

Newcomb Ambrose

Eagles of the Sky: or, With Jack Ralston Along the Air Lanes



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Eagles of the Sky; Or, With Jack Ralston Along the Air Lanes

CHAPTER I

READY FOR BUSINESS

When the “Big Boss” at Secret Service Headquarters in Washington sent Jack Ralston and his pal, Gabe Perkiser, to Florida with orders to comb the entire Gulf Coast from the Ten Thousand Islands as far north as Pensacola and break up the defiant league of smugglers, great and small, that had for so long been playing a game of hide-and-seek with the Coast Guard revenue officers, the task thus assigned was particularly to the liking of those two bold and dependable sky detectives.

They loved nothing better than *action*— never felt entirely happy unless matching their wits against those of skulking law breakers—while to sup with danger, and run across all manner of thrilling adventures—that was a daily yearning with them.

Since so much of their work must of necessity take them over that vast stretch of salt water lying between the Florida coast and the far distant Mexican shore line, the wise men in Washington had supplied Jack with a speedy plane of the amphibian type, capable of making landings either on shore or in any of the numerous inlets dotting the coast, it being equipped with both aluminum pontoons and adjustable wheels.

Jack had spent several days at the Capital, conferring with various high officials, being thus put in possession of every available scrap of reliable information at the disposal of the Department.

He had also been given documents of authority, calling upon each and every Government agent in all Florida to afford him any possible assistance, should he require such backing while learning the identity of the “higher-up” capitalists guilty of financing the secret clique that had been giving the revenue men such trouble recently.

The fact was well known that besides the valuable *caches* of unset diamonds, and other precious stones, coming surreptitiously into the country without yielding the customary heavy duty imposed on them, there was also being smuggled into the innumerable lonely bayous and inlets of the lengthy coast line vast quantities of contraband in violation of the eighteenth amendment, also batches of undesirable aliens like Chinese, anarchists and Bolsheviks, such riffraff as Uncle Sam had been holding off under a strict ban.

So, too, it was understood that besides the fleet of swift, small power-boats employed night after night in this profitable game of mocking the Treasury Department, latterly the smugglers had been freighting their cargoes by means of airplanes that would be able to land the contraband stuff in lonely places far back of the low coast sections.

It was therefore a monumental task, covering a wide field of operation and with constant peril hovering over the heads of the two adventurous aviators who had undertaken so joyously to spread the net and draw its meshes about the offenders.

Their preparations having been completed, they were waiting in an isolated little bayou surrounded by inaccessible swamps and mangrove islands ready to take off with the coming of the friendly shades of night.

To those who enjoyed reading the preceding volume of this series of aviation adventures, where Jack and “Perk,” in order to get their man—one of the boldest and most successful counterfeiters known in the annals of crime—found it necessary to fly across the Mexican boundary line and snatch their victim out of an extinct volcano crater that had once been the fort of the fierce

Yaqui Indian tribe,¹ will think it a rather far cry for the Sky Detectives to be detailed to active duty some thousands of miles distant, and in the extreme southeastern corner of the republic.

So it always must be with the famous Secret Service men—their motto, like that of our present day Boy Scouts, is “Be Prepared”; for day and night they must hold themselves in readiness to start to the other side of the world if necessary—China, Japan, India, the Philippines perhaps—detailed to fetch back some notorious malefactor wanted by Uncle Sam, and information of whose presence in distant lands has reached Headquarters.

As a rule it was Perk’s duty to see that their flying ship was well stocked with all necessary supplies, from liquid fuel and lubricating oil down to such food stores as they would require, even if forced to remain for days, or a week, without connections along the line of groceries and commissary stuff.

Perk himself was an odd mixture of New England and Canuck blood, one branch of his family living in Maine, while the other resided across the border. Hence Perk sometimes chose to call himself a Yankee; and yet for a period of several years he had been a valued member of the Northwestern Mounted Police, doing all manner of desperate stunts up in the cold regions of Canada.

He was considerably older than his gifted chum and had seen pretty hot service flying in France while with Pershing’s army in the Argonne. It was his knowledge of aviation in general that had caused Jack to pick him as his assistant when the Government decided to fight fire with fire, by pitting their own pilots and aircraft against those employed by the powerful combine of smuggling aces.

Sometimes it chanced that Jack, for good and sufficient reasons of his own, did not fully explain the necessity for making plans along certain lines.

This was not because he lacked confidence in his loquacious chum’s ability to keep a still tongue in his head or exercise due caution, but usually through a desire to make doubly sure of his own ground before submitting the arrangement to Perk’s sharp criticism, which Jack valued even more than the other suspected.

Consequently Perk, with the Yankee half of his blood stirred by an ever present curiosity, wanted to know and invariably asked numerous questions in the endeavor to find a leading clue.

It was in the late Fall and already the advance guard of the winter tourist crowds had begun to arrive from the North, in ever increasing numbers, all set for an enjoyable winter in the sunny resorts of both coasts.

Jack had already made quite a thorough investigation and picked up some important clues that he meant to run down in hopes one of them might lead to definite results.

The amphibian floated on the surface of the isolated bayou with glimpses of the open gulf toward the golden west forming an alluring picture as seen between the jaws of sand points, with palmettoes guarding the entrance to the sheltered nook.

It was just sunset, and inside another hour the night would have advanced far enough to permit their departure on the first leg of their intended flight up the coast.

Perk was exceedingly fond of his pipe and choice tobacco, and looked the picture of contentment as he squatted in his seat, scratching his ankle, where a burning sensation told him he had once again been visited by the tiny but venomous red-bug pest which he hated with all his heart.

“Drat the little beggars,” he was muttering as he kept on digging at his leg, “they sure do beat anything I ever run acrost in all my wanderin’s. It ain’t so bad to be slappin’ at pesky skeeters, ’cause I’m used to sich bloodsuckers; but sandflies, and’ jiggers, an’ redbugs make a combination that’d be hard to beat.”

¹ See “*The Sky Detectives; or How Jack Ralston Got His Man.*”

“Try that kerosene again, brother,” advised Jack, who somehow seemed to be a favored one, since he was immune from similar attacks, and greatly envied on that account by his unlucky; pal.

“Yeah!” growled the usually good tempered Perk, “I’ve rubbed that on, an’ witch hazel, an’ all sorts o’ lotions till I guess now I smell like a stick-pot set out, with old rags smoulderin’ to keep the skeets away. Salt water helps a mite, but this scratchin’ which I just can’t let up on to save my life, makes things worse right along.”

Thereupon he kicked off his shoes, removed his socks, and thrust both feet over the side to dabble them in the saline water of the lagoon.

“Keep an eye out for that big ’gator we scared off the bank a while back,” warned Jack, wickedly, “he might think it was a wild duck splashing, and try to pot it for his supper.”

