

The Boy Aviators' Treasure Quest

Captain Wilbur Lawton

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(pseudonym for John Henry Goldfrap)

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CHAPTER I. THE EAGLE AND THE BUZZARD.

“Hurrah!”

The shout went upward in a swelling volume of sound as a thousand voices took up the cry.

“Say, those boys can fly!”

“I should say so.”

“Did you see that swoop!”

“Did I? I thought they were goners sure.”

“They handle that sky-clipper like a bicycle.”

These admiring exclamations came in a perfect hailstorm as the big biplane air-craft, which had called them forth, swept earthward, bearing her two young occupants downward in a long graceful glide, and landing them at the door of their red aerodrome with the precision of an automobile being driven up to its owner's front steps.

The drone of the engine ceased and little spurts of dust shot up from the landing wheels as the young aviator at the helm of the beautiful craft applied his brakes, threw out the spark and cut off the engine. The plane ran about one hundred feet on its wheels and then came to a standstill.

“Hurrah for the Golden Eagle!” shouted a voice. The enthusiasm was echoed all over the crowded field. From the long rows of autos, parked at the edge of the field and crowded with applauding men and women, came the “honk! honk!” of horns in a deafening clamor.

Smilingly making their way through the enthusiasts who swept down on them, Frank and Harry Chester, the Boy Aviators, who had just concluded a tuning up flight for the Hempstead Plains Cup—the contest for which was to take place in a week's time—entered the shed and, making their way to a screened-off room in the corner, shed their leather coats and woolen caps and removed the grime from their hands and faces. Their mechanics, in the meantime, had shoved the Eagle into the shed and closed the doors on the horde of the inquisitive.

The boys' flight had taken place above the aviation grounds of the Aeronautic Society, situated at Mineola, on Long Island, a few miles outside New York city. For several days they, and several others who had announced their intention of competing for the coveted Hempstead Plains Cup, had been making flights that had attracted vast crowds from the metropolis and filled the papers with air-ship news. The city was aviation mad.

The wide sweep of green flats was dotted at the end where the town encroached upon it with the sheds in which were housed the different aerial craft that were to take part in the great contest. Some of them had tents snuggled closely up to them in which the machinists, and others employed on them, made their temporary homes. Some were elaborate structures of galvanized iron, carefully fireproofed and covered with notices warning against smoking; others, again, were plain, hastily erected wooden structures. The Boy Aviators' shed was one of the latter, for they had returned from their adventures in Africa only a short time before this story opens.

In that far-off country, as told in “The Boy Aviators in Africa; or, an Aerial Ivory Trail,” they had outwitted a wicked old man named Luther Barr, who tried to steal from them the ivory that they had recovered from the grip of an Arab slave-dealer. In Luther Barr's yacht, which they had acquired in a surprising manner, they had brought the ivory back to America and saved Mr. Beasley, the father of their chum, Lathrop Beasley, from financial ruin. After a short rest, they had announced that they would contest for the Hempstead Plains Cup. There was an interval of impatient waiting and then the freight steamer, which carried the Golden Eagle II from Africa, arrived safely and the work of setting the biplane up for the great contest had been at once begun.

The boys' first craft, The Golden Eagle, had been destroyed in a tropical storm in which they were blown to sea, as described in Volume One of this series: “The Boy Aviators in Nicaragua; or, Leagued With The Insurgents.” The Golden Eagle II was the same craft in which, besides their African adventures, they had accomplished the dangerous mission for the Government, with the details of which our readers became conversant in “The Boy Aviators on Secret Service; or, Working with Wireless.”

Their hasty toilet completed, the boys donned street clothes of neat fit and pattern and hastened to an automobile, halted at the roadside, in which their father and mother were seated. The two lads, as they leaned against the side of the car and chatted, made a pleasant picture of vigorous, adventurous youth. The eldest, Frank, was a little over sixteen, Harry, the younger boy, was about two years his junior. Both lads had crisp, curly hair

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and frank, blue eyes. Their faces were tanned to a dark tinge by their African trip.

Mrs. Chester looked eagerly about her at the shifting, colorful scene. There was certainly plenty to be seen and every minute held its own bit of interest. As they watched, another 'plane soared into view, black as a crow against the evening sky; it showed first as a mere speck, rapidly grew larger, and dropped to earth like a tired bird, while the crowd applauded once more.

"Whose 'plane is that?" asked Mr. Chester, as the machine was trundled into its shed—a pretentious affair built of corrugated iron and painted dark blue.

"Why, that's a mystery," laughed Frank, "but it's a dandy flyer. In fact it's about the only rival we really fear."

"What do you mean by 'a mystery,' Frank?" asked his mother.

"Well, mother, nobody knows who owns it. Its black-covered planes have earned it the name of The Buzzard and it can glide like one too, but as to its owner we are all in ignorance, though we should like to know."

"Whoever he may be he has made a lot of money," chimed in Harry. "Several enthusiasts who have watched the Buzzard fly have placed orders for similar machines."

"How much does such a craft cost?" asked his father.

"Oh, ones patterned after the Buzzard sell for \$25,000," was the reply; "and if that machine wins this race, of course, it will give the mysterious manufacturer a tremendous prestige. But I think at that," he broke off with a merry smile, "that the Golden Eagle II is going to prove more than the Buzzard's match."

"Did you go over the whole course this afternoon?" asked his father.

"Yes, and the Eagle handled like a race-horse," replied Frank; "if she makes a like performance on the day of the race I think we have the cup as good as won."

"Don't be too sure, my boy," warned his father. "There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip—or rather the aeroplane, you know."

"That's so, father," replied the lad, somewhat abashed, "it doesn't do to be overconfident. There's only one thing I don't like about the course."

"What is that?"

"Why, the 'take off' at the Harrowbrook Club links."

"What do you mean by 'take off'?" inquired his mother.

"I mean the space in which an aeroplane makes its preliminary run, as you might call it, before it takes the air," rejoined the boy. "You see the rules of the race are that we fly from here to the Harrowbrook Club—a distance of twenty miles, alight there and refill our gasolene tanks, drink a cup of coffee in the club-house and then rise up once more and fly back."

"You mean that you are afraid that there will be difficulty in starting back from the Club grounds?" asked his father.

"Yes, father. You see, while we did it all right this afternoon, on the day of the race there will be a lot of 'planes all on the ground at the same time, and it's going to make it more difficult. However, I daresay we shall be able to manage it all right."

"Oh, Frank, do be careful," cautioned his mother.

"Of course I will, mother," the lad reassured her. "If I thought there was any serious risk I would not cause you anxiety by competing."

After a little more talk the elder Chesters drove off, as the boys had decided to sleep in their aerodrome that night, on the two camp cots they had provided for such emergencies. They intended to get an early start in the morning, on another practice sail, as at that hour there was usually little wind.

As they strolled across the grounds which were now rapidly being deserted, as all the aeroplanes were housed for the night, they encountered Armand Malvoise, the French driver of the mysterious Buzzard. He was a heavy-set, blue-chinned man with eyebrows that met in a black band, lending his face a perpetual scowl.

"You made a fine flight this evening," cried Harry cheerfully.

"You think so?" replied the Frenchman. "I shall make a better one on the day of the race. I mean to win that cup."

"Well, give us at least a look-in," laughed Frank good-naturedly.

"Bah, you are boys. I am a seasoned aviator. I have flown at Rheims and Vienna and in the south. It is absurd for you to compete with me."

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“Personally I should like to see an American carry off the trophy, but if the best flyer wins I shall be quite satisfied,” was Frank's quiet reply.

“You will see the colors of La Belle France floating over my aerodrome after the race,” was the rejoinder.

“We shall see,” was Frank's quiet answer, as the Frenchman strode off toward the village, where he usually remained gossiping in the hotel and complacently receiving the adulations of his admirers till late at night.

“Ach, he is as goot-natured as a caged lion, dot feller!” came a sudden exclamation behind the boys.

They turned about and faced old August Schmidt, the German aviator, who had started his career as a builder and operator of dirigibles, but was entered in the Hempstead Cup race as the flyer of a monoplane of his own design; and which, on account of its peculiar appearance, the crowds had already nicknamed the Grasshopper. As if in furtherance of this idea the German had painted his queer craft a bright green.

“Vell, you boys have a good chance for der cup got,” the old man went on, between puffs at an enormous pipe with a china bowl that formed his inseparable companion when he was not in the air.

“Do you think so?” asked Frank.

“Ches, I do. Der Grasshopper is a goot leedle monoplane, but I am afraid dat some of der principles I have worked oud in her iss all wrong. Some day I break mein neck by der outside I am afraid much.”

“Why you've done some good flying in the Grasshopper,” consoled Harry.

“Ches, she is a goot leedle ship, bud she vont vin dees race, I dink. By der vay, boys, I have been meaning to warn you about dot Frenchman.”

“How do you mean—'warn us'?” asked Frank.

“Vell he means to win dis race. I know dot he has bet a lot of money on himself. Den also the manufacturers of der Buzzard will make a lot of money already if der Buzzard wins der cup. If she does not—abend, dey lose. Yah, der is a lot to vin and much to lose for der Buzzard, and dot Frenchman vill do anything to make sure of vinning.”

“Well, I guess we can take care of ourselves,” laughed Frank, as he and his brother bade the queer old man good-night and entered their shed. It was filled with the appetizing odor of frying steak. On the top of the blue flame stove in a screened-off corner, Le Blanc, one of their mechanics, was cooking the simple meal with the loving care of a ten-thousand-dollar chef.

“Smells good!” remarked Harry sniffing. “Where's Sanborn?”

Sanborn was the other machinist and had been taken on in the place of their faithful old Schultz, who had fallen heir to a large sum of money in Germany, and gone home to spend his days in a cottage on the outskirts of Berlin.

“He has gone down to the village,” replied Le Blanc, vigorously shaking the pan of sizzling potatoes.

“He seems to spend a lot of time down there lately,” remarked Frank.

“I'd rather see him about the aerodome,” put in Harry; “we don't want everybody to know all the details of our trials.”

“That's so,” assented his brother, “I'll speak to him about it when he comes in to-night.”

The two lads fell to with keen appetites on their supper, which was served on tin plates and washed down with coffee out of tin mugs. Not a very aristocratic service, but the boys rather liked roughing it than otherwise, and you may be sure that the “dinner set” off which they ate did not engross a fraction of their attention. The meal disposed of, Le Blanc and the boys fixed up the folding camp cots and spread their blankets. There was still no sign of Sanborn. Frank was still struggling to keep awake in order to read the man a sharp lecture when he returned when drowsiness overcame him and he dropped off to sleep.

It was an hour later, and not far from midnight, when two dark figures crossed the deserted aviation field and threaded their way among the various aerodromes. They paused in front of the one in which the boys were asleep. Had the lads been onlookers they would have seen that one of the men was Sanborn, the new machinist, and the other was Malvoise, the driver of the sable Buzzard.

“You won't lose your nerve?” said the Frenchman.

“Not me. I'm sore at those kids, anyhow,” was the reply. “The eldest one undertakes to call me down for going out at night all the time.”

“Well, you have a good chance to get back at him and make some money at the same time,” was the other's rejoinder.

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“You are sure the money will be forthcoming?”

“Well, I should say! Old man Barr, who bought the patent of the Buzzard dirt cheap from her inventor, has a pile of it. He's going to manufacture the Buzzards to make money out of 'em and he'll stop at nothing to gain the prestige of winning this Hempstead Plains Cup.”

“I've heard of old Barr before. He's a regular skinflint, but I suppose, if you say it will be all right about the money, I'll have to take your word for it. I need some coin too badly to stick at anything.”

“That's the way to talk. By the way, talking of the inventor of the Buzzard, I saw a piece in the paper about him to-night.”

“What was it?”

“Why it seems that the poor beggar applied for shelter at the Municipal lodging-house in New York and told them a long tale of Barr having robbed him of his invention. They sized him up as being just another of those inventor bugs and so sent him to the booby hatch in Bellevue.”

“A good place for him,” was the rejoinder, “these inventors are all crazy.”

“Well, Luther Barr's found a way to make this particular crank pay,” was the reply.

“That's so. Well, good-night. Oh, say what was the name of the man who planned the Buzzard?”

“Oh, Eben something—let's see—Eben—it began with a J. I've got it—Eben Joyce, that's it—Eben Joyce.”

“Queer name that—Eben Joyce,” was Sanborn's comment. “Well, good-night.”

“Good-night. You won't fail us.”

“Not I,” responded the machinist, as he slipped into the aerodrome and was soon wrapped in slumber as profound as if the thought of committing a treacherous act had never entered his mind.

CHAPTER II. BILLY'S STRANGE TALE.

The next morning, as soon as the alarm clock rang out its summons at four-thirty, the boys were up and stirring, dashing the sleep out of their eyes with plenty of cold water. Le Blanc and Sanborn soon joined them, the latter heavy-eyed and sleepy-looking from the late hours of the night before. He was smoking a cigarette.

"Look here, Sanborn, I don't want to be too strict, but you know there's too much gasoline around here for it to be safe to smoke in the shed," said Frank, with some irritation, as he spied him.

Sanborn threw the cigarette away with an ill-tempered exclamation.

"Gee! It's a wonder you don't start a Sunday-school in here," he said.

"Well, I don't think it would do you any harm to attend one for a while," answered Frank, "and by the way, can't you make it possible to come in a little earlier? You are a valuable man to us and you can't do your best work if you are sitting up till all hours at the village hotel."

"You ain't got no complaint about my work, have you?" was the surly rejoinder.

"No, I think that you are a very capable mechanic but I hate to see you wasting your time and opportunities this way," replied Frank. The boy was in some doubt as to the wisdom or the utility of calling Sanborn's attention to the latter's bad habits, but having embarked on his admonition he was not going to quit just because the man was surly.

"When are you going to go up?" asked Sanborn, changing the subject abruptly.

"Right after breakfast," was the boy's reply, as he looked out of the big sliding doors and surveyed the cloudless sky. "There doesn't seem to be a breath of wind and it's ideal weather for a good long flight."

But if the boys were up early they were not the only ones astir. Gladwin, who was an experimenter and who, although he had only been up a few times, meant to compete in the big race, was already busy outside his aerodrome, lovingly adjusting the engine of his queer-looking monoplane which had already been wheeled out. Malvoise, his hands in his pockets and a red sash about his waist, was also studying the sky. As Frank gazed about in the crisp morning air a dozen other aviators opened up their sheds and the day-life of the aviation camp began.

After breakfast had been despatched the boys at once went to work on their engine, a hundred horse-powered, eight-cylindereed machine which was capable of driving their twin-screwed craft through the air at a rate of sixty miles an hour. One of the cylinders needed a new gasket and they were engaged on the task of fitting it when a sudden hail outside the shed made them look up inquiringly. A short, fat youth with a pair of spectacles bestriding his round good-natured face stood in the doorway. The boys recognized him instantly.

"Why, hullo, Billy Barnes!" they cried, "come on in."

"Hullo, Frank, hullo, Harry," grinned the newcomer, frantically shaking hands. "I'm an early caller, but I slept at the village hotel last night and the beds there are as hard as a miser's heart. So I decided to get out early and take a chance on finding you fellows up and about."

After the first hearty greetings between the boys and the young reporter—with whom the readers of the other volumes in this series have already formed an acquaintanceship—the boys started asking questions.

"What are you doing here anyhow?" demanded Frank.

"Yes, you mysterious scribe, tell us what you are after—a scoop or a story of how it feels to ride in an aeroplane?"

"Well," laughed Billy in response, "I've had so many flights in the Golden Eagles—both one and two—that I really believe I've had too much experience to write a story about it from the novice's standpoint. No, the fact is that I am down here on a story—a good one too."

"You can't keep away from the newspaper field, can you?" laughed Frank.

"No, that's a fact," agreed Billy ruefully; "I've tried to, but it's no good."

"Well, you ought to be 'a man of independent fortune' now, as the papers say," cried Harry.

"You mean with the percentage I got of the recovered ivory?"

The others nodded.

"I always felt I didn't really deserve that money," urged Billy. "You fellows did most of the work in Africa, I

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just trailed along.”

“Oh, get out, Billy Barnes!” cried Frank. “You did as much as any of us in overreaching old Barr.”

“Go ahead and tell us about this story of yours,” demanded Harry.

“Well, it sounds like a weird dream and perhaps you fellows will laugh at me for taking it seriously, but a few days ago an old fellow in a tattered blue suit called at the Planet offices and said he wanted to see the city editor. Of course nobody ever does see the city editor, so I was sent out to ascertain what the visitor wanted. I saw at once he had been a seafaring man. He told me his name was Bill Hendricks, known better as Bluewater Bill. He beat about the bush a good while before he would tell me what he was after, and finally he unfolded the wildest tale about buried treasure you ever heard—that is, I don't mean buried treasure—floating would be a better word to describe it. He told me that he had been one of the crew of a sailing vessel that had drifted, after being dismasted in a storm, into the Sargasso Sea.”

“You might tell us where the Sargasso Sea is,” struck in Harry. “I never heard of it.”

“Why, it's a vast expanse of floating seaweed brought together by circling ocean currents,” explained Billy. “There are hundreds of miles of seaweed in it and from the name of the weed it gets its title of Sargasso. It is in the north Atlantic, just about off the Gulf of Mexico roughly speaking, though many hundred miles from land. It is shifting all the time though, I understand, and a ship that once gets into it never gets out. The weed just holds her in its grip till she rots. Bluewater Bill told me that, after his ship drifted into it, he counted ten steamers and four sailing vessels drifting idly about on the brown expanse that spread like a desert on all sides. But the most remarkable of all, according to his story, was a high-pooped, castle-bowed affair with three masts that the tattered sails still hung to. According to him she was a real, sure-enough galleon. One of the old treasure vessels that used to ply the Spanish Main.”

“Oh, I say, Billy, you don't believe such a yarn as that, do you?” burst out Frank and Harry, both at once.

“Well, I don't know,” replied Billy, “the fellow seemed serious enough and I am half inclined to believe he was telling the truth. He wanted to get somebody to finance an expedition to go down there and prove that he was not falsifying, and give him a small share of the treasure he is sure the vessel is laden with, in return for his information.”

“In other words he is seeking a backer for an enterprise that looks ridiculous on the face of it,” commented Frank.

“I'm not so certain of that,” went on Billy. “Look here,” and with the air of a conjurer producing a card from the empty air, he dived into his pocket and then, after a moment's fumbling, held out a round gold coin for the boys' inspection.

“A Spanish pistole!” exclaimed Frank, as his eyes fell on the dull yellow metal of the golden coin.

“That's right,” said Billy. “I took it to a coin-dealer and had him give it a name. Of course the paper laughed at the story, so I'm after it now on my own hook. I got a leave of absence to dig it up. Bluewater Bill lives in Mineola and I'm going to see him later to-day and get more details from him. The more I think it over the more I think it's worth looking into.”

The boys, whose opinion of the old sailor's story had been much altered by Billy's production of the indisputable evidence of the gold coin, agreed with him that it was indeed worth investigating further.

“But you haven't told us half the story, Billy,” objected Frank. “How did Bluewater Bill escape? What became of the other men on the ship? How did he get aboard the galleon and get the coin? Oh, and heaps of other hows? and whys?” he broke off, laughing at Billy's serious face.

“I haven't got time to tell you all that now, and besides I am not clear on many of those points myself,” replied Billy. “Suppose, if you are not doing anything this evening, you come round with me to Bluewater Bill's home and talk to him about it yourselves.”

“Say, are you trying to lure us into any fresh adventures?” said Frank with mock seriousness. “Didn't we have enough of them in Africa?”

“I don't see how we could get at the galleon, supposing there is one there, even if we did go after it,” chimed in Harry, whose active mind had already jumped ahead of the boys' conversation.

“Why not?” demanded Billy.

“Why, you chump, if ships get in there and can't get out, how are we going to sail in there—get the treasure—always supposing there is any—and then return to civilization?”

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“Do you mean to say that your gigantic brain can't grasp that?” demanded the reporter.

“No, my brilliant literary friend, it cannot—can yours?”

“It can.”

“Well, let us have it.”

“Well, in the first place,” began Billy, “if—I only say if—the galleon is there and—if—please remark I say 'if' once more—if we should decide to go after the treasure—if (useful word that) we did do so, we wouldn't have to sail INTO the Sargasso Sea at all.”

“No?”

“No. We could sail OVER it.”

“By George! that's so, isn't it?”

“Of course it is,” concluded the young reporter; and he artfully added, “it would be a great chance to demonstrate Frank's pet theory that an aeroplane that can float on the water on pontoons would be as easy to construct as one that will fly in the air.”

“What if a storm came up?”

“It is always calm in the Sargasso Sea, so Bluewater Bill told me. The great mass of tangled weed prevents the waves breaking while the severest storm may be raging all about. Nothing more alarming than a gentle swell ever disturbs its repose.”

Frank, the mechanical-minded, already had fished out an envelope, and on its back was scribbling the rough outlines of the aluminum pontoons, he had frequently made a mental resolve to attach to the aeroplane, so as to render it safe on the water as well as over the land. He had no intention then of embarking on the enterprise that Billy had outlined—at least he didn't think he had—but any suggestion of aeroplane improvement always interested the boy keenly and set his inventive mind at work.

While the three boys had been discussing Bluewater Bill's strange tale there had been a fourth auditor whose presence, had they known it, would have caused them to talk in lowered voices. Sanborn, the mechanic, from behind the canvas screen where he was supposed to have been eating his breakfast, had been listening greedily to every word the young reporter said. His eyes fairly burned in his head as he listened and a half-formed resolve entered his mind.

There might be other persons who would be interested in learning of the treasure ship which Sanborn's greedy mind already had regarded as a reality.

“Guess I'll take a run down to Bluewater Bill's myself to-night,” he said to himself as he prepared to go to work on the aeroplane, at which Le Blanc had been busy tinkering during the boys' talk.

“Well, Frank,” said Billy at length, “what do you think of it?”

“I'll reserve decision till we see Bluewater Bill to-night,” quietly rejoined the other, rising from the box on which he had been sitting and slipping into his leather coat.

CHAPTER III. A TRIAL FLIGHT.

When the boys wheeled the Golden Eagle II out of its shed, the green plains which stretched in an apparently limitless level on all sides were flooded with bright sunshine. They had delayed longer than they had intended to in making their start and already most of the other prospective contestants had concluded testing their engines or giving a final look over to brace wires and turn-buckles. A sparse sprinkling of spectators from the village was already on the grounds, early as was the hour.

The Golden Eagle's fuel and lubricating tanks were quickly filled, and every bit of metal about her shone and glistened in the sunlight, making a score of bright points of light. Her great planes, with their covering of yellow vulcanized silk, were in marked contrast to the inky hue of the Buzzard's surfaces, whose driver, Malvoise, was just settling into his seat, his inevitable cigarette still in his mouth. The Buzzard was even larger than the Golden Eagle, but her lifting capacity was a good deal less, as she was not so well designed. Malvoise, however, was a reckless driver, and had already had several narrow escapes from upsets.

The other air men bustled about and from their engines came an occasional gatling-gun-like rattle and roar, as they tried their motors out. In the air was the raw smell of gasolene and the odor of trampled grass. Clouds of blue smoke arose from where the proprietor of a small biplane had drenched his cylinders with too much oil. Occasionally an auto or a motor cycle chugged up, and the early comers watched with intense interest the flying men preparing for their trial flights.

Frank and Harry paid little attention to the others as they drew on their gloves, and carefully inspected their propellers. A man had been almost killed on the grounds a few days before, when a propeller blade had torn loose under the terrific strain of its 1200 revolutions a minute, and the boys were not anxious for anything like that to happen to their machine.

At last, everything seemed to be in order and the Chester boys scrambled into their chassis. The Golden Eagle had been stripped of all the appliances she usually carried as a passenger craft. Her searchlight and wireless were missing. Her transom seats were gone. Several braces had been taken out also, as the removal of her passenger accommodations had rendered the strain on her framework much less.

"I'd hardly know her," remarked Billy, watching the boys, as they took their places on two small seats with slender steel arm rests. Harry's seat was by the engine and Frank sat at the steering wheel, which manipulated the dipping and diving rudders as well as the rearward steering surface. One of his feet was on the brake—an automatic contrivance that cut off the spark. The other reposed on the foot pump which was used in case anything went wrong with the force-feed lubrication.

"All right," said Frank, twisting the valve that sent the gasolene flowing to the carburetor and adjusting the switch.

Billy could stand it no longer. He had been watching with anxious eyes the preparations and apparently the boys were going to fly without him.

"Say, Frank," he began hesitatingly, "I don't suppose you could—"

Frank turned and saw the wistful look in the young reporter's eyes.

"Take you up?" he said, with a laugh at Billy's downcast appearance.

Billy nodded.

"Well, there's not much room for passengers the way she is fixed at present," laughed Harry catching Frank's mirth, "but if you want to squeeze in by me here, you can. Here, Le Blanc, bring out that spare seat."

A few seconds later the delighted reporter was sitting on a small aluminum seat fitted with clamps to screw to the framework, and handles to grasp hold of tightly when the craft was in mid-air.

"Let her go," cried Frank, as soon as the delighted Billy had taken his place.

Sanford and Le Blanc, one at each of the propellers, gave them a few twists, and after about the third silent revolution there came the startling roar of the exhaust that told the boys that all the cylinders were getting down to work. Blue flames and smoke belched out of the vents and the mechanics sprang back, as the propellers whirled round at a pace that made them seem blurred shadows.

"Hang on till I get up speed," shouted Frank to the two mechanics, who, with several volunteer helpers, seized

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hold of the rear framework and held the struggling aeroplane back with all their might. Her frame shook as if it was being swept by some mighty convulsion. The racket was terrific, ear-splitting. The wind from the propellers blew hats in every direction and streamed out the hair of the men holding the aeroplane back, as if they had been poking their faces into an electric fan.

Faster and faster the propellers revolved, as Frank increased the power of his mixture and advanced the spark. At last, when the men holding the craft were shouting that they couldn't hang on much longer, Frank dropped his hand, the signal that the craft was to be released.

Like a scared jack-rabbit, the big-winged craft shot forward over the uneven ground at race-horse speed. Several boys on bicycles, who started after the air-ship, were speedily distanced.

After a short run, Frank jerked forward his control wheel, and the Golden Eagle, amid a cheer that was of course inaudible to the boys above the uproar of the engine, shot upward into the blue.

A few seconds later there was another roar of applause as the black Buzzard darted forward, and was soon soaring upward in pursuit of the speedy Golden Eagle. Old Schmidt in his monoplane was the next off—the crowd howling with mirth as the queer green contrivance scuttled over the ground in a series of spasmodic hops, just like its grasshopper namesake. Then came Gladwin, the novice, and a half dozen others. Presently the air above the plains was full of ambitious air craft, but with the exception of old Schmidt, who rose to a height of about a hundred feet and contented himself with circling about the grounds, none of them made any but the shortest of flights.

The attention of the crowd, therefore, naturally centered on the two rivals—as they were universally conceded to be—the Golden Eagle and the Buzzard. There was no difficulty in telling the craft apart, as they circled about high above the now crowded grounds. The spirit of emulation seemed to have seized on Malvoise. He followed the boys closely, and every feat they performed he attempted to imitate.

Frank at first contented himself with practicing swoops and glides, but after a while, tiring of this, he headed his craft due east and the Golden Eagle was soon a diminishing speck against the sky. The crowd watched till the big 'plane became a pin point and then vanished altogether. The Buzzard was off after them in a flash and the crowd cheered her just as impartially as they had the boys, as the graceful, black flyer stopped her soaring and headed off in the direction in which the Golden Eagle had rapidly vanished.

Before she had gone a mile, though, it was apparent to the watchers that something was wrong. A cloud of black smoke enveloped her engine and she wobbled badly. A rush across the field began. Suddenly the black aeroplane made a dash downward at a speed that seemed as if her driver had lost control of her altogether.

"He'll be dashed to death," cried the crowd, as they saw the craft shoot downward.

Indeed it seemed so.

But Malvoise was too experienced an aviator to be caught napping. As soon as his engine began to miss fire and to smoke, he had set his guiding planes at a sharp angle and dropped in the manner described.

Had the Buzzard not been fitted with air-cushion buffers on her landing wheels and steel springs on the skids that supported her stern, a serious accident must have inevitably occurred. But, as it was, the Frenchman only received a severe jarring and was scowling over his engine when the crowd rushed down on him.

As the crowd of curious onlookers swept down on the disabled aeroplane and her furious driver, a loud "honk-honk" was heard and a big touring car came dashing across the plain. The people scattered right and left as soon as it was apparent that the car's destination was the stranded Buzzard.

Beside its driver, the car had only a single occupant, an old man it seemed by the tuft of gray hair that was projected from his chin, and which was all that could be seen of his face. The rest of his features were covered by a motoring mask with large glass eye-holes that made him look not unlike a goggle-eyed frog.

"Come here, Malvoise," croaked the newcomer, in a voice strangely like that of the creature he remotely resembled.

The Frenchman instantly left his engine and hurried to the side of the automobile. The two conversed in low tones, though it was easy to see that the old man was in a violent rage.

"I tell you the Buzzard must win," he concluded, after storming at Malvoise for an accident that had really been no fault of his. "I've put up a \$50,000 plant for the manufacture of aeroplanes of her type and I've got to have that cup in order to sell them."

"I told you, Mr. Barr," rejoined the Frenchman, "that I had found a man who would do what we want. I told

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you that over the 'phone last night, you recollect.”

“Oh, yes, I recollect,” croaked the old man impatiently, “but he doesn't seem to have done much. You are sure we have no other dangerous rivals?”

“Quite,” was the reply. “Old Schmidt's monoplane is the only other one that comes near us and we can easily outdistance her.”

“Good! that only leaves the Golden Eagle to contest for the cup with us.”

“Yes, and she is never going to get it,” grinned the Frenchman.

