

THE
MOTOR
BOYS
ON THE
WING



CLARENCE
YOUNG

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ON THE WING

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["IT'S A NOTICE ABOUT A REWARD THAT'S JUST BEEN POSTED," SAID A MAN.](#)

THE MOTOR BOYS ON THE WING

Or

Seeking the Airship Treasure

BY

CLARENCE YOUNG

AUTHOR OF

“THE RACER BOYS SERIES” AND “THE JACK RANGER SERIES.”

ILLUSTRATED

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THE MOTOR BOYS ON THE WING

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THE MOTOR BOYS ON THE WING

CHAPTER I

TWO QUEER MEN

“Don’t try it Jerry, you can’t make it.”

“Yes, I can Bob. There’s more room than you think. Besides, the hay is soft.”

“No, don’t, Jerry. We’re in no hurry,” put in the third member of a trio of boys in a big touring car that was skimming along a pleasant country road behind a load of hay. “Don’t do it!”

“Say, I’m tired of taking in all that fellow’s dust,” returned Jerry Hopkins. “Hold fast fellows, here we go!”

He pressed down the accelerator pedal of the machine and headed the car for a narrow space that showed between the load of hay and the side rails of a bridge that the farm wagon was just crossing.

It was a rather small opening to get through but Jerry was a skillful steersman, and, as he had said, he had traveled behind the load of hay so long, breathing the dust kicked up by the plodding horses, that he was tired of it. The driver had been obstinate and would not pull over, and this was the first chance Jerry had had to pass.

“You’ll have a smash!” predicted Bob Baker.

“Not on your life, Chunky!” called back Jerry.

“Hug the hay—not the bridge—those side rails may be rotten,” advised Ned Slade, as he took a firm grip on the lap-robe rail in front of him.

“Right you are,” admitted Jerry. “Here’s where we hit the red top and timothy. All ready now!”

The big car shot ahead. The farm wagon was rumbling over the bridge, which was none too strong, and when the auto also reached the clattering planks it sounded as if a thunder storm had broken loose.

With quick eyes and ready hands Jerry guided the car. Close up against the sides of the billowy hay he sent the machine to avoid hitting the bridge rail, yet so narrow was the space that the hub caps raked a furrow in a retaining plank,

while the hay whipped the faces of the autoists.

“Look out!” yelled Bob.

“Farther over—farther!” cried Ned.

“Oh, all right. Don’t get excited,” advised Jerry calmly. “We’re safe now.”

They would have been, in another instant, for with a quick turn of the steering wheel the tall lad on the front seat was about to send the car cutting in ahead of the horses, having nearly passed the wagon. But whether the steeds were frightened by the shouts of Ned and Bob, or whether the driver unconsciously or intentionally turned toward the auto was not known. At any rate only by a rapid shifting of his course was Jerry able to avoid a collision. He screwed the wheel around to the left, and then, as he saw that he was running the front tires into the bridge rails he twisted his “helm” once more to the right. By this time the end of the bridge was reached, and Jerry saw an open road ahead of him, having emerged from behind the hay wagon.

He cut sharply into it, so sharply in fact that the mud guard on the right rear wheel scraped the nigh horse, causing the animal to swerve against its mate in fright.

“Whoa there! Hold on! I’ll have th’ law on you fellers!” cried the driver of the hay load.

“Say, you *did* hit his horse,” remarked Bob in a low voice.

“Better pull up and see if he’s going to make trouble. Otherwise he may take our number and report us,” advised Ned.

There was a grinding and shrieking of brakes and the auto came to a stop just ahead of the farm wagon, the driver of which had now quieted his horses.

“What do you mean?” he roared, as he dismounted, whip in hand. “What right you got to smash into me that way?”

Jerry stood up in the machine, and looked at the steeds before replying. A quick glance told him that beyond a mere scratch that had not even drawn blood, the horse he had struck was not injured. Then the tall lad replied.

“Look here, Mister Man. I don’t want any of your talk!”

“Oh you don’t; hey? Wa’al, I’m goin’ to give you some, an’ then I’m going to make a complaint agin ye!”

“No, you’re not,” declared Jerry with easy assurance. “In the first place you’re a road-hog of the worst type. We kept behind you for nearly a mile, swallowing your dust, and, though there were several places where you could have turned out, and let us pass, you wouldn’t do it. I got tired of tooting my horn, and when I saw a chance to slip by I took it. I wouldn’t have barked your horse, if you’d kept to your own side of the bridge, and you know it.

“As it is, your animal isn’t hurt a bit, but you were nearly the cause of something serious happening to us. Now go ahead and make a complaint if you dare. We’ll come right back at you with a worse one for obstructing the road. That’s all I’ve got to say to you, and you can put it in your pipe and smoke it! Hold fast, fellows, here we go!” And with that Jerry threw in his gear, let the clutch slip into place and they were off down the road before the angry and chagrined farmer could think of anything to say.

When he did get his brain to working all he could ejaculate was:

“Wa’al, I’ll be gum-swizzled! Them auto fellers is gittin’ wuss an’ wuss every day. I wish I’d upsot ’em!”

Jerry and his chums were too far off, however, to hear this uncharitable wish, and it would probably have given them little concern had it come to their ears.

“Whew! That was hot while it lasted,” remarked Bob, breathing easily for the first time since the beginning of the little scene.

“You certainly had his number all right, Jerry,” said Ned.

“Yes, there are too many farmers like him,” retorted the tall steersman. “We autoists don’t want any more than our rights on the road.”

“Yes, and that’s one disadvantage of traveling in an auto,” went on Ned, when they were once more skimming peacefully along the highway. “Now if we’d been out in our motorship *Comet* we shouldn’t have had any trouble at all. There’s no blockading of the roads up there,” and he motioned to the blue sky above them.

“No, it’ll be some time before we have to take anybody’s dust up in the air,” was Bob’s opinion.

“Still the upper regions are more crowded than when we first took to ‘sky-larking,’” spoke Jerry. “Especially at an aviation meet. Which reminds me that I saw something in a paper I bought back there in Hammondport about a big gathering of birdmen that’s to take place soon.”

“Where is it?” asked Bob.

“Didn’t have time to look,” replied Jerry. “Here, you and Ned have a peep at it. If the meet is anywhere around here we might take it in.” Jerry reached in his pocket, and pulled out a folded newspaper. He passed it back to Ned, who exclaimed a moment later:

“Say, fellows, we ought to take this in. It’s going to be great, and maybe we can pull down one of the prizes.”

“Where’s it to be?” asked Jerry.

“At Colton.”

“And where’s Colton?” demanded Bob.

“Not far from the city of Harmolet. We stopped there once to fix up after a blowout.”

“Oh, I remember that place!” exclaimed Bob. “It was there we had such a jolly chicken pot-pie dinner.”

“Hum! Yes! Trust Bob to remember anything that had ‘eats’ in it,” came from Jerry, with a chuckle. “But Colton isn’t so far away. We could take it in. What do you say?”

“I’m for it,” declared Ned.

“Same here,” added Bob. “But, speaking of chicken pot-pie makes me hungry. There’s a good hotel just ahead and what’s the matter with stopping there for dinner?”

“Nothing, I guess,” conceded Jerry. “We’re out for a good time, and we might as well have it. We’ll stop for grub, fellows, and then we can talk about this meet.”

A run of five minutes more brought them to a small country town called Freedom, where they ran their car under the hotel shed, and were soon arranging for dinner.

While waiting for the meal to be served the boys sat in the hotel lobby, which contained quite a few persons; farmers who had come in on business, or to sell produce, traveling men, and one or two well dressed persons, apparently auto tourists like our heroes.

Two men in particular attracted the attention of Jerry and his chums. They

were dark-complexioned chaps, evidently used to being out of doors, and their quiet but expensive clothes betokened that they were well off, or posed as being in that condition.

But it was neither the clothes nor the appearance of the men that attracted the attention of the boys as much as their manner. They sat together, not far from the hotel clerk's desk, and sharply scrutinized every person in the lobby. Nor did our friends escape observation. The dark, eager, shifting gaze of the two men rested on the boys from time to time, and then darted off toward newcomers.

"Have either of you seen those two men before?" asked Jerry of Ned and Bob, in a low voice.

"No," replied Bob, who because of his fleshiness was still panting from the exertion of climbing the hotel steps.

"How about you, Ned?"

"I agree with Chunky," was the other lad's reply, giving his stout chum his often-used nickname. "But they certainly will know us if they see us again."

"They sure will," came from Jerry. "But now let's have a look at that paper. I want to read about the meet. Where did you say it was to take place Ned? I mean that aviation meet."

"At Colton, near Harmolet. We could put up at Harmolet I think, for there are not likely to be many accommodations in Colton. I know there is a good hotel in Harmolet."

"Then Harmolet for ours!" exclaimed Bob in rather a loud voice. "I think—"

At the mention of the name of that city the two queer men, as if moved by the same impulse, stared straight at our heroes. The eyes of Jerry met first those of the man nearest him, and then shifted to the face of his companion. The two men hastily glanced away, and then, as Bob, who had noticed their strange action and who had interrupted himself, resumed his remarks about the desirability of Harmolet as a stopping place, the two strangers whispered eagerly together.

"Hum," mused Jerry. "That's rather odd. They must know something about Harmolet."

"That's not strange, seeing that it's a good-sized place," observed Ned. "But I don't believe I'd care to have anything to do with those chaps—especially after dark," he added in a low voice. "I don't like their looks."

“Same here,” agreed Jerry. “But we’re not likely to have anything to do with them. Now about this meet. If we’re going we’ll have to give our motorship *Comet* an overhauling,” and with that our friends fell to talking of air travel, in which they were well-nigh experts.

Dinner was presently announced, and the boys went up to the hotel desk to register. Just in front of them were the two strange men, whose conduct had been the cause of some speculation among the three lads. The men put their names down on the books just ahead of Jerry Hopkins.

“Hum—James Brown and John Black,” mused Jerry as he looked at the signatures. “Couldn’t be any more common names than those I guess.”

“Where are they from?” asked Bob, for Jerry had registered for his two chums.

“It might be almost any place,” was the answer, “for it’s such a scrawl that I can’t read it. Brown and Black; eh? Well, they’re both dark complexioned enough to be called ‘black.’ However let’s go in to dinner. I hope we don’t sit anywhere near them. It would spoil my appetite to be stared at the way they have been looking at us.”

“It’ll take a good deal to spoil *my* appetite,” observed the stout lad with a heart-felt sigh.

The fears of our heroes were groundless, for they were seated well away from the two odd men, and they managed to do ample justice to the meal.



CHAPTER II

WARNED AWAY

“Well,” observed Bob, after an eloquent silence, during which knives and forks had been industriously plied. “Now I’m ready to talk business. When do you think we can go to that meet, Jerry?”

“As soon as we like, or, rather, as soon as it opens, which isn’t for two weeks.”

“Will you try for a prize?” asked Ned.

“I don’t see why we can’t,” was the opinion of the tall lad. “I wish they had some water there, so we could do some stunts with our hydroplanes, as we did when we rescued Mr. Jackson. That was a trip worth taking.”

“It sure was,” agreed his chums. “Maybe we can soon take another like it.”

And they fell to talking of their adventures in the past, and of those hoped for in the future.

While they are thus engaged I will take the opportunity of telling you something more about the boys, for I may not get another chance, as they are such rapid-fire chaps. Those of you who have read the previous books in the series need no introduction to the motor boys, but new readers may wish to be formally presented to them.

The boys were Jerry Hopkins, the son of Mrs. Julia Hopkins, a wealthy widow, Bob Baker, whose father, Andrew Baker, was a prominent banker, and Ned Slade. Ned’s father, Mr. Aaron Slade, owned a large department store. The boys had been chums ever since they were in the primary school, and when they were old enough to have motorcycles their friendship was more than ever firmly cemented, for they had many adventures together, as told in the first volume of this series, entitled “The Motor Boys.” Later they got an auto, and made a long trip overland, and some time afterward, in company with Professor Uriah Snodgrass, they went to Mexico to discover a buried city.

Coming home from Mexico across the plains they had more adventures. With some money they had made in a gold mine they had located, they bought a fine

motor boat, and in that they spent many pleasant hours. The fifth volume of our series, entitled “The Motor Boys Afloat,” details some of them. In their craft the *Dartaway*, they took quite a trip along the Atlantic coast, and also down in the everglades of Florida. Later they voyaged on the Pacific ocean, in search of a mysterious derelict.

But staying on the earth, or afloat on the water did not long content our heroes. Airships were coming more and more into prominence, and it was not long before our friends had a fine motorship called the *Comet*.

You will find this air-craft fully described in the ninth volume of the series, entitled “The Motor Boys in the Clouds,” so I will not take up space to tell of it here. Sufficient to say that it was a combination of a dirigible balloon and an aeroplane, and could sail for many miles without coming down. In it our friends had many adventures, nearly always accompanied by Professor Snodgrass, who was an enthusiastic collector of bugs, reptiles, and scientific specimens of various kinds, for a museum.

It was not always easy sailing for our heroes, for in their town of Cresville, not far from Boston, there lived a bully, Noddy Nixon by name, who with his crony, Bill Berry, made much trouble for them. But our friends generally got the best of Noddy in the end.

The motor boys made a long trip over the Rockies in their motorship, and helped to rescue a band of white persons who were held captives by a strange tribe of Indians. Later, Jerry and his chums, as told in the eleventh book of the series made a flight over the ocean, and succeeded in rescuing a Mr. Jackson, who with some friends and a crew were unconscious in a dirigible balloon that had become disabled at sea. Mr. Jackson, as told in the story “The Motor Boys Over the Ocean,” was being sought by Mr. Slade, to aid him in his department store business, which was on the verge of failure. And Ned and his chums rescued Mr. Jackson just in time, not only to save his life, but to prevent the ruin of Mr. Slade’s business.

The boys had been back from this trip over the ocean some time now, and, after a winter spent at their studies, they were, with the arrival of summer, ready for fresh adventures.

They had been out for a spin in their auto when the events narrated in the first chapter took place, and now we will resume their acquaintance in the hotel where they are just finishing dinner.

“Well, shall we go on?” asked Jerry, as he and his chums arose from the table.

“Oh, let’s sit around a while and rest,” proposed Bob. “It’s bad for digestion to hustle around right after a meal.”

“There’s nothing the matter with *your* digestion,” declared Jerry with a laugh. “But I guess it won’t hurt us to sit around a bit. Who’s got that paper about the aviation meet?”

“Here it is,” replied Bob, passing it to his tall friend.

“I see you are interested in airships,” remarked the hotel clerk, for the lads were talking in front of the desk where they had paid for their meal. “We have other guests here today who are what you call ‘birdmen’ I guess.”

“What, some aviators here?” exclaimed Ned, and he and his two chums showed the interest they felt.

“Who are they?” demanded Jerry. “I didn’t see any one in the dining room that I’ve ever met in a dirigible or aeroplane.”

“Well, perhaps these fellows are amateurs, but they came sailing here all right in one of those air machines—I don’t know enough about ’em to tell whether or not it’s a dirigible balloon or a monoplane,” said the clerk with a laugh. “But they’re here.”

“Who are they?” asked Jerry again.

“Those two dark-complexioned men standing over near the door,” replied the clerk, nodding his head in that direction.

“What? Not Brown and Black?” exclaimed Ned.

“I think those are their names,” went on the clerk, as he looked at the register. “We had quite a crowd here to-day—yes, it’s Brown and Black all right, though I don’t know which is which.”

“Brown and Black,” mused Jerry. “I never heard of their doing any great stunts in a dirigible balloon or aeroplane.”

“No, they’re only amateurs, they told me that when they arrived,” went on the clerk. “They came out from Boston, and are going back soon. It’s a trial flight for them.”

“Where’s their machine?” asked Bob eagerly.

“Yes, could we get a look at it?” put in Jerry.

“I don’t know,” spoke the clerk doubtfully. “They told me they didn’t want to

be bothered with a crowd, and they stored their machine in an enclosed lot back of the carriage sheds. There is a high fence all around it, and the gate is locked. But as long as you boys are air navigators yourselves I guess Mr. Brown and Mr. Black won't mind if I let you look at their machine. They are busy talking now, anyhow, so you can slip out and take a peep at it. Here's the key to the gate. Go out this back door, down the alley, and open the first gate you come to. Don't let any one else in."

The boys eagerly promised, and making sure that the two strange men were deep in a conversation, our friends slipped out of the hotel rear door, Jerry taking the key.

"Who'd ever think those fellows were birdmen?" asked Bob, as they went along.

"No one," agreed Ned. "There's something mysterious about them. Why are they so afraid of any one seeing their machine?"

"Give it up," answered Jerry. "We'll soon have a peep at it, and perhaps we can tell then. But I don't blame them for not wanting a lot of farmers crowding around when they're trying to land or make a flight. You know what trouble we've had at times."

"That's right," agreed Ned. "Well, there's the gate in the fence. Now for a look."

In the midst of a small enclosure they saw the air machine—a large-sized biplane of an up-to-date model. It took but a glance to disclose this, and with expressions of admiration the boys hurried up to it, to inspect it more carefully.

"Say, that's a beaut all right!" declared Bob.

"Some class to it," exclaimed Ned. "Look at that engine! Why it's almost as powerful as the first one we had."

"Yes, it's a good machine—of its kind," admitted Jerry. "Of course it isn't like ours, but it's got a lot of speed and power, I'll wager. And look at that gasoline tank. Why they could go several hundred miles with one filling."

"The *Silver Star*," read Bob, as he saw the name of the aeroplane painted on one of the side planes, and on the vertical rudder. "Rather a classy name; eh?"

"It sure is a good machine," went on Jerry, as he took in the various details. "I wonder if those fellows—Brown and Black—made it themselves, or who did? There are some points about it that are worth copying, if they aren't patented."

“Let’s ask ’em,” proposed Bob.

Jerry did not answer. He was looking at the double seat of the aeroplane—for it was built to carry two—and near one of the improvised chairs was a small box, evidently for tools.

The cover of the box was partly raised, and with pardonable curiosity Jerry tilted it all the way back. He was anxious to see all the details possible of the machine that had so interested him and his chums.

As he got a glimpse inside the tool box Jerry uttered a half-suppressed cry of astonishment.

“Look here, fellows!” he exclaimed. “See these queer tools? First time I ever knew an aeroplane operator to carry anything like them.”

“What are they?” asked Bob, peering over his chum’s shoulder.

“Why here’s a powerful drill, some lead hammers, another of copper, and a drill, to be attached to an electric light circuit. And here’s some sort of a fusing torch, to melt or fuse a hole through steel. What in the world can they want with these tools in an aeroplane?”

“Maybe they’re afraid of a break-down,” suggested Ned.

“What good would an electric drill or a fusing torch do even if they did get a break-down?” demanded Jerry. “No, there’s something queer here, and——”

“Hi there! Get away from that machine!”

“Clear out, you fellows! What are you doing there?” interrupted two angry voices, and our heroes looked up to see the two men—Brown and Black—running towards them across the enclosed field.



CHAPTER III

A SUDDEN DISAPPEARANCE

Startled, the boys moved back somewhat from the aeroplane, and waited, not without a little apprehension, the arrival of the two strange men. The strangers increased their speed, and came up on the run, their faces showing the evident anger they felt.

“What—what are you doing at our machine?” panted Black, the taller of the twain.

“Just looking at it,” replied Jerry calmly. “We haven’t done any damage. We’re aviators ourselves.”

“We’ve made lots of flights,” put in Ned.

“And we know enough not to monkey with another man’s apparatus,” added Bob. “We were only looking at it.”

“What right had you to come in here?” demanded Mr. Brown, in surly tones.

“Yes, who let you in?” added his companion.

“The hotel clerk,” answered Jerry, for the key of the gate in his hand was rather incriminating evidence. “He didn’t mean any harm, but we were very much interested when we heard that you had come in a biplane, and we wanted to see what type it was. We saw you were busy talking, so we didn’t bother you. We just came out here to have a look.”

“It was mighty fresh of you!” growled Mr. Black.

“Yes, and we’ll report that hotel clerk, too,” added Mr. Brown. “He had no business to give you the key.”

“Oh, it—it wasn’t altogether his fault,” said Bob, hoping that their friend at the desk would not be blamed.

“We know whose fault it was, all right,” snarled Mr. Black. “Now you fellows clear out of here. We arranged, when we put up at the hotel, that we shouldn’t be annoyed by snooping crowds, and now——”

“We’re not a crowd,” remarked Ned with a smile.

“None of your back-talk!” exclaimed the shorter of the aeroplanists. “We know our own business best. Now make tracks out of here, quick—give me that key!” and he fairly snatched it from Jerry’s hand. The tall lad seemed about to say something, but he thought better of it, and held his tongue.

“Go on—move!” ordered Mr. Black, as the boys showed no inclination to walk away. “Get a hustle on you!”

By this time Mr. Black had caught sight of the opened tool box. A flash of rage seemed to pass over his face.

“Who opened that box?” he snarled.

“I did,” replied Jerry calmly.

“Did you—did you take anything out?” demanded the man, striding toward our hero.

“I did not,” was the quiet rejoinder.

“Did you dare unlock it?” demanded Mr. Brown.

“It was unlocked, and the cover was partly raised when we got here,” went on Jerry. “We wanted to see what kind of tools you carried, so I opened it. We meant no harm, and I trust we did none. We are sorry you take our harmless investigation in this spirit.”

“Are you sure the box was open?” persisted Mr. Black.

“It was,” declared Jerry, his face flushing at this implied doubt of his word.

“I—I guess I unlocked it, and forgot to close it,” put in Mr. Brown.

“Huh! Mighty careless of you—Jake—I mean James,” said Mr. Black, hastily correcting himself. “Now you fellows clear out,” he went on. “We’s going to make a flight, and we don’t want to be bothered.”

Silently Jerry and his chums left the enclosure. Mr. Black followed, and locked the gate after them. Our heroes returned to the hotel lobby.

“Say, they’re regular fire-eaters,” declared Ned.

“Yes, they get on their ears mighty quick,” said Jerry.

They found the hotel clerk quite disturbed.

“Say, did they make much of a fuss?” he asked anxiously. “They came for the

key of the gate directly after you boys left, and I tried to put them off. But they wouldn't have it, and then I told them some aeroplanists were out looking at their machine. Whew! They ran out as though the sheriff was after them. Did they raise much of a row?"

"Oh, not an awful lot," said Ned, not wanting to make the good-natured clerk worry any more than was necessary. "I guess it'll blow over."

"I hope so," murmured the hotel man.

The queer aviators did not seem disposed to make any further trouble, for presently a stable man appeared with the gate key, saying that the two men were about to leave in their airship.

"They hadn't time to come in an' bring the key," he explained. "I'm goin' out an' see 'em fly."

The news soon spread around through the hotel that an airship was going up, and a crowd rushed out to see the start. The high fence of the enclosure prevented the ground-maneuvers from being viewed, but presently there was a clatter as the motor started, and soon a bird-like shape arose above the fence.

"There they go!" cried the throng, and our heroes and the others saw the two men seated in their machine mounting rapidly upward.

"I hope we've seen the last of 'em—they're so unpleasant," remarked Jerry. But he and his chums were destined to meet the two strange men again, and under queer circumstances.

Discussing their encounter with Messrs. Brown and Black, talking of the aeroplane *Silver Star*, and planning what they would do when they took their own motorship *Comet* to the coming aviation meet, Jerry and his chums were soon speeding back toward Cresville in their auto.

"Maybe we'll see Brown and Black at the Colton doings, fellows," suggested Bob. "They seemed to be on the alert as soon as we mentioned Harmolet."

"Well, they may be there," agreed Jerry. "They certainly have a good machine of its class, though I believe ours would beat it in a race."

"I'm sure of it," declared Ned, who took great pride in the *Comet*. "But I can't get over the queer tools those fellows carried."

"Me neither," went on Jerry. "It looked to be a lot of useless weight."

This gave a new turn to the conversation, and one thing led to another, so that

almost before our friends realized it they were near Cresville.

As they approached a turn in the road, they heard behind them frantic tooting of an auto horn, and the loud throbbing of a cut-out muffler.

“Some one’s in a hurry,” observed Jerry, steering over to one side.

“Maybe it’s a doctor on an emergency case,” suggested Bob.

“Doctor nothing!” retorted Ned, after a look to the rear. “It’s Noddy Nixon, and he’s coming on at a terrific clip. Look out Jerry! He’ll do something spiteful just for fun. Keep over.”

“I’m over as far as I dare go,” replied the tall lad. “I don’t want to slide into the ditch,” for the road at this point was bordered by deep marshy gutters on either side. It had rained that morning, and the hollows of the road were filled with muddy water.

On came Noddy, his horn wildly tooting, and his cut-out muffler thundering like a battery of small guns. His machine was increasing its speed every moment.

“He’d better look out on the turn,” said Jerry to his chums, as he slowed up.

With a whizz and a roar the machine of the bully passed the one containing our heroes. This was at a point on the road where there was a big puddle. Into it splashed the big-tired wheels of Noddy’s car, and instantly a shower of dirty water was sprayed all over our friends, drenching them, and soiling their trim car.

“Wow!” yelled Noddy in derision as he passed. “Wow! Look out for me! I’m a terror!”

“You’re a sneaking coward! That’s what you are!” shouted Ned, wiping the muddy drops from his face.

“By Jinks! Look at my clothes!” wailed Bob.

“The sneak!” burst out Jerry. “I’ll fix him for that!”

“Take after him!” urged Ned. “We can beat his car all to pieces! Overtake him, and we’ll haul him out and rub his nose in the mud! The cad!”

“I’ll catch him all right!” declared Jerry grimly. “We’ll get even with him for this, all right.”

It was the work of but an instant to turn on more power, and the speedy car of

our motor boys shot ahead down the road after the fast-disappearing vehicle of the bully.

“There! He made the turn!” cried Ned.

“And on two wheels,” murmured Jerry. “He’s taking chances.”

On thundered the pursuing auto. Jerry slowed up at the turn, but even then he took it at such speed that the machine skidded unpleasantly.

Once more they swung out into a straight stretch, and as they did so there came a simultaneous cry of surprise from the three boys.

For there before them, off to one side, and stuck deep in the muddy road-side ditch, was the car of Noddy Nixon. But the bully was not in it, nor was he in sight. He had suddenly disappeared.



CHAPTER IV

NODDY NIXON'S PLIGHT

“What can have happened to him?” asked Ned.

“That’s his auto; isn’t it?” demanded Bob.

“Surely,” answered Jerry. “No mistaking that; but Noddy isn’t in it—that is unless he was knocked unconscious and has slipped under the seat.”

“Let’s look,” proposed Ned. Jerry had brought their own car to a stop, and as the three lads alighted, peering anxiously toward the stalled machine for a sight of the bully, they were startled by hearing a groan of distress.

“What’s that?” cried Bob.

“It sounded like—him!” declared Jerry.

“Oh—Oh fellows—help me—Oh I’m—I’m stuck!” exclaimed a woe-begone voice.

Simultaneously our friends turned their gaze in the direction of the cry. It came from a slimy black pool of mud and water, off to the left of the Nixon car, which was in the slough over the hubs. The sight that met the gaze of Jerry and his chums was enough to excite their pity, even though the victim was their worst enemy.

Noddy Nixon was standing in the mud puddle which came considerably over his waist, and from the condition of his face, it was evident that he had been flung in head first, and had, after a struggle righted himself. He was covered, streaked, spotted and speckled with the black, slimy mud. It dripped from his shoulders, dripped from his extended hands, and even oozed from his chin in a slimy stream.

