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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SPARKY AMES OF THE FERRY COMMAND ***



SPARKY AMES AND MARY MASON
OF THE
**FERRY
COMMAND**

Sparky Ames
of the
Ferry Command

Story by ROY J. SNELL

Illustrated by
ERWIN L. DARWIN



FIGHTERS FOR
FREEDOM
Series

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*All names, characters, places, and events in this story
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*A Formation of Four-Motored Planes Passed
Over*

Sparky Ames
of the
FERRY COMMAND

11

CHAPTER I

THE FLIGHT OF THE LONE STAR

The air above the Brazilian jungles along the dark waters of the Rio Branco in northern Brazil was full of sound. The roar and thunder of many motors beat down upon the sea of waving treetops until it seemed to stir them into animated life. A formation of great, four-motored planes was passing over.

Two natives in a small dugout on the river dropped their paddles into their wooden canoe, then sat staring upward. The river's current swept them beneath the branches of a dead mango tree. One of them reached up to snap off a brittle branch.

Breaking pieces from this branch he placed them, one by one, in the bottom of the canoe. When there were thirty-eight pieces, he stopped to sit as if in a trance watching those great, man-made birds go sweeping on.

Presently his companion grunted, then pointed at the sky upstream. The first native again looked skyward, then placed two more sticks with the others, making forty in all. Then he drawled a few native words that in our language mean:

"One of these big birds is very sick."

This native was old. He had lived long beneath the overhanging treetops. He knew the ways of birds and men, but not of airplanes. For all that, he was right. One of these flying things of metal was sick, very sick.

Even as he said the words, there came a sudden burst of thunder, and the larger of the two planes, the one that was not "sick," a ship so well formed—sleek and beautiful—that a native's eyes shone at sight of it, pulled away from its slow, sick companion and went speeding along over the forest that lined the downsweep of the river.

"Gone," said the native. "Now this one will die." His eyes shone with a new light. Once on the Rio Negro, he had seen one of these man-made birds. There had been much on that plane that he had coveted. And now—

These last two planes were not bombers, but transport planes. It was quite evident that the speeding plane had not deserted its companion, for, in a short time, it came roaring back and a girl's voice speaking into a radio said:

"There's a rather large clearing about fifty miles down. Think you can make it?"

"We'll have to try," came in a man's strong, even tone. "We're on one motor now. The other is cutting out on me. Can't tell how soon it will quit dead."

"We'll tag along," came in the girl's voice. "If you make it—"

"If we get that far, we'll try a landing," was the answer.

"And if anything goes wrong—"

"You'll fly right on." The man's voice was harsh, insistent. "Remember! Secret—"

"Don't say it, Sparky!" The girl's voice rose sharp as an alarmed bird's. "Don't say it!"

"All right! All right!" the man's voice grumbled into the tropical air. "Then I won't say it. All the same—"

"All the same, if you go down there we're coming right down after you," the girl insisted. "You know what our orders were, to fly in pairs. If one plane is disabled, its mate must go to the rescue. All other planes must go straight on. We're on a mission of destruction. That's all we know. It's urgent. We must go through!"

"Okay, sister, that's why you should fly right on."

"But we won't." The girl spoke quietly. "If you crack up, we'll be right down. This ship has control. I can land her on a dime."

"But don't forget—"

"I never forget," the girl snapped. "Now go on down there and try your luck. It's all that's left to do."

"What'd he mean—secret?" The blonde-haired girl who sat in the co-pilot seat beside the girl who had carried on that spirited conversation, drawled, "What secret?"

"Sorry, Janet," was the slow reply. "You've heard of military secrets, I suppose?"

"For Pete's sake, Mary Mason! Yes! Of course, I have, but I don't see—"

"This is one of them." Mary Mason, the little girl who piloted a big plane, favored her with a smile.

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After that, save for the slow drone of motors, there was quiet in the cabin, a tense sort of calm, such as comes before a storm. After a time the blonde-haired Janet said:

"Sparky's motors didn't stop all by themselves."

"Of course they didn't. Sparky's too good a pilot for that."

"He sure is. It's the work of the enemy. That's what it is. He knows. He's after us, after you and Sparky, Don and me. He's got us coming down in a jungle and we're only just out of good, old U.S.A. And think of the dizzy miles still ahead of us! And the enemy dogging our luck all the way!"

"I thought of him before I started," Mary replied quietly. "Let him do his worst. We'll win, you'll see!"

For the swift, powerful twin-motored transport plane flown by Mary Mason, the distance to that native clearing on the Rio Branco was just a jump, but she did not jump. Instead she followed doggedly on behind her limping companion. And as she followed, she found time to think. Those were long, long thoughts.

She was a member of the WAFS, Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron, this slender girl with the flashing black eyes and trigger-quick fingers. For six wintry months she had flown planes from east to west, from north to south, and all the way back again. Sometimes these planes were transport planes or bombers with comfortable, heated cabins. More often they were open-seated trainers or fighters. She flew them in wind, rain, and snow. Mile after weary mile in lonely solitude she had gone roaring through the night sky to arrive at last at her destination only to be ushered aboard an airways plane and hurried back again.

"It was hard," she said to Janet Janes, her companion.

"Sure it was," the other girl agreed. "Looks as if this would be harder."

"Perhaps," Mary answered. "But just think! In the past two days it's been San Francisco to Denver, to Chicago, to Miami!"

"To Caracas, and then to the heart of a jungle where headhunters beat on hollow logs inviting their friends to a feast." Janet laughed in spite of herself.

"This will be just a pause," Mary insisted stoutly. "After that it will be Para, to Dakar in Africa, Dakar to Egypt and the pyramids, Egypt to Persia—"

"Under the Persian moon," Janet sang softly.

And then:

"Watch!" Mary exclaimed. "There's the clearing. Sparky has spotted it. He's preparing to circle. He's going down!"

Suddenly Mary set her motors thundering. After climbing steeply she leveled off to stare down at the clearing.

"He didn't go down, not yet," Janet informed her.

"No. There are people running from that row of native huts. He'd hit them."

"They're like ants coming from an ant hill. They don't seem important."

"Oh! But they are!" Mary exclaimed. "Every human life is important. Besides, if Sparky killed just one of them, our lives wouldn't be worth a penny. We're in the wilds."

"Probably not a white man within a hundred miles."

"Or perhaps a thousand."

"I wish we might go on." A suggestion of strain crept into Janet's voice.

"Oh! But we can't." Mary's plane was circling slowly now.

"Of course we couldn't go on," she told herself. "Not even if Sparky insisted."

Through her racing mind whirled memories of other days, those bad days of winter convoy in America. There had been only twenty-five of them, twenty-five WAFS, and so much work to do. Always, on her return from a long, hard trip, muddy, chilled through and half-starved, if he chanced to be in, she had found Sparky waiting in his car to whisk her away to her barracks and after that to a glorious hot meal. "Thick, juicy steaks, French fries, lemon pie, and barrels of hot coffee," she whispered.

And now Sparky was down there below her in his disabled plane waiting, waiting for the last darting spot to glide from those huts into the bush that lay beyond. No, they could not go on. "Not even for the secret—" she spoke aloud, then checked herself just in time.

"He can't climb," she said to Janet. "He can only circle. And if his other motor quits he may go crashing straight down!"

"There!" Janet breathed. "Now there's no one!"

"Yes, just one more."

A very small black spot, moving, oh, so slowly, went weaving this way, then that, toward the forest.

"A child!" Mary exclaimed. "How Sparky would hate hitting a child!"

"Now!" Janet breathed.

"No," Mary groaned. "One more, a smaller one."

It seemed an eternity before this last child had reached safety.

Of a sudden the plane beneath them lunged downward.

"There they go!" Janet gasped while Mary's clutching fingers fairly bit into the stick.

But no, Sparky's plane seemed to shudder. No doubt his motor had quit, then gone on again.

"Why doesn't he go down?" Mary groaned. "Here, take the plane!" She gave Janet her place. "Just circle slowly."

With long, swift strides she reached the plane's door. There she braced herself, then stood watching the plane below.

"He's going down," she whispered.

It was true. Circling slowly, cautiously, Sparky nursed his disabled plane at last into a smooth glide that brought him swiftly down.

"He's out too far," she groaned. "He's afraid there's just one more native child."

"There!" she exclaimed. "He's down!"

She saw the big plane bump hard, then bump—bump again. It did not heel over, but went gliding straight on.

“He made it!” she screamed aloud. “Oh! Glory!”

Bright hopes sped through her mind. The defective motors would soon be repaired. Before the natives returned they would once again rise high above the jungle and speed away to rejoin their convoy. She had begun to feel dreadfully lonesome away from all that thundering flight. At Para, they would be united and then—

Her thoughts broke off. Her lips parted in a scream that did not come. Of a sudden the ship down there on the ground, gliding forward, had whirled half about. Its right wing crumpled; it turned toward the black waters of the river. After gliding forward half the distance to those threatening waters, it came to a sudden halt, then crumpled into a heap.

With lips parted she kept her eyes glued upon the plane. Would it be set on fire? A slow smoke rose, but no flames.

A figure came tumbling from the plane. “One more!” she whispered. “Just one more!”

The figure that had appeared remained motionless for a space of seconds. Then he leaped forward to re-enter the wreck.

“One of them is hurt,” she called to Janet. “Keep circling.”

It was true, for soon the single figure appeared once more, this time bearing a limp burden.

“Janet,” Mary exclaimed as she resumed control of the plane, “we’re going down!”

“This,” said Janet, “is a large plane. Larger than Sparky’s.”

“And easier to control. This,” said Mary proudly, “is the Lone Star, the only plane of its kind in the world!”

“It’s almost priceless,” Janet agreed.

“Yes, and its cargo is really priceless,” Mary might have added, but did not for that was her military secret, hers and Sparky’s. The C.O. had told just that to her before they took off.

“I am putting it on your plane,” the C.O. had said, “because your Lone Star is the fastest, strongest, most dependable transport plane we have in our outfit. And I have given the plane to you because other than two pilots that cannot be spared, you are the only one who knows her and can take her safely through.”

This, she realized, had been high praise. Hers was a grave responsibility, but Sparky, her good pal, was down there. Was he the one who had been injured? She had no way of knowing.

“I’m going down,” she repeated softly.

CHAPTER II

SAVAGES AND THE NIGHT

As the big plane circled, drifting slowly down, Mary leaned over to say in a deep, impressive voice:

"Janet, if we crash, and there's a spark of life in you, get out quick and run, crawl, anything. Get away fast."

"Who wouldn't?" Janet stared. "If the ship gets on fire the gas tanks will explode and—"

"It's worse than that," Mary confided. "This ship is mined."

"Mined!" Janet stared.

"It certainly is! And by our own people. This is one ship our enemies will never take apart piece by piece, nor its cargo either. In case of a crash, it will be torn to ribbons."

"That—why, that's terrible," Janet's voice was husky.

"Not as bad as it seems," was the slow reply. "Only fire will set off the explosives. Bumping won't do it. There's a fuse, too. I know right where it is. No, they'll never get the Lone Star or her cargo. And there's nothing they'd like half as much to do. But they won't get her. Never! Never."

"And now," she breathed. "Here we go!"

As her ship glided down, even in this moment when her own fate seemed to hang in the balance, on the walls of Mary's mind was painted a picture that would not soon be erased. It was as if her first glimpse of a tropical jungle, the waving palms, the slow, rolling black river, the native huts, the sloping hillside all bathed in a beautiful sunset, had been painted there by some great artist.

And then her ship's landing wheels touched the broad, hard-trodden path of the natives. Coming in closer to the natives' shacks she had avoided the treacherous hillside and suddenly, there she was. Graceful as a plover with wings outspread the Lone Star came to rest.

"We made it!" Mary gave vent to a heavy sigh of relief. "But now!" She was up and away in the same breath, for the solving of one difficult problem had only served to bring her closer to another. There had been two men in the bomber when it crashed, Sparky Ames and Don Nelson. One had been injured. Which one? And how badly? She had to know.

"I'm going over there!" she exclaimed as she leaped from the plane, at the same time pointing up the hill.

"Okay. I'll watch this plane," Janet said.

"Yes, I think that's wise. You never can tell."



The Lone Star Came to Rest at the Foot of the Hill

Mary cast an apprehensive glance at the long row of native houses. "Homes of a hundred people," she thought. "Perfectly wild natives." But now nothing stirred there.

With long, quick strides she made her way where one man bent over the prostrate form of another.

When she was half way there she saw the kneeling man turn his head. Then she knew.

"Oh! Sparky!" she exclaimed. "You're safe!"

"Sure! What'd you think?" The tall, strongly built young man with black, kinky hair grinned.

"I—I didn't know." She was closer now. "It would have been terrible if you had been seriously injured, you know." Her voice dropped. "Secret cargo!"

"Yes, I know."

"But Don!" she exclaimed. "Is he badly injured?" She was standing beside Sparky now.

"I can't tell yet," was the slow answer. "I have the courage to hope not. He got a bang on the head. That knocked him out. I've felt him over pretty carefully. No bones broken is my guess. But he keeps groaning. His hand comes up to his chest. Got a cracked rib or two I shouldn't wonder."

"That's bad, isn't it?"

"Bad enough, but it might be worse. Anyway, our plane can never be repaired. Not here it can't."

"And how will you ever get it out?"

"That's it," he agreed. "Looks as if we're stuck—at least, our plane is. Guess we'll have to go it alone, Mary, just you and I. It's the way the Chief would want it." His voice went husky. "That secret cargo must go through at all cost. Those were the orders. How do you feel about that?"

"How would you feel about going over the top somewhere in Africa?" she challenged.

"I wouldn't think. I'd just go, same as any other soldier does."

"It's the same with me now," she replied soberly. "I—am a soldier, too. Well, perhaps not quite, but I'm serving in a soldier's plane, a mighty good one, too. Any man in my shoes would have to have had five hundred hours in the air."

"And so where duty calls or danger—" he quoted.

"I shall always hope to be there," she saluted. "But look!" she exclaimed. "Don is trying to sit up. He must not do that!"

"No! No! Old man! Not yet!" Once again Sparky was at his comrade's side gently pushing him down.

"Wh—where am I? Who—what happened?" came in thick tones.

"You're here and we're here. Sparky and Mary," said Sparky.

"Oh! Then it—it's all right." The injured man settled back.

"I'll go get some pneumatic pillows," Mary volunteered.

"Yes, and something hot to drink," Sparky suggested. "That will help a lot." Mary was away.

When Don had fully recovered consciousness and had been made as comfortable as possible, they gathered around him for a council of war.

"It's getting dark," said Sparky. "In another quarter of an hour it will be darker than a stack of black cats. In this land the dawn comes up like thunder, and the sun blinks out in the same way."

"And there's no moon," said Janet.

"All of which means we're here for the night," said Mary. "Sparky," her voice seemed a little strained. "What kind of a country is this?"

"Good head-hunting country," Sparky laughed.

"No, but really, we've got to face facts," Mary insisted.

"Truth is," said Sparky, "I don't know about the upper waters of the Amazon, or the people who live here. Do the rest of you?"

There came a chorus of "no"s.

"All right, then we'll be prepared for the worst and hope for the best."

"They scattered fast enough when they saw us coming down," Don volunteered.

"That was natural," said Sparky. "It is also natural to suppose that, in the end, they'll defend their homes. They may come back in the night. There are two loose machine guns in each plane. The Major had them put there for just such a time as this."

"And for the time when we'll be over battle zones," Mary added. "We may be attacked—"

"Just now we're in a jungle, so we'll limber up the guns," said Sparky. "How about you ladies fixing up a little chow?"

"Sure, oh, sure! We'll do that!" was the quick response.

By the time Sparky had two guns set up in the Lone Star, which he figured might, in the event of an attack in force, be used as a fort, and had dragged the other guns to the spot, a short distance away, which they had chosen as a camp site, darkness had fallen and the girls had coffee brewing over a cheerful fire.

"Say! This is great!" Sparky exclaimed. "I've always wanted to go camping but never had time!"

"Well," Don drawled, "You've got about ten hours now with nothing else to do but camp."

"Unless we're attacked," Janet supplemented with a shudder.

"Why bring that up?" Mary laughed. "Dinner is about ready to serve. Let's make it a date."

"A date it is," Sparky agreed.

Their grub box contained a little more than iron rations. Sweet potatoes and sausages each served from a can, big, round white crackers, a square of butter and, aromatic coffee with real sugar and canned cream, made up the bulk of their satisfying meal. Dessert was little wild bananas, and huge, over-ripe grapefruit that were sweet as oranges. These came from the edge of the jungle.

"Um," Janet breathed. "That was really a feast."

"Yes, and listen!" Mary exclaimed low, "What was that? Really something different!"

A low rolling sound had come drifting in out of the night.

"A native drum!" was Sparky's instant answer.

As they listened from farther away came the answer.

"Talking drums," Mary whispered. "I never expected to hear them."

She was hearing them all the same and, coming as they did out of the night with the low murmur of the dark, rushing river as their accompaniment, they sounded weird indeed. Now came a roar close at hand, *tom-tom-tom* sharp and clear, and now from far away with the booms blended into one long roar.

"Night in the jungle," Mary whispered.

"Crawl into your ship and forget it," Sparky suggested. "We'll be here in the morning."

"Oh! I never could do that," Janet exclaimed.

"All right," said Sparky. "Then you girls keep the first watch and I'll sleep. But first we'll fix Don up as comfortable as we can."

It was Don whose eyes first closed in slumber. With soft pneumatic cushions under him and a mosquito canopy to protect him and a soothing capsule to allay his pain, he was asleep before the others could arrange for the watches of the night.

Just as Sparky crept away to the Lone Star for three winks a bright golden moon came rolling along the fringe of the forest.

"Oh! That's better!" Janet exclaimed.

Was it? It was not long before every shadow cast by the moon appeared to move and the darkened grass houses seemed alive with people.

"Ghosts," Mary whispered. "Ghosts of native men and women who lived here long before we were born."

"Be still!" Janet whispered. "I heard a voice. It was somewhere down the river. Listen!"

As they listened a voice seemed to ask: "Why? why? why?"

"That," Mary laughed low. "That's a big, old tree frog. He lives in a pool of green water in a hollow tree, way up high. I read about it once. If you drink the water he lives in you'll go crazy."

"I think you might," Janet whispered. "What do you suppose he wants to know with his eternal 'why'?"

"Perhaps he wants to know why we are here, why my father is out somewhere in Africa."

"And why my two brothers are in Australia," said Janet. "Do you know the answer?"

"No," said Mary. "At least not all the answer. I only know that we must keep on being here, and in Africa, Egypt, Syria, India, China, wherever we're sent until this terrible war is over and all our loved ones can come home again."

"Yes, that's right. But, Mary, you know we were volunteers. We didn't have to join up. And above all, we didn't have to go on this long, long trip so far from home."

This Mary knew was true. They had, in truth, volunteered twice. Joining the WAFS was purely on a voluntary basis. Once they were in they were expected to ferry planes from place to place in their own country. But a sudden, urgent call had come from China for forty planes, all but two of them bombers. There were not enough men available so volunteers were called from among the women.

"All of us volunteered, except those who had children," Janet said, thinking aloud.

"Who wouldn't? It's what I've always wanted most." Mary's voice rose a little. "When Sparky used to come in after a week's absence and say, 'Hello, sister, I'm just back from Russia,' I was burned up with envy. The next week it would be Africa, and after that London, and there we were plowing through the sky to Kansas City, Des Moines or Peoria. And now," she breathed, "we are on our way to China by way of Africa, India, and all the rest."

"We!" Janet exclaimed. "Do they expect just you and me to fly the Atlantic, alone?"

"Why not?" Mary asked, teasingly. "Oh, well—" she added, "Sparky told me tonight that he and I would go on alone."

"Nice going," Janet's tone was a trifle cold.

"Oh, Janet!" Mary put out a hand. "Don't look at it that way. There's something aboard the Lone Star that just has to go through. I wish I could tell you what it is. I can't because I don't know. Naturally, it's better that a man pilot the plane, one who has flown the Atlantic many times. It would be natural, too, that Don should go if he were able, but—"

"Oh, sure!" Janet was her old, friendly self again. "I understand. We'll have to get Don to a hospital somewhere and I'll stay to see him through."

"Yes, and you may get to China yet, both of you."

"Oh, China," Janet yawned. "Just now I'd love to find myself on Broadway in little, old New York, with a run to Denver waiting for me in the morning. It's a funny world, isn't it?"

"It certainly is," Mary agreed.

At one A.M. Sparky climbed down from the Lone Star's cabin. "Go on up there and sleep," was his gruff but kindly order. "We've got a tough day ahead."

They obeyed. While Janet wrapped herself up in blankets, Mary spread out an eiderdown robe her father had once brought from the far North, and they were soon fast asleep.

Three hours later, just as the moon was nearing the crest of the ridge, lying off to the west, Mary crept down from the plane to join Sparky in his vigil.

"Don still asleep?" she asked.

"Sure is. He's lucky to be able to sleep."

"Perhaps he's not so badly injured after all."

"Bad enough," Sparky sighed. "We'll have to get him over to the hospital at Para. Then you and I'll have to hop the little channel that lies between South America and Africa. Your cargo must go through."

"Secret cargo!" she whispered. "Wonder what it could be."

"Some new weapons for destroying Japs perhaps. A new type of sub-machine gun, or just a badly needed medicine for the soldiers up there in Burma. They say it's plenty bad up there this time of year. Anyway, that secret cargo must go through."

"'Ours' not to reason why—'ours' but to do and die," she parodied.

"Who knows!" His voice sounded solemn in the stillness of the night. "The enemy has our number."

I've been looking at my motors. They've been tampered with, emery dust in the pistons or something."

"But where could that have happened!" she exclaimed.

"Caracas!"

"But there were soldiers guarding every plane."

"Soldiers of foreign lands are sometimes traitors. So, too, are mechanics who tune up the motors. We'll have to be on our guard every moment. This time we were over the land. The next it may be the sea."

"We'll watch," she vowed. "Day and night. Night and day."

"But it's all so strange," she mused after a time. "Why should there be a sudden demand for so many big planes in China?"

"There are rumors of a plan to bomb Tokio."

"Oh! I'd like to be in on that!"

"Wouldn't we all! But it's just a rumor. I've heard that we are to attack Burma from two sides."

"Try to re-capture the Burma Road?"

"Yes."

"That would be glorious!"

"Then I've heard the Japs are going after Russia and that these bombers are for our Russian allies. All these are rumors. We may never know the truth. That's the way it is in war."

For a time after that nothing but the low rush of the river and the croaking of the 'Why' frog disturbed the silence of the jungle. Then, suddenly, Mary whispered:

"Listen!"

"Singing," Sparky whispered back after a tense moment. "Natives on the river."

"The moon has gone behind the hills. They're coming back. The natives are coming."

"Yes, and let them come," Sparky rattled his sub-machine gun. "If they're peaceful, things will be all right. If not—" He rattled the gun once more. "This is war. The Lone Star and her secret cargo must go through!"

After that for some time they sat there in silence listening to the wild native chant that, with every movement, grew louder.

Then, suddenly, the dark waters of the river came all alight. The long canoes had turned a bend of the river. In each canoe were a dozen torches held aloft. Mary counted nine canoes in all. To her heightened imagination each canoe seemed a hundred feet in length.

"Do they come like that when they want to fight?" she asked gripping Sparky's arm hard.

"Who knows?" was the brief reply.

CHAPTER III

BATTLING A SPY

For a time Sparky and Mary sat in the dark silently watching the torch-lit procession of great canoes. To Mary it was a fascinating and fearsome spectacle.

Suddenly Sparky let out a low exclamation. "Thunderation!"

At that he jumped from the log on which he had been sitting to kick at their half-burned-out campfire until the coals glowed red again. Then, gathering up an armful of dry-as-tinder leaves, he threw them on the coals.

For a space of seconds a column of dense smoke rose straight toward the stars. Then, as the whole mass burst into flames, all about them, the native huts, the airplanes, and the jungle at their backs stood out in bold relief.

"Sparky!" Mary exclaimed, shrinking back. "Why did you do that?"

"I'll meet any man half way," was the reply. "That is, anyone but Hitler's mob and those dirty, little Japs."

"But those men are savages!"

"Who knows? What's a savage anyway," Sparky's voice sounded strange. "Every man is a human being. Those are men. Brazil is our ally at war and this is Brazil. When men come to you singing and waving torches, you just must meet them half way."

By this time the dugout canoes were pulling up to the shore. The chant had ceased. In its place was only the murmur of voices. The torches still flamed.

Soon a procession came moving like a great, twisting, glowing serpent toward the campfire.

"Sparky!" Mary crowded close. "It's too much. I can't stand it!"

"Steady, girl!" Sparky's voice was calm. His hands still gripped the tommy-gun.

As the procession came closer, they saw that most of the natives were all but naked, that some carried rifles and others spears and that they were led by a little man wearing striped trousers, a bright jacket and a sword. They did not pause until, as if in a high-school drill, they had ranged themselves in three semicircular rows before the fire. The little man stood at the center and three steps before them.

Mary tried to think what one swing of Sparky's spitting tommy-gun would do to those rows and shuddered.

At last the little man spoke. His words came in slow, precise English.

"You are from the United States?"



Sparky and Mary Watched the Natives Come Closer

"That's right, pardner," Sparky agreed.

"The United States and Brazil are united against a common enemy."

"Right again."

"As our ally I salute you." The little man's hand shot up in a salute.

Thrilled to her fingertips, Mary managed to join Sparky in a salute.

The little man spoke a single word in a strange tongue and instantly the circle of natives dropped to their knees in a position of ease.

"Just like that," Mary whispered. She wanted terribly to cry.

With a courteous gesture the little man invited Mary and Sparky to resume their positions on the log. Then he sat down at Sparky's side.

"I," he said, "am Doctor Salazar. I have studied in your country. Being not unskilled in the medical profession and also possessed of an interest in native life, I was sent to this place that I might make friends of the natives. This, you will see, I've done."

"You are wonderful," Mary exclaimed. "And you are a doctor."

"Yes, that is my profession."

"One member of our party has been injured, how seriously we can't tell," Sparky explained.

"I am at your service. Shall we have a look at this man?"

They rose and walked over to Don's side. He had been sleeping but now stared at them with questioning eyes.

"We have brought you a doctor," said Mary.

"And not a medicine man either," Sparky laughed.

With practised fingers the little man went over Don from head to toe. "No bones broken," was his diagnosis. "Probably three ribs cracked. When his chest is taped up, he can be moved."

"Good! We'll take him to Para in the morning."

"In that large plane, I suppose," said the doctor.

"Yes."

"And the other plane?" asked the doctor.

"If your men will help us, we can load the motors in our good plane," said Sparky.

"It shall be done. You are Americans. I am an American. We all are Americans."

"You're right. We all are!" Mary exclaimed.

"The motors shall go," said the doctor. "But that which remains?"

Sparky shrugged. "In a war there will always be losses."

