

The Airplane Boys among the Clouds; Or, Young Aviators in a Wreck

John Luther Langworthy



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THE AIRPLANE BOYS AMONG THE CLOUDS

or,

Young Aviators in a Wreck

by

JOHN LUTHER LANGWORTHY

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THE AIRPLANE BOYS AMONG THE CLOUDS

or, Young Aviators in a Wreck

CHAPTER I

TRYING OUT THE NEW BIPLANE

"I tell you, Elephant, it's the Bird boys, and nobody else!"

"But they had a monoplane last summer, Larry; and you can see for yourself it's a biplane out yonder over the lake. So that's why I thought it must be Percy Carberry and his crony, Sandy Hollingshead."

"Shucks! stir up your think-box, Elephant. Get a move on your mind, and look back. Don't you remember Percy lost his old biplane when he took that trip down to South America, and had some trouble with the revolutionists in Colombia?"

"Say, now, that's right. You mean the time Andy Bird found his long-lost father, whose balloon left him a prisoner in such a queer way? Yes, but tell me, where would Frank and Andy Bird get a biplane now?"

"Oh! rats, what ails you, Elephant? Didn't they make the other; and don't you know they've been busy all winter, in that shop Old Colonel Whympers fitted up for them out in the field? And not even such bully good friends as you and me were allowed to take a peep inside. That's what they were working on—building this new biplane, after sending for the parts."

"Don't it just shine like fun in the sunlight, though?" declared the little "runt," who had been nicknamed "Elephant" by his chums, possibly in a spirit of boyish humor, and which name had clung to him ever since.

"It sure does look like a spider-like craft," Larry Geohegan went on. "Just see that white-headed eagle up in the blue sky. I bet you he's looking down, and wondering what sort of thing it is."

"Huh! don't you fool yourself there, Larry," chuckled the other. "That wise old chap knows all about aeroplanes. He's had experience, he has. You forget that last summer, when the race was on between the Bird boys and Percy, to see who could land on the summit of Old Thunder-Top first, from an aeroplane, those same eagles had a nest up there, and tackled the boys for a warm session."

The two lads had come to a halt on the road about half a mile from the borders of Bloomsbury where they lived. From where they stood, holding their fishing rods, and quite a decent catch of finny prizes, they could look out over the beautiful surface of Lake Sunrise, which was over fifteen miles long, and in places as much as three or four wide.

"Mebbe you can tell me, Larry," the smaller boy presently said, "just why Frank keeps sailing around over the lake that way? Suppose he's taking pictures from his biplane?"

"That might be, Elephant," Larry answered, slowly and thoughtfully. "Seems to me I did hear somebody talking about the State wanting to get a map of the lake, with all its many coves and points. But ain't it more dangerous for aviators hanging over water than the shore?"

"That depends," remarked the other boy, whose real name was Fennimore Cooper Small, and who was rather apt to have an exalted idea of his own importance, as do so many undersized people. "If a fellow dropped out of his machine when he was even fifty feet high, he'd be apt to break his neck, or anyhow a leg, if he struck on the land; but in the water he might have a show."

"Look at 'em circling round and round, would you?" Larry went on, his curiosity climbing toward the fever stage. "I'd give a fit now to know what Frank's got in that wise old noddle of his. He ain't the one to do things for nothing, take it from me, Elephant."

"Hi! step out of the way, Larry, if you don't want to get run over!" exclaimed the other, suddenly gripping his companion's sleeve. "Here comes a car, and the driver's tooting his old bazoo to beat the band."

"They're slowing up, don't you see," observed Larry, who had been startled by the other's abrupt warning. "No need to scare a feller like that, Elephant."

"Well, that machine don't belong around here, anyway; and I guess they're tourists doing the lake road course. Lots of 'em come this way just for the view, which they say can't be beat," the other went on, in a low tone; for the touring car had drawn very close by now.

Two men sat in it, one apparently the chauffeur, and the other occupying the commodious seat in the tonneau. The latter was a keen-faced man, with a peculiar eye, that seemed to sparkle and glow; and Larry immediately became aware that he was experiencing a queer sensation akin to a chill, when he returned the gaze of this individual.

Still, the other could look very pleasant when he chose to smile, as was the case immediately after the car came to a halt within five feet of where the two Bloomsbury high school boys stood.

"Looks like you had had pretty good luck, boys," he remarked, smoothly.

"Pretty middlin'," Elephant said, indifferently, as though this were an everyday occurrence with him; when to tell the truth, he and Larry had not done so well all season as on this particular day.

"Guess you know where the old fishing hole lies," laughed the stranger, pleasantly. "Quite a collection too—black bass, perch, 'slickers,' as we used to call the pickerel, and even some big fat sunfish. Many a happy hour have I spent just as you've been doing. And I'll never forget how fine those same fish tasted after I'd cleaned them myself for the frying-pan."

"That's what we do, sir," replied Larry, now beginning to think the stranger rather a nice spoken man.

"My friend and myself were just wondering what aviator you've got up here," continued the gentleman, as he cast a quick glance out over the lake. "You see, our attention was attracted toward that circling biplane as we came along. I happen to know some of the most famous fliers myself; but I never heard that any one of them was hiding up here this summer, trying fancy stunts. Look at that dip, Longley. That was a corker, now, I'm telling you. Do you know who that fellow is, my boy; the one handling the levers of that sparkling biplane out

yonder?"

Larry and Elephant glanced at each other and grinned. Then the little fellow threw out his chest, after a pompous way he had, and observed:

"Sure we do, mister. That's a chum of ours. His name is Frank Bird, and he knows more about aeroplanes in a minute than the rest of us do in a year. His cousin, Andy, is along with him. They stick together through thick and thin."

"Bird!" remarked the other, watching the agile movements of the biplane eagerly, as Larry could not but note. "A very suggestive name for a flier, too."

"That's right," burst out Larry. "Frank always said he was just forced to take to being an aeronaut. He says it's just as natural for birds to take to the air, as it is for ducks to swim in the water."

"Bird?" the other went on, turning to his companion. "Seems to me, Longley, there used to be a professor by that name in one of our colleges, who went daft on the subject of flying."

"You're right, Marsh; and he lost his life down at Panama; tried to cross the isthmus in a dirigible, and was never heard from again."

"Oh! but you're wrong, sir!" exclaimed Elephant, eagerly. "He was saved through those two boys in their monoplane, and is alive and well in Bloomsbury right now. It's a great story, and all to the good for the Bird boys."

"I'd like to hear it some time or other," replied the gentleman called Mr. Marsh by his companion who was serving as chauffeur. "But it seems to me these young fellows must be unusually bright boys to do what they're doing right now."

"That's easy for Frank and Andy Bird, sir," declared Larry. "Why, they've got a shop that they keep under lock and key, where they spend most of their time when they ain't flying. That biplane is what they made last winter—got some of the parts, and did the rest themselves. And it would be just like Frank to have invented some clever stunt that's going to just revolutionize flying."

Again a quick look passed between the two tourists, but the boys simply considered that it implied wonder at such youthful ingenuity.

"They must be smart boys, surely," remarked Mr. Marsh, again turning his head to look out over the lake. "And you say they even have a shop, where they work out these wonderful new ideas? Perhaps if we stayed over in Bloomsbury, Longley, they might be willing to let us have a little peep in that place?"

Elephant promptly shook his head in the negative.

"I wouldn't build too much on that, if I was you, sir," he said, "because, you see, we're chums of the Bird boys; and if they wouldn't let us once inside that shop all winter they ain't going to invite strangers there."

"Well, hardly," laughed the other. "How's that, Longley? Quite interesting to run across a couple of boy inventors up this way. Must tell Wright about it the next time we see him, and Curtiss too. They'll want to look them up perhaps, and coax them to join the new aeroplane trust that's forming. But what makes that biplane shine so? It glitters in the sunlight like silver."

"That's just what me and Elephant were talking about when you came along, mister," remarked Larry.

"And we just came to the conclusion that it must be something Frank's been experimenting on. Mebbe he's made his machine out of aluminum; or else he's got a new Kinkaid engine that has a lot of brass about it. Gee! look at 'em now, Larry! My heart jumped up in my throat because they just skimmed the water, and I was dead sure it meant a ducking for the boys."

"They certainly seem to know how to handle an aeroplane as well as any one I have ever seen," declared Mr. Marsh; who apparently could not tear his eyes away from the thrilling spectacle of the swooping air craft, that soared aloft, only to again dart daringly down toward the surface of the almost quiet lake.

"I bet you it's a game of conquer they're playing," suggested Elephant. "Each one seeing how close to touching the water he can come. Say, Larry, d'ye suppose Percy Carberry has got his new biplane yet? He's been boasting about it for weeks, and what he meant to do when she arrived."

"I saw him this morning, and he said he was still waiting; but that the thing had been shipped," replied the other. "Never saw such an unlucky dog as Percy is; and to tell the honest truth, Elephant, 'twouldn't surprise me one little bit if the old train got smashed up on the way, and the new flying machine along with it."

"Wonder if he's watching the stunts them fellers are doing out there, and saying all sorts of mean things about 'em?" suggested the smaller boy, grinning.

"Shouldn't wonder," Larry chirped. "He keeps tab on all Frank does these days. You know they've had to keep a man on duty every night around that workshop, because of Percy. He ain't to be trusted, and would just as soon put a match to the place as eat his dinner—if he thought he could do it on the sly."

Mr. Marsh caught the eye of his companion, and instantly a quick signal seemed to pass between them, unnoticed by either of the two boys, who were keeping their attention glued on the fluttering aeroplane a quarter of a mile away, and which had again mounted to quite a little height by means of boring upward in circles.

"There they go again!" exclaimed Elephant, excitedly, as the flying machine once more tilted its planes, and started down toward the water like a huge bird intending to alight.

"Oh! look at it, would you?" cried Larry, almost as much worked up as his smaller companion. "This time there's going to be something doing! I bet you Frank wants to just snatch a floating piece of wood off the water as he skims along, just like them Wild West riders do on horseback, when they throw their hats down. Why! Something must a-busted—they dropped splash on the lake; and look at the old biplane sitting right there like a great big gull! Ain't that too bad, though; I'm sorry for Frank and Andy!"

But Mr. Marsh, bending his head close to the ear of the man who sat in the front of the touring car, laughed softly, and remarked with an air of triumph:

"What did I tell you, Longley? Now say it was a false scent, will you? It isn't often I make a mistake, and already I believe we've struck great luck in coming up here."

CHAPTER II

A RESCUER FROM THE SKIES

"What if the bally thing takes a notion to duck under, Larry?" asked Elephant, staggered himself at the possibility of such a catastrophe happening.

"Wow! they'd stand a chance of being drowned, then, I take it!" answered the taller lad, shaking his head as if worried.

"Say, p'raps we ought to be chasing after a boat, and putting out there right now," the small boy exclaimed.

"O K say I. Let's make a dash for Cragan's dock, and borrow his skiff!" suggested Larry, ready to toss fishing poles, and even the fine catch in the dusty weeds bordering the road, so that they might be unimpeded in their flight.

"Hold on, boys!" observed the gentleman in the tonneau of the touring car, as he reached out and caught Larry by the sleeve of his shirt. "No need of bothering yourselves in the least, I assure you."

"But perhaps the biplane might sink, sir," declared Elephant, still showing extreme nervousness. "And what if Frank or Andy happened to be caught in the wires that stay the planes? They might be drowned, you see. Accidents can happen, even to the two smart Bird boys."

"No danger of any such catastrophe, I give you my word," went on the gentleman. "And when you learn the truth, you'll thank me for restraining you from acting in a foolish manner. Here, take a look through this glass I chance to have along in the car. What do you see now?"

Larry accepted the binoculars, and immediately adjusted them to his eyes.

"Well, of all the things I ever heard of!" he slowly ejaculated.

"Let me look, Larry," exploded Elephant, as he deftly "hooked" the glasses away from his companion's hands, and immediately clapped them to his own eyes, to let out a shout of amazement. "I declare if the old thing ain't floatin' like a big duck. Talk about her sinking, you couldn't push that wonder box down under the surface. Some more of Frank's magic; he's got 'em all queered a mile, Larry."

"Listen," remarked Mr. Marsh, quietly. "There's nothing so very wonderful about this new stunt of your friend, Frank. Those shining things you noticed about the biplane happened to be a couple of new aluminum pontoons under the craft, meant to float the whole affair whenever it drops in the water. They will be in common use shortly. And that machine is what we call a hydroplane—that is, it will prove to be as much at home on the water as in the air."

"What d'ye think of that, Elephant?" cried Larry, ready to swing his hat, and give a loud whoop to let the young aviators know that friendly eyes had been watching their startling maneuvers. "Ain't they all the candy, though? Why, Perc Carberry never could get up early enough in the morning to best the Bird boys."

"They float all right," remarked the other boy, still gazing through the fine pair of marine glasses that seemed to bring the biplane within touching distance. "But how under the sun can they start up again? Don't they have to take a run on them bicycle wheels first?"

"Watch and see," laughed Mr. Marsh. "A hydroplane can rise from the surface of the water just like a wild duck might. The propeller starts to working, the machine is sent swiftly along, and soon leaves the water, to soar upward as the planes are moved accordingly. There they go; now, keep tab on what they do, Longley."

He took the glasses from Elephant and placed them to his own eye, as though it might be of the greatest importance that he see distinctly every little movement of the daring young aviators.

"Whoop! hurrah! there they quit snaking along on the water! They're going to climb, I tell you, Larry! Look at that, would you? Up they go, as easy as you please! Now, ain't that just a hummer; and did you ever hear tell of as smart a pair of boys as Frank and Andy Bird? What won't they try next, I wonder?"

"They certainly seem to be made of the right stuff for airmen," admitted Mr. Marsh, with animation. "Some time I hope to make their acquaintance, and hear the story of their stirring adventure down in South America. What say Longley, can we afford to lay over at this Bloomsbury for a couple of days, while we have the car overhauled, and put in apple-pie condition?"

"It might be a good thing, Marsh," the other promptly answered, as he detected the signal wink his companion gave. "You know they say an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure. And unless something is done we stand a chance of being thrown over a precipice, when that weak place in the machinery gives way suddenly."

"All right, then; we'll stop," remarked the gentleman with the glittering eyes, as if the new idea quite appealed to him. "I'd like to see something of these Bird boys. They have a future before them, I believe. And if I'm any judge of up-to-date things I even suspect they've gone and applied that latest device the Wrights patented, where a little pendulum under the machine warps the planes automatically, at the slightest motion of the body, keeping the aeroplane in an exactly horizontal position."

"Oh! they're up to snuff, all right, take it from me," declared Elephant, with an air of pride, since it was his friends whose praises were being sung, and he could bask in the reflected light.

"I bet you there ain't anything going on in aviation circles that them two boys don't know," put in Larry, enthusiastically. "They take all sorts of papers and magazines, and spend every living day in that old shop. I knew something was on, and there she is, all hatched out. Poor old Percy, won't he just want to crawl back into his hole, though, when he learns this?"

"Rats! you don't know him if you think that!" exclaimed Elephant. "Ten to one he plays Frank and Andy a close second. Right now that sharper has got cards hidden up his sleeve, and ready to surprise everybody. Didn't he slip away early in the spring, and go down to New York? You watch his smoke, I tell you, Larry. No, Perc ain't giving up till he has to, and that won't be till the race is run. Just wait!"

"I declare, that's a queer thing to allow!" exclaimed Longley, who had picked up the glasses and with them swept the surface of the lake, as well as surveyed the

hovering biplane that had walked on the water like an aquatic bird.

"What now?" asked Mr. Marsh, looking a little nervous.

"Why, see that boat floating out yonder, the plaything of the breeze that seems to be rising?" asked the other, still using the binoculars.

"I see what you mean," remarked Mr. Marsh, "and it seems to have drifted away from the shore. Is that some man lying down in it? There, I saw the object move then. What is it, Longley?"

"A little baby, hardly more," came the startling reply. "Oh! he was nearly over the side, that time. However in the wide world do you suppose the child ever came to be in that boat? Here, take a look. Marsh. Another tilt like that, and the child will be drowned for certain!"

"Why, it must be Tommy Cragan, the fisherman's baby," said Larry, his face turning a bit gray with alarm. "I've seen the little shaver playing around his daddy's boat many a time. It must have floated off; and now it's away out on the lake, where the water is twenty feet deep!"

"Cracky! that's tough on poor old Cragan, with his wife sick abed!" groaned the sympathetic Elephant, as he strained his eyes to watch.

"If the child would only remain quiet there would be little danger," remarked Mr. Marsh, who was still looking through the glasses, as though something about the picture fascinated him.

"That's the trouble," remarked his companion, quickly, "the little chap is getting frightened, or else bolder, for he keeps leaning far over all the time. Can nothing be done to save the child? If I could swim I'd take a chance at it myself."

"We could run as fast as anything to Cragan's, sir," declared Elephant, "or perhaps you could take us in, and we'd show you the way there. He might have another boat, and would put out to save Tommy."

"I'm afraid that would be too late, good though the intention might seem," the man said regretfully.

"I can swim like a duck, sir. What's to hinder me jumping in and trying to get out

there to him in time?" demanded Larry, hastening to start removing his shoes as he spoke.

"It's a long way out there, my boy, and you might take a cramp," said Longley.

"But I'm willing to try it, sir. Besides, the rest of you could be heading for Cragan's fish house, and seeing if he's around. I know that little chap, and he's the idol of his daddy's heart. It'll nigh about kill Amiel if the kid was drowned."

Even while he was speaking Larry had kicked one shoe off, and was working to undo the stubborn lace of the other, which of course had to get in a snarl as usual, exciting his nervous disposition to the utmost, as he tugged away.

"Hold on! I'm afraid it's going to be too late!" exclaimed the other occupant of the touring car, still keeping his eyes glued to the smaller end of the marine glasses.

"Oh! is he going to fall in, sir?" gasped Elephant, in a quiver of fear, as he shaded his eyes with both hands, and stared out across that glowing stretch of water.

"There! he has done it!" cried the other; and all of them saw what seemed to be a faint splash alongside of the drifting skiff. "No, strange to say the little fellow has caught hold of the gunnel of the boat; and while his body is in the lake, he continues to hold on desperately, just keeping his head above the surface! But it can't last, it can't last! He could not keep up that grip more than a minute at the most! This is terrible; and all of us so helpless to save the child!"

He took the glasses down as though really unable to watch any longer. But his companion did not seem to feel the same way, for he immediately snatched them out of Mr. Marsh's hand, and clapped them to his eyes.

"No use, boy, thinking of swimming out yonder," said Mr. Marsh, seeing that Larry had finally broken the obstinate lace, and kicked the shoe into the bushes. "Long before you could get near the boat it would all be over. If anything is to be done, some one else will have to engineer the rescue."

"And it's coming," shouted the other, just then. "Watch the biplane, Marsh! The boys have seen the danger of the child! They are headed for the drifting boat,

and darting down again. Perhaps they mean to alight in the water alongside, and pick the little chap up! Good! Another ten seconds, and they will have arrived on the spot!"

Even Larry, barefooted now, and with both hands tightly clenched, such was his wrought-up condition, stood and watched with burning eyes as the aeroplane sank lower and lower in its forward swoop. Undoubtedly the Bird boys had suddenly become aware of the dreadful peril threatening the little chap belonging to the well known Bloomsbury fisherman, who was every boy's friend; and meant to do their level best to save Tommy from the watery grave that yawned to receive him.

"Oh! it's too late!" suddenly cried Longley, staggering back as if he had himself received a blow.

"What happened?" exclaimed his companion, hoarsely.

"The child let go! See, he is struggling in the water, but must disappear before the aeroplane can alight, for it is still twenty feet above the lake. Too bad! Too bad! They might have got him in another minute!"

"Look there! One of them has leaped into the lake! See that splash, would you?" shrilled Larry, jumping up and down in his excitement.

"That was Andy, I reckon!" cried Elephant, climbing up on the side of the car, the better to see, at this tremendously exciting stage of the game. "He ain't afraid of anything; neither is Frank, for that matter. And he just dove right down like a hawk after a breakfast of fish. Do you see him, mister? Ain't he come up yet? Oh! my! I wouldn't have missed this for a cookey. What's he doing, mister, please? He's our chum, Andy is, and we're proud of him."

"Yes, there he is alongside the boat now," said Longley, using the binoculars again, "I can see him swimming with one hand. He seems to have injured the other—no, no, it must be he's got the child gripped in his right arm, for I seem to see a yellow head close to his. There, the hydroplane drops in the water near by. The boy lifts up his burden and places it in the boat. Now he's climbing in himself, as if he means to revive the child. Marsh, he's done it! And if that was Andy Bird I take off my hat to him."

Whereupon both Elephant and Larry started in to shout and cheer at the top of

their voices; as though they might have a personal interest in the gallant rescue which had just come under their observation.

CHAPTER III

THE MEN IN THE TOURING CAR

When Andy Bird, wet through to the skin, arrived at the fisherman's dock a little later, he found quite a crowd awaiting his coming.

The small urchin, Tommy, had apparently not suffered seriously from his immersion in the waters of Sunrise Lake. Perhaps he was to some extent accustomed to tumbling overboard; though this time the consequences might have been most serious only for the lucky presence of the Bird boys near by, intent on trying out their new hydroplane.

Tommy's mother managed to thank the rescuer, after a fashion; but Andy was a modest lad, and made light of his recent adventure.

"Don't mention it, fellows," he laughed when Larry and Elephant started to lavish praise on his head. "I'm thinking of sending in an application to become a member of the Life Saving Corps on the Great Lakes, you know. And this was just the finest chance ever to try how things worked. Besides, some day Frank and myself may have to take a header from an aeroplane, and it's just as well to know how to drop."

"Well, all I can say is, that you did it as well as any expert," observed the occupant of the tonneau, who had given the name of Mr. Marsh.

Andy looked at him, noticing for the first time that strangers were present.

"Thank you, sir," he said, blushing a trifle, for he was as yet hardly accustomed to praise, and quite unspoiled. "But there comes Frank with the machine. Did you see us rise from the lake, fellows?"

"Did we?" exclaimed Elephant, with his face beaming; "well, I should smile we

did now. It was the greatest stunt ever. I thought at first, Andy, something had happened to your new biplane; but these gentlemen knew all about such things, and they explained to us what you meant to do."

Andy at this stole another side glance at the occupants of the big touring car. Noticing this, Mr. Marsh hastened to remark:

"Well, that is putting it rather strong, my boy. We've been interested in several aviation meets during the last year, and keep posted as to what is new along those lines. Plenty of people know about hydroplanes, and such things. And so this represents the last thing in your work, does it? I must say you are a credit to your teacher, whoever he may be."

Frank, who had landed close by, heard these words, as possibly the gentleman intended he should. But he was too much interested in other matters to pay any particular attention to the flattery of passing tourists.

"How did Tommy come out of the accident?" he asked.

"All right, I guess," laughed Andy Bird, his cousin. "His ma has carried him off into the house, to fill him up with cake, or bread and molasses. He didn't swallow more than a pint of water."

"Lucky Tommy!" observed Mr. Marsh.

"You made the drop in fine shape, Andy," Frank went on, still keeping his face turned toward his chum, as though not really caring to enter into conversation with these unknown gentlemen, who seemed to be so well posted on things aeronautic.

"It was a peach of a dive!" exclaimed Elephant, enthusiastically.

"And since you're wringing wet I don't think you'd better go up with me again right now," Frank continued. "Hike for home, and get into some dry duds. I'll knock around for a spell, to try out a few more stunts I have in mind."

Truth to tell Frank was eager to get his new hydroplane away from those searching eyes of Mr. Marsh. They gave him a queer feeling, which of course he was quite unable to understand.

During the preceding summer, when the Bird boys were using the monoplane they had put together so successfully, it chanced that they had quite a serious adventure with a couple of thieves who had robbed a jewelry establishment, and were trying to get out of the country, where the roads were being closely watched by the police.

On this occasion one of the rascals chanced to be a man named Jules Garrone, who, over across the water had been something of an aeronaut and aviator. Conceiving the brilliant scheme that if the monoplane of the Bird boys could only be stolen he and his companion could easily elude their hunters, he had given Frank and Andy lots of trouble before finally falling into the net.

That was one reason why Frank felt rather cool toward strangers who manifested undue interest in his work. He was of an inventive turn of mind, and believed he had several new features connected with this hydroplane that as yet were, so far as he knew, novel to the science of aviation.

And those keen eyes of Mr. Marsh gave him an uneasy feeling.

"Your biplane seems to be built especially for two?" remarked that gentleman, as he watched Frank swing the machine around, with the help of the willing Larry and Elephant.

"Yes, sir," replied the boy, promptly. "Andy and myself always hunt together. We are called the Siamese Twins, because we won't be separated. Where one Bird boy is found you can make up your mind the other isn't very far away. Once on a time they got to calling me Smoke, and Andy, Fire; but we just wouldn't stand for that."

"But possibly your machine may not fly quite so well with only one to balance!"

Was that a broad hint that he would be only too glad of an invitation to occupy the seat left vacant by the departure of Andy? Frank suspected such a thing; and made a quick reply.

"Oh! we've got all that arranged to a dot, sir," he laughed. "I can change my seat, and still reach every lever easily. And as to balancing, the time has come when the aviator is going to be freed from all that anxiety. Give me a start, will you, fellows? It's easier rising from the water than on land, because no stumps or roots get in the way there. That's it. Good day, sir!"

There was a whirr of the powerful little Kinkaid engine, the lightest ever installed in an aeroplane, and immediately the new biplane started to take on speed. When, in the estimation of the one who handled the flier, it has attained sufficient momentum, the planes were elevated, and like a great bird it gracefully began to mount upward into space.

Larry was watching the two gentlemen in the car, who had been paying the closest attention to every little detail. He saw Mr. Marsh turn his head, and nod several times quickly to his companion.

"As neatly done as I ever saw it accomplished," the gentleman muttered, though the sharp ears of Larry Geohegan caught the suggestive words.

