

TRACKERS OF THE FOG PACK



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Trackers
OF THE FOG PACK
or Jack Ralston
Flying Blind

BY AMBROSE NEWCOMB

Author of
THE SKY DETECTIVES
EAGLES OF THE SKY
WINGS OVER THE ROCKIES
SKY PILOTS' GREAT CHASE

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Trackers of the Fog Pack

CHAPTER I

PERK SIGHS FOR ACTION

San Diego, in sunny Southern California, was looking its prettiest, with balmy breezes blowing softly; cloudless blue skies overhead; the usual throngs on the streets, and a general atmosphere of contentment resting over the entire place.

Already tourist pilgrims were beginning their annual migration from the cold lands of the north and northeast, seeking the more congenial climate along the picturesque Coast, where flowers bloomed throughout every month of the year; and outdoor sports of all descriptions tempted those inclined that way to participate.

But, just the same, there appeared to be *one* individual sauntering along Main Street, in a certain San Diego suburb, who did not seem to share in the general joyous spirit—this grumbler amidst such perfect surroundings was really an old friend of the reader, no other than Gabe Perkiser, familiarly known among his fellows of the flying fields by the shorter name of “Perk.”

At his side stalked his bosom pal, Jack Ralston, in whose company latterly the said Perk had participated in a number of thrilling flying stunts, all of which have been narrated in the earlier books of this series of aviation stories.

Those who have enjoyed a previous recital of their adventures in the precarious vocation they followed, as policemen of the skies, need no further introduction to the pair of cronies. For the benefit of new readers, less fortunate, it may be said right here, before embarking on the latest and most thrilling of their recent exploits, that Jack and Perk were trusted members of Uncle Sam’s wide-flung Secret Service organization; and on account of their clever and conscientious work, often entrusted with some of the most dangerous and difficult missions engaging the attention of the high “muck-a-muck” (Perk’s definition) authorities at Washington Headquarters.

“What puts you in the dumps so, Perk?” Jack was asking, after noticing for the tenth time what a frown had settled on his chum’s usually smiling phiz. “Dinner knocking harder than customary; or did you get a letter from your best girl,

breaking off the engagement? Strikes me you're fast becoming a chronic crêpe-hanger these days."

"That's all hot air—boloney I'd call it, as yeou know right well, Jack!" Perk flung back. "Chow was all to the good—ain't got nary a best gal, an' never did have, neither—they're all rank pizen to me. Guess again, Mister."

"Then what *does* ail you, boy—something gone wrong with your plans—can I do anything to ease the strain? I'd go a long way to get you out of that black look, partner; you're worrying me a heap I allow."

The other stopped short on Main Street's pavement, and looked his companion straight in the face, actually smiling a bit in the bargain.

"Yeou *would* do jest that, ole pal, wouldn't yeou? I know I'm a tarnel fool to get stewed like this," he burst out; "an' orter be ashamed—I'm meanin' to kick outen it right away. Fact is, it's the same ole story, Jack—I'm gettin' fed up by things goin' too smooth. Guess it's in the blood—my Yankee ancestors they was all men o' action, doers o' things that called fur courage an' double risk. They set their seal on me, seems like; fur ever since I was a kid I've been on the hunt fur adventure by land an' sea; yeah, an' o' late years, in the air besides. That's all I gotter say; but blood'll tell ev'ry time."

"Well," remarked Jack, looking much relieved it could be seen. "I more than half suspected this, Perk; but cheer up—the longest lane must have its turning. Meanwhile we're getting our regular pay from our Uncle Samuel, remember!"

"But not earnin' a red cent, jest the same, which is what upsets me most," continued the complaining one. "Makes me feel like I'm sorter pensioned off, an' ain't worth the snap o' my fingers to the Service. Huh!"

"Nonsense, boy, that's a silly way of looking at things. We're just resting up after that difficult job we pulled off, with the help of the Mounted Police, far away up in Northwest Canada.^[1] That successful flight, and arrest, earned us a vacation, our superiors believe; which I for one have enjoyed immensely. Now I'm feeling fine, and fit for the next commission the Big Boss decides to hand out to us."

"Hot-diggetty-dig! then I sure hopes it drifts this way right quick," Perk eagerly observed. "I kinder guess them racketeers an' their crowd o' bootleggers must a got things mighty near sewed up, when the Department lets us loaf away our time out here on the Gold Coast. If it keeps on we'll be apt to forget heow to handle a ship, an' get air shy—neow *wouldn't* that same be a tough joke on us poor guys?"

"Little danger of such a thing coming to pass, Perk—it's a whole bit like swimming—once you learn how to keep afloat it's good for a life-time."

"Mebbe so, Jack—I got a hunch it's the same way with ridin' a bike used to be

—first few days yeou felt stiff in all yeour joints, ev’rything out o’ kelter; but when a chump got used to guidin’ the skittish wheel along it came as easy as fallin’ off a log. Honest Injun, neow, Jack, ain’t yeou any idea when we’re apt to grab an order to get goin’ again?”

“Any old day I’m looking for the same, Perk.”

“Gosh! that don’t strike me as givin’ much encouragement, partner,” Perk told his mate, aggrievedly.

“I wrote in ten days ago,” Jack went on to say, quietly, “to say our ship was in first-class condition, while we were on deck, waiting for orders.”

“Bully for yeou!” snapped Perk, brightening up visibly, as though, like a war horse at the scent of burnt powder making his nostrils quiver with anticipation. “I’m right neow yearnin’ to set eyes on a different landscape than sleepy ol’ San Diego, an’ slow towns borderin’ on the same.”

Perk only stated a truth when he referred to his adventurous life. He was considerably older than his running mate, having been over in France when only eighteen years of age, handling a sausage balloon on the fighting line, and running into numerous close corners, having been shot down at least twice.

After the war was over he came home, and started learning the ropes of the new craze—flying; becoming a very good pilot in time, though a bit reckless, it must be admitted.

Then he drifted into the lumber camps, and played logger for a few seasons. After that Perk, who was proud of having a strain of Canadian blood along with his Yankee heritage, turned up among the Mounties in the Far Northwest regions and spent some years doing service with those dashing officers enforcing the Law of the wilderness.

Meeting up with Jack Ralston—after being coaxed to throw his fortunes in with the Secret Service at Washington, he took a strong liking for the bright-witted youngster, and they had been boon comrades ever since, sharing their blankets, meeting all manner of peril in company, and becoming what might be called real “blood brothers.”

So, too, had Jack been through some interesting experiences, although not of the same thrilling character as those Perk could look back to, when musing of the past.

He had had a run of circus training, being a natural athlete; and on the bills had been advertised as a famous trapeze performer. Then naturally the lure of the air gripped Jack, and forsaking the sawdust ring he began making parachute drops with one of those barnstorming aviators possessing a dilapidated crate with which he was wont to give exhibitions at Harvest Home festivals, and County Fairs all over the West—just as Lindbergh did in his school days.

It was in this fashion that young Ralston learned to be a clever pilot; and possibly his skill at the controls was one leading factor bringing about an earnest invitation for him to join up with the Secret Service—about that time it became evident that a new branch of the Law organization must be built up, in order to compete with the lawless smuggling gangs that were already using airplanes with which to fetch contraband of every description into the country.

So well did the pair co-operate that they worked as two parts of the whole machine—as one hand knows what the other hand requires to make a finished product so their brains often worked in unison, thus adding additional strength to their united efforts.

As they continued their walk, meaning to return to the city in time for lunch, Perk continued to ramble on with observations covering much ground; for he had a decided opinion on every variety of subject, and could be depended on to exploit his ideas at the slightest invitation.

“No use talkin,’ Jack,” he was saying, as he tapped his pocket significantly, “that same Jerry Slocum’s a crackin’ good locksmith an’ gunsmith. I took up with his offer, yeou know, to put my ol’ six-shooter, used in France with my work in the sausage balloon corps, in apple-pie condition; an’ he done a smart job. He happened to have some ammunition to fit the gun, so I laid in a bunch o’ cartridges, meanin’ to shoot at a target when time hung heavy on my hands. But listen, will yeou, ol’ pard, what’s all that whoopin’ mean ’round the corner jest ahead—sounds like a reg’lar *stampede* was takin’ place, I’d say if yeou asked me?”

[1] See “*Sky Pilots’ Great Chase.*”

CHAPTER II

HE GETS HIS WISH

“Some excitement, I own up, Perk,” agreed Jack, exchanging a look of inquiry with his companion. “Dog fight, like as not, since I thought I heard a yowling just then, as if one mutt’d got his in the neck.”

“Jest hear the people a shoutin’ will yeou?” snapped Perk.

“But that doesn’t sound like they were enjoying themselves a heap, I’d say, boy—such screaming and yelling—they’re badly rattled over whatever’s going on. What could it all mean, I wonder?”

“Hot-diggetty-dig! we’ll know right soon, ole hoss; ’cause it’s headin’ this way—gettin’ a heap louder ev’ry second, I vow! Guess yeou struck it right when yeou sez they must be skeered into a near panic. Don’t hear no guns agoin’ off, so it cain’t be a brawl ’tween drunken bootleggers an’ town constables. Well, I swan, it gets me—look at the folks a beatin’ it to the houses, like they reckoned they’d be safer there. Mebbe we better shin up a telegraph pole like that youngster’s a doin’ over yonder—he means to git high an’ dry, so’s to see the circus, but not take chances with the runaway animal’s flyin’ heels. Wow! what’s this I lamp a comin’ ’reound that corner, waggin’ his ole head from side to side—a big yellin’ *dog*, Jack, with foam a drippin’ from his open red mouth! Great guns!”

“That beast is as mad as a hatter!” boomed Jack, thrilled by the frightful sight. “He’s bound to own the whole street, no matter if a battalion of cops try to sheer him off!”

“Mebbe, mate,” Perk was shouting “we’d better be steppin’ to one side in a hurry; I ain’t lost nary dog; an’ I’m not fool enough to want to stand up ’fore one that’s rabid—not Gabe Perkiser! Get a move on, Jack, an’ vamose!”

“Wait up!” cried the other, for so great was the clamor no one could expect to be heard unless he fairly shouted.

“Excuse me, boy—I got a date!” Perk bellowed back, grinning as he spoke.

“Look ahead, Perk—that child—little boy he is—fell down in his fright, and

must've sprained his ankle—see him try to scramble up again; but he can't manage it, what with his fright and twisted ankle. The dog—it's making straight for the youngster—we can't stand by, and see him tackle such a mere baby—we've just *got* to do something, Perk!"

"Sure do, partner—let's go!"

Others were running in every direction save toward the great ugly beast, thinking in their panicky state of nerves only of their own safety. All the while the shouts continued to go booming along the length of Main Street:

"Mad dog! mad dog! everybody run—get the children indoors! He's rabid and ready to snap at anybody in his way! Run for it!"

But the poor little baby directly in the path of the oncoming demon could not heed the shouts—vainly he tried to crawl to one side, his terrified eyes fixed on that dreadful vision of fury and rabies confronting him, and drawing closer with every passing second.

Jack and Perk were galloping forward with all their might, intending to throw themselves between the child and that stumbling terror with the lolling head and dripping jaws.

It could be seen that Perk was gripped by a sudden inspiration—he had dragged some sort of object from his pocket, and was working feverishly with the same. Jack understood, and inwardly blessed the lucky chance that had caused his pal to fetch his old war weapon out to his friend the town gunsmith, so as to have it put in first-class condition. It must have been the hand of a kind fate that brought about this wonderful coincidence, Jack was telling himself, when guessing that the running airman must be trying with all his cleverness to insert a cartridge or two into the chambers of the small, antiquated six-shooter.

Fortune favored them, for they were enabled to pass beyond the writhing and shrieking child, thus facing the danger themselves as a shield to buck up against the charge of the mad dog.

Perk dropped down on one knee—it was the natural position for one to assume under such conditions, bringing him more on a level with the beast. Jack, too, knew he had a part in the scheme to save the tiny lad—lacking a weapon of any kind he could not stand by Perk; but one thing was left to him, which was to snatch up the imperiled child, and leap to safety before the crisis crashed upon them.

Even as he was thus bearing the lad out of the danger zone, he caught a sudden explosion that told him Perk had sent in a shot. It was his bosom pal crouched back there with that shaggy beast almost upon him; for he knew full well Perk had waited until he could make doubly certain of his aim.

Somehow Jack could not keep from turning his head, so as to know the worst

—he had a cold feeling in the region of his heart, undoubtedly fearing he would discover Perk engaged in a furious struggle at close quarters with the animal, one bite from whose jaws would contaminate the flesh his cruel fangs thus mangled.

But that fear was instantly put to flight—Perk still knelt there, while the furious beast writhed on the ground, making frightful efforts to get up on its four feet again.

This he no sooner succeeded in doing than Perk let him have a second leaden pill, working his keepsake weapon of the great war with mechanical precision. How lucky then he must have succeeded in thrusting *two* cartridges into the maw of his gun, since there proved to be such great need of an *encore*.

It was “all over but the shouting,” as Perk himself would have put it. He rose to his feet, and coolly stepped forward, to bend over and see that there no longer remained a single breath in the carcase of the terrible brute he had stayed in his mad passage through the town.

The tenor of the wild shouts changed like magic—joy and triumph, not to say relief, began to be heard, as if reassuring the frightened populace there was no longer anything to be feared—the ogre Jabberwock had been laid low, and once again the length of Main Street could be traversed without peril to life and limb.

And the one who had performed this valorous deed seemed only anxious to make himself scarce before the worshiping citizens could lay hands on him—shower him with thanks, perhaps *kisses* as well from the gentler sex, who knew a hero in the flesh as well as on the Hollywood screen.

Jack was trying the best he knew how to allay the terror of the child he still held in his arms, speaking to him with assurance in his tones, and squeezing the white-faced little chap close to his heart.

“It’s all right, buddy,” he kept saying, with a comforting smile on his face, that was bound to stop the trembling sobs of the other, if anything could. “The ugly dog can’t hurt you, for he’s been killed, and can never bite anybody. You must have hurt your ankle, little brother; I’m going to carry you to where you live, so they can take care of you, and get the kind doctor to take the pain away. Put your arms around my neck, and I’ll be able to hold you better—that’s the way, kiddie; you know I’m a good friend of yours, don’t you?”

The crowd was all around them by this time, milling so as to get as close as possible—it reminded Jack of cattle being rounded up by expert punchers, so as to be shipped to market, or it might be, branded.

“Stand back, please, and give us air!” Jack called out, to add: “Perk, see that they don’t crowd in any further. I’m not going to be satisfied until I’ve seen this little lad safe in his home. Who knows where he lives?”

There were a dozen voices raised in explanations; but Jack lifted a hand to

stop the confused racket.

“Hold up on that!” he told them, sharply; “I want just one person to tell me—here, you boy, you seem to know him okay—tell me his name, will you, and where he lives—nobody else break in now, get that? Go on, George, speak up!”

“My name’s Jimmy—his’n is Laddy Boy—he lives with his granny Mrs. Fergusan right ’round that next corner, in a little shack.”

“Fine for you Jimmy—lead us to it; and please everybody stop pushing—that shouting must be dropped, or you’ll have the old lady frightened half to death before we get there. Now start along, Jimmy—you’re a good pal to tie to, I’ll say.”

So they made a start, with scores following after them, all talking; but in more subdued tones. Possibly they realized that this young chap with the capable look, and firm voice, was one accustomed to having his orders obeyed without any questions being asked, and that he would brook no interference.

As they turned into the side street the young pilot hastened to point in the direction of a small old, but respectable looking cottage of some three rooms, that was surrounded by masses of flowers in full bloom.

Jack could see the door of the small house was wide open, and that an elderly woman stood there, shading her eyes with a hand, as she watched the approach of the crowd. Undoubtedly she must have heard what had been so loudly shouted, when the mad dog was causing such a panic on Main Street—she may even have started toward the nearby corner, with a great fear tugging at her heart, knowing her Laddie Boy was going about on the little errand she had entrusted to him; but if so fear had driven her back to the home, where she could slam the door shut in case personal peril threatened her.

Seeing Jack in the lead of the procession, carrying some object in his arms, she came flying down to meet him, looking aghast.

“Don’t be so alarmed Mrs. Ferguson,” Jack said, sympathizing with her new fears; “he wasn’t bitten by the dog; but had the bad luck to sprain his ankle. It’s nothing serious, I’m telling you straight—lead the way, and I’ll put him on a bed, when you can send for the doctor to look him over; but don’t worry—he’s safe enough, I promise you.”

Presently Jack joined his partner.

“Let’s go, matey,” Perk hastened to say, uneasily, as though he feared those admiring good folks outside were actually conspiring to pick him up on their shoulders, and march around town with the hero of the mad dog scare; something like that, but to which he was very much averse.

“Wait a few minutes,” Jack told his nervous comrade, “I promised the old lady I’d stay out here until the doctor had looked the child over; she wants to get the

story out of us, I imagine, guessing something queer must have happened, from the way those folks kept pawing at us.”

Perk drew a long breath, and muttered something under his breath that sounded like “drat the tough luck;” but he did settle down on a chair, and amused himself looking around the room, on the walls of which were a number of cheap pictures, also several portraits.

“Come over here, Perk,” Jack was saying, as he stood in front of the picture of a man, “here’s a queer happening—look at that face—have you ever seen it before?”

CHAPTER III

ECHOES OF THE PAST

Looking rather surprised, as well as duly curious after his nature, Perk accordingly stepped blithely up, took one good stare, and immediately burst out with his characteristic and pet “swear-word” phrase:

“Hot-diggetty-dig! hard to b’lieve my eyes, for a fact, partner—course I seen that phiz afore neow, an’ same stirs up some mighty warm session we passed through a while back.”

“Then you say it’s a portrait of Slim Garrabrant?” asked Jack, in a lower key, and with a quick glance toward the connecting door that was a bit ajar it happened.

“None other, buddy—the slickest flim-flam artist that ever fooled the banks of every state west o’ the Mississip—fair good job that crayon artist made o’ his work—mebbe copied from a reg’lar photo. Ain’t this this the limit though—to think o’ runnin’ acrost *his* mug out here clost to San Diego. Huh! I allers heard the world seemed mighty small sometimes, an neow I b’lieves it.”

Jack put a finger up to his lips warningly.

“Softly, Perk. That old lady must be some close connection of Slim’s, I’d say; it may be his own mother—yes, the fact of finding his picture hanging on this wall in an honored place makes that plain; she evidently doesn’t know what a rogue her boy is—they must have kept things from reaching her ears after we gobbled him up, and he was sent to Leavenworth—or was it Atlanta?”

“Yeou got me there, ’cause I never did know,” observed Perk, taking yet another look at the face within the gold frame. “Aint sech a tough looker as we know he is, eh, ole pal?”

“Yes, that’s a fact; but then this was evidently taken years ago, most likely, before he became so hardened. I wonder—”

“What neow, Jack?”

“That handsome little boy must be some relative of Slim’s,” said Jack, on a hazard; “if he was old enough I’d begin to believe the kid was his own child—”

they call her Grandmammy Ferguson, remember—yes, that would square things I'd reckon, Perk."

"Aint it won-der-ful?" the other was saying, half to himself apparently; "jest to think o' us arunnin' smack into somebody connected with the man we was responsible for sendin' to the pen years ago. 'Bout one chanct in a million sech a thing could happen; but it shore has."

Jack also showed that he was feeling about the same as his comrade; indeed it was one of the queerest episodes he had ever met up with.

"If that turns out to be a fact," he went on to comment, "I imagine Garrabarnt behind the bars would give considerable for a glimpse of that kid's sweet face."

"I wouldn't blame him any at that, Jack. How 'bout the kid—dye kinder guess he'll have a bad time with that leg?"

"The doctor will be able to say after he's had a lookover," came the confident answer. "My opinion is it'll prove to be a simple sprain, and if such is the case the child will only have to keep quiet for a spell. There's a car stopping at the gate, and the man getting out has the look of a professional—yes, he's carrying a little satchel in the bargain, so it must be the doctor she sent after."

This proved to be the case, for the young man spoke to them on entering, and seemed very agreeable.

"What's happened here?" he asked, as though his hasty summons, and the sight of that excited crowd outside, had aroused his curiosity greatly.

Jack thought the doctor should be told what necessity there was for his services; as such knowledge would prepare him for what must follow. Accordingly he very briefly explained, making light of what connection he and Perk had with the matter.

Thus forewarned the doctor smiled his thanks, and hastened to pass into the room where the old lady and the child were located. Some little time afterwards the doctor came out again. Perk could see from the look on his face it was not so very serious, nor was he mistaken in his diagnosis.

"A simple sprain, just as you suspected," the physician assured them; "and he'll be running around again inside of five days."

He shook hands with them very earnestly, which fact caused Perk to remark, after the doctor had passed out of the door:

"Huh! it's mighty plain to be seen, Jack, he's smart enough to smell a rat—the grip he gimme said as he kinder guessed we had a finger in the pie. Look for yeourself, partner—he's talkin' to some o' the folks out there, an' I jest bet yeou they're a makin' out we done somethin' grand. Rats! why caint a gink do a simple thing like we done without people wantin' to gush over him? Makes me fair sick to see so much o' the stuff wasted. Do we get a move on right away,

mate?”

“Better wait up a bit until he starts back to his office,” suggested Jack, also peeping out of the window.

“Yeou said it, Jack—if we stepped eout right neow it’d look like we wanted ’em to give us a cheer—as for me I’d be glad if we could slip away by the back door, an’ give ’em the laugh. There, he’s gettin’ into his car, an’ the coast’s clear.”

Jack stepped into the other room to say goodbye to the old lady—for she did seem to be of a higher class than one would think from the humble cottage she called home—truth to tell Jack wished to have another look at that bright-faced little lad, whom he was apt to remember for a long time.

The boy had come-to, and shook hands at Jack’s request, also gave him a sweet smile.

“If he owes either of us any thanks,” Jack told Granny, as he turned to leave, “it should go to my chum; who chanced to have a gun in his pocket, having had it cleaned and repaired at a shop here—he threw himself between the ugly dog and the child, and shot the mad brute dead. The lad wasn’t touched, I assure you, madam.”

“Thank him for me a thousand times, please, young man—it was a brave act, and his mother surely has cause to be grateful for having such a son. Come and see us sometime later on; both of us will be very glad to have you drop in.”

Jack hurried out, with a strange thought racing through his brain; he could not help wondering what that fine elderly woman would think if only she knew how the two young men thus befriending her grandson (who must have been so precious to her heart) had been the chief instrument in shape of the outraged Law to run down and send her son-in-law Slim Garrabarnt, up to the penitentiary for a long term of years, as a much wanted criminal.

It was hardly a pleasant thought, but nothing to be ashamed of, since he merely represented the Government in all he had done, and could not be blamed any more than the judge who dealt out the grim sentence.

Perk was eager to be gone, and led the way outside. They pushed a passage through the still jabbering crowd, and walked off, followed by admiring looks from those gathered there.

On the way back to the city Perk seemed to be wrapped in his own thoughts much of the time, which was such an unusual occurrence that Jack marveled to take note of his silence.

“Still o’ the opinion the kid might be his’n?” Perk asked his companion, as they finally drew near the location of the building in which they had a furnished room.

“Feel pretty sure of it,” he was told, without the slightest hesitation. “I explained to the old lady that it was you who kept the dog from contact with the child, and she asked me to thank you with all her heart.”

“Shucks! why did yeou ever mention sech a thing, Pal Jack? ’Twan’t nawthin’ ’tall—jest a soft snap for a chap what was yearnin’ for action. But it gives me a queer thrill to know heow we run up agin *his* folks—’bout a hundred-an’-thirty million people in this here country, an’ to think we’d pick ’em aout o’ all that mob—it sure has got me buffaloed for keeps.”

As Jack opened the locked door of their room he stooped to pick up some object that had been thrust underneath. Perk saw it was a letter, with a special delivery stamp on the same. Somehow its coming gave him a sudden thrill around the region of his heart, as though he could sense important news in the offing—apparently this was destined to be a red-letter day in their experiences, with a decided break in the long release from active duty.

CHAPTER IV

BY SPECIAL DELIVERY

Somewhat to the disappointment of Perk his comrade did not evince any haste about opening his letter, thrusting the same into his pocket, while he washed his hands, and brushed his hair.

“Somehow I seem to be as hungry as a wolf,” Jack remarked; “and as it’s long past our usual time for lunch I move we drop around to our beanery, and lay in some stores in the way of chow.”

Of course such a proposition appealed strongly to Perk, who was seldom able to resist a call to meals. For the moment he quite forgot his recent curiosity to know what was in the letter, the receipt of which had caused Jack to smile; and which moreover had certain familiar marks about it to make Perk feel certain it came from Headquarters.

“Queer heow a feller c’n nigh ’bout forget certain stirrin’ events in his past,” he observed with a shake of his head; “an’ suddenly have the same bob up in his mind, as clear as if they might a happened on’y yesterday.”

“I reckon you’re referring to our old friend, Cool Slim Garrabrant, eh, Perk?” queried the other, indifferently.

“None other,” came the reply. “There was a man as might be called the king o’ the counterfeiters, who’d had his thumb to his nose ever so long, alaughin’ at Uncle Sam’s slick boys, an’ sendin’ ’em all sorts o’ tauntin’ notes; so in the end the Chief he come down off’n his high perch, an’ gave us a chanct to knock down the persimmons with a long pole; which we done as neat as any body’d choose.”

“Bad taste to boast, Perk, you want to remember.”

“Can’t help sayin’ a few things, Jack, an’ pattin’ us two flyin’ cops on the chest. Honest, I got an idea Slim’s sun had begun to set jest as soon as the job o’ runnin’ him in was placed in aour hands. Nobody but them as knew haow to handle an airship could a fetched home the bacon in that case; ’cause Slim he knowed how to get his long-green stuff clear withaout leavin’ any trace, usin’

that ole crate to carry the coney supplies east an' west o' his hidin' place, where he carried on the work along a big scale."

"Of course what you say is all true enough," ventured Jack as they walked along, heading for the nearest eatingplace, which they sometimes patronized when close by; "but both of us would do well to try and forget our share in that haul—it's old stuff by now. And besides," continued Jack, "somehow I feel bad when I remember that it was probably that little kid's own daddy we sent up."

"Yeah!" mused Perk, unwilling to change the subject, it appeared, "an' the judge socked it to Slim good an' heavy—give him a long sentence, so 'at he'll have to serve behind the walls o' that Atlanta pen 'til he's an old, broken-down man, an' not marked dangerous to law-abidin' folks."

"There are a few others of his stripe yet outside prison walls, remember, partner," Jack told him, as they entered the eatingplace, walking over to a table somewhat aloof from all others, and on this account usually chosen for such meals as they took there; as they sometimes discussed their secret work while eating it was policy to keep clear from other diners, and at the same time lower their voices, since walls may have ears, and even hide dictaphones that record every spoken word.

"Yeou never said truer words, ole top," Perk agreed in his odd fashion. "Scofflaws aplenty to keep our crowd busy for years ahead. Say, d'ye know I been readin' a heap 'bout a smart guy they say calls hisself King Cole—seems like he got a hole in the wall 'way out in the wildest part o' the Rockies, an' jest laughs at the boys from Washington to size him up."

"I recollect you talking of him more than a few times, Perk; from which fact I had a hunch you might be wishing the Chief'd turn over the assignment for apprehending him to our hands—is that correct, partner?"

"Don't care if I do have to acknowledge the corn, matey; someheow that dickey grabbed a stiff hold on my thinkin' box—why, onct I even dreamed we'd cornered him with his gay crowd, an' was commencin' to exchange shots with the bunch, when I woke up, an' felt too cheap for anything to know it was on'y hot air."

Jack laughed as he seated himself.

"I remember how furious you were, and saying it was a shame to be cheated that way, eh, Perk?"

They gave their orders, and were presently partaking of what the waiter set before them; afterwards retiring, as though already knowing they would call should they require further service. This afforded Perk another opportunity to "use his tongue," a vocation that gave him the utmost enjoyment.

"Jest occurred to me them paper accounts sez as haow his bees'-nest was

located in a stretch 'tween two o' the highest mountain ranges in the hull country o' the Rockies—called the secret settlement Happy Valley; which I opine sounds a right queer name for a den o' pizenous human snakes, sech as the Law wants f'r 'bout ev'ry crime on the calendar.”

“No accounting for tastes, buddy,” Jack told him. “It might feel that way to men against whom the hand of every honest person was raised. Most of his crowd, I read, was believed to be reckoned the scum of the earth, who were wanted for nearly every crime going—murderers, bank cashiers who'd robbed the institutions of which they had been the head; and all such black sheep, outlawed from decent society by their crimes and misdemeanors.”

