

Newcomb Ambrose

# Trackers of the Fog Pack; Or, Jack Ralston Flying Blind



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Or, Jack Ralston Flying Blind**

«Public Domain»

**Newcomb A.**

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### CHAPTER I

#### Perk Sighs for Action

San Diego, in sunny Southern California, was looking its prettiest, with balmy breezes blowing softly; cloudless blue skies overhead; the usual throngs on the streets, and a general atmosphere of contentment resting over the entire place.

Already tourist pilgrims were beginning their annual migration from the cold lands of the north and northeast, seeking the more congenial climate along the picturesque Coast, where flowers bloomed throughout every month of the year; and outdoor sports of all descriptions tempted those inclined that way to participate.

But, just the same, there appeared to be *one* individual sauntering along Main Street, in a certain San Diego suburb, who did not seem to share in the general joyous spirit – this grumbler amidst such perfect surroundings was really an old friend of the reader, no other than Gabe Perkiser, familiarly known among his fellows of the flying fields by the shorter name of “Perk.”

At his side stalked his bosom pal, Jack Ralston, in whose company latterly the said Perk had participated in a number of thrilling flying stunts, all of which have been narrated in the earlier books of this series of aviation stories.

Those who have enjoyed a previous recital of their adventures in the precarious vocation they followed, as policemen of the skies, need no further introduction to the pair of cronies. For the benefit of new readers, less fortunate, it may be said right here, before embarking on the latest and most thrilling of their recent exploits, that Jack and Perk were trusted members of Uncle Sam’s wide-flung Secret Service organization; and on account of their clever and conscientious work, often entrusted with some of the most dangerous and difficult missions engaging the attention of the high “muck-a-muck” (Perk’s definition) authorities at Washington Headquarters.

“What puts you in the dumps so, Perk?” Jack was asking, after noticing for the tenth time what a frown had settled on his chum’s usually smiling phiz. “Dinner knocking harder than customary; or did you get a letter from your best girl, breaking off the engagement? Strikes me you’re fast becoming a chronic crêpe-hanger these days.”

“That’s all hot air – boloney I’d call it, as yeou know right well, Jack!” Perk flung back. “Chow was all to the good – ain’t got nary a best gal, an’ never did have, neither – they’re all rank pizen to me. Guess again, Mister.”

“Then what *does* ail you, boy – something gone wrong with your plans – can I do anything to ease the strain? I’d go a long way to get you out of that black look, partner; you’re worrying me a heap I allow.”

The other stopped short on Main Street’s pavement, and looked his companion straight in the face, actually smiling a bit in the bargain.

“Yeou *would* do jest that, ole pal, wouldn’t yeou? I know I’m a tarnel fool to get stewed like this,” he burst out; “an’ orter be ashamed – I’m meanin’ to kick outen it right away. Fact is, it’s the same ole story, Jack – I’m gettin’ fed up by things goin’ too smooth. Guess it’s in the blood – my Yankee ancestors they was all men o’ action, doers o’ things that called fur courage an’ double risk. They set their seal on me, seems like; fur ever since I was a kid I’ve been on the hunt fur adventure by land an’ sea; yeah, an’ o’ late years, in the air besides. That’s all I gotter say; but blood’ll tell ev’ry time.”

“Well,” remarked Jack, looking much relieved it could be seen. “I more than half suspected this, Perk; but cheer up – the longest lane must have its turning. Meanwhile we’re getting our regular pay from our Uncle Samuel, remember!”

“But not earnin’ a red cent, jest the same, which is what upsets me most,” continued the complaining one. “Makes me feel like I’m sorter pensioned off, an’ ain’t worth the snap o’ my fingers to the Service. Huh!”

“Nonsense, boy, that’s a silly way of looking at things. We’re just resting up after that difficult job we pulled off, with the help of the Mounted Police, far away up in Northwest Canada.<sup>1</sup> That successful flight, and arrest, earned us a vacation, our superiors believe; which I for one have enjoyed immensely. Now I’m feeling fine, and fit for the next commission the Big Boss decides to hand out to us.”

“Hot-diggetty-dig! then I sure hopes it drifts this way right quick,” Perk eagerly observed. “I kinder guess them racketeers an’ their crowd o’ bootleggers must a got things mighty near sewed up, when the Department lets us loaf away our time out here on the Gold Coast. If it keeps on we’ll be apt to forget heow to handle a ship, an’ get air shy – neow *wouldn’t* that same be a tough joke on us poor guys?”

“Little danger of such a thing coming to pass, Perk – it’s a whole bit like swimming – once you learn how to keep afloat it’s good for a life-time.”

“Mebbe so, Jack – I got a hunch it’s the same way with ridin’ a bike used to be – first few days yeou felt stiff in all yeour joints, ev’rything out o’ kelter; but when a chump got used to guidin’ the skittish wheel along it came as easy as fallin’ off a log. Honest Injun, neow, Jack, ain’t yeou any idea when we’re apt to grab an order to get goin’ again?”

“Any old day I’m looking for the same, Perk.”

“Gosh! that don’t strike me as givin’ much encouragement, partner,” Perk told his mate, aggrievedly.

“I wrote in ten days ago,” Jack went on to say, quietly, “to say our ship was in first-class condition, while we were on deck, waiting for orders.”

“Bully for yeou!” snapped Perk, brightening up visibly, as though, like a war horse at the scent of burnt powder making his nostrils quiver with anticipation. “I’m right neow yearnin’ to set eyes on a different landscape than sleepy ol’ San Diego, an’ slow towns borderin’ on the same.”

Perk only stated a truth when he referred to his adventurous life. He was considerably older than his running mate, having been over in France when only eighteen years of age, handling a sausage balloon on the fighting line, and running into numerous close corners, having been shot down at least twice.

After the war was over he came home, and started learning the ropes of the new craze – flying; becoming a very good pilot in time, though a bit reckless, it must be admitted.

Then he drifted into the lumber camps, and played logger for a few seasons. After that Perk, who was proud of having a strain of Canadian blood along with his Yankee heritage, turned up among the Mounties in the Far Northwest regions and spent some years doing service with those dashing officers enforcing the Law of the wilderness.

Meeting up with Jack Ralston – after being coaxed to throw his fortunes in with the Secret Service at Washington, he took a strong liking for the bright-witted youngster, and they had been boon comrades ever since, sharing their blankets, meeting all manner of peril in company, and becoming what might be called real “blood brothers.”

So, too, had Jack been through some interesting experiences, although not of the same thrilling character as those Perk could look back to, when musing of the past.

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<sup>1</sup> See “*Sky Pilots’ Great Chase*.”

He had had a run of circus training, being a natural athlete; and on the bills had been advertised as a famous trapeze performer. Then naturally the lure of the air gripped Jack, and forsaking the sawdust ring he began making parachute drops with one of those barnstorming aviators possessing a dilapidated crate with which he was wont to give exhibitions at Harvest Home festivals, and County Fairs all over the West – just as Lindbergh did in his school days.

It was in this fashion that young Ralston learned to be a clever pilot; and possibly his skill at the controls was one leading factor bringing about an earnest invitation for him to join up with the Secret Service – about that time it became evident that a new branch of the Law organization must be built up, in order to compete with the lawless smuggling gangs that were already using airplanes with which to fetch contraband of every description into the country.

