

MARK GILMORE
SPEED FLYER

PERCY KEESE FITZHUGH

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Title: Mark Gilmore, Speed Flyer

Date of first publication: 1931

Author: Percy Keese Fitzhugh (1876-1950)

Date first posted: May 4, 2020

Date last updated: May 4, 2020

Faded Page eBook #20200518

This eBook was produced by: Roger Frank and Sue Clark

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"I POTTED HIS TWO FRONT TIRES," HE SHOUTED TO MARK.

MARK GILMORE
SPEED FLYER

By
PERCY K. FITZHUGH

Author of
THE TOM SLADE BOOKS
THE ROY BLAKELEY BOOKS
THE PEE-WEE HARRIS BOOKS
THE WESTY MARTIN BOOKS
THE MARK GILMORE BOOKS

ILLUSTRATED BY
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GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS : NEW YORK

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MARK GILMORE, SPEED FLYER

CHAPTER I

HEAD ON

A heavy, chill mist lay below and above a choppy wind held sway. Mark Gilmore was forced to ride the gale though it would take the Kent D-2 fifty miles off her course. He smiled slowly in answer to the questioning look on Arty Aylesworth's bright face and pointed eloquently toward the fog-bound earth. A moment later the nose of the trim little plane climbed still higher into the roaring tempest.

Arty shook his dark head dubiously. "You do the darndest things, Red," he shouted. "I'm sure that that crate we sighted a minute ago is on our course too, yet...."

"She's dipped the fog just to keep straight on her course like all good pilots *should do*," Mark interposed with a note of raillery. "Well, Art, I'm not such a good pilot if you measure me by those standards. I'm the kind of a pilot that will sacrifice time and speed for safety any time—see? Especially I'll do it when I have cargo on board to account for."

"Human or otherwise?" asked Arty grinning.

"Both." Mark glanced quickly at his companion. "You're thinking that such talk won't help me measure up to the job your father's offering, huh?"

"Dad will fall hook, line and sinker for that cargo talk, Red—don't worry about that. What he won't fall for, though, I warn you, is any mention of sacrificing time. He's a demon for time and he won't listen to any excuses."

Mark nodded happily. "Ever since I was a kid fifteen years old, I've managed to make the goal on time. Nobody's ever really had to wait for me so I guess your father won't have to either. Air troubles—after all I beat them on the home stretch."

"Attaboy! I bet that's the truth too. Safety first and speed last. Well, maybe there's a lot of chaps could learn something from that creed. Anyway I cracked you up to the skies to dad—you're sure to get the job. I didn't tell him how you lost your last one with the East Coast people either."

"That," said Mark with a decisive tug at his controls, "is something I'm not ashamed of. Did the East Coast people tell you why I was let out?"

Arty nodded. "The manager said there had been constant friction between you and Richie Benson. There was a slight accident to his plane when he was on an important flight and I understand the chap hinted that it

must have been the result of some tampering with the crate by enemy hands.”

“Meaning *me*,” Mark grinned. “You see he and I were making a test flight for the High-Oil Company—New York to Washington record, see? Five thousand bonus to the winner. We had an even start but ran into some terrific weather in Jersey. Richie’s folks are poor so I let him overtake me and pass me. I guess he was so overjoyed that it went to his head because he began trying to cut time and the wind and before you knew it he was having trouble. All of a sudden I didn’t see him and I kind of figured that it was either one thing or the other—forced down or knocked down. Wild country, that part of Jersey. Not a house in sight and as hilly as can be. All of a sudden I saw some flames below.”

“His crate?” asked Arty, tense.

“I thought so at the time. Anyway, I made about the worst forced landing I’ll ever make, banged up my wing considerably and almost succeeded in finishing things up including myself. But I didn’t and instead I scrambled out fearing the worst for Richie as I ran toward the flames. Well, it proved to be no more than a brush fire and I found Benson the other side of the hill, quite well but his plane out of kilter. He had come down in a hurry with engine trouble.”

“And for *your* trouble he reported you to the East Coast big guns as having tampered with his engine so’s you could get that bonus yourself,” said Arty indignantly. “Oh, I know that story, Red—the manager told me that much. He said he hated to let you go but he had to because the incident cost them the entire business of the High-Oil people. Well, so it goes. Benson deserved to get the gate and I hope he realizes it by now.”

“I hope he’s as lucky as I am,” said Mark with a smile. “There I was walking out of the East Coast office kind of down and you came running after me.”

“Dad’s the lucky one that he sent me on to snoop around the East Coast office for a good pilot. The minute I mentioned my business, the manager buttonholed me and he said I could have one of their best chaps as soon as he fired you.”

They both laughed heartily at this and listened for a time to the gale whistling eerily as it beat against the cabin. Arty pressed his face against the cold pane and peered at a little glow of light that seemed to be bobbing along on the roof of the fog.

“Think I see our former friend down there,” he observed.

“Huh!” Mark asked, watching his gauges as he brought down the altitude. “That crate, you mean?”

“Mm. Suffering cats, but she’s low. I guess you know what you’re doing. Rather have wind any time than take chances on a rim like that.”

Mark shrugged his shoulders. “Let him go to it. He’ll take chances once too often. I’m going to put this ship straight south, I know that. Get out of this wind—Arkansas, Oklahoma, a bit of Texas and New Mexico, and then we’ll wind up in your Colorado at Dawson City, huh?”

Arty had not heard, that was obvious, for his face was pressed against the cold pane, anxiously. “Red,” he said at length, “that plane down there is in trouble. I’m certain she’s sending down flares.”

Mark leaned forward. “Too bad,” he said sympathetically, “but there’s nothing much we can do, Arty. He’ll have to bail out if things get bad enough, same’s we all do.”

“But we’re in a bad part of Missouri, Red,” the other protested. “Heaven knows where the poor egg would land if he *did* bail out. He’ll either land in the river or stick in the mud for that’s all this part of the country boasts of. A poor white’s shack here and there, but mostly there. Still, as you say, we can’t do anything about it—we can’t risk our own necks too.”

Mark said nothing for a while but leaned over and scrutinized his altimeter. The lights from his control board gleamed upon his thick blond hair bringing out that peculiar reddish cast that had earned for him the affectionate nickname of “Red.” His bushy eyebrows, too, as they squinted over the dash-board had this same glint, belying the dancing brown of his eyes. Mark was singularly handsome, Arty decided as he watched him.

“*We’re* only five thousand feet, would you believe that?” Mark asked simply.

“What about it, Red?” Arty returned.

“Just that our friend must be pretty low. How does he seem to be getting on?”

Arty looked. “Rotten,” he announced. “He just sent down another flare. Guess he can’t penetrate that fog with dynamite.”

Mark brought the plane into a nose dive. “We’ll cruise down around her and see what we can see.”

They dove down out of the wind and came out on an even keel just above the roof of the fog. The other plane was a little below and a trifle to the left. Manifestly, she was in distress and afraid to make a landing for her nose was wobbling about uncertainly one moment, then righting itself the next.

Arty kept his face close to the little cockpit window. “I got a glimpse of the poor egg’s face then,” he said excitedly. “Can you dip her a bit nearer, Red?”

“Guess so. I’ll take it easy and tell me when I’m getting warm.”

“Sure thing. Let ’er go!”

Mark throttled her down, and they came breathtakingly near the other plane, their wheels seeming almost to touch the gleaming wing. Arty raised a brown hand warningly. “Warm enough, Red. Now, I can see him ... he’s hanging his head out of the window ... wait ... shut ’er off a second, huh?”

Mark immediately did so and after a tense second received an assenting nod from Arty.

“All right,” said the other. “His motor’s dead as a door nail. Looks frantic—he sort of shook his head as if he hasn’t any chute.”

“Can you imagine that!” Mark bit his lip, perplexed. “My gosh, if he can’t bail out...”

Arty grasped his seat with both hands. “He’s ducked in, Red ... *he’s gone!*”

“Plane too!” Mark shouted.

“*Sure.* It nosed right over the minute he pulled his head back in. Suffering cats!”

“He’ll be caught in the mess sure as guns,” Mark cried sympathetically. Then: “Hey, Art!”

“Yeah!”

“Want to bail out?”

“What for, huh?”

“I’m going after that fool. If I don’t, my conscience will bother me the rest of my life. There’ll be a nice little fire as soon as his ship strikes terra firma, if it turned over here as you say it did. He’ll make part of the fuel too, because he’ll have one sweet job getting out. Maybe I’m wrong, but it’s a hunch. Want to...”

“What do you think I am, Red? I’m stickin’ and that isn’t maybe! Go on—here’s to life, death or the pursuit of happiness, huh?” Mark sighed as he shut off his motor.

“Arty,” he said in all seriousness, “I can see that you’re just as great a fool as I am. And that’s no compliment to either of us, believe me.”

The Kent D-2 hovered an instant, then slid noiselessly into the black fog and down.

CHAPTER II

A LONG CHANCE

Mark did everything with a sort of reckless frenzy. So now he guided the plane through that impenetrable fog in its almost headlong descent. It was like him, too, neither to care nor wonder into what abysmal pit of death this foolhardy impulse might bring them. His particular thought was that they should not desert their fellow airman in his distress.

For a few moments the blinding headlights showed nothing but fog bank after fog bank. Mark's fingers were icy, and Arty sat tense and silent. They were thinking that because of this stranger, in a second, life would very likely end for them both.

Fate, however, had other plans, and life for them was destined to continue in the uneven tenor of its way. Mark espied in that momentous second a familiar blackness, the earth yawning silently below. The fog was now above them and rapidly drifting heavenward like some gigantic veil suddenly cast aside.

Mark's next move was decisive, for the Kent D-2 swooped forward, flattened itself against the dark horizon, then drifted quite noiselessly to the ground.

The blinding headlights swept the welcome earth before the wheels gripped its solid substance, yet a curious gurgle issued from Arty's throat when first they felt the familiar bumping beneath them. Mark laughed aloud.

"What's the matter, Art?"

"Never thought we'd make it—couldn't believe it, that's all," the other answered with no little relief in his voice. "Phew!"

Mark was on his feet as soon as the plane came to a full stop. He threaded his way through the cabin with Arty close at his heels. "Grab a flashlight," he said, "we may need it."

A damp, muggy breeze greeted them as they stepped down and Mark was aware at once of the soft, soggy condition of the ground underfoot. "Swampy," he observed.

Arty plied the flashlight around the tail of the plane. "I was pretty certain it would be, Red. Nothing back here," he shouted. "Not a house from the looks...."

A faint cry startled them. Mark rushed around the plane to the left. "Came from this way," he cried. "The light, Art—you might know I'd have had to bring her down with the lights facing the wrong way. Well...."

Arty's light fell upon more swamp, a seemingly endless stretch of it. They stumbled and ran a few yards until the cry came again, stronger and distinct. "*Help!*" came the plea.

Its echo seemed to linger among some high grass, northwest of where they were searching. In a bound they were in it, shouting as they went. The echoes of their own cries beat about the tall wet grass and though no answering cry came they kept on, sinking into the mire up to their ankles. Once, Mark felt his forward foot come in contact with something and instinctively jumped. Arty's light disclosed a copperhead, coiled up and peacefully slumbering.

They laughed nervously and plunged ahead and after a few minutes, Mark beat the last of the stinging, dank weeds away from his face. The ground sloped down from their feet and suddenly they realized that they were standing upon a river embankment. Shadowy waters lapped upon its sides and gurgled away into the black night.

Mark grasped Arty's shoulder and pointed to a telltale grayish outline that was bobbing merrily downstream. A bit of airplane wing stuck out of the muddy waters at a crazy angle and clinging to it was the still form of a young man. At sight of the gleaming light he raised his head slightly, seemingly too dazed to speak.

Mark divested himself of his jacket and helmet and kicked off his shoes. A moment later, his tall slim body had cleaved the muddy water and Arty held his breath until he saw the head of his friend come up a few feet distant.

"O.K.?" he called anxiously.

"Yep," answered Mark cheerfully. "Don't worry—just give us lots of light!"

Arty did that with a will, holding on to the cool metal with taut fingers. He had seen at first glance that Mark would have not a little trouble in rescuing the young man, for the floating wreckage had a buoyancy that kept pace with the tumbling current.

Mark, too, was aware of this presently and found that he had an added difficulty in fighting a curious cross current. Also, a great deal of driftwood was a further impediment but after a few minutes of uncertainty the fickle current suddenly decided in his favor.

He was literally swept toward the wreckage and needed but a few hearty strokes to reach out and grasp the bewildered young man. At that juncture, Arty's light swept upon them and to Mark's consternation he realized that it was Richie Benson whom he was rescuing.

His gasp brought Benson out of his daze. He looked up at his rescuer, startled. "*You?*" he asked in thick, frightened tones.

"Just me," Mark answered with genuine relief. "*Not hurt?*"

Benson shook his head. “I—I’m in a fog, that’s all,” he stammered. Then, complainingly, he added: “You know I can’t swim, Mark, you know....”

“Of course, of course,” Mark said in his most cheerful voice. He flung his arm about the fellow and in a second was paddling energetically back toward the shore.

CHAPTER III

BENSON

Benson was bruised and uncomfortably water-soaked but that was all. He was able to get off his clothes and able to wrap himself in a blanket cheerfully proffered by Mark, but he was unable to be genuinely thankful for his timely rescue. Instead he could find voice only to denounce and complain.

“S too hot in here,” he said, sullenly glancing about the trim little cabin. “No wonder I cracked up—if I’d of known I was anywheres near *you* I’d of swung for south and throttled her to the limit instead of tryin’ to keep on my course and beatin’ the fog. Even Lindbergh couldn’t break *your* jinx—I might o’ known it was *you!*”

Mark winked at the bewildered Arty, then turned to Benson. “One thing at a time, Richie,” he said good-naturedly. “As for the heat—our clothes have to dry, mine as well as yours, you know. And as for you cracking up—I’m sorry.” He chuckled softly. “I’d have got out of *your* way if I’d known it was you, too. I’m not keen about being around a fellow who dislikes me as you seem to. And as for that jinx idea of yours—it’s crazy. You simply don’t like me, that’s all. Why don’t you say so and be done with it?”

Benson frowned. “Why is it I’ve cracked up twice now when I’ve been flyin’ in your neighborhood, hey?” he returned hoarsely. “Do you say that doesn’t look like you’re the jinx?”

“You mean *you’re* the jinx, Benson!” Arty spoke up indignantly. “Not only that, but it seems to me you’re a pretty sour sort of guy—sour and ungrateful. Red didn’t ask you to try and beat the fog. Besides, do you suppose it was a pink tea for him to ship down after you? All he thought about was that maybe you were sizzling in your crate down here. And for all the gratitude he doesn’t get it’s a pity you *didn’t* sizzle!”

“Who’s ungrateful?” Benson grumbled. “Anyway, he didn’t take such a risk shipping down after me. Not Mark. That guy could ship through a tornado and land on velvet in an airport. He’s lucky. Lucky for himself,” he added with a sardonic smile.

Arty got up and thumped toward the cockpit, disgusted. If his first impression of Benson was destined to be a lasting one, it did not augur well for the future. And Mark, temperamental and sensitive to the extreme, was aware of a strange sense of foreboding, feeling that the gods *meant* Richie to

be part of that unknown future. What adventure they had prepared he could not guess.

Mark draped his partly unclothed figure in a tarpaulin and flumped himself down in a seat facing Benson. He grinned broadly and flung his rebellious blond locks back in place with a vigorous shake of the head.

“Well, Richie,” he said, pleasantly, “there’s no use denying I was surprised to find out you were the victim. No doubt you were just as surprised, huh?”

“Sure, I was. I ain’t no mind reader. I didn’t know it was you swimmin’ toward me any more than I knew I was going to crack up in this forsaken place—where are we?”

“Missouri, Sweetness,” Arty hissed from the cockpit. He did not turn around. “We were five thousand one hundred and ten feet, wind north and northwest and the visibility wasn’t bad until we had the hard luck of seeing you. Talk about the jinx....”

“Pipe down, Aylesworth,” Benson growled. “Since when did I ask you for your two cents in my business, hah!”

Arty’s answer was a dark, withering glance over his shoulder. “I’m only interested in Red, Benson,” he added severely; “your business means absolutely nothing to me. I don’t like you enough—in fact, I don’t like you at all!”

Benson shrugged his broad shoulders and frowned. “Who cares anyway?” he mumbled.

Mark tapped the back of the seat with his fingers. “Quit bickering, Rich—I’ve wasted enough time already. I’m due in Dawson City before midnight and I’m late now. Where were you heading for when your crate started acting up?”

Benson smiled slowly. “So you’re going to Dawson City, hah? Funny, that’s just where I was headed for! I’ve got me a swell job with the Dawson-Inland Airlines.”

“Well,” Mark smiled, “some coincidence! I’m to claim a job from Art’s father, president of Inter-Mountain Airways. We’re both in luck, huh?” He turned toward Arty and saw that that person had completely turned about and was staring at them both from the cockpit.

“Did I hear you right, Benson?” Arty asked. “Did you say you were going to work for the Dawson-Inland?”

“Sure—*why*? You don’t look none too happy about it. What’s the matter with Dawson-Inland?”

Arty bit his lip. “You’ll know after you get to Dawson City and speak to Daly Rumson. He’s your boss.... Oh yes, I suppose you do know that. Well, you’ll know more after you talk with Rumson—he’ll soon tell you. And

after he gets through telling you—you can tell him that I said he was an unscrupulous competitor of my father. We have no use for him for very good reasons.”

“Because he’s a competitor of your father’s?” asked Benson with a sarcastic smile.

“No, because of his methods in business. Just now we happen to be suspicious of him because he wants the government mail contract. So do we. My father wants it to stimulate business not only for the company but for the good of Dawson City in general. Rumson wants the contract for strictly personal reasons, or I’ll miss my guess. You see my family have known him for years and he’s never done a strictly honest thing in all that time. It’s no secret with the home folks, but Rumson doesn’t care—never did care. That’s the man you’re going to work for.”

Benson laughed. “That’s my business, Aylesworth,” he sneered. “What’s more, it doesn’t interest me what you or anybody else thinks about him—see! He’s going to pay me a nice fat salary and that’s all that counts.”

“Suppose it means risking your ‘rep’?” Mark asked. “What then?”

“Aw, you make me sick, Mark,” came the reply.

“Don’t I know it,” said Mark calmly. “Just the same, I’m giving you warning, Richie—you’ve heard what Art had to say about this Rumson. You want to be careful if only for your mother’s sake.”

“Why should *you* care about his mother?” Arty interposed hotly.

“Because I’ve known her since I was a little kid,” Mark replied. “You see, Art, Richie and I were brought up within a block of each other. A fellow’s bound to have some sentiment about a thing like that, especially when both of us learned to fly together and got our first jobs together with the East Coast people. The only trouble with our friendship, Rich’s always had a chip on his shoulder about me. It’s been a sort of one-sided affair.”

“And why not?” Richie returned complainingly. “Ever since I can remember, you’ve been trackin’ my heels and givin’ me your old woman’s advice.”

Mark smiled quietly. “I’ve never given you anything but good advice, Rich,” he said pleasantly. “And boy, that’s something you’re always needing! I’ve not got your hot head, remember, and I can see trouble quicker than you—that’s why I’ve always tracked at your heels. If you want to know it—your mother made me promise to keep an eye out for you, no matter what happened. And I promised.”

“Oh yeah? Well, I’ve been out of knee pants quite a few years and I ain’t knucklin’ down to that kind of thing now, mother or not. What does she think I am; an infant? And who does she think you are, hah? Solomon? That hands me a big laugh.”

"I'd rather see you laugh than the usual frown you wear, Rich," Mark said seriously, "but don't laugh until you know what it's all about. Your mother happens to know you very well, also she knows me and while I don't flatter myself that she's ever thought of comparing me with Solomon, she knows I've been level-headed enough to get you out of several scrapes. You would have been out of East Coast six months ago if I hadn't smoothed things over with the manager about that Midland Airline business."

Arty turned about once more. "You mean to tell me that Benson here was the egg who was mixed up in that business?"

Mark nodded. "Did the manager tell you?"

"Sure. I had to find out what kind of a pilot I was hiring for dad and I told the manager to tell me what he knew about you both. Benson didn't have the promise of Rumson's job then, I guess. Anyway, your former boss gave you a clean bill, Mark. But he said he couldn't say the same thing about Richie, here. It seems that Sweetness was accused of selling some promising freight contracts to a rival airline—The Midland Airline."

"Yeah, and why did I!" Benson retorted blatantly. "The East Coast people paid me a rotten salary, that's why. No guy should be blamed if he wants to make some extra change. Anyway, I should worry now. The Midland people didn't forget me. I got this job through them—Rumson has some interest in it."

"Oh," Mark breathed. "That kind of throws some light on things."

"I'll say it does," Arty said quickly. "Rumson even picks his pilots, hey? Well, Benson, considering everything, you ought to fit in the job like a glove."

Mark spread his hands entreatingly. "Listen Richie, Arty's right. Don't you see? Rumson has a bad name. You did something not entirely honest in their favor. What could they want you for then, huh? Nothing honest, you may be certain of that."

"Saint Mark," Richie sneered. "What of it if it ain't so honest, hah? This is one time when you can't poke your nose in my business—see? I'm paddlin' my own canoe and once we're in Dawson City, I'm goin' my way and you go yours. If you don't it'll be your funeral and that's no joke."

"All right," said Mark, jumping up decisively. "Our clothes must be dry—we'll get going. How about a smoke first, huh?"

Richie took the proffered cigarette, smiling. As Mark held a match to it, Arty said, "Is this supposed to be a sort of peace smoke?"

"No, not exactly," Mark answered chuckling. "This is a kind of toast to Richie's business—here's hoping it will always be mine."

Benson glared but said nothing and Arty instinctively felt that sometime, some day, he would have an answer for Mark and when it came there would

be more than angry words.

CHAPTER IV REFLECTION

A sort of armistice prevailed during their journey southward. Benson betook himself to the further end of the cabin and went to sleep while Arty kept Mark company in the cockpit, beguiling him with various anecdotes concerning Dawson City's present activities.

Mark learned much of the bustling little Colorado city in those few hours. From the gist of Arty's talk he realized that his prospective position under the senior Aylesworth was going to have its difficulties. It seemed that he was not only expected to better his own previous flying record, but to better that of his rival, the Dawson-Inland ship, which made a nightly trip from Dawson City to Phoenix, Arizona. For a month at least, his job would hang on his success in making that goal, pre-schedule if possible, and on schedule without fail.

"Why?" Mark asked curiously.

"Because of Rumson," answered Arty. "We have a postmaster that's easily influenced the wrong way and Rumson's trying to work his points so's he can get the job. He'll bid lower than dad—they're the only two bidding."

"Then why don't your father underbid Rumson if he knows all this?"

"He can't afford to lose money, much as he'd like the contract. That's just what he'd do if he'd bid as low as Rumson. Can't you see, Red? Rumson wants the job even at a loss—*why*? You may be certain he's banking on winning something out of it sometime or he wouldn't want it."

"Then if it's a foregone conclusion that Rumson will underbid your father and get the contract, why all this excitement about me making pre-schedule time to Phoenix for a month?"

"It isn't a foregone conclusion that Rumson will get the contract even if he does underbid dad. You see integrity counts for something too and also good service (two items that Rumson couldn't swear honestly to give in his contract), and the postmaster knows that all Dawson City is for dad. If we keep on giving good service to Phoenix nightly, for another month till the bids come up, we'll get the contract and I don't mean maybe. That's why dad's been so set on getting a good pilot for the Phoenix run—see? And we've got you!"

Mark grinned. "Hope I live up to expectations, Art. I'll certainly do my best. What's the matter with the present pilot?"

“Our day man on the Des Moines run has been doubling on that, but he’s been complaining that the night run to Phoenix is too much, and it is. He gets tired, naturally, and he’s been having a couple of bad spills lately. Lost some freight and things like that, that don’t help us with the postmaster. So you see why we have to have a good man. The coming month counts a lot, for with a good record and no casualties we’ll have the upper hand even if Rumson does underbid.”