“She must not,” said the old man, earnestly, “I owe those boys a grudge for the way they robbed me of my ivory. I never found the other tusks they said they had left behind either. I believe that ill-favored black rascal, Sikaso, got them.”

“You leave it to me,” was the rejoinder of the Frenchman, to whom the latter part of this speech had been incomprehensible of course, “the Buzzard will win the cup, never fear.”

At this moment, the heavy-set figure of Sanborn was seen shouldering its way through the crowd.

“Why here's our man now,” whispered Malvoise to old Barr. “This is the mechanic of the Chester boys of whom I spoke to you.”

Old Barr greeted Sanborn graciously, but he seemed somewhat surprised when the mechanic, after some talk, suddenly said:

“I have something important to tell you, Mr. Barr.”

“What is it?” demanded the magnate, not without impatience.

“I cannot tell you here, somebody might overhear us. I'll take a ride with you in your car.”

“But it won't do for the Chester boys to see us together.”

“They won't be back for some time. They are off on a long flight. I can tell you my proposition and be back at the aerodrome by the time they return.”

“Very well, I will hear what you have to say.”

As the car moved slowly off, the chauffeur steering it carefully among the scattered crowd, the two occupants of the tonneau were engaged in a conversation that must have been deeply interesting, judging from old Barr's gestures and exclamations. If one could have penetrated behind his mask they would have seen his thin lips curled in a delighted smile and his eyes glisten with cupidity at the proposition Sanborn was craftily unfolding.

CHAPTER IV. EBEN JOYCE APPEARS.

Hardly had the automobile containing the old man and the machinist vanished down the road in a cloud of dust before a shout from the crowd proclaimed that the Golden Eagle was once more in sight. At first a mere speck against the blue, she rapidly assumed shape and was soon circling above the heads of the onlookers, her engine droning steadily, as if she had been some gigantic beetle.

"I say, Frank, this is glorious. How much better she flies than when she was laden down with her cabin and fittings."

Billy shouted this comment at the top of his voice, so as to be heard by the others above the roar of the engine.

Far below them—spread out like the figures on a carpet—they could see the plain; with its big crowd massed in one corner and dozens of tiny figures scuttling about so as to get a better view of the air-craft by getting right underneath it.

"Watch, I'm going to give them a scare."

It was Frank who spoke, and, as he did so, he shoved forward his control-wheel post till the front elevating planes were dropped at an acute angle. There was a sharp snap as he opened the circuit and the roar of the propellers came to a sudden stop.

"Good Lord, Frank, what are you going to do?" gasped Billy, to whom floating in the air with the engine cut out was a new and somewhat terrifying sensation.

"Glide," was the reply.

"Hold on tight now!"

Suddenly the great craft began to descend in a quick dropping rush that sent the air tingling against Billy's cheeks as though they had been plunging through a hailstorm. There was a mighty buzzing in his ears, and every stay and wire on the big craft sang its own song, as the wind rushed through them as if the Golden Eagle had been converted into a monster Aeolian harp.

Down and down they dropped.

A sudden fear shot into Billy's mind.

What if Frank couldn't start the engine again?

They would be dashed to death to a certainty.

And now it seemed that instead of the aeroplane gliding down on the earth that the earth was rushing upward with terrific velocity to meet them.

Just as Billy was about to shout aloud in actual terror at the disaster that seemed unavoidable, there was a sharp "click" as Frank closed the circuit with his emergency foot pedal and the engine began to revolve once more.

Her two propellers shoving her ahead with a mighty push, the big aeroplane began to shoot upwards again in a long swinging arc. She had dropped to within twenty feet of the ground.

It was a hair-raising feat and the crowd that had scattered in terror, as the monster craft bore down on them, quickly reassembled and sent up a cheer.

There was an even heavier scowl than his habitual frown on the face of Malvoise as, having completed his repairs on the engine that had caused him to make such an abrupt descent, he prepared to go up once more.

"Sacre!" he muttered, "those pigs of American boys would certainly get the cup if it wasn't for my foresight in providing against such an emergency."

The crowd scampered across the field to the Frenchman's side as it was seen he was about to take the air again, and a dozen volunteers laid on to the rear frames of his craft and held her back while he started the engine. The Frenchman took his seat with deliberation and adjusted his gloves with care. It was easy to see that he fairly reveled in the admiration he excited.

Just as the Frenchman was about to start his engine, preparatory to giving the word to let go, there was a shout from the crowd and cries of:

"Let him through."

"No, keep him out."

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"Who is he, anyhow?"

"Aw, he's an old man; let him get through."

"He's crazy."

"No, he isn't."

"I am not crazy," came in a shrill, cracked voice, "unless it is with my wrongs."

Malvoise looked up quickly.

He saw an old man with long, flowing gray hair and clothes of the shabbiest making his way toward him. Close behind followed a young woman of unusual beauty, who seemed to be endeavoring to stop the aged man from going further. But he was not to be restrained. In a few strides he was at the side of the Buzzard, and gazing with piercing eyes into the French aviator's face.

"Well, what do you want, old man?" asked Malvoise sharply.

"I want the world to know that the Buzzard is my invention, my design, the child of my brain from her top-plane to her landing wheels;" shrilled the old man, who seemed beside himself with excitement.

"Father, do be calm, I beg of you," entreated the young woman.

"Calm, child! how can I be calm when I realize that I have been robbed of the work of years by the craftiness of this old man, Barr?"

"Hush!" exclaimed the Frenchman, as the old man voiced the name of his employer, "don't talk so loud. I know who you are now. You are Eben Joyce, the inventor."

"Yes, I am," replied the old man in a lower voice, for he too saw that the more curious members of the crowd were pressing so close to them that every word of their conversation must have been audible. "I am indeed Eben Joyce, the unfortunate inventor from whom Luther Barr by trickery secured my working drawings and specifications for the Buzzard. For a paltry five hundred I sold them all to him on the understanding that I was to have a share in the business. There will be millions in it—millions in it for him, but not a cent for me; for the agreement that I foolishly signed contains a clause that resigns all my interest in the Buzzards. Fool that I was, in my lack of knowledge of business trickery, I did not realize what the cunningly-worded sentence meant till it was too late. The five hundred went to pay my debts, and my daughter and I now face starvation."

"Well, that's none of my business," was the brutal reply. "I simply am here to drive the Buzzards, not to talk about them."

"What!" stammered the old man, "will you have no pity on us nor even direct where we may find Luther Barr if he is on the grounds?"

"I can't waste any time on you, I tell you," cried the Frenchman, his eye scanning the sky, where the Golden Eagle was maneuvering in circles and swoops.

"Moreover," went on Malvoise, "I should not advise you to mention Barr's name as the manufacturer of the Buzzards. He has a business deal on in which it is important he should not be known as an aeroplane speculator. If he learns that you are giving his secrets away, he will make it hot for you, I can tell you. You were sent to Bellevue yesterday, were you not?"

"I was—yes," pitifully cried the old man, "but I was at once released, and it was with money given me by one of the doctors who heard my story and pitied me that I came down here to-day to find Luther Barr and see whether—although in law he owes me nothing—whether I could not persuade him to at least give me something to keep the wolf from the door till I have perfected my new automatic balancing device for air-craft."

As he spoke, the old man's eyes kindled with pride at the achievement he hoped to accomplish. He shook off the touch of his daughter's hand on his ragged coat-sleeve. In his kindling enthusiasm he seemed to have forgotten his cares and anxieties.

"Oh, sir," he went on eagerly, "it would take very little money now before the invention is ready and if Mr. Barr could find it in his heart to help me I would gladly share the proceeds with him. It is the most needed improvement of the age for air-craft and—"

"Oh, you are like all crazy inventors," brutally blurted out Malvoise, "every idea that enters your cracked brain you think is the greatest improvement of the age, as you say. What good would your inventions be anyway without money to back them up—they'd only be junk for the scrap pile."

The old man's eyes filled with tears as the Frenchman began his rough speech, but the look in them changed rapidly to one of amazed anger as the aviator continued. Drawing himself up to his full height the old man seemed

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about to launch a terrific denunciation at the other when his daughter once more intervened.

"Come, father," she said gently, "we shall gain nothing by remaining here. You have been robbed of your invention and it is evident that Mr. Barr means to adhere closely to what he and his like call business methods. Come, let us get back to the city and—"

Her words were cut short by a shout from Malvoise. He started up his engine suddenly and before the old man could step back out of the way, the helpers, taken by surprise, let go of the rear structure to which they had been clinging.

"Out of my way!" yelled Malvoise, as like some huge juggernaut the black aeroplane bore down on old Eben Joyce. But the warning came too late.

A horrified cry of:

"He's killed!" went up from the crowd, as the end of one of the planes struck the old man and knocked him on to the grass with crashing force.

His daughter shrieked aloud as she saw the accident and rushed to her father's side as the Buzzard swept on.

Old Mr. Joyce lay very still. There was a deep gash in his head where the aeroplane had struck him.

In the midst of the excitement there fell over the crowd a dark shadow. Everybody looked up to see what had caused it, and there, right above them, was the Golden Eagle. Frank had seen the crowd and driven the aeroplane above it to see what was the matter.

The next minute the great aeroplane glided groundward and landed within a few feet of the crowd. The press made way as the Eagle's occupants hastened to the side of the wounded man.

"Here, Harry, here, Billy, carry him to our shed and lay him on one of the cots," commanded Frank. "I'll tell Le Blanc to get on his motor cycle and hurry back with a doctor."

The boys picked the unconscious man up and carried him to the Golden Eagle's shed. His pitiful emaciation made their task an easy one. The unfortunate old man was reduced almost to a skeleton.

"Oh, thank you so much, sir," exclaimed Eben Joyce's daughter, clasping her hands gratefully, you—you don't think that he is badly hurt, do you?"

"Why, he has a nasty cut," replied Frank, who had hastily examined it, "but I think it is only a flesh wound. He'll pull through, never fear. You are a relative of his, miss?"

"I am his daughter," exclaimed the girl.

At this moment, Malvoise, who had checked the Buzzard and dismounted, hastened up. His face was livid and his hands shook as though with palsy.

"It was an accident—it was all an accident," he cried. "I didn't mean to. Is—is he dead?"

"He is not,—and he is not likely to die," sternly replied Frank, looking full into the Frenchman's cringing face, "do you know who he is?"

"Do I know who he is?" repeated the Frenchman slowly, "why, no, monsieur, I never saw him before in my life."

CHAPTER V. A STRANGE STORY.

It was not long before, under the friendly administrations of the boys, Old Eben Joyce opened his eyes on a cot in their aerodrome and gave a long sigh. It was several minutes, however, before he realized what had happened.

"How can I thank you—?" he concluded, after he had informed the boys of his name and profession.

"Hush," said Frank, "you must not exhaust yourself by talking now," and the aged inventor remained silent therefore, till Le Blanc returned with a doctor from Mineola.

The physician, after a brief examination, pronounced that the wound in the old man's head was not at all serious, but recommended his removal to the hospital notwithstanding.

"It is nothing more than a flesh wound," he said, "but at the hospital he can get better treatment than at home."

And so it was arranged that for the present old Eben Joyce was to go to the hospital,—being driven thither in Dr. Telfair's rig,—and that his daughter would return to New York and make her home with relatives till such time as her father had recovered. These arrangements made, and the inventor's daughter having been driven to the train, it was time to think of accompanying Billy Barnes to Bluewater Bill's cottage, on the outskirts of the little town.

Just as the lads were about to take their departure, leaving Le Blanc in charge of the aeroplane, Sanborn made his way into the tent shed. He had heard from loungers about the grounds of the plight of aged Eben Joyce as he returned from his ride in Luther Barr's car. He was somewhat perturbed as he entered the shed for fear that he would have to face the inventor, fresh as he was from an interview with the man that had practically robbed the aerial genius of his life-work. But Eben Joyce and his daughter had both left and he had no more of an ordeal to undergo than Frank's searching glance.

Knowing as he did what he had been talking to old Luther Barr about, Sanborn's eyes dropped as he met Frank's gaze.

"I—I have been to the village for a little tobacco," he stammered, "I hope you have not needed me. I did not think you would be back so soon."

"You had better help Le Blanc bring in the Golden Eagle," rejoined Frank shortly. He felt no wish to enter into an argument with the man whom he had already made up his mind to discharge at the first opportunity.

The two mechanics therefore were soon at work, wheeling in the aeroplane, as the boys trudged off down the road to the village. Half-way there they were startled to hear the loud "honk-honk" of a rapidly approaching auto behind them and to be hailed in an imperious voice that shouted:

"Get off the road!"

The boys had no choice but to step nimbly aside as the car whizzed by in a cloud of dust, but quick as had been its passing, Frank and Harry gave a simultaneous sharp exclamation as they both recognized the face of its occupant. Luther Barr, once clear of the grounds, had removed his uncomfortably warm autoing mask and the two lads, as the car vanished in a cloud of yellow dust, both cried out his name in sharp astonishment.

"Whatever can he be doing here?" exclaimed Billy.

"I don't know; but you can depend on it he is up to no good," was Frank's reply.

"The old fox,—I wonder if he recognized us?" cried Harry.

"If his eyes are as keen as they used to be, he did, without a question," rejoined Frank.

The boy was right. Old Barr had recognized them, and knew them all the more readily indeed for the reason that at that very moment his mind was bent on frustrating a plan that Sanborn had informed him the boys had in mind, and which they were on their way to culminate.

"I'll bet, if he knew what we are on our way to talk over, he'd give a few dollars to be present at the conversation," remarked Billy.

"You may well say that," laughed Frank, "anything that there seems to be a dollar in, is old Luther Barr's highest ideal."

By this time they had passed through the village and, after walking about half a mile down a country road, they emerged on a green, park-like meadow, at the further side of which stood a neat cottage. Portions of a

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whale's huge bones dotted either side of the path as ornaments, and in front of the cottage stood a flagpole from which fluttered the Stars and Stripes. The cottage was painted white and was as neat and ship-shape as the quarterdeck of a man-of-war.

As they walked up the path the door opened and a grizzled face, set in a perfect forest of white whiskers, protruded itself with a smile of welcome.

“Hello, boys—welcome to my cuddy,” cried Blue-water Bill's hearty voice. “I've a fine dish of lobscouse, a raisin pie and some cider from Farmer Goggins's press all ready for you. Come in—come in.”

He ushered them into a small sitting-room, furnished with all sorts of sea curiosities, and, after explaining several of the curios to the boys, he announced, following an interval of visiting in the kitchen, from whence proceeded an appetizing odor, that the meal was ready. The boys were nothing loath to fall to on the sea banquet the old salt spread before them, and so busy were they despatching the sailor's cooking, that it was not till after they concluded the meal and Bluewater Bill had his old brier pipe going that they came down to the discussion of what each of the boys had uppermost in his mind—namely, the history of Bluewater Bill's discovery of the lost treasure galleon of the Sargasso Sea.

As for Bluewater Bill he was delighted to spin his yarn to such sympathetic listeners and told it with so much embroidery and discursive oratory that to repeat it in his words would be tedious. We shall therefore condense it as follows:

Bluewater Bill had been mate on the Bath, Me., barque, Eleanor Jones. They were bound for South America with a cargo of chemicals and assorted canned stuffs. From the first day out misfortune assailed the vessel. She encountered heavy weather and, during a towering climax of the storm, part of her deck load of American lumber fetched away and carried with it three of her crew of ten men. Shortly after that the cook's big copper boiler ripped loose and fell on him, scalding him so badly that when the ship finally emerged from her storm-battering he died and was buried at sea.

The captain of the craft, however, was what Bluewater Bill termed “a masterful man.” Despite the urgent entreaties of his depleted crew to put into some port and refit, he kept on, with favoring breezes, and soon entered what are called the “doldrums” in which fierce hurricanes alternate with periods of dead flat calm in which a ship will float on a rippleless sea “as idle as a painted craft upon a painted ocean.” The Eleanor Jones drifted about in one of these flat, hopeless calms till the pitch boiled in her seams and the sails seemed dried to tinder.

After a week of this, without the slightest warning, one of the sudden storms, that are common to the region in which she was navigating, came up.

“Caught aback,” as they were, with all canvas set in the hope of catching what breeze might come to disturb the flat calm, the Eleanor Jones' main and fore masts were ripped out of her as if by a giant's hand. The crew managed to cut the wreckage away before it had pounded a hole in her side, and with what canvas they could set on the mizzen the captain attempted to drive her before the wind. But naturally enough the ship had no steerage-way and simply revolved in the huge seas.

Every time a comber caught her broadside, the water swept over her decks in tons of overwhelming fluid. As they fought desperately to retain footing, under the constant assaults of the waves, there came a sudden cry of:

“Heaven help us!”

More from instinct than anything else Bluewater Bill cast himself flat on his face, clinging to a ring-bolt in the deck. Dazed and almost senseless, he felt the mighty onslaught of the wave, which, strong as was his grip, plucked him from his hold and sent him tumbling and half drowned into the lee scuppers. Fortunately he managed to get a firm grip on the mizzen shrouds and clung there till the wave had passed. As he staggered to his feet he gazed about him on the seemingly doomed ship.

He was alone.

Every soul on board but himself had been swept from the deck by that mighty mass of water.

For two days the storm tossed the ship about like a plaything. Her lone voyager had no means of knowing whither he was being driven. He ate at times mechanically and scarcely emerged on deck at all. The fear of sharing the fate of his comrades possessed him and he remained in the cabin, not knowing from one minute to the next whether the succeeding instant would not prove his last. At last, however, the storm blew itself out and Bluewater Bill ventured on deck.

What a sight met his gaze!

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At first he thought he was dreaming.

All about him for miles—as far as he could see in fact—stretched a gently—heaving, brown expanse. It looked like a vast prairie. From it rose the sharp, pungent odor peculiar to seaweed and the old mariner had no difficulty in recognizing the stunning fact that he was adrift in the Sargasso Sea of which he had heard so many ominous tales.

The realization was a shocking one. It meant, as he knew, that he was to all intents and purposes a doomed man. Despairingly he gazed about him and almost uttered a shout as at a distance of not more than a mile or two he made out the outlines of a queer-looking three-masted ship. Here at least was company. Obtaining the glasses, which the ill-fated skipper had left in his cabin, the mate of the Eleanor Jones scanned the neighbor vessel eagerly. She was as motionless under the cloudless blue dome of the sky as the ship on which he stood.

But she seemed to have men on board of her.

At least there were figures leaning against her rail.

The castaway lost no time in lowering the one boat that had not been smashed and sliding down the “falls” into her. Then he sculled, not without difficulty, through tangled weed to the side of the strange vessel. But a strange sight met his eyes as he drew nearer. His neighbor in the vast entangling expanse was a high-sided craft with great ports, of which one or two had fallen away, revealing the grinning muzzles of great guns. Her sails hung in torn fragments from her square yards, and on her lofty poop the gilding had faded from three big battle-lanterns and the carved scroll work surrounded her name, El Buena Ventura. (The Fortunate Venture.)

But the men leaning over the side?

Alas for poor Bluewater Bill's hopes of human companionship.

It was many long years since they had been men, and it was a dozen or more grinning skeletons in time-tattered garments that gazed over the galleon's faded side at the lone castaway in his cockle-shell. How they had died, the sailor, even after he had clambered on board, could make no guess; but there they stood, a ghastly row of dead sailors, held upright, as they had died, between the big gun-carriages of the lost galleon's deck carronades.

Whatever Bluewater Bill's failings might have been, he was no faint heart, and despite the shock of the gruesome discovery he continued his investigation of the silent ship. Apparently some attempt had been made when first the Buena Ventura was caught in the deadly embrace of the Sargasso to convey her treasure to the boats, for, at the head of the main companion-way, Bluewater Bill found a chest of antique pattern, the lid of which he ripped open without much opposition from the moldering lock.

He staggered back at the sight that greeted him as the lid fell open. Within the chest were gold pieces, jeweled candlesticks and other costly articles. A score of other chests examined by the castaway, in what had evidently been the officers' cabin, yielded like discoveries.

The galleon was a veritable treasure ship.

The castaway was examining a marine candlestick that fairly blazed with its setting of precious stones when he dropped it with a crash.

A hoarse cry from outside the cabin had caused his scalp to tighten and his heart to start pounding like a trip-hammer.

CHAPTER VI. THE GOLDEN GALLEON.

With his seaman's knife drawn ready for action—the badly-scared sailor rushed out on to the deck prepared to sell his existence dearly. To his amazement the deck was empty of all life, however.

Suddenly the hoarse cry sounded again, and this time he located its source correctly. Seated on the crumbling maintop of the ship was a huge, evil-looking bird of the kind called “Gallinazos” in South America. The carrion creature eyed the newcomer with a red malevolent eye and again gave voice to its harsh croak—the sound that had so startled him at its first utterance.

“Ah, you old death bird, so you think you are going to get me, do you?” shouted the indignant castaway, as the bird looked at him with unpleasant anticipation.

“Well, you're not. Not if I have to shoot you.”

With a heavy flop of its wings the carrion bird soared slowly away toward the west as the sailor fairly shouted his defiance.

“Ah, my fine fellow,” cried Bill to himself, “you have given me renewed hope. I know that birds of your feather are good strong flyers, but you've got to light somewhere. I judge from the fact that you came visiting here that I can't be more than two hundred miles from land—maybe not so much.”

The thought was a cheering one and as the sailor, having filled his pockets with doubloons and other coins, and given the dead men a sea-burial by consigning them to the deep, sculled slowly back to the Eleanor Jones, his mind was busy with plans of escape.

Now it chanced that among the cargo carried by the barque was a small launch intended for the use of a plantation owner in South America. Bill recollected it with peculiar vividness on account of the peculiar shape of its propeller, which he could see through the crate that surrounded it when it was hoisted on board. He had asked the manufacturer's representative, who had superintended the loading of the motorboat at Bath, why the wheel was shaped in such a queer way. He recollected the answer now with joy, for he had conceived a daring plan.

“Why, Mr. Mate,” the manufacturer's representative had replied to his query, “that's what we call a weedless wheel. That is, it is specially designed for service in South American rivers of shallow draught where an ordinary propeller would soon get entangled in the weeds and water plants and stop. We guarantee this wheel to go through any tangle, just as an eel would.”

“To go through any tangle.”

The words sang in Bill's brain.

Why couldn't he get out of the Sargasso seaweed tangle in the little sixteen-foot craft?

“At least, it is better than waiting here for a horrible death,” he reasoned to himself.

After a hasty meal in the lonely galley, Bluewater Bill set to work to uncrate the little launch. Fortunately for his purpose the Eleanor Jones had been fitted, in common with many modern sailing vessels, with a “donkey engine” for trimming the heavy sails and hoisting cargo, which was operated by a gasolene engine. Several cans of gasolene formed part of the engine's equipment. This solved the problem of fuel and for the rest—though Bill had never run a launch—the manufacturer's directions seemed explicit enough. These directions Bill discovered stored away in a locker of the tiny craft. He spent the rest of the day reading them carefully and going over every part of the engine till he had familiarized himself with the function of each.

After a good night's rest, the next day he set about laying in a stock of provisions and filling several kegs with water from the ship's tanks. This done, and the little vessel's gasolene receptacle filled and her lubricating devices furnished from the supply intended for oiling the “donkey engine” of the Jones, Bill was ready to start. Ready, that is, except for the fact that as yet he had not considered how he was going to get the launch over the side.

For a time this seemed an insurmountable problem, but Bill had all the ingenuity of a sailor. With a small “jack” he tilted first one end of the launch and then the other and passed slings under it. Then he rigged a block and tackle to the mizzen-mast, and heaved on it till he had dragged the launch along the deck on rollers, made by sawing a spare spar into lengths, and hoisted it up on the poop deck. Then, detaching his tackle from the mast, he swung the boom overside with his tackle attached to its outer end. The end of the tackle was once more made fast to the slings supporting the launch and Bill attached another rope to her which was then belayed around the mast,

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in order to prevent the little craft swinging out to the end of the boom as soon as he raised her a few feet from the deck. This done, he hauled away on his tackle till the tiny motor-boat swung free. Then he made fast his tackle on a belaying-pin and gently paid out the restraining rope he had fastened round the mast till the launch swung at the end of the boom suspended twenty feet in the air. It was then an easy task to lower her with the block and tackle till she floated on the water.

Bill swarmed out on the boom and cut loose the tackles, and soon had the launch snuggled alongside the Eleanor Jones. He then proceeded to stock her with food and water he had made ready, and in addition strapped round his waist the captain's revolver which he had found in the cabin. These preparations concluded he was ready to cast off. His eye had taken in, during the brief period he had been in the Sargasso, that while it appeared to be at a casual glance simply a wide expanse of weed, in reality there were "water-lanes" in it which were clear of the entanglement. Bill resolved to follow these passages wherever practicable.

"The longest way round may be the shortest way out," he told himself.

He soon had the small three-horse engine going, following to the letter the instructions set forth in the book of directions he had found.

It was with a light heart that he steered his tiny craft from the side of the imprisoned Eleanor Jones,

"Good-bye, old ship," he exclaimed, as he headed his craft toward the west—the direction in which the gallinazo had flown and in which he judged land must lie.

To his delight the patent wheel worked perfectly. Occasionally, it is true, Bill was compelled to stop the engine and, leaning over the stern, clear it of the few weeds that clung to it with a boat-hook he had brought for the purpose, but otherwise it answered every claim of its makers, that it could not be checked by even the densest tangle.

As the sun set and darkness closed in, Bill noticed, to his gratification, that the weed seemed to be thinning out and that the water-lanes grew more and more frequent.

He made a hasty meal off the provisions he had brought with him and, after a long period spent in trying to keep his eyes open, he was fain to lie down on the bottom of the launch and, with the engine shutoff, drift through the blackness till daylight. He awoke with a start. The launch was tossing about wildly and an occasional shower of spray flew over her side.

She had cleared the Sargasso and was in the open sea at last.

Bill started up the engine as soon as he got the sleep out of his eyes, and tossing the spume from her bow the little craft fairly leaped through the tumbling waters. But Bill soon saw that if she was to handle in such a sea he would have to reduce speed or risk getting swamped. He therefore throttled down the engine and rigged a tarpaulin over the bow to keep out the wave crests, part of which came tumbling aboard.

"If it freshens I don't stand much of a chance to get out alive," mused the sailor, as he sat in the stern of his cockle-shell, with only a frail bottom of half-inch planking between him and the floor of the sea.

The launch in fact, while a staunch little craft, was better adapted for lake or river navigation than as a sea-goer.

"However, I might as well keep on as stay still," mused the philosophical Bill, baling out the water that now came tumbling aboard in far too great quantities to render the situation a pleasant one. So the day passed and it was not till the next morning, after an exhausting night of constant terror that the launch was about to sink, that Bill saw the smoke of a distant steamer as he rose on a wave crest.

Would her officers see him?

That was the question that agitated his mind as he waved frantically while she drew nearer and he saw that she was one of the crack liners of the Central American Trading Company. As she raced through the water a great "Bone" of white spray was sent out from each side of her keen cutwater. A volume of thick black smoke rolled from her yellow funnels. She would have made a fine sight to any one less in fear of his life than Bluewater Bill.

Till she was within half-a-mile of him it seemed the big craft was going to pass him by, but suddenly, to his joy, Bill saw her change her course and bear down for him. As she drew nearer, rolling mightily in the high sea, a man on the bridge hailed him in stentorian tones through a megaphone.

"Ahoy! what lunatic are you?"

"Bluewater Bill of the Eleanor Jones of Bath,—castaway," yelled back the drifter in the launch, who had by this time shut off his engine.

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“We'll stand by and lower a boat,” was the next hail and soon Bill was on his way aboard the Yucatan—for that was the vessel's name—and the tiny launch, which had been the means of saving his life and almost of his losing it, was tossing far astern.

But Bill, perilous as his position was until he was actually in the Yucatan's lifeboat, had not lost his presence of mind. He realized in a flash that a castway with a pocket full of gold would be an object of suspicion and he had his own reasons for not wanting to tell how he had obtained it, so, before the ship's boat reached the launch the old mariner emptied his pockets of their golden freight and sent the coins tumbling into the sea. He retained only the one piece that he had loaned to Billy Barnes as an evidence of his good faith.

“And now, boys,” concluded the old mariner, “what do you think of my story?”

“Why, it's the most marvelous thing I ever heard of!” exclaimed Frank.

“But do you think it is TRUE? You believe me?”

“We certainly do,” chorused both the boys, much impressed by the old salt's narration.

“Well, the only problem is to get to the galleon,” resumed Bill.

“That would be easy in the Golden Eagle,” was Frank's quiet rejoinder. “She could be fitted with aluminum pontoons, and, with a propeller device installed, we could start her upward from the water as easily as from the land.”

“By the Lord High Admiral's slippers!—do you think you could, lads?” exclaimed the old mariner in great excitement.

“I am certain of it,” was the quiet rejoinder.

“Boys, there's enough gold there to make us all millionaires.”

“Hardly enough for that, I should think,” smiled Frank, “but at least it is worth trying for. What do you say, boys, shall we make a dash for the golden galleon?”

“Will we? Why, Frank, if you'll lead the way we'll follow all right,” cried Billy, wild with excitement at the notion.

Hastily the eager group sketched out the rough details of the expedition and it was agreed that the boys should start on their treasure quest immediately after the cup race—provided they could obtain their father's permission.

“Hurray for the treasure of the Sargasso!” shouted Billy, throwing up his hat and catching it again and almost upsetting the lamp in his enthusiasm.

But his excitement received a sudden check.

A man was racing by the house on a galloping horse and as he tore along he shouted the alarming cry of:

“Fire! fire! fire!”

CHAPTER VII. A FIRE ALARM BY AEROPLANE.

They all raced out of the house and soon saw that the fire was some distance off. The glare of the flames spread redly on the sky and illuminated the low hanging clouds till they glowed like red-hot coals. It was evidently a fierce blaze.

"It's Farmer Goggins's place!" announced Bluewater Bill as he noted the direction of the glow.