"My men and I can take it in pieces. We shall float it to the Rio Negro. There it can be put on a steamer. It should be in Para perhaps in two weeks. So there you are." The doctor made another bow.

"Indeed, you are wonderful!" Mary exclaimed.

"It is all for the great cause. Speed the victory." The doctor clicked his heels and saluted.

The salute was returned in good measure.

And so it was arranged. Scarcely had the red of dawn disappeared from the sky when the Lone Star rose to greet the sun, then began winging its way toward the far-away city of Para.

Four hours later, far above the clouds, they flew across the broad waters of the Para river at its mouth, then began circling down to the city of Para.

First to catch Mary's eye was the city's ancient fortifications. As they circled lower she caught the gleam of the cathedral's roof. The governor's palace and other public buildings stood out from among the royal palms. Last but not least were the hundreds of homes, each with its lovely little garden surrounded by palms.

The broad public garden caught her eye, then the airport. So they came circling down to ask for and receive permission to land.

As soon as they were down an ambulance was called and Don, with Janet in attendance, was whisked away to the hospital.

"I'm staying with the ship," Sparky said to Mary.

"Sure," Mary agreed. "Can't take any chances this time."

"That's right. Besides there's a lot to be done. The motors from my ship must be unloaded and arrangements made for the repairing and assembling of the other plane when it arrives—if it does," Sparky added gloomily.

"Oh! It will!" Mary exclaimed. "I'd trust that little doctor with my life."

"Okay. We'll hope for it," Sparky agreed. "You just hop out somewhere and get yourself a good, square meal."

"One good Brazilian feed," she laughed.

"That's it. One dinner in every land. That's our motto."

"I'll bring you a dinner on a tray, buy tray, dishes, and all. When we get going you can eat the food and throw the dishes into the sea."

"We'll be taking off in just a couple of hours, if I can get our papers all cleared up, so don't admire the scenery too long."

"Don't worry. I'll be right back."

Even at this strange corner of the world the war was much in evidence. Soldiers were all over the field. Army planes from many lands came and went. At the gate stood two guards. A smile and her uniform were all the passes she needed.

Not so the youth in tattered clothes who stood outside the gate, gazing in at Mary's big plane.

"That's some plane you've got." He tipped his seedy hat.

"You're an American, too." She smiled.

"Yes—I—guess so. At least I used to be." He did not smile. "Now, well, I guess you'd say I'm sort of a tropical tramp. Been down here for five years."

"But," his voice rose, "Boy! That plane of yours. Must be the best there is!"

"Ever do any flying?" she asked. She should be going on but this boy interested her.

"Sure—I've flown quite a bit, here and in U.S.A., too."

"Why don't you join up?"

"Your outfit?" He grinned broadly. "You're a girl."

"Oh, but there are a lot more men than women flying for the Ferry Command."

"But then," her voice dropped, "they probably wouldn't take you."

"Why?" His shoulders squared.

"That's just it," was the quick reply. "You're too fit. They'd want you for combat duty. You can't make our outfit unless you're too old for combat or there's something a little wrong with you. Sparky, my fellow-pilot, has a hole in his eardrum. Combat wouldn't take him, but Ferry did."

"But say!" She gave him a good, square look. "Why don't you ship back to U.S.A. and get into a uniform? Afraid to go back?"

"No, just ashamed. I ran away. My mother's a peach. She really is."

"Go back and sign up. Get into uniform, then breeze back home. You'll make a hit."

"Well, I—"

He broke short off to leap sideways, take three flying steps, then swing his arm to knock something from a stranger's hand. Without knowing why, Mary followed on the run. It was lucky that she did, for the angry man flashed a knife. He slashed at the boy once and drew blood. His second blow, better aimed, might have been fatal had not Mary done a flying leap to knock his arm high in the air and send the knife flying away.

Instantly they were surrounded by soldiers. The youth and the man were seized. Two soldiers stepped toward Mary.

"What eez zis all about?" one asked.

"I—I really don't know," was her faltering answer.

The soldier looked at her in astonishment. "You might have been keeled. Now you say, 'I know nothing.'"

"It's a fact for all that." She smiled in spite of herself. "I—I do things like that sometimes."

"I'll tell you what it's about," the boy broke in, holding up a bloody arm. "That man," he pointed to the stranger, "is a spy. He was taking pictures of that big plane. That's an American plane and I'm an American. He can't get by with that!"

"Good for you!" The words were on Mary's lips. She did not say them. Instead she bent down and picked up something black that gave off a bright gleam. "He's telling the truth," she said in as quiet a tone as she could command. "Here's the proof, his camera. That boy knocked it from his hand."

"It's a lie!" the man snarled. "I never saw the thing before!"

"It's one of those costly miniature cameras," Mary went on. "It takes a hundred pictures as easy as firing a machine gun. And sometimes it's twice as deadly." She handed it to the soldier. "Have the film developed. The pictures will speak for themselves."

"It's a lie," the man growled, trying to break away.

"He calls himself Joe Stevens now," said the boy, swabbing his bleeding arm with a soiled handkerchief. "I knew him in Manos. That was before we entered the war. He was a rubber trader then. They called him Schnieder."

"We'll look into this," said the officer.

To Mary he said, "This boy needs attention. There's a Red Cross first-aid station up that way a block."

"I'll have him fixed up," said Mary.

"And will you vouch for his return to the station at the airport gate?"

"Absolutely."

"Come on then," the soldier spoke to Stevens who had once been Schnieder, then they marched away.

"It's nothing," the boy said, hiding his hand. "I'll fix it."

"No," said Mary. "We're going to the first-aid station. Then you're going to take me to some place where I can get a swell dinner."

"Oh, so that's how it is?" His face lit up. "Come on, then, let's go."

An hour later, with his arm neatly bandaged, the boy sat opposite her, smiling. The grand dinner he had promised was coming to an end. It had been all she had dreamed of and more. They were having their black coffee and ice cream.

Taking a pencil from her purse she wrote on a card then handed it to him. "That," she said, "is my permanent address. I'm going on a rather long journey. I may not come back. We never know. But if I do, I'd like to have something nice waiting for me. Send me your picture when you get in uniform, won't you?"

"Well, I—" He swallowed hard. "Yes, I will, if I make it." That was all he said.

At the airport gate he put out a hand for a good stout handclasp.

"Ships that pass in the night." His voice was husky.

"Yes," she replied quickly. "Fighting ships that are going to put things to rights in this old world of ours." At that she turned to march away.

"By the way," he called after her. "Just in case you might like to know, my name's Jerry Sikes—"

"Thanks, Jerry." She smiled. Then without thinking she added, "I'll be seeing you."

One more hour passed. Just as they were ready to take off, Mary brought Sparky his dinner on a tray.

"It's paid for, tray and all," she said.

"Good! Then, let's go." He led the way into the cabin. "They say it brings good luck if you throw your dishes into the sea," he laughed.

Mary did not laugh. One word Sparky had spoken stuck in her mind.

"Luck," she whispered to herself. "We may need it, all kinds of luck." She could not quite forget that they had already lost one plane. Just now she had visions of herself on a rubber raft in mid-

Atlantic, casting a line in the vain hope of catching a fish.

CHAPTER IV

THE BIG HOP

Shaking herself free from these disturbing thoughts, Mary checked the No. 1 card Sparky handed her and said, "It's okay," then watched him check his gas.

Working together like the well-trained team that they were, they threw on a switch here to release it, then snapped on another there, only to reach for one more switch. Mary nodded to the mechanic waiting outside. He nodded back, then held up a fire bottle. One engine coughed, then the other. Mary reached for two small levers, Sparky eased the throttle back to one thousand, then nodded to the mechanic. The mechanic removed the chocks from before their wheels. Sparky eased his plane slowly down the runway. They picked up speed. Faster—faster—faster they sped and then that magic word, "up," and they were away.

They were not off for Africa, not yet. Their way led along the coast toward Natal, the jumping off place.

Sometimes they were far out over the sea and then again the beauty of tropical forests lay beneath them. It was a glorious trip.

Just at sunset a white spot appeared before them and Mary knew that this lap of their journey was nearing its end.

"There are good American mechanics at Natal," Sparky said. "They'll give the old ship a real going over. We'll get a few hours of good, sound sleep. And then—"

"We'll be off." Mary thrilled to the tips of her toes. "Off for the Old World. We're going abroad, Sparky! Just think! Really going abroad!"

"It's just another trip for me," Sparky laughed low. "But if you get a kick out of it, that's just fine."

"Get a kick out of it!" she exclaimed. "Of course I will. If the time ever comes when I no longer get a kick out of things, I'll be ready to die."

"Guess you're right at that," Sparky agreed. "But then, what's a thrill to you may be just another headache for someone else. I, too, have my big moments."

"Let me know when you have one?" she asked.

"I might, at that," he agreed.

"There's a good little hotel run just for American women at Natal," he said. "Run by an old lady called Aunt Polly."

"Aunt Polly—sounds like a parrot," Mary laughed.

"She's got one, too," said Sparky. "She keeps a nice place. I'll run over there soon's we land."

"Set your alarm, for I'll be after you at two A.M. We'll not sleep going over so don't lie awake thinking. Hit the pillow fast and hard. That's my motto."

"Fast and hard it shall be," Mary agreed.

At that they began circling for a landing.

At 2:15 that night they had breakfast sitting on stools in a little all-night stand.

"Lots of coffee and plenty of oatmeal with cream," was Mary's order.

"And good, brown toast with well-done bacon," Sparky added.

"Nervous?" he asked as her fingers shook a bit.

"Yes."

"That's fine. I wouldn't give a plugged nickel for a partner that didn't have nerves. It's part of our equipment. Keeps us on our toes. But you're not scared?"

"Just a little."

"Don't be!" He grinned. "It's only a step."

"Pretty long step." She smiled back at him.

"Eighteen hundred miles, plus, and water under us all the way. What could be sweeter? And we'll be flying out to meet the dawn."

"Oh, Sparky!" she exclaimed. "That does sound swell! I never did like night. Just to think that we're hurrying away to meet the sun that is just popping along to meet us! That sure is something."

The food was excellent so she ordered a lunch "to go" and, producing a gallon thermos bottle, ordered it filled with coffee.

"That," said Sparky, "will be frozen solid. We're going to be flying up there among the stars."

"Oh, no, it won't," she gave him a sly smile. "There are some advantages in having a gal for a co-pilot. One of the advantages is a hot lunch half way across."

"Tasting is believing." He was a skeptic.

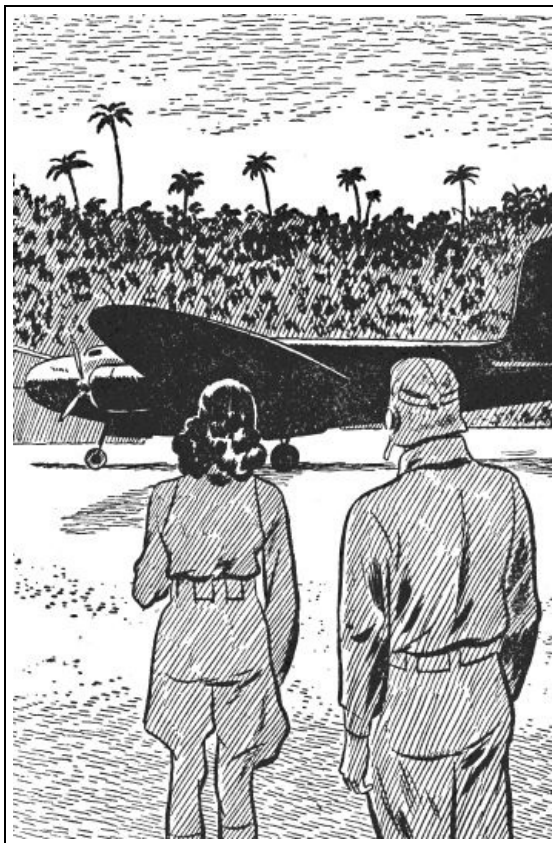
"Wait and see."

"I'll wait."

Ten minutes later they were at the airport and with their arrival a burden seemed to fall upon Mary's slender shoulders. She had started out light-heartedly enough to do, with her companion, Janet, what no woman of the Ferry Command had ever done before, to ferry a big ship half way round the world. What was more, their ship was to carry a light cargo of vital war equipment. Now her companion was gone. Sparky had taken her place. They had started out forty planes strong. Now one plane was out of action and thirty-eight were a full day ahead of them.

"We'll have to go it alone," she said, speaking half to herself and half to Sparky.

"That's it," Sparky agreed. "The Fates have arranged that."



"We'll Have to Go It Alone," Said Mary

"And our cargo is priceless. That's what the Major said."

"Priceless," he agreed. "It's quite as important that it should arrive safely as, well perhaps, as it is for all those big bombers ahead of us to go through."

"But, Mary," his voice changed, "don't think of it that way. You'll tighten up if you do. That might prove fatal. You have to be relaxed, flexible, ready for anything. That's how you have to be."

"I—I'll try to forget that cargo," she agreed.

"Well," he breathed, "here's our ship all primed up and rarin' to go. Come on. Let's climb up."

Once again he handed her the "Form One" card. This time she studied it with supreme care. It told her that the engines were in perfect order, that the tubes of carbon dioxide snow for fire prevention were full as were their oxygen tubes, and that fuel and oil supply were at their maximum.

When she had studied the card, she nodded to Sparky, and at once, he began thumbing the oil gage.

"Do you always check your oil supply?" she asked.

"Always," was the emphatic reply, "regardless of the report on the card, test your fuel. If you want to keep on living, you'll always do that. Men are human. An attendant may read your report, note that your No. 1 tank is short a hundred gallons, record that he is putting that amount in, then discover that he has but fifty gallons to spare. He forgets to record the change and—"

"Right out over an endless forest your engine coughs and dies. No gas—I see," she replied soberly.

"Gas and oil okay," Sparky murmured. Then in silence he flipped on the ignition and gas, set the electric primer going, counted five, allowed it to snap off, then nodded to his mechanic. The mechanic grinned as he held up a carbon-dioxide fire extinguisher.

"That's one more thing," Sparky warned. "Don't ever start twin motors unless someone is near with the fire bottle. And don't you let me do it!"

"Is that so bad?" Mary asked.

"Worst in the world," Sparky exploded. "If one motor fails to start popping, you'll have a fire in your exhaust pipe.... A fire bottle will put it out in a hurry. But if there's no fire bottle your ship will go up in smoke. A fire of high octane gas is something to think about!"

He started the energizing wheel going, waited a space of seconds, then threw on the fuel-booster switch. First the right engine began coughing. Mary worked her two levers that enriched the fuel mixture. Sparky eased his throttle back to one thousand, then nodded to the mechanic. The mechanic removed the chocks from before the wheels, and the big ship started to move.

"We're off!" Mary thought with a little choking sensation at her throat.

Sparky cursed some small, foreign plane that, taxiing across the field, caused him to swing sharply to the right.

"Looks like he did that on purpose," said Mary.

"May have, at that," was the reply. "There are some Hitler sympathizers down this way."

"Well," he sighed ten seconds later. "I fooled him. Now the runway's clear, so here we go." The powerful motors roared in unison. They rose sharply toward the stars. Ten minutes later they were out over the blue-black sea and still slowly climbing.

"The sea is so black," Mary thought. "The sky is all filled with night. Hours of this! How can I bear it?"

Then, as a sense of real joy, the feeling that must come to a night-flying bird, passed over her, she whispered, "But we're rushing east to meet the dawn."

"Get on your oxygen mask," Sparky commanded, crashing into her dream. "We're going up where there isn't any weather and mighty little air."

Their masks were attached by rubber tubes to pipes running from the oxygen storage tanks. When Mary had pulled on her mask she sighed, "Ah! That's great! Isn't it wonderful that they should mould our masks to fit our faces!"

"It's a grand idea," Sparky agreed, "but you'll get tired enough of it before we greet that dawn of yours. We're going up to twenty thousand feet and stay there for hours. We'll make better time that way and there'll be no bumps. You can even sleep if you want to."

"Sleep!" Mary's voice rose. "I'd never do that. Suppose you fell asleep, or—or something happened to you!"

"I never get sleepy and nothing ever happens." Sparky settled back in his place. "Talk when you feel like it," he drawled. "I like the sound of your voice."

"Oh, you do," Mary laughed.

They climbed to twenty thousand feet. It seemed to Mary that she could feel the intense cold creeping through their cabin's walls and her four-inch-thick suit of wool, leather and fur. But this, she knew, was pure imagination.

As they zoomed along through the blue with the black ocean far below and the stars apparently scattered all about them, she felt very little desire to talk. She just wanted to think.

Her mind went back to childhood days. Happy days they had been, those days with her father. School shut out much of this. And then had come college. College vacations found her flying, first with her father, then alone. She had learned about airplane engines from the ground up and had even become an expert with a machine gun.

"That," she told herself, "was Providence, a dress rehearsal for war."

As if he had been reading her thoughts, Sparky said, "Mary, there were a dozen or more who volunteered for this job you're doing now. I wouldn't want you to think I don't like your work. I do. You're swell, but how come they picked on you? You're about the youngest of the lot."

"That's right," Mary agreed, "but I've had more hours of solo flight than any of them. Fifteen hundred, to be exact."

"Fifteen hundred?" Sparky whistled. "Practically flew from your cradle!"

"Nope—started when I was sixteen. You see, Dad is as much at home in the air as on the ground."

"And you take after him?"

"Sure. Why not? What's more, I know a lot about airplane engines and machine guns."

"Handy man with tools, eh?" Sparky drawled.

"Try me." Mary did not laugh. "Who knows? This job of ours may call for all the tricks we know before it's done."

"Guess that's right," Sparky agreed. "And I sure am glad you're on the job."

After that they once more lapsed into silence. The miles and the stars flew by. There were times when Mary was plagued by the illusion that somehow their ship had stopped traveling, that they were there, suspended in space, their motors roaring, but taking them nowhere. At such times she felt an all but over-powering desire to scream, for her overwrought imagination was telling her that the motors would roar on until the fuel was gone, then they would crash into the sea.

At times she felt drowsy, at others she was so wide awake that she wanted to leave her seat for a walk. This she knew was not entirely impossible since a bottle of oxygen attached to her tube and slung over her shoulder would give her freedom of movement. But this would call for more exertion than she felt like, and she lapsed back into sleepiness.

Then, little by little, she found herself drifting into a light and hilarious mood. She wanted to sing. She did hum little snatches of funny songs she knew. "The Bear Went Over The Mountain," "The Old Gray Mare, She Ain't What She Used To Be," and "Clementine."

From time to time Sparky looked at her and growled into his mask.

"Oh, Sparky," she cried at last, "I'm tired of this mask. Can't I take it off?"

She meant this only as a joke but Sparky roared, "For heaven's sake! No! You wouldn't last half a moment."

Nothing daunted, she told him a rather long, funny story.

"Is that supposed to be a joke?" he growled. "If so, where's the point?"

She began to realize that something was wrong.

"Either Sparky has turned into a terrible crab or I'm plain crazy," she told herself half in despair.

From hilarity she went into gloomy foreboding. Then, of a sudden, she sprang out of both. She knew what had happened. Both she and Sparky were drunk on oxygen. They had been up high too long. They should drop to lower levels at once. But how was she ever to make Sparky see this? In the morose mood of a partially intoxicated man, he would perhaps resist all her suggestions.

After a moment's thought she believed she had the very idea. "Sparky," she said, "I'm hungry."

"Suck your thumb, like a bear," he growled.

"The coffee's hot, a whole gallon of it."

"It's frozen solid. I told you it would be. Know what the temperature outside is? Thirty-five below."

"Yes, I know, but that coffee's still hot."

"How come?"

"That's my secret."

"Then keep it."

"I'll bet you five dollars it's hot, yes, and the bottle of soup, too."

"You got five dollars?"

"Sure I have."

"All—all right, it's a bet."

"Sure it is. Do come on down to five thousand feet and I'll show you."

"Okay, here we go. But I get the five."

They started down. Anxiously Mary watched the recording gage. Twenty thousand, fifteen thousand, ten, eight—she opened a ventilator, then another. At five thousand they leveled off. When at last the air was changed, they dragged off their masks.

"Whew!" Sparky breathed deeply. "That's great!"

"You don't know half of it," said Mary.

"Where's your hot coffee?"

"I'll get it." She did. When the cork was removed steam rose from the bottle.

"Well, I'll be!" Sparky exclaimed. "You win! How do you do it?"

"Little electric heat, that's all." She pointed at the connections at the base of the thermos bottle.

"Say!" Sparky beamed. "From now on, you and I travel together."

"At least for some little time," she agreed with a wise smile.

It was a grand little lunch they enjoyed there above the black waters of the Atlantic. Mary flew the ship while Sparky drank hot coffee and soup, and munched hot cheese sandwiches. Then he took the controls while she carried on with the lunch box.

But when it was all over and they began once more to climb, weighty problems once more bore down upon Mary's tired brain. Would they again climb high and fly too far, then become oxygen-drunk again? She hated to ask Sparky and yet—

Thousands of weary miles lay ahead, miles where danger lurked all the way. Then, too, there was their precious cargo. Would it reach its destination safely?

"It must," she whispered. She reached for her mask and then Sparky spoke.

CHAPTER V

THE LADY IN BLACK

"Forget the mask," Sparky was saying. "We've got loads of gas. Dawn will soon be here. We'll stay five thousand feet. Go back and get a little rest."

Reluctantly she obeyed. Having wrapped herself in the eiderdown robe, she fell fast asleep. But not for long. She awoke with a start from a disturbing dream to find an eerie light shining down upon her.

"The ship's on fire!" she thought tumbling out of her robe.

She sprang to a window to whisper, "We have met the dawn."

It was true. The sun, a red disk, rolled along the horizon. The sea and the sky were all ablaze with light.

"Sparky!" she exclaimed. "It's wonderful!"

"Is it?" he asked sleepily. "Just another sunrise. That's all it seems to be. But look, Mary, you've been a peach. I suppose I should apologize for being gruff with you back there when we were way up high."

"Oh, no!" Mary exclaimed. "Don't ever apologize. Your friends don't demand it, your enemies don't deserve it. Besides I never quarrel with people when they're drunk." A teasing smile played about the corners of her mouth.

"Who's been drunk?" He shot her a quick look. "You think I'm crazy? I'm not a drinking man, but if I were, I'd be plain mad if I drank before a trip like this."

"Oh! So you weren't drunk?" She threw back her head for a good laugh. "You were all the same."

"What!" Sparky seemed ready to leave the controls to crown her.

"Yes, you were drunk and so was I. I was happy and you were sad. That's how people get when they are drunk."

"Say, are you crazy?"

"No, Sparky, I'm not." She laughed again. "We were having an oxygen drunk. It might have been dangerous. I realized the danger just in time. Too much oxygen, too long, that's all."

"Too much oxygen, too long," he repeated after her. "I've heard of that happening but just think of an oldtimer like me getting caught with it!"

"The bigger they are the harder they fall." She favored him with a good laugh. "But it's not really strange," she added soberly. "Our trip, this far, has been a hard one. You've worked long hours. You were too tired to think. I was fresh. That made all the difference. And just for that, how would you like to crawl back for a few winks?"

"Don't mind if I do." He offered her the controls. "But promise me that if anything unusual occurs, seaplanes show up, or anything like that, you'll call me."

"I'll call you," she agreed.

Sparky's sleep was long and peaceful. Never had Mary enjoyed herself half so much as on that morning guiding the big ship through the blue sky over a sea as dark and mysterious as death.

An hour passed, two, three hours. Sometimes she wondered in a vague sort of way about their secret cargo. Would it go through safely and would she be with the ship to its journey's end? Just then none of these things appeared to matter much. It was good to live. That, for the moment, was enough.

There was a spring-like warmth in the air, and a faint fragrance as of flowers. They were going against a mild off-shore breeze.

Once she spotted dark dots on the ocean far below. There were twenty-four, a convoy. It must, she told herself, be an American convoy. She wanted terribly to drop down low and dip a wing in salute but, this, she knew, would never do. Some enemy sub might see that dip and know that the convoy lay beneath her. They would close in and then—

No—it would never do, so she drove straight on toward the rising sun.

At last a long, low, gray-green cloud appeared on the horizon before her. Or was it a cloud? Breathing softly she waited and watched. The long, narrow line widened. It seemed to take form. Some spots were higher, some strips greener than others. At last she whispered excitedly:

"It's land! Land! Africa! I'll soon be abroad. The long hop is nearing its end." She wanted to shout for joy, to scream, but this she knew was not expected of the co-pilot of a big ship so all she said was:

"Sparky! Sparky! Wake up! We're nearing land, and I don't know the way to that secret airfield."

"What—what?" Sparky groaned sleepily. "It can't be land. I just stretched out here a minute ago."

"Yes, I know." Mary laughed for sheer joy. "It's land all the same. I think I see a camel. Come and see."

Sparky came forward rubbing his eyes. Adjusting his glasses he took a good look.

"Can't make out your camel," he drawled, "but that white spot off to the right is Dakar, all right. Good girl! You hit it right on the nose. Give me the controls and I'll have you eating fried camel steak and dates before the hour is up."

They did just that. Coming down on an airfield fringed with palms, they were given a cordial greeting by a dozen good American soldiers. To a man, they stared at Mary, then grinning, saluted.



Soldiers Greeted Them at the Secret Airfield

"Jeepers, boys!" one of them exclaimed. "An honest-to-goodness lady of the Ferry Command."

"If they all come like this one, make 'em all ladies from now on," his buddy chipped in.

"It's nice to see you all." Mary put on her best smile. "I only wish I could be with you for a week."

"Make it two! Make it for the duration!" came in a chorus.

"Two hours," was Sparky's pronouncement. "Give our ship the once-over, will you, while we motor in for some chow?"

"Oh, sure, we'll fix her up fine," a big sergeant grinned. "But you'll have to do your own searching for stowaways."

"And be sure you look well!" the lieutenant in charge added. "I'm short-handed. Can't spare a man."

An army jeep appeared and they were whisked away to a small city of low, white buildings, gleaming streets, and many camels.

"My!" Mary exclaimed. "It's hot!"

"Sure!" said Sparky. "This is Africa."

"The scene shifts so fast I can't keep up," Mary said, fanning herself.

"It won't be bad in here," said Sparky, motioning her to enter a long, low eating place. "It's more than half American, patronized mostly by our people. They run a sort of concession and get real food supplies from America."

The place was all open screened windows. There was a breeze from the sea. The food was good, even to the coffee.

"Just think of taking off in two hours!" Mary exclaimed. "I'd like to make it two weeks."

"Sure," Sparky grinned. "Great place for a gal. Hundred American soldiers to pick from."

"Sparky! Forget it!" She was half inclined to be angry. "What I mean is, I'd like really to see these places we visit, not go to it hop-skip-jump. It—it seems such a waste."

"That's right," Sparky agreed. "After the war we'll do it all over—take a whole year for it."