For a moment our heroes gazed at him without speaking, then Jerry uttered an expression combining surprise, dismay and pity.

“Well, what do you think of that?”

“He certainly is all in,” was Ned’s opinion.

“Good and proper,” murmured Bob.

Probably the hardest thing Noddy Nixon ever had to do was to appeal for help to the three boys whom he had, many times in the past, used so meanly. Yet there was no way out of it.

“Oh—oh, fellows,” he faltered. “See if you can’t help me out of here. I—I’m stuck.”

“How’d you get there?” asked Jerry for want of something better to inquire about.

“I—I stopped my car too suddenly,” replied the bully trying to wipe some of the mud from his face with a still muddier hand. “It skidded, and I put on the brakes hard, and I was flung out.”

“You didn’t pick out a very good place to land in,” grimly remarked Bob.

“Guess he didn’t have time,” suggested Ned.

“Oh, aren’t you going to help me out?” begged Noddy.

“Do you mean help you out, or your car?” asked Jerry. “Why can’t you wade over to solid ground? Then we’ll help you pull out your car. That’s stuck pretty bad too.”

“No, I—I can’t wade out,” replied Noddy helplessly. “I’m in a sort of muck, or quicksand. Everytime I try to take a step I go in deeper. I need a board or a fence rail, or—or something to help me. Oh, please, fellows—I know I’ve been mean to you—but forgive me and help me out!”

“It’s about time you got wise to the fact that you did us some mean turns,” spoke Ned. “How about splashing mud on us a little while ago?”

“I’m sorry I did that.”

“Yes, you are now, but the next time you get the chance you’d do the same thing,” declared Jerry.

“No, honest I won’t!” promised Noddy, and he was in earnest—at least for the time being.

“Well, you don’t deserve to have us help you out, but we can’t see you in this plight without doing something,” went on Jerry. “Try once more to pull yourself out. I don’t fancy getting all covered with mud.”

Noddy tried, but it was of no use. The more he struggled to free himself, the

deeper he sank, and he was evidently very much alarmed—so much so that he began to blubber.

“Oh, now, stop bellowing, and we’ll help you,” cried Ned, much disgusted by the cowardice of the bully. “Come on, fellows, get some fence rails, and we’ll see what we can do.”

The rails were brought, and extended to Noddy in a sort of criss-cross platform to support him. In placing them our friends got in the mud over their shoes, but there was no help for it. Presently Noddy was able to bear part of his weight on the rails, and then, by a vigorous effort, he managed to pull his legs loose from the grip of the sticky mud. He crawled out on the firm ground, a worse looking sight than Jerry and his chums had seen for many a day.

“Look at me!” gasped Noddy in dismay, as he glanced down at his legs. “Look at me—Oh!—Oh! It’s—it’s—awful!”

“Better look for a clean puddle of water and roll in it,” advised Ned, trying not to smile.

“If you had a lot of newspapers you could wipe some of it off,” added Bob.

“Or some rags from your auto,” put in Jerry. This mention of the car recalled to Noddy the plight of his machine. He looked over to where it was firmly imbedded in the slough, and said:

“Will you help me get it out, fellows?”

“It’s in pretty deep,” observed Jerry, going closer and taking a critical observation.

“We’ll have to get some wide boards and put them under the wheels,” was Ned’s opinion.

“Maybe we could pull it out with our car, if we had a long rope,” suggested Bob.

“That’s the very thing!” exclaimed Jerry. “I guess we can pull it out, Noddy—but next time, don’t go so fast—especially around a curve.”

“I’ll not,” promised the miserable bully.

“And don’t steer out of your way to splash mud on people from whom you may want help afterward,” suggested Ned significantly.

“I—I won’t,” declared Noddy. “Oh, fellows if you’ll only pull my car out for

me I'll pay you well. My father said if I had any more accidents I couldn't run it again this summer. I'll do anything you say if you'll pull it out."

"We don't want any of your money," half growled Jerry. "There's one thing about it though, you've got to wade in there yourself to attach the rope; that is if we can get one."

"I've got a long rope in the car!" exclaimed Noddy eagerly. "I always carry one, for I was stuck in the sand once. I'll go in and get it, and fasten it to my car. Then I'll bring the end out here, and you can attach it to your machine."

"Yes, I guess you'd better do the wading," said Ned, for to get to Noddy's stalled car it would be necessary for some one to go in the muck up to his knees, and none of our heroes relished this. "You can't be much muddier than you are Noddy," finished the merchant's son.

"I'll do it," promised the bully eagerly, and having gotten rid of some of the muck on his face and hands he stepped into the miniature swamp, and was soon attaching the rope to the rear of his car. Then he brought the free end out to firm ground where Jerry received it. Then, having turned his auto around, the tall lad made the cable fast to the rear of his machine.

"Come on now, fellows, get in our car to hold it down when the strain comes," suggested Bob to his chums.

"All ready?" asked Ned of Noddy, a little later.

"Yes," was the faltering answer.

Jerry threw in the gear, and let the clutch slip into place. The car of our heroes went forward a little way, and then began the strain on the rope. The strands straightened out, there was a creaking sound, but Noddy's auto did not budge.

"Try more power, Jerry," suggested Ned.

The tall lad turned on all the gasoline he dared. The rear wheels of his auto spun uselessly around in the wet dirt of the highway.

"Wow! Stop!" cried Bob. "You'll rip off our tires."

"I guess we can't stir you, Noddy," called Jerry, as he shut off the power.

"Oh, try! Try once more!" begged the bully.

Jerry did not relish his task much, but he did try. Once more the rope became taut. There was a great strain on it. Once more the wheels of the pulling auto

spun around. Still Jerry kept the power on.

Noddy's car quivered in the mud that held it fast. It moved not an inch, however.

"Go on! Go on!" yelled the bully encouragingly.

"You'll ruin our tires!" cried Ned.

Jerry, with a grim look on his face turned on the least bit more gasoline. Then, with a crack like that of a revolver the rope snapped, and one end of it flew dangerously close over the heads of our heroes in their car. For when a rope on which there is a great strain breaks suddenly, it is a dangerous missile.

"Look out!" yelled Ned, as he saw the end of the cable hurling toward himself and his chums. They ducked just in time. The other end flopped down in the mud behind Noddy's car.

The bully looked disconsolate.

"Have to try it again, I guess," he suggested.

"Not much!" declared Jerry decisively.

"Wha—what?" gasped Noddy.

"No more tries for us," went on the tall lad. "You've stuck too fast for us to pull you out, Noddy. What you need is some pulleys and a derrick. We can't risk breaking our car, and ripping off the tires. You'll have to stay there until you can get some one else to pull you out."

Jerry detached the broken rope from his car, and got in again.

"You—you aren't going away and leave me; are you?" faltered Noddy.

"You guessed it," declared Bob.

"Oh, please pull me out!" pleaded the bully.

"We can't," spoke Jerry, not unkindly. "It's impossible, Noddy. That mud has too firm a hold on your wheels. The best we can do is to stop at the nearest garage and tell them about you."

The bully begged and pleaded by turns, and offered the boys a large sum of money; but though our heroes would have helped him, in spite of his former meanness, it was out of the question. They could not afford to damage their own car, and risk getting hurt by a breaking rope.

“Sorry to leave you, but we must,” called Jerry, as he sent the auto slowly ahead. They turned toward Cresville, leaving Noddy standing on the brink of the muck-hole, gazing disconsolately at his stalled auto, while the mud and water dripped from him at several points, and formed little puddles at his feet.



CHAPTER V

A SIGHT OF THE BIPLANE

“Say, things haven’t done a thing but happen to us today,” remarked Bob, when they were nearing the broad, smooth highway that led directly into Cresville.

“That’s right,” agreed Ned. “Meeting those two queer men, having them nearly take our heads off because we looked at their aeroplane, and then this mix-up with Noddy.”

“Noddy got *his* all right,” observed Jerry grimly. “I don’t believe, even if we’d caught him, and given him a well-deserved licking, that he’d be any worse off.”

“It was retributive justice with a vengeance,” was Ned’s further opinion. “But, speaking of queer happenings, what do you make of Brown and Black?”

“Can’t make much of them,” spoke Bob.

“I’d like to know what those tools were,” came from Jerry. “They were the queerest combination I ever saw on an aeroplane. We carry a lot on our *Comet*; but nothing like those, and we’ve got twice as much complicated machinery as those fellows have.”

“Sure,” agreed Ned. “Well, we’ll soon be out in the motorship again if we conclude to go to the aviation meet; and maybe they’ll have some new tools on exhibition there.”

“We’ll certainly go,” agreed Jerry. “Automobiling is all right if you’ve never sailed in the air, but once you have skimmed along above the clouds—”

“You want to keep at it,” finished Bob. “But say, we mustn’t forget to stop, and send help out to Noddy. He’s human, even if he has done us many a mean turn.”

“That’s so. We’ll stop at Mason’s garage and tell them,” suggested Jerry. “I think——”

But what he was thinking about he never mentioned, for at that moment he and his chums were aware of a curious throbbing and humming sound in the air,

far above their heads. With one accord they gazed upward, and the sight they saw caused Jerry suddenly to shut off the power, and bring the auto to a stop.

“An aeroplane!” exclaimed Ned.

“A biplane,” supplied Bob.

“And going fast, too!” added Jerry. “Say, but they’re eating up the air-space all right!”

“I wonder if that can be Mr. Jackson?” ventured Ned.

“He’s far enough from here,” declared Jerry, referring to the millionaire whom they had so thrillingly rescued from his disabled dirigible balloon over the ocean.

“Whoever it is, he knows how to handle the craft all right,” declared Ned. “Look at that spiral dip he’s making.”

As he spoke the air machine came down a little way in a corkscrew curve.

“Wait!” exclaimed Jerry impetuously as he reached back in the tonneau and took from a pocket in the side a pair of powerful field glasses. “We’ll see what these show,” he went on, as he focused them on the distant aeroplane.

No sooner had he gotten the aircraft in his range of vision than he uttered a startled cry.

“What’s the matter?” demanded Ned.

“Some one you know?” asked Bob.

“I don’t know that we have the honor of their acquaintance,” spoke Jerry slowly, “but if that machine isn’t the *Silver Star* I’ll buy you fellows ice cream sodas—that’s all! Here, Ned, have a look.”

Jerry passed his chum the glasses, and no sooner had the merchant’s son gotten a good view than he exclaimed:

“You’re right! It’s Brown and Black sure enough.”

“You don’t mean to say you can make out faces at that distance,” exclaimed Bob incredulously. “Let me have a peep.”

“I can’t see their faces,” declared Ned, “but I’m sure it’s them, for it’s their machine, and they’re so touchy that they wouldn’t let any one else run it. It’s them sure.”

“I believe you,” commented Jerry. “Those are the two mysterious men we met at the hotel.”

“I wonder where they’re going?” mused Bob, as he took another look. “They’re flying high for amateurs.”

“They’ll reach Harmolet if they keep on in that direction long enough,” declared Ned. “It may be that they’re going to the meet at Colton.”

“It’s too soon for that,” was Jerry’s opinion. “But it certainly is odd that we should see those fellows again. Let me have another look, Bob.”

It was difficult now, even with the powerful glasses, to discern the aeroplane, for it was almost hidden in the haze of the upper regions. In a few seconds more it had entirely disappeared, and Jerry putting up the field glasses, started the auto.

The boys discussed the curious sight, speculating on the destination of Brown and Black, and then branched off on matters connected with their own motorship. By this time they had reached Cresville, and stopped at a garage, the owner of which promised to send out a powerful car, with ropes and pulleys, to haul Noddy from the ditch.

“Well, that’s over,” remarked Jerry, as they turned toward the home of the tall lad, where the auto was kept. “We’ve had plenty of excitement.”

“Enough for one day,” added Ned.

“But it isn’t over yet,” said Bob quickly.

“Why not?” demanded his chums together.

“There comes Andy Rush, and he acts as though he had something to tell us,” went on the stout lad.

Standing on the sidewalk, just ahead of them, and waving his arms about like those of a miniature windmill, was a small lad, bearing every evidence of great nervousness. He was jumping up and down, now running forward a few steps, and then coming to a halt.

As soon as the motor boys were within hailing distance he called to them:

“I say—stop—wait a minute—great excitement—maybe somebody killed—mine blown up perhaps—all the gold gone—maybe someone wants to buy your motorship—special message—don’t know what’s in it—fortune for you—maybe—here is it—saw you coming—ran out to stop you—I have it—open it quick—

whoop! up in the air—down again—start over—here you are!” and with that Andy Rush, for it was indeed he, passed over to Jerry a yellow envelope—a telegram.

“Are you sure that’s all, Andy?” asked the tall lad gravely.

“Sure—that’s all—agent just gave it to me—I was at the station when it came in—messenger boys all out—I said I’d take it to you—he gave me a dime—bought an ice cream soda—maybe it’s bad news—I don’t know—whoop!”

Andy was wiggling about like an uneasy snake, and he only had one foot on the ground at a time. Jerry looked at the telegram, saw that it was addressed to himself, and tore it open.

“Are you sure you’ve got all that out of your system?” inquired Ned of Andy.

“All of what?” asked the small, excited boy.

“All that talk. Because if you keep any in you might explode,” went on the merchant’s son.

“Better get another ice cream soda and cool off,” advised Bob, handing Andy a dime.

“I will—thanks—no bad news I hope—mine all safe—motorship not busted—I’ll cool down soon—go to the store—drug store—half a dozen flavors—I always take vanilla—lots of ice cream—here I go—whoop!” and down the street Andy started on the run.

“Thank goodness he’s gone,” murmured Ned with a sigh of relief. “He gets on my nerves. But what’s the news, Jerry?”

“Professor Snodgrass will arrive to-morrow,” replied the tall lad folding up the message. “He’s on the track of some new kind of bug or beast I suppose. He wants us to meet him at the station.”

“Good!” cried Bob. “Now we’ll have some more fun, and go off after a mosquito that plays the piano, or something like that, I suppose. Three cheers for Professor Snodgrass!”

“Say, you’re getting almost as bad as Andy Rush,” commented Jerry, as he once more started the machine, and steered it into the driveway of his home.



CHAPTER VI

“HOLD THE TRAIN!”

“What time will the professor get here?” asked Ned, as he and Bob sat on the broad porch of Mrs. Hopkins’s house.

“On the afternoon train, he says,” replied Jerry.

“And what sort of a bug is he after now?” demanded Bob.

“He doesn’t say. Not that it makes much difference. All is grist that comes to his mill, and if he can’t get an ant with pink legs, he’ll take a June bug with purple wings. But be on hand to meet him, fellows, and we’ll go down to the station together to-morrow afternoon.”

“Say, if he doesn’t get in until then we’ll have time in the morning to make a flight in the *Comet*,” suggested Bob.

“That’s right. Then we can see what we have to do, to get it in shape for the Colton meet,” added Ned.

“I’m with you,” declared the tall lad. “Let’s go on out now and have a look at it. And say—you fellows stay to supper at my house, and we’ll go all over the *Comet* this evening.”

“Good idea,” commented Bob, with a sigh of satisfaction. He knew of old the skill of the Hopkins cook.

“Very good—especially the supper part; eh, Chunky?” put in Ned with a laugh. “I’ll telephone home, and tell mother that I’m going to stay.”

Bob did the same thing, and after the meal, which Bob declared was the best he ever ate (though he was always saying that) the boys went out to the aeroplane shed which was in a large field, owned by Mrs. Hopkins, and some distance from her house.

“Now Jerry, be careful,” the widow cautioned them as they left. “You remember once you had trouble at the shed, when Noddy Nixon bound Sud Snuffles, the watchman, and took the aeroplane away. Look out for bad characters there. I wish it was nearer the house—especially when night comes

on.”

“Oh, there’ll be no danger from Noddy Nixon to-night mother,” declared Jerry with a laugh. “Noddy is stuck in the mud too fast to get out in a hurry,” and he told of the bully’s plight. “But we’ll be on the lookout. We don’t keep Sud on guard any more.” For following his unscrupulous theft of the motorship, the bully had been more careful how he interfered with the property of our heroes, and there was no necessity of a watchman at the shed.

The boys spent some time going over the motorship. They had not used it in the past two weeks, on account of bad weather; but they found it in good shape, and, after a few adjustments and a tightening of the guy wires, it was ready for service.

“We’ll take a flight in the morning,” decided Jerry, as he and his chums left the shed, making sure that the doors were securely fastened.

“And maybe we’ll meet that other aeroplane—the *Silver Star*,” suggested Ned.

“Not much likelihood of that,” declared Bob. “Those fellows are up to some game, I think.”

“What game?” demanded Jerry quickly.

“Oh, I don’t know,” was the somewhat uncertain reply of the stout lad, “only I have my suspicions of them.”

“So have I,” admitted Ned, “only I don’t know what I’m suspicious of.”

“Well, I’m going to get to bed,” announced the tall lad with a yawn. “Be on hand early fellows, and we’ll go off on a little flight.”

Jerry and Ned were on hand in good time at the aeroplane shed the next morning. They wheeled the craft out into the broad, level starting place, and proceeded to tighten the few wires they had overlooked the night before.

As has been told in previous books of this series, the *Comet* was a combined dirigible balloon and aeroplane. By means of a powerful gas, forced into a container above the aeroplane proper, it could ascend as a balloon, or it could scud along over the ground on bicycle wheels and, when sufficient momentum had been obtained it could rise by means of the tilted forward lifting planes, and maintain itself as long as it was in motion.

“What’s the matter with Bob, I wonder?” remarked Jerry as he went in the

engine room, to look at the motor.

“Oh, probably he’s eating his second breakfast,” replied Ned, who was inspecting the gas machine.

“She isn’t making vapor very fast,” spoke Jerry, as he looked at the dial of the containing tank, and noted how much of the lifting gas was in storage.

“No, it needs a new valve,” decided Ned. “But we can go up as an aeroplane, and by the time we get up a mile or two there’ll be gas enough.”

The *Comet* was a roomy craft. There was a good-sized dining room, plenty of sleeping apartments, a storeroom, a large motor compartment, a neat little galley or kitchen, where Bob spent much of his time, and a living room, where they all gathered during the day to read, talk or make observations as they scudded through space, high above the earth.

“I wish Bob would come, if he’s going to get here,” went on Jerry. “He is always more or less late. We won’t have time to get anywhere before we have to be back again to meet the professor.”

“There he comes now,” exclaimed Ned, as he caught sight of a stocky figure hurrying across the field. “And by Jove, if he isn’t swallowing the last of his breakfast on the run! He must have overslept.”

“What’s the matter, Chunky?” asked Jerry, as his chum approached, panting from his unusual speed.

“One of our rabbits got loose—had to chase it—might eat up the neighbors’ fruit trees—never saw such a rabbit—thought I had it in the cage half a dozen times—but it got out—that’s what made me late.”

“But you stopped to get your breakfast,” observed Ned, as he saw traces of egg on Bob’s fat good-natured face.

“Sure I did! What do you think I am? Going off on a flight without something to eat! I had a good breakfast, and I brought along a package of grub—I was afraid you fellows would forget it.”

“Oh, Chunky!” cried Jerry with a hopeless laugh. “Will you ever get over your appetite?”

“I certainly hope not,” declared Bob earnestly.

He stowed away in a locker the food he had brought, and then helped his chums in getting the *Comet* ready for a flight. This was soon done. The sharp

nose of the craft was pointed down the long smooth starting slope, and the motor started. The big propellers whirred around like the blades of an electric fan, and the motorship quivered from end to end. The engine increased its speed under the skilful handling of Jerry Hopkins, and then, with a rush, the trim air machine glided forward.

Faster and faster it forged ahead, the motor thundering with its rapid explosions. Just as Jerry was about to tilt the lifting planes, there came a faint hail from back near the shed.

“Hold on—wait—give me a ride—I’ve got some news!”

“It’s Andy Rush!” exclaimed Ned.

“We can’t stop now!” shouted Jerry. “Here we go!”

He yanked the plane lever toward him. Up went the nose of the *Comet*, and the next instant she was sailing gracefully through the air, mounting higher and higher.

“Works better than ever,” was Bob’s opinion.

“Yes, I wish we had time to go to the lake, and try the hydroplanes,” said Jerry, “but we haven’t. I rather like landing on the water and starting from the surface. It’s smoother than a land start.”

The hydroplanes, as I related in a previous volume, were a new feature of the *Comet*, and worked well.

It was no novelty to our heroes to sail about through the air, and as soon as they were up sufficiently high they settled back to enjoy themselves. The gas machine had by this time generated enough vapor, so that they could float lazily along if they wished, or even hang in space without moving, save as the wind blew them.

“Let’s look around and see if we can sight the *Silver Star*,” proposed Ned, as he took down from the rack a small but powerful telescope.

“Oh, you’ll have your trouble for your pains,” declared Jerry, and so it proved. The strange biplane containing the two mysterious men was not in sight. In fact no other air craft was visible, and, after sailing around for several hours, and having their lunch about three miles above the earth, our heroes descended, and stored their craft in the shed once more.

“Wonder what Andy wanted?” mused Jerry.

“We’ll soon know,” said Bob. “Here he comes now.” The excitable lad was observed hurrying toward the three chums.

“Why didn’t you wait?” he demanded. “I had something to tell you—great news—he’ll smash all to pieces—whoop! up in the air—down again—race you motor boys—whoop!”

“He? Who are you talking about?” demanded Ned.

“Noddy Nixon. He’s going to get an aeroplane and race you fellows—big excitement—going to some balloon meet—whoop!” and Andy hopped up and down on one foot.

“Hump! Noddy must be up to some more of his tricks!” exclaimed Jerry. “Well, if he bothers us as he did once before he’ll get what’s coming to him.”

“I shouldn’t think he’d want to risk any more air flights,” ventured Ned, “especially when he can hardly run his auto.”

“Well, we’ll see what happens,” went on the tall chum. “Whew!” he whistled as he looked at his watch. “We haven’t more than time to get down to the station before the professor’s train will be in. We don’t want to disappoint him. Sprint for it, fellows, and we’ll get to my house and go down in the auto. Come along Andy, if you like.”

“Sure I’ll go—anything for excitement—I can run—let me steer—blow up a tire—whoop!” and the excitable lad was off on a run with the older boys.

They reached the station a little before the train pulled in, and waited on the platform while a crowd of passengers alighted. Among them was a little man, rather slight in build, wearing a pair of very strong glasses. He had on a broad-brimmed soft hat, and around his shoulders and hanging down his back were a number of insect specimen boxes, held by straps or cords, while in one hand he carried a large butterfly net.

“There’s Professor Snodgrass!” exclaimed Jerry. “Now to hear what new quest he is on.”

“He looks the same as when he caught the flying-singing fish,” remarked Ned.

“He never changes—he’s like a mummy,” declared Bob.

The little scientist caught sight of his three young friends, and gaily waved his hand, smiling a greeting. He advanced to meet them, passing close to the panting locomotive. As he did so there came two shrill blasts of the air whistle,

indicating to the engineer that he was ready to start.

At that instant Professor Snodgrass happened to glance beneath the big driving wheels. In a moment he was all excitement. His face lighted up, off came his big hat, and, rapidly divesting himself of his many boxes he dropped on his knees close beside the rails.

“What’s the matter?” cried Jerry.

“He’ll be killed!” yelled Bob.

“Look out!” shouted Ned.

“The man has been taken with a fit! Pull him away from the engine!” begged the station master.

The professor heeded none of the cries. Raising himself slightly, he waved his hand to the engineer who, after pulling the throttle partly open, was leaning from the cab window. The ponderous locomotive was moving slowly.

“Stop the train! Stop it!” commanded the scientist. “Stop it or you’ll kill him! Stop it I say!” and he fairly shook his fist at the astonished engineer.



CHAPTER VII

A CURIOUS RACE

“What’s the matter?”

“Is anybody killed?”

“Oh, there’s some one under the locomotive! A child!”

“I’m going to faint! I know I’m going to faint!” exclaimed a very fat lady, making her voice heard above the others who had given utterance to the excited expressions. “Catch me, some one!”

But as no one seemed capable of sustaining her weight, the fat lady concluded not to faint. Meanwhile there was considerable excitement, for the professor continued to kneel beside the locomotive, making signals to the engineer to bring the ponderous machine to a stop.

And the engineer did. With a face that went white under its coating of oil and grime he slapped on the air brakes with a suddenness that brought the train up with a smashing bang. Then, as the released air hissed through the valves, the driver leaned from the cab window and hoarsely asked:

“How’d he get under there? I didn’t see him. Did I run over him?”

“Not quite, but almost!” exclaimed Professor Snodgrass, as he reached under the great driving wheels and lifted something out. “It was a narrow escape. If you had run over this bug you would have killed it sure, and it’s worth at least seven dollars for my collection.”

“Bug!” fairly yelled the engineer. “Do you mean to say you made all that fuss, and stopped the train on account of a bug?”

“Certainly,” replied the scientist coolly. “It is a very rare specimen of a red beetle, seldom seen in this part of the country. I saw it on the track just as you were about to run over it. Fortunately I stopped you in time,” and he carefully put the beetle in one of his specimen boxes, and looked around for the boys.

“Stopped me in time! I should say you did!” gasped the now angry engineer. “I slapped on the emergency air when I heard you yelling that way. I thought it

was a kid under the machine. And all for a bug—a bug! I guess that ain't the *only* bug around here, either,” and he looked significantly at the professor who, however, was calmly unconscious of the glance. “Can I start now?” sarcastically enquired the engineer, “or is there more live stock under my driving wheels? Hey?”

“No more—unfortunately,” replied the professor, with great good nature, after a glance under the locomotive, to make certain. “I wish there was, but I will have to be content with this one. Now boys, I'm glad to see you,” and he turned to greet the three chums, who up to this time had been too surprised at the sudden and odd turn of events to speak to their friend.

“We're glad to see you!” exclaimed Jerry, holding out his hand.

“And I you!” cried the scientist. “I always have good luck when I'm with you boys, and it has started early this time.”

“So we see,” observed Ned.

“You haven't changed any since our last trip,” remarked Bob. “You're still after specimens.”

“And I will be, as long as I can see, and handle my butterfly net,” declared Mr. Snodgrass. “Ah, there is our little excitable friend, Andy Rush. Glad to see you, Andy.”

“How are you Mr. Snodgrass? My—a bug on the rail—almost run over—great excitement—woman nearly fainted—slam on the breaks—blow up the boiler—hold down the safety valve—sand the tracks—get the bug—whoop!”

“Yes—er—ah—um!” murmured the professor, looking over the top of his spectacles at Andy. “You haven't changed either.”

“We've got the auto all ready for you,” explained Jerry, as he led the way to the waiting car. “You came in good season, Professor Snodgrass, as we're about to start off on another little air-trip.”

“Not over the ocean I hope this time,” exclaimed the scientist, “for the specimen I am now after is not to be found at sea. So if you're going over the water I'm afraid I can't be with you.”

“What are you after this trip?” asked Ned.

“A green flying frog,” explained the professor gravely. “The museum by which I am employed needs one of these rare specimens, and I have engaged to

spend my entire vacation looking for it. They are only to be found inland, however, and, so far as is known, such frogs only exist in Java. But I have made a study of the creature, and I see no reason why it should not be discovered in this country, especially farther west, in some of the great forests.

