

Newcomb Ambrose

Wings Over the Rockies; Or, Jack Ralston's New Cloud Chaser



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Jack Ralston's New Cloud Chaser**

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Newcomb A.

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Wings Over the Rockies / Jack Ralston's New Cloud Chaser

I

WAITING FOR ORDERS

“Hot ziggetty dog! I kinder guess now Jack, we’ve been an’ put the new cloud-chaser through every trick we’ve got up our sleeves – flopped her over on her back, righted her, to turn turtle again, done nose-dives an’ Immelmann turns, made a shivery sixteen thousand foot ceilin’ for altitude – an’ now, after all this circus stunt business, we figger she’s a real ship, queen o’ the air-ways.”

“Perk, you never said truer words and I’m sure proud of the fact that our Big Boss up at Washington appreciated that little Florida job we put through last winter, so’s to put us in charge of such a swell air craft.”

“Ginger pop! we used to reckon our old crate some punkins at speedin’, when *real* flyin’ was needed but shucks! with this cracker-jack boat we could make all kinds o’ rings ’round the old bus or else my name ain’t Gabe Perkiser.”

The young leather clad pilot at the controls, as if to still further emphasize his good opinion of the spanking, up-to-date plane they had for some days been joyfully testing out, volplaned down on a long coast just as though a merciless enemy craft were on their tail with a babbling machine-gun keeping up an intermittent fire and a hail of bullets filling the air around them.

Then he leveled off, attained a dizzy speed, turned, banked, and came roaring back to execute a dazzling monster figure-eight sweep.

“Great stuff, old hoss!” cried the exultant Perk for they had their earphones adjusted so as to be able to exchange comments at will, despite any racket caused by the madly racing motor and spinning propeller combined.

“I reckon that will be enough juice used up for today,” Jack Ralston was saying in a thoroughly satisfied tone, “and now we’d better make a bee-line for our landing field. It’ll be the same old story, – a gang gathering around to admire our new boat – and all trying to find out just who we are and what big air company we’re connected with.”

Thereupon Perk chuckled in a queer way he had, evidently vastly amused.

“We got ’em right goofy with guessin’, partner, for a fact. How the curious minded boobs do try to squeeze a few grains o’ information out of us with their foxy questions. I’ve heard some wise-cracks along them lines silly enough to make a hoss laugh an’ all o’ the remarks ain’t jest as complimentary as I’d like, not by a long shot.”

“Little we care,” remarked Jack, adjusting his goggles to a more satisfactory angle and releasing the ear flaps of his helmet. They had left the frigid altitude where they had climbed almost as though shot upward by some monster cannon, thanks to the novel wings with which the new ship was equipped.

“Huh! let ’em try to outsmart us,” Perk went on to say, a bit scornfully. “We c’n jest keep our lips buttoned tight an’ mind our own business. Won’t be long, anyway, I guess, till we hear from Headquarters an’ have to jump off on some fresh stunt, roundin’ up the slick crooks who keep puttin’ their thumbs on their noses an’ wigglin’ their fingers at Uncle Sam’s Secret Service boys – counterfeiters, smugglers, aliens crossing the borders, booze from out on the high seas, makers o’ moonshine in the mountings and on the burnin’ deserts like Death Valley an’ such riffraff that scoffs at the law!”

Perk, as he was generally called by his friends, was really a World War veteran, having served aboard a “sausage” observation balloon and later on as a fighting pilot of more than average bravery and ability. He did his “daily dozen” through the whole desperate series of conflicts in the Argonne with a fair number of “flaming coffins” placed to his credit – enemy ships shot down on fire.

Since quitting the army after the Armistice put a stop to all hostilities, Perk had passed through quite a number of vocations that appealed to the unrest in his blood, demanding so strenuously a calling built upon more or less continual excitement.

He had been a barn-storming pilot, giving exhibitions of reckless parachute jumping from high altitudes and similar stunts at county fairs and other public gatherings and had also spent several years as a valued member of the Mounted Police up in the Canadian Northwest country. He finally was drafted into Uncle Sam’s Secret Service by reason of an official having met up with him when moose hunting in the trackless wilds of northern British Columbia.

When Jack Ralston, who himself had gained a little fame in the Secret Service on account of generally bringing in his man, was selected to pilot a speedy ship he picked Gabe Perkiser whom he had known for some time and whose companionable disposition as well as unquestioned courage made him an ideal pal – in Jack’s eyes at least.

Their first assignment called for service carrying the flyers over the Mexican border to apprehend a notorious character who had long been a thorn in the flesh of the Washington authorities, since he came and went, mostly via the air route, crashing Uncle Sam’s frontier gate with cargoes of undesirable aliens, usually Chinese, willing to pay as much as a thousand dollars per head for an opportunity to enter the States, forbidden ground to those of their race.¹

Having, despite all difficulties, carried out their instructions to the letter and handed over their man to the nearest U. S. District Attorney for prosecution, Jack and Perk were later on dispatched with their efficient plane to the Gulf Coast of Florida, there to break up a powerful combination of smugglers through whose bold and lawless ventures, by air and sea, the whole Southern country was being submerged in a flood of foreign brands of liquor.

Again the two pals proved their calibre and brought home the bacon, having dealt the rum-runners a severe jolt and actually kidnaped the chief offender.²

Now they were daily anticipating still another assignment which, for aught they knew might carry them to the Maine border or even to Alaska – all sectors of our wide country look alike to energetic Secret Service agents especially when they have magical wings with which to annihilate space and carry them through cloudland at a hundred miles and more an hour.

It looked very much as though their excellent record was being fully appreciated at Headquarters for there had come to them a wonderfully equipped new ship, carrying many lately discovered and new inventions calculated to lighten the labors of the man at the controls as well as to secure a degree of safety never before attained in any craft.

Jack was heading for the home port, quite satisfied with the finishing check-up of the amazing attributes of their new acquisition, and as for Perk, he could hardly contain himself, such was his enthusiasm in connection with their trying-out process.

“Beats anything that carries wings,” he vowed in his characteristic fashion, “and it’s bound to be a poor day for any guy who thinks he c’n get away from this race hoss o’ the skies. See how she snorts on her course will you, partner, and us agoin’ at mor’n a hundred an’ thirty right now! This is the life for me, an’ I wouldn’t care much if my legs got so cramped I couldn’t walk a mile – some birds are like that, I understand, buzzards f’r instance fairly wobble on the ground but able to put the kibosh on most other feathered folks when they take off in their clumsy way.”

¹ See the first volume of this Series, “*The Sky Detectives*.”

² See the preceding story entitled, “*Eagles of the Sky*.”

Jack did not show much desire to keep up the conversation – the fact of the matter was he felt more or less tired after a long day in the clouds and much preferred to pay strict attention to the many dials on the black dashboard just in front, with which he was by degrees becoming familiar.

