

ROY ROCKWOOD

DAVE DASHAWAY, AIR
CHAMPION: OR, WIZARD
WORK IN THE CLOUDS

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CHAPTER I AT THE HANGARS

“Dave, here is something that will surely interest you.”

As he spoke, Hiram Dobbs held up a newspaper to the view of his companion, and Dave Dashaway caught sight of the prominent head line: “Grand International Aviation Contest.”

The two friends were amid an environment strongly suggestive of airships and their doings. They were sitting under a tree near the hangar where Dave’s various aircraft and equipments were stored. This was Dave’s home, for the time being. Here, for over a month he had slept, ate and trained for just such an event as the one which his chum had brought to his attention.

There was nothing about Dave’s present appearance to indicate that he was an expert in aviation except a medal modestly showing beyond the lapel of his coat. It might, however, have been a source of surprise to the average person to read the inscription on the medal, certifying to Dave’s championship in a feat that had startled the aviation world.

Hiram proudly wore a pin bearing the initials: “N. A. A.” (National Aero Association) showing a distinction beyond the ordinary for a boy of his age, and showing, too, that when he spoke of aviation it was not as a novice.

“Dave, you ought to go in for that,” he added.

“Yes, it looks attractive,” agreed the young aviator after a swift glance over the item under discussion.

“Ten thousand dollars – think of it!” exclaimed the interested Hiram.

“It’s a big lot of money,” responded Dave, slowly.

“And a big heap of work to win it, I suppose you would say,” supplemented Hiram. “Well, you never were afraid of work, and as to the chances – say, a fellow who has done what you’ve just done – why, it’ll be mere child’s play!”

Dave Dashaway smiled at the ardor of his companion. He was thinking, though, and impressed by the present situation. All things pertaining to aviation had a great attraction for Dave. His dreams, his practical efforts, all his ambitions lay in the direction of supremacy as an air pilot.

“I have been resting for a spell, as you might call it, Hiram,” he said finally, “and hadn’t of late, thought much of business. After that last dash of ours, you know, Mr. Brackett thought we had better let the season run out and prepare for something out of the ordinary next year.”

“This has come along all right; hasn’t it?” challenged Hiram, pointing at the item. “And the biggest kind of a thing, too. ‘Ten thousand dollars to the aviator scoring most in all events.’ Besides that, prizes for points in plain sailing, altitude and fancy stunts. It’s your class, Dave, it’s near here and you were never in better working trim in your life.”

“Why, Hiram,” spoke Dave, “you seem to have quite set your heart upon it.”

“Indeed I have!” vociferated the impetuous Hiram. “Think I’m going to sit around and keep mum, and hear a lot of would-be-airmen brag? Not much! They boast about a heap of records I know they never made. They were talking about this very prize offer last night. I took a good deal of pride in telling them about some of the things you’ve done. They knew about most of them, though. They looked glum when I hinted that you were going in for a try.”

“You shouldn’t have done that,” said Dave, quickly.

“Shouldn’t – why not?”

“Because in this line the wise man keeps his business to himself. Airmen, generally, are a jealous lot. Some of them, as we have reason to know, are untrustworthy.”

“I never thought of that,” replied Hiram, his face growing serious. “You’re right! It wouldn’t be the first time some schemers got after you, and tried to block you. That’s so! All the same, with that new *Ariel*, biplane, made specially for you, who can beat you? Why, Dave, your little trailer, the *Scout*, alone has half a dozen speed points ahead of the average machine on the field here. Those new release gears are just dandy, and there isn’t a craft on the list that has such an engine as the *Ariel*, let alone the fuselage angle rods and the tubular framework.”

“I declare, Hiram,” laughed Dave, “you’ve been posting up on scientific details lately; haven’t you?”

“I’ve tried to get it pat, yes, I’ll admit,” assented Hiram proudly. “Then again, I’ve had a motive in view. You see, I’ve been thinking up a grand scheme – ”

Hiram came to a sudden stop, looked embarrassed, and there was a faint flush on his face. It was with a somewhat sheepish expression in his eyes that he glanced at his companion.

“I know what you’re hinting at,” observed Dave shrewdly. “I suspected you were up to something when I saw you working over those little canvas bags. What’s the mystery, Hiram? Going to tell, this time?”

“I’m not,” dissented the young airman’s assistant staunchly. “You’d just laugh and say it was another of my grand schemes. All right! Those bags mean something – provided you go into this new contest. Honest, Dave,” went on Hiram with impressive earnestness, “I can put you onto a wrinkle in aeronautics that is new enough, and strong enough, to carry the day any time – oh, bother!”

Whatever scheme the young lad had in his mind, its disclosure was prevented at that moment by the arrival of an intruder. A man of about thirty, wearing a monocle, mincing in his steps and looking the typical English “dandy” to perfection, approached the bench where the two friends sat.

“It’s Lieutenant Montrose Mortimer,” remarked Dave with a faint smile.

“Lieutenant nothing!” declared Hiram forcibly. “He’s no more a British army officer than I am.”

“Ah, Mr. Dashaway,” spoke the newcomer, bowing, “I hope you’ve thought over my proposition.”

“Why, yes, Lieutenant,” replied Dave, “I have done so.”

“And have arrived at a decision?” questioned the other with marked eagerness.

“Well, no, not exactly,” answered Dave promptly. “You see, Lieutenant Mortimer, I am not a free agent in aviation matters. In fact, you might say I am under contract indefinitely to Mr. Brackett, who has financed me in the past. I should have to refer your offer to him, you see.”

“When will he be here?” asked the man, evidently very much disappointed.

“He may be here within a week.”

“I sincerely trust you will prevail on him to accept my offer,” spoke the pretended army man. “I shall feel that my duty to the admiralty and war office has been remiss if I fail to secure your valuable services. I am aware of your opposition to leaving your native country. I also appreciate your wish to remain neutral in regard to any actual warfare. That can be arranged. What we ask of you is to act as an instructor. Please think it over,” and he turned aside.