“Gosh, I understand, Art. But how about Rumson’s men and his ships?”

“Nothing to brag about. The crates are almost antiquated and the men just half and half. His Phoenix run man he lost about a month back. Poor chap got caught in one of those early fall snow squalls above the mountains and he was forced down in one of the canyons. Searched for two weeks and finally found the charred wreckage. Bodies burned to nothing—in fact, they had burned so there was no trace of them. Lucky there wasn’t any more than two passengers on board that night.”

Mark shivered slightly, he did not know why. He had no especial fear and he had heard innumerable stories such as this one. Many of his comrades had met an identical fate and after a wistful thought of their good qualities he had let them take their place in memory. That was the way of the airman. It admitted too much of defeat to let oneself become sentimental over the tragedies of one’s comrades. A good airman thought only of forging ahead and by dint of constant application to his calling became triumphant over that all-powerful enemy, the air. In that way only could he defeat the grasping hand of death.

“I take it then that Richie will be Rumson’s man on the Phoenix run, huh?” he asked at length.

“Righto, and you’ll be ours,” Arty said brightly. “And I’ll stake my life on it that I’ve picked a winner.”

“Don’t be too sure,” Mark laughed. “The best often fail.”

“Seldom,” Arty returned vehemently. “Maybe the kind of best that Benson is, but not you.”

“Oh, Richie’s not a bad airman. He’d be A-1 if he’d use his head in a tight place. But like tonight he just lets things slide out from under him. That crate of his wouldn’t be floating down the river now if he’d taken time to think of a way out.”

“Well, from now on you should worry about Benson, Red. Believe me, you’ll have enough to do worrying about yourself if you’re going to make pre-schedule trips to Phoenix this time of year. That run isn’t any pink tea with the snows already started and the wind whooping things up, but you could handle a run over the Gobi desert, that’s the faith I have in you! Now take our other runs—any half-baked pilot could handle them. The one to

Helena and the other to Carson City, they're child's play, but you got a man's job, a....”

Mark half heard Arty's chatter, then did not hear at all, for he was lost in his own thoughts and wondering just how much risk the job involved. Was it worth his neck to bring success to either of these rival airlines? Hardly. Yet even as he pondered this his mind came back to the question of Richie Benson. There was his responsibility, his risk, and regardless of any business intrigue, he realized that it was worth his life even, to keep Richie out of the grasp of a man like Rumson.

And as a balmy Texas wind blew in the cockpit window and a starlit southern sky shone overhead, Mark visualized a day some fifteen years back. He had been but a little fellow then, ever so little, but old enough to realize that it was Richie's mother who lent a helping hand to the then destitute Gilmore family.

Vividly he recalled his father, bankrupt and sick, and his little family on the brink of starvation. Mrs. Benson and her husband had kept them all from stark disaster and given them a new start with their kindly aid. From that day they had gradually prospered until now Mr. Gilmore had a comfortable income and a comfortable home, while Mrs. Benson, widowed and poor, had nothing but a rash, impetuous son—an uncertainty.

Yes, at any cost, he must stay for Richie.

CHAPTER V

PARTING OF WAYS

The buildings housing the offices of the rival airlines faced the great airport field and were situated within about five hundred feet of each other. Arty pointed this out to Mark as the Kent D-2 swished down the runway and stopped. Both buildings were ablaze with light.

“We’re expected,” said Arty, pointing to the modest electric sign displaying the name Inter-Mountain Airways, Inc.

“Looks as if I am too,” said Richie Benson from the doorway of the cockpit where he was standing. He waved his large, tanned hand toward the building adjacent where the Dawson-Inland Airlines displayed their name in four feet of electricity. “Can’t miss that, hah?” he added with a sardonic grin.

“That’s as much as Rumson ever shows of himself,” Arty returned sarcastically. “Nobody hardly ever sees him in the daylight. He skims around here at night—I guess that’s so folks won’t get such a good look at him and use that impression for future evidence.”

Benson scowled. “Sounds to me like you and your father’s outfit are nothin’ but a bunch of soreheads,” he snapped, and moved for the fuselage door. “Sour grapes and that kinder thing. Well, on my way.”

Mark scrambled up on his feet. “Rich, you can fly this crate back east if you want to right now. I’ll only be laying it up, except on occasions. What do you say?”

“What do I want with it?” Benson returned, half-smiling. “Why should I want to fly back east right now? I’ve had enough for tonight, thank you, and besides I intend to telegraph Missouri and see what can be salvaged of my bus. It ought to be heading for St. Louis by this time and if luck is with me I’ll have her whipped back into shape by the time I kiss this job goodbye. So don’t worry about how I’m going back east again, Mark. I’ll have my old buggy or buy another one. But what’s the use of talking about going back now, hah? That won’t be for a long time if I know what I’m doing.”

“Rich,” said Mark crisply, “before you go over and sign any contract with that man, think what you’re doing! Don’t let him help you to put yourself in a halter because it won’t be so easy to get out. I’ve a hunch, Rich. There’s still time to back out and fly this crate back east. You determined to go?”

“Yes, grandma,” Benson said and laughed aloud. “For once I’m going to do as I want to do and not take your advice. You and your hunches! Ha, ha! Think I’m going to throw a nice, fat salary over my shoulder just on account of your say so? Watch me! I’ll be seeing you, Mark.”

He was gone but his taunting laugh seemed to linger. Mark shrugged his shoulders and prepared to put his plane into a nearby hangar at Arty’s instigation. He went about it mechanically, for his eyes were following the short, broad figure of Benson who was trudging along the edge of the field toward the Dawson-Inland offices.

“Oh, well,” he said half aloud, “maybe I am cooking up things. Maybe that fellow’s not as bad as he’s painted.”

“Huh?” Arty asked. “What fellow?”

“Rumson. I’m hoping that he’s better than you think he is.”

Arty said nothing until after they had left the hangar. The capable hands of mechanics were already busy going over Mark’s plane and making it ready for him when he should be free from duty.

“I’ve only told you what I know from hearsay, Red, that’s all. I agree with you that maybe things aren’t really as bad as they’re supposed to be with Rumson. Lots of folks have the name without ever having played the game, huh? Let’s hope it’s that way with him. Just the same I’d rather my father gets that contract. It would make it look better for the town—our planes and everything are in so much better shape.”

“Civic pride, huh?” Mark teased.

“Oh, I suppose so. But I hate things done on a shabby scale, don’t you? Rumson’s things are all shabby. Even his offices. You’d agree with me if you ever saw them. That’s why it looks as if he wants all the dough for himself and not for his business. Anyway, we should worry about him. I wouldn’t worry about Benson either if I were you. He’s an ungrateful egg, that’s what I think.”

“Richie’s got a good side or I wouldn’t be bothered with him,” said Mark firmly. “It wouldn’t be natural for him not to have, with the mother he’s got. He *has* to inherit something of her and as long as she’s alive ... well, I’ll tag after him as best I can.”

Savory odors from a nearby lunch wagon assailed Mark’s nostrils. He was just about to suggest a snack when Arty reminded him that they were at the door of the Inter-Mountain offices.

CHAPTER VI DAWSON CITY AND—

Mark's interview with the senior Aylesworth was all that Arty had warned him it would be. A highly efficient man he was who seemed to diffuse efficiency with every crisp sentence spoken. He looked at one with alert, penetrating eyes and his heavy jaws had a way of snapping down after each word uttered as if to impress upon his listener the fact that it was to be remembered for all time.

He blew cigar smoke into the four corners of his simple, but tastefully furnished office, then looked up from his desk at Mark. "There's a few things I absolutely require," he said tersely. "Punctuality in reporting for your run, economic handling of my planes and the safety of passengers, first, last and always. And there must be fast time made this coming month. Arty's probably told you the necessity of that. If we're fortunate enough to get the mail contract, we'll talk about that phase when the time comes. At present I'm only concerned about you giving the service and showing the merit that your last employers assured my son that you had."

"Oh, I'll do that, sir," Mark said, smiling. "I'm terribly anxious to make a record myself. You see my father has never been keen about me choosing a career in the air and I'd like to convince him that I can do what I set out to do."

"Hmph, very well. That's about all then, Gilmore. You'll report to Arty tomorrow night and get your orders. Eight o'clock, prompt. Hereafter all your orders you'll get from my son. He's timekeeper—starting from the bottom up. Downstairs office. Goodnight!"

Mark found himself a moment later in Arty's office downstairs, thinking how prosaic after all the whole thing seemed. He felt like laughing at the day-dreaming he had done through the previous afternoon. With what enthusiasm he had looked forward to Dawson City! With what secret pride had he thought of being chief pilot of an airline like Inter-Mountain! Somehow the name had thrilled him and had conjured up a hint of adventure. But now that he was here the very thought of adventure was impossible. His interview with the senior Aylesworth had dispelled it all in a second. His great chance had proved to be nothing more than a mundane business proposition.

He confessed this to Arty, frankly. "You see, it's the first time that I was ever west of Chi. I won't say I'm disappointed—it's a good job, I suppose."

Arty grinned understandingly. “I get it all right, Red. You’ve known right along that the old wild west was moss eaten twenty-five years ago and more, still you like to think that it isn’t. You’re kind of hoping that a little spice lurks around, huh? Well, Red, I hate to disappoint you, but there ain’t no such animal. I’ve lived in Dawson ever since I was born and nothing exciting’s ever happened that I can remember. Gol darn, I’m not even allowed to fly because I had three crackups when I was still a stude. So cheer up, you’re lucky alongside of me. All the thrills I get is sitting in this pokey office keeping time and listening to complaints. Well, such is life. You’ll need a room, did you think of that?”

Mark had not but it seemed that Arty had. He knew just the place not a quarter of a mile from the airport. A nice, quiet well kept home owned by a sweet-motherly person, Mrs. Jenkins. Another pilot of Inter-Mountain’s on the Helena run had a room there and liked it.

“She’s got a dandy room, I happen to know,” said Arty efficiently. “Southern exposure with bath. Just the thing for you. No, she won’t mind being called out of bed at this hour. Not when it’s me calling. Known her since I was a kid. Well, Red, you must be sleepy. I’ll run you up there in my roadster. It’s on my way, so don’t worry.”

Mark felt not a little dazed as he followed Arty into his roadster. The glamour, if there had ever been any at all, was gone. Even the moon, in its last quarter, seemed feeble and dull and a significant haze surrounded it.

“Looks like we’ll be having some weather between now and the next moon change,” Arty observed. “We’re due for it. Have some pretty bad snow storms out here this time of year while you eastern folks are going around without overcoats.”

Mark nodded politely. “What do you do out here for excitement, Art?” he asked suddenly.

Arty started the car, swung it out to a wide highway and mounted a hill in high gear. “We can go to Denver on your time off, Red,” he answered at length. “Plenty doing there. The most that one can do in Dawson is the movies and I guess you get enough of that home.”

“And how!”

Mark got his first lung full of Colorado air then and expanded. He thrilled to its exhilarating effect and pulled his coat collar close about his neck. He looked behind, down to the airport, and saw that it was on the lowest level of Dawson City. The rest of the town seemed to be snuggling against the base of the Rockies for protection from the elements. Mark grinned at the thought for on closer inspection the gigantic outline of the mountains did not bespeak protection. Rather, it looked formidable as it rose

away from the foothills and like some grinning, evil monster slunk into the obscurity of distance and night.

“Now Denver’s swell,” Arty was saying. “We’re almost there.... I mean Mrs. Jenkins’ house. Of course, no place is as nice as New York, as cities go. More to do. I realized that yesterday even if it was my first visit. I’ll be keen to go again and stay a week at least the next time, when dad won’t be in a rush for a good pilot. Well, here we are.”

Mark looked up at the darkened house. A pretty little place painted white with green trim. Vines and a garden and a good lawn. Not unlike his own comfortable house back in Kent’s Falls, New York. Nothing much to distinguish the one from the other except that Mrs. Jenkins’ back yard was a foothill of the Rockies. Outside of that, east was west and west was east.

Arty rang the front door bell and after a hushed silence, a sleepy voice called out questioningly. A moment later, Mrs. Jenkins opened the door, arrayed in bathrobe and white muslin cap, and considering the hour she was gracious indeed. A lady long past middle age, she seemed heaven-sent to watch over and minister to the needs of a temperamental, adventure-loving pilot like Mark.

Mark liked her and was delighted with the room. More, he was inspired with a thought at sight of neatly made up twin beds. “It’s a shame to have two when I can only occupy one,” he said, smiling.

“It’s such a large room and I have sometimes been able to rent it to two gentlemen,” Mrs. Jenkins explained.

“Great,” said Mark. “You can rent it to two now. I’ve a friend, a neat quiet fellow who’s not so kindly disposed to the world at large, but quiet just the same.”

“Benson?” Arty asked with evident astonishment.

“Sure. What more natural thing for two fellows—life-long acquaintances and all that sort of thing—to bunk together. Why should it make any difference if we are working for rival companies, huh? Richie isn’t as bad-natured as you saw him tonight. He’s got his human moments. Yes, I think he’d like it here as much as he’s capable of liking anything. Got a phone, Mrs. Jenkins? I’ll call and tell him.”

“Make yourself at home, my boy,” said Mrs. Jenkins sweetly. “The phone’s downstairs in the front hall. I’ll get you a key and then get back to bed. Oh, don’t apologize. I’m used to you pilots coming in and out at all hours. Besides, I’m always glad to have a tenant that Arty Aylesworth recommends.”

When she had left the room, Arty turned to Mark. “Spouse you know what you’re doing, Red,” he said skeptically. “I’m just a bit foggy about Benson all around. He’s a queer egg. Well, I’ll be on my way. Our ranch is

ten miles out and I'm doggone tired." He went to the door and hesitated a moment: "Don't let yourself get low because things seem so tame around here, Red. I'll see what I can think of to whoop things up a bit. Maybe something will turn up anyway."

"I hope so," Mark said vehemently. "Nothing I'd like better." He laughed.

And the gods laughed also, for they were even then preparing to take him at his word. The grim shadow of the mountains which he could see from his windows seemed to be beckoning him on as if they alone knew the secret.

CHAPTER VII EAVESDROPPING

Mark settled his financial arrangements with Mrs. Jenkins when she returned with the key. He bade her goodnight, then went on downstairs to phone while the good woman retired to her back bedroom for the remainder of the night.

A deep tranquillity had settled in the house before Mark finally found the Dawson-Inland telephone number. Somehow he found the silence irritating and stood, telephone directory in hand, thinking about it. Then he grinned. People had to sleep out west as well as anywhere else. And he couldn't expect Mrs. Jenkins to sit up and talk with him until he felt sleepy!

That was it—he wasn't at all sleepy. He hadn't any more desire to go to bed than if it were early evening. A restlessness pervaded his being and he was suddenly aware of being hungry. That decided him at once for he remembered the lunch wagon down at the field. He wouldn't phone Benson; he'd take the chance of his being still at the Dawson-Inland offices. Then they could both have a hot snack together and perhaps an amiable talk over their prospects.

He acted upon the idea at once and tiptoed past the night lamp in the hall to the door. He let himself out noiselessly and went down the porch steps like a cat. Once clear of the lawn, he chuckled mirthfully, looking up the road at the few darkened bungalows that lay between Mrs. Jenkins' house and the turn in the highway. Their architectural deformities seemed emphasized in the sickly moonlight and they looked to be staring out upon the roadway with disapproval of all things nocturnal.

Still chuckling, Mark turned his back upon them and directed his steps straight down the hill toward the airport. Mrs. Jenkins' garden occupied about one hundred feet on this side of the slope and beyond her hedge began a convenient footpath which led directly down to the field. Mark took it, whistling softly as he went, and swung along with a reckless gaiety that defied this prosaic sequel to his visionary adventures.

As he drew nearer to the field he could hear the intermittent sound of hammering coming from one of the big hangars. Hushed talk issued from a smaller hangar on the extreme edge of the airport where some mechanics were working. Mark hurried past unseen and cut across the narrow, hubbly road until he came to the lunch wagon. He went in, glancing at his watch.

“Open all night?” he asked the inquiring proprietor.

“Uh huh. Why?” the man returned wiping his hands on his big apron.

“Nothing, except that I wanted to make sure you wouldn’t close until I could get back,” Mark explained. “I’m just going in the Dawson-Inland a second and then I’ll be here for some good hot food.”

He had a feeling that the man looked at him more closely and longer than was necessary under the circumstances. He did not wait to ascertain why, however, but hurried out and across the few feet of ground that separated the lunch wagon from the unpretentious wooden building that housed the Dawson-Inland offices.

Most of the lights had been extinguished there since the trio had arrived little more than an hour before. A dim light burned in the narrow reception hall and through the dirty glass-topped door, Mark espied a dumpy man nodding where he sat on one of the benches.

Mark opened the door and closed it behind him, instantly alert to the sound of Richie Benson’s voice coming from somewhere behind a passageway adjoining the reception hall. Offices in the rear of the building, he thought. At any rate, Richie was there.

Suddenly the dumpy man came out of his half-slumber and sat up, startled. It was obvious that he had not heard Mark enter and that he was a little alarmed.

“You were asleep, I guess,” Mark said reassuringly. “Hope I didn’t do something I shouldn’t have. I just came for my friend, Richie Benson. He’s having an interview with Mr. Rumson, I believe.”

Actual relief brightened the dumpy man’s face. “Oh er, er—that’s all right then. Thought mebbe ... wa’al, go ’long back. Young Mr. Benson must be about ready to leave, I reckon. Yeh, go right ’long back.”

Mark did as he was told, threading his way through the short passageway with that cautious step that we all unconsciously assume in unfamiliar surroundings. Perhaps that is why he approached and reached the back hallway, unheard.

He did not realize it at the moment. In point of fact he had no thought at all except that he was puzzled. Two doors opening into the hallway stood slightly ajar. Mark did not know which one to enter for the talking had ceased. Both rooms seemed to have one or more occupants; he could see the shadow of a figure on each wall as he passed. Suddenly he stepped up to the nearest door, then hesitated at the sound of Benson’s voice talking within.

“Is that all, Mr. Rumson?” Richie was asking.

A thin, wheezing voice answered. “No, ’tain’t. Ain’t safe to have a contrac’ on a job like this. You’n me and Bailey understan’ what’s to be done an’ that’s all that’s necessary, eh! Wa’al, I jedge yore purty nervy from past events an’ sech so I’m trustin’ you with a big order—see! Once we git

that mail contrac' safe in this office, it's yore turn, son. Not right away o' course, but some stormy...."

"What about the—the pass—the...."

Richie's voice was tremulous.

"Say listen, Benson, thar ain't no two ways, 'bout it now," the thin voice wheezed angrily. "Ye agreed to this unconditional, didn't yer! Wa'al, after yer know our plans we ain't goin' ter let yer slide out 'count of sobby reasons on yore part. Ain't it enough that we'll see yer safe an' sound if yer do as we tell yer!"

"Yes, sir," said Benson very softly. "It's just—you see—er, my mother...."

Mark knew that he shouldn't have stood listening as long as he did, but somehow he seemed rooted to the spot. Now it was too late to make a graceful departure for someone—a man, as he could see by the thick-soled shoes—was standing watching him from the doorway of the next room.

He could feel the color flooding into his face like a schoolboy caught in the midst of a mischievous prank. Then he raised his brown eyes to those of his watcher and quickly stepped back so startled was he at the baleful expression upon the man's face.

"Well?" he asked in a coarse gruff voice. "Hear all you wanted to hear?"

Mark stammered at the unjust accusation. "Why, sir,—why, I heard very little. It was mere accident, absolutely! The little chap in the reception hall said it was all right for me to come through. I—"

"That watchman send you back?" the man roared blatantly.

"Yes, why shouldn't he have done so?" Mark gathered himself together.

The man glared at Mark through his narrow-slitted eyes. His short, rotund figure, seemed to shake convulsively and he stood for a moment with clenched fists. Then: "Nobody's got business back here unless they're sent for. And you weren't sent for—you...."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you, sir," Mark explained. "I came for my friend, Richie Benson. That's all."

"Ben—Benson?" the man repeated with a low growl. "Well, well...."

A door closed quickly somewhere within the room and suddenly the half-closed door before which they were standing, swung fully open. Richie Benson stood, his hand still on the knob glaring at Mark and his face dark with anger.

"So you had to come here too, hah!" he shouted.

Mark's attention was immediately drawn to the room in which Benson was standing. Dusty, half-broken chairs stood about and a dilapidated desk was the only other furniture it contained. Shabby, was the thought uppermost

in his mind. Suddenly he remembered Richie's conversation with Rumson. Where was the man now? He was nowhere to be seen.

Mark glanced into the room a second time to make certain. Rumson was not there.

CHAPTER VIII CONFUSION

"I said somethin' to you, Mark!" Benson cried impatiently. "What's the idea, hah? *Answer me!*"

Mark grinned. "Why all this excitement and everything, huh?" he returned complacently. "You'd think I'd committed some terrible crime the way you and this Mr.—er, Mr..."

"Bailey's my name," the man interposed gruffly.

"And mine's Gilmore, sir—Mark Gilmore." Mark beamed. "I was about to say before that you and Mr. Bailey jumped on me before I could explain. Listen, Rich, I got a swell room, southern exposure, twin beds and bath. It's the first house up on the highway, right hand side. A widow lady, Mrs. Jenkins, keeps it and a nice, motherly person she is. Came down to tell you about it and to ask you if you'll bunk with me, huh?"

Richie grinned sardonically. "What's the catch, Mark?"

"Catch? No catch, Rich. Honestly. Bygones are bygones. That's the idea I came here with. I'm not keen about bunking alone in this dead place and I thought..."

"Ain't you always thinking!" said Richie disgustedly. "The point is you didn't have any business sneakin' back here like this."

"I didn't sneak, Rich. The man told me to come—that watchman. I wouldn't have done it if I'd known. I'm sorry and I'll run right along if you'll tell me you'll take the room with me, huh?"

"Why, er..." Richie began.

"That means you will," Mark interposed hastily. "Now I'll beat it out and wait for you to finish your interview with Mr. ... er, I couldn't help hear you talking to someone that time. Both doors stood ajar and the lights on. I didn't know where to knock until I heard your voice, Rich, and then, it was kind of a puzzle when to knock when you were in the midst of a conversation."

Mr. Bailey coughed. "You wait outside, Gilmore," he said tersely. "I got a few words to say to Benson yet, then he'll be with you. You see it was me talking to your friend that time when you came along. These rooms are adjoining—see?" He stepped heavily across the door sill and went half-way along the wall where he pulled open a door for Mark's inspection.

Mark nodded. "You didn't have to do that, Mr. Bailey," he said grinning. Then he glanced at Benson. "Thought we'd have a hot snack together at the

lunch wagon, Rich. I'll go over and wait for you there. I'm hungry."

Richie nodded, seemingly dazed. Mr. Bailey stared after Mark with a puzzled scowl on his pudgy face. "You wait for Benson at the wagon, Gilmore," he called. "He'll be there in a few minutes."

Mark hurried through the passageway and out past the sleepy watchman. For some reason he was relieved to get out of the building and into the cold, bracing air. His head was pounding with conflicting thoughts. And as he hurried across to the lunch wagon he was turning over in his mind, word for word, the entire conversation that he had heard between Richie and Mr.—there was the mystery! Mr. who?

Richie had distinctly said Mr. Rumson and the man who had been in the room answered distinctly to that name. Then what of Bailey and his explanation? The pudgy man's anxiety to convince him that the rooms were adjoining and that it was *he* who had been talking with Richie, was obvious.

Mark remembered no door opening or closing while he had stood listening to Richie's conversation with the mysterious Mr. Rumson. But he did remember hearing someone moving about in the next room and he felt confident that it was Mr. Bailey. The man couldn't possibly have been in both rooms at one time. And, last but not least, there were two important factors determining the lie. One was the coarse gruffness of Mr. Bailey's voice and the other the thin, wheezing tones of the man addressed as Rumson. Also, hadn't this same Rumson in his conversation spoken of "you'n me and Bailey"? Excluding Richie, that took clearly into account, two persons. Which was which and why?

