps.

“Don’t let them get away,” shouted Harry wildly.

Frank, who by this time had switched off the current, and was outside, seized him with a detaining grasp.

“No good, Harry,” he exclaimed. “It would be taking needless chances. Now, let’s look to Ben.”

“Only a hen-peck,” hailed that redoubtable ex-mariner, coming up, “just nicked my starboard ear, but I thought for a minute they had done me.”

“That was no fault of theirs,” answered Billy, “they – ”

He was interrupted by a series of guttural shouts and piercing shrieks.

“Ach Himmel – donnerblitzen vass iss – !”

“Sacre nom de nom! Qu’est-ce que cela! To the aid. Monsieur Chest-e-erre!”

The cries came from the aerodrome and were uttered by the awakened Schultz and Le Blanc, the latter of whom was almost in hysterics. Frank laughingly quieted them and explained what had happened.

“Ve vos only eggcited on your aggount,” remarked Schultz bravely when he learned that all danger was over.

“Comment, vee fight lek ze tiger-r-r n’ c’est pas?” demanded Le Blanc, flourishing a pillow fiercely. “A pitee I deed not see zee ras-cals.”

CHAPTER VI

THE START FOR THE 'GLADES

The incident related in the last chapter determined Frank to abandon his half-arrived at intention to enter the Everglades from the Atlantic side. The appearance of the dark man in Washington – he was now certain their plans had been overheard – the episode of the tramp and the attempt to blow up the aerodrome all combined to convince him that his original scheme of invasion of the little known wastes of Southern Florida was as an open book to the men who had only too evidently their destruction at heart.

A hasty trip to Washington resulted, and a consultation with the Secretary of the Navy. The result was that arrangements were made whereby the boys' expedition was to gather at Miami as openly as possible, and then under cover of night run down Biscayne Bay and eventually double Cape Sable by the inland passage. Then they were to beat up through the Ten Thousand Island Archipelago to the mouth of either Shark or Harney River and thence into the trackless wastes of unmapped swamp and saw-grass known as the Everglades.

The *Tarantula* was to cruise off and on around the coast and in case of dire need was to be signaled by wireless. These details completed, Frank and Harry returned to New York and a week later, the *Golden Eagle II* being completed, and loaded in small cases marked "Glass, Fragile," and other misleading labels, the Boy Aviators bade farewell to their mother and friends and started by the Southern Limited for Miami. With them they carried in ordinary trunks their mess and camp kit outfits, rifles and medical supplies as well as two of the Government's field wireless outfits. The rest of the party was to follow a week later in a private car with all the other baggage, including the boxed sections of the *Golden Eagle II*. The canoes and boats for the trips were to be purchased at Miami or along the coast in the vicinity, as the boys deemed fit. In the meantime the *Tarantula* had been dispatched from Hampton Roads for Southern waters under sealed orders. Not till her commander opened his instructions at sea did he know the real nature of his errand.

At this point it may not be amiss to give a brief description of the little known country to which the boys were bound. Everyone has heard of the Everglades, few have any accurate idea of them beyond a sort of hazy conception of a vast tract of morass, overgrown with giant forests and rank growth of all kinds. Nothing could be further from the truth.

It is without doubt the peculiar, even extraordinary, character of this great stretch of country that has caused its geography to remain obscure. Even recent maps are extremely inaccurate. It seems remarkable in these days of African and Polar discovery that here in our own country is a vast waste, 130 miles long and 70 wide, that is as little known to the white man as the heart of the Sahara. The Everglades are bounded on the north by Lake Okeechobee, on the east by a belt of scrub pine-land about six miles wide facing the Atlantic, on the south by the great mangrove swamps facing the Bay of Florida and the Gulf of Mexico, and on the west by the Big Cypress Swamp which runs right up to the uninhabited region verging on the west coast of the peninsula.

The prevailing idea that the Everglades are unhealthy is about as far as it is possible to get from the truth. So far as the few expeditions that have penetrated the great mystery have reported, the water is fine and the air healthful. The saw-grass, the Seminoles and the snakes – rattlers and cotton-mouth moccasins – are the worst enemies the explorer ordinarily encounters, with an occasional panther.

Over the watery wastes of the Everglades which are not tree grown, but on the contrary great expanses of saw-grass grown prairie, the Seminole poles his cypress dug-out defying the government which wishes to place him on a reservation but has no means of "smoking him out" of the impassable wilds he has chosen for his refuge. The Seminoles also haunt the Big Cypress Swamp and observe numerous tribal rites and legends of which we know little. They are dignified, trustworthy people – but

the bad treatment they have received from the government has made them the implacable foe of the white man for whom their word is the same as “liar” – such has been their impression of civilization.

