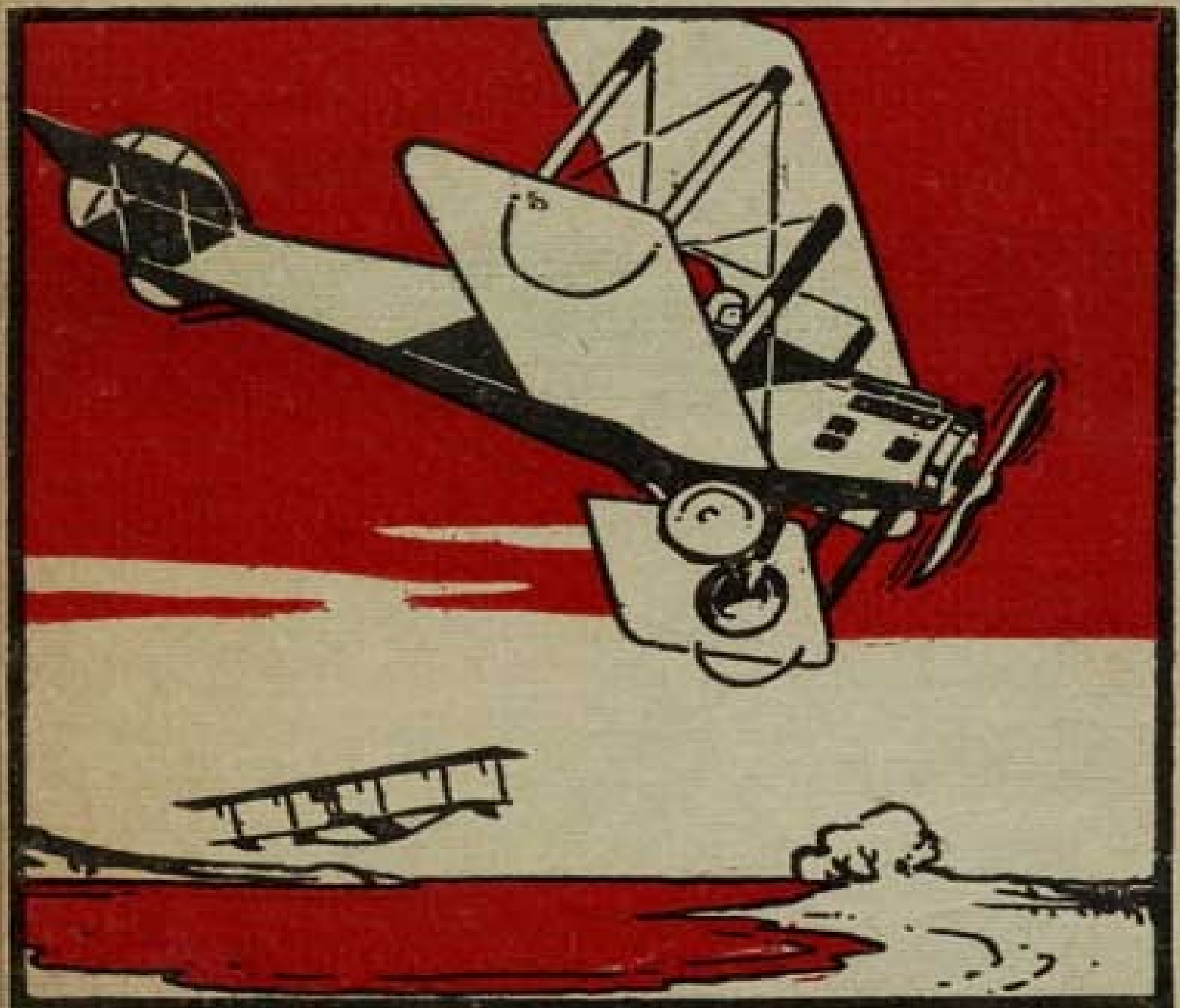
Battling the Clouds



Aeroplane Boys Series

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Battling the Clouds Aeroplane Boys Series

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AEROPLANE BOYS SERIES VOLUME 1

BATTLING THE CLOUDS

OR

FOR A COMRADE'S HONOR

BY

CAPTAIN FRANK COBB

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AEROPLANE BOYS SERIES

1 BATTLING THE CLOUDS,
OR, FOR A COMRADE'S HONOR

2 AN AVIATOR'S LUCK,
OR, THE CAMP KNOX PLOT

3 DANGEROUS DEEDS,
OR, THE FLIGHT IN THE DIRIGIBLE

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BATTLING THE CLOUDS

CHAPTER I

The vast aviation field at Fort Sill quivered in the grilling heat of mid-July. The beautiful road stretching through the Post looked smooth as a white silk ribbon in the blazing sun. The row of tall hangars glistened with fresh white paint. On the screened porches of the officers' quarters, at the mess, and at the huts men in uniform talked and laughed as though their profession was the simplest and safest in the world.

Around the Post as far as the eye could reach the sun-baked prairies stretched, their sparse grasses burned to a cindery brown. From the distant ranges came the faint report of guns. The daily practice was going on. Once in a while against the sky a row of caissons showed up, small and clear cut.

Overhead sounded the continual droning of airplanes manœuvering, now rising, now circling, now reaching the field safely, where they turned and came gaily hopping along the ground toward the hangars, like huge dragonflies. And when they finally teetered to a standstill, what splendid young figures leaped over the sides and stretched their cramped legs, pushing off the goggles and leather headgear that disguised them! Laughing, talking, swapping experiences, listening in good-natured silence to the "balling out" that so often came from the harried and sweating instructors, splendid young gods were these airmen, super-heroes in an heroic age and time.

In the shade of one of the hangars sat two boys. They were blind and deaf to the sights and sounds around and over them. The planes were as commonplace as mealtime to them, and not nearly so thrilling. All their attention was centered on a small box on the ground before them. It was made of screen-wire roughly fastened to a wooden frame. One side was intended for a door, but it was securely wired shut. The box had an occupant. Furious, raging with anger, now crouching in the corner, now springing toward the boys, only to strike the wires, an immense tarantula faced his jailers with deadly menace in his whole bearing. One of the boys gently rested a stick against the cage. The great spider instantly hurled himself upon it.

Involuntarily both boys drew back.

"What you going to do with him now you have got him?" asked the taller of the

two boys.

"Dunno," said the other, shrugging his shoulders. "No use expecting mother to let me keep him in quarters, and the C. O. won't have 'em around the hangars. I guess I will have to give him back to Lee and let him get rid of him."

"What does C. O. mean, and who is Lee?" asked the first boy.

"Gee, you are green!" scoffed the smaller of the two. "Tell you what I'll do, Bill; I will take a day off and teach you the ropes."

"I will learn them fast enough if I can get a question answered once in awhile," answered Bill, laughing pleasantly. "You can't expect to learn *every*thing there is about the Army in a week."

"It is too bad you are in Artillery," said the other boy, whose name was Frank and whose father was Major Anderson, in the Air service. "There is a lot more doing over here, but of course as long as I am sort of your cousin, why, you can get in on things here whenever you want to."

"Much obliged," returned Bill. "And of course whenever you want, I will take you any place you want to go in my car."

"That car is the dandiest little affair I ever did see," said Frank half enviously. "Just big enough for two of us." He glanced over to the boy-size automobile standing in the shade. It was a long, racy looking toy, closer to the ground than a motorcycle, but evidently equipped with a good-sized engine. "Where did you get it, anyhow?"

"I have an uncle in the automobile business, and he had it made for me."

"Some uncle!" commented Frank. "How fast will she go?"

"A pretty good clip, I imagine," said Bill. "I have never tried her out."

"What's the matter with you? Scared?" asked Frank. "I say we speed her up some of these days."

"Can't do it," said Bill, shaking his head. "There is a speedometer on it, and I promised my mother I would never go over fifteen miles an hour until she gives me leave."

"Fifteen miles; why, that's crawling!" said Frank scornfully. "I tell you what. I

can drive a little, and you can let me take the wheel, and see what she will do. That won't be breaking your word."

Bill shook his head. "It isn't my way of keeping a promise," he said. Then to change the conversation before it took a disagreeable turn, he asked, "You didn't tell me what C. O. means and who Lee is."

"C. O. means Commanding Officer; you had better keep that in your head. And Lee is the fellow who gave me this tarantula. He takes care of the quarters across from yours at the School of Fire. I go over there to play with the Perkins kids a lot. Lee fools with us all he can. He is a dandy. He is half Indian. His father was a Cherokee."

"I know whom you mean," said Bill. "He is awfully dark, and has squinty black eyes and coal black hair. He has been transferred to our quarters now. He is splendid—does everything for mother: brings her flowers and all that, and a young mocking bird in a cage he made himself."

"I didn't know he had been transferred," said Frank. "I bet he won't be let to stay long. The Perkins family like him themselves."

"Can they get him sent back?" asked Bill anxiously.

"Sure," said Frank. "Colonel Perkins can get anybody sent where he wants them. If he was your orderly he would stay with you, of course, but he isn't; he is working as janitor."

"What's an orderly?" asked Bill.

"You sure have a lot to learn!" sighed the learned Frank. "It is like this. That new dad of yours is a Major, isn't he? All right. He has the right to have a special man that he picks out work for him, and take care of his horse and fuss around the quarters and fix his things. But the man has to belong to his command, and Lee is attached to the School of Fire."

"I see," said Bill, thoughtfully. As a matter of fact he did not see so very clearly, but he knew that it would be clearer after awhile, and he had the good sense not to press the matter further. Bill had the great and valuable gift of silence. To say nothing at all, but to let the other fellow do the talking, Bill had discovered to be a short cut to knowledge of all sorts.

"Yes," said Frank, "you see now that you can't get Lee for orderly."

Frank was glad of it. He did not know it, but down in his heart, he was jealous of this Bill boy, who had appeared at the School of Fire with his quiet good manners and his polite way of speaking, his good clothes and, above all, his wonderful little automobile scarcely larger than a toy, yet capable of real work and speed.

He rejoiced that Bill at least was not going to have Lee for an orderly. He knew what it was to have a fine orderly, and Lee was almost too good to be true at all. Why, only the week before, Lee had offered to get Frank a wildcat cub for a pet. Frank's mother, Mrs. Anderson, and his father, the Major, had refused to have the savage little creature about and Frank had had to tell Lee so. He had kept teasing Lee for some sort of pet, however, and as a joke Lee had just presented him with the biggest tarantula he could capture.

The tarantula, taken as a pet, was not a great success. Frank poked the stick at the cage and watched the ferocious creature dart for it, and decided that the wisest thing was to get rid of it at once.

"I will give you this tarantula, Bill," he said with an air of bestowing a great benefit. "I bet your mother has never seen one, and you can take it home with you in your car and show it to her. If she has never seen one, she will be some surprised."

"I suppose she would," said Bill, "but for all I know it might frighten her, and I couldn't afford to risk that. Mother isn't so very strong, and dad says it is our best job to keep her well and happy. I don't believe it will help any to show her something that looks like a bad nightmare and acts like a demon, so I'm much obliged but I guess I won't take your little pet away from you, not to-day at any rate." He laughed, and jumped to his feet.

"Where you going?" demanded Frank.

"Home," said Bill. "It is nearly time for mess. Get that? I said *mess* and not *dinner*."

"Don't go yet," pleaded Frank. "What if you are a little late?"

"Mother likes me to be punctual, so I'll have to move along," said Bill.

Frank looked at him. "Say," he said, "aren't you just a little tied to your mother's apron strings?"

"I don't know," replied Bill good-naturedly. "I think it is a pretty good place to be tied to if anyone should ask me, and if I am, I hope I am tied so tight she will never lose me off."

He shook himself down and started toward his little car. "So long! Come see us!" he called over his shoulder.

Frank scrambled to his feet and followed. He stood watching while Bill settled himself in his seat and started the engine. He stood looking after him until the speedy little automobile swept out of sight across the prairie and down the rough road that led to the New Post and from there on to the School of Fire.

Frank gave a grin. "It's a dandy car, all right," he said, "and he may be able to swim and ride the way he says he does, but I can beat him out on one point. I can pilot a plane, and I have been up in an observation balloon. I wonder what he would look like up in the air. I bet he would be good and sick!"

Bill, guiding the car with a practiced hand, swept smoothly along, avoiding the ruts made by the great trucks belonging to the ammunition trains and the rough wheels of the caissons.

Bill was thinking hard. The years of his life came back to his thoughts one by one.

When his father died, he was only four years old, and his pretty young mother had been obliged to go out into the world and support herself and her little son. They had lived alone together, in the dainty bungalow that had been saved from the wreck of their fortunes, and had come to be more than mother and son; they were companions and pals.

So when Major Sherman appeared, and surprised Bill greatly by wanting to marry his mother, he was not surprised to hear her say that the Major would have to get the permission of her son before she could say yes.

Bill and his mother had many a long and confidential talk in those days and Bill learned, through her confidences, a great deal about the strange thing that grown people call love. Bill's mother talked to her son as she would have talked to a brother or a father, and the result was that one day young Bill had a long talk with Major Sherman, a talk that the Major at least never forgot. After it was over, Bill led the way to his mother, and taking her hand said gravely:

"Mother, we have been talking things over, and I think you ought to marry the

Major. You are a good deal of a care sometimes, and I have his promise that he will help me."

Bil's mother laughed, and then she cried a little, while she asked Bill if he was trying to get rid of his troublesome parent. But Bill knew that she was trying to joke away the remembrance of her tears, so he kissed her and went out, wondering if he had lost his darling mother or had won a new and dandy father.

It proved that he had found a real father after so many years, a father who understood boys and who was soon as good and true a pal as his mother was. Bill commenced to whistle when he remembered up to this part, and then he laughed to himself when he recollected a couple of old lady aunts who had offered to take him to bring up, because they were sure that Major Sherman, being a soldier and no doubt unused to boys, might abuse him!

It was enough to make Bill chuckle. His mother said that the Major spoiled Bill. And in his secret heart Bill knew that there were times, off and on, say a few times every week, when the Major gave him treats that he would never have been able to coax from his mother. The little car for instance. His mother had declared that it was a crazy thing to give a boy twelve years old, no matter how tall and well grown he was, but the Major had prevailed, and she had at last given a reluctant consent. There had been an endless time of waiting, indeed a matter of several months while the small but perfect car was assembled, and Bill could never forget the day it arrived and the Major squeezed his big frame into the driver's seat and gave it a thorough trying out.

Pets, too. Mother was brought to see that pigeons and white rats and a tame coon and indeed everything that came his way, was a boy's right to have. The Major was educating Bill in the knowledge of how to care for dumb animals: he was learning the secret of self-discipline and self-control, without which no man or woman or boy or girl is fit to be the owner of any pet.

The Great War was ended when Bill's mother married the Major, just returned from foreign service, and immediately they packed their belongings, putting most of them in a storehouse for the happy day when the Major should retire and be able to have a home. This is the dream of every officer who gives his days and strength and brains to the service of his country. Then they packed the few articles that they felt most necessary to their comfort, gave away ten guinea pigs, eight white rats, four pigeons and a kitten, crated Bill's collie and the Major's Airdale, and started off for their first post, Fort Sill, where the Major was

stationed at the School of Fire as instructor.

Fort Sill rambles all over the prairie. Not the least of its various branches is the Aviation School. And when the Major arrived with his wife and son, he found that his cousin, Major Anderson, who was in the Air service, was stationed at the Aviation School. Major Anderson had two children: a little girl, and a boy just the age of Bill. Frank Anderson liked his new cousin, but scorned him for his very natural ignorance on subjects referring to the Army. He did not stop to discover that in the way of general information Bill was vastly his superior. Major and Mrs. Anderson were quick to see a certain clear truthfulness and good sense in Bill that they knew Frank lacked and they were anxious to have the boys chum together for that reason.

CHAPTER II

Bill, driving the little car which he had named the Swallow, reached the quarters at the School of Fire in a rising cloud of dust. The wind had risen suddenly and the fine sand whipped around the long board buildings, driving in through every crack and crevice. All the rest of the afternoon it blew, and at six o'clock, when the Major came in, he was coated with the fine yellow dust. By nine o'clock, when Bill went to bed, a small gale was singing around, and about one o'clock he was awakened by the scream of the wind. It shrieked and howled, and the quarters rattled and quivered.

Bill remembered the Swallow and his dad's car, both standing at the back door. He rose and went to his mother's room. He found her curled up in a little ball on her quartermaster's cot, looking out of the window.

"Come in, Billy," she said as she saw him at the door. "You are missing a great sight."

They cuddled close, their arms around each other, and pressed their faces close to the pane. The yellow sand was driven across the prairie like a sheet of rain. The Major's big car shuddered with each fresh blast, and the little Swallow seemed to cower close to the ground. Continuous sheets of lightning made the night as bright as day. Over the whine and whistle of the wind they could hear the distant rumble of the thunder. The room was full of dust, driven through the cracks of the window. Their throats were choked with it. The wind blew harder and harder; the lightning grew brighter, slashing the black sky with great gashes of blinding light.

Bill looked sober. "Gee, it is fierce!" he said in an awed tone. "Where is dad all this time?"

"In his room sound asleep," said Mrs. Sherman. "I suppose he is used to sights like this. Wasn't it *nice* of Oklahoma to stage such a wonderful sight for us? I wouldnt have missed it for anything."

"It is going to rain," said Bill, again looking out. "The thunder is growing louder and louder. Did you ever see anything like the glare the lightning makes?"

All at once Mrs. Sherman clutched Bill and pointed out.

"Oh, look, look!" she cried.

Bill followed the direction of her finger, and saw a small rabbit running before the blast. He was going at a rate that caused his pop eyes to pop worse than ever. As he skimmed along, he made the mistake of trying to turn. In a second he was being rushed along sidewise, hopping frantically up and down in order to keep on his feet, but unable to turn back again or to stop. Bill and his mother laughed until they cried as the little rabbit was hustled out of sight around the end of the students' quarters.

The lightning grew worse and occasionally balls of flame shot earthward. The thunder rolled in a deafening roar. Then suddenly the wind stopped—stopped so suddenly and completely that Bill jumped and his mother said, "Goodness me!" in a small, scared voice.

There was a long pause as though Nature was calling attention to her freaks, and then down came the rain. It came in rivers, sheets, floods. The roads ran yellow mud; the creek over the bluff commenced to boil. The sparse dwarfed trees that clung to the sides of the gullies bent under the weight of falling water.

It poured and poured and poured.

Bill had seen rain before, if not in such quantities. He found himself growing sleepy, and kissing his mother twice, once for luck and once for love, as he told her, he went to bed and to sleep, while the downpour continued until almost morning.

The roads were impassable, although a hot, steamy, sunshiny day did its best to dry things up. Bill spent most of the day putting the poor half-drowned Swallow in shape.

Frank telephoned, but could not get over. He was excited about the damage that had been done at the Aviation Field. One of the great hangars had collapsed, ruining the machines inside. No planes were allowed to fly.

Frank wanted Bill to walk over and Bill suggested the same pastime for Frank; consequently neither one would go. The roads continued to be a gummy, sticky mass of clay, and after four or five days Frank started to walk across the prairie to the School of Fire.

Just before he reached the bridge crossing the glen between the New Post and the School, he heard a joyful whoop and there was Bill running to meet him.

"Hey there!" called Bill, as soon as he could possibly make himself heard. "I was just starting over to see you."

"Come on back!" grinned Frank. "I am at home this morning."

"Not as much as I am," answered his friend. "Gee, it has been a long week! Did you ever see such a storm?"

"Oklahoma can beat that any time she wants to," boasted Frank. "That was just a *little* one. You ought to see a real blizzard or 'sly coon' as we call the cyclones. They are bad medicine, as the Indians say."

"This was big enough to start with," said Bill. "I thought the Swallow was going to fly away. And dad's big car *reeled* around. And you should have seen our bath tub! It was full of sand."

"Clear up to the top?" asked Frank teasingly.

"There was a good inch in it," retorted Bill, "and it looks to me as though that was a good deal of sand to trickle through the windows when they all have screens and were closed besides."

"It surely does get in," granted Frank. "Hello, there comes Lee! Where is he going, I wonder, without his fatigue suit on?"

"I suppose you mean those overall things he works in, don't you?" said Bill. "I know that much now. Lee doesn't wear them any more. He was so crazy over mother and so good to her and to me that dad got him transferred to his Battery, and now he is our orderly."

"How did he manage to do that?" said Frank.

"Why, there was some fellow who wanted to leave the guns and work around the quarters as janitor. They have an idea that it is an easy job. So dad let him make the exchange, and I can tell you we were all about as pleased as we could be."

"Good work!" commended Frank, but without enthusiasm. He did not want Bill to have the fun of having Lee for orderly. He had been trying to think up some scheme whereby the soldier would be sent over to fill that position with his own father.

"Lee is a peach," said Bill warmly. "Look what he made me."

He fished in his pocket and drew forth a length of chain. The small, delicate links were carved from a single piece of wood, and at the end, like an ornamentation, hung a carved cage in which rolled a little wooden ball. It was all very curious and delicate.

"My, but that's a peach," said Frank.

"You ought to see the one he did for mother," said Bill. "Small enough for a bracelet almost, and the little ball smaller than a pea. The links are all carved on the outside, and there is a sort of rose on the end of this cage thing, and Lee painted it all up pink and green where it ought to be like that.

"He knows all about a car too. This week he has been going over dad's car and the Swallow, and they run like grease."

Frank fiddled with the chain. He had nothing to say. On account of his Indian blood, his silent ways and mischievous nature, Lee had always filled him with interest. He could tell wonderful stories too of his own times and the times that lay long behind him, as he heard of them from his father and grandfather.

