

Newcomb Ambrose

**Flying the Coast Skyways.
Jack Ralston's Swift Patrol**



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«Public Domain»

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Flying the Coast Skyways

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CHAPTER I

By Airline to Atlanta

“Big smoke dead ahead, partner!”

“I’ve been expecting to hear you announce that fact, Per – I mean Wally!”

“Kinder guess naow it mout be Birmingham, eh, what, Boss?”

“No other – you hit the nail on the head that time, Mr. Observer.”

“Huh! my *native* town, which I’m naow agwine to see fur the fust time.”

“Better get out of the habit of making such crazy cracks, brother – what if any one overheard you, and took a notion in his head you might be somebody other than just a Down-in-Dixie product from Alabama, – raised in the North, where you acquired a whiff of the dialect of a Canuck – and by name Wallace J. Corkendell, though generally answering to plain *Wally*.”

“Hot-diggetty-dig! that ere smoke cloud sure looks jest like an ole peasoup fog-pack we done got lost in not so far back. By gravy! I doant b’lieve we’ll even git one squint at the pesky city as we fly over the same!”

“I can easily see where I’m bound to have a lot of fun listening to you trying to talk in three different lingoos, all mixed up in one great mess – Yankee, your native brogue; Canadian patios, contracted while with the Northwest Mounted Police; and now a pidgin English, such as a Southern colored boy might use. I only hope such a mixture doesn’t queer the big game we’ve got laid out ahead for us, whatever its nature proves to be.”

“I er-*reckons*—*yeou* says I gotter use that word right along naow, ’cause no Alabama white or black boy never does *guess* anything – I reckons, suh, I’ll git a strangle-holt on the way a gen-u-ine cracker keeps up his end o’ a talkie – given a little time fo’ practice.”

“That begins to sound like the real stuff, comrade,” observed Jack; and despite the clamor of engine exhaust, and whirling propellers both of them were able to hear every word uttered, simply because they were wearing their usual earphone attachments, without which they never made a flight. “I’m beginning to feel encouraged to believe you’ll come through with flying colors. There, we’re directly over Birmingham, and going strong to eastward.”

“Huh! I’m right glad yeou done tole me so, suh,” Perk hastened to reply, doubtless with one of his usual chuckles; “’case all I kin make aout’s a black smudge o’ smoke ahuggin’ the ground, with a few church steeples apokin’ a finger through the same. So, there she lies, my own, my native city! Ain’t it affectin’, though, ole pal, a comin’ back like this, after many years, an’ discoverin’ that same thick smoke fog asettled daown on the dear old place? Gee whiz! I’m jest awonderin’ whether us Southern kids ever *did* have a gen-u-ine ole swimmin’-hole in them *won*-derful days, eh, what?”

When they were positively alone, and no danger of crafty eavesdroppers picking up their words, the two cronies were pleased to extract a certain amount of fun out of their assumed characters – for Jack Ralston of course was also sailing under a *nom-de-guerre*, as well as his best pal – with him the new name was “Rodman Warrington,” and he was supposed to be a rich and eccentric New York City sportsman, weary of the routine of the Carrituck Sound shooting club to which he belonged, and ardently desirous of exploring the various bays, sounds and twisting rivers along the wild coast of North and South Carolina, as well as Georgia.

“To be sure they did, brother,” Jack was saying, reassuringly, in reply to the skeptical question propounded by his running mate; “if you stop and think you’ll remember how every American boy who grew up and amounted to shucks was always getting a great thrill out of memories of such a meeting-place, where all the boys took occasion to show off in doing stunts with a diving board.”

“Say, naow ’at we’ve left dear ole Birmingham in the rear, haow long ’fore we drop daown on Candler Field outside Atlanta?”

“Depends on what time we keep making,” Jack informed him; “we’re speeding along at a hundred-and-twenty clip just now, with only two motors working; and if there was any necessity for fetching it up to an even hundred-and-fifty we could easily enough do the same – and then some. I reckon we’ll come in sight of Candler Field in about an hour-and-a-half – the chart tells me it’s something like one-fifty miles, as the bee flies, between this Southern Pittsburgh and the Capital of Georgia.”

“Meanin’ to stop over in Atlanta long, partner?” demanded Perk; who apparently was not wholly advised of his leader’s plans, as far as they were matured, and as usual “wanted to know.”

“Around twenty-four hours, possibly less, buddy,” Jack explained. “We’ve an appointment, made for us from Headquarters in Washington, to meet up with a certain official connected with the Secret Service, who holds forth in Atlanta – from him we’ll receive a certain amount of information, and be referred to another party, high in the secrets of the Service in Charleston. When we jump off from that South Carolina city we’ll know all we’re expected to carry out – what we’ve been called east to accomplish. There, that’s everything in a nutshell; I’m as much in the dark as you, even though I reckon I’ve figured things out, if a bit hazily, to tell the truth.”

“We’re goin’ after some sort o’ big game, I er-reckon, partner?” Perk speculated, his manner making the remark seem like a question.

“No doubt about that, boy – they wouldn’t have called for us to fly all the way from San Diego, (with two necessary stops to prevent spies from learning as to who we are, and why we’re heading east) if it hadn’t been that some others in the Secret Service had played their innings – and fallen asleep at the switch.”

“Hot-diggetty-dig! I’d say that’d be a neat compliment they’re givin’ us, ole hoss,” Perk exulted; as enthusiastic as a boy over a Christmas present of a brand new shiny pair of club skates. “Another thing I’d like to hear tell ’baout, Ja – er, Mr. Warrin’ton, suh.”

“As what, partner – you’ll notice that I’m trying to call you all sorts of chummy names – that’s for the purpose of trying to forget I ever knew you as Perk, or Gabe Perkiser. If you do the same there’ll be less chance of giving our game away; for if any kind of quick-witted spies should hear us exchanging words they’d remember the real names of the two sky detectives who were playing particular hob with gents who gave Uncle Sammy the laugh. Now, I reckon you’re referring to that letter I had just before we lifted out ship at San Diego last night.”

“Yeou said it, er-ole pal,” replied Perk, catching his treacherous tongue just in the nick of time. “I kinder – reckoned it mout acome from the gent over in San Diego, who’s been aour boss since we started operations ’long the Coast.”

“A fair enough guess, brother,” Jack told him; “because that’s the official who gave us the order to break away, and what to do on the skyway east. There was also some interesting information concerning the job we finished up some weeks back; and I meant to hand that over to you; but somehow failed to connect.”

“I’m right tickled to hear that, suh – fack is I’d begun to feel they wasn’t zactly treatin’ us white, not sayin’ as haow we’d done the Service proud, the way we fetched Slim Garrabrant back after he’d broke loose from the pen, an’ started his ole tricks again.”¹

¹ See “*Trackers of the Fog Pack*.”

“Oh! they were quite enthusiastic about the success of our work, after others had fallen down on the job – that is, as warm as those cold people at Headquarters ever do get, it being against their principles to over praise those working under them, for fear of giving the poor guys the big-head. You can read the letter before I destroy it, brother. The Big Boss in L. A. also wrote that Slippery Slim had been safely returned to his former cell in Leavenworth, and with an added sentence; so, as they’ll watch him closer from now on, there’s small chance of our ever running up against him after this.”

“Well, he was a good guy when it came to tacklin’ big games, I’ll tell the whole world,” observed the satisfied Perk; who again busied himself with his reliable binoculars, eagerly surveying the checkered landscape a mile or more under the bottom of their fuselage; and which continued to prove of considerable interest to Perk, this being actually the first time he had ever passed over that section of the Southland, despite his absurd claim to having spent his boyhood days in Birmingham, Ala.

