

Newcomb Ambrose

**The Sky Pilot's Great Chase;
Or, Jack Ralston's Dead Stick
Landing**



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CHAPTER I

THE CLANG OF THE FIRE BELL

“Well, I kinder guess now this here little ol’ ho-tel in Salt Lake City’s got our experience in Cheyenne knocked all to flinders. Good room, twin beds that keep you from hoggin’ all the covers on a cool night an’ as to *eats*, say it’s sure prime stuff, though mebbe I ain’t no judge ’long any line ’cept quantity. How ’bout it, Jack, ol’ hoss?”

The happy-go-lucky speaker was an old friend of ours, one Perk, and the companion to whom he addressed his question was his bosom pal, Jack Ralston of the U. S. Secret Service. Nevertheless, it seemed that Perk was now known as Gabe Smith, a woods guide of wide experience who in the course of his wanderings had managed to pick up a smattering of aviation, a particularly useful thing in these air-minded days.

And Jack, whenever there was a third party within hearing,

was always referred to as Mr. John Jacob Astorbilt, a wideawake young millionaire sportsman always seeking novel thrills hunting big game by means of the latest type airship.

All this had a good and sufficient reason back of it, which will be placed before the reader ere we have gone deeply into this log covering the latest undertaking of the two redoubtable sky detectives.

“Oh! things suit me okay, Perk,” was Jack’s rather indifferent reply, as he smiled at his companion’s grinning, enthusiastic face. “Somehow I don’t seem to set quite as much store by my meals as you do but I’ll say the food is pretty decent – better than the restaurant stuff we used to eat three times a day over in old Cheyenne.”

“Hot ziggety dog! I should say so. But what tickles me most of all, partner, is the dandy ship Uncle Sam turned over to us after we climbed out o’ all that hot stuff down on the west coast o’ Florida. She’s a genuine cloud-chaser, boy, an’ don’t take any guy’s dust – am I right ’bout that, Boss?”

“I’ll admit she’s a prize boat and no mistake. Able to drop down on land or water and with skis in place could do the same on a frozen lake or the deepest snow the Northland ever saw. Yes, it would be hard to beat our ship, Perk.”

“Right up to date she is. Look at the shiny aluminum pontoons an’ rubber tired wheels peekin’ out from the bow ends. The Hamilton propeller that does its stuff to the dot; a real Hasler Telmot Flight Meter; aluminum oil tanks so light and yet so

strong; earth-inducter compass next to infallible; Eclipse Starter – gosh amighty, if there’s a single thing worth its salt that our ship ain’t got I’d like to hear ’bout it.”

Jack laughed. He had a whole-souled laugh that did any one good just to hear it – kind of gave you a warm feeling and seemed to draw you into friendly relations with the clear-eyed young aviator.

“Just one thing lacking, partner, in the round-up if you stop to think of it. We felt the need of it on our last jaunt¹ when in the midst of the most dreadful fog-belt either of us had ever struck, we climbed to a ten thousand foot ceiling only to have ice begin to form on our wings. Haven’t forgotten that, eh, Perk old fellow?”

“Ginger pop an’ the weasel! I guess now I ain’t. You’ve crabbed my game, buddy, that’s what you’ve done. But as we ain’t, so far, been sent to the South Pole to help get an explorer out o’ his bad fix in the ice, I kinder guess we don’t need that ice meltin’ device much. Got to draw a line somewhere you know, Boss, else the ship’ll be so loaded down with new contraptions there won’t be any storage room for the grub-pile!”

“And sure enough that’s where the shoe would pinch, Perk. Grub, and plenty of it is the real necessity to have aboard. It bobs up just three times a day right along and with mighty long waits between according to your way of looking at it.”

“You said it, partner! I’ve tried goin’ shy on the eats but it don’t seem to work worth a red cent. Right away there’s a mutiny

¹ See “*Wings Over the Rockies*.”

breaks put under the midship hatch an' I jest *got* to surrender. But, to change the subject, I'm botherin' my poor brain tryin' to figger out which way we'll face when the orders come breezin' along?"

Jack chuckled as he lolled back in his comfortable easy-chair for they chanced to be sitting in their third-floor hotel room while engaging in this little confab.

"It's a toss-up I'd say, Perk," he remarked a bit mysteriously. "You know the whole wide world is our hunting ground as you've so often boasted. International crooks breed a like species of detectives. When they take to flying, the Secret Service has to go them one better. Our familiarity with airships helped to rustle this job for us and we've got to make good, no matter whether we fly to Japan, India, South Africa or any other old country under the sun."

Perk displayed the proper amount of enthusiasm as this wide subject came along, for his eyes sparkled, and he grinned broadly.

"You bet, Jack ol' hoss," he blurted out, "an' like's not the slick way we put through that last deal down on the west Florida coast, fetchin' the king o' booze smugglers back with us to the bar o' justice has made us solid with the Head at Washington."²

"I shouldn't wonder buddy," was all Jack said, not being given to blowing his own horn as Perk often did, being only human as he would explain, and knowing a good thing when he saw it.

"We dropped in at this 'ere airport," Perk continued, "cordin'

² See "*Eagles of the Sky*."

to orders a hull week back, sailin' under new names to hide our identities an' here we be, killin' time an' waitin' to make a bee line for any place that happens to be in need o' cleanin' up. We're the boss outfit for that sorter job, on'y I'd give a heap to know what's what."

"That's a weakness of yours, Perk. Now in my case it doesn't give me one minute's uneasiness. Whether I'm working in Paris, Cairo or Timbuktu makes no difference, I calculate on getting enough to eat, pick up plenty of sleep and beat the game if its possible. Nothing else will satisfy me, as you pretty well know, brother."

"When I happen to wake up in the small hours o' the night, Jack, I just get bothered 'bout the next layout and sometimes wonder if I'm right then an' there across the Pacific or playin' a swift game down in Nicaragua f'r instance. Feels a whole lot like we might be reg'lar gypsies, changin' our camp every night."

"Well, what of it?" demanded Jack, looking vastly amused. "It wouldn't be the first time that name was applied to me for you remember when I first broke into this game it was as a gypsy pilot, doing stunts with my 'chute at county fairs and Harvest Homes all around the country. That name always did sound kind of sweet in my ears. I like it to this day, in fact."

"Mebbe now, it might be that you could give a sorter guess 'bout that job we're goin' to have tacked on to us right away? How 'bout it, old hoss?"

"Oh! that doesn't concern me one whit, Perk. Just hold your

horses and take things as they come. There's a bit of fun being kept in the dark about these affairs. Makes me think of the times we used to have grab-bags at church fairs, when you paid a penny or a nickel and pulled out something queer. Say, didn't we feel a great big thrill just before making the grab? Take things easy and let the folks at Headquarters do most of the worrying. That's what I call logic, buddy."

"Huh! mebbe so," grunted Perk, eyeing his comrade quizzically as though more than half suspecting that if Jack chose, at least he could give a fairly good guess covering their next thrilling assignment. "But that sorter philosophy don't cut any figger when I lie awake nights cudgelin' my slow-workin' brains an' tryin' to get the answer. But then, like as not, we ain't goin' to stick to this queer old burg much longer an' I sure do hope the wire givin' us full directions in cipher comes along right soon."