Then, after a few pleasant words to the two boys who had been fishing, the men in the touring car started off, heading toward town, and were speedily lost to sight in a cloud of dust.

"Let's take the short-cut, and bring up at the field where Frank and Andy do pretty much all of their practice, turning, and cutting figure-eights," suggested Larry, as though he had a purpose in saying this.

"Oh! I guess I'm still able to toddle that far," remarked Elephant who was compelled to work his short legs very fast when trying to keep alongside the taller Larry; and yet these two, so unlike in almost every way, had long been known as inseparables, ready to have an occasional little spat, yet just as quick to pour oil on the troubled waters again.

"There's Andy turning out," remarked Larry, after a while. "Perhaps, if you could only get going a little bit faster we might overtake him before he reaches home. I reckon he means to head for the shop in the field, because I know he always keeps a lot of old duds there."

"Sure thing," assented the dwarf, cheerfully, as he started on what was for him very like a run. "And it would be just like Andy to want to help when Frank comes along with the new biplane. Say, ain't she a dandy, though? Did you ever see such a neat contraption? Guess them gents thought we had some pretty smart fellows in Bloomsbury."

"That's just what I was thinking, Elephant," remarked Larry, "but here we are at the edge of the old field, and Andy just ahead. See that, he's aiming for the shop

in the middle of the patch, where the hangar lies that holds their old monoplane. Perhaps you could buy that cheap now, Elephant. You know you always declared you meant to take up flying some day."

"Haven't given it up yet, either," returned the other, doggedly.

"Well, I advise you to think it over good and hard. Remember the fate of Darius Green. It needs a mighty active fellow to manage one of those tipsy, cranky machines. And if you ever should fall out I bet you there'd be an awful squash!" chuckled the tall boy.

"Let up on that, can't you?" expostulated Elephant. "I'm small, but I can get around as well as the next one. And when I get to sailing through the air, I expect to have wings. Then, if any accident comes along, it's me to flap my feathers, and drop like a thistle-down. In other words, Larry, I've got a parachute all arranged that will let me down easy; just like the fellow at the county fair, who drops from a hot air balloon."

"Hello! now what d'ye think of that?" claimed Larry, suddenly.

"What do you mean?" demanded the small boy. "You're the most mysterious fellow ever. Oh! I see now, by the way you stare over yonder. Yes, it's the same two gentlemen who admired the daring of the Bird boys a little while back. They must have found out where Andy lives, and have run out here from town to see what sort of a hangar they have."

"Yes, that's right, but I don't like it, I tell you," Larry went on, as he led the way over the fence that surrounded the field.

"What's that?" cried Elephant. "Sure you don't suspect these two fine looking gents might be another pair of crooks like the ones that tried to steal Frank's monoplane last summer, do you?"

"Oh! rats! You wouldn't understand if I did try to explain. There they go now, in a cloud of dust. Guess they saw us pointing at the car. Come along, slowpoke, and get up with Andy," and Larry linked his arm in that of his comrade, though he had to stoop considerably in order to make the connection.

"Why, hello, fellows!" exclaimed Andy, who now for the first time became aware of the fact that they had been trailing after him.

"Just dropped around to see if we could be of any use putting the new machine away," remarked Elephant, as if an apology were needed to account for their presence; but both boys had always been accounted special friends of Frank and Andy, and warmly greeted, though not taken into the secrets of the shop, where mystery reigned much of the time of late.

"And there's Frank coming right now!" declared Andy. "I guess he made up his mind he didn't care to put her through all her paces, with me away. We're sure proud of this new one, fellows. Why, she works like a clock, and minds her helm better than anything that ever answered to the call of the plane."

"Say, did you happen to notice that car on the road over there?" asked Larry.

"I saw one moving along in a cloud of dust; but didn't notice who was in it. Why do you ask that?" answered the young aviator, looking at his friend curiously.

"Oh well, it happened to be those same two men you saw, when you brought little Tommy ashore," remarked the other, mysteriously.

"But I thought they were headed for Bloomsbury?" exclaimed Andy.

"That's what they said; but you see they thought it worth while to run past and come away out here, just to take a peek over the fence and see what you Bird boys had in this section."

"That's funny now," muttered Andy, who, being less keen than his cousin, could not let suspicion find lodgment in his brain as quickly either. "But perhaps Frank may know who they are. He keeps pretty well posted on everybody connected with aviation meets and inventions. Marsh, he said his name was; what was the other, do you know, fellows?"

"I heard him call the man at the wheel Longley several times, so I reckon that must be his handle," said Elephant, who never liked being left out in the cold whenever there was an argument on the carpet, or in fact any talking being done.

Frank came sailing directly toward them with considerable speed. When it began to look as though he might mean to collide with the low workshop close by, he suddenly swooped upward, and passed over their heads, uttering a laugh as he saw how the alarmed Elephant dropped flat on his face and hugged the earth.

Circling around, Frank cut several fancy figures with the new biplane, the hum of the twin propellers making merry music in the ears of the delighted boys.

Finally, as though tiring of this sport he dropped on the grass as lightly as he had a little while before nestled on the smooth surface of Sunrise Lake.

The three boys joined him, and willing hands soon stored the aeroplane in the snug hangar prepared for it alongside the workshop. Then Andy dodged inside to change his clothes before he got a chill; for though summer had come, the air was far from hot right then by any means, a storm having cleared the atmosphere during the preceding night, and leaving it delightfully crisp.

"I saw a car buzzing along the road while I was up, but couldn't use my glass to see who was in it. Did you notice, Larry?" Frank asked as they stood there near the open door of the shop.

"I was just going to mention the fact that those two men act like they had taken a great fancy to you and Andy," returned the other, readily.

Frank Bird frowned.

"H'm! I just don't like to hear that," he said. "Andy and myself have been working on something lately that we want to keep a dead secret from everybody. If we don't tell even our friends, then there can be little chance of a leak. But I'm not inviting strangers to take a ride with me, or visit us in our shop. Though you can come in now, any time you want, Larry and Elephant."

"Sho! we wouldn't know the wing feather of a plane from one that belonged in the tail or steering rudder," chuckled Larry.

"But I'm meaning to learn, Frank," put in the small chap, strenuously. "It looks so easy for you fellows, knocking around up there, with nobody ever getting in your way, like on our roads, that I want to fly."

"Well," pursued Frank, shaking his head. "I don't encourage anybody to take up the business. It's certainly the most dangerous calling going at present; but after the Wrights have put their latest balancing idea into general use, the number of dead aviators will drop fast. In time it may be a fellow can hardly fall out of a well-made flying machine if he is the most reckless aviator going."

"Hear that, Elephant," laughed Larry. "Hope yet that some of us common truck may be flapping through the upper currents, and getting out of the wet when it rains, by sailing above the clouds. But I see some fellow coming along the road on his wheel like he had a hurry call. Looks like Nat Holmes too, and he's coming in here."

"Funny how badly balanced that fellow is," remarked Frank. "Always in a hurry in everything he tackles; and then falling all over himself when he tries to talk. He's waving his hat too like he had something interesting to say. Let's hope, boys, it happens to be one of his good hours; or we're in for a lot of gibberish Hottentot patter, I'm afraid."

CHAPTER IV

SUSPICION

"F-f-frank!" stammered the new arrival, as he actually fell off his wheel, allowing the same to drop in a heap on the turf.

"That's me; what d'ye want, Nat?" asked the one addressed; as he assumed a reassuring air, knowing what a terrible mess the wretched stutterer often made of his attempt at speech, especially when he happened to be excited.

Nat was breathing hard. He always did things with a whirlwind method; and of course the exertion added to his difficulty in forming such words as he wanted.

"D-d-did y-y-you k-k-k-," he started, with a rush; and then seemed to lose his grip entirely; for all he could do was to make a sharp, hissing sound, get red in the face under the strain and tremble all over.

"I s-s-say, d-d-do y-y-y-," he went on, when there came another full stop, and as Larry said, a further escape of gas to account for that hissing noise from between his partly closed lips.

The contortions of his face when poor Nat worked himself into this sort of a fever were simply agonizing. Some boys made it a habit of laughing coarsely at the afflicted boy. But Frank always felt sorry, and tried the best he knew how to break the spell that seemed to bind up Nat's vocal faculties. For strange to say, there were other times when Nat could really speak calmly and evenly, as if he had never stammered in his life.

As though utterly despairing of ever being able to get out what he so eagerly wished to say, the boy suddenly snatched a pencil from one pocket, and a pad of paper from another. These necessities he always carried along with him, though hating to have to make use of such a silly trick at all.

Rapidly dashing a line or so upon the little pad, Nat tore the sheet off, and thrust it into Frank's hand.

Andy had come out of the shop by that time, dressed in dry garments; and bending over his cousin's shoulder he read these words:

"Percy's new aeroplane has arrived at the station. He's down there right now, seeing about having it put on a cart and pulled to his shack."

"Just about what we expected; eh, Frank?" asked Andy, handing the scrap of paper to Larry, so that he and the runt could read what news Nat had brought in such a tremendous hurry.

It was as if the stammering boy had judged, that of all the people in Bloomsbury who would be interested in knowing that Percy had received a new aeroplane, the Bird boys took front rank. For was not Percy Carberry the old-time rival of Frank; and on numerous occasions had he not striven furiously to keep the cousins from winning the laurels that came their way, despite all opposition?

"Yes, I understand that he was going in for aviation again," replied the other. "And I don't know whether I'm glad or sorry. If Percy and that crony of his, Sandy Hollingshead, only believed in the square deal, we might have great times in racing and exploring; but the trouble is, they hate to see anybody getting ahead of them, and lots of times as everybody understands, have tried to injure our machine."

"Oh! I don't know," said the optimistic Andy; "we always manage somehow, to come out of every affair right-side up, and they get the rough end of the deal, as they should because they won't leave us alone to manage our own business. I can see some warm times coming soon, when they get to cruising around once more."

"Well," said Frank, thoughtfully, "I never believed that Percy had really reformed when he said he was through playing mean tricks. He's always kept quiet about that trip down to South America. Why, he even accused me of giving him away just because I told of our adventures there, even glossing over the part he played in our little rumpus with the revolutionists in Columbia, at the time I found my dear father, and rescued him."

"That's just like Percy," declared Larry. "Don't I size him up, though? He never

knew what gratitude meant. I've been told that you and Andy really saved his life down in that upset country."

"Oh! perhaps it wasn't quite all of that, Larry," protested Frank.

"All right," spoke up Andy immediately; "at least we got those fellows out of a mighty tough hole. But it was just like Percy to declare that he was going to use some chloroform he had with him, to put the whole bunch of revolutionists to sleep, take their guns away, bind them hand and foot, and send some of the government troops out to capture 'em. So you see, we spoiled all that fine game by insisting on rescuing him and Sandy."

Larry laughed uproariously.

"Too bad about that chap," he remarked, when he could catch his breath again. "He's that slippery you never know when you've got your finger on him. And the excuses he gets up to cover his knockouts, they just sizzle. I reckon Percy is bound to be a promoter when he grows up."

"Say, let's all go down to the railroad yards, and watch Percy get his machine on the cart?" suggested Elephant, wickedly.

"Count me out, fellows," remarked Frank, immediately, "I don't want him to think I'm curious about what he bought that time he went to New York. Perhaps it's a better aeroplane than we've got here; but I don't believe it yet, after what she did for us in the tryout this day."

"Besides," observed Larry, "the chances are ten to one such a sly fellow as our Percy ain't going to knock the crates around the many parts of his machine into flinders right there in the open. He likes a little bit of mystery too, even if he hasn't got any reason to hide things."

"That settles my neat little scheme," sighed the runt, disconsolately. "Don't understand why it is that everything I happen to propose, Larry or somebody else always sits down on it, kerchunk! It's discouraging to genius, I say, and might keep a budding inventor from ever attaining his manifest destiny."

"Hear! hear!" chuckled Andy.

As for the tall boy, he came near having a fit, so doubled up with laughter did

this important remark on the part of his small chum leave him.

"No danger of you ever being discouraged, or left at the stake, Elephant," he managed to say, presently. "You come up smiling after every backset. You've sure got grit, and to spare, if they did forget you when handing out bone and muscle."

"And I bet you if I'd only had the chance, fellows, I'd have dropped into the bally old lake, just like Andy did, and saved that sweet cherub, Tommy Cragan!" declared the "Bug," as Larry often called his diminutive chum, when he tired of using his other misplaced nickname.

"Sure you would," said Andy. "I was only lucky in having the chance, that's all. Why, I don't see anything in that to make a fuss over. It was just like a picnic to me. Frank wanted to go the worst kind, but he couldn't let go the levers of our new and dandy machine, which might sail away up in the clouds."

"Oh! how I envy both of you fellows!" sighed Elephant, placing a hand on his breast, though Larry told him that his heart was probably located on his right side, which would account for the flutter he fell into whenever he thought he detected an opportunity for distinguishing himself approaching.

But everybody took these sharp sayings of Larry Geohegan in the same happy-go-lucky spirit in which they were uttered. No one had more friends and fewer enemies than the tall boy; because he was generous to a fault, humorous in his remarks, and the life of the camp when out with any of his companions.

Andy had stalked back into the shop again, though Frank had looked after him as though inclined to wonder what ailed his cousin to be so mysterious in his actions.

"Forgot to take his change out of the pockets of those wet clothes?" suggested Larry, noticing the upraised eyebrows of Frank.

"I don't know about that," returned the other, stepping back a pace to where he could glance through the open door. "He's gone straight to the drawer where we keep some of our stuff. There, he's taken out the marine glasses that I just put away. What under the sun do you suppose Andy wants with them? He doesn't look up at the summit of Old Thunder Top, where we landed from our monoplane last summer, being the first human being ever to step there above the

big cliffs. No, Andy has gone to a window with the glass. He seems to want to keep out of sight. Now, I wonder why?"

"Three to one he just saw your sister Janet going along the further road; and couldn't keep from wanting to admire her at close range," chuckled Larry.

"But now he's elevating the glasses," Frank went on. "He seems to be interested in that old mill you can see yonder above the trees. I declare, I did see something moving then in one of the upper windows. That beats everything. To think of Andy having such sharp eyes."

"Oh! the boys used to play there last summer," ventured Elephant; "though since then nobody goes near the old place. I was told it had become the haunt of hoboes this summer. Anyway, the boys fight shy of it right along now."

"Here comes Andy; now we'll know," said Nat, just as smartly as any of them could have spoken, for his hurry spell was over, and he had command of his vocal chords once more.

"Wondering what took you inside to get the glasses," remarked Frank, as the other joined them, a frown marked on his usually placid face. "And then, what made you go to a window instead of standing outside openly, and looking?"

"I'll tell you," returned Andy, solemnly. "I didn't want 'em to see me peeking."

"You mean the fellows in the old deserted mill?" asked Larry.

"No other," came the quick reply, "I don't know how it came to strike me, because you know as a rule I ain't suspicious; but something about the way those two men in the touring car looked so greedily at our new aeroplane gave me an idea it might be them."

"Goodness gracious!" gasped Elephant, his eyes round with wonder and excitement.

"And was it?" demanded Frank, hastily, frowning at the same time.

"Nobody else," replied Andy, impressively. "They must have swung around, passed up to the old mill on that side road, and from the upper windows have been watching us all the time through the fieldglasses they carry!"

CHAPTER V

FIGURING IT ALL OUT

"It begins to look as though you were right, Andy, and that these strangers certainly feel an uncommon interest in what we've been doing up here," said Frank, seriously.

"Oh! I don't take much of the credit for hitting on that idea, Frank," declared the other Bird boy, quickly. "You kept watching that Marsh right from the start. I could see a question in your eye every time you looked at him. And it spurred me on to keeping closer tab over his ways."

"Are they still up there, d'ye think?" queried Frank; while Larry, Elephant, and Stuttering Nat hung around, saying nothing, but listening for all they were worth.

"No," replied Andy; "I've got an idea they began to suspect some of you were looking that way. Anyhow, I saw Marsh duck his head, and think they came down. No use going in to take a shy at 'em now."

"I'd give a fit to know what they are up to?" mused Frank, a thoughtful look on his face.

"Well, perhaps we can hit somewhere near the facts if we start guessing," remarked Andy, with a knowing nod.

"Look here, you've been turning it over your mind, then?" asked his cousin.

"Sure I have," grinned Andy, promptly. "Never could bear to let anything puzzle me long. Used to lie awake half the night trying to clinch a name that had just slipped a cog in my memory."

"All right. Suppose you give us the benefit of what you decided might be the

answer to this problem. Who are these two men, Andy?"

"You know they admit being well up in aviation?" the other remarked as a preliminary.

"So Larry and Elephant said," Frank replied.

"And that not only had they attended many meets but admitted being well acquainted with a lot of people whose names we see in the papers every day—men who have done things along the line of aviation. Get that, Frank?"

"I have. Now go on with your answer," nodded the other, encouragingly.

"These gentlemen have been sent up here for a purpose! Perhaps they are in the pay of some unscrupulous manufacturer of aeroplanes, who would not be above stealing the ideas of two boys, and applying them to his up-to-date machines, placed on the market, and for sale to the public!"

"Gosh!" exclaimed Elephant.

"That sounds all to the good to me!" remarked Larry; while Nat tried to express himself intelligently along similar lines; but being suddenly seized with one of his spasms, was obliged to take it out in numerous mouthings, and a working of his facial muscles, all the while making unintelligible sounds.

Frank seemed to consider this startling proposition of his cousin, for there were lines about his forehead, and his eyes took on a reflective look.

"Now, I can see already that you don't agree with me wholly," Andy said, quickly for he was accustomed to studying that countenance of his cousin, and could read between the lines.

"Well, I'd hate to think that any maker of aeroplanes could descend that low as to want to steal ideas from any one," Frank answered. "They are few in number, and so far as we know, honorable men. If they wanted to get something that you and I, or any other fellow, had happened to hit on, and which would be of value to aviators, the chances are they'd send somebody to open up negotiations, and offer to buy the improvement outright, or take it on a royalty basis."

"Perhaps you're right, Frank," admitted the other; "but all the same there was

something I didn't like about that Mr. Marsh. I warrant you he's a sharp one in a dicker. He looked it. But see here, what've you got to offer in place of my poor little kicked-out suggestion? There's some sort of answer to the puzzle; and five to one you've guessed it."

Frank laughed as he replied:

"Hold on, now, I may be just as far off as you are. As usual we look at things on opposite sides, you know, Andy. But we never disagree, and that's one good thing about our partnership. Either you convince me, or I show you."

"Sure we do, Frank; and nine times out of ten it's your game. When I make a hit it's a great day for Andy Bird. But please hurry up, and tell us what you think!"

"Yes," said Larry, who had been moving restlessly about, being consumed with the fever of curiosity, "who do you say Mr. Marsh and his friend are, Frank?"

"To begin with, just as you did, the fact that they admit knowing many people connected with the game, strengthens my suspicion. I too believe they may be connected with some maker of aeroplanes like the Wrights; but instead of being sent up here to steal our ideas, they have come as detectives, to find out if the Bird boys have been lifting any patented inventions belonging to their employers!"

"Whew! that takes my breath away!" gasped Andy.

"It's sure a screamer, that's what!" cried Larry.

"Frank, go up head!" said Elephant, solemnly.

Stammering Nat wanted to say something the worst kind; but being still under the domination of his nervous excitement, he could only work his jaws and violently nod his head; but then that stood for acclamation on his part, and so they all understood it.

"Frank, I begin to cave already," declared Andy. "Because that would account for the way they stared so hard at our hydroplane, and the aluminum pontoons under the body. But we bought those from the patentee, and have the bill of sale to show for it."

"And there isn't a single stolen idea about the machine," Frank went on. "I've been mighty careful about that. I believe in an inventor having full credit for his work. If ever I do happen on a valuable device, I would want to feel that it couldn't be stolen away from me."

"Listen, boys," Larry spoke up. "That would account for something that Mr. Marsh said when we were talking to them, before little Tommy took our attention. As near as I can remember I'd been telling them about your shop, and how you fellows just haunted it all winter, working on lots of ideas. He turned to his friend, and he says, says he: 'Longley, they might be willing to let us have a little peep into that wonderful shop of theirs, eh?'"

"Yes, that sounds interesting," remarked Frank. "Go on, Larry. What did you say to that?"

"Oh! Elephant here took the words right out of my mouth, Frank. He up and says: 'I wouldn't bank too much on that, mister. Both of us are chums of the Bird boys; and if they wouldn't let us come inside their shop all winter, I guess they ain't inviting strangers there!'"

"How did they take that?" continued Frank.

"Mr. Marsh just laughed, and asked the other man what he thought of that. Said it was mighty interesting to run across a couple of bright young inventors so unexpectedly; and that Wright and Curtiss ought to know the Bird boys. Also remarked, as he winked at Longley, that you might be induced to join the big aeroplane makers' trust that was being talked of; but I believed he was just joshing when he said that, Frank."

"It's all in the wash, though, and mighty interesting," Frank continued, still thoughtful.

"And you can take it from me, them gentlemen never just happened on Bloomsbury, like they said," Elephant declared, emphatically.

"I agree with you there, Elephant," Frank echoed. "They came here to do something. It may be as Andy said, to steal our thunder, if so be we had anything worth lifting; and then again my idea may be the right one, and that they represent owners of patents who are determined to protect their rights in things they've spent time and money in perfecting. Perhaps we may never know the

truth. And then again before many days, or even hours, we might run across the answer."

"Well," remarked Andy, complacently, "one thing sure, we've got to take extra measures to protect our shop, and keep prying fingers from meddling. I'll speak to my father and Colonel Josiah about it. They may hire old Shea again to watch of nights."

Colonel Josiah Whympers had been Andy's guardian during the time he believed his father to be dead. The old man was lame, and used a crutch; but he was a great admirer of the Bird boys, and ready to back anything they advocated. Once a great traveler he had been to every corner of the world, and was full of the most thrilling stories of what had happened to him during his forty years of roving in queer places.

"Excuse me from Shea," laughed Frank. "Don't you remember how he failed us last year, and was caught napping. He's as honest as the day is long, but a mighty poor guard. No, we'll have to do just what we did before, take up our lodgings right here in the shop, where we can defend our property."

"That suits me OK," returned the jovial Andy. "And so we'll consider it settled, Frank, that so long as these mysterious strangers are around Bloomsbury we'll just camp out here."

"And then some," continued the other; "because, you see, they might guess what we had up our sleeve, and just pretend to move along."

"It's a measly shame, that's what!" grumbled Larry.

Elephant immediately fell upon him and shook his hand vigorously.

"Me too!" he exclaimed, looking unusually sad.

"What's all this row about, fellows?" demanded Frank, pretending not to understand.

"It's ghastly to have all the good things pass us by, that's what!" Larry declared.

"Meaning what?" Andy inquired.

"Think of the bully good times you two can have here, playing at camping out. You've even got a stove handy, and a whole outfit of aluminum cooking ware to be carried along with your aeroplane when you go off a long ways. There never was a luckier pair than you two Bird boys, that's what," and Larry groaned again to express the envy that was burning in his boyish soul.

"If you'd only let us bring over our blankets, and sleep here with you, it would lighten things up a heap, I tell you, Frank," said Elephant.

"We wouldn't occupy much room," went on Larry, eagerly, thinking he saw signs of giving in on the other's face. "Why, you could chuck Elephant under the workbench and never find him again. And I'd sling a hammock in a corner. Looky here, if you say no I'll feel like jumping in the lake right away."

Frank and Andy exchanged glances. They were genuinely fond of the strangely mated pair; and besides, there was no longer any reason why these old chums should be longer refused the liberty they had once enjoyed, of entering the workshop as they pleased.

"It's a go, Larry; eh, Andy?" said the taller of the Bird boys.

With that the two favored ones indulged in sundry whoops and leaps to express the joy that Frank's announcement had given; even Stammering Nat grinned, and no doubt wished he had been included in the invitation; though he knew there would be no room for a further increase in the guardians of the shop.

"I'm going right home and get my blankets," said Elephant, eagerly.

"And me ditto," echoed Larry. "Hey, fellows, you know what dandy doughnuts my mother makes; shall I fetch a bunch along, with a loaf of bread?"

"Fine," laughed Andy, "and be off with you."

"Hold on, boys," Frank broke in just then. "Let's see what this procession coming along the road means. Two hay wagons, and each loaded with some crates of merchandise. Beside each driver I notice a second figure, and unless I'm mistaken the first one is Percy Shelley Carberry."

"That's right," remarked Larry. "And it's his crony, Sandy Hollingshead, on the second wagon. Say, you're gazing right now on the wonderful new aeroplane

which your rival Percy has sent for, and in which he means to make you fellows look like two cents. Hey! what's this I see?"

"They've stopped short, that's all," observed Andy. "An automobile has blocked the road, and Percy seems to be having a confab with one of the parties in the car. Frank, do you see who whose men are? The very gents we were talking about. And now they've struck another scent, for they seem to be bent on learning all about who these boys carrying a crated aeroplane in parts can be. The mystery grows! My word! but there's going to be lots doing around here soon!"

CHAPTER VI

AN UNKNOWN ENEMY

"Huh! see there, that Mr. Marsh has got down from his machine, and gone ahead to talk some more with Percy," remarked Andy, as they continued to keep their eyes directed toward the road, not so very far distant, where this little drama was taking place.

"They certainly seem to be interested in everything touching on aviation," mused Frank. "Going to hang around Bloomsbury several days, are they, while their car is being over-hauled? Did it look broken down to you, Larry?"

"Almost new," replied the other, readily "I'd just like to say that that was only an excuse for hanging around a while. They came here on purpose, with something in their noddles; and you mark me, Frank, they don't mean to skip without having a try at that same."

"Well, there they go off, and the procession starts again. Percy is turning around to look after the two men, as if they interested him a heap," Andy observed.

"He's calling something to Sandy, but I can't make out what it is," Larry declared; for he was noted on account of his unusually keen hearing.