Mark would have given much to be able to answer that question, but being no more nor less than an ordinary human, it was impossible. Instead he burst into the lunch wagon, a famished young man, and shouted for a cup of coffee—*hot!*

CHAPTER IX

SPACE

The red-faced proprietor set down a cup full of the steaming beverage. He was about to move away when Mark shot the question at him.

“What kind of a voice has this Rumson got, huh, mister?”

The proprietor was astonished. He smoothed his large hands over his soiled apron, allowing them to rest a moment on a protuberant abdomen.

“Eh? *Rumson*?” he asked. “Er...”

“You must know—must have seen him!” Mark interposed impatiently. “What about it, huh? What’s he talk like? Thin, whining sort of voice?”

“Er—yes,” the proprietor answered grudgingly. He scratched his bald head and stared at Mark. “What you want to know for, eh? Did you—did...”

Mark was smiling reassuringly. “It’s all right, mister. I just got Rumson and Bailey mixed up. Saw them both, or rather I heard ’em both, and I just wanted to distinguish the voices. Things like that annoy me. I always have to be certain for my peace of mind.”

The look of suspicion that Mark had noticed on the proprietor’s face during his first call, was again predominant. The man eyed his young customer in frozen silence and even when he went back to his duties, Mark was still aware of that curious, disapproving scrutiny.

In the course of the next fifteen minutes he consumed another cup of coffee. Then he fell into small talk, which the taciturn proprietor answered in jerky monosyllables and after a half hour’s wait he began to wonder. What was keeping Benson?

“A friend of mine was supposed to come over here after a few minutes and join me in a snack,” he informed the proprietor. “Funny that he’s not here yet, huh?”

“Mm,” the man grunted.

Mark smiled. “Well, I’m too hungry to wait any longer. He can eat by himself when he comes and I’ll look on, huh? What have you got in the line of stew? Or anything?”

He wound up with bacon and eggs and hot biscuits which he presently washed down with a third cup of coffee. After that he lit a cigarette and tipped his slim body back on the stool, keeping a thoughtful eye, meanwhile, upon his wrist watch. An hour had passed.

He ordered an ample portion of pumpkin pie after another fifteen minutes and consumed it in silence. Then he stepped down from the stool

and strolled toward the door. He was plainly puzzled and not a little impatient for it was getting on toward three o'clock. Besides he was beginning to feel sleepy.

"Some few minutes," he murmured half aloud.

"Eh?"

"I was sort of talking to myself and wondering what that Bailey calls a few minutes. What on earth they could find to talk about all this time I don't know." Mark pressed his face against the cold window pane in the door and peered across to the Dawson-Inland building. Only the dim light from the reception hall cast its feeble shadow outdoors. That meant little, he told himself, for one could not see the lights of the rear offices from that side.

He strolled back toward the counter again, wondering whether or not to go on and go to bed, when suddenly a voice sounded from without.

"Hey, Collins!"

The proprietor suddenly became a figure of great activity as he hurried from behind his counter and stepped toward the door. "It's for me—me," he said in a nervous, jerky tone. "I'll be right back. Er—" He hesitated a moment: "Be much obliged if yer'll watch for me a minute."

"Sure," Mark answered good-naturedly. "Why not? I've nothing to do but wait anyway."

The man had been gone only a little while when he hurried back into the warmth of his establishment slapping his hands together. "Pretty cold even to stand a minit," he said in the same nervous way as before. "I—that was Regan, the Dawson watchman, you know?"

"Oh yes?"

"He says your friend wants you to come over there a secunt. Er—he called it to me, Regan did."

"Oh, all right. This Regan could have called me instead of getting you out of here in your shirt sleeves. Well, sorry to trouble you, mister. Thanks a lot for putting up with me."

"S all right. Er—no trouble, no trouble," said Mr. Collins with obvious confusion. "See you agin."

The man's tone and curious stare aroused a vague element of suspicion in Mark's mind. What was it all about? The man had changed instantly at sound of the watchman's voice. What had caused him to throw off his former taciturnity and suddenly assume that nervous, apologetic manner?

Mark forgot about it as he stepped down from the lunch wagon step. His alert mind was already centered on the thought of Richie, wondering what it was he wanted and what could have been detaining him. Intermingled with these thoughts was a strange sense of foreboding and it seemed to take a firm hold as he looked across the desolate little stretch of black night that

separated the Dawson-Inland building and Mr. Collins' ill-lighted establishment.

Mark was sufficiently aware of his own sensitiveness to know that the utter bleakness and loneliness on this side of the airport contributed toward his state of mind. Yet this alone had not the effect of chilling him so thoroughly. He knew this instinctively, for the lunch wagon was not more than five hundred feet from the nearest hangar and even then he could hear the laughing voices of mechanics trailing off into the night. And, though the powerful lights from the runway did not penetrate to where he was standing, it meant much that he could see them. Then why this sense of desolation, he asked himself?

Quite a few hours passed before he was able to answer this question intelligently for he had gone but a few steps more when he felt a presence behind him. He started to turn when he felt something slapped against his face, something that robbed him of all resistance.

To gasp, even to cry out, was futile, and though he felt himself slipping into unconsciousness he was utterly unable to resist.

CHAPTER X

A PRISONER

Mark never knew how long he was in the borderland. His first vague remembrance was of the distant sound of a plane, that familiar whirring so beloved by airmen. It seemed to be whirring into his very brain for his head was pounding with the vibration. Then the low murmur of voices came to him like the rustling of the dead leaves he had kicked up in crossing Mrs. Jenkins' lawn.

An interval of nothingness ensued in which he visualized himself as hanging in a state of suspended animation. Dreams followed this, horrible nightmares in which he seemed to be struggling against that something which prevented him from walking from the lunch wagon to the Dawson-Inland building. After a time he could feel himself sinking with exhaustion until some new distorted fancy captured his feverish mind.

And so it went until he again heard the vague murmur of voices. He wanted desperately to hear what those voices were saying but he seemed not to have the strength to listen. He preferred giving way to the powerful drowsiness that constantly overcame him.

This last state gradually passed until he attained enough consciousness to realize that he felt cold. It was that strong human demand for warmth that quickly brought him to himself and the knowledge that he was in unfamiliar surroundings. He sat up, weakly, realizing that he was on some sort of a bed—a cot. The outline of it became visible as his eyes grew used to the darkness.

His hands floundered around awkwardly at first, but presently gained strength and gripped the coarse covering of a mattress. He had no covering over him of any kind, and though he was still fully clothed, his teeth were chattering and his hands like ice.

He felt around his heavy leather jacket, found a bulging pocket and drew out his thick, warm gloves. He trembled like one with the ague and each finger seemed numb as he forced them into the gauntlets. That done, he tried to think about himself and where he was.

A dull headache and a parched feeling in his throat were the only definite sensations he had at the moment, for when he looked beyond the cot there seemed but a dark void. He presently espied a tiny window on the other side of him, however, a window that he gradually saw was not large

enough to put his head through. And to convince himself he finally managed to get up and try it.

The window was without a pane, he soon discovered, and a blast of gripping cold air blew across his fevered forehead, reviving him instantly. He stood with hands clenched to the broken sill for support, and inhaled the bracing air until every vestige of nausea and faintness passed. Then he peered out and saw to his amazement a dizzy height of jagged mountain climbing up out of a canyon not more than a few hundred feet from where he was standing.

“Where in heaven’s name am I?” he cried, and turned away from the window.

Through the darkness of the room he groped, feeling along the wall until he came to a door. His hands slid across the hinges, down the panel and rested at last upon the knob. This he tugged lightly at first but as it did not yield he pulled hard only to realize that its resistance meant but one thing. It was locked.

He was a prisoner.

That knowledge baffled him more than ever and worked him up into a rage that was unusual for one of his calm, good-natured demeanor. He called and rattled the knob alternately until his cries became angry shouts and when that brought no response he took to pounding the stout panel until it resounded deafeningly in the little room.

This had a quieting effect upon his temper and he decided that he would wait a little longer to see what happened. Discouraged and not a little weary, he flung himself back onto the cot and pulled his coat collar close about the neck. The room was like ice.

Minutes passed and suddenly he had an idea. Matches! Why hadn’t he thought of that before? A hasty search of his pockets yielded two packets and with them his “smokes.” The very feel of them buoyed up his flagging spirits and after he had lighted one he chuckled.

Its friendly glow and warm fragrance gave him a sense of hope and calm determination and he was able, after a few contented puffs, to be analytical about his strange situation.

His first activity was to search the room thoroughly. That used up one packet of matches and the result of his efforts was the knowledge that the room contained nothing but the cot with its well-worn straw mattress.

“At least I’m sure of that,” he said as the match burned low in his fingers. “Even too much wind and cold for the cobwebs,” he added, as he scrutinized the dim ceiling corners. Most of the lacy webs hung suspended and waved slightly with each fresh onslaught of the wind.

His mind went back to the window and he went over to it blowing his smoke out in dancing spirals. He glanced at the worn frames and saw that not even a splinter of glass remained in them anywhere. It was obvious that the house was very old and that the window had been long without a pane.

In this reflective state of mind it suddenly occurred to him that he could see the jagged slope rising above much more clearly than he had a few moments ago. The canyon too seemed to have thrown off the shackles of darkness for its precipitous sides now showed a dull red color. Mark's hopes rose and his heart leaped at the realization.

Day was breaking—daylight with its security and sun warmth. He could do much then; he could do anything, in fact, and whoever had imprisoned him could not long neglect him after sun-up. That is, they couldn't unless they intended to let him starve and....

Mark didn't dare let himself complete that thought. It was too terrifying. People weren't that cruel in this advanced stage of civilization despite rumors to the contrary. They'd go far in defying the laws, but....

"I've been kidnapped," he murmured, "there's not the least doubt of it! Where to and why—well, that's the disturbing question. I can't believe ... let's see...."

He settled down on the cot once more and proceeded to make a mental survey of all that had happened since he landed in the Dawson airport. He checked off all persons and details until he came to the episode that had taken place with the so-called Mr. Bailey and Richie.

Bailey had been annoyed at first but showed no sign of antipathy when Mark left the building to go to the lunch wagon. Richie too had calmed down considerably and his parting nod was friendly enough, considering. Rumson had been unobtrusive to say the least, but Mark minded that not so much. Indeed, it was preferable to having any verbal fireworks with the man and his sudden exit certainly did not bespeak a very violent disapproval of the chance eavesdropper.

No, Mark could not associate his present strange plight with that incident. True, the bit of conversation he had overheard between Richie and the man addressed as Mr. Rumson, was mystifying. Also it hinted of things illegal when the man himself admitted that something wasn't safe to be written into a legal contract. That much bore out Arty's story of Rumson's alleged unscrupulousness. But what had that to do with himself?

"Nothing," he murmured after a stifled yawn. "But it's another story about that Collins, and that watchman, Regan. Was it he that called Collins outside the lunch wagon? Someone called him out, that's certain. I wasn't hearing things then."

He ran his hands over his blond hair, rumpling it up nervously. Collins' queer looks and actions were to be remembered, certainly. The man knew what was going to happen—that was it! *He knew*. His queer pale face had betrayed that knowledge and Mark would have given much in that instant to know whether the proprietor himself had rendered him unconscious.

Daylight was streaming in the window by that time, striving to banish those sinister shadows of night. For a moment, Mark tried to believe that he had been dreaming. That it was all nothing more than a mere figment of his vivid imagination he was almost convinced until the sound of faint stirrings came from somewhere in that strange house and swept him back to realities.

A little later he distinctly heard footsteps coming nearer and nearer.

CHAPTER XI

A GOOD FACE

He listened, fascinated by the sound of the pattering steps. Suddenly they stopped before his door and after a moment's silence the metallic clicking of a key in the lock caused his heart to flutter strangely. He was not afraid, but expectant, and sat quietly on the cot with his gloved fingers interlaced watching with steady eyes the worn panel.

To the sleepy-eyed man who opened the door, Mark's attitude was nothing if not nonchalant. In point of fact, it quite staggered the newcomer and caused him to stare in astonishment.

"Good morning," said Mark pleasantly. "It would be a swell day if this room had a window pane in the window. I either like to be out when I'm in the air or in the house when I'm out of the air. Perhaps I don't make myself very clear."

"Say," said this fairly young turnkey, "what's the ideeah, hah? Blow me smoke, if I didn' expec' tuh see yuh flat on yuh back!"

"Not while this gale's blowing a nor'easter through that window. Besides, fellow, you've heard that old saying about a slim horse, haven't you? Well, that's me and nobody else. A little thing like ... like; what was it that knocked me out? Oh, really don't spare my feelings—it won't knock me out to know now. Was it chloroform?"

The fellow nodded and gathered the collar of his heavy sweater under his unshaven chin. He had small, but bright, blue eyes and stared at his prisoner quite frankly, though somewhat abashed.

"I didn't have no hand in that mess, buddy," he protested. "So, blow me smoke if I did!"

Mark smiled disarmingly. "Who did?" he asked softly.

"I guess yuh'd give a whole lot to know, hah? Well, that ain't fer me tuh say—see? I got me orders tuh come up here at six o'clock an' see if the angels didn't make a mistake and take yiz on their merry way."

"Oh," said Mark complacently, "then my kidnapper or kidnappers didn't really intend I should shuffle off this little old earth, huh? Well, that's comforting at least. I wouldn't want anyone to dislike me so much that nothing but murder would satisfy them."

"Say the boss ain't got any pick on you!" the young man protested earnestly. "It ain't that—it's ... well, anyways, you're here an' I kin tell

youse this much. The boss ain't got no ideeah but to treat yuh as good as anybody kin be treated in a house like this an' a room like this."

"Mm," said Mark thoughtfully. "The boss, as you call him—how long does he intend to keep me here in this outdoor room and in this house?"

"It depen's—see? There's no tellin', buddy. It may be a month—maybe two months. Anyways, yuh're here till it's safe fer the boss tuh let yuh go. Then yuh'll have a bodyguard tuh see yuh safe home—where is yuh home, buddy?"

"Kent's Falls, New York," Mark answered smiling. "It's a nice, quiet little town, not far from Albany. I have a strict, but kind father, an indulgent, sweet mother and until four years ago a brother who met with a tragic end in an Adirondack mountain lake. Oh, and before I forget to tell you, I'm nineteen years old, but nearer twenty—thank goodness! Now that's all I can tell you, Mr. ... er, I don't know your name?"

"Cut out the mister, buddy."

"Mark Gilmore is my name. Occasionally I'm called Red, but I don't know why."

"Yeah? Well, Red kinda suits you at that. Yuh got that noivy way that some red headed guys have got. Anyways, beins' that yuh likely tuh see a lot o' me from now on, I'll tell youse my monicker. It's just plain Looie and like I tells you before, cut out the mister."

"Gladly, Louis," Mark smiled. "But getting back to the subject of towns and such, you don't talk Westernese by a long shot. It sounds New Yorkese to me."

"Atta kid, buddy. Tenth Avenoo and Twenty-eight Street was where I made my first daboo as the French says."

"Then we're both a long ways from home, huh, Louis?"

"You tell 'em, Red."

"Where are we, Louis?"

The young man half smiled. "Yuh're a clever kid, Red, ain't yuh? Think yuh could catch me in tellin' yuh tales out o' my turn, hah? Well, I ain't, as much as I'd like tuh. I gotta boss downstairs that's a bad egg when he's toined wrong side up an' I ain't takin' no chances wit' the wrong side. One t'ing—we're more than forty-five minutes from Broadway, I kin tell yuh that!"

Mark chuckled. "I believe you. I don't want to get you into trouble, Louis. I don't care about getting anyone into trouble. But just tell me this—is that the Rocky Mountains I see outside my porthole?"

Louis' eyes gleamed with laughter. "Them's the Rockies, Red," he whispered. "Anythin' else?"

“Yes. Are we near Dawson City or in it?” Louis shook his head violently.

“In Colorado?” Mark persisted.

“Wrong agin, Red. Whatcha feel like eatin’?”

“A house and lot from the way I feel right now. What’s on the menu?”

“Flapjacks, fried ham an’ eggs an’ coffee’s on the menyoo, Red. Things ain’t fancy but youse won’t starve. The boss likes his eats an’ that means we all eats.”

Mark thrummed his gloved hands together. “If it’s true that your boss is determined to confine me here so long, why in this desolate room? I can’t keep my gloves and jacket on day in and day out for a whole month or more, yet if I took them off it would endanger my health. Isn’t there some other, warmer room that I could have. At least one with a window pane?”

Louis shook his head apologetically. “There ain’t no such room in this barn, Red. The boss an’ his buddy take two o’ th’ rooms and I got a cot in th’ kitchen. Outside o’ that there ain’t another room fit tuh use. This room is a wow ’longside o’ them.”

“Then how about me coming to the kitchen with you? I’d sleep on the floor—anywhere, in order to keep warm. And I’m not such a fool to think I could slip out so easy. I know what you’ve got in that back hip pocket of yours, fellow.”

“An’ don’t make me use it—see?” Louis asked earnestly. “Yuh’re one guy I’d hate to pull the trigger on. Anyways, forgit about th’ kitchen an’ try tuh keep warm here. I’ll bring youse some heavy hawse blankets so yiz kin drop the jacket an’ the gloves an’ play big chief, hah? Naw, the boss wouldn’ stan’ fer yuh comin’ tuh the kitchen. He made me put yuh in this room special, so’s yuh couldn’ see what was goin’ on in th’ front o’ the house.”

“And of course there’s nothing to be seen but the canyon in the rear of the house,” Mark said with mock despair. “Still, it’s what many would call a deep outlook.”

Louis stared at him. “Hones’,” he said with ill-concealed admiration. “I mus’ say youse ain’t lackin’ fer stuff. Many’s the guy would be nutty in yur place. But youse put a good face on it, I’ll tell ’em.”

Mark did put a good face on it, until the door had shut and the key clicked in the lock.

The smile even stayed put until Louis’ heavy footsteps died away and left him alone with his thoughts.

And that they were the most despairing thoughts, Mark could not disguise.

CHAPTER XII

ESCAPE

Mark had had two wholesome meals and a three hours' rest. Consequently he awakened at mid-afternoon, warm under the horse blankets that Louis had generously provided, and refreshed. His cheeks felt glowing in the crisp air blowing about his head and he suddenly made up his mind that he would bolt this prison at any cost, before nightfall. Too, it was on his mind that he had given his word to the senior Aylesworth to report for duty at eight o'clock. What would they think if he didn't?

He got up and, discarding the blankets for his jacket, went to the window to think. The dull red sides of the canyon gleamed in the afternoon sun and here and there patches of dead, dried brush stuck out of its crevices. A few stunted cottonwood trees grew out of one large crevice and down below on the further side of the gulch, Mark got a glimpse of something green.

He leaned heavily upon the window sill in order to get a better view of it. As he did so, a part of the rotting frame loosened, no doubt under this unaccustomed pressure, and fell down into the canyon. Mark gave a slight push on the remaining piece of frame until that too crumbled out of its rotted resting place. Then he found that he could loosen the crumbling plaster and dry-rotted shingles by the same method. Just a few turns of his wrist and he was able to get his head and shoulders out of this queer looking aperture, for one could not now call it a window. Its former proportions were not even a memory by five o'clock for Mark had made it a thing of convenience and paid not one bit of attention to the fact that it gaped with irregularity in an architectural sense. And after all he had but his hands to work with.



HE LEANED UPON THE WINDOW SILL AS THE ROTTING FRAME
LOOSENEED.

Before the last light of day had gone he made a final inspection of his handiwork. The aperture would admit his whole body and without much of a stretch he could reach a rain pipe, rusted but seemingly solid, that ran from

the rotting eaves, down the back of the house and around to the side. There he felt certain, it emptied into a barrel. But he was not concerned with that, neither was he concerned about the side of the house. It was enough for him to know that there was a grassy coulee on the further side of the canyon which seemed to have a trail leading out of it. And as far as he could see the coulee was not visible from the front or either side of the house.

Darkness fell quickly after that and before long he smelled savory odors floating into the room. Louis was getting supper. Voices rumbled somewhere in the house also as if the household had just become astir at this hour. Mark spent the next few minutes with his ear pressed close to the door and tried to distinguish the sounds but it availed him nothing.

Soon, he heard Louis' familiar patter coming along the hall. In a flash he had thrown himself on the cot and rolled into the blankets. His heart pounded against his breast as he waited for he knew that the next few seconds would be one of the most crucial times in his life. It would mean escape or....

He closed his eyes tight as the key clicked in the lock. When the door swung open he felt it rather than heard it, for the wind blew an icy draught across the room and all but slammed it in Louis' face.

"Ugh," said Louis. "Sleepin', buddy?"

Mark waited a moment before he answered. "Mm," he murmured sleepily.

"Don' let me butt in on it," said Louis apologetically. Then: "Say, I brought youse some supper an' a lantern. Want me to light it?"

"Mm—no—no thanks. Want to sleep some more."

"A'right, buddy. I'll leave it by the door where youse can't miss it—matches and all. See yah 'bout a half hour. The boss'll be gone then. We kin talk."

The door was shut and locked again, but Mark made certain that the footsteps had really gone before he left the cot. When he did so, it was on tiptoe straight toward the window. As he swung his leg out over the gouged out frame, he had the whimsical thought that he would be as disappointed as Louis not to have that talk. Louis was not only an excellent turnkey; he was an excellent fellow considering all things.

He spent no more time philosophizing but proceeded to grasp the rain pipe. His very first effort was successful and like a monkey he let himself down the rusty pipe until his hand came in contact with such a jagged, projecting piece that it tore a cruel wound straight across his palm. He all but cried out with the pain, and remembered just too late that his warm gauntlets were lying upon the cot.

He had to gauge the distance for his jump from the pipe to the ground, from memory. The darkness below told him nothing and he tried as best he could to remember how great a height it had seemed in the daylight. Several projecting bits of the pipe had taken its toll of his hands until they pained him intensely and interfered with his mental calculations.

He was relieved, however, to note that the back of the house was in total darkness. This he thought was probably the part that Louis referred to as not fit to use. The kitchen, he was certain, was on the right side and, though rather close to the coulee, he hoped that he could make it unheard and unseen.

Perhaps he invited the hand of Fate with that thought; perhaps that had nothing to do with it. Be that as it may, he had no sooner made himself ready to jump than he felt the pipe coming away in his hands. Cling as he would, he knew that he was falling, and with him came the rest of the pipe.

He landed with a terrific thump, having enough presence of mind to put out his feet. The impact, however, threw him to the ground and after a tearing, hissing tumult he felt a shower of plaster and shingles falling about him while the rain pipe was clattering on its merry way down the canyon.

He had but a moment to think and to be thankful that he too had not met such a fate. There were significant shouts within the house and he knew immediately that it was Louis' voice leading two others. Then came the sound of running feet.

He lost not a second. Instinctively, more than from his careful self-coaching of the afternoon, he darted across the strip of narrow ledge and made straight for what he believed to be the coulee. No stars were out, there was nothing in all that vast canopy overhead to guide him. He must feel his way or be lost.

As he shot past the corner of the house he almost collided with a figure swinging a lantern. Whether or not it was Louis, he never knew for the whole incident so startled him that he darted ahead like a maddened hare and scurried into the nearest brush. Then someone shouted and the sound had a freezing effect upon him.

"He skipped in that thar brush!" the voice cried.

That voice was slightly familiar to Mark, yet he had not the time to give it as much as a passing thought. Afterward it was so crowded into the memory of those hectic moments that it lost all meaning and became just one of the thrills that the night had to offer.

He stumbled and crashed his way through an eternity of brush. Once a bullet singsonged past his head, so he changed his course, as he thought, to the extreme right. He had no idea where it would lead to but then he didn't

care. Anywhere was better than the locality from which he had just made his escape.

After a time he heard the sound of voices no longer. He had at least escaped them. Who? He would have given much to know, but at that instant it was enough to gloat over the fact that they could not keep him prisoner for a day, much less a month. He had the last laugh.