Jack Ralston, as the readers of the three preceding stories in this series of Sky Detective adventures already know, had been building up quite an enviable reputation in the Secret Service of the Government, being entrusted with a number of the most important tasks that were cropping up from time to time.

These necessitated not only a cool head, quick decisions and plenty of nerve, but also demanded a thorough knowledge of aeronautics, since many malefactors in these very modern days were taking to the air in order to facilitate their unlawful operations so that it had become necessary to meet them on their

own grounds and go them one better.

His best pal was Gabe Perkiser, whose odd name was usually shortened to Perk. He was fully ten years older than Jack and at the time our country entered the World War chanced to be connected with the balloon corps so that for some time he found himself a manipulator of an observation balloon, better known as a "sausage."

Tiring of this monotonous life, the active Perk took up aviation. Here he was in his element and few there were during those mad months when the American army was breaking the Hindenburg line and pushing through the terrible thickets and machine-gun nests of the Argonne, who attained a higher rating as a fearless pilot than Gabe Perkiser.

He had numerous glorious victories to his credit, having sent down many enemy flyers in blazing coffins but eventually met with a serious mishap that sent him to a field hospital and kept him out of the rest of that frightful campaign.

Recovering in due time, Perk had come back to the States bent on securing some sort of employment that would give him all the excitement his system demanded. This he found when he joined the Northwest Mounted Police of Canada. The fact that one of his parents had been born across the line while the other was a Maine Yankee, gave Perk the opening he desired and his yearning for adventure after that was never left unsatisfied.

But after a while he even began to tire of such a lonely life as his duties entailed and floated down once more to the country

of his birth. There by some happy accident Jack ran across him and recognizing a kindred spirit, he induced Perk to apply for a position in the Secret Service.

Still later, when he had been detailed to make use of his ability as an air pilot to carry on with a certain job that had been placed in his hands, Jack remembered Perk. It was essential that he have an assistant aboard his ship and so he negotiated matters so that Perk was ordered to report to him and act as co-pilot for an indefinite length of time, an arrangement that gave both the greatest satisfaction possible.

They were after all a well matched pair. What one lacked the other possessed in abundance. Jack was able to hold his more impulsive comrade in check when safety first became their watchword, and on the other hand when a show of dash and vigor was the order of the day, Perk was apt to take the lead and strike terror in the hearts of the enemy.

Naturally enough inaction became irksome to Perk and he fretted because he loathed remaining quiet when his whole system was calling for accomplishing things.

Jack, of course, was the one who laid out the plan of campaign, he being much better fitted for such essential matters. Perk on the other hand really needed some one above to give him the order and check his impulsiveness on occasion. So they got on together admirably, and worked like a well matched team.

To be sure Jack sometimes knew a bit more than he chose to tell Perk but he always had good and sufficient reasons for

holding back such information and his lack of knowledge, until such time as his leader saw fit to take him wholly into his confidence, did Perk no harm whatever.

It did, however, cause him to lie awake nights wondering and speculating as to what would be next on the program. He would try his best to tempt Jack to commit himself but all to no purpose, for the other put him off with one plea or another with Perk returning to the attack time and again.

They had had their wonderfully efficient plane lodged in a hangar out at the flying field where just so often each day an air-mail pilot was scheduled to arrive or depart with the letter sacks of the Post Office Department. This courtesy had been bestowed upon them by a Mr. Spencer Gibbons a private flyer and a man of considerable means who came and went as his fancy dictated.

He had met Jack while the latter, under strict injunctions from the Department, was posing as a young and enthusiastic air-minded millionaire and had given him the use of the single-ship hangar while he, Gibbons, was off on a jaunt that took him down to the Mexican border, but as he was expected back at any time now they had changed the location of their amphibian that same afternoon. It now rested secure in another nearby hangar that happened to be empty and which Jack could hire, being liberally supplied with funds by his generous employer, Uncle Sam.

This was only a minor incident, and yet it was fated to play an important part in the general network of things, and hence to be the cause of many speculations on the part of the two chums.

Perk, acting under the direction of his mate, had taken a vast amount of pleasure in loading up a supply of commodities. These consisted of the ordinary supplies, such as an old and experienced camper would be apt to put down on his list and possibly a few special dainties that particularly appealed to Perk's appetite and which he meant to spring upon his fellow flyer at some convenient time when both of them happened to be ravenously hungry and there came a chance to build a cooking fire.

Then too, it was always their day by day plan to keep a full stock of fuel and lubricating oil aboard their boat since there never would be much warning given them when the order to hop-off came by telegraph.

They seldom allowed a favorable flying day to pass by without going aloft in order to keep in practice and also be certain the precious ship was in first class condition for immediate service. As they had not had possession of the wonder plane for any great length of time, Jack was always finding out some fresh discovery calculated to increase his admiration for his craft and evoke a volley of expressions from the voluble Perk.

The sun had already set and dusk was beginning to gather, telling them it was about time to descend to the dining room and partake of their customary evening meal. After that Perk would doubtless wander around to the nearest moving-picture palace and allow his feverish soul to have full swing in the excitement depicted on the silver screen.

Just then there came along one of those little incidents that

sometimes turn out to have unsuspected potentialities. Perk seemed to catch it first, for he jumped up and broke loose by crying:

“Hear that, partner? The fire alarm as sure as you’re born and me, always like a little kid, crazy to run with the engine and watch the fire boys go through with their thrillin’ stunts. Come along, buddy – supper c’n wait a bit for us an’ we’ll be all the hungrier at that. Snatch up your hat an’ let’s go!”

II

TRAPPED BY THE FLAMES

Jack seemed perfectly willing to accompany his chum, even if it did put a damper on their supper. Possibly he was like the vast majority of American youngsters in his youth, and could never resist the lure of a fire.

Accordingly they hurried down to the lower floor and dashed outside.

“Which way now, partner?” gasped Perk who was a bit short of wind after making that rush downstairs, not waiting to use the elevator. “I don’t see any glow in the sky to tell where the blaze c’n be.”

“Follow the crowd – that’s our only cue, Perk,” Jack hastened to say. “Listen to all that row – must be a fire engine heading to the spot; ought to set us right, I reckon.”

“Sure thing, Boss an’ here she comes a rushin’ along like an express train – no hosses though, these days which knocks a whole lot o’ the picture silly. On your way, John Jacob, I’m with you!”

They ran like deer, side by side. Others were streaming ahead, everybody displaying the utmost zeal to get to the fire before the conflagration was smothered by the streams of water turned on it.

Perk was in his glory – this sort of thing appealed to his nature

as a pond would to a flock of thirsty ducks. Only for his lack of wind he might have indulged in a few cowboy whoops as he tore up one street and down another, touching elbows with his pard and eagerly straining his eyes in the hope of presently detecting a gust of smoke that would proclaim their arrival at the scene of operations.