“Now, then,” broke out Hiram promptly as the lieutenant sauntered away, “what is that fellow really after, Dave?”

“Why, Hiram, according to his own story he is a representative from the aviation department of the British war office. He has made a very creditable showing – and he offers me all expenses paid abroad, where he says a yearly contract of several thousand dollars will be offered.”

“I don’t like him. Why, say, he reminds me of one of the funny cartoons that new tramp friend of yours drew for us last evening.”

“Hello!” exclaimed Dave, glancing hastily at his watch and then at the hangar. “He’s some sleeper; isn’t he, that tramp?”

The young airman referred to a new character who had incidentally come across their path the day previous. He was a tramp, a little above the average, but still frowsy, hungry and penniless. His humor had made an impression on the boys. They had fed him and he had asked for work to repay them. He was sober, and he looked honest, Dave had consented to his sleeping in the hangar.

“I guess it’s the first comfortable bed the poor fellow has had for a long time,” explained Hiram. “Say, Dave, he must have been a good artist once, to draw those faces as cleverly as he did last evening.”

“Yes, he certainly has a sort of genius about him,” began Dave, when there was a sudden and startling interruption.

From Dave’s hangar there came a dull explosion. Both of the young aviators made a rush in its direction, wondering what accident had happened.

CHAPTER II

THE TRAMP ARTIST

“Somebody is trying to blow us up again!” shouted Hiram, in a great state of excitement.

That word “again” meant just what the young airman apprentice intended that it should. As we have already said, the two chums were no novices in the strange line of business activity they had taken up to earn a living. They had not only shared triumphs and gains, but many a peril besides. There had instantly come to Hiram’s mind, and to that of Dave Dashaway as well, on the present occasion a memory of past deeds of jealousy, hatred and cunning on the part of unprincipled rivals, where fire and powder were used in destructive and dangerous work.

There had been no lights in the hangar since the night before, its only occupant that the boys knew of was the tramp-artist they had accommodated. As both noticed a little puff of smoke shoot out through a ventilating pipe in the roof of the structure, they were sure that something had blown up, or had been blown up.

Hiram and Dave were greatly anxious. Inside that hangar were two machines valued as an expert horseman would cherish his pet steeds, or a crack motorist his favorite automobile. Particularly was Dave’s latest acquisition, the *Ariel*, to which Hiram had referred so proudly, a possession that the young birdman treasured. The active fear that this might have sustained some damage spurred him to hasten on and see what had happened.

It was by no easy or accidental route that Dave Dashaway had reached his present position as an aviator. It had been no path of roses for him. In the first book of this series, entitled “Dave Dashaway, The Young Aviator,” his struggles and initial triumphs have been depicted. He found a good friend in one Robert King, a man of some means, and by hard study and practice Dave won his laurels as a professional.

In the second volume, called “Dave Dashaway And His Hydroplane,” the further progress of the ambitious young airman is recited. His father had been a scientist and balloonist. The cooperation of one of his old associates proved a wonderful aid to Dave, and he went through some stirring experiences both up in the air and on the water.

“Dave Dashaway And His Giant Airship,” was the medium for telling of Dave’s breaking of many aviation records. In that book the flight of the dirigible *Albatross*, involved a fascinating series of discoveries and adventures. The last preceding book of the series, “Dave Dashaway Around The World,” describes a daring race for a rich prize, which Dave, with the willing aid of his young friends, won, honorably defeating all competitors.

Hiram Dobbs, a young aero enthusiast, Dave had picked up accidentally. It proved to be a lucky “find.” Crude, impetuous though he might be, Hiram was not only a loyal friend, but developed great efficiency as a sort of understudy of the chum and employer whom he looked up to as the ideal champion of the aviation world.

As the young airman had put it, he and his good-natured and well-intentioned assistant were now “taking a rest.” They had come to Midlothian, a practice field of a Mississippi river city, to be near several points where exhibition aviation features were in progress. Mr. Brackett had been the mainstay, financially, of Dave all through his professional career. It was true that the young aviator had essentially won his own way and had helped to make famous the output of the Interstate Aero Company, of which Mr. Brackett was practically the owner. Still, Dave felt that all he had gained had been through the encouragement and assistance of the manufacturer. As a matter of fact, Dave deferred greatly to the opinion and direction of this valuable friend. He had been expecting his arrival daily at the Midlothian grounds, to talk over the situation and prospects for future work.

“Whew!” ejaculated Hiram, as he pulled open the door of the hangar, and rushed in. “Fire!”

“No, only smoke,” corrected Dave – “and not much of that, lucky for us!”

“I say!” cried his companion in an exasperated tone as he went spinning off his feet. Contact with an indistinct, wildly-rushing human form had caused this. There had been a smoky haze inside the hangar that had hid the aroused sleeper from clear view. Now, however, the tramp was plainly visible. He looked startled and scared and he was nursing the fingers of his left hand in the palm of the other.

“What’s happened – are you hurt?” inquired Dave.

“Whew! Well – why, oh, it’s only a little burn, but – catch the rascal!”

As the speaker finished the rapidly shouted sentence he dashed towards the fence. Upon this the rear of the hangar backed. The tramp was quick, and as nimble as a monkey as he ran at the fourteen-foot barrier. One of its slanting supports carried him within reach of the bracing stringer. He lifted himself to this. From the ground the aeroplane boys could see him bobbing his head about among the barbed wire runners, strung along on top of the fence, as if to catch a view of a vacant field beyond.

The tramp yelled out some disjointed words, and shook his fist angrily, as if after a scurrying fugitive. Then he slid down to the ground and faced Dave and Hiram, panting and excited.

“He made off – he got away!” the tramp ejaculated. “Too bad! I’m so big I couldn’t get through that window.”

“What window?” inquired Hiram.

