

Newcomb Ambrose

The Sky Detectives; Or, How Jack Ralston Got His Man



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The Sky Detectives How Jack Ralston Got His Man

CHAPTER I READY FOR THE TAKE-OFF

It was a day in the late Fall when Jack Ralston, accompanied by his best pal, Gabe Perkiser, known simply as “Perk” by all his friends, found themselves climbing out of a hired taxi that had halted on the border of Candler Flying Field just a short distance out of Atlanta, Georgia.

“Huh! reg’lar mob out here today, seems like,” observed Perk, as he took note of the triple line of cars parked around the field, with its numerous up-to-date hangars, and with ships coming and going every few minutes.

“Yes, you see Perk, it happens to be a big day at stunt flying, with fat prizes for the winners. All the better for us, I’d say, since our take-off will hardly make a ripple in the pond, with all this confusion going on.”

“Sure thing, my boy,” continued Perk, with one of his humorous grins that betokened a good-natured chap; “and privacy’s just what we crave. I guess now that might be the mail comin’ from down East an’ New York?”

“A rotten guess then, Perk,” chortled the other; “Eastern mail boat was due here at six-ten this morning; the Pitcairn Aviation concern handle that route, as well as the run between Atlanta and Miami down in Florida; and I’m telling you for a fact the boys holding the stick with *that* corporation are nearly always on time to the dot, come storm, come fog as thick as pea-soup. The schedule I glimpsed at the Atlanta post office gave the time of the East Coast ship as seven-thirty P. M.; that from New Orleans at six-thirty P. M.; and the one from Chicago about the same time. So you see it couldn’t be a mail crate dropping down right now, unless they’d had to make a forced landing, and lost time in making repairs.”

“Yeah, come to think of it I sure did hear a bus passin’ over just at peep o’ day,” admitted Perk. “Let’s have a look-in while we’re here, and see what a bag o’ tricks these stunt flyers are holdin’ up their sleeves, so’s to give this crowd a row o’ thrills.”

“Suits me, Perk; no great hurry about our jumping off, so long as we pull the gun before dark sets in.”

“Shucks! little difference it makes on a patch as well lighted as this Candler Field o’ your home city, old boy; and with a flashlight beacon set every ten miles all the way down to Orleans, to keep us on our course. Look at that guy fairly burning the air like hot cakes – he must be tryin’ to beat the speed record, I guess, Jack.”

“Hardly a day comes without some record going by the board,” remarked Jack, who had a reputation as a safe and sane pilot, although on occasion he had been known to put through some tricks so death-defying as to make the hearts of the spectators seem to jump up in their throats with the thrill.

Perk was quite correct when he stated that Atlanta was the home city of his close friend and chum; although Jack’s family had moved away years back, and become fruit raisers in far-off California. Still, having spent some years in the Georgia capital Jack always liked to drop in and renew a limited number of old friendships when opportunity offered.

Jack Ralston had begun his aviation work starting at the lowest round, that of a Gypsy pilot, flying an ancient boat at County Fairs and Harvest Home gatherings; doing aerial stunts, and “bailing

out” by means of a parachute while another pilot ran the ship; also taking up air minded “sand-bags” as passengers at so much each person.

From this modest beginning he had finally accepted a position with an aircraft corporation having contracts with the Post Office Department at Washington for carrying the mails, and later on express matter as well; and last of all working for Uncle Sam through joining the Secret Service corps of skillful detectives, whose activities covered every part of the Nation, and even to adjacent countries as well.

When the Government wearied of the bold doings of one “Slippery Slim” Garrabrant, and decided to “clip the wings” of that audacious freebooter and bogus-money crook, it was only natural they should pick Jack for this service. The reasons for doing so were many, but what counted most was Jack’s well known cleverness as an all-round air pilot; for it happened that the slick rogue who had been giving the revenue men such a wild-goose chase, with his thumb held up to his nose, so to speak, was himself a remarkable master of the air lanes, he having been an ace as a flying pilot over with the army on the Argonne front in France.

Since as a rule this troublesome offender carried on his bold enterprises by means of a handy plane – frequently with a single assistant, who helped handle both ship and cargo – the man thus selected to put a crimp in his activities was likewise given full permission to engage a helper from the same arm of the Government forces, one who must of course know something about the handling of a plane, so that in case of necessity he could serve as co-pilot.

Jack lost no time in picking Gabe Perkiser, otherwise known simply as “Perk” – a man who had supped with adventure since he was “knee high to a duck” – a half Yankee – half Canuck, drifting into the army, and serving with the sausage observation balloon corps over in France; from which patriotic occupation he later on became a champion light-weight boxer. Leaving the ring while as yet undefeated he served for several years with the Canadian Mounted Police. Here his smartness in usually fetching back his man, no matter what the difficulties that had to be surmounted, attracted the attention of a gentleman connected with Uncle Sam’s Secret Service, just then moose hunting over the northern border, who finally influenced Perk to join up with his force.

Jack and the other had met under peculiar conditions when both were tracking a bunch of check raisers floating across the country and leaving a wide swath of victims in their path. They had become more than friends, although meeting but seldom; then, when the opportunity came for Jack to call upon Perk to join him in the new job that had been turned over to his charge, the latter had responded with alacrity.

So here they were, on the threshold of an affair that promised to engage their united talents in running down the leader of the most troublesome gang of counterfeit currency makers known to the Government agents in the last ten years.

Every clue possessed at Headquarters had been turned over to Jack at the time he was given authority to carry on as the situation demanded; although this information was a bit limited, and much was left to the shrewdness of the two trail hounds themselves.

There was no hurry at all, and Jack had always been one of those cautious workers who meant to provide for all sorts of emergencies. Only too well did he know how many a splendid undertaking went on the rocks from lack of foreseeing the next move on the part of the astute criminals whose apprehension meant so much to the Government, as well as the folks they were victimizing.

But by now he had decided everything was arranged so far as human means would permit, and that it was high time they started on their long chase. Their boat, a Stinson Detroiter, a monoplane with a Wright Whirlwind motor, and reckoned to be an unusually swift craft, was already loaded, and ready for immediate departure. It had been stored in one of the big hangars connected with the Candler Flying Field but could be taxied into position when Jack felt ready to skip off.

Their flying togs were also contained in a locker in the same hangar, and could be donned in a jiffy, even to the ’chute harness that was so familiar to Jack, and a constant reminder of early

experiences when he was accustomed to carry out his daily program of “quitting the ship” with as much *sang froid* as though the jump into space from a five thousand foot ceiling were absolutely next to nothing.

But plainly Perk was becoming a bit restless, as though eager to be on his way; which fact doubtless influenced Jack to eventually give the word that took them to their hangar. Here they commenced preparing for a night flight that was expected to land them in New Orleans, where Jack was to interview a certain representative of the Government service, from whom he anticipated receiving a few valuable tips that would give them something tangible and serve as a beginning of their arduous chase.

While they were thus engaged someone hailed them with a boisterous greeting, at which Perk grinned, and made a suitable reply.