The boys had familiarized themselves with the nature of the country by a close study of all the available works on the subject – which were not many. The government had placed the latest maps and charts of the region at their disposal. Even these, however, showed them little. In fact the parting words of the Secretary of the Navy to them were:

“Boys, you’ll have to blaze your own trail.”

Of course in selecting an equipment for such a region the boys had made lightness the prime essential.

They knew that on much of the journey in search for a spot for a permanent camp they would have to pole over shoal water, in some places not more than two feet deep. An overloaded canoe might therefore cause a lot of trouble and delay. Like true old campaigners they had prepared elaborate lists and then gone through them again and again till nothing appeared on them but the barest necessities.

Ben Stubbs had put in several days making a number of light but strong chests twenty-two inches by thirteen and nine inches deep. These contained, among other necessities, an aluminum cooking outfit weighing nine pounds. There were two pots, a frying pan and four plates nesting into each other. And then there was a coffee pot in which was stowed away four cups (nested) pepper and salt castors, knives, spoons and forks, the frying-pan and coffee-pot had detachable handles for lifting on and off the campfire with ease and comfort, no matter how the wind might be blowing the flames about.

The grocery chest contained flour, sugar, salt, cornmeal, pepper, sliced bacon, beef extracts, soup-tablets (three varieties), root-beer, lemonade and sarsaparilla tablets, oatmeal and evaporated fruits of various kinds. These were all put in glass jars with screw tops and rubber gaskets so that even in case of an upset the contents would remain dry. There was also a blue-flame double burner kerosene stove of the marine type, lanterns, and a supply of candles and matches in waterproof jars. The medical outfit consisted of some antiseptics, pills, several tablets of permanganate of potassium for the same purpose and a hypodermic outfit, bandages and lotions.

Each boy carried an automatic rifle for big game or defense, the kind chosen being a weapon carrying .49-50 nickeled steel cartridges. This gun was heavy enough for alligators; or the more savage crocodile, pumas, leopards, gray wolves or any human enemy. They also purchased two three-barreled guns having two parallel barrels, twelve gauge, for shotted shells, and another rifled barrel underneath of .35-55 caliber. Two 16-gauge shot-guns for duck and small game were also stowed away in the “armory” chest. In addition each boy had his magazine revolver of .38 caliber, and a six-inch bladed hunting-knife with a heavy back so that it might even be used for chopping.

Shovels, axes, picks, etc., were back with the heavy baggage to be brought on by Ben Stubbs and Billy. Frank, of course, carried his nautical instruments. A sextant, a compass, two tested watches of the finest split-second make and an artificial horizon.

Their clothes were stout hunting boots, khaki trousers and Norfolk jackets of the same material and flannel shirts with campaign hats. Each carried a change of underwear and socks in his toilet bag which also held two towels, toothbrush, cake of soap and brush and comb.

For transportation into the Everglades the boys soon managed with little difficulty to secure canoes and a lighter draught “cruiser,” similar to a Barnegat duck-boat. The flotilla was to be taken down the coast by an auxiliary sloop also chartered at Miami.

On the appointed day the boys were at the railroad station of the Florida East Coast railroad to meet the arrivals from New York, and warm were the greetings as Billy Barnes and Stubbs stepped from the private car which had been attached for them when they left the north. The car was sidetracked at Miami and the train kept on its way to Key West along the wonderful chain of cement bridges constructed over the numberless keys that run out from the “leg” of Florida. The boys and Ben were busily engaged getting the various bales and crates in some sort of order for transfer to

the trucks by which they were to be taken to the flotilla of canoes when they were startled at being hailed by a voice that sounded familiar.

The boys hastened to the door of one end of the car and were amazed to see standing on the steps, looking rather embarrassed and doubtful, Lathrop Beasley. He wore a well cut suit of white serge and a straw hat with a light blue ribbon. In addition he sported snowy canvas shoes, topped off with light purple socks and a pale pink tie. Altogether he looked as if he had just stepped from a clothing ad. Even in their astonishment at seeing him there the boys could not help laughing at the contrast they presented to him.

In their rough working garb, and all begrimed with dust as they were from handling the kit in the car, two more unpresentable youths from a sartorial standpoint, could not well be imagined. The three boys gazed at each other in silence for a few seconds and then Lathrop said rather shamefacedly:

“Hello, fellows.”

“Well, Lathrop, what on earth are you doing here?” naturally demanded Frank.

“I guess I came on a wild impulse,” began Lathrop, and then stopped.

“Well?” questioned Harry.