“Cut in the fence that makes the rear of the hangar,” was explained. “Come in. Let me show you.”

Dave cast a hurried glance about the interior of the hangar as he entered it. Except that the little door which protected the rear window opening was out of place, everything seemed in order. Their tramp friend, however, had stooped over near the *Ariel*.

“Look here,” he said, and the boys, crowding nearer to him, noticed that he held in his hand the crisped, blackened end of what resembled a fuse.

“Where does it lead to?” asked the startled Hiram.

Very gingerly the tramp ran eye and hand along the sinister-looking fuse. He seemed to locate its end as he reached under a corner of the airplane.

“Better get it outside,” he suggested, and the boys saw that he had unearthed a round box-like object resembling a dry electric battery. The fuse ran to its center. The tramp carried it outside, set it down in the grass at a safe distance from the hangar, and observed:

“Better soak it in a pail of water before you handle it much. Those things are dangerous; very much so! If I don’t mistake, you’ll find it’s dynamite.”

“Then some one’s up to a mean trick again!” cried the excitable Hiram, unable to repress himself. “Dave, you’re not going to stand this; are you?”

“Why, Hiram,” responded Dave quietly, “we don’t yet know our bearings. Maybe it’s a joke –”

“Joke! Joke!” fairly yelled Hiram. “Yes, the same kind of a joke as that fellow Vernon played on us when he stole the *Comet* at the Washington aero meet. Or like that partner of his, who dropped a steel hook on the biplane purposely to wreck us.”

Hiram had named the enemy the boys, according to past experience, had most to fear. Dave, however, was not wont to jump at hasty conclusions. He did not do so in the present instance. He put aside unproven suspicion for the time being.

“We had better make an investigation, and find out all we can,” Dave suggested. “You said your name was Borden, I believe?” he observed to the tramp.

“That’s it – Roving Borden, they call me. I was Henry, in my respectable days.”

“Very good, Mr. Borden, now please tell us what you know of this affair,” Dave requested.

"I'm a pretty sound sleeper," narrated the tramp, "especially in such a famous bunk as you kindly gave me. I'd slept so long, though, that I fancy I was more easily awakened than usual. What I saw was done quickly. Some one must have forced in that shutter yonder. He had just put that thing we discovered under the edge of the balloon. The end of the fuse was spluttering as I woke up. I saw the fellow bolt through the window. Then I sprang up and grabbed the fuse. As I snapped it in two, it sort of exploded. See where it burned me?" and the speaker showed his blackened fingers.

"Lucky for us you were on hand!" broke in Hiram.

"I believe this to be the work of an enemy," spoke Dave, rather solemnly, after a moment's deliberation. "Did you have a good look at the fellow you saw go through the window, Mr. Borden?"

"I should say, I did!" exclaimed the tramp. "When a fellow gets waked up suddenly and startled, like I was, everything hits his brain as if it were a photograph camera. Say," and the speaker half closed his eyes, "I can see that rascal just as plain as day now. By the way, too, if I'm not mistaken I saw the very same individual hanging around the outside of the grounds when I sneaked in last night."

"Dave, I call this serious!" cried Hiram, aroused and indignant. "It's a queer thing if we can't have protection from the cowards who steal in on us when we're not watching, and try to wreck our aircraft! I'll wager the stuff in that canister would blow a small mountain to pieces!"

"Guess I'd have gone up, too, if it was that bad," remarked the tramp with a shiver.

Dave went to the window and examined it. The edges of the solid board shutter showed the marks of some chisel, or other tool, used to pry it open. Then the chums went outside. On the way Dave caught up a bundle of waste used in removing oil and grime from the machinery of the air crafts, and a newspaper.

The others watched him in silence as he carefully wound up what was left of the fuse, and placed it and the canister, to which it was attached, in the waste then, wrapping all in the newspaper, he said to Hiram:

"I'm going down to the manager's office."

"Going to find out if that's a real explosive; aren't you?" inquired Hiram.

"Yes, that's my purpose. If we find that it is, we can make up our minds that the people we have had trouble with before are still on our trail. I fancied we'd beaten them off so many times they had now gotten sick of such doings."

"Oh, if it's Vernon, or any of his crowd, they're the kind that will keep on pestering us to the last," declared Hiram. "Be back soon, Dave. I'm all rattled, and anxious."

The young birdman proceeded on his way. Hiram turned to the tramp, who had manifested a decided interest in all that had taken place.

"We didn't wake you up when we went down to the restaurant for breakfast," said Hiram. "You were sleeping so soundly it seemed a pity to disturb you."

"You're very good, both of you, to think of an old derelict like me," was the reply, given with feeling.

"Why, you've done us a big turn," responded Hiram, "so I guess you've squared things. I brought some eatables up from the café, and if you're hungry –"

"Say, friend," interrupted Borden in a serio-comic way – "I'm *always* hungry!"

"Then start with what there is," directed Hiram, always glad to make others comfortable, as he spread the food out upon the bench near by. He watched their guest devour the viands with a relish that made him almost wish for a second breakfast himself. The tramp bolted the last morsel, and breathed a sigh of genuine content.

"That fills a mighty hollow spot," he observed. "Say, about the fellow that tried to blow you up here – got a piece of chalk?"

“Why, no,” answered Hiram, noting that the speaker was viewing the smooth side of the hangar as might an artist a blank canvas. “I suppose you want to draw something,” guessed Hiram, recalling the artistic efforts of the evening previous.

“That’s it,” assented Borden. “It might sort of satisfy your curiosity, and maybe give you a hint, if I can furnish you with an idea of how that blowing-up rascal looked.”

“Why, that’s a great idea!” cried Hiram. “Do it!”

“I want to get at it while the picture of the fellow is fresh in my mind,” went on Borden. “Here’s the very thing,” and he picked up the paper that had held the morning lunch. “If I only had a black crayon now, instead of my fine pencil –”

“I’m pretty sure there’s a carpenter’s pencil in our tool box,” suggested Hiram.

