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THE GREAT AIRSHIP WAS GOING A MILE A MINUTE, FOLLOWING THE WATER LINE BETWEEN THE TWO CONTINENTS.

Our Young Aeroplane Scouts In Russia

OR

Lost On The Frozen Steppes

By HORACE PORTER

AUTHOR OF
“Our Young Aeroplane Scouts In France and Belgium.”
“Our Young Aeroplane Scouts In Germany.”
“Our Young Aeroplane Scouts In Turkey.”

A.L. BURT COMPANY
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OUR YOUNG AEROPLANE SCOUTS IN RUSSIA

OUR YOUNG AEROPLANE SCOUTS IN RUSSIA.

CHAPTER I.

THE SIGN OF THE THUMB.

"Well, my young skyscrapers, I hear that you were lost in Petrograd, but the special messengers tell me that if anything else was lost it was not time on the way back."

The aviation chief in Warsaw had this greeting for Our Young Aeroplane Scouts, Billy Barry, U. S. A., and his chum Henri Trouville, when the young airmen completed an interview with Colonel Malinkoff, the officer who had selected them as pilots for the dispatch-bearing aerial trip to the Russian capital.

"Maybe you think we are like bad pennies—always sure to turn up," laughed Billy. "But, believe me," continued the boy, "it was no merry jest to us when the strange streets seemed to have no end, and we knew that we were counted upon to pull out by daylight."

"I can't figure, upon my life, why you tried to foot it alone; at night, too, in a city like that."

The aviation chief had another think coming to him, if he imagined for a minute that he was going to hear the real story of the Petrograd adventure from the youths he addressed.

"We thought the walk would do us good."

Henri had some difficulty in keeping a serious face when Billy offered this plea as an excuse for the performance that had almost brought nervous prostration to Salisky and Marovitch, the dispatch bearers.

In a quiet corner later on, Henri had no desire to even smile when Billy gravely reviewed the possibility of the vengeful Cossack tracing them to Warsaw.

"You know," said the boy from Bangor, "those fellows hang on like grim death when they have a grudge against anybody, and this wild and woolly scout is evidently anxious to stick his claws into us."

"Maybe after all," suggested Henri, "it is just because he thinks we are spies, having seen us working with or, rather, for the other side."

"Why, then, didn't he make his spring when we were within easy reach?"

"You forget, Billy," replied Henri, "that by the time he had patched up his memory we were in Malinkoff palace, and even the tiger of the plains would hesitate before attempting to rough it with a Russian duke."

"And there was a good reason why he did not have it out with us when we left the palace," added Billy.

"A backway reason," concluded Henri.

The Russian secret service, reputed to be a wonderfully efficient system, had now advices of the activities of that eminent arch-schemer, Roque, or whatever other name by which he was known, in this section of the war zone.

The blowing up of the war depot in Warsaw was less a mystery since the authorities had learned of the presence of this dreaded operator even so close as the width of a river.

If the wily Cossack could connect our boys with the previous movements of the aforesaid Roque, then, as Billy would say, "good night."

In Colonel Malinkoff would be vested their only hope.

That the boys were not crazy about making another journey at present to Petrograd, goes without saying. They would be insane if they did, of their own accord.

But, luckily, their next flying assignment was the piloting of scouts sent out daily to observe the maneuvers of the great army in gray, then working on a new tack to break into the coveted city of Warsaw.

The aviators operated near a battle front nearly forty miles wide, and above a veritable hurricane of gunpowder, but in this experience Billy and Henri had grown old.

Once away from the city, and up in the air, their chief worry was behind them—their Cossack Nemesis could go hang!

From Salisky, now acting as observer in one of the biplanes, the boys learned of the fall of the great underground fortress of Przemysl, in and out of which they had served as aerial messengers, and where they had, not so long ago, bidden farewell to that gallant soldier-aviator, Stanislaws.

"I hope that 'Stanny' will be given a soft berth as a prisoner," said Billy to his chum.

In the presence of the other airmen, however, the boys kept discreetly silent as to their acquaintance with the Austrian fort and town now overrun by the Russian forces.

Now and again there were days when Billy and Henri were relieved of the strain of constant aeroplane driving, and which was given to wandering about the streets of busy Warsaw.

One afternoon their steps inclined to the well remembered square with the tall column and heroic statue of bronze. In the door of a shop bearing the symbol of a silversmith, the proprietor happened to be standing when the boys strolled by.

This tradesman, at the time without trade, suddenly changed from sleepy attitude to one of alert anticipation after second view of the strollers. Under a skull cap of silk gleamed a pair of keen, blue eyes, and the smooth-shaven face of the man was alight with a half-smile of recognition.

He lifted his right hand with a peculiar gesture, the thumb folded into the palm.

Billy, idly glancing at the performer, remarked:

"That fellow wants to sell you a dinner set of fifty pieces, Buddy."

"That hole in the wall wouldn't hold half of it," joked Henri.

The tradesman seemed puzzled at the lack of response to his thumb signal, but he was evidently determined to have a word with the boys.

With a low bow he stepped to the middle of the sidewalk, as if soliciting custom, and in English, with peculiar accent, softly mentioned a familiar term—Two Towers!

Billy started as if a torpedo had exploded underfoot.

“Where have I seen that face before?”

This thought wave was instantly merged into the sense of knowing:—

The coal heaver who had presented the soiled scrap of paper which summoned the young aviators to the twin towers on the day of the destruction of the war depot!

That face, though now clean of grime, was the same that had burned itself into the lad’s memory when the stirring message was delivered.

“I gave you the sign and you did not respond. Why?”

“Blest if I know what you mean,” Billy told the supposed silversmith.

“But it was to you that I was sent when the hour of need was near.”

“Now see here, for good and all, let me say that neither my chum nor myself has any knowledge of the inside workings about which you are trying to talk, and what’s more we don’t want to know anything about them. Mr. Roque showed us a lot, but I guess he stopped somewhere this side of the inner circle.”

Billy did not care to assume any new responsibility which might lead Henri and himself into some maze of mystery far beyond their depth.

The man addressed appeared to be puzzled at the boy’s reference to “Mr. Roque.” He evidently believed that Billy was fencing with him. “Kindly step into the store for a moment; I will not detain you long.”

Though both the boys had reached the same conclusion, that it was a sort of spider and the fly game, they impulsively followed the leader into the little shop.

Spreading a few articles of jewelry and silverware upon the top of the counter, as a cloak for the line of talk he was pursuing, he quickly remarked:

“I sometimes fear that I am a suspect, and we cannot be too careful in these times.”

Billy darted a look at Henri full of apprehension—“we cannot be too careful.”

“It is no use to hide behind the bush, one from the other, my young friends,” continued the man behind the counter; “of course, I do not blame you for being cautious, but now that we are past the limit of assurance, let us get together and talk straight.”

“You still have the advantage of us,” insisted Billy, glancing uneasily toward the door, as if contemplating a hasty move in that direction.

The keen blue eyes under the skull cap flashed a threat of growing irritation.

“Perhaps you do not appreciate, young man,” and the voice of the speaker sounding a harsh note, “that we sink or swim together. It is no ordinary tie that binds us, and woe to the one who breaks it.”

“Say, old scout,” interposed Henri, “this isn’t a theater.”

“Or an asylum,” added Billy.

How the silversmith would have resented these strokes at his manner of dramatic declaration was left for surmise, for at the moment his whole expression changed to one of bland greeting at the sight of a newcomer in the shop—a man who presented a wide front view, wearing a military cape and fairly bristling with authority, evidenced by his manner of pushing open the door and his heavy tread, which raised a creak from the floor as he strode to the counter where the boys were standing.

“They have just dug something that looks like a clock out of the ruins up there, Ricker, and as you are the nearest time tinker around here, I want you to come alone and see what you think of it.”

The boys saw the hue of ashes in the face of the tradesman, but the words that gave him the scare were as Greek to them.

“Certainly, sir; certainly,” the silversmith was saying, as he reached for his hat and greatcoat, hanging on a convenient peg. Turning to the boys, he politely directed them to the door, with an excellent imitation of regret that their expected purchase must be delayed by this emergency call.

On the sidewalk the boys watched the turn of the corner of the burly cape wearer and the silversmith, the latter walking like a weary soldier on a forced march.

“Here’s a pretty howdy-de-do, Buddy,” observed Henri, “getting twisted up with a fellow that evidently has a price on his head, and who thinks we are as deep in the muddle as he is. Did you ever see such luck?”

“If I knew a single word in the outlandish language spoken by that fat policeman I could tell better about our chances of being bothered again by the man with the thumb sign.”

It was not the first time that Billy had been stumped by the various lingoes in the war zone.

While the boys were dreaming that night of lurid initiation into some bloody brotherhood, there came riding into Warsaw a bevy of splendidly mounted horsemen, brilliantly attired in scarlet, gold-braided caftans, white waistcoats and blue trousers—imperial Cossacks from Petrograd!

CHAPTER II.

BETWEEN TWO FIRES.

The boys were aroused in the early morning by the shrill neighing of horses in the courtyard underneath the windows of their sleeping quarters, and other sounds indicating the incoming of a cavalry troop, created sufficient inducement, at least, for an after-waking peek at the night-riders who had cut off a good hour of slumber.

Billy, the first at the window, drew back with a sharp note of alarm.

"The fancy Cossacks!" he exclaimed.

"Quit your jollying," cried Henri, unbelieving, bouncing out of his cot and barefooting it to the lookout point. "Jumping jimminy," he excitedly admitted, when he saw one of the red horsemen in the act of dismounting, "you are right, sure enough."

"But what are they doing here?" questioned Billy. "This is no stableyard."

"Looking for us," slyly insinuated Henri.

"Maybe there is more truth than poetry in that proposition."

The boy from Bangor was taking the matter seriously.

In the interval several Cossacks, trailing their lances, crossed the courtyard to the main entrance of the building where the aviators were housed, and vigorously thumped for admission. These knights of the plain evidently held themselves to be privileged characters.

Billy and Henri, getting into their clothes as quickly as possible, poked their heads over the stair railing, from which location they could see and hear all that was happening in the spacious hall below.

By what they heard, however, they were not enlightened, for it was in the speech unknown to them, but enough and plenty in the sight of no other than the Cossack who had given them the evil eye in Petrograd.

The aviation chief seemed to be strenuously saying "no" to some question put by the giant in scarlet, shaking his head and handsweeping over his shoulder in directing manner.

The insistent intruder finally accepted the advices given, and with his companions again took to saddle, spurring their horses into a clattering gallop out of the paved enclosure.

Just as if they had not been watching and listening, the boys descended the stairs, giving their usual good morning salutations to their fellow aviators, who had all been attracted to the hall by the discussion just concluded.

To give the lads an understanding with the rest as to what it had all been about, the chief mingled French and English in his explanation.

"That big fellow is Nikita, who has been attached to the imperial service on account of his skill and daring as a scout. I heard a story about him only the other day. Along with ten comrades, he was captured through falling into an ambuscade. Three days later he turned up at the camp of his command with two bullets, one through his clothes, and one through his thigh. He was horseless, but carried his long lance. Without horse or weapons, he had crept during darkness from the tent in which he slept, got safely past the German sentries, and then reflected that it was a shame for a Cossack to lose his horse and lance. So, as the story goes, he crept back, recovered both horse and lance and galloped away. The horse was killed by a shot from an outpost, but I see that Nikita still has his lance. I tell you that this is a breed that never lets go."

This last comment had a jarring effect upon both Billy and Henri. The latter, however, did not restrain a desire for some direct information:

"That's a fine story, lieutenant, but it doesn't tell what this wonderful warrior wanted here this morning."

"He demanded an interview with the dispatch bearers who aeroplaned into Petrograd on a certain date—the same date, by the way, upon which you were detailed as pilots for Marovitch and Salisky. I had difficulty in convincing the Cossack that the men he was seeking were at present scouting along the Vistula south of Warsaw."

"Where I wish we were this very minute."

Billy had edged close to Henri to say it.

The aviation chief further advised that the Cossacks had gone to the general's quarters, and would probably remain in Warsaw until they had completed a mission, of which he (the chief) knew nothing about, but which apparently had to do with some recent happening in Petrograd.

Right there the boys made up their minds that they had all the rest they needed, and Billy, as spokesman, so informed the lieutenant.

"If there are any air scouts going out to-day," said the boy, "we want to be on the job."

"All right, my birds," agreed the lieutenant, "you will be marked first on the list."

When at last the aerial assignment of the boys for the day was made they were greatly interested to learn that the flight was to be directly across the river, in which direction they had never traveled since the day they came into the city by the written directions of Roque.

The observers they were to pilot were immediately identified with the general's staff, and the young aviators were duly advised of the rank of their passengers.

"They all look alike to me," remarked Henri, as he and his chum waited at the hangars for the order to start—"all except Colonel Malinkoff, and he's my pick every time."

Nevertheless, the pilots showed proper deference when the officers boarded the aircraft, after briefly outlining the plan of journey. The boys did not take the time nor assume the trouble of telling that they needed no guide notes for this particular voyage!

The same old entrenchments skirted the mud-colored river, but thinly populated now, for the main body of German soldiery there had joined in the new move upon Warsaw from the northwest.

Billy and Henri had each an eye for their former earthy lodging, and marked in memory the very

spot in the battlefield where the French boy had landed the firebrand Schneider for his desperate dash in rescue of the grounded colors.

Of the fate of the secret agent and his fighting attendant, however, no tidings came up from the mottled plain.

Somebody might know in the clean, white lodge-keeper's kitchen, where the canary sang, but there was no available excuse to turn downward the swiftly sailing biplanes when they swept over the one bright spot in all that forbidding surface.

"I can recommend your license as master pilots," jovially observed one of the officers when the machines again rested in the aviation field, just at sunset.

The other observer nodded approval of the compliment to the youngsters, and both found it not beneath their dignity to give Billy and Henri a hearty handshake.

The young aviators had hardly completed the housing of the biplanes when they were accosted by a loutish lad attired in a smock-frock and leather leggins.

With a pull at his forelock, the boy handed Billy a fold of notepaper, and then shuffled away.

"Some more shady business," muttered Billy, opening the message.

One line, that was all:

"To-morrow noon. Sign of thumb."

"Why can't that fellow let us alone?"

With the petulant words Billy tore the note to shreds and cast them to the wind.

"Between the Cossack and this alleged silversmith," complained Henri, "we will have more than enough practice as artful dodgers."

"Got us both going and coming," gloomily added Billy, "and no show for argument."

"We don't have to respond to that message, anyhow."

"I don't know about that, Henri; we might be able to convince the crank at the shop that we haven't any hold on underground wires, and so get rid of him."

"And then prove an alibi when we meet that Cossack."

Henri wore a grin as he put this extra spoke in the wheel of hope that his chum was turning.

Humor, however, was not catching to Billy this evening. The boys sat in silence at the mess table, and as silently stole away to bed.

The young aviators had no call for their services the next day, and Billy insisted that they play a quitting visit to the little shop in the square. Besides, he had urged, they were less likely to encounter the Cossack out in the big city than if they idled about headquarters. His motion prevailed, and shortly before the tower clocks sounded the twelve strokes, the chums were rounding the tall column and nearing the symbol of the silversmith.

Ricker had an assistant on duty in front this day, a wild-eyed individual literally overgrown with hair on head and face. When the boys entered the shop the queer-looking clerk spoke not a word, but simply pounded with his knuckles on the counter.

The proprietor of the place quickly appeared from a curtained recess at the rear of the shop, and crooked a finger in beckoning invitation to the visitors to come back and join him.

The hairy assistant went to the street door, and after peering up and down the avenue, nodded clearance to his chief.

The boys perched themselves on a couple of high stools in the work room, while Ricker leaned against a low and broad shelf covered with equipment of the clockmaker's trade.

Billy was determined to settle matters there and then and get clear of an annoying and dangerous complication.

"This is the last time," he bluntly stated, "that we will stand for a call here. Just as I told you before, there was a limit to our knowledge of Mr. Roque's affairs, and as he did not choose to take us all the way, we have no desire to be dragged along by any stranger. Running aeroplanes is our business, and we are not seeking to acquire any other profession. So it's farewell on the spot."

Ricker showed a red flush of anger rising to his cheekbones, but he tempered his reply to the boy's declaration. "Stick to your flying trade, young man, as you will, but on your service the Cause has a claim, and the penalty for ignoring that claim will be exacted to the last farthing, be it blood or bones."

The implied threat put a tingle in Billy's spirited makeup, and, jumping from the stool, he impetuously took up the challenge of the silversmith with wordy proclamation:

"When we leave this place, understand me, we don't return, and, again, not the slightest bit of attention do we pay to any further communication from you. You get me?"

Ricker put another curb on his temper, and his tone was even and subdued, slightly tinged with mockery as he replied to Billy's forceful speech:

"You bluff beautifully, my young friend, but for one who was hand and glove with the great Herr Georges you wear your chains too lightly."

"Herr Georges? Is he another growth in your mind?" Billy happened to think at the instant that "Georges" and "Roque" were one and the same person—as the secret agent changed his name as many times and as easily as he changed his clothes. But he let the question go as put, for a feeler, if nothing else.

"Oh, you know the one I mean, though you and I are seemingly at odds in naming him," confidently asserted Ricker.

"But what of that?" argued Billy. "For all we know, Roque or Georges is beyond interest in the doings of earth, and, what's more, we have paid our score and have been acquitted of the service."

The silversmith turned thoughtful for the moment, hesitating as to his next word. Then, deliberately, he questioned:

"Do you mean to tell me that you knew nothing of the plot to blow up the war depot?"

The boys stared at the questioner in affright!

CHAPTER III.

TRAILED BY RED RIDERS.

The silversmith seemed satisfied that he had effectually unseated Billy from his highhorse position, and in cat and mouse attitude awaited complete surrender.

“You—you dare to voice that suspicion?” gasped the boy. “We never heard or even dreamed of such a plot, and with the coming of the shock hadn’t the least idea what caused it.”

“Is it not true that the pair of you at the very moment of the explosion were preparing to speed in aeroplanes to the rescue of at least two of the plotters?”

Ricker smiled as he presented what appeared to him to be a poser.

“Only half a truth,” cried Henri, “with the worst half added by you. We did intend to offer Roque a saving turn in one of his own machines, for old acquaintance sake, but not in the connection that you put it. For even that much, I know, you have us against the wall, but let me tell you, sir, if the worst comes to the worst we will confess our part to our friend Colonel Malinkoff and he can weigh the testimony that the three of us can give.”

This dropped Ricker, not only to a seat on a workbench, but in point of argument. Just back of him were the battered remains of a time-clock, with twisted wires still attached, for the custody of which he was responsible to the authorities, and about which, as an expert, he was expected to report the next morning. It was a part of the infernal machine dug out of the ruins of the war depot!

Both Billy and Henri were quick to observe that the silversmith was about all in, so to speak, and more than willing to play quits.

The man who had missed his reckoning an hour in the setting of a spring was not now disposed to perpetuate the error!

As the boys were about to push aside the curtain and get out into the open, a small bell suspended from the ceiling of the workroom softly tinkled. Ricker was on his feet in an instant and holding a finger to his lips.

At the store entrance some rapid-fire Russian was being exchanged, and Billy took the liberty of peeping through a slit in the drapery behind which he was concealed. The look was a blood freezer.

Nikita, the Cossack, and the hairy clerk were having it hammer and tongs about something, when all of a sudden the red rider unhanded one of his heavy leather gloves and with it struck the queer shop attendant full in the face.

Of all the malignant looks that Billy had ever seen on human countenance the blackest was pictured in the glaring eyes of the fierce servitor, who, retreating before the assaulting Cossack, had backed against the counter.

Ricker, catching the drift of the quarrel in front, turned quickly, and noiselessly pushed aside, in well-oiled grooves, a solid-back plate case, and to the opening revealed in the wall he beckoned the boys. “He is evidently after you, for some reason,” whispered the silversmith; “claims that he trailed you here. Is he friend or foe? Tell me quick.”

Without a word, Billy and Henri classed the hunter outside as a decided enemy by hurriedly slipping through the aperture, the case smoothly shutting the way behind them.

It was not in the program of Ricker that his shop should be the scene of an arrest, and, too, it was now in his interest that the boys should escape the probe of any investigation.

Having disposed of this dangerous exhibit in his back room, the silversmith hastened to the front to pacify, if possible, the unruly intruder.

Ricker, showing his best professional smile, stepped between the frowning Cossack and the enraged clerk, speaking a sharp word of warning to the latter, and asking the former what it was that he desired.

“Ah, two boys, air drivers, you say? I know them not. Reported to be in my shop? There cannot be good eyesight around here. Everything is open. This way, please.”

The silversmith moved backward, closely followed by the Cossack and several others of his kind, and pulled the curtains aside, with a sweeping gesture of invitation to search at will.

Though the keenest of trackers in the great outdoors, the red riders were at a loss when it came to detective work within four walls. They prodded with their lances bundles of wrapping paper in the several dark corners of the workroom and poked their heads into all of the packing cases, but with cunningly designed entrances into secret apartments they had no experience.

At last, scowling and grumbling, the baffled searchers marched themselves out of the shop. As the Cossack, Nikita, passed out the queer clerk shook a fist at the crimson-clad back, mumbling frightful maledictions to himself.

The silversmith assumed a busy manner, shifting the stock display on the shelves, winding clocks, and generally bustling about as if making up for lost time.

All this time the boys were completely shut off from every sight and sound in the musty room behind the plate-case.

“Wonder how long this lockup is going to last, Henri?”

“Until the shutters are put up in front, I suppose, Billy.”

“That’s entirely too long for me,” impatiently asserted the boy from Bangor. “Let’s see if there isn’t some other outlet to this den.”

But with all the sounding and pounding they could do, the lads found no back way to the dismal room.

And, too, they were baffled again and again by the mechanism of the sliding door by which they had entered.

Nothing more to do than to await the pleasure of the silversmith, and so they awaited, hour upon hour, seated on a rickety sofa, nursing their chins in their hands.

The one little, cobwebby window at the top of the dingy wall in front of them no longer showed light.

Then there was a click, a faint squeak, and Ricker appeared in the opening, cleared by the movement of the sliding case.

“Have they gone?” eagerly inquired Henri.

“Apparently so, but Hamar is out now to make sure that they have not set a watch on the place.”

“There’ll be somebody else hunting for us if we don’t get away pretty soon, and that will be a squad from headquarters. The lieutenant,” concluded Billy, “is mighty particular about the off-duty hours that the aviators keep.”

Hamar, the hairy lieutenant, had been a long time gone, and Ricker had difficulty in persuading the boys to lay quiet until positive assurance came that the coast was clear. With the next striking of the big clock in the square—it was eight—Billy declared against further delay.

“I really believe that Marovitch and Salisky have returned, without reason to the contrary have given the Cossack what they know of our history and identified us with the last trip to Petrograd. So what’s the use of further dodging? It will all come out, and if they hitch us onto the explosion plot—well, you can guess the rest.”

Ricker squirmed in his chair. “Say,” he pleaded, “hide here for a day or two and we will find a way to get you both across the river.”

“No,” declared Henri. “I’m going to put it up to Colonel Malinkoff this very night. He can, and I believe he will, save us from the fate of spies.”

“But what about me? Am I to be betrayed?”

The silversmith’s right hand was buried to the wrist within the breast-front of the loose coat he wore.

There was a muffled knock at the front door, twice repeated.

“Hamar,” muttered the silversmith, lowering his hand. “Stay where you are,” he hissed to the boys. With the turning of a ponderous key the wild-eyed servitor, hooded to the shoulders, pushed his way through the space in the half-opened door.

“Where in Satan’s name have you been?” growled Ricker.

The hairy man laughed—and it was a laugh to curdle the blood.

CHAPTER IV.

THE POISONED RING.

“Stow that yelp,” commanded Ricker; “it sets one’s teeth on edge. What are you playing the clown for, anyhow?”

Hamar threw back his hood, and with the black mane draping his temples and mingling with the mat on his face, eye and tooth glittering in the shaded glow of the swinging lamp overhead, he was the living picture of a fabled fury.

In words that ran in a stream of gutturals, deep in his throat, he told the story of the adventure that had prolonged his street scouting-mission, and here liberally translated.

“I sold him the ring—the very red man that struck me in the face—it was a rare work; he knew me not, my head down and covered. His dirty roubles—see?” (Hamar opened a clenched hand, in the palm of which were several silver coins.) “He has it on his finger. I told him it would bring him good luck—bring him to the worms I meant. Ha, ha. Go you,” addressing the boys; “no fear now.”

Ricker stood dumfounded at the completion of this outburst. Then he faced the young aviators, who had been held spellbound by the weird performance—meaning the actions, for the words were mere gibberish to them.

“Do you know what he has done?” exclaimed the silversmith—“why, he has put the death ring on the Cossack!”

Going behind the counter, Ricker took from under the glass case a tiny chamois bag and shook it over the polished surface. The bag was empty.

“This man, I tell you,” the silversmith cried, aiming an index finger at Hamar, who had relapsed into sullen indifference, “is a fanatic, not a patriot, and serves not for any government, but against all governments. That blow in the face went to his very soul, and here’s the result. What he has taken and used to wreak personal vengeance is known as a possession of mine, a curio, and often displayed to the curious, for the ring had this peculiarity—it is poisoned. The heat of the finger starts a poison to work that lies in the setting—whoever decorates his hand with it is dead in two weeks!”

“Yes, dead, dead,” mumbled Hamar.

“And woe to me if the foxes from the division of justice are in at the death; is it not enough,” groaned the silversmith, “that I am now beset on all sides?”

The passing thought to Billy and Henri—the wearing of the terrible jewel would rid them of their savage foe and avert a trial for their lives.

But, shuddering, the boys resented even the thought of such a relief.

The one overpowering impulse with both of them at the moment was to get out and away from this ferment of intrigue and passion, out into the free air, anywhere that offered a change.

With this end in view the lads had been slowly but surely edging, inch by inch, foot by foot, nearer the door, under cover of the exciting controversy between Ricker and his hairy henchman.

One twist of the key, a pull at the knob, and the trick was done.

But any mishap, a stumble, a catch in the lock, and Ricker and Hamar would be on their backs.

It was Henri, lightning fast in every movement, who essayed the first jump for the door. It was done in an instant when the silversmith, who was nervously pacing the floor, had faced the curtain in the rear of the store, and while Hamar had lifted his arms in the act of unfastening the loops that closed the collar of his heavy greatcoat.

The work of a second, and the bolt snapped back in the lock, the door rattled on its hinges by the force of its opening, and two lithe figures leaped out into the night!