Lee's grandfather knew a great many things that he never did tell, but once in awhile he was willing to open his close-set old mouth and talk. He wore black broadcloth clothes, a long coat, and a white shirt, but never a collar. A wide black, soft-brimmed hat was set squarely on his coal black hair. Under the hat, smooth as a piece of satin, his hair hung in two tight braids close to each ear. They were always wound with bright colored worsted. Grandfather Lee, the old chieftain, liked bright colors, so he usually had red and yellow on his braids. They hung nearly to his waist, down in front, over each coat lapel. Small gold rings hung in his ears, and under his eyes and across each cheek bone was a faint streak of yellow paint.

His Indian name was Bird that Flies by Night, and he lived about a hundred miles away, on a farm given him by the Government. He had lived there quite contentedly for many years, tilling the ground when he had to. But now everything was changed. Oklahoma had given up her treasure, the hidden millions that lay under her sandy stretches. Oil derricks rose thickly everywhere, and Bird that Flies by Night found that all he had to do was to sit on his back porch and look at the derrick that had been raised over the well dug where his three pigs used to root. Two hundred dollars a day that well was bringing to the

old Bird and, as Lee said, was "still going strong."

"And here *I* am," said Lee grimly, "enlisted for three years!"

Lee's father was an Indian of a later day. He had gone through an eastern college and had been in business in a small town when the oil excitement broke out. He went into oil at once, and was far down in the oil fields, Lee did not know where.

As a boy, Lee himself had refused to accept the schooling urged by his mother and college-bred father, and had led a restless, roaming life, filled with hairbreadth escapes, until the beginning of the war, when he had enlisted in the hope of being sent across where the danger lay. But like many another man as brave and as willing, he had been caught in one of the war's backwaters, and had been stationed at Fort Sill.

Sauntering up to the quarters, the boys found Lee staring moodily at the small and racy Swallow, now standing clean and glistening in the bright sunlight.

"She knocks," he said, knitting his fierce black brows. "All morning I have been working over that car, and I can't find that knock."

The boys came close and listened.

"I don't hear any knock," said Frank.

They all listened.

"Don't you hear it now?" said Lee, speeding the engine.

"Seems as though I hear something," said Bill, partly to please Lee.

They all listened closely.

Lee commenced to pry about in the engine. "I have it, I think," he exclaimed triumphantly as he took out a small piece of the machinery. Frank motioned Bill one side, and they wandered around the end of the building.

"Don't you feel sort of afraid to let Lee tinker with your car?" he asked with a show of carelessness.

"Not a bit! Dad says he is a born mechanic and he trusts him with all the care of his car. If dad thinks he can fix that, why, I guess it is safe to let him do anything he wants to do with the Swallow."

"Do you ever let anybody else drive the Swallow?" asked Frank. "I wouldn't mind taking it some day if you don't care."

Bill looked embarrassed.

"I would let you take her in a minute," He said, "but dad made me promise that I would never loan the Swallow to anyone. It is not that he wants me to be selfish, but he says if anything should happen, if the car should be broken, or if there should be an accident and some other boy hurt, I would sort of feel that it was my fault."

"I don't see it that way at all," said Frank, who was crazy to get hold of the pretty car and show it off to some boys and girls he knew in Lawton. He didn't want to drive with Bill. He was the sort of a boy who always wants all the glory for himself. That car was quite the most perfect thing; the sort a fellow sees in his dreams. Frank knew that he could never hope to own such a car, and the fact that Bill was always willing to take him wherever he wanted to go was not enough. Bill had never driven to Lawton, the town nearest the Post. He had told Frank that he would take him with him the first time. Frank had thought it would be pretty fine to go humming up the main street past all the people from the Post and the ranches, and the old Indians and the crowds of Indian boys his own age who always came in on Saturday from the Indian school near by. He had been anticipating that trip ever since Bill had appeared with the Swallow; but now he felt that it would be far nicer if Bill would or could be made to loan him the car. Of course he couldn't run it, but he could run an airplane engine, and he was perfectly willing to try running the little Swallow.

Frank had a great trick of getting his own way about things, and he reflected with satisfaction that as long as the roads to Lawton were almost impossible for traffic after the rainfall, there would be a few days in which to scheme for his plan. Nothing of this, however, appeared in his face. He turned and shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, if you and your dad think Lee can handle a car all right, it's all the same to me," he laughed. "My father says you never can trust an Indian anyhow."

"Well, we would trust Lee with anything in the world," reiterated Bill.

"That's all right, too, if you think so," said Frank, trying slyly to breed distrust in Bill's heart. "I guess you never heard my father tell some of his Indian stories. You would feel different if you had."

"But anybody would just *have* to trust Lee," said Bill. "Why, he is as good as gold! And he hates a lie, and he has such nice people—two of the prettiest little sisters. One of them plays the harp. It's one of those big gold ones, and she is so little that Lee says she has to trot clear round the harp to play some of the notes, because her arms are too short to reach."

"He's half Indian just the same," insisted Frank. He warmed to the subject as he went on. He couldn't forgive Lee, quite the most thrilling and amusing soldier he knew, for *letting* himself be made Major Sherman's orderly.

"Well, I am for Lee every time," said Bill, "and I would wager anything I have that he is just as true blue as—as—well, as my dad!" Bill could pay no greater compliment, and the words rang out clear and honest. The boys stood beside the quarters, staring idly across the bluff as they talked. They were so interested in their conversation that they were not aware of a listener. Lee, with a part of the Swallow in his hand to show Bill, had followed them in time to overhear the conversation concerning himself, but he quickly drew back and returned to the automobile.

"Good boy, Billy!" he said softly to himself. Then with a dark look coming into his face, "So you can't trust an Indian, can you? Ha ha! I wonder what we had better do about that?"

CHAPTER III

Frank Anderson found no time to invent a scheme that would put the Swallow into his hands because two days later on a bright Saturday morning, Frank heard a silvery little siren tooting under his window, and looked out to see the Swallow below and Bill in businesslike goggles.

"Hey!" called Bill joyfully. "Want to come along and show me Lawton? Dad and mother are coming in for dinner to-night, and we can stay in all day and see the sights, then meet them and have dinner with them. Dad sets up a dandy dinner, I will say. Hurry up!" He tooted the siren again gaily, and Frank bolted in search of his mother.

He found her getting ready for a bridge luncheon, and she scarcely listened when he told her the plan for the day. She managed to say yes, however, when she understood the part Major Sherman was going to play, and drifted out of the room leaving Frank to yell down from the window that he was coming and to embark on a more or less thorough toilet. He looked very smooth and clean, however, ten minutes later, when he hopped into the Swallow and settled himself beside Bill.

Frank pointed out the various places of interest as they went along, and before they knew that the miles had been passed, they were entering the outskirts of the village. It was a typical Western village: low, squat, unpainted sheds of houses, with sandy front yards, and heaps of refuse lying about.

As the boys picked their way along, they turned a corner into a better part of the town. Here the houses were better; but on the whole very shabby. The influence of the oil boom was being felt, however, and here and there immense and showy residences were being built.

They then turned into the main street, a very wide, splendidly paved thoroughfare crowded with automobiles, carriages, mule teams, saddle horses, and indeed every possible kind of conveyance.

Frank noted with pride that wherever they went the little Swallow created a great commotion. People stopped to stare and exclaim. Bill, who was busy guiding his little beauty among the larger vehicles, did not seem to notice but it was meat

and drink to Frank.

Down by Southerland's drug store they parked the Swallow, locking it carefully, and walked off, leaving the Swallow literally swallowed up by a crowd of admiring people. Frank hated to go and when they had wandered half a block away made an excuse for going back. Bill said he would look at some sweaters in a sporting goods window until he returned.

Frank found the crowd larger than ever. A policeman had attached himself to the circle and a couple of old Indians stood looking solemnly down. Someone was talking and when Frank pressed through the crowd he found a boy about his own age leaning on the fender and addressing everybody in general. Frank listened and studied the boy as he did so. He was a slim, pale chap with a shock of light, wavy hair which was shaved close to his head everywhere except on top where a thick brush waved. He was continually smoothing it back or shaking his head to get it out of his eyes. He seemed to consider it a very fascinating motion. Frank liked his man-of-the-world air and did not see the grins on the faces of many of the listeners.

"Rather nice little machine," said the boy. "I wonder who owns it. I would like to tell him a few things he ought to have changed about it. Some of the lines are all wrong, and anyone can see the engine couldn't hold up under any strain. I bet he has trouble with the hills. All the cars of this make have trouble. His tires are wrong too. He ought to use a heavier tire if he expects to get any speed out of it. It ought to go at a pretty good clip if the chap knows how to drive. There is everything in the driving. I have taken my eight-cylinder at one hundred and ten miles easily a good many times, but my dad and the chauffeurs never get over eighty-five out of it."

Frank felt his head swim. Here was talk that *was* talk! He completely forgot Bill, looking at sweaters. He edged up to the car and fumbled under the seat.

"Hello!" said the boy. "This your car?"

"It belongs to another fellow and me," said Frank, unable to keep himself from establishing some sort of a claim on the Swallow. "Why?"

"Quite a nice little toy," said the boy, nodding condescendingly. "I never cared much for toys myself but some chaps like 'em. I have an eight-cylinder machine and a six-cylinder runabout, and that's enough to keep me going for the present. I want a racing car built for me pretty soon."

"You don't live here, do you?" asked Frank, sure he would have heard somehow of this remarkable youth who talked so glibly of owning a string of cars.

"I should hope not!" said the boy scornfully. "Not in this dead little hole! I guess you don't know me. I am Jardin, Horace Jardin. My father is the automobile man."

"I have heard of him," said Frank.

"I guess you have!" chuckled young Jardin. "You couldn't go anywhere on the globe without seeing the Jardin cars. Dad puts out more cars than any other two concerns on earth." He assumed a very bored look. "Gee, sometimes I wish I could change my name! Makes a fellow so conspicuous, you know."

"Well, *I* didn't know who you were until you told me," said Frank, grinning.

Jardin flushed. Evidently he could not take a joke that was levelled at himself.

"No, I suppose there are a few rube places like this where the people have never heard of the Jardin car."

Frank hastened to smooth things over. He had no desire to quarrel with this young prince who talked so easily. Frank had to admit that a good deal of it sounded like ordinary boasting, but he assured himself that it must all be true, and proceeded to make things square again.

"You are wrong there," he said. "It would be a good deal smaller place than Lawton before the people had to be told about the Jardin car. Of course I didn't know that you were Jardin, but I couldn't be blamed for that."

"Sure not!" granted the boy. He took a gold cigarette case from his pocket and lighted one, then as an after-thought offered it to Frank who refused, but with a feeling of disgust that he was unable to take one and smoke it coolly as young Jardin was doing.

"The little fool!" a man in the group was saying, but Jardin either did not hear or care.

"Where is the other boy who owns the car?" he asked.

"Down the street," said Frank. "I forgot all about him. We are in town for the day. His father is an instructor at the School of Fire at Sill, and mine is stationed at the Aviation School."

"That's what I am crazy over," said Jardin. "If I consent to go to school and stay all through the winter, I am to have a little plane this fall. I have been taking lessons down at Garden City, and my plane is to be a real long distance one. Dad will give me anything if I will go to school. Gee, I hate it!"

Frank swallowed hard. Two automobiles and an airplane! He commenced to feel sorry for Bill. "Bill and I are going east to school this fall," he said. "Where are you going?"

"I don't know yet," said Jardin. "I have got to talk it over with dad."

"Let's go find Bill," said Frank. "That is, if you haven't anything better to do."

They detached themselves from the crowd and walked down to the sporting house, where they found Bill just tucking a bulky bundle under his arm. He had bought his sweater and stopped to count his change before he turned to greet the boys.

"Gee, what an old woman's trick," said Frank, who wanted to let Jardin know that *he* was not afraid to spend.

"You mean to count the change?" Bill inquired.

"Yes," said Frank.

"You are right," Jardin cut in. "I never have time. *My* time is more valuable than a few cents the fellow may swipe from me."

"Suppose it is the other way around," said Bill. "Suppose the fellow has made the mistake. When the checks are made up, his shows the loss and he has to make it up. Not much fun for him. Perhaps he has a family and he can't afford it. I never used to bother either, but once I was taking dinner in New York with a friend of mother's who has oodles of money, and when he came to pay the check he looked every item over and counted the change and it was thirty cents overcharged. I suppose I looked funny, because he said to me when the waiter went off to get it straightened out, 'Bill, it is no special credit to let these fellows do you. If you want to give money away, there are plenty of beggars on the streets, or you can buy millions of shoe laces and pencils. But never let anybody think they can put it over you.'

"And then to show the other side, that is, when the other fellow makes an honest mistake, he told me a story that made me remember. Then the waiter brought the

right change, got a tip, and we left. But I always count change now."

"I'd like to see anybody do that in the Biltway Hotel!" laughed Jardin.

"This was in the Biltway Cascades," said Bill.

"Come down here," said Frank. "Here is where the Indians come most." Young Jardin and his father had only reached town late the night before so he was as ready as Bill to see the sights.

On a corner by a drug store two very old Indians stood gesturing at each other. The boys stopped a little way off and watched them. Their wrinkled old mouths were tight closed but their hands flew in short, quick motions that were perfectly impossible for the boys to understand. It was evident, however, that the two old men understood each other with perfect ease because at intervals they would laugh as though at an excellent joke.

"That beats all!" exclaimed Jardin, actually interested for once. "Both those old fellows are deaf and dumb."

"Wait," said Frank.

The gestures went on, and presently another old Indian approached. He was even older than the other two. His face was a network of wrinkles and his braided hair hung in two thin, scant little tails scarcely reaching his shoulders. It was gayly wound, however, and his cheeks were carefully painted. The two other old men seized him by the arms and to the amazement of Bill and Horace both commenced to talk at once.

"Now what on earth did they do that for?" demanded Bill of no one in particular. "If they can talk, why did they go through all that crazy motion business?"

"I don't know," said Frank. "They do it all the time. Only the old ones, though."

"I bet Lee will know," said Bill. "We will ask him."

"Who is Lee?" asked Horace

"My dad's orderly," said Bill. "He will drive father and mother in to-night when they come. Who are all these boys in blue suits? Look like bell boys."

"They are from the Indian school we passed on the way out," explained Frank.

"Lee knows a lot of the boys in that school," said Bill. "He is going to go over

with me some day."

"How does he happen to know them?" asked Jardin.

"He is part Indian himself," explained Frank.

"A half-breed?" said Jardin. "They are awfully treacherous. Don't you feel afraid to have him around?"

Bill laughed. "I should say not! Why, Lee is the finest and best fellow I ever knew! He wouldn't lie to save his life. Dad says he can trust him with anything anywhere. Afraid? Well, you just don't know what you are talking about! Frank has got that afraid bee in his bonnet. It makes me sort of tired because I know what Lee is, and I am going to be for him every time and all the time."

"You always act as though it was a personal slam if anyone says the least thing about Lee," complained Frank.

"That's the surest thing you know!" said Bill fervently. "I *do* take it as a personal slam always if anyone says things against a friend. And a friend Lee certainly is. I think he is as true and clean as any man I know, and he is—well, he is a dandy! Anybody who says he is different will have to prove it!"

A spirit of malicious meanness rose in Frank. He assumed an air of good nature.

"All right," he said. "It is really not worth talking about, but some day I may be able to make you see things differently."

"I will believe you when you can prove it," retorted Bill.

"Aw, let's drop it," said Jardin, taking each boy by an arm and turning into a doorway. "Let's look in this pawnshop. Did you ever see anything like that white buckskin Indian suit?"

"The Sioux Indians work those, little gentlemen," said the owner of the pawnshop, seeing them pause before the soft, snowy leather garment. "They are the only Indians who can cure the hides and tan them like that, and the squaws do the bead work."

"I have a notion to buy that for my sister," said Jardin, feeling of the delicate fringes. "She could wear it to a fancy dress ball. I suppose this feather headdress goes with it."

"It is worn with it," said the man. "I will let you have them cheap. Dress and headdress for fifty dollars."

"All right," said Jardin as coolly as though the man had said fifty cents. "Send them over to the hotel C. O. D. May will have a fit over those."

"I reckon you are sort of all right to get a present like that for your sister," said Frank, as they strolled out. "You must like her a whole lot."

"I don't," said Jardin. "I just have to keep squaring her all the time. She is an awful tattler, and if I don't keep her squared, she peaches on me. Sisters are an awful nuisance!"

"You are right," said Frank. He had never thought so before but if this wonderful young man thought so, why, it must be true.

Bill said nothing.

Jardin glanced at his wrist watch.

"Lunch time," he announced. "Come on back to the hotel and have something to eat with me."

"That suits me," said Frank.

"Sorry, but I can't accept," from Bill. "I have a couple of errands to attend to for mother and I have been fooling around so long that I will have to be pretty spry. You all go on, and I will get a bite later."

"Well, of course I will stay with you if you think you can't put your errands off for an hour or so," said Frank sulkily.

"I have put it off too long anyhow," said Bill, "but I certainly won't mind if you go."

"No, I will go with you," decided Frank.

"All right then," said Jardin, shrugging his shoulders. "Suit yourself, of course! Perhaps we will meet later." He turned and started back toward the hotel, leaving the boys looking after him.

CHAPTER IV

"Well, I will say he's a peach!" said Frank.

Bill made no reply.

"Don't you say so?" pressed Frank. "Don't you think he is a peach?"

Bill, forced to answer the question, made a frank but reluctant reply.

"No," he said. "I think he is a pill." He shook his head.

"You are a queer one!" said Frank. "It don't look as though you had any sporting blood in you. I suppose because he smokes naughty cigarettes—"

"It isn't that," said Bill, frowning. "He is just plain *foolish* to smoke. Why, he is undersized and underweight now for his age, and every time he smokes he checks his growth. It is up to him. I bet he has had it explained to him a million times by each teacher and tutor he has ever had just how smoking will harm him and dope up his brain, so if he wants to miss out on athletics and all that, and look like a boiled mosquito in the bargain, let him go to it. *I* don't care. It's not that I don't like about him. It is the way he thinks and talks. Where does he live when he is at home?"

"Detroit," said Frank.

"You would think he owned the whole world!" grumbled Bill. "And *squaring* his sister!"

"Oh, well," said Frank, "you have a queer way of looking at things. I don't think you are giving the fellow a fair deal. Perhaps he *does* talk pretty big, but on the other hand he has a lot to talk about. Think of it: a fellow only the age of us and he has a couple of automobiles of his own and is going to have an airplane. Gee, I am glad I can manage a plane! I have got him there."

"It's all right, I suppose, for him to gab all he wants to about his cars and things. By the time we go back to the Post to-night, if we see him again, I'll bet you he tells us what his father is worth and just how many gold chairs they have at his house."

"You are sore," said Frank loftily.

"What at, for goodness' sake?" demanded Bill. "I wouldn't swap the little Swallow for all the cars he ever had or will have. We have more fun in our little cooped-up quarters over at the School than he ever thought of with his scraps with his sister. I guess I am sore a little, Frank. I am sore because he came butting in and spoiled our whole morning. Let's forget him for awhile. I want to take mother's watch to a jeweller and then we will hunt up a good restaurant and have lunch. It is on me."

Frank followed in silence. He knew Bill was right, but the stranger had dazzled him. He wished bitterly that his father was a rich manufacturer instead of a poor army officer. The traveling they had had, the wonderful sights they had seen all over the world seemed poor in comparison with all the glories Jardin had told and hinted at.

Poor Frank, did not know it, but slowly, ever so slowly, he was making the wrong turn; the turn that led away from the right.

"The trouble with you, Bill," he said, as they loitered over their ice-cream at luncheon, "the trouble is that you are narrow."

Bill groaned. "There you go on Jardin again, I do believe," he said. "All right; I will tell you what *I* will do. I will really try to like him, and if he comes around where we are I will be as decent to him as I can be. Perhaps he has a lot of good in him, as you say. *I* don't want to be unjust."

Frank looked pleased. "I think that is the square thing for you to do," he said. "Jardin may turn out to be a good scout in every way. Perhaps he saw the Swallow and was so impressed with it that he wanted to make a big impression to get even. You can't tell the first time you see anybody what they will be like when you get to know them well."

"Well, I gathered that Jardin was here with his father on some oil business, and probably we won't see him anyhow after this afternoon. He won't be apt to come to the Post. Anyway, let's not spoil our whole afternoon. I want to see some more of those Indians, and I would like to go to that pawnshop without someone tagging along who can buy the place out. I want to buy a little bead bag I saw in the window if it does not cost too much. I think mother would like it to carry with a blue dress of hers.

"Say, you are just like a girl, aren't you?" exclaimed Frank. "I would never know what sort of a dress my mother had on, and she would *never* get a bag if she depended on *my* getting it for her."

"I suppose there is a difference in folks," said Bill. "There was a man visiting my uncle back home one time. He broke his leg while he was with us, and mother helped take care of him and amuse him, and say, he could embroider and crochet! He taught mother a lot of stitches."

"A regular sissy!" sneered Frank.

"I thought so," said Bill; laughing at the recollection. "One night when he felt sort of bad I rubbed his back, and his shoulders were all covered with scars. Well, what do you think? A tiger did it. A Royal Bengal tiger like you read about! And I found out that he had hunted every kind of big game there is, and the fiercer, the better. He simply didn't care *what* he did in the way of hunting. Oh, my; that was a snap for me! When he found out that I was simply crazy to hear his yarns, he used to tell me thrills, I can tell you.

"I didn't think he was such a sissy then. That crochet work looked all right. But it was sort of funny to see him lying there showing my mother how to make a new kind of muffler or table mat and remember how he came by a great white scar that showed on his wrist when he stuck his arm out."

"How did he get it?" asked Frank, all attention.