The time drifted along, with their speed undiminished. Pine woods, tracts of corn, cotton, tobacco; acres of fruit trees, pecan groves, even sugarcane patches – all these signs of the Southland he kept seeing as the miles flew past.

“I kinder – er-reckons as haow we’ve done shot past the dividin’ line ’tween Alabam ’nd Georgia, boss,” he presently announced, with a grand air of superior knowledge; “case I jest seen a town squatted on a river, an’ painted on the roof o’ a house was a name, fo’ the benefit o’ fliers like weuns – Tallapoosa she read, which tells me that must a been the river Tallapoosa – all bein’ ’cross the line in Harlson County, Georgia, (’cordin’ to my map here.) If that’s correct we right naow ain’t more’n fifty miles from aour goal – less’n half an hour yet to fly.”

“You are hot on the trail, comrade,” Jack assured him. “Keep your eyes skinned to pick up another smoke cloud dead ahead, which will be the first sign of our nearing Atlanta, the New York City of the South.”

Perk continued to watch and wait, until finally he gave a half suppressed whoop, to add exultantly:

“It’s a *big* smoke smudge, all right, buddy; so we’re rushing daown on aour goal like a river afire; which pleases a feller called Wally okay, yeou bet!”

CHAPTER II

The Cipher Letter

Jack did not seem to be at all surprised when his best pal made this abrupt announcement; but then he always kept himself prepared for coming events.

"I was expecting to hear you say that, buddy;" he told his mate; "for the past fifty miles on, our string up to date had about run through. I reckon we'll be on foot before many more minutes. Get the airport yet – Wally?"

"Sure do, and right naow I kin glimpse a big – looks like our Fokker, agoin' to drop daown."

"Yes, possibly belongs to either of the latest lines using Candler Field for a base – Eastern Air Transport, for passengers and mail; and Southern Air Fast Express – covering the route between Los Angeles and Atlanta – both now-a-days carrying capacity loads, the papers have been saying."

"Shucks! takes yeou to git things daown pat, Big Boss," Perk went on to comment. "Where do we go from here, Mister?"

"After we've made arrangements for housing our crate," explained Jack, good-naturedly – although he had told his chum the same thing at least twice before the present occasion – Perk could be so forgetful, he remembered – "we'll make straight for the Henry Grady Hotel, where we'll find a letter in code awaiting us, unless there's been a nasty hitch in the arrangements."

"But – yeou said we had to meet up with some gent here, partner?"

"That's right, too, Wally; but only after I've decoded the letter from Headquarters, which is going to put us wise about the nature of our present big adventure. No great hurry to get moving on, as far as I know at present; so it might be we can hang around Atlanta a day or more. But both of us will have to play our parts, and fend off any too inquisitive newspaper men. I've learned that the Atlanta reporters are keen on picking up every scrap of aviation news possible, so's to make up a story that will go well. We shun that sort of notoriety, don't forget, brother, as the devil does holy water."

They were by this time circling Candler Field, which seemed to be bustling with feverish activity – planes of various types were either landing, or else starting up; while several could now be seen cruising at sublime heights, either being put through their paces by pilots, or what was more likely carrying excursionists in the shape of "sandbags," greenhorn air holiday makers, out to get an experience that would give them a superior advantage over friends who had never as yet gone aloft.

Jack made an exceptionally clever landing, and then turned over the stick to his mate, as if eager to make it appear that Perk was the *real* article when it came to being the head pilot of the multi-motored cabin Fokker, that had not the least sign of a name, nor yet a number to identify it.

A number of men came running toward the rather retired spot where Jack had purposely come down. Leading them was a little whipper-snapper specimen, in a rather loud checkered suit, who gave all the recognized signs of being a hustling, live-wire newspaper man, always on the scent for some unusual happening such as could be turned into a thrilling story, – such keen investigators are to be found at nearly every airport worth while, eager to satisfy the curiosity of the multitude of readers who are developing air mindedness at a rapid rate.

"Greetings gents;" he started in to say, with a cheerful grin on his sharp features, and holding a pencil in one hand while he had a pad of blank paper all ready in the other. "If you would kindly give me a few facts connected with your identity, where you jumped off, whither bound, and so forth the many readers of my paper would be glad to extend to you a warm welcome to the Gate City of the South."

Jack gravely shook hands with the diligent worker, and obligingly fed him a little cock-and-bull story, giving the names he and Perk had recently taken upon themselves, and merely stating they were from Texas, bound to Atlanta on private business connected with aviation circles. He did this

to quiet the news gatherer, until they could dispose of their ship, and get started for the hotel in a taxi to be hired near by.

Jack knew the breed to a dot, and felt confident the lively chap would fill in enough imaginary details to make an interesting account; so that was that, and he was at liberty to turn to the one in authority with whom arrangements could be made for parking the big Fokker in a convenient hangar at so much per diem.

Of course wise Jack had seen to it that never the slightest clue could be discovered by the shrewdest spy, to indicate what these air travelers really had in view – he was quite willing that such a sneaky investigator examine the ship from one end to the other, and welcome – the gravest danger of discovery would lie in some indiscreet remark on the part of Perk; but even this did not give Jack any considerable worry.

They were soon on their way into the heart of wide-awake, bustling Atlanta, and presently brought up at the noted hostelry, to which they had been directed to proceed.

Jack, after dismissing the taxi, followed the hotel attendant who had seized upon the two bags they had with them. He registered without ostentation; and no sooner had the clerk taken a look at their names, when about to assign them a double room on the third floor, than he remarked casually:

“A letter waiting for you, Mr. Warrington,” and after shuffling a pack of envelopes swiftly, he handed Jack a registered letter, bearing the Washington postmark across the stamps.

Jack carefully deposited the same in an inner pocket; then a minute later they both followed a bellboy into the elevator and ascended.

When finally they found themselves behind a closed door Perk turned an eager face upon his comrade, as he remarked in a low tone, with a nervous look all around, as though half expecting to discover some eavesdropper peeping out from a closet, or from behind an easy-chair:

“She kim okay, seems like, Ja – er Mr. Warrington – then things they’re keepin’ on the move, an’ we’re a step closer to aour field o’ operations than when we started aout, eh, what, suh?”

“Lock the door, brother – I’m going to get busy decoding this letter, after which you’ll know *everything*. Now settle down in that chair, and give me ten minutes of time for the job – possibly a bit more, since I see it’s rather a long communication.”

Perk followed these directions out, and continued to watch the other as a terrier might hover over a hole in the kitchen wall, from which he expected a rat to thrust out his nose at any second.

Jack took a little more time than he had reckoned on; but, being expert at reading the secret cipher code adopted by the Government, in the end he had mastered the entire contents of the letter of instructions.

“Pull over this way a little, partner,” he told the feverishly waiting Perk. “I want to lower my voice while explaining what it’s all about; and we just can’t be too careful, since walls sometimes have ears especially in this day of the hidden dictograph. To begin with,” he went on to add, “we seem to have guessed fairly well that it was bound to have some connection with the smuggling business along the Atlantic seaboard, between Norfolk and Savannah.”

Perk’s grin was enormous at hearing this.