“Hey, Scotty, this your night off, is it – got in from your route okay, and stepped out to see the boys cut a few figger-eights in the sky – just can’t keep away from the game, even when you got a lay-off? What’s new, old hoss?”

“They told me at the house you expected to step off tonight, boys – is that a fact, or did they slip an easy one over me, I want to know?” demanded the other, who was apparently a mail pilot friend of theirs – in fact, having the adjoining room at the small hotel where they were stopping.

“Yes,” Jack told him, secretive as usual, “we’re going further, and boosting the Stinson Detroit ship by showing what it has to set it above most other boats. Plans not fully arranged as yet, but we’re on our way; so it’s good-bye, and good luck to you, Scotty.”

“How about that news, Scotty?” the insistent Perk went on to demand, being by nature one of those stubborn chaps who can never be happy until they get what they are after, no matter how trivial it may seem.

The air mail pilot scratched his head, and then with a grin answered Perk’s question.

“Nothing much along the line of aviation; but something queer happened to me – say, did you boys sleep at home last night while I was on the road?”

“We sure did,” Perk told him, and then added: “What makes you ask that, old hoss?”

“Didn’t hear any sort of racket in my den did you, fellows?” continued the other; at which Perk, after exchanging a look of bewilderment with his pal, hastened to answer.

“Not a thing, Scotty; but then you know I sleep like a log; and it’d have to be a thunderclap to wake me up; what’s been going on?”

“You got me guessing, Perk,” said the other, with a look of disgust; “only when I got in this morning I found my room looking like a hurricane had struck it, my things tossed out of drawers, my trunk broken open, and say, you never saw such a dirty mess. Course I asked the boss what it meant; but he was as much surprised as I was – talked with every servant from the cook down to Mary the chamber maid; but nobody could tell a darned thing about it.”

Again Jack and Perk exchanged a swift glance, as though the same idea had struck both of them. Scotty did not appear to notice this, being too worked up with the mystery that had so suddenly gripped his fortunes.

“Did you lose anything worth while, Scotty?” Jack asked, in a voice that suggested sympathy; but to his surprise the other shook his head in the negative, and even grinned as he lifted his heavy eyebrows to say:

“That’s the funny part of it, boys; whoever the sneak thief was, he didn’t even dent me a little bit – so far as I c’n see not a blessed thing is missing – fact is, I’m even better off than before he paid that queer visit, ’cause he left this old pocketbook mixed up with my traps; and it ain’t mine for a fact, though I’m meaning to spend the little wad of dough it holds. Like manna coming down to the children of Israel in the Wilderness, wouldn’t you say, boys?”

“Lucky old hoss you are, Scotty,” remarked Perk, enviously; while Jack nodded his head as though to echo the sentiment.

CHAPTER II

THE LUCK OF SCOTTY

“Happen to have that pocketbook along with you, Scotty?” asked Jack, in a matter of fact tone; just as though he might be possessed of ordinary curiosity concerning so amazing a visit; since never before had he heard of a night prowler leaving his own money behind him, when his intention had been to rob his victim.

“Sure thing, Jack,” promptly replied the air mail pilot; “here, take a squint at my Christmas present, dropped in by old Santa Claus a bit before the reg’lar holiday season,” and with a laugh he chucked the object in question into the hand of the other.

“Old, just as you remarked, Scotty,” observed Jack, “and used a long time. It must have slipped out of his pocket when he worked your stuff over to mix it up like the devil.”

“Open it up and see what the blessed chump left me in place of his card,” the other continued, looking exceedingly proud over his lucky find.

Jack did that with alacrity; in fact it was what he intended doing, for reasons of his own; something more than curiosity influencing him, it would appear.

“Gee whiz! a neat little bunch of the needful, I’d say, Scotty, old hoss!” burst out the envious Perk, his eyes fixed full upon the contents of the much worn pocketbook, which Jack was holding in his hand and apparently interested in counting, for there were a number of bank notes for various amounts, and among them just three five-dollar bills, seemingly quite fresh, though a bit soiled, as though they had been in circulation.

“Nineteen smackers in all,” announced Perk, showing that he had also been keeping tabs on the count. “Well, wouldn’t that knock you cold though? Huh? that same caller must’ve been looking for *me*, and just missed connections by striking the next door. Well, here’s wishing you the same old luck every time a sneak thief pays you a visit, Scotty boy.”

Jack on his part was feeling of the three five-dollar bills, and holding them up to the light from the western sun that managed to come into the hangar by way of the open doors.

“What ails you, Jack?” demanded the recipient of Fortune’s smiles, as he noticed these strange actions on the part of his new friend.

“Nothing much,” he was told, “only I’m going to give you a bit of advice, partner, if you don’t mind.”

“Go to it, boy; always willing to take it when it seems sound!” snapped the mail carrier, briskly enough, still more than curious.

“If you’re wise, Scotty,” went on Jack, smilingly, “you’ll not try to pass any one of these five-dollar bills until you’ve asked the opinion of some bank teller – it might get you into trouble.”

“Zowie! what’s that you’re saying, Jack – don’t tell me they’re off-color bills, counterfeits in fact. Wouldn’t that be a rotten deal to hand out, and me figgering how I’d spend them? Is *that* what you mean?”

“I reckon it’s so, Scotty, much as I hate to knock your good luck,” Jack told him, with a shake of his head. “I happened to have a little experience in a small bank some years ago and they did say I showed signs of being a clever detector of bad money. That’s a clever job all right; but I’m afraid it won’t stand the wash worth a cent. Go slow, and don’t count your chickens before they’re hatched. Also I’d advise you not to go around telling about your windfall until you’ve shown this stuff to some friendly bank official, whose advice you’d be willing to take. If he says it’s good stuff why forget what I’m saying, and go the limit. But we’d better be finishing our own job, Perk, and get off on our jump.”

Scotty hung around for a short time, looking puzzled, as though he hardly knew how much to believe. What Jack had said in his friendly fashion had doubtless cast quite a damper on certain bright

dreams in which he had been indulging. However, he finally decided to take himself off, evidently eager to know whether the laugh was on him or not, for he called out:

“Goodbye, Jack, Perk; and be sure to look me up when next you drop in at Candler Field Airport; like as not I’ll still be on my old job here, unless they decide to transfer me somewhere else. And say, Jack, I’m meaning to take your advice, and get an opinion on this here stuff ’fore I try to pass it out on any old duffer. So-long boys and luck!”

When the two comrades, adventure bound, found themselves alone they looked at each other in silence for almost a full minute, when a grin started to travel over Perk’s well bronzed face.

“Say, wouldn’t it jar you though, to have such luck knock at your door, and then give you a sly kick?” he demanded of his companion.

“To tell the honest truth, Perk, I’m not thinking about Scotty and his queer windfall; it’s our own great good luck that’s making me suspect we’re bound to carry this job through with flying colors.”

“Eh? now what d’ye mean by saying that?” asked the other hastily.

“Right in the beginning, Perk, we seem to have stumbled on a nice little plum in the shape of a clue – flung directly at our heads, you might say in the bargain.”