“Huh! mebbe now that’s about the only way to get relief—let him snap the foot off an’ it won’t itch me any more.”

Nevertheless, despite this reckless assertion Perk quickly ceased his splashing and resumed his footgear, heroically refraining from rubbing the affected parts. After a short interval of staring at the glowing heavens, as if the sight fairly fascinated him, Perk again spoke, this time finding something of more importance than insect bites to talk about.

“Wall,” he drawled in his customary slow fashion, “here’s hopin’ we ain’t agoin’ to be knocked out in our calculations tonight, but get a line on what the boys are doin’ up the coast, eh, partner?”

“Won’t be our fault if we don’t,” said Jack, who doubtless recognized from the signs that his mate had something in his mind, which he meant to spring on him by cautious insinuations and half questions.

“A right decent crate that was we saw pass over early this morning I’d say, old hoss,” continued Perk, nodding his head as if to punctuate his remarks and also to cause his thoughts to flow more smoothly. “I had a good peep at it as we lay behind that bunch o’ saw palmetto out front, an’ unless I’m away off in my guess, she was a Curtiss-Robin ship—a big crate in the bargain.”

“They need them big in their line of business,” Jack went on significantly. “A full cargo of wet goods is pretty heavy, you know, Perk.”

“You said it, partner,” assented the other, grinning amiably and yet with a shade of Yankee cunning. “An’ what’s more to the p’int the guy handlin’ the stick was no slouch at his job, b’lieve me. I wonder now could he have been that Oscar Gleebe we been hearin’ so much about since comin’ down here,—got an idea he might abeen, ain’t you, Boss?”

“Just as like as not,” Jack told him.

“Huh! Some go as far as to say he used to be a Boche pilot in that fuss across the big water,” continued Perk, reflectively, as though certain memories of the long-ago had awakened in his brain—recollections that breathed of action, staccato machine-gun fire, exploding shells, and the terrible odor of gas that had poisoned so many of his former mates.

“Yes, they said there wasn’t any doubt about that,” Jack asserted. “After the war was over and he couldn’t find work in his home country, he managed to get to America and has cut quite a figure in flying circles. I reckon he was tempted by the big money in the smuggling game to take a job with this combine along the coast and has been fetching heaps of cargoes ashore from vessels anchored far out on the gulf, or even across from Bimini or Santa Fe Beach near Havana over in Cuba.”

“By jinks!” ejaculated Perk, “that there’s the place we learned they was shippin’ Chinks over to Florida from, ain’t it Jack, boy?”

“Just what it was,” admitted the other. “It seems that this big combine, made up of rich American sporting men, with a mixture of Cubans and adventurers from all nations, doubles up in crashing Uncle Sam’s coast gates with aliens, as well as hard stuff in bottles and barrels.”

“Me, I’m jest awonderin’?” continued Perk, “whether it could a’ happened that this same Oscar Gleebe an’ me ever hit it up and had an air duel tryin’ to strafe each other when flyin’ across

No-Man's-Land over there. Kinder like to meet up with him so we could run over our scraps an' see if one o' us sent t'other down in a blazin' coffin. It'd be funny if it turned out that way."

"Queer things do happen sometimes," agreed Jack, yawning. "This warm day's made me feel a bit lazy but as soon as we get a move on all that will slip away like fog under the morning sun."

"I say, partner, how 'bout that Greek sponger we talked with when we dropped in at Tarpon Springs t'other day—you kinder s'pected he knew a heap more about these goin's-on than he wanted us to grab, even if we was jest s'posed to be Northern tourists, bent on havin' a fishin' spree later on when big tarpon strike in around Fort Myers—could them spongers have a hand afetchin' in bottled stuff, or ferryin' Chinks over from some island halfway point?"

"Some folks seem to think that possible," he was told. "After looking over the ground, and getting the opinion of a heap of people who ought to have an intelligent opinion covering the facts known and suspected, I've come to the conclusion that if ever there was a time when you could play safe by suspecting everybody you met of having some sort of money interest in this big game, it's down along the Florida west coast and like as not over toward Miami just the same. I'm not trusting my secrets to a living soul, saving a few Government agents to whom I've been directed by my superiors—and I'm even a bit leery about some of that bunch."

"Yeah! From this time on seems to me we'd be wise to play a lone hand, an' not bother about takin' any gyps into our confidence, eh what, Jack?"

"You never said truer words, my boy," assented the other, smiling as he noted the look of pleasure flashing across the bronzed face of his pal at thus having his own opinion confirmed; for Perk valued a few words of praise from Jack far above any other source.

"Kinder get to thinkin' that Greek sponger—Alexis was his name, if my memory ain't gimme the bounce—was a bit o' a sharper, an' knew beans in the bargain from the way them black eyes o' his'n kept watchin' us all the time we asked questions, just like we'd heard people sayin' queer things concernin' how easy it was to grab any quantity o' bottled stuff if on'y you had the ready cash, an' a good eye for winkin'."

"We may know more about Alexis before we're through with this trip," was all Jack would say concerning the matter. "On my part I'm shaking hands with myself because we were smart enough to camouflage our ship with green stuff for that pilot passed over and could have glimpsed our crate lying half hidden here, and through his glasses—which I understand they all carry—made out how it didn't match up with any of the aircraft they use in their business."

"Thanks to you, partner," Perk hastened to confess. "If it all depended on my poor head I kinder guess I'd a'slipped up right then an' there an' give the hull scheme away which would a'been a danged shame, an' busted the game higher'n a kite."

"We make a pretty good team, matey," said Jack. "Sometimes it's you that goes loco, and threatens to step off your base, and then another time I feel myself side-slipping and have to lean on you to hold my own. That's just how it should be with partners—give and take, with never a bleat if our calculations go wrong."

"It's right nice o' you to talk that way, brother," Perk hastened to assert, beaming with pride and making out as if tempted to begin scratching again when Jack reaching around, gently steered his clutching fingers away from the itching locality, at which Perk heaved a relieved sigh and nodded his thanks.

"The sky has lost most of that glorious color," mentioned the head pilot, "and before long now we can be hopping-off. Our first job will be to swing down the coast and learn if there seems to be anything going on among the southern islands in this beastly mangrove section where a man could easy enough lose himself for keeps among the countless water passages and inlets. See here, what's the matter with you, staring that way, Perk?"

"Wouldn't that jar you now," snapped the other, "that Robin ship is headin' back this way; or else some other crate that looks like its twin!"

CHAPTER II

THE CURTISS-ROBIN PLANE

Jack, a bit startled by his companion's sudden exclamation, took a good look and hastened to remark:

"Reckon now you hit the nail on the head that time, Perk and it's heading this way in the bargain. Why d'ye suppose we didn't see the crate before?"