He stumbled on until the low hanging branch of a tree struck him forcibly across the face. It stung him with pain but he chuckled. “A pine tree,” he said, sniffing audibly. “Well, that’s something to know. At least I’m certain I’ve just been swiped by a pine tree. Heaven only knows where I really am.”

And only heaven did know, but wouldn’t tell—not for a while at least.

CHAPTER XIII

DARKNESS

It seemed to Mark that he had been wandering for hours when, in point of fact, he had escaped from Louis' but three-quarters of an hour before. He soon assured himself of this by striking a match and studying his wrist watch. It was exactly forty-five minutes past six o'clock.

A grim smile flitted over his tired, thorn-scratched face. He was due in the Inter-Mountain ship an hour and fifteen minutes from now. What the senior Aylesworth would say he could only guess. The man looked over-efficient, Mark decided, as he thought of him in retrospect. A man that had never taken No for an answer and who demanded a reason for everything. What he would say to this strange adventure, Mark could only wonder. Arty, he knew, would offer sympathy first and advice afterward. Well, it was no fault of his, but what seemed worse in the face of Mr. Aylesworth's probable severity, he was unable to advance any satisfactory explanation as to who were his abductors.

He thought of this as he trudged along but it helped him not at all. Indeed, it took his mind off his precarious trail-making in that dense forest and caused him more than once to stumble and fall over hidden stumps until he was forced to think only of where he was going and feel his way along.

Not a few times he heard ominous, rustling sounds and once, from afar, came the eerie howling of coyotes. He had not one cigarette and his matches were gone and the knowledge rather robbed him of his former sense of security. To make matters worse, something brushed past his shoulder roughly and a second later he could hear it crashing through the thicket but a few yards away.

The incident had a chilling effect on his sensitive temperament and set his nerves on edge. Was it a deer? He hoped so sincerely, for, like all eastern tenderfeet, Mark distrusted the non-combatant theory advanced by natives regarding wild animal life in the Rockies. He much preferred being on his guard constantly and so able to defend himself if need be.

He scuffed up the carpet of dead leaves underfoot holding out both his hands in the manner of the blind. He had lost track of the times they had been bruised and his knuckles scraped in his continual contact with the rough bark of trees. His aching, swollen palms were a constant reminder of his adventure with the rain pipe and the memory of his lost gloves seemed to be the last bitter pill that he could swallow.

An unjust sequel to his high hopes of the west and Dawson City! Not thirteen hours ago had he landed in the airport, carefree and ready for adventure. But this kind of adventure? No, it was too baffling and threatened his future too much for him to view it with the fine reckless abandon that he would otherwise have done. Here he was lost somewhere in the Rockies with the time for his first report for duty drawing perilously near and no chance to get to some sort of civilization where he could phone or telegraph his plight. Mr. Aylesworth, he felt confident, would dismiss him peremptorily if he did not show up. There was no doubt in his mind either, that his experiences during the day would not help him with his superior. The man would probably tell him that he had no business lingering around Mr. Collins' establishment at that hour.

"Why, I wonder," he asked himself, "am I cooking these things up about Mr. Aylesworth?" He shrugged his shoulders. "A hunch I suppose. Anyway I'm a free spirit and I love the air and he's efficient and loves business, so I suppose that's what makes me think of him that way. Oh, well, whatever's to be.... Still, I want my job and I want to hold it. I realize now that it's the one thing to gain dad's confidence in my flying. And then there's Richie...."

He hadn't thought of Richie all day so much had he been thinking of his own troubles. And even at this moment, Benson was destined to be given only a flashing consideration in Mark's mind, for something occurred just then to make him forget all but the glowing fact that he had suddenly left the dense, dark forest behind.

The next joyful realization was that he had come out on a narrow, dirt road. Above, the stars were shining and the dark vault of heaven spelled freedom and safety. At least he would be going somewhere now.

CHAPTER XIV

FRIEND IN NEED

Dense forests of fir bordered the road and to the right the tips of the trees could be seen in the starlight, sloping downward until the abysmal darkness swallowed them. Beyond that Mark could see nothing, not even a friendly light from some eagerly looked-for cabin.

He did not lose heart, however, for his joy at being free of the black loneliness of the forest knew no bounds. He told himself he could afford to wait until midnight now—even morning. He was bound to meet someone or catch sight of a sequestered cabin in this mountain wilderness by that time. And as for the Inter-Mountain question, he had made up his mind that his job was as good as lost right then. He could not hope to keep it now.

This definite turn of mind brought him a sort of tranquillity that he had not felt before. He dug his numbed hands into his big pockets and braced himself to face the wind. True, his legs were a bit weary and muscle bound for he had not walked so far in years. But he felt exhilarated and, at the moment, he felt that he could never again be overpowered as he had been the previous night. He would be ever alert in the future and allow no sneaking sinister force to catch him off his guard.

Mark was strong, despite the slim appearance of his graceful five feet and ten inches. He had become soft from too much time spent in the air. His arms, though muscular, had lost the flexibility of his scouting days but he determined that he would get it back at any cost.

In the midst of these thoughts a welcome sound reached his ears. A motorcycle! Its loud reverberations and occasionally missing motor echoed back and forth until, as it came nearer, the noise was almost deafening. Then the glowing headlight came into view and Mark shouted.

The machine tore along raising a storm of dust. As it came close Mark could see that the driver was reckless, to say the least, for he zigzagged back and forth over the road with shouts of gay abandon. A light sombrero that he was wearing swayed precariously on his head, yet stayed in place for all that.

Mark laughed aloud as the fellow drew up and dug his spurred heel into the ground. “Some stunt, buddy,” he applauded pleasantly. “Want a passenger? I’ll make it worth your while.”

The fellow balanced his motorcycle and, swinging his other leg over to the ground, looked at Mark with a kindly smile on his tanned, weather-

beaten face.

“Yore a stranger, eh?” he asked.

“And how!” Mark answered vehemently. “I don’t even know where I am.”

The man pushed his Stetson back on his forehead and put his hands on his hips. “Whar yuh aimin’ tuh go, stranger?”

“Dawson City, if I can get there,” Mark laughed. “What part of Colorado am I in?”

“Yuh ain’t in Colorado ’tall, stranger. Yore ’bout fifteen mile ’cross the border from Colorado, in New Mexico. Right now yuh is in Bleak Hills. Yah wuz walkin’ ’way from Colorado, son, d’ye know that!”

“I didn’t know anything, fellow, honestly. I’m sort of out of kilter, to tell the truth. Shows how much I can tell the North Star from the rest, huh! Here I was walking south. Well, they say it’s a cinch to lose a good aviator on earth and I believe it.”

The man’s face lighted with interest. “Yore a airman, eh son! Wa’al, wa’al—yuh wa’n’t cracked up like they say, eh!”

“No, and yes,” Mark answered enigmatically. “Somebody cracked me up all right, but it wasn’t a plane.”

“I reckon I’m on, son,” said the man, with an understanding wink.

Some inner voice whispered prudence in Mark’s ear. It was a poor plan to go about whispering his troubles to everyone. Better keep silent until he knew of some effectual method of apprehending his abductors. Consequently he let the man go on believing that it was some indiscretion he referred to.

“Where were you going?” Mark asked politely.

“Bleak Valley,” the man answered. “It’s at the border, fifteen miles from here. I’m a-goin’ tuh meet a buddy what’s comin’ down from Des Moines in a arypplane.”

Mark started and grasped the man’s arm. “You mean to tell me that there’s an airport in this Bleak Valley place?”

“Sure is, son. Yuh aimin’ tuh go thar?”

“Man alive—*am* I!” Mark’s face beamed as he peered at his wrist watch under the headlight. “It’s only twenty-five after seven, fellow. What time do you have to be there?”

“Seven fawty-five. Reckon we better be steppin’ along, eh?”

“You said it.” Then: “Say, what airline is this buddy of yours traveling on?”

“Inter-Mountain from Dawson City—jest whar yuh said yuh wanted tuh go, eh? Reckon I cum ’long ’jest ’bout in time. Wa’al, wa’al.”

“You’re the original life-saver,” Mark breathed happily, “and if that ship does its stuff I shouldn’t be a heck of a long time in getting back, huh? If she makes it in time, I’ll even remember you as my guardian angel.”

The man laughed good-naturedly and after mounting his motorcycle invited Mark to take his place behind. They were off in a moment doing better than fifty miles an hour right from the start. They bumped and jumped ditch after ditch but kept on going just the same.

Mark held on for dear life to the man’s heavy jacket and minded the cold not at all in his great elation. Perhaps after all he would get there in time—dare he hope for it? It seemed a perilous journey at best. But there was always hope.

The man informed him in stentorian tones that they were on the lowest level of the mountain and that their journey was down hill all the way.

When they had gone about two miles they suddenly came upon the headlights of a car gleaming out upon the road and making it obvious that the car itself was backed into a narrow trail. The man brought the motorcycle down to a low speed, then coasted the rest of the way until they came directly opposite.

“Wa’al...” he began to inquire.

“*Hey, youse!*” a familiar voice shouted. “*Hey, Red!*”

Mark’s blood ran cold as ice in a second. Louis! They were looking for him.

He nudged the man in the ribs roughly. “Beat it, fellow, beat it! They’re after me!” he breathed hoarsely.

“Wa’al, that’s different, son,” the man whispered hastily.

A sudden snort escaped from the engine and they were off, kicking up a thin film of dust behind. Mark was almost thrown from his place and hung on only by sheer determination. But he laughed heartily.

He soon sobered from this untimely mirth, however, for it took but a moment to see that the car had turned out into the road and was now giving chase. Mark passed on this information to his companion.

“Wa’al, so they’re kickin’ up thar heels too, eh?” he said with a loud laugh. “Let ’em, son. Don’t worry. We kin leave ’em clear in th’ dust once we strike th’ next stretch. Know how to handle one o’ these contraptions?”

“I’ll say I do—why?”

“Cause yuh kin drive then till we pass this hubbly, pesky road. I’ll take yore place an’ if they kitch up ’twon’t be fuh long, son. I’ll fix ’em.”

They changed places in a flash. Mark asked no questions because his kind friend had asked none of him. There was something undeniably tolerant in this attitude of the first real westerner he had ever met. The man seemed to take it for granted that this young man in distress was in the right.

Mark kept a firm hand on the bars and got the touch before they had gone five hundred feet. He hadn't ridden a motorcycle in a couple of years—not since Richie got his and shared it with him. And now they were both in the air and the forgotten motorcycle lay in the cellar of Mrs. Benson's home. Things did move swiftly.

“Wa'al, they ain't give up yet, son. Looks like they'll git purty close but that's as far as they'll ever git tuh me, don't worry,” the man shouted reassuringly.

“I'm not worrying,” Mark laughed. “Somehow, I'm not. I've got faith in you and I don't mean maybe!”

The man roared with laughter. Mark could feel him turning about at close intervals to watch the approaching car's progress. Suddenly as the headlights gleamed almost upon them, the fellow shouted tauntingly.

“Cum on, yuh pore critters! Little closer—I reckon a little closer.”

Mark dared not turn around. His fingers clutched the handlebars, numb and uncomfortably moist. He wished he knew what the fellow meant to do—why he was urging them closer. For a moment he wondered about the man's sanity.

From the sound he could tell that the pursuing car was not more than twenty feet away. He was about to shout out in protest when suddenly he felt a movement and heard the crack of a gun, once, twice, three times.

The man laughed uproariously as the sound of hissing, punctured tires came to them. “Reckon that'll hold the pore critter fer awhile,” he shouted to Mark. “I potted his two front tires. Guess we kin make that next stretch in no time, eh?”

“I'll tell the world,” Mark laughed. “A thousand thanks, mister...”

“Jes' Jake, son,” the man said pleasantly. “Glad tuh make yore 'quaintance. Any time yore up Bleak Hills way drop in an' see me. I'm foreman on Kelley's Silver Crescent Ranch. Sheep's my worry. Wa'al—want me tuh take 'er naow?”

Mark was relieved to get his hands in his pockets for a moment. Five minutes later, Jake was pointing toward some gleaming lights. “Bleak Valley field, son. Thar 'tis, plain's day. Not much as them places go, I guess.”

“But it looks like heaven to me,” Mark interposed laughing. “And it's just twenty minutes of the hour, Jake. You're aces high and then some.” After a moment, he asked: “Why did you go to so much trouble for me, huh, Jake? Shooting at those tires for me and acting like a regular guy in general without any questions asked—why?”

Jake's shoulders heaved a little in quiet mirth. “Jes' 'cause I reckon yore not so bad. As man tuh man I don't think yore bad 'tall. Yuh don't wear the

look, son. Fac' tuh fac' I jes natcherally think yore aces up too. Wa'al, here we are."

Mark smiled and offered his hand when they had dismounted. "I'll remember that, Jake," he said pleasantly. "And some day when a guy by the name of Mark Gilmore drops in at Kelley's Silver Crescent Ranch to see you, you'll know it's me."

They laughed together and were about to wander about a little when Mark heard the plane bringing down her altitude before she reached the field. His heart leapt three paces ahead and he studied his watch. It was seventeen minutes to eight o'clock.

Could they possibly make it?

CHAPTER XV

MINUTES TO GO

The pilot of Inter-Mountain No. 7-X, Des Moines to Dawson City, looked up at Mark with astonishment. "You mean to tell me you're the new pilot on the Phoenix run? My gosh! Where've you been all day? Some guy by the name of Benson, who said he's your pal, reported to Arty Aylesworth that you never returned to your room last night. The whole outfit at the field's been wondering where you skipped."

Mark laughed. "Somebody skipped me, but that's a long story. The burning question at present is—how about making this crate get to Dawson a couple of minutes before eight if possible?"

"K.O. brother. It's making her do the stuff, but she can do it. I left the last of my passengers off at this dead end street so we should worry about anybody but ourselves! Worried about the boss?"

"And how!" Mark answered.

"Well, you've got a right to be. He wouldn't stand for much and darn little of that, I'm giving you the tip right now. He's good pay, but hard as stone and there's one thing that won't soften him. Pilot pranks. Get me? Well, to make myself clearer he won't stand for unfavorable publicity of Inter-Mountain and that includes everybody in the outfit from the big mogul himself down to the lowest mechanic. So if I were you, bud, I'd keep a dark secret about what happened to you since the wee hours of this morning. We all get into mischief sometime or other, but it's better to keep it to ourselves."

They left the field with that, climbed up with all three motors roaring and headed due south. Mark settled himself in the narrow seat, with prayerful thanks. The pilot's advice brought a smile to his lips, however, at the thought that for the second time within less than an hour, two men, fellows not much older than he, had taken it quite for granted that his trouble was due to indiscreet behavior. Queer, he thought, how these fellows were so ready to explain one's misfortunes.

For a moment he thought of relating just what had happened but again prudence decided him against such a procedure. He was instinctively aware that there was some indefinable gravity about the affair. Something so serious that it was unwise to discuss it with strangers. Such a kidnapping as he had experienced wasn't because of some trifling incident. His lucid mind grasped the fact that there was some deep underlying motive. Why should

anyone have wanted to keep him prisoner a month or more? He, a stranger in the strange west? He hadn't been long enough in Dawson City to make an enemy. Suddenly he thought of his hands still swollen and painfully sore.

"Got a first aid kit in this crate, fellow?" he asked the pilot.

The pilot nodded. "Back in the rest room, bud. What's the matter?"

Mark spread out his hands.

The pilot whistled. "Mustard and macaroni! Where did you get such hands!"

Mark grinned. "You'd be the most surprised fellow in the world if I told you. Unfortunately, I feel that I shouldn't tell. Just the same I'll be grateful for that first aid kit and maybe some day I can relieve your curiosity."

"S all right, bud," the pilot said good-naturedly. "I'm not the kid to butt into anybody's business. Just the same I'm going to tell you that I feel sorry for you with those hands. How the dickens are you going to handle it to Phoenix?"

"I'd handle it if both my arms were broken!" Mark declared. "You see, fellow, I didn't come all the way to Dawson City to play at a job. I've got a father that is kind but terribly strict, not to mention set ideas. He never did like my going into the air. He wouldn't ride a crate if it was to add fifteen years to his life. No sir! And if I lose this job, I've got a strong feeling that he'll make me quit the air. He can do it too. I'm not of age, not for a couple of years so believe me there's a reason why I want to get that crate out of Dawson on time tonight and every other night too."

"Don't blame you, bud," said the pilot sympathetically. "Go back there and fix up your mittens then. I'll have you down under the big mogul's tent to report for duty in three minutes."

Mark hurried back, saturated his cuts and bruises with antiseptic, then smeared them generously with a cool, healing salve. He managed to bandage them after a fashion considering that he had but one hand at a time to work with. In any event it was a temporary relief and that was what he wanted.

Another second's snooping and he found a pair of clean, though worn, canvas gloves. They were rather large but suited his purpose excellently and by the time he had completed a hasty toilette, the plane was going into a dive, all motors silent. They must be almost at the field.

Mark looked at his wrist watch. It was exactly four minutes of eight.

CHAPTER XVI AT HIS POST

Arty sat behind the time-keeper's desk staring as if at a ghost. "You, Red?" he asked, awed.

"Absolutely," Mark grinned. "It's three minutes to eight o'clock. Have I time to run over to Collins' for a cup of coffee?"

"Sure, but where've you been, Red? Everybody's been hunting for you since...."

"Listen, Art, it would take at least an hour to tell you and an hour for you to grasp it. Is my ship still waiting?"

"Sure, but...."

"No buts. I give you my word to tell you later. What time do I get in here from Phoenix?"

"Pre-schedule, four-five."

"Then you'll hear it at four-five. If not, I'll be here at seven-thirty tomorrow night and tell you. Is it eight sharp I'm due to take off from here?"

"Righto, Red, will you please...."

"Arty, I can't swallow a cup of coffee in less time than I have already. And I haven't had a bite since lunch. Sleep neither. Now don't keep me. I need some good strong coffee to carry on this night, believe me."

"But your hands, Red! What on earth's wrong and...."

"Just wait for an earful, Art. I can promise you that—your father too! See you later!"

He ran like the proverbial Indian straight to the lunch wagon. Minutes were nothing. Time was faster than the wind and he couldn't hope to compete with either. Yet a firm resolve brought him to the rickety step of Collins' wagon with breath-taking speed. Two minutes to go. A minute for a cup of stimulating coffee.

He burst into the warm, odorous interior, flushed of cheek and a defiant gleam in his eye. A gleam that somehow challenged a world of kidnapers. Collins was busy at his griddle; he had a customer and did not see who was his new patron.

"Collins!" Mark shouted. "I've only a minute—will you give me just a cup of coffee?"

Collins dropped the fork he held in his hand even before he turned. He stared as he faced Mark, then quite suddenly the color left his face and he stood motionless.

“What’s the matter?” Mark asked. “I told you I’ve only got a minute, Collins!”

Collins nodded mechanically and picked up his fork. Mark noticed that the customer was too engrossed in his food to have noticed the proprietor’s sudden perturbation. After all, it was just as well.

“Coffee,” Mark repeated softly. “That’s all. Something to pull me together. I guess you know I’m due to hop off at eight.”

The color came rushing back into Collins’ face as he reached for a cup and saucer. His hand shook palpably as he held it under the coffee tank and when he placed it at Mark’s elbow the saucer was filled with the steaming brown liquid. At this juncture, the customer, having finished, flung down some coins covering the amount of his check, and left.

Mark sipped a mouthful of coffee and smiled.

“You seem to be surprised to see me, Collins, huh? I’d almost say you looked as if you saw a ghost when I spoke to you.”

Collins wet his lips. “Mebbe I did sort of see a ghost in you,” he said nervously. “Yuh see, yore friend Benson’s been like crazy today thinkin’ mebbe somethin’ happened tuh you ’cause yuh never ’rived at the office when I told yuh or anythin’. He got tired o’ waitin’ so he went up to the place where yuh hired a room for him, so he told me. He says he didn’ sleep an’ I b’lieve him ’cause he comes in here seven o’clock gettin’ me tuh tell him how I told yuh tuh go over tuh the office las’ night like I did an’ yuh didn’ go. We all gets in a stew, Mr. Gilmore, ’count o’ Benson thinkin’ it was strange that yuh didn’ come tuh the office an’ didn’ go back tuh Mrs. Jenkins’ neither! Th’ hull field was up in arms all day—yesirr!”

Mark swallowed the rest of his coffee in one gulp and leveled his eyes at Collins. “Your story’s fine, Collins. I couldn’t do nearly as well myself. Oh, I don’t mean about Benson coming in here. I believe that Richie was anxious about me—somehow I have a hunch that that’s the truth. But as far as you’re concerned—well, I think your anxiety was made of different stuff. I think you weren’t sure about me—*staying put!* You didn’t think I could escape and yet you were afraid of it! That’s the opinion I just got of your very odd behavior.”

“Whatcha talkin’ ’bout?” Collins asked thickly.

“Collins, I don’t have to repeat it, ever! I’d stake my life that never in your life will you ever forget what I’ve just said. You’ll remember it word for word, the longest day you live.”

Collins pulled a little stool from under the counter and sat down. “If you ain’t the mos’ gol dang riddle I ever heard,” he said with a nervous laugh. “If you think I had anythin’ tuh do with yore disa...”

Mark laughed. "I thought I'd make you admit something, Collins," he interposed grimly. "You admit then, that you know I did disappear strangely last night, huh? I'm not saying you had anything to do with it personally."

"I—lissen, Mr. Gilmore...."

"But I think that you're well aware of all the facts of the case," Mark interposed calmly. "I was chloroformed not twelve feet from your lunch wagon last night and you knew I would be when you sent me away from here. I'm certain of that much. As for the rest of it—I'll find out and don't think I won't. Believe me, Collins, you'd never guess how I can get riled up with a proper incentive. And I've never had such an incentive in my life. I'll tear down the world if I have to, to find out who's the person that's so anxious to get me out of the way and why! Do you understand?"

"Er—yore turrible het up, Mr. Gilmore, an' I agrees with you if that happened yuh got a right tuh find out. Why a body should want yuh—a stranger 'most, tuh git outa heah, I don' know."

Mark got up and hurried to the door. "Well, if you don't know, Collins, you'll find out soon, I can assure you of that. I got back tonight, didn't I? Well, it was partly luck and partly determination. You'd be surprised if you knew the story. But I'm here and that's what I meant to do. Just like that I'll find out the guy who's responsible for last night's pink tea and I'm not bragging when I say that I won't rest until I do. G'night, sir. I get back from Phoenix at four-five. Expect me for breakfast sometime after that."

At eight o'clock, Mark was busy at the controls of the Black Arrow, Inter-Mountain's finest tri-motor plane. A moment later it was roaring along the concrete runway of the Dawson field, then climbing into the night.

Arty Aylesworth watched it as it rose above the far end of the field. Presently its nose turned south, quivered over the silent reaches of Dawson Peak and was gone.

CHAPTER XVII COMPARISONS

Arty lingered a moment in the brisk, cold air and watched the take-off of another plane at the far end of the field. A Dawson-Inland plane, its name, curiously enough, was the Shadow 3-D, bound also for Phoenix.

To one whose ear was attuned to the sound of perfect motors, the Shadow 3-D was apt to be not so musical, mechanically speaking. A jarring note now and again drifted down with the wind even after she had left the peak's rugged heights on the trail of the Black Arrow. Richie Benson heard it too and promised himself that Rumson's mechanics would get it fixed before another night rolled around or he'd know the reason why.

Arty's thoughts followed the same channel. They differed only in the knowledge that Rumson's Shadows^[1], the first, second and third, were all defective. All the mechanics in the world couldn't fix them and their span of life was a matter of luck and nursing. Rumson knew it when he bought them, *cheap*, and he contended that all motors were imperfect in a sense and boasted that his passengers were required to wear "chutes". This, of course, was airport gossip, but Arty surmised, after listening to the Shadow 3-D that night, that the gossip had a more substantial foundation than was supposed.

"Anyhow it's Rumson's funeral and Benson's too if he wants to keep on working for them," Arty said indifferently. "I should worry when I've got other things on my mind, when I went to the trouble of going east and picking an egg out like Red, it's kind of up to me to have him make good. I've got to think of that! Suffering cats, he looked as if he'd been in a fight or something! I wonder what was up, where he was since ... anyway, he kept his word and got here on time. That's the main thing—gee whiz!"