“Glory be! do you mean to tell me those bogus notes were off the same plates we’ve been hearing so much about lately that I’ve been dreamin’ I was tied hand an’ foot, an’ poked under a dozen bales of them?”

“Just that, as sure as you live, partner,” said Jack, composedly; but if he could take it so coolly, not so his right bower who showed signs of extreme excitement and satisfaction, for he thrust out his hand, that had so often been an object of vast respect on the part of some welter weight boxer, and insisted that Jack accept a gentle shake.

“We’re sure Fortune’s favorites,” Perk was saying, striking an attitude as he thus proudly spoke; “an’ with such luck hoverin’ over our heads I vow all the Lower Regions with its devils can’t prevail against us. But see here, old hoss, there’s more than chance in this break o’ the party who broke through Scotty’s door, and panned all his traps – I guess now he must have missed a cylinder, an’ jest passed us by in a ground loop.”

Jack was accustomed to the other’s quaint way of expressing himself, for he lost no time in adding:

“About that way, I take it, Perk. And if what we suspect turns out to be true, it stands to reason there’s some sort of big combine back of it all.”

“With this same Slippery Slim Garrabrant pulling the wires for the whole bunch, is that what you mean, Jack?” demanded the other flyer quickly; for when once set on the right track Perk’s mind could travel speedily enough.

“It’s certainly his brain that’s built up this wide flim-flam trade in the make believe green stuff that’s been fooling a whole lot of bank tellers, it’s so near the genuine article. To smash the combine we’ve got to check up on Slim; after he’s caged the entire arrangement’s bound to fall through.”

“I get you, partner; and them’s my sentiments every time,” admitted the eager Perk. “And here, when we’re starting out to pull off our fresh stunt, I’m wishing all the luck that’s going to our little game. Meaning to give her a last checking over, eh, Jack?”

“It’s a habit of mine, as you know, Perk; and you might amuse yourself stowing the cargo we’ve taken aboard, so’s to let us have room for our feet when we take off. From the looks of the junk you picked up anybody’d reckon we planned to go into camp for a week or two.”

“Well, mebbe that’s what’ll happen to us before we strike pay dirt in this ticklish job,” asserted Perk, stoutly. “You know we figgered things out, and made up our minds this same slick article of a Slim might have his hangout over the line in Old Mexico, where he prints his bad bills, and then comes across the line with a big bunch in his ship, so’s to scatter the stuff around to his agents in Texas and Arizona, or it might be all through Southern California. If that guess turns out to be a

bullseye we might be away off the line of travel for days at a stretch, and a grub stake'd turn the trick okay, I'm thinking, boss."

Jack made no reply, for he was already busily engaged in looking over his crate. This was, as he had mentioned, an old habit, contracted in the early days of his career as an aviator of sorts; and most likely such extreme caution had saved his life more than once.

As he too worked close by, Perk was thinking more or less about something that had caught his ever watchful eye just before they entered the hangar to make these last preparations for their southern flight. As usual he was unable to keep his speculations entirely to himself, since he always liked to compare notes, and find out whether his companion's views coincided with his own.

"Say, Jack, did you happen to notice that Ryan ship they'd just taken out of the shed before ours?" he demanded, while still lifting packages of various supplies, and stowing them away in a shipshape fashion; so they would not be likely to shift, and thus imperil the safety of himself and comrade, should they chance to encounter rough weather later on.

"Not particularly," came the answer. "I was too busy over my own affairs to bother with anything that didn't concern me in the least. What of it, Perk?"

"Nothing much, old hoss, only it was a next to new bus, and hadn't been flown more'n a few thousand air miles, I'd guess. Couple of fellers seemed to be the crew, one of 'em lookin' like he might be a pilot; and the other a chap that was out to have a jolly good time sportin' for sport. I saw him handlin' some sort of gun, which made me guess he was down South for the shootin' season – mebbe after bear in the Louisiana canebrakes."

Jack laughed as if amused, for he had noted the way in which the other made this stab at what might be the designs of the unknown parties.

"Feel a bit envious I take it, Perk," he observed, laconically. "Always did yearn for the day to come when you'd have a ship of your own, and could spend all your spare time jumping about the country, enjoying yourself with rod and gun. Cheer up, old sport, you may live to see that day yet, if things break right for us in a few big games like this one we're running down."

"Thanks for your good luck wishes, Jack," the other was saying; "I c'n just picture the bully times that pair'll like enough have sitting by their camp-fire, living on game they've knocked over, and not caring a darn whether school keeps or not. Oh! well, if I live long enough mebbe I may have a whiff of that kind of life before I kick off for keeps; they say everything comes to the man who waits, and that's me. There, that finishes my job, with everything stowed away as slick as you please. When you're ready, Jack, we'll be on our way."

CHAPTER III

HEADED SOUTH

Apparently Jack had completed his task about the same time, for he was adjusting his 'chute harness, without which he seldom made a long distance flight. This was only second nature to him, because of the long experience he had had in barnstorming, and doing stunts for a living in years gone by.

This accomplished, he stepped outside the hangar, and beckoned to a couple of ground workers who chanced to be close by, possibly in anticipation of their services being required, with a tip in prospect.

Between them the ship was moved to the open, and after that it would be a simple thing for Jack to taxi across the strip of ground adjoining the big Pitcairn hangar, so as to face such wind as was stirring.

With what Perk had said concerning the new Ryan monoplane and its crew still fresh in his mind, Jack did give a brief glance in that quarter. He could only see that both men were fully equipped with dungarees, helmets, and even chutes fastened to their backs; which combination was an effectual disguise, since their best friends might have failed to recognize either of them offhand.

The one who was garbed in what seemed to be fresh clean overalls, and who must be the employer, seemed to feel a mild interest in their movements, for he was looking that way through his goggles, that had been pulled down as if in preparation for some species of flight. The other was busying himself adjusting something, and from his greasy dungarees it was evident he must be the working pilot of the Ryan craft.

With all the bustle that was going on covering the stunt flying and speed races, Jack did not bother taking a second look; he failed to have the same interest in the possible sporting excursion of the unknown pair that had gripped Perk and hence failed to let the matter occupy any more of his limited time.

They were soon both settled down in their respective places in the double cockpit of the ship, Jack of course occupying the front seat, since he had been placed in command, with the other acting as co-pilot and observer.

It was a very decent crate taken in all, that had been secured for their work on this special occasion, for Uncle Sam is never stingy in supplying his agents of the Secret Service with whatever they need, from means for swift travel to the customary "grub" necessary to their upkeep when "on the road." These air detectives in whom we are particularly interested just now, as a rule were angling for big fish, and it was absolutely necessary they should be given a free hand when making their demands for proper backing.

"Well, it's goodbye to Candler Field for us right now," remarked Perk, as he shot a general look around, being more or less interested in the exciting events being pulled off in the air circus. "Playtime's past, and now we've just got to put in our best licks along the line of business. Huh! seems like them two guys are meaning to pull out right on our heels, from the lively way that greasy lad is jumping around – keeps an eye on us in the bargain, as if it mattered a lick whether we did get going before he was ready to follow suit. Some folks never do like anybody to show 'em their dust, even when it don't matter a pinch."