The afternoon was drawing near its close, with the sun drawing closer to the mountainous horizon off to the west. So after swinging on their way for half an hour they were able to glimpse their destination which was the Cheyenne, Wyoming, airport.

“Keep up your bluffing when we land Perk, remember,” warned Jack as he started to circle at a height of a thousand feet and could see a number of people running this way and that, undoubtedly in their endeavor to be close by when their landing gear struck the ground.

This wonderful new plane, and the mysterious pair of pals handling it had continued to excite the curiosity not only of pilots using the field, but aviation bugs who haunted the place as well. These folks were enthusiasts over the exploits of noted flyers, but not venturesome enough themselves to wish to become pilots, even though they were of the right calibre. However, they knew considerable about ships and their furniture so as to be able to appreciate anything exceedingly novel along those lines.

“Watch my smoke, partner,” said Perk complacently enough. “I’m not agoin’ to let any o’ that mob crab my game. Men in our class don’t go around doin’ their stuff in the open, like they was magicians throwin’ a fit. We got to know how to mix things a heap an’ pull the wool over the eyes o’ the crowd. So far as they need to know, we’re jest a couple o’ guys out for a lark an’ with shekels to burn.”

“That’s the ticket Perk, keep the racket going up to the time we pull out of Cheyenne no matter which way we climb. Well, here goes to knock our tail on the ground again then for a bite of supper at the Emporium and a look in at some show. I’m getting a bit tired of this inaction, to tell you the honest truth. I reckon both of us will be glad to get our next orders and cut loose with our nobby ship.”

“You said a mouthful buddy that time,” observed Perk as he raised his hands with the intention of removing the earphones since they were at the end of their afternoon check-up, delightfully happy because their plane had shown its exceedingly strong points.

Now they were circling for the last time and those below, discovering just about where they meant to land, had started on the run, apparently eager to be on hand in order to obtain a fresh close-up of the mysterious chums who had been hanging around the airport for such a length of time.

Never had a boat dropped down more lightly than did their craft – Jack could not help giving his mate a look of overpowering joy at the slight impact, which was returned in full measure by the proud Perk who anticipated wonderful things to come when they got going for fair up among the clouds or dodging through the canyons of the mighty Rockies, wherever the hand of Fate, and orders from Headquarters, took them.

So the landing was made and the wonder ship safely housed in the hangar they had hired which could be securely locked to keep curious minded or unscrupulous people from trying to get a line on its several novel features.

A short but serious-looking chap came up to have a few words with Jack – this was the party who had been hired especially to keep watch and ward over their highly prized aerial steed. Cal Stevens had been recommended as a man to be trusted and although he had no positive knowledge of their identity, he did know they were clean sportsmen and men of their word. Consequently Jack felt the precious ship given into their charge by the Government would be carefully guarded throughout each night.

They left the field with several figures trailing after them for the mystery hovering over their movements had piqued the curiosity of a number of men. All manner of queer stories, resting on insecure foundations, had been rumored so that people pointed them out in the street and some wise-acres even gained considerable notoriety by pretending to know it all, though under a pledge to keep their secret inviolate.

It became even necessary to resort to expedients in order to shake these snoopers as the indignant Perk called them and usually a vehicle of some sort offered them an easy way to beat out the clan. On this particular evening, however, a big car occupied by several men whom they did not remember having noticed before, kept after their own vehicle up to the very door of the modest house in which they had a room.

"I say it's a danged shame," stormed the angry Perk as the two of them started to strip and get into ordinary citizen's clothing so they would not attract unpleasant attention while eating their supper and attending the movies later on – "that pesky car kept on our tail right up to the door an' chances are it's parked somewhere out there right now, awaitin' for us to hike over to the Emporium restaurant. Riles me for fair, partner, an' for two cents I'd like to stand them hoboos on their heads, on'y I guess that'd be fool's play for me."

"It certainly would, Perk," his chum assured him as they dressed. "Men in the detective line never want to draw attention to themselves for once it's known what calling they're engaged in and a lot of their value to their employers is lost. That's just why the detectives in big cities like New York wear masks when suspects are lined up each morning for inspection. You know that, of course, Perk, but I'm just reminding you because if you get all 'het up' you might say or do something that would spill the beans for us."

"I'll cool down right away, Jack old hoss," the other assured him contritely. "That's my greatest weakness you know, an' I'm countin' on my best pal to keep a finger on my pulse so's to check me up when I threaten to run loose with my too ready tongue. Wait a minute, Jack, till I get a paper so I c'n read up on the dope as I munch my feed. I'm wanting to learn whether anything's been heard from our mutual friend, Buddy Warner, the best air mail pilot on the job today."

"I certainly hope he's turned up since we jumped off this morning," said Jack with more than his customary earnestness. "There must be a dozen or two ships scouring the country in search of Buddy." This pilot had never reached his port of call two days back and is believed to be down somewhere in that wild country among the big hills and canyons, either dead or badly hurt and needing a helping hand right away.

Perk gave a hurried glance at the scare-heads on the front page of the newspaper he had purchased and then grunted dismally.

"Nothin' doin' so far, partner," he announced with a sigh that welled up from the very depths of his warm, friendly heart. "More ships a'startin' out from every-which-way. A happenin' like this, when the lost guy chances to be a friendly dick that everybody likes, seems to arouse that sportsman spirit that you find in all air pilot circles. It gets to be a reg'lar *fever*, with even famous flyers givin' up vacations they'd been lookin' forward to for weeks, just to start out an' try to locate the lost man. Huh! nothin'd tickle me more than a chance to lend a hand myself, on'y we're in the Government's employ and can no more quit our job than air mail lads could throw the letter sacks in the discard and sail around peekin' into every gulch an' hidin' place in the mountains in hopes o' bein' the lucky guy to fetch Buddy back."

"I'm mighty sorry nothing's been found out," said Jack, "but the boys are sure to comb every rod of ground again and again until it's certain he can't be located. But here's our restaurant Perk, so let's drop in and dine."

II

PERK GROWS SUSPICIOUS

"I swan if it don't beat all creation what stuff these newspaper boys do turn out when they're put on the job o' pickin' up sensational news," Perk was saying some time later as both he and his companion were satisfying their hunger with such viands as appealed to their taste upon the bill of fare.

"What ails you now, comrade?" asked Jack, smilingly for he always found the strongly expressed likes and dislikes of his chum a never failing well of interest that frequently brought out one of his seldom used chuckles.

"Why, seems like they never let a chance get past to fetch Lindbergh into the picture, no matter if he's three thousand miles off as the crow flies. Here one account tells that it's *'reported'* our distinguished air pilot's set out to lend a hand at findin' poor Buddy Warner,' who, the story goes, 'used to be a blanket pal o' Lindbergh's away back in them balmy days when Charles jumped with his little chute at county fairs an' did the barn-stormin' racket. Not that he wouldn't be on the job if on'y he didn't happen to be away off around New York right now, up to his eyes in business connected with the new air line he's at the head of. Course lots o' good folks'll swallow this story without a question but it's jest a sample o' wild newspaper stuff – no man c'n be on the Atlantic coast an' out here in the Rockies at the same time. Gosh! but they do pull the wool over some people's eyes these days – anything for a sensation an' to get the jump over the other cub reporters."