Perk grinned amiably, as though what his companion had just said made no difference to him—that he still wished from the bottom of his heart they were commissioned to undertake the dangerous task of breaking up the settlement in that so-called Paradise of fugitives.

“Don't faize me any when yeou talk that way, boy,” he told his companion, with one of his amused chuckles that seemed to come up from his toes, “The more stuff yeou gotter bump up agin the better I like it—cain't be too tough for a hill-billy like me—that's what they calls the boys daown in the Ozarks, where I put in near a hull year huntin' precious stones in the earth, an' never findin' enuff to git me my grub. Another o' them memories as comes along withaout warnin', to ha'nt me.”

“Perk, you promised me once that some fine day you'd make a start at that memory book, covering all your activities since you were knee-high to a duck—I'm going to press you to really start in doing the job, Perk; it will make a book well worth reading, if only half of all the adventures you've told me about are included. Now, don't forget your promise, for I'll hold you to it the next layoff we have float our way.”

“I sure hate to do it, partner; but seein' I did give yeou my solemn word I s'pose I'll jest have to keep my promise; but it'll seem to me like a heap o' blarney an' boastin'. My loose tongue sure gets me into a nest o' scrapes, which ain't one bit pleasin' to sech a shy gink as me.”

Ah! Perk's eyes opened wider as he saw the other make a quick movement with his hand, as though suddenly remembering the mysterious letter thrust under the door of their room, and bearing that long blue stamp that signified special service, quick delivery to the person addressed.

Sure enough Jack drew the missive out, and proceeded to cut the end of the envelope, using a table knife for the purpose.

Shooting a quick glance across the table in the direction of his chum, he smiled slightly, as though very well knowing how Perk was eating his heart up

with curiosity.

Perk stopped feeding, as his abstraction was so intense he hardly knew the way to his mouth—both eyes were glued on Jack’s face, as if he hoped to read the answer to the riddle there, a thing that had never as yet come within the scope of his knowledge, since Jack could hide his emotions under an assumed indifference that baffled interpretation.

It seemed that Jack had read every word of the letter, although there were several enclosures yet to be gone over; however he appeared as if he had picked up certain intelligence of such a drastic character as to make him sit there mulling it all over, and possibly trying to dovetail things together.

Perk, poor fellow, could stand the awful suspense no longer.

“Well, ole scout, ain’t yeou thinkin’ ’baout lettin’ me into the game—I somehaow take it fur granted there’s news come ’long that’s agoin’ to start us off agin follerin’ the air trails on the heels o’ some skunks what got themselves outside the law. Lay off, partner, an’ gimme a run fur my money, won’t yeou?”

CHAPTER V

THE CAT IS OUT OF THE BAG

Jack looked at Perk, and smiled.

“I certainly must ask your pardon, old chap,” he hastened to say; “for keeping you in the dark so long. Fact is, what came to me in this letter gave me such food for thought I clean forgot you were my side partner, and entitled to my full confidence. Forgive it, Perk, wont you?”

“Sure thing, Jack; then I kinder guess the letter must be from Headquarters?”

“No other, Perk.”

“What’s in the wind this time?” demanded the other, eagerly; as though his nostrils could already sniff the burnt powder that went with action.

“That’s a fair question, and I’ll try to answer you,” said Jack. “It isn’t the mere fact that we’re ordered to duty once more, that I was thinking about just now, because such a thing comes along every once in so often in the exercise of our duties—but strangely enough our meeting up to-day with the family of a man we’d help put in jail doesn’t seem to bring our queer list of coincidences to a halt.”

“Hot-diggetty-dig! naow yeou got me a guessin’ good an’ hard, partner—go to it, an’ explain what yeou mean.”

“Well, it looks as if a wish you expressed only a short time ago was going to be fulfilled,” Jack told him.

“Haow come, buddy?” queried Perk.

“We were talking about a certain scoundrel who’s name we’ve seen so often of late in the papers—remember, Perk?”

An expression of sublime delight passed over the face of Gabe Perkiser; showing how he understood, and what a sense of exhilaration the knowledge afforded him.

“Kinder guess naow, Jack, yeou might be meanin’ that same Ole King Cole like he goes to call hisself—the brazen guy that makes all kinds o’ fun o’ Secret Service mokes—is *that* the answer, brother?”

Jack nodded in a way that could have only one meaning.

“Okay, Perk; you’re on.

“Shake on that, young feller—it’s the most glorious news I ever did get outen Washington. If half what they says turns aout to be true, we’re in fur the hot time o’ aour life, seems like.”

“You never can tell, partner, which way the cat will jump—sometimes when you’re expecting an easy windup things get mighty tough; then again if you’re looking for a hard battle it sometimes turns out to be just a mere walkover—a flash in the pan. We have to take things as we find them, and let it go at that.”

“Ole King Cole sent aout his nasty defi to the hull Secret Service crowd, an’ so far he’s been able to give the boys the nasty grand laugh; but they say a pitcher may go to the well jest onct too many times—mebbe we might be the lucky ones to smash the same, pronto.”

“I’ve read that two different men of our staff have disappeared, after getting hot on the trail of this band of scoundrels; which goes to tell us they’re a hard-boiled bunch, who wont stop at committing any crime so as to keep out of the pen.”

Perk only grinned, as though the tougher they came the more he liked them.

“That’s all right Jack, I’m best suited when they make ’em that way,” he hastened to assure his chum; although really there was no need of his thus doing, since Jack knew him like a book, with all his good qualities, and shortcomings as well.

“Are you through eating?” asked the other; and on receiving an affirmative nod he continued: “all right, suppose we adjourn to our room for a conference, where we can be dead certain of not being overheard. There are a few other things to tell that may open your eyes still further, as they did mine; besides, the Big Boss enclosed a few clippings, and typed reports, for us to study, as he believes they will give us some important clues that are going to be of considerable help in tracking these outlaws to their den.”

“Gee whiz! things *do* seem to be headin’ aour way, don’t they though, Jack? Yeou said there might be a sudden turn in the game, an’ she sure enough did come hoppin’ ’long, to make me laugh, an’ feel so like singin’.”

“Well, please don’t start that racket here, partner; if ever they heard you singing they’d certainly put the bars against us; and we both like the chow in this same little restaurant, remember.”

“Go easy on a feller whose education in music must a been neglected when he was a kid. An’ Jack, mebbe so yeou’ll let me set my lamps on that ere document, onct we get indoors at aour quarters.”

“You’re going to know everything that I do, Perk; that goes without question;

for how could we work together as a team if we pulled contrarywise?”

Leaving the eatinghouse they were soon back in their comfortable room, where they could take things easy while laying out plans for the near future.

Perk started his favorite pipe going, as though getting ready to be vastly entertained by what was in prospect; he always looked as though at peace with the whole world, even counting those who defied the law to keep them from doing whatever they pleased, however it might turn out for other people—such was the beneficial effects of tobacco on his system, for there were times when he could never be supremely happy until he got his pipe going full blast.

“Naow fur it, partner;” he opened up with, “I’m settled, an’ ready to imbibe the hull kittin’ story, with nawthin’ bein’ held back, like yeou promised me.”

“I’m meaning to read the letter to you first, and then later on you can pore over it yourself, making a mental photograph of the contents, so that every sentence can be recalled from memory upon occasion.”

This was the way Jack generally arranged things, for he knew just how to work so as to get Perk fully interested; and accustomed to the programme the other had never been known to take exception to Jack’s methods.

“I get yeou, partner,” was Perk’s comment; “it’s part o’ aour reg’lar programme to learn the big points o’ aour job, so we aint agoin’ to be rattled when we come to settle daown to work.”

“Now fix your mind on what I’m going to read, and forget everything else but the one business we’re being given to carry through.”

Accordingly Jack commenced, with Perk occasionally asking some pertinent question, which was cheerfully answered by the reader.

“Now,” observed Jack later on, “we’ve covered much that the Chief has had taken down by his stenographer; but the windup of the whole matter is the heart of the story; you want to hold your breath while I read it out to you, because, unless I miss my guess, you’re in for the biggest shock of your life.”

“Hot-diggetty-dig! that sounds right ser’us, partner, she shore do; but I’ll stiffen aout, grip the sides o’ my chair, an’ gulp it all in like a thirsty broncho would fresh water after comin’ in from the sandy desert. Hit ’er up!”

“Listen then to what he writes here,” Jack was saying, soberly, yet keeping an eye on Perk’s tell-tale face, which he never could wholly control: “The enclosed suggestions are clippings, and reports from some of our agents who had started out to track this ugly gang to its secret hideout. Taken collectively and individually they will convince you as to the character of many of the knotty problems you will have to solve before success can be your reward in smashing this new King Cole mob of law breakers, cattle thieves, bank robbers, and what-not along the line of up-to-date crime.

“So you will understand the magnitude of this business when I tell you it is not only suspected, but fully believed, this so-called King Cole is an old offender, sailing under a new name—none other than a clever convict whose escape from the Atlanta penitentiary some months ago has been purposely kept a state secret, in hopes of its being helpful in locating his whereabouts, and bringing him back to his empty cell, with the penalty of having his sentence lengthened on account of his flight—an arrangement that so far has not been in the least profitable or successful.

“You will understand what I mean when I tell you the name of this rascal, whom I remember you and your comrade had the high honor of bringing before the courts, and starting on the road to the Government institution—it is’”—Jack paused to watch Perk’s eager face, and then added with considerable force: “it is Slippery Slim Garrabrant!””

CHAPTER VI

LAYING PLANS

“Oh! my gosh!”

So completely staggered did Perk seem to have become at the disclosure made by Jack, that he sat there, incapable of motion, just staring at his companion in the manner of a man who thinks he sees a hobgoblin.

“Slim—Slim Garrabrant!” he finally mustered up enough breath to almost whisper, looking a bit awed, Jack thought.

“No other, partner,” his pal assured him, cheerfully. “You know how we were saying that sometimes this old world looked mighty small—well, this happens to be one of those times. Take it as a matter of fact, Perk—one of those quirks that roll around occasionally.”

“Yeah—sure, that’s right, Jack—jest so—nawthin’ awful strange ’bout him aturnin’ aout to be the lucky dog as skipped aout o’ the pen, giving Uncle Sam the laugh. Go on an’ tell me some more. Kinder looks like we’d got to roll aour hoop up agin that Smart Aleck again, ’fore we get him caged for keeps.”

“Well, I don’t know about that, matey,” Jack told him, frowning as he spoke; “but if they *do* get him back alive in his cell they’ll keep closer tabs on Slim, you can wager. But the devil of it is, can he ever be retaken? Both of us have good reason to remember what a big job we had on our hands the other time; which isn’t to be compared with what we’ll stack up against now.”

Perk had by this time succeeded in getting back his customary self reliance, when he would scoff at such a word as “can’t.” He screwed his face up in what evidently was intended to be a sneer, as he went on to say:

“Huh! that ere is the last thing to worry me, buddy. Yeou an’ me, guess we make a team not easy to beat. When we git started we’ll jest give that gink a knock fur a goal, an’ clinch the game for keeps. But like as not we orter be makin’ up aour plans, hadn’t we, Jack?”

“Certainly,” responded the other, calmly; “but first of all let it be distinctly understood in the beginning there’s no need of any undue hurry.”

“Course not,” agreed Perk, wagging his head in the affirmative, as was his usual habit when Jack was laying down the law.

“While of course we’ll not loiter on the way,” continued the head man of the combination; “just the same we must not do anything that’s going to interfere with our customary efficiency—no going off at half-cock, like a gun that’s in need of lock repairs.”

Perk chuckled as if highly edified.

“Say, partner,” he hastened to remark, “not much danger o’ sech a thing happenin’ with *yeou* runnin’ the lead, I give *yeou* my affidavit on that same.”

“That’s all blarney, Perk; and don’t depend on my being free from stumbling in the dark—I’m only human, and can make silly mistakes, like every known pilot—even Lindbergh’s had the misfortune to smash his landing gear when making an ascent, and with the girl he afterwards married, remember.”

“Sure thing, Jack, but didn’t he manage a wonderful landin’, an’ keep from a bad smashup, on’y hurtin’ his shoulder in the jam?”

“Yes, and Perk, some people attribute his escape to good luck; but I know full well it was his skill in understanding just what to do in an emergency.”

“Well, what’s aour programme agoin’ to be?” demanded the other.

“First of all, then, we’ve got to study those enclosures the Chief sent in his letter—they’ll give us a good many important points, and it may be locate this secret hideout of the crowd that’s bothering Uncle Sam so much. Get that, do you?”

“I’m on, boss—go to it some more,” replied Perk, blithely.

“As we shall be scouring one of the wildest and most dreaded parts of the whole Rockies,” continued Jack, “of course it’ll be necessary for us to carry a big cargo of stuff along—plenty of supplies in the line of grub, as well as gas and oil. Then, since we are bound to line up, sooner or later, against the whole gang, we must tote tear-bombs, and some of the destructive ones, such as we’ve been forced to make use of before.”

“Sounds okay to me, ole hoss,” Perk assented, looking particularly well pleased at the possibility of wild action, which these preliminary remarks of his leader seemed to presage—doubtless his wonderful memory carried him back to the previous occasion when they went out after Slim Garrabrant, and dragged him before the bar of justice, a feat which earned them the commendation of the Big Chief, as well as a nice step upwards in the way of increased pay.

Although in many things Perk took no man’s dust when it came to a knowledge of flying activities, and air knowledge; just the same he felt it no disgrace to “sit at the feet” of his best pal, and imbibe information when the plan of campaign was being laid out—Perk freely admitted he was “not so good,”

along such lines—ready to shift the responsibility to Jack’s shoulders, yet joyfully bear his share of all subsequent action.

The papers were divided up, and both of them read steadily for some time, occasionally exchanging observations, with Perk asking frequent questions concerning matters that were not quite clear to his rather slow mind.

In this fashion, just as wise Jack knew would be the case, both of them gradually got “heated up,” with the fervor of the case—indeed, this view of matters was also taken by his companion, since Perk declared it made him think of how they used to get a tracking hound to smell some garment worn by the child that was lost, so he could take the trail, and follow it to a successful finish.

“Which I vum will be aour way o’ clappin’ hands on this slippery kiote, once we git agoin’ strong,” he went on to add, with supreme confidence, it appeared.

“One thing we’ve got to remember,” Jack mentioned; “which is about keeping our light hidden under a bushel. Men who follow our dangerous profession must never get themselves in the public prints if it can be avoided; and as for standing up to be in the spotlight, so all people can take note of their looks, it just isn’t done, you know, Perk.”

Possibly there may have been occasions in the past when, after they had been unusually successful in landing their man, Perk had shown a disposition to talk a bit too much—grant interviews to newspaper reporters, who were apt to go into details covering some of the ways such sleuths outwitted those whom they hunted; all of which was bad for their being successful in forthcoming missions of like character, since the lawbreakers would avidly seize upon all such printed matter, to size up the methods that were utilized in bringing about the downfall of men of their stamp.

“Yeah, course that’s the right thing—we’ll jest keep aour own counsel an’ do the gittin’ o’ aour stuff together withaout beating the gong an’ ’tractin’ the mob’s attention. We wouldn’t live up to aour reputation as sleuth hounds if we didn’t work undercover, Jack.”

“Fine for you, brother,” he was told; “I’m tickled pink to know you’re waking up to the necessity for Secret Service men keeping away from the glare of publicity, even if they have to lose much credit; like editors of the big newspapers, who never put even their initials to the strong articles they write everyday.”

In this fashion did Jack usually apply himself to eradicating certain weaknesses that afflicted his best pal, knowing that in so doing he was helping Perk to become more efficient; also more valuable in the service of the Government.

After some hours spent in this fashion, they found themselves pretty well

inoculated with the most salient points connected with their latest task; and both of them were glad when it began to grow dark, with supper in prospect.

“I rather think we’re pretty well fed up on this stuff,” Jack finally took occasion to remark, getting up from his easy-chair, and stretching his cramped legs; “so how about dropping it all, and going out to feed our complaining tummies?”

“I aint got any objections to that ere business, buddy,” Perk quickly observed, following suit in leaving his seat, and going through certain motions such as office sitters carry out in accordance with radio instructions each and every morning, before going forth to the daily grind. “They c’n boast all they likes ’bout the belles o’ the ballroom; the sweet janglin’ o’ the bells in the Spanish Missions up ’long the Coast here, an’ even the never-to-be-forgotten schoolbell; but for *me* they aint nawthin’ to make my heart sing with joy like the good ole-fashioned dinnerbell.”

“You’ve got plenty of company in that same worship, Perk,” the other told him, “A few people eat to live; but the biggest bunch live to eat. Let hard times come, and they’ll do without a good many things, but must have three meals a day—yes, and with men, their regular smoke as well.”

After leaving their cozy room, to walk along the street, business was tabooed; they must forget such personal affairs, and talk of anything under the sun save what engrossed their minds chief of all.

Jack had stressed this point when laying down that rule for their guidance, saying practically as follows:

“We don’t understand as yet just what the ramifications or extent of this combination of lawbreakers is; for all we know they may be organized, and doing such a big business that they can employ spies in certain cities, to pick up valuable pointers; informing them of profitable strikes on Western trails, and along railroads where treasure is being daily carried east and west; besides that, these spies would be on the watch to learn of plans for bringing members of the gang to justice—for all we know they have been keeping tabs on *our* movements right along; and may be in possession of considerable knowledge covering our being the ones commissioned by Headquarters to proceed against them. On this account it is up to us to play the innocent, and when in a public eating place never talk shop, especially if the room is full, as is always the case here at supertime.”

There was always so much common sense in what Jack advanced that Perk could seldom grumble, no matter if he did not wholly agree with his partner. Besides, there were so many interesting matters, as given out in the daily prints, and along the line of aviation stunts, that they need never lack for material to

carry on their careless chatter as they dined, and watched their neighbors, after the usual manner of detectives on or off duty, seeking to further add to their information as to the possible presence of eavesdroppers.

CHAPTER VII

READY FOR ANYTHING

The following day was a busy one for the two pals. Each had a regular programme to follow, Jack having made out two lists of important things absolutely essential to the carrying out of their plans.

As usually happened he left to Perk the task of seeing that the ship was fully supplied with all the fuel and oil she was capable of carrying off in making an ascent; some of which could be stored in the wings, purposely provided with stowage room for such occasions.

Then when it came to taking aboard a stock of provisions, such as would not require cooking, trust Perk for having a complete understanding as to these requirements—he possessed such a vast knowledge of what was good for a hungry man, not in a position to start a campfire, that when he put the last of their stock away aboard the plane it looked as if they might be getting ready to explore the Arctic regions, where nothing but driftice was to be met, and no chance of having a fire either for cooking or comfort.

Jack, meanwhile did his part, making carefully arranged plans, with alternate makeshifts such as could be taken up in case unsurmountable obstacles baffled them in the one chosen for the start—with Jack it was always part of his strategy to have several “strings to his bow,” and never if possible “put all his eggs in one basket.”

When wearied after all the tramping he had done in accumulating such a vast pile of material, Perk dropped down into a chair alongside his chum—who was still doing the finishing touch to his programme—he heaved a sigh as of contentment—as a rule Perk was not a vigorous walker, preferring to go by airplane, motorcar, or bus; perhaps even by stage if necessary, so that such unusual exercise told heavily on his muscles.

“Get through with your list, partner?” queried Jack, shoving aside his papers, as though he too had had quite enough of work for one day.

“Sure did, matey,” came the satisfied reply; “we’re done loaded up to the

limit, an' then some. Hope the ole gal don't fight shy o' liftin' sech a rummy cargo; but so far we aint never had her balk on us. How yeou gittin' on with things, Jack?"

"Making good progress," came the steady answer. "I've learned that we've shouldered a whopping big job this time; and still things keep cropping up, that make it necessary to go back and change matters some. But I'll be in fine shape by tomorrow noon, I figure."

"Kinder reckon on makin' the jump then, air yeou, boss?" demanded Perk.

Jack shook his head in the negative.

"Better wait up until night-time, buddy," he explained. "An ounce of prevention's always a heap better than a pound of cure, you remember. We can slip away a lot easier in the night, as we've proven more than a few times in the past. Then besides, we'd like to profit by the latest weather report. If a wide storm threatened it would be good policy to hold back even for several days, rather than get caught in a hard blow; such things are said to be doubly tough amidst the mountain gorges and canyons, with their cranky air currents, and a continual danger of running smack into some high peak."

"I leaves all that figgerin' to yeou, as usual, partner; when yeou gives the word, that's goin' to be the right time for us to climb, an' not afore. Golly! but I'm as hungry as seven wolves all in one—hopes as haow they got steak an' fried onions on the bill o' fare tonight, 'cause my innards air jest a yellin' fur a mess o' my fav'rite chow."

"I can't say I'm in the same box, because being shut up for hours, and badgering my poor brain with a hundred puzzling questions, isn't calculated to make a man ferociously hungry. You had outdoor exercise, and in consequence have built up a glorious appetite. Queer what some fellows *will* do so as to cater to their thirst or hunger."

"Naow whatever kin yeou mean by that same remark, Jack, ole boy?"

They were on their way along the street at the time, keeping step as they headed for the restaurant. Jack seemed agreeable so far as explaining, for there was a little yarn back of his words, just as the astute Perk had suspected, knowing his chum as well as he did.

"This story was told to me long years ago, but I never think of it that I don't get a fresh laugh," Jack was saying, chuckling as he spoke. "It seems a couple of artists who were fond of trout fishing were up in Maine, stopping at a small hotel, while waiting for their guides to show up.

"They noticed at breakfast several mornings that another party, small and dried up, but a fisherman to the tips of his fingers nevertheless, always ordered salt mackerel for his morning meal. This aroused their curiosity, so one day, after

having a good confab with him on the prospect of sport ahead on the trip they had planned to take, one of the pair had the audacity to refer to the singular liking for such a dish evinced by the other. He grinned and looked wise, as he went on to say in reply, not taking the least offense over the matter as a personal one:

“‘Oh! I aint carin’ so much for the fish, gents, an’ gets fed up on the same sometimes; but let me tell you, folks ’long ’bout ten o’clock every mornin’ there comes the most delicious *thirst* that pays up for my eating them salt fish.’ Think of him punishing himself so regularly, just to create a tremendous yearning for his favorite tipple.”

Perk saw the point, and of course laughed quite vigorously.

“Hot-diggetty-dig! boy, hope I aint jest as bad as that same gent,” he presently gurgled. “I c’n understand heow he felt though, an’ she don’t seem so derned queer to me after all.”

Jack often managed to get off some such yarn when the necessity arose for keeping the talkative Perk from “spilling the beans,” as the latter himself would have explained it—Perk was a rather simple minded fellow, taken in all, but a faithful and sincere chum, a ready worker, and as brave as they make them, even if a bit incautious, often to recklessness in his actions.

It seemed as though there were more people dining that evening in the particular little restaurant than ever before: but Joe had upturned two chairs at their favorite corner table, toward which Jack led the way; so they were assured of comfort, even though late-comers were standing, awaiting their turn.

Both of them always made it a point never to dress in any fashion such as would be apt to give away the fact of their being airmen, or as having some connection with the following of aviators. This was done from a broad policy, founded on the fact that undoubtedly rumors of their calling might long ere this have posted criminal circles; and Jack for one had no fancy about having gunmen dogging his steps, with murder in their hearts, because of the fact that this pair of “birds” had been chiefly instrumental in sending some pal, or brother, to the “big house” for a long stay, or it might be to the chair to atone for his crimes.

Jack always sat so he could look in careless fashion around the room. His manner was that of a social fellow, taking an inventory of the diners, as though wondering if he could single out some crony. There was nothing of the “eagle eye that could look into a man’s very soul, and read his hidden thoughts,” as usually connected with the mystery story, or stage detective—not about Jack, or for that matter Perk either—so far as outward appearances went they were only a couple of goodnatured young men, smiling and agreeable, enjoying their meal,

and chatting about the latest stirring events of the day in the field of sports, possibly also interested in political matters, as would be natural.

Perk always declared he felt as though he had put on a mask, when thus debarred from “talking shop,” with curious ears so close by; but he realized the necessity for such extreme caution, when they were always pitted against the desperadoes of the underworld in their daily work.

“Somethin’ o’ a mob here tonight, partner?” suggested Perk, after they had been served by Joe, the waiter, and taken the edge off their appetites; both having settled on the same aromatic dish, which Perk was savagely attacking.

“Looks that way, Perk; if this keeps on we’ll have to find another place to feed, when we strike San Diego again; since neither of us is partial to crowds. Remember the old frontiersman who complained that the neighborhood was getting too thickly settled for him and his folks, because a new family had started to build a log cabin less than *seven miles away*? People look at what makes a crowd with different viewpoints, we have to remember; what is flesh to one is just poison to another man.”

“Huh! never heard tell o’ that idear ’fore,” confessed the interested Perk; “but it rings like there might be somethin’ in the same. See anybody yeou happens to know ’round here partner?”

“Not one that I would be apt to speak to,” Jack told him; “of course we see some of them each night; but they’ve paid no attention to us, for which we’re only too glad; doesn’t pay to pick up chance acquaintances at haphazard, when you happen to be engaged in a certain type of business. If you reckon you’ve attended to that vacuum downstairs we might as well be moving out, and give some of the standup people a chance at this table.”

“Let’s get goin’ then,” agreed Perk, pushing back his chair; which action caused several groups of impatient waiting persons to start toward the spot, so as to preempt the vacant table.

“Show tonight, Jack?” queried the satisfied Perk, as they moved along.

“I ought to get busy once more on my stuff, as my programme isn’t at all complete; but just the same I don’t want to overdo such brain fatiguing work, and have to lay off a spell—nothing to be gained by such corrupt practices, I imagine. So, since I know you feel as if you’d like to see something, to take your mind off business for one night, decide on where you want to go, and we’ll be off.”

“Course I’m not really dead set on seeing any picture,” apologized Perk; “but chances are we aint agoin’ to have another whiff o’ a screen drama for days and days; an’ it’ll fill in time, as well as freshenin’ up yeour mind more’r less, buddy.”

What they saw and heard does not concern us in following up this, their latest exploit; but evidently Perk fully enjoyed the night's entertainment, since he seemed to be in a jovial state of mind all the way back to their sleeping quarters.

Their ship was quartered close to a well known aviation field, where air mail was coming and going at all hours of the day and night; as well as privately owned planes of the very latest design, some of them wonderful craft in which daring adventurers could seek out the utmost parts of the earth, backed of course, by an abundance of necessary funds.

They were not known under their real names to any of those who from time to time they chanced to meet and chat with. It was generally understood however, that Jack was the son of a wealthy family in the South—New Orleans to be specific; and had come from Candler Field in Atlanta, with his companion as assistant pilot. Moreover they were believed to be waiting for certain things to transpire, after which they meant to take an extended jaunt down through South America, over the Andes, and the vast wilderness of the Amazon Valley, with its tributaries, engaged in collecting myriads of wonderful orchids, said to have their *habitat* in that torrid region.

Thus no one had bothered them to any extent—at least not thus far; realizing that the young explorer expressed a dislike about creeping into print, and having his plans broadcast, so that perhaps some rival plant hunter might “slip one over” and beat him to the much prized field.

They came and went, as they pleased in their boat, making sure never to leave the slightest evidence of their true calling lying around, which would be apt to “lift the lid,” and give them away. When Perk that very day was so busily engaged loading up, it was all in line with their pretended objective; entering into the spirit of the great game of “pulling the wool over the eyes” of curious fellow aviators, Perk took delight in concocting an extravagant yarn, depicting some of the possible adventures he anticipated running across down in the countries of South America—Brazil, the Orinoco River forest lands, Peru, Chili and the Argentine—enough to make them envy his good fortune, when tough Luck bound them in fetters along the line of their more prosaic jobs.

Jack was indeed through with the last item on his lists by noon of the following day; but adhered to his expressed policy of holding back their launching until night came on. Perk, however, made a last visit to the hangar in which their beautiful ship lay quartered, to make doubly certain he had omitted absolutely nothing that could add to their comfort—and safety.

CHAPTER VIII

THE WINGED MESSENGER

“Coast seems to be clear, eh, Jack?”

Perk asked this question as they reentered their room, after having come back from supper.

“Looks that way, as far as I can see,” replied his shipmate, throwing himself down in an easy-chair, that seemed to invite attention.

“No signs o’ aour bein’ spied on so far,” asserted Perk, boldly.

“I saw nothing that looked suspicious, partner,” continued the other.

“Kinder had an idee that lanky goof at the table ’gainst the wall kept lookin’ aour way, like he had a suspicion we’d bear watchin’—did yeou happen to notice him, buddy—queer squint to one o’ his lamps, an’ a turrible long nose that made me think it jest longed to stick itself in other folks’ business.”