"Anyhow they seem to be laughing, and looking over this way, Frank," Andy remarked. "Just as if they thought they had a good joke on us. Say, d'ye suppose now, that Mr. Marsh gave Percy a little hint he had it in for us? If he did, it would tickle that bunch to beat the band. Don't I know 'em though? Never did take any stock in that conversation of Percy's. He had to say something, after we got him out of the hands of the revolutionists down in old Columbia."

"Well," Frank went on, "there's no need of our worrying about things that may never happen. We won't cross this bridge till we get to it."

"But, Frank, while that sounds fine, you know right well that it's always been your way to prepare for possibilities?" Andy continued, positively.

"That's correct, and we mean to now by camping out here," Frank laughed, as if quite at his ease. "Besides, we've got things fixed pretty safe by now, so that if what you thought turned out to be true, the thieves couldn't profit by anything in the line of an idea they hooked out of our shop. Those ideas are being patented, and safe from the hands of a robber."

"Just as you say then," Andy went on, "we'll try and forget about Mysterious Mr. Marsh—how's that strike you as a stunning title for our new adventure? Be off with you, Larry and Elephant. Nat, would ask you to join us, but I'm afraid there wouldn't be room for so big a crowd, unless you slept in my boat, which I've not had in the water this summer so far."

Stammering Nat tried to answer, but knowing the uselessness of such a thing, instead he darted into the shop, took one look at the open canoe occupying slings at the further end, and then came hurrying out. He pounced on Andy, wrung his hand violently, and managed to gasp the one word:

"B-b-b-bully!"

Then he waved his hand toward Frank, and shot after the two boys who were heading for the road, anxious to return with their belongings.

Within half an hour they made their reappearance, each laden down with a bulky bundle, under which poor little Elephant seemed almost buried, though he trudged manfully along, and asked no favors from his taller companions.

Evening was now near. Andy had made several trips to his home beyond the border of the big field, each time returning with a load; though he and Frank had for a long time kept their cooking kit and their blankets in the shop, so that they would be handy when wanted.

He had also told his father and Colonel Josiah about their intention to sleep in the workshop. Neither of the gentlemen thought anything strange of the proposition, for the Bird boys were well able to look out after themselves. They had proved this so often in the past, that by now Frank's father, as well as the parent of Andy, offered no objection to their projects, however bold they might appear at times.

"I had your dad on the 'phone, Frank," Andy remarked, the last time he came back. "He'd just gotten in from his round of afternoon visits; for there's a heap of sickness about Bloomsbury just now, I hear. And of course he said that he wouldn't worry because you stayed away for a few nights. I tell you, old chum, we've just got the finest governors ever. It's a lucky thing to have an obliging dad!"

"And be able to wind him around your finger, as I hear you do yours, ever since he came back from South America," laughed Frank.

By the time darkness began to gather the boys were deep in the delightful task of cooking a genuine camp supper. The stove was of generous size, so that several could work around it at the same time. Andy took charge, nor would he let Frank have any hand in the proceedings, calling upon Elephant, Larry and Nat when he needed assistance.

Of course the ham was tender, the coffee nectar fit for the gods, the Boston baked beans just as appetizing as they could possibly be, and all other things on the menu equal to any they had ever tasted. But then, hungry boys are not apt to be discriminating, save sometimes at home. Anything eaten under such romantic conditions as this was sure to be classed as prime.

Larry had been as good as his word, and brought back a generous donation on the part of his mother, whose doughnuts were reckoned the very finest in all that section; so that they topped off a hearty supper with several of these apiece.

After the aluminum cooking outfit had been thoroughly cleaned, and every piece put away in its exact place, as was the custom of the Bird boys, who could never tell just when they might want to go off in a hurry, and take the camp kit along, they gathered around a table and indulged in some friendly games, Andy having been thoughtful enough to fetch these out from the house.

About ten Elephant was discovered to be fast asleep, while the others were holding a talk fest by themselves.

"Time we all turned in, fellows," Frank declared, after Larry had aroused his mate by tickling his ear with a straw.

So for a short time there was much fussing and blanket turning. Finally one by one they announced themselves settled comfortably, Frank staying up until the

last in order to put out the lamp.

All of them had arranged it that in case there came a sudden alarm they would not be more than a dozen seconds getting into some clothes and their shoes, so as to rush outside.

There were several patent fire-extinguishers handy, for the Bird boys had had one experience with a conflagration that threatened to destroy their workshop, and with it their precious aeroplane, and they did not mean to be caught unprepared for such an emergency again.

Many times during that night Frank awoke, and on each occasion he would sit up to listen. It was a quiet night, and the windows of the shop, over which heavy wire netting had been secured, were of course open, so that the air could pass on through.

Thus, what sounds there might happen to arise without could be plainly heard. But the hours passed on and there was no cause for alarm. Frank had arranged certain devices whereby he expected to be warned should any one attempt to enter the workshop. The fine wire had been secretly carried to Andy's room in the house, where a bell would sound an alarm, and arouse the sleeper.

Of course this was not wholly in use while the boys were camping there in the enclosed shed; but in its way it would prove another guardian.

Once Frank thought he heard murmuring voices; he was so impressed that he even crept out of his bed and advanced to the nearest opening, thinking to locate the speakers, whether they proved to be Percy Carberry and his crony, bent on mischief, or the mysterious Mr. Marsh and Longley, spying around for some secret purpose of their own.

It turned out to be only little Elephant, who was lying on his back, and breathing heavily. Frank turned him over, and then crept back under his blankets.

So morning found them, ravenous as wolves, and each one ready with some suggestion as to what they could have for breakfast.

But after all, Andy had assumed the office of high cook, and his word was law to the rank and file. He declared that codfish cakes would be a good starter, and that he had the stuff already mixed, as given him by the colored aunty in the Bird

kitchen.

Besides that, he announced that he would treat his guests to pancakes, or as they are always known in camp, flapjacks, which he prided himself on knowing how to make. Some honey had been smuggled over to make these more acceptable. Indeed, it would appear that Andy did know how to make light cakes, since it seemed impossible for the others to get enough of them, and he was kept over the fire until as red as a turkey cock in the face.

"How about taking a turn this morning Frank?" asked Andy, as he found himself forced in turn to cry quits, with half of a flapjack still on his platter.

"Don't wait to clean up, fellows," said Larry, promptly. "Give the rest of us something to do while you're sailing around up among the clouds. I know just where you keep every article, and my word for it you'll find them in place when you get back again."

"That's nice of you, Larry," laughed Frank; "and I'm going to take you up on it. It does seem a shame not to take advantage of so fine a morning as this. Hardly a breath of wind as yet, you notice. And yet by noon it may be blowing great guns. You never can tell. Andy, shall we get the new machine out of the hangar?"

"Oh! I'm game for anything you offer," asserted the other, getting up slowly, as became one who had just been crammed.

"We tried the pontoons yesterday, and they worked as fine as silk," Frank went on to say. "Suppose we leave them off this time, as we will not be over the lake?"

"Just as you say," returned the willing Andy. "I tell you what, Frank, let's go up to the top of the mountain again. Haven't been there this season, you know."

"Just what I had in mind myself, and I think you knew it," Frank said, as he led the way outside. "Then we might sail around over the woods up in that region where we discovered those two hiding jewelry thieves, who were making headquarters of that old shack in the forest. If this biplane can climb any better than our little Bug used to do, she'll be a wonder, all right. Come on, and help us get things moving, fellows."

Many hands made light work, and presently the biplane was ready for the start.

When Frank gave the word the others pushed her off; and as the two propellers hummed, the machine started along the ground on the three bicycle wheels until presently it arose in the air as gracefully as any bird could have done.

"Now, which way first?" asked Andy, when the shouts of their comrades had died away in the distance, and they were half a mile from the trying-out field.

"I guess we'll take a little twenty-mile spin first," Frank replied, moving a lever; "to see what she can do in a hurry pinch. That new engine seems to work all right; just as the smaller one did, seldom failing us. Tell me, what could be as fine as this, sailing over the earth? I don't wonder that when a fellow has once started in to be an aviator he can't ever break away. Peril and accidents he laughs at; not because he's reckless always, but just on account of the fascination of the sport."

"We're the luckiest fellows ever, just as Larry and Elephant say," Andy declared as they soared upward, and then descended in daring spirals as Frank tried out the new airship, to see what it was capable of doing.

In a dozen ways had it proven even more than they had expected, and both boys were wild with enthusiasm over the performance.

"Let Percy come along with his new one!" cried Andy, after they had volplaned successfully down toward the earth, until not more than a few hundred feet above the tree tops of the forest; "it would tickle me to have a turn with him again. He has forgotten his other beat, and is beginning to boast again about what great stunts he means to kick up."

"Well, who knows what may be in store for us yet," Frank remarked; "and now, let's head up again, and strike for the summit of Old Thunder Top, ten miles away."

"Oh!"

Andy's sudden exclamation was caused by the report of a gun in among the scattered trees directly below them; and both young aviators distinctly heard the peculiar "whine" of the bullet, as it passed close by their ears, actually making a little hole through the cloth of both planes!

CHAPTER VII

SEEN FROM THE EAGLES' EYRIE

They were already spinning along at a lively clip, and rising too, at the moment that shot sounded, and the leaden missile whizzed past so close to them. Almost through sheer instinct Frank instantly shifted his lever, and started the biplane upward on a slant that was the limit, and approaching the danger line.

The two Bird boys turned and stared at each other. Wonder and indignation seemed struggling for the mastery in their faces.

"Frank, he fired that shot at us!" exclaimed Andy.

"Seemed like it," returned the other. "At any rate, it came much too close to suit my ideas of comfort. Made me think of those warm times we had down in Columbia, when the revolutionists were after us."

"What a wicked shame!" went on the other fiercely. "And I guess the silly fool thought he was doing something smart! That's a new danger aviators will have to face—being shot at by every loon that carries a gun, just like they might be some strange bird."

"Well, we're Birds, all right, but hardly strange ones," Frank continued, with a frown on his face. "And we've been knocking around this section of the country in our jolly little monoplane so long, that I supposed every farmer's boy knew us and felt an interest in our work. That makes me believe it could hardly have been done in a spirit of what some people would call a joke."

"Good gracious! Frank, do you mean that the fellow really wanted to hit us? Oh! that seems too terrible to believe!" cried Andy, aghast.

"Stop and think," Frank continued, steadily. "In the first place, what would any

one be doing, hunting in the middle of summer. Why, outside of a short spell given over to woodcock, there isn't a thing the law allows a sportsman to shoot up to Fall. And Andy, did you ever hear of anybody shooting woodcock with a rifle?"

"Oh! Frank!"

"Well, am I right about that? It sounded like the report of a rifle to me; and it was sure a bullet that whistled past us!" Frank pursued, in his customary positive way.

"Yes, you're right about that. But who could be so horribly mean as to want to injure us?" said Andy. "Why, even if that bullet had struck our biplane in one of half a dozen places, it might have made us fall. And Frank, that would be just criminal, you know."

"I suppose you noticed that puff of smoke below us?" Frank went on.

"It just happened that I was looking down, and I saw it burst out of a thicket," came the answer.

"It was the same way with me," Frank continued. "I had just a glimpse of some fellow throwing himself under the bushes but if you asked me I couldn't say for certain whether it was a man or a boy."

"Just like he was afraid of being seen, and recognized; is that what you mean?" asked Andy.

"It looked that way," Frank replied.

"Don't you see, Frank, he gave himself away in doing that? First, he knew he was doing a dirty mean act; and second, he must have been somebody we knew, or he wouldn't have been so afraid of being seen."

"That's so, Andy. Another thing, perhaps it may not have struck you that once before you and I met with an adventure while almost over the same spot."

Andy gave vent to an exclamation that told of excitement revived.

"You mean the time we sighted those two skulking jewelry thieves, the fellows

who had robbed Leffingwell's store, and were hiding until the row quieted down?"

"Yes, Jules Garrone, and his pal," Frank went on.

"Jules was the one who had been an aviator over in France, and who tried to steal our Bug, meaning to fly away, and leave no trail behind for the hunting police. But Frank, you can't possibly believe Jules was the fellow who fired that shot? It don't stand to reason; because you know, he was sent to the penitentiary for ten years. Oh! no, I guess we'll have to think up something else this time," and Andy shook his head vigorously in the negative.

"Well, time may tell," Frank said, simply.

"Looky here, Frank, now there's no use denying it, I know you've got some sort of idea about finding out who that rascal was," declared Andy.

"Well, perhaps there is some sort of hazy notion hovering around in my brain, that I ought to learn more about him," the other smiled back. "This thing of being made a target by any fool who happens to own a rifle is something that ought to be stopped with a jerk. Yes, I do expect to try and find out."

"And you won't tell me what's on your mind?" asked Andy.

"Not just now. It's too uncertain to speak of, yet. And perhaps, after all, it was only some boy, who thought it would be smart to give us a little shock; and who sent his bullet closer than he had meant to."

"You sure don't mean—Percy?" exclaimed Andy.

"Oh! no, I didn't have him in mind," laughed Frank.

"Not that he wouldn't be guilty of such meanness if the chance came—you know that fellow isn't above anything!" declared Andy, vigorously.

"Well, just at present I can imagine that Percy and his crony Sandy Hollingshead, are using up every minute of their precious time assembling the parts of their new aeroplane. Consequently, Andy, neither of them would be apt to wander away up here, miles from Bloomsbury, and carrying a rifle."

"Guess you're right," grumbled the other, as if loth to entirely give up the idea that had flashed into his mind. "But it strikes me, Frank, after this, when we're out for a spin, we ought to give that region of the old charcoal burner's shack a wide berth. It spells trouble for the Bird boys."

"Oh! I don't know; perhaps the trouble may later on be all in store for the fellow who held that gun. But look up, Andy; we're getting along toward the peak at a gay old pace. Say, what do you think of the biplane now?"

"She's a peach, that's what!" burst out Andy, impulsively. "I thought the little Bug was the whole thing, and then some; but honestly, Frank, she wasn't in the same class as this new machine."

"And yet," Frank laughed, "remember that with her we beat Percy and his biplane, manufactured by one of the best firms in the market. That ought to be glory enough for the Bird boys. Now, get ready for your part in the landing; because, you know the plateau isn't extra big on Old Thunder Top."

"I see our old friends, the white-headed eagles soaring around. D'ye think they'll tackle us again, like they did last year?" Andy asked.

"Oh! I hope that by now they've grown used to us, and consider that we've got just as much right up here as they ever had. Besides, we gave 'em an awful walloping you may remember. And this time we've been smart enough to fetch along a couple of fine sticks to repeat the dose if necessary. Careful now, Andy. Here goes for a snug drop on the rock!"

Almost as lightly as a thistle-down the biplane alighted on the small table rock that constituted the apex of grim Old Thunder Top. High cliffs completely surrounding this summit had kept it from ever being reached, up to the time Frank and his cousin landed there, in winning the race for a silver cup; and planted the Stars and Stripes there for the first time on record.

Since then the boys of Bloomsbury, not to be wholly outdone, had set to work, and actually carved a set of rough steps, that were hardly more than footholds, in the uneven rock; so that the most daring had been able to climb up; and with the aid of a friendly rope carried along for this purpose, get down again in safety. But in the annals of Bloomsbury the Bird boys would be set down as the pioneers who led the way to the peak.

Frank and his cousin were soon walking around the rocky plateau, using their fieldglasses to observe the many things that lay stretched out in every direction. It was well worth all the trouble it cost to enjoy that magnificent view; for they could see for many miles in every direction.

Andy more than once turned the glasses toward the quarter where they had had their peculiar little adventure that morning. But of course he saw no sign of the unknown party who had fired the shot. The dense forest would naturally prevent their sighting him when miles away.

Half an hour they spent in this manner; and then Andy suggested that they might just as well be starting for home.

"I notice that the wind is beginning to come up quite some," he remarked. "And at such a height I rather guess it can blow for all that's out, when it wants. Besides, we've got a number of little things we had expected to attend to at the shop."

"All right," replied Frank, who was using the glasses at the time.

"I'll be ready to join you in a minute or so."

"You seem to be interested in taking in our practice field," remarked his cousin.

"See the boys; and are they watching us right now?"

"I was wondering what was going to happen," said Frank, taking the glasses down.

"Happen—to us, do you mean?" Andy asked, instantly taking the alarm, because he saw from Frank's manner that the other meant something by his remark.

"Here, have a look, and then tell me if you recognize it."

Andy immediately accepted the glasses, and clapped them to his eyes. He had no sooner done so than he gave vent to an exclamation.

"I know now what you meant, Frank," he remarked.

"Well, what do you make of it?" asked the other.

"The same car, beyond a doubt; and it's stopped in the road right in front of the

bars where we enter our field. Yes, and there's that mysterious Mr. Marsh going into the field right now. Frank, he knows we're away, for he must have seen us sailing around up here. And that's why he's heading for our shop. Perhaps he believes it's unguarded, and expects to get a chance to spy around. Now, what do you think it all means? Oh! I wish we had started back long ago. What if the boys fall to his dope, and let him see everything with those sharp eyes of his? Frank, let's be going home!"

CHAPTER VIII

MYSTERIOUS MR. MARSH AT IT AGAIN

"What's the hurry?" remarked Frank, who seemed much more composed than his chum.

"Why, think of the impudence of that man!" burst out Andy. "Taking advantage of our being away, to prowling around our shop."

"Now you're guessing, you know. He may be only intending to call on us. Anyhow, it's no use to think of trying to get there in time. We just couldn't do it. And besides, Larry and Elephant are there, and we don't think they're fools, do we?" Frank remarked, as he again used the glasses.

"There, didn't he go inside the shop?" demanded Andy, straining his eyes to see what went on far below.

"That's so; but Larry promptly walked him out again. They're talking right now in front of the door, and the other two fellows fill the doorway," Frank reported.

"I just bet he'll pull the wool over their eyes, and get in again. I know he's a soft talker, and can blarney to beat the band. Oh! if we could only shout loud enough to make them hear. Or if we had our wigwag flags along with us," and Andy actually groaned with the suspense.

"Come, let up, old fellow," observed Frank. "What's the use worrying like that? You know we fixed things, so even if he got in again he'd see precious little to give him any satisfaction. There, Larry is walking away from the door with him. Give him credit for being sharp enough to see through a grindstone that has a hole in it, will you?"

"Bully for Larry; he's all to the good!" exclaimed the other. "But tell me what's

doing now, Frank."

"The gentleman is holding out his hand, and Larry takes it. So I reckon they didn't have any hard words," Frank answered, quickly.

"And is he going away?" demanded Andy.

"Seems like it. There, he stops and looks around, as if he might be interested in our field, and arrangements for tryouts."

"I hope he don't turn back again, and force his way in; you know he could easy enough do that, Frank; because they're only three boys, and two of 'em hardly worth counting," Andy observed, anxiously.

"Nothing doing," commented Frank. "He's started again for the road, where the car stands. Here, take another look at that car before it goes off."

"All right, Frank; but I'm all balled up about why you want me to do that," replied Andy, suiting the action to the word.

"You see which way the car heads, don't you?" asked his cousin.

"Sure; toward town. That's as plain as the nose on my face," Andy answered.

"And from that you'd judge they'd been out for a spin, wouldn't you?"

"Ask me something harder, won't you, Frank?" said Andy, scornfully.

"But you forget that they expected to hand their car over to the man at the garage to be entirely overhauled! That was to be their excuse for remaining over in Bloomsbury a couple of days!" Frank exploded.

"Wow! that's so!" exclaimed the startled Andy. "And seems now they didn't bother doing it. Something else gripped 'em to Bloomsbury. They concluded that they had right good need of their old car while they hung around here. Frank, it knocks me silly; but I honestly own up I just can't get the hang of this thing."

"Well, I'm almost in as bad a state as you are over it," replied the other, as he pressed his lips firmly together in thought. "But, Andy, that wasn't all I wanted you to notice, when I asked you to look at the way the car stood."

"It wasn't, eh? Well, please keep right along, now that you've got started, Frank. I'm shivering all over with excitement right now. Something seems to tell me we're in for a new set of adventures that will make all the others look tame."

"If they came along that road, Andy, it would have been the easiest thing in the world for Mr. Marsh and his friend to have been up in the neighborhood of the old deserted shack half an hour ago!"

Andy stared into his cousin's face, while an ashen hue spread over his own usually cheery countenance.

"Oh, my! then you believe—," he began when Frank interrupted him by saying:

"I don't believe anything; but the circumstance seemed a little suspicious to me, that's all. It's possible, and that's the extent of what flashed into my mind. But we have no proof; and I'd hate to think that Mr. Marsh could be guilty of such a nasty thing as trying to injure us."

"Shall we make a start now?" asked Andy, who seemed more or less in a daze.

"I suppose we might as well. Look at the eagles dipping lower and lower. They've got some young ones in the nest, and if we went closer there'd be a circus going on pretty quick. But we're not looking for trouble today," Frank remarked.

"No need to," replied the other, instantly; "because it's hunting us."

They were very careful to make sure that no loose stones barred the way; for as the plateau was very short they must sail off into the air almost immediately on starting the engine; and even a small turn at such a critical moment was apt to cause the biplane to swerve, and bring about a catastrophe.

But the start was successfully accomplished. Frank always paid so much attention to little things that he was not very apt to be caught napping.

"Straight home?" asked Andy, once they were afloat, and heading down from the dizzy height.

"Yes," replied his cousin. "I'm curious to hear what our friend Mr. Marsh could have had to say to Larry; and how the boy carried out his job of keeping

strangers from nosing around inside the shop."

"Just as well that we left when we did," remarked Andy; "for over in the southwest I noticed some clouds that may bring a lot of wind along, and weather that no self-respecting aeroplane has any business to be out in."

"Why, yes, I've seen the peak of Old Thunder Top buried in low hanging clouds many a time," Frank declared. "And it wouldn't be the nicest thing in the world for us to be caught up there, with a wild storm raging."

"Ugh! deliver me from that experience," grunted Andy, turning his head to look back toward the peak they had just left, and which was already far astern, so rapidly did the little but powerful Kinkaid engine whirl the biplane onward, when let out to its limit.

Frank kept his eyes ahead; but he knew when his companion gazed toward the dense woods away off to the right, where they had been fired at by the unknown marksman.

"Still harping on that bang, eh?" he observed.

"Yes, and I won't have any peace till we find out who fired that shot," answered the other, doggedly. "Just think how nasty it is to never know when you're going to be potted, like an old crow! It takes most of the fun out of flying, that's what."

"Well, wait a little, and perhaps we may learn something," Frank went on; and before his companion could make any remark he suddenly switched the conversation by saying: "the boys are waving their hats to us, and I thought I got a faint yell; but the breeze is dead wrong for hearing. I'm tickled to death with the handsome way the machine carries herself; and that's a satisfaction worth while, eh?"

So Andy stopped twisting around to look back, and confined his attention to the scene in front. As they drew closer to the practice field the shouts of the trio of lads near the shop came plainly to their ears.

Then Frank began circling, and cutting figure eights, wishing to discover just what the biplane could do in that line. Perhaps he also was not averse to giving the admiring audience below something more to gape at. But all the same, Frank took no great chances; he was too cautious and level-headed a boy to do that,

unless the emergency called for it; and then his nerve was equal to any demand.

When the biplane finally dropped down to the ground close by the hangar where it was to be housed, the three comrades were only too glad of a chance to clutch hold, and assist to the best of their ability.

"She's just a jim-dandy for going and turning, Frank!" exclaimed Larry.

"Yes," exclaimed Elephant; "I used to think that little Bug was the limit; but now I see I was away off. This biplane has got her number, all right. Why, there ain't anything you couldn't trust her to do, fellows."

"W-w-with F-f-frank at the h-h-helm, you m-m-mean!" spluttered Nat.

"Oh! that goes without saying, Nat," declared Elephant.

"We was wondering whether you had another scrap with the two pirates up there?" remarked Larry, pointing toward Old Thunder Top.

"No, the eagles have become used to seeing an aeroplane by now. They came close to watch us, because they've got eaglets in the nest; but never once swooped down to strike at us with talons, wings or beaks," Frank replied.

"We're going to tame 'em so's to shake hands with us," grinned Andy.

"I was watching you through the old telescope Andy has here," observed Larry; "and which he says one of his ancestors used when he was captain of a sailing vessel more'n eighty years ago. She worked fine too, though a bit clumsy. And Frank, what under the sun did you make that sudden upward slant for, when you was away off over the Powell woods? Whew! I thought you'd sure go clean over backwards!"

The Bird boys exchanged glances, which of course aroused the curiosity of the observing Larry more than ever.

"Here, none of that, now, fellows," he remarked. "There's something in the wind, and you've just got to tell us all about it. Did the lever break or get away from your grip, Frank? There was a reason for that jump, and I know it."

"Sure there was," said Andy. "If you heard a gun go bang a few hundred feet

below, and then got the zip-zip of the bullet as it whipped past not five feet from your ears, perhaps you'd move the ascending lever some too, and take chances on getting out of that dangerous spot in a big hurry, eh?"

Larry and the other two could not reply at once. The explanation given by Andy fairly took their breath away, so that they could only stare, and gasp.

CHAPTER IX

STARTLING NEWS OVER THE WIRE

"Frank, is he kidding us?" finally cried Larry, turning to the pilot of the new biplane; for Andy sometimes liked to joke his chums, as they well knew.

"Not this time," replied Frank.

"And somebody did really and truly shoot at you, then?" gasped Elephant, holding up his hands in horror.

"Huh! what d'ye think of these holes through the planes?" demanded Andy, drawing attention to the stout tanned cloth that constituted the air-resisting cover of the framework.

"Oh! my, it's so, as sure as you live!" cried Elephant, thrusting a finger through one of the little openings. "And not five feet away from where you sat. What a terrible shame! Whoever could have been so wicked?"

"We don't know," returned Andy, soberly. "But we're going to try and find out. And all I can say is, that if we do, we're going to make it mighty warm for him, no matter who he may be."

"He ought to be tarred and feathered," gritted Larry. "Of all the mean and contemptible things anybody can do, I think the worst is to shoot at a fellow up in a balloon or an aeroplane. Because they can't fire back; and the least accident means death to the aviator!"