He hurried back into the time-keeper's office and flashed the take-off time of the Black Arrow to the Phoenix terminal. After that he sat back in his swivel chair to think. In point of fact, he thought himself to sleep at his post, and awakened only when he got a flash from Phoenix that Mark had made a new record.

He pounded the desk with his chubby fist and said something that sounded like *hot dog*. Then he looked up at the clock and after entering some notes in his time book, decided that he would get himself a snack. Consequently, he strolled off along the edge of the field toward the lunch wagon and his spirits were bubbling. Red had started off wonderfully in

spite of everything, he told himself. If he would only end up that way—well, what was to prevent him?

What indeed! Arty had not imagination enough to realize that much could prevent his friend from continuing these record-breaking flights for a whole month. Also he did not know what a penchant Mark had for tempting the fickle fates and hitching his plane to that rather elusive combination of Adventure and Chance.

Be that as it might, Arty was not worrying about uncertain tomorrows and entered the lunch wagon singing. Mr. Collins showed signs of being startled just as he had done ever since Mark had visited him earlier in the evening. Many customers had come and gone, to be sure, but the usually placid proprietor could not seem to face the opening and closing of the door without a certain nervous, expectant look.

This strange expression faded, however, at sight of Arty. Mr. Collins seemed actually relieved and gave vent to his emotion with an audible sigh. This seemed to help him gather himself together and before another second passed he was once more the genial host inquiring after his customer's health and present wishes.

"Ham *and*, Collins," Arty explained smilingly. "Cup coffee and one of those nice, fat doughnuts that you've got. I'm not going home as usual tonight. I'm waiting up for Red—I mean our new Phoenix pilot, Mark Gilmore. Know him?"

Mr. Collins stopped in his preparation of ham *and*, and turned to Arty, his face drawn and worried looking. "Er—that was him in here before eight o'clock, eh?"

"Oh yes, he said he was going to grab a cup of coffee here. I suppose you heard we were quite worried about the way he disappeared after he left here last night. You remember he was here last night too?"

"Yes, yes, yes," said the proprietor nervously. "It sort of upset me like. A body hears so much of how they try to git rid of them Chicago bad men and send them out all over the country. No tellin' if one o' 'em lands here an' tries them gangster methods right under our noses, so to speak. I thought mebbe that's how it had been with this Gilmore. It's mos' dark enough between some of these here buildin's on the field tuh knock a feller endways an' then spirit him away tuh one of the canyons and drop him fuh good."

Arty laughed, not quite at ease. "My goodness, Collins! You've got it figured out so realistically that for the moment I thought it was actually so. But thank heavens, Red wasn't dropped in any canyon for good. I've proof positive that it was he controlling the Black Arrow from here tonight. Yes, it was he, alive and kicking."

"But kinda mad actin', eh?" Collins questioned in a low voice.

“Yes, I noticed he was mad about something and it’s probably got to do with his disappearance today. *It must have!* Whatever happened I don’t think he was robbed like you just suggested. He didn’t say anything about it anyhow. But anyway I’m good and curious to hear what really did happen. His hands were all bandaged up as if he’d been in a good sound battle or something. He came running in my office a second or two after the 7-X came in making a new speed record from Bleak Valley. Dilly Dunn, our man down there, flashed the take-off time as being on schedule so she made the new record sailing up here. Ten minutes. That’s saying a whole lot on the stretch from Bleak Valley. But going back to Red...”

“Yuh don’t suppose he could o’ come up on the 7-X, eh?” Collins asked suddenly.

Arty was startled. “Why, what makes you ask that, huh? Why, what would Red have been doing in Bleak Valley, anyway? In the first place, how could he have got down there? He didn’t use his own plane. It’s stored up where we left it when we came in at midnight last night. It hasn’t been touched. You see we even had an idea that maybe he might have got thinking afterward and decided to fly back home. He was saying to me when I left him at Mrs. Jenkins’ that he thought Dawson was kind of tame. Well, I don’t blame him for thinking that. But as it developed he came down to the field again to get Richie because he wanted to walk and was hungry. But what happened after that—well, I’m all ears to hear about it when he gets back. And as for him coming back on the 7-X, that’s the bunk, Collins. Why for one thing, like I said, he couldn’t possibly have got down there.”

Collins turned back to his skillet where the ham and was merrily frying. He gave the handle a few mechanical flips. “Er, er, yuh didn’t happen to see yore pilot on the 7-X, eh?” he asked slowly.

“Why sure—he had to give me his time, didn’t he? Why?”

“Just thought mebbe he would have said somethin’ ’bout this Gilmore comin’ back with him—ef he did come back, I means.”

Arty shook his head. “No, he didn’t say anything because there wasn’t time. I was too anxious to get outside and see if Red got off O.K. Another thing, I didn’t give it a thought that Red could be in Bleak Valley and I don’t believe it besides.”

“No, no, I reckon not. Wa’al, so long as he got back, eh? That’s the main thing.” Then after a studied pause: “Did y’ever see that Houdini feller, Mr. Arty?” he asked.

“*Houdini?*”

“Yeah, I wuz jest a-thinkin’ how I seen him tuh Denver one time.”

“No, I never saw him,” Arty said, thinking what a digression it was from their former subject to the man, Houdini. Certainly one could never account

for the human mind and Collins, he supposed, was like every one else. And aloud, he added: “What about this egg Houdini?”

“Jes’ that he sure wuz a wonder, Mr. Arty,” Collins readily explained. “Why, with my own eyes I seen him git clear of a straightjacket an’ a pair o’ handcuffs. They do say how he even did them things under water. Escaped, mind yuh! Don’t know as if it’s jes’ talk or not but he got clear o’ a submarine too, they say. Reckon that must be jes’ talk though. But a frien’ of mine in Denver says it wuz Lord’s truth that the man let them lock him up in the city jail. With them handcuffs on and all he got clear of it, mind yuh!”

“How did he do it?” Arty asked, interested. Collins shrugged his shoulders. “My frien’ says folks jes’ couldn’ tell. The feller done it too quick. Jes’ like that they saw him git clear o’ the handcuffs an’ then, *pop*—outa the cell he came walkin’ like as if it wuz nothin’ more than a plain door he had tuh tackle.”

“Well, that is marvelous,” said Arty. “Still I suppose there’s a trick in it. There must be! Good thing that the jailbirds didn’t get onto the game, huh?”

“Yeah, but I wuz thinkin’ it’s too bad a feller like that didn’t live longer. Think there’ll ever be another feller like him?”

“Houdini? Well, if we believe the old saying that there’s always someone ready to take our place, I guess there’s another Houdini floating around somewhere, huh?”

“Reckon so,” said Collins.

He flipped Arty’s order onto a platter, and proceeded to draw a cupful of coffee from the big urn. That done he served his customer, then drew out his stool from under the counter and settled his big bulk upon it.

As he lighted a fat cigar, a sigh escaped him and numerous little worried wrinkles appeared on his usually placid brow. Arty, enjoying his food, did not notice, but a keen observer might have done so, and surmised that Collins was still thinking of the man Houdini. That he was associating the ingenious magician with Mark Gilmore called for a stretch of the imagination, yet how very often is the imagination correct. Certainly, in this instance, it was.

Collins, at that moment, was actually wondering if Mark Gilmore was a reincarnated Houdini.

[1] The three planes comprising the Dawson-Inland Airlines fleet.

CHAPTER XVIII

MARK AND ARTY

The Black Arrow appeared over Dawson Peak at exactly three fifty-five o'clock. Arty could not believe his ears and rushed out doors to make sure that the deafening roar was indeed one of Inter-Mountain's own tri-motored planes. He chuckled heartily as the big ship skipped down the concrete runway and stopped.

A half dozen passengers, laden with baggage, soon emerged and, seemingly from nowhere, a half dozen voices of taxi drivers droned for fares. Their stands at the edge of the field soon became a scene of activity for a minute or two, then, before the Black Arrow had discharged its small cargo of freight, the cabs were out of sight of the airport and speeding toward town.

Mark waited until he saw the last of the freight borne off toward the sheds before he stepped down from the fuselage door. He then hurried toward the time office with a light heart and whistled every step of the way.

Arty was smiling as Mark burst into the office. "Hot dog, Red! Know you made some record just now? Boy, but dad will be smiling all over in the morning when he hears it. 7-X from Bleak Valley made a record last night too, but not as good as you."

Mark divested himself of his jacket and smiled. "Sure, I know about the 7-X from Bleak Valley. I ought to. I was on it."

"You! Then Collins was right. He...."

"Oh, so Collins knew I was on the 7-X, huh?" Mark interposed.

"Why er—I don't know how he *could* know it any more than I *didn't* know it!" Arty protested. "I was just so glad to know that you were back and ready for your run ... anyway, Collins just kind of had a hunch about you being on the 7-X, I guess. I didn't give it a second thought because I couldn't see how it was possible for you to have got down in Bleak Valley, New Mexico, when you were standing in this airport around three o'clock this morning."

Mark dragged a chair up to Arty's desk and sat down. "There are hunches and hunches," he said thoughtfully. "But Collins didn't have any hunch about me coming in the 7-X, Art—he had a straight tip. And before I give you the full dope on what happened to me, let me tell you that that little lunch wagon could tell you just as much almost, as I'm going to tell you—if lunch wagons could talk. I don't say that I think Collins had a hand in it

exactly, but he had *something* in it, you may be certain. If he didn't, he wouldn't have had any more hunch than you *didn't* have that I came in on that ship from Bleak Valley."

Arty was mystified and looked it. "What is this, Red, a cross-word puzzle or something? What you talking about anyhow?"

Mark crossed his long, slim legs. "To begin with, after you left me at Mrs. Jenkins', I decided I wouldn't phone Richie."

"That's what she thought," Arty interrupted. "She told me this afternoon when I went up there to find out all about you. She heard you go out the door, she said, and decided that you probably wanted to take a walk or something. Anyway, like I told you last night, she's used to pilots coming in and out all hours, so she didn't think anything wrong about you doing it either."

"And there wasn't anything wrong," Mark continued. "Not then. I went to the lunch wagon to find out if he stayed open all night. You see, I wanted to know because I had decided to go and get Richie (if I hadn't already missed him), and bring him back for a snack together. So I went over to the Dawson-Inland place...."

"Yeah, and I know that too," Arty interposed smilingly. "I got to hand it to you, Red, for trailing Benson like you do. Anyway, I want to take back all I said about him being ungrateful, etc.,—there's lots worse, I guess. But the main thing, he's not so bad—not when he can worry about you like he did."

"I know. I saw him in Phoenix and he told me. He didn't have a chance to talk only a minute or so. That reminds me I made it five minutes better than his Shadow 3-D and that's the reason. Bailey was with him and said they'd better give her a looking over before they came back. Richie whispered that he didn't like the sound of her at all and he added that he'd see me at breakfast. So I'll hear more then. Anyhow, the main thing is that Rich seemed really glad to see me and he said he was worried terribly. Bailey tried to act nice too, but at heart he was sore at me for beating the Shadow. The Black Arrow's a peach, Art. I believe I could get a world's record out of her."

"*You could!*" Arty said, flattered. "We've got the best crates this side of the Rockies, believe me. No excuse for a guy like you to not get the best out of 'em. But about yourself, Red—Richie said that being you were his friend, Bailey and Rumson decided that they'd forget who were your employers and have you over to share a bite with them. Sort of celebration in Richie's honor—see? So they had Regan their watchman call over to Collins and tell him to get a lunch ready and a special invitation to you to join them."

"Mm, that fits together all right," Mark mused. "Go on, Art."

“Well, Collins said he told you that they wanted you and that you left. That’s all he knew—you *left*. Regan came over fifteen minutes later for the grub and said you hadn’t showed up yet. So then to take up Richie’s version of it, he said he took it for granted that maybe you had got kind of sore at the reception Bailey and he gave you first off, and he said he didn’t blame you, but that it was a misunderstanding. Anyway, he made up his mind that if you had gone back to Mrs. Jenkins’ in a huff he’d go and get you and explain. Well, he went and got Mrs. Jenkins out of bed a second time that night. But she’s a good scout, she understood when Benson explained.”

“And what did he do then?”

“Stayed there. He thought maybe he’d missed you on the way up and he said he made up his mind to wait until you came in. So he threw himself down on one of the beds, and fell asleep.”

“Don’t wonder after the cold ducking he got last night and all,” said Mark sympathetically. “I suppose he slept till morning?”

“Righto. When he woke up this morning and saw that you hadn’t come in at all, he was really worried. He got word to me right away. I was still home too, but you can bet I beat it down as quick as could be. Dad didn’t like it for a cent because he’s a funny sort. Always puts a wrong construction on things. I told him what kind of an egg I knew you were, but I might as well have talked to the wall. I ’phoned him tonight though, that you turned up and that everything was O. K.” Arty chuckled. “I think he was almost disappointed, do you know that, Red? He told me last night, or this morning rather, when I got home, that he thought you were entirely too young to carry the responsibility of the Phoenix run. You see I begged him to let me go east and pick a pilot. I wanted the fun of it. He usually attends to those things himself.”

“And the long and short of it is, your father doesn’t think much of your picking, huh Art?”

“Well, it was just about you being so young, last night. But today, when he heard you were gone, he shook his head as if to say ‘I told you so, Arty.’ You know that look, Red. He just likes to find fault with my judgment in picking out reliable pilots. But we’ll fool him, huh?”

“*And how!*” Mark said earnestly. “He’ll shake his head pretty hard when he hears that after I stepped out of Collins’ last night and had gone a few feet some unknown person chloroformed me and knocked me cuckoo.”

“*Red—chloroformed you?*”

“Dead to the world, Art—dead to the world!” Mark echoed reflectively. “And that is neither one quarter nor even half of it. Listen to the rest...”

CHAPTER XIX

THE HATCHET BURIED

When Mark finished his strange narrative, Arty sat back in his swivel chair, wondering. So deep in thought was he that he did not hear the faint whirring coming from the direction of Dawson's Peak. Suddenly he grasped its meaning and looked at his watch with a broad grin curling the upper corners of his mouth.

"That's the Shadow 3-D, Red," he chuckled. "She's fifteen minutes late. Ha, ha, ha! That's even worse than their relief pilot's been doing for a week. Ten minutes was his limit, but poor Benson's got him beaten, huh? Sufferin' cats, that's terrible for a new and hopeful airman who's trying to pull down the mail contract, huh? Rumson's wailing and gnashing his teeth right now, I'll bet my socks."

"Richie's a marvel to get that much out of her," said Mark scornfully. "Rumson and his outfit have one awful nerve to expect that kid to compete with your tri-motors. They were still unloading my freight in Phoenix when that Shadow rode down the wind and if she didn't sound like some of the vintage of eighteen I'll say it's nobody's business! She ought to be condemned, that's what I think, and I mustn't forget to remind Richie to wear a good 'chute every time he steps in her!"

Arty rose and yawned. "Not a bad idea, Red. Let's mosey on down to Collins' for breakfast. Benson ought to be showing up there by that time too. They never have much freight to unload. Guess folks just simply don't want to see their stuff burned unnecessarily. Well, what do you say?"

They hurried down to the lunch wagon and found that Collins had gone off duty. In his place, a young, quiet sort of chap sought to look after the customers efficiently. Mark was glad of this change somehow, for he had an aversion just then for seeing or talking to the proprietor.

Richie came along shortly after, and the smile he gave Mark was genuine. "Boy, it was good to see you back there in Phoenix," he said, taking his place at the counter. "It's good to see you here too, only that first time of knowing you were O. K. sort of set me right."

"But you can't be too gay now, Rich, after Rumson's bawled you out, huh?" Mark said with a ring of real feeling in his voice. "I mean he must be sore at himself for letting you ride such a rock crusher."

Benson shrugged his shoulders and flushed. "She's some tough bird to handle. Can't take the smallest bit of gaff. But what's the use o' kickin',

hah? Rumson was sore at first, but Bailey was along to hear the way she carried on, so I had him to stick up for me. Anyway, Rumson promised to have the boys haul her all over before tonight, so I'll see what kind of a break that gives me." And in a whisper intended for Mark's ears only, he added: "That's more than I can hope from you, hah?"

"What—you mean you're hoping for a break from *me*?" Mark asked puzzled, after making certain that Arty's attention was elsewhere. "How?"

"By bringing the Black Arrow in on schedule and not before," Benson whispered rather hesitantly. "I can never hope to beat that Black Arrow, Red, *never!* That crate of a Shadow won't make it. I won't ask you to kill time. Just come in on the dot so it won't make things look so bad for me, hah? It's just a favor."

Arty's attention wandered back to his friends and Mark was forced to summarily dismiss any further talk on the subject. He resumed it, however, when he and Benson were left alone in the privacy of their room at Mrs. Jenkins'.

They were getting ready for a much-needed rest when Mark thought of it again. "That favor you asked of me, Richie—if you're absolutely in earnest about it, I want to tell you, that it'll be a difficult thing for me to do. In a sense I have as unreasonable a boss to work for as you have."

Benson dallied over the unlacing of his shoes. "I realize that, Mark—I kind of guessed it that night when Art was talking about schedules. Even Rumson admitted that old Aylesworth's a bug for schedules. But I don't think he'd be hard on you if you just sort of came in on the dot. If you did it a couple of times, I think it would make that old geezer I got act more human."

"But how about the overhauling you mentioned him promising?" Mark asked as he threw his collar and tie on the dresser.

"That might help her knocking, but it won't give her speed when she hasn't got any. I tell you, Mark, I got wise to that crate the minute I felt her rise off that runway tonight. It isn't only the engine part, Red, it's the body. She doesn't seem able to shed the wind. Bucks at it like some old war horse. Besides, Rumson ought to have sense enough to see the difference between Aylesworth's layout and his own."

Mark turned around. "Chuck Rumson, huh Rich?"

Benson looked up. "You mean quit him?"

"Sure. Maybe Aylesworth could fit you in here some place so's you wouldn't have to lose any time."

"Nothing doing, Mark. Much as I'd like to quit that complaining old Rumson, I like the salary too much. I get twice what you do."

Mark wheeled about. “Rich,” he said earnestly, “it isn’t your mother, is it? She—she isn’t in any great need—any trouble?”

Benson shook his head and laughed. “Naw, nothin’ like that. Ma’s getting along all right. I want to buy me a trim little plane like yours for one thing, Mark. My old bus is beyond salvage even. I phoned back today. Well, what’s the use of worrying, I’ll do the best I can with that junk they’ve wished on me.”

“And wear a ’chute, Rich,” Mark warned. “Oh, that’s all the preaching I’m going to do. I turned over a new leaf about you. That’s what I had in mind when I came to call for you at Rumson’s. And by the way, Richie, where did Rumson disappear to when you opened the door on me, and why?”

“‘Cause he’s a peculiar guy, Mark,” Richie answered with his eyes on the floor. “He says he doesn’t like people and the fewer he meets the better satisfied he is. He ran through that door, the one that Bailey said he used too. Rumson just slipped into that next office, the room you saw Bailey come out of. They’re connecting you know. I knew you’d think it was funny because I was positive you heard the old guy talking to me.”

“I did hear some of it,” Mark confessed. “I’ll admit it puzzled me too. Him talking about not putting something into a contract and that you and he and Bailey understood and that was all that’s necessary. It didn’t sound so good to me, Rich, but don’t tell me if you feel that it’s not to be told.”

Richie toyed with his shoes for some little while. “Aw, it’s nothing so much,” he said thickly. “But it’s something that Rumson wouldn’t want to get around. He’d have my neck. And though he didn’t exactly say what it was he hinted that once in a while I’d have to carry contraband stuff from Mexico after we once get the mail contract and ain’t obliged to keep up such a regular schedule. Passengers’ll bring the goods aboard, I understand, at Phoenix. That’s all there’ll be to it.”

“Rich, I wish you wouldn’t let yourself in for that kind of thing. Money or no money. It’s too risky. Rumson is unscrupulous! The very worst kind, it seems to me.”

“Aw, it ain’t anything so terrible, Mark. He told me something about materials that the poor people couldn’t afford to pay duty on—that’s what the contraband is. There’s nothing so risky in that, is there? Gee whiz, it’s all right when a feller’s helping poor people, isn’t it?”

“Mm, but not when you have to break laws to do it,” Mark declared passionately. “And besides, Rich, I have a little hunch that Rumson isn’t the gink to help the poor people. He’s out to help Rumson, take it from me! Let him help the poor without breaking laws, then I’ll change my mind about

him. How about your mother—will she know you're making big money by cheating the law, Rich?"

"Aw, all right, Mark. I call quits. Anyway, I'm sleepy. I'll stick at this job then until Aylesworth gets the mail contract. Rumson won't begin to think of that other line until then. Meanwhile I can draw quite a nice fat pocketful, hah? It's not hurting me nor anybody else to do that, is it? Like you say, I guess he's all for himself so I guess he's deserving of having somebody cheat him a little."

"And that's what he's going to pay you a large salary for, huh Rich? Contraband."

"Not until after the mail contract's given out," Richie protested. "He says it's too risky. Well, what's to prevent him from thinking that I'm going to do it! I'll try hard to make that ship do her stuff for a month and quit on him. Let somebody else do his dirty work, hah? That's me. But in the meantime he'll be ragging me to death to try and grab that contract by making the Shadow 3-D do what she can't do!"

"Why is Rumson so anxious to have that mail contract, Rich?" Mark asked thoughtfully.

Benson bit his lip. "For business reasons, he says. But if you're thinking anything, Mark, you're wrong. He can't pull off anything with the government—no, sirr! He's not such a fool to think it either."

Mark was ready for bed and jumped in. "Just what he can pull off, I don't know, Rich. What I do know is that I don't trust him somehow. Without having seen him I feel as I do. His voice ... well, I didn't like his actions either. But aside from that, I don't think he's worthy of a government responsibility. I know I wouldn't trust him with my two cents postage and I mean it. But I'll give you a break, Rich, on my schedule. I won't try any records for a few nights and see how your crate follows."

Benson smiled. "Gee, you're a peach, Mark. Honest you are! I won't forget it, I sure won't. It'll help keep peace until the month is up and that's something."

Mark dug his elbow into the pillow and propped his head on his hand. "Well, I hope it'll help you, Rich. Honest, I do. But before you get too elated, I want to tell you one thing—I wouldn't keep up my dallying very long if I thought that it was going to put that contract into Rumson's pocket. Not by a long shot. In fact, I'll do everything possible to keep it out for I haven't any intention of that worm crawling through my mail in the near future. No sir, not me."

The smile faded from Benson's face, but he covered it up with an audible yawn. A second later, he switched out the light and turned back the covers of his bed and crawled in.

CHAPTER XX

ADVICE

Bad weather set in over the Rockies, weather that made air travel difficult. Day after day dawned with blustering, icy winds and little sun and the nights were interminable with long hours of black chaotic skies and ripping gales that made a pilot's existence almost miserable. Mark thought just that about it when he opened his eyes toward middle afternoon on the fourth day at Mrs. Jenkins'.

He glanced at the bed opposite and called loudly to the still sleeping Benson. "Come on, Rich," he said cheerfully, "we ought to get up and take a good long walk around the town or up a way into the mountains. This isn't any good for us, shut up in a stuffy cockpit half the night and sleeping half the day and more."

Richie growled softly, then slowly opened his eyes. "Sleepy," he said in a half whining voice. "I didn't get in here until almost six."

"Mm, I thought I never heard you come in. Missed you at the wagon too. So did Arty. Where were you?"

"You can imagine!" Richie said vehemently. He was wide awake by then. "That miserable old fool Rumson was chewing my ear off till I thought I'd go crazy."

"What's the matter? You haven't been doing so badly. Only a minute or two late each time now. Twice on schedule. What's he kicking about considering the material you've got to work with?"