Jack laughed as if highly amused.

“So you reckoned he was some interested in us, did you, Perk? Well, he had a right to be, I’d say, if you asked me.”

“What’s that, partner?” asked the stouter member of the crew of the flying ship that was working for Uncle Sam’s law and order department.

“Why, he knew just who we were, and why we chanced to be in old San Diego right now—get that straight, Perk.”

“Yeou’re kiddin’ me, Jack,” whined Perk, looking hurt.

“I repeat what I said; and to make it plainer I’m adding further that man you mention not only knew us for what we are, but also why we were whispering across our table so much, when certain things came up that had to be discussed, even against our general rule never to talk shop when in public.”

“The devil he did!” ejaculated the astounded Perk; “then why did yeou jest say there didn’t seem to be any spy a hangin’ ’round on our tail, to put them critters wise to our headin’ thataways—tell me that, Mister?”

“Ask me a hard one, brother,” Jack flashed back, still amused it could be easily seen. “I’ll go a step further, and say that he was tempted to speak to us,

perhaps even join us at our table; but one thing kept him from doing so, which was the iron-bound rule that one agent of Uncle Sam must never thrust himself into any game that is being conducted by another of the brotherhood.”

Perk drew in a long breath, and stared at his comrade.

“Meanin’, I kinder guess, as heow that party might be in the Secret Service like we air—does that fill the bill, Jack?”

“Just what it does,” he was told straight from the shoulder.

“Then—yeou *know* him, I’m understandin’ boy?”

“I most certainly do, Perk—you’ve heard of him many a time too, even if you’ve probably never happened to run across him. That man’s one of the smartest detectives in the whole shooting match—his name, son, is Josiah Harper, sometimes called The Hawk on account of his long beak, and the fact that he possesses abnormal eyesight.”

Perk grinned as if relieved.

“So, that’s the wonderful Hawk, is it, partner?” he was saying, as if he found it difficult to grasp the fact. “No, I never did run acrost him so far’s I know. What in tarnation kin *he* be doin’ out this way—yeou don’t figger he’s goin’ to butt in on aour job, do yeou?”

“Hardly that, Perk, I should say; if he was we’d have been piped off to that effect. I reckon he had orders to run over to San Diego to catch us before we took off.”

“Does that mean he might be fetchin’ a last hour message, Jack?”

“I figured that way,” came the ready answer; “and following you across the room I managed to rub up against Harper, to have a small slip of paper pushed into my waiting hand. Here it is, and we’ll see what it carries—some last hour report, I fancy, that the Chief believes will come in handy, sooner or later.”

“Well, I swan!” gasped Perk, evidently considerably tickled over the clever work carried through by his companion, without any diner in the restaurant being the wiser, so far as they knew.

For several minutes Jack appeared to be studying the writing on the crumpled piece of rice paper he had drawn from his vest pocket and straightened out. No wonder, when the writing seemed just a crazy mess of words, and figures—undoubtedly a secret cipher used by the agents in their particular branch of the Government Service, when occasion arose to communicate with each other.

Jack was so proficient in the cipher writing that he could read it readily without applying the key; in this case he evidently was weighing each terse paragraph as he translated the same.

“Some important, I takes it, buddy?” observed Perk, who had watched the other nodding his head as he perused the message.

“Very, if we happen to be lucky enough to get close to the hideout of the gang. This little scrap of paper has a history, Perk. It was carried from the mountains where this crowd hold out, to Los Angeles by a feathered post.”

“I doan’t jest get yeou, partner—what’s a feathered post—I never yet seen anything like that—yeou got me sunk, Jack, boy.”

“You know what a carrier pigeon is, of course, Perk—well, one of the two agents who were sent out on this case several months ago conceived the bright idea of carrying a bird with him. Just as he feared might be the case they were eventually discovered, and brought to bay in a rocky canyon—the men wolves had them bottled up, so they must either surrender and take the consequences, or perish of hunger and thirst. He wrote this message in code on this thin tissue paper, fastened it under the wing of his bird, and tossed the pigeon up in the air. It may have been fired at, but since it showed up at its home cote in Angeles it escaped being killed, or even crippled.”

“Great work that, partner,” snapped the intensely interested Perk; “I shore takes off my hat to the lad who could think up sech a neat dodge. An’ right there clost to the tigers’ den he could set daown an’ write a ’portant message in code, so’s to send off his little birdie. That’s a new trick on me, I own up—a stunt worth while.”

Jack went on to interpret the contents of the little missive that had been carried all the way from the heart of the mountains. Perk listened as if bent on letting each and every word sink deeply into his receptive mind for future use.

“Them ere directions for locatin’ the place where they foregather, is shore valuable stuff fur aour crowd, Jack, ole hoss,” he finally remarked, after his chum had read the writing on the thin paper twice, putting due emphasis on certain words that had an apparently significant meaning.

“Particularly Perk, that part describing a splendid landing-field some miles distant, where we could drop down safely, and without getting close enough to the haunt for sharp ears to catch the noise of a ship’s exhaust.”

“Wust thing ’bout human bloodhounds huntin’ their prey in a bus—never will seem right to me ’til they fix things so’s we kin creep up on aour prey without tellin’ the hull world a airplane is somewhere ’round. Think that happy day ever will come, Jack?”

“Sure it will, Perk, and we’ll see it to—if it so happens we haven’t already crashed, and gone west. Why not, when such wonderful advances are being made in aviation circles every moon. Right now we’re doing a lot of amazing stunts with our ships that were never dreamed of five years ago. Anything is possible, now they’ve got started taking to the air.”

“Huh! it was time all right,” grunted Perk; “when yeou see haow all the

highways air gettin' glutted with autos, 'specially clost to big cities. Even San Diego folks find it hard to git 'round on Sundays an' holidays. But this fresh happenin' sorter gives me a hunch we're agoin' to make the ripple, an' fetch home the bacon after all—things they air all workin' thataways.”

“I had the last word from the weather man,” Jack went on to add; “and I’m sorry to say it wasn’t quite as fine as I’d like.”

“Storm agoin' to hold us up, mebbe naow, partner?” suggested Perk, with one of his impatient frowns, as he disliked very much being balked in any plan.

“N—no, not quite that bad; but there are reports of a nasty field of fog gathering in the direction of the mountains far back from the coast; but we’ll have to take our chances, now we’re fixed for the jump—it may not turn out as bad as they reckon on. Let’s get ready to slip off, Perk.”

CHAPTER IX

HEADED FOR TROUBLE

An hour later the two adventurers arrived at the San Diego aviation grounds, having taken a taxi to carry them and their limited luggage.

The night was a fine one, so far as the star-studded heavens could be taken as an indication. If there was fog gathering some hundreds of miles distant along the route of the air mail course, no indication of such worry to the pilot's peace of mind had reached this coastal station.

"Goin' to have a right decent start, looks like," Perk mentioned, after they had dismissed the taxi close to the isolated hangar just outside the aviation field limits.

"I expected we'd have it clear as a bell," Jack told him, as he unlocked the doors of the hangar; "just as well that we don't have our troubles strike us before we even hit our pace—time enough for all that when we get well on our way."

As Jack had anticipated there was light aplenty for their purpose; ships were coming and going at this early time in the evening, so that the field lights were all on, making it easy to see.

Secrecy was such a part of their business that they did not even have hostlers present to help push their bus out to the runway—it would not be the first occasion when these two energetic fellows had managed all such things by themselves.

They did not loiter, now that the final take-off was at hand; Jack was a little afraid lest some mechanic, or pilot, hearing them working, and being more or less curious concerning the pair who owned the trim aircraft in which they had been taking trips for weeks past, (and about whom a halo of mystery hovered) might come nosing around, offering to lend a hand, but really hoping to pick up a few words that would explain their leaving under cover of night—honest to goodness sportsmen, going off for a hunt, or a fishing jaunt to the mountains, would not be apt to time their departure while the world was smothered in darkness.

They were now poised on the short runway, and ready to start off. Perk had followed his mate aboard, and was already busying himself with certain preliminary duties that always fell to his charge.

“Ready, all?” called out Jack.

“Give her the gun, partner!” replied Perk.

There was a sudden roar as the engine took the spark, a quiver of the entire craft, and then a quick jerk as Jack moved the throttle toward his chest. Down the slight slope they started, gathering more headway with every second until the ship was bumping rapidly over the ground, her skid already beginning to scorn the soil as if eager to take to the air.

Then her nose being pointed upwards she began to rise like a bird, passing well over the trees that stood at the end of the course.

They were off on their momentous and perilous mission; only Fate knew what the result would prove to be; whether success awaited them, or failure, perhaps even death; for they were bound on an errand to a country where the majesty of the Law was scorned, where might meant right, and men did not place much value on a human life, more or less.

To see how joyous Perk seemed to be no one would imagine he gave much heed to the prospect of thrilling episodes that would threaten them as soon as they entered the danger zone. But then that was the way with Perk, who loved adventure and close calls, and was never happier than when defying the power of lawless men, badly wanted by those higher-ups in charge of the famous Secret Service.

The lighted aviation field was quickly left far behind, as Jack headed into the northeast, with the intention of holding to the beacon-lighted trail of the air mail up to a certain point; when they must abandon those welcome markers that flashed their intelligence every ten seconds, and were so useful for keeping the mail carriers on their proper course.

Like most up-to-date pilots Jack and his mate had supplied themselves with the handy ear-phones, by adjusting which to their heads they could communicate in a satisfactory fashion when it became necessary. But for this wise preparedness they would have had to shout at the top of their lungs in order to pass a few words back and forth—a most unsatisfactory way of doing, as every pilot has found out in times gone by, when there was no other method known.

For a full hour they kept on their way persistently following the air mail route. It was exceedingly refreshing to be able to note as many as three flashing beacons at the same time, from the four thousand foot ceiling at which Jack was flying, the further one rather dim, it is true; but strong enough to catch the watchful eye of the pilot.

Perk had kept “bottled up” as long as he could stand it, and now broke out as if eager to ask some sort of question that was on his mind. Under such conditions it was his usual way to gradually approach the matter by jerks.

“Huh! pretty soft I’d call it, partner, if yeou troubled to ask me,” he observed as an opener.

“As what?” demanded Jack, tersely.

“The job o’ bein’ an air mail runner—everything fixed for ’em so’s they kin keep on the right track—who’d lose his way with them friendly flash-light beacons apoppin’ up ev’ry ten miles’r so, I want to know?”

“You’re away off your reckoning when you say that, Perk; remember how they’ve got to meet up with tough storms; and pea soup fogs you could cut with a knife, they’re so thick. And in parts of their run the country is treacherous, with slants of wind breaking out of deep canyons; then, too, if anything goes wrong aboard their boat to make a safe landing on such rocky ground is full of all kinds of difficulties. No, the air mail pilot doesn’t have such a sweet time of it as you seem to think—a night like this he can consider a peach; only there are not many built that way. You know they lots of times insist on starting out when a when of pilots would stay safe on the ground, and not take desperate chances.”

“Partner, yeou’ll have to excuse haste an’ a bad pen, as the pig said after breaking out, and skippin’ off on a full run. That time I shore didn’t count ten ’fore I broke loose. Guess naow all pilots git up agin hard fixes onct in a while, where the finest flash beacons in the hull world caint help ’em any. I kin understand haow it aint possible to lamp them lights atall through a thick fog—on’y by the altitude marker kin yeou tell if youre aflying sky high, or near scraping the ground. But did yeou happen to hear a ship takin’ off jest after we slid aout, boss?”

“Yes, but that didn’t give me any concern, Perk. No danger of it’s being any spy interested in following *us*.”

“But jest the same, Jack, she’s been keepin’ on aour tail right along,” protested the watchful one, as if he might have been worried a bit.

“Why not, when like as not the pilot is carrying the U. S. mail, and on his reg’lar night run north. We happen to be making use of his lights, that’s all; and he’s attending to his usual business. When we sheer off to the east soon now, leaving these flashlights behind, *then* if you discover a ship following after us it’ll be time to do something, not before.”

“Thanks, partner; jest thought I had orter tell yeou, that’s all,” and with that Perk lapsed into silence again, having worked his mind clear once more.

Further time passed.

They had covered some hundreds of miles since leaving San Diego, and Jack,

watching his map understood the time was close at hand for him to alter his course, and turn sharply toward the east, while the lighted mail line of travel continued northward.

Ten minutes afterwards and Perk again broke out.

“I kin see the fust wisps o’ that ere fog yeou was a tellin’ ’baout, boss,” he announced grimly, as though appreciating the flashing beacons more than before, now that they were about at the end of their string, with the whole world of mountainous ground facing them, so full of hidden snares and pitfalls, not to mention human tigers with a fierce vendetta against all those busybodies of their particular breed.

“That’s interesting news, but not so delightful, Perk, since I’m just going to switch, and head into the east.”

CHAPTER X

BATTLING WITH THE FOG

Thanks to his carefully studied chart Jack knew just about when he must head into the east, and make for the disputed land, where fugitives from justice had long kept away from the long arm of the Law. In former days there had been just such a safe hiding-place further to the north, locally known as the “Hole in the wall;” but it was of the past, and for some years had been thrown open to settlers and tourists.

The die was cast, and for better or worse they had made their decision; but neither of them had any disposition to turn back. Danger and these men of the Force were accustomed to being familiar campmates; since there was no mission on which they could be sent but had its share of peril; if such expeditions were but picnics it would not be so necessary to dispatch the prize men of the Service on the track, where others had failed after shooting their bolt.

Speedily were they swallowed up in the night. Far distant, and in the east a mellow light low-down announced the rising of the moon, now far advanced in its last quarter. Jack did not count for any assistance in the rising of the uncrowned queen of the night, since already he could see the gathering fog was growing thicker every passing minute.

Several times he lost the remnant of moon entirely, to have it creep into view again, as though the thick vapor had temporarily opened up; but only to close in again worse than ever, until the glimpse of the climbing orb came no more.

Thus began their fight with the fog—its insidious influence seemed to shut them in like an opaque curtain, growing more and more dense as the minutes moved along.

Realizing that they were now heading into that stretch where they might expect to meet with lofty mountain peaks, and crags, Jack began a steady upward climb, being most desirous of taking no unnecessary chances of crashing against a rock cliff that was hidden from their view by the creeping fog.

It seemed to be a most extraordinary fog, all told, Perk explained to his own

satisfaction. Usually when thus compassed around about by a dense sea of vapor, and unable to take any sort of reckoning by means of the heavens above, or the earth beneath, this trouble could be remedied by climbing still further into the region of the clouds, and thus finding an altitude where the air was sweet and pure, even if a bit shivery.

Apparently that was not going to answer in the present case. Jack had ascended until they were already some eight thousand feet from the earth; but if anything their enemy the fog appeared to be more dense than ever.

In fact, it did not seem worth while to pursue this system of tactics any further, in order to beat the enshrouding blanket of sticky wetness—why, if they kept on much longer, the cold increasing the higher they lifted their ship, that same dripping moisture would be turning into *ice*, and the additional weight was apt to play havoc all around.

“Don’t seem to be any let-up to the derved stuff, Jack,” Perk at this time observed in the ear of his running mate.

“Bad medicine, all right—don’t like it one bit, partner,” came just the answer Perk would have sworn his pal would make.

“Seems like there aint nawthin’ we kin do to make things easier, eh, buddy?”

“Must peg away, keeping our nose pointed east, and ready to drop down lower if given half a show,” was how the head pilot answered him.

“Yeah! don’t ’pear to be anythin’ else in sight, an’ its sure gettin’ mighty cold ’raound these diggin’s, boy. I’m agoin’ to drag aout my heavy fleece-lined coat, an’ climb into the same jest for fun.”

“Go to it, old chap; and after you’re settled give me a chance to follow through, since I’m beginning to shiver as if I had the ague. This cold of the upper air currents is a heap worse than any we run into on the ground—seems to go all through you like a knife. Phew!”

Apparently Jack was not yet satisfied to drop lower; he would give their present altitude a little more chance to show what it could do in pressing the beastly fog down in the direction of the earth.

“Thunder an’ Mars! aint it awful thick, though?” Perk was telling himself, as he rubbed the glass, and did his best to pierce the miserable stuff by which they were thus bound, so they had no power to break loose. “Don’t b’lieve I ever did see such a mess in all my days. Talk ’bout flyin’ blind, if we aint adoin’ that same right naow I’ll eat my hat!”

Flying blind—yes, that name seemed most appropriate. Perk could look away back to his childhood, and see the boys and girls playing—himself with a handkerchief over his eyes, and trying to grope his way around so as to lay hold of the active dodgers who slipped out of his grip so adroitly. But he also

remembered, with a chuckle, how as a rule it was always possible for the bandage to be lifted just a little, allowing the chaser slight glimpses of those whom he was supposed to trap, and catch hold of.

“Huh! no sech luck in this here game up ’bove the clouds,” Perk grumbled, as if much provoked because there was no chance to “peep”—that pea-soup sea covering so many miles in every direction was absolutely impenetrable; and their only resource would be to depend on their reliable instruments; keep their wits about them, so as to know how far they were going in a certain direction; and when relief came be able to about pick their position on the map.

That was supposed to be Jack’s affair, and Perk felt quite willing to trust his side partner to the limit; whatever Jack decided on he was ready to make unanimous, and let it go at that; so why worry his poor brain when his pal was so much better equipped for handling things?

Still, he *did* worry—it would not have been Perk otherwise; for he found all manner of grewsome possibilities crowding into his mind such as must give him what he called “the willies.”

“Hot-diggetty-dig!” he grumbled to himself “but this *is* a nasty mixup we’ve tumbled into. Jack, he says to me the weather reports tell haow there seems to be a bit of fog aformin’ off to the mountings—say, if they calls this a *bit* I wonder what a real smashin’ big fog’d seem like. From the way she acts I’m commencin’ to figger as haow she could keep this way right along fur a hull day’nd night, withaout fazin’ any; an’ that’s no bunk either. S’pose it does that same, what’s bound to happen to us dicks runnin’ wild up here, I want to know?”

That was always Perk’s trouble—anticipating things long before they were really due. He even figured out how, with gas and supplies running low, in the end they might have to make a perilous forced landing, taking most desperate chances of a calamitous smash.

It kept him on “needles and pins” to have such a dire threat loom up so soon after their takeoff, with the work connected with their mission entirely in the future, and unaccomplished.

How the minutes did seem to drag when they were pretty much in the dark as to the progress their ship was making; or whether they had managed to hold on to the course set by Jack in the beginning.

“Huh! it’s like gropin’ ’raound yeour bedroom in the pitch dark, when wakin’ up from a bad dream—kinder lose yeour head, an’ get sorter nutty in the bargain. Mebbe we’re miles an’ miles eouten the way, even gettin’ wuss rattled right along; but say, that aint like my partner, to lose his head, an’ run us into a blind sack. I jest *got* to depend on Jack to pull us through—aint I seen him come eout right-side up heaps o’ times when things they had an *awful* black look?”

Taking himself to task after this fashion Perk rose up out of his state of despondency, and actually forced himself to chuckle, as if things looked perfectly all right in his eyes; but there was something lacking in the sound, something superficial, and his seeming hilarity did not last long.

Thus it happened that once, when Jack, believing they were attaining too great altitude, took a slide down, shutting off the power; Perk felt positive he again caught a sound from somewhere that must certainly have come from the exhaust of an airship motor, running at full speed!

The thought gave him a momentary thrill, it seemed so pregnant of accumulating possibilities in the line of hazards; his old fear lest they should have been surreptitiously followed by some secret enemy, in the shape of an ally of the men they sought to run down, returned in full force, to stab him most viciously.

CHAPTER XI

THE MYSTERY AIRSHIP

“I say, Jack!” Perk called, making use of the friendly ear-phones.

“What’s eating you, buddy?” demanded the other, who must have known from his comrade’s shifting about so much there was something amiss.

“Did yeou hear it?” asked Perk, anxiously.

“You mean that sound in the fog pack, don’t you?” Jack countered.

“Yeah, yeou said it, partner—I kinder guess naow it was a ship up here in this same sea we’re buzzin’ through, don’t yeou?”

“Couldn’t be anything else, because we’re thousands of feet away from ground,” Jack admitted; and somehow it gave his chum a feeling of relief to notice how his voice showed no signs of sudden alarm.

“As haow would yeou make it eout to be—some bewildered air-mail pilot loose in his bearin’s, and shootin’ ahead, thinkin’ he could get somewhere right speedy, so’s to find his course agin?”

“Not any, Perk; and you’ll realize that much if you figure things out in a matter-of-fact way. They don’t have greenhorns in the air-mail service, or carrying passengers on the big lines—every applicant for a job has got to have a thousand hours at least in the air, and even at that he isn’t reckoned to have won his spurs. If such an experienced flier got balled up in this fog blanket he’d do just what we’re carrying out—depend utterly on his instruments. His compass would tell him he could never regain his course by flying *due east!*”

“That’s what he’s adoin’ then, yeou figger, eh, Jack?”

“Sure thing, boy—he’s directly behind us, and getting closer right along, for the sounds keep growing louder.”

“Guess that’s so, partner—I kinder had an idee he was on aour tail. What’s the answer, Jack?”

“Another dive, maybe two in fact, so as to leave him this ceiling to himself. We can climb again, buddy, after he’s passed us, and pushes further on his way. That’s the only sensible thing to do.”

Perk had been allowing his mind to picture a battle royal up there in cloudland, amidst the fog mists, where machine-guns might rattle just as years ago they always did when bitter foes over on the French border came in contact, while bent on forays that took them on long air voyages, to bomb forbidding ammunition dumps, and thickly manned trenches back of No Man's Land.

In imagination he had already heard the terrible long roll being sounded by the chattering quick-firing guns; with a hail of missiles sweeping all around them, like a swarm of enraged hornets as experienced in his own boyhood days.

But Jack, who kept his imagination under better control, did not look at things in the same way—his idea was not to accept the gage of battle when diplomacy and clever tactics could shift it on to some future date, when the chances might be more in their favor.

What a partner to have at your side when things looked more or less dubious—Perk drew a long breath as of relief, and inwardly blessed the day he paired up with Jack Ralston.

There, once more they were shooting almost straight down into that bewildering sea of fog. It could not but give even seasoned Perk the thrill of his life, as he contemplated what would happen should they dash against some isolated mountain crag or peak, while rushing along at this tremendous speed.

He held his breath during the score of seconds they occupied in thus seeking another ceiling. Then the quivering ship, under Jack's skillful guidance, glided into a level course, and Perk breathed naturally once more.

While the swift descent continued he had listened intently, and was overjoyed to note how the distinct clamor of the other plane's motor gradually grew fainter, thus proving that they must be increasing the distance separating the two hidden airships.

Jack, one eye on his altitude instrument, even brought about another dip, during which Perk failed to catch even the faintest mutter of a working motor; which fact seemed to prove beyond dispute their object had been achieved—the unseen flying craft had been given all rights to that upper ceiling, and all danger of a chance collision in the sky lanes was avoided, at least for the time being.

They were still heading into the east, with a shade running toward northeast, as though Jack continued to hold fast to his belief they were following the proper course. It required the most wonderful grasp upon the situation, as Perk well knew, to keep going so confidently through such an ocean of dense fog, utterly unable to see any obstacle threatening them ahead.

Perk, absolutely content to leave all matters of this sort in the hands of the partner who had never as yet failed him in a pinch, found himself wondering what that decision, given so assuredly by his companion, might signify—if not a

lost air-mail pilot, then who could the unknown voyager, shooting so recklessly through the pea-soup sea, be?

They were again ascending, proving that Jack understood what additional chances for a mishap they were tempting at the lower level, and wished to play safe as soon as he could do so with the unknown ship having passed on into the unseen vacuum ahead.

Again did the temperature approach close to the freezing point, and no wonder, with their ship soaring at such a height; but in that part of the mountainous country they must expect to find lofty uplifts mounting to the clouds, many thousands of feet above all comfortable atmosphere.

Perk busied himself in moving around, following such duties as devolved on his shoulders while his partner handled the stick. His chief concern lay in the direction of finding out just when the dense vapor began to form a thin coating of ice on the wings.

With the coming of such an insidious enemy their danger increased ten-fold, since by degrees it would add enough weight to the already heavily laden ship as to force it down all too speedily, with what hidden perils lying in wait below as only a lively imagination could vision.

Still that question remained unanswered—try as he might Perk seemed unable to successfully grapple with so puzzling and knotty a problem—if not a mail pilot off his course, nor yet some enemy trying to overtake, and run them down in midair, then who could it be?

With Perk bewildered the matter must inevitably settle down to one well practiced means for finding the answer to the enigma—“ask Jack—he knows”—a formula as simple as anything could be, also shifting all responsibility to other shoulders.

Perk went at it again, and asked for light.

“Mebbe naow, partner,” he called out, “it might be yeou guessed this crazy flier up yonder was some madcap pilot atryin’ to beat the record goin’ east from coast to coast; or else a locoed lad carryin’ a passenger who’d lose his hull fortune if so be he didn’t land in Wall Street inside so many hours.”

Jack laughed, as though amused at these vague stabs—he knew what the other had in his mind by going on in this fashion.

“Just fishing again, eh, Perk—want to know what I think covering the game, isn’t that so? Well, listen, and I’ll put a flea in your ear.”

“Go to it, partner—I’m agreeable, an’ wantin’ to be informed,” Perk hastened to say.

“Among those documents I examined there was one fact I laid some stress on, which consisted of a statement that the Secret Service man who sent his report

in, and then seemed to disappear utterly from the knowledge of all men, declared it to be his opinion these hideout big guns in the criminal world, working under our old friend Slippery Slim Garrabrant, had some sort of an *airship*, with which they were doing a rattling good business—perhaps you slipped up on that particular fact; but I figured we might run across that plane, sooner or later, and have considerable bother with the same.”

“Hot-diggetty-dig! then Jack, you mean it could a been that crate we heard abeatin’ time on aour tail; an’ mebbe chasin’ us like hot beans—tell me, is that what hits you so hard, matey?”

“I have a pretty strong idea it was their ship, covering a well-known course from the coast to this valley in the rocky unknown territory too rough even to have been explored, as it was believed to be worthless for even mining purposes. As to whether those aboard were trying to strike us in the fog, that’s still a mystery, and must remain such for the present.”

“Then do yeou guess they knowed we was ahead on the same track, eh, Jack, ole hoss?”

“Remember Perk, that as far as we know they didn’t change their ceiling at any time—just kept booming away at the same level. That being the case they couldn’t have heard the sound of our own motor working, as their exhaust would deafen them completely; for we only caught the racket behind us when we were shooting the shoot, with our engine shut-off.”

“Good enough for us, buddy—then we got a clear field ahead, an’ c’n foller aour own plans right along.”

“For the time being; but don’t forget we’ve got rough sledding ahead. It all depends on how long we’ll be held fast in the grip of this accursed fog pack. Running blind isn’t a very satisfactory way of getting along, especially when you only know the country through rude charts that may be all right, and then again sprinkled with errors that are bound to be full of danger to us.”

“Hit an’ miss, Jack, we’re used to takin’ the chances—it’s all a part o’ the followin’ we’re rappin’ in. We jest got to do aour best, an’ leave the rest—aint I been adoin’ that same mighty near all my whole life? an’ seems like little ole Perk he’s still on deck, able to eat his three good meals a day—whenever he c’n git the same.”

“It’s after midnight, Perk.”

“So it be, partner; an’ we muster gone a good many hundred miles since jumpin’ off—strikes me we orter be clost to the goal we had in aour minds; if so be we been keepin’ on a di-reck course, with no wabblin’ to check us aout.”

“I figure that way myself,” replied Jack; “but nothing can be done to make certain until conditions change for the better.”

“Which would mean we got some hours to kill, 'fore mornin' comes along to give us a show fur aour money, eh, Jack, ole boy?”

“There's only one way to do that,” snapped the other; “which is by circling around, keeping our altitude, and within a range of say fifty miles; and that's what I'm aiming to start doing right now.”

CHAPTER XII

WHEN THE DAWN BROKE

When Jack thus decided it good policy to start riding that gigantic circle, reducing their speed at the same time, he knew it was really the only course left to them in order to kill time, until there arose a change in weather conditions, and the coming of daylight.

It would require the utmost skill and vigilance combined, thus to keep going over about the same line of travel, with naught to depend upon save his reliable instruments, aided by the deductions he must be continually making, with his eyes on the compass, the speed indicator, altimeter, and kindred apparatus by means of which, in conjunction, a clever pilot may cut circles around an objective at will.

All this when he has daylight to assist him, and can see the distant ground beneath; but when blinded by both fog and intense darkness it is "a horse of another color" entirely, and if successfully carried out may be considered on a par with a near-miracle.