“Didn’t I jest *know* that’d be aour job?” he chuckled, evidently vastly pleased at having “hit the target in the bull’s eye.” “Ever since we carried on so well daown in Floridy along back, I been ’spectin’ Unc. Sam’d root out same kinder game fur us to get busy on onct more.”

“But this promises to be the biggest adventure we’ve ever tackled, bar none, brother,” Jack proceeded to explain. “This letter goes on to tell what an enormous amount of unlawful stuff is being flooded on the country through a powerful syndicate that’s said to be backed by some heavy unknown parties with unlimited capital at their control. Ours is going to be the task of finding out who they are; and likewise throwing a monkey-wrench into the smoothly running machinery by which they have been cheating the Government revenue right along, getting bolder and bolder, so that they virtually snap their fingers under Uncle Sam’s nose.”

“Gee! that sounds fine to me, ole hoss,” gurgled Perk, rubbing his hands vigorously together as he spoke. “I jest kinder allers did yearn to tackle things sech as had a tough reputation behind ’em. Course there’s been a when o’ customs men atryin’ to squash this combine – it’s allers thataways, seems like!”

“Yes, looks as if the whole business is running true to form, brother,” Jack further admitted. “The Chief candidly tells me they have been laying all sorts of clever traps for many moons, only to have these skip-by-night lads give them the laugh. He hopes we’ll meet up with better luck.”

“If so be it’s a fair question, partner, haow do they reckon this traffic she’s bein’ kerried on, to slip by the fast customs patrol boats an’ land the cargoes safe an’ sound?”

“That’s where the crux of the whole affair seems to come in,” Jack thrilled the other by saying. “A few craft from Bimini have been overhauled, and seized, though as a rule the crew always managed to slip away, jumping overboard close in among the reeds, and disappearing in the brush along the river bank. But these occasional seizures never made even a dent in the immense operations, the Chief admits.”

“How come then, buddy – bet yeou a cookey ’gainst thirty cents they got a line o’ flyin’ boats doin’ the business.”

“My stars! how wonderfully keen you are about guessing things; for that’s just what this letter admits; and now we know why they called on us to get in the game – we seem to have made a big hit with the Chief, on account of how we managed to use our wings, and beat the Old Nick at his own game of high-spy.”

“Ain’t it great, though, to know they do ’preciate *somethin’* we’ve kerried aout? But what’s the idee o’ aour headin’ fur Charleston after we kick aout o’ this burgh, eh, partner?”

“There are a lot of things to be said and done before we can break into the game; and we’ll get fully posted by the Government agent in Charleston. Besides, we’ve got to handle another kind of ship, – in fact an amphibian, capable of dropping down on water as well as on land, and taking off the same way.”

“Glory be! naow ain’t that fine?” Perk exclaimed, ecstatically. “I never yet had anythin’ to do with them crocodile type o’ boats, an’ never ’spected to; so this same is a big s’prise, as well as a pleasure – thank the Chief fur me whenever yeou’re writin’, baby.”

“Okay, brother,” came the ready answer. “Fortunately it happens that I’m somewhat familiar with the handling of that type of boat. Besides, we’re under orders not to hurry things along at all – to take our own time, and get fully in touch with our new craft before starting on the job for keeps.”

“Air we meanin’ to handle this layout all by aour lonesome?” Perk questioned.

“As a rule, yes; but we are also expected to call upon certain skippers of fleet patrol boats to lend a hand. He’s given a list of four rum chasers whose commanders will recognize the signal we give, and place their craft at our disposal as long as we wish; so you see we’re to really be in command of a squadron, if the necessity arises. I’m meaning to take down the names of the four customs boats before I destroy this illuminating letter, according to instructions.”

Then Jack went on to speak of other things the letter had contained, with the intention of posting Perk regarding the immensity of the task being given over to their handling.

“He described this wide-stretching conspiracy to smash the Coast Guard service as a species of octopus, reaching out its myriad of arms, so as to cover the entire coast line – deliveries have been accomplished with almost clock-like regularity, and the custom service is being made a laughing stock among those in the secret. No wonder the Chief is feeling hot under the collar; for I reckon there never as yet has been a time like the present, when all the best laid plans of his most skillful and bravest men have gone on the rocks. I’ve a feeling that if we manage to give this big conspiracy its death blow, there isn’t a favor too great for the Boss to grant us.”

“What’s bein’ kerried in mostly, partner – does he tell us that?”

“He mentions expensive liquor, of course, as the principal contraband,” Jack informed him “but narcotics as well have been coming, in unknown quantities, straight from China, also some country in the Balkans, Turkey being suspected. Then there are diamonds, and other precious stones that carry a heavy duty; laces; expensive Havana cigars from Cuban factories; and even Chinese immigrants, so eager to land in the country of Opportunity and dollars they are willing to pay enormous sums for transportation, with a safe landing guaranteed.”

“The more the merrier, sez I,” snapped Perk. “Yeou was asayin’ a bit ago it’s b’lieved they done got rafts o’ spies pickin’ up secrets o’ the customs service, so’s to trick the boats into startin’ aout on false leads, that leaves the landin’ places unguarded – mebbe, naow, ole scout, yeou even goes so far as to reckon that slick newspaper gink might be jest sech a peek-a-boo boy, aout to put the kibosh on aour fine game.”

“You never can tell, buddy; if you meet him again play the deaf and dumb racket, which is the only safe plan.”

CHAPTER III

The Leech Hangs On

“Hot-diggetty-dig! seems like the more we poke into this here business, the warmer it gets!” Perk exploded, banking on the safety of their hotel room to keep his language from being heard.

“Oh! like as not all this is only the opening gun of our new campaign,” was his companion’s cool comment. “Later on, when we find ourselves neck deep in the mixup, you’ll be looking back, and smiling at what you’re saying now. From present indications I’d say this affair is giving promise of being the biggest case we ever had the nerve to tackle.”

“The bigger they get the further they falls, partner, doan’t make any mistake ’bout that ere fack,” said Perk, grimly. “Huh! sometimes I get to thinkin’ what happened up in that Hole-in-the-Wall outlaw retreat, and I’m awonderin’ what ever did come o’ that gang after we kicked off with aour prisoner.”²

“Which reminds me I didn’t think to tell you *all* the news that was contained in that letter from Los Angeles – want to hear it now, brother?”

“Sure do, Mister,” snapped Perk, greedily; “it’ll amuse me while I’m awashin’ up here in aour neat little bathroom.”

Jack followed him into the next compartment, evidently so that he could keep his voice down to a low pitch.

“Something like a week later,” he told the listening Perk, “they took off in the biggest crate they could commandeer into the service – half a dozen fighting men, heavily armed, and prepared for anything that might come along. Good weather favored them, and they came in sight of the valley among the high cliffs in the daytime.

“After circling, and lowering their altitude, they could not see the least thing to indicate the presence of a solitary human being; so finally the pilot set them down exactly on the smooth landing field the gang used when working their old wreck of a ship, carrying the packages of counterfeit notes out to distribute the same to different stations; and fetching back assorted supplies, including the best of grub.

“The place was abandoned, and looked like an earthquake had struck that particular quarter – the mouth of the pass leading into the wonderful valley was filled thirty feet high with a mass of rocks, thrown down by the tremendous force of the bomb you exploded when we cleared out; and some of the cabins and huts had been knocked to flinders by the men in their rage at being kicked out of their hidden retreat. Their old plane too, was scattered all around the field.