“Thar she blows!” Perk suddenly gasped, “see that black smudge blowin’ in from a side street ol’ hoss? Jest one more burst an’ we’ll be Johnny on the spot! Wow! ain’t this glorious sport though?”

Jack made no answer, since there was nothing to say and he needed all his breath to keep going, not yet having caught his second wind.

Already a large crowd had gathered and was milling this way and that, trying in every way possible to catch a better view of the house that was the object of all these activities. Several engines had arrived and were making a great noise as they began to throw streams of water on the imperiled building as well as its near neighbors that would soon be in danger should the fire get a better start.

“Whee! smoke aplenty but so far I don’t lamp any fire,” Perk was saying in disjointed fragments as he and Jack stopped running and commenced to make their way through gaps in the moving crowds.

“A four-story frame building,” observed Jack as though that fact gripped his attention first of all, “and looks like it might be

a tenement in the bargain.”

“I kinder guess you’re ’bout right there, partner.” Perk chimed in. “See the women and kids huddled up over yonder, some o’ ’em holdin’ bundles o’ stuff they’ve grabbed up when they hurried to get out! Ain’t that too bad, though – the poor things, to git burned out o’ their homes.”

It was a picture well calculated to wring the heart of a softy like Perk. Apparently all of the tenants had managed to get clear of the smoke-filled halls for the police officers standing guard at the exit were preventing any of the wildly excited women from rushing back into the building, doubtless with the intention of saving some beloved article which had a value in their eyes far in excess of its intrinsic one. Although they fought desperately to push past, the stern guardians of the law stood between and held them back, as if acting under the belief that such an act would be sheer suicide with all that dense smoke filling the halls and stairways.

“There, I saw a flash of flame jest then, Jack!” suddenly ejaculated Perk and if there was a little tinge of satisfaction in his voice it was hardly to be wondered at, the old boyish spirit rising up superior to his feeling of sympathy for the unfortunate families thus dispossessed of their humble homes.

Jack himself had noted the fact, although he made no remark, only shook his head sadly as if recognizing the fact that despite the fight put up by the fire laddies the frame building was very likely doomed.

They stood there and watched operations for some little time meanwhile other engines had come up, attached their hose to convenient hydrants and added fresh streams to those already drenching the buildings.

“Hot ziggetty dog! this here is gettin’ some monotonous, partner,” Perk finally remarked, “mebbe after all we’d show good sense by hikin’ back to the hotel and tacklin’ that grub.”

“Don’t be in such a big hurry, buddy,” objected the other who usually did prove to be some sticker, as Perk often observed, “since we’ve gone and made the run we ought to see a bit more of the fire. Supper will keep and besides, you’re likely to have a bigger vacuum to be filled. What say to taking a turn around and getting a view from another quarter?”

“That ain’t a bad idea boy, let’s get a move on,” agreed Perk who always liked a change of base when it promised further novelty.

“Come this way then,” Jack told him, starting to the left, “the crowd thins out off yonder, and we’ll be able to push through much easier. They still keep on coming though; men, women and lots of children who’d be better off at home I reckon still, what would you have? Chances are the average kid is just as wild to run with the fire engine as when we went into action!”

“Seems like it,” chuckled Perk, grinning amiably at a bunch of half-grown lads who had just come up and were staring goggle-eyed at the red streaks of leaping fire that appeared frequently amidst all the dense smoke.

Jack had been right in choosing to take the left turn, for they presently had everything to themselves. Evidently the other side of the building presented the most picturesque part of the conflagration, for hardly a straggler was met as they pursued their way.

“Here’s the rear of the tenement,” Jack remarked in a loud voice for the assembled steamers were kicking up so much noise that it was not easy to make himself heard. “See, they’re trying to wet down the building that backs up so close to the one that’s afire. It’s a four-story one at that and luckily built of brick, which may save it from catching fire.”

There seemed to be a rear entrance for a cop was standing guard there, apparently to keep any frantic tenant from rushing inside in the mad hope of rescuing some cherished object that had been forgotten in the frantic dash from the building earlier in the evening.

Flames were now coming out of several windows in the upper part of the doomed structure. On seeing this Jack lost all hope of the house being saved through the heroic efforts of the striving firemen.

“It’s bound to go, Perk,” he remarked, “I’m sorry for those poor families that stand to lose everything they’ve got in the wide world. Such as they never have a red cent of fire insurance. Look at that burst of flame will you? Small chance anybody’d have if they were unfortunate enough to get trapped up there!”

“Ugh! don’t mention it, partner!” cried the shocked Perk, his

gaze fixed on the red tongues that kept flickering out of the upper windows like angry demons. “Many a time I’ve dreamed I was in a fire-trap like this here, an’ had to slide down the water-pipe with greedy fingers like them flames up there settin’ my clothes afire, singein’ my hair and eyebrows an’ nigh chokin’ me in the bargain. I’ll dream o’ this for a month o’ Sundays but ain’t it a thrillin’ sight though?”

That was just like honest-hearted Perk – filled with pity for those who stood to lose all their scanty earthly possessions, yet fascinated and duly thrilled by the fire itself and the whole surrounding panorama.

A minute afterwards Perk burst out in most intense excitement, gripping his chum’s arm with a strained clutch as he cried:

“Je-ru-sa-lem crickets! now ain’t that a danged shame though?”

“What do you mean buddy?” demanded Jack, also thrilled.

“Up yonder at that third-story window where the smoke’s comin’ out in big whoops – I certain sure did see a poor woman reach out, wringin’ her hands like she was hopin’ they started to set the ladders up – then she fell back again in the smoke – oh! Jack, she’s goin’ to be smothered an’ burned to a crisp if nobody c’n get to her in time!”

III

BRIDGING THE GAP

“Which window, Perk?” cried the startled Jack, staring upward.

“That one – third from the further end – gee whiz! like I might be in a cutout – brain all in a mixup – what c’n we do, Boss – knock that cop over an’ skoot upstairs?”

“Not any of that stuff, buddy,” Jack told the impulsive one in his impressive fashion. “He represents the Law, and so do we. Besides, look at the smoke rolling out of that rear door, it would be the last of us if we started that fool racket.”

“But – somethin’s *got* to be done, Jack – we jest can’t stand here and let a poor woman be burned to death. Do somethin’ partner, ’cause I’m flyin’ blind in a messy fog and can’t see where I ought to head.”

His voice and manner were both imploring, and Jack could not but be impressed by the gravity of the occasion.

“Sure you saw some one are you, Perk?” he demanded.

“Jack, I got good eyesight, an’ – looky there, right now, she’s back at the same window an’ *will* you b’lieve me if she ain’t got a kid alongside her? Wouldn’t that jar you, ol’ hoss?”

Jack no longer entertained any doubt regarding the truth of what his comrade had seen for he too could dimly make out

moving figures at the third window from the end of the burning tenement.

“They’re makin’ motions to us right now!” sang out the greatly distressed Perk in new agony of mind. “I swan if I don’t think they’re meanin’ to make the jump an’ it’d be a crack-up dead sure!”