"That's what I'd like to know, Mark. But he isn't satisfied. He says he'll fire me altogether if I don't make her do better. You see he's friendly with the postmaster in this graveyard and he's the one that keeps at the old guy to put on more speed so's people will sit up and take notice of how reliable the Dawson-Inland is. Ha, ha, if they only knew the old crates as I know 'em, hah? That postmaster is anxious to get in Rumson's good graces if you ask me."

"Think he's on to Rumson's rep and his future plans?" Mark asked.

Richie looked almost frightened. "No, Rumson's not such a fool. But that postmaster is for thinking the old guy will fall at his feet for that contract. But don't you go telling anything what I told you, Mark! After all, it hasn't anything to do with the mail part of it, so forget it, hah? Just keep on throttling your crate down a bit so's I won't hear any more than I do."

Mark nodded but he was soon to hear about that subject from Arty, and it changed the aspect of things considerably. “Dad’s been wondering,” said Arty, obviously not happy to mention it, “why you couldn’t do better than you’ve done the last few nights. I suppose he wouldn’t have thought twice about it really, except that you made such a record that first night.”

Mark threw down his cap on Arty’s desk and smiled. “That’s usually the way with first nights, isn’t it?” he said. “Rich and I took a walk down to your village and had dinner for a change. We walked all the way back too and, boy, I feel swell.”

Arty looked worried. “I’m glad you feel swell, Red, because dad’s stayed up in his office specially to see you. I told him I expected you early tonight on account of us planning to take a little spin. Well, he said he won’t keep you long enough to interfere with it.”

“Then what are you looking so worried about, huh?”

“Oh, because dad always worries me when he wants to see people. I never know what he’s going to complain about. I’d worry if he wanted to see *me*. He’s so hard and cold, Red. Even my mother admits it. But maybe it’s nothing more than him wondering about how well you did the first night. I worry sometimes for nothing.”

Mark got up. “It’s probably nothing now, Art. Cheer up. I can face anything I have to. How about my trouble that first night—you told him that story and he said he’d talk with me about it at his convenience, didn’t he?”

“That’s right, Red, he did. Gosh, I hope that’s what it’s about. He wouldn’t give me any opinion at all. Just told me to keep my mouth shut and not let anybody know it as long as you were wise enough to keep still about it. But you told Richie.”

“Sure, and that’s the end of it as far as Rich would be concerned. He may have his faults but he’ll keep still if you get his word on it. And I did.”

“Well, go on up then, and good luck. I’ll be waiting.”

Mark made a grimace at Arty’s worried face and ran up the stairway to Mr. Aylesworth’s office, two steps at a time. The door was slightly open and the older man called for him to come in before he had a chance to knock.

“Take a chair, Gilmore,” he said tersely and pulled up his own closer to the shining desk. “Won’t keep you but a minute or two,” he added, taking out his watch and holding it in his hand after a second’s scrutiny of it.

“Take your time, Mr. Aylesworth,” Mark said pleasantly. “I’m good and early.”

The man seemed not to have heard but thrummed with his free hand on the desk and studied Mark closely. “Two things I want to speak to you about,” he said at length. His jaw snapped down, then opened to add, “First

about your unusual experience the other night. I've been thinking it over. I think you're truthful."

"I always try to be, Mr. Aylesworth," Mark said, meeting his eyes squarely.

Mr. Aylesworth nodded. "Looking at you now I believe your story. At first I didn't. I believe you were really kidnapped. Your escape from those people is really commendable. Have you thought much about who could have wanted to do such a thing to you?"

"Naturally. I've thought of it more or less ever since. Collins is the only one I can lay my finger on but of course...."

"That's absurd when the man was in his lunch wagon until morning. Arty could testify to that through some of our mechanics. A mere thief wouldn't go to such pains to abduct you and threaten to keep you incarcerated for a month or longer."

"Plain as day," Mark agreed.

"Arty told me about your accidental eavesdropping at Rumson's and the circumstances following." Aylesworth's eyes were like bits of steel. "I take it you heard some significant talk."

"Rather," Mark admitted. "It was and it wasn't. Rumson said he didn't care about giving my friend Richie a contract, but then lots of good business men don't care about contracts either."

Mr. Aylesworth waved a small, strong hand half-way above the desk then brought it pounding down. "That's not relevant. Besides, there's nothing really definite we could agree upon as to what you heard. Rumson never means any good, but he takes care nobody finds it out. I had thought perhaps you did find something out when you were listening—something really incriminating, that we could pin him down with. You told this Benson about your experience?"

"Yes, and it's safe," Mark said, ready to defend Richie. "He thought it was terrible and said that as bad as Rumson was, he expressed concern about my absence that day. Oh, I know what you're thinking, Mr. Aylesworth. I did too, until Rich told me that Mr. Rumson and Mr. Bailey had slept all night in a little room they use occasionally back of their offices."

"Benson say anything about where Rumson and Bailey live?"

"No. I've never thought to ask. Don't they live here in town?"

"They do not. No one seems to know, but I heard vaguely that it was over in Utah. A ranch this side of Salt Lake. Hmph. Too far from Bleak Valley, eh?"

"Rather," Mark smiled. "And why should they resort to anything like that with poor me? In that short time it was even impossible for me to make an enemy, huh?"

“Then I’m convinced that it was mistaken identity, Gilmore. See that you don’t let yourself in for that sort of thing again, by avoiding Rumson’s vicinity entirely. I’ve heard that he has many competitors—men of his ilk, but not of my business, I assure you, who may have reason to believe that your friend Benson would act too much in cooperation with Rumson. You see I happen to know that the man occasionally runs contraband in from Mexico.”

“Oh, not now anyway,” Mark protested. “Richie told me there was nothing like that now.”

A ghost of a smile flitted across the older man’s face and was gone. “Perhaps there is nothing like that now. But an old dog usually trots in accustomed pathways. Rumson can’t keep away from it.”

“Why don’t you make that known, Mr. Aylesworth? You could tell the postmaster....”

“When I haven’t actual evidence. No, no, Rumson’s too slick to discredit himself like that now. I’d look like a fool. The best thing is to give him enough rope. He’ll hang himself.”

“Then you think that maybe I was mistaken for Rich, huh? You think maybe Rumson’s enemies....”

“*I think*, I don’t know!” the man interposed tersely. “And as a second matter, I would try and get your friend out of Rumson’s employ. He may think he’s doing all right, but I have my doubts. Also, I’d be willing to put him on as relief man just to see him free of that scoundrel. And as far as you’re concerned, Gilmore, I wouldn’t spoil a fine record to keep your friend Benson in Rumson’s good graces. You’d be doing the young man a favor by beating him mercilessly at every trip. You can do it and you know it!”

Mark colored like a schoolboy. “Mr. Aylesworth—I....”

“There’s no need of white lies, young man. Not even that. I’m a business man and I’ve summed it up. Arty says you’re unusually fond of this Benson. I happen to know that Rumson is fighting tooth and nail for the contract and that he won’t stand for slip-ups from his pilot without giving out a tongue-lashing. One and one won’t make anything but two, Gilmore. You showed what you could do that first night and I have my own conclusions since the Shadow 3-D happens to be wobbling in so close onto your record every night. If you’re so fond of Benson, help him out, not in. That’s all.”

Mark escaped from the room and rushed downstairs. He felt that Mr. Aylesworth had actually held a mirror to his mind and read it freely. There was something almost uncanny about the man’s talking so calmly concerning a matter that had been mentioned in confidence between Richie and himself.

Yet Mark knew that Mr. Aylesworth was in the right. He could see the whole thing as no one else could see it. And as much as he distrusted and suspected Rumson, he was sporting enough to let the man run himself into the ground without having a hand in hurrying him there. But it was a far different matter about Richie.

Before Mark took off in the Black Arrow a little later, he had resolved on one plan. If it was a favor to his friend to beat him mercilessly on this and every other future trip, then he would beat him. He had such a wealth of sentiment and boyhood friendship for Benson that this breaking of the hated promise really lightened his heart. Richie would thank him in the end, he felt certain.

But would he? In his enthusiasm for Benson's welfare, Mark did not take into account that young man's erratic nature. He never dreamed that in bending the rod into submission, it might possibly spring up at another angle.

CHAPTER XXI

FLASHES

Mark bettered his previous record that night. Despite a terrific gale, he had made the trip to and from Phoenix merrily and was quite shocked at the sullen reception Benson had given him. Nothing he could say helped matters and the end of it was that Richie had packed up his things and left Mrs. Jenkins'.

Mark managed to sleep until mid-afternoon because he felt that he was right. He had fallen into a doze after Richie left at six o'clock and awakened with something of a shock to find that his friend had not come back.

"You see I fully expected he'd get over his huff," Mark explained to Arty when they sat in the time office after dinner. "But he didn't and it looks as if he won't."

"Did you explain to him that my dad insisted?" Arty asked anxiously.

"Of course. I even told him of your father's offer to take him on, but he laughed in my face. Said that this firm was the dog-in-the manger around this airport. Before he left he told me that he couldn't pal around with me and share my room when I came right out with it that I was going to beat him. He said even if Rumson didn't have anything to do with it he couldn't stand for that—it hurt his air pride. Well, I suppose in a way it did, but I didn't mean it that way."

"Still, you could handle that Shadow 3-D better than Rich," Arty said admiringly. "You are the better airman, Red. I don't forget what you told me about Rich losing his head when things aren't running smoothly."

"I know, but I guess he can't do much more with the Shadow than he has done. I hate to do it, but maybe if I keep it up, Rumson will fire him. In a way I'm sorry I told Rich that, it only seemed to make him angry and nasty."

"What did he say?"

"Not much," Mark answered wistfully. "He just said that he'd see to it that Rumson *didn't* fire him."

Mark strolled over to the window and looked off across the field. The Black Arrow was out on the runway and they were filling up her gas tanks. After that the mechanics strolled back to other duties leaving one man inside the lighted cockpit to warm up the engine. Each wing end was in shadow but now and again a human figure would pass around it, then disappear somewhere in the darkness behind the big hangar.

Mark went back and sat down with Arty until five minutes before eight o'clock. Then he announced that he would go out to his plane and prepare for a start.

The sky looked more bleak than ever and little flurries of snow whipped past his face as he stepped from the doorway. "Wouldn't be surprised to have a good snowstorm," he called back to Arty.

"Not tonight," Arty observed looking heavenward. "Plenty of wind, but no snow. Too cold. Wait till she warms up in a day or so."

"Let her come," Mark flung back and said, "Goodnight!"

Arty returned the salutation and gladly entered the cheerful warmth of his office where he sat peacefully down to await the arrival time of the Black Arrow from the Phoenix representative.

Hours passed. Midnight came and had gone when he began to feel uneasy. Not a flash had he got from Phoenix—nothing. He flashed on his own hook and waited.

The answer came back—"Black Arrow not arrived. Wait instructions."

He took up the phone with cold, moist hands and called his father's ranch.

CHAPTER XXII

LAUGHING AT AIR

Mark had glanced back over his shoulder when they were crossing over Dawson's Peak and saw that the Shadow 3-D had got a good start that night. She was not far behind and her lights gleamed defiantly at the Black Arrow's tail.

Mark chuckled and gave his motor the gun until they had left the Shadow so far in the rear that it was nothing more than its name implied. After that the Black Arrow climbed into an evil looking storm cloud and continued on her roaring way.

Mark had six passengers; four men, one middle-aged lady with a young girl, presumably her daughter. They were pleasant company, all chattering and participating in that give and take hospitality which the air affords. Mark couldn't refrain from keeping half his senses on the sound of the young girl's laughter. It was sweet and silvery of tone and he would have liked to listen to it, but for the fact that his air sense divined something not altogether right in the throbbing of his ship's pulse.

He glanced at the altimeter—nine thousand one hundred feet exactly. The wind was sweeping them north and northwest. No reason in the world for her to be showing resistance. The visibility, to be sure, was terrible. Snow banked the windshield and beat against the windows all around.

He throttled her down a little in order that he might listen better. To his alarm, one motor went completely dead. The girl was laughing more than ever back in the cabin. Mark struggled with all his mechanical ability but it was too apparent that a second motor was also silent.

He cut down the altitude a thousand feet. His only motor was missing the least bit. One of the men called out to him from the cabin that he should join them in a little community singing, at which the young girl laughed again.

Mark called back to go ahead and sing. He tried not to let fear creep into his voice and he evidently succeeded. Presently the merry voices of the passengers rang out again and it gave him a queer feeling of despair. He bucked up against it the next moment, however, and listened in vain for the motor to miss.

A few seconds passed and he decided to cut down another thousand feet. He knew he must still be over the mountains and kept as close a watch as he

was able. His heart sank once when he caught a gleam of white just under his headlights but it proved to be no more than a good-sized snow flurry.

The motor missed again after another minute and after a pause continued this action at intervals. Mark decided to face the thing for his company. He glanced back at his male passengers and picked out one of the older men, a man not much past forty, called him up into the cockpit.

“I’m running on one motor,” he explained to his passenger. “And it’s missing terribly. Hear it?”

The man admitted that he did hear it.

“Well,” said Mark as calmly as he could, “it means we’ll have to bail out—all of us. And pretty darn quick if I don’t see my way clear to make a good landing. What I want to ask you—are you willing I should take a chance and see what’s under us?”

The man hesitated. “I’ll ask ’em—they’re all a good bunch. No weaklings—not even that girl or her mother.”

“Hurry,” Mark pleaded.

The man turned back to him again. “Cut her down as much as you can. They all think it’s safer on such a night. We might land anywhere in ’chutes with this wind, eh?”

“Just what I was thinking,” said Mark and throttled his engine down.

A world of courage went with that action for Mark knew he was risking more than he cared to contemplate. But it was the lesser of two evils on such a night and he dared it with clenched teeth and hands gripped tight to his wheel.

“Some sporting bunch!” he thought of his passengers as they sat back in the cabin, silent and waiting. Only a swift glimpse he had of the girl but it was enough for him that her eyes were still smiling, even though her little mouth was drawn tight. The resolve to die game, was the way Mark thought of it.

He felt his way, swinging down rather than diving, and took heart when his altimeter showed up less than a thousand feet and all was still well. His passengers stood by his side looking on grimly. Mark pointed to the meter. Mark answered. “Watch out for me, sir, huh?”

“Would I say no!” the man answered pleasantly.

“Would I say no!” the man answered jokingly.

Presently the motor went completely dead. Mark said nothing and decided that he would have to trust to luck. There wasn’t a moment even in which to tell the passengers of this long chance.

They went into a nose dive, came out on an even keel and barely brushed the tips of some towering pines. Suddenly the plane seemed to flatten out, then swooped down under Mark’s blind intuition and with a

heart-rending thud they felt the wheels scrape over solid ground as it careened along like a drunken sailor. Slowly it came to a full stop.

Mark was still gripping the wheel and staring at his passenger when they heard the young girl burst into laughter. "You don't suppose we've been carried to Hawaii?" she called merrily.

Mark shook his blond head violently and his brown eyes twinkled. "Say," he said, "I wouldn't care if we've been carried to China as long as we're on terra firma."

"The more firmer the less terror!" shouted one man with nervous relief.

"I know an older joke than that, even," said another with a staccato laugh.

Mark was up and out through the fuselage door. He saw a lantern moving across the lighted space before and soon a man came into view, hailing him cheerfully.

"In trouble, stranger?" he asked from under his turned up coat collar.

"And how!" Mark exclaimed. "We just made it and that's all. I'm all out of gas and I don't know how it happened, that's a fact. They always fill me up for the full trip, but I've been stuck for sure this time."

"Reckon you need gas then, eh, young man?"

"Exactly," Mark answered. "But where are we?"

"Sillers," the man said. "Sillers, Utah, an' yuh ain't far from a good gas station neither, young man. Jes' walk out with me tuh the road afore them trees an' it's the highway. Jake Sillers' garage is right thar and he's a mos' accommodatin' feller. He allus did wanta chance tuh potter fuh a stranded aviator. Now he's got his chance. Come 'long with me, young man, I'll take yuh tuh Jake."

Mark was starting off when he heard the sound of his girl passenger's voice. He looked up to see her standing at the fuselage door.

"Mr. Pilot, you're lucky," she said smiling sweetly. "You're simply rolling in luck."

Mark grinned mischievously. "I'm just lucky in some things," he said enigmatically and continued to follow the obliging countryman. Then he called to her, "You'd be surprised to know how unlucky I am sometimes."

"Sometimes, how?" she asked with natural feminine curiosity.

Mark laughed. "That's for me to know and you to find out."

CHAPTER XXIII

STARTLING KNOWLEDGE

Arty got word of the safe arrival of the Black Arrow at Phoenix and her time was flashed at twelve-forty o'clock. It was a relief and at the same time, disappointing. The man hadn't thought to say what was the matter but that could wait until Mark's return, he decided as an afterthought.

It seemed a long wait under the circumstances and he was relieved when he heard the Black Arrow's motors roaring over the peak before four o'clock. Mark was trying to make up for lost time!

A few passengers hurried across the field and soon departed in taxis. Mark looked from the cockpit window toward the office and saw that Arty was waving to him from the door. It gave him an idea and he hurried out and over to the Inter-Mountain's main hangar where he summoned Joe, a mechanic.

"Yes, Gilmore?" the fellow asked.

"You were supposed to have charge of gassing up my bus, huh?" Mark asked.

"Sure, why, was that your trouble over Utah? Arty was telling some of us before down at Collins'."

"How much gas went in?"

"We were starting to put in the usual amount," the mechanic explained, "when your friend Benson came over and told us that you sent word only to put in quarter as much. He said you had had her filled up in Phoenix yesterday morning before you started."

Mark felt as if he had received a sharp blow. So Richie could do that to him! He couldn't believe it. "You certain about that, Joe?" he asked tremulously.

"As sure as I'm standin' on muh feet, Gilmore. Why—wasn't it so that you had her gassed up in Phoen..."

Mark put his hand over the fellow's mouth. "Sh! Don't say any more about it." He looked at the young man's face and felt confident. "Joe," he said hoarsely, "no matter who asks you, even if it's old man Aylesworth or Arty, tell them I've remembered that I told you to gas up only quarter the amount last night instead of the whole business—tell them you sort of misunderstood me because I was in a trance or something. It's my fault—see? I was just kind of dazed last night and forgot that I didn't gas up in Phoenix yesterday morning."

The mechanic's mouth opened in wide protest. "But, Gilmore, it's a shame tuh git in dutch with the mogul 'count of somebody...."

Mark interposed. "Somebody is *me*, Joe. Understand? It has to be for a very good reason. And, Joe, you look as if you'd understand this—there are some things, even some pretty rotten things, that a guy has to stand for a friend."

Joe looked at him admiringly and nodded. "I get yuh, bud. Take it from me though, yore white. Wouldn' be me tuh stand such a coyote's trick from *my* buddy!"

"I think you would if your buddy happened to be in the same circumstances. If I didn't think so, I wouldn't have told you this much. I have your word not to tell a soul? See?"

Joe held out his hand.

Mark grasped it and hurried over to the time office. Arty was amazed and not a little chagrined to hear him speak so calmly of what was manifestly gross negligence.

"It doesn't sound like you somehow, Red," he said quietly, when Mark had finished. "I can't believe you could forget that you hadn't gassed up. No sir."

"Well, it's so," Mark protested. "I suppose I'll never hear the end of it from your father."

"Naturally, he won't take it calmly when he thinks how close you came with those six passengers of his. You don't know what I went through too, Red, thinking the worst, of course. And mostly I was thinking and worrying about you, if you want to know! Then you come in here as if it wasn't any more than a social call that you made at Sillers, Utah."

"I did have a nice social chat with Jake Sillers while we were gassing up," Mark said quizzically.

Arty looked down in his time book, apparently disgusted. "You make me good and sore and sick, Red."



“SH! DON’T SAY ANY MORE ABOUT IT.”

“I landed safely, didn’t I?” Mark returned a trifle impatiently. “Every passenger was accounted for at Phoenix. There was a girl by the name of Robin Dale. Pretty name for a girl, huh? Pretty as a picture and game as they come. She laughs as sweet as her namesake sings. But the main thing, she

and her mother are returning from Phoenix in a few days and they're going to come back with me. Nice, huh? Kind of a way of showing what faith they have in my...."

"Luck," Arty interposed sarcastically. "You know that's all it was, Red. Nothing more. We all look alike to Death with empty gas tanks and don't try and kid me about it either! But I wish you'd get sense about this business. I'm just good and scared if you act so flip about it when you tell dad tonight."

Mark swallowed hard. "I told you I couldn't help it! Is there anything so flip about saying that? If you ask me, I'm the one who should be sick and sore. I had a nice little time trying to dope out what was best to do and whether or not it was luck, it was darn hard on the nerves. But I'm willing to take the punishment so I don't know what else I can do to square myself."

"I know there's nothing much can be done," said Arty earnestly. "It'll just be a lesson to you not to ever be so forgetful again."

"Oh, all right," Mark said with some show of irritation. "I'm not some school kid you're talking to, you know. A fellow doesn't like his mistakes rubbed in the second time. Once is to remember and twice is to get mad and that's what I'll be in a minute."

Arty's chubby face drew up in a frown. "If you feel that way about it, all right. I didn't think I was rubbing it in, but as long as you say so, I'm just sorry."

Mark's face was like stone. "Want to have some breakfast?"

"No. Dad will expect me home with an account of you. I'll eat breakfast there."

Mark nodded and without another word left the office. He stumbled along the edge of the field toward the lunch wagon and as he drew near he looked closely at the Dawson-Inland runway. The Shadow 3-D had not come in yet. He looked at his watch and saw that it was five minutes past four. Richie was due. Would he be late? And when he did come, what then? They must talk the thing out, of course, and see if there wasn't some terrible mistake after all. Joe's mistake, perhaps?—But Mark knew whose deliberate mistake it was.

The leaden weight of his heart told him.

CHAPTER XXIV

BROAD SHOULDERS

Mark waited in the sullen gloom beside the lunch wagon until the two passengers of the Shadow 3-D drifted off with their baggage across the field. Then he hurried across and came face to face with Richie at the fuselage door.

He gave the appearance at once of going into a mental heap as Mark stared accusingly. His face turned ashen and he stumbled down to the ground.

“Well,” said Mark, “here I am, Rich. Did you expect me to crack up so easily?”

Richie’s hand trembled as he touched Mark’s arm. “Mark—er, you see, they—well, it was this way. I just kind of got sore—see? You kind of played me mean, you got to admit, after you promised. I just got wild to make you come down off your high horse a bit so I thought....”

“That you’d dispose of me in the simplest manner possible,” Mark interposed sarcastically. “Not only *me*, but *six* passengers and one of ’em a darn pretty, sweet girl by the name of Ro ... anyway, you don’t know how close you came to deliberately murdering all those people. Do you know it? *Rich*, what were you thinking of!”

Richie looked at his friend appealingly. “Mark, I never would have—have, I mean I just got the devil in me, I suppose, and I didn’t think of the consequences. All I thought was that I’d delay you and show you up. I never thought you’d have trouble or anything—I swear I didn’t! I said to myself how you are always lucky in landing. You know how I always said that, don’t you, Mark? Remember in our stude days when you were trying out a quick landing and you just missed the swamp? I told ma then that I bet you could float in quicksand.”

“Well,” Mark said gruffly, “I dare say you wouldn’t want to tell your mother what a hand you played in my quick landing tonight, would you, Rich?”

Benson gulped. “I’ve cracked up a hundred times since I told Joe to put in a quarter of your usual gas. Honest, Red, I wouldn’t go through it again for anything! It’s been a night I won’t forget!”

Mark had expected to feel a loathing for this false friend who might have caused his death. But instead, a tenderness welled up in him and he readily forgave the rash impulse that had prompted Richie’s act.

“It’ll take me a long time to get over it, but the worst of my feeling is gone,” he said. “I just pity you, sort of. But it’s past. Just don’t let’s talk about it again, ever, huh?”

Richie was more than agreeable to that. His face looked haggard and worn, and it was easy to see that he had told the truth in saying how much he had suffered. Mark took his arm and they strolled together around the plane and then across the field.

“Want some breakfast, Rich?” Mark asked kindly.