So well did the pair co-operate that they worked as two parts of the whole machine – as one hand knows what the other hand requires to make a finished product so their brains often worked in unison, thus adding additional strength to their united efforts.

As they continued their walk, meaning to return to the city in time for lunch, Perk continued to ramble on with observations covering much ground; for he had a decided opinion on every variety of subject, and could be depended on to exploit his ideas at the slightest invitation.

“No use talkin,’ Jack,” he was saying, as he tapped his pocket significantly, “that same Jerry Slocum’s a crackin’ good locksmith an’ gunsmith. I took up with his offer, yeou know, to put my ol’ six-shooter, used in France with my work in the sausage balloon corps, in apple-pie condition; an’ he done a smart job. He happened to have some ammuniton to fit the gun, so I laid in a bunch o’ cartridges, meanin’ to shoot at a target when time hung heavy on my hands. But listen, will yeou, ol’ pard, what’s all that whoopin’ mean ’round the corner jest ahead – sounds like a reg’lar *stampede* was takin’ place, I’d say if yeou asked me?”

## CHAPTER II

### He Gets His Wish

“Some excitement, I own up, Perk,” agreed Jack, exchanging a look of inquiry with his companion. “Dog fight, like as not, since I thought I heard a yowling just then, as if one mutt’d got his in the neck.”

“Jest hear the people a shoutin’ will yeou?” snapped Perk.

“But that doesn’t sound like they were enjoying themselves a heap, I’d say, boy – such screaming and yelling – they’re badly rattled over whatever’s going on. What could it all mean, I wonder?”

“Hot-diggetty-dig! we’ll know right soon, ole hoss; ’cause it’s headin’ this way – gettin’ a heap louder ev’ry second, I vow! Guess yeou struck it right when yeou sez they must be skeered into a near panic. Don’t hear no guns agoin’ off, so it cain’t be a brawl ’tween drunken bootleggers an’ town constables. Well, I swan, it gets me – look at the folks a beatin’ it to the houses, like they reckoned they’d be safer there. Mebbe we better shin up a telegraph pole like that youngster’s a doin’ over yonder – he means to git high an’ dry, so’s to see the circus, but not take chances with the runaway animal’s flyin’ heels. Wow! what’s this I lamp a comin’ ’reound that corner, waggin’ his ole head from side to side – a big yellin’ *dog*, Jack, with foam a drippin’ from his open red mouth! Great guns!”

“That beast is as mad as a hatter!” boomed Jack, thrilled by the frightful sight. “He’s bound to own the whole street, no matter if a battalion of cops try to sheer him off!”

“Mebbe, mate,” Perk was shouting “we’d better be steppin’ to one side in a hurry; I ain’t lost nary dog; an’ I’m not fool enough to want to stand up ’fore one that’s rabid – not Gabe Perkiser! Get a move on, Jack, an’ vamose!”

“Wait up!” cried the other, for so great was the clamor no one could expect to be heard unless he fairly shouted.

“Excuse me, boy – I got a date!” Perk bellowed back, grinning as he spoke.

“Look ahead, Perk – that child – little boy he is – fell down in his fright, and must’ve sprained his ankle – see him try to scramble up again; but he can’t manage it, what with his fright and twisted ankle. The dog – it’s making straight for the youngster – we can’t stand by, and see him tackle such a mere baby – we’ve just *got* to do something, Perk!”

“Sure do, partner – let’s go!”

Others were running in every direction save toward the great ugly beast, thinking in their panicky state of nerves only of their own safety. All the while the shouts continued to go booming along the length of Main Street:

“Mad dog! mad dog! everybody run – get the children indoors! He’s rabid and ready to snap at anybody in his way! Run for it!”

But the poor little baby directly in the path of the oncoming demon could not heed the shouts – vainly he tried to crawl to one side, his terrified eyes fixed on that dreadful vision of fury and rabies confronting him, and drawing closer with every passing second.

Jack and Perk were galloping forward with all their might, intending to throw themselves between the child and that stumbling terror with the lolling head and dripping jaws.

It could be seen that Perk was gripped by a sudden inspiration – he had dragged some sort of object from his pocket, and was working feverishly with the same. Jack understood, and inwardly blessed the lucky chance that had caused his pal to fetch his old war weapon out to his friend the town gunsmith, so as to have it put in first-class condition. It must have been the hand of a kind fate that brought about this wonderful coincidence, Jack was telling himself, when guessing that the running airman must be trying with all his cleverness to insert a cartridge or two into the chambers of the small, antiquated six-shooter.

Fortune favored them, for they were enabled to pass beyond the writhing and shrieking child, thus facing the danger themselves as a shield to buck up against the charge of the mad dog.

Perk dropped down on one knee – it was the natural position for one to assume under such conditions, bringing him more on a level with the beast. Jack, too, knew he had a part in the scheme to save the tiny lad – lacking a weapon of any kind he could not stand by Perk; but one thing was left to him, which was to snatch up the imperiled child, and leap to safety before the crisis crashed upon them.

Even as he was thus bearing the lad out of the danger zone, he caught a sudden explosion that told him Perk had sent in a shot. It was his bosom pal crouched back there with that shaggy beast almost upon him; for he knew full well Perk had waited until he could make doubly certain of his aim.

Somehow Jack could not keep from turning his head, so as to know the worst – he had a cold feeling in the region of his heart, undoubtedly fearing he would discover Perk engaged in a furious struggle at close quarters with the animal, one bite from whose jaws would contaminate the flesh his cruel fangs thus mangled.

But that fear was instantly put to flight – Perk still knelt there, while the furious beast writhed on the ground, making frightful efforts to get up on its four feet again.

This he no sooner succeeded in doing than Perk let him have a second leaden pill, working his keepsake weapon of the great war with mechanical precision. How lucky then he must have succeeded in thrusting *two* cartridges into the maw of his gun, since there proved to be such great need of an *encore*.

It was “all over but the shouting,” as Perk himself would have put it. He rose to his feet, and coolly stepped forward, to bend over and see that there no longer remained a single breath in the carcass of the terrible brute he had stayed in his mad passage through the town.

The tenor of the wild shouts changed like magic – joy and triumph, not to say relief, began to be heard, as if reassuring the frightened populace there was no longer anything to be feared – the ogre Jabberwock had been laid low, and once again the length of Main Street could be traversed without peril to life and limb.

And the one who had performed this valorous deed seemed only anxious to make himself scarce before the worshipping citizens could lay hands on him – shower him with thanks, perhaps *kisses* as well from the gentler sex, who knew a hero in the flesh as well as on the Hollywood screen.

Jack was trying the best he knew how to allay the terror of the child he still held in his arms, speaking to him with assurance in his tones, and squeezing the white-faced little chap close to his heart.

“It’s all right, buddy,” he kept saying, with a comforting smile on his face, that was bound to stop the trembling sobs of the other, if anything could. “The ugly dog can’t hurt you, for he’s been killed, and can never bite anybody. You must have hurt your ankle, little brother; I’m going to carry you to where you live, so they can take care of you, and get the kind doctor to take the pain away. Put your arms around my neck, and I’ll be able to hold you better – that’s the way, kiddie; you know I’m a good friend of yours, don’t you?”

