PORSON'S FLYING SERVICE

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HE WAS HEADING FOR THE METALS, DIRECTLY BETWEEN THE TRAIN AND THE MOUTH OF THE TUNNEL.

PORSON'S FLYING SERVICE

BY
GEORGE E. ROCHESTER

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PORSON'S FLYING SERVICE

CHAPTER I

THE FLYING CRATE!

"GEORGE!"

"Yes, aunt?"

"I think you are behaving in a most unreasonable and foolish manner!"

George Porson wriggled uncomfortably in his chair. Funny what a demoralising effect the lorgnettes of Aunt Elizabeth had on a fellow!

"But, aunt, you don't understand!" he expostulated. "I know it's most frightfully decent of Uncle Bartholomew to offer to get me into a bank, but I'd come an awful crash if I went in for banking. That sort of banking, I mean. Ha ha!" He laughed feebly.

"Good joke, that—what?" he ventured hopefully.

Aunt Elizabeth raised her eyebrows and lorgnettes.

"Joke?" she inquired frigidly.

"Yes, I—I meant I'd crash if I banked in a bank," Porson exclaimed lamely. "But if I banked in my Farman biplane I don't think I would crash, you know."

"Well?"

Porson ran frenzied fingers through his tousled hair and glared appealingly round the living-room of the little cottage. Aunt Elizabeth surveyed him coldly through her lorgnettes.

Oil and an elusive smell of petrol seemed to be the predominant notes about George Porson at the moment. There was oil on his flannel bags, oil on his school blazer, and smudges of oil on his good-natured face.

"Well, that's the joke, don't you see," he said wildly. "I'd be sure to crash banking in a bank, but banking in my biplane is the sort of banking I can—can bank on to do more or less without crashing, don't you know."

Not the flicker of a smile softened the firm line of Aunt Elizabeth's compressed lips.

"I fail to follow you," she remarked acidly. "It seems very involved."

Porson gave up the unequal contest. Aunt Elizabeth, he reflected bitterly, had no sense of humour. She made a fellow feel as though he ought to see a mental specialist, with a view to being removed to a home.

"Kindly refrain from fidgeting," went on his aunt. "It irritates me. As I have already told you, I have motored down here to-day to take you back to town with me. You will stay with your uncle and me until Grubbins & Grime have a vacancy to offer in one of their branch banks. By hard work and concentrated effort, you have no idea how far you might rise in the world."

Porson sat bolt upright on his chair, the light of the enthusiast glowing in his eyes.

"But I have, aunt!" he exclaimed. "I've already risen to eight hundred feet. It was a little more than that, really, but my altimeter's a bit groggy. Call it eight-fifty. Yes, eight hundred and fifty feet on that old Maurice Farman biplane. As you say, it took jolly hard work and concentrated effort, because she was built more for hedge-hopping than climbing, and——"

"You quite misunderstand me," snapped Aunt Elizabeth. "When I said that you might rise in the world I was referring to the world of commerce, and not to this ridiculous and dangerous flying with which you are wasting your time."

"Dangerous"—Porson almost snorted—"it's not dangerous, aunt!"

"Both your uncle and myself are of the opinion that it is decidedly dangerous!" replied his aunt tartly. "Now that you have left school we are morally responsible for your welfare, until your father returns from his big-game hunting up the Congo. You ought to have consulted us before you purchased this Mr. Farman's flying-machine. How much did he charge you for it?"

Porson grinned.

"I bought it from the Air Ministry for ten pounds," he replied. "You see, it's an old, obsolete type of machine, and it's called a Maurice Farman because it was Maurice Farman who designed it years and years ago. This machine of mine was used for instructional purposes during the War, and the chappie who handed it over to me said that they used to fly it at exhibitions before the War. So it's frightfully old, you see; but it's good enough for me. Besides, I couldn't afford anything better."

"But what was your object in purchasing this machine?"

Porson leant forward in his chair.

"I bought it because I'm starting an Air Service," he said enthusiastically. "Porson's Passenger Service—By Air to Anywhere!' Didn't you see the notice on the board as you came in the garden gate?"

"I certainly did see a board daubed with some such absurd legend," admitted Aunt Elizabeth. "I instructed Benson to remove it."

"Oh, dash it, you shouldn't have done that!" exclaimed Porson; then added hastily: "I—I beg your pardon. But you shouldn't really. Who's Benson, anyway?"

"My chauffeur."

"And has he taken down my notice-board?"

"Certainly."

"Officious ass!" mumbled Porson.

"The man merely obeyed my instructions!" snapped Aunt Elizabeth.

She glanced round the room, surveying with cold disapproval the crude furnishings.

"You have rented this cottage?" she demanded.

"Yes, aunt. There's a perfectly topping field at the back, where I can take-off, and a jolly good barn which serves as a hangar."

Aunt Elizabeth sniffed disdainfully.

"You had fifty pounds from your father when you left school at the end of the term," she stated. "How much have you left?"

Porson hesitated.

"Oh, a little!" he hedged.

"How much?"

"Er—well, four shillings; and eightpence, to be exact. You see, aunt, there were heaps of things I had to get when I moved in. This place is my headquarters, you know. Head office of the Porson Passenger Service—what? When I start making money I'll rent some old Army aerodrome and take over the hangars and everything. Just wait!" Porson's voice rang thrillingly. "Some day I'll have a whole fleet of air taxis taking passengers wherever they jolly well want to go. I'll be the great Porson, President of the world-famous Porson Passenger Service, owning luxury air liners and airships, fitted with private suites for millionaires and——"

"And at the moment you have four shillings and eightpence!" cut in Aunt Elizabeth, bringing Porson to earth with a bump. "I received your letter this morning, informing your uncle and me that you had taken this cottage and bought an aeroplane. I have come down to investigate and to take you back to town with me. This scheme of yours is utter imbecility. You are a mere child——"

"Dash it, I'm seventeen, aunt!" interposed Porson, with some display of heat.

"A mere child to attempt such a ridiculous thing as the establishment of an air passenger service," went on Aunt Elizabeth, unheeding the interruption. "You had better pack at once!"

"Pack?" echoed Porson.

"Yes. You will return to town with me, and your uncle will find you a safe and comfortable position with Grubbins & Grime."

Porson shook his head.

"No!" he gulped.

The lorgnette glittered at him wrathfully.

"George! Are you defying me?"

"No, aunt," replied Porson doggedly. "But I'm not cut out for a bank. Honest Injun, I'm not! I'd be most frightfully miserable. I—I'm going through with this idea of mine!"

"I forbid you to think of such a thing for another moment!" snapped his aunt. "What would your dear father say if he knew I had allowed you to continue with this idiocy?"

Porson brightened visibly.

"Oh, he'd be no end bucked!" he replied heartily. "He always said to me: 'I don't care what you are as long as you are a man.' Well, this is a man's job, and I'm jolly well going through with it!"

"I forbid——"

“Aunt,” cut in Porson, with heroic determination, “I hate appearing ungrateful for uncle’s offer to get me into a bank, but I’ve made up my mind. I love flying, and I’m going to carry on with this scheme of mine!”

Aunt Elizabeth breathed heavily. She was not used to defiance such as this. But she had a final shot in her locker.

“You will not get a halfpenny from either your uncle or myself when you fail!” she said acidly.

“I shall not fail!” replied Porson, with sublime confidence.

Aunt Elizabeth rose from her chair. Haughtily she drew herself erect.

“Indeed?” she said witheringly. “I trust you are correct!”

She swept to the door. Simmering, she was conducted down the garden-path to the gate by the victorious but silent Porson. An obsequious Benson ushered her into the luxuriously upholstered limousine which stood waiting on the dusty roadway.

“Good-bye, aunt!”

No answer save the slam of the door, the whirr of the self-starter. The car shot forward and in a cloud of dust disappeared round a bend in the road. No general ever vanished more quickly from a stricken field.

With a sigh Porson turned away to retrieve the notice-board which the officious Benson had deposited on the other side of the hedge.

Having re-erected his notice-board, Porson hurried up the garden-path and round the cottage to where a wicket-gate at the rear led into a large field. Inside the field, backing against the nearest hedge, was a large barn, in front of which stood Porson’s £10 aeroplane.

Remember, it had been built in the dark ages of flying, but by a great pioneer. It was a cumbersome-looking machine, yet its bamboo framework body gave to it a certain air of frailty. It was practically a glider, fitted with a 35 horse-power Green engine driving a pusher propeller.

The long flat wings, almost void of camber and dope, were patched in a score of places. Many of the multitudinous flying wires and bracing wires seemed to have become either elongated through long wear or to have slipped their moorings. Others, once broken, had been spliced. There were still others which were tied together by stout pieces of string.

The machine had a pilot’s cockpit of sorts. In a canvas box-like arrangement on the lower plane were two low wooden seats. In front of each was a weird-looking dashboard, a control-stick, a throttle-handle, and a rudder-bar. Having been used for instructional purposes, this ancient relic was fitted with dual control.

With hands plunged in the pockets of his grey flannels, Porson stood surveying it with an air of proud proprietorship. It was his—his very own! The first bus of the great Porson Air Service! Whipping off his blazer, he struggled into a pair of greasy and dilapidated dungarees which he took from the barn. Swinging himself up to the engine, he proceeded to clean plugs and oil-feed and generally disembowel the engine with skilful and loving hands.

He was so engaged when an ancient gentleman, clad in a long, white smock and with a cheery, weather-beaten face, fringed with carefully trimmed whiskers, came pottering through the wicket-gate into the field with a small, black-and-white mongrel trotting sedately at his heels.

At sight of Porson the little dog hurled himself forward with a yelp of delight. Dropping to the ground, Porson gathered the little fellow up in his arms.

"Had a good time, Bill, old man?" he crooned, fondling him just behind the ears.

Bill's stumpy tail and little body quivered ecstatically; pink tongue came out in frantic efforts to lick the oil-bedaubed face of his mighty lord and master, Porson.

"Ay, a fine time he's had, sir!" quoth the ancient gentleman, hobbling up. "He's bin rattin', and a real sharp 'un he is!"

"It was jolly decent of you to take him for a run, Gaffer!" said Porson gratefully. "Aunt Elizabeth hates the sight of him!"

"Be the fine lady gone, then, sir?"

"Yes, she's gone, Gaffer!" Porson frowned. Then his brow cleared, and he added: "But I've told you to stop calling me 'sir.' It sounds so dashed idiotic! My name's George."

"Ay, so you be allus tellin' me!" piped Gaffer. "And be ye busy with the flyin'-machine now, Garge?"

"Yes," replied Porson. "I'm getting her ready for to-morrow, Gaffer. The flying club at Tuttleberry-cum-Hacklehurst are holding a meeting to-morrow—races and stunting, and all that, you know."

"And be you goin' to race, Garge?"

Porson shook his head ruefully.

"Not with this old bus, Gaffer," he replied. "I believe they're a frightfully posh sort of crowd at Tuttleberry-cum-Hacklehurst. They've got Avro Avians and Moths and Blackburn Bluebirds, and my bus'll stand about as much chance as a Ford car against Segrave's Sunbeam. But there's a certain event which I'm going to have a shot at. The prize for it is a silver medal and ten pounds. It doesn't matter very much about the medal, but I can jolly well do with the ten pounds!"

Gaffer glanced at the boy with shrewd and kindly eyes.

"Be you hard pressed for cash, lad?" he asked quietly.

"I will be soon unless I get a passenger or win a prize to-morrow," admitted Porson frankly.

Gaffer gazed steadily at a cow munching stolidly in an adjacent field.

"I'm meanin' no offence, lad," he said; "but I've a pound or two put by, and if so be you're pressed—why, you're welcome to it! You—you're allus so kind to me, d'ye see, lad?"

Porson slipped his arm round the old man's shoulders.

"Thanks, Gaffer!" he said softly. "You're one of the best! It's decent—so jolly decent of you! But I'm seeing this thing through alone, and"—his jaw jutted out grimly

—"I'll pull through all right!"

Gaffer nodded.

"Yes, you'll pull through, Garge!" he assented gravely. "You be the right sort!"

Porson laughed happily.

"Come on! We'll have tea now," he said, "and after tea I'll finish off overhauling the old bus."

Tea over, Gaffer took his departure and went hobbling up the dusty road to his cottage in the village of Sudcombe, a quarter of a mile away. Porson washed up the tea-things, for funds would not allow of his employing any domestic help, and he and Bill looked after themselves.

He then returned to his machine, with Bill gambolling idiotically and joyously at his heels.

"I'd like to have a flip, Bill," he remarked, "but we've just got about enough petrol left to get us to this blessed Tuttleberry-cum-Hacklehurst to-morrow. It's a thumping good job that petrol is supplied free to competitors, or we wouldn't be jolly well able to compete!"

He laboured till dusk, overhauling bracing and flying wires and tightening up the rudder-bar, which had a deplorable habit of moving a full three inches to either port or starboard without having any noticeable effect on the rudder.

Then, leaving the machine picketed down—for the night gave promise of being fine—he removed the plugs from the engine and returned to the cottage. He turned in after supper, and scarcely had his head touched the pillow than he was sound asleep, with Bill dreaming doggy dreams on the floor at the foot of the bed.

He was up early, and, after an exhilarating plunge in the waters of the River Brent, he breakfasted on somewhat charred bacon and eggs. Not yet had Porson mastered the intricacies of cooking, but, with splendid optimism, he told himself that he was improving.

"Now, Bill," he said, when washing-up was again over, "we'd better be pushing off to this flying meeting. It's a frightfully swell sort of affair, and they'll probably think my old bus a perfect scream. Well, let 'em! That's all I can say—let 'em!"

He took down his flying kit from its peg behind the door, and five minutes later was casting off the picket-ropes of his machine. Switching on, he swung the heavy four-bladed propeller. There came a mournful sort of gasp from the old Green engine. Again he swung the propeller, and, as though realising the hopelessness of further protest, the engine picked up with a clattering, banging sort of roar.

At first Bill had been scared of that noise, but he was quite used to it by now, and at a gesture from Porson he scrambled up into the rear seat. Porson drew on his flying-gloves and mounted to the forward seat. During past holidays he had done nearly one hundred hours' flying, and had passed out as a fully qualified pilot.

"Hope we've got enough petrol to get us to Tuttleberry!" he remarked. "It's about twenty-five miles as the crow—I mean aeroplane—flies, and it'll be sickening to have a forced landing!"

Bumping, jolting, swaying, the machine taxied close to the hedge, then swung into wind as Porson pressed on the rudder-bar. Porson had the whole stretch of field in front of him for the take-off. He needed it.

He gave the bus full throttle, and gallantly the old Maurice Farman lumbered towards the farthest hedge. Its speed rose to forty-five miles an hour, the engine banging and spluttering for all it was worth. Porson pulled on the control-stick. The machine rose a few feet, then bumped—heavily. Again Porson pulled on the control-stick, and executed a hop of full twenty feet. For the third time he pulled on the stick and knew that if he didn't get into the air this time and keep there, he'd finish in the hedge towards which he was heading.

The old Farman lumbered into the air in a heavy, sluggish upward glide. The propeller, thrashing at full revolutions, kept it there, lifting it onwards and upwards. Porson heard the top of the hedge whipping against the patched wheels of the under-carriage.

But that didn't worry Porson. He was in the air and that was all that mattered. At fifty feet he flattened out and went banging and clattering his way across country, hoping to cast up at Tuttleberry-cum-Hacklehurst without mishap!

. . . . .

Eustace Lowther-Lowther was remarkable only for the loudness of his plus four suits and the size of his income. He was a smallish sort of fellow, with a pink-and-white complexion, an anæmic moustache, and a shrill, penetrating voice.

He was the founder of the Tuttleberry-cum-Hacklehurst Flying Club, and had talked himself into the presidency of it. He was the proud possessor of a tiptop Moth machine, fitted with an A.D.C. Cirrus engine. He was also a first-class snob. His life held two great passions. One was to be on speaking terms with everybody who mattered in the county, from the lord lieutenant downwards. The other was a detestation for his cousin, Thomas Cresswell, triple blue at Oxford and English Rugby International.

Thomas Cresswell, honest, blunt, outspoken, had a habit of kicking Eustace on sight—if not literally, at least metaphorically. Consequently, it isn't difficult to understand why Eustace didn't like him.

Eustace was in his element on this particular morning of the flying meeting, which was open to all machines within a radius of thirty miles. He strutted about with a programme of events in one hand, and a gold pencil in the other. The meeting was being held on Tuttleberry Downs, and the roped-off enclosures were crowded with spectators. In front of the hangars stood an array of Snipes, Moths, Bluebirds, and Avros, their fuselages glittering splendidly in the morning sun.

"Come on now, get ready for the first event!" babbled Eustace, strutting up to a group of leather-clad pilots. "There are ten entries for this event—a thirty miles race across country at a height of four thousand feet!"

"Fathead!" growled Thomas Cresswell, one of the pilots. "Isn't the aerial golf the first event?"

“Oh, yes, so it is!” admitted Eustace, consulting his programme. “He, he, he! I was looking at the wrong page. Well, now, there are six entries for the aerial golf—Johnson, Henderson, Jennings, Fraser, Cumberleigh, and Porson. Who the dickens is Porson? I’ve never heard of him. He’s entered from Sudcombe. Is he here? Has anybody seen him? Dash it, where is he? Where is this Porson?”

“Perhaps this is him coming now!” remarked Cresswell thoughtfully.

Eustace wheeled round, scanning the skyline with the monocle which he wore more for effect than utility.

“Not up there, ass!” grunted one of the pilots. “Over yonder on the ground!”

“Oh, rooty-toot!” gasped Eustace—an imbecile expression with which he was wont to register astonishment. “ ’Pon my word! I—I——”

Words appeared to fail him, and he stood gaping towards where a great splay-footed, sad-looking carthorse was towing Porson’s Farman across the Downs towards the hangars.

“Is—is this a bally joke?” he demanded, wheeling on the pilots. “Is this Porson a blessed comedian?”

“Hope not!” grunted Cresswell. “We’ve got one here already, so we don’t want another!”

Eustace swallowed the insult, and turned again to glare at the melancholy equipage moving slowly towards the hangars.

“What kind of—of machine is it?” he stuttered.

“Looks like a Maurice Farman!” replied a pilot.

“He, he, he!” cackled Eustace. “Fancy bringing an old crate like that here! I say, though, what a ghastly cheek! Absolute blessed nerve, I call it!”

Amidst a good-natured cheer from the spectators, the carthorse came to a halt in front of the hangars. Porson descended magnificently from the cockpit.

“Conked out?” inquired Cresswell sympathetically.

“No; ran out of petrol two miles away!” replied Porson. “The farmer on whose ground I landed made me do two hours’ haymaking before he’d lend me a horse to tow me here!”

“Two—two hours’ haymaking?” stuttered Eustace. “What the dickens for?”

“Because I hadn’t any money to pay him for the hire of the horse!” Porson replied bluntly. “That’s what for!”

“Oh, I see!” tittered Eustace. “He, he, he! A bally flying pauper! Are you Porson, the fellow who’s entered for the aerial golf?”

“Yes,” replied Porson. “And you keep a civil tongue in your fat head.”

“Don’t threaten me!” blustered Eustace. “Don’t you dare threaten me! You don’t know who you’re talking to. I’m president of this club, and you can’t jolly well fly that outsize in kites here. I won’t allow it. It’s dangerous!”

"You can't stop me!" retorted Porson. "You accepted my entry—George Porson, flying a Maurice Farman—and I'm jolly well going to fly it!"

"Yes!" cut in Cresswell. "You accepted his entry and you can't stop him, so shut up and get on with the business!"

"But he hasn't got an earthly chance of winning!" yelped Eustace. "He'll kill himself, that's what he'll do. He'll crash, and there'll be a rotten inquest, and——"

"There'll be an inquest on you, if you don't shut up!" snapped Cresswell. "The spectators are getting impatient, so get the machines lined up. The boy can fly if he wants to. I'm on the committee, and so is Henderson and Cumberleigh, and we say he can compete."

"All right, then!" snapped the baffled Eustace. "But I'll eat my hat if he stays in the air twenty minutes with that—that flying crate."

"He might win the aerial golf stunt with that bus!" remarked Cresswell thoughtfully, surveying the Maurice Farman. "And if you'd the brains of a bat you'd realise that!"

"Win?" sneered Eustace. "Win, did you say? Dash it, if he wins with that thing I—I'll act as his mechanic for a week!"

"Thanks very much!" remarked Porson.

Eustace glared at him, than consulted his programme.

"Come on, then!" he babbled wrathfully. "Get your machines ready for the take-off. You know the rules; they're frightfully simple. That's the target over there—that white patch on the ground. Each competitor carries six small sandbags. The nearest bag to the target, dropped from five hundred feet, wins. Go on, Henderson; you're first. Six shots at the target from five hundred feet!"

Porson got his tank filled with petrol, and watched, maybe, a little enviously, whilst Henderson's streamlined Snipe came hurtling over the target at ninety miles an hour. Six times Henderson thundered over the small white patch on the ground below, and each time a sandbag dropped from his cockpit, to fall with a thud near the target.

His best shot was twenty-eight feet from the target. Jennings, Fraser, and Johnson failed to beat it, as one after another they took the air in their Avro Avians and skimmed over the target at a speed which must have made Porson's poor old Green engine feel sick.

Then came Cumberleigh, in his swift little Tiger Moth. His first bag dropped within twenty feet of the target. He was hopelessly wide with his second and third, but his last three were painfully close, and the marksman announced through his megaphone:

"Mr. Cumberleigh leads with a shot eleven feet six inches from the target!"

"Great shooting!" grunted Porson, and clambered up into the forward seat of the old Maurice Farman.

Cresswell swung his propeller for him, and, with Bill in the rear seat, he taxied out into the wind. Giving the bus full throttle, he went bumping and jolting across the short, crisp turf.

“He’s away home!” remarked Eustace hopefully, as the Farman showed no signs of taking the air. “Let’s get on with the next event!”

“Oh, dry up!” grunted Henderson; and there came a thunderous cheer from the crowd as, after a few clumsy hops, the Maurice Farman lumbered up into the air.

The spectators wanted Porson to win. For one thing he was just a kid. For another, they admired his pluck in ranging his flying relic against the splendid little machines at the meeting. But no one wanted Porson to win more fervently than did Porson himself. He was broke to the wide, and the ten-pound prize for this event would keep him going, perhaps, until his first passenger came along.

Pressing on the rudder-bar, he banked towards the target and came lurching in over it at five hundred feet.

Thud! His first bag dropped—almost braining Eustace, who was standing thirty yards or more from the target with the marksmen.

The Farman had hit an air-pocket, and Porson’s first shot had gone hopelessly wide. Banking carefully, Porson came spluttering and banging his way over the target again at his fastest flying speed—a modest forty-five miles per hour. Thud!

“That’s inside Mr. Henderson’s!” exclaimed the marksman excitedly. “He’s got a fine chance, that lad, with that slow flying-machine, sir!”

Three more sandbags hurtled downwards from the Maurice Farman. Each was within a radius of thirty feet, but Cumberleigh still led with eleven feet six inches from the target.

Porson, in the pilot’s seat of the Farman, was leaning forward, his eyes fixed grimly on the target slowly creeping towards him. He had one last chance to win that tenner, for he knew none of his previous shots had been inside that of Cumberleigh. Suddenly he tensed. Thud!

“He’s done it!” howled the marksman, and there came a roar of cheering from the crowd, for Porson’s last shot had burst within a yard of the target!

It was late afternoon when the meeting concluded and the spectators dispersed. But Porson lingered, and with him Cresswell. In Porson’s pocket was a silver medal and ten pounds. To him came a bustling Eustace, demanding shrilly:

“Well, what are you waiting for? Why don’t you clear off?”

“I’m waiting for you!” replied Porson grimly.

“What the dickens do you mean—waiting for me?”

“You said that if I won you’d act as my mechanic for a week!” stated Porson slowly and deliberately.

“Don’t be a silly fool!” screeched Eustace. “I didn’t mean it!”

“You said it!” cut in Cresswell grimly. “And I’m going to see that you go through with it. If you don’t, then I’ll thrash you every day till the week is up. What’s more, I’ll have you black-balled in every club in London as a fellow who makes wagers and won’t pay up when he loses!”

“But it’s ridiculous!” howled Eustace.

“I’m waiting!” said Porson coldly.

“So’m I!” added Cresswell, more coldly.

Eustace looked round, as though contemplating a bolt. Cresswell’s hand closed on his coat collar.

“I shall start now with the first thrashing,” he remarked, “and to-night I shall write to the secretaries of your clubs!”

“Don’t!” bleated Eustace. “Don’t do that, confound you! I—I’ll be ruined socially if you do that. Leave go of my collar, dash you!”

Cresswell released his grip. Eustace glared at Porson.

“Well, what d’you want me to do?” he spluttered.

“You can swing the prop first, and then squeeze in beside Bill in the back seat!” replied Porson.

“I won’t!” gulped Eustace.

He saw Cresswell taking a step towards him. Abruptly he changed his mind.

“Yes, I will!” he yelped.

“You’ll write and let me know how he gets on, Porson?” said Cresswell.

“Yes, I’ll write and let you know!” promised Porson. “Jump to it, Eustace, and mind the propeller doesn’t knock your brains out!”

“It can’t!” remarked Cresswell laconically. “He hasn’t any!”

Gloweringly, Eustace swung the propeller, and leapt back just in time to escape being brained as the engine picked up with a roar.

“Just wait!” he said savagely, as he clambered up beside Bill. “You’ll be blessed sorry for this before I’m finished with you—both of you!”

CHAPTER II

THE PASSING OF EUSTACE!

DUSK was falling, and shades of the coming night crept in across the hushed and peaceful countryside. All was serene and tranquil—all except the troubled soul of Eustace Lowther-Lowther!

Eustace, a brooding figure in loud plus-fours, sat on an upturned petrol tin in front of an old barn, scowling into the vista of shadowy trees and mist-swathed hedges.

Life, mused Eustace bitterly, was a bally washout. In the ordinary scheme of things he should at the moment be enjoying his after-dinner cigarette in the perfectly topping smoke-room of Lowther Court. He didn't smoke cigars because they made him feel sick—but that is by the way.

Anyhow, that is where he ought to be—in the smoke-room of Lowther Court. Instead, here he was squatting like a blessed night-watchman on an upturned petrol tin in front of a rotten barn in a dew-soaked field. It would be a funny thing if he didn't catch a chill.

But that was only the hors-d'œuvre, as it were, of Eustace's discomfort. He was—and his scowl deepened dreadfully at the thought—acting as mechanic to a perfectly beastly kid called George Porson. It was Eustace's cousin, Thomas Cresswell, English Rugby International, who was to blame. Of course, any fathead could see that. Cresswell had encouraged the kid——

Eustace brought his morbid reflections to a sudden termination. Something remarkably like a ghost was ambling towards him through the dusk. As it approached it resolved itself into an ancient gentleman, clad in a long, white smock.

"Well, what the dickens do you want?" snapped Eustace.

"Be Garge back yet?" demanded the old fellow shrilly.

"No, he isn't!" retorted Eustace. "I hope he's broken his bally neck! And you say 'sir' to me!"

"But you be Garge's hired man, bean't you?" inquired the ancient.

"No, I'm jolly well not!" was the yelped reply. "I'm Mr. Eustace Lowther-Lowther, and—and I'm doing this rotten mechanic business for a bet!"

"That ain't what Garge said. Garge said——"

"I don't care what your confounded George said!" howled Eustace. "You clear off! I won't have you messing about here!"

"You'm forgettin' your position, young man——" began the ancient severely; then broke off as, from away over towards Sudcombe, there came the wheezy rattle of an old aero engine.

The noise grew in volume until, spluttering and banging, an old Maurice Farman biplane came lurching through the dusk, and at fifty feet above the field dropped its

nose for a landing.

"That be him—that's Garge!" quavered the old man. "I've brought him a few eggs!"

"I wish you'd go away somewhere and suck them!" snapped Eustace, and watched gloweringly as, circling widely like some big glider, the Farman came dropping lower and lower.

"Handles her pretty, don't he?" remarked the ancient enthusiastically, as the biplane came to earth with a bumpy "Thank goodness I'm on the ground!" sort of landing.

A burst of the throttle brought it jolting and swaying towards the barn. Then the old 35 h.p. Green engine was switched off, and from the low forward seat on the lower plane George Porson leapt to the ground, followed by his black-and-white mongrel, Bill.

"Hallo, Gaffer!" he cried heartily to the old man. "How do, Eustace, old bean?"

Eustace sniffed.

"I thought your beastly old flying relic must have crashed," he said malevolently. "I jolly well wish it had!"

Porson's good-natured face became one vast grin.

"Crash?" he repeated. "She wouldn't crash, Eustace. I've just been trying out some new aileron wires. She banks toppingly now."

"She'll fall to pieces in the air some day," said Eustace darkly. "I've seen wings float off machines before to-day——"

"Well, you shouldn't look at 'em so hard," remarked Porson. "Come on, get the tail-skid trolly out and we'll shove her into the barn. Then we'll have supper! I'm frightfully peckish! You'll join us, Gaffer?"

"No, Garge! I've got to be gettin' along home. I just bringed you these here eggs. Good-night, lad!"

He thrust a bag of eggs into Porson's hand, and, waving away the boy's thanks, hobbled off towards the wicket-gate which led out of the field.

"That cheeky old beast was rude to me!" bleated Eustace.

"Don't you call him a cheeky old beast!" said Porson warmly. "He's one of the best, is Gaffer, and he's my friend."

Eustace's sneer was hidden as he turned towards the barn to bring out the tail-skid trolly.

During the tête-à-tête supper with Porson in the living-room of the latter's little cottage, the simmering Eustace burst out vehemently:

"Look here! I'm fed-up to the blessed back teeth with this sickening idiocy. I—I ——"

"Yes?" remarked Porson encouragingly.

"I'm not going to stand it any longer, dash it!" babbled Eustace wildly. "When I said that I'd act as your rotten mechanic if you won the aerial golf at the Tuttleberry

flying meeting with that rickety old death-trap of yours, I didn't really mean it!"

"Didn't you?" said Porson politely.

"No, I didn't!" howled Eustace. "I've stuck it three days, and I'm blowed if I'm jolly well going to stick it any longer!"

"All right!" remarked Porson affably. "There's the door. Pop off!"

"It's all right your saying pop off!" snarled Eustace. "But you know what'll happen if I show up at Lowther Court before the end of the week!"

"No, what?"

"That beast Cresswell will thrash me! He said he would. He said if I didn't keep my promise to act as your rotten mechanic, he'd thrash me. Dash it, you heard him, didn't you?"

"I seem to remember some such remark being made!" replied Porson, tilting elegantly back in his chair. With hands plunged in the pockets of his school blazer, he thoughtfully surveyed the puny frame of Eustace. "But why let him?" he added.

"Why let him?" echoed Eustace bitterly. "I couldn't jolly well stop him. That's not all, either. If I don't see the week through as your mechanic, he's going to have me kicked out of my London clubs as a fellow who makes wagers and won't pay up when he loses. Confound it, I'd be ruined socially if he did that! He's a great, heavy-handed bully—that's what he is!"

Porson suppressed a grin. Cresswell was anything but a bully. He had, however, little use for that insufferable snob, Eustace, and when Eustace had promised—in his foolishness—to act as Porson's mechanic should Porson win the aerial golf, Cresswell had determined to make Eustace keep that promise. True, Eustace had never dreamt that Porson had an earthly chance of winning, but Porson had won.

All this had proved very upsetting for Eustace.

"Look here!" he went on. "I know you're jolly hard up, and that you're trying to build up a beastly air passenger service with that old Farman biplane of yours. Well, you haven't had a passenger yet, and, personally, I don't think you ever will have one. So I'll tell you what I'll do!" Porson eyed him grimly.

"Yes, what?" he demanded.

"I'll give you a fiver if you'll write a letter to Cresswell saying that you don't require my services any longer. Dash it, the rotter can't do anything if I turn up at Lowther Court with a letter from you saying you don't want me. You can post it if you like."

"I don't like!" replied Porson coldly. "And if you offer me money like that again, I'll give you a preliminary hiding just to be going on with. As far as I'm concerned you can pack your toothbrush and push off now."

"But I can't, I tell you!" wailed Eustace. "Cresswell is staying at Lowther Court, and—and he'll pounce on me the moment I show up there."

"Then you'd better stay here till your week's up!" grinned Porson. "Not that you're much use. The old bus has never been the same since you filled the radiator with petrol

and the tank with water. I tried to swing the prop for twenty minutes, and spent another half-hour cleaning the plugs before I discovered what you'd done!"

"It wasn't my fault!" snorted Eustace. "The rotten caps are so close together that I got 'em mixed. Anyway"—he rose to his feet and stood glowering at Porson—"I'm going to bed. But you wait. You and Cresswell think you've got me dished, but I'm not a chump, by Jove! You wait!"

With which dark, if vague, threat he strutted wrathfully from the room and went groping his way up the rickety staircase of the little cottage en route for his bed-room.

As for Porson, he sat with his hands plunged deep in his pockets, a worried frown on his generally good-natured face.

There was no doubt about it, he had to bite the bullet. His dreams were not materialising. With his old Maurice Farman biplane which he had picked up from the Air Ministry for ten pounds, he had hoped to make a beginning of what would some day become the mammoth Porson Passenger Service—By Air to Anywhere!

That was why he had rented this little cottage at Sudcombe with its adjacent field and barn. But so far, his first passenger had not yet cast up. True, he had won ten pounds when he won the aerial golf at the Tuttleberry flying meeting, of which Eustace was president.

But, he reflected, he couldn't go chasing about the country picking up prizes. It was only the slow flying speed of his bus which had enabled him to win at Tuttleberry. He could never hope to compete in a race against the fast little Moths and Snipes which all posh flying men owned. Dash it, his old Farman was nothing more nor less than a glider, fitted with a low-powered engine. He could make one like it, easily. Any fellow could if he set his mind to it.

Perhaps, after all, it was idiocy to go on. Why not chuck it and accept Uncle Bartholomew's offer to get him into a bank?

No! Porson's jaw set grimly. He'd see the thing through. Something would turn up. He wasn't beaten yet. Some day he would own his fleet of air taxis and air liners, some of 'em fitted with luxurious suites for millionaires. And all built up from his dear old, rickety old, Maurice Farman biplane.

"We'll pull through, Bill, old fellow!" he said to the little mongrel lying on the hearthrug in front of the fern-filled grate.

Bill's stumpy tail thumped hearty endorsement of the words, and, comforted, George Porson lighted his candle and went up to bed.

. . . . .

Porson was awakened from healthy slumber by someone below banging on the front door of the cottage. He sat up in bed with a jerk. It was almost morning, for the grey light of dawn was creeping in through the lattice windows of the bed-room.

Thump! Thump! Thump! went the banging on the door.

"Perhaps it's a passenger!" gasped Porson excitedly, and leapt out of bed.

Bounding to the open window, he thrust out his head. A plump figure, muffled in a greatcoat, was standing on the doorstep below.

"Hallo, hallo!" exclaimed Porson. "What d'you want?"

"I want to see this chappie Porson!" came in excited accents from the muffled figure. "I want to see him—I must see him! Go and wake him—go and wake him at once!"

"I'm Porson! What d'you want?"

"Are you the chappie with the aeroplane? I mean, are you the Porson on the notice-board at the garden gate?"

"Yes, that's me!" replied Porson.

"Oh, good! Oh, spiffing! Please come down and let me in!"

"But what d'you want, man?" demanded Porson.

"Oh dear! Don't keep me standing here!" pleaded the muffled figure. "Please come down and let me in, and I'll explain."

"Do you want me to take you somewhere in my bus?" persisted Porson. "Is that what you want?"

"Yes, yes—that's what I want! But please let me in!"

"I'll be down in a minute!" exclaimed Porson; and, withdrawing from the window, he executed an impromptu dance round the bed-room floor.

"A passenger!" he carolled joyously. "Oh, a passenger at last!"

Struggling into his dressing-gown, he wrenched open his bed-room door and almost cannoned into a weird-looking object in pink pyjamas.

"Hallo, Eustace!" he exclaimed. "Glad to see you up so early. Better get dressed. We've got a passenger!"

"He woke me up, making that confounded row on the doorstep!" snarled Eustace, who was never at his best at that hour of the morning. "Who is he?"

"I don't know," replied Porson. "I'm just going down to find out."

"I heard him talking," snapped Eustace. "I seemed to recognise his foul voice! I ____"

Thump! Thump! Thump!

"My hat, there he goes again!" exclaimed Porson, as the banging on the door recommenced. "He's in a hurry, whoever he is."

"I tell you I think I know who he is!" began Eustace. "I recognised his voice, and ____"

But Porson was already half-way downstairs. Reaching the front door, he unbolted it and swung it open. The figure in the greatcoat—a plump young man who appeared to be wearing plus-fours—pushed past Porson into the narrow hallway.

"Oh, good!" he gasped. "Safe at last!"

"Is somebody after you?" asked Porson, closing the door and leading the way into the living-room, into which was flooding the grey light of early morning.

"Well—er—not exactly!" replied the young man. "But—er——"

"Why, you're a blessed convict!" roared Porson, as the newcomer's greatcoat gaped open to give a glimpse of convict garb beneath.

"I'm not—no, really, I'm not!" bleated the plump young man. "My name's Algy Blenkinsop, and—and I've been to Lady Marling's fancy-dress ball at Marling Towers, near Tuttleberry-cum-Hacklehurst. I went as a convict, and—and——"

"I don't believe you!" roared Porson. "You're a real convict, that's what you are! No wonder you were in such a hurry to get out of sight! Come on, tell the truth!"

"I am telling the truth!" babbled the other. "I was motoring home with Percy Poulter and Horace Pyeman and young Woolerton, and—and the rotters thought it would be a bit of a scream to—to drop me and see if I could get home with these awful clothes on. They've got bets about it. Percy Poulter has laid Pyeman and Woolerton five to one against me getting home without being nabbed by a bobby and shoved in the lock-up!"

Porson's grim face somewhat relaxed. There was an earnestness about this Algy Blenkinsop which carried its own conviction.

"They dropped me just outside Sudcombe," went on the latter, almost tearfully. "Shoved me out of the car and drove away—the heartless rotters! I was walking along the road, feeling awful, when I saw your notice-board, and—and here I am!"

"He, he, he!" came a titter from the doorway. "He, he, he!"

Wheeling round, Porson beheld the pink pyjama-clad figure of Eustace. Algy Blenkinsop saw the apparition as well, and gave a heartfelt bleat of relief.

"Oh, is that you, Eustace?" he cried. "Where have you come from? Oh, yes—I remember! I heard about you acting as mechanic, and——"

"Yes, you would!" cut in Eustace scowlingly. "There's precious little you don't hear!"

Then the scowl faded, and he tittered again.

"Do you know this fellow?" demanded Porson, indicating the plump young man.

"Of course I know him!" replied Eustace. "It's Algy Blenkinsop. He lives at Little Slopperton. He's the ass who runs the Little Slopperton Otter Hounds!"

Porson's brow cleared. Having thus had Algy's respectability vouched for, he became at once the keen business man.

"Well then," he said, turning to Algy, "that's all right! I'm sorry I called you a convict. Now, where do you want me to take you to?"

"To Slopperton Grange, of course, where I live," replied Algy. "There's a deer park where you can land if you can dodge the trees!"

"Oh, I'll dodge the trees all right," replied Porson confidently. "You leave that to me. Go on, Eustace, jump to it. Get yourself dressed and help me to get the old bus out. You, sir"—he turned briskly to Algy—"if you will kindly be seated, I will be ready in a few minutes. Porson for promptness and civility, you know."

“You called him a convict!” cut in Eustace nastily from the doorway. “If I were him I’d consult my solicitors about it.”

“You shove off and consult your wardrobe!” roared Porson, and took a menacing step towards him.

A peculiar look crept into Eustace’s pale blue eyes. Without a word he turned away and bolted upstairs to his room. He literally hurled himself into his clothes, then crept quietly downstairs to where Algy Blenkinsop was regaling himself with a copy of the local paper whilst Porson dressed.

“Algy!” he whispered, advancing stealthily into the room.

Algy jumped.

“Oh dear, what a fright you gave me!” he bleated. “I feel an absolute blessed nervous wreck. But I say”—and a note of interest crept into his tones—“are you really acting as mechanic to this Porson kid? We were screaming about it at the dance, you know, and——”

“Shut up!” hissed Eustace. “Listen! Did Poulter and Pyeman and Woolerton really turf you out of the car?”

“Yes, but——”

“And did Poulter bet Pyeman and Woolerton that you wouldn’t get home without being nabbed?”

“Yes, that was the rotten idea,” replied Algy wrathfully. “That’s why they kicked me out of the car—just to see if I could get home. Beasts!”

“Oh, well, you’ll be all right now,” said Eustace soothingly. “This beastly kid, Porson, isn’t a bad pilot really. You’ll be all right, Algy, old bean, don’t you worry!”

“It would have been awful if anyone had seen me in this rig-out,” remarked Algy, with a shudder. “It would have taken hours and hours to explain to the police that I wasn’t really a convict—— Here! Where are you going, you ass?”

But Eustace had departed. Letting himself out of the front door into the fresh clear air of early morning, he passed round to the wicket-gate which led into the field at the rear of the cottage.

Dew sparkled on grass and hedge and distant copse, and there was that clean, fresh smell in the air which comes with the beginning of day. But all this was lost on Eustace, as with eyes gleaming, he hurried towards the barn where the old Maurice Farman was housed.

Unlocking the heavy, creaking door, he swung it open and passed into the barn. Dodging under the wide flat wings of the Farman, he made towards the light, kite-like tail. Standing against the side of the barn was Porson’s ten-gallon petrol drum. Somehow or other Eustace bumped against it in passing. Strangely enough he knocked open the outlet cock. Petrol began to pour out of the drum, but Eustace didn’t seem to notice it! Getting his shoulder under the light, bamboo framework of the tail he lifted it clear of the tail-skid trolly, then swung himself up and began to prime the engine.

He was thus industriously engaged when a few minutes later Porson stalked into the barn, flying kit over his arm, and followed by a gambolling Bill and a hopeful

Blenkinsop.

"Hallo!" Porson stopped short, sniffing. "Ghastly smell of petrol—what?"

"I'm standing in a pool of it!" bleated Algy.

"It's my drum!" roared Porson, with sudden enlightenment. "Here, you! What the dickens have you been playing at?"

"Me?" echoed Eustace, with praiseworthy astonishment. "I haven't been doing anything."

"You've emptied my petrol drum, you rotter!" replied Porson wrathfully.

Eustace blinked at the petrol-sodden floor of the barn.

"I don't know how that's happened," he lied glibly. "I'm frightfully sorry. I must have caught the tap as I passed."

"Come down off that engine!" said Porson grimly. "I'll deal with you later. You've done it on purpose."

"I haven't!" yelped Eustace. "Why should I?"

"That's what I intend to find out when I come back!" replied Porson coldly. "I was wondering why you sneaked out to the barn. Come down, will you?"

Eustace dropped to the ground, and Porson swung himself up to the forward seat with its weird-looking dashboard.

"We've got enough petrol to get us into Frammington Village," he announced to Blenkinsop. "We'll land there for more. I can't help it. It's this fathead's fault!"

"All right. I don't mind as long as I get home soon," babbled Algy. "I just want to get home!"

"Right-ho!" replied Porson, struggling into his flying kit. "I'm switching on, you, so swing the prop!"

Eustace obeyed without demur, and the barn re-echoed to the spluttering, banging roar of the old Green engine. Driven by its slowly-revolving pusher propeller, the biplane moved out of the barn. At a word from Porson, Algy clambered gingerly into the rear seat, whilst Bill leapt up beside his lord and master.

"If you crash you'll get the crankshaft in your back, Blenkinsop!" howled Eustace. But the old Farman was already jolting and swaying towards the nearest hedge.

Eustace watched as Porson turned into wind and gave the bus full throttle. He sneered as he saw it go lumbering gallantly across the wide field. That Farman required an enormous run to get it off the ground!

When the speedometer was registering forty-five miles an hour Porson pulled on the control-stick. The biplane executed a long, clumsy hop. Again Porson pulled on the control-stick, and the old biplane heaved itself sluggishly into the air. This time it stayed there, and went banging and spluttering its way over the trees towards Frammington.

Eustace turned and bolted to the cottage. Porson had a telephone there, and five minutes later Eustace was babbling excitedly over the phone to Percy Poulter, who had just gone to bed.

“Hallo! I say, Percy, is that you, old bean? Lowther-Lowther speaking. I say, I’m speaking from Sudcombe. I’ve just seen Blenkinsop. He’s told me all about it. He, he, he! I say, how much do you stand to win if he doesn’t get home? . . . A tenner each from Pyeman and Woolerton! Well, I’m fixing it so that he doesn’t get home if I can stand in, halves. I can? Oh, good man! Thanks awfully! He, he, he! No! Shut up! I’m not a mechanic. I’ll explain that later. I’ll explain everything later. I haven’t time now. Good-bye!”

Eustace banged down the receiver, then looked hastily through the directory for the phone number of the Frammington Police Station.

Meanwhile, Porson was banging and clattering his way across country at a modest forty-five miles an hour, which happened to be his best flying speed. He was making the morning hideous with his din, and more than one sleepy country yokel turned over in bed and rated him heartily.