“This frog has a sort of membrane between its legs, like a flying squirrel, and in addition to that feature it has the power of changing its color like the chameleon. Ordinarily it is light green on top, and white on the under parts, but it may become orange-hued, or even pink or brown. I have great hopes of finding one, and if I do, I will be richly repaid for my trouble, and our museum will have a great prize.”

“Well, I don’t know as we’re going any place where there are flying frogs,” said Jerry, “but we are going to an aviation meet, and after that we have made no plans. We’d be glad to have you go with us.”

“I’ll certainly go,” promised the professor, as they got in the auto, and started toward Jerry’s house, where the little scientist was to make a visit. “Do you suppose you’ll head for the middle west?”

“Very likely,” said Bob. “We haven’t been out there in some time, and it might be well to make a trip to see how our gold mine is coming on.”

“Oh, I guess it’s going all right,” came from Jerry, as he speeded up the car. “We get our dividends regularly.”

The professor was busy arranging his specimen boxes about him in the tonneau of the car, where he sat with Bob and Andy Rush. The long-handled butterfly net was thrust down behind the lap-robe rail, and the cloth part fluttered in the air like a flag of distress, causing on the part of pedestrians several curious glances at the auto. But the professor little cared for that.

“Would you mind slackening speed somewhat,” begged the scientist as they neared Jerry’s house.

“Why?” inquired the tall youth.

“Well, I can’t tell whether or not we are passing any valuable insects on the bushes,” explained the professor, as he peered through his powerful spectacles at the shrubbery that lined the roadway. “I must lose no chances of getting specimens,” he innocently explained, “so I thought if you could run more slowly I might sight a rare bug or worm: Ha—there! Stop if you please, Jerry!”

Jerry brought the car up with a jerk, and, almost before it had ceased moving

the professor was out, and had darted to a blackberry bush, net in hand.

He made a swoop, gathered a part of the net in his fingers, looked closely at what was in it, and then exclaimed:

“Oh, pshaw! it’s only a common June bug. I thought I had a seven winged dragon fly. Go ahead Jerry. I hope I have better luck when I look for the flying frog?”

During this time Andy Rush had said little, but the manner in which he fidgeted about on the seat, and the way in which his lips moved, showed that he was holding something back with a great effort.

Jerry swung the car up in front of his house, and as he and his chums and their guest alighted, the excitable little chap asked:

“Say, professor, is there really a flying frog—one that sails through the air—like an aeroplane—over the trees—’round in a circle—faster and faster—is there really—whoop!”

Andy ended up with a vigorous swinging of his arms. The professor looked curiously at him, and then, without a word, made a jump for the small chap.

Surprise manifested on his face, Andy leaped back out of reach of the butterfly net that was extended toward him. The scientist took another forward step. Andy leaped back still more, and then, as if alarmed at the manner of the bug-collector, the boy turned and ran down the street.

“Hold on! Come back here at once! I want you! You must not get away from me! Stop I say!”

The race was on, each one running at top speed.

“Don’t let him catch me! Don’t!” yelled Andy, working his legs to their limit. “I didn’t mean anything! I wasn’t making fun of the flying frog! Don’t catch me!”

“Stop! Stop I say!” ordered the professor imperiously.

“By Jove!” exclaimed Jerry. “The professor is angry at Andy. He thinks he’s been making game of him. If he catches him he may hurt the little fellow.”

“What, the professor? He wouldn’t hurt a fly unless he wanted it for a specimen,” spoke Ned.

“Maybe that’s what he wants of Andy—he’s so little,” ventured Bob.

“Well, he’ll soon have him at the rate he’s going,” predicted Jerry, for the scientist was now almost up to the small fellow, who was still begging to be let alone, while the professor was shouting:

“Stop! Stop I say! Come back here at once!”



CHAPTER VIII

NODDY'S AEROPLANE

How long the race might have continued no one could have told, but unfortunately several pedestrians got in the path of Andy and he was forced to slacken speed. His youth and fleetness gave him an advantage, but the professor was used to chasing after flitting butterflies and elusive insects, and this training stood him in good stead. So in a few minutes he caught up to Andy, and grasped him by the shoulder.

“Did it get away? Is it still on you?” Jerry and his chums heard the scientist ask the small chap.

“Did what get away? Is what still on me?” gasped Andy. “Didn’t you—?” Words failed him. He could only look and pant.

“Ha! I have it!” cried the professor. “The little beauty didn’t get away. One moment, Andy, and I’ll secure it.”

He made a sudden motion, and caught something that had been perched on the small lad’s shoulder.

“A red ant, one of the largest of its kind, and a very fine specimen,” observed the professor, as he carefully put the insect in a small box that he took from his pocket. “You have unconsciously been a great aid to the advancement of science to-day, Andy. That red ant is worth at least five dollars.”

“A red ant! Five dollars!” gasped Andy Rush. “Is that why you were chasing me?”

“Yes, to be sure. What else did you think I was running after you for?” demanded Mr. Snodgrass.

“I thought—that is—the flying frog—I thought that you thought I was—Oh, I guess it’s all right!” exclaimed the small chap quickly. “You jumped at me so I was afraid I had offended you.”

“Offended me? I guess not, especially when you had a valuable red ant on you!” cried the professor heartily.

“You thought he was going to scalp you; didn’t you, Andy?” asked Ned in a low voice.

“That’s what I did! I couldn’t stand for that green flying frog. I thought he was making a joke, and I was going to say something funny. I’m glad I didn’t—but he scared me just the same.”

“The professor never jokes,” said Bob. “If he says there is a flying frog you can depend on it that there is one.”

“Come on in, fellows,” invited Jerry to Ned and Bob, as they reached his house. “We’ll hear what the professor has to say about his plans for catching the flying frog, and then we’ll tell him what we are going to do. We’ll have to make up some sort of a program.”

The next hour was spent in talk, the scientist giving some facts about the curious frog, which he stated, could glide from the ground to low bushes and down again, in search of its insect food.

“But what about this aviation meet?” asked the professor. “I must not be selfish and monopolize all the talk.”

They told him of their plans, and also mentioned meeting the two queer men—Brown and Black.

“If we run across them at the meet I’m going to give them a wide berth,” declared Ned. “I don’t cotton to ’em.”

“Me either,” agreed Jerry.

“And so your old enemy, Noddy Nixon, is also to have an aeroplane?” asked the professor, that fact having been mentioned. “Do you expect to race with him?”

“Not if we can avoid it,” declared Jerry. “He may enter his craft in the meet though, but we haven’t seen anything of it as yet. Perhaps it’s only a rumor.”

But it was more than that, as our friends found a few days later, when as they went down to the freight office to get some duplicate parts for their motor, which they had ordered from the factory, they saw several large packing cases on the platform. The boxes were addressed to Noddy Nixon, and were marked—“Fragile—Handle with Care.”

“Maybe that’s his aeroplane that Andy Rush was telling us about,” suggested Bob.

“Shouldn’t wonder,” agreed Jerry. “Let’s see if we can tell where it’s from. There are several firms making them now.”

They saw no harm in looking at the shipping tag to ascertain what type of aircraft Noddy was getting, and they had just located the card, tacked on the end of one of the boxes, when a rough voice exclaimed:

“Here, get away from there! What are you trying to do; damage our machine?”

The boys turned quickly to observe the unprepossessing countenance of Bill Berry gazing at them. He had come up unheard.

“Your machine?” murmured Jerry.

“Yes, mine—mine and Noddy’s. I’ve got an interest in it. It can carry two. You needn’t think you’re the only ones in town with an aeroplane,” and Bill sneered.

“We were just looking to see where it came from,” said Bob.

“You needn’t give yourselves the trouble,” went on the bully’s crony. “Just keep away from our property. We can do all the looking that’s necessary.”

“What’s the matter? What were they doing?” demanded the angry voice of Noddy himself, as he came quickly from the direction of the freight office, and mounted the platform. He had gone to sign a receipt for his property. “What were they doing, Bill?”

“Oh, snooping around, as usual.”

“That’s not so!” cried Ned hotly.

“Say, if you bother with my aeroplane I’ll have you arrested!” threatened Noddy, with a bluster. “I intend to make a lot of flights, and if you get in my way there’ll be trouble.”

“Don’t worry; we’ll take good care to keep out of your way,” said Jerry significantly. “Come on, fellows. And the next time Noddy gets in a mud hole we’ll let him stick.”

“I guess Noddy means business as far as flying goes,” remarked Ned, when they were on their way home. “That firm he bought his machine from makes good aeroplanes.”

“Yes, he’ll fly if he doesn’t break it the first time he goes out,” said Jerry.

“Well, he needn’t trouble us—there’s plenty space to fly in. We’ll go off on a little trip, and take the professor with us when we get the motor fixed.” For the engine of the *Comet* had developed a slight defect, and it was decided to remedy it before going to the meet.

In the meanwhile the boys worked on other parts of their air machine, while Professor Snodgrass put in his time seeking various insects in Cresville. He had agreed to go to the aeroplane meet with the boys, and later they planned to take a short flight out West, to see if there was any truth in the Professor’s theory that the flying frog might be discovered there.

They heard some reports of Noddy’s aeroplane. An expert from the factory where it was made had come on to Cresville to assemble it, and also to give Noddy lessons in running it. Noddy knew something of aeronautics, though his first attempt at flight in his tin fly had been most disastrous.

“He means business,” said Jerry one day to his chums. “I went past yesterday afternoon, and Andy and Bill were making a trip over Mr. Nixon’s big meadow. Noddy will fly all right.”

“Did he go up high?” inquired Bob.

“Not very. He was just about snipping the tops off the daisies—regular grass-cutting work. Afraid to go up, I guess. But say, I thought of making a trip tomorrow. Will you fellows come?”

“Sure,” agreed Ned. “We’ll take the professor, too. He hasn’t had a ride since he came.”

“Can’t we take considerable food along, and stay several days?” asked Bob.

“No, it’s too near the time for the meet,” decided Jerry. “There are several little changes I want to make in the *Comet* before we enter her for a prize, and if we go scooting off around the country we can’t get them done. Besides, there’s always the danger of an accident that might put us out of the race. We’ll postpone our trip until after the meet.”

His companions agreed with him, and the next morning, in company with the professor, they started off on a day’s flight, planning to return to Cresville before nightfall.

“Noddy Nixon went off in his machine early this morning,” was the information Andy Rush brought when he appeared at the big shed, for he had been invited to make the trip with our heroes.

“He did, eh?” spoke Ned. “Well, I guess he won’t go far. Come on now, Andy, hop in. We’re ready to start.”

The professor, carrying a number of specimen boxes, and an extra long-handled net with which he hoped to capture insects of the upper regions, entered the cabin of the *Comet*. Jerry was in the pilot house, with Ned and Bob standing by to give their aid.

“Let her go!” cried the tall lad, as he turned on the power, while Ned turned over the auxiliary fly wheel that was connected with the big propellers. They whirred around with great swiftness, the *Comet* skimmed lightly over the ground, and a moment later had mounted easily up into the air.

“Whoop! La-la!” cried Andy Rush. “Here we go! Up in the air! Never say die! Never come down! Go on like the *Flying Dutchman*! Whoop! La-la!”



CHAPTER IX

A DISASTROUS FLIGHT

Higher and higher soared the *Comet*, mounting upward on the wings of the wind until it was more than a mile in the air. Then Jerry brought her to a level keel, and turned on more power.

“Where you heading for?” asked Ned, noting that the machinery was running almost at the limit of speed. “What’s the haste, Jerry? Are you trying for a record?”

“Not especially, though we might as well hit it up to see how the renovated motor works.”

“It works fine, if you ask me,” came from Bob. “We haven’t traveled so fast since we were after Mr. Jackson. But then I guess if we’re going to try for a prize at the meet we’ll need speed.”

“That’s one reason,” conceded Jerry. “Another is, that I’m going to try to get to Lake Martin and back before night.”

“Ha! I see your game!” cried Ned. “You haven’t had a chance to try the hydroplanes lately, and you are afraid they won’t work.”

“Not at all afraid of that,” declared the tall lad, “but I *do* want to give them another try-out.”

“It’s quite a trip to Lake Martin and back again—especially when we haven’t much food aboard,” ventured Bob.

“Oh, what’s the matter with you, Chunky?” cried Jerry. “You’re always thinking of eating. Forget it once in a while. We can easily make the lake, and be back for supper.”

“If we don’t have any accidents,” put in the fat boy, somewhat dubiously. “I’m going to see what we have got in the galley,” and despite the laughing objections of his companions he departed to inspect the larder. He came back grinning cheerfully.

“Well?” asked Ned.

“Enough for a week!” exclaimed Bob in satisfied tones. “I forgot that we stocked up the other day. It’s all right. Go as far as you like.”

It was quite a trip to Lake Martin, but Jerry knew the *Comet* could easily make it. They had gone farther than that in one day, and he wanted to try the hydroplanes on a large body of fresh water. He knew, or was practically certain, that they would work all right, but they had not been used since the trip over the ocean, when the boys rescued Mr. Jackson.

It was about an hour after they had started, and the *Comet*, was speeding swiftly along, when Mr. Snodgrass quickly arose from his seat amidships, and with a cry of delight, rushed toward the stern of the craft.

“There’s one!” he exclaimed. “One of the upper-air mosquitoes. Look out, Bob, and I’ll get him!”

With uplifted net the scientist headed for the very end of the *Comet*. Buzzing just out of his reach was a large insect, and so intent on its capture was Mr. Snodgrass that he never noticed his own danger.

The rear of the airship ended in a sort of open deck or platform, that was used for various purposes. Usually a stout iron railing enclosed it, but, in order to make some changes, this railing had been taken down, and had not been replaced, though Jerry intended to do it before going to the meet. But now the end of the craft was unprotected, and the professor was running quickly toward it.

Eager as he was to capture the insect, there was every likelihood that he would hurl himself off into space if he was not stopped. Ned saw his danger and yelled:

“Professor! Professor! Stop! The railing is down! Look out!”

The scientist either did not hear or did not heed, but kept on.

“Stop the ship! Stop her! Send her down! He’ll be killed if he falls!” cried Ned to Jerry. There was little doubt of this, for the *Comet* was now two miles above the earth.

The professor was now within ten feet of the end of the platform, and it seemed that nothing could save him. But Ned and Jerry, who were looking with horror in their eyes at their friend, reckoned without Bob. The stout lad was on the after part of the motorship, at one edge of the platform. He looked up as he heard the cries, and saw the scientist coming. Then Bob acted.

Instead of calling to Mr. Snodgrass, the fat lad fairly rolled out directly in his

path, and lay there. There could be but one result. The professor, his eyes fixed on the insect that was fluttering before him, did not see Bob. But he could not avoid him.

The next instant he had stumbled over him, and went down in a heap, about four feet from the end of the platform, his net slipping from his grasp, and falling off into space.

“Ugh!” grunted Bob, as the breath was knocked from him by the impact with the professor.

“Oh, my dear boy! Did I hurt you?” exclaimed the scientist as he slowly arose.

“Not—not much,” gasped the fat youth.

“Oh dear! My best net is gone! And the insect has disappeared!” lamented Mr. Snodgrass.

“And in another minute *you* would have disappeared!” declared Jerry half angrily. “You must not take such chances, Professor. Only for Bob you would have been killed.”

“Well, I’m much obliged to Bob, I’m sure,” said Mr. Snodgrass with a curious air. “Very much obliged. I wonder where I can get another handle for the new butterfly net which I must make?”

“And that’s all he thinks about his narrow escape,” commented Ned. “Say, he’ll give us heart disease if he keeps on this way.”

“A miss is as good as two miles,” observed Bob, as he rubbed his hip where the professor had fallen on him. “I’m glad he didn’t go overboard,” he added as he looked at the earth far below them.

The professor, after thinking the matter over, began to realize what he had escaped, and shook hands warmly with Bob. Then he forgot all about the matter, in the work of making a new handle for another net he constructed out of some thin cloth.

Meanwhile the *Comet* was speeding on, and in less time than our heroes expected they were at Lake Martin. Jerry sent the craft down to the surface of the water, and landed on the hydroplanes. Then, setting the water-screw in motion, he directed the motorship about on the lake, to the no small amazement of some motor-boat enthusiasts who were there. Dinner was eaten afloat, and after giving the professor a chance to look for the flying frog, but without success, preparations were made for the return.

“I told you we could make the trip easily in a day,” observed Jerry to his chums, as, toward the close of the afternoon, they were nearing Cresville.

“Yes, the *Comet* is doing herself proud,” declared Ned. “I hope we take a prize with her at Colton.”

“Sure we will,” insisted Bob, who was feeling very fine because of a good dinner.

“We wouldn’t if we depended on you,” said Jerry, “though I must say you keep us up to the mark on grub,” and the fat lad grinned in appreciation of this compliment.

They were about three miles from home, and were slowing up their speed, and coming down on a long slant, when Ned, who was looking from the window of the pilot house suddenly exclaimed:

“There’s another aeroplane down there, fellows!”

“Where?” demanded Bob.

“Hovering over that meadow. See, it’s a big biplane, too.”

They looked and saw the white planes of a large aircraft.

“It’s a new one—see how white the canvas is,” commented Jerry.

“Looks just like the *Silver Star*,” put in Bob. “Maybe Brown and Black have come to apologize to us.”

“Not much,” answered Ned grimly.

“Say, fellows, that’s Noddy Nixon!” cried Andy Rush, who, strange to say, had been rather quiet on this trip. “He has a biplane.”

“So he has,” agreed Jerry. “I shouldn’t be surprised if it was Noddy, boys.”

“Let’s go down and see,” proposed Bob. Accordingly the *Comet* was headed for the strange aircraft which was slowly skimming along over the big meadow, at no great distance above the ground. There were two figures in it, as our friends could observe, and they were guiding the aeroplane about in easy circles and figures of eight.

“It’s Noddy all right,” declared Jerry, when they had come near enough to make out the occupants of the machine, “and Bill Berry is with him.”

“Let’s watch him for a while,” suggested Bob, and his tall chum shut off the propellers, let some gas blow from the compressor into the big bag, so that the

Comet floated in the air like a balloon, at some distance above the slowly-moving aeroplane of Noddy Nixon.

The bully and his crony had noticed the air-audience and, probably to show off, they increased the speed of their craft, though they did not ascend any.

“Guess they’re afraid,” remarked Ned.

Then Andy Rush did something, which, if his companions could have anticipated they would have prevented. Leaning over the side of the *Comet*, and directing his voice at Noddy and Bill, he loudly shouted:

“Hey, why don’t you go up? Don’t be afraid! Be sports! Come on up, the air is fine! Show us what you can do!”

Whether Noddy imagined it was one of the motor boys calling thus mockingly to him was not learned, but at any rate the bully retorted:

“Huh! afraid, are we? I’ll show you!”

There was an increase to the speed of his motor, as our friends could tell by the more rapid explosions, and the new aeroplane, boastfully named the *Winner*, shot upward.

“We’ll show you what we can do!” cried Bill Berry. “Go right over their heads, Noddy!”

“I will!” declared Noddy, and he pointed the nose of his craft straight at the *Comet* on an upward slant.

“He’s coming for us!” cried Ned.

“He may hit us!” added Bob.

“Not much danger I guess,” replied Jerry. “He ought to be able to steer well out of the way.”

But the *Winner* did seem to be coming alarmingly close to the *Comet*, and even Jerry was a bit apprehensive.

“Guess I’ll get some steerage way on, and move up a bit, fellows,” decided the tall lad. But before he could do this something happened.

The *Winner* was coming on rapidly. The malevolent faces of Noddy and Bill could be made out now. They were both grinning.

“We’ll cut over your heads all right!” boasted Noddy. “We’ll show you how to fly.”

An instant later the nose of the *Winner* was tilted upward still more, as Noddy shifted his rudder. It seemed as if the new craft would clear the *Comet*, and that Noddy would make good his boast.

But just as Jerry got the propellers in motion, and as the motorship was slowly moving to one side the *Winner* topped her. Right over the heads of our heroes flew Noddy.

Then came an ominous ripping, tearing sound, a hissing as from compressed air, and the *Comet* began to sink.

“He’s torn a hole in our gas bag! We’re going down!” yelled Jerry, as he leaped toward the motor room. “Ned—Bob! Start the vapor machine or we’ll crash to earth!”



CHAPTER X

SUSPICIOUS CONVERSATION

There was intense excitement aboard the *Comet*. So, for that matter, was there also on the *Winner*, for at first Noddy and Bill did not know but that their own craft had been damaged. But, as they kept on rising, in response to the uptilted rudder, Noddy was sure they were all right. He quickly brought his craft up on a level keel, and then swept around in a big circle to see what was happening to the *Comet*.

“Lively, boys!” cried Jerry. “Turn on the machine at full speed, Ned, and that will check us until we can get under way,” for they were motionless when the accident occurred.

Ned had acted the instant he heard Jerry’s call, and now a double quantity of the lifting gas was pouring into the ripped bag.

Though the rent was a large one, the bag was made in a number of compartments, so that only the two that were ripped open by the *Winner* lost their vapor. The others were more fully distended and served to check the downward rush of the airship.

After a sickening plunge the *Comet* gradually slowed up in her descent, and when within a few hundred feet of the earth she glided ahead as an aeroplane, her propellers forcing her onward.

But there was not chance enough to get up much momentum, and, as they ran into an adverse current of air, which continued to force them earthward, and, as for some reason the main motor was not working well, Jerry concluded to make a full descent, so he could see what damage had been done, and then rise again.

“Stand by to make a landing!” he called to his chums; and a moment later the *Comet* came to rest on the level green meadow while above her the *Winner* winged her flight through the air.

“Well, wouldn’t that jar you!” exclaimed Ned in great disgust.

“I should say so,” remarked Bob. “It’s just like Noddy Nixon’s freshness. He ought to learn how to run an aeroplane in the kindergarten class before he comes

out with the high school boys.”

“I’ll make him pay for our damaged bag!” declared Jerry firmly. “He ought to have known better than to try that stunt. I’ll make him soak up for it all right.”

The boys were standing beside their craft, and Jerry was peering upward trying to discover the extent of the tear in the gas bag.

“I’m afraid it was all my fault,” said Andy Rush, more quietly than he usually spoke. “If I hadn’t challenged Noddy the way I did it might not have happened.”

“Oh, well, you didn’t mean anything,” consoled Ned. “Besides, Noddy might have done it anyhow. Even if you did call to him he ought to have known better than to try to cross over us so close. I guess Bill Berry put him up to it. Don’t worry Andy. Is it very bad, Jerry?”

The tall lad had climbed up in the rigging that held the bag, and was critically examining it.

“Two of the compartments are all ripped to pieces, and there’s a small tear in a third one,” Jerry reported. “We’ll have to put on big patches. I’ll make Noddy pay for this.”

“Can we get home?” asked Bob.

“Of course. You forget that as an aeroplane we’re as good as ever,” responded Ned. “Say, look at Noddy though, he’s flying high.”

Indeed, the bully and his crony were making a successful flight, and were now but a mere speck in the sky.

“He’s doing better than I ever expected he would,” remarked Jerry. “I hope he steers clear of us after this. He needs half the upper region to navigate in. If he goes to the Colton meet we won’t enter any of the events he’s in.”

“I should say not!” exclaimed Ned earnestly.

There was nothing that could be done toward repairing the *Comet* now, so, after letting all the gas out of the bag, and seeing to the defect in the main motor, which was in the ignition system, the boys made ready to fly home as an aeroplane.

The propellers were started, and the motorship skimmed over the meadow. It was rather an uneven course, and the boys were pretty well jolted up, but they managed to acquire enough speed to lift their craft, and once in the air the machine soared high. In ten minutes they were in front of the hangar, and the

Comet had been wheeled inside.

“Are you really going to tackle Noddy about paying for the damage?” asked Ned, as he walked beside Jerry toward the latter’s house.

“I sure am! I’m going over there to-night, and if he won’t pay I’ll see his father. It’s time that bully found out that he can’t have everything his own way.”

“Want Bob or me to come along?”

“No, I think I can do better alone, thanks. If we all go we might get into a quarrel. I’ll tackle him alone.”

In accordance with his plan, Jerry set off that evening, leaving Professor Snodgrass at home classifying some of the specimens he had caught that day. There were many lights in the Nixon mansion, which was set in the midst of extensive grounds, for Mr. Nixon was quite wealthy.

“Looks as if they had company,” mused Jerry. “I guess I’ll find Noddy home. He always is if there’s any eating going on—like Bob,” and he smiled in the darkness.

But Noddy was not at home—at least, that is what the maid said who answered Jerry’s ring. The tall lad was right in his surmise that something was going on at the Nixon home, for he could see many guests in the parlors, and he caught the strains of music.

“Is Mr. Nixon in?” he asked, determined to make an appeal to Noddy’s father.

“He is, but he’s very busy. I doubt if he’ll see you,” was the reply, and, after thinking it over Jerry concluded that it was an inopportune time to make his demand.

“I’ll see him to-morrow,” he said as he turned away.

The shed where Noddy kept his aeroplane was some distance from the house, but on the same street, for Mr. Nixon owned a large piece of property adjoining his residence. It was in front of this shed that Jerry found himself a few minutes later.

He gazed up at the big, dark building, and his thoughts were not very pleasant as he recalled the damage the bully had done to the *Comet* that afternoon.

“I wonder where Noddy is?” mused the tall lad. “He and Bill are probably off somewhere together. I wonder if he could be in here?”

Jerry paused. There was no light visible in the shed, and our hero was about to pass on, when something—some impulse he could not define,—caused him to turn and advance a little way inside the fence that surrounded the building. The gate was open.

“Oh, pshaw! They can’t be in there,” thought Jerry. “I might as well go home.”

But at that instant there came to his ears the sound of voices in cautious conversation. He listened intently.

“I tell you it’s too risky,” he heard some one say, and in a moment he knew it was the tones of Bill Berry.

“Oh get out! You’re afraid!” retorted Noddy Nixon. “We can easily do it, and get safely away.”

“But the police?” objected Bill.

“Bah! They’ll never suspect that we’re going to do anything like that. And, even if they do we’ll have the job done and get away before they know anything about it. I tell you it’s perfectly safe. Isn’t it worth trying for?”

“Yes, I s’pose it is—but if we’re nabbed?”

“We won’t be I tell you,” and Noddy seemed half angry. “Most of the police will be at the Colton meet, anyhow.”

“Do you think you can handle the machine well enough?” asked Bill.

“I know I can. Look what I did to-day.”

“Yes, you did cut it pretty fine,” admitted Bill.

“And I guess I gave those fellows a scare they won’t soon forget!” chuckled Noddy.

Jerry clenched his hands in anger. But he was not yet ready to make his presence known.

“Then you’ll go in with me on it?” asked Noddy, after a pause.

“Oh, I suppose so. If we’re caught it can’t be——”

“We’ll not get caught!” declared Noddy again. “The Harmolet police are too sleepy for anything like that to happen. There’ll be a big surprise when they wake up in the morning and find it gone,” and he chuckled again.

Then the voices died away, and it seemed as if the two cronies had gone inside the shed, outside of which they had evidently been standing in the darkness when Jerry overheard their conversation.

The tall lad hesitated a moment, uncertain what to do. Then he murmured:

“I guess I won’t say anything to Noddy to-night. I’ll wait and see what sort of a game he’s up to. It sounds suspicious to me.”



CHAPTER XI

OFF TO THE MEET

“What do you reckon they were talking about?” asked Ned.

“Are you sure it was Noddy and Bill?” inquired Bob.