If they were pursued they never knew it, for a deer would hardly have been in the running with them as they dashed across the square.

Once in the great avenue diverging northward, the lads again breathed freely, but wasted no time in making their way to aviation headquarters. If they had expected to be immediately hauled before stern judges to show cause why they should be permitted to live, they were agreeably disappointed. Not even the lieutenant was there to inquire about their overstay of leave.

“I can’t get that horrid ring business out of my mind,” said Henri, half rising from his cot, after the tired boys had supposedly settled for much needed rest.

“Neither can I,” promptly agreed Billy, who was just as wide awake as when he first jammed the pillow under his head.

“Do you suppose it might have been that those fellows invented that story just for our benefit?”

“Not a chance, Henri,” replied the U. S. A. boy; “that man Ricker is an actor all right, but in this show he was real; I’ll lay my life on that. And don’t tell me that the long-haired guy wasn’t in earnest. Steer me clear of him on a dark night.”

“What do you think we ought to do about it?”

No sleep for Henri until this question was settled.

“There you are,” said the sorely perplexed chum; “if we go to warn the Cossack it may not blunt the claws he has sharpened for us; if we tell it straight it will put Ricker on the rack, for nobody would believe that the crank who wished the ring on the red man did it of his own accord, and with Ricker against the wall there’s no telling how far he would go to fix us good and plenty.”

“If it was a fair fight like Schneider put up,” argued Henri, “it would be no strain of conscience, but to let slow poison work when we could stop it, it seems to me, would class us as first-aid assassins.”

“There is no other way then,” decided Billy, “but to get the tip, somehow, to the Cossack in the morning.”

If Nikita got the “tip” it did not happen in Warsaw, for the boys were informed in response to their break-of-day inquiry that the lance-bearing cavalryman had, the afternoon previous, been urgently summoned by aerial messenger to report at the headquarters of the greatest of Russian military

commanders, a hundred miles east of Warsaw.

On steeds of tireless breed, and racing with the wind, the red riders had a long start of now these many hours.

“And that’s the end of it,” declared Henri, when told that the Cossack band was by this time far away, and by route known only to themselves.

Billy was as deep in thought just then as were his hands in his pockets.

“What’s the matter with chasing them in the biplanes?” he suddenly asked.

“Man alive,” cried Henri, “it is the very ticket!”

CHAPTER V.

STRIKING IT RIGHT.

How to bring about the flying assignment that would put them on the trail of the otherwise doomed Cossack was the next problem to engage the young aviators.

The boys well knew that aeroplane connection was being constantly maintained between Warsaw and the center of Russian operations at Brest Litovsk, one hundred miles east, even though numerous telegraph instruments, in the schoolhouse there occupied as headquarters by the mighty commander, ticked messages every minute day and night.

No weather conditions served to check modern aircraft, and hostile wire-cutters had nothing but the laugh due them when it came to intercepting or destroying aeroplane communication.

How much they would be compelled to tell to create an emergency for their journey, the boys had no fixed idea.

“Let’s try it first on the lieutenant,” suggested Billy, “and if he doesn’t see the way, have a talk direct with Colonel Malinkoff.”

“Whatever is to be done must be done at once,” declared Henri.

So they jointly proceeded in search of the aviation chief.

As though a change of luck had succeeded the recent adverse fortune assailing the lads, whom should they meet in crossing the aviation grounds but Salisky and Marovitch, the scouts and special messengers lately back from important mission to the front.

“Joy of my heart,” was the hail of Salisky, at sight of the pilots who had made the record flight from Petrograd, “if here isn’t the salt of the earth in two good packages.”

His companion observer showed equal pleasure in greeting the lads, and the four of them had a busy moment voicing questions and answers.

“Thought you had skipped with the Cossacks,” bantered Salisky; “the big chief of the riders put me through a regular course of sprouts in trying to get a line on you. I knew precious little, except that you were the right stuff and more than full hands in an aeroplane. Did he find you?”

“Not that anybody knows about,” replied Billy, “but we would like to find him just now.”

“You would have a noble chance of making that discovery if you were going with us,” put in Marovitch.

“Where are you going?” was Henri’s eager query.

“In two hours we will be in full sail for Brest Litovsk,” announced Salisky.

The boys each took an elbow grip on the speaker.

With one voice they cried: “Count us in on the flight, if you can!”

“Suits me all right,” promptly agreed Salisky, “but it is the lieutenant who names the pilots, and we are hunting for him now.”

“He’s the very man we have been looking for ourselves,” said Billy, “and we are more in a hurry than ever to get hold of him. Come along.”

The aviation chief had just emerged from the house quarters of a brother officer when the searchers surrounded him, Salisky presenting a written order, and the boys with difficulty refraining from putting their request in advance of the reading.

Indeed, the lieutenant had barely comprehended the text of the official billet before Henri was talking in one ear and Billy in the other. It was breach of discipline for which any of the veterans in the aviation corps would have forthwith been called down, but exuberant youth could not be denied.

The upshot of it was that the young aviators carried their point, having the hearty endorsement of the two men directly responsible for the success of the mission assigned to them.

“Talk about striking it right,” rejoiced Billy as Henri and himself were getting into suitable outfit for a long drive in the cold; “it certainly seems as if our good fairy were on the job to-day.”

“Maybe it was good intent that had something to do with the shaping of this venture,” added Henri. “It isn’t just like we were backing this effort with a solely selfish motive. If we have nothing to gain we might have everything to lose.”

“Come to think of it in that light,” said Billy, “if we don’t gain as much as the point at which we are aiming, it is somebody else that will lose—the Cossack will be minus his life.”

A corporal was calling from the hall below, and the pilots hastened to report themselves at the hangars where the military biplanes—the famous No. 3’s—were in trim for instant flight.

Salisky and Marovitch were ready and waiting, and at the signal from the aviation chief the aeroplanes were off like a shot, soon to be in touch with the directing power of the biggest army under one command in the world’s history of warfare—the Russian forces maneuvered by Grand Duke Nicholas along a battle front of 1,500 miles.

Yet in all the legions before them the hooded pilots, holding hard to the compass-set course of the winged cyclones, would first have eyes for but one equestrian figure, scarlet clad, with a sleeping death coiled in his hand.

From the observers behind them the Boy Aviators had withheld all mention of the original incentive for this particular service—but the time was approaching when this confidence must be extended. As well address an Eskimo in Arabic as to trip the tongues the lads knew over the language knowledge of Nikita, the wild horseman.

They must speak through the city-bred Muscovites with whom they were traveling—friends in need.

The main thing was to locate immediately the man they would warn and save, and with this end in view, a plea had been made to the observers to give note if in the sweep of their glasses they caught the ground picture of the crimson cavalcade.

But not once during the flight was there even a snapshot of anything like that picture—and it must needs be a waiting game, to be finished with the journey’s end.

CHAPTER VI.

THE END OF THE CHASE.

A thin, spare figure rising to a height of over six and a half feet, in field uniform, without a show of ribbon, cross or medal, grim, silent and determined—this was the remarkable personality pointed out to the boys as the military head of the enormous army of seven million men.

The aviators had landed within a few hundred yards of the headquarters of the Russian commander-in-chief.

When Salisky and Marovitch had reported to an adjutant and turned over the contents of their dispatch boxes to the proper authority, the time was opportune for the young airmen to solicit the aid of the veteran scouts in accomplishing that which they had set out to do.

“You are sure that nothing has turned your head?” anxiously inquired Salisky, when he had heard, in part, the thrilling story of the death ring and its secret menace to the life of Nikita.

“I am not cracked,” earnestly assured Billy, so earnestly indeed that his hearers’ unbelief was considerably modified, and both observers began to realize that the strange tale was not altogether the creation of a disordered mind.

Marovitch even recalled hearing some talk at one time of some such historical jewel owned in Warsaw, but memory failed him when it came to placing it.

The boys had said nothing to specify the former ownership of the dread decoration, and so did not repair this defect in the scout’s recollection.

“Taking it all seriously,” remarked Salisky, now about convinced that it was no myth with which they were dealing, “there is the duty of getting to the Cossack chief without delay. Death is an everyday visitor around here, but not in the form of slow poison, and there is peculiar interest enough in this idea of rescue to key us all up to high pitch.”

Marovitch, too, shared his comrade’s growing concern as to the importance of quick action. The driving force of intense interest inspired them all.

Consider their disappointment, then, when it was learned at headquarters that Nikita and his band had been but an hour in this camp, and were already pushing on toward Petrograd.

“Here’s where we stop, according to orders,” regretfully stated Salisky, “and I don’t know for how long, either.”

“Is there no earthly way to get a release?”

Billy was hoping against hope.

“Not unless by new instruction,” responded the scout.

“Do you suppose the ring story would let us out?” asked Henri.

“Don’t believe at all that they would swallow it,” advised Marovitch; “besides, it would probably take a lot of time to hit the trail of the red riders. Too much space out there.”

The speaker referred to the vast and trackless territory at the north.

Their first night in Brest Litovsk was not a happy one to the young aviators. They had set their hearts and minds to the mission of nullifying the vengeful scheme of Hamar, the very knowledge of which spelled guilt to them.

And here all their plans were as naught in the face of inexorable military rule, which held them fast until new commands succeeded the original order.

An attempt to steal away in one of the biplanes would be simply reckless folly, and of no avail—they had no definite advices as to the direction even that the Cossack band had taken in their proposed journey to the Russian capital, direct or roundabout, and, in addition, there was the fear that without an interpreter it would be equally foolish to approach Nikita, even though they located him.

The measure of life for the Cossack, with the death ring encircling his finger, fixed by Ricker as two weeks, and handed down, no doubt, with record of the ancient jewel, was still an uncertain quantity. It might be in this very hour that the slowly coursing venom had done its work.

The favor of just another day for the boys’ venture was needed to save it from hopeless failure. Once on the trail there was always the chance of making timely discovery; a continued internment in this camp, and there was left nothing but the distress of defeat and the reverse flight to Warsaw.

Would the streak of luck that in the first place had shunted the lads into the coveted aeroplane space be extended?

It so developed that that was just what happened, and Salisky was the early bird who brought the good news to the blanket bedsides of the drowsy pilots.

“There is a regiment of Turkomans reported on the move, riding up to the north line, and there is an order out for aeroplane service to convey directions to these troops from headquarters. Marovitch and I have the assignment—and that means our pilots, too.”

“Doesn’t that cover the route to Petrograd?” quickly questioned Billy.

“As far as two hundred and fifty miles,” advised Salisky.

“Bully! Do you hear that, Henri?”

“Well, I guess yes, Buddy.”

“Who are the Turkomans, anyhow?”

Billy wanted to learn a little every day.

“They are our new cavalry force,” explained Salisky, “and they are even quicker to ride at a fence of bayonets than the Don Cossacks, and that is saying something. They came from the desert, the oasis and the steppes of the Trans-Caspian provinces, as well as Caucasia, and they come of their own accord.”

“A famous fighting lot, that,” added Marovitch, “and of all the horsemen I have ever seen, these fellows are in the lead as whirlwind riders.”

“They’ll look good to us,” exclaimed Billy, “especially as they are the means of getting us out of

here.”

While the scout-messengers were waiting for their orders, the boys put the biplanes in flying trim, and the party were off for the frozen north within the hour.

The young aviators had never seen entrenchments laid out on such a tremendous scale as in the early passing of this flight, and noted with wonder the fortifications set up by the Russians in the open field.

What Napoleon had once called the “fifth element”—Russian mud—was now sheeted with snow, and the great rivers and swamps were covered with ice—an impressive outlook with a real chill in it.

But of dead white scenery the young pilots had grown weary; with them the miles they left behind were of chief consequence—and full many a league had then been rolled backward under the top-speeding aeroplanes.

It was at Vilna, where the observers had been directed to go, that first landing was made by the aviators, and following which the scouts had advices of the near approach of the Turkomans.

Upon sight of these picturesque cavalrymen, who feared neither hardship nor danger, the boys were surprised at the youth of most of them, and for whom it had been said, “war is the great and only poem, their unique dream and faith.”

These bold riders wore dark-brown caftans, and full headdress, instead of the usual lambskin cap.

The sons of princes, khans or beks, the officers of these troops were keenly shrewd and intelligent, as well as fiery and impetuous.

They gave the envoys from army headquarters a respectful hearing, and in every way set back a common belief that the Turkomans generally were merely hordes without discipline.

Of greater interest than all else in the proceedings, as far as Billy and Henri were concerned, was the statement from a Turkoman chief brought out by inquiry from Salisky, and by the latter interpreted, that only the day before, traveling due northwest, the brown riders had met the red-clad Nikita and his comrade Cossacks at the crossing of the Duna River.

“One day’s ride, he says,” translated Salisky, “but he measures by the gait of a horse. Even counting upon the fact that the Cossacks have done some galloping since this meeting, it is no task to overhaul them now in our aeroplanes, providing, of course, we do not miss their trail. I will tell you what we will do,” continued the scout; “Marovitch and I will chance an extra dozen hours for this side expedition, but that is the limit of our discretion. We have no choice but to return to headquarters, and depend upon you drivers to make up most of the lost time.”

“You will get all there is in the motors,” assured Henri.

The upshoot of the biplanes presented a spectacular leave-taking to the horsemen, and they raised their lances on high in appreciation of the show.

The twelve hours allotted would have been all too brief in which to serve the purpose intended had the searching party been dependent upon ordinary means of locomotion, and with less wide range of vision.

But in less than three hours the biplanes had swept across the river mentioned by the Turkoman as the place of meeting with Nikita, and onrushed, with occasional deviations right and left from straight course, at hurricane speed.

The machines had traveled some fifty miles on the north side of the Duna, when a shout from Marovitch, in the craft driven by Henri, caused the pilot to suddenly set the planes for descent.

On the glittering white surface of the steppe there appeared a new color effect—moving discs of scarlet!

CHAPTER VII.

BROTHERS OF THE BLOOD.

The Cossacks rode in a wide circle, ’round and ’round the settled aeroplanes, at which the wild ponies snorted and seemingly feared to approach.

When, however, Salisky and Marovitch each gave vent to one of those weird calls peculiar to the denizens of the desert, the tribesmen drove their shaggy mounts full speed toward the searching party.

Nikita was the first to dismount. He knew the scouts, and gave them guttural greeting. The question in his keen eyes, though, did not sound from the lips. He had caught a glimpse of the boys, still seated in the biplanes. The tall chief was instantly a-quiver with a certain fierce joy of possession—that which he desired had apparently been delivered into his hands.

“You bring these young dogs to me?”

“We bring to you, chief, brave lads who have risked much for your welfare—for your life, chief, for your very life!”

Salisky, who had no knowledge of that past, wherein had crossed the paths of Nikita and these boys, and sizing only the present purpose of his young friends, was inclined to indignantly resent the address of the Cossack.

“With my life what have they to do?”

To the red rider the reply of Salisky was a riddle.

“They are but spies,” he continued accusingly, “and upon the heads of their kind is the blood of my brother.”

The speaker supplemented his words with a menacing movement toward the young pilots, who were wholly ignorant of the nature of this parley.

“Hold!”

The voice of Salisky had a hard note, and conveyed no double meaning.

Marovitch ranged alongside of his comrade, and each of the scouts rested a hand on the holsters attached to their belts.

The Cossacks, with lowered lances, closed in behind their chief.

Anything might have happened in the next minute if Billy, noting the trend of action, had not pushed himself to the front, and made eloquent plea to Salisky to avoid the threatened encounter.

“Explain to him,” cried the boy; “tell him right off the bat what we are here for; ask him about the ring; spar for time; scout, spar for time!”

Nikita, seeing this new breeze blow into the squall, was curious to know what the pleading was about. He grounded his lance, and his companions followed suit. The scouts relaxed their grip on their side arms.

The atmosphere had cleared a bit.

Acting upon the urgent suggestion of Billy, the scout, Salisky took the straight line in his talk to the Cossack.

“You bought a ring in Warsaw, chief?”

Nikita nodded, tapping a leather pouch at his girdle.

“He is not wearing it,” whispered Henri to his chum.

“We are on time then,” said Billy, with a sigh of relief.

“Of what concern of yours is this bauble?” Nikita was asking. He had taken the jewel from the pouch, and the glittering circlet was exposed in the open palm of his gauntlet.

“It is beautiful enough for a courtier to offer to his emperor,” murmured Marovitch.

“Save the thought!” exclaimed Salisky. “There is death in it!”

Nikita, holding the ring between thumb and forefinger, as if admiring its brilliancy, awaited further speech from Salisky.

“Of what concern, I say,” he repeated, “is it of yours that I paid my roubles for this shining thing?”

“Of this concern, chief,” impressively declared the scout addressed, “that with it on your finger you would be pointing your way to the grave; that with it on your finger in a few days the wolves might be snarling over your swollen corpse.”

The Cossack shook his head, and turned to his comrades, with a significant shrug of the shoulders, as much as to say that somebody’s mind was wandering.

“Tell him that the man of whom he bought the ring,” urged Billy, “had sworn revenge for a blow inflicted.”

Salisky put the information in form of understanding to the Cossack.

Nikita dropped his manner of incredulity like a shot.

“A blow. Now I remember; it was in the place where led the trail of these spies.”

“Drop that last, chief,” angrily challenged Salisky. “These boys, as I told you, have sought you day and night to save your life. Were they what you claim, is it likely that they would so desperately attempt to overturn that which would quietly remove one who hungered to lay them low? Have a thought, chief.”

Nikita was thinking, the savage in him was receding. He looked attentively at the death ring poised in his finger.

Then he cast the jewel downward to the ice-encrusted surface at his feet, and ground its shimmering facets under the pointed heel of his cavalry boot.

The Cossack had accepted as the whole truth the story of the ancient ring, and as fully realized the stated intent of these strange boys, who had raced with death that he, their deadly enemy, might retain the boon of life.

He spoke rapidly to his comrades, queer phrases that even the scouts did not comprehend.

That some sort of ceremony was under way was demonstrated by the next move of the tribesmen, when Billy and Henri became centerpieces in the parti-colored cluster of lance bearers.

The scouts, showing no disposition to interfere, the boys were convinced that the attentions paid to them were now wholly of a friendly nature.

But a severe test of such belief was furnished by Nikita, as the latter drew near to the lads, carrying in his right hand a dagger, with the point turned forward.

Only a reassuring glance from Salisky kept the young aviators from giving ground before the threatening advance.

Nikita, pausing before Billy, reached for the latter's wrist, lifted it, made a tiny puncture near a smaller artery, and with the same dagger point slightly scarified his own wrist.

With Henri identically the same transfer of blood corpuscles passed from himself to the Cossack.

Upon each of the boys the Cossack then bestowed an amulet—lance points of flint, curiously marked, and with holes in the center, through which thongs had been drawn.

Translating the words of presentation, Salisky with due solemnity advised the young friends that "now and thereafter they were protected from anything that cuts or points, knives or daggers, carbines, long or short rifles, lances, against all kinds of metal, be it iron or steel, brass or lead, ore or wood, when in the hands of the Don Cossacks. This day and forever they were the adopted of the tribesmen of Southern Russia."

"All the degrees at once," said Billy, in undertone to Henri, while the latter was alternating a wondering eye between the thonged charm he was holding and the stern-visaged giver thereof.

"You never can tell but what these things might prove useful in a pinch around here," was the side remark of the French boy, who had taken the ceremony more seriously than his chum.

He had occasion later on to remind Billy of this observation.

"How do you suppose he resisted the temptation of decorating his fist with that showy band?" was a new query that just occurred to the irrepressible one. "Put it across, Salisky."

The scout, in his own way, made the inquiry.

"To one of our great, far away, had I planned to give it—and woe to me if I had."

Salisky satisfied Billy's curiosity by rewording the answer.

"There is one thing I am sorry about, now that the deck is cleared," said Henri, "and that is the forced implication of Hamar—he's a gone gosling, I fear."

"Don't worry about that," replied Billy; "from the way things looked when we skipped the shop, I am pretty sure that the whole outfit has disappeared by this time. We could not help it, anyhow."

While the boys were exchanging confidences, the Cossacks had mounted their ponies, preparatory to resuming their interrupted journey. As a last reminder of their new relations, the red riders, headed by the chief, rode in single file past the initiated brethren, giving each the sign of the lifted lance—the "high sign," as Billy put it.

"Good-by, old top," sang out the boy from Bangor; "glad everything is on the square now."

The scouts looked reproof at this manner of address, but as the Cossack did not understand a word of it, no harm was done.

"Farewell, brothers," called Henri, with more decorum.

"It is our turn now," briskly broke in Salisky, "and I want some speeding to make our faces good at headquarters."

"You will get it," was Billy's comeback when the young aviators started the buzz in the biplanes.

"It will take a week to get the water out of my eyes," laughed Marovitch, when the machines dipped that evening into the camp at Brest Litovsk.

Expected orders for the dash back to Warsaw were not forthcoming.

The aviators were destined to view the river Vistula at an entirely different point—to see it again tumbling down from the snow-dad Carpathians, where the titanic war struggle raged with unabated vigor.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE AVIATORS' PLEDGE.

For several days, from behind the lines, the Boy Aviators had watched the Russian attack upon the heights on the north declivities of the Carpathians, in desperate endeavor to open a path to the highest ridges commanding the mountain wall.

Their own inaction on the edge of terrific combat, pouring in and out of Uzsok, Lupkow, and Dukla passes, had been nerve-racking. The roar of battle never ceased, day or night, and among all the Slav contenders swarming in the camp there were but two with whom they could commune, the familiar scouts, Salisky and Marovitch.

A welcome word then from the latter was the word "move."

The flight of the aeroplanes from this point, where Lupkow pass pierced the Carpathians, followed the Vistula River in that part of its course which forms the boundary between Austria and Russia.

It was in the little town of Sandomir that the aviators rested after a continuous flight of 200 miles, and where the pilots met an old friend of the Przemysl time, none other than Stanislaws, in the guarded procession north of the defenders of the late Austrian fortress.

Billy and Henri did not hesitate in making a rush to greet this former comrade of the aerial profession, and eager to hear of the last days in the surrendered stronghold.

"Here you are again, Stanny," cried the U. S. A. boy, "and, though the luck has run tough against you, we can't help being glad of the chance to see you."

The Austrian airman for the moment had a look askance at the green garb of the lads, indicating Russian service, but he could not long withhold hearty response to the advances of his young friends.

"I did not know you first, you gay turncoats," he jovially quizzed, "but it's a happy break in the gloom for me, I assure you."

"As for that," said Billy, touching the green sleeve of his coat, "we have simply been tossed about from one to the other of you until the Joseph we read about could scarcely have worn more colors on his back. But how did they get to you, Stanny? I thought the old fort didn't have a hole in it."

"There was an opening, though, my boy, and wide enough for famine and fever to crawl through. That was the combination that got to us first and there was nothing else to do but to give up. The rank and file did not know how near the rations were gone until Breckens, you remember him, was starting in his aeroplane with distress messages for Vienna. The Russians shot him down, and he fell within our line. The situation was then revealed. Well, my young friends, it is all over, and we have only one glow ahead—they have promised not to send us to Siberia."

"But how was it that the aeroplanes could not bring in enough concentrated foodstuff to keep you ahead of hunger?"

Henri had recalled the many expeditions in which Billy and himself had participated to serve that purpose.

"An impossible task," asserted Stanislaws. "With the rations entirely exhausted, there were one hundred and twenty thousand mouths to feed in the garrison alone, and civilian inhabitants, too, clamoring for food."

"It must have been awful," was Henri's sympathetic comment.

Stanislaws passed a hand before his eyes, as if to shut out the terrible memory.

"Is there anything we can possibly do for you, Stanny?" earnestly asked Billy.

The haggard soldier in faded blue at first gave the negative by shaking his head. Then he suddenly asked:

"By any chance, do you suppose that you will visit Przemysl in your present routing?"

"I'm not sure," replied Billy, "though it is evident that our scouts started here to get in touch with the Russian forces whose strength may be diverted elsewhere, now that the fortress has surrendered."

"If it be so, and you are again privileged to move at will within the enclosure, there is a favor that you may safely, I believe, do for me."

"Name it," urged Billy.

"In the bastion at the extreme right of the west rampart of the inner fort is a loose stone, rough-faced, and marked by powder burn, cross shape. The stone can be moved with knife blade. Behind it you will find a moleskin belt, containing a decoration of great value to me and mine; a ruby-set sword hilt of far more value to a jeweler; a packet of letters, and several roleaux of gold. I would that you could accept the gold without danger, owing to its place of minting, but otherwise I pledge you to deliver this belt to the man, Fritz, at the Steiber Coffee House. Say to him, 'It is for Eitel,' and you will have fulfilled your promise."

"What if there are no 'Fritz' and no 'Coffee House'?"

Billy spoke like the critic of a contract.

"In that case," wearily stated Stanislaws, "return the belt to the place I left it. In no event must you assume any further risk."

"I don't see why you didn't get away in your aeroplane when you saw the jig was up. You could have done it with honor."

Henri could not suppress his regret over this lost chance on the part of the Austrian.

"That was officially suggested to me more than once in the fort just before the storm broke," said Stanislaws, "but the idea did not appeal to me. My duty was to sink or swim with the balance."

It was not remarkable that the boys should be permitted to hold such lengthy converse with the prisoner, for as the companions of the noted scouts from headquarters they roved without hindrance, and, besides, had not the Muscovite troops themselves, but a short time previous, cheered the unarmed Austrians after their parade out of Przemysl?

That Salisky and Marovitch finally interrupted the interview was not a move of official interference,

but due only to the emergency of their travel plan. The scouts attributed the interest taken by the lads in the trooper under guard solely to the fellowship of airmen.

“All aboard,” hailed Salisky, at sight of the young pilots; “we must be pushing on.”

“Where away?” called Billy.

“‘Ask me no questions, and I’ll tell you no lies,’” quoted the scout. “But,” he instantly added, good-naturedly, “we expect to visit some new birds in an old nest.”

The inference was plain enough that the aeroplanes would be headed for the Przemysl fortress, and the direction taken by order speedily proved it.

Billy and Henri did not realize what a shake-up there had been in and about the stronghold since their leaving with Roque, until the machines they were driving hovered over the once familiar ground.

Heaps upon heaps of débris marked all that remained of the strongest of the outlying forts, which the Austrians had blown up preparatory to surrender.

Only the inner sections and the town itself, the boys observed, were intact.

Over all now the black double-headed Eagle of Russia—gone the long-resisting garrison of von Kusmanek.