"Will we?" she asked.

"Who knows?" He spoke slowly. "We may be dead. This is war."

Sparky hurried through the meal, then excused himself. "Gotta see about our papers," he explained. "Be back in 'bout half an hour. Get yourself another cup of java and wait here in the shade."

Hardly had Sparky disappeared when a tall, distinguished-looking young woman entered. She was dressed in a striking manner, all in black, yet it was not the black of mourning for she wore much bright costume jewelry.

The place was fairly empty, a native couple in one corner and two doughboys in another.

"Do you mind?" The woman indicated the chair Sparky had left. "One sees so few women here."

Mary did not mind. The woman, who spoke with a French accent, took a seat, then ordered cakes and sour wine.

"You are from America?" the woman suggested. Mary nodded.

"A lady soldier?" Mary shook her head.

"But your uniform?"

"In America many women wear uniforms. We like them." Mary smiled. "I happen to be a member of the Ferry Command."

"And you flew a big plane all the way! How wonderful! Shall there be many more of you?"

"No—I—" Mary broke off. She had been about to say, "I may be the only one. Mine is a special mission."

"What a fool I am," she thought.

"I came for the ride really," she said, covering up deftly. "My father is over here somewhere."

"Ah! You brave Americans!" the woman exclaimed. "They saved my country, France, in the last war and now—"

"Now you expect us to do it again," Mary wanted to say. "And over here you are divided. You don't really know what you want."

She did not say this, nor did the woman finish, for at that moment a bright-eyed young woman in khaki entered the place and walked straight to their table to ask:

"Are you Mary Mason?"

"Yes." Mary stood up.

"I've been asked to speak to you—that, that is I have a message for you." The girl seemed embarrassed. "Perhaps—"

"No! No!" The French woman was on her feet. "I have urgent business. I was about to go. It is good to have seen you—" She bowed to Mary and was gone.

"Will you forgive me." The girl in khaki dropped into a seat. "I just had to do it. I never saw that woman before. She may be all right. You never know. Over here half the people are for us, the other half against. You dare trust no one. You didn't—" She hesitated.

"I didn't tell her a thing worth knowing." Mary smiled. "Will you have a cup of coffee?"

"Oh, sure!" The other girl's face beamed. "Real American girls are so rare here."

"You are a WAC?" Mary suggested.

"Yes, of course. There are very few of us here now, but there will be more and more." Her voice dropped. "That's the sort of things they want to know," she confided in a whisper.

They talked, sipped coffee, and munched cakes until Sparky hurried into the place.

"All set!" he exclaimed. "Our outfit is still far ahead of us. Got to get going."

After Mary had introduced Lucy Merriman, the WAC, they were on their way.

"I'll be seeing you," Mary called back. Then she added in an undertone, "I wonder."

As she climbed into the car, she caught a glimpse of the tall French woman. She was talking to a small man with a round face.

"That's a queer-looking pair," said Sparky. "Lady of quality and a beggar Arab."

"He looks like a Jap," Mary gave the fellow a sharp look. She would know him if she saw him again. "Besides," she added, "he can't be quite a beggar. He's got a camel."

"You meet all types here," Sparky replied absently. "It's the strangest country you ever may hope to see. We've sure got to watch our step. By rights we should fly square across the desert. But with our cargo," his voice dropped, "it's too risky."

"So we'll go northeast?" Mary suggested.

"That's right."

"That takes us into fighting country?"

"Yes—sort of—"

The car started, returning them to the airfield.

"There's a secret airport, on an oasis," Sparky told Mary. "That'll be our first stop. After that we hit Egypt and another secret spot. Egypt is safe enough. It's those miles in between." His brow wrinkled in a frown. "But we'll make it."

CHAPTER VI

MYSTERIOUS MOSLEM

To Mary the next lap in their long journey will always remain a blank, but the oasis at which they arrived will stand out vividly in her memory.

The reason for the blank was quite simple, for, as soon as they were safely in the air, Sparky said:

"Mary, you look tired. I know you are tough as a hickory limb and you've got all kinds of grit—"

"Oh, thanks, Sparky," she grinned. "I'm glad you've got my number."

"Got your number!" Sparky exploded. "Of course I have and just now you need sleep. That secret cargo of ours won't wait and so—"

"Sparky! Tell me what our secret cargo is," she begged.

"Will you stop interrupting me?" he stormed. "How do I know what it is? That's a military secret. All I know is that China needs all the help we can bring her, every bit! And that this cargo of ours is of the greatest importance. I shouldn't wonder," his voice dropped as if he were afraid someone were listening, "I shouldn't wonder if the enemy knows it's important. I got a warning to be on my guard not an hour ago, and that goes for you as well. This is a dangerous land. It's all full of Italians, wild natives, and even a few traitorous Frenchmen that would sell us out for a dime or kill us just for fun.

"And so—" He paused for breath.

"And so—" Mary prompted.

"Let's see, where was I?" Sparky pulled back the stick to climb a bit. "Oh, yes! And so we've just got to keep right on flying. Mighty little time for sleep. I had a dandy rest before we hit Africa. Now it's your turn. I'll do this lap. You just crawl back there, roll up in your robe, and sleep."

All too willingly Mary rolled up in her robe and slept. When she awoke they were circling for a landing at one of the most fascinating spots she had ever known.

Looking down upon it, as they were, from ten thousand feet, it seemed a green carpet on an endless gray floor.

"An oasis!" Mary whispered. "How beautiful!"

"Yes, and I shouldn't wonder if those dark, moving spots over there on the grasslands were giraffes or maybe elephants."

"Yes, and there's a camel caravan just coming in," Mary exclaimed. "How long it is. Must be fifty camels. And the shadows seem darker than the camels. Oh! I wish we could stay a week!"

"Well, we can't," Sparky warned. "Few hours at best. Our right engine isn't acting properly. Has to be tuned up for this desert air, I guess. That'll give you a breathing spell. Make the most of it."

The camel shadows on the desert were long. The sun was almost down when at last their plane came to rest on that long, narrow runway there in the desert.

Here again they found good American soldiers and mechanics. And Mary once more found herself creating a sensation!

"Hey, fellas!" one boy with bulging eyes shouted. "It's a lady, a lady pilot, right out here just a mile beyond nowhere!"

"Joe! Hey, Jerry! You! Tom!" another called. "Come and see it. We got lions an' elephants, zebras, giraffes, and aardvarks, but this one is different! Come a-running! See if you can name it." He looked at Mary and laughed happily.

They were grand boys, all of them, and those who were not on duty showed her the time of her life. They hurried her off to mess where they feasted her on ripe figs, bananas, strawberries, and all manner of African delicacies.

Then one of them said, "Come on! We'll show you something you'll never forget."

"How long will it take?" she demurred.

"Only an hour or two."

"I'll have to ask Sparky about that."



Mary Found Herself Creating a Sensation

She found Sparky perspiring and covered with grease as he worked with the mechanics tuning up the engine.

"Two hours," was his short reply. "Be back in two hours if you want to fly with me."

"We'll be back in an hour!" a boy from Indiana exclaimed.

"Sure! Sure!" they all agreed. "Come on. What are we waiting for? Let's go."

And so away they all marched to the shelter where the jeeps were kept.

It was while on this march that Mary received a sudden shock. As they hurried along, they met a woman dressed as a Moslem woman always is. She wore a long, flowing robe and her face, save for her eyes, was covered with a veil. Yet there seemed to be something very familiar about the tall, erect figure and the brisk, springing walk.

"Jeepers! I never saw her before!" a boy whispered.

At the same time Mary was thinking. "I must have seen her somewhere. But how could I—"

Just then the dark eyes shining out from behind the veil gave her a sharp, penetrating look. In her shock Mary stumbled and nearly fell.

"Can she be the woman who asked me questions in that eating place, way back there in the little city by the sea?" she asked herself. And then, "How could it be?"

"Oh!" she exclaimed, stopping short. "I can't go with you boys. I must not!"

"Aw, come on!" a boy from Texas begged. "You'll never see a thing like it again."

"We won't be gone an hour."

"Sure! Sure! You must come!"

They were such nice boys and she knew so well what it must mean to be escorting a real American girl in such a place, that she yielded and came along.

"And yet, I shouldn't do it," she told herself.

Before they were gone she received a second shock. Just as they were all piling into the car, a small man and a camel came shambling down the road.

"Can he be the little man I saw at the port?" she asked herself. It gave her a shock to think that this little man and the woman in black had somehow made their way here before them. This thought, as far as the little man was concerned, was short-lived. When he had come closer she saw that he was shorter than the other man, that his face was rounder, and there was a scar across his left cheek. She heaved a sigh on making this discovery, but her relief was not to be of long duration.

And so they rattled away, nine boys and a lady, the first they had seen in many a day.

"I shouldn't have come," Mary whispered to herself once again. Had she but known it, she was to be thinking that very thought hours later, and with regrets.

Darkness had come. Switching on the lights, they went bumping over the sand ridges.

"Rides just like that big ship of yours, doesn't it?" said the boy from Kentucky.

"Exactly," said Mary, giggling like a kid. She was happy but some sprite seemed to whisper, "Not for long."

After rattling along for a while with the lights on, they snapped the lights off, but rattled straight on.

A dark bulk loomed up before them. Shutting off the gas, they, all but the driver, piled out and began to push.

"Such crazy business," Mary whispered.

"Wait and see," came back to her.

At last they came to a halt. The dark bulk was closer now. Mary made out the forms of palm trees. One of the boys was dragging something. Strange sounds came from before them, low grunts, splashes, then a loud trumpet-like sound that made Mary jump.

"Say! What is this?" she whispered.

Someone snapped on a spot light connected by a wire to the car. Then she knew, for there before her, like a set in a museum was a water hole and in the water, belly-deep, stood all manner of creatures, ugly rhinoceros, graceful gazelles, ungainly giraffes, huge elephants and who could say what else.

"Are they really alive?" she asked in an awed whisper.

"Sure! What do you think?" The boy at her side laughed. "We got 'em trained now. You should have seen 'em the first time!"

"Yes, an' heard 'em," another laughed low. "They spilled all the water getting out."

"It's about all the fun we have way out here," one boy added with a touch of sorrow. "Oh, gee! Why don't you stay with us?"

"I'd love to," said Mary, "but I've got a job to do. There's a war on, you know."

"And don't we know it," the boy whispered. "One night we were bombed. Two boys were killed and three went to the hospital. Gee! Just think of dying way out here!"

Mary was thinking.

By and by she whispered, "We'd better go back."

Without a word they turned about to go shuffling back to the car. "Thanks a lot for coming with us," one of the boys shouted when they unloaded at the airport.

"Sure! Sure!" they shouted. "Hope you come this way again!"

"I'll be seeing you," she called. Then with a lump in her throat she walked to the plane where the men were just replacing the motor.

Did she see a shadow dart away from the other wing of the plane? It was too dark really to know. "Probably a sneaking old jackal," she told herself.

"Sparky," she said as they soared aloft some time later, "I'm going to resign from this job of mine."

"And then what?" Sparky asked in surprise.

"Then I'm going from place to place in all these lonely spots cheering up the boys."

"That," said Sparky, "would be a noble purpose, but just now you're bound to this big plane and

me. And you'll not leave us for a long time, not till the journey's end."

"Not till the journey's end," she repeated softly. And how soon would the end come? Who could tell? Perhaps tonight. One never knew. She shuddered a little, then turned her attention to the work of the hour.

That night Mary did not sleep. Sparky had first call on a time for rest and he surely needed it. He told her to call him in two hours.

"But I won't," she told herself. "Not if all goes well. Something tells me I won't sleep if I have the chance." She found herself haunted by a sense of impending doom. The tall French woman, all in black, and the stately Moslem lady were constantly being blended on the pictured walls of her mind. And after that, with the slow sleepy tread of the desert, came the two little men and their camels. They too seemed part of the same picture, but just how, she could not tell.

"What foolishness!" she whispered. "Lie down, you ghosts." But they would not. They continued to haunt her.

She gave herself over to glimpses of the desert and the night. There was a glorious moon. The desert beneath her was full of haunting shadows. For the most part they were shadows of sandy hills, but at times they loomed dark and large.

"Oases," she told herself. "Wonder if friend or foe live here—" Sparky had told her that this night they were to fly over dangerous country. Little pockets of enemy resistance here had not been crushed. She was to keep a sharp lookout and if she sighted a plane, was to call him at once.

"We can outclimb and outfly most enemy fighters," he had said. "But we must not let them get the drop on us."

So, with eyes and ears alert, she rode on through the night.

All went well. She called Sparky in three hours. He scolded her for waiting so long.

"It was the spell of the desert at night," she told him. "Seems as if I could fly on and on forever. And just think! We may never pass this way again!"

"Life is like that, so why bother?" was the reply. She went back for her turn at resting, but did not sleep.

Was it the spell of the desert night that kept her awake? Who can say? At least she did not sleep, just lay there, wrapped in her robe, staring into the darkness, listening to the roar of the motors and thinking, thinking.

Her father was somewhere in Africa. She knew that and no more. It would seem strange to pass over him in the night and not to see him at all. Yet, that might happen. There was no time for looking around, no time for anything. They must go on and on.

When two hours had passed, she was back at Sparky's side asking for the controls.

"I can't sleep," she explained. "Flying over the desert is fascinating. You don't care a whoop about it."

"That's right."

"Then why not let me have a chance at it?"

"Sure! Why not?" He yielded the controls.

As she took over, the words of an old song were running through her mind:

"Dance, gypsies; sing, gypsies; dance while you may."

It is in time of war that such simple songs as this take on a world of meaning.

She had not been at the controls an hour when the first faint traces of dawn began to appear. Then, suddenly, a signal on her board flashed a grim warning. Instantly her fingers shut off the fuel and oil from their left motor. The next instant she turned the carbon-dioxide snow on that motor, as she called:

"Sparky! Sparky! Quick! Our left motor is on fire!"

Sparky was at her side in an instant.

CHAPTER VII

BATTLING AT CLOSE QUARTERS

"Let me see!" Sparky's eyes flashed over the instrument board. "Fuel and oil off, extinguisher on. Good girl!" He patted her shoulder. "You know what to do."

"I know more than that." Her lips were in a straight line.

"What's that?"

"I should have stayed with the ship last night."

"I don't see that."

"Someone tampered with our left motor while you were busy with the other one."

"Not necessarily. Motors have caught fire many times without tampering. Your motor is set on springs. That's to prevent vibration. Because of this your fuel and oil must come through flexible tubes."

"Yes, I know all that," she broke in. "Sometimes the connection gets loose. Gas drips on the manifold and then there is a fire. All the same—"

"You think our motor was tampered with. Well, I don't. Anyway, all we can do is to watch everything, fly on one, and hope for the best."

"And you said this was dangerous country."

"Very dangerous."

"Dawn is here."

"The most dangerous of all. If an enemy fighter spots us, he's sure to come after us."

"And then—" She was feeling a little dizzy.

"Then we'll have to try to defend ourselves. Mind if I leave you for a moment?"

"No—I—I'll carry on."

"We've got a couple of free machine guns. I'll have them ready just in case."

"Must we fight?"

"It's all there is left to do. We can't climb on one motor. All we can do is to stay up a mile and go straight on."

"Oh! Perhaps a fight," Mary thought as he went back in the cabin.

The gray sands were turning white before the rising sun. She saw a speck in the distance. Could it be an enemy plane? She wished Sparky would come back.

Supposing the fire broke out of the motor enclosure and the ship burned. She shuddered at the thought. "Of course," she reassured herself, "we'd take to our parachutes and escape."

"But escape to what?" a voice seemed to whisper.

To sifting sands. That was the answer. And then there was their precious cargo.

Here was Sparky again. "All set." His voice was almost cheerful.

"Spoiling for a fight?" Mary teased.

"I wouldn't mind knocking down one or two of Hitler's desert rats," was the quick reply. "There's fighting blood in my family. Grandfather in the Civil war and Dad all the way with the Canadians in the other World War. And here I am just flying, flying, flying, flying. Gets a bit dull at times.

"Except," he hastened to add, "when you have an attractive co-pilot."

He was talking, she knew, just to quiet her nerves.

"There's worse to come," she told herself. And she was not mistaken.

"The fire must be about out by now," he said a moment later. "There are a lot of sprays shooting carbon-dioxide snow at that engine. It's under 850 pounds of pressure. Turn off the extinguisher and I'll work my way back there through the wing."

She snapped off the extinguisher. "Can you do anything about it?"

"Oh, sure!" There was a forced cheerfulness in his voice. "I can get to that engine. I'll take tools and a new tube. I'll fix it. Wait and see!"

"Sparky!" She gripped his arm. "Be careful. I wouldn't want—well, you know, that desert looks awfully lonesome."

"I'll be careful." Once again he was gone, leaving her to the ship's controls, the desert, and the spreading dawn. She could see a long way now. There really was an airplane out there on the horizon. But then there were planes everywhere these days.

This plane acted strangely. It seemed at first to be coming straight toward her. Then it took a broad sweep and began to disappear.

"Like some old marauding crow going back to tell his friends," she thought. "Hope Sparky won't be long. But then, of course, in that cramped place he can't work fast. Just have to be patient, that's all."

The truth is that Sparky had not even started repairing the engine. There were, he had discovered, other matters that needed attending to first.

All the time Mary was watching the sky. The plane out there on the edge of the horizon had reappeared. A mere speck against the blue, it increased in size. Even at that great distance, she somehow believed this was a different plane.

Presently this plane too cut a broad circle, then began to fade.

"Like bees coming out from a hive," she thought. "Afraid of us perhaps. Our big, fighting planes

have been knocking them down of late." If that were true she hoped they would keep on being afraid.

As Sparky crept on hands and knees through the low wing section of the plane, toward this disabled engine, he had caught a disturbing sound. "Like the hiss of a goose," he thought. He flashed a light before him, then recoiled as if struck a blow. Little wonder, for there, not ten feet before him, was a pair of bulging eyes. Beneath the eyes was a mouth with a tongue moving up and down.

"Like a snake," he thought.

He was not deceived. It was not a snake but, of all persons, a Jap.

"Our engine *was* tampered with!" His head spun, but his temper rose to a white heat.

Between him and the Jap was a trap-door leading to the desert below, providing you had a parachute. And the Jap had one, strapped to his back.

"Ready to go," Sparky told himself. "He would have gone before this, but he was afraid. Now he will never jump."

As if reading his thoughts, the Jap sprang forward. He was too late. Sparky was solidly settled on the door.

Hissing like a snake, the little man snatched a knife from his belt. One moment it hung in air, the next it rattled against the wing's floor. A heavy wrench had crushed against the Jap's arm, all but breaking it.



Between Him and the Jap Was a Trap-Door

Then they came to grips. It was muscle and brawn against ju-jitsu, and all manner of oriental tricks. Now an arm, like the tail of a boa-constrictor, was about Sparky's neck, choking, choking him to death. And now Sparky's steel-like fingers were gripping the Jap's arm, twisting it until bones cracked.

It was a tooth-and-nail battle. Now the Jap was clawing at Sparky's eyes. And now Sparky had those claws between his teeth.

It became a struggle for weapons. Once the Jap gripped the handle of his knife only to receive a blow in the face from Sparky's fist that sent him reeling.

Regaining possession of his wrench, Sparky aimed a blow at the head of that serpent of the Rising Sun. Only a sudden upward thrust of a foot saved the Jap.

"I'll kill you," the Jap hissed in good English.

"Come on, then. Try it!" Sparky aimed one more blow at the Jap's face.

The Jap dodged. Sparky lost his balance and fell flat. For a space of seconds he was at the enemy's mercy. But to get the knife the Jap must crawl over Sparky's body. He tried just that and this was his undoing for, with a mighty heave, Sparky pinned him flat and full-length against the hard slats above him.

Rising to hands and knees, Sparky put all the power of his splendid muscles into the task of crushing the last gasp from the now thoroughly beaten enemy.

When the last gasp came, he slid from beneath the Jap to let him down with a dull thud. "You wanted to go down," Sparky panted. "Now's your chance." His hands were on the trap-door's fastening. The Jap lay on that door.

Then he paused to reflect. It would be the end, he knew, well enough. The Jap was not dead, but helpless. His parachute had been torn from his back.

"You've got it coming," Sparky grumbled. "You planned all this. It would have been our end, not yours, but now—"

His fingers trembled. He undid a catch, then he fastened it again. He was thinking of the empty desert and the jackals. "It's too good for you," he grumbled, "but I can't do it."

At that he bound the Jap, who by this time was stirring and breathing. Then, pushing him far back in the wing, he tied him fast. "Tomorrow," he said aloud, "they will shoot you at dawn—the firing squad, you know."

The Jap's eyes rolled as a low hiss escaped his lips.

After that Sparky went about the business of repairing the disabled engine.

And all the time Mary at the controls was growing more and more uneasy at his prolonged absence. Little wonder for, out there on the horizon, there were movements, like that about a beehive when the bees begin to swarm.

They were a long way off, but an ever-increasing threat for all that.

Now there was one, now two, now three, and now five airplanes. Like a small flock of birds they flocked toward the sky, then all went swooping down again.

"Rehearsing for trouble," she breathed. "I wish Sparky would come back."

What was to be done? Trouble soared in the distant air. She feared the worst for Sparky yet had no means of communication with him and could not for a single instant leave the controls.

Despair had begun to grip her heart when there came a series of bumps behind her and there stood Sparky.

"Sparky!" she exclaimed, "You look terrible! There's blood on your face, blood, soot and grease. What happened?"

"You were right." He leaned heavily on the back of the seat. "There was a man back there, a little rat of a Jap."

"I knew it. I saw him back there at that oasis," she exclaimed. "There may be a tall woman in black in that other wing."

"Now you *are* crazy!" he exclaimed.

"Let me tell you." She told of the tall woman in black and the Arab woman that looked like her.

"Were those two the same person?" she asked.

"We'll ask the Jap." He managed a smile.

"Then you didn't—" She hesitated.

"No, I didn't kill him," he answered, "but I should have. I had a coil of insulated wire in my kit. I bound him hand and foot with that and left him back there. I hope he likes it."

"He won't get loose?"

"Never! Try that engine. I cobbled it up. Take it easy."

She eased the engine into motion once more. Soon both engines were roaring their best.

"Sparky! That's wonderful! Now we're safe!"

"Not for sure. That motor needs a going over. We—"

He broke off to stare at the northern sky.

"Planes! Headed this way! A whole formation of them! Say! This is being done according to plan! The enemy knows of our secret cargo. The Jap was to cripple us. Those planes were to finish us off. Well, they won't. Get out your oxygen mask, girl! We're going up to visit the stars. There's not a fighter made by those rats that can beat us to the stratosphere!"

She set the ship climbing, then reached for her oxygen mask. When she had it handy, she set herself for this new ordeal.

"But, Sparky!" she cried, "what about the Jap?"

"Well, what about him?" he growled.

"He'll die!"

"Let him die, then!"

"Yes, but you didn't finish him. You let him live."

"All right. I'll take him a mask and two oxygen bottles. It's a waste of that precious stuff, but there's the rule of war. I'll be back."

He vanished and on the instant Mary wished that she had not spoken. "What is one spy, more or less?" she asked herself. "Now I'm here to face it alone!"

CHAPTER VIII

DESERT BATTLES

Oddly enough, as Mary set the big plane climbing she recalled Sparky's words, "You are with me to the journey's end." Was this to be the journey's end? One thing was sure. During their moments of excitement over the captured spy, they had allowed the enemy to come dangerously close. Six fighting planes were coming roaring toward them at top speed.

Breathless with suspense, Mary watched their altitude increase. Ten thousand feet, eleven, twelve, fifteen thousand. It was not as fast as this; instead, to her excited mind the figures appeared to creep upward like a man with a crutch going upstairs.

One plane was ahead of the others. "He'll get us! I am sure of that!" she groaned. "Oh! If Sparky were only here!"

Then the on-rushing enemy did a strange thing. Instead of coming right on, like a catbird after a hawk, he circled wide, going completely around the big plane.

"Afraid." There was contempt in her voice.

"He'd better be!" It was Sparky who spoke. He was standing in the center of the cabin. In his hands he gripped a heavy machine gun.

As the enemy circled closer, he opened a window a crack to send forth a burst of fire.

The plane veered off, swinging around before them, then coming up on the other side.

Sparky had donned his mask. So, too, had Mary. They were getting into thin air. "If only we can hold them off," Mary thought.

Once again Sparky's gun spoke, then again and yet again. Like a cowardly wolf-pack the fighters were closing in slowly. There were three of them now.

There came the rat-tat-tat of machine gun fire from the distance. No bullets found their mark.

In desperation Mary set her motors going at a dangerous rate.

"If that burned motor fails me now—" Her heart paused, then raced on.

"Good girl!" Sparky encouraged her. "We're leaving them behind. They can't go much farther, not at this altitude. You, you're looking white around the lips. Here! I'll take the controls."

She staggered from her place, leaned for a space of seconds then, looking down, watched the fighter planes still battling their way upward. With shaking hands she reached for the machine gun. "This can't be the journey's end," she murmured.

And then something strange happened. The foremost plane that had been straining to reach them, faltered in midair, seemed to hang there for a moment, then, dropping one wing, went into a spiral dive that increased in speed until it seemed a boy's top, spinning in the sky.

Dragging her eyes from this fascinating and terrible sight, she looked for the other planes. They, too, were going down, but under control. They had given up the task assigned to them.

"It—it's all over! Finished!" She sank down in her place beside Sparky. "That first plane," she said after a time, "it went down in a spin. The pilot didn't bale out. It just went down, down."

"I've done a lot of duck hunting in my day," Sparky replied quietly. "Sometimes I'd shoot at a flock of ducks in midair. They'd sail right on, but a mile away, one of them would drop behind, go into a spin and come plunging down."

"You mean your bullets reached that plane?" Mary asked.

"They might have. Then again the fellow may have climbed too high."

"Something on his plane froze up?"

"Yes, or he did. Whichever way it was, there's one less of them for our boys over here to take care of. We won a bloodless battle."

After that, maintaining their altitude, they flew on for a hundred miles in silence.

Then, after a good look at the empty sky, Sparky tilted the plane's nose downward. Soon they were dragging off their masks and drinking in the crisp desert air of the upper reaches.

"Have to get back and see how my prisoner is getting on."

"You—your—oh, yes, that Jap spy." She took the controls.

There was a strange look on his face when he returned.

"Well?" she asked.

"I didn't mean to tell you," he replied, soberly. "You asked for it, so here it is. He's gone to join his ancestors."

"You mean—"

"Seems his mask didn't suit him, so he knocked it off."

"Oh! I see."

"In other words he committed hari-kari in a rather strange way."

"I gave him a desert burial," he explained after a while. "Just opened the trap door to the wing, and let him down."

She nodded. It had been a long, hard journey that day. She hoped there would be sunshine, laughter and song at that day's journey's end. And, for once, she was not to be disappointed.

