

Islands in the Air

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by Lowell Howard Morrow

“Somehow the momentum of the islands could not be checked. Edge to edge they met. The detonation was deafening... Blue, green and yellow fire enmeshed them for a moment before the great mass rushed down.”

HERE is one of the most extraordinary air stories that we have read in a long while. It is sure to arouse your wonder and excitement.

One of the important and most revolutionary inventions, which is sure to come about sooner or later, is the control of gravitation. When we have conquered gravitation, man will be set free in earnest.

The slavery of weight, which chains us to this planet and to the ground, is far more serious than we appreciate, simply because we have always been “earthbound”. But, sooner or later, it will be possible to bring about such conditions as our author describes so vividly in this excellent short story. When it does, aviation will be helped tremendously, and indeed the conditions of our entire world will be revolutionized literally.

CHAPTER I

An Astounding Plan

“WE CAN control the laws of gravitation and perform new miracles.”

My good friend, Professor Gustave Steiner, was speaking, and for that reason I pondered his remarkable words.

“Such an attainment would overshadow all else in the realms of science,” I observed casually.

“Already the problem has been mastered,” asserted the professor solemnly.

I gave him a startled look. He gazed back with calm assurance, stroking his pointed beard as was his way when discussing a serious subject. Had his astounding declaration come from any other source I would have treated it as the idle mutterings of a diseased mind.

“Has been mastered?” I repeated incredulously.

The professor nonchalantly lit a cigar, puffed silently a moment and eyed me speculatively.

“Absolutely mastered,” he answered finally. I stared. “But it will take capital to perfect the system,” he added timidly.

I understood the professor. He reversed the time-honored maxim by having more brains than money. Still I could not help reasoning that this time his mighty intellect had slipped a cog. How could one upset the basic law of the universe? It was impossible, absurd. However, the savants of two continents did obeisance to Professor Steiner. The furore caused by his lecture on cosmic energy, delivered at Heidelberg, was still fresh in mind.

“I see, my boy, that you doubt my claim,” he went on presently.

“It is so astonishing.”

The professor smiled tolerantly. “It is not astonishing when you know how to harness the forces of nature, my boy.” He rubbed his hands together gleefully. “A few known principles well chosen, an opportunity—and there you have it.”

“And you have overcome the gravitational pull of mother earth?”

“Nothing of the kind my dear boy; I have but neutralized it.”

“Why, man alive,” I cried, “such a thing would send this old globe wobbling through space like a drunken man—leaderless and beyond control.”

“Precisely. But I propose to control gravitation locally.”

Again I stared. Was the professor going crazy? Was he breaking under the strain of overwork? I recalled his sister Greta’s remark to me that she feared some day he would lose his mind, inasmuch as both his father and his grandfather had ended their days in a mad house. But as I gazed steadily into his calm blue eyes I read no sign of insanity there. Nothing but steadfast confidence.

“Locally,” I echoed at last, staring at him blankly. “And for what purpose?”

“To build islands in the sky.”

“Islands!” I gasped.

“To be sure, my boy. Do you not realize the need of such things? Airplanes are creatures of the air—are they not? Therefore they should fuel in the air, and the beacons set to guide their course should shine in the element through which they pass.”

“That is true,” I assented, catching a faint glimmering of his stupendous scheme. “But what is to hold your islands in place and keep them from blowing away? And will they not become a serious menace to air travel rather than an aid?”

“By no means,” he replied confidently. “I will not only control gravitation, I will also use its force as a repellent.”

“A repellent?”

“Exactly.” The professor drew his chair nearer and leaned toward me with

shining eyes, his hands spread out comprehensively. “Instead of attracting objects to its center the earth must be made to repel them,” he continued in a low voice, glancing furtively about the brilliantly lighted room, then at the open windows where the breeze stirred the curtains lazily. “I have invented what I call a gravity repeller, which causes the gravitation lines of force to bend through 180deg. and lift an object away from the earth with the same force that it would ordinarily be attracted.”

“I understand,” I said doubtfully.

“Well, then we have only to perfect my device and operate it on a large scale.”

“But that would throw the world out of balance and destroy all life.”

“Don’t be alarmed, my boy,” went on the professor, smiling complacently, “as I have intimated I do not propose a blanket control. I shall tap this energy only in spots for the benefit of my—that is—our islands.”

The Professor’s Fear

THE professor’s face glowed with enthusiasm as he looked at me. I saw that he was looking to me for funds to further his experiment. As the goddess of fortune had blessed me with more than my share of riches and I loved the eccentric professor I listened sympathetically. I may say that my interest was somewhat heightened by my friendship for Greta, who was a skillful air pilot and who had given me many pleasurable rides in her plane which embodied many of the professor’s radical ideas of airplane construction.

“What do you want me to do?” I encouraged.

“Well, Walnut Ridge is a good place to start.”

“Walnut Ridge—why that is away out in the wilderness.”

“Of course, but that is where we want to start—away from everybody. You see I have not been idle since coming to America. While you were away on business I was out looking the ridge over. I would buy and fence a section of the west end of the ridge perhaps a half mile in length by a quarter of a mile in width. There would be machinery to install, you understand, and an island to manufacture—perhaps many of them.”