Startled by his own works Perk began to make violent gestures, as though endeavoring to warn the frightened woman not to dream of jumping.

“Hold your hosses – we’ll get goin’ an’ have you out o’ that mess in a jiffy;” and then turning upon his companion Perk almost savagely demanded: “It’s up to us, Jack – now how’re we goin’ to do it?”

“There’s only one chance that I can see,” Jack told him, “which is by way of this other building here. We must rush up to the third floor and if luck backs us we can find some way of passing over to her room – see, it’s only a matter of five or six feet at most. Come on, buddy!”

“Whoop! here we go then!” thundered Perk, making one more sweep of his arms as if to reassure the trapped inmate of the tenement and then rushing in the wake of the fast moving Jack.

Several people were emerging from a rear door of the brick building, and lugging all manner of household things in a mad endeavor to save cherished possessions. Evidently they had been seized by an overpowering fear that the fire might leap to their establishment and acting under this impression were hardly

conscious of what they were doing.

Indeed, it began to look as though they might so block the narrow passage with the stuff they sought to salvage that no one could either get up or down. Jack was finding it difficult to push past and had almost to climb over a bulky bundle of bedding that had become lodged in the passage.

Perk, more impetuous, bowled over a stout man who had come down the stairs dragging a trunk, that banged and skittered in a dangerous fashion.

By great good luck and the exercise of some muscle, they both managed to brush past the blockade and the stairs seemed free above them. The first landing was reached and the second almost immediately afterwards; then came the final climb and the two pals, almost breathless, reached the third floor.

There was enough illumination for them to see what lay about them for the fire seemed to be breaking out of all the upper windows by this time and despite the thick smoke, shone through into the interior of the brick tenement.

Smoke had found entrance too, and made their eyes smart but that was a small matter and could be tolerated with such a vital stake in view.

Perk saw his companion take a swift look around as though to get his bearings, after which he turned to the left and ran along the hall. By this time Perk, a bit bewildered and confused, was willing to follow wherever Jack saw fit to lead, so in blind confidence he put after the other.

A door stood open as if inviting the would-be rescuers to enter a room which Jack lost no time in doing, with Perk at his heels, both of them groping about amidst whirls of pungent smoke.

One of the two windows was open, which would account for the presence of that dense blanket and like a shot Jack jumped over to thrust out his head so as to ascertain whether his guess had been worth while.

He saw the greedy banks of flame shooting out, across and up, and felt it almost scorching his cheeks but just the same it was a satisfaction to discover he was exactly opposite the third window from the end of the burning building.

“This the right place?” Perk was booming in his ear for what with the roaring of the fire, the pumping of the steamers down below and the shouts of deeply interested crowds in every quarter, the clamor was indeed something fierce and impressive, stirring the blood in their veins and causing their hearts to beat wildly.

“Yes – that window right across this gap, Perk, is the one we picked out!”

“Je-ru-sa-lem crickets! I kinder guess I c’n make the riffle!”

Jack managed to catch hold of the reckless fellow as he was in the act of clambering up on the sill of the window, undoubtedly with the full intention of making a desperate attempt to jump across, to the one from which the smoke was pouring forth.

“Don’t think of trying it – a crazy idea – one chance in ten you’d get across without falling!” he shouted in the ear of the

struggling one.

“Gosh! let me make the try, partner – sure I c’n do such a little stunt okay – let off, won’t you, Jack?” pleaded Perk, but the other only tightened his grip.

“Even if you did manage to hang on and climb inside, what good would it do – how get the woman and child across the gap?” Jack roared, feeling that his comrade was losing all the sense he ever had.

Perk suddenly ceased struggling as though he had seen a great light.

“Wall, I guess you ditched me, ol’ hoss – that’s a fact they couldn’t make it after all. Then what’s to be done?” he went on to say, dejectedly.

“We’ve got to bridge it some way or other,” snapped the ever ready Jack. “This is a kitchen, seems like, partner – jump into it now, and see if you can’t run across something that would reach across to that other window – even an ironing-board might make it. I’ll take a look across the hall, in some other apartment, and may run across another.”

Perk, as if freshly inspired, set about his commission with alacrity and almost immediately made a plunge toward a corner of the small room to snatch up a six-foot board covered with several thicknesses of cloth that was scorched in numerous places as with a hot iron.

Jack had meanwhile darted into the hall, discovered another open door nearly opposite and without knocking rushed through

to find a second deserted kitchen and not quite so much smoke to interfere with his vision.

Fortune again favored him, for almost the first object he saw was a similar ironing-board, evidently a mate to that Perk had run across. Snatching it up he turned and hurried back to the opposite room, where he found Perk just laying his frail plank across the area to discover that it bridged the gap, although with but a mite to spare.

Jack arrived just in time for the rash one was in the very act of crawling out on his unsteady bridge which, if moved a few inches, would have precipitated him down thirty feet and more to land upon a cement pavement and meet with grievous injuries, even if he survived the drop.

“Hold on!” Jack shouted as he again caught hold of his chum. “Here’s a second board that will widen the bridge. Let’s swing it across and then one hold them together while the other crawls over!”

“Yeah, let’s,” Perk chimed in, seeing the advantage a double width would afford, and this was quickly accomplished.

“I’ll go over,” Jack was saying.

“Not much you won’t – that’s *my* job I’m tellin’ you partner!” the other insisted, pushing Jack aside.

“But – I’m younger than you, Perk, spryer too – it ought to be my game, don’t you see?”

“The devil you are!” whooped the one who would not be denied. “I’m stronger an’ tougher’n you ever be, boy – an’ I saw

'em first, too! Let me have my way, *please*, partner, won't you?"

Jack, realizing that it would be the utmost folly for them to keep on disputing in this fashion while the very seconds were so valuable when human lives were in jeopardy, gave up the contention.

"All right, Perk, you win, but I'll go next time, remember. Make up your mind I'll keep the boards close together – be as easy as you can when crossing. Now, go to it!"

Already Perk was out on the strange bridge on hands and knees, crawling toward the opposite window while Jack, gripping the ends of the two boards with all his strength, held them steady. It was a tense moment and one not soon to be forgotten.

By this time it seemed that two of the firemen down below holding the nozzle of a hose and sending a stream of water up to the roof of the doomed tenement building had discovered what was being done, for they raised their hoarse voices to applaud the daring bridge creeper. It was all in the line of their own daily work and they surely could appreciate the venturesome act at its full value.

Jack had a dread lest they change the direction of the stream, hoping thus to sprinkle the climber and render him immune to that heat which they must know would be almost unbearable so close to those darting billows of fire but fortunately they did nothing of the sort, doubtless realizing how frail that mockery of a bridge must be and how the shock of a volume of water might cause it to break away.

A few seconds of dreadful suspense and then Perk vanished from view, having passed into the room through the third window from the end of the tenement. Jack almost ceased breathing, so thrilled was he lest that might be the last glimpse he would ever have of his pal.

IV

THE RESCUE

There was some sort of a movement across the way – then to Jack's great relief he saw Perk's head appear in the open window.