"He c'n do it, if anybody's able," faithful Perk was assuring himself, as he sat and watched the other go through with motion after motion, doubtless mentally figuring up knotty little problems in arithmetic that would either prove the accuracy of his general plan of campaign, or cause him to correct any faulty upsets.

"Gee whiz! if on'y we could a climbed on that gink's tail, an' follered him to where he was agoin', what a soft snap it'd been," Perk was telling himself, as he imagined them climbing back to the level followed by the "mystery ship," and keeping on at just a certain distance, where their presence would not be betrayed by the commotion they caused; "but it's a hull lot too late neow to think o' tryin' that ere stunt aout; so what's the use figgerin' any more? 'Sides, they aint no chanct for even a pilot what knows his beans 'raound this pesky country, to drop daown, so long's this soup hangs over aour heads, under aour feet, an' plays the devil with things gen'rally. Jack's got it all laid aout, an' we're on aour way to

Pike's Peak—er bust—mebbe so its jest plain *bust!*”

As the time drew on Perk found himself engaged in a peculiar game of guessing as to what the character of the ground below would turn out to be when they were given a blessed chance to view the same by the dispersal of the fog, and the coming of broad daylight.

He knew what it meant to be hovering over mountainous country, where all manner of weird canyons and dry water courses could be traced on the rough landscape—secluded haunt of the Rocky Mountain sheep, or big-horn; the savage silver-tip bear known also as the grizzly, most dreaded wild beast of the entire Americas, the claws of whom the Indians of the West always prized as mementos of their individual valor, when slain at close quarters, with the warrior living to tell the story of his triumph.

Then, too, he could imagine vast herds of the now almost extinct buffalo, seeking shelter and grazing during the winter in some sheltered valley among these same mountain ranges, where green grass might be found in abundance even during blizzard weather conditions.

Once he gave full play to his fertile imagination, and Perk would even forget the passage of time; and this was just as well, since nothing he could do would alter their situation in the slightest degree; besides, it prevented him from worrying, as he so often did.

Along about three o'clock—as he knew by consulting his wrist watch for the twentieth time since their start—Perk had another little bright thought—what was to hinder them from having a nice snack, just to kill time, and cause them to feel stronger for whatever might come along later on?

Accordingly he got out a certain small packet which he knew contained some sandwiches he had paid their waiter to have made up for them, as a souvenir of the much esteemed little restaurant in San Diego, city of the Dons.

Sitting there, and still keeping an observing eye first on Jack, and then sweeping it around the array of instruments fastened to the black dashboard in front of the working pilot, Perk enjoyed his little nightly repast as only a fellow with his splendid appetite might.

When he nudged Jack in the side, and offered him a tempting ham sandwich the other shook his head in the negative, as though he was quite too busy to take advantage of the offer.

Following this up he made gestures which Perk interpreting understood him to signify he might alter his mind later on, when the conditions had changed a bit for the better. That was just like Jack—he liked to eat, it was true, when hungry; but never allowed a mutinous stomach to cause him to take the slightest chance of neglecting his duty.

So Perk had to dine all by himself; but he generously kept one fair-sized sandwich for the time when his chum would feel like having a few bites; which might not be until he wished Perk to take his place at the controls.

It was a dreary round they were making now—like keeping time in the awkward squad in the training camp—going through all the motions without advancing the spark an atom—round and round in that big circle, as the hours dragged along on leaden feet, with Perk growing fairly wild to end it all, even by accepting unusual risks.

Five o'clock came at last, and Perk more than once strained his eyes in staring hard toward the east, hoping to be able to glimpse a faint sign of approaching dawn—just a peep that would make him feel better; but thus far all in vain.

Nor was he able to detect any let-up in the floating sea of murky fog—it hung about them most persistently, almost dense enough to be felt; indeed most of the time their faces were wet despite the fact that they were shut up in the closed cabin of their ship.

“Ev’rything must have an end,” Perk told himself about this time; “an’ I kinder guess naow that ole snap sayin’ must be so; anyway, here’s hopin’ afore long naow I’ll be squintin’ at the sun apeekin’ above the rim o’ the world over yonder in the—yeah, it’s east, okay, the compass she tells it. Gettin’ sorter sleepy in the bargain; but shucks! nothin’ doin’ ’long that ere line till we’re outen the woods, an’ on ground safe’n sound agin.”

Half-past five brought a little but welcome change in the monotonous situation. Perk was duly thrilled to discover what he believed to be a dim gleam of light piercing the shrouded east, which he fondly hoped was caused by the near approach of the early dawn.

He did not mention the welcome news to his ally, fearing lest it prove to be a mere stretch of that wonderful imagination of his, such as in times past had so frequently played him the saddest of tricks—no, it would really be wiser for him to bide his time, and make sure he was not turning out to be what he would call a “false alarm.”

Despite his eager wish the faint light did not appear to increase to any extent; although Perk knew it must surely be about time for the dawn to break, if it ever meant to dispel the miserable pall of wet fog that had been like a blanket during the whole night—saving the hour or so they spent on the way before it gathered around them.

“If the tarnation thing gives me the merry ha! ha! neow, after I’ve shook hands with myself, I’ll feel like jumpin’ off, and tryin’ aout my ’chute, that aint been aired for many a blue moon. But it stands to reason there *must* be some sorter end to ev’ry night; an’ I’ll hold on a bit longer. Gosh amighty! what wouldn’t I

give to feel jest a whiff o' wind caressin' my cheek when I pokes my nose outadoors—but no sech good fortune—we're still in the soup for keeps, Jack 'nd me, wuss luck!"

Still it seemed as though his heart was set on seeing that dim line grow wider, and bringing with it fresh hopes of a change in the dull programme; judging from the way Perk continued to stare toward where he knew from the compass lay the eastern heavens.

Jack flew on, apparently quite oblivious to the wild yearnings that kept gnawing at the heart of his comrade. Thus far he had reason to believe they had continued on that circle, where fifty miles of running would fetch them back again to about where they had started to make a ring. He would fight it out on that line if it kept them going all the next day; but until they could see the ground, so as to find their bearings from certain landmarks expressly emphasized in the rude chart inherited from the missing brother of the Service, it was utterly useless to expect to get anywhere.

Some little time afterwards Perk, thinking to find out whether there could be a "whiff of fresh air" stirring outside, thrust his head from the partly open door, and sniffed eagerly.

The result was highly satisfactory, for he instantly discovered a most delightful thing—there was not only the fresh cold air to be expected at such a high altitude, possibly ten thousand feet at the time; but, in addition there came across his feverish face the sensation of a genuine *breeze*, blowing, as he quickly found out, directly from the south.

He could not resist keeping his head protruding, so as to make assurance doubly certain; and while thus engaged he chanced to turn and look toward the east again.

Something caught his eyes, and held him riveted, as if turned into a pillar of salt like Lot's unfortunate, disobedient wife.

"Hot-diggetty-dig! if that ere aint the mornin' star I'll eat my hat!" Perk told himself in great excitement.

It was most thrilling news he carried back with him when he ducked inside the cabin once more—news he felt absolutely positive would break down that icy reserve of his companion; and cause Jack to join him in giving vent to expressions of jubilation.

"Hey! c'n yeou beat it, partner?" he cried, as soon as he could get to the ear of his boon companion; and for the time being disdaining the help of the ear-phones; then he paused for breath, having in his excitement lost his grip, it appeared.

"Beat what?" roared the other, understanding from Perk's actions, together

with the exultant tone of his raised voice, that something out of the common must have come about.

“Breeze started up!” whooped Perk, gulping in a supply of wind.

“Bully boy!” Jack sent back at him, managing to make himself understood above all the racket of motor and propeller, which was some triumph, since he did not possess the lung power that Perk boasted.

“And—yeou c’n see the ole mornin’ star off in the east, showin’ the dratted fog pack she’s a liftin’ by hunks; so, as the dawn’s at hand we’ll be okay!”

CHAPTER XIII

ALL THANKS TO SIMEON

“Bully again!” Perk faintly heard his cool pal call out, against the roar their motor exhaust was keeping up.

There was considerable excitement in camp just about that time, although to be sure Perk was showing most of the same.

The fog was in retreat after all those tantalizing hours of holding the fort—there could no longer be any doubt concerning this fact. He could even see how it was being blown off toward the north by increasing puffs of agitated air; and meanwhile that line of pearly hue in the east was widening by spasms, until faint touches of rosy light painted the skyline as with the brush of a magician artist.

Perk had adjusted their useful ear-phones, for he felt confident they would want to exchange congratulations, in that the long and tedious night had finally come to an end, with what promised to become a “dandy” day opening up before them.

Jack laughed to himself when he actually caught his relieved brother pilot humming a fragment of a little popular love-song they had been hearing several times of late in the “talkies” they patronized when in old San Diego; and which evidently had been echoing in Perk’s brain ever since; though if accused of “getting soft” the other would most certainly have indignantly denied the fact, and vowed he had never had a best girl—or any species of girl—in his whole natural life.

So things continued to brighten more and more, with Perk straining his vision from time to time in order to be the first to discover “land ahead,”—in other words sight the far-distant earth below them.

It came at last, after he had thus stared as much as half a dozen times; and he had the proud satisfaction of informing his comrade of the interesting fact. There was a vein of triumph in Perk’s voice; one would easily think he must be a modern Columbus announcing the discovery of a new world; and yet it had only been one solitary night since last they were in touch with their old friend *terra*

firma—solid ground.

Just the same that had proven to be such a memorable night, so filled with thrills, and accumulated anxieties, so gloomy in the midst of the greatest fog pack in history, that really Perk might be excused for showing undue jubilation over this, their ultimate deliverance.

“Hully gee! partner!” he called out suddenly; “I kin see it, that’s right; an’ say, she sure *does* look good to me.”

“Meaning the earth, I reckon, eh, Perk?”

“Nawthin’ less, buddy—fog’s a climbin’ aout like hot cakes—soon wont be a single wisp left, I take it. But gee! what a pictur’ it makes—never did set my lamps on sech *turrible* stuff afore—looks like Ole Nature had busted loose in tryin’ to pile up rocks as big as skyscrapers in little Ole New York, some o’ ’em as big as the highest hill in the Catskills. What a place—what a place, I’d say agin.”

“Does look a bit rough,” admitted the noncommittal Jack, after himself taking a swift survey.

“A bit rough—huh! yeou jest can’t ekal it if yeou trips all over this Rocky Mountain country fur weeks, that’s a fact, Jack Ralston. Seems like we was abeatin’ the record right along on this here jaunt—the thickest fog—the longest night—an’ neow the beatenist country ever! If it keeps agoin’ like that we’re bound to run up against the wust gang o’ holdup men that was ever heard of.”

“Had that idea in my mind from the start, so it isn’t going to surprise me much if it comes true,” Jack calmly informed him.

About this time Perk discovered that the last retreating phalanx of the late fog belt had passed from his sight, dissolving in thin air as it seemed. The early morning, as viewed from that great altitude, was most charming indeed, with those fleecy white cloudlets all around them.

The speeding plane ducked in and out of the groups as though playing the old childrens’ game of tag, or else hide-and-seek. Perk himself likened the picture to the gridiron, being especially fond of football games as practiced along the Coastal Slope around Thanksgiving time, and later on, when the East was battling with its chilly blizzards—in imagination he could readily picture their ship to be the man who had the pigskin bag held tightly under his arm, and kept darting this way and that, eluding the outstretched hands of would-be tacklers, and dodging all interference, on his wild dash to make a much needed goal.

It gave him a delightful thrill to thus compare their passage with the one hero whom he most admired—the prodigy to whom his favorite college was indebted for their greatest victory, when defeat had seemed so perilously near.

“Take over the stick, Perk; I reckon I’d feel better if I stretched my arms and

legs a bit,” the wearied pilot now announced; to which the other only too gladly acquiesced; for many times during the last few hours he had hung over his mate, as if trying to influence Jack to change places.

“Yeah, an’ Jack, while yeou’re ’bout it jest sample the grub—coffee’s fine an’ dandy, as well’s steamin’ hot. Goes through yeou like ’lectricity in this cold atmosphere.”

“After I’ve had a good look through the glasses, to see if there’s any sign of the targets Brother Simeon marked down on his rough pigeon carrier chart we’re depending on to see us through.”

That was just like Jack—duty always before pleasure. His empty stomach—the lovely view Perk had been drinking in so eagerly—all such trivial matters must wait until he had attended to much more important ones.

Perk might have expected to hear him say what he did, since from long experience he was fully acquainted with his pal’s methods of carrying out his business calls. Perk also knew quite well that he could never claim to be such a Spartan, since the “fleshpots of Egypt” usually tempted him to take precedence, when it became a matter of choice between them.

Long and earnestly did Jack examine the ground below. He had given Perk instructions to make several long dips, each time flattening out again on a level keel; and during all this time he was engaged in staring through the magical lens that brought far distant objects so close he could even distinguish the character of the bark on such trees as came under his observation.

At such times as they were moving on the level Perk managed to also scan the scene below them. They had by now greatly reduced their distance from the rugged landscape, being not more than something like five thousand feet aloft; but stare as he might Perk, even with his keen vision, was unable to discover a single moving object—it was as if they owned the whole world for the time being—a weird sensation that rather awed imaginative Perk.

About this time the one at the controls saw his companion keeping the glasses focussed on a certain point, as though he might have discovered something encouraging there—possibly an upstanding object such as had been noted on that invaluable if crude penciled map.

“Hot-diggetty-dig!” Perk muttered to himself, as he felt his pulses quicken once more, “don’t I jest hope he’s struck ile—run acrost some piled-up crags that might a served Simeon as a good marker. But great snakes! heow air we agoin’ to drop daown anywhere when there aint nary a sign o’ level ground as big as my red neckerchief; an’ us a wantin’ a stretch a hundred feet, long—as much more as we kin find?”

So he tried to keep still while waiting to hear anything of interest Jack might

have to report. Most certainly the other must have made some sort of discovery, or believed he had at least; for he continued to scrutinize that particular section of the rocky ground just ahead in a way that looked promising to his anxious partner.

Finally Jack lowered the binoculars, with Perk watching his face as if hoping to read good news reflected there.

“No doubt about it, I’m glad to tell you, Perk,” Jack was saying; and if there was a trifling vein of relief in his voice one could hardly wonder at such a thing, after their just passing such a wretched night, and flying blind through the long hours, with but faint prospects of striking their goal when the coming of dawn allowed of an observation.

“Hey! does that mean yeou got a squint o’ somethin’ worth while, partner?” cried Perk, solicitously.

“Just what it does,” the other assured him. “Swing around in a circle, and I’ll let you have a look for yourself, buddy.”

CHAPTER XIV

CLOSING THE GAP

Accordingly Perk swung off to the left, and banked sharply, thus starting on a turn that if pursued long enough would once more fetch them to the point from whence they had started the maneuver.

“Now I’ll take hold again for a time, until you’ve had your look,” announced Jack, suiting the action to the word.

While his mate manipulated the glasses Jack coached him word by word, until Perk finally uttered a cry of triumph.

“I got it, partner, sure I have!” he was saying in great gladness. “Can’t hardly b’lieve my eyes, it sure seems like a reg’lar miracle—to think o’ all we plugged through, an’ was able to hit straight to the bullseye o’ aour target—it dazes me to strike sech a wonderful happenin’, that’s right.”

“Then you recognize it from the brief description he gave on the side of his tissue-paper chart, do you, Perk?”

“It caint be anythin’ else, for a fack, buddy—there couldn’t run two queer heaps o’ rocks that look so much like a reg’lar ole-time castle on the Rhine! Yep, we done aourselves proud this time—meanin’ *yeou* did, Jack, ahandling the stick so smartly. Naow, what’s next on the programme, tell me?”

“You’re to take hold once more, and keep circling that target, while I stow away a little chow; afterwards I’ll run things while you stoke up. We must keep in mind that there’s no occasion for any undue haste—we’re out to get results, no matter how long we’ve got to hang around this part of the country. Caution, and slow progress—those are to be our watchwords, Perk.”

“I get yeou, partner,” was all that the other remarked, as he once more laid down the binoculars, and proceeded to take over the controls.

Just the same Perk knew full well Jack was intending to warn him against one of his faults, that of starting off on some important mission without due regard for precautions—a failing that had cost Perk dear more than a few times in the past, and which had never been fully eradicated from his system, no matter how

gallantly he tried.

Now that the coast was clear, and he had made the discovery calculated to prove so fortunate, as well as useful, Jack could think of other matters less important and yet really necessary.

He got out their “bait-box,”—as Perk always called the receptacle of their food supplies—and proceeded to enjoy a ham-sandwich, washed down with the hot coffee already sweetened, and with genuine cream added; thanks to Perk’s “pull” with that favorite waiter in the San Diego restaurant, and whom he had mentally promised to reward some fine day, in a way commensurate with the service rendered.

Jack took his time.

He always did when eating, and consequently never knew those qualms along the line of indigestion, which occasionally doubled poor, hasty Perk up with such violence. Moreover, he seemed to be enjoying his novel breakfast vastly, a fact that tickled the other more or less, for Perk certainly did enjoy seeing others happy.

From time to time they exchanged words. Of course their talk was wholly connected with the serious business on which Uncle Sam had dispatched them, and which they were now following out as best they could.

So early in the game it was of course wholly impossible to lay their plans save vaguely; as they picked up further information they could, as Perk was fond of saying, “advance the spark,” and build some sort of a structure calculated to bring down the enemy’s fort in ruins, unless indeed, they managed to turn the tables on the two sleuths.

As they thus chatted at their ease while swinging around in a succession of short circles, the centre of which was always that conical heap of jagged rocks Perk humorously called Castle Thunder, the name of Simeon Balderson naturally came up.

Perk had himself been doing more or less pondering upon the unknown fate of the Secret Service man, who was, so Jack had informed him, a most valued agent of the Government.

“I jest caint help awonderin’ what made him fall daown on his job that a ways,” he mentioned to his comrade; which of course was Perk’s method of trying to draw the other out, so as to imbibe Jack’s way of reasoning.

“That must, as I said before,” came the reply, “remain a dead mystery to us unless we happen to run across the answer while poking around. He was up against a tough bunch, and if they discovered what he was doing the chances are they’d put him out of their way in the easiest possible fashion—throwing him over some precipice, or shooting him full of holes. That’ll come to us in the

bargain, I reckon, if we're unlucky enough to slip-up, and fall into their hands."

"Huh! I cal'late these kiotes jest hate all Government men like a cat does agettin' its feet wet," hazarded Perk, shrugging his shoulders.

"Oh worse, far worse than that, buddy," Jack assured him amiably; "they know how their lives are at stake, and to them a Secret Service man takes on the shape of a noose, or the electric chair. Whenever it comes to a fight between the two of us, and that crowd, it's got to be to the death, with no mercy shown."

"I savvy, partner," Perk told him, firmly; "knowed that much right along. Doant skeer me any, either, 'cause my life's been made up o' takin' chances—over in France in that ole sausage balloon company—then in circus stunts in a ricketty airship that *was* always agoin' to blow up with us—after that servin' with the Canadian Mounties up in the Northwest Territory, like yeou know 'bout; and last but not least, the times I been with yeou ascootin' raound the hull country, ahaulin' in smugglers, bootleggers, flim-flam artists, bogus money-makers, check raisers, an' sech nasty fry. I jest dote on runnin' close chances—it's sure the life that suits Gabe Perkiser."

"The first job we're going to tackle is along the line of making a safe and sane landing—you get that of course, Perk?" continued practical Jack.

"Nawthin' else, partner," answered the other, without hesitation; "seems like ever'thing depends on that same. But aint it like lookin' fur a needle in a haystack to reckon on findin' that ere one little patch o' level ground he wrote was the on'y place where a ship could come daown, an' not crash?"

"I'm going to correct you there, brother," Jack was saying; "there is yet another landing field, and even a much better one; but out of our reach, for according to Simeon it lies *inside* the Hole-in-the-Wall valley where these fugitives from the Law have their hangout. He even so much as hinted that they had some kind of a plane themselves, which was in frequent use between this section of country, and certain cities where they had secret connections, and started much of their counterfeit stuff into circulation, to the mystification of the authorities, who could never seem to pick up their trail."

"Jest so, Jack, ole hoss, the air doant ever leave a trail, which makes it right hard fur such fellers as us to get agoin' straight. Ready to start on aour way, be yeou, partner?"

"Yes, but I want you to keep on using the glasses right along," Jack told him. "If we had the misfortune to overlap that single open patch of ground, we'd be all at sea, and must double back, so as to go over the ground again, which would increase the chances of our being discovered, or heard by some of the outlaws possibly out hunting, or going to and fro."

"I'll do my level best to hit on the mark, Jack; jest go as slow as yeou kin, so's

to gimme every chance to count. Haow far 'bout do yeou figger goin' on this tack, I want to know?"

"Well, this target we've struck he said on his paper map was something like twenty miles away from the entrance to the hidden valley—you remember that of course, Perk? The landing field, as we've got to call it from now on, would be some six or seven miles away from their Haunt; and consequently I expect to cover twelve miles, more or less, before I'm looking to have you tell me you've sighted our goal. If ever you used those sharp eyes of yours to advantage, now's the time for an extra effort, partner."

"Leave it to me, boy; I aint agoin' to fail yeou, not if I have to stare my ole peepers aout o' focus for keeps. Drop daown some ways, Jack—less chance o' aour bein' seen; an' it's goin' to help me a heap in hittin' that bit o' level stretch. Cuckoo! that's the ticket—we're droppin' like a rocket-stick after she's shot her bolt. Naow for to get my eagle eyes daown to business."

CHAPTER XV

A CLEVER LANDING

A brief time passed, and then Perk called out excitedly:

“Say, I kinder b’lieve I kin glimpse thet same pesky hangaout—looks like some sorter mounting pass, sech as he drawed in his map, where they went in an’ kim aout; but they’s a kinder haze ahangin’ over yonder that makes it hard to be dead sure. If we get it araoun’ here it’ll hide us from bein’ seen. The wind up here’s hittin’ us in the face, too, which helps some in the bargain.”

“Never mind about the hideout—that’ll all come later on. Just now it’s that landing-field we need most of all—keep your glass on the ground just ahead, Perk.”

Ten seconds later the observer uttered a sudden exclamation.

“Get a bite?” demanded Jack, just about ready to swing around, as it seemed taking too hazardous chances to continue their advance any further.

“Kinder guess I sure have,” Perk told him; and then proceeded to direct the eyes of the pilot on a certain spot over which the ship was then passing.

“You struck it that time, buddy!” exclaimed Jack, evidently mightily relieved in his mind; for a crisis was upon them, with a change in their movements absolutely essential, unless they meant to give the whole scheme away, and wreck their plan of campaign, which was not to be considered at all.

“Yeah,” Perk went on to add, more confidently than before; “that’s it, for a certaintee—the on’y place where a ship kin drop with a ghost o’ a show to keep from bein’ smashed to flinders. Goin’ doawn, are yeou, Jack?”

There was no need for the other to make answer, since already the big Fokker tri-motored ship was dropping steadily. How fortunate for them that just at that critical moment Nature herself was working overtime in their favor—the wind veering until it came directly in their faces; while that little haze acted as a veil to conceal them from the hidden valley lookout—if indeed any such happened to be posted, to give warning should danger menace the fugitive gangsters.

Perk waited, and watched, his tense face betraying the natural anxiety he must

just then be enduring. It was indeed no small danger that faced them, for only a most skillful pilot would be able to successfully land a great airship on such a precarious and scanty stretch of fairly level ground.

A very small thing that could hardly be avoided, save through a near miracle, would suffice to throw the heavy plane off balance, and bring about a wreck that must interfere greatly with their mission, if not utterly ruin every hope of success.

Yes, Perk could easily be excused for feeling a tenseness around the region of his staunch heart—a tightening of the nerves and sinews—a halt in his free breathing, all of them occurring simultaneously; for the most sanguine of watchers would have easily said the feat was beyond human capacity.

Yet there was Jack going about the job with apparently the same *sang froid* that it was his custom to show when coming down from the clouds, to settle upon the almost perfect landing green of the big San Diego airport.

“Say, what *wouldn't* I give right naow if on'y I could ketch that confident spirit my best pal's got mixed up in his mind an' heart?” So Perk was telling himself as he saw the deftness of the touch shown by the hand at the controls, as well as the wonderful response the perfect mechanism aboard the Fokker displayed.

Now Jack held her head on, with the ground almost within reach—beyond, the narrow stretch extended just about a hundred feet; and in this space he must bring his charge up with a round turn; for should the ship keep on she would assuredly be wrecked beyond repair.

The tail came in contact, and bounded up again, to immediately repeat the manœuvre; the wheels gliding roughly along, with the body of the ship bouncing from side to side, after the usual custom when the landing is at all inclined to be a bit off-color.

The motors had ceased working, and the spinning propeller had in consequence commenced to whirl less violently. Perk allowed himself to suck in his first good breath in a score of seconds.

“Glory be!” he was saying to himself, lost in admiration and sheer wonder—“dang my hide if he ain't agoin' to make it, I do declare—did yeou ever in yeour born days see the like o' that—bet there aint another pilot west o' the Mississip could a done it that smart—hot-diggetty-dig! we're astoppin', as sure as anything we air. Wow!”

As the big plane ceased to move forward and came to a stand less than five feet from the terminus of the smooth ground, Perk, utterly overcome, lay back inert, “weak as a cat,” as he himself afterwards described his condition.

“And that's that!” was all Jack allowed himself to comment; just as he might

have said in the days when he was a barnstormer, and 'chute leaper at County Fair gatherings—after sailing down from a five-thousand foot ceiling, clinging to his decrepit parachute, and making a soft landing in some ploughed field.

They both sat there as if to recover their breath.

No longer did the roar of the exhaust break upon their hearing—all was marvelously still round about them—the rocks reared their crests high above their heads, and looking more cruel and pitiless than when seen at a distance. Perk shuddered as he noted the innumerable projections that stuck out almost like giant needles in a cushion, any one of which, had its point come in contact with the now stranded ship, must have played havoc with its structure.

“Huh! wake me up somebody, wont yeou kindly?” Perk finally broke out, as if possessed by the idea he must have been dreaming such a descent could be put through successfully. “There sure never was sech a crackin’ good drop as the one yeou jest made, Pal Jack—I hand yeou the palm for luck an’ skill combined; an’ I hopes as heow I have yeou fur my side kick as long as I’m in this here flyin’ trick!”

Jack turned a beaming face on him at hearing this fulsome compliment.

“Nice of you to say what you did, Perk, old chum;” he remarked, with a nod of his head; “but you greatly overrate the landing—all any one had to do was to pick out the safest way, and stick to it through thick and thin. Easy as falling off a log, let me tell you, buddy.”

“Oh! yeah; *but yeou stuck!*” Perk thrust back, as though after all that clinched the whole matter, which it undoubtedly did.

“Next thing we’ve got to do, Perk, is to check up, so as to find out whether the ship was injured any by contact with rocks.”

“Right yeou are there, partner,” the other chimed in, quickly; “but I kinder guess as haow we aint got much to worry over that-a-ways, ’cause she kim daown so easy like, it wouldn’t hardly abroken an egg.”

“The proof of the pudding is always in the eating,” wary Jack told him; “and we know one of the weakest parts of a ship lies in the undergear. Let’s get a move on, and find out what’s what.”

Accordingly they both started to look things over, backed by a host of past similar checkings. It could be only a superficial examination; but just the same the result pleased them immeasurably, for never the least damage could they hit upon.

Perk was almost delirious with joy, and wonder as well.

“I never would a b’lieved that stunt could be pulled off if I hadn’t seen the miracle carried aout with my own lamps,” he kept saying half to himself, as he finished his part of the survey. “Jest won-der-ful, I’d call it, an’ let her go at that,

which doant tell half the story.”

Jack, having had the severe strain removed from his mind, now consented to finish his breakfast, the natural hunger of a healthy young chap asserting its prerogative. Accordingly, since Perk also confessed to feeling a “bit peckish” they sat down on the ground, with the coffee container between them, and a heap of the “ham-an’ sandwiches” which had come from their favorite restaurant.

“As soon as we get through this necessary business, Perk, we’ll stow some of the grub that’s left over in our pockets for an emergency. After that we’ll pick out such traps as we may need in our game, and trot along—though judging from the looks of this same ravine it’ll be only a figure of speech, because we’ll find it necessary to crawl like a couple of snails most of the way.”

“Yeah! that sounds more like it, buddy,” agreed Perk, eyeing the depression with a scowl, as though he hardly liked the nature of the job ahead.

CHAPTER XVI

UP AGAINST A SILVER-TIP

There was some difficulty when it came to selecting such things as might prove most handy in their difficult task. Several had to be laid aside as being too bulky and cumbersome; for weight would count heavily against them in forcing a passage through the thick growth in the ravine; as well as later when they struck the mighty upheaval of rocks on the side of the mountain, below the natural pass into the Hole-in-the-Wall valley.