"Huh! I kinder guess now," Perk went on to say, "she bust out o' that little fog cloud right to the south—a'swoopin' up the coast, you notice, partner, don't you?"

"Sure is," assented Jack, as though that small circumstance assumed some importance in his eyes, as well as those of his comrade.

"Ginger pop! but mebee I ain't glad we didn't show any hurry to kick off this camouflage green stuff, thinkin' it'd served its purpose okay and could be knocked into the discard. See how they keep dodging' in an' out like they might be scourin' every foot o' shore line, little bays back o' these mangrove islands an' all. Strikes me they're a'searchin' for somethin', Jack, which might be the pair o' us, eh, what?"

"Right you are!" snapped Jack, without hesitating a second.

"Which, I take it, would mean there might a'been some sort o' little leak up at Headquarters, hang the luck, when we figured we'd got the gang buffaloed right smart. Don't think they c'n lamp us lyin' here, do you, Boss?"

"Small chance of that, boy, if only we lie low, and make no move apt to attract their attention," Perk was told in a confident tone that effectually calmed his rising alarm.

He hastened to settle down in a position where he could thrust his glasses between interstices in the green covering of the fusilage and wings so as to keep close tabs on the advancing plane without making any particular movement of arms or body.

"How?" asked Jack, a few seconds later, when he fancied his mate must have made up his mind as to the identity of the flying ship.

"Curtiss-Robin crate, that's right, Jack an' the same we saw before," replied the observer, excitedly. "Hey! guess now they got a glass up there too. I sure saw the sun shinin' on somethin' bright, 'cause the old boy's still on deck to chaps that high up."

"I've discounted that fact long ago, Perk; men engaged in the desperate game they're playing night after night would need such a useful instrument, so's to keep a sharp lookout for Coast Guard boats or bunches of revenue men lying in ambush close to the place they expected to land a wet cargo, or a couple of high-pay Chinks, it might be."

"Then you got an idea they must have a spy up in Washington—a sneaker who c'n find out what's bein' hatched up so's to cook their goose an' that he manages to get warnin' down here to the workin' crews so's to put 'em on their guard—is that it, partner?"

"Looks that way—that's all I can say, Perk. Now lie low and don't do any talking, though with their crate kicking up all that row I reckon there'd be small chance of their hearing us even if we shouted."

Perk was chuckling to himself at a great rate and could not keep from taking advantage of the invitation Jack had really extended to say:

"Yeah! an' I kinder guess now we got one thing they ain't, which is a silencer on our engine that'll keep it muzzled, even if it does knock off a bit o' our speed when we happen to use it. Luckiest thing ever you managed to get the Big Boss to send us such a bully contrivance that seems to work jest great. Listen to the racket they're kickin' up right now—enough to tell any chump ten miles off a crate's headin' his way. Jerusalem crickets! but ain't I glad we're fixed as we are."

The ship far up in the heavens was almost directly over them by this time and Perk relapsed into silence, being vastly interested in watching it passing over.

Possibly he had his eyes glued on the figures—there were two occupants in the Robin's cabin he could easily see—leaning over and doubtless closely scrutinizing the intricacies of the ragged shoreline below, hoping to make important discoveries.

If the leading figure, piloting the craft, was actually Oscar Gleebe, onetime noted Hun ace over in the Argonne, it might be Perk, with his past war history rising up to thrill him afresh, may have found himself half expecting to hear a terrific explosion close by on the shore as the German flier let drop some sort of bomb, with the idea of striking their concealed bus which his keen eyes might have detected despite their wonderful camouflage.

But nothing like that came to pass and the cruising ship kept moving in a northerly direction, growing less distinct as miles were being covered at the fast clip it swept along.

“Cripes! that was worth somthin’ to glimpse, bet your sweet life, partner,” Perk finally observed as he ventured to make a little movement, feeling dreadfully cramped and the danger of discovery growing momentarily less as the first shades of coming evening began to gather around the secluded cove. “Jest as like as not they started away down toward the tip o’ the mainland, an’ hev been examin’in’ every mile o’ the coast, bent on doin’ a clean job while they’re at it. An’ if they meet up with no luck mebbe now they’ll make up their minds it was only a false alarm, and let her go at that.”

Presently they could no longer glimpse the faintest sign of the scout plane—when last seen it was still heading up the coast as though making for some destination where action awaited the members of its daring crew.

“The passing of that crate settles one thing, anyway,” observed Jack presently.

“As what, partner?” queried Perk, who had already begun to denude the anchored amphibian of its covering, as though it was settled they need no longer fear being spied upon from above.

“We needn’t bother striking into the south when starting out to look for suspicious lights, such as would tell of business being put through—those boys are right now heading for their rendezvous and it’s our game to chase after them, as soon as nightfall makes it safe to get a move on.”

“That suits me fine, Jack old hoss. I’m right sick o’ keepin’ our nose stuck so close to the ground—me for the high places where I c’n get my lungs filled with clean air—this swamp stuff don’t make no sort o’ hit with me, I’m tellin’ you. Gosh! looky at that bunch o’ measly big pelicans flappin’ their wings as they fly close to the water, headin’ to some island where they have a rookery, like as not. An’ Jack, honest to goodness if I didn’t see the head an’ knobby eyes o’ a monster scaly ’gator stickin’ up out o’ the water in the lagoon jest now. Got me goofy, this sorter thing, an’ I’m asighin’ for the air lanes two miles high.”

“I understand just how you feel, Perk, but hold your horses a bit. Hurry is something we’ve got to fight shy of in this game of hide-and-seek with these dangerous smugglers of the gulf coast. As smart a group of men as we can ever claim to be, have bucked up against the gang and dropped out of the chase—more than a few of whom have disappeared mysteriously, and up at Headquarters it’s believed they’ve met with foul play. This big Mex gulf hides a heap of secrets and has ever since old Blackbeard and that crowd of buccaneers used to sink Spanish galleons after looting them of their gold cargo and sending hundreds of poor wretches to a watery grave.”

“I’m wise to all them facts, partner,” piped up Perk, grinning amiably, “an’ I sure don’t hanker after bein’ sent down to that port o’ missin’ men in no hurry. I’ll stick it out on this line jest as long as you say an’ try to keep from grumblin’. Thar goes the last o’ the rotten stuff overboard, Boss, an’ we’re all clear again. While we’re a’waitin’ till the last speck o’ daylight slickers away, wouldn’t it be right smart if we set our teeth in some o’ that fine grub I laid in, to keep us from starvin’ to death?”

“Suits me okay, buddy; suppose you trot it out and we’ll pas the time away bolstering up our strength—no telling what we may have before us tonight if we happen to strike rich pay-dirt.”

Accordingly they busied themselves with what to Perk especially was a most agreeable occupation, for it must be confessed that the Maine lad possessed a fairly good appetite while his capacity for storing away good things was something close to marvelous.