Algy, having somewhat recovered from his first nervousness, was taking stock of the multitude of flying wires and bracing wires with wondering eyes. Some were sagging, others had been spliced, still others were tied together with pieces of string. The planes also were patched in more than a score of places, and here and there the bamboo framework which served as a fuselage had been strengthened by splints of wood.

Still, the thing could fly, and that was all that mattered. Looking down, Algy saw the waters of the River Brent glittering in the morning sun. Then the rising ground towards Frammington slid into view, and as Porson closed down the throttle, the nose of the machine dropped for a landing on the common outside the village.

Banking carefully—for the ancient bus had a nasty habit of side-slipping whilst banking—Porson circled lower and lower. At thirty feet he flattened out and glided to earth in a tolerably smooth landing.

“Now, you stay here,” he said to Algy. “Bill and I will go and rout out some petrol from somewhere. Bound to be a garage here.”

He turned away, with Bill yapping joyously at his heels, then stopped abruptly. The burly figure of a constable, accompanied by four big, strapping fellows in velveteens, had appeared from behind a bush a hundred yards away. The five men were sprinting towards the machine.

“Oh crumbs!” gasped Algy, and almost tumbled to the ground in his haste to quit the machine.

“Stay where you are, you ass!” rapped Porson. “We can explain this easily.”

But Algy had no desire to risk being locked up whilst investigation of his explanations was being carried out. He wanted to get home without any trouble; so he took to his heels and bolted.

“Oh, the idiot!” groaned Porson.

“Hi!” bellowed the constable. “Hi! Stop!”

But Algy didn’t stop. They had seen his convict garb somehow. He was convinced of that. So he hurled his greatcoat from him and, with elbows up, sprinted madly across

country. Porson leapt for his machine. He still had some petrol left, but not much.

"Stop, in the name of the law!" bellowed the constable. But Porson had already swung his propeller and clambered up to the front seat, where Bill was already ensconced.

The machine was moving forward when one of the men in velveteens made a grab for the tail. Porson kicked on the rudder, and the tail swung viciously, sending the fellow sprawling. The other four had swept past in full hue-and-cry after the unfortunate Blenkinsop, who was running strongly.

Giving the machine full throttle, Porson went bumping and jolting away at right angles to the lines of pursuit. The engine was hot, and as he pulled on the control-stick he lumbered into the air at the first attempt. Banking, he went clattering and banging away after the pack and its quarry. He passed the perspiring quartette at a height of about twenty feet and, overhauling Blenkinsop, dropped to earth in a field about a hundred yards ahead.

Algy crashed his way through the hedge and reached the bus, almost at his last gasp. Porson hauled him up into the rear seat. He had kept his engine ticking over, and as the first of the pursuers came blundering through the hedge he gave the bus full throttle and went bumping away at full taking-off speed. Algy's added weight made a longer run necessary for the take-off, and the opposite hedge was perilously close when the old Maurice Farman lifted heavily into the air.

Baffled, the pursuers stood gazing up at it, shaking their fists and mopping their brows.

"I'll try to get you home on the petrol I've got!" roared Porson; and Algy gave a gasping moan of assent.

Porson swung the biplane towards Little Slopperton, fifteen miles away. Field after field dropped behind, and still the engine roared and spluttered. Luvdale Plantation was skirted, for Porson hadn't the height to fly over it. Then ahead loomed the deer park at Slopperton Grange.

It was then that the engine gave a final spluttering gasp and died away. Porson eased forward the stick and got the bus on to her gliding angle. Lower and lower she dropped, gliding towards the wall of the deer park. Porson's heart was in his mouth as he approached the wall. Would he clear it? There came a slither as the patched rubber wheels of the under-carriage touched the top of the wall; then, as though realising that it had got its first passenger home, the gallant old Maurice Farman glided to earth and came to a jolting, quivering halt in the deer park of Slopperton Grange.

. . . . .

Eustace, later that morning, was sitting on the upturned petrol tin in front of the old barn. He was brimful of mirth.

"I'll bet that beast Porson's had a rotten quarter of an hour explaining how he came to have a blessed convict in his bus!" he reflected happily.

A portly figure in blue entered the field and crossed towards him.

“Good-morning, constable!” greeted Eustace.

“ ’Morning!” replied the constable, “Are you Mr. Lowther-Lowther?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“Well, we’ve been making investigations about a telephone call to Frammington Police Station this morning,” replied the constable. “Somebody hoaxed the police and made ’em think a gent from Little Slopperton, name of Blenkinsop, was a convict when he wasn’t. The station sergeant wants to see you, and if so be it’s you what done it, you’ll get off with a fine or seven days, if you’re lucky.”

“I didn’t do it! It wasn’t me!” lied Eustace, in alarm.

“Come on!” said the constable stolidly.

In vain Eustace threatened, cajoled, and protested. Eventually he went, yelping protests. He had never thought of this eventuality.

And, lunching at Slopperton Grange with Algy Blenkinsop, Porson was waxing enthusiastic about his great scheme for building up an air passenger service.

“She’s a fine bus, that old Maurice Farman,” he was saying. “Dash it, you must admit that, Blenkinsop. She got you home!”

“She’s a wonderful bus, even if she is a bit old!” agreed Blenkinsop enthusiastically. “You’ll get heaps of passengers after this, because——”

He broke off as the luncheon-room door crashed open and his uncle, Colonel Blenkinsop, barged into the room.

“By George!” roared the colonel, waving a crumpled newspaper in his hand. “Is that boy here whose aeroplane is standing in the deer park?”

“Yes, sir,” replied Porson, rising.

“There’s a confounded man-eating tiger escaped from the circus at Luvdale!” roared the colonel excitedly. “Fifty pounds reward for its capture, dead or alive! I don’t want the money, but, by George, I want the sport. I’ll get my guns and we’ll hunt the brute by aeroplane and pepper him from the air—what? Are you game?”

“Sir,” replied Porson, “I’m game for anything!”

CHAPTER III

THE ARMOURED FARMAN!

"BINNS!"

"Sir?"

"Bring me a map, Binns—a large map—at once!"

Binns coughed discreetly.

"An hatlas, sir?" he murmured. "An hatlas from the library?"

Colonel Blenkinsop snorted.

"No, fool! I mean a map of the county. Bring me my hunting map from the gun-room."

"Very good, sir!" replied Binns.

He proceeded to withdraw his sleek and portly form from the luncheon-room, but a bark from the colonel pulled him up short.

"Oh—and Binns!"

"Sir?"

"Tell the first and second footmen to stand by. I shall require them in a few moments. And tell Jobson to fill up the petrol-tank and radiator of that aeroplane standing in the deer park. He'll find plenty of petrol in the garage."

"Very good, sir!"

The luncheon-room door closed quietly on the retreating Binns.

"Look here, uncle"—Algy Blenkinsop, the colonel's nephew, turned from the window—"are you really going to hunt this beastly tiger by aeroplane?"

"Certainly I am, by George!" snorted the colonel. "The brute is a man-eater. It escaped from the circus at Luvdale in the early hours of this morning, and I have ascertained by telephone that it has not yet been recaptured. It's one's duty, by Jove, to do everything in one's power to hasten the capture of the dangerous animal. Confound it—it might tear some of my tenants limb from limb and—and devour little children—hmph!"

He blew his nose violently.

"But what about Porson?" demanded Algy, indicating a good-natured-looking boy about seventeen years of age, clad in oil-stained flannel bags and well-worn school blazer. "It's Porson's old bus you're going to use, and if you do sight this beastly tiger and happen to have a forced landing near it, it might jolly easily be you and him who'll be torn limb from limb. It's not fair on old Porson, dash it!"

"Not fair?" barked the colonel. "What the dickens do you mean, Algernon, by not fair?"

"Well, Porson's full of a most frightfully fruity scheme for building up a thumping big air passenger service!" explained Algy. "He's only got that old Maurice Farman out in the deer park, as yet. But when he's made enough money by carrying passengers on it, he's going to buy another machine, and then another, and—and so on. Aren't you, Porson, old bean?"

"Yes, I am!" replied George Porson confidently.

"Well, then," went on Algy, "you ought to jolly well think twice, uncle, before you risk your neck and Porson's neck and Porson's machine in going chasing about the country hunting for a tiger like that. Why not go on foot?"

"On foot?" snorted the colonel. "Confound it, it's the sport of the thing I want. There's no sport to be had in going about with a crowd of armed country yokels, who might shoot you in the back, by George, if one of their guns goes off accidentally. Also, we will be able to discover the whereabouts of the brute the sooner by aeroplane, and dispatch it before it has time to do any further damage."

"But how do you intend to dispatch it?" inquired Algy.

"I'll shoot the brute, of course!" retorted the colonel. "I shall take one or two guns up with me, and when we spot it I shall quietly put a bullet through its head."

"From the air?"

"Certainly from the air. You do not imagine I am crass enough idiot to land near it, do you?"

"No!" admitted Algy. "But it's Porson I'm thinking about. He brought me home this morning after my pals had stranded me in convict's dress, and—and, dash it, I think we ought really to consult him as to whether he's keen on this tiger hunt."

"Oh, I'm keen enough!" replied Porson. "Colonel Blenkinsop says there is a fifty-pound reward, and I'm frightfully keen at having a shot at that, you know!"

"Good lad! Good lad!" replied the colonel heartily. "We'll find the brute all right; and, by George, I'll give him short enough shrift. Ah, here you are, Binns!"

He took a folded map of the county from the butler's somewhat flabby hand, and, spreading it on the table, said to Porson:

"Now, my boy, let me explain the district to you, so that you will be able to follow my directions as to where to go when we are in the air!"

Colonel Blenkinsop, having duly conned over the map with Porson, bustled off to the gun-room. Porson collected his flying kit and, accompanied by Algy Blenkinsop, walked across the deer park of Slopperton Grange towards where his old Maurice Farman biplane was standing.

"Great, isn't she?" demanded Porson enthusiastically, as he and Algy approached the old relic. "She'll stand any amount of knocking about for a good bit yet!"

"Yes, of course she will!" agreed Algy; then added: "That is, if she's treated properly. Look here, old bean," he went on hastily, "I want to give you a word of warning. Uncle thinks he's absolutely wonderful with a gun. He is. He can do things with a gun that would make a blessed comedian feel sick. If he doesn't trip over it, he fires it off accidentally, or nearly brains somebody with it. Last grouse-shooting he

winged two gamekeepers and shot an ear off a black Labrador—the best gun dog we ever had!"

"Sounds cheerful!" grinned Porson.

"He'll probably riddle your machine for you," went on Algy, "or fall out and break his neck, or something. But he's set his mind on this bally tiger hunt, and nothing will jolly well dissuade him now."

"I don't think we've much chance of getting near the brute," remarked Porson. "The noise of the engine will scare him and keep him under cover. So perhaps, after all, Colonel Blenkinsop won't have any cause to use his gun."

"Yes, that's all right!" objected Algy. "But once he gets a taste for this sort of fatheaded, hedge-hopping hunting, he'll probably want to do a bit of rabbit shooting from the air. Dash it, he might commence flying to hounds instead of riding to hounds when the season opens, and——"

He broke off and stood goggling in the direction of the Grange. Porson, following his gaze, gasped.

Colonel Blenkinsop, arrayed for the chase, was striding across the park towards the machine. His stout person was encased in a deer-stalker hat, Norfolk shooting jacket, baggy plus-fours, stockings, gaiters, and brogues. But what drew the astonished gaze of Porson and Algy was the two footmen who followed the colonel. Between them they carried two shot-guns, two fowling-pieces, one elephant gun and a punt gun. Behind them staggered Joe, the boot-boy, with a box of assorted cartridges.

"Great pip!" ejaculated Algy. "Uncle's bringing a bally arsenal!"

"Well, are we ready? No time to lose, you know, George!" panted the colonel, stalking up and mopping his brow. "I think we'll land near Luvdale village first, Porson, my boy, and find out if any trace of the tiger has yet been found!"

"But, uncle," protested Algy, "you can't take all those guns with you. This isn't a bally air liner, you know."

"Confound it, I must take 'em!" snorted the colonel. "How the dickens do I known which gun I'll want till I sight the brute? I must take a selection of weapons with me!"

"Pity you hadn't got a spare bomb or a harpoon to add to the collection!" remarked Algy dryly.

"I don't want any confounded levity, sir!" barked his uncle. "This is a very serious matter. Tenants torn limb from limb—little children devoured, by Jove!"

He wheeled on the grinning Porson.

"Well, I'm ready—I'm ready!" he snorted. "Shall I sit in the back seat or the front?"

"Better sit in the back one, sir!" replied Porson.

Colonel Blenkinsop scrambled up into the canvas box-like arrangement which did duty as a cockpit. Seating himself heavily on the low wooden seat at the rear, he bellowed for his guns.

The footmen handed them up, and he stowed them away as best he could on the floor of the cockpit. Then the box of cartridges was handed up and he stowed that away

on the seat beside him. He couldn't move his fat little legs for the cumbersome elephant gun and punt gun, so he shifted the weapons and sat hugging the two heavy calibre guns between his knees.

Porson struggled into his flying kit, then swung himself up to the forward seat with its weird-looking dashboard, and switched on the engine. Dropping to the ground again, he swung the big four-bladed pusher propeller. The engine picked up with a banging, nerve-shattering roar, and the old Maurice Farman quivered and shook in every strut and flying wire.

"Well, what the dickens are we waiting for?" roared the colonel as Porson made no effort to clamber up to the pilot's seat.

Porson did not heed. He was watching a small black-and-white body coming hurtling towards him from the rear of the Grange.

"Why, Bill, old fellow!" he said, dropping on his knees beside the little black-and-white mongrel which came dashing up. "I thought you were making new pals round at the kennels. I wasn't going to take you on this flip, but you can come if you like!"

He straightened up, gesturing towards the forward seat. Bill understood the signal, and leapt up, to snuggle down beside Porson as that cheerful youth clambered up after him. Porson opened the throttle, and the old Maurice Farman began to move slowly forward. He kicked on the rudder to bring it into wind, then opened the throttle to full. The old biplane commenced to lumber gallantly forward, swaying and bumping over the rough, uneven ground.

But the going was slightly downhill, and the speed increased till it was rocking along at a full forty-five miles per hour. Porson pulled on the control-stick. The Farman lifted into the air, then bumped heavily.

"Great Godfrey!" ejaculated the colonel in the rear seat.

Again Porson pulled on the control-stick, and again the old Farman took the air in a long, lumbering hop.

"What the old Harry are you playing at?" roared the colonel, as the barrel of the punt gun hit him a jolt under the chin.

Porson did not appear to hear the inquiry. His every effort was concentrated on getting the bus into the air. For the third time he pulled on the control-stick, and, with engine banging and spluttering for all it was worth, he lifted into the air, the patched wheels of the under-carriage missing the park wall by inches as the machine floundered onwards and upwards.

"Well, good luck to 'em!" remarked Algy, watching the departure. "They'll need it. Poor old Porson!"

. . . . .

Porson flattened out at seventy feet, and the Maurice Farman went clattering across country towards Luvdale village.

Skirting Luvdale Plantation, Porson headed towards the stretch of common which fronted the straggling main street of Luvdale village. He glided earthwards and made a

more or less smooth landing. Throttling down till the Farman had lost way and the engine was barely ticking over, he turned to Colonel Blenkinsop.

"What now, sir?" he inquired.

"Not a soul in sight anywhere," grumbled the colonel, staring about him. "Looks like a confounded village of the dead, by George! I say, you wait here and I'll go and make inquiries."

"You stay and I'll go, sir!" volunteered Porson. "The village people seem to have shut themselves up in their houses. The tiger might be lurking about here, you know."

"D'ye think so?" Colonel Blenkinsop stared about him harder than ever. "By Godfrey! Perhaps you're right. Yes, you go. I'll stay here and defend your machine for you in case the brute appears and attacks it. By George! I wouldn't like your machine to be damaged, you know. Here, take the punt gun!"

Porson suppressed a grin, and, with the loaded punt gun on his shoulder, set off for the village with Bill capering joyously at his heels. Colonel Blenkinsop spent the next few minutes in overhauling his armoury, keeping, however, a good look-out for a black-and-yellow striped body.

"Well, what's the news?" he demanded, as Porson returned.

"I saw the innkeeper," replied Porson. "The tiger has been traced to Luvdale Plantation, and the circus men are in the plantation now beating the undergrowth and trying to drive the brute from cover. It killed a cow and a calf this morning. If they can't net it they're going to shoot it. All the villagers have locked themselves in their houses."

"Now I'll tell you what we'll do," said the colonel. "We'll take off and hover about over Luvdale Plantation. If the brute breaks cover and takes to the fields we'll dive on him and I'll finish him off—what!"

"But won't the noise of the engine scare him, sir?" remarked Porson.

"Of course it will," replied Colonel Blenkinsop triumphantly. "That's what I want. He'll turn tail and bolt. We can go as hard as he can, confound him, and I'll get an absolutely sitting shot at him! I'll dish him first go—you see!"

Porson had plenty of nerve; he required every whit of it at that moment.

"Right-ho!" he replied; and clambered back into the forward seat, wondering which would get him first—the tiger's fangs or the colonel's guns!

Twice Porson completed a circuit of the plantation at a height of one hundred feet. But nothing stirred in its depths, and no sounds were audible above the spluttering roar of the old Green engine. With an occasional anxious eye on the dashboard in front of him—for he never knew what whim as to heating up or choking the old bus might develop—he peered downwards as he swung the machine on its third circuit.

Then it was that from the southern side of the plantation a big, lithe, yellow-and-black striped body broke cover and went loping away across the fields towards Little Slopperton.

"H-o-o-ick!" roared the colonel. "Tally-ho! Gone awa-ay!"

“F-o-o-rr-ard! F-o-o-r-rard!” he screamed, for all the world as though he were away after hounds, as Porson shoved forward the control-stick and went diving down after the loping tiger.

Men had broken from the woods, but they halted in astonishment as they saw the rickety old Maurice Farman go roaring away in the wake of the now thoroughly-scared and wildly-running tiger.

Porson had never dived at such a rate in the old Farman before, and he was wondering, apprehensively, how the old bus would stand the strain. Wind shrieked through the multitude of flying and bracing wires, and the unvarnished struts quivered and shook protestingly in their sockets.

But the spirit of the chase was in his blood now, and the old Green engine banged and spluttered away gallantly, as though it knew what was afoot. Porson glanced over his shoulder. Colonel Blenkinsop had slithered the heavy barrel of the elephant gun on to the side of the makeshift fuselage. His finger was curled round the trigger, and his eyes were gleaming excitedly behind the goggles which Porson had lent him.

Porson turned again to view the quarry. The Farman was now no higher than thirty feet from the ground. Two hundred yards ahead the tiger was doing its utmost to put as much distance as possible between itself and the terrible thing which was roaring down on it. As Porson watched, it cleared a low hedge in its stride and swung towards the wall of Slopperton Grange deer park.

BANG!

Porson was almost deafened by the thunderous explosion of the elephant gun. The only immediate result of the colonel’s shot was that a couple of flying wires parted and commenced to slap madly against the upper plane. An instant later Porson saw the heavy weapon slither past him on the lower plane and go hurtling to the ground below.

Wildly he looked round. The colonel was lying on his back in the cockpit amidst an assortment of weapons, his fat little gaitered legs waving frenziedly in the air. It was obvious what had happened. The recoil from the gun had knocked him flat on his back! It was also perfectly obvious that unless he was released from his unfortunate predicament, he might at any moment tumble out of the bus, or get mixed up with the propeller.

There was only one course open to Porson, and he acted promptly. He switched off his engine and kicked on the rudder-bar to circle for a landing.

“Well, where’s the body?” demanded Colonel Blenkinsop, the landing having been effected and he himself extricated from his unfortunate position by Porson.

“The body, sir?” echoed Porson.

“Yes, the body of the tiger! I got him, of course?”

“No, sir!” Porson shook his head. “You missed him, sir! Last thing I saw of him he was making towards your deer park!”

“Great Godfrey!” snorted the colonel. “D’you mean to say I missed him? Me?”

“I’m afraid so, sir!”

“But I winged him, at least. Confound it, I must have winged him!”

“Not even winged him, sir!” mourned Porson sympathetically.

“Oh, confound it! I always said the sights of that dashed gun were wrong—always! And the brute’s gone towards my deer park, you say?”

“Yes, he was heading that way.”

“Well, now, I’ll tell you what we’ll do. I’m not beaten yet, by George! I’ve got a jolly fine Boche tank gun. I got it in France. It’s a thing just like a big rifle mounted on a thin tripod stand. We’ll fix it on your machine, and I’ll blow the brute’s head off with it. Couldn’t possibly miss with it, you know. Not me!”

“But won’t it be a bit difficult to fix?” protested Porson.

“Difficult? Pooh—no! Not a bit difficult. Jobson will fix it. Come on, let’s get home and get it done. Then we’ll rout around and find this beastly tiger again. He can’t have got far. Pick up the elephant gun, yonder, and we’ll take off.”

“Right-ho!” replied Porson good-naturedly.

He retrieved the elephant gun and, switching on, swung the propeller. With the colonel ensconced in the rear seat and Porson and Bill in the front seat, the old Maurice Farman lumbered up into the air and headed for Slopperton Grange.

Algy Blenkinsop, Jobson, and Joe, the boot-boy, were waiting to welcome the two adventurers.

“Jobson, come with me to the gun-room!” commanded the colonel. “You, Joe, take those guns and ammunition out of the machine.”

He stalked off, and whilst he was gone Porson explained to Algy what had happened and what Colonel Blenkinsop now intended to do.

“Oh, crumbs!” groaned Algy. “D’you mean to say he’s going to mount that Boche tank gun on your bus?”

“That’s the idea!” grinned Porson, hands thrust in the pockets of his school blazer. “He’s determined to get the jolly old tiger by hook or by crook, but I can’t understand why he doesn’t use an ordinary rifle!”

“Because he couldn’t hit a barn door with one, that’s why!” replied Algy. “He’s a dear old chap, but dash it, somebody ought to stop him. This blessed tank gun of his will drive a bullet through armoured plate. It’s frightful to think of him flying about loose with it.”

“Oh, we’ll be all right!” replied Porson good-naturedly. “Here he comes with Jobson and the gun!”

Under the colonel’s fussy supervision, the tripod stand was firmly lashed to the lower plane of the Farman and the gun mounted on it so that the colonel could manipulate it as he sat in the rear seat.

“I’ve got six cartridges to fit the gun!” he boomed, as he shoved them into the chamber. “But I’ll only require one, by George!”

“Better take the six, though!” advised Algy Blenkinsop hastily. “You never know ____”

He broke off as from a clump of beech-trees some little distance away a tall fellow in velveteens came running madly towards the machine.

"The tiger!" gasped the man—one of the colonel's underkeepers—as he dashed up. "It's got into the deer park where—where the wall is breaking away!"

"Jumped it, by George!" roared the colonel. "Whereabouts is the brute, man?"

"Over yonder!" replied the fellow pointing.

"Then let's be off, Porson, my boy!" bellowed Colonel Blenkinsop. "We'll get him this time!"

Porson swung the pusher propeller of his biplane, and clambered up to the forward seat where Bill, his little mongrel, was waiting unconcernedly.

"All right, sir?" he inquired, over his shoulder, of Colonel Blenkinsop.

"Absolutely!"

Porson turned to his controls. Opening the throttle, he waited until the old bus was lumbering forward, then swung her into wind. He went swaying and jolting along with increasing speed. It was when the speedometer needle was flickering at forty-five miles per hour that he pulled on the control-stick. Twice the ancient Farman hopped into the air, to bump again, but the third time it rose heavily and went banging its way along towards where the underkeeper had indicated the tiger to be.

"There it is!" howled the colonel, pointing wildly towards where a black-and-yellow striped body was slinking along by the side of the park wall.

Porson tingled with excitement. Swinging the bus so that he was flying parallel with the wall, he closed the throttle to half, and, pushing forward the stick, took the machine past the animal in a long, smooth glide.

Bang! He heard the German tank gun bark viciously. The tiger halted snarlingly. Almost crazed by the chivvying it had received, the brute scarcely seemed to know which way to turn. It backed against the wall, fangs gleaming cruelly, tail switching.

Bang! Crack! Again the tank gun barked into life, and simultaneously there came a sharp, whiplike crack audible above the clattering of the engine, which had begun suddenly to race madly. The machine lurched madly.

Porson switched off his engine, and, holding the Farman on its gliding angle, glanced over his shoulder.

"Great Scott!" he gasped.

That second bullet from the tank gun had gone right through the propeller, snapping off one of the blades like a carrot. The flying piece of propeller had crashed through the tail plane. Colonel Blenkinsop was hanging on to the butt of the tank gun, goggling in dismay at the havoc he had wrought.

But Porson had little time for thought in that direction. He had to get the machine down somehow without crashing. He glanced downwards. The ground was less than twenty feet below. Again the old Farman lurched sickeningly, and he whipped over the stick to bring the opposite aileron control into play.

It did not occur to him in those hectic moments that he was bound to land close to the tiger. But somehow that seemed a secondary consideration. All he wanted was to get his dear old Maurice Farman to earth with as little damage as possible.

The ground was only a few feet below him now. Ahead was a clump of trees, and he had no space for a run when he landed. With jaw set grimly, he pulled the control-stick back. Up came the nose of the machine, then the old Farman dropped like a stone in a beautiful pancake landing.

Colonel Blenkinsop was catapulted out of his seat, to fall heavily to the ground. Porson looked around. The tiger, eyes, blazing, tail switching, was advancing towards the machine.

"Don't move!" roared Porson to the prostrate colonel, and scrambled for the swinging tank gun.

But Bill hurled himself from the forward seat and rushed, with doggy devotion, to keep this strange animal from his lord and master. Barking defiantly, he came to a halt full in the path of the brute. Frenziedly Porson swung the tank gun. There came a deep-throated snarl, a sweep of a paw, and Bill was hurled aside. Porson had a vision of red, blazing eyes, of long, cruel fangs as the brute sprang at the machine.

Bang! With a scream which was almost human, the tiger seemed to leap upwards in mid-air. Then it crashed against the lower plane and slumped heavily to the ground. Its lithe body quivered an instant, then was still.

A head appeared above the opposite end of the lower plane, and the hoarse voice of Colonel Blenkinsop inquired "Is it dead?"

"I—I think so," replied Porson unsteadily. "Yes, it is."

Then he was out of the machine, and, with something approaching a sob in his throat, was running towards where lay the little black-and-white body of the faithful Bill.

. . . . .

"He'll pull through!" said the veterinary surgeon that evening, as, with tender hands, he finished his examination of the little black-and-white mongrel.

"I'm glad of that, by George!" boomed Colonel Blenkinsop, blowing his nose violently. "A dashed plucky little fellow!"

He turned to Porson.

"And you'll stay with me, my boy, until he's better, and until we get your machine repaired. Hallo! Who the dickens is this?"

A fast little Blackburn Bluebird came roaring low over the stable yard. The noise of the engine died away as it dropped its nose for a landing in the deer park.

"He's got a fine little bus, whoever he is!" remarked Porson. "I wouldn't mind having a flip in it."

A wish, by the way, which was to be gratified within a very short time under circumstances undreamt of by young George Porson!

CHAPTER IV

THE BARON'S BALLOON!

"I SAY!"

With one accord George Porson, Colonel Blenkinsop, and the veterinary surgeon turned.

A youth wearing very new and very expensive-looking flying kit was ambling into the stable yard of Slopperton Grange, where Porson, the colonel, and the veterinary surgeon were holding an anxious and expert consultation over old Bill, Porson's much-bandaged and bright-eyes little black-and-white mongrel.

He was a pink-and-white complexioned youth, with somewhat protruding eyes, which at the moment were fairly goggling with excitement.

"I say!" he babbled as he approached. "Is it true?"

"Hallo, Reggie!" greeted Colonel Blenkinsop heartily. Then in the same breath: "Is what true?"

"About this blessed tiger hunt," babbled Reggie. "The whole countryside's talking about it. Mother's sent me over to get particulars. She's in a perfectly frightful state about it. Is it true? Did you really slaughter that man-eating tiger which escaped from the circus at Luvdale?"

"Of course I did!" replied the colonel. "Or, at least," he amended handsomely, "this brave lad did."

He patted George Porson on the back. Porson blushed.

"Oh, you did, sir!" he said hastily. "You did all the hard work, as it were, and I merely finished the brute off."

"Ah, well, perhaps that was the way of it."

It wasn't the way of it at all. As a matter of fact, if it hadn't been for Porson the tiger would have lunched off cold colonel—unless, of course, the colonel had turned out to be a faster runner than the tiger.

"I was determined not to let the beggar escape," went on the colonel in his best platform manner. "My tenants torn limb from limb, and little children devoured, and all that sort of thing, by George! So I cornered him in the deer park, and—er—between us Porson and I finished him off with a Boche tank gun. But, great Godfrey, that reminds me! I haven't introduced you two lads yet. Reggie, this is George Porson. Porson, this is my nephew, the Honourable Reggie Marling, of Marling Towers. Son of my sister, Lady Marling, don't you know."

Introductions thus completed, the Honourable Reggie bleated excitedly for further details of the wonderful hunt.

"But they say you went chasing about the countryside in a perfectly foul thing called a Maurice Farman biplane," he rattled on. "Young Woolerton said he's never

seen such a weird-looking thing in his life before. Said it gave him quite a turn, poor chappie. A nightmarish sort of thing, like a cross between a man-flying kite and a glider and a birdcage.

"He said he saw it from the morning-room window, and they had to lead him away to lie down because he got such a shock, and he said that the ghastly thing was making a most frightful row. And what we all want to know is: Where did uncle unearth the bally thing?"

"He didn't unearth it from anywhere," remarked Porson coldly. "It happens to be my biplane!"

"Oh dear!" gasped Reggie, in dismay. "Oh, great pip!"

"And if this Woolerton fellow," went on Porson unheedingly, "has any more remarks to pass, comic or otherwise, I wish he'd pass 'em in my hearing. He won't feel so jolly humorous after that!"

"Young Woolerton is a confounded jackanapes!" snorted Colonel Blenkinsop, whilst his crimson-faced nephew stood fairly oozing embarrassment and apologies. "He once placed an explosive cigar in my cabinet, the confounded idiot! I didn't know it was there, and I was dining the Lord Lieutenant of the county. The Lord Lieutenant got the cigar, and the thing nearly blew his moustache off. Great Godfrey! He really thought I'd given it him on purpose, and he was insulting—most insulting!

"And if this puppy Woolerton," he concluded, "had one quarter the grit of this lad here"—again he patted the blushing Porson on the back—"he would be carving out a manly career for himself, as this lad is doing, instead of lounging about at home like a —like an infernal incubus!"

Reggie gazed in wonderment at Porson.

"Are you really doing that?" he inquired.

"Doing what?" demanded Porson.

"Carving out a career for yourself, as uncle says."

"With that mirth-provoking Maurice Farman biplane," replied Porson coldly, "which I bought for ten pounds from the Air Ministry, I intend to make enough money by carrying passengers and things to enable me to buy a more modern bus. Then when I get more money I'll buy another bus, and so on. Some day"—his voice rang with enthusiasm—"I'll have a whole fleet of passenger-carrying aeroplanes, some of 'em fitted with luxury suites for millionaires.

"I'll be the great Porson, president of Porson's Passenger Service—By Air to Anywhere. I'll rent an old army aerodrome, with its hangars and workshops, and that'll do until I can afford to build my own aerodrome."

"Great pip!" gasped Reggie, eyeing Porson's oil-stained flannel trousers and school blazer. "But how old are you?"

"Seventeen," replied Porson.

"Seventeen!" echoed Reggie. "And you're going to do all that?"

"I am!" replied Porson emphatically. "I may say that I've already started."

"Good man!" exclaimed Reggie admiringly. "I say, would you like a flip in my Blackburn Bluebird out there in the deer park?"

Porson's eyes glowed, but he shook his head resolutely.

"I would, very much," he replied. "But I can't leave old Bill here. He tried to keep the tiger from me, poor little fellow, and he got mauled. But he'll pull through all right. In any case, it's too dark now for me to risk going up in your Bluebird. I'm not used to sensitive little buses like that, and I'd probably bust something on landing. She'll be quicker to answer the controls than my old Farman."

"Well, you'll come to mother's garden fête to-morrow, won't you?" pressed Reggie. "There's going to be all kinds of sideshows and things, and there's a fellow going to make an ascent in a balloon. He's a baron, and he's the hottest thing with a balloon that ever came out of Europe. I'll let you have a flip in my bus as well, if you'll come.

"You'll bring him along, won't you, uncle?" he demanded, turning to the colonel.

"Certainly I will!" replied the colonel. "His biplane needs a few slight repairs after the—er—little affair of this morning, and he is my guest till the repairs are executed. Yes, of course I'll bring him."

. . . . .

Before Porson turned in that night he sat on his bed, conning over three entries in a small pocket-book:

	£. s. d.
For winning aerial golf	10 0 0
For taking Algy Blenkinsop home	5 0 0
For killing tiger	50 0 0

"Sixty-five pounds!" he soliloquised. "Well, that's not so bad. And Aunt Elizabeth said I wouldn't make a ha'penny. That aerial golf, now. I really won that because my old Farman was a jolly sight slower than the other buses competing!"

Contemplating the second entry, he muttered:

"I didn't want to take a fiver for that job. But the poor blighter would insist on it. It saved him from getting locked up, anyway!"

His eyes kindled as they surveyed the third entry.

"Fifty pounds, dead or alive, was the reward they offered for the capture of that tiger! Colonel Blenkinsop wouldn't touch a bean of the reward. Jolly sporting of him! Still, I suppose I did earn it, really. Oh, well!"

He closed the book, and placing it carefully in a drawer of the dressing-table, switched out the light and turned in. In less than two minutes he was sleeping the sleep of healthy boyhood.

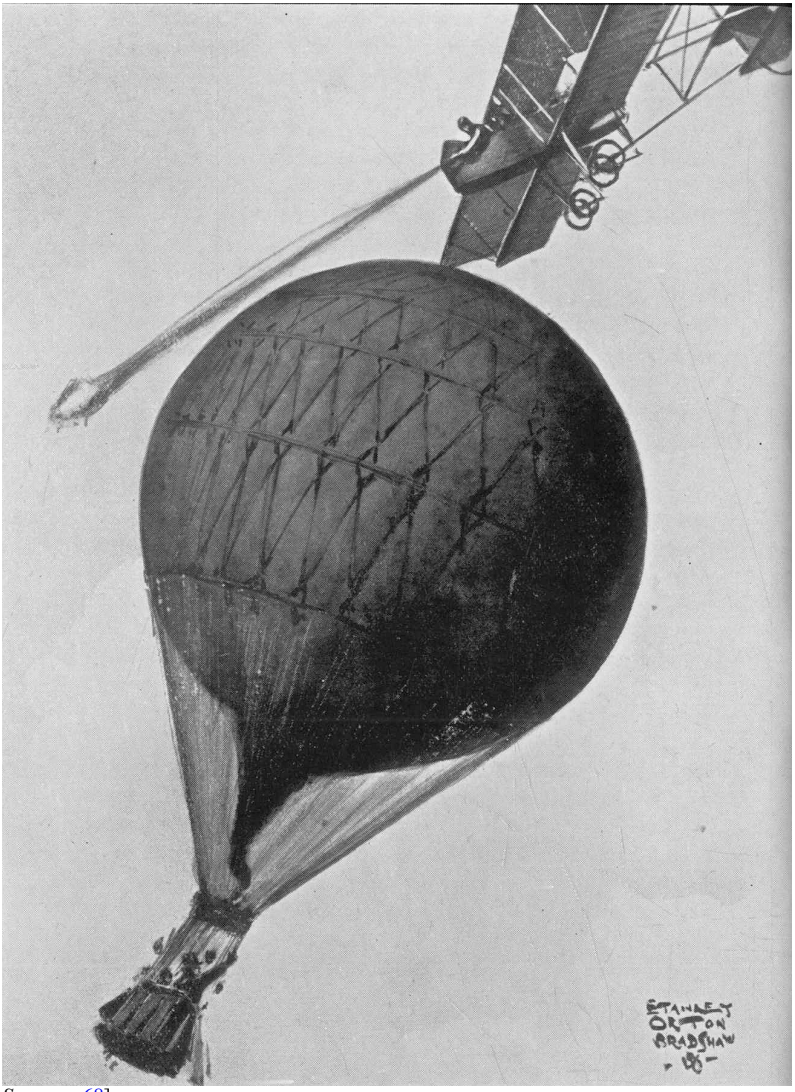
He was early astir, and paid a visit to Bill, whose stumpy tail played a veritable tattoo on the straw of the sleeping-box at sight of him. The little mongrel was much better, and, vastly relieved, Porson went and inspected his damaged machine.

With tender and skilful hands he examined the damage caused by the crash when Colonel Blenkinsop had put a shot through the propeller in the excitement of the tiger hunt. The distant booming of the breakfast gong recalled him to the house, and later in the morning he set out with the colonel in the latter's old Ford car for Marling Towers.

He was looking forward with considerable interest to the garden fête of which Reggie had spoken. For one thing, Reggie had promised him a flip in the little Blackburn Bluebird, and for another he wanted to see the balloon ascent.

He and the colonel arrived at Marling Towers in time for lunch, and Reggie took Porson under his wing.

"Come on, old thing," he said. "I'll introduce you to the balloon merchant. He's been staying with us overnight. He's a queer sort of chappie—a German, I believe!"



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AT TWENTY FEET ABOVE THE GAS-BAG PORSON PRESSED ON THE TRIGGER OF THE PISTOL.

"What's his name?" inquired Porson, as Reggie piloted him through a medley of stalls and sideshows to where the envelope of a huge balloon was being inflated from cylinders of gas in preparation for the ascent when the guests had arrived later in the day.

"Oh, it's Bloggerheimer—Baron Bloggerheimer, of Stuttgart. That's him there!"

Reggie indicated a fat, florid, and perspiring individual, wearing a flat felt hat, white waistcoat, morning-coat, striped trousers, and patent-leather shoes, and who was fussily superintending the inflation of the gas-bag.

"Er—Herr Baron——" ventured Reggie at the florid one's elbow.

"Von moment—von moment, blese!" boomed the baron importantly. Then, to a hungry-looking, spindle-shanked assistant: "Ach, numskull! Haf I nod vonce, dwice, an' dree dimes said for to make sure dat de outled valve vorks before filling vid de gas to full?"

"Eet ees working!" replied the hungry-looking assistant mutinously, with an accent bred in Italy.

"Block'ead!" boomed the baron. "Pud de dose to de valve an' sniv-v-v so!" He sniffed ponderously through bulbous nostrils to indicate more clearly how the outlet valve was to be tested.

"I 'ave sneefed!" screamed the assistant. "Eet ees workin'."

"Goot!" remarked the baron, mollified, and turned to Reggie. "Now, mein young friendt," he said, with heavy joviality, "vot you vant vid me, hein?"

"I want to introduce Porson to you," replied Reggie. "Porson's frightfully keen on flying, you know. He's got a jolly fine machine!"

"Ach, Borson!" said the baron, taking Porson's hand in a podgy and clammy grasp. "You a aeroblane haf, is id nod?"

"Yes, I have one," replied Porson modestly. "Not a very good one, I'm afraid. I mean, it's a jolly fine one, really, but it's old."

"Id madders noddings," remarked the baron, mournfully shaking his head and still retaining Porson's hand in clammy grip. "Id madders noddings, mein young friendt, if id be old or new. De heavier-dan-air machines is no goot—nein, no goot ad all! De airshibs, de Zebbelins, de balloons, dey do nod fall down—bonk!"

"But I've never fallen down exactly—bonk!" replied Porson. "I have crashed, you know. But the word 'bonk' seems to suggest such an awful wallop, doesn't it?"

"Somedime every heavier-dan-air machine comes down—bonk!" reiterated Baron Bloggerheimer. "Bud de balloon—never! Nein! De balloon, he fload down so gendle like de liddle budderfly on de cabbage!"

He released Porson's hand in order to demonstrate with his own fat ones how gently and gracefully the butterfly floats down to alight on the cabbage.

So for a while we will leave these aeronautical experts discussing the respective merits of heavier-than-air and lighter-than-air machines, the baron stolidly staunch to his belief that, sooner or later, every one of the former must of necessity come down—bonk!

. . . . .

Having waded unfalteringly through an excellent lunch, the baron pulled down his waistcoat, adjusted his tie, and waddled forth to inspect his balloon.

The grounds of Marling Towers were rapidly filling with visitors and guests. The chief centre of attraction was undoubtedly the balloon. The spindle-shanked assistant, aided by the under-gardeners and the odd-job man, had got the gas-bag filled, and its

massive, circular bulk swayed gently above the small, square basket which was moored to the ground by a couple of wire hawsers. The baron spent almost an hour fussing about, then announced boomingly:

"All is ready vor de ascendt! Mein assisdant an' me vill go oop an' oop an' oop an' den bull de cord of de oudlet valve and fload down so gendle to de ground! Ja!"

There was an excited flutter amongst the crowd as the thin assistant struggled into his jacket and clambered into the basket. Pompously, as befitted the adventurous and courageous owner of the thing, the baron followed him into the basket. Placing his flat felt hat carefully in a little locker, the baron adjusted a large pair of spectacles on his ponderous nose and blinked owlishly round the interior of the basket in a final survey of ballast-bags and so on.

"Ach, numskull!" he bellowed, catching the wretched assistant a thump on the ear. "Block'ead! Vere is de delescope of me, hein? Vere is mein delescope, pig dog?"

"The teleescope, eet ees at the 'ouse where you took eet!" snarled the assistant, rubbing his ear.

"Ach, so! You are correcdt. I am de voolish von!" admitted the baron magnanimously, then addressed the tittering crowd.

"I go vor to ged mein delescope from mein room ad de house!" he boomed. "Von dousand bardons vor delay!"

He heaved himself out of the basket and waddled away. Ten minutes later he returned, at a puffing, ambling gait, mopping his perspiring and florid face with a large multi-coloured handkerchief. Sticking out of the pocket in the tail of his morning-coat was the telescope.

"Ach, Borson, mein friendt!" he panted. "Blease take hold of de cable near de basked so dat ven I casdt off id vill nod spring back an' hid anybodies in de crowd."

He showed Porson what he meant, then clambered in. Again he addressed the crowd.

"Dere is no danger in de balloon, mein friendts, bud no man of common sense goes oop widout virst pudding on de barachude harness, hein. Id is a brecaution which must be observed. Ja!"

Suiting the action to the words, he got himself draped in parachute harness, whilst his assistant did the same.

"Now den!" he bellowed. "Stan' by vor to joomp back! Mein balloon is aboud to ascend!"

He tackled one mooring cable, whilst his assistant tackled the other. Porson hung on grimly, to prevent the suddenly-released cable from whanging back and braining someone amongst the spectators. Reggie had hold of the other cable.

"Von!" boomed the baron. "Two—dree—an' oop she goes!"

Up she went as the cables were unhitched. The baron hung out of the basket, waving his handkerchief as the balloon soared up. The spectators clapped with restrained dignity. A small section of village youths cheered lustily.

Perhaps the baron heard that cheer. He dispensed with the handkerchief and blew kisses on both hands as he went floating up and up till the balloon looked little more than a toy, high in the sky.

"He'll be coming down again soon!" remarked Reggie, gazing up into the blue. "I say, he's rather an ass, isn't he?"

"Oh, I dunno!" grunted Porson good-naturedly. "But he's a bit off the rails when he says that lighter-than-air machines are better than heavier-than-air ones!"

"Oh, absolutely!" began Reggie, then broke off abruptly as from the direction of the house there came a startled shriek.

He and Porson wheeled. A white-faced lady's-maid was running across the lawn from the house, shrieking:

"Modom! Modom!"

"Great pip!" gasped Reggie. "That's mother's maid. Celeste! What the dickens has happened?"

Celeste hysterically poured into the astounded ears of Lady Marling and the staring guests how she, Celeste, having had occasion to visit Lady Marling's room, had found the floor littered with her ladyship's jewel-cases, which had been ripped open and ravaged of their contents!

"Cat-burglars, by Godfrey!" roared Colonel Blenkinsop.

"Come with me!" exclaimed Reggie, taking Porson by the arm; and together the two dashed towards the house.

Reggie led the way, bounding upstairs to his mother's dressing-room. As the maid had said, jewel-cases littered the floor. Drawers had been pulled out and their contents hurriedly rummaged through.

Porson picked a scent-spray up from amongst the debris on the floor and replaced it on the dressing-table. Reggie was at the window.

"It's cat-burglars, as uncle says!" he bleated. "They've come up this water-pipe outside here whilst everybody was out in the grounds——"

At that moment Colonel Blenkinsop came charging into the room, at the head of a contingent comprising the butler, three footmen, and a few privileged guests. A tearful Celeste brought up the rear.

"Now!" roared the colonel, taking charge of operations. "Dry those confounded tears, my girl, and tell us when you discovered this—this infernal mess!"

Celeste was understood to say that she had discovered it but a few minutes ago.

"Ha!" snorted the colonel. "And had you visited the room before that?"

Yes, Celeste had visited the room about half an hour before.

"Well, had anything been touched on your previous visit, half an hour ago?" demanded the colonel.

No, nothing had been touched at all.