"He got that one in Africa," said Bill, taking a taste of his ice-cream. "He and another chap had penetrated away into the jungle. They were after a splendid specimen of—"

Bill stopped, looked at the door and attacked his ice-cream.

"Here is little Percy again," he groaned. "Frank, if I don't treat him according to agreement, you are to kick me."

Frank turned. The African jungle faded away. There was Jardin!

He came smiling across the room and joined them.

"Hello, everybody!" he said gaily. "Getting some grub? It didn't take me very long to get through, so I thought I would wander down the street and see if I could run across you. Thought you might like to go to see a movie."

"That is mighty nice of you," said Bill heartily, "but I sort of wanted to see a little of the town this afternoon."

"I think that is a good idea," said Jardin. "We can go to see the movies any old time. I saw my dad at the hotel and have some good news to tell you. We are going to stay here for a couple of weeks. Dad thought that I would make an awful kick about it, and I would if I hadn't met you fellows, but between us we ought to be able to start something going. If I had one of my cars here I could give you a good time, but we will have to take a fall out of your little steamer."

"Say, that's fine!" said Frank with enthusiasm enough for two. "I will have a chance to show you the Aviation Field, and Bill can show you the School of Fire, and there are some dandy fellows over at New Post and up at Old Post too."

"I would like to see them, especially the Aviation part," said Jardin. "I might get some pointers about flying my plane. It will be done before long,—in a couple of months anyway. I worked hard enough for that car," he chuckled. "I thought up every kind of mischief you ever heard of and then some, and tried 'em all out, and all the time I kept hollering for an airplane. I just wore dad out. He offered me everything you ever heard of if I would stop cutting up, and at last he hit on this airplane which was what I had been after from the start. So we made an agreement, regular business affair you know, and we both signed it. I am to stop smoking the day school opens and also agree to go to whatever school he picks out and to keep the rules and remain for the three terms of the school year. He has got to give me plenty of money, though. You can't have a decent time in school without your pocket full of money."

"I don't see why you need much," said Bill thoughtfully.

"Take it from me, you do," replied Jardin. "I have been in about every high-class school around our part of the country and I *know*."

"I am going to boarding-school this fall, and I don't believe I will have much of an allowance. My folks won't think it is wise, I know."

"A lot of people are like that," said Jardin. "Are you going away to school too, Frank?"

"I expect I am," said Frank. "I don't know where yet; the folks have not decided for either of us, but we hope we will go together; don't we, Bill?"

"Sure!" agreed Bill.

"Wish you knew where you were going," said Jardin. "I would make dad send me where you were. That would be a lark. The Big Three: how would that go for a name, eh?"

"Great!" said Bill absently. He finished the last spoonful of his ice-cream. "Let's go out and see the town," he suggested. "There is a shooting gallery around the corner that has the cutest moving targets I ever saw."

"That's the ticket!" said Jardin. "I can shoot almost better than I can do anything else."

They wandered out, and turned down to the shooting gallery. A soldier was leaning idly against the door frame. Bill looked twice, grabbed the young man in a bear hug.

"Lee, you old scamp!" he cried. "How did you happen to get here?"

The dark face of the handsome young half-breed lighted up. "I drove the car in," he answered. "Your mother is shopping and your father will come in with Colonel Spratt in time for dinner. I have been watching these people shoot. Are you boys going to try it?" He glanced at Jardin with a keen eye, then looked away instantly.

"I can't shoot for sour apples and you know it. I suppose you want to have a good laugh at me," said Bill. "All right, here goes!" He laid down his money and received the little rifle.

"No moving targets for me," he said to the man in charge. "And I want the biggest target you have, at that."

"Here is one we let the ladies shoot at," the gallery man laughed. He put up a brilliant affair of different colored rings encircling a large black spot.

"That is the thing for me," said Bill.

"Us ladies!" jeered Frank, laughing.

"Shoot!" commanded Lee.

Bill aimed, breathed hard, blinked and pulled the trigger violently.

There was a black hole in the outside ring.

"Good boy!" said Bill, patting himself. "Good boy! 'If at first you don't succeed,

try, try again.' I have just three tries, I believe."

The next shot was a trifle closer. Bill held a little steadier. The last shot he took his time about and pulled carefully, using his finger instead of his whole side. A bell clanged. He had actually hit the bull's eye! Bill fell against Lee in a make-believe faint.

Frank tried next, Jardin refusing to make an attempt. At last however, after Frank had repeated Bill's performance, Jardin selected a rifle and asked for the moving targets to be set in motion.

He aimed quickly at the head of the smallest duck, and it disappeared behind the painted waves. Again and again he repeated this while the boys stood spellbound.

"That's easy!" said Jardin, laying the rifle down on the counter. "I can beat that easily."

"Do it," said Lee, handing him a rifle.

"Put up your hardest target," instructed Jardin. "I want something worth while."

The target popped into place. It was a pretty little figure of a dancing girl with a tiny tambourine in her uplifted hand. She whirled and turned and the little tambourine gleamed and sparkled. Jardin took careful aim at the tambourine and missed. Three times he missed, the boys exclaiming that no one could hit anything so delicate. Finally he gave it up, giving a number of explanations *why* he did not hit it.

Then, quite idly, Lee picked up a rifle and with a half smile at the gallery man he shot without raising the rifle to his shoulder. A shower of tiny flashes burst from the uplifted tambourine. Then three times, as fast as he could lift a rifle, Lee hit the little tambourine and the bright flashes leaped up. It was evident that Lee had been there before because without a word the man removed the little dancer and placed a row of small and lively dolphins in view. They curved in and out of sight and looked very funny indeed. But Lee shook his head. The man removed the target, and feeling under his lapel drew out a pin, a common white pin which he stuck carefully in the middle of the black cloth at the end of the gallery. Lee's bullet drove the pin into the cloth as neatly as though it had been done with a mallet.

"Want to try?" he asked Jardin.

Jardin smiled sourly. "I am no professional," he said.

He and Frank sauntered out, followed by Bill and Lee.

"Who is that soldier?" asked Jardin. "Isn't he just an enlisted man?"

"That's all," said Frank. "He is the Major's orderly."

"I don't like his looks," said Jardin.

"Neither do I," agreed Frank. "But you had better not tell Bill that. He is crazy over Lee."

"Every man to his taste!" Jardin said with a sneer.

CHAPTER V

About a week later, Bill, accompanied by Lee, drove the Swallow over to the Aviation Field. They found Horace Jardin staying there at Frank's quarters, as the houses are called on all army posts. Mr. Jardin had gone down into the Burkburnett Oil Fields and Frank had invited the boy to come and stay with him. Mrs. Anderson, a weak and idle person, was flattered to have the young millionaire as her guest and revelled as Frank did in his glowing yarns of everything concerning the Jardins. Horace treated Mrs. Anderson and the Major with all the politeness he could muster.

It was always his policy to be agreeable to other fellows' parents. It made things easier all around to have what he privately and rudely called "the old folks" think he was a fine boy, and he found that they always "fell for it" when he paid them a little attention.

So he cleverly kept silence whenever the Major was around, only asking questions that he knew would please him to answer and enlarge upon.

With Mrs. Anderson he worked a different scheme. He launched into glowing accounts of parties and bridge luncheons his mother had given, recounting with more or less truth details about the food and the decorations, and the jewels worn by the guests.

"Seems to be a very quiet, studious boy," was Major Anderson's decision, and Mrs. Anderson proclaimed him "The sweetest child, with such *lovely* manners, and perfectly unspoiled by his enormous wealth."

Jardin laughed in his sleeve, and Frank, also a willing listener, but to a greatly differing line of talk, was rapidly absorbing all the mental and moral poison that Jardin could think up.

As Bill looked at his friend, he was conscious of a change in him. He had a worldly, bored air that to Bill was extremely funny. Frank and Horace did not trouble to speak to Lee, who grinned cheerfully and said nothing, while he cared even less. Lee saw through the two boys and was determined to keep them from doing any harm to Bill, for whom he felt the truest affection. They were growing into a friendship that was destined to last for many years.

Lee was the soul of honor and had a sense of humor seldom found in one of Indian blood, and was as ready to romp and roughhouse as a boy of twelve. His straightforwardness and his tender care of Mrs. Sherman caused the Major to rejoice every day that he had transferred him to his service as orderly.

Lee had the Indian gift of silence, so he made no comment at all when he was alone with Bill and Bill commenced to sputter and fuss about the change in Frank. He just stared ahead, gazing off across the prairie or carving delicately on another length of chain which Mrs. Sherman had asked him to make for her sister back in the east.

"My airplane is finished," said Horace as soon as he could make Bill hear the glad news. For once he looked genuinely pleased and excited.

"Good enough!" cried Bill. "Is it here?"

"Of course not," scoffed Jardin. "I will not get it until I go back east. But Major Anderson has arranged for me to learn to fly here. My father called him on long distance and arranged it."

"I guess I will hang around and pick up some pointers myself," said Bill. "When do these lessons come off? 'Most any time?"

"Almost any time we want to go over to the Field and get hold of an instructor," answered Frank. "Now the war is over, the rush is over too and we are taking our time over here. Stick around all you want to, Bill; I can fly myself."

Walking over to the hangars, the boys found the field bright with the giant dragonflies hopping here and there or rising slowly from the ground, and taking wing with ever increasing noise and speed. Lee followed the boys and was glad when he found that Bill could not make a flight without written permission from his parents. This was a rule of the Field, no minor being allowed to go up without the presentation of such a paper, which acted as a sort of release in ease of any accident. Jardin buttoned himself into an elaborate and most expensive leather coat, carefully, adjusted his goggles, stepped into a plane beside the usual pilot who winked slyly at Lee, and proceeded, to send his big bug skimming here and there across the field under the wobbly and uncertain guidance of Horace. They did not leave the ground, but Frank soon soared upward on a short flight that filled Bill with joy and envy all at the same time. He felt that he *must* fly.

Frank was really mastering the control of a plane in a remarkable manner. The

instructors said that he was a born birdman. He seemed to know by instinct what to do and when to do it.

Bill and Lee, on the sidelines by the hangars, did not find all this very exciting. Bill grew more and more crazy to go up, and Lee, who was an artilleryman and had no use for flying, was sorry to see the craze for the dangerous sport grow in his favorite.

Finally the lesson was over, and Frank and Horace, both much inclined to crow, rejoined Bill and Lee to talk it over. They wandered over to the Andersons' quarters, where Lee left them to go to the men's mess for his luncheon. Mrs. Anderson was out attending a bridge luncheon, and the Major did not come home at noon, so the boys had the table to themselves.

"Well, I have decided to be an aviator," declared Jardin. "There will be another war sometime perhaps, and there is nothing like being ready. I suppose I will have to go to school this winter because I agreed to. Gee, I hate the thought of it! Perhaps there will be some way of getting out of it, I can almost always work dad one way or another. He is crazy for me to go through college."

"So is my father," said Frank. "But I am going to be an aviator too, and I don't see any need of college."

"My father is set on college, too," said Bill, "or at least a good training school."

"Well, he is only your stepfather, so I suppose you will do just as you like about it," said Jardin.

"I don't see it that way," replied Bill, flushing, "Of course he is my stepfather, but he is the kindest and best man I ever knew or heard of and I will say right now I am perfectly crazy over him. If I hadn't been, I would never have let mother marry him."

"Much she would have cared what you wanted!" chuckled Jardin.

"She would have done exactly as I said," Bill insisted. "We always talk things over together and never decide any really *big* things without a good old consultation."

"Nobody ever consults me," grumbled Frank.

"None of the women consult me," said Jardin. "They know I won't be bothered

with them. Dad and I usually go over things together."

How Horace Jardin's father would have laughed if he could have heard his son and heir make that remark! Horace was Mr. Jardin's greatest care and problem. He often said that his son caused him more trouble than it gave him to run all his factories. Mr. Jardin was a very unwise man who loved his only son so much that he did not seem able to make him obey. Horace had not been a bad boy to start with, but twelve years of having his own way and feeling that, as he said, he could work his father and mother for anything that trouble could procure or money buy had made him selfish, grasping and unreliable. Other and graver faults were developing in him fast, to his mother's amazement and his father's sorrow.

When Mr. Jardin found that he must go down into the oil fields to look after his wells there, he was greatly relieved and pleased to find that he could leave his son with such pleasant people as the Andersons. He knew that for awhile at least the novelty of being right at an Aviation Post would keep Horace out of any serious mischief. In a measure he was right. The discipline and routine, the sharp commands, the rage of the instructors if anything went even a shade wrong, impressed Horace as he had never been impressed before. All the good in him came to the surface; the bad hid itself away.

Unfortunately, however, while Horace was spending his time in what seemed to all a highly creditable manner, his influence over Frank was bad, and grew worse as time went on. He absorbed like a sponge every word of Jardin's boastful tales; he learned a thousand new ways in which to gain his own ends; he learned to cheat; he learned to lie without the feeling of guilt and distress that used to bother him when he slipped from the truth. And most of all, he was made to feel that there was nothing so necessary as money, money and still more money. Every letter from Mr. Jardin brought Horace a check for anything from twenty-five to a hundred dollars, and this money was spent like water.

Frank, who had thought his allowance of a dollar a week a fine and generous amount, watched Jardin buy his way and squander money in every direction. Frank commenced to worry about school. It must be as Horace said: useless to try to be happy or comfortable unless one had a pocket full of change all the time. He commenced to wish for some money, then the wish changed, and he wished for a certain sum, the amount he thought would be sufficient to carry him through the three terms of school. He made up his mind that he wanted six hundred dollars. Where this vast sum was to come from he did not know. He

knew very well that his father and mother would not give it to him. He could not earn it. Only a few weeks later the boys would be sent east to school. Six hundred dollars he wanted, and his whole mind seemed to focus on that amount like a burning glass, and the thought of it scorched him.

All through luncheon Frank thought of the money. He went off into day-dreams in which he rescued the daughter of the Colonel from all sorts of dangers and invariably after each rescue, the Colonel would say, "My boy, thanks are too tame. I insist, in fact I *order* you to accept this little token of my regard." And then he would press into Frank's hand six hundred dollars. It was thrilling; and in a day-dream so easy.

The fact that the Colonel's only daughter was a strapping damsel who stood five feet eight and weighed one hundred and sixty pounds and always took the best of care of herself in all kinds of tight places without asking odds of anyone, did not affect Frank's day-dreams at all. Neither did the fact that the Colonel was well known to be so close with his money that he had learned to read the headlines upside down so that he seldom had to buy a paper of a newsy! Six hundred dollars ... it would have killed him!

Frank was called back to the present by hearing Horace say,

"Six hundred dollars! Where does a common soldier get all that?"

Frank looked up from his dessert quite wild-eyed. It was so pat!

"His grandfather sent it to him. He has a lot more than that."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Frank, coming wholly out of his trance and looking from one to the other. "Who has six hundred dollars, and whose grandfather sent it to him?"

"Lee's," said Bill.

"I don't believe it!"

"It is true," Bill affirmed. "I was just telling Horace that I went to Lawton this morning before I came here, so that Lee could bank the money. He has a nice bank account. He is saving up so he can go into business when he is discharged."

"Well, I don't believe it," said Frank bitterly. Six hundred dollars—and someone else had it!

"It is true anyhow," repeated Bill, "and this is the way it happened. Years and years ago, as the storytellers say, the Government decided to grant to every Indian a certain amount of ground. I forget how much Lee told me. Anyhow, it was a nice large farm, and they gave one to each Indian. Some of the Indians were glad to get the grant and went right off and settled down and did their best to be farmers. And some of them didn't want land, and said they wouldn't *have* land. It looked too much like work.

"Lee's grandfather was one of those. He just said no, he wouldn't take it. But the Government knew that what one Indian had, the rest ought to have or there would be scrapping over it sooner or later, sure as shooting.

"So old Foxy Grandpa found a farm wished off on him whether he liked it or not. He was quite mad about it—so mad that for a long while he wouldn't speak more than once a week instead of once in a day or two, the way he usually did. Bimeby he built a house and his boys, who were all getting an education, commenced to work the ground and collect cattle and horses. This commenced to interest grandpa a little, although he wouldn't help, and he used to sit on the back porch and look over the farm and watch his children, and just rattle right along, saying nothing at all.

"Then all at once oil was discovered in Oklahoma, and the Government took control of the Indian grants. That; is, they dig the wells and give the Indians a big royalty. If the well is a dry hole, it does not cost the Indian anything.

"The fellows who knew about such things came moseying around grandfather's farm and thought they smelled oil. So they put up a derrick, and commenced to drill right where the pig yard was, not far from the house.

"Grandfather just sat right on the back porch and watched them do it. Didn't keep them from work by his talking; just sat and looked on. It took several weeks to drill the well, but grandfather kept right on watching.

"Finally bing, bang! They struck, and it was a gusher. Just poured right out and most drowned grandfather on the back porch before they could plug it and fix the tanks.

"The first dividend was five thousand dollars, and grandfather took it and looked at it and then shoved it over to his oldest son and commenced to talk. That is, Lee said he spoke *one word* in the Indian language. It meant the-car-that-runs-by-itself. He wanted an automobile! Well, his son went off and got him the

biggest he could for the money, and now the old gentleman is quite satisfied.

"When he isn't riding around the country he still sits and watches that old gusher keep gushing. He gets about two hundred dollars a day out of it."

"That's nothing!" said Horace Jardin.

"*Nothing?*" repeated Bill. "Well, it would mean *some*thing to me, I can tell you!"

"Nothing?" cried Frank in a tone filled with real pain. "*Nothing?* My soul! It would be six hundred dollars every three days."

"Why pick on six hundred dollars?" asked Bill. "Why not fourteen hundred a week? Those old wells go right on working on Sunday, you know."

Frank slammed down his fork and shoved his chair back from the table.

"Oh, it is a *shame*!" he cried bitterly.

Both boys looked at him in surprise.

"What ails you, anyhow?" asked Bill.

"Nothing," said Frank.

CHAPTER VI

Jardin left the following week and the two boys tried to settle down into the old groove. Bill spent a great deal of time with Frank, watching the manœuvers on the Field. Frank kept up the study of aviation with surprising earnestness. He had a special gift for it and was really a source of great pride to his instructors. Of course his father forbade long or very high flights, but Frank soon was able to execute any of the simpler stunts that make the air so thrilling.

Bill, who refrained from any flying even as a passenger on account of his mother, tried to absorb as much as he could from the talk and from a couple of the airmen who took a great fancy to the quiet, handsome boy who asked such intelligent questions and who so soon mastered all the technicalities of the monster dragonflies.

With a small maliciousness that surprised even himself, Frank had dropped a hint here and there that Bill was afraid to fly, and the two airmen, Lem Saunders and Chauncey Harringford, who were his special friends at the Field discussed it between themselves. One day they stopped Lee and asked him if it was true. Lee flushed under his dark, swarthy skin, and his small, black eyes flashed angrily.

"Who says it?" he demanded.

"I don't know how it started," answered Lem. "I don't know as it matters whether the kid is afraid or not, but it doesn't seem just like him; and I sort of hate to think there is a grain of yellow anywhere in that good body of his."

"I will bet all my month's pay that there isn't," affirmed Chauncey. "I *know* there isn't, but I wish I knew how the report started. It makes it sort of hard for him. The fellows guy him."

"I wish *I* could be there when they do. I know one soldier who would have a ticket for the guardhouse for fighting in about ten minutes."

"It is not as bad as that," said Chauncey. "The fellows don't mean any harm, only young Frank is such a whiz and even that green little sprout of a Jardin flew like a swallow. And here is Bill, by far the best of the three, won't go off the ground but just shakes his head and grins if you ask him why not."

"I know the reason," said Lee firmly. "It is a good one, too. Do you know his mother? No? Well, she is more like an angel than a human being." Lee took off his campaign hat as he spoke, as though he could not talk of Mrs. Sherman while he remained covered.

"She is perfect," he continued. "So gentle, so sweet; and such a true friend! But she has a very weak heart. There is something wrong, very wrong about it, and Major Sherman has told me that a shock might kill her. And what greater shock could there be than something happening to her only son? Major Sherman told me that he had explained it to Bill, and that Bill never did one thing to worry his mother. If he says he will come home at a certain time, he gets there. When he is away, at Lawton or Medicine Park or any place like that, he telephones her a couple of times to let her know he is all right. That boy is a peach, I can tell you! There are dozens of things he doesn't do on her account. And he never complains. He doesn't wait for her to ask him not to, either. It is awfully hard on him, I can tell you, because he is the most fearless and daring boy of his age I have ever seen. He wants to try everything going." Lee looked wistful. "I wish *I* could hear someone say Bill is a coward!"

"They don't go as far as that," said Chauncey soothingly. "They just guy him a little."

"They will stop guying if *I* hear them," said Lee doggedly. "The boy has every kind of courage that there is and some day will prove it. But never, never if it will distress his mother. He will bear all the slurs and insults in the world rather than hurt her."

"Jimminy, old fellow, you take it too hard!" said Lem, laughing. "All the fellows do is guy him, and we will see to it that they stop that, you can bank on it. Chance here and me will never see the kid abused. I am some scrapper myself, if it comes to that!"

He pounded Lee cheerfully on the back and that young man smiled in spite of himself. Turning, he caught Lem, a six footer and heavy, and with what seemed a playful little clasp raised him from the ground and tossed him over his shoulder where he hung balanced for a minute before Lee gently eased him to the ground. Chauncey was round-eyed with amazement and Lem sputtered, "Lee, you wizard, you! How in the world did you do that? Why, I am twice your size!"

"Just a little Indian trick that I learned a good while ago when I used to visit some cousins of mine. There were two young bucks who used to wrestle with

me, and I learned a lot from them. I have been teaching Bill, and he can almost beat me at my own game. You don't have to be big like you, Lem. Do you want to see me throw you twenty feet over my head?"