"Bully for you, Larry!" exclaimed Andy.

"My sentiments exactly," remarked Elephant, with a vim.

Poor Stuttering Nat wanted to echo what Larry had said; but of course the excitement had seized him in its grip, so that words positively refused to pour from his parted lips. So after making a great effort, amid much twisting of his facial muscles, he contented himself with patting Larry on the back, and nodding, as if to stand for everything the other had said.

"Well, let's drop that subject for the present, fellows," Frank suggested. "We saw that you had visitors while we were away, Larry?"

"Why, yes. Your friend, Mr. Marsh, dropped in to say howdyedo. He breezed in some unexpectedly to us, for we happened to be all inside when he stepped across the sill, and said he was delighted to renew our acquaintance."

"Yes, go on, please!" urged impatient Andy.

But there was no hurrying Larry. When he had anything to tell he always insisted on narrating it after his own fashion.

"Of course I jumped for him right away," he went on, slowly; "and managed to escort him outdoors, all the while explaining how Frank here had plainly left word that nobody was to be allowed inside the shop besides us three."

"How did he seem to take it?" asked Frank.

"Oh! he wasn't at all flustered, as far as I could see," came the ready reply. "Elephant here says he saw him frown, and bite his lips, as I grabbed his arm and hustled him out; but I only saw him smile, pleasant like; and then he said it was all right, and that he didn't blame you one whit for being careful—that perhaps if you knew him better you might invite him in."

"He said all that, did he?" Frank continued.

"Sho! ten times as much. That man has the gift of gab. He can wrap you right around his finger, I reckon," Larry went on.

"Told you so!" exclaimed Andy, nodding his head in affirmation.

"But seems he didn't wrap you around, very much," Frank laughingly said; "because you didn't take him back in again, did you?"

"He never asked me. P'raps I wouldn't a-done it if he had; but I don't know. He's sure got a way about him that's terribly convincing," Larry muttered.

"And he went off pleasantly, didn't he? I saw you shake hands with him," continued Frank.

"As smooth as oil. Why, I can feel his grip yet, it was that strong. Thought my bones'd crack that time. Wonder who Mr. Marsh is, anyway, Frank, do you know?"

"I do not," was the prompt reply Larry received; for if Frank happened to have any suspicion, he did not consider it his duty to confide the same to everybody who expressed the least curiosity.

When the biplane had been safely housed Frank dodged into the shop as though to convince himself that nothing had been taken. When the others followed they found him moving around. Finally he came to a stand near the door, and called out once more to Larry:

"Was he in this far when you discovered him?"

"What say, boys; it must have been about there, eh?" the one addressed remarked, appealing to his comrades for their opinions.

"Just about," Elephant answered; while Nat nodded his head as the easiest way to cut a Gordian knot.

"Oh! well, he couldn't see anything worth while from here," Frank went on. "Now, did any of you notice whether he used his eyes to look around; or was he only bent on saying howdyedo to you?"

"When Larry grabbed him by the arm and started to lead him out, I saw the gentleman take a good look all around; and that's the truth, Frank," Elephant remarked.

Frank hardly knew what to think. This might be a very significant thing; and then again, if one looked at it another way, was it not simply what any curious stranger, interested in the doings of the venturesome Bird boys, might have done?

It was about ten o'clock, and growing quite hot, since the time was July. Just as Andy had hinted, that bank of dark clouds hanging low along the horizon in the southwest might take a notion to climb up in the heavens at any time, and bring about a summer thunderstorm.

Apparently Frank did not bother his head in connection with such a possibility; for a little later he wheeled his bicycle out of the shed as though intending to leave the others temporarily.

"Be back in half an hour or so, Andy," he called over his shoulder, as his cousin came to the door to see what he was about to do.

"Going over home for something, Frank?" called Andy; but if the other heard he chose or some reason to decline to commit himself.

Had Andy been able to follow his course after he left the field he would soon have known that Frank was rather heading for town than intending to pedal in the direction of his own house, which was situated on the outskirts of Bloomsbury.

And doubtless the curiosity of Andy would have mounted to near the fever pitch did he but know that when Frank jumped from his wheel he stood directly in front of the low building known as police headquarters.

Without any hesitation the boy walked in through the open door. He had often been here before; and knew the head of the force very well, also the officers who constituted the Chief's staff.

Chief Waller was bending over his flat-top desk, and evidently reading some communication or other. He looked up, and on seeing who his caller was, smiled amiably; for Frank Bird was a favorite of his, and possibly the best liked boy in Bloomsbury.

"Why, glad to see you, Frank; won't you sit down?" he said, offering his hand to the boy.

"I didn't just drop in to chat, Chief," marked Frank, after he had accepted the proffered hand, and been favored with a hearty grip.

"No, I suppose not, because you're a boy of business generally. Well, what can I

do for you, Frank?" asked the other, pleasantly.

"Your phone here is one of the long distance ones, isn't it, Chief?"

"To be sure, since most of the use we have of it is to talk with other places. Do you want to use it, Frank?" replied the officer.

"No, but I'd like you to do something for me, and I'll explain afterwards what my reason is," Frank went on.

"Sure I will, my boy. Do almost anything to oblige you. Now, who do you want me to get at the other end of the wire?" and as he said this the Chief took down the receiver of the desk phone.

"The penitentiary isn't more than thirty miles away from here, is it?" asked Frank.

"Whew! what ever would you be wanting to know from there?" the officer remarked.

"Please call them up and ask whether that man you captured a year ago, up in the Powell woods, is still doing time there."

"You mean Jules Garrone, do you?" asked Chief Waller.

"That's the man."

Still looking at Frank as though wondering what he could mean by such a strange request, the other started operations, and after some skirmishing managed to get in touch with some one who might possibly be the warder of the State penitentiary.

"Yes, this is Chief Waller of Bloomsbury," Frank heard him say. "How are you, sir? I would like you to give me a little information connected with a man I had the pleasure of railroading over your way a year ago. His name was Jules Garrone, and he was convicted of having broken into the jewelry establishment of Leffingwell—what's that, sir?" And Frank, watching closely, could see the lips of the Chief pursing up, as though he might be tempted to whistle while listening to something the party at the other end of the wire was telling him.

Then, perhaps a minute or so later, the Chief turned around to Frank, as he once more hung up the receiver.

"Look here, Frank," he said, exhibiting signs of excitement now, "how did you ever come to know or suspect that?" he demanded.

"You have told me nothing yet, Chief," Frank remarked, calmly. "But I judge from the way you acted that you heard some surprising news from the warden at the penitentiary. What about Jules, sir?"

"He no longer lodges with my friend, the warden," went on Waller. "In fact, to tell the whole truth, there was a jail delivery week ago, which has been kept secret up to now. The warden says he was just sending out the news when I called him. Jules and two other convicts managed to break away; and while the others have been recaptured, Jules is still at large!"

CHAPTER X

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE CHIEF

Frank breathed a little faster than ordinary but there was little else to indicate that he had heard startling news.

"And now, Frank, don't forget that you promised to take me in on this," the head of the local force went on, persuasively. "You remember that we stood by you at that other time, and rounded Jules up in great shape. Seems like we might have to do it again, sort of history repeating itself. How did you know about it?"

"I didn't, sir, and that's the queer part it," replied the boy.

"Then you suspected something of the sort—did you run across Jules on the road; or has he been trying to steal your aeroplane again?" continued Chief Waller.

"Neither one nor the other, sir. But some unknown person fired a rifle at our biplane today, when we were passing over those woods near the old shack. The bullet came within a few feet of us, as I can show you, for it passed through both planes. That looks as if the scamp meant to do us real harm. And it set me to thinking and guessing, with the result that I made up my mind to come to you, and find out if Jules was still safe behind the bars."

"Well, this is something I'll have to look into," bustled the stout Chief, as he pushed back his chair. "Up in the Powell woods, you said; that makes it look as if it must be him; because he hid there before, you know."

"If it had happened anywhere else, I guess I'd never have thought about Jules, sir," Frank candidly admitted. "But you see, we were just talking about our other adventure when the shot came; and somehow, it was natural to connect the two. But it seems foolish for him to come back to the old place again."

"When you know slick rascals as well as I do, Frank, you'll understand that they often do just what everybody never dreams they'd be silly enough to try. That's the tricky part of the game, you see. Ordinarily that woods is the last place we'd think of looking for Jules. It ought to have an evil name for him, and make him shun it. You see, that's the way we'd just naturally dope it out."

"I see now, sir. And then again, all of the plunder taken from Leffingwell's establishment was never recovered, I heard. Perhaps Jules has got a plant somewhere up in those woods, and came back to get the stuff?" Frank suggested.

"A bright thought for you, my boy!" cried the Chief. "Of course that sort of thing would strike me the first thing; but for you too speak of it proves that you have a clever mind. Yes, undoubtedly Jules has come back for the loot."

"And then," Frank went on, steadily; "just by accident he happened to hear our propellers buzzing, and looking up recognized the two boys who had so much to do with his being nabbed last summer. He couldn't resist the temptation to have a pot shot at us, hoping to pay the Bird boys back for their share in his capture."

"Yes, sometimes even the sharpest of them fall down," the head of the local police continued; "and before we're done with him Jules will realize that when he allowed himself to give way to temptation he did the most foolish thing possible, for it puts us on his track, and we'll get him again. I want to thank you too, Frank, because you see, there will be quite a little reward paid for the recapture of so notorious a convict as Garrone."

"Oh! you're quite welcome, sir," replied Frank. "I was just thinking whether, if that was Jules, and he saw that his shot did no damage, he mightn't decide to pay us a visit in the night, and try some more funny business."

"Well, now, I wouldn't put it past him a particle, Frank," remarked the Chief, promptly; "and if I were in your place I'd be on my guard. He might try to steal your new biplane I've heard them talking about; or even burn down your whole outfit. Better get a gun, and keep watch. He's fair game, you know, if so be you catch him prowling around after dark. An escaped convict hasn't any rights in the eye of the law."

"I wouldn't like to be the one to shoot him," Frank observed; "but if he came around as you say, I'd want to be in a position to defend my property, and give

him a good scare."

The Chief asked a lot more questions, which Frank answered as well as he was able. He could see that he had stirred the police head greatly, and that before long all the available men on the force would be making for the direction of the Powell woods, bent on rounding up the lurking Jules, if so be it had been him, as seemed so probable now.

Frank had left his chair and started for the door, when something chanced to strike him, so that he turned back.

"I don't suppose now, Chief, you happen to know the two gentlemen who blew into Bloomsbury yesterday in a touring car, and are perhaps quartered at the hotel here. They go by the names of Mr. Marsh and Mr. Longley?"

"I understood that two gents did put up there; but I saw them go off this morning in their car, and supposed they were leaving," replied the other.

"If you glance out of the door right now, Chief, you will see the parties dropping out of their machine right in front of the hotel," Frank remarked, quietly.

Accordingly the other moved over so that he could look out, immediately remarking:

"Sho! that's a fact, just as you say, Frank. Come back to dinner, I reckon; for old Barnwell does set a good table in the Quality Inn. I've seen twenty cars parked in his dooryard of a Sunday. And these parties like his style, it seems."

"But why should they say that their car needed overhauling, and that they might as well have it done in Bloomsbury? You can see it's a right new one, and runs as smooth as silk," Frank remarked.

"They said that, did they? Who to, Frank?" asked the other.

So Frank had to go back and relate what had occurred at the time Andy dropped from the hydroplane into Lake Sunrise, and saved little Tommy Cragan from becoming food for the fishes.

Of course the policeman was not able to look at the matter from the same standpoint that Frank and Andy had. All the same, he admitted that the actions of

the two touring gentlemen did look a bit queer.

"I'll take the first chance I get to look 'em over, Frank, and learn who they really are," he said, in conclusion. "Of course that'll have to wait, since I've got this other business on my hands, which is of greater importance, you know."

"You don't think, do you, sir, that either of them could be this Jules Garrone in disguise?" suggested Frank.

Chief Waller caught his breath.

"Whew; that is a notion, now, ain't it?" he exclaimed. "From what I've learned about that rascal I wouldn't put it past him to be up to some clever dodge equal to that? The bolder the game the less danger of discovery. See here, Frank, you say you was close to these parties; and sure you ought to remember Jules—now, think a bit, and then tell me if you can imagine him playing such a part?"

"Oh! I have been hammering my brain for a long time over that, Chief," Frank answered, with a slight smile.

"And what conclusion did you reach, Frank?"

"That neither of them could hardly be Jules," came the ready reply. "I only mentioned the thing to see how it struck you. In the first place, Jules was smaller than either of those men; and he couldn't hardly have grown under prison fare, you know. Then he had black hair, and neither of these have. Besides, Longley wears a mustache, and no convict could grow one in a week. While such eyes as Marsh has I could never, never forget, once I felt them fastened on me."

"Well, I'll have one of my men keep an eye on the gents as long as they stay at the Quality Inn. Going now, Frank? Shake hands again, will you; and remember, anything we can do for you, just ask. This is great news you've brought here today, and it may mean a heap for me."

When Frank went outside and mounted his wheel he never once glanced across the square to where the car of Mr. Marsh stood. True, neither of the parties happened to be visible just then; but how was he to know but what they might be looking out from behind the filmy lace curtains with which Mine Host Barnwell decorated his front parlor windows?

He rode straight home, and reaching his den where he kept all his belongings in the line of sport, took down from the wall a double-barrel shotgun, with which he had had many a day's pleasure in the past.

From a drawer he also gathered up half a dozen shells, carrying Number Ten shot; which Frank calculated would tickle rather than severely injure, if used with discretion, at a certain distance.

After spending a short time at home, and not seeing his father, the good doctor, who was off in his car paying his morning calls, Frank again mounted his wheel, and headed toward the home of his cousin.

He had much to ponder over as he proceeded, making no pretense at speed; for he was carrying the gun in one hand. It was not a very pleasant thought, that at any minute almost he might run across that revengeful Jules, bent on paying back the debt he chose to believe he owed the young aviator. Frank was almost tempted to stop, alight, and place a couple of shells in the gun, so as to be ready for any emergency that might arise.

"Shucks! what's getting you, Frank Bird?" he exclaimed, as he laughed at the idea of being held up in that fashion on the public highway. "Just make up your mind nothing's going to happen to you; and that if Jules did come back to the Powell woods he's started away by now, full tilt. I'm ashamed of you, that's what. If it was Andy now, he's so full of imagination he sees lots of things that never exist; but you know better. Why, whatever can that smoke mean? And as sure as anything, it seems to be rising straight over the field where our shop lies!"

He immediately increased his speed, and went flying along the crooked road, bent on reaching a point where he could see the open, and ascertain if his worst fears were going to be realized.

CHAPTER XI

A NEW ALARM

The next two minutes seemed an eternity to Frank, spinning rapidly along on his trusty wheel as he was. He wanted to know the worst, and yet dreaded to pass beyond the trees where the field would be in full sight; because it would be distressing if he discovered the shop and hangars blazing, and everything gone.

Still, Frank was not the one to shirk bad tidings. And consequently he increased his speed all that was possible.

"Bully!"

Such was the exclamation that involuntarily burst from his dry lips when, having burst from behind the barrier, he had a clear view of the field. For the shed was there as intact as ever, and also the two hangars sheltering the aeroplanes. Some distance back, far enough removed to avoid any danger to the gasoline in the storage houses, Andy was tending a bonfire; while the other boys seemed to be carrying shavings and trash thither in bags and baskets.

Old Colonel Josiah Whympers was bobbing and bustling around on his crutch, and seemingly bossing the "whole shooting-match," as Frank laughingly said to himself.

Of course he saw now what Andy had been doing. For some time the other had threatened to clear the shop of all the accumulated rubbish of the winter; and the notion must have seized him just after Frank left for town.

"Hello! back again, are you, Frank?" laughed his cousin, as the rider dropped off his wheel close to the bonfire. "Cleaning house, you see. Threatened to do this a long time back; and as we have to sleep in the shop now, thought I might as well get at it. But what's that you've brought along, Frank? My goodness, your gun!

Now, what sort of game do you expect to get with that thing?"

"Don't know," returned Frank, grimly. "Might be Jules Garrone for all I can say!"

At that Andy dropped the long stick with which he had been pushing the trash into the heart of the blaze, and stared at the other as though stunned.

"Didn't I know you had something on your mind though?" he muttered. "See here, Frank, ain't I in on this thing too? What d'ye know about Jules Garrone? Ain't he fixed tight in the stone jug? I'm not from Missouri, but all the same I want to know!"

"So say we all of us," remarked Larry, who had come up while they were indulging in these few remarks, and was able to give a good guess as to the nature of what had been said.

"Please confide in us, Frank; we'll keep mum, sure we will!" pleaded Elephant.

Stuttering Nat only wagged his head, and moved his jaws; but this pantomime stood for volumes with those who knew his infirmity.

"It turns out that our old friend Jules gave them leg bail a week ago, along with a couple of other convicts. But though they recaptured the two fellows, crafty Jules is still at large!" Frank said, quietly.

At that Andy came near having a fit.

"My goodness gracious! hear that, would you, fellows?" he exclaimed. "Now we know who fired that nasty shot at us this morning. And he meant to hit us, too. Oh! the coward, to stand down there, and just let us have it, when we couldn't give him back as good as he sent! Frank, is that going to end our flying?"

Andy looked pained at the very idea, and Frank could hardly keep from laughing at the miserable face his chum exhibited.

"Oh! I don't know," he replied. "There's no reason it should, that I can see. We can avoid that section, or else keep high up when passing, so he never would have the least chance at hitting us, going a mile a minute. Besides, perhaps he'll

find himself in hot water presently, when Chief Waller gets a line on him."

"Does the Chief know he's loose?" asked Larry.

"He does now, but he never suspected it until I dropped in on him," replied the other, calmly.

"But see here, how did you know?" demanded Elephant.

"The Chief told me," laughed Frank.

"Oh! say, is this fair, Frank?" complained Andy. "You're just getting the whole lot of us balled up. You told the Chief; and the Chief told you! Please lift the curtain, won't you, and let us see the game."

So Frank, taking pity on them, condescended to explain. Colonel Josiah had also joined the group, and was an eager listener to the recital.

The old traveler had himself been through a vast number of adventures in his time, for he had delighted in exploring odd corners of the world seldom heard of by ordinary people. Hence, he delighted in listening to "his boys" when they were narrating some stirring event that had come to their experience.

All sorts of exclamations arose when they heard what the warden of the State penitentiary had to say about Jules. Andy even looked about him suspiciously, as if he might entertain a feeling approaching timidity, lest the desperate escaped convict suddenly appear, and threaten them in some way.

"Now I know why you went after your gun, Frank!" he remarked. "Not that I blame you a particle, remember. Don't I remember the dark face of that Jules, and how he stared at me, and ground his white teeth, when they took him away. All this time I've allowed myself to sleep sweetly, under the belief that, since he was bound to stay behind stone walls at least eight years, I needn't be afraid. But sometimes even walls can be scaled. Is it loaded, Frank—your gun, I mean?"

To oblige him Frank laughingly opened the breech, and inserted a couple of shells.

"Shucks! only Number Tens?" ejaculated Andy. "If it had been me now, I'd have brought a handful of buckshot ones. Much good these would do now if Jules was

running away, and had covered a hundred yards."

"Then I'd be willing to let him run," said Frank. "What I want them for most of all is to meet Jules, if he persists in advancing too close."

They were still discussing the matter an hour later; or at least some of them kept it up, while Larry started the fire inside the shop, and began the necessary operation looking to a dinner to which the old Colonel had been invited on condition that he relate a few more of his strange experiences in China, Thibet and Northern India.

"Look who's coming!" called out Elephant and of course this made them all turn their heads; even Larry running to the door, gun in hand, as though he had heard the remark, and thought it might refer to the dreaded Jules himself.

A car was coming from the direction of the town, and in a cloud of dust. Naturally the first thought that came to Frank was that it might be Mr. Marsh and his companion, Longley. But as the breeze lifted the curtain of dust, he immediately discovered that this was not so.

Half a dozen men were crowded in the car and one of these half arose in passing, to wave a hand vigorously toward the group of boys in the field.

"That's Chief Waller!" remarked Andy, with more or less eagerness in his voice.

"And those others are some of his men," Frank went on. "They don't mean to lose any time about looking Jules up, do they?"

"Hey! are you sure about that?" asked Elephant; "because none of 'em had a uniform on; and what good are the police in plain clothes?"

"Oh! there are times when they can do more without their uniforms than in them," Frank remarked. "And this ought to be one of them. Suppose now that keen-eyed Jules happened to be on the lookout, and saw a car loaded down with bluecoats come along, wouldn't he hide, all right? Well, that goes without saying, fellows. As it is he might never suspect a thing. I've often seen as many fellows jammed in a car, and so have every one of you."

"One good thing is, Waller ought to know that section pretty well," remarked the old traveler. "He's been brought up here, and scoured the country as if he had a

fine tooth comb, many a time. He will know how to close in on Jules, if the fellow is hiding there, which I doubt."

"Why do you say that, sir?" asked Frank, who had a genuine respect for the opinions of the veteran, based as they were on long experience and observation in all parts of the world.

"It is only a surmise on my part, Frank," replied the Colonel. "We all admit that Jules is a very clever and long-headed rascal. Very well. Don't you suppose that he may regret having given way to sudden temptation, and fired at you boys this morning? He will, on reflection, fear that you may guess who did it; for of course Jules does not know that his escape has been kept a secret all this week, in the hope that he might be recaptured, and nothing need be told. Follow me, boys?"

"Oh! yes, sir," Frank declared. "And in that case the Chief will have all his trouble for his pains, since Jules will have made tracks long before this. He may be out of the county by night."

"That is true; providing that he does not allow a fierce desire for revenge to stay his feet," replied the old man, soberly.

Usually the veteran was not the one to imagine trouble where there was none in sight; and knowing this Frank looked at him somewhat uneasily.

But before anything more could be said they were surprised to see Stammering Nat coming toward them on a run, for he had been watching the last of the bonfire to make sure it did no harm; and of course, as he was brimful of excitement, he had lost all power of control over his voice.

He tried the best he knew how, to regain the mastery of his vocal chords; even resorting to an old expedient of whistling, that perhaps had served him on some previous occasion. Finding everything of no avail, he clutched Andy by the sleeve, and started dragging him around the corner of the shed.

"Hey! what ails you, Nat?" shrilled the struggling Andy, wondering whether the other could have lost his mind because of his great affliction.

Another moment and the rest heard Andy give tongue in a way that announced his complete surrender to the same mysterious source of excitement that had

mastered Nat. Of course this needed an explanation; and accordingly Frank and Elephant dashed off, with Colonel Josiah stumping along close behind; and even Larry, leaving his cooking dinner, to come after them, still clinging to Frank's gun.

CHAPTER XII

SANDY DROPS SOMETHING

"Whoop! now, what d'ye think of that?" shouted Elephant, as soon as he turned the corner of the shed.

"Percy shies his hat in the ring! Another man-bird come to keep the pot boiling! Now, will you be good, Frank? Look at it eat up distance, will you? Say, that's going some, I tell you!" Larry exclaimed.

"Percy deserves credit for staying up about all night to assemble the parts of his new biplane, and that's a fact!" Frank candidly admitted; as with kindling eyes he watched the progress of the new wonder that marked the latest achievement in the line of aviation, as advanced by a well-known brand of builders.

His whole heart and soul were wrapped up in the strange calling that seemed to be his birthright; so that he could even admire the clever work of a bitter rival, and applaud his successful evolutions.

Over the treetops the biplane had arisen. Frank instantly remembered how they had seen Percy starting aloft on his initial flight with his old machine, the one later on seized by the natives of Colombia, and which might still be doing duty down in that South American republic, for aught they knew.

Apparently the young pilot of the new aircraft was filled with exultation over his successful start. He sent the biplane swiftly around in eccentric circles, as though testing its ability in various lines. Now he shot upward as if intending to mount like an eagle in gigantic circles until among the fleecy clouds that floated overhead. Then he would volplane downward at dazzling speed, to resume a horizontal flight when close to the earth.

The boys watched as though fascinated. When a particularly daring act turned

out to be a success Frank was the first to clap his hands vigorously.

Possibly those in the aeroplane might not hear the applause; but whether or no, it proved what the boys of Bloomsbury had always known, and this was that Frank Bird did not have a mean or jealous fibre in his whole body. He could thoroughly enjoy seeing a rival perform brilliant "stunts;" and the only effect was to spur him on to excelling.

"Percy is just as daring as ever! That is his one weakness, I'm afraid!" he remarked, as they saw the other make a sudden swoop that must have been particularly trying in the planes of his machine.

"I bet you he's going to break his neck some day," grumbled Andy, who could not bring himself to feel just the same way toward Percy as his cousin did; according to the way boys look at these things, Andy was the more "human" of the two; having faults that were lacking in Frank.

"That's certain a better biplane than the one they had last year," Larry remarked, after he had been thrilled with the daring exhibition Percy was putting up in his exultation at being once more afloat in the air, after a long absence.

"A great deal better," Frank admitted. "I knew what the faults were with that old plane, and so far I fail to discover the same failings with this one. If Percy would only use a little more sense, and not be so willing to take unnecessary risks, he could have a grand time this summer."

"Gee! look at him going it now, would you?" gasped Elephant. "He must have a bully good motor aboard to eat up space like that. Talk to me about your mile a minute, he's beating that all hollow!"

"No doubt of it," laughed Frank; "for everything happens to be favorable just now;" but Andy frowned and remarked:

"Oh! I just guess that ain't anything so remarkable. Percy hasn't got the push on our biplane. I'd take my affidavit that we went faster than that at one time when Frank let her out. You wait and see; some fine day we'll show you a sight that'll make your eyes stick out."

Andy was not a boaster as a rule; but whenever Percy Carberry started to show

what a mighty conqueror of the air he had become, something seemed to rise up within the second Bird boy that made him give vent to such expressions.

"He knows we're watching him, that's why he does it!" said wise Elephant.