“Then,” bellowed the colonel, addressing the room at large, “it’s perfectly clear that the scoundrels looted the room during the time which elapsed between the visits of this girl. They can’t have got very far. We must telephone the police, and——”

“Excuse me, sir,” cut in Porson, “there’s no necessity to do that.”

“What?” ejaculated Colonel Blenkinsop, whilst everyone gaped at Porson. “What d’you mean by no need to telephone for the police, boy?”

“I mean that I don’t suppose they can help you very much!” replied Porson. “To put the matter in a nutshell, Baron Bloggerheimer’s got the jewels! It was he who looted the room when he came back to the house under the pretext of seeking his telescope!”

“Rot! Rubbish! Absolute nonsense!” snorted Colonel Blenkinsop. “The baron came here with the highest credentials!”

He glared at Porson, but, in no way abashed, Porson waved an airy hand towards the window.

“Look, sir, and see if he’s coming down, as he said he would!” he remarked.

There was a rush for the window, but there was no sign of the balloon floating gently to earth, as per programme.

“He’s gone!” said Porson. “And he’s got Lady Marling’s jewels with him. If Reggie will lend me his Blackburn Bluebird, I will go and bring the jewels back.”

“But you’re only assuming that he’s a thief!” barked the colonel. “You can’t prove it!”

“I’m not assuming it, sir!” retorted Porson. “I know he’s the thief, and I can jolly well prove it right up to the hilt. But I haven’t time now. If Reggie’ll lend me his bus I’ll pop off and bring the jewels back!”

He took Reggie by the arm.

“Jump to it, old bean!” he said. “We haven’t any time to lose if I’m to find that giddy balloon!”

“But even if he has got the—er—swag on him, how the dickens are you going to get it back when the blighter’s in a balloon?” demanded Reggie wildly.

“Leave it to me!” replied Porson. “Come on; where’s your Bluebird?”

Reggie led the rush downstairs and round to the rear of the house, where the hangar containing his little machine faced a first-rate taking-off ground. Willing and excited hands sent the hangar doors rumbling open, and the Blackburn Bluebird was wheeled out.

“Now explain the controls!” commanded Porson. Reggie obeyed.

“By thunder, if you’re making a mistake,” came the booming voice of Colonel Blenkinsop, “there’ll be old Harry to pay!”

“I’m not making a mistake, sir!” replied Porson calmly. “I know he’s got Lady Marling’s jewellery!”

“But how the dickens do you know?” roared the colonel. “That I want to know, because——”

The shattering roar of the Blackburn Bluebird's Armstrong-Siddeley Genet engine cut in on his words.

"Don't you want any flying kit?" howled Reggie, screaming to make himself heard above the roar of the engine as Porson clambered into the snug little cockpit.

"No, I don't!" replied Porson, turning up the collar of his school blazer. His fingers closed on the throttle-handle and he opened up. The little Bluebird shot forward, gathering impetus every second. The tail came up, and as Porson eased back the control-stick the little bus took the air in a steep, upward climb.

"Hope I don't stall!" grunted Porson, as he held the machine on its climbing angle. "Dash it, I wish I had my old Farman!"

When he had last seen the baron's balloon it was drifting slowly towards the coast, and in that direction Porson swung the Blackburn Bluebird, peering up into the blue ahead for some sign of the balloon.

"Clicked!" he murmured excitedly some fifteen minutes later. Ahead of him, a mere blob in the distance, was the baron's balloon.

"Hope I catch him before he gets over the sea!" muttered Porson, as his splendid little machine rapidly overhauled the balloon.

It was going to be a near thing! Already the balloon was almost over the waters of the Channel. At six thousand feet, Porson began to close in on his quarry. Squinting through his wind-shield, he could see the corpulent figure of Baron Bloggerheimer watching the oncoming Bluebird through his telescope.

Porson groped for and found in its rack the Verey pistol which Reggie used in order to drop his landing signals. It was loaded with a thick magnesium cartridge.

Porson was no higher than fifty feet above the balloon as he roared towards it, his hand holding the Verey pistol extended far outwards. The baron must have seen that extended, menacing arm, for he and his assistant fairly hurled themselves at the ballast-bags in an effort to lighten the balloon and gain height!

At twenty feet above the huge gas-bag, Porson pressed on the trigger of the pistol, and a white Verey-light floated flaring past the balloon. He had missed intentionally, having come to a pretty accurate estimate as to the baron's courage.

Gripping the control-stick between his knees, he rapidly reloaded, then, kicking on the rudder, he banked steeply, and thundered back towards the balloon, which by this time was rising quickly. Again, as he roared over the great gas-bag, a Verey-light dropped flaring. It missed the bulging envelope by inches!

That, apparently, convinced the baron and his assistant that the fellow above them was in earnest. They would be over the sea in another five minutes, and they didn't want to be shot down in flames over that. So with one accord they leapt out of the basket and went hurtling earthwards, leaving the balloon to take care of itself.

Their parachutes opened as they pulled on the release cords, and gently they floated downwards, to land in tangled heaps on the Fuzbeach golf links.

Porson, already landed, was waiting for them, with the Verey pistol, a mixed foursome, two singles, a caddymaster, and about a score of caddies.

“Hand ’em over!” demanded Porson grimly, as Baron Bloggerheimer emerged from under the limp parachute.

“Hand vot over?” snarled the baron.

“The jewellery!” replied Porson calmly. “Lady Marling’s jewels!”

“Block’ead!” roared the baron. “I haf nod god dem! Nein! You are von big pig dog, an’ I dink you vos mad!”

“Do you?” replied Porson sweetly. Stepping forward, he pulled a miscellaneous collection of jewellery from the baron’s capacious pockets.

“There!” he said. “You try a heavier-than-air machine next time, Herr Baron. You’ll find it better than a balloon. If you hadn’t jumped out when you did I would have sent your balloon down—bonk!”

. . . . .

“But how in thunder were you so jolly certain that the blackguard was the one who had robbed Lady Marling?” demanded Colonel Blenkinsop of Porson, later that evening.

“Because,” replied Porson, “when he came from the house, after getting his telescope, he was mopping his brow, and I got a whiff of his handkerchief. It was reeking with scent—the same scent which was in the spray which I picked up from the floor in Lady Marling’s room. For some weird reason, the ass had pinched some of Lady Marling’s scent. It was too much of a coincidence to think that he used the same scent as Lady Marling. But blessed if I know why he bothered to pinch any at all!”

“Did you ever know a confounded, dandified foreigner who could resist scent?” roared the colonel. “I didn’t—and I’ve met a few. But I’ve heard from the police. He’s not a baron at all, the blackguard! He’s a well-known crook. There’s been a thousand marks’ reward out for his apprehension for a long time!”

“Has there?” inquired Porson, with interest.

“Yes, by George! And I’ll see you get it, my lad!” replied the colonel. “What’s more, I’m jolly certain the insurance people who insured the jewellery will be very pleased to show their appreciation of your dashed plucky act.”

“Well,” remarked Porson, hastily changing the subject, “I’ve certainly found this flying business rather exciting up till now!”

But little did he imagine that immediately ahead along the air trail which he was following lay even more startling adventures!

CHAPTER V

A HOP—AND A FLOP!

"YE be doin' well, then, Garge?"

"Yes, Gaffer," replied George Porson earnestly. "But I've been very lucky."

Gaffer—George's neighbour and good friend—shook his head.

"Nay, lad," he said firmly. "It ain't luck; it's grit. I allus said ye had grit, Garge. And when yon fine lady—your aunt—come here an' said as how ye wouldn't make a ha'penny wi' your flyin'-machine, I ses as how ye would. Didn't I, lad?"

"Yes, you did, Gaffer. You always had faith in me!"

"Ay," nodded Gaffer portentously. "Ay. And for why? 'Cos I can see deeper'n most men—that's for why!"

The old fellow was silent a while, sitting with gnarled hands resting on top of his thick stick, gazing dreamily down the stretch of garden towards the hot and dusty roadway beyond.

It was very pleasant sitting there on the bench in front of Porson's little cottage. Porson, lolling with hands plunged deep in the pockets of his grey, oil-stained flannel bags, felt at peace with all the world. It was topping just to be sitting there doing nothing for a while, after the crowded events of the past few days.

"Folks say," remarked Gaffer reflectively—"folks say, Garge, that ye got a hun'erd pounds for catchin' that there furriner what robbed Lady Marling."

"Yes. A hundred pounds, Gaffer," replied Porson. "Fifty from the German police, who wanted the fellow rather badly, and fifty from the insurance company."

"A hun'erd pounds'll keep a man a powerful long time!" soliloquised Gaffer.

"Yes. But I don't want to use it like that," replied Porson gently. "I've put it into the bank with the other money which I've made, Gaffer, and when I've got enough saved, I'm going to buy a jolly fine passenger-carrying aeroplane. I'll still keep my old Maurice Farman in use, of course, and that'll be a couple of buses I'll have.

"Then, when I've made some more money, I'll buy another machine, and so on, until I've got a whole fleet of passenger-carrying aeroplanes—some of 'em fitted with luxury suites for millionaires!"

"That be a great ambition, lad," replied Gaffer enthusiastically—"ay, a fine ambition that be! An' ye'll do it!"

He had heard all the details of Porson's great scheme many and many a time before, but it was a subject which he and the boy found always fresh and always enthralling.

"And at first I'll rent some old Army aerodrome," went on Porson happily. "Then some day I'll build my own aerodrome, and it'll have great whacking big notice-boards, with 'Porson's Passenger Service—By Air To Anywhere!' painted on 'em—just like I've got it painted on that notice-board stuck at the gate there!"

He nodded towards the garden gate, where a notice-board displayed that particular legend to all passers-by.

"And you'll come and see me, Gaffer, won't you?" he continued eagerly. "You'll come and see me just like you do now, and we'll discuss plans for the future like we do now, and we'll talk about the days when I just had the jolly old Farman and this topping little cottage and——"

He broke off as a somewhat pale and inquiring sort of face, ornamented by a pair of gleaming spectacles, was suddenly thrust over the top of the garden gate and a voice demanded shrilly:

"I say! Does George Porson live here?"

Porson sprang to his feet and strode down the path towards the gate.

"Hallo, Spencer!" he cried heartily. "Dash it, man! I wasn't expecting you till the next train. I was going to toddle along to the station to meet you."

"I caught an earlier train from Victoria," remarked Spencer, passing in through the gateway and taking Porson's outstretched hand. "But I say, George!" he went on, in aggrieved tones. "You do live an awful long way from anywhere, don't you? I've walked miles and miles!"

"Two miles, old bean!" grinned Porson, possessing himself of Spencer's suitcase and leading the way up the garden-path. "Two miles, and not a blessed yard more."

"Well, it seemed a frightful distance to me!" bleated Spencer. "I couldn't get a conveyance of any kind, either. I feel most awfully limp and fagged!"

"Well, you sit and talk to Gaffer whilst I make the tea," replied Porson cheerily. "Gaffer, this is Cyril Spencer. He and I shared a study at school last term. Cyril, this is my friend, Gaffer. No, don't do a bunk, Gaffer. You're going to stay and have tea with us, then I'm going to fly Cyril over to Summerdale, where two pals of his—Baxter and Binks—are camping."

"Now," remarked Porson, when he, the white-smocked Gaffer, and Cyril Spencer were seated in the little parlour of the cottage doing ample justice to a lavish spread, "what exactly is this camping stunt, Spencer?"

"Bug-hunting!" replied Spencer laconically. "Treacle on trees by candlelight, and all that, you know."

"Eh?" demanded Gaffer, laying down a piece of cake which had been half-way to his mouth. "Treacle on trees, did ye say, young man?"

"Oh, yes! That's the way to catch moths, you know!" explained Spencer. "Attracted by the light, they hover about the tree and get all stuck up with the treacle!"

"Fust I've heard on't," replied Gaffer. "Best way o' catchin' moths an' sich-like is to give 'em a good belt wi' your hat!"

"Oh, but that might damage them!" protested Spencer.

"Ay, 'course it'll damage 'em!" retorted Gaffer. "Kill 'em, it will. That's what ye want, ain't it?"

"Yes. But we like to obtain each specimen intact!" explained Spencer patiently.

“Sounds like a waste o’ good treacle to me!” grumbled Gaffer fretfully. “Give ’em a belt wi’ your hat, ses I!”

“Er—have these prize asses, Baxter and Binks, been camping at Summerdale long?” interposed Porson hastily. “You write such foul letters, you know, Spencer, that I couldn’t get the hang of it.”

“I stated quite plainly in my letter,” replied Cyril Spencer coldly, “that Baxter and Binks have been camping at Summerdale for a week, and that on my way to join them I would break my journey here, and you could give me a flip the rest of the way in this aeroplane which you’ve bought.”

“Oh, I see!” grunted Porson. “But, I say, you’ve got a nerve. Spencer, to go under canvas with Baxter and Binks. The fatheads couldn’t even boil a kettle last term, so I don’t know what your digestion’s going to be like after a few days of their cooking.”

“I shall cook!” remarked Spencer loftily. “I’ve brought a cookery-book with me which I picked up for tuppence at a second-hand book shop. It looks rather good.”

“I hope, for your sake, that it is!” commented Porson dryly.

Tea over Gaffer took his departure, and went hobbling away up the road towards his cottage in Sudcombe village. After washing-up, Porson led the interested Spencer to the field at the rear of the cottage where his Maurice Farman was standing in front of the old barn which did duty as a hangar.

“Well, what do you think of it?” demanded Porson, coming to a halt in front of the ancient biplane, with its flat, much-patched wings, old Green engine, and multitude of flying and bracing wires.

“Ripping!” replied Spencer, blinking through his spectacles.

“Yes, I thought you’d say that!” beamed Porson. “She’s a wonder really!”

“I don’t doubt it!” agreed Spencer politely. “But where’s your aeroplane, old man?”

“Aeroplane?” echoed Porson. “What the dickens are you burbling about?”

“The aeroplane in which we’re going to fly to Summerdale, you know!” explained Spencer. “Where is it?”

Porson gaped at the fatuous Spencer dumbfoundedly. Then he gave tongue.

“Why, you’re looking at it, you crass ass!” he roared. “That’s the aeroplane you’re looking at—in front of your nose!”

“That!” exclaimed Spencer aghast. “Oh crumbs! I thought that was a—a glider you’d been making out of some spare parts. It—it’s not really an aeroplane, old man, is it?” he concluded pathetically.

“Of course it’s an aeroplane!” roared Porson. “A thundering good aeroplane, as well. What the dickens did you expect to see? A Handley-Page, or an Avro-Bison, or what?”

“Where did you say you got it?” asked Spencer weakly.

“From the Air Ministry!” replied Porson. “It’s an old bus which they used for instructional purposes during the War.”

“I see!” Spencer blinked harder than ever at the old Farman. “And how much did they charge you for it?”

“Ten pounds!”

“Ten pounds?” echoed Spencer, scandalised. “You’ve been robbed, old man!”

“No, I haven’t!” retorted Porson warmly. “Just you jolly well wait until you’ve had a flip in the bus before you start slanging it.”

“Flip?” shrilled Spencer, backing away nervously. “What—in that? No fear! I’m not going for a flip in that thing.”

Porson’s jaw jutted grimly.

“Spencer,” he said, “you proposed going over to Summerdale in my bus, and you’re jolly well going in it!”

“I’m not!” bleated Spencer. “I—I didn’t think it was a sort of floating orange-box. I’m not going. I’m not a suicidal maniac!”

“Shut up!” roared Porson. “You are going! It’s as safe as houses. Bill and me have had hundreds of flips in it.”

“Who’s Bill?” inquired Spencer feebly.

“My dog!” replied Porson. “He’s over at Slopperton Grange just now. The poor little fellow got mauled by a tiger when Colonel Blenkinsop shot my propeller off. You’ll have noticed that the bus has been fitted with a new prop, and——”

“Porson, old man,” said Spencer gently, “come indoors!”

“What for?” snorted Porson.

Spencer plucked at the sleeve of Porson’s blazer.

“You’ve got a touch of the sun, old chap!” he explained soothingly. “I don’t suppose you realise it, but you’ve been raving about tigers and colonels and things. Come and lie down for a bit!”

“I’m not raving, ass!” retorted Porson. “It’s quite true about the tiger. I’ll tell you the story later. Go on, get up to the rear seat and I’ll shove your suitcase up after you. You won’t need any flying kit, because it’s a warm evening and I can’t get much above six hundred feet when I’ve got a passenger.”

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HE SQUEEZED HIMSELF DELIBERATELY BETWEEN FLYING WIRES.

He propelled the unwilling and protesting Spencer forward.

"You—you haven't got a parachute, have you?" inquired Spencer hopefully.

"No, I haven't!" replied Porson coldly. "But you needn't worry. We won't crash! Go on, up you get!"

Dumbly, Spencer clambered up to the rear seat. His face had a strained look about it. He ventured one last feeble protest.

"I—I'm certain I'm going to be air sick, Porson!" he groaned.

"Well, as long as you're not sick on me it won't matter much," replied Porson unfeelingly.

"Beast!" moaned Spencer, sinking on to the low rear seat and stowing his suitcase away as best he could between his feet. "What'll happen if we do crash?"

"We won't!" remarked Porson confidently, as he clambered up to the front seat in order to switch on.

"But if we do?" persisted Spencer. "Just suppose, if we do!"

"Then you'll get the crankshaft through your back!" replied Porson, with frightful complacency.

Blinking fascinatedly over his shoulder, Spencer watched Porson swing the heavy, four-bladed propeller. The old 35 h. p. Green engine picked up with a banging roar which set every flying wire and strut a-quiver.

Porson clambered back to the front seat and settled himself down with his feet on the rudder-bar and his hand on the control-stick.

"Whereabouts is this tent of Baxter's?"

He roared to make himself heard above the noise of the engine.

"Nor—north of Summerdale Woods," replied the pallid Spencer.

"Right-ho! Sit tight!"

Porson turned to his controls again and opened up the brass-handled throttle. The engine roared, spluttered, and banged in alarming fashion, and slowly the biplane commenced to lumber forward towards the nearest hedge.

Pressing on the rickety rudder-bar, Porson swung into wind with the whole stretch of the field before him. He opened up the throttle to full, and with increasing impetus the old Maurice Farman lumbered forward, jolting, swaying, and bumping. Spencer, with anguished glare, saw the ground whirling past, faster and faster.

As Porson pulled on the control-stick the biplane rose heavily into the air, then bumped to earth again. Porson kept the stick back, and the biplane executed another ungainly hop. Spencer got ready to jump. He was convinced they were going to finish in the hedge which was tearing towards them.

For the third time the Farman rose into the air, and this time it stopped there. With knees knocking and eyes protruding, Spencer was borne away over the trees towards Summerdale Woods, twenty-four miles distant. And the banging clatter of the old Green engine marked the course he took!

Never, during the whole sixteen and one half years of his existence, had the wretched Spencer spent such a ghastly half-hour as that which ensued. He failed entirely to appreciate the glory of the sun setting red behind far-off Hamilton Hill, and the mellowed beauties of pleasant meadows and shadowy copses were lost on him. Yet he viewed these things from a vantage point of six hundred feet of altitude.

That, of course, was the rotten part about it. He didn't want to view anything from such an altitude. At least, not from Porson's biplane. Never before had Mother Earth, dear old terra firma, appealed to him so strongly. He peered down at it with longing eyes, whilst the old Maurice Farman lurched, swayed, and dipped alarmingly as it clattered and banged its way towards Summerdale Woods.

Now and again Porson would bellow some remark over his shoulder, either pointing out some landmark or else inquiring as to the comfort of his passenger. He was all right, reflected Spencer bitterly; he was used to it.

Never, never would Spencer have suggested the flip had he for one moment imagined that Porson's aeroplane was such a frightful relic. He was so horribly conscious of that awful crankshaft behind his back. Suppose Porson was wrong. Suppose they did crash——

With a moan, Spencer closed his eyes as the Farman dropped ten feet, like a stone, as it encountered an air pocket. Then, with a bleat of alarm, he opened them again. The roaring rattle of the engine had died away, and the nose of the machine had dropped.

"Are—are we crashing?" he howled.

Porson grinned over his shoulder.

"No, we're landing!" he replied. "We've arrived. I say, you're sure these asses are camping on the north side of the woods, aren't you?"

"Yes—yes!"

"Because," explained Porson, "there's a tent away over yonder on the south side, as well!"

He pointed to a small triangle of white canvas in a distant field beyond Summerdale Woods.

"No, Baxter said the north side," quavered Spencer. "There's a tent below us. That'll be it."

Then he hung on grimly as, circling widely, the biplane dropped lower and lower. There was no sound to break the stillness save the rumble of the quietly running engine and the swish of the wind through flying wires and struts.

At one hundred feet Porson brought the biplane in from over the trees of Summerdale Woods, and, banking, side-slipped down towards the tent which stood in the field below. Flattening out, he made a more or less smooth landing, and, giving the bus a burst of the throttle, took it surging in towards the tent, where it came to a quivering stop as he switched off his engine.

"Well, here we are!" he remarked, turning to Spencer.

"Yes, here we are!" replied Spencer, deep and heartfelt relief in his voice. "But, I say," he went on, blinking towards the tent, "there doesn't seem to be anyone at home. The flap's shut and tied down."

"You told 'em you were coming, of course?" questioned Porson, clambering out of the low canvas-sided cockpit and dropping to the ground.

"Oh, yes, I told them!" replied Spencer, joining him. "The rotters must have gone off somewhere. Dash it, they might have been here to meet us!"

"Anyone," remarked Porson, unfastening the laced tent flap, "who expects politeness from Baxter or Binks is an optimistic ass!"

Throwing back the flap, he poked his head into the tent. Two unmade camp beds occupied the interior, together with a miscellany of cooking utensils which, dirty and

unwashed, lay scattered on the floorboards.

"Looks more like a pigsty than anything else!" commented Porson. "Talk about slackers!"

"It is pretty foul," admitted Spencer, inserting his head into the tent. "They seem to have left in a hurry."

"They do!" agreed Porson grimly. "That's the kindest explanation of this mess. Come on, we'll clean up."

He and Spencer entered the tent and set to work to make the beds and to collect the scattered cooking utensils. They had been at it for about five minutes when voices were heard approaching.

"This'll be the rotters——" began Spencer, then broke off abruptly as a dirty, unshaven and scowling face was thrust into the tent.

"Ho!" growled the face. "Ho! An' very nice, too, I don't fink!"

With that the owner of the face—a great burly tramp—stepped into the tent. He was followed by a colleague, equally unprepossessing as to appearance and attire.

"They're a-pinchin' of our vallybles, Alf!" growled tramp number one.

"So I sees, 'Erbert," replied tramp number two. "Cussed impittence."

"Fancy comin' 'ere in that there airyplane to rob two pore, honest, 'ard-workin' blokes like us!" went on the gentleman addressed as Herbert, eyeing Porson and Spencer menacingly.

"Swell mobsmen, that's what they are!" agreed Alf.

"Do you mean to say that this is your tent?" demanded Porson coldly.

"I does, me young cock-sparrer!" growled Herbert. "Wot abaht it—eh?"

"Are you sure it's your tent?" persisted Porson, and his jaw was jutting grimly.

"In course I am!" roared Herbert. "D'yer fink I'm a liar?"

"Yes, I'm afraid I do!" replied Porson pleasantly. "I think this tent belongs to two friends of ours."

"Bash 'im, 'Erbert!" advised Alf wrathfully. " 'It 'im a clout round the 'ead!"

"I'm a-goin' to!" promised Herbert earnestly. "But first I'm a-goin' to arsk 'im if them two friends wot 'e says owns this 'ere tent ain't two spotty-faced, under-sized shrimps wiv school caps on!"

It was a libellous description of Messrs. Baxter and Binks, but it wasn't too wide of the mark.

"That may be them," admitted Porson cautiously.

"Well, then," roared Herbert, "they're a-campin' away yonder on t'other side of the woods! Us has seen 'em, haven't us, Alf?"

"Yus!" agreed Alf. "Saw 'em there this arternoon!"

Porson and Spencer exchanged glances.

"I—I'm sure Baxter said the north side," bleated Spencer nervously, "but he might have made a mistake, Porson. There is a tent, you know, on the south side of the woods. We saw it from the air."

"Well, we'll go and find out," said Porson. "If this really is your tent," he went on, addressing the scowling Herbert, "I'm awfully sorry we butted in! We'll shove off!"

"Ho, will yer?" said Herbert nastily. "Just 'arf a tick, my lad! Wot abaht a little compensation for this 'ere trespass an' nosin' abaht in a honest bloke's tent—eh?"

"You'll not get a hapenny from me!" replied Porson coldly. "I've told you that my chum and I thought this was our friends' tent. I've apologised, and that's all I'm jolly well going to do!"

He attempted to push past the burly Herbert, but a savage thrust in the chest sent him reeling back. Before he could recover his balance Alf rushed at him and swung a dirty and vicious fist. It took Porson full on the side of the head.

White-faced, Spencer leapt heroically to Porson's aid. But a blow from the wheeling Alf sent him, sick and dazed, with bleeding lips, against the tent pole. Then the two hooligans attended to Porson. The boy battled gamely, but he never had a chance. Twice they sent him down, and twice he staggered to his feet.

Again Spencer came to his assistance, and again he went reeling backwards out of the battle, this time holding his nose, which had been almost squashed by a savage back-hander from the snarling Herbert. It was then that Porson went down for the third time and stayed down, all the breath and resistance knocked out of him by a vicious knee-thrust full in the stomach.

"There!" snarled Herbert pantingly. "Now we'll go through 'is pockets, bust 'im!"

They went through Porson's pockets with a thoroughness which left nothing to be desired. They only found fourpence-halfpenny, which seemed to quite upset them. However, they raided Spencer's person with more success, the loot being a pound note and some small silver.

"It ain't fair!" grumbled Alf, eyeing Porson, who was getting shakily to his feet. "It ain't fair, I says, that 'e should only pay a few cussed coppers for this 'ere trespassin, and the kid in specs what ain't 'arf so cheeky and impittent should fork out moren a quid!"

"Neither it are!" agreed Herbert scowlingly. "Four and a 'arf blinkin' coppers! It ain't wurf it!"

Then suddenly his scowl cleared, and the tent rang with his raucous laughter.

"Ho, ho, ho!" he guffawed. "I've got it, Alf! Ho, ho, ho!"

"Cough it up, then!" counselled Alf.

"Us'll make 'im take us for a ride in 'is airyplane," replied Herbert. "I ain't goin' ter risk goin' up in the air, but us'll go round an' round the field like as if us was in a charrybang—see?"

"Ah, but," demurred the cautious Alf, " 'e might take us up!"

"Not 'im!" snorted Herbert. "I'll catch him such a smack round the ear if 'e tries it!"

“I couldn’t take two passengers up,” interposed Porson, and his voice was strangely meek. “My engine’s not powerful enough. I might manage a hop or two, but that’s all.”

“ ’Op?” questioned Herbert, puzzled. “Oh, I see!” he added, with sudden enlightenment. “Well, yer can ’op, but yer ain’t goin’ up!”

“I couldn’t go up, I tell you!” reiterated Porson humbly.

“Mind yer don’t try, then!” warned Herbert grimly. “Come on!”

He and Alf led the way to the old Maurice Farman. Porson, in their wake, winked bruised and swollen eyes towards the battered Spencer. With quip and jest and loud guffaws, Messrs. Herbert and Alf ensconced themselves in the rear seat.

“No funny bis’niss, mind!” said Herbert menacingly, as Porson switched on, preparatory to swinging the propeller.

The engine, picking up with its usual clattering roar, drowned Porson’s reply. Spencer noted his chum’s jutting jaw and pondered deeply. He didn’t quite see what Porson could do about things.

Clambering up to the front seat, Porson opened up the throttle. The old Farman commenced to move lumberingly forward with increasing impetus. Faster and faster it went till it was rushing round the field at a good forty-five miles per hour, with Herbert and Alf lolling elegantly in the rear seat.

Twice the old bus completed the circuit of the field, but the third time Porson pressed on the rudder-bar. The machine swung violently, starboard planes dipping wildly.

“Wot ye a-doin’ of?” howled Herbert, as the Farman charged straight across the field towards the hedge.

Porson did not reply. He was hoping against hope that he could clear that hedge. Pulling on the control-stick, he sat tense. The biplane lumbered up into the air, the top of the hedge whipping against the tyred wheels of the under-carriage. Forward went the stick, and bumping heavily to earth in the next field, the Farman went tearing across it.

“Stop!” bellowed Herbert, and lunged wildly at Porson with clenched fist.

But Alf’s frenzied grip of panic impeded his aim. Three fields Porson traversed, hopping heavily over each hedge. Then ahead lay the glittering waters of Deepdale Pond.

“ ’E’s a-goin’ ter drown us!” yelped Alf shrilly. “ ’E’s gorn mad!”

“Leave go of me so’s I can stop ’im, will yer?” roared Herbert.

But the panic-stricken Alf only clutched the tighter.

There’s not the slightest doubt that Alf would have released his grip on Herbert and jumped for safety, only the ground was whirling past at such a terrific rate that he was convinced he’d break his neck. So he stayed where he was; and as the biplane soared into the air from the very brink of Deepdale Pond he let out a howl of sheer terror.

But Porson knew what he was doing. That last hop took him far out over the still waters of the pond. He eased the stick forward and snapped the throttle shut. The

banging roar of the engine died suddenly away as the nose of the biplane dropped. Then back again came the control-stick.

The nose of the Farman lifted. For an instant the machine seemed to hang suspended a few feet only above the water. Then it dropped like a stone. There came a terrific smack as its long flat wings hit the water in a perfect pancake drop. Porson was almost thrown out of his seat with the jar of that landing, but his fingers closed on the switch and he cut out his engine.

Next instant he was overboard, striking out strongly for the nearest bank, whilst seventy feet or more from land the Farman floated, with its impotent and wrathful passengers shaking their fists and bellowing invitations to Porson to return and see what he'd get. Porson didn't return. Reaching the bank, he clambered out, and, shaking himself like a dog, waited for Spencer.

"I don't think either of the rotters will be able to swim," he soliloquised, as he walked a few yards to pick up a fallen bough from a near-by tree; "but if they can they won't jolly well get ashore."

Spencer arrived pantingly, and was at once dispatched to the nearest farm-house. He returned twenty minutes later with a dozen hefty farm labourers at his heels. Herbert and Alf were still aboard the Farman, which floated where it had pan-caked. They had preferred its security to the ten feet deep water of the pond.

Salvage operations were commenced at once!

. . . . .

"I thought this was the north side," babbled Baxter later that evening to Porson and Spencer.

"Well, all through your fatheadedness we've got a couple of black eyes between us," remarked Porson coldly. "And—er—this."

He produced a couple of five-pound notes, one of which he handed to Spencer.

"Who gave you those?" demanded Binks, staring.

"Lord Summerdale's agent," replied Porson. "After the police had locked up Herbert and Alf at Frammington they found a lot of snares and salmon nets and three-pronged hooks and things for poaching under the floorboards of the tent. They think the tent has been pinched as well. They're going to make inquiries about that."

"And do you mean to say your old rattletrap of an aeroplane isn't damaged after floating about that pond?" asked Binks.

"Damaged?" snorted Porson. "Of course it's not damaged. It was far too light to sink, and a jolly sight too well built to take any harm. I'll have to overhaul the bracing wires and under-carriage, but that's all."

"You seem to have rather an exciting time, don't you?" remarked Baxter.

"I do," murmured Porson thoughtfully. "And if my bus wasn't fitted with a pusher propeller, I think I'd rig up a synchronised gun. It would be jolly useful! I suppose, though, I'll have to wait until I've earned enough to buy an up-to-date machine—and that won't be very long at this rate!"

CHAPTER VI

THE PLOT AT PRIMROSE FARM!

"GARGE!"

"Yes, Gaffer?"

"Telephone be ringin' tar'ble loud, lad!"

"Right-ho, Gaffer, I'll attend to it," replied George Porson, dropping to the ground from the engine of his old Maurice Farman biplane. Wiping his hands on a piece of oily waste he set off for the cottage whence came the persistent trilling of a telephone-bell.

"Hallo!" he called, unhooking the receiver.

"Hallo!" came a squeaky sort of voice over the wire. "I say, I want to speak to this fellow Porson!"

"Porson speaking!"

"Oh, good!" squeaked the voice. "Are you the Porson—the aeroplane proprietor, I mean?"

Porson had never been thus addressed before. He felt vaguely flattered.

"Yes, that's me!" he replied. "I have an aeroplane!"

"You carry passengers, don't you?" demanded the voice. "Well, look here, my name is Muggeridge—Mr. Muggeridge, of Little Wappington. Have you got that?"

"Yes, you're Mr. Muggeridge, of Little Wappington."

"That's right!" squeaked Mr. Muggeridge. "Now then, if I bring my Winnie over to you some time this afternoon, can you take her to Hooperton in your aeroplane? I want her to be there for to-morrow!"

"Yes, certainly, I can take her!" replied Porson.

"That's good—that's fine!" squeaked Mr. Muggeridge delightedly. "You'll be awfully careful with her, won't you? You mustn't let her out of your sight for a moment," went on Mr. Muggeridge. "Not for a moment! There's half a dozen blackguards in this county waiting for a chance to wring her neck!"

"I—I——" stuttered Porson. "Hallo! What did you say?"

"I said that there's half a dozen unprincipled scoundrels in this county who'll wring her neck if they get hold of her!" repeated Mr. Muggeridge.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Porson. "What on earth for?"

"To annoy me, that's what for!" squeaked Mr. Muggeridge indignantly. "You wouldn't believe it, would you?"

"I—I wouldn't!" replied Porson weakly.

"Oh, well, it's true all the same!" sniffed Mr. Muggeridge. "But I've got her insured for a thousand pounds, so if anybody does wring her neck I'll get the insurance money.

That's something!"

"Is it?" said Porson dazedly.

"Yes, of course it is!" replied Mr. Muggeridge. "A thousand pounds is a thousand pounds, isn't it? But there's another thing: She's off her feed a bit, so you'll have to be awfully careful when you feed her——"

"Feed her?" echoed Porson, goggling. "D'you want me to feed her?"

"Of course!" snapped Mr. Muggeridge. "Somebody's got to feed her, haven't they? She'll be in your charge, so you'll have to do it!"

"But can't she feed herself?" protested Porson.

"No, she can't!" snapped Mr. Muggeridge. "The poor thing's been very upset since a dog bit her on the beak and——"

"On the what?" gasped Porson.

"On the beak!" repeated Mr. Muggeridge testily. "You're not deaf, by any chance are you? A nasty brute of a dog bit her on the beak. But that's not all!"

"Isn't it?"

"No, it isn't! A boy, armed with a catapult, hit her a terrific smack on the neck. Nearly broke it!"

"But what for?" demanded Porson wildly. "What did he want to do that for?"

"To annoy me, of course!" snapped Mr. Muggeridge. "They do these things just to annoy me!"

"She—she does seem to have a rotten time of it, doesn't she?" said Porson. "A perfectly putrid time!"

"She does!" squeaked Mr. Muggeridge. "Oh, she does, and that's why I want you to take especial care of her. I'll bring her along some time this afternoon. Do you know a man named Drudge?"

"Drudge?" repeated Porson. "No, I don't know him!"

"Ah!" Mr. Muggeridge's words came in a hiss. "He's the biggest villain of the lot. He'll have her blood if he can. Beware of Drudge!"

He rang off. Dazedly, Porson laid down the receiver and, like one in a dream, set off for the field in search of Gaffer, his near neighbour and good friend.

He found Gaffer sitting on an upturned petrol tin in front of the old barn in the field at the rear of the cottage. Gaffer's gnarled hands were resting on the top of his stick, and he was gazing thoughtfully at the ancient Maurice Farman biplane.

"Gaffer!" said Porson, a trifle wildly. "I've been talking over the phone to a man named Muggeridge, and either he's mad or—or I'm mad."

"What did he say, Garge?"

"He says he's going to bring some female, called Winnie, over here this afternoon! I've got to take her to Hooperton. I suppose it's his daughter. If it had been his wife he'd have referred to her as Mrs. Muggeridge, wouldn't he?"

"He surely would, Garge!" opinionated Gaffer.

“Well, he’s been telling me the most extraordinary things about this Winnie,” went on Porson. “He says that there are six scoundrels waiting for an opportunity to wring her neck. Not, apparently, because they dislike her, but just to annoy this fellow Muggeridge. And he says a dog has bitten her on the nose and a beastly kid has hit her a frightful wallop on the neck with a pebble from a catapult—and I’ve to feed her because she can’t jolly well feed herself!”

Gaffer’s blue eyes opened wide.

“She’s had a tar’ble rough time, poor lass!” he piped. “But what did ye say them six villuns want to murder her for, lad?”

“Just to annoy this man Muggeridge!” replied Porson excitedly. “At least, that’s what he says. Dash it! It sounds a bit weird, doesn’t it?”

“I ain’t never heered nuthin’ like it,” pronounced Gaffer emphatically—“no, never!”

“He ought to get police protection for the girl!” went on Porson warmly. “Unless, of course, he’s a lunatic. He may be a lunatic, Gaffer. Dodged his keepers and got hold of the phone, you know. Dash it! If he doesn’t show up here this afternoon, I’ll find out from the exchange where that call was put through from. If he is a lunatic, he’ll have to be under better control. He might call out the fire-engines or something some time.”

Then, until tea, Porson overhauled the old thirty-five horse-power Green engine of his biplane, the gibberish of Mr. Muggeridge providing him and Gaffer with an inexhaustible topic for conversation.

It was whilst they were sitting at tea in the little front parlour of the cottage that an old Ford car came rushing along the dusty road which ran past the foot of the garden and drew up at the garden gate with a screech of hastily applied brakes.

“This’ll be Muggeridge!” said Porson, and, rising to his feet, crossed to the window.

A little man, with a large, drooping moustache, drooping shoulders, but a certain air of perkiness about him, was ambling up the path to the cottage. He carried in one hand a square basket fitted with a lid, which was closed.

“I can handle him,” remarked Porson confidently, “even if he is dotty. But I don’t see any sign of this Winnie person. Perhaps she’s still in the car.”

He went to the front door to meet the newcomer, whilst in the little parlour Gaffer possessed himself of the poker, in case the visitor displayed violent tendencies.

“I want to see Mr. Porson!” squeaked the little man, as Porson confronted him at the door. “I am Mr. Muggeridge. He is expecting me.”

“Er—I’m Porson, don’t you know!” said that youth.

“You?” squeaked Mr. Muggeridge, in surprise. “Why, you’re only a mere boy!”

“Dash it! I’m seventeen!” interposed Porson.

“But are you the Porson—the passenger-carrying Porson?” persisted Mr. Muggeridge.

“I am!” replied Porson. “Will you come in?”

"Oh, yes, I'll come in!" squeaked Mr. Muggeridge, and followed Porson into the little parlour. He stared with unpardonable curiosity at the white-smocked Gaffer standing with his back against Porson's bookcase, poker in hand. Then, with loving care, he deposited his basket on the tablecloth.

"I've brought Winnie," he said. "Poor thing! I told you about her getting a bite on the beak, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did," replied Porson. "It must have been jolly painful for her. She's in the car, I suppose?"

"Of course she's not in the car!" snapped Mr. Muggeridge. "You don't think I'd leave her in the car with that villain Drudge prowling about, do you?"

"Oh, that's the rotter that's going to—to——" began Porson.

"To wring her neck!" cut in Mr. Muggeridge. "Yes, that's him, the scoundrel! No, I've got Winnie here!"

"Here?" echoed Porson.

"Yes. In that basket!" squeaked Mr. Muggeridge. "Safe and sound in that basket!"

Gaffer's mouth opened and stayed like that. He took a firmer grip on the poker, the while he stared nervously at Mr. Muggeridge.

"Do—do you mean to say you've got her in that basket?" demanded Porson weakly.

"Yes. She's in there!" replied Mr. Muggeridge. "And never you let her out for an instant till you get safely to Hooperton. She's in most frightful danger. It's a bit cramped for her, maybe, in that basket—but it's a strong one!"

Porson drew a deep breath.

"Who, exactly," he demanded steadily, "is this Winnie?"

"D'you mean to say you don't know?" squeaked Mr. Muggeridge, in astonishment. "Why, she's my prize Wyandotte hen, and she's going to win the gold medal at the Hooperton Poultry Show to-morrow!"

There came a clatter from close by the bookcase as the poker dropped from Gaffer's nerveless hand!

"You see," went on Mr. Muggeridge warmly, "this scoundrel Drudge, who lives at Snorem, is entering his hen Jennie for the gold medal at the poultry show. That beastly bird has been second to my hen Winnie on four occasions. So, you see, if Winnie was safely out of the way, Drudge's confounded hen would win! D'you follow me?"

"Yes!" said Porson, in a faint voice, resolutely avoiding Gaffer's gaze.

"Well, then, I'm sending Winnie over to Hooperton by aeroplane," continued Mr. Muggeridge, "because she can't stand the jolting of a sixty-miles train journey. And, another thing! Drudge might interfere with her between here and Hooperton if she goes by train. The villain will stick at nothing!"

"You said there were half a dozen men who'd like a chance of wringing her neck," remarked Porson.

"So there are—so there are!" replied Mr. Muggeridge, with an airy wave of the hand. "Lesser breeders, you know—men in a small way—jealousy—pooh! It's Drudge whom we've got to be on our guard against!"

"I'll be very careful!" promised Porson.

"Yes, you must be—you must be!" replied Mr. Muggeridge, in an impressive squeak. "I wouldn't for the world that anything happened to Winnie. I want that gold medal, and I want to see Drudge's face when I win again. He, he, he! This'll be the fifth time I've won!"

"But you haven't won yet, you know!" pointed out Porson bluntly.

"I know I haven't. But I'm going to!" Mr. Muggeridge's voice was almost a snarl. "You get my hen safely to Hooperton. That's your job. And it's a job you'll get well paid for!"

"Good!" said Porson heartily. "Will you have a cup of tea?"

"No!" refused Mr. Muggeridge churlishly. "I won't!"

"Oh, well, then you'd better come and see the aeroplane," replied Porson. "And after you've given me your instructions, I'll shove off to Hooperton!"

"Yes, get off as soon as you can," said Mr. Muggeridge, clutching the basket containing the precious Winnie. "I'll never rest till I know she's safely in the nestbox reserved for her at the poultry show! You must ring me up as soon as you reach Hooperton. I shall go on to Hooperton by train to-morrow."

"Why can't you take the hen with you when you go?" asked Porson.

"Impossible!" snapped Mr. Muggeridge. "The poor thing must have a good night's rest in order to be at her best for the judging to-morrow. Come on, let's see your aeroplane!"

Porson led the way to the field at the rear of the house.

"There it is!" he said proudly, indicating the ancient Farman biplane.

Mr. Muggeridge might have known a lot about hens, but he certainly didn't know anything about aeroplanes. Otherwise it is doubtful if he would have trusted the priceless Winnie to make the journey to Hooperton aboard the flat-winged, rickety-looking biplane which was more like a glider fitted with a low-powered engine than anything else.

"You're sure you'll get there safely?" he squeaked, after a prolonged stare at the Maurice Farman. "It's sixty miles away, you know."

"It wouldn't matter if it was six hundred!" replied Porson proudly. "No, nor six thousand. I'd get there all right. 'By Air to Anywhere'—that's my motto."

"Well, get to Hooperton—that's all I'm worrying about!" said Mr. Muggeridge. "Now listen to me."

He thereupon gave Porson detailed instructions as to what to do with Winnie when he got her to Hooperton. He talked earnestly, squeakily, and fluently; and equally earnestly did Porson listen. Then, with loving and tender hands, Mr. Muggeridge

stowed the basket containing Winnie away beneath the low rear seat in the canvas-sided, box-like cockpit.

Porson turned to Gaffer, who was an interested spectator.

"I'm shoving off now, Gaffer!" he said, drawing on his flying-gloves. "I'll be back some time to-night, all being well. You'll look after Bill for me till I get back, won't you? Poor little doggie, I'm sorry he can't come with me, but he'll be A1 fit for flying again in a few days."

"I'll look arter him, Garge!" replied Gaffer.

"Then good-bye, Mr. Muggeridge!" said Porson, and held out his hand.

Mr. Muggeridge shook it limply.

"Good-bye—oh, good-bye!" he bleated. "How nervous I am! But this mode of transit is safer than the train under the circumstances—and quicker. If you crash, your first thought will be of Winnie, won't it? You'll open the basket and let her fly out, won't you?"

"I—I'll do my best!" gasped Porson, somewhat taken aback by the startling cheek of the suggestion. With that he released his hand from the limp clasp of Mr. Muggeridge, and, switching on, swung the heavy, four-bladed pusher propeller. The ancient Green engine picked up with a banging clatter which caused Mr. Muggeridge to leap hastily backwards.

Porson mounted to the front seat, shoved his feet on to the rickety rudder-bar, and grasped the control-stick. He opened up the throttle, and slowly the Maurice Farman commenced to lumber forward. Jolting and swaying, it turned into wind, then, with ever-increasing impetus, went careering across the field for the take-off.

As Porson pulled on the control-stick the Farman lumbered up into the air, to bump heavily.

"Help!" yelped Mr. Muggeridge, watching with protruding eyes.