Again I stared at my friend, and he smiled back in his inscrutable, confident way.

“And the islands—what will you do with them?”

“I shall place them in the sky and anchor them.”

This was too much for my sense of humor and I laughed in spite of myself. Manufacturing islands and anchoring them in the sky was such a ridiculous proposition that I treated it as a big joke. But now the professor was frowning and a cold light flamed in his eyes.

“You think me joking,” he said with quiet dignity, “but I am not. Already I have proved my theory.”

“Forgive me,” I said contritely. “But my God, man,” I added, “your proposition fairly stuns me. It will revolutionize aviation, astronomy—everything pertaining to the heaven above us. Have you worked it out alone and does no one know your secret?”

A shadow came over Professor Stiener’s fair face. For a long minute he looked down at the floor, then raised his head with a jerk.

“I believe that no one has stumbled onto this thing but me. However, there is Van Beck. You know something about that confounded Dutchman, how that while I have worked with him and discovered much for the benefit of our fellowmen, he also has pestered me, often garnering the fruits of my toil. You know how he has disputed my claims on several occasions while posing as my friend. The devil take him. I wish I was sure.”

Professor Van Beck, a small, wiry man with a bristling black beard, was Professor Stiener’s closest rival in the realms of science. The men, differing widely, still had much in common and had been closely associated in Europe before Van Beck took up his residence in the United States. But always Van Beck had managed to gather most of the rewards to himself. And now that I had invited Professor Stiener and his sister to make me a long visit, the irony of fate had guided him to the faculty of the university where the great Dutchman labored.

“You haven’t said anything about this to Van Beck?”

“Not a word. But he is always trying to worm something out of me. You know what a persistent way he has—his strange personality—you like him and yet you hate him. And last week while I was conducting my experiments out on the ridge I spied a fellow far across the valley looking in my direction through a field glass.”

I certainly sympathized with Professor Stiener’s efforts to stop his rival. The little Dutch scientist seemed to exercise some sort of an influence over Greta. She was often seen in his company and always took his part whenever he was held up to scorn by her celebrated brother.

“Your words imply that there is much still to be done; that you have proved only that the theory is feasible.”

“That is just it, my boy—perfectly feasible.”

And then drawing his chair still nearer the professor told in low tones many of the details of his marvelous plans, but as he talked on his voice rose on a wave of enthusiasm and more than once I had to caution him for fear some servant might overhear.

The night was far advanced when at last he finished and rose to retire. His face shone with ardent hope as he bade me good night and ascended the stairs. I stared after him until he passed from view, and then too much upset by his astounding revelations to sleep I went out to take a turn or two about the lawn in an effort to get the thing thoroughly analyzed before committing myself to sponsor a scheme that seemed to be the most impossible thing ever conceived by the mind of man.

As I went down the porch steps I fancied I heard a slight scraping noise from the direction of my study window. I looked that way and for a moment thought I saw a vague shadowy form emerge from the deeper shadows and disappear over the porch railing. But as the sky was overcast and the gloom deep in that particular quarter I dismissed the notion.

For more than an hour I paced up and down the drives and across the lawn thinking over the professor’s words. The result of it all was that I finally concluded to back him financially.

CHAPTER II

The Secret of Walnut Ridge

WE HAD no difficulty purchasing the desired tract on Walnut Ridge. We enclosed it with a high, woven wire fence topped by five strands of barbed wire. Our workmen were selected carefully, housed to keep their mouths shut. As secretly as possible the material of diverse sorts was collected on the ridge and the actual work of construction began. The few reporters and other curious humans that found their way out through the wilderness to the plant were sent on the wrong trail by the report that we were about to test out special iron mining machinery and make borings for other minerals.

While our electricians under the able direction of a little red-headed Scotchman named McCann were familiar with all the workings of the intricate machinery, motors, transformers and so on, no one understood the complete working principle save the professor himself, although McCann, being canny and deep, I credited with understanding more than he let on. Certain it is that the professor was in love with him and trusted him implicitly. The professor was everywhere, tireless, secretive, and often provoking. Sometimes he worked far into the night when all others had sought their beds.

As for myself I wandered about from one section to another in a maze of doubt and wonder. The whole thing was too deep for me, and I thought so much on the subject that it began to rob me of my sleep. Besides, the Professor's taciturnity finally began to irritate me. Although I was furnishing all the money he did not offer to divulge the inner secrets of his scheme. My wonder was intensified as the sky islands, two in number and located one near each end of the enclosure, began to take form. These islands were fashioned out of structural steel, were square in form and about one hundred yards from rim to rim. Although their superstructure was built of light-weight materials, each must have weighed many thousands of tons burdened as they were with machinery of many kinds—oscillators, condensers, motors and diverse other machines whose names and offices were known only to the Professor.

Besides the machines on the islands, others were sheltered by small buildings on the ground. At three corners of each island were short mastheads with powerful

lights and at the fourth rose a taller masthead bearing a revolving airplane beacon. I knew that the Professor proposed to raise this great mass into the air by wireless control, to suspend it there and raise and lower it at will. Having had the theory dinned into my ears for many days I naturally absorbed some of the faith of its inventor, but as the work progressed I began to have misgivings and to fear that, after all, his mind was unbalanced.