"Sure," Larry admitted; "but that don't take away anything from his circus stunts, does it? Now he's going to swing around and circle your field, Frank. Wish he'd take a notion to drop down here, and let's look his new article over."

Andy laughed scornfully.

"I see him doing that same, Larry, when water runs up hill!" he observed sarcastically. "Did you ever know Percy to be open and frank? Ain't he always hiding what he knows, and trying to spring surprises on people? You don't catch him letting Frank look over his biplane, not if he knows it. Why, he's afraid Frank might get on to some little device that he expects will play a big part in the game, if ever he races us again. Huh! come off your perch, Larry, and take another guess."

"Well, there he goes around the field," the other went on. "Listen to the hum of the propellers, would you? Don't they make sweet music, though? I'm afraid I'll be like poor little Elephant here, and get the aeroplane fever myself, if this thing keeps on. Then there'll be a whole flock of us bobbing around."

He laughed heartily at the idea, as though he could imagine himself whizzing through the air "like a comet," as he remarked.

"Look at Sandy swinging his hat!" called out Elephant. "He's yelling something too, but I can't make it out, because of the racket the machine makes."

"Well, it wouldn't be hard to guess," declared Andy; "because you know how Sandy Hollingshead likes to boast. The joke of it is, he never does anything but hang on to his crony, and keep up the shouting. He's such a coward naturally that I don't understand how he finds the nerve to go up in that cranky craft with Percy."

"There! he's making faces at us; or doing something with his hands," Elephant continued, as he watched the biplane swinging past, some hundreds of feet in the air.

"I suppose that's meant for a defi," laughed Frank. "You know Sandy's ways, fellows? He always was something of a monkey on the team when he played ball. Don't answer back, any of you. A cat may look at a king; and we have a perfect right to stand here in our own dooryard, and gape at the show. But, Andy, pay attention to the way his machine works. I've caught on to a little idea already that I believe we could use with benefit ourselves."

That was practical Frank every time, always keeping an eye out for the usefulness of things, and ready to improve his opportunities as occasion arose.

Three times did Percy circle the big practice field, as though determined to impress upon the lookers-on the marvelous advantages his new biplane had over the old.

Doubtless time had not effaced the bitterness of his former defeats at the hands of his rival; and he was now fairly burning for a chance to wipe the memory out.

"Now, what d'ye suppose he's hanging around here all this while for?" grumbled Andy, who was nervous just so long as the other aeroplane kept winging its flight over the encircling fence that marked the confines of the aviation field.

"Oh! Percy wants you to know he ain't stingy," sang out Larry. "Look your fill, from a distance, but you can't come any nearer."

"Don't bother your head about him, Andy," remarked Frank. "It's giving him heaps of pleasure, and doesn't hurt us a whit. In fact, I don't care how long he keeps it up; for by degrees I'll be able to understand some things I'd like to know about that make of biplane. You can see it differs from ours in lots of ways. Some things may be a bit better, and others not so good."

"But, Frank, you don't think it could beat us out, do you?" Andy quickly demanded.

Frank shook his head.

"I hope not," he said, quietly; "but you can't always tell. That's a great machine Percy has there now, and it would be silly to deny it. A good deal depends on how it's going to be run."

"That's the ticket, Frank!" exclaimed Larry. "And I'm dead sure that no matter

which biplane you handled in a race you'd come out ahead."

"Sure he would," added Elephant, emphatically. "Because he keeps his head about him, and knows just what to do in a tight pinch; while Perc gets rattled, and loses his judgment."

"That's good of you to say such things, boys; but I don't think I deserve them," Frank laughed.

"You sure do!" declared Andy, who ought to know better than any one else the good qualities of his chum, since he had seen him under fire many a time.

"L-l-look at 'em!" burst out Nat just then, surprising himself by his ability to actually speak clearly.

The biplane had again headed across the field at a height of about three hundred feet; only this time, instead of cutting corners it was coming on directly, and gave promise of passing over the shed.

"Hey! what's that Sandy's got in his fist?" cried Larry.

"He's going to drop something, as sure as you live!" echoed Elephant.

"Mem-mebbe it's a b-b-bomb!" burst out Nat, his mind filled with accounts he had been reading of what was being done over in Africa by the Italians in their war against the Turks and Arabs.

At that Elephant seemed seized with a panic. He was not a valiant boy, generally speaking, and something about the ridiculous suggestion concerning a bomb seemed to fill him with sudden terror.

Uttering a howl he started to run one way, and then changing his mind darted in another direction; only to come back and finally crawl under a pile of boards that chanced to be lying near.

"Hey! what you thinkin' of doing, Sandy?" shouted Larry, shaking his fist up at the approaching aeroplane. "Don't you dare drop that on us, or I'll take it out of your measly hide, I sure will! Look out, Frank, he's let and here it comes a-sailin' down at us. Whoop!"

From under the woodpile issued an echoing squawk, as Elephant hugged the ground, and waited for the expected explosion.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CHALLENGE

Frank laughed heartily, so that Andy turned toward him in surprise. Of course it was silly to think of such a thing as a bomb, in connection with the object Sandy had dropped. Then again, Frank had seen that it was bound to fall at some little distance away from the shed. He also caught the unmistakable flutter of paper, and could give a pretty accurate guess as to what it all meant.

"It's dropped, Frank, and didn't go off!" exclaimed Larry, having himself been more or less influenced by the panic into which timid Elephant had fallen.

Frank started forward as if bent upon approaching the object that lay upon the ground; while the biplane was now heading straight away, as if it might be the intention of the pilot to seek new pastures.

"Be careful, Frank!" called out Larry.

"Yes, go mighty slow, please!" added Elephant, thrusting his head out from cover, much as a cautious old tortoise might do, to see if the coast were clear.

They saw Frank reach the object, and immediately pick it up. He seemed to be examining it with more or less interest.

"Why, I declare if I don't believe it's only a block of wood after all," remarked Larry, in disgust.

"Sure it is; anybody could see that!" declared Elephant, who had managed to slide out from under the woodpile most adroitly, and was rubbing his cheeks to induce a return of his customary color.

"Frank's reading something, fellows!" cried Andy. "I know what it must be; and

just like that sassy Perc Carberry to send it in that way. He wants to do everything just like he was on the stage, you know."

"A challenge!" burst out Larry.

"Sure thing!" piped up Elephant, grinning now, and ready to make it appear that he had guessed this from the very first, and that his actions had been in the light of a huge joke.

Frank had turned around now, and was approaching them, still engrossed with what he had found on the paper Sandy had dropped, with a heavy block of wood to carry it direct to the earth.

"What is it, Frank?" asked his cousin.

"Yes, tell us before we burst, please!" Elephant pleaded.

"Me too!" said Larry, feeling that he ought to be heard.

"D-d-do it, F-f-frank!"

"All right, fellows," replied the other, nodding and smiling, as if something had pleased him. "Suppose we sit down on that long bench in front of the shed."

He had no sooner dropped upon the wooden settee than there were a couple of eager boys hanging over either shoulder.

"It's a challenge, all right?" said Andy, his eyes sparkling.

"Yes, that's where you hit the nail on the head," replied the other. "And like everything that Percy manages, it is gotten up in a way to sting. We might decline an ordinary, everyday challenge; but he manages to fix it so that you've just got to accept, or be set down as afraid."

"Huh! no danger of our not taking him up on anything that's half way fair," said Andy, promptly. "And now suppose you read it out to us, Frank."

"Here goes then. He's got it headed 'A Challenge!' And then right below he gets down to business in this way: 'Frank Bird and Andy Bird, Aviators!'"

"Wow!" cried Larry, "that sounds all the good; but he's giving you that taffy only because he wants to claim the same title himself; ain't it so, Frank?"

"You'll see presently. Here's the way he goes on, fellows: 'Greeting: I hereby challenge you to a trial of skill and speed with our respective biplanes, same to take place within three days from date, at an hour to be selected mutually. Said test to include first, a thirty mile straightaway race, and circle the liberty pole on the Commons at Hazenhurst; next altitude, to be decided by the barograph carried on each biplane; then three times around the peak of Old Thunder Top; and finally the feat of volplaning from the greatest height, to land on Bloomsbury high school campus. Other rules for this race to be arranged between us at a meeting to be held later on. If you decline to accept this challenge I propose to go over the aforesaid schedule alone, and claim a victory.' And then underneath it all he signs himself: 'Percy Carberry, Aviator.'"

The boys looked at each other.

"Sounds like a real good test, Frank!" suggested Larry, cautiously.

"Just what I was going to say," Elephant put in, watching Frank's face, and seeing what he considered favorable signs there.

"And I move for one that the challenge be immediately accepted, so that further arrangements may be made!" Andy observed, grimly.

"Well," remarked Frank, slowly; "we'll consider it. As a rule, you know, fellows, I'm not much in favor of racing, when there's so much danger involved, but just as I said a bit ago, Percy knows how to fix things so as to stick pins in you. He's written his challenge in a way that makes us accept, or be branded for cowards."

"Oh, he needn't have worried about that!" cried Andy, angrily. "If he knows anything about the Bird boys he ought to make sure they never take water. Didn't we see whatever he did before, and go him one better? And down in the land of revolution he knows who carried off the honors, as well as saved him from those men who had him in their power. Frank, we've just got to do it!"

"I suppose so, Andy," returned his cousin; "but if you think that another win on our part is going to close Percy up like a clam you're away off. He makes me think of a medicine ball—every time you hit it and send it flying, it comes back again as chipper as ever. He just won't stay down, that's all."

"I don't agree with you there," said Andy. "If we can only rub it into him hard enough, Percy will never have the nerve to hold up his head again in Bloomsbury."

"But we can't expect to do that, you know," Frank went on. "He seems to have a splendid machine there, that will make us hustle all we know how to pass ahead. And even you give the fellow credit for knowing his business. He's a bird boy all right, even if his name happens to be Carberry. No overconfidence, Andy. That's lost any number of races that ought to have been won, hands down."

"Oh! I understand that, Frank," the other said; "but I believe in you, and that Percy ain't in the same class. Count on him to make a mistake when the crisis comes. And if he thinks he's going to be passed there ain't any low down trick he wouldn't be guilty of. I leave it to Larry, Nat and Elephant if that isn't right."

"I've known him to do lots of mean things," spoke up Elephant, promptly; "and if I had to enter a race with him I tell you right now I'd keep out of his reach, all right."

"The best way is to get the lead in the start, and never let him come within striking distance. Then you could snap your fingers at his games," declared Larry.

"Say, there is something in that, Frank," Andy admitted.

"I believe it," returned the other young aviator. "The only trouble I can see is that Percy usually starts off with a furious rush, and takes the lead. He believes it gives him an advantage, and perhaps it does. Every fellow has his pet theories in a race, and no two of them may be alike."

"I guess the main idea with him is that he can get in some of his dirty work if he sees the other is passing him," Andy sneered.

Frank shook his head at him; but on the whole did not know that he could blame Andy for feeling so bitterly toward the other. Their experiences with Percy in the past had been far from pleasant; and many times had he attempted some unscrupulous game that had stirred Andy's fighting blood to the boiling point.

As for Sandy Hollingshead, Andy's opinion of him as a sneak was known to every boy in Bloomsbury; nor did the party most interested seem to care to

knock off the chip aggressive Andy had long carried on his shoulder.

The aeroplane had vanished beyond the high fringe of trees. Possibly Percy had headed for town to show off his new purchase to the gaping Bloomsbury crowds, certain to come rushing from houses and stores as soon as the word was passed around that a flying machine was hovering overhead.

As the afternoon passed, the boys debated pro and con concerning the challenge. Frank had agreed to accept, much to the delight of the others, and his answer was carefully prepared, so as to cover every point in question.

He and Andy realized that after all, their prediction as to a storm had failed, for the clouds seemed to have passed away, leaving the day hotter than ever.

"Whew! ain't I glad though I can camp on a night like this," said Elephant, as started in to assist Larry get dinner ready.

"Just what I was thinking," added the chief cook, looking up from his task with a grin of pleasure. "I've got the peskiest hot room ever, on a still summer night like this is goin' to be; right under the roof, cold as a barn in winter; roasting in July and August. Say, I've often said they'd find me fried like a doughnut some fine morning; or froze stiff. This thing just suits me to a whiz."

"Heard Frank ask the Colonel to eat with us tonight; so I s'pose we're going to have an extra good spread," Elephant went on, scraping the potatoes industriously.

"That's what," chuckled the other. "You just leave it with your uncle, and the chances are you won't be disappointed much. I like good things myself. Used to say I was going to study to be a great chef when I grew up. May yet, who knows? What's Frank and Andy doing with that wire right now?"

"Why, you see the Colonel made 'em promise to connect him with the shed; so in case any row happened to be pulled off here he'd know it. Hard for him to understand he's out of the game with that crippled leg. He's been doing things all his life. I think he's the most wonderful old codger I ever knew."

"And that's where you're just about right, Larry. We must make him tell us some of his travel yarns tonight while we sit around," Elephant declared.

CHAPTER XIV

SOMETHING DOING

"I don't suppose any of you fellows have seen signs of the Chief and his men returning with any prisoners?" Frank asked, a little later, as he entered the shed to see how the arrangements for the evening spread were progressing.

"Nary a sign," replied Larry, who was bending over the stove, very red in the face, and yet grinning with pleasure; for he dearly loved to handle the pots and pans on an occasion like this, and was really a clever cook.

"Same here!" spoke up Elephant, who was fanning himself near by, and sniffing at the odors that arose from the fire, as though he wished the time would come when he might partake of the feast Larry had prepared.

"Then it looks as if the raid hasn't panned out a success so far," remarked Frank. "I'm sorry, too, because I believe I'd sleep sounder if I only knew our friend Jules was caged once more."

"Then you really think he'd be mean enough to try and burn the shed down, and destroy your aeroplanes?" asked Larry.

"Oh! from all I've heard about Jules, he'd never balk at a little thing like that," Frank continued. "The scoundrel who could shoot at two boys sailing hundreds of feet in the air, and take chances of sending them down to a terrible death, wouldn't hold back at anything, in my opinion."

"The Colonel says he'd just like to get in touch with him," remarked Elephant, with a chuckle. "I can just see the old chap dancing around with his war paint on, swinging that crutch of his to beat the band. Wow! wouldn't he just make mincemeat out of Jules though, if ever they met up?"

"Don't you forget it, Colonel Josiah still burns with the same spirit that carried him through a bunch of tight places. He's promised to tell us all about his ride with Gomez in Cuba during the war with Spain. And mark me, it'll be worth listening to. He never yarns, and has the proofs to show for every story he tells. That's the best part of it, because you know all the time you're listening to real hard facts, and not fiction."

"There he comes now, stumping along. Bet you he's sniffed some of these delicious smells away up at the house. Larry, if you don't get a move on, and announce dinner pretty soon, I declare if I don't start a raid on the grub. Can't stand for much more of this," and Elephant hugged himself as though it were only by a determined effort that he refrained from beginning work then and there.

"Hold on five minutes more, old chap," soothed the cook. "Everything's ready, and as soon as Frank gives the word we'll sit down."

To enjoy the meal all the more they had taken the table outdoors, and places for half a dozen had been made ready. The sun had set, but there would be light for an hour at least, plenty to last them during the meal.

The old traveler they seated at the head of the table, and Frank was made to take the other end. Then Larry and his assistants set to work dishing up. As the lovely aluminum set only carried enough for four, Andy had been compelled to call upon his reserves for additional plates, cups and such things.

And that dinner was surely worth remembering. Larry had certainly "done himself proud," as the delighted Colonel declared, after he had eaten until he could no longer do justice to the spread.

After the things had been cleared away they started the veteran to dipping into certain of his recollections; and once he was set going, he might be likened to a clock, for being wound up, adventure after adventure fell from his lips in a way to keep the listeners charmed.

Not that the Colonel was a boaster at all; he never assumed that he had done anything at all wonderful; but just related facts in his simple though dramatic way, and those who heard could draw their own inferences.

The boys would never forget that evening, or the feast that Larry put before

them. It would ever be marked by a white stone in their memories; and doubtless in after years, when fully launched upon the more serious avenues of life, more than one of them would look back with a smile as the picture arose in their minds' eye, with that white-haired old man sitting near by, and thrilling them with his recollections of the past.

It was long after ten when he bade them good-night, and betook himself off to the house, his last words being:

"Don't forget that your Uncle Josiah is coming like a runaway engine if so be that bell sounds the alarm! And to tell you the truth, boys, I'm half wishing it might be so!"

After he had gone they began to make their preparations looking to the passing of another night. Each one believed he could make some improvement on the former experience. This was especially the case with Elephant, who had been very uncomfortable in that swinging canoe; though it looked cozy enough.

Frank seemed to be busying himself after a strange fashion.

Elephant had cast a curious look that way several times as he labored to improve his own conditions. Finally his natural desire to know compelled him to turn to Larry, and put the question:

"What's Frank doing over at the end of the shed? Sure he don't mean to change his bunk for a place like that?"

"Oh, rats! don't you understand? Frank's making a trap!" Larry replied.

"Rats—a trap!" repeated the runt, mystified by the coming together of these two significant words. "But what does he have to go to all that trouble for? I'd think one of them ordinary regular wire traps would fill the bill as well."

Larry looked at him queerly, as if making up his mind whether the other meant it, or was simply joshing him.

"This is a man-trap!" he said, severely.

"Oh! my!" Elephant gasped; and then fell to watching Frank more intently than ever, as he continued to work on.

"And," continued Larry, "if you wake up in the night, and hear the most awful racket in the wide world, make sure we've caught something, do you understand, Elephant?"

"Meaning Jules?" queried the other, in an awed tone.

"Meaning Jules," repeated Larry, mocking the other by even assuming his manner.

"But do you really think he'll drop in on us, Larry?" the small boy asked.

"Wouldn't surprise me one little bit," returned his tormentor, calmly. "You heard what the Colonel was saying about those Spanish brigands who captured him—well, this Jules is just the same sort of customer, revengeful, desperate and ready to take almost any sort of chances, if he sees an opening. And Frank is that accommodating, he means to have a most inviting opening ready, so Jules can't resist the temptation to stick his nose in. Then slam! bang! and it's all over with Jules but the shouting, believe me."

Naturally all this sort of talk had its effect upon the timid Elephant. He could not keep his thoughts away from the trap Frank was making in the rear of the shed, and the possibility of that dark-faced escaped convict being caught in the act of entering the place, on mischief bent.

"I'll just dream about him coming, see if I don't!" he warned Larry, as he prepared to crawl into the swinging canoe, where his blankets had been placed.

"All right," answered the other; "only don't you go to whooping things up here too lively. Remember there are others, and that they want to snooze right along till morning. I'm glad Frank didn't draft you for a sentry, though."

"Oh! it was nice of him," answered the small boy, readily. "But then you see, Frank knows I just can't keep awake to save me. And what good is a sleepy guard, I'd like to know. Hope I've got it fixed now so I won't feel the ribs of this blessed Oldtown canoe poking me in my slats tonight. They kept me uneasy last night to beat the band. Aw! I'm awful sleepy, Larry; and I guess I'll turn in."

"Good. Only go careful, or you'll roll out the other side. That boat swings with a hair trigger. The least touch starts her to going. There you are. It's rockabye baby for you, Elephant. Mother's little darling boy, go to sleep now like a good kid!"

Elephant mumbled some sort of answer but in another minute he was off, fast locked in the arms of the dream god. Larry lost little time in following his example, for he expected to be called at a certain hour by Frank, who would have the first watch himself.

Darkness fell upon the interior of the workshop. If there was any sound to be heard, such as the heavy breathing of some sleeper, the sigh and moan of the night breeze without deadened this.

Frank had assumed a comfortable position. He could sit there and allow his mind to grapple with numerous things that interested him; at the same time feel that he was keeping a strict watch. Time passed on. The air happened to be coming from the direction of the town, so that when the clock in the church tower struck the hour he could easily hear the sounds.

In this way he knew how his watch went on, and when it would be time to change places with Larry. To the average lad there is something approaching a fascination in this near approach to life in the open. The mere fact that peril threatened, so as to compel a night watch, was enough to keep Frank from feeling drowsy. But then he always had a peculiar faculty for controlling his weaknesses. Most other boys would have had to fight desperately to remain awake.

He had just counted the strokes as the town clock droned off the midnight hour, and was wondering whether he had not better let Larry sleep until one had arrived, when without the slightest warning there arose the most dreadful racket any one could well imagine.

It sounded as though the whole roof might be falling in, what with the clatter of tinpans, the upsetting of chairs and the half muffled shouts that punctuated the entire clamor. And Frank leaped to his feet, believing on the spur of the moment that his trap had been sprung!

CHAPTER XV

THE AWAKENING

"What is it, Frank?" shouted Larry, as he scrambled to his feet, and began clawing around in the dark for the one he called upon.

"We've got him!" sang out Andy, gleefully. "Frank, it worked fine and dandy. My! what a noise he kicks up!"

"Where's Elephant?" asked Frank, suspiciously.

"Sleeping through it all. An earthquake wouldn't wake him up, once he gets to going," snorted Larry.

"Keep quiet; I'm going to light a lamp!" Frank went on, as he reached out to a spot where he knew he had left a box of matches handy for just such an emergency.

"Ouch! somebody kicked me then!" Larry shouted. "Frank, there's more'n one of 'em, and they're inside here, feeling around for us. Go slow, Frank! Have your gun ready when you light up. Pepper 'em good, now! Who's afraid?"

"Wait! don't shoot, Frank! It's only me!" shrilled a voice as the speaker managed to get his head out from the muffling folds of the blanket.

Then came the scratch of the match in Frank's hand. He held it up first in order to see what was going on; and then with a burst of laughter began to apply the flickering flame to the wick of the ready lamp.

And as the light filled the interior of the shed the boys saw a sight that sent them off into spasms of uproarious merriment. Yes, it was Elephant all right, just as he

had so wildly declared when he heard all that threatening talk about guns and "peppering" and such dire things.

He had evidently fallen out of the canoe as he tossed about during some dream that excited his mind. In tumbling to the floor his heels had upset the entire outfit of tin kettles and pans that Andy had fetched from the house. Such a clattering as they had made upon being dashed to the floor. And as if that were not enough Elephant had managed to turn a chair over with the lot, adding to the confusion liberally.

Larry helped him up, for as he was swathed from head to foot in his flaming red horse blanket the other was quite unable to manage alone. Poor Elephant rubbed his eyes and stared around him as if looking for the blue dragons that had filled his dreams.

"What d'ye mean by scaring us all half to death, Elephant?" demanded Andy, when he could in some measure command his voice.

"My goodness gracious! you don't think I did that a-purpose, do you?" exclaimed the small boy, rubbing his elbows as though they tingled after coming in such rough contact with the floor. "What d'ye take me for? And Larry, didn't I tell you that rarebit would make me dream? You just made me eat it; and now see what happened! Oh! but I thought the whole house had blown up, and I was heading for the stars. It was a fierce experience. Talk about your rarebits, never more for me!"

"Listen! somebody's coming, sure!" exclaimed Larry.

"Oh! what if it's Jules, after all? Where's the gun, Frank? Get it ready, won't you? There, he's pounding at the door. Where's my club? Somebody took my club!" and Elephant scrambled around, looking for the lost weapon which he had placed within reach before retiring.

Bang! bang! bang!

"Here, open up, and let me get at the rascals! Frank, Andy, have they murdered you all? Why don't somebody answer? Why don't you open this door before I smash it in with my crutch?" came a roar from without.

"It's Colonel Josiah!" cried Andy. "Hold on, Colonel; we're all right here.

Nobody hurt! All a mistake! Frank, open the door, will you? Nothing doing, Colonel, you see!"

The aged veteran stalked inside, using his crutch once more to assist his locomotion. In his other hand he gripped a tremendous horse pistol, the very size of which must have sent a shiver through any nocturnal prowler.

"It was Elephant who raised the rumpus, Colonel!" explained Andy. "He had a dream and fell out of his hammock, knocking over all the tin pans and a chair. We were all scared, thinking it might be Jules come to town."

The grim old traveler turned upon Elephant, trying to hide the twinkle in his eyes by pretending to assume a heavy frown.

"I won't do it again, I assure you, sir!" faltered Elephant, trying to hide behind Frank. "It was an accident, indeed it was. And I bruised both my elbows just fierce. After this I'm going to tie that swinging canoe down, so it won't kick me out again."

"H'm! you'd better," was all the old man said as he turned away; but Frank was of the opinion he wished to hurry off, so that he could chuckle over the ridiculous picture presented by the interior of that shop, without being seen by the boys, and his dignity impaired.

"Now, get busy, Elephant, and tidy up the mess you made," said Larry, as he once more crawled under his blankets.

"And remember," said Andy, severely, despite the grin on his face, "we don't stand for any more of this foolishness."

"Let me help you tie the canoe, so that it can't swing," Frank observed, taking pity on the victim of the mishap; for Elephant was still rubbing his elbows, and making faces as though they hurt him.

So after a little, peace once more fell upon the camp. The swinging canoe had been so firmly secured that it could not "kick" as Elephant declared it had done before. Then the light was put out again, and darkness reigned.

Frank again sat there, engrossed in thought. And naturally his mind went out in the direction of the recent event. If a false alarm could cause such confusion and

excitement it was probable that in case there came a genuine one things would take on a still more brilliant color.

He could hear Elephant turning from side to side. Perhaps his arms pained him; and thinking thus Frank was sorry he had not insisted on swabbing them with some witch hazel which they kept handy in the shop, in case of bruises while working. But he did not think it good policy to disturb the entire bunch again in order to relieve the slight pain of Elephant who must sooner or later grow used to hard knocks, if he ever expected to face the world.

Finally the boy in the canoe became quiet. Sleep had evidently mastered him, for ere long Frank caught his heavy breathing at such times as the wind stopped sighing around the eaves of the shed.

It must be growing near one when he expected to hand over his duty as sentry to Larry. All he waited for was to catch the stroke of the hour. He had the lay of things well in his mind, and could even have moved about the shop in utter darkness without tumbling over anything; for he and Andy had spent uncounted hours under that roof during the last year.