Again Porson pulled on the control-stick. Lazily, reluctantly, the biplane rose for the second time. The Green engine, clattering at full revolutions, kept her up and, slowly gaining height, the old Farman headed away towards distant Hooperton.

"Am I right," Mr. Muggeridge communed wildly with himself in audible tones, "or am I wrong? I have done it for the best! You!"

He wheeled suddenly on Gaffer.

"I'm listenin'!" said Gaffer laconically.

"Do you know the man Drudge?"

"Nay, that I don't!" replied Gaffer.

"A villain!" hissed Mr. Muggeridge dramatically. "A hen-killer, if ever there was one!"

. . . . .

Mr. Drudge was leaning moodily against the wire fence which encircled his chicken farm, chewing reflectively at a wisp of straw. His sombre and slightly bloodshot eyes were fixed on nothing in particular; certainly not on the beauty of the sun sinking in a blaze of vivid red and burnished gold beyond Hooperton Woods.

He was a long, thin individual, sallow and sunken of cheek. His suit can best be described as roomy. His scraggy neck reared itself from an encircling band of dirty linen collar, around which was an aged black tie which would have given excellent service as a bootlace.

"Swab!" said Mr. Drudge, with sudden venom.

He rolled the straw savagely to the other side of his mouth.

"Insufferable little prig!" he snarled.

Certainly Mr. Drudge was not in merry mood. He didn't as a rule converse thus with himself, but he was thinking about the morrow—and Mr. Muggeridge. Four times in poultry shows he had suffered defeat—had had to be content with second place to the roup-ridden, crop-bound Winnie. And the morrow would bring a further defeat at the Hooperton show. Oh, galling thought! Mr. Drudge snorted.

Suddenly into his eyes crept a look of interest. Progressing towards him with elephantine gambol was a little, stout, farmerish sort of man, the redness of whose waistcoat vied with the redness of his fat, perspiring face.

Reaching Mr. Drudge, this individual cavorted gaily, snapping joyous fingers above his head. Mr. Drudge watched this exhibition in startled silence for a moment, then said severely:

"You've been drinking, Mr. Primrose!"

"Better than that—better than that!" chortled Mr. Primrose.

He ceased to cavort, and jabbed a fat thumb into Mr. Drudge's ribs.

"Got it!" he said, in deep, husky voice. "In my 'ouse!"

"What," demanded Mr. Drudge, "are you talking about?"

"Winnie!" replied Mr. Primrose, his fat face oozing perspiration and excitement. "Muggeridge's Wappington Winnie!"

"What!" exclaimed Mr. Drudge, straightening up with a jerk.

"True as true!" chuckled Mr. Primrose. "At this very minute she's a-sitting in 'er basket on my supper table as snug as could be!"

Mr. Drudge grasped him by the arm.

"Explain!" he said thickly. "How did she come there?"

"It's like this," Mr. Primrose proceeded to explain. "Muggeridge sends 'er to 'Ooperton by airyplane. Well, that airyplane 'ad a forced landing in one of my fields. The pilot—a kid called Porson—can't get off again till the morning. 'E's staying with me overnight. 'E's got Winnie with 'im. She's staying as well. I leaves Porson tucking into a good supper and comes for you!"

"Why—why did you come for me?" asked Mr. Drudge.

"I should 'ate," said Mr. Primrose, staring steadily away into the distance, "to see Muggeridge win the gold medal to-morrow. That 'en of 'is isn't a patch on your Jennie. I want you to stay at my 'ouse to-night. I can lend you an axe!"

Mr. Drudge's eyes closed ecstatically. His lips moved.

"I'll come!" he said, with simple fervour.

"Mind you," said Mr. Primrose warningly, "it'll 'ave to be done cunning like."

He didn't say just what would have to be done cunning like. But apparently Mr. Drudge understood. For he replied grimly:

"It shall be! It shall be done most cunningly, Primrose!"

. . . . .

Having finished supper at Primrose Farm, and his host being still absent, Porson rang up Mr. Muggeridge in order to acquaint that gentleman with the fact that Winnie would not reach Hooperton that night.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said over the phone, "but my engine was heating up badly, and I had to land. I'll be off again first thing in the morning and have your bird at the show in plenty of time for the judging."

"But where are you speaking from?" demanded Mr. Muggeridge.

"Primrose Farm," replied Porson. "I'm staying here overnight."

"Primrose Farm?" yelped Mr. Muggeridge. "Did you say Primrose Farm? Oh dear, oh dear!"

"Great pip!" ejaculated Porson. "What's wrong?"

"Everything's wrong!" howled Mr. Muggeridge. "That villain Primrose is a scoundrel of the deepest dye! D'you mean to say he has you and Winnie in his clutches?"

"No, of course he hasn't!" snapped Porson. "I can jolly well look after myself!"

"But Winnie?"

"Yes, and I can jolly well look after her as well!" responded Porson cheerily. "Don't you worry, sir. We'll be all right!"

"You won't!" howled Mr. Muggeridge. "You don't know what you're talking about, and——"

Porson rang off abruptly. Carrying Winnie in her basket, he walked thoughtfully from the house to make sure that his machine was safely picketed down for the night. It was half an hour later that he returned. Messrs. Primrose and Drudge had arrived in his absence and were seated in the front room, each puffing away at a big cigar.

"Come in, my boy! Come in!" said Mr. Primrose heartily, as Porson appeared in the doorway. "This"—he indicated Mr. Drudge—"is a friend of mine by name of—of—Smith."

The pseudo Mr. Smith extended a limp hand in greeting, a bloodshot eye on the basket Porson was carrying. He continued to keep his eye on the basket in a fascinated

sort of manner whilst he, Mr. Primrose, and Porson sat chatting. The conversation, engineered by the guile of Mr. Primrose, ran for the most part on flying. Hens weren't mentioned until at length, encouraged by sundry rustlings from the interior of the basket, Mr. Drudge blurted:

"What have you in there, my boy?"

" 'E 'as a 'en in there!" said Mr. Primrose hastily, with a scowl at the impetuous Drudge.

It had been arranged that hens as a topic of conversation should be taboo.

"Let's have her out!" said Mr. Drudge, with a ghastly attempt at joviality.

"No, sir! I'm sorry," replied Porson firmly.

"Quite right! Quite right!" said Mr. Primrose, rising quickly to his feet. "That's a vallyble 'en for the 'Ooperton show to-morrow. Wouldn't interest you, Smith; wouldn't interest you. About time you were turning in, my boy," he went on to Porson. "You know your room, but I'll take you up so's you won't mistake it."

"Thanks awfully!" said Porson.

Bidding Mr. Drudge, alias Smith, good-night, he was piloted by Mr. Primrose to a bed-room. Carefully he placed the basket containing the valuable Winnie at the foot of the bed.

"Are you going to keep her there?" inquired Mr. Primrose casually.

"Yes. I haven't got to let her out of my sight for a moment, you know," replied Porson. "Mr. Muggeridge was very emphatic."

"Ay, you've got to be careful with a vallyble 'en!" nodded Mr. Primrose. "I only wish there was a lock on your door, but there isn't. Still, she'll be safe enough in 'ere with you. Good-night, lad!"

"Good-night, sir," replied Porson. "And thanks awfully for putting me up for the night!"

"Don't mention it!" said Mr. Primrose, and trod heavily away. Downstairs in the front room he dug Mr. Drudge joyfully in the ribs.

"Give 'im three hours and 'e'll be sound asleep!" he chuckled.

"You're sure he doesn't suspect anything?" inquired Mr. Drudge.

"No, of course 'e doesn't!" snorted Mr. Primrose. " 'Ow should 'e? The 'en basket is at the foot of the bed!"

"All right. You go to bed," said Drudge. "It doesn't want two of us to do it. You have the other hen ready?"

"Yes. She's in the kitchen," replied Mr. Primrose. "Well, I'm off to bed."

Off to bed he went, and for the next three hours Mr. Drudge sat smoking in the front room. At the end of that time he consulted his watch, then, turning out the light, went stealthily upstairs. He paused outside Porson's room, then gently opened the door. He smiled as a muffled snore came to his ears.

Stealthily he crossed the floor, groped for and found the basket containing Mr. Muggeridge's hen, then retreated. But scarcely had he gone than the muffled snore ceased abruptly and Porson sat up in bed.

"Ah!" murmured Porson. "The plot thickens!"

Scrambling into his flannel bags and school blazer, he crept from the room. Down the stairs he went and silently approached the kitchen.

Porson peered round the door. Mr. Drudge was on his knees by Porson's basket. On the floor beside him lay an axe. Opening the lid of the basket, Mr. Drudge drew forth a plump and struggling hen. With one hand he gripped it, with the other groped for the axe.

The fell deed done, Mr. Drudge rose to his feet. From a ventilated box on the table he withdrew a skinny black hen, and, thrusting it into Porson's basket, closed the lid. Porson lingered no longer. Silently he streaked along the passageway and upstairs to his room. He had been in bed but a minute, and had scarce switched on the muffled snore, when Mr. Drudge's step was heard outside. Cautiously Mr. Drudge entered the room, replaced the basket at the foot of the bed, and retreated. . . .

. . . . .

Ten o'clock next morning, and the poultry show in full swing. Porson, carrying basket and attended by Messrs. Drudge and Primrose, standing by the judging benches awaiting Mr. Muggeridge.

A squeaky voice makes itself heard and Mr. Muggeridge dashes up, pale with foreboding at the sight of Messrs. Drudge and Primrose.

"You—you have my Winnie?" he bleats, grabbing the basket.

"Yes, here she is," replies Porson, and hands over the basket.

Messrs. Drudge and Primrose are all ready to laugh. But they don't laugh. Instead, with goggling eyes, they watch Mr. Muggeridge withdraw the plump and beautiful Winnie from the basket.

"Oh, good!" bleats Mr. Muggeridge. "Clever lad! Square up with you later. Will pay handsomely. Oh, good!"

With a glare at the petrified Drudge and Primrose he dashes off, Winnie under his arm. Those two gentlemen exchange stricken glances and prepare to move off. They wish to consult together in private. Someone has blundered!

"One moment!"

Porson's dreamy voice brings them up short.

"Yes?" says Mr. Drudge thickly.

"You owe me a pound!"

"A pound?" echoes Mr. Drudge. "What for?"

"For killing my hen, which I bought for a pound at a cottage near Primrose Farm," replies Porson. "I bought it after supper last night when I went out to have a look at my

machine. I didn't want to carry two hens about, so after I went to bed the man I'd bought the hen from brought it along below my bed-room window in a basket.

"I let down a couple of sheets tied together and pulled it up. I thought Winnie must be wanting a change of quarters by that time, so I put her in the new basket and shoved her under the bed. I put *my* hen in *her* basket, and you chopped its head off. It was a Wyandotte, just like Winnie by moonlight. Anyway, you owe me a pound. Do you follow me?"

"Yes," said Mr. Drudge huskily, "I do!"

CHAPTER VII

THE MISSING LINK

"SAY, lissen!"

George Porson stiffened. He was balanced precariously on the lower port plane of his ancient Maurice Farman biplane, engaged in tightening up a bracing wire, when that shrill, nasal voice fell on his ears.

"Say, you up there!"

There was an impatient note in the voice. Porson slid one arm around a strut and turned. Then he stared.

Blinking up at him through large, horn-rimmed spectacles was a fat and podgy youth of some fifteen summers; an unpleasant-looking youth with a flabby, colourless face and garbed in a knickerbocker suit of startling black-and-white checks.

A wide-brimmed straw hat was thrust well back on his head. With hands in pockets and jaws working rhythmically, he gazed through his spectacles at Porson with eyes which reminded Porson how boiled gooseberries would look viewed through glass.

"Good-morning!" said Porson politely.

The youth did not reply. Having succeeded in attracting Porson's attention, he seemed for the moment satisfied. With finger and thumb he extracted from his mouth a wad of chewing-gum. He stepped forward, jammed the stuff on to the bottom of the Farman's lower port plane, then stepped back.

There was something so superbly cheeky about the way it was done that Porson gasped. Then he gave tongue.

"Kindly remove," he said coldly, "your breakfast, before I descend and smack your head!"

The youth giggled.

"You've gotta 'nother guess coming if you reckon you're gonna smack my head!" he said shrilly. "Yessir, jest you lemme tell you that!"

"Oh!" said Porson grimly. "And what's to stop me smacking your fat head?"

"No guy's ever done it yet," replied the other smugly, "and I'm not aiming to stand around and let a bonehead like you do it! Nossir, I am not! Say, d'you know who I am?"

"No," said Porson slowly. "But I could make a jolly good guess!"

"You don't say?" smirked the youth. "Waal, now, have a guess! Who d'you reckon I am?"

"You're the Missing Link!" replied Porson, with the pleased expectancy of one who fancies he has solved a conundrum.

"Wrong!" yelped the youth triumphantly. "I'm not! I'm Bosker K. Bosk, of Hogville, way back in Arkansas. Yessir, that's me; and my pop is the gent what put Hogville on the map. Yessir; you ask anybody. Just you ask 'em, and they'll tell you ——"

He broke off suddenly, frowning. It seemed as though he had recollected something.

"Say," he shot at Porson, "this Missing Link what you figgered was me—what is it, anyways?"

"Allow me to explain," replied Porson pleasantly, "*à la* dear old Puggy, my late Form master, whose style was very much admired. Ahem! The Missing Link, my boy, has been much sought after by scientists who wish to produce irrefutable evidence that man is descended from monkeys. Briefly, when found—if ever—the Missing Link will prove to be a creature which has progressed only so far through the various stages of evolution, and will therefore be half man and half monkey.

"I thought, when I first beheld you standing there, that the long search was at length ended. I thought you had wandered from out the depths of yonder woods—maybe in search of food; maybe moved by the first faint stirrings of some vague reasoning as distinct from blind, unthinking instinct and——"

"Aw, cheese it!" howled Bosker K. Bosk. "Cheese it, you big stiff! I don't wanna hear any more!"

"Don't you?" inquired Porson regretfully.

"Nossir, I do not!" replied Bosker K. Bosk, shrill with indignation. "I've got you. Yessir, I'm wise to you! You called me a monkey—me! Gee, if that don't beat the band! He, he, he!"

"I'm glad you're amused about it!" said Porson affably.

"Amused?" echoed Bosker K. Bosk excitedly. "Sure, I'm amused! I'm mighty tickled, lemme tell you. Lissen me laff——"

"No, no!" interposed Porson hastily. "I've heard you once. Please don't laugh again. It's such an unpleasant noise, you know!"

"Aw, is it?" shouted Bosker K. Bosk. "You reckon you're mighty smart, don't you? Say, lissen. Lemme tell you sumthing. When I came dandering along here——"

"When you what?" demanded Porson.

"Walking, then!" yelped Bosker K. Bosk. "When I walked into this field I was aiming at asking you a question. Yessir, I sure was! 'Sumbody,' I says, 'has put that guy in a cage, and I'm gonna find out why!' Waal, now, just you tell me who put you in that cage!"

"What cage?" demanded Porson.

"That cage what you're standing around in, saphead!" replied Bosker K. Bosk. "That cage what you're in now!"

"Are you, by any chance," inquired Porson coldly, "referring to this aeroplane?"

“He, he, he!” yelled Bosker K. Bosk. “He, he, he! Is—is it an aeroplane? Oh gee! I thought it was a——He, he, he! Oh, my! Oh gosh! ’Scuse me laffing! He, he, he!”

His mirth was wonderful to behold. He bent double, fat arms folded across his stomach, squealing with shrill laughter. Undoubtedly he was vastly amused. Porson watched the exhibition in grim silence. At length, satiated, Bosker K. Bosk removed horn-rimmed spectacles and wiped his streaming eyes. Occasional gusts of mirth still shook him as a stout tree still quivers before the lessening gale.

“Little lunatic boy,” said Porson gently, “depart! Kindly shove off! People, hearing your childish and innocent laughter, will think I have been murdering a pig. Please run away and bury yourself somewhere!”

Bosker K. Bosk lingered. He wanted, it seemed, information.

“Say, lissen,” he demanded weakly, “is that really an airplane?”

“It is!” replied Porson coldly. “But—as I believe they say in Arkansas—vamoose!”

Bosker K. Bosk didn’t vamoose. He stood his ground, blinking through horn-rimmed spectacles at the old biplane which Porson had bought from the Air Ministry for ten pounds. Its long flat wings, void of dope, and patched in a score of places, its multitude of flying wires and bracing wires—some sagging loosely—appeared to fascinate him.

Let us be just. He had asked Porson who had put him in the cage. And, standing amidst the host of bracing and flying wires, Porson certainly tended to give one the impression that he was caged.

“Say,” tittered Bosker K. Bosk suddenly, “I must bring Sam and Jake to see this. Yessir, it would be real low down for me to let ’em miss this!”

“I suppose Sam and Jake are your keepers?” remarked Porson politely. “I should go and look for them if I were you. They’ll be getting anxious about you.”

“Sam and Jake,” explained the other wrathfully, “are a couple of mighty slick air pilots, lemme tell you. They’re my pop’s private pilots, Mister Smarty. My pop is a vurry busy man, and he’s some hustler. Yessir, my pop thinks nuthing of railroads and automobiles. Say, if my pop suddenly gets a hunch that he can do business in some burg five hun’erd miles or more away, what happens? Just you tell me that. What happens?”

“He sends a postcard!” suggested Porson brightly.

“Sends a postcard?” echoed Bosker K. Bosk, with withering scorn. “Nossir! I guess he just stands around and hollers for Jake to hustle and get the Curtis ready to hop off in less’n no time. Or if he figgers on using the super-powered Baltimore Bat, he hollers for Sam. Then off he goes in his airplane, and either Jake or Sam drops him just at whatever place he wants to be dropped. D’you get me?”

“You mean they heave him overboard when the destination is reached,” remarked Porson. “I say how jolly interesting! I suppose when he wants to interview his broker in New York, he comes crashing through the ceiling and lands in a sitting posture on the fellow’s desk. Then, picking plaster out of his hair with one hand, he holds out the other and says: ‘Ah, my dear Mr. Huckleheimer’—or whatever the fellow’s name happens to

be—'I've just dropped in to see you about those land shares. Beastly bore, isn't it, that Britain owns such a lot of the globe!' Then, removing one foot from the inkwell, he ——"

"You've got it wrong!" howled Bosker K. Bosk. "Pop doesn't drop in that way, saphead! They land him at the nearest airport, and—and he just walks in and goes up in the elevator like any other guy would!"

"Ah, pardon!" drawled Porson. "I see what you mean. It was the way you put it, you know. But tell me, little lad, if the question is not impertinent, why has your—er—pop shipped you, and Jake, and Sam across here to England? I presume Jake and Sam are somewhere in the vicinity, for you spoke of bringing them along here!"

"Pop didn't ship us——" began Bosker K. Bosk indignantly.

"Come, come!" said Porson, shaking his head. "You're not going to tell me that you've flown across! I know your fellow countrymen have been at it ever since two English gentlemen named Alcock and Brown showed them the way. But neither Sam, Jake, nor little Bosky have flown it, so don't say you have!"

"I'm not saying we have!" replied Bosker K. Bosk shrilly. "We could if we wanted to, mind. Them guys, Jake and Sam, are some pilots, lemme tell you. The Atlantic wouldn't scare them. Nossir, there ain't a guy pulled an air stunt what Jake and Sam couldn't pull. No, never. But say, you lissen. D'you know Luvdale Hall?"

"Yes!" admitted Porson.

"Waal, I'm staying there along with Jake and Sam. Pop's there as well. Say, we're all there."

"How frightfully jolly!" drawled Porson.

"We only arrived last night," went on the other. "Pop's taken the hall for a month. I guess it's gonna be a bit slow. Still, we've got the two airplanes with us—the Curtis and the Baltimore Bat, so I'll get plenty of flips. But gee! I guess I've never seen anything to lick this thing of yours. He, he, he!"

"Don't," said Porson earnestly, "make that horrible noise again!"

Bosker scowled. Then he brightened up again.

"Sam and Jake will laff when I tote 'em along to see it!" he sniggered. "Gosh! They won't believe me when I tell 'em about it. Nossir, they'll figger that I'm just kidding them up and—— Hallo! Who's this ol' guy with the whiskers?"

He stared towards where Porson's friend, the white-smocked Gaffer, was coming through the wicket-gate which led from Porson's cottage into the field. At Gaffer's heels gambolled Bill, Porson's little black-and-white mongrel.

Bill was a friendly little fellow, and, having been treated to some jolly fine ratting by Gaffer, was in exuberant spirits. Once through the wicket-gate, he streaked towards the old Maurice Farman where his lord and master awaited him.

He noted the fat Bosker and leapt up to give him friendly greeting with little pink tongue, tail wagging ecstatically. Porson's pals were his pals. He was not to know that Bosker K. Bosk scarcely entered that category.

So he leapt up to give doggy greeting. And a savage blow on his sensitive little black nostrils was the reward he got.

"Hur!" snorted Bosker K. Bosk, and drew back fat and podgy fist to strike again. "Mangy li'l cur!"

But Bill did not attempt a second greeting. Agony in his eyes, bewilderment in his little heart, he cowered away. A hand closed on Bosker's jacket-collar. Turning, that youth found himself face to face with Porson. But what a Porson! His face was pale, his jaw jutting, his eyes blazing. In his hand he held the thick control-stick which he had wrenched from its socket before leaping from the machine.

"Gaffer," he said, from the corner of his mouth, "that petrol tin!"

Gaffer picked up an empty petrol tin and set it on the ground near Porson. Still grasping the shrinking Bosker by the collar, Porson lowered himself on to it. Then, with a jerk, he had the podgy Bosker across his knee.

Thwack! Thwack! Thwack! Well and truly fell the control-stick on the Bosker person, and wild were the squeals and howls which echoed far across the pleasant meadows. Ah, with what remorseless rhythm moved that stick! The very poetry of motion was in its every rise and fall. Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!

Let us not dwell on it. Suffice it to say that it was a thrashing of thrashings. And when at length it was over Porson dropped the stick and jerked a quivering and blubbering Bosker to his feet.

"Now go!" he said. "And don't come back, you fat little worm!"

"I—I guess I—I will come back!" blubbered the wretched Bosker. "And—and I'll bring Sam and Jake with me. They—they'll make you—you pay for this!"

Porson took him by a fat ear and led him to the wicket-gate.

"Go, little beast," he said tersely, "before I jolly well hoof you out of it!"

The little beast went. He went squirming and limping, snivelling and blubbering, and massaging himself with careful hand. He passed round the cottage, down the garden-path, and through the gate on to the dusty roadway. Then a fat fist waved above the garden hedge and a shrill and tearful voice was wafted to Porson.

"Jus' wait!" it said. "Thassal—jus' wait!"

"Ye sarved him good and proper, Garge!" said Gaffer, as Porson retraced his steps towards Bill—who was by now showing signs of recovery.

"Yes, Gaffer," replied Porson, a trifle shortly, stooping to fondle Bill's ears. "But don't let's talk about it."

He straightened up, glancing at his wrist-watch.

"It's about time for lunch," he went on. "You'll grub with me, Gaffer, then I'll walk as far as the village with you. I've got to lay in some extra supplies."

"Be ye expecting company then, lad?" inquired Gaffer.

"Yes, my cousin, Dick Ellison, is coming down for a few days," replied Porson. "He's frightfully keen on flying. He was a pilot during the War days, and was rather hot

stuff, I believe. Anyway, he got his Distinguished Flying Cross. But come on, I've got the potatoes to peel yet."

Lunch over, and with Bill frisking at their heels, Porson and Gaffer set out for Sudcombe village. They parted company at the garden gate of Gaffer's little cottage, and Porson and Bill went on to the village stores. Having ordered a wonderful and varied assortment of goods, which Mr. Mimble, the proprietor, promised to deliver that evening, Porson took the winding country road which led to Frammington Station.

He walked briskly, for he had none too much time in which to reach the station before the train bearing Dick Ellison was due to arrive from town. It was as he neared the buildings of the little wayside station that he noticed a long, open touring-car roaring towards him from the direction of Luvdale.

A sleek, well-dressed and hatless young man was lolling at the wheel. In the tonneau, accompanied by another equally sleek and equally well-dressed young man, reclined the fat and podgy form of Bosker K. Bosk. As the car approached Porson, Bosker K. Bosk sat up with a jerk. Then he gave tongue.

"That's him!" he howled. "Stop, Sam—stop!"

With a screeching and grinding of brakes Sam brought the car to a skidding halt. Porson also halted. His eyes were grim and his jaw jutting.

"Hey, you!" bellowed Bosker K. Bosk, rolling out of the car. "Don't you run away! We're wanting just a li'l word with you!"

Accompanied by the two sleek young men whom Porson judged to be Sam and Jake, he approached.

"Waal, say," he said shrilly, "if this ain't the cat's whisker! Gee! This is mighty lucky. Us were heading for Sudcombe just to have a li'l word with you, and us connects up right here. Gosh! If I ain't just tickled to death!"

Porson wasn't paying much attention to him. He was taking careful stock of Sam and Jake. They were a couple of sizeable fellows, and much too heavy for the seventeen-year-old Porson if the meeting developed into a scrap.

"Waal, Sam's just itching to have a li'l heart-to-heart talk with you. Ain't you, Sam?" went on the fat Bosker.

"I sure am, kiddo," agreed Sam heartily. "Say, you big stiff," he continued, addressing himself to Porson, "I reckon I wanna know just what you've been hitting Bosker for?"

"Oh, you want to know, do you?" replied Porson, eyeing him grimly.

"Yeah! You've said it!"

"Well, why not ask the fat little blot, then?" retorted Porson.

"Say, don't you get fresh with me, you slab-sided mutt!" said Sam warningly. "I ain't the guy to stand it, see?"

"You've called me a big stiff and a slab-sided mutt!" remarked Porson coldly. "You will oblige by withdrawing both expressions or——"

"Or what?" sneered Sam.

"Or I'll knock you down!" said Porson.

He said it quite quietly, as does one who states an obvious fact.

"Gosh! Ain't he got gall!" remarked the frowning Jake.

"He, he, he!" tittered the fat Bosker. "You ain't taking that, Sam, hey?"

"Nope!" snarled Sam. "Nope, I ain't taking that, as you says. We'll quit," he went on, addressing Porson, "this li'l discussion as to why you slammed Bosker. You says you'll knock me down—you says that, hey?"

He sidled a step forward.

"I certainly shall!" replied Porson grimly. "Unless you withdraw——"

"Withdraw nuthin'!" snarled Sam. "Hold that, you bonehead!"

He snapped out a vicious fist flush for Porson's mouth. Porson jerked his head aside. Then something like the kick of a mule took Sam full under the jaw. That gentleman staggered wildly back, protruding eyes agape, then sat abruptly and heavily on the road. He had a vague idea that Porson had hit him—yes, that was it—the mutt had the gall to knock him down, just like he said he would!

Sam scrambled furiously to his feet. Porson, with his back against the hedge, was being sorely pressed by Jake and Bosker. Jake was using his fists. The fat Bosker, not so particular, was using his feet. He had already sent Bill retiring, yelping, from the fray with a savage hack in the ribs, and now he was concentrating on Porson's shins.

"Here, lemme get attim!" roared Sam, diving into the melee.

Porson's fist squelched full on Jake's rather long nose, then Sam's hard fist caught Porson a terrific whack under the ear. It rocked Porson, did that smack, and another one flush to the throat sent him reeling into the hedge.

"Atta boy!" bawled the fat Bosker, cavorting excitedly behind the battling Sam. "I'm feeling good, Sam! Gee, boy! I'm feeling fine!"

The next instant he wasn't feeling quite so fine, because Bill took a hand—or rather a jaw—in the fray, for he took a generous bite at Bosker's bulging calves.

"Ow-w!" yelped that youth. "Ow-w-w! Ow-w-w-w! Oooer!"

It was startled surprise which caused the change of note in his howls, for a strong arm had brushed him roughly aside and a young man—a newcomer with face set grimly—dashed into the fray.

He didn't waste any time in words, this newcomer. He hit Jake once, but he did it so snappily that Jake went sprawling on to the roadway. A warning howl from Bosker brought Sam right-about-face. He wasn't right about the face for days after!

Smack, smack, smack! That, briefly, describes what happened to Sam. It was all mixed up with stars and constellations as well. He had an idea that he was falling, but he couldn't really say, because everything was so mixed up and jumbled. But when the stars had cleared, and the tornado—or whatever it was—had passed, he found himself reclining inelegantly amidst a bed of stinging-nettles in the hedge bottom. Standing over him was the grim-faced newcomer; whilst Porson stood by, dabbing at bruised and bleeding lips with a handkerchief. Jake also was standing by, no longer sleek, but

looking as though contemplating a bolt. He had a crimson handkerchief to his long nose, and there wasn't a kick left in him.

"Get up!" said the newcomer to Sam. "Get up, you cur!"

"Eh?" gasped Sam idiotically. "Whaffor?"

The newcomer bent down. His hand grasped the collar of Sam's jacket. He jerked Sam to his feet.

"Three to one, you rotter!" he said sternly. "Go on! Clear out of it before I lose my temper!"

Sam stood swaying, gaping owlishly through blackened eyes. The newcomer turned to Jake.

"Take it away!" he said tersely.

Jake limped forward. He took Sam by the arm.

"Let's quit!" he said huskily.

"Yeah!" said Sam unsteadily. "Let's quit!"

He tottered away, supported by Jake.

Meanwhile, the newcomer had turned to Porson.

"Hallo, George!" he said, with a smile.

"Hallo, Dick!" replied Porson thickly. "I'm sorry I wasn't at the station to meet you. Er—thanks awfully for butting in!"

. . . . .

"So you're not doing badly, old man?"

Supper was over, and Dick Ellison was stretched out in the basket-work armchair in the parlour of Porson's cottage.

"Not badly, Dick," replied Porson modestly. "I've made one hundred and eighty pounds since I started. I got a tenner for winning the aerial golf at Tuttleberry-cum-Hacklehurst, and a fiver for taking a fellow called Blenkinsop home when he was in a bit of a hole. Then I got fifty pounds for helping to kill a man-eating tiger.

"Then a foreigner bolted in a balloon with Lady Marling's jewellery, and I got one hundred pounds for stopping him."

"Rather exciting so far!" laughed Ellison.

"Oh, yes! Then I got a fiver for catching a poacher, and another tenner from a fellow called Muggeridge for taking his prize hen to a poultry show."

"For what?" exclaimed Ellison.

"For taking his prize hen to a poultry show," repeated Porson. "A chap called Drudge tried to chop its head off, and——"

The shrill trilling of the telephone-bell in the passage cut in on his words. With a " 'Scuse me, old man!" he rose from his chair to answer it. Three minutes later he came back, pale of face.

"Dick!" he cried. "Luvdale Hall's on fire! There's a fellow on the roof, and they can't get him down. The ladders aren't long enough. There's only one chance to save the chap—by aeroplane!"

Dick Ellison was on his feet.

"Come on!" he said grimly, and led the way at a run through the rear doorway of the cottage and to the field where Porson's old Maurice Farman was housed in its barn.

"You pilot, Dick!" cried Porson. "There's only one way to get the chap. I'll lower myself from the under-carriage."

"No! It's too risky for you!" snapped Dick. "I'll do it, and you pilot!"

"No, man, no!" gasped Porson, diving for a coil of thick picket rope. "You're a better pilot than me. It's the piloting which is going to count! Switch on, and I'll swing the prop!"

Dick Ellison saw the force of the words, and leapt for the pilot's seat. Next instant the old 35 h.p. Green engine picked up with a clattering roar which re-echoed deafeningly through the barn. Porson streaked round to the under-carriage and, clambering on to it, braced himself between the V-shaped shock-absorber casings.

"Right-ho!" he roared; and as Ellison opened up the throttle the biplane lumbered out into the night.

It was risky work taking the slow and ungainly Farman off in the dark; but the magic hands of Ellison got the machine up into the air.

Meanwhile, Porson was knotting and reknotting the picket rope around the casing of the shock-absorber. He looped the other end and held it in his hand. Luvdale Hall was very close now, and he saw it was blazing furiously. Flames were bursting from upper story windows, and reflected in their ruddy and terrible glow he could see dark figures on the lawns in front of the house, the glittering brasswork of two fire-engines, and the silvery jets of water playing upwards.

Dropping lower, the old biplane came in over the lawns, and Porson sent his rope snaking down. He watched, tensely, as the blazing building wheeled below him as Ellison banked. Then came blinding, suffocating smoke, for Ellison had brought the biplane up into wind.

Gripping the rope, Porson launched himself outwards and went sliding down. He swung wildly, dizzily, sickeningly, as again Ellison banked. Then he was right over that blazing inferno! Feet below him was the flat roof, and, crouched against the coping, he had a glimpse of a dark figure, face showing ghastly in the reddish murk.

Porson had but an instant in which to act. He released his grip and dropped.

He ran staggeringly, to bring up with a jerk against the blistering hot coping. Recovering, he dashed across to the crouching figure. It was Bosker, in a state of hysterical collapse. He clutched at Porson with wild hands—babbling, screaming.

His self-control was gone, his nerve snapped. Hating himself for the thing he must do, Porson drove clenched fist full to the other's jaw. The boy staggered back, and, as Porson leapt forward and caught him, went suddenly limp.

Then, working with frenzied speed, choking and gasping in the hot and swirling smoke, expecting every instant that the roof would collapse beneath him, Porson lashed the boy's wrists together. He thrust his head between the loop made by the arms, so that he had the unconscious Bosker slung on his back.

It was up to Ellison now. Above the roaring crackle of the blazing building, Porson could hear the engine of the old Maurice Farman. Twice the machine roared a few feet only above his head, and twice he clutched at the trailing rope—to miss by inches.

In the cockpit, Dick Ellison's face was white. Peering down, he brought the old biplane back into wind, and for the third time passed low over the roof—right over the dark figures of Porson and his burden, silhouetted in the glow. Porson saw the rope snaking towards him. He lunged at it, grasped it, and felt it cut through nearly to the bone as it swirled through his hands.

Then came a jerk—a wrench which seemed as though it had dislocated every joint and muscle in his arms—and next instant he was swinging wildly in space, his torn hands gripping the loop in the rope.

Ellison whipped forward the control-stick and went earthwards in a steep dive. Striving desperately to keep his hold, Porson saw, through swimming vision, the ground rushing up to meet him. He could nearly touch it now with his feet. But he must wait just another few moments—madness to drop yet!

There came a sudden terrific jar, and the world went black about him.

. . . . .

It was three days later, and Porson, very pale and shaky, but convalescent, was sitting on the rustic bench in front of his cottage. With him sat Dick Ellison.

"You dropped," Dick was saying, "just when I pulled the nose of the old bus up. You couldn't have judged it better if you'd tried!"

"It was your piloting that did it, old man!" replied Porson.

"Your pluck, you mean!" retorted Ellison. "If the fat little freak hadn't got the wind up when the fire started, and bolted for the roof, the rescue stunt wouldn't have been necessary. He's quite O.K. again, and he's coming to see you to-night."

"And are Sam and Jake coming?"

"I understand," replied Dick, "that they've got the sack. The idea of getting Bosker off the roof by aeroplane was suggested to them, but they weren't having any!"

"What was it Bosker said?" murmured Porson dreamily. "There ain't a guy pulled an air stunt what Jake and Sam couldn't pull! Er—what about Captain Dick Ellison, D.F.C.?"

CHAPTER VIII

THE PHANTOM PARACHUTE!

"No, sir," said George Porson firmly. "It's jolly decent of you, and I appreciate it no end, but it's quite impossible." And in order that there should be no lingering doubt as to his meaning he repeated, with a shake of his head: "Quite imposs."

"Well, I'm real sorry to hear you say that—yes, sorry and disappointed," replied Bosker K. Bosk, senior. "You took a mighty big risk when you saved the life of my son, and now you won't allow me to show my gratitude in concrete form by——"

He hesitated, his hand moving towards the pocket in which he carried his cheque book.

"By writing me a cheque!" Porson concluded the sentence for him. "No, sir, I couldn't!"

Bosker K. Bosk, senior, allowed his gaze to travel round the little parlour in which he was seated. The furniture looked rickety and cheap; it was both.

"Say," Bosker K. Bosk, senior, leaned forward in his chair, "I'll be vurry much obliged if you'll just tell me why you won't accept a cheque from me for saving my boy's life."

"Well, that's just it, don't you see," replied Porson, hands in the pockets of his oil-stained flannel bags, blazer-clad shoulders against the mantelpiece. "No fellow, except under exceptional circumstances, could take money for saving another fellow's life. It's—dash it—it's not done, sir! And, in any case, I didn't save your son's life.

"I only helped a bit. It was my cousin, Dick Ellison, who did the real work—the piloting of my old Maurice Farman. If anybody's getting a bit of credit for the job—and it's jolly well not necessary—it should be Dick!"

"You were both equally plucky—equally!" replied the other. "You must allow me to show my deep appreciation in some way, Porson."

"No, sir!" said Porson determinedly. "Excuse me if I talk like a boy in a book, but we only did what anyone else would have done."

"Did you, indeed?" Bosker K. Bosk, senior, smiled grimly. "Those two skunks whom I had in my employ wouldn't do it, anyway."

"You mean Jake and Sam, your two private pilots?" remarked Porson.

"Yes, I do!" agreed his visitor. "And I've sacked 'em—both of 'em!" Again he glanced round the small parlour of Porson's cottage. "Say now," he went on, his gaze returning to Porson propped against the mantelpiece, "I don't follow your reason for refusing my cheque, but I'll put another proposition to you. I don't know your plans, and I don't know how you're fixed, but right now I'm offering you a job with me as my pilot at five hundred dollars a month and all expenses."

Porson straightened up with a jerk. Five hundred dollars a month—about twelve hundred pounds a year! His eyes glowed.

"Over in the States I'm what is called a hustler," went on Bosker K. Bosk. "When I want to get anywhere I generally want to get there quick! That's why I have my own aeroplanes—two of 'em. Now, your job would be to just pilot me around, and I could promise you a mighty good time."

Porson scarcely heard. He was thinking—thinking. He was being offered a thundering good job at over a thousand pounds a year salary. And he was only seventeen! Dash it, he'd only left school last term!

"And I don't want you to think," went on the other, "that I'm offering you this job just because you saved my son's life. I want a pilot, and I want a good one. I've seen you fly, and you'll do. Well, what do you say?"

Porson squared his shoulders. His hands clenched and his jaw jutted. He hoped he wasn't acting like a prize ass, but he replied, almost fiercely:

"No, sir—no, sir! I'm awfully obliged to you, but I really can't!"

"Oh, gee!" There was something akin to dismay in the voice of Bosker K. Bosk, senior. "Will you tell me why you can't take the job?" he went on, staring at Porson.

"Well, it's like this, sir," explained Porson. "I'm building up an air service for passengers—by air to anywhere, you see—at least, that's the motto of my firm. It's not a big firm yet, you know"—he was rather apologetic about it—"there's only me and my old Maurice Farman biplane. But I've already made a bit of money, and some day I'm going to have a whole fleet of passenger-carrying air liners!"

There was real enthusiasm in his tones now.

"And I'm going to have some of those air liners fitted with luxury suites for millionaires," he went on, his eyes shining, "and they'll go all over the world. I'm going to be the Porson—President of the Porson Passenger Service—By Air To Anywhere! At first I'm going to rent some old Army aerodrome and then, when I've got enough money, I'll build one of my own—a whacking big one, with Neon beacons and airship hangars, and—and all that sort of thing."

"I see!" said his visitor quietly.

"So if I took your job, sir," continued Porson, "it would seem like"—he groped a moment for the word—"like quitting, sir."

"Yes," said Bosker K. Bosk, senior, eyeing Porson steadily, "like quitting. Yes, I get you. And you aren't a quitter!"

He groped for his hat, and, rising to his feet, held out his hand.

"G'bye, boy!" he said a trifle abruptly. "I hope you do well! Oh, gee! You will do well, I know. G'bye!"

Scarce had Porson seen the departing visitor off the premises when the persistent trilling of the telephone-bell recalled him to the cottage.

"Hallo!" he said, picking up the receiver.

“Hallo!” came a deep and mournful sort of voice over the wire. “I desire to converse with Mr. George Porson, please.”

“Porson speaking,” replied that youth, striving to keep from his voice the idiotic inflection which the other’s words seemed to invite.

“Ah!” returned the voice—and it seemed unutterably sad. “My name is Halibut—Ephraim Halibut. Perhaps you are aware that the science of the conversion of mechanical energy into heat, or the converse, is called thermodynamics?”

“I—I beg your pardon!” gasped Porson. “What did you say?”

“It is of little consequence,” replied Mr. Halibut mournfully. “Pray tell me, are you disengaged this afternoon, Mr. Porson!”

“Well—er—why?” demanded Porson cautiously.

“Because,” replied Mr. Halibut—and by his tone he might have been reciting a dirge—“a friend of mine wishes to soar in space. That is to say, he is desirous of making a flight in an aeroplane. I have pointed out to him that the change of momentum of a falling body varies as its inertia—a fact with which probably you are acquainted.”

“Well, no, I wasn’t till you told me,” replied Porson, speaking slowly and with effort. “Am I to understand that you have a friend who wants a flip in my bus this afternoon?”

“You put it crudely,” sighed Mr. Halibut, “but it is so. My friend is very anxious to soar. I have attempted to dissuade him, but he persists. His name is Mopp—Mr. Marmaduke Mopp. Are you at liberty this afternoon?”

“Oh, yes,” replied Porson.

“Good!” said Mr. Halibut heavily. “At two-thirty, accompanied by Mr. Mopp, I will arrive at your domicile. In the meantime, consider that centrifugal force is the force exerted by a whirling body on the connection which obliges it to move round a centre. I thank you! Good-bye!”

Mr. Halibut rang off. Porson slowly laid down the receiver and stood staring at it.

“Dotty!” he communed with himself. “Dotty—undoubtedly.”

He was still pondering on the strangeness of Mr. Halibut’s conversation when that afternoon, prompt to the minute, a rickety old car drew up at his garden gate. From it there descended a long, thin, dreary-looking individual and a dapper little fellow in a blue serge suit. These two helped a third individual to alight—one of the fattest men Porson had ever seen.

Porson hastened down the garden-path to meet them.

“Are you,” inquired the dreary-looking gentleman, “Mr. George Porson?”

“Yes, that’s me,” agreed Porson, cheerfully if ungrammatically.

“I am Mr. Halibut,” replied the other. “This”—he indicated the fat man—“is Mr. Marmaduke Mopp. And this”—he indicated the dapper little man in the blue serge suit—“is Mr. Alfred Hopper!”

“How d’you do?” greeted Porson, gazing askance at the plump Mr. Mopp and wondering if the old thirty-five horse-power Green engine with which the Farman was fitted would prove equal to the task of getting such a bulky passenger off the ground.

But there was something else about Mr. Marmaduke Mopp which puzzled Porson for a moment. Somehow, the man didn’t quite seem in proportion. He was fat and bulging from ankles to neck and from shoulders to wrists. But his face wasn’t a bit fat, neither were his hands. It seemed as though Nature had treated him a trifle carelessly by allowing all his plumpness to run to his arms and body.

“I don’t think I’m frightfully keen on this flight now, don’t you know,” said Mr. Mopp huskily. “I—I think I’ll go home.”

Messrs. Halibut and Hopper, having assisted him to alight from the car, still had him by the elbows. They exchanged a glance—which wasn’t lost on Porson—and gripped Mr. Mopp the tighter.

“No, now, no!” said Mr. Hopper soothingly. “You’ve come all this way in order to have a flight, so don’t back out now!”

“It’s all right you talking——” began Mr. Mopp, almost fiercely; then, seeing Porson’s eye upon him, he broke off abruptly.

“I fail to see,” remarked Mr. Halibut, in deep and mournful tones, “why we should linger thus like inanimate objects in the roadway. Forward, I say, to the machine!”

“It’s all right you saying ‘forward’ like that——” began Mr. Mopp furiously; then again he broke off abruptly.

“If you’d rather not have a flip, you know, you’ve just got to say so,” said Porson pleasantly.

“Oh, but he does—he does!” said Mr. Halibut. “He is, naturally, somewhat nervous at the moment. But he wishes to soar, do you not, Marmaduke?”

“No, I don’t!” replied Mr. Mopp savagely. “I’ve changed my mind, so there!”

For the second time Messrs. Hopper and Halibut exchanged glances. Further, Mr. Hopper turned for a moment and stared back along the roadway with what seemed to Porson a somewhat anxious eye.

“Come now, come!” he said, jogging Mr. Mopp’s plump arm. “Don’t be a coward. You’ll be quite safe.” He appealed to Porson: “He’ll be quite safe, won’t he?”

“Yes, of course he will!” agreed Porson.

Mr. Mopp scowled at him.

“That’s all you know!” he snarled.

“I beg your pardon,” began Porson warmly. “But——”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!” snapped Mr. Mopp. “Shut up!”

“Pray do not thus lose control of your temper, Marmaduke!” droned Mr. Halibut, and he also was glancing back along the roadway as he spoke. “Come! Make the flight as you intended. Be brave! Be courageous! Think what it means when you have successfully demonstrated—er—h’m!”

He smothered the rest of the sentence in a cough.

“Well, five hundred, mind!” said Mr. Mopp waveringly.

“Five hundred!” repeated Mr. Halibut sonorously.