Those things they had selected were divided up, and made into two packages of about equal weight. When Jack did not happen to be looking Perk managed to slip several articles into his pack, evidently begrudging their lack; which he considered only right and proper, since his shoulders and back must stand for the extra strain.

“An’ if we do need ’em, which is like enough,” he told himself, as if in apology for his deceit; “they might jest prove *life-savers*—yeou never kin tell haow the cat’s agoin’ to jump; an’ they do say as a stitch in time saves yeour whole bacon.”

Having attached these bundles securely to their backs the pair were ready to start forth on their perilous errand—matching their wits and courage against the lawless spirits who had defied the power of Uncle Sam, believing it would take the whole U. S. army to dislodge them from such an isolated and natural fortress.

“First thing we’ve got to remember, partner,” said Jack, softly, as they began to plunge into the wild growth that filled the deep ravine from one side to the other, “is to get our bearings as we advance.”

“Gosh amighty! Jack, is that a go, when all we got to ’member is haow we kept aheadin’ ’long this ere coulie. I doant see haow anybody could go astray in sech a canyon as this same.”

“To be sure,” Jack assured him, “that’s true as long as this is the only old waterbed we’ll have to follow; which it isn’t, if you remember those directions Simeon sent in. Once we became a bit rattled as to which channel to follow, and

it'd ruin all our calculations—the element of uncertainty has wrecked more clever plans than anything agoing. More than that, we must turn around and stare at the way things look from the other direction; because we'll be heading back to our camp when we need to follow our trail. You know lots of landmarks may seem okay in going, which you'd never recognize when coming from the opposite quarter.”

“Yeah! I knowed that too, buddy,” affirmed Perk, with a grin; “read 'baout the same lots o' times as a kid, when I used to soak in stories o' them old days in Kentucky, that they called the Dark an' Bloody Ground——Daniel Boone, Simon Kenton, Harrod an' them forest rangers picked that trick up from the Shawnee Injuns they used to fight. We'll face the other way heaps o' times, an' make picters o' the scenery on aour minds; that's okay with me, Jack.”

For some little time they had all they could do to push their way along, so matted were the vines and the underbrush, so extremely rough the footing.

Twice Perk had stumbled, and come near having an ugly fall; he even managed to skin his right knee painfully by coming in contact with a rock; but never a grunt did he emit, accustomed as he was to taking such things as part of the game.

“Mebbe naow this is what I get fur loadin' me daown so heavy,” he told himself, under his breath; “but jest the same I aint ameanin' to throw a single thing away; 'cause that'd sure turn aout to be jest what we needed most to save our skins.”

Later on, as they stood still and rested a bit, Perk again confided in his companion; he always did seem to suck more or less consolation out of these frequent “chinnings,” as they afforded him opportunities to see things through Jack's eyes, an advantage Perk greatly appreciated.

“More I get thinkin' 'baout the slick way that same Simeon took a carrier pigeon 'long with him, so he could be sure o' gettin' valuable information into the hands o' his boss, the more I admire the ole gink. I knowed as haow the French used them birds over across the water, when we was afightin' the Heinies; but say, tryin' sech a game aout in the Secret Service was a new dodge on me.”

“Both clever, and original, Perk,” assented the other, fastening on his pack once more; “but then, as I remember Simeon Balderson he was always different from the common truck of the Force. I'll be right sorry if anything has happened to him—wiped out by these devils up here, just because they naturally hate all Service men.”

Thus they continued to stumble along, sometimes one in the lead, and then later on the other would forge ahead, just as circumstances brought things about.

There was no attempt to make any kind of speed, since time did not count in what they were trying to accomplish—far better to spend a week, even two, than to ruin everything by some incautious move.

From time to time sounds would come to their ears, mostly ahead; but in every case these could be set down as proceeding from birds, or small animals that may have discovered their approach, and were showing signs of restlessness.

Once, however, a faint report drifted to their ears through some slant in the breeze, being possibly a mile or more distant, which both recognized as a gunshot—the only evidence of human beings that thus far they had discovered.

It acted as a spur, making them remember what they were up against; but Perk only smiled, as though he cared very little how soon they ran into the jaws of trouble, and matched their talents against those they sought.

Then they had a severe shock—it came almost without the least warning too, which made it more stunning.

A rustling in the underbrush—what sounded like a snarl or a grunt; and as they flashed a startled look in that direction, a huge shaggy figure uprose to betray the presence of a genuine Rocky Mountain grizzly of un-heard-of proportions, standing erect.

To make the matter all the more serious the frightful beast was almost directly in their way, blocking any further movement along the ravine. Besides, while they carried arms, it was highly imprudent on several accounts for them to dream of using the same.

In the first place their automatics would seem but trivial instruments when used against such a monster, said to have the nine lives of a cat; and often known to still be in fighting trim after receiving a volley of lead from powerful modern sporting rifles.

Then again if they were forced to fire, even though lucky enough to down their hairy enemy, the sound of the discharges was certain to be heard by those in hiding, and would serve to turn the entire settlement out searching for the cause of the rattling sounds.

“Hot-diggetty-dig! did yeou *ever* see sech a buster o’ a bar?” Perk was gasping, as he stared aghast; “an’ the tarnel beast’s startin’ to move this way, as sure as shootin’, Jack!”

“We’ve just got to clear out!” came the ultimatum from Jack.

That was easy to say, but what chance would they have against such a powerful beast, evidently with some reason to hate all two-legged bipeds, having possibly at some time in the past been severely wounded by such a creature, and holding a vendetta against all the clan. He could break through the worst tangle

with ease, while they must be held up, and their progress impeded frightfully.

Jack hit a brilliant idea almost on the instant.

“Follow me, Perk!” he shrilled, tersely; “we’ve got to climb a tree! Let’s go, partner!”

“Which tree?” Perk demanded, as he kept close at the other’s heels.

“Over this way—got limbs low down—silver-tips can’t climb a tree, I’ve heard. Hurry—hurry!”

There was indeed need of haste, for they could distinctly hear the smashing advance of the big brute; also catch the growling as he pursued the fleeing pair who had dared invade his private hunting patch.

Neither of them dared cast a single look back, lest they stumble over an outcropping rock, or get entangled in some running vine, such as fairly covered the ground in certain places, to serve as traps to incautious feet.

Jack managed to arrive at the selected tree ahead of his mate, and swinging around to the further side, so as to keep out of the other’s way, commenced to lift himself into the lower branches.

This was no slight task, seeing how heavily they were both loaded down with those bundles fastened to their backs; but it is wonderful what fright can accomplish under similar conditions; and Perk was already pawing at the other side of the friendly tree, wild with eagerness to hoist himself far enough from the ground so as to avoid contact with those cruel claws of the monster, of which he had doubtless heard thrilling stories concerning their length, and sharpness.

Nearer came the crashing sounds, and the growls; but by great good luck the angry beast arrived just too late to attain his end; for while he reached up all of ten feet Perk believed, he could not more than barely touch the lower foot of the climber, which was instantly drawn beyond his reach.

For a full minute, more or less, neither of them could spare the breath to make any sort of comment over their narrow escape—it was enough for them to know they had nothing to fear immediately from the irate silver-tip, still standing erect, and emitting those hoarse growls, as if to tell them what he would do if only they ventured within his reach.

Then Perk made a slight move, and Jack feared he might be about to kick at the beast’s elevated snout, which would only irritate Bruin a great deal more.

“Keep quiet, and don’t do anything to stir him up more than he is already,” was the way Jack cautioned his running mate, knowing the impulsive nature of Perk only too well. “He may fade away when he sees he can’t touch us. Just get your breath back, Pal Perk, and wait up.”

“Okay, brother,” replied the other, as though recognizing the soundness of his comrade’s doctrine.

But somehow or other the big beast showed no signs of intending to break the siege by “fading out,” as Jack had termed it; he continued to move around the base of the tree, now on all fours, and again raising up to his full height with ferocious growls if either of them so much as made a slight move.

“Gee whiz! he sure is some wheeze, I’d say, Jack,” Perk remarked, after some little time had passed, with no change whatever taking place. “What if the ole geezer takes a notion to tent aout here at aour tree—say, that’d be the limit, bet yeour boots it would!”

Then he fell silent for a spell, as though mentally calculating the extent of such a calamity on their fortunes.

CHAPTER XVII

PERK SHOWS HIS HAND

“Let me tell yeou, partner, that same bar he’s some stickin’-plaster all right!”

A full half hour must have passed without any noticeable change in the conditions. The obstinate beast stayed close to the foot of the tree, never making any attempt at climbing the same; just as though he might be well aware of his own shortcomings.

A number of times, when one of the prisoners among the branches chanced to make some sort of movement, in order to relieve the numbness that had gripped his legs, the bear would exhibit the same ferocity he had shown all through the siege.

“The old chap certainly must have a long debt to pay toward somebody, and is taking it out on us, Perk,” ventured Jack, breaking the silence once more.

“But it doant seem so much like a joke as at first,” grumbled Perk, disconsolately. “What in thunder’d we do if he camped aout on us, mebbe fur a hull day’nd night—gorry! wouldn’t we be in a pickle, though—nawthin’ to eat’r drink it might be, an’ so sore in aour bodies we’d feel like howlin’.”

“Oh! let’s hope it doesn’t turn out so serious as all that,” Jack soothed him somewhat by saying confidently. “What bothers me most is how we’re going to do any sort of business, with that chap hanging out in this neighborhood, and likely to drop in on us any old minute.”

“Drat the luck, any way!” growled the greatly annoyed Perk, aghast at the very idea of slow starvation; with that fat old husky camped at the foot of their tree refuge, daring them to set a foot on the ground.

The morning was wearing away by degrees, with the sun already peeping down into the deep ravine, from its more lofty position in the heavens. Perk was now busily engaged cudgeling his brains in the endeavor to conjure up some species of scheme by which they might have a chance to rid themselves of their four-footed jailor.

All at once Jack saw the other start to feeling of his person eagerly as though

some dazzling idea had burst upon his mind. As a rule these occasions were few and far between, and yet Perk had been actually known to originate some amazing schemes, that perhaps did not always turn out as successfully as he himself might have fancied would be the case.

“I could a sworn I fetched it along, thinkin’ there might be some pesky rattlers in this here coulie,” Jack heard him muttering; and then an exclamation of delight announced that whatever he had in mind it had eventually turned up in one of his numerous pockets.

“Hey! what’s in the wind now, I want to know?” Jack demanded, in idle curiosity, since he hardly anticipated that his chum would be able to offer any plausible plan for ridding themselves of that intolerable nuisance encamped below decks.

Perk was holding something up exultantly, and Jack could see it appeared to be a small *flask*—such things were very common nowadays, with prohibition in the land; but as he had never known his mate to use strong spirits Jack naturally felt more or less surprise to see such a bottle stowed away on Perk’s person. But the word “rattlers” may have given Jack a slight inkling of what it all meant.

“Fetched this here stuff ’long, Jack, in case either o’ us ran afoul o’ a pizen snake,” came the explanation; “kinder do hate to waste the same on sech a wretched beast; but seems like it might get us outen this nasty scrape.”

Jack was forced to laugh.

“Quite an original joke you’d play on Old Eph, I take it, partner—get the poor stick drunk, you mean, of course; but what makes you reckon he’d take to the bottle; for of course you couldn’t lean down far enough to pour the stuff into his open mouth—that’d be a heap too dangerous, I’d think.”

Perk gave him a reproachful look as he hastened to explain.

“Say, I aint *quite* that silly, I hopes, Jack ole hoss, as to give that critter half a chanct to nab me. I got another idee, it happens, such as ought to pan aout too, if I kin do what I want without spillin’ the beans, or in this case the bootleg stuff.”

“Sounds good to me, Perk,” Jack told him as if to encourage further explanations. “If you don’t expect him to swallow it what then, partner?”

“Jest yeou watch yeour Uncle Perk get busy, boy, that’s all.”

Long before this both of them had relieved their aching shoulders of the weighty packs they were carrying, attaching the same safely to certain broken limbs of the tree that came in conveniently enough. This allowed of a certain amount of freedom; and so Perk was able to wriggle down several feet, his movements as usual attracting the observation of the jealous guardian, for the great shaggy beast stood upright, with his snout elevated menacingly.

“Be careful now, and don’t give him half an opening to nab your foot,

brother,” warned Jack.

“Shucks! he aint got a Chinaman’s chanct to do that same, Jack. Hey! ole boy, do yeou smell it a’ready, to be makin’ sech faces at me? Well, here goes to wet yeou daown nice an’ easy like.”

With that Perk leaned over still more—his hand holding the pocket flask was just a foot or so above the extended snout of the bear, when the first trickle of the liquor started to fall, striking the animal’s nose, and running down on the heavy hair covering his neck and back.

“Glory be! look at the scamp openin’ his mouth and puttin’ aout his red tongue to ketch some o’ the drops!” cried the excited Perk. “Hey! don’t be so het up an’ greedy, Mister; I sure aint atryin’ to get yeou soaked—seems like he’s quite took to the bottle, don’t it, Jack?”

“Like an old toper, for a fact, brother,” the other assured him, laughing as he spoke. “I’ve heard how the young black bears over in Yellowstone Park come up to tourists, and beg for some spirits, to which their taste turns; but I didn’t know a big old tramp like this had a leaning that way. I see you’re trying to keep him from swilling it down, Perk; must have some object in letting the stuff run all over his back as you’re doing?”

“Kinder think I have got sech a neat little scheme, partner; on’y yeou wait up till I put the finishin’ touch to the game—proof o’ the puddin’s in the eatin’ o’ the same, yeou know.”

“I’m waiting to be shown, buddy—you know your hand, and can play it best. Go to it then, and I’ll be the judge to say if it pans out okay or not.”

Perk was now draining the flask of the last drop; for when he made up his mind to do a thing he always went the limit.

“There, that finishes my snake-bite cure, more the pity,” he kept telling his fellow prisoner, with a vein of keen regret in his voice. “No, yeou jest caint have another drop yeou greedy rascal. Seems like yeou made things warm enuff for two ginks what never did any harm to yeou or the fambly; an’ now suh, the tables got to turn—I’m figgerin’ on makin’ the likes o’ yeou as hot as Tophet, that’s right, Old Eph.”

Still holding out the empty flask as though to keep the bear from dropping down on all-fours, Perk carefully took out a match, and held it poised between fingers and thumb. Then it was that what he really meant to do clicked in the mind of Jack; it rather staggered him in the bargain, so that he uttered an exclamation that told the other he had divined his secret.

“Kinder guess yeou’re on to my curves, buddy,” observed Perk; “well, here she goes, an’ hopin’ luck comes aour way.”

He thereupon scraped the head of the match along a certain part of the tree

trunk—several times was this repeated, but all to no avail, as the friction did not appear to be brisk enough to start things going.

Then Perk went back to first principles, and gave a quick scrape down the seat of his trousers; whereupon there followed a tiny flash, and the match began to burn brightly.

Waving the bottle, and letting a drop or two ooze from its mouth Perk, watching his opportunity cast the burning match directly on top of the bear's shaggy neck. He must have held his breath with suspense while so doing, for he felt as though he were casting the die, with everything at stake.

"Wow! it's a go, Perk, you wonderful schemer!" burst from Jack, as he saw a blue flame start up, where the booze had fallen on the thick, rusty looking coat of the astonished animal, instantly increasing as the liquor caught.

Both of them watched with staring eyes to see what followed; but they did not have long to wait. The bear dropped down on all four feet, and twisting his head around commenced snapping viciously at the spot where he already began to feel uncomfortably warm. This caused him to burn his tongue, and from that moment it took on all the aspect of a *circus* to the two spectators lodged there amidst the branches of that friendly tree; although to be sure it was an altogether different kind of situation to the astonished bear.

The animal developed a surprising amount of agility, twisting and turning in a frantic endeavor to bite at the object that was giving him such a queer sensation as of pain. But all his antics had no effect on the fire in his coat, which was continually extending its circulation by streaks and bounds.

"Go to it, buddy—call aout the hull fire department an' smother the blaze, or yeou're sure a goner. Lookit him arollin' on the ground to beat the band—aint that cute though, partner—jest like sensible human bein's would do if they had their heads 'bout 'em when on fire. But it aint agoin' to help the pore ole dick any, either. There, he's a runnin' off like fun, headin' fur some sorter water-hole he knows 'bout, I kinder guess. What a sight that is, Jack ole geezer; but jest the same I'm sorry 'bout that snake pizen stuff, I sure am—didn't fanc'late to have to use it on sech game."

"That's all right, Perk; it'd saved the cause, and possibly our lives in the bargain. I'd call it well spent, if you asked me," Jack told him.

"Say, look at him goin' licketty split, like the Ole Nick was after him, blazin', an' with spurts o' smoke bustin' outen his singed hide. He sure enough played outen his class that time, I figger. Mebbe, naow, he'll cut an' run next time he meets gentlemen o' aour stripe."

The spectacle was so extremely ludicrous to Perk that he writhed and twisted about as if seized with a fit; so, too, did he threaten to burst out into loud

laughter only that Jack gave him due warning of what dire consequences would be apt to follow any indiscretion along those lines, which sobered the hilarious one, and brought him back to sanity.

“Kin we climb daown ouden this tree naow, partner?” asked Perk, after he could no longer discern any further sign of the badly singed king of the mountain valleys; “I’ll be tickled pink to be able to stretch my legs a bit, seein’ they’re so stiff an’ sore; but it shore was too bad ’bout losin’ my precious snake pizen cure—hopes we aint a goin’ to need it any time, that’s all.”

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CIRCLING BUZZARDS

Jack seemed nothing loth to carry out his chum's suggestion. Truth to tell he himself felt considerably "cramped" in the lower part of his anatomy—any one who has been compelled to camp amidst the branches of a tree for a period of successive hours, knows the experience is anything but a pleasant one.

So they slipped down, and once more stood on solid ground, with Perk casting suspicious looks in the quarter where last they had glimpsed the fleeing grizzly, with jets of mingled smoke and fire spitting this way and that.

"Huh! here's hopin' he's went for good," he was saying, meaningly. "Let's get a move on, partner, an' vacate these premises pronto—smells too rank fur me jest naow—burnt hair allers *did* get my goat, ever since that barber coaxed me to have my crop singed—said as haow it'd grow out agin a heap faster if the split ends they was scotched away; but for a whole week afterwards folks used to look at me funny like, an' move further away. Huh!"

"No hurry at all, buddy," Jack told him; "that live wire isn't going to come back this way in a hurry, you can depend on that. Let's take a look, and make sure nothing has been dropped from our packs, or pockets. On the whole we've got a heap to congratulate ourselves on, coming out of such a scrape as well as we did—thanks to that bright thought of yours."

"Gee! it's real nice o' yeou to say that, Jack, ole bean; I'm not sorry we had sech a queer experience; on'y I do begrudge him that real stuff, which is gone for keeps—it wasn't moonshine, or bootleg either, boy; but worth it's weight in solid silver—the man says as sold it to me."

"Well, it did come in handy, for a fact, Perk, and we mustn't grieve over using it. Just try to imagine one of us *did* get struck by the fangs of a rattler, and the stuff saved a human life—in this case maybe two. Cheer up—plenty more where that came from, if only you've got the coin."

"Right yeou are, brother," Perk thereupon hastened to say, as he adjusted his pack to conform with the angles of his body. "On'y I got to be doubly keerful

from neow on bout runnin' smack up again a pizenous viper, since it'd be jest too bad to get struck, an' no cure handy."

When Perk had anything bothering him he was in the habit of keeping his "misery" constantly on tap; but then Jack was used to such little eccentricities on the part of his bosom chum—Perk's good qualities more than compensated for his poor ones, a fact which those who knew him realized.

They started on, following the devious windings of the former watercourse, where ages back there must have been terrible floods rush down toward the lowland, after every cloudburst at the top of the mountains. Many years must have passed since those happenings ceased, for the trees and heavy undergrowth rooted in cracks of the mighty rocks told this story of change.

"I sure do hope we doant run into any other kind o' wild critter, while makin' this grand sneak," Perk was telling himself, as he kept close behind his leader, picking his steps as daintily as any high born lady—since that was his method of keeping watch for suspicious moving objects on the ground, such as might turn out to be reptiles waiting to puncture his ankles. "If I was totin' my Winchester along, an' met up with a snarlin' mounting lion, I'd think it a bit o' luck; but when yeour hands are tied, so yeou dassent shoot a gun, things look kinder different, that's right, an' not so good."

Whenever Jack paused for a brief stop, and stared back, Perk dutifully copied his action, trying to impress certain local features of the landscape upon his memory.

They had by this time come a considerable distance away from the spot where the airship had been abandoned, partly screened by the overhanging branches of several trees, and also a partial blanket of evergreens, small ones they had been able to tear up, and use with rare judgment.

Part of the time it was possible for them to raise their eyes and see the clear blue sky in places. Once Perk discovered a moving object pass before his vision, which he speedily made out to be a buzzard. A second followed close behind, and then numerous other of the carrion eaters, all swinging in the same direction after the manner of their clan.

As his eyes followed the circle of soaring birds Perk had an unpleasant thought strike in that gave him a chill around the region of his heart.

"Hot-diggetty-dig! I wonder neow could it be them gluttonus birds they been pickin' the bones o' that poor Simeon what disappeared 'round this section o' kentry? Jack hinted like he kinder guessed the plug uglies had knocked him on the head, an' tossed his body over some big precipice. Gee whiz! it shore does gimme a bad feelin' to think thataways, 'specially since chances air we might be headin' straight along that same road aourselves."

After that there seemed to be some sort of a horrible fascination about the wheeling line of feathered scavengers, so that at every opportunity, when an opening presented itself, Perk just stared, and stared, frequently stumbling awkwardly over an unnoticed object, and almost losing his balance.

Jack noticed this fact presently, and felt called upon to warn the other.

“Keep your eyes more on the ground, partner, and do less sky gazing,” he told Perk in a low but distinct tone. “A tumble might give you a bad hurt; and besides, we can’t afford to make any sort of racket, you know. Never mind those rotten buzzards—what do we care about their carrying-on.”

Perk suspected that Jack had himself guessed what ailed him, from the way he connected the sailing of the uncanny crew with his companion’s erratic actions. At any rate it rather abashed Perk to realize his weakness could be so readily observed; so he braced himself up, and tried to give a low laugh.

“That’s okay, Jack; I’ll be a heap more keerful. We got to do this grand creep as slick as grease, with them pesky kiotes keepin’ their ears to the ground for s’picious noises.”

As the subject of Simeon’s possible raw deal had fastened itself on his mind, Perk continued to speculate regarding the personality of the missing Secret Service agent. The subject grew more interesting the further he went, and in the end he even asked Jack a question that was bothering him.

“Yeou says as haow yeou knowed this guy Simeon some, didn’t yeou, partner?”

“I only met him a few times about a year back while in Washington; but at that took quite a shine to him,” Jack explained, as Perk nudged up against him, both having stopped to rest after negotiating an extra difficult stretch on their climb.

“He must a been a fair good chap then, I guess, partner, eh, what?”

“I liked him,” Jack added, concisely; “and they thought well of him in the Big Chief’s offices.”

“Any fambly as yeou heard of?” Perk further wished to know.

“He told me he was a widower—I thought he must be up against some sort of mind trouble—it just impressed me that way, though he never let out a word of his personal affairs; but I never saw him smile, even when others in the party were cracking jokes, and laughing their loudest.”

“Huh! too bad sech a fine guy should a been sent out on a tough job like this one,” was all that Perk remarked, half under his breath, as though what Jack had told satisfied his curiosity, and further increased his respect for the brave brother officer whom he knew only by report.

These things were bound to crop up in his mind from time to time, and give

him reason for further thought; for whatever the sad fate of Simeon might be it seemed to have some connection with their own fortunes.

Then Perk's roving fancy came back again to the adventure through which they had so recently passed, with such wonderful success. Figuratively he patted himself on the back, because it had been wholly his conceit, that of setting their grim four-footed jailor on fire, and causing the beast to break the siege in hot haste.

"Huh! not so bad—fur me," Perk told himself, with one of his queer chuckles. "Ole Perk he kin wake things up once in a coon's age, if he sets his mind on doin' the same. Kinder guess it'd pay me to sorter cultivate that streak o' ingenuity—mebbe I'm movin' along to be some sorter inventor like Tom Edison—yeou never kin tell 'til the time comes. 'Twouldn't be so funny after all, come to think o' it—my ole man had a gift thataway, even if he never did set the State o' Maine on fire. Huh! if things keep on amovin' like this, little ole Perk mebbe'll amount to some punkins after all!"

CHAPTER XIX

TAKING GREAT CHANCES

Jack could read his chum almost as easily as he might an open page. Consequently he readily surmised what was making the other feel so good—he saw Perk's chest swell up, and his whole person partake of the joy that accompanied his secret thoughts. Not for worlds though would he wish to let the other know how it amused him.

“Let him enjoy the thrill while it lasts, the dear old chap,” he told himself in a whisper. “It isn't often he plays the high hat role; and after all's said and done his queer little game *did* pan out just fine—no shooting, or whooping things up; just making it hot for that ill-tempered live wire of a silvertop bear.”

What was causing Perk to feel so good was the thought of what would happen should any one ever again try to coax that identical bear to partake of the tempting fluid that had brought about his recent panic and flight.

“Me, I'd shore hate to be in his shoes, if that big hulk broke loose an' made things fly,” was the way he wound up his soliloquy; when other more vital matters began to engage his attention.

It was by now long after noon, and as usual Perk had begun to feel a bit “queer” down in the pit of his stomach. For this feeling there was, as he very well understood, but one sovereign remedy. Accordingly he gave a little tug at his companion's arm, and hastened to suggest:

“Jack, haow 'bout holdin' up, an' having aour lit snack—aint no tellin' when a better chanct'll come aour way, I kinder guess?”

“It wouldn't be a bad idea, Perk; and to tell the truth I'm feeling as if I needed a bite or two so's to keep up this climbing. Hold on, here's as good a spot as any—let's go!”

Two minutes afterwards and they were seated crosslegged on the ground, amidst a generous growth of covert, which would likely screen them effectually from any prying eyes.

Jack realized that by this time they must have climbed far enough up the

mountainside to bring them fairly close to the opening of the pass that led into the valley of the giants.

If this were true then it behooved them to exercise a greater amount of caution than ever, lest they betray themselves to some vidette who might be posted near by.

With this idea in view he considered it the part of wisdom to take Perk into his confidence, so that as they exchanged views they could tone down their voices to the whispering stage.

Meanwhile Perk had produced the aforesaid “snack” in the shape of a small package, neatly done up by that efficient waiter friend, and containing, it turned out, another kind of sandwich, with a tasty brand of cheese as the “filler.”

“Jest didn’t dare try to hitch that ere tank o’ hot coffee along on this tough hike, partner,” explained Perk apologetically, after listening to the need of caution mentioned by Jack. “So we’ll have to munch this spread dry; or else locate a spring so’s to wet aour whistles.”

“That isn’t much of a hardship,” he was told; “but we may be lucky enough to run across fresh water; and you could fill that empty flask of yours if you wanted.”

“By gum! not a bad idee that, Pal Jack; shore I’ll do that same right willin’ly, if the chanct comes aour way. Haow ’bout the next move, sense it seems we’ve got this far okay?”

“I’ve been trying to figure that out,” Jack told him, reflectively it could be seen. “I’ve studied the conformation of the ground, which is something out of the general run; Simeon’s rude chart helped me a lot in the bargain. This enclosed valley, you understand, has high cliffs around it, with possibly only one way to go in and come out.”

“Yeah! I get yeou, buddy—meanin’ the queer pass that’s so narrow three hossmen couldn’t enter abreast—is that straight, Jack?”

“Absolutely so,” came the immediate reply, accompanied with a smile, as if it pleased Jack to understand how readily his comrade entered into the explanation he had offered. “That being the case it seems likely we might be able to keep on climbing until finally we reached a place where we could find a screen close to the top of such a cliff. That would give us a wonderful eyrie like an eagle would select to build her nest on; and from which place we could look down into the entire valley.”

“Hot-diggetty-dig! but woudn’t that be a scream, oh! boy?” gasped the deeply interested Perk, in whole-hearted enthusiasm, as he nodded his head in approval. “Let’s do jest that, then, partner. Why, with the glasses as I fetched along for keeps, we could spy aout everything we’d want to know, an’ mebbe find a way

to git into the valley, withaout usin' that guarded pass."