Ah! there was the anticipated stroke, sounding quite clearly.

"Frank!" came in a low tone, almost a whisper.

"Hello!" answered the sentry, "that Larry?"

"On deck. Must have been my call the wasn't it? Thought I heard one strike," as Larry began to raise up alongside Frank, shedding his blankets as he did so.

"Have you been awake all the while?" whispered Frank, surprised.

"Guess pretty much," chuckled Larry. "That thing just broke me all up. I've been laughing to myself under the blanket ever since."

"Oh! is that so?" Frank replied. "Well, do you know I wondered what those queer noises were. Thought possibly you had an ache from eating too much."

"How's everything on deck, Frank?"

"Fine and dandy. Nothing to cause alarm yet," came the answer.

"All right, then. You just crawl in, and get a snooze started. I'll take care of the camp up to three, when Andy comes on duty. How d'ye keep awake, Frank?" asked the new guard.

"Keep thinking of the late unpleasantness, as you have been doing. It did the trick before, and may again. Good night! I'm off."

Frank found no little difficulty himself in getting asleep. Unaccustomed to his strange bed, and with all the recent excitement added, it was not strange that even Frank had to take himself severely to task before he could lose his senses in slumber.

He too dreamed, for had he not also partaken of the same tasty cheese and toast, of which poor Elephant complained as the main cause for his troubles? Several times Frank woke up and was puzzled to understand just where he could be. Then things would come back to again; and with a chuckle he would turn over, to once more lose himself in sleep.

The third time this happened he lay there listening. It seemed to him that he had heard a slight rustling noise; and moreover, it had come from the far end of the shed!

Could it be Larry; and if so what business had the sentry to be wandering about that section of the forbidden ground? Another fancy struck Frank, to the effect that it might be either Andy or Stuttering Nat, walking in their sleep. If that proved to be the case, then the awakening was likely to surprise somebody, unless he was very much mistaken.

He put out his hand and felt Andy in his accustomed place. Then rising quietly he crawled over far enough to come in contact with Nat's arm, thrust out from his blanket. This left only Elephant, whom he found slumbering soundly in his canoe, and the sentry, who was also fast asleep!

Frank felt a thrill pass over him at this. Then the sound could not have been made by any one of his comrades. Who then was prowling around that danger zone? Even as he asked himself this important question he heard a sudden sharp "click!" that could only be made by the trigger of his dead-fall trap; then came a heavy, sodden, crunching sound, that told better than words what had happened. Frank jumped to his feet, shouting:

"Wake up! wake up! we've caught something, fellows. Wake up everybody!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE CHIEF MEETS AN OLD FRIEND

There was a tremendous amount of excitement in the workshop when Frank aroused his four chums by this cry. All around him he could hear them calling out.

"Another fake alarm, I bet!" grumbled Larry.

"It's that miserable Elephant again," said Andy in disgust. "He ought to be taken down to the lake and ducked, that's what!"

"Me ducked? I'd like to see you do it!" shrilled a voice close beside Andy, and which he recognized as belonging to the runt.

"Hey! Frank, what is it?" demanded Larry.

"Light up! we want to see something!" called Andy, now beginning to experience a strange sensation in the region of his heart, as the possibility of its being the genuine article of alarm struck home.

Frank was already doing this very same thing; he struck his match even while Andy was calling so loudly for a light. When the lamp was brought into use the boys stared around at each other.

"Where's Stuttering Nat?" questioned Larry, suspiciously.

"H-h-here!" came a quavering voice, as the other pushed himself forward, so that none of them would believe he might be at fault, as he was not particularly desirous of a bath just then.

"Then we're all on deck; ain't that so, Frank?" asked Andy.

"Count noses, and you'll find it that way," returned the other Bird boy, as he calmly picked up his gun.

"Take the lamp, Andy, and fall in just behind me," he said.

"O-oh! Frank believes he's caught him!" gasped Elephant, in a quivering voice.

"Stop talking, and come on, everybody," Frank insisted.

Each boy had armed himself as best the occasion allowed. One carried a hammer, another a baseball bat, while Elephant had found his club, and Larry picked up a seven foot piece of piping, which he thrust ahead of him after the nature of a spear.

So they advanced in the direction of the end of the shed where Frank had arranged his trap. Every one of them felt his heart beating like a triphammer as the sound of writhing, accompanied by groans, came to their ears.

There seemed no reason to longer doubt but what the trap would be found sprung, and game of some species within.

"Hold up that lamp, Andy!" said Frank, sternly. "Here, don't let your hand tremble so. We must have light, you know. Steady now!"

"Oh! I see him!" gasped Elephant, whose eyes were almost sticking out of his head with the excitement.

"I guess it's Jules, all right," Andy managed to say; as he too took in a long breath, while he thrust the lamp out further so that all could see better.

Something lay in the hole, something that took on the outlines of a man flat on his face, and with a heavy log almost squeezing the last bit of breath from his body. A broken old gun, that looked like one of the muskets used in the Civil War, lay close beside him, and had evidently been dropped when the trap was sprung without warning, after the victim had started to crawl into the shed by way of this inviting opening.

"Yes, it's our old friend, Jules, come to pay us another night visit," observed Frank, coolly as he handed the shotgun to Larry, and bending down proceeded to draw both arms of the senseless man behind him, fastening them securely with a

stout cord which he drew from his pocket, having prepared for this same event in advance.

"Is he killed?" asked Elephant, in an awe-struck voice.

"Sure he isn't," replied Larry, who had seen the man moving, as though his senses might be coming back.

Five minutes later he opened his eyes, and stared hard at the array of boyish faces before him. Evidently Jules may have suspected that the Bird boys would be sleeping in their precious shop; but he had hardly imagined that he would run up against a whole school there.

Frank had meanwhile tied his ankles as well, and helped drag him further into the shop. When the man started to using language that was offensive, he warned him plainly that if he kept that up any longer they would find some means of gagging him. The threat served to keep him quiet, though from the black looks on his face it was evident that the fellow was extremely bitter against them all.

It was now three o'clock. Since all of them were too much excited to even try to sleep any more, they concluded to remain on guard in a bunch. Larry received no end of joshing on account of having slept on his post; Frank even told him that it was considered so serious a matter that men had been stood up against a wall, and shot for allowing the enemy to creep into camp.

"All right," said Larry, who hung onto the gun all the while. "Let's see you do it right now. I'm the only one that's got a shooting iron, and I refuse to give it up, or use it on myself. Call it off, Frank, and we'll begin all over," and so, as Larry was a pretty decent sort of a fellow, as they go, and besides, just as he said, held possession of the only weapon, for that musket had been broken by the fall of the log, they concluded not to shoot him on the spot, but give him another chance to make good.

It was a long wait till morning; but finally the stars vanished before the gray light of early dawn. Larry, as soon as he could see decently, started to get breakfast; for he declared that if he was a mighty poor sentry he did have a few good points, one of which was his ability to sling tasty messes together.

Jules was as "mum as a church mouse," as Elephant called it. But by degrees he took more or less interest in what the boys were doing.

"Look out for him," said Larry aside to Frank. "I think he means to try and escape if he gets half a chance. That's why he smiles now and then."

"You're away off, Larry," replied Frank. "For I notice that every time that pleasant look creeps over his face it is when a smell of coffee drifts this way. Jules hasn't tasted anything like that for more than a year. And while he's got to go back to where the law has sent him, we're going to give him a decent breakfast first."

When a little later they heard the stamp of the Colonel's crutch the boys looked up expectantly, knowing they would have the laugh on the old veteran traveler, who had flown to the rescue when the alarm was all a farce, and slept through the real thing.

"What's all this? Bless me, if they haven't caught the rascal after all! Why didn't you ring me up? That alarm bell must have played me false, Andy, and I believe you juggled with it! The old cry of 'wolf' again; and I'm the victim."

Expressing his disgust in this way the Colonel stumped in, and proceeded to let the prisoner know what he thought of a man who would try to revenge himself upon a couple of bright lads; especially after bringing all his troubles down upon his own shoulders.

It afterwards developed that Jules had stolen the musket, and also the suit of clothes he was wearing, from a farmhouse that he raided shortly after his escape from the prison. Although he never confessed to the fact, Frank never had any reason to doubt but that it had been Jules who fired that shot at them while they were speeding over the Powell woods in their biplane.

Jules was given his fill of good breakfast, and this possibly put him in a better humor. He was not wholly an unscrupulous villain, and the fact of these boys treating him so decently seemed to make an impression on the fellow, for he watched Frank closely.

The boys were talking the matter over, as to how they might best get their prisoner transported to the lockup in town, when sharp-eyed Nat began to make a great noise, and pointed down the road.

"It must be the Chief and his officers heading back home!" cried Andy, jumping up from his seat.

"Here, make a dash toward the fence, and get their attention! Don't tell them why we want them to come in here, but just let down the bars," said Frank; and at his words Andy went flying away across the pasture.

By swinging his arms and shouting, he managed to attract the attention of those in the passing car, which was halted. Then Frank saw Andy speaking hastily, at the same time letting down the bars; after which the car swung in, with the Bird boy perched on the step.

Chief Waller did not look particularly happy as he sat there alongside the man who served as chauffeur. He had lost a night's sleep, and covered many miles in a useless search of the great Powell woods; and for so stout a man this was exhausting business.

"Hello! Frank! How are you, Colonel? Sorry to say we haven't picked up our man yet; and the chances are we won't do it, either. He must have taken the alarm, and slipped off before we got there."

Then the police head must have detected Elephant grinning broadly; and this no doubt excited his suspicions; for he whirled on Frank, having laboriously descended from his car, and burst out with:

"Looky here, Frank, what you got up your sleeve, anyhow? There's something doing that I ought to know about, I reckon."

"Oh! we thought it might pay us to set a trap, Chief," returned Frank, keeping as straight a face as possible. "Sometimes you have to go to the mountain; and then again it comes to you. We made up our minds to try it, anyhow."

"And it worked?" demanded Chief Waller, his face lighting up with eagerness.

"Did it, fellows?" asked Frank, turning to the rest of his mates.

"If the Chief had been anywhere around at three this morning he'd have thought something was working all right," gurgled Andy, his face all aglow.

"Larry, help our guest out here, won't you?" said Frank; and only too willing the one addressed stepped inside the shop, to reappear a moment later and not alone. Chief Waller took but one look and then threw up his hands, exclaiming:

"Jules Garrone, and nabbed by a parcel of boys. Men, the joke is on us!"

CHAPTER XVII

GALLANT ANDY

"Good morning, Chief!" said the prisoner, with a cool grin.

The Head of the Bloomsbury police force looked so utterly amazed that Larry and some of his mates could not help laughing.

"Didn't expect to find Jules waiting up for you on the way back, did you, Chief?" asked Andy, with perhaps a touch of sarcasm in his voice; for to tell the truth the boy did not have a very high opinion of the stout man's abilities in the way of thief catching, though liking him well enough as a genial townsman.

"Well, I confess that I never expected such great good luck," admitted the other. "And now, boys, tell me just how it happened."

"Oh! he dropped in on us, Chief," Andy went on.

"And liked the accommodation afforded by the Birdsnest so well that he concluded to stop over," Larry remarked. "Frank here, expected something of the kind, and got ready to receive visitors."

"You mean he set a trap?" asked the official, looking admiringly at the party in question.

"Well," Larry drawled, "I guess you could call it that, and not get far off the road. It had a trigger all right, and when Jules touched this off a nice heavy plank that was like a log dropped, and pinned him down on his chest. We found him gasping for breath, and his gun with a broken lock."

"Gun! Then he was armed, and creeping into your shop!" exclaimed the other, with a frown toward the grinning and apparently indifferent prisoner. "That looks

bad, now. What would he want to carry a gun for, if not to injure you boys? And where d'ye suppose he got it at?"

"Oh!" Frank remarked, "he says he entered a farmhouse, and hooked a suit of old clothes, so he could throw away the striped ones. And at the same time he helped himself to that old musket, thinking he might have to hunt game while he hid in the woods."

"Look here, Frank, wasn't you telling me about some villain who fired a shot up at you boys when you were flying over the Powell woods?" asked the Chief.

"That's so, and we believe it was Jules, all right," Andy took the liberty of saying; for when excited he could not be kept still.

"But he wisely declines to commit himself, so there is no proof," Frank went on. "And at any rate, what's the use bothering about that little thing? There was no real harm done, except a little scare. And I think Jules will have about all the trouble he wants to handle without adding any to it."

He looked at the prisoner, perhaps with a touch of feeling. At any rate, to the surprise of them all, Jules actually smiled, and made a declaration that proved he had been using his eyes and ears since coming among the campers.

"I just want to say right here, Chief, that I was a fool to bother about these boys. I got what I deserved. I should have left them alone. And mark me, that if ever I have the luck to escape again never will I turn one hand to injure them. Now take me to your old lockup. I want to sleep."

So they took him to the car, and that was the very last the Bird boys ever saw of Jules Garrone, once a well-known French aviator, until he fell into evil ways. No doubt he was returned to the penitentiary, where he would have to serve an additional length of time because of his flight.

Of course the talk for an hour or more was all about the recent adventure. But in due course of time Andy began to get uneasy.

"We're losing a fine chance for a spin, Frank!" he grumbled, glancing up at the sky, across which here and there clouds were slowly moving, but with no indication of coming trouble.

"Well, do you know," smiled the other, immediately, "I was just thinking that same thing myself. Suppose we do hitch up, and take a drive in our aerial go-cart, Andy. There are a heap of little things I'd like to experiment on before that race comes off with Percy."

"All right. And the sooner we start the better," Andy flashed back. "What d'ye say to going all over the course this morning? It would only be the right thing; and when rowing clubs train for a race they always study the course foot by foot, so as to learn the currents, the hidden rocks, and the chances for head winds. Will you take me up on that, Frank?"

"If you mean that we head across to Hazenhurst, and interview that liberty pole Percy lays so much stress on, I'm willing. Then again, I want to try for height while we're about it. We don't know just what this biplane can do, or how it'll act when a mile or so up."

"Huh! I didn't see anything the matter when we landed on top of the peak," remarked Andy. "Sure she was all to the good then. Frank, honest Injun now, I'm more in love with this outfit than I ever was with our first one. I can see possibilities about a biplane that a monoplane never can own."

"Wait," said Frank, "the proof of the pudding is in the eating. After we've had this a week we can begin to talk. Just now it's up to us to study her every little whim, and try to improve on things."

The other boys were taking turns in going home and "making the acquaintance of their folks," as Larry quaintly put it. But there would be a couple of them at the shop all the time. Of course there was now no danger from Jules, since he had fallen upon evil ways; but as Larry said mysteriously, "you never could tell," and everybody knew whom he had in mind, although no name was mentioned.

The Bird boys had that running start down to a fine point. Frank had made an especial study of it, so as to rise in the air with as little ground work as possible. And this was what served him well on many occasions—for instance when on the plateau of Old Thunder Top, where the level space was limited.

So they rose quickly and successfully. Andy gave a yell of satisfaction, to indicate that his confidence in the new aeroplane was being strengthened every minute that he saw her strong points being developed.

They rose to a considerable height before starting away in the direction of Hazenhurst. It looked just like a homing pigeon seeking an altitude, from which it could find its bearings, before starting in a bee line for its loft far away.

Andy was using the glasses, while Frank drove the machine, and studied every little part, touching a straining wire guy here, and tightening a valve there, as he noted minute chances to improve conditions.

It was this complete mastery of the subject that gave him such control over his aeroplane; so that when he chose he could develop unexpected resources of speed, or ability to successfully carry out difficult feats.

"I can see the town easy enough from here," announced Andy, presently.

"Am I headed right?" asked the pilot.

"Just send her a trifle more to the northwest. There, now we aim straight for Hazenhurst," Andy called out; for the motor was crackling, and besides, there was more or less noise arising from the stiffened planes, so that it became necessary to raise the voice in order to be easily heard.

So, for some little time they went humming merrily along, just "eating up the miles," as Andy remarked delightedly.

It was a great sensation for these two lads; but having been at this now for so long a time they fairly overcome the thrill that is apt to seize upon a novice.

Frank had dropped down to a lower level. Since they were now passing over territory that they had never before looked down upon from such a height, it was just as well that they keep to that distance from the earth which would probably be their course during the race that Percy had forced upon them.

And all the time they drew nearer the town that was to be their goal. Both boys had been there once or twice. But this was years back when they used to wheel all around the surrounding country during vacations. They had now gone a long ways ahead of pedaling a bicycle. After once soaring through the air in a biplane no one could ever be content to go back to the old ways.

"I can see the commons," announced Andy, who was using the glass. "Yes, and there's the liberty pole too, right in the middle. See that big green stretch, Frank?"

Will you drop lower, and circle it while we're over here?"

"Why not? Might as well go the whole thing when about it," returned the other, as he continued to test first one thing and then another.

"On the way back let's put her to her level best speed, and see just how long it takes us to cover the thirty miles," Andy suggested.

"All right," was the ready reply; "but before we do that I'd like to drop down to the ground for a bit. I can see several slack guys that will be all the better for being tightened a little. Like every other new machine, this needs constant attention to bring things up to their best."

"Oh! well, what's to hinder our lighting on the green, and giving the good people of Hazenhurst a chance to see a genuine aeroplane. I don't believe one ever came up here before," Andy remarked.

In a short time they were skimming along over the tops of the trees, and even dipping lower when openings appeared.

"Going all right, Frank?" asked Andy, anxiously, as they drew within a mile of the town; for if they expected to be watched by hundreds of curious eyes he wanted everything to work smoothly.

"Just running like clock-work," the other announced.

"I haven't heard you say a single word against this biplane," remarked Andy.

"Why should I?" laughed Frank. "I may not be so outspoken as you about my likes and dislikes, but I feel as deeply. And, Andy, I want to say right here that this machine is a whole lot ahead of anything I've ever seen, or handled. She moves like a witch, and answers her rudder like a thing of life. Why, I almost feel that I'm a part of the whole business, and that I have only to think a thing when it is executed."

That was high praise from so conservative a fellow as Frank, as his cousin well knew; and it filled Andy with rare delight.

"Oh! look down there, Frank!" he suddenly cried, pointing beneath them, to

where there was an open field.

Looking quickly Frank saw a sight that filled him with dismay. A young girl was crossing the open stretch, and as her back was toward them, of course she had not as yet discovered the presence of the biplane.

Racing back of the girl, and evidently meaning to overtake her, was a savage-looking dog; and it required no effort on Frank's part to understand that the intention of the brute was decidedly hostile.

Frank was a lad of prompt action. He instantly sent the aeroplane downward, aiming for the running dog; and at the same time starting to shout at the top of his voice, in which last Andy joined with him.

The animal, attracted by the clamor, looked up, and seeing that monster bird as he believed swooping down at him, turned tail with frightened yelps and ran away.

There was nothing for it now but to alight, since they had already darted close to the earth; and accordingly Frank proceeded to accomplish this feat as gently as possible.

It happened that the biplane came to a stop close to the girl, who was standing there staring, as though hardly understanding what it all meant. Andy hopped out the first thing even though he happened to be holding the monkey wrench in his hand at the time, having snatched it up in his excitement when he first discovered the threatening peril of the girl.

He had just reached her side, and was starting to speak when a warning shout from Frank, still in his seat aboard the aeroplane, caused Andy to look around.

"The dog! Take care, he's going to attack you!" was what Frank shouted.

Apparently the ugly beast had already recovered from his fright, when it discovered that human beings were aboard the strange airship. He had halted a little distance away, and then, as Andy actually headed toward him, started to meet the newcomer.

There could be no mistaking the evil intentions of the beast, he was of the savage bulldog strain, and from the cut of his mouth it could be seen that just now he

meant business. And as Andy could not retreat, with that pretty girl standing there unprotected, he just had to raise his monkey wrench and wait for hostilities to begin.

CHAPTER XVIII

AT THE FOOT OF THE LIBERTY POLE

"Look out!" shouted Frank, who was trying to find some sort of weapon himself, armed with which he could hasten to the aid of his chum.

But Andy kept his senses well about him. Perhaps had he been alone, and there opened a favorable chance whereby he could put a convenient fence between himself and those grim square jaws of the ugly dog, he would have been only too glad to do so. But that was utterly out of the question now. The girl must be defended, come what might.

He fortunately remained fairly cool, which was a good point in his favor. Just then, singular to say, Andy seemed to remember what he had read about what Old Putnam said to his Colonials at the battle of Bunker Hill: "Wait till you can see the whites in their eyes, boys!" He held himself back until he was positive that he could land a blow on that massive head of the prize bulldog.

Whack!

The wonder was that Andy did not crush the beast's skull in with the monkey wrench. He surely would, had he struck with all his strength; but being afraid that if he missed connections he might lose his balance, and be seized by the brute, he only "tapped for a single," as he afterwards remarked.

It staggered the beast at any rate, and drove him back a foot, stopping his onward rush.

"Good! give him another like that, Andy! I'm coming right along!" whooped Frank who had managed to lay hold on some sort of tool which he carried for emergencies, and was jumping forward as fast as he could move.

The dog tried a second time to seize the daring boy in those cruel white fangs. He presented a terrible sight just then; for there was blood showing on his white hair, where the edge of the monkey wrench had struck.

"You will, will you?" gasped the boy, who had thrown himself into a position of readiness once more, with his novel weapon upraised.

This time the dog tried to duck the descending blow. Had his ruse been successful undoubtedly Andy would have found his ankle fast in the grip of those terrible teeth before he could recover. But again he had figured on such a move; and as he swung the tool downward he jumped forward a pace himself. It was "meeting the ball before the break came," as they would have it in baseball language.

Crunch!

That was surely a good sound crack. The force had been visibly increased too, so that the brute was knocked completely over into a kicking heap.

"Try it again, if you want to!" shouted the now aroused Andy. "Plenty more like that left! Hi! hold on there; what're you sneaking away for? Not had your fill yet, have you, pup? I guess you've got a streak of yellow in you! No prize dog about you. Well, good-bye then. Next time I call I'll try and do better by you!"

The dog seemed half dazed by that last blow. Struggling to its feet it began to run away, though hardly able to keep a direct course.

Frank arrived on the scene just too late to be of any assistance; but then as it turned out, his cousin had not really needed help.

"Well done, Andy, old fellow!" he exclaimed, proudly, as he seized the hand of his cousin, and shook it heartily. "I'm glad to own you as a member of the Bird family. And you're dead game on dogs, that's sure."

"Oh! it was splendid!" exclaimed the girl and both boys now saw that she was a very pretty little miss, with sparkling blue eyes, and golden locks. "I shall never, never forget how brave you were. That terrible dog would have bitten me, I just know. I was so silly to cross this field to save time."

She insisted on shaking hands with each of the lads, though naturally it was

Andy who took the greater share of her attention.

Just then a loud hoarse voice broke in upon them. Looking up they were surprised to see a big, rough looking man, evidently the farmer himself, coming toward them. He carried a gun in his hands, and had all the appearance of anger in his manner.

"Jest stand whar ye be, ye scamps!" he bellowed as he made threatening gestures with the gun. "Don't ye try to run away, er I'll gie ye somethin' ye'll never furgit. Maul my prize dawg, will ye, and on my own private groun's? I got the law back o' me, and ye'll pay damages er go to jail. Hear that, consarn ye?"

Of course neither of the boys thought of running. Why should they when their precious aeroplane lay there close at hand? Evidently the excited farmer had not yet noticed this; or if so may have taken it for some new species of motorcycle. His entire attention seemed to be wrapped up in keeping the boys from fleeing. He was figuring on taking advantage of his rights, and exacting heavy toll for the assault on his "dawg."

He came on until within ten feet of the boys. Andy still held that useful monkey wrench in his left hand, having transferred it at the time the girl insisted on his taking her little white hand in his.

The enraged and suspicious farmer must have just noticed this, for he suddenly started to bellowing again.

"Put up your hands, both o' ye!" he exclaimed, waving the gun threateningly. "Ye be desprite scoundrels, I take it, an' I don't mean to gi'e ye any chance to treat me like ye done my dawg. Fifty dollars wouldn't buy that critter; an' like's not he won't never be any use arter this. I'm goin' to march ye both to the town lockup, right away. Don't ye move a hand, consarn ye!"

"Mr. Sweesey, how dare you? These boys are my friends!" and as she uttered these words; in an indignant voice, the girl stamped her little foot on the ground.

"Hey! what! oh! is thet you, Miss Alice? Sho! now, I never knowed ye, Miss," the old man stammered, looking toward the girl for the first time.

"I was coming to your house with an important paper my father asked me to hand you, when he heard me say I meant to take a long walk. I crossed this field

to make a shortcut, as I've often done before. That terrible dog of yours was loose, although you have been warned against allowing it. And he would have attacked me, only that these brave boys came to my assistance. I shall tell my father about it, you can depend, sir."

All the bravado had vanished from the farmer by now. He seemed to fairly cringe before the girl. Afterwards the boys learned that there was good reason for this, since her father was Mayor Stephens, the richest man in Hazenhurst, and the farmer a tenant who was forever behind in his rents, and heavily in the debt of the owner of the place.

"I didn't mean to run 'em in, Miss Alice," he hastened to explain. "I was just a-tryin' to skeer 'em, ye know. I've had heaps o' trouble with boys from town, and in course I thought they was up to more o' their tricks. Tige broke loose this mornin'. But p'raps he got just what he orter hed from this brave boy. I'm orful glad he didn't bite ye, Miss. And I hopes ye won't complain to yer governor."

"I'll think it over, Mr. Sweesey," replied the girl, somewhat softened by his abject demeanor. "Here is the paper father wanted me to take to you. I think I'd better be going back to town after this. And I promise you I'll never again cross this field."

She turned her back on him, and looked toward the biplane.

"How wonderful that you should have come to my help in that way," she said.