“The Government agents found the plates from which the spurious notes had been printed, and destroyed all but a portion, which they wished to forward to Washington for inspection by the Chief and his staff. Then they amused themselves by climbing to a five hundred foot ceiling, and making a target of the hut where the work had been carried on. Our friend in L.A. went on to assure me a clever hit by a bomb had scattered that squatty building we used to watch by the hour, to the four winds; and the printing press too was smashed to useless atoms by the force of the explosion.”

“Bully! bully!” Perk was saying, joyously, proudly, through the soap lather he had accumulated on his face; “then we sure did a natty piece o’ work up there in that God-forsaken neck o’ the woods. Seems like life has got *some* bright spots in the framework arter all, an’ ain’t jest a dinky fogbelt like I sometimes find myself b’lievin’.”

² See “Trackers of the Fog Pack.”

“It has its ups and downs we’ve got to remember, partner,” advised sensible Jack; “especially along the risky line of business we’re engaged in. So we’ve got to take things as they come, wet weather mixed with sunny days, and just keep on doing our duty as we find it.”

“Huh gue – reckon we gotter jest grin an’ bear it,” added Perk, rubbing his face and neck with the course huck towel, as he loved to do on occasion. “But haow long do we stick here in Atlanta tell me, Boss?”

“For one night only, if things work as I hope they will,” said Jack, promptly enough, showing that his plan of campaign was beginning to shape up.

“Mind if I step aout for a little while, partner; I done forgot to lay in some tooth-paste, an’ I’m kinder used to havin’ a tube o’ the same along with me, yeou know, suh?”

Perk was the possessor of an unusually fine set of teeth, of which he was inordinately proud, as Jack had occasion to know full well; so that this request on his part seemed perfectly natural.

“Certainly not, *Wally*,” Jack told him, purposely emphasizing the name, as if to keep the other from forgetting how necessary it was to be forever on his guard, so as not to be caught napping. “Like as not you’ll find a drugstore handy to the hotel, and can get what you want easily enough. I’d rather you didn’t go far away – a walk might seem like a fine thing; but when it’s taken I want to be along, as two pair of eyes and ears might be better than one, to ward off danger.”

“That’s okay, Mister,” came the cheery reply, as Perk stepped over to pick up his hat; “an’ it gives me a warm feelin’ ’raound my heart to hear yeou say that same – I’m never so happy as when goin’ into action, yeou know right well. When I was over in France, helpin’ run that sausage balloon we used for observation purposes, it allers gimme a wonderful thrill jest to see six Heinie ships takin’ off, intendin’ to ketch us guys ’fore we could drop to solid earth, an’ knock the stuffin’ aout o’ us with some o’ their consarned bombs, which they sure knowed haow to manufacture to beat the Frenchies all holler. So-long Ja – Mr. Warrington I’ll be back agin in a jiffy.”

Just the same it was fully fifteen minutes before Perk again showed up; and Jack found himself beginning to worry when the door opened, with Perk’s grinning face exposed. Jack noticed that after the other entered the room his first act was to most carefully *lock the door*; and there was something significant about this action, so foreign to Perk’s usual carelessness, that the other was forced to believe something or other must have happened while he was out of the hotel, to render Perk so solicitous.

“Got your tooth paste, did you, boy?” he asked.

“Easy enough,” quoth Perk, still with that quizzical expression on his sun-tanned, homely face. “Found there was a drugstore right handy; an’ seein’ I was thirsty I jest stopped over to pick up a drink o’ soda an’ cream. That’s where, things begins to happen, yeou see.”

“Oh! they did,” echoed Jack, raising his eyebrows as he watched the face of the other, and noting how a grave look had succeeded the humorous one. “Suppose you tell me what it was came along while you were enjoying your soda?”

“Well, yeou see, partner,” commenced Perk; “there happens to be a gink astandin’ close by, which I aint paid any ’tention to, bein’ wrapped up in my own affairs jest then. I’d raised the glass to take a fust sup when I done heard somebody say, right by my ear seemed like: ‘Goin’ to stay with us in Atlanta enny length o’ time, Mister Corkendall, suh?’”

Perk evidently had a little streak of the dramatic in his composition, for he stopped just then, and eyed his companion eagerly, as if tickled to know his communication had given the usually cool Jack a bit of a start.

“Oh! you don’t say, brother?” the other was remarking; “then after all the party at the soda counter wasn’t quite a stranger to you seeing he evidently had learned your name?”

“Darned if I kin make aout partner, haow he ever got wise to the fack, so’s to call me Mister Corkendall.”

“Go on, brother – what did you do then?” demanded Jack.

“Huh! I was a bit flustered, yeou see,” explained Perk, “‘cause I’d got a side squint at his mug; I reckoned I needed ’bout half a minute to git a grip on my senses; so I tilted up my glass, an’ swallered a few times; and say it ’peared to me like a thousand things flashed through my poor ole brain like a stroke o’ lightnin’.”

“Did you answer him?” demanded Jack, frowning.

“I sure did,” came unhesitating the reply; “‘case I jest had to. Yeou see, partner, he’d been astandin’ thar right along, an’ in course he done heard me order my drink; so if I tried to play that dumb trick, as haow yeou tole me, he’d aknow’n things must a been a bit mixed, an’ the fat’d be in the fire. Did I do the right thing Boss, tell me?”

Jack smiled amiably again.

“That was certainly one time your mother wit *didn’t* fail you, comrade,” he told the other. “Now, go ahead and let me know what followed; because I’ve already guessed the man at your elbow must have been that Smart Aleck newspaper reporter we last saw looking over our ship so suspiciously.”

CHAPTER IV

Perk Has an Adventure

Perk might have been observed swelling out his chest somewhat, as though this praise on the part of his ally went straight to his head like rich wine.

“I done tole him it was all up to yeou, Mister Warrington – seein’ as haow I was jest a humble air pilot aworkin’ fur yeou – we might be in Atlanta a hull week, mebbe so, fur all I knowed.”

“That was another clever thing for you to say, brother,” Jack assured him, only too ready to praise when praise was due; “it might serve to throw him off the scent; but no matter how long or how short our stay chances to be, I’ve a hunch we’re bound to see more than we want of that nosey chap. Like most of his breed he means to find out all he can, either to make a story that will give his readers a fine kick; or on the other hand, if he does happen to be one of that syndicate’s paid spies, to learn who and what we really are, and why we’re in Atlanta, coming out of the west – for I reckon he saw our first approach this same day, and jotted that fact down in his mind.”

“He done tried hard to start me talkin’ ’baout yeour business, so I jest had to tell him as haow yeow was on’y sportin’ fo’ sport, an’ undecided whether to go on daown to hunt black bears in the canebrakes o’ Ole Louisiana; or else strike aout fo’ Currituck Sound on the coast, to git a whack at the wild geese an’ swans as kin be shot on the club preserves.”

“You couldn’t have done better any way you tried, brother,” warmly commended Jack, whacking the other on his back, and causing him to fairly glow with satisfaction. “Only I hope he didn’t catch on about that three distinct language business I was speaking about not so long ago.”

Perk shook his head briskly in the negative.

“I was mighty keerful not to say *too* much, partner,” he continued; “with him afirin’ questions at me like the rat-tat-tat o’ a machine-gun. So I pays fo’ my soda, an’ tells the youngster I gotter hurry back to where yeou was awaitin’ fo’ me to unpack the bags; an’ with that I leaves him right whar he was standin’, lookin’ at me outen them sharp eyes o’ hisn like he’d bore into me with a gimlet, so’s to know ever’thing I had in my head. That sap is certain sure the mos’ uncomfortable bird to run across when yeou got a secret up yeour sleeve, I ever did tackle.”