“Good! Get it, and a few brads, or tacks. Just the thing,” he added, as Hiram, after a search in the hangar, brought out the articles named.

Borden proceeded to attach the sheet of manilla paper to the side of the hanger. He smoothed its surface with his hand, rubbed the broad end of the big pencil to a point on a brick he discovered, and rolled up one ragged sleeve with a certain affected, artistic twirl that set Hiram laughing.

“That’s all right,” nodded the tramp indulgently. “I don’t look much like a cartoonist, but all the same I once traveled as a lightning caricaturist. Heads are my specialty, and here goes for the fellow who came so near to blowing out the lights for a budding genius!”

Hiram watched eagerly, from that moment, for the space of a quarter of an hour. The faces Borden had quickly and crudely drawn on some cards, to amuse Dave and himself, and show off his accomplishments, the evening previous, had awakened the interest and admiration of the two lads. Now, however, Borden began to create, line by line, and curve by curve, as perfect a human face as Hiram had even seen done by an expert crayon artist.

“That’s him,” announced the artist, with a last touch of the pencil, and drawing back from the impromptu easel with a satisfied air.

He viewed his clever handiwork with a critical but gratified eye.

“Yes, it’s him,” went on Borden. “Thin, peaked chin, one wall eye. There you are! Just as good as if you’d got his picture from the rogues’ gallery – where he belongs, if I don’t miss my guess.”

“Pshaw!” exclaimed his audience of one, in so decidedly a disappointed way, that the amateur artist knit his brows, and looked hurt.

CHAPTER III

“TARGET PRACTICE”

“Why, I say!” exclaimed the tramp with a wondering stare at Hiram, “you don’t seem glad at all.”

“It isn’t him, you see,” responded Hiram dubiously. “Oh, yes,” he hastened to add, noticing the injured way Borden took it, “I’m glad you are here to draw a picture of the man who tried to blow us up, but I was almost sure it was – well, a fellow we know, and have every reason to fear. But it isn’t!”

“I see, I see,” murmured the tramp thoughtfully, and he ran his eye more critically than ever over his handiwork. “Ye-es,” he continued slowly, “it’s a pretty fair picture. He doesn’t seem familiar to you; eh?”

“No, I don’t remember ever having seen a face like that before,” answered Hiram, doubtfully.

“Just as well, I reckon. He’d be no advantage to anybody, that fellow wouldn’t. Well, that’s the fellow you want to go after, provided you intend to.”

“Dave will,” declared Hiram with vim. “There’s some mean hangers-on in our line, and lots of jealousy, and it’s led to danger and loss for us several times before this. The management here will take this matter up, if we make a complaint about it. Dave’s going to. I could see that from the look on his face when he went off just now. Thanks!” he shouted to a young fellow on a motor cycle who flashed by, flipping an envelope to Hiram. He had a gold braided “M” on his cap, indicating that he was a grounds messenger acting as postboy in distributing the mail to the various hangars. “Why,” added Hiram with increased animation of manner, as he scanned the printed words in one corner of the envelope, “it’s from Chicago, and the headquarters of the International Meet Association we were talking about not an hour ago. I wonder – ”

Hiram strolled off by himself, looking out for Dave, and building all kinds of air castles. In about five minutes his chum put in an appearance. Hiram ran towards him, waving the envelope, and placed it in his hands. Dave opened it. His assistant watched his face keenly, and was gratified to note that it assumed a pleased expression.

“It’s from the people offering all those prizes we were talking about; isn’t it, Dave?” questioned his eager assistant.

“Yes,” replied the other, “it’s from the committee of the big International meet. They invite us to participate, Hiram.”

“Us?” repeated Hiram – “Oh, yes! You can be sure they’d ask you, though. What you going to do about it?”

“Oh, we’ll think it over. They write that they are sending the details, such as rules and restrictions, in a later mail. We’ll study them when they come.”

Of course Hiram, in his impetuous way, was ready to take up any proposition in the aviation line, no matter how important. To him Dave was the one champion in the field able to compete with all rivals. He had been with Dave long enough, however, to get used to his methodical business-like ways. Hiram was eager to plunge at once into the merits of the new proposition, but he knew that Dave had put the matter aside until he was ready to take it up for real action.

“Oh, say, Dave,” Hiram changed the subject, “come along till I show you the picture our tramp friend has drawn. That’s the man who tried to blow us up,” he announced, as they reached the side of the hangar where the sheet of manilla paper was tacked.

Dave surveyed the sketch critically. He saw at a glance that the artist had caught some strong facial characteristics of the person whose likeness he had attempted to draw. The young birdman shook his head slowly.

“Don’t know him?” broke in Hiram questioningly – “neither do I. Anybody would again, though, if that sketch looks like him. See here, Dave,” and Hiram was very serious and impressive, “it’s just such mean tricks as this one that have been the start of all kinds of trouble for us. We want to nip it in the bud this time. What do they say up at the office?”

“They promise a thorough investigation. There has been quite a lot of vandal work at the different meets, and they say they will spare no pains, or expense, to run down the fellows who are discrediting our exhibitions. Want to speak to me?” asked Dave in a kindly tone, noticing the tramp hovering about near them as if he had something on his mind.

“Why, yes,” answered Borden. “You fellows have been mighty good to me, and I feel as if I owed you something. I’m no detective, or anything of that sort, but if it’s a point to you to find out something about the original of that picture – ”

“I should say it was!” interrupted Hiram, strenuously.

“Then, as I’m the one who saw him closest, and who know him best, maybe I’d be luckiest in recognizing him on sight. I’ll take a little scurry around, if you say so, and try to run him down, or head him off, and find out what’s back all this.”

“Vernon, our old-time enemy is back of it, or else some envious chaps who think you may go to this new meet, and who want to keep you out of it because they know you’ll win,” whispered Hiram to Dave.