"Why, you loon, I should say not!" said Lem, backing off.

"Oh, be a sport, Lem, and let me see the fun!" cried Chauncey.

But Lem refused to be obliging. For a man who did not care how high or how far he flew, he was strangely unwilling to let himself be tossed out on the prairie to amuse Chance or anyone else.

Lee walked off laughing. The others stood looking after him.

"The only Indian thing about him is his color and his walk. Do you notice how he puts one foot down right in front of the other as though he was walking along a narrow trail?"

"He is one of the straightest fellows I have ever known," said Lem, feeling of his neck and waggling his head to see if it was all right after its late experience with Lee. "I am glad to know about Bill. He understands every last thing there is about a plane, and it did seem so funny that he would never leave the ground. It is a wonderful chance for those kids to stand in over here, you know. They are getting the best training in the world in the flying game. I had commenced to think Bill was a perfect sissy. That little automobile of his is a wonder—a regular racing car on a small scale—and yet he goes crawling along at fifteen miles an hour. Well, I am glad to know how it is."

Lem fished in his pocket and found some chewing gum which he offered to Chauncey. They strolled away in the direction of the hangars and Lee hurried over to Major Anderson's quarters, where he found the two boys sitting on the wide, screened veranda.

"Just waiting for you, Lee," said Bill, looking at his watch. "We must be getting along. Do you know what I am doing these days?" he asked Frank, who was moodily staring at Lee. "I am packing up for school."

"Why didn't you begin last Christmas?" asked Frank, coming out of his dream.

"There is always such a lot of things to attend to at the last second and I am getting all my traps in shape."

"Mother is packing for me," said Frank. "I wish we didn't have to go. I will be all out of practice with the planes by the time we have a chance to fly again. I wonder where Jardin is going to school?"

"Have you heard from him lately?" asked Bill.

"Not a word since he went away. Mother thought it was funny he didn't write her a note to thank her for entertaining him. His father wrote her instead."

"Did Jardin know where we are going?" asked Bill.

"We didn't know ourselves when he left, and I can't write and tell him, because for all I know he may be in Europe by this time."

"*I* am just as well pleased," said Bill. "You know I never did have any use for him, and I think we will get along a good deal better with the other fellows and with the teachers if he is not there as a friend of ours."

"You were always down on him and for nothing," said Frank. "I think he is all right. And he has the money, too."

"Well, you don't want to sponge, do you?" asked Bill.

"Of course not!" said Frank, flushing. "You are such a nut about things! Of course I don't mean *sponge*, but money is the only thing that will put you in right at school or anywhere else."

"That sounds just like Jardin," replied Bill. "Well, if that is so, what do you suppose I am going to do on about nine cents a week? What are you going to do yourself?"

"I don't know, but if there is any money to be had, I am going to get it."

"How are you going to go about it?" asked Bill as he stepped into the Swallow and prepared to start.

"I don't know," answered Frank, still sitting with his chin in his hands. "Beg it, or borrow it, or steal it."

Bill threw in the clutch and the Swallow sped away.

Frank was left to his own bitter thoughts. Money! He had brooded over his lack of it and had remembered Jardin's assurance that to have a good time in school he must have a pocketful of money at all times. Frank had changed his mind

about school. He was going for the good time he expected to have. He only wished that he was going with Jardin instead of with Bill Sherman. What Bill had said about sponging had stung him. Now he knew that he must obtain what he wanted somehow and somewhere. His mother could not give it to him; his father would not. He had nothing to sell that was of any value. Yes, there was one thing. He could pawn his watch, that beautiful watch that had been his grandfather's and which he was to use when he was twenty-one. In the meantime it was *his*, left him by his grandfather's will. On the spur of the moment he rose and hurried into the house. Why had he not thought of it before? It was a repeater, that watch, and his grandfather had paid nearly a thousand dollars for it. He would sell it. He hurried into the house and to his mother's room: he knew where she always kept her jewel case hidden. The watch was there and putting it in his pocket, Frank hurried out of the house.

Bill and Lee took it slowly as usual going back to school, stopping to watch the big observation balloon come down to anchor.

"I am sorry about Frank," Bill remarked as they turned and skirted the parade ground in New Post. "I never saw a fellow change so in such a short time. He is brooding all the time and is as grouchy as he can be. I wish there was something I could do for him."

"Just what I was thinking," said Lee. "Do you suppose his folks would mind if I gave him the money he wants? I am getting an awful wad down there in the bank. I am always in right with my grandfather because I can talk his sign language and because I look more like an Indian than some of the real ones. I would be awfully glad to give him five or six hundred dollars."

"That is perfectly fine of you, Lee, but I know they would not want you to do such a thing, because they would think it was simply wild to have Frank have a large sum. At the school we are going to, there is a rule that the boys are not to have money. There is a small sum deposited with the principal and he gives us what he thinks we ought to have. More for the big fellows and less for the little ones, and none at all if we don't behave."

Lee looked disappointed.

"That's too bad," he said, patting Bill on the shoulder with a rare caress. "I was going to get Major Sherman to let me divvy up with you."

"You are all right, Lee, old man," said Bill, "but honest, I won't need money.

What I will want is a letter from you once in awhile. That will be the best thing you can do for me. Gee, I know I am just about going to die with homesickness. Why, I was never away from my mother before in my life! I can tell you, I will never be away from home any more than I can help. Home folks are good enough for me," he laughed.

Lee stuck to the subject. "What if I should *lend* Frank the money he wants?" he persisted.

"I tell you, old dear, he won't be allowed to have money at all."

"What is to prevent it if they don't know it?" asked Lee.

"Why, *he* wouldn't want to break the rules," said Bill. "There is no fun in breaking rules. You can get enough fun without that."

"All right," said Lee, "but the Indian part of me is having a bad hunch about Frank. You watch and see. He is going to get into trouble, and I think it will have something to do with this money he wants so much."

"I hate to have you say that," from Bill. "Your hunches come to time pretty sharply; but I will simply keep an eye on him and try to keep him out of trouble. It is lucky we are not going to the same school with Jardin."

"Do you know that you are not?" said Lee with a queer smile.

"Yes, I *do* know, and for two reasons. We did not know where we were going when he was here and, second place, the school we are going to is not swell enough for Jardin."

"Look for him when you get there," remarked Lee.

"Oh, wow!" cried Bill, sending the Swallow in a long sweep to the back step of the quarters in B2. "If you keep this hunch business up, Lee, you will be getting up as a fortune-teller. We are through with Jardin for a good while, I am thinking."

They were not through with Jardin's influence at least. If it had not been for his tales and suggestions, Frank would not at that moment have been walking the streets of Lawton, his grandfather's splendid watch in his pocket, hunting for a pawnshop that looked inviting. He came to one with a window filled with diamond rings and watches that were certainly not in the class with the timepiece

he was carrying. That seemed a good place to go. With so many ordinary watches on hand, they would appreciate as fine a one as he carried.

He looked in the window, then walked boldly in with the air of a person who wishes to buy something. He did it so well that the proprietor came forward with a beaming smile.

The smile faded when Frank laid the watch on the counter and the man pierced him with a keen look. He took the watch and turned it over.

"What is your name?" he asked suddenly.

Frank looked up in surprise.

"I don't see as that has anything to do with it," he replied stiffly.

"It has a good deal to do with it," said the man. "That is not the sort of a watch a boy your age carries. Not on your life it isn't! Now where did you get that watch? Did you steal it? That is the question. Are you selling it for someone else? That's what I want to know. We are licensed dealers here, and we got to be pertected. Come across, young feller, come across! What's your name?"

"Bill Sherman," said Frank, and was sorry as soon as he had said it. But he did not dare retract his words.

"So far, so good!" said the man to whom the name meant nothing. "Now, Bill Sherman, where did you get this watch?"

"It is mine," said Frank, "and I am not selling it; I want to pawn it."

"If Bill Sherman can afford to own a watch like that, why then should he pawn it? Looks like he ought to have plenty of money."

"I do mostly," said Frank, red and fidgeting. "But I am short just at present, and that is my own watch that my grandfather willed to me so I thought I would pawn it for awhile."

"I don't know," said the man. "I got boys of my own. But if I don't take it you will go somewhere else. So what's the difference? What do you expect to get for it?"

"Grandfather paid nearly a thousand dollars for it!" said Frank. "Would you think six hundred dollars about right?"

Then for a moment Frank thought the pawnshop man was going to have a fit, a fit of large and dreadful proportions, right on the premises. His eyes bulged; he choked and gurgled. It was really awful, and Frank could not help wishing himself home again, watch and all. Even with the coveted sum so close within reach, he was sick of the whole thing.

Presently the pawnshop man came to himself a little.

He leaned across the counter and said softly, "Would you please say that again?"

"Six hundred dollars," repeated Frank.

"Say," said the man, leaning confidentially toward the boy, "what a joker you are! That's good enough for vaudeville, I'll say! Well, we've laughed enough at that, ain't we? And I feel so funny about it that I will give you a good price for the watch. What do you guess it is?" He leaned closer. "Twenty-five dollars."

"*Twenty-five dollars!*" gasped Frank. "Why, my grandfather paid 'most a thousand dollars for it!"

"Sure, I don't doubt it; and so did George Washington have a watch bigger than this that cost a lot of money but I would not give more than twenty-five dollars for either one of 'em."

"I can't take that," said Frank, looking so shocked and disappointed that the man knew that he would end by accepting.

"Twenty-five is as high as I can go," said the man. "We got to pertect ourselves."

CHAPTER VII

With a bitter feeling of disappointment and shame, Frank took the proffered twenty-five dollars, after a long wrangle had convinced him that there was positively no more to be wrung from the pawnshop man. He left the shop with dragging feet, half inclined to go back and throw down the money with a demand for his watch. But the thought of Jardin deterred him. As he went out he could see the man leaning into the window where he rearranged the group of watches already displayed there, and placed the watch, Frank's beautiful watch, in the place of honor on a purple velvet cushion in the center.

Two weeks passed, and one day remained before the boys were to start to school. Frank finally heard from Horace Jardin. Horace urged him again to collect what he termed a "*wad*," assuring him that life would be really terrible without a lot of money. Also he hinted darkly of something very surprising that he would have to tell later. That it only concerned Jardin himself Frank did not question, as Jardin was never interested in anything concerning other people except as it had some bearing on himself in one way or another.

Money—money! Frank thought of nothing else. Then, as though it had been a terrible unseen monster waiting to spring on the boy, his temptation leaped upon him.

Temptation only attacks the weak. If we allow ourselves to harbor unworthy or wicked thoughts, if we pave the way with wicked and unworthy deeds, temptation has an easy time. Temptation is like a big bully. He does not like to be laughed off, or to be scorned. He prefers to be parleyed with. Then there is always a good chance for him. Better still, he prefers to dash up to the weak and sinning, and say hurriedly, "Here: quick, quick! Here's the easy way out! It's the *only* way out! Just you tell this lie, disobey your parents, or take this money. It isn't stealing, you know, because you mean to put it back as soon as you can and everything will be all right."

That is the way temptation talks, and on that last day before the boys started off to school Frank listened.

He was over at Bill's quarters, in B2, when the telephone rang. Now there are just two telephones to each building at the School of Fire, one upstairs and one

down. They are wall phones, fastened on the outside of the buildings, midway of the porch that runs the whole length. When the bell rings, whoever is nearest answers and calls the person who is wanted. So Frank, standing in Bill's doorway and close to the phone, stepped out and took down the receiver. While he waited for an answer, he leaned his elbow on the sill of the window beside him and idly scanned the confusion of papers on the big desk shoved close to the sill inside. A strong wind fluttered the papers.

Frank, waiting on a dead line, stared at the desk and his eyes grew wild. Down at the end of the porch a grey-haired Colonel sat with his eyes glued to the *Army and Navy Journal*. He was reading about a proposed increase in pay, and he had no interest in small boys. Across the sandy space on the porch of the opposite quarters two ladies sat embroidering.

In the Sherman quarters, he could hear Mrs. Sherman and Bill and Lee talking as they finished packing Bill's trunk.

No one noticed Frank. No one saw what he did next, so stealthily and rapidly. But in a moment he put the receiver down on the shelf, hurried to the Shermans' door, and called for Lee.

"Someone wants you on the phone," Frank said, and as Lee hurried out, Frank sat down on the door sill and whistled shrilly to the Shermans' Airdale, who was trying to chum with the pretty ladies across the way. They looked up, saw Lee at the phone but did not see Frank who had dodged inside the door. The Colonel looked up from his paper, scowling. He laid the whistle to Lee and glared.

Lee called "Hello!" half a dozen times. He too leaned on the sill of the open window. No one answering the phone, he hung up and went back to the packing.

And the next morning, Bill and Frank, feeling fearfully overdressed in new suits, and bearing spotless shiny yellow suitcases, stood on the train waving to two rather damp looking mothers and two fathers who stood up almost *too* straight, and started away on their long journey.

Lee did not wave at them. The half of Lee that was Indian was afraid that the half that was white would look too sorry and lonesome if he stood on the platform watching the two small figures waving on the train while a friendly porter clutched a shoulder of each. So Lee stayed in the machine and listened as the train pulled out, and felt very blue and lonesome, and fell to planning how he would ask for a furlough and go shoot some wildcats to make rugs for Bill's

room. And he wondered how soon the boys would look inside their suitcases. Lee had opened both those suitcases!

The boys, wildly excited over the charm and novelty of travelling alone, went to their seats and gravely studied the flat bleakness of Oklahoma. As yet they had no regrets at leaving the Post, although Bill felt rather low whenever he thought of his mother. Her picture, as radiant and lovely as any of the girls who came visiting on the Post, he had pasted on the dial of his wrist watch, the Major helping. They had had lots of fun doing it, the Major pretending to be awfully jealous. But when the picture was fastened safely on the dial, it was the Major, who was something of an artist, who got out his color-kit and delicately tinted the lovely features until the cut-out snapshot looked rare and lovely as a portrait painted right on the watch. Then he carefully fastened the crystal, and Frank slipped it on his wrist, more than pleased.

"In old times," said the Major, washing his brushes in the tumbler of water, "the knights always wore a ribbon or a glove belonging to the lady they loved the best. They did not hide their keepsakes in their inside pockets but bound them boldly on their helmets, to remind themselves that they must be loyal, faithful, fearless, brave and true for her sake, and to show all who cared to look that they were proud to do their best for one so fair. No doubt there were dark days and hard times when they needed every ounce of support and encouragement they could get.

"You will find it so, old man. I can't help you, but," he gently touched the watch, "*she* will, always. You know it, don't you?"

"Yes, sir, I do!" said Bill, looking down on the smiling face.

"Then you don't need another word from me, son," said the Major. They were alone. He bent and kissed the boy on the cheek. Then he smiled.

"That is allowable between men, you know, son, on the eve of battle. Put up a good fight." He left the room, and something that was part promise and part prayer went up from his soul.

"I *will* put up a good fight!" he whispered.

Frank had spent his last evening alone, a throng of distressful thoughts crowding in on him. His father was on some official business in town and his mother had not thought it necessary to break her weekly engagement with her bridge club.

Frank wandered over to the hangars but he missed Lem and Chauncey and soon returned home. He was greatly excited over the coming trip, and had other and most serious reasons for wishing to go away. So many unpleasant thoughts crowded upon him that it was not until ten o'clock that he happened to think of his watch, still in Lawton at the pawnshop. He had not redeemed it, and the twenty-five dollars reposed in the bottom of his kit bag, in an envelope that had thread wound around it.

He reflected that he could send the money and his ticket back to the pawnshop man, for it was too late to take the trip to town. His parents were apt to return at any time. They did not come very soon, however, and Frank went to bed, a lonely, unhappy and sinning boy.

The boys had so much to look at that for awhile they were quite silent. Then Bill remembered something.

"Say!" he suddenly exclaimed. "We are having the deuce of a time at the school. Right in our quarters, too. Did you hear?"

"No," said Frank, still staring out. "What was it?"

"Somebody stole six hundred dollars from Captain Jennings next door to us. It was money he had to pay the Battery, and it is gone. There is an awful fuss about it."

"Will they arrest him?" asked Frank.

"Why, no; they won't do that, of course. He didn't steal it from *himself*, and Dad says he has money besides what he gets as captain, but I don't suppose he likes the idea of making it good. There is going to be an *awful* fuss about it."

"Did he lose it out of his pocket?" asked Frank.

"No; that's the funny part," said Bill. "He had it on his desk in his study, under a paperweight, in an envelope, and that's the last he ever saw of it. Oh, there will be an *awful* fuss over it! Whoever took it will go to Leavenworth for so many years that he will have a good chance to be sorry about it. It is an awful thing."

"Do they suspect anyone?" asked Frank.

"I didn't hear anything this morning," said Bill. "We left too early. But there will be an awful fuss. Why, it is an *awful* thing, you know. I didn't know there was

anyone over there low enough to steal. It makes me feel kind of queer!"

CHAPTER VIII

The day passed rapidly. The boys were the first in the dining-car when a meal was announced, and be it said they were almost the last to leave. They had been provided with plenty of money for "eats," as the two Major-fathers wisely remembered that a boy is never so hungry as when travelling. Also their section was the first one made up. They were tired, and sleepy.

They tossed up to see which should take the upper berth, both boys wanting it, and Frank won.

They spread their suitcases out on Bill's bed to open them, then Frank decided to take his up with him and climbed up into his lofty berth while Bill boosted and lifted the suitcase after him. Bill had packed his own suitcase for the first time, and his mother had smiled as she saw him carefully plant his pajamas on the very bottom. She said nothing, however, as she knew that another time he would lay them on the top where he could get them without any trouble. Frank had done the same thing, so for a little there was silence as the boys spread everything on the beds in a wild effort to locate the missing garments. At last they were found, and the suitcases repacked, hair brushes and tooth paste being salvaged as they went.

As Bill slipped into his pajama coat something pricked him. The pocket was pinned together with a large, rusty pin. He drew it out and from the pocket took a folded envelope.

"What in time is this?" he murmured to himself, then smiled as he reflected that it must be a little love letter from his mother. He winked mischievously at her picture on his wrist as he tore open the envelope. But there was no letter from mother in the envelope. Instead it was stuffed with perfectly new, crisp five-dollar bills. There were twenty of them. Twenty! Bill counted them twice. Then still disbelieving his eyes, he laid the beautiful green engravings all over his sheet and counted them one by one with his forefinger. Twenty! He noticed a small piece of paper in the envelope and examined it. It read briefly:

"BILL:

"i looked all over Lawton for sumething nise for you to take to school. So please spend this on something you like. I will tell your mother what I done so she wont kick. Anyhow I aint afraid of her kicking ever since the day i broke her big glass dish that you said was cut. It cut me all right, but she never said a word, and I bet she wont now when i explane. So remember when this you see, remember Lee. That is some poetry partly mine and partly out of a book. If I had kept at school the way I should of, I could have made the whole piece up myself. Rite soon to

yours as ever,
"LEE."

Bill gasped. Then he gathered the precious money tight in his hand and standing on the edge of his berth, hoisted himself up to Frank's level.

"Glue your eye to this!" he whispered loudly over the racket of the train. "Gee, have you got the same?"

At the sound of Bill's voice, Frank, who was staring at a handful of bills, started violently, then forced a rather shaky smile.

"Found this in my pajama coat," he said; then as Bill waved his fist, "What! Have you the same thing?"

"Surest thing you know!" said Bill. "Never had so much money in my life. The darned old peach!"

"I haven't counted it," said Frank. "It sort of scared me. Who do you think gave it to us?"

"Didn't you read your letter?" asked Bill, wiggling the rest of the way up and taking a paper like his own from Frank's envelope. He handed it over and Frank unfolded and read it. Reluctantly, but seeing no way out of it, he handed it over to Bill.

"Frank," said the letter, "Lawton is a dead one. Nuthing in it for boys except rattles and guns and pink silk shirts and stick pins. But your dad wouldnt let you have the pins and your mothers wouldn't see you found dead in them shirts, and the pins was sort of advansed, so I want you to spend this money on something you like when you get to whatever it is.

"Just a present from your friend
"LEE."

"P. S. Say, Frank, lets take a fresh start me and you. I wouldnt believe you would lie or steal even if some do do such. So you must take it from me that a good indian is a good indian just as a good white man is good.

"So that all we want to bother about that.

"Your true friend
"LEE."

"Well, this beats all!" said Bill, handing back the letter. "Isn't Lee the *peach* though? I wish I was sure Mom would let me keep this. Isn't it great—all new fives! I suppose he thought it would be handy that way for us to spend."

"What does he mean about not believing that I lie or steal?" said Frank, scowling.

"Why, just what he says, you nut!" exclaimed Bill. "Can't you read? He means he knows *you* wouldn't do anything wrong, and so you must believe in *him*. I bet he has overheard some of the things you have said about him. Anyhow, it is just as he says. You must keep his present, and make a new start. He wants to be good friends with you and wants you to like him. And I should say he deserves it."

Frank said very little about the present but Bill didn't notice. He was too busy voicing his own surprise and gratitude. Before he finally slid down into his own berth he had spent the crisp new fives twenty times over. He thought he was too excited to sleep, but after he had pinned the present back in his coat pocket, and had carefully laid himself down on that side, and tied all the curtains shut, and balanced his suitcase on end at the front of the berth so a possible robber would tip it over on him, he was asleep in two seconds. It would have worked all right at that, only by-and-by in the middle of a dream where Bill was batter in a baseball nine that used ice-cream cones instead of balls, the train went around a curve and over came the suitcase. Bill was awake in a second, and for a moment had a hand-to-hand fight with the curtains before he realized what had happened. With a laugh he felt for his precious pocket, and slept again.