Clearing the trenches and the barbed-wire entanglements, the pilots volplaned to the old landing place, where they had first met Stanislaws, the friend to whom they had just pledged their services for the only favor they could grant.

“Some changes here, pard,” remarked Billy, as they looked out and around from the rampart to which they had climbed.

“I should say,” commented Henri; “I see that all the bridges are gone, and that pontoon one leading out of the town, I suppose, was set up by the Russians immediately after the surrender.”

“Speaking of the town,” said Billy, “reminds me that it wouldn’t be a bad idea to go over and see if the Coffee House is yet standing, and if Fritz is still on his pins.”

“I expect Fritz has many times tightened his belt since the picking grew thin, let alone feeding the public as he used to do.”

“Well, old top, and what of it?” laughed Billy. “Fritz could buckle up a foot or two and then would never be mistaken for a fairy.”

The Steiber Coffee house, the boys soon discovered, was no longer a center of good cheer, bright fires and sanded floors, but an improvised hospital, crowded with the sick and wounded. Fritz, however, was there as large as life, and apparently none the worse for the horse-meat diet during the weeks of want and woe in the town.

Like Stanislaws, he had an extra look at the transformed aviators before he began to thaw into former genial address, a warning process instantly and wholly completed when Billy sounded in his ear the words, “It is for Eitel.”

This friend of many travelers, credited with speaking knowledge of seven different languages, probably used a little of all of them in the greeting inspired by the magic sentence.

“The same flying boys you are that sat at my fireside with the Herr Georges” (Roque) “and the red giant” (Schneider) “on that first dark night when the great guns were roaring across the river and you came in with the wind. Ah, how different now,” sighed the heavyweight host; “the good days are no more. And,” he concluded, “what of Eitel; what word of him?”

Henri told of the trust imposed in them by Stanislaws, and of the charge that they deliver to him (Fritz) the belt and the valuables therein.

“He knows, he knows,” murmured the innkeeper, with eyes moist and a tremor in his voice, “that old Fritz will find a way to reach his loved ones at home.”

“The next thing,” asserted the practical Billy, “is to pass you the trinkets, for we never know when the call will come to pull out for another station. Keep a happy thought, old man, until we see you again.”

With these parting words the lads sauntered back toward the fort, with a studied air of careless unconcern.

All the time they were figuring on the quickest way to get to the earthwork where Stanislaws’ treasure was concealed.

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNEXPECTED ORDER.

Within the fortress enclosure the boys took their bearings from memory and soon stood in the shadow of the west wall, in the location described by Stanislaws. They could see a sentry moving with measured tread on the narrow walk above them, and waited until he passed beyond the turret in the first turn of the circular parapet.

Billy led the way in setting foot on the elevation, with Henri close at his heels. In quick step they were within the angles of the bastion, and Billy took a peep along the wall to see if the sentinel had commenced his backward beat. But the guard was taking it leisurely, for no armed foe was known to be lurking without, and the duty of patrol this evening was a matter of military form.

Henri in the meantime had been casting about for the loose stone marked by the cross-shaped powder burn.

He had evidently found it, for Billy heard a whispered request for the loan of his knife.

Inserting the blade in the thin line where the mortar had crumbled, Henri dexterously twisted the stone out of its socket.

“It is here all right,” he said, holding up the belt for the inspection of his chum.

Billy, as a matter of precaution, replaced the stone and smoothed away with his foot the earth particles which had fallen with the knife chiseling.

When the guard finally approached, the belt was safely tucked away in Henri’s blouse, and both of the innocents were idly leaning over the parapet, apparently viewing the activity in the Russ encampment, across the San river.

The Slav soldier challenged the intruders in his own language, but in answer the boys simply shook their heads, indicating lack of understanding.

Looking downward, the guard hailed a number of Cossacks engaged in some lance-tilting game in the stone square.

The Dons surrounded the boys the minute they descended to the level, and failing to get satisfaction in their jerky string of questions, began to pull and haul the captives in a roughly sportive way.

The boys vigorously protested, but to no avail, and Billy even resorted to a real kick or two at savage shins. In the scuffle it so happened that the amulet which Nikita had given Henri fell out of the torn front of his blouse and under the feet of the tormentors.

The sight of the thonged lance-point had magic effect. The Cossacks ceased their badgering as one man quitting. The Don in authority had lifted a hand high above his head.

As Henri stooped to recover the flint talisman, the chief anticipated him, presenting it with a grave salutation to the bewildered lad.

It dawned then upon the aviators that they had been recognized as “brothers of the blood.”

Henri turned an “I told you so” glance at his chum. That “useful in a pinch” prediction had been verified in most opportune manner.

Salisky and Marovitch had no honor as a rescue party when they later arrived in the enclosure, completing a hurried search for their pilots, who had failed to report for the evening distribution of rations.

But the scouts could have exacted the credit of being a surprise, or, rather, surprised party when they plumped upon the seated group of Cossacks dividing the contents of their knapsacks with two youthful recruits occupying the center space at the feast.

“By my sainted ancestors,” exclaimed Salisky, “look at the lion tamers!”

He was careful, however, to say it in other than the native tongue.

“Been looking for us?” asked Billy in the most innocent way imaginable.

“No, we are just trotting about for our health,” ironically replied Marovitch.

“Better come along, however,” advised Salisky, suppressing an inclination to laugh, owing to the presence of the seriously gazing tribesmen.

“All ready,” cheerfully announced Billy, after Henri and himself had made a handshaking round of the circle.

Marching away with the scouts, it had been made up between the chums that the details of their adventure were strictly private business.

While particularly anxious to get Stanislaws’ belt to Fritz that very night, Henri concluded that the early morning would do, especially in view of the fact that Salisky had made no mention of any move immediately contemplated.

It developed, however, that the boy missed his reckoning, and proving the old saying that “delays are dangerous.” Hardly an hour of sleep, it seemed to the boys, had been granted them when the hand of Salisky dragged the pilots out of slumberland. In reality, it was cold, gray dawn which accompanied the awakening process.

“Orders to backtrack,” was the brief statement of the scout, himself already attired for flight, and with dispatch case swung over his shoulder.

“You don’t mean right away?” Henri sat up in his cot to put the question.

“Just as soon as you can get outside of some rations,” replied Salisky, “so there is no time for napping. It is a long ways to Warsaw and only two stations for food and fuel in between.”

“But you didn’t say a thing to us about it last night,” argued Henri, greatly disturbed by the prospect of failure to fulfill their pledge to Stanislaws.

“Come out of your dream, boys; it is not like you to question orders.”

The scout stood by while the boys prepared for the journey, and they were never alone again in this last hour in Przemysl.

Stanislaws’ belt weighed like a chunk of lead against the heart of Henri.

As Salisky had stated, the aviators had but two brief rest periods in the flight to Warsaw, and they traveled at lightning speed.

At the end of this air voyage, the aviation chief peremptorily ordered them off duty for at least two weeks. “No use of killing these birds,” he said to Salisky, with a chuckle, “when you have taken all the fat off their bones.”

In their old quarters that first night of their return to Warsaw from the Galician fortress, Henri looked about for a safe place to hide Stanislaws’ belt, which not only produced worry of mind but a positive irritation in the several days’ wearing. The chums lay awake long after the other aviators in the dormitory were deep in slumber, and cudgeled their brains to invent a way of shifting their new responsibility to some likely cache for the time being.

Billy happened to think of the rusty, dusty portrait of some long departed inmate of the house, hanging just outside the door which opened on the stair landing.

He transferred the thought into Henri’s ear, and the pair cautiously tiptoed across the room, taking advantage of the intermittent shafts of light sifting through the tall windows nearest the lamppost at the street corner.

“Gee whiz!” muttered Billy, halting in momentary anguish, after stubbing his toe against a chair leg.

“Ssh!” sibilantly warned Henri; “you’ll wake the dead with your clatter.”

Noiselessly drawing back the door, the boys stood under the iron-framed likeness of the early day representative of the household, Henri holding the moleskin girdle in the crook of his arm.

Billy did the squirrel act in mounting the newel post, and could easily reach behind the picture. His chum passed up the belt, and the climber hooked the brass buckle over the wooden peg from which the portrait was suspended.

“Safe enough now,” he whispered, sliding down from his perch, getting a helping arm from Henri.

Five minutes later the young aviators were sleeping the sleep of the satisfied.

CHAPTER X.

HUNTING FOR TROUBLE.

The sun was ten o'clock high when Billy hoisted himself with his elbows and realized that Henri and himself had been singularly favored by the usually exacting aviation chief, who tolerated no lazybones around quarters.

"Hi there, sleepy head," he called to his chum, who was still drawing long breath through a wide-open mouth.

"Hold your peace," growled Henri, turning for another snooze.

But Billy, now wide awake, and in frolicsome mood, had his comrade out of bed by the heels, and it was not until they had knocked over about everything in the room that they desisted from their riotous wrestling.

"Blame your gaiety," panted Henri; "why couldn't you let a fellow rest?"

"You'd be a Rip Van Winkle if you had half a show," guyed Billy.

In more serious turn the boys went out to look at the picture above the stair landing, to see if any telltale strap of the concealed belt was showing. Nothing, however, to betray their secret to the curious eye was in evidence.

"A good job for a dark night," observed Billy, going down the stairway, two steps at a time.

"All the grub gone?" he inquired of Corporal Romeroff, on mess duty.

The latter grinned, and showed the boys two well-filled platters on a near-by table.

"The chief is a first-rate boss," was the enthusiastic expression of Henri, between attacks on the provisions.

"None better," admitted Billy, sitting back from the table, with a sigh of repletion.

"What's the program for to-day?" queried Henri, "seeing that we are freelances for a while?"

"I've just been thinking that I'd like to know for sure whether or not Ricker got out of town."

"Say, Buddy," broke in Henri, "I don't believe we had better toy with that buzz-saw again."

"Only a bit of scouting, old pal," wheedled Billy, "a sort of look over and not in. I confess that my bump of curiosity is not growing less as I grow older."

"Oh, well, let it go at that," agreed Henri, with an air of resignation. "Maybe it wasn't intended that we should live long enough to wear carpet-slippers."

The boys strolled to the square of the memorial column, and halted at a point directly opposite the shop of the silversmith. The front of the establishment was sealed by closed shutters.

"Evidently nobody at home," said Billy; "and, really," he added, "I didn't expect there would be."

"How do you know but what the old fox is still in his den and not using the front entrance?"

"If I were guessing," replied Billy, "it would be that Ricker has long since crossed the river. Yet I wouldn't mind finding out for certain."

"There it is," commented Henri; "I knew you wouldn't be satisfied to let well enough alone. Come on, then; let's look in the alligator's throat to see if he has teeth."

"Easy now, pard," chided Billy; "there is nothing rash in my mind at this moment. If a little closer view doesn't serve the purpose we will just be ladies and ask a policeman."

Crossing the street, the lads tried the shop door. It stood as tight as wax.

A passerby tried to tell the boys something, but gave it up in despair when they looked as blank as a person stone deaf.

"Why didn't you add the Slavonic to your language list, young man?"

Billy shook his finger at Henri in mock severity.

"You've no room to call me down in that regard," retorted the French boy.

"True enough, pal," apologized Billy; "it's only a case of two babes in the woods in Russia instead of one."

Between the silversmith's shop and the next adjoining building, a warehouse, apparently deserted, was a narrow, covered walk, running back and the full apparent length of both structures.

Billy, evidently forgetting his original determination not to cross the line of discretion, started to explore this cul-de-sac, this passage open only at one end.

His chum accepted the inevitable and doubled up with the leader.

"It's an even bet that we will be yanked up for attempted burglary," he gloomily predicted.

"Here's about the point, I think," mused Billy, "where we lay behind that revolving door; that is, providing we were now inside."

"Well, what of it?" impatiently demanded Henri. "We certainly don't intend to break in to prove your deduction."

Billy had no response for this. He was curiously examining a postern, or door, in the wall cutting off the vaulted passage.

"Wonder if there is a combination to this thing?" He put the question to the test, closely inspecting every panel in the door from top to bottom.

"Old thumbs up surely had a way of getting through from this side," continued the Bangor boy, "and it was not by key, either—no sign of a keyhole anywhere."

The mechanician in Henri was aroused. The door puzzle was something in his particular line. With no less interest now than that displayed by his comrade, the expert began tapping up and down the solid surface with the haft of his pocket-knife.

Directly he turned a bright eye and a complacent smile upon the interested Billy.

"Nothing to it at all, Buddy," he advised, putting his hand on one of the little iron plates that studded the doorway in two rows from jamb to hinges. "The hollow is behind this one. See?" Henri illustrated by thumb pressure on the edge of the metal disc, which turned upward, exposing to view a steel ring slightly more than finger size.

Without waiting for further demonstration, Billy promptly tried a pull on the hoop in the hole. It was lost motion, for the ring had no forward give to it. An experimental push, also, was without result.

“Turn it,” was Henri’s rather impatient suggestion.

That was the trick that drew the bolt. The boys heard the click of the hidden spring, and so sudden was the giving of the barrier that Billy, using an arm prop against it, went in like a diver. The recoil was equally speedy, and Henri saved himself a shutout by using his foot as a preventing wedge.

With both boys inside, the postern closed behind them without a sound. The passage here was so narrow that it enforced single file proceedings. At the right was the wall of the silversmith’s shop, to the left the barred windows of the warehouse. The structures might have been houses of the dead for all the signs of occupancy then shown.

Billy was uncertain in his mind as to the first tackle of the mystery that he had conjured to while away an idle hour. He was not particularly anxious to run afoul of Ricker and his hairy retainer. Indeed, had he glimpsed the heads of either of them in window or doorway it would have been back to the square for him, and if there was any talking to be done, that conversation would have to be exchanged in the open.

But it was just that bump of curiosity, of which Henri had more than once jokingly said “could only be reduced by a smash with a sandbag.”

Billy’s conclusion favored further exploration of the vaulted walk, which no doubt had been originally designed simply as an air shaft, and later converted to some other use. It was the latter supposition that appealed to the would-be explorer.

With continued progress between the walls, the boys marked gradual descent, becoming more pronounced at every step. Then the path curved abruptly and ended at the base of a tower-like brick chimney, built outside of the warehouse wall and making the first opening in the hitherto overlapping cornices of the buildings running parallel.

“The silversmith’s shop is considerable of a bluff when you come to compare the known front with the unknown rear,” remarked Billy, who had been mentally figuring the distance from street to postern, and from postern to this chimney obstruction.

“It has just occurred to me that Ricker must have been in charge of the whole block. The way it looks, all the rest around here have marched off to war.”

Henri had no proof up to the minute that the warehouse was or ever had been a hive of industry.

“Come here, pal,” called Billy, who had stepped from the front to the side of the chimney base; “I believe there’s a way to get to the basement of this old shack.”

His discovery was a rusty grating set in the floor close to the foot of the chimney, and it was surprising how easily it could be moved.

“For our special convenience,” chuckled the Bangor boy, when he noted a number of iron spikes protruding from the masonry in order for descent.

“The same sort of fire escape arrangement runs up the chimney; didn’t you notice?” asked Henri.

“But that’s for the lookout, pard; I tell you this is a bully plant in which to prowl. But let’s go below now and aloft later.”

Billy was already legging it, spike to spike, into the depths of the old warehouse.

CHAPTER XI.

GAME OF HIDE AND SEEK.

“What a place for a ghost dance,” commented Billy, peering into the shadowy beyond, as he waited for Henri to join him in the big cellar.

Henri, letting go the last hand-hold, immediately announced that the briefer the stay here the better it would suit him. “Trot along, Billy,” he urged, “and get it over with.”

They had passed under several arches in half-seeing endeavor to locate a way to the floor above, when Billy came to a quick halt.

“I thought I heard voices!”

“You’re likely to hear anything in this catacomb,” replied Henri.

“No, it isn’t nerves, Buddy; it’s talking. Listen!”

The lads, standing mute and with ears attuned to acute pitch, were soon impressed with the fact that there was a mumbling medley of conversation somewhere about, but whether at hand or more remote they could not decide.

So in tremor and doubt they moved with less haste, and stopping at intervals to analyze every suspicious sound. But now it was only their own breathing and footfalls that disturbed the tomb-like stillness.

At the bottom steps of a broad flight of stairs, which they had finally located, to their great relief, the boys made resolve that the first opening at the top that presented itself, offering opportunity of escape from the building, would not be neglected for the space of even a half minute.

The excitement of breaking in had now no show with the desire to break out.

At the top of the stairway the climbers saw before them an immense platform, very likely the place of loading, for several trucks in advanced state of disuse were here and there in view.

But what most interested the lads was a clearly outlined path, through the heavily settled dust, stretching across and beyond the platform, and leading to a door of white pine.

“I expect the voices we heard belonged to the same parties who made this trail,” was Billy’s low-toned opinion.

“Whoever they belonged to,” softly observed Henri, “I prefer to give them the benefit of the doubt, and if there is a window handy, opening on the good old outside, it’s me for it.”

“I’m with you this time, Buddy,” promptly agreed the Bangor boy; “I’ve had my full of this expedition, and ready to play quits.”

If Henri had anything further to say, it did not reach utterance, for quite distinctly now the lads could hear in varying strain the muffled intonation that had at first startled them in their stumble through the lower regions beneath.

Stealthily skirting the platform, the boys took to their knees in the dust, with their eyes on a level with the raised flooring, at a point immediately to the right of the big door.

It had been their intention to make their way past the door to the first turn of the counting room enclosure, which they were sure would set them going in the direction of the street flanking the west side of Memorial Square.

Off the platform they were afforded better opportunity for quick concealment in case any of the mysterious inmates of the supposedly deserted warehouse should suddenly appear on the higher plane.

From the near point of hiding the boys got a new idea of the center plan of the working floor, as adapted to the business for which it had been designed.

The counting house was arranged like a deck cabin of a ship, open space all around, a fact not apparent to the boys when they first emerged from the cellar.

“It’s a cinch,” whispered Billy, “that we can get by on one side or the other if we haven’t forgotten how to do the Indian crawl.”

“If it wasn’t for that talk buzz,” asserted Henri, “I’d be inclined to tell the neighbors that the old plant was as empty as a last year’s bird nest.”

“Not to mention the tracks on the platform,” reminded Billy.

“No definite telling when those marks might have been made,” continued Henri, “and as I was saying, the talkfest mystery is the one absolute assurance that we are not alone in these diggings.”

“In the passing,” intimated Billy, “there may be a crack in that hut in which an eye would fit, and there is no use leaving an unsolved problem behind.”

Henri grinned. “I’ve been expecting that, Buddy,” he said.

Alongside the counting house the boys moved on all fours, and it did not take Billy long to find a place to put his eye. Just over his head was the checking window—a small aperture, masked by a curtain of green baize, from which projected a rounded shelf. There had been a warp between this projection and the window setting, and through the open seam a free view of the enclosure was presented.

When Billy had completed his look-in, he resorted to the sign language as a means of conveying the word that the room was occupied. Henri, surmising as much from the fragments of conversation sifting through the loose lines of the wooden wall, took his turn as an observer.

In the same rough garb of coal heaver that he wore on the day of delivery to the young aviators of the summons to the twin towers, Ricker was lolling on a rickety bench, and another man equally shabby in makeup was perched upon a dingy counter. On the floor at their feet, gagged and bound hand and foot, was the heavyweight policeman, who had officially invoked the services of the silversmith as an expert examiner of the battered remains of the time clock dug out of the ruins of the explosion-rent military storehouse.

Ricker had occasion to several times admonish his companion for getting too high a pitch in his

rumbling voice. These vocal lifts at intervals, no doubt, were the sounds that had from the first convinced the boys of the presence of other life than theirs in the building.

"This carrion," Ricker was saying, prodding the prostrate officer with the toe of a hobnailed boot, "is too much of a blunderhead to kill outright, and it would be a shame to deprive the rats of such a splendid spread of live meat. But, after all, seeing that the game is up here as far as I am concerned, I will let the palace of justice keep their numbskull. There's a lout that will let them know in twenty-four hours after we are gone."

The man on the floor spluttered in his gag and strained at his bonds.

"Heigho, Casper," yawned Ricker, rising and stretching himself, "it's soon farewell to Warsaw for us; we were good citizens, eh, Casper? We leave our mark, too—and we will also leave that crazy Hamar if he does not show his ugly face within the next ten minutes."

Ricker consulted a heavy gold watch, which he produced from the folds of his woollen shirt. Two gunny-sacks, bulging at both ends and roped in the middle, might have furnished evidence that the silversmith was taking most of his stock with him.

The boys, taking turn about at the look-in point, concluded to sheer off for the time being, when Ricker bestowed a parting kick upon the trussed policeman, shouldered the gunny-sacks and started for the door of the counting house.

"I suppose Hamar will know where to find us?" questioned the man called Casper.

"Blast him for a crank, there is no telling anything about him," fumed Ricker; "he had the hour pounded into his addled brain, and it is nobody's fault but his own if he misses fire."

Billy and Henri were prepared for the sport of hide and seek, until they could learn the direction that Ricker and his companion proposed to take.

Each took a corner of the counting house at the rear, and each on the alert to work the disappearing act.

CHAPTER XII.

AN EXHIBIT OF NERVE.

Ricker and his companion, however, took a route that relieved the wary watchers of the necessity of doing lively footwork to keep out of sight. The path followed was that across the platform toward the top of the stairway descending to the basement. Through the opening there the pair disappeared.

The first thought then with the boys was to immediately release the prisoner in the counting house from his uncomfortable predicament, but a second thought made this preceding one for debate. Through no fault of their own, and, unconsciously, the lads had been indirectly connected with recent Warsaw operations of Ricker, and to be well rid of him was a matter of self-protection. Having squared themselves with the Cossack, Nikita, the passing of the silversmith would be a final clearance of old scores.

"Let's give them an hour's leeway, and then we'll cut his nobs loose," suggested Henri; "the chap in there would start something mighty quick the minute he got on his feet, and there's no telling what might be coming to us if Ricker was brought to bay. He'd surely think we had betrayed him."

"Yes, and come to think of it, as we did before, the authorities here might not accept graciously our plea of innocence. We'd get it both going and coming. Plenty of time to untie the policeman. He ought to be thankful that it is only one hour instead of twenty-four, and maybe a good sight longer than that, if we did not interfere."

Billy's conclusion would have stood as satisfactory but for a startling development of the instant. Some intuitive process of the mind caused him to cast a glance over his shoulder, and within twenty feet of him, coming with cat-like tread from the far front of the warehouse, was the threatening shape of Hamar. It is doubtful if the hairy henchman of Ricker was then aware of the presence of the boys, and if he had any special purpose for carrying an unsheathed knife in his hand, the reason must be accounted for in the person of the unfortunate policeman on the counting house floor. Hamar was of the fiery brand of conspirator who resented any application of law, and woe to the man who affronted him. The poisoned ring episode was an instance in point.

Henri, gazing in another direction, for the moment, was wholly oblivious of the new peril at hand until apprised by a hiss from Billy. Half turning, the French boy was looking full into the malignant face of the velvet-footed oncomer.

With a side leap that covered several feet, Henri dashed around the cabin, meeting his chum, who had jumped on the other side, at the front entrance, both crossing the threshold at one step, and banging the door behind them. Billy grabbed at the bolt just over the latch, and sent it with a snap into its socket.

"Gee whillikens," he panted, "that was some acrobatic act!"

The door creaked and cracked with the outside pressure that a powerful and infuriated man was exerting against it.

The boys hastily dragged forward the several heavy benches in the room and stacked them up for an additional and supporting barrier.

The next move was to free the policeman, who, though carrying a lot of surplus flesh, would apparently make a fair bid as a full hand in a fight.

Relieved of the gag, what the officer had to say about his late captors was red-hot Russian. When Henri had severed, with his pocket-knife, the last strand of the confining cord, the big policeman regained his feet with astonishing alacrity for such a heavyweight. He speedily worked the stiffness out of his joints by swinging his arms about like a windmill and vigorously stamping up and down the few feet of floor space.

Shrewdly surmising that his rescuers were not conversant with the native tongue, he asked in French: "How many of them out there?"

The door was rattling ominously, and one of the hinges gave way with a scattering of screw fastenings.

"One," answered Henri, "but he's a corker—the fellow with the hair mattress around his ears."

"Oh, oh," exclaimed the policeman, "I gave him a rap with my stick before they downed me. He's of strange breed, not like the rest."

The thought came to both Billy and Henri that Hamar was here to exact blood atonement for the mentioned blow.

The policeman wrenched a heavy oak brace from one of the benches, tested its heft by a long arm swing over his head, and grimly remarked:

"This will drop him if he comes through."

The door gave way with a crash, the piled up benches toppling with the impact, and on top of the whole mass the tiger man with dagger drawn.

Before the fierce intruder could recover his balance, the policeman with bench brace poised for action brought the oaken weapon down with terrific force on the raised right arm of Hamar, a muscle-numbing stroke, which relaxed the latter's grip on the haft of the glittering blade and sent it spinning under the counter across the room. A second blow cut into his forehead.

The men grappled, swayed to and fro in interlocked fury, rolled over the fallen door and out upon the platform. Hamar was at a disadvantage by reason of the blinding effect of blood from the forehead wound, and it was evident that he was seeking to break away from his burly antagonist.

Billy and Henri, wildly excited over the fray, danced around the combatants, narrowly escaping at times a bruising jab from whirling heels.

The fight ranged closer and closer to the head of the basement stairway, the plain intent of the policeman's hairy adversary.

Here it was, by some cunning wrestler's trick, that Hamar broke the hold of the heavyweight,

bounded through the opening and down the stairs with an agility that baffled interference.

The policeman, though winded by exertion, did not delay pursuit, and he was not far behind his wily foe when the latter paused for a second as though hesitating over the course to take.

The boys, in the immediate wake of the doughty officer, saw that the fugitive was making the run back in the same direction that they had followed in coming. Speeding along with the policeman, their judgment as to this was verified in the passing under an arch out of which several large stones had fallen.

“He’s making for the chimney grating,” advised Billy.

The policeman, under ordinary conditions, might have yielded to detective instinct and asked the boy how he knew so much, but this was no time for cross-examination by him, racing through a cellar after a fight for life, and in eager pursuit of a desperate and dangerous enemy.

Hamar had climbed the spikes to the chimney base, and by the time the policeman got his head through the grating was shinning up the big smokestack like a monkey.

The trio in the rear swarmed up the handholds in close pursuit, the fat officer puffing and growling at every reach.

From the wide expanse of the warehouse roof could be seen, quite near, the channel of the Vistula river. Hamar had reached the extreme west line of the elevation, and was looking down into the void that effectually blocked further flight.