“That is a very good idea,” said the latter to Borden. “You think you saw this same man hanging around the grounds last evening? You might come across him again by keeping your eyes open. Suppose you do that now? Here’s a little change you may need,” and the young aviator slipped some silver coins into the man’s hand. “Hiram, the management here are talking about a bonus-flight the end of this week. I’m interested and have promised to meet with the directors in an hour. I suppose you want to take your regular fly with the *Scout*?”

“I’ve counted on it,” replied Hiram promptly, “but some one ought to keep a close watch around the hangar, I suppose.”

“Oh, I don’t think we’ll be troubled in the day time,” answered Dave. “You can arrange with the grounds watchman to look in on our property from time to time. You won’t be gone very long, I suppose?”

“Oh, just a scurry across country, and back,” replied Hiram, with a nonchalance manifestly affected, and Dave smiled to himself, suspecting that his young assistant was up to something as he recalled to his mind the mysterious bags that Hiram had been making.

Surely enough, those same bags played a part in the later proceedings of the ardent young amateur airman. The tramp had started off on his mission, promising to report his possible discoveries that same evening. Dave followed him in the direction of the office of the grounds. Hiram, left alone, bustled about in the most active enjoyment of one of those occasions when he was given a chance to test out the knowledge of air-sailing he had acquired under the tuition of his gifted chum. He threw open the doors of the hangar, and, as the bright sunlight streamed in, stood in a sort of rapt dream surveying the two machines exposed to his view.

“The beauties!” he cried, his sparkling eyes resting first upon the *Ariel* and then upon the *Scout*.

The *Ariel* was the very latest model in the aeroplane line. It succeeded the famous *Comet*. That was the fine machine in which Dave and his friends had made their trip around the world. The *Comet* had been built more for rough usage and staying power, than for fancy sprints or stunts. It was now an honored relic in the show rooms of the Interstate Aero Company. Only a few weeks before the present introduction of the reader to our young hero, Mr. Brackett had delighted his young protégé by shipping to him, at the Midlothian grounds, the latest model in air craft.

The *Ariel* flew as a parasol-type biplane. It gratified Dave to note that the manufacturer had followed out many incidental suggestions he, himself, had made from time to time, when visiting

the plant which Mr. Brackett practically owned. The main planes of the new machine enabled easy entrance to, and exit from, the cockpit. The pilot had an unhampered view in all directions. The craft had a maximum span of thirty-five feet and a chord of seven feet.

The area of the main planes was two hundred and twenty-five square feet. The over-all length of the machine was twenty-five feet, while the weight empty, was nine hundred pounds. The motor was of radial construction and of the six-cylinder type, having a bore and stroke of five by six inches respectively. A speed of about eighty miles per hour was easily attained by the machine loaded with fifty gallons of gasoline and ten of lubricant, as an average for a three-hour flight.

“Want some help?” inquired a man from a neighboring hangar, strolling up to the spot.

“Just a mere lift,” replied Hiram briskly. “The little *Scout* acts just as anxious to get up cloud-chasing as I am.”

“Ready,” announced the helper, getting into position.

“Let her go,” ordered the enthusiastic young airman in a tone like a hurrah, his quivering fingers clutching wheel and control, and thrilling to the tips with animation and delight.

It was a superb day. Air, sky and wind currents were propitious for an easy flight. To Hiram there was nothing in the world equal to that delightful sensation of skimming through the air like a bird. It was almost rapture to realize that the turn of a wrist, or the pressure of his foot sent the airy, graceful fabric of steel and wood far aloft, like a pinion-poised eagle, ascending safely through space as would a speeding swallow arrow-aimed for a long, deep dive.

Hiram struck a course due west, once aloft at a convenient level. Eyes and mind were fixed upon a direct point in view. At the end of an hour he was out of sight of the camp and the air craft practicing in the vicinity of the exhibition grounds.

Between two settlements, some fifteen miles apart, Hiram began to descend. It was where a two mile reach of level pasture land intervened, dotted here and there with underbrush and stunted trees. The *Scout* landed and its young pilot alighted. Under one arm he carried some sheets of white paper. He halted to place one of these on the ground, holding it flat by stones weighing down its corners. He then proceeded fully half a mile farther, again placed a sheet on the ground, gradually, in like manner, making a circle of fully a mile and a half. Finally he came back to the *Scout*, and got up into the air again.

“Target practice!” chuckled Hiram, as he circled away from the spot, made a sharp turn and volplaned full speed, as though aiming to land, nose first, directly upon the first white sheet in his course. Hiram made a magnificent dive. He swung over the control so that fifty feet from the ground the machine turned the reverse arc of a circle of nearly two hundred feet. His hand shot down beside him and grasped one of the bags, lifted it, aimed it and practically fired it at the “target” in view.

“Missed,” he grimly observed, but quite pleased all the same, for the bag landed flat and did not roll, and lay not two feet away from its intended mark.

“Hit it!” crowed the excited Hiram as, with a second swoop, he made a direct hit of the second target with a second bag. The third was a miss. The fourth was like the second.

“If I can make it that good, what can’t Dave Dashaway do?” soliloquized the young aeronaut, as he gathered up the bags and replaced them in the *Scout*. “I’ll spring the scheme on him just as soon as he makes up his mind to go into that International contest, which he’s just *got* to do!”

Hiram went afloat once more, determined on a swift run west, a turn, and then a course homeward bound.

“Hum” he chuckled. “If any of the airmen saw my maneuvers with those bags they’d think I was practicing to go over to Europe and drop bombs. Now what does that mean?” murmured the lad suddenly, and, with a quick start, Hiram slackened his speed, to study out the details of a lively scene in progress directly beneath him.

CHAPTER IV

THE UNDER DOG

“I’m not going to stand that!” suddenly shouted Hiram, and he started a spiral descent, on the spur of the moment.