“All right, let’s get it over!” snapped Mr. Mopp. “Come on!”

Supported on one side by Mr. Halibut and on the other by Mr. Hopper, the plump Marmaduke shuffled towards the gate.

“Wait a minute!” said Porson coldly, barring the way. “I don’t know that I’m so frightfully keen on taking Mr. Mopp up, after all this arguing. He doesn’t seem keen, and you gentlemen are trying your best to get him to go up. Why?”

“Because, really, he does wish to soar,” replied Mr. Halibut hastily. “Do you not, Marmaduke?”

“Yes, I do!” replied Mr. Mopp surlily.

“But you said you didn’t!” snapped Porson.

“I can change my mind if I want to, can’t I?” snarled Mr. Mopp. “It’s nothing to do with you, is it?”

“Perhaps not!” retorted Porson. “But what’s this five hundred you’re getting out of it?”

There was a sudden stricken silence. Mr. Halibut gulped. Mr. Mopp stared, seemingly bereft of speech. It was Mr. Hopper who came to the rescue.

“He’s not getting any five hundred out of it!” he said sharply. “When he mentioned the words ‘five hundred,’ he meant he didn’t want to go higher that five hundred feet. That’s what you meant, isn’t it, Mr. Mopp?”

“Yes,” said Mr. Mopp huskily, “that’s what I meant.”

Porson hesitated a moment.

“Oh, all right, then!” he said. “Come on!” And turning on his heel, he led the way up the garden-path and round to the field at the rear of the cottage.

Mr. Mopp walked slowly, leaning heavily on the arms of Messrs. Hopper and Halibut. When he had passed laboriously through the wicket-gate which led into the field which Porson used as a taking-off and landing ground, he halted, staring almost pop-eyed at the ancient biplane standing in front of the old barn which served it as a hangar.

“What’s that thing?” he inquired, in a hushed voice.

“That’s the aeroplane—my aeroplane!” snapped Porson.

“Then I’m going home!” said Mr. Mopp resolutely, and attempted a right-about turn. But the faithful Hopper and Halibut clung to him lovingly.

“It’s a fine machine!” encouraged Mr. Hopper, with an enthusiasm which rang hideously false.

“Yes,” added Mr. Halibut ponderously, “an excellent craft in every respect. Observe, Marmaduke, the wide spread of the wings which will materially assist in the withstanding of gravity, which, as probably you are aware, is the attraction of the earth, and which——”

“Stop talking drivelling bilge!” advised Mr. Mopp savagely. “I’m not going up in a thing like that!”

“But what’s the matter with it?” expostulated Mr. Hopper. “If you were to ask me, I’d say it was a lovely machine!”

“Yes; but I’m not asking you!” snarled Mr. Mopp. “It looks like a floating birdcage to me.”

He glared at the ancient Maurice Farman, with its long, flat, and much-bepatched wings. He took stock of the array of flying wires and bracing wires, some of which were sagging alarmingly, and he shook his head.

“I’m not going!” he said emphatically. “I’m not—and that’s flat!”

“But think,” pleaded Mr. Halibut—“think of the inconvenience to which we are putting this lad by your refusal!”

“You needn’t worry about me!” said Porson coldly.

“I’m not,” replied Mr. Mopp bluntly. “I’m worrying about myself. What’s going to happen if we crash?”

“Crash!” The dapper Mr. Hopper seemed literally to pounce on the word. “Why, you fool, isn’t that just——”

He paused abruptly, avoiding Porson’s inquiring eye.

“Yes, you were saying——” remarked Porson invitingly.

“Nothing,” mumbled Mr. Hopper. “I was just going to say that you wouldn’t crash. You won’t, either, will you?”

“No,” said Porson, “I won’t!”

He was quite convinced that there was something fishy about the trio. He was intrigued, also, by the peculiar plumpness of Mr. Mopp and by the fact that Mr. Mopp’s companions kept a very tight hold upon him. It couldn’t be that they contemplated Mr. Mopp attempting a bolt. That gentleman’s mode of progression was a shuffle. Yes, Porson was interested.

“You will go, Marmaduke, will you not?” asked Mr. Halibut humbly.

“Seven hundred and fifty, then!” said Mr. Mopp furtively.

Mr. Halibut caught the eye of Mr. Hopper, who nodded.

“Yes, seven hundred and fifty, Marmaduke!” he agreed.

Mr. Hopper turned to Porson.

“That’s feet we’re talking about, mind,” he said hastily. “Seven hundred and fifty feet. That’s what Mr. Mopp means. He wants to go to seven hundred and fifty feet. Don’t you, Mr. Mopp?”

“Yes,” replied Mr. Mopp, although he addressed the words to the lanky Halibut. “Seven hundred and fifty—and don’t you forget it!”

“Come on, then; you’d better get into the cockpit,” remarked Porson. “Do you want a loan of some flying kit?”

“No!” replied Mr. Mopp hastily. “No, I don’t!”

Assisted by the willing hands of Messrs. Hopper and Halibut, the plump Marmaduke Mopp got himself squeezed between flying wires and bracing wires, and sank on to the low rear seat in the canvas-sided, box-like cockpit.

"Got a strap?" he inquired of Porson.

"Strap?" echoed Porson. "What d'you want that for?"

"To strap myself in with, fathead!" snarled Mr. Mopp. "D'you think I want to hang myself with it, or what?"

If Porson hadn't been determined to discover just what the queer trio were up to he would have abandoned the proposed flight long before this. As it was, he answered mildly:

"You mustn't strap yourself in, you know. If you do, and we do happen to crash, you'll get the engine right on top of you. If you aren't strapped in, you'll have a chance of being thrown clear."

"But you said we wouldn't crash!" snorted Mr. Mopp.

"Neither will we," replied Porson. "I'm only pointing out——"

"Then if you're so cocksure that we aren't going to crash, give me a strap!" snapped Mr. Mopp.

"All right," replied Porson; "but I've warned you of the danger."

He made his way to the cottage, to return within a few moments with the required strap and with his little black-and-white mongrel, Bill, gambolling at his heels.

"Keep that great brute of a dog off me!" howled Mr. Mopp, in sudden alarm.

"He won't touch you!" said Porson, and at a gesture from him Bill leapt up at the front seat, where he sat taking bright-eyed notice of what was going on.

"That brute's not going with us, is he?" demanded Mr. Mopp angrily.

"Yes, he is!" replied Porson, handing the strap up to the fat Marmaduke.

"I won't have it!" shouted that individual.

"Oh, all right!" replied Porson, withdrawing his hand.

"I mean I won't have the dog, idiot, not the strap!" bellowed Mr. Mopp. "Here, give it to me, and kick that brute off the machine!"

He snatched the strap out of Porson's hand and slipped it round his waist.

"Bill's going with us, whether you like it or not!" said Porson firmly. "He always flies with me. Now, if you're ready. I'll switch on and swing the prop."

Mr. Mopp's grumbles were drowned by the sudden clattering and banging roar of the old Green engine as Porson swung the heavy, four-bladed pusher propeller. Then, drawing on his flying-gloves, Porson mounted to the front seat, where Bill snuggled down between his feet.

"Wait!" shrieked Mr. Halibut, to make himself heard above the clatter of the engine. "Wait, please!"

"Well, what's the matter now?" inquired Porson, throttling down.

“Mr. Hopper and I intend to follow you in the car, so that Marmaduke will know we are at hand should an accident happen!” explained Mr. Halibut. “Therefore, will you kindly keep above the road which leads towards Little Slopperton?”

Porson eyed him curiously. Truly, the plot was beginning to thicken!

“Yes, I will!” he replied. “Anything else?”

“No, that is all,” said Mr. Halibut, and stepped back.

“All right, you?” inquired Porson over his shoulder.

“Yes,” gulped Mr. Mopp.

“Sit tight, then!” said Porson, and opened up the throttle.

Swaying and bumping, the old Maurice Farman raced across the field towards the farther hedge. And in the rear seat the plump Mr. Mopp was swaying also in strange and balloon-like fashion. But Porson had no eyes for him at the moment. He was too intent on getting the old biplane into the air.

Thrice, as he pulled on the stick, the machine hopped clumsily, but the fourth time it lumbered up into the air and stayed there. Climbing, Porson flew towards Luvdale Plantation. Then, coming about in a wide and careful bank—the ancient biplane had a foul habit of side-slipping if the bank were too steep—he headed back towards the white ribbon of roadway which wound towards Little Slopperton.

At three hundred feet he passed over it and swung the Farman in the direction of Little Slopperton. Looking down, he saw that Messrs. Hopper and Halibut had entered their rickety car and were driving along the road in the same direction.

“Now what,” he asked himself, “are these bounders up to?”

He glanced over his shoulder. Mr. Mopp, squeezed in the rear seat, was glancing nervously to port and starboard. He caught Porson’s eye, and scowled. Porson nodded pleasantly, and turned again to his controls.

His height was now five hundred feet. Below him wound the dusty road along which was careering the rickety car in which sat the mournful Halibut and the dapper Hopper.

“I’ll stay up half an hour and see what happens!” soliloquised Porson. “There’s some mystery here, and I——”

He broke off short, for the biplane had taken a sudden pronounced list to port. For a moment Porson thought his port planes had struck an air-pocket. He kept the control-stick steady and glanced outboards. A bulky something impinged on his vision, and he looked round with a jerk. Then he let out a yell.

The fat Mr. Mopp had left his seat, and was crawling out on the lower port plane like some gigantic slug!

“Hi!” yelled Porson. “Hi! What are you doing, you idiot?”

Mr. Mopp turned his head and gibbered at him—at least, he seemed to gibber.

“He’s mad!” groaned Porson, and whipped forward his control-stick to throw the biplane into a dive. “Get back into your seat, you lunatic!”

But Mr. Mopp didn't. Instead, he deliberately squeezed himself between flying wires and bracing wires; then, poised on the very edge of the lower plane, he turned, made a face at Porson, and launched himself out into space!

Let us not dwell on Porson's sensations in that moment. He didn't exactly cover his face with his hands and shudder, but he felt pretty ghastly. Banking, he looked down, expecting to see his late passenger hurtling to the ground below.

But he saw nothing of the kind. With eyes which were almost protruding in astonishment, he saw the plump Mr. Mopp drifting slowly earthwards, feet first, as though descending by means of some phantom parachute.

Porson never quite remembered how he got the old Farman to earth after that. All he was conscious of was the astounding fact that Mr. Mopp was slowly drifting downwards as though, in some strange manner, he had outwitted the laws of gravity.

"There he was," as Porson said later, "floating gently earthwards, his coat tails flapping in the breeze—as though hanging from a phantom parachute! And once he actually waved his paw to Hopper and Halibut, who had stopped their car on the road below!"

Anyway, Porson did land. He brought the old Maurice Farman to earth on the stretch of firm turf which bordered Slopperton Marsh, towards which, born on the wings of a gentle breeze, the amazing Mopp was drifting.

Mr. Halibut and Mr. Hopper burst through the hedge which bordered the roadway and dashed towards the spot where it seemed Mr. Mopp would alight. The trouble was that Slopperton Marsh didn't exactly look like a marsh. Its grass-tufted surface seemed quite firm, and an unwary stranger could walk into it before he knew what had happened.

Messrs. Hopper and Halibut didn't walk into it. They ran full tilt into it, in spite of Porson's bellowed warning. The thick, oozy mud clutched at their ankles. Too late they strove to stem their wild career, tripped, and took involuntary headers into the black and slimy mess.

There came howls and horrid squelching noises; and then an angry, breathless roar from Mr. Mopp as he alighted feet first in the centre of the marsh and toppled slowly forward on his face.

Covered from head to feet in slime and mud, Messrs. Hopper and Halibut ploughed their way back to firmer ground. They made no effort to aid the distressed and bellowing Mopp, who was progressing towards them in a sort of waddle-cum-crawl.

"Help me oud!" roared Mr. Mopp. "Confound it, help me oud!"

But neither Mr. Halibut nor Mr. Hopper attempted to help him out. They were busily engaged in wiping each other down with great handfuls of grass. Porson joined them.

"How," he inquired, watching the floundering Mopp, "did he do it?"

"Do what?" snarled Mr. Hopper, combing great masses of mud out of his hair by means of his fingers.

"Float earthwards like he did!" said Porson.

“Mind your own business——” began Mr. Hopper furiously, then broke off and stared as a motor-cycle came to a slithering halt on the road and a young man leapt from the saddle.

“Tootle!” gasped Mr. Hopper.

Mr. Halibut straightened up with a jerk.

“Where?” he yelped.

“There!” gasped Mr. Hopper. “I’m off!”

And off he went, rounding the edge of the marsh like a miler going all out.

Mr. Halibut took one look at the young man who was bursting his way through the hedge, then off he went in the wake of Mr. Hopper. In spite of the mud which still clung to them, both showed a pretty turn of speed.

“Strange!” murmured Porson, and watched with interest the advent of the young man, who came charging up.

“Got you!” panted the young man, making a grab at Porson. “Scoundrel!”

Porson evaded the clutching hand.

“Perhaps you’ll explain?” he said coldly.

“Explain?” echoed the young man angrily. “It’s you who’ll have to explain!”

“Hi!”

The plaintive bellow came from Mr. Mopp, who was standing almost knee-deep in the marsh. And Mr. Mopp was making laborious efforts to open a penknife.

“Hi, Tootle,” he bellowed, “what are you going to do?”

“Hand you over to the police, you scoundrel!” replied the young man.

“Then,” roared Mr. Mopp, “I’m going to rip it—yes, rip it to shreds!”

“No, no!” yelped the young man frenziedly. “No, don’t do that! Come out, and—and I’ll call it quits!”

“Honest injun?” demanded Mr. Mopp.

“Yes—yes, honest injun!” replied the young man. “Don’t rip it, and—and I won’t say anything more about it!”

Mr. Mopp closed his knife and continued his waddle towards firmer ground.

“Will somebody,” said Porson wearily, “kindly explain?”

The young man wheeled on him.

“You explain,” he snapped, “just how you came to be mixed up with this crowd!”

“I have an aeroplane—that’s it there,” said Porson. “They asked me to take Mopp up. I took him up, and he chucked himself out, and he just floated earthwards like a feather.”

“I know he did,” said the young man proudly, “and I know how he did it, as well. My name’s Tootle, and I used to work for Halibut, who’s an inventor. I——”

He broke off to grab the plump and wretched Mopp, who was struggling through the last few inches of marsh.

“Deflate it, Mopp!” he ordered.

Mopp groped with muddy hands beneath his waistcoat. There came a hissing noise, and Mr. Mopp slowly subsided till he was as thin as the erstwhile Mr. Halibut.

“What the——” gasped Porson.

“Don’t you see?” yelped Mr. Tootle happily. “It’s a patent rubber suit, inflated with a patent gas which I invented. It’s for the use of airship passengers really. Mopp had leaden soles on his boots to make him drop feet foremost. It’s much handier than the parachute, because an airship will carry cylinders of the gas and passengers can get their suits filled if there’s any danger, and——”

“But why didn’t they tell me?” demanded Porson. “And why was Mopp wearing it under his clothes, and why were they so jolly mysterious about it?”

“Because Halibut pinched it from me,” explained Mr. Tootle excitedly. “We’d tried it heaps of times with dummies, but we couldn’t get any pilot to take us up to try it properly. They were frightened of the consequences if it didn’t work. That’s why Halibut and Hopper inflated it on Mopp and bought an outsize in suits to put on over it, so’s you wouldn’t realise what they were up to. How much was Halibut going to give you for the descent, Mopp?”

“I got him up to seven hundred and fifty pounds,” snarled Mopp, gouging mud out of his ears and collar, “but I suppose I’ll lose that now.”

“No,” said Mr. Tootle happily, “I’ll play the game by you, Mopp. It was jolly plucky of you. You’ve proved the suit’s absolutely all right. And you as well”—he turned beamingly to Porson—“I’ll jolly well see you get a share out of it. I’m going to take it to the best aeronautical firm I can find.”

“I wish you luck!” said Porson.

“What are you going to do about Halibut and his friend Hopper?” demanded Mr. Mopp thickly.

“I don’t think we’ll see them again!” replied Tootle. “Do you?”

“No!” said Mr. Mopp. “I don’t!”

CHAPTER IX

THE AMBUSHED ADMIRAL!

"IT were," said Gaffer determinedly—"one hun'erd and seventy punds, Garge!"

George Porson nodded.

"Yes, I know, Gaffer," he replied; "but I've made another thirty pounds since then. I got a tenner from Muggeridge for taking that blessed hen of his to the poultry show at Hooperton, and I got twenty pounds from Tootle for helping Mopp to test the Tootle Inflated Rubber Suit. Though, mind you," he added thoughtfully, "as I explained to Tootle, I didn't know that I was helping."

"Well"—Gaffer wrinkled his brows in concentrated effort—"that makes two hun'erd punds what ye've earned since ye started this here flyin' bis'ness—two hun'erd punds, lad!"

He patted Porson on the shoulder.

"Fine," he said—"ay, fine!"

"Oh, it's not bad!" admitted Porson modestly. "But I've been lucky, you know, Gaffer."

"Lucky!" Gaffer snorted. "As I've said afore, Garge, it ain't luck—it's grit! Ay, grit!" he added fiercely, as though daring anyone in the wide, wide world to contradict him.

No one did. There was no one to do so, for there were only George Porson and his good friend and near neighbour, old Gaffer, sitting on the bench in front of Porson's little cottage.

"Though," said Gaffer suddenly, "ye'll not yet have enough money to buy a real airyplane, I suppose. Mind ye," he added hastily, "I'm not meanin' that the one ye've got ain't a real 'un, but—but——"

"I know what you mean, Gaffer," said Porson gently. "No; I haven't anything like enough yet to buy a more modern bus. I will have some day, though. But I'll never never forget the old Maurice Farman!"

Gaffer nodded. His gnarled hands were clasped on the top of his stick, and his eyes fixed dreamily on the roadway which ran past the bottom of the garden.

"Ay, it's been a good friend to ye, that old airyplane!" he said quietly.

He paused, staring. A shiny, silk top-hat had appeared above the garden gate. It was a hat which glistened sleekly in the morning sun, surmounting a plump, pink-and-white-complexioned face adorned with rimless eyeglasses and luxuriant moustache.

A plump, wash-leather-gloved hand groped over the gate in search of the latch. The gate swung open, and into the garden stepped a stout gentleman immaculately clad in frock coat, striped trousers, white waistcoat, patent-leather shoes and white linen spats.

In his buttonhole was an expensive orchid, and he carried a gold-mounted, rolled-up umbrella. Altogether, a very well-turned-out gentleman—from his head to his heels.

"I'm goin'!" said Gaffer hastily, and, rising to his feet, he hobbled away round the cottage, deaf to Porson's objurgation to stay where he was.

The stout gentleman came stalking magnificently up the garden-path, swinging his rolled-up umbrella.

"Good-morning!" he boomed, bringing up short in front of Porson. "Good-morning, boy!"

"Good-morning, sir!" replied Porson.

"I understand that there is a person named Porson who resides here," went on the stout gentleman. "He has an aeroplane for hire, I believe. Kindly conduct me to him."

"I'm him!" replied Porson. "I'm Porson!"

"You!"

The stout gentleman started dramatically. "Why, you are a mere boy—a mere boy!"

"I happen to be seventeen!" said Porson pointedly.

Through his rimless eyeglasses the stout gentleman took frowning stock of Porson's features, his well-worn school blazer, and his oil-stained flannel bags.

"Am I to understand," he said ponderously, "that you are the Porson—the Porson who owns a passenger-carrying aeroplane?"

"Yes, I am the Porson!" admitted Porson modestly.

"Hah!" said his visitor, staring at him. "I did not know—I never anticipated—h'm—h'm!"

He broke off as though communing with himself.

"My name," he boomed suddenly, "is Bottle—Mr. Benjamin Wilks Bottle. I am in rather a quandary!"

He scowled.

"I am, I may say, the victim of a plot," he went on angrily—"yes, the victim of a foul and dastardly plot. But there shall be a reckoning—yes, sir, there shall be a reckoning!"

He swiped viciously at nothing in particular with his umbrella.

"If there is anything I can do, Mr.—er—Milk Bottle——" began Porson hastily.

"Wilks Bottle!" boomed his visitor. "Wilks Bottle! Yes, there is something you can do. You can take me at once to Shallowford Meadows, where I shall descend on the plotters like a—like a——"

"Ravening lion!" suggested Porson.

"No!" snorted Mr. Wilks Bottle. "Like a bolt from the blue—yes, like a bolt from the blue! Hah!"

He twirled his moustache furiously.

"Are the—er—plotters plotting in Shallowford Meadows, sir?" inquired Porson.

Dash it, he didn't like asking questions, but he'd met such a lot of weird johnnies since he had come to Sudcombe. A chap had to be careful, you know!

"Plotting in Shallowford Meadows?" echoed Mr. Wilks Bottle. "No, of course they're not. They have already plotted, and my being here is the result of their scoundrelly plotting."

"Then what," demanded Porson, "are they doing in Shallowford Meadows?"

"Running about in idiotic manner!" snorted Mr. Wilks Bottle. "Eating, laughing and giggling like maniacs, revelling in my discomfiture, behaving like imbeciles generally. But I know who is at the bottom of all this—I know the instigator!"

"Who?" demanded Porson, striving to make some sense out of his visitor's disjointed sentences.

"Why, that jackanapes Fossleton, of course!" replied Mr. Wilks Bottle angrily. "I don't know what the admiral will think, I'm sure!"

"What admiral?" pressed Porson, who really wanted to ask what the dickens Mr. Wilks Bottle was raving about.

"Admiral Stumper, of course!" snapped that gentleman, for all the world as though Porson ought to have known. "Admiral Stumper, of Shallowford Hall. What a lot of questions you do ask," he went on querulously. "You are a most inquisitive boy. I abominate an inquisitive boy. Now tell me, are you sure you can carry me in your aeroplane without mishap to Shallowford Meadows?"

"Yes," said Porson shortly. "And I'm jolly well not inquisitive, only——"

"You are inquisitive!" barked Mr. Wilks Bottle. "And argumentative! I detest an argumentative boy!"

"Look here, sir——" began Porson warmly.

"Ah, now he is instructing me as to where I must cast my vision!" cried Mr. Wilks Bottle wildly. "He is domineering! I abhor a domineering boy!"

"Sir," said Porson, a trifle wearily, "do you want me to take you to Shallowford Meadows or do you not?"

"Yes, of course I do!" snapped Mr. Wilks Bottle. "I've said I do, haven't I? What is your fee?"

"Three pounds."

"What?" shrieked Mr. Wilks Bottle, in shrill and shocked falsetto, with a little jump up into the air. "Three pounds? I shall be ruined!"

"That's my fee, anyway," said Porson steadily. "Shallowford Meadows is in the next county, and you jolly well won't get a taxi to take you there for less than three pounds."

"I know!" moaned Mr. Wilks Bottle. "I've tried—I mean," he corrected himself hastily, "I haven't tried!"

"Well, sir, perhaps you'd like to go and try?" suggested Porson.

"No, no! I must get there quickly!" bleated his visitor. "But three pounds! It is an imposition! Shall we say two pounds ten shillings?"

"No, we shan't!" replied Porson stubbornly.

"All right—all right!" moaned Mr. Wilks Bottle. "I must accept your terms! Three pounds! Oh dear! Come, where is your aeroplane? I must get to Shallowford Meadows without delay!"

He followed Porson round to the field at the rear of the cottage. He followed him through the wicket-gate which led into the field. But he didn't follow him any farther. Instead, he halted abruptly, pointing with rolled-up umbrella.

"What," he demanded thickly, "is that monstrosity?"

There was no mistaking what he meant, for he continued to point at Porson's ancient Maurice Farman biplane.

"That's my aeroplane!" said Porson.

"Aeroplane?" repeated Mr. Wilks Bottle austerely. "You are joking! Kindly refrain from joking. I have a rooted antipathy for a joking boy."

"I'm not joking, sir!" snapped Porson. "That's my aeroplane—and it's a jolly good aeroplane, as well!"

"But do you seriously suggest that I should commit my person to the dubious safety of—of that thing?" demanded Mr. Wilks Bottle. And what withering scorn he brought into the last word!

"Well, other fellows have," replied Porson defensively. "But you're under no obligation to go in it, you know. You can get a taxi."

"I cannot get a taxi!" barked Mr. Wilks Bottle. "Apart from the exorbitant charges of taximen, I would lose valuable time in reaching Shallowford Meadows. Tell me at once—is the thing safe?"

"Yes, sir," replied Porson patiently. "It is safe!"

"Duty," moaned Mr. Wilks Bottle, as though communing with himself, "says, 'Forward!' Common sense says, 'Back!' Ah, duty or common sense—to which voice shall I hearken?"

He took a firmer grip of his umbrella and stood there glaring at the Farman just like a fat officer trying to make up his mind whether to charge the foe or not. It was really just like that, because the next thing he said was:

"Duty—duty!"

Then, without a backward glance, he stalked straight towards the ancient biplane as though he were going to cleave his way right through it with the umbrella. Of such stuff are heroes made, my masters!

But when he reached the old Farman he sheered off to one side and walked all round it. Then he propounded his conundrum.

"How," he demanded, "do I get through these infernal wires to the seat which I shall occupy?"

Porson explained, then assisted him up into the rear seat.

"I can lend you some flying kit, sir," he said. "You may feel rather chilly when we get up and——"

“Kindly understand,” cut in Mr. Wilks Bottle haughtily, “that I never wear borrowed clothing of any description whatsoever. I am not a pauper!”

“But——” began Porson.

Mr. Wilks Bottle waved impatient hand.

“Kindly get on with the—ah—proceedings,” he said coldly. “You are a most talkative boy. I loathe a talkative boy!”

In silence, Porson drew on his flying-gloves. Then, echoing far across the field, he sent a shrill whistle. From a distant hedgerow came streaking a little black-and-white body.

“Why,” asked Mr. Wilks Bottle severely, “do you whistle in that nerve-racking and ear-splitting manner?”

“I’m whistling for my dog,” replied Porson shortly, and stooped to fondle the little black-and-white mongrel which dashed up.

“Flip, Bill!” he went on; and at a gesture Bill leapt up to the forward seat.

“Shoo!” said Mr. Wilks Bottle, and poked at it with his brolly. “Go away, little flea-ridden beast!”

“He’s not flea-ridden!” said Porson warmly.

“I say he is!” snapped Mr. Wilks Bottle authoritatively. “All dogs are flea-ridden. Kindly remove him from such close proximity to myself!”

“He’s coming with us,” said Porson determinedly. “He always flies with me, and if you don’t like it, sir, then you’d better get out!”

Mr. Wilks Bottle glared.

“Assuredly I would get out,” he snorted, “were it not imperative that I reach Shallowford Meadows without delay. But I fly with that dog under protest!”

“I don’t suppose he’ll worry about that!” grinned Porson, and, switching on, swung the heavy four-bladed pusher propeller.

The old Maurice Farman took off in quite its usual manner—that is to say, after executing two long clumsy hops it lumbered up into the air and went clattering and banging its way across country towards the borders of the county and Shallowford Meadows.

Mr. Benjamin Wilks Bottle sat hunched up in the rear seat. His silk hat was jammed tightly down almost over his ears. His neatly-rolled umbrella was gripped between his knees, and his gloved hands had the sides of the canvas, box-like cockpit in frenzied clutch.

Now and again he winced. That was when little spatters of oil from the clattering old Green engine hit him in the nape of the neck. He did think of putting his umbrella up in order to protect himself, but the thought that it might blow inside-out deterred him.

Which is just as well, because if he had put it up the chances are that it would have been whisked out of his hand and through the propeller, with disastrous results. For even a piece of paper can break a whirling propeller.

Porson was flying over well-wooded country, and whenever he passed over a sizable clump of trees the ancient biplane took the air bump in heavy, lurching fashion. Each time that happened Mr. Wilks Bottle gave a little moan and closed his eyes, for he was quite certain that the bump was but the prelude to a crash.

However, in spite of bumps and occasional air-pockets, the Maurice Farman at length came banging and clattering triumphantly over Shallowford Meadows. Looking down, Porson saw in a large field two charabancs drawn up by the hedge. A swarm of small boys who had obviously arrived by the charabancs were gambolling and disporting themselves with joyous abandon.

Porson looked over his shoulder for instructions. Mr. Wilks Bottle gave them by means of a quick and nervous point downwards with his gloved forefinger. Closing down the throttle, Porson shoved forward the control-stick and went earthwards in a wide spiral.

The little boys clustered in a crowd, watching the descent. In their midst towered a tall young man. Surely, thought Porson, these could not be the plotters? But scarcely had he landed and brought the old biplane to a quivering halt than Mr. Wilks Bottle rose stiffly in his seat and, with a wave of his umbrella, boomed:

"Hah! I am here! Here I am!"

A little anæmic cheer floated up from the small boys. It was a cheer lacking both in substance and enthusiasm. Mr. Wilks Bottle snorted.

"Fossleton!" he boomed. "Come here, sir!"

With as much dignity as he could muster he squeezed between flying wires and bracing wires and descended to the ground. The tall young man, obviously Fossleton, moved towards him, surrounded by a solid phalanx of small boys.

He was a cheery-looking individual, this Fossleton. He glanced at Porson, grinned and winked, then addressed Mr. Wilks Bottle.

"Why, here you are, sir!" he said heartily. "We thought we'd lost you!"

"You mean you hoped you had lost me!" snapped Mr. Wilks Bottle. "That's what you mean, sir! When I descended from the charabanc in Sudcombe, in order to indulge in a cup of coffee, you drove off without me. Don't deny it, sir! Don't dare to deny it!"

"I'm not denying it, sir!" grinned Fossleton. "But you were such a long time over your coffee that I rather fancied we'd better be shoving along, don't you know."

"You fancied!" bellowed Mr. Wilks Bottle. "And who the dickens are you, sir, to take the matter into your own hands? Answer me that, sir! However, it doesn't matter. I shall report this to your committee, sir!"

"Please do!" said Fossleton cheerily.

Mr. Wilks Bottle glared at him, then wheeled on the crowd of youngsters.

"What have you been doing?" he snapped.

"Playing games, Mr. Wilks Bottle," chorused the boys.

"Playing games?" snorted Mr. Wilks Bottle. "Absurd! Disgraceful! Kindly fall in and follow me. What the dickens are you grinning at, Fossleton? Kindly fall in, boys,

and follow me to yonder woods, where we shall spend an instructive hour in studying the flora and fauna of our beautiful countryside. Come!"

Off he went, stalking pompously, the small boys trailing dolefully behind him, with many a backward glance at Fossleton, who lingered by the Farman.

"You," said Fossleton, turning suddenly to Porson, "have ripped it. You have absolutely upset the bally apple-cart! In other words, you've messed up the day for those poor little kids."

There was nothing of anger in his tones, only a plain statement of fact.

"I'm awfully sorry," said Porson humbly. "I didn't understand. Perhaps if you'll explain——"

"It's like this," replied Fossleton. "A few other fellows and me run a club for poor boys in the City. I'm secretary of the club, and Mr. Wilks Bottle is one of the patrons. He's got frightfully weird ideas about boys——"

"I know that!" cut in Porson.

"Yes," nodded Fossleton. "Well, Admiral Stumper, who has come to reside in the Hall yonder"—he indicated a house amidst the distant trees—"gave us permission to hold our annual outing on his land. Wilks Bottle insisted on coming along, but, knowing he'd give the kids a poisonous time, I shunted him off at Sudcombe when he stopped for coffee. Now he's going to give the kids an instructive afternoon instead of letting the little blighters enjoy themselves. It's rotten!"

"But has he really any authority?" demanded Porson. "I mean, can't you overrule him?"

"No." Fossleton shook his head. "You see, he's got some wealthy friends of his interested in this club movement and if we offend him he might get 'em all to withdraw. There'll be a row about my leaving him behind at Sudcombe, but I can handle that part of it all right. But the kids are going to have a foul time as long as he's messing about here."

"I see," said Porson thoughtfully. "It would be better if he wasn't here, what?"

"Absolutely!"

"Will you," asked Porson, clambering out of the cockpit, "keep an eye on this machine till I come back? I'm going up to the Hall to ask if I may use their telephone."

. . . . .

The Hon. Reggie Marling, of Marling Towers, was lounging in an armchair in the morning-room, idly contemplating a list of hunting fixtures for the coming season, when to him, with soft tread, came a deferential butler.

"Mr. George Porson wishes to speak to you on the phone sir," said the butler.

"Does he?" exclaimed Reggie, and, dropping the hunting-list, he legged it for the phone.

"Hallo, Porson! Is that you?" he bleated. "Reggie speaking!"

"Good!" came the mournful voice of Porson over the wire. "Listen, Reggie! I'm speaking from Shallowford Hall. I've put a whole whack of kids in the cart."

"Great pip!" ejaculated Reggie. "Whose cart? What for?"

"Nobody's cart," replied Porson. "I'm only speaking metaphorically. I'll explain."

He did. He told Reggie all about the saddening effect of the advent of Wilks Bottle on Shallowford Meadows.

"And it's up to me to do something," he went on, "so that these kids can enjoy themselves without that interfering old fossil mucking up their outing for them."

"Yes," babbled Reggie; "something must be done! But what?"

"I've got an idea," replied Porson. "Can you get hold of Algy Blenkinsop and young Woolerton and Percy Poulter?"

"Yes—oh, yes!"

"Well, then, listen," said Porson. "There's a path leads from the road to the Hall, here. It passes through a pretty dense copse. I explored it on my way up from the meadows. There's an old wooden hut in the copse. Have you got that?"

"Yes, but——"

"The four of you can lurk in the copse—you can get here by car," went on Porson. "I'll wangle things so that Wilks Bottle walks along the path with me. When you see him with me you'll know it's Wilks Bottle. You must pounce on us—me as well—and hold us prisoners in the hut till sunset. D'you see?"

"My sainted aunt!" gasped Reggie. "I——"

"Shut up! It's the only thing to be done. You'll have to bag me as well as Wilks Bottle to make the hold-up look real. You'd better bring a few cigars along for him. We'll let him down as easily as possible. Oh, and by the way, you'd better wear masks so that he'll think you really are a gang of hooligans."

"But——" quavered Reggie.

"Will you do it?" demanded Porson. "Dash it, man, think of the poor little kids!"

"I am, but——"

"Will you do it?" roared Porson.

"Yes," bleated Reggie—"yes, of course, I'll do it! He, he, he! I'll get Algy and company and be in the copse in about an hour!"

"Good man!" said Porson gratefully, and rang off.

Now, his idea was to hasten back to the meadows and prepare for the luring of Mr. Wilks Bottle along the path which ran through the copse. But just then the lunch gong reverberated throughout the house, and Admiral Stumper, bluff and genial, hove into view.

"Lunch, my boy!" he roared. "You will lunch with me. I insist, begad! Won't have no!"

It was dashed decent of the old chap. Porson admitted that. But it was dashed awkward as well. He begged, feebly, to be excused. But he wasn't excused. No, he had

to lunch with the admiral.

"And then we'll have a walk down to the meadows and see the little lads amusing themselves!" roared the admiral, as though he were bellowing remarks from the quarterdeck. "You came here by aeroplane, didn't you? Deuced interestin', that!"

He didn't hurry over lunch. There was no earthly reason why he should. But at length it was over. The sitting, by Porson's watch had occupied an hour and a half, and he was ready, as he put it, to set sail and stand out for the meadows.

So, taking Porson in tow, off he went.

"I know a short cut!" he roared, strutting along, a stout little figure in roomy plus-fours. "I haven't been in residence long, but I know all the short cuts. We go through this copse, reach the roadway, and we're at the meadows in no time."

"I—I——" stuttered Porson, coming to a halt—for he knew what that copse contained in its shadowy depths.

"Can't we go by the fields, sir?" he blurted. "I—I like the view better from the fields."

"Nonsense!" snorted the admiral. "Beautiful view once we get through the copse—excellent view!"

And on he went, with Porson trailing dumbly by his side. They took the path which led through the copse, the admiral strutting and talking, and very pleased with himself and everything in general.

"I must say," he was booming, "that we seadogs find the peace and quietude of the countryside extremely restful after——"

He didn't find it restful any longer. For from the bushes fringing the path came a frenzied howl, and four masked figures leapt into view. They were brandishing old-fashioned horse-pistols taken from the gun-room of Marling Towers. Two of them tackled the admiral, and the other two tackled Porson.

With a pistol under his nose, and another one tickling his ear, plus a couple of masked faces thrust menacingly into his, the admiral can be excused if he was at a momentary loss for words.

Not so Porson. That youth gave tongue in no uncertain voice.

"You silly chumps!" he roared. "What the dickens do you think you're playing at? You've made a mistake, you fatheads, and——"

"Gag him!" growled Algy Blenkinsop, who was one of the pair attending to the admiral, and a handkerchief was whipped round Porson's mouth, successfully choking further utterances.

Porson struggled wildly, but his captors merely thought he was attempting to be realistic. So they nobly backed him up, and, tripping him, got him on the ground and sat on him.

As a hold-up the whole thing had been eminently successful. The admiral, recovering his wits somewhat, let loose the floodgates of speech.

"What," he roared, "is the meaning of this?"

That is really what he said. But it was accompanied and punctuated by strange seafaring items picked up here and there in odd corners of the Seven Seas.

"Quiet!" hissed Algy Blenkinsop. "Quiet, fool, or I'll blow your head off!"

It was very dramatic the way he said that. But the admiral wouldn't be quiet. So he, also, was gagged with a silk handkerchief. Then the captives were taken, struggling and squirming, to the hut standing amidst the bushes.

Porson was mouthing frantically, striving to get rid of his gag. But young Woolerton and hefty Percy Poulter held him fast.

"We're not going to kill you," said Algy Blenkinsop pleasantly, when captives and captors were safely in the disused hut, "but there are strong reasons why you—especially you"—he nodded towards the writhing and apoplectic admiral—"should be held prisoners here till sundown!"

Admiral Stumper made hoarse noises which might have been construed into a demand to know what the reasons were.

"Political reasons!" replied Algy gravely. "The ambassador at Peking has not yet received the papers from the agents of the foreign power which is plotting against Lapland, and he has asked the agents of the other foreign power to post them off to him as soon as they get them because the agents of the first foreign power are anxious to see them and," he concluded triumphantly, "that's why you're here! D'you follow me?"

The admiral shook loose his gag.

"No, confound you!" he bawled. "I don't! By the great horned toad, you'll pay for this outrage, sir! Confound it, d'you know who I am, you blackguard? I'm Admiral Stumper, and if there's a law in this country I'll make you suffer! D'you hear me, you scoundrel?"

Undoubtedly they heard him—all four of them. They gaped at him blankly.

"Ad-Admiral Stumper, did you say?" asked Algy Blenkinsop weakly.

"Yes, Admiral Stumper, sir!" roared the furious little gentleman. "Of the Royal Volunteer Naval Reserve, you blackguardly villain!"

Algy Blenkinsop swooped at Porson. With trembling fingers he loosened that youth's gag.

"Is—is he telling the truth?" he stuttered.

"Yes, fathead!" snapped Porson. "You've made a ghastly mistake. But, oh, dash it, I suppose it was my fault!" He turned to the admiral. "It was like this, sir," he began lamely; and he told the whole miserable story from beginning to end.

"And when you suggested coming through the copse, sir, I thought we might get through safely, so—so I risked it because it would have been so difficult to explain about the ambush and—and that's all, sir."

The admiral stared at him. He began to go almost purplish about the face. Then he threw back his head and the hut re-echoed to his delighted guffaws.

"Ho, ho, ho!" he bellowed, slapping fat little knees and doubling up with mirth. "Ho, ho, ho! Confound it, I've never heard anything to beat this since I was a beastly

kid at a prep. school—I mean," he corrected himself hastily, "since I was a kid at a beastly prep. school! But I'll tell you what I'll do.

"I'll have this fellow Wilks Bottle up to the Hall at once. I'll show him round—conservatories, greenhouses, gardens. I'll keep the fellow there, and you fellows had better help this young chap Fossleton to amuse the kids in a proper manner. I'll look after Wilks Bottle.

"You leave him to me, and, confound it, you must come and see me at the Hall. Come often. I like to see young fellows who aren't afraid to exert themselves. Now let's find this Wilks Bottle fellow!"

Mr. Benjamin Wilks Bottle was found. He was flattered at the admiral's invitation to visit the Hall and have tea and inspect the gardens. He went pompously. And what with a flip in Porson's biplane and break-neck circular tours in Reggie's super-sports car, the youngsters had a day which will for ever remain green and verdant in their memories!

CHAPTER X

THE GHOST OF THE CROSS ROADS INN!

"NIGHTS be cuttin' in, Garge!"

"Yes, Gaffer."

"Ay"—Gaffer nodded, puffing reflectively at his pipe—"it'll soon be Christmas, Garge. Lawks! How time do fly, to be sure."

"It does indeed, Gaffer."

"Seems no time since you an' me used to sit out there in the garden," went on the ancient. "But it be too cold for that now, eh, lad?"

"Much too cold," assented George Porson.

There was a gloomy—almost despondent—note in his voice. It seemed as though Gaffer noticed it, for he became silent and sat staring into the fire with blue eyes which the years had failed to dim.

A coal fell noisily on the hearth, sending dancing shadows flickering around the cosy little unlighted parlour of George Porson's cottage. Gaffer shifted his gaze to the boy's face.

"Ye've not done badly in this here flyin' bis'ness since ye started, lad?" he ventured.

"No, not badly, Gaffer," admitted Porson, from the depths of his somewhat rickety basket-work armchair on the other side of the fire. "But now that winter is here things are awfully quiet."

"Ay, it's allus powerful quiet around these parts in th' winter-time," agreed Gaffer. "But there's sport, lad. There's huntin' and shootin', and come a frost there'll be skatin'. Ye have your football every Saturday, as well. Ye're the best player Sudcombe village team has had for many a long year. How many goals was it ye scored agin Frammington last Saturday?"

"Oh, I dunno," began Porson hastily. "I——"

"It were three," interposed Gaffer stolidly. "Ay, I minds me—three it were."

"Yes, but that's not the point, Gaffer," protested Porson. "Hunting, shooting, and football are all jolly fine as recreations, but, unfortunately, I'm afraid they're beginning to form the whole sum and substance of my activities. There doesn't seem to be anything doing in the flying line at all."

Gaffer gazed into the fire.

"Ye're young, lad, and eager," he said tremulously, "and I'm just an old, uneddicated man what ain't got much larnin'. But I've watched ye careful, Garge, and I knows that these idle days is hittin' ye hard and I knows what sumtimes ye've bin thinkin'."

"Do you, Gaffer?"

"Ay, sumtimes ye've wondered if all them fine dreams and ambitions what ye and me have talked of are goin' to come true after all. Sumtimes, lad, ye've bin tempted to turn your back on them all. Ye've bin nigh waverin', lad, and I've seen it."

Porson was silent.

"Lad"—Gaffer leaned forward and placed gnarled fingers on Porson's knee—"things look black these empty days, but what is a man worth if he ain't got the grit to face the bad times with a smile? It's easy to smile when things go right, but it takes a man to do it when things go wrong."

"Gaffer, you—you make me feel ashamed!"

"Ashamed, lad? Not ye. Ye're young, I've said, and ye're eager, and it's on'y nat'ral that sumtimes ye should feel cast down. But I know ye, Garge. Ye've got grit and ye've got pluck, and ye'll come through wi' your colours still flyin'."

"I will—you bet I will!" cried Porson. Then his voice became strangely humble as he added: "But it's all due to you, Gaffer. You've never lost faith in me and—and you don't know how it's helped!"

"Lawks! It's nigh my supper-time," said Gaffer hastily. "I'll have to be goin', Garge. Nay, I ain't goin' to stop. I promised I'd be home for supper and——"

He broke off as there came a loud, imperative knock at the outer door of the cottage.

"Who the dickens can that be at this time of night?" grunted Porson. Then his eyes kindled. "It can't be anyone wanting a flip in the old biplane, surely?"

"Go and see!" commanded Gaffer. "There, they're knockin' agin. Go on, don't keep 'em waitin'!"

Porson didn't. He reached the front door in record time and, swinging it open, peered at the tall figure of a man muffled in a greatcoat outside in the darkness.

"That you, Porson?" said the latter brusquely. "I'm Brayley, the veterinary surgeon. I've had an urgent telephone call from Colonel Hamilton—something wrong with his favourite hunter. It's forty miles over rotten roads to his place. Can you get me there in your bus?"

"Yes," replied Porson. "I'll ring through to them to light some sort of bonfire in a field to act as a beacon and then I'm ready!"

"Good man!" said Brayley. "Hurry—it's urgent!"

Telephonic communication having been established with Hamilton Court, and satisfactory arrangements made as to the beacon, Porson struggled into thick flying kit, for the night was bitterly cold.

Gaffer had taken his departure and, leaving his little black-and-white mongrel, Bill, in charge of the cottage, Porson ushered his passenger out through the rear door. Locking it behind him, he led the way through the darkness to the barn in which was housed his old Maurice Farman biplane.

By the illumination of a dry battery lamp Porson switched on and swung the heavy four-bladed pusher propeller. The ancient 35-h.p. Green engine gave one or two mournful gasps, then picked up with its usual clattering roar.