So the night settled down around them—sounds indicative of a Florida coast camping ground began to make themselves manifest—mullet jumped up out of the brackish water where some stream emptied its tide straight from the Everglades into the gulf, to fall back again with resounding splashes. Now and then there was a rush, and a great deal of agitation of the water close to one of the mangrove islands, showing where some fierce piratical deep water fish was making an evening meal of the unlucky mullet—several wild ducks came spinning along from other shore places to settle further in where the reedy islands offered effectual shelter from night-raiding owls and hawks that could see in the dark.

“Gee whiz!” Perk was saying as he finished eating and started to put away what sandwiches and other stuff had been left over, “this sure must be a dandy place to do some shore shootin’ an’ if I hadn’t other fish to fry I’d like to hang around a week’r so, takin’ toll o’ ducks, turkey, an’ deer up on the mainland, with like as not a bobcat, or even a panther in the bargain!”

“All very fine for those who are down here sporting for sport, brother,” Jack told him, “but our bunch has another kind of game to pull in and you’ve got to forget all this temptation so as to buckle down to business. Reckon it’s time for us to be hopping-off and getting that taste of cool, clean air a mile or so up. Shake a leg, buddy, and we’ll shove off.”

Jack, of course, had long since figured just what he meant to do when the moment arrived to leave their hiding place and take to their wings again, so after their little anchor had been drawn out of the mud, carefully washed, and then stowed away where it would take little room and not be in the way, each of the occupants of the double cockpit set about carrying out their customary duties when a launching was in order.

“All set, Mister Pilot!” remarked Perk, finally, “give her the gun, boy!”

With only a fraction of the rush and roar usually connected with a start, the amphibian, with cut-out choked down, commenced to glide through the water of the partly enclosed bay, heading straight for the jaws of land beyond which lay the open and mighty gulf.

CHAPTER III

LIKE A NIGHT OWL ON THE WING

The rush and gurgle of the water parted by the pontoons beneath the fuselage of the plane was sounding most delightful to the ears of Perk as he sat there watching the jaws of land draw rapidly nearer.

Resting up was always a painful thing to Perk whose nerves called for action and had done so ever since he served in the flying corps across the Atlantic when men's souls thrilled with frequent contacts in the line of equally daring Hun war pilots.

Now they had shot past the twin points and were out upon the open gulf, their speed increasing every second as Jack pulled the stick closer against his chest. Then the experienced pilot lifted her in a zoom that was simply magnificent, and they were off on their adventure at last.

Rising fast, the boat was soon at a good ceiling for flying. So too the night promised all manner of favorable things for men of their calling—up where they were the wind did not amount to much but it was blowing at quite a lively rate closer to the earth and doubtless the broad palmetto leaves must be making a considerable slashing as they struck one another, dead and withered ones sawing like some giant violin bow.

This, with the wash of the waves upon the pebbled beach, would make enough noise to effectually deaden the whirr of the propeller—the new and novel muffler or silencer, fashioned very much on the order of such a contraption as successfully applied to small firearms, was doing wonderfully, and Perk every little while made motions as though shaking hands with himself because of this addition to their security, for under the usual conditions prevailing anything like secrecy in a noisy airship had been unknown to the sky detectives.

Perk had been under a strange hallucination when that other plane was soaring overhead—in fact he was once again back in the Argonne, with his boat hugging the earth, and an enemy swooping in circles overhead—he had even gone so far as to imagine the German war ace might be maneuvering so as to drop one of his bombs straight down on the stranded craft, with results that must spell a complete wipeout.

When they did not have their handy earphones in service Jack and his right bower had arranged a secret alphabet of signals, consisting of all manner of pokes and nudges, by means of which they were enabled to communicate along professional lines at least. If it seemed necessary to Perk to ask questions not down on the brief list thus worked out, all he had to do was to adjust Jack's harness and then his own little outfit, enabling him to chatter away to his heart's content—and often to the annoyance of his less talkative chum.

But first of all he proceeded to make good use of the binoculars upon which so much depended. From side to side he would swing the glasses and search for anything that looked like a suspicious light on land or water then turn to what lay dead ahead.

In this region of the Ten Thousand Islands—all fashioned from the queer spreading mangrove that drops its long seeds so that they stick upright in the mud, and, quickly developing roots, spring up to add to the dimension of the original "island" there were never at any time many settlers so that the coast has been reckoned as the "loneliest ever," on which account Perk realized that if he should happen to glimpse a light, whether on land or gulf, the chances were fifty to one it might have some connection with the operations of the smuggler league.

Perk remembered how that Curtiss-Robin ship had finally disappeared in the haze lying to the north and from this he sucked more or less consolation, since it seemed evident the location of their job must lie in that quarter toward which they were now bound like a great owl swooping on noiseless pinions to seize its prey.

A delicious thrill ran through his frame from time to time. If any one could “get a kick” from such a situation it was Perk, who was already visioning some sort of a battle royal when they struck the smuggling gang in the midst of their lawless work. The gang did their best to create a reign of terror.

Once far out toward the west, where rolled the tides of the broad gulf that stretched for a distance of five hundred miles across to the Coast of Mexico, he certainly did glimpse a light, low down on the horizon where just the faintest gleam of the late departed day still lingered. Ha! the mother ship no doubt, riding at anchor some miles out where the gulf was shallow and holding ground good—a heavily laden sailing craft, coming possibly from the Bahamas, and passing into the gulf between the Florida keys. Its captain knowing that the cargo they carried could be much more easily landed there than around Miami, where the Coast Guard was more vigilant.

Long and earnestly did Perk stare, picturing the shore motorboats speeding out through the gloom toward that signal light to take aboard their several loads and make for certain secluded harbors where trucks would be waiting to transfer the illicit stuff to its destined markets where prices ranged high with the holidays approaching and rich, thirsty tourists to be supplied.

“Bang! it’s gone blooie!” Perk suddenly told himself as he no longer found himself able to distinguish that suspicious gleam which had gradually grown dim and then utterly vanished from view. “Now, what in thunder does that mean I want to know—why should they douse the glim in such a hurry—wonder if they could have caught any sound from us to give ’em a scare? I’m in a tail-spin, seems like. Oh I shucks! mebee it was on’y a measly star after all, that’s set back o’ the horizon. Who got fooled that time, I want to know, Gabe Perkiser, you smarty?”

He took it humorously, happening to be one of those sensible lads capable of laughing, even when the joke was on himself.

Shortly afterwards Perk picked up what seemed to be a low-lying light, this time off toward the east, where he knew the land lay.