“You can bet I do. I couldn’t touch anything in Phoenix. I purposely stayed where I couldn’t hear or see what came in the field. I didn’t even look for your crate, that’s the state I was in.” Richie looked up suddenly. “But you came in before time anyway, didn’t you?”

“Seven minutes, that’s all.”

Richie’s face fell. “It’s enough to have to go through another scene with Rumson. That’s partly what’s getting on my nerves.”

“You can still quit,” Mark reminded him gently. “If you don’t you’re a fool! Now, how about breakfast?”

“Soon’s as I report in the office. I’ll try and get out in less than fifteen minutes this time. Then we’ll talk.”

Mark watched him walk toward Rumson’s rickety building, and after he disappeared within its dusty doorway, hurried around two of the Dawson-Inland hangars and up to the lunch wagon.

Mr. Collins’ helper was again on duty and Mark was genuinely glad. The proprietor would not have suited his mood at all and probably would have had the effect of tearing down what little faith his short conversation with Richie had built up. Mark was indeed out of tune with the world that morning. To have one’s best friend turn would-be assassin and one’s next best friend show his impatience and disgust, when one was trying to do his very best.

He shivered and ordered some flapjacks and coffee. “Orange juice, first,” he said, on second thought. “It’ll take a little time to make it up, huh?”

“A little,” the clerk answered brightly.

“Well, take your time because I’m not in a hurry. I want to wait and have my friend eat with me.”

He sat and chatted with the young fellow and after five minutes his orange juice was gone. He ordered another and disposed of it in five minutes more. Then he ordered his flapjacks and strolled up and down the wagon until he centered his attention upon two of the mechanics who were just then running the Shadow 3-D back into its hangar.

A few seconds later, the sound of another plane could be heard. Mark could barely see it as they ran it up to the far end of the runway where it was

difficult to distinguish between shadows and objects. After a moment, however, he thought he saw the long, swinging strides of men as they crossed the field toward the waiting ship.

Just then Regan, Rumson's watchman and general office man, hobbled into the wagon. He touched his peaked cap respectfully and looked at Mark.

"Young Benson sent me to tell you he can't join you," said the man. "The boss has an errand or something for him, I guess, and he said he'd see you before tonight, if he could. Sometime tonight," he repeated, rather bewildered, and hobbled out of the wagon as painfully as he had come.

A moment later, Mark heard the whirring of the plane and soon it was lost in the distance. "That doesn't happen to be a passenger ship, does it?" he asked.

"Oh, no," said the young man, rather eager to talk, "that's Mr. Rumson's plane, Mr. Gilmore. It's a small cabin kind, Mr. Collins told me, and that's the only way he travels. Yessir!"

"Oh yes?" Mark asked interested. "Collins tell you anything else—just between you and me, I mean?"

The young man's eyes narrowed. "I ain't got no likin' for Mr. Collins, and I don't mind tellin'," he whispered. "I'm here today and in Chicago tomorrow maybe, so Collins can go hang, hah? I know one thing, he's afraid of this mystery bloke Rumson."

"*Collins?*"

"Yessir! He shakes all over like when he even hears the name. And the other night, he tells me in one of them secret minutes folks have, that Rumson sneaks out of here in that plane early mornin's like this because he don't want nobody to see or know his business."

Mark sat down on his stool again and putting both elbows on the counter cupped his chin in his hands. "Collins didn't happen to mention, by any good luck, where Rumson hangs out between dawn and night, did he?"

"No, Mr. Gilmore, he didn't 'ceptin he said he kinda thought the old man pounded his ear in Utah, long back in some mountain ranch. A body can't tell 'bout such men like Rumson, hah?"

"Seems not," Mark admitted baffled. "But it's something to know what time he sneaks off from this airport every morning. Kind of gives me a hunch. Nothing very definite, just sort of an idea."

"Glad to be of service, Gilmore. I got my suspicions o' this outfit same's you, and I thinks to myself that Rumson can't come to no good end 'bout this airline business. Seems to me there's somethin' too sneaky 'bout it. Like one morning a week or so back, I wuz comin' tuh work late. Rumson wuz goin' home early, so Collins was tellin' me, and I got a quick look at him and that Bailey fellah, and they wuz carrying the biggest and funniest

lookin' bundle I ever saw. Collins wouldn't let me get close enough tuh see real good, but I saw somethin' an' I had my s'picions it wasn't within the law whatever it wuz. They wuz hurryin' tuh the plane too fast. Yessir!"

"Hmph," said Mark thoughtfully. And after another moment's contemplation he uttered another, "Hmph!"

CHAPTER XXV

LETTER

Mark walked slowly home, feeling lonely, and terribly tired. Doubts assailed him—doubt of Richie, doubt of his own job and doubt of the brotherhood of man in the bargain. Nothing seemed right—all seemed wrong. It afforded him keen pleasure, then, to find a lengthy letter from his mother and father on Mrs. Jenkins' table.

To make the reading of it doubly delightful, he waited until he got in bed and perused it slowly in the soft light of his bed lamp. Little by little he was transported by the cheery gossip, back to his own native hearth in Kent's Falls, New York. In every line he could see the people he had known all his life, hear their cheery voices and their heartening laughs. He told himself he was not homesick, yet he knew he could go at his job much better that night if he could just hear one word of encouragement from someone who really cared about him and not about what he could do.

That was what was the trouble, he told himself looking up from the letter. Old Aylesworth and even Arty looked upon him as a sort of machine. They expected him to function just as any fine piece of mechanism should and it was manifest that with their high-powered efficiency a pilot's miss was as good as a mile. And as it was only the beginning of his association with such demanding people he feared and even dismissed the thought of how it would end.

He looked down again at some lines from his father which rambled on: "Glad to hear Richie's accident in the river was not worse ... a Godsend that you went after him. I'm proud of you, my son.... Mrs. Benson says she's eternally grateful for your heroic deed and subsequent consideration of him. Keep it up, son, no matter how odd and ungrateful the lad is. Some day he'll come to with both eyes open ... didn't mention this part to his mother of course ... she's got lots to worry her. Two years now since Benson Sr. died and his debts keep coming back like ghosts of a mismanaged past. I learned from authentic sources that she's about ten thousand in her husband's debts. She'd die rather than have us know, but I pray for the chance to pay back our old debt somehow...."

Mark looked up and whistled. So Richie did need that fat salary of Rumson's! But he had denied that he needed it for his mother's sake. There were the Bensons for you—proud as Dick's hatband, as Mrs. Benson once said of herself. And it was the truth.

The concluding lines interested Mark also. "I'm always having to take back what I say," his father had written, "and my opinion of your present job is probably another retraction that I'll have to make sooner or later ... seems to me it's pretty strenuous and not much time for your pet adventures."

Mark laughed aloud. "Hardly my pet ones," he murmured, "but adventures just the same. Yes, come to think of it, I've had a few ticklish situations to get out of already."

"Look out for fancy salaries, son ... I'm alluding to Rich's job with this Rumson man,"

Mr. Gilmore had scrawled near the end of the page. "It'll come to grief, mind you, so for Mrs. B's sake be on hand to get her son together when he's ready to go to pieces. That's all except that we miss you and want to tell you that there's talk in the papers of a flying school contemplated somewhere near here ... that means they'll be looking for instructors. Just a suggestion in case that speed-record fiend Aylesworth begins to pall ... Your loving father and mother..."

Mark looked up and his eyes were a trifle dimmed when he turned out the light. He glanced out at a grim looking dawn streaking the horizon with lead colored light. Parents thought only of their children's happiness and good, he was telling himself. He had had quite a nerve-wracking night of it, but sleep would fix him ... if Richie would only come to his senses before things *did* get worse....

CHAPTER XXVI

MOONLIGHT

Mark's interview with the senior Aylesworth early that evening left their relations somewhat strained. Arty, being present, added confusion and more or less constraint by trying earnestly to present Mark's offence as negligence which most young fellows were likely to have happen once in a while!

Mr. Aylesworth contended that he wasn't running his airways for negligent young fellows. After that his jaw snapped down and he gave Mark a curt nod which seemed to say that he would not accord him another such audience but that further remissness would bring dismissal.

Mark felt not a little embarrassed when he and Arty were alone together. In point of fact, he had never been so taken to task except by his father and a smoldering resentment found root in this thought. He was sick and tired of the eternal Aylesworth efficiency and did not hesitate to say so to his astonished friend. It did not occur to him somehow that the Aylesworth interests had just cause to complain of the night's near-tragedy. They could not know that the guilty Richie was hiding behind Mark's slim shoulders. Neither could they know what sentiment had prompted this sacrifice of merit.

As the fit of temperament quickly passed and gave way to his usual good nature, Mark bethought himself of his father's letter, and decided not to be such a fool. If he lost this job so quickly he'd never hear the end of it. A week at any job was a poor recommendation for the employee. He'd keep his head at all costs and show his parents that the flying school could wait until he had had his fill of Inter-Mountain and threw up the job himself. He would not be fired if he had anything to do with it and ended by telling Arty so.

Nothing could have pleased Arty better. He had a real affection for Mark and it hurt him to be held responsible for his father's adamant views. "And I disagree with dad about a lot of things, Red," he said after they had talked over the matter. "Of course I upheld him about last night because lives were at stake, including your own. But as far as his hammering away at pre-schedule and the like, I'm getting fed up on it too. I've tried to suggest that he bring his mail contract bid down lower than Rumson and he'd get it without a wink. But d'ye think he'd do that? Not on your life. He's that hard. No, he'd rather fly his pilots ragged making new records so's to get it on merit rather than price. Sufferin' cats, I'm not so tickled, Red, take it from

me. I respect and love my father, but I'd rather be digging ditches than falling asleep in my father's time office every doggone night. Or a professional 'chute jumper. That'd suit me."

Mark laughed. "Well, anyway, I'll say you're not one of these ginks that wants to grab a soft job right off the bat. You're willing to sail right on up from the bottom or come down from the top. Nothing mean about you, Art, and that's a fact."

They shook hands on the strength of that and Mark strolled off to his plane.

Arty called after him, "Make sure nobody's cheating you out of your gas tonight, Red, huh?"

"Boy, I should say. This little pilot's looking after his own gas from now on and not leaving it to mechanics or anybody else."

"Atta boy," Arty called back, then withdrew into the lighted office.

Mark felt strangely alone after the door had shut. In order to not indulge in any of his depressing hunches he hurried over into the brilliantly lighted field where the Black Arrow was already vibrating with her motors tuning up. She stood like some quivering night bird ready for flight and her gleaming wing spread gave her a truly noble appearance.

He looked at her for a moment with the airman's approving eye, then noticed by his watch that time was almost up. Two minutes to go and he had only three passengers. People didn't care much to travel on these cold, windy nights, Arty had told him. He didn't see why—there was nothing so thrilling as to battle the elements on a terrible night. One came back from a journey with the feeling of being a victor in its fullest sense. To make the air submit to one's wishes, there was the real joy of flying!

He climbed into the cockpit and relieved the mechanic. He felt sure of himself that night and experienced a keen enjoyment in knowing that he was master of the big sturdy plane. She had been so game the night before and had brought them so safely out of the storm clouds and darkness that he felt she was a staunch friend.

At eight o'clock he was once more headed for Dawson's Peak. A bleak and feeble moon cast its sickly rays over the snow-capped summit. A few stars glittered here and there shedding their glinting lights over the tips of giant forests. Mark flew over them and gained but a slight altitude.

He had no desire to go higher on a night with moderate winds. Besides the mountains looked like a poem in the thin moonlight. Mile after mile of proud forest—the trees lifting skyward and swaying in the moaning winds with a majestic grace. On the higher levels of the mighty range he could see, here and there, the plodding forms of mountain sheep and goats. Once above the timberline the moving bulk of a white goat attracted his attention. All

else was serene and for a moment Mark felt that he would like to be roving down in the piney fastnesses with no “record” to think about.

But the soft sibilance of his motors brought him back to his first and only love and he smiled as he throttled her down in crossing above New Mexico. Bleak Valley lay below, bleak enough, he thought, as he saw it in a greenish hue under the moon.

His thought of the night when he had made his escape from that barn-like house and had been picked up by Jake. Mark wondered if he could ever again find the place. After all, he knew nothing of the location—he hadn’t even seen the house except at the back. He had surmised ever since that he had backtracked from the house. Else why had he surprised Louis on the road when he was escaping with Jake? It proved that the place couldn’t be a considerable distance from the road. But wherever it was, he was certain that no one knew save the mysterious occupants themselves.

Mark put his ship in a little dive hoping to get a clearer view of the vast mountain wilderness. It was the first night that he could really do so and he enjoyed the change of looking ahead and seeing nothing but a maze of swirling storm clouds and the black vault of heaven.

There was a decided break in the mountains below just at that point. To the south lay a small peaceful valley dotted with the forms of sheep. Beyond a vast clearing spread out under the skies, was a ranch and in the wavering light Mark could see a huge crescent painted on the roofs of the four main buildings. The largest building, which he judged to be the ranch house itself, was situated exactly in the center of the group.

It came to him in a flash. Kelley’s Silver Crescent Ranch! Bleak Valley—Jake! The words fitted together perfectly. Was the foreman about anywhere? A bevy of lights shone about the place and he was certain as he looked that he could see a person or persons moving about in a corral.

In any event, he decided on a lark. If Jake was watching he’d understand and if he wasn’t he’d probably understand when he was told about it. And so, with a pleased chuckle, Mark released a flare, put the ship in an outside loop and came out on an even keel in such a swoop that he could not even see the Silver Crescent over the tree tops. He was already past it by a half mile.

And so, without any further desire for adventure, Mark pointed the Black Arrow’s nose southwest.

CHAPTER XXVII

A SHADOW VISIT

Mark spent his layover time in Phoenix that night. He was stretched out in the cabin, luxuriously resting, with his long legs propped under his chin and his feet resting on the seat opposite. Three-quarters of an hour still lay between him and the hour of his start on the return trip. He'd have plenty of time to hunt up Richie and kill time talking.

And so on the impulse of the moment, he laid down his book and was soon out of the fuselage door. To his surprise, a mechanic accosted him.

"Gilmore!" he called hurrying up to the ship.

"Yes!"

"Benson of the Shadow 3-D told me to drop you the word that he'd like your company."

"Swell," Mark said enthusiastically. He looked back at his ship and decided she'd be as safe as a child. "Passengers won't start arriving for twenty or twenty-five minutes yet," he assured himself.

He hurried down past the tail and all but collided with a figure whose chin was sunk under an upturned collar. The man said nothing, did not even look up, but hurried on, evidently on his way to some definite point beyond the Black Arrow.

Mark waited only long enough to see that the stranger was already past the ship's nose. Everything was safe he decided and time was flying. He felt a need to talk to Richie. Especially since getting the letter from home.

Richie was awaiting him eagerly. "I thought I'd send for you, Mark," he explained, "because I wasn't sure what time Bailey would come back and I never know what I'll be wanted for next."

"Bailey come down with you tonight?" Mark asked, making himself at home in the dusty disarrangement of the Shadow 3-D's cabin.

Richie frowned. "Yeah, and I don't like the idea of them snoopin' at my heels like this. I can't do a thing when I come down. Bailey's always wanting something done himself. Gee, I get sick of it."

"Bet you do," said Mark sympathetically. "Never mind. Better luck next time. Where do you suppose he is?"

"Wandering around here for exercise," Richie grunted disgustedly. "That's the deal I get! Well, I'll fix 'em."

"Where'd they carry you this morning that was so important, huh Rich?"

"Regan tell you all right that I couldn't have breakfast with you?"

“Sure. That was all right. I’d have liked having you though. Kind of gets lonesome to eat alone, you know it?”

“Ask me! Say, I’ll tell you something about being lonesome.”

Mark lighted a cigarette and watched the glowing end grow a moment. “Where’d you go in Rumson’s plane this morning, Rich? To his house?”

Mark did not let his eyes stray from the cigarette, but still he could feel Richie hesitate. “Where’d you go, huh?”

“Why, I don’t know what you’re talking about, Mark, honest,” he answered.

“Mm—honest?”

Richie colored. “How do you know about this plane business?”

“Little birdie told me,” Mark answered with a laugh. “Never mind—it’s enough that I know. Did you sleep there too? Oh come on, Rich. Tell a guy.”

Richie looked around, actually frightened. “Mark, I’d tell you if I wasn’t expecting that sneak Bailey. He’d blow in maybe just when I was telling you something important. But I’ll tell you—I promise you that!”

“That’s something to look forward to, then,” Mark laughed. “You know, Richie, I’ve had a dozen theories about this outfit but not one real clue.”

“But keep them under your hat, Mark, do you hear?”

“Absolutely. The trouble is I so seldom wear a hat. Never mind, Rich, I’ll keep lots under cover for you.”

Richie glanced out through the nearest window. “You’ll have to keep lots under cover for me, Mark, or there’s no telling what Rumson or Bailey’d do. Especially Bailey. He seems to have a lot of talk and a lot of muscle. Can’t ever tell when he’s going to sneak....”

The door opened, admitting Mr. Bailey. His narrow eyes seemed to sweep the entire cabin in that instant. Then he smiled and clambered up puffing under the weight of his rotund body.

“Hmph, see *you’re* here, Gilmore, eh? The Black Arrow down below?”

“She was when I left her there,” Mark answered. “One dandy ship that little lady is.”

Mr. Bailey divested himself of his big overcoat and smile. “Yes, I hear great things about her,” he said eyeing Mark narrowly. “But I guess that when it comes to walking off with the mail contract, the Shadow 3-D will do it.”

“Walk off? I rather think she could. From her record I think she’s a beautiful walker.”

“Cut out the wise cracking, Gilmore,” said Bailey, taking one of the cabin seats and lighting a cigar. He frowned fiercely at Mark.

“You don’t know anythin’ ’bout this Aylesworth, do you?”

“No more than I could swear that he’s honest,” Mark said loyally. “He’s severe and efficient, but honest for all that.”

The gleam in Bailey’s eye was far from being kindly. “You seem to know a lot about him, eh?”

“Oh yes. I ought to. He’s bawled me out twice.” Mark got up and stretched his legs. “Well, I’ll have to toddle along and get the Arrow off. That name ought to bring Aylesworth luck. Gosh, how you people ever named your ships, Shadows, is beyond me. It was enough to fasten the jinx on them right then and there. Absolutely!”

“Oh yeah?” Bailey asked sardonically. “You think so, eh? Well, maybe the jinx is already broken if there ever was any. Our ships ain’t showin’ up bad lately and maybe sometime the Black Arrow’ll be surprised to find a shadow swingin’ way ahead, eh? And maybe it won’t be the kind of a shadow you think—it’ll be a real Shadow 3-D of the Dawson-Inland Airlines, see?”

“I hear but I don’t see, Mr. Bailey,” Mark corrected. “Your error, and my surprise—when I see the Shadow 3-D. How’ll I be able to tell her, by her knocks or what? Or maybe she gives one long whistle and two short ones, huh? Anyway as they say in China—I’ll be seeing you—maybe! Toodle-oo.”

Mark caught a glimpse of Richie’s face as he went out and saw that his eyes were smiling. Bailey, however, glared after him, tight-lipped and grim.

CHAPTER XXVIII

FOUL PLAY

Mark started with a full cabin, the first full passenger list he had thus far carried. He looked forward to the company's receipt of this good news and hoped that it would entirely square him with the senior Aylesworth. Arty, he knew, would be glad to hear of the delicious digs that Bailey had been given. First and last, he had seen worse days than the one now starting.

The moon had long since disappeared and a thin mist covered everything. His wind was good, however, and he'd trust to luck not to let any fog conquer him after he'd got through the gales of the past few days. He was scrutinizing his dash-board closely when his eye fell on the oil gauge. The hand had fallen over to zero.

Mark felt his heart freeze within him. The laughing and chattering of his passengers only served to deepen this fear. Luck was against him. There was only one thing he could do and that was to land immediately. He shouted his intention until the cabin rang with the echoes.

There were immediate murmurs, some of protest, some of impatience and some even of anger. One man must make connections with Chicago, another man for Seattle and another had to be at a funeral by early morning in Helena.

"Can't help it," Mark protested. "I'm certainly not anxious to spoil my own record any more than you want to be delayed."

"Will we have to use our parachutes?" asked a finicky old lady. "I had a premonition I shouldn't come by airplane tonight," she repeated to her neighbor. "Whenever I dream of my late mother-in-law, there's sure to be trouble. And I dreamed of my dead cousin last night too, and that's a bad sign."

"I thought this Inter-Mountain Airways was the hotsey-totsey line this side of the Rockies!" another man sneered. "Say, what you people trying to pull on a busy man that has to make Chicago for an important deal? It's the bologna—I'd ride a donkey before I'd ever ride this half-baked line again that has planes always going on the bunk."

"Sure," said another. "Didn't they almost have a crack up with this the other night? Why, sure. It was in the papers. This clam of a pilot tells the passengers after they're almost killed that he forgot to put all the gas in that he should, so just account of a little mistake like that they git caught with dead motors in a nice breeze over these sweet little hills. Just by luck he

made a good landin' and gits some gas from a nearby garage. Honest, I think we ought to ask him if his papa knows he's out driving a big, nasty plane, hah? Maybe he made a mistake about his license—maybe it was for bicycle ridin' instead of airplanes—ha, ha!”

“Maybe some of you would sound less like fools if you knew exactly what you were talking about,” Mark hissed, livid with anger. “I’m here to see that I land you safely and I’m not taking any chances. Perhaps you that talk so much will be disappointed to know that I can see the little town of Dorner, Arizona, directly below, and we’ll land there safely and get immediate aid.”

He was shaking with emotion. It seemed such an unjust sequel to his efforts, this being made to stand for the ridicule of a few ignorant salesmen. He glanced anxiously at the oil gauge indicator repeatedly, hoping that perhaps it would right itself. But it didn’t and Mark brought the ship down with sinking spirits. After all, the passengers would lose only such time as it took for him to find a mechanic to get the oil working properly. But as for himself ... Aylesworth would declare that it was his fault when in reality it wasn’t. Mark was too good an airman not to see that his gauge was working properly when they left the Phoenix field. But who would believe that?

To make matters worse, the old lady of the premonition didn’t keep to her seat as Mark warned her to do, and as they slid over the hubbly field at Dorner, she stood half up to look and was thrown backward against the metal of the seat frame. The impact broke one of her ribs and she was taken to the hospital, really disappointed, Mark thought, that it wasn’t a much more serious injury.

With that over, Mark left his passengers up in arms, to trudge a mile in search of a mechanic. He came back weary and thoroughly disappointed. The mechanic had allowed him to call Arty at Dawson and their conversation was “the straw that broke the camel’s back.” Mark always likened it to that. Mr. Aylesworth had left word that the pilot of the Black Arrow did not need to give his services to Inter-Mountain any longer.

It left Mark listless and apathetic and had it not been for his clamoring, impatient passengers, he felt that he would have liked to lay everything down and go to sleep.

His energy belied that idea, however, for he helped the mechanic to hunt the cause of the oil’s not pumping. After a dreary half-hour, the workman declared that it was pumping and pumping perfectly, whereupon he sat down and scratched his head.

Mark went back into the cockpit, disgusted. Nervously, despairingly he ran his hand back and forth over the dash-board, then under it. Suddenly he called to the mechanic.

“Find something?” the man asked.

“Feel,” Mark answered and pointed to the narrow tubing under the board.

The mechanic examined it a moment, then looked up at Mark, puzzled. “Somebody done that deliberate,” he informed him. “The little nut there what holds the indicator in place has been unscrewed between the tubin’ an’ the indicator. Thar wuz nothin’ wrong with the oil like I said. She was pumpin’ perfect. Anyhow, it’s good you felt that or we’d have been huntin’ all day.”

“You mean to tell me there was really nothin’ wrong?” the irate salesman from Chicago demanded.

“Accordin’ tuh that dead oil gauge indicator, thar wuz plenty wrong. This pilot did what any good pilot’d do under the circumstances and come down for he wouldn’t know what it would mean. But somebody’s fooled him a’ purpose by unscrewin’ that nut so’s the indicator would fall to zero when the plane got up in the air and started joltin’. Jes’ enough they unscrewed it so’s it wouldn’ happen till yuh got in th’ air. They knowed it would bring you down, pronto.”