“I can well believe you, brother,” observed the relieved Jack. “Chances are you’ve left him in something of an uncertain frame of mind; but as he’s built on the pattern of a bloodhound, he isn’t meaning to give up the scent as long as we’re within his reach. That forces me to decide on skipping from Atlanta as soon as possible, for he’s marked ‘dangerous – keep out.’”

“What’s next on the programme, Mister?” asked Perk, satisfied to have come out of his little adventure with credit, and nothing like reproof from the pal whose good opinion he coveted so much.

“I must leave you here for an hour or so, and keep my appointment with Mr. Justice, although I hardly expect him to give me anything like the full details of the work ahead of us – that must wait until we get to Charleston, when everything will be laid before us; together with coast charts issued by the Government from surveys carried out by experienced geographers, and which we can rely upon to the fullest extent.”

“I done reckons then, partner, yeou got yeour plans fixed up in case he is alayin’ fo’ yeou somewhars, eh, what?”

Jack chuckled as if amused.

“I understand how you’re referring to our enterprising young scribe on one of Atlanta’s lively papers; and especially vigilant in connection with air travel matters at Candler Field – nothing would please me more than to take him on, and give him a whirl or so. I think I can play my part as a millionaire sportsman to the dot, and give him a mouthful that’s apt to set him wondering more than ever. I might even invite him to dine with us, say tomorrow evening at the Grady here, when he will

be at liberty to ask all the questions he wants about my love for outdoor sports, and so on – that would be a good joke on the slick lad, since we'll be on our way east many hours before that time.”

“Gosh all hemlock! but say, wouldn't that be rich, though; an' what wouldn't I give to be close by, an' hear haow yeou stuffed the duffer,” Perk went on to gush, surveying his companion with eyes that fairly glowed with sincere admiration.

“Lock the door, and under no consideration allow any one to enter while I'm away. Just say you're tremendously engaged, and can't be disturbed, if that everlasting busybody shows up.”

“Huh! jest trust me to lay the same aout if he gets too fresh,” grunted Perk with a menacing ring to his voice. “Course I wouldn't knock him any what yeoud call physically, only shut him up, an' send him off to mind his own business.”

“When I come back we can have another little chin, for I promise to keep you fully posted from now on, concerning everything connected with the big game. After that we'll have a full dinner, and decide about pulling out of Atlanta while the going is good.”

“Tonight, does yeou mean, partner?” queried Perk, craftily.

“Possibly, yes,” came the ready reply. “We'll take a look over the afternoon *Journal*, and see what sort of flying weather is offered for the next twelve hours; and if at all favorable we can make our plans accordingly, so as to jump off before midnight. Candler Field is kept fully lighted nights, with so many ships of all types coming and going, on schedule and otherwise, that there'll be no difficulty about that part of the deal.”

“Huh! which makes me remember I done got a copy o' that same paper when I was in the drugstore,” explained Perk, pulling it out of his pocket as he spoke; “so I kin be amusin' myself while yeou're gone. I'll suck every bit o' weather information outen the paper, bet yeour boots, so's to be all primed when yeou come back; it'll be supertime 'baout then, an' right naow I'm feelin' them grippin' pains daown below, sech as allers warns me the fires they need stokin', so's to keep the engine workin' full speed.”

This arrangement pleased Jack perfectly; he realized how Perk was apt to be more or less “fidgetty,” and it was just as well he had something to read while standing guard over their luggage, so as to keep his mind from other subjects.

Jack waited outside for a brief space of time, and thus heard the key being duly turned in the lock, which relieved him of any further anxiety concerning the one left behind.

Perk, left to his own devices, settled down in an easy-chair to make himself comfortable. Beginning with the first page he read everything that had any promise of interest, applying himself particularly to such items as covered aviation matters. As is the case in these enlightened days of intense activity in air circles, he came upon a number of brief articles along those lines, all of which he absorbed with deepest interest.

Then for five or ten minutes he allowed himself to sit there, his mind filled with the magnitude of aerial inventions that had been sprung on the market within the last ten years; and marveled at the vast gap separating the bustling present with those lean years when he was serving his country over in France, attached to the observation corps, with their clumsy sausage balloons that could be let soar at a limited height, and then drawn down by rope and windlass when some enemy threatened their safety.

Arousing himself presently Perk next busied himself in searching the columns of his paper for the latest weather report, especially as concerned the promises for flying craft.

Eventually he found what he was after, and read the report most eagerly. To his delight it seemed to be favorable throughout the coming night, a fact of considerable importance to all air mail pilots, as well as others who were contemplating going aloft while the night lasted.

People passed the door of the room from time to time; and twice Perk had an idea some one was fumbling at the lock; but concluded it might have been some tenant of a neighboring room, either going out, or coming in, for at least nothing suspicious followed, and he breathed easy again.

The hour had just about slipped by when he caught footsteps he knew right well; as he listened he heard them stop before the locked door; then came a light tap, and he caught Jack's voice:

"Wally, it's me – Warrington, you know!"

"Okay, suh!" sang out the one within, as he stepped over and turned the key.

"How about it, partner – anything happened since I left?" Jack asked softly, after he had again turned the key in the lock.

"Not any; suh – an' I ketched the weather report in the dinged paper, which gives us the pleasin' information as haow it's bound to be halfway decent this same night, with wind from the southwest up at three thousand feet ceilin', which makes things look kinder promisin', I'd say, suh."

"That settles it then, buddy; we'll get a move on, and climb out before twelve. Might as well strike Charleston with as little delay as possible, for we'll possibly have to hang around that place some time, tuning up our new crate to know its possibilities. Besides, I've a feeling this town wont be big enough to hold both us, and that cub of a reporter, and keep him from whiffing some of our secrets with that inquisitive nose of his."

Perk grinned.

"Strikes me, partner, yeou done run up against that nosey critter, same like I done, aint that a fack, suh?"

Jack drew a card out of his vest pocket and tossed it on the table near which the pair of them were just then seated.

"That's the card he pressed into my hand, with the name of his sheet on the same. We've an appointment to dine with him here at the Grady tomorrow night, when he will be at liberty to ask as many questions as he pleases, connected with a rich sportsman's love for the game fields."

"Hot-diggetty-dig!" spluttered Perk, fairly aghast; but without waiting for him to say another word Jack continued, with a chuckle:

"Always providing we are still in Atlanta at that time. Yes, I gave him a nice little run for his money – led him on interesting journeyings, and along pleasant ways. He fell for it all, as far as I could judge; and probably I managed to get the fish well hooked; but they're a slippery bunch, these newspaper chaps, and can give the best detective points, to beat him in the end in solving the great mystery. I'm leery of the whole tribe, partner – you never can tell whether you're stringing them, or they are playing you, giving you line so as to bring you up with a round turn eventually. We shake off Atlanta's dust by midnight, brother – and that goes!"

CHAPTER V

Their Running Schedule

“Hot-diggetty-dig! What a big snap I shore missed by not bein’ jest ’raound the corner, alistenin’ while yeou was afeedin’ that tall yarn to ’im, what’s the name o’ that trail hound what builds up thrillin’ yarns fo’ the readers o’ his paper to swaller?” and after taking a look at the card still lying on the table Perk continued: “James Douglas Keating, ’ huh! well, Jimmy, mebbe so yeou didn’t run up ’gainst a buzz saw when yeou tackled aour – er, Mr. Rodman Warrington.”