He had a small figure in his arms – the boy, undoubtedly and was already starting out upon the bridge. Jack could see no sign of life about the little child and had some fear that the rescue might have been too late to save him from being smothered by that dense smoke.

Just then he also discovered that another figure had appeared back of Perk, and readily guessed this must be the woman. She seemed to be holding the ends of the ironing boards as though possessed of a deadly fear lest they slip from the stone coping and precipitate both child and rescuer to their death in a wild plunge.

That caused Jack to tighten his own hold for Perk was having considerably more trouble in making his return than on his previous crossing since he now had to push the child ahead of him, being unable to navigate and hold a burden, however helpless, in his arms.

Again the firemen below were shouting words of praise and encouragement to the gallant soul that so fearlessly risked his own life for that of another. With them such exploits came in line with their duty, but in this case it was simply an act of humanity.

Jack waited until Perk had pushed the child against his hands, then cautiously he loosened his grip on the right board and dragged the light weight over the window sill to safety. Perk clambered in and immediately made a suggestive move as though about to turn around and do his stunt all over again but Jack refused to stand for such a thing.

“You’ve had your inning, buddy, so don’t be hoggish,” he bawled as he shoved Perk aside, “now it’s my turn. Take hold, and keep the boards as steady as you can while I fetch the woman across.”

Perk was very loath to obey and doubtless did a lot of grumbling, but Jack paid no further attention to him, just began to creep out on that narrow bridge, and move ahead inches at a time. He dared not look down lest it have some sinister effect upon his nerve – just kept his eyes firmly fixed upon that window toward which he was creeping.

The poor woman was still in sight, wringing her hands and yet evidently satisfied to know her child had been safely carried across the abyss that yawned there so threateningly. Jack would have liked to call out and beg her to keep quiet lest she chance to dislodge one of the frail supports upon which so much depended but he also feared lest he himself in thus shouting cause immediate trouble and defeat his purpose.

The crossing was made in safety. It was simply wonderful how those twin planks held together when the necessity was so great. Jack would never be able to look upon such an humble kitchen

necessity again, whether in a house or a hardware store window display, without feeling warmly drawn toward the mute object on which his very life now depended.

He crawled through with a tongue of flame darting down and almost licking his cheek. It was necessary that he should get the woman to go out ahead of him, so that he could encourage her as they crept along.

“Steady yourself, madam,” he called out as he felt her hands come in contact with his arm, “it’s all right – your boy is safe, and you will be too if you get a grip on your nerve and do what I tell you.”

She was evidently badly shaken as might be expected – he could see how she trembled and seemed so weak, which was why he spoke as he did, in the hope of putting a little new confidence in her almost fainting heart.

“You must crawl out ahead of me,” he told her. “Don’t look down – keep your eyes on the window where my pal waits for you – just keep saying to yourself that your boy is over there waiting for you – he needs you, and you must be brave now. There is no other way by which you can be saved to join him again. Can you make the venture, lady?”

He used that last word almost inadvertently, yet already had he decided that she was indeed a lady, though poorly dressed and evidently under financial difficulties.

He must have inspired his charge with some of his own valor, for he saw her cease trembling and knew full well it had been his

mention of a reunion with her child that had effected this change.

“Yes, oh yes, I will be brave – for Adrian’s sake, my baby boy!” he heard her cry as she started to creep out of the window amidst all that smoke and the devilish tongues of fire that darted after her as if in rage at being cheated of their intended prey.

Carefully did Jack follow after her, ready to throw out a helping hand should she make the slightest slip and be in danger of falling. But to his surprise and delight as well, she seemed to be supported by some miraculous power for she made the short passage without a single mishap.

Perk made no effort to drag her through the opening – to do so he would have had to take his hands from his job of holding the ends of the planks and this might lead to a sudden shift that would bring about the very disaster he had been dreading. His one thought now was the safety of his pal – the woman was capable of passing over the sill of the window without any assistance.

When, therefore, Jack came over the bridgehead and landed on the floor, the impulsive and thrilled Perk threw his arms about him, words failing him just then.

“We must get out of this,” Jack managed to say, as soon as he could catch his breath again, “the fire is almost sure to jump across that gap and start things in this building unless firemen climb up here and hold it in check. Perk take up the child, who I see is beginning to come to all right. I’ll help his mother down the stairs. We’re all safe and sound, lady, so keep as nervy a front as you can.”

Perk cuddled the little chap to his breast and Jack was tickled to see the boy clasp his own chubby arms around the other's neck as though he realized something of what Perk had done for him and loved him for that.

The descent was made slowly for there was more or less danger of one of them slipping and having a bad fall – but presently the last flight of narrow rear stairs had been negotiated and they came to the open door that led into the alleyway and safety.

They were just in time too, for a party of firefighters with a slack hose were just entering the brick tenement, evidently with the intention of dragging it to an upper window where, with the water turned on, they could fight the hungry flames at close quarters and at least keep the second building from being involved in the common destruction.

Perk might have been bothered to know what next to do but not the versatile Jack who led the woman out of the crowd and then looked around for some vehicle in which she and the boy could be taken to a hospital, for he had discovered that one of her arms seemed to hang at her side, as though it may have been broken in the excitement.

Fortunately a taxi chanced to come along into which they all bundled and were taken to the hospital. The boy sat in Perk's lap and his preserver seemed to take positive delight in holding one of the little chap's hands. Noticing how fond Perk seemed to be of children – and this was not the first time he had learned of this

fact, since he had one of his humorous smiles for almost every child – and dog – he met – Jack wondered why his elder pal had never married but that was a subject Perk never mentioned nor had Jack felt it his province to make inquiries, since there are some things that are no one's business.

A doctor quickly examined the mother's arm and admitted that one of the bones was fractured. It was not a bad break, however, and she could be around with her arm in a sling after he had attended to it.

Somehow, although as yet supperless, neither of the chums seemed in any hurry to get away. Perk was held by his attraction toward the chubby little boy and as for himself he felt concerned with regard to what the pair they had saved would do, since they no longer had a home and all of their scanty possessions must have been devoured by those greedy flames.

He determined not to abandon them until he had learned how the mother was fixed with regard to this world's goods. Somehow, although she dressed very simply, there was an air of refinement about her that impressed Jack very much and he also had an idea she could not be in straightened circumstances for she was wearing a ring of considerable value, he noticed.

He managed to enter into conversation with her after she had tried to tell him she would never forget what he and his friend had done for her that night. He had listened with his customary smile, shaking his head meanwhile, as if to belittle their actions.

“We could not have done less, after we saw that the firemen

had not placed any ladder up to that third floor,” he went on to tell her. “And then, you see my chum here, who lives only for excitement, was just complaining that things were so humdrum and dull so it tickled him to have a chance to test his nerve again. And you can see he’s especially fond of little boys, not girls. We expect to leave Salt Lake City any hour now as we are aviators, – flying men you know – and have a job ahead of us. Before saying goodnight to you, madam, would you mind telling us if we can be of any further assistance to you and your fine boy here – pardon me for mentioning it, but are you supplied with present funds, since possibly you may have to remain here in the hospital for a week or more?”

