

The Girl Aviators' Motor Butterfly

Margaret Burnham

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[Illustration: "What are you doing to this child?" demanded Roy indignantly.]

THE GIRL AVIATORS' MOTOR BUTTERFLY

BY MARGARET BURNHAM

1912

AUTHOR OF "THE GIRL AVIATORS AND THE PHANTOM AIRSHIP," "THE GIRL AVIATORS ON GOLDEN WINGS," "THE GIRL AVIATORS' SKY CRUISE," ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHARLES L. WRENN

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The Girl Aviators' Motor Butterfly

CHAPTER I.

PREPARATIONS AND PLANS.

"It will be another 'sky cruise,' longer and daintier and lovelier!" exclaimed Jess Bancroft, clapping her hands. "Peggy, you're nothing if not original."

"Well, there are automobile tours and sailing trips, and driving parties--" "And railroad journeys and mountain tramps--" interrupted Jess, laughing.

"Yes, and there are wonderful, long-distance migrations of birds, so why not a cross-country flight of motor butterflies?"

"It would be splendid fun," agreed Jess eagerly; "we could take the Golden Butterfly and the Red Dragon and----" "Don't forget that Bess Marshall has a small monoplane, too, now. I guess she would go in with us."

"Not a doubt of it. Let's go and find the boys and see what they say to it."

"No need to go after them, here they come now."

As the golden-haired Peggy spoke, two good-looking youths came round the corner of the old-fashioned house at Sandy Bay, Long Island, where the two young Prescotts made their home with their maiden aunt, Miss Sally Prescott. One of the lads was Roy Prescott, Peggy's brother, and the other was Jimsy Bancroft.

"Well, girls, what's up now?" inquired Roy, as both girls sprang to their feet, their faces flushed and eyes shining.

"Oh, nothing particular," rejoined Peggy, with assumed indifference, "except that we've just solved the problem of what to do with the rest of the summer."

"And what's that,--lie in hammocks and indulge in ice-cream sodas and chocolates?" asked Jimsy mockingly.

"No, indeed, you impertinent person; the young lady of the twentieth century has left all that far behind her," was Jess's Parthian shot, "for proof I refer you to our adventures on the Great Alkali."

"Hello! what's this?" asked Roy, holding up a dainty cardboard box, and giving vent to a mischievous smile.

"Chocolates!" cried Jimsy.

"It was chocolates," corrected Peggy reproachfully.

"And yet shall be," declared Jimsy, producing from some mysterious place in a long auto coat another box, beribboned and decorated like the first.

"Jimsy, you're an angel!" cried both girls at once.

"So I've been told before," responded the imperturbable Jimsy, "but I never really believed it till now."

Peggy rewarded him for the compliment by popping a chocolate into his mouth.

Gravely munching it, Jimsy proceeded to interrogation.

"And how did you solve the problem of what to do with the rest of the summer?" he asked.

For answer Peggy pointed to the sky, a delicate blue dome flecked with tiny cloudlets like cherub's wings.

"By circling way up yonder in the cloudfields," she laughed.

"But that's no novelty," objected Roy, "we've been up 5,000 feet already, and----" "But we're talking about a tour through cloudland," burst out Jess, unable to retain the secret any longer, "a sort of Cook's tour above the earth."

"Wow!" gasped both boys. "There's nothing slow," added Roy, "in that or about you two. And, incidentally, just read this letter I got this morning, or rather I'll read it for you."

So saying Roy produced from his coat a letter closely written in an old-fashioned handwriting. It was as follows:

"My Dear Niece and Nephew: No doubt you will be surprised to hear from your Uncle Jack. Possibly you will hardly recall him. This has, in a great measure, been his own fault as, since your poor father's death, I have not paid the attention I should to my correspondence.

"This letter, then, is to offer what compensation lies in my power for my neglect. Having read in the papers of your wonderful flying feats in Nevada it struck me that you and your young friends might like to pay me a 'flying trip,' making the excursion via aeroplane.

"We are to have some flying contests in Marysville during the latter part of the month, and you might care to participate in them. Of course I expect your Aunt Sallie to accompany you. Hoping sincerely to see you, I am

"Your affectionate uncle,
"James Parker.
"Marysville, North Carolina."

As Roy concluded the reading the quartet of merry youngsters exchanged delighted glances. As if by magic here was an objective point descried for their projected motor flight.

"Well, that's what I call modern magic," declared Jimsy glowingly; "consider me as having accepted the invitation."

"Accepting likewise for me, of course," said Jess, shaking her black locks and blinking round, expectant eyes.

"Of course," struck in Peggy affectionately, "the Girl Aviators cannot be parted."

Just at this moment came a whirring sound from high in the air above them. Looking up, they saw a dainty green monoplane, with widespread wings and whirring propeller, descending to earth. An instant later the machine had come to a halt on the lawn, alighting as lightly as wind-blown gossamer. In the machine was seated a pretty girl of about Peggy's age, though rather stouter. In harmony with the color of the machine she drove, the newly arrived girl aviator wore a green aviation costume, with a close-fitting motor bonnet. From the beruffled edge of this some golden strands of hair had escaped, and waved above two laughing blue eyes.

"Hello, people!" she hailed, as the porch party hastily adjourned and ran to welcome her, "how's that for a novice only recently out of the Mineola School?"

"Bess Marshall, you're a wonder!" cried Peggy, embracing her; "the _Dart_ is the prettiest little machine I've seen for a long time."

"Isn't it a darling," agreed Bess warmly, "but, my! how I had to beg and pray dad before he would buy it for me. He said that no daughter of his should ever go up in an aeroplane, much less drive one. It wasn't till I got him down at Mineola and persuaded him to take a ride himself that he consented to buying me my dear little _Dart_."

She laid one daintily gloved hand on the steering wheel of the little monoplane and patted it affectionately.

"It's pretty enough, but it wouldn't fly very far," commented Roy teasingly, "sort of aerial taxicab, I'd call it."

"Is that so, Mr. Roy Prescott? Well, I'd like you to know that the _Dart_ could fly just as far and as fast as the _Red Dragon_ or the _Golden Butterfly_."

"Well, if you wanted to take a trip to North Carolina with us you'd have an opportunity to test that idea out," laughed Peggy.

"A trip to North Carolina? What do you mean? Are you dreaming?"

"No, not even day-dreaming."

Just then Miss Prescott, her gentle face wreathed in smiles, appeared at the door.

"Children! children!" she exclaimed, "what is all this? Adjourn your discussion for a while and come in and have tea."

While the happy group of young fliers are entering the pretty, old-fashioned house with its clustering roses and green-shuttered casements, let us relate a little more about the young personages to whose enthusiastic talk the reader has just listened.

Roy and Peggy Prescott were orphans living in the care of their aunt, Miss Prescott, the location of whose home on Long Island has already been described. At school Roy had imbibed the aerial fever, and after many vicissitudes had built a fine monoplane, the _Golden Butterfly_, with which he had won a big money prize, besides encountering a series of extraordinary aerial adventures. In these Peggy participated, and on more than one occasion was the means of materially aiding her brother out of difficulties. All this part of their experiences was related in

the first volume of this series, "The Girl Aviators and the Phantom Airship."

In the second volume, "The Girl Aviators on Golden Wings," a combination of strange circumstances took our friends out to the Great Alkali of the Nevada desert. Here intrigues concerning a hidden gold mine provided much excitement and peril, and the girls proved that, after all, a fellow's sisters can be splendid companions in fun and hardship. An exciting race with an express train, and the adventure of the "Human Coyote," provided stirring times in this story, which also related the queer antics of Professor Wandering William, an odd character indeed. Space does not permit to relate their previous adventures in more detail, but in "The Girl Aviators' Sky Cruise" still other interesting and unusual experiences are described,--experiences that tested both themselves and their machines in endurance flights.

Of Roy and Peggy's devoted friends, Jess and Jimsy Bancroft, it is enough to say that both were children of Mr. Bancroft, a wealthy banker, who had a palatial summer home near to the Prescotts' less pretentious dwelling. Since we last met Jess and Jimsy their father had allowed them to purchase an aeroplane known as the _White Flier_. It was in this craft that Jimsy and Roy had flown over for mail when they made their entrance at the beginning of this chapter. Of the letter they found awaiting them we already know.

Jolly, good-natured Bess Marshall had taken up aviation as a lark. She was a typical specimen of an American girl. Light-hearted, wholesome and devoted to all sorts of sports, tennis, swimming, golf, motoring and finally aviation had, in turn, claimed her attention.

And now, having introduced our heroes and heroines of the sky to those who have not already met them, we will proceed to see how Miss Prescott receives the startling plans that her young charges are about to lay before her.

CHAPTER II.

OFF ON THE FLIGHT.

"But, my dear children, do you realize what such a trip means?"