“Wait and see,” cautioned Jack; “for all I can tell that lad may have been feeding me some slick medicine when he seemed to fall for my talk so readily. I’m not going to feel dead certain I scotched the busybody until we’ve left Atlanta and Candler Field well in our wake, with nothing happening to prove a give-away.”

“Yeou would, partner – it’d be jest like yeou to say ‘mebbe’ till things they got ab-so-lutely certain – never yet knew yeou to jump at conclusions, so I done reckon yeou was really born to be a scientist. When do we eat, I’d like to know; things are agettin’ near the danger line with me, right naow, an’ there’s a ‘cry from Macedonia, come on an’ dine.’”

“Let’s go,” Jack told him, reaching out for his head covering; for they had both doffed their flying clothes before quitting the ship, and were in ordinary garments that would not cause comment or unusual notice on the streets of any city.

Over a very bountiful dinner they continued to “talk shop” in low tones. Since their table was a bit removed from any other, thanks to Jack tipping the head waiter bountifully, with the orchestra playing softly, it seemed almost an impossibility for any hostile ear to catch a single word they uttered.

Thus Perk was put in possession of further valuable information with regard to the probable field of their forthcoming adventure, Jack having managed in his customary clever fashion to get hold of reading matter covering the entire romantic coast country between Norfolk and Savannah.

“It seems to be a wonderful section, just teeming with queer people and equally strange sights; and for one I’m a bit eager to look things over. Just the same, buddy, neither of us must forget even a minute the main object that’s calling us into the coast skyways. We’ve got a man’s size job on our hands, and some mighty smart people, as well as devil-may-care ones, to pack up against, so that a slip is apt to set us back, and for all we know even cost us our lives. I’m saying that not to scare any one, but because I’ve posted myself on the game, and know to what vile ends some of these dicks would go if they thought men of our trade were holding them under surveillance.”

“Well, so be it, partner doant forgit I’ve heard the whine o’ lead pills close to my ears many a time, so it’s an ole story with me!”

“When we manage to get in touch with one or more of the swift Coast Guard patrol boats things will begin to look brighter – as though there might be something doing; but that wont come along for quite some time. We’ve got to get things down pat, know all about the regular routine movements of those swift airships, and then begin to cut into their number – first one must mysteriously disappear, and then a second, possibly even a third. By that time we’ll have certainly thrown a pretty hefty scare into the bunch, and things are bound to slacken, more or less.”

“Speed the day, sez I, partner caint come any too quick to suit me, an’ that’s no lie either,” saying which valorous, fire-eating Perk again attacked his supper; for by this time they had reached the dessert stage, and were discussing prime apple pie, with the richest of thick cream to top it off, always one of Perk’s favorites, when given his choice.

It will be noticed that when off duty these minions of the Secret Service were apt to live like kings, and with reason; for often they had to put up with scanty rations, and poor at that, when far removed from restaurant fare, and forced to live off the country. “First a feast, and then a famine,”

Perk was accustomed to saying when Jack mildly reproached him for giving so much thought to what he usually designated as “the eats.”

Perk would have liked very well to have spent an hour or so at some theatre or other, and had even given a few hints about a screen play at the Paramount but met with no encouragement from his side partner.

“Best for us not to make any sort of an exhibit of ourselves while we’re in close quarters with that write-up newspaper chap,” he told Perk, who, realizing that Jack meant just what he said, allowed the subject to drop.

“Kinder gu – er-reckon as haow yeou’re ’baout right there, ole hoss,” he admitted, with a slight vein of regret in his voice; “course we kin see all the picters we want when we’ve struck the wind-up o’ aour trail – that is, providin’ we’re still alive, an’ kickin’ as usual.”

“That lad has got me guessing, and no mistake,” Jack added; “in one way I admire such persistence, especially in one of his breed, where there’s a big scramble for fresh news stories; but they can make it a whole lot disagreeable for other people in the bargain. Makes me think of the leeches that used to pester us by hanging on in the old swimmin’ hole of my boyhood days – you just couldn’t shake the blood-thirsty varments off, try as you might, they were such stickers.”

Finishing their supper they strolled forth in a leisurely fashion, as if, as Perk himself observed in his quaint way: they had “the whole evening at their disposal, with nothing to do but kill time.”

Picking up a late evening paper on the way to their room at the Henry Grady Hotel they settled down to be as comfortable as possible, until the time arrived to make a start.

“We’ll get a taxi to take us out to Candler Field,” quoth Jack, always arranging his plans with meticulous certainty; “then change to our flying togs, and get going as quietly as possible. It’s to be hoped that sticking plaster wont be nosing around out there, to see some mail ship start off, or come into the airport – you never can tell about such fly-by-nights, who bob up in the most unexpected places just when you don’t want to see them.”

“Huh! yeou said it, partner,” Perk added, whimsically; “jest like I used to see that queer jack-o’-lantern in the country graveyard foggy nights now here, an’ agin over yonder, fur all the world like a ghost huntin’ fur its ’ticular stone to climb under agin.”

Jack, having made himself comfortable, commenced glancing over the paper he had picked up, briefly scanning each page as though skimming the news.

“Haow ’bout the weather reports, buddy?” asked Perk, later on, suppressing a big yawn, as though time was hanging somewhat heavily on his hands, being, as he always proudly declared, “a man of action.”

“Just about the same as a while ago – no change in the predictions having come about,” he told the other.

“Like to be no storm agoin’ to slap us in the teeth, then, eh, what?”

“I don’t see where it could come from, it being clear in almost every direction, saving possible rain in South Florida; so don’t let that bother you in the least, old scout.”

“An’ fog – haow ’bout that same, suh? I opines as haow I sorter detest fog more’n anything I know – ’cept mebbe stones in my cherry pie.”

“No record of any fog over the air-route east,” Jack informed him; “and you know we mean to follow the flash beacons all the way to Greenville, South Carolina, where they turn off in the direction of Richmond, while we shift more to the southeast by south, and head for Charleston. It looks as though we’d have a nice, even flight all the way, and land in our port early tomorrow morning – without trying to make any great speed in the bargain.”

Time passed, and it drew near the hour they had selected for their leaving the hotel. Perk was a bit eager to be going, and began to pack his bag as a gentle hint to his running mate.

“Finish mine while about it, partner,” he was told by his comrade; “while I’m down below settling our joint account, and securing a taxi. I’ll be back in a short while; and then for business.”

“Yeah! that strikes me where I live, buddy. Take yeour time, an’ doant come back atellin’ me that pesky Jimmy’s squatted in the hotel lobby, alookin’ over everybody as goes aout, er comes in.”

Jack was gone as much as ten minutes, and then opened the door quietly, to have the other snatch a quick inquiring look at his face and say:

“Ev’rything lovely, an’ the goose flyin’ high, ole hoss?”

“We’re going to kick off right away; and so far the coast seems clear.”

CHAPTER VI

By the Skin of Their Teeth

Once settled down in the taxi Perk felt much better. He had been casting suspicious glances this way and that, eying a number of parties, as though he more than half anticipated the slick newspaper man might be hanging around the Grady in some clever disguise, bent on tracking them to the aviation field.

“Huh! kinder guess – ev’rything’s okay with us naow – glad Jack didn’t hear me asayin’ that forbidden word, er he’d be kickin’ agin. Tarnel shame haow a life-long habit do stick to a guy like glue – didn’t realize haow things keep acomin’ an’ agoin’ year after year, when yeou git ’customed to doin’ the same.”