"But Perk, we do happen to know that there are quite a number of noted pilots out scouring the entire region and sticking to their job like leeches, under their sporting slogan 'do as you'd be done by'."

"Sure thing, partner – that's legitimate news and not faked," agreed the other with a grunt as he speared a small boiled onion of which he was very fond, and thrust it into his mouth. "Lindbergh is a wonder, as we all know, but there's a limit to his activities and it ain't fair to want him to take hold o' everything that comes along. Now he's doubled up and took him a wife. They reckon nothin' c'n be carried through without his name bein' tacked on somehow or other. 'Taint fair to that boy, an' them's my sentiments."

Jack shook his head and looked serious.

"Then the mystery is as deep as ever and they haven't yet found out what happened to poor Buddy?" he asked, to which Perk shook his head in the negative, saying:

"Never a thing – all wrapped up in a black fog – he started off in high spirits and with a joke on his lips an' then disappeared like he never was. Hang it all, why couldn't I have been doin' some other sorter job where they might 'a' let me off for a spell? Nothin' I'd like better than to comb the hull countryside in hopes o' findin' that bully boy – he told me once 'bout that mother o' his'n. I kinder guess she must be a peach, he thought so much o' her. Lands sake! but it might even kill her if her boy ain't never heard from again. I'd give every dollar I got in the wide world – which ain't boastin' none I know – if only I was a free agent an' goin' on my own hook."

"Hard luck, partner," soothed Jack, laying a hand on the arm of his pal as if to sympathize with the impulsive one; "but of course that's out of the question, you and me – we're under a contract that can't be broken recklessly, no matter what happens and we've just *got* to keep everlastingly on the job till our time is up when we can either renew or get out."

"I guess you got it down pat, Jack," agreed the other with a heavy sigh that told of his regret being genuine. Perk was one of those queer chaps who are born with a stubborn itch to find *anything* that is said to be lost which would account in part for his having thrown in his fortunes with both the Northwest Mounted Police and now the United States Secret Service.

“Besides, there was a sort of intimation in that late letter from the Big Boss,” Jack went on to say, “that seemed to hint at something big coming our way before very long so all we can do is to keep hoping for some luck and doing our daily stunt flying so as to learn all the wrinkles connected with our new cloud-chaser as you like to call the ship we’re attached to right now.”

“Why do you keep on turning your head a little while you’re eating I’d like to know, Perk – got to seeing things again, like you did once before, I remember?” continued Jack.

“Huh! I’m jest takin’ a peep in that mirror over there partner,” replied Perk in a low tone that had a slight air of mystery about it, Jack imagined.

“Pretty girl this time struck you where your heart is soft, eh, buddy?” Jack inquired with a chuckle.

“Not this time old hoss – take a squint yourself – see them two fellers sittin’ at the corner table, where they c’n watch us? – well, seems like they take a heap o’ pleasure keepin’ tabs on us while we sit here and gobble. I’m wonderin’ who and what they are also why they bother to keep an eye on our actions right along.”

“Yes, I can see them out of the tail of my eye,” Jack told him. “Don’t you remember the pair in the big touring car that kept ducking after us? – I reckon these boys are that same couple. Did you notice them sitting there when we came in?”

“Nothin’ doin’ that way, Boss,” Perk told him with a positive ring to his voice. “I chanced to turn my head a few minutes after we got settled down, an’ they were walkin’ over to that corner like they’d sized up the table as if it suited their plans. Ever since, they’ve kept talkin’ in low tones, an’ watchin’ us like I’ve seen a fox do, hidin’ in the brush an’ waitin’ for a fat young partridge to come close enough for him to make a spring and grab his dinner.”

Jack refused to become flustered, even if Perk showed signs of being annoyed.

“Oh!” he went on to remark casually, “chances are they may be some of those pests of newspaper boys, scenting a scoop of a story for their sensation loving sheets – competition is so keen these days they lie awake nights I’m told, and accept all sorts of chances of being kicked out if only they can get the right sort of stuff to build up into a thriller.”

“Mebbe so, mebbe so,” grumbled the indignant Perk, “but anyhow I don’t like it a bit. That dark-faced guy strikes me as a pretty tough sort o’ scrapper, one I’d hate to smack up against in a dark alley an’ the other ain’t much shakes as a good-looker either. Jack, do you think they know who we are and got some sort o’ grudge against us on ’count o’ the trade we foller, eh, what?”

“Oh! it might be so,” replied the other, “anything is possible and while we’ve been lucky enough to hide our light under a bushel all the time we’ve hung around the Cheyenne airport, we couldn’t expect to keep that game up indefinitely, you understand. After all, we hope to be pulling our freight and slipping out of this burg before long. So we’ll just keep our eyes open for stormy weather and be on our guard.”

“Hot ziggetty dog! I sure do hope now they ain’t meanin’ to bust in on our fine ship an’ play hob with her – wouldn’t that jar you though, partner?” and Perk could be seen to grind those big white teeth of his as if gripped by a spasm of rage almost beyond his control. Like the Arab whose love for his horse is said to exceed any affection for his wife, most sky pilots feel an overpowering regard for their ship in which they risk their lives every time they jump off and Perk was peculiarly built that way.

“That would be a calamity for a fact,” admitted Jack, giving the two men under suspicion another little survey, “but we’ve got a good guard keeping tabs over the boat and he’s empowered to shoot if some one tries any funny business out at the hangar, so I reckon there’s nothing to worry over in that direction.”

Perk continued to grumble, half beneath his breath, showing how he felt under the skin about the matter. Jack on his part skillfully directed the low conversation into other and more cheerful channels so that presently, after the two strangers had passed out of the restaurant, Perk seemed to

put them aside as “false alarms” and entered into the discussion of the merits of their beloved cloud-chaser with a modicum of his usual good nature which was just what his chum wished to have happen, so as to clear the atmosphere, which, in Perk’s case was getting considerably muddy.

III

THE HOLD-UP

Jack had certainly shown considerable cunning in starting to talk about some of the clever and novel devices with which their new ship was equipped in order to turn the attention of his chum into more pleasant channels for Perk soon became most eloquent in speaking of those wonderful discoveries.

"It sure is a great stunt, us bein' able to quit the ground in ten shakes o' a lamb's tail," he was speedily remarking, "stead of havin' to take such a long an' often bumpy run. The way that boat acts under your pilotin' makes me think o' how a clumsy buzzard when scared, gives a hop up into the air for a few feet, starts them big wings o' his'n workin' and goes hoppetty-skip-petty off on an upward slant. Seems like the next thing we know we'll have some sorter contraption that'll jest give us a toss, like you'd fling a pigeon up, for a gunner to smack after it'd started to fly out o' bounds."