"That's just beyond the aviation grounds," cried Harry. "I know, because old Schmidt fell into a field, with a bull in it there, one afternoon and his Green Grasshopper was nearly broken up."

"Come on, boys; I'll get out my little mare and we'll drive over there," shouted Bill.

In a few minutes the horse was hitched to Bill's old carryall and, the boys piling in, they drove rapidly off. As they passed through the gate in Bill's neat fence, the carriage lamp they carried suddenly flashed on a dark figure that the next minute was obliterated in the darkness.

"Hello, somebody skulking around here," shouted Bill, drawing up his horse almost on her haunches.

"Hey there, come out and show yourself!"

There was no answer.

"I'll make it hot for you, my hearty, if I find you," shouted Bill. He leaped out of the rig and after entering the house returned with a revolver.

"Go on, boys, you drive to the fire and then send the buggy back by a boy. I'm going to find who that fellow was."

"Somehow, even in the second I saw him, he seemed a familiar figure to me," exclaimed Harry.

"Who could it have been?" wondered Frank.

"Oh, some no-good hobo," replied Bill. "If I catch him, I'll teach him to come snooping around folks' houses this way."

"I hope he didn't overhear our conversation about the galleon," suddenly exclaimed Frank, who had been struck by a sudden apprehension that perhaps this was no ordinary loafer or burglar, but some man who had got wind of Bill's discovery and meant to turn his find to advantage.

"By jumping rat-tailed land-sharks, I never thought of that," exclaimed Bill. "Why, any one that knew our secret could sell it for a large sum."

"That's so," agreed the boys; "but perhaps it was only a tramp and we are scaring ourselves unnecessarily."

"I hope so, I'm sure," rejoined the old sailor, "but now, boys, you drive on. You may manage to be of help at the fire."

"Won't you come, Bill?" asked Frank.

"No, thank you, lad, I'll stay here and guard my shanty. That feller may hev been after some of my dried shark or stuffed land-crabs. I wouldn't put it by him to steal that picture of the schooner, Boston Girl, in a heavy blow off Hatteras. That's a real work of art, boys."

As the boys drove off they heard the old man grunting and grumbling and poking about among the bushes in search for the intruder.

"I don't envy that fellow whoever he is, if Bill catches him," remarked Frank, as he urged the old sailor's little horse along.

"Nor I," laughed Billy; "but depend upon it he is a long way off by this time."

As they drew near the aviation grounds, the boys saw that the fire was indeed a serious one.

Everything in the vicinity was lit up as bright as day by the glow, and they passed scores of men, women and children from the village, all hastening along the road to the scene of the conflagration.

Farmer Goggins's place was a large one, and as they reached the orchard which surrounded the house the boys saw that a big barn at the rear of the dwelling-house was in flames and that two smaller structures had already gone. Men and boys were leading out horses and driving cows from adjoining sheds.

"The whole place is going!" the boys heard a man say as they drove up.

And indeed it looked so.

The flames, fanned by a brisk breeze, were roaring through the ancient timbers, devouring them eagerly.

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Farmer Goggins and his family, wringing their hands despairingly, gazed at the scene.

"Where is the fire brigade?" shouted some one.

"They started out but they've broken down on the road," came back the reply. "They won't get here before the entire farm is destroyed."

"What's that?" cried Farmer Goggins, near whom the speaker had been standing. "The fire department's broken down. Then I am a ruined man. The barns that are burned I used for hay and though my loss is heavy I can stand it, but if the fire spreads it will burn down my dairy plant and destroy my home."

"Is there no other fire department near?" asked Frank.

"No, none nearer than Westbury," was the reply.

"Why don't you telephone for them?"

"We have tried to but, as luck would have it, there is something the matter with the wire and we cannot raise the Westbury exchange at all."

"If only the Westbury department could be notified they might still get here in time to save the house," cried another onlooker, "they've got an automobile fire-engine that just eats up the road."

"That's so, but how are you going to get them. It's fifteen miles away and a horse couldn't do it in less than an hour and a quarter."

"How about an auto?"

"Even if they was one handy, the roads are too bad, except for a high-powered car."

"I have it," shouted Frank suddenly. "I'll get the engines and try to hurry them here in time to save the house at least."

"How's that, young feller?" asked Farmer Goggins, who had stepped up. "Say that again."

"I said I'll get the engines for you and in jig time too," cried the boy.

"Don't see how."

"Well I do; watch me."

Leaving the horse in charge of a lad and calling on the others to "come on," Frank, with his brother and Billy, raced toward the Golden Eagle's shed.

Most of the crowd followed them.

"He's one of them flying kids," shouted a man.

"He's never goin' ter fly ter Westbury ter-night. It's as black as yer hat."

"Looks like he's going ter try," was the answer as the boys trundled the Golden Eagle out of her stable.

And this was indeed the lad's intention.

It was the work of a minute to test the gasolene tank and rapidly see that the engine was in running order.

"How can we tell when we strike Westbury?" asked Frank, as he and his brother clambered into the machine. Billy Barnes, it had been settled, was to wait at the aerodrome in order to save weight.

"Why, there's two red lights at the railroad crossing there and the village is just beyond," cried Farmer Goggins; "but, boys, don't risk your necks on my account."

"Oh, we are not risking our necks," laughed Frank reassuringly; "but, tell me, is there a good meadow or a bit of flat land there to light on?"

"The whole ground just beyond the red lights at the crossing is as flat as the back of your hand and unfenced," was the reassuring reply, "it is used for a circus and show ground. It will make a good place for you to light."

"All right," cried Frank, "that's all I wanted to know. Now then, Harry, are you ready?"

"All right here," answered the boy.

"Then let her go."

The propeller roared and as the craft sped forward, with a warning shout from Frank that scattered the crowd like chaff, the lad threw on the searchlight which had been rapidly adjusted as the plane was wheeled out.

A dazzling shaft of white light cut the darkness ahead of the Golden Eagle, as on her wings, tinted crimson by the glare of the fire, she rose into the night.

Frank headed her for the direction in which he knew Westbury lay, and gradually increased the speed till the craft, her great single eye shining like some strange star, was skimming above the sleeping countryside.

Far behind them, the cheer that had greeted the boys' rising died out and the glow, too, faded as they dashed along.

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It seemed almost no time at all before beneath them they heard the roar of a train, and as it dashed by far below the two red lights of the crossing were sighted.

“Now for taking a chance,” laughed Frank, as he set the descending blades and the Golden Eagle glided downward. It was “taking a chance,” indeed, and the slightest mishap might have resulted in a catastrophe.

However, Farmer Goggins's directions turned out to be quite correct and the aeroplane landed perfectly in a big field, as smooth as a board, only a few minutes after she had left the scene of the fire.

As she struck the ground there was a wild yell from down by the railroad tracks and the boys saw the old switchman on watch there dart out of his tiny hut and dash down the road shrieking:

“Robbers! Murder! Ghosts!” at the top of his voice.

“Hi, there! come back,” shouted Frank, “we won't hurt you.”

At the sound of a human voice the old man checked his mad career and tremblingly approached.

“Gee! you 'most scared me to death,” he said, as the boys stepped forward into the glare cast by the searchlight and stood revealed as two human boys and no spirits of the air, such as the old man had imagined they were, when they first alighted.

“Say, who are ye, anyway, and what are ye doing round here in that sky-buggy?”

“We have come to summon help from the Westbury fire department,” said Frank, “can you direct us to the headquarters?”

“Sure, right up the street about six blocks.”

“Good. Is there any one on watch?”

“Sure, some of the boys sleep there every night.”

“Is it a good engine?”

“None better. She's an automobile engine. Goes sky-hooting 'long like a joy-rider. Just got her two weeks ago. Cost ten thousand dollars.”

Leaving the garrulous old man to examine the Golden Eagle with timorous interest, the two boys ran at top speed down the street till they reached a building surmounted by a high tower and with a small red light burning over the door.

Frank seized the rope that dangled at one side of the portal and, rightly surmising that it was placed there to summon the firemen on duty, gave it a tug. The clamor that followed was startling. The rope was connected with a big bell in the tower, and as its clamor rang out several heads were poked out of an upper window.

“What's the matter?” cried a voice.

“Big fire—Goggins's farm—Mineola fire department bust up—hurry,” cried Frank all in a breath.

“All right, we'll be on the job in ten minutes,” cried the voice, and in a short time the big doors of the fire-house were flung open and lights switched on.

The Westbury fire-engine was the cause of just pride to its operators. It was a new type auto-engine and capable of making a speed of fifty miles an hour. While several men and boys, aroused by the clamor of the big bell, summoned the men who were sleeping away from the fire-house, the others got the engine going. Soon puffing and chugging like some fiery-eyed monster, the racing fire-fighter was ready to start.

“You know the road?” asked Frank.

“As well as I do my own face,” was the merry reply of the chief.

“Suppose you fellers will follow in your buggy,” yelled the chief as the auto-engine started on its dash.

“We didn't come in a buggy,” shouted back Frank.

“Auto then?”

“No.”

“S'pose you flew,” sarcastically cried the man on the engine.

“That's what.”

“Gee-whiz,” was all that was audible of the amazed fireman's reply as the big engine whizzed off.

Frank's assertion called for some explanation to the crowd of bystanders, and after he had given an account of their trip most of the crowd that had got out of bed at the summons of the fire-bell accompanied them to the meadow where the old watchman was still eyeing the Golden Eagle with suspicion. So closely did the curious crowd press about that it was some time before the boys were once more aboard their craft and in the air.

Fifteen minutes later they were receiving the congratulations and thanks of the crowd and Farmer Goggins,

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for, thanks to the timely summons of the air-ship, the auto fire-engine had made the run in time to save the most valuable of the buildings.

CHAPTER VIII. NEARLY OUT OF THE RACE.

The day of the big race in which the various air-craft had been entered dawned fair and cloudless. There was not a breath of wind and the conditions seemed propitious for making ideal flights.

The big crowds that early thronged the grounds thought so too. They strolled about, poking their heads into various sheds and making conditions almost unbearable for the various flying-men who were busily preparing their machines within.

A band had been engaged and was blaring away at popular tunes. All the aerodromes were draped with flags, and bunting of all kinds made the grounds gay indeed.

But the gayety did not extend inside the boys' aerodrome where, in fact, dismay reigned.

To explain its cause we must go back a little and recount some happenings of the preceding night.

While the boys and Le Blanc had been sound asleep, the figure of Sanborn had upraised itself from his cot and quietly sneaked over to the aeroplane. Softly he worked with a wrench and screw-driver for some time, and then with an exclamation of:

"That will fix you," he had softly tiptoed out of the tent carrying the detached main guiding lever of the ship. He rapidly traversed the deserted aviation grounds and flung the important part of the air-craft's mechanism into a clump of bushes. Thus did Sanborn carry out his promise to Malvoise and Luther Barr to cripple the Golden Eagle.

"There, that's done," he said, with an evil sneer, "and now I'll make myself scarce. I came too near to being caught by that whiskered old Apache, Bluewater Bill, the other night, to make it healthy for me round here when it is discovered that the lever is gone. However, I managed to overhear all the details of the treasure galleon and if old man Barr doesn't make the knowledge worth my while he's not so greedy after gold as I thought he was."

Thus musing, Sanford walked rapidly off in the direction of the village.

When the boys awoke on the eventful day, naturally their first thoughts were of the machine in which they hoped so ardently to win the aviation trophy. Their dismay may be better imagined than put into words when they discovered their loss.

"It puts us out of the race," was Harry's despairing cry.

"We can never replace it by two o'clock, the time set for the start," was Frank's despairing exclamation.

Suddenly they realized that Sanborn also was missing. Like a flash Frank realized that it must have been their mechanic who had done the damage. It would have been impossible for any one to enter the shed from the outside without leaving traces, as the lock was on the interior of the door.

Le Blanc raged round the shed like a wild man. It would have fared ill with Sanborn had he fallen into the hands of the Frenchman just then. Le Blanc regarded the Golden Eagle like his own child and his rage would have been comic from the antics it made him perform if the situation had not been so serious.

What was to be done?

Frank tried device after device in his anxiety to provide a substitute lever, but they all proved too frail. It was impossible to get a duplicate at such short notice, as the levers were especially made for the Golden Eagle.

"Well, boys, it looks as if we will have to disqualify," finally pronounced Frank, after his fifth endeavor at a substitute lever had broken off short when a strain was placed on it.

"I wish I could get hold of that fellow for just five minutes," groaned Harry.

"I was foolish not to discharge him when I made up my mind to do so," rejoined Frank. "I felt all along that the fellow was a scoundrel."

Bluewater Bill had entered the shed while the boys were discussing the situation and Le Blanc was tearing his hair. He was soon made acquainted with what had happened.

"Say," he said finally after due consideration, "that was a pretty heavy lever, wasn't it, boys?"

"Yes," was the reply.

"Then he didn't carry it very fur. This fellow Sandboy, I mean."

"I don't suppose so," rejoined Frank.

"In that case he must have hidden it somewhere."

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"That's true, but that doesn't put us any nearer to finding it."

"Have you tried?"

"No."

"Well, then, here's what you do. Announce your loss on the grounds by posting a notice and offering a reward. Maybe someone will show up who has found it."

"That's a pretty slim chance," despairingly said Frank.

"Worth trying. I had a pretty slim chance when I was in that launch. It's slim chances that win out lots of times."

"Well, perhaps, as you say, it is worth trying. Anyhow I'll write out a notice and post it on the outside of the shed."

Frank rapidly wrote out a description of the missing aeroplane lever and soon it was tacked up on the door of the shed. An eager crowd surrounded it at once and soon a score of men and boys were searching over the grounds in the hope of being able to claim the reward.

As the time wore on and there seemed to be no chance of their contesting in the race, the boys grew more and more angry at the thought of Sanborn's treachery.

"We ought to have him locked up if we can get hold of him," was Harry's indignant exclamation.

"That's just the trouble, that little 'if,'" put in Billy Barnes. "I'll bet he's a long way off by this time. What motive can he have had in removing the lever?"

"Somebody must have put him up to the job, that's certain to my mind," said Frank.

"I think so, too," agreed Harry, "I have it," he cried suddenly. "I'll bet that fellow Malvoise is in this some way. He'd do anything to see us lose."

"I wish we could prove it on him," sighed Frank.

At this point a gray head stuck itself into the shed and the boys, as they recognized its possessor, shouted:

"Come in, Mr. Joyce."

A rapidly healing scar was all that remained of the injury that had sent the old man to the hospital. He had found work on the grounds and was fast recovering his health.

"Well, I suppose you boys are going to win the cup," he said, smilingly, as he came in. "I had a letter from my daughter to-day in which she asked to be remembered to you and to convey to you her best wishes for your success."

"Thank you," politely answered Frank, "but I am afraid we are out of the race."

He hastily explained the loss of the lever and the old man shook his head sympathizingly. He examined the aeroplane carefully but was unable to suggest a substitute for the missing lever.

"If you had been able to race, I had some advice for you," he said. "As I told you when you visited me at the hospital, I am the inventor of the Buzzard and the plans and patents were wrongfully obtained from me by a trick. I know the Buzzard's strong points but I also know her weak ones. When going at full speed she cannot steer round into the wind which is, I hear, one of your aeroplane's good features. Now, if you had gone into the race to-day, with the direction in which the wind is blowing, you could have outgeneraled Malvoise by forcing him to make such a maneuver. I would give anything to see the man who robbed me of my designs robbed, in his turn, of the cup."

The old man clenched his fists as he spoke and his eyes shone.

"If only we had the lever we might still defeat his attempt to put us out of the race, for I am now certain that Sanborn was bribed by him to deprive us of it," exclaimed Frank.

At this moment a sound was heard that brought them all to their feet. It was a shout from the crowd which grew nearer every minute. As the boys ran to the door to see what could be the matter, and if the uproar had been induced by an accident to one of their competitors, they saw a sight that made their eyes dance.

A small boy was laboriously dragging toward the shed the missing lever while the crowd pressed about him enthusiastically.

"Hurray!" shouted the boys. "We'll be in the race after all."

The small boy soon told of his discovery of the lever in a clump of bushes into which he had crawled in search of a missing ball he had been playing with. He did not know what it was he had found, till one of the crowd who had read the "Lost" notice, recollected it and told the lad to take his find to the Golden Eagle shed. There certainly

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was one happy soul in Mineola that day as the little fellow pranced off with the easiest money he had ever earned.

But happier still were our young heroes, as they rapidly adjusted the lever and fitted their craft for the race, the starting moment for which was now only a brief time away.

“You have never told us who that man was, Mr. Joyce,” reminded Frank.

“No, I have not,” replied the old inventor, his excitement rising, “but I will tell you now. It was Luther Barr, the—”

He got no further.

“Luther Barr,” amazedly echoed the boys, “has he gone into the aeroplane business?”

“He has, with the fruits of my industry,” exclaimed Mr. Joyce. “Do you know him? I imagine from your expressions that you do?”

“Do we know him?” repeated Billy. “I should say we do.”

Frank soon appeased old Mr. Joyce's curiosity and told him of their experiences in Africa with Luther Barr pitted against them.

“If Luther Barr intends making money out of duplicates of the Buzzard, that explains a whole lot of things,” cried Harry, as Frank concluded.

“That's right,” cried Frank. “I shouldn't wonder if he's at the bottom of this whole business. I only wish we had the evidence against him.”

“Don't I too?” rejoined Harry; “but he covers up his tracks too cleverly.”

CHAPTER IX. THE GRASSHOPPER'S MISHAP.

The grounds by noon were fairly alive with crowds of curious men, women and children, and every train brought more. They swarmed about the aerodromes and almost drove the mechanics and aviators crazy with the ridiculous questions they asked.

"Oh, mister, what's that flapper for?" inquired a woman with a green dress and a red parasol of old Schmidt, the owner of the eccentric Green Grasshopper, indicating that machine's propeller.

"That's to keep the flies off, madam," gravely rejoined Billy Barnes, who happened to be standing by, assisting Schmidt to adjust his planes.

In the boys' aerodrome they were hard at work putting the finishing touches on the Golden Eagle and adjusting the lever.

"I wish I knew where that fellow was. I would certainly have him arrested and locked where he would be out of further mischief, for the time being anyway," angrily exclaimed Frank, as they worked.

At last all was ready and the sudden call of a bugle caused the folks who had brought lunches with them to hastily quit their meals in the shade of the trees that bordered the road and hurry out on to the field. They swarmed in such numbers that the judges of the course found it impossible to keep them back of the rows of red flags, that had been planted as a boundary mark, and therefore restraining ropes were stretched on stakes that had been hastily driven into the ground. This kept the throngs back effectually and gave the aviators clear space for their starting maneuvers.

"Ta-ra-ta—Ta-ra-ta—tara—ta!"

The bugle rang out once more.

It was the signal for the competitors to make their appearance.

From every shed on the grounds there issued strange birdlike air-craft of different designs—in fact only a few of the machines were practicable at all. The others were destined for the scrap-heap. Their owners, however, all fairly beamed with pride, as their various masterpieces were trundled forth and took the places assigned them by the judges of the Aero Club.

The Golden Eagle, of course, received a burst of applause, for the Boy Aviators were by this time quite well known. The Buzzard, too, as her inkhued shape loomed up, came in for a buzz of admiration. Malvoise, in a leathern jacket of black, with black leggings, gauntlets and goggles, instantly set to work on a final inspection, looking like some species of sable imp as he dodged in and out among the intricate wires.

As for Frank, he contented himself with sending the Golden Eagle engine up and down the speed scale from 100 to 1500 revolutions a minute. All her cylinders worked perfectly and the steady drone, rising in intensity as her young owner speeded the mechanism up, showed that the motor of the big craft meant to get down to work without a skip or a break.

Inasmuch as most of the other contestants were testing their engines at the same time the uproar was deafening. The sweep of the propellers created back draughts that swept off the spectators' hats and gave the men who were holding on to the struggling machines all they could do to keep them from getting away. They were like so many restive race-horses breathing blue flames and spouting smoke.

Suddenly there was a loud shout, half of derision, half of fear, from the onlookers.

"He's off!" yelled the crowd.

The boys gazed round to ascertain what could have caused the sudden outcry.

To their amazement they saw the Green Grasshopper leaping and bounding across the field—scudding along like a scared kangaroo.

On his little seat clung old Schmidt, frantically endeavoring to manipulate his stopping levers and to cut out his engine. But something was wrong and he only scudded along faster than ever, for all his frantic efforts.

What had happened soon became apparent. The men engaged to hold back the Grasshopper while her engine was being tested had clung on well enough till old Schmidt insisted on getting on board his queer craft and speeding the engine to the limit. Then as the propeller reached its maximum velocity the terrific strain caused the holding-back grips to part and the machine had instantly darted away. The crowd, shouting and halloing at

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Schmidt, broke all bounds and dashed off over the field after the bounding Grasshopper, but it sped along far in advance like a wild thing with eager hounds in pursuit.

About half a mile to the right of the aviation grounds was a small farm occupied by a dealer in hogs. Straight for this little estate the Grasshopper headed, driven as it seemed by some perverse instinct. Schmidt, seeing evidently that he couldn't steer his craft, tried to avoid a collision as he neared the outbuildings by manipulating his elevating planes.

The move was successful, or at least was so for a brief space of time. The Grasshopper rose with convulsive leap, like that of a bucking bronco. She shot into the air to a height of about twenty feet and then suddenly, without the slightest warning, she gave a crazy swoop down and caught in some trees, landing her unfortunate navigator full and fair into a sty occupied by an old sow and her numerous progeny.

Such a chorus of squeals from the pigs and roars of fear and pain from Schmidt went up that the crowd, among whom were the boys, feared at first that several persons had been hurt instead of the luckless aviator. All at once, as they neared the pen, the figure of Schmidt appeared covered with mud and dirt—a sorry sight indeed.

He attempted to scramble over the fence surrounding the pen and had just reached the top rail when the old sow, in whom fear at the sudden appearance of the Grasshopper's owner had given way to wrath at his invasion, suddenly charged at him. She caught him, just as he was striving to maintain his balance, and the unlucky inventor for the second time that day was hurled to the ground.

[Illustration: The Luckless Aviator and the Pig.]

“Are you hurt?” yelled the crowd.

“Am I hurt—aber I am dead, I dink!” shouted back the badly rumped Schmidt. “Ach himmel! der Grasshopper is a pig—pen—hopper, ain't it?”

He hastened over to where the Grasshopper, her engine still going and her propeller still beating the air, lay like a dismal wreck in the trees on the other side of the pig—pen.

“Donner und blitzen, you Grasshopper, you my neck brek yet, I dink,” roared Schmidt, gazing at the disaster. “Vos iss los mit you, any vay, you bad Grasshopper. Himmel! dot propeller almost takes my nose off. Aber nicht, I am a dunderhead. I forget to turn der switch; dot's vy I can't stob der Grasshopper ven she hobs away.”

Rapidly muttering these remarks in an undertone the old man finally turned off the switch and the engine, with a grunt and a sigh, came to a standstill.

“Vell, I am oud of der race,” announced philosophical Schmidt, as the propeller came to a stop. “Aber maybe dot's chust as vell. If I ged into der race maybe I be by der cemetery already to—morrow.”

As he was consoling himself with this thought a rough—looking man in overalls hastened up. He carried a shotgun.

“Get off my turnip land,” he shouted to the crowd, “or I'll fill some one full of birdshot.”

The crowd scattered, and old Schmidt among them; but the man with the shotgun was on him in two jumps.

“See here, you bumble—bee,” he bellowed; “you and I have got an account to settle before you get away from me. What do you mean by coming flopping on to my farm and breaking my pig—pen?”

“Aber, I didn't come, der Grasshopper bring me—” expostulated Schmidt, “I would much rather have been somevhere else. I don't like pork except mit sauerkraut.”

“Well, you've scared my prize sow out of a year's growth, smashed two rails of my pig—pen and brought a lot of folks, who ought to be at home instead of fooling around a lot of crazy flyers, traipsing all over my young turnips. Now, the question is—how much do you owe me?”

“How much do I owe you?” spluttered the German. “Ach, ve are quits, I dink. I spoil your pig—pen, but your pig—pen spoil my suit and your sow scare me oud of TWO years' growth.”

“Now, don't get funny. Fork over fifty dollars or you go to the constable.”

Old Schmidt's face was a study. Finally, however, he produced a fat wallet, and peeling off two twenty—dollar bills and a ten, he handed them over with a sigh.

“Ach, you leedle Grasshopper, fifty dollars for your trip, and then you don't fly exceptd in mit der hogs,” he exclaimed, shaking his fist at the inanimate wreck of his craft.

A loud report of a gun brought the crowd's attention from this scene, which they had watched from a respectful distance, back to the aviation grounds.

It was the warning gun.

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In ten minutes the big race would start.

CHAPTER X. THE AERO RACE.

“Bang!”

As the echoes of the starting gun sounded, and women screamed at the loud report, a dozen air-craft shot forward like horses leaping from the barrier at a race-track.

Off over the ground they scudded—faster—faster—faster.

From their wheels arose clouds of dust and a trail of gasoline-tainted blue smoke spread behind them, like the tail of a comet. After a run of about five hundred feet a shout arose from the crowd as the Buzzard left the ground and suddenly shot upward. The next minute she was followed closely by the Golden Eagle.

A thrill of excitement swept through the throng as the two aeroplanes almost simultaneously rose.

Another air-craft, and then another, closely followed by a third, took off after the first two. It was a magnificent spectacle and the roar of the crowd showed their appreciation of the marvel of witnessing five aeroplanes in the air at once.

Of the other starters two came to grief with engine troubles and yet two others crashed together in collision. A third, a queer freak craft with flopping wings instead of a propeller, piled on top of them and they were soon tangled in an inextricable mass of wires, torn canvas, twisted braces, levers and angry aviators. This accident left the field—or rather the air—clear for the other five contestants.

Almost in a line the quintette swept along, heading straight as homing pigeons for the Harrowbrook Country Club, where a big delegation of enthusiasts awaited to watch the contestants alight, drink the prescribed cup of coffee, take on gasoline and start back.

“Steady as she goes, old boy,” said Frank, as Harry excitedly cried to him to put on more power, “we are doing very nicely.”

“But look at the Buzzard” cried the younger boy, “she's ahead of us!”

It was true their chief rival—on a lower course than the Golden Eagle—had indeed forged about half a mile to the fore. From time to time the boys could see the black figure of her operator turn about and gaze back to gauge the distance he was ahead.

The roar of the crowd had died out several minutes before and the only sound to be heard now, as the Golden Eagle swept along at a height of five hundred feet or more, was the drone of the engines of their own and the other contestants' craft.

Of the other starters, Gladwin was the nearest to the boys. He was driving ahead at a forty-mile clip about fifty feet below them and a little to the west. Owing to the construction of his machine, the wind was sweeping him more and more off his course as he rose, and the boys saw they had little to fear from him. The others were in a bunch, a quarter of a mile to the rear, and, even as they glanced back, the boys saw one of the aviators dive downward and land. Evidently something had gone wrong with his engine.

The wind was freshening and this, while good for the boys, evidently meant trouble for the Buzzard; for the black craft, swiftly as she was going, was now giving occasional giddy careens. Malvoise apparently had a hard time to keep her on an even keel.

The ground below them, a vast level plain, was dotted all over its flat surface with automobiles, men and women on horseback, and boys and men on motorcycles, but fast as the people following the aeroplanes drove their various means of progression, the sky clippers flew along even faster.

The Golden Eagle was capable of making seventy miles an hour and, as her engine warmed up and Frank speeded up the spark and found a favorable air current, she gradually picked up speed till she found her full capacity.

Through powerful binoculars Harry scrutinized the landscape ahead. It didn't take him long to make out the low white buildings, with their red roofs that marked the half-way point of the race—namely, the Harrowbrook Club. So swiftly were they going that it seemed as if the buildings rushed at them instead of their dashing toward the buildings.

Ten minutes later the Buzzard, amid a perfect scream of frenzied welcome, dropped on to the wide sweep of green lawn in front of the club-house, followed almost in the same breath by the Golden Eagle. Rapidly the other

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four craft left in the race descended also.

The coffee tables and the gasoline cans were placed on the club-house veranda, about five hundred yards from where the machines had alighted. As they scrambled from their seats, the aviators made a rush for the spot. Frank and Harry had the only 'plane in the race occupied by two; but of course they could not both go to the veranda. Frank, therefore, dashed off, leaving Harry standing by the Golden Eagle. He was kept busy explaining its points to the admiring throng. To save all the time possible the engine had not been cut out, but was merely disconnected from the propellers and throttled down. A brief examination showed that it was almost as cool as when they had started on the race.

And now Frank was back with the gasoline, his mouth scorched with the almost boiling coffee he had hastily poured into it. Malvoise had been scalded worse than the boy aviator, but he had manfully choked down the hot fluid and arrived at the side of the Buzzard at practically the same moment as Frank.

Hurriedly the cap of the fuel tank was unscrewed and the contents of the gasoline can poured in. Amid a murmur of excitement, the boys climbed back into their seats. At the same instant Malvoise prepared to start. There was not a second between them in the making of this action, but the watches of the timers at the Harrowbrook showed the Frenchman to be a minute ahead of the Boy Aviators.

With a quick movement Frank threw his engine first into neutral, then medium, and then up to third speed.

"Let go," he shouted with a sweep of his hand to the volunteers holding back the big 'plane, and the next instant they were off once more and on the home stretch.

Simultaneously a rush of wings sounded close beside them and the black aeroplane swept by them, seemingly gathering velocity at every revolution of its engine.

"That's a great machine," exclaimed Frank admiringly.

"But ours is a better one," expostulated Harry.

"That's to be seen, Harry," rejoined his brother, "he's a minute ahead of us now, you know."

"I hope he breaks down," exclaimed the younger lad.

"No, if we beat him, we want to do it fairly and squarely," replied Frank. "I think we have a better machine, and the only way to prove it is to beat the Buzzard at its best."

No more words were exchanged as the two machines tore onward back toward the starting-point.