She looked at him and smiled as though pleased with the solicitude he showed but she shook her head and hastened to say:

“We are not what you would call poor, for we have good friends back of us. Indeed, it was my intention to start for Spokane tomorrow as I must try to find a certain party whose present whereabouts means everything to me. So please do not worry about us, for we can get on. It was a furnished flat we occupied and while I have lost all my clothes as well as those of Adrian, that lack can easily be replaced. I thank you for your card giving me your Washington address. Some day perhaps you may hear from me and possibly I shall have some pleasant news to tell you but just now it is all wrapped up in mystery. So much depends on my finding the one who does not dream of the information we are carrying to him. If only my clue proves trustworthy.”

That was as much as Jack learned and it was bound to often come up in his mind, causing him to wonder what the “good news” she mentioned could be.

V

AT THE FLYING FIELD

It was pretty late when they sat down to supper that night but as Jack had predicted, the appetite of his chum was amply recompense for the delay. They had done a good deed and best of all managed to get away before any inquisitive newspaper men arrived at the hospital on the track of a sensational beat.

“Which pleases me a whole lot,” Jack went on to say as they started eating.

“Same here ol’ hoss,” added Perk, with unction. “Once them chaps get on the scent o’ a good story they never do let up till it’s spread out on the front page after bein’ blue-penciled by the city editor. I know how it’s put through, ’cause I got some pretty good friends in the bunch – they’re all wool an’ a yard wide on everything ’cept pokin’ their noses into the private affairs o’ citizens and couples that jest *can’t* get on in double harness.”

“Just imagine what a nasty shock it’d be to us both Perk, to see our names and pictures staring at us under a scare line of black type – yes, and like as not with as much as they could scrape together about our private business – nice way to upset all the plans of Secret Service hounds on the trail of big game, I must say.”

“Honest, I didn’t give away a single thing, buddy,” said Perk

with unusual earnestness, which was as good as an invitation for Jack to clear his skirts of the same suspicion, which he hastened to do.

“I simply gave her my address in Washington – at my room, you understand, Perk – I wanted her to write to me later on so we could know how they both came out after that nasty squeeze play. Not a whisper what line of business we followed and I asked her as a particular favor not to let a single soul know who the two parties were to whom she and her boy owed their narrow escape from being trapped in that burning house. She said the name would never pass her lips and that she would write, after something she was bound to accomplish had been put through. Of course I couldn’t even give more than a guess what that is, only she seemed dreadfully in earnest and I reckon it might be a reconciliation with her husband, Adrian’s father.”

Perk nodded his head solemnly.

“Huh! mebbe so, Jack, mebbe so, lots o’ that sort o’ trouble goin’ ’round these days, seems like. Now I wonder if you thought to ask what her name might be?”

“Queer that I didn’t think to do that, partner,” Jack told him with a little laugh. “I reckon I must have been a little absent-minded but that’s nothing to us for chances are we’ll never meet the lady again. How about you and the boy?”

“He told me his name, Jack, when he gave me this little picture he happened to have in his pocket – you see on the back it’s got written, I guess by his Mom herself: ‘Adrian, at six’; but tarnation

take the luck if I ain't jest plumb forgot the last name he told me – somethin' like Burnham or Barnard – begins with a B, I'm dead sure – Buster, Bramley – Buttons – well, for the love o' mike I can't strike oil but it'll come back, given a little time."

"And I can see plain enough if it keeps on skipping you it's bound to keep you busy guessing right along," Jack was saying, for only too well did he know this little weakness on the part of his comrade. Perk was bound to keep on pounding away at that puzzle day and night, giving himself no rest until he either solved the riddle or else some one told him the answer – left to himself he would never give up trying.

"Like as not, buddy," replied Perk, frowning darkly; "seems I'm gettin' up a tree every little while – never could remember names worth a cent but I don't forget faces, you understand."

"And then too, you're a great hand for remembering to hear the first sound of the dinner bell," said Jack with a chuckle.

"I sure am some punkins 'bout that," admitted the amiable Perk with one of his goodnatured grins spreading over his homely face.

"What's the program after we've cleaned up this mess, eh partner?" inquired Jack, who doubtless could make a good guess from previous experience as to what his companion's answer was apt to be, but for once he counted without his host.

"Wall," observed Perk shaking his head, "I did mean to take a look in at the pictur house, seein' they got my ol' favorite, Milton Sills booked tonight but shucks! it's too late an' 'sides, somehow

I kinder lost my likin' for action jest now – mebbe I got my fill in that busy bee session with the fire fiend down by the tenement district – kinder a bit lame in the arm muscles, so I figger on rubbin' 'em with my salve that worked so fine after my rough landin' away back. Yep, I'll cut out the movies for one night in port an' go to bed early.”

“I'm meaning to pick up all the extra sleep possible,” ventured Jack at which his mate nodded approvingly.

“I get you, partner,” he hastened to say, “kinder figgerin' on our skippin' out any ol' time an' like as not runnin' up against a rough passage that'll keep us on the jump. But I sure would like to have even an inklin' which way that hop-off's goin' to lead us.”

“I'm surprised at such a reckless, devil-may-care sort of chap as I've known you to be, Perk, bothering your poor nut about such a silly thing just as if it mattered two cents to either of us which way we head – nothing ought to give us a second thought except that we're ready to jump in and carry through, any old place under the sun.”

“Yeah! but then what'd I find to worry 'bout if I didn't pick on the way we're kept in the dark up to the last minute?”

Jack looked at him blankly and shook his head as if such peculiar philosophy were too much for him to master – then he changed the subject and the meal went on until even Perk, with his tremendous cargo capacity, could contain no more.

They sat in their room reading until their eyes getting heavy warned them it was time to hit the hay, as Perk was so fond of

calling the act of getting into bed.

In the morning they were both astir, for it so happened that neither had ever shown signs of being late sleepers, save on special occasions.

“Another day,” remarked Jack while leisurely dressing, for since they had nothing afoot (save to possibly take a few hours’ spin in order to keep in practice as well as test out several new devices with which they had as yet not become as familiar as Jack would like), there was no necessity for any hurry.

“An’ wouldn’t I give somthin’ if only I knew we could check out before sundown tonight,” grumbled Perk, yawning and stretching as though life was becoming entirely too tame and monotonous to satisfy his cravings.

“Wait and see,” advised his chum, “you know the old saying that it’s always darkest just before dawn – we’re due to get a thrill before many more hours. Give Headquarters decent time to cook up a fine fat game for us, a nut to crack that’ll be worth going after. I’ve a few little things on my list that I mean to carry out this morning when I’ll be ready for the call.”

Perk seemed unusually slow that morning, though he did not complain about his lame muscles. Even when Jack asked about it he shrugged and with a grimace remarked indifferently:

“Oh! that’s okay, buddy – turned out to be a false alarm – nothin’ the matter with me, I guess, except I need shakin’ up a when.”