At a sign from Porson, the veterinary surgeon clambered up to the rear seat in the low, box-like cockpit, and Porson swung himself up to the forward seat. Navigation lights glowed red and golden on tail and wing-tips, then slowly the old Farman lumbered out into the night as Porson opened up the throttle.

Porson had no brilliantly illumined "T" to aid him in the take-off, but he knew every inch of the field. Taxi-ing forward until the black shadow of the nearest hedge loomed before him, he swung into wind.

"All right?" he roared over his shoulder.

"Yes!"

Porson turned again to the weird-looking dashboard in front of him. The ancient engine roared and clattered alarmingly, as though in protest against this night excursion, as Porson gave it fuller throttle. With increasing impetus the Farman went lurching and swaying away into the night.

Porson, peering ahead, pulled on the control-stick. The biplane hopped heavily, but a moaning head wind was sweeping over the fields, and as Porson eased the control-stick back for the second time, the machine lumbered up into the air. At fifty feet Porson pressed on the rudder-bar and swung the Farman southwards towards distant Hamilton Court.

The wind was rising, bringing with it a promise of snow. But it was a following wind on this course, and the old biplane made good progress. Hunched in the rear seat, the veterinary surgeon strove to still the chattering of his teeth, for the cold was biting through to his very bones.

Minutes passed—long, weary minutes—then far ahead a bonfire glowed redly through the mist. The altimeter on Porson's dashboard was registering two hundred feet and, pushing forward the control-stick, Porson went down towards the beacon in a long dive.

He circled once above the field in which it had been lighted, then side-slipped earthwards, switching off his engine the instant he landed, and kicking on full rudder to bring the tail-skid into play as a brake.

"Thanks, Porson!" said Brayley, clambering stiffly from the rear seat. "I'm afraid this is going to be an all-night job for me, so you'd better come along to the house and have some hot coffee before you push off back home."

"No, I'll take off at once, I think, if you won't be wanting me again," replied Porson. "The wind's getting up and I'll have to fight it the whole way back."

"Yes, perhaps you're wise," said Brayley. "There's snow coming. I'll arrange for you to stay here overnight, if you like."

"No, I'll shove off and get home while I can," replied Porson. "Good-night, sir!"

"Good-night, lad!"

The engine clattered and banged into life again, the red tail-light of the Farman grew smaller and smaller in the darkness, then suddenly lifted into the air. The flight homewards had begun and, as Brayley turned towards the house in company with one of Colonel Hamilton's grooms, thick white flakes of snow came swirling down out of the night.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated the veterinary surgeon in dismay. "That boy's running right into the thick of this!"

Young George certainly was—and running right into the thick of something else besides snow! Verily, Christmas was approaching in the true, old-fashioned style as kept green in our memory—or imagination—by Christmas card scenes!

. . . . .

Mine host of the Cross Roads Inn was sitting in his kitchen thoughtfully munching a supper of bread, inferior butter, and leathery cheese.

He was a long, thin, miserable-looking individual blessed with the name of Samuel Pugpie. He couldn't help being long and thin, and perhaps it's safe to say that he couldn't help being miserable, either. He didn't have an exciting sort of life.

The Cross Roads Inn stood about fifteen miles from anywhere, at a point where two lonely moorland roads intersected and the inn now had few customers.

By some strange freak of fortune—or so it seemed to Samuel Pugpie—two visitors had turned up at the inn on this particular evening and, what was more, they intended staying overnight.

They had not arrived together. They were only now getting acquainted in the front parlour. The first to arrive had been Mr. Alexander MacNab, small, red-headed, travelling in golf balls and golf clubs. He had been calling on the professional at Frammington and, stopping for tea at the Cross Roads Inn, had elected to stay overnight in preference to facing the darkness and the cold, biting wind.

The other guest was young and swarthy, and where he had come from Samuel Pugpie didn't know. He had arrived with the dusk and had passed some vague remark about being in the district with a view to selling some agricultural machinery. He had given his name as Isaac Rosenbaum, and that was all Mr. Samuel Pugpie knew about him.

So, as he munched his supper, Samuel pondered on the pleasing prospect of having the price of two beds and breakfasts to collect in the morning. Once or twice he raised his head to listen to the wind moaning and wailing around the lonely inn and fervently hoped for a heavy fall of snow which would keep his guests stormbound for a few days.

Supper over, he pushed back his chair and, rising to his feet, slip-slopped to the window and pulled back the curtain.

"It *are* snowing!" he chuckled, peering out into the night. "Snowing heavy!"

He dropped the curtain back into place and, rubbing his skinny hands, slip-slopped out of the kitchen and across a cold and mildewed passageway into the front parlour,

where Messrs. MacNab and Rosenbaum were seated over a crackling and but recently lighted fire.

"Snowing, gentlemen!" he reported with evident relish. "Snowing heavy!"

Rosenbaum turned his head sharply.

"Is it?" he demanded. "Confound it, I hope it lets up before morning!"

"Hoots, mon, dinna fash ye'sel'!" counselled the little MacNab. "As I was tellin' ye when Samuel interrupted us, I well remember Sandy Herd winnin' the Open Championship wi' th' first rubber-cored golf ba' an'——"

Thump, thump, thump!

A knocking on the door of the inn cut in on his words. Samuel Pugpie started. Who could be knocking on the door of the Cross Roads Inn at so late an hour on a night such as this?

Thump, thump, thump!

"Gan an' open th' door, mon," said MacNab. "Some puir body's wantin' to get in!"

Samuel departed with all the haste his outsize in carpet slippers would allow. To the ears of MacNab and Rosenbaum there came the creaking of bolts, the rattle of a door-chain, then the confused murmur of voices as a gust of cold air swirled into the parlour.

The outer door banged shut again, bolts screeched once more in their sockets, the chain rattled back into place, and Samuel's slipslopping steps came along the passage towards the parlour, followed by a firmer tread.

Samuel was almost speechless with delight, for he had gathered in yet a third guest —as strange a one as had ever sought shelter beneath his roof! He piloted him into the parlour, and Messrs. MacNab and Rosenbaum stared in astonishment. MacNab was the first to give tongue.

"Why, it's a laddie!" he said. "And in flyin' kit! Where on earth hev ye come from, ma mannie?"

"Er—my name's Porson," replied the newcomer. "I was flying from Hamilton Court to Sudcombe, but the storm forced me down. I saw the light of this inn and landed near it, out there on the moor."

"And where's your machine?" demanded Rosenbaum.

"It's out there. I've picketed it down and there's a tarpaulin over the engine. The wind's dropping and the snow is coming down in earnest. The bus won't take much harm."

"Then git your wet flyin' clothes off," said MacNab heartily, "and pull a chair up tae th' fire. Samuel, bring the laddie some supper, and, mind ye, let the coffee be pipin' hot!"

"Noo, as I was tellin' ye," said MacNab, when Porson had drawn up his chair to the fire and supper had been brought in by the now happy Samuel. "I see'd Sandy Herd win th' Open Championship wi' th' fust——"

"Look here, can't you talk about something else than your confounded golf?" demanded Rosenbaum roughly. "Ever since I met you to-night it's been golf—golf—

golf! Haven't you any other topic of conversation?"

"Nae, I havna!" admitted Alexander MacNab. "An' I dinna want anither, either. It's a gran' game is gowf, and I——"

"Is it?" cut in Rosenbaum. "I'll tell you something about golf, and it concerns a fellow-countryman of yours who stayed the night in this very inn."

"Indeed?" said MacNab.

Rosenbaum looked round to see if the parlour door was shut. It was, and Samuel Pugpie was in the kitchen working out on a piece of grubby paper how much he could with safety charge his guests in the morning.

"Have either of you ever heard of McGoudie?" Rosenbaum demanded, with lowered voice.

Neither of them had, and they admitted it.

"Oh, well, perhaps you haven't," replied Rosenbaum, "because I'm going back fifty years or more. Anyway, McGoudie was a fine golfer, and he came across the border into England to play a series of exhibition matches. One night, the same as you, MacNab, he found himself stormbound at this inn."

"Ay?" said MacNab interestedly.

"The inn in those days was owned by a cut-throat sort of scoundrel called Patch. McGoudie, accompanied by a faithful caddie——"

"By a whit?" interjected MacNab.

"By a faithful caddie!"

"Ye use a strange adjective," grunted MacNab. "Ay, git on!"

"McGoudie, accompanied by a faithful caddie, stayed here overnight. The only other occupants of the inn were Patch and his wife. McGoudie had won a lot of prize-money, and he had it with him. Well, when morning came he was found dead in bed. *He had been murdered!*"

"Th' de'il!" ejaculated Alexander MacNab.

"A bloodstained niblick and some sovereigns were found in the caddie's room. He was arrested, tried at the assizes, and hanged. But there were those who thought that it was Patch and his wife who should have been hanged."

"H'mph!" grunted MacNab, eyeing Rosenbaum narrowly.

"But that's not all," went on the latter. "Although if you ask Samuel Pugpie he'll deny it—it isn't good for custom, you understand—the ghost of McGoudie still haunts this inn! On nights when snow is falling he walks moaningly along the corridors, a tall, white, ghastly figure, and——"

"How d'ye know he does?" demanded MacNab abruptly.

Rosenbaum spread out his hands with a gesture.

"Everybody about here knows," he replied. "It's common knowledge that the inn is haunted."

"I'll ask Samuel!" said MacNab, and stretched out a hand towards the bell.

"Ask him if you like," replied Rosenbaum, "but I tell you he'll deny it. As I say, it's not good for custom, and I'll give you my word that if there had been another inn in this neighbourhood I wouldn't have stopped here to-night!"

MacNab glanced at Porson.

"What do you make of it, laddie?" he demanded.

"I don't believe in ghosts!" replied Porson stoutly.

"Nae mair dae I!" assented Alexander MacNab. "And as for this McGoudie, I've niver heerd o' him, an' if he had been much of a gowfer, I'd hev bin sartain tae hev done sae!"

"Oh, well, whether you believe it or not, it's true," said Rosenbaum, "and if you take my advice, you'll lock your doors when you go to bed to-night!"

"D'ye think I'm a babbie?" demanded MacNab angrily. "D'ye think I'm frightened o' ony ghostie——"

"That's a jolly fine hunting picture!" cut in Porson, hastily, in an endeavour to switch the conversation away from what threatened to be a dangerous channel.

It was indeed a fine old picture of a hunting breakfast, and MacNab agreed as he looked at it hanging above the mantelpiece. But Rosenbaum demurred.

"I know a bit about pictures," he remarked. "That one is a copy. Worth a few shillings at the most!"

"I wouldn't mind having it, all the same," replied Porson.

The head of Samuel Pugpie appeared round the parlour door.

"Time for bed, gentlemen," he said. "Here's your candles!"

Samuel led his three guests up a rickety flight of uncarpeted stairs to a long, narrow and gloomy corridor. Rosenbaum's bed-room was the first, and he promptly vanished into its uninviting interior, locking the door behind him.

Alexander MacNab sniffed and followed along the corridor in the wake of Samuel Pugpie and Porson, till he came to the door of his own room.

"I'm not locking mine!" he said defiantly, as he bade Porson and his host "Good-night!"

Two doors farther along was Porson's room, and as he closed the door behind him, and raised his candle to take stock of his surroundings, he wondered whether he had been shown into a bed-room or a box-room!

There were a few remnants of age-old paper on the walls, a small, unvarnished chest of drawers, and a ramshackle-looking bed. The place smelt of cold, damp, and mildew, and Porson shivered with chill and distaste.

Setting down his candle, he undressed and, snuffing out the light, climbed into bed. It was still snowing outside, and the wind moaned fitfully round the lonely inn. There was no warmth in the thin sheets on the bed, and for an hour or more Porson tossed and turned in abject, shivering misery.

Sometimes he fell to thinking of the old bus out there in the snow. But it was securely picketed down, and would come to little harm. Again, he thought of the

strange tale told by Rosenbaum. It was ridiculous, of course, to think that there was a vestige of truth in the story.

There were few old inns which had not some tale to tell of ghostly visitants, but Rosenbaum's story had been the absolute limit! The thing was an insult to any fellow's intelligence. But it was a strange place this, and dashed lonely——

At length Porson's eyes closed and he fell into a fitful sleep, to dream that he was flying the old Farman biplane through a blinding snowstorm with the ghost of McGoudie sitting in the rear seat! But the ghost of McGoudie was behaving like a fool. It had stretched out its hand and was pressing it tightly over Porson's mouth.

"Grrrr!" grunted Porson, and awoke with a start.

Full consciousness came at once, and with it a strange stirring at his scalp. For a hand was pressed tightly on his mouth, and by his bedside stood a dim and ghostly figure!

"Whassermarrer?" spluttered Porson, and struggled to rise.

"Whist, mon, whist!" came an agonised whisper from the dim figure by the bed, and its hand was withdrawn from Porson's mouth.

"What the dickens is the matter?" demanded Porson, sitting up.

"It's me—MacNab!" replied the figure huskily. "Get intae your claes!"

"What for, man?"

"Hssh!" whispered MacNab. "Th' ghost o' McGoudie's abroad the nicht!"

"What?"

"It's true, I'm tellin' ye! The moans an' groans o' th' puir creature waked me fra oot o' ma sleep!"

"My hat! You're—you're not pulling my leg, are you?"

"Nae, nae! It's th' truth I'm tellin' ye. Oh, mon, tae hear it oot there i' th' corridor fair turned ma stomach! Get intae your claes."

Porson obeyed, groping for his clothes in the darkness. He didn't believe that the ghost of McGoudie was abroad, but undoubtedly there was something strange astir.

"Are ye ready?" whispered MacNab. "Then keep close tae me!"

With that, MacNab gently opened the door of the room and peered out into the corridor. The doubting Porson, at his heels, suddenly caught his breath. Elusive, eerie, and utterly weird, a long-drawn moan came from the darkness of the corridor!

"Ye hear?" whispered MacNab.

"Yes, but—but I don't see anything!" gulped Porson.

"I've got some sample golf clubs i' ma room," whispered MacNab. "We'll get one apiece an' hunt for this puir ghostie."

On tiptoe, treading warily, with more than one backward glance, they went along the corridor to MacNab's room. And there, by the momentary light of a candle, Porson armed himself with a niblick and MacNab with a brassie.

The candle was blown out, and as MacNab opened the door there came again the long, unearthly moan! Then along the darkened corridor came gliding a dim white figure. With goggling eyes, Porson and MacNab watched it as it passed in silence within a few feet of them, to vanish along the corridor towards the staircase!

A low moan marked the course it took and galvanised the watchers into action.

"Come on!" whispered MacNab grimly, and, taking a fresh grip on his niblick, Porson followed him along the corridor. Something white and dim was descending the stairs.

"There it is!" whispered Porson.

"Ay," breathed MacNab. "It's gang doonstairs."

Side by side, the investigators followed. For an instant the ghostly figure seemed to hesitate, then glided into the parlour.

"Quick, noo, or we'll lose him!" breathed MacNab. Together he and Porson gained the foot of the stairs, and crossed on tiptoe to the half-open parlour door. Inside the parlour a strange sight met their gaze. In the glow from the dying fire the white phantom was plainly visible, erect and motionless in the centre of the room. But it was not the only occupant!

A man was standing on a chair by the fireplace. What on earth he was doing neither Porson nor MacNab could see, nor had they time to ascertain. For, in deep, sepulchral voice, the ghostly figure spoke.

"Scoundrel!" it said, and the hollowness of its voice echoed through the room.

The man on the chair wheeled. Something fell with a clatter into the fireplace. Then he shrieked. At the same moment the white, ghostly figure hurled itself forward. Its arms encircled the knees of the man on the chair, and he crashed to the floor, the phantom on top of him.

Porson and MacNab sprang forward.

"Stop it!" howled MacNab, springing forward, whilst with shaking fingers Porson lighted the lamp. The wicks flared, then burned with a steady glow, and Porson turned —to find Samuel Pugpie in long, white nightshirt and nightcap leaning pantingly against the mantelpiece; whilst MacNab was seated astride Rosenbaum!

. . . . .

It was an hour later. Porson, Alexander MacNab, and Samuel Pugpie were sitting over a blazing fire. Rosenbaum was glowering from the chair to which he had been bound by stout rope.

"It was my indigestion, you see," Samuel was explaining. "I get it chronic. It's fair agony while it lasts, and I had it so bad to-night that I couldn't help groaning a bit. Then I remembers that I have a bottle of stuff the doctor give me. I'd left it in the parlour, so I comes to get it. It's the first time I've blessed my indigestion, because if I hadn't had it that scoundrel"—he indicated the writhing Rosenbaum—"would have got away with that hunting picture which I'm keeping for Major Murray, who's abroad. Cutting it out of the frame, he was!"

“Is it valuable, then?” asked Porson.

“The major thinks so,” replied Samuel.

“It’s worth fifteen hundred pounds in London, any day!” snarled Rosenbaum. “I came here specially for it.”

“Ye dae weel tae come clean aboot it,” remarked Alexander MacNab. “But for why did ye tell us that tale o’ th’ ghost o’ McGoudie?”

“To scare you and keep you in your rooms,” snarled Rosenbaum.

“Ay”—MacNab nodded—“but ye couldna scare th’ laddie an’ me. Besides, I didna really believe ye. I’d niver heerd o’ this McGoudie, an’ I ken ivery guid gowfer. Noo, as I was tellin’ ye earlier in th’ evenin’, when Sandy Herd won th’ Open Championship ____”

“Shut your mouth!” said Mr. Rosenbaum savagely.

CHAPTER XI

BACKING UP PORSON!

"A PERFECTLY ghastly business!" remarked Algy Blenkinsop mournfully.

"Shockin'!" agreed the Hon. Reggie Marling, in a hushed sort of voice.

"It must have happened awfully suddenly," commented Percy Poulter.

"That's what I can't jolly well understand about it," chimed in Horace Pyeman. "What I mean to say, you've never noted any—er—symptoms, as it were, have you, Algy?"

"I have, heaps and heaps of times!" cut in young Woolerton. "Dash it, I remember once——"

There came a discreet knock, and the library door opened to admit the sleek and portly presence of the butler, Binns.

"Master George Porson!" he announced, and ushered that youth into the room.

"Hallo, you men!" greeted Porson cheerily. "I've brought my skates along. I hear there's ripping skating down at Frammington Meadows."

"There's no skating for us, Porson, old top," said Algy Blenkinsop hollowly. "Nor for you. You got my message?"

"Yes," assented Porson. "At least, Binns rang me up, gave me your compliments, and said you wanted me to come over here, to Slopperton Grange, at once. He didn't give any details, but I thought there was probably a skating party or something on. Anyway, here I am, and I've brought along a new pair of skates, which I must show you chaps——"

"We have no time for such—er—frivolities as skates," cut in Percy Poulter severely.

"Eh?" exclaimed Porson, staring.

"You don't know what's happened, or you wouldn't talk like that about skating," added Horace Pyeman.

"It's so unfeeling," supplemented Percy Poulter.

"Quite!" agreed Horace Pyeman.

"Well, what has happened, then?" demanded Porson. "You're standing talking like a couple of bally backchat comedians——"

"Ssh!"

"Hush!"

"Look here! What the dickens is wrong with the pair of you?" demanded Porson wrathfully. "What's wrong with the whole blessed five of you, if it comes to that. I've seen fellows up for a Head's flogging wearing the same sort of expressions as you. Dash it, anybody would think you had the cares of the world on your shoulders——"

“So we have—only worse than that,” butted in Percy Poulter.

“Well, what’s wrong, then?” reiterated Porson impatiently.

There was a moment of silence. Then young Woolerton drawled:

“As a matter of fact, Porson, old thing, Algy’s uncle, Colonel Blenkinsop, has suddenly gone off his nut!”

“Gone wonky, you know,” explained the Hon. Reggie.

“Gone wrong in his mind,” enlightened Horace Pyeman.

“Gone absolutely stark, staring, raving mad!” wound up Percy Poulter.

Porson stared at them suspiciously, then turned to Algy.

“I say,” he demanded, “are these rotters trying to pull my leg? Because if they are, I think their joke’s in jolly bad taste, and, what’s more, I’ll smack their silly heads! I ____”

“It’s quite correct. Porson, old top!” admitted Algy mournfully. “Uncle’s gone potty. We were discussing it when you arrived. As a matter of fact, that’s why we sent for you. We want your opinion.”

“But, my hat! When did it happen?” demanded Porson. “He must have gone dotty very suddenly. He was all right when I was round here for dinner the other night. Where is he now? Locked in his bed-room biting chunks out of the mattress, or what?”

“He’s in Scotland,” said Algy, “staying with some old friends of the family called MacHusky.”

“And I suppose these MacHuskys have written to tell you about it,” inquired Porson, “and to ask you to go and bring him away?”

“Well, no, they haven’t,” admitted Algy. “I don’t suppose they like to. As a matter of fact, uncle rang Binns up at some unearthly hour like nine o’clock this morning. That’s how we found out.”

“D’you mean to say that your uncle rang up to tell you that he’d suddenly gone daft?” began Porson, incredulously. “Because if that’s what you’re trying to tell me ____”

“No, no!” cut in Algy hastily. “You’re getting it wrong. We know he’s gone mad by the message which he gave to Binns.”

“Well, what was the message?”

“He said,” replied Algy, speaking slowly and distinctly, “that he wanted his favourite cow brought to MacHusky Castle without delay, and that you were to bring it in your aeroplane.”

“His favourite cow—in my aeroplane?” stuttered Porson.

“That’s what he said!” assented Algy gravely.

“But it’s absolute rot!” babbled Porson. “You’ve got the message wrong—Binns has got it wrong. There’s a mistake somewhere. No one but an idiot would expect me to be able to freight a bally cow in my aeroplane!”

“An idiot—exactly!” murmured young Woolerton. “That’s what we’ve been trying to tell you.”

“But—but—— Oh, dash it, I can’t think that the colonel would send a message like that!” spluttered Porson. “Perhaps he’s pulling our legs!”

“I can’t imagine uncle tramping five miles and expending the best part of ten bob for the sake of pulling our legs,” commented Algy dryly.

“What do you mean—tramping five miles?” demanded Porson.

“The MacHuskys are old-fashioned folk,” explained Algy. “They have no modern innovations in the castle, and the nearest telephone is in the village, five miles away.”

“But are you sure he said cow?” insisted Porson.

“Quite sure,” replied Algy. “We’ll have Binns in again for the umpteenth time, and you can question him yourself. He’ll be getting a bit fed-up with it by now.”

He pressed the bell, and a few moments later the library door opened and the portly Binns hovered on the threshold.

“Oh, Binns,” said Algy, “will you please tell Mr. Porson exactly what passed between you and my uncle over the phone this morning?”

“Keep nothing back, Binns,” said the Hon. Reggie encouragingly.

“Not even a comma,” added Percy Poulter.

Binns sighed wearily. It seemed to him as though the whole morning had been spent in his being examined and cross-examined by Algy and his friends on the subject of the colonel’s message.

However, smoothing his few scant hairs with ponderous sweep of podgy hand, and prefacing his remarks with a discreet and well-modulated cough, he began:

“At approximately nine a.m. this morning I ’eard the telephone-bell ring in the ’all. Picking up the receiver, I says:

“ ‘Hallo!’

“ ‘Hallo! Is that you, Binns?’ says a voice which I at once recognises as Colonel Blenkinsop’s. ‘This is Colonel Blenkinsop speaking. I want you to tell Master Algernon to arrange with Master Porson to bring my favourite cow at once to MacHusky Castle!’

“ ‘I beg your pardon, sir,’ I says, for if I may say so, gentlemen, I was took aback. ‘I beg your pardon, sir, but did you say cow?’

“ ‘Yes, I said cow,’ replies Colonel Blenkinsop, and was kind enough to spend a minute in asking me if my ’earin’ was in any way afflicted. I assures him that it wasn’t, and then he says:

“ ‘Tell Master Algernon to dispatch the beast at once. I intend to give it to Mrs. MacHusky as a Christmas present.’

“ ‘Do you wish Master Porson to bring the animal by train, sir?’ I asks.

“ ‘No, you——’ he says. I didn’t quite catch what came after the ‘you.’ Then he says, ‘I want Master Porson to fly over with the brute.’

"Very good, sir!' I says. 'I will give Master Algernon the message.' He rings off then, gentlemen, and that's all I knows about it."

The six youths exchanged glances.

"Did my uncle seem at all excited?" asked Algy.

"Very excited at times, sir," replied Binns. "Very husky as well, if I may say so, sir."

"You're sure it was his uncle speaking?" demanded Horace Pyeman. "What I mean to say, some ass might have been impersonating him."

"It was Colonel Blenkinsop's voice, sir," affirmed Binns emphatically.

"And a cow?" demanded Percy Poulter.

"A cow—'is favourite cow, sir," said Binns firmly.

Algy nodded.

"Right-ho, Binns!" he said. "You can push off now. Get yourself a cigar out of the cabinet in the smoke-room."

"Thank you very much, sir!"

Binns withdrew, closing the door softly behind him.

"Well, there you are!" said Percy Poulter triumphantly, turning to Porson. "Now do you believe the poor old bean's gone off his nut? Wanting a cow by aeroplane—your aeroplane!"

"And to give it away as a Christmas present," commented Horace Pyeman. "Fancy anybody giving a cow as a Christmas present!"

"You're a lot of footling chumps," said Porson calmly. "A set of prize asses—a pack of drivelling infants, suffering from arrested development of the brain."

"Eh? What?"

They gaped at him wrathfully, astonished.

"Colonel Blenkinsop's got a jolly sight more sense than the whole crowd of you put together," went on Porson, "and I'll prove it to you."

"Delighted if you would, old thing!" snorted Reggie.

"If you've ever looked at that notice-board that I've got stuck outside my cottage," continued Porson, "you'll know that it says in jolly big letters 'BY AIR TO ANYWHERE.' Well, I wouldn't advertise a thing if I couldn't carry it out, and Colonel Blenkinsop knows that. He wants his cow, and he wants me to take it to him. I shall!"

"But how, fathead?" demanded Percy Poulter. "You can't possibly take it in that old Farman biplane of yours. Unless, of course, you propose to slaughter the poor beast and cart it away in chunks. One thing's certain—you can't freight that cow alive in your aeroplane."

"And that," said Porson triumphantly, "is the whole point. Colonel Blenkinsop never mentioned my aeroplane. He merely said that I had to fly the cow to MacHusky Castle. He means I've got to charter some big bus, like those in which animals are carried across the Channel. That's what he means, and if you weren't a set of howling cuckoos you'd have seen it before this."

A sudden silence fell on the hearers. It was broken by Reggie.

"I say," he said slowly, "I believe old Porson's hit it."

"I believe he has!" admitted Percy Poulter.

"So do I," agreed Horace Pyeman.

But Algy Blenkinsop and young Woolerton looked dubious.

"It's an ingenious way of looking at it," murmured the latter, "but I still think the poor old fruit's got a sudden big bee in his bonnet."

"Well, anyway, I'm going to hire a bus, and I'm going to take his cow to him," said Porson defiantly. "Which is his favourite cow, Algy?"

"The black-and-white one called Bluebell," replied Algy. "But where on earth do you think you'll be able to hire a bus? If MacHusky was on the phone I'd ring him up and have a few private words with him."

"But he isn't on the phone, you say, so you can't," said Porson. "And all the time we're gassing here your poor old uncle's probably pacing the battlements of MacHusky Castle, waiting anxiously for his cow. I wonder who'll be the best people to approach to ask for the loan of a decent sized baggage plane?"

He walked to the window and stood gazing out across the deer park, with its vista of leafless trees. Then suddenly he wheeled, his eyes shining.

"I've got it!" he cried. "Haven't those Tuttleberry-cum-Hacklehurst Flying Club fellows bought an Army surplus non-rigid airship?"

"They have," said young Woolerton, looking at him strangely.

"Then we'll take the cow to MacHusky Castle in that, if they'll lend it us," cried Porson.

Woolerton sprang to his feet.

"We'll jolly well make them lend us it!" he said delightedly. Then a sudden thought seemed to strike him, for he added: "But can you fly an airship like that?"

"Oh, yes!" replied Porson modestly. "I had a month on them when I was taking my pilot's certificate. I learned on both lighter and heavier-than-air machines. They're easier to fly than aeroplanes, anyway. But I'll want a bit of assistance, you know. Are you chaps game?"

"Are we?" demanded Woolerton. "Are we backing up Porson?"

"We are," came the unanimous and emphatic chorus of assent.

"Then you look after the cow, Algy," said Woolerton, "and I'll get hold of Cresswell and fix up about borrowing their old blimp."

"What's a blimp?" inquired Percy Poulter.

"A non-rigid airship, fathead," replied Woolerton sweetly.

Porson and young Woolerton experienced no difficulty in obtaining a loan of the airship. As a matter of fact the committee of the Tuttleberry-cum-Hacklehurst Flying Club were rather fed-up with the old blimp, and inclined to look upon it with a somewhat jaundiced eye.

It had been bought by Eustace Lowther-Lowther, a former president of the club. Eustace had not consulted his committee when he bought it. His idea had been, apparently, that it would be rather jolly to fly his friends about it in—a sort of aerial charabanc, as it were.

Anyway, it had descended upon the Tuttleberry-cum-Hacklehurst aerodrome one Saturday afternoon, literally from out of the blue. From the control cockpit had stepped a War pilot—a grizzled veteran.

"She's yours," he had said darkly. "And I wish you luck!"

He had travelled home by train after that, without explaining what he meant. But they soon found out. The old blimp was naturally quite tractable whilst on the ground. But once it got up into the air it would develop a temperament and become moody.

Sometimes it would start off with being quite frisky and skittish, then, for no apparent reason, it would go off into sulks. The slightest touch on the control-wheel and rudder-bar might send it sheering wildly, bobbing its blunt nose to every point of the compass in mad abandon. On the other hand, it might stolidly refuse to take any notice whatsoever of the controls, and just go wallowing its way along, surlily ignoring the futile hand which was supposed to guide it and control its course.

So when Porson and company requested a loan of the thing, the committee agreed without hesitation, and Thomas Cresswell, who had succeeded Eustace in the presidency of the club, led the way to the long shed in which the airship was housed.

Cresswell and his committee appeared to be under the impression that the freighting of the cow to MacHusky Castle was something in the nature of an elaborate and glorified rag, which had originated in the fat head of Algy Blenkinsop.

"Do you," he inquired, "intend to take this cow inside the cabin with you? What I mean to say is, if an armchair will be of any use I'm sure the committee——"

"Don't be funny!" advised young Woolerton. Then, after consultation with Porson, it was decided that a carpenter be sought and instructed to fix a thin wooden partition across the spacious cabin of the gondola.

"Bluebell can have one half, and we'll have the other," said Woolerton. "That's fair."

"Quite fair," agreed Cresswell. "I'll lend you the club carpenter."

"Thanks! We couldn't possibly reach MacHusky Castle before nightfall, so I vote we push off in the morning, Porson, what?"

"Yes, first thing in the morning," agreed Porson. "I'll stay here to-day and overhaul the engine and controls."

"Right-ho!" replied Woolerton. "I'll fix up with Algy that we all stay the night with him at the Grange. And I say, Cresswell, I shall expect your committee to be here in their poshest morning dress, to bid us adieu and bon voyage, and all that."

"We'll be here," grinned Cresswell. "Wild horses wouldn't hold us back."

. . . . .

“Ready Oi be an’ willin’; but where be ol’ cow?”

George Porson, Algy Blenkinsop, Pyeman, Poulter, and the Hon. Reggie gaped at the white-smocked and bewhiskered country yokel who came hobbling into the breakfast-room at Slopperton Grange an hour before dawn the following morning.

“Great Scott, it’s Woolerton!” gasped Algy. “What the dickens are you rigged out in those things for, you crass ass?”

“He told me last night that he intended to dress to fit the part,” explained Horace Pyeman. “I didn’t know what he meant at the time.”

Woolerton addressed himself to Algy.

“Where be ol’ cow, zur?” he demanded in a quavering treble. “A willin’ laad be Oi, allus civil an’ ready.”

“You don’t mean to say you intend going to MacHusky Castle in that beastly smock and things, do you, fathead?” demanded Algy.

“Es, zur,” said Woolerton meekly. “Oi be on’y a poor workin’ laad, but ’ungered I be summat fearful.”

He attacked a ham on the sideboard with relish.

“Look here, you chump——” began Algy wildly.

“Zur?” inquired young Woolerton, as respectfully as he could with his mouth full of ham.

“Are you going to take those confounded things off? What the dickens do you think uncle and Mr. MacHusky will say if you roll up at the castle like that?”

“Oi’m danged if Oi knows!” replied young Woolerton. “But Oi ’opes they’ll say, ‘There, laad, there be a shillin’ for ye. It be ’mazin’ cold, bean’t it?’ ”

“He, he, he!” tittered the Hon. Reggie. “You’re rather priceless, y’know, Woolly, old bean.”

“He’s a prize ass, you mean!” snorted Algy. “I suppose there’s no use arguing with the idiot.”

“Not a bit,” said Porson cheerily. “Well, if you chaps are ready we’d better be shoving along.”

There was a general exodus from the breakfast-room. Greatcoats and mufflers were collected, and the party sallied out into the cold greyness of the early winter morning. Bluebell, the black-and-white cow, was awaiting them on the gravel in front of the house in the charge of a shivering farmhand.

“Ah, there she be!” quavered young Woolerton. “Giv’ Oi th’ rope, laad!”

He took possession of the leading rope and the procession moved off down the drive, watched from the breakfast-room windows by the portly Binns and the first and second footmen.

“That young Woolerton’s a fair caution,” ventured the second footman with a smirk.

Binns surveyed the speaker loftily.

“A little weak!” he remarked. “Yes, a little weak in the ’ead, if I may say so!”

Porson and his companions had a long walk in front of them, but they moved briskly and, when possible, cut across fields which were firm in the grip of hard frost. Their blood was circulating freely and they felt fit for anything when, eventually, the canvas hangars of the Tuttleberry-cum-Hacklehurst Flying Club loomed into view.

"They've got the airship out of its shed, anyway," grunted Algy. "I must say they've behaved jolly decently about this!"

"They're jolly good sports, that's what they are!" said Reggie. "We'll stand them a dinner over at the Towers when we get back."

"If ever we do get back," interjected Percy Poulter, gazing askance at the grey envelope of the blimp. "We might never get to MacHusky Castle, let alone get back!"

A cheer arose from the small but select crowd which had gathered to witness the departure, as the Porson party arrived on the aerodrome, preceded by the white-smocked Woolerton, leading the amiable Bluebell.

Eustace Lowther-Lowther was there, hideous in screaming plus-fours and with gaudy, multi-coloured scarf twined negligently around his throat.

"He, he, he!" he giggled, as the party marched up. "The idiots are really going, after all!"

"There's one idiot that's not!" said Horace Pyeman pointedly. "And that's you!"

"I don't want to go," yelped Eustace. "I wouldn't go if you asked me. I——"

"Will sum kind gen'elman cover up this 'ere scarecrow?" quavered Woolerton. "It be frightenin' ol' cow summat fearful!"

"Why, you cheeky ass, you!" gasped Eustace. "I'll smack your head for you——"

Then he discovered that the yokel was Woolerton. He doubled up, squealing with shrill mirth.

"He, he, he!" he cackled. "Did you ever see such a lot of comic loonies? They ought to be in a home——"

Woolerton turned Bluebell lumberingly towards the improvised gangway which led into the cabin of the airship gondola. The heavy, bulging flank of Bluebell bumped the mirthful Eustace. The late president of the flying club sat down heavily in a pail of nice, thick, clinging grease which had been used for greasing the control wires.

The carpenter had fixed a partition, dividing the cabin of the airship into two; and willing hands and encouraging pats ushered Bluebell into the portion which had been reserved for her. There was plenty of hay for her to lie down on, and she seemed assured of a most comfortable journey—an infinitely more comfortable journey than she would have experienced either in a jolting cattle-wagon by railroad or in a narrow, hemmed-in pen in the bowels of a cattle-ship.

Meanwhile, Porson had pulled on his flying kit and taken his seat in the forward control cockpit. Cresswell clambered up and jerked the starting-handle of the engine when Porson had switched on. The engine took up with a roar, which died away as Porson throttled down.

"All aboard!" roared Algy, his voice audible above the quietly running engine.

The six of them were safely aboard and the gangway was being unshipped, when Woolerton appeared at the as yet unclosed door of the gondola.

"Oi be wantin' a word wi' Mister Lowther-Lowther!" he quavered.

"What the dickens do you want, you blithering idiot?" snarled Eustace, busily engaged in wiping grease from his plus-fours.

"It be summat Oi want to say confidenshul loike!"

"See what he wants," said somebody. And the grinning spectators pushed Eustace forward.

"This it be!" smirked Woolerton.

He bent down. Before the startled Eustace knew what had happened, Woolerton had him by the jacket-collar and had hauled him kicking and protesting into the gondola. Then the doors banged shut and Eustace was a prisoner.

"A willin' laad be Oi, allus civil and ready," Woolerton addressed the joyous spectators from the cabin window, "but a bit o' 'elp Oi do loike. If so be you gen'elmen can spare Mister Lowther, 'e'll 'elp me wi' th' ol' cow!"

"You can have him!" bellowed the spectators. "We don't want him!"

Young Woolerton raised his battered hat. The mooring-ropes were cast loose. The roar of the engine rose to a deep, pulsating note. Slowly the airship commenced to glide forward and, with a parting cheer from the crowd, it rose gracefully up into the morning air.

"Blighters!" said Eustace, sitting on the floor of the cabin. And there was a world of venom in the word!

. . . . .

The short winter day was drawing to a close, and dusk was creeping in over snow-clad rugged heights and silent glens. Windows were beginning to glow warm and golden in the little village of Kinlochrie, five miles from the grim castle of the MacHusky.

Suddenly, from far away in the greyness of the darkening sky, came a faint drone. It grew steadily in volume, bringing men, women, and children to their doors to peer upwards in anxious and excited speculation.

The drone deepened into a roar and, like some huge mythical flying monster of a long dead age, an airship emerged from the shadows of the coming night and thundered low over the roofs of Kinlochrie.

Once, twice, it circled over the village at less than two hundred feet, then from it there dropped, flaring, a small parachute. A wild scamper of boys and girls, large and small, to retrieve that parachute to which was attached a message:

"We are going to land. We require assistance."

The village schoolmaster, with creditable promptitude, took charge of operations. He marshalled every able-bodied man in the place, and trooped with them to the snow-

covered moorland outside the village, over which the airship was dropping lower and lower.

It was less than twenty feet up, with propeller barely ticking over, when out went the snaking mooring-ropes, to be pounced on by the stalwart villagers. Then slowly to earth drifted the airship, to be securely anchored to great stakes driven into the ground by a rapidly working party under the supervision of the blacksmith.

So well tethered was the blimp that the gondola bottom was resting on the ground. The wide doors of the cabin were thrown open, and out marched Algy Blenkinsop, Horace Pyeman, Percy Poulter, and the Honourable Reggie Marling.

The villagers raised a cheer.

Then, as though the gondola was a modern sort of Noah's Ark from which the comedian makes his entrance in pantomime, there lurched out a weird figure in loud plus-fours. It was Eustace Lowther-Lowther. Eustace was half-frozen, utterly miserable. The pimples on his face were red, his nose was blue, and his face was white. A patriotic colouring, but a ghastly effect.

The villagers raised another cheer.

Then from this floating box of tricks appeared a white-smocked, grinning Woolerton, leading a black-and-white cow. He raised his battered hat to all and sundry.

The villagers gasped, then cheered again.

And lastly came George Porson, drawing off his flying-gloves, his expression that of one who sees completed a job well done.

A thunderous cheer rose from the villagers. For this was undoubtedly the controlling genius. This was the fellow who had brought the airship to Kinlochrie.

Again they cheered, and yet again.

"Where," demanded Algy Blenkinsop, "is MacHusky Castle?"

They jostled and pushed each other in a scramble to lead the way to the castle of their chief, the MacHusky. Lanterns were procured—and bagpipes. The triumphal march to MacHusky Castle began.

. . . . .

Colonel Blenkinsop was sitting with his host over late tea. A great fire crackled and blazed in the hearth, and curtains were drawn. To them came dashing a white-faced retainer.

"Maister, maister," he gasped, "there's a mob wi' sivin Sassenachs i' their midst clamourin' at th' gates! Sivin Sassenachs an' a muckle coo!"

"A mob?" echoed the MacHusky, and strode off to investigate, with the colonel trotting snuffing at his heels. For the colonel was suffering from a severe cold in the nose.

"What's this?" demanded the MacHusky, confronting the crowd surging round the entrance to the castle.

Algy Blenkinsop thrust himself forward.

“My uncle, Colonel Blenkinsop, telephoned for his favourite cow, sir,” he said. “We’ve helped Porson to bring it.”

Colonel Blenkinsop darted from behind his host.

“Dow!” he bellowed, for one’s enunciation is invariably ruined by a cold in the nose. “Dow, you fool! I didn’d wand my favourid dow. I told Binns I wanded my favourid dow—nod dow!”

The crowd, including Bluebell, gaped at him.

“Dow!” he raved. “Nod dow!”

“Write it down, uncle!” counselled Algy gently.

After minutes of furious refusal and all-embracing denunciations, the colonel grabbed paper and pencil, wrote a word, and thrust the paper savagely at his nephew.

Algy Blenkinsop took it, glanced at it, then in stricken silence handed it to Porson.

“Chow!” said Porson dazedly. “He wanted his favourite Chow. He wanted a dog, not a cow!”

Till late that night the rumbling laughter of the genial MacHusky was heard in the castle.

“And they say the younger generation is lacking in enterprise,” he chuckled. “That boy Porson, now, who piloted the airship. There’s a future for that young man, I’ll wager.”

“Yed, dere id!” agreed the now mollified colonel heartily, if thickly. “And now dad he’s brod Bluebell, I insid dad Mrs. MacHusky has id insded of de dow!”

“Instead of the Chow,” translated his host. “And in return for their pluck and initiative, I intend to give the boys a rattling good time as long as they care to remain here as my guests.”

And he did. Even Eustace Lowther-Lowther voted it the best Christmas holiday he’d ever spent!

CHAPTER XII

THE WRECKERS!

HE was a plump young man, rather red and coarse of feature. His eyes were, perhaps, a little too closely set. With gloved hands in the pockets of his heavy, leather motoring-coat, he stood staring at the notice-board by the garden gate of George Porson's cottage:

PORSON'S PASSENGER SERVICE!
BY AIR TO ANYWHERE!

Thus ran the legend on the board. The plump young man nodded.

"This'll be the fellow," he remarked to himself. "I hope he's at home. Beastly awkward if he isn't!"

Opening the rickety gate, he marched up the garden-path to the front door and knocked. It wasn't a timid or unassuming sort of knock. It was the imperious knock of one who is very sure of himself and his business.

The door was opened by a good-natured-looking youth of some seventeen summers, wearing an old school blazer and oil-stained flannel bags.

"Good afternoon!" he remarked cheerily.

The plump young man frowned, as might one who is addressed more breezily than respectfully.

"I wish," he announced loftily, "to see this Porson fellow. Kindly inform him that a gentleman wishes to see him on urgent business!"

The youth grinned.

"I am Porson," he replied—"George Porson!"

"Yes, yes," said the plump young man testily. "But it's not you whom I wish to see, boy. It is your father, or elder brother—the flying Porson, in fact!"

"Well, that's me!" replied Porson cheerfully, if ungrammatically. "I am the—er—flying Porson!"

"You?" exclaimed his visitor. "But, confound it, you're only a kid!"

"I'm seventeen!" Porson informed him.

The young man gaped.

"But are you the Porson who has a passenger-carrying aeroplane for hire?" he demanded.

"Yes."

"Do you pilot it yourself?"

"Certainly!"

"Oh!" The plump young man seemed somewhat taken aback. "I suppose it's quite safe to go up with you, isn't it?"

"Anyone who is under the impression that it isn't," replied Porson coldly, "is not obliged to go up with me!"

His visitor digested this in silence for a few moments.

"Well, look here!" he blurted out suddenly. "My name is Hake—Mr. Horace Hake! It's absolutely imperative that I reach the Frigate Inn, between Sandy Cove and Dunsea, before dusk. Can you take me there?"

"The Frigate Inn?" repeated Porson thoughtfully. "You mean that lonely inn which stands on the sand dunes, miles from anywhere, opposite the Cutlass Rocks?"

"Yes, that's the place!" replied the other eagerly. "I was motoring there, but my car broke down outside Sudcombe village. I must get there before dusk. Can you do it?"

"Yes," said Porson, eyeing him, "I can. Will you step inside for a few moments while I finish washing-up my lunch-dishes?"

Mr. Hake stepped inside, with a disdainful sniff. Lunch-dishes—washing-up——!

Porson escorted his visitor to the small and comfortable parlour, where a fire was glowing and crackling cheerfully on the hearth.

"Beastly cold outside, this weather!" grunted Mr. Hake, and strode towards the fire, drawing off his gloves.

Then suddenly he came to an abrupt halt. Gingerly, he fished in the inside pocket of his coat and produced a small cylindrical parcel—like a cocoa-tin wrapped in brown paper, and heavily sealed. He placed it carefully on the table, made certain that it couldn't roll off, then stepped forward and spread his podgy hands out to the fire.