The others had lost so much time getting into the air at the Harrowbrook grounds that they were practically out of the race. The contest lay between the Buzzard and the Golden Eagle.

Suddenly, as they were racing high above a road that showed far below them like a bit of white ribbon. Harry uttered an exclamation and pointed downward.

Directly beneath them an automobile was moving along, and as Frank gazed downward for a fraction of a second he saw a man, seated in the tonneau, place a glittering object to his shoulder.

"Zi-i-i-p!"

Something that sounded like a big bee sang by the boys' ears.

"A bullet!" cried Harry.

"They are shooting at us!" exclaimed Frank.

"I know that automobile," suddenly cried Harry, "it's Luther Barr's."

"So it is."

"And," shouted Harry, bringing his glasses to bear on the car, "the man with the rifle is that sneak Sanborn."

Before Frank could reply another bullet sang by them.

This one ripped a hole in the upper plane, but fortunately a hole of such size did not affect the machine.

"They are trying to hit the engine," cried Harry the next minute as a third bullet whistled unpleasantly near.

"Or more likely the fuel tank," corrected Frank.

"The cowards," cried the indignant Harry.

Whatever the intentions of the men in the auto had been, however, they came to nothing, for a sudden turn in the road compelled them to turn off almost at right angles from the course taken by the air-craft. As a last farewell bullet whizzed harmlessly by, Harry, through the glasses, saw a familiar figure spring upright in the tonneau and shake his fist upward in impotent rage.

It was Luther Barr.

His features swam in the field of the glasses as clear as if he had been standing ten feet away. His lean, mean

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face was convulsed and gray with rage. He seemed to be furiously berating Sanborn, whose rifle, Harry now observed, was equipped with a silencer. With this appliance bullets can be fired from an ordinary rifle without even as much sound as an air-gun. It is a murderous device.

But now the boys' attention was imperatively centered on the rival aeroplane. The wind had suddenly become gusty and the Buzzard was behaving in a most eccentric manner. To the boys several times it looked as if Malvoise had lost entire control of her.

The tents and aeroplane sheds of Mineola were now plainly in view, and the boys could see the black mass of the crowd as it raced out to meet them.

"It will be bad for a landing if they don't keep them back," exclaimed Frank, as he saw this. "Someone will get hurt."

Suddenly, as a sharper puff than usual came, the Buzzard gave a lurch that Malvoise in vain tried to counteract by using his ailerons. These balancing devices are almost automatic in their control, and usually can be depended on to control an airship to keep an even keel, but this time not even Malvoise's skill could save the Buzzard.

Down she sped, straight as a plummet, for fully fifty feet.

Desperately her driver strove with levers and guiding wheel. But his efforts were of no more avail than if he had idly surrendered to disaster.

Like a stricken bird the Buzzard dropped downward. All her occupant could do was to check the awful speed of her fall by spreading his ailerons to their fullest extent.

Luckily for Malvoise a clump of willows, about a shallow pond, were directly below him in his fall and the Buzzard crashed into these, throwing him out into the soft pond mud in which he received a ducking, but no great harm.

It was the end of the great race.

A few minutes later the Golden Eagle swept to the ground almost at the very door of her aerodrome, and Billy Barnes, Le Blanc, old Eben Joyce and Bluewater Bill rushed excitedly forward to greet the young aviators. Madly the excited crowd pressed about them, among them many reporters from New York and Philadelphia papers, who had been sent to report the details of the great race.

It was an hour or more before a wagon arrived with the remains of the Buzzard, and Malvoise followed, mud-covered and angry clear through. He cast a malevolent scowl at the boys as he passed their aerodrome, in front of which the crowd still lingered, unable to gaze enough at the victorious Golden Eagle and her young drivers.

While Frank and Harry were still trying to tear themselves away, a blue-garbed messenger boy pushed his way through the crowd and extended a yellow envelope.

"Message for you," he grinned, "Mr. Chester." Frank took the envelope in wonderment. He had no idea whom it could be from. The look of astonishment on his face froze into one of amazement as he perused the contents of the message, which read:

You have beaten me once more. Next time you will not be so fortunate. I'll drive you cubs off the earth yet.

Luther Barr.

"Well, what do you know about that?" exclaimed the slangy Billy Barnes, as he in his turn conned the remarkable document from the old man, who seemed destined to be checked at every point by the boys.

CHAPTER XI. LOST IN THE FOG.

It is a week after the race and the Hempstead Plains cup proudly reposes in a place of state in the Chester boys' home. On the morning in question the boys and their chums are getting ready for a test of Frank's pontoons, which, as our readers know, he had already begun to figure on as soon as Bluewater Bill had unfolded his strange tale of the Golden Galleon of the Sargasso.

In a quiet bay on the north shore of Long Island the tests were to be made, and a launch had been engaged for the occasion. At the commencement of this chapter our readers are to imagine the boys on a train speeding toward Lone Cove, where they plan to embark. In the baggage car are the "pontoons," which in reality are two cylinders of aluminum, about twenty feet in length by three in diameter and capable of sustaining a weight of almost a ton. To the bottom of each, Frank had riveted a thin "keel" of manganese bronze with a heavy fin of lead affixed to it. This was to give stability in the rough waters they ran a chance of encountering on the outskirts of the Sargasso.

A space of about two feet at each end of the pontoons had been partitioned off, so as to form four tanks in which water and gasolene could be stored. Caps screwed over vent-holes provided opportunity to insert a small pump when it was necessary to draw on the emergency supplies or water ballast thus carried.

Lone Cove, a small sand-bordered inlet off the Sound, was reached after a run of about two hours and the tanks—boxed in long wooden cases so as to avoid the scrutiny of any villagers who might prove too curious—were transferred to a wagon and carried to the small wharf where the Ocean Spray, the launch the boys had chartered for their experiments, lay at anchor.

Her owner, an old beachman, at once turned the craft over to the party and expressed a lot of curiosity, which was not gratified, as the boys knocked the cases off the "pontoons" and then floated them. With the boards from the cases, a sort of platform was then constructed between the floating tanks and lashed to them with stout wire. The wonderment of the old waterman was in no wise decreased when he saw the boys then fall feverishly to work and load the dinghy, attached to the launch, with large stones. When they had her piled to the water line, they pulled out to where they had anchored the tanks with their bridge-like platform, and commenced to place the rocks on board till Frank estimated that there was as much weight reposing on the pontoons as they would be called upon to bear when the Golden Eagle was super-imposed on them.

As Frank had figured, the tanks were immersed for about a third of their depth under the weight, and when the burden of the boys and Bluewater Bill was added, they sank till about half their circumference was above and half below the water. The whole contrivance was then taken in tow of the Ocean Spray, in order to ascertain just how she would behave under the speed at which it was hoped the propellers of the Golden Eagle would drive her when the contrivance was affixed to her bed plates.

It was a perfect day, and as the boys emerged from the mouth of the inlet and the blue expanse of the Sound spread before them, they fairly shouted with delight at the sparkling water and invigorating air.

"How long are you going to stay out?" asked Bluewater Bill, as the Ocean Spray plunged bravely forward and the sharp-nosed pontoons, to the boys' delight, clove the water behind without making any noticeable resistance.

"The Golden Eagle will drive over any seaweed that ever floated on these," shouted Billy excitedly as he gazed back.

"How long are we going to stay out?" repeated Frank, in reply to Bluewater Bill's question. "Oh, not more than an hour or so, but it's such a glorious day I'd like to keep on going for a while."

"So would we," chorused the others.

"Wall," was the old-sailor's rejoinder, "I don't want to be a spoil-sport, boys, but do you see that haze yonder?"

Frank nodded.

Over on the Connecticut shore, which lay a low, blue line on the opposite horizon, a sort of haze, floating like a silken scarf, was indeed quite observable when attention was called to it.

"What is it?" asked Frank.

"It looks to me like fog," said Bluewater Bill, slowly, "but it may be nothing. Anyhow we've got time for a cruise afore it comes up, I reckon."

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“Oh, lots of time,” rejoined Frank confidently, as he gave the wheel a twist and sent the little Ocean Spray, a twenty-five foot craft, dancing clear into the sparkling seas that came tumbling along. As her sharp bow encountered them, the speedy little craft tossed the water in glittering cascades back over her foredeck. The pleasantly stinging spray blew in a moist cloud back in the young voyagers' faces.

“Say, Frank,” exclaimed Billy, suddenly, “let me take a cruise on those pontoons, will you? I've read about rafts ever since I was knee-high to a bicycle pump, but I never rode on one.”

“All right, Billy,” laughed Frank, and after the queer craft astern had been drawn up by the tow-line the young reporter jumped aboard.

“Let out lots of rope,” he cried, as the stone-laden contrivance bobbed about on the waves, “this is bully. A regular private yacht.

“Oh, a sailor's life is the life for me,
Out on the ocean, out on the sea;
Out with the whales, out with the shark,
If a cat-fish mews does a dog-fish bark?”

The Ocean Spray once more forged ahead, and so absorbed were the boys in putting the little ship through her paces that not one of them noticed a curious change that was gradually taking place in the weather. The air had grown more chilly and an almost imperceptible film of mist was creeping over the sun-warmed waters. If Bluewater Bill had not dropped into the little cabin for a snooze he would have warned the boys of their peril, but, as it was, their first realization of the fact that the fog was upon them was their complete envelopment in a dense blanket of dripping mist.

If a curtain had rolled down all about them they could not have been more completely blotted out from their surroundings.

Everywhere the soft white mist baffled sight. From the stern of the Ocean Spray it was impossible to make out the tiny vessel's bow.

The smothering blanket of pearly-gray vapor had enwrapped them so completely that in their first excitement they lost all sense of their bearings, and as they had no compass they were in a bad fix indeed.

Hastily Frank awoke Bluewater Bill.

The old sailor uttered a sharp exclamation as he emerged from the cubby hole in which he had been sleeping and gazed about him. The fog settled in glittering masses on his bushy eyebrows and whiskers, as he scanned the impenetrable mist in every direction.

“Whereabouts was you when the fog came up?” he asked suddenly.

“About in the middle of the Sound,” announced Frank.

“Couldn't be in a worse place,” commented Bill, “right in the track of the Fall River steamers and any other craft that happens to come up or down the Sound.”

Even as he spoke there came the long melancholy boom of a steamer's whistle from somewhere in the obscurity.

Bill hastily searched the Ocean Spray's cabin.

“Well, we are in a fix, boys,” was his comment as he concluded his examination of the lockers and cupboards.

The boys looked their questions.

“Ain't a fog-horn nor a bell aboard this craft,” was Bill's alarming intelligence, “we may get run down any minute.”

Again through the fog came the roar of the approaching steamer's whistle.

Ominous, full of sinister possibilities, the voice of the nearing peril roared through the fog.

Suddenly there was a shout from astern.

“Hey there, I don't want to squeal, but I'm getting nervous. Have you forgotten me or am I adrift?”

“Billy Barnes!” cried Frank, “I had clean forgotten about him. Come on, boys, lay a hand on the tow-rope and we'll get him aboard.”

The engine of the Ocean Spray had been cut off by Bill, when he first discovered that the little craft was as helpless to aid herself as a drifting log in the dense smother. She now rode the swells silently and powerless.

In response to Billy's hail, the boys shouted back:

“All right, Billy, we'll have you aboard in a minute.”

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“Hurry up, it's awful lonesome out here,” came back Billy's cheerful hail through the fog.

Frank and Harry laid on to the rope and started to haul the pontoons and their freight inboard, but even as their hands closed on the rope the booming roar of the menacing steamer's whistle permeated the fog once more.

It seemed as if this time it was directly over them.

“Start the engine,” cried Harry, as the full sense of their peril was borne in on him.

The shriek of the large vessel's whistle was now sounding almost in their ear-drums. Frank expected every minute to see the obscurity pierced by a huge black prow.

But as this thought flashed across him there came a sudden diversion. The tow-rope they were hauling on suddenly was torn from their hands, almost dragging them overboard, and though they could hardly see it they could “feel” the presence of a huge vessel going past not twenty feet astern.

“Billy!” shouted Frank as the tow-rope was jerked from his grasp.

The only reply was a grinding, rasping crash as if some great object were brushing resistlessly past a smaller one, and then the whistle boomed out again.

This time, however, its sound came in diminishing form and as the Ocean Spray cruised round blindly in the fog, searching in vain for any trace of the raft, it grew fainter and fainter and finally died away into the distance.

Half an hour later a breeze sprang up, the fog lifted almost as suddenly as it had closed in and the Sound once more shone in the sparkling rays of the afternoon sun.

The boys uttered a shout as they perceived not a mile from them the raft bobbing about on the waves as buoyant as a cork. It had, then, evidently survived the collision, but in the same glance they saw that it had no occupant.

Billy Barnes had vanished.

They spent the rest of the day till sunset circling about in the vain hope of coming across some trace of the missing lad; but in vain.

If the sea had indeed, as the boys now feared with sinking hearts, swallowed their young companion, he could not have vanished more completely.

CHAPTER XII. BILLY HEARS AN INTERESTING CONVERSATION.

When Billy Barnes opened his eyes, he found himself lying in a white and gold stateroom that seemed luxurious enough in its furnishings to be the cabin on some millionaire's yacht. Where he was, he had not the slightest idea. All that he recollected of the events preceding his awakening was his shout to the boys to be taken aboard after the fog closed down. Then came the sudden appearance above his head of what seemed a mountainous black steamer bow, a terrific crash, that hurled him from the pontoon raft into the water, and then a frenzied grip for a trailing rope.

As he reflected on these events and wondered where on earth he could be, the door opened and a white-coated steward stepped in. He seemed surprised to see Billy's eyes opened.

"You came to pretty quick after your ducking," he remarked. "I'll go call the doctor."

In a few minutes he was back with a pleasant-faced, gray-whiskered man who informed Billy that the ship that had run him down was the Sound steamer, Princeton, bound from Boston for New York. The instant the lookout had reported an object dead ahead, ropes and life-buoys had been thrown overboard, one of which Billy had managed to grasp and hold on to till a sailor could be lowered and the half-drowned reporter dragged on board.

"You held so tight to the rope even after you became insensible," commented the physician, "that we had a hard time to break your grip. How did you come to be out on the Sound in such a fog?"

Billy hastily related to him the events that had led up to his presence on the raft, only omitting, of course, the object of the experiments. The doctor was very curious on this point, but his inquisitiveness was destined to go unsatisfied. Billy had no intention of betraying the boys' confidence in so important a matter as the proposed recovery of the golden galleon. The secret was theirs alone, he reflected. What was his amazement, then, about half an hour after the doctor had left him, with orders to sleep if he could, to hear in the next stateroom a voice, which he had no difficulty in recognizing as Luther Barr's, utter the following words:

"Then we start for the Sargasso Sea as soon as possible. You have done very well, Sanborn, and you, Malvoise. You need not be afraid I shall not reward you."

"Thank you," the listening boy heard Malvoise reply, in his smooth tones. "We have indeed done all that we could to hasten the scheme. It was lucky that we were able to purchase that dirigible of Constantio's at Boston, for if we had had to construct one of our own we should have been in a hard fix to beat the Boy Aviators in getting to the golden galleon. As it is we will be there first and when they arrive they will find an empty shell of a ship for their pains."

"Ha! ha! ha!" Billy heard old Luther Barr laugh in his thin piping tones, "it will be as good as a feast to see their faces when they find that we have forestalled them. What is the best part of it is that they will never guess who gave us the secret of the lost galleon's location."

"I look to you to make that information worth my while," put in Sanborn's rasping tones.

"And I will," cried old Barr, clapping his withered hands together. "You shall be well rewarded, never fear. But now about your purchase in Boston—how much did she cost?"

"Twelve thousand dollars," was the cool reply of the speaker, whose voice Billy had recognized as being that of Malvoise.

"Twelve thousand dollars!" almost screamed old Luther Barr, "why you mean to ruin me."

"What, you grudge twelve thousand dollars when there are millions, perhaps, at stake?" demanded Malvoise's calm tones.

"No, no," old Barr corrected himself, "it's not that, but twelve thousand dollars is a lot of money. However, I'd gladly give twice that sum to get first to the lost galleon and her golden cargo."

"It's well worth it," commented Sanborn.

"Anyway, she is exactly the kind of air-ship we need for the recovery of the treasure," put in Malvoise. "Originally intended for Government use, she was turned back to her owner on account of a defect in the machinery which has since been rectified. She carries a fine cabin and a pilot house on her substructure, and is fitted up with sleeping quarters. Best of all, she is capable of lifting five tons beside her own weight. The

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hydrogen gas to inflate her with, we can carry down in tubes on your yacht and fill the bag when we get to the borders of the Sargasso, although Constantio, her inventor, who will go with us, has ideas of his own about hydrogen.”

“But how are you to float her while we are rifling the galleon of her treasure?” demanded old Barr.

“Very simple,” was the reply, “merely tether her to the galleon as you would a horse and when we are ready to load, haul her to a level with the deck and then with a full cargo of treasure—hurray for New York!”

“Splendid,” cried old Barr, catching the enthusiasm of the other, “we will sail then, shortly?”

“As soon as everything is ready” was the reply of Malvoise, “we need one more man and I have advertised for him—now let us drink to the treasure of the Buena Ventura and may we soon have our hands in the sack.”

There was a clinking of glasses as the toast was drunk, and then the trio conversed in lower tones. Billy had heard enough, however, to convince him that by some strange fate he had been rescued from death in the Sound to become the instrument of the discovery of a plot to beat the boys to the Sargasso and the treasure ship. Gritting his teeth he resolved to do all he could to frustrate the man who had tried to outwit the Boy Aviators in Africa and steal their hard-won ivory.

Two hours later, the Princeton docked at New York, and Billy hastened to despatch a telegram to Lone Cove, telling the others of his safety and that he had important news to communicate.

With what delight the chums received news of their comrade's safety may be imagined and they boarded the first available train to meet him at the Astor House in New York, where Billy had agreed to be at the appointed time.

As the young reporter hastened from the wharf, taking good care—as he thought—not to let old Barr and his two accomplices see him, he almost collided with a seafaring man who was hurrying down the wharf to board a Boston steamer that was about to pull out. The next instant his hand was caught in a mighty grasp that almost wrung it off.

“Wal, I'll be hornswoggled, Billy Barnes!” was the exclamation of the stranger.

“Ben Stubbs!” exclaimed the amazed Billy, almost knocked off his feet at the sudden encounter with the brave adventurer who had shared the boys' perils in Nicaragua, the Everglades and in Africa. “What are you doing here?”

“I might ax the same question of you,” was the reply, “but one at a time as the feller said when they all wanted to shoot him at once for stealing a horse. I've got time and I can wait.”

“You are the same old Ben, I see,” laughed Billy; “but seriously, what are you doing here?”

“Why I was just on my way to Boston,” was the rejoinder. “I seen this 'ad' in the paper where it said, 'Wanted, brave man, ex-sailor preferred, to assume dangerous mission—Big pay. Apply No. 46, Charlton Street, Boston.'” And Ben flourished a clipping.

“But, Ben,” remonstrated Billy, “you have plenty of money from your share of the ivory. I thought you had invested it in a rubber plantation in Central America.”

“That's right,” said Ben, with a sorrowful air. “I invested it all right—sunk it, maybe would be a better word, fer when I gets down there to start in developing my plantation, I finds that you couldn't see my noble estate fer the water that happened to cover it.”

“What!” exclaimed Billy, “you had been swindled?”

“Ay, ay, lad, that's about it. Some of these here land-sharks had trimmed me from top-gallant mast to bilge keel. They cleaned me out and left me high and dry. So when I see that 'ad' I says to myself, says, I, there's just the thing for me.”

“Say, Ben,” exclaimed Billy, suddenly, “Let me have a look at that 'ad' again, will you?”

“Sure,” said the old adventurer, handing him the clipping from which he had taken the address, “here you are.”

“Why!” exclaimed Billy suddenly, “L. B. are the initials of Luther Barr.”

“What! that old cat-a-mount?” cried Ben, “is he still alive?”

“He certainty is and up to fresh mischief,” was the rejoinder. “Of course there are lots of L. B.'s in Boston, but coupled with a conversation I overheard, it looks to me as if the man who inserted this 'ad' is Barr himself.”

“What makes you think so, youngster?”

Billy launched into a narration of what he had overheard on the steamer after his rescue.

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“Ph–e–e–w!” whistled Ben, as the young reporter concluded, “so the old varmint is up to his tricks again, is he? Well now, sonny, if this L. B. in the 'ad' should be the same as Luther Barr, it won't do no harm for me to be along with him. But first, I'll get my whiskers shaved off and that will make me look a heap different. Then I'll dress in a different rig and he won't know me any more than I'd know the old clipper North Star after they turned her into a coal barge.”

“You really mean that, Ben?”

“Do I really mean it,” echoed Ben, “well, watch me. Hullo!” he exclaimed suddenly, “there goes the last whistle. Well, good–by for the present and give me your address and I'll let you know as soon as I find out anything. Whoop–ee! it's good to see you lads again.”

So saying, after a hearty clasp of the hand the former mariner ran up the wharf and was pulled aboard clinging to one end of the gang–plank like a fly.

As Billy started for the hotel to meet the others, he was musing deeply over what he had overheard. So engrossed was he in his thoughts, in fact that when a rather roughly–dressed man stepped in front of him and peered into his face once or twice, as if to make certain he was the lad he sought, Billy gave an involuntary start. He was walking beside the gloomy arches of Brooklyn Bridge, some of which are used for refrigerating plants and others to store all kinds of goods, from hides to tin articles. It is a little frequented part of town except by persons walking across town from East River steamers.

“What do you want?” he demanded.

“Your name Barnes, young feller?” was the response.

“It is—what do you want?”

“Old man named Eben Joyce was just run over. They carried him into my house and he sent me to look for you.”

“How did you come to recognize me in the street?” demanded Billy, feeling a strong distrust of the stranger, who had little rat–like eyes and a furtive manner.

“I was on my way ter yer noospaper office, gov'ner,” rejoined the other, “but you see I had such a good description of yer handsome face that I couldn't miss but rec'ernize yer when I ran inter yer in the street.”

Now if Billy had thought this explanation over he would have seen that it would not hold water for a minute, but he was excited by the events of the day and in no mood for reflection.

“Well,” he demanded, “what does Mr. Joyce want?”

“I don't know, gov'ner. I didn't ask him that, you know. We always mind our own business, we folks on Vanderwater Street do. Come on, gov'ner, I'll take you there. It's only a few blocks. The old man does want to see you awful bad.”

“As a matter of fact I had an important engagement,” cried Billy, “but still if the poor old man is injured and wants me, I'll go with you.”

“All right, gov'ner, I'll take yer there,” promised his guide with a grin, “follow me and you can't go wrong. You've got a good heart, gov'ner.”

So saying he dived into the shadow of one of the great arches and Billy the next instant followed him into the gloom.

CHAPTER XIII. LUTHER BARR'S TRAP.

Billy's guide conducted him under the bridge and along a gloomy-looking street of poor houses, huddled together like the cages of animals. The windows of many of them were broken and they were otherwise tumbledown, and the young reporter realized that he was in one of the most squalid parts of New York. He grew suspicious and was about to halt his guide and ask him some questions when the ill-favored conductor suddenly stopped in front of a particularly dark, gloomy-looking brick tenement, and beckoning to Billy, urged the lad to follow.

In spite of his misgivings, Billy entered the place and followed his guide up four flights of steep, unlighted stairs.

"Here is Mr. Joyce's room," he announced, flinging open a door. Billy stepped forward through the portal, and found himself in an apartment in which the paper was peeling off the wall from long neglect, and the light only streaked in through cracks in the closed shutters. Save for a rickety chair and a broken-down table, it was empty.

"Where is Mr. Joyce?" Billy was about to ask, when he felt himself seized from behind and a voice hissed in his ear:

"Well, Master Barnes, we've got you where we want you."

At the same instant a stout rope was drawn about him, pinioning his arms to his sides.

In his captor, as he stepped forward, Billy had no difficulty in recognizing Sanborn, the treacherous mechanic, and while he gazed in astonishment at the man there appeared from an inner room Luther Barr and Malvoise, the French aviator.

"You'd better let me go at once," cried Billy angrily. "What do you want with me?"

"Nothing very much," piped old Barr, "nothing very much, my dear lad. You are in a position to do us a great service, that is all, and I am sure, after your providential rescue from the waters of the Sound, you ought to be grateful enough to try to benefit your fellow man by imparting a little information. You see, we saw your rescue and had a messenger track you from the wharf and bring you here."

Billy was puzzled, but nevertheless somewhat relieved. He had thought at first that his capture was due to the fact that the boys' enemies knew that he had overheard their conversation in the stateroom of the Princeton, but it was now evident that they had some other motive in luring him to their obscure meeting place, and had no idea that he had played eavesdropper on their plan to forestall the boys in their treasure quest.

"Tell me first what it is you want to know," said he stoutly, "I cannot say whether I will tell you anything or not till I learn that."

"Well, we won't occupy much of your valuable time then," put in Malvoise; "what we want to know is this: "How soon are those young whelps, the Boy Aviators, going to start for the Sargasso Sea?"

"Suppose I won't tell you," retorted Billy, bravely sparring for time.

"Then we shall find a means to make you."

"Well, I will not tell you one single thing about our plans, and you might as well make up your minds to that right now."

"What, you won't?"

"No, I won't."

Malvoise crouched as if he was about to spring on the boy, but old Barr interfered.

"No violence now, Malvoise," he croaked; "we can use other means. I really think we shall have to use another method to bring this young man to his senses. First of all, however, search him, he may have papers on him that concern our project."

But a search of Billy's clothes revealed no paper that threw any light on the Boy Aviators' plans, and the baffled plotters looked their rage.

"Lock him in the inner room," ordered old Barr, "it's a nice warm place for a young man to sit and meditate on his stubbornness, and perhaps to-morrow he will have come to his senses."

Without more ado Malvoise and Sanborn picked Billy up in their arms and carried him through the door from which Barr and the Frenchman had emerged and thrust him forward into a small room without windows. It was

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really more like a large cupboard than a room, and most probably at one time or another had been used as a clothes closet in the days when the old house was a mansion and stood in a fashionable part of the town.

Billy heard the key click in the lock and found himself in total darkness. From outside came to him the mocking voice of old Barr.

“We shall be back at the same time to-morrow, Master Barnes; please be ready to tell us what we want to know at that time.”

The others laughed; but Billy, angry and somewhat scared as he was, made no reply. Then he heard their footsteps die away and he was alone in the darkness in the deserted tenement.

He threw himself against the door with all his force several times, till his body was bruised and sore in fact, but it was of stout wood and yielded no more than if it had been the portal of a steel vault.

Seeing the futility of hoping to escape that way, Billy fell to trying to work himself out of his rope bonds. To his great joy after several minutes of wriggling he succeeded in loosening the not very securely tied knot and was soon free; so far as the rope was concerned. This accomplished he felt far more cheerful and set about trying some means of opening the door of his prison.

But without tools this was difficult—in fact, an impossible feat—as Billy, after a long period of wasted effort, found out. If only he had some kind of tool, however, he might be able to make some impression on the lock, he thought.

It was quite by accident that he encountered what he wanted. He was leaning back against the wall, after a long period of vain effort on the door, when his hand encountered what his sense of touch told him was a clothes hook, formed of bent wire—a relic of the days when Billy's dungeon was used as a cupboard evidently. With eager fingers the young reporter unscrewed the hook from the wall and then went to work to straighten it out till he should have a serviceable bit of wire with which to pick the lock. In his capacity as a reporter, Billy had some knowledge of the methods used by burglars; but he never thought, at the time the subject had interested him, that he would ever have occasion to put his knowledge to practical use.

Now, however, with his clumsy skeleton key he set to work poking about in the lock as eagerly as any marauder trying to effect an illicit entrance to a rich trove.

Just as it seemed that he would have to give up in despair, the lad's wire encountered a “tumbler” of the lock that yielded to its pressure.

Billy with a beating heart pressed and the lock, which in spite of its age seemed to have been recently oiled, probably by Barr, responded. The next instant with a click, the lock slid open and Billy walked out of the stifling air of the coop—free.

It was the work of only a few minutes for him to reach the street, as Barr and his accomplices had not taken the precaution to lock the outer door in their hurry. Probably they didn't think it necessary, anyhow, as it could never have occurred to them that Billy would be able to effect an escape from the locked closet, except by working a miracle.

Swiftly the boy threaded his way through the streets and finally reached the Astor House. He found that the boys had preceded him there and had gone away, after leaving a message with the clerk for Billy to call up the Chesters' Madison Avenue home in case he should happen to arrive after they had left.

Billy at once made his way to the 'phone booths and was soon in communication with Frank at the other end of the wire.

“This is the second time to-day you've worried the life out of us,” exclaimed Frank, much relieved as he heard Billy's voice. “When you didn't appear at the Astor we were badly puzzled, I can tell you. We thought something had happened to you.”

“And it nearly did,” retorted Billy indignantly, “I've got a long story to tell you, Frank.”

“Get right on a car and come up,” was the rejoinder.

Billy was soon speeding uptown to the Chester boys' home. He found all the adventurers there in the room over the garage which had been given up to the lads as a workshop and experimental laboratory. With what wonderment the boys listened to Billy's tale may be imagined.

“I'd like to see the rascals' faces when they open that closet to-morrow morning,” cried Lathrop Beasley, who had joined the boys' party at Frank's urgent invitation.

“It will be a case of 'gone, but not forgotten,’” grinned Billy. “But seriously, fellows, this shows the necessity

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of starting as soon as possible. It means a race between us and old Luther Barr.”

“And we mean to win it,” put in Frank in a determined voice. “It will not take long to adjust the pontoons to the Golden Eagle's frames, and that done we are practically ready.”

“Where do you intend to start from?” asked Billy.