Just then Jack waved his hand toward the two hostlers whom he had generously tipped, and pulled the gun in his accustomed careful fashion; after which they started along the level field for the takeoff, there being small necessity for a runway on such a generous fairway.

Faster and faster they flew along the ground, and then with their wheels parting contact with the earth up they started at an easy incline. The roar of the motor already drowned most of the clamor

from the surging crowd, while the racket of the whizzing propeller added to the chorus so joyous to the ears of all real air pilots, since nothing pleases them more than to feel they are masters of a ship that is in “apple-pie” condition for battling whatever lies ahead, be it storm, fog or whatnot.

Somehow Perk was twisting his head around as if curious to ascertain whether that Ryan crate had succeeded in imitating their example, and was already making the preliminary dash across the field – which luckily enough had chanced to be fairly clear of maneuvering planes, either descending, taking off, or being taxied into position for the next stunt on the program.

The afternoon was getting well along by this time, and already the first dim shadows of approaching night were to be seen slipping out from certain patches of pine trees ahead. But the higher they climbed, now that a start had been accomplished, the lighter it would become, what with a lower horizon, and the sun still hanging in plain sight.

Once free from any possibility of any contact with the wheeling and ducking planes – some of which were doing the barrel roll, and others making successive somersaults, with the daring pilots proceeding while in an inverted position – Jack could start spiraling, and climbing.

Rapidly was Candler Field fading from view behind them since Jack had swung toward the south, as if to lay his course directly for New Orleans. Perk seemed to find a subtle attraction back where they had just come from, since he was again turning his head with nothing else to do save gratify his innocent curiosity.

“Huh! ’pears like they might be meaning to strike for the Louisiana canebrake country, and black bear diggings, just like I said,” he was telling himself, with a chuckle of amusement over his shrewd guess. “And say, that little Ryan crate’s no slouch ’bout making speed, I’d mention. Come along you sportin’ crowd – plenty of room in the ceiling overhead, an’ nixey a chance to bring about a collision. Take your choice, and cut out for all you’re worth, boys. If you get there before we do, just tell ’em we’re acomin’ too.”

So Perk continued to amuse himself in watching the antics of the rival ship, and indulging in all kinds of wild speculations as to what the real object of those two sporty looking occupants might prove to be.

Evidently thus far not the slightest suspicion had entered his mind that the taking to the air of the shining Ryan boat had the first thing to do with their own skipping out, and heading toward the Crescent City.

“Like as not when it gets real dark after a bit,” Perk continued to say, being addicted to talking to himself more or less, “we’ll soon lose her, and have the field all to ourselves. Only moving thing I c’n sight back there, ’cept them circlin’ buzzards huntin’ for a carrion supper. Guess everything’s going along first class and we’re in for a comfortable night run down over the corn and sugarcane country. This is the life for little Perk, you hear me saying, everybody – it’s got the boxin’ game, and even that outdoor life up with the Mounties in Canada, beat to a frazzle.”

So Perk busied himself with his duties for some time, and presently became aware of the fact that evening was actually at hand; for the sun had dropped out of sight over in the far west, and looking down he found it absolutely impossible to distinguish what lay beneath them some two thousand feet more or less earthward – there might be forests, farms, hills or swales following each other in rapid succession; but all masked by the sable curtains of night. When the moon rose later on, its light would not afford them any opportunity for marking any peculiarities of the ground down there, since it must simply present the appearance of a swiftly moving panorama.

Perk, moved once more by his old curiosity concerning the ship that had started off immediately after their own jump, again twisted his head so as to take another backward look.

“Hanged if she ain’t keeping on our tail right along,” he told himself, as if a bit surprised, though not in the least troubled, since there could be no possible connection between this Ryan monoplane and their own old bus, bent on reeling off so many miles per hour, and aiming to make the airport

at New Orleans by early dawn or before, according to how the weather treated them, and the speed Jack could coax from his aerial steed.

Further inspection convinced Perk that the rival ship was neither gaining nor losing as the two sped along their way; a fact that began to make him “sit up and take notice,” and then express himself confidentially:

“By jinks! it looks to me like that clever little Ryan bus could make circles around our tub ’less Jack c’n squeeze a lot more snap from our Whirlwind motor. Now what game c’n that pair of sports be playin’ right now, I want to know – must be they’re so used to bettin’ on anything an’ everything they’re meanin’ to keep right on our tail all night long, just to make us hump along, and get the laugh on us poor guys.”

CHAPTER IV

THE GRIM PURSUER

As the minutes crept along Perk's uneasiness commenced to make itself more manifest, finally reaching such a condition that he felt it would ease his mind if only he could get the opinion of his companion on the subject.

To do this it would be necessary that they should make use of the head earphones that had been taken along for this particular purpose. Accordingly he quickly adjusted his own, and then proceeded to advise Jack as to what he wished to do. Since these useful adjuncts of the pilot's outfit were so arranged that they could be slipped on and off with little loss of time, it was an easy matter for Perk to apply them, after which he went on to speak.

"Jack, seems like that pesky little Ryan insect's been tailing us right along, though mebbe now you didn't notice it."

"I know it, Perk – fact is I proved that fact to my own satisfaction, for twice now I've changed our course, once into the west, and again heading into the southwest, even if it didn't catch your attention."

"You did that same; and say, what happened, Jack?"

"Not a blessed thing," came the immediate answer.

"They still hung on our tail, do you mean, old hoss?"

"Seems like they did – queer how two pilots, strangers both, would take a notion to change their course, not once but twice running," commented Jack in his non-committal fashion that always had Perk guessing.

"Strikes me as something more than a happy chance," asserted Perk, beginning to throw off that comfortable feeling with which he had wrapped himself as he contemplated a steady going night run, with never a reason for anything gripping them by way of excitement; "ev'ry little movement of that Ryan two-seater's got a meanin' of its own. Now what ails the ducks I want to know – how c'n our movements have a mite to do with what they're planning to carry out – got any idea along them lines, old hoss?"

"Nothing definite as yet," answered Jack; "I was starting to figure it out just when you barged in, and opened this talk fest up with your question."

"Jack, come to think of it, what did you make out of that stiff yarn Scotty put over on us a while ago?"

"It was raw stuff for a fact; but I don't question anything he told us, remember, Perk."

"Whoever his mysterious visitor was he must have been hunting for something, that's dead sure!" declared Perk.

"Yes."

"Something he didn't find, either," continued Jack's assistant pilot.

"Scotty was ready to swear to that fact, and he ought to know." Jack countered by saying:

"But see here, old hoss, you've got some sorter idea what the game might abeen, haven't you for a fact?"

"I reckon I know why the sneak thief failed to carry away the thing he was looking for, if that's what you mean, Perk."

"As what, boss – I'm all worked up wantin' to know."

"Perhaps the reason might have been because the object of his search happened at that very time to be safe and snug in the inside pocket of this same coat I'm wearing under my overalls."

At hearing this startling announcement Perk gave a quick look into his pal's face, there being just enough light remaining in the western sky to allow this searching glance.