"Buck up!" he commanded over his shoulder. "Get your blessed dishes washed up and we'll push off. Haven't you got a housekeeper, or anything?"

"I'm afraid I haven't," replied Porson. "Well, if you'll excuse me, I shan't be long."

"No, don't!" grunted Mr. Hake.

Porson withdrew to the tiny scullery, where Bill, his black-and-white mongrel, was waiting expectantly for a bone.

"Bill," he murmured, closing the door, "I rather fancy that our Mr. Hake is well named. There's something fishy about him!"

Bill thumped his stumpy tail as though in hearty endorsement of the remark.

"Decent of you to agree with me," continued Porson, doing yeoman work with the drying-cloth, "considering that you haven't met the gentleman yet! That package now." He suddenly seemed to recollect that it was in his pocket, and he pulled up short as though he'd been shot. "H'm! Strange!"

He placed the last dish in its appointed place and, taking his flying kit from its peg in the narrow hallway, re-entered the parlour.

Mr. Hake was standing with his back to the fire, feet straddled wide apart on the hearthrug. The small cylindrical package still lay where he had placed it on the table.

"Oh, by the way, Porson," he remarked, with a casual off-handedness which was painfully laboured, "I've been thinking that you're probably wondering why on earth I want to go to a place like the Frigate Inn."

Porson stared at him.

"Why should I wonder?" he demanded pointedly.

Mr. Hake moved uneasily.

"Well, it's such a beastly lonely and isolated sort of spot, you know! What I mean to say is, you're bound to be wondering why a fellow like me wants to go to such a ghastly hole. Now I'll explain."

"There's really not the slightest reason why you should," murmured Porson.

"But I insist!" replied Mr. Hake firmly. "Yes, I insist! Now, it's like this. I am the owner of a small, eight hundred tons vessel called the *Seamew*. During the early hours of this morning she went ashore on the Cutlass Rocks opposite the Frigate Inn."

"Rotten luck!"

"Yes, it was rotten luck!" went on Mr. Hake. "In fact, you'll say it was dashed rotten luck when I tell you that all my money is invested in the *Seamew*, and that she is not insured!"

"Not insured?" echoed Porson.

"No!" said Mr. Hake mournfully. "I suppose it's my own fault, really, I should have had her properly insured. Now I want to get to the Frigate Inn as soon as possible to see if there is any chance of refloating her. If there isn't, it's going to be a big loss to me!"

"Where's the crew?" asked Porson.

"Oh, they've all gone home by train from Dunsea. Captain Crib, the skipper, telephoned me from there this morning. He's waiting to meet me at the inn."

"Does he think there's any chance of getting her off the Cutlass Rocks?"

"No, I'm afraid not," Mr. Hake replied sadly. "He thinks she'll be a total wreck after a few tides."

"Well, we'll shove off at once!" said Porson. "I'm ready when you are."

"Yes, let's be going," replied Mr. Hake anxiously.

He drew on his gloves, stepped to the table, and picking up the small package, proceeded to place it carefully in his inside pocket. Then he hesitated, looking questioningly at Porson.

"No fear of our crashing, is there?" he demanded.

"Not the slightest," Porson assured him confidently.

"All the same, I think——" murmured Mr. Hake.

He did not complete the sentence, but withdrew the package from his pocket and kept it in his gloved hand.

Porson led the way round to the field at the rear of the cottage, where his old Maurice Farman biplane was standing in front of the barn which did duty as a hangar.

Mr. Hake, it appeared, didn't know very much about aeroplanes. But his jaw dropped as he took in the long, flat wings, void of camber and dope and patched in many places.

"I say! Is this your machine?" he demanded nervously.

"Yes," replied Porson shortly.

In time, he supposed, he'd get used to the sudden unnerving effect the sight of his ancient biplane had on the majority of his intending passengers.

"Are those—those wires meant to be loose like that?" demanded Mr. Hake. He indicated the miscellaneous assortment of sagging bracing wires and flying wires.

"No, not exactly," admitted Porson. "It's largely a matter of taste, I suppose. Some of those Snipe or Blackburn Bluebird pilots wouldn't like 'em that way, of course; but I prefer it."

"Do you?" inquired Mr. Hake. "But is it quite safe?"

"Safe?" Porson laughed with the easy confidence of the man who knows. "Safe? I should jolly well think it is safe! Now, if you'll just get up into the rear seat there, I'll switch on and swing the prop."

Mr. Hake nodded. But before clambering into the low, box-like cockpit, he reached up and placed the small package carefully on the cockpit seat. Then, swinging himself up, he established himself as comfortably as he could on the low seat, and picking up the package, sat with it in his gloved hand.

Porson noted the solicitous care with which that package was handled by Hake, and he was intrigued.

"Fishy!" he communed with himself, as he switched on and swung the heavy, four-bladed propeller. "Decidedly fishy!"

The old thirty-five horse-power Green engine picked up with a clattering roar, which died away somewhat as Porson swung himself up to the front seat and closed down the throttle. Drawing off one of his flying-gloves, Porson sent a shrill whistle echoing across the frost-bound field, and from a distant hedgerow came tearing the small black-and-white bundle that was Bill.

Reaching the machine, Bill leapt up to the front seat and, scrambling into the canvas cockpit, settled himself snugly and pantingly at Porson's feet, but clear of the rudder-bar.

"I say!" roared Mr. Hake, to make himself heard above the noise of the engine. "Is that dog coming with us?"

"Yes," replied Porson over his shoulder. "He invariably flies with me. Any objections?"

"No!" grunted Hake.

"Right-ho! Then sit tight!"

The engine roared and banged alarmingly as Porson opened up the throttle, and slowly the ancient Farman commenced to move forward over the hard and bumpy

ground. Porson taxied it to the nearest hedge, then swung into what little wind there was that raw and cold afternoon.

He had the whole field in front of him for the take-off. Giving the old bus the full throttle, he commenced to surge lumberingly forward, bumping, swaying, and jolting in a manner which set the plump Hake bouncing in his seat.

"I say!" roared that individual, between bumps. "Is this necessary?"

Porson did not reply. He was used to some such query from his passengers at this stage of the proceedings. He pulled back the control-stick, his eyes on the weird-looking dashboard in front of him, and the old Farman lifted sluggishly into the air, bumped heavily, lifted again, and this time stayed up.

Climbing laboriously, Porson circled once with wide and careful banks, then pressed on the rudder-bar and swung the machine towards the distant coast where lay the Frigate Inn.

The flight which ensued was uneventful. Blue with cold, clutching tenaciously at his small package, Mr. Hake sat with chattering teeth, with his back to the whirling pusher propeller. At eight hundred feet he was borne over fields, hard in the grip of unremitting frost, frozen lakes, leafless woods and hedgerows, greying in the dusk of the shortening winter day.

Then, after what seemed a shivering eternity to him, he saw far ahead the thin white line of breaking water which marked the coast. Porson, peering downwards, pressed on the rudder-bar and swung a few degrees to port. He had flown a good course, and as he swung away from the little fishing village of Dunsea, he pushed forward the control-stick.

He glided down with engine running at half-throttle till he was less than two hundred feet above the sand dunes. For fifteen minutes he flew, hugging the desolate beach, then ahead he saw a glimmer of light through the deepening dusk. It came from a square, stark building standing solitary and alone amidst the sand dunes.

"Frigate Inn!" he roared, pointing, and Mr. Hake nodded.

As he circled low, looking for a landing-place, Porson saw the black hull of a small coasting steamer close inshore on the Cutlass Rocks.

"Seems to have told the truth, anyway!" he soliloquised. "That, I suppose, is the *Seamew*!"

About a quarter of a mile behind the inn was a tolerably flat stretch of short, crisp, seaside turf. The old Maurice Farman came side-slipping down towards it out of the dusk, and landed with engine cut out. Kicking on full rudder to bring the tail-skid into play as a brake, Porson brought the machine to a quivering halt.

"Thank goodness that's over!" said Mr. Hake, through chattering teeth, as he clambered stiffly from the cockpit. "Here, hold this till I get down!"

He handed Porson the small package and dropped to the ground with the grace of a clumsy elephant.

"Right?" inquired Porson. "Then catch!"

He lifted his hand to throw down the package.

"Don't!" howled Mr. Hake in agonised accents. "Don't do that, you ass! Don't throw it!"

He reached up a podgy hand and took the package from Porson.

"There's something in there that—that I don't want broken," he said lamely. "A—a most delicate instrument!"

"For use at the wreck?" suggested Porson blandly.

The effect on Mr. Hake was remarkable. He glared at Porson with blazing eyes, swallowing visibly. Then:

"Mind your own confounded business!" he snarled, and, turning on his heel, strode away across the sand dunes towards the inn.

Porson sat in the cockpit staring after him.

"Then there is something fishy about Mr. Hake, after all, Bill, old chap!" he murmured. "I thought he was going to try to dot me one on the nose for that remark of mine—a most harmless remark, too."

He sat a moment, musing, then, rising to his feet, busied himself filling up the petrol-tank and replenishing the oil-feed.

"Just as well to be ready for a quick take-off," he remarked. "Now we'll see what's doing at the inn!"

Covering the engine loosely with its tarpaulin, he and Bill set off for the lonely inn. Not a sound broke the stillness save the murmur of the sea breaking on the beach and the long-drawn, plaintive cry of some wheeling gull.

Rounding the stark, gaunt building which was Frigate Inn, Porson knocked on the weather-beaten front door. The innkeeper, a pallid-faced fellow clad in a pair of dirty trousers and with only a waistcoat over his shirt, came slipslopping from somewhere in the rear.

"Well, what d'yer want?" he growled.

"Tea, please!" said Porson cheerfully.

The fellow hesitated.

"Are yer the chap wot's brought Mister 'Ake 'ere?" he demanded.

"The same," replied Porson.

"Huh!" The innkeeper pondered. "Well, I s'pose it's orlright! Yer'd better come in. Mister 'Ake and Cap'n Crib 'ave gorn off ter th' wreck."

Turning, he led the way along a mildewed passageway to a small, sparsely-furnished parlour, lighted by a smoky and swinging oil-lamp. A fire of sea-coal and driftwood spluttered flaringly on the hearth, but for all that there was a dampness in the atmosphere of the room which spoke of its being little used.

The innkeeper withdrew to prepare some sort of tea, and after stirring the fire with the toe of his shoe and taking a walk round the room, Porson wandered back along the passageway to the front door.

Night was coming on apace now. The *Seamew* lay awash on the rocks on a fairly even keel, little more than two hundred yards from the beach. Porson could distinguish the forms of two men silhouetted on the deck, and as he watched they disappeared below. He lingered on, now peering towards the silent *Seamew*, now watching Bill scampering madly along the beach.

"Yer tea's ready!"

The unpleasant voice of the innkeeper behind him brought Porson about and, after a shrill whistle to summon Bill, he returned to the dreary parlour and attacked an unappetising meal of coarse bread, weak tea, and rancid butter. But he ate heartily, for the flip through the cold air had given him an appetite which even the fare of Frigate Inn could not balk.

He had scarcely finished when there came the tread of heavy feet in the passageway, and Mr. Hake strode into the room, followed by a huge, bearded fellow wearing a broken-peaked nautical cap, reefer jacket over well-darned blue jersey, and serge trousers tucked into heavy, knee-high sea-boots.

"Oh, hallo, Porson!" greeted Hake heartily. "Glad to see you're looking after yourself. This is Captain Crib, the master of the *Seamew*!"

Captain Crib grunted, surveying Porson from beneath a matted tangle of eyebrows.

"I say"—Hake's voice was low and propitiating—"I'm sorry I was rather curt out there when we landed, but I was so jolly scared that you were going to smash that—that instrument, that it rather upset me. No offence, I hope?"

"Not at all!" replied Porson courteously. "Don't mention it! I hope you found that your vessel can be refloated?"

Hake shook his head.

"I'm afraid it's hopeless," he said sorrowfully. "There's a great hole in her plates where she's bumped herself on the rocks. I'm afraid I'll have to give her up as a total loss!"

Captain Crib had lighted a short black clay pipe and was sucking stolidly. As a master who had lost his ship he seemed singularly unconcerned. Perhaps, thought Porson, it wasn't the first one he'd had to abandon.

"Well, I'm jolly sorry," he said, turning again to Hake. "You and Captain Crib must feel rather fed-up about it!"

"I am deeply distressed!" replied Hake unctuously. "Captain Crib says he will never forgive himself. But his steering-gear broke down with him. That was the trouble!"

"Oh, that was the trouble!" remarked Porson.

"Ay, that was the trouble!" growled Captain Crib.

Then there was silence for a few moments. It was broken by Hake.

"I suppose," he remarked with studied indifference, "that you'll be shoving off home again now?"

"Shortly!" assented Porson. "Bill and I are going to have a walk along the beach first!"

“But it’ll be pitch dark soon!” objected Hake. “What on earth do you want to go along the beach for?”

“Oh, just for a stroll!” remarked Porson easily.

He sauntered from the room and out of the inn, with Bill gambolling at his heels. Reaching the beach, he seated himself on the gunwale of the ship’s boat which had conveyed Hake and his skipper to the *Seamew* and back.

He sat there, swinging his feet, plunged in thought, till there loomed up out of the darkness the burly figure of Captain Crib.

“Get off’n that boat!” he growled.

“I’m not doing any harm, dash it, am I?” retorted Porson.

“Never mind! You get off’n that boat!” was the surly reply.

Porson slid from the gunwale, and, without a word, sauntered away along the darkened beach, dragging his feet. More than once he kicked some hard object, but at length he found what he wanted—an empty bottle, corked, washed up by the sea.

From his pocket he drew a box of matches and placed the contents in the bottle, ramming home the cork. He whistled softly, and Bill came racing to him out of the darkness.

“Come on, Bill!” he whispered. “I may be acting like a prize ass, but I don’t think so!”

He walked to the water’s edge and took off his shoes and heavy flying coat. Placing the bottle inside his shirt, he deliberately walked into the sea. The water was cold—icy cold; but his jaw was set and there was grim determination in his eyes.

Next moment he was striking out through the darkness towards where he judged the *Seamew* lay. And by his side, as often he had done in the waters of the River Brent, swam the gallant little Bill.

Porson swam strongly, but the cold had begun to bite through to the very marrow of his bones when against the grey background of sea ahead loomed the bulk of the *Seamew*.

Gaining the silent, deserted deck, he stood for a moment listening with straining ears. Nothing broke the stillness save the uneasy creak of plates and the lapping of the water against the *Seamew’s* hull. There came no gurgle of in-washing water below decks, and George Porson nodded grimly.

With shaking fingers he withdrew the bottle from the inside of his shirt and, with it in his hand, groped his way along the darkness of the deck towards the forward hatch. The cover was off, and his groping hand found the top rung of the ladder.

He stiffened, sniffing. To his nostrils had come the acrid smell of burning powder.

“Bill—Bill!” he rapped, and hastily tumbled down the ladder into the blackness of the hold. Something thudded on to a packing-case beside him.

“Seek, boy—seek!” he said sharply, knowing that Bill had leapt down beside him, and with eager fingers he tugged at the cork of the bottle wherein lay his matches.

From somewhere near at hand came the sharp, excited yapping of the mongrel. A match flared up in Porson's hand, and he slithered and scrambled his way over heavy packing-cases towards Bill. The match burned away, and with eager fingers Porson struck another. Then he gave a shout of triumph.

"I knew it!" he cried.

For illumined in the feeble light of the match was a tin canister to which was attached a length of slow-burning, smouldering fuse. And round this Bill was dancing excitedly. The match burned out, but the red glow of the fuse now guided Porson. Sprawled across a packing-case, he tore off the fuse close to the canister.

"Now, Bill," he said grimly, "we've got the evidence! They've run this ship ashore on purpose, and to make certain they get the insurance money—and I'll bet she is insured jolly heavily!—they intended to blow her plates out. It would look just as though the plates had been bumped out when she grounded. I'll bet that's the facts of this case!"

It was the facts of the case. Porson discovered that later when, after swimming back from the wreck, he streaked for his machine, and, taking off, landed a few minutes later outside Dunsea to pour his story into the ears of an astonished coast-guard.

Despite his protests, they put him to bed, in hot blankets, and Bill was soon aglow with warm milk. A party set out for the Frigate Inn, where Messrs. Hake and Crib were found regaling themselves before the parlour fire, waiting for the muffled explosion which would mark the end of the *Seamew*.

When asked by a wondering coast-guard what on earth he thought had happened to Porson when he had not returned to the inn, Hake said that at first they thought the young fool had lost himself. But when they heard the noise of his engine, they came to the conclusion that he had gone home in the sulks, because they wouldn't let him mess about with their boat!

"Which shows," as Porson remarked later, when being congratulated by his friend, young Woolerton, on receipt of a substantial cheque from the underwriters "the futile idiocy of Horace Hake, who must fuss over his blessed package of explosive like an old hen over a chicken, and jolly well arouse a fellow's suspicions!"

CHAPTER XIII

TAKING IT OUT OF CUTHBERT

THE little super-powered scouting plane came skimming in over the old barn which served George Porson as a hangar and, banking clumsily, made a more or less bumpy landing.

From the snug cockpit clambered a tall, languid sort of youth, expensively clad in leopard-skin flying helmet, elbow-length gauntlet gloves of the same material, and heavy leather flying-coat.

"What," he demanded of the dungaree-clad Porson, who came hastening across the field to meet him, "is that weird-looking thing over there?"

He nodded towards Porson's ancient Maurice Farman biplane standing outside the barn.

"That's my machine!" replied Porson shortly.

The languid individual smiled tolerantly.

"Indeed!" he drawled with kindly interest. "And does it—er—fly?"

"Yes, it flies!" snapped Porson.

"On the end of a length of string, like a kite?" suggested the newcomer gently.

"Look here," said Porson wrathfully. "If you've landed in my field in order to ask a lot of funny questions, the sooner you push off again the better!"

"You do not appear to realise to whom you are speaking, boy," retorted the other loftily. "I am Cuthbert Crawford-Carter—the flying Crawford-Carter. You have heard of me of course?"

"I'm afraid not," replied Porson, with laboured sarcasm. "I get such little time for reading the comic papers, you know."

Cuthbert Crawford-Carter glared.

"Do you want me to smack your head for you?" he demanded beligerently.

"Yes, please!" said Porson.

The utter simplicity of the reply appeared to take Crawford-Carter somewhat aback.

"Well, I—I will if I have any more impertinence from you," he said weakly.

"Right-ho!" beamed Porson. "That's a promise. Now, what's wrong with your bus? You seem to have made a forced landing, and if there's anything I can do to help you ——"

"Nothing, thank you," cut in Crawford-Carter coldly. "I have had a forced landing, but I never allow anyone except my own private mechanics to touch my machine. I am missing on two cylinders, my oil-feed is choked, and my aileron controls are not functioning properly. I may say that any other pilot would have been in a flat spin ages ago with her. But not me!"

"Oh! Why not you?" demanded Porson, staring.

"Because"—Cuthbert Crawford-Carter waved airy hands—"I am a pilot. Pilots are born, not made. Ninety per cent of the fellows who call themselves pilots are no more pilots than—than"—he paused, seeking a suitable simile—"than you!" he concluded triumphantly.

"Oh, is that so?" said Porson.

"Yes." Cuthbert Crawford-Carter warmed to his theme. "The majority of pilots to-day aren't fit to be trusted in charge of a balloon, let alone a machine. But I'm different. I have the flying instinct, which is the hall-mark of the real pilot. It was," he added modestly, "born in me!"

"Was it?"

"Yes. I took my pilot's certificate at the Dudmarsh Aero Club, and my instructor said he'd never seen anyone handle a machine like me. I'll never forget what he said when we landed after I'd been up with him under dual control for the last time. There were tears in his eyes and a tremble in his voice when he said——"

Cuthbert Crawford-Carter paused.

"Well, what did he say?" demanded Porson curiously.

"It sounds so like boasting, and I never boast," murmured Crawford-Carter.

"I'd like to know," remarked Porson.

"Well, then, he said: 'Mr. Crawford-Carter, I was a sergeant-instructor during the War, and I've trained some hundreds of pilots, but I'll give my oath that I've never trained one like you. I've spent thirty-six hours, off and on, in the air with you, and during that time I've seen you do things with a machine which I never thought was possible. Believe me, Mr. Crawford-Carter, I shall follow your future flying career with the greatest of interest.' "

"He said that, did he?" murmured Porson.

"Yes, he did," replied Cuthbert warmly. "Don't you believe me?"

"Believe you?" echoed Porson. "Oh, yes, I quite believe you!"

"I only wish," went on Cuthbert, encouraged, "that I'd been old enough to have flown in the War. I think our men were frightfully slow in getting that fellow Richthofen. Now, I think I may safely say that if I——"

"Cheese it!" snapped Porson.

"Eh, what?"

"Stop drivelling!" commanded Porson. "I don't know whether Richthofen ever had a shot at a petrified rabbit, but if he'd met you in the air he could have started right in then. Now, is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes. I'll use your telephone, if you've got one," replied Crawford-Carter sulkily, "and then you can direct me to the nearest hotel. I'll have to stay there till my mechanics arrive."

Porson hesitated. There was no hotel in Sudcombe village. Then his good-nature reasserted itself.

"I'm afraid there's no place near here where you can get put up," he said, "but you can stay with me, if you like."

"Oh, all right!" grunted Cuthbert. "You live with your people, I suppose?"

"I live in that cottage there," replied Porson, "by myself."

"Do you?" inquired Cuthbert, with some show of interest. "Who looks after you, then?"

"Nobody," replied Porson. "I look after myself—do my own cleaning and cooking and washing-up and everything."

"Great Scott!" moaned Cuthbert Crawford-Carter.

. . . . .

"Of all the utter bilge! Of all the poisonous gush——"

The Hon. Reggie Marling stuttered incoherently. His usually pink-and-white complexion was crimson. Savagely crumpling the newly delivered issue of the *Sudcombe Weekly Gazette*, he hurled it into the grate.

Algy Blenkinsop swooped to retrieve it.

"What's the matter, old man?" he demanded, smoothing out the crumpled sheets on the library table. "Has someone written at last protesting against your being allowed to ride to hounds? I believe there was some talk of it after you headed that dog-fox last Wednesday."

"Five minutes after hounds had put him up!" commented young Woolerton.

"And just when the whole field was settling down for a thundering good run!" supplemented Horace Pyeman.

"Fatheads!" snorted Reggie. "You don't think anybody minded a little thing like that——"

"I rather fancy the M.F.H. did, just a little," drawled Woolerton. "I'm drawing my conclusion solely from his concise and masterly summary of your character, habits, attainments, and ambitions. Whilst deploring the language in which he couched his remarks, I must admit that I've never heard anything delivered with such feeling, such verve, such——"

"My hat!" cut in Algy, his voice hushed, his gaze suddenly riveted on the paper. "Shut up, Woolly! Of all the infernal cheek——"

He turned on Reggie.

"Was this what you were reading?" he demanded. "This, about that swab, Crawford-Carter?"

"Yes, that's it!" yelped Reggie. "Of all the conceited, swelled-headed fops, that fellow takes the giddy bun!"

Algy turned again to the paper and read, with growing indignation:

DISTINGUISHED PILOT VISITS SUDCOMBE

LECTURE IN VILLAGE HALL TO-NIGHT.

Sudcombe has been honoured by the presence in its midst of Mr. Cuthbert Crawford-Carter, the well-known air pilot. Mr. Crawford-Carter, who had what is known as a forced landing on the outskirts of the village a few days ago, is the guest of Mr. George Porson whilst necessary repairs to his powerful machine are being carried out by expert mechanics.

Mr. Crawford-Carter has arranged to lecture in the village hall this evening on British aviation. Mr. Crawford-Carter will, in the course of his address, touch on the mistakes made both by our air authorities and pilots during the Great War, and will point out the lessons to be drawn and the pitfalls to be avoided in the future.

We are convinced that our readers will avail themselves of this opportunity of hearing the carefully considered views of a gentleman so well-known and respected in aviation circles as Mr. Crawford-Carter.

"Gosh!" said Algy Blenkinsop dazedly.

Young Woolerton gently possessed himself of the paper, read the effusion, and handed it on to Horace Pyeman.

"Well?" he remarked.

"Something ought to be jolly well done about it!" babbled Reggie. "It oughtn't to be allowed, dash it. Neither you nor Algy have met this blot, but I have. I dropped in to see poor old Porson last night, and this excrescence was there. He monopolised the whole of the conversation, talking about his beastly self and what a marvellous pilot he was, and what he'd have done in the War if he'd been out there. Dash it, he hasn't had his pilot's certificate three months yet. And poor old Porson just sat taking it all in and saying nothing."

"It's a wonder Porson didn't shut him up pretty smartly!" commented Algy.

"Well, you see," explained Reggie, "poor old Porson is rather handicapped. He can't forget that the beast's his guest, don't you know. But he admitted to me, when eventually the rotter put on his hat and went out, that he can't stand much more of it."

"He went out, did he—this Crawford-Carter?" commented young Woolerton. "D'you happen to know where he went?"

"Yes, the village pub," replied Reggie promptly. "He's that sort of bounder as well. He thinks he's no end of a dog."

"Drinks, brags!" murmured Woolerton. "An unpleasant specimen!"

"You'd say that if you met him," assented Reggie earnestly. "You don't know how poor old Porson is suffering. What gets Porson so fed-up is the way the beast sneers at the old War pilots."

"Oh, well," remarked Woolerton confidentially, "Porson won't suffer much longer —not after to-morrow, anyway!"

"How d'you know he won't?" demanded Reggie.

"Because," replied Woolerton, "to-morrow, if I may quote, Cuthbert Crawford-Carter will 'fold his tent like the Arab and silently steal away.' "

"But he hasn't got a tent!" exclaimed Reggie, bewildered.

Young Woolerton looked at him, and sadly shook his head.

"Poor fool!" he murmured.

"What do you intend to do, Woolly?" demanded Algy Blenkinsop. "Smash up this confounded meeting of his, give him a thundering good hiding, and turf him out of the village? Because if that's the programme let me tell you that I'm game!"

"So'm I!" chipped in Reggie.

"And me!" added Horace Pyeman, ungrammatically.

"Thanks!" drawled young Woolerton. "I love this rallying-round spirit. But to smash up his meeting and all the rest of it is crude. This Crawford-Carter has got to be cured once and for all, and there's only one way to do it!"

"How?" demanded Reggie.

"By showing him to himself; by allowing him fully to understand that he's nothing but a loud-mouthed braggart; by revealing to him the thick and wide streak of 'yellow' in his make-up; by driving it home to him that big talk can't camouflage pluck in the minus quantity.

"Do that, and even Cuthbert Crawford-Carter might in some remote and distant future develop into a tolerably respectable and even useful member of society!"

"Yes; but how are you going to do all that?" demanded Reggie.

"I have a scheme," replied Woolerton, "which we shall put into operation at once. In the first place, Reggie, you and Pyeman will go to this meeting to-night."

"Not me!" ejaculated Reggie. "I wouldn't jolly well be found dead within a hundred miles of the village hall to-night!"

"You will go!" said Woolerton firmly, "and you will occupy a seat in the front row. You will, furthermore, applaud with gusto the tosh and imbecilities of friend Crawford-Carter!"

"I won't——" began Reggie, in an indignant yelp.

"And," went on Woolerton, unheedingly, "you will walk home with him to Porson's cottage after the show. You will speak admiringly of him; you will pat him on the back, both literally and metaphorically. Then, in Porson's parlour, you will, as it were, sit at the feet of this master and lap up hungrily all he's got to say. He will undoubtedly, under such circumstances, spread himself."

Reggie mouthed feebly. Words were beyond him. Unconcernedly Woolerton turned to Pyeman.

"And you, Pyeman," he said, "will accompany Reggie to the village hall in the role of ribald and derisive scoffer. You will play the part of foil. You will not applaud Crawford-Carter's futile outpourings, but will, at suitable intervals, interject loudly 'Rubbish!' 'Rot!' 'Rats!' and remarks of a like nature."

"I'll do that, all right," assented Horace Pyeman heartily.

"Yes; after the show you will walk with Crawford-Carter to Porson's cottage. You will probably have—er—got his goat by that time, but you will continue to carry on with the good work. You will disagree with everything he says, and indicate that he is talking alternatively out of the back of his neck and his hat. By the time you are all seated in Porson's parlour he should be exceedingly shirty, if you have played your role only tolerably well."

"Oh, he'll be shirty enough!" remarked Pyeman confidently. "I'll have him raving by that time!"

"Exactly!" assented Woolerton. "He will be nicely prepared to walk into the trap."

"What trap?" demanded Algy.

"Porson's Maurice Farman!" replied Woolerton. "Pyeman will suggest that he, Crawford-Carter, hasn't got the pluck to take the ancient bus up. This is where Reggie will come in. Having played the part of admiring friend all evening, he will hotly assert that Crawford-Carter is not afraid to take the bus up.

"He will appeal to Crawford-Carter to give the sneering and sceptical Pyeman the lie. With Reggie ardently persuasive, and Pyeman blatantly unconvinced, Crawford-Carter will have no other option than to take the bus up."

"Well, what if he does?" objected Algy. "I don't see what good that'll do. He can take the Farman off, fly it around, and land it again. There's nothing in that."

"Ah, but," said Woolerton gently, "he will carry a passenger—Reggie's uncle, a dear old gentleman of eighty who's never been in an aeroplane in his life."

"I haven't got an uncle of eighty," cut in Reggie.

"You have!" corrected young Woolerton. "And he's awf'ly, awf'ly keen on having a flip with such a clever young pilot as Mr. Crawford-Carter. He must go up to-morrow because he's going away the next day. So see that you fix up with Crawford-Carter to take your dear old uncle, Reggie!"

"I tell you I haven't got a blessed uncle of eighty!" yelped Reggie.

"You have!" affirmed Woolerton. "At least, you will have to-morrow. I shall be your uncle, Reggie!"

"Ass!" snorted Reggie. "Blessed if I see what the idea is!"

"You'll see to-morrow," said Woolerton. "You and Pyeman do your bit to-night by fixing up this flip for me—as your uncle, remember—and I confidently predict that by to-morrow evening Cuthbert Crawford-Carter will be hiding his head far from the madding crowd!"

"Are we going to tell Porson that there's a plot being jolly well hatched?" demanded Reggie.

"No; keep him in the dark until to-morrow," replied Woolerton. "After all, Crawford-Carter is his guest. Thank goodness he's not ours!"

. . . . .

There was something passing strange afoot. George Porson was fully convinced of that. Although he had loathed the prospect he had, out of courtesy to his guest, attended the Crawford-Carter lecture in the village hall. He had, in fact, sat between the Hon. Reggie and Horace Pyeman.

At first he had been inwardly tickled at Reggie's frantic plaudits of the Crawford-Carter sentiments, dubbing such plaudits as ironic. But amusement had given way to bewilderment as on the way home Reggie had fawned fatuously over the lordly Cuthbert, humbly soliciting his views on the correct method of holding the control-stick, the best banking angles, war flying, Atlantic flying, and so on ad nauseam.

And Pyeman had verged on the other extreme. He had been cynical, disbelieving, rude—offensively so. He had argued with everything Cuthbert Crawford-Carter said, and now, in the privacy of Porson's parlour, things were rapidly coming to a head. Cuthbert was holding forth on the new slotted Avian, whilst a beaming Reggie and a glowering Pyeman listened.

"Of course," said Cuthbert loftily, "this slotted wing device is all very well for a fellow who's heavy-handed on the controls. Personally, I think a fellow who aspires to piloting a machine should be above adopting such a security device. I should never dream of using it. If a pilot can't rely on his nerve, then all the safety devices in the world won't help him. Now, I flatter myself——"

"You do!" cut in Pyeman nastily. "You flatter yourself so much that I wonder you don't choke! You've been at it all the evening!"

Cuthbert glared at him.

"I don't want any impertinence from you," he said angrily. "When you know as much about flying as I do you'll——"

"I know more!" grunted Pyeman.

"What?"

"I say I know more," repeated Pyeman. "A jolly lot more, but I don't go yapping about it. For one thing, I can pilot that old Farman of Porson's, and that's more than you can!"

"That thing?" Cuthbert laughed scornfully. "You surely wouldn't expect a fellow like me to waste his time flying a relic like that?"

"No," retorted Pyeman. "I wouldn't, because you couldn't. And if you could you wouldn't dare!"

Eagerly Reggie leapt to the defence of the outraged Cuthbert. And thus it was that eventually from a welter of insults, threats, accusations, and denunciations Cuthbert Crawford-Carter emerged committed to the flying of Porson's Farman on the morrow.

"Just to show you, you impertinent fellow," he informed Pyeman heatedly, "that there's no machine which I can't fly!"

"And you'll take uncle with you?" babbled Reggie.

"Yes, Marling, I shall take your uncle," announced Cuthbert. "But I have one request to make."

"Yes?"

Cuthbert fingered his tie with well-manicured hand.

"I must ask you," he said in superior tones, "to keep this affair quiet. It would never do if my friends learned that I had been piloting a rotten old Maurice Farman. I mean—well, you understand. It's not done, don't you know."

He concluded with airy wave of hand. Porson, sitting silent in his chair, gulped. Never had he felt so tempted to take this fellow by the scruff of the neck and turf him out into the night. He caught Pyeman's eye. There seemed to be something radically wrong with Pyeman. To anyone in the secret, of course, Pyeman might have been interpreted as endeavouring to convey to Porson the idea that there was more in this business than was apparent.

But to Porson, who wasn't in the secret, he appeared to be on the verge of a fit!

"I'll get you a drink of water, Pyeman!" he said hastily.

"What the dickens for?" demanded the ungrateful Pyeman. "You needn't bother. Reggie and I are going now. And as for you"—he wheeled on Cuthbert—"we'll be along here to-morrow to see you take Reggie's uncle for a flip in that old Farman."

"You have already said so," drawled Cuthbert. "I find both your voice and reiteration decidedly wearisome. Kindly go!"

. . . . .

There was an exhilarating nip in the air the following afternoon, when Reggie's car drew up at the garden gate of Porson's cottage and deposited Reggie, Pyeman, and young Woolerton.

The latter was muffled in a greatcoat, with the collar turned well up about his ruddy, white-whiskered features. He wore an old-fashioned cap with ear-flaps, and he looked nothing more nor less than an elderly gentleman slightly bent with advancing years.

"I don't want this Crawford-Carter to get too good a look at me," he remarked, "so you go up to the cottage, Pyeman, and Reggie and myself will totter round to the field by the back way. Got the—er—doings, Reggie?"

"Absolutely!" replied Reggie, indicating a light but bulky parcel which he carried.

"Come on, then!" said Woolerton, and, taking Reggie's arm, passed through the gate en route for the field at the rear of the cottage.

When, some few minutes later, Porson, Pyeman and Cuthbert Crawford-Carter strolled from the cottage on to the field and approached the barn outside which the Farman was standing in readiness for the flip, they found the now be-goggled Woolerton already perched on the rear seat of the low, box-like cockpit. The parcel which Reggie had carried was out of sight beneath the seat.

"This is uncle, you men," remarked Reggie, with an indicating wave of hand. "Uncle, this is George Porson and Crawford-Carter!"

"How d'you do?" replied uncle shrilly. "It is indeed an honour for me to take my first flight with such an experienced pilot as you, Mr. Crawford-Carter."

Mr. Crawford-Carter didn't reply. He was gaping at a silk-hatted and frock-coated individual who was dodging about in mysterious fashion near the back of the barn. Beneath the top-hat was a mournful countenance and a long-drooping moustache.

"Who's that fellow?" he demanded.

He wasn't long left in doubt. For suddenly the mournful-looking individual dashed forward, whisking a tape-measure from his pocket.

" 'Scuse me, sir," he wheezed, and had Cuthbert's height measured in a twinkling.

"Five feet, eleven—I'll do you cheap—already have Mister Porson measured—waiting for him—get him before long. 'Scuse me!"

He jerked this out, thrust a card into the hand of Cuthbert and darted away. Dazedly Cuthbert looked at the card. Then he started, for it bore the legend:

"Hezekiah Grabbem,
Undertaker."

"Wh-what cheek!" he snorted; but something of the old fire was absent from his tones.

Porson didn't say anything. Instead he stared sternly at the bland Reggie. For behind the drooping moustache of Mr. Grabbem he had recognised the features of Algy Blenkinsop. Cuthbert had not until then met Algy.

"Come on, let's get off!" snapped the whiskered Woolerton testily. "What are we waiting for?"

"Do you want a parachute, sir?" asked Reggie, as Crawford-Carter adjusted the harness of his own compact and expensive one.

"Parachute?" snapped Woolerton. "No. What do I want a parachute for?"

"He won't require one when he's with me," announced Cuthbert loftily, having fully recovered from his momentary shaking. "I only wear one myself as a matter of form. The committee of my flying club insist on it."

He clambered up to the front seat, switched on, and Porson swung the propeller for him. Cuthbert was feeling pretty confident. He'd had an hour on the beastly Farman that morning, and as long as he could get it off the ground he fancied he'd be all right.

"I want to go high!" shrieked young Woolerton. "I want to go as high as high!"

"I'll go high!" roared Cuthbert, above the clatter of the ancient Green engine.

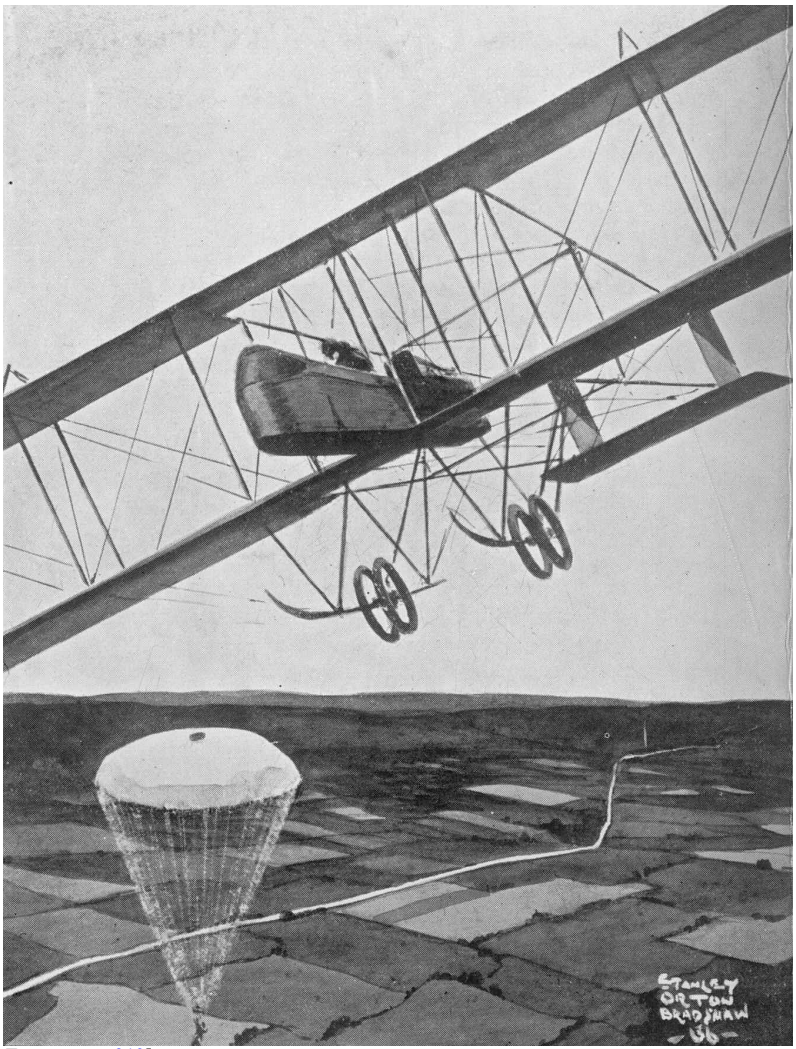
He opened up the throttle, the Farman moved forward, and after three times nearly charging the farthest hedge and having to start all over again, Cuthbert got it lumberingly up into the air. At two hundred feet he banked cautiously, and continued to climb.

He didn't look round more than once to see how his passenger was getting on because his eyes were glued on his instrument-board. If he had looked round he would probably not have seen much because Woolerton was working carefully and secretly.

From the now unwrapped parcel beneath his seat Woolerton withdrew a gigantic firework—a fat squib. From a pocket inside his coat he withdrew a small pair of

household tongs. Holding the squib in the tongs he applied to the short fuse the glowing end of an electric lighter.

Bang!



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FALLING UNTIL HIS PARACHUTE OPENED AND TOOK HIM GENTLY EARTHWARD.

Cuthbert leapt in his seat, looked round with suddenly pallid face. But exploded squib and tongs were already on the floor of the cockpit, out of view. Cuthbert turned to his dashboard, his hand on the control-stick trembling slightly.

And now from the parcel Woolerton withdrew a large bundle of small squibs and crackers. A lump of lead was tied to them to keep them weighted, and there was also a thick fuse to ignite the bundle.

The fuse glowed on the electric lighter, then Woolerton pushed the bundle away behind him till it slithered out of sight off the lower plane and hung, dangling, held by a length of string from the cockpit. With the tongs he held another fat squib.

Bang!

Almost deafened, Cuthbert leapt again in his seat with a yelp of sheer alarm. The confounded engine was going to blow out every dashed cylinder—was going to seize up!

Bang!

White-faced, Cuthbert throttled down with frenzied, shaking fingers. Forward went the control-stick, to keep the Farman from falling into a spin. And as the noise of the engine died away Woolerton leaned forward in his seat and yelled:

"Oh, listen—listen!"

Cuthbert did listen. The squibs and crackers had got well alight. Above the whine of wind in flying wires and bracing wires came sharp, staccato cracks. It seemed as though every strut and joint was breaking.

"She's coming to pieces!" shrieked Cuthbert, whipping his hand from the control-stick.

Next instant he had leapt far out-board, falling earthwards until his parachute opened and took him drifting gently down. And above him, in the Farman, a white-faced Woolerton was leaning far forward, his hand on the abandoned control-stick. Woolerton's lips were moving.

"I'll get her down!" he muttered. "I'll get her down! But what a cur!"

. . . . .

An almost blubbering Cuthbert Crawford-Carter was confronted some minutes later by a grim-faced Woolerton—minus his disguise. George Porson, Pyeman, and Reggie Marling stood silently by.

"Some fellows might think I played a caddish trick on you," Woolerton said sternly. "But I had a reason for it! You've been Porson's guest, and Porson's treated you a jolly sight more decently than you ever deserved. Do you know, you beast, with your sneering talk of the old War pilots, that Porson's brother was a War pilot—that he died in France? And do you know how he died?

"By sticking to a riddled and blazing machine when his observer was lying wounded in the rear cockpit. He didn't use his parachute! No; he got the machine to earth, but it cost him his life. And do you know who the observer was, that lived?"

"No!" muttered the other.

"His name," said Woolerton coldly, "was Crawford-Carter. Any relation to you?"

"My brother!" whispered Crawford-Carter. "But—but I didn't know—I never guessed."

"No," said Woolerton, turning on his heel. "And Porson never told you—although he knew!"

CHAPTER XIV

PORSON'S PUPIL!

"GARGE!"

"Yes, Gaffer?"

"There be a lady and young gen'elman to see ye, lad."

"Right-ho, Gaffer!" replied George Porson cheerily. "Show 'em into the parlour, will you, whilst I make myself presentable?"

With a nod, Gaffer—George's close neighbour and good friend—ambled off towards the cottage. Dropping from the engine of his ancient Maurice Farman biplane, Porson divested himself of his oil-stained dungarees and, following Gaffer to the cottage, indulged in a hasty wash-and-brush-up. Then, giving a final adjusting tug to his tie, and hoping that the smudges of oil on his soft collar weren't too noticeable, he entered the parlour.

"Er—how d'you do?" he remarked, by way of greeting.

"How do you do?" replied a stout and much be-furred lady, under whose weight Porson's rickety basket-work armchair was creaking protestingly. "Mr. Porson, I presume?"

"Oh, yes," admitted Porson modestly. He might have added—but didn't—that he was *the* Porson, who, though not long left school, was not only a skilled aeronaut, but was determined one day to be the founder and head of a great fleet of luxurious air liners—"Porson's Passenger Service—by Air to Anywhere!"—though as yet he was only earning his living with the aid of an old ex-Army biplane, picked up at a second-hand sale for £10!

"My name is Mrs. Cranston-Parfitt," replied his visitor. "This is Woppy, my son!"

She indicated a limpish, pasty-faced, sleek-haired young man of about twenty, perched uncomfortably on the edge of a chair, and sucking the silver knob on the end of his walking-stick. Both his forehead and chin were of the receding type, and his eyes protruded like those of a startled fish.

"Woppy darling," said Mrs. Cranston-Parfitt, "this is Mr. Porson!"

Woppy removed the knob from his mouth and turned to stare at Porson.

"Woppy has been so eager to make your acquaintance, Mr. Porson," went on Mrs. Cranston-Parfitt gushingly. "Haven't you, Woppy?"

"No," said Woppy.

"Oh, darling, how can you tell such an untruth?" said his mother reproachfully. "You know how perfectly thrilled you've been by the exploits of Mr. Porson!"

Woppy sucked at his stick in sulky silence. Mrs. Cranston-Parfitt turned again to Porson.