Of course the public was not admitted to the grounds. I began to suspect that many doubted the iron machinery story, for several reporters and photographers finally came to visit us and were turned away with a sharp rebuke.

One of our first tasks consisted of clearing a landing field, after which Greta always brought the Professor and me over in her plane—a remarkable machine in its way. Although she did not understand these air islands any more than I, she criticized the Professor for evolving them and was sceptical of their success.

We heard and saw little of Van Beck, but Greta saw him often—as I afterward learned. Then one day she swooped down suddenly out of the sky, climbed from the cabin of the plane and was followed by Van Beck.

Professor Stiener glared, but Van Beck grinned amiably through his black, bushy beard.

“Sir, you must know that you are not wanted here,” fumed the Professor. He turned savagely to Greta. “What is the meaning of this, Greta?”

“Why Professor Van Beck is an old friend,” she said innocently. “I just landed here without thinking. I beg your pardon, Gustave. We will be going.”

Greta made for the plane. Just then McCann ran up with a blue print and asked the Professor a question.

“Certainly, certainly,” chimed in Van Beck. “We do not wish to trespass.”

The professor had been poring over a large blue print spread open in the sun when he rose to rebuke his Dutch friend. Now he walked away with McCann and I followed. We were absent but a few minutes, and when we turned back instead of seeing Van Beck getting into the plane I observed him turning away from the blue print and I thought I saw him hastily thrust a black object into the capacious pocket of his long black duster. There were no workmen near at the

time and as I had no witnesses and could not be sure I resolved to say nothing about it. Smiling graciously Van Beck ambled to the plane, took his seat by Greta's side and they were off with a wave of the hand.

The Professor was furious over the unexpected visit.

“What is Greta thinking about?” he stormed. “Has she no respect for her brother and his work? Please God he didn't learn anything—but maybe he did,” he added fearfully. “He has a devilish way of learning things. What do you think?”

I assured him I did not think it likely any of our secrets had leaked out in so short a space of time. And I was in no amiable mood. Van Beck seemed to be exercising an hypnotic influence over Greta and I resented it bitterly. However, shortly afterward I had reason to be thankful for the episode and the resultant lecture which the Professor gave Greta. She was seen less often in Van Beck's company and devoted herself closer to me and the work of her eccentric brother. Nor did we see any more of Van Beck nosing around. He was seen but little about town and seemed to keep pretty close to the class room. Near mid—summer we heard he had obtained a vacation and had gone abroad for a time.

The Professor breathed a sigh of relief. “We are rid of him for a time,” he said gratefully. “Before he returns the danger will be past.”

A Disappearance

WEEK after week rolled away, the mellow days of September were at hand and the islands were nearing completion. Then one morning as the Professor and I stepped from the plane we were met by McCann with the startling intelligence that the office had been entered during the night, but a cursory examination had revealed nothing disturbed.

The Professor stared blankly a moment, then rushed away to the office. We followed breathlessly.

The outer door had been forced, its lock being broken, but beyond this no damage had been done so far as we could discover. Anxiously we ran over the papers—not a print was missing.

“Nothing gone,” said the Professor. “Yet the place has been entered. What for?”

“Perhaps the thief was frightened away before he could grab anything,” I suggested.

“I don’t see how he got in,” said McCann. “I have made sure that every guard was at his post throughout the night.”

“I hold you personally responsible, McCann,” said the Professor severely. “See that it doesn’t happen again.” And with that he turned and walked away leaving McCann with a crestfallen air.

I felt sorry for the Scotchman. He seemed devoted to the Professor, and I believed the rebuke to be undeserved.

The ridge which the Professor had selected for his daring experiment was the center of an unbroken wilderness far remote from any human habitation. It was fifty miles from the university, and was a land of no roads and but few dim trails. The ridge dropped away to the north and to the south in a series of valleys heavily clothed in virgin timber. It was admirably situated for a secret enterprise. The vicinity was never visited save by hunters, and this was not the hunting season. Even the route of the mail planes was far to the north.

One night not long after the forced entrance to the office McCann disappeared. The chief electrician had called at his office as usual the next morning. He was not there. Nor could he be found anywhere on the grounds. As it was against the rules for any one to leave the premises under any circumstances, without a permit from the Professor, we stared in blank dismay. A careful search of the surrounding woods brought no clue. We followed up a rumor that he had been seen in his car driving out of the city at daybreak, but we could not verify it.

The Professor, wild with suspense, anxiety and remorse for having criticised his faithful aid, rummaged among his papers and discovered that the blue prints covering secret parts of one of his giant condensers were missing.

The scene that followed I will not attempt to describe. The Professor lost his head. He raved like a madman, condemning everybody, threatening everybody. He said he would give up the work, commit suicide and be through with it all. But at length he grew calm, asked my pardon for the outburst and ordered the work to go on.

“I simply can’t believe that McCann is a traitor, Bob,” said the Professor. “I’d

stake my life on his faithfulness. He may be ill. He may be wandering about with an unbalanced mind. You know this work always did affect him profoundly. He has a great brain, and I really believe that he understands this work as well as I do. It is a pity if he has become unbalanced. But sane or not I fear his absence means trouble for us.”