“You’ll get all you want of that I reckon before you’re many

days older,” Jack told him, “somehow I’ve got a notion we’re going to be sent on a wild goose chase that may cover some thousands of miles and take us into a queer section of country – nothing but a surmise, or what you might call a *hunch* to back me up in that, remember, but I’ve known a hunch to come true more than a few times.”

“I wonder,” Perk observed dreamily, eyeing his comrade as if he again felt the old suspicion arise with regard to Jack knowing more than he chose to tell just then.

But unseen by either of the two pals, coming events were hurrying along and threatening to speedily engulf them in as dizzy a spin as either had ever encountered in all previous experiences.

It was around eight when they arrived at the flying field, as usual a scene of considerable bustle with ships coming in and departing – air mail carriers, visiting boats taking off in a continuance of their prearranged flights east or west and several heavier bombing planes that were being taken to Los Angeles by naval pilots for some secret purpose of the War Department.

Jack and his pal observed all this with grins of sheer enjoyment, so bred in the bone had their love for their profession grown to be that everything connected with flying drew them as the Polar star does the magnetic needle of a compass.

“Times are getting right lively around these diggin’s,” remarked Perk, with a sparkle in his eyes and enthusiasm in his voice.

“Seems like it,” replied Jack who chanced to be watching a novice just then starting out on what appeared to be his initial solo flight. “That boy shows fair promise of being due to break into the ranks of express pilots after he’s had another hundred miles or so of flying. I like the way he handles himself and the test pilot told me yesterday he was sure to be a comer.”

“Ol’ Bob ought to know what’s what,” mentioned Perk taking a look for himself, “there, he’s off and see how he lifts the ol’ bus when he’s ready. I watched him make as neat a three-point landin’ yesterday as anybody could wish. A few o’ ’em seem to be born with wings – but not many, not many, I’m sorry to say. Well, let’s step over and get things started.”

Perk stopped short as though some one had given him a blow – he seemed to be holding his breath while he stared and then commenced rubbing his eyes in a peculiar fashion, just as though he imagined he must be seeing things where they could not possibly exist.

Jack realized that his chum must have had a shock of some kind, and turned upon him quickly.

“What’s the matter – what ails you, Perk?” he demanded.

“Gosh amighty! Jack, looky there will you – the hangar – Mister Gibbons; you know, where we parked our boat – it’s burned down last night!”

VI

A BLOW IN THE DARK

Jack was naturally intensely shaken by this outburst from his companion. His first act was to whirl around and look hastily in the quarter indicated where he discovered quite a bunch of men clustered around some object from which wisps of smoke seemed to still be rising on the clear morning air.

He and Perk exchanged startled looks as though the same sudden thought had gripped their hearts.

“Queer I didn’t notice a thing before, Perk, though I saw a crowd gathered – but then that’s a common occurrence out here where so many interesting things keep on happening. Sure enough, the Gibbons’ hangar has gone up – such accidents don’t come along often in any modern aviation field.”

“Accidents!” blurted out Perk steaming up – “lay off that stuff, ol’ hoss – ev’ry little movement has a meanin’ o’ its own – up to last afternoon it was our ship that snuggled in that hangar, don’t forgit that, my boy. Talk to me ’bout luck, we hit it sky-high that time. Let’s go see what’s happened, and how they talk ’bout it in the bargain.”

This proposal Jack was only too willing to stamp with his approval so they hurried toward the bunch of men – pilots, mechanics, visitors and riffraff chancing to be at the field just

then and now engaged in staring at the ruins of the new hangar, doubtless exchanging opinions as to how the conflagration had occurred in the dead of night.

“Huh!” Jack heard his comrade saying as if to himself as they approached the cluster of men, “seems like we got up against a reg’lar roundup o’ fire – last night that tenement, an’ now today the hangar we been usin’ to shelter our boat. Hot ziggetty dog! but ain’t life queer though?”

Everybody was turning to stare at them as they came along. Undoubtedly it was generally known that their ship had been stored in the destroyed shelter while Mr. Spencer Gibbons was away and that it was only on the preceding afternoon on coming back from a flight that they had transferred it to another hangar Jack had been able to hire since the owner of the one they had been using had wired he would be home shortly after dark.

“When and how did this happen?” Jack asked one of the pilots as he took in the fact that the remains of a plane could be seen amidst the wreckage – apparently an explosion had taken place, for much of the charred material of which the hangar had consisted was scattered around the near vicinity.

“They tell us around about midnight,” came the answer for the pilot knew Jack as a fellow craftsman, although a stranger to Salt Lake City aviation circles. “The alarm was given by the pilot of an incoming mail ship making port hours late on account of heavy fog in the mountains. Queer, too, they say, how quick it all came about – fire was blazing furious like when discovered, and

nothing could be done to save Mr. Gibbons' fine ship. There he is yonder, talking to some newspaper boys."

Jack went over to tell the other how he was shocked to see what had happened to his property and to ask if anything was known as to the origin of the conflagration.

"Seems to be pretty much a mystery, they all tell me," the genial sportsman informed him, not showing any signs of being at all worried although undoubtedly deeply mystified. "You fellows were in some luck to get your ship out before this nasty thing came along which I'm glad to know. Of course I'm well insured and can replace my Pitcairn Mailwing readily enough, only I'd gotten that one working like magic. I'm glad no other hangar caught when mine burned. I've offered five hundred dollars for any information that will prove that this was a set-up job for it happens that on one other occasion something similar to this came my way. You see, I was unlucky enough to make a few enemies in Wall Street who've never forgiven me for knocking them out on a big deal."

Mr. Gibbons laughed and seemed in no wise bothered by his recent loss, only Jack noticed how his eyes seemed to glint like sparks from steel when mentioning the fact that he had unscrupulous enemies in the commercial world.

Jack hung around for some little time, talking to several of those present and asking numerous questions but learning next to nothing. If, as some of the ground attendants seemed to believe, it was an incendiary act, those who took big chances in carrying

it out must have planned carefully and fixed matters not only to make a certainty of the ship sheltered within the hangar being destroyed, but also covering their tracks with great skill.

Finally he started over to the other hangar and Perk, seeing him go pulled his freight, as he would have called it, to hasten after his chum.

“Huh! looks like a fine sight for sore eyes,” Perk declared with glee, “to see our boat standin’ there safe an’ sound tho’ I’m sure sorry Mister Fitzgibbons – I mean Gibbons, had to lose his crate – no fault o’ ourn I’ll tell the world, Jack.”

“To be sure we could hardly be blamed for what happened,” returned the other with a deep meaning in his voice and manner that caused Perk to start and then blurt out:

“By jinks! partner, does it look to you like some crazy snooper set fire to the hangar under the belief that our ship was locked in there?”

“Between you and me and the lamp-post, buddy, that just struck me as possible, though I’ve no proof to back me up in saying it.”