"I understand," Jack told him, smoothly enough, "they've got something mighty near as wonderful as that, only it lacks just a little finishing touch to make it sure pop. Five years from now the boys who've come through with their lives will be looking back to *our* day as being still in the woods, and us pilots rough neck amateurs – such staggering things will be the regular line by then."

"Jest see how the've changed a heap o' the instruments we used to swear by in them days o' the big war over in France, eh Jack? You don't see so much difference, but us boys who were in that scrap sometimes c'n hardly believe it's the same aviation world we're livin' in. From compass to pontoons, a dozen or two things have been vastly improved. Look at the new ship; we got aluminum pontoons to let us light on the water of a river, lake or the sea itself and with the wheels set in the shoes so as to make a landin' on dry land whenever we feel like it."

"Pretty slick trick that, I own up, buddy," admitted Jack, "and best of all they seem to work like magic in the bargain. And of course we still go under the same old name of *amphibian*, for we can drop down anywhere with only a fair-sized opening."

"Too bad they didn't give the fine boat a name – havin' only a number gives it a sorter orphan look, strikes me," continued Perk, thus voicing an old grievance that thus far he had kept to himself.

"I knew that bone was bothering you some, partner," Jack told him, "and now you've mentioned it we might as well have it out. Names are all very fine for ordinary airships because there's every reason for giving them publicity, which helps business along; but in our case that's exactly what we want to avoid like a sick tooth. Get that now, brother, do you?"

"Huh! I flop, partner – queer how I didn't think o' that before you mentioned it jest now. Some day mebbe I'll be workin' in a line that don't have to keep things shady all the time – gettin' my fill o' sneakin' an' snoopin' so's to pull in results."

"Here's wishing you luck, boy," Jack was saying with a vein of seriousness in his voice, "but see here what's bearing down on us like a ship under full sail? – he must have been out of sight behind that partition all the time we've sat here – got a wide grin on his sunburned face, which looks kind of familiar to me. Know him, Perk?"

"Zowie! I'd jest say I do partner, don't you see, it's my old friend Cyclone Davis, the cowboy we've seen more'n once doin' his stunts on the screen. Hey there, Cyclone, where'd you pop up from, old pard?"

Perk in evident excitement had jumped up from his chair and with outstretched hand met the oncoming grinning range rider with tumultuous joy, slapping him on the back, wringing his hand furiously and giving a most energetic display of delight at the unexpected meeting.

"Sit down here an' have a little chin, Cyclone – meet my side partner, Jack Ralston. Got to walk back to our room with us so's to tell how you happened to break into the movies an' make such

a big hit. Glory! didn't it bring back old times when I saw you prancin' around, knocking some big guy on his back like you used to do when in the prize ring as a comin' welterweight champion. Now, start doin' your stuff, old pard."

Innumerable questions from the excited Perk brought out more or less interesting information for Cyclone proved to be quite a good talker. They managed to keep their voices lowered, although it could be plainly seen Jud Davis was as a rule built along the jolly and noisy type of optimistic chap, such as make hosts of friends wherever they roam; but he seemed to sense the fact that the two in whose company he now found himself wished to keep strangers from overhearing the subject of their confab and thus toned down his effusiveness accordingly.

That was a subject Jack kept constantly in mind – the avoidance of anything calculated to put the spot-light of public attention on his doings – he would have been broken hearted if some morning, after having played a big game to a successful conclusion, with his man safely lodged behind the bars, to see on the front page of the daily papers a picture of himself, no matter how poorly executed and thus holding a member of the Government Secret Service up for every lawbreaker in the wide land to stamp on his mind as something to be never forgotten and thus greatly lessen his capacity for efficient work.

"We're jest about through here, old hoss," Perk finally told the other "an' you jest got to fall in so's to sit with us a while in our room so we c'n tell you what we're a'doin' as boon pals. I know right well it'll never go any further, 'cause you happen to be one o' them fellers what c'n button their lips tight as a clam, with never a single leak."

"That's all right, Perk," came the other's reassuring answer, "I've got a few hours more to spend in Cheyenne and then I'm heading direct for the old motion picture studios at Hollywood to do a few easy stunts in a new picture they're going to build up – I'm a cow puncher again, you understand, Perk, though I own up now and then my old fighting profession comes in pretty well when there's some scrapping taking place between the cowboy mob and the cattle rustlers or Mex outlaws of the border."

Perk listened to everything the other said with an enraptured expression upon his face, he doubtless was able to mentally picture some of those exciting episodes described by Cyclone and felt an itch to be in similar hand-to-hand battles where real blows were exchanged in order to make the scene realistic when depicted on the silver screen.

Jack could hear him giving many a full-sized sigh when Cyclone was running off some of his many adventures with a vein of real humor back of his provocative words and from this could readily believe his chum was having the time of his life.

After a while they all arose, and paying their reckoning at the desk, the proprietor eyed the trio as though he rather suspected they must be Tom Mix and some of his movie friends off on a holiday jaunt – possibly there must have been a certain jaunty air about Cyclone's manner that stamped him as belonging to those who moved out on location and cut all manner of amazing capers before the camera.

It proved to be pretty dark on the street with few persons abroad, although the hour was not late. The neighborhood happened to be a bit lonely, Jack noticed as they walked along three abreast, Cyclone continuing a recital of some comical as well as near tragic happening through which he had lately passed.

They would not have very far to go to reach their destination which had been one of the reasons for Jack selecting the Emporium as their dining place its convenience appealing to him more than anything else.

At a certain point where the gloom was somewhat more dense than in other localities, Jack noticed a motor standing close to the curb and with one of its rear doors standing open. The engine was running, for its steady throb could be plainly heard. But then such a thing is no uncommon occurrence when some busy folks have trouble in starting the engine and prefer to leave it running while they dash into the house for a minute or so.

Just as they came opposite, he noted that it was a large touring car but the significance of this was borne in upon Jack's mind with a rush when two dark figures suddenly sprang out from behind the waiting motor, and with outstretched hands confronted himself and companions while a deep bass voice snapped out the words:

“Put 'em up, and be snappy about it too, boys!”

IV A CHANCE CLUE

It was a holdup pure and simple, appearances would indicate. Jack could see in the uncertain light that each of the men gripped a gat in his fingers, covering the astonished trio; he also made out that they had handkerchiefs covering the lower portions of their faces, which made it all the more interesting, since nothing was lacking to fix the picture in the mind as worthy of the latest movie thriller.

Jack apparently started to raise both hands in obedience to the order so brusquely given but with an incredibly speedy move he suddenly threw out his fight hand and caught the wrist of the nearest holdup man, giving it a twist that compelled the bandit to let his gun fall to the ground.

Then there was Cyclone, true to form as his nick-name would indicate, making a lightning play and leaping on the second bandit with the agility of a Canada lynx pouncing on a bounding rabbit.