"We have been hearing such a lot about you from Lady Marling," she said, "and I have come to see you for the express purpose of asking you if you will be kind enough to teach darling Woppy how to fly."

Porson started.

"You mean take him as a pupil?" he inquired.

"Yes," replied Mrs. Cranston-Parfitt. "Woppy is so keen on aviation, and does so want to learn how to fly. Don't you, Woppy darling?"

"No," said Woppy, removing the knob.

"But, darling, you said you did!"

"I don't want to be taught by a bally kid!" said Woppy mutinously. "I want to be taught at a real flying school."

"Oh, but you wouldn't like that, dear," said his mother soothingly. "Some of the instructors are such horrid men who say most rude and unkind things to their pupils. Poor Bertie Booster was most hurt at the awful things one of them said to him when he was learning, just because the poor boy complained about the draught made by the nasty propeller."

"Well, but——" began Woppy.

"No, I must be firm!" cut in his devoted parent. "I cannot have my own Woppy exposed to the gibes, sneers, and insults of these coarse flying school instructors. We have discussed this before, darling, and you know my views. Mr. Porson shall act as your instructor."

"But, I say," said Porson hastily, "I don't know whether I can. You see, I've only got an old-fashioned bus, and although it's fitted with dual control, it isn't much good nowadays for a fellow learning to fly."

"You would, nevertheless, be able to give Woppy a thorough grounding in the rudiments of flying" remarked Mrs. Cranston-Parfitt. "The Honourable Reggie Marling—a friend of yours, I understand—has assured me on that point. When Woppy has mastered the—ah—controls, I think you call them, I will be prepared to purchase a more modern machine for him, and someone from the works can show him how to fly it."

"I see," said Porson, eyeing the sulking Woppy dubiously.

"There is a further reason why I wish my son to learn his flying from you," went on Mrs. Cranston-Parfitt. "His cousin, Bertram Boggles, is at St. Edmund's School, which is near here. Bertram is a dear child, but a trifle wild I'm afraid, and Woppy has such a refining influence over him. They will be able to meet occasionally, and it will be so nice for Bertram!"

"But do you mean that Wop—er—your son should stay here with me?" demanded Porson.

"Certainly! I trust you have sufficient accommodation. We are staying with Lady Marling until to-morrow, when I return to town. Woppy will then come to you!"

There was something a good deal like Aunt Elizabeth about Mrs. Cranston-Parfitt, reflected Porson. If he didn't want to find himself landed with her bright-looking

offspring, a firm stand was indicated. Certainly the thought of a blot like Woppy floating about the house was pretty ghastly. But, then, on the other hand, a pupil was a pupil. Dash it, a fellow couldn't turn business down like this! He couldn't afford to.

He took another look at Woppy, who was drooping on the edge of the chair as though posing for the picture of an imbecile bank clerk contemplating suicide. Porson almost wavered. He took a firm grip on himself; cleared his throat.

"Mrs. Cranston-Parfitt," he said, before he had time to change his mind. "I shall be —er—delighted to take your son as a pupil!"

"There Woppy, darling!" exclaimed Mrs. Cranston-Parfitt triumphantly. "Now, isn't that nice of Mr. Porson?"

"No!" said Woppy sourly.

. . . . .

Woppy turned up after lunch the following afternoon. He arrived in the Hon. Reggie Marling's car and, whilst he was upstairs glaring round in speechless indignation at the size and furnishings of the bed-room which he was to occupy, Reggie took Porson by the arm and drew him into the parlour.

There was a humble and apologetic look about Reggie as he closed the door.

"I say, old chap," he said mournfully. "I'm most frightfully sorry about this!"

"Eh—about what?" demanded Porson.

"About your getting that excrescence upstairs landed upon you," replied Reggie.

"Oh, you mean Woppy!"

"Yes, I mean Woppy. You don't know what a perfect blister the blighter is. He doesn't play Soccer or Rugger because they're too rough, and he doesn't hunt in case he breaks his bally neck. I should say," added Reggie, with the air of one who gives a considered opinion, "that he'd be hot stuff at halma, and perfectly ruthless at snakes and ladders."

"It doesn't somehow seem to fit in with his wanting to fly," said Porson slowly.

"Well, you see, Porson, old chappie," explained Reggie, "it's like this. There's a weed called Booster who's learning to fly at some bally flying school. These Boosters live near the Cranston-Parfitts, and the two families, whilst being most awfully nice to each other, really loathe each other like poison.

"What I mean to say is, if their vicar gets up a bazaar, you'll see Mrs. Booster and Mrs. Cranston-Parfitt legging it for the vicarage—absolutely neck and neck—in order to click for the job of opening the bazaar! First there wins. I believe they once dead-heated, and the vicar had to take refuge in an attic whilst they were settling the matter.

"I mean, they're always trying to go one better than the other. If the Boosters hold a flower show for the villagers, then the Cranston-Parfitts come back with an outing for the mothers' guild, or something. D'you see what I mean?"

"Oh, quite!"

“Well, then, this young Booster scored rather a neat point by taking up flying. Woppy can’t be left at the post like that, so he’s jolly well got to learn flying as well. I had been gassing a bit about you, so his mother came barging over here to fix up with you to teach the freak. Porson, old chappie, if only I’d had the sense to refrain from chirping about you this would never have happened! You don’t know how rotten I feel about it.”

“Don’t you worry about that, Reggie,” replied Porson. “As a matter of fact, I’m jolly grateful to you. Business is business, and I’m getting fifty pounds for taking Woppy as a pupil and teaching him to fly.”

“Fifty pounds won’t recompense you for having that mother’s pet floating about the home,” said Reggie glumly. “Did she tell you what a refining influence he is?”

“She did say something about his having a refining influence over some cousin who’s at school near here,” admitted Porson.

Reggie laughed hollowly.

“Yes,” he said, “and she was telling the mater last night what a refining influence he’ll have on you. According to his mother he has a refining influence on everybody. She said that after you’d associated with darling Woppy you’d see that life is altogether a greater and grander thing. She said that you’d find yourself filled with lofty sentiments and noble endeavour, and that you’d aspire to be a good and upright man, like he’ll be, spurning all worldly things——”

He broke off as the door opened. Woppy, the Refining Influence, drifted into the room. And from the corner of Woppy’s mouth a Turkish cigarette was drooping inelegantly.

“Hallo!” he smirked.

“Hallo!” exclaimed Reggie, “I—I say, I didn’t know you smoked!”

“Didn’t you?” replied Woppy fatuously. “Oh, yes, I’m a bit of a goer, really, you know. Of course, I keep it dark. The mater’s rather inclined to be down on this sort of thing, what?”

Porson and Reggie exchanged glances.

“Have a gasper!” went on Woppy affably, producing a cigarette-case.

“No, thanks,” said Porson coldly. “And if you’ll have the goodness to chuck that foul-smelling thing away, we’ll go round to the flying field and get the Farman out!”

“Oh, no, I’m afraid there’s nothing doing in that line to-day,” replied Woppy airily. “To-morrow, perhaps, but not to-day!”

“Oh, indeed!” said Porson. “And why not?”

“Well, as a matter of fact, I’ve got one or two fellows coming here for tea,” explained Woppy.

“You’ve what?”

“Got one or two fellows coming round here for tea this afternoon,” repeated Woppy. “Bertram Boggles, you know, my cousin who’s at St. Edmunds. I wrote to him

last night. They have a half-holiday to-day, and I told him to crawl along here and bring a couple of pals with him."

"Oh, did you?"

"Yes! You'll like old Boggy. He, he, he! Boggy's an absolute scream, you know. A bit of a lad, and all that——"

There came the click of the garden gate, and Woppy broke off to dart to the window.

"Here he is!" he chirruped. "Rather earlier than I expected. But we don't mind that, of course. He's got two other fellows with him as well. I say, pop the kettle on, Porson, and get tea ready. These blokes'll be hungry after their walk, what?"

Porson and Reggie withdrew to the scullery to hold a council of war, whilst Woppy went to the front door to welcome his guests.

"Well, of all the bally hypocrites!" exclaimed Reggie, behind the closed door of the scullery. "The fellow's a proper snake in the grass! And all his beastly relatives think he's such a goody-goody sort of ass!"

"Never mind that just now," said Porson grimly. "The point is, do we chuck this tea-party out on their necks, or what?"

"Well, what do you think?" replied Reggie dubiously. "This Boggy seems a foul sort of specimen, judging from the glimpse I got of him through the parlour window. But," he went on warmly, "what beats me is the infernal cheek of Woppy in asking his confounded pals here without mentioning it to you. I vote we turf the lot of 'em out, and if he wants to entertain 'em let him take them to a teashop. I mean to say, put your foot down once and for all. If you don't, you'll have the most awful outsiders rolling up here asking for Woppy and absolutely taking possession of the bally place!"

"The whole point is," said Porson slowly, "that if Boggy and his pals have hoofed it here from St. Edmund's, it's going to be a bit rough on them if we sling 'em out. After all, they're not to blame. They only accepted Woppy's invitation. I think we'd better give 'em tea, and then when they've gone I'll point out to ass Woppy, quietly but firmly, that he's here to learn flying and not to hold tea-parties."

"Yes, perhaps that'll be the best way," assented Reggie. "Shall I put the kettle on?"

"Thanks!" said Porson. "And then you can cut the bread and I'll butter it!"

"Eggs?" queried Reggie, poking his head into the larder.

"There's a couple of dozen there somewhere," grunted Porson. "And some fresh crumpets and cakes."

"They're going to have a pretty good spread, aren't they?" said Reggie, producing the comestibles. "Great Scott! What's that?"

"It sounds," replied Porson, with head cocked in listening attitude, "like someone laughing."

"Oh," said Reggie, relieved. "I thought it was the death wail of a slaughtered pig. I suppose it's the noise Boggles makes when he's amused. It certainly isn't Woppy's ghastly cackle."

“Well, we’ll go and see,” said Porson.

“We can’t do much more here until the kettle boils.”

He and Reggie returned to the parlour.

“Oh, here you are!” said Woppy graciously. “This is Boggy!”

He indicated a fat, pimply-faced youth sprawling in Porson’s armchair.

“Howdo, you men!” greeted Boggy, extending a limp and podgy hand, but making no effort to rise.

Neither Porson nor Reggie availed themselves of the honour of grasping that unwholesome-looking paw.

“And this is Crib and Cooke,” explained Woppy, indicating two furtive-looking youths seated on the ramshackle sofa.

Messrs. Crib and Cooke nodded jerkily. They did it simultaneously, giving an odd effect of mechanical propulsion.

“Ah,” said Porson. “Quite a cheery little gathering, what?”

“Rather!” assented Woppy heartily. “I’ve just been telling Boggy about a bookmaker I knew who——”

“And,” went on Porson unheedingly, “I notice that you’re all smoking. How perfectly jolly!”

“Yes, rather!” assented Woppy, but with a little less heartiness this time, and a somewhat nervous glance at Porson. He didn’t quite like Porson’s tone.

“Yes,” continued Porson, “and in about ten minutes you’re all going to be sick. That’ll make an absolutely topping finale, won’t it?”

“My dear man,” drawled Boggy loftily, “don’t talk such footling drivel——”

“So,” wound up Porson, ignoring the interruption, “you can put those cigarettes out at once. Apart from your being sick, I won’t have you smoking here!”

“Oh, won’t you?” demanded Boggy. “Then let me tell you, you blithering infant, that if you don’t like it you can just jolly well lump it!”

Porson stepped forward, plucked the cigarette from between the lips of the outraged Boggy, and dropped it into the fire.

“I’m not,” he said politely, “a prig, I hope. But I won’t have an unhealthy-looking porpoise like you lounging about here smoking when you should be out on the footer field!”

“I’ll—I’ll——” spluttered Boggy, lumbering to his feet.

“Yes, you’ll—what?” demanded Porson, eyeing him grimly.

“Not forget this,” replied Boggy weakly. But that, obviously, was not what he had intended saying.

“I hope you won’t,” said Porson. “In fact, I’m glad to hear you say so!”

He turned to the furtive-looking pair on the sofa.

“Put ’em in the fire!” he commanded.

Messrs. Crib and Cooke looked at the scowling Boggy for support. They didn't seem to find any, so they switched on to the speechless Woppy.

"I'll not ask you again," said Porson grimly.

"Look—look here, you chaps, don't take any notice of him——" began Woppy.

"You shut up!" snapped Porson. Then to the unhappy Crib and Cooke: "I'm waiting!"

They rose, deposited their cigarettes in the fire, and reseated themselves.

"Now you!" ordered Porson, turning to Woppy.

Woppy glared at him. By Jove, but this was too much! This was the absolute outside limit! Dash it all, he wasn't a blessed school kid like Boggy.

"I—I'll smoke if I like," he said, with shrill determination.

"You may smoke just as much as you like," replied Porson patiently, "but you'll chuck it as long as you're my pupil. It's going to be the dickens of a job to teach you flying as it is, without your making matters worse by saturating yourself and your nerves with nicotine."

"You mind your own business!" snarled Woppy venomously.

"Exactly what I am doing," replied Porson. "And every time I find you smoking whilst you're here I'll give you a thundering good hiding. Now put that poisonous thing in the fire and hand over the rest of 'em!"

"And—and if I won't?"

"Then I'll up-end you and take 'em myself, and then start right in now on the first hiding!" Porson informed him.

Woppy, speechless with indignation, caught the eye of Boggy. Boggy winked—nodded. Woppy didn't quite understand, but it seemed as though Boggy was advising surrender. So, sullenly, Woppy pitched his cigarette into the fire and handed over his cigarette-case.

"Now," said Porson cheerily, "we'll have tea. Open the window, Reggie, and let some fresh air into the place!"

. . . . .

The short winter's afternoon had drawn to a close. Tea was over and the lamp lighted in the cosy parlour of Porson's cottage. It hadn't been a success, that tea. There had somehow been lacking a spirit of bonhomie and camaraderie. As a matter of fact, four of the participants had eaten in sulky silence.

But now tea was over, and in the scullery Reggie and Porson were washing up. In the Parlour, Boggy was holding forth with considerable heat.

"It's not as though we were a lot of kids, to be bossed about by him. Dash it, he's only a blessed kid himself. Now, you said in your letter, Woppy, that we'd play cards. So we're jolly well going to play cards!"

"What d'you think he'll say?" squeaked Cooke, who always spoke like that.

"He'll tell us to stop it, of course!" replied Boggy. "And then we'll act. We must do something or poor Woppy's life's going to be a blessed misery to him whilst he's here. We've got to show this Porson beast that he can't boss us, nor Woppy."

"Quite so—absolutely!" agreed Woppy.

"Well," went on Boggy, "if he tries to stop us playings cards we'll act together. We'll chuck him and that idiot Marling outside. That's what we'll do!"

"But do you really think we can?" squeaked Cooke.

"Of course we can!" snorted Boggy. "That's where he had us at a disadvantage before. We hadn't had an opportunity of planning concerted action like this. Four of us can handle those two prize asses. Now get your cards, Woppy, and we'll start!"

Woppy got his cards, and the unlovely four drew their chairs up to the table.

"You see," remarked Boggy, shuffling the pack, "if we show this Porson chump that we're standing no nonsense we can come along here on 'halfs' and have a jolly good time with Woppy. Can't we, Woppy?"

"Of course you can!" twittered Woppy.

It was then that the door opened and Porson and Reggie appeared.

"Chuck that!" said Porson sharply, eyeing the cards.

"We won't!" snarled Boggy.

There is little need to dwell upon the details of what transpired. Suffice it to say that Boggy's plan of chucking Porson and Reggie outside came lamentably unstuck. The affair, of course, at once developed into one of fisticuffs. In a remarkably short space of time the parlour was a heaving and panting mass of waving arms and legs and tangled humanity.

But Boggles had made the fatal mistake of grossly over-estimating the strength and morale of the forces at his command. Woppy and the squeaky-voiced Cooke retired from the fray in the very early stages; the former minus a couple of his rabbit-like teeth, the latter with a bleeding nose and a rapidly-discolouring eye.

As for Crib, suddenly finding himself whirled under the table, he stayed there, tenderly massaging his jaw. A little chucking-out operation followed. Boggy went first, followed in quick succession by his henchmen, Crib and Cooke. Their caps, overcoats, and mufflers followed them.

Sorting themselves out, the dismal and disillusioned trio struggled into their things by the light of the wintry moon and limped painfully down the garden-path.

Then the vicious slam of the gate gave token that they had gone.

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Hounds had checked, and whilst the field—some patiently and others impatiently—sat watching the huntsman make his cast, Reggie Marling sidled his mare up to where George Porson was sitting astride a handsome chestnut.

"H'lo, Porson!" he greeted. "Ripping run, what?"

"Yes," grinned Porson, "but I needed it, Reggie I've had a ghastly three weeks!"

"What, with Woppy?" demanded Reggie. "By Jove, how time flies! I'd no idea it was three weeks since we had that bust-up with his precious pals. I've been intending to pop in and see you. How's the blot getting on?"

"Oh, he can fly now," replied Porson. "He can take off and land without crashing!"

"Great Scott! Can he really?" demanded Reggie. "I wouldn't have thought it. His pal Boggles hasn't been back, has he?"

"No! Woppy's been very quiet and subdued," replied Porson thoughtfully. "Too quiet for my liking. I believe he's got something up his sleeve—— Hallo, hounds are running! Come on!"

The whole field was away to a burst of melody from the hounds, and for more than a mile Porson and Reggie kept together. Suddenly Porson reined in his horse and, thinking something was amiss, the good-natured Reggie did likewise.

Porson had wheeled in his saddle and was staring up into the sky behind him.

"I thought I heard it!" he snapped. "Now, what's the beggar doing out this afternoon with the bus?"

"My hat! It's your biplane!" exclaimed Reggie, following Porson's gaze.

Two miles or more away, flying low, was Porson's old Maurice Farman biplane. The clattering roar of its old Green engine was perfectly audible.

"It must be Woppy—can't be anybody else!" ruminated Porson. "Hallo! He seems to be going down. He's somewhere about Much Muddlethorpe, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is by now," replied Reggie.

"Then I'm going to find out what the dickens he's doing with my bus!" snapped Porson. "You needn't come, old man!"

"I'll come," said Reggie. "I couldn't catch up with the hounds now, even if I wanted to."

They turned their horses' heads towards the distant village of Much Muddlethorpe and set off at an easy canter. And when eventually they approached Much Muddlethorpe they saw Porson's biplane standing in a field behind the Bull Inn, half a mile from the village. Stabling their horses, Porson called the landlord.

"Whose is that machine?" he asked.

"It belongs to a gentleman what's in the billiard-room, sir," replied the fellow.

"Is he alone?" asked Porson casually.

"No, sir, there's another young gentleman with him!"

Porson and Reggie exchanged glances.

"Well," demanded Reggie, as the landlord waddled away, "what do we do? It's pretty obvious that Woppy and Boggles, have come over here, thinking you safely out of the way. It'll be a half at school. Do we rout 'em out?"

"We wait!" said Porson firmly.

And wait they did until, when dusk was deepening into night, they heard the voice of Boggles inquiring excitedly of the landlord where he could get a taxi. The reply was apparently, "At the village," and Boggles, rushing out of the inn, cannoned full into Porson.

"Dear Boggy!" said Porson, clutching him by the arm. "Where are you off to?"

And after Boggy's first pardonable astonishment, Porson and Reggie got the full story of how Woppy and Boggy had come to play billiards, and how Woppy, engaged in a game with some pot-washer, had absolutely refused to take Boggy back to St. Edmund's until the game was finished.

"And I'll be late for lock-up," concluded Boggy, on the verge of tears, "and the whole blessed business will come out and—and I'll get the sack!"

"Little lad," said Porson soothingly, "I will take you home in the Farman."

Boggy went, rejoicing. Reggie lingered by the door of the inn. Minutes passed, and then he heard the clattering roar of the Green engine as it picked up. Someone else heard that roar as well, for, billiard-cue in hand, a white-faced Woppy dashed out of the inn.

"Help!" he yelped wildly. "Help!"

"What," said Reggie, insinuating himself forward from out of the shadows, "is the matter with you?"

Woppy grabbed him by the arm.

"Oh, Marling, is that you?" he babbled. "Oh dear! That—that fool Boggy's trying to fly that machine. He—he'll be k-k-killed, as sure as anything!"

"But what's he doing here, anyway?" demanded Reggie.

Again came the whole wretched story, whilst the roar of the Farman died slowly away somewhere in the night sky.

"I—I explained the controls to him on—on the way here," almost sobbed Woppy. "But I never thought he'd try to get home that way. He's sure to—to crash!"

"Certain!" assented Reggie gravely.

"And be k-k-killed?"

"Almost sure to be!"

"Oh dear, w-what shall I do?"

"Well, you can't stop him now, you see," replied Reggie. "It's a lucky thing for you I happened to be passing here on my way home from the hounds. We'll go down to the village and get a taxi, and get to Porson's cottage just as soon as we can. There's a chance he has got safely back!"

"Oh, no—no chance!" moaned Woppy.

"Pull yourself together, man!" said Reggie sharply.

When their taxi drew up at Porson's cottage, with a shrieking of brakes, it was Porson himself, in carpet slippers, grey flannels, and pullover, who answered the door.

"Is—is Boggy back?" stuttered Woppy.

“What the dickens are you talking about?” demanded Porson.

Woppy literally stumbled into the parlour. He collapsed on a chair at the table and buried his face on his arms. His body was suddenly racked with great sobs and he slowly lifted ghastly face to stare at Porson.

“I—I’ve killed him!” he whispered, choking.

Porson had him by the shoulder.

“You haven’t, Woppy!” he said sharply. “He’s all right! He got back safely! I brought him back myself! Do you understand?”

. . . . .

“He’s cured,” said Porson as he stood at the garden gate an hour later, saying good-night to Reggie.

“Absolutely!” nodded Reggie. “The chappie’s had a lesson he’ll never forget. Dashed drastic, but permanently effective. And what about Boggy?”

“He’s going to take up footer and live like a decent fellow in future,” replied Porson. “He gave me his word of honour that he would!”

“Did he?”

“Yes,” said Porson thoughtfully. “I don’t think I’d have got him back before lock-up if he hadn’t!”

CHAPTER XV

THE LAST FLIGHT!

"MASTER GEORGE PORSON!" THE portly butler, having announced Porson, stood aside to usher that youth into the comfortably-furnished library of Hooperton Hall.

Mr. Isaac Sogglebaum, stout and bald of head, screwed himself round in his armchair by the fire and waved a podgy hand.

"Ah, Porson!" he said graciously. "So here you are?"

"Yes," replied Porson, a trifle dryly, "here I am."

This was his first meeting with Mr. Isaac Sogglebaum. All that Porson knew about him was that after amassing a fortune in the City Mr. Sogglebaum had retired to Hooperton Hall—which he rented—and had taken over the mastership of the Hooperton Hounds.

"This," went on Mr. Sogglebaum, indicating a ferrety-faced young man perched nervously on the edge of an armchair on the other side of the fireplace, "is Mr. Tootle! Mr. Tootle—Mr. Porson!"

Mr. Tootle fingered his collar and made a husky sort of noise which might have been construed into a "Delighted!" The introduction completed, Porson seated himself at the request of Mr. Sogglebaum.

"Now," said the latter, puffing at a plump cigar, "perhaps you are wondering why I sent for you, Porson?"

"I am," admitted Porson.

Mr. Sogglebaum permitted himself the luxury of a knowing smile which, to Porson, smacked of a leer. Then, leaning forward in his chair, he went on impressively:

"It's because I'm going to do something what nobody else 'as ever done."

The letter H, by the way, was a perpetual curse to Mr. Sogglebaum.

"Yes," he continued, "something what 'as never been done before. And you and Mr. Tootle are going to 'elp me. I'll pay well—fifty pounds to each of you!"

Mr. Tootle was understood to murmur:

"Handsome—very handsome!"

"You'll understand, of course," remarked Porson coldly, "that before I can possibly consent to help you I must know what the idea is."

"Quite," assented Mr. Sogglebaum magnanimously. "Quite! Well, now, perhaps you are aware that I've taken over the 'Ooperton 'Ounds?"

Porson nodded.

"Captain Milvain, the gentleman what owns this 'ouse," went on Mr. Sogglebaum, "is abroad, big-game hunting. 'E used to be M.F.H., and when he went away nobody

was over keen on taking the job on, because it's expensive. Costs a lot of money to run these 'ounds, allow me to tell you!"

"Must do," remarked Mr. Tootle—"must do!"

"It does do," replied Mr. Sogglebaum testily. "I've just said it does! But money isn't really no object to me, so I took over the 'ounds when I took over the 'ouse. Now then," he went on, turning to Porson again, "I'm going to 'ave a most original memento made of my mastership of 'ounds. And that's where you come in."

"Oh! How?"

Mr. Sogglebaum did not answer immediately. First of all, he took a long whiff at his cigar and exhaled the smoke with exasperating and deliberate slowness. Then he looked at Mr. Tootle and smiled. Then he looked at Porson and smiled. His was an "Ah, wouldn't you like to know?" sort of attitude. Having dallied enjoyably with the situation to the full, he leant forward and said triumphantly:

"I'm going to 'ave a film made of my 'ounds running in full cry—a film what'll start at the meet in front of the 'ouse and finish with the kill!"

"A film?" exclaimed Porson.

"Yes," said Mr. Sogglebaum—"a film! As I say, it'll open with the meet and with me patting a favourite 'ound, or something. I'll 'ave to be careful about that, though. Last time I patted one the nasty brute bit me. Then, after the meet, we'll have some scenes taken at the coverside, including one of Mrs. Sogglebaum, who doesn't 'unt but who'll be there in 'er car!"

"And how will Mrs. Sogglebaum be taken?" inquired Porson, with interest, who knew her to be a stouter edition of her husband, much be-ringed and be-furred.

"Oh, she'll be taken chatting with a few friends from the window of 'er car," explained Mr. Sogglebaum. "And if a few of the local nobs can be wangled into the picture, so much the better. That," he went on, turning to Mr. Tootle, "will be up to you."

"How," demanded Porson, "will it be up to him?"

"Because Mr. Tootle is the gentleman what I've engaged to take the film," explained Mr. Sogglebaum. "He's the operator."

"Photographer," corrected Mr. Tootle meekly.

"Oh, I see!" said Porson.

"Then," went on Mr. Sogglebaum, "when we've finished taking scenes at the coverside, the 'untsmen will send 'ounds into the cover, and the next scene will show them breaking cover after their fox—'ard on its 'eels!"

"Wait a minute," cut in Porson. "How do you know you'll find a fox when you draw the cover? You might have to move to half a dozen covers, and then finish up with a blank day."

Mr. Sogglebaum laid a fat finger against the side of his bulbous nose and winked.

"I shall find a fox in the first cover I draw!" he said, with easy confidence.

Porson stared at him.

“And then,” went on Mr. Sogglebaum, “the rest of the picture will show ’ounds running strong across country till finally they bowls over their fox. The concluding scene will show me clip-clopping ’ome with the mask and brush dangling from my saddle and the pads sticking out of my pockets.”

“Eh?” gasped Porson.

“The pads sticking out of my pockets, I said,” replied Mr. Sogglebaum impatiently. “I think a close-up of me, smiling, would round off the whole thing nicely. We can put a sub-title to it, something like this: ‘And thus, after showing, as usual, a glorious day’s sport, that popular and sporting master, Mr. Isaac Sogglebaum, returns home, followed by his faithful ’ounds!’ Well, what do you think of it?”

“Excellent!” bleated Mr. Tootle.

“I should like, if I may,” said Porson slowly, “to ask one or two questions.”

“Certainly!” agreed Mr. Sogglebaum handsomely.

“In the first place,” asked Porson, “what exactly is the film for?”

“Oh, just a memento, like what I said,” replied the other. “To show to my friends, you know. Of course, if the film companies care to make me an offer for the right to exhibit it, I don’t say as ’ow I won’t consider it!”

“I see!” said Porson. “Now, where exactly do I come in?”

“You?” exclaimed Mr. Sogglebaum. “Why, I thought by now that you’d ’ave seen where you come in!”

“I rather fancy I do,” replied Porson. “But will you please tell me?”

“Well, the idea is,” explained Mr. Sogglebaum, “that Mr. Tootle fixes his camera in your machine and you follow the ’ounds at a ’eight of about one ’undred feet. That’ll suit you nicely, won’t it, Mr. Tootle?”

“Excellently!” assented Mr. Tootle.

“It might suit him,” remarked Porson grimly, “but I don’t think it’ll suit your hounds, and I’m dashed certain that it won’t suit the field!”

“ ’Ow won’t it?” demanded Mr. Sogglebaum.

“Well, simply because the noise of the engine will thoroughly scare the horses and most likely upset the hounds,” replied Porson.

“I know one ’orse that won’t be scared,” said Mr. Sogglebaum, “and that’s the only ’orse what matters. I refer to my ’orse. ’E’s been ridden over hurdles in ’is time, and knows what noise and crowds is. If the rest of the field finds their ’orses are scared, so much the better. I’ll be the only fellow up with ’ounds—and that’ll look well in the picture, eh?”

“It will!” bleated Mr. Tootle.

Porson ignored him.

“Well, even if you are confident that you, at least, will be able to keep your horse up with hounds,” he said to Mr. Sogglebaum, “how do you know the hounds will run? Personally, I don’t for one moment think they’ll hold the scent with an aeroplane roaring behind them.”

“That’s a matter of opinion!” remarked Mr. Sogglebaum loftily. “I think they’ll run as they always do, young man.”

“I don’t say they won’t,” said Porson doubtfully, “if the scent is strong enough to hold them. But there’s a chance they’ll jib!”

“I’ll whip ’em back to their scent quick enough if they do!” promised Mr. Sogglebaum grimly.

Porson pondered in thoughtful silence, and Mr. Sogglebaum went on:

“Now, see here, my boy, I’ve ’eard a lot about you, and I know you’re a good pilot. Everybody says so. So I’m offering you fifty pounds to take Mr. Tootle and ’is camera, and follow my ’ounds. If you won’t, somebody else will. I’m offering you the job because, for one thing, you live near ’ere—over at Sudcombe. Are you on, or aren’t you?”

Porson looked at him. Apart from the financial point of view, Porson was attracted by the thought of seeing just how this scheme would work out.

“Yes,” he said, “I’ll do it!”

“Good!” breathed Mr. Sogglebaum heavily.

“Fine!” added the fatuous Tootle in the other armchair.

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Porson had gone, and Mr. Tootle was in the morning-room—where there was no fire—lunching magnificently off a boiled egg, leathery cheese, and well-watered tea. And the tea, like the room, could have done with a good heating.

However, Mr. Isaac Sogglebaum, being alone in the library, pressed the bell and sent for his huntsman, Joe Hawke.

Joe was all that a huntsman should be, and even on non-hunting days was as spick and span as a new pin. He had served the old master, Captain Milvain, well. He was doing his best to serve the new master in like manner, but sometimes he sadly wondered whether he, horses, or hounds would be able to carry on much longer.

The stables were damp through want of repair, and the bedding was rotten. The kennels were bad, and hounds underfed. Joe himself was losing heart. There were days when he didn’t seem to care whether he hunted or not. And to realise the full portent of that, it is only necessary to mention that his father and grandfather before him had been huntsmen to famous packs, and hunting was all-in-all to him.

So now, glumly, he betook himself to the presence of Mr. Isaac Sogglebaum.

“Ah, ’Awke,” said Mr. Sogglebaum, as Joe stood hat in hand before him, “there’s a little matter I want to talk over with you. There’s something I want you to arrange!”

“Yes, sir?”

“It’s like this, ’Awke,” went on Mr. Sogglebaum. “ ’Ounds meet on the lawn outside in the morning, and I’ve arranged to ’ave a film taken of the ’unt!”

Then followed a few minutes of explanation on Mr. Sogglebaum’s part, and ominous silence on Joe’s.

“So you see, ’Awke,” concluded Mr. Sogglebaum, “ ’ow very necessary it is that we find a good fox in the first cover we draw. That’ll be Marston Gorse.”

“There should be a fox there, sir!”

“Ah, but listen, ’Awke!” went on Mr. Sogglebaum. “There might not be a fox. Some low, common, poaching fellow with a cur might raise ’im early in the morning. I’ve got to be certain ’ounds break cover in full cry from Marston Gorse, else I’ll ’ave to waste a lot of time drawing other covers. So you and me are going to make certain that we find a good fox in Marston Gorse, see?”

“No,” said Joe stubbornly.

“What don’t you see?” snapped his master.

“How we’re going to be certain we find in Marston Gorse!” replied Joe.

Mr. Sogglebaum smiled.

“Ah, but I do!” he said darkly. “You know, ’Awke, it’s brain you want. If I ’adn’t ’ad brain I wouldn’t be where I am to-day. And if you’d ’ad brain you’d ’ave made something better of yourself than an ’untsman. Never mind, I’m getting away from the point. Now, ’Awke, ’ave you ever ’eard of a bag-fox?”

Joe nodded, his lips compressed.

“Good!” said Mr. Sogglebaum. “And ’ave you ever ’eard of an aniseed trail?”

Again Joe nodded, only now his strong fingers were playing havoc with the hat they held.

“Well, you’ll arrange to have an aniseed drag made from Marston Gorse for about two miles across country,” continued Mr. Sogglebaum. “ ’Ounds will follow it like as if it was a breast-high scent. At the end of the drag, say at Rushdown Banks, Woffles, the underkeeper, can shake out a bag-fox and let ’im go. ’Ounds will run on, following the scent of the bag-fox, if Woffles doesn’t slip ’im too soon. We’ll have a real good run, starting with a fine breakaway from cover. See?”

“Yes,” said Joe, in a strangely quiet voice, “I see!”

“Of course,” went on his master, “we must keep it quiet, you know. Some of these old stagers who ’unt with us wouldn’t like it. But I’ll leave the details to you. That’s all, ’Awke.”

“Is it?” demanded Joe.

“Yes, you can go now.”

Joe took a deep breath, his eyes glinting.

“Yes, I’ll go now,” he said, in a voice quivering with anger, “and I’ll go for good. I’m through with you, you rotten, make-believe sportsman. I’ve never hunted a bag-fox in my life, and I’m not going to start now. I——”

“ ’Awke!” gasped Mr. Sogglebaum. “You forget yourself, ’Awke!”

“Do I?” shouted Joe. “Then it’s a pity that I haven’t done it before. You’ve come down here and tried to play the gentleman—you, who haven’t got a decent gentlemanly instinct in you. Your horses are coughing, and your hounds are starving. But what do you care? Nothing, as long as you can go swanking round the countryside.

"I've only one regret in leaving you, and that is that I've got to leave horses and hounds with you. You're not fit to have charge of a rocking-horse, you mean, stingy blackguard! But you wait! Some day the old master will come back, and pity help you when he sees what's going on here!"

"You—you impertinent scoundrel!" spluttered Mr. Sogglebaum, almost speechless with rage.

"It's lucky for you," shouted Joe, "that I haven't my hunting-crop here, or I'd give you a taste of what you gave old Ravager the other day, just because he pawed your riding-cords. He'll carry that weal for many a long day, let me tell you, you shark! Well, I'm going, and I'll take care you don't get another huntsman here."

He clapped his by now shapeless hat on his head and strode towards the door.

Mr. Sogglebaum looked as though he would like to commit assault and battery, but having no weapon handy, and not caring to trust to his podgy fists, he wisely contented himself with yelling threats.

"Go!" he almost screamed, on the verge of apoplexy. "Go—don't come back. I can get another huntsman. I'll have the law on you for slander——"

The door slammed. Joe had gone.

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In spite of several notable absentees a good field cast up the following morning for the meet at Hooperton Hall.

Colonel Blenkinsop, Admiral Stumper, Major-General Gorem-Bluster, and other old members of the hunt had long since sent either coldly brief or hotly-worded letters of resignation to Mr. Isaac Sogglebaum. They did not, it appeared, approve of him as M.F.H.

But, borne on the wings of gossip and rumour, word of Mr. Sogglebaum's film had travelled around the countryside, and amongst others who turned up to watch the proceedings was Algy Blenkinsop, accompanied by the Hon. Reggie Marling, young Woolerton, Percy Poulter, and Horace Pyeman.

Algy and company arrived just at the interesting moment when Mr. Sogglebaum, having been filmed in the act of patting steady old Brilliant, was now being filmed mounting his horse.

A word about this horse. He was a piebald, which Mr. Sogglebaum had picked up cheap from a small dealer. The dealer, in telling Mr. Sogglebaum that the horse was a hurdler, had very nearly lied; but not quite. As a matter of fact, the piebald had jumped low painted hurdles in the ring of a travelling circus before the proprietor had gone smash and sold up.

But apart from jumping hurdles, the piebald could do one or two other things, of which Mr. Sogglebaum was blissfully unaware. So when Mr. Sogglebaum, surrounded by a ring of grinning, red-coated horsemen, seated himself in his saddle, and in excess of spirits cried "Ho-oop!" he wasn't exactly prepared for what followed.

The piebald, lifting his head and pricking his ears, stirred restlessly. It was a long time since a man on his back had given him that word, but he remembered it.

"Ho-oop!" cried Mr. Sogglebaum again, smiling towards the camera, which was being worked by an earnest Tootle.

The piebald flung up his head, champing at his bit, then with deliberate steps he commenced to walk backwards.

"Stop it, you fool!" snapped Mr. Sogglebaum, taking a short hold of his riding-crop.

But the piebald wouldn't stop it. He'd backed out of the sawdust ring to the word "Ho-oop!" and he continued to walk backwards now. The red-coated horsemen surged aside to give him passage, and the fatuous Tootle continued to turn the handle of his camera, faithfully recording the distressing scene. Tootle knew nothing of horses, and slightly less of hunting. He saw nothing extraordinary in the M.F.H. giving a little circus turn to enliven the proceedings, and as everybody was laughing, he laughed as well.

Mr. Sogglebaum used whip, spurs, and language; but all to no purpose. He yelled at Tootle, and he yelled at the horse. The poor brute seemed to get the impression that he wasn't moving lively enough, so he quickened his step.

The french windows of the drawing-room stood open behind him. His hind hoofs scraped against the six-inch step. Yes, there had been a higher step than that to negotiate out of the ring. He lifted first his off hind leg, then the other. And to shrieks of mirth from the convulsed field he backed into the drawing-room, carrying the impotent and frenzied Mr. Sogglebaum with him. And Tootle kept turning his handle.

The piebald halted then, his head only visible through the open windows as he regarded the field with a patient gaze. Mr. Sogglebaum flung himself furiously from the saddle, kicking over a table laden with priceless bric-a-brac as he did so. He did not pause to reflect that probably he was the first Master of Fox Hounds to dismount in his own drawing-room. Perhaps it did not occur to him.

Seizing the reins, he dragged the piebald out on to the smooth turf of the lawn. He was crimson with anger, and his little eyes were blazing.

"I'll teach you to make a fool of me, you brute!" he roared, and brought his riding-crop savagely across the piebald's flank.

"I'll show you who's your boss!" he bellowed, holding the rearing horse whilst he raised the crop preparatory to bringing it down again in a stinging cut.

But suddenly the riding-crop was wrenched from his hand, and, wheeling, he confronted a grim-faced Porson.

"For two pins I'd give you a taste of your own medicine, you rotter!" rapped the boy.

"Mind your own business, confound you!" screamed Mr. Sogglebaum. "Give me that whip!"

In reply, Porson flung the riding-crop far into the laurels.

"You can go and get it, if you want it!" he said contemptuously. "But don't let me or any of these other fellows see you thrashing a horse like that again, or you'll be

sorry!"

"Get out of my grounds!" roared Mr. Sogglebaum. "I won't 'ave anything more to do with you. I won't let you 'elp me in the film. Go on, get away! Get out!"

"I'm going!" replied Porson. "And if I'd properly understood the kind of cad you are I wouldn't have taken on the job of helping you with your rotten film. There's one thing, though. If Tootles offers what he's just taken to any film company for distribution he'll get a tiptop price for a snorter of a comedy!"

"Get out—get out, confound you!" raved Mr. Sogglebaum. "Get out, before I 'ave you thrown out!"

"I'll get out," retorted Porson, "before you make me sick!"

. . . . .

The man with money can always command a following of sorts, and Mr. Sogglebaum was no exception to the rule. Having recovered his riding-crop and something of his composure, he mounted the piebald and set off for Marston Gorse, accompanied by hounds, a sprinkling of horsemen, and Mr. Tootle, with camera.

At length, when Mr. Tootle had used several hundred feet of perfectly good film, the second whip, who, by the way, had been promoted to the position relinquished by Joe Hawke, sent hounds into cover.

They weren't long in picking up the aniseed trail which the second whip and Mr. Woffles had laid early that morning. They crashed out of cover with a burst of melody, and away they went, followed by the aforementioned sprinkling of horsemen.

Hounds held the line well, heading towards Rushdown Banks, where, behind a bush, Mr. Woffles was waiting to release a whacking big dog-fox. He saw hounds far off racing towards him, and, opening the basket he carried, he shook out the fox.

Now, this fox was old, and he was cunning. He was determined not to be caught again.

To his ears came the melody of the approaching hunt, and, three fields away, hounds hove into view, running strongly a long way ahead of Mr. Sogglebaum and company. A blanket would have covered them, so well were they holding the line. Reynard whisked his brush, turned, and was off.

He knew where he wanted to go. Once, when hard pressed, he had dashed into Rushdown railway tunnel, which was half a mile in length, and hounds had been whipped off him by a frantic huntsman. Well, as Rushdown tunnel seemed to spell sanctuary, he'd try it again.

At the bush where Woffles had slipped the bag-fox hounds picked up the new scent and swung on to it, still full of running.

Away in the distance sounded the clattering roar of Porson's ancient Maurice Farman biplane. Porson was heading home to Sudcombe, after a prolonged discussion of the situation with Algy Blenkinsop and company.

Looking down, Porson saw the red-brown body of the fox slip across a field, then through a fence and down the embankment on to the gleaming railway metals. Shifting

his gaze, he saw the hounds come racing across the same field, tumble pell-mell over the fence, and also tear down the embankment on to the metals, and, hard on the heels of their quarry, race towards the black mouth of the long tunnel. Then Porson saw something else—something which brought a gasp of dismay from him.

A white wisp of smoke was drifting on the still morning air over towards Rushton Station. It was the slow local train, which had left the station and was now heading towards the other mouth of the tunnel. In an instant Porson grasped the situation. The train would meet the hounds somewhere in the tunnel, and they would be cut to pieces!

Even as he watched, he saw the pack vanish into the tunnel, and the local was steaming hard towards the other entrance. Nothing could save the pack unless the local was stopped. But how could it be stopped? It was within a quarter of a mile of the tunnel already.

Porson's fingers jerked open the throttle to full, and he shoved forward his control-stick. His face was white, and there was something approaching a sob in his throat. But he was going to do the only thing possible. He took the ancient biplane earthwards in a dive which set the wind singing madly through flying wires and bracing wires. He was heading for the railway metals, directly between the train and the mouth of the tunnel.

Porson's jaw was set. Right above the gleaming metals he pulled hard on the control-stick.

The nose of the old Farman came up, and the machine seemed to hang an instant suspended in mid-air. Then, with an ominous crack, it flopped in a perfect pancake landing right across the metals in front of the approaching train.

Porson literally hurled himself out of the low forward cockpit, and fell heavily on the embankment. He heard a terrific shrieking of brakes, then a splintering crash; and, picking himself up, saw the train come to a sudden jolting stop, with the mangled wreckage of his dear old biplane crumpled on the front of the engine!

The driver, guard, and passengers descended. They surrounded Porson, all talking at once. Then two men, clear-cut and bronzed of feature, elbowed their way through the crowd.

"What," said one of them to Porson, "is the idea, old chap?"

Porson looked at him for one split second, then let out a yell:

"DAD!"

Porson's dad it was, bronzed and fit-looking from the big-game hunt in the Congo he had embarked on just before George left school and started his ambitious flying-service.

Father and son gripped hands tightly, too astonished at the unexpectedness of the meeting to say anything much!

Mr. Sogglebaum arrived on the scene as their hands met.

"My 'ounds," he gasped, "are in the tunnel!"

The man who was with Porson's father turned to Mr. Sogglebaum.

"You will pardon me," he said coldly, "but I rather think it is my hounds which are in the tunnel. I am Captain Milvain!"

. . . . .

A week passed, and Algy Blenkinsop and company arrived at Porson's cottage for tea, with Porson and his father.

"Got over the loss of your old Maurice Farman?" inquired Algy sympathetically.

Porson nodded sorrowfully, then a slow grin spread over his good-natured features.

"I've had it reassembled, and I'm always going to keep it, although it'll never fly again!" he said. "But come out to the barn, you chaps!"

Out to the barn they went, and there stood two new beautifully-streamlined aeroplanes!

"The Moth was given me by that American whose son I saved—Bosker K. Bosk!" explained Porson. "And the Hunt Committee presented me with the Fairey because I lost my Farman in saving their hounds. I didn't expect anything, and I jolly well didn't want anything. But," he added modestly, "what about my Flying Service—'Porson's Flying Service—By Air to Anywhere!'—now, eh? I've raised over two hundred pounds as well!"

"You have," said Algy, patting him on the head, "made good, dear lad! Congratters from all of us!"

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

A cover was created for this eBook and is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Porson's Flying Service* by George Ernest Rochester]