The crowd was all around them by this time, milling so as to get as close as possible – it reminded Jack of cattle being rounded up by expert punchers, so as to be shipped to market, or it might be, branded.

“Stand back, please, and give us air!” Jack called out, to add: “Perk, see that they don’t crowd in any further. I’m not going to be satisfied until I’ve seen this little lad safe in his home. Who knows where he lives?”

There were a dozen voices raised in explanations; but Jack lifted a hand to stop the confused racket.

“Hold up on that!” he told them, sharply; “I want just one person to tell me – here, you boy, you seem to know him okay – tell me his name, will you, and where he lives – nobody else break in now, get that? Go on, George, speak up!”

“My name’s Jimmy – his’n is Laddy Boy – he lives with his granny Mrs. Fergusson right ’round that next corner, in a little shack.”

“Fine for you Jimmy – lead us to it; and please everybody stop pushing – that shouting must be dropped, or you’ll have the old lady frightened half to death before we get there. Now start along, Jimmy – you’re a good pal to tie to, I’ll say.”

So they made a start, with scores following after them, all talking; but in more subdued tones. Possibly they realized that this young chap with the capable look, and firm voice, was one accustomed to having his orders obeyed without any questions being asked, and that he would brook no interference.

As they turned into the side street the young pilot hastened to point in the direction of a small old, but respectable looking cottage of some three rooms, that was surrounded by masses of flowers in full bloom.

Jack could see the door of the small house was wide open, and that an elderly woman stood there, shading her eyes with a hand, as she watched the approach of the crowd. Undoubtedly she must have heard what had been so loudly shouted, when the mad dog was causing such a panic on Main Street – she may even have started toward the nearby corner, with a great fear tugging at her heart, knowing her Laddie Boy was going about on the little errand she had entrusted to him; but if so fear had driven her back to the home, where she could slam the door shut in case personal peril threatened her.

Seeing Jack in the lead of the procession, carrying some object in his arms, she came flying down to meet him, looking aghast.

“Don’t be so alarmed Mrs. Ferguson,” Jack said, sympathizing with her new fears; “he wasn’t bitten by the dog; but had the bad luck to sprain his ankle. It’s nothing serious, I’m telling you straight – lead the way, and I’ll put him on a bed, when you can send for the doctor to look him over; but don’t worry – he’s safe enough, I promise you.”

Presently Jack joined his partner.

“Let’s go, matey,” Perk hastened to say, uneasily, as though he feared those admiring good folks outside were actually conspiring to pick him up on their shoulders, and march around town with the hero of the mad dog scare; something like that, but to which he was very much averse.

“Wait a few minutes,” Jack told his nervous comrade, “I promised the old lady I’d stay out here until the doctor had looked the child over; she wants to get the story out of us, I imagine, guessing something queer must have happened, from the way those folks kept pawing at us.”

Perk drew a long breath, and muttered something under his breath that sounded like “drat the tough luck;” but he did settle down on a chair, and amused himself looking around the room, on the walls of which were a number of cheap pictures, also several portraits.

“Come over here, Perk,” Jack was saying, as he stood in front of the picture of a man, “here’s a queer happening – look at that face – have you ever seen it before?”

## CHAPTER III

### Echoes of the Past

Looking rather surprised, as well as duly curious after his nature, Perk accordingly stepped blithely up, took one good stare, and immediately burst out with his characteristic and pet “swear-word” phrase:

“Hot-diggetty-dig! hard to b’lieve my eyes, for a fact, partner – course I seen that phiz afore neow, an’ same stirs up some mighty warm session we passed through a while back.”

“Then you say it’s a portrait of Slim Garrabrant?” asked Jack, in a lower key, and with a quick glance toward the connecting door that was a bit ajar it happened.

“None other, buddy – the slickest flim-flam artist that ever fooled the banks of every state west o’ the Mississip – fair good job that crayon artist made o’ his work – mebbe copied from a reg’lar photo. Ain’t this this the limit though – to think o’ runnin’ acrost *his* mug out here clost to San Diego. Huh! I allers heard the world seemed mighty small sometimes, an neow I b’lieves it.”

Jack put a finger up to his lips warningly.

“Softly, Perk. That old lady must be some close connection of Slim’s, I’d say; it may be his own mother – yes, the fact of finding his picture hanging on this wall in an honored place makes that plain; she evidently doesn’t know what a rogue her boy is – they must have kept things from reaching her ears after we gobbled him up, and he was sent to Leavenworth – or was it Atlanta?”

“Yeou got me there, ’cause I never did know,” observed Perk, taking yet another look at the face within the gold frame. “Aint sech a tough looker as we know he is, eh, ole pal?”

“Yes, that’s a fact; but then this was evidently taken years ago, most likely, before he became so hardened. I wonder – ”

“What neow, Jack?”

“That handsome little boy must be some relative of Slim’s,” said Jack, on a hazard; “if he was old enough I’d begin to believe the kid was his own child – they call her Grandmammy Ferguson, remember – yes, that would square things I’d reckon, Perk.”

“Aint it won-der-ful?” the other was saying, half to himself apparently; “jest to think o’ us arunnin’ smack into somebody connected with the man we was responsible for sendin’ to the pen years ago. ’Bout one chanct in a million sech a thing could happen; but it shore has.”

Jack also showed that he was feeling about the same as his comrade; indeed it was one of the queerest episodes he had ever met up with.

“If that turns out to be a fact,” he went on to comment, “I imagine Garrabarnt behind the bars would give considerable for a glimpse of that kid’s sweet face.”

“I wouldn’t blame him any at that, Jack. How ’bout the kid – dye kinder guess he’ll have a bad time with that leg?”

“The doctor will be able to say after he’s had a lookover,” came the confident answer. “My opinion is it’ll prove to be a simple sprain, and if such is the case the child will only have to keep quiet for a spell. There’s a car stopping at the gate, and the man getting out has the look of a professional – yes, he’s carrying a little satchel in the bargain, so it must be the doctor she sent after.”

This proved to be the case, for the young man spoke to them on entering, and seemed very agreeable.

“What’s happened here?” he asked, as though his hasty summons, and the sight of that excited crowd outside, had aroused his curiosity greatly.

Jack thought the doctor should be told what necessity there was for his services; as such knowledge would prepare him for what must follow. Accordingly he very briefly explained, making light of what connection he and Perk had with the matter.

Thus forewarned the doctor smiled his thanks, and hastened to pass into the room where the old lady and the child were located. Some little time afterwards the doctor came out again. Perk could see from the look on his face it was not so very serious, nor was he mistaken in his diagnosis.

“A simple sprain, just as you suspected,” the physician assured them; “and he’ll be running around again inside of five days.”

He shook hands with them very earnestly, which fact caused Perk to remark, after the doctor had passed out of the door:

“Huh! it’s mighty plain to be seen, Jack, he’s smart enough to smell a rat – the grip he gimme said as he kinder guessed *we* had a finger in the pie. Look for yeourself, partner – he’s talkin’ to some o’ the folks out there, an’ I jest bet yeou they’re a makin’ out we done somethin’ grand. Rats! why caint a gink do a simple thing like we done without people wantin’ to gush over him? Makes me fair sick to see so much o’ the stuff wasted. Do we get a move on right away, mate?”