This fellow, taken off his guard it seemed, managed to shoot but the bullet went wild and before he could recover enough to do any damage he was being whirled this way and that in the dazzling fashion shown by the cowboy actor in all his pictures and which had gained him his well earned fame.

Poor Perk, who was left in the lurch, there being no third party in sight whom he could tackle, hardly knew what to do – he kept jumping from one whirlagig to the other, endeavoring to get in a swing with his fist but with rather meager success for he feared to exert himself to the utmost since there was danger of the blow coming in contact with a friendly head instead of the one he meant to strike.

Jack had knocked his man down twice by well directed blows but each time the rascal climbed to his feet again, being no mean hand it seemed at a scrimmage. He must have been built along the bulldog line more or less, for even while taking a lot of punishment he still stuck to his guns.

The third time he managed to close in and again they went spinning round and round, held fast in each others' arms, breathing hard, and endeavoring to effect a windup of the struggle.

Perhaps the would-be holdup man may have begun to suspect that the pistol-shot would likely enough bring some one running to the spot – even a cop who may have been on duty not far away, at any rate he began to fight most desperately to break loose, thinking that discretion would be the better part of valor and that “he who fights and runs away, may live to fight another day,” as the old saying has it.

At first, somewhat to Jack's astonishment, he realized the man was trying with might and main to force him toward the open door of the touring car as though it may have been his intention to take him “for a ride.” That significant phrase had become so notorious of late, in accounts of rival gang fights in the big cities of the East, that Jack really began to believe these men aimed to carry him off in their touring car to do something terrible when outside the city limits and then toss him out on the side of the road as a victim to some unknown species of hatred and revenge.

Of course there was no time just then to try and analyze this strange supposition for all his energies must be engaged in endeavoring to down the unknown who was just then locked in his arms.

Cyclone was having a beautiful time, giving his man a full measure of the stuff that lay in those steel muscles of his and which had doped out many a case of k.o. when he was in the prize ring. Indeed the fellow was so confused and befuddled by the cracks he received on his head and chest that he put up only a puny defense.

It proved to be such a one-sided affair that Cyclone felt ashamed to keep doing all the hitting and presently lifting the almost senseless wretch he actually tossed him into the car with a crash.

This seemed to give Jack's opponent a flash of commonsense for he burst out of the encircling arms and dove after his pal, Jack having no desire to follow after and try to drag him out again, since as a rule he was far from being a hog for punishment.

The man lost not a second in starting his machine which went off down the dimly lighted street like a crazy thing, zigzagging from curb to curb, just as Jack remembered seeing shown in comics on the screen.

There was disconsolate Perk, looking as provoked as any one could be, shaking his head, and punching one fist into the other palm.

"Such rotten luck!" he was moaning as he strode around the late battlefield. "Every feller had his hand in but poor me; what've I done to be cheated out o' my share like I was a baby? Why, oh! why wasn't there three bums in the bunch, just enough to go around; dang 'em, why did they want to crab my game like that?"

Jack who could keep from bursting into a loud laugh only through severe measures along the line of repression, managed to soothe the unhappy Perk by judicious words of sympathy.

"If only I'd known you wanted a little exercise so much partner," he observed without the flicker of a smile, "why, I'd have tossed him over to you with pleasure. Then Cyclone here should have slipped you his bird while he was jumping him around at such a great rate. However, it's past now, and the damage can't be mended. Next opening that comes along, brother, I solemnly promise to let you try your hand so it won't get out of practice."

"That's a bargain, Jack old hoss," Perk hastened to say as if anxious to make it a compact between them, "an' I won't say what'll be on the cards when I try an' make up for all the times I've been cheated o' my share o' the gate receipts. Now, what next I wonder?"

"We'll just trot along home and see if there are any hurts needing attention," replied Jack. "That one I tackled could squeeze like a bear but my being able with a hand free to swat him several times in the jowl, made him ease up more or less until in the end he weakened and went skidoo. Come along fellows, let's be hiking into the next street where we put up and get our sleep."

Everybody seemed quite willing to call it the close of a perfect day and let things go at that – the holdup men had long since vanished from view; there was more or less danger of a prowling cop having heard that sound of firing and after summoning help, might be on the way to learn the cause. Not wishing to be mixed up in anything that might hold them in Cheyenne for days awaiting a police court trial, Jack had plenty of good reasons for wanting to depart while the going was good. So they trotted along, arm in arm.

In good order they reached the private house where the two flyers slept and soon were sitting in the most comfortable fashion possible in the apartment. Perk had carefully closed and locked the door, something Jack could not remember him doing all the time they had been housed under that hospitable roof which showed how wrought up Perk must have become.

"An' I'm still a'wonderin' what their silly game could a been," he was saying in a whining tone accompanied with another shake of his head. "None o' us look a bit like bloated plutocrats, 'less it might be Cyclone here but seems like that tall lad was a'tryin' to shove you into his blamed old car, Jack like they wanted to kidnap you – noticed that didn't you?"

"Well it struck me that way too, Perk," he was told unhesitatingly, "which has me guessing good and hard; what reason could they have for wanting to knock me out of the running – taking me for a ride that way?"

"Shucks! partner," commented Perk immediately, "they be a'plenty o' guys who'd laugh to know you an' me'd kicked the bucket, pe'ticularly you, Jack. Some o' them lads you've sent up to the pen might have pals at large who'd be ready to make you cash in for playin' them a trick that cost 'em their liberty. Revenge I kinder guess is a poisonous weed that takes a quick rooting in the average prison bird's heart – sorter helps to make him better able to bear the years he's got to serve. If on'y he could know the man as sent him into quod had been rapped on the head and kicked out o' a speedin' car."

“That makes me think of something,” Jack remarked just then as he rammed a hand down into one of his coat pockets and drew a yellow piece of paper out. “I chanced to see this lying on the pavement after our birds had taken French leave; it may help us to understand what now looks like a dark mystery beyond our solving.”

He glanced at what turned out to be a much handled telegraph sheet with typewriting on one side. Perk showed sudden interest when he saw how his partner seemed startled and uttered an exclamation indicative of pleasure.

V WHEN A COG SLIPPED

“What’s up, partner?” demanded Perk who always admitted to being more or less curious-minded.

“Something I happened to pick up,” replied Jack, grinning happily, “after that chap dived into his car and tore off down the street like a house afire.”

“Huh! strikes me it looks kinder like a telegraph message buddy,” Perk replied eagerly as if he began to smell something like a fire burning.

“Go up head boy, you said it,” his mate told him. “Here, read what it says for yourself – you too, Cyclone, though it’ll be Greek to you since you don’t happen to know the gent who sent it to Cheyenne.”

Perk glued his eager eyes to the yellow slip of paper and as he took in the printed words he held his breath – as if unable to fully grasp the whole meaning of the message with only one reading, he started again, this time going over it aloud.