The two were questioning their chum Jerry the day following the accident to the *Comet*, when the tall lad had reported to them the result of his visit to Noddy’s house.

“I’m as sure it was Noddy and Bill, as that I’m talking to you and Ned this minute, Bob. But as to what they were talking about I give up. I’ve been thinking of it all night, but I can’t hit it,” answered Jerry.

“Some mischief I’ll wager,” came from Ned.

“Oh, you can be sure of that,” added Bob.

“One thing seems to be certain,” went on the tall lad, “and that is they’re going to the Colton meet. I wish they weren’t, since we’ve entered our machine there. But there’s no help for it.”

“This is a free country,” declared the stout lad. “They can do as they please, I suppose.”

“Well, if we’re going to the meet it’s time we did something to the *Comet*,” suggested the merchant’s son. “What about the rips in the gas bag, Jerry?”

“We’ll get right at them. I’ve got out the stuff to mend the tears. I’ll start you and Bob on that, and I’ll make another try to see Noddy. I’m going to make him pay up if it’s possible.”

A little later, having seen that his two chums were putting the patches on the gas bag the right way, Jerry again went to the Nixon house. A sleepy-eyed maid answered the bell, yawning, though it was after ten o’clock. Evidently the company had stayed late the night before.

“Master Noddy is not in,” she replied in response to Jerry’s inquiry. “He’s out of town, and I don’t know when he will be back.”

“Out of town?”

“Yes, to some balloon show I heard him tell his father. Mr. Nixon is in, if you’d like to see him.”

“Never mind,” said the tall lad. “Did Noddy take his airship with him?”

“No, it’s being packed up now. Some men are out in the shed boxing it up. It’s going out to the balloon show I believe. Is there any word you’d like to leave,” she asked, as she saw Jerry turn to go.

Jerry thought there was none, and hurrying to the shed where Bob and Ned were working away over the *Comet*, he told his chums the news.

“Noddy means business all right,” declared Ned, pausing with a cement pot in one hand, while with the other he tried to rub off a daub of tar on his nose.

“Maybe he’s after our scalp,” suggested Bob. “But I guess we can do stunts with the *Comet* that he wouldn’t dare dream of.”

“Sure,” assented Jerry. “Well, as long as he’s gone I’ll have to defer collecting damages. Now we’ll get busy.”

For more than a week our heroes spent most of their time in the aeroplane shed. The gas bag was repaired, and made stronger than ever, the motor was overhauled, a general cleaning of the machinery took place, a new railing was put around the after platform, and the air craft was put in condition to take part in a distance race, a high flight, or to do startling evolutions about the aviation field.

They had formally entered the *Comet* in the hundreds miles’ race which was to take place in a ten-mile circuit about the aviation grounds, and they had also entered in the high-flying event.

One afternoon, when Jerry went to the post-office, he received a letter from the secretary of the meet, enclosing an entrant’s certificate, and also a list showing those who would take part in the various events.

“Well, we’ll have to compete against Noddy in both big races—distance and height,” said Jerry dubiously to his two chums.

“Really?” asked Ned.

“Sure, here’s his name, and he’s entered Bill Berry as a passenger.”

“He’s got nerve,” declared Bob. “Well, we’ll beat him all right. But I would

like to know what game he and Bill are after in Harmolet.”

“So would I,” agreed Jerry. “But say, fellows, we haven’t any too much time. We ought to give the *Comet* one good try-out, and then take her apart and ship her to the meet.”

“What’s the matter with going to the meet *in* her?” asked Ned. “We can easily do it, and it will save time and work.”

“The only thing is we might have an accident on the way, and then we’d be out of it, if we couldn’t get the repairs done in time,” objected Jerry.

“Oh, take a chance,” urged the merchant’s son; and so it was decided.

The *Comet* was given a final trial flight the next day, and the boys, in company with Professor Snodgrass, went through some intricate evolutions, as well as testing the speed of the motorship on a straight-away course.

They sailed up to a dizzy height, came down in spirals, volplaned to earth as an aeroplane with the gas entirely out of the bag, floated lazily in the air as a balloon, and went after a height record. The last they did not accomplish, for they had only gotten up about three miles when they ran into a violent snowstorm, and Jerry, not wanting to take any chances with the time of the meet so near at hand, made a quick descent.

“We’ve gone higher on other occasions,” he said to his chums, “and we know we can do it, so there’s no use taking too many risks. Otherwise the *Comet* never did better.”

“And if we don’t win at least two prizes I’ll eat my hat,” observed Bob.

“And about everything else on board too, I suspect, Chunky,” remarked Ned, with a grin.

While the professor was interested in the working of the motorship, and proud of the ability of his young friends, he spent more time looking for insects in the upper air, than in watching the intricate evolutions.

“And how soon after the meet will you start for the West?” he inquired anxiously, when they had wheeled the *Comet* into the shed.

“Oh, in a few days,” promised Jerry. “I believe he cares more about that flying frog than he does about us winning a prize,” confided the tall lad to his chums.

“I’m sure of it,” agreed Ned.

The final preparations were made. Plenty of provisions were put aboard, there was enough gasoline for a long flight, and materials for making the lifting gas had been stored away. The *Comet* was ready for the flight to Colton.

“Well, we might as well get aboard,” remarked Jerry the day of the start, after he and his chums had looked over every bolt, nut, lever, cam, valve, gear and guy-wire. “We can take our time getting there.”

“Let her go!” cried Bob. “I’ve got everything ready for a meal above the clouds.”

“Oh, of course,” murmured Ned. “No danger of you forgetting anything in *that* line.”

Professor Snodgrass was busy mending a hole in his butterfly net. Jerry was in the pilot house, while Ned and Bob were in the engine room.

“All ready?” inquired the tall lad.

“All ready,” replied Ned, with a final look at the machinery.

“Then here we go!”

Jerry pulled the starting lever, just as Andy Rush ran into the enclosure.

“Good-bye!” called the little lad. “Good luck! Off you go! Up in the air! Whizz around! Turn over—right side up with care—off again—high as Gilroy’s kite—win the prize—whoop-ee!”

“Well, I’m glad that’s over,” murmured Jerry with a smile.

Across the level space went the *Comet* with a whizz and a roar. The next minute it had mounted upward, and the motor boys were on the wing.



CHAPTER XII

NEWS OF BROWN AND BLACK

“Well, it seems like old times,” remarked Ned as he took an easy chair in the living room, back of the pilot house, and watched Jerry manipulating the various wheels and levers, as the big motorship mounted upward on a long slant.

“Yes, we’re under way again,” agreed the tall lad. “I wonder what will happen to us this trip?”

“What makes you think anything will happen?” asked Bob.

“Well it generally does, Chunky. Either we run over a spotted calf, or rip a cornice off a barn, or have a run-in with Noddy Nixon. Oh, there’ll be something doing on this trip before it’s over, mark my words.”

“I hope we’re done with mix-ups and Noddy Nixon,” came from Ned. “More likely we’ll have one with those queer fellows we met at Freedom—Black and Green.”

“Black and Brown you mean,” broke in Jerry. “What’s the matter with you; are you color blind?”

“That’s right, it was Black and Brown,” assented the merchant’s son. “Well, I hope if we do meet them, that they turn out to be ‘white.’”

“Ha! Ha!” laughed Bob. “That’s a joke—‘white!’ Oh my!”

“Glad *you* aren’t color blind, and can see it,” said Jerry with a smile. “But what makes you think we’ll meet them, Ned?”

“Oh, it’s just a notion; that’s all. But say, we’re up high enough. Set the automatic steering gear, and take it easy, can’t you?”

“Guess I will,” assented the tall youth. “There’s no use wasting gas,” for in addition to mounting upward by means of the aeroplanes the lifting vapor was also in use.

For several hours our friends sailed slowly along, high above the earth. They were not running their machine to the limit of speed, for though they could readily have made a quick trip to Colton, the place of the meet, they preferred to

take it easy, and avoid chances of a breakdown.

Promptly at noon—perhaps a little in advance of that hour—Bob announced dinner, which he had been some time in preparing. His chums said it did him credit, and the manner in which they ate was additional testimony. Even Professor Snodgrass, who managed to tear himself away from his specimens long enough to come to the table, condescended to pass his plate for some more of the fried chicken. Bob had installed a small ice chest on the *Comet*, and victuals could be kept cold by means of ammonia vapors, so it was possible to serve fresh meats.

“We ought to be there pretty soon now,” observed Jerry, toward the close of the day. “I figure we’ll just about get to Colton before dark.”

“You engaged a hangar for us, didn’t you?” inquired Ned.

“Sure. The secretary of the aeronautic association wrote me that he had picked out for us one of the best on the grounds. It’s of heavy canvas over a wooden frame. They didn’t have time to put up all wooden ones.”

“Well, better speed up a little,” suggested Bob. “We don’t want to drop down on a strange ground after dusk. Hit it up a little, Jerry.”

The *Comet* was soon scudding along at a faster clip, when suddenly a little cry from Ned, who was in the pilot house brought Bob and Jerry to his side on the run.

“There’s the place!” he cried, pointing ahead.

They could see a broad level plateau on which could be made out many tents and hangars, gay with flags and bunting, while here and there the graceful biplanes or monoplanes were interspersed with the more bulky dirigible balloons.

“Say, there’s a lot of ’em all right!” exclaimed Bob.

“Yes, I guess it’s going to be a good meet,” assented Jerry.

“You better make the landing,” interposed Ned, motioning for the tall lad to take the steering wheel. “You’re more used to it than I am, and we want to make a good impression.”

“You fellows can do it as well as I,” declared Jerry. “The only thing is that you lack confidence. You must get used to it. However, I’ll take her down this time.”

He turned on a little more power and then, shutting off the gas he picked out

an unoccupied spot, and volplaned to earth with great skill, evoking applause from a crowd of aeronauts and spectators who crowded out to witness the arrival of a new machine.

“Here safe,” remarked Ned as he prepared to descend from the deck of the motorship.

“Look around and see if you can pick out Noddy’s craft,” advised Jerry.

“Or that of Brown and Black,” added Bob.

But a first glance about the grounds did not disclose the biplanes either of the bully, or the two odd men, and Jerry and his chums could have instantly discerned them had they been in sight, for they were experts in the matter of identifying aircraft.

“Glad to see you! Your hangar is right over this way, boys!” exclaimed a hearty voice, and looking up Jerry and his chums saw a small, pleasant-faced man making his way through the crowd toward them. “I’m Mr. Nichols, secretary of the meet,” he went on. “We’re all ready for you. My! That’s a great machine you have!” and between shaking hands with our friends and the professor he gazed admiringly at the *Comet*.

Many willing hands aided the boys in rolling their machine over to the big canvas shed that had been set apart for their use. They had landed not far from it. Of course Professor Snodgrass had disappeared the instant earth was reached, but the boys saw him some distance off, eagerly peering about for specimens.

“He’s at home all right,” murmured Ned.

Our friends found their hangar well furnished for their use. They did not need to take advantage of the cots and cooking arrangements that had been put in, for their machine was as good as a hotel to them. But not every airship was thus completely fitted up.

“Well I’ll leave you for a while,” said Mr. Nichols at length, when he had explained to the boys some of the details of the meet which was to open officially in two days. “I’ll see you later.”

“Oh, by the way,” began Jerry, “have you another craft here from our city—Cresville?”

“Yes, I believe there is an entrant from there,” replied the secretary. “It’s a big biplane—a very good craft too. Run by a fellow named Dixon, I think.”

“Isn’t it Nixon?” asked Ned.

“You’re right—I believe it is.”

“Is he here now?” asked Bob.

“Well he was, but if I’m not mistaken I believe he and his partner—a Mr. Apple I think it is——”

“I guess you mean Berry,” interposed Bob.

“You’re right, it is Berry. I am poor at remembering names. Nixon and Berry went out for a spin. They just got their machine together to-day.”

“I’m glad we didn’t take ours apart,” spoke up Ned. “We saved a lot of time.”

“Have you any entrants named Brown or Black?” went on Jerry, who was somewhat anxious for news of the two strange men.

“Hum! Brown and Black. Oh, yes, I remember now. They were here, with their machine, too, a big biplane named the *Silver Star*.”

“That’s it!” exclaimed Ned eagerly.

“But they left,” went on the secretary. “They refused to comply with the rules regarding the number of flights, and left in a huff. I don’t much care, as I didn’t like their appearance. But I’m glad you boys are here. You’ll be a sort of drawing-card, as you have quite a reputation in aviation circles.”

“Thanks!” said Jerry with a laugh, as the genial secretary withdrew.

“Well, we’ve got Noddy to reckon with, but not the others,” remarked Ned, as they proceeded to wash up for supper, over which Bob was already busy in the galley.

“Yes, and Noddy’s enough trouble at a time,” spoke Jerry.

Ned had lathered himself well and was about to indulge in the luxury of a splashing in the basin, when some shouts outside caused Jerry, who was getting rid of his coat and vest, to rush from the hangar.

“I’ll wager it’s the professor in trouble over his bugs again,” ventured the merchant’s son.

“No it isn’t, it’s a biplane coming down,” called back Jerry. “It’s Noddy Nixon, too! And say, he’s lost control of it! He almost turned turtle then!”

Bob and Ned rushed outside the tent. In the gathering dusk they looked up to

where Jerry pointed and saw a big biplane coming down with a rush, while two frightened figures clung to the seats, one endeavoring to bring up the head planes and avoid smashing to earth.

“They’re in a bad way!” murmured Jerry. “Their engine must have stopped and they tried to volplane down. But their rudders won’t work and——”

“They’re going to smash as sure as fate!” burst out Ned. “I guess it’s all up with Noddy Nixon and Bill Berry!”



CHAPTER XIII

WINNING A PRIZE

Indeed it did seem that nothing could save Noddy and Bill. With the speed of the wind, and like a bird with a broken wing, their aeroplane was shooting downward. The two could be seen, even in the gathering dusk, to be working desperately to throw up the head planes or the lifting rudder. If this could be done the biplane would shoot upward on a slant, and its swift downward flight would be checked.

“His rudder lines must be jammed,” murmured Jerry in a low voice.

There were expressions of horror from the crowd. The aeroplane was now within a hundred feet of the ground.

Suddenly there was a flutter of white at the prow, a flash of a canvas plane, and the nose of the craft appeared to tilt upward.

“He’s done it!” cried Ned. “He’s got the rudder to work! Now he can save himself!”

“If it isn’t too late,” added Bob.

But Noddy proved himself to have some pluck, and he showed not a little knowledge of how to manage his machine. Quickly throwing up the forward plane, he sent his craft along on a slightly upward slant. This checked it almost like a brake, and, when he had considerably reduced the momentum, he shifted the rudder lines, and once more headed for the earth.

There was a cheer from the crowd, and our friends could not help joining in it, even though they had no love for Noddy or Bill.

“He’s all right now, if he keeps control of it,” spoke Jerry.

Whether Noddy did not keep control of it, or whether the experience through which he had just passed shook his nerves was not manifest, but as a matter of fact he came down to the ground on too short a slant, and without checking enough of his speed.

There was a splintering sound, a breaking of metal, and the bicycle wheels of

the aeroplane collapsed under the sudden shock. Noddy and Bill were thrown out, but not hurt beyond a severe shaking up. Willing hands assisted them to rise.

“You had a lucky escape,” commented one man.

“I should say yes,” chimed in another. “I thought it was all up with you.”

“Oh, we’re tough; eh, Bill?” cried Noddy with a boastful laugh. “I knew we’d come out all right. The tilting rudder got jammed. But I guess our machine is badly smashed.”

“No, a new set of wheels and a couple of springs is all it needs,” decided one of the aeronauts after an inspection. “There are a lot of spare parts here. You can get fixed up in time for the race.”

“He’s got more pluck than I gave him credit for,” remarked Bob, as he and his chums went back to their quarters and proceeded to get supper.

There were busy times next day for all concerned in the meet. Officials were making the final arrangements for handling the crowds they expected; exhibitors and those who expected to take part in the flights and races were “tuning up” their motors, or making repairs or changes in their machines. Some of the earlier comers were taking short flights, and one daring Frenchman, in a tiny machine, was circling high in the air, trying for a record.

Our heroes found a few changes necessary to make to their craft, and they were so busy over them that they paid little attention to what was going on outside. In the afternoon Ned, who had gone to the secretary to secure some information concerning the time of certain races, reported that Noddy’s machine had been repaired and that the bully and Bill were going to make another flight.

“How’d he get another set of wheels so soon?” asked Jerry, pausing with a small bicycle wrench in his hand. He had been tightening some of the turnbuckles of the guy wires.

“Oh there was a set here that some one left or didn’t want and some extra tires,” replied the merchant’s son. “Say, you ought to see them. They’re almost as big as automobile wheels, with thick, heavy tires on them, and those raised, right-angle, anti-skid projections on the rubber. They make a track in the mud like a lot of chickens.”

“What made Noddy put on such heavy tires?” asked Bob.

“Guess he hadn’t any choice,” answered Ned. “He’s going to take part in the hundred mile race to-morrow, and he wants to be ready, I guess.”

“I hope we win that race,” remarked Jerry thoughtfully.

“Why there isn’t much money in it,” went on Ned. “There’s twenty-five hundred dollars for the machine that makes the best height record. I should think you’d care more about that. It’s only a thousand and the gold cup for the winner of the hundred mile race.”

“I know it, but it’s the cup I want for a trophy,” said Jerry. “We don’t really need the money, but I like the glory. Besides, going after a height record is rather monotonous, just circling about in a spiral. Of course it’s sensational for the crowd to watch, and that’s why the management offer a big money prize for it. But the best test of an aeroplane is in a long distance flight. I hope we win.”

Of course Ned and Bob did also, though there was a difference of opinion as to which race would confer the greater honor if won.

There were many machines in flight now, in preparation for the next day. There were a number of biplanes, including Noddy Nixon’s *Winner*, several monoplanes, one triplane, three dirigible balloons, and one machine something like that of our heroes, a combination balloon and aeroplane. But it was not as large nor as powerful as the *Comet*.

The air was filled with the snapping, crackling sounds of motors being tried, and the smell of gasolene was all over. There was a babel of tongues, French, German, Italian and Japanese, for one aviator of the latter nation was going to try for a prize.

Here one would see an aviator and his assistants mending a torn plane, or fixing a rudder. Over at the other side of the grounds one of the birdmen was testing the thrust of his machine’s propellers by means of a spring scale. Another was trying to discover a defect in his ignition system, and others were oiling, fixing or warming up their motors. Flags and banners fluttered from tents and hangars, officials were hurrying to and fro, and some excited and anxious aviators were seeking missing parts which had been shipped to them but which had not arrived.

“Lots doing,” commented Bob, as he and his chums got ready to go up in their machine.

“Plenty,” agreed Jerry.

“It’s almost like a circus,” was Ned’s opinion, “and we’re part of the show.”

“Well, get aboard and we’ll start,” counseled Jerry. “We’ll see if we can get up

any speed.”

“That’s a great machine you’ve got there,” complimented the busy secretary as he hurried past. “Will you give some exhibitions flights after the regular events?”

“Perhaps,” promised Jerry.

Our heroes had no reason to complain of the manner in which their craft behaved. They went up to a good height and circled about in graceful curves. Then, having warmed up the motor, Jerry, who had been picked by his chums to guide the *Comet* in the race the next day, sent her around the ten mile course.

Faster and faster flew the big machine until even the tall steersman, exacting as he was, could not help admitting that he was satisfied.

“She’ll do,” he said, as he coasted toward the earth. “We’ll make the flight of our lives to-morrow, and——”

“Win!” cried Ned.

“Exactly!” exclaimed Jerry.

Swiftly the time went by, until at last came the hour for the great hundred mile race. The immense grand stand was filled with an eager anxious throng, and thousands equally eager and anxious stood about the big field, well out of way of the air machines. The course of ten miles was marked by anchored balloons, painted white, which were easily visible across the wide valley where the meet took place.

Noddy Nixon had his machine out at the starting line. It had been patched up, and, as Ned had remarked the wheels seemed too big for it. In all there were seven starters besides the *Comet*, and contestants included the *Winner*, a triplane, an Antoinette, a Bleriot monoplane and Wright, Curtiss and Farman biplanes.

It was to be a “flying” start. That is the contestants would get in motion at the sound of a gun, would rise as best they could, and approach an imaginary line in the air, above the white balloon marking the beginning of the course. Then the race would be to the swiftest machine.

There was a last inspection of the engines and air craft, a hurried testing of the propellers, and then, in answer to a question from the secretary, the contestants said that they were ready.

Bang! went the pistol. The report was followed by a series of deafening

explosions as the motors started. Our three heroes were among the first to get under way, and they quickly mounted to a good height. The others followed. All approached the first anchored balloon in a bunch and a moment later the race was on.

“Now for a long and steady grind,” said Bob, as he and Ned, oil cans in hand, went to the motor room. Jerry was in the steering tower.

“Look what’s coming!” cried Bob, pausing in the act of lubricating a bearing. “The Antoinette is going to pass us!”

“Let her,” answered Jerry easily. “He hasn’t enough gasolene to last out, I don’t believe, if she burns it up that way.”

“And here comes Noddy in the *Winner*,” added Ned.

“Don’t worry,” advised the tall lad. “The race has only begun.”

Noddy and Bill, in their craft shot up on even terms with our friends, and then, as though to show what he could do, Noddy dropped back again.

The big triplane was having difficulties, and it had not covered more than three-quarters of the way around the first circle of the course before it dropped out and went back to earth, engine troubles being responsible. The other machines remained in the race, however, and were about on even terms. Now one would be ahead, and then another. The monoplane took the lead after the first ten miles, and kept it for two rounds. Then the engine suddenly ceased working and the unlucky operator had to volplane to earth.

Meanwhile Jerry and his chums had gone steadily on. The tall lad had gradually increased the speed of the engine, as he found it working well, and now they were making about forty miles an hour. This would soon be almost doubled when the race was nearer an end.

The Farman, Curtiss and Wright machines were about on a line with the *Comet*, and the *Winner* was a little to the rear.

“I guess those big tires are too much for Noddy,” remarked Ned.

“Aren’t you going to speed up, Jerry?” asked Bob.

“Yes, I guess it’s about time.”

The race was half over when Jerry opened the gasolene throttle wider. At once the *Comet* shot well to the fore. As if only waiting for this the others followed suit, all save the Antoinette, which had to drop out. This left five contestants.

“Now the real race begins,” remarked Jerry grimly, as he took a firmer grasp of the steering wheel.

“And here comes Noddy,” added Ned.

Indeed the race was now on in earnest. Faster and faster flew the airships, their motors crackling and spluttering in a deafening manner. They were not flying very high, for it was desired to give the spectators a good view of the spectacular contest.

“They’re creeping up,” warned Bob, as he saw the other four machines edging closer and closer.

“Let them,” said Jerry. “I’ve got some reserve power yet, and I think they’re about all in.”

Ned looked at the speed gage.

“Ninety miles an hour!” he gasped. “We’ll finish in a few minutes more.”

“That’s what I hope to do,” replied the tall lad.

Hardly had he spoken than there sounded behind them an ominous cracking sound. In alarm our heroes looked to the wings of their craft, but they were all right.

“It’s the Curtiss,” cried Ned. “One of the wing tips had gone to smash.”

This was so. Too sudden a strain had put it out of commission. Like a disabled bird the biplane was wobbling uncertainly in the air. The next moment it shot toward earth, and came down with a crash.

Our heroes turned white, for well they knew the terrible result of such a fall. But they could not stop. On and on they went, faster and faster. Yet, as they circled the course on the last ten miles they saw Noddy and the Farman machine creeping up on them.

Now Noddy was almost on even terms, and so close that the evil, grinning faces of himself and Bill Berry could easily be seen.

“Beat him, Jerry! Beat him!” begged Ned.

“Yes, don’t let him get ahead!” pleaded Bob.

Jerry did not answer, but his lips parted in a grim smile, and his hand grasped the steering wheel more firmly while with his foot he pressed open still wider the accelerator throttle.

The Wright and Farman machines were now almost wing and wing with Noddy's craft, which hung just at the flank of the *Comet*. The white balloon, marking the finish was but three miles ahead. They would be up to it in about two minutes at the fearful speed they had now attained.

Suddenly, with a rush, the *Winner* forged ahead of the other two contestants and took her place on even terms with the *Comet*.

"Look out!" cried Ned. "Noddy may foul us!"

Jerry nodded. He threw over the throttle to the end notch. The *Comet* shot ahead like a fox making a last desperate spurt to get away from the dogs. The finish balloon was but a few hundred feet farther on.

Suddenly the motor of the *Comet* ceased working. The silence was more ominous than a terrific explosion could have been.

"We're done for!" cried Ned.

"It's all up!" predicted Bob.

"No!" fairly shouted Jerry. "We'll volplane the rest of the way!"

He tilted the deflecting lever. Instantly the nose of the *Comet* pointed earthward. There was a shout of dismay from the spectators, and a yell of triumph from Noddy Nixon.

But he had reckoned without his host. With the terrific speed at which she had been running to urge her on, and aided by the force of gravitation and her momentum, the *Comet* shot forward. Then, when still a good distance from the earth Jerry sent her up on a sharp slant.

Forward she shot, like an arrow from the bow, and an instant later, with her engine "dead" she crossed the line a winner, two lengths in advance of the Nixon machine, which was second.

"Wow! We did it!" cried Bob in delight.

"By the great horn spoon, yes!" yelled Ned. "Jerry, you're a wonder!"

Jerry said nothing. He was now guiding the *Comet* safely to earth by the maneuver known as "volplaning."

CHAPTER XIV

A RISKY CLIMB

“That race wasn’t won fair!”

“That’s right, Noddy, we’ll protest it!” This from Bill Berry, who with his crony had hurried to the office of the secretary after alighting from the *Winner*.

“What’s that?” asked the official, looking from Noddy to our three friends who, in response to the request, had come up to headquarters to receive the prizes they had so pluckily won.

“I say that race wasn’t won fair!” insisted the bully. “The engine of the *Comet* stopped and they coasted over the line. That’s not right.”

“Oh, I think it is,” replied the secretary gently. “You read the articles of agreement which you signed. They are alike for all contestants. The first machine to cross the line wins, engine or no engine.”

“Well, it’s not fair!” grumbled Noddy.

“Course it ain’t!” declared Bill. “We wouldn’t have raced if we’d known that.”

“Oh, get out!” exclaimed the operator of the Wright machine who had finished a close second to Noddy. “You make me tired. If your engine had stopped you’d have tried to win the same way. Get out! Jerry Hopkins and his chums won the race fair, and I never saw a more plucky finish! I’m proud to shake hands with you,” and he extended his palm to the tall lad.

“It gives me pleasure,” spoke the secretary, “to hand you this trophy, and the thousand dollars, and to congratulate you boys on your success,” and he passed over the gold loving cup, and a crisp thousand dollar bill.

“Speech! Speech!” came the cry from the crowd that had gathered; but Jerry, blushing furiously made his way through the press of people, followed by Ned and Bob, and sought seclusion in the hangar. But the mob was not to be denied and followed there, to gaze at the successful aviators. They insisted so on being talked to that, to get rid of them, Jerry did make a few remarks, thanking them for their appreciation, and telling something of how the race was run.