“Better wait up a bit until he starts back to his office,” suggested Jack, also peeping out of the window.

“Yeou said it, Jack – if we stepped eout right neow it’d look like we wanted ’em to give us a cheer – as for me I’d be glad if we could slip away by the back door, an’ give ’em the laugh. There, he’s gettin’ into his car, an’ the coast’s clear.”

Jack stepped into the other room to say goodbye to the old lady – for she did seem to be of a higher class than one would think from the humble cottage she called home – truth to tell Jack wished to have another look at that bright-faced little lad, whom he was apt to remember for a long time.

The boy had come-to, and shook hands at Jack’s request, also gave him a sweet smile.

“If he owes either of us any thanks,” Jack told Granny, as he turned to leave, “it should go to my chum; who chanced to have a gun in his pocket, having had it cleaned and repaired at a shop here – he threw himself between the ugly dog and the child, and shot the mad brute dead. The lad wasn’t touched, I assure you, madam.”

“Thank him for me a thousand times, please, young man – it was a brave act, and his mother surely has cause to be grateful for having such a son. Come and see us sometime later on; both of us will be very glad to have you drop in.”

Jack hurried out, with a strange thought racing through his brain; he could not help wondering what that fine elderly woman would think if only she knew how the two young men thus befriending her grandson (who must have been so precious to her heart) had been the chief instrument in shape of the outraged Law to run down and send her son-in-law Slim Garrabarnt, up to the penitentiary for a long term of years, as a much wanted criminal.

It was hardly a pleasant thought, but nothing to be ashamed of, since he merely represented the Government in all he had done, and could not be blamed any more than the judge who dealt out the grim sentence.

Perk was eager to be gone, and led the way outside. They pushed a passage through the still jabbering crowd, and walked off, followed by admiring looks from those gathered there.

On the way back to the city Perk seemed to be wrapped in his own thoughts much of the time, which was such an unusual occurrence that Jack marveled to take note of his silence.

“Still o’ the opinion the kid might be his’n?” Perk asked his companion, as they finally drew near the location of the building in which they had a furnished room.

“Feel pretty sure of it,” he was told, without the slightest hesitation. “I explained to the old lady that it was you who kept the dog from contact with the child, and she asked me to thank you with all her heart.”

“Shucks! why did yeou ever mention sech a thing, Pal Jack? ’Twan’t nawthin’ ’tall – jest a soft snap for a chap what was yearnin’ for action. But it gives me a queer thrill to know heow we run up agin *his* folks – ’bout a hundred-an’-thirty million people in this here country, an’ to think we’d pick ’em aout o’ all that mob – it sure has got me buffaloeed for keeps.”

As Jack opened the locked door of their room he stooped to pick up some object that had been thrust underneath. Perk saw it was a letter, with a special delivery stamp on the same. Somehow its coming gave him a sudden thrill around the region of his heart, as though he could sense important news in the offing – apparently this was destined to be a red-letter day in their experiences, with a decided break in the long release from active duty.

## CHAPTER IV

### By Special Delivery

Somewhat to the disappointment of Perk his comrade did not evince any haste about opening his letter, thrusting the same into his pocket, while he washed his hands, and brushed his hair.

“Somehow I seem to be as hungry as a wolf,” Jack remarked; “and as it’s long past our usual time for lunch I move we drop around to our beanery, and lay in some stores in the way of chow.”

Of course such a proposition appealed strongly to Perk, who was seldom able to resist a call to meals. For the moment he quite forgot his recent curiosity to know what was in the letter, the receipt of which had caused Jack to smile; and which moreover had certain familiar marks about it to make Perk feel certain it came from Headquarters.

“Queer heow a feller c’n nigh ’bout forget certain stirrin’ events in his past,” he observed with a shake of his head; “an’ suddenly have the same bob up in his mind, as clear as if they might a happened on’y yesterday.”

“I reckon you’re referring to our old friend, Cool Slim Garrabrant, eh, Perk?” queried the other, indifferently.

“None other,” came the reply. “There was a man as might be called the king o’ the counterfeiters, who’d had his thumb to his nose ever so long, alaughin’ at Uncle Sam’s slick boys, an’ sendin’ ’em all sorts o’ tauntin’ notes; so in the end the Chief he come down off’n his high perch, an’ gave *us* a chanct to knock down the persimmons with a long pole; which we done as neat as any body’d choose.”

“Bad taste to boast, Perk, you want to remember.”

“Can’t help sayin’ a few things, Jack, an’ pattin’ us two flyin’ cops on the chest. Honest, I got an idea Slim’s sun had begun to set jest as soon as the job o’ runnin’ him in was placed in aour hands. Nobody but them as knew haow to handle an airship could a fetched home the bacon in that case; ’cause Slim he knowed how to get his long-green stuff clear withaout leavin’ any trace, usin’ that ole crate to carry the coney supplies east an’ west o’ his hidin’ place, where he carried on the work along a big scale.”

“Of course what you say is all true enough,” ventured Jack as they walked along, heading for the nearest eatingplace, which they sometimes patronized when close by; “but both of us would do well to try and forget our share in that haul – it’s old stuff by now. And besides,” continued Jack, “somehow I feel bad when I remember that it was probably that little kid’s own daddy we sent up.”

“Yeah!” mused Perk, unwilling to change the subject, it appeared, “an’ the judge socked it to Slim good an’ heavy – give him a long sentence, so ’at he’ll have to serve behind the walls o’ that Atlanta pen ’til he’s an old, broken-down man, an’ not marked dangerous to law-abidin’ folks.”

“There are a few others of his stripe yet outside prison walls, remember, partner,” Jack told him, as they entered the eatingplace, walking over to a table somewhat aloof from all others, and on this account usually chosen for such meals as they took there; as they sometimes discussed their secret work while eating it was policy to keep clear from other diners, and at the same time lower their voices, since walls may have ears, and even hide dictaphones that record every spoken word.

“Yeou never said truer words, ole top,” Perk agreed in his odd fashion. “Scofflaws aplenty to keep our crowd busy for years ahead. Say, d’ye know I been readin’ a heap ’bout a smart guy they say calls hisself King Cole – seems like he got a hole in the wall ’way out in the wildest part o’ the Rockies, an’ jest laughs at the boys from Washington to size him up.”

“I recollect you talking of him more than a few times, Perk; from which fact I had a hunch you might be wishing the Chief’d turn over the assignment for apprehending him to our hands – is that correct, partner?”

“Don’t care if I do have to acknowledge the corn, matey; someheow that dickey grabbed a stiff hold on my thinkin’ box – why, onct I even dreamed we’d cornered him with his gay crowd, an’ was commencin’ to exchange shots with the bunch, when I woke up, an’ felt too cheap for anything to know it was on’y hot air.”

Jack laughed as he seated himself.

“I remember how furious you were, and saying it was a shame to be cheated that way, eh, Perk?”

They gave their orders, and were presently partaking of what the waiter set before them; afterwards retiring, as though already knowing they would call should they require further service. This afforded Perk another opportunity to “use his tongue,” a vocation that gave him the utmost enjoyment.

“Jest occurred to me them paper accounts sez as haow his bees’-nest was located in a stretch ’tween two o’ the highest mountain ranges in the hull country o’ the Rockies – called the secret settlement Happy Valley; which I opine sounds a right queer name for a den o’ pizenous human snakes, sech as the Law wants f’r ’bout ev’ry crime on the calendar.”