“I have him now,” exulted the big policeman, hurrying forward.

But it was not a sure thing, after all.

Directly beneath the coping, over which Hamar was leaning, rose the rigging of a great crane, the mighty arm of which was lifting with mechanical regularity to swing heavily weighted sacks from the wharf into the hold of a waiting collier.

Hardly ten feet separated the pursuer and the pursued, when Hamar bestrode the coping—now he is over and hanging by his hands—now he drops into the crane rigging—then crawling out on the swinging arm, he is swept in wide circle over the dizzy height—now he slides down the chains, now astride the sack just hooked—now lowered with the weight of coal into the vessel!

During the exhibit of daring, from the first sight of the perilous descent on the chains to the final dump, the stevedores stood aghast and open-mouthed.

As for the policeman and the boys, looking out and down upon the astonishing performance, none of them had a word to say for several minutes after it was all over.

“Gee whiz, but wasn’t that the limit?”

It was Billy who broke the breath-holding period.

When the policeman awakened from his temporary trance, he was very much awake.

“There is still a live chance to nab him,” he exclaimed, “if we can only get down there before the collier clears. Once out in the channel and that fool is liable to drown himself.”

If the officer had only known it, the man he most wanted, and upon whose head was the far greater price, even now was a stowaway in the very ship into which Hamar had been tumbled.

CHAPTER XIII.

FOILED BY A FALL.

Such was the haste of the officer to get to ground that he started down the spike row in the chimney regardless of the fact that a slip for him might spell dire consequence. It was not exactly a slip, however, that actually brought him to grief, but the outpulling of one of the big nails, owing to the drag of unusual weight, and resulting in about a twenty-foot fall. Had it not been for the assumed leadership of the ponderous policeman, either or both of the boys who might have immediately preceded him would either or both probably have ceased to take any further interest in the doings of earth.

Billy, next in the line of descent, almost took a drop himself, when he heard the gasp of alarm and the thud of the heavyweight on the stone pavement below.

The fallen man was unconscious when the boys reached his side, and blood was flowing in thin streams from his nostrils. He groaned when an attempt was made by Henri to raise his head for pillowing on the boy's coat, which he had removed for the purpose.

"One of us had better go for help right away," suggested Billy, "and I guess it will be me, for you are better on the nursing part of the job."

With the utterance the self-elected seeker for aid ran at a lively clip up the passage toward the street front.

The runner was hardly through the spring-locked door before Henri, left behind as nurse, noted in his patient signs of returning consciousness. Indeed, the policeman had opened his eyes and was staring at his attendant.

"Where am I?" he hoarsely questioned.

"You will remember it yourself in a minute or two," cheerfully replied Henri. "Take a brace, cap., and you'll be going again like a top before the supper bell rings."

"Now I have it," cried the victim of the jarring fall; "we were just closing in on that wild man when he jumped onto the derrick. Why are we not at the wharf to stop that boat?"

"Take it easy, cap.," cajoled Henri; "you've had a bit of a tumble, but you'll be there on time. Don't worry."

The policeman raised himself on his elbows, fired by a spirit averse to delay, twisted himself about, and succeeded in making a back rest against the chimney.

"What has become of the other boy?" was his next inquiry.

"Gone for a doctor or anybody else that he can pick up in a pinch," advised Henri. "But you can see for yourself—here he comes now."

Billy was accompanied by a tall, slender man with a clean-shaven face, swinging a leather case in his hand in the usual professional way, and indicating readiness for any surgical or remedial emergency.

Bringing up the rear were two policemen in uniform and a short-legged apothecary from the nearest drug store.

The company entire sounded a note of recognition when they saw the injured man sitting at the foot of the chimney base.

"Strogoff, by my soul," ejaculated the doctor; "this young messenger said that a policeman had been hurt, but I had no reckoning that it was the fighting sergeant of headquarters staff. Let me have a look at you, man."

"Ah," he said, after quick examination, "a little concussion, that is about the extent of it; no bones broken; lucky, sergeant, that you were so well-cushioned by nature, and good feeding, I might add. You will be sore from this shake-up, but far from the hospital, my dear sir."

"Here, give me a hand," broke in the sergeant, addressing the officers standing behind the physician. "Now," he continued, stiffly rising with the assistance rendered, "I want the pair of you to use your legs to best gait and give order of detention to the master of the wharf back of these buildings, to hold at all hazards the collier there loading. Go!"

With the doctor's arm aid on one side and the druggist's on the other, the sergeant was led, slowly and limping, out to the street.

Hailing a hack, passing through the square, Strogoff, aided by vigorous boosting, climbed in and motioned the boys to follow.

"Drive like the devil around to the river front," he commanded the reinsman on the box, and the way the vehicle rattled over the pavement showed that the officer inside was not considered the kind of individual with which to trifle.

When the sergeant reached the wharf, a big transport occupied the offing, upon which troops were embarking, and small mountains of military supplies also being loaded with all possible dispatch.

Strogoff's brother officers, who had been sent in advance to the wharf, had made no progress in their mission, owing to the martial preemption of the premises, and the sergeant's attempt at argument with the irate lieutenant-colonel directing the getaway proceedings fell upon deaf ears.

It was not until the transport was in mid-channel and swiftly steaming up the river that the wharf master could be reached.

The sergeant, for the time being, had no regard for his aching head and back, and with renewed vigor was on the trail of the suspect who had given him the slip on the warehouse roof. "You saw the way that ape got into the coal boat, didn't you?" was the first interrogation fired at the wharf master.

"I'm not blind," responded the official addressed.

"Has the collier cleared yet?"

"No, and it will not until morning."

This last answer to his questioning set the sergeant up in confidence that he would be soon

dragging Hamar out of a dust pit.

The vessel which he was seeking was readily located, out at anchor, by an obliging stevedore, and the three officers, accompanied by our boys, reached the hulk in the wharf master's launch.

It was in the deepening dusk that the searching party went aboard of the dingy craft, and the skipper was inclined to be surly until the rays from the mainmast lantern were reflected in the shining badges of authority on the breasts of two of the officers.

"What's wanted?"

"A fugitive from justice."

Strogoff's declaration was snappy. He did not approve of the sullen attitude of the skipper.

"I will call the crew; you can choose your man."

"The rascal I am after came on board with a sack of coal this afternoon."

"That oaf," sneered the shipper, "have him hide and hair for all of me. Druski, ho, Druski," he called.

From between the decks slouched the brawny mate of the vessel.

"Druski," repeated the skipper, "is the dolt still below?"

"No," answered the mate; "I kicked him, along with two hiding heavers, out of the bunkers two hours ago, just before the transport forced us to move. One of the heavers carried a good lot of dunnage over his shoulder, but he did not steal it here."

Another sailor just at the moment came over the side, completing shore leave. "While you are asking, sir," he stated to the skipper, "I saw the three of them go aboard the transport. A matey with me on the wharf said the big bark was short-handed in the engine room, and anybody with a pair of shoulders was liable to be nabbed."

"Three of them!"

The big sergeant made a bee-line for the informer. He reeled off a minute description of Ricker.

Looking to the skipper for permission to speak, and getting a nod, the sailor expressed the view that one of the three might fit the illustration if he were dressed differently.

"One net for them all," almost shouted Strogoff, "and in the stew they will make a pretty kettle of fish. Look alive; into the launch with you!"

The little steamer was showing all its lights, fore and aft, as it hummed through the pitchy darkness, heading straight for the wharf.

Piling into the hack the five were driven furiously to police headquarters—there is no speed limit in Warsaw—where the sergeant reported the situation in brief to his long-headed superior in the inner circle of surveillance.

"Show me the way to catch the transport," declared Strogoff, bringing his knuckles down with a bang on the table, "and I will show you the spy who blew up the storehouse!"

The chief was on his feet in an instant. "Telephone the shipping bureau," he sharply ordered, as a desk man responded to an insistent buzz signal, "and ascertain if a high-speed dispatch boat is available for immediate service."

Five minutes had elapsed when the desk man reappeared. "Sorry, sir," he said, saluting, "but numbers four, seven and nine, the only fast travelers retained here, are to-night somewhere near Plock, and are not due to return inside of six hours. No other steam vessels in harbor but the slow colliers."

"Ask them, then," impatiently commanded the chief, "if the transport can be reached by wire this side of Vloclavek?"

Another wait of several minutes. Again the voice at the door:

"No, sir; the vessel has no wireless apparatus, and the first land station is Vloclavek."

"Might as well be Siberia," lamented the sergeant; "those foxes will be off the boat long before the land telegraph can spot them."

The chief made no reply. He was wrapped in meditation, with lowering brow and thin lips compressed.

Then his eyes lifted and his entire expression changed.

"There is nothing on land or sea, sergeant," he triumphantly asserted, "that can outspeed an aeroplane."

CHAPTER XIV.

AGAIN ON THE WING.

Sergeant Strogoff's elation over the solution of the pursuit problem was manifested by a sounding slap on his knee, forgetting that it was the leg most bruised by his recent fall, and his beaming face was comically twisted by a wince of pain.

"Have at them, chief!" he cried. "But we must appeal to the military authorities for the airships, and the experts to guide them. With your permission, sir, I will put the emergency to Colonel Malinkoff this very hour."

The chief, undisturbed, checked this proposition of hasty action with a gesture of dissent.

"Daylight will do for that, sergeant, and a few hours more or less will not matter. With sixty or seventy miles an hour as our advantage, there is no question as to the outcome of the chase."

The cold-gray eye of the chief, lighting upon the boys, standing with Strogoff's comrades near the door, he imperiously demanded:

"Are these new recruits in your service, sergeant?"

"Bless me, sir," quickly responded the officer addressed; "let me tell you that if it had not been for them I might have been filling an uncovered grave to-night."

"Put it all in your report, sergeant. You had better be eating and sleeping while I prepare a statement that will induce the military branch to act and aid promptly."

The summons for the chief's secretary was sounding when the sergeant and his young companions left the office.

"I think a half hour in the chop house around the corner will be good medicine to start with," remarked the big officer, who was a famous feeder, and who had missed several meals since his hold-up in the rear of the silversmith's shop.

In the continuous run of excitement following their discovery of Strogoff trussed up on the counting house floor in the old warehouse the policeman had never made a single inquiry as to the boys' identity. If he had noticed them on the day they were posing as would-be customers in the shop of the silversmith, and when he served summons on Ricker to appear as an expert witness, there had been no sign of the fact.

As Billy said, in an aside to his chum, "He thinks, maybe, that we dropped out of the sky just to help him out of a scrape."

Strogoff, having gorged himself with a mammoth beefsteak flanked by onions, and the boys fully satisfied with their own prowess at table, the trio hied themselves back to police headquarters.

"Andreas," said the sergeant to the desk man, "we are going to take a snooze in the rest room, and if the chief wants me never stop shaking until you get my eyes open. And, what is more, do not come too soon if you can help it, but by the powers do not come too late if you know it."

The desk man grinned and nodded understanding. Three hours later he fell like a fire alarm on the snoring officer, and as the latter rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, handed him an envelope, sealed with red wax. It was addressed to Colonel Malinkoff.

It was in the gray dawn that the sergeant and the boys set out for army headquarters.

Stopped by a sentry, Strogoff displayed his badge and also produced the letter from the police chief.

They were passed without further question, and found the colonel, ever an early riser, preparing for breakfast. Such was the bulk of the policeman that the boys in line behind him were completely hidden from view.

Opening the envelope, Colonel Malinkoff noted the contents, penciled a few words on the margin, and instantly remarking:

"Request granted forthwith. Orderly," turning to a soldier in the room, "go with this officer to aviation quarters."

As Strogoff stepped aside, that the aide might lead, the colonel saw the boys.

"'Pon my word, young men, you are early visitors. What has gone wrong with you?"

Much to the astonishment of the policeman, the colonel extended a welcoming hand to each of the youngsters.

"You know them, colonel?"

"Rather well acquainted," laughed Malinkoff. "Hope you have not arrested them, officer."

"Not me," stoutly declared the sergeant; "I owe them my life. But may I tell about that later, colonel? Time presses."

Malinkoff waved consent, and a few minutes later Strogoff handed the letter and order to the aviation chief, with the presentation, saying:

"If it pleases you, sir, we would ask the services of aviators who can go the route with the greatest skill and speed."

"There is a pair of them behind you this minute," was the quick answer.

Strogoff simply stared at the youths, who now stepped forward to salute their chief.

"What next?" The question was in his eyes.

The arrangement was that two biplanes were to go, it being deemed essential that there be carried one observer vested with the authority of the military branch.

Captain Walki was assigned to the duty, and to the biplane which Henri was to pilot.

"I am the boy with the ballast," joked Billy, when he learned that Strogoff was to ride behind him.

"Don't you think for a second that he is entirely new as an air passenger," quietly advised the aviation chief, who had heard Billy's facetious remark; "several times to my knowledge, and for hours at a time, he has leaned over the side of a speeding aeroplane, watching city roofs for contraband wireless apparatus."

Within twenty minutes after the order had been presented by Strogoff, such is the efficiency and

expedition of all proceedings with which trained soldiers have to do, the aviation party were off in swift and unerring pursuit of the transport, now many miles away churning against the current of the river Vistula.

In the open country near Gombin, having encountered a fierce gale which whirled them out of the line of the river course, the aviators decided to alight, and wait for a lull in the storm.

Though chafing at the delay, Strogoff wholly agreed with Captain Walki that possible overstraining of the rigging and mechanism of the aircraft was something that must be avoided.

As it was, Billy and Henri had their hands full in repairing some damage already done.

“You boys wear a couple of level heads,” admiringly commented the big policeman, when landing was made; “there is more ventilation aloft this morning than I have ever experienced, but perhaps you are used to it—at least it did not seem to bother you much.”

“If it had, Mr. Strogoff,” jollied Billy, “you might have been spread all over the ground by this time.”

Shortly after the noon hour the high wind shifted, and when flight was resumed the gusty force was behind the biplanes, which served to increase their speed to a tremendous degree.

Notwithstanding this, however, the long stop had served to vastly increase the lead of the transport, which had never ceased to plow ahead by the impulse of its powerful propellers.

The vessel was steaming into Vloclavek harbor when the onrushing biplanes neared this port.

By the time the aviators could reach the ground, the ship was at anchor, with many small boats plying about her.

Captain Walki immediately approached one of the ship’s officers, who was standing on the quay, and explained the situation.

“There was quite a number shoveling below as we came up,” said the official addressed, “and the only thing to do is to go on board and look them over. There’s a gig at your service.”

Strogoff was the first in the proffered boat, and the rowers that manned it did not pull any too fast to suit him.

With a file of soldiers the searching party went below, but among all the smutty-faced, stripped-to-the-waist workers in the furnace room the men wanted could not be found. No more successful was the further and thorough search made in every conceivable hiding place on upper and lower decks.

“Duped again,” raged Strogoff. “What is your opinion, captain?” he appealed to Walki.

Captain Walki, who had been fully advised of the clue which had caused the pursuit of the transport, reflectively stroked his short beard and laconically remarked:

“I think the sailor on the collier lied!”

CHAPTER XV.

THE SERGEANT'S VOW.

"Do you know what I believe, Buddy," said Billy to his chum, while they were having a little quiet discussion of their own about the way Strogoff had been misled; "I believe, sure and certain, that it was a phony crew on the collier—not a man jack of them regularly on the job."

"Report at once, pard, and get your badge," laughingly urged Henri. "Why don't you tell it to the sergeant?"

"I'm not taking any chance of getting on his toes just now," was Billy's reply, shaking his head.

Strogoff, though somewhat crestfallen over the collapse of his eagerly conceived plan to put the irons on the adroit Ricker and the lesser lights with him, had lost none of the bulldog tenacity of purpose which characterized his every movement.

"I will yet put every last one of them against the wall," he earnestly vowed; "the chief by this time has received my wire, and that coal boat will be a marked craft wherever it goes. Strange, though," he continued, "that the skipper should have been so indifferent as to inspection, when he well knew what he would get if caught at deception."

Billy tipped a significant wink to Henri.

The sergeant, having obtained positive assurance that no man unaccounted for had either boarded or left the transport from start to finish of its passage, agreed to the proposal of Captain Walki to immediately return to Warsaw, and there frame a new course of action.

With clearing sky and no countering winds, the young pilots made the most of the remaining hours of daylight, and there was safe landing in Warsaw while the night was yet young.

Strogoff's reception at police headquarters was not such as rejoiced his soul—the chief had a piece of news for him that had stunning effect.

The regular master and crew of the collier, No. 49 in the shipping record, the very vessel upon which the sergeant had been hoodwinked, were even now still in the slow recovery stage from drugging. Only the night before the whole seven, captain, mate, engineer and deck men, had been found deep asleep in a dinghy, drifting about the harbor.

"You seem to be losing your grip, Strogoff," snapped the chief in that steely voice of his.

The sergeant hung his head for a minute, and then, advancing, looked his chief straight in the eyes.

"For every inch I have gained in unearthing the spy den in our midst, sir, I have risked again and again that precious possession called life, and while I may have proved for the once a dull blade against overly keen ones, it is no sign that I am through."

"Well, well, Strogoff," hedged the chief, "they have had a fall out of you; that cannot be denied, but, perhaps, after all, you are not through. The credit of locating the nest is still yours, and you shall have a free hand to complete the work."

"Thank you kindly, sir;" there was renewed vigor in the tone and manner of the sergeant; "may I ask what became of the coal boat that was in the offing when I left?"

"With the discovery of the stupefied sailors, and their identity established, the harbor patrols were put to work, but no trace of the vessel was found along the city front."

"No question, then, sir, but that she immediately weighed anchor and made off down stream—it was not up, I assure you, for I had my glass on the river from the time we started from Vloclavek."

"That was the theory upon which we acted, sergeant; two dispatch boats have already taken up the chase."

"And me not in the forefront," cried Strogoff, sounding a note of disappointment.

"You still have the aeroplane route," suggested the chief.

The sergeant brightened at this. "But no use of a blind run," he sighed; "in the dark we might overrun a dozen boats like the collier, and never know it."

"Get your boy wonders and start as soon as you can see, then."

"That is just what I will do, chief, and I would like to have Lowiez assigned with me."

"Just the man, if there is any fancy shooting to be done," agreed the chief.

"It might come to that," grimly observed Strogoff.

At sunup the Young Aeroplane Scouts had their second early call within three days.

"We haven't signed up with the police for the league season, have we?" inquired Billy, with a slight touch of rebellion.

"They have the colonel's orders back of their request," explained the aviation chief, "and the officer with the wide front positively declares that nobody will suit but the pair I see before me. Climb out, boys, and hustle, or he is likely to have a fit."

"Some lively vacation this, eh, Billy?"

Billy did not catch Henri's remark, for he was over ears in a basin of ice-cold water.

"I had intended to take a peep behind the picture and see if the belt is there all right," said Billy, as they passed out of the mess hall in the direction of the hangars.

"No need," replied his chum; "nobody ever touches that wall relic, and Stanny's girdle is safe."

Henri's new flying partner, Lowiez, was of swarthy type, and with the keenest pair of black eyes the boy had ever seen over a human nose. The outside pockets of his greatcoat bulged with the heft of two heavy revolvers, and if the carrier should have shown a hesitancy in using them, if occasion served, a surprise would be coming to any person who had sized them up.

It might also be stated that Officer Strogoff, with all his cares and strenuous activities, had lost no flesh overnight.

The young aviators had not been given any advance notice of just where this day's journey was expected to take them; they only knew that there was to be a beginning. The end was not until they reached it.

Strogoff was not inclined to be bubbling with information, either, this crisp morning. Following the boys' usual careful inspection of the flying machines, the startling words were simply: "Down the river." Additional orders were to fly low.

Having no trouble to compass a course, merely to follow the flow of the broad Vistula, the pilots were completely at ease. Under them were the famous No. 3's, the finest military biplanes, in their opinion, that ever crossed the country.

In the current below could be seen at intervals all sorts of steam and sailing craft, iron-sided or slab-sided, modern and ancient, but the space-filling observer in Billy's biplane, with constant level of field glasses, had no disposition to waste a word upon any of them.

A certain slow-moving tub, with "49" showing at the beam, would have caused lung expansion for the heavyweight, but that particular brand of boat had yet to be discovered.

It was 10:20 o'clock by Billy's watch when a smart tap on the shoulder roused him from some day dream of far-off Bangor or Boston, and made him set a little tighter grip on the steering wheel.

At the junction of the Vistula and one of the numerous smaller rivers emptying into the big channel, several little dispatch boats were chugging around a large freighter, plowing northward. The hulk was easing its way at the challenge of the mosquito fleet.

"To the ground," commanded the sergeant, when he had secured the attention of the pilot.

Billy nicely figured a stop on the river bank within a stone's throw of the watercraft argument. Henri followed suit with equal exactness of placing.

Megaphoning through the hollow of his joined hands, Strogoff brought one of the light draught dispatch boats close to the shore.

A gangplank bridged the way to the deck, and the big policeman lumbered aboard in a hurry.

"What's the row?"

The officer in command of the boat, detailed from the river patrol, explained to Strogoff that before passing the mouths of any of the tributary rivers in the course down, they had been holding up each and every north-bound vessel for the purpose of inquiry. In every instance but this one of the freighter, Collier No. 49 had been reported.

"My opinion, sergeant, is that right here the coal tub dodged out of this channel. The master of the freighter has not spoken a single craft of collier build below this point."

Strogoff thought a minute. "I am not going to put all of my eggs in one basket this time," he finally observed, "no matter how fair the quotations. Two of your boats may proceed, and two are to follow me up this tributary."

Leaving to the officer addressed the duty of arranging details of the plan, the sergeant regained the river bank and advised the pilots of the new course of the biplanes.

Hardly twenty-five miles had been traversed, when the aviation party, even as one man, caught sight of a hull at a dead standstill in the sluggish stream. The bow of the big boat listed in a way to suggest that it had been stranded on a sand or mud bar. There was no sign of life on her decks.

Strogoff shouted an order to descend, and the pilots circled in prompt endeavor to land as near as possible to the apparent derelict. No chance whatever for a deck fall on this old hunker with its topside barrier of crowding masts.

Once on the ground, Strogoff and Lowiez cast about for a way to reach the vessel, bow-ended in an extensive marsh between the shore and river channel.

It was not long before Lowiez discovered in the drift, a hundred yards or so downstream, one of the ship's boats, by means of which, no doubt, the bogus crew had landed from the stolen craft. The hulk had been instantly identified at closer range as the collier sought for—"49" showing at the stern.

If either of the policemen feared ambush on the hunker, it was not apparent in their manner of proceeding, except that Lowiez, the pronounced "fancy shot," kept both hands in his overcoat pockets while the stout sergeant volunteered to pole the skiff out to the stranded collier.

Billy and Henri watched them from a perch on a pile of driftwood.

"I can't see to save my neck," observed the Bangor boy, "why that Ricker crowd, with all their daring and cunning, didn't paint a new number on the collier, change the papers to suit, and bluff their way nearer to the Austrian border before they shook the ship."

"For the reason," argued Henri, "that the live-brained leader counted upon aeroplane pursuit and no chance in the world to escape capture on the open waterway."

"There's something in that, come to think of it," admitted Billy, "but there is also some pretty hard sledding ahead of them in the bleak country back of us," indicating by an overshoulder look at the great barrens stretching away to the horizon.

"All the more room to hide," observed Henri.

"And to starve and freeze," added his chum.

They could see the two policemen moving about the upper deck of the collier, but the fact that their search was soundless made it plain to the watchers that it was a sure thing that the hull had been deserted.

Now in the distance could be heard the chug, chug of the fast-coming dispatch boats.

As they finally drew alongside the stranded vessel, Strogoff and his comrade lowered themselves by the side chains to the deck of the first comer, which then turned toward the shore.

The boys were wondering what the next move would be.

The answer was embodied in a pair of long, sinuous shapes, tawny-hided and slather-jawed, sleepily stretched full length in the cuddyhouse of the little craft.

The fugitives were to be trailed across the steppes by Siberian bloodhounds!

CHAPTER XVI.

LOST ON THE FROZEN STEPPES.

Yelping and tugging at leash, the hounds were given the scent at the shore point where the ship's boat had been found. It was decided to let them run free, and to follow the fierce trailers in the biplanes.

Thus it was that Henri was compelled to take on an extra passenger in his machine, no other than the handler of the dogs, who alone could be depended upon to bring the animals to heel if the men pursued should be brought to bay. As luck would have it, the additional weight was that of a little man, who could have been wrapped twice, and some over, in Strogoff's coat.

All three of the officers were armed to the teeth with modern repeating rifles, taken from the supply on the dispatch boats, and supremely confident of their ability to cope with the estimated small party, however desperate, which they expected to encounter.

The dogs, too, were allies that would make a goodly showing if it came to a clash in close quarters.

The young aviators had been impressed by the sergeant that their business was solely that of pilots.

"Let anything happen to you," he said, "and my day of self-forgiving would never come. Besides, I am now accountable to Colonel Malinkoff for your safety on the ground, the same as you are responsible for mine when you get me on high. Understand?"

"We get you, sergeant," was Billy's reply; "you have our promise not to butt into any shindy where we are not invited."

"Turn them loose," was the sergeant's order to the little man, who was struggling to restrain the leaping hounds.

Two streaks of brown and yellow flashed across the plain.

"All aboard!" shouted Strogoff.

There was a scramble into the biplanes, and a lightning-like getaway.

The hounds were already far afield, but nothing on two feet or four, on wheel or keel, can stay ahead of an aeroplane, and the scampering animals were overhauled in a jiffy, and the pilots holding to low speed to even up the chase.

Along a marshy stretch of ground the dogs seemed at fault, going at zigzag, but ever returning to the spot where first the scent was lost.

The little man, crouching behind Henri in the biplane, requested the pilot to descend forthwith, and as it was simply a 'round and 'round operation to keep in sight of the baffled hounds, there was really nothing else to do but stop.

Billy had already anticipated the situation, and had started to volplane even before his chum had set the planes for landing.

The master of the hounds, whom Strogoff addressed as Petro, was forced to literally drag his canine charges away from their persistent adherence to the one spot on the high side of the marsh.

Lowiez, he of the keen eye, had been doing some scrutinizing on his own account, and read an explanation by certain marks on the flinty ground.

Addressing the sergeant, he briefly disposed of the puzzle:

"Horses here not long since; the men we have been trailing went no further on foot. That is why these beasts are out of the running."

"Cossacks, I'll be bound," exclaimed Strogoff.