As for Noddy, like a bear with a sore head, he and Bill sulked in their tent, grumbling at the action of the officials in awarding the race to our heroes. But no one paid much attention to them. Jerry and his chums were much relieved to learn that of the two operators on the Curtiss biplane, which fell to the earth, one was only severely bruised, while the other sustained a broken arm. Their escape from death was almost miraculous.

“What was the matter with our motor that it stopped?” asked Ned, looking at the *Comet* which had been wheeled into the big tent.

“I don’t know, we’ll make an examination,” replied Jerry, who was gazing at the gold loving cup. “Do you know, fellows I’m prouder of this than some of the other trophies we’ve won, and we have quite a few.”

“What did you do with the thousand dollar bill?” asked Bob with a laugh.

“Oh, it’s somewhere around,” and Jerry pulled it, all crumpled up, from his trousers pocket.

“What makes you think so much of this cup?” asked Ned.

“Because we’ve won it against some of the best birdmen in the world, and against some of the speediest machines. You must remember that our craft isn’t primarily a racer. The *Comet* is more like a touring auto—built for pleasure, and since we put on the hydroplanes it’s considerably heavier than it was. This is the first race we’ve won since we attached them, and it goes to show that we’ve got a fine and powerful motor. That’s why I’m so proud of this cup.”

“Aren’t you going to try for the elevation prize?” inquired Bob.

“Sure, but as I said I prefer distance racing. Now we’ll look to see what the trouble was.”

“And I’ll take care of this thousand-spot,” added Ned, as he carefully put the bill in his pocketbook. “You’d use it to clean a brass pipe with, Jerry.”

It was found that a broken wire in the ignition system was responsible for the stopping of the motor, and the defect was soon remedied. While the boys were at this, a message came from the secretary, asking them if they would not oblige the big crowd by doing some special stunts late that afternoon, following the regular events. These latter included some monoplane flights, and some qualifying ascensions by men who wanted to get a pilot’s license.

“Shall we do it?” asked Jerry of his chums.

“Might as well,” replied Ned, and word to that effect was sent to the secretary.

“We ought to take the professor along if we’re going to give an exhibition,” remarked Bob a little later. “The *Comet* goes better with four aboard, especially when we’re doing stunts.”

“That’s right,” agreed Jerry. “I wonder where he is? I haven’t seen him since early morning.”

“Oh, he’s off after bugs, you can depend on it,” declared Ned.

They were engaged in cleaning and oiling the motor, in anticipation of the flight they were to make later in the day, when a series of shouts outside their big tent caused them to stare at each other in surprise and some apprehension.

“What’s that?” asked Ned.

“Maybe some one else is falling,” suggested Bob.

Jerry hurried out, and immediately called to his chums:

“There’s something wrong over at Noddy’s hangar. Maybe he and Bill are having a fight.”

It needed only such a mention as that to bring Ned and Bob out on the run. They looked to where Jerry pointed and saw a big throng gathering about the tent set aside for the use of Noddy and his *Winner*.

“Come on!” cried Ned, springing in that direction. Bob and Jerry followed, and when they got near enough they could hear shouts and calls like the following:

“He must be crazy!”

“Perhaps it’s the heat!”

“Did he fall from an aeroplane and land on his head?”

“What’s he trying to do, anyhow?”

“Give it up. Maybe he’s a snake charmer and one of his reptiles got away.”

There were screams from several women at this.

Now Jerry, Ned and Bob had pushed their way in, and, just as they half expected when they heard the remarks, they saw Professor Snodgrass on his knees at the edge of the canvas shelter. He was evidently trying to capture some bug.

“Might have known he’d create some excitement before the day was over,” remarked Bob.

Hardly had he spoken than the little scientist jumped up as if he were shot.

“Look out!” he cried. “There he goes! Don’t let him get away! Oh, there he goes on top of the tent!”

In an instant the professor had pushed his way through the crowd, and seeing a rope hanging from the top of the front pole of the hangar he began to climb up it, the frail structure swaying with his weight.

“Come back! Come back!” yelled Jerry. “That won’t hold you!” But the scientist kept on up the rope.



CHAPTER XV

A BREAKDOWN

The crowd, which at first had been inclined to be amused at the spectacle of the odd little man shinning up a rope, was somewhat aghast at Jerry's cry. And indeed it was a perilous climb that Professor Snodgrass had essayed.

For the hangars were rather frail, and were only designed as shelters from the sun and rain, being merely poles set in the earth, with a light frame built on them, and muslin, or thin canvas, stretched over.

"Come down!" pleaded Jerry. "Don't trust your weight to that tent, professor!"

"I must! I must get that insect!" he replied. "It is a very rare kind of flying grasshopper, and I can see it perched up on the ridge pole!"

"What's the matter, is he crazy?" asked a man of Ned.

"No, he's only a scientific enthusiast," was the reply.

The danger of Mr. Snodgrass was now obvious to all, for the frail shelter was swaying with his weight.

"Here! What's going on!" imperiously demanded Noddy Nixon. With Bill Berry, he had been over to the secretary's office, and the bully was now coming back on the run as he saw the crowd about his tent.

"Get away from there!" he cried. "Ah, it's that Snodgrass man! He's trying to get in our hangar, and damage our machine. Bill, call a policeman and have him arrested. Get down off there, Snodgrass!" he called disrespectfully.

"Oh, dry up!" advised Bob to the bully. "Don't you suppose if he wanted to get in there he could have gone in easier than by climbing up a rope?"

"Well, he has no right on our tent," went on Noddy.

"He's after a new kind of grasshopper," explained Ned.

The professor paid no heed to the cries of warning, nor to Jerry's appeals. Yet he was in grave danger. His motions, as he went up the rope hand over hand, for he was quite an athlete, made the main front pole of the hangar sway more and

more, and it was almost on the point of snapping off.

“Come back! Come back!” pleaded Jerry.

“Not until I get that insect!” replied the scientist. “It is very rare. Ah, I see you, my beauty! Keep still a moment longer and I’ll have you!”

He tried to reach up with a short net he took from his pocket, meanwhile supporting himself on the rope by one hand and by twisting his legs in the strands. But he could not quite stretch far enough.

Then he seemed to become aware of the dangerously swaying pole, which was becoming loose in the ground. The professor looked down at the crowd below him.

“He’ll fall in another minute,” predicted a man.

“Get a net!” ordered some one.

“There isn’t any,” was the reply.

“A ladder then! Get a ladder! He’ll be killed!”

The professor looked longingly at the grasshopper, then he gazed down at the crowd below him. To his credit he said that he was not afraid. Yet he saw the impossibility of keeping on. And, if he slid down, the violent motion of the rope thus occasioned might have disastrous results.

“Come on, Ned and Bob, we’ve got to save him!” cried Jerry.

“How you going to do it?” asked the merchant’s son.

“I saw a big step ladder over here!” went on the tall lad, running toward a tent where was housed a dirigible balloon. “It’s an immense one. We can put it up near the rope, and he can get down on it.”

They found the ladder standing outside the tent, and it was the work of but a few seconds to rush it back to where the scientist was still dangling. Nor were they any too soon, for as they got it in place the swaying pole cracked off close to the ground, and the professor just managed to throw himself on the ladder which was grasped and held firm by scores of willing hands.

“Oh, dear! the grasshopper got away!” exclaimed the scientist as he reached the ground.

The professor thought more of the loss of the insect than he did of his own narrow escape, but a little later, having succeeded in capturing a curious kind of

bug in the grass near the tent of the *Comet*, he forgot his troubles.

There were many interesting aerial exhibitions that afternoon, and several small races in which our heroes did not take part. Noddy Nixon and Bill went in one race and won it, much to the delight of the bully, though really he deserved small credit, for his machine was much more powerful than those of his competitors.

Then came the turn of our friends to show what could be done in their craft, and to the wonder of the crowd they went up almost out of sight, coasted down on a bank of air, propelled themselves as a dirigible balloon, as an aeroplane, making the change high above the earth and then did some other intricate evolutions. They received many vigorous rounds of applause.

That night our friends made a careful examination of their craft in anticipation of the races for high distance that were to take place on the morrow.

“Is Noddy going to compete against us?” asked Bob. “I suppose he will though.”

“No, he isn’t!” declared Ned, who had just come in from the secretary’s office.

“Why not?” demanded Jerry.

“Oh he and Bill got huffy at something, or else they are afraid, and they have withdrawn their entry. The secretary said Noddy was going to take his machine and leave.”

“Small loss,” commented Bob.

There were not so many entrants in the trial for a record elevation as there had been in the hundred miles race, but there were enough to make it interesting. Our heroes got a good start and began the upward spiral climb, going higher and higher, well in advance of all the others.

They were making good speed, though the Wright biplane was creeping up on them, when there sounded an ominous snapping sound from the motor room.

“What’s that?” cried Jerry, who was in the pilot house.

“I’ll see,” offered Ned.

He came back with a rueful countenance.

“Well,” asked Jerry.

“One of the cylinders is cracked,” reported the merchant’s son.

“Then we’ve got to go down,” declared Jerry.

“We’re going down already,” exclaimed Bob, looking at the barograph. It had registered a little over two miles, but now the hand was rapidly swinging the other way as the motor of the *Comet* lost speed at every revolution.



CHAPTER XVI

STARTLING NEWS

There was no alarm among those aboard the *Comet*. Our heroes had, by this time, become used to accidents happening even higher in the air than they now were. In fact their machine was constructed purposely to render them safe in case of a breakdown, for they could instantly change from an aeroplane to a balloon, and thus float even with the motor motionless.

This was what they did in the present emergency. Jerry saw that it was useless, with one cylinder out of commission, to try to get any speed out of the engine.

“Shut down!” he ordered Bob and Ned, and the big propellers ceased revolving.

“It’s tough, just when we were after a record,” remarked Ned.

“Can’t we go down, fix her up and try again?” asked the stout lad.

“No use, Chunky,” declared the tall youth. “It will take several days to put in a new cylinder. No, we’ve got to give up. But we ought to be satisfied with the prize we won.”

They were not, however; in fact human nature never is, and Jerry and his chums were no different from other lads. As they began falling downward they could hear from below murmurs of fear, for the great crowd thought the motorship was wrecked.

“Throw in plenty of gas!” called Jerry to his chums, and a moment later the descent of the craft was checked as the lifting vapor rushed into the bag. Then she floated lazily in the air, and, in a few minutes, to reassure the watching, anxious throng, Jerry sent her about in dips and circles, to show that they had her under full control.

A cheer greeted this evidence of skill in aeronautics, and then, there being no necessity for descending farther the boys remained there to watch from that vantage point the other machines climbing upward.

The big Wright passed close by them, the two occupants calling to know what the matter was.

“Broken cylinder,” answered Jerry.

“Too bad, old man!” came the sympathetic hail, and then the biplane continued to poke her nose toward the upper regions.

In turn a Bleriot monoplane, a Curtiss biplane, a “Baby” Wright, a Santos Dumont, and a Farman shot upward, while our heroes had to look on mournfully, being out of the race.

A little later, when all the competing craft had reached earth, it was announced that a biplane had made the best record, having reached a height of over 15,000 feet, establishing a new record.

“We could have beaten that if our engine hadn’t gone back on us,” said Ned mournfully.

“I believe we could,” assented Jerry. “Well, we’ll be out of it the remainder of the meet I guess, but let’s get busy, put in a new cylinder, and start for the West to help the professor capture his flying frog.”

“That’s it, boys!” joyfully exclaimed the little scientist. “I have had very good success here, and only to-day I caught a little black lizard, very rare and valuable, but I want to get after the frog.”

An examination showed that they would have to take out the cylinder and put in a new one, and the preliminary work was started that evening.

Jerry and Ned were laboring in the motor room, and Bob had been sent to tell the secretary that the *Comet* could not, as her owners had promised, take part in a final exhibition stunt. The stout lad came back in a hurry, exclaiming as he entered the tent:

“Hey, fellows, Noddy Nixon is going!”

“Going where?” asked Jerry pausing, monkey wrench in hand.

“Going to leave. He’s taking out his biplane, and he and Bill are going to cut the rest of the show just as Ned said. But they’re going off in style. I thought he’d pack up his airship, but he’s going off in her.”

Out on the grounds could be heard the rattle and bang of a powerful motor in operation. Our friends crowded to the tent entrance in time to see the *Winner* shoot up into the air, with Noddy and Bill in the seats. Then the craft, describing a long curve, shot off toward Harmolet.

“I wonder where he’s going?” mused Ned.

“No telling,” was Jerry’s opinion. “But come on, let’s get busy. We’ll have to go to Harmolet to-morrow, and see if we can get another cylinder in place of this cracked one.”

There was a trolley line not far from the aviation grounds, and our three boys, catching a car early the next morning, were soon on their way to the city where, so some of the birdmen had assured them, they could easily get a new cylinder, or other parts of their machine or engine. In fact, in anticipation of such calls being made during the meet, one of the automobile dealers in Harmolet had laid in a stock of airship parts.

Passing through a pleasant country, the boys shortly found themselves in a good-sized city. The car was passing through the principal street when, as it went by a bank building, the attention of Jerry and his chum was attracted by a large crowd standing in front. The people overflowed the sidewalk out on the trolley tracks.

“What’s the matter, a run on the bank?” asked Jerry of the conductor.

“Something like that,” was the reply.

“Did the cashier skip off with the funds?” inquired Ned.

“No, the safe was blown open last night, and fifty thousand dollars in cash was taken, besides more in securities. It was quite a sum for the bank to lose, and I guess some of the depositors are nervous. But most of the crowd is there out of curiosity. The police are inside looking for clues. I heard the news on my first trip this morning.”

“Fifty thousand dollars taken!” exclaimed Bob. “That’s a neat sum. Let’s get off here, fellows, and see if we can get a glimpse of the wrecked vault or safe. I’ve got my camera, and maybe they’ll let me take a snap-shot. That would be a picture worth getting.”

“All right,” agreed Jerry. “There’s no special rush about the cylinder.”

They joined the throng about the bank, but looked in vain to see some place where the side wall had been blown out with dynamite, or some other explosive.

“Guess it wasn’t much of a blow-up,” remarked Ned in somewhat disappointed tones.

“Oh, it’s all inside,” a man in the crowd informed them. “They nearly blew the doors off the big safe, but nothing shows from the outside. They got the money all right. Half the police in town are on the job now, but last night, when the

explosion took place, not a soul heard it.”

“I wish we could get inside and see it,” murmured Bob “I’d like to take a picture.” But there seemed no chance of this, as the police were keeping the crowd back from the front of the building.



CHAPTER XVII

SEEKING CLEWS

“Come on, let’s go around this way,” proposed Ned in a low voice to his chums, as a little later, he pointed to a side alley that apparently led to the rear of the bank.

“Go ahead,” urged Bob, who had his small pocket camera ready. There were but few persons near the alley, and our chums were just entering it quietly, when a voice called out:

“Hey! Where you fellers goin’?”

“Oh, just up here,” replied Jerry, in non-committal tones.

“Well, you’ll have to keep out. I got orders not to allow any strangers in there, and—why hello! If it isn’t the motor boys from Cresville! Why, how are you?” and the man, evidently a watchman, or a policeman in plain clothes, extended his hand toward Jerry, a smile illuminating his face. “How’d you come here?” went on the man.

“Well, if it isn’t Mr. Thompson!” exclaimed Jerry in amazement. “How in the world did you get here?”

“Sort of a mutual surprise party,” murmured Ned. “Hello, Mr. Thompson.”

“All three of you, eh?” went on the guard. “Jerry, Ned and Bob. Well, I’m glad to see you,” and he shook hands with each of them in turn. Mr. Thompson had lived in Cresville for many years and had done some work for Mrs. Hopkins at odd times. The boys knew him very well, but of late years had not seen him, for he had moved away from their town.

“How comes it that you are here?” asked Jerry. “Do you work in the bank?”

“No, I’m one of the Harmolet police force. I’ve been on about two years now. I knocked about the country after leaving Cresville, and finally settled down here. I’m a regular officer now, and if I catch you boys cutting up I’ll run you in!” and the man laughed at his joke.

“Where’s your uniform?” asked Bob.

“Didn’t have time to put it on. Soon as this robbery was discovered the chief sent for all the reserve men. I was home sleeping, after my night on duty, but I had to get up. We’ve got all the men we can spare on this job.”

“What for?” asked Jerry. “Especially after the money is gone—fifty thousand dollars of it?”

“Sixty thousand would be nearer the figure,” declared Mr. Thompson. “It does seem sort of like locking the stable door after the horse is stolen, but orders from the chief are orders. Besides, it takes quite a few of us to keep the crowd back, and the rest are looking for clews.”

“Inside the bank?” Ned wanted to know.

“Inside and outside. The robbers made a neat job of it, and the funny part of it is that we can’t seem to find out how they got in and got out again. However they got the money all right—a clean sixty thousand. But what are you boys doing here?”

“We took part in the airship meet at Colton,” said Jerry; and they told Officer Thompson about it, of how they had seen the crowd, and stopped off the car to learn the cause of the excitement.

“I wanted to get a picture of the wrecked safe,” put in Bob, “but I——”

“Say now, I’m glad I met you,” interrupted Mr. Thompson. “It’s a little against orders, but I guess I can let you in, especially as no one is looking. Slip around in back of me, and go to the rear door. Wait there for me, and as soon as I can get some one to take my place I’ll bring you in, and show you the way they did it. It’s worth seeing.”

They had not been waiting at the rear door of the bank more than a few minutes, and had seen, through the windows, a number of men hurrying here and there, when their friend came up.

“It’s all right,” said Mr. Thompson. “Come on, I’ll take you in.”

Piloted by the former Cresville resident, our friends entered the bank. A scene of confusion greeted them. The officers and clerks of the institution were hurrying to and fro with books and papers, and from the president’s room came the murmur of voices.

“The directors are having a meeting to decide what to do,” explained Mr. Thompson. “Likely they’ll offer a big reward. I’d like to pull it down myself, but the detectives will probably get this job. They ought to offer at least five

thousand for the recovery of the sixty thousand.”

“Sixty thousand? They got more than that!” exclaimed a policeman in uniform who nodded to Mr. Thompson and the boys in a friendly fashion.

“More than that?” repeated our heroes’ friend in surprise.

“Sure. The sixty was mostly in paper money—bills of big denomination, and a lot of double eagles—they left the silver scattered around. Probably it was too heavy to carry, though there was plenty of it. But they took a hundred and fifty thousand dollars more in negotiable securities—stocks, bonds and so on.”

“A hundred and fifty thousand!” gasped Bob.

“Two hundred and ten thousand dollars in all!” half-whispered Ned. “That was a haul!”

“Come on over this way, and I’ll show you where they took it from,” proceeded Mr. Thompson, and the boys followed. They halted in front of a massive safe, built into the wall in the form of a vault, and a scene of ruin met their eyes.

The big doors were shattered and twisted, and one had been completely torn from the hinges and lay on the floor. The inner doors, of less weight, had also been blown open. Even yet books and papers, and many silver coins, lay scattered about, the clerks not yet having had time to pick them up.

“It was a good job all right,” explained the former Cresville man;—“that is, good from a burglar’s standpoint, though they used more juice than they needed to.”

“Juice?” queried Bob.

“Yes, nitro-glycerine you know. They carry it in a bottle, drill a hole in the door, pour it in, tamp it with soap, and set it off with a fuse. They must have blown the doors when a train was going past so as to deaden the noise, for no one heard it.”

“Where was the watchman?” asked Jerry.

“The bank didn’t keep one, but I guess they will after this,” replied Mr. Thompson grimly. “They’d have saved money if they had had a man on guard. Here you can see where they started to drill a hole in the door, and changed their minds. Probably it wasn’t in the right place.”

He pointed to a small hole, neatly made in the hard steel.

“Took a pretty good drill for that,” was Jerry’s opinion.

“Yes, it was a power-drill,” said the policeman. “Oh, these were up-to-date crooks all right, and they made a good get-away.”

“How’d they get in?” asked Ned.

“I don’t believe they’ve found out yet. You see this is the first time we’ve had a big robbery like this, and it’s sort of upset the force. It’s a mystery how they got in.”

“The detectives have about solved it though,” put in an officer in uniform.

“How?” inquired Mr. Thompson.

“Through the roof scuttle. One of ’em—Blake I think it was—just discovered some finger marks in the dust around the scuttle, and it was found unhooked, so he’s pretty sure they came in from the roof.”

“How’d they get on the roof?” asked Jerry.

“That’s what they’ve got to find out,” went on the policeman.

“I wonder if I could take these friends of mine up and have a look?” ventured Mr. Thompson.

“Sure,” assented the other. “There’s not much to see though. I guess the best clews will be found down here.”

Bob wanted to take several snap shots of the wrecked safe, and Ned and Jerry waited for him. Meanwhile two or three detectives were observed poking about in the ruins, and the litter of paper for possible clews.

“Come on, Chunky, you’ve got pictures enough,” called Ned finally. “Let’s take a look at the roof, and you can make a snap shot there, and then we’ll get over to the store, buy the cylinder, and fix up our motorship.”

“All right,” assented the stout lad, closing his camera; and then Mr. Thompson led the boys up to the roof of the bank.



CHAPTER XVIII

A NEW THEORY

“Those robbers probably came in a light, rubber-tired rig, left it somewhere around the corner, got into the bank, did the job and drove away again,” was the opinion of Mr. Thompson, as he crawled out of the roof scuttle, followed by the boys.

“But how did they get to the roof?” asked Ned. “You’ve got to explain that.”

“Easy enough,” spoke the policeman. “You see this bank is in a row, with several other buildings, all about the same height. They could have climbed up the fire escapes, or they could have used a ladder. I’m inclined to the latter theory myself, for the fire escapes are on the front of the buildings, and if they went up them they’d be seen, whereas they could put a ladder up in back.”

The boys looked about them, and Bob took a couple of snap shots, including one of his two chums and the officer as they stood near the opened scuttle. As Mr. Thompson had said there was not much to see. The roof was a long one, extending over several buildings, and being flat, and covered with a composition of tar and gravel, alternating with tin on some of the structures, made quite a place to stroll about.

Jerry walked a little away from Ned and Bob, who were listening to Mr. Thompson’s explanation of how Detective Blake had discovered the finger marks in the dust around the scuttle rim, and had thus made his discovery.

“Blake thinks the scuttle was left unhooked, or else that the thieves reached in with a bent wire, and lifted the hook from the catch,” said the policeman.

The tall lad was walking over a stretch of tin roof, on a building two or three doors from the looted bank. There had been rain two days previous, followed by a brisk wind, which dried out the dust, and there was now quite a coating of the latter on the tin. There was also something else, and as Jerry caught sight of several marks in the dirt-coating he uttered an exclamation.

“Somebody with rubber-soled tennis shoes has been walking up here,” he said.

He bent closer over the footprints, and then he saw another mark that caused him to spring up quickly, and call to his companions and the policeman.

“Look here!” he cried, beckoning to them.

“What’s the matter?” demanded Ned, coming up on the run.

“Easy! Easy!” cautioned Jerry. “Don’t trample on these marks. Look! If some one hasn’t been up here on a bicycle I miss my guess!”

“A bicycle!” exclaimed Bob. “Do you mean to say that the robbers rode a bicycle up here?”

“There are the marks of the rubber tires plain enough,” replied Jerry, pointing to them.

“That’s no bicycle track!” declared Ned.

“Why not?” the tall lad wanted to know.

“Or, if it is, the fellow rode on one wheel, or else is more expert than anyone I ever saw. See, there’s only one straight mark, and the best rider in the world turns his front wheel every now and then, making a separate track from the rear one. That’s no bicycle mark.”

“What is it then?” demanded Jerry. “Did some one roll a single bicycle wheel about on the roof for fun?”

Before Ned could reply, Bob, who had gone off several paces to the left, uttered a cry.

“Here’s another!” he shouted, pointing to the dusty tin roof. His companions hastened over, taking care to keep off the tracks, and there saw another mark, exactly like the first.

For a moment Jerry Hopkins stared at the second impression. Then he went back to look at the first one. Next he hurried forward and began looking at a space about midway between the two tire tracks. His companions and the policeman watched him curiously. Suddenly Jerry threw up his hand as a signal.

“I’ve found it!” he cried.

“What?” asked Ned.

“The third track!” was the response. “Fellows it was no bicycle up here. It was _____”

“An aeroplane!” fairly burst out Ned and Bob together, for now, with the

discovery of the third impression, midway between and ahead of the first two, it was very plain to anyone who had had to do with aeroplanes that they were the marks of the three landing, or starting wheels, of such a craft, that had left the marks in the dust of the roof.

“An airship!” exclaimed the policeman. “Do you boys mean to say that an airship has been up here?”

“It certainly has,” declared Jerry firmly. “Look here! There are more marks farther on.” He pointed just beyond a blank space, where the tin roof was clean of dust, and the marks were again visible in the soft tar of another roof. “They landed here and made a start from here. They could easily do it. In fact this long, flat roof with the tar and gravel to give good traction, is an ideal starting place for an aeroplane.”

“An aeroplane on the roof!” murmured the officer, as if unable to believe it. “Do you think, Jerry——”

“I think,” interrupted the tall lad, “that the bank burglars came through the air, made a landing here unseen by anyone in the street, went down the scuttle, looted the safe, and made a flying start from this roof.”

“Wait! Wait!” begged Mr. Thompson. “This is a new theory—I never heard the like before. It needs a regular detective to consider this. Wait until I get Blake up here. I’ll wager it’ll be news to him. Wait here for me.”

He hurried down the scuttle, and the boys eagerly looked for more impressions and talked about Jerry’s discovery. They went to the end of the row of buildings, and there, where the roof was of tar and gravel, they found in the soft black material the plain impression of the three wheels. They came to a sudden stop before “the jumping-off place,” as Jerry called it, was reached.

“Here’s where they sailed into the air,” he declared confidently.

“Let’s see if we can find where they landed,” suggested Ned.

They did, at the opposite end of the row of roofs, just where a tall building reared itself several stories higher than the row of low structures.

“They came down here all right,” declared Jerry excitedly pointing to the deep impression made by the wheels. The boys even found the place where the drag-brake had scraped a long line in the gravel, and that, to them, made their “case complete.”

Suddenly the merchant’s son uttered a cry, and straightened up.

“What’s the matter?” asked Jerry in surprise.

“Those wheel marks!” gasped Ned. “Look! Those are new tires, Jerry. Not worn a bit, and they’re the anti-skid style—see the corrugations and the rubber-protruding cleats.”

“I see ’em—what of it?”

“Don’t you remember—Noddy Nixon’s aeroplane—after he put on the new wheels, following his smash-up? Don’t you remember? He had wheels just like these—exactly like them. Look!”

Jerry glanced at his chum with wide-opened eyes. Then he looked down at the marks. The light of remembrance came into his eyes.

“By Jove, Ned, you’re right!” he exclaimed. “Noddy Nixon and Bill Berry—and that talk I overheard between them—Noddy Nixon—his aeroplane—I——”

At that moment Detective Blake, followed by President Carter of the looted bank, and several of the directors, came out on the roof.



CHAPTER XIX

SUSPICIONS

“How about it, Jerry?” asked Ned in a low voice, as the bank officials and the police approached. “Shall we tell ’em what we think?”

“And put ’em on Noddy’s track?” went on Bob.

“I hardly think so. Keep quiet. Leave it to me a while. I want to consider it. No, I guess we won’t say anything except that we believe an aeroplane was used. We needn’t say we have a suspicion as to whose it was.”

Thus Jerry answered his chums, and when the bank president, and the others, reached the side of the boys the tall lad was ready for them.