“Glory be! now I’m beginning to get somewhere, and ready to quit this gropin’ around, like a man in a London fog – that letter you had this very morning from Headquarters – somehow ’r other some of the gang had wind of your gettin’ it, and they guessed it’d be kept safe under lock and key in your room at the hotel; and then they got balled up about the number on the door, so they broke into the wrong room. Jack, am I on the right track?”

“Seems that’s so, according to my notion, Perk; unless I miss my guess that’s the way things stand.”

A disgusted grunt from Perk told that he did not feel very happy over certain facts in the case.

“Gosh-a-mighty!” he burst out, explosively, “if that’s right, then the tricky crowd know you’n me are on this case – that even right now we’re starting out to pluck their tail feathers, and fetch that master-crook to the bar!”

“Oh! I expected that would happen,” said Jack, indifferently. “Having been told by several of the best men in the service that Slim was the smartest all-round dopester known in all the land, I anticipated that he’d have means for finding out that fact long ago – that there might be a leak around Headquarters; for spies can worm in almost anywhere, given an opportunity, and the backing of a big bunch of jack.”

“Yet that fact don’t seem to rattle you worth a red cent, old hoss,” continued the puzzled Perk, who oftentimes found the actions of his cool partner a mystery he could not solve, because of his own more impetuous ways.

“I hope not,” was all Jack said in reply.

“Thunder and lightning!” ejaculated the co-pilot, as if an illuminating idea had suddenly flashed through his brain – “that Ryan bus, Jack!”

“Well, what of it?” demanded the one at the stick.

“What if that sporty guy I told you about should turn out to be the critter who broke into Scotty’s room, and made it a complete wreck?”

“It could happen that way, Perk; seems like you’re working on a warm scent right now. Pity we didn’t get a good look at the gentleman before he hid his face behind that helmet and goggles; then at least we’d know him if ever we happened to run across his trail.”

The other was almost frothing at the mouth through disgust and anger combined; but he managed to say, with a select few hard words interlarded as a vent to his outraged feelings:

“Give me half a chance and I’ll mark him so there’s be no difficulty in locating the sneak when we meet him again – I’d put a bit of lead through his arm that’d keep him out of the scrap for a week of Sundays; or else clip off one of his ears, to stamp him as a low-down crook.”

Jack knew full well that this was no idle threat on the part of his running mate; for Perk had a reputation as a pistol shot second to none in the entire service, being a natural born marksman.

He lapsed into a spell of silence after making that vicious remark; but from the way he glanced back again and again it looked as though Perk meant to keep close tabs on the craft that was dogging their own ship so steadily.

They were roaring on their way, and it would seem as if they must be showing a clean pair of heels to anything in their rear; but just the same, Perk, with the vision of an air-minded individual, could readily understand how the speedy Ryan plane was slowly but insidiously picking up on them continuously.

“Blamed nuisance,” he was muttering to himself when this important fact became a positive truth; “guess now that rip-snorter could make circles round us, if so be he wanted to. Shucks! what’s left to us I want to know; an’ just what does he ’spect to accomplish with all this chasin’ us? Might as well get out my little old six-shot bear gun, so’s to be ready in case there’s any sort o’ ruction aheadin’ our way.”

The idea seemed to afford him a strange sort of grim satisfaction, for bending down he ran his hand under the coaming of the cockpit; to almost immediately withdraw a very decent looking

sporting repeating rifle, evidently his working tool whenever he felt disposed to spend a week in the wilds, either alone, or with some boon companions also yearning for wild game and the much desired campfire.

“Hold tight, Perk,” Jack was saying just then; “going into a nose dive, and see if that will upset his calculations; for he’s got me buffaloed all right as to what’s in the wind!”

Almost immediately they turned the nose of their craft earthward, and went down on a swift slant. Perk kept his head turned even as this manoeuvre was being executed, and what he saw was something calculated to almost take his breath away; for where the pursuing Ryan ship loomed up as a shadowy form, vivid splashes, as of fire, were coming in quick succession – he could even imagine he heard the pulsating staccato reports following each other in succession, just as in those never-to-be-forgotten days when he would have a covey of devil-may-care German air fighters stepping on the tail of his old-fashioned boat, and peppering him from their rapid-firing guns!

CHAPTER V

THE DUEL IN THE AIR

The significant flashes abruptly ceased; but Perk realized this was only because the expert pilot handling that same Ryan wasp was also ducking down in an exact copy of their own game.

For the moment Perk lost sight of the shadowy pursuing craft; then Jack changed his tactics, and once again brought his boat on an even keel. Perk strained his eyesight in an endeavor to pick up the other ship after it too had swung into a direct course.

“Devil take that guy at the stick,” he stormed to himself, although Jack caught almost every word, since the earphones were still in operation, “he’s seen our move, an’ gone us one better. No slouch o’ a pilot, either, I’ll admit. When that gent who goes by the name o’ Slippery Slim picks his gang he knows how to pull trumps out of the pack all right. Give him another shoot, Jack, old hoss; mebbe he wont be so lucky next time. He’s got some kind o’ a rapid-fire shooter aboard, and had started to send a hail o’ lead ’bout our ears just as you turned the trick on him.”

Jack was apparently quite willing to give a repeat, for hardly had the other ceased shouting than they again shot down in a dizzy dive that seemed likely to lower their altitude by something like five hundred feet.

Perk was keeping a close watch, and knew that once more the grim pursuer had copied their daring manœuvre.

“He’s a good one, or I’ll eat my hat!” he burst out, as they were “cutting a blue streak” once more through the growing darkness, and he could see those suggestive flashes again punctuating the gloom in their track. “Jack, he’s started that racket again, don’t you know; and any second we may get a slug in our belly, bustin’ things all to flinders. Try a razzle-dazzle on the boob, old broncho!”

So making a bank, Jack changed his course, running at right angles, and if anything at a faster pace than ever. Perk had the situation “sized up to a fraction,” as he himself would have called it; he realized that it was only through the greatest of good luck they had escaped being hit by one of those flying missiles; and that so long as the mysterious enemy kept using their ship for a flying target they were in constant peril. Despite all this ducking and dodging on Jack’s part he did not seem successful in throwing the pursuing craft off the track. To be sure the darkness was gradually growing thicker with every passing minute, and this seemed to be their only hope of crawling out of a “hot hole,” according to Perk’s calculations.

Perk afterwards frankly admitted that he was frothing at the mouth on account of finding himself up against a situation where the cards seemed stacked against him – where his hands were tied as it were, and that reckless pilot, chasing after them hell-bent, held all the trumps.

“No use tryin’ that game any longer, Jack, boy!” he yelled suddenly. “See the glim all ’round us, partner – sure as you live they’ve even got some kind o’ a searchlight aboard, just like they’d planned all this thing out beforehand. Guess now it’s up to Little Perk to put a plug into their game. Hold her steady a bit, boss; I’m meaning to make ’em sit up an’ take notice they can’t hog *all* the fun going. Watch my smoke, Jack, old hoss.”