A short time later something big loomed up before them on the horizon. "Is it a mountain?" Mary asked herself. It seemed a little strange that it should be there. Then, too, it was so perfect in form, no bumps on this side or that.

"Recognize it?" Sparky asked.

"No, could it be—"

"Yes. That's exactly what it is," he laughed. "A pyramid. And this is Egypt."

"Egypt!" She was impressed.

"Yup! Better get out your lipstick. We'll be landing in about fifteen minutes. I've never been here but the other boys say it's quite a spot, not so far from Cairo."

"You need scrubbing up more than I do, and a bit of first aid."

"Don't bother about me."

She did, for all that. With a damp cloth she washed the blood and engine grease from his face, then applied antiseptic.

After that she gave herself a hurried make-up. And then there they were, circling for one more landing among the date palms.

She found herself a trifle shaky about the knees when, at last, she stepped down to the good earth.

A few steps away a strongly built man was standing talking to another.

"He looks familiar," she told herself.

Just then the man turned. "Dad!" she cried. After three long strides, she was in his arms.

"Mary! It's good to see you!" he boomed. "I knew you were coming, but I couldn't let you know where I was. Why did you volunteer for so dangerous an assignment?"

"Because I am your daughter," she replied proudly. "You wouldn't want me to stand back, now, would you?"

"No, Mary, I wouldn't. You've made it safely this far. Here's wishing you luck and safety to the journey's end."

"The journey's end," she thought. "If he but knew how close we came to that end this very day."

"Mary," her father was saying, "I want you to meet the finest American flier in Egypt, Captain Burt Ramsey. Captain Ramsey, this is my daughter."

"Charmed to meet her, sir," was the quick response.

"I am pleased to meet you." She gave the young man her best smile. And why not? He stood six-foot-three and looked every inch the soldier—dark hair, brown eyes, and that far-away look that fliers, especially over the desert, acquire.

"I am surprised at that introduction, Colonel Mason." The Captain grinned broadly. "From all you've been telling me, this young lady must be the best flier in Egypt."

"Oh, that's purely a family matter, paternal pride," said the Colonel.



"Captain Ramsey, This Is My Daughter, Mary."

"Mary," he said, "you must be starved, dead for sleep, and—"

"And visibly shaken," she added. "Yes, all of that and more. You'd never believe it, but we did away with two desert rats on this trip."

"That's right," Sparky, who had just come up, agreed. "One yellow rat and one that was a doubtful white."

"Tell us," Ramsey demanded.

"Not now," Mary pleaded. "Perhaps not ever."

"I just wanted to say," Sparky broke in, "that we'll be here until three tomorrow morning. Our next hop is a long one and that burned engine needs a going over."

"Oh! Hours of rest!" Mary nearly collapsed in her father's arms. "You'll never know what that means."

"I'll leave you now," Burt Ramsey saluted. "Shall I see you at Waltz Time tonight?"

"Waltz Time on the radio?" Mary stared.

"No, indeed. Waltz Time on a very good floor and with an orchestra that lifts its hat to none."

"Oh!" she breathed, "That will be too much."

"Just the change you need," her father encouraged. "You can do a man's work, but no woman can be a man all the time."

"All right, then, it's a date." She put out a hand. "Father and I will be there."

Once again the Captain saluted, then, turning about, he marched away.

After taking her overnight bag from the plane, Mary climbed into a big car beside her father and went rolling away.

"This is like old times," she sighed.

"I wish you were staying a week." He drew a long breath. "That, of course, is out. That big flight of four-motored bombers went through here yesterday."

"Our flight."

"Yes, I suppose so. Thirty-eight planes. And they were burning up the air. Looks as if something big were in the making over the air of China."

"Or Tokio."

"That's what everyone is hoping, but no one really knows."

"Did you see our flight leader?" she asked.

"Yes, indeed. They took on gas here. He was very much concerned about your plane, and—" his voice dropped, "about your cargo. Made me promise you fighter protection across the Arabian Desert."

"Fighter protection. Hmm—we could have used some today."

"You'll have the very best tomorrow. Captain Ramsey is going as fighter flight commander. He'll have three men with him."

"Oh! That will be wonderful," she enthused. "Even if we don't run into trouble."

"Well, here we are. This is where I live." He brought the car to a stop before a beautiful little chateau.

"Some class!" she exclaimed. "How about my staying on as your cook?"

"The cooking is taken care of. I'll give you a job as hostess after your journey's end."

"Nope. Not interested. I'm in for the duration."

"Good girl." He took her bag. "We'll find you a cool, dark room to sleep in and call you in time for dinner. How's that?"

"Nothing could be sweeter."

She was awake and dressed for dinner before he called her and, in spite of the ordeals of the day, felt quite refreshed and ready for anything.

"Here's a party dress I managed to pick up for you," her father said, holding out a creation of thin, dark blue trimmed with some strange Syrian lace. "Bought it from a Syrian peddler. It's the real McCoy."

"Oh! Dad! It's lovely! But for just one night! It must have cost a fortune!"

"Not so great a fortune," was his smiling reply. "Besides, in times like these, when we live so fast, one night of perfect happiness can be treasured for days on end."

"One night of happiness," she repeated softly. "That sounds wonderful!"

"I'm hoping it may be wonderful. The dance is to be held at the Officers' Club, quite a splendid place. It's really a British affair, but we're all in on it, just as we are in the big fight. Once a week officers motor from long distances and bring the ladies. The Colonel's lady," he laughed. "I tried to get your partner Sparky in on the dance," he added. "He turned me down, said he needed the time for getting the plane in shape, but he did promise to have dinner with us."

"Dad, he's wonderful, Sparky is," Mary enthused. "The only trouble with him is," a wistful note stole into her voice, "he's just a machine, like those engines he watches so carefully."

"You're lucky to have a partner like that. There's only one in a hundred like him. You could fly all the way around the world with him."

"Looks as if we might do just that."

"Your destination is China?"

"Yes."

"What route do you take on your return to America?"

"I—I'm afraid we never gave it a thought. Our journey's end comes first."

"Yes, of course. You'll return by way of Australia or Alaska perhaps."

"Either will be thrilling."

"And dangerous. Well, now," his voice changed, "get on your party dress and we'll be on our way."

A maid appeared from nowhere. She had, in truth, been borrowed from a beauty parlor. When she looked at herself in the glass after the maid had done her work, Mary gasped, then experienced a sinking feeling about her knees.

"Sparky," she thought. "He'll put on his everyday coat and come strolling over to the club for dinner. It's a shame. I wish I could wear my uniform with a few spots on it!"

But then, perhaps she did not know Sparky. Or was it young Captain Ramsey who had engineered the transformation? Be that as it may, as she entered the club, she looked Sparky up and down for a full ten seconds before she knew him.

"Sparky! You old rogue!" she exclaimed. "Why! You're actually handsome! I'd like to—" She advanced toward him with shining eyes.

Blushing, Sparky backed away. "It says in the Bible," he drawled, "that you should let your moderation appear before all men. You're not looking so bad yourself," he added in a low tone, "but, pardner, this is no sort of armor for a fightin' fool. When do we eat?"

Colonel Mason led them to a table in the corner where the lights were subdued, and there they took their places, Mary, Sparky, Ramsey, and the Colonel.

The food, Mary discovered, was wonderful. "Lend-Lease?" she whispered to her father.

"Something like that," he smiled. "However it gets here, it's deserved. All the men you see here, British, French, or American, are on active duty. Most of them are fliers. Some have just returned from Tunisia where they have been on duty for long weeks. Half their squadron was shot down. Some are guarding the airways, as Captain Ramsey will be doing tomorrow. Almost every day some fine fellow fails to return—"

"But they seem so happy and cheerful." Her eyes swept the large room filled with laughing, chattering men and their ladies.

"Certainly. What do you ask?" was the quick reply. "You just must believe in your luck and keep your sense of humor. You, who have come a long way, should know that."

"Yes—" she agreed. "Yes, of course, I know it."

Just then young Captain Ramsey claimed her attention. For the next half hour he held it. While the Colonel and Sparky were busy comparing notes on the performance of various types of airplanes, she and Ramsey talked and laughed as they compared notes on the lives they had lived before the war descended upon them.

"It will never be the same," she sighed at last.

"Of course it won't," he agreed. "But do you really wish it?"

"I—I don't know," she hesitated.

"Of course you don't. None of us does. We've been whirled completely out of that world. When we get back, if we do—" his voice fell, "then's the only time we'll really know what we want. That's why I say, 'forget the post-war problems. Let's get on with the war.' We—"

"Look!" She gripped his arm. "There's an Arab. The head-waiter is bringing him this way. Oh, I'm scared."

"Arabs are harmless enough." He gave her a questioning look.

"Not all who pass as Arabs are harmless," she insisted. There was no time for explaining. The Arab, with the head-waiter at his elbow, had arrived at their table.

CHAPTER IX

A ROLL OF PAPYRUS

"I tried to tell him, sir, that it was not right that he should come in," the polite waiter apologized to the Colonel, Mary's father. "I said it is not convenient, it is not allowed, but he would come."

"It's all right, Pierre," the Colonel spoke quietly. "What is it you wish?" He turned to the Arab.

"Oh! Sir, if you knew." The Arab spoke English without a flaw. "You are interested in Egypt, all her past,—"

"Yes, yes, I know, but—"

"It is this." The man drew something from beneath his robe. Both Sparky and Ramsey half rose in their places, then settled back for, the Arab's fingers, long and thin, held what appeared to be a roll of paper.

Taking the roll, the Colonel removed the outer layer of green paper, of a peculiar tint, then examined the dull, gray roll beneath.

"Is it papyrus?" he asked.

"Yes, Colonel," came in a whisper. "From an ancient tomb. It is, I believe, three thousand years old."

The Colonel made no reply. Instead he took from his pocket a small, powerful magnifying glass.

Mary, who was watching the Arab, saw a sudden look of fear pass over his face. It was little more than a flitting shadow, yet she was to recall it in the days to come.

"Yes," said the Colonel after a minute examination of the roll, "it is papyrus. Beyond a doubt it is quite old. And I suppose you want to sell it?"

"Oh, no! No! No!" The man's face was twisted into a look of terror. "It is not for me to sell. I must send it to Dr. Spinka. He is a great Egyptologist. His home is in America."

"But I am not returning to America. Perhaps I shall never return."

"Ah, yes, but the young lady—" The Arab leaned forward, hiding the roll under his long robe. "She is but a visitor. Is it not so? She will return very soon. Is this not true?"

"Perhaps." The Colonel spoke slowly. "What do you say, Mary? Will you accept the responsibility?"

"No!" was the quick response. "How could I? Even my own life is not safe. Only today—"

"Ah! Yes, it is true," the Arab broke in, "today, yes, but the miserable wretch who threatened your life is dead."

"What? How did you find this out?" Sparky demanded.

"Not so loud, my friend," the Arab spoke in a hoarse whisper, at the same time completely covering the roll. "There are those who would kill me for having this roll."

"They would kill me as quickly," Mary declared.

"Ah, but they shall not know. It shall be at your Chateau one minute before you go. You fly to Persia. I do not ask, I know. I shall not speak. I am always to be trusted. In Persia they do not care for papyrus. There you are safe. Wherever you go, you are safe."

Mary looked to her father for the answer to this strange problem. What he said puzzled her more than a little.

"There is no reason why you should not take this with you. At my house and the airport you will have ample protection.

"You, of course, must take the risk of its being destroyed by the fortunes of war." He spoke to the Arab.

"It shall be in the hands of God and a lady," was the reply. "If God wills its destruction, I shall bare my head. As for the lady, I trust her."

"It is then so arranged." The Colonel re-wrapped the roll. "The roll must be in my hands at midnight."

"But, sir, the plane does not—"

The Colonel held up a hand. "None but God is permitted to know the hour of departure. Midnight—how do you say?"

"It is the will of God." The Arab was gone.

The two hours that followed will linger long in Mary's memory. "I never dreamed of anything like this when I volunteered for this trip," she said to Captain Ramsey, as they swung away for the dance.

"You expected only blood, sweat, and tears," he replied soberly.

"Something like that."

"That's mostly what war is like. But there must be change and contrast, laughter, music and the lighter touch or we break and then we're no good."

Music, laughter, and the lighter touch, that was what they had during the next swiftly passing hours. The dances were all waltzes. The strange, fantastic orchestra—Mary could not name half the instruments—played very well. There was a wild ecstasy running through it all. The shrill pipe of reed instruments, the tom-tom-tom of strange drums at times set her blood tingling. Then, too, there were moments of quiet, swinging rhythm that set her dreaming.

The people too were interesting, intriguing. Dark-eyed, Egyptian women; slender, young French officers; smiling, little French ladies with faces like dolls; imperial dames from the British Isles—all

these swung past her and on out of sight.



The Quiet, Swinging Rhythm Set Her Dreaming

She danced with Ramsey, with her father, and with nice British and American boys to whom she was introduced.

"This," she said to Ramsey, "is the sort of life I used to love."

"But not now?" he asked.

"For tonight—yes—tonight it is divine."

"But not for tomorrow?"

"Not tomorrow. Even now I find my hands reaching for the controls, my fingers itching for the feel of the switches, and my ears listening for the roar of the motors."

"It gets in your blood. I know. What's it going to be after it's all over?"

"We'll know when it is all over, if we're still around to know. Let's have tonight for tonight."

"And tomorrow for tomorrow."

The music ceased. That dance was over. It was announced that the orchestra would play two selections that were not dances.

"We sit these out. Come on!" He led her by the hand. "There's a spot before the fountain where we can sit and watch the pyramid."

"Does it need watching?" she asked with a laugh.

"It seems not." His tone was sober as he helped her to a seat beneath the stars. "I like to watch it all the same. Sometime I expect it to speak to me."

"Speak to you?"

"Yes, why not? Surely it's stood there in silence long enough. Look," he leaned close to her, "did you ever think what that great pile of stone over there stands for?"

"No—I—"

"Of course not. You haven't watched it night after night as I have. It stands for power. That's what. The power one man wielded over thousands and thousands of others. Think of the weary years toiled cutting those stones with primitive tools and getting them up, up, up toward the sky."

"What for?"

"Because some man wanted to be remembered after he was dead. They did remember, but only to curse him. We have our monuments today, skyscrapers, museums, places for fishes to live in, homes for mummies and stuffed elephants. They have been built by men who wanted to be remembered. But the people who pay for them are the little people who have made machines, sold goods, and all that for a little pay, and who were left to finish their lives as best they could when they were too old to work any more. That is what the pyramid will say to me some moonlit night."

"And what shall you do about it?"

"Probably nothing, just as other generations have done. But see here!" he sprang to his feet. "This was to be a night!"

"Of music, laughter and the lighter touch." She supplied the words. "Well, there's the music. Isn't it lovely?"

When it was over and they were sauntering back toward the dance floor he said:

"I'm to be up there with you over the Arabian Desert tomorrow. Rommel's desert rats have a hidden base somewhere out there. We lose a plane now and then, never get a trace of it. It seems your father doesn't want you to get lost."

"I think you're right."

"There will be three other escorting planes in the squad. They will all be double seaters. I'll be in a single-seater, a regular blue devil of a fighting plane."

"So I'll be able to recognize you. How grand!" she enthused. "You shall be my knight in shining armor."

"Sure, it's like going back to ancient days, when fair ladies and rich treasure in coaches were guarded on their way by armored knights on horseback."

"Swift steeds you ride now," she laughed.

"Real enough for all that. The lady is real, too, and the treasure, never forget that."

"I shall not forget."

"Have you any notion what the treasure is?"

"Not the slightest. All we know, Sparky and I, is that it is of the greatest importance to China and that it must go through."

"Here we are," he said, helping her up the steps. "One more dance."

"One more and that's all," she agreed. "I must have my beauty nap, for tomorrow I am a working woman again."

A short time later they said good-night to the Colonel who assured them he was leaving at once. Then he drove her home in his car.

"It's been the most delightful evening of my life," she declared.

"It's the contrast," was his reply. "Today you were in great danger." She had told him of her adventure with the spy. "Tonight you have been safe with the right kind of people and quite happy."

"And tomorrow?"

"Who knows? I shall be with you in the Arabian skies. That much is decided. The rest is chance."

He went with her to the door of the chateau. Then, gripping her hand he whispered: "Just something to remember."

She did not refuse. A moment later, a little flushed and quite happy, she was in her own room preparing for a few winks of sleep.

She was just putting on the night robe that had been left for her when her father entered the chateau.

"Have a good time?" he asked.

"Best ever."

"That's splendid! I wish you were to be here a week."

"I don't," was the quick reply. "I love duty, and, I'm ashamed to say it, danger. But, Dad, I don't

see this papyrus business. Why should I take that roll to America?"

"Why shouldn't you?"

"It might be dangerous."

"There's scarcely a chance. In the first place, I know that Arab. He seems an honorable old man. In the second, I shall place your overnight bag in your plane the moment before you start—"

"And the roll will be in that bag?"

"Exactly. Once you are in the air, the roll cannot possibly get you into trouble. When you arrive at your destination there is not a chance in a thousand that anyone there will know about that papyrus—or any papyrus, for that matter.

"So you see—" he went on, "you will be aiding this aged Arab and, at the same time, adding a little to our American collection of Egyptian lore. Some rare discoveries have been made by those who delve into the mysteries of the messages recorded thousands of years ago."

"Perhaps this tells of some war fought and won on these very grounds," she suggested.

"Here is a card," he said, handing her a square of cardboard. "On it I have written the address of my old professor of Egyptology. I suggest that you show the roll to him before you deliver it to this Doctor Spinka—"

"Why?"

"Well," he hesitated, "in these times we must be very careful. There is an off chance that an enemy spy is working through this Arab to turn a sharp trick on us."

"And if that is true, your professor will discover it?"

"He and his colleagues."

"Okay—good-night, Dad. You'll call me?"

"You'll be at the airport on time, with a good cup of coffee and toasted English muffins under your belt."

The off chance is sometimes the real chance, also the wisest of men sometimes make mistakes. It is also true that the game is neither won nor lost until the last card is played. The roll of papyrus went aboard Mary's plane as planned and was promptly forgotten.

CHAPTER X

TWO CAN HIDE IN A CLOUD

When, at three A.M., Mary walked up to her plane, she found Ramsey waiting for her.

"I just wanted to tell you," he said, "that you need not be frightened if your fighter escort seems at times to disappear."

"Disappear from the sky? How could you?"

"Even over the desert at times there are fleecy, white clouds, like a filmy party dress."

"And you hide behind them—not the dresses, but the clouds."

"Quite right."

"And then you come dashing out at the Messerschmitts?"

"Right again. That may seem like using your plane as a decoy. Perhaps it is, in a way. But we're guarding the airways and we must get those flying rats. Two of our finest boys, the grandest in the world, vanished over that desert, just last week."

"We'll be seeing you." She climbed up to take her place in the plane.

She found Sparky looking rather bleary-eyed. "Big job getting that burned engine into shape," was his curt explanation.

"I'm all rested up," she said. "Just as soon as we're well in the sky, I'll take the ship. You're due for two hour's rest."

"Guess that's safe enough." He handed her the "Form One" card. "Those brigands of the air don't operate close to this airport."

She studied the card. He turned on fuel and ignition, then tested his fuel tanks.

"Okay," he murmured. At that he primed the motors, set the energizer whirling, nodded to the mechanic, flipped on the fuel booster, nodded once more to the mechanic, then they were away.

Five minutes later Sparky slipped from his place and Mary had the big ship all to herself.

It was a marvelous day. They were flying at eight thousand feet. The indistinct desert trails seemed mere lines. Camel trains were moving insects.

As they advanced, the occasional villages began to disappear. At times she imagined that she saw elephants and droves of zebras close to the same water hole.

Their fighter escort caught up with them when they were an hour from port.

"Port." That was the name Mary found herself giving to the place she had left. Why not? One left a port for a sea lane. Sea lanes were carefully guarded these days. Their fighter escorts were like destroyers. They guarded her air lane. And her plane's load might, for all she knew, be more precious than a big ocean freighter's cargo.

"Well," she thought, "we're fully halfway between America and China and they haven't got us yet. We—"

Her thoughts broke off short. Had she spotted a plane flying low on the horizon?

As if to confirm her suspicion, her escort flew in close. She recognized the long, slim, sleek fighter flown by Ramsey. He dropped his right wing in salute.

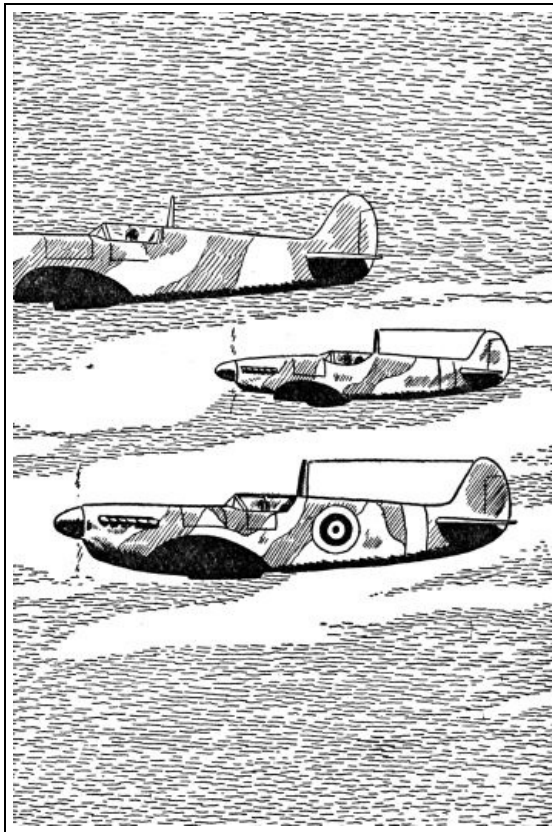
The last plane in Ramsey's fighter formation gave her a real shock. The pilot dropped the plane's nose, then pulled it up short as if he were riding a bucking bronco.

"That," she told herself, "is one of Dad's tricks. But he can't be in that two-seater. He's taught the trick to one of his men, I suppose. I wonder?"

For a full hour after that she zoomed straight on.

"We'll be in Persia in a few hours, dining in one of those rare Persian gardens." For her Persia was Persia, the Persia of the golden moon. People could call it Iran if they chose. She was all for the beauty and romance that had been Persia.

There were fleecy, white clouds in the sky just as Ramsey had said. The members of their flying escort seemed to be playing a game of hide-and-go-seek among those clouds. Then, just as a thicker cloud shut her off from the light of the sun, they all vanished.



The Fighter Planes Guarded Her Air Lane

At that moment, as everything took on a darker hue, she seemed, to be in a lonely little world all her own. She wanted to call Sparky but could not get the consent of her mind to do so. "Poor Sparky," she thought, "he works so hard. And when he's through the old ship moves on like a placid river."

Another quarter hour passed and then suddenly she called in a startled voice:

"Sparky! Sparky!"

"What is it?" He was at her side in an instant.

She did not answer, only pointed forward and down, then set her plane climbing toward a cloud, at the same time driving the engines into a tremendous roar. Four powerful enemy fighters were all but upon them and, as if bent upon suicide and destruction, racing straight on. If these pilots had rejoiced because of their rare find, their exultation was short lived, for, darting from a cloud, a flying fury sprang straight at their leader.

"Ramsey!" Mary exclaimed. "It's Ramsey! He'll be killed!"

"Give me the controls," Sparky's voice was quiet. After slowing the motors, he continued to climb.

"It's our only chance," he grumbled. "Not much of a chance at that. Those Huns are too close. If it wasn't for those fighters of ours we'd be lost."

"Lost before you could say it," Mary agreed. "But Ramsey! Ramsey!" she screamed.

The leader of the Messerschmitts had let loose a burst of fire at Ramsey's plane but, tilting his ship's nose, he had gone shooting beneath the enemy to execute a turn that was like a pinwheel and then to send three short, sharp bursts at the flying Hun.

It seemed to Mary as she looked that the Messerschmitt had been sawed squarely in two. It doubled up, began to smoke, then went spinning down.

"I'll take the controls," she said. "You man the machine gun. They may come straight at us."

Hardly had Sparky gripped the machine gun when one of the remaining flying bandits came zooming in.

"He's got a cannon," Mary thought. "He'll get our right engine and then—"

But he didn't. Seeming to have hopped off from the back of her plane, a two-seated fighter leaped straight at the on-coming enemy.

As if fearing a collision in mid-air, the enemy pilot banked sharply to the left. This left his broadside exposed. At the same instant, both the gunner of the two-seater and Sparky let go a smoking fury of fire. For a moment the enemy appeared to stand still in mid-air. Then its nose turned swiftly downward as it went into a spin.

"Two of them!" Mary exulted. "We'll have them all in a minute more."

But when it comes to enemy fighting planes it would seem that four minus two equals five for, as she looked again, she saw five planes zooming straight at them.

The sun came out from behind the cloud. At that all the planes shone in that bright light. Mary's big plane with its precious load still climbed, but to her excited mind it seemed so slow. "Like a lumbering stage coach," flashed through her mind.

The fighters, too, climbed. It was one of those times when a minute seems an hour, when the work of a lifetime is rewarded for good or evil in a trice.

Before the girl's astonished eyes, a rare spectacle of the air formed itself, then put on its deadly show. Six planes, three of the enemy and three of her fighter escort, formed in a circle, head-to-tail. Each striving for the advantage, went circling round and round.

It was Ramsey who broke this up. Darting out from a cloud he sent a burst of fire into the tail-end enemy plane, then with a wide swing met the foremost enemy head-on.

Mary caught her breath. It seemed to her that they must crash. A moment more and they were hidden by smoke. One had been hit. Which one? She could not tell.

Free for the moment, the remaining enemy of the three headed straight for the big cargo ship. Then it was that the two-seater pilot, who had given her the bronco-nose salute earlier in the day, got in some deadly work, for, with surprising speed, he got on this last plane's tail and brought him down in flames.

"Good work!" she screamed. "But, Ramsey? What of Ramsey?" She was soon enough to know.

After allowing her eyes to sweep the sky making sure that the two other enemy planes were not an immediate menace, she turned once more for a look at the spot where Ramsey and his opponent had been. They were not there, but high in the sky and still climbing, Ramsey was in hot pursuit of his antagonist.

"Both planes are smoking," she said to Sparky who had come to stand at her side.

"But neither badly," was the quiet reply.

"There! Oh! There!" she exclaimed. "The Spitfire has gone into a nose dive!"

"Don't expect too much. He's not badly hurt."

Scarcely had Sparky spoken when the enemy plane, coming out of his dive, spun around in a narrow circle to get on Ramsey's tail and let forth a burst of fire.

"Oh! He's got him! Poor Ramsey's gone!"

"Give me the controls." Sparky took over while, with lips parted, eyes staring, Mary watched for the end.

The end was not yet. Ramsey's slender fighter staggered, spun half about, tilted over, did two complete flip-flops, then by some miracle, or by the sheer will-power of her master, righted herself.