"On that theory, sergeant," continued Lowiez, "we have two surmises, one that the band was on the way to the nearest army command, and the other that they were free riders and traveling as the wind listeth. In either event, does our service extend so far?"

"The arm of the Russian police system," proudly declared Strogoff, "has no limit within the realm of the Czar. And, too, our special mission is backed by both civil and military authority."

"As you will," conceded Lowiez; "it is needless to state that I am with you to the death."

Turning to Petro, the sergeant said:

"As the dogs can no longer be of use, and as it is practically impossible to safely carry them in the aircraft, I must bid you back with them to the dispatch boats, which had orders to await, for a period of three days, our return."

Without comment, the master of hounds faced about and started on his long march, with the dogs capering at his heels.

"Well, we have a roving commission now."

Strogoff had his field glasses glued to his eyes, and taking in the range of open country. The powerful binnacle, however, showed him nothing of interest. It was a dreary outlook at best.

"Fly east, fly west, fly south," he repeated—"a choice broad enough for an empire maker. It is well that we know what is behind us. Are we prepared for a longer journey, my pilot?"

"We can easily do three hundred miles with our petrol supply," assured Billy, who had just completed inspection of the tanks in both machines.

"There are two days' rations in the lockers," volunteered Henri.

"So far, so good," commented Strogoff; "there is no use standing here cooling our heels. Let's be off!"

For three hours the aviation party was continuously on the wing, traveling a southwesterly course, a trying experience owing to the frigid atmosphere and the cramped position maintained.

Toward evening another stop was in order. A bivouac must be established for the night. The aviators had been hoping against hope that a settlement would be reached, where, at least, the privilege of a shakedown before a peat fire would be accorded.

It was a bitter disappointment to Strogoff that fortune had not favored him in these long hours of vigilant outlook with a sight or sign of the horsemen he was pursuing. Almost a monomania with him

was that one overwhelming desire to lay his hands upon the arch-plotter Ricker.

The truth was, he had no fixed idea when to quit, and now was so far beyond his reckoning that he did not know how to back out.

When that night the weary four sat huddled together and blanketed to the ears on the frozen plain, Lowiez, who since his first venture and rebuke had offered no remonstrance, suggested that the early morning ought to see them well on the way to the Vistula, and then homeward bound.

“We won’t get anywhere, sergeant,” asserted Billy, upholding Lowiez, “if we wait until the petrol’s all gone—and another day without filling, that will be exactly the condition.”

“Have it over, then, as you will. If you know the way, take it.”

Strogoff had spoken, and resignedly.

When they slept, or how long, none of the party could have told, at first awakening. Their disturbance it was that filled the full measure of mind.

Billy was picked for the initial shock. He opened his eyes against the nose of a horse! That a Cossack was looking at him from higher up did not serve, either, to reduce his pulse rate.

A prod with a lance put Henri in the line of sitting up and taking notice, and similar applications hastened wakefulness on the part of both Strogoff and Lowiez.

“Filimonoff!”

This cry of recognition from Lowiez.

One of the greatest of all Cossacks—Michail Filimonoff, of whom the boys had heard so much in Galicia—the man “who sits his horse like a Petrograd bank clerk, but leads like the devil.”

The Don chieftain, a little to the rear and apart from the other horsemen, gravely inclined his head, when convinced by the uniform that the speaker was a fellow countryman.

Strogoff, too, had once seen the noted free lancer at the staff headquarters of Duke Nicholas, and he followed the lead of his comrade in proclaiming the name.

He then stepped forward to address the Cossack leader, telling him in a torrent of words how and why he had come to grief as a lost man in these frozen steppes.

Filimonoff shook his head. “None of this company,” he gravely advised, “has seen those whom you seek. It may have been Nikita, who rode this way, I am told, not long since. But I did not meet him, and I do not know that he had prisoners.”

Out of the chief’s address the boys singled the word “Nikita.”

“Tell him,” requested Billy, looking to Strogoff, “that Nikita took us into the brotherhood.”

The sergeant turned a gaze of anxiety upon the young aviator, as if in fear that his mind had been affected by overstrain.

“Tell him,” repeated the boy, in form of earnest demand.

Strogoff then complied, but in apologetic manner.

If the big policeman had any further doubt of the propriety of his statement as interpreter it did not stay with him long.

Billy and Henri capped the climax by a joint display of the amulets they carried, and every lance in the Cossack company was raised, including that of the leader.

Filimonoff beckoned the boys to his side, having dismounted to give them greeting.

Said Strogoff to Lowiez:

“The next thing we know those lads will be taking lunch with Duke Nicholas. They started in on familiar terms with a commanding officer at Warsaw the second day I knew them, and have already worked on through to a prince of the desert!”

But by the grace of it all, the pilots were given their bearings and carried the policemen passengers out of the barren maze.

CHAPTER XVII.

A FREAK OF FATE.

One afternoon, a few days subsequent to their return from the last air voyage with Strogoff, and while the boys were engaged in making repairs and generally overhauling the No. 3's, who should appear on the aviation grounds but the selfsame sergeant wearing a brand-new uniform and a profoundly long face.

"I do not really know," he said, drawing closer to the young aviators, "why I should want to tell you anything about the latest jolt I have received in connection with that Ricker deal, but as you were in the game from first to last, it just seems as though you have a right to share in all the details, though it sort of rubs it in on myself."

"What's the news, sergeant; give it to us straight."

Billy's bump of curiosity was apparently incurable.

"Neither that prince of rascals, Ricker, nor any of his lieutenants were in the party that gave us the slip on the plain. One of our 'quiet friends' in the Bzura river region has just reported the presence there of the one-time silversmith, another of the spies we know as Casper, and the Tartar crank, blast his whiskers."

"Who then ran off with the collier?" inquired Henri.

"That is where I am still guessing," continued the sergeant, "but I am letting the Cossacks take care of them. No doubt they were bought, body and breeches, and delivered the goods by putting the marked men across the Vistula."

"Why didn't you nip Ricker at the outset?" asked Billy.

"Never suspected him until the time the clock was found in the fallen walls of the storehouse, and he failed to report with it for investigation. The whole affair had been charged up against the men who jumped from St. Michael terrace into the river."

Billy was about to state that he knew all about Strogoff's official visits to the silversmith's shop, but it suddenly occurred that the least he said the safer for Henri and himself.

"My first bad break," asserted Strogoff, "was the night I went alone to that den to take Ricker into custody. I had handled, I thought, worse than he. But I got a biff from the rear with a sand-bag—and you know the rest. I will have to admit," he concluded, "that for once in my life, at least, I have been bested all around."

The boys might have told the Warsaw sleuth that they were acquainted with a secret service worker called Roque, who was even a slyer fox than any the big policeman had ever encountered—but, of course, they did not tell him anything of the kind.

The aviation chief was responsible for a break-up of this review of recent adventures, when he called to the young aviators to report immediately at headquarters.

Hastily laying aside the tools with which they had been working on the aircraft, the boys instantly responded to the summons of their chief, while Strogoff started on his way downtown.

"You are booked to pilot a couple of old friends of yours in another flight to Petrograd," announced the boss airman; "that is if you are ready to resign from the police force."

He was smiling when he submitted the last proviso.

The "old friends" were the scouts Salisky and Marovitch, who had just sent another pair of tired aviators to the rest ward, after a gruelling trip along the firing line in the southwest.

"Are you up to snuff, my laddybucks?" was Salisky's jovial greeting.

"In the pink of condition, Brother-never-wear-out," gaily rejoined Billy.

"None of your duke's palace entertainments this time," broke in the other iron man, Marovitch.

In destiny had been indelibly written a certain happening that would be, and was, and in the great capital city of the Russians resulted in the translation of our boys into an entirely new sphere of action.

But the pilots set out on the familiar route without other thought than that, if no unforeseen peril of aeroplaning intervened, they would slide again into these grounds in the same old way. The scouts had orders to return within three days, if it were by consent of the powers that be at Petrograd.

When the biplanes had winged their way along the flow of the Neva to the fixed point for the flight's finish, there was goodly margin on the right side of the time limit.

Once more the young pilots climbed the marble steps of Admiralty Place, preceded by the veteran scouts and special messengers—this time, however, without encountering in the imposing interior any former fierce foe in parti-colored uniform. By the blood ceremony elected to the Cossack brotherhood, the boys could now look without tremor into the somber eyes of each and every knight of the desert in imperial service that they might pass in the wide and high corridors.

But as none of the Dons with whom to exchange the high sign happened to be about, Billy and Henri soon wearied of the waiting assignment on the outside of carved and brass-knobbed doors. They flatly informed Salisky that this part of the contract belonged to himself and Marovitch, and if the scouts did not consent to letting their pilots go out and knock around for a while it would certainly result in two clear cases of St. Vitus dance.

"Get along with you, then," ordered Salisky, with a grin, "but, mind what I say, you are not to leave the immediate vicinity, and must return within the next two hours. There is no telling at what o'clock we may be called upon to sail out of here."

Talk to the winds, old scout, the boys were on the way to the open before you had turned the last period.

It was a glorious afternoon on the great Nevskoi Prospekt, the magnificent street overflowing with life.

"There's more people out on runners here than I ever saw before in one procession," observed Billy.

“Doesn’t look as though all the fine horses were stopping bullets on the battlefields.”

If Henri had not early gone into training as an aviator, he could easily have passed muster as a premium giver in an equine show.

“They couldn’t drive ’em like this through the streets of Boston,” further commented the U. S. A. boy. “Patrolman Maguire of the traffic squad would have a picnic on this avenue.”

Hark! What tumult this in the block beyond—this mad haste of fur-muffled reinsmen to guide toward the curb lines—these shrill cries of warning!

A pair of splendid Orloff stallions, black as Erebus, red nostrils agape, foam-flecked, raising, with the frantic pounding of their iron-shod hoofs, upshooting fountains of ice and snow particles, were running a frenzied course directly towards the spot where our boys had been viewing the unceasing sweep of sleighs.

Behind the maddened animals, swaying and now and again skimming sidewise on one runner, and as often lifted clear of the ground, was a sledge of swan-like outline, from which trailed the dragging ends of furry robes.

As in the span of a clock-tick the young aviators had sight of a child clinging to the high back of the sleigh, a little girl, her hood fallen and twisted over shoulder, and her bright crown of curls tangling about her set, white face.

With every nerve tense, and as if strung on one wire, Billy and Henri had a second to think, and in the next time flash to act.

In the passing the sleigh swung dangerously close to the curb, upon which the lads were poised for a spring at the wildly careening conveyance.

With the opportunity, the boys leaped together—Billy went sprawling into the pile of furs in the bowl of the vehicle, while Henri had a close call in getting aboard at all, just managing to grasp the hand-curve of the rear seat, and his knees were sweeping the street surface for twenty or thirty feet before he attained foothold on the runners.

The U. S. A. boy leaned far out of the bed of the sleigh, with lowered hands, striving to reach the trailing reins, whipping about in the wake of the racing steeds.

Two men ahead tried for the curb bits of the high-checked horses, but were hurled aside like featherweights. Billy had a fleeting glance at one of the brave fellows, lying quite still, face down, in the street.

The width of the avenue—about 150 feet—and its straight length—more than five miles—had so far afforded a fighting chance of escaping death-dealing collision.

The action in this saving venture of our boys cannot be followed in its rapidity by the telling of it. When Billy found, with a grab or two, that the reaching of the reins was a long shot, he was up with a jump and at the scroll-turned front of the sleigh.

The crupper of one of the runaways was at his hand—this horse was lagging a little. The next instant, and the boy was clinging to the rein rings of the top harness and digging his heels into the heaving flanks of the laboring animal. Working forward with the same celerity, Billy got a hand-twist on the reins where they doubled to the bit.

Sawing for dear life, he forced the horse’s jaws with the killing curb—but then it was that the free running steed swerved into the path of its mate, and the team went down in a crashing mix-up.

The Bangor boy was catapulted forward, clear of the thrashing hoofs, yet with a falling force that jarred him into oblivion.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A NEW ASSIGNMENT.

When Billy regained his senses he found himself in a clean, enameled white bed, and was conscious of a black silk sleeve with snowy cuff when a deft hand tenderly adjusted a bandage that lay damp upon his aching forehead. These little details were impressive in the way of assurance to the patient that he had awakened this side of the grave.

“Where’s Henri?”

The nurse made no reply to this first question from the bed, except the mute expression of putting a finger to her lips, enjoining silence.

“I say, nurse, I mustn’t be wasting time here; my chum and I have a flying contract on hand, and this very minute ought to be sticking around that big building down the street.”

Getting more and more impatient, Billy essayed a sitting posture, but the effort forced a groan. At this the attendant hastened to settle the boy in comfortable position.

“You must be quiet, monsieur,” she softly admonished in French.

“Guess I’ll have to be,” weakly conceded Billy. “But can’t you tell me whether or not my pal is all right? And—that’s so; did the child in the sleigh come out safe?”

“No one hurt but you,” gently assured the woman.

“Bully for so much,” rejoiced the boy.

“Surely enough,” murmured the attendant.

A portly surgeon entered the room, reached for the wrist of the patient, and his smiling face indicated that the case looked good to him.

“Out in a week,” he announced to the nurse.

Billy did not understand the words, but the manner was satisfactory.

To some whispered inquiry by the nurse, the surgeon nodded his head.

“To-morrow will do,” he advised.

With the passing of the surgeon, the nurse told Billy that he might expect a visit from his comrade in the morning. “You can be sure,” she added, “that it has been no easy task to keep him out.”

The patient grinned. Since he had learned that Henri had escaped unhurt, he had really wondered how they had worked it to keep his chum away from him.

When the morning brought Henri, the French boy was not alone—and the rather boisterous greeting between the reunited inseparables was witnessed by a tall, broad-shouldered man of most distinguished bearing and a beautiful child with a shower of bright curls over her shoulders.

In the presence of the important visitor the surgeon and the nurse were all deference, and eager to give information that would interest.

But the tall stranger then had eyes for no other than the boy propped up among the pillows of the hospital bed.

“My brave lad,” he said, leaning over the boy with the bandaged head, and lifting Billy’s hand from the coverlet, “what I might say would poorly express my gratitude and admiration for your heroic action. Fredonia, my daughter, would add her tribute of heartfelt thanks to mine.”

The child shyly extended her hand, which Billy touched as he would a flower.

With an arm over the shoulders of Henri, the tall man amended the initial address by saying:

“What I most desire now is to have both of you in the service at Odessa, that I may have opportunity to advance your interests and in some substantial way emphasize my grateful appreciation of your splendidly courageous action on behalf of my child.”

“But we are already spoken for in Warsaw,” intimated Billy.

The man smiled as he quietly remarked:

“Perhaps they may not speak louder than Sergius. Until you have mended, then, my lad, we will await final decision.”

When the surgeon had bowed these interesting visitors to the door, he briskly returned to the bedside, and put Billy in possession of some facts regarding the gentleman whose high favor the boys had won.

“A master of money, my lads,” declared the doctor, “and allied with the most powerful elements of the empire, of blood rank most high, and none the less a prince of finance for all that. He ought to know what is in the war chest, for he has wonderfully helped to fill it. To Odessa with Sergius? Thank your lucky stars, lads, for the chance. He has airships without rest at his command, as well as the other kind.”

The surgeon had been told by Henri that aviation was the profession of both his chum and himself, and so in exploiting the opportunities open to the boys through their new acquaintance he naturally laid stress on the aircraft inducement.

In the doorway now appeared Salisky and Marovitch who within the hour had been apprised of the exact whereabouts of their pilots, and having also earlier learned of the thrilling scene on the Prospekt, in which their young friends had been the principal actors.

“Come alive, son, but it is good to see you with your head still on your shoulders.”

The greeting by Salisky, though on the surface of the lighter vein, had nevertheless an undertone of deep feeling. That the veteran scouts were greatly attached to these boys was a fact not open to argument.

“You will be wanting somebody soon to drive you home, old top,” cried Billy, evidencing his pleasure at the sight of the hardy observers.

“Two flyers of the Admiralty corps have already been detailed to take us back, and we start in the morning.”

“Nothing slow about the way you are replacing us.”

Billy was inclined to be a little piqued at this ready acceptance of new service on the part of the scouts, though he was well aware that he would be in no condition to take his turn at the wheel within the prescribed time limit.

Salisky leaned toward the boy, and said:

“The truth of it is, if you do not already know it, that your next move is not of our choosing. Your assignment to Warsaw has been cancelled, and your custody, if it might be called that, has been transferred to another center of operation.”

“The result of a long reach,” supplemented Henri.

“Just so,” concluded Salisky. “Good-bye, my young friends; luck be it that some day we may meet again.”

The speaker turned away without another word, and Marovitch was equally brief in his farewell. Both of the scouts, strange to state, were seized with a joint spell of coughing as they passed out.

“Now, let’s have a bit of a confab all by ourselves,” invited Billy, “before the nurse fires you. Tell me what happened after I took the count in front of those black space-killers?”

“When you started that circus act on the horse’s back,” narrated Henri, “I was hanging on by my eyebrows. Then I managed to get a leg inside the sleigh and had rolled over on the pile of robes; then a sudden stop as the sleigh bumped into the fallen horses—so sudden that my head cracked the dashboard. You sure found the combination in the nick of time, with an open drawbridge less than twenty yards ahead. While about a dozen men were sitting on the heads of those flopping beasts, who should come galloping up on a big gray horse but the little girl’s father, and they had a time together, for a minute or two, I tell you. When we picked you up, limp and bleeding, I prayed like a good fellow that you would open your eyes and say ‘All right, pard.’ The prince, duke, or count, I didn’t know which, had you in a carriage in a brace of shakes, and you have been here ever since, with me hanging around like a lost soul.”

“Where was the driver of the runaways all this time? How did they get away from him?”

Billy was a stickler for details.

“Oh,” continued Henri, “all I know about that is hearsay; the rig was in front of a palace up the way, the little one waiting for her father to come out. The moujik, or driver, was standing at the horses’ heads when a passing auto blew up a tire. The fellow in front of the wild ones that you pulled down counted for as much as a piece of paper string. They left him in the road. That’s how we got into it. There’s one thing more, Buddy, believe me—those Sergius horses are not city broke; they’re too nervous for even a joy ride.”

The nurse came in on the talk about this time and banished Henri.

A week later, when Billy was himself again, the boys, so long accustomed to the plain fare, and often no fare, the hardships, the makeshifts, the discomforts and dangers of military campaigning, began to believe that they had hitched up with another Monte Cristo. Nothing was too good for them in the well-ordered train of Sergius.

“If we don’t get out of here pretty soon,” declared Billy, “we will be afraid to sit near an open window on account of the draught!”

Here was a pair not built for coddling.

But the days of ease were slipping into the scroll of time. It was not intended that the flying boys should too long linger in the lap of luxury. Their patron had another side to his make-up, and that was adamant and of boundless determination.

The call of the Black Sea was in the air—there was plenty of powder burning in and about those strange waters, and another belligerent nation involved, the like of which the young aviators had never before encountered during their varied experiences in the great war zone.

CHAPTER XIX.

A CRUCIAL TEST.

Strong winds were raising clouds of chalky dust over the great seaport when the boys caught their first glimpse of Odessa, the terraced city, rising nearly 200 feet above the level of the surrounding steppes. By all manner of conveyance, by land or water, but ever in continuous motion, the Sergius party made remarkable progress from Petrograd to the borders of the Black Sea. Behind the expedition was that power which, as Billy observed, “makes the wheels go ’round.”

The last leg of the journey landed the travelers at the basins of the mighty rivers Dnieper and Dniester, upon which floated fleets of Sergius’ ships, and more of the same vessels controlled by the master of money lay in the two harbors of the Bay of Odessa. These latter the boys viewed from the head of the superb flight of steps descending from the central square, adorned with a statue of Richelieu, to the sea. On the chief embankment was the magnificent residence of Sergius, fronted by a fine promenade.

“Some mixture in this town,” remarked Henri, marking movement in Odessa streets, through which they were passing—Great Russians, Little Russians, French, Jews, Italians, Greeks, Roumanians, Servians, Bulgarians, Tartars, Armenians, Lazes, Georgians, and so forth, and so forth.

The Turk in his fighting clothes, however, was an acquaintance the young aviators had yet to make—the time drawing nigh, though, and a veritable storm of explosives to make the occasion memorable.

Billy and Henri were to work with the Black Sea air fleet, their expert services as a contribution from Sergius, which made them, in a sense, independent factors as pilots.

As untried recruits, and on account of their youth, the boys had the usual doubt on the part of aviation chiefs to overcome—and, based upon past experience, it is perfectly safe to anticipate that they passed the crucial test, literally speaking, with “flying colors.”

While the lads regretted that they would not have the No. 3’s under them in their trial trip, all types approaching the same lines looked alike to them.

With two noted aerialists and high-range bomb-throwers, Lieutenants Moppa and Atlass, behind them, within three days after their arrival in Odessa, the newly assigned pilots set out in two specially designed seaplanes for scout duty that would take them far across the waste of waters.

The bombardment of Novorossisk was in progress as the aviators sped that way, and the pilots were compelled to run at great altitude to clear the mass of flames that lit the lowering sky for miles around. German gunners in Turkish warships had shot a hundred oil tanks into blazes. At Poti another Turkish cruiser was exchanging shells for the shore pepper of machine guns, and cannon were thundering from the fortress of Sevastopol.

Lieutenant Moppa, from the aircraft Billy was driving, sent down a couple of bombs on the Turkish battleship “Midirli,” but the missiles missed and splashed into the sea far to the right of the vessel.

A couple of marine riflemen took a chance at the seaplane in return, and more than one bullet flattened against the armored bottom and side of the big flyer. The observer seemed to revel in the game, and shouted defiance at the air, for with the hum of the motors the biggest voice for distance counted no more than a penny whistle.

The officer at the rear of Henri, however, made himself heard by the pilot, when directing attention to a cloud of smoke lifting high above the lower strata of mist, and urging speed in that direction. It was a Russian fleet hastening from its bombardment of Turkish Trebizond to give battle to the Ottoman disturbers of the Russian coast line—“two, three, four, five, six, seven,” counted the aviators—all of them big ships, and five smaller ones completing the naval procession.

At the two Turkish vessels, five miles away, the oncomers plugged big shells at a lively rate, and about the craft under fire the aviators could see that the water jumped and churned and rose in columns. To port and starboard, fore and aft, above and below, there was nothing but shot and shell. It looked like the Turks did not know which way to turn, but by some hook or crook they got things to running smoothly, and made a clean getaway.

The mist curtain had grown so dense that the aerial bomb-throwers did little execution, in their turn, and soon abandoned pursuit of the fleeing cruisers, pushing hard for the Turkish coast.

The seaplanes settled in the path of the rapidly approaching Russians, and Billy and Henri rested after their introductory dash along a new line of strenuous endeavor.

Billy turned to Lieutenant Moppa, with the inquiry:

“Did everything work all right?”

“As far as you are concerned,” promptly advised the officer, “it could not have been better managed. I was a little off, though, in the matter of landing bombs in the right place.”

The observer with Henri had just told the lad that he was engaged for life.

The Russian warships, among which they were drifting, the boys learned, were in the Slav naval movement to approach the strait of Bosphorus from the north, and related to mighty effort of the allied forces to pound their way through the Dardanelles on the other side—that the fleets of all three powers might shell Constantinople from two directions.

“If we get through the Bosphorus, and I am wagering we will,” said Lieutenant Moppa as the seaplanes, side by side, gently undulated with the waves, “it will be the first hostile fleet that has done the trick for more than four centuries.”

“It will be getting by some 120 guns, I have heard,” remarked the brother officer, “and they are pretty near all Krupps, shooting irons not in the toy class.”

“I remember once reading a five-cent tear-me-up entitled ‘The Bride of the Bosphorus; or, the Fourteen Corpses of the Caspian Sea,’ and if the passage is as exciting as that story, count me in.”

This an aside from Billy to Henri.

While the boys were having a quiet chuckle to themselves, the flagship of the fleet showed signal to

forge ahead, and the pilots of the seaplanes went to work again.

There was a night journey ahead, but with many searchlights sweeping both sea and sky, it was not a blind-going proposition.

The naval program included an issue with Fort Killis, about six miles from the entrance of the Bosphorus, where the Turks had a battery of 6-inch Krupp guns.

It was up to the aeroplanists to look over the situation in advance, with additional responsibility of keeping themselves well out of the range of the big shooting irons, one straight aim of which would bring the lofty sailing party a very chilly trip clear to the bottom of the sea.

In the early morning the seaplanes quit the company of the warships to essay the exceedingly perilous reconnoiter.

The battery which the air scouts sought to accurately locate was constructed in, or, rather, under a cliff, and flying high and immediately overhead the observer had scant opportunity to size up the real strength and range of the masked position. To win a look worthy of record it was decided to chance an 80-mile-an-hour spurt across the sea front.

If the gunners were a little slower than the aviators, it was all to the good for the latter—if the reverse, the Black Sea air fleet would be reduced just so many.

With all the power in the motors applied, the seaplanes swept by the face of the cliff, the observers mentally gathering every detail through straining eyes, and the pilots equally intent in planning the lightning swerve that would baffle the men from behind the Krupps.

Out and away! One gun belched fire—then another—now the whole half dozen or more—with the crack of rifles in between the heavier detonations.

The terrific speed, and the skilful manipulation of the seaplanes that prevented the presentation at any time of a broadside target, soon safely carried the daring airmen far out to sea.

Reporting to the admiral of the fleet, Lieutenants Moppa and Atlass presented Billy Barry and Henri Trouville with such glowing words of commendation that the lads quit the quarterdeck with very red faces.

An hour later the warships were throwing projectiles that showered splinters of rock all over the masked position. The Russian assault upon the Bosphorus had begun.

CHAPTER XX.

RUSSIA’S GREATEST AEROPLANE.

There had been a solemn council, lasting several hours, in the spacious drawing room of the Sergius palace in Odessa, and the majority of the participants wore the insignia of preeminent rank in the Russian navy.

It was evident that some momentous question was in the foreground, and having to do with a war move of consequence.

In the aerodrome, down on the bay front, another conference was in progress, of no less importance to those there gathered—aviators all. The supreme assemblage on the hill had its problems, but no more intense interest therein than these aerial experts manifested over the display of the greatest of all aeroplanes—the Russian “Sikorsky”—just received for particular use in the Black Sea fleet, the second of its kind constructed, and in which achievement of one of his subjects the Czar himself had been reported as taking personal pride and keen practical interest.

“The first time I ever threw up my hands for anything that didn’t come out of our factory,” exclaimed Billy, walking in wonder around the gigantic aircraft.