“We were talking that over on our way up to the city,” was Frank's reply. “My plan was to charter a large cabin motor-boat at some point on the Gulf coast—say Galveston—and then round the point of Florida and keep on east across the Caribbean. Once we have arrived on the outskirts of the Sargasso we can erect the Golden Eagle on her pontoons and make a flight for the galleon.”

“A good idea,” cried Billy, eagerly, “we ought to have no difficulty in getting a good boat at Galveston.”

“I have one already,” was Frank's astonishing reply. Frank loved to spring surprises.

“What?” shouted the amazed young reporter.

Frank drew out a telegram.

“I got this to-night in response to a wire I sent a yacht broker there some days ago,” he said.

“Read it out, Frank,” urged Billy.

“Have what you want in gasolene yacht, Bolo. Fifty feet over all, twenty-five horsepower engine, auxiliary sails and fine cabin. Will charter reasonably. Wire at once if you want her.”

“Sounds good,” commented Harry.

“So I thought,” said Frank, “and as we've no time to lose, it would be a good idea to telegraph them to get her ready for sea at once. I will also instruct the agent to get a ship chandler to stock her with provisions for a cruise of two months.”

Billy threw his hat in the air.

“Hurray for the BOY AVIATORS afloat!” he shouted.

CHAPTER XIV. MR. "L. B.'s" DIRIGIBLE

The next morning Ben Stubbs arrived in Boston, and waiting till evening made his way to No. 46 Charlton Street. During the day he had had his whiskers shaved off which entirely altered his appearance.

The house bearing the number he sought was a five-story structure of gray stone, and had evidently once been a home of wealth; but the manufacturing district had long since encroached on the region and it now was the only residence remaining in the midst of monotonous blocks of houses of industry. In fact, at dusk—the time at which Ben Stubbs paid his first visit to it—the neighborhood was practically deserted, as the factory hands who worked there during the day had all gone home and they lived in another part of the city.

Ben "took his bearings," as he would have termed it, before he mounted the flight of steps leading to the front door of the house. He noticed that the windows were all shuttered, and to the casual observer it would have seemed that the house was unoccupied. The sailor's sharp eye, however, noticed that a cloud of smoke was proceeding from a chimney and that numerous electric wires were strung from the street poles into the house.

As he stood there gazing at it an old watchman, who had been sitting in a shanty in front of one of the factories, approached him.

"A gloomy-looking place that, eh?" said the garrulous old man, addressing Ben.

"Ay, ay, shipmate, you may well say that," was the reply, "a melancholer looking craft I never see. Do you know anything about the folks as lives there?"

"Very little," replied the old man in his quavering tones, "but that little I don't like. I've seen wagons drive up there with big carboys of acid on 'em, and sometimes in the night, when it's all still, I hear a great noise of hammering and strange lights gleam through the chinks of the shutters—ah, there's something queer about it I can tell you. All's not right in that house."

"Hum," said Ben, for lack of anything better to say.

"And for the last week," went on the old man, "things has been queerer than ever. I don't like it, I tell you, when at midnight you see a great dark thing come flying off the roof with a gleaming eye on it and a buzzing voice like a big fly. I leave it to you if that ain't enough to scare any Christian, let alone an old man watching a factory in this lonesome part of town."

Ben agreed; but to tell the truth, his attention had been distracted by the old man's description of the night-terror he had seen. In the old sailor's mind there was little doubt that the object that had so scared the old watchman was the dirigible that Luther Barr had purchased and which the crafty old millionaire was trying out by night so as to avoid attracting any attention.

"Well," said Ben lightly, "I've got a little business in that there house, shipmate, and if so be as I finds out anything about what kind of folks they are, I'll let you know."

"Thank you," rejoined the old watchman earnestly, "I'm getting an old man to have such scares thrown into me—it's really too bad."

Ben lightly ran up the steps, having nodded farewell to the old watchman, and the next minute pressed the electric bell. Somewhere in the far interior of the gloomy mansion he could hear the tinkle of the answering summons. The sailor, as he waited for the door to open on he knew not what, reached back with his weather-beaten hand to his hip pocket. He nodded with satisfaction as his fingers encountered the butt of a revolver of heavy caliber.

"All right, old bark-and-bite," muttered Ben to himself, "I feel better now we've shaken hands."

At that moment there came a great clanking from inside the door, as if heavy bolts and chains were being removed, and the next instant the portal swung open and Ben found himself face to face with a thickset man, who seemed, by his complexion and general appearance, to be of Spanish origin. His heavy eyebrows and thin, cruel lips gave him a singularly sinister appearance.

"What do you wish?" he demanded of Ben, with a foreign accent that agreed with his general makeup.

"Is Mr. L. B. at home?" inquired Ben, "cos if he is, I want to see him particular. You see, I'm in need of a job and—"

"Oh" said the other, with what seemed to be relief in his tones, "you come in answer to the advertisement.

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Come in. I am glad you have called. We were sadly in need of a hand, and you seem stout and strong enough for any work we may call on you to do."

"That's as it may be," cautiously replied Ben. "I ain't delicate exactly, but I'd like to know just what my dooties are to be, afore I signs on for this cruise."

By this time the man with the heavy eyebrows had ushered Ben into a parlor furnished with what had once been great splendor; but now the hangings were faded, the furniture warped and aged and over all hung a musty aroma as if the place had been closed for ages.

"Sit down," ordered Ben's guide, "now then, first, where do you come from?"

"Right here in Boston," rejoined Ben, "that is, when I'm at home; but Hank Hardtack don't get a shore cruise very often. I follow the sea, gov'ner, from year's end to year's end mostly; but tiring of the foc'sle I thought I'd like a land job for a spell, and seeing your 'ad' in a New York paper, I happened to get a hold of, I made bold to call."

"What did you say your name was?" inquired the other.

"Hardtack—Mr. Hank Hardtack, sometimes called 'Skilly,'" said the unblushing Ben. "I'm a homely craft, but seaworthy, gov'ner."

"So I see," said the other, with a slight smile. "Well, Mr. Luther Barr, who is L. B., is not at home now. In fact, he is in New York; but I venture to say that you will suit him down to the ground."

Ben could scarcely suppress a grin of delight at the mention of old Barr's name. He was then on the right track. How lucky that the crafty old wolf was in New York, he thought.

"As for your duties," went on the other, "they will be novel to you. I do not suppose you are at all acquainted with air-craft?"

Ben shook his head, inwardly thinking, "If you knew what I know, my hearty."

"Well, this job is to help run a dirigible balloon," went on the other. "We advertised for a sailor so that we would be sure of getting a man who would not lose his head at a height and who would be an all round handy man. We have an engineer and a pilot and Mr. Barnes and myself at present complete the crew. If you will follow me I will show you the vessel."

Hardly able to conceal his satisfaction, Ben, with all the indifference he could assume, replied that he would be very glad to see the air-ship, and followed his guide to the roof of the house. The factories about them were mostly two-and three-story structures, so that the roof of the deserted mansion formed a fine workshop for those who did not want their movements spied upon or overlooked.

Housed under a protecting shed of canvas, stretched in a wooden framework, was a large dirigible balloon, its partially filled bag of yellow silk wrinkled and lopsided under its network of stout cord. Suspended below the bag was a framework, in the center of which was built a pilot house with a short "deckhouse," so to speak, extended astern of it. A runway extended fore and aft on the platform and was railed, clearly indicating its purpose as a sort of promenade deck, or perhaps a navigating bridge.

Ben's guide beckoned to the amazed adventurer to follow, and led the way through a small door, kept closed with a powerful spring, into what seemed to be the engine-room of the craft.

"A hundred horsepower here," said the black-browed man, touching the glittering cylinder tops of the gasolene engine. "The tanks are carried below and have a large capacity. We have a cruising radius of more than fifteen hundred miles on one filling."

Ben nodded and his guide, after indicating the various gauges, height and speed indicators and other instruments in the engine-room, led the way through another spring-closed door into a comfortably fitted up main cabin. Touching a switch he flooded the cabin with a soft light that glowed from a ground glass shade affixed to the engine-room bulkhead. The place was decorated in white and gold, and divans, covered with crimson velvet cushions, extended along each side of the chamber. In the center was a swinging table, and above it, in neat racks, were numerous charts and mathematical instruments, each in its own place. Six large portholes, three on a side, admitted daylight when the ship was out of the shed, and there was a window of plate glass in the floor, through which occupants of the cabin could gaze down to the landscape below if so inclined. Small staterooms opened off it.

The next part of the ship to be visited was the pilot-house, which was reached by a short flight of steps from the main cabin. In this part of Luther Barr's dirigible were placed the steering wheel, engine controls and wind and weather gauges. Large portholes, that could be opened if required, gave a view out on every side, and through two

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affixed at the rear of the pilot-house, which was raised about three feet above the cabin roof, it was possible to command a view of the stern of the ship. From the pilot-house, doors opened on to the navigating deck. Ben's attention was caught by an object shrouded in heavy tarpaulin on the deck immediately forward of the pilot-house.

"A rapid-firing gun," explained his guide, "you see we are going on a cruise that may be dangerous and so we are going armed. In the cabin, beneath the divans, are lockers in which ammunition and rifles are kept."

"Well, shipmate, I don't want to go on no cruise that threatens danger," cried Ben, hoping in this way to elicit something as to the nature of Barr's plans, but he was unsuccessful. The other merely shrugged his shoulders and replied:

"I did not say there WAS danger. There is none in fact—to us that is, but—"

He paused and checked himself as if he realized he was saying too much, nor could Ben elicit anything more from him.

"Well, you've got a good-looking ship here," was Ben's next remark, "but are you sure she can fly?"

"Fly!" indignantly cried the other, "like a seagull, man. We have tested her several nights from this roof. She is as safe as a street car. This wonderful craft, senior, is my invention—mine, the child of the brain of Alfredo Constantio."

He struck an attitude.

"Well, Mr. Constantio, you're all right," replied Ben, "and now if you'll excuse me I'll just go round to my sumptuous apartments and get my ditty bag."

"Very well, I will come with you," rejoined Constantio, "you see, you have seen the secrets of the ship now, and I don't want you out of my sight till we are ready to sail on our venture."

This was an unexpected complication.

Ben had figured on getting out of the house on the excuse of packing his things and then taking a train to New York and apprising his young friends of his discoveries. Senior Constantio, it seemed, was too crafty for this, however.

"Well," thought Ben, "there is no help for it. I shall have to trust to luck to give him the slip I suppose."

Thus hoping the old sailor sallied forth with the redoubtable Don Constantio, who, for his part, was very garrulous and confided to Ben that he had sold his invention to Luther Barr for a big price, because the old millionaire needed a good dirigible in a hurry.

"But," he went on, "while I have a great ship, my main secret is in the gas. I have discovered a powder which can be easily carried and which when mixed with the proper ingredients forms the pure hydrogen gas. I make it in cylinders that will withstand a pressure of two thousand pounds. Hydrogen cylinders weigh, it is true, three hundred pounds each, they are of such enormous thickness, and are made of special steel—like a gun, but, Senior Hardtack, my powder occupies so little space that I can carry enough for several inflations in receptacles which combined do not weigh more than one hundred and fifty pounds."

Talking thus the black-browed inventor walked beside Ben, occasionally asking:

"How much further, Senior Hardtack, to your lodgings?"

"Not much further now," Ben always replied, wondering when an opportunity would present itself to escape. Suddenly one came.

As they turned a corner a small boy with a bundle of papers almost ran into them, and thrusting his papers up almost in Senior Constantio's face, shouted:

"Wuxtry, wuxtry!" with deafening lung power.

All at once he darted off, and at the same moment the inventor cried:

"My watch! he has taken my watch! While he thrust his papers in my face he stole my watch!"

Shouting "Stop thief" at the top of his voice he raced off in the direction the newsboy had run, and Ben lost no time in taking to his heels in the opposite direction.

After doubling round several corners and then doubling on his own trail round another block he felt reasonably secure he had given the inventor the slip and, hailing a cab, was driven to the station. He was fortunate in securing a train to New York without having to wait more than five minutes, and late that night the Chester boys and the others of their party were in full possession of the details of the air-ship in which Luther Barr meant to overreach them if it lay within his power.

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CHAPTER XV. OFF FOR THE SARGASSO.

The knowledge that Luther Barr's air-ship was so nearly ready to start on the expedition which Sanborn's treachery had suggested to the old millionaire, acted as a spur to the boys in making their final arrangements. By starting from Galveston itself they saved the necessity of laying in a large stock of supplies in New York, so that when two days later "good-byes" having been said and last parental warnings issued—their only equipment beside their personal belongings were the boxes containing the sections of the Golden Eagle and the pontoons. The coverings had not been removed from the aeroplane's surfaces, but they had been packed, covered as they were. There was a reason for this, as lacing on the coverings at sea, even with the additional stability the boys hoped to secure by the use of the pontoons, would have been a tedious or even perhaps an impossible task. The wings, therefore, which joined at the center of the aeroplane, above the chassis, were packed in four sections measuring twenty-eight feet each. These sections Frank planned to carry in the cabin of the Bolo where they would be out of harm's way.

Five days later the adventurers reached the flat, uninteresting city of Galveston and lost no time in making immediate preparations for a start. Frank found that the agent had followed his instructions to the letter, and the galley shelves of the Bolo were filled with small articles to be used in cooking, and that flour bins, sugar and other receptacles had been well stocked. Besides all this there was a plentiful supply of such staples as beans, onions, potatoes, bacon, coffee, tea and a big stock of canned meats and vegetables. Their weapons were the boys' own armory, and Harry put in the best part of a day constructing neat racks in the cabin, which, when the various rifles and shotguns were hung in place, gave the little chamber a very businesslike appearance. The cabin was twenty-nine feet long, and the wings of the Golden Eagle were therefore a snug fit when suspended on slings from the cabin roof. The aeroplane engine was also placed in the cabin. The framework and other less perishable parts of the Golden Eagle, as well as the pontoons, were placed outside on the cabin roof, securely lashed down and covered with waterproof tarpaulin.

In the space under the cabin floor was stored an extra heavy anchor for use in emergency, in addition to the two fifty-pound mud-hooks the Bolo regularly carried. The boys noted with satisfaction that the booms on which the Bolo spread her auxiliary sails were lengthy affairs and would readily lend themselves to use as derricks when the time came to hoist the various parts on the Golden Eagle overboard into the floating erection base. The Bolo also carried a twelve-foot, high-sided dory, almost as seaworthy, despite her diminutive size, as the larger vessel. Under the cockpit seats were reserve tanks for gasolene and water, and beneath the cabin floor and in the bow were additional receptacles for fuel. Besides this supply the boys laid in a stock of five-gallon cans of gasolene, which were distributed wherever they would fit in on the little craft; some even being lashed on deck alongside the cabin.

The transportation of so much inflammable matter naturally called for the greatest caution, and, much to the disappointment of Ben Stubbs, who had insisted on joining the expedition, and Bluewater Bill, Frank absolutely forbade smoking aboard the craft. Nor was anybody allowed to carry matches. The only lucifers aboard were locked in the galley under Frank's sole charge. However, they all agreed that no precautions could be too stringent on a craft so laden with inflammables and explosives as was the Bolo.

The night before they were to sail, the boys slept on board. The Bolo's cabin was equipped with folding Pullman berths and also with transoms. Each berth held two, and the transoms accommodated the same number, so that eight could sleep comfortably aboard the little craft. Early the next morning, while the appetizing aroma of coffee and frizzling bacon filled the cabin from Ben's galley, a youthful news peddler wandered on to the dock and took up his place with other curious persons; for the equipping of the Bolo had made quite a stir among the water-front loungers of Galveston. The lad insisted on throwing a paper on board for "good luck," he said. Frank, who was out in the cockpit at the time re-stowing some cases of gasolene, threw the boy a coin and thought no more of the paper till, as they were discussing Ben's breakfast, he idly glanced over its front page.

"Mysterious Air-ship," was the heading that instantly caught his eye and caused him to set down his cup of coffee untasted. Reading the article he found even more matter to hold his attention. The item was dated Miami, Fla., and read as follows:

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“Much curiosity has been excited here by the sudden appearance of a tent housing a huge air-ship. The aerial camp is located at a point several miles south of town. The tent is guarded by men armed with shotguns and no one is allowed to approach anywhere near it. The air-ship, however, has been seen at night taking flights seaward. So far, no explanation of the object of the air-ship's presence here has been vouchsafed by those interested in it. They are all strangers here and will not impart any information.”

A few paragraphs further down another Miami despatch caught the eye. It was to the effect that “the Brigand, the yacht of Luther Barr, the New York and Newport millionaire, arrived here yesterday and anchored off shore. Mr. Barr is not a guest of any of our hotels, but is making his home aboard his palatial craft.”

“Well, here's some news as is news,” laughed Frank, handing the paper to the others. “It just goes to show that we are not any too previous in making a start. Now, if everybody's finished breakfast, I propose that we send our good-bye letters ashore and cast off for the Sargasso.”

“The sooner the better,” cried Harry, diving into his locker for a letter he had written the night before. The others also had their correspondence ready, so no time was lost in entrusting the mail to the same gamin who had thrown the paper on board and making final preparations for the start.

With the exception of the loafers on the wharf there was no one to look on, as the Bolo, with the Stars and Stripes bravely flying from her staff astern and the Golden Eagle's pennant attached to her bow, chugged out of the harbor and into the open Gulf.

“Off at last!” shouted Billy Barnes, from his seat on the top of the piled up cabin roof, as the shores of Galveston rapidly receded and finally became a mere blot. “If we don't have some dandy adventures before we get back call me a doodle bug.”

All that day and the next the Bolo forged steadily onward over the purple waters of the Gulf. The boys set regular watches and things moved aboard the little craft man-of-war fashion from the start. Every night at sundown “colors” were made, that is, the flags were hauled down and the sunset gun fired with the tiny saluting cannon the little craft boasted. Then the red and green side-lights and the white bow-light were set in position. After supper in the cockpit under the awning—for it was far too warm to eat in the cabin—there would be songs and stories by Ben Stubbs and Bluewater Bill, who had been appointed navigating officer and first mate respectively, of the good ship Bolo.

On the morning of the second day out the boys were treated to a rare sea spectacle. There was a fair seaway, and the Bolo was plunging along through it as if she enjoyed it as much as the boys, when a cry from Billy, who had the lookout, aroused them all.

“Sail ho!—or rather, steamer ho!” hailed the amateur A. B.

“Where away?” thundered Bluewater Bill, who had the wheel, in true nautical style.

Billy was up a stump. What to reply he had no idea.

“It's off our bow,” he hailed back; “but I don't know if you call it port or starboard.”

Steadying himself by one of the foremast stays, Ben Stubbs sprang on to the cabin roof.

“Steamer on the port bow,” he hailed, “looks like a Mallory liner.”

And a Mallory liner it was.

As the boys drew nearer they gazed entranced at the fine spectacle the huge black hull made as she rushed through the rolling Gulf waters, her bow piling up a huge creamy wave as she cut her way. Her passengers lined her rail and waved madly at the tiny Bolo, rolling and plunging about in the waves that did not even rock the big liner. The boys for their part waved with all their might and Billy blew a blast on the foghorn.

“Aft there—aft and dip your colors!” shouted Bluewater Bill.

Ben Stubbs scrambled to the stern and dipped the flag again and again as the big black craft rushed on, without, however, noticing the courtesy of the small boat. As she sped by the boys spied her name, Brazos, in big gilt letters on her stern.

“I wish we could go as fast as that,” remarked Billy, as the big steamer rapidly dwindled and finally passed out of sight, leaving only a black pall of smoke to show that she had passed.

“We are doing well enough,” remarked Bluewater Bill, gazing back at the Bolo's wake.

“What are we making, do you judge?” asked Frank.

“Ten knots easily,” replied the sailor, squinting at the white line of foam astern.

“Pretty good for this little craft,” remarked Ben Stubbs, “though you can't always judge by the wake. I

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remember when I was on the old Dolphin brigantine in the China Sea. One morning we all of a sudden noticed a most tremendous wake ahind us. It was running like a mill-race. I peeked over the side and it was fair whooping along.

“Why, we must be going twenty miles an hour,” says the skipper; “queer we can't feel any motion.”

“Well, boys, to make a long story short, we was that way for three days and never moved a foot. You see, it was one of them queer currents, and the pace it streaked by made it look as though we was going ahead when, shiver my top-gallants, if we wasn't standing still, the wind being just strong enough to keep us going forward at the same pace the current drew us back—what do you think of that?”

The boys didn't know what to think, and said so, but Bluewater Bill winked at them with a portentous eye and merely said:

“That reminds me, shipmate, of what happened when I was aboard the Flying Scud off Madagascar. If so be you don't mind, I'll spin you the yarn.

“One night it comes on to blow most tremenjous, and by morning we finds we was in one of them circular storms. Wall, mates, the wind blew all around us, but we didn't move at all. At eight bells the pig-pen fetched loose and them porkers got caught in the wind and whisked off the deck by the hurricane. As I've said, it was a circular storm and them poor porkers jest kep a goin' roun' and roun' and roun' the ship all that day. It was night afore the wind died down, and then, by a freak, it reversed and blew 'em all back again; but they was so dizzy that for a week they ran round the deck in circles and when we wanted pork it was no trick at all to catch a hog. All you had to do was to find out how he was revolving and then get in his way,—what do you think of that?”

“That you are exaggerating, William,” said Ben, in a tone of reproof.

“Wall, if wind and tide can hold a ship still; wind alone can give a bunch of hogs a merry-go-round, can't it?” rejoined Bill.

“It can, but it don't,” was Ben's reply.

“Ah, but you never sailed off the coast of Madagascar, did yer?” demanded Bill.

“No, I can't say as I ever did,” replied Ben.

“Wall, then,” triumphantly cried Bill, “you don't know what a pesky wind that Madagascar one is.”

How long this argument, which the boys listened to with some amusement, might have gone on is hard to say, probably all night, if Ben had not suddenly cut it short by springing to his feet with an exclamation:

“Come on, shipmates!” he exclaimed, “stop gamming and get a move on and snug down this yer awning if you don't want to lose it. Billy, you open the self-baling scuppers in the cockpit, my lad, and Lathrop and Harry, you get out forward and double lash all that top hamper.”

“Why, Ben, what's the matter?” asked Frank, “the sea is just as smooth as it has been all day and the sun is shining.”

“Well, it won't be in a half an hour,” replied the old salt, pointing southward. “See that cloud?”

He indicated a tiny purplish bit of vapor floating against the distant blue like an argosy. “There's wind in that cloud or my name's not Ben Stubbs,” he concluded.

Bluewater Bill nodded his assent.

“Mor'n a capful, too,” he said grimly.

Even as the two old salts exchanged glances the cloud seemed to grow, as if by magic, and by the time the awning was snugged home and lashed and everything had been hauled taut in preparation for the blow, the whole heavens were overcast with a sullen gray veil, and the sea began to rise with a low moaning sound that presaged what Ben Stubbs termed “a bad blow.”

CHAPTER XVI. IN DIRE PERIL.

"Get that thar dory aboard," was Ben's next order to the boys, who began to feel quite tired, what with their exertions and the oppressive weather. As he spoke, a livid streak of lightning tore across the overcast sky, followed by a long roll of thunder that made the boat vibrate.

"Come on, bear a hand, there's no time to lose," he insisted, "tumble aft there—tumble aft."

It was quite a task to get the dory aboard, even with the aid of the Bolo's stern davits. The sea was rising every minute and even when they had the "falls," as they are called, secured to the little dinghy, she threatened to stave either herself or the Bolo while she was being hoisted and lashed. At last, however, even that task was accomplished and the boys began to anticipate a rest. But the indefatigable Ben would not let them loaf, even then.

"I want her to set more by the stern," he said, "shift those gasolene cans aft here, and we will trim her down in good shape."

"You see," he explained to Frank, "when the sea gets real high she's going to lift her propeller out of the water if she isn't well down by the stern, and that would make the engine 'race,' and that we don't want it to do, as it is likely to put it out of business."

The boy nodded.

"I suppose it's a good thing to have all the freeboard at the bow you can, also," he said.

"That's the idea," was Ben's reply.

And now the storm was upon them in its full fury.

The wind seemed like a wild beast filled with furious instincts and bent on the destruction of the Bolo. Half buried in the giant waves that the sudden hurricane whipped up, the little craft bravely struggled along. Bluewater Bill kept her nose pointed right into the big combers.

Her engine was cut down to half and then a quarter speed, but she was rolling so badly that Ben Stubbs was considering the advisability of putting a rag of sail on her to steady her. She wallowed in the big seas like an empty bottle, and every lurch threatened to start some of her seams.

While not exactly scared, the boys were certainly worried.

"Do you think she'll last out?" asked Billy of Ben, poking his head out of the cabin companion—for all the boys but Frank had been ordered below by Ben that there might be plenty of room for working the Bolo in case of a sudden emergency.

"Last out?" roared Ben, the wind whipping the words from his lips as fast as he framed them, "why of course she will, my boy. I've seen as bad seas as this lived out by a craft no bigger than our dory."

But although Ben spoke so confidently he was, none the less, worried. As long as the engine kept at its work he knew they were all right, but, like most old "tar hands," he mistrusted gasolene "contraptions," as he called them, and in this instance his mistrust seemed well founded, for, as he stood in the after part of the cockpit looking anxiously astern at the mountainous green combers that raced after the Bolo, as if determined to drag her down to "Davy Jones' locker," the old sailor noticed something peculiar about the motion of the boat.

She seemed to be falling off into the trough of the waves.

"Keep her up!" yelled Ben to Bluewater Bill, who sat grimly at the wheel affixed to the cabin bulkhead.

"I can't!" roared back Bill against the fury of the wind.

"What's the matter?"

"The engine's broke down, I guess; anyhow, she don't answer her helm, I can't get steerageway on her."

As he spoke a huge sea crashed broadside on against the Bolo, shaking her as an angry mother shakes a child, and sending a great volume of green water tumbling aboard.

"We've got to do something and do it quick or we'll be swamped," thought Ben to himself.

He banged on the top of the closed companion slide.

It was drawn back from inside and Harry's head appeared.

"Did we strike anything, Ben?" he asked.

"No, youngster, but a wave struck us and that's near as bad. What's the matter with the engine?"

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"I don't know," answered the boy, "I'm trying to fix it, but the boat's rolling so that I can't seem to get at anything. I'm doing the best I can."

"Well, fix it as quick as you can," was Ben's reply.

"Why—are we in danger?" demanded Harry, struck by Ben's anxious tone.

"Well, I don't want to say that YET, but we've got to get out of the trough of the sea or—"

A huge wave came toppling aboard, drenching the speaker from top to toe, and almost washing him overboard. A brass handhold saved him. The cockpit was instantly flooded, but thanks to the patent self-baling scuppers, she cleared herself without much water getting into the cabin.

But it had been a narrow escape for all three of the adventurers in the open part of the boat. As the mass of water struck him, Frank had grabbed an awning stanchion, more from instinct than anything else, and thus saved himself from being swept overboard.

Bill had laid hold of the wheel, and although he was lifted from the helmsman's seat and forcibly banged down again, he was safe.

"We've got to rig a sea anchor," declared Ben, "but in the first place, Frank, get below and empty your canvas clothes bags, stuff 'em with oakum and pour all the lubricating oil you can spare in on top of the oakum and then make a lot of holes in the side with your knife."

Frank did not ask any questions, although he had no idea what the old sailor meant to do. He entered the cabin, through the slide, and was soon at work on his assigned task, although the motion of the Bolo, which seemed first to stand on her bow and then on her stern and varied this with a plunge sideways till it seemed as if she was going to the bottom, made its accomplishment difficult.

In the meantime, Ben had taken the oars and spare spar out of the dory and lashed them all together with a long rope. Carrying this bundle forward he attached it to a line and dropped it overboard. The Bolo instantly began to drift away from it as it seemed. Soon there was a distance of fifty feet or more between the struggling vessel's bow and this improvised "sea-anchor." Ben made the line fast to a Samson post and crawled aft along the cabin roof; pausing several times when an extra hard blast of wind made it dangerous to proceed.

Primitive as the device was, it answered.

The Bolo's head was drawn round toward the wind by this "drag," as sailors call it, and she no longer shipped cross seas. A few minutes later, Frank had two of the oil bags ordered by Ben ready. Once more the sailor crawled on to the plunging bow and made one of the devices fast on either side.

To Frank's amazement the seas at once began to subside—that is, in the immediate vicinity of the Bolo.

"That's what oil will do," commented Ben, gazing about him with a satisfied look. "It spreads a thin scum on the waves and prevents them breaking. Now we shall do nicely for awhile, though now the worst is about over, I don't mind admitting that I did think once or twice that we were bound for Davy Jones' locker."

After a lot of searching the cause of the engine's sudden stoppage was located. One of the bearings had become so heated in the struggle against the storm that the machine had ceased working. The cause was evidently that the violent "tumblefication" that the Bolo had gone through had hindered the proper operation of the force-feed lubrication. After giving the bearing time to cool off, Frank affixed a regular grease cup to it and no difficulty was then experienced in starting up the engine once more.

"No use in laying to," said Ben, after he had been consulted as to the advisability of going ahead. "The blow's as bad now as it will get, and we are being driven back every minute we aren't going forward. There's no such thing at sea as standing still."

The drag was accordingly hauled aboard, at no small risk; but the oil bags were left to drip their calming lubricant alongside. This done, the Bolo was put on her course again and slowly forced her way through and over the angry waves that seemed determined to prevent her progress. Owing to the heavy clouds that overhung the sky, ever and anon ripped open by a lightning flash, it grew dark at four o'clock, or eight bells, as Ben called it, and Bluewater Bill was sent forward with the lights. But they had hardly been placed in position when a huge sea swept the Bolo from stem to stern, extinguishing them instantly.

"No use putting out any more," said Ben, "we must trust to luck not to run across any vessels. I don't think that we are in the steamer track anyway."

But how wrong Ben's words were they all realized when, at about midnight, Harry, who had the wheel, thundered on the cabin top and yelled at the top of his voice:

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“All hands on deck.”