By some good chance, Ramsey found himself facing his on-coming opponent. He must have pressed the firing button and given her the works for the enemy plane appeared to fall to pieces in mid-air—not, however, until its pilot had sent one more burst of fire into Ramsey's smoking plane.

"He's on fire! He's going down!" Mary shouted. At that moment she was seeing war in all its stark naked horror.

"There! Your friend Ramsey's out of the plane," Sparky said quietly as ever.

"Good!" The girl settled back. "His parachute is open. He's coming down. But, Sparky! we'll be

right beneath him!"

Sparky banked sharply to the right. Mary leaped for the door. Bracing herself against the current of air, she threw the door open, to stand there waiting, looking up, hoping.

Yes, there he was drifting down. He was closer, closer, much closer. He saw her. She could see him smile. She waved. He waved back. She shouted:

"I'll be seeing you!"

He could not hear, but understood. With his hand he threw her a kiss. Then he was gone. When Mary brushed her hands across her eyes, they were wet with tears.

After that, seated beside Sparky, she sat in silence while miles of desert and mountains, narrow, green valleys, and more mountains passed beneath them until, with surprising suddenness, a small city with many trees, domes and strange rooftops appeared beneath them.

"That's it," Sparky said quietly. "We come down here."

A little beyond the city that nestled among the hills, they dropped into a narrow valley and down upon a landing field.

As Mary stepped from the plane, she once again found herself staring at a familiar, broad back and, as the man turned, exclaimed:

"Dad! It's you!"

CHAPTER XI

THE TUMBLING DONKEY

"Ramsey," Mary caught her breath. "Did he—he—"

"Did he land safely?" Her father's eyes shone. "Of course he did. I followed him down in my two-seater."

"You!" she exclaimed. "Were you in that fight?"

"Surely. Didn't you recognize my bronco-buster salute?"

"Yes, but—"

"You didn't think it was I? I don't wonder at that. I would have told you I was to be in it, but I was afraid it would make you nervous."

"Nervous?" she shuddered. "After today, I shall never be nervous again."

"It was a grand fight," he enthused. "You and Sparky had a real part in it."

"And we're still here safe and sound. So's our cargo."

"Yes," he frowned, "but that was a narrow escape. Here's hoping you meet with nothing like that on the remaining laps of your important mission."

"Without Ramsey and you, it would have been fatal."

"Ramsay is a brave and skillful fighter. I've known no better. I stayed around long enough to see that he was picked up by one of the other planes. Then my gunner and I flew on toward Persia. We made one stop for fuel but beat you here as it is. Our plane is really fast."

"Well," he sighed, "it's been quite a day. We cleaned up that nest of hornets. Two of them got away, but we've spotted their landing field and can finish them off later."

"I've got a little business here. You'll not be leaving before morning?" he said, turning to Sparky.

"Daylight is best for our next long flight," said Sparky.

"And it pays to be at your best on such a journey," Colonel Mason agreed. "Persia is worth a good, long look."

"I'll be looking after the plane," said Sparky, hurrying away.

"Oh, my overnight bag!" Mary called, hurrying after him.

"I will meet you at the desk in the small landing field depot," said the Colonel.

"Set your bag in this corner," her father told her when he joined her in the depot later. "Persian coffee is not bad, and their lemon ice is really good."

"Hot coffee and lemon ice," she laughed as she dropped into a low, rattan chair. "What a combination!"

"Try it. You'll find it hits the spot," he laughed.

"I have a friend in the city," he told her. "A wealthy Persian merchant. He takes great pride in his garden. It is really very wonderful. I want you to see it. But first we'll take a car up town and reserve rooms for the night."

"Look!" Mary exclaimed, springing up. "That man is carrying off my bag! Quick! Stop him! That roll of papyrus!"

"Why, no," her father stopped her. "There's your bag, right where you left it."

"Sure—there it is," she stared in surprise. "But think of a man having an overnight bag just like mine, and in such a strange place."

"American-made goods go everywhere. My merchant friend sells many articles from America. Most of the cotton used in his prints comes from America."

For all that Mary breathed a sigh of relief as she picked up her bag.

"It's that roll of papyrus," she sighed. "I wouldn't mind about the other things. I suppose they could all be replaced from the shops right up here in the city."

"Every item," he agreed.

At that they did not know the half of it.

A few moments later they hailed a cab and rode up to the strange little city half hidden among the barren hills.

"You'll not see anything like it for a long time," he assured her.

Having secured a suite of three rooms in a small hotel, they departed, after depositing their bags, for a look at the city.

"We'll hire a couple of donkeys," her father said, "and ride up to the bazaar. That's the most colorful spot of all, and that too is where we will find my friend of the glorious garden."

Mary felt very much as if she were riding astride a child's scooter as their shaggy donkeys crept down the hot, dusty street.

"It all takes you back into the past," she said.

"Yes, a thousand years."

"But it's charming for all that, a glorious place to rest."

After riding down narrow, winding streets they came to the gates of the bazaar which, with its vaulted roof, offered cooling shade from the heat of the day.

"We ride in," her father explained.

"How odd!" she said, patted her donkey, and in they went. At once they found themselves in a jam of donkeys, camels, and perspiring men. "Avarda! Avarda!" sounded on every side.

"What do they mean—Avarda?" Mary asked.

"That means, 'Make room!'," her father explained.

"All right," she laughed. "Avarda! Avarda!"

They came at last to the shops where men sat cross-legged in the midst of their wares. Here were piles of cups, saucers, pitchers and plates, there were all manner of brooms, here piles of cheap, cotton prints and over in this corner long, flowing gowns.

"My friend has a large shop back a little from the others," the Colonel explained, "This seems a quiet spot. Hold my donkey. I'll be back." He hurried up a flight of narrow stairs. To Mary the passing throng, Arabs, Syrians, black slaves, Jews with packs on their backs, and portly strangers of seeming importance, were a fascinating study in character and life.

It was a man of portly importance who at last caught her attention. She had seen him before, but where? One swift glimpse at the picture walls of her memory and she knew. He was the man who had been carrying a bag exactly like her own.

Just then their eyes met. For ten seconds his startled eyes were upon her. Then, shouting, "Avarda! Avarda!" he forced his stout donkey through the throng, all but running several people down, at last disappearing from sight.

"How strange," she murmured.



*Men Sat Cross-Legged in the Midst of Their
Wares*

All too soon she was to learn that his actions had more meaning than they appeared to have.

"It is all arranged." Her father was again at her side. "We are to be at the garden gate in just two hours. You'll find it fascinating, the experience of a lifetime."

"In these days," she replied slowly, "each experience is one of a lifetime.

"I just saw the man who has an overnight bag like mine," she added.

"Did you? What of that?"

"I don't really know. He ducked, that's all, rode a donkey right through the crowd."

"That's strange."

"It sure was."

When, some twenty minutes later, in search of a clean handkerchief, Mary opened her bag, she let out a gasp:

"Why! This is not my bag!"

Her father stared. "It must be!"

"It's not. These garments are not mine. Nothing is mine. And," she ran her hand through the carefully packed bag, "the roll of papyrus is not here!"

"That man must somehow have gotten his bag mixed with yours."

"But this is a lady's bag."

"It must belong to his wife."

"But he's fat, a Dutchman, or German I think. Who ever heard of a slender German housefrau? And these clothes are my size." She held up a shimmering dream robe. "It's the strangest thing I ever heard of," she said when, after five minutes of examining the contents of the bag, she held up a beautiful party dress. "You'd think that my bag had been burned up, contents and all, and that someone, who knew the contents very well, had gone to the trouble of replacing it piece by piece. Every article here is brand new. Only the papyrus roll is missing."

"It is strange," her father agreed, "but the ways of enemy spies are past finding out, or, perhaps, he was only an Oriental robber."

"A thief of Bagdad?"

"Something like that. The roll of papyrus may be quite valuable, worth many thousands. That depends upon the Egyptian dynasty from which it came. Museums pay almost any price for certain rare writings from those ancient times."

"Why did I accept it?" Mary moaned.

"Why did I encourage you to accept it," he amended. "Perhaps time will bring the answer. Then again there may be no real answer. Come, let's get ready for the Persian garden party. We have quite a way to go, and donkeys are slow.

"You didn't happen to have any secret papers in your traveling bag, did you?" he asked as they rode toward his friend's garden home.

"None whatever, not even a letter. Sparky keeps all our papers in a secret compartment of the plane. That's where the papyrus should have been, but who would suppose—"

"That anyone in Persia would be interested in that roll?"

"Yes, or know anything about it."

"The enemy's network of spies is vast and endless. Without doubt they have radio connections with every large city."

"You keep hinting that the papyrus carries a secret message or something. You surely don't think a message written so long ago means anything to this generation?"

"There are those who do. I can find you men who will tell you how this war is to end. They found it all written out in the Koran, or the Bible."

"You're not clearing things up much."

"Let's forget the whole business," he suggested. "We accepted no responsibility, only agreed to try to get the roll to America. Well, at present, it appears that we have failed. The sun is lower now. My friend's garden will be delightful. Let us sing while we may."

The garden was all that he had promised, and more. Having arrived at a massive, iron-bound gate in a wall, they tethered their donkeys, then knocked. The gate swung open and they stepped inside.

"Look up," said the Colonel.

"How gorgeous!" Mary exclaimed as her eyes feasted themselves on the scene that lay above them. Up a steep slope ran two stone walks. Between these walks a small stream of crystal-clear water gurgled and danced over bright colored tiles.

Between the walks and water were narrow flower beds all aglow with blossoms.

Here and there the stream spread out into a pool or rose into a spouting fountain. About the pools were more flowers, while on the surface water lilies—lily pads with yellow flowers—lay.

As they walked slowly up the narrow walk, the valley widened a little. Low trees began to appear on either side. Beyond this they saw a small house that was all doors and windows.

"It's out of a story book," Mary whispered.

"Yes, Arabian Nights," her father agreed.

They entered the house. At its center a small fountain played. About its walls were low benches piled high with cushions.

"Oh!" Mary breathed, settling herself among the cushions. "Why must life go on and on when it could end itself in a blaze of glory right here?"

Her father laughed but made no reply.

For a long time they remained silent, gazing at the scene before them, bright flowers, gently swaying trees, dashing water, and beyond that, in sharp contrast, dull, brown, barren hills and grassless valleys.

"It's like life," Mary whispered. "Beautiful and gay, then somber and sad."

However, it seemed that for the time their lives were to be filled with beauty, gayety and charm, for here was their jovial host and with him two black slaves bearing trays of fruit, cakes, and tea.

When the tea and cakes were gone, they sat for a time in silence, just resting and admiring the scene that lay beneath their feet.

"This is one time when I wish I could paint pictures," Mary murmured at last.

"The charm of our little world here is its contrast," said the host, pleased by her words. "Without the brown hills beyond, our gardens would not seem half as beautiful."

Once again there was silence for a time. And then came the slaves bringing rice cooked with meat, a roast of mutton, bread, cheese, fruit and light, red wine.

"Ah! a feast!" the Colonel exclaimed.

"We have very little here in the hills," his host apologized in true Eastern fashion.

"It is wonderful," said Mary, "and more wonderful still to have time for enjoying it. Tomorrow, we shall be rushing through the air once more."

"When there is a feast one forgets tomorrow," said their host.



"It's out of a Story Book," Mary Whispered

But Mary could not forget. She thought of many things, the bag, the boy beachcomber she had left behind in South America, of the fine boys of the desert and Ramsey who had guarded her so well, and of the vanishing papyrus. "What of tomorrow?" she asked herself.

With one ear she was catching threads of a conversation.

"Yes, he is short and rather fat," her father was saying, "rather pompous, a Dutchman or perhaps a German."

"Yes, I think I know him," was their host's reply. "He says he is from Holland. He trades in cheap pottery and sometimes in toys. I think he is German. We shall catch up with that man, you and I."

She knew they were speaking of the man who had taken her bag.

They were to "catch up with that man" sooner than she thought, not her father and their host, but her father and herself.

Night was falling as they rode back into the village. They were passing along a street lined on one side by low homes and on the other by a hill that sloped away from them, when they caught up with a vaguely familiar figure.

"It can't be that I know him," the girl thought. "He is wearing a long, Persian robe. I am acquainted with no Persians."

The man turned to look back. Starting, she whispered: "There's that man!"

They were abreast of him when, suddenly, the wind blew back his robe, giving them a moment's glimpse at a flash of peculiar green.

Then it was that the Colonel did a strange thing. Apparently he kicked his donkey in the back of the forelegs, for, suddenly, he stumbled and fell to his knees. At the same time the Colonel went over sideways with a lunge that carried both him and the astonished pedestrian in a Persian robe, over the edge of the road and half way down the steep decline.

Expecting a struggle and perhaps shots, Mary sprang from her donkey.

There were no shots. Instead, in the half darkness she saw one shadowy figure go gliding down the hill while the other came struggling back up.

"Dad! Did you get it?" she whispered, greatly excited.

"If I hadn't I would be going down, not up." He was panting a little.

"Couldn't you hold him?"

"Didn't want to."

"You didn't want to!"

"You don't know the laws of the Medes and Persians." Her father laughed low. "They alter not and if we had him put in jail, you'd be here until Christmas as a witness."

"Wise old dad." She patted him on the back. "But see! Our donkeys are gone!"

"Let them go. I have paid for their use. They'll find their own way home to their supper. We'll catch a cab and get out to the airport at once."

"Why?" The word was on the tip of her tongue but she did not say it.

CHAPTER XII

SEALED ORDERS

Once they were safely stowed away in a cab he pulled the green-wrapped package from his pocket.

"Papyrus," he said softly, "like our paper of today, has caused a lot of trouble in the world. Today a printing press rattles and bangs for an hour or two and not many weeks later two groups of men, one a band of thugs, the other a squad of officers, shoot it out for possession of that printing press's work. And all because it says on each slip of paper, 'Payable to the bearer on demand.'"

"But why would that man risk his life to get that roll of ancient papyrus?" Mary asked.

"That," said her father, "appears to be something I must find out!"

"You or I?"

"You are practically out of it. We're taking the roll to Sparky. He'll hide it in his secret compartment for the night. When I fly back to Egypt tomorrow the roll will go with me."

"Why?" Mary's eyes opened wide.

"Hasn't it caused you enough trouble?"

"Not if it's really important."

"It seems to be all of that."

"Then why should I give it up now?" She was very much in earnest. "You know, in a very old book I sometimes read, it says something about putting your hand to the plow, then turning back. I don't like turning back, or giving up. It's part of my religion not to."

"So that's the way you feel about it?"

"Yes, but—" she hesitated, "one thing is more important than the papyrus."

"Your ship's cargo? I agree with you. It is all-important. Helping to get it through to China is the most important task you've ever undertaken, or perhaps ever will."

"Will taking the papyrus make that harder?"

"I doubt that. Sparky will always be with the ship. It is true that somehow the enemy agents here have learned of the papyrus, and wanting it for, God knows what reason, have made a play for it. But will they carry this on even in India and China? I doubt that. When you hop off from here, you will be headed for quite another world."

"Another world," she repeated the words softly. "That sounds strange and, and rather frightening. But, unless you seriously object, the papyrus goes with Sparky and me to that other world."

"Then that's settled," he agreed.

And now, here they were at the airport.

"Well! For once!" Mary exclaimed as they came up to the plane. "Here's Sparky. And he's not working on the engines. What's the matter, Sparky? Are you sick?"

"No—" he drawled. "Couldn't think of a thing that needed doing, so I've just been reading a book about Persia. Quite a place I'd say."

"We'll watch the ship while you look the city over," the Colonel volunteered.

"Oh, no, thanks all the same." Sparky's sun-bronzed face crinkled into a smile. "I'm turning in—sleep on the job, you know—in a few minutes. We'll take off at dawn. You'll be here, Mary?"

"Yep. Johnny-on-the-spot. And, Sparky, since you're guarding the ship, here's one more little thing you can keep an eye on. Put it in our hiding-place."

"Oh! Sure! What is it?"

"Just a bunch of old papers." It was the Colonel who replied.

"Very old," Mary grinned.

"Oh, yes, I remember, that old Arab's stuff," Sparky yawned. "Lot of trouble for very little, I'd say."

"Yes," Mary agreed. "A whole lot of trouble." She laughed, and Sparky wondered why.

When Mary and her father re-entered their rooms at the hotel a half-hour later, things seemed a little strange.

"I left that bag on that low bench," Mary recalled. "Now it's standing beside the bench. What's more, it doesn't look quite the same."

Picking it up, she turned it on its side, placed it on the bench, then threw back the snaps. Up came the lid.

"Dad!" she exclaimed, "it's my bag! The things are all there, even a candy bar I bought at the U.S.O. in Egypt."

"Very kind of our Nazi friends to return it. Probably came in through the window." He wandered about testing the catches. "That's right," he called at last. "The window in my sleeping room is unlocked."

"Lock it, please," said Mary. "I—I'm feeling a little strange."

"You'll be all right when the windows are locked and the shades down." And she was.

"Dad," she said, after a few moments of quiet thought. "Perhaps that other bag belonged to the woman in black."

"The woman in black?"

"Yes. Don't you remember? The one who seemed to be working with the Jap spy who posed as an Arab."

"She was in West Africa."

"Yes, of course, and then I'll never be sure that the French woman at the port and the Arab woman at the secret oasis were the same person."

"You'll probably never know that," was his reply. "However, it would be my guess that they were two different people and, if there is really a woman mixed up in this affair of the papyrus, that she is still another. In this country and in Africa where spies are common, it is not difficult to maintain a regular fraternity of lady spies. To pass on a message from spy to spy is easy but for one spy to travel by plane from place to place in territory controlled by our friends is practically impossible. At any rate your bag is back and so is the papyrus and that, for the moment, is all that matters. And I'm surely going to see you safely off in the morning."

In spite of the mysterious events of the day, and her strange surroundings, Mary slept well that night. Why not? Was not her father close at hand? Had he not been with her during the greater part of her life? And had she not always felt secure when he was near?

She awoke an hour before dawn to wish with all her soul that he was going with them all the way to the very end. But this, she knew, was impossible. He had stretched a point coming this far. His work was in Egypt, keeping the airways clear. He must turn back.

She bounded out of bed and, a half hour later, sprang from their car to greet the cold, gray dawn.

"Sunshine, fountains, flowers, and now this. All a part of life," she thought with a shudder.

After switching on the plane's lights she crowded her way back through the cabin. She examined each well-bound package with care, counted them and then, in one fleeting thought, asked herself what their contents might be. For the time, the roll of papyrus was forgotten. Only one thing mattered now—their cargo.

Finding everything ship-shape she worked her way back to the cabin door to stand there polishing her glasses.

Suddenly she found herself staring at the square of white with which the polishing was being done.

"That's not my handkerchief," she exclaimed. "It has embroidery in the corners, a date palm in one corner and a flying bird in the other."

"You must have picked it up somewhere," her father suggested.

Digging into her purse for her own handkerchief, she pulled out one more of the same pattern.

"This," she exclaimed, "is getting funny." Then: "Oh! I remember. There was that strange bag last night, you know? I needed a handkerchief. My bag was gone."

"So you took those, and you have them still. Well, you got something out of that adventure," he laughed good-naturedly.

They were up and away at dawn. As the sun rose over the gray hills, painting them with a golden light, it seemed to Mary that now nothing could hinder them from reaching their distant goal in far-away China.

Two days later, weary, bleary-eyed, but happy, she found herself looking down on the rooftops and strange towers of a great city. Like a broad ribbon a river divided the city into two parts while, far away, glimmering in the sun, lay the ocean.

"This," Sparky's voice was hoarse with emotion, "this is the heart of India."

As usual, they passed over the city to drop down upon a secluded airport all but hidden by tropical trees.

They had made an overnight stop just within the border of India. From that airport they had radioed the probable hour of arrival. Mary was surprised to see a small crowd of people race on the field as their plane came to a stop.

When, at last, she stood in the doorway of the plane, blinking from the bright sun, there came a loud roar of applause which fairly set her back on her feet.

"What is it?" She turned to Sparky. "They must think we're a big league baseball team or something."

"There are a lot of Americans here," he explained. "That's including the soldiers. You're the first lady member of the Ferry Command that's ever showed up here."

"Ray! Ray! Ray! for the lady pilot," a soldier shouted.

"Hurrah! Hurrah!" came roaring back.

Mary said never a word, just stood there, blinking in the sun.

Then an attractive young lady came up close. "I'm Judy Pierce from the big school for girls here. I heard you were to arrive and I wish you would be my guest while you're here."

"That would be just fine—I—I—guess. How about it and how long?" Mary asked Sparky.

"Ought to be swell. How long? That I can't tell."

"This is a city," Judy Pierce said. "We have phones and everything. We can keep in touch with you at the airport."

"That will be quite all right," Sparky agreed.

"Speech! We want a speech!" some boy from Kansas, Iowa, or Oklahoma shouted.

"Speech! Speech! Speech!" came in a chorus.

"I can't make a speech," Mary's voice carried across the field. "All I can do is to fly a plane, and I don't know too much about that. But it does make me feel as if I had gone round the world and got back home to see you all here. I know now, as I never knew before, that the sun never really sets on the Army of the U.S.A."



"I'm Judy Pierce," Said an Attractive Young Lady

There came one more roar of applause during which Mary leaned over to say to her new-found friend: "I'll be ready in just a little while."

"That's fine," Judy smiled. "I have my small car. We'll be in the city before you know it."

"Oh! A car!" Mary exclaimed. "Then I must be back home."

At that she dodged back into the plane. There she came upon Sparky waving two envelopes in the air.

"Sealed orders," he whispered hoarsely. "One is to be opened here. That's got to be done before you go."

"Oh!" Mary breathed. "Now we'll know!"

"Not all of it," Sparky warned. "Only part, and the least exciting part is my guess."

They crowded back into a dark corner of the plane, then shoulder to shoulder, heads close together, read the note that came from the wax-sealed envelope.

"The boxes marked (C)," they read, "are to be trans-shipped to the Burma front. They contain quinine and should be guarded with the greatest care."

"Quinine!" Mary dropped down upon a case marked (C). "Is that what we're risking our lives to defend! Every drug-store has quinine!"

"Not any more," said Sparky. "The supply in those cases came from thousands of druggists in the U.S.A. They donated it to the men who are fighting in the mosquito plagued swamps of Burma."

"And don't you think it doesn't matter." He shook a finger. "At our last landing I saw a man who came from those swamps. He was being sent home. They thought he might live. But you should have seen him! Oh, no! You shouldn't. It was terrible to see a skeleton that's still alive. Malaria did it. Quinine would have stopped it. Those dirty little Japs have all the quinine trees in the world and that's one way they hope to win the world. That's how they fight!"

"Oh! Sparky!" Her voice was hoarse. "You're always wonderful. If that was all we came for it's enough—"

"But it's not. It's only the beginning. There are the boxes marked (D). We won't know what's in them until we are at the foot of the Himalaya Mountains."

"And then—"

"That, we hope, will be the beginning of the end."

"Sparky," her voice was tense, "I'd like to take that quinine to Burma."

"You can't, not in our ship. This ship goes straight through to China."

"I'd like to see those fighting boys. That—well, that would be sort of a reward."

"I might be able to fix it," he conceded. "Anyway, I'll try. Now you run along and have a good time with your new friends. You've got it coming."

"My best times always come in the hardest places." She was still thinking of Burma. For all that she left the plane to join Judy Pierce in her bright little sport car.

CHAPTER XIII

SNAKE CHARMER

"It would really be a shame to pass right through India without seeing any of it," Judy said as they slid smoothly over a paved street.

"Yes, I suppose so," Mary agreed. "But business is business. We haven't much time. I must always be in touch with Sparky."

"We'll arrange it that way," Judy promised. "We'll not be away from the phone more than an hour at any time."

"That will be swell. You see, we have part of a ship load of quinine."

"Quinine!" Judy exclaimed.

"It's for Burma."

"Oh! You are a public benefactor! What a wonderful privilege, to fly half way round the world to bring health back to hundreds of our boys!"

"It has its drawbacks," Mary spoke slowly.

"How do you mean?"

"Let me tell you later. Just now I'd like to sit back and enjoy the sights."

"Do that. I'll say never a word."

For a full half hour after that they wound in and out, from one gorgeous scene to another in a world's paradise. Beautiful residences set back among tropical trees, little gardens where oranges and lemons clung to branches like spheres of gold, narrow arched bridges over which they glided—all these delighted Mary's eyes.

The people were strange. Some were faultlessly dressed Europeans, some dark-robed Mohammedans, and some the slender, olive-complexioned Hindus. But all, even the children, seemed bright, well-fed, and gay.

"Why this is a golden paradise!" Mary exclaimed. "I never dreamed that India could be like this!"

"It can't," said Judy. "Not all of it. In America there are two sides of the railroad track. In India there are the two sides to the river. This is the bright side. I'll show you the other side after tea. You need to see that at dusk."

"We'll have to be getting back," said Judy. "There may be a phone call from that man Sparky. It must be great traveling with a man like Sparky."

"Oh, it is!"

"You must have lots of fun together."

"We do, on the job."

"And the rest of the time?"

"The rest of the time he's too busy taking care of his engines."

"So he sends you off alone to have all the fun," Judy laughed. "But when you've reached the journey's end—"

"Will we have fun!" Mary grinned.

"Well, here we are," Judy swung the car into a drive before a stately brick building. "This is the school. Classes are over and all the teachers are waiting to have tea with you."

They walked up the broad path that lay between two rows of stately palms. Judy led Mary to her own room, that she might wash and brush up, then hurried away to ask about a phone call.

"No call yet," she said, as she returned.

"Listen!" Mary held up a hand. From the sky came a thunder of sound.

"Big planes, a lot of them! Come on!" Seizing Judy's hand, Mary dragged her outside.

There, looking up, they saw a large formation of heavy bombers. All but breathless, Mary began to count. "Thirty-six, thirty-seven, thirty-eight," she ended. "Judy! That's the flight Sparky and I started out with. We're going to have company over the mountains!"

"And you're going to need it," Judy said soberly.

Had Mary consulted her own wishes, she would have hurried away to the airport, but courtesy decreed that she remain at Judy's tea, so Judy's tea it was, and not so bad after all.

There were twenty-three teachers in the group waiting to welcome Mary on the large, cool porch of the teachers' home. Some had gray hair and some, like Judy, were young. One and all they were eager to know more about the war and the lands they had left behind.

When tea had been served and they had chatted informally for a short time, they led Mary to a large, easy chair, and bolstered her up with cushions.

"Now," said the dean, "you are our queen. We each and every one of us demand an audience."

"A queen for an hour," Mary laughed. "What is it you wish to know and what is your supplication?"

"Tell me," said a girl with glorious red hair, "I have done some flying, oh! quite a bit. How may I become a WAF and go flying around the world?"