“When I heard of your trip, from hanging around the aerodrome after you left – oh, it wasn’t Ben Stubbs or Barnes that told me, they were close as clams,” – he hurried on, “but when old Schultz told me that you were going to cross the Everglades I thought that maybe you’d need an extra hand so I got permission from my folks and here I am.

“If you want to say the word I’ll go back,” he concluded rather lamely but with a longing look in his face that told of his eager desire to be allowed to join the expedition.

“Well, you certainly have an impetuous way of doing things,” commented Frank. “Did you come on this train?”

“Yes,” replied the boy. “I’ve just been up to the hotel and engaged rooms and tidied up a bit and then hurried right down here.”

Frank and Harry exchanged glances of amusement, the cause of which Lathrop was at a loss to fathom.

“Well,” began Frank, after a brief whispered conversation with his brother, “you are here now and I suppose you’ll have to stay. We can find some work I dare say for you to do and there are a lot of ways you can be useful.”

“I’ll start right in at anything you tell me,” began the boy eagerly. “It’s mighty good of you – ”

“Not much you won’t. Not in that fancy rig,” burst out Harry, “if you are coming with us you’d better go up to the village store and get an outfit as much like ours as possible and forget you ever patronized a tailor.”

Lathrop gladly agreed and hurried off to get himself a working outfit. As he hastened down the tracks, Frank turned to Harry with a grin.

“Well, we have gone and done it now,” he said. “But we really have use for another hand, and I think that we can make something out of Lathrop, besides we owe him a debt of gratitude for helping us out at White Plains. If it hadn’t been for him we might have lost the *Golden Eagle II* and all our work.”

“That’s so,” assented Harry. “I guess he will work out all right. But those fancy duds he had on – ”

And the boy burst out laughing at the recollection.

By sundown most of the “duffle” in the car had been transferred to trucks and carted down to the wharf, where the boys, with considerable pride, exhibited to Ben Stubbs, Billy, and the newly overalled Lathrop, the light draught thirty-foot sloop, with an auxiliary five-horse engine, the four canoes and the light draught “sneak-box,” they had secured for their transportation round the Cape and into the Thousand Island Archipelago. The canoes were of the “Ontario” type, fitted with narrow decks round the edges and canvas covered. The sneak-box was of the spoon-bowed variety familiar to

duckers in Barnegat Bay. It drew only a few inches of water and afforded a lot of space in its sixteen feet of length for the stowage of the heavier baggage. It rejoiced in the name of *Squeegee*.

Ben Stubbs was delighted with the “fleet” as he called it, and declared that the sloop was a “witch.” After a dinner at the quiet boarding house at which the boys had been stopping the adventurers that night finished the stowage of their impedimenta aboard the sloop and piled the canoes on the top of the canvas enclosed “summer cabin.” The “sneak-box” was towed astern.

The owner of the sloop, a coal-black negro called Pork Chops – the boys could never discover that he had any other name – was to take them round the cape as far as the Thousand Island Archipelago where they were to be left. From there on their course would lie up the Shark River into the heart of the little known Everglades.

Of course the wharf loungers were full of curiosity as the work of transferring the boys’ belongings and outfit to the sloop proceeded, but Frank and Harry had allowed it to become widely circulated that they were a hunting party bound for some of the keys to the east of Cape Sable, and “Pork Chops” also was of this belief, so that the boys were pretty sure that none but the members of their own immediate party knew of the real goal of their journey.

By midnight everything was in readiness and the tide served for start. With her big mainsail flapping lazily in the breath of wind that was stirring Pork Chops’ sloop, which held the poetic name of *Carrier Dove* dropped down Biscayne Bay with her “kicker” going and dawn found her well on her journey south with a spanking breeze out of the northeast to fill her canvas. As she skimmed along over the sparkling blue of the tropical waters in whose crystalline depths hosts of fish of all kinds could be easily seen and on the surface of which floated great masses of yellow gulf weed, the boys rejoiced that their momentous expedition had started so auspiciously. As for Lathrop he acted like a boy out of his head with joy at his unexpected good fortune. Ben Stubbs and the inky Pork Chops relieved each other at the wheel, and Frank and Harry, at the table in the stuffy little cabin, worked at plans and lists trying to devise ways of still further cutting down their outfit without impairing its usefulness. Billy Barnes, with a knowing air, scrutinized the sails and from time to time admonished Ben Stubbs to “keep her up a bit,” to which suggestion Ben with an air of ineffable contempt replied:

“I never knowed they taught navigation on a newspaper but it’s a good school for nerve.”