The gentle-voiced Miss Prescott leaned back in her easy-chair and gazed at Peggy and Roy with an approach to consternation.

"It means fun, adventure, and--oh, everything!" cried Peggy, clapping her hands.

"You can't have the heart to refuse us," sighed Jess.

"If it were only the boys it might be different, but two young ladies--"
"Three," corrected Bess.

"Three, then. For three young ladies, supposedly of sound mind, to go flying across country like, like--" "Butterflies," struck in Jimsy.

"Wait a minute," cried Jess, "there'd have to be four ladies--"
"Of course; a chaperon," breathed Peggy, with a mischievous glance.

Miss Prescott dropped her knitting.

"Peggy Prescott, you mean me?"

"Of course; who else could go?"

"My dear child, do you actually contemplate taking me flying through the air at my time of life?"

"Why not? It isn't as if you'd never been up," urged Peggy.

"You said you liked it, too," struck in Jess.

"Um--well, I may have said so," admitted Miss Prescott, visibly weakening from the stand she had taken, and she went on: "I would like to see James again."

"And here is your opportunity ready to hand, as the advertisements say," declared Bess, her blue eyes shining.

"But how could I go?"

The question was an outward and visible sign of capitulation on Miss Prescott's part.

"Why, I was thinking we could use that big biplane I was building for Mr. Bell's use out in Nevada," spoke up Roy; "it will seat three, and is as steady as a church, thanks to that balancing device Jimsy and I figured out."

"I'd fly my little _Dart_," declared Bess.

"And you and I would take the _Golden Butterfly_," cried Peggy, crossing to Jessie and placing her arm round the dark-haired girl's neck.

"Jimsy can fly the _Red Dragon_," and that leaves Roy and auntie for the biplane," she went on, bubbling over with enthusiasm as her plans matured and took form.

"Goodness gracious, an aerial circus!" cried Miss Prescott. "We would attract crowds, and that wouldn't be pleasant."

"I was planning to make it a sort of picnic," declared Peggy, who appeared to have an answer for every objection that could be interposed to her project.

"What, camp out every night? Well, you are a wonder," exclaimed Jimsy, "if there's one thing I love it's camping out."

"How long would it take us to get to Marysville?" asked Bess.

"I'll get the atlas," cried Peggy, "but if we have good weather not more than three or four days."

"I hardly think it would take as long as that," declared Roy, as five eager heads were bent over the atlas.

"But camping out!" exclaimed Miss Prescott, "think of colds and rheumatism, not to mention snakes and robbers."

"Tell you what," cried Jimsy suddenly, "what's the matter with Miss Prescott going along in an automobile? We can map out the route, arrange our stops and meet every evening at some small town where we won't attract too much of a crowd."

"Jimsy, I always said you were a genius," cried Peggy.

"Behold the last objection swept away," struck in Bess.

"Surely you can't refuse now?" urged Jess.

"Please say yes," came from them all.

"But--but who would drive the car?" asked Miss Prescott, in the voice of one who is thinking up a feeble last objection.

"Why, Jake Rickets, of course," declared Roy, referring to the man who helped the boys in the machine shop in which the aeroplanes for the desert mines were manufactured.

After this Miss Prescott could make but a poor stand against the united urgings of five impetuous, enthusiastic young people. The air was filled with plans of all sorts. Jimsy was for going at once, but it was finally decided to meet again and set a definite date for a start. In the meantime there were parents' consents to be obtained, plans laid for the route to be followed, and various things purchased for the aerial trip.

All this occupied some time, and it was not till a week later that the last difficulty in connection with the motor flight had been straightened out and the three aeroplanes stood ready, in Roy's hangar, for a tour that was to prove eventful in more ways than one.

It was just after dawn on the day of the start that Roy and Jimsy for the last time went over every nut and bolt on the machines and declared everything in perfect readiness for the trip. Breakfast was a mere pretence at a meal; excitement got the better of appetites that morning.

Beside the winged machines sputtering and coughing as if impatient at the delay, was a large and comfortable red touring car. At the driver's wheel of this vehicle was seated a small, "under-done"-looking man, in a chauffeur's uniform of black leather. This was Jake Rickets.

"Well, Jake, we're all ready for a start," announced Roy, at last.

The small man, whose hair was fair, not to say pale, glanced at the glowing boy with an expression of deep melancholy.

"Yes, if something don't happen," he declared, in tones of deep pessimism.

"Jake's never happy unless he's foreboding some disaster," explained Roy to Bess, who happened to be standing by drawing on her gloves.

"It don't never do to be too sure," murmured the melancholy Jake, "'cos why? Well, you can't most generally always tell."

"Everything ready?" cried Peggy at last, as Miss Prescott got into the car.

"As ready as it ever will be," merrily called back Bess, who was already seated in the little green _Dart_.

The chorus of engine pantings and explosions was swelled by the roar of Roy's big biplane and the rattling exhaust of Jimsy's fierce-looking _Red Dragon_.

The _Golden Butterfly_, which was equipped with a silencing device, ran smoothly and silently as a sewing machine. Peggy sat at the wheel, while Jess reclined on the padded seat placed tandemwise behind her. It made a wonderful picture, the big white biplane with its boy driver, the scarlet and silver machine of Jimsy Bancroft and the delicate green and gold color schemes of the other two flying machines.

"The first stop will be Palenville," announced Roy, "the biplane will be the pathfinder."

Despite the earliness of the hour and the efforts that had been made to keep the motor flight a secret, the information of the novel experiment had, in some way, leaked out. Quite a small crowd gave a loud cheer as Roy cried:

"Go!"

"We're off!" cried Peggy, athrill with excitement.

Propellers flashed in the sunlight and the next instant the biplane, after a short run, soared aloft toward a sky of cloudless, clean-swept blue. In rapid succession the _Dart, Golden Butterfly_ and _Red Dragon_ followed.

"Come on," cried Bess to Jimsy, waving her hand challengingly.

"Ladies first, even off the earth," came back from Jimsy gallantly, as he skillfully "banked" his machine in an upward spiral.

Then upward and outward soared the gayly colored sky racers, like a flock of wonderful birds. It was the greatest sight that the crowd left behind and below had ever witnessed, although one or two shook their heads and prophesied dire results from young ladies tampering with them blamed "sky buggies."

But not a thought of this entered the heads of the aerial adventurers. With sparkling eyes, and bounding pulses they flew steadily southward, from time to time glancing below at the touring car. Even though they were flying slowly it was plain that the big auto had hard work to keep up with them. The unique motor flight was on, and was about to develop experiences of which none of them at the moment dreamed.

CHAPTER III.

LITTLE WREN AND THE GIPSIES.

They flew on, keeping the motor car beneath them in constant sight till about noon. Then, from the tonneau of the machine, came the waving of a red square of silk. This had been agreed upon as a signal to halt for a brief lunch.

Shouting joyously, the young adventurers of the air began circling their

machines about, dropping closer earthward with every sweep. Beneath them was a green meadow, bordered on one side by a country road and on the other by a small brook of clear water and a patch of dark woods. It was an ideal place to halt for a roadside lunch, and as one after the other the machines dropped to earth Miss Prescott was warmly congratulated on her choice of a halting place.

The car was left in the road, and the melancholy Jake Rickets set to work getting wood for a fire, for it was not to be thought of that Miss Prescott could go without her cup of tea. In the meantime the girls spread a cloth and set out their fare. There were dainty chicken sandwiches with crisp lettuce leaves lurking between the thin white "wrappers," cold meat and half a dozen other little picnic delicacies, which all the girls, despite their aerial craze, had not forgotten how to make.

The boys set up a shout as, returning from attending to the aeroplanes, they beheld the inviting table.

"This beats camping out by ourselves," declared Roy, "girls, we're glad we brought you."

"Thank you for the compliment," laughed Jess. "I suppose you mean that you are glad _we_ brought all this."

She waved her hand at the "spread" dramatically.

"Both," rejoined Jimsy, throwing himself on the grass. By this time Jake's kettle was bubbling merrily, and soon the refreshing aroma of Miss Prescott's own particular kind of tea was in the air. The boys preferred to try the water from the brook, despite Jake's dire hints at typhoid and other germs holding a convention in it. It was sweet and cool, and the girls voted it as good as ice-cream soda.

"At any rate as we can't get any we might as well pretend it is," declared Bess.

So the meal passed merrily. After it had been concluded, amid gay chatter and fun, Peggy proposed an excursion to the woods for wild flowers which grew in great profusion on the opposite side of the stream. Crossing it by a plank bridge, the young people plunged into the cool woods, dark and green, and carpeted with flowering shrubs and vines.

For some time they gathered the blossoms, and were just about to return to the aeroplanes and resume their journey when Peggy uttered a sudden sharp exclamation:

"Hark! What's that?" she cried.

They all listened. Again came the sound that had arrested her attention; a sharp cry, as if some one was in pain or fright.