“No accounting for tastes, buddy,” Jack told him. “It might feel that way to men against whom the hand of every honest person was raised. Most of his crowd, I read, was believed to be reckoned the scum of the earth, who were wanted for nearly every crime going – murderers, bank cashiers who’d robbed the institutions of which they had been the head; and all such black sheep, outlawed from decent society by their crimes and misdemeanors.”

Perk grinned amiably, as though what his companion had just said made no difference to him – that he still wished from the bottom of his heart they were commissioned to undertake the dangerous task of breaking up the settlement in that so-called Paradise of fugitives.

“Don’t faize me any when yeou talk that way, boy,” he told his companion, with one of his amused chuckles that seemed to come up from his toes, “The more stuff yeou gotter bump up agin the better I like it – cain’t be too tough for a hill-billy like me – that’s what they calls the boys daown in the Ozarks, where I put in near a hull year huntin’ precious stones in the earth, an’ never findin’ enuff to git me my grub. Another o’ them memories as comes along withaout warnin’, to ha’nt me.”

“Perk, you promised me once that some fine day you’d make a start at that memory book, covering all your activities since you were knee-high to a duck – I’m going to press you to really start in doing the job, Perk; it will make a book well worth reading, if only half of all the adventures you’ve told me about are included. Now, don’t forget your promise, for I’ll hold you to it the next layoff we have float our way.”

“I sure hate to do it, partner; but seein’ I did give yeou my solemn word I s’pose I’ll jest have to keep my promise; but it’ll seem to me like a heap o’ blarney an’ boastin’. My loose tongue sure gets me into a nest o’ scrapes, which ain’t one bit pleasin’ to sech a shy gink as me.”

Ah! Perk’s eyes opened wider as he saw the other make a quick movement with his hand, as though suddenly remembering the mysterious letter thrust under the door of their room, and bearing that long blue stamp that signified special service, quick delivery to the person addressed.

Sure enough Jack drew the missive out, and proceeded to cut the end of the envelope, using a table knife for the purpose.

Shooting a quick glance across the table in the direction of his chum, he smiled slightly, as though very well knowing how Perk was eating his heart up with curiosity.

Perk stopped feeding, as his abstraction was so intense he hardly knew the way to his mouth – both eyes were glued on Jack’s face, as if he hoped to read the answer to the riddle there, a thing that had never as yet come within the scope of his knowledge, since Jack could hide his emotions under an assumed indifference that baffled interpretation.

It seemed that Jack had read every word of the letter, although there were several enclosures yet to be gone over; however he appeared as if he had picked up certain intelligence of such a drastic character as to make him sit there mulling it all over, and possibly trying to dovetail things together.

Perk, poor fellow, could stand the awful suspense no longer.

“Well, ole scout, ain’t yeou thinkin’ ’baout lettin’ me into the game – I somehaow take it fur granted there’s news come ’long that’s agoin’ to start us off agin follerin’ the air trails on the heels o’ some skunks what got themselves outside the law. Lay off, partner, an’ gimme a run fur my money, won’t yeou?”

## CHAPTER V

### The Cat is Out of the Bag

Jack looked at Perk, and smiled.

“I certainly must ask your pardon, old chap,” he hastened to say; “for keeping you in the dark so long. Fact is, what came to me in this letter gave me such food for thought I clean forgot you were my side partner, and entitled to my full confidence. Forgive it, Perk, wont you?”

“Sure thing, Jack; then I kinder guess the letter must be from Headquarters?”

“No other, Perk.”

“What’s in the wind this time?” demanded the other, eagerly; as though his nostrils could already sniff the burnt powder that went with action.

“That’s a fair question, and I’ll try to answer you,” said Jack. “It isn’t the mere fact that we’re ordered to duty once more, that I was thinking about just now, because such a thing comes along every once in so often in the exercise of our duties – but strangely enough our meeting up to-day with the family of a man we’d help put in jail doesn’t seem to bring our queer list of coincidences to a halt.”

“Hot-diggetty-dig! naow yeou got me a guessin’ good an’ hard, partner – go to it, an’ explain what yeou mean.”

“Well, it looks as if a wish you expressed only a short time ago was going to be fulfilled,” Jack told him.

“Haow come, buddy?” queried Perk.

“We were talking about a certain scoundrel who’s name we’ve seen so often of late in the papers – remember, Perk?”

An expression of sublime delight passed over the face of Gabe Perkiser; showing how he understood, and what a sense of exhilaration the knowledge afforded him.

“Kinder guess naow, Jack, yeou might be meanin’ that same Ole King Cole like he goes to call hisself – the brazen guy that makes all kinds o’ fun o’ Secret Service mokes – is *that* the answer, brother?”

Jack nodded in a way that could have only one meaning.

“Okay, Perk; you’re on.

“Shake on that, young feller – it’s the most glorious news I ever did get outen Washington. If half what they says turns aout to be true, we’re in fur the hot time o’ aour life, seems like.”

“You never can tell, partner, which way the cat will jump – sometimes when you’re expecting an easy windup things get mighty tough; then again if you’re looking for a hard battle it sometimes turns out to be just a mere walkover – a flash in the pan. We have to take things as we find them, and let it go at that.”

“Ole King Cole sent aout his nasty defi to the hull Secret Service crowd, an’ so far he’s been able to give the boys the nasty grand laugh; but they say a pitcher may go to the well jest onct too many times – mebbe we might be the lucky ones to smash the same, pronto.”

“I’ve read that two different men of our staff have disappeared, after getting hot on the trail of this band of scoundrels; which goes to tell us they’re a hard-boiled bunch, who wont stop at committing any crime so as to keep out of the pen.”

Perk only grinned, as though the tougher they came the more he liked them.

“That’s all right Jack, I’m best suited when they make ’em that way,” he hastened to assure his chum; although really there was no need of his thus doing, since Jack knew him like a book, with all his good qualities, and shortcomings as well.

“Are you through eating?” asked the other; and on receiving an affirmative nod he continued: “all right, suppose we adjourn to our room for a conference, where we can be dead certain of not

being overheard. There are a few other things to tell that may open your eyes still further, as they did mine; besides, the Big Boss enclosed a few clippings, and typed reports, for us to study, as he believes they will give us some important clues that are going to be of considerable help in tracking these outlaws to their den.”

“Gee whiz! things *do* seem to be headin’ aour way, don’t they though, Jack? Yeou said there might be a sudden turn in the game, an’ she sure enough did come hoppin’ ’long, to make me laugh, an’ feel so like singin’.”

“Well, please don’t start that racket here, partner; if ever they heard you singing they’d certainly put the bars against us; and we both like the chow in this same little restaurant, remember.”

“Go easy on a feller whose education in music must a been neglected when he was a kid. An’ Jack, mebbe so yeou’ll let me set my lamps on that ere document, onct we get indoors at aour quarters.”

“You’re going to know everything that I do, Perk; that goes without question; for how could we work together as a team if we pulled contrarywise?”

Leaving the eatinghouse they were soon back in their comfortable room, where they could take things easy while laying out plans for the near future.