But in the upper berth Frank Anderson had tossed Lee's friendly letter and the packet of bills down to the end of the berth as though they were worthless. He

was only a boy and should have slept but all night long he lay and stared at the little electric bulb burning dimly over his head. He lay and thought; and his thoughts burned like fire.

It was very late the following night when they reached their destination. Bill had come to the conclusion that Frank was not a very jolly traveling companion. He was moody and inclined to be really grouchy. And touchy.... *Whew!* It was all Bill could do to say the right thing. Finally he remembered that some people are always car-sick when they travel, and on being asked, Frank admitted that he didn't feel so very good. So Bill let him alone and things went better. Bill made a good many friends that day and came within an ace of being kissed by a pale little lady who found a chance to take a much needed nap because Bill took charge of her two-year-old terror of a baby boy while she slept. There was an old gentleman too, who asked him a million or more questions, and enjoyed himself very much. He asked the boys to take luncheon with him, and proved that he had not forgotten his boyhood by ordering the *dandiest* dinner—even a lot of things that were not on the bill. He was a director of the road, or vice-president, or something, the porter told Bill in a whisper, but Bill didn't pay much attention. What the old gentleman *didn't* tell was that he was a trustee of the very school the boys were going to attend. Some day they were going to meet him again, but that is another story.

Anyhow, it was very late when they arrived and they were piloted to their room by a pale young instructor who met them at the station in an ancient and wheezy Ford belonging to the school. They were the last boys to arrive, he told them, and school was to begin at eight o'clock in the morning. He warned them to be perfectly quiet as the boys were all asleep and it was against rules to speak or have the lights on after nine. But they were to be allowed a light to undress by, and he would come in in fifteen minutes and put it out.

They undressed in about a tenth of the time it usually took for that ceremony, and even Bill, who forgot to brush his teeth and had to get up again to do it, was deep under the covers when Mr. Nealum, the instructor, came silently in, said goodnight without a smile, turned off the light, found the door by the aid of a big flashlight he carried and silently disappeared.

"Undertaker!" whispered Frank.

"Shut up!" said Bill. He listened intently, then said under his breath, "Be careful! I thought I heard him breathe!"

"He is gone," answered Frank. "I heard him walk away."

"Not much you did!" said Bill. "He pussyfooted it. Must have had rubber soles on his shoes."

"I heard him anyhow," insisted Frank. The boys lay still, thinking over their new situation. It was very exciting. They were not lonely. Their narrow beds, but little wider than the quartermaster cots at Sill, were side by side, nearly touching. Presently Bill spoke.

"What's the matter with you, Frank?"

"Nothing! What ails *you*?" retorted Frank.

"Nothing, but you *breathe* so hard—sort of choky and gaspy."

"That's you doing *that*," said Frank. "I can't sleep with you snorting so."

"I tell you it's you!" said Bill. "I listened to myself breathe, and you couldn't hear me. I was breathing just like this." He gave a sample, and you could not hear him. Then as both boys listened, things began to happen.

Frank made a light leap from his bed and landed on top of the stunned, scared and astonished Bill.

"Sssssh!" hissed Frank. "The money!... Robbers!... Under the bed!"

Frozen with horror, the boys listened intently. The breathing *was* under Bill's bed. It seemed as though they lay listening for a week before Bill made a violent motion to free himself from Frank's grasp.

"Where you going?" hissed that youth.

"To light the light and give the alarm. If he tries to get out, we will hold him."

"Stay here!" commanded Frank.

For answer Bill wrenched himself free and bounded out on the floor. With another bound he reached the light and turned the button. No light responded. He stood beside the wall, uncertain what move to make next. The sensible thing seemed to be to shout an alarm or else go out and find Mr. Nealum. In either case what would the robber do to Frank, who was roosting right above him? The breathing under the bed continued, now fast, now slow, up and down. Bill had heard something like that somewhere.

As his fright subsided, he recognized the sounds as very familiar. Bill had not lived in the apartments at Sill for nothing. Too, too often had he listened to the sounds that trickled clearly through the plaster-board partitions. Those partitions were like sounding boards. From one apartment to the next, they transferred the arguments, discussions and all goings-on on the other side. Bill laughed soundlessly in the dark. The lights had been turned off at some central switch, and the darkness was intense. He was lost in the strange room. He took a step sidewise along the wall and stubbed his toe against a suitcase. Bending, he found that it was his own. The problem was solved. Rummaging hastily, he found his flashlight.

"Frank!" he called in a low whisper.

"W-w-what?" quavered from the dark.

Following the direction of the low sound, Bill crossed the room until his outstretched hand collided with Frank's eye. This mostly happens, you know. Frank stifled a howl as Bill hissed, "Listen! We have him now! He's asleep—snoring. Let's take a look at him and then beat it for Mr. Nealum. He must be somewhere about."

"Don't you do it!" whispered Frank, clutching Bill. "Find Mr. Nealum first. You go to flashing that light in his eyes and you will wake him up. He's apt to kill us before you could get to the door."

"Think what a lark it will be if we take him prisoner all by ourselves! We can tie him up with these sheets in no time. Now I tell you how we will work it. As soon as we see just how he is lying, I will shove the bed off him, and you lam him good and plenty with that dictionary. Soon as you do that I will throw all the blankets and bedclothes and the mattress on him and then we will sit on him and yell. Somebody ought to come."

Frank still objected, sure from the size of the sounds that were now easily recognizable as snores, that the robber was really in a deep sleep.

"If he is anything like Lee," he said, "he will throw us off in a second."

"But you are going to lam him one!" whispered Bill patiently. "You must hit hard enough to knock him out—stun him."

"Well, have it your own way!" conceded Frank. He commenced to realize what a

wonderful introduction this would be to the boys of the school if it went through as smoothly as Bill seemed to think it would.

"Here, take the flashlight, but don't turn it on," whispered Bill. "I want to get the bedclothes ready."

Silently and quickly he loosened the tucked-in sheets and blankets. He rolled up the sleeves of his pajama coat

"Now," he said, "let's take a look before we roll the bed away."

Clutching the dictionary in both hands, Frank slid to the floor where he crouched, shivering from excitement. Bill, on his knees, folded a handkerchief over the flashlight to dim it, then pressed the button. Slowly he turned it under the bed. The dim light rested on a tumbled shock of hair and a flushed face, pillowed uncomfortably on a cramped and doubled arm.

Snores rattled furiously from the open mouth. Sleeping the sleep of the weary, the thief lay completely at their mercy.

"Gosh!" said Bill as he looked.

"Gee-roosalem!" murmured Frank.

With a bang the big dictionary slipped from his hands and landed on the floor.

The intruder with a violent start opened his eyes and looked at them.

CHAPTER IX

Setting the flash so it would not go out, Bill laid it down on the floor, cried "Oh, you robber!" and beginning to laugh continued until he had to lie on the floor and roll around. Frank, laughing, too, carefully shoved back the bed. The intruder sat up, rubbing his eyes.

"I guess the joke is on me," he said.

It was Horace Jardin!

"This beats everything in my young life," said Bill as soon as he could speak. "What are you doing here anyhow, scaring the life out of two poor little boys on their very first night in boarding-school? Don't you know you are making us break rules the first shot?"

Horace laughed sheepishly.

"I was going to give you a good old scare," he said, "but I was so tired and it took you so long to get here that I went to sleep. But I bet you are surprised to see me here."

"Here at this school, or under our beds?" quizzed Bill.

"Both," said Horace.

"How did it happen?" asked Frank.

"It was the airplane," explained Horace. "This is the only school in the country where they let you fool with this air stuff, and so I told dad that it was no use bribing me with an airplane to stay in school all the year if I couldn't go where I could use it. I have learned to fly, by the way. Dad paid a dollar a minute to have me taught. I tell you I am a whiz! It cost him five hundred dollars for my tuition, and two thousand more to mend a plane I broke, but he was so pleased at the way I learned that he didn't mind the bills at all. So here I am, and when I heard you were coming—well, I was certainly tickled! So I sneaked in here as soon as the bell rang for lights out, and first I knew I was asleep."

"From the way you were snoring, I should say first thing you knew you were

awake," laughed Frank.

"Guess I will beat it now," said Horace. "There is no school to-morrow—just the organization of classes, and we can go down to the hangars and see my plane. You ought to see those dinky little hangars! Not much like the big government ones. There are only three planes. Mine and one belonging to the school, and one that belongs to a fellow from Toronto. It is a peach, and he thinks he can beat me in a race. We are going to try it out some day if we can ever get up without an instructor. They are awful strict here. I will have a deuce of a time if they catch me in here."

"I should think you had better fade away then," said Frank uneasily. "We don't any of us want to get in wrong."

"Well, I am glad you have come, fellows," whispered Jardin, tiptoeing to the door. "Put out that flash, Bill! You don't want to tell everybody what we are doing. See you in the morning. Goodnight!".

He slipped out, and the boys silently crept back into their beds.

"That beats all!" exclaimed Bill after a long pause when he decided by Frank's breathing that he was still awake. "I surely thought we were quit of that chap."

"You always have it in for him, haven't you?" said Frank. "You are a funny one. Always cracking up that Indian orderly of yours as such a peach and a straight fellow, and forever knocking a first-class good sport like Jardin."

"I didn't mean to knock Horace," said Bill, "but he does seem—well, I don't know just what!"

"I guess that's about it," sneered Frank. "Just about it! You don't know *why* you knock him or what about, because you have just made up your mind to do it. Well, suit yourself! I like Jardin and he is good enough for me, and that's all I have to say about it. You can do as you please; don't mind me."

"Don't get so sore," said Bill. "I told you back home that I was going to treat him decently, and I am."

He turned on his pillow and was silent, and both boys were asleep in about a minute. They were very tired.

Early in the morning Jardin introduced the Toronto boy, and they found him a

very quiet, pleasant chap who made no pretensions of any sort. Together they walked down to the hangars.

"How do you learn to fly in the civilian schools?" asked Bill of the Toronto boy, whose name was Ernest Breeze.

"It is about the same as the government schools," said the boy. "You know something about flying, don't you?"

"A little," replied Bill modestly. "I can control the machine on the field, but I have never been up. There are reasons that keep me from flying but I hope to some day."

"Well, we learned on an old style Bright," said Ernest. "With a dual control, you know. You take the same seat you will always occupy, you follow every movement of the instructor beside you, and you sort of feel that you are managing the levers all alone, until you sense the tricks of the machine and learn a few things like rising from the field, manœuvering and landing. It is a good deal easier than it is to drive an automobile."

"That's the way you start at the aviation schools in the Army," said Frank. "But there you don't have to pay any of this dollar-a-minute business."

"No," said Ernest, "but in exchange for your tuition you have to join the Aviation Corps. And now that the war is over, I would rather do postal work, or ferry or excursion lines instead of hanging around an Army aviation camp. My aim is to be as perfect a flier as I possibly can, and then if there is ever any need of another Army Aviation Corps, why, I will enlist right off. You see your final test qualifies you for government service if you make good."

"What do you think is the quality a birdman should have most of?" asked Bill.

"Our instructor used to say a pilot should have courage, skill, knowledge, aptitude and confidence; but he always went on to say that all these together amounted to very little unless you have a bushel of common sense. I think he was right. I had to earn part of my tuition in the Aviation school because I didn't want to ask my father to pay all that out for me and get me an airplane beside. That is why I am just entering school. As long as the war lasted, I thought I ought to be learning something that would help a bit if they needed me, but it ended before I got a chance to offer myself, and now I have got to work mighty hard to make up for the time I spent in the air. That's why I am here. I want to

keep in practice and fly whenever I am not busy with school work."

He looked critically at the sky.

"It is going to be a wonderful day up there," he said. "Don't you want to come up, one of you?"

"Frank is going with me," said Jardin.

"Come on then," invited Ernest, smiling at Bill.

"I am sorry, but I can't go up," said Bill, flushing.

"Bill likes to stay on the ground pretty well," sneered Jardin, pushing open the door of the hangar. He disappeared within, followed by Frank.

"Well, that's all right," said Ernest, smiling pleasantly. "I don't see as it is anyone's business what you like to do. I think if you feel a bit uneasy you are very wise to stay right on the ground."

"It is not that at all," said Bill, acting on a sudden impulse to tell this pleasant young stranger the reason for his refusal. "It is not that, and the reason probably won't interest you. Frank and Horace are always kidding me about it, but I can't help it. You see, I promised my mother that I wouldn't go up. She has a bad heart, and a shock like my getting hurt would certainly kill her. I can't risk that, can I? And when you come down to it, it is just as you say. I don't see as it is anybody's business what I do."

"I rather think not," said Ernest, clapping Bill on the shoulder. "I guess if you were in *my* boat, with no mother to do things for, you would be glad enough to give up a thing like that. What do you care *what* they say?"

"I don't," declared Bill, "only they always give people the impression that I am afraid. And I am not."

"Of course you are not!" exclaimed Ernest. "That bores me awf'ly! Let's get my little boat out. You don't mind skating around the field, do you?"

"Tickled to death!" said Bill eagerly, and hastened into a place in the trim, beautiful little plane.

The moment they were set in motion he saw that the plane was a wonder. It answered to the slightest touch of the wheel or levers and rode the humps on the

field with a motion that told Bill, experienced as he was in that part of the sport, that it was made of the finest possible materials.

His admiration finally burst into speech.

"What a beauty this is!" he roared over the blast of the throbbing engine.

The young pilot turned a lever, and the racket subsided into a soft, steady humming.

Bill repeated his remark. Ernest stopped the plane and, getting out, commenced to adjust the engine.

"I see she needs a little tuning up this morning," he said, pulling off his gauntlets and fishing a screwdriver out of one of the many pockets in his aviator's coat. Bill joined him.

"It *is* a good machine," admitted Ernest. "I am certainly proud to own it. It is too good a machine for me but I am as careful of it as I know how to be. I think so much of it that I never try any fool stunts with it. Dad says it was worth all he put into it just on that account. He says that perhaps I would forget to take care of my own safety, but he is sure I will never fail to look after this little pet. For instance, when I was learning to fly three years ago (and I don't consider that I really know how to do it yet) they tried to din it into me that I must always keep the tail of my machine a little higher than the nose, in case the engine should go dead when I wasn't expecting it."

"What would happen then?" asked Bill, deeply interested.

"Well, if the aeroplane is correctly balanced with the tail a little higher than the nose it will be ready for a glide if the engine goes dead, and on the other hand it is apt to lose headway, and go down tail first. And that, you know," added Ernest, laughing, "is often very uncomfortable for the occupants of the car."

"I should say so!" agreed Bill.

"Chaps make such a mistake trying to build their own cars," said Ernest. "More accidents come from that than people realize. While the war was going on, no one had time to tinker at building, but now half the chaps I know are studying up and attempting to make aeroplanes for themselves.

"It just can't be done. For instance, every piece of wood used in a machine must

be tested with the greatest care. A chap can't do that himself. Every piece of wire used has got to be stretched in a machine specially invented for the purpose. For instance, to find the breaking strain of a piece of wire, a piece fifteen inches long is placed between the jaws of a standard testing machine, so that a length of ten inches of the wire is clear between the two ends. What they call the 'load' is then put on by means of a handle at the rate of speed of about one inch a minute. You can't do this yourself, and by the time you have sent your wire, or have taken it where the test can be applied, and have also had the test made on the twist of your wire, and all the woodwork, you will have a machine that will cost more than one made by skilled workmen. There is another test too that is very necessary. That is for your wing fabric. It ought all to be soaked in salt water. If the fabric has been varnished, the salt will soften it. Then dry the sample in the sun and if it neither stretches nor shrinks, you will know that it is all right, and you will feel safe about using it."

"I took in all I could learn, without actually going up, at the Aviation field at Sill," said Bill. "I will get my chance some day. I wrote mother this morning, telling her about our trip and all, and I asked her if she thought she would sometime feel like letting me fly. I didn't *ask* her to let me, you know, but I have a hunch that something might happen sometime and I might almost have to fly. So I told her just how I felt about it. Whatever she says goes."

"That's a good sport!" said Ernest, smiling. "It seems to me that I would be willing to give up anything in the world if I could have my mother alive to make sacrifices for. Of course I have dad, and he is a corking pal and just an all-round dear, but a chap's mother is different, somehow. I think you were wise to write that letter, for you never know what might come up. If your mother is what I should think she is, she will understand that you are not trying to fix a loophole for yourself or tying a string to your word of honor."

"No, she won't think that," said Bill positively. "Mother and I understand each other. I can trust her and she knows she can trust me. It makes things nice all around. She will be *crazy* about this machine of yours. Perhaps she will take a little glide with you, if she doesn't feel like actually going up. She has promised to come on and spend the Thanksgiving vacation with me."

"Good work! That makes me feel glad that I can't go home. I am going to stay right through the whole year and put in some extra work during the vacations."

"Mom will like you too," said Bill. "She will want to know all about the plane,

and when she gets through listening she will know 'most as much as you do. There is one thing I am afraid of, if I should fly, and that is spinning. Now if you begin to side-slip, either outward or inward, you are apt to commence to spin, and—well, there is usually a speedy and more or less painless end to you and your hopes."

"I think, Bill, that you will have no trouble in learning to control a machine when your mother feels like releasing you from your promise. I knew of a fellow once who made a long and successful flight with no preparation at all other than what he had learned from books and observation."

"I don't believe I would want to try anything like that," laughed Bill, "but I am stowing away all I can gather here and there."

"The thing for you to do," said Ernest, "is to roll around the fields every chance you get. I will be glad to take you with me any day or every day that you feel like going. Of course you won't have very much time after to-day except on Saturdays. To-morrow classes will be in full swing. Get in now and take my seat."

Ernest tucked his screwdriver deep in his pocket, pulled his goggles over his eyes and, seating himself behind Bill, directed his actions. A thrilling two hours followed for Bill.

When at last they returned to the vicinity of the hangar from which they had started, they found an excited and angry group around Horace Jardin's aeroplane. Something was wrong with it and the two mechanics working over it were unable to find out why the machine refused to fly. It refused, indeed, to rise from the ground and the engine worked with a peculiar jolt. The sound of the bugle from the high ground in front of the mess hall called them to lunch and they went off, leaving the men still at work. Horace was in a very bad humor, and as usual indulged himself in a number of foolish threats, the least of which was to scrap the whole machine.

"I will do it sure as shooting!" he blustered. "If that machine isn't going to come up to the maker's guarantee, I will make my dad get me one that will. I won't tinker round with any one-horse bunch of junk like this looks to be."

"Give it a chance," suggested Bill soothingly.

"Not a darned chance!" declared Jardin. "I tell you my father promised me an

aeroplane, and he has got to come across with a good machine! He will do it, too. He's too stuck on me to risk my being hurt. And he knows it is not my fault. I can fly all right."

"Don't junk it, anyhow," said Frank anxiously.

"Want to buy it?" asked Bill.

"I might," said Frank, "provided Horace doesn't charge too much."

"If she won't fly, I will sell her to you for five hundred dollars," declared Horace. "You can tie a string to her, and Bill here can have her to lead around the lot."

"That's a go," said Frank. Everyone laughed, but a look of cunning suddenly flamed in Frank's eyes. He commenced to lay a train for Jardin's anger to burn upon, a sort of fuse leading up to the explosion Frank wished. He cast a quick glance at the others. It was evident that they took the whole conversation as a joke. But Frank, with an arm over Jardin's hunched shoulders, commenced pouring into his willing ears a stream of abuse directed at the makers of Horace's beautiful plane, and an account, invented on the spot, of divers people who had thrown over their planes for just the reason which had so angered Horace. Frank, with his real working knowledge of flying learned at the greatest of schools, was able to talk in a most convincing manner. Horace, sunk in a sullen silence, listened closely.

CHAPTER X

The first week of school, full of adjustments and experiments, passed with the greatest swiftness. The boys were soon accustomed to their surroundings and threw themselves with enthusiasm into their studies and drill. Every possible moment was spent on the aviation field. Bill was learning every quirk and crank of such work as he could do in Ernest's plane without leaving the ground.

The mechanicians still worked on Horace Jardin's plane, but seemed to make no headway. Horace threatened one thing and then another, ready to take the advice of whoever stood nearest. Frank made it a point to be that person as often as possible. He fretted no longer about money, a fact that pleased Bill.

Then Saturday came, and things commenced to happen.

First was the usual rush for the morning mail at eight o'clock. There was a letter from Mrs. Sherman, which Bill carried into the deserted library to read. He always wanted to be alone when he read his mother's letters. They were so dear and so precious, and seemed so nearly as though she herself was speaking to him, that he hated to be in a crowd of careless, chaffing boys.

When he had read half the long, closely written pages, however, he gave a shout and hustling down the corridor to the chemistry room, burst in upon Ernest who was doing some extra work there.

"Hey, Ern!" cried Bill, waving the letter. "Hear this! My mother is a peach if there ever *was* one!"

The elder boy laughed. "I bet she says you can fly," he guessed.

"Just that. Listen!"

Bill hastily hunted for the right place.

"'You know, darling' ... no, that's not it," he hastily corrected himself. "Here it is. 'Perhaps I have been selfish in asking you not to try your wings until you are older. Your dad assures me that you are an expert with your automobile and says that there are no age limit flyers. You see, the trouble is, sonny, that it is hard for your mother to realize that you are going to grow up soon. You notice that I say

you are *going* to, not you *are* growing up. This is a gentle way of leading up to what I want to say about flying.

"'Dear boy of mine, please, *please* let your promise stand, with this much of a release. If ever, *ever* there comes an occasion of the *greatest importance*, an occasion where you know I would approve—and you always do know when I approve—then you may fly. I hope and pray that it will not come, but if it does, you will know how to act. And whatever you do you will know that your mother stands back of you because she trusts in your judgment.