Then came definite words:

"Don't! Please; don't hit me again!"

"It's a child!" exclaimed Jimsy.

"A girl!" cried Peggy, "some one is ill-treating her."

"We'll soon find out!" cried Roy hotly. It infuriated the boy to think that a child was being subjected to ill-treatment, and the nature of the cries left no doubt that such was the case.

"Stand back here, girls, while we see what's up!" struck in Jimsy.

"Indeed we'll do no such thing!" rejoined the plucky Bess, bridling indignantly.

"At any rate let us go in advance," advised Roy; "we don't know just what we may run up against."

This appeared reasonable even to Bess, and with the boys slightly in advance the little group pressed rapidly forward. After traveling about two hundred yards they found themselves in a small clearing where a most unusual sight presented itself; a sight that brought a quick flash of indignation to the face of every one of them.

Cowering under the blows of a tall, swarthy woman was a small girl, so fragile as to appear almost elfin. The woman wore the garb of a gipsy, and the presence of some squalid tents and tethered horses showed our young friends at once that it was a gipsy encampment upon which they had happened.

The woman was so intent on belaboring the shrieking child that at first she did not see the newcomers. It was not till Roy stepped up to her, in fact, that she became aware of their presence.

"What are you doing to this child?" demanded Roy indignantly.

"That's none of your business," was the retort, as the woman for an instant released her hold on the child.

Instantly the little creature darted to the sheltering arms of Peggy, sobbing piteously.

"Oh! Save me from her, she will kill me," the child cried, in a broken voice.

"There! there!" soothed Peggy tenderly, "don't cry. We won't let her harm you any more."

But like a fury the woman flew at the girls. Before she could lay hands on them, however, Roy and Jimsy had seized her arms and held them. At this the crone set up a hideous shriek and, as if it had been a signal, two swarthy men, with dark skins and big earrings in their ears, came running from behind the tents.

"What's the trouble?" they cried, as they ran up, regarding the boys malevolently.

"It's the Wren; they're trying to steal the Wren!" shrilled out the woman.

At this the men rushed at the boys, one of them waving a thick cudgel he carried.

"Let go of that woman," they shouted furiously.

Another instant and the boys would have been in a bad position, for both the gipsies were powerful fellows, and appeared determined to commit

violence. But Roy, releasing his hold of the struggling gipsy woman, put up his fists in such a scientific manner that, for an instant, the attack paused. This gave Jimsy time to rush to his side. The instant she was released the woman darted to the side of the men.

"Beat them! Kill them!" she cried frantically.

The men resumed their rush, and the next moment the boys found themselves fighting to escape a furious assault. Neither of the lads was a weakling, and good habits and constant athletic exercise had placed them in the pink of condition.

But the two gipsies were no mean antagonists. Then, too, the one with the cudgel wielded it skillfully. Time and again Jimsy avoided a heavy blow which, if successful, must have injured him seriously. The girls, screaming, rushed off, carrying "the Wren," as the woman called her, with them. They dashed at top speed back to the spot where the aeroplanes had been left, and summoned Jake.

"I knew something would happen," declared that worthy, as he picked up a monkey wrench, the only weapon at hand, and started off for the woods.

The girls followed him, Miss Prescott not having been vouchsafed anything but a most hurried explanation of what was going on. Just as Jake appeared on the scene Jimsy had received a terrific blow on the arm from one of the gipsy's cudgels. The boy's arm dropped as if paralyzed. With a howl of triumph the ruffian who had dealt him the blow rushed in on the injured lad. In another instant it would have looked bad indeed for Jimsy, but Roy, landing a hard blow against his assailant, hastened to his chum's rescue.

"You look after that fellow. I'll take care of this one," cried Jake, rushing into the melee, whirling his monkey wrench in a formidable manner.

The girls, huddled in a group, gazed on in frank alarm.

"Oh, they'll be killed!" shrilled Jess.

"Roy! Roy! Be careful!" cried Peggy.

"Oh, I wish we could get a policeman," cried Bess, clasping her hands nervously. But as it happened a policeman, even if such a personage had been within a dozen miles, was not needed. A clever blow from Roy laid the cudgel wielder low, and the other man, not liking the look of Jake's monkey wrench, capitulated by taking to his heels. The woman cowered back among the tents.

"Come on, let's be going," cried Roy, as he saw that the battle was over.

"Ouch! my wrist!" exclaimed Jimsy, wringing his left hand; "I believe that fellow has broken it."

"Let's have a look," said Roy, as the two boys made their way to the huddled group of girls.

"Nothing but a nasty whack," he pronounced, after an examination. "Well, girls, was it an exciting battle?"

"Oh, it was terrible," cried Jess; "we thought you'd be badly beaten."

"But as it is we appear to be future 'white hopes,' not forgetting Jake," smiled Roy, who was still panting from his exertions.

"You were awfully brave, I think," cried Bess admiringly, giving the three "heroes" a warm glance.

"Well, there wasn't anything to do but fight, unless we'd run away," laughed Roy, "and now what about the cause of all the trouble?"

He glanced at the little girl clinging to Peggy's hand. The child was pitifully emaciated, with drawn features and large, dark eyes that gazed about her bewilderedly. Her clothing was a red gingham dress that fitted her like a sack. She was shoeless and stockingless. Her brown hair, unkempt and ragged, hung in elf locks about her sad little face. Certainly, as regarded size and general appearance, her name, "The Wren," fitted her admirably.

"I don't know what to do about her," admitted Peggy; "suppose we ask Aunt Sally? I don't want to let the gipsies have her again, and yet I don't see how we can take her."

At the words the little creature burst into a frantic outbreak.

"Don't let those people have me back; don't," she begged; "they'll kill me if you do."

She clung passionately to Peggy's dress. Tears came to the girl's eyes at the pitiful manifestation of fear.

"There! there, dear," soothed Peggy, stroking the child's head, "you shan't go back if we can help it. Come with us for the time being, anyway."

"But we have no legal right to take her," objected Roy.

"Don't say another word," snapped the usually gentle Peggy, whose indignation had been fully aroused, "come on. Let's get back to where we left Aunt Sally, then we can decide what to do."

"Incidentally, we'll do well to get out of this vicinity before any more of those fellows come up. There must be several more somewhere close at hand," exclaimed Jimsy.

"Yes; and I'll bet the others, the two who ran off, have gone to call them," put in Roy; "that woman has disappeared, too."

No time was lost in getting back to the aeroplanes, "The Wren," as the gipsies called her, keeping tight hold of Peggy's hand. The boys walked behind and, with Jake, formed a sort of rear guard to ward off any possible attack. But either the other members of the band were far off, or else they did not care to attempt an assault, for the party reached the aeroplanes without further incident or molestation.

Miss Prescott's consternation may be imagined as she listened to the tale they had to tell. From time to time during its relation she glanced pityingly at the Wren.

"Poor child!" she exclaimed, gazing at the wizened little creature's bruised arms. They were black and blue from rough handling, and bore painful testimony to the life she had lived among the gipsies.

"What is your name, dear?" she asked, motioning to the child as Peggy finished her story.

"The Wren, that's what they always called me," was the response, in a thin little wisp of a voice.

"Have you no other name?" asked Miss Prescott kindly.

The child shook her head.

"I don't know. Perhaps I did once. I wasn't always with the tribe. I remember a home and my mother, but that was all so long ago that it isn't clear."

"Then she's not a gipsy," declared Peggy emphatically.

"I'll bet they kidnapped her some place," exclaimed Roy.

"That doesn't solve the problem of what to do with her," struck in Jess.

"We can't send her back to those people," declared Bess, with some warmth.

"On the other hand, how are we to look after her?" said Jimsy.

"It's a problem that will have to solve itself," said Miss Prescott, after a few moments of deep thinking.

"How is that?" asked Peggy.

"Because she goes with us no matter what happens. It may not be legal, but humanity comes above the law sometimes," declared Miss Prescott, with emphasis.

"Hurrah for Aunt Sally!" cried the boys, "she's as militant as a newly blossomed suffragette. Cheer up, Wren, you're all right now."

"Then I'm to stay with you?" questioned the child.

"Of course," came from Aunt Sally.

The child buried her head on the kind-hearted lady's lap and burst into a passion of weeping that fairly shook her frail frame.

It was at this juncture that Jake set up a shout and pointed toward the woods. From them a group of men had burst, armed with sticks and stones. They came rushing straight at the little group, uttering ferocious shouts.

"We're in for it now," exclaimed Roy; "girls, you had better get in the machine and drive a safe distance. Those fellows mean mischief."

CHAPTER IV.

APPROACH OF THE STORM.

It was apparent enough that mean mischief they did. Their dark eyes gleamed fiercely out of their swarthy faces. One or two wore a vivid red or blue handkerchief knotted about sinewy necks, this means of adornment only adding to their generally sinister look.