With its curtained “cabin,” many-windowed “control house,” searchlight, powerful engines, steering wheels, projecting bow, “corridor,” and a proved carrying capacity of seventeen men, this creation may seem more of imaginative invention than the actual production of a machine shop.

But the “Sikorsky” is a sure thing, and just as represented in the sight of our boys on the day they first marveled at its bulk.

They had no idea, though, at the moment of an experience in this huge machine that would set a capsheaf on their war zone sky-riding.

So when Billy and Henri studied in detail the points of this wonderful craft it was solely by the prompting of professional enthusiasm and no intent of going into training to handle it.

They noted that the mighty flyer, of biplane type, was fitted with four German Daimler engines, had double control, with two steering wheels, while each of the four engines drove a separate propeller.

“The wind would have to hustle to keep up with that force,” commented Henri, strongly inclined to the mechanical exhibit.

Lieutenant Moppa called attention to the fact that the craft had also been fitted with floats, “which about provides for every emergency,” he concluded.

“Think of an aeroplane pilot working behind glass windows; he will feel as stuck up as a chauffeur in a first-class automobile.”

“And as high-toned as the steersman of an ocean liner, pard,” said Henri, adding to Billy’s comparison.

The council on the hill in the meantime had marked a map with a red line—the Bosphorus at the end of it.

The warships that the aviators had left shelling the cliff battery near the entrance of the strait were to be tremendously reinforced.

“Great news, men,” announced Lieutenant Moppa, after perusing a slip of paper handed to him by a trim sailor who had been serving the war council as messenger. “Everything that flies has been ordered into service for convoy duty with the squadron that sails in the morning. The new airship will lead the way.”

“It would not surprise me a bit,” volunteered one of the soldier-aviators, “to see the new airship flying over the Bosphorus batteries before we are very much older, and loaded with bombs, too.”

“A prophet has come among us,” laughed Lieutenant Atlass, “but more power to him if he rings true, and rings me into the venture.”

“Give another pull to that bell,” suggested Lieutenant Moppa.

The influence of Sergius was in evidence when assignments to honor places in the new crafts were made, and the boys found themselves listed among the pilots who would take turns at the steering wheels of the mighty “Sikorsky.”

However, the recent performance of the young aviators before Fort Killis, reported in dispatches, had the effect of reducing any feeling that favoritism had been wholly responsible for this advancement.

“Really, it is more than we had any right to expect,” said Billy, in discussing the selection of the airmen who were to serve aboard Russia’s greatest aeroplane.

“Suppress your modesty, my boy; it may be that I have given you a short lease on life by my recommendation, but in your work you take the chances anyhow, so I put you in the way of dying at the top of the profession.”

It was the voice of Sergius, half serious and half in the lighter vein.

He had stepped quietly into the air station, and was contemplating with interest the lines of the new wonder of the air.

Already experts were at work within the enclosed rigging, oiling and polishing the machinery, filling the tanks and in every way putting in perfect shape the mammoth flyer.

When, the next morning, the great bird of passage was driven aloft, and leading a flock of lesser ’planes, the wheelmen on the job were Billy Barry and Henri Trouville.

There were fourteen, all told, on board, and Lieutenant Moppa was in command. Two guns showed, one fore and the other aft, manned by practiced marksmen, while equally proficient in their line were several riflemen in the crew. The two lieutenants could be depended upon to take care of the explosive-dropping assignment.

Though the motion of the huge machine through the air was very smooth and graceful, the roaring sound made by the four powerful engines, as the airship forged ahead, high above the sea, was

nothing less than terrifying.

The commanding officer kept his sailing orders to himself, but, nevertheless, the belief among those aboard, which would not down, was that the big craft was going over the Bosphorus batteries, straight to Islam's capital, to give the ancient city, for the first time in history, an air bombardment.

When the rumor reached Billy, he thought of Sergius' remark about "dying at the top of the profession!"

To his brother wheelman, close enough to catch his words, he had just been saying:

"This is the kind of a gear we will have to put together for our trip across the Atlantic."

Then the thought that the contract they had immediately on hand, if the rumor had foundation, might take all they had to give.

A few miles from the entrance of the Bosphorus, Lieutenant Moppa, instead of issuing a stop order, in stentorian voice sounded the word:

"Attention!"

Above the roar of the engines the crew heard again a shouted command:

"Pilots, guide left!"

Then all hands knew that the airship was headed for Constantinople. The first link in the chain of Bosphorus forts was below, and the sea of Marmora only eighteen miles distant! The great airship was going a mile a minute, following the water line between the two continents, yet running so high that gun flashes from the batteries were as the explosion of so many firecrackers to the aviators.

The boy pilots leaned hard against the steering wheels; they were feeling the strain of continuous effort, but made no call for relief. It was a red-letter chapter in their flying record.

Now the sea of Marmora, stretching away 170 miles to the straits of the Dardanelles, on the other end of which the allies had concentrated twenty great battleships, eight powerful cruisers and a land force of 50,000.

Over Pera, the residence section of Constantinople, Lieutenant Atlass sent down a shower of bombs, and for miles of Moslem territory the onrushing airship left a blazing trail behind it. The "Sikorsky" had drawn the fire of many guns in its dash between seas, and but for one stray bullet that splintered the glass front of the pilot house would have escaped unscathed.

By fort fire the aviators were driven high again over the Dardanelles, but the forty-two miles in these straits were traversed in fifty minutes.

Landing on the floats was made off Tenedos island, in the Ægean sea.

"You looked like a Zeppelin coming in," hailed a bluff Briton from the conning tower of a submarine that had bobbed up alongside of the floating aircraft, "and your colors just saved you from being blown to smithereens. That's the biggest thing on wings you have there."

"And it has carved a new niche for aviators to reach, this day," proudly proclaimed the Russian airman.

CHAPTER XXI.

SAVED BY SEAPLANES.

The boy pilots completed their many hours of trying vigil at the wheels of the largest aeroplane ever built by guiding the immense craft to housing place on the shore, and in the first night period of relaxation were drowsily dead to the world.

“We’ll be twisting the heads off one another if we lie this close,” jollied Billy, when his chum and himself rolled into blankets on the verge of dreamland, “for I’m still bow-legged in the arms from holding those spokes, and the motion won’t leave me.”

This humor was lost on Henri, for he had gone over the border, and no return until next sunrise.

No need to awaken the youngsters from the eight hours of slumber due them, for the morning will do well enough for an interesting discovery coming their way.

Anticipating this awakening and a grand surprise, however, it may be stated that among the operators of the war-planes identified with the superdreadnaught “Warspite,” then lying off Tenedos island, were a couple of airmen of some renown along the coast of the North Sea. They answered to the names of the Leonidas Johnson, with complimentary title of captain, and Josiah Freeman, one time of Boston, U. S. A.

Then, again, in the British submarine E-14, even then returning from a reconnoissance in the Dardanelles mine field, there was a sailor lad from Dover, Jimmy Stetson, surely remembered in the live days when our Young Aeroplane Scouts were campaigning in France and Belgium.

Stirring times in front when these time-tried, powder-burned excitement seekers get together once more!

Lieutenant Moppa was exhibiting the fine points of the “Sikorsky” to a group of British naval officers and war-plane experts when Billy and Henri sauntered in that direction, sound sleep and a good breakfast having restored them to normal condition.

Something that the Russian said caused a turning of all eyes upon the approaching lads.

Two of the group opened their mouths as well as their eyes.

“Jumping Jehoshaphat,” cried one of the pair, breaking the spell that bound him, “if it isn’t our long-lost flying boys!”

“By the great hornspoon,” almost shouted the other, “the dead is alive!”

While all the rest of the party looked on in astonishment, the coming couple and the waiting two indulged in a veritable war dance, accompanied by handshaking and shoulder-slapping, until the four were breathless and compelled to desist.

“I’m not a bit surprised now, sir,” declared Captain Johnson, addressing the Russian officer; “these kids are the candy in that game, born to it, sir; born to it!”

Lieutenant Moppa, while somewhat puzzled as to the “candy” qualification, nevertheless appreciated the spirit of the hurrah indorsement.

“Set up a sky contest, sir,” added Freeman, “and they wouldn’t have space on their clothes for all the medals they would capture.”

“Oh, you fellows dry up,” laughed Billy, “or you will get us arrested for false pretense. My first duty is to Henri; he must be kept out of jail at all hazards.”

Henri was about to retort in kind when he received a slap on the back that startled the idea out of his mind.

“Jimmy!”

Billy and Henri spoke in one breath, and the onlookers were amused by another animated walk-around.

Then the insistent call of duty broke in upon the reunion. Johnson and Freeman climbed into a war-plane for the morning reconnoitering flight over the straits, and the submarine upon which Jimmy served put out to sea on mission unknown.

Our boys looked to Lieutenant Moppa for some stirring order that would put them again in action, but that officer made no sign that would indicate immediate movement of the big airship. The surmise was that the mighty craft would be held in reserve for the allies’ next concentrated effort to force the Dardanelles.

It occurred to Billy and Henri that they could obtain permission to serve with Johnson and Freeman in the war-planes in case of emergency—and to their eminent satisfaction such leave was granted, for aviators were in constant demand. The heavily mined waters made close scouting in surface boats an exceedingly precarious proposition, and inside the straits the fort guns speedily put anything but a submarine out of business. Even the underwater craft had short shrift when exposed.

A day passed with no call for the services of the young pilots, but when the summons did come it was in a hurry-up manner, and involved a venture perilous to the extreme.

Submarine E-14 was aground on Kephez point!

The submarine boat had started from Tenedos island at midnight, entered the Dardanelles at 2:20 in the morning and dived at 2:30 to avoid the searchlights. Carried forward by the strong current it grounded four hours later, with the conning tower showing out of the water.

Picket boats reported at Tenedos that the stranded submarine was under fire from the Turkish batteries, and that there was little or no chance of the crew escaping annihilation.

Captain Johnson, engaged in conversation at the time with Billy and Henri, upon hearing the direful news, cried out:

“That’s Jimmy Stetson’s boat!”

“Can’t we do anything?” was Billy’s frantic query.

“We can volunteer to make a try,” replied the captain, as he raced to the water front, closely followed by the excited boys.

Freeman was standing near the seaplane station when the runners arrived.

Captain Johnson reeled off the story of the submarine mishap with telegraph speed.

“I’m in it every minute,” stoutly declared Josh, when advised of the rescue movement.

The volunteers instantly received the orders they sought, and with equal celerity set out on a mission that literally meant flying in the face of death.

They rode in two seaplanes that many times before had weathered storms of shot and shell.

Captain Johnson, himself, veteran of the air, acted as pilot in the lead, for he knew the direct route to the scene of the submarine disaster, and with Henri at the motor end. Billy guided the escort machine, with Josh behind him.

The seaplanes, of the very largest type, had capacity to carry, in a short run, at least a dozen of the submarine crew, if, indeed, that many had survived the pitiless fire to which they had for nearly an hour been exposed, and which fusillading had crippled the electric power appliance of the underwater craft.

Sweeping around the point, the shattered submarine was located by upstanding bridge and periscope, but the crew had been obliged to leave the boat and crawl out into the mud which held the bow aground.

Through an atmosphere dense with powder smoke, the seaplanes sped like bolts, and then striking the water with a force that tossed spray in every direction.

The submarine captain and three of the crew had been killed, and of those still alive seven were wounded. To cover the movement of the seaplanes, the “Warspite” and other British warships kept a rain of shells falling in the vicinity of the Turkish battery.

When the seaplanes lifted from the water, the wounded members of the submarine crew were crowded inside, and others clung to the rigging. The powerful motors responded wonderfully to the test.

Reaching the turn of the point without being brought down by the parting shots from the Turkish battery, the overloaded aircraft soon settled in the shelter of the warships outside the entrance of the straits.

“Glory be!”

Billy’s high note of rejoicing had been sounded.

And there was Jimmy Stetson, without a mark, astride the bow of the seaplane!

Other aviators in lighter machines now hovered over the submarine, dropping bombs on the works above water, with the purpose of rendering the lost vessel absolutely useless to the Turks.

“That was a scary come-through, all right,” said Jimmy to Billy, when once within the safety line. “I saw my finish out on that mud pile, and I guess I didn’t care much after Captain Gardiner fell dead on the bridge. But somehow, when I saw those seaplanes swooping down, and glimpsed Captain Johnson, I took a fresh hold on hope. And, lo and behold, when I splashed out to the planes who should be sitting in there as large as life but you and Henri. It was the spirit again of the brave old days.”

“We surely have had some close calls together, come to think of it,” recalled Billy.

“Well, now that the good boat, E-14, has gone by the board, I am out of a job,” sighed Jimmy; “I knew that craft like a book, and no better diver than she is in the service.”

“Brace up, Master James,” was Billy’s word of cheer, accompanied by a slap between the shoulders of the Dover boy.

Jimmy, it proved, had no reason to complain of enforced leisure; indeed, the only change in his line of duty was that by boat register he moved ahead a couple of numbers, hereafter to travel in E-16—and this underwater craft happened to be the very one detailed to attempt the difficult and hazardous task of cutting a submarine cable.

Billy and Henri were to have a share in this same risky enterprise, but without knowledge in advance of what was coming to them.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE CUTTING OF A CABLE.

Submarine E-16, taking an air bath off Tenedos, and floating in the shadow of the mighty "Warspite," awaited orders that would send her night-groping under the strong current of the Dardanelles channel, and with the set purpose of clipping a cable connecting the European and Asiatic shores of the straits.

If not detected by the Turkish searchlights, the expedition might win forward, and, perhaps, back. Captain Montgomery, a regular fire-eater, was in command, with a picked crew, including our young friend, Jimmy Stetson.

The enterprise was to have aviation aid, and sure-shot candidates for such participation were the veteran pair, Johnson and Freeman. As there was possibility of a bit of a scrap before the affair ended, it was deemed expedient to carry extra pilots in case of accident.

"Keeping it all in the family," was Johnson's humorous way of later telling Billy and Henri that he wanted them to go along.

The upshot of it was that in the late afternoon of the day fixed for the undertaking, two biplanes rose high above the Ægean sea, high enough to make them appear as mere specks in the sky. Turning north, their course followed the line of the Dardanelles.

The submarine waited for nightfall before it made the plunge that would start its journey in the same direction pursued by the aircraft on high.

Porus-Tabia battery, on the European shore of the straits, stands close to the ruins of the ancient stone fort, Bokal-Kale, from where there is a submarine cable that connects it with Nagara on the Asiatic shore.

This was the cable that the military promoters of the submarine journey proposed to sever, if they got near enough to it.

The aviators were to play into the scheme in some manner yet to be developed. It would not be Johnson or Freeman if their long heads failed them on this or any other occasion. It was a safe wager that they had some sort of working plan up their sleeves, and the two boys in their company were certainly ready to produce a vote of confidence.

The lay of the land here is an elevation, not approachable from the front without sure discovery, but some opportunity for concealment at the rear—more favorable, for example, for a drop-down party to operate and escape immediate detection.

Four aviators, at least, were taking the chance of a night prowl here, after coming down at dusk, with muffled motors, behind a clump of trees, and within fairly easy reach of the ruins of the ancient fortress.

"Now, my hearties," advised Captain Johnson, when the four edged against a clammy stone wall for council, "this is only a two-gun battery; the garrison is not expecting company at the back door, and for this reason it's a fair shake that we might be able to attend to a little business here and get away with it.

"The active end of this position, further up," he continued, "I propose to visit a little later on, and it is a crawling contract all the way. I feel sure that the two guns here are in need of repair, and I guess I'll have to fix them!"

The captain mixed a chuckle with these concluding words, and set a deep bite in a lengthy plug of tobacco.

"What's the object, anyhow, of this cable-cutting business?" asked Billy, who liked to dig at the roots of anything that puzzled him.

"To strike terror in the heart of the Turk," commenced the captain—but he switched off to the practical statement that he only knew that military strategy demanded it—and so ordered. To the soldier this latter was all-sufficient reason.

This conversation was in tone audible only to the closely knit group in hiding.

Now the captain was making ready to "repair" the guns above the water front. He took off his boots and his topcoat, transferring therefrom to the inside of his blouse a tool commonly known as a monkey-wrench, tightened his belt and pulled his cap down to his ears. Revolvers swelled both of his hip-pockets.

"If you hear any shooting," he whispered, "just make a break for the biplanes, stand by until you see 'em coming, if I don't get there first, and then pull out."

With these words the veteran airman disappeared in the darkness with all the stealth of an Indian in moccasins.

"When the submarine crowd gets to work on the shore end of the cable there will be a stew in the operating room up here. The captain fears that in the excitement those defective guns might explode and hurt somebody. That's the reason he is so anxious to get everything fixed to prevent accident."

Josh's explanation was taken no more seriously than he intended it to be. The boys knew well enough that the captain was taking his life in his hands to so upset the mechanism of the guns that they could not be used in throwing lead at the submarine, if discovered during the cable-cutting performance.

An hour passed, in which the anxious waiters, in the chill precincts of the ruins, would have promptly testified was six times sixty minutes.

Billy started to say as much, when Josh gave him a poke in the ribs in the way of mute advice to keep still.

There was some sort of commotion breaking out in the quarters of the cable operators, at the north end of the ruins.

"Something doing now, sure."

Henri sidestepped further along the wall in order to get a little closer to the scene of action.

"The connection's shut off, that's what's the matter," predicted Josh, speaking into Billy's ear. "The job down below is going on. We'll know in a minute or two whether or not the captain has 'fixed' the big guns."

A door was flung open and a broad stream of light penetrated the outside darkness. In the illuminated opening was framed a stalwart Turk, and he started a yell, which found echo in the high-pitched voices of several more of the fez wearers behind him.

The sentries at the fort, two hundred yards distant, responded quickly to the summons, coming in twos and threes, pell mell, toward the cable station, brandishing their rifles, and doing some shouting on their own account.

"Gee whiz," muttered Billy, "it's a regular riot!"

Then to the rear of this noisy demonstration, the real note of alarm to the trio of watchers in the ruins rang out in the night.

Crack, crack—the whiplike snap of small-bore shooting irons!

The last words of the captain had been for his companions to make for the biplanes when shooting commenced. In compliance, the trio retreated in single file, close to the wall, and then ran like deer across the open, luckily for them a little way and partially screened by trees.

Up to the moment there was never a boom from the big guns, and even the spatting of the lesser weapons had ceased after the first few shots.

As instructed, Josh and the boys "stood by" the biplanes. The captain had failed to get there first, and it did not look like he was going to even get there next, for already the soldiers of the garrison were scattering in search of a certain disturber, who had the nerve to fire back when he was fired at.

The entire garrison appeared to be charging about except the disgusted gunners, who found that they could not pump even a single shell at a suspicious-looking object off the water front.

The cable operators, with a number of the sentries, had raced down the steep incline to where the cable lifted from under the current of the straits. The casing of the wires on shore had twisted up like a great snake, hacked apart from the tension-creating line under the channel.

For a scant minute or two the far-reaching rays from the lighthouse tower on Bakkal headland splintered on a polished surface like a whale's back, which quickly disappeared in a circle of foam below the rushing tide.

The gunners above had seen much more of the submarine before it dived, but that is about all the good it did them.

It was dawn before any of the Turks stumbled upon the hiding place of the aviators and their craft, and there was only four of this advance guard.

Josh counted a red furrow across the cheek after the first fire, and retaliated with one of the big service revolvers he carried, sending the marksman who marked him to the ground with a shattered knee-pan. Another of the attacking party got a chunk of lead in the shoulder, and the remaining two backed out for reinforcements.

In the meantime, the boy pilots had started the motors to humming, and Josh, though his fighting blood was up, concluded that there were too many coming just then, and hopped aboard with Henri.

"Not by a blamed sight are we leaving the captain to skirmish for himself," he announced with the uprise; "we'll hang around here till doomsday but what we'll get him out."

It was a mighty brief hang-around, after all, for the aviators were barely out of range of the Turks' rifles, when Billy's quick and roving eye caught the vivid flutter of a bandana handkerchief, Captain Johnson's favorite colors, from a cactus cluster in the sandy expanse over which the aircraft circled.

The Turkish troopers had ceased fire at the biplanes—a mere waste of powder now—but when they saw one of the machines dip and dive, a dozen or more of them, howling in triumph over the belief that their bullets really had winged one of the big flyers, charged full tilt across the plain.

Billy, however, had the bulge on the quick-comers, in that he was skimming the sandy soil before the Turks were fairly started, and Captain Johnson swung a leg in the aeroplane without compelling a stop.

The soldiers popped away with their rifles, but made no holes in the deceptive target. On the rise, Captain Johnson gave them a couple of rounds from his revolvers, and shouted, as a farewell salute:

"Dern your pictures, haven't you got enough yet? We'll come back some day and carry off the whole fort!"

"Of course," concluded the captain, settling into his seat in the space-killing biplane, "they couldn't understand a word, but there is nothing like relieving your mind of extra pressure."

He also relieved the tobacco plug of about a third of its weight.

CHAPTER XXIII.

RIDING A HURRICANE.

“We did the trick in fine style,” proclaimed Jimmy Stetson, at next sight of the young aviators, “but twice we missed a mine by eyelash length, and I warrant if we hadn’t, your record of lofty travel would be knocked in the head.”

“We had some little experience ourselves,” modestly advanced Billy.

The three boys, perched on a cracker box, compared notes until Jimmy was called away by a submarine lieutenant.

“What is on our list to-day?”

Henri pretended to look for answer to his chum’s question in a worse-for-wear notebook.

“Only a dinner engagement,” he gravely stated, “and that’s four hours to come.”

“Here comes Lieutenant Moppa,” observed Billy; “maybe he can prescribe something besides a rest cure.”

“You might suggest, Buddy, that we all go over and knock a chip off the old town.”

Henri was referring to Constantinople.

“Do your own suggesting,” advised Billy, rising to greet the Russian officer. “We were just talking, sir, about the effect of nothing-to-do on the nerves.”

“How long have you been at peace with yourselves and the world?” laughingly queried the lieutenant.

“I think about nine hours now,” replied Billy, looking at his battered silver watch.

“You will be going to seed, I am sure, if this state of things continues. By the way,” continued the officer, “I was about to tell you that the big airship is going into commission for a run around to the Gulf of Enos, backing up the British move on the Turkish port there. Heavy bombardment is already in progress, I am told, and we propose to show our allies that all the shaking up of the enemy is not to be performed by the land and water forces. As you know, we can put a choice lot of bomb droppers into the game. The largest aeroplane in the world did not come over here just for a show.”

“Thought you were not going to make your move until the warships got ready to break through the straits,” interposed Billy.

“That is just it,” said the lieutenant; “they are not in quite the shape for the grand rush, and in the meantime I want to get in a helping stroke wherever else I can. There is too much of the ‘Sikorsky’ to knock about in these little scouting operations, but the kind of an engagement now going on at Enos, I believe, is something nearer our size.”

This talk was interrupted by terrific cannonading. Four British warships had entered the Dardanelles and were shelling the Turkish forts—getting vigorous response from the shore batteries.

The boys caught sight of Captain Johnson hustling for the water front, and so apparent was their anxiety to get on the trail of their old friend that the Russian officer told them to skip out, but on no account to fail in reporting to him the following morning.

“Hold on there, my lads,” called Josh Freeman, whose track they crossed, and who also seemed to be answering an emergency summons, “Johnson isn’t going to start till I catch up, and maybe we will give you a lift.”

For this very invitation the boys were hoping, and they immediately reduced speed to correspond with the slower stride of the veteran aviator.

“Ordered to signal work,” announced the captain, as Josh and the boys joined him.

“Who’s up for pilots?” queried Freeman.

“The commander left the details to me,” rejoined Johnson.

“We’re ‘it’ then,” declared Billy.

“You take a whole lot for granted,” bantered the captain, with a wink at Josh.

The young aviators had their way, for it was just the way that suited Captain Johnson.

Hovering over the warships engaged in the bombardment, Johnson and Freeman, as observers and signal scouts, by the flag code kept the range finders on the gun decks apprised of the shots that told, as well as those that were ineffective.

They also showed the sign of warning against the approach of several Turkish torpedo boats, which were quickly turned by the hot reception measures taken by the warship gunners.

Several times in the lower strata the circling biplanes were jarred and dangerously shaken by the concussion of the tremendous gun-play.

On these occasions a rapid upshoot restored the fluttering flying machines again to even keel.

For three or four hours the four daring aviators were aloft and running the whole gamut of air perils attendant upon signal service over cross-fire of big guns.

With the retirement of the cruisers came relief, and when Billy and Henri got the word to backtrack they sent the machines along like two streaks of lightning.

“That ought to hold you a day or two,” grimly observed Captain Johnson, stamping the kinks out of his legs on the landing place, and addressing his young friends, who were also working off the strain by a vigorous arm-rubbing.

“Another job in the morning,” stated Billy, “and in a house on wings. Come around and see us start, captain, you and Josh.”

“Sure and we will,” assured the captain, “for that Russian craft beats all hollow, for size, any airship I ever saw.”

A word that evening from Lieutenant Moppa cinched the belief that it was a certain go, and Billy and Henri joined the other experts employed in preparing for the flight of the mighty machine.

Lieutenant Atlass assumed the responsibility for the storage of the explosives to be carried, and it can be stated that this officer had an assignment of the utmost importance. If anything went wrong in

the magazines the travelers aboard the craft would never know what hurt them.

Billy and Henri waved good-bye to Captain Johnson and Josh from the door of the pilots' cabin on the "Sikorsky" and then set their grips on the steering wheels as the starting signal was given. With the four engines roaring, the great bird of passage soared over the sea.

By the compass, the course was set southwest, for the point at which the expedition aimed is on that extreme quarter of the Turkish domain.

The first fighting viewed from the immense aeroplane was on and off the Gallipoli peninsula, where warships of the allies were hot-shotting the Turkish land positions.

But just about this time the barometer in the air pilot's cabin was the center of attraction for the commanding officer and the wheelmen.

The indications were of decidedly ugly aspect, and storms in these parts were notable for their violence.

"Hadn't we better take to the floats, lieutenant?" inquired Billy, feeling new resistance in the wheel.

Moppa from the lookout seat noted the turbulence of the waves far below, and shook his head.

"Better go higher," he directed.

The pilots set the planes for the ordered ascent. So fierce now were the gusts against them that they were compelled to turn and ride with the gale, which had, with awful suddenness, expanded in shrieking force. The broadside for the few minutes presented, very near proved the drivers' complete undoing, for the immense fabric could not be shifted with the celerity of the lesser craft heretofore handled by the boys, and it heeled over in a most alarming manner.