"'I sound like a *nobul parent*, don't I, Bill dear? Well, I *do* feel that I am on the safe side, because I cannot foresee any possible occasion for you to go flying off from school. However, if ever you feel that you *must*, why, you *may*!

"'Get that nice boy Ernest to teach you everything he can, and if you have to fly, ask him to fly with you.'

"That's all she says about *that*," said Bill with a happy grin, "but now I feel safe. I don't know why, but I had a sort of hunch that I ought to ask her to let me fly if I had to."

"It is certainly nice of your mother," remarked Ernest, "but I agree with her that there will be very little chance of your finding it absolutely necessary to go aloft in the near future. Of course if you go, I will go along."

"I have not read the rest of the letter," said Bill, "but I had to show you this. I will read the rest now."

He hurried back to the library and resumed his reading. And the very next sentence made him sit up straight, a dark scowl on his face.

"And now I must tell you something so dreadful and so sad that I can scarcely write it," said the letter. "You will remember the money that was stolen from a certain officer next door to us here? It happened just before you left for school. Oh, Bill, you will find it almost impossible to believe it when I tell you that our Lee, Lee whom we have always found so honest and so faithful, is *under arrest* for taking it.

"It seems that two ladies were sewing or visiting on the porch across from our quarters, and a colonel was reading at the end of our own porch. Lee came out and went to the telephone and kept saying hello so many times that they all noticed him. The telephone is right beside the window, and inside, on a desk, the

money was lying in an open envelope under a paperweight. The weight was so heavy the money could *not* blow away. Lee was the only one out there while the owner of the desk was away from it. He was only gone for a moment, while he spoke to an orderly at the back door.

"You know Lee always has lots of money of his own, but now they don't believe that his grandfather sends him the money at all. He is up for trial and if he is convicted, (and the circumstantial evidence is very strong) he will be sent to Leavenworth for years and years. It is a *dreadful* offence.

"The money was in an official envelope, and if *that* could only be found Lee would be cleared, unless it was found in his possession. They even ripped up his uniforms to see if it was hidden there, but now they think he has burned it. Of course I believe in Lee. It is all a horrible mistake, and some day perhaps it will be cleared up, but not soon enough to save Lee because if he even gets inside Leavenworth he will feel disgraced for life and I don't know *what* will become of him.

"Oh, Bill, it is simply *too awful*! Of course they found three or four hundred dollars on him, but he always has a great deal too much money for an enlisted man to be traveling around with. Dad is simply sick over it. Our Lee! We don't know *what to do*. Who could have taken that money? And where is the envelope? If we could only find that! They say a criminal always leaves some clue behind him, but the person who stole that money must be a clever thief. There is nothing, absolutely *nothing* to guide us.

"Isn't it too awful? I wish you would write to Lee. He is in the guard house, but I could get a letter in to him without any trouble. Make him understand, Bill, that you believe in him and are his friend. He is down-hearted."

There was but little more in the letter. Bill's mother had felt too sad to fill the pages with all the little details of the Post. And Bill, after he had read about Lee, felt as though he could never smile again. He felt helpless and lonesome and very far away. He wished heartily that he was back on the Post. It *did* seem as though he could help if he only knew what to do.

Advice: that was what he wanted. But who was there to advise him? The principal of the school was absolutely out of the question. He thought of the instructors one by one. No good on such a count.

Troubled beyond words, he made his way slowly to his room. Frank was not

there, and Bill sat down and wrote a letter to his mother, which he later sent special delivery. It was rather a rambling and purposeless affair, but the best he could do under the circumstances. The note which he enclosed for Lee was quite different in tone, and was intended to make the prisoner believe that it was only a question of a few days before the real culprit would be led to justice.

The trouble with Bill was that he could remember nothing at all of the events of the fateful morning of the robbery except that he was busy packing and yelling good-byes to everyone who passed the back door of the quarters, Bill's locker being on the back porch, past which long lines of student officers on their way out to make road maps continually marched two by two, followed by the usual company of little and big mongrel dogs that are always found on army Posts. Bill could see the men and the dogs and he remembered the greetings, but who passed by or what occurred on the front porch he did not know. His mind remained a blank.

Frank came in whistling. He grinned in an unfriendly fashion when he saw his roommate slumped in the camp chair by the window.

"Heard the news?" he demanded.

"No; what's up?" asked Bill without interest.

"Well, the school was just put under strict quarantine," said Frank. "The town and all the country is so full of that new disease, what-you-call-it, that we are going to be shut up here for goodness knows how long. And they say there are seven fellows down with it in the hospital now. What do you suppose they will do if it gets to be an epidemic in the school? I saw old Nealum just now, and he was mum as an oyster: looked bad, because he always loves to give out information, you know. We are to go to chapel in half an hour for instructions and new rules. Wish they would send us home! I don't like school."

"I would like to go home too," said Bill.

"Why, I thought *you* were dippy over your 'dear school' and your 'sweet teachers,'" sneered Frank.

"It's all right," said Bill, "but I got a letter from home just now. Lee is under arrest for stealing that money."

Bill was looking out of the window. He did not see the look of triumph that swept over Frank's face.

"Good work!" said Frank. "I knew he was a crook, and I knew that sooner or later they would grab him. Did they find the money?"

"They didn't find the money, and Lee is as straight as I am!" declared Bill. "And if you say anything different I will lick you out of your skin! I have a mind to do it anyhow!"

Frank glanced at the door. "You make me tired!" he said. "You won't let anybody have an opinion without jumping them for it. Wait and see what comes of this before you get so brash! I am going out to the field. Ern is waiting for you there, or perhaps he will meet you in chapel. Nealum told me there was going to be a halt on most of the indoor classes. They want to keep us out in the air. That will give us a lot more time with the planes. Too bad your mother won't let you fly. You could fly home. I would do it if *I* owned a plane. Jardin is sick of his."

He went off whistling, and Bill walked wearily to the chapel.

Days went by. The country trembled for the children and young men and women who were being stricken, the teachers redoubled their efforts to keep the boys well and happy, and the boys themselves regarded the affair as a happy interlude in the year's grind.

Our four boys spent all their leisure time on the aviation field. The Jardin plane seemed possessed. Every night, after the mechanicians had spent the day working over it, the machine would go sailing off the field, purring and humming and flying smoothly and evenly. And as surely as morning came something was wrong! Jardin was frantic. Frank, always at his elbow, irritated him into admissions and statements that he scarcely recognized as his own when he afterwards thought about them. He was not wise enough to put two and two together.

Another letter came from Mrs. Sherman, and on the same mail one from Major Sherman written, not from his cozy desk in quarters, but over at his office.

Bill looked very grave after he read it. Strangely enough, he had left his mother's letter for the last. Major Sherman wrote to know what watch Bill had pawned. A pawnbroker in Lawton had written him to say that he would be glad to sell the watch left with him as he had a good customer for it. Major Sherman wanted an explanation from Bill. He had simply written the man to hold the watch until he had heard from his son.

Bill was stunned. What it all meant he could not guess. Something strange was in the air. He felt the influence of evil but could not place it. Taking his mother's letter, still unopened, he walked slowly to the library. It was full of boys, all laughing and talking. It had become a lounging room during the quarantine. Bill could not read there. Slamming on his cap, he wandered over to the hangar. Climbing into Ernest's plane, he huddled down where he was effectually hidden. He knew that Ernest would not be out of the chemistry laboratory for hours, and he tore open his mother's letter and read it rapidly.

Lee had been convicted! Bill groaned in anguish as he read the words. He was to be taken to Leavenworth as soon as a couple more trials were held so that all the prisoners could go under the care of one officer and a squad. *Lee going to prison!* Bill could not believe it. And Lee had told Mrs. Sherman that he would never be taken to Leavenworth alive. Bill shuddered.

Stunned by his emotions, Bill lay motionless in the cramped quarters he had chosen. Presently he heard a light footstep. It stopped close beside him and Bill, raising himself on his arm, peered over the edge of his small quarters at the back of Frank Anderson, who was bending over the engine of Horace Jardin's plane. No one else was in the hangar. Bill heard the scrape of steel on steel and saw Frank slip a small screwdriver into his pocket. Then Bill dropped out of sight, and soon he heard Frank retreating to the small door of the hangar where he stood for a moment looking out before he went out.

Five minutes later he returned with Horace Jardin.

Horace as usual was sputtering.

"I tell you, Andy," he said with his usual bluster, "this is the *last* day I will fool with that plane. Absolutely the last! If she doesn't go before night, she needn't go at all. I will get rid of her. Dad wrote me this morning that he had had a letter from the chief mechanician here, and what the fellow says about the plane looks as though the company had put one over on us. Dad won't stand for that. He is going to make them replace the car. But they can't have this one back. I will sell it sure as shooting! I need money."

"What's your price?" asked Frank.

Jardin registered deep thought. "I need five hundred," he said.

"I will buy it," replied Frank. "I can make a little on it if I sell it for junk, and

you can't afford to dicker around like that. It would be out of place for a Jardin to be dealing in second-hand stuff. Everyone knows I have nothing."

"How do you come to have the five hundred then?" asked Horace suspiciously.

Frank flushed but did not hesitate.

"A present from my grandmother," he said, trusting to luck that Jardin would not know that the lady had been dead for many years.

"Well, if she doesn't go by to-night, she is yours for the five hundred," promised Jardin. "I wonder where those mechanicians are. Let's go look them up."

Together the boys went out, and Bill, feeling it was high time to escape, leaped out of the plane and dodged out the door.

Across the field, Ernest, the two mechanicians, Frank and Horace were talking excitedly.

Bill joined the group.

CHAPTER XI

"No use talkin' Mr. Jardin," one of the men blurted out as Bill came up. "There is some monkey work going on here. Somebody is foolin' with your plane. We lock the hangar every night, and someone is always around all day, but allee samee, as the Chinee says, allee samee, *somebody* gets that machine all out of tune as soon as I get it right. And it's no fool, either. Whoever is tinkering with it understands that type of flyer down to the ground. He knows just what to discombobolate in order to make us the most trouble."

Ernest laid a hand on the man's shoulder.

"The thing is, Tom, we will have to look for a motive. Now what earthly motive can anyone have?"

"Search me!" said Tom. "Whoever is doing it doesn't want to hurt Mr. Jardin here, because the damage is always to something that will keep the plane from rising. For instance, yesterday the spark plugs had mud in 'em. Before that, the exhaust wouldn't work; one time the priming pin was clean gone; once the dust cap was half off; then the drum control, warping the wings got on the blink. I tell you, it is enough to drive anybody crazy! Lately we have took to sleeping in the hangar, but things happen just the same."

"I am afraid it is a case of poor construction," said Ernest. "There is no one who would pick on Jardin like that. Why don't they do something to *my* plane? Jardin has no enemies. He has invited about every boy in the whole school to ride with him."

"Certainly I have!" said Jardin. "I guess I more than pay my way around this place! I have stood treat oftener than any one in the whole school. It doesn't pay to be an enemy of mine."

Ernest frowned. "It is not a case of treating," he said sternly. "It is merely that no special fellow here owes you a grudge. So, as they have no reason to owe me a grudge either, I don't see why I do not come in for some of the damage, or you, Tom. There are only three planes here. Why do they pick on Jardin? It beats me! There is something back of this that I do not understand."

Bill, cautiously studying Frank, said to himself, "There will be trouble with the other planes to-morrow. The conversation has given Frank an idea."

"Well," said Jardin mysteriously, "after today I don't care what happens. Come along, Tom, and see if she is all to the bad today."

Together they walked over to the hangar and wheeled Jardin's plane out into the field. It could not be made to start. Tom gave a short, hard laugh.

"I am beaten!" he declared. "The screws are all loose on the interrupter and it will take me all day to adjust the engine again."

"Gee, that's a shame!" said Frank, shaking his head.

Bill looked at him with amazement. After what he had seen in the hangar, the boy's sly cunning filled him with amazement. He had an overwhelming desire to confide in someone, and Ernest flashed into his mind.

The sky was growing very dark, and a queer yellow light spread the northwest like a blanket.

Tom turned the plane and headed it back toward the hangar. "No flyin' today," he said. "Look at that sky!"

The boys helped him put the plane away, then they sauntered up to the school. A flash of lightning split the sky.

"Funny time of year for lightning," said Bill.

"It is, at that!" answered Ernest. "But it looks to me as though we were going to have a real electrical storm. Let's get under cover."

They raced up the hill and into the building just as the storm descended in good earnest. As Bill hurried to his room to shut the window, the boy in the telephone booth called him.

"Telegram for you," he said, shoving the message through the wicket. Bill signed the slip with a hand that shook a little. His mother! She was his first thought. But her name was at the foot of the message which proved to be a night letter.

"Lee will be taken to Leavenworth on Tuesday," it ran. "Circumstantial evidence too strong. He is in a dreadful state but promises me to take it like a soldier. Wish that you were here, but am told the quarantine is absolutely strict. Will see

you Thanksgiving if possible. Love. Mother."

Bill turned abruptly and went after Ernest. No one had seen him. Presently he gave up the search and went to his room where he found everything in the greatest disorder and a gale sweeping clothing, papers and bedding from their places. He closed the window and straightened up the place, moving the two army lockers to a new and better position and rearranging his desk. He was too worried and restless to work, so he went to the window, and leaning against the sash, watched a spectacular storm sweep across the valley. In the distance he could see the trolley cars struggling against the blast, but presently they were seen no more. Great branches broke from the trees and whirled through the air. The steel flag-pole before the main building bent perilously and, as Bill watched, a row of telephone poles went toppling over. Blacker and blacker grew the air, and at last with a crash the rain fell. Bill drew a chair and moodily stared out into the whirling wet landscape.

All day the storm raged and Bill, worried and irresolute, sought Ernest. It was not until supper time that he found him.

He had shut himself in the clubroom over the grill and had been boning for an examination. Mess over, they wandered out on the terrace. The storm was over, completely and wholly. The air was clear, the sky cloudless. A gentle breeze fanned them. Trolley wires, telephone poles and trees lay in every direction, with here and there a rolled-up tin roof. It had been bad enough while it lasted.

"Come over here by the tennis court," suggested Bill. "I want to talk to you. A lot of things have happened in the last few weeks, and I don't know what to make of them."

"Fire ahead if I can help," said Ernest.

Bill commenced his story with the influence Jardin seemed to have over Frank and concluded with what he had seen in the hangar.

"What's the game?" he demanded at last.

"I can't guess unless he wants Jardin to get so disgusted that he will give him the plane. Has Frank any money?" asked Ernest.

"He had a present from a friend of ours when we came," said Bill, "but most of that has been frittered away. Besides that, he hasn't a cent although he goes strutting around as though he had a little private wad to draw on. But I know he

hasn't any. Where would *he* get money? His folks have only their army pay."

"It surely is funny about that plane," said Ernest. "I never saw a chap so crazy about flying, but he can't expect to get a plane like that for nothing, and yet what you saw looks suspiciously as though he was up to some scheme. What sort of a chap was he at home?"

"Not bad," replied Bill generously. "There was a lot of things I didn't like about him, but I never suspected he would do anything underhanded. Why, he might kill Jardin, monkeying that way with the plane!"

"He is determined not to harm him," said Ernest. "Everything that has happened to the plane has been of a nature that has made it impossible to get it off the ground. So Jardin is safe for the present at least. I think I will manage to secrete myself in that hangar to-morrow morning. I don't believe we had better tell anyone about this, Bill; it would stir up such a fuss. The plane is in perfect order now. I saw Tom a little while ago and he has it tuned up to perfection. In the meantime I think I will seek our friend Jardin and sound him a little. Later I will drop in." He strolled off in the direction of the billiard room where Jardin was usually to be found, and Bill went to his own room and tried to read. The thought that in a short time Lee, good, honest, loyal Lee, would be on his way to prison, a convicted thief, was more than he could bear. The print danced before his eyes. He heaved a sigh of relief when a tap on the door was followed by the entrance of Ernest.

"The plot thickens," he said, closing the door carefully and glancing about to assure himself they were alone. "I have had a long talk with young Jardin and it was very mystifying. You are mistaken about Frank, I think. He must have a bank account or something of the sort, because he has actually offered to buy that plane. I suspect he has offered very little for it, because Jardin would not tell me the price. But the deal is good as closed. Jardin is going to get a new machine, and Frank is to pay him for this one to-morrow."

Bill was silent for a long time. "I don't know what it all means," he said finally. "Something queer has happened to me that worries me. I wonder—do you think —no, it couldn't be."

"Probably it couldn't," agreed Ernest, "but I can't think before you explain what to think about."

"It was a letter from my dad," explained Bill, and went on to tell him about the

watch that was in the pawnshop in his name. And then, because he had a good start, he told Ernest about Lee.

"That pawnshop affair may have something to do with Frank," said Ernest, "but you can't connect him with that robbery. That is too big and too serious. Six hundred dollars, you say?"

"I think that was what they told me," said Bill. "No, of course Frank has nothing to do with that, and I know Lee is perfectly innocent of it too. I just about go crazy when I think about it."

"It is terrible," said Ernest, deeply troubled.

For a long while they sat talking things over, but were finally interrupted by the entrance of Frank, who came bursting noisily into the room, throwing his cap across the bed and tearing off his coat.

"Taps going to sound!" he said.

"I don't have to go to bed until I want to," said Ernest. "Will it disturb you boys if I stay awhile?"

"Don't mind me!" said Frank. He took off his stock, and sat down on his bed with his back to them.

"I never did show you the pictures of my folks, did I?" asked Bill of Ernest. He went over to the lockers.

"Darn these lockers," he laughed. "They are exactly alike. I never know which is mine."

"Yours is next the window," said Frank, "and mine is always locked."

"They are both locked now, as it happens," said Bill. He went over to the dresser and picked up a key. "That doesn't look like mine," he said, squinting at it.

"Mine is in my pocket," said Frank.

Bill took the key and opened the locker. He tipped up a corner of the tray and felt under it, drawing out a square photograph case.

"Our folks fitted us out just alike as to kit bags and toilet sets and photograph cases," said Bill, coming over toward the light with the case. It slipped out of his hand as he spoke and he made a grab for it, catching it by one corner. A

photograph and a long envelope fluttered to the floor.

"This isn't—" said Bill, then stopped and glanced at Frank who was lying on his back on the bed with both legs in the air, unfastening his puttees. With trembling fingers Bill seized the paper and scanned it. He took one look at its contents and for a moment stood as though turned to stone.

He passed a shaking hand across his forehead, then in a terrible voice he cried:

"Anderson, you—you—you thief, I've got you! Oh, you dog, I've got you!"

He choked and took a step toward Frank who had bounded to his feet.

"Stop!" cried Ernest. "Stop, Bill! What does this mean?"

"The envelope!" cried Bill, violently striking the paper in his hand. "The envelope! And the money! The money Lee is going to prison for!"

"No such thing!" cried Frank, finding his tongue. "That money is mine!"

"Here is the paymaster's endorsement on the envelope," cried Bill furiously. "You stole it—stole it and somehow put the blame on Lee. And then you took his present!"

He struck away Ernest's restraining hand.

"Give me that money!" cried Frank. "I found that envelope; that's all there is to that! The money is *mine*. Give it to me!"

"Yours?" said Bill. "Well, you won't get it!" and he thrust the long envelope full of bills into Ernest's grasp.

With a muttered word, Frank made a leap for it and Bill met him half way. Bill parried the blow that Frank launched as he realized that the money was out of his grasp, and in another instant they were fighting silently and desperately. Both were furiously angry, but Frank was desperate. Ruin stared him in the face. He was too stunned to realize that the game was up, his hand played out, and he fought with a primitive impulse to down the person who had trapped him.

That Bill had changed the trunks around when the storm was raging and that the keys were identically alike never occurred to either of them. Bill's mind was a blank save for the one overwhelming thought that he had found the envelope that would free Lee.

Frank's mind was chaos. A wild and whirling fury at Bill, at himself for carelessly keeping the money in the envelope although its hiding place back of the photograph seemed absolutely safe, at fate for playing him such a trick, the thought of exposure—everything was mixed into a poisonous potion which filled his brain and of which his soul drank. He leaped upon Bill and tried to throttle him. He fought with the strength of ten. Somehow both boys seemed to feel the need for silence. Except for the quick intake of their labored breathing, there was no sound save the scuffle of Bill's shoes and the impact of their blows.

When Frank clinched and tried to gouge, Bill in self-defence dropped his sparring and resorted to the Indian tricks taught him by Lee. He took joy in the thought that the person who had taught him such clever modes of self-defence was now to be benefitted by them.

Frank went down like a rock, and Bill, still holding him helpless, said panting, "Will you give up?"

CHAPTER XII

"Let me up!" cried Frank, the veins standing out on his purple forehead as he struggled vainly under Bill's grasp. "You Injun fighter you, give me a white man's chance and I'll fight you square!"

"I don't intend to fight you at all," said Bill. "I don't fight with fellows like you. And I don't intend to let you beat me up. If you promise to sit there in that chair and make a clean breast of it, I will let you up."

"There is nothing to tell," said Frank. "Lee must have put that money and that envelope in my trunk. I don't see what you are going to do about it."

"Thank goodness there was a witness of the way you acted when I found it!" exclaimed Bill. He stood up, and Frank scrambled to his feet. He watched Bill furtively until he glanced aside, then he made a mad lunge toward him. Bill was too quick for him and once more Frank, sobbing with rage, went crashing to the floor.

As Bill stood over him, he glanced at Ernest, who had been an interested observer.

"What are we going to do with him?" he asked.

"This," said Ernest. He pulled a quantity of very strong waxed cord from his pocket. It was some he sometimes had need of in fixing his plane.