“Adolph Barkus, 173 Evergreen Street,

“Cheyenne, Wyoming.

“Have received positive information they are in your city. Pay particular attention to the young flyer. Treat him with brotherly kindness and to please me take him for a nice, long ride. Keep me posted. Things down here in something of a snarl. Better drop in and report. I may need you the worst way.

“*Kearns.*”

“Hot ziggetty dog! what d’ye think o’ that measly rum-runner bobbin’ up like a floatin’ cork to annoy us again?”

Perk gave all the signs of annoyance – he clenched his fist, frowned most horribly and drew a long breath as though his feelings threatened to overwhelm him entirely.

“Oh! we landed that gent behind the bars all right,” Jack remarked, taking things much more coolly than the excitable one, “but it’s hard to keep a man with a big wad of long-green shut up – he hires a celebrated lawyer, gets out on heavy bail, has his case postponed on one account or another until witnesses disappear and the public forgets what it’s all about. Like as not he’s as free as either of us, only it may be he’s forbidden to leave the State of Florida pending his trial – you notice the message was dispatched from Jacksonville.”

“From his getting on our track I kinder guess the gent must feel a bit peeved at the firm o’ Ralston an’ Perkiser. Brotherly kindness, eh? – take him for a nice long ride – how swell that’d be – an’ all jest to please Mr. Oswald Kearns, the high light o’ most o’ the schemes hatched up to run in case goods from Bimimi along the Florida shore.”

Then Perk forgot his indignation long enough to grin as though the humorous side of the case struck him.

“Such great luck I never did see,” he burst out, “to think o’ you pickin’ up his telegram so pat after we’d kicked him an’ his slinkin’ pal off the lot. That’s what I’d call incriminatin’ evidence, partner and if ever the case is called an’ we’re sent down to Florida to tell ’bout our part o’ the mess, this message ought to make the jury sit up an’ take notice, sure as I’m born it ought”

“I’ll keep it safe, you can well believe, Perk and I’m not bothering my head about those two sneaks for they’re not apt to give us any further trouble after what happened to them tonight. When this Mr. Barkus discovers how he must have dropped his fine telegram, he’ll suspect it fell into our hands and the chances are he’ll give us a wide berth the rest of our stay in this burg.”

“Jest so Jack, an’ let’s hope we’re goin’ to climb out o’ here right soon now. The dirty scoundrels – wantin’ to give you a *ride*, was they? Which means in these days take a feller off into the country, knock him on the head an’ dump him out on the road like he was a log. Zowie! times is out o’ joint strikes me, when these pesky gangs think nothin’ o’ murderin’ a man ‘cause they don’t like the color o’ his necktie.”

Cyclone had listened to this exchange of conversation between his two companions and the look on his face plainly told that he could not grasp what it was all about.

“I’d like to get a grip on what all this clatter’s about, boys, if neither of you object. I ought to be starting back to Hollywood in the morning for they’re shouting and sending hot wires telling me I’m holding up the show; but since I’m crazy to see that boat of yours, and you promised me a little gallop up among the clouds, I’m bound to wait over till afternoon, no matter what happens to the bunch on the Coast – they c’n use my understudy till I choose to lope along and be hanged to ‘em. Now, what about putting me wise to the game that was sprung on you tonight?”

“Nothing to hinder our telling you what we ran up against down in Florida last winter,” remarked Jack and as they settled back in their chairs in comfort he explained all about the mixup as recorded in the previous volume of this series.

Cyclone proved an attentive listener, eagerly drinking in the particulars – nodding his head approvingly at certain points that appealed especially to his discriminating mind until the finishing stroke had been laid bare when he jumped up to shake hands boisterously with both Jack and Perk and to give vent to his feelings in words.

“By the great horn spoon! so that’s the bully sort of life you fellers in the Secret Service lead, is it?” he exclaimed with flashing eyes and an expression of eagerness on his enraptured face. “Some fine day, after I’ve had a few words with my director and told him where he gets off, I’ll be hanged if I don’t strike out for Washington and try to bore my way into the game you’re following – suits my spirit to the dot – lots of adventure, fair pay and the thrill of turning back these smart alecs who think they own the world because they’ve got a speed boat and the jack to buy a load of hard stuff in the Bahamas that they figure on landing along our coast.”

“That mightn’t be such a bad idea, Cyclone, for a man built like you and who yearns for excitement,” observed Jack sympathetically, for he could understand just how the other must feel. “When you get to that point of kicking over the traces in the picture game let me know and perhaps I can speak a good word for you at Headquarters. They’re always in need of the right sort of men. Remember that, will you, Cyclone?”

“You bet I will Jack, and I mean every word I say, too. I’ve never gone up in an airship yet, but the desire’s been gripping me a heap lately and perhaps, after I make the try tomorrow morning, that you’ve so kindly promised me, the fever’ll get so high I just won’t be able to hold back any longer.”

“That depends on how you come through your examination,” Jack plainly explained. “A lot of boys have an itch to make the raffle, but are turned down because they lack some one of a dozen requirements that are positively essential these modern days to get a pilot’s license. But as far as I can see, you ought to pass with flying colors – no joke intended either.”

They sat there chatting for several hours. Cyclone’s enthusiasm fairly bubbled over at times as he listened to some of the accounts of adventures that had befallen both Jack and Perk in days gone by.

“The more I hear from you boys the sicker I get over the way I’m wasting my young life with foolish cowboy stunts and make believe fights in the pictures. It’s pretty much a fake business and gets on my nerves – even many of the most thrilling scenes are fakes of the worst kind – pulling the wool over the eyes of the simple public. I got a notion I’m built for something that’s genuine and not a fraud – when you lads get into a mess it’s the real thing and you can put your heart in the action without a director yelling at you and ordering it all done over – sometimes as many as five times, till his royal highness is satisfied and you’re all worn to a shred with the hard work. Bah! me for the open and a life of genuine adventure, every time.”

“Je-ru-salem crickets! but you have got it bad, partner!” croaked Perk grinning happily as he spoke. “Goin’ are you, Cyclone? – well, we’ll pick you up about nine on the way to the flyin’ field. So-long – mighty glad we run across you tonight and had a chance to see how you work, them fists o’ yourn. The Service could make good use o’ a few real scrappers and I’d say the chance o’ you buttin’ in is gilt-edged.”

So closed a day that was not without its redeeming features, even Perk being satisfied that things were moving along the line of adventure and excitement.

VI

CYCLONE PROVES GAME

In the morning after they had partaken of a late breakfast, Jack and his pal stepped around the corner to get a taxi, pick up Cyclone as per arrangement and proceed out to the flying field.

“For one thing,” Perk was remarking as they stepped gaily along, “we ain’t noticed any sign o’ them gringos we licked so neat last night. Guess they had their little tummies filled up with excitement and right now may be rubbin’ arnica on their hurts. Wow! but I’d hate to’ve got them socks Cyclone passed on to his party – must have near broke his nose for I saw his face was gettin’ fair bloody when he was snatched up and tossed into the car.”