The young airman was warm-hearted and impulsive. Hiram was usually in the midst of any “scrimmage” going on in his vicinity, but it was generally when his sympathy, or chivalry, were aroused from interest in others. Just now all that was manly in him awakened his natural championship of “the under dog in a fight.”

Just below him was a wide swampy spot, and about forty feet from the solid land, edging it on one side, were two men. One of them, portly and mean-faced, was waving a cane and shouting angrily at a younger companion. This individual was wading stumbingly towards him. His feet were mired in the soft, mushy soil, and the water came up to his waist.

Upon a little swamp-island was a ragged, barefooted boy of about sixteen. He had a broad piece of tree bark in his hand. This he was using as a scoop. Dipping it down in the black, watery mire near the edge of the swamp, he would lift it aloft. Then with a dash and a swing he would fling it at the retreating man in the water.

At a glance Hiram read the situation. The boy looked like a half-starved runaway. The old man resembled some cruel relative, or guardian. He was in a fury. Suddenly he seized a flat stone at his feet, and sent it whizzing through the air. It landed against the boy’s cheek, drawing the blood.

“Now’s your chance – make for him!” cried the older man.

His younger and mired helper half turned, but it was to find the boy not yet out of the ring. The latter staggered slightly under the blow he had received, and the bark scoop dropped from his hand. He quickly picked it up, however, and sent into the face of his returning foe a deluge of black, blinding muck. The man rubbed his eyes, veered about again and made for the shore.

The irate old man was brandishing his cane, and shouting. He seemed to be censuring his defeated aide, who, dripping and bespattered, stood disgustedly on dry land.

“They’re trying to corner that boy, and he’s too plucky to let them,” decided Hiram. “There goes another stone. Good! it missed, and the boy is safe under cover.”

The lad had slipped behind a tree, but he kept the scoop in his hand. The two men gesticulated and parleyed. Finally the old man pointed toward a little settlement about a mile away. His companion started in that direction. The old man mopped his head with his handkerchief. Then he sat down under the shade of a tree as if exhausted with rage and his unusual exercise.

“He’s sent for help; maybe for the police,” reflected Hiram. “Right or wrong, the boy looks in need of a friend. I’m going to know the ins and outs of this affair.”

So far no one of the three persons in sight had caught a view of the descending machine, so absorbed had they been in the conflict in which they were engaged. At the sound of the snort of the exhaust of the aeroplane, however, the barefooted lad started nervously, and looked up.

The *Scout* had landed in the middle of a clear spot edged by some bushes. Hiram who had some time since shut off the power, faced the astonished lad not twenty feet away from him.

“Hello!” he hailed, leaping out, and advancing. “What’s the trouble here?”

For a second or two the lad did not speak. The startling appearance of airship and pilot seemed to benumb him. He looked appealingly at Hiram, as though trying to figure out whether his strange and unexpected arrival meant help or harm. Then, something in the friendly face of the newcomer seemed partially to reassure him. His wan face twitched and his lips puckered.

“I’m in trouble,” he said – “terrible trouble.”

“Those men, I suppose?” questioned Hiram, pointing to the spot across the watery space.

“Yes, I’ve been on a run for hours, till I’m ready to drop. I thought I was safe here on this island, but they hunted me out. I’ve been fighting them off for nearly an hour.”

“Who are they, anyway?” asked Hiram.

“That old man claims to be my uncle. The other fellow he sent to town to get a constable, and hunt me out, is one of the half a dozen bad men he’s in with. Oh, he’s led me a terrible life! I just had to break away from him. I couldn’t stand it any longer. Oh, is there any way to keep me out of their hands?”

The speaker looked up in a beseeching way. The tears were running down his wasted cheeks. Hiram was much stirred.

“Say, I’ll do anything, any time, for a fellow in the fix you’re in, if I believe he’s right!” he cried valiantly. “I think you are. That old man has seen us now. Look at him rage.”

By this time the older man, on the mainland, had caught sight of the newcomer and of the machine that had brought Hiram to the rescue. He leaped to his feet, and seized his cane. He ran, brandishing it, to the edge of the water.

“Hey, say; you there!” he yelled. “Whoever you are, don’t you dare to interfere. The law will soon be here, and attend to that young rascal.”

“Yes, it will be all over for me when the constable comes,” choked out the lad by Hiram’s side. “Please, please help me, if you can! I don’t care for myself. It’s my little sister. They could hammer me, and I’d grin and bear it, but when they began on her I simply had to get away.”

“Little sister – what? Where?” inquired Hiram, in perplexity.

“Look there,” was the response, and the boy parted some bushes. Hiram uttered a wondering and a pitying cry, as he looked over the shoulder of his guide and saw a little girl, not more than four years of age. She was lying asleep on the dry grass, her head pillowed on a coat, evidently belonging to the lad, her brother. Her attire was as torn and threadbare as his own. Her face showed tear stains and exhaustion.

“Oh, dear! Dear!” murmured the pitying Hiram at the sight of such forlorn misery.

“If you don’t think I’m telling you the truth, just look there!” cried the lad brokenly, and he leaned over and gently pulled loose the poor thin dress covering the child. Across her shoulders were half a dozen dark welts.

“That man over there did that,” sobbed the barefooted boy. “Wouldn’t you run away for that? Wouldn’t you want to hit that mean man over yonder, if he treated a sister of yours that way?”

Hiram Dobbs fired up in a flash. He ran forward and shook his fist at the man in view. Then he looked in the direction of the town. The messenger sent thither was out of sight. Hiram cooled down.

“That fellow will soon be back with the officers of the law,” he said. “We mustn’t lose any time, I suppose. Do you know what that is?” he questioned his companion, pointing to the *Scout*.

“It’s an airship; isn’t it?” asked the boy. “I’ve seen one or two of them before.”