The revelations of the next few days seemed to justify the Professor’s alarm. The press of the city carried big black headlines announcing that Professor Stiener, the great German scientist, was at work on a theory calculated to upset one of nature’s laws. The exact nature of the scheme was not known, but it was said to portend a mighty revolution in air travel.

The Professor read the news and smiled grimly. He was pleased by the compliment, yet fearful of the public’s premature praise.

It was about the middle of October when one morning the Professor and I, walking along the street near the university campus, suddenly came face to face with Van Beck.

“My dear old pal,” said the Dutchman, taking the Professor’s hand which had not been offered and squeezing it cordially. “I have just returned from a visit to my old home across the sea. Yes,” he went on eagerly without waiting for the question, “I had a fine time—a very fine time.” The Professor smiled sourly. “And now may I ask how you are coming on with your—that is—er—this new scheme of yours?”

The Professor frowned. “I remember your uninvited visit, Van Beck,” he said icily.

“Beg pardon, Professor Stiener. Greta took me to that wilderness retreat. It was a mere accident on my part, I assure you. But now that I know something tremendous is being evolved by your great brain I naturally am anxious over it and I wish you well.”

“Thanks, Van Beck.”

“Often you and I have worked together and together have reaped the reward.”

“You mean you have reaped it,” rasped the Professor.

“You wrong me,” remonstrated Van Beck.

“I don’t want your help, Van Beck. My good friend here, Bob Bookman, is furnishing the funds and—”

“To be sure, to be sure,” cut in Van Beck pleasantly. “I am glad for your sake and for Mr. Bookman’s sake. It is a rare privilege to aid in any work of yours.”

“We are busy,” said the Professor ignoring the compliment. “You must excuse us.”

“Certainly, Professor Stiener. But if at any time you feel the need of assistance you know you can count on me.”

“Damn that infernal Dutchman,” said the Professor as we walked on. “He has a great mind, a wonderful mind, but he is a rogue. And yet,” he added reflectively, “he has served me in the past though he also has beaten me. I despise him and still like him. But I wish he’d let me alone now,” he finished irritably.

This was a vain hope, for during the next few days Van Beck crossed the Professor’s path frequently, became more insistent, more diplomatic in his search for information, taking the Professor’s rebuffs with a smile and maintaining an air of the utmost friendliness. And at length he wormed the main secret from the Professor—the momentous admission that the latter was striving to overcome the laws of gravitation.

CHAPTER III

Into the Air!

IT WAS not long afterward that the location of our plant became known to the public. A strange plane, flying low, circled the field and took its own time getting away. People eagerly responded to its news. During the next week automobiles by the thousand braved the rocky trails leading to the plant, and folks by the hundreds peered curiously through the wire fence at the manifold and mysterious preparations to harness nature's mighty forces.

The newspapers of the entire country teemed with conjectures and declarations as wild and fantastic as the Professor's scheme itself.

Airplanes began to circle and maneuver above us during every hour of the day and night. But we spread canvasses over the most important machinery where the men worked unobserved.

By the fifteenth of November everything was at last complete. I shall never forget the day, the crazy delight of the Professor as he went about testing the intricate machines, the air of awe and mystery that kept the workmen silent, and my own wonder, enthusiasm and yet doubt that the experiment would succeed. Thus far the project had cost me a mint of money which I did not begrudge, if the thing only proved a success. But how could such a thing succeed?

I roamed about over the great artificial island, looking over the wonderful oscillators, condensers, transformers, and so on. I knew their office but vaguely, knowing only that they transmitted the power to operate the gravity deflector. Their number and size were bewildering surrounded as they were by diverse other machinery whose nature I could not guess.

At each corner and in its center the island rested on a solid copper pier ten feet in height and about a foot in diameter, and at the points of contact on the island itself were magnet-like apparatus. On the ground near each pier was a dynamo whose current was supplied by a central power-house. There were also many amplifiers and projectors of peculiar construction. The whole fabric beneath my feet with its network of wires and steel and machinery was so heavy that the idea of projecting it into the sky and holding it there suspended like a great captive

balloon without the aid of gas or lifting wings appalled me. Only my faith in the Professor's uncanny power made me hope it might succeed.

Not a plane was to be seen in the sky save Greta's which kept diving and circling far above us, and it was still too early for the curious crowds from town. Except the workmen, the Professor and myself there was not a soul in sight. The Professor confided to me that he was glad we were alone. I understood. If the thing should fail he would save himself from the ridicule of the world.

When all was in readiness the Professor, looking very grave and a little pale, beckoned to me silently, and I followed him up the ladder on board the island. He had just been over the whole thing thoroughly and had given last minute instructions to his engineers.

"If anything happens, Bob," he said quietly, "Greta will pick us up with the plane. But I don't look for anything untoward to happen," he added confidently.

We paused near the center of the island. The Professor gave a final look around and over this marvelous child of his brain.

"God, how I wish McCann were here to share the glory with us," he said sadly. "Poor McCann, some dire tragedy must have overtaken him. I would give anything now to recall my harsh words."