They found the ex-fighter and cow puncher waiting anxiously for them, he having been abroad early and had his customary morning meal. Later on they arrived at the landing field and found everything “okay” as Perk put it. He had confessed to a little anxiety concerning the safety of their ship but the man they had hired to stand guard had not seen or heard anything suspicious during the entire night.

“Huh! guess they feel too blamed sore this mornin’ to be up an’ around,” was the sensible conclusion arrived at by Perk after his fears had been dissipated and in this summing up of the conditions he was seconded by Jack, likewise their mutual friend, Cyclone Davis.

It was Jack’s custom to always have his ship in condition for an immediate flight – there could be no telling how soon an order might reach them giving directions for a hasty takeoff with their goal any old place as Perk was accustomed to remarking off-hand.

Consequently there was always a full tank of gas on board together with plenty of lubricating oil and all manner of essential things so necessary to a successful flight. Of course, as a rule they could drop down at some wayside landing field for the purpose of replenishing their stores since the whole country was becoming dotted with such necessary places, some of them gorgeously fitted up with everything in the way of landing lights, extra hangars for visiting ships and even service plants for supplying gasoline with little effort.

Cyclone displayed no actual concern as he was secured in his seat by a stout leather strap, having also had the parachute harness fastened to his back. He watched every move of his two experienced companions with eagerness and asked not a few pertinent questions, thus showing his desire to know all there was connected with the flying game.

Then the pilot gave her the gun and they started to move along with constantly accelerated speed until presently Jack lifted his charge and they no longer found themselves in contact with the earth but mounting toward the blue sky overhead.

Up, up they climbed with great spirals marking their course – the earth below began to lose its individual proportions and looked like an immense checkerboard to the thrilled cowpuncher.

Cyclone could be seen twisting his head this way and that, eager to see everything. Perk, noting this, nodded his head as though feeling positive the other was going to fall in love with flying. Dashing across the plains on a cow pony, pursued by made-up Indians and all that regular sort of stuff must seem mighty tame to him after moving through the air at the rate of possibly a hundred and fifty miles an hour with the motor and propeller keeping up a constant roaring sound and all with the consciousness that he was several miles above the earth, amidst floating fleecy clouds, with even the high-flying eagle far, far beneath.

Jack took special pains to give the ambitious comrade such a ride as he could never have imagined, even in his wildest dreams – he put the new boat through all manner of ordinary stunts, even turning over so that they kept going ahead at a fair pace while flying upside-down – he went

through dizzy revolutions, banked sharply and carried on generally as skillful pilots seem to take great delight in doing.

All this never seemed to bother Cyclone a particle – perhaps his experience as a cowboy may have assisted him to meet the numerous thrills without quailing.

Of course he could not talk with either of his friends for hearing was next to impossible since Jack was not making use of the silencer that had been made a part of the “furniture” of the new ship – but he nodded his head joyfully whenever he found Perk watching him with a question in his eye.

The two pilots had their head-phones in position, for they would no doubt like to hold communication from time to time. Thus it happened that Jack, chancing to think of something, addressed his chum.

“Forgot to ask you whether they’d learned anything about our lost friend, Buddy Warner – how about it, Perk?”

The other mechanically shook his head in the negative.

“Nothing doin’ along them lines, sorry to say partner,” he explained. “To be sure there was a’ plenty o’ rumors, but the paper said nobody had learned a blamed thing that’d stand the wash. Afraid Buddy’s gone under an’ that the on’y thing left to do is to come across his crashed boat in some canyon off there in the Rockies. Tough, all right, but then us flyers jest got to look at sech mishaps as all in the line o’ duty – it’s like bein’ a soldier all over again, ready to start out mornin’s without a ghost o’ an idee we’ll be back to eat another meal or write a last letter home.”

“I’m mighty sorry to hear that, Perk. Buddy was a fine boy and everybody liked him. That old mother of his, too, it may be the death of her. Hurts to feel that no matter how many pilots may be scouring the land they just can’t seem to dig up even a little clue to tell where he dropped out of sight and never was heard from again – not even a flower could be dropped on his grave if they wanted to.”

Jack had taken a wild ride through cloudland, going something like two hundred miles and then swinging around to make the return trip after that he had climbed to a ceiling of something like twenty thousand feet until they were all shivering with the frigid air. Still Cyclone never flinched – indeed, he did not even display the slightest inclination to beg Jack to drop down where it was warmer – in fact he showed all the signs of one who would eventually make an exceptionally good flyer, could he but pass his examination successfully.

It was close to high noon when they landed after the most thrilling morning in all Cyclone’s checkered life. Before he said goodbye to his two pals he squeezed their hands, and with a face illumined said in his determined way:

“Me for a pilot’s license, boys and when I’ve done my fifty hours of solo flying and get my papers, behold me making a bee-line for Washington and breaking into Uncle Sam’s Secret Service corps. I’m a fade-out as a movie actor, and I feel that my star of destiny calls on me to be a cloud chaser, getting after law breakers in the air across the land from the Atlantic seaboard to the Gold Coast; ditto on the sea to the ends of the earth. Wish me luck, fellows and here’s hoping that some day we’ll all be pals in a great game. If ever you get to Los Angeles drop in and see me at Hollywood – if I’m still on deck and doing my little stunts rescuing fair maidens and beating the villains black and blue – all in your eye, boys.”

They were sorry to see him go, for Cyclone had turned out to be a most enjoyable companion as Jack told Perk more than a few times.

Since the morning flight had covered so much in the way of stunt flying, speed testing and altitude climbing, Jack decided there was hardly any necessity for their going out again in the afternoon. So they figured on taking things comfortably in their room, catching up with their sadly neglected correspondence, and even getting in a nap or two while waiting for their usual supper hour to come along.

The sun was well down in the western heavens when a knock on their door caused Jack to answer it. Perk could hear him speaking to the lady from whom they hired the room, then Jack came

back examining a yellow bit of paper, meanwhile giving Perk a peculiar look that somehow caused the other to jump up excitedly and exclaim:

“Hot ziggetty dog! that strikes me like a wire, partner, tell me, has our order to strike out and get busy come along – gee whiz! I’m trembling all over with eagerness to know what our next line’s goin’ to be!”

VII THEY ARE OFF!

Jack lost no time in answering the pleading look in Perk's eyes.

"Order's come at last, brother and we're due to skip out of this burg just as soon as we can get a bite to eat."

"Where to, Jack – north, east, south or west?" babbled the pleased Perk.

"Looks like it might be the last you named," he was told.

"And if it ain't a dead secret would you mind tellin' me what sort of a jaunt we're pushed on to this time – is it to be a hunt, partner?"

"I'd say it was, and with a vengeance too," admitted Jack, still holding his chum over imaginary hot coals in that he declined to hasten with the information so urgently desired.