“What’s this the detective tells me you’ve discovered about an aeroplane being used?” asked Mr. Carter, incredulously.

“I think—in fact I’m sure one was,” declared Jerry. “It seems a strange thing to say, and a few years ago of course would have been out of the question, but it is not now.”

Then, with Ned and Bob putting in an occasional remark Jerry carefully explained his theory, pointed out the impressions of the anti-skid tires, and showed where the airship had landed, and where the robbers had gotten their start for a flight into the air.

“Hum!” mused President Carter, “I am almost convinced in spite of myself, young man. It certainly is an ingenuous explanation. What do you think of it, gentlemen?” and he turned to the directors. Some of them were plainly skeptical, some were half convinced, and one or two, who had seen some recent airship flights, expressed their belief in Jerry’s theory.

“What have you to say, Mr. Blake?” asked the president, of the detective.

“Well, sir, I hardly know. I never had any experience with a safe robber who used an airship, and yet, as this young man says, it might be possible. If it is we’re going to have a hard time to trace the thieves. It isn’t as if they had used an auto or a carriage. The air doesn’t leave any marks or traces.”

“Oh, it’s all nonsense! Utter nonsense!” interrupted a tall, thin director. “Preposterous! Why it’s out of the question. An airship indeed! You might as well tell me it was spirits that robbed the bank. I don’t believe a word of it! Besides, who are these boys who originate such a foolish theory. Do they know anything about airships?”

“They certainly do!” broke in Mr. Thompson with great earnestness. “They have been running one of the best airships ever made, and they just won the hundred mile race at Colton in their motorship *Comet*.”

For a moment the director who had ridiculed the theory of our friends looked first at them, and then at the officer. A change came over his face.

“Oh, these are those boys; eh?” he asked. “I—er—I read about that race—and they own the *Comet*? The craft that made that marvelous rescue in midair of Mr. Jackson. Mr. Jackson is a friend of mine. He told me about that. It was very wonderful. Well, of course that puts a different face on it. If these are the motor boys, and they say an airship was used to rob our bank, why, I don’t know—of course I don’t understand much about such things, Mr. Carter—but I should say—not to be too positive of course—but I should say these boys know what they are talking about. Oh, yes, I believe I agree with them, and the best thing we can do it to get some circulars printed, offering a reward for the capture of the airship bank robbers.”

“I agree with you, and I think these lads are right,” spoke the president. “The next thing to do is to consider ways and means for capturing the robbers, and also how we can best protect our credit. For there will, no doubt, be a run on the bank as soon as the full news leaks out, as it will. I think we had better resume our deliberations, gentlemen. And I suggest that we have these boys before us, and question them. They may be able to give us some valuable clues.”

Once more the directors were in session, and Jerry and his chums told over again, and with more detail, how they had come to form their theory as to the airship.

“Now that is settled,” began the president, “the question arises, what sort of an airship was used, whose it might be, and where we can look for it? Can you boys enlighten us on those items?”

These were the questions Jerry had been fearing would be asked. He was in a peculiar position. He and his chums had well-grounded suspicions against Noddy and Bill, and yet Jerry thought it would hardly be fair to disclose them.

“It would be very hard, Mr. Carter,” said Jerry, “to say what kind of an aeroplane was used. In general they are all alike as regards the use of bicycle wheels. I should say that this was a large biplane, and that at least two men were in her.”

“Easily two men,” confirmed Detective Blake. “No one man alone could have blown the vault open.”

“As to finding out who they were,” went on Jerry, “I think the best plan would be to make inquiries among the makers of aeroplanes in this vicinity regarding the persons who have purchased machines lately, and also what machine was fitted with those peculiarly marked tires. Do that, at the same time send out a description of the missing securities, and have detectives in different parts of the country on the lookout for birdmen who have plenty of money to spend, and I believe you’ve done all that is possible—at least for the present.”

“Why, have you any hope for the future?” asked the president, struck by some peculiar meaning in Jerry’s tone.

“No—that is I—well, my chums and myself intend going off on a trip soon, and I was going to say that we would be on the lookout also, and, if we heard anything, we’d let you know.”

“Thank you,” said Mr. Carter genially. “I believe your advice is good, and we’ll follow it. Did you make a note of it, Mr. Blake?”

“Yes, sir, part of it has already been done. We have wired to all big cities for the police to be on the lookout for the thieves, and brief descriptions of the stolen securities have been wired broadcast. A printer is now setting up a circular to be posted in all railroad stations and other public places, so you see we have covered that end. I’ll at once get busy among the aeroplane makers and tire people, and as soon as I have anything worth while I’ll let you and the other gentlemen know.”

“Very good, and if these young men can get any trace of the robbers we’d be glad to hear from them. We are about to consider the matter of offering a reward, and that will soon be made public.”

Jerry and his chums, as well as several detectives who were in the room took this as a hint that they might now withdraw, and they did so. The motor boys, after a little further talk with their friend Mr. Thompson, and lingering a while to look at the large and increasing crowd about the bank, proceeded to the supply house to get a new cylinder.

“Well, we certainly ran into a bunch of news that time,” remarked Jerry, when, having purchased what they needed, they were on the trolley, going back to Colton.

“Yes, and we haven’t heard the last of it,” commented Ned. “What are we going to do about Noddy being mixed up in it?”

“I hardly know,” replied the tall lad. “It certainly looks as if he and Bill were in it. Yet I hate to inform on them.”

“But it isn’t right to let them get away with all that money—especially when some of it belongs to poor depositors,” declared Bob.

“You’re right, Chunky. I guess we’ll have to tell all we know,” and Jerry looked solemn. It was a duty to be performed, and Jerry was not one to shrink from it, no matter how unpleasant it might be.

“When you think of the talk he and Bill had that night you overheard them,” went on Ned, “there isn’t much doubt of Noddy’s guilt. Weren’t they saying something about doing a job, and getting away from the police?”

“Yes,” assented the tall lad.

“Then you can depend upon it they’re the guilty ones. I say let’s go back and tell the bank people about Noddy’s tires.”

“No—not yet—wait a day,” advised Jerry. “If it was Noddy and Bill they can’t get far away, and we seem to have the faculty of butting into them often.”

“But they may spend all that money,” objected Bob.

“Hardly two hundred and ten thousand dollars in a few days,” replied Jerry. “We’ll take a little longer to think of it, and then we’ll decide what to do. If we make up our minds to take a flight after the robbers—whether they are Noddy and Bill, or some one else—we’ll have to get the *Comet* in shape. Come on now, we’ll get busy and we won’t think anything more about the robbery until we have to.”



CHAPTER XX

A BIG REWARD

There were several more events to come off in the aviation meet, but our friends were unable to take part in them because they found it a harder and longer task to put in the new cylinder than they had anticipated. But they had time to stop occasionally, and watch the birdmen in their dizzy flights high in the air or about the big valley where the contests were held.

Jerry and his chums finished work on the engine one afternoon, the day before the close of the meet, and yielding to the entreaties of the secretary and the other officials they gave an exhibition flight that was greeted with cheers.

“And this is the end of the meet,” remarked Jerry as they sat in their tent that night, for the next day would come the awarding of such prizes as had not previously been given out, and then the affair would be over.

“Well, what are we going to do?” asked Bob. “Have you made up your mind any further regarding Noddy and the robbery, Jerry?”

“No, and I can hardly say what we ought to do. Sometimes I feel like telling President Carter and the detectives everything, and again, suppose I should be wrong? It wouldn’t be very nice falsely to accuse even a fellow like Noddy Nixon.”

“Why don’t you tell the facts in the case, and let people draw their own conclusions,” suggested Ned. “You can tell of the conversation you heard between Bill and Noddy, and about the tires on Noddy’s machine. Then drop out of it, and tell them to work the clues as they see fit.”

“I believe that would be a good way out of it,” assented the tall lad. “I’ll do it. We’ll go to the bank to-morrow, and then we’ll start on a trip out west and see if we can’t get that flying frog for the professor.”

“Oh, you don’t know how anxious I am to start on that quest!” cried the scientist. “I can hardly wait! And so we will go to-morrow. Still, I can’t complain. I caught a pink striped June bug to-day, a very rare and valuable specimen,” and then the little man began poring over his note books.

There was little of interest to our heroes at the aviation grounds the next day, and Jerry and his chums made a trip in to Harmolet with the intention of having an interview with the bank president and the chief detective.

As they neared the bank building they saw in front of it almost as large a crowd as had been there the morning after the robbery.

“Hello!” exclaimed Ned. “I guess the run is still keeping up. Let’s get off the car and see what’s doing.”

“Maybe the robbers came back for the silver they didn’t take,” suggested Bob with a laugh.

By dint of pushing this way and that, the lads managed to get to a place where they could read a notice, which, printed in large type, posted on the side of the bank building. It caught Jerry’s eyes at once. The notice read:

\$10,000 REWARD!

The above reward will be paid to any person or persons who shall cause the arrest and conviction of the robber or robbers who, on the night of July 15, broke into this bank, and stole bank notes to the amount of sixty thousand dollars, and negotiable securities to the amount of one hundred and fifty thousand. About four thousand dollars in gold was also taken.

It is believed that the robbers used an aeroplane to land on the roof and in which to make their escape. The above reward will be paid immediately on the conviction of the robbers.

THOMAS CARTER,
President.

“Well, they’ve officially adopted our airship theory,” remarked Ned, with a smile at his chums.

“Yes, and I guess now will be as good a time as any to tell what more we know,” suggested Jerry. “Come on, we’ll ask to see Mr. Carter.”

They were making their way through the press of people and finding it no easy matter, when Ned almost knocked down a boy who, with three small bicycle tires hanging over his shoulder was standing on his tiptoes, trying to look over the heads of the crowd to read the reward notice.

“I beg your pardon!” exclaimed Ned. “Did I hurt you?”

“Naw, not a bit!” exclaimed the lad good naturedly. He was a typical errand boy, always glad of an excuse to stop and “kill” time. “Dat’s a swell reward de bank is offerin’,” he volunteered. “I wish I could cop it.”

“Yes, it wouldn’t be bad,” said Bob. As for Ned, after the first shock of the collision, and his apology, he was looking at the lad in a curious fashion—yet not so much at the boy as at the bicycle tires he carried.

“Look!” whispered Ned to Jerry, pointing to the rubber circlets. “Those are tires for aeroplane wheels,” went on the merchant’s son, “and they’re marked just like those Noddy had on his machine. Jerry, here’s a clew right under our noses!”



CHAPTER XXI

THE RAG ON THE STATUE

The attention of the boy with the tires was so much taken up with trying to look over the heads of the people about him, that, for a time, he did not notice the excitement of Jerry and his two chums caused by the unexpected discovery.

“They are the same tires,” murmured Bob.

“Exactly,” agreed Jerry. “What shall we do?”

“Let’s get this lad off in some quiet place, and talk to him,” proposed Ned. “We’ll ask him where he works, and whether his firm sold any tires to an aeroplane owner lately.”

“He’d hardly know about that,” objected the tall lad, “but we’ll question him, anyhow. I’ll talk to him.”

After considering the matter for a few seconds, and turning over in his mind the best way to get at what he wanted to know, Jerry touched the lad on the shoulder, and asked:

“Have you got a few minutes to spare?”

“What for?” asked the boy suspiciously, taking a firmer hold of the rubber tires.

“We want to ask you a few questions.”

“What about?” and the lad backed away.

“About those tires,” and Jerry indicated them.

“Where can we get some like them?”

“At the store where I work, Johnson and Carroll, 236 Main street. It’s just down about two blocks.”

“Are you delivering these tires to some aeroplane owner?” asked Jerry.

“No, I’m taking these back to the store. They were out at the meet in Colton.”

“Colton!” gasped Jerry.

“Yes, some fellows that had an aeroplane out there sent for some extra ones just before the exhibition opened. They wanted a heavy anti-skid kind—wanted several sets of ’em, in case they punctured some. So I took out three sets—nine in all. But those fellows left before the meet opened, and I was sent to-day, when it closed, to get the tires they hadn’t used. They left word at the store that the unused tires would be found in their tent, but the boss didn’t think to send me for ’em before. Those fellows used only one set, and left two.”

“What were the names of those men?” asked Jerry with growing excitement.

“Brown and Black!” answered the lad, and he was little prepared for the flurry caused among his questioners by his unexpected answer.

“Brown and Black!” exclaimed Jerry.

“Yep. Was they friends of yours?” asked the boy.

“No, not exactly, but we had met them. So they used this style of tires on their wheels?” Jerry’s brain was in a whirl. His suspicions against Noddy were disappearing.

“But how is it, if they left two sets, or six tires, that you only have one set of three here?” asked Ned. “Couldn’t you carry them?”

“Sure, but they weren’t in the tent that Brown and Black had used before they left. There was only these three tires there. At first I thought some one had swiped the extra set, but the secretary of the exhibition paid me for ’em.”

“Had he used them?” inquired Bob.

“No, but some fellow who had an accident and needed new wheels and tires on his airship heard about these tires in the vacant tent, and he took three, giving the money for ’em to the secretary. The secretary knew they were our tires, and kept the money for us.”

“Were the tires exactly like these?” asked Jerry, as he noted that the ridges and corrugations corresponded to the marks on the roof of the bank.

“Just like ’em,” replied the lad. “The fellow whose airship had a smash, and Brown and Black, each have a set like ’em. They’re great for airships. Maybe you’d like a set.”

“Later, perhaps,” assented Jerry who could not but admire the lad’s business instinct. But Jerry had something else to think about just then. “Who was the man who bought the extra set of tires, and left the money for them with the

secretary?” asked the tall lad.

“A young feller named Noddy Nixon,” replied the messenger promptly.

“Noddy Nixon!” exclaimed Ned and Bob in a breath. It was the answer they had expected, but, nevertheless, it startled them.

“Huh! Do you know him too?” asked the boy.

“Slightly,” admitted Jerry. “We’re much obliged to you. Here’s a dime for some ice cream soda,” and then, fearing the lad would ask questions that might be embarrassing to answer, Jerry pulled his two chums to one side, and they soon lost sight of the messenger and his tires in the crowd.

“Say, wouldn’t that make you want to go in swimming?” demanded Ned, when they could talk freely.

“It’s certainly got me going,” admitted Bob, with a sigh.

“And it knocks most of our theory squeegee!” said Jerry, shaking his head. “There are two aeroplanes fitted with those peculiar tires—Noddy’s and Brown and Black’s. Now which one landed on the roof of the bank?”

“Give it up,” answered Bob.

“Same here,” replied Ned. “It’s too deep for me.”

“Who’d ever think of such a thing?” went on Jerry. “When Noddy smashed his wheels that time he must have heard about those extra tires that Brown and Black didn’t use, and he put them on his machine. Then those two men already had a similar set on, and—there you are.”

“Or rather, there you—aren’t,” suggested Ned. “Now who committed the robbery—Noddy or the other fellows? You ‘pays your money and you takes your choice,’ as the fellow said in the circus.”

“Are you going to tell President Carter now?” asked Bob.

“I don’t know what to do,” replied Jerry, with a puzzled shake of his head. “This puts an entirely new turn on it. Let’s go off and talk it over.”

“There’s a little park somewhere up this way, not far from the bank,” suggested Bob. “It’s got a statue and a fountain in it, and right across the street is a nice restaurant. I noticed it the other day. We could go to the park, sit down, and——”

“Then go to the restaurant and have something to eat; eh Chunky?” asked

Jerry with a smile.

They walked on in silence and soon came to the little park of which Bob had spoken. It was prettily laid out, and in the centre was a large fountain, surmounted by a large statue on a pedestal, the statue being that of a man on a horse, holding aloft a bronze object that represented an ancient torch.

As the boys came in sight of this art work they saw several men gathered about it, and one was raising a long ladder to the shoulder of the figure.

“What’s going on, I wonder?” asked Bob.

“Maybe they’re going to wash the man’s face, or feed the horse,” observed Ned. “How about it, Chunky?”

A man was now mounting the long ladder, and looking up our friends saw, fluttering from the torch which the bronze figure held aloft, a long rag.

“What’s up?” asked Jerry of one of the workmen who was holding the ladder steady.

“Oh the sparrows have carried a rag up on the statue to build a nest in the torch I guess,” replied the man. “The birds like to get in there, but they make such a litter of straw, grass and rags, that we have to clean it out every once in a while. The top of the torch is hollow, you see, and it makes a good place for ’em. But I never knew ’em to take up such a big rag before. It’s been there several days, but we’ve been so busy cutting the grass that we haven’t had time to take it down. To-day there was a letter in the paper from some old lady, who said the rag looked bad, so the superintendent of the park told us to get it down.”

The explanation was satisfactory, and the boys watched the man climb up, and pull down the offending rag.

“Pretty good size for sparrows to take up,” he remarked to his fellow workmen, as he descended. “There was this package in the hollow torch, too. I wonder how it got there?”

He tossed the rag on a barrel full of leaves and paper refuse that had been swept up on the park paths. Something about the cloth attracted the attention of Jerry, who picked it up. No sooner had he felt of it than he uttered an exclamation.

“Fellows!” he cried, “this isn’t an ordinary rag. It’s a piece of canvas such as airship planes are made of!”

“Are you sure?” demanded Bob.

“Certainly,” replied Jerry. “See, it’s just the kind we use—in fact nearly all planes are made from this kind, which is woven especially for the purpose.”

“An airship; eh?” mused the foreman of the park laborers. “Maybe it dropped from some of the machines that were flying out at Colton.”

“It didn’t drop, it was torn off,” declared Jerry, looking at the ragged edges. “Some airship went too close to the statue, and a wing tip, or a rudder hit the torch. It was risky flying all right.”

“Then it must have been done at night,” declared the foreman, “for some of the men are on duty in this park all day, and they’d have seen it if anything like that happened.”

“Perhaps it was a night flight,” assented Jerry, as he looked at Bob and Ned. The same thought was in the minds of all of them—the aeroplane of the bank robbers!

“What’s that other thing you found in the torch?” asked Ned of the man who had climbed the ladder.

“I don’t know. It’s pretty heavy. Likely it was dropped by the fellows in the airship. I’ll undo it.”

He took off the wrapping paper, disclosing a small flat stone. As he did so two pieces of white paper fluttered to the ground. Jerry picked them up, and, as he read what was written on them he could not repress a cry of surprise.

For the names that confronted him were those of Noddy Nixon and Bill Berry!



CHAPTER XXII

OFF ON THE HUNT

“Don’t talk any more—come away,” advised Jerry in a low voice to his chums, as he handed back the slips of paper. “We want to talk this over among ourselves.”

“The restaurant’s the place,” decided Bob, and neither Jerry nor Ned laughed at him this time.

The three lads talked in guarded tones as they sat at a table in the eating place, waiting to be served. The new turn to the mystery had come with startling suddenness.

“Now whom do you think committed the robbery?” asked Ned. “It begins to look as though Brown and Black were out of it; eh?”

“Not at all,” was the answer of the tall lad. “It was more likely them than Noddy and Bill. Not that the latter wouldn’t do it if they had the chance, but I don’t believe they know enough to drill a safe. Then there are those queer tools we saw in the *Silver Star*. One of them was a safe drill, I’m sure.”

“But do you think there were two airships circling around Harmolet the night of the robbery?” asked Bob.

“It’s possible. We saw Noddy head in that direction, and though Brown and Black left the aviation grounds before we reached them, they might have returned to rob the bank. I’m sure they did it.”

“And I’m sure Noddy did,” declared Ned.

“But why was he so close to the statue?” asked Bob.

“There’s no telling,” answered Jerry. “Maybe he did it just for a daring stunt. Leaving his name there makes it look that way.”

But Ned was sure Noddy and Bill had robbed the bank, and nothing his chums could say would make him change his opinion.

“Then the only thing to do is to go to President Carter, tell him what we have found out, and what we know, and let him do as he likes,” suggested Jerry.

“We’ll mention about the queer tools we saw in the airship of Brown and Black, and how angry they were because we looked at their machine. Then the police can get busy, but I don’t envy them their job.”

“And you’ll tell about the conversation you overheard between Bill and Noddy; won’t you?” asked Ned.

“Sure.”

“Then that’ll clinch the guilt on them all right, and we can divide the reward between us.”

“Wait until we get it first,” advised Jerry drily.

Mr. Carter was much startled when told of the new developments in the case, and when informed of the suspicions of Jerry and his chums.

“You did right not to speak of them before,” he said, “as the discovery of the tires puts a different face on it. I, myself, believe those two men Brown and Black, if those are their real names, are the guilty persons.”

“You’ll find it was Noddy,” declared Ned firmly.

“Everyone is entitled to his own theory,” said the president with a smile. “Now I am going to summon here as many of the directors as I can get in touch with. I’d like them to hear the stories of you young men. Would it be asking too much to request you to wait here?”

Jerry and his chums were willing, and the president sent out and got the latest magazines for them to read while they were waiting.

“I may have an offer to make to you after the meeting,” he said with a smile, when a messenger had informed him that several of the directors were on their way to the bank.

The boys indulged in several speculations as to what Mr. Carter might want with them after the meeting, which was soon being held in the directors’ room. It was not a lengthy session, and in a little while a messenger came to summon the boys.

“You are to appear before the president and directors,” he said in awed tones.

“My! We’re getting to be quite important!” remarked Bob.

Mr. Carter came to the point at once.

“Young men,” he said, “I have told the directors what you have related to me.

They wish to thank you for the pains you have taken, and they highly commend your course. Now they have a request to make of you.

“As you are doubtless aware, a reward of ten thousand dollars has been offered for the arrest and conviction of the thieves. We thought we would make it big, as the sum taken was large, and unless some of it at least, is recovered, our bank may be seriously embarrassed. As it is we have been able temporarily to tide over our affairs.

“Now, what I wish to know, and what these gentlemen have commissioned me to ask you motor boys, is whether you will not undertake to find the thieves for us?”

“We’d like to have you undertake the search, not only because you have discovered the first clues,” proceeded the president, “but because you have an airship, and can thus go where no other persons could. The police have no such advantage. Will you undertake this quest for us?”

Jerry looked at his chums, and they looked at him. Evidently they were waiting for him to speak.

“May we—that is, I’d like to talk with my friends before answering,” said Jerry, after a pause.

“Certainly. Take all the time you need.”

The tall lad drew his companions into a corner of the big room.

“Shall we do it, boys?” he asked.

“But we don’t know where to look for ’em, whether it’s Noddy, or those other two fellows?” objected Ned.

“No, not yet, but we may be able to pick up some clues by circling around Harmolet. Shall we have a try for the ten thousand?”

“I’m game,” declared Bob. “We were going off on a trip anyhow, to help the professor get his flying frog, and we might as well combine business with pleasure.”

“Well, I’m willing,” declared Ned.

“That settles it,” answered Jerry. “We’ll go!”

He turned to the president and announced the decision of himself and his chums.

“Good!” exclaimed the bank official. “I was pretty sure you’d go. Now as to details. Have you any idea where to begin to look?”

The boys hadn’t, and said so, but they had, in times past, gone off on quests with even more slender clues to work on, so they were not dismayed now. They said they would need a day to stock up the motorship for a long voyage, and get plenty of gasoline aboard. Then, too, they would have to send word of their intentions to their folks.

“Well, start as soon as you can,” urged the president, and they said they would. In spite of their diffidence about taking funds for expenses, the directors insisted on it, and a substantial sum was advanced. It was really needed, as the boys had not brought much money with them, and provisions were expensive.

They arranged to start on the following day, if possible and agreed to keep in telegraphic touch with the bank officials. They were to work independently of the police.

There were busy times ahead for our heroes. Hurrying back to the aviation grounds they gave their craft a thorough overhauling, and contracted for their supplies and stores.

They were ready to set sail on the afternoon of the following day, having sent word to Cresville of their plans.

“Before we leave this vicinity, we’ll just stop off at the bank, and see if there is any news,” said Jerry, as they flew up from the aviation grounds.

They landed on the roof of the bank building row, partly because that was the best place, and partly to show that it had been perfectly feasible for the robbers to do so. A big crowd watched them.

“Have you any news before we leave?” asked Jerry of Mr. Carter.

“Not any,” he said. “You’ll have to depend on yourselves, I’m afraid.”

As he spoke a messenger came in with a telegram. Idly the president opened it. As he did so an expression of surprise came over his face.

“Listen to this, boys!” he exclaimed. “There is news! This is from one of our private detectives. He says: ‘Strangers in this town two days ago, passing twenty dollar gold pieces. May be a clew.’ You know some gold pieces were taken from our vault,” the president went on. “This may be of some value to you.”

“What town is that from?” asked Jerry eagerly.

“Newton; in this state,” was the reply.

“Then we’ll head for Newton,” cried the tall lad. “Come on, fellows!”

A little later the motor boys were once more on the wing, on the trail of the bank robbers.



CHAPTER XXIII

AFTER BROWN AND BLACK

Newton, as they had learned from a hasty inquiry just before they started, making their flight as the robbers had, from the roof of the bank, was a fairly large city about two hundred miles from Harmolet. It lay in a westerly direction, and so far that fitted in with the plans of Professor Snodgrass.

“First we’ll hear what Halwell, the private detective, has to say,” decided Jerry. “He may be able to give us a clew. If there were men in Newton, passing twenty dollar gold pieces right after the robbery, they were probably Brown and Black.”

“Or Noddy and Bill,” put in Ned, who persisted in his theory.

“Have your own way,” spoke Jerry with a smile. “At any rate we’ll see what the detective has to say. Of course many persons may have twenty dollar gold pieces, but perhaps these men also passed big bills, and there were a number of them taken from the bank vault.”

Meanwhile the *Comet* was making good time in the direction of Newton.

They sighted the church spires of that place shortly after dinner, and their descent into that quiet city was a great sensation. Every boy, nearly all the girls, and a good proportion of the men and women were on hand when our heroes came down, for an airship was a rarity in that part of the country.

“And yet, if the bank robbers were here in one, spending money, I shouldn’t think the folks would be so curious about ours,” remarked Bob.

“Maybe the burglars left their craft somewhere out in the woods, and came in on foot,” suggested Ned.

“We’ll find out from Detective Halwell,” decided Jerry.

“Where will we locate him?” asked Ned.

“I told President Carter to wire him that we’d call on him at his hotel—the Mansion House,” went on the tall lad. “As soon as we fix things here so the boys won’t meddle, we’ll go and——”

“I’ll stay here and guard the craft,” interrupted the professor.

“Are you sure you won’t go off after the flying frog, or something like that?” asked Jerry half jokingly.

“Oh, no!” the professor earnestly assured him. “This section of the country is too much built-up to expect to find the frog here. Of course if I see a rare insect anywhere near the airship I’ll get it. But I won’t go so far away but what I can guard her.”

The boys left with that understanding, and as they started for the hotel they looked back to see their scientific friend gravely pacing the deck of the *Comet*, about which was gathered a curious crowd.

Detective Halwell was located at the hotel, and the boys were just in time to catch him, for he was about to go out to meet them.

“I heard of your arrival,” he said. “I got Mr. Carter’s message, and I was expecting you. Then I heard of the airship, and I knew it must be you. Glad to meet you. Now how much of this case do you know, and what can I do for you?”

Jerry quickly put the detective in possession of the facts already known to my readers. In turn the tall lad asked:

“Did the robbers actually come here in their airship? If so can you describe them to us, for we don’t know for sure whether it was Noddy and Bill Berry, or Brown and Black.”

“I’m sure in my own mind,” interrupted Ned.