Perk started his favorite pipe going, as though getting ready to be vastly entertained by what was in prospect; he always looked as though at peace with the whole world, even counting those who defied the law to keep them from doing whatever they pleased, however it might turn out for other people – such was the beneficial effects of tobacco on his system, for there were times when he could never be supremely happy until he got his pipe going full blast.

“Naow fur it, partner;” he opened up with, “I’m settled, an’ ready to imbibe the hull kittin’ story, with nawthin’ bein’ held back, like yeou promised me.”

“I’m meaning to read the letter to you first, and then later on you can pore over it yourself, making a mental photograph of the contents, so that every sentence can be recalled from memory upon occasion.”

This was the way Jack generally arranged things, for he knew just how to work so as to get Perk fully interested; and accustomed to the programme the other had never been known to take exception to Jack’s methods.

“I get yeou, partner,” was Perk’s comment; “it’s part o’ aour reg’lar programme to learn the big points o’ aour job, so we aint agoin’ to be rattled when we come to settle daown to work.”

“Now fix your mind on what I’m going to read, and forget everything else but the one business we’re being given to carry through.”

Accordingly Jack commenced, with Perk occasionally asking some pertinent question, which was cheerfully answered by the reader.

“Now,” observed Jack later on, “we’ve covered much that the Chief has had taken down by his stenographer; but the windup of the whole matter is the heart of the story; you want to hold your breath while I read it out to you, because, unless I miss my guess, you’re in for the biggest shock of your life.”

“Hot-diggetty-dig! that sounds right ser’us, partner, she shore do; but I’ll stiffen aout, grip the sides o’ my chair, an’ gulp it all in like a thirsty broncho would fresh water after comin’ in from the sandy desert. Hit ’er up!”

“Listen then to what he writes here,” Jack was saying, soberly, yet keeping an eye on Perk’s tell-tale face, which he never could wholly control: “The enclosed suggestions are clippings, and reports from some of our agents who had started out to track this ugly gang to its secret hideout. Taken collectively and individually they will convince you as to the character of many of the knotty problems you will have to solve before success can be your reward in smashing this new King Cole mob of law breakers, cattle thieves, bank robbers, and what-not along the line of up-to-date crime.

“So you will understand the magnitude of this business when I tell you it is not only suspected, but fully believed, this so-called King Cole is an old offender, sailing under a new name – none other than a clever convict whose escape from the Atlanta penitentiary some months ago has been purposely kept a state secret, in hopes of its being helpful in locating his whereabouts, and bringing him back to his empty cell, with the penalty of having his sentence lengthened on account of his flight – an arrangement that so far has not been in the least profitable or successful.

“You will understand what I mean when I tell you the name of this rascal, whom I remember you and your comrade had the high honor of bringing before the courts, and starting on the road to the Government institution – it is” – Jack paused to watch Perk’s eager face, and then added with considerable force: “it is Slippery Slim Garrabrant!”

## CHAPTER VI

### Laying Plans

“Oh! my gosh!”

So completely staggered did Perk seem to have become at the disclosure made by Jack, that he sat there, incapable of motion, just staring at his companion in the manner of a man who thinks he sees a hobgoblin.

“Slim – Slim Garrabrant!” he finally mustered up enough breath to almost whisper, looking a bit awed, Jack thought.

“No other, partner,” his pal assured him, cheerfully. “You know how we were saying that sometimes this old world looked mighty small – well, this happens to be one of those times. Take it as a matter of fact, Perk – one of those quirks that roll around occasionally.”

“Yeah – sure, that’s right, Jack – jest so – nawthin’ awful strange ’bout him aturnin’ aout to be the lucky dog as skipped aout o’ the pen, giving Uncle Sam the laugh. Go on an’ tell me some more. Kinder looks like we’d got to roll aour hoop up agin that Smart Aleck again, ’fore we get him caged for keeps.”

“Well, I don’t know about that, matey,” Jack told him, frowning as he spoke; “but if they *do* get him back alive in his cell they’ll keep closer tabs on Slim, you can wager. But the devil of it is, can he ever be retaken? Both of us have good reason to remember what a big job we had on our hands the other time; which isn’t to be compared with what we’ll stack up against now.”

Perk had by this time succeeded in getting back his customary self reliance, when he would scoff at such a word as “can’t.” He screwed his face up in what evidently was intended to be a sneer, as he went on to say:

“Huh! that ere is the last thing to worry me, buddy. Yeou an’ me, guess we make a team not easy to beat. When we git started we’ll jest give that gink a knock fur a goal, an’ clinch the game for keeps. But like as not we orter be makin’ up aour plans, hadn’t we, Jack?”

“Certainly,” responded the other, calmly; “but first of all let it be distinctly understood in the beginning there’s no need of any undue hurry.”

“Course not,” agreed Perk, wagging his head in the affirmative, as was his usual habit when Jack was laying down the law.

“While of course we’ll not loiter on the way,” continued the head man of the combination; “just the same we must not do anything that’s going to interfere with our customary efficiency – no going off at half-cock, like a gun that’s in need of lock repairs.”

Perk chuckled as if highly edified.

“Say, partner,” he hastened to remark, “not much danger o’ sech a thing happenin’ with *yeou* runnin’ the lead, I give yeou my affidavy on that same.”

“That’s all blarney, Perk; and don’t depend on my being free from stumbling in the dark – I’m only human, and can make silly mistakes, like every known pilot – even Lindbergh’s had the misfortune to smash his landing gear when making an ascent, and with the girl he afterwards married, remember.”

“Sure thing, Jack, but didn’t he manage a wonderful landin’, an’ keep from a bad smashup, on’y hurtin’ his shoulder in the jam?”

“Yes, and Perk, some people attribute his escape to good luck; but I know full well it was his skill in understanding just what to do in an emergency.”

“Well, what’s aour programme agoin’ to be?” demanded the other.

“First of all, then, we’ve got to study those enclosures the Chief sent in his letter – they’ll give us a good many important points, and it may be locate this secret hideout of the crowd that’s bothering Uncle Sam so much. Get that, do you?”

“I’m on, boss – go to it some more,” replied Perk, blithely.

“As we shall be scouring one of the wildest and most dreaded parts of the whole Rockies,” continued Jack, “of course it’ll be necessary for us to carry a big cargo of stuff along – plenty of supplies in the line of grub, as well as gas and oil. Then, since we are bound to line up, sooner or later, against the whole gang, we must tote tear-bombs, and some of the destructive ones, such as we’ve been forced to make use of before.”

“Sounds okay to me, ole hoss,” Perk assented, looking particularly well pleased at the possibility of wild action, which these preliminary remarks of his leader seemed to presage – doubtless his wonderful memory carried him back to the previous occasion when they went out after Slim Garrabrant, and dragged him before the bar of justice, a feat which earned them the commendation of the Big Chief, as well as a nice step upwards in the way of increased pay.

Although in many things Perk took no man’s dust when it came to a knowledge of flying activities, and air knowledge; just the same he felt it no disgrace to “sit at the feet” of his best pal, and imbibe information when the plan of campaign was being laid out – Perk freely admitted he was “not so good,” along such lines – ready to shift the responsibility to Jack’s shoulders, yet joyfully bear his share of all subsequent action.

The papers were divided up, and both of them read steadily for some time, occasionally exchanging observations, with Perk asking frequent questions concerning matters that were not quite clear to his rather slow mind.