Then he put a whistle to his lips and blew shrilly. For the fraction of a second nothing happened, then the fabric beneath us trembled. There was a hiss, a sputter, an upward flash of fire, a shower of sparks through the frame-work, a drone of the dynamos, like the hum of a million bees, and we began to move. Slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, then we shot upward with sickening suddenness. Up, up we went on a level keel. I felt but a slight tremor and only the rush of air proclaimed that we were rushing heavenward with terrible speed.

The Professor grabbed me and hugged me in a frenzy of joy, for the time being too much overcome to speak. And all I could do was to stare at him in speechless wonder. Suddenly he drew back and touched a button on the corner mast. Instantly our motion was arrested. The island rocked gently a few times, then came to rest without a jar. The altimeter showed us to be up one thousand feet. Looking down through the steel work I saw the workmen staring up at us. There we rode in the air as steady as a duck on a millpond, sustained by the invisible force of gravitation.

Greta landed her plane, rushed up and embraced her brother.

“Oh, Gustave,” she cried, “I did not think you could do it—I am so sorry that I ever doubted you; that I—” She paused as she looked away a dark shadow in her eyes.

“Never mind,” said the Professor.

“Oh, Bob, isn’t this wonderful?” she said turning to me.

“It is more than that. At a time like this, words fail us.”

“I am wondering whether I dare try a little stunt,” said the Professor. “And do you folks know that we could go on up to the moon if we wanted to?” he added mysteriously. “But enough for today. We will return to the earth. I see other and greater marvels just ahead of us.”

As the girl and I gazed in awe at this remarkable man he manipulated the machinery again and we descended slowly and easily landing exactly on the points of the piers. The workmen clustered around their employer showering him with congratulations.

The Professor Triumphant

WELL, that night I couldn’t sleep for thinking of that wonderful exploit and the fact that the Professor hinted at other wonders hidden up his sleeve. Would man ultimately conquer all the laws of the universe? Was there no limit to his power? Preposterous as it seemed I answered these amazing questions in the affirmative. Fulfilling the scriptures, man was to become as gods.

And now the Professor, athrill with triumph and enthused over the future outlook of his aerial islands, invited everybody to come out into the wilderness and witness man’s latest conquest over mother nature.

The day was set and widely advertised. Scientists from all over America were tendered special invitations, as well as many statesmen. The professor sent Van Beck a messenger urging him to be present.

The whole nation was dumfounded by the announcement, but almost every one treated the matter as a huge hoax and questioned Professor Stiener’s sanity.

But they came by thousands—coming by plane and automobile, on horseback and on foot. The woods surrounding the high fence was black with people. But, of course, no one was permitted inside the fence. Even Professor Van Beck, who seemed to consider himself a special guest, was forced to peer through the fence and reach between its wires to give the Professor the handclasp of congratulation.

“My dear Professor,” he said with an injured air, “one would think you would make an exception in the case of an old pal.”

“There can be no exceptions,” replied the Professor tartly.

“Do you expect forever to keep this great secret locked in your own breast?”

“Until every feature is protected by patent,” returned the Professor meaningly.

I could see that this answer cut Van Beck to the quick, but he said nothing and in a minute he moved away shaking his head and mingled with the crowd.

The demonstration was a success in every way. Both islands were raised simultaneously. They were partly lowered, then raised again alternately, shot into the air until they appeared as small dark specks in the blue sky. And finally they were landed safely and noiselessly on their piers.

The Professor was wild with enthusiasm and joy. He bowed again and again as the milling crowds cheered madly. Often he ran over to Van Beck where he stood with his face pressed against the wire and boasted of the complete success of his great venture. It was plain to be seen that the Professor was gloating over the Dutchman. At last he had succeeded in making and utilizing a great discovery without his butting in. But Van Beck did not stint his praise.

“I rejoice with you, my friend,” he said heartily. “Great wealth and endless fame are yours. It is marvelous, marvelous—and it is just.”

The immense crowd left reluctantly. Long after nightfall knots of excited and awe-struck people lingered about the refreshment stands and stood peering curiously through the fence discussing the miracle which had taken place before their eyes.

But there was a fly in the ointment of the Professor’s happiness—he bitterly

regretted that McCann was not there to witness the climax of his work.

Owing to the success of the demonstration and the fact that the press of the entire country had spread its description far and wide, the Professor seized the opportunity to launch a stock company to exploit his invention whose scope and possibilities, he averred, were well nigh limitless. But he pointed out that its initial work would be in the field of the airplane. A line of his islands would be placed along every plane route. Machines would refuel and make repairs in the air. In the air, the islands would act as guideposts by day, and at night their beacons would flash out to cheer and guide the aviators on their way. Should storms arise the islands would be shot above the storm, and here in a haven of refuge the plane could rest and make necessary adjustments and repairs if need be. Its passengers could leave the cabin for a few minutes, walk about and procure refreshments and many luxuries right on the island.