“Huh! I kinder guess that ain’t a silly star,” was the way he expressed his feelings as he continued to watch the glimmering object that rose and then grew dim, only to once more flash brightly. “Might be some squatter sittin’ alongside his campfire—mebbe a fishing camp, on’y I got an idea the light comes from a big lantern and not a blazing fire. Strikes me it oughter bear watchin’ just the same.”

A minute afterwards and he could no longer see the object of his concern.

“By jinks! what sort o’ hocus-pocus might *that* be, I want to know—did somebody blow that light out just when I was hopin’ big things might come from it, or was it only a bunch o’ cabbage palms that come in between me an’ the glow?”

It did not reappear, although Perk kept turning his glasses in that particular quarter time after time, as fresh hopes awakened.

The amphibian was running as smooth as silk, Perk told himself more than once—why not, when they had most carefully checked it over with scrupulous exactness, so as to be able to pronounce it in perfect condition. That new muffler did the work like magic and Perk really began to feel as though the efficiency of their aerial mount had been increased a hundred per cent by the installation of such an up-to-date contrivance, even if it did cut their speed down more or less—when they had good need of swift wings it could be done away with, since racket was powerless to hurt them then.

A few clouds had started up and were drifting overhead by this time. Perk gave them several hasty looks, possibly wondering whether there could be any chance of a sudden blow arising since indeed they came from the southwest, where many of the rains and high winds had their brewing place, far out on the mighty gulf to be followed in turn by a “norther,” cold and violent.

“That might be rotten luck for us,” he grumbled, sensing trouble in putting Jack’s scheme into operation, “but I guess there ain’t anything to it—right cool even downstairs, I noticed an’ they tell me it always heats up afore one o’ these fall rains come along.”

He put that matter out of his mind as hardly worthy of attention then a minute later he made another discovery. Again his attention was turned toward the west, for a light had appeared low down, a light that actually moved, this fact convincing the vigilant observer it could by no possibility be another setting star in the bright firmament above.

“That’s the genuine stuff, or I’ll eat my hat!” was his characteristic way of confirming this fresh discovery, and there was certainly a trace of triumph noticeable in his voice, as though this would wipe out his former blunder.

CHAPTER IV

THE DANCE OF THE FIREFLIES

Perk, now fully convinced that he had “struck oil,” as he mentally termed it, laid the binoculars down on the front seat beside his pal and gave him certain nudges in his side, thereby telling him he, Perk, would take over the controls while the head pilot used the glasses.

When this had been accomplished Perk managed to point toward the west, so as to draw the attention of his mate thither without any waste of precious time.

Of course Jack immediately located the light and was watching it closely. He could easily make it out to be a lantern that must be on the deck of a vessel, since he discovered a mast and rigging near by, also the moving figures of several men.

The lantern did not remain stationary more than a few seconds at a time, but kept up a swinging movement that was eccentric to say the least, now passing back and forth like the weighty pendulum in an old-fashioned “grandfather” clock; then with an up-and-down action and, as a windup performing a circular movement, repeated twice.

Of course Jack understood that those on board the smuggler must be trying to signal to those of their group who were on shore, the land workers of the hard-working bunch, which conclusion caused him to turn his attention in that quarter.

At first he was not rewarded by any discovery but not in the least discouraged he continued to wave his glasses back and forth, feeling certain those continuous signals from out on the gulf must be noticed and returned.

He chanced to be again watching the moving gleam when he felt Perk trying to gain his attention and when this had been accomplished pointing eagerly off to the east.

Yes, there it was as plain as anything—in fact there seemed to be two separate lights looking like twin stars and even as Jack watched he saw them carry on in a most remarkable fashion. Now one would be in violent motion, perhaps doing some intricate figure that had a meaning; then the other would join in, with the pair swinging back and forth, crossing each other’s path, and going through the most wonderful evolutions.

To Jack’s mind they looked like a pair of gigantic fireflies gone loco with excitement and carrying on in the most astonishing manner. Indeed, he could easily picture it as a wild dance of make-believe insects on a greatly magnified scale.

Of course Jack never had the slightest doubt as to what all this mystifying activity must be—the two extremes of the smuggling fraternity were exchanging signals—each and every movement had a meaning of its own and conveyed such information as was most valuable to the business in hand—in Jack’s mind it was as though the conversation might be running something after this fashion:

“Well, here we are on hand according to promise, with a full cargo of the finest wet stuff you ever had drop down on your coast. How does the land lie over there?”

“Coast all clear—we will start the fleet out to lighten your cargo right away—keep the beacon burning so they’ll make a straight line to your anchorage, which will mean a saving of time.”

“We get your meaning—glad you are so prompt to send back word—come right along and get your invoice—the more the merrier, boys. Wind getting rougher, and we ought to be off this shallow shore before it swings around any more. Don’t hold back—Merry Christmas to you all, boys!”

Perk on his part was also trying to keep tabs on all that was going on, not neglecting his duties with the controls, it can be set down as certain. He twisted his neck and cast swift glances first to the right and then in the opposite direction, fascinated by that flashing beacon conversation.

“By gum! if they ain’t holdin’ a regular confab with them lights,” Perk was telling himself, delighted with his opportunity to witness such a proceeding, knowing as he did what this all meant

to himself and Jack. "That guy on shore is sure some punkins about this signal layout—works jest like a Boy Scout might, sending a message across to another o' the troop standin' on top o' a high peak—makes me think I'm back on the front, with Signal Corps men wigwaggin' for all that's out. Huh! There goes them twin lights, showin' the chinnin' must be over with both sides posted on the program. Say, ain't this the boss job though? I guess I never did get half as much fun outen any game I tackled before."

Just then Jack signalled that he wished to handle the stick once more, which the other was indeed not sorry for, since it began to look as though they were close to a critical moment when considerable skill would be required in manipulating the ship so as to accomplish their ends without unduly alarming those they spied upon.

Already they had managed to collect a certain amount of valuable facts which were only guessed at previously, so cleverly had these transfer bases been kept concealed from the most skillful of the Government agents. Perk himself felt confident that they were as yet only on the threshold of still more important discoveries.

It was one of Perk's peculiar little eccentricities that he could do better thinking if only he had a bit of chewing gum between his teeth, just to keep some muscles at work, he said, and in some mysterious fashion having this energy pass from his working jaws to his brain and hasten its activities.

So what did he do now but fumble in a pocket of his oily dungarees and produce a slab of his favorite brand, Perk thrusting it into his mouth and savagely rolling it between his teeth, really believed this helped his brain to function more easily.

Perhaps it may have done so—some people have all manner of strange hallucinations, which, being favored, bring satisfaction to their train of thought. If Perk actually believed in his remedy that was half the battle and no other person's business whatsoever.