"Just so, Perk, and I notice you've got a strangle hold on the situation, which pleases me a heap. You see, there were a few hints in what our good friend Simeon incorporated in his brief notes, that started such an idea in my brain; so once again we're indebted to his scouting for putting us wise to a good thing."

"Bully ole Simeon—he's all wool an' a yard wide I'm a tellin' yeou Jack, as the boys used to say in aour village when I was a smart-aleck kid."

"Then that's settled," Jack announced, with finality, "and we'll keep on climbing after we get some rest, and finish our lunch. I've an idea I can catch the sweet song of a brook up above, so we'll be able to wash down this dry stuff in fine style."

"Good for that, partner," gurgled Perk, with his mouth almost full, so that he was in danger of choking; and Jack, noting the fact, refrained from making any further remarks calculated to tempt the other to splutter out a reply, or a comment of some sort.

Once while thus engaged in "feeding," as Perk always called the act of satisfying hunger, he chanced to lift his eyes above the high margin of the gully, and immediately stopped munching what he had in his mouth. Those sailing buzzards were still making their wide loops as they always do when scanning the face of the country for miles in search of their next meal; and somehow the very sight of them took away part of the satisfaction Perk was feeling in filling up a vacuum "down-below-stairs."

"Drat the foul birds!" he muttered, half to himself; "they shore do make me tired with their everlasting wheelin' an' cavortin', atryin' to see what sorter grub we got daown here that they'd like to gobble. Gosh all hemlock! haow I'd like to knock their red blocks off with a scatter-gun!"

Jack understood enough not to make any remark calculated to cause his pal to again worry his mind over what could not be remedied—the mysterious vanishing of poor Simeon Balderson. And presently Perk chirked up, as though he could put the grewsome matter out of his mind so long as he refrained from watching the constant evolutions of the carrion birds.

As they devoured their last sandwich, feeling as though they had had quite sufficient, somehow both were silent. Jack contemplated remaining there in that sheltered nook for a further brief rest, after which they would again take up the tedious and arduous climb.

"Mebbe we had orter be on the move, partner," Perk finally suggested in a low whisper, just as though he feared lest a host of hostile ears might be hidden from sight by the nearby thickets. "I 'low I'm right daown thirsty, an' a swig o' that gurglin' stream'd come in fine."

“Just as you say, Perk,” with which remark Jack started to arise; and presently both were toiling upward, stepping carefully, and endeavoring not to brush against the branches of the stubby pinons as they advanced slowly on the way toward their goal.

A minute or so afterwards found them lying flat on the ground, swallowing generous quantities of the cold, icy water that was running down the rugged slope in a zigzag fashion, due to the innumerable obstacles that caused it to make little detours, since water must always seek its own level, and will find different means for so doing.

Suddenly Jack lifted his head, swallowing hastily, and made a low hissing sound that thrilled his companion.

“Voices near by—somebody coming this way, perhaps for a drink—we must get a move on or we’ll be discovered! After me, Perk, and be still as the grave,” was what Jack whispered in the ear of his mate as he commenced crawling away.

CHAPTER XX

ON THE ENCIRCLING CLIFF

Considering the fact that neither of the two Service men could boast of having graduated from the school of born scouts, and that their education along the line of the crafty pioneers was a bit off-color, it was simply wonderful how successfully they managed to creep into the thickest of the surrounding heavy growth without making any noticeable noise to betray the fact of their passage.

When Jack fancied they had covered sufficient ground he gave Perk a signal with his foot—an old trick with the well paired couple that they had worked to advantage on numerous occasions.

Thereupon, when Jack halted his snake-like progress, the other glided alongside; and thus they lay so close together that if necessary they could exchange a few words in whispers, although most likely Jack would forego this privilege.

The sound of conversation had grown much louder, accompanied by the swishing of bushes, as two or more persons continued to follow some sort of narrow path undoubtedly leading to this wonderful little rivulet.

Now the speakers must have reached their goal, for the voices were stilled, as though the men might be lying flat, and quenching their thirst in something purer than the poor stuff with which they were probably wont to seek the much desired kick.

Both of the hidden intruders strained their ears in hopes of making out what was being said, and thus possibly acquiring a little useful information; but the men spoke in such muffled tones this expectation failed to materialize—the deep, rumbling tones of one, and higher and shrill voice of the other, accompanied by occasional laughs, kept on for at least ten minutes; then from the sounds growing fainter Jack and Perk understood the two men must be going back the way they had come; from which fact they judged the opening into the closed valley must lie in that quarter, almost due north-by-east from their present refuge.

“Dog gone it! an’ I ain’t wise to a single thing they was a sayin’,” Perk lamented, half under his breath, after they could no longer catch the faintest sign of the pair who had been so near them.

“Same here,” added Jack, “which was too bad, for we might have picked up a little useful information while they talked and laughed.”

“Gee! I strained my hearin’ so hard it near cracked my ear-drums, I bet,” continued Perk, with a shake of his head; “but it was all rumble an’ squeak, mixed in a mess. I shore never did hear so high-pitched a voice on a man in all my born days.”

“Well, I have; and if you’ll think back some you’ll remember just *one* occasion in the bargain—both of us remarked it as a queer kind of a voice—particularly for a big, bold fellow, who scorned to show a sign of weakness even when hemmed in, and taken prisoner by a couple of fresh Secret Service detectives, belonging to the Flying Corps.”

The effect of these words on Perk was electrical—he started as though he had been shot, stared hard at his companion, then grinned broadly, and gave vent to his feelings in a suppressed *roar*—as near as he dared under such sensitive conditions.

“Well, well, well—hot-diggetty-dig! what a blind loon I am, not to ’ve s’pected that same! Yeou mean that boob was no other than Slippery Slim hisself, the Ole Scratch we’re runnin’ after right at this minute, doant yeou, partner mine? Glory be! what a great chanct we lost o’ fillin’ aout aour job in the start—why, we could aturned back to the ship, gone aboard, an’ cut loose at two miles a minute fur the home airport, with *him* safely bagged.”

“On the other hand, Perk, we might have given ourselves away, and let him slip out of our hands; when it would be ten times as hard to capture him as if he didn’t dream we were around this district. Depend on it this is all for the best—we’ll imitate the hungry wolf, and lie in ambush until such time as we can pounce down on Slim, and carry him off unbeknown to the balance of the gang.”

“Yeah! I kinder guess that’s ’baout the ticket, partner; but it gives me a bad case o’ the willies jest to think haow close we was, an’ let ’em skip aout. Gee! I’m in a cold sweat, drat the luck!”

“While I was listening to his coarse language, and hard rasping laugh,” Jack went on to say, softly; “do you know what came into my mind—a picture of that cottage in the suburb of San Diego, where we took that clever little lad we managed to keep from falling into the jaws of the mad dog.”

“I’ve thought o’ the same many times since we left town,” Perk declared, in a sincere tone that bespoke his feelings in the matter. “Nice ole lady, too; an’ it gets me jest haow a boy could treat sech a fine mother like he’s done—he orter

be tarred an' feathered, that's my 'pinion!"

"Don't jump at conclusions that way, brother," Jack interposed, as usual seeing further than the more impulsive Perk. "First of all, we're not so dead certain he *is* her son, and that sweet child his boy—we just guessed as much because that was surely Slim's moniker on the wall we glimpsed. But then the chances are, no matter what his relations may be with the old lady, she's never really known what a bad egg Slim's been. I've heard of cases where a wife of ten years standing still had faith in her man, and believed him to be simply unfortunate. So we mustn't feel so positive until we know more; although it looks as if Mrs. Ferguson must think him a good guy, the story of his crimes having been kept from her ears, either through accident, or a desire to save her mental suffering."

"Mebbe that's it, Jack—yeou kin see deeper into sech puzzles than I ever could. But I only hope we manage to pick up leadin' clues, an' find aout 'bout that matter 'fore we're through with this case."

"Believe me, we're going to do all of that, Perk. Once we get our man again, and are aboard our good ship, headed for port, we'll see that he opens up and explains a good many things that so far are wrapped in mystery."

"I kinder guess that's right, buddy," was Perk's comment; after which they ceased whispering, to turn their full attention upon the task ahead—that of climbing still higher up the face of the steep mountain, with the idea of securing a full view of the hidden valley, and all contained therein.

Whenever a good opportunity opened up for an observation Jack studied the nature of the ground above them.

In this fashion he felt capable of deciding when they had gone as far as was needful in order to carry out their purpose, and secure an unobscured view of the wonder valley, with all it contained.

Both of them experienced more or less curiosity along these lines, as was most natural. So much had been said concerning the hard gang of bad eggs who had taken up their quarters in this wild locality—they had caused such a riot of annoyance to the authorities at Washington, on account of their periodical forays, and the apparent impossibility of breaking up the defiant group, that anything connected with their life in the mountain fortress must appeal strongly to each and every Secret Service man.

Then besides, the unknown fate that had overtaken the last two gallant adventurers who had dared to try and beard the tough lawbreakers in their den—and which had only latterly come to the ears of Jack and Perk—was calculated to invest the whole subject with a tinge of mingled romance and sheer adventure, such as added to the thrill.

It began to look as though they might reach their objective with an hour or so of daylight remaining, in which to take an observation. Later on, as they sat, or lay resting after the strenuous climb, they could compare notes, and begin to build up something of a plan of campaign.

“I reckon,” said Jack, softly enough, after one of those halts, during which he always made up his calculations, “we’re as high as we need go. By sheering off here to the right we’re apt to strike the top of that high cliff we spotted. Then we’ll have all the chance we want to get rested.”

“Shucks! I aint a mite tired, buddy,” Perk assured him, between breaths; “on’y short o’ wind, as yeou might say. Some climb, b’lieve *me!*”

“Get your breath then, Perk; and if you’re ready say when.”

“Go to it, ole hoss!”

They exercised due caution, and gradually swung around in a half curve, when Perk gripped the arm of his mate, to hoarsely exclaim:

“Thar she be, partner, openin’ up like a book right ahead o’ us!”

CHAPTER XXI

ALL ON A DIET

“Steady then, boy—we mustn’t give them a chance to glimpse anything moving up here, or the fat’ll be in the fire. A step at a time, and mighty slow at that!” Jack warned the hasty Perk.

The sun lay low toward the western horizon, as seen through a gap in the mighty snow-capped mountains lying in that quarter. It happened that there was a line of scrub growing close to the edge of the cliff; and which the quick-witted Jack saw would prove a very effective screen for them to hide back of.

Down on hands and knees they dropped, to begin crawling inch by inch toward their objective. A cat creeping up on a sparrow, or a fat robin, could not have displayed a greater amount of sagacity and caution than those two man-hunters exhibited then and there—every little move was a gem; and Perk, keeping close to the heels of his leader, was fain to thrill with admiration over the wonderful skill shown by Jack in making this advance.

By slow degrees they opened up an amazing vista as they drew closer to the brink of the cliff—it was a spectacle such as neither of them had ever laid eyes on during their entire past life—that glorious green valley lying like an oasis amidst grim mountain ranges, making the contrast clean-cut, and magnificent indeed.

Later on no doubt Jack would drink the scene in with avidity, since he was a great lover of the picturesque; but at that particular moment there happened to be other things demanding their sole attention.

The valley itself was the only frame that surrounded the picture most interesting to their minds. Those who had gathered under the effective leadership of the man whom they had been credited with sending to the Federal penitentiary not so many moons back, were the objects of their dangerous journey into these untracked wilds; and they were most eager to learn just how they were living in their hidden retreat—also what their mode of slipping out to make a bold stroke, and then disappear again most mysteriously, might be.

First the further end of the valley came under their view, but with never a moving figure, nor yet any sign of huts or tents to indicate the presence of human beings.

By slow degrees they widened their line of observation—objects closer at hand began to be noticeable, and finally they discovered the first shack. It was only a place used as a shelter for animals, which would indicate that they had a herd of ponies in the valley, where doubtless there would be found plenty of grass for grazing, even throughout the severe winter season.

Jack's first impression ran along the line of what a wonderful prize such a rare mountain retreat must some day prove for cattle, driven from the open range by the coming of cold, and heavy snows.

Ah! a second structure now bobbed up; but like the other it had the look of a rough shelter unsuited for human use. Others by degrees came along, and Jack counted nearly a dozen up to the time he struck quite a commodious log cabin, looking like some he had seen in times gone by when in a logging camp in Michigan, where a bunch of loggers cutting timber during the winter, had to be kept warm when feeding.

Men were clustered around this structure, some lying on the ground, while others sauntered about, evidently talking and joking; although any sounds they might be making came but faintly to the strained hearing of the watchers up on the heights, so great was the distance separating them.

"Hot-diggetty-dig! thar they be, partner, the hull kittin' crew," Perk ventured to say, softly; for as yet they did not know whether a lookout or vidette was kept posted, where he could have a range of vision covering many miles out over the rock strewn country toward the east and south.

"Just a round dozen in sight," muttered Jack, who was already using the binoculars; "but at that there might be as many more in the huts and shacks. Away off there to the north, where the grass looks greenest I can see a small herd of ponies feeding; remember, Perk, some of those accounts hinted that in all probability they conducted their raids on horseback, and faded away again completely after striking."

"Huh! seems like they got a reg'lar *system* organized," grunted the observant Perk, staring off to the section where Jack indicated.

"That's all the work of our old friend, Slippery Slim," he was told in terms that would not admit of any denial; "he's shown in his past jobs he's a wonderful organizer—if he had been straight, and in the army, his genius might have pushed him far up the ladder; as it is he's only been able to prove one of the nastiest thorns in the flesh the Government ever tackled."

"Then I kinder guess it'll be a relief if we carry this job through to a finish,

and get the critter landed for keeps back where his wings'll be fair clipped."

"You said it, Perk."

Jack still held on to the glasses, finding it so interesting trying to locate this thing and that; but then Perk had most astonishingly keen eyesight, and could pick up considerable information unaided. He was accustomed to staring into dim far-off spaces when aloft, which added to his ability in that line.

Lower dropped the sun.

Presently the shadows would come trooping out of their hiding-places, where they holed during daytimes. Jack realized that, shut in as the valley was by those beetling cliffs, the twilight must be already falling down yonder—yes, he could notice the failing light, and inside of a brief time darkness must wrap everything in its dark folds, save where possibly some fire continued to burn, and dispel the gloom.

"I figure that they do most if not all of their cooking inside of that long log cabin, and eat there to boot," he explained to his companion, eagerly listening.

"More organization stuff, eh?" grunted Perk; "then like as not they even got some kinder cook, or *chef*, to handle the pots an' pans. Flyin' high, I'd call it, partner—alivin' off the fat o' the land mebbe."

"Why not, when they've pulled off some mighty big shake-downs during the last few months, and must have raked in a heap of dough? With the coin you can buy all sorts of good things to eat; and don't forget how they've got a special delivery ship, that is able to tote half a ton or more of freight."

"Whew! jest to think o' that," breathed Perk, making a face as if some extremely painful thought had flashed through his excited brain; "an' heow we on'y got *four* slim sandwiches to fill up on—hardly a bite apiece."

"Tough luck, that's right, boy," said Jack, cheerily; "but such old campaigners as we are shouldn't squeal because we miss a few meals. Easy enough to make up for lost grub when we're all cleaned up, and sitting pretty. Besides, just as like as not I'm going to ask you to trot back to our ship in the morning, if you're agreeable."

"Huh! surely not to stay, while yeou're up here by yeour lonely—don't tell me that, Jack, ole pard."

"Hardly, buddy; I'll need your help too much to divide our forces in front of the enemy, or when crossing a stream, which is a bad time, they say, to change horses. I meant that you could make up a big bundle of grub, and tote it along; for there's no telling how much time we're going to squander, loafing up on this roost, and watching how things go."

"Gosh! *that's different*, partner; of course I'd be glad to slide daown there, take a peek at our boat, load up with some stuff, an' make it back here 'bout

middle o' the afternoon—if I'm lucky."

"Well, you've just *got* to be lucky, and not spill the beans, that's a foregone conclusion, Perk. Every foot of the way you must keep on the alert, and take no chances of discovery. But it's getting so dark down in the valley we might as well shut up shop for the present."

"Meanin' it's the end o' a perfect day, eh, what?" asked Perk, as he started to "back water," and push away from the screen of scrub bushes.

"Well, we've accomplished a few things worth remembering, so the time hasn't been exactly wasted, Perk. But the main job still lies ahead of us, remember, brother. It's going to be no small job either, to separate that slick rascal from the balance of the gang, and carry him off in our airship, without having to fight a regular battle with the mob."

Perk scratched an ear, and then remarked softly:

"It never could be done if left to a lad built like me, I'm tellin' yeou, my boy—couldn't make the grade, which is a fack. Some galoots air built that way, yeou savvy? But, so long as I got a pal to lean on I aint worrin' 'baout not bringin' home the bacon, not me."

"None of that baloney, Perk."

They continued to back away until Jack decided they were far enough distant from that dreadful brink of the mighty cliff, to avoid any possibility of falling over if by chance they "walked in their sleep," as Perk had been known to occasionally do, when something was weighing heavily on his mind.

"Let's have those last few sandwiches that you held out at lunchtime," Jack remarked, settling down to make himself as comfortable as the conditions allowed. "Good thing too, you were so thoughtful, since only for that we'd have gone to sleep with empty stomachs, which is rather hard on a fellow as fond of chow as some one I know."

"I'm guilty, all right, Jack—eatin's one o' my shortcomin's for a fack—allers did count the hours 'til the horn'd blow fur dinner-time—age haint changed little Gabe Perkiser a whit, an' never will, I kinder spect. Take yeour pick—jest two each, an' haow I wish I'd a told him to make 'em double thick—why, dang it they on'y be a couple o' bites each, sech bites as I take."

"Half a loaf's a lot better than no bread—be philosophical, buddy, and as you munch your fodder keep thinking what you're going to do punishing the grub when the time of plenty rolls along, which it surely will do in good time."

They sat there exchanging remarks in cautious tones, and making the slender allotment of food go just as far as possible—as might a child nibbling all around the sugar coating on the top of his cake, "keeping the best for the last."

"Goin' to be some cold, in the bargain, seems like," suggested Perk, whose

mind always ran to picking out the thorny parts, and forgetting the pleasant ones lying in wait for them later on.

“Oh! well, we ought to know what cold stuff means, after being miles high so many hours at a time, and in an open cockpit at that, remember, Perk. What can’t be cured must be endured—there’s going to be a lot of good times when we’ve wound up this game for keeps, skip back to old San Diego, and that jolly little restaurant we know.”

“Yeah! providin’ we aint knocked aout o’ the runnin’ ’fore that time, ole hoss,” grumbled Perk.

CHAPTER XXII

THE MAN WITH THE COOK'S CAP

Somehow Perk's mind seemed to dwell most persistently on their lack of a comfortable fire. Many a time he must have been in much sore need of warmth than on the present occasion, and could "grin and bear it." He wondered himself at his frequent grumbling, and at one time even openly confessed to Jack, as though his guilty conscience had begun to reprove him.

"Doant jest know what ails me, partner, to kick up sech a big row over standin' things—must be I'm agettin' right old, an' near my second childhood. I'd sure give somethin' to be able to warm my hands at a cracklin' fire right naow; an' seems like I wouldn't get much o' a snooze, when I'm a shiverin' to beat the band, with nawthin' warm inside me neither."

"We'll crawl a little further along to where we can get out of this chilly breeze. It's because we're so high up we feel it so. I'm meaning to take a look around tomorrow, and see if I can't run across some sort of a hole, or crevice, where we'd be a lot more comfortable nights."

"Huh! might as well make it a reg'lar *cavern* while yeou're 'baout it, partner; not as I'm atall greedy, see; but I always *did* want to explore a gen-u-ine cave, ever sence I read Mark Twain's 'Tom Sawyer' an' 'Huckleberry Finn' books."

"Just as you say, brother, it'll have to be some kind of a cave then, so you'll feel satisfied—anything to keep peace in the family. But for just one night we must put up with whatever comes along, and take it out in thinking how fine we'll be another night, with a warm hole in the rocks, perhaps a nice blaze going, and all those good things to eat you mean to lug up here."

"Say, have heart, wont yeou, partner, an' please don't aggravate the situation so bad? If yeou hear me a rollin' off a list o' dishes like the waiter does in a cheap chop house, don't knock me any, 'cause like as not I'll on'y be a talkin' in my sleep."

When they had devoured the last crumb of their limited supply of ham sandwiches the change in the campground was effected; and just as Jack had

prophesied, the cold wind did not seem to strike them as keenly as before.

“Stand it as long as you can, Perk,” Jack told his mate, before they thought of turning in, “when you get to shivering too much, the only thing to do is to get up, and start your daily dozen in exercising your arms violently; but make no noise on your life. We don’t know when one of those brutes may be prowling close by, and upset all our tricks by knocking over the apple cart.”

“Needn’t fear I’m sech a silly as that, ole hoss,” Perk assured him, indignantly. “But what I want to ask is why couldn’t some fellers that knowed haow to slip daown a rope withaout burnin’ their hands to a crisp, drop into that same valley as neat as wax, while night hung on?”

“Simple as falling off a log, that’s okay, Perk, old pal; if *only* you happened to have a rope, and it was long enough to do the business.”

“Shucks! allers is some kinder drawback to every game I hatch up—we aint got any rope fur a fack; which is too bad, aint it? Guess as haow if we ever do get inside that ere valley we’ll shore have to sneak in by way o’ the narrer little pass. If so be they got a sentry on deck there, why, we’ll have to poke him in the neck, an’ put the gink to sleep.”

“Too early to be settling that matter, before we’ve located things,” Jack argued. “Always a chance of something popping up that we don’t know about, and which’d solve our troubles. First let’s try and get a few winks of sleep, because I for one feel as though I needed it.”

It was fated to be about as mean a night as they ever could remember, and undoubtedly they had both experienced many poor ones. Jack managed to drop asleep, to awaken later on to find himself shivering, and with his teeth rattling like castanets in the dextrous slim fingers of a Spanish dancer.

Something was moving near by, and, looking that way he could just manage to make out, with the starry heavens as a background, a figure with numberless arms, so it seemed, shooting up and down with mathematical precision.

Jack chuckled, realizing how it must of necessity be his pal, Perk, who, also awakened by having shivers run over his entire system, had remembered the advice given him, and was doing his daily dozen several times over, to induce a circulation of warm blood in his extremities.

Like a good doctor, not averse to taking his own medicine, Jack hastened to scramble to his feet; after which there were a pair of them industriously working their arms like flails on the threshing floor, taking steps in unison backward and forward. Perk fell in with the trick, and managed to keep time with his companion, as though it might all be a huge joke.

Then, after they began to feel more comfortable, they again lay down to try and get a little more sleep.

“Wonder what time it kin be, Jack; caint get a peep at my wrist watch in all this darkness, yeou know?” Perk was asking, turning as always to his reliable comrade when in any trouble.

“Somewhere around three, I’d say, according to the lay of the stars overhead,” came the ready reply, proving that Jack had for his own comfort challenged the chart of the skies, which was well known to his understanding, from long practice in reading the ways of the planets.

“Kinder guess that’s ’bout so, an’ I’m glad on’y a few more hours got to be endured, when mornin’ll come along, and mebbe the warm sun’ll show his nose to help aout some.”

After that Perk must have gone to sleep, for Jack did not hear him speak again. If Perk felt compelled to get up and do some more exercising later on at least he did not arouse his companion; for when Jack once more opened his eyes it was to see a faint light over toward the east, to prove that dawn was well on the way.

He was feeling greatly chilled, and losing no time hastened to get up and commence that swinging of his arms; also punching an invisible bag again as though he might be a pugilist at his regular exercises, in view of an approaching fistic battle in the arena, amidst cheering multitudes of frenzied fight fans.

Then, too, Perk speedily realized what was going on, and joined forces with the early riser, making all sorts of remarks, both in lament and otherwise, and keeping time with his vicious lunges.

“Take that, yeou pizen critter, an’ a few more o’ the same stripe, to make yeou take the count for keeps! Haow dye like that swipe, I’m askin’ o’ yeou,—a sweet upper-cut I got a copyright on? That’s a bit under the belt, mebbe, but ev’rything counts in this mill—there aint no foul blows. An’ by the same token I’m beginnin’ to feel some better a’ready, Jack, ole hummer.”

Before ten minutes had passed both of them were content to call a halt, as their arms were beginning to feel the strain, and they found themselves no longer chilled to the bone.

“Hot-diggetty-dig! it’d be simply scrumptious if on’y we had a good breakfast on top o’ that exercise,” with which gruesome remark Perk pulled in his slack belt another notch, under the impression that by increasing the pressure on his empty stomach he could cause the distress to disperse.

The light in the east had been growing brighter all this while, having taken on a pinkish tinge that announced the speedy coming of the king of day. Of course it would still be dark down in the valley, so there was no use as yet in their moving over to their shelter of the preceding afternoon.

“Seems like I might get a move on, an’ be agoin’,” Perk suggested; nor did the

other try to place any obstacle in his way.

“Nothing to hinder you, buddy,” Jack was telling him, holding out his hand with a smile. “I’m not going to say another thing about being careful, because I’m dead certain you’ll be on your guard every minute of the time. Only, if set upon fight with all your might; for you must know men like these jail birds, most of them I reckon having broken out of bondage, hate our class as the devil is said to detest holy water; and they’ll never give you a decent chance if you surrender.”

And Perk, that veteran of the war across the big pond, nodded his head as he went on to say nonchalantly, as became a soldier of fortune:

“Yeou want to understand, partner, if I jest have to turn my toes up to the daisies in this game I’m agoin’ to have some company along the road to shadowland, yeou bet yeour boots on that same. Ta! Ta! an’ look fur me araound sunset, er earlier if I kin make it a go.”

Jack hated to see him depart, but it was all in the line of business; and many unpleasant things have to be endured in following the path of duty; none realizing this truth better than men in the Secret Service, where they never know at what minute they may be called upon to risk life and limb in carrying the summons of the Law into all manner of dens and hideouts, where potential criminals may be lying in ambush, with machine-guns, and bombs, ready to bring destruction to the daring officers of Justice.

Jack, as soon as the early morning mists had cleared away, began work. He had laid out a dozen important things he wished to see through, and as a beginning once more posted himself in a recumbent position behind the friendly screen of those stunted bushes, close to the edge of the steep descent—a most colossal precipice it now became in his eyes, although always in the nature of a cliff to dwellers of the sunken valley some hundreds of feet below.

Of course, as he dared not creep any closer to the brink, he was unable to make any sort of survey of the near section; but he fancied the more important huts and shanties were within range of his glasses.

He moved his hands with the utmost care, for how was he to know when the bright rays of the rising sun might glint from the magnifying end of the binoculars, attracting the attention of some suspicious man far beneath by the brilliant flash that was bound to follow a hasty movement?

Besides, Jack felt constrained to keep himself in touch with a retreating line of brush, in order to make a quick getaway should any alarming sound, like the fall of a dislodged rock, give warning of the possible approach of some curious investigator.

By degrees he familiarized himself with every part of the depressed ground

falling under the scope of his glasses. In so doing he paid a great deal of attention to the long, low log cabin, which he had in the beginning decided must be a dining hall, and general loafing quarters.

Men came and went, and several of those who reappeared, after a protracted stay within, seemed to be wiping their mouths, as though they had been eating. Then it was finally decided without the least doubt, when a man wearing an apron that may have once been white, and a similar peakless cap, evidently serving as a general cook, came out and emptied some left-overs into a wooden pail, so it could be carried away, to be devoured by buzzards, or possibly skulking foxes and coyotes, perhaps even timber wolves.

CHAPTER XXIII

PERK CARRIES ON

Apparently Jack found considerable interest in the man wearing the white cap of a cook, for he watched him keenly as he came and went, limping a little, it seemed, as though somewhat lame.

Then, as the morning drew on, Jack changed his location, as though desirous of applying his energies to another duty that claimed attention. He was away from his post all of three hours; and when once more creeping over to the friendly screen of scrub bushes, there was a satisfied look on his grim face, that gave him an air of renewed confidence.

Apparently things were working along the right path, which would mean he found them to his liking.

If Jack felt exceedingly hungry, with so little to stay the clamorings of an empty stomach, he gave no evidence of such a thing. But then he did not happen to belong to the class of "squealers," as honest Perk often delighted to assign himself, without a blush of shame—he was built to expect three square meals per diem, and felt he had a right to "kick" when, through some misfortune they failed to come along on schedule.

The afternoon wore away slowly, with Jack in continual use of his glasses. It was a most interesting study for him, this spying upon the hideout of the greatest aggregation of badly wanted refugees from the Law he had ever run across.