“I’m afraid it’s going to be hard to tell,” went on the private detective. “From what I can learn it was a middle-aged man who passed the twenty dollar gold pieces by which I got the clew. Now the best plan would be to go to the person who changed the money and have him describe this man. Then perhaps you could tell which one it was of the four you suspect.”

“Good idea,” declared Jerry. “Who changed the gold piece?”

“It was a man who keeps a little hotel on a country road leading in to this place,” replied the detective. “The way I happened to hear of it was this. I’d been sent here by President Carter you see, to pick up any clews I could. Naturally I made inquiries, and the other morning I heard that the hotel clerk here had a twenty dollar gold piece, and was doubtful whether or not it was genuine. I have had some experience in counterfeiting cases, so I looked at it.

“I never saw any better money—it was Uncle Sam’s kind all right, and I asked him where he got it. He said the night clerk had taken it in, and as I was on the alert for anything like that, I kept on with my inquiries until I found that the money had been paid in by this hotel keeper I speak of—Hardy his name is. He came to town to do some buying, and stopped here for his meal.

“Naturally I went after Hardy, but so far I haven’t been able to locate him. He hasn’t been back home since he changed the money here.”

“Does that strike you as being suspicious?” asked Ned.

“No,” replied the detective, “for Hardy is well known hereabouts, and is considered honest. I’ve found out that he’s visiting relatives and expects to be back in his hotel to-day.”

“Then let’s take a run out there. We can go in the *Comet* if it’s far,” said Jerry eagerly.

“It’s not far enough,” said Mr. Halwell, “and besides it would create too much talk if we descended in an airship. In a case like this the less talk you stir up the better. If the burglars don’t know that we’re so close on their trail they won’t be in such a hurry to move on. We’ll go out in an auto. They’re common enough.”

They found Mr. Hardy, the hotel keeper, to be an elderly man, of a genial disposition. He had just returned from a three-days’ visit to relatives, and was very willing to talk.

“I did break the twenty dollar gold piece,” he admitted, “but I never thought it would make such a rumpus. You see this is the way it was. I was sitting all alone here one evening, a few nights ago, let me see it was on Tuesday——”

“The night of the robbery!” interrupted Jerry.

“So I’ve been told,” went on Mr. Hardy. “Perhaps I shouldn’t have said evening, for it was past midnight when I got ready to lock up and go to bed, trade being dull. I was at the front door when I heard a racket over head like when there’s a sharp clap of thunder—you know, one of those close-by ones, that sound like whips snapping. I was quite surprised, for the stars were out, and there wasn’t a sign of a storm. The noise passed away in a second, but it gave me quite a start, and I stayed by the front door a matter of several minutes, but I couldn’t see anything.

“I was going on with my locking up, and was just ready to put out the last light, when I heard a knock on the door. That startled me too, for I hadn’t heard

any rig drive up, nor any auto puffing, and this place is rather far out for people to walk to. I didn't like the thing at all, but as I'm here to do business I went to the door. There stood two men——”

“Not a man and a young fellow?” interrupted Ned eagerly.

“No, two men, rather middle-aged men. They were dressed like autoists, and I was rather surprised at that, for I couldn't see any car. They apologized for coming in so late, and they asked me if they could get a meal—anything cold—said they'd pay well for it.

“I didn't like to bother at that time of night, as all my help had gone to bed, but I like to be accommodating, so I told 'em to come in. I asked 'em where their machine was, and they said they had a slight accident and had left it down the road. I asked 'em what kind of an auto it was, and how badly it was broken, for my son's a machinist, and handy with tools. I thought I might get him some work, but they said they could fix it themselves, and one of 'em made a funny sort of remark.”

“What did he say?” asked Jerry.

“He said they had broken one of the guy wires on the warping wing tips,” replied Mr. Hardy. “That was the first auto I ever heard of having wings, and I didn't ask any more questions for fear they were making game of me.

“To make a long story short I got 'em a meal, and they tossed me a twenty dollar gold piece when they were through. I gave 'em change and they hurried out into the darkness. I listened for some time, but I couldn't hear any auto chugging off, so I went to bed. That's how I got the gold piece, and I was so suspicious of it that I changed it the first chance I got. But I told the Newton hotel clerk about it, and I said if it turned out bad to let me know, and I'd make it right. I thought maybe that's what you had come out here for.”

“No, it was a genuine gold piece all right,” answered the detective.

“But what made you suspicious of it?” asked Jerry.

“Because of the way those men acted. I didn't like their looks at all.”

“Can you describe them?” inquired Ned eagerly. Then in a low voice he added to Jerry: “You know Noddy is big enough to be taken for a man.”

“Nonsense!” exclaimed the tall lad. “Listen to what he says.”

“I don't know as I can describe the men better than to say that they seemed

suspicious of every one,” said Mr. Hardy. “As they ate they kept shifting their gaze all around, as if they were afraid of some one coming in unexpectedly. They both had sharp eyes, were of dark complexion and were well dressed. One of them had his hand tied up in a handkerchief and when I asked him if he’d hurt it in the auto accident he said no at first, and then, as quick as a flash, he said he had. So I thought that was queer.

“However, I had no complaint coming, and I’m glad the money was all right. Now, does this description fit in with what you want?”

“It does!” declared Jerry. “I’m positive the men were Brown and Black, and that they robbed the bank.”

“And I guess I’ve been wrong in thinking it was Noddy,” admitted Ned. “Still what about the rag on the statue, and that suspicious talk?”

“We’ll consider that later,” replied Jerry. “This clears the atmosphere, so to speak, and we know who we’re after. Now to get on the trail of Brown and Black, who undoubtedly were in this vicinity with their airship.”

“That’s what I think,” said the detective. “I’ll ask you to keep quiet about this, Mr. Hardy.”

“Oh, sure.”

“Now for further clues,” went on Jerry. “I’m going to have a look to see if we can find where they landed in the biplane when they came here for their midnight supper.”



CHAPTER XXIV

THE LONELY FARMHOUSE

Regarding this place of landing Mr. Hardy could give the boys and the detective no clew. He could only point out the direction taken by the men when they left his hotel, and that was down the main country road. He said he had soon lost them in the darkness.

“And I didn’t see which way they came, so I can’t even tell you that,” said the innkeeper. “But they were surely two suspicious men if I ever saw any.”

“Could you get any line on their conversation?” asked Jerry.

“No, for they talked in whispers when I was around. I did hear ’em speak about the broken wing tip, or something like that, but I didn’t take any stock in it. I never dreamed of an airship. I was thinking of an auto all the while.”

“They were in an airship all right,” declared the tall lad. “And as they would have to have quite a level place on which to land and get a start from again, we’ll look for that. Come on, we’ll get back to the *Comet*.”

They rose high in the air, and circled about the country looking for the most favorable spot near the hotel of Mr. Hardy, where it was likely an air ship would have landed.

“Yet as it was night, they couldn’t have had much choice fellows,” spoke Bob.

“Especially with a broken warping wing,” added Ned.

“That last may have been only talk,” declared Jerry. “Brown and Black are sharp enough for that. Besides, with a powerful search light, such as they carried on their machine the first time we saw it, they could pick out a clearing in the trees.”

“There’s a clearing down there now,” remarked the stout lad, pointing to an opening in the forest. It was the first large one they had sighted, and it was at once decided to drop down to it.

But they got no clews there. The glade was carpeted with long green grass, and even if an airship had landed there the marks of the wheels would scarcely

have made an impression. Or, if there had been such marks, the wind would soon have effaced them.

“Try again,” suggested Jerry, as they got ready to rise as a balloon, for there was hardly room enough to manipulate the *Comet* as an aeroplane.

The rest of that day they circled about, descending into several clearings in the hope of coming upon the one where Brown and Black had temporarily left their machine. But it was of no use.

“I guess I’d better get back to my hotel,” announced the detective, as night came on. “I can’t do anything more for you boys, and I want to wire a report to Mr. Carter. There’s no use of me staying in Newton any longer, for it’s evident now that Brown and Black are far away.”

“Yes, so far that I doubt if we ever catch them,” remarked Ned dubiously.

“Oh, yes we will,” exclaimed Jerry confidently. “We’ll not give up yet. We’ll keep on going west, for I believe that’s where we’ll find them.”

“And that’s where we’ll get my flying frog,” put in the professor.

Night saw the boys heading due west in their craft, the detective having alighted on the outskirts of the town, to make his way back to his hotel. He wished them all success.

“We’ll travel all night,” decided Jerry to his chums, “for I believe those men will make long flights, and it’s no use looking for them within several hundred miles of this place. They’d want to put as great a distance as possible between themselves and Harmolet.”

“That’s right,” agreed Ned, who was now converted to the views of his two chums. “We’ll keep on until daylight, and then go down and make inquiries as to whether or not any airships have been seen lately.”

The hours of darkness passed without incident, and when morning came the boys found themselves over a small country town. They were flying low enough so that the craft was speedily made out by some early risers. The word quickly went around, and soon there was a good-sized crowd gazing earnestly upward.

“Shall we go down?” asked Jerry.

“Might as well,” decided Ned.

But their anxious inquiries resulted in nothing. There had been no signs of any other airship, and theirs was the first the inhabitants of the town had ever seen.

Nor had any one heard the noise of the motors of one of the craft passing onward in the night.

When they were ready to start again, Professor Snodgrass, as usual, was not on hand. They made a search for him, and found him on the bank of the mill pond, industriously catching frogs in his net. He had engaged half a dozen enthusiastic boys, promising that whoever found the flying frog would get five dollars. The boys had dozens of the hapless creatures in tin cans, but all proved to be of the ordinary kind.

“I guess we’ll have to look farther west,” admitted the scientist with a sigh, as he accompanied the boys back to the air ship. “Though when I saw those insects I thought sure I’d have my frog. However, I’m on the right track, I’m positive of that.”

“I wish we were just as positive,” remarked Jerry, as he and Ned started the gas machine, and sent the *Comet* aloft again.

Once more on the wing, the airship made rapid progress through space. The boys swept about in great circles, now scanning the sky dome with powerful glasses for a possible sight of the *Silver Star*, and again descending to some quiet country town to make inquiries. They avoided the big cities, since they argued that Brown and Black, in their efforts to escape observation, would do the same thing.

But as the days passed, and they were no nearer the trail of the thieves, the confidence of even the optimistic Jerry began to wane. Still he had no thought of giving up. The boys took a lesson from Professor Snodgrass, who, though disappointed many times in finding his flying frog, always approached every new pond full of confidence.

“I’ll get it yet!” he declared sturdily.

“And we’ll get Brown and Black!” asserted Jerry.

It was nearly a week since they had set out from Harmolet. In that time they had communicated with President Carter several times, but only to say that they were still on the trail. In turn the bank president had wired that there were no new developments at his end. The boys had telegraphed to their folks, and had received messages and greetings in return.

Toward the close of a warm, sultry afternoon, when they were sailing over a lonely stretch of country, Jerry called to Ned to look at the barometer.

“Why, what’s up?” asked Ned.

“It feels like a storm, and if one’s coming I think we’d better go down and wait until it’s over. Is the mercury falling?”

“By Jove! It is going down,” reported the lad. “I guess we’re in for it.”

A little later there was noticed a bank of dark and angry-looking clouds in the west, and from them came fitful flashes of lightning, while the distant rumble of thunder could be heard.

“Better go down,” advised Bob. “It’s going to break soon.”

“I was waiting until I saw a little better place to make a descent,” answered Jerry, peering anxiously ahead through the gathering murkiness. “It’s a pretty rough country here—nothing but woods.”

“Well, we can stay in the air ship cabin,” retorted Ned. “Go ahead down Jerry.”

“All right,” assented the tall lad. He pulled the deflecting lever, and, as he did so there was a sharp snapping sound.

“What’s that?” cried Bob in alarm.

“Lightning!” answered Ned.

“No, something broken,” declared Jerry. “It’s a main brace, too,” he added a moment later. “We’ll have to go down now whether we want to or not. That brace will have to be heated, and welded together before we can run the machinery at full speed. Here we go!”

The *Comet* shot downward on a long slant, and a moment later there was a vivid flash of lightning, followed by a crashing peal of thunder.

The night was brilliantly illuminated for an instant, and Bob cried out:

“There’s a house. Head for that, Jerry!”

Jerry and Ned had also seen, revealed in the flash of celestial fire, a lonely farmhouse in the midst of a little clearing. The airship had suddenly shot over it on her downward course.

“That’s a good place to land!” cried Jerry above the noise of another clap of thunder. “Head for the barn yard!”

An instant later there came a deluge of rain, and in the midst of it the airship came to the earth rather suddenly, for a gust of wind upset Jerry’s calculations

with the rudder.

As the *Comet* came to rest, after shooting across the yard in front of the barn, a man came running from the farmhouse.

“By Peter! Another one of the critters!” he cried. “Hey, you fellers! Come on in the house! Come in the house!”

“No, we’ll go in the barn, after we fasten down the ship!” shouted Jerry.

“Come in the house I tell you! Keep out of that barn! Come in the house!” And the farmer who seemed greatly excited over something, fairly grasped Jerry by the arm, as the widow’s son alighted from the ship, and led him toward the house.



CHAPTER XXV

QUEER ACTIONS

Ned and Bob were already out in the rain, getting ready to make the anchor ropes fast to the nearest firm objects. They gazed somewhat curiously after Jerry, wondering where he was going with the farmer. Professor Snodgrass, after seeing that all his specimen boxes were safely put away, had come out and was helping the two boys.

“I’ll have to give them a hand,” shouted Jerry above the noise of the storm. “Can we wheel the airship under the shed? I see you have one by the barn.”

“Not that shed—the one over here,” answered Mr. Rossmore pointing to another, somewhat removed from the big barn. “That shed ain’t safe. It might tumble down and smash your air machine. Wheel it over to that other shed, and then come in the house. Land sakes! This is a fearful storm.”

He made another grab for Jerry’s arm, but the tall lad avoided the grasp, at the same time wondering at the strange behavior of the farmer.

“He wants to be hospitable all right,” mused the widow’s son, “but he takes a queer way of showing it. Wait a minute,” he called to Bob and Ned, “I’ll give you a hand. We’re going to put her under the shed. I guess it’s big enough.”

“Bur-r-r-r-r! It’s awful wet rain!” exclaimed Ned, as a stream of water ran down his neck. “Who’s your friend, Jerry?”

“Hush. I don’t know, except that his name’s Hiram Rossmore. He wants us to come in the house. He’s a bit queer. Here he comes.”

The farmer had followed Jerry as the latter turned back toward the airship; and Mr. Rossmore, together with the boys and Professor Snodgrass, wheeled the *Comet* toward a big wagon shed, which fortunately proved large enough to accommodate the craft. Not that rain would spoil it, but in a terrific thunder storm, such as was now in progress, and with a stiff wind blowing, there was danger of damage to the somewhat frail machine.

It was soon under shelter and well secured with ropes, while Jerry went inside to make a quick inspection of the broken brace.

“It will need a blacksmith shop to repair it,” he reported to his chums.

“Wa’al, can ye come in th’ house now?” asked Mr. Rossmore, as he stood under the shed, at the side of the motorship. “This is a bigger shebang than the other—I mean it’s the biggest one I’ve ever seen.”

“Oh, then you’ve seen one before?” asked Jerry with a quick and warning glance at his chums.

“Yes, I saw one on exhibition at our county fair,” was the disappointing answer. “It wasn’t so big as this, and was some different.”

“We are looking for an airship that belongs to—er—well, to some men we know,” spoke Jerry. “It may be sailing around here. We’re looking for it.”

“Wa’al, I guess you won’t find it here,” said the man, with rather an uneasy laugh. “Now come on in the house and dry off. I live all alone exceptin’ for the hired man, and he’s gone to town to-day, so we’ll have the place to ourselves. Come on in the house. That barn’s dangerous in a thunderstorm—in fact it’s dangerous most any time. It’s likely to fall. I wouldn’t go too near it if I was you.”

Jerry looked at the barn in question. It seemed well made, and solid, being in good repair. He looked at Mr. Rossmore. The farmer was glancing anxiously about, as though to assure himself that all four airship travelers were following him. Then, as if apparently satisfied on this point, he hurriedly led the way through the pelting rain to the farmhouse.

Jerry and the boys looked about them. Save for the clearing in which the house and other structures stood they were surrounded by a great forest. It was a very lonesome place.

“Did you have some accident?” asked the man, as he opened the door of a spacious farmhouse, and ushered them in.

“Yes, we broke one of the main braces of the motor,” answered Jerry. “Is there a blacksmith shop around here? Or have you a portable forge we could use?”

“No, I haven’t any. But there’s a shop about ten miles away. You might go there after the storm is over. But stay in the house until it is. You see I come here for solitude. I don’t have much of a farm. This was a big one once, but it’s mostly growed up to second growth now, and I sell some lumber. I don’t farm it.”

“It’s a pretty nice place for a bachelor,” observed Jerry, looking around, and

noting that the house showed a woman's care. There were many evidences that other hands than those of men had to do with the place.

"Oh, I ain't a bachelor," was the quick answer. "My wife's gone to visit some relations, and I let the hired man have a vacation too. So I'm all alone. But make yourselves to home. Peel off your wet things if you want to. I'll get some blankets you can wrap up in, and there's a good fire in the kitchen. Then I'll get you something to eat."

"That'll be good!" exclaimed Bob, so earnestly that his chums laughed.

"You mustn't mind him," apologized Jerry to the farmer. "It's his one failing to be always hungry."

"Better tell some of your own," murmured the stout lad.

Mr. Rossmore laughed and left the room, soon returning with a pile of blankets. The boys and the professor, going out in front of the big kitchen stove, divested themselves of their outer garments, and were soon warm and comfortable, while their wet clothes were drying before the oven.

"Now, for a meal," went on the farmer. "I'll do my best for you. I just cooked some chicken, so I'll warm it up."

Bob's eyes sparkled in anticipation. They were left to themselves for a few minutes while they heard Mr. Rossmore rummaging about down in the cellar, evidently after the victuals.

"Does anything strike you as peculiar?" asked Jerry of his chums, as he noted that Professor Snodgrass was trying to capture a fly that was buzzing on the window pane.

"About what?" asked Ned.

"About this farmer—and this place."

"It looks comfortable," remarked Bob. "Comfortable, and—and a good place to stay. He's going to feed us well, too!"

"Oh, that's all you think of, Chunky! I mean doesn't Mr. Rossmore strike you as rather odd?"

"It was kind of funny, him not wanting you to go out in the barn," said Ned.

"That's what I mean. Now I think——" and Jerry drew closer to his companions.

But what Jerry thought he did not at that moment say, for at that instant there sounded outside, and above the noise of the rain on the roof, a loud cry.

“That came from the barn!” cried Bob.

“Sure!” assented Ned.

Their voices were silenced in a terrific clap of thunder that followed a vivid flash. Professor Snodgrass jumped back from the window in some alarm.

“Look!” cried Jerry pointing outside where the rain was coming down in torrents. What he saw, and what the others saw was Mr. Rossmore rushing toward the barn at full speed—toward the barn against which he had warned our heroes.



CHAPTER XXVI

THE WOUNDED MEN

“Well, what do you make of that?” asked Ned, as they watched their host disappear inside the big structure.

“Didn’t that call come from there?” asked Bob.

“Sure,” assented Jerry. “And Mr. Rossmore ran out there as soon as he heard it. He must have gone from the cellar by the outside door.”

“What do you suppose he ran out to the barn for in the rain?” asked Bob.

“Because he has something there that needs his attention,” decided Jerry. “We heard the yell, out he rushed, and he went suddenly. Whatever he has out there he doesn’t want us to see; that’s evident.”

“We’ll see if we can’t discover it,” suggested Ned. “I don’t like the looks of things around here. Shall we tell Mr. Rossmore why we’re looking for the other airship, Jerry?”

The tall lad shook his head.

“Why not?” persisted Ned. “Don’t you recall what he said when he caught sight of us?—something about it being ‘another one of th’ critters.’ That looks suspicious.”

“There are a lot of things that look suspicious,” agreed the widow’s son, “but we can’t solve them that way. We must be as foxy as this farmer is, that is, if he is trying to play foxy; keep our eyes open, listen with both ears, and we’ll see what happens. Meanwhile say as little as possible, let him think we are falling in with his ideas, and he may betray himself. Here he comes back. Don’t let him see that we’ve been watching.”

Mr. Rossmore must have known that his trip to the barn had been observed, for instead of coming in through the cellar, the way he had gone out, he came in by the back entry of the kitchen.

“I had to go out in the barn—I’ve got a sick horse there,” he explained. “Maybe you boys heard him neighing.”

“We heard some noise out that way, but the storm made such a racket we couldn’t be sure,” spoke Jerry.

“Yes, it was my horse. He’s in a bad way.”

“I shouldn’t think you’d keep him in a barn that was in danger of tumbling down,” remarked Ned, with a wink at his chums.

“Oh, I don’t know as the barn is going to fall right away. Still it’s best to be on the safe side with folks. Now I’ll go ahead and get up the victuals. If you hear any more noises from the barn—well, don’t go out there, that’s all. That horse might get loose and hurt you.”

“We won’t,” promised Jerry. “Not in this rain.”

For it was pouring harder than ever, though the thunder and lightning were not so severe. Mr. Rossmore was drenched by his trip to the barn, but he did not seem to mind. In a short time he had set out a substantial meal, Bob offering to help, of which services the farmer availed himself.

“Isn’t there any blacksmith shop nearer than ten miles?” asked Jerry, after the meal. “That’s too far to go in our airship with a broken brace. If we can’t find one nearer we’ll have to make temporary repairs ourselves.”

“Well, it might not be quite ten miles,” said the farmer, in what the boys thought was an eager tone. “In fact perhaps it isn’t more than three or four. I guess you could get there all right. When are you going to start?”

“In the morning,” answered Jerry, for it was now unusually dark, because of the heavy clouds overhead.

“Oh, then you’re calculating on staying here all night,” spoke the farmer. “Well, now, I’m sorry, but you see I’ve only got one bed—that is I’ve got more, but they’ve been taken down to be painted, and they’re not dry. The bed clothes have gone to the wash woman’s too. In fact that’s why my wife went away. We’re sort of house cleaning, and the only bed fit to use is a couch I sleep on.”

“Oh, we wouldn’t think of troubling you!” interposed Jerry. “We’ll go aboard the *Comet* and sleep there. We always do. We have plenty of bunks.” The more he saw of the queer man the less he liked the idea of spending the night under his roof.

“Oh, if you’ve got your own accommodations it’s all right,” went on Mr. Rossmore. “I can give you plenty of victuals.”

“That’s good!” exclaimed Bob, involuntarily.

“We have plenty of things to eat, too,” went on Jerry, who felt a growing distrust of the farmer, “though we are much obliged for what you have given us. We’ll go aboard our craft now, I think, and in the morning we’ll see if we can get to the smithy.”

“Well, it’s quite a bad break,” remarked Jerry a little later when, as they were all on the airship, he and his chums had made another inspection of the fracture. “There must have been a flaw in the steel. I don’t believe we’d better risk going on to the blacksmith shop.”

“What will you do?” asked Ned.

“Make a new brace here. We can build a sort of forge out of stones and heat the metal enough I guess. I can make a temporary repair, that will last until we can get to a machine shop.”

“Then we’ll stay on at this place a little longer, eh?” asked Bob.

“Yes, until to-morrow afternoon anyhow.”

“That will give us a chance to do some investigating,” decided the merchant’s son. “I want to see inside that barn.”

“So do I,” agreed Jerry, “but we’ll have to be careful how we go about it. I guess Mr. Rossmore will be on the lookout.”

“He doesn’t go to bed with the chickens, at any rate,” observed Bob. “He’s got a light in the kitchen, and seems to be moving about, if the shadow on the curtain goes for anything.”

It was evident that the farmer was up and about, for the moving shadow was visible until nearly midnight. By this time the storm was over, and our heroes, who had been waiting up for a chance to make at least a tour outside the barn, had about decided to go to bed.

Jerry could not get to sleep, though he was soon made aware by the heavy breathing of Bob and Ned that they were slumbering. But the tall lad was thinking of many things. At last, after tossing restlessly on his bed for some time, he got up and partly dressed.

“I think I’ll take a turn outside,” he thought. “Maybe I can get in the barn now, if that suspicious farmer is asleep.”

But Jerry’s hopes were doomed to disappointment. He had no sooner gone a

few paces toward the forbidden barn than a hail came from the now darkened house.

“Who’s there?” called the voice of the farmer.

“It’s me—Jerry Hopkins,” was the reply.

“Oh—do you want anything—any of you boys sick?”

“No, I—I was just looking out—I couldn’t sleep. I’m going back now.”

“Oh—all right,” was the noncommittal answer.

“No use trying that—he’s on guard,” mused Jerry as he got back into bed. “I’ll have to wait.”

The tall lad told his chums the next morning of his experience, and they agreed that there was something very strange about the matter. They got an early breakfast in the *Comet*, and at once set to work making a temporary forge to weld a new brace.

“I thought you were going to the blacksmith’s,” remarked the farmer, as he saw what they were doing.

“We concluded it wouldn’t be safe,” replied Jerry. “No objection to making a fire here, is there? We’ll keep it inside the stones, and not set the barn afire.”

“Oh, that—that’s all right,” said the farmer with an obvious effort. “But don’t go in—that horse is dangerous.”

All that morning the boys worked hard at the new brace. They had it nearly finished and were getting ready to attach it. In the meanwhile Mr. Rossmore had been hovering about them, never very far away, and always keeping between them and the barn, which structure he entered several times, taking with him bottles of medicine.

“We’ll never get in there,” grumbled Ned.

“Take it easy,” advised Jerry. And then, most unexpectedly, their chance came. A man who was driving past in the road called to Mr. Rossmore, who was hoeing in the garden near his house. The farmer, after a quick glance at the boys, who were busy over their forge, hastened to the fence, and soon was in earnest talk with the horseman.

“Now’s our chance!” exclaimed Ned. “Jerry, you slip over to the barn. Rossmore can’t see you from where he stands. I’ll hang your coat on this stake,

and Bob and I will crowd up around it so it will look as if all three of us are here at the fire. Go ahead and be quick about it.”

Jerry saw that the plan was a good one. With a quick glance to assure himself that Mr. Rossmore was still at the fence, the tall lad hurried toward the barn. The big front doors were locked, but Jerry ran around to the back, and there found a portal open. It was the work of but an instant to slip inside.

At first, coming in out of the bright light, he could see nothing. Then his eyes became accustomed to the darkness. He moved forward, and as his feet echoed over the rough boards the lad was startled by a call:

“Who’s there?” asked a voice.

“Where are you?” inquired Jerry in turn. He heard some sharp whispers, and then, before he could move, a door was thrown open. It gave a view of a large, light harness room, but it was not the sight of horse trappings that attracted Jerry’s attention.

Lying on a cot in the room was a man whose head was done up in bandages, while holding the door open was another wounded man leaning on a crutch. The latter caught one view of Jerry, and then the door was slammed shut with a bang. At the same instant there sounded that loud cry that Jerry had heard once before. His blood was chilled as the echoes vibrated through the old barn.



CHAPTER XXVII

THE CAPTURE

For one instant Jerry Hopkins was almost inclined to believe that what he had seen was part of a dream. Then as the nerve-racking yells continued to vibrate through the barn, he knew that they came from real men.

And the faces of those men!

It was like some vision of the night. He racked his brain for a remembrance.