Looking out to sea he could still find that lone beacon, even without the aid of his binoculars. It was easy for such an imaginative fellow to picture in his mind the lingering sloop, loaded to the gunwales with case goods, worth almost a millionaire's ransom—the dark sailors from Bimimi lolling around on deck, ready to up-sail and flee should the slightest sign of a Coast Guard raid make itself manifest. From off toward the distant shore line there came dully to their listening ears the repeated throb of one or more speed boats hastening to lay alongside and transfer their prearranged quota of cases, after which the burden of getting the illicit cargo safely landed would rest on the shoulders of those who manned the smaller smuggler craft.

It was a beautiful little game, Perk was assuring himself, when he realized how everything had been arranged to make things work as though greased. As the isolated places along the gulf coast were without number and the enforcement agents woefully pressed to even half cover their allotted territory, the reason for the few arrests that had rewarded the most strenuous efforts on the part of the Coast Guard could be easily comprehended.

"And that's just why they picked out Jack, out of all the boys in the service, loaded him up with this here amphibian crate that c'n drop down on land or water, it don't matter a darn which, got him a sort o' side partner to help make things go and turned him loose to pull in the net. Huh! we'll know before long just what this racket is goin' to wind up in, for we've made our first move, our hat's thrown into the ring, and we'll either make Pike's Peak, or—bust!"

Presently Perk began to convince himself he could at times pick up the throbbing sound of a humming motor, undoubtedly one of those on their way out to the supply boat off shore some miles and ready to deliver such number of high-priced cases as the lists called for.

Yes, when the night wind veered or shifted a bit he was absolutely certain about picking up the chug-chug-chug that betrayed the presence of the leading speed boat.

About this time Perk noticed two separate things that had a bearing on their mission—the first was that for some reason they no longer romped along at their earlier speed, showing that the pilot

had seen fit to slacken his craft to a considerable degree, though keeping up steerage way. The second thing that struck Perk was the fact that they were slowly but surely making a decided swing off to the west, which if continued would make their immediate course a complete circle.

“Go to it, old hoss!” he was saying, just as if he expected the other to hear every word which was out of the question with that whirring propeller keeping up its low, sing-song tone. “You got ’em beat a mile when it comes to playin’ safe, that’s right. Don’t want to rile the water an’ let everybody in on the fact that we’re hangin’ around here, waitin’ for somethin’ to turn up. ’Sides, it ain’t good policy to make the ten-strike till they got the stuff on board the chuggin’ speed boat.”

He was intensely interested in Jack’s play for time and listened with his heart almost up in his throat, fearing lest the steady chugging should suddenly stop and the game be thrown by default. But no, it was keeping on in perfect rhythm, sounding in Perk’s ear something like the tattoo of a machine-gun in action and sending out its swarm of leaden missiles—a sound that had long ago become so familiar to his ears as never to be forgotten, despite the lapse of time.

Surely by now that leading boat must be getting close to the schooner so that the transfer would soon be an accomplished fact, after which the return trip was due to be started which was when they meant to break into the game.

“Ginger pop! if I don’t ketch the grumble o’ a second tug further away, and I guess now a consid’able bigger craft than the leadin’ one. Get a move on, fellers—the dinner gong’s struck and the grub’s on the table waitin’ to be swallowed—first come, first served’s the rule things go by, so stir your stumps, an’ put in the best licks you know how—an’ may the devil take the hindmost. Hey there! that drummin’ noise, it’s stopped—wonder if they got out to the sloop or else smell a rat an’ are lyin’ low till they make it a dead certainty? Gosh, but ain’t this all mighty thrillin’ though, and how it does tickle me most to death,” muttering which Perk, still listening, actually held his breath the better to catch any sound from below.

CHAPTER V

A BATTLE ROYAL

Jack, being desirous of ascertaining just what was taking place over where the sloop laden with contraband was anchored, did his best glide or coast, a feature at which he was most competent.

When the engine ceased to function and the whizzing propeller lost much of its dizzy momentum, both he and Perk strained their ears so as to catch any sound calculated to inform them as to what was going on.

The trick proved worth while, for plainly they could make out human voices; also a certain rumbling sound that Jack imagined might be caused by the rush back and forth of a small hand truck on which cases of imported liquid refreshment were loaded.

This told the story to the effect that the speed launch must have reached the schooner and was lying alongside with its intended cargo being delivered with no loss of time. Probably, if everything went with machine-like precision, the speed boat would soon be fully laden and started back toward some secret haven where big motor trucks would be waiting to transport the cargo to Tampa, St. Petersburg, or some other city to the north.

Meanwhile the second boat was due around that time—they could hear her hoarse exhaust as she bucked the billows rolling in toward the shore line and a moving light about half a mile distant betrayed her position.

If one thing tickled Perk more than another just then it was the realization that he and Jack held aces in the game—their possession of that almost priceless muffler, by means of which they could approach fairly close without the working motor betraying their coming, gave them an enormous advantage.

“We sure have got the upper hand in this tangle,” Perk was telling himself in great glee as he listened to the chugging of the second transfer boat. “Huh! I kinder guess them guys been sleepin’ at the switch not to savvy what a bully thing one o’ these here silencers’d be to the smugglin’ game. Looks like it might be a walk-over for our team, if the luck on’y holds good.”

Jack had about decided on his course of action. He did not mean that either of those boats should get safely ashore with their loads, if he had anything to say about it, and he reckoned he had.

Still, it was not politic to be too quick on the trigger—they could just continue to hang around and be ready to pounce down on their intended prey after the fashion of a hungry eagle striking a fat duck that had been selected out of the flock on the feeding grounds.

One thing he did do was to cut his intended wide circle short and again head toward the scene of action, a move that certainly afforded the eager Perk more or less satisfaction, he being thrilled with the expectation of breaking into the game without much more loss of time.

But you never can tell just what may happen when rival forces are striving against one another. The best laid plans often go wrong and there was always a chance of the unexpected happening.

Hardly had the airship whipped around again so as to head into the north than Perk became aware of the fact that there was a sudden accession of weird noises springing up from the goal toward which they were now aiming. Jack, too must have caught the increased volume, for he sheered off as if to hold back a bit so as to grasp the meaning of the new racket.

Men were no longer simply talking or laughing as they so cheerfully labored in transferring some of the contraband from the sloop to the deck of the speedboat—their voices were raised to shouts in which surprise, even the element of near-panic, could be detected.

Then came a flash, succeeded by a sharp report, undoubtedly standing for the discharge of some species of firearm! Others of a similar character immediately followed until there were all the elements of a genuine rough and tumble fight discernible in the growing confusion and uproar.

Perk was astounded by such unaccountable goings-on. Whatever could possess these smugglers to start a fight among themselves, when such a disturbance was likely to be heard by any Coast Guard boat that might happen to be cruising within ten miles of the spot and bring down all manner of serious trouble on their heads, certainly breaking up the fine combination that had been effected for that especial delivery?