They tumbled out without waiting to don any more clothes than they had turned in with. The cause of the boy's sudden summons was at once plain. Not half a mile from them were the red and green lights of an approaching steamer, and judging from the height they were out above the water, the vessel was a big one.

“She's headed right for us,” shouted Harry.

“That's right, we can see both lights,” exclaimed Frank.

“Put your wheel over,” yelled Ben.

“I can't, something's the matter with it,” rejoined Harry, as the Bolo rose on the crest of another big wave and they saw the steamer driving toward them right in their path.

“Tiller rope's broken,” pronounced Frank after a brief examination.

“No time to fix it up now,” announced Ben, “cut out the engine. We must trust to the wind to drift us off the steamer's course.”

Bluewater Bill dived into the cabin for the lantern, but the furious wind snuffed out the light in a second.

And all the time the big steamer was driving closer and closer—straight for the helpless motor-boat.

“The signal gun,” suddenly shouted Frank. This was a small saluting cannon fixed to the after end of the cabin roof.

Quick as thought Billy and Lathrop ripped off the waterproof cover and Frank jerked the lanyard. Luckily the gun had been loaded with the idea of firing salutes as they left Galveston, but the idea had been forgotten in the excitement.

“Bang!”

Even above the storm the report sounded loudly, and the flash at least was visible.

Would the steamer notice their signal?

There was a moment of agonizing suspense—in which the boys saw death at sea in its ugliest form loom up in front of them.

[Illustration: “A moment of agonizing suspense.”]

The towering black bows seemed to be imminent above the Bolo when there was a sudden flashing of lights on the lofty foredeck, and a voice hailed through the night:

“Motor-boat ahoy!”

The adventurers shouted back at the top of their lungs.

Suddenly the black form of the great vessel, pierced by scores of lighted portholes, seemed to glide away from the Bolo, and, with a rush and roar as the waves smashed against her lofty steel sides, the big vessel raced by.

Gazing far above them the boys could see a uniformed figure on the bridge shouting questions through a megaphone. He was, no doubt, inquiring what sort of lunatics they were whom he had so narrowly escaped sending to the bottom.

“A miss is as good as a mile,” was Ben's comment when they all breathed more freely, “but no more misses like that, thank you.”

CHAPTER XVII. BILLY'S NARROW ESCAPE.

By daybreak the fury of the hurricane had blown itself out and the sun rose on a sea that while still storm-tossed was moderate compared to the terrific upheaval of the preceding night; by noon, in fact, so suddenly did the wind drop, the Bolo was nosing her way along through what seemed a glittering, sunlit desert of almost perfectly smooth water.

"Let's get the lines out and troll; we might catch a shark," was Billy's sudden suggestion.

"Right you are," assented Bluewater Bill. "There's lots of them in these waters—savage critters, too. It's a charity to catch them."

Suddenly he broke into song:

"Oh, sharks have teeth and whales have tails,
Cows have horns and so have snails,
But of all the fish in the ocean blue
The very worst is the green gaboo."

"What on earth is a gaboo?" demanded Frank, who with the others was lolling about the cockpit under the awning, which had been re-rigged.

"Why," said Bill, scratching his head, "a gaboo is—well now, let's see—ah, yes, a gaboo is a good rhyme for blue."

"If you do anything like that again we shall have to hold a court-martial and have you thrown overboard to feed your gaboos," laughed Frank.

"Well, that's what you call poetic license," protested Bill.

"From now on, yours is revoked," declared Frank, "but, seriously, Bill, do you know anything about shark fishing?"

"Do I?" demanded the old shellback. "Well, when I was in these very waters in the Scaramouch we caught one with a bit of pork that weighed—the shark, I mean, not the pork—I forget just what, and wouldn't say, for fear you might think I was prevestigating, but it was twenty-four foot long."

"Oh, come, Bill, not twenty-four," protested Harry.

"That's what it was," stoutly asserted Bill, rummaging in a locker for a shark-hook.

"Why, the biggest shark recorded is only eighteen feet in length," protested Billy.

"Don't know nothing 'bout records, Master Billy, but I do know that this yar varmint was twenty-four."

"Did you measure him?" asked Frank.

"Not much," snorted Bill, "he'd have measured us, and we'd have soon measured our length if we'd tried. But now if any one has a bit of fat pork, I wouldn't be a bit surprised but we can fish up one of them finny monsters."

Accordingly a bit of pork was secured from the galley stores and placed on the shark-hook, a huge affair as big as the hook used to hang meat on in butcher shops. To its hank was shackled a bit of stout chain, about two feet long. To this, Bill affixed a stout rope, and let the line trail out astern about fifty feet.

"Now, Billy Barnes, since you was so skeptical, you hold the line, and, when you feel a tug, take a turn around the cleat here or he'll yank you overboard."

"Yank me overboard," cried Billy, incredulously. "Oh, get out, Bill! What do you think I am—an old woman?"

Bill said nothing, but cut himself a big bit of chewing tobacco and stuffed it into his face. Frank would not have allowed such a habit on the Bolo, but he felt as he had deprived the old sailors of their pipes, he could not cut off every luxury, so Bill was allowed to chew in quiet content.

"Isn't this bully, just going right ahead like this after all the terrible things that happened in the night!" exclaimed Harry, as the Bolo cut along through the placid waters.

"Great," agreed Frank, "and yet I am glad in one way we ran into that blow. Ben Stubbs assured me that we were not likely to get anything worse in these latitudes, and the Bolo stood up to it as if she had been a clipper."

"Yes; she certainly is a fine little ship," agreed the others.

All at once there came a yell from Billy Barnes.

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The startled boys look up just in time to see him yanked bodily out of the cockpit, over the counter and into the sea. To their horror, when he struck the water he vanished; only to reappear a few seconds later, however, with his head above the surface, and moving through the water away from the boat at a terrific rate.

“Good heavens, what has happened!” exclaimed Frank, horror-struck at the scene. The others were white and too unnerved at the sudden accident to speak.

Only Bill and Ben Stubbs kept their heads.

“Let go of the rope,” they bellowed.

Billy gave a despairing look back and then was rushed onward through the water at a greater speed than ever.

“What is it—what has happened?” repeated Frank.

“Matter enough,” was Ben's rejoinder, “he has evidently got that shark line entangled in his clothing and when the monster gave a pull at the hook it yanked him overboard.”

“What are we to do?” cried Harry.

“Put on full speed and go about,” cried Ben, suiting the action to the word.

At top speed the Bolo rushed through the water after poor Billy, who was still being borne along at a terrific rate by the hooked shark.

“Get ready to shoot the shark when he comes up,” yelled Ben.

“But will he come up?” asked Frank.

“He's got to,” was Ben's brief reply, “with that hook in him, he's as good as dead. He won't keep under much longer now.”

“Hold up, Billy,” shouted the boys to their imperiled companion, but the young reporter was too far gone and too choked with the water he had swallowed in trying to keep his head above water to reply.

Frank dived into the cabin and reappeared with a heavy rifle. He slipped into it a cartridge carrying an explosive bullet. Trembling with eagerness, he took up his position on the bow of the speeding Bolo, anxiously scanning the waters ahead for any sign of the shark's reappearance.

Suddenly an ugly black fin loomed up, cutting through the water like the conning tower of a submarine.

“Crack!”

The explosive bullet sped from the rifle, but either Frank's aim was bad from nervousness or the powder charge was too heavy, the ball struck the water fully a foot from the racing creature.

“Try again,” said Ben consolingly, “I'll slow down the boat.”

Luckily the shark had not dived and his fin still afforded a good mark. It was moving so rapidly, however, that it was going to be a difficult matter to hit the large body that moved beneath it.

Once more Frank rested the rifle and drew a careful sight on the fin. He aimed a little ahead of it this time, with the result that there was a terrific disturbance of the waters as the bullet sped home and the wounded creature convulsed with the pain.

“Another,” cried Ben; “good work.”

Before Frank could fit another cartridge—his rifle was a single-chambered one—the shark had dived, leaving only a crimsoned pool on the smooth surface to bear testimony that he was wounded.

The boys uttered a groan of dismay as they saw the thrashing form vanish and a second later saw Billy flash out of view.

It seemed impossible that their chum could survive being dragged to the depths of the sea.

The shark, however, did not remain down long. It soon reappeared on the surface, with Billy in tow, still thrashing the water into crimson fountains with its fins and tail. Sometimes it leaped clear out of the water in its agony.

“Bang!”

Another bullet sped from Frank's rifle, and this time the maddened animal seemed to sense from whence came the attack, for it suddenly charged furiously at the motor-boat.

Quick as thought, Ben Stubbs, who had seen its coming, leaned over the side and with his seaman's knife in hand waited the moment when it dived under the boat.

As it did so he gave a quick downward slash.

The rope that seemed to be pulling Billy to his doom severed under the blade with a crack. The next minute the young reporter was able to swim feebly to the side of the Bolo.

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Badly weakened and unnerved by his experience he was pulled on board and laid on a bunk in the cabin, where restoratives were administered to him.

It was late in the evening before he was himself again, and he then explained how he had been idly twisting the line in and out of a hook on his belt when there came a sudden tug. Before he knew what was happening he found himself rushing through the air and was then immersed. Fortunately, he was a good swimmer and kept his head or there might have been a more serious termination to his adventure.

“How big do you think that shark was, Billy Barnes?” Frank could not help asking him mischievously later in the evening.

“Oh, at least fifty feet,” was the young reporter's reply, delivered in all seriousness.

CHAPTER XVIII. INTO THE SARGASSO.

The days slipped rapidly by until one fine morning, about a week after the events narrated in our last chapter, Ben Stubbs and Frank announced that their observations showed that they had doubled the southernmost cape of Florida (which had been the scene of some earlier thrilling adventures described in the second volume of this series, "The Boy Aviators on Secret Service"), and were now on a direct course for the mysterious region of the Sargasso Sea. For three days more they went steadily onward toward the rising sun, occasionally sighting a school of porpoises and scaring up whole legions of flying-fish with their sharp bow. The days were glorious—a trifle hot, perhaps, but none of the boys minded that; and at night the stars, "as big as lamps," Billy declared they looked in the far southern latitude they had now reached, gave almost as much light as the moon in our chilly northern clime.

Every day, now, some one of the party took turns with the glasses under a small shelter erected with canvas and oars in the bow of the boat, and painstakingly scanned the horizon all about for any sight of the Brigand or Luther Barr's dirigible. But although once or twice they saw distant smoke, it always turned out to be a false alarm, and they hourly grew nearer the Sargasso without having made out a trace of the rival treasure-hunters. This fact put them all in high spirits, and each of the boys was already busy building lofty air-castles concerning what he would do with the treasure when he got it.

Much of the time, too, was occupied in clearing away the lashings of the planes and other apparatus and parts of the Golden Eagle attached to the cabin top forward, and discussing plans to erect her at sea. Frank perhaps was the only one of the party who fully realized the extreme difficulties that confronted them. However, the water was at present smooth as glass almost and seemed likely to remain so, if Bluewater Bill and Ben Stubbs were to be relied on as weather prophets.

"We are getting into the Doldrums now for fair," the old sailor announced one morning, pointing to the horizon, where a big, full-rigged vessel lay motionless in the breathless atmosphere. "That ship yonder may not get out of here for a week."

The chart now showed that they were far out of the track of all ships and on a lonely sea, so that the becalmed wind-jammer had probably been driven off her course in the same hurricane that menaced them and was likely to be a long time before she got out of her melancholy predicament.

One day Billy, who was leaning over the side, gave a sharp cry and drew back from the bulwarks.

"Come here, fellows—ugh, what an awful-looking thing," he cried.

He pointed down at the sea. The others rushed to his side, and as they gazed into the water, which was as clear as crystal for a considerable depth, they felt like echoing his exclamation of repulsion.

Through the opalescent green overside could be seen a huge shadowy shape slowly settling downward, though from the depth two menacing eyes gleamed upward at the young watchers.

From every side of the creature's round, barrel-like body stretched huge arms covered with myriads of suckers. It looked like some evil spirit of the deep, and the boys estimated the length of its arms as at least twenty-five feet. It slowly waved the long feelers as if in farewell as it sank.

"That there's a devil-fish," proclaimed Ben, who had joined the group as the monster vanished, "some calls 'em octopus, but devil-fish is a better word, to my thinking."

The boys agreed with him.

"Surely that must have been an unusually large one, Ben?" exclaimed Frank, still with the feeling of repulsion with which the monster had imbued him strong upon him.

"A big one," echoed Ben. "Oh, no, not so extra big—though he was sizeable, I'll admit. I've never seen such things myself, but I've heard crews of whalers tell of having been attacked by one of them critters, and sometimes they come back to the ship several men short. Them devil-fish are as ferocious as tigers and many's the poor sponge-diver they have gobbled up."

"Are there any in Sargasso Sea?" asked Billy, who seemed fascinated by the subject.

"I should say there are," put in Bluewater Bill, "and they grow there as big as elephants to a rabbit compared to this fellow. I don't doubt that some of them has lived there for hundreds of years, just like turtles. You see it's a

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fine place for feeding in, among all that seaweed, and when a ship gets in there and some poor chap goes crazy and jumps overboard, why, then they have an extra nice morsel to make 'em get fat and live long."

"Well, that's a nice prospect," said Billy. "I don't know but what I should prefer their room to their company."

"Same here," chorused the others.

Hour by hour now the seaweed began to get thicker. At first spread in isolated clumps and drifting prettily on the waves, it now became so dense as to be a menace.

"We'll have to turn back," announced Frank, "we can't afford to risk snarling up the propeller."

Accordingly the Bolo's head was put about and she was headed westward again. When the seaweed became so thin as to not offer any serious impediment to navigation, the Bolo's heavy anchor was dropped. Luckily she carried six hundred feet of one inch manila, but even this was hardly enough for the depth of water and had to be eked out with every bit of chain and cable that could be spared. Fortunately under the circumstances the Bolo carried a capstan which could be thrown into a gear with the engine, otherwise it would have been impossible for her to anchor in that depth of water, as her crew could never have got up the mud-hook by hand.

The weather promised to be clear, and a consultation of the barometer showed the instrument to be absolutely steady. After breakfast the next day, therefore, the work of erecting the Golden Eagle at sea was begun. First the pontoons were lowered over the side and the boys, working from the Bolo's dory, connected them by the rigid vanadium steel framework provided for that purpose, and which fitted into brackets bolted to the sides of the tubes themselves. When connected up they formed a sort of catamaran with a space of about twenty-five feet intervening between them. The chassis of the Golden Eagle, which was in sections, was then erected on a framework previously built and which was attached to the floating pontoons. This work occupied the greater part of two days, and impatient as Frank was to be off, he would not allow it to be slighted.

[Illustration: Erecting the Golden Eagle on the pontoons.]

The wing-supporting framework rising from the chassis next engaged the young workmen's attention, each part being screwed to the other and fixed in place with nuts locked by a spring devised for the purpose by Frank. This was necessary, as the incessant jarring of an aeroplane's powerful engines will work loose the most tightly screwed on nut if it is not locked, and, of course, the working loose of even a minor part on an air craft is a serious proposition indeed. The vanadium steel quadrangle being in place, the next task was to adjust the wide stretching wing-frames of the big plane. This was a tough job, but the boys managed to overcome the tendency of the floating craft to capsize under the uneven burden by placing a raft made of boards from the cabin floor of the Bolo under each wing tip as it was screwed in place.

Of course, as soon as the frames were bolted on on either side and the weight was equalized, the aeroplane balanced on her pontoons and there was no need for artificial support. Getting the engine in place came next, and for a time seemed to promise serious difficulties; but this problem was finally solved by towing the pontoon-supported air-ship alongside the Bolo, and then using her main boom as a derrick. Billy Lathrop and Ben Stubbs hauled on a tackle attached to the engine, and thence to the end of the boom, and the heavy bit of machinery swung outboard without a hitch. It was then an easy matter to lower the motor on to its bed, which had been previously set in place. It didn't take long to bolt the engine down, lay the propeller bearings and set the main shaft and its twin connections in place and "true" them up. The last work, before adjusting the tanks for gasoline and oil, was to affix the propellers themselves. This was accomplished by erecting a rough stand on a platform of the cabin floor boards.

At last everything was pronounced ready for a start and the finishing touches were completed. Harry even lovingly touched up some scratched places about the frame with the contents of a paint-pot he had found in a locker.

It was at this point that Billy Barnes made a great discovery.

"But say, Frank," he exclaimed, "when you start the propellers she is going to fly even though you may want her to skim the water."

"Is she, mister know-it-all?" laughed Frank, "that shows all you know. See this pump?" He indicated a small centrifugal affair geared to the main shaft.

Billy nodded.

"Well," explained Frank, "when we want to keep the Golden Eagle down on earth, or rather sea, we fill the pontoon tanks to the necessary weight with this pump. When I want to rise, I pump the water out again."

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“Gee, that's simple—like all your ideas, Frank,” said the admiring Billy.

“When are we going to try a trial trip?” demanded Lathrop.

“No reason why we shouldn't start right away on one,” declared Frank, “if you fellows will bear a hand and fill up the gasoline, radiator and lubricator tanks.”

The receptacles were quickly replenished with fuel, water and oil, and then the young aviators waited in a thrilling state of suspense while Frank tested the engine. After a few adjustments of the bed, the machine fell to work as evenly as it had at Mineola, and Frank announced that he was ready to cast off the lines that restrained the aeroplane to the side of the Bolo.

With Frank in the driving seat, Harry at the engines and the others grouped in the chassis the start was made.

At Harry's cry of “All right,” the young leader started up the power and threw in the propeller clutch. A shout broke from the throats of the adventurers as the Golden Eagle began to move gracefully ahead in her new element.

Soon she began to gather speed and skim rapidly over the water as Frank increased the power; but he soon came to a stop.

“We'll have to put more water in the tanks,” he announced, “she's trying to rise.”

More water was quickly pumped in by running the machine pump on the engine with the propellers cut out. As the ship settled lower and lower, Frank watched her carefully.

“That's enough,” he cried at length to Harry, who was filling the tanks. The pump was stopped and the automatic caps screwed on the valve opening of the pontoons.

Once more Frank threw in the propeller clutch and started up the engine. This time he ran the motor to high speed without the aeroplane rising more than enough to just gracefully skim the top of the water, like a drinking swallow.

“It's better than flying,” enthusiastically cried Billy, hugging Lathrop in his excitement, “and you don't have to keep still either,” he added.

“Wall, I've followed the water for a good many years, but I never went to sea on a water air-ship before,” was Bluewater Bill's contribution.

“You like it, don't you?” demanded Billy, almost fiercely.

“You bet cher life, I do,” was Bill's truthful, if vulgarly expressed, rejoinder.

On and on skimmed the Golden Eagle, seemingly as much at home on the surface of the gently heaving South Atlantic as in the upper air currents. So exhilarating was the sensation, that Frank kept the winged craft straight on, holding her to her course with the air rudder, which worked as well on the water as in the clouds.

Then swinging in a long circle, so that the strain on the long pontoons and their bracings would not be too great, he brought the ship about and headed her back for the Bolo, that lay, a tiny speck, on the far horizon, so far and fast had they traveled.

They came back at the same swift gait as they had taken the outward spin, and all voted this new form of water riding as enjoyable as anything they had ever experienced.

That night was spent in making final arrangements for the dash in search of the golden galleon. As the adventurers did not want to carry more weight than could be avoided, it was agreed that Bluewater Bill, Lathrop and Billy Barnes should remain on board the Bolo, while the Boy Aviators and Ben Stubbs started on the aerial search for the treasure ship.

From the latitude and longitude in which they were then anchored, Bluewater Bill judged that the galleon could not lie much more than two hundred miles to the southeast, out across the wilderness of Sargasso. Of course she might have shifted, but from an aeroplane it is possible to survey a tremendous area, and the young adventurers were confident of being able to pick up the prize.

Two more bitterly disappointed youths than Billy and Lathrop could hardly be imagined than they were when they learned that it would be impossible to take them on the scouting expedition. Frank, however, pointed out the utter foolishness of overloading the Golden Eagle—more especially as they might have to bring back a heavy load. Being sensible boys, both Billy and Lathrop, therefore, soon got over their gloom.

Early the next morning, the final provisions were loaded into the aeroplane's chassis and her barometer, auto-clock and other instruments were adjusted by the Bolo's own and set in place. A careful note was then made of the Bolo's position and noted in Frank's pocket log-book. This done there only remained farewells to be said

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and these were necessarily brief.

It was ten-thirty o'clock on a cloudless, breathless morning that the Golden Eagle, with her pontoons empty, except for a supply of drinking water carried in the small reserve tanks at either end, shot into the air from the glassy sea.

Had any strangers been there to witness the start they could not have forborne to cheer at the sight the noble ship presented, soaring onward higher and higher, like a mighty sea-bird winging its way toward the unknown wastes of the mysterious Sargasso.

CHAPTER XIX. THE RAT SHIP.

Strong of wing and sound of engine, the Golden Eagle sped on through the clear, warm air, the rushing sensation of her flight sending the wind in a cooling stream against the faces of the occupants of her chassis. From time to time, Ben scanned the vast flats of ocean below them with the glasses, but for some time nothing appeared in the field of the binoculars to warrant them in changing their course. Seen from above, the mucilaginous character imparted to the Sargasso Sea by the vast acreage of flowing seaweed, inextricably entangled, was clearly perceptible, even though from the deck of a ship the shallow layer of water that overlies the seaweed imparts the blue hue of open water to it and makes its treacherous character.

"It is like traveling over a water desert," declared Harry.

Far on the horizon were piled castellated cloud masses, seemingly immovable and changing in tint as the day lengthened. On all the vast stretch beneath them was not a sign of life. It was an ocean solitude indeed.

Suddenly Ben who had the glasses in hand gave a shout.

"I make out something!" he exclaimed.

"Where?" cried Harry.

"About two points to the starboard—change your course a bit, Frank, and we'll be bearing directly up for it."

Frank gave the wheel a slight twist and the Golden Eagle obediently swerved off to the right.

"What was it you saw?" asked Frank.

"A ship, though whether it is the one we are after is doubtful," was Ben's reply. "I reckon there are enough ships drifting about in this tangle to stock up a dockyard."

It was not long before all doubt on this point was resolved. The object Ben had sighted was indeed a ship.

As the Golden Eagle soared nearer they perceived that the vessel was a small steamer—a craft of perhaps 2,000 tons, painted black with a yellow funnel. Except that no smoke curled upward from her stack and there was not a sign of life about her, she looked as if she might have just set out on a voyage. From her mainmast a flag hung, wrapped about the spar in the breathless atmosphere.

"I'm going to drop," announced Frank.

Instantly the Golden Eagle's steady, forward motion ceased and she began to descend with a rapidity that would have taken the breath away from less experienced aviators than her occupants.

It was like going down in a rapidly falling elevator.

She struck the water with a gentle gliding impact that hardly did more than ripple the surface, and a cheer broke from the boys as they perceived how perfectly the new pontoons worked.

"As easy as lighting on a feather-bed," was the way Harry put it.

The spot where they had settled was some little distance from the steamer, so, at a pace which would not raise the aeroplane from the water, Frank steered her toward the derelict.

Viewed even in the cheerful sunlight she was a melancholy object. Although at a distance it was not perceptible that she was an abandoned craft, a near view showed that it must have been some time, perhaps even a period of years, since she had been trapped in the Sargasso.

As she rose and fell in the gentle, heaving swell, the boys could see that long green weeds grew on her sides where the water laved them and her paint was blistered and flaked off in great patches, showing the rusty red of her iron plates beneath.

In the presence of this mystery of the ocean the boys grew silent as Frank maneuvered the Golden Eagle alongside and stopped the clattering motor.

The silence was profound.

Except for the occasional creak of a block as the derelict slowly swung to and fro it was as still as noonday in the desert. Even the usually light-hearted Harry was awe-stricken in the presence of the silent derelict.

Ben was the first to break the stillness.

"I'm going aboard," he announced, singling out with his eye a dangling rope which depended from a davit.

"Look, boys," he went on; "perhaps the poor fellows got away. See, the boats are gone."

"Let's hope they did," replied Frank, making fast the Golden Eagle to another of the dangling "falls," and

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preparing to follow Ben's example and clamber aboard.

Soon the boys stood on the main deck of the abandoned steamer, whose name they now saw was Durham Castle.

"She was a Britisher," declared Ben.

As he spoke there was a mighty noise like that of rushing water from the forecastle and the boys started back in affright. And well they might, for on the heels of the noise came a perfect torrent of rats. Gray rats, brown rats, young rats, old rats, thin rats, fat rats. They dashed directly at the boys, seeming mad with terror, or rendered ferocious from thirst or other causes.

Their little beady black eyes gleamed wickedly and their sharp yellow teeth were exposed.

The boys ran and Ben leaped into the main shrouds by which they had been standing, but the forerunners of this avalanche of crazed creatures was upon them. The rodents with squeaks and cries swarmed after the human beings as if they meant to devour them by sheer force of numbers.

"Shoot—shoot," shouted Ben, as he dashed from his waist a big brown rat that left the imprint of its teeth in his hand as he struck at it.

Frenziedly the boys emptied their magazine revolvers at the mass of swarming creatures and they fell dead in heaps at their feet. But still the onrush came and the lads shuddered with repulsion as they felt the tiny claws of the rodents fixed in their trousers as the creatures tried to swarm up them.

They seemed to have a leader. An immense gray fellow almost as big as a rabbit. A sudden idea came into Frank's head, he did not know at the time whether he had been told it, or read of it somewhere, but it seemed to him if he could kill that old gray leader the rest might take fright.

Hastily he fired, almost blowing the creature's head off, so close was it to him.

As the others saw their leader killed they hesitated, and Ben and Harry took advantage of the pause to empty a fresh magazine full of bullets into the closely packed mass.

It was the turning point.

With shrill squeaks and cries the rats turned and dashed for the other rail. As they reached it they swarmed over it madly, unheeding of the water beneath. In whole battalions they plunged into the sea, most of them sinking immediately; but some of them swimming about in circles with piteous cries. The sea was discolored with their swarming heads for some distance about the ship.

Suddenly there shot up from the seaweed a long fleshy arm covered with what seemed to be huge excrescences. It curved like a serpent and swept deftly within its grasp dozens of the struggling rodents. Other arms appeared waving and seizing on the rats as they swam desperately about.

The boys knew that the arms were the tendons of giant devil-fish that had scented from afar the feast of rats.

They shuddered as they thought of the fate of human beings who should be cast adrift in such waters. In a short time not a rat remained on the water and the arms too subsided and sank.

White and shaky from the creepiness of the scene they had just witnessed the boys turned to Ben. The old mariner was mopping the sweat off his brow with a huge, red bandanna handkerchief.

"Wall, boys, if that's one of the sights of the Sargasso," he said, "I'd prefer Africa or even the Everglades—oof."

"How could such myriads of rats exist aboard a ship?" asked Frank.

"Easy enough, boy. This ship was a sugar ship bound from New Orleans to England with raw sugar for refining I take it.—See the remains of the sugar bags scattered about where the rats dragged 'em?"

The boys nodded.

"Well, rats swarm aboard such ships if they are not kept down, and I suppose that when this craft drifted in here to the Sargasso, and her crew deserted her, that the rats just naturally multiplied till they ate the holds clean of sugar and gnawed into the water tanks. Then we come along and they figures on making a meal out of us. They're queer things are ship rats, look how they ran when their leader was killed," went on the old sailor. "No sailor would go to sea on a ship that hasn't got any aboard though."

"Why is that?" asked Frank.

"Well, it's the old saying, 'rats leave a sinking ship,' you know," rejoined Ben.

"Let's explore the ship," said Frank, "that is, if there are no more rats about. Thank goodness, there is no chance of our meeting any devil-fish aboard here."

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“No, that's one good thing,” put in Harry. “Ugh!—did you ever see such horrid looking things as those waving arms?”

Peeping down into the deserted engine-room, where the machinery was rusting and rotting from long neglect, the boys made their way aft to what had evidently been the quarters of the vessel's captain.

“Ah, here's his log-book!” exclaimed Ben, opening a volume which lay on a desk attached to a bulkhead, “but first let's look into the staterooms.”

There were four of these, opening off from the main cabin and in each there were evident signs of a hasty departure. Clothes, books and nautical instruments lay scattered about in confusion. The boys did not come across anything though to show them the fate of the crew of the ill-fated vessel.

They therefore examined the log-book and found that, as Ben had surmised, the derelict had started on her last voyage from New Orleans to Liverpool laden with raw sugar. Her captain was Elias Goodall, and her first mate James Hooper. The day of her entrance into the fatal Sargasso was set down as June 21st, 1898. Previous to this date there had been several entries referring to a break-down in the engine-room, which caused the steamer to be driven miles off her course by heavy gales. It was undoubtedly in this way that she drifted into the fatal seaweed.

“Have got the engine going again,” read the entry, “but the sky for days has been overcast and have had no chance to make observations. Know we must be miles off our course, however.”

Below was the next record of the ship's fate.

“Chief Engineer Maxwell just informed me that something seems the matter with propeller.—Later—Found the propeller matted with huge growths of seaweed. Cleared it with some difficulty by shifting some cargo forward and then revolving wheel till, blade by blade, we cleared it with axes from the small boats.”

June 22nd.—“Seaweed seems to be getting thicker. With difficulty we progress at all. Mate Hooper just suggested terrifying possibility.—Are we in the Sargasso?”

June 25.—“Since the last entry in the log, have learned that our fears were only too well grounded. We are indeed in the Sargasso and there seems to be no escape. Engine stopped working long ago. The propeller so matted with seaweed that we could make no progress. What will become of us?”

June 26.—“Have tried to keep true state of affairs from the crew, but they learned of facts in some way, and made a demand to take to the boats. I told them that our duty was to stick by the ship till all possibility of aid was exhausted. They seemed ugly; but for the present at least there is no sign of mutiny. If only we had wireless we might signal our plight.”