It was a delicate situation without any doubt; for if those aboard that little Ryan plane, taking advantage of the halo of light covering the craft they followed, continued to make use of their rapidfire gun, the danger of a hit had vastly increased; but Perk must have some sort of scheme in mind it was evident, or he would never have asked his chum to steady the badly wobbling boat when such action only doubled their peril.

Calmly and deliberately, as though simply bent on fetching down a deer he wanted for his next camp supper, steady old Perk had his faithful gun up to his shoulder, and was sighting that piercing glare of light that marked the bow of the pursuing aircraft, betraying the presence of a searchlight.

Possibly owing to the clamor of their own working motor Jack could not tell when his companion unloosed a fusilade of shots; but he did know that something suddenly changed the situation, and to their advantage; for as though a blanket had been tossed over the piercing ray the illumination abruptly ceased, leaving them to continue their wild flight shrouded in encompassing darkness.

Then, too, the sound of Perk's exulting yell was quite enough to tell the story of his success in finding a glowing target for one of his several missiles – the old sharpshooter had evidently lost none of his cunning by reason of a lapse in action.

“Set 'em up in the other alley, boys – give your Dutch uncle a chance to show an old trick or two! Now *will* you be good, or must I give you another smash in the jaw – better haul off while the haulin's good, fellers – I'd sure hate to make you crack up, and fade out!”

Even though his clever shot had doubtless utterly smashed the searchlight, and put it out of business, that bothersome rapidfire gun was still in working order, as Perk discovered when once more those insistent flashes, following closely upon each others' heels, announced a fresh barrage, with the unseen, unheard hissing bullets doubtless whizzing all around them.

This was adding insult to injury, Perk was doubtless telling himself, as he realized that his lucky shot had after all failed to daunt that stubborn pair in the speedy Ryan ship.

“You *will* have it, seems like,” he growled to himself; for since he had discarded his earphone harness just previous to starting his late “shooting spree,” Perk could no longer hold intercourse with his fellow flyer; “all right then, I'll try some more o' the same sorter medicine; what's good for the goose orter be fine for the gander. Mind your eye now, boys, and keep a tight grip on your chutes if anything happens not down in your gamble.”

Again did the continual flash of spitting fire from the gun afford the sharpshooter in the chased ship abundant opportunities for focussing his aim; although instinct may have taken the place of vision on Perk's part.

Fortunately Jack must have been expecting something along those lines, knowing his companion so well, and how he was always eager to “repeat” when things were coming his way; for he kept the flying boat wonderfully steady just then, even though realizing how such action doubled their own chances of being hit.

Perk was now shooting on general principles, in hopes of being fortunate enough to find a billet for one of his random bullets. He went at the business with all the *sang froid* of a veteran fighter, accustomed to meeting hostile craft up in the wide air spaces, or even above the clouds – all the fierce delight of matching his skill and life against a foeman worthy of his steel had once more gripped the old flying warrior; and it may be for the moment he deluded himself with the belief that this was but a reincarnation of those never-to-be-forgotten days when all Europe was held fast in the throes of the grisly war-god.

Suddenly Perk ceased firing, nor was this caused by the magazine of his repeating rifle being empty – he had seen that the discharges back yonder were no longer in full blast, showing that something must have happened to cause such a sudden cessation to hostilities.

Before he could attempt to analyze what this might mean it was all flashed before his questioning mind – a burst of flames came from the spot where last he had seen the shadowy shape of their persistent pursuer clipping through space like a blazing meteor.

Perk sat there doubled up, his mouth half open, staring with might and main, as some object began to drop toward the earth with ever increasing speed – something which he knew full well must of necessity be the beautiful little Ryan plane, which he had admired so much when at Candler Field at close of the late day, and before this wild dash into the darkness of night began.

Evidently one of his missiles (fired with such grim determination when he “took the bit in his teeth,” and struck back) had found its mark, and unleashed the dangerous contents of the gasoline

reservoir, with the splashing fluid instantly catching fire from the exploding spark of the running motor.

No flyer ever saw his enemy going down in a flaming coffin without feeling compassion gripping him; that one moment had changed his heart from bitter hatred to a sense of pity; knowing as he must have done that the day might be near at hand when he too would share in a similar dreadful fate.

And so Perk found himself all in a nervous tremble as, laying down his gun, he managed once more to adjust the head harness, so as to be able to again hold communication with his fellow adventurer.

CHAPTER VI

PARACHUTE JUMPERS

Just then Jack hurriedly banked, and swung around as though to double back on their late course. This of course told Perk the pilot must be already aware of the terrible tragedy that was being enacted close at hand, and meant to see its finish with his own eyes.

With the abrupt change in their course he was in time to catch a glimpse of the flaming object still spiraling earthwards, a billow of fire that glowed suggestively in the darkness.

Then far below it seemed to strike the ground – they heard no sound whatever, but the fire became stationary; although increasing in fury, since the wind created by its passage no longer whipped the devouring flames. Evidently by the time the conflagration stopped for want of further material on which to feed, nothing inflammable would be left of the once haughty little Ryan masterpiece save the engine, and other metal parts.

“What’s the big idea, old hoss?”

Perk asked this as a leader, wishing to get a better grip on his own nerves, since they had been dreadfully shocked at the dire result of his random shot.

“Going to circle around a few times, and drop down a bit,” came the illuminating reply; “though I reckon it’s no use, since nothing could live in all that awful blast.”

“Mebbe not, Jack,” remarked Perk, a bit cheerily; “but there’s a fair chance neither o’ them guys got snagged in the flash o’ that gas.”

“See here, Perk, have you some foundation for saying that?” demanded the other, eagerly.

“Sure – they jumped all right, boss,” Perk told him.

“You saw them do it then, did you, boy?” continued Jack.

“They bailed out okay – I saw two take the jump right after the first flash came – went down like plummets in the bargain – smart lads those guys are, I’m tellin’ you, partner.”

No doubt Jack was glad to hear this bit of news, for it had filled him with horror to realize that in order to escape they had been compelled to ruthlessly take human life. He was much younger than Perk, veteran of the World War, who had grown more or less hardened to such happenings when staking his own life against that of a tricky German air pilot.

“Still goin’ down, are you?” asked Perk shortly afterwards, on finding that they were still swinging around in a wide circle, that burning pyre far below being the hub of the wheel of which their boat was the outer tire.

“Might as well,” came the ready answer, showing that Jack had made up his mind hurriedly.

“Guess now they’ll get down somehow, boss; a whole lot depends on what kind o’ landin’ they’ll be able to make – if its rocks, or trees, they got to strike it’s apt to be some hard sleddin’ for the boys. Say, ’taint possible now you’re fixin’ to try an’ lend ’em a helpin’ hand? I’d hate to know they’d been wiped off the map in that hot fire; but somehow I don’t feel like playin’ the part o’ the Good Samaritan to such man devils as them two.”

“No danger of my trying to make a landing where the chances are ten to one it just *can’t* be done,” explained Jack, seeing that his companion was almost ready to mutiny if any such mad proceeding were contemplated. “I’d just feel better if I knew they’d reached ground okay; then we could keep on our way, and it’d be up to them to get out of the scrape.”