In this fashion, just as wise Jack knew would be the case, both of them gradually got “heated up,” with the fervor of the case – indeed, this view of matters was also taken by his companion, since Perk declared it made him think of how they used to get a tracking hound to smell some garment worn by the child that was lost, so he could take the trail, and follow it to a successful finish.

“Which I vum will be aour way o’ clappin’ hands on this slippery kiote, once we git agoin’ strong,” he went on to add, with supreme confidence, it appeared.

“One thing we’ve got to remember,” Jack mentioned; “which is about keeping our light hidden under a bushel. Men who follow our dangerous profession must never get themselves in the public prints if it can be avoided; and as for standing up to be in the spotlight, so all people can take note of their looks, it just isn’t done, you know, Perk.”

Possibly there may have been occasions in the past when, after they had been unusually successful in landing their man, Perk had shown a disposition to talk a bit too much – grant interviews to newspaper reporters, who were apt to go into details covering some of the ways such sleuths outwitted those whom they hunted; all of which was bad for their being successful in forthcoming missions of like character, since the lawbreakers would avidly seize upon all such printed matter, to size up the methods that were utilized in bringing about the downfall of men of their stamp.

“Yeah, course that’s the right thing – we’ll jest keep aour own counsel an’ do the gittin’ o’ aour stuff together withaout beating the gong an’ ’tractin’ the mob’s attention. We wouldn’t live up to aour reputation as sleuth hounds if we didn’t work undercover, Jack.”

“Fine for you, brother,” he was told; “I’m tickled pink to know you’re waking up to the necessity for Secret Service men keeping away from the glare of publicity, even if they have to lose much credit; like editors of the big newspapers, who never put even their initials to the strong articles they write everyday.”

In this fashion did Jack usually apply himself to eradicating certain weaknesses that afflicted his best pal, knowing that in so doing he was helping Perk to become more efficient; also more valuable in the service of the Government.

After some hours spent in this fashion, they found themselves pretty well inoculated with the most salient points connected with their latest task; and both of them were glad when it began to grow dark, with supper in prospect.

“I rather think we’re pretty well fed up on this stuff,” Jack finally took occasion to remark, getting up from his easy-chair, and stretching his cramped legs; “so how about dropping it all, and going out to feed our complaining tummies?”

“I aint got any objections to that ere business, buddy,” Perk quickly observed, following suit in leaving his seat, and going through certain motions such as office sitters carry out in accordance with radio instructions each and every morning, before going forth to the daily grind. “They c’n boast all they likes ’bout the belles o’ the ballroom; the sweet janglin’ o’ the bells in the Spanish Missions up ’long the Coast here, an’ even the never-to-be-forgotten schoolbell; but for *me* they aint nawthin’ to make my heart sing with joy like the good ole-fashioned dinnerbell.”

“You’ve got plenty of company in that same worship, Perk,” the other told him, “A few people eat to live; but the biggest bunch live to eat. Let hard times come, and they’ll do without a good many things, but must have three meals a day – yes, and with men, their regular smoke as well.”

After leaving their cozy room, to walk along the street, business was tabooed; they must forget such personal affairs, and talk of anything under the sun save what engrossed their minds chief of all.

Jack had stressed this point when laying down that rule for their guidance, saying practically as follows:

“We don’t understand as yet just what the ramifications or extent of this combination of lawbreakers is; for all we know they may be organized, and doing such a big business that they can employ spies in certain cities, to pick up valuable pointers; informing them of profitable strikes on Western trails, and along railroads where treasure is being daily carried east and west; besides that, these spies would be on the watch to learn of plans for bringing members of the gang to justice – for all we know they have been keeping tabs on *our* movements right along; and may be in possession of considerable knowledge covering our being the ones commissioned by Headquarters to proceed against them. On this account it is up to us to play the innocent, and when in a public eating place never talk shop, especially if the room is full, as is always the case here at suppertime.”

There was always so much common sense in what Jack advanced that Perk could seldom grumble, no matter if he did not wholly agree with his partner. Besides, there were so many interesting matters, as given out in the daily prints, and along the line of aviation stunts, that they need never lack for material to carry on their careless chatter as they dined, and watched their neighbors, after the usual manner of detectives on or off duty, seeking to further add to their information as to the possible presence of eavesdroppers.

## CHAPTER VII

### Ready for Anything

The following day was a busy one for the two pals. Each had a regular programme to follow, Jack having made out two lists of important things absolutely essential to the carrying out of their plans.

As usually happened he left to Perk the task of seeing that the ship was fully supplied with all the fuel and oil she was capable of carrying off in making an ascent; some of which could be stored in the wings, purposely provided with stowage room for such occasions.

Then when it came to taking aboard a stock of provisions, such as would not require cooking, trust Perk for having a complete understanding as to these requirements – he possessed such a vast knowledge of what was good for a hungry man, not in a position to start a campfire, that when he put the last of their stock away aboard the plane it looked as if they might be getting ready to explore the Arctic regions, where nothing but driftice was to be met, and no chance of having a fire either for cooking or comfort.

Jack, meanwhile did his part, making carefully arranged plans, with alternate makeshifts such as could be taken up in case unsurmountable obstacles baffled them in the one chosen for the start – with Jack it was always part of his strategy to have several “strings to his bow,” and never if possible “put all his eggs in one basket.”

When wearied after all the tramping he had done in accumulating such a vast pile of material, Perk dropped down into a chair alongside his chum – who was still doing the finishing touch to his programme – he heaved a sigh as of contentment – as a rule Perk was not a vigorous walker, preferring to go by airplane, motorcar, or bus; perhaps even by stage if necessary, so that such unusual exercise told heavily on his muscles.

“Get through with your list, partner?” queried Jack, shoving aside his papers, as though he too had had quite enough of work for one day.

“Sure did, matey,” came the satisfied reply; “we’re done loaded up to the limit, an’ then some. Hope the ole gal don’t fight shy o’ liftin’ sech a rummy cargo; but so far we aint never had her balk on us. How yeou gittin’ on with things, Jack?”

“Making good progress,” came the steady answer. “I’ve learned that we’ve shouldered a whopping big job this time; and still things keep cropping up, that make it necessary to go back and change matters some. But I’ll be in fine shape by tomorrow noon, I figure.”

“Kinder reckon on makin’ the jump then, air yeou, boss?” demanded Perk.

Jack shook his head in the negative.

“Better wait up until night-time, buddy,” he explained. “An ounce of prevention’s always a heap better than a pound of cure, you remember. We can slip away a lot easier in the night, as we’ve proven more than a few times in the past. Then besides, we’d like to profit by the latest weather report. If a wide storm threatened it would be good policy to hold back even for several days, rather than get caught in a hard blow; such things are said to be doubly tough amidst the mountain gorges and canyons, with their cranky air currents, and a continual danger of running smack into some high peak.”

“I leaves all that figgerin’ to yeou, as usual, partner; when yeou gives the word, that’s goin’ to be the right time for us to climb, an’ not afore. Golly! but I’m as hungry as seven wolves all in one – hopes as haow they got steak an’ fried onions on the bill o’ fare tonight, ’cause my innards air jest a yellin’ fur a mess o’ my fav’rite chow.”