"I knew we wouldn't get far without running into trouble," moaned Jake dejectedly.

Roy turned on him sharply, almost angrily.

"You get the ladies in that machine and drive off down the road a bit," he said; "I'll attend to this thing. Jimsy, come here."

Jake hesitated a moment and then strode off to the auto.

"Can't we stay and help?" asked Bess.

"No; we can help Roy best by doing what he; wants us to. He's got some plan in his head," rejoined Peggy firmly, "come along, Wren; Jess, help me with her, she's terrified to death."

This was no exaggeration. At sight of the gipsy band, the child so recently taken from their clutches shrank and cowered against her young protectress.

"Don't let them take me--don't!" she kept wailing.

"Never mind; don't be scared, Wren," Peggy comforted, "they won't get you."

A flash of determined fire came into Peggy's eyes as she spoke.

"Peg! You're magnificent," exclaimed Jess, as, headed by Miss Prescott, they hastened toward the car which Jake had already cranked.

The gipsies had paused for an instant. Evidently the sight of the aeroplanes bewildered and amazed them. Expecting to come on a camp of young folks they had suddenly encountered a group of machines which, to them, must have savored of the supernatural. But as the auto drove off they were due for an even greater surprise.

Following a swift whisper from Roy both boys had jumped into the _Red Dragon_. In an instant came the sharp barking of the engine. The flying machine dashed forward almost simultaneously. Straight at the angry nomads Roy headed it. It was as if a war chariot of old was charging into a group of defiant barbarians.

For a few moments the gipsies stood their ground. But as the machine rose from the ground, skimmed it, as it were, Roy thrust on full power. The machine darted over the spot where the gipsies had stood but an instant before; but they had gone. Scattering with wild cries of fear, they could be seen running for their lives toward the wood.

"I don't think they'll trouble us again in a hurry," declared Roy grimly, as he brought the _Red Dragon_ round in a circle and headed back for the rest.

From the machine came a cheer, Miss Prescott's voice ringing out as loudly as any.

"The idea just came to me in a second," explained Roy modestly, in

answer to the ladies' congratulations and praise, "it worked, though, didn't it?"

"Like a charm," they all agreed.

"Hadn't we better be getting on?" asked Jimsy, a minute later.

"Yes; there's no knowing if those fellows won't try a flank attack, although I think they've had a big enough scare thrown into them to last them quite a while with economy," laughed Roy.

"Who is going to take care of Wren?" asked Bess.

"She'll ride right in the car with me," declared Miss Prescott positively, "you don't think I'm going to risk her in one of those things of yours, do you?"

They all laughed. As a matter of fact, there was not one of the party that was not more at home in the air than on a road. Then, too, Roy's balancing device had about removed the last peril of air traveling. It was agreed to stop at Meadville, which the map showed was about thirty miles to the southeast, and purchase a dress and other necessities for their new ward. As to what was to be done with her after that nobody had any very definite plans. And so the journey was resumed, with congratulations flying over the way in which they came out of what, for a time, looked like a really serious scrape.

The weather had held fair till a short time after the start was made from the scene of the encounter with the gipsies. It was Peggy who first observed a change in the sky.

From the southwest billowy masses of slate-colored clouds came rolling on, obscuring the sunlit landscape beneath with an effect of lights turned down on a stage. Turning to Jess, who occupied the seat behind her, she remarked:

"We're going to have some bad kind of a storm, girlie."

Jess nodded.

"Wonder how far we are from Meadville?" she asked.

"Quite a way yet. I'm afraid that we can't make it before the storm breaks."

"Look, there's Roy coming back, and Jimsy, too. I guess they want to talk about it."

This turned out to be the case. As Roy came swinging by he held a small megaphone to his mouth with one hand, while the other gripped the steering wheel tightly.

"We're in for a storm, girls, and a hummer, too, from the look of it."

"Better drop down," counseled Jimsy.

Jess nodded, and, as at this moment Bess, who had seen the boy's maneuver, came by, the news was communicated to her.

The next thing to do was to look about for a suitable place to land. The country over which they were passing was heavily wooded, and seemingly

sparsely populated. Beneath them wound a road, along which, but at some distance behind, the touring car could be seen coming in a cloud of yellow dust.

The wind began to grow puffy, and it required all the skill of the young aviators to keep their flock of motor-driven birds on even wings. Before long, just as the distant, but fast approaching, cloud curtain began to be ripped and slashed by vivid scimitars of lightning, Roy espied, beneath them, a field, at one end of which stood a prosperous-looking farmhouse, surrounded by buildings and hay stacks.

It was an ideal spot in which to land, and as the road was near by they would have no difficulty in attracting the attention of Miss Prescott when she went by. In graceful volplanes the aeroplanes lit in the field like an alighting flight of carrier pigeons. But hardly had they touched the ground when from the farmhouse a man came running in his shirtsleeves, his lower limbs being garbed in overalls and knee-boots. On his chin was a goatee, and as he drew closer they saw that his face was thin and hatchet shaped and anything but agreeable.

"You git out of thar! You git out of thar!" he kept shouting as he came along, stumbling over the stubble, for the field had been newly reaped.

"Why, what's the matter? We're not hurting anything," objected Roy; "surely you don't mind our occupying the field for an hour or so till the storm blows over?"

"I daon't, hey? Wa'al, I do, by heck. I own all the way daown and all the way up frum this farm, and thet's ther law."

"If we didn't have these ladies with us we'd be only too glad to leave your field," rejoined Jimsy, "but you can see for yourself a nasty storm is coming up."

"What bizness hes gals riding round in them sky-buggies," stormed the farmer; "ef any darter uv mine did it I'd lock her up on bread an' water, by Jim Hill."

"I don't doubt it in the least," smiled Peggy sweetly.

"Humph!" grunted the cantankerous old agriculturist, not quite sure if he was being made fun of or if his resolution was being admired; "all I got to say is thet ef you want to stay here you gotter pay."

"That can be arranged," spoke Jimsy, with quiet sarcasm.

"An' pay wa'al, too," resumed the farmer tenaciously.

"How much do you think the lease of your field for an hour or so is worth?" asked Roy.

The farmer considered an instant, and then, with an avaricious look in his pin-point blue eyes, he looked up.

"'Bout ten dollars," he said, at length.

"We don't want to buy it, we just want to rent it for a very short time," struck in Bess, with her most innocent expression.

"Wa'al, it's ten or git off!" snapped the farmer.

"I'll pay you a fair price for it," spoke up Roy, "and not a cent more."

"Then I'll drive you off with a shot-gun, by chowder."

"Oh, no, you won't."

"Won't, hey? What'll stop me?"

"The law."

"Ther law? Thet's a good one."

"I think it is, a very good one," struck in Jimsy, who now saw what Roy was driving at.

"Humph! wa'al, if yer a'goin' te talk law I'll jes' tell yer quick thet this is my land and thet you're all a-trespassing."

"You are not very well up on aerial law, it seems," replied Roy, in an absolutely unruffled tone.

"Don't know nuthin' 'bout this air-ile law," grumbled the fellow, but somewhat impressed by Roy's calm, deliberate exterior.

"Well, then, for your information I'll tell you that under the laws of the country recently enacted aviators are entitled to land in any safe landing place in times of emergency. If they do any damage they must pay for it. If not the owner of the land is not entitled to anything for the temporary use of his place."

"Five dollars or nothing," spoke Jimsy, "and if you try to put us off you'll get into serious trouble."

"Wa'al, yer a-robbin' me," muttered the man, much impressed by Roy's oratory, "gimme ther five."

It was quickly forthcoming. The old fellow took it without a word and shuffled off. As he did so there was a vivid flash of lightning and the growl of a big crash of thunder. While it was still resounding the auto came puffing up. Jake had put up the storm top and made it as snug and comfortable as a house.

"Come on, boys and girls," urged Roy, "let's get the engines covered up and then beat it for the car. The rain will hit in in torrents in a few minutes."

Indeed they were still making fast the waterproof covers constructed to throw over the motors in just such emergencies when the big drops began to fall.

There was a helter-skelter race for the car. In they all crowded, and none too soon. The air was almost as dark as at dusk, and there was a heavy sulphurous feeling in the atmosphere. But within the curtains of the car all was fun and merriment. The case of the old farmer was discussed at length, and Jimsy convulsed them all by his clever imitation of the way the bargain was driven.

He was in the midst of his description when a fearfully vivid flash lit up the interior of the car as brightly as day. As it did so The Wren uttered a sharp cry.

"What is it, dear? Afraid of the lightning?" asked Miss Prescott, while a thunder volley boomed and reverberated.

"No, no," shivered the child, drawing closer to her, "but when I see a flash like that I sometimes remember."

"Remember what?" asked Miss Prescott tenderly.

"Oh, I don't know," wailed the child, "people and places. They come for a moment and then disappear again as quickly as they came."