"You probably can't," was the disturbing reply. "I, it seems, am a person of special privilege or, perhaps you might say, with a dark curse upon my head. At least, until now, I am the only member of our band who has turned into a world traveler."

"But if you are extremely serious—," she added.

"Oh! I am!"

"Yes, I also," came from another corner.

"And I," came again.

"In that case," said Mary, "all you have to do is to get back to America."

"Very simple!"

"Just a little hop."

"Yes," Mary agreed, "but whether I will make it, or how, I don't really know."

"When you are in America," she went on, "make sure you have five hundred hours of flying to your credit, then step right in. There are rather rigid examinations. After that you go through four weeks of tireless basic training, learning how to be a soldier and all that."

"And then you get your wings?" the red head suggested.

"You might call it that. After that you fly and fly and fly, delivering all manner of planes to all sorts of places all over U.S.A.

"And then," Mary drew a long breath, "if you've been a good girl and if the gods are kind, you get a trip round the world, practically free."

"Tell us about this marvelous trip," another girl said.

Mary allowed herself a fleeting thought of all the grand boys of the bombing flight waiting at the airport, then launched herself into the bright, hilarious, sober, breath-taking story of her journey. The crackup in the Brazilian jungle, the beachcomber of Brazil, the Jap spy, the Woman in Black, the battle over the desert with Burt Ramsey as hero, the missing traveling bag of Persia were all there.

"Oh! That's how it is!" the red head gasped when Mary had finished.

"No," Mary laughed. "That's how it was. Once we have delivered our plane and cargo, I suspect that we shall drift back to America on flowery beds of ease and with never an adventure."

CHAPTER XIV

THE CAST ASSEMBLES

As she left the cool shade of that porch, Mary was thinking of just two things, her reunion with the men of the big bomber flight and their plans for the immediate future.

One thing surprised her. When they had entered the school an hour before, the sun had been shining brightly. Now it was raining hard.

"What a change!" she exclaimed as she and Judy raced for the car.

"It's the start of the rainy season," Judy explained, once they were inside the car, gliding along. "When it starts it keeps right on. It's too bad you didn't arrive a week sooner."

"Why?"

"At this season of the year terrible storms sweep over the Himalaya Mountains. You've got to cross them, you know."

"Is it very dangerous?"

"They say it's one of the most dangerous passes in the world. Once a flight of five planes with Chinese pilots started over the pass. Not one of them was ever heard of again.

"But then," Judy hastened to add, "those were small planes. You've got a real ship."

"Yes," Mary thought, "we've got a real ship." For all that, she could not help recalling the many times "real ships," big passenger planes, had crashed against the stone wall of the Rockies.

"The Himalayas are much higher than the Rockies," she said.

"Oh, much higher! One peak has never been scaled. It's been tried time and again. Many a poor climber is buried beneath their snows."

Mary scarcely heard this last remark for the airport loomed just ahead.

Having bidden Judy good-by with a promise to join her again in an hour, she found herself in the midst of a veritable mob of U.S. airmen, who, in their joy at seeing her, threatened to wreck her precious flying hands, squeezed the life out of her and talked her deaf and dumb, all in the same five minutes.

After that, order was restored and they led her to a back room. There they set her on a stool to join her in a toast to the god of the Himalayas and the future, drunk with honest-to-goodness American coffee.

By the time she managed to drag Sparky into a corner for a private conference, she was quite out of breath.



She Cornered Sparky for a Private Conference

"Sparky," she spoke in a low tone, "as the crooks would say, 'what's the lay?'"

"We'll be here for at least another day." Sparky's brow wrinkled. "I don't like it. The rainy season is here. Every day it will get worse. We've made it this far alone and, considering the circumstances, got on pretty swell."

"Sure we have, Sparky—just wonderful."

"But orders are orders," Sparky sighed. "We're to go over with the rest of the flight."

"That's so they'll pull us off a mountain peak in case we get stuck," Mary suggested.

"Something like that. That's the toughest bit of flying in the whole trip, so everything has to be a little more than all right. Our ship is ready to go right now."

"Thanks to Sparky's endless hours of toil."

Sparky grinned. "Have it any way you like. The other planes are not ready, won't be for a day, sooo—"

"What about the quinine?" Mary asked eagerly.

"I wanted to talk to you about that. There's time to get over to the Burma line and back before we start."

"Oh! Sparky!" Her eyes shone.

"But not with our plane," he went on. "It's too risky. The balance of our cargo is the most important part. Our ship must be in first class shape for that last lap."

"But can't we borrow a smaller plane for the Burma trip?"

"Well, we might," Sparky spoke slowly. "Thing is, I hate to leave our ship and its cargo for a single hour. You know all the things that have happened."

"Yes, Sparky, I know." Her voice was husky.

"We've had a lot of luck, Mary." He hesitated. "Tell you what, you show up here just before dawn tomorrow and we'll see what can be cooked up."

"I'll be here, Sparky. And now look! There's my car waiting for me."

"You've made some swell friends."

"I sure have. See you in the morning." She went racing away.

"You look tired," said Judy when they were once again headed for the school. "How would you like to take a nap in my room for a couple of hours?"

"That will be just swell," said Mary.

"By that time it will be early twilight, just the right time to visit the other side of the river."

"Oh, yes, the other side of the river."

"It's quite different, I assure you. When I am in a strange little world I've never seen before, I like to see it all, not just part of it."

"Oh, so do I."

"Well, this time you'll not see it all. No one has ever seen all of India, but you can see the other side of the river."

They arrived at the school and soon, with the shades drawn and door locked, Mary was drifting off to the land of dreams.

When she was awakened, it seemed she had just fallen asleep, but a dash of cold water on her face and a demitasse of very black coffee brought her back to life.

"We'll do the other side," said Judy. "We'll not take too long for it. Then we'll dine in one of those strange, little restaurants. You may not like the food but you'll like the setting. The fruit is always good and the tea—um!—such tea as you have never before tasted."

"Sounds all right."

"And after that—"

"After that I'd like to run over to the airport for just a moment. Won't take long. Want to check on some things." Down deep in her heart Mary was hoping that Sparky would have things all fixed for her trip to Burma with the quinine. She really had her heart set on that trip. To visit a real battlefield, to see the men who for months had been fighting in mud and blood for victory.

That would be like visiting another world, something she'd never forget. And to be able to tell some of them that she had done a little, just a very little, to bring them new health and happiness. Ah! That surely would bring a thrill.

She and Judy were crossing the bridge as she thought all this. Arriving on the other side, she was surprised and shocked. Here, it is true, were the same grand, old palms, the sweeping drive and all that. But the people and their homes! Here were dirt, squalor, ragged children, slinking dogs, and shaggy monkeys staring down at her from the trees.

"Why don't they kill the monkeys?" she asked. "Then there would be more for the people to eat."

"Oh! You can't do that! If you killed just one monkey you'd be mobbed." Judy was shocked.

"In goodness name! Why?"

"The monkeys are sacred. Religion is a potent force to these people. But don't let's get started on that. Come on. Let's go." Judy hurried on.

Each filled with her own, long thoughts they wandered on and on. As the shadows darkened, the streets narrowed. At last they were in the very heart of the city.

"Look!" Mary whispered, suddenly gripping Judy's arm. "See that tall woman in the black dress?"

"Yes, a Moslem."

The woman was moving across an open space where the afterglow of the sun brought her out in bold relief.

"Does she—would you say there was anything unusual about her?" These words were said by Mary in so tense a whisper that Judy turned to look at her.

"Why, yes," she replied slowly, "she is strange. I should say that she doesn't belong here at all."

"How could you know that?" Mary asked in a startled voice.

"I teach art and I paint quite a bit. You know an artist, a really good one, makes you conscious of a beautiful figure, even though it is loaded down with robes. It's the way you sit and stand and

move. That woman does not belong here. I've never seen anyone like her. There is a spring in her step. Her body is like a tight wire. I'd hate to meet her in the dark. I—"

Just then, as if conscious of the fact that she was being talked about, the woman turned and looked back.

As if startled, she quickened her pace.

To say that Mary was startled and alarmed would be to put it very mildly. She was not dreaming that, here in India, she had come across the Woman in Black, and yet this woman did seem to have something in common with her. It was strange.

"Come on!" she whispered. "I want to see—" She did not finish. What did she want to see? Perhaps she did not know.

She saw sooner than she wished. The woman had turned a corner. As they appeared, rounding that same corner, she made a sudden movement. Something bright gleamed in her hand. In the nick of time Mary dropped flat. There was a flash, and a report, then a scream.

Neither Mary nor Judy had screamed, though Judy would have done so had she not lost her voice. It was that woman who had screamed. Little wonder, for a white man darting from a corner had knocked the gun from her hand, then had made a grab for her.

Quicker than any cat, she bent low to escape his grasp, then vanished into a dark and narrow street.

After bending over to pick up the woman's pistol, the man walked toward the girls in long strides.

"She almost got you that time, miss," he spoke gruffly. "Now, what would nice girls like you be doing in such a place as this? And one of you in uniform!"

"Say!" His tone changed. "You don't happen to be the young lady who helped bring that quinine from America?"

"That's who I am," Mary admitted.

"Say! You're a real hero! Shake!" He gripped her hand until it hurt.

"Here," he said, "take this gun. You may need it." He held out the pistol.

Mary dropped it into her pocket.

"What'd she shoot at you for?" he demanded.

"It's a long story." Mary hesitated. "At least I think it is."

"Oh! It is? Then let's get out of here. She might come back."

With long, swinging strides he led the way out of the narrow labyrinth of streets.

"What were YOU doing back there?" Mary asked, as they neared the river.

"Me?" He laughed hoarsely. "That's a good one. Me, I'm a Flying Tiger. Nobody ever touches a Flying Tiger. They don't dare!"

"A Flying Tiger!" Mary was thrilled. Judy nodded her confirmation. Then she whispered: "That's what he is and one of the best!"

"You'd be honorin' me if you'd have a bite to eat with me," said Mary's new-found friend. "Both of you. I'm Scottie Burns and I'm with an American squadron now."

"It will be a pleasure," Mary said. "And I'm sure—"

"Yes, yes," Judy hastened to add. "It will be a real joy."

"And will you name the place?" Scottie begged. "I'm not so well acquainted here."

Judy led them to a quiet place run by a native Indian chef, who had spent several years in America and who knew how to prepare Indian food as Americans liked it.

It was a jolly and delightful occasion. After some urging Scottie told with laughter and tears of his experiences with the Flying Tigers.



"Nobody Dares Touch a Flying Tiger!"

"That's one spell in my life I'll never forget," he concluded. "Never! Never! It was tough, but it was glorious. When the last battle is won and the last man of that brave band is laid away like a tattered flag for keeps, we'll be a-flyin' and a-yarnin' in that place where all good Indians go.

"And now," he turned to Mary, "how about this black-robed lady who wishes you were dead?"

"Oh! It's nothing at all, after what you've been telling, but I'll tell you all the same—"

Mary told the story of her journey while Scottie listened with rapt attention.

"Young lady!" he exclaimed when she had finished, "you've got what it takes!"

"I'm only one of the thousands of American women who have joined up to help win the war," said Mary. "And they've all got what it takes."

"Glory be for that!" Scottie exclaimed. "Now I know the fight will soon be over. When the ladies get into Hitler's hair there's nothing left but the shouting.

"And here's a secret." He leaned forward and his eyes shone. "There is talk of sending me to Burma with that quinine early to-morrow morning."

"Oh!" Judy exclaimed. "That wouldn't be fair. Mary and Sparky should do it. They've earned the right."

"Exactly what I said," Scottie agreed. "But Sparky won't risk his ship and he won't leave the rest of his cargo alone for an hour and as for this young lady—" He hesitated, embarrassed.

"Of course it wouldn't be safe," Mary stepped in. "I don't know the route. The quinine is too precious. I wouldn't think of risking it."

"Of course not," Judy smiled. "But if Scottie were sent with it and if he were to ask that you be sent along as his co-pilot?"

"Oh! I'd accept!"

"You would?" Scottie exclaimed. "Then what's keeping us?"

"Only Sparky's okay!"

"And orders from headquarters. I'll get it all fixed within the hour. Where's my hat? Oh—oh, yes, waiter! Waiter! Bring the checks!" With the least possible ceremony and no apology, Scottie paid the charge and bounded from the room.

"A Flying Tiger!" Judy exclaimed. "He flies even when he's on the ground."

"All the same, I like him a lot." Mary's eyes shone.

"Who wouldn't? I envy you. That will be something to remember—the trip."

"Everything we do is something to remember," said Mary. "That's why I like flying."

"If I had the flying hours I'd resign tomorrow and join the WAFS."

"You can get the necessary training at the Woman's Flying Training Detachment," said Mary. "Jacqueline Cochrane is the director."

"I'll think about it," Judy replied soberly.

They left the place to wander slowly back toward the school. As they crossed the long bridge, the dark waters of the river sweeping beneath them seemed to whisper of the thousands who had swarmed its banks since time began.

"Do you know," said Mary, "I am obsessed with a strange notion that this black-robed woman who shot at me tonight is a French woman I saw at the port we reached after we had flown the Atlantic."

"In North Africa!" Judy exclaimed. "That's impossible."

"Yes, I suppose so but I seem to have been haunted by women in black all the way."

"That's possible and it is also possible that they were all spies."

"But they were all so very much alike," Mary insisted.

"That," said Judy, "is even probable. I have a friend, here in India, who is a counter-spy. He told me once that women spies were all very much alike, that is, the successful ones were. They are smart, he says, keen in their own way, usually well educated and all that. Their smartness is like the smartness of a dagger, if you can say a dagger is smart." Judy paused to reflect.

"Smart as a dagger," Mary murmured. "That does sound a little strange."

"Smart and beautiful," said Judy. "I have a friend who has a collection of what he calls 'beautiful daggers.' They *are* beautiful too, hilts of gold, some with pearls set in silver, mother-of-pearl handles and a lot more. But they all have one thing in common, an ugly, dangerous blade. Women spies are alike, I suppose, in very much the same way. That's why this one seems like the others."

"Probably so," Mary agreed. "But say! I'd like to go over and see Sparky before we go to bed. He might have something more to tell me."

"I'll drive you over," Judy volunteered.

"It's all fixed, Mary," were Sparky's first words to her when she reached the airport. "That Flying Tiger, Scottie, will fly with you to Burma first thing in the morning."

"Scottie's a fast worker." Mary was pleased.

"He sure is, and a good one. They say he's downed more Japs than anyone in China, and he's barely twenty-two."

"Twenty-two years old!" She stared.

"That's right. They grow old fast over here. But he'll turn young again when this is over."

"Sparky," her voice dropped, "if I shouldn't come back, you can get a good co-pilot to go with you on that last lap to our journey's end."

"Oh, sure! But you'll come back, Mary. If I wasn't dead certain of that I'd never let you go."

"Oh! So that's the way it is," Mary laughed.

"You bet your life, it is. We're going to finish this thing, you and I."

"But I want you to go with Scottie," he added. "You've had a lot of grief on this trip. I want you to see just how worthwhile it is."

"Thanks, Sparky." Her voice went husky. Their hands met in a good stout grip.

A half hour later Mary crept between cool, white sheets in the teachers' home at the school, prepared for a good sleep before the dawn of one more big day.

CHAPTER XV

BURMA DETOUR

When Mary arrived at the airport before dawn next morning, guards, like gray ghosts, were moving silently about among the many planes assembled there.

Having been challenged by one of the guards, she explained her mission and was at once led to a cabin monoplane that was just warming up.

"Oh! There you are!" Scottie exclaimed. "I hope you're ready for a bit of a scrap or anything that comes along."

"I'm with you for anything that comes our way," she replied.

"Good!" said Scottie. "Well, then let's get up and get going."

Climbing to his place, he released the mechanic who had put his plane in motion, then motioned Mary to the co-pilot's seat.

"This is a small plane alongside yours," he said. "We had to break up some of the boxes of quinine and store the goods in the wings, but it's all there."

"Listen to her!" he exclaimed, as the motor roared. "Snortin' to go! She's the sweetest ship I've ever flown. She'll jump right straight up from the ground, or nearly so, and can land on any road a car can run on. She can do four hundred miles an hour, flying straight on, and can cut circles around any Jap plane that's made. I only wish I could show you what a fighter she is, but they say all's quiet on the Burma Front."

"Please don't stir it up on my account." Mary laughed a bit nervously. "All I'm interested in is getting that quinine to the hospital—"

"Sure!" Scottie agreed heartily. "That's our mission and that's what we'll do, but downing a couple of Zeros won't hurt a bit."

It seemed to Mary as they rose to greet the dawn, that he had spoken the exact truth. His ship did appear to leap straight into the air like a frightened bird.

"I'm glad Sparky is getting a chance to have a real rest at last," she said after a time.

"Yes, I imagine he can use it, all right," said Scottie. "He told me he was going to sleep late. After that he and one of the boys at camp will fly your plane to the foot of the mountains. We'll meet them there late today."

"And tomorrow we'll go over the Himalayas?" Mary drew in a long, deep breath.

"Yes, providing the mountain gods permit you. They don't always, not by a long ways."

"Is it really bad?"

"It's the toughest bit of flying between China and Chicago. Every pilot who's done the trip says so. And there's a score or more of men who've flown it many times. Help is coming to China from America in a big way—by plane. And I'm glad."

"So are we all!" Mary agreed.

For an hour they sailed on over green fields of rice and dark, tangled forests.

"There's a storm gathering over there," Scottie nodded in the direction they were going. "Hope we can beat it."

"Oh! I hope so."

They were over a broad stretch of water now.

"It's getting really black over the jungle where those Jap rats are hiding." Scottie set his motor roaring. "They'll not bother us today."

As Mary watched the gathering storm she thought she saw small planes, like birds circling before the clouds. "Scurrying home," she told herself.

They had reached the far side of the water when, with startling suddenness, the storm struck. Catching their plane as if it were a wisp of paper, the wind whirled it up—up—up a thousand, two, three thousand feet, then sent it whirling down again.

"Just hold your seat," Scottie's lips were drawn into a straight line. "I've been all through this before."

When their downward rush had slackened, he kept the plane headed toward the earth. "We're still at five thousand feet," he murmured. "Might be a bright spot below."

All the time Mary was thinking, "We've come all that long way with the quinine and now—"

Suddenly, she let out a little cry of joy. From the very blackness of night that was the heart of a storm cloud, they leaped into clear, bright air.

Better still, beneath them lay a large clearing and at its far end, half hidden, was a small airfield.

Scottie spoke a few words into his radio. Mary caught the answer:

"Come on down, you monkey. What you want to do, stay up there and get wet?"

Roaring with laughter Scottie set the plane circling down. The next minute their plane bump-bumped and they slid in for a stop.

"Here we are!" Scottie exclaimed.

"Yes, and here comes the rain," was Mary's answer as big drops began beating a tattoo on their fuselage.

Three minutes later, while the rain was coming down in torrents a laughing young doughboy carrying slickers on his arm climbed to the plane's cabin to thrust in his head for a look.

"I win!" he shouted to someone standing in a tent door. "You lose your two bucks. She's a lady!"

And, boy, oh, boy! Is she!"

There came a roar from the distant tent, then the boy crowded past the boxes of quinine to hold out the slickers.

"Here. Get into these," he urged. "We heard about your coming and about the quinine. You won't be here long. Gotta make every moment count."

Smiling happily, Mary hid herself in a slicker six sizes too big, then raced away to the tent where she found a score of young men, most of them with full beards, singing:

"It ain't going to rain no more."

The instant she appeared the song broke off short.

"Here she is! Danny!" her escort shouted. "Now where's the two bucks."

"You gotta take that raincoat off her before I'm convinced," came the defiant reply.

With a happy smile Mary threw aside her raincoat.

There came a succession of low gasps, then whispers: "It is! It's a gal pilot."

At that a tall doughboy shuffled forward. "We drew straws," he began bashfully. "I lost so I've got to make you a speech. We—we all want to thank you for the quinine. A lot of our buddies are in the hospital. We've been out of quinine for a week and,—and who knows which of us goes on sick leave next so—"

"As you were—" Mary's voice faltered, then steadied. "You should know that we gals in the army ask only one thing, to be treated as buddies and—and regular soldiers."

This speech was received with a round of cheers.

"Come on, boys!" shouted a husky sergeant who beyond doubt had crashed many a football line. "Give her the hero's rush."

At that they hoisted her to their shoulders and heading into the drenching rain, carried her away to the hospital.

There, safely hidden away at the edge of the jungle, they put her down in a big tent packed full of cots and on every cot rested an invalid soldier.

"Boys," said the sergeant, "we've brought you the two best things in the world, plenty of quinine and a lady."

"Speech! Speech!" came from every corner.

"Oh, boys," Mary was close to tears, "I'm a flier, not a chaplain. All I can say is that I shall always remember this as the happiest moment of my life.

"One thing more before I leave. I'd like your names and addresses. If I'm lucky enough to get back to good, old U. S. A., I'll write to your mothers, every one of them and tell them that I saw you."

"Oh!" exclaimed a very young boy close beside her, "that—that will be swell!"



"I'll Write to Your Mothers," She Promised

With aching heart but smiling face Mary went from cot to cot collecting addresses and personal messages of the sick men.

Then Scottie came in. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "The rain has stopped. There's just time for a bit of chow with the other boys here, then we'll have to hop into the sky. Don't forget that Sparky's waiting."

"Of course," she exclaimed. "We must get going."

A roar of farewell from the soldiers a half hour later, a burst of speed and once again they were in the air.

For some time they were silent, then Mary said in a solemn voice:

"Scottie, I saw things in that field hospital today that I hope I may never see again, but I'll never forget them. Never! Never!"

"Yes, I know," Scottie replied.

There was another long silence. Then Scottie spoke: "I don't often speak of it. War's not a thing to be talked about, really, especially when you're talking to a girl. But did you happen to notice those two boys in the far right-hand corner of the hospital?"

"Yes, I talked to them. Such nice boys. Both college men. They were fliers."

"Yes, and 'were' is exactly the word. Neither of them will ever fly again and one will never even walk."

"Terrible," she murmured.

"It is terrible." Scottie's voice rose. "They were my buddies, those boys were. More than once we flew in the same formation. We were together when it happened. Want me to tell you?" he hesitated.

"Yes, tell me." Her voice was low.

"Well, those boys were flying a two seater, one was pilot, the other radioman and gunner. We were four planes together on patrol. Ten Zeros dropped down upon us from the clouds."

"Oh! The clouds!" Mary looked up. Large, white clouds left by the storm were hovering above them.

"It was a hot fight," Scottie went on. "I got me two Zeros, sent them down in flames. Having one more burst of fire I went after one more Zero. He was a tough one. Got in a burst of slugs on me and cut half my ship's tail away. But I gave him one that set one of his wings shaking like a dead leaf. With my guns empty, I was heading for home and wondering if I'd get there, when I saw a good American two-seater going down in flames.

"It's the end of those boys,' I thought. Then I saw two parachutes blossom out."

"Did they make it?"

"They would have." Scottie hesitated. "You might not believe me, but those boys would tell you if you asked them—"

"Why? What—"

"The Jap that shot them down followed them, followed until their parachutes opened up and—"

"Shot them up—"

"That's what he did. Me? I was so mad I went after him and without ammunition and with a shot-up tail I'd have got him too if I'd had to ram him, but he hid in a cloud."

"And didn't anyone get him?" Mary asked eagerly.

"Not that day, they didn't, nor ever I guess. We'd know his plane if we got him and I'd know him in the air."

"How could you?"

"The impudent monkey had the nose of his plane painted to represent our Uncle Sam with a long beard and a very red nose."

"Giving you something to shoot at, I suppose."

"Let me see the target just one more time," Scottie exclaimed, "and I'll make a bull's eye."

For a long time after that Mary sat staring dreamily down at the tropical beauty that glided beneath them and thinking of the people who, like bits of the jungle, had come and gone in her life during the days that had just passed. She saw again Jerry, the beachcomber, The Woman in Black, Captain Ramsey, and her father. A dozen other familiar figures passed before her mind's eye. And then of a sudden, Scottie exclaimed:

"Look! There's four of those black-hearted, little goggle-eyes slipping out of a cloud right now! I don't suppose—" he hesitated. "Of course we can run, or we can climb. They'd never come near us. Perhaps that's the best way. There's Sparky waiting for you, and your cargo." There was a wistful note in his voice. It was, Mary thought, like the singing note of a faithful dog's whine when he was begging to be loosened for a fight.

"Sparky can wait, if need be—forever." Her voice was firm. "The cargo will go through even if I'm not there."

"Then we—"

"Go get them, Scottie!" Her words came short and quick.

"You asked for it." His motor roared. "So did they."

The four Zeros, sure that one of them would finish Scottie off, came right at them. As if by thundering straight on he hoped to avoid them, Scottie did not change his course until he was almost beneath them.

Then, with a "Hang on, Mary!" he tilted his plane straight up to climb toward the stars.

Caught off guard, the attackers attempted to scatter. One narrowly escaped crashing into the other and, in the confusion, found Scottie beneath him, with every gun blazing. With its fuselage sawed half in two, the Zero doubled up to go rolling and tumbling toward the jungle far below.

Just in time Scottie dropped the nose of his plane, tilted, and went into a spiral to escape an enemy on his tail.

When he came out of the spiral, he stood for a second on his wing, then rising like a comet,

flashed past the would-be attacker to catch a second Zero unawares and send him down in a pillar of smoke.

Just then a stream of slugs cut across their cabin, so close to their backs that Mary felt the heat of their passing.

"The dirty—" Scottie did not finish. As the other plane flashed past him, he had seen something. Mary had seen it, too.

"Get him, Scottie," she screamed. "Get him if it's the last thing you ever do."

"Never doubt it!" In deathly fear lest his ship had suffered from the attackers' bullets he set his motor thundering her best as he set himself to beat the Zero to a cloud a mile or so away.

They gained. They halved the distance between them. They quartered it. The plane seemed a thing alive.

"Get him, Scottie! Get him!" she cried hoarsely.

It was a long chance but just as the enemy touched the edge of the cloud, Scottie let go. A burst of fire, another, then another.

The Zero had completely disappeared, when the last burst roared from his guns.

Ten seconds passed, twenty, thirty, then, down from the cloud, as if the cloud itself were falling apart, came broken bits of something that once had been a Zero fighter.

"Just blasted him apart!" Scottie muttered. "Can you beat that?"

"That picture of Uncle Sam on his plane's nose—"

"That, Mary? That picture!" Scottie laughed hoarsely. "That's blasted into bits. His engine must have blown up or his gas tank or both!"

A half hour later, as they circled for a landing over the field where Sparky awaited them, Scottie said:

"What's the use of a good, American flier being over Burma without doing a little fighting, even if she is a lady?"

"Fighting, Scottie?" said Mary. "I haven't been fighting. Just had a ride with a Flying Tiger, that's all."

"And one you'll not forget."

"Not ever."

And so they came on down.

CHAPTER XVI

"ME GOT MACHINE GUN!"