With a quick twist he had a loop around Frank's ankles, and then, dragging the resisting boy to his feet, he jammed him down on a chair and proceeded to fasten him neatly to it.

"Now," he said, "what next?"

"Next is to save Lee from Leavenworth," said Bill. "Mother says he will kill himself if ever he gets there. He can't stand the disgrace. If you will stick around and watch this fellow, I will go down and see about sending the telegram."

"You had better stay here, and I will go," offered Ernest. "It is too late for you underclass fellows to be out in the corridor, and I can go down and rush the

message. I have a pull with the telephone boy. Write your message."

"Don't do it; you will ruin me!" cried Frank.

Bill stared. "Ruin you; ruin you? What do you mean?"

"Why, you know what this will mean to me if it gets back on the Post. What's Lee, anyhow? Just a half-breed private! Let him take his medicine!"

Bill paled and Ernest made an involuntary motion as though he was going to strike the coward down. Bill controlled himself with an effort.

"He is worth more—his little *finger* is worth more than your whole body. He is the finest chap I know. And the next time you call him half-breed I will lick you. He is justly proud of the American Indian blood in him. Oh, you aren't worth talking to!"

He scribbled something on a pad and gave it to Ernest, who disappeared with it. Instead of returning in a few minutes, it was almost an hour before he stuck his head in the door and beckoned Bill into the corridor.

The boys had not spoken during his absence.

"Wires all down," he said briefly. "The storm has destroyed all lines of communication. And they say there are wash-outs all along the lines of railroads. Also we are under quarantine. Hope you don't mind what I did. I went to the principal and told him the whole thing, and offered to take you and Frank out to Sill in my plane. I am perfectly capable of making a flight ten times that long, and as you know I am a licensed pilot. Unless a new storm comes up, the air is perfect for flying, and we can start at daybreak. What do you say?"

"Do you mean to tell me old Prexy will let us go?" demanded Bill.

"Surely! He is a good old chappie when he has to rise to an occasion and I should say this was one. Besides, he wants to get rid of Frank. He says he doesn't want him in the school another day, and if he is here he will put him in close confinement. And this affair really does not come within the school discipline, so the old dear is willing to let you take Frank and that precious envelope back to Sill. And the only way we can make it is by air."

"Oh, it is the greatest luck in the world!" cried Bill. "This is the reason mother let me off my promise. That plane of yours holds three, doesn't it?"

"Easily!" said Ernest.

"Don't say a word to Frank until we are ready to go," Bill suggested.

"Well, you can't leave him trussed up there in that chair all night," said Ernest. "We all need to sleep. I never fly unless I have had a good supper and a good sleep afterwards. It is the only way to keep a clear head and steady nerve."

Between them they lifted Frank, who in sullen silence refused to stand or use his legs, over on one of the beds, and again tied him securely. When they were sure that he could not escape, and yet was able to move sufficiently to keep from being cramped, Bill tumbled into his own bed and Ernest went off in the direction of his own room, stopping on his way to thank the principal for his permission. Then, with a last look at the sky he set his alarm clock, and in a second was fast asleep.

Before Bill realized that he had really shut his eyes, he felt Ernest shaking him, and rolled over to see Frank, still bound, glaring at him in sullen fury.

"Almost daylight," said Ernest. "I have some breakfast ready over at the Grill. No one is up, so we can bring Frank right along."

"What are you up to?" demanded Frank as Bill commenced to dress, hastily donning his heaviest underclothes. "I am sick of this fooling. You try to take me out of this room and I will yell so I will bring every teacher in the building!"

"Good for you!" said Ernest. "Forewarned is forearmed." He arranged a gag which effectually prevented Frank from making a sound and, loosening his feet, they started toward the door. But scenting punishment, Frank let himself go suddenly limp, and Bill had to put the screws on, as he expressed it, by applying one of the hand holds that Lee had taught him. After that the prisoner walked.

As they silently passed the office the stern face of the principal of the school suddenly appeared. He made a gesture and the three boys stopped. Then for a long minute he looked at Frank.

"Good-bye," he said solemnly. "I pray that you will wake to a realization of what you have done. You have been a thief; you have willingly allowed a good young man to bear punishment for your crime, and you are now about to endanger the lives of two of your mates, who are willing to take the risk in order to save the innocent. If you are mercifully permitted to make good this wicked crime, arouse yourself, Anderson, and resolve to be a different boy." He turned as though he

could say no more, and with a warm handclasp for each of the others, closed the door.

"I bet he has been up all night," whispered Ernest.

They found a hot breakfast at the Grill, and just as the pitch darkness gave way to a pale streak of dawn, they cut across the campus and reached the hangar.

As they switched on the lights, Ernest's beautiful plane seemed to sparkle with preparedness. He went over it bolt by bolt, nuts, screws, wires, and wings passing under his careful and critical eye. He looked at and tested the tension of the wires, the swing of the rudder, the looseness of the ailerons. Satisfied at last that everything was perfectly in tune, he turned and gave a critical glance at Frank.

"He is going to freeze," he said. "You go up to the gym and in my locker you will find another coat and safety helmet."

Bill started on a run. It was growing light fast, and it was time they were on their way. Frank suddenly found his tongue.

"You have got to tell me what you are trying to do with me," he said. All the bluster had gone from his voice, and he watched Ernest with worried eyes. "It is not fair the way you are acting. What are you going to do?"

"You may as well know now," said Ernest. "I think myself it is fair to tell you. We are going to fly to Fort Sill and save Lee from the trip to Leavenworth. If we have good luck, we have just about time to make it. That storm last night blew half the telephones down, and we are under such strict quarantine that we couldn't get away from here any other way.

"And if we could there is no time. Of course if we could telegraph, it would fix things all right. But we have got to hurry. Mrs. Sherman writes that your victim will never allow himself to go to Leavenworth. The Indians are proud, you know, and we are making this flight perhaps to save a life. I don't envy you when you get there, young chap!"

"I won't go!" said Frank in a low voice. "If you take me up, I will spill us all out of the plane."

"You can't do it, you know," said Ernest, laughing. "This plane doesn't spill as easily as all that, and if you go to talking like that we will tie you up. I think we

will anyway."

Frank came close to his side. "Have a heart, will you?" he said. "I did take that money, and I did pawn my watch in Bill's name, but I will write it all down, if you won't try to take me back."

"More news," said Ernest. "We didn't know about the watch. I think you are badly needed back there at Fort Sill."

He turned to adjust something, dismissing Frank as though he was not there. They could hear Bill trotting rapidly down the campus. A short heavy length of iron pipe lay close to Frank's foot. He stooped, picked it up and made a lunge for Ernest. Ernest turned in time to see the bar descending and threw up his arm. The bar struck it with sickening force and the boy reeled back, both bones in the forearm broken. His right arm dangling loosely at his side, Ernest leaped on his assailant and threw him to the ground as Bill came up.

"Help me!" he panted, his face pale with pain. Once more they bound Anderson, and then put Ernest's arm in rough splints.

"Well, this ends it!" said Bill gloomily. He dropped down on a bench and pressed his face in his hands.

Frank grinned. He was desperate and almost crazy with worry and despair and remorse. He had not meant to hurt Ernest badly; he thought a good crack would disturb him and he would have a chance to coax or wriggle out of the terrible trip before him. He was called to the present and his surroundings by hearing Ernest's voice.

"Ends it? Not at all! We will go right ahead."

"You can't drive with one hand," said Bill sadly.

"*No, but you can and will*," replied Ernest grimly.

"What?" cried Bill.

"He can't drive!" cried Frank. "It will be suicide and murder to let him try. He has never been up in a plane in his life. Don't do it; don't do it, I tell you! Don't you know anything, Bill? You will be killed sure as shooting!"

"I am not afraid," said Bill calmly.

"Well, I am!" cried Frank.

"I would be if I were you," scorned Bill. "If I had stolen one man's reputation and broken another man's arm, I would be a little afraid myself!"

"To say nothing of stealing another boy's name!" cut in Ernest.

"What's that?" asked Bill.

"That's another story," said Ernest. "You can hear that some other time. Hustle into your togs now; I want to get to Sill. My arm hurts."

Flying is getting to be such a widespread sport as well as profession that every device possible is being developed for the safety and welfare of airmen and women. So Bill helped Ernest into a leather hood which extended down over the shoulders, and which was softly and warmly lined with wool fleece. Over this went a helmet with a specially heavy padded top and sides built on a heavy leather form with ear cones, adjustable visors, and flaps. Ernest's leather coat could only be worn on one arm on account of the right one which was tightly bandaged against his breast, but Bill buttoned and tied it together as closely as he could.

He then ordered Frank into a similar outfit, which they found in Jardin's car, and rapidly dressed himself in the same manner. He unlatched the great doors and swung them wide, and together they pushed the plane out onto the field, Frank lying tied in the observer's seat. It seemed cruel to tie him in the face of his fear, but they were afraid he would do something desperate.

"Now just a last word," said Ernest, laying a hand on Bill's shoulder. "You won't lose your nerve, will you, old fellow?"

"Of course not!" said Bill. "Let's get off. I have a hunch that we ought to get along. We don't want to have to follow all the way to Leavenworth."

"All right-o, let's be off!" seconded Ernest. "Take the pilot's seat, and I will help you if it is necessary. Good luck, old dear!"

"Here comes Tom and the other fellow," said Bill. "They can hold us."

He climbed into his seat and Ernest sat beside him, nursing his wounded arm. Tom and his helper, boiling with amazement and curiosity, held the machine and turned it to face the wind.

Bill gave his engine plenty of gas, the propellers whirled faster and faster, and when they reached top speed under Bill's accustomed hand, he gave the signal and the men let go. The plane bounded forward, skipping merrily over the field. Bill balanced on one wheel for a moment, then with a thrill of the heart such as he had never known tilted the elevating plane and felt himself rise in the air.

They were off!

CHAPTER XIII

As the plane, responding perfectly to Bill's touch, soared upward, it seemed as though they were rising on gossamer wings out of a well of darkness and mists. They actually rose to greet the sun whose first rays were gilding the tops of the hills. They went up in the very face of the great orb whose light, first striking the upper wings, turned all the delicate wires and cords to gold. How they shone in the clear early sunlight! As the pace increased, Bill felt rather than heard the delicate humming of the wires. Over the roar of the engine he did not know whether he could distinguish a delicate sound or whether it was only a trick of his imagination, but he was so exalted and so thrilled by the wonderful experience through which he was passing that he seemed to hear all sorts of celestial sounds.

Fear fell from him. A new power was born in heart and brain. He felt as uplifted in soul as he was in body. Somehow he longed more than ever to be a good boy; to harbor good thoughts; to do good deeds. When he tried to think of Frank and his ugly black actions, he found that he regarded them through a haze as though they were a long ways away and of little consequence. All was going to be well. It was as though the darkness from which they had risen was a symbol. They were going up, up into the light! Bill knew as well as though some higher power had whispered it to him that there would be a good ending: he did not doubt his ability to do an almost unheard-of thing. His hand was as steady as though he had flown all his life. He was "exalted in spirit," because his goal was a worthy one. Without a question for their own safety, the boys had started on an enterprise filled with dangers, in order to save Lee from false imprisonment and possibly worse. Ernest knew the Indian nature better even than Bill. He knew how impossible it is for them to bear unmerited disgrace and how often they end that disgrace with a bullet or the swift thrust of a knife. He hoped that the white blood that dominated Bill's good friend was strong enough to overcome this trend, but nevertheless he felt that there was not a moment to be lost. So there he sat, only an observer in his well-beloved aeroplane, the broken arm throbbing with a blinding pain, while Bill—young Bill who had never been nearer to flying than the warping of a wing and the sailing on one wheel over the field—sat in the pilot's seat, grave and intent, and guided their swift flight.

But ah, who could tell the thoughts that all unbidden coursed through the mind

of the culprit lying bound and muffled in the rear seat? So intently were the eyes of his spirit bent inward on the dark and whirling horrors they found there that the eyes of his body were blind to the wonders of the young day. He lay where they had placed him, staring blindly through his goggles straight up into the great dome above him.

The storm seemed to have washed the very air. It was clear as crystal. A few clouds, thin as gossamer, hung here and there, growing less as a steady breeze sprang up in the wake of the sun and gently dismissed them from the great blue bowl in which they lingered.

When they passed through these fairy clouds, they found them a soft golden mist shot through with rainbow colors. Then emerging, they passed once more into blue space, a space greater than Bill had ever imagined.

How tiny, how frail they were: three boys darting in a man-made machine high above their own realm! What daring! What risks!

Daring, risks? Bill was unable to grasp the meaning of those earth-born words. He felt neither small nor frail. He, Bill Sherman, a boy, was among the conquerors!

At a signal from Ernest he increased the speed and soared upward. It is safer in the higher altitudes, although there is usually a great deal more wind blowing there. In case of any engine trouble, you have more time and a longer distance in which to bring the machine to the gliding angle. Also if you are flying over a city when trouble threatens, you have a chance to find a good landing place.

All of these things Bill had had lectured to him endlessly at Sill, and from both Ernest and Tom at school. But actual experience he had not had. That fact, however, he put resolutely behind him. Just one breath of fear struck him. He had witnessed a tail dive once at Sill, and over and over his mind kept repeating, "Keep the tail a little higher than the head and you won't spin." Ernest smiled to himself as he saw from Bill's manœuvers as the flight went on that he had stored away all the counsel he had listened to. Many a trained aviator never learned to drive his engine and balance his plane with the cool cleverness and judgment of this young and untried aeronaut. Ernest commenced to relax and enjoy himself. If they had no engine accident, there was no reason to suppose that Bill would wreck the plane.

"Up!" cried Ernest, pointing with his well hand.

Bill responded and the plane again soared aloft.

Here the wind screamed a gale. The plane shot forward, the wires whistling, the engine drumming, the whole light fabric in which they rode quivering. Bill's hand on the wheel grew tense; his faculties seemed on a wire edge. Ernest's guiding hand pointed to the right. Bill was surprised. He had kept good track of his direction by the aid of the air compass and felt sure he was going in the right direction. Nevertheless he turned and, banking his wings and lifting the ailerons, moved smoothly in the direction suggested. Half an hour later Ernest again motioned, this time for a turn to the left.

It was not until days after their arrival at Sill that Ernest thought to tell Bill that the unexpected and seemingly unnecessary deviations from the straight course were merely to try him out. An hour or so later when Ernest saw that they were passing over a strip of country where good landing places seemed plentiful, he indicated a dip and Bill executed it perfectly. He felt proud of himself now, and said, "Tail up, tail up!" repeatedly, as he felt the plane drop earthward. Reaching a lower level, Ernest nodded and they sailed on a straight-away flight, their eyes turned ever to the far-away goal in the west.

Bill was unconscious of the passing time. They had had a heavy and sustaining breakfast, and luncheon was forgotten. There was no time to stop if they had been hungry. But Ernest was thinking of many things.

He carefully scanned the country they were passing over for a landing place. Bill's face was well covered with the flaps of his helmet and the wings of his goggles, but Ernest fancied that the young aviator was pale. He felt that they must land for awhile. Even now they were many hours ahead of the time they would have made on a railroad train. He indicated an upward course, and Bill rose as they raced over a flat and open part of the country. Far ahead there lay what seemed to be an open plain dotted at long intervals with small villages. A pleasant farming district evidently, far from any large city. Ernest was sure that he could get gasoline in any hamlet, and there seemed to be plenty of landing places. The only question remaining was Bill's ability to get down without a smash. Ernest smiled. He was fatalist enough to be willing to risk what *had* to be risked.

The sun was well in the west. They seemed to be flying straight into the blazing disk when Ernest, pointing to a wide plain far ahead, touched Bill and told him with a gesture to go down and land.

Bill gave a short nod and prepared to obey. There flashed into his head a saying of Tom's, "Anybuddy can fly, but it's the landing that hurts."

Bill felt everything—their safety, his own self-respect and Ernest's confidence in him—rested on this last and different test. He could not conceive of a reason for landing, but Ernest said land, so land it was!

At any rate, his engine was going perfectly, so he was not required to attempt a difficult volplane with a dead engine. It was something to be spared that. Bill picked the likeliest spot in the distant landscape, all immense field with only a few groups of black dots to break its late fall greenness. Bill could not tell the nature of the dots at the height he was flying. They might be bushes or cows. Bill hoped for the latter, and as he came down he saw that he was right. Cows would be likely to scatter, thought Bill, but bushes would be difficult to steer around.

About a hundred feet from the ground he tilted his elevating plane, and the machine, nosing up, glided off at a tangent. Once more making a turn, he came down to the ground, striking it gently, and bobbing along the grassy surface of the field.

The cows scattered all right. When the machine came to a standstill, swaying back and forth like a giant dragonfly, all that remained of the herd was a glimpse of agitated and wildly waving tails galloping off into the second growth which rimmed the pasture.

Ernest, who had taken many long flights, removed his goggles and smiled at the young pilot as he climbed awkwardly over the side and dropped to the ground. His head whirled, and his eyes felt strained out of his head. With fingers that trembled he undid his helmet and pushed off his goggles.

"Well, boy, I may say that I was never so proud of a friend in my life! You have done nobly!"

"What did we land for?" asked Bill. "I don't see as we can afford the time."

"We must take time to get some gas and rest you up a little. Don't you worry, son! You are going to drive all night to-night unless—well, why didn't I think of this before? We are 'way past the path of the storm last night, and—"

"Last night!" interrupted Bill. "Was it only last night? I feel as though it was a week ago."

"I was going to say," resumed Ernest, "that we can send a telegram from somewhere around here, and then we can spend the night at a farmhouse, and go on to-morrow. We can reach there to-morrow night, perhaps earlier."

"I don't approve of that," said Bill. "If my mother thought I was 'up in a balloon, boys,' she would about die of fright."

"She gave you permission," reminded Ernest.

"Yes, but of course she never thought anything like this would happen and honestly I wish you wouldn't! I can drive all night all right. That is, if I can get a little rest," he added, as he sensed his aching muscles and realized the tension he had been under.

"I think about so," said Ernest. "I will look around for a farmhouse. Must be one near on account of all these cows. Oh, goodness! See what's coming!"

Across the field surged a small but excited procession. A lean boy on horseback, without saddle or bridle and guiding the shambling colt he rode by a halter strap, led the van. Behind him, as lean as he, and about seven feet tall, a farmer, whiskered like a cartoon, kept pace easily with the horse. Behind came a roly-poly old lady, her apron strings fluttering in the breeze as she bowled along dragging a fat little girl by each hand. Three dogs barking loudly brought up the rear.

Twenty-five feet from the plane the procession was thrown into confusion by the colt which suddenly discovered what seemed to him to be a giant horsefly, its wings wagging lazily. He had dreamed of just such monsters while snoozing in the shade on hot summer days, but here, oh, here was the creature itself ready to fly up and alight on him!

He did not wait for further investigation, but whirled and left for parts distant where the cows peered through the saplings at the awful intruder in their peaceful pasture. The sod was soft and the young rider, rolling head over heels, was not harmed as he came to a stop close to the boys and sat up, rubbing his red head.

"What's your hurry?" asked Ernest, smiling.

"Nuthin'," said the boy. "Say, is that a airyplane?"

"Sure thing!" replied Ernest. "Do you live near here?"

"Yep!" said the boy. "Let's see you fly in it."

Ernest laughed. "You certainly believe in speeding the parting guest, don't you, young chap? Is this your father coming?"

"Yep! Say, how do you work her?"

Ernest turned to greet the tall farmer. Everything was turning out as he hoped. Not only would the farmer and his roly-poly wife, who presently came up panting, give them supper and a place to rest, but he had a Ford, and on account of the distance from town was always supplied with a large tank full of gas. Ernest gave a sigh of relief. The only danger was from their curiosity. When the thin boy went off to get the colt, and was seen riding furiously away, Ernest knew that, like Paul Revere, he was off to give an alarm and rouse the countryside. He looked at his watch. There should be a full moon later, but Bill was completely tired out and had not yet come into the condition known as second wind. It would take three or four hours to get ready for the rest of the flight.

"What sort of a chap is that boy of yours?" asked Ernest.

"Pig-headed!" said the old lady, speaking for the first time.

"That is not a bad trait," said Ernest, smiling. "I mean can you trust him?"

"Yes, you *kin*," said his mother. "Webby will do just what he says every time and all the time."

"The woman's right," said the farmer. "I kin trust Web soon as I kin myself."

"Sooner!" said his wife scornfully. "You are the forgittinest feller, and Webby don't *never* forget. If you want he should go an errant, mister, he'll be back soon."

"Not exactly an errand," said Ernest, and no more would he say until he saw the boy come galloping back to the field. He dismounted a long way off, and came running.

"Your mother and father tell me you can keep your word, and be trusted," said Ernest. "I want you to stand guard over this machine. I don't want you or anyone else to *touch* it. I want you to keep everyone at least ten feet away. If you will do this, I will either pay you or else take you up for a little flight."

"Wait!" said the boy. He turned and went running back to his colt and, mounting, dashed out of sight. In five minutes he returned bearing a long out-of-date rifle.

"Go ahead and get something to eat," he said. "This ought to fix 'em!"

With a stick he drew a deep scratch in the green grass around the plane. Then he looked with a smile across the field.

"Let 'em come!" he said. "This ought to fix 'em!"

Ernest looked. Mr. Paul Revere Webby had not ridden in vain. They were coming. Coming in Fords, buggies and on horseback. Coming strong.

CHAPTER XIV

Ernest turned to the boy with the rifle who was standing guard over the wonderful, strange thing that had alighted in his father's meadow, and was satisfied. Cool, clear, honest blue eyes stared back and met his gaze fairly.

"Don't you be feared," said the boy. "They won't come apast that scratch. You kin trust me. Ma and Pa trusts me with the roan colt."