“Where have I seen them before—those wounded men? I’m sure——” He paused irresolutely.

His musing was interrupted by the breathless entrance of Ned and Bob.

“Jerry!” cried the stout lad. “Are you hurt?”

“What’s the matter?” gasped Ned. “Was that you calling, Jerry?”

They could not see him at first, coming in from the bright sunlight, but in a few seconds they could make out the form of their tall chum, as he stood staring at the closed door of the harness room whence came those terrific cries.

“I have it!” fairly shouted Jerry. “Now I know who they are! Boys we’ve found the bank robbers!”

“Found the bank robbers?” repeated Ned.

“Yes. Brown and Black! They’re in there—in that harness room! I had a glimpse of them. They’re both wounded. They must have met with an accident. They can’t get away. We’ve found them!”

“Now for the ten thousand dollars reward!” cried Ned.

“And this is why that farmer didn’t want us to come in the barn,” went on Jerry. “He had these men hidden here!”

Hardly had he spoken when the farmer in question came fairly bursting into the barn, entering from the big main doors. Mr. Rossmore was greatly excited. He saw the boys at once.

“Here! What does this mean?” he cried. “Didn’t I tell you to keep out of here?”

Now get out at once and stay out. Clear out of my place! Get away, do you hear?"

"Yes, we hear, but we're not going," said Jerry calmly.

"We came to see that sick horse," spoke Ned, sarcastically.

"Get out!" cried the farmer angrily, advancing toward them, with a threatening gesture.

"Don't move, boys," came the advice from Jerry. "We'll have this thing out. Go call the professor, Bob," for Mr. Snodgrass had been catching bugs in a field near where our heroes were working when Jerry decided to investigate the mystery of the barn.

"Look here! What does this mean?" blustered Mr. Rossmore, as Bob slipped out of the small door.

"It means just this," went on Jerry, while another of the strange cries, though not so loud as the previous ones, echoed through the structure, "it means that you are concealing here two men who robbed the Harmolet National Bank of two hundred and ten thousand dollars, and carried it away in an airship! It means that Brown and Black—to give them the names they go under—are in that harness room, and it means that we have discovered them. It also means that we are going to cause their arrest, and that if you interfere with the course of justice you lay yourself liable to a charge of aiding criminals. That's what it means!"

Jerry spoke with great firmness, and the attitude of himself and Ned was such that the farmer was cowed.

"Rob—robbers!" he stammered. "Two hundred and ten thousand dollars! Why that's nonsense! Those men are not thieves."

"What are they then?" asked Ned.

"One of them has been wrongly confined in a lunatic asylum," went on the farmer. "He is Mr. Hendrix, and the other man is Mr. Clark, a friend of his. Mr. Clark managed to get his friend out of the asylum, and was taking him away in an airship. They got over my place and had an accident. They both fell from the airship into a tree, and were badly hurt. They appealed to me for help, and offered me a large sum if I would conceal them, so that they would not be captured by the asylum authorities. The asylum people want to keep Mr. Hendrix in their possession so they can get his valuable property, but his friend is trying to prevent this. That is why I am concealing them, and why I did not want you to

go near the barn. I deceived you, I admit, but I cannot believe that they are robbers. If I had known that they were——”

“Suppose you come in that room with us, and let us ask them a few questions, about the box of strange tools they carried on their airship,” suggested Jerry. “I think that will convince you.”

“I’m willing,” agreed the farmer. “I never would have believed such nice gentlemen could be robbers. They told such a straight story. And I saw them fall from their airship. So when I saw you arrive in yours I thought you were from the asylum after them, and I tried to get you away from the barn.”

“Just confront them with us, and we’ll soon prove that the story they told you was all made-up,” said Jerry eagerly.

“All right, come on,” agreed Mr. Rossmore. “I don’t want to do nothing wrong.”

Again there came that terrifying yell.

“My gracious! What’s that?” gasped the professor.

“That’s Mr. Hendrix—the supposed lunatic. He is badly hurt, and delirious from pain,” explained Mr. Rossmore. “His friend and I have to give him quieting medicine whenever he gets one of those fits. That’s why I ran here. He is suffering greatly.”

“Well, we can’t let even a bank burglar suffer,” said the scientist, to whom Jerry quickly explained what the farmer had told them. “I’ll take a look at him, and you boys can make sure you are not mistaken in your identity. Then we can decide on what to do. They can’t get away.”

With the farmer leading the way the boys and the professor entered the harness room. If any other confirmation was needed that the suspicions of our heroes were true, it came when Clark, *alias* Black, exclaimed as he caught sight of the boys:

“Well, the jig is up!”

“Yes, I guess it is,” said Jerry grimly. “You made a bold effort, but fate was against you. Where is the money?”

“We haven’t got it,” growled the least injured of the two burglars.

“Haven’t got it?”

“No, it’s in the airship. I might as well tell the truth now.”

“In the airship? And where is that?” demanded the professor.

“How should I know?” snapped Black, while his companion tossed feverishly on the narrow cot. “We both fell out when it nearly turned turtle, then it righted itself again, and sailed off over the forest, the engine set at full speed. It’ll run until the gasoline gives out, or until it’s wrecked, I suppose. But we’ll have to have a doctor for him,” and he nodded at his companion. “He’s getting worse. The game’s up. I’m ready to take my medicine. One of my legs is broken, and I’m hurt inside. Oh, how I suffer! We did rob the bank. I confess. We laid our plans a long time ahead and thought if we used an aeroplane no one could trace us.”

“He must have a doctor, and that soon,” declared the professor. “He is in a bad state; indeed both are. Boys, word must be sent to the authorities at once, and these men must be taken to a hospital under police guard.”

“And to think they told me they were escaping from an asylum,” murmured Mr. Rossmore. “I can’t get over it!”

“Was it true what they said about the airship going on after they fell out?” asked Jerry eagerly.

“It was,” replied the farmer. “It went sailing over the trees like a big bird.”

“Which way?” asked Ned, for he was thinking of the treasure on board.

“I didn’t notice,” was the answer.

“Which way did it go?” went on the tall lad, turning to the robber who went by the name of Black or Clark.

“Hey?” The man gazed almost stupidly at Jerry. There was a strange light in his eyes.

“Which way did the airship go?” repeated the lad.

“It went to Africa,” was the unexpected answer. “The engine was set to carry it to Borneo, and from there we are to pick up the Japanese Mikado and go on a pleasure jaunt in the Andes mountains. We’re going to race with the condor birds. Ha! Ha! We’ll lead a jolly life. Pass over that juice, Bill, I’ve got the hole drilled!” he exclaimed. “Look out now! It’s going off! Oh, maybe we haven’t made a haul this time.”

With a shriek he fell back on the cot, beside his companion who was moaning

in pain.

“Delirious—out of his head,” murmured Professor Snodgrass. “I doubt if we can get any more information from either of them right away. They must have medical attention, and the police must come here.”

“I’ll go for them,” volunteered Jerry. “Ned and I can manage the *Comet* if you and Bob will stay here and guard them.”

“I’ll help,” volunteered the farmer. “I’m with you boys now.”

They accepted his offer. Professor Snodgrass administered some quieting medicine to both wounded men. A little later Ned and Jerry started for the nearest town for a doctor and the proper authorities.

“And then we’ll go off after the airship treasure,” decided Jerry.

“We’ll have a hard time hunting it,” declared Ned.

Both robbers were in the delirium of high fever when the doctor reached them. He at once took charge, and the constable formally placed the strange men under arrest as the bank robbers, though Brown and Black of course did not realize this. Then, being made as comfortable as possible, they were taken in the airship to a hospital, Mr. Rossmore remaining at his farmhouse a very much surprised man.

A telegram was sent to the bank authorities telling them of the capture, and stating that the boys would try to recover the treasure. Then, arranging to have the robbers sent to Harmolet for trial as soon as they were well enough, the boys and the professor entered the *Comet* and headed her once more back toward the farmhouse.

“We’ll get the direction as nearly as we can from Mr. Rossmore in which the *Silver Star* disappeared after the men fell out,” said Jerry, “and then we’ll go on a hunt. Think of a big fortune being lost somewhere in these woods!” and he pointed to the vast, lonely forest below them.



CHAPTER XXVIII

TOSSED BY THE STORM

Very little information could be obtained from Mr. Rossmore. He was so “flustered,” as he expressed it, from what had taken place, and so unnerved by the thought that he had been harboring in his barn two desperate bank robbers, that he could hardly answer simple questions.

“All I know,” he said, “is that I was out in the garden when their airship whizzed overhead. It flopped on one side, and the men were spilled out. They fell in a tree, or they’d have been killed instantly. I ran to help them, so I didn’t notice which way their machine went off.”

“But you must have some idea,” insisted Jerry.

“Well, as near as I can tell it went over that way,” and he pointed to the west. “It’s a terrible lonesome country there. Once you get lost it’s all up with you.”

“We don’t intend to get lost,” declared Ned.

Nothing more could be gained by questioning the farmer, and, after paying him for his hospitality our friends looked over their craft to see if it was in shape for another long flight.

The repairs made to the brace had been completed, and the machinery was in perfect order. There was also plenty of gasolene and provisions and stores on board.

“We’ll just have to cruise about until we sight the airship that got away from the robbers,” decided Jerry.

“You don’t suppose it’s floating yet; do you?” asked Ned.

“No, it must have run out of gasolene some time ago, to say nothing of being deflected downward by the wind, and crashing into a tree. No, we’ll have to look on the ground in the forest for this craft.”

“And maybe the bank treasure isn’t on it after all,” suggested Bob.

“Maybe not, Chunky. Yet if those robbers had it about them we’d have discovered it. And I don’t believe they have hidden it in the barn. Well, let’s

start.”

All the rest of that day they cruised about in the air, occasionally veering to the left or right, for they could not be certain that the pilotless *Silver Star* would keep to a straight course.

“If we only knew which way the wind was blowing at the time their airship scooted off by herself, we might know better how to search,” observed Bob, pausing in his work of getting supper.

“Yes, and if we knew how much gasoline she carried, we could tell how long her engine would run, and if we knew just where she had fallen in these woods we’d go there and find her,” added Jerry. “But we don’t know those things, so we’ve got to do the best we can.”

“I certainly hope I get a chance to look for my flying frog,” put in the professor. “We are getting over the region now where they are to be found.”

“We’ll do the best we can for you,” promised the tall lad.

On and on they went. Night came, and they descended in a small clearing, for in the darkness they did not want to run over the place where the wrecked airship might be. Morning again saw them on the wing.

It was about noon, when Jerry, who had paid several anxious visits to the barometer, came back into the pilot house where Ned was steering.

“What’s up?” asked the merchant’s son.

“We’re in for another storm—a worse one than the thunder and lightning kind we had the time we landed at the lonely farmhouse,” replied the tall lad. “It’s going to be a blow.”

“Well, can’t we weather it?”

“I suppose so. We could go down now, as there are several clearings around us. But if we do we may lose a chance of discovering the airship treasure.”

“Then keep on,” advised Ned.

“The only thing is,” resumed Jerry, “that if we get in the midst of a stiff blow we may not be able to land when we want to, on account of the thick trees.”

“I guess we’ll have to take the chance,” went on the other. “We’ll get everything snug, and then, when it does come on to blow, we’ll be in shape for it.”

Everything loose about the airship was made fast. Jerry and his chums, with Professor Snodgrass to help them (for the scientist left off his bug collecting pursuits when he saw the storm coming up) went over the machinery, and saw that it was in good working order. The gas container was filled with the vapor under double pressure, ready to be used in case of emergency.

Then all they could do was to wait, meanwhile sailing slowly on, peering down through the gathering murkiness for a sight of the disabled biplane.

The storm broke with a suddenness that was almost terrifying. It came with a dash of rain, some thunder and lightning, and then these ceased, while the wind blew as the boys had seldom seen it blow before. In an instant they were tossed skyward, and then hurled toward the earth, and had not Jerry quickly set the rising rudder they might have been dashed upon the tree tops.

The wind now became a perfect gale, and on the wings of it they were hurled forward, almost faster than their powerful propellers could carry them. They were tossed hither and thither by the storm, and only Jerry's skill, aided as he was by his chums, prevented a wreck in the first few minutes of the opening blasts on the trumpet of the storm king.

"Can't you go up higher, and get away from it?" yelled Ned into Jerry's ear.

"If we do we may miss the *Silver Star*," was the answer. For it was not so dark but that the white and flapping expanse of the planes of the wrecked airship could be noticed in case the boys sighted her.

Forward they were hurled, Jerry trying to keep at about the same distance above the forest, but finding it hard work. It was over an unbroken woods that they were now moving. Not a clearing was to be seen in the many miles they covered in a short space of time.

"We're going to have trouble when we want to land to-night," remarked the tall lad. "I doubt if we can do it."

"We can't unless we get to a clearing," declared Ned.

"Or a lake," added Bob.

With a swoop the *Comet* went sailing upward, as a fiercer blast of the wind caught under her big planes, and Jerry strained at the lever of the deflecting rudder to bring her down.

"Give us a hand here!" he cried to his chums, and they sprang to his side.

Slowly the airship was forced downward, and then on she went on the wings of the gale, swaying from side to side, while the wind howled through her wire rigging as if in glee at the fate in store for her.



CHAPTER XXIX

THE WRECKED AIRSHIP

Several hours passed, and it was only by the greatest skill that Jerry and his companions were able to keep their craft on a level keel. Several times she almost turned turtle, and they were in danger of being hurled to earth as the unfortunate bank robbers had been.

Night was approaching, and still the *Comet* hurled herself forward through the heart of the storm. Finally Jerry, who had gone to the motor room, while Ned steered, came back to the pilot house.

“We’ve got to go down,” he said. “We can’t stand this much longer. It’s getting worse; and besides, we can’t look for the airship in the darkness. We’ll have to make a landing.”

“But how can we—in that?” and Ned pointed to the vast expanse of black forest below them. “We’ll be torn to pieces on the trees.”

“We’ll have to wait until we see a comparatively clear place, of course. Even then it’s going to be risky; but we’ve got to do it. Tell Bob to watch out for a clearing.”

Eagerly they all watched, while the darkness gathered more densely. The storm had not abated a bit, and it was now raining again, the drops whipping against the airship almost like hail, such was the force of the wind.

Suddenly Bob, who had donned a rain coat, and a rubber hat with a flap that came to his shoulders, uttered a cry, and pointed downward and to the left.

“What is it?” called Jerry.

“A clearing—a big place—make for it!”

Ned sprang to his chum’s side.

“A clearing!” he shouted. “That’s a lake—a big lake! Good enough, Jerry! Head for that. Our hydroplanes will come in useful now!”

It needed but a second to put the nose of the airship in the right direction, and in a few moments our heroes found themselves over a large body of water in the

midst of the vast and uninhabited forest.

“Some waves there,” murmured Bob, and indeed the lake was covered with whitecaps from the wind, which was whipping their crests into spray.

“Still it’s better than landing on the trees,” replied Jerry. “Stand by to let the hydroplanes down, boys!”

Nearer and nearer to the foam-crested water came the gallant craft. The waves could be seen to be larger now, and even Jerry, staunch-hearted as he was, felt a momentary sense of fear. He had never dropped his machine on water that was as rough as this.

But there was no help for it. They could not keep on, and they must stop somewhere for the night. So, after a glance about in order to pick out the most sheltered spot, the tall lad yanked the lever of the deflecting rudder over still farther.

“Here we go!” he cried. “Look out, boys! Shoot the hydroplanes out when I give the word!”

Jerry turned off the power. The great propellers ceased revolving. The airship was now diving rapidly downward under her own momentum.

“Ready!” suddenly shouted Jerry; and Bob and Ned pulled on the levers, folding up the bicycle wheels, and shunting into place on the toggle-jointed arms the hydroplanes that would keep the *Comet* afloat.

The boys were hardly prepared for what followed, for as soon as they struck the water they were at once tossed about by the violence of the waves, the airship being so buoyant that she was like a chip on the lake. Up and down on the long swells, from side to side, she was thrown most violently.

“We can’t stand this!” yelled Ned. “We’ll tear the motor from the bed-plates.”

“Start the water propeller,” called Jerry to Ned and Bob, “and I’ll head for shore. Be ready to jump out when I give the word, and haul her up with ropes. I’ll let down the wheels as soon as we get in shallow water.”

A moment later the craft was a little steadier, for Jerry had headed her up into the eye of the wind, and her bow instead of the side was taking the breaking waves. Then she moved forward toward the distant shore.

It was a hard fight, and one the boys never forgot. Time and again they were in danger of being swamped. But the gallant *Comet* struggled on, proving herself

almost as good a water navigator as she was in the air. Then, as they neared the shore, Bob and Ned leaped out and reached the bank, holding long ropes attached to the airship. Jerry dropped the bicycle wheels and a little later the craft was pulled out on land.

Fortunately this was during a lull in the gale, or even then she might have been dashed against the trees and wrecked. But before the blast could resume its howling the boys and the professor had rolled their airship up into a little opening amid the trees, and soon it was well lashed to the sturdy trunks, some of the wing planes being folded over to offer less surface to the gale.

“Now I guess we’re pretty snug,” remarked Bob, as they sat in the closed cabin, and listened to the howl of the wind and the dash of the rain without. “I’ll get supper, and then we can sit and talk. It was a lucky thing I saw the lake.”

“Indeed it was,” agreed Jerry. “For doing that we’ll forgive you for mentioning something to eat.”

“Sure, go ahead and get two suppers,” urged Ned. “I’m hungry.”

The professor was observed to be putting on a rain coat and a pair of rubber boots.

“Where are you going?” asked Jerry.

“Out to look for my flying frog,” he explained.

The boys persuaded him to wait until morning, and soon Bob served supper. Then, being tired with their day in the storm, they turned in, being almost as comfortable as if they were at home, save only that the *Comet* trembled now and then, as the blast shook her.

It stormed so all of the following day that they did not venture up in the air, but remained anchored. It began to clear during the afternoon, and the professor went searching for the flying frog, but came back at dusk without it.

“We’ll start in the morning,” decided Jerry that night, “and I hope we’ll soon find what we’re looking for.”

It was about noon of the next day, when they had covered many miles over the trackless forest, that Ned, who was in the bow, looking eagerly through the binoculars, uttered a joyful cry.

“What is it?” demanded Jerry.

“I’m not sure—but I see a big patch of white down there. It may be the

wrecked airship we're looking for. See, right by that clump of pines?"

He pointed and handed the glasses to Jerry.

"It's either her or a big white stone," murmured the tall lad.

"It can't be a stone, for it flutters in the wind," declared Ned.

"Don't be too sure," advised Bob. "We've been fooled before."

"We'll soon see what it is," said Jerry. "We'll go down there."

Eagerly they watched as the white patch became bigger, for they were nearing it rapidly. Now they could make out that it was some kind of cloth, caught on the limbs of a tree, for it flapped back and forth like a signal of distress.

"I—I guess we've found it at last," murmured Jerry hopefully.

"If only the treasure is there," added Ned in a low voice.

In a few seconds more they were over the object. Just ahead of them was a little clearing where Jerry was going to land. As the *Comet* passed over the white object the boys looked down. Then came a joyful cry.

"That's her!" yelled Ned. "It's their airship!"

For what he and the others saw, on the ground under the white cloth, was the bent and twisted remains of a big biplane, the engine, wings and frame being tossed together in an almost inextricable mass. It was the wreck of the *Silver Star*.

But was the airship treasure there?

CHAPTER XXX

THE AIRSHIP TREASURE—CONCLUSION

“That’s the same one!”

“The craft Brown and Black had.”

“The one they ordered us away from; I can tell by the peculiar wing tips—at least from what’s left of ’em.”

Thus spoke Bob, Ned and Jerry in turn as they stood in the little clearing where they had landed, and viewed the airship wreck that was just on the edge of it.

“Jove, but she’s certainly smashed up!” went on the stout lad.

“The engine is nothing but junk,” said Ned.

“And look where the radiator is,” called Jerry. “Up in that beech tree.” The cooling apparatus, torn loose from the rest of the machinery had caught on a great limb and hung there.

“She must have crashed full-tilt into the trees,” was Ned’s opinion. “That tore things loose, and then, if the engine was going, the propellers threshed around and broke to pieces.”

“That last is true, anyhow,” observed Bob. “Here is a piece of one of the blades,” and he held it up.

Professor Snodgrass was observed to be carefully scanning the ground about the wreck.

“Are you looking for the treasure?” asked Jerry.

“Eh? What’s that? Treasure? No, my dear boy, I’m looking for the flying frog. This seems a likely place to find one.”

“And we’ll have a look for the treasure,” said Ned, smiling at the odd indifference of the professor. “It ought to be somewhere around here—if Brown and Black, or whatever their names are—told the truth.”

After a glance at the wrecked craft the three boys began eagerly looking for

the loot from the bank.

“First we’d better make sure it isn’t still aboard,” suggested Jerry. “They had two or three compartments on their craft where they could carry the money.”

It needed but the most casual glance, however, to show that none of the treasure was now aboard the *Silver Star*. In fact the several compartments or boxes of which Jerry had spoken were smashed beyond holding anything. In the corner of one, however, where it had become jammed, was part of the same curious implement that had first aroused their suspicions.

“That’s the drill they used to make a hole in the safe door, so they could put in the explosive,” declared Bob.

“Yes, and we’d better take it along for evidence,” remarked Jerry, as he carried the tool to their own machine.

“And there’s not so much as a gold-piece here,” gloomily went on Ned, after a careful survey of the ground about the wreck. “I guess they’ve got it hidden somewhere.”

“I don’t agree with you,” declared Jerry. “I think it was in the ship after they were spilled out. How long it remained after that we can’t say. But I’m going to have a look back over the air path which this machine took in coming here.”

They were hopeful at first, but when, after a walk of several hours, they had not even found a scrap of paper they began to get discouraged. All about them was the vast, silent forest, in which it seemed that the foot of man had not been set since the Indians had disappeared.

“It’s no use,” declared Bob, sitting down on a stone. “I wish I’d brought along something to eat. I’m going back. You fellows can hunt, if you want to.”

“Oh, come on, just a little farther,” urged Jerry. “Go one more mile, and then, if we don’t find something we’ll go back, and try it again to-morrow.”

“Well, just one mile more,” stipulated the fat lad wearily.

They trudged on, poking about in the dead leaves for a sight of gold or paper. They had about covered the additional mile, and Bob was urging his companions to return, when, as he impatiently kicked at a stone, he uttered a cry.

“Hurt yourself?” asked Jerry, turning around.

Bob did not answer. He dug his fist down into the leaves and dirt, and when he raised his hand his fingers clutched something that glittered in the sun.

“Gold! Gold!” he cried. “A twenty dollar gold piece!”

“The airship treasure at last!” shouted Jerry.

Almost immediately after that Ned found three of the double eagles scattered about, and Jerry picked up five more close together. Then they hurried along the track, as indicated by the gold, and in a few minutes they came upon a bundle of papers. The wrappings were torn off, and then to the delighted gaze of the boys there were disclosed big bundles of bills, and the other securities that had been stolen from the bank vault. Jerry hastily counted them over.

“There’s two hundred and six thousand dollars here,” he announced.

“That’s right,” confirmed Ned. “There was four thousand in gold taken. Let’s see if we can’t pick up some more.”

They hurried back to the place where they had first found the glittering coins, and by dint of searching in the leaves managed to pick up one hundred and ten of the coins—twenty-two hundred dollars. Then, as it was getting late, and they wanted to make secure the great treasure they had found, they went back to their craft.

As they came in view of it they saw Professor Snodgrass capering about like a boy.

“Hurrah! Hurrah!” he shouted at the sight of them. “I’ve found it!”

“Maybe he found the rest of the gold,” suggested Ned.

“We’ve got most of the treasure!” yelled Bob.

“And I’ve got my treasure—my prize—the flying frog!” exclaimed the scientist. “I just caught it! Oh, but I am the lucky man! Congratulate me, boys!”

“Look here!” called Jerry, showing the big bundle of notes.

“Ah, yes, very good, very good,” spoke the professor calmly, “but look at this,” and, trembling with eagerness, he opened a specimen box and showed the boys a tiny, trembling green frog. “I had rather have this than the airship treasure,” said the professor. “You ought to see it change color.”

He agreed with the boys that it was useless to spend any more time hunting for the rest of the gold. It had evidently been scattered when the airship turned over, spilling out the other valuables, just before crashing into the trees.

“The bank will be glad enough to get that back, and with the capture of the

robbers, to pay you the reward,” said the professor.

The airship treasure was carefully put aboard the *Comet* and then, rising high in the air, the nose of the craft was pointed toward the east, and she began her swift flight again over the pathless forest.

“Well, something was doing on this trip, almost all the while,” remarked Ned, a day or so later when they were nearing Harmolet.

“Yes, it was one of the most exciting ones we’ve had,” agreed Jerry.

But it was not the last voyage of our heroes, for they were destined for other adventures, which will be related in the next volume, to be entitled, “The Motor Boys After a Fortune; Or The Hut on Snake Island.”

“I’d like to know the secret of the cloth on the statue and how Noddy’s and Bill’s names came in the torch,” said Bob.

They did learn a little later, at the trial of the robbers. It became necessary to have evidence about the queer bicycle tires, and Noddy, being a witness, explained how he had purchased a set exactly like those on the *Silver Star* from a supply left by Brown and Black.

It developed at the trial that Noddy had proposed to Bill the daring scheme of sailing around the head of the statue in the park, and lifting off a loose portion of the torch as a trophy. Noddy thought it would show his skill as an aviator, and that the people of Harmolet would be much surprised when they found the piece of bronze gone. It was this scheme he was proposing to his crony, when Jerry overheard him. Noddy had been in Harmolet before, and knew about the statue.

But Noddy had a slight accident in his machine after leaving the Colton grounds, and so could not start to circle the statue until after dark. Then the park was deserted and no one saw him. He had his trouble for his pains, and found it impossible to take away a piece of the bronze. He and Bill went too close, and tore one of their wing tips. Noddy did manage to toss his name and Bill’s into the hollow torch, a foolish and risky trick.

They escaped police detection, which Bill was afraid of, but gained none of the notoriety for which Noddy thirsted. Then the two went off on an auto trip that lasted until they were summoned to court.

“It’s no wonder though, after what happened, and remembering Noddy’s talk, that we suspected them for a time,” said Jerry; and his chums agreed with him.

The trial of the two robbers, who went under various names, was short and

summary. They had recovered from their accident when taken to court. The evidence against them, given by the boys, was so conclusive, that they did not offer a defense, and were quickly convicted.

It developed that the day they were in the little country town, where the boys first saw them, they were planning the robbery, and the mention of Hamlet so startled them that they betrayed a nervousness that drew the attention of our friends to them.

The boys had found nearly all the gold, for what was missing had been spent by the thieves. The evil doers were sent to prison for long terms.

Of course our heroes received the ten thousand dollars reward, and the thanks of the bank officials. The prize money was divided among them, Professor Snodgrass getting his share. Nor did the boys forget the friendly policeman, Mr. Thompson, but for whose aid they might not have gotten on the trail of the thieves.

Professor Snodgrass returned to the museum, the proud possessor of the flying frog, as well as many other specimens gathered on the trip. As for the boys, they had several more trips in the *Comet* and then prepared to return to school in the fall. Anxiously then, they awaited the next summer, when they planned to do great things.

And now, for the time being we will say good-bye to the motor boys, trusting to meet them soon again.

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