In the meantime, with a borrowed co-pilot, Sparky had made his way to a hidden airbase at the foot of the mountains. Since the co-pilot had made the flight several times before the trip was accomplished without mishap or adventure.

The moment they landed a Chinese boy, hopping along on one leg and a crutch, came out to greet them and guide them back into the bush where living quarters had been established.

"Oh!" he exclaimed after looking into the cabin. "Somebody say mebbly lady flier come. Mebbly somebody don't know."

"They were not mistaken," said Sparky. "The lady pilot belongs to this plane. She's coming later with Scottie Burns."

"Oh! Scottie!" the boy exclaimed. "Very good flier, Scottie, mebbly seventy Japs he shoot down, me not know."

"That's a great record," said Sparky. "What's your name, boy?"

"Me, Hop Sing. Alla time me hop—sometimes me sing." The boy laughed at his misfortune.

"You're all right." Sparky laughed with him. "How did you lose your leg?"

"Zero plane come down," the boy swept the air with an arm, "came zoom! Zoom! Zoom! Machine gun—rat-tat-tat, go down me. Too many times shot. American hospital doctors fix up. Now, me, I got machine gun. Want Zero come back."

"You Chinese people have been taking the rap for us all these long years," Sparky said soberly. "Now—here we are."

"Very soon come many big planes," said the boy. "Mebby bomb Tokio."

"Maybe yes, maybe no," Sparky said.

After looking the plane over carefully, then locking it up tight, they made a dash through the pelting rain where a warm welcome and a good American dinner awaited them.

When Mary and Scottie came zooming down on the hidden airfield, they found Sparky waiting for them. In a jeep he whisked them away to a little eating place where they had coffee and sandwiches and where Sparky listened to their rather amazing story.

"I wish I had been with you when you visited that hospital," Sparky said when the story was told.

"Oh! I wish you could have been!" Mary exclaimed with real feeling. "It was sad but just wonderful. I'd go around the world three times just to do that much for our fine boys, who seem to feel that they are sort of forgotten over here."

"You took a long chance?" Sparky said to Scottie.

"When we went for that Jap after our plane had been shot up?" Scottie spoke slowly. "Yes, that's right, we did. But if you had seen that Jap in his plane with Uncle Sam's face painted where it was and you knew what that rat of a monkey had done,—"

"That's right," Sparky grinned, "I'd have gone after him."

"Of course you would," Mary agreed. "Any real man would have done just that. There are some things in this war that can be passed up. Others are on the must-be-done list, and that was one of them."

"But Sparky," she leaned forward eagerly, "what comes next? When do we cross the mountains?"

"Tomorrow morning if the mountain storm gods permit," was his reply. "This afternoon, however, I have a little trip to make." He turned to Scottie. "Do you know the road to a town called Gonagona?" he asked.

"Very well," said Scottie, "I've been there several times."

"There's an officer over there with secret orders for us," Sparky explained. "It has something to do with our landing place once we are over the mountains. I must get over there. Will you drive me?"

"Oh! Sure!" Scottie grinned.

"We'll leave Mary in charge of the plane," said Sparky. "Think you can manage that?"

"What am I to guard it from in this wild place?" Mary asked. "The Monkeys of the Snows or something?"

"You never can tell," Sparky did not smile. "And, by the way, there's a one-legged Chinese boy who will help you out in a pinch. He has a sub-machine gun that someone loaned him. It's a businesslike affair and I shouldn't wonder if he could shoot it. He's looking for a low-flying Zero plane. Perhaps you can find one for him. He calls himself Hop Sing. Sometimes he hops and sometimes he sings."

"He sounds interesting," said Mary. "Please tell him to come around."

A half hour later Sparky and Scottie motored away, leaving Mary seated on a fallen palm tree at the edge of the narrow airfield.

Mary dreamed of many things, of wide, black waters, sifting desert sands, glorious dances in Egypt, Persian gardens, and many more. But suddenly she was startled from her dreaming by a high-pitched voice saying;

"You are the so beautiful flying lady and I am Hop Sing. Me, I got machine gun. Many times practice." Aiming the gun at a tree the Chinese boy seemed about to mow it down but, instead, merely clicked his gun. "Can shoot very well. Come Zero plane, flying very low, I show you plenty."

"I'm glad to see you, Hop Sing." She slid down from her log. "You'll protect me from the monkeys, won't you?" she added with a laugh.

"Monkeys not hurt white lady," was his laughing reply. "Only monkeys wearing glasses, they hurt white lady, but *not* hurt white lady. Me, I shoot them, all-a-same them shoot me."

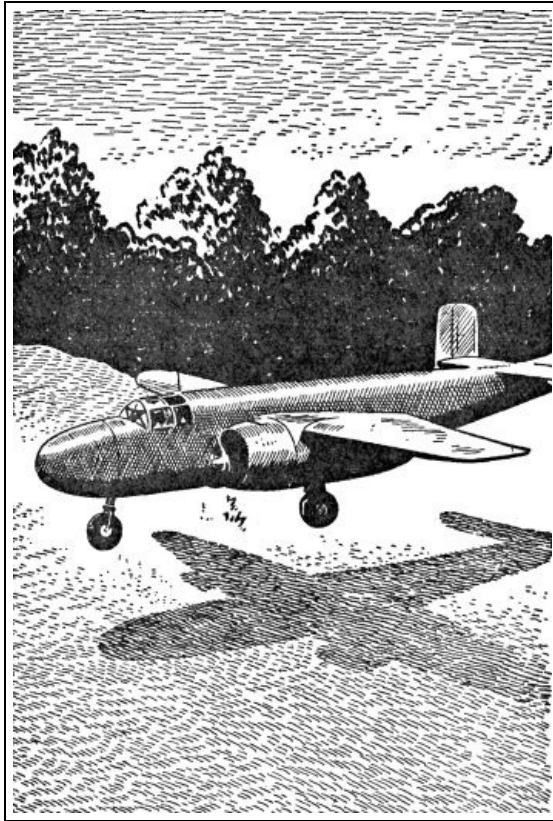
Mary took to Hop Sing at once. She enjoyed his happy, squirrel-like chatter. He told her many amusing stories of the war, how his people had learned to trick the Japs and lead them away from their goals, how they had hidden their food to return for it and so save their own lives. He told her too of things that made her blood run cold.

"How can you be so happy when such terrible things are going on?" she asked.

"No happy, bye-um-bye dead, that's all," was his way of saying that happiness, come what may, is a human necessity.

After a time Hop Sing wandered away. Taking a seat on the plane's right wing, Mary sat dreaming in the bright tropical sunlight until, with startling suddenness a powerful twin-motored plane appearing to come from nowhere circled once then swept down upon the field.

The plane came to a halt not thirty paces from where she sat. Immediately four big men in officers' uniforms leaped from the plane.



A Powerful Plane Swept Down Upon the Field

"This the plane that arrived today from Calcutta?" The younger of the four pointed at Sparky's plane.

"I wouldn't know." There was something about these men that Mary didn't like. She was thinking, "What's this?"

"Where is this plane's pilot?" the man demanded.

"I don't know."

"See here!" The man took a step forward. "We just came over the mountains from China. We were sent to pick up the cargo of that plane."

"It is imperative that we have it at once." An older man took up the story. Mary did not like his accent. He certainly did not come from America. "There has been far too much delay," the man went on. "Bah! A woman for a co-pilot. What can you expect?"

"We are to take off that cargo at once," said the younger man.

"And fly it to China," the other added.

Mary, who had been studying their plane, made no reply.

"Well?" The younger man took a step forward. Mary backed away, then stood her ground.

A great silence had fallen over the jungle. From far away came the scream of a parrot. Mary's low-spoken words scarcely broke the silence:

"I have orders to guard this plane until the man who flies it returns. He'll be back in a half hour. If you've come from China you might like a cup of coffee."

"Preposterous!" The older man's face purpled.

The younger man took another step forward but this time Mary did not retreat. She just stood there looking him squarely in the eye as she said, "Why so preposterous? What does this mean, your swooping down like this? I haven't been long in the Orient and I'm only a girl but all this seems strange and,—irregular."

"Irregular!" the older man stormed. "You can't run a war in this country in what you call a regular way. You must sometimes act in a hurry. China cannot wait, so please step aside."

"I am remaining where I am," she declared stoutly. "Anyway, I don't have the key to the plane. I may be right, then again I may be wrong. If I am wrong, I may lose my wings but you'll have to come and take me if you want the cargo of this plane." Outwardly Mary was calm but inside, she was all atremble.

The younger man's lips twitched. "Such stupidity!" he muttered, as his hand slipped toward a something that showed black beneath his belt. Mary trembled but did not move.

At that instant there came a sound from behind the plane. "Who can that be?" Mary asked herself. Her heart gave a great leap as she heard a thin voice say:

"I got me a tommy gun. I can shoot him very good. Wanna see?"

Before Mary could stop him Hop Sing sent out a burst of fire that burned the air above the four men's heads.

"You little Chinese rat," the older man stormed. "You—" He broke off short. The gleam in Hop Sing's eyes at that moment was a terrible thing to see.

Hop Sing's burst of gunfire, following as it did the arrival of an unidentified airplane, brought a score of officers, soldiers, and mechanics rushing to the scene.

"What's all this?" Captain Noble, the officer in charge of the field, demanded.

"Well, sir," said Mary, forgetting to salute, "these men say they're from China. They say they have orders to take the cargo from Sparky's plane."

"Let's see your orders," the Captain said, turning to the four men.

"Certainly, Captain." The younger of the four drew a sheath of papers from his pocket. "Here they are, Captain." He shot Mary an ugly look.

"Oh! Boy!" Mary thought. "If I'm wrong, I'll be washed out of this man's Army, just like that—"

"Hm!" said the Captain. "Papers seem all in order. Suppose you'd like a cup of coffee before you start back?"

"There's not much time—we—" The younger man frowned.

"Time enough for a cup of coffee." The Captain's smile was disarming. "Are you guarding the plane?" he asked Mary.

"Yes, I—I and Hop Sing." She nodded toward the Chinese boy.

"Unlock the cabin and start unloading the cargo. These boys will help you." The Captain nodded to the group of mechanics.

Mary's heart sank. Then she remembered something. "The cabin's locked," she said quietly. "Sparky has the key."

"Where is Sparky? Oh, yes, he went to see the Major. I'm afraid we can't do a thing until the pilot returns." The Captain smiled once again.

"Break the lock," the older man snarled.

"You know that cannot be done." The Captain did not smile.

At a slight nod from the younger men, the four moved toward the plane that had brought them.

Oddly enough, with just no orders at all, but with guns ready for action, the soldiers of the Captain's squad lined up in front of that plane.

"I think," the younger of the four licked his lips, "we'll accept your offer of hospitality."

Ten minutes later, when Sparky returned, he went at once into a huddle with the Captain.

A half hour later the four men returned to their plane but four armed doughboys went there with them. The Captain and a co-pilot took charge of the plane.

"Mary, you're a wonder!" Sparky exclaimed as that plane climbed the sky.

"Who are they?" she asked in a whisper.

"That," said Sparky, "is a military secret."

"Where are they going?" she asked.

"I don't exactly know." Sparky smiled. "One thing I'm sure of, and that is they won't come back."

"One thing still puzzles me," said Mary.

"What's that," Sparky asked.

"Why did the Captain order me to open the plane's cabin door for those men?"

"Perhaps he knew you didn't have the key. Then again he may have known you wouldn't use it if you did have it. Either way he was right. What he wanted was to avoid any shooting, and he got that. I wouldn't trade you and Hop Sing for four Lieutenant Colonels and a General," Sparky laughed. "And you're both going with us to China."

"That," said Mary, "will be swell!"

Later that day when they were together once more, Sparky and Mary lingered long over their tea in a little place run by a friend of Hop Sing.

When Mary had told her story all over again, Sparky's admiration for his co-pilot was greater than ever before.

"Listen!" She held up her hand. The air was filled with sound.

"The bombers are here," he said.

"And that means—"

"That we go over the mountains tomorrow providing the storm gods smile."

CHAPTER XVII

IN SWIFT PURSUIT

That night, lying on a cot in a tent shared with three Red Cross nurses, Mary did not fall asleep at once. The day had been a tremendous one. Much that war means had come crashing in upon her. At the field hospital she had seen what war could do to fine American boys. She had not known that she could feel so terribly sad and yet keep on smiling as she had done as she moved from cot to cot.

On the other hand she had never been quite so happy in her life as she was on realizing that she had helped them in a big way by bringing the quinine from America and that she could serve them still more by contacting their relatives and friends in America, when she got back.

"If I do get back," she whispered. Watching Scottie down those Jap fighters who so richly deserved to die, she had realized as never before how easy it was for a life, just any life, her life, to go out like a match in a high wind.

"But my life must not go out yet," she told herself, almost fiercely. "I have so much to do—"

She thought again of the messages she was carrying to America, and, strangely enough, of the roll of papyrus. She could not but feel that this roll was somehow very important.

Most important of all was the cargo. "It must go through!" she told herself. "We've only a little farther to go."

After dinner that night she had sat on a log beside the stout-hearted Hop Sing. He had told her how his people had suffered through all those long years, of the speechless cruelties of the Japs, of homes destroyed, women and children reduced to slavery, and all the rest. And now help was coming—not enough yet—but more and more help.

What was the cargo they carried? Once again this question came up to intrigue but not to disturb her. Neither she nor Sparky had tried hard to guess the answer. "We shall know," she assured herself. "It won't be long now."

Why were all those bombers heading for China in such haste? Would they help retake Burma and with it the Burma Road? Would they help defend Russia from possible Jap attack? Would they bomb Tokio? She could not guess the answer, but having visited that field hospital, she hoped as never before that they were headed for Tokio.

"And I'd love to go with them," she told herself.

"But first the mountains," she whispered. Scottie had told her of the pass, how during the monsoon period great storms went roaring up the sides of those highest mountains of the world.

"You can't imagine it." Those were his words. "Snow rising like smoke a thousand, two, three thousand feet from their peaks. A plane caught in the grip of such a storm is like a chip caught in a great whirlpool."

Shivering at the very thought, Mary drew the covers close about her and at last fell fast asleep.

She was awake an hour before dawn and, disturbed by an overpowering sense of something wrong, drew on her clothes and walked outside. It was dark, gloomy, and chilly.

"Why did I leave my cozy bed?" she asked herself as she walked across the narrow airfield and then among the shadows of many planes to search out their own.

"There you are," she whispered at last. "Good, old ship!"

To her surprise she saw that the door stood slightly ajar. Instantly her curiosity was aroused. Sparky, she knew, had not slept in the ship. For all that, he may have arisen early to look things over before the big day. That there were guards about she knew quite well, though she had not been challenged.

This, she told herself, was not strange. The moon was down. It was the darkest hour before dawn. There were more planes on the field than ever before in its history. No one would risk a light.

And yet, as she came close to their plane, she thought she caught a faint flicker inside its cabin. This did not startle her. Sparky was still in her mind. She would surprise him. It would be nice to spend an hour with him in their own ship before dawn on a day that should mean much to them.

With noiseless footsteps, she reached the plane, then climbed two rounds of the boarding ladder. Without a sound, she opened the door half way to peer into the darkness.

Did some good gremlin whisper, "Wait?" Who can say? She did wait. And then—she barely suppressed a gasp. The gleam of a tiny flashlight reflected by some bright object faintly illuminated a face within the cabin. It was not Sparky, not a man at all, but a woman. "The Woman in Black," she thought, nearly falling from the ladder. She was sure that this was the woman who had fired a shot at her back there in the city.

Fascinated, she watched. The woman had torn the top from a corrugated box containing a unit of their precious cargo and was studying it intently.

"This," Mary thought, "must be stopped." Her heart beat a wild tattoo.

In her excitement, she must have made some slight sound. The light blinked out. There came the sound of rushing feet and before she could think or move, she was knocked from the ladder.

Landing on her head, she was knocked unconscious momentarily. But something made her mind fight back. When her senses started returning she could think and hear but could neither move nor speak.

She heard steady, approaching footsteps. "A guard," she thought. "Oh! If I could only scream."

With a violent effort she brought back her power of motion. Sitting up, she *did* scream. It was not

a loud scream but enough for a voice said:

"Mary! What are you doing here? What has happened?"

"Sparky! Oh! I'm so glad!" She staggered to her feet.

"What is it?" He was near now.

"The Lady in Black! She was in the plane. She broke open a box. She knows the secret of our cargo. She—she's a spy. Perhaps she has the roll of papyrus. She will escape and she must not!

"There!" Her voice rose as there came the sound of an airplane motor. "There's a plane! Someone is with her. They must have stolen a plane. They will get away!"

Two guards came racing up. "Oh! It's you!" the taller of the two said. "What's up? What happened?"

"A woman spy was going over the cargo of our plane!" exclaimed Mary. "She saw too much. She may have taken something with her. We've got to catch her."



"The Lady in Black Knows the Secret of Our Cargo!"

"That must be her plane warming up!"

"Did she have a plane? Why was she allowed to land?" Sparky demanded.

"No plane has come in tonight."

"Then she and her accomplice are planning to steal a plane. Come on! We may catch them yet!"

Sparky led the way on the run.

But they were too late. As they reached the runway, the stolen plane went gliding over the cement to rise into the air.

"That's a fast two-seater. You'll need a fast one to overtake them."

"We'll take Scottie's plane!" Mary exclaimed. "It's gassed and oiled, ammunition, everything. I helped him get it in shape last night. It's really fast and a real fighter!"

"Come on, then!" Once again Sparky led the way.

The moment his feet hit the ship's deck, he had the motor singing.

"All right, Mary," he called. "Not much time. What about your jacket, oxygen mask, and all that?"

"They're all here. Scottie's are there, too, for you. We left them. I—I don't know why."

"That's great! Get in and let's ramble. Okay, boys, turn us loose!"

Blocks were removed from before the wheels. The motor thundered, then slowed to an even grind. They glided away, faster—faster—faster. Then up they shot into the sky to greet the dawn that "comes up like thunder."

"There they are!" Mary exclaimed. "Heading straight for the mountains!"

"What luck! They can't lose us now. We'll follow them straight to China if we have to."

"If we only had our plane!"

"Perhaps it's best that we haven't. This may be tougher than you imagine. And this plane is faster than our own."

"Yes, that's right!"

As they sped on the sun rose. The sky was crystal clear. Far ahead of them, triangles of deep purple where shadows lay and of light yellow where sunlight fell, were the mountains.

"Beautiful," she murmured.

"Beautiful and terrible," he agreed.

"We're gaining," she said after a time. "I can see them much more plainly. If we catch up with them—"

Mary could not go on. She was wondering how far this chase would take them and how it was to end. Sparky had said they were headed for China. Part of China was in Allied hands. Much of it was held by the Japs.

"They'll lead us over Jap-held territory." She spoke aloud. "And then—"

"Fighters may come out to meet us."

"If they do we'll shoot them down," she declared fiercely. "You should have seen Scottie in this very plane yesterday. It was wonderful!"

"You have all the luck," said Sparky.

"Sparky," she leaned toward him. "Suppose we don't come back."

"From this trip? We will, Mary."

"But suppose we don't. What about our plane and its cargo?"

"Scottie knows all about that. He'll take it through. None of us is absolutely necessary, but we'll come back, Mary. We'll take our own plane to the journey's end."

"Look!" She pointed toward the other plane that momentarily grew larger in their field of vision. "They've changed their course. They're heading down the mountain range."

"Toward the highest peak of all," said Sparky. "The one nobody's ever climbed."

Mary had read of this peak and the futile attempts men had made to scale it. She had been thrilled then. But now, she shuddered.

"They hope to tire us, run us out of gas, something." Sparky tested his supply of fuel. "They've got a long way to go yet. But we must be careful. A forced landing on these white slopes means death!"

"We must save enough gas to take us back."

"Exactly that."

Once more Mary's mind was working. Was this to be an endurance race, endurance of plane, of fuel, and human courage?

"Hardly that," she told herself. "We should be up with them in less than a half hour."

Through the clear air they could see great distances. Far ahead, perhaps a hundred miles, stood a peak much higher than the rest. Was this the highest peak of all? She had no way of telling. And so they sped on.

Ten minutes passed, fifteen, twenty—they were nearing the fleeing plane. The lofty peak was very near.

Sparky studied his fuel gages.

"In twenty minutes we must turn back or run the risk of crashing among these peaks."

"Or in jungles at the mountain bases."

"Yes."

They came nearer, ever nearer to the spy and her plane.

"A burst of fire might bring them down even now," said Sparky. But his fingers did not reach for the gun controls.

Five minutes more. They must decide. To turn back meant defeat. Could they face that? Or should they turn loose the fury of their guns?

But what was this? The fleeing plane faltered, began to fall, then righted itself and flew on. Ten tense seconds passed and again it faltered.

"They stole the plane." Sparky's voice was solemn as Moses. "They did not take time to check the ship's fuel."

Once again the plane picked up speed, only once and then, like a kite that has lost its tail, the

plane began to fall, slowly at first, then faster and faster, turning over and over.

"She was a spy," Mary said, forcing her eyes away from the sight.

The next time she looked, the plane was all but upon the mountain, the snow-packed slope. She saw it crash, then begin rolling over and over. Down it spun, a thousand, two, three thousand feet.

They followed it part way down. Once it leaped across an open space, to crash again, then to roll on.

When at last it came to rest a faint film of smoke came up from it. This grew dense, then burst into a red flame. They watched. Nothing moved.

"The end," said Sparky. Then, he set his motor roaring to speed away toward the small airport they had left.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHERE ARE THEY?

"Oh! They're gone!" Mary exclaimed in dismay as they came in sight of the airfield.

"What? They can't be!"

"But they are! The bombers are gone. The field is practically empty."

It was true. Warnings of an approaching storm had sent the big bomber squadron roaring on its way over the mountains. But Mary and Sparky landed a moment later with plenty of room to spare.

To Mary this was a great disappointment. She dearly loved being in a parade, always had. And flying in a great formation like that was a big parade.

"Now we'll have to go it alone," she said soberly.

"Nothing new about that," Sparky grinned. "We've made it alone practically all the way and you're bound to admit that we've had all the luck any flier could ask."

"Yes, all the luck," Mary repeated slowly.

"You're tired, Mary," Sparky said with a show of sympathy.

"Yes, I guess I am. Can't take it after all, I guess."

"Can't take it! Man! Oh! Man!" he roared. "Listen to you talk!"

Just then Scottie came over from Sparky's plane.

"I covered up the box that the spy pried open," he said. "Then I changed the loading so it's on the bottom. And believe it or not," he added, "I didn't peek."

"The secret compartment?" Mary's voice rose. "Had it been broken open?"

"Don't know a thing about a secret compartment," was Scottie's reply. "I went over the cabin with a fine-toothed comb. Everything but that box seemed okay."

"Then the roll of papyrus is still there and wasn't burned up in that plane." Mary heaved a sigh of relief.

"So that's what happened?" said Scottie. "Their plane burned."

"Yes, it burned." Mary spoke slowly. No other questions were asked.

"The Colonel said if you didn't bring my plane back in twenty-four hours," Scottie laughed low, "that I could have yours."

"And you said?" Sparky asked.

"I said it would be a fair enough trade but that guys like you and Mary always came back."

"Yes," Mary agreed. "We always come back—sometimes."

"Mary," said Sparky, "I'm going over our plane, every bit of it. People who open secret cargoes also put emery in engines, cut fuel pipes and all that. When we go over those peaks, everything has to be right."

"It certainly does." Mary was seeing again those cold, white slopes where a plane forced to land goes rolling down, down, down, to dizzy depths below.

"I'll go get a cup of coffee," she said dreamily.

"And have a good rest," said Sparky. "We may go over the big top yet today. That all depends."

While she was drinking her coffee, Mary was joined by the Captain who had helped her save the secret cargo from the would-be hijackers. "Sparky tells me that you chased that woman spy to her death," he said. Mary nodded. "I just wanted to tell you," he went on, "that while you were gone, I did a little investigating. That woman flew to a small airport owned by a rich native, about forty miles from here. She must have motored over here, though her car wasn't found. Had an accomplice, no doubt.

"A man I got on the phone," he went on, "tells me she checks with a native Indian woman who studied in America but who soured on Americans for some reason or other, and so went into spying. Looks as if you and Sparky have done the country a great favor."

"I—I'm glad," Mary swallowed hard. "But for my part I'll do my bit some other way after this."

Two hours later Mary was wakened from a dream in which she was riding on an ocean liner gliding rapidly down a swiftly moving mountain stream.

"Mary! Mary!" It was Sparky, calling outside her tent. "I'm sorry, but orders have come through by radio. We are to start within the hour!"

"Okay. I'll join you at the canteen for our last cup of java in Burma."

"Here's hoping." Sparky was away.

"It's not too promising," he was telling her a half hour later, talking between gulps of steaming hot coffee. "The barometer is falling. A storm is on the way, but the big shots figure we can make it. This time of year it storms for weeks once it gets a good start and it seems our cargo is vital to some great mission."

"Sparky," Mary drawled sleepily, "the next time you and I fly together we'll insist on having a cargo of toothpicks, crackers, chewing gum, and non-essentials."

"Something that doesn't count too much," he grinned. "I wonder. It strikes me that you're just the sort that insists on doing hard, important things all the time."

"You might be right at that, and perhaps I've got a buddy that's built along the same lines," she answered smiling.

"Might be," he agreed. "Anyway the next hop promises to be both important and tough so we'd better get going." He slid off the stool.

Five minutes later, having been joined by Hop Sing, they were back at the plane. Heavily padded suits, fur-lined jackets, and marvelous wool socks were selected with great care for all. Sparky went through the business of getting set for a long flight, then, when his motors were rolling, nodded to the mechanic and they went gliding away.

As if by way of a warning from the storm gods, as they cleared the treetops, a stiff push of wind lifted their plane high, then let it down with a bump.

"Oh, ho!" Sparky shouted. "So that's how it is! Blow high! Blow low! Not all your snow can stop our motors' steady roar." He was in high spirits. But Mary was ill at ease.

"They say that women have instincts," she said to Sparky.

"Meaning what?"

"Nothing much, I guess."

He set the ship climbing. They went speeding on toward those eternal fields of white.

Perhaps the events of the morning had shaken Mary's usually steady nerves. Then again the strain of long, exciting days and nights had begun to tell. Be that as it may, as they came closer and closer to those mountains of eternal snow, her apprehension increased.

They came close to the place where they must climb and climb again to make the pass in safety, and she was obliged to confess to herself that she was really frightened.

At that moment she recalled the words of a pilot who had crossed many times. "They call it a pass but it's only a slightly lower level between two towering peaks." She looked at the peaks and the narrow depression that lay between them. At the same time she thought she had discovered a change in the peaks that lay far to the left.

"Some of them are gone," she said.

"Gone? What's gone?" Sparky asked.

"Mountains."

"Mountains! They don't go away. They're eternal. It says so in the Bible."