“Huh! I get you, partner,” grunted the relieved Perk. “Don’t think I’m bitter about the thing, ’cause they’re sure hot stuff all right; but I’m a bit slow to accept that forgive and forget stuff, specially after any guy’s tried his level best to gimme a dirty deal.”

“We’ll try the thing out while on the job,” Jack announced. “Our own wonderful escape from meeting just that same kind of fate makes me kind of soft. Perhaps we’ll not be able to learn a single

thing; you know how it often is when you've finally struck ground after quitting the ship by the chute route – all out of breath – sometimes knocked up a bit, if you escape broken bones – not any shape to shout, or do anything but just lie there, and suck in the air in big gasps.”

“Yeah, that's right for you, old hoss,” Perk readily agreed. “Me, I once got a collar bone smashed that way. No harm in our makin' a few swings around these diggin's 'fore we put out for Orleans. That fire keeps burnin' like things they got sprinkled right well with the juice when the tank blew up. Go to it, Jack, just as you please, never mindin' a few squeals from a hard-boiled guy like Perk Perkiser.”

“I'm going to shut down on the engine, and take a little glide, so we can pick up anything like a yell,” announced the pilot a minute later.

“Go to it – duck then, boy!” snapped Perk, as he temporarily relieved himself of his ear-phones in order to catch anything bordering on a shout from the ground below.

The simple expedient was carried out successfully, and when once again they leveled out, to continue circling, Jack asked eagerly:

“Get anything, Perk?”

“Not a bleat, partner,” replied the other, who had hurriedly held his earphones in position so as to cover the emergency.

“Sorry for that, but we'll try a couple more times before calling it all off,” suggested Jack, who could be more or less persistent when the occasion arose for such action, though never carrying it so far as to be reckless.

So a dozen seconds or so afterwards he again gave warning that it was time for another drop of a few hundred feet – not that they meant to take any chances by getting too close to the unknown terrain lying in the pitch blackness under the flying ship; but simply to be able to listen with the horrid clamor of the bustling engine momentarily stilled.

No better success followed this second manoeuvre – all was deathly silent around, above, below, as though never a solitary living human being existed within miles of the spot where the destruction of the Ryan monoplane had taken place.

“We'll give a third and last try,” was Jack's announced decision, to which Perk added:

“Three times, and batter's out – by then I rather guess we'll be down close enough to the solid ground to make another drop dangerous. Either way I'm satisfied we've done the right thing, old hoss. Suit yourself when you see fit to coast,” whereupon he once more denuded his ears of the exceedingly useful and really indispensable phone harness, to await the occasion of the last try in the line of an aviator's duty.

“How about it, Perk? – get a whisper?”

They had completed the glide, and were once more on a level course, with Jack even turning the nose of the ship a bit heavenward; since neither of them knew what the nature of the ground below must be – whether some hill lay directly ahead, against which they might smash for a complete wipeout.

“Huh! a heap more'n that, partner!” came the triumphant reply. “Heard a shout, an' then another some distance off – struck me both jumpers had lit okay, and were tryin' to communicate, so's to get together again. Guess things ain't so bad after all with them guys, an' we c'n be movin' on our way without botherin' any more 'bout their safety. Some two-legged varmints seem to be watched over by Old Satan hisself, they bein' that venomous, and evil-minded.”

Jack made no rejoinder to this remark, tinged with bitterness as it was, only pointed the nose of his craft upward, and started to spiral for altitude. Undoubtedly he was feeling greatly relieved because of their having escaped so miraculously from the hovering peril; and best of all managed to turn the tables on those who would have encompassed their destruction just in order to defend the lawless game in which they were engaged in connection with Slippery Slim.

Perk must have been doing a little hard thinking as the time passed and they raced on their way, for later on he started to speak; and as usual his line of chatter told that he was seeking information,

trying to find a solution of certain exasperating puzzles that were “twisting his intellects,” as he himself described matters.

“Things kind o’ got me goofy, partner, an’ I’d like you to raise the curtain some, if so be you feel so bent. First place I guess it goes without questionin’ that these huskies must be in cahunks with that there big gun, Slippery Slim Garrabrant?”

“Oh! that’s a dead certainty – who else would have any reason for waylaying us in Atlanta, and setting up this trap for us to fall into?”

“Shucks! then it stands to reason, boss, he’s got means for findin’ out what the Secret Service aims to do; an’ so has been able to play the boys for suckers every time they set out to lay him by the heels, eh, Jack, old hoss?”

“That’s past history, Perk; even the Big Boss got wise to it, and tried everything possible to learn where the great leak happened; but our experience proves they haven’t discovered it so far. I’m making up my mind that the closer we draw to the headquarters of this rotten clique of crime, where they make the bogus long-green that’s been flooding the whole West for a year and more, why, the harder our job is bound to be.”

“Which tickles me a heap, boy – I’m just yearnin’ for comin’ to grips with that gazaboo o’ a Slim; and now we’re on to the job I’ll never be happy ’till he’s on his way to that big Government pen we glimpsed in Atlanta, where some other lads we helped to pinch are doin’ time.”

“Well, if you keep on as you’ve started, Perk, we’ll flatten the whole gang like pancakes – they’ve stacked up against a new sort of revenue dog when they started a shooter of your calibre on the trail. First you smashed their searchlight, and then sent a chuck of lead into the gas tank that broke up the game. That’s the kind of a pinch hitter you are, partner; and right now I want to congratulate you on such dandy marksmanship.”

“Lay off that stuff, Jack – nothin’ but great luck fetched the bacon home for this lad. But me, I’m shakin’ hands with myself ’cause I had that hunch a bear gun mightn’t be such a bad thing to tote along on a trip that’s goin’ to carry us across the border, an’ into Old Mex, like as not; where the greasers are sometimes tough nuts an’ hard to handle they tell me. ’Spose we’ll run across them two hill billies again, partner?”

“Wouldn’t surprise me a bit if we did,” replied the pilot, leveling off at a three thousand foot ceiling, and still heading due southwest. “Like as not they’ve got plenty of ready cash along; and after having been so cleverly upset in their calculations, due to your beating them silly with a barrage of hot lead, they’ll be hot to wipe out their disgrace. Oh! yes, we’re going to run up against that foxy pair again before the book is closed for keeps.”

CHAPTER VII

STRIKING THE FOG BELT

With the stars shining brightly above them, and a moon just past its full climbing the eastern heavens, having dissipated the darkness of the earlier part of the night, Jack and his fellow voyager continued plunging along in a very satisfactory fashion, having no reason for feeling further concern regarding the peril to which they had been so lately subjected.

But things were not destined to continue so comfortably for the two adventurers, it seemed. Perk was just congratulating himself for about the fourth time at having such a comfortable flight, when he sat up and took notice of the fact that those heavenly bodies were beginning to look exceedingly hazy.

“Danged shame, that’s what, to spoil such a dandy night!” he muttered.

“What ails you now?” demanded Jack, on hearing the other make this little remark that bespoke exasperation at least; “another boat on our tail?”