Perk was muttering this to himself half under his breath as the taxi took off, and immediately headed almost straight toward the quarter where the fast growing Candler Field lay outside the thickly populated part of Atlanta.

He was just about to thrust his head out of the open upper part of the door on the left side when Jack jerked him violently back.

“Hey! what in thunder – ”

“Shut up! and lie back!” hissed the other, almost savagely.

“Gosh-a-mighty! was *he* hangin’ ’raound after all?” gasped the startled Perk, who could think of but one reason for the other treating him so unceremoniously.

Jack had turned, and was trying to see through the dimmed glass – he even rubbed it hastily with his hand as if to better the chances of an observation; but as they whirled around a corner gave it up as next to useless.

“It was *that boy* all right, and making straight for the hotel in the bargain; which proves he’d located our layout okay,” he explained to the excited Perk.

“Doant tell me he done spotted us, partner?”

“I don’t just know,” came back the answer, hesitatingly. “I thought I’d yanked you back before he looked our way; but as sure as anything he came to a full stop, and stared after our taxi. For all we know he may be jumping for some kind of conveyance to follow at our heels.”

“Hot-diggetty-dig! but things shore *air* gettin’ some int’restin’ like, I’d say, if yeou asked me, boy! An’ even if he keeps on agoin’ to the Grady the night clerk’ll tell him as haow we done kicked aout. Kinder wish we was a zoomin’ long on aour course, an’ givin’ Jimmy the horse laugh. Caint yeou git the shover to speed her along a little, ole hoss?”

“We’re already hitting up the pace as far as safety would advise,” Jack told him, as they both swayed over to one side, with another corner being taken on the jump. “It’d spill the beans if we had any sort of accident on the way to the ship; better let well enough alone, partner.”

“Huh! the best speed a rackabones o’ a taxi kin make seems like crawlin’ to any airman used to a hundred miles an hour, an’ heaps more’n that,” grumbled the never satisfied Perk; but just the same it might be noticed that Jack did not attempt to urge the chauffeur to increase their speed at the risk of some disaster, such as skidding, when turning a sharp corner.

On the way Perk amused himself by taking various peeps from the rear, gluing his eye to the dingy glass. Since he raised no alarm it might be taken for granted he had made no discovery worth mentioning; and in this manner they presently arrived at the flying field, which they found fully illuminated, as though some ship was about to land, or another take off.

This suited them exactly, as it would be of considerable help in bringing about their own departure.

Jumping out Jack paid the driver, and after picking up their bags they hastened in the direction of the hangar in which they had been assured their ship was to be placed.

A new field service motor truck was moving past them, evidently bent on servicing some plane about to depart east, west, north or south; which Perk eyed with admiration; for he knew what a comfort it was to have one of these up-to-date contraptions swing alongside, and carry out all the necessary operations of fitting a ship out, which in the old days had to be done by hand, with the assistance of field hostlers.

“Anyhaow, we doant need a single thing to set us on aour way, which is some comfort,” he remarked to his mate as they arrived at their destination.

While Jack was making all arrangements for their big Fokker to be taken out of the hangar, and brought in position for taking off, Perk continued to look eagerly around him, as usual deeply interested in all that went on in connection with a popular and always growing airport, of which Candler Field was a shining example.

“By gum! if there aint one o’ them new-fangled air mail flags, painted on the fuselege o’ that Southern Air Fast Express ship gettin’ ready to pick off; an’ say, aint she a beaut though – regulation wings in yellow, with the words ‘U. S. Air Mail’, an’ the upper an’ lower borders marked with red an’ blue painted lines. Gosh! I’d be some proud naow to be handlin’ sech a nifty ship in the service I onct worked by; but no use kickin’, what I’m adoin’ these days is heaps more important fo’ Ole Uncle Sam than jest acarry’n’ his letter sacks. An’ mebbe that ship means to head back jest where we come from, Los Angeles, an’ San Diego, by way o’ Dallas, Texas. Haow they keep askippin’ all araoun’ this wide kentry, day an’ night, like grasshoppers on a sunny perairie – the times o’ magic have shore come to us folks in the year nineteen thirty-one.”

Other sights greeted his roving eyes as he held himself impatiently in check waiting for Jack to give him the word to start. Both of them had hurriedly changed their clothes, and were now garbed in their customary working dungarees, stained with innumerable marks of hard service, yet indispensable to those who followed their calling.

It certainly did not take long for their ship to be trundled out on to the level field, and brought into position for taking off. There was considerable of a gathering, considering that it was now so late in the night; and Perk, giving a stab at the fact, came to the conclusion there was something out of the common being, as he termed it, “pulled off” – possibly the presence of that beautiful emblem of the air mail service on the fuselage of the western bound mail and express matter carrier had to do with the occasion – a sort of honorary christening, so to speak – he was content to let it go at that.

Jack was still talking with some one he seemed to know, some one who must surely be a fellow pilot, for he was dressed in regulation dingy overalls, and kept hovering near that fine multi-motored Curtiss Kingbird plane that he, Perk, understood belonged to the new fleet of the line to be operated in a short time between Atlanta and Miami, Florida, carrying passengers, the mail, and express between the two airports.

Thus far there had been no sign of the ubiquitous newspaper man, and Perk continued to bolster up his hope this might continue to be the case to the very moment of their departure. It would be a bit exasperating should the fellow suddenly burst upon them, jumping out of a taxi, and tackling Jack with a beastly shower of questions that were suited to the ends he had in view of building up a fanciful story that must tickle the palates of the numerous readers of his department on aviation in the paper he served.

There, thank their lucky stars, was his companion giving the wished for call for him to stand by, as everything was fixed for immediate departure. In less than three minutes they would be taking the air, and leaving lighted Candler Field behind them – once that happy event had taken place and they could snap their fingers derisively at any attempt on the part of their determined annoyer to give them trouble.

“Huh! it’s to be hoped the pesky guy doant take a notion to hire a ship, an’ try to stick to aour tail, ashoutin’ aout his crazy questions like he spected us to done hole up, an’ hand him his story on a plate! Kinder gu – reckon as haow there aint much danger ’long them lines – it’d be a whole lot too hard fur him to manage. Okay, suh, right away!”

As Perk was supposed to be a pilot in the employ of Mr. Rodman Warrington, of course it was only right for him to be at the throttle of the ship when they took off. Accordingly he hastened to settle down in his seat where he could grip the controls, and manipulate things in the dash along the field that would wind up in a swing upwards toward the starry heavens.

Having given a last hasty inspection of his gadgets, and the numerous dials as arranged on the black dashboard before him, Perk called out, the propeller started to roar and spin like lightning; and in that very last second of time, as the ship commenced to leap forward, Perk caught a glimpse of the man whom they had believed left in the lurch – no other than Jimmy himself!

CHAPTER VII

On the Air-line to Charleston

Jimmy was leaping from a taxi that had come whirling almost up to the spot where their ship was in the act of taking off. Perk in that hasty look – when truth to tell he had no business to be taking his eyes away from his course ahead, lest he make a slip that would upset all their calculations – had seen the printer's ink man heading in leaps toward their plane – yes, and sure enough he was holding a pad of paper in one hand, and doubtless a sharpened pencil in the other, a typical up-to-the-minute knight of the press bent on snatching up his facts on the run.