"Holy smoke! they sure must a'gone looney!" Perk was telling himself, lost in wonder and dismay, for he began to suspect that this would be apt to mix their own plans and upset all Jack's calculations.

It would seem to be the only explanation possible—that some of the case goods had been tampered with, the result being that the willing workers were not only hilarious, but ready to start a rough-house then and there on the deck of the schooner.

Then suddenly remembering how both he and Jack had their head-phone harness attached, and could thus exchange words when they pleased, Perk broke loose in his usual impulsive fashion, seeking the light which he somehow had reason to believe his chum could give him.

"Gee whiz! partner, what's broke loose, would you say?" he demanded. "Them guys act like they'd been tryin' out the high power stuff they fetched all the way from the Bahamas. Danged if it don't sound to me like a reg'lar old Irish Tipperary Fair fight—listen to 'em shootin' things up to beat the band! Say, if they keep agoin' like that, they'll smash every case they got an' we won't find any evidence to grab. Got a line on the racket, old boss?"

"It's a fight, and a lively one at that," admitted the pilot, "but I reckon you're away off when you figure it's a ruction between those on the schooner and the boys of that speedboat."

"You got me guessin' partner," said the puzzled Perk; "then who's mixed up in the shindy, I want to know?"

"Sounds a whole lot like hijackers to me, Perk."

"Ginger pop! Is *that* what it means then, Jack—some tough guys been out there on the gulf keepin' a close watch on the schooner that came up the coast loaded to the gun'ls with case goods, an' crept in with small boats to make a big haul! Listen to 'em squabble, will you, boy? What wouldn't I give for daylight so's to see that boss shindy—shootin' keeps a'goin' on like the old days over there—wow! They must be a bunch o' rotten marksmen, or the whole lot'd be wiped out afore this time. What're we a'goin' to do 'bout it, Jack—we ought to have some say what's to be done with all that stuff—no use bein' eagles o' the skies if we gotter stick around an' let a measly set o' hawks get away with the game."

"Don't worry, that's what we're *not* aiming to do!" snapped Jack, as he banked, and once again headed in the direction of the spot where all that wild commotion was taking place.

"I get you, boy—the machine-gun, is it?" barked Perk, starting up from his seat as though to make ready.

Before he could throw off his head-harness Jack stopped him.

"Wait—you got me wrong—let the gun lie where it is. You know we never expect to use it unless our lives are in danger. Get the bombs, Perk—the simple tear bombs—they ought to fill the bill!"

Perk evidently not only understood now but was fully in sympathy with the scheme Jack had hatched out under the spur of necessity—quick thinking was one of young Ralston's strong points and his cleverness along those lines had served him wonderfully on more than a few previous occasions, where the situation looked desperate.

They were sliding down a steep glide with the engine shut off. The deck of the nearby schooner was plainly visible due to the lights aboard, and the successive discharges of firearms, each looked like a miniature flash of lightning. As they approached the scene of confusion the racket

grew in volume,—a dozen men seemed to be whooping things up as though under the impression that the battle could be won by sheer noise—and broken heads.

Perk kept his wits, and managed to locate the small stock of tear bombs that had been given into their charge, with the idea they might find them more or less useful should they strike a superior force of reckless law breakers and get into what Perk would call a “jam.”

Already he had succeeded in clutching a couple of the round missiles that were charged with the acrid gas that could play such havoc with human eyes as to render the strongest men as weak as babes and settled down in a position where he could throw them to advantage.

CHAPTER VI

THE TEAR-BOMB ATTACK

It was certainly a thrilling moment for Perk as he crouched there in his awkward cubicle back of the pilot and waited for the proper second to arrive when his accuracy at throwing the bombs would be tested.

Jack meanwhile had his hands full attending to his part of the business—it was of course of prime importance that they should drop down as close to the deck of the schooner as possible so the full effect of the bursting tear-bombs might be felt by those struggling smugglers and hijackers, but there was the mast of the cruising vessel to bear in mind since it towers many feet in the air.

To strike this spar would entail danger of a crash, or having their landing-gear torn away, which would prove a disaster. Consequently Jack held himself in readiness to once more start his engine when sufficiently near the object of his attack.

Perk knew just when their downward velocity terminated, for not only were they again on a level keel, but the motor commenced working with its customary intensity and the whole fusilage quivered as usual when they were under way.

All this had consumed mere fragments of a minute and Perk had already drawn back his hand to make ready for his first toss. It was his intention to follow this up with a second bomb, hurled in double-quick order, for a dual fire would make the results more complete.

Jack left it completely to his comrade to decide just when to let fly, relying on the lessons Perk had taken along those lines in order to make himself as near perfect as possible. If it so chanced that their initial attack turned out to be futile, it was always possible for the fighting airship to swing around so as to permit a second attempt.

Much would depend on just how those who were struggling like mad wolves on the deck of the schooner to gain or retain possession of the spoils took the attack from the air. Jack rather fancied they would be panic stricken at having a grim spectre of the skies descend on them like a plunging eagle and before they could possibly recover sufficient energy to strike back, the monster roc must have winged past, and the pungent gas started to affect their eyes, rendering them frantic with a threatened temporary blindness.

Then Perk began his share of the vicious attack. He followed out his prearranged programme with machine-like movements, sending his first bomb with such cleverness that it struck close to the stern, for Jack had made his hawk-like swoop so as to pass completely along the entire length of the deck—this in order to give his working pal a better chance to fulfill his assignment.

Even before that missile struck, Perk had instantly changed the other bomb to his eager right hand and in a rapid-fire way sent it, too, hurtling downward, to crash further on close to the bow.

Then they were speeding into space beyond the bowsprit of the anchored rum-runner, with Jack starting to climb in order to bank and swing around, so as to complete the job if his first endeavor lacked in any detail.

Lucky indeed for the two aviators that they had their goggles on, else they too might have suffered from the fumes that so quickly spread in every direction as though fanned by the night breeze. Perk afterwards admitted that he had caught a whiff of the penetrating gas despite the covering helmet and close-fitting goggles but thanks to the haste with which Jack carried their ship past, the gas had little or no effect.

The clamor still continued, if anything, redoubled, for now the element of fear had gripped the hearts of every man on board both boats as they felt that terrible, unseen agency stabbing at their eyes and making the stoutest writhe with agony and alarm, thinking they must be doomed.

Jack could easily comprehend why they should be demoralized under the prevailing conditions—there had been enough excitement in the air to start with when the hijacker crowd boarded the rum-runner and joined issues with the crews of the two allied boats but when from out of the skies there descended a swooping monster, apparently about to fall upon them as might a stray meteor from unlimited space in the firmament, and that strange, racking pain gripped their eyes, nothing but panic could describe their condition with any degree of accuracy.