“Well, I guess not just now,” replied Perk, scoffingly; “one was more’n enough for a single jump. But we’re agoin’ to run into a pesky fog belt, sure as you’re born, old hoss!”

“That all?” laughed the other, who apparently saw nothing of particular consequence about such a common happening; “it may perhaps manage to slow us down more or less; but what does that matter, when we’ve got time to burn. The Big Boss told us, remember, not to hurry things at all – plenty of time, oodles of money, and any backing we chose to call for in the way of a new boat, or more helpers. We should worry, old scout!”

“Tain’t that in peticular Jack,” complained the other; “but of all things a sky detective’s got to run smack up against, fog’s the one I despise most. It’s got me in bad more’n a few times, so I’ve grown to look on the peasoup stuff like it was my – er, what-dye-call it – Nebraska, no, I mean Nemesis.”

“Yes, now you mention it, Perk, I remember you telling me something about that strange feeling you have creep over you. No need for you to apologize – in my knocking around among airmen I’ve found that often even the most daring and reckless in the bunch had some kind of a weakness, if only you looked far enough under the surface; just as sometimes you’ll find a boasting bully actually afraid of his little wife at home, who’s smacked him with her handy rolling pin many a time.”

“Huh! wasn’t I a canvas man ’long with a travelin’ circus a wheen o’ years ago, an’ didn’t I see the biggest elephant in captivity rear up on his hind legs, lift his trunk sky-high in the air, an’ squeal like fun just when a little half grown mouse happened to run along near his alley. Well, I’m the tusker, an’ fog is the mouse, as you might say – we never do get on well as a combine. Hope it hugs the ground, an’ leaves us a clear track up among the clouds I c’n see creepin’ up ahead yonder.”

“Doesn’t bother me a whit, partner; don’t forget we’ve got that new radio beacon aboard to try out; and if it’s as clever as I’ve heard tell it’ll carry us along our route to Orleans through the thickest nest of fog anybody ever stacked up against. Naturally we can’t expect to get the full benefit of its capacity to hold a speeding plane on its true course; because the invention’s hardly more than half baked up to now; but I set it according to directions, and if at any time we begin to slide off our course the light that springs up is bound to give warning.”

“A bully good layout I’d say, if it c’n do what they claim,” ventured Perk, who undoubtedly had read certain things concerning the new invention, and was eager to learn just how it would pan out. “You showed a level head, partner, when you decided to take the offer o’ that gent in Atlanta, and try the thing out. Guess, then, I needn’t bother my head ’bout gettin’ astray; if things keep bein’ invented it ain’t goin’ to be very long till a pilot’ll get slapped good an’ hard if he misses runnin’ on a straight line, or even veers from his proper course in a great big blow.”

“We’re living in a machine age, Perk, and every day things are heading that way on the run – electric helps in kitchen, factory, and even aboard our air cruisers. While the brainwork and strain

grow harder the actual manual labor is lessened all the time. But as you say it's getting a bit hazy, and chances are we're in for a spell of blue fog."

Ten minutes afterwards there could not be the least doubt concerning that fact, for by degrees even the stars vanished from view, ditto the gorgeous round moon. Still, since the sky remained brighter in the east, it was not at all difficult to tell where the fair mistress of the Southern night had hidden her face behind the opaque veil.

Jack was now flying by instruments alone, since never a thing could be seen by the keenest eye above, below – they seemed to be hung in unlimited space; but pushing along with considerable speed just the same, bound for the distant city on the vast Mississippi, situated not so very far from its delta.

Thus passed a full hour.

Suddenly Perk saw a small light spring into view on one side of the plane, and it certainly electrified him considerably.

"Hi! there, partner, we're off our track – shifted to the east, seems like, unless I'm away wrong in sizin' things up 'cordin' to Hoyle. Got to swing her to the larboard-watch side, I kinder guess – how 'bout that, boss?"

"You hit it that time, Perk, and here she goes to climb back to our true course. Worked just as we figured it would, and put us wise to a fact we'd hardly have picked up in any other way. I reckon now this same radio beacon's bound to turn out a great help to the poor badgered air pilot, flying blind when fog hides the ground beacons, and he gets no aid from the heavens above."

"I'll say it's the best thing I've struck for a long time," affirmed the delighted Perk. "There she goes – the glim I mean – closed shop, havin' 'complished the business set for her; showing we must have struck our real course again."

"Easy money," laughed Jack, just as well satisfied. "Makes a fellow sit up and try to guess what the next big idea connected with aviation will prove to be; doesn't seem to be any limit to the dazzling discoveries these scientific chaps'll turn out."

"Just so, partner – like that big chute they're trying out, which they claim will keep any plane from crashing – if the engine goes dead all you got to do is to press a little button, and when the drop comes open goes the monster umbrella, able to hold you and the crate suspended in the air, to gradually fall to the earth like the colored balls from a bursted skyrocket. Great stunt that, an' I'm livin' in hopes it'll be my luck to some day find myself aboard a ship that's equipped with such a giant chute, an' have the glorious experience of seeing the thing work."

Jack seemed to consider it the part of wisdom to pull up more or less, as they were in no hurry, and could drop down on the aviation field at New Orleans by dawn, even though they concluded to just "loaf along." Disliking anything pertaining to fog Perk naturally said nothing to hint at a desire for further speed; besides his own good sense told him that what his mate had just said with regard to no necessity existing for haste, was sound logic, and a due regard for "safety first."

So the time slipped away, with midnight finding them past the meridian of their projected flight. Perk had long since subsided and seemed content to sit there in the double cockpit, letting his thoughts roam back to the exciting developments of the earlier night.

Years had elapsed since last he watched a doomed plane writhing and twisting in its death agonies, with the flames wrapping it in an envelope – a blazing coffin speeding headlong to a final crash; and here, strange to say, after all that time intervening he had again passed through a similar experience. Now that he had an opportunity to calmly review the happening, Perk admitted he was pleased to know the two occupants of the Ryan cockpit had apparently escaped a miserable fate that must have been laid at his door.

Two A. M. and all's well!

Perk figured that when a few more times sixty minutes had passed it would be time for them to catch a first glimpse of the great rolling turgid stream that could, when the heavy rains united with the melting snows up in the mountains of the Far West, create vast floods that placed much of

the low country along the river under many feet of water. It had been a long time since last Perk had set eyes on the Mississippi, and hence he was considerably worked up over the prospect of soon glimpsing the mighty flood.

CHAPTER VIII

NEW ORLEANS – FIRST STOP

“There she rolls, Jack, old boy – the greatest stream in the whole U.S.A. – I swan if she don’t look just as fine as when I glimpsed her for the first time many years ago!”

That was Perk’s tribute on beholding the Lower Mississippi perhaps thirty miles above New Orleans; he displayed almost as much enthusiasm as those early discoverers did centuries back, when their distended eyes took in the mighty sweep of the flood rolling down toward its junction with the Mexican Gulf.

It was early dawn, and the fog bank had been dissipated by a fresh breeze acting as advance courier to the rising of the sun. Jack, looking toward the southwest could also see the object of his companion’s exultation, and undoubtedly felt some of the same pleasure.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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