"Steady, lads," shouted the commanding officer, as Atlass and himself lent helping hands in holding the pounding wheels.

"Steady it is, sir," cried Billy, like an old salt, and "steady" it was when the craft beam-ended to the hurricane. But at what a speed! Two of the engines were cut off to slow the propellers, yet nothing short of 90 miles to the hour was still maintained.

The sense of location was as speedily lost. So many deviations were there in the cyclonic flight that the dancing compass needle lost its value as a true guide.

It was a toss up whether the airship would bump into Athens or Smyrna, if it did not before hit the bottom of the sea.

The pilots ever endeavored to keep the nose of the craft on the upturn, in the hope of overriding the terror howling behind it. That they succeeded to some extent had proof in a slight easing of the strain on the steering gear.

"Still blowing like Sam Hill," exclaimed Henri, "but the wrench isn't near as strong as it was."

The four at the wheels were dripping with perspiration from their muscle-racking experience. The balance of the company of nine men, with the exception of the engineer, were huddled in a bunch in the "corridor."

About everything movable on the airship was scattered about the deck. Atlass had many a dark thought regarding the explosives, and, no doubt, as many times thanked his stars that he had done a thorough job of packing.

He had more than once exchanged glances with Moppa when a particularly violent vibration was felt in the vessel. They were both thinking alike, and of the magazines.

As the storm died away and the sea no longer leaped in wild waves, the pilots essayed a cautious descent, by slow degrees. The compass showed the movement due south, but there was nothing to convince as to how far south.

No land was visible to the naked eye, but Lieutenant Moppa, having resumed lookout duty, announced that with his binocle he perceived a faint blue line in direction directly ahead.

"Ease her off a point or two," he commanded, "and hold this course without change." With a second thought, he further ordered: "Let Mowbray and Gault take the wheels. You boys will be dead on your feet if you do not quit for a while."

Billy and Henri rather reluctantly relinquished their guiding posts, though, if the truth be known, both were rather shaky in the legs.

The new pilots, however, had plain sailing, and the boys felt that they had done their full duty, and more, when it had really counted for something.

Sailing lower and lower, the big airship, with driving force reduced to one engine, slowly approached a strip of land in the sea, now quite plainly visible to the crew.

There were military forces assembled on this ground, and it was Henri who first distinguished their nationality, when close enough to distinguish color. Blue tunics and red trousers—that was enough, without waiting to set eyes on the top display of red kepis, surmounted by the familiar tri-color cockade and ball.

"They're French!" he shouted. "The real thing. Vive, La France!"

The port was Mudros, on Lemnos island, in the Ægean sea, where 35,000 French and British soldiers had just landed.

"Descend."

With the command the pilots lowered the "Sikorsky" to the water level.

"Vive, La France!"

Henri's exulting shout was heard again as a boat shot out from the shore to meet the gigantic aeroplane drifting in on its polished floats.

CHAPTER XXIV.

LOFTY GUN PRACTICE.

When the identity of the Russian aircraft had been established, the big ship was landed, and the aviators mingled with the soldiers on shore. Henri was particularly active in making the rounds among the French contingent.

He had been separated from his companions for less than a half hour, when they saw him coming, with a joy-illumined face and a skip between every other step. At Henri's side, but at a more dignified pace and looking every inch a soldier in the uniform of a French artilleryman, walked a youth who commanded immediate recognition from Billy.

"Hello, François," cried the Bangor boy, rushing forward with outstretched hand, and the newcomer so hurried his stride that he came more than half way with his warm return of happy greeting.

"The world isn't so wide, after all," laughingly declared Henri. "What do you think of us running up against one another in this out of the way neck of the woods? It is the remotest thing on earth that would have entered my mind. But isn't it great?"

The boys had last seen François, Henri's brother, in a hospital at war-torn Arras, these many days agone, and how much of history had been written in red since that meeting!

François, then pale, worn and suffering from a serious wound, was now straight as an arrow, ruddy of cheek, and in gallant array of blue and red.

"I've heard all about how you and brother here," he said to Billy, "saved for mother the family fortune, and it would make your ears burn were I to tell you all else that has been related of your courage and fidelity."

"Go lightly on that, please," was Billy's modest plea; "let's talk about something different—cabbages or kings, for instance."

François laughed. "Same old boy, I see, bound to bloom under cover. Oh, well, you can't get away from your record, so have it as you please."

"Say, Billy," broke in Henri, "I haven't had a chance to tell you before, but the bold Britons have broken into Enos, and that storm caused us to miss the grand entry. It was something of a scrap, too, I hear."

"Don't worry about that," observed François; "just take a run over to Smyrna instead; you will get all the thrills you desire there along about now—the allies' aviators are scattering bombs all over the place."

"There's a chance for the 'Sikorsky' to show them a thing or two in the way of distributing fireworks."

Henri recalled the showering the Russian lieutenants gave Constantinople as they passed over the ancient city coming down from the Bosphorus.

"What's your route?" inquired Billy.

"Don't know exactly," replied François, "but I fancy it will be the Dardanelles for us. The transports have been waiting for several days to take our troops somewhere."

"That will give us another look at you soon," rejoiced Henri, "for our craft is going to be mighty close to the front when the real push is made."

Within forty-eight hours the boys witnessed the embarking of all the Anglo-French forces, with the exception of a few battalions left at Mudros, for renewed assault on the Turkish defenses of the Gallipoli peninsula. François was among the departing troops, and with farewell words of gay assurance that he would soon meet again his brother and Billy.

Lieutenant Moppa, enthused over the reports of aviation activity at Smryna, and determined to give the "Sikorsky" another long-distance try-out, ordered immediate flight toward the coast of Asia Minor.

"Barring a storm disturbance," declared the officer in command, "our four engines ought to hit the high mark of going this time."

On this journey the barometer proved not at all fractious, and it was easy sailing.

The aviators found a large number of troop transports off Smyrna, and on the very day of the arrival of the big airship a French airman dropped two bombs on Fort Kastro, killing several soldiers; another sank a German ship lying in port, and a third struck the railroad station.

"Those French flyers certainly are a busy lot," commented Lieutenant Moppa. The occupants of the "Sikorsky," in coming on high, had a full and open view of these effective aeroplane maneuvers.

The aviators on the Russian craft were also impressed with the fact that about 40,000 Turks were engaged in the defense of Smyrna, well entrenched on heights commanding the city.

Constantinople had just contributed thirty heavy guns to the equipment of the defenders.

Joining the allies in the offing, the mammoth machine, which dwarfed the other planes to small proportions by comparison, excited much curiosity, and attracted many ceremonial visits from the officers of the attacking forces.

Lieutenant Moppa was more than willing to accept a test of efficiency of his ship and the metal of his men.

"The only trouble is, your oversized aeroplane presents too big a target for close flying," argued a member of the French aviation corps.

"Perhaps so," smilingly returned the lieutenant, "but we are elusive enough at a speed of 90 miles an hour."

"Well, it is a powerful machine, no question about that," cheerfully conceded the French aviator. "I would like very much to make a trial trip with you."

"You have the invitation," promptly stated the lieutenant.

When the "Sikorsky" made a demonstration the next day over Forts Two Brothers and Bastrati, on Smyrna heights, the Frenchman was an interested passenger, and the four engines, working all at

once, gave him an earful of noise that he had not expected. He was no less surprised at the youth of the pilots, but was soon convinced that they were star performers at the wheels.

“Wonderful work there,” he said to Lieutenant Moppa, after the big craft had been put through all the paces of scientific planing.

This flight, however, was not intended solely as an exhibition trip. Lieutenant Atlass was soon working overtime with his bomb-dropping specialty, and Mowbray and Gault, the aviator-gunners, swiveled the little growlers, mounted fore and aft, in most effective manner, raising many a howl from the trenches with their expert downfire.

The fighters in the fortifications were not slow themselves in showing that this was no holiday set apart for rest.

They banged away with more vigor than precision at the huge fabric above them, and occasionally put a dent in the armor of the aerial tormentor.

“Your enclosures, I guess, have saved us many a flesh clip from spent balls,” said the French aviator, who was standing in the fore-cabin with Lieutenant Moppa.

“Wouldn’t be surprised,” responded the officer, “yet if we held one position long enough, there is no telling what a shell might do to us.”

But it was the business of Billy and Henri to see that no fixed position was presented to the aim of a long range gun.

“I was just thinking,” remarked Billy, in an aside to his fellow wheelman, “that if a chunk of lead should happen to strike full force one of those magazines forward they’d be picking up pieces of us for a week in Siberia or some other section of nowhere.”

“Far be the dark moment,” fervently declared Henri.

Happening to glance sidewise through the windows of the pilot house, the last speaker saw a biplane lifting from the level between the two forts.

“Say, Buddy,” he called, “they’re going to fight us in our own strata. There’s another of ’em coming up—and yet another. Three to mix with.”

Lieutenant Moppa himself had just sighted the hostile aircraft, and he ordered the gunners to watch for an opportunity to put a check on the flying challengers if they ventured too close. The men serving the airship’s little battery, however, needed no encouragement. They were keyed up to best effort for the difficult test of marksmanship—wing shooting from under wings.

“There goes one of their popguns,” cried Mowbray, as a smoke wreath showed at the bow of the leading Turkish aeroplane.

“Keep the nose right at them,” the lieutenant instructed the pilots, “as long as they come together. Don’t present a side view unless you have to.”

“If they get far enough away from the forts what’s the matter with bumping them?”

This suggestion from Henri did not seem to appeal to Lieutenant Moppa, who lifted a hand in protest.

“It would be taking big chances for mighty small game,” he asserted. “Let Mowbray and Gault give them the tumble at long range.”

The first named gunner at the moment blazed away, and with successful result, to which he testified with a whoop of satisfaction.

“One down,” he yelled; “only crippled, maybe, but out of the game.”

“Yes, and you have spoiled the day for the other two; they are not coming to see the air circus at all.”

It was Lieutenant Atlass who announced the retirement of the bold navigators. What with Mowbray’s center shot, the roaring of the four engines and the appalling size of the great airship, it had been all sufficient to send the Turkish craft to cover.

“I see how it is,” chuckled the French aviator; “they thought we had rigged one of the warships with wings, and the idea scared them stiff.”

The “Sikorsky” after a week’s service over the Turkish entrenchments, on the heights of Smyrna, started on return voyage to Tenedos, where Lieutenant Moppa proposed now to hold the big craft in readiness for that long-expected summons to meet the Russian fleet when it should win through the Bosphorus. That this was a near coming event, the officer implicitly believed.

Billy and Henri were not so much concerned in the whys and wherefores that prompted the backtracking as they were in the prospect of rejoining Captain Johnson and Josh.

With these old scouts, as Billy said, “there was something doing every day.”

CHAPTER XXV.

IN THE HANDS OF THE TURKS.

The “Sikorsky,” being out of commission until further orders, the boys had the liberty of free lances, and, by favor of the British military authorities at Tenedos, accompanied an aerial fleet dispatched to the north, to work for a time with the forces of General Hamilton, recently landed on the northern side of the Gulf of Saros and also opening at various points on the Gallipoli peninsula. In spite of serious opposition from the Turks in strong entrenchments protected by barbed wire, the khaki-clad troops were continuing to advance toward the interior when the aviation aids arrived at the scene of action.

The flying contingent included the veterans, Captain Johnson and his inseparable, Josh Freeman, to whom, without doubt, Billy and Henri owed their chance of getting places in the expedition.

“We may have to operate separately, young man,” advised the captain, “and take assignments as they come, and I want to urge that you have a care about overleaping orders. I know you of old, and know that you sometimes forget that there is a limit.”

“Here’s a lecture on caution from a man who never dodged dangerous duty in his life,” laughed Billy; “we have acquired a whole lot of wisdom, professor, since we joined the war college over here.”

“But still I have my eye on you,” persisted the captain, with an attempt to hide a broad smile by a turn of the head.

If it so happened that the boys really did overshoot the mark early in the advance movement, the fault was none of their promoting, and the authority for the mishap was close behind them when it befell.

Billy was piloting no less a personage than “Daring Dan” Macauley, and Henri had behind him Marcus Jones Canby, also a hairbreadth member of the famous Seventh Corps, when they struck the snag that tumbled them within the Turkish lines.

The war-planes carrying our boys and soldier observers started from Enos at break of day to reconnoiter the territory along the Gulf of Saros, and get as near as possible to the line of defenses above the Dardanelles, on the Marmora sea coast.

It was first acquaintance day with the pilots and their companions. The two behind and the pair in front had no knowledge of just how they would balance when it came to a weighing in of their metal on the scales of emergency.

If, however, the young aviators expected restraint in the matter of taking risks, they were entertaining an error in their minds.

Macauley and Canby were as free-handed in the acceptance of danger as any two men living, of which fact the wheelmen were very soon aware.

So the journey proceeded further and further afield without a word of protest from the officers, until all of a sudden the aircraft were in rapid ascent to clear a fortress crowning an elevation five hundred feet above sea level.

Rising above the battery, the aviators looked down and out upon the Sea of Marmora. It proved that the garrison here was on the alert, acutely so, for the reason that the British invasion of the peninsula to the near west had sent a note of alarm up and down the coast.

Before Henri could get the war-plane he was guiding wholly out of range, a sharpshooter on one of the four towers of the Seddil-Bahr fort opened up with a Mauser magazine rifle, and to the ill fortune of the airmen sent a bullet where it would do most harm in the propeller section of the craft.

The young pilot comprehended in a mental flash that a downshoot of the wings of the war-plane was the only thing to do, and he made it a long slide, so long, indeed, that the garrison waiting for the capture never made it.

But the landing on Marmora Island offered no other than the same result—the aviators had fallen into a web too wide for avoidance.

Billy never hesitated a minute in volplaning in the trail of the crippled machine, and the two warplanes alighted almost at the same time.

The young aviators jumped at the job of attempting repair, but failed to finish before they and their companions were surrounded by Turks. Macauley and Canby instinctively reached for their revolvers, but it would have availed nothing to resist, and would mean certain death from the muzzles of a score of rifles covering them.

“Hands down, Mac.,” was Canby’s cool and quiet address to his comrade; “we are up against it, and no use of making a bark.”

The captive airmen were marched off to Marmora town between a double file of soldiers, while other islanders brought up the rear, dragging the war-planes.

One of the Turkish officers spoke French, indicated by the few questions he asked in that language, principally as to what had caused the downfall of the aeroplane. The uniforms worn by Macauley and Canby presented all the evidence required showing that they belonged to the peninsula invaders.

That it was proposed to take the prisoners away from the island forthwith was impressed by the incoming, upon signal, of a small steamboat, and the immediate ushering aboard of the airmen, who soon learned that the destination was Islam’s capital city.

“Going right to headquarters,” remarked “Daring Dan,” as the four leaned over the steamer rail watching the swirl of the tide, “and no cards with us to send on to the sultan.”

“I hope the beds are well aired at the jail,” drawled Canby, catching the humor of his comrade.

Billy and Henri were wondering just what the Turks were really going to do with them.

It was not until the following morning that the young aviators saw the marble minarets of Constantinople sparkling in the sunlight, and little reckoned then that they were soon to pass the “high door” or “Sublime porte,” the principal entrance of the sultan’s palace, which rose in grandeur on the extreme point of the promontory where the ancient city stands. Just then the boys were more

inclined to the belief that locks and bars were to form the only vision coming to them for many a day.

"Here's where the 'blood brotherhood' won't count," sighed Henri, reminded of their Cossack relation by happening to touch the amulet in his blouse pocket.

"Might trade these flints for crescents," suggested Billy, "only I'm afraid we couldn't bluff the Turks with that sort of game."

While the boys were speaking the steamboat was puffing into the Golden Horn, an inlet of the sea, at the north of the promontory.

Once on the central quay of the harbor the prisoners were marched through an exceedingly crooked and tortuous street to the forbidding front of a gloomy-looking and huge pile of bygone architecture, and a few minutes later were the sole occupants of an immense and dimly lighted apartment, stone-walled and furnished only with a few wooden benches, upon two of which the disconsolate quartette seated themselves and waited in dreary anticipation for the next deal of fate.

CHAPTER XXVI.

SEEING THE SULTAN.

“If it should please the gentleman in the bushy trousers who served as chief of the reception committee to place some light repast before us, he would at this moment fill a long-felt want.”

Canby was not constructed to remain under a cloud for any lengthy period, and he proceeded with his inimitable drawl to divert the dismal train of thought.

“Turn me loose in the corridor out there with the fellow who appropriated my revolvers,” growled the fighting Macauley, “and I will credit it up to a change of luck.”

“Tut, tut, Danny, you must cease exercising your temper,” chided Canby, with a grin; “always meet misfortune with a May morning face.”

“You go hang,” replied “Daring Dan,” who was compelled to smile in spite of himself.

“Your suggestion respectfully turned down,” bantered Canby, “and the same to the Turk, even if he should insist upon it.”

The Turkish officer who had brought the prisoners up from Marmora just then made his appearance, accompanied by a couple of attendants, who served an excellent brand of coffee to the captives, along with plates of sweetmeats. When the two Britons finally located themselves behind huge cigarettes, also presented by their captor, they were in a mood to seek information as to the near future.

“We would be in great distress if the brave visitors should soon depart,” was the roundabout answer to the question of Canby as to what he and his companions might expect, and the evasive words were spoken with oriental gravity.

Macauley shrugged his shoulders. “Much good it does you to try and pump him”—this an aside to his comrade.

The Turk raised his eyes, but by no other sign showed interest in or desire to know what the Briton had said to his mate.

“May I have a word with the young gentlemen?”

The Turk bowed to Billy and Henri, who had been singularly silent for them, and still engaged with some of the confections that came with the coffee.

“Go ahead, your excellency,” said the Bangor boy, returning the salutation with a short nod.

“I must request that you go with me for a brief hour or two.”

“But what about our friends here?” asked Henri.

“I beg that they will excuse you for a little while.”

With this, the Turk stepped aside and motioned the boys to precede him through the doorway. Having no other choice, the lads marched out, with assurance to Macauley and Canby that they would return as soon as permitted to do so.

“Hope it is all for your good that you are going,” wished Canby.

“Same here,” added “Daring Dan.”

A ride of twenty minutes in a closed carriage, and the boys stepped out in front of a large and lofty gate, the principal entrance to the grounds of a palace, which, with its buildings, pavilions, gardens and groves, occupied a large space.

“Pinch me and see if I’m awake,” urged Billy, under his breath, and Henri was equally stranded in his wonder.

Their guide seemed to grow in serious mien, and his attitude was one of new importance. With bent head he led a long march through magnificent halls, decorated more in European than oriental style, and finally a splendid stairway with crystal balustrade was ascended to the second floor of the palace, where the boys were ushered into a small, plainly furnished private parlor, in marked contrast to its surroundings.

Seated on a divan, near a grate in which a cheerful fire was crackling, and with several uniformed officers standing near, was a keen-eyed man, wearing lightly a weight of years, and otherwise the conventional red calpac or fez of Turkey, a low white collar, gray cravat, blue serge suit and black shoes of comfortable cut, but no jewelry of any sort.

The officer standing nearest the divan, evidently of high rank, turned to look at the boys, who, just inside of the door and nervously fingering their caps, awaited some word that would set them straight.

The mentioned official, who was doing the looking over, also acted as spokesman.

“These are the flying boys?” was the question he put to the guide.

The individual behind the lads nodded assent. He gently pushed his charges closer to the questioner.

“You are the youths who guide airships, I believe?”

This interrogation straight at the boys.

“That is our business,” modestly advanced Billy.

“You know also of their construction?”

“Yes, sir,” replied the Bangor boy, “we are factory trained.”

Then followed a series of questions relating to the heavier-than-air machines, the rapid improvement thereof, the various types in use, the duration of flight, carrying capacity, and so forth.

Warming to a subject so near to their hearts and so familiar by constant contact and continuous practice, the boys alternated in detailing what experience had taught them about modern aeronautics. They forgot to feel like a cat in a strange garret, as at first entrance into the palace. They also forgot mention that they had, not so long since, flown over Constantinople in a Russian airship that left a stream of fire behind it.

The man on the divan, the only one seated in the room, during the practical exposition of the past, present and future of air mastery, had listened attentively for some twenty minutes or more, when he indicated by a slight movement of the hand that the statements already made would suffice.

The boys backed out through the doorway, held to that movement by a significant pressure on their elbows from behind.

Once outside the palace, and putting two and two together, the young aviators might have guessed that they had not been very far away from the first caliph of the Moslem world—the sultan himself.

The boys expected that they would be taken back to where they had left their companions in misfortune, but this was evidently not the plan of their guide and custodian. Instead, they proceeded straight to Golden Horn Harbor, where they boarded the same steamer that had brought them up from Marmora.

“Let’s ask his nibs what’s on the carpet now,” suggested Billy, as they stood on the deck of the vessel then getting under way.

“Might as well try to open a can of sardines with a wooden toothpick as to get anything out of that fellow. But there is no harm in making another attempt, just to while away the time.”

To the surprise of Henri, he missed his guess on the silent Turk this time. The boys’ reception at the palace had raised their standing. The officer told them that they were to repair the damaged aircraft as soon as it could be done, and then pilot both war-planes to the capital. Turkey needed all the aeroplanes it could get, and these had come cheaply.

“Now let me tell you, Buddy,” confided Henri, “we are not going to contract to work around these diggings any longer than we can help; the job doesn’t appeal to me.”

“Right you are, pard,” agreed Billy, “we’ve been pulled and hauled enough; I’d just like to volunteer to do something on my own account, for a change.”

After several days of scientific tinkering, Henri, ably assisted by his chum, succeeded in reducing the fracture at the propeller end of the crippled war-plane, and the machine again worked like a watch.

“What a rattling good chance to steal away in one of these machines if we could somehow get rid of the busy watchers ever at our elbows.”

“That’s a great idea, Henri, but it would be catching a weasel asleep to dodge that boss Turk who is charged with our keeping. If there has been a waking moment for a week that he hasn’t had his face within arm’s reach of us, I don’t recollect it. And, Buddy, it has just occurred to me that it wouldn’t be a very joyful return, after all, pulling in without the men who rode behind us into this trap.”

“That’s a thought that missed me,” regretted Henri; “we’ll just wait and put something across that will count us all in.”

CHAPTER XXVII.

OUT OF THE TOILS.

It is doubtful if the chief Turk and the lesser Moslem who rode with the young aviators from Marmora to Constantinople had ever before had a flying experience, but they sat like wooden images in the observers' places, impassive and silent. Their watchword was "kader"—which means that their fate is in the hands of a superior force, and that what is going to happen will happen anyway.

If the pilots, in a spirit of mischief, put the war-planes through some fancy paces, they wholly failed to disturb the composure of the Osmanlis.

As Billy remarked later, "the chap with me was like 'a painted ship upon a painted ocean,' and I couldn't shake him out of his trance to save my neck."

Sailing into the Golden Horn, and alighting on a quay pointed out by the Turks, the boys found shelter for the war-planes in a covered bazaar condemned for military purposes, and located near the artillery barracks. To the great delight of the lads, they found Macauley and Canby sitting in front of the last named building, complacently puffing cheroots and seemingly with the least worry in the world.

"Who comes here?" hailed Canby. "Advance and say 'how-de-do.'"

The young aviators gave the demanded countersign with a will, and two-handed emphasis.

"They have not put us under parole yet, I'm thankful to say," stated Macauley in an undertone, "and I hope they won't for a week at least. I see you brought up the war-planes, and, blame me, if I don't believe there is some show of a get-away if we work it right."

"S-sh," warned Canby, "the boss Turk has an eye on us."

The quartette bunked together that night, though the Turkish officer at first insisted that the boys should accept quarters to themselves, the honor of that palace visit still clinging to them. Billy and Henri very promptly protested against separation from their comrades, and finally had their way.

That they were closely guarded was impressed by a continuous shuffle of slippered feet throughout the night before the door of their sleeping apartment.

"How about your get-away?" whispered Canby.

Macauley turned over in his cot, with a grunt. He was not ready, apparently, with any definite plan of action.

Billy and Henri were doing some thinking on their own account. They, too, had yet to realize upon any brilliant idea of forming.

They, however, found in the morning a line of labor cut out for them, and that was an overhauling of the Turkish aeroplane stock in the improvised aerodrome—quite a variety, but rather short in number and condition, the real quality of the collection being machines forwarded from Germany.

Then it was that Billy expressed a decided liking for Turkish attire, and he had a reason for that, with Henri as his sole confidant. The latter, it is needless to detail, also took immediate notion to a Moslem masquerade.

Billy's next move was to request the assistance, in the old bazaar structure, of the two British scouts, for "heavy work," as he explained it, and the boy had to hold his sides, so mirth-provoking was the first appearance of the Britons in Oriental pick-me-ups, something the worse for former wear.

Carrying on in amusement, Billy delivered an address to the "apprentices," for the benefit of the real Turks standing around, in which he advised: "There is a wise saying I have heard spoken here, 'Luck is infatuated with the efficient;' now hustle and see if luck likes you."

Macauley shook a fist at Billy in mock anger, while Canby made a fearful face at the laughing lad.

The Britons were quick to fathom the design of the young aviators in getting all of them into disguise.

"That boy has a good head for music," was Canby's quiet tip to Macauley.

Billy and Henri certainly earned their salt by the expert manner in which they set in order the flying fleet of the Turks, and the Moslem aviators that went out on scouting trips every day had no complaint of ill behavior on the part of the aeroplanes used by them.

It might be mentioned that two war-planes of British make, occupying space near to the open front of the bazaar building, were not neglected by the busy aeroplane experts. The tanks of these machines were kept filled to the brim, and every running part oiled to a nicety.

The prisoners were biding their time, and awaiting the golden moment when the taskmasters would relax vigilance by reason of some counter-interest. Who but their immediate guard could have instant knowledge that two aeroplanes in the common run were carrying other than real "defenders of the faith" on scouting journey?

And if all of these intimates in a bunch should join one of the daily processions to the mosques, some special occasion demanding it, "just see us get," as Billy said when figuring on such a happening.

It came about that on a memorable day, nearing sunset, and the return of the Turkish airmen from various scouting tours anticipated, the four captives found themselves alone in the makeshift aerodrome.

"Catch on here," was Billy's quick summons to the others, who as quickly responded in rolling out the war-planes and into the starting place at the rear of the barracks.

The boy pilots set the motors in motion, and never had the buzzing seemed louder nor more insistent for attention than on this occasion, when every nerve in the four human make-ups was taut and tense with suppressed excitement.