But one element was now lacking in the dreadful turmoil—Perk could no longer detect the quick percussion of blows, as fists and clubbed firearms clashed against human bodies backed by a fierce anger that had been fanned into a blaze by injuries received and a sense of impending victory, with the spoils in sight.

Apparently every man among them was thinking of nothing save his own individual sufferings and terror—unable to see with any degree of certainty, they must be staggering this way and that, colliding with each other and then one by one either falling into the water or else jumping aboard the speedboat so conveniently nearby.

Jack had by this time brought the ship around again so as to head into the wind as before. Perk, divining that this meant a second slash at the mob on the sloop's deck reached out for another relay of missiles. Now that he had got started he was in prime condition to “keep the ball rolling” until there did not remain a single hijacker or smuggler aboard the rum-runner.

But Jack, more inclined to pity than the former war ace, did not make that second dip—he had a good idea the punishment thus dealt out with their initial swoop would be severe enough to clear the deck and set the late rival forces to quitting the vicinity of the ill smelling sloop with the utmost speed, regardless of the means employed to accomplish such a retreat while the going held good.

Perk could hear splash after splash, as though the frenzied sufferers in their agony had been seized with the possibility of cooling water being a sovereign remedy for the ills that had so suddenly gripped their aching eyeballs.

Perk was chuckling to himself, even as he continued to crouch there, and held a third tear bomb ready for instant use when Jack was pleased to give him a fitting opportunity to throw it.

“Zowie!” he was telling himself, “if that don't make me think o' the times when us boys lined up on a dock and made the dive, one right after another—plunk—plunk—plunk! Go to it, you terriers—swim for the shore, boys, and good luck to you all. Our job'll be to pick up the rum-boat with her juicy cargo, an' hand her over to some Government official Jack knows about around these diggings. High—low—Jack an' the smugglin' game—that spells the hull thing I kinder guess!”

Perk was by no means so lacking in sagacity not to understand just why his comrade was hanging fire and keeping at a respectful distance from the sloop. He wished sufficient time to elapse so that most of the penetrating gas from the tear bombs would be carried off on the night wind and it might be reckoned safe for them to go aboard.

He could vision the terrified hijackers after their speedy plunge overboard managing to find their several boats and dragging themselves over the gunwales with but one thought in their bewildered minds, and that to put as much distance between themselves and the rum-runner as possible.

He even told himself he could catch the sound of splashing and oars working madly in the locks, although this may have been only imagination on Perk's part, but for one thing, he did glimpse a moving light and could detect a chugging movement such as would accompany the inglorious flight of the speedboat, racing for some shore harbor.

Silence followed, as though all the human elements in that late wild tumult had managed to leave the scene of their defeat. Still Jack continued to swing around in a short circle, showing how even with the spoils of victory close within their reach he could keep to his standard maxim of “watch your step!”

Minutes passed, and it went without question that the penetrating gas must be well swept away by the night wind so that it would be safe for them to board their prize and take a quick inventory of the illicit cargo.

Perk knew the time for action had arrived when he felt the plane head toward the surface of the gulf, as though it was Jack's intention to drop just back of the sloop's stern when they could taxi alongside and readily climb to the low deck.

There was nothing surprising about their coming in contact with the surface of the water—Jack had acquired a habit of making perfect landings whether ashore or with pontoons. Knowing this, Perk never looked for anything else.

They came down with hardly any more of a splash than a pelican might have made and almost instantly Jack started taxiing ahead in the direction of the nearby anchored sloop.

Perk had set the third tear-bomb down with the belief that there would be no necessity for his using it. Silence hung about the sloop, and he had decided there could be no one around, unless, when they clambered over the side, they should discover some poor chap who had succumbed to the provoking gas or else been stunned by a blow in the wild melee that had raged previously.

Just the same wise old Perk did not mean to be caught off his guard and so he dragged out a formidable looking automatic, supplied by the Secret Service to all its accredited agents as a means for compelling a surrender on the part of any “wanted man” when overtaken in his flight.

The head-phones had been disconnected so there was nothing to hinder a prompt boarding of the captured boat when Jack gave the word. With the glorious flush of victory thrilling his whole frame Perk stood by to fend off as they drew close to the squatty stern. It would be his duty to clamber out on one wing and get aboard, carrying a rope by means of which the floating airship could be secured to the water craft.

This he managed to accomplish without much difficulty, wondering while so doing whether he and Jack might not be making history, for he suspected that never before in the annals of aviation had an amphibian plane been afforded a chance to take a prize of war in such an original fashion as bombarding the enemy crew with tear-gas bombs and causing them to flee in mad haste.

It was an exultant Perk who stood erect on the deck and waved his flying helmet with the proud air of a neophyte hunter planting his foot on the body of his first slain lion or tiger.

CHAPTER VII

A WHITE ELEPHANT ON THEIR HANDS

“Come on in, Jack old hoss, the water’s fine!” was the way Perk greeted his chum after gaining the deck of the captured rum-runner.

“First make that rope fast somehow so we’ll run no risk of losing our floating crate,” Jack advised him.

“Yeah, that’s just what I’m goin’ to do, buddy,” continued the other, as he proceeded to make fast to the sloop’s wheel after which Jack managed to clamber aboard.

There were lanterns scattered around, and in the haste with which the afflicted crew had abandoned their ship no one had bothered about extinguishing them. By means of the meagre illumination afforded by them, the two airmen were able to take a fairly comprehensive survey of their surroundings.

“Huh! I kinder guessed we’d find a bunch o’ the scrappin’ critters stretched out, an’ lookin’ all bloody like,” ventured Perk, with possibly a shadow of regret in his voice and manner, “but shucks! never a one do I set my lamps on. Here’s a case or two o’ wet goods been busted open, seems like, in all that kickup an’ mebbe now some o’ the wild boys got a taste that helped keep ’em in the roarin’, tearin’ fight they had but looks as if every man must a’ been mighty keen on jumpin’ his bail. Wow! I can’t blame ’em any, if the way my eyes feel is a fair sample o’ what they got served out to ’em!”

“You said it, partner,” echoed Jack, “but keep from rubbing it in, if you know what’s good for you. The gas is being carried away right along by the breeze, so let’s forget it and take a look around.”

“Let’s,” echoed Perk, always more or less curious and eager to “peek” when the chance offered.

It seemed as though they were alone on the anchored sloop that was rising and falling on the long rollers coming in off the wide gulf. Piles of cases lay on the deck around them, ready to be transferred to such smaller craft as were expected to draw alongside with orders for them from some mysterious central clearing house. Possibly there were many more similar packages down below, for the sloop was evidently heavily laden.

Now and then the voluble member of the firm would let out a crisp exclamation as though those keen eyes of his had run across some visible sign of the recent rough-house disagreement that tickled him more or less.

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