What a grand haul would result if only he chanced to have a dozen of his fellow workers in the Secret Service at his call, ready to draw a net around the sunken valley, and forcing a general surrender. A good many empty cells in the Federal penitentiaries would be filled with their former occupants, Jack was telling himself, as he strove to count the idle members of the gang sunning themselves, and taking things so comfortably, as though they refused to entertain a single minute of fear concerning the possibility of the army being used by Uncle Sam to encompass their downfall.

Jack now began to anticipate the return of his comrade, judging from the

manner in which he frequently turned his head, as if to listen, while a look of concern began to draw lines about his eyes.

The fact that he had seen no sign of excitement among those he was watching had given him good cause for confidence. Surely, if the presence of strangers in the neighborhood had been discovered, with possibly Perk made a prisoner, he must have noted the fact as he viewed the panorama spread out before his eyes.

It was when the descending sun had dropped well down the western sky—about five by his faithful little wrist watch—that all of a sudden he heard something drop just back of his position, followed by a low, shaky voice saying:

“Hot-diggetty-dig! say, I’m ’baout all in, for a fack—gee whiz! sech a climb, with a pack on my back that weights somethin’ like a ton. Whee!”

And there was Perk, flat upon his back, having been drawn down when he attempted to let his burden drop. Jack gained his side as speedily as he could, his mind at ease once more, his late fears having vanished like a puff of mountain fog before a rising breeze.

“Mighty glad to see you safe back, buddy—was just beginning to feel a bit anxious—but you shouldn’t have attempted to lug such a whopping bunch of stuff up this steep grade.”

Perk gave him a wise grin, and managing to find his voice he went on to say, in a jerky manner between breaths:

“Didn’t reckon to in first place, Jack—after I hitched to aplenty yeou know I ’membered ’bout somethin’ else—then saw a package o’ grub I jest did want to try eout the wust kind—so she climbed to this mounting—but it’s okay—we kin make use o’ ever’thing, bet yeour boots we kin.”

“I hope you did what I told you to—eat a good lunch while you had the opportunity?” Jack asked, solicitously, whereat the other silyly winked one eye, and made reply:

“Sure thing, partner—easier to swaller the grub an’ carry same *inside*, than to tote it on my back. But queer haow a gink keeps on buildin’ up a appetite, fur somehaow I’m hungry as all git-eout agin.”

That was just like Perk; but Jack had to chuckle at the lugubrious expression he could see on his comrade’s expressive face as he announced this sad fact.

“Well,” he told the returned scout, “we’ll eat as soon as we get further away from the cliff; I’ve got some things to tell you that may sound interesting; but not a single word until I’ve had a chance to break *my* fast.”

“Great guns! Jack, ole hoss, I forgot as haow yeou aint had nary a bite all day long, while I was jest *gorgin’* myself daown yonder!”

“First tell me, was the ship okay?”

“Sure was, Jack,” the other went on to state, as he managed to regain a

stooping position, with the mighty pack still on his back, assisted by a friendly push at the hands of his ally.

Jack seemed to breathe easier, showing that he had really worried about the possibility of something happening to their air courier, such as must put a halt to their operations, if not entirely smashing the same.

“Fore I started back,” continued Perk, who was now wound up, and capable of running on for any length of time, his wind being assured, “I took time to toss some more o’ them evergreens on exposed parts o’ the crate. She’s camouflaged neow to beat the band—kinder guess a galoot with the eyes o’ a hawk might pass by less’n fifty feet away, an’ never suspicion what that big mound was. But there ain’t been anybody araound there since we cut aout—I’m givin’ yeou that straight, Pard Jack.”

Shortly afterwards they settled down in a secluded spot, where the brush grew thick enough to effectually conceal their presence, assisted in this friendly task as it was by various piles of rough rocks, such as were as plentiful in that wild country as “grains of sand on the seashore,” Perk had more than once declared.

Jack held to his resolve, and refused to say another word until he had taken the sharp edge off his appetite. Just then he doubtless could appreciate how his always hungry chum must suffer between meals.

By the time he had been munching the stuff the sympathizing Perk kept putting before him, for something like ten minutes, the acute sensation had passed away.

Perk had also been doing a little side act of his own, and managed to put away a fair proportion of eatables. He was waiting as patiently as he could for Jack to start telling what he meant by the word “discoveries;” and hoping something entertaining might be forthcoming.

“I’m glad you saw fit to fetch that big flashlight, *ditto* the two extra dry batteries along, buddy,” observed Jack, finally; “because we’re going to find a good use for the same. I’ve entered a claim for a nice dry residence, which we can use while we’re in this region—rain or shine, cold or otherwise, it’s a sure enough jim-dandy *cave!*”

“Bully boy, Jack; I’m tickled pink to hear such good news; when do we move in, tell me?”

“Right away—that is, by the time darkness comes along, Perk; because it isn’t a great way off—a fissure in the big rock that looked sort of inviting to me; so I crept inside, with a splinter of dry wood that I could coax to burn. Couldn’t see all I’d have liked to, but enough to tell me the crack developed into a regular cavern, with a roof fully twenty feet up, and feeling a heap warmer than we found ourselves last night.”

“Whoopee! that sounds right fine to me, cully; I’m sure glad yeou hit sech a prize package fust shot. But I jest knowed yeou’d be adoin’ yeour stuff when I was a crawlin’ ’long daown there in the bottom land. I’m crazy to take a squint at aour new lodgin’; but I guess there aint no sech hurry.”

“Plenty of time for everything,” Jack assured him, still engaged in the pleasant task of feeding the furnace fires within. “We can have a great chin once we get settled; and Perk, I spent a full hour toting a lot of wood into that split in the wall.”

“Meanin’ as haow we kin even have a bully little fire—all the comforts o’ home, an’ nary a red cent to pay for rent, in the bargain. Ain’t we the lucky boys, though.”

“Listen! that’s a familiar sound I’m picking up, eh, what, Perk?”

“Sure is!” cried the other, showing signs of sudden excitement. “Some sorter airship headin’ thisaways. Must be that ole crate belongin’ to the boys daown in the valley; let’s git back to the cliff, an’ see what’s what, Jack.”

CHAPTER XXIV

IN THE TOM SAWYER CAVERN

“She’s a comin’ closer right along, Jack!” Perk was saying, cautiously, as he limped along at his companion’s heels, evidently more or less tired after his long tramp, with that great pack settled on his back.

Jack realized this fact himself. He was keeping a wary eye turned in the quarter whence the roaring sound could be heard, constantly growing louder with each passing second. If he suddenly discovered the approaching plane he could give the plodding Perk the “high sign”, when both must drop down flat to keep from being discovered by those in the ship’s cabin.

As it happened the incoming aircraft was keeping low down, its pilot undoubtedly expecting to swing into the valley by way of the spreading jaws of the narrow pass.

By the time they managed to gain their old location the landing had been successfully accomplished, a fact that caused Perk to remark:

“Huh! them guys arunnin’ that crate aint no dummies at their job, sure as shootin’. That was a slick landin’ the gink at the stick set daown. Wow! See haow they’re aswarmin’ eout o’ evry shack, will yeou; like this comin’ back o’ the patched-up ship might mean it was afetchin’ ’em all sorts o’ stuff they kinder hankered after? What a soft time them rats air ahavin’, with nawthin’ to do ’cept wait fur the supper bell to sound.”

“Watch and see what manner of stuff they take out of the cabin,” advised the wide-awake Jack, with an evident hope he might learn a few “wrinkles” concerning the occupation of the confederates in this mountain retreat, by thus checking their plane’s cargo, for he had noted that it was heavily laden.

There seemed to be an abundance of willing workers now, and the way the freight was lifted out of the cabin, to be carried toward the big log cabin, told of the personal interest they had in the stuff.

“Looks mostly like grub, I’d say,” Jack remarked, keeping his eyes fastened to the useful binoculars; “and I reckon business, whatever it is they’re carrying on,

must be good, for them to buy such a mountain of food, staples and fancy groceries in the bargain.”

Perk could be heard making a queer sound in his throat.

“I’m a piker if this doant beat anythin’ I ever stacked up against,” he gritted between his teeth. “Hard times, they say, an’ yet here’s a bunch o’ tough guys aloaded up with ’bout sech truck like a oil-well nabob daown in Oklahoma might lay in fur the hull winter. Mebbe I wouldn’t like to board up at this hotel fur a spell! I’d sure make a dent in their ole grub pile.”

The plane cabin was soon emptied, and apparently it had held an enormous cargo. They saw the two men forming the crew head toward the dining hall, as though to await the call to supper. Perk, having begged to hold the glasses, was eagerly staring at the pair, wearing dingy flying togs.

“Hot-diggetty-dig!” he muttered, just loud enough for Jack to hear him, “so *that’s* what took ole Nat outen San Diego, was it? Did somethin’ to make him want to skip by the light o’ the moon, an’ then hitched up with this ere rotten bunch o’ crooks. He sure had it comin’ to him, bein’ he’d been skatin’ on the edge o’ goin’ bad some time back.”

“You seem to know some one, Perk, from what you’re saying?” ventured Jack.

“Yeah! a galoot called Nat Tucker, once a fair sorter pilot; but kinder crooked, some folks used to say behind his back. That’s him, the stouter lad with a limp—got that onct when he had to step off a mile high, an’ his chute didn’t work as nice as it orter, lettin’ him crash when he landed in a hay field—would a been killed if it’d been rocks, like these here. Found his level okay when he struck this rotten crowd. Had a sorter nice halfbreed squaw fur a wife, too, pretty as a picture; but I heard she kicked Nat aouten the house, so he’s cleared up fur keeps. Well, he’s kinder classy as a pilot, an’ said to be a reg’lar dare-devil in his way. The boys’ll sure be some s’prised to hear what’s happened to ole Nat.”

As the crowd down in the valley had thinned out by this time, most of them passing into the big log cabin, Jack concluded there was no necessity for himself and Perk to remain any longer at their lookout point.

Once back at their former campground Jack picked up his supper at the point he had quit when the sound of the oncoming airship drifted to their ears.

Perk looked expectant, as though he still remembered that his chum had promised to enlighten him concerning various discoveries made during the day just then closing.

“I’ve been figuring things out,” Jack commenced saying, as he continued his interrupted meal, “and from a number of little things I saw I’m almost certain these banded crooks must be carrying on a bogus-money plant up here—several

times when the wind changed I thought I could catch a queer sort of sound that was along the line of machinery, a press perhaps working at printing the counterfeit bills.”

“Gee whiz! I wonder!” ejaculated the deeply interested Perk, his eyes aglow with half suppressed excitement.

“Stop and figure it out for yourself, buddy,” Jack went on smoothly, as though his own mind was already fully made up. “Could anybody think up a finer and safer location for such an illegal plant than up here, where they could carry on their work without molestation? And then, when they had a good grist of bogus stuff to scatter over the western country, how easy to send it out aboard that swift airship? I warrant you they’re doing a land-office business—no stagnation in this neck of the woods, even if it’s said to be the case nearly everywhere else all over the world.”

“Gosh! doant it beat the Dutch, Jack, haow chumps like that kin lick up all the cream on a pan o’ milk, leavin’ the skim stuff to honest folks? But yeou said yeou’d picked up a heap o’ pints, which I’d hear ’bout later on. Aint that time come ’raound yet, buddy?”

“Hold your horses, Perk; that news can keep until after we get located in our new sleeping quarters. Suppose we divide up all this stuff you’ve fetched, along with what we already had on hand; so I can help tote the same. I can see with one eye how you must be fairly worn out with what you carried all the way up here. Come, let’s get a move on, partner.”

Perk did not show much signs of being so dead tired, judging from the alacrity with which he scrambled to his knees, and busied himself making up the two packs. One, which he evidently fully intended for himself, was about twice as heavy as the other; seeing which, (and comprehending the usual generous spirit of this big-hearted chum) Jack managed to pick it up when the other was not looking, and absolutely refused to surrender when appealed to.

“Not any, partner,” he told Perk, resolutely; “what do you take me for, a weakling, or a shirker? If you say much more I’ll sling *both* packs over my shoulder, and leave you to trot along in the rear. I’ve done nothing but loaf all day, while you were as busy as a beaver. Get out, and stay out, d’ye hear, boy?”

He led the way, and seemed to know just where he was going, passing around a dozen great rocks that barred their passage. Perk marveled at his pal’s skill and memory as a guide, never pausing to question his route, but following the circuitous trail as though he had trodden the same for a long time.

Finally, when they had descended the slope for a short distance, Jack stopped in front of a minor cliff, and pointed to the fissure in question.

“I’ll go on ahead with my flashlight, and you keep close to my heels, Perk,”

he explained. “So far as I could tell there’s nothing apt to trip us up; but its just as well to be on your guard, with a clumsy bundle on your back, and your legs being a bit tottery after that long climb. Ready, buddy—then in we dip.”

Perk could not keep from feeling something of a thrill as he followed his partner into the fissure, which seemed to widen the further they advanced. Presently he could no longer glimpse either wall, and hence came to the conclusion they must have already reached the large cavern mentioned by Jack earlier in the evening.

Coming to a halt the leader shifted his hand torch in such a fashion that both of them were now able to see the walls, as well as the high ceiling of the natural cavern. Perk could not repress an exclamation of mingled satisfaction and awe.

“Hot-diggetty-dig! but aint this jest grand?” he burst forth. “Me always a feelin’ a yearnin’ inside to glimpse what yeou’d call a reg’lar cavern, like Tom Sawyer an’ Huck Finn explored, daown on the bank o’ the Mississip; an’ here she be like magic. Say, this takes the cake, partner.”

“Welcome to our new home, brother,” laughed Jack, but not hilariously; “and now to drop our packs so as to rest up.”

CHAPTER XXV

SQUATTERS' RIGHTS

“Yeou doan’t reckon as haow anybody kin see a fire, if so be I started a little blaze back in here, do yeou, partner?” queried Perk.

Jack knew how the other was fairly itching just to feel the warmth of a genuine campfire, under such extraordinary conditions, and hence shook his head.

“Not a Chinaman’s chance, buddy—too many crooks in the passage we took getting here. The wood I fetched in lies just back of you; and besides, a fire will save my battery, which means a heap. Go to it then, and get busy.”

Accordingly Perk lost no time in carrying out his cherished plan, for he had always vowed himself to be a “reg’lar cat o’ a fire-worshipper;” so, the match having been applied they were treated to a generous glow that revealed much more plainly the character of the wonderful cavern.

Later on the investigating Perk discovered that another fissure, shaped somewhat like a regular tunnel, led away from the central cavern, and sloped downward.

His mind seemed to still follow up that Mark Twain idea, for he had no sooner taken a good survey at the passage entrance than he gave Jack a shrewd look, and followed this up by saying ingenuously:

“Huh! if I didn’t know we was a heap o’ miles away from the ole Mississip I’d be ’clined to swear this must be the gen-u-ine cave Tom and Huck knocked ’raound in the time they found all that lost treasure. But I wonder—”

“What do you wonder, Perk?”

“Struck me that mebbe aour ole friend, that silvertip bear, might have his den somewhere ’bout in the rocks; an’ where’d he run ’cross a better place to hole up fur the winter than right here! Say, mebbe I wouldn’t hate to run smack on the ugly critter while we was a explorin’ some o’ the tunnels an’ passages that lead outen this here central chamber? They kinder give these here grizzlies a reputation fur havin’ long memories, jest like elephants do; an’ I bet yeou a

cookey he aint never agoin' to fureget little Gabe Perkiser, what throwed a match into his hair, an' set him afire."

But Jack did not appear to have such a lively imagination as his comrade, for he shook his head in the negative, and tried to soothe the anxious Perk.

"I hardly think there's any chance for such a nasty happening, buddy," he assured the other; "though I do reckon the old chap'd never forget you, after receiving such scurvy treatment at your hands. Some time later we'll take a look in at that same passage—these caves in the mountains often turn out to run for a mile or more, twisting and turning, to come out it may be close to the starting point, even in the shape of another fissure."

"Say, I'd like that same trick, I'm atellin' yeou, Jack, boy. 'Sides, bein' partial to caves o' all kinds an' species I'm also given to explorin' queer places—got me into heaps o' trouble in my kid days, which same makes me laugh to remember. But tell me some more things yeou thunk up, or seen, while I was aout wrastlin' fur grub."

Jack looked at him in a peculiar way that caused Perk to wonder what he was about to spring upon him.

"Remember my telling you about that cook chap they've got, waiting on them, and all that, Perk?"

"Sure do, him with the s'posed to be white *chef's* cap—was he any different from the general run—cook, crook, seems to me they sorter hitch like they might be first cousins."

"There was something that seemed familiar about him, but it was only later in the day I managed to glimpse a better look at the fellow, when the sun shone full on his moniker; then it flashed on me who he was."

"Hold on there, partner, I jest hopes yeou ain't agoin' to inform me he's yet another galoot I useter know—seems like that Nat Tucker, added to aour ole friend, Slippery Slim, might be enough former 'quaintances to meet up with in sech a nest o' flim-flam artists an' crooks."

"Well, I think you told me once you'd never known this party; but I had, and only a short time back I told you more or less about him. It was in Washington I used to run along with him in my work."

"Wait up, partner—go slow 'til I ketches my breath. Yeou ain't agoin' to stagger me by sayin' that this here cook might be *him*?"

"Just what I mean, Perk."

"Simeon—Simeon Balderson?"

"No other, brother, undoubtedly a prisoner, and being made to serve that miserable gang of hoodlums in a menial capacity, partly to humble him, and give them plenty of chances to throw mean jibes at him as the representative of the

Service they hate so much. It's the irony of Fate, if ever such a thing could be."

"Dead certain be yeou, Jack?"

The other nodded in the affirmative, adding:

"He must have been badly injured in the scrap before he and his companion were knocked out, for he certainly never limped like that when I knew him, only a year or so back. Possibly the second man may have been wiped out in the gun battle; though why they should spare Simeon's life is a puzzle to me; but some day we'll understand, since I wouldn't think of going away from here and leaving him in the hands of those human tigers."

"Shake on that same, ole hoss; I'm with yeou every time, 'cause it means we're agoin' to have some mighty stiff work on aour hands 'fore we kin send a ball daown in each alley, an' make a clean sweep o' the duck-pins; an' that's the dizzy game I sure likes most."

There was really nothing like brag about what Perk said, as his comrade knew full well; in the past he had seen Perk put up a grand fight, and never could forget how he slashed, and cut, and struck home with any old weapon he chanced to have in his hands, until a clean swathe had been cut through the ranks of their foes. He always appeared to be a little ashamed of having lost his head, and striking blind, excusing himself under the plea that he must have been in a bit of a "tailspin."

"Here we can stay, Perk, without running much risk of being discovered; for I hardly imagine any of those chaps would bother exercising themselves to try and find out what the country around their Happy Valley looks like."

"Huh! I kinder guess not any," remarked the skeptical Perk, with a look akin to disgust on his face; "they're a heap too lazy to move, 'cept to come to their three meals a day when off duty, and kept in camp. Same men when on a raid robbin' some border bank; holdin' up a train; or nice healthy jobs like that, kin act like a pack o' half starved locoed wolves."

"I was just thinking," continued Jack, who seemed never to lose a point worth considering, "that perhaps we'd better make sure our eats are kept secure. Such places as this cavern would be attractive dens for foxes, and such predatory varmints, who'd like nothing better than to steal every scrap of food we've got; which would be a serious thing, I'd allow."

"Wall, I kinder guess it sure *would*, by hokey!" exclaimed Perk, quickly aroused, as the danger loomed along the line of possible starvation, "an' it ain't agoin' to happen either, if I have to stick 'raound all night long. Grub an' me air the best o' friends; an' I'd go a long way to defend sech a good pal."

"Hardly be so serious as that, buddy," advised Jack, seeing how his suggestion had awakened lively fears in his companion's breast. "Plenty of loose stuff lying

around in here, so we'll just *cache* our food supplies, by covering the pile with a heavy weight no beast could budge."

"Yeou said it, partner, an' I'll take a look 'raound till I kin pick aout the best place to build aour fort. Watch my smoke, Jack, boy."

It did not take him long to find what he sought, after which they speedily arranged things to suit their idea of security.

"There she be," Perk remarked, in a satisfied tone, as the job was finished. "If any red fox or kiote kin scratch his way under that stack o' dornicks I'll eat my hat—an' ole dungarees in th' bargain. I ain't a luggin' good eats all the way from San Diego, an' payin' aout lots o' coin fur the same, jest to make a holiday fur four-footed thieves."

"Both of us are dead for sleep, I reckon," ventured Jack, as they lay on the rocky floor, Perk indulging in the luxury of a pipe of his favorite Turkish mixture for solace; "and perhaps we'd be wise to snatch a few hours while we may—we're up against a pretty hard proposition, and there's no telling just what lies ahead of us. How about it, Perk?"

"Shucks! I'm willin' enuff to lay off; an' mebbe naow I ain't glad I done fetched them two woolen blankets along as we had on aour cots aboard the ship. They sure helped to make up a fine load; but right naow they'll be wuth all they cost me on the hike."

"And I'll bless your long-sightedness in thinking of our comfort," Jack hastened to assure him. "Bare rocks like these are hardly in the same class with a good spring bed, and plenty of covers. We'll skip some sore bones because of having these to tuck under us, Perk."

"I hate to let the bully fire die down," Perk presently observed, for he never was so happy as when sitting alongside a cheery blaze, puffing at his briarwood pipe, and watching the rings of smoke sail upward.

"Oh! it wouldn't do to try and keep it going all night," Jack told him. "Too little stuff for burning, and hard to tote in here. I'll keep my electric hand-torch close beside me, and if there's any occasion for lighting up the cavern I can do it in a jiffy."

That seemed to ease Perk's mind somewhat, for Jack could plainly see the other was somewhat concerned regarding the possibility of their having an unwelcome visitor during the time they were resting from the fatigues of the past day.

He watched Perk making his preparations for retiring, and just as he anticipated the other was exceedingly careful to pick out a camping place as far removed from that mysterious passage leading out of the central cavern as he possibly could.

Of course the reason for his so doing was plainly manifest to Jack—he could spell it in four letters—B-E-A-R—Perk could not wholly dissuade himself that Fate meant to play him a nasty trick, and bring him into close quarters with that ferocious monster, the silvertip, or as he was known along the mountains of the Coast, “Old Eph.” The distinct smell of burning hair still seemed to linger within reach of his olfactories, and give him a reproachful sensation, as though he felt he had taken a mean advantage of the beast.

No such thought worried Jack; but then the shadow of guilt did not hang over his head as was the case with Perk.

“Don’t forget to wind up your wrist-watch, buddy,” warned Jack, shortly afterwards; as Perk still sat there on his blanket, keeping up his meditative puffing, as though he meant to see the fire to its last flickering extinction. “They’re our only reliable guide to tell us when morning comes around. In this black cave we might lie dozing until the middle of the day, without knowing how we were sleeping at the switch, and wasting precious time.”

“Hot-diggetty-dig! partner, haow yeou do jest think o’ ever’thing. On’y fur yeou I’d be like a lost lamb awanderin’ ’raound the countryside, bleatin’, an’ shiverin’ fur fear the pesky wolves’d get me.”

“That’ll do for you, buddy,” Jack sternly told him. “We’ve both got our several good and bad points; but we’re essential to each other to make up a working team, six of one, and half a dozen of the other—now, don’t let me hear you getting off any of that boloney stuff again, mind.”

“Huh! yeou lets me daown too easy, partner; guess I know my shortcomings better’n anybody else; an’ thinkin’ ain’t much o’ a long suite with Gabe, not at no time in hist’ry.”

“Well, have it any way you like, Perk; but I’m meaning to settle down for a nice nap. Just call out if you want a light any old time, and I’ll accommodate you before you can say Jack Robinson. So-long, and here’s hoping we’ll be able to get a move on before another night sets in.”

“I sure echoes that wish, boy,” muttered Perk, seriously; for he realized that they had undertaken one of the most troublesome tasks that could be placed to their credit; and would have need of all the good luck and breaks possible in order to come through.

Perk having set himself to what he considered a duty, would never let any trivial things deter him; and so he must have sat up with that declining fire until the very last feeble flicker expired; then rolling himself up in his blanket he sought relief in slumber.

Time went on, the night passed away, and there was not a solitary alarm to give Perk a thrill. Both of them were very tired, and must have slept soundly, for

the first thing Perk knew Jack turned the dazzling light of his little torch full on his face, arousing him, and then remarked quietly:

“Time we were stirring, partner—I figure the dawn has got around, when we can start doing things.”

CHAPTER XXVI

A BACK DOOR TO THE VALLEY

A hasty breakfast was eaten, washed down with a few swigs of cold liquid refreshment, which the ever obliging Perk had fetched up in a bottle taken from the ship for the purpose, and filled with coffee from their gallon Thermos jug.

Thus the adventurous pair felt well braced for whatever duties the new day had in store for them.

“We’ll divide our force for the morning,” suggested Jack, knowing only too well his chum would take his words in the way of a command, for he occupied the position of leader, and Perk was only too willing to accede to each and every suggestion his mate advanced.

“Jest so, partner,” Perk instantly commented; “an’ what air yeou agoin’ to pass on to me, I wanter know?”

Jack picked up the glasses, and handed them to the other.

“You’re a vidette on the lookout this morning, buddy,” he explained. “Up in our old place you’ll keep watch on the valley, to note everything that takes place, so you can pass it along to me. Keep your eye particularly on those two figures whenever they’re in sight—Slippery Slim Garrabrant and the cook, whom I believe to be Simeon Balderson, a prisoner.”

“Consider it done, ole hoss,” Perk went on to say, firmly. “Yeou’ll sure git a report o’ all the doin’s when we meet agin. Anyways I got a purty good mem’ry, if I am short o’ some things.”

“When noon comes by the sun, make your way back to the entrance of our cave, where I’ll be waiting with my flashlight to fetch you in here. In the afternoon, possibly both of us will go on guard up above.”

“I notices, Jack, as haow yeou allers say *down here* when yeou mentions this cave; haow do yeou make that aout, partner?”

“It’s simple enough, Perk, if you stop to remember how we kept descending more or less all the way from where we entered by means of that split in the rocks.”

Perk wagged his head as if to acknowledge that was something absolutely true, even though he himself had not previously noted the fact.

“Partner, if so be it’s jest the same to yeou, may I ask what line yeou goin’ to foller while I’m on sentry duty—I likes to be posted, that’s all?”

“Which is perfectly all right, Perk; and I’ll just say I expect to look around here a bit, and find out a few things that have struck me as possible, even if hardly probable. I’ll give you the gist of what success I have in my prowling around when we are taking a snack at noon.”

“I git yeou, Jack, an’ it’s all to the good with me every time.”

Jack chuckled, for he had noticed the quick and significant glance his comrade shot across the cavern toward that yawning opening marking the tunnel-like passage Perk had held in such suspicion just before they wrapped up in their blankets and sought forgetfulness of their troubles.

Just the same Jack did not undertake to explain what he had in mind; it was his usual habit to make his investigations first, and follow up with explanations afterwards, when he had figured things out, and proven his point sound.

He convoyed Perk close to the opening where the fissure split the rocky wall—here after a laconic “so-long” they separated, and Jack retraced his way back along the winding passage.

Perk again climbed the hill until he was able to creep back of those friendly scrub bushes. Here he could lie flat on his stomach, and cautiously survey pretty much all of the wonderful valley spread out before him like a genuine panorama.

Thus he spent all of the morning, occasionally changing his position when finding that his limbs were becoming more or less cramped. During this time Perk was busily storing his mind with dozens of incidental happenings down in the camp of the fugitive criminals, banded together for preying on the forces of law and order, which they held in contempt in carrying out their occasional forays, with defenceless banks, or unprotected trains carrying United States registered-mail sacks, as the objects of their special regard.

He thus saw the outlaws’ patched-up airplane make an ascent, and head off toward the southeast, rising to pass over the lofty peaks lying in that general direction many miles distant.

“Kinder guess as haow Jack he’ll be some int’rested in what I kin tell him ’bout the little cargo they stored in the crazy ole cabin o’ thet crate, all right,” Perk was muttering to himself, while he watched the ship growing less and less distinct, as it soared through a fleecy cloud, and began to look very much like some distant buzzard, or vulture. “Less I’m way off in my figgerin’ them three packages might a been the last printin’ o’ bogus bank notes they was asendin’ aout to ther agents in some cities daown Texas way. Didn’t I read in the papers

on'y a short time ago, that there never was knowed to be sech a raft o' bad money in the country 'long the Rio Grande; an' sech good imitations o' Uncle Sam's genu-ine currency it faized the bank tellers to pick it aout. 'Baout time I'd say we got busy, an' stopped up the hole in the dam, 'fore the hull kentry was flooded with the stuff."

He knew when it was getting close to noon by the clamor arising down where he lived, and after that kept a close watch on the glowing sun. Finally, when the time seemed fully ripe, Perk started to creep away, arriving promptly at the fissure, to have Jack show himself, and beckon him to come on in.