CHAPTER V.

PEGGY'S THOUGHTFULNESS SAVES THE FARM.

Flash after flash, roar after roar, the lightning and thunder crashed and blazed as the full fury of the storm struck in. Miss Prescott, who was in deadly fear of lightning, covered her eyes with a thick veil and sank back in the cushions of the tonneau.

But the rest of the party regarded the furious storm with interest. The rain was coming down in sheets, but not one drop penetrated the water-proof top of the big touring car.

"It's grand, isn't it?" asked Peggy, after a particularly brilliant flash.

"Um--ah, I don't just know," rejoined Jess, "it's rather too grand if anything. I----" Bang!

There was a sharp report, like that of a large cannon. The air was filled with an eye-blistering blaze of blue fire. Stunned for an instant, and half blinded, not one of the young folks in the touring car uttered a word.

The storm, too, appeared to be "holding its breath" after that terrific bombardment.

"That struck close by," declared Roy, the first to recover his speech.

"Oh! oh!" moaned Miss Prescott, "then the next will hit us!"

"Don't be a goose, Aunt Sally," comforted Peggy; "don't you know that lightning never strikes twice in the same place?"

Miss Prescott made no answer. In fact she had no opportunity to do so.

From close at hand shouts were coming. Loud, frightened shouts.

"Fire! fire!"

"Gracious! something's on fire at that farmhouse!" cried Peggy.

"That's what!" came in excited tones from Roy as he peered out through the rain.

"Look at them running about," chimed in Jimsy.

"It's from that haystack! See the smoke roll up!" cried Bess.

"The lightning must have struck it. Say, we'd better go and help," exclaimed Roy anxiously.

"I don't see that the old man who was so mean to us deserves any help," murmured Bess, rather angrily.

"Why, Bess, for shame!" reproved Peggy. "Go on, boys, the rain's letting up, maybe you can help them."

"All right, sis. Come on, Jimsy!"

The boys dived out of the car and set off running at top speed for the scene of the blaze, which was in a haystack back of the main barn of the farmhouse. Several farm hands, under the direction of the disagreeable old man, whose name was Zenas Hutchings, were running about with buckets of water, which were about as effective as trying to sweep the sea back with a broom, so far as gaining any headway against the flames was concerned.

Had the rain continued it might have been possible for the farm hands to quell the blaze with the assistance of the elements; but the storm had ceased almost as suddenly as it began, and only a few scattering drops were now falling. Off to the southwest the sky was blue once more.

The farmer turned despairingly to the boys as they came running up.

"Clare ter goodness if it ain't them kids ag'in," he exclaimed; "wa'al, you ain't brought me nuthin' but bad luck so far as I kin see. Hyars a hundred dollars' worth of hay goin' up in smoke an'--"

A farm hand came bustling up. His face was pale under the grime of soot that overlaid it.

"Ef we don't git ther fire under control purty soon," he cried, "ther whole place 'ull go."

"What's thet, Jed?" snapped old Hutchings anxiously.

"I said that ther sparks is beginning ter fly. If ther fire gits much hotter it'll set suthin' else ablaze."

"By heck! That's so!" cried old Hutchings, in an alarmed voice.

He gazed about him perplexedly.

"Isn't there any fire apparatus near here?" asked Roy.

"Yep; at Topman's Corners. But that's five miles off."

"Have you telephoned them?" asked Jimsy, who had noticed that the Hutchings farm, like most up-to-date ones, was equipped with a telephone; at least there were wires running into the place which appeared to be of that nature.

"Ain't no use telephoning" was the disconsolate rejoinder.

"Why?"

"Wire's busted. Reckon ther storm put it out of business. I guess it's all up with me now. I hoped ter pay off ther part of ther mortgage with ther hay and grain in thet barn yonder, an' now----" He broke off in a half sob. Cantankerous as the old man had shown himself to be, and grasping withal, the boys could not help but feel sorry for the stricken old fellow. He looked pitifully bowed and old and wretched in the midst of his distracted farm hands, who were running about and shouting and not doing much of anything else.

"Wa'al," he said, at length, pulling himself together with a visible effort, "thar's no chance of gitting ther fire ingines, so it'll hev ter go, I guess."

"Yes there is a chance of getting the engines, and a good one, too."

They all turned at the sound of a girlish voice, and there stood Peggy with Jess by her side. The two girls had stolen up unnoticed in the excitement.

"Bravo, Peg!" exclaimed Roy heartily, glancing approvingly at his sister, "what's your idea?"

"Fly over and get help."

"Fly over! Wa'al, I'll be switched!" gasped old Hutchings.

"I don't see why not," struck in Jimsy, "it's five miles, you say. Well, we ought to make that in ten minutes or so, or even quicker."

"How fast can the engines get back?" asked Roy practically.

"Wa'al, ther roads be good and Bob Shields hez a right smart team," was the rejoinder. "They ought ter make it in half an hour."

"Good. Then if you can hold the flames in check for a short time longer we can save your place yet."

Beckoning to Jimsy, the boy darted off for the Red Dragon. This machine he selected because, with the exception of the Dart, it was the fastest and lightest of the aeroplanes they had with them. Farmer Hutchings had hardly closed his mouth from its gaping expression of surprise when a whirr of the motor announced that the Red Dragon was off. Its lithe body shot into the air with tremendous impetus.

"Ther Corners is off thar to ther westward," shouted up the farmer, "you can't miss it. It's got a red brick church with a high tower on it right in the middle of a clump of elms."

Speeding above fields and woodland the red messenger of pending disaster raced through the air. Five minutes after taking flight Jimsy espied a high red tower. Eight and one half minutes after the Dragon had shot aloft it fluttered to earth on the village street of Topman's Corners, amid an amazed group of citizens who had seen it approaching.

It was the first aeroplane ever seen in the remote Pennsylvanian hamlet, and it created commensurate excitement. But the boys had no time to answer the scores of questions, foolish and otherwise, that were volleyed at them from all sides.

"There's a fire!" exclaimed Jimsy breathlessly, "a fire at Hutchings's farm. How soon can you get the engines there?"

A stalwart-looking young fellow stepped up.

"I'm chief of the department," he said, "we're the 'Valiants.' I'll be there in twenty-five minutes if I have to kill the horses. It's downhill most of the way, anyhow. Jim, you run off and ring ther bell."

A second later the fire bell was loudly clanging and several of the crowd melted away to don their helmets and coats. In less time than the boys would have thought it possible a good-looking engine came rumbling out of the fire house half a block down the street. Behind it came a hook and ladder truck.

Fine horses were attached to each, and from the way they leaped off the boys saw that the "Chief" meant to make good his promise.

"Race you to ther fire!" shouted the latter functionary, as, in a storm of cheers, his apparatus swept out of sight down the elm-bordered street.

"You're on," laughed Roy, whisking aloft while the Topman's Cornerites were still wondering within themselves if they were waking or dreaming.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GIRL AVIATORS IN DEADLY PERIL.

The fire was out. A smoldering, blackened hillock was all that remained of the stack ignited by the lightning bolt; but the others and the main buildings of the farm had been saved.

Such work was a new task for aeroplanes--but there is no doubt that, had it not been for Peggy's suggestion, the Hutchings farm would have been burned to the ground. As it was, when the firemen, their horses in a lather, arrived at the scene, the farm hands, who had been fighting the flames, were almost exhausted.

Had they possessed the time, the young folks would have been glad to tell the curious firemen something about their aeroplanes. But it was well into the afternoon, and if they intended to keep up their itinerary it was necessary for them to be hurrying on. A short time after the blaze had been declared "out" the aeroplanes once more soared aloft, and the auto chugged off in the direction of Meadville.

The afternoon sun shone sparkingly on the trees and fields below, all freshened by the downpour of the early afternoon. The spirits of all rose as did their machines as they raced along. Before leaving the Hutchings farm the old man had been so moved to generosity by the novel manner in which his farm had been saved from destruction that he had offered to give back \$2.50 of the \$5 he had demanded for the rent of his field. Of course they had not taken it, but the evident anguish with which the offer was made afforded much amusement to the young aviators as they soared along.

In Peggy's machine the talk between herself and Jess was of the strange finding of The Wren, and of the child's curious ways. Both girls recalled her odd conduct during the storm and what she had said about

the peculiar influence of lightning on her memory.

"Depend on it, Jess," declared Peggy, with conviction, "that child is no more a gipsy than you or I."

"Do you think she was stolen from somewhere?" asked Jess, readily guessing the drift of her friend's thoughts.

"I don't know, but I'm sure they had no legal right to her," was the reply.

"Oh, Peg! Suppose she should turn out to be a missing heiress!" Jess, who loved a romance, clasped her gauntleted hands.

Peggy laughed.

"Missing heiresses are not so common as you might suppose," she said; "I never met any one who had encountered any, except in story books."