“And that is not all the wonders I have in mind,” said the Professor with shining eyes as he unfolded the plan to me. “Think of an airplane without any motive power. I am not thinking of gliders,” he added with a deprecatory wave of the hand. “I am thinking of an airplane sailing through the air without any motor or other visible means of locomotion, controlled by power stations on earth which can be fifty miles or more apart, through the medium of my device located on the plane. The future plane, disabled in the air, will not fall like a plummet and crash, or have to glide down and make a forced landing for repairs,” he went on eagerly. “It simply will radio to the nearest hangar island, a repair plane will then slip off through the air, hitch to the nose of the disabled plane and tow it to the island just the same as crippled autos are now towed to a garage.”

Accustomed as I was to listening to the wonderful plans of my friend I could only sit and stare dumbly over this new scheme. Where would that mighty brain finally lead this man? And for the first time I began to fear the final results of his work. If he were able to perform such miracles they might lead him on and on to new fields and triumphs until grasping unseen and undreamed of forces he might innocently usher in a planetary catastrophe.

CHAPTER IV

Evil Premonitions

THE stock of our company—known as the Stienen, Bookman Airways Inc.—took the market by storm. In less than two weeks every share of both common and preferred was sold, and had I not been in on the ground floor with a large block of stock I would have considered I had lost a great investment.

Although Van Beck, whenever we ran across him—which was not often—continued to voice his praise of the Professor's latest invention, he took no stock in the company so far as we were able to learn. Although the Professor made no complaint I saw that his pride was hurt.

During the next week we were head-over-heels in work. What with perfecting the plans of the new organization and daily trips out to what the Professor termed the mother plant we often worked twenty hours at a stretch without rest. I had put my whole soul in the venture, as well as most of my fortune, but the closer I became associated with the Professor the more secretive and mysterious he became. I thought I had earned the right to know the innermost secrets of his plan which was to revolutionize the world, and Greta agreed with me. At last I faced his reticence with open rebellion.

"Tut, tut, my boy," he said soothingly. "Of course you have a right to know and you shall know. I will explain all."

"When?" I demanded harshly.

"Have patience. I have postponed my revelations to you that I might give you other and greater surprises. I will carry out other experiments soon and then I will make you master of all."

"Do you not realize that your delay to give me all details might easily wreck the whole enterprise? Suppose you were to die who would carry on?"

The Professor stroked his beard thoughtfully.

"Perhaps you are right, my boy," he said at last. "Something might happen to me

and then with my secret unrevealed posterity would lose a priceless heritage. Have the plane made ready, Greta,” he continued turning to his sister. “We will go out to the plant, and then after I try out another idea of mine you shall know all, my boy, you shall know all.”

I was athrill with joyous anticipation as we stepped from the plane beside one of the islands. Soon the Professor would draw aside the veil and allow me to view the pulsing heart of this marvel. And then I confidently told myself I would ask Greta the question which long I had wanted to ask. But there was to be another delay.

“I don’t know whether it will work or not,” suddenly said the Professor as if to himself. He began to act queer, jumping about from one thing to another muttering and shaking his head affirmatively. “Maybe I’ll smash it” he said finally. “But we shall see—we shall see. Come, my boy,” he added turning to me and eyeing me oddly.

He led the way aboard the island, and Greta soared into the air. In a few minutes we had risen to a height of two thousand feet. Then Greta gave another exhibition of the unique braking system of her plane by landing on the little field by our side.

“I am going over to the other island,” announced the Professor. “I shall send it into the air and maneuver it horizontally. I will even come over to visit you, my boy. I shall step from that island onto this one. But if anything should happen to me—” he went on while I gazed at him in astonishment, “you must descend. Just pull this lever down and forward and press this—” He paused with his hand on the lever and looked at me steadily. “But I believe I’ll have you meet me” he continued, his eyes burning and boring into mine. “It will make the test complete. Come, Greta, let’s be going.” He turned and clambered into the plane.

“Hold on—you have not told me how to meet you,” I reminded unable to understand the sudden changes of his mind.

“Never mind,” he said. “I’ll try out my island first, then I’ll send directions by Greta.”

In another moment they had zoomed into the air leaving me alone aboard this strange contrivance of the sky.

As they winged away a sudden feeling of loneliness assailed me not unmixed with misgivings. My eyes roved about me. I had but a vague knowledge of the mechanism of this craft. Its bewildering array of wheels and levers and buttons appalled me, thanks to the Professor's foolish procrastination in teaching me their use. I wondered what would become of me, marooned here in the air should the Professor crash and something happen to Greta. I knew the island could not be lowered from the ground by anyone save the Professor. I looked below hopelessly. The workmen were only small dots, and the buildings and equipment of the plant looked like toys.

My attention was soon diverted to the Professor and his island. Majestically he rose into the air until he was about on a level with me. Then I saw him hurrying about over the structure, pausing now and then to oil and examine a machine, to adjust a lever and try a valve. I took up the binoculars and watched him closely. I saw that he was nervous, and the expression on his face alarmed me. His cheeks were pale, his eyes glowing like red coals and the motions of his lips told me he was talking rapidly to himself. I feared that the dreaded moment long feared by Greta had come at last.

And then as I gazed I saw about half a mile beyond the Professor something moving among the trees. Autumn was tardy in coming and most of the timber among the evergreens still retained its foliage though it was splashed with gold. As I watched the tops of the timber seemed to expand, to become strangely animated. Then they appeared to be rising to meet the sky as though they had suddenly taken on a phenomenal growth.