"Well, the fact is, Miss Alice," remarked Andy, quick to catch the name used by the old farmer, "we were on our way to Hazenhurst, meaning to drop down on the commons and give your people over here a chance to see what a biplane looked like, while my cousin Frank Bird was making a few little changes in this new machine; when we happened to see the dog chasing after you. Then we dropped down in a big hurry; but fortunately no damage was done."

"Oh! are you the famous Bird boys I've heard so much about?" she exclaimed; at which Andy turned red in the face, and laughing awkwardly, replied:

"I'm Andy Bird, all right, and this is my cousin Frank, the head and brains of the combine; but as to our being famous, that's all a mistake. We have taken up aviation as a business, and mean to follow it. My father was a well-known aviator; so you see it runs in the blood. You live in Hazenhurst, I suppose, Miss

Alice?"

And it was at this point the pretty girl informed them who she was.

"Oh! I hope you will stay long enough by the liberty pole for me to get back!" she observed, eagerly.

Andy nodded his head.

"Oh! I can promise you that we're not going to be in any very great hurry to start back home. Why, we might even have to wait a whole hour. There are lots of little things to be done, you see;" and as he said this Andy gave his cousin a sly kick on the shin with his toe, which was apparently understood by Frank, since he did not venture to say a word in opposition to what had been spoken; though truth to tell, he believed ten minutes would have sufficed him to make what little changes he had in mind.

"Then I'll start right away," Alice declared. "And as I chance to be a good walker I will show up inside of fifteen minutes at the most."

She shook hands with them again, and started toward the road. The old farmer, with bulging eyes, watched the two lads get their biplane ready; and obeying Frank's request even gave a shove at the proper instant. Then he stood there, craning his scrawny neck as he watched the great bird-like object soar upwards, hardly able to believe that he had actually assisted in the launching of one of the modern miracles that had conquered the forces of the upper air currents.

Andy was watching, and as they sailed over the road where Miss Alice was trudging back to town he shouted a greeting, and waved his handkerchief, to be delighted by a return salute.

"If I'd just dared, Frank," said Andy, regretfully, "I'd have offered to take her to town along with us; but I was afraid you'd say no."

"Which I certainly would," replied his cousin, immediately. "It may be all right for us to risk our lives in the way we do, but I don't believe we have any business to take chances with that of another, except under certain conditions. If we had to take up some one to give them from peril that would be all right. Now, here we are at the commons, Andy."

"Wow! look at the people rushing out of the houses," cried Andy, "would you? I guess this is the biggest thing that's happened at Hazenhurst for a whole year of Sundays. Hope they give us plenty of elbow-room to land. If they push in too far, somebody is going to get hurt."

Frank called out in time, and the crowd swayed back, so that presently the wonderful biplane dropped as lightly as a feather on the beautiful green commons, and close to the foot of the liberty pole.

"Please keep back before you do any damage!" Frank exclaimed.

Fortunately there were some sensible fellows present, who realized the need of care; and when these athletic young chaps had formed a ring around the aeroplane Frank breathed more freely again.

He went about making his little changes leisurely, while Andy did most of the talking, and answering the multitude of questions that were fired at them.

When the good people of Hazenhurst learned that these two modest young chaps were the Bird boys, of whom they had heard and read so much, they were loud in expressions of pleasure at welcoming them to the town. And when later on Andy told them of the contemplated race, they declared that everybody in Hazenhurst would surely be on hand to see the two contestants turn around the liberty pole.

Of course Miss Alice arrived, even ahead of schedule time; which would indicate that she had indeed hurried. And presently the boys were introduced to her father, and had to receive his hearty thanks after he learned how greatly the Stephens family were indebted to them.

But Frank noticed with secret pleasure that the girl entered no complaint against the old farmer. From which he understood she had come to the wise conclusion that a lot of good had sprung out of the chance meeting, that might never have happened only for Tige's breaking loose that morning.

And later on, when the biplane arose gracefully from Hazenhurst green, a mighty roar of cheers attested to the fact that the Bird boys had succeeded in making a very favorable impression, not only on Miss Alice and her father, but the rank and file of the townspeople as well.

CHAPTER XIX

THE MYSTERY STILL UNSOLVED

"You fellows have been gone a long time!" observed Elephant, reproachfully, as the Bird boys came down in the open just before the workshop.

"And I've had dinner ready nearly half an hour," complained Larry, as though in his mind their delay consisted of an unpardonable sin.

"Sorry," smiled Frank, "but we found we had to land at the liberty pole in Hazenhurst, to do some little altering; and it was mighty hard work getting away again."

Larry's sharp eyes caught the quick, quizzing look which the speaker shot toward his cousin.

"Hey! be honest now, fellows," he said. "There was a reason back of that holdup, I just know. Look at Andy turning red, would you? Elephant, don't he look guilty now? Tell us all about it, Frank. Who is she; what's the name of the little witch? We're from Missouri, and we want to know."

"Oh! let up on that sort of soft stuff, won't you?" complained Andy. "Things have come to a pretty pass when a fellow can't just biff a measly old bulldog on the jaw, without having a romance made out of the thing."

"A bulldog?" echoed Larry, grinning immediately. "Listen to that, Elephant and Nat! He's been having a fight with a terror of a dog. And believe me, Andy didn't hunt for trouble. Tell us all about it, Frank. Whose bulldog was it, and why did Andy tackle him? Was he going to bite the pretty one?"

Of course Frank had to tell the story, as soon as he could recover from the fit of

laughing into which Larry's persistence had thrown him. Andy wandered away, as though his modesty forbade his remaining where he could hear his praises sung. Perhaps he also disliked the idea of having those humorous eyes of Larry keep tabs on his telltale countenance while Frank was speaking of Alice, and of course remarking how very pretty the daughter of Hazenhurst's mayor happened to be.

"But you say you left there at eleven," remarked Elephant, when the story had been completed. "Then it took you all this time to get back here, did it?"

"Shucks, no," replied Andy, who had now rejoined them, since the danger of quizzing seemed past. "We tried for height, and managed to get up to a point that we only beat once with our old monoplane. And this craft can do much better, Frank says."

"We made as high a point as we dared," Frank said. "It really got too cold, and we were shivering as if we'd been dropped into winter. Next time we go after an altitude record for amateurs we'll make sure to have warmer clothes along, eh, Andy?"

"We sure will," remarked that worthy, shivering at the recollection; and yet it was a hot July day; almost sweltering, in fact, where they now stood.

Larry stepped over to the biplane, and bending down, glanced at the little instrument intended for recording the extreme height reached during a flight. It could be set over again simply enough when the key was used to unlock the frame; this particular arrangement having been adopted in order that during a contest there could be no possible tampering with the barographs, the several keys to which would remain in the possession of the judges.

"Hey! that's going some," Larry immediately called out. "Ten thousand seven hundred feet is sure high, according to my notions. I don't wonder you found it slightly chilly. I've never been half that far up in all my life; and I've seen some big mountains, too. What's the record, Frank?"

"To tell the truth," the other replied, "I don't exactly know. The last I saw recorded it was about fifteen thousand feet; but hardly a week passes without some new man forging to the front, and putting up another win."

"Anything doing here while we were gone?" asked Andy, carelessly.

"Lots," replied Larry, with a knowing grin.

"Suppose you open up then, and tell us about it. Been having visitors?"

"How smart some people can be, eh, Elephant? Hits it the very first guess," and Larry winked at his chum as he said this, purposely keeping Andy on the anxious seat.

"Perhaps you've been butting up against some sort of bulldog, too?" suggested the other, quickly.

"No such good luck, because the girls have kept away from here," replied Larry.

"Then it was Percy?" Andy persisted.

Larry only shook his head in the negative; while Elephant took occasion to remark:

"We saw him cutting all sorts of figures in the air with his new biplane. And say, don't you forget it, Percy is some pilot. He sure did skim around to beat the band. You ain't going to have any walkover, Frank."

"I understand that, Elephant," replied the other, soberly. "And I'm the last one underrate a rival. Percy is just as good as I am in this business. His weakness lies in his spirit of recklessness; and giving way to temper when things seem to be going against him. He may beat me; but he'll have to do his level best."

"But looky here," Andy broke in. "That ain't telling us who was here, Larry."

"Guess again," answered the other, who liked to tease.

"I just can't think of anybody; unless it might happen to be that meddling, mysterious Mr. Marsh again," and then, seeing the raised eyebrows of Larry admit that he had hit the nail on the head, Andy went on: "What d'ye think of that, Frank; the bump of curiosity is pretty big with that gentleman. Now, what excuse did he have this time for invading our camp; and did he try to push into the shop like the last time he dropped around?"

"I saw him looking all about a lot, and he seemed right interested in a heap of

little things," Larry remarked.

"Yes," put in Elephant, who did not like to hear his chum do all the talking. "Lots of times he'd turn to the other chap, and nod his head or wink his eye, just like he wanted to say: 'There! what did I tell you, Longley; wasn't I right?'"

"Oh! he did, eh?" grumbled Andy, shaking his own head in an angry fashion; "well, all I can say is, that Mr. Marsh'd better keep his nose away from places where it ain't wanted. He's just after something slick, Frank. He means to steal some of your clever ideas, that's what."

But Frank was not so easily convinced. He believed in hearing all he could before making up his mind.

"Look here, Larry," he said, earnestly, "he must have given some sort of an excuse for coming out here again, didn't he?"

"More than a few, Frank," was the other's prompt reply.

"As what?" continued the young aviator.

"Oh! he kept on saying he was so much interested in you fellers that he just couldn't continue his vacation tour without seeing more of you. In town they're talking already about the race that's going to take place between you and the other biplane; make up your mind Percy was the one to scatter the news, and spread his boasts about how he's going to make you look like thirty cents. And Mr. Marsh, he just wanted to know if it was so, and all about the same; because he says he means to hang around Bloomsbury till that event is pulled off."

"Hear that, Frank, will you?" burst out Andy. "Told you he was a spy of some kind. Perhaps Mr. Marsh expects to spring a neat little surprise just before we start in that bully old race. Mebbe he's got a few cards up his sleeve. Mebbe he wants to stop us from starting, and claim we're using a device that is patented by the firm that employs him. Anyhow, he's bound to give us trouble."

Apparently Frank was not in the same anxious and worried frame of mind as his cousin. He paid no attention to what Andy was saying, but went on questioning the one who had been in camp, and talked with the gentleman in question.

"What other reason did he give for coming out here?" he asked.

"Oh! let's see," Larry, replied, slowly, as though thinking. "Elephant, he mentioned the fact that he had heard something of our little circus last night, didn't he; and wanted to hear the truth about the arrest of Jules?"

"Yes, and even told us that Mr. Longley was connected with a big New York newspaper, an editor or something, and wanted to wire the truth down to his office," Elephant added.

"I wonder if that was a yarn, now?" remarked doubting Andy.

"Oh! well, he did take a lot of notes down in shorthand, while the lot of us kept on telling all about the coming of Jules," Larry went on.

"I hope you didn't stretch things too much," Frank remarked, knowing that this was really a failing of Larry's, especially when relating the exploits of any of his chums, rather than his own adventures.

"Now, that's mean of you, Frank, to suspect me of yarning," protested the other. "I just hewed as straight to the line as I could. Elephant here, and Nat, tried to widen things every little while; but I wouldn't have it. When you read the story you'll see how Truthful Larry talked."

Frank smiled at the idea of poor Stuttering Nat being drawn into the mess; when the chances were he could not have said even one word with two such ready and willing talkers close by.

"How am I ever going to read about it?" he inquired.

"Why, you see, Mr. Longley promised to have some papers with the interview in, mailed to me as soon as it appeared, which would be tomorrow morning. Said it was a dandy piece of news, didn't he, fellows? And thanked me ever so many times for my extremely modest way of telling it."

Elephant had a wide grin on his face about this time, and Frank could draw his own conclusions as to just what the gentleman really did say.

"Well, I must say that Mr. Marsh puzzles me right along," he remarked. "And all I hope is, that when we come to learn the truth about him it isn't some unpleasant surprise he means to fling us."

"He acted mighty nice, anyhow," remarked Elephant.

"And that's a fact, ain't it, Nat?" remarked Larry, turning to the stutterer.

Possibly Nat had been preparing for his little speech, and shaped his lips so as to give utterance to the few words promptly; for he astonished them all by calmly remarking, with not a trace of hesitation:

"It sure is; there, how's that?"

"Bully! Keep it up, and you'll be all hunky!" ejaculated Larry.

"But see here, how about that grub?" demanded Andy, suddenly remembering that it was now one o'clock, and that they had eaten an early breakfast.

"Wow! the chances are it's all burned up!" cried Elephant, making a bee-line for the door of the shop; in which rush he was followed by all the others.

But Larry was too good a cook to leave his dinner exposed to any such danger. Before he went outdoors he had moved everything back on the stove; so that when the five hungry lads finally sat down they found every article just right.

While they ate, many questions flew back and forth. Larry wanted to know more particulars about that little affair with the dog, and just how Andy knocked the savage beast headlong with that handy monkey wrench; also what Miss Alice looked like; whether she had black eyes, or blue; and so many other things in connection with the dainty little miss that Andy begged Frank to seal his lips, because their comrade was only doing this for a lark.

Frank on his part was not wholly satisfied with what he had heard concerning the new attempt of the mysterious tourist to pry into his affairs. He every little while would spring some new question, which Larry answered to the best of his ability. Evidently Frank was trying to discover the real motives actuating Mr. Marsh when he so suddenly decided to remain around Bloomsbury a few days, and made such a lame excuse for so doing.

The balance of the afternoon was passed as usual. Frank and Andy went up again along about four o'clock, everything being favorable for an ascent. It was the desire of the young pilot to ascertain just what effect the several little changes he had made would have upon his mastery of the biplane.

Evidently they gave him more or less solid satisfaction; since, when the time came for a final landing, with the westering sun throwing almost horizontal beams upon the aviation field before dropping beyond the trees, Frank had a smile on his face, and Andy looked more pleased than ever.

So another night came around, on which at least they need not fear a repetition of the escaped convict's visit.

CHAPTER XX

THE RIVAL AVIATORS

"It's what I call a blooming shame, that's what!" declared Andy. "Here's the day of the big race come along, and it's within an hour of the time set for the start from Bloomsbury high school campus; and the measly old weatherman has to dole us out a 'probable rain' sign. Going to upset all our calculations sure; and disappoint all those fine people over in Hazenhurst."

"That's where the shoe pinches, Frank," spoke up Larry. "He's just thinking about one pretty little girl who will be waiting to wave her handkerchief when the hero of the bulldog scrap comes whizzing around that old liberty pole."

"Am I?" demanded Andy, indignantly. "Just you take a look yonder at the western horizon, and tell me what you see there?"

"A low down bank of clouds, that's a fact, Andy," replied the other, candidly. "But only for this race business you wouldn't take any particular notice of that same. You remember it looked just as bad the other day, and petered out without ever giving us a drop of rain."

"Yes, that's so, Larry," observed Frank. "I've been watching those clouds for some little while now. They don't seem to be climbing up, as far as I could see."

"But I sure saw a little something right then, that may have been lightning," put in Elephant.

"I reckon you did," Frank admitted, "for I saw it, too. One thing sure, there's going to be no trial for elevation today. Nothing could tempt me to bore up thousands of feet, with a dark storm threatening below. Even if we escaped the wind, we might be kept up there until night came on."

"Excuse me, if you please," remarked Andy, with a shudder. "It's bad enough up there on a bright, sunshiny day, let alone night, with a storm howling below. The judges won't allow of such a thing. We'll put off altitude until a better day."

"Percy will be mad, though," said Elephant. "He just hates to give in; and if they let him have his way he'd defy you to make the trial, no matter what the weather."

"Well, that's why I made sure there were sensible men on the jury that's going to decide this race," Frank remarked, confidently. "I happened to remember what a hot-head Percy is. While I'm ready to meet him in any reasonable test, to prove which of our aeroplanes is the better, I don't want to act like a crazy aviator. There's danger enough, goodness knows, at the best, without taking chances that no sensible person would consider."

"Is everything all ready, Frank?" asked the other Bird boy.

"I believe so. Wait till I lock the shop, and then we'll take a little spin before heading for the campus, just to warm the engine up."

"There's nothing lying around, is there?" asked Andy, anxiously; "in case a fellow took a notion to break in here while the circus is on in town, and everybody interested in our biplanes?"

"I've made sure of that," smiled his cousin; adding significantly: "I suppose you're thinking of Mr. Marsh right now?"

"That's who I am," came the prompt reply. "Don't you see how he would have loads of time to get in and rummage around, while all of us were off—even Colonel Josiah is bound to be at the high school building this p. m. Perhaps Mr. Marsh had that game in mind when he asked so many questions about the race."

"Oh! you suspicious chap," laughed Frank. "But rest easy, Andy, Mr. Marsh could look a long while through here without discovering any sign of my experiments; or at any rate, what success I had met with in the same. If he goes to all the trouble to get into the shop he'll have his work for nothing."

"And I'm going to make it a point to keep an eye out for that same gent," declared Larry, positively; "and if he vanishes from the campus just you make up your mind your Uncle Larry will be camping on his trail. I'd just like to see him

breaking into a private building, no matter if it is only the workshop of two boys. Let him try it, if he wants to see what nice quarters Chief Waller has in the Bloomsbury lockup. You hear me?"

"After you give us the shove-off, boys, get on your wheels and hike for the campus. We expect you to be there to start us in the race. Something depends on a clever get-away, you know," Frank observed, as he locked the door, and put the key in his pocket.

A short time later the biplane rose swiftly, like a hawk that had been startled, and began to mount upward in gigantic circles, the faithful little Kinkaid engine throbbing with the regularity of heart beats.

As directed, no sooner had Larry, Elephant and Nat seen the Bird boys well off, than they mounted their waiting wheels, brought over for this especial purpose, and started for town.

Anybody could see without trouble that Bloomsbury was in the throes of a tremendous excitement that afternoon. People abandoned their houses in crowds, and flocked toward the campus of the high school, which seemed to be the hub of a vast wheel, the squads of citizens taking the part of spokes, all headed toward the common center.

And nearly everybody seemed to be turning around, to observe the biplane which was plainly visible, as Frank and Andy warmed the engine up for speedy use. All sorts of remarks reached the three boys, as they slackened their pace, once inside the limits of the town. The vast majority of the crowds seemed to be in favor of the Bird boys; though of course there were some who sympathized with the opposition; not because they cared so very much for Percy and Sandy, as of a desire to be on the other side of the fence. Some boys are built that way. They call it "taking the weaker part" but in reality it is a spirit of contrariness that pushes them on.

And when they reached the vicinity of the campus Larry and his comrades were astonished to see the multitude that had gathered to witness the novel event. All sorts of vehicles were parked in the nearby side streets, from big touring cars, and little electrics, to farm wagons; and even a hayrick, on which a dozen country people had ridden some ten miles, with a desire to witness the miracle of the twentieth century, the flying boys of Bloomsbury.

"Oh! my! where do they all come from?" gasped Elephant, as he looked around at the sea of faces.

"Thank goodness," remarked Larry, "Chief Waller is on deck with all his force, to keep the crowds back. Only for that how would the aeroplanes ever get started?"

"L-l-look y-y-yonder!" said Stuttering Nat, pointing, as he stood beside his wheel. "T-t-there he is, f-f-fellows!"

"You mean the mysterious Mr. Marsh?" echoed Larry. "So I see, and his friend the great editor is with him too. If I get a chance to have a few words with that Mr. Longley I'm going to ask him just why it is we haven't received a copy of his paper containing the account of Jules' capture. He didn't keep his promise to me, and I don't like that way of doing things."

"There's Percy with his biplane over yonder, holding a levee," remarked Elephant.

"He looks as happy as a clam," said Larry. "You know his way, fellows? Ten to one he's dead sure he's got this race clinched already. See him shake hands with Bessie Clinton! I can just guess how he's saying what he means to do to Frank and Andy. Huh!" finishing his sentence with a snort of disgust.

"The feller that crows last crows loudest," observed Elephant.

"Well, you ain't got that just correct, Elephant," remarked Larry, letting his frown disappear in a grin; "but it means the same thing anyhow. Let's find a place to stack our wheels, and get around. The Chief will let us go inside the lines, for he knows we belong to Frank's crowd, and are needed in the push-off."

Just as Larry had said the big police head met them with a warm smile of welcome. His sympathies were positively with the Bird boys, though he would do his duty impartially as he saw it. But Larry and his friends had brought him a piece of rare good luck in the capture of the escaped convict, and for this alone the Chief had a warm feeling in his big heart for them all.

Presently a cry went up.

"They're coming! The Bird boys are headed this way, fellows! Get back

everybody, and give 'em plenty of room to land! Move back! Make way there!"

The police assisted in driving the dense crowds still farther away from the open campus, where the aeroplane would be likely to drop under Frank's clever manipulation of the levers.

It happened that the big campus of the high school was entirely destitute of trees, being in reality a wide field, on which many of the town sports took place from time to time. In this way it offered a very good starting point for an affair of this sort.

Every sound was hushed as the biplane circled the field, like a bird seeking a favorable spot on which to alight. Then Frank headed straight for the vacant place, left on purpose for the second aeroplane.

When he landed and, after running a short distance on the green, came to a full stop, a storm of cheers broke out. Evidently the Bird boys had a host of warm adherents among the attendant crowds.

Frank did not allow himself to pay the least attention to the shouting lookers-on. They would never see him bowing and scraping before the race had even been started, like Percy had done. Time enough for all that later on.

"Look at him, would you?" said Larry, indignantly, as he joined the young aviators. "Percy thinks all that shouting was for him. See him waving his hand and laughing! Why, he's being crowned with the wreath of victor already, in imagination! Bah! he makes me tired, that's what!"

"Don't pay any attention to him, Larry," smiled Frank. "I think he does that on purpose to make some of us mad. Percy generally has a reason in everything he does. He's a sly one. It seems to give him a heap of pleasure, and I'm sure it doesn't hurt us one little bit. Let him have his fun."

"Well, perhaps he's smart enough to know this is the only chance he'll get to listen to the cheers," remarked Andy, grimly; "for when the game is over Percy is only going to be found among the 'also rans'!"

"That's it," crowed Larry, gleefully.

But Frank said nothing. If he believed that he would have an easy thing of it, and

leave his rival far in the lurch, he gave no expression to such views.

"Here come the judges," remarked Elephant; "and they're going to explain just what the conditions of the race will be. Yes, Percy has quit laughing. He looks sober enough right now. Listen to what Judge Perrine says, fellows."

The judge had gained a spot between the rival biplanes, where he could be easily heard. Then he started to explain just what the committee having the race in charge had decided the rules should be.

In the first place, he remarked, it would be utterly suicidal for the young aviators to think of trying for height on such a threatening day. That would be left until the second afternoon, to be settled then, if both parties were agreed.

After that he went on to state how points were to be given for expert management of the aeroplane, as seen from the start and return; also for speed. The time of reaching the liberty pole at Hazenhurst was to be taken there by a member of the committee sent over for that purpose. After leaving that town the rival biplanes were to circle the peak of Old Thunder Top three times, and last of all make a landing on the campus.

"Any questions, either of you, before the word is given to start?" asked the gentleman in charge of arrangements, after he had finished reading his rules.

Neither of the contestants evidently had anything to ask. They knew what they had to do only too well; and both were like restive horses, awaiting the tap of the bell, or the crack of the pistol, to be off on the jump.

That vast crowd surged and swayed, everybody wishing to see the start, which would prove a novel sight to many of the country people at least. Once the aeroplanes had soared aloft, their flight could be watched without trouble.

Frank and Andy had mounted to their places; and an air of expectancy hung over the broad campus. After they had left the earth it would be a straightaway course for both contestants in the direction of Hazenhurst.

"Are you ready?" asked the starter, in loud voice.

Both replied in the affirmative.

"Then go!" and with the words the judge fired a pistol into the air.

Instantly the whirr of the motors was heard, and with a rush along the ground the contesting biplanes started upon the long race!

CHAPTER XXI

THE RACE WITH THE STORM

It seemed to most of the thousands of lookers-on as though both biplanes left the green at the same instant. And as they speedily soared upward it was impossible for any one among those left behind to positively decide whether either one of the rivals had the slightest lead.

Of course a hurricane of shouts had broken loose the very second there came a forward movement. It was as though the repressed enthusiasm of the vast throng had refused longer to remain bottled up, and just had to find a vent.

Still that volume of sound would prove but a shadow to the wild outburst by which the ultimate victor might expect to be greeted when he came in later on.

Frank saw that his rival was right there alongside when they had sped swiftly over what might be five miles; and it took very few minutes to accomplish this part of the race, too.

"He's holding us, Frank!" shouted Andy, nervously.

"I know it; don't let that worry you!" was the composed reply he received.

"But why don't you let go, and eat up ahead?" demanded the other again, presently, when he had kept watching the progress of the second biplane, and calculating the distance between them.

Truth to tell Andy was so suspicious of Percy that he felt a constant dread lest the other might play some dastardly trick, meaning to thus gain an advantage. Of course no one could guess what the nature of this game might be; but he had the reputation of being a "slick one," and among boys that signifies a fellow who never hesitates to apply mean tactics rather than accept a square "beat."

In that case the sooner they put on a spurt, and left their rival behind, the better Andy would like it.

"I'm waiting to study his way of doing things first," Frank answered, as steadily as though they were seated in the shop, discussing arrangements. "Just hold your horses a bit, and we'll start something. I'm nearly ready to begin showing what our new engine can do."

So the impatient Andy had to keep his eagerness in check, although his very heart seemed to be eating itself with suspense.

Then he caught a quick breath. Frank moved his hand clutching the speed lever. They had immediately commenced to increase their forward motion to a perceptible extent.

Anxiously did Andy glue his eyes on the other aeroplane, and for a brief time he seemed to almost hold his breath as he watched to see whether they would leave it behind, with Percy desperately endeavoring to copy their spurt.

Looking thus he had seen Percy instantly imitate the action of the other, proving that he too had been keeping a little extra speed in reserve. And as the minutes passed Andy failed to discover the slightest difference in the relative positions of the two airships.