June 28.—“The worst has happened. In attempting to drive the crew back from the boats, Chief Engineer Maxwell was instantly killed with a handspike, poor Hooper so badly wounded and beaten that he died half-an-hour ago and I myself wounded in the left arm. The crew have taken to the boats and two loads are now about half a mile from the vessel. The men are shouting. Something terrible must have happened—”

June 29.—“I have not been able to nerve myself until to-day to record the frightful interruption that occurred while I was penning the last lines. I was interrupted by a fearful shriek and hastening on deck saw a sight that will not be blotted from my memory till I go to my death. The boats seemed to be in the grasp of what appeared at first glance gigantic snakes. The men, unfortunate fellows, were trying to beat the creatures off and pull back to the ship. Their vain cries for aid were pitiful. I got the glasses, the better to see what was happening. My horror at what I saw then was so great that I can hardly set it down. The creatures I had seen were not snakes at all but the arms of huge octopi. They enwrapped the boats in every direction. Even as I gazed one boat-load was drawn beneath the surface. In a few minutes more all was over.”

July 4.—“On this day, at home, all are celebrating and rejoicing, and here am I encircled with horrors, and adrift, as it seems, on a doomed ship. There is one boat left. I mean to lower it and try to reach the land or at least the open sea where I may fall in with a vessel. The rats are swarming everywhere. They have attacked the cargo in the forward hold and the noise of their fighting and struggling is terrible. Last night they killed my poor cat. I found her clean-picked bones on the fore-deck this morning. I can stay no longer on this horror ship.—God be with me.”

Goodall,
Captain.

Here the pathetic record ended abruptly and of the fate of the unfortunate captain the boys had of course no

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inking. They, however, took the log-book with them for delivery in the future to the vessel's owners, and ten minutes later were back on board the Golden Eagle.

"It feels good to be off that 'horror ship' as her captain called her," exclaimed Frank, as he started up the engine.

"I should say so," was Harry's reply, in a sobered tone, "and I suppose scores of other ships have met the same fate."

"Undoubtedly," said Ben, "every year vessels sail from the United States and foreign ports that are never heard of again. No accounts of storms are received during their voyages, yet they never reach port; undoubtedly many of them wind up in the graveyard of the Sargasso."

"I'm glad we have a good stout air-ship to carry us," exclaimed Frank, as the Golden Eagle soared into the air and soon left the derelict far behind.

CHAPTER XX. THE GOLDEN GALLEON.

A sharp hail from Harry, who had the glasses, aroused Frank from a reverie into which he had fallen as the Golden Eagle skimmed along. It was some time since she had left the ill-fated Durham Castle.

“Look, Frank,—here, take the glasses,” the younger boy cried excitedly,—“there's a queer-looking ship dead ahead of us—can she be the Buena Ventura?”

Frank surrendered the wheel to Harry and gave the object a prolonged scrutiny. Then he handed the glasses to Ben with a quiet:

“What do you make of her, Ben.”

The old sailor held the glasses to his eyes for a space of ten seconds or more and then turned to the boys with an excited look on his face.

“Whatever she is, she is no modern ship,” he cried, “she's got a high stern on her like a castle, and her masts and rigging are like no ship that sails the sea to-day.”

“There's another ship over on the horizon,” cried Harry, “looks like a wreck.”

Ben took the glasses once more.

“It's the wreck of a barque,” he announced. “Guess it's the one that Bluewater Bill was cast away on. If it is, that must be the galleon over yonder, 'cause Bill said she was close to his ship, and I guess vessels don't change their relative positions much in this place.”

As the Golden Eagle rapidly approached the ancient vessel the boys went nearly wild with excitement.

The glasses were constantly trained on her and when Harry, who had kept the binoculars fixed on the vessel's stern, announced in a voice that quivered with suspense:

“I can see her name—it's Buena Ventura all right,” they all broke into a shout.

[Illustration: “I can see her name—it's Buena Ventura all right.”]

The goal was reached at last then.

Frank sent the Golden Eagle swinging in a long graceful circle round the galleon, from whose tall masts still hung fragments of rotting sails, and finally settled alongside her towering wooden sides, which still bore tracings of the gilding and paint with which the old Spaniards loved to decorate their vessels. Her lofty stern was a mass of splendid carving and gilt work. In its centre, in faded paint was the figure of a woman, surrounded by stars and other heavenly bodies. The vessel's stern cabin windows also were richly embossed and gilded.

“If there's as much gold inside her as there is out we'll all be millionaires!” exclaimed Ben.

“How are we going to get aboard?” questioned Frank, as he gazed at the high, smooth sides.

“Yes, that's a problem. I don't see the rope Bluewater Bill used either. It must have rotted away,” rejoined Ben.

“Let's circle round her,” he went on, “maybe I can see a foothold and then I can get aboard and let down a rope to you boys.”

Accordingly, the Golden Eagle was steered slowly round the great hull, and finally Ben selected a place to clamber up among the fretwork below the heel of the bowsprit. With a nimble leap he was soon clinging to the heavy carving, and rapidly swarming hand over hand to the galleon's deck. When he reached it, he flung down a rope with which the Golden Eagle was made fast to the galleon's side, and in a few minutes the boys stood by his side on the moldering deck.

As it was getting dark, there was not time to do a great deal that night. All they found opportunity to accomplish, in fact, was a brief exploration of the main cabin, which was magnificently hung in silks and velvets once splendid, now mildewed and rotting. The decorations of the place had been sumptuous evidently.

In the rear of the cabin was a pile of ancient-looking chests, heavily strapped with iron, and with great brass locks curiously carved affixed to them.

“The treasure chests!” cried Harry, trembling with excitement.

All three of the adventurers hurried across the cabin. In the afternoon-light that streamed through the stern-windows Frank fell on his knees and eagerly tried to wrench one of the locks off. Aged as it was, however, it resisted his exertions.

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"Hold on!" cried Ben. "I'll get it off." He raised his heavily booted foot, as Frank drew back, and brought it down with a crash on the massive brasswork. With a rending and tearing of the worm-eaten wood the lock ripped loose and the lid, operated by some concealed spring, flew open.

The boys gave a shout of disappointment. Nothing in the way of treasure lay revealed—only a faded velvet cloak edged with tarnished lace.

"Wait a bit," cried Ben tearing off the cloak. "Ah!—"

A different sort of shout came from the boys' throats then. Beneath the cloak lay candle-sticks, gold and silver, great vases, gleaming dull yellow in the mellow light of the gloomy beamed cabin, bowls of the precious metal, splendidly carved, and small parchment bags bulging with the varied shapes of the coins they contained.

The boys dragged the contents of the chest and spread it in a glittering pile.

"So it was no dream of Bluewater Bill's after all," exclaimed Harry.

So excited were they that the boys were anxious to go ahead with the work of breaking open more treasure chests that night; but they yielded to Ben's entreaties and agreed to have supper and a good night's rest before they proceeded to their task. After a meal of bacon, coffee, bread and preserved fruit, cooked on the gasolene stove of the Golden Eagle, the boys professed themselves ready for bed.

"Better sleep aboard the galleon," said Ben.

"Why?" asked Frank.

"Why, we don't want any of those devil-fish coming snooping around in the night, do we?" asked the old sailor, "and they might, if we slept so near the water."

"I should say not," exclaimed Harry, with a shudder at the bare idea.

"Say Frank," exclaimed the younger lad, an hour later, when they were snuggled under blankets—for there is a heavy dew and night chill on the Sargasso—on the deck of the Buena Ventura, "what would you do if the door of the cabin yonder should suddenly open and an old don all in armor should come stalking out and say:

"Get hence, get hence, young marauders, and leave my treasure untroubled!"

"I'd offer him a ride in the Golden Eagle to clear the cobwebs out of his brain," said Frank sleepily.

The treasure hunters were astir early the next day and immediately after breakfast—a hearty meal cooked on the Golden Eagle's stove,—had been despatched they were ready for work.

It had been determined to go at the task systematically, so Frank in a notebook, checked off the articles as chest after chest of valuable gold and plate was dragged from the galleon's cabin. He soon had his book full and was compelled to borrow a small pocket diary from his brother.

"I say, Frank!" exclaimed Harry, as he and Ben drew from the moldering chests piece after piece of dull golden ornaments, some of them studded with jewels that blazed as they caught the sun. "What should you say this stuff was worth, as far as we have gone?"

"Every bit of \$50,000 I should imagine," replied the elder boy, "although I'm not much of a judge in such matters."

"Hurray, Ben! that will make us all rich," shouted Harry.

"Say," remarked Ben, pausing in his task of emptying a squat chest, marked, Don Ramon De Guzman, Sevilla, "you don't think I'm going to touch any of this loot do you? It all belongs to you boys and Bluewater Bill, and I've no right to a cent's worth of it. The excitement is enough for old Ben Stubbs."

"Well, you've got a nerve!" cried Frank, "to think that you are not going to get a share. Why we are all in on this, and, when we have all the stuff out and get it valued, we'll divide it up in fair proportion."

"You won't get me to take any of it," grumbled old Ben obstinately, grubbing away in the treasure-filled box.

"We shall see about that," said Frank, who knew it was useless to argue with the old sailor.

As they worked feverishly, from time to time gazing at the sky in apprehension of the appearance of Luther Barr's dirigible, the adventurers had an illustration of the manner in which the old Spaniards guarded their treasure that came very near having a tragical termination.

Ben Stubbs had hammered off the lock of a huge chest, with a semi-circular top, and was in the act of flinging back the lid, when he stopped short with an exclamation. It was fortunate for him that he paused, for as he did so, the lid, actuated by some hidden mechanism, swung back and a steel arm, tipped with sharp prongs, shot out. Had the sailor been less nimble the device would undoubtedly have caved his skull in. As it was, it missed him only by an inch.

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“Well, that's a nice murderous contrivance,” gasped the astonished sailor.

An examination showed the boys that the tips of the prongs were stained and they had little doubt, as they examined it, that the marks were those of human blood. The life fluid of some old-time marauder who had paid with his life for his attempt to rifle the chest. The death-bearing arm, they discovered, was actuated by levers and springs, connecting with the lifting mechanism of the lid. The boys were compelled to admit, as they examined the device, that fiendish as it was it had been designed by a master mechanic of his time.

As they worked, you may imagine, the boys swept the sky for a sign of Luther Barr's dirigible, but not a trace of her did they discover that day.

“It begins to look as if we had beaten Luther Barr this time,” cried Harry, exultingly.

“Don't be too sure,” was Frank's cautious reply. “He is capable of going to any lengths to satisfy his lust for gold, and I am sure he would stop at nothing to get the treasure from us. We may have a lot of trouble on our hands yet.”

The treasure as it was catalogued was placed in canvas sacks brought for the purpose, and by supper time that night all the chests had been pretty well emptied and the sacks lay distributed in such a manner as not to interfere with her equilibrium on the Golden Eagle's deck.

“It's going to make a heavy load,” said Frank, shaking his head as he looked at the pile.

“We've got to take it all out at once, however,” said Ben, “or we would be pretty sure not to find any when we came back.”

“It's very certain that Barr cannot be far off,” said Harry, gazing about at the opal sunset sky.

“Well, if he comes to-morrow he'll come too late,” said Frank, “for we'll be far away from here by then. I intend to sail at dawn.”

“That's the idea,” was Ben's comment, “no use wasting time on a job of this sort. It's a good thing the weather has kept so clear, otherwise we might have had trouble; aside from old Barr's brand.”

“I must confess it was a surprise to me to find that he had not reached here ahead of us,” went on Frank; “you know we lost a lot of time in that storm.”

“Maybe something went wrong with the dirigible before they started,” suggested Harry.

“I guess that must be it,” said Ben; “otherwise you can bet he'd have gotten on more of a hustle than this.”

“Well, I'm just as well content with things as they are,” commented Harry, “in fact it would not grieve me much to hear that his old balloon had tumbled into the ocean, crew and all.”

Supper was soon despatched that evening, and the boys turned in early. They slept soundly, but toward midnight Frank had a queer dream. It seemed to him that he was on board the rat ship once more and that scores of the rodents they had battled with were again overwhelming him. He battled bravely with the hosts but they were too many for him. Just as it seemed that all was over, however, he heard a voice say, “Hold on there!”

So startlingly clear was the voice that Frank awoke as it uttered the words and almost gave a cry, which he instantly checked, as he perceived that it was no dream-voice he had heard.

As he listened intently he heard the voice once more.

“Hold on there—this is it.”

The words seemed to come from overhead.

Gazing upward, the boy saw, hovering between the deck of the galleon and the stars, a large black object.

He instantly knew it for what it was.

Luther Barr's air-ship!

CHAPTER XXI. DIRIGIBLE VS. AEROPLANE.

A galvanic shock passed through the boy at the discovery, and he silently crawled to where Harry and Ben lay and placing his hand over their mouths he in turn awoke them.

"Don't utter a word," he whispered, "Luther Barr's air-ship is here."

From the spot in which they crouched, keeping as closely in the shadow of the stout mast as they were able, the adventurers could hear distinctly the conversation of the men in the dirigible.

"This must be the galleon," Frank heard a voice he recognized as Sanborn's saying, "it's lucky we decided to keep on."

"Well, we might as well have turned back for all the good we can do now," came another voice—that of Malvoise. "I'm not going to run a chance of wrecking the ship by making a landing in the dark."

"What, you are not going to descend?" came Sanborn's voice in a querulous tone.

"Not much," was the rejoinder. "What's the use of risking our necks and taking a chance on smashing up the air-ship. If she is damaged we would be stranded here and leave our bones in the Sargasso in all probability."

"That's so," chimed in another voice—that of the inventor Constantio. "It would be very dangerous, senor, to make a landing to-night. Let us go back to the island and start out to-morrow again."

The boys exchanged glances. So the Barr party had encamped on an island; doubtless one of the numerous little keys that abound in those waters and which, had they water on them—which few have—are ideal spots.

"That's my idea, Sanborn," went on Malvoise, "come, shall I put her about and sail back?"

"Let's circle the ship first," exclaimed Sanborn. "So far as we know we are here ahead of those Boy Aviator cubs, but we can't tell positively unless we make an examination."

Frank's heart stood still. If they circled the ship there was little doubt they would spy the Golden Eagle floating alongside; in black shadow though she was. His fingers closed on his revolver. But fortunately there was no need to use weapons then, for Sanborn's idea was overruled, and from the position in which the air-ship hovered she could not spy the aeroplane.

"No; come on, let's get back," urged Malvoise; "there is something wrong with one of the cylinders and I want to fix it before we tackle the job of taking off the treasure."

"Very well then," said Sanborn, yielding to the will of the majority. "We'll get back, but I want to be here first thing in the morning and make a thorough overhauling of the ship. There ought to be enough gold aboard her, from what I overheard Bluewater Bill say, to make us all kings."

"Ah, then I can invent more dirigibles, large ones to carry passengers across the Atlantic," the boys heard Constantio say—though of course, till Ben told them, they were not aware of the speaker's identity.

To their great relief the engine of the dirigible, which had hovered stationary above the galleon during the men's talk, was once more set in motion and the big air-ship drove off at a rapid pace.

"Phew! that was a narrow escape," exclaimed Frank. "I don't want many more like that, I can tell you."

"If they had only gone round the galleon they could not have escaped spying the Golden Eagle," said Harry.

"Fortunate for them they didn't," said Ben grimly, fondling his blue magazine revolver; "they'd have got some indigestible leaden pills, I'm thinking."

"Shooting is just what we want to avoid," said Frank. "I never want to have to fire on a human being."

"Well, if they fire at you first, what are you going to do?" was Ben's incontrovertible argument.

Naturally the Boy Aviators and their companion slept no more that night. The remaining hours before daybreak were occupied with getting everything in first-class shape aboard the Golden Eagle in readiness for what might prove a dash for life.

"Are we faster than the dirigible?" asked Harry, who realized as well as his brother that there might be a chase between the two air-ships.

"I don't know," was Frank's reply, "we ought to be; but from Ben's description, and what we saw of her, that dirigible must be at least a hundred and fifty feet long and she has a more powerful engine than we have."

"But look at her weight," argued Harry.

"That doesn't cut so much figure if you have a powerful enough engine to overcome it," was the reply; "some

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European dirigibles, bigger than Luther Barr's, have made eighty and even ninety miles."

"Well, we wouldn't stand much chance with an affair like that and that's a fact," commented Harry.

"We can only hope things won't come to such a pass," said Frank.

Soon all was ready for a start and Frank, taking careful bearings, headed the Golden Eagle round on the course she had followed on her way to the galleon. As the sun poked his rim above the horizon the Golden Eagle shot into the air and rapidly the hulls of the galleon and Bluewater Bill's castaway hulk were mere specks behind them.

The spirits of the boys rose. They breakfasted on cold stuff cooked before they started and coffee heated over the exhaust of the engine. Ben lit his pipe, and with Frank at the wheel and Harry on lookout, any one looking at the party in the Golden Eagle would have said that they were a trio of pleasure-makers instead of adventurers engaged on a daring dash for fortune.

It was about nine o'clock in the morning when the danger they had feared loomed up out of the clear sky as suddenly as a tropic squall.

Coming straight toward them, but a mere dot on the sky, though momentarily growing larger, was an air-ship that they could not doubt was Luther Barr's.

"What are you going to do?" asked Harry, as Frank put the wheel over and brought the aeroplane on a course which would take her far to the westward of the dirigible.

"Try to avoid her," was Frank's reply; "they are equipped with a rapid-firing gun and could make mince-meat of us in a short time."

"We have rifles," said Harry.

"They would be little use against such a weapon," replied Frank.

But as the Golden Eagle shifted her course it became clear to those aboard her that the other air-ship did the same.

"They have seen us," gasped Harry.

"Yes, and mean to pursue us, too," was Frank's reply, through gritted teeth; "well, we'll give them a long chase of it."

The Golden Eagle was speeded up to her full capacity, although with the heavy load she was carrying, she by no means attained the speed of which she was capable.

In one thing, however, she had the advantage over the dirigible. She could maneuver with twice the speed and turn and twist like a snake, while the more cumbersome air-ship took a lot of handling to navigate in any intricate movements.

As the dirigible drew nearer, the boys, critical as was the moment, could hardly restrain their admiration at the fine appearance she presented. Her distended gas-bag shone in the sunlight like silk and her cabin woodwork sparkled where brass handholds and plates were attached to it, like the main deck of a passenger liner.

Suddenly, however, her sinister character became apparent.

There was a puff of smoke from what, if she had been a "sea" ship, would have been her bow, and a projectile sang by the Golden Eagle. "That was a warning shot, Frank," cried Ben; "the next will come closer."

"I am going to watch them get ready to fire and then drop suddenly," said Frank, his face white, but with a set, determined look on it.

The man at the lanyard of the dirigible's gun, who looked like Sanborn, bent low over the weapon once more and adjusted it carefully for a second shot, the helmsman of the air-ship at the same time swinging her so that she would be on a direct line with the Golden Eagle.

Frank watched his every movement with a hawk-like intensity. Just as Sanborn stepped back, lanyard in hand, to fire a second shot, Frank dived like a sea-gull sweeping down on a fish and the missile whistled harmlessly overhead.

At the same instant Ben Stubbs, unable to restrain himself any longer, snatched a rifle from one of the lockers and aimed at the pilot-house of Luther Barr's craft.

A shower of splinters flew from the casing of a porthole as his bullet struck, but no further harm was done.

The aeroplane was now far below the dirigible, which was soaring at a height of two thousand feet. At such an angle it was impossible for those on board to use their rapid-fire gun, and Frank, setting the Golden Eagle's rising planes, soared rapidly along at an elevation of about two hundred feet.

By the time the men on the dirigible had got her round, the Golden Eagle was two miles ahead of the

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gas-suspended craft.

“We've escaped them,” cried Harry.

“Not yet,” said Frank; “don't holler till you are out of the woods. They know now we've got the treasure and they are not going to give up the chase as easily as all this.”

From time to time the dirigible, which was not gaining on the Golden Eagle, fired a shot from her forward gun, but the dipping, scudding aeroplane afforded a poor mark and, moreover, the deck of a dirigible at full speed is not the steadiest place in the world. So after a few attempts more to wing the swift aeroplane, the crew of the dirigible gave the effort up and turned all their attention to getting every ounce of speed out of their craft. With sinking hearts the boys realized that she was gaining on them.

Hour after hour, above the glassy Sargasso Sea, the battle went on, the aeroplane ducking and diving and gliding and skimming whenever the dirigible got a good chance to send a fatal projectile into her.

From time to time, also, Ben got a chance to send a bullet crashing into the dirigible's gas-bag, and from the actions of the men aboard her they were evidently badly worried by this. However, as Ben knew, the gas-bag of the dirigible was constructed in sections and the gas manufactured by Constantio was so buoyant that if even one section remained intact it would still serve to sustain the dirigible in the air.

But no fight of such a character can endure long. Sooner or later one or the other of the combatants is bound to succumb, and so it was in this case.

Just as Frank was making a dive to avoid, for the twentieth time, getting within range of the dirigible's gun, a skillfully aimed projectile came crashing through the Golden Eagle's gasoline tank. The fluid poured out in a flood.

A few minutes later the engines ceased to revolve and the aeroplane was compelled to descend, Frank driving her down in a long arc that brought her to the surface of the water without accident.

Crippled as she was, the Golden Eagle could not be set going again without repairs that would take hours.

In the meantime their opponents had taken advantage of the aeroplane's plight to riddle her wings with bullets.

Brave as the boys were, they were not foolhardy.

Ten minutes after the fatal accident to the tank, Ben Stubbs, with bitter protests, waved a white shirt in token that the occupants of the Golden Eagle were driven to surrender.

CHAPTER XXII. ON BOARD BARR'S SHIP.

"Do you surrender?" shouted a voice through a megaphone from the dirigible as it hovered above the stricken aeroplane.

"Yes, hornswoogle you," roared Ben Stubbs, "but if it hadn't been for that gas-bag of yours you'd never have got us, and I can lick any man aboard yer with my fists or any other weapon."

Luther Barr's men paid no attention to this outburst and the boys were too sick at heart at the complete failure of their venture even to hear Ben's words. Frank choked back his tears with difficulty and Harry gazed straight out over the sea.

It was defeat final and complete.

"Make fast the ladder and we'll board you," was the next hail as a trap in the under side of the dirigible was opened and a long rope ladder came snaking down.

Ben, although he would cheerfully have slashed it to bits with his sea knife, had no recourse but to make the end of the apparatus fast to the Golden Eagle's framework, and a few seconds later Malvoise came rapidly down it. To guard against any attack on him the men on the dirigible leaned over the rail and kept their rifles covering the boys and Ben.

"Hum, you saved us the trouble of packing up the treasure, I see," said Malvoise, his eyes sparkling as they fell on the sacks of treasure.

"If we'd only fixed you last night when you was in the air over the galleon we'd have done a good job," growled old Ben.

"Ah, you think so," grinned the Frenchman. "I don't doubt that it feels bad to be the conquered, but you must not grudge us the treasure, my dear Mr. Stubbs—"

The sneer on his face was unbearable and Ben started forward to fall upon him, but as he did so a bullet from above zipped down, narrowly missing his arm. In fact, it ploughed through his loose shirt-sleeve.

"You see, I am well protected," grinned the Frenchman, as Ben started back.

"Yes, I reckon we've got to give in with as good a grace as we can," grumbled Ben; "though I'd give all the treasure in them sacks to get my hands on you for just five minutes," he muttered to himself.

"Let down a tackle there, you," shouted Malvoise to the crew of the dirigible, "and you, Sanborn, come down aboard here. We must get the treasure on board before it starts to blow at all."

Sanborn came hastily scrambling down the ladder, and a few seconds later a block and tackle were lowered. Malvoise and Sanborn, who greeted the boys with a scowling sneer, first deprived the boys of their weapons and forced Ben to give up his revolver and then made fast the block and tackle to the first of the treasure sacks.

It was rapidly hauled up to the dirigible; the other treasure bags followed in the same manner. In half an hour the Golden Eagle was swept clean of the contents of the galleon's chests which the boys had loaded on her with such light hearts.

"Now, then, I guess we are all ready for a start," said Malvoise, when the last of the sacks had been hauled into the dirigible's cabin. "As a matter of fact," he went on, "I suppose I ought to leave you here, as you only will make a lot more weight in the air-ship, but I am more humane than that and I'll allow you to come on board. Up the ladder with you, and briskly now."

Ben went first, followed by the two boys; behind them came Malvoise.

"Come on, Sanborn," shouted the Frenchman to his companion, who still lingered on board the aeroplane.

"Wait a minute. I've got a job to do first. I want to sink the thing for all time," cried the other.

The boys, who had by this time gained the swaying deck of the dirigible, saw the treacherous mechanic deliberately draw a pistol and prepare to fire a hole in the pontoons, which would inevitably have sunk the gallant craft.

But as his finger pressed the trigger the man's foot slipped and he was dumped off the pontoon into the water.

His companions, far from being alarmed, shouted with laughter at his mishap, as Sanborn, cursing, prepared to climb back on to the Golden Eagle. But even as the oaths left his lips a change came over his face. It turned an ashen gray.

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"Help!" he shouted.

"What's the matter?" roared Malvoise.

"Something is after me!" came the agonized cry of the man.

As the words left his lips a cry of horror broke from all on the dirigible's deck who were watching Sanborn's struggles.

A great arm, covered with mouths, like the ones the boys had seen absorb the rats, shot out of the sea. Another and another followed it, and hapless Sanborn, screaming in terror, was dragged from the structure of the aeroplane, to which he clung with a drowning man's clutch.

"It's a devil-fish," shouted the boys.

"Fire on the thing," shouted Malvoise, pouring the contents of his revolver down into the fleshy mass of the octopus.

Instantly a great cloud of inky fluid spread over the waters and into the opaque waves the waving arms sank, dragging with them to the depths of the sea the treacherous mechanic.

Shocked and sickened by the scene, the boys turned away and even Malvoise seemed powerfully affected. He hid his face in his hands as the wounded monster slowly sank without relinquishing its hold on its victim.

As for Constantio and a red-headed bushy-whiskered man, whom the boys learned later on was Sam Wells, one of the three men who helped in working the dirigible, they seemed completely unnerved by the sight they had witnessed. Malvoise's sharp voice recalled them to themselves.

"Come now, collect your wits," he shouted; "poor Sanborn's gone, and we can't save him. Cut loose from the aeroplane and haul up the rope-ladder. Constantio, you take the wheel. Wells, when you have got the ladder aboard, turn to and stow that stuff further aft."

He indicated the pile of treasure sacks.

Wells and two other men who had been standing about the deck instantly busied themselves obeying these orders. It was evident from their implicit obedience that Malvoise was master on the dirigible.

As the engine was set going and the ship forged ahead, leaving behind it the wrecked aeroplane and the watery grave of Sanborn, Malvoise called the boys' attention, in a half-joking way, to the damage Ben Stubbs' bullets had done to the gas-bag.

"However," he went on, "fortunately it does not make so much difference as it would in any other air-craft. After dinner I will send one of the crew aloft to put a patch on the hole and we can then re-inflate that section from one of the hydrogen tubes."

Precarious as their situation was, the boys, whose interest in aeronautics was a sort of ruling passion with them, could not but help being interested with the perfect working out of all details aboard Luther Barr's craft. After an excellent dinner, in which fresh meat and vegetables from a well-stocked ice-box formed the staples, they watched with interest the red-headed sailor, Wells, scramble up into the network of the bag and sew a patch over the bullet hole made by Ben Stubbs' shot. The patch affixed, it was coated with a water and gas-proof solution the sailor carried in a small pot suspended round his waist. After an interval allowed for drying, a cylinder of gas was dragged out of the after storeroom where they were kept, and the section which had been injured was refilled by means of its own inflation hose, which was provided with a nozzle adjustable to the mouth of the gas receptacle.

To the boys' surprise, when darkness fell the dirigible still forged ahead and no change of her course was observable. They had imagined that she was on her way to join Luther Barr at some nearby meeting-place, where the Brigand would take the treasure on board, but, so far, her navigators showed no intention of alighting.

At ten o'clock Malvoise stepped up to the three adventurers and said:

"It is a rule on board that all lights shall be extinguished at this hour. If you are ready for bed I will show you to your sleeping place."

He led the way to a small cabin fitted with two bunks and lounge. The boys wanted to ask a score of questions, but knew it would be useless, so remained silent.

"I wish you a good night's rest," said Malvoise as he switched on a tiny electric light with the warning that the dynamo would be cut off in ten minutes' time.

As he closed the cabin door behind him there was a sharp click.

The cabin door was fitted with a stout spring lock.

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The adventurers were prisoners a thousand feet in the air.

CHAPTER XXIII. PRISONERS IN DIRE PERIL.

"Locked in, by gosh!" exclaimed Ben Stubbs, as the lock clicked.

"What can they mean to do with us?" wondered Frank.

"So far we've been treated like lords, but I don't like the idea of being penned up in this cabin," said Harry.

Much more speculation was indulged in by the boys, but without their arriving any further at an accurate idea of what was likely to be their ultimate fate at the hands of Luther Barr's men. While they were still talking the light went out, as Malvoise had warned them it would, and they were plunged in total darkness.

Not being heroes of romance, but just healthy boys, the two lads were asleep a few minutes after they threw themselves in their bunks, which were provided with excellent springs, and bed-clothing of good material. As for Ben Stubbs, as he himself said, he could have slept on a whale's back so long as the animal didn't dive.

How long he slept Frank had, of course, no means of estimating, as it was too pitchy black in the cabin for him to see the dial of his watch, but he opened his eyes with a start and soon found out that he had been aroused by what seemed an unusual disturbance aboard the dirigible.

He heard the trampling of feet as the crew ran to and fro, and the shouting of orders in Malvoise's voice. The cabin port was closed and locked on the outside, although the cabin seemed perfectly ventilated by some other aperture; so it was impossible for Frank to distinguish what was said, but the tones of the Frenchman's voice conveyed intense excitement.