I blinked, lowered the glasses and hastily wiped them with my handkerchief. But as I placed them again to my eyes I uttered a cry of amazement and stupefaction, for soaring above the tree tops was another island of the sky! And this island carried trees and shrubs on its bosom. There was grass there and flowers. At each corner and in the center were airplane beacons the same as ours, but they were of a brilliant hue and artistic design.

A Catastrophe

I rubbed my eyes with a trembling hand. What had come over me to cause this hallucination? I had thought so much about this sky island business, had lost so much sleep over it that the thing was getting the best of my reason. I surely was seeing things. That green island over there soaring into the blue was a mirage, a

fantasy of a disordered brain. I resolved to get a grip on myself and quit this business before it was too late. But as I stared again the mirage persisted mockingly, grew plainer and finally ceased its upward flight and came to rest. It was then that I suddenly discerned a figure bobbing about near the corner masthead—a small man with a bristling black beard. I caught my breath with a gasp. My God, I was beholding no mirage but the devilish handiwork of Professor Stiener's rival—Van Beck!

With sickening force the hot truth surged over me—Van Beck had stolen a march on us, after all. He had photographed the blue print the day Greta landed him in her plane. He had broken into the office, and the report that he had gone abroad was a lie and a blind. He had stolen the Professor's secret and improved it. True to form he was about to rob the Professor of the fruits of victory. The thing was unthinkable but there was the evidence before my eyes.

And now as I looked closer I saw another man on the green island. His back was toward me and he was crouched over some sort of a machine. He seemed to be working over Van Beck's directions, for I saw the latter run up to him every little while and gesticulate excitedly.

All this time the Professor was still running about making everything secure for his coming test. At last he paused and looked around with an air of satisfaction. All was ready. And then I observed him suddenly catch sight of his sky neighbor. I saw his face grow white as chalk, and he stood for a moment rigid as a statue. Then he placed a hand to his head in a dazed sort of way. Suddenly I saw him stagger forward, grip a large lever and cast his eyes in my direction. I thought he was about to try out the lateral act, to come over to me and discuss Van Beck's startling appearance in our field. In another moment I saw that his island was indeed moving laterally, but not in my direction. He was rushing toward Van Beck!

Overhead Greta was soaring and dipping and circling gracefully. I believed that she had not witnessed the advent of Van Beck and his island. I knew she was keeping an eye on her brother; that she would swoop down and rescue him should anything go wrong. It was evident that the Professor was about to board his rival and demand an explanation. In the present state of his mind I feared a battle between the two scientific geniuses—a battle that would bring death and ruin to our cause. Then I saw that Van Beck's island was moving—that he was coming on to meet the Professor!

“My God they have both gone crazy!” I exclaimed aloud.

And so it seemed. Even through the glasses I could see that they were rushing along at tremendous speed, but as they drew near each other Van Beck gave evidence that he did not wish to commit suicide, did not wish to fight. Evidently he was but seeking to show the Professor that he could equal and duplicate any feat of his. He raised his island, only to be followed swiftly by the angry Professor. Van Beck shot down lower, and again the Professor followed him.

By this time Greta was flying low above the Professor, and by her gestures and the agonized expression on her face I understood that she was imploring him to check his onward flight, to back away from his foe and seek safety on the plane. But the Professor waved her back with a horrible grimace and turned his blazing eyes toward the advancing island of green. It was plain that he intended to smash the creation of his rival even though he himself should perish in the wreckage. Embittered by years of Van Beck’s meddling in his affairs he would kill him and wipe out the disgrace on the altar of death. I could do nothing to save him. In my excitement I ran to the very edge of my island, shouted and waved my arms frantically. And then as I gazed in the dumb agony of despair I saw that Van Beck was striving desperately to avert the catastrophe. He and his companion were working madly with the machinery, but somehow the island’s momentum could not be checked. The machinery had gotten beyond their control, and the maddened Professor was coming resistlessly on. Edge to edge they met. The detonation was deafening. Blue and green and yellow fire enmeshed them for a moment, then the great mass rushed down.

I shut my eyes and reeled backward faint with horror. I heard an awful crash as they struck. I looked over the side and as the dust cleared away among the trees, many of which had impaled the falling structures, I saw the ruins of the islands.

Greta was flying wildly about above the ruin vainly seeking a place to land. Once I saw the wings of the plane become entangled in a tree top. She had difficulty clearing it, and I thought she was going to crash. I must rush to her aid. I must hurry down. But how?

I gazed about me in dismay. The Professor had delayed the vital information too long. But in my wild anxiety over Greta and the fate of her brother I must attempt the descent. I went up to the center masthead and studied the instrument board carefully. After a time I believed that I understood the lowering

mechanism. I seized the lever which the Professor had indicated. I swung it over and pushed it downward. I pressed a button. And then—Was I moving? At first it was uncertain. I looked down at the earth. The workmen within the enclosure were running wildly about, waving their arms and staring upward. It was then I realized I was moving. But, God in heaven, I was mounting higher!