“Yes, it’s a biplane,” explained Hiram. “There’s a second seat in it, but it can’t carry a very heavy load, but I am sure, though, it will hold you and your sister. Pick up that poor little thing and I’ll show you how to get aboard. You’re not afraid?” he questioned.

“Me? No. I’d jump aboard a balloon if it would get little Lois safe out of the clutches of old Martin Dawson!” cried the lad.

The little girl stirred and moaned, as her brother lifted her in his arms. Hiram piloted him with his burden to the side of the *Scout*. He helped him step over the controls, eased him back into the seat and strapped him in, the little one in his lap.

“Snug and safe,” he spoke. “All you’ve got to do is to shut your eyes if you get dizzy. Now then, you old tyrant!” added Hiram speaking in the direction of the storming stamping man across from them, “we’ll set you a pace you couldn’t follow with all the constables in creation.”

The young aviator had to make three different efforts to clear the ground. It was not a very good spot for a start. Finally, however, the *Scout* gained enough momentum and made a graceful dart up into the air.

“Law! – stop! – arrest!” – fuming, and shaking his cane, the old man cried in disjointed fragments frantic threats after the vanishing air craft.

“Look there!” chuckled Hiram to the passenger behind him. Then he laughed outright, and, notwithstanding his anxiety and his miseries, the boy laughed, too.

His persecutor, eyes fixed aloft, following the vanishing *Scout*, had not heeded his steps. Coming too near the slimy edge of the swamp he lost his balance. With a splash he went flat, face first, into a bed of black sticky mud.

CHAPTER V

THE BIG EVENT

Not a word was spoken by either Hiram or his passenger as the *Scout* took its average altitude. The former was busy at his post. As to the other, holding the sleeping child in his lap, he sat like one entranced. The rescue from unfriendly hands, the odd situation in which he found himself, the novelty of a flight he had never before anticipated, fairly overcame him.

The able young pilot set out on a glide of easy progress. Then he had time to speak a few words to his fellow passenger.

“Comfortable?” he inquired.

“I could stay here forever!” ardently breathed, rather than spoke, the boy. “I never dreamed of such a wonderful thing as this airship. Oh, but you must know a lot, to be able to fly around up here in this way!”

“Huh! you’d ought to see what my chum, Dave Dashaway, can do,” vaunted the loyal Hiram. “Well, we’ve got away from that old rascal back there, anyhow.”

“I hope I may never see him again,” replied the lad with a shudder. “I don’t think I’ll ever forget what you’ve done for us in all our troubles.”

“What’s your idea now?” inquired Hiram in an off-handed way. “I suppose you had some plan when you gave that old man the slip?”

“Well, yes, I had,” was the reply. “I was thinking of poor little Lois only, though. I was trying to get to a place called Benham.”

“Where’s that?” asked Hiram.

“It’s about fifty miles from the town near the island where you came across me,” explained the boy. “I was making for the railroad when Mr. Dawson and the man with him came up with me. I thought if I could do that, and get into an empty box car, or something like that, with little Lois, we might get a ride clear to Benham. Then I would know what to do.”

“And what is that?” inquired Hiram, with interest.

“There’s a children’s home there. I’ve heard all about it. I don’t know anybody there, but I’m sure they would take in Lois. If I can only get her in a safe, comfortable place for a time, I’ll soon find work, and earn a home for her,” he said eagerly.

“You’ve got some good ideas,” commented Hiram, “and I can see you are of the right sort. I’ll take you to Benham. I don’t exactly know where it is, but it will not be hard to find out. You just forget all your troubles, and take it easy back there, and I’ll do the rest.”

After running about twenty miles, keeping well in line with the towns and settlements dotting the landscape beneath and ahead of them, Hiram descended at the edge of a little village. He left his passenger in charge of the machine, and was gone about half an hour. When he returned he brought with him a package of food and a bottle of milk.

The little child had awakened by this time. Her brother had evidently made her understand what had transpired, for she regarded the young airman in a friendly, grateful way, and prattled out new thanks when Hiram invited her to the modest but appetizing meal he had provided.

“I’ve got our bearings now, and can get you to Benham straight as an arrow,” reported Hiram. “You didn’t tell me your name,” he added, looking his companion searchingly in the eyes, inviting his confidence, for he was curious to learn more about him.

His companion hesitated, flushed, and acted confused and undecided. Then he said frankly:

“I’ve often thought if I ever got free of Mr. Dawson that I would take a new name, and get thousands of miles away from him, so he could never find me again. I’ve got to tell you anything you want to know, though. My name is Bruce Beresford. My sister and I are orphans. That man,

Dawson, has always had a legal hold on us, and he has treated us cruelly. I suppose there are hundreds of fellows in the world just as unfortunate as I am, but when you have a little sister like Lois to look after, and protect – ”

There the speaker broke down. Hiram was full of genuine pity for the two waifs. He, too, admired the fidelity of the thoughtful and affectionate brother. He did not ask any more questions. It seemed to be a simple case – two unprotected orphans cruelly treated by a heartless guardian.

As they neared Benham Hiram landed at the edge of the place, so as not to attract undue attention to the biplane or his companions.

“I’m interested enough in you to wait here, and have you report how you get on with your arrangements about the little girl,” he said to Bruce Beresford.

“You’re taking a heap of trouble for a stranger,” murmured his companion.

“You’re no stranger,” declared Hiram. “I seem to have known you a long time, although I’ve only been with you a couple of hours. I guess it’s because you’re square and honest. Go ahead, and good luck to you!”

The girl waved her thin little hand to Hiram until they were out of sight. The young aviator then busied himself about the machine. He was so engrossed in his task that he was not conscious of the flight of time, when Bruce Beresford came running into sight with a radiant face.