"The one you were riding?" asked Ernest.

"Naw, not that," the boy laughed. "You git on, less'n you want to answer four million questions. You kin leave her with me. They won't come apast that scratch, and I kin skeer 'em off with this. They know I kin shoot."

He patted the long, lean rifle lying along his arm, and Ernest knew that in truth he could not leave the airplane in safer hands.

He followed Bill and the farmer's family across the slope, Frank lounging along beside him. They did not talk. Frank staggered as he walked, he was so tired, and Ernest, who was accustomed to long flights, was silent too. The pain in his arm was about all he could bear, and he did not feel in the mood for talking to the fellow who had injured him. So they moved silently across the soft sod, the farmer and his wife talking busily to Bill. The two children and the three dogs ran and frolicked in the rear. From the distant second growth the herd gazed out, still suspicious. They had almost forgotten to chew their cuds!

The roly-poly farmer's wife gave them a feast. Home-cured ham and home-laid eggs and corn pone and jam and jelly and cake and molasses and all sorts of good things besides, including cream to drink—real cream, all blobby on the sides of the glass. Bill thought he would never get enough to eat, and even Frank consumed about enough for two boys. As soon as the meal was over, Ernest made Bill go and lie down on Webby's bed. Frank was given the narrow horsehair sofa in the stuffy parlor, but Ernest knew that Bill must sleep in an airy room, and the parlor had not been opened since the war of '60 to judge by the musty closeness of it. Ernest himself was in too much pain to rest so he sat and talked aviation with the farmer for a few minutes and then they went down to the lot to take a look at the machine. The farmer's wife had stacked her dishes and

was there before them.

Not even his mother was allowed inside the scratch by the important and faithful Webby. He stood guard beside the machine, enjoying the proudest moment of his life. In after years, when Webby, goaded on by that fateful landing, had gained the highest rung of fame's ladder, his triumph was little compared to that clear sunset time in the pasture when he stood guard over the wonder-car that had come from the sky with its pilot and passengers scarcely older than himself.

When Ernest approached, the crowd surged forward, but Webby sternly drove them back.

There were growls from the outsiders, who yearned to step over the danger line and look and handle and if possible go off with a bit of wire or string or what not, as a keepsake. But Webby was adamant, although he was obliged to make dates for the following day with three boys who insisted on fighting him out of revenge.

One glance at the plane assured Ernest that everything was exactly as he had left it. He thanked Webby and asked him what he would like best—a payment of money or a flight.

"Druther fly," said Webby promptly, laying down his rifle and starting toward the car.

"I can't fly it myself now," said Ernest, "but when the other boy comes down from the house he will give you a little turn. If we had time, we could stay here for a day or so. This is the finest field for landing that I have seen in a long time. But we are in a great hurry, and all we can do for you to-night is to give you a short spin."

When Bill came down, his eyes heavy with sleep, he found Webby restlessly pacing up and down before the car, and a silent, attentive crowd of natives waiting to see what was going to happen. Webby's parents did not know enough about aviation to feel any fear for their son, and watched with unspeakable delight as Ernest with his one arm and Bill with his two sound ones, pulled the plane around to face the wind, settled Webby in his seat and started the engine.

"Don't go more than fifty feet above the ground, and keep over the field if you can," whispered Ernest in Bill's ear.

"Aren't you going up?" asked Bill.

"No use; you can manage it all right," said Ernest, "and I will stay here and keep an eye on Frank. He needs watching. He would lose himself in the swamp for a cent. He is in a bad state of mind. I hope he is, too. Perhaps he will come to realize what he has done."

"I hope so," said Bill. "Can't we leave as soon as I give that kid a turn? I want to get along. It seems as though we were hanging around here an awful while."

"Land over by the bars if you can," said Ernest. "It will be fun to see this outfit scamper over, and besides it will be closer to the gasoline tank."

"All right," replied Bill, tuning up the engine. He skimmed along the field while a wild, shrill shout went up from the observers. They commenced to trail excitedly after, and stood hopping up and down and tossing their hats in excitement as the graceful car left the ground and sailed smoothly into the air. Bill found that flying, rising and lighting the second time was much easier than the first. He had lost what little awkwardness he had had in the beginning, and the machine moved with a smooth freedom. He wished that he had eyes in the back of his head so he could see Webby. But if he *had* seen Webby, he would not have laughed. Webby, watching the old familiar earth drop away, felt exalted; he felt as though he had suddenly become a creature of some finer, rarer place. When Webby told about it next day, he said, "I felt like I was a chicken just hatched fum out an aig," but Webby said that because words were hard things and difficult to handle. He really thought of angels and made up his mind then and there to be a great man.

Bill made the landing on the other side of the field as Ernest had suggested, and he and Webby sat in the car and laughed as the audience streaked across to them. Webby shook just a little when he stood once more on solid earth, and he was more silent than ever. But when Ernest came up he said in a low tone: "Say, ain't there books about this here?"

"What you want is a magazine," said Ernest, "and I will send you mine as soon as I have read it."

"Every time it comes?" asked Webby. "Say, you are good!"

"That's all right," said Ernest, "only take one piece of advice. The flying will keep. Just you *keep on going to school*. You will need all sorts of learning, especially mathematics."

"Ho; I kin *eat* figgers!" boasted the boy.

"That's good," said Ernest, shaking his hand. "Now, good-bye. I have left my address with your mother. If you will write me next week, I will send you that magazine."

They said good-bye to the kindly farmers, having filled up with gas, settled Frank in his seat, and arose just as a great white moon showed itself over the trees.

Once more they were off. With good luck they would reach their destination early the following day. Bill was tired, deadly tired; but he thought of the pain Ernest must be suffering from his wounded arm and settled himself to his task with dogged determination. He had never been up after dark, and the sensation was a new one. He was glad to have Ernest beside him. As they rose, a couple of enormous birds sailed out of their way. Eagles or buzzards; he did not know enough of the country to be able to tell which. He was conscious of a feeling of dizziness and fatigue. Everything he had ever heard about side slipping, tail spins, nose dives—in fact, all the accidents that might befall an aviator passed through his mind in gruesome procession. He looked down at the compass, now beginning to show its luminous dial, and saw that they were really going in the right direction. As he looked down, he commenced to feel a stranger to the many levers and knobs before him. He knew them all, knew them like a book; at least he had. Now they were slipping, slipping away from him. He could not remember what they were for.

He felt rather than saw Ernest motion him upward. As he climbed through the cutting air, he plunged into a dense bank of cloud. The thought flashed over him that if the plane turned over there in unlighted space, he would not be able to right it again. As they passed once more into the clear air, it was as though they were plunged into a bath of liquid silver. The moon, immense and coldly luminous, had risen and hung in the sky huge and pale. If the morning sun had turned every wire and blade to gold, the moon silvered the whole plane. Space about them stretched off dim and threatening. Bill shivered. His clutch on the wheel loosened and the engine coughed twice.

Bill felt his nerve die within him. Then a voice clear and sweet seemed to speak. It was so clear that he glanced toward Ernest to see if he too heard. Twice he heard his name called, then the dearest voice in the world said clearly:

"All's well, sonny. We are waiting. You will be in time."

With a start Bill knew that his mother was speaking. Where she was he did not know, but he heard her. All his fear, his indecision and his nervousness faded away. He glanced at the dial of the clock. It was just nine. The long, hard night was ahead of him, but he could make it. He set the wheel and risked a look at Ernest. He had not spoken, and he had not heard. With his well arm he was nursing the broken one, and as Bill looked at him he once more motioned upward. So they went soaring up, up and still up, into silver-shod space, above ink-black masses of cloud that held the silver rays of the moon on their upper surfaces as though they were cups.

As they sped on a wind began to blow behind them. It raced with them, caught them, hurled them forward with incredible speed. Bill held his course steadily, remembering "tail up!" as he tore onward. They were now so high that the earth was not even a shadow below them.

Suddenly as though flung through a doorway, they fell into one of those strange freaks of the upper air called a "pocket." It is a vacuum, and most dangerous.

The plane shook and wavered, but Bill set himself for a downward course and glided across the perilous area. As they emerged and struck the wind again, the plane slipped dangerously, but Bill warped the planes and set the ailerons with all the speed he could, and presently the indicator before him registered an even keel and the danger past.

Silently Ernest reached over and patted Bill's shoulder. Bill scarcely noticed. He was no longer afraid, no longer nervous. He had come into his own—and his mother was waiting for him! He would not fail her. She expected him. He would be there. How or why she knew that he was coming he could not guess, but he had heard her voice. Bill settled back in his seat and felt that he was master of his machine. And, better still, he was master of himself. Never again would he lose control of his nerves. He wondered how he had ever done so. In the darkness he smiled.

Hour after hour sped by. Bill was experiencing one of the peculiar things about air voyages. Time seemed to be obliterated and he did not feel the slightest fatigue. All the usual sensations of the human body seemed to disappear just as the earth had disappeared. On and on flew the plane. Once more he glanced at Ernest. It seemed as though he had slipped down in his seat. Bill wondered if he was tired. Darkness crept over the intense moonlight like a veil, and Bill realized that the moon was gone. He kept his course, however, with the aid of his

indicator and the air compass and at last a new light commenced to show, the cold, cheerless, dun light of early dawn. As yet there was no sign of the sun.

Bill wondered if, in the night, he had flown past Fort Sill. It was certainly time they were approaching it. He slowed the engine down as much as he dared, and waited for more light. As day came, he saw that he was indeed over the bleak, cheerless wastes of Oklahoma, but as yet there was no sign of the great Post.

At last, far, far ahead he saw it; a great city, part of it forsaken and dismantled now that the war was ended and the need of trained troops not so important. He dropped a little as he recognized his location. He scanned Old Post lying on its low eminence, with the white hospitals spreading over their area, New Post with its wide parade ground and its trim rows of officers' quarters staring primly at the departmental buildings built in the old Mexican fashion on the other side of the parade.

Donovan, with its splendid roads and miles of skeleton tent frames, and nearer Bill recognized with a quickly beating heart the squat, ugly quarters and class buildings of the School of Fire.

Now on the instant there came to Bill a daring idea. Back of the quarters where his mother and dad lived, a wide level space stretched out to a bluff under which ran a sluggish stream called Medicine Creek. It was a good-sized field, but of course not nearly the size of Aviation Field lying far the other side of the Post. Nevertheless Bill made up his mind to land there. He circled the Post, rising as he did so to a high altitude, and leaving the plain he wished to land on far behind.

He knew that he must be careful, as too great speed in striking would drive the plane forward into the Students' building lying broadside.

If he approached from the other direction, a false landing would send them over the cliff into the trees and underbrush along the creek bank.

But he knew that he could do it, and he did. The plane came down at a perfect angle, reached the earth just at the edge of the bluff, hopped gayly along toward the class building, turned in response to his hand on the wheel, and stopped almost opposite his mother's back door.

Bill turned and looked at Ernest. He was lying low in his seat in an almost fainting condition. Frank, with closed eyes, looked deathly in the early morning

light. Bill struggled out of his seat, and stood shakily beside the plane, undoing his helmet. A group of orderlies and janitors ran up, and several officers in more or less undress appeared on the porches. Bill, reeling, walked over to his mother's door.

She herself opened it, clasped him in her arms, and gave a cry of delight.

"Bill, darling, you have *grown*!" she cried, and then as an after-thought, "How *late* you are! I have been watching for you for an hour."

CHAPTER XV

"How did you know I was coming, mother dear?" asked Bill, clinging rather crazily to her as he tried to steady himself.

"I just *felt* it," she answered, "and once I was so frightened about you, but that passed away."

"What time was it, do you remember?" asked Bill.

"Nine o'clock," she said. "I was waiting for dad to come home from a board meeting."

"Yes, it was just nine," said Bill with a strange look on his face. "I heard you when you spoke to me, mother, and I think it saved my life, and the lives of the other fellows.

"How very strange!" exclaimed Mrs. Sherman. "Who came with you, Bill, and who piloted the plane?"

"I did," replied the boy. "It is a very long story, mother. It was the only way we could come. We *had* to get here, and a storm had torn all the wires down, and the school was in quarantine, and oh, mother, Lee is *saved*! We have the envelope and the money and it is all going to be right again. They have not taken him away, have they?"

"They were going at noon to-day," answered Mrs. Sherman. "I don't understand at all, Bill. How do you happen to have the money, and all that?"

"I will tell you everything about it presently, mother," said Bill. "I want you to take care of Ernest Breeze, if you will. It is his plane, and he has a broken arm and could not manage to drive, so I had to do it. We flew all night and all day yesterday. Gosh, we are about all in!"

"Don't say another word then!" cried Mrs. Sherman. "Dad isn't out yet, but go get Ernest and I will make some coffee."

Bill took a quick step to her side.

"Coffee for three, please, mother," he said. "There is someone else with us.

Frank Anderson is here. He knows something about the theft."

Bill stumbled over his statement. Somehow he hated to tell his mother the bald and awful truth about the boy who had been his friend and hers.

She did not wait for further explanations. Already she was moving rapidly about the tiny kitchen, regulating the roaring fire that had already been started by the janitor, and getting out the canister of coffee.

Bill went back to the airplane. With the aid of the soldiers grouped about, he assisted Ernest over to the quarters, and laid him down on the Major's bed. That gentleman called a lathery greeting from the bathroom where he was shaving.

Ernest was in bad condition. The exposure and the lack of proper care had caused his arm to become terribly inflamed. Mrs. Sherman sent an orderly with a side car over to the Hospital on a hurry call for the doctor.

Then she braced the boy carefully with pillows and covered him with a warm blanket. As soon as it was ready, she brought him a cup of hot coffee and an egg, leaving Bill to care for himself and attend to Frank.

Frank had reached a state where he seemed numb. He was past caring what happened. After a hot drink, however, he braced up a little and prepared to face his ordeal. He did not know what it was to be. For all he knew, he would be taken to Leavenworth. It was agony to think that soon someone would go to his father and mother and tell them that their son on whom they had built such hopes was a thief. He sat silent and downcast and only answered in brief sentences when they addressed him. Of course Major and Mrs. Sherman sensed something dreadful, but they were too wise to press their questions until such time as the boys were fed and rested.

A little color had already crept back in Ernest's face, and Bill was seemingly quite himself.

Then he asked Major Sherman to come into the den, and beckoned Frank to follow. The boy did so with the air of a condemned man.

No one ever knew what went on at that solemn meeting. One hour, two passed and still they sat behind the closed door. Then Major Sherman, with a grave and troubled face, came out, kissed his wife, mounted the horse the orderly had been holding for the past hour, and rode away in the direction of the General's quarters. Bill and Frank remained seated in the den.

Bill, almost as shaken as the culprit, stared out of the window at the quarters across the court. Frank, broken at last, lay on the hard quartermaster cot and shook with dry and racking sobs. Neither boy knew what the outcome would be. It seemed days before the jingle of spurs in the tiny passageway told of the approach of officers, and the door opened to admit General Marcom, his aide, and the Major. Bill rose and stood at attention. Frank too struggled to his feet and stood drooping before his judges.

Once more the story was told, this time Frank adding a broken sentence here and there. He told how Jardin had filled him with the longing for money, and how he had seen the amounts that Jardin spent and wickedly wanted to do likewise. It was on the impulse of the moment that he had taken the envelope filled with bills to pay the Battery. Once in his possession, he was panicstricken. The terror of being found out and punished had driven him onward; that was all.

The General, an old and kindly man, listened with a grave face. He said nothing. Writing an order on a slip of paper, he gave it to his orderly, who galloped off toward Old Post where the jail is situated. In this grim building with its small, grated windows and thick stone walls, Lee was awaiting the hour of his departure for prison. There was much red tape to go through with, but at last the orderly went clattering back to the General with his answer, and close behind him followed an ambulance with Lee and a couple of guards, armed with short carbines and heavy pistols.

As they entered the quarters through the kitchen, Mrs. Sherman placed both hands on Lee's shoulders—shoulders as straight and proud as ever.

"Oh, my dear boy, it is *all right*!" she whispered so the guard would not hear. "It is all right, just as I knew it would be! Be generous, be forgiving, won't you, Lee?"

He smiled down tenderly at the little lady he loved so well and nodded. Then he too passed into the den. For a long while the rumble of the General's deep voice rattled the ornaments on the thin walls, and once more the wild sobbing of a boy was heard. The orderly, standing just outside the door, saluted as the door opened and the General gave him another order to deliver. He came out in person a moment later and dismissed the ambulance and the guards, who went away wondering.

Lee was a free man.

When the General returned to the den he looked long at Frank, and the Major was inspired to ask permission to leave for a few moments.

"Please call if you want us," he said, and nodding to Lee and Bill to follow, he took them across into his wife's room where they awaited a signal from the General. The wise Major knew that anything the General might say to Frank would be burned forever on his memory. For the General was not only a very great man but a wise one as well, and his words were always words of wisdom, and they were often words of mercy and forgiveness as well.

So the deep old voice rumbled on in the den, with only a brief word in Frank's boyish tones once in awhile.

Presently the door was opened and the General called.

The group advanced.

"Lee," said the General, "have you anything to say to this boy?"

There was a silence. Lee stiffened. Then Mrs. Sherman's tiny hand closed around Lee's great horny fingers and pressed them in the warmest, tenderest clasp. It was very unmilitary, but the General said nothing.

Lee looked down at the little lady and smiled; the first smile for many weeks.

Then he stepped forward a pace, still holding Mrs. Sherman's little hand. Lee raised it, looked at the General, at Mrs. Sherman and last at Frank. With a gesture of reverence he let the little hand drop.

"I forgive you!" he said, "Let's begin new." He held out his hand to the boy, but with a cry Frank turned away.

"Not yet, not yet! I can't take it!" he cried.

"You can if I can," said Lee.

"No, no, I can't; not yet!"

"He is right," said the General. "Let *me* shake your hand instead, young man, and thank you as one man to another for your forgiveness."

"My car is outside," said Major Sherman meaningly.

"Thank you," said the General. "Anderson, the hardest part is before you. Go

home and make a straight confession to your father and mother, and then close this black chapter. Somehow or other I will see that our part of it is taken from the records. It remains for you to turn over a clean page."

Looking at no one, Frank left the room. He entered the Major's car, a lonely, frightened, despairing culprit.

"General," cried Lee suddenly, "if you please, sir, let me go with him! Major Anderson is a hard man, sir. Please let me go!"

"Go!" said the General, and in a moment the boy who had caused such bitter trouble and so much pain and his innocent and forgiving victim were on their way to the Anderson quarters at Aviation Field. The General fussed for a moment, then went outside to the fateful telephone and called Major Anderson.

The others could hear what he said.

"Anderson," he commenced, "this is unofficial. General Marcom speaking. You have a hard and trying interview before you. I want you to meet it with *mercy*, Anderson; *mercy* rather than justice. Justice has already been done. I could recall something in your past, Anderson, that met with mercy, and which saved your whole career. I ask you to remember this. What? No, I won't explain—the explanation will reach you shortly—You will do as I suggest? Thank you, Anderson. Tell your wife what I have said. Good-morning!"

He hung up the receiver and returned to the house. A round wicker table stood in the center of the living-room near Ernest's couch. A snowy cloth covered it, and it was spread with the most delicious breakfast.

Notwithstanding the General's assurances that he had eaten hours ago he sat down, unable to withstand the delicious whiffs rising from the coffee urn, and the smell of crispy toast browning in the electric toaster.

Grapefruit and eggs and commissary bacon (which is by all odds the best on earth) and that same before-mentioned toast, and coffee, and orange marmalade.

Bill, who had never imagined the time would come when he would be taking breakfast with a real General, was nevertheless so hungry and so happy that he forgot rank and everything else. The General did too, it seemed, because he sat and sipped, and ate, and ate, and questioned the boys and finally wanted the story of the flight from the very first instead of getting it tail-end first in little pieces.

Bill told his side of the flight, and Ernest told his, and together they told about the landing in the farmer's field, and the amusing people and about Webby, the "pig-headed" and trustworthy one.

And then the General and Major smoked as though there were no dispatches for the General to read and no classes waiting for the Major—in fact, as though there was no military discipline at all. But as the General said, what was the use of being a General, anyway, if it didn't give you some privileges?

But at last the General jingled away, happy and quite full up with delicious coffee and things, and thinking Major Sherman was a lucky dog anyhow to have that little wife and fine boy. Before he left he gave an order for a guard for the airplane standing so calmly in the small field.

Close on his departure came the ambulance, and Major Sherman went off with Ernest to the Hospital for an X-ray of his broken arm.

Bill and his mother were alone.

Together they hustled the dishes into the kitchen and cleared up the living-room. Then Mrs. Sherman sat down in her favorite corner on the couch and Bill threw himself beside her with his tousled head in her lap.

"Goodness, Billy, you certainly *have* grown!" she said. "Your legs trail way off the end, and when you went to school you didn't reach to the edge."

"Oh, come now, mother," said Bill, "quit fooling! I have grown about an inch."

"More than that," insisted Mrs. Sherman. "You are taller than I am now. What an awful time I am going to have bossing you around now that you are so big."

"You never *did* boss me," boasted Bill. "You just twisted me around your little finger."

"I won't be slandered!" said Mrs. Sherman, pulling his hair. "You are tired now and I should think you would like a nice hot bath and a good long sleep."

"That does sound good, Mummy. We will have to stay here for awhile, you know, because of the quarantine. But we will get rested up in, a few hours."

"Yes, you *must* get rested," said Mrs. Sherman, "because as soon as you feel right, I want you to take me for a ride in that nice, lovely airplane."

Bill sat up. "*What!*" he cried. "You—fly!"

Mrs. Sherman nodded, smiling. "Yes, *me*—fly!" she mimicked. "Bill, I am converted!"

THE END

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