"Still, it would be great if we had really found a long missing child, or--or something like that," concluded Jess, rather lamely.

"I can't see how we would be benefiting the child or its parents, either, since we have no way of knowing who the latter are," rejoined the practical Peggy, which remark closed the discussion for the time being.

It was not more than half an hour later when Jess uttered a sharp cry of alarm. From the forward part of the aeroplane a wisp of smoke had suddenly curled upward. Like a blue serpent of vapor it dissolved in the air almost so quickly as to make Jess believe, for an instant, that she had been the victim of an hallucination.

But that it was no figment of the imagination was evidenced a few moments later by Peggy herself. Aroused by Jess's cry, she had made an inspection of the machine, with alarming results. What these were speedily became manifest.

"Jess! The machine is on fire!" she cried afrightedly.

As if in verification of her words there came a puff of flame and a strong reek of gasoline. It was just then that both girls recalled that the Golden Butterfly carried twenty-five gallons of gasoline, without counting the reserve supply.

Fire on an aeroplane is even more terrifying than a similar casualty on any other type of machine. Hardly had Peggy's words confirming the alarming news left her lips when there came a cry from Jess.

The girl had just glanced at the barograph. It showed that they were then 1,500 feet above the surface of the earth. The girl had hardly made this discovery before, from beneath the "bow" of the monoplane, came a wave of flame; driven from the steering wheel by the heat, Peggy drew back toward her companion. Her face was ashen white.

Left to itself the aeroplane "yawed" wildly, like a craft without a rudder. Then suddenly it dashed down toward the earth, smoke and flames leaping from its front part.

Both girls uttered a cry of terror as the aircraft fell like a stone hurled into space. Faster and faster it dashed earthward without a

controlling hand to guide it. It was at this instant that Roy and Jimsy became aware of what had happened.

[Illustration: Both girls uttered a cry of terror as the air craft fell like a stone hurled into space.]

Instantly they swung their machine around in time to see the _Golden Butterfly_ make her sickening downward swoop. Both lads uttered a cry of fear as they saw what appeared to mean certain death for the two Girl Aviators.

Roy's fingers scarcely grasped the wheel of his machine as he saw the downward drop. Jimsy was as badly affected. But almost before they could grasp a full realization of the accident the _Golden Butterfly_ was almost on the ground. It was in a hilly bit of country, interspersed by small lakes or ponds.

A freak of the wind caught the blazing aeroplane as it fell and drove it right over one of these small bodies of water.

The _Golden Butterfly_ appeared to hesitate for one instant and then plunged right into the water, flinging the two girls out. Both were expert swimmers, but the shock of the sudden descent, and the abrupt manner in which they had been flung into the water had badly unstrung their nerves.

Jess struck out valiantly, but the next instant uttered a cry:

"Peg! Peg! I'm sinking!"

Peggy pluckily struck out for her chum and succeeded in seizing her. Then with brisk strokes she made for the shore, luckily only a few yards distant. It was at this juncture that the boys' machines came to earth almost simultaneously. High above Bess's _Dart_ hovered, and presently it, too, began to drop downward. Apparently the accident had not been seen from the auto, at any rate the car was not turned back toward the scene of the accident.

As the boys' aeroplanes struck the earth not far from the bank of the pond toward which Peggy was at that moment valiantly struggling, the two young aviators leaped out and set out at a run to the rescue. They reached the bank in the nick of time to pull out the two drenched, half-exhausted girls.

"At any rate the fall was a lucky one in a way!" gasped the optimistic Peggy, as soon as she caught her breath, "it put out the fire."

And so it had. Not only that, but the aeroplane, buoyed up by its broad wings, was still floating. On board the _Red Dragon_ was a long bit of rope. Jimsy produced this and then swam out to the drifting _Butterfly_. The rope was made fast to it and the craft dragged ashore. But when they got it to the bank the problem arose as to how they were going to drag it up the steep acclivity.

Again and again they tried; Bess, who had by this time alighted, aiding them. But it was all to no purpose. Even their united strength failed to move the heavy apparatus.

"I've got an idea!" shouted Jimsy suddenly, during a pause in their laborious operations.

"Good! Don't let it get away, I beg of you!" implored Peggy.

"Oh, Peg! Don't tease, besides, you don't look a bit cute with your hair all wet and dragged, and as for your dress--goodness!"

This came from Jess, herself sadly "rumpled" and in addition wet through. Before Peggy could reply to her chum's half rallying remark Jimsy, unabashed, continued:

"We'll hitch this rope to the _Red Dragon_ and then start her up for all she's worth."

"Jimsy, you're a genius!"

"A modern marvel!"

"A solid promontory of pure gray matter!"

In turn the remarks came from each of the party. But Jimsy, bothering not at all at the laughing encomiums, proceeded to secure the rope to the _Red Dragon_. This done, he started up the engine and clambered into his seat.

"All ashore that's going ashore!" he yelled, in mocking imitation of the stewards of an ocean liner.

There wasn't an instant's hesitation as he threw the load upon the engine. Then the rope tautened. It grew tight as a fiddle string.

"Goodness! It'll snap and the _Dragon_ will be broken!" cried Jess, in alarm.

But no such thing happened. Instead, as the _Dragon's_ powerful propeller blades "bit" into the air, the _Golden Butterfly_ obediently mounted the steep bank of the pond. Five minutes later the pretty craft stood on dry land and the party of young aviators were eagerly making an investigation of the damage done.

The cause of the fire was soon found. A tiny leak in the tank had allowed some gasoline to drip into the bottom of the chassis, or passenger carrier. Collecting here, it was plain that a back fire from the carburetor had ignited it.

Neither of the girls could repress a shudder as they thought of what might have occurred had they been higher in the air and no convenient pond handy for them to drop into. In such a case the flames might have reached the gasoline tank before they could be extinguished and inevitably a fearful explosion would have followed.

"I think you are the two luckiest girls in the world," declared Roy solemnly, as he concluded his examination and announced his conclusions. Naturally they fully agreed with him.

CHAPTER VII.

A STOP FOR THE NIGHT.

It was some two hours later that Meadville received the greatest excitement of its career. People rushed out of stores and houses as the "flock" of aeroplanes came into sight.

As they gazed down the young aviators felt a momentary regret that they had chosen a town in which to pass the first night of their motor flight. It appeared that they would get into difficulties when they attempted to make a landing.

But almost simultaneously they spied a public park, which appeared to offer a favorable landing place. As soon as their intention of descending there became manifest, however, the crowd made a headlong rush for the spot.

It was too late to seek some other location to alight even had there been one available. Trusting to luck that the eager spectators would get out of their way the four aeroplanes began their spiraling descent.

Roy was first in his big biplane. As the ponderous, white machine ranged down close to the park the crowd became well-nigh uncontrollable. They swarmed beneath the big machine, despite Roy's shouts of warning.

Skillfully as the boy manipulated the aircraft he could not check its descent once begun.

"Out of the way! I don't want to hurt you!" he shouted, as he dashed down.

But the crowd, sheeplike in their stupidity, refused to budge. Into the midst of them Roy, perforce, was compelled to drive. Once the throng perceived his intention, however, they scattered wildly. That is, all sought positions of safety but one man, a stout, red-faced individual, who appeared dazed or befuddled.

He stood his ground, glaring foolishly at the sky ship. With a quick turn of his wrist Roy swept the big biplane aside, but a wing tip brushed the stout man, toppling him over in a twinkling. By the time Roy had stopped his machine the man was on his feet again, bellowing furiously. He was not hurt, but his face was contorted with anger.

He pushed his way through the crowd toward the young aviator.

"You young scoundrel!" he yelled, "I'll fix you for that! I'll--" "Look out, here come the rest of them!" shouted the crowd at this juncture.

Nobody needed any warning this time. They fled in all directions as one after the other the _Golden Butterfly_, the _Red Dragon_ and the pretty, graceful _Dart_ dropped to earth.

"Wa'al, look at them gals, will yer!" shouted a voice in the crowd.

"What's the country coming to?" demanded another man. "Gals gallivanting around like gol-dinged birds!"

But the majority of the crowd took the pretty girl aviators to its heart. Somebody set up a cheer.

It was still ringing out when, to the huge relief of the embarrassed girls, the auto came rolling up with Miss Prescott and "The Wren," as they still called the latter.

The girls, leaving the boys to look after the aeroplanes, ran to the side of the car and were speedily ensconced in its roomy tonneau. "We'll see you at the hotel!" cried Roy, as the car rolled off again, much to the disappointment of the crowd.

Two local constables came up at this juncture and helped the boys keep the crowd back from the machines. The throng seemed souvenir mad. Many of them insisted on writing their names with pencils on the wings of the air craft. Others would have gone further and actually stripped the aeroplanes of odd parts had they not been held back.

"This is the last time we'll land in a town of this size," declared Roy indignantly, as he helped the constables shove back an obstreperous individual who insisted on examining the motor of the _Dart_.