The motion of the air-ship, too, seemed strange.

When they had gone to sleep it seemed as if they were sleeping in a room ashore, so perfectly evenly did the ship rush ahead through the night; but now every portion of her frame seemed to be complaining in its own particular voice, and she groaned and strained like a ship in a storm.

Frank aroused Harry, and a few minutes later Ben Stubbs, too, was awakened by the peculiar motion of the ship.

"What's happening?" he demanded, as one of the air sailors ran heavily along the deck overhead.

"I don't know," rejoined Frank; "but it seems to me that we are in a storm of some kind.—Hark!"

As he spoke there was a blue glare of lightning outside, in which the ropes and stays of the ship, seen through the closed port, stood out as in an etching. Simultaneously there came a terrific crash of thunder. They were evidently in a bad storm.

"I wish we were outside instead of cooped up in here," exclaimed Ben. "I like to be out on deck in bad weather and not penned up in a cubby hole."

"Let's try the door," suggested Frank, "we might be able to force the lock."

But the lock was evidently put on to stay, and tug and strain as they would, they could not budge it an inch.

The motion of the ship by this time was so violent as to make them feel quite seasick. She swayed from side to side and now and then took long dips.

"I know what they are doing," exclaimed Frank as the ship executed the latest of these diving maneuvers; "they are setting their aeroplanes low so as to try and find a smooth current of air."

"They've got a fine chance to, if it's blowing as hard as it seems to be," was Harry's comment.

The uproar on deck grew louder.

They could now hear Malvoise's voice, directing the crew to strengthen this stay or lend a hand on that rudder brace.

The ship was evidently passing through a crisis.

It was hard for the boys to remain cooped up in their pen, but deliverance was near at hand.

The door was suddenly flung open, and Malvoise himself stood framed in the square of light from the illuminated saloon behind him.

"You had better come out of there," he said briefly, "we are in a bad storm."

"Are we in danger?" asked Harry.

"I don't know yet. If it doesn't blow any harder we may be able to weather it."

"And if not?"

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"If not, we may go to the bottom."

"Is anything wrong with the ship?" was Frank's next question.

"Yes, the engine is not working right. It is not developing enough power to keep us driving against the storm. I am afraid it may strike us broadside on and tear the cabin and decks loose from the gas-bag," replied the Frenchman.

As the boys and Ben gained the deck, the storm struck them in its full fury. It was not cold, they were too far south for that, but the wind fairly drove their breath back down their throats.

"Say, let's grab on to a stay or something," gasped Harry, "I don't want to get blown overboard."

They fairly fought their way to the edge of the navigating deck, which was swaying in a sickening fashion, and clung to one of the stout mainstays of the stressed and storm-driven gas bag above them.

Far below, the sea roared and its wave crests gleamed with phosphorescent light, as the furious wind ripped off their tops and sent them scurrying over the heaving waters.

But, bad as the wind was, a far graver peril menaced the dirigible, and the boys knew it. The lightning was zipping and ripping across the sky in every direction, and, in the event of a bolt striking the craft to which they clung, the boys knew that they might as well be sitting on a keg of exploding dynamite. There would be a blinding crash as the gas exploded, and then oblivion.

As they hung on for dear life, Malvoise, his face gleaming white in the glare cast from one of the cabin ports, came up to them.

"Do you think you can take the wheel for a while?" he asked Frank. "What with fear and exhaustion Constantio is almost unable to stand up."

Frank agreed, and, followed by the others he entered the pilot-house. With the exception of the binnacle light above the compass and a small shaded incandescent that shed a glow on the height indicator, the place was as black as a well.

"How is she doing now?" the boys heard Malvoise ask the inventor.

"Ah, senor, poor thing, she is torn and strained in every direction. My heart bleeds for her!" exclaimed the Spaniard.

"Yes—yes," broke in Malvoise impatiently; "but can she last out?"

"I do not know," came the reply of the other. "It is much to ask of any dirigible to last out such a storm. See," he turned the light on to the wind-gauge—it showed a pressure of sixty miles an hour, "it is a wonder to me she has not been torn apart," he declared.

"Well, you'd better go and get some sleep now," said Malvoise abruptly, "one of these boys here will take care of the ship while you nap."

"Very well," said the Spaniard, "do not drive her too hard against the wind, senor, but rather let the wind drive her. Good-night."

He staggered out on to the swaying, plunging deck and vanished. Frank had taken the wheel as the Spaniard relinquished it and he was astonished to find how, in spite of its gears, the wind-stressed rudder tore and tugged at the spokes.

"The strain on the rudder must be terrific," he thought to himself; "it's a wonder it has held out as long as it has."

Taking a casual glance at the height indicator, Frank gave a start. It indicated twelve thousand feet. It was higher than the boy had ever been before.

For several minutes he was too busy easing the dirigible through a blast that seemed as if it would rip her apart to notice the gauge again. When he had an opportunity to do so, he gave a whistle of surprise.

The dirigible had now climbed on the wings of the storm to an altitude of fourteen thousand feet.

Glancing through the pilot-house window the young helmsman saw tattered shreds of storm clouds driven by at a terrific speed; but fast as they went, the dirigible was hurried along with them at an equal speed. The rapid motion had a tendency first to exhilarate and then to turn dizzy those who participated in it.

All at once a sharp whistle sounded from a tube placed so that it was close to the helmsman's ear.

"A signal from the engine-room," cried Malvoise, "answer it."

"Hullo!" called Frank, turning back the whistler at the mouth of the tube. Then he placed his ear to it.

"Two cylinders are missing fire," came the hail, "to make repairs we shall have to stop the engine."

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“Keep on with what power you have,” shouted back Frank. “We've got to keep going.”

There was no need to explain to the others what the bad news from the engine-room was. They had guessed from his reply.

And still the dirigible rose.

She was now at an altitude of fifteen thousand feet, and even as Frank gazed at the indicator she soared higher.

It grew bitterly cold.

“Something will have to be done,” he shouted to Malvoise, “if we keep on going higher the air will soon be so rarefied that we shall be unable to breathe.”

“Set your dropping planes,” shouted Malvoise, above the turmoil.

“I have tried to,” yelled back Frank, “but she won't drop unless the engine forces her ahead faster. The wind is stronger than we are.”

“Let out the gas,” suggested Harry.

Frank shook his head.

“I don't want to do that except in case of actual necessity,” he said. “We may need all we have before long.”

“I can feel an awful pressure on my ear drums!” suddenly exclaimed Harry.

“No wonder,” was Frank's rejoinder; “look at that.”

He pointed to the gauge.

The dirigible had now been driven to a height of eighteen thousand five hundred feet, and breathing was really becoming painful.

Desperately Frank struggled to get the sinking planes to act, but the wind pressure on the bag counteracted all his efforts in this direction. So fast was the hurricane now driving the gas-bag ahead that the sub-structure lagged behind, straining at its confining stays and braces.

All at once Harry gave a cry and sank to the floor of the pilot-house. Malvoise, the next instant, hastened to the deck and cried:

“Air, air!”

Frank felt a warm liquid streaming from his nose and ears. He put up his hand. It came away stained red. Even tough old Ben Stubbs felt the baleful effect of the high altitude.

“I'll be hornswoggled if I can stand this much longer,” he gasped out to Frank.

“Can you take the wheel?” replied the young aviator. Ben nodded.

“Then take it. I'm going to get this ship down.”

Frank reeled from the pilot-house on to the deck. He almost stumbled over the body of Malvoise as he did so. It lay as inanimate as in death where it had been thrown against the railing by the impact of the ship's wild swaying.

“You'll go overboard if you're not careful,” Frank found himself saying in a voice he hardly recognized as his own.

Making his way aft the lad encountered the red-headed sailor, Wells.

“Oh, sir, what is happening?” gasped the poor fellow.

“We've gone too high,” replied Frank, every word cutting his chest as if a knife had been plunged into it.

“Where's the valve cord?”

“Aft there, sir, it's belayed to the starboard rail.”

As he spoke the man pitched forward as if he had been shot and lay inanimate on his face.

CHAPTER XXIV. THE INVENTOR'S TREACHERY.

Weak almost as a baby, Frank made his way to the stern of the navigating deck, and with what seemed the last ounce of strength in his body he gave the cord a feeble yank.

It resisted and the boy tugged once more.

Still it stuck.

Mustering his strength to keep on his feet a minute longer, the boy tied the cord to his wrist. Then, as he fell forward in the swoon that he knew must ensue, the cord tightened under the weight of his body and yielded.

The dirigible with an unconscious crew aboard plunged on through the night, but every moment exhausted more gas from her bags and the craft gradually dropped till she had reached an altitude where the air was breathable.

Frank was the first to stir. He discovered at once that the air-ship's drop must have been considerable and hastened to close the valve which connected by a tube with each one of the gas partitions. The dirigible's fall was checked in this way and the lad made his way forward.

By this time a sickly dawn had arisen and although it was still blowing hard the full fury of the hurricane had distinctly moderated. The dirigible, however, was clearly beyond all control and Frank, after a glance into the engine-room, where the engineer lay insensible beside his machines, started for the pilot-house.

At its threshold he stopped with a cry of surprise.

The railing, against which he had left Malvoise lying, gaped open raggedly for a space of several feet, as if a heavy body had plunged through it. A brief examination showed the boy some bits of cloth still clinging to the rough ends of the shattered rail, indicating plainly enough that the doomed Frenchman had been hurled into empty space while the storm was at its height and they all lay senseless.

Undoubtedly his body had been rolled by a lurch of the ship in toward the cabin and then been cast outward again by a reverse swing. The railing, none too strong at best, had evidently not been capable of withstanding the impact and the Frenchman's body had been hurled through into the void.

Shuddering at the thought of such an end, Frank aroused his brother and Ben and then went aft to inspect the engine-room. He found that of the eight cylinders only five were doing their work, and a brief examination showed why. The insulation on three of the spark plugs had cracked and it was not before he had done a lot of rummaging around that the boy found spare ones stored in a locker.

By this time the engineer, who seemed a decent enough fellow, and told Frank his name was Dick Richards, had recovered and helped the boy fit the new sparkers to the motor. First, however, Frank had hailed Harry through the tube leading to the pilot-house.

"How high are we?" he asked.

"A thousand feet," came back the reply.

"All right," shouted Frank back. "I guess the wind has moderated enough now for us to drift for a while. I am going to stop the engine."

The machinery accordingly was brought to a standstill and Frank and the engineer set busily to work placing the new sparkplugs and wiring them up.

This completed, Frank hailed Harry once more.

"I'm going to start up."

"All right. I'm looking out," came the reply.

The compressed air apparatus that started the engines was put in operation and the engine was soon working as if nothing had happened.

"Say, you are an all right mechanic," was Dick Richards' admiring tribute to Frank's skill.

By noon the last traces of the hurricane had died out and the dirigible was driving forward over a sparkling sea with a cloudless sky overhead. After breakfast, in which the now resuscitated members of the crew and Constantio took part, Frank called them forward and told them of the fate of Malvoise. None of them seemed particularly grieved, as the man had undoubtedly been a hard taskmaster.

"You are captain of this ship now," said Constantio to Frank. "I am only her inventor and have already

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received from Luther Barr the full purchase price. I have deposited it in a bank in New York. In this treasure they are hunting I have no interest. All I want to do is to invent air-ships.”

Constantio had recognized Ben Stubbs as soon as he set eyes on him, and laughed with apparent good nature at the recollection of their meeting in Boston. He had recovered the watch the little gamin got away with, he told them, and had never mentioned to Luther Barr the fact that Ben had inspected the air-ship and then escaped, for fear of the grim old millionaire's wrath.

“When he is mad he is like one volcano,” he declared volubly.

Breakfast over, they skimmed along through the air till noon, when Frank took an observation with the ill-fated Malvoise's instruments.

“We ought to be falling in soon with one of the Bahama group of islands,” he announced. “We were not driven so far as I thought, and if we can make a landing we ought to be able to effect repairs and then fly for land. We certainly cannot go much further on the supply of gas we now have, the ship is getting lower all the time.”

This was indeed the fact. With her heavy load and reduced supply of gas the air-ship was rapidly decreasing the space between herself and the sea.

During the afternoon the water tanks were emptied, which lightened the ship considerably, but left the voyagers only a small supply of the fluid, which was likely to prove serious if they did not find land soon. By supper time it became necessary also to tear out some of the heavy cabin fittings and cast them away.

By early the next day, after a restless night, the ship had settled so much, despite the lightening process, that she rode soggily along at not more than fifty feet above the level of the sea. The situation was indeed a serious one.

Suddenly there came a hail from Ben, who was standing at the bow of the craft.

“Land ho!”

The adventurers crowded forward.

There, sure enough, dead ahead of them, was what looked like a tiny blue cloud on the horizon, but which Ben's practiced eye had told him was land. With new heart the voyagers drove on and by mid-afternoon were in sight of the island, which on closer view proved to be one of those small palm-crowned atolls that are common enough in these waters.

The dirigible had by this time settled so badly that she was barely twenty feet above the wave-tops.

Some sacks of ballast still remained, kept by Frank for an emergency. He now was compelled reluctantly to give the order to cut these away and one by one they dropped overboard; but as they did so, the ship rose and an hour later they landed on a smooth beach.

The island did not seem to be of great extent, but to the delight of the adventurers, from the midst of the cocoanut grove that crowned the islet there flowed a tiny stream of clear water. This was indeed a godsend, as they did not know how long they might have to remain there. With a spade, which formed part of the dirigible's outfit—“I suppose they figured on shoveling out the treasure,” laughed Harry—a small basin was soon dug out for the water to settle in and make a sort of small well, from which it could be dipped out for cooking and drinking purposes.

Fortunately the larder of the dirigible was well stocked, and as they were two mouths short they were not in any immediate fear of hunger. That evening, when arrangements for sleeping and keeping watch for any passing steamer or vessel had been made, Constantio beckoned to Frank and asked him to join him in a walk along the beach. The lad, nothing loath of a chance for exploration, started off with the Spanish inventor, who seemed to be anxious to confide something to him.

“You are worried about getting away from the island?” he said.

“I am—yes,” rejoined Frank, “you see our gas is exhausted and I for one can't figure out but we shall stay here till some one comes along and picks us up. Unless we can build a raft out of the remains of the dirigible.”

“Oh, make yourself easy about that, my dear young friend,” exclaimed the inventor. “I can refill the gas-bag and that without delay, but—but—well, to be frank with you, how much is it worth to you if I do so?”

Frank was amazed at the sudden proposal and no less astonished at the Spaniard's boast that he could inflate the dirigible.

“What do you mean?” he asked. “I confess I don't altogether understand you.”

“I thought I had made myself clear,” was the reply. “I have changed my mind since I spoke to you last about

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the treasure, and now I feel that I am entitled to some of it if I can refill the dirigible.”

“Why, yes,” said Frank, with a laugh; “of course you are IF you really can.”

“Would five thousand dollars' worth of ornaments or doubloons seem too much?” ventured the Spaniard.

Frank broke into a loud laugh.

“Why, no; you shall have that, and gladly, if you think you can help us to get out of this place.”

“Thank you,” said the inventor, quite seriously, “I don't want more than my just dues, but I certainly am entitled to that.”

“Oh, certainly,” laughed Frank, much amused at the man's deprecatory manner. “What is your plan?”

“Well, senor,” said the Spaniard, “I have a certain amount of my gas-producing powder left in my cabin. There is none too much, but enough, I think, to inflate the dirigible with—at any rate, to fit her for flight to the mainland, which cannot be so very far off.”

Frank nodded.

“There are some empty cylinders on board,” went on the inventor. “All that is necessary to do is to put equal parts of sand, water and my powder into the cylinders and then screw on the caps to produce almost pure hydrogen gas at tremendous pressure. You follow me?”

“Yes,” said Frank, “when can we do this?”

“Why, to-morrow morning,” was the reply. “The actual inflation will take but little time.”

As they returned to their camp they found it in a state of great excitement. Two of the men, in strolling about the island, had found lying up in a small cove, where it seemed to have drifted, a ship's boat.

There was no clue as to how it had come there, but on its stern were painted the words “Falcon, New York.”

“I'll bet a lemon that it's one of the ship's boats of the Falcon that I read about been missing this year,” exclaimed Ben; “it's got oars in it, too, they say. They are lashed under the seats, so that it must have broken loose from the ship when she went down and been washed ashore here. We can get away in the boat if nothing better offers.”

Frank drew him aside and explained to him Constantio's plan for reinflating the gas-bag.

“We will try that, and if that plan fails then we can take to the boat,” said the boy.

Ben agreed that if the air-ship could be inflated it would be much better to fly to land in her than to set out under the tropical sun in an open boat, not knowing where they might land.

The camp was so arranged that night that the treasure was placed near to the boys and Ben, while the three members of the dirigible's crew, her engineer and Constantio slept at some little distance.

Had the boys seen the gleam that had come into the inventor's eyes at the discovery of the boat they would not have been so trustful of him when he volunteered to take the middle watch of the night. As it was, however, they little imagined the plot that had formed in the fellow's head. While the boys and Ben slumbered, however, he drew aside the engineer and Wells, the red-headed sailor, and the three rapidly stocked up the boat with water from the spring in kegs and jars taken from the dirigible and laid in a supply of provisions. Then they awakened the other two men and explained to them in low whispers the plan to escape from the island they had formed.

“We will get all the treasure and divide it,” whispered the cunning inventor. “If the boys wake while we are getting it to the boat, don't hesitate to attack them. We are stronger in numbers and can beat them off.”

The other two readily agreed, more particularly as the inventor told them that it was the boys' intention to keep all the treasure for themselves in the event of their getting ashore in the dirigible. Before the boat had been found the inventor had been willing enough to aid the boys, but with the discovery of that means of escape his plans had undergone a change. He saw a way to appropriate the entire mass of treasure.

CHAPTER XXV. THE FIGHT ON THE ISLAND.

Silently as cats the plotters approached the pile of treasure sacks when they judged that the time was ripe for their raid on the valuables. Constantio, who was a coward at heart, had taken his station by the boat so as to be the furthest away from danger should the boys be aroused.

With a beating heart he waited the appearance of the first heavy bag of treasure. At last the engineer and one of the sailors came in sight dragging it over the top of a sand dune.

"Phew, that's heavy," exclaimed the sailor, who was our red-headed friend, Wells, setting the bag down with a sigh. "How far is it from the camp to this boat, Mister Concertina?"

"Not more than a few hundred yards," replied Constantio; "I don't see what a big strapping fellow like you is making so much fuss over packing a fortune that little distance."

"It's a wonder you wouldn't tackle the job yourself," said Wells indignantly, as he and the engineer heaved the sack into the boat. "I guess you are scared though. I always knew that Spaniards were cowards."

Infuriated as much by the truth of the insult as stung by the stigma it conveyed, Constantio, pale with fury, sprang at the sailor with his knife drawn. He sprang back again with the same agility and crouched on his haunches like a tiger-cat, as the sailor whipped out a revolver and leveled it at him.

"Now you be careful what you are doing, Concertina," he said, "or I'll have to send you where you won't make no more trouble."

As he spoke there came a loud report from the direction of the camp.

It was followed by another and another.

"They have discovered us!" cried Constantio, seizing hold of the boat and trying to drag it off.

At the same instant the two sailors, who had been left behind to bring a second sack of the treasure, appeared, racing over the top of the sand dune.

"They heard us as we were moving the sack," cried one of them; "something jangled, I guess, and—"

"They awakened and fired at us,—see here," he held up a bleeding arm, "broke my elbow I guess."

"Come on," shouted Wells, "we are playing for too big a stake to let two boys and an old man beat us off. Who is for coming back and driving them off?"

Constantio turned white, fighting was not in his line, but the sailor stepped to his side and whispered something, at the same time pressing his revolver to the Spaniard's head, and the wretch, trembling in every limb, followed the others back. But the attacking party was doomed not to get any more treasure that night. As they approached the camp Frank called out in a clear voice:

"We don't want to do you any harm, but don't come any closer or we shall fire."

For reply Wells let fly a bullet at the boy's head, which, if the sailor had not been an indifferent shot, would have inflicted a serious wound. As it was, it flew wide and went whistling out to sea.

Before Frank could check him, old Ben in a furious rage stood up and fired straight at Wells. He shattered the man's wrist and with a howl of pain he dropped his revolver.

"Come on, men," shouted Constantio, as he saw the mainstay of the attackers rendered helpless; "we've got enough loot in that one sack to secure us all a good sum when we get ashore. Come on—I'm for the boat!"

So saying he turned and ran at top speed for the boat, the others after him. The shore gained, they leaped to the sides of the craft, having first thrown in the wounded sailor Wells, and then shoved the boat off till they were waist-deep in water.

The boys and Ben reached the spot just as they were clambering in and getting out the oars.

"Shall I tell 'em to come back, or have a hole shot in their boat?" asked Ben.

"No," decided Frank, "let them go. We are cheaply rid of the rascals at the cost of only one sack of valuables."

The men fell to the oars with a will, and were soon out of sight in the darkness. Nothing more was ever heard of them by the boys, but as some time ago a sailor was arrested on the Bowery trying to pawn a candlestick of solid gold marked Buena Ventura, it is reasonable to suppose the men eventually got ashore. The prisoner gave the name of Jones, but as he had red hair it is not unreasonable to assume that he was none other than Wells. As nobody claimed the candlestick and the police had received no word of such an article being stolen, it was given

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back to the man and he was released.

CHAPTER XXVI. THE BOYS WIN OUT.

“Now,” said Frank briskly the next morning, “as that scoundrel Constantio tried to steal a march on us we shall have to try to discover his powder and make the gas by ourselves.”

“What,” exclaimed Harry, “do you mean to say that you think it would be possible to do it?”

“If he can, I don't see why we can't,” rejoined the other. “The first thing to do is to find his powder. Then to mix it with equal parts of water and sand in the cylinders and screw the caps on.”

“Sounds easy,” commented Harry.

“I guess the hardest part will be to find the powder,” put in Ben. “How are we to tell whether it's hydrogen gas powder or Seidlitz powder, I'd like to know.”

After a hasty breakfast a thorough rummaging of the cabin occupied by Constantio was begun.

“Say, Frank,” suddenly cried Ben, who was bending over a locker, “is this the stuff?”

Frank hastened to his side and saw, ranged side by side, a number of wooden boxes about a foot square labeled “Dangerous.”

“I guess that's the stuff all right, Ben,” he said, “bear a hand and we'll drag it out. Only be very careful of it. It is probably a high explosive if not handled delicately.”

One by one the boxes were transferred until two dozen of them stood on the beach, set in soft sand. Then a sudden difficulty flashed into Frank's mind. Constantio had said “equal parts of sand, water and the powder,” but he had not said how much these equal parts were to be. The only thing to do was to experiment.

Fortunately the massive steel cylinders, in which the gas was to be generated, were provided with gauges to register the pressure. One thousand pounds were marked as top measure, so Frank assumed that somewhere about 800 pounds would be enough.

The first mixture they tried only registered three hundred pounds, but by gradually increasing the amount of powder they at last hit upon the required strength, and were ready to start on the work of inflation.

They had six cylinders full of the gas. Not enough to fully inflate the bag, but enough, Frank calculated, to render it sufficiently buoyant to carry the reduced weight it would be called upon to convey now that the crew was gone.

The inflation nozzle was connected with cylinder after cylinder, till the bag became so buoyant that it was necessary to weight the machine down with heavy stones. At last the cylinders were emptied and the great bag, expanded by the warm sun, swelled up till it seemed it must burst. The expansion of gas by the sun was one of the things Frank had counted on when filling the bag, and he was glad to see his theories work out right. The treasure bags were hastily laden on to the craft and then the boys, standing on the lower framework, one on each side, while Ben stood in the pilot-house, started to kick off the weights that restrained the ship from rising.

They had not cast off more than half a dozen before the ship gave a mighty bound upward that threatened to throw them off her frames and before they could catch their breath they had shot up 1,200 feet or more. Hastily clambering aboard and laughing at the sudden jump, the boys got the engine going and shaped a course that would bring them over the spot where they had left the Bolo.

They held steadily on their course that day and the next. Early in the morning of the second they encountered a surprising incident. Frank, who was on lookout, hailed “Air-ship ahead.”

And there, sure enough, heading northward, was a big red dirigible coming toward them like the wind.

As they drew near, a man with a megaphone appeared on her bridge and signaled that he wanted to hail them. Frank shut down the engine and the two air-ships drew alongside.

“What ship is that?” hailed the man on the bridge of the red air-ship, who wore yachting flannels as did his three companions.

“The Luther Barr of New York,” responded Frank for lack of a better name.

“We are the Dos Hermanos, five days out from Cuba, bound for Jacksonville, Florida,” was the response, “can you spare us any bread?”

“Come alongside,” responded Frank in a hearty tone, “and we'll give you some tins of pilot bread.”

“Bully for you,” responded the red air-ship man.

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The two dirigibles drifted together and the boys handed over some tins of pilot bread or ship biscuit with which the larder of the Luther Barr, as Frank had called her, was well provided.

“Thank-you,” shouted the men on the red dirigible, as the lines were cast off, “good-bye and good luck.”

“Same to you,” hailed the boys, as the engines were started. An hour later the red dirigible had vanished on its voyage to the north.

“Well,” said Frank, “that's the first time I've ever heard of 'ships that pass in air and speak to each other in passing.' I'm glad we were able to help a fellow voyager out.”

Frank's observations that day showed that they could not be far from the spot from where the Bolo had been left, but eager scrutiny failed to reveal her till almost sundown, when Ben's sharp eyes spied her—little more than a tiny black object on the horizon.

“There she is,” he hailed.

Frank's binoculars soon confirmed the good tidings.

But as they neared the Bolo an astonishing thing happened.

Through the glasses they saw a form they recognized as Bluewater Bill's come out on the deck and gaze at them in amazement, to judge from the way he threw his arms about.

Presently he was joined by two other figures that the boys recognized as Billy Barnes and Lathrop.

Harry impetuously rushed to the rail, oblivious of the fact that at that distance the boys could not hear him, and shouted at the top of his voice.

“Hullo, Billy, hullo, Lathrop, hullo, Bill!”

It was then that the surprise was sprung. Frank through the glasses saw Bluewater Bill raise a rifle to his shoulder, and take deliberate aim at the dirigible. The bullet sang by the pilot-house chipping off a bit of molding.

“What on earth is the matter with them, have they gone crazy?” exclaimed Harry.

Frank was as puzzled as his brother for a minute, but suddenly the meaning of this inexplicable conduct burst upon him.

“They think we are Luther Barr! The sight of the dirigible has deceived them,” he cried.

“I'll bet that's the right explanation,” cried Harry, “how are we to undeceive them without getting our heads shot off?”

“I have it,” cried Frank, diving into his pocket and bringing out a crumpled bit of silk, “that's the old Golden Eagle flag. I saved it when we had to abandon her.”

Ben seized it from the boy's hand and ran to the rail with it, waving the bit of silk furiously. Evidently the occupants of the Bolo saw and recognized it, for they stopped their threatening demonstrations and began waving furiously.

As they hovered above the Bolo, Frank shouted as much explanation as he could through the megaphone, and then told the Boloites to be ready to make fast a line. This done a tackle was rigged and one by one, amid great cheering on Billy Barnes' part, the sacks of treasure were lowered.

This task accomplished, there remained but one thing for the boys on board the dirigible to do—namely to get on board the Bolo. The gas-bag was deflated by means of the escape valve till the big dirigible was but a few feet above the Bolo, and then the adventurers slid down the rope on to the smaller vessel's deck. There being no way of transporting the dirigible, she was allowed to drift away.

What greetings, handshakings, dances and yarn spinning took place then, we will leave our readers to imagine. Early next day, after it had been agreed that two-thirds of the treasure was to be divided among Bluewater Bill, Frank and Harry, and the remainder in even parts to Billy Lathrop and Ben Stubbs, anchor was got up and the Bolo headed for the Florida coast. The young adventurers meant to head for St. Augustine and then take train to New York, sending the Bolo back to Galveston with a hired crew.

They had but one regret—the loss of the gallant Golden Eagle. How she was recovered will be related in another volume, but restored to them she was.

“I'm glad we came through with such flying colors,” said Harry to Frank one evening, while the boys were all seated on the foredeck, “but I hate to think our adventures are all over.”

“I don't suppose we shall have any more for awhile,” sighed Billy Barnes, “it seems to me we've done about all that's possible.”

Frank laughed.

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“With the money we can make from the sale of the treasure, we can build another aeroplane and have lots of good times,” he said, “we might even try a transcontinental flight.”

“From New York to Frisco—bully,” exclaimed Billy Barnes.

“Do you think that you really could make such a flight, Frank?” asked Lathrop.

To satisfy the curiosity of others like Lathrop, we will say that not only could the boys make the flight but that they did, and had a series of surprising adventures in connection with it.

It now only remains to tell of the conclusion of Luther Barr's vain quest for the treasure. Perhaps an item from a New York newspaper best covers the ground. The clipping we have selected reads as follows:

“Luther Barr's yacht, *Brigand*, returned to-day and thus cleared up some of the mystery connected with her long sojourn in Southern waters. Seen on board her, Mr. Barr declined to be interviewed or to tell anything about his absence, which has created some stir on Wall Street. Asked if he were still interested in aeronautics, he became furiously angry and threatened to have the reporter thrown overboard. Mr. Barr said he had not heard anything about the remarkable discoveries on a derelict Spanish galleon made by Frank and Harry Chester, the Boy Aviators, and a party of adventurers who accompanied them, and of which a full account was printed in these columns some days ago, on the safe arrival of the boys from St. Augustine, Fla. Frank Chester said yesterday that there was nothing to add to our article as printed, except that the valuables recovered had realized more than \$500,000.”

And here for the present we will leave our young friends to renew our acquaintance with them in the next volume of this series, which will be called:

THE BOY AVIATORS IN RECORD FLIGHT; OR, THE RIVAL AEROPLANE.

THE END.