"So that's all settled, hey? And what are we supposed to be huntin', if it's just the same to you to cough up that necessary information – more rum-chasers – bogus money-makers – check raisers, mebbe – runaway cashier with all the bank funds – which is it buddy?"

"Never came within a mile of the right answer," Jack assured him with one of his puzzling smiles. "Fact is, it's a pilot we're ordered to fetch in."

"Pilot – say, do we have to shoot out to sea after a steamship that's carried off its harbor pilot – such rotten luck, when we expected something real big to take up our time and labor – shucks!"

"Wait, you jump at conclusions all too soon, Perk my boy. There happen to be several other kinds of pilots besides those who fetch ocean steamships in and out of New York harbor or the Golden Gate at San Francisco – for instance those on river steamboats, it might be, or those of airplanes!"

"Airships did you say, Jack?" roared Perk, his eyes widening while he clutched the hand that held the telegram as though tempted to try and read the printed words he could just manage to see upon the sheet.

"Yes, air-mail pilot in the bargain," Jack fired at him.

"Hot ziggetty dog! do you mean a *missing* mail pilot and his name is – "

"Buddy Warner – that's right Perk, no other."

The most ecstatic expression imaginable crossed the face of the amiable Perk to proclaim better than any words could ever tell just what he thought of the great news he had just heard.

"I'm *so* glad, partner – nobody could've fetched me better news than what you're telling me right now. If I was asked what I'd like best to do – jest what line o' work I'd be crazy to handle, I'd say it was to take a look in at every pesky canyon and sinkhole along the mountain ranges in hopes o' findin' that fine lad an' fetch him back home to his old mammy. And now you're givin' me my best wish right off the bat. Go on an' tell me what it says, that wire they sent you."

"That we are to drop anything and everything else and start out to help find Buddy Warner; they must think a heap of that mail pilot for our Boss to issue such a broad order as that. It means we've got to jump off before night sets in and head for the western town where he was last seen. It also means we'll be on the job for days, or anyway until we get orders it's no use combing the gullies and ravines and canyons any longer for the missing pilot must be dead."

"Can't strike off any too soon to please me, Jack. I'd even go without any grub if by saving an hour we could have a better chance o' strikin' pay dirt an' turnin' him up alive."

"No such desperate hurry as all that," the other assured him to put a quietus on his nervous desire to be winging their way toward the scene of all the excitement and thus add one more ship to the flotilla already seeking information concerning the whereabouts of the missing mail pilot. "Also, Perk, as nobody knows when we may get another chance to eat, it would be wise for us to take advantage of the present opportunity as well as lay in a little grub for emergencies. For all any one

can say to the contrary it may be our hard luck to get caught in an air pocket and take a tumble just as Buddy probably did when such things would come in mighty handy. I'm leaving that little task for you to handle, Perk, because you're right clever when it's grub that's needed."

"Yeah, I always aim to be that way an' I take it as a compliment you're payin' me when you talk that way. Nobody c'n amount to thirty cents when he hasn't stoked his engine properly with fuel."

"I don't know whether you're on to it or not, brother," pursued Jack as they began to hastily assemble their few possessions preparatory to stepping out; "but I've been clipping every account I could find in the papers you fetched home, covering Buddy's dropping out of sight."

"Huh! I sure did take notice of the fact, but never dreamin' we'd have a peep-in at this wide search. I jest guessed you was enough int'rested to want to compare these here wise-cracks about the cause o' his trouble with what it really must a'been, in case they found the remains o' his crate in some canyon or gully."

"That was one reason," admitted Jack candidly, "but somehow, though I never let on to you, I seemed to have a sort of feeling we might be working on that mystery sooner or later – you might call it an *inspiration* and let it go at that."

"Glory be Jack, an' what have you got in that wise coco o' yourn, if it's all right for you to up an' spill the game?"

"Some time while we're on our way," the other explained just as if he had the thing all laid out, even to the smallest particulars, "while you're running the ship, I mean to go carefully over those newspaper reporters' accounts and try to figure out just what could have happened to bring about Buddy's disappearance – also, find what sort of weather he must have struck right after jumping off from his last port of call to drop mail sacks and pick up others."

Perk thereupon wagged his head as though he began to understand what a skillful way his chum had of getting at the "meat in the cocoanut."

"No wildcat skirmishin', an' heatin' about the bush for *you*, eh partner?" he blurted out in sincere admiration. "An' I'd wager all I got in my jeans you're bound to hit on the real facts when everything's figgered up."

"Don't be too sure about that brother," advised Jack, shaking his head as he spoke, "I'll certainly do my level best, but you never can tell how the cat's going to jump. It's one thing to theorize and quite another to hit on what's the truth. I'll try and separate the wheat from the chaff and by degrees build up a little story of my own that may, and again may not, cover the ground. Now let's clear out of this after we've paid our landlady what we owe for our room, and thank her for being so kind to a couple of forlorn bachelor flyers."

This was soon done and shortly afterwards they sat down to have a last meal in their favorite restaurant, Perk meanwhile having laid in a certain amount of supplies in the way of such food as they could take care of while on the wing.

Then they hastened to the flying field to have their ship hauled out of the hangar, tuned up for the last time and give them an opportunity to "kick-off," as Perk was pleased to call it, before darkness fell.

Perk secretly had been entertaining a little fear lest at the last minute something not down on the bills might spring a leak and bring about an unfortunate delay in their departure – so much time had already passed since the disappearance of the air-mail pilot that another six or ten hours must seem deplorable – but fortunately nothing untoward came along. The ship was trundled to a nearby point where Jack figured they should take off, basing his decision on the way the wind happened to be blowing and after a brief examination they pronounced their air steed to be in perfect trim.

Jack shook hands with the late guardian of their plane as he slipped an extra bill into his possession so too, did Perk thank him warmly concerning the way he had performed his duty for since those enemies had failed in their attempt to "take them for a ride," it had always been possible

for them to cripple the new cloud chaser so that something dreadful was likely to happen when they were a mile from the ground.

Nothing now remained for them to do save settle down in their seats – they had donned their dungarees, fixed their helmets and chute packs and in other ways prepared for a long flight into the west. Already it had grown dusk, although the sun could not be far down below the horizon and very likely they would glimpse his smiling face again when they had climbed toward cloud-land so Jack gave her the gun and with a roar they sped down the field.

VIII

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

Just as they had expected they soon glimpsed the descending sun when they had attained a certain altitude and at the same time the earth far below was almost lost to sight, since the night haze was settling down.

Perk, having nothing else of importance to do, was arranging their headphone apparatus so that in case they wished to make any sort of talk it could be readily carried out in spite of the continuous clamor surrounding them. This new ship was also supplied with that recent invention known as a silencer – long used in connection with firearms by the way, and now applied to the motor of a plane with successful results – Jack had not thought it necessary to bring it into play since it retarded the speed of the ship to some extent and there was no necessity for demanding a cessation of the dreadful clatter and droning.

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