With the help of the constables a sheltering place for the machines was finally found. A livery stable that had gone out of business the week before was located across the street from the small park in which they had alighted. The owner of the property happened to be in the crowd and a bargain with him was soon struck. The aeroplanes were then trundled on their landing wheels into this shelter and the doors closed. Roy, for a small sum, engaged a tall, gangling-looking youth, whose name was Tam Tammass, to guard the doors and keep off the inquisitive. This done, thoroughly tired out, the boys sought the hotel. Like most towns of its size and importance Meadville only boasted one hostelry worthy of the name. This place, the Fountain House, as it was called, was a decent enough looking hotel and the young aviators were warmly welcomed. After supper, for in Meadville nobody "dined," Miss Prescott and the girls sauntered out with The Wren to obtain some clothing for the waif who had so strangely come into their possession. It was odd, but somehow they none of them even suggested giving up the queer little foundling to the authorities as had originally been their intention. Instead, although none of them actually voiced it, it appeared that tacitly they had decided to keep the child with them.

While they were gone on their errand of helpfulness Roy and Jimsy were seated on the porch of the hotel watching, with more or less languid interest, the inhabitants of the town passing back and forth. Many of them lingered in front of the hotel, for aviators were not common objects in that part of the country, and already the party had become local celebrities.

"I guess we'll go inside," said Roy, at length, "I'm getting sick of being looked at as if I was some sort of natural curiosity."

"Same here," rejoined Jimsy, "we'll go in and I'll play you a game of checkers."

"You're on," was the response.

But as the boys rose to go, or rather the instant before they left their seats, there came a heavy step behind Roy and a gruff voice snarled:

"What are you doing in that chair?"

"Sitting in it," responded Roy, in not too pleasant a voice. The tone in which he had been addressed had aroused a hot resentment in him toward the speaker.

Turning he saw the same red-faced man whom he had been unfortunate enough to knock down.

Instantly his manner changed. He felt genuinely sorry for the accident and hastened to explain that such was the case. But a glowering glance was the only response he received. "You done it a-purpose. Don't tell me," snarled the red-faced individual, "an' now you git right out uv that chair or--or I'll make you!"

Both boys stared at the man in amazement. His tone was coarse and bullying to a degree.

"We are not occupying these chairs to your inconvenience," declared Roy stoutly, "there are lots of others."

He indicated several rockers placed at intervals along the hotel porch, and all empty.

"That chair you're sitting in is mine," snapped the man, in response.

"Got a mortgage on it, eh?" smiled Jimsy amiably.

"I'll show you kids how much of a mortgage I've got on it," was the reply.

It was just then that a lad of about Roy's own age, but with a surly, hang-dog sort of look, emerged from the smoking-room of the hotel.

"What's up, father?" he demanded, addressing the red-faced man.

"Why, Dan, the kids have appropriated my chair."

"Oh, those flying kids. Well, they'll see that they ain't everything around here," responded the lad; "I reckon Jim Cassell has some say here, eh, dad?"

"I reckon so, son," grinned the red-faced man, in response to this elegant speech; "now, then, are you going to give up that chair or not?"

"I was just leaving it when you came out," rejoined Roy, who, by this time, was fairly boiling over. "Under the present conditions, however, I think I shall continue to occupy it."

"You will, eh?" snarled out Dan Cassell, "then I'll show you how to vacate it--so!"

With the words he laid hands on the back of the chair and jerked it from under the young aviator. Roy, caught entirely off his guard, was flung to the floor of the porch. He was up in a flash, but as he rose to his feet Dan Cassell, evidently excited by what he deemed a great triumph, aimed a savage blow at him.

Jimsy was rushing to his assistance but the red-faced man suddenly blocked his path.

"Hold off, son! hold off!" he warned, "unless you want to get the same dose."

CHAPTER VIII.

ROY MAKES AN ENEMY.

In the meantime Roy had skillfully avoided Dan Cassell's blow, and was aggressively on the defensive. He was a lad who did not care for fighting, but notwithstanding was a trained boxer. Something of this seemed to dawn on Dan Cassell as the boy he sought to pummel dodged his attack with such cleverness.

For a moment Dan stood stock-still with doubled up fists and a scowl on his not unhandsome, though weak and vicious features. Then, with a bellow, he rushed upon Roy, who contented himself by sidestepping the furious onslaught.

This appeared to enrage Dan Cassell the more. Either he interpreted it as portraying cowardice, or else he deemed that he had his opponent at his mercy. At any rate, after an instant's pause he rushed at Roy with both fists. It was the young aviator's opportunity.

"Look out!" he warned.

The next instant the pugnacious Dan Cassell found himself upon his back, regarding a multitude of constellations.

At almost precisely the same time Jimsy's fist happened to collide with the point of the jaw of the fallen battler's father.

"Sorry; but I simply had to, you know," remarked the nonchalant Jimsy, as the red-faced man found himself occupying a position not dissimilar to that of his son.

Both boys were heartily sorry for what had happened, the more so for the reason that at the very instant that both crestfallen bullies were scrambling to their feet the hotel door opened and several of the guests came out to ascertain the cause of the trouble.

Among them was Jonas Hardcastle, the proprietor of the place.

"What's up? What's the trouble?" he demanded, in dismay, as he viewed the scene of the confusion.

"It's those brats of aviators, or whatever they call themselves," bellowed Cassell, who was purple with fury; "they attacked Dan and me and assaulted us brutally."

The landlord looked doubtingly at the man. Then he turned to Roy.

"What are the facts?" he asked.

Roy told him unhesitatingly the whole truth. When he had concluded Jonas Hardcastle spoke.

"You've been hanging around here too long, Jim Cassell," he said, in a voice that quivered with indignation; "now make yourself scarce, both you and your son. Don't annoy my guests any more."

Cassell, nursing a spot on his jaw which was rapidly growing a beautiful plum color, lurched off without a word. His son followed. It was not until he reached the street that he spoke. Then, in a voice that trembled from suppressed fury, he hissed out:

"All right for you kids. You think you've played a smart trick on Dan and me; but I'll fix you! Just watch!"

Without uttering another syllable he slouched off into the gathering darkness, followed by his son, who bestowed a parting scowl on Roy and Jimsy.

"I'm sorry that you had a row with them," remarked Jonas Hardcastle, as the pair vanished.

"How's that?" inquired Roy. "They forced it on us, and--" "I know. I know all about that," was the rejoinder, "but Cassell is quite by way of being a politician hereabouts, and he might try to make it uncomfortable for you."

"In what way?" demanded Jimsy.

"Oh, many ways. Those fellows have no scruples. To tell you the truth, boys, I guess you haven't heard the last of this."

With this he left them, a prey to no very comfortable thoughts.

"I'm half inclined to believe what he said," declared Jimsy.

"In just what way?"

"Why, about the harm this fellow Cassell can do us. In every community like this you'll find one local 'Pooh-bah' who runs things pretty much as he likes. They have satellites who will do just about as they're told."

"You mean--" "That we'd better keep a good lookout on the aeroplanes. From my judgment of Cassell I don't think he's got nerve enough to attack us directly, but he can wreak his vengeance on our machines if we don't watch pretty closely."

"I'm inclined to think you're right. But don't say a word of all this to the girls. It might upset them. You and I will decide on a plan of action later on. To tell you the truth, I'm not any too sure of our newly acquired watchman, Tam Tammass."

"Nor I. We'll wait till the rest get back and then take a stroll down to that livery stable. Seems funny, doesn't it, to stable aeroplanes in a livery stable?"

"Well, why not? Wasn't Pegasus, the first flying machine on record, a horse?"

"Humph; that's so," agreed Jimsy, whose supply of classical knowledge was none too plentiful.

It was not long after this that the girls returned. With them came The Wren in a neat dress and new shoes, an altogether different looking little personage from the waif of the woods whom they had rescued at noon.

"Why, Wren," cried Peggy, "you are positively pretty. In a month's time we won't know you."

"A month's time?" sighed the child; "am I going to stay with you as long as that?"

Miss Prescott caught the wan little figure in her arms.

"Yes, and many months after that," she cried.

Roy and Jimsy exchanged glances.

"Another member of the family," exclaimed Roy; "if we go at this rate we'll have acquired an entire set of new sisters by the time we reach the Big Smokies."

CHAPTER IX.

JIMSY FALLS ASLEEP.

"Anybody been around, Tam?"

Roy asked the question, as later on that evening he and Jimsy dropped around to the disused livery stable in accordance with their plan.

Tam shook his head.

"Nobody bane round," he rejoined, and then, after a moment's pause, "cept Yim Cassell and his boy Dan."

"Jim Cassell and his son," echoed Roy, "the very people we don't want around here. What did they want?"

"They want know where you bane," rejoined the Norwegian youth.