A chorus of ohs and mm’s escaped the passengers. They were all apologizing to Mark for their impatience—all except the big salesman from Chicago.

“So do we go now?” he asked in a booming voice.

Mark looked around at him and quirked his mouth significantly. “Brother,” he said vehemently, “we’re going and we’re going as you never went before in your life. And for the wise cracking gentleman who wanted to know whether I’ve a license for riding a bicycle—he may be pleased to hear I have. I got it when I was fifteen years old. Two years ago I got my pilot’s license, but I owe it all to the bicycle—see?”

The mechanic had screwed the nut tightly in place and assured Mark that nothing but a human hand behind a wrench could unloosen that again. “An’ that’s what did it before, bud. Think you got enemies?”

Mark grinned. “I’m beginning to think I have. There’s every indication of it, isn’t there?”

The man agreed that there was. “Any folks you know what’re jealous and would want to get you down?”

“Yes,” Mark answered and his eyes flashed fire, “I’ve got a pretty good idea who would want to get me down. In fact, I’m certain of it.”

CHAPTER XXIX

DEPARTURE

Mark hadn't much heart to talk to Arty. In point of fact, he tried his best to avoid him and had about succeeded when he all but collided with him as he was entering the hangar to board his own plane.

Arty stood with one shoulder propped against the fuselage. "Been waiting for you, Red. Thought this is where I'd be bound to see you."

"I'm sorry, Art—I really am," Mark said, opening the door and throwing his baggage into the trim little cabin of the Kent D-2.

"Mrs. Jenkins's sorry too, I bet," Arty said irrelevantly.

"Sure, I'm sorry myself. It doesn't make me feel any too good to have a man fire me like your father's done without giving me a chance to explain."

"Well," said Arty with a pathetic eagerness, "did you tell him that the oil gauge business was something beyond your comprehension?"

"It's beyond his to understand," Mark said quietly. "No sarcasm meant, Art, but I can't understand your father. He wants a mechanical doll, not a flesh and blood pilot. Oh, I heard that Joe spilled the beans about Richie doing the gas trick the other night. And right away, he decided that I was certainly working hand in hand with Richie for the Rumson interests. Well, listen, Art, if that's the kind of a suspicious mind your father carries around, I'm glad I know it now. I wouldn't want to have had my head worried off by getting too deep in the job and then having to quit. But as it turns out I'm glad to know in time."

"Joe spilled the beans because he thought he'd show how good you were on account of the other night. He just wanted dad to see you weren't guilty so's that he'd be more lenient about today."

"Oh it's all right, Art. Everything's all right. I haven't a thing against anybody. Not even the gink that helped me lose my job today. You see, I realize now that after all it wasn't done to me so much as to your father's plane. So don't blame me for not wanting to work for a man who's so disliked by his competitors. My gosh, there's something to be said for Rumson and Bailey."

"Don't be too bitter, Red!" Arty pleaded. "After all my father's just as he is and he thinks he's right. Gee whiz, I'd do anything if I could."

"But you can't and I know you can't," Mark said, giving his friend a pat on the shoulder. "And don't worry about it, Art. Your father was white enough to give me the best of the bargain, so I'm not broke by a long shot."

Now I'm going to see the country in my little crate and I'll see it the long way around. I just hate awful to leave Richie, but he said he was bound to Rumson and couldn't break his contract."

"Didn't know he had one," Arty mused.

"Neither did I. Still, he says he has, and Rumson wants the mail contract. In a way, I hope he gets it. If things had been different and I was given a chance to know I had enemies keeping me back on my record, I'd have done *anything* to help your father get it. Boy, I was all settled about keeping my job. But what's the use!"

"Where you going to stop first, Red?"

Mark chuckled. "I don't know, Art, but I kind of had an idea that I'd stop and pay Jake a little call over at Kelley's Silver Crescent Ranch in Bleak Hills. Know where it is?"

Arty nodded. "I've seen the silver crescents on the roofs when I passed lots of times. Never knew what the place was called though."

"Well, I told you about Jake and how kind he was to me that night," Mark explained. "Just for the fun of it I think I'll stop and make that call. Guess I'll run this bus out of here now."

"Then it's goodbye," said Arty wistfully.

Mark reached out and ruffled his hair. "It is *not* goodbye. Think I'm that kind of a friend? Well, you're crazy, if you do. Listen, Art—I'm not putting you up to tricks or even suggesting you leave the comfortable parental roof, but in case you ever get the urge and want to see me, just wire that you're coming."

Arty's face brightened. "And not that I'm hinting of leaving my parental roof or anything like that, Red, but you can never tell when I'll get the urge. You're absolutely right about that."

"Then I'll be seeing you, huh Arty?" Mark held out his hand.

They clasped hands warmly. Arty laughed. "So if I don't see you here, I'll see you there, huh?"

Mark nodded and a few minutes later when he was guiding the Kent D-2 out of the runway, Arty saw that he was still smiling.

CHAPTER XXX

SILVER CRESCENT

Mark got a much clearer view of Kelley's Silver Crescent Ranch in the broad daylight. Its wide comfortable looking buildings and vast pasture land invited the socially-inclined airman. Rest and peace from speed records seemed to be a thing assured as he inspected the fertile looking place from above.

He swung his trim plane out over the mountains and back to the ranch, making a wide circle. In a flash there were figures moving below, as he hoped there would be. Satisfied with that, he throttled down his motor and came down with each spiral. Then over the field next to the main ranch house he gauged his distance and made a perfect landing.

A bevy of cowboys applauded his efforts and shouted vigorously as he came sauntering from his fuselage door. And then he caught sight of Jake.

"Wa'al," said the foreman with his big hand extended in true western hospitality. "Guess it's muh aviatuh boy, Gilmore, eh?"

"No other," Mark answered smiling. "Just stopped in to make a little call, Jake. I just lost my job with the Inter-Mountain people and I'm going to circle the country in my little bus. Thought I'd at least say hello and goodbye."

"Reckon yuh might's wa'al git used tuh the hello part fust, Gilmore," Jake smiled. "Wa'al, this is mighty nice—we'll go t' the bunk house an' kinda talk, eh? Kelley an' his folks went south, so's me an' th' boys have nothin' tuh do but keep watch out fuh the cattle n' sheep."

"Then what do you do the rest of the time?" Mark grinned when they had made him at home in the bunk house.

"Wonder who's sneakin' off our sheep an' cattle occasional," Jake answered seriously. "Say, Gilmore, maybe it's what folks call one o' them good omens that you come, eh? Fuh years now we been mos' puzzled tuh death with rustlers. Never kin git track o' em. Thar's so many ways in these heah foothills of havin' yuh camp outa sight that a body can't find 'em. That's what we jedge these rustlers have—a hideaway camp, yessir! Thar clever ones whoever they be. Jes' occasional it happens like I said, but fuh so many years I jes' made up my mind we hev tuh find 'em somehow. An' now that yuh come, we kin do it!"

"I'm crazy to be of service to you boys," Mark said genially, "but how can I help you with cattle and sheep rustlers?"

“By takin’ one o’ us in yore plane so’s we kin git a look on these here hills from the sky. Folks does say thar’s a sho way of findin’ a camp no matter how well it’s hid.”

“And that’s right, Jake,” Mark agreed. “You can find even the most hidden trails in a certain light and of course, at a certain time of day. I’ll be glad to help you. My time’s my own for a little while, so bring on the rustlers, huh?”

They all laughed as Jake nodded. “Yore welcome tuh our bed an’ board all winter, son, if yuh’ll spin us aroun’ till we find them critters.”

Mark laughed. “Well, I won’t be able to stay with you all winter, Jake, many thanks just the same. But I *will* stay with you for a little while. You see I have a friend who’s working for the Dawson-Inland people. I want to be where I can be of help to him if he needs it. He’s going to quit in a month or so, then we’ll both go home together. He doesn’t know I’m here, of course, and I don’t think I’ll tell him for a while. He’s one of those kids that doesn’t like to be tagged and you can’t blame him.”

Murmurs went about the room that bespoke agreement. Jake nodded his head thoughtfully. “Yuh got home yoreself that night, I reckon? Guess I crippled that stranger’s tires some, eh?”

“He was the fellow who was in that house I was kidnapped to, Jake,” Mark explained. “I didn’t have a chance to tell you that story, did I? Well, I’ll tell you now—from beginning to end and it’ll include my friend, Richie Benson, because after all he’s a big part of the story.”

Before Mark was through with that simply told narrative, he had won the regard of every man in the room. Jake, particularly, was his avowed champion and before many weeks had passed, Mark was to find that his acquaintance with those rough, big-hearted men was really a thing to be valued.

CHAPTER XXXI

VISITORS

Mark swore Arty to secrecy about his present abode. "I want to do it especially because I didn't feel sure about Rumson or Bailey, Art. Somehow I got that hunch about them and I've kept it. I'll wait until the month is up, then I'll get in touch with Rich."

"Then you haven't but a few days," Arty reminded him. He fumbled about with his cap, then added, "Rumson's got the mail contract anyhow, so you go with him."

Mark smiled. "Don't you care, kiddo. You're out of the time office and doing swell with the Black Arrow, so you should worry. You're doing more than I could do with that crate, so let that be some consolation. I listen for you every night, Art, and occasionally I've heard you come back. Gee, I sleep so sound here—they've been swell fellows to me just because I trot them up to look for those rustlers."

"Find 'em yet?" Arty asked anxiously.

"Nope. But it's no surprise they say. We haven't had a really clear day in this place for almost a month and that's the only time we'll find their camp. I've got a sneaking idea it's a place that's down in one of the canyons. This one I have in mind is almost hidden because the mountain wall juts way out and there's oodles of trees so you can't see a thing. It would have to be a day when the air's like a mirror."

"Well," said Arty rising to go, "it's good and warm today and that means snow for sure. Piles of it. After that it'll freeze and you'll get your looking glass day."

They strolled out of the bunk house arm in arm and walked thoughtfully toward the Black Arrow, which was surrounded by the cowboys. Mark's Kent D-2 looked decidedly modest as she stood parked next to Aylesworth's big tri-motor which the men were commenting on admiringly.

"Wonder why Richie hasn't quit Rumson?" Mark asked hastily. "He said he would as soon as they took on the mail."

"But he hasn't," Arty said. "Rumson's been carrying the mail for over a week. I hear they're going to carry some fortune to Phoenix tonight. Seventy-five thousand in bank notes and I don't know how much more in registered mail. Richie'll be riding with more money than he'll ever get in his life."

“You said it. I guess I’ll go over and see him tomorrow. Time I should. We ought to be going home and just saying hello to the folks if nothing else.” Mark looked up. “Starting to snow now,” he observed.

“And watch it stop,” Arty warned. “Not for hours.”

He took off skilfully in the Black Arrow, but Mark was not envious. He felt more relieved to be away from Aylesworth’s efficiency than he had ever dreamed he would. His life at the ranch too, had been one of the most pleasant interludes he had ever experienced, but he was beginning to get restless for the air. A curse, he told himself whimsically. Yet it was life to him.

He wandered about the corral after Arty had gone. Jake walked with him and they were talking about many things, but mostly about Richie Benson. Mark was really worried about him now that he knew Rumson had the mail contract. It was silly in a way, he told Jake, but somehow he felt now that Benson was in real danger.

“Reckon I know how yuh feel, son. A body gits them feelin’s when they hear talk like yuh did. Mebbe it won’t be so bad, but I kinda think yuh’d feel better if yuh fetched him away, eh?”

“You bet I will. Tomorrow, Jake. Suppose, though, if he’s carrying mail he’s been bonded and all now, huh?”

“Reckon so. That kinda protects him—I mean he’s safe with that money tonight fer instance ’cause he’s bonded. Wa’al, mebbe he finds out it’s a good job.”

Mark didn’t know. He felt depressed and after seeing that the cattle were safely back in the corral, they turned their steps toward the bunk house. It was beginning to snow in earnest.

The sky was a leaden chaos and Mark was infinitely glad when the shadows of night drew about the big ranch. The wind did not seem cold, yet it moaned weirdly and beat down the mountainside in a threatening way.

The modern bunk house with its cozy bedrooms was a warm retreat after supper. Mark shared his with Jake and he was glad to have a human voice to answer if he called out in the deafening noise of the storm. One could hardly hear his own voice in the room then—what would it be at midnight?

Jake laughed at his fears. “It’s jes’ that yuh ain’t used tuh a good storm in the mountins. Yuh’ll git used to it ’fore an hour.”

Mark had his doubts and he was right. Long after Jake was peacefully snoring, this tenderfoot easterner tossed about under the heavy blankets and listened to the howling winds. At times he covered his head to escape the eerie sounds.

He hadn’t heard Arty pass—the wind was too bad. And Richie too—how was he making out? Tonight was the night for that money! It was such a

terrible risk on such a night.

Mark seemed to feel choked by the very thought of it and the end was that he got up and dressed.

The room was almost as cold as outdoors so he put on his heavy jacket and went to the window. Through the driving blizzard he could see the gleaming barbed wire strung along the edge of the corral. Now and again he could hear the cattle and wondered how the beasts stood it.

While he was wondering, he caught sight of an object out beyond the corral near the road. It was a small car and between the driving flurries, Mark could see a man's heavy-coated figure pulling a young steer after him.

Jake was sleeping so peacefully that Mark had not the heart to waken him. But he knew at once that it was imperative for there was no doubt that this strange night visit was from one of the petty rustling band.

Jake was on his feet instantly. A few seconds more and he was in his clothes, coat and all. He cautioned Mark to silence and together they slipped out into the driving wind and snow. As they crept slowly around to the corral, the rustler had already made fast the steer to his Ford and was getting in under the flapping curtains of his car.

Jake shouted and fired his gun, but the man was too quick. He poked his head out from between the curtains and said, "*Blow my smoke!*" Then he stepped on the gas and was gone, with the steer trotting madly behind.

Mark stood like one in a trance. Jake was saying something about it being useless to get out his motorcycle. He couldn't get it going for a half-hour probably. And the horses weren't any good in chasing a Ford. Suddenly he stared at Mark.

"You look like you saw a ghost, son," he said presently.

"Not a ghost, Jake," Mark answered. "Just Louis—my warden or turnkey or whatever you want to call him. That's who your rustler is. *Louis*, of all people!"

CHAPTER XXXII IN THE STORM

Between the howling winds, Mark was suddenly aware of a plane. He listened intently and after a moment knew that it wasn't the Black Arrow. It had a familiar sound, however, and in between the moanings of the storm, he decided that it must be the Shadow 3-D. The peculiar knocking of her motor seemed accentuated by the wind for some reason.

Jake was listening too and before another minute had passed her lights came sweeping over the ranch. She was flying low and almost at her tail was another plane. What struck Mark so peculiarly was that the Shadow 3-D should be flying back east when she was due west and south. Suddenly they could see, about ten miles distant, the first plane sending down a flare. Several flares followed and for a time they could see only one plane, then none at all.



THE BAGS WERE ALL SAFELY GATHERED UP.

Mark frankly felt worried and told Jake so. "If that was Richie and he's in trouble, I'll never forgive myself, Jake. I'm going to warm up my crate and follow. Are you with me?"

Jake was ready for anything that night, especially since his ire had been aroused by Louis' bare-faced thievery. The Kent D-2 must have caught some of this warmth too for she warmed up quickly considering the weather.

Mark had plenty of flares and he waited until he had gauged about the same distance before he released one. Suddenly Jake pointed to a half snow filled canyon which took an abrupt turn and was hidden from view under the trees.

“See some flames from around thar,” he said. “Take a spin over.”

Mark throttled down the throbbing plane and swung her across the gaping void. Suddenly a burst of flame shot up from around the bend and they stared breathlessly at the flaming fabric of a wing which burned like paper in the wind. Below and standing on a rocky ledge was the form of a young man, waving his hands frantically.

Mark didn't have to be told—he knew that it was Richie Benson.

CHAPTER XXXIII

FACES SOUTH AND EAST

It was an impossibility to get Richie out that night. They had to be satisfied to throw blankets down to him in order that he might protect himself as best he could from the weather. And, as he told afterwards, he spent a fairly decent four hours hugging a tree.

Mark had cruised over the canyon more or less all night. Before dawn the cowboys had trekked through the deep drifts and through the forests at the base of a jagged looking range. Their task was a difficult one for the canyon was so hidden that approach to it except on foot was impossible. Nothing but a plane would have discovered it in the wild blasts of such a night or even day for the trees would have obstructed it from view in any case.

Mark declared that it was only the burning plane which made Benson's plight known to them. Otherwise he must certainly have frozen to death. But Richie declared that it was Mark and his timely presence at the ranch that saved him from a terrible fate.

Be that as it might, he trudged back with the cowboys, not much the worse for his experience, and sat at a plentiful breakfast with them, smiling and serene as the cold, sunlight day outdoors. He glanced over his shoulder at the drifts piled out in the road, and smiled.

"I sent my bags down here last night," he said anxiously. "I just happened to remember what Mark told me about this Jake being foreman at the Silver Crescent."

"When and where did you send them down?" Mark asked excitedly.

"Somewhere about here. I knew the location from coming over so many times and I thought that they'd be safer here than anywhere. You see it was when I first started out. Rumson and Bailey were following me in their plane. Oh, it was all arranged. I was to drop the bags down when Louis burned the flares down below here."

"*Louis?*" Mark laughed. "Then...."

"Yes," Richie announced vehemently.

"They were the ones that kidnapped you. Bailey did the chloroforming. I was just sick over it and they had me scared by threatening me if I told. They thought you knew too much—overheard too much about this mail business. That's why they were going to keep you for a month. But you fooled 'em, hah, Mark?"

“And how!”

“They were never so surprised in their lives when you got away. Nobody knows about that place because it’s back under the canyon. They always took the plane to a place a few miles from Bleak Valley field. There Louis met them in the Ford.”

“And he was a rustler too, I reckon,” said Jake. And then to some of the men he added: “Git goin’ an’ see whar them mail bags is layin’. Louis mighta got ’em too.”

But as it happened, Louis hadn’t got them. The shouts of the men from the other side of the corral soon told them that the bags were all safe under the snow.

“What crooks, Rich! But go on,” Mark begged.

Richie sat back with a cup of steaming coffee in his hand. “They had it planned to make me the goat all along. They knew about this big transfer of money from Helena to Phoenix. That’s why Rumson was so anxious to get the contract. Besides he knew we’d be having bad wind storms about this time and he said it would be a dandy and plausible excuse to have the plane burned to a crisp so’s they’d think the money burned too. Well, I agreed all along, but I was just waiting to see if they’d have the nerve to let a thing like that happen.”

“They’d have nerve enough for anything,” said Mark.

“Well, you see Rumson got the inspiration from the time their other man was lost and burned. He told me that himself and said we could do that with the money—make it appear so. They could take it and hide it away for a number of years and then suddenly disappear. That was their plan. You see I had to wait because they hadn’t given me my money. Then all of a sudden they told me I was to carry that money. I almost died, because I had intended to get away from them before then. But I couldn’t today, because they dogged me all day.”

“And what did you do—intend to fool them by flying straight to Phoenix?”

Richie laughed. “Yes, until I saw that they weren’t going to let me get away. After I skimmed away from them a couple of times, I decided about dropping the bags here and I did. Then finally when they chased me off back up the canyon I knew that they meant business. I released the flares just to stall for time, but they were on to it. They knew by then I’d dropped them somewhere and had meant to double-cross them. So they got back at me right away.”

Mark’s mouth opened. “Not...”

“Sure, they shot me down. And believe me, Mark, you were sent here with that crate of yours for a purpose. These boys, as well as they might o’

meant, couldn't have known where Rumson and Bailey shot my plane down. I would have frozen; *whew!*"

Mark's face lighted up with a grateful smile. "Everything did fit in together, Rich—somehow as if fate sort of keeps me tagging after you whether you like it or not. That's why I hadn't been bothering you on account of that reason. I just kept hoping that you'd quit before anything happened and that's why I finally sent for Art yesterday afternoon to tell me how you were and all."

Jake looked puzzled. "Say, Benson," he asked. "What did Rumson reckon on doin' with yuh aftuh the plane wuz supposed tuh burn money an' all."

"I was supposed to burn too, but they said they'd spirit me away. But I don't believe they ever intended to. Once I dropped the bags down for Louis, they'd have put some bullets in my tanks and let me go fish."

"Suppose there had been passengers?" Mark asked suddenly.

"Well, they were expected to have 'chutes on, but in any case, Rumson meant that nobody should live to tell who threw out the bags. I saw that all tonight and I was crazy not to see it before. Cold blooded murderers, that's what he and Bailey are!"

"And last but not least, Collins," Mark said. "How about him?"

"Just a tool and scared to death, the same as anybody would be in their clutches. Believe me, I had to act all the time, Mark. Even that fight I had with you at Mrs. Jenkins'. It was because they didn't want me to stay with you or see you that they made me come over with them in Rumson's plane every morning and sleep in that cold barn. And they were so sore about you escaping that they waited their chance to fix you. Bailey made me tell that gas gag to the mechanic at the point of a gun. He wanted me to say you had the tanks full, but I was afraid for you."

"And Bailey fixed my oil gauge then that night in Phoenix, huh?" Mark guessed.

"Righto. He said he would have fixed it to send you crashing if there had been more time. They were afraid of you."

"But you should have told me, Rich! Keeping it from me all that time?"

"Yes, and have you with your excitable ways get the worst of it from them! They wouldn't stop at anything. I found that out the first night, so I knew I'd just have to wait and stall for an opportunity of showing them up. But it came so suddenly last night, gee, I didn't have time to get my wits together."

And so after breakfast they piled the fortune into Mark's plane after having notified Phoenix that they were just about to start. While they were warming up the motor, Jake hurried out.

“Jes’ got a phone call from the Valley an’ a frien’ of mine says how the two men ownin’ the airline company, named Rumson and Bailey crashed tuh smithereens in their plane early this mornin’. He jes’ found out from Dawson, I guess.”

Mark pondered a moment. “Then I wonder what about Louis?” he asked.

Jake clenched his fist. “Ef he’s got one o’ our steers an’ is still down tuh that house what young Benson told us ’bout why we’ll soon know it’s Louis!”

Subsequently, the steer was found but Louis—never. And by the next day Mark and Richie had quite forgotten all about him for they were sailing the air on a warm California breeze. “We’re going over south and up east, hah, Mark?” Richie asked with ill-concealed enthusiasm.

“You tell ’em, Rich. And we’re forgetting all about a few certain states for a while. Not that I want to forget about Arty, but it’s good for the system to forget the scene of so much trouble, huh?”

“I know,” Richie reflected, “but it was some trouble that did me a lot of good. I’m broke and never *did* get that fat salary I crowed so much about to you, but I feel as if I got a shaking I needed. You know, Mark, I once did something a little shady when we were with the East Coast. It wasn’t stealing, but it wasn’t honorable and that’s what counts—I realize it now. Anyhow, it’s the only shady thing I’ll ever have to my record, believe me. Because Rumson and Bailey were two such scoundrels that it made me see what I’d be like maybe if I kept on thinking of fat salaries and shady work instead of small salary and a clear conscience. Not that I want to sound like a moralist, Mark....”

“No, don’t do that—*ever!*” Mark said happily. “And don’t ever get so terribly honest and efficient that you make everybody miserable, including your family. Mr. Aylesworth’s a terrible example.”

“Well, I promise you I won’t go that far. How about in between, Mark?”

“Suits me. Then I won’t have to do anymore tagging, huh?”

“Don’t you dare stop!” Benson laughed. “What would I have to complain about then?”

“That’s so, too,” Mark admitted. “As long as I know I’ll be of some use, I’m satisfied. But I think the next time you get in such a scrape, I won’t wait to tag and urge you to act human. I’ll give you a good punch in the nose.”

“Go as far as you like,” Rickie shouted. “My nose is the limit!”

END

[The end of *Mark Gilmore, Speed Flyer* by Percy Keese Fitzhugh]