Frantically I ran here and there, pulling levers, whirling wheels, but steadily, mercilessly, noiselessly I rose into the sky. The great bulk beneath my feet was steady as a house floor. Nothing that I did affected it in any way. It was as if some great power from above had reached down and was pulling me into the heart of the universe. I wondered why some of the electricians on the ground did not notice my predicament and shut off the power, then remembered that they did not dare to, the Professor having failed to instruct them what to do in such an emergency. Besides, I realized their attention was centered on the wrecked islands and the safety of Greta.

I speculated on how long the power to operate the repellent device of the Professor's terrible machines would last. Surely, I reasoned, I must soon pass beyond their influence. But then would I fall gently back or would the gravitational pull of the earth assert its rights and suck me down to destruction?

Wanderer Through Space

EVEN as these alarming thoughts drummed upon my brain I realized that I was rising faster and faster. The altimeter soon registered ten thousand feet, and the air was icy cold. I shivered and buttoned my coat about me. Then came more alarming thoughts. Suppose that these gravity waves, which the devilish ingenuity of the Professor had reversed, reached beyond the sun! Suppose that this island should rush on and on until it should escape those waves and come under the influence of the sun or some other great star, or fall and crash upon the cold, dead moon? Or suppose it would not be attracted to the surface of any of these but would sail on and on through space—a lonely wanderer of the sky!

Again in a frenzy of desperation I made the rounds of the machines. I bitterly reproached myself for permitting the Professor to keep postponing the instructions covering the manipulation of the islands. Now all was lost. Fortune, Greta—everything sacrificed for a madman's dream.

Fifteen thousand feet by the altimeter. I was still rushing toward heaven like a

rocket. My teeth were chattering and I was gasping for breath. My hands and feet were aching with the cold. In a sort of drowsy subconsciousness I realized that I would soon succumb for the want of oxygen. Soon this strange vehicle that was bearing me to destruction would become both my funeral car and my tomb. Yet there was nothing I could do to save myself. Then a strange peace settled upon my soul. Why should I worry? Was I not a distinguished person? My death was to be the most unique ever witnessed by the stars. I gazed up at the cold, blue sky and laughed hysterically. What did I care? But even as I gave myself up for lost and my brain grew dull, I was sensible that my speed—tremendous as it had been before—was even faster now. The thin air swirled and whistled about my ears as I fought for breath and my numb hands clutched the mast to keep from falling.

As I stood there swaying dizzily I felt ajar. Somebody was calling my name—it sounded as from a great distance—and there was Greta stepping out of her plane.

Neither spoke as she helped me into the cabin, but I understood in a vague way how she had witnessed my plight and followed me. Also as in a dream came the thought that I had to thank the genius of the Professor for constructing a plane capable of such a flight.

Several minutes after we had left the island and were rapidly dropping toward the earth my senses returned to normal and looking up I saw the dim form of the island still racing on into space.

Landing at the plant we marshalled the workmen, secured tools and set out afoot for the wreck. After a weary tramp of an hour through the brush and over the rocks we reached it. The ruin of the islands was complete, and near where the edges had met, interlocked and almost welded themselves together we found the lifeless forms of the Professors within a few feet of each other. Their differences were settled at last.

“Poor old pal” I said sadly. I took Greta by the arm and turned away just as the workmen gathered up the bodies.

She was silent.

We inspected the other side of the green islands, marveling over Van Beck’s originality and artistic bent. We were about to leave the spot when we heard a faint moan from above us.

Clambering up over the twisted steel we came upon a man pinned fast between two beams. We ran to him, then started back in dismay, for it was McCann. Exerting all our strength we released him. He was badly crushed but conscious. Here, I said to myself, is the secret of Van Beck's knowledge about the islands. McCann is a traitor, I thought, as I glanced at Greta reading agreement in her eyes. But the injured man swept us with a look of pleading as though he sensed what was passing in our minds.

"I'm no traitor, folks," he said weakly. "Van Beck's men kidnapped me and kept me by force. He forced me to tell all I know about the islands, and I know much." The Scotchman smiled whimsically.

"Then you will tell us what you know," I said. It was a chance to save the priceless knowledge to the world.

"Aye, aye, sir—if I can. But—" He put his hand to his chest while a paroxysm of pain distorted his features. "If—if you have but a bit of paper now—I'll tell you all I know. We'd better hurry now, for—for—"

His face became ghastly and I thought it was all over.

Madly I searched my pockets. I could find nothing but a small note book. I knew that McCann was dying. We must hasten.

As I poised my pencil above the paper the dying man made a brave effort to go on, but it was no use. He looked at us appealingly. His head sank back and he was gone.

"The great secret has died with him," I remarked.

"And I am glad," she said. "Man may aid nature's laws, but when he reverses them he must pay the penalty. Gustave's mad dream has killed him."

I gave her a startled look. She was not in sympathy with the works of science.

"Nevertheless I wish our island would drift back to earth. With it we might make a new start."

"If you love it so much perhaps I had better take you back to it," she suggested quietly.

“Agreed,” I said. “The only condition I impose is that you remain there with me.”

To which she made no answer then, nor has she to this day. We never looked for the island—nor did it ever return. Somewhere off in the far reaches of space it still pursues its solitary way.

THE END