They are off! Rising above that remarkable square of At-Meidan, occupying the site of the ancient Hippodrome, and wheeling to the right of the magnificent mosque of Soliman, the young aviators had a clear view of the sea-front.

Coming in both directions, up and down the coast, were the six or eight Turkish aircraft that had set

out from the capital several hours previous.

Leaning over Billy's shoulder, Macauley vociferated in the young pilot's ear:

"We have a shot in the locker, but none in the gun."

The "shot in the locker," to which "Daring Dan" referred, was food, which from time to time had been stored in the war-planes, in anticipation of escape and some unforeseen delay in getting back to the British lines. The prisoners had had no chance to obtain any cartridges for the wicked little swiveled shooting irons carried in the armored aircraft. The Turkish officer was responsible for the removal of the original supply.

Billy well knew of the lack mentioned by Macauley, and he had already decided to dodge the well-armed airline patrol by turning back from the sea and making a dash for the open on the Asiatic side.

"Blame me," cried Macauley! "it looks like they've got a line on us!"

Two of the Turkish craft were coming like the wind toward the British war-planes, the latter still working directly upward.

That was enough to settle the minds of the pilots on a land course straightway. Every ounce of driving power went into the war-plane motors, and there was nothing aloft in the Turkish empire that had a ghost of a show in a race with these fleeing space-killers.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IN THE GROVES OF DAMASCUS.

“They might as well be tied to a post for all the gain they are making,” gleefully proclaimed Macauley, looking backward at the pursuing aircraft, which even then were rapidly fading in the rear distance.

“And I thought I had patched up the junk they are driving in pretty good shape,” laughingly remarked Billy, turning his head to see the last of the winged fleet of the Turks.

Canby, in the other war-plane, had just been asking Henri if he had any idea where he was going. The pilot strained his voice in telling the soldier that he “didn’t know,” and at the moment “didn’t care much.”

It was strictly the truth, this assertion as to lack of knowledge of any fixed route to follow, and equally hazy any idea as to where the war-planes were going to stop.

With the balmy air blowing full in their faces, and clear sailing under a sun-lit sky, the young aviators were living in the present—a present wherein for the first time in many a day the alarms of war were not resounding. Trouble was behind them, and very likely in front of them, but sufficient this little respite.

The compass showed that they were traveling in direction southwest, and far to the left could be seen a line of railway, on which, reduced by distance, a toy-sized locomotive was speeding in front of a miniature train of cars.

To the right was unrolled afar a real surface picture of the ancient land of the nomads—the land from which come dates, galls, gum, mohair and carpets, where the camel cushion-foots the deserts and lies down to rest in the generous shade of the oasis.

It was a vast and fertile area over which the warplanes were sailing, and as their rapid transit carried the machines further south, the silver threading of rivers of names unknown to the air travelers crossed and recrossed the green expanse of the glorious panorama.

Fleas and flies and locusts and plagues do not rise to aeroplane strata—so it all looked wholly good then to the aviators.

Thirsty and hungry, Billy concluded to chance a descent, and nearing the ground, saw several muffled figures hastening away from the stone-bordered brink of a well, followed by a number of smaller shapes not muffled at all. Goatskin water pouches were abandoned and gourd drinking vessels scattered when the scared water-bearers made their bolt. They had, perhaps, learned not to shy at a locomotive, but a buzzing aeroplane suddenly flapping down from above was a different proposition.

“It looks like taking candy from the children,” said Henri, picking up one of the gourds dropped by a little bronze cupid, now kiting across a grassy slope not far from the well.

“Better drink your fill before some of the tribesmen come and poke you with a scimitar,” advised Macauley, who was already setting example.

“I don’t believe they will bother us with these aeroplanes showing their teeth,” asserted Billy, “and what’s more, I am going to chance it, anyhow.”

With this declaration, the Bangor boy plumped himself down on rudely constructed stone settee alongside the well and contentedly munched some of the cakes that had been stored against an hour of hunger in the war-plane lockers.

In a land of prophets, Billy was not the least. The aviation party was not “bothered,” and even indulged in slumber, without sentinel, for about the whole night.

“The only thing that is of serious outlook,” declared Billy the next morning, “is just how long the petrol is going to hold out. We can pick up enough to eat, at least enough to keep our bones from showing, but I’ll be blessed if we can run these machines with anything like olive oil.”

“Where are we bound for, anyhow?”—the second or third time that Canby had put the same question.

“‘Ask of the winds that far around with fragments strewed the sea,’” recited Henri, who had never forgotten his original attempt to set the “boy stood on the burning deck” verse to the French language.

“‘I don’t know where I’m going, but I’m on the way,’” sang Billy, with a mixture of flat notes.

“You are not the only clown in this company, it seems, Canby,” chuckled Macauley.

“Couldn’t aspire with you present,” was Canby’s retort.

The petrol question was not settled by this hilarity, and as to the destination of the war-planes, only time could settle that.

“There certainly must be some big towns in this region,” argued Henri, thinking of the railway they had seen, “and I’ll warrant we can get a tank supply with the exercise of a little nerve and diplomacy.”

“That is just what you will have to use, and, I might say, all you have to use to get it,” put in Billy. “You and I haven’t a red cent between us, and I doubt if our friends here transferred their gold and silver to the new, or, rather, old clothes they are wearing.”

“We didn’t,” exclaimed Macauley, “but I could tell you to whose clothes the few shillings we carried were transferred: Abou, peace be with him—not.”

“Yet we have Billy’s watch,” advanced Henri, with a grin; “heirloom though it is, the sacrifice must be made.”

The Bangor boy cast a rebuking glance at his chum, for that battered “turnip” had outworn long-continued fun-making, as well as any value for exchange it had ever possessed.

“What’s that saying, Billy, that you sprung on us the other day, ‘luck is stuck on the efficient,’ or something like that? Maybe it will work if you hustle right on the petrol trail.”

Canby was the speaker, and he owed Billy one for the way the latter had laughed when Macauley and himself made their début as Turks.

Seeing that he was getting the worst of it, Billy crossed in with:

"Too much talk; we'd better be pulling out."

There was no dissent to this, and after Macauley and Canby had appropriated and filled two of the goatskin water pouches, the aviation party took to the air.

The pilots had made up their minds to keep up a high rate of speed, and take the chances of running into or near a populous city, where by some hook or crook the waning supply of petrol could be replenished.

Over 200 miles had been covered that day before any of the four in the war-planes raised a cry of "found," and it was Canby who had the honor of making the loud announcement:

"Look, sports; look away to the right!"

The vision to which the soldier called attention were towering domes glittering with the crescent, rising out of a sea of foliage; white buildings shining with ivory softness through bordering clumps of dark verdure, and flat roofs resembling miniature lakes in the distance.

As the war-planes swung around and were sent, nose on, straight at this point of lovely vista, the aviators faced breezes laden with the odors of roses and jasmine.

This wilderness of gardens and scented thickets was encircled by bare mountain walls, piercing the azure sky above.

The war-planes settled in a clearing between two orchards, and near a bubbling spring, shaded by olive trees and vines.

"Let the petrol question go on the table for an hour or two, anyway," pleaded Henri, entranced by the appeal of this earthly paradise.

"So be it," agreed Macauley, "and while we are resting I mean to commune with nature, including the fruit that yonder tempts me."

"I'm with you," cried Canby, rising from a kneeling position at the spring, in which he had buried his face from chin to eyebrow.

Billy, ever practical, turned to the work of gauging the war-plane tanks.

"Down to bed-rock, Buddy," he reported ruefully. "Twenty-five miles more would finish us."

"You're a regular vandal, pard," dreamily protested Henri, backstretched on the grass, his head pillowed on his hands.

The dreamer, however, in the next moment was sitting up and taking notice, for majestically approaching from the shady recesses of the nearest orchard was the grand figure of a man, under turban and swathed in flowing, loose-sleeved gown, a veritable patriarch, white-bearded and benign of countenance.

The newcomer, whose eyesight was evidently not of the best, for he judged the staring lads by their garb, spoke the familiar greeting in Arabic: "Peace be with you."

Drawing nearer, though, and perceiving that the invaders were of another type than Turk, he astonished the boys by speaking in perfectly good English.

"How came you to Damascus?" was his first query.

"Damascus!" exclaimed Henri. "Is this Damascus?"

"So; and the oldest city in the world," gravely replied the patriarch.

"Where the swords come from!"

This from Billy, whose great-grandfather had handed down a Damascus blade, and which still hung over the family fireplace back in the Old Bay state.

Macauley and Canby by this time had come up from the rear, and listening in wonder to the plain English from the oriental mouth.

The old man seemed to appreciate that he was causing a bit of a stir by the fluent use of a foreign language.

Waving his hands, palms upward, he explained:

"I am one of the Jews who immigrated back from Europe—and I have memories; oh, so many; but how long ago; how long ago."

The wisdom of ages was on his brow, and treasured memories in his heart.

"How came you here?" he repeated; "I have listened and heard no answer."

Billy simply pointed to the war-planes, resting on the sward.

"But once have I seen the like, and on high, above the Mediterranean. Will wonders never cease?"

The old man curiously paced the length of the machines, and peered through the rigging, lightly touching the various exposed parts, all the while talking softly to himself.

Finally he again directly addressed the aviation party.

"What is your will?" he asked, the soul of hospitality in his eyes. "Food? More than a plenty you shall have. Shelter? It is yours for the word, but in these divinely beautiful days, no four walls for me. Heard ye ever the cry of the desert, and 'the house not made with hands'?"

"So far, so good, kind sir, but have you in the town any of the stuff generally called 'petrol'?"

The patriarch hesitated at the term of general classification of fuel oils. "Maybe it is there," he replied uncertainly.

Henri jumped into the breach by setting forth that what they wanted was "just oil to burn."

The face of the graybeard flashed a look of comprehension.

"It is not the impossible that you request; in the manufactures there is use for the mineral fluid, and for you it shall be found."

"We haven't the price of it about us," confessed Billy.

The patriarch shrugged his shoulders. "I am making no measure of shekels for the stranger at my door. In my groves take your ease until the morrow, and all these things I have promised will be delivered unto you."

With these words, spoken like a benediction, the old man departed in the direction of the splendid terraces of level roofs.

"If this isn't a rum go, count me a goat," remarked Canby, in his breezy way, when the four resumed easy attitude on the green carpet of the glade. "Young men, you have saved the day, more power to

you!”

“And Billy has saved his watch,” teased Henri, and for which his chum handed him a rousing slap on the back.

With the coming of the swarthy servitor, whom Macauley promptly named “Mustapha,” hunger was routed without benefit of surrender. The platter-bearer brought a delicious service of cereals, grapes, figs, oranges and apricots, and coffee as thick as syrup. To crown it all, for the soldiers, “Mustapha” also produced some fragrant tobacco, rolled in husks.

“I think I will register for a month,” enthusiastically advised Canby; “if this isn’t going on the sunny side of the street I will never steal another umbrella.”

His comrade, flat on his back, was blowing smoke rings at the birds.

“I guess these are private preserves,” sleepily commented Billy, “for no other foot has trailed us but the boss and the black. There is no necessity of locking up the diamonds and plate to-night.”

And so the four dreamed in a valley of Lebanon.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THROUGH THE HOLY LAND.

The drumming of a pheasant in a near-by thicket was the first sound of the dawn to the first of the four sleepers who emerged from dreamland—no other than Billy, whose slumber had been haunted by old impressions of war.

Half awake, the boy looked dazedly for the appearance in the clearing of rank upon rank of marching soldiers, moving to the measure of the drum-beat. When, however, he had rubbed his eyes and realized where he was, his ringing laugh not only dissolved the fantasy, but brought Henri to his elbows like a jumping-jack.

"Plague take it," cried the startled lad; "what do you mean by scaring a fellow out of his boots?"

"That's just what a jolly old bird over there in the bushes did to me," said Billy; "I thought he was sounding a 'Charge of the Light Brigade,' with no less terrible result than when Bill Williams used to recite it on exhibition days at Brixton school."

"What are you fellows chattering about?" This from Canby, rising from his mossy bed.

"Another county heard from," announced the Bangor boy; "we were discussing, sir," he went on, "whether the clothes you are occupying were tailored just before or just after the Byzantine period."

"Hold hard there," put in Macauley; "'spare that tree, woodman,' it's a fine old oak, no matter how rough its coat."

Canby, beginning to fear that "Mustapha" was going to be late with the breakfast, broke away from the wordy exchange to take a look through the orchard, in the hope of meeting the incoming provider.

He soon returned in triumph, drilling the grinning black in drum-major style, waving an olive branch for a baton.

"Most illustrious purveyor, thou art most doubly welcome," declared Macauley, as "Mustapha" shifted the load from his head to the ground.

The disappearance of the breakfast marked the appearance of the patriarch, who was accompanied by a husky pair of natives, each with a balancing pole across the shoulders, double-ended with buckets of brass.

"Of that for which you most wished I have it here in gallons," stated the graybeard, "and with blessing on its use."

Billy constituted himself a smelling committee of one to analyze the product in the swinging metal vessels.

"By the nearest approach," decided the young aviator, "it is either the real thing or first cousin to it; a little closer to tan-yard aroma than is usual, perhaps, but the kind that will make the wheels go 'round."

"Sorrow is with me if this last gift should hasten the passing of the flying men, for whom I hold a never-dying welcome."

Touched by the words of the patriarch, and profoundly grateful for all that he had done for them, every head among the four was bared, as Macauley, in his deep voice, and with scarcely concealed emotion, returned the heartfelt thanks of the aviation party for the benefactions so freely and so generously bestowed upon them.

"That we must soon depart," he exclaimed, "is inevitable, but no day to come will be empty of a thought of our treatment by you. Out in the hurly-burly we cannot expect to match it, yet out in the hurly-burly we belong. Peace be with you, sir."

On ordinary occasions nothing could have restrained Canby from crying, "Hear, hear," at such eloquence on the part of his usually blunt-spoken comrade. But Canby had a fine edge under his rough and ready manner, and he merely nodded his head in approval of the sentiment expressed.

"You are a soldier?" The aged man had evident intent of changing the subject.

"Two of us are in the service, sir," replied Macauley, "and would answer the bugle call did we but know where it was sounding hereabouts."

The patriarch raised his dimming eyes to the blue canopy above, a prayer on his lips.

"That all could say, 'peace be with you,'" he muttered. Then, drawing himself up in the full measure of his tall figure, the old man, with a sweeping gesture to the south, quietly directed:

"That way does the carnage rage."

He gave more minutely, however, details of distance, territory to be traversed and other facts of value to the travelers.

"We will start in the morning, sir," advised Billy.

"And so it is written," solemnly returned the patriarch. "Farewell and fare thee well." To the boy he handed a scroll, with Arabic characters thereon. "To any Jew," he said.

Gathering his robe about him, the speaker turned into the shady walk of the orchard, followed by his dusky retainers.

More of his bounty came during the day, but never another sign of his presence in the hours that completed the stay of the flyers on the border of the city that its people call "a pearl set in emeralds."

Following the southerly course, as directed, the aviators began to note a change in the fleeting landscape below, nature in less luxuriant form, foliage sparse and more and more of the stony gray of arid country with wide wastes of desert sand.

Macauley's loud cry—"the sea, the sea!" found an echo in the other war-plane, Canby also shouting his discovery of the great expanse of water to the west.

Henri, remembering the advices of the patriarch at Damascus, proclaimed it the Mediterranean. The war-planes were sailing over the deep valley of the Jordan, and in Palestine, or the Holy Land.

With so much mountainous country about them, the pilots concluded to descend to the valley for rest and council.

Landing was made near a spring of boiling hot water, something not before of record in Henri's notebook.

"If the janitor of my uncle's apartment house in Boston had this to tap for the kicking tenants, I believe the hump in his shoulders would lose its curve in a week."

Billy had tested the product of the boiling spring with a finger tip, and promptly poked the scalded member into his mouth for cooling.

"It wouldn't be a marker to the way my Aunt Melissa would go on," remarked Canby, "if she knew her wayward nephew was really in the 'land flowing in milk and honey.' Even if the 'flow' isn't showing much yet to me, that good old soul has it fixed in her mind. It wasn't so far from here, I guess, that King David looked one way at Philistine enemies and the other at Moabite foes."

"Suppose we may as well camp here for the night," said Henri, "though it strikes me that I'd rather be where the sea would sing me to sleep."

"No dark night flying for me this trip. I don't want to smash any mountains by running into them."

Billy had concluded that the sand was soft enough for a good bed, and there was another spring near, in decided contrast to the hot one.

"We can be in Jerusalem in almost no time now, and a little further on the fighting game begins again. Why hurry? There'll be plenty of powder left when we get to Egypt."

"You ought to have said that before we shook the pleasant berth up at Damascus, Billy," insisted Henri.

"But, you know, Macauley and Canby wouldn't have consented to keeping that far away from the cannon's mouth. They know now that the jumping-off place is close enough to reach in a day or two, and, maybe, they'll stand hitched for a little while."

Billy spoke loud enough for the soldiers to hear, as he intended.

"Don't worry yourself, my kiddy," laughed Canby; "we are not going to run away from you."

"There's a big bunch of sheep and goats, I see, feeding around these hills, but strange to say, we haven't glimpsed a single human since we came down."

This observation by Macauley conveyed a fact at which the others, too, had wondered.

"Well," asserted Billy, "there's one thing sure, we had more of an air escort flying in here than I've seen in many a long ride. The eagles, vultures and hawks must think the war-planes are a new brand of bird come to crowd them out of business."

"Maybe they thought the planes were geese, seeing Canby's head sticking out of the rigging."

"Mac's jealous," parried Canby; "he has to keep his ears folded up when we're flying, and can only bray on the ground."

"Why don't you fellows put on the gloves?" suggested Billy.

"I guess they don't irrigate this country like they used to do in the old days," observed Henri, who had been taking a little jaunt of inspection toward the overhanging hills; "it's as dry as a bone, and if you show me a tree I'll eat it."

"You'd better save your appetite for the spread we are going to have before we turn in," said Billy; "our old friend at Damascus sure gave us a load of fig-pasty fixings that we'll have to get away with before they spoil. And, besides, Buddy, this is a tiny little country, they say, and we may see a better side of it when we go a bit further."

"That will be at daylight, I hope," put in Macauley.

When next the sun rose above the plateaux, the war-planes had lifted for flight to the great maritime plain at the west of the Jordan, a wonderful journey, over a country of stones, caves, tombs, ruins, battlefields, sites hallowed by traditions—all bathed in an atmosphere of legend and marvel.

Drawing near now to Jerusalem, "The Holy," one of the most ancient and interesting cities in the world, the aviators from afar could see its walls outlined three thousand feet above the sea.

Approaching this center of pilgrimage in an aeroplane! Dashing toward the "wall of David" in a buzz-boat of the air! "Something to remember," thought Billy, steering for one of the five city gates now in use.

When the war-planes skidded in the train of a procession of mules and camels, there was considerable of a scare along the line, and the aviators were soon surrounded by a curious bunch of Bedouins. It was just a babel to the airmen, until there stepped from the press of strange humanity one of authoritative manner, a Hebrew of advanced age and apparent consequence.

It struck the travelers all in a heap, the marked similarity of type between the Jew of Damascus and the man who stood before them.

The latter intently surveyed both the flying machines and flyers before he spoke, and in English, for he saw that the four were but poor imitations of Turks.

"Came you this way or that?" he questioned, pointing in turn to the flanking valleys at all points of the compass.

"From the north," promptly replied Billy.

It just then occurred to the boy to produce the scroll given to him by the Damascus patriarch. "To any Jew," the latter had said, and here was a goodly specimen of the race within easy reach.

So Billy stepped forward with the parchment roll in extended hand. A brief glance at the Arabic communication by the man accepting it had magic effect.

He clapped his hands in signal to someone in the confusedly murmuring crowd, and two Arabs, mere boys, responded, leading a pair of heavily laden donkeys.

A few words of command and the loads on the donkeys' backs were transferred to the humps of two camels, the last named animals making protest by savage teeth snaps at the nimble servitors doing the work.

Rope attachments made, the war-planes were hauled through the city gate, the first and only time these machines ever worked under donkey power!

Turning out of the traffic of the main road into a narrow, ill-paved street, down-sloping into the interior of the city, the four flyers, walking alongside of the machines to steady them, and their self-declared host marching ahead of the donkey drivers, passed through long double lines of dead walls,

for though the houses were substantially built of stone they presented no windows to the streets.

However, the air travelers had a glimpse or two of the modern Jerusalem here and there; new hotels, for instance, that had the appearance of being up-to-date.

“No look-in there for us,” sighed Billy; “we’re just plain broke; but let me say, Buddy, it seems that we are somehow always provided for, no matter what has happened on this side of the ocean.”

“Giving the glad hand seems a specialty with the Damascus man and his twin in Jerusalem; they’re all to the good in that line,” declared Henri.

Canby would have strayed from the line of march when he caught sight in the distance of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, but the leader kept straight ahead, and the Arab boys were constantly whanging the donkeys to keep up with him.

Pausing finally in front of a flat-roofed stone dwelling, with courtyard enclosure, the war-planes were sheltered within the walls of the latter, while the host guided his guests into and through the house to an extensive garden at the rear, rich with flowering plants.

“Probably our last day of peaceful avocation,” mused Canby, as he applied a lighted taper to the bowl of a long-stemmed pipe, which had been served to him by an Arab attendant.

CHAPTER XXX.

OFF FOR EGYPT.

"The reverend sir tells me that this country of Palestine is only 140 miles long and about 80 miles wide," said Henri, who had entered the information in his ragged notebook, to which he had clung like grim death from the day he had entered the war zone.

"My Aunt Melissa would tell you," stated Canby, "that nearly all the events in the accounts of Israel that are recorded in the Old Testament happened within this space. From the days of Abraham to our own times there's been a mighty lot of history made here."

"Pity we could not have gone about a little bit more," remarked Billy, "but warriors and war-planes must get to the front."

"If it pleases your honor," slyly intimated Macauley, "Canby and I could walk the rest of the way."

"I've got a picture of you doing it," retorted the Bangor boy; "the war would be over by the time you got anywhere. You were built for riding, my bold captain."

"Listen to the wasp," laughed Canby.

The stillness of evening pervaded the garden, and the four fell into the brooding silence of the hour. The liquid notes of a nightingale contributed to the dreamy effect of the oriental surroundings. With the morning the vision of the Holy Land would fade.

Up betimes, again alert and eager to proceed, the air travelers had once more the kindly greeting of the venerable host, and once more partook of his generous hospitality. At his order the war-planes were wheeled into the open, and followed by a blessing the pilots, fully advised of the route, sent the machines buzzing away to the south, along the Mediterranean coast line.

Their fixed destination was El Arish, on the border of Palestine and Egypt, the key to the fighting zone in the land of Suez and the Nile, where General Maxwell, in command of the British forces, was matching wits with the Ottoman commanders, urged to best effort by the presence of Enver Pasha, the young "war lord" of Turkey.

While fully ten miles away from the border, Macauley declared that he could scent gunpowder, and as the distance rapidly lessened, numerous enough were the signs of military occupation to convince Billy that the soldier's nose had not gone back on him.

A half hour later the war-planes were down, and Macauley and Canby had found their own again; if not, indeed, the "old Seventh," just the same kind of fighting blood under the Union Jack.

While Billy and Henri got busy in overhauling the war-planes and reducing in the machines some of the effects of rough usage and continuous journeying, the two soldiers were equally active in getting into the campaign. Well set up again in khaki uniforms and with pith helmets on their heads, "Daring Dan" and Canby looked like ten-time winners. The boys also had ceased to be "Turks," by the courtesy of the quartermaster.

"Guess we'll have to shake you for a while, and sorry for it, my young friends. We have your gauge for a dandy pair, and the breed to which anyone may safely tie; so I am just wanting to say that I hope we will meet many times and often in the future, the nearer the better."

"What's the occasion?" questioned Billy.

"Marching orders for the morning," continued Macauley; "not a flying assignment this time, or you boys would be on the front seats. Just plain footing it for the present."

The speaker gave each of the boys a hearty grip and a look of strong liking, Canby following suit with equal fervor.

When the soldiers turned away to join the regiment to which they had been assigned, the lads climbed to an elevation on the sea front and looked out upon the rolling blue of the Mediterranean.

"Many the hard parting we've had, Buddy," murmured Billy; "how I would love to go back over the trail and greet the good friends and true comrades again, one by one. Mayhap some of the warm hands are cold by now, some of the great hearts stilled. My prayer is that this be not so. And I've been asking myself if there is any pledge behind us that we have broken?"

"I don't believe there's a single shortage there," exclaimed Henri—"why, yes, there is, too, come to think twice—Stanny's belt."

"Not so much of a fracture there, after all," said the Bangor boy—"only delayed delivery. We couldn't help that."

"Let's call the past a fairly clean slate, then," conceded Henri. "Faces to the front, old pard; we're not through yet!"

The boy was right; there were still strenuous days in the mist-veiled future, and in territory all unknown to them.

A message to Port Said was in the making, and no wires to convey it; what next to the electric flash for lightning speed? The aeroplane!

The call was sudden, but no less prompt the response.

Billy Barry and Henri Trouville saluted a pair of shoulder straps, received the word to go—and, forthwith, went!

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This story of the boy chums' adventures on and off the Florida Coast describes many scenes of daring and adventure, in hunting for ships stranded and cargoes washed ashore. The boy chums passed through many exciting scenes, their conflicts with the Cuban wreckers; the loss of their vessel, the "Eager Quest," they will long remember. This is the fourth book of adventures which the boy chums experienced.

THE BOY CHUMS IN THE GULF OF MEXICO; or, a Dangerous Cruise with the Greek Spongers.

This story of the boy chums hunting for sponges is filled with many adventures. The dangers of gathering sponges are fully described; the chums meet with sharks and alligators: and they are cast away on a desert island. Their rescue and arrival home make a most interesting story. This is the fifth book of adventures of the boy chums.

THE BOY CHUMS CRUISING IN FLORIDA WATERS; or, the Perils and Dangers of the Fishing Fleet.

In this story Charley West and Walter Hazard embark upon a new and dangerous quest for fortune. With their old and tried comrades, Captain Westfield and the little negro, Chris, they join the great army of fishermen that yearly search the Florida seas for the thousands of kinds of rare fish and water creatures that abound there. The Florida waters hide many strange and unknown dangers. The perils the chums encounter from weird fishes and creatures of the sea and the menace of hurricane and shipwreck, make very interesting and instructive reading. This is the sixth book of adventures of the boy chums.

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