“Another o’ them slick hunches o’ yourn, eh partner?” Perk hastened to say and then, scratching his chin in a way he had when seriously considering some debatable proposition that puzzled him very much, he added: “can’t for the love o’ mike guess how anybody could learn jest who an’ what we might be but it’s a risky line we’re engaged in, buddy, an’ some o’ these here smart crooks have accomplices they say even in the service

o' Uncle Sam. It's possible a whisper leaked out an' havin' some fish to fry, word was sent to some o' the big gang out here at Salt Lake City to do for us, or wipe our ship off the face o' the earth instanter. Gee whiz! but that sure does make things look mixed-up for us, ol' hoss."

"For one thing," said Jack, firmly, "after this I never mean to leave our boat in a strange hangar without hiring a guard to watch over it every hour of every night, no matter what the cost to Uncle Sam. I reckon they keep some insurance on these crates, but it would be what time and instruments and charts we lost that would knock us the hardest."

"But how could anybody know what sorter job we're goin' to wrestle with next, even 'fore we got a glimmer o' it ourselves?" querulously demanded the bewildered Perk, up in the air again apparently for there seemed to be a vast number of things of which he was densely ignorant.

Jack laughed and shook his head.

"Some fine day perhaps we'll get on the inside track of these strange doings, brother but right now I'm just as much in the dark as you. All I know is that for some little time rumors have been going around at and close to Headquarters but so far as I understand the matter up to lately, the mysterious party responsible for such give-aways hasn't been located. So it's within the bounds of reason for me to suspect we've fallen under the ban and have had some sort of secret enemy set on our track."

"Huh!" snorted Perk indignantly, "kinder like that Oswald

Kearns employed one o' his critters to do us a bad turn – you know, that big rum-runner we nailed down in Florida not so very long back an' whose trial hasn't come along so far, we've heard.”

“Just like that,” Jack told him, “although I hardly believe it could be any of his dirty work. Still, it's going to pay us to keep our eyes peeled right along and never imagine the coast is clear just because we don't happen to see any ugly character around. Such scamps usually manage to hide themselves daytimes, to slip out after dark and do their tricks.”

Soon afterwards they had toiled their ship to the runway close at hand, made the dash, and started skyward like a bird. For two hours they tried out various capers so as to make certain they had complete control of the wonderful amphibian that had been placed at Jack's disposal by those at the Secret Service Bureau in Washington, intent on equipping their trusted agents with the best going, so that no failure might be laid at their door due to insufficient backing.

They were back again by one that same afternoon, it being against Jack's better judgment to remain away more than a few hours at a time. He knew that at any day a message from Washington, in secret cipher, was apt to come along and which, for aught he knew, would call for them to start out without any unnecessary delay and he wished to be on hand to receive it.

To save time he and Perk dropped into the dining room of the hotel without visiting the office so they might have dinner before going up to their room. This was pretty much of a daily habit

with them and so far there had not been any disadvantage arising from the arrangement.

They had almost finished their dessert when one of the bellhops came along and being familiar with the pair from rubbing up against them so often, he asked no questions but laid down a telegraph envelope addressed to Mr. John Jacob Astorbilt.

“Gosh!”

That was all Perk could gasp when he saw that presumably the orders they had been expecting for so long must have arrived. He watched Jack reach out and pick up the sealed envelope – noted that there did not seem to be the slightest quiver of his hand – indeed, if it were an ordinary dunning epistle Jack could not have acted more carelessly – so far as outward manifestations showed – than was the case just then.

He opened the envelope and then, still as cool as a cucumber grown in the shade of a cornstalk, drew out the enclosure which Perk’s devouring eyes told him was unusually long.

Food was quite forgotten – for once – by the enthralled Perk who sat there, fascinated, watching Jack’s face as though in anticipation of being able to tell from what he might read there something of the nature of the communication that had been telegraphed from far distant Washington.

It was quite useless, however. Had Jack been glancing over a casual invitation to some party he could not have evinced more unconcern. Of course the message was so fashioned that

in order to glean its full meaning a recourse to his code would be necessary but then as Perk knew, Jack would be able to pick up a word here and there and in this way get an inkling as to its purport.

VII

PERK HEARS THRILLING NEWS

“On your way, partner – gimme a clue to save me from crashin’!” begged poor Perk, his wits in a huddle that would have made any football enthusiast take a back seat.

“It’s our order to get busy, okay,” said Jack with a gleam in his eyes his pal loved to see, since it meant *action* and plenty of it.

“Where bound, for the love o’ mike?” continued the other.

“I’ve made out one name here which may be our destination, Perk.”

“Yeah?”

“Spokane,” he was told at which Perk lifted his eyebrows as if to denote more or less surprise, likewise disappointment.

“Huh! ’bout a short day’s flyin’ from this joint,” was the way the ambitious Perk voiced his feelings, just as if his expectations had been taking wings and soaring across the Pacific or some such long distance.

“Go slow, brother,” his mate advised him, “give me half a chance to make this puzzle out – so far I’ve caught just a word or two here and there. From the size of this message there’s a heap back of it. If you’re done stoking, let’s pass up to our den where I can get out my code and decipher this thing.”

Perk was out of his chair in a jiffy.

“I’m with you, laddie so let’s get a move on. I kinder guess now I’ll jump out o’ this here lowdown fit in a hurry, once we get goin’.”

He already looked a hundred per cent more awake than he had been for several days and Jack chuckled as he led the way to the elevator, knowing how new life had been pumped into his chum’s veins by the receipt of the order to go.

Once seated in the room they shared in common, Jack took his secret code from its hiding place and set to work in earnest. Perk could see him writing down word after word and filling in vacant places. The minutes fairly dragged like lead to the impatient one and when Jack sat back, nodding his head as if wholly satisfied, the other again begged him to lift the lid and give him a peep-in.

“What’s the matter at Spokane? Some o’ them Bolshevik miners broke loose over in Idaho an’ threatenin’ to kick up general hell again like they’ve done so many times?”

“A rotten guess brother,” Jack told him. “Nobody said we were going to stop long at Spokane – just ordered to look up a certain party there who’d pass on a bunch of information he’s been collecting this long while back and so help us on our way.”

Perk beamed again, as though quite a load had been lifted from his chest.

“Sounds better to me, ol’ hoss,” he hastened to say. “An’ tell me, where do we go from Spokane?”

“Due north!” snapped Jack smilingly, “in the direction of an old stamping-ground of yours.”

“Across the border – into Canada, partner?” demanded Perk.

“Just where we’ll be aiming for and moreover, buddy seems to me I’ve even heard you speak of a fur-trading post known as Frazer’s, with a Scotchman as factor of the Hudson Bay Company, name of McGregor!”

At that Perk let out one of his whoops as though unable to contain his overpowering delight.

“Ol’ Jimmy McGregor you mean, Jack! Don’t I know him from his moccasins up, the queerest but straightest man in the whole Northwest Territory? Why, I was located not many miles away from his store an’ many a time dropped in to get my ’baccy at his counter. I’ll be as happy as a lark to shake his honest hand again. Now wouldn’t that jar you though – such great luck?”

“Here’s another name you may chance to know. We’re to pick up one of the Mounties at the post and take him along as a sort of guide and backer, so as to show we’re playing our game in conjunction with the legal authorities of the region. Ever meet up with Sergeant Lowden, Perk?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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