"All the same there are not as many as there were," Mary insisted.

Sparky gave her a sharp look, then he gazed away to the left.

"By thunder! You're right!" he exclaimed. "They are vanishing. Know what that means?"

"A storm!"

"Absolutely. With the direction of the wind, quartering to the direction the range takes, that storm will come and come and come."



"That Means a Storm!" Sparky Exclaimed

Even as Mary watched the view away to the left changed. Instead of simply disappearing each mountain began to “smoke.” It wasn’t smoke, she knew that. It was snow blown hundreds, perhaps thousands of feet into the air.

As the moments passed the thing grew in horror and intensity. Striking the mountains at an angle, the storm appeared to creep upon them like a thief in the night.

“It’s coming, Sparky!” she exclaimed.

“Yes, coming,” he agreed. “And we’re climbing.”

“Can we beat it?”

“If we can’t we can fight it. I’ve seen storms before.”

“Not a white storm.”

“Yes, white storms.”

“Not over the Himalayas.”

“Have it your own way,” he grumbled. “Anyway, we’ll fight. We’ve got it to do.”

Frightened within an inch of her life yet fascinated by the strangeness, the expression of power, the beauty of it all, she watched the storm arrive. Now there were twelve mountains in the calm that lay between them and their destiny. Now one more mountain smoked, leaving eleven. Now there were ten, eight, six, five, four, three.

“Sparky! It’s almost here!”

No answer—only a grim look of utter determination.

“Sparky! It’s here!”

As if a white blanket had been wrapped about their plane, everything before them vanished. At the same time, as if it were a child’s toy, the storm caught their plane and carried it aloft. The motors still turned, but meant nothing. Had the plane ever traveled so fast before? Mary doubted it. Where were they? Where was the mountain? It seemed to her that they must be approaching the stars. A stinging cold crept in everywhere.

And then, just as she had begun to despair, still as if they were toy people in a toy plane of a toy world, the storm gave their plane a final push, turned it completely over, then abandoned it to its fate.

They began to drop. The motors were no longer turning. Had that intense cold rendered them useless? If so their fate was sealed.

With benumbed fingers Sparky tried a switch here, another there. There came a faint humming sound. It grew and grew. Somewhere a wheel turned, then another. Then, suddenly, the motors roared.

With great skill, Sparky plied his wings, his tail controls until, slowly, like some great, graceful bird, the plane turned over.

The motors roared on. Five minutes more and they were hanging in calm, clouded skies.

“Question right now is, where are we?” Sparky said after a moment’s silence. “The bear went over the mountain,” he hummed.

“Yes, but did we?” Mary asked.

No one cared to risk his reputation on an answer to that question.

CHAPTER XIX

ST. ELMO'S FIRE

"If there are mountains about it's always best to climb." Sparky set his plane to reach higher altitudes. When at last he felt the push of strong winds behind him he said:

"The storm took us over the mountains all right."

"That's something to be thankful for," said Mary.

"Yes, but we're still more or less lost."

This, they discovered, was truer than they had thought, for the cold or the push and bang of the storm had damaged their radio. Try as she might, Mary could raise no one.

For a time, flying by instrument, Sparky flew across what he hoped was low, level land. Since he could not be sure of this, he still flew high among the thick clouds.

When at last, in desperation, he dropped lower and lower until they were dangerously close to the earth, they found themselves still in a dense formation of clouds.

"Where are we?" Mary asked.

"Somewhere over China."

"The part held by our own people or by the enemy?"

"There is no sure way to know. Here, take the ship. Let me at that radio. We've just got to get it going."

Whether this was a "must" or not did not appear to matter. The radio was dead and apparently would remain so.

To make matters worse the shadows within the plane grew darker with every passing moment.

"Night," Mary thought. "Night over a strange land."

Night settled down and still they cruised on. From time to time, they came down close to earth, often too close, in the hope of finding a break in the clouds, of spotting a landing beacon. No break was found, no light appeared.

"Our position is growing desperate," Sparky said at last. "Our fuel is running low. In less than a half hour we'll be obliged to make a blind landing and that, well—you know—"

Yes, Mary knew. There was no need for her to answer.

"I think I'd better get the ship aloft then let the rest of you take to parachutes." Sparky's voice was husky. "For better or worse, this looks like journey's end."

"Yes—yes, I guess you'd better let Hop Sing use his parachute. It will be safer for him."

"Yes, and for you."

"Not so much better, Sparky, perhaps much worse for me if we're over enemy territory. I'm staying with the ship."

"Okay. It's your life. I can't live it for you."

For a little time they were silent. "About time to do a little climbing." Sparky shifted his controls.

"Sparky! What was that?" Mary cried sharply.

"What was what?"

"A light!"

"I didn't see any light."

"Yes, there! No, now it's gone! Yes! Yes, there it is! By the nose of the plane!"

"Yes, I saw it!" Sparky seemed unimpressed.

"But look, Sparky!" she exclaimed. "Look at the radio antennae. They're like neon tubes! They, they're burning up! Sparky! What's going to happen? Is the ship on fire?"

"Not so you can notice it."

"But, Sparky! Look! There's a ball of fire on the ship's nose—big as a Fourth of July balloon."

"No—no! Now it's gone! But, look! There's a flash right across the propeller blades!"

"Say! We can begin to see things!" she was fairly beside herself. "I just saw a house and a clump of trees."

"The clouds are lifting," said Sparky. "There may be a chance—"

"Yes—there's a road. It's broad and white, must be cement." Mary grabbed Sparky's arm. "Sparky! we're going to be safe. We've been saved by some kind of miracle!"

"Miracle, my eye!" Sparky grumbled, as he set his ship for a try at landing on that road. "If I don't hit it right on the beam," he said grimly, "we'll crash and that means like as not that this whole trip has been made for nothing."

"No, not for nothing. Don't forget, there's the quinine!"

With balls of fire rolling all over the plane and with their landing lights on for a space of seconds, they hit that hard road, bounced, hit again and again, then began to glide. Just before the ship came to a stop, the right wheel left the road to bury itself in soft mud.

"Nice thing to do at the very end!" Sparky growled. "If we're in enemy territory we're in a bad way!" Snapping off the lights, he headed for the door.

All the strange, rolling balls of light were gone. About them it was dark as a subway when the lights are off.

"Sparky," Mary insisted as her feet hit the pavement, "it was a miracle! You don't dare say it wasn't!"

"Oh! Can't I!" Sparky squeezed her arm. "At least I'm bound to try. That, my dear Mary, was what

they call St. Elmo's Fire."

"St. Elmo's Fire!"

"Sure! It's a form of electrical disturbance. I picked it up once when I was half way across the Atlantic. The scientists say it's harmless. Probably they're partly right, but I claim that a thing that scares you to death can't be entirely harmless.

"And now," he added, "since we've put one more ghost to rest, let's find out where we are."

"Hop Sing," he called.

"Right here, Mr. Sparky."

"Hop Sing, this is your country, China. Where are we?"

"Can't tell—me. I go see. Mebby quick find somebody who live here, then quick find out."

The stump-stump of Hop Sing's crutch faded into the distance. After that, by the plane, for quite some time there was silence.

"Sparky, I'm tired," Mary said at last. "I hope we can get to the end of our trip soon."

"Don't hope too much," he cautioned. "We wandered about in the sky a long time and that storm may really have taken us places before it let us down."

The darkness was something to brood about. The big plane loomed like a shadow above them. It seemed a long time before they again heard the stump-stump of Hop Sing's crutch. As it came closer Mary became conscious of another sound. It was like the wind rustling through dry leaves. Or was it a shuffling sound?

Before she knew it she found herself surrounded by silent, shadowy forms and Hop Sing was talking in a hoarse whisper to Sparky.

Hop Sing's report was both astonishing and terrifying. They were twenty miles behind the Jap lines. The road on which they had landed ran parallel to the lines. That was why on a dark night like this there was no traffic. Men, ammunition and supplies going to the front traveled a road, some fifteen miles away, a road that crossed this one.

The shadowy forms about them were Chinese, men, women, and children. These astonishing people had hidden in the mountains until the battle lines had swept over them. Now, still hiding in holes and cellars, they were back near their homes.

"Most surprising of all," Sparky whispered to Mary, "a half mile down this road, and off to one side, there is a small airfield."

"An airfield! Didn't the Japs destroy it? Or do they use it?"

"Neither. They know nothing about it. It's a turnip patch, just now."

"A turnip patch!"



Hop Sing's Report Was Terrifying

"Sure. These Chinese are smart. This airfield has always been a secret one. Before the Japs came, they kept it covered with nets and burlap that made it look like plowed ground. They only used it at night for refueling."

"Fuel, that's what we need!"

"Yes, and it's there." Sparky spoke rapidly. "It's in a hidden underground room, two drums of it."

"What are we going to do?"

"Nothing. These people, like gremlins, gnomes, or something, are going to do it for us. They'll get the plane back on the road. That's what they're doing now." The plane gave a sudden lurch.

"And then?"

"Then some of them will pull and push the plane down the road while the women and children remove enough turnips and earth from the airfield to make us a runway."

"And then we'll fuel up and take off. How sweet!"

"Yes, if the Japs don't come. Our journey's end is only two hundred miles away."

"And if the Japs come?"

"We'll fight. These Chinese have arms. We've got two machine guns. We'll put up a good scrap." The big plane with its precious cargo tilted back to the road bed. Then, slowly, yard by yard it rolled down the half mile to the airfield.

There, by the sense of touch alone, since no lights could be allowed, Sparky felt his way across the prepared runway, and Mary supervised the refueling of the plane, and all the time, Hop Sing was pouring into her ears stories of his people's courage and heroism.

"Oh!" she breathed at last. "I do hope we can make it. I don't know what it's all about but I do know that it will mean a great deal to these noble, fighting Chinese."

At last all was ready.

With the aid of a very faint light Sparky and Mary went through the business of getting the ship going. At last Sparky gave an order to Hop Sing. Hop Sing passed it to those on the ground. The motors thundered and:

"Up!" Mary exclaimed. "We're in the air again!"

"That's not all," Sparky added happily. "The air is clearing and we have gas to carry us to our objective."

They reached it before the hour was up. Recognizing the roar of their plane, a member of the bomber squadron's crew sent up a small plane to guide them in.

"Ah! At last you're here," shouted a voice. The bomber squadron's flight commander pulled himself into their cabin. "We'll have men here in a moment to take off your cargo. It is of vital importance. That's all I can tell you now."

"Me," said Mary, "all I want is sleep."

"There's a car waiting for you right now. It will take you to the city's best little hotel which is not a quarter of an hour away."

Mary fell asleep in the car. She roused herself long enough to reach her room and undress. Then she traded the world of harsh realities for one of pleasant dreams.

CHAPTER XX

DEEP SECRETS REVEALED

When Mary awoke with the sun shining on her face through a small window next morning it was with a vague feeling that something was gone.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, jumping out of bed. "I've slept too long. Sparky has left me behind."

When her bare feet hit the floor she awoke to the reality of things.

"It's all over," she sighed, sinking back on her bed. "We've reached the journey's end at last."

Then with a fresh thought stirring her to action she hurried through her toilet and donned her dusty uniform.

"Perhaps this is going to be like Christmas morning, when secrets are revealed, just perhaps," she whispered.

After a hasty breakfast she begged a ride out to the airfield. It was a fairly large airdrome. The runways were neither long nor numerous but back among the trees cement had been laid making hiding places for many planes. And the planes were there.

"Sparky!" she exclaimed as she came upon her companion of many adventures. "Look at the planes! There must be two hundred of them."

"Fully that many," Sparky agreed. "And all bombers."

"What does it mean? What is their mission?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," he grinned. "We would guess the same thing I am sure."

"And might be wrong."

"Yes, but one thing is certain, about a hundred of them are being equipped with the same type of gadget. And they all came from the packing cases that only a few hours ago rode in our plane."

"Sparky! What are they?"

"Shush," he whispered. "It's still a deep military secret. They are being provided with a new and more perfect type of bombsight than ever has been used before."

"So that was it! Sounds quite simple, doesn't it?"

"Very. But in this world the answers to most great mysteries are usually quite simple. In this case, however, the mystery concerned something of tremendous importance.

"These planes have been assembled here for a task that the Japs would give a prince or two to know about. Our flight of bombers, of course, brought their own bombsights. And they brought other much needed equipment. For some reason, known only to the big shots, the bombsights for planes already here were entrusted to our ship."

"And if that Jap spy or the Woman in Black had wrecked our plane!"

"That would have been just too bad. But they didn't, so you and I are to be attending a banquet in your honor tonight. It's to be quite a brilliant affair. High-ranking officers from the armies of China, Great Britain, and America are to be there. What's more, you are to make a speech."

"Oh, no! Sparky," she cried. "No! No! No!"

"It won't be hard, not really," he assured her. "They'll want to know about the first overseas trip made by a WAF. If you tell them half the things that have happened to you, they'll be forever convinced that the ladies of the Ferry Command can really take it."

"Since you put it that way," Mary replied soberly, "I've got to accept."

"That's the girl!" Sparky applauded.

Mary could be quite the lady when occasion demanded. The wife of a flying Colonel took her under her wing to help her with dress and make-up. The beautiful gown she had worn in Egypt was still at hand and so it happened that a young flying lieutenant was heard to remark as she entered:

"*That glorious dame! She never flew a plane in her life!*"

Catching the words, Mary blushed, but forgave the lieutenant on the spot.

Had not the very substantial Sparky, still in his uniform, been seated at her side to nod in confirmation to every strange tale she told, there might have been many an older head that would have questioned her story. As it turned out, she was quite the lady of the hour.

For all that, when she found Sparky next morning, the first thing she asked was: "When do we leave and how?"

"We're leaving the good, old Lone Star behind," he admitted sadly. "It's needed for fighting China's battles."

"Then I'll forgive them," she replied instantly. At that moment she was once again seeing shadowy forms and a heavy plane moving down a dark highway, and hearing the crippled Hop Sing tell the story of his brave people.

"But how—"

"How are we going to America? Is that it?"

"Yes, and where is our roll of papyrus?"

"The papyrus is still in the secret compartment on our plane. We'll go and get it right now. You'll carry it in your traveling bag."

"Just for luck."

"Luck and perhaps a little further adventure.

"As to our mode of travel to San Francisco," he added, "I'm told that we are to travel just as we have done in America after we have delivered a job."

"By transport plane?"

"That's it."

"Dull but restful," she sighed. "I'm all for it."

Two days later, together with a score of officers and men of official distinction, bound for home on leave or on business, they climbed aboard a giant airliner and headed out over the Pacific. After long hours of travel they came swooping down upon a broad island airfield that, as far as they are concerned, will remain forever unnamed.

Here they were greeted by hundreds of American soldiers who, at first, stared at Mary in disbelief, then let out a lusty cheer.

Beneath the palms that night, with only the stars for light, and with soldiers, sailors and nurses as an audience, Mary told her story all over again.

In the very midst of her talk, someone set a shiny object down before her, then whispered:

"You're doing great, sister. Keep right on."

Cheered by the marvelous attention of her audience, she talked for an hour only to learn in the end, what she had suspected all along, that the last half of her talk had been broadcast by short wave to America.

"Now there'll be no living with you, Mary," Sparky laughed as he escorted her to the nurses' tent where she was to spend the night.

"In Heaven's name, why?" she exclaimed.

"You're famous!"

"Nothing like that," she laughed. "Just a flying fool of the Ferry Command."

From here they hopped along in a leisurely manner to Honolulu.

Many a time in her younger days Mary had dreamed of sitting beneath the palms on the Hawaiian Islands. But on this trip she had seen palms in Brazil, North Africa, Egypt, Persia, India, China and the islands of the sea.

"What's one palm more or less?" she said to Sparky. "Here's hoping we catch an early plane home."

They were obliged to wait two days before the long hop for San Francisco. It was on the evening of their last day at Honolulu, while they were seated in the lounge of their hotel, that a real thrill came over them as they listened to the radio.

"Listen!" Sparky sat up suddenly. Mary shifted to face the radio.

"We are now permitted to report," said a voice in far away China: "that, four days ago, Tokio was heavily bombed by an airforce of great strength and that an enormous amount of damage was done to steel mills, airplane factories and other objectives. All our planes returned safely to their base."

"Here it comes!" Mary whispered tensely.

"It's the pay-off," Sparky agreed.

"Here in the studio with me now," the voice on the radio went on, "is Flight Commander Major Tom Cole. Major Cole, will you tell us a little about that raid?"

"I certainly will," came in another voice. "It was magnificently planned and executed with great daring and tremendous success."

"Were you able to sight your objectives?"

"And how! Those bombardiers just laid those blockbusters right on top of the targets."

"Was much damage done?"

"I should say that fully a third of the factories, mills, and steel mills in the Tokio area had been put out of commission for weeks, perhaps months."

"And Tokio itself?"

"All I can say is that if I lived in a paper house, I'd never start a war."

"Thank you, Major. Oh! One thing more. There is a rumor about that a girl, Mary Mason, of the WAFS, had something to do with the success of this effort. Could this be true?"

"Not only could it be true—it is true. Much of the success of this mission is due to the loyal service of the young lady you mentioned. I, of course, can't give you details. I will say that she no longer is in China."

"In Honolulu, perhaps."

"I wouldn't know. Those gals really get about. All I want to say is that, wherever Mary Mason is tonight, our hats are off to her. Every man who flew on that mission would be glad to shake her hand."

"And so ladies and gentlemen—" The broadcast ended.

"Oh!" Mary breathed, sinking deep into her big chair. "What did you say, Sparky—the pay-off?"

As Mary started for her room a short while later a reporter stepped up to her.

"Might you be Mary Mason?" he asked in a low voice.

"I might and I might not. You should know that we are not permitted to divulge secrets to strangers, particularly when we are on duty." Once more Mary was on her way.

When they landed in San Francisco one morning at nine, Mary carried a mysterious package under her arm.

"Sparky," she said, "I've carried this roll of papyrus half way round the world. The first thing I want to do in America is to get rid of it."

"Okay, I'm with you," was his quick response, "We'll sit on a stool long enough for coffee, toast, and bacon, then we'll be on our way."

When, three hours later, they alighted from a cab before an imposing home hidden behind tall shrubbery in one of the city's finest suburbs, Mary's hands gripped the roll of papyrus. Her tense fingers trembled slightly as, with Sparky at her side, she marched up the winding walk.

"This is the place," she whispered.

"And this the hour," he agreed. "Keep a stiff upper lip. Everything will be fine and dandy."

"All the same, I don't like it." She gripped his arm. "I'd rather be right up there in the sky."

"Even in Burma?"

"Yes, even that."

Just then a half block away, a heavy car slid up to the curb. Three husky men sprang out and marched briskly up the street.

"The cast is all here. The stage is set," Sparky whispered, as he rang the door bell.

Their ring was answered at once. A blonde-haired maid ushered them in. She led them to a door, tapped, then waited.

"Come in! Come in!" a large voice welcomed as the door swung open. "I have been expecting you." The large, red-faced man waved them to chairs close by his mahogany desk.

"Now we shall see!" He breathed heavily as his hand gripped the roll of papyrus. "Perhaps this is genuine, and perhaps not."

After unrolling the parchment, he sat for a full minute studying the first, full sheet through his thick glasses—so intently that one might have said he was trying to read something not written there at all.

Sparky gave Mary a meaningful look.

"Yes," the big man drew in a deep breath, "this is genuine, and should be of great service to humanity by revealing the real life of those strange beings who lived so long ago. You have been at great pains to bring this to me."

"He doesn't know the half of it," Mary thought, smiling to herself.

"You must allow me to pay you for your trouble," he went on. "How much do I owe you?"

"Oh! Noth—but nothing." Mary hated herself for stammering. "But I wish you would look at all the sheets and per—perhaps count them," she added hesitatingly.

"Very well. I shall do as you say." The big man's thumb and finger reached for the first sheet. Sparky half rose in his chair. From outside came a faint sound.

"One," the big man counted, "two, three, four—"

Mary's heart fluttered.

"And then—" The big man did not finish. Instead he sat there staring and as he did so his face purpled. A slip of paper had been inserted between the sheets of papyrus. On it had been written these words:

"You are Peter Schwartz."

That was all. This could have been a harmless trick had he not for years lived in America under quite another name, and had not Peter Schwartz been wanted for some time by certain gentlemen who made their homes in Washington.

Half rising in his chair, the big man reached for the right-hand drawer of his desk. Sparky beat him to it, striking his arm down. And then the big man found himself surrounded by three men, each as large as himself and more powerful.

A pair of handcuffs clicked. "Come on, Schwartz," one of the men said gruffly while another lingered for a word with Mary and Sparky.

"Nice work," he commended. "The F.B.I. owes you a debt of gratitude, as does our government."

"Most of the credit goes to Mary's father," said Sparky.

"And to his friends, the Egyptologist and the one who knows so much about lights." Mary amended.

"You see," said Sparky. "As soon as we showed them the roll of papyrus they put a sheet of it under the infra-red light."

"And that brought out all sorts of things you couldn't see with the eye," Mary broke in. "Maps, charts, figures and all kinds of messages in code."

"Enough to tell our enemy all they'd like to know about Egypt," the F.B.I. now agreed. "They'll never know now. The proper sort of bath will remove all their fancy maps and messages. And then—" he paused. "What about that roll of papyrus?"

"Let us know when you're through using it as evidence," said Sparky. "Then we'll try to find out what will happen to it next."

Ten minutes later they were once more out in the glorious sunshine of their native land. Sparky hailed a cab and together they rode to the little hotel where the girls of the Ferry Command stay when they are in the city.

As they entered the lobby Mary saw one of the girls she knew.

"Greetings," she called.

"Same to you," came back. "Where did you just come in from?"

"Been round the world," Mary smiled slyly.

"Oh, yeah?" Then the girl's look changed. "Say, that's right! You're Mary Mason! I heard you on the radio!"

"Oh! I hoped no one would hear!" Mary was startled.

"Everybody did. Say! It was great! And now all the girls want to cross the ocean. And say! There's a telegram for you at the desk! Yes, and a letter."

"A telegram! A letter!" Mary marched to the desk, received the telegram, and the letter, then stood staring.

The letter had given her a real thrill. It was not really a letter, only a picture on a postcard with some writing on the back. The picture was of a fine young American soldier in uniform. On its back she read: "You asked for it, so here it is." It was signed "Jerry Sikes."

"That boy in South America," she whispered. "How grand!"

But the telegram?

"What's the matter? Bad news?" Sparky asked.

"I'll say so!" Mary made a face. "It's from the WAF central office. They've booked me to appear before three women's flying clubs. I'm to recruit fliers for our organization. Oh, when will we two fly again?"

"Time enough for that," said Sparky. "Just let me know when your lecture tour is over and I'll see what can be cooked up.

"Well, Mary," he said as their hands met, "you saw a lot of nice boys on that trip."

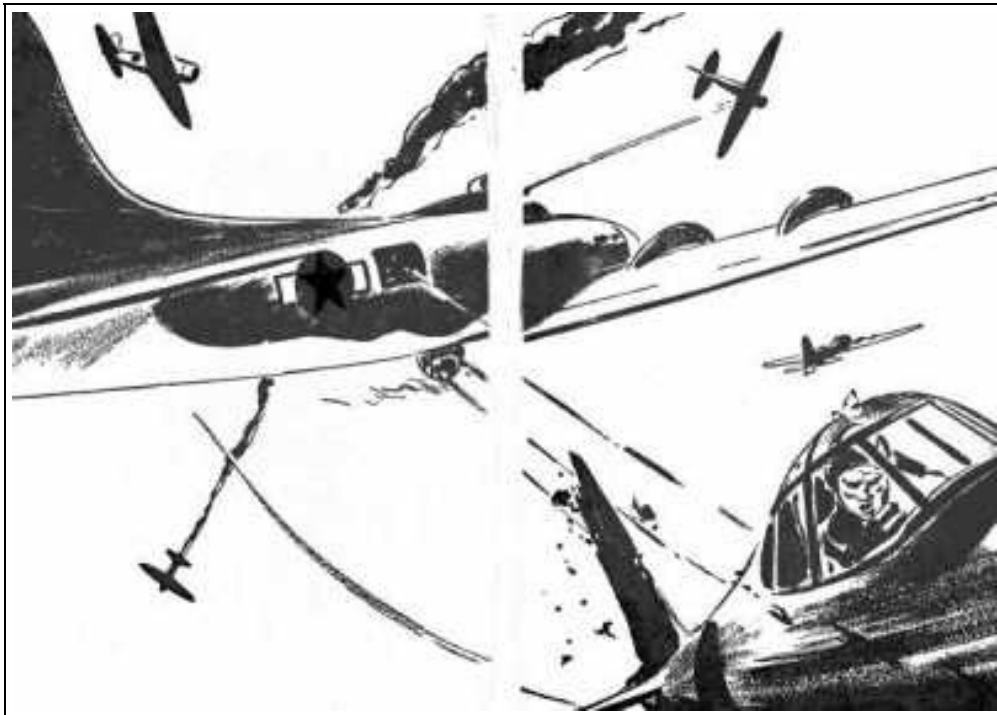
"I sure did, Sparky." Her eyes shone. "But the best of them all—"

"Was the gray-haired one who met you in Egypt," Sparky said smilingly.

"That's right, Sparky—my dad—but next to him, the finest of them all was the guy who went with me all the way."

"Thanks, Mary. I'm glad you feel that way, for you're the grandest girl I know. I'll be seeing you." He turned to march away.

"Oh! Gee!" Mary thought. "Life sure is funny! Some of the things that happen to you make you feel all funny inside, but when there's a war and you're in it, you just have to let it go—for the duration."



Endpaper illustration

ADVENTURE—THRILLS—MYSTERY

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Some presumed printers' errors have been corrected without mention, including normalizing punctuation and minor spelling errors.

page 16 - probably publisher's error - "After climbing steeply she leveled off to start down at the clearing" - changed to "... stare down at"

page 49 - "near with the firebottle" changed to "near with the fire bottle"

page 59 and two other pages - "gage" is used where we would today use "gauge" - left the word as is, it seems to be a slightly archaic spelling but is used consistently in the text

page 97 - "The pilot didn't bale out" left as is, instead of changing to "bail out" - some references indicated that "bale out" is correct for "using a parachute to escape a plane"

page 169 - "The monkeys are sacred. Religion is a potent, force to these people" comma after "potent" removed

page 182 - "You loose your two bucks. She's a lady" "loose" changed to "lose"

page 217 - "People who open secret cargos also" "cargos" changed to "cargoes"

page 223 - removed extraneous comma after "some" "...his tail controls until, slowly, like some, great, graceful bird..." changed to "...his tail controls until, slowly, like some great, graceful bird..."

page 237 - "China, Great Britian, and America are to be there." changed "Britian" to "Britain"

page 242 - "we are not permitted to devulge secrets" changed "devulge" to "divulge"

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SPARKY AMES OF THE FERRY COMMAND ***

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