"Frank, it didn't go!" he cried, with beads of perspiration on his forehead; due, not to the heat of the afternoon, for they were making lots of circulation in the stagnant air by their rapid progress; but because of intense emotion.

"That's so, Andy," replied the pilot; "but perhaps a second time it may be more successful!"

"Oh! have you any more held back, then?" asked Andy, in a trembling voice, from which he could not however keep out the tone of joy.

"A little. Wait till we are two-thirds of the way there, and then watch out!"

They talked no more. It was difficult, to say the least, when going at such a frightful pace through the air. Andy divided his time watching first the near-by aeroplane, which Percy was so skillfully guiding toward the haven ahead; and then turning his attention towards the western sky.

That low bank of clouds had commenced to move upward now. Yes, and when Andy looked, he could see the sudden wicked gleam of the zigzag lightning as it shot athwart the black masses.

No doubt he experienced a certain amount of anxiety concerning the coming of that summer storm. It would be only natural that he should; for if the aeroplanes were ever caught in the sweep of the furious tornado they would be as straws, to be toppled over and over to the ground far below.

But the fever of the race had full possession of Andy by now; and even given a chance to descend it is doubtful whether he would have availed himself of it.

Perhaps the storm would hold off long enough to allow them to complete the conditions of the event. And, anyway, so long as Percy chose to take the chances, it must not be for them to give up, and let him crow over them by finishing alone.

Was Frank affected in the same way as his cousin? Perhaps, to some extent; but he would have welcomed a proposition from Percy looking to the calling off of the contest to another and better day. If no such bail came Frank might deem it his duty to keep on.

Now they were approaching Hazenhurst; that is, they could easily see the many houses of the town; and the commons near the center.

"Another big crowd waiting there to see us turn the liberty pole," ventured Andy, who had been using the glasses a brief time before, perhaps in the vague hope of being able to discover a certain fluttering handkerchief among the waving hundreds, that had a familiar face behind it.

"I guess it's about time we took the lead, if we can," observed Frank.

He had no sooner spoken these words than Andy felt the sudden change of pace; for it seemed to him that the biplane actually jumped forward. When he heard loud shouts of rage and chagrin from the direction of the other aeroplane he did not need to be told that Percy had no further speed to let loose; and that he recognized the fact of sure defeat staring him in the face, unless fortune proved kind, and brought about some accident to Frank's machine.

If what Percy must be wishing in his heart just then could only be realized, no

doubt the leading biplane would crumple up, and drop to the ground like a crippled bird.

But no such event came to pass. Frank continued to slowly but steadily gain on his competitor. He knew that undoubtedly Percy was trying, by every means possible, to increase the power of his engine, already taxed to the utmost limit.

"How is it now?" asked Frank, as they began to gradually descend, so as to get within the proper distance from the earth at the time they made the sweep around the liberty pole.

"Still gaining a foot at a time!" shouted the exultant Andy; who thought things could hardly have been better for him, if they were allowed to pass around that stake with their rival trailing in the rear—for surely *she* would see him there in the limelight, and he was eager to pick Miss Alice out of those many hundreds gathered to cheer the plucky air navigators on their way.

Now they could hear the hoarse shouts that arose. All Hazenhurst had apparently gathered for this grand spectacle of man conquering the air. It was an inspiring sight; and while the younger element cheered madly, the older people gazed in sheer awe at seeing what, most of them had up to now, doubted could ever come to pass.

Frank was keenly awake to everything. He did not mean to make any mistake at this critical moment. It was the part of wisdom to circle around the liberty pole at quite a little distance. Likely enough Percy would be more reckless, and cut in closer, hoping in that way to make up a little of his lost ground. Very well, let him, if so be he chose to take chances.

The Bird boys had the better machine, there could now be no doubt of that in Frank's mind. And as they had been able to gain while on the forward leg, the same conditions could be made to prevail when on the homeward stretch.

One thing alone troubled Frank. He realized that it was folly in them to think of carrying out the part of the conditions that called for three circles around the peak of Old Thunder Top before heading for the high school campus on the last stage of the race.

And after they were well on the way toward home, he meant to hail Percy to propose that they combine to cut that risky part of the performance out. A joint

agreement would settle it; and doubtless the judges would hail that decision as the part of prudence. Human lives were worth more than empty honors; and while the gathered thousands might be cheated out of a thrilling sight as they stood and looked toward far-off Thunder Top, still few would complain.

Would Percy agree?

That was where Frank felt doubtful. He knew the nature of the other only too well. Perhaps Percy would flaunt it in his face that he was a coward! Possibly he would declare that as for him, he meant to circle the mountain top those three times no matter if the storm did catch him; and having done his duty, would snatch the victory from his weak-hearted rival.

Now the liberty pole loomed up half a mile ahead. But the next clap of thunder was certainly louder than any preceding one had been. Still, the storm would be behind them in heading for home, and hence they might keep ahead of it, if only they did not dally in the neighborhood of Old Thunder Top.

Frank had settled down to the proper distance from the ground. Having been here before he knew whether any obstacle would present itself in making that swoop around the tall mast. Not for a single instant must he allow his eyes to leave the object of his flight. Andy could observe what was transpiring below but to the young pilot of the biplane his only recollection would be a hazy one of a multitude of upturned faces, a wilderness of fluttering handkerchiefs and flags together with hats thrown into the air; and the whole accompanied by stentorian cheers from thousands of throats.

With scarcely any perceptible slackening of his fearful speed the leading aviator swept in a graceful curve around the big liberty pole; and having made the complete circuit, once more headed off toward distant Bloomsbury, with the gathering storm grumbling and growling in the rear.

Andy was happy for the moment; and he thought he had good reason to be. In the first place, they had met Percy going in, while they were coming out; though Frank had wisely given his reckless rival plenty of swinging room, not wishing to have a head-on collision. Then again, Andy had positively caught sight of that pretty rosy countenance that he had seen pale with fear the other day, at the time he stood between Miss Alice and that savage bulldog.

Yes, she was there, just where she had promised to be, with the mayor alongside;

and how her dainty little handkerchief did wave to and fro, when the daring Bird boys were making their circuit of the liberty pole!

Gradually the shouts of the enthusiastic Hazenhurst people grew fainter in the distance; for when going at the rate of a mile a minute it does not take long to lose even such a vast volume of sound.

Frank determined to put the little plan he had in mind into practice. Better speak to Percy while the opportunity was still open. So he slowed down just a trifle.

"Frank, they're gaining!" shrilled Andy, in new alarm.

"I want them to," answered the other. "I cut off some of our speed on purpose to let him come up where I can shout out to him."

The second biplane was now close alongside. Andy could see the faces of those aboard, and noted the fact that they were flushed with the new hope that Frank had shot his bolt, and that his engine was now going back on him.

Waiting until the other was on about even terms Frank called out as loudly as he could.

"Hello! Percy!"

"Well, what d'ye want?" came back the surly answer.

"Don't you think it's next door to foolish for us to head up to the peak with that storm coming swooping after us? Suppose we make straight for the campus, and call that a race? Another day we can fix it to make the try over again."

Frank was very doubtful even while shouting this proposition; and just as he feared, Percy chose to look upon it as a sign of weakening.

"You can do what you please," he called back, with a shrill laugh, "I know that I'm going around the top my three times. If you're afraid, back down, and make for the town. We'll see who's got the most nerve right now. Get that?"

CHAPTER XXII

A TERRIBLE MOMENT ON OLD THUNDER TOP.

That settled it!

Andy had been holding in his breath while this short conversation was being held between the rival pilots of the aircraft, with voices raised to shouts.

"Are you going to give it up, Frank?" he questioned anxiously, as the other once more let his new Kinkaid engine out to its utmost, so that they began to forge to the front again.

Frank hardly knew what to do. Prudence dictated that he decline to risk his life and that of his cousin in such a foolhardy attempt to fulfill the conditions of the race. And yet he did hate most unmercifully to show the white feather. What lad with red blood in his veins does not? And then there was Andy, who, seeing his state of wavering uncertainty, began to plead with him to try the thing.

"Frank, don't let 'em crow over us!" he went on, the fever still in his blood. "We can do it, all right, you know. It'd only take a few minutes to wheel around that bald old peak three times; and then a long dip will carry us clear to the campus. Frank, head for Old Thunder Top! Show him he ain't the only Bloomsbury aviator that's got nerve!"

And so Frank decided. Possibly he might regret his choice when it was too late; but having taken the jump, he began to gradually rise, so as to get on a level with the high peak.

"He's right after us, Frank!" commented Andy, seeking by that means to keep the determination of his cousin from growing slack.

"So is the storm!" thought Frank, as he realized that already some of the advance

couriers of the cloud bank had raced up, and were even then around them.

Sitting there, with his teeth pressed firmly together, Frank realized that by deciding on accepting the challenge Percy had so scornfully thrown to him, he had indeed taken big chances.

Would they ever live to finish that race; or must the wind, when it finally bore down upon them, send both aeroplanes, together with their occupants, to a terrible fate far below?

It was now too late to change his course. And besides, Frank was not even at this moment fully ready to throw up the sponge. Perhaps the storm would kindly hold off a little longer, as sometimes happened, and give them a fair chance to go around the peak of the bald mountain thrice before heading for home.

"Hang the old clouds!" cried Andy. "The folks won't be able to follow us around each time. And if Percy chooses to turn tail, and cut for home, declaring that he did the bend three times who's going to prove it a lie, tell me?"

"Oh, some of them have fine glasses, and you may be sure they're on us about every second. They'd get his number, all right; just let him try some of that funny business, that's all," Frank replied.

Andy said no more. Truth to tell, the conditions surrounding them were by now beginning to look fearfully desperate, with those billowing clouds at times shutting out all view of the earth so far below.

Frank had only eyes for the rocky top of the mountain, though he knew that he must presently also keep constant watch for the rival aeroplane; for Percy might elect to pass around the other way, there being no stipulated course about it; and in that event there was always the chance of a collision.

When racing such a reckless fellow, one had to make his eyes do double duty, as Frank Bird had learned long ago.

He could see the pair of white-headed eagles soaring around the top of the mountain, as though glorying in the battle of Nature's forces that was so soon to be opened. Frank inwardly wished they were as capable of finding shelter as those sagacious birds.

"Watch out for the other biplane, Andy!" he called, in the ear of his chum, as he started on his first circuit around Old Thunder Top.

His last words were fairly drowned in a peal of thunder, that seemed to announce the near approach of the gale. Even then there was possibly time for them to have made Bloomsbury, had they been content with just one spin around the bald knob of the great rocky height. But the conditions of the race said three; and Percy meant to hold them to the letter of the contract.

Frank well knew that far away in the home town anxious hearts were beating, as loving eyes kept glued to the fieldglasses—he could easily understand that not a few among the applauding spectators would ten thousand times rather the race were lost than that these terrible chances were taken. Yet he had started, and there could be no help for it now, however much he would have liked to give the thing up.

Doubtless others were admiring the pluck shown; but then these had no personal interest in the lives of the young adventurers.

They had now finished the first circuit and were starting on the second. Under normal conditions it would have been next to nothing to Frank to guide his biplane around the head of Old Thunder Top twice more. But with such dreadful surroundings it required all the nerve of which he could boast not to turn and shoot downward after making that initial circuit.

The clouds were beginning to scurry around them now, showing that the wind was arriving. Frank knew this when he once more started around the peak, for he met it head on.

This meant another peril. He had to keep his wits fully about him, lest a sudden flaw tilt the biplane over. And it was at that moment of uncertainty that the young aviator had reason to rejoice because of that new device under the aeroplane whereby an automatic balance was maintained between the planes.

Birdmen who have attempted to show their ability to manage an aeroplane close to a big city like New York claim that their greatest danger arises from the numerous gusts of wind that come out of the deep canyons formed by the skyscraper buildings.

"There they go!" screeched Andy, suddenly.

Frank received something of a start, for the other aeroplane shot past not more than thirty feet away from the tip of his port plane. It had been a narrow escape from a calamity that might have cost all their lives; for Percy, for some unaccountable reason, had chosen to pass around the summit of Old Thunder Top in just the opposite way from that they had taken.

How foolhardy to keep this up! It was next door to madness, Frank concluded. He was determined to have nothing more to do with it, but give over the idea of fulfilling the conditions of the race.

Was it too late to think of making the home town? Would the hovering gale swoop down on them when half way, and in the twinkling of an eye wind up their mortal careers?

Frank had learned his lesson. He was grimly determined that if good fortune allowed him to get out of this scrape alive he would never again allow himself to be tempted into a thing that he positively knew to be rash beyond all description.

But it might be too late now. The storm would soon come riding along with a rush and a roar. Sorry, indeed, the frail aeroplane caught in its merciless grip. A handful of straw would not be scattered more quickly by the onrushing blast than the pitiful frame that went to make up the imitation bird.

Even the eagles had mounted higher out of reach of the storm; or else sought some snug retreat among the rocks, where they could bid it defiance; at any rate had utterly lost all sight of the king birds.

But where was Bloomsbury? How would he know which way to turn, when desirous of fleeing before the threatening storm? The clouds had gathered in such force that it was now utterly impossible to see the earth far below. And how pitiful to think of those two little aeroplanes isolated so far away from any shelter.

At such a time it behooved one to do his thinking quickly. Andy was really of no use just then, for he had become really frightened by the darkness gathering around them; realizing at last what folly it had been in accepting that dare on the part of reckless Percy. So Frank knew that he must depend entirely upon himself, if he yet hoped to escape the consequence of their rashness.

Another thought flashed across the active mind of Frank Bird just then. Would it

be possible for them to alight on the summit of Old Thunder Top? And even granted that such a difficult feat might be safely engineered, could they find any way of staying there while the storm raged?

He made up his mind on the spur of the moment. It was simply madness to think of shooting downward now. The storm hung low, and most of its violence would be apt to pass by beneath the height marking that lofty crown. Yes, the safest thing for them in the long run would be to land on the rock, as they had done several times before, and then seek to save their lives, no matter what became of the biplane.

Money would purchase another aeroplane; but money could never restore a lost life. So Frank reduced the speed at which he was rushing around the top of the rocky mountain.

If the wind would only hold back another minute he believed he would be able to make it. But Andy must know, for he would have to hold himself ready to jump at the proper second, so as to stop the fluttering air craft before it went beyond the further edge.

At least one thing was in his favor as he turned back to make the second circuit, as Andy believed; the air currents were from the west, and they faced them now; hence the biplane was in the proper shape to effect a landing; birds almost invariably drop to earth facing the breeze, and not with it.

"I'm going to land on top, Andy!" he shouted, knowing that the other would be panic-stricken by the fact that he had shut off nearly all the power.

"Oh! why?" cried his cousin.

"It's our only chance; we could never get to the ground! Be ready to jump like you did before! Watch out, now, Andy!"

"I'm ready, Frank!"

Andy tried to control his voice when he shouted this; but it was quavering sadly, what with his fright, and belief that the very end of all things had probably come for them. The lightning was flashing savagely, and the boom of the thunder down below sounded like the discharge of tons of dynamite.

It was just in between these sounds, when a silence of a few seconds happened to brood over the wild scene, that Frank heard loud cries. They came from the top of the rock close by, just where they were heading for at that very moment.

"They've struck the rock, and been smashed!" shrieked Andy, whose face was undoubtedly the color of a piece of yellow parchment, if the horrible state of his feelings was any index.

Frank had already guessed as much himself; but just then it became necessary that he give his whole and undivided attention to their own chances for making a landing; or else, if a flaw of wind came just at the wrong time their aeroplane might also meet with the same fate that had overtaken that of Percy.

"Now! jump, Andy!" he called, as the bicycle wheels struck the surface of the rocky plateau.

Even the rising wind assisted in halting their progress, and both boys were able to drop out of their seats. Most fellows would have immediately thrown themselves down on the rock, thinking only of saving their lives; for there was real danger of their being swept off the exposed plateau, should the wind become very violent, as was to be expected at such an altitude.

Even at such a frightful time Frank's ready wits did not desert him. He instantly seized a stout rope, and commenced fastening the engine of the biplane to an upturned point of rock, which seemed just made for an anchorage. Andy caught the spirit that animated his cousin, and did what he could to secure the biplane; not that either of them had much hope of its being spared to them.

They had hardly managed to do all that lay in their power when with a roar the storm broke. The next few minutes would decide whether they were to retain their grip on life, or be hurled down to the cruel rocks below.

Frank clutched his cousin by the arm, and began dragging him across the top of the plateau, both of them bending low so as to escape the worst of the wind's fury. And from the confident manner in which he drew Andy, the latter began to pluck up fresh hope; for it seemed possible that Frank knew of some sort of refuge.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE BIRD BOYS' TRIUMPH

"Crawl in here!"

As he said this Frank Bird pushed his nearly exhausted cousin into a narrow crevice of the rock. It was a retreat which he had noticed on their first visit to the crown of Old Thunder Top. At that time Frank had made up his mind that if ever he were marooned on that lonely mountain crest, he would seek temporary shelter there.

Little had he dreamed of what the future held for himself and Andy; and that one day he would have good cause to remember with thanksgiving that same split in the massive rock.

A surprise awaited them, and of an agreeable nature. Andy had not crawled five feet inside the shelter than he gave utterance to a loud cry.

"Percy, is this you?" Frank heard him say, with positive relief in his voice.

"Yes, all that's left of me," came a reply. "We got banged awful hard on the rock, when my machine played that nasty trick on me. It was all I could do to crawl here; and Sandy had to help pull me. I reckon my leg's broke."

"Is Sandy there, too?" demanded Frank.

"Yes, and banged up some too; but mighty glad he didn't go kerflummick down to them rocks when Percy foozled," grumbled another voice.

"Aw! let up on that, won't you?" the other snarled. "I tell you it was all the fault of the blamed cranky engine; it went bad on me just at that time the flaw struck us on the side. Keep a still tongue between your teeth, Sandy Hollingshead."

That was Percy all over. Even in this grave crisis he would not admit having made an error of judgment; but was determined to lay all the blame upon the faulty construction of the aeroplane.

But Frank was mighty glad that both boys had escaped the terrible fate to which they had seemed doomed at the time their machine smashed down on the plateau.

"We're all lucky, fellows," he said cheerily; "and since we've got to bunk together for some time, let's make the best of a bad bargain. Here, Andy, take this bit of candle, after I've lighted it, and hold over while I look to see if I can do anything to help Percy. We ought to be able to tell whether his leg is broken or not, and perhaps relieve his suffering some."

This they did, and after a close examination both declared that beyond a severe wrench and some bruises there was nothing the matter. Any ordinary lad would have felt grateful for this intelligence. Percy only growled the more, declaring that if his leg was not broken it felt worse than such a condition would bring.

"What can we do, Frank?" asked Andy, apprehensively, as he listened to the roar of the storm without. "Must we stay up here all night?"

"I'm afraid that will be the result of our foolishness," remarked the other, gravely. "And we ought to be thankful that our punishment isn't any worse."

The summer storm began to die out after an hour; but by then the afternoon had drawn near an end; so that it was folly to even think of making any effort looking toward their escape from the rocky crest of Old Thunder Top.

Frank crawled out of the friendly crevice, and after a short time returned, to bring good news.

"So far as I can see the biplane isn't badly damaged," he said to Andy.

"Hey! you ain't going to desert us up here, I hope?" cried Percy, in sudden alarm; which remark proved how much he was depending on Frank after all to get them out of the bad scrape.

"Not at all," came the reply. "Nobody can go down till morning. But if the machine can be coaxed to work decently then, I can carry the whole bunch, one

at a time, to the ground."

This prospect of being brought home by a victorious rival was apparently not very pleasant to Percy's proud soul. He grumbled for a bit, and then said:

"Huh! guess you'll have to drop me in our front yard then, 'cause I won't be able to crawl home. I don't want to be seen in this shape, Frank Bird, remember that!"

"Sure, take you wherever you say, Percy. But we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Perhaps we may have to get down by means of a rope after all," the good-natured young aviator replied.

As night came on the clouds rolled away from the summit of the mountain, and Frank could see the light of the town far below. He knew only too well that many anxious hearts would be suffering because of the dreadful uncertainty that hung over the fate of the quartette of venturesome aeroplane boys.

"I'm going to find some way to let them know we're all safe," he said, finally.

"But how?" demanded Andy. "If it was daylight we could stand out in a row, and they'd see us through the glasses. Or we could use the wigwag code, which some of the Boy Scouts would translate. But in the dark—"

"That's just what occurred to me," said Frank, quickly. "Listen, Andy. Strange to say, our little searchlight on the biplane escaped being broken when we landed so roughly. I mean to use that to signal with."

At that his cousin gave vent to an exclamation of delight.

"Great! It sure takes you to think up these things, Frank!" he cried.

Accordingly Frank secured the acetyline lamp and having lighted the same, stood out where his actions could surely be seen by some of the anxious watchers in Bloomsbury. Then he started to wave the light slowly but methodically, so as to induce some sort of reply.

After about ten minutes he called out to Andy and the others:

"One of the Scouts is starting to answer with a lantern. And now to try and make him understand that the whole four of us are up here safe, and will stay until

morning."

Even the groaning Percy managed to crawl to the mouth of the crevice to watch operations. Frank persisted until he knew that his message had been understood, for the answer had come "O. K."

"Now we can take things more comfortably, because we know they won't be worrying about us," he said.

But that was a night never to be forgotten. Nobody obtained much sleep, for what with the novelty of their situation, the hard rock underneath, and the almost constant complaints of Percy, who was really in great pain, they watched the stars in their wonderful procession toward the west until finally dawn began to appear.

As soon as it was fairly light Frank got busy. He examined his biplane in the most thorough manner; for it would never do to have a slip, once he quitted the safety of the plateau. Rather than take chances he would have waited until help had arrived at the bottom of the cliff, with a rope which could be hauled up by means of a cord; or carried up the chipped footholds by an agile lad like Larry.

But he found that his machine could be readily put in apple-pie condition. The sun was up before things were ready. Percy declined to be the first to accompany him, for some reason or other, so Andy went.

The trip to Bloomsbury was made without a single hitch; and great was the rejoicing when they landed on the commons. But remembering his promise Frank did not linger. He succeeded in transporting Sandy the next trip; and that worthy made haste to lose himself in the crowd without even thanking his rescuer.

Last of all Percy was carried to his home. Frank could not land in the Carberry yard on account of the trees; but he did close by; and as the injured boy's mother, as well as a score of others, were eagerly waiting, there would be little difficulty in getting Percy indoors.

"I suppose I ought to thank you, Frank, for this," said the injured boy with a half surly look on his face, which, however, may have been caused by his pain.

"Don't mention it, Percy," smiled Frank. "I'm sure you would have done the

same for me. Hope you get out soon again; and sorry you lost your biplane. Better luck next time," and with that he turned away.

Having broken away from the crowds on the commons, the two Bird boys, accompanied by their friends, Larry, Elephant and Stuttering Nat, once again sought the privacy of their dear old workshop. Here they were sprawled, taking it as easy as possible, and resting their aching muscles, as they went over the stirring events of the accident again and again, when into the shop strode Mr. Marsh and his friend, Mr. Longley.

The former gentleman at once approached Frank, who, understanding that the seal of mystery that had so long cloaked his actions was about to be removed, stood up.

"Shake hands, Frank, won't you?" said the other, with a look of warm admiration on his face that quite captured the young aviator. "Longley here has copies of the papers he promised your cousin, containing an account of your little episode with the escaped convict. But Frank, I've got another mission here. And I hope you'll be of a mind to accept the offer I want to make you on behalf of the well known firm making the very brand of aeroplane you pin your faith to. Will you listen?"

"Certainly, sir," Frank answered, accepting the hand that was outstretched; "as to accepting any offer, that is another matter entirely. But please go on."

Andy, Larry and the other two listened eagerly; for they believed that the Bird boys were about to be given as great a compliment as any aviator could hope for.

"I represent the company that makes the best aeroplane in the country. I am empowered to be constantly on the watch for just such daring yet cautious aviators as you two have proven yourselves. That was why I came here to Bloomsbury, because we knew something of what you had been doing. And I want to say right here that personally I firmly believe those glowing reports have been in no way exaggerated; for you both have the making of admirable aviators in you, after you have been in the company of the chief of them all for a few weeks. And I hope you won't decide too hastily, and turn an offer down without due consideration. Are you open to an engagement for a year to come with my company, and prove to the public what they claim for their make of machine?"

Frank shook his head, though with a pleased smile; for who would not have felt

a thrill of pride at such a remarkable evidence of confidence in his abilities. This gentleman knew every famous flier of the day; and that he should rate the Bird boys as among those who were "called" was a compliment worth having.

"I'm afraid we'll have to disappoint you, Mr. Marsh," he said. "In the first place our fathers would not want us to become public birdmen; and in the second we expect to attend school for several years yet before branching out. No, please forget it. I believe in the merits of the aeroplane I've been using. The new features are wonderful; and as long as I continue to fly I expect to stick by that make. But neither of us are professionals. And that will have to end it."

Which it of course did. Mr. Marsh, much against his will, was compelled to leave Bloomsbury without having signed the Bird boys for his enterprising company; but at least he had the satisfaction of knowing that no rival concern could succeed any better than he had.

Just as Frank had said, Percy's injuries were not serious enough to keep him shut up more than a few days. Many times did Frank and Andy have to narrate the entire story of that hazardous feat connected with the race. They never made themselves out heroes; but most people, knowing their modesty, could read between the lines, and understood that Percy Carberry and Sandy owed much to the Bird boys.

Of course such a backset could not long deter Percy from flying. His rich and indulgent mother would supply the cash for another biplane in due season. But it was to be hoped that his experiences might teach him more caution.

Frank himself was resolved never again to be tempted into risking his life unnecessarily simply because a reckless rival threatened to dub him a coward.

As the Bird boys were thoroughly imbued with the aviator spirit it might easily be set down as positive that as time went on they would continue to study the science of flying, and take advantage of every opportunity that presented itself for indulging in their favorite sport.

And we shall certainly hope to meet them again in the near future, when possibly other of their stirring adventures call for a new volume concerning the Bird boys.

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