Back in the central cavern they built a little fire, in order to save the precious battery of Jack's hand-torch; and seated close together proceeded to again lower the stock of eatables.

"By close economy we ought to have enough grub to carry us through a couple of days after this one," Jack observed, while they were munching what was intended to be a mere lunch; Perk announcing his intention of doing a little cooking at their later evening meal, he having fetched along a pound of sliced bacon, a few raw potatoes, and some onions, to which latter he admitted being very partial.

"Sorry we ain't got any coffee up here," he said, a bit sadly; "but it stands to reason yeou jest caint 'spect everythin' when yeou're on the trail o' bad gunmen like we air right naow. I ain't kickin', remember, Jack, ole man."

Presently, when they had about finished their frugal lunch Jack asked his companion to make his report. This Perk did, giving many different suggestive happenings that he had noted in rotation, and emphasizing his words at certain points.

"You've done a good job, Perk," the other assured him, when the end of the story was reached. "In lots of ways what you're reporting strengthens our previous convictions—there can be no possible doubt about the cook being our fellow worker, Simeon; and so it goes without saying that when we kick out of here its got to be with two others in our company—Slippery Slim, and Simeon."

"That's okay with me, partner," agreed Perk, eagerly; "an' we'll keep on deck in this here nest o' snakes 'til we kin put the game through—no matter if we gotter go withaout a bite o' chow fur a hull week—kinder guess I kin stand it as long as yeou kin."

"Nothing else you noticed, partner?" queried Jack.

"On'y that the ole crate she skipped off 'bout a hour after I settled daown back o' them nice bushes," came the ready reply; after which Perk went on to describe how the man they knew as Slippery Slim seemed to be so careful of the several packages, and the leather bag he handed over to the pilot of the plane; and which

Perk was so dead certain must contain the latest printing of notes off the press they could sometimes hear rumbling down at one of the cabins, in and out of which some of the men were so frequently passing.

This additional information seemed to please the listening Jack exceedingly, to judge from the way he nodded his head, and smiled knowingly.

“Things are breaking for us, I’d say, buddy,” he told his mate, to the other’s satisfaction; “and by slow degrees we’ll carry on, step by step, until one of these nights we can explode our bomb, and play the game to a finish. But it happens that you haven’t got a monopoly of the good news.”

“Hully gee! then yeou been a nosin’ ’raound this queer hole back o’ the cliff, an’ mebbe run acrost somethin’ wuth knowin’, eh, what, partner?”

“Just what I have, Perk—I started in to explore the black, tunnel-like passage that you kept your eye on last evening.”

“Say, doant tell me yeou run acrost that big hill-billy o’ a grizzly, Jack?”

“You’re a bad guesser, matey,” he was assured; and then Jack added: “Found that the passage kept dropping down all the time; and in the end I came to another fissure, with broad daylight ahead—then looked out into the valley; and found I was only some twenty feet from the bottom of the big ditch, Perk!”

CHAPTER XXVII

PIKE'S PEAK, OR——BUST!

When Jack made this dramatic announcement Perk manifested such supreme astonishment, coupled with delight, that his eyes looked as if they would jump out of his head. He reached over and clutched the other's hand, which he proceeded to squeeze unmercifully, as he burst out:

"Hot-diggetty-dig! but *did* yeou ever hear o' sech great luck in all yeour born days? Why, it seems like there might be a back door to the Hole-in-the-Wall, after all; which mebbe nary a single boob in the bunch has ever discovered!"

"I figured it all out while down there, and peeking," Jack continued to explain; "and felt certain what you are saying was absolutely true. You see the fissure lies high up on the wall, and there seems to be a narrow slanting shelf running down nearly to the bottom, where green grass is growing that would hide a trail of footsteps wonderfully, if we decided to drop into the valley while night lasted, and investigate; possibly get in touch with friend Simeon."

"Great stuff yeou're a givin' me partner; looks like ever'thing might be arunnin' for a fall with them tough guys. They're so dead sure nawthin' kin reach aout an' git 'em, they trust to dumb luck, an' lays 'raound puttin' on layers o' fat, playin' keerds an' agamblin' away sech cash as they got in the divide-up arter the last scoop."

"Let's hope Fortune will keep on smiling, Perk; but just the same we'll keep our wits sharpened, and let no opportunity for making a point pass us by."

"Huh! guess naow as haow yeou mean we gotter to trust in the Lord, but keep aour powder dry; like the ole Pilgrim Fathers uster do in Colonial days,—as I've read in hist'ry."

"Exactly," concurred Jack, to add, as though he could not quite get over the great satisfaction his latest discovery gave him: "but look at the advantage we now have, being able, as I think is certain, to go and come in and out of the valley, without any one being the wiser."

"Jest so, Jack, we doant need to try an' slip past the sentry we reckoned was

on duty at the narrer pass—kinder got my goat wonderin' haow in tarnation we was agoin' to chuck *him* overboard when the time kim along. Naow we needn't bother headin' thataway, 'less we wanted to keep them boobs plugged up inside the big hole. Doant furgit I fetched along some bombs that cud do the trick, an' mebbe blow up that ere pass sky-high, makin' a reg'lar jumble o' things which they couldn't climb over, it might be."

"Not a bad idea at all, brother," Jack told him, with an admiring look. "When it comes to doing *big* things, especially with all kinds of bombs, (even to mustard and the tear sort) you take the cake. Wait until we get our final plan going, and we'll see what can be done to give them a great scare. With their leader missing, and the entrance to their valley fort laid in ruins, I reckon they'd cut and run for it, thinking Uncle Sam would now send a force by air ship to round them up."

"Gosh amighty! but things *do* look good to me, partner," Perk could not help saying again, with his face wreathed in smiles.

"Well, I'm first meaning to take you down through that passage, and let you have a glimpse out through the second fissure in the cliff. I'd like to make certain, if we dared take the risk, that the sloping little trail is safe enough to let us creep down, and come up again, in case we decided to try and get in touch with Simeon this very night!"

"Wow! that same 'peals to me like all get-aout, partner. Le's shake a foot right away an' *go*," was Perk's energetic appeal, as he got to his feet, primed for fresh adventure and discoveries—always ready to "do things."

Accordingly Jack led the way into the hole in the wall, his little hand-electric torch lighting up the passage, so there was no risk of either of them stumbling when they "took a chance," as Perk would say.

Later on, after they had arrived at the terminus of the down-grade, Jack whispered directions in his chum's ear, and started him off to take his first view of the valley floor from that lower level. Perk was extra careful not to expose even his nose, in securing this thrilling survey, and came back fairly bubbling over with excitement, also enthusiasm.

They sat there within sight of the daylight streak, talking in whispers, and exchanging comments on the situation. Afterwards they both crept forward, and commenced a careful survey, even to poking out a head when it seemed judicious and safe to do so.

"Perhaps," suggested wise Jack, after a while, "we'd better get busy at the old stand, where it's easy to watch everything that goes on in the enclosed valley. I want to fix the points so carefully in my mind, that I could move around in the blackest night, and keep clear of the different huts and shacks."

“You would—that’s right,” commented Perk, firm believer that he was in his best pal’s ability to carry on where most other men must give up, and seek help; “any feller what could fly blind through the worst sea o’ fog that ever was seen, kin do like he had cat’s eyes, an’ could see things in the pitch dark.”

“You rate me much too high, brother; if I’m any judge you’ve got far better vision for distances than I ever boasted. But it’s always been one of my pet schemes to build up my memory by what you might call a brain photograph that I can depend on to give me my points when in a fog, or the blackness of midnight. But come on, let’s be moving upwards again, Perk.”

Before another half hour had expired they were once more crouching back of their friendly brush screen, and taking turns in making good use of the powerful binoculars.

“Lucky thing, Jack, we didn’t leave these here bully glasses behind by mistake when we fixed to start on this same little jaunt an’ adventure,” Perk was saying, almost under his breath, as he handed the object in question to his companion, making each movement slowly, so as to keep from attracting attention to the top of the high cliff.

“That could never happen to us, brother,” Jack told him, with conviction in his tones; “because wherever we go in our task of getting some particular man the Government wants badly, these same glasses are worth their weight in solid gold—don’t make any mistake about that, partner.”

“Huh! I’d say six times over, they air, Mister. ’Member haow we used ’em daown there in Florida, when chasin’ after them wind-jammer planes the smugglers were usin’ to fetch in all kinds o’ stuff that didn’t pay any duty—hard booze, diamonds, even yaller Chinks what was willin’ to set up the long green flimsies so’s to get a footin’ on U. S. A. soil. They helped us kerry aout aour plans jest fine.”

The long afternoon slowly passed, and as evening drew on apace Jack was ready to call it a full day.

“I’m loaded for bear, as they say, Perk,” he announced, showing signs of giving up the lookout, with the gathering of shadows far down below in the long valley. “I mean by that I fancy I’ve got all my bearings down pat, and couldn’t better the same no matter how much time I spent.”

“Gosh all hemlock! partner, does that same mean we kin get started this very night to make contact with Simeon?” demanded the duly thrilled Perk, backing out on hands and knees from his covert.

“Why waste any more time when there’s no need?” Jack told him. “A bad spell of weather might come along to knock our plans silly; or perhaps these chaps down yonder might have some scheme that would take them pretty much

all away on a big lay. We couldn't play our hands if the man we want so badly has gone off with his crowd, to hold up some bank, or treasure train, could we? So while the stars hold out to shine up in the sky, and things seem to be fairly quiet with that mob, we'll see what luck we have. I've got it figured out that Simeon must sleep in that dun-colored army tent close to the cookhouse, and dining hall; so that's bound to be our main objective tonight, after we land in the valley."

"Huh! only thing I got to worryin' 'bout, partner, is *dawgs*," said Perk, with a particular emphasis on the last word.

"Yes, I know they seem to have several bow-wows in the settlement; but as a rule they're common riffraff stuff—never a sign of a police dog, or collie; so we needn't anticipate any trouble from such measly mutts, only good to play with, or gnaw a bone. So let's figure we're going to make connections with Simeon tonight, if it's any way possible, or know the reason why."

"Yeah!" Perk added joyously, "Pike's peak—or bust, it is—make it unanimous ev'rybody."

CHAPTER XXVIII

INVADING THE TIGERS' LAIR

Having thus decided to begin work that same night, naturally Jack and his best pal were more or less concerned as to what the weather promised.

As aviators they had become accustomed to securing the very latest Government report as to the probabilities ahead, so that by now this had become a habit. The knowledge that there was a strong likelihood of a dense fog along their proposed route—perhaps signs of a war of the elements, not only put them doubly on their guard, but often proved of value in meeting and overcoming the threatening danger.

In this instance they had no weather sharp to give them a clue, founded on late wires from different points, as to the velocity of the wind, its direction, the chances of snow or rain, perhaps electrical disturbances in the bargain—now everything must depend on their own ability to figure things out through taking note of the heavens, and kindred storm indicators.

Jack was a fair weather prophet himself, though never so bold as to claim absolute perfection; yes, and Perk too prided himself on knowing considerable, also able to tell when any severe upset was in the offing—though it must be confessed he was rather inclined to depend on an aching corn, or some sort of queer itching in his joints, to be able to prophesy a sudden change in prevailing conditions.

So they studied the sky, noted the passage of certain types of clouds, as well as several other heralds of the weather in prospect; and finally agreed that, unless something came along to materially affect matters, they could reasonable expect quite a lengthy spell of seasonable weather.

At any rate the fact that both reached the same conclusion was looked upon as promising double insurance—several days would surely see them through their big job, and that was all they asked.

Accordingly, having settled that part of the arrangement, they started for their underground retreat, feeling that thus far everything seemed to be working in

their interest.

Perk was looking wonderfully pleased, and Jack could give a good guess just why this should be so. It had been arranged that on this fateful evening, when their mission was on the eve of taking a fresh spurt, Perk was to be permitted to actually *cook a meal*—such as the camp larder allowed.

He had asked his comrade concerning the possibility of the odors betraying their hiding place; and Jack told him there was not one chance in a hundred of such a thing coming about.

“Already you’ve been smoking in our cave, and the odor of your tobacco must have floated out to the open air; but from what we’ve learned no one ever comes up this way—those lazy panhandlers down there wouldn’t bother themselves to scout around. So its perfectly safe to fry your bacon, and even make coffee—if you’ve got any sort of a vessel to contain the same.”

“Jest leave all that to little Perk, Senor Jack,” the other told him, in half suppressed excitement; “I’m the lad as kin sling the hash to beat the band. My innards air yellin’ fur a gen-u-ine hot meal, ’cause cold stuff doant seem to touch the spot. Git ready to give yeour tummy a treat fur a change.”

They were back in the cavern when this little discussion took place; and no sooner had a decision been reached than Perk commenced his preparations; Jack meantime busying himself with pencil and paper, figuring out certain little problems connected with their programme for the night.

Later on Jack began to lift his head, and turn anxious glances toward his busy comrade, meanwhile sniffing the atmosphere, and faintly *smiling*—when a healthy young man, accustomed to feeding on first-class chow, day in and day out, is forced by reason of unusual circumstances to partaking—in limited quantities at that—of cold meals, with an extremely minute bill of fare in the bargain, naturally when once again catching the appetizing whiff of frying rashers of prime bacon, also sliced potatoes; and above all the thrilling odor of boiling Java coffee, how could he help displaying his joy at the prospect of such a coming treat?

The realization was quite as good as the anticipation, only it must be confessed that when they had dutifully scraped the pan absolutely clean, and squeezed out the last drop of the ambrosia Perk had brewed in some sort of a hobo empty quart fruit-can, that chanced to be aboard their ship, neither of them felt filled to capacity.

“Never mind,” Jack remarked, observing the rueful expression on his chum’s face, and watching him rubbing his stomach, as if to show how far from being distended it was; “the *sample* was extra fine. Just hold your horses until we get back to town, and then the sky is the limit. Get that, pard?”

“Thanks, awfully, Jack, ole hoss; I’m agoin’ to live on promises fur a short spell; but oh! baby, aint the fur bound to fly when I get workin’ my jaws reg’lar onct again?”

After that they lay around and waited, for a certain length of time must elapse before it would be safe to start operations.

Perk asked numerous questions, since as usual certain matters seemed a bit hazy in his mind, never as speedy as that of Jack to grasp things. Despite these breaks the time hung heavily on their hands, for careful Jack refused to pay any heed to all the long sighs that welled up from Perk’s heart, with the object of hastening the decision.

Finally, when the impatient one was writhing as if actually in pain, Jack took compassion on him.

“I reckon we might just as well make a break, buddy; once down at the outlet we can do the balance of our loafing, until it looks safe for us to start. That ought to be well along toward midnight, all depending how soon those noisy card players break up, and hit the hay.”

Earlier in the evening there had been considerable loud talking, calling, and singing among the confederated fugitives; but already much of this was stilled. A number of them, however, seemed to be gathered in the dining hall, gambling—these evidently were the lucky players; those who had already turned in the ones who had in previous bouts been cleaned out, and must hold themselves in check until another foray had been carried out, with fresh plunder divided up among the members of the lawless community.

Lying there at the crevice that formed a back door to their wonderful cave, the two sky detectives listened, and whispered to each other; meanwhile keeping a close watch on the big log-cabin, where lights could be seen through an opening serving as one of the rude windows, destitute of glass, and closed in cold weather with wooden shutters.

“When the last game is played out,” Jack was saying under his breath, for they were not so far removed from the rough shack in question that talking in ordinary tones would be exceedingly risky; “it’s the habit of Simeon as sexton and cook of the central ranch, to shut up shop, turn out the lamp and then limp around to the tent where he sleeps, a pretty tired man I’d say. We want to be on hand to give him the tip that strangers are inside the barricades of the valley. Then, when he knows who’s come to his assistance we can start to make up our plans for the big break.”

“Yeou doant kinder guess Simeon he might give us away in his excitement, eh, partner?” Perk asked, anxiously, always scenting trouble, it seemed.

“Not on your life, partner,” Jack assured him. “Simeon has been in the service

for a good many years, and learned to control his emotions, no matter what happens. You'll not hear a whisper from his lips when we speak his name—I'd stake anything on that."

Presently, from indications they believed the last three men had emerged from the dining hall; some one was moving about within, which Jack felt certain must be the prisoner who had been forced to play the part of general servant, possibly to humiliate him for his attempt to break up the gang.

"It's time we moved along," whispered Jack, with which remark he crawled out upon the little ledge, and commenced the rather hazardous task of backing down the incline, each movement being executed with extreme care.

It turned out just as they had anticipated, for the sloping ledge kept on to the level of the valley bed, although it must have been next to impossible for any one to distinguish its presence from the level ground.

Jack led the way, and they were close to the tent, when the last light vanished in the big cabin near by. Presently, just as Jack had figured with such exactness, a dim figure came slowly around the corner, almost colliding with the crouching pair.

CHAPTER XXIX

ALL READY FOR THE GRAND BLOWOUT

“Simeon!”

Perk held his breath in awe as his pal whispered that one word.

An answering voice, very, very low, came back, asking a question; and in another second Jack was squeezing the groping hand of the duly thrilled prisoner of the outlaw’s hidden retreat.

It was considered much too risky for them to remain there, and try to engage in explanations; so Jack took the other in tow, and led him over to the foot of the mighty cliff, with Perk trailing in.

So well taken had Jack’s calculations been that he hit the exact spot at which the descending slope of rock ended amidst the green grass. In whispers he explained what must be done in order to gain a secure place where they might converse without incurring any risk.

With Jack leading the way, and Perk acting as a buffer in the rear, to prevent the rather unsteady Simeon, trembling in every limb from extreme excitement, from falling off the narrow and treacherous ledge, they all managed to presently gain the passage leading to the big central cavern.

Here they sat down, and a brisk conversation followed between Jack and Simeon—after Perk had been duly introduced to the captive Service man.

Without going into too many details everything was told by Jack, to account for the presence of himself and partner in the tigers’ den amidst the mountains. Then in his turn Simeon briefly sketched the mishap in connection with the discovery of himself and companion; sadly admitting that his fellow worker had been shot down and killed in the battle although combined they had diminished the roll-call of the tough gangsters by one bad man slain, and two wounded.

“I was myself seriously shot in the left leg,” he went on to say; “and undoubtedly would have been tortured, and put to death by those fiends, they hate and despise Secret Service men so much, only for one thing—Slippery Slim Garrabrant chances to be a brother-in-law of mine—nothing to be proud of, and

of which I've never boasted, you may be certain. We married sisters, both of whom have since passed on. He has no love for me, but showed a streak of decency, I must admit, in sparing my life, although letting the gang make me its general servant, and cook. Still, things might have been worse with me, and I'm not complaining. I reckoned the Chief would do something to learn just what had become of poor Ross and myself; but never believed I'd get out of this sweet mess alive."

They talked, and conspired for a full hour, when Simeon declared it was time he left these new-found allies. Some one might happen to come to his tent on an errand, for he served as doctor as well as cook; and thus discover his absence.

It was arranged that he come again to the crevice in the cliff the following night, when they could go deeper into the bold scheme Jack had suggested, and which appeared to meet with his hearty approval; for he turned out to be just the same type of man as Jack Ralston himself, a believer in daring and aggressive work.

Perk managed to explain how short of provisions they chanced to be, and to his extreme delight Simeon accommodatingly promised to fetch some eatables with him when he joined them on the following night.

After that the pair retraced their steps along the passage, being able, thanks to Jack's flashlight, to fight shy of all impediments such as loose stones, and pitfalls that might have given them a bad half hour, had they attempted to proceed in the darkness.

Again they tried to get some sleep, and Jack, who was able to control his feelings better than his mate, succeeded admirably; but Perk, more excitable, only secured what he called "cat-naps," being awake a good deal of the night.

The following day they spent much as before. Perk again trailed down to where the camouflaged airship lay under its covering of evergreens. He took back a few things they were not apt to need, and yet which they disliked leaving behind, once they quitted the neighborhood of the valley; but his main object was to make certain the plane was safe, and in condition for a quick take-off in case such became a necessity, as was likely.

Jack on his part added materially to his knowledge of things, and in a fashion touched up portions of his intended programme, to be carried out whenever Simeon, who could best know, told them conditions looked most promising.

Much to Perk's relief Simeon did not fail them; and then, too, he brought a promising bit of plunder in the shape of provisions, which came from the commissary of the settlement, and of which he held the key.

Another hour of talk followed, and further details of their great plan were discussed. Simeon assured them the opportunity for which they waited was

certain to arrive on the following night, so they must make all preparations to put their confidence to the test and expect to quit the game, it was to be hoped with a victory set down to their credit.

On the following day a party of the marauders planned to set out on a most important raid, that promised unusually great plunder. Slim Garrabrant could not accompany them that particular time, having injured his right arm so that he must be unsteady in the saddle; which fact Jack observed virtually cinched the plan they had been arranging.

If all went well, after the party had gone forth, Simeon before dark would as if by chance throw a red cloth on top of the big cabin; which would be a signal that the coast was clear, and everything ready for their working scheme.

When the following day came along, Perk was for the third time dispatched along his former trail down the mountain-side. This time he carried quite a load on his strong back; for, as they anticipated not having to spend another night in the Tom Sawyer cave—Perk always called it by that suggestive name that carried him back to his own boyhood dreaming, and reading—he was taking pretty much all the things he had toted up the ascent shortly before, so they could be safely stowed away in the airship's cabin.

Everything thus far had gone along like clockwork—if only there was no slip after they had started their attempt to take Slim prisoner, the chances for a regular old-fashioned cleanup looked bright, Perk kept telling himself.

He got back to Jack's side in due time, with nothing transpiring calculated to breed trouble. They ate their last meal in the cave, and then passing down to their secret exit, waited for the time to come when they could translate planning into action, and endeavor to bring about a successful windup of their mission.

CHAPTER XXX

THE END OF ROBBERS' ROOST——CONCLUSION

Looking back when all this was but a memory, it must always seem like a dream to Perk. Everything moved along smoothly as if in grooves. They joined the waiting Simeon alongside the big cabin, and he led them to the hut which Slim occupied by himself, because of his being the acknowledged leader and “high-muck-a-muck”—as Perk always had it—of the outlaw league.

They took the occupant completely by surprise, and a smart blow on the head kept him still until they could secure his arms, and fasten a cloth over his mouth to prevent his giving the alarm.

Then he was hustled outside, and with Jack on one side and Simeon on the other convoyed as noiselessly as possible to the mouth of the valley, and the narrow pass. Perk had vanished for the time being, but joined them about the time they reached their objective, acting as though secretly pleased over something he had just carried out. Jack had a suspicion as to its character, having heard the other muttering certain threats that were aimed at the miserable but useful old ship, manipulated by the counterfeiters in bringing in supplies, and distributing the result of their latest printing.

The next thing on the program was to overcome the sentry just beyond the outer end of the narrow cleft, where the walls lifted themselves hundreds of feet above the passage in to the valley.

This was accomplished by Jack himself, unaided—he crept up behind the dozing man, dealt him a blow on the head, and tumbled him in a heap. Thus their way was cleared, and they could proceed to the place where their ship awaited their coming.

“Gimme me jest five minits, fellers,” Perk besought the others; whereupon Jack fell upon the senseless vidette and dragged him some distance away—it was an act of mercy, since the man must have been killed otherwise, when Perk completed his little arrangement; for it had been settled between Jack and himself that, in order to convince these tough lawbreakers they could no longer

depend on their Hole-in-the-Wall to hide them from those who were ever on their trail, the overhanging walls of the pass must be brought down in a heap of ruins, that would forever choke all entrance and exit in and out of the valley.

“All set, Jack—she’s fixed, an’ goin’ like wildfire—let’s clear out *pronto*, ’fore she gets busy!” Perk was crying, in some little excitement.

As they moved hurriedly off there came the loud sound of an explosion from within the cliff encircled valley.

“That’s on’y the little bomb I stuck under that rattletrap airship to send it in the wust wreck ever,” explained Perk, he kept looking back while trailing the others.

Loud yells and whoops reached them from within the barrier. Showing how those of the gangsters left behind were expressing their astonishment and alarm at such an unheard of happening in their midst.

“Huh! that ain’t jest *nawthin’* to what—” but what Perk intended to say was drowned in a most terrific explosion, that made the rocky surface of the earth under their feet quiver like an animal in its death throes. A vivid sheet of flame darted upwards—then there came a sickening crash after crash as if the whole mountain were toppling down, with fragments falling for half a minute after.

Fortunately they were far enough away by that time to escape any possible damage. Simeon in particular seemed to be deliriously happy; it was as though in this utter destruction of the robber roost he found solace for the death of his late companion; also all the insults and indignities to which he himself had been subjected at the hands of those tough gunmen.

Reaching the ship they went aboard. Then came the last critical act of the moving drama—getting the big plane safely launched with such difficulties to contend with. But, as if to add a finishing touch to Jack Ralston’s usual luck—also due in great part to his skill, and efficiency—this hazard was safely passed, the launching followed by their thrilling climb into the air spaces, with unlimited possibilities awaiting their choice of a route.

Apparently, as Perk was saying to himself, it was “all over but the shouting;” and he imagined there had been quite enough of that when the startled inmates of the blocked valley heard that dreadful thunderous sound typifying the collapse of the organization of defiant lawbreakers clever Slim Garrabrant had built up, partly to show his contempt for Uncle Sam’s thief catchers.

Slim, by the way, after he had recovered from the blow received at the time of his surprise, and capture, exhibited an utter indifference as to what became of him. He even laughed, as if absolutely free from any concern; and joked with Perk as the airship raced through illimitable space, declaring it was one thing to nab him, and a horse of another color to hold him.

“Bet you three to one you two boys will have your same old job to do over again before six months have gone into the discard,” he shouted, humorously; but Perk only grinned, and shook his head; at the same time wondering if the rest of their lives were really to be taken up with chasing after this slippery customer, and curbing his pernicious activities.

Having the whole day ahead of them, Jack did not mean to put his cherished aircraft to its best licks—plenty of time; and actually he dreaded receiving the anticipated thanks and compliments from the Big Boss over at the Washington Headquarters; in which Jack surely differed vastly from most men of his dangerous calling, who would be only too willing to stand in his shoes.

After delivering their prisoner, just as jolly and unconcerned as ever, over to the Federal officials at Los Angeles, Jack and Perk headed for San Diego, the latter wild with an eagerness to “fill up to capacity” at their beloved restaurant.

They carried Simeon along with them, having a spare cot in their room to which he was more than welcome, for a day or two, until an answer came to his wire to Headquarters, ordering him doubtless to report, and tell his dramatic story in person, after which he would be given a vacation to fully recover his broken health.

Jack had a purpose in this besides the wish to see more of a man whom he respected so much. He had heard Simeon say that he and Slim Garrabrant had married sisters, both of whom were no longer on this earth. This had set Jack to speculating, concerning the old lady named Mrs. Ferguson, grandmother to the handsome little boy whom he and Perk—principally Perk—had saved from the cruel fangs of a mad dog, as narrated in the early pages of this book.

He introduced the subject by asking Simeon if he would like to hear where they had picked up some kind of a clue covering Slim Garrabrant; and upon the other eagerly saying he certainly did, there followed the brief story of the strange adventure of Main Street, in one of San Diego’s suburbs.

When he spoke of their discovering the picture of Slim on the wall of that cottage, and incidentally mentioned the old lady, Simeon was greatly shaken. He clutched Jack by the arm, Perk staring open-mouthed, not quite understanding the drift of things—and in broken language begged him to tell some more—what about the old lady—did they know her name—and was it Mrs. Leonore Ferguson; and what of the lad—was he apparently in good health?

“I’m asking you Jack, because he is *my own*, my beloved little Walter, the only legacy my dear wife left me to remember her by, when she passed away. There was a fire in the building where they lived, something like a year and a half ago; and hunt as I would I never could get a trace of my dear ones. To think that, not content with saving my own life, you two should be the means of my being once

more reunited with all I have in the world! Take me to see them without delay, if only you will, and I shall never, never cease to bless both you gallant comrades.”

Inside of an hour he had his boy pressed close to his heart, and even Perk who sometimes liked to call himself a “hard-boiled guy,” turned away to wipe the unbidden tears from his cheeks.

Of course in due time they heard from Headquarters, with more or less words of high praise, such as seldom spring from such offices where Uncle Sam’s Secret Service agents do their business without expectation of anything more than routine acknowledgment. They were given quite an extensive holiday until there came up another knotty problem which might be submitted to their solving. That such *did* come along sooner than expected can be understood by the title of the story following this, viz: “*Flying the Coast Skyways,*” or, “*Jack Ralston’s Swift Patrol.*”

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1. Obvious typographical errors were corrected without note.
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