Then Perk – still paying strict attention to his special task – gave a grunt of satisfaction, coupled with derision. To himself he must have been thinking, if not saying, “that's the time we jest made a slick get-away by the skin o' aour teeth – yeou're five seconds too late, Jimmy, boy – try some o' yeour tricks on slower game, not we-uns. Whoopla! here she goes!”

As they were just then about to leave the ground and start their upward climb of course it was absolutely out of the question for the one holding the stick to twist his head around so as to see what their tormentor was doing; but then he felt certain Jack must be taking in everything that occurred, and in good time he would be told of each little incident.

Perk had his instructions, and knew just what he was doing. Accordingly, when the ship had reached a comfortable ceiling of say half a thousand feet, he banked, and swung around so as to head toward the southwest.

“Shore thing,” Perk was telling himself, in a spirit of pride and astuteness. “Sense the gent's is aimin' to git a black bear in them canebrakes o' ole Louisiana, we gotter be headin' thataways at the start. Hoopla! aint it jest the limit, apullin' the wool over the eyes o' one o' the darnedest sharpest newspaper boys as ever was?”

It had been arranged that they were to keep on that course for a brief time, and when sufficient distance had been covered – so that the hum of their exhaust could no longer be heard at Candler Field – they would change to another quarter, swing around the distant city, pick up the light at Stone Mountain, and from that point industriously follow the beacons that flashed every ten miles or so all the way to Richmond, Virginia.

Jack soon displaced his assistant pilot at the controls, and Perk was able to take hold of other special duties, such as were usually left to his direction.

One of the very first things he carried out was to attach the harness of the invaluable telephone, that, when connected with their ears allowed of such exchange of views as they saw fit to indulge in; and Perk was burning up with eagerness to find out what Jack must have seen after they made their start.

The big ship was speeding at a merry clip, and before long Stone Mountain would be reached with the first beacon flashing its welcome light to beckon them on their well marked course.

“Was that *him* as I guess – reckoned I done seed, jest as we started to move, hey, partner?” Perk demanded; and as Jack knew only too well he would have no peace until he handed over such information as he possessed, he lost no time in making answer.

“No other, brother – he came in a taxi, and was in such a hurry it's plain to be seen he'd picked up a clew at the hotel that sent him whooping things up, and burning the minutes until he got there at Candler Field. Unfortunately – for Jimmy – he dallied a half minute too long, trying to get some lead from that night clerk, and so we slipped one off on him.”

“Yeou doant reckon as haow he'd be so brash as to hire a ship, to try an' sit on aour tail, do yeou, ole hoss?” demanded Perk, who had even looked back once or twice, as though such a possibility had begun to bother him.

“Not a Chinaman’s chance of such a happening, Wally – we’ve got a clear field ahead of us, and I feel pretty certain that’s the last we’ll see of our friend Jimmy. Just the same, leave it to him to concoct a thrilling yarn to feed to his readers to-morrow morning – imagination will supply the missing facts; and I’d like to set eyes on what he hatches up.”

“Me too, partner,” echoed Perk, greedily; “an’ if it’s possible while we hang aout araound Charleston I’m meanin’ to look up all the Atlanta papers, and read all the air news they carry.”

“Go to it, partner; but that must be Stone Mountain over there on our larboard quarter; look sharp, and you’ll glimpse a flashing light, for we’re about to pick up our first beacon.”

“Bully for that, ’cause afterwards it’ll be the softest sailin’ ever, with aour course charted aout fur us most all the way.”

“I’m holding her down a bit,” explained Jack, “because we’d better stick to the beacons until dawn; after that we can depend on our compass and chart to carry us the rest of the way to Charleston.”

“I get yeou, ole hoss, an’ agree with yeou to a hair. No hurry whatever, yeou done tole me the Chief sez in his cipher letter o’ instructions – slow an’ sure, that’s agoin’ to be aour motto this campaign,” and Jack must have chuckled to hear the impetuous Perk say that, it was so foreign to his customary way of rushing things.

The line of beacons was now picked up, and Perk could see sometimes as many as three at the same time – the one they were passing over; that left behind shortly before; and still a third faint flash at some distance beyond.

They had climbed to a ceiling of some two thousand feet, which might still be increased when passing over such outspurs of the Allegheny or Smoky Range Mountains as would be met on the regular air mail course to Richmond.

As the air seemed unusually free from any vestige of fog, being very clear, of course visibility was prime, which fact added to Perk’s happiness, he being unduly fond of such favorable weather conditions.

Such a voluble chap could not keep silent long, when it was so easy to chat with an accommodating companion; and hence presently Perk found something else to mention to the working pilot.

“I say, partner,” he sang out, “tell me who yeour friend was, the pilot I seen yeou talkin’ with, an’ who sure seemed to be ’quainted with yeou.”

“Knew you had that question up your sleeve, buddy,” Jack replied, always ready to satisfy any reasonable amount of curiosity on the part of his chum, “Yes, he was an old friend of mine, and I expect you’ve heard me speak of him more than a few times – one of the most adept pilots connected with the Curtiss people, – no other than Doug Davis, who back in twenty-nine won the country’s speed race at Cleveland, with a record of a hundred-and-ninety miles an hour.”

“Gee whiz! haow I’d liked to amet up with him!” exclaimed Perk, showing a trace of keen disappointment in his tone.

“I’d have introduced you, partner, only the conditions wouldn’t admit it.” Jack threw out as a bit of apology.

“But, say – what if that speed hound, Jimmy, happened to learn he was atalkin’ with yeou, wouldn’t your friend Doug be apt to give us away, withaout knowin’ the reasons why we wanted to keep shady right naow?”

Jack gave him the laugh.

“Not on your life, buddy,” he announced, without hesitation; “I managed to let Doug know what line I was in, and how just at present I’m a New York millionaire sportsman and aviator, Rodman Warrington by name, headed toward some shooting-grounds for a whack at big game. He’s a lad you could never catch asleep at the switch; and make up your mind our secret’s as safe with him as anything could be. Jimmy’d have all his trouble for his pains, if he ever tried to pump Doug Davis, who’s as keen as they make them in our line.”

“But, partner, didn’t he introduce yeou to another pilot – I reckon I seen him adoin’ that same, an’ heow yeou shook hands with the other guy.”

“Yes, but I’d already tipped Doug off, and he strung his friend with the story we’ve hatched up about our meaning to try the shooting in those wonderful canebrakes in Louisiana. And that’s all he’ll ever tell connected with my identity, till the cows come home, or water runs uphill.”

“An’ who did the other chap happen to be, if it’s a fair question, suh?” continued Perk, who, once he started on an investigating tour, never would let go until he had extracted every particle of information available.

“Sorry that I didn’t catch his name clearly; but Doug told me he was connected with the U. S. Air Reserve Corps operations functioning there at Candler Field,” Jack explained.

He certainly stirred up something when he said that.

“Well, well, what dye know ’baout that naow,” gushed Perk, apparently thrilled more or less by what he had just heard. “I’ve been gettin’ wind o’ that ere movement, and meanin’ to look it up whenever the chanct drifted along.”

“A most interesting subject, buddy, and one I’d think you’d want to look into, seein’ you’re a veteran of flying in the Great War over in France, and could join without any trouble. From what Doug told me, and what I’ve read concerning the game, the organization is growing stronger every day – made up of men especially fitted to step in and man fighting planes, should any occasion arise, such as another foreign war. Right in the southeast district there are something over two-hundred-and-thirty pilot members, who could be mustered by Uncle Sam in an emergency, just twenty-two of whom belong in Atlanta, Doug told me.”

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