“I can’t say I’m in the same box, because being shut up for hours, and badgering my poor brain with a hundred puzzling questions, isn’t calculated to make a man ferociously hungry. You had

outdoor exercise, and in consequence have built up a glorious appetite. Queer what some fellows *will* do so as to cater to their thirst or hunger.”

“Naow whatever kin yeou mean by that same remark, Jack, ole boy?”

They were on their way along the street at the time, keeping step as they headed for the restaurant. Jack seemed agreeable so far as explaining, for there was a little yarn back of his words, just as the astute Perk had suspected, knowing his chum as well as he did.

“This story was told to me long years ago, but I never think of it that I don’t get a fresh laugh,” Jack was saying, chuckling as he spoke. “It seems a couple of artists who were fond of trout fishing were up in Maine, stopping at a small hotel, while waiting for their guides to show up.

“They noticed at breakfast several mornings that another party, small and dried up, but a fisherman to the tips of his fingers nevertheless, always ordered salt mackerel for his morning meal. This aroused their curiosity, so one day, after having a good confab with him on the prospect of sport ahead on the trip they had planned to take, one of the pair had the audacity to refer to the singular liking for such a dish evinced by the other. He grinned and looked wise, as he went on to say in reply, not taking the least offense over the matter as a personal one:

“Oh! I aint carin’ so much for the fish, gents, an’ gets fed up on the same sometimes; but let me tell you, folks ’long ’bout ten o’clock every mornin’ there comes the most delicious *thirst* that pays up for my eating them salt fish.’ Think of him punishing himself so regularly, just to create a tremendous yearning for his favorite tipple.”

Perk saw the point, and of course laughed quite vigorously.

“Hot-diggetty-dig! boy, hope I aint jest as bad as that same gent,” he presently gurgled. “I c’n understand heow he felt though, an’ she don’t seem so derved queer to me after all.”

Jack often managed to get off some such yarn when the necessity arose for keeping the talkative Perk from “spilling the beans,” as the latter himself would have explained it – Perk was a rather simple minded fellow, taken in all, but a faithful and sincere chum, a ready worker, and as brave as they make them, even if a bit incautious, often to recklessness in his actions.

It seemed as though there were more people dining that evening in the particular little restaurant than ever before: but Joe had upturned two chairs at their favorite corner table, toward which Jack led the way; so they were assured of comfort, even though late-comers were standing, awaiting their turn.

Both of them always made it a point never to dress in any fashion such as would be apt to give away the fact of their being airmen, or as having some connection with the following of aviators. This was done from a broad policy, founded on the fact that undoubtedly rumors of their calling might long ere this have posted criminal circles; and Jack for one had no fancy about having gunmen dogging his steps, with murder in their hearts, because of the fact that this pair of “birds” had been chiefly instrumental in sending some pal, or brother, to the “big house” for a long stay, or it might be to the chair to atone for his crimes.

Jack always sat so he could look in careless fashion around the room. His manner was that of a social fellow, taking an inventory of the diners, as though wondering if he could single out some crony. There was nothing of the “eagle eye that could look into a man’s very soul, and read his hidden thoughts,” as usually connected with the mystery story, or stage detective – not about Jack, or for that matter Perk either – so far as outward appearances went they were only a couple of goodnatured young men, smiling and agreeable, enjoying their meal, and chatting about the latest stirring events of the day in the field of sports, possibly also interested in political matters, as would be natural.

Perk always declared he felt as though he had put on a mask, when thus debarred from “talking shop,” with curious ears so close by; but he realized the necessity for such extreme caution, when they were always pitted against the desperadoes of the underworld in their daily work.

“Somethin’ o’ a mob here tonight, partner?” suggested Perk, after they had been served by Joe, the waiter, and taken the edge off their appetites; both having settled on the same aromatic dish, which Perk was savagely attacking.

“Looks that way, Perk; if this keeps on we’ll have to find another place to feed, when we strike San Diego again; since neither of us is partial to crowds. Remember the old frontiersman who complained that the neighborhood was getting too thickly settled for him and his folks, because a new family had started to build a log cabin less than *seven miles away*? People look at what makes a crowd with different viewpoints, we have to remember; what is flesh to one is just poison to another man.”

“Huh! never heard tell o’ that idear ’fore,” confessed the interested Perk; “but it rings like there might be somethin’ in the same. See anybody yeou happens to know ’round here partner?”

“Not one that I would be apt to speak to,” Jack told him; “of course we see some of them each night; but they’ve paid no attention to us, for which we’re only too glad; doesn’t pay to pick up chance acquaintances at haphazard, when you happen to be engaged in a certain type of business. If you reckon you’ve attended to that vacuum downstairs we might as well be moving out, and give some of the standup people a chance at this table.”

“Let’s get goin’ then,” agreed Perk, pushing back his chair; which action caused several groups of impatient waiting persons to start toward the spot, so as to preempt the vacant table.

“Show tonight, Jack?” queried the satisfied Perk, as they moved along.

“I ought to get busy once more on my stuff, as my programme isn’t at all complete; but just the same I don’t want to overdo such brain fatiguing work, and have to lay off a spell – nothing to be gained by such corrupt practices, I imagine. So, since I know you feel as if you’d like to see something, to take your mind off business for one night, decide on where you want to go, and we’ll be off.”

“Course I’m not really dead set on seeing any picture,” apologized Perk; “but chances are we aint agoin’ to have another whiff o’ a screen drama for days and days; an’ it’ll fill in time, as well as freshenin’ up yeour mind more’r less, buddy.”

What they saw and heard does not concern us in following up this, their latest exploit; but evidently Perk fully enjoyed the night’s entertainment, since he seemed to be in a jovial state of mind all the way back to their sleeping quarters.

Their ship was quartered close to a well known aviation field, where air mail was coming and going at all hours of the day and night; as well as privately owned planes of the very latest design, some of them wonderful craft in which daring adventurers could seek out the utmost parts of the earth, backed of course, by an abundance of necessary funds.

They were not known under their real names to any of those who from time to time they chanced to meet and chat with. It was generally understood however, that Jack was the son of a wealthy family in the South – New Orleans to be specific; and had come from Candler Field in Atlanta, with his companion as assistant pilot. Moreover they were believed to be waiting for certain things to transpire, after which they meant to take an extended jaunt down through South America, over the Andes, and the vast wilderness of the Amazon Valley, with its tributaries, engaged in collecting myriads of wonderful orchids, said to have their *habitat* in that torrid region.

Thus no one had bothered them to any extent – at least not thus far; realizing that the young explorer expressed a dislike about creeping into print, and having his plans broadcast, so that perhaps some rival plant hunter might “slip one over” and beat him to the much prized field.

They came and went, as they pleased in their boat, making sure never to leave the slightest evidence of their true calling lying around, which would be apt to “lift the lid,” and give them away. When Perk that very day was so busily engaged loading up, it was all in line with their pretended objective; entering into the spirit of the great game of “pulling the wool over the eyes” of curious fellow aviators, Perk took delight in concocting an extravagant yarn, depicting some of the possible adventures he anticipated running across down in the countries of South America – Brazil, the Orinoco River forest lands, Peru, Chili and the Argentine – enough to make them envy his good fortune, when tough Luck bound them in fetters along the line of their more prosaic jobs.

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