CHAPTER VII

A NIGHT ATTACK

Most of that day they dropped leisurely down Hawk Channel and at night anchored off a small key covered with a luxuriant tropical growth and topped by the feathery crowns of a group of stately royal palms. It was early afternoon when they let go the anchor and the boys lost no time in getting into the Squeegee and rowing ashore. They carried with them the *Carrier Dove's* water keg which held ten gallons and which had been discovered by them to be half empty the first time they went forward for a drink. What water there was in it was so stale as to be almost undrinkable. Pork Chops was summarily sent for and arraigned on the "quarter deck."

"I done declar I clean forgit all about deh watah," he gasped, as Frank read him a lecture on his carelessness. Indeed everything about the *Carrier Dove* bore witness to Pork Chops' shiftless ways. Her rigging was spliced in innumerable places and her halyards badly frayed so that they wedged in the blocks sometimes. Her paint was peeled off her sides in large flakes and altogether she was quite as disreputable a proposition as her owner; but in her, Pork Chops had navigated the waters about Miami for many years and was accounted a skilful mariner.

The boys uttered a cry of delight as the Squeegee's nose grated on a beach of white sand and they sprang out. The key was a veritable fairyland. Lime, lemon and guava trees grew almost down to the water's edge and further back were several wild banana plants with their yellow fruit hanging temptingly for the boys to pluck. And pluck it they did and declared they had never known what real bananas were like before, – which is hardly surprising as the fruit is picked for the northern market long before it is ripe and shipped in a green state.

After they had fairly gorged themselves on fruit, they set out to look for a spring. They were not long in finding it and Billy Barnes, dipper in hand, started in to fill the keg. He had ladled out a few dipperfuls when he started back with a yell. The others, who had been roaming about in the vicinity, hurried back and found the reporter gazing petrified at a huge cotton mouth moccassin. Frank, who had one of the sixteen gauge guns with him, quickly despatched the creature, which was about three feet long.

"Ugh, what a monster," exclaimed Lathrop, as he gazed at the ugly, dirty-brown colored body.

"He is a pretty sizeable reptile and that's a fact," remarked Frank, "But what would you say to a serpent twenty feet long?"

The others looked at him incredulously.

"Twenty feet long – Oh come, Frank," laughed Billy. "That sounds like the fish that got away."

"Lieutenant Willoughby, who explored the Everglades in 1897, reports that he heard from Indians and believed himself that in the southern portions of the Everglades there are snakes bigger than any known species," replied Frank, "his guide killed a reptile marked with longitudinal stripes, – but otherwise like a rattlesnake, – which measured nine feet from tip to tip."

"Well, I don't want to be around when any such creatures as that are about," said Lathrop.

"I'm with you there," cried Billy, "snake stories are all right in print but I don't want to figure in any of them."

"Come on, boys, – volunteers to get supper," cried Frank, after the group had strolled back to the boat landing, – all hands taking turn at packing the water keg.

"Supper?" cried the others.

"Yes," replied Frank, "we can row the keg off to the *Carrier Dove*, get some duffle ashore and camp here in the jungle for a night. There's no use trying to navigate this coast in the dark. Who says – yes?"

Of course they all did, – hailing his suggestion with acclamation, – and, after Frank and Harry had rowed off to the sloop, Lathrop and Billy Barnes set about getting in a supply of firewood and laying a fire between two green logs set parallel, in a manner that did credit to Bill's training as a woodsman in Nicaragua.

Frank and Harry were too tender-hearted to resist Ben Stubbs' pleadings to be made one of the party – moreover he promised to cook them what he called a bush supper if allowed to come ashore, so that when the boys shoved off in the placid water on their return trip to the Island Ben made one of the Squeegee's load.

As soon as they got ashore Ben approvingly commended Billy's camp-fire arrangements, at which the reporter glowed with pleasure. Somehow in the wilderness a small tribute to a boy's handiness will send him into the seventh heaven of gratified pride. Under Ben Stubbs' orders the party had soon secured several bunches of oysters from the mangroves, – which were laden with the bivalves where they dipped into the water at low tide, – as well as half a dozen turtles, small fellows which Ben declared made as good eating as the terrapin of the northern restaurant and banquet. To crown the feast, Frank, who had been scouting about with one of the shot-guns, brought down a couple of small ducks.

The oysters Ben roasted in their shells, laying them when finished on plantain leaves on previously heated rocks. The turtles he prepared by scalding them and then, after cutting down the center of the lower shell, the meat was easily got at. Salted and peppered inside and out and the meat removed from the shell after a half-an-hour's boiling with onions and the young campers had a meal fit for a president, who, as Billy observed, "is a heap more particular than a king."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.