“It’s all right,” he proclaimed. “They’ve taken in little Lois, just as if she was an own child. The matron kissed her, and cried over her bruises. Of course I didn’t tell them anything about Mr. Dawson by name. I’ve agreed to send the home ten dollars each month as soon as I get work. Oh, what a relief! and how easy I can do it,” and the speaker threw out his arms with a gesture that seemed to say he was ready for the hardest work in the world if he could find it.

“I’ve been thinking about you,” said Hiram. “What’s the matter with your coming with me? I’ve got a famous chum, and I’m sure he’ll take to you. I’m certain, too, he can get you a place somewhere.”

“You’re awful kind,” responded Bruce, “but I would like to stay around Benham here until I see how Lois gets on. She might miss me. Dawson might trace us. I can get some odd jobs around town for a few weeks, I am sure. Then, soon as I know Lois is safe and contented, I’ll branch out in a bigger city.”

“Well, you’ve got the right spirit,” encouraged Hiram. “I want you to keep trace of us. Maybe we can help you out. You’ll always be able to locate us through this address,” and Hiram gave his new friend a card, naming the present headquarters of himself and Dave. He could see the tears of gratitude and gladness shining in the eyes of Bruce as he sailed aloft.

“Glad I helped him,” soliloquized Hiram. “Poor fellow! And that tiny little midget of a sister! And that big, mean old Dawson! I hope he got a good soaking! Hope I run across this Beresford boy again, too. He’s the right sort!”

The young airman had put the *Scout* away in the hangar in good order, after a careful clean up, and was ready to sit down on the bench out in the open air, when Dave put in an appearance. Hiram was too full of his recent adventure to postpone its recital. His chum listened with interest to its details. Hiram, however, made no mention of his “target practice.”

“There’s something here to interest you,” observed Dave, drawing a bulky envelope from his pocket. “It’s the details of the Chicago contest meet, that followed the invitation from the committee,” and Hiram looked at the advertising literature with interest.

“Why, Dave,” he cried, glancing over the list of prizes offered, and the programme outlined for a three days’ meet, “you surely won’t let this slip by?”

“I wish very much to enter,” was the reply. “Of course, though, that depends on what Mr. Brackett says.”

Hiram showed his impatience and suspense.

“See here!” he cried, “you can’t wait on anything so indefinite as his coming here, maybe in a day; maybe in a week.”

“I don’t intend to wait,” remarked Dave. “In fact, I telegraphed him this morning, after I had thought things over, giving him an idea of the importance and scope of the meet. Here’s his answer, which I received not half an hour since.”

Hiram took the open telegram tendered by his chum. It read:

“Will be with you to-morrow morning.”

“Hurrah!” shouted the irrepressible Hiram, in his delight hopping from one foot to the other. “Oh, Dave, I feel in my bones that you are going to make the hit of your life!”

CHAPTER VI

A STARTLING DISCOVERY

“Go in by all means, Dave.”

It was Mr. Brackett, the aircraft manufacturer, who spoke, and never was a decision more welcome to boyish ears than this announcement. Prompt with his engagement, as was his business rule, the President of the Interstate Aero Company had arrived at the Midlothian grounds at eight o'clock in the morning, of the day succeeding Hiram's adventure with the *Scout*.

There had been warm greetings, for Dave felt deeply grateful to the wealthy manufacturer who had so advanced his interests. His impetuous assistant was equally responsive. As to Mr. Brackett, it had been a great satisfaction for him to realize that his young protégés had not only made good the promise of their early professional career, but had largely been the means of popularizing the machines turned out at his plant.

He had listened to all that Dave had to say, had gone over the papers sent from the promoters of the International meet at Chicago, had considered for a few moments, and then had settled the matter of Dave's participation in the six words above noted. Hiram's eyes sparkled. A dazzling picture of new fame and sure success came into his imaginative mind.

“I've got to say something or bust, Mr. Brackett!” he exploded. “I hardly slept last night for thinking of it all. Why, where should Dave be but in the front ranks at Chicago? A first-class prize meet would be second-class without the aviator who won the trans-Atlantic medal, and looped the loop at Philadelphia ahead of all the competitors, and invented all the new wrinkles in hydro-aeroplane work at Cape May, and – ”

“There, there, Hiram – that will do,” interrupted Dave, but smiling indulgently. “From the entrants' list they send us there will be no ordinary talent at the Chicago meet and no worn-out stunts will pass. We've got to better ourselves and prepare for real work, if we expect to make a showing.”

“You've got the last word, the real finishing touch in the *Ariel*, Dave,” reminded Mr. Brackett.

“I appreciate that, yes, indeed,” responded the young airman warmly, and with pride. “And it means half the battle.”

“I suppose you can realize our interest in this meet,” continued Mr. Brackett. “If the *Ariel* wins, it standardizes our new model in a manner, and means thousands of dollars in effective advertising for the Interstate Aero Company.”

“I'm going to do my level best,” Dave assured him, and he was so stirred with hope, faith and eagerness that he paced about restlessly. “There are some points I am sure of – distance flights, altitude and speed. None of them can meet the *Ariel* there. The stunt programme, though, is another thing. I want to study up on that and practice, and I would like to have a talk with the managers at Chicago as soon as possible.”

“Just what I was about to suggest, Dave,” said Mr. Brackett. “I don't see anything gained by your staying here at the Midlothian grounds. In fact, after what you tell me of the explosion yesterday morning, I strongly advise making a move. Has that tramp friend of yours shown up?”

“No, he hasn't reported, as I expected he would,” replied Dave rather disappointedly, and the manufacturer looked thoughtful as though entertaining some suspicions. Hiram broke in with the words:

“He's true blue, though, Mr. Brackett; I'll vouch for him! If he hasn't got to us yet, it's because he hasn't found any trace of the man he's after.”

“And have you no idea as to the motive for the attempt to destroy the *Ariel*?” asked the manufacturer.

“I have!” cried Hiram in his usual forcible way. “When we come to trace this thing down, we will certainly find that it goes back to that schemer, Vernon, who has made us so much trouble in the past.”

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