"Yes; and what did you tell them?"

"I bane tell them I skall not know," responded Tam.

"And then?"

"They bane ask me if ay have key by door."

"Oh, they did, eh? What did you say?"

"I say I bane not have key."

"Then what did they do?"

"They bane go 'way."

"Didn't say anything else?"

"No, they must go."

"Said nothing about coming back?"

"No."

"All right, Tarn, you can go home now. Here's your money."

"You bane want me no more?"

"No; we'll watch here ourselves to-night. Good night."

"Good night," rejoined Tam, pocketing his money and shuffling off down the street.

He had hardly gone two blocks when from the shadow of an elm-shaded yard the figure of Dan Cassell slipped out and intercepted him.

"So you've been fired, eh?"

He shot the question at the simple-minded Norwegian lad with vicious emphasis.

"No, I no bane fired; they bane tell me no want me more."

"Well, isn't that being fired? Moreover, I can tell you that they've hired another fellow in your place."

The Norwegian youth's light blue eyes lit up with indignant fire. Like most of his race he was keenly sensitive once aroused, and while he was quite agreeable to being dropped from his temporary job, he hated to think of being supplanted in it. Crafty Dan Cassell was playing his cards well, for a purpose that will be seen ere long.

"So they bane fire me," ejaculated Tam.

"That's the size of it. I guess you feel pretty sore, Tam, don't you?"

"No, they bane pay me wale; but I no like being fired."

"I should think not. The idea of a man like you being dropped. What did they tell you when they let you go?"

"That they bane watch place themselves."

Dan Cassell smiled. His crafty methods had elicited something of real value after all.

"Did they say they were going to watch all night?" he asked.

"Yes," rejoined the Norwegian, "they ask about you, too."

"Humph! What did they want to know?"

"If you'd been round by stable and what I bane tale you."

"What did you say?"

"I tale them the truth. I say that you and your father bane by stable this evening."

Dan's face darkened.

"You had no business to tell them anything," he snarled. Then, with a sudden change of front: "See here, Tam, do you want to make some money?"

"Sure, I bane like make money."

"Then come into the house a minute. Dad and I want to talk to you."

So saying Dan took the Norwegian by the arm and led him in through a gate in a whitewashed picket fence. Beyond the fence was a fairly prosperous looking house, on the piazza of which lounged Jim Cassell smoking a cigar.

"Well, Tam," he said, "lost your job?"

The Norwegian replied in the affirmative.

"Well, never mind, I've got another for you," replied Jim Cassell, in what was for him an unwontedly amiable tone; "can you go to work at once?"

"Ay bane work any time skol be," spoke the Norwegian, and a puzzled expression flitted over his face as both Cassells broke into what was to him an inexplicable fit of laughter at his words.

In the meantime the boys had telephoned to the hotel that work on the aeroplanes would detain them till late. They did not wish to inform the girls that they were undertaking a night watch, as that would have led to all sorts of questions, and if their fears proved ungrounded they felt pretty sure of coming in for a lot of "joshing."

They agreed to divide the night into two parts, Jimsy watching till midnight and then awakening Roy who would take up the vigil till dawn. This arrangement having been made they secured a light lantern from an adjacent hardware store and, entering the deserted livery stable, prepared to carry out their plans. With the canvas covers of the aeroplanes Roy managed to fix up quite a comfortable bed on a pile of hay left in a sort of loft over the abandoned stable.

As for Jimsy, he made himself as comfortable as possible in the chassis of the _Golden Butterfly_, the seats of which were padded as luxuriously as those of a touring car. He had a book dealing with aeronautic subjects with him, and, drawing the lantern close to the aeroplane, he buried himself in the volume.

In the meantime Roy had rolled himself up in his canvas coverings and was sound asleep. For a long time Jimsy read on. At first frequent footsteps passed the door of the stable, but as it grew later these ceased. Folks went to bed early in Meadville. Long before midnight there was not a sound on the streets.

Jimsy read doggedly on. But he was painfully conscious of an almost irresistible desire to lie back and doze off, if only for a few seconds. The exciting events of the day had tired him out, nor was the book he was reading one calculated to keep his wits stirring. It was a technical work of abstruse character.

Jimsy's head began to nod. With a sharp effort he aroused himself only to catch himself dozing off once more.

"See here, Jim Bancroft, this won't do," he sharply admonished himself, "you're on duty, understand? On duty! Wake up and keep your eyes open."

But try as he would tired Nature finally asserted herself. Jimsy's head fell forward, his eyes closed for good and he snored in right good earnest. He was sound asleep.

It was about half an hour after he dozed off that a window in the rear of the stable framed a face. A crafty, eager face it was, as the yellow

light of the lantern revealed its outlines. Dan Cassell, for it was he, gazed sharply about him. He swiftly took in the posture of the sleeping boy and a smile spread over his countenance.

Dropping from the ladder he had raised outside, he joined two figures waiting for him in the shadow of the livery barn.

"It's too easy," he chuckled, "only one kid there and he's sound asleep. Got everything ready?"

"Dey all bane ready, Maister Cassell," rejoined the slow, drawling voice of the Norwegian Tam.

"Now don't botch the job," warned the elder Cassell, who was the third member of the party; "remember it means a lot of trouble for us if we're caught."

"No danger of that, dad. Come on, I'll go first and you and Tam follow."

"Is the window open?"

"No, but it slides back. It's an easy drop to the floor from it."

"All right, go ahead. I'll be glad when the job's over. I'm almost inclined to drop out of it."

"And let those kids get away with what they did? Not much, dad. We'll give them a lesson they won't forget in a hurry. Come on."

He began climbing the ladder. Behind him came his worthy parent, and Tam formed the last member of the now silent procession. The Norwegian carried a bulky package of some kind, the contents of which it would have been impossible to guess save that it gave out a metallic sound as Tam moved with it.

Dan Cassell reached the window, slid it noiselessly back in its grooves and then, crawling through, dropped lightly to the floor within. He was followed by his father and Tam.

But Jimsy slept on. Slept heavily and dreamlessly, while deadly peril crept upon him.

CHAPTER X.

PEGGY'S INTUITION.

The movements of the invaders of the stable, which now housed the "winged steeds" of the young aviators, were mysterious in the extreme. The Norwegian carried a tin can containing some sort of liquid which he was ordered to pour about the floor in the neighborhood of the aeroplanes. This done, Dan Cassell collected several scraps of litter and made quite a pile of it.

"All ready now, I guess," he said, with what was meant as an attempt at a grin. But his lips were pale, and his forced jollity was a dismal failure. As for his father, he made no attempt to conceal his agitation.

"Dan, they may be burned alive," he faltered; "better call it all off."

"Not when we've gone as far as this with it," was the rejoinder; "give me a match."

"Dan!"

"It's all right, dad. They'll wake in time."

"But if not?"

"Then they'll have to take their medicine."

With fingers that trembled as if their owner was palsied, Jim Cassell handed his son some matches. The latter took one, bent low over the pile he had collected and struck the lucifer.

A yellow sputter of flame followed, and the next instant he was holding it to the pile of litter which had been previously soaked by the contents of the Norwegian's can.

But before he could accomplish his purpose and set fire to the pile of odds and ends saturated to double inflammability by the kerosene the Norwegian had carried, there came a startling interruption.

There was a knock at the door and a girlish voice cried:

"Roy! Roy, let me in!"

"Furies!" exclaimed Dan Cassell under his breath. "It's one of those girls."

"Come on. Let's get away quick!" exclaimed his father, trembling from nervous agitation.

"Not before I set a match to this," exclaimed Dan Cassell viciously.

He touched the match to the pile and the flames leaped up.

"Now for our getaway," he cried, and the three fire-bugs ran for the window by which they had made their entrance.

In the meantime a perfect fusillade of blows had been showered on the door outside. Jimsy awoke just as the last of the three midnight intruders vanished through the window. His first instinct was a hot flush of shame over the feeling that he had betrayed his trust.

Then to his ears came the voice that had alarmed the Cassells and their tool.

"Roy! Jimsy! Are you there?"

"It's Peggy!" gasped Jimsy.

"And Jess," he added the next instant, and simultaneously there came the pounding of a stick on the door.

"This is an officer of the law. Open up at once."

Jimsy, dazed by his sleep, had not till then noticed the blazing pile of litter. Now he did so with a quick cry of horror. The stuff was blazing

up fiercely. Already there was an acrid reek in the air.

"The place is on fire!" he shouted.

The next moment there came a violent assault on the door and the crazy lock parted from its rotten fastenings as a man attired in a police officer's uniform burst into the place. Behind him came two wide-eyed frightened girls. The leaping flames lit up their faces vividly.

"It's fire sure enough!" cried the police officer.

"Great Scot, what's happening?"

It was Roy who shouted the question. He was peering down from the loft where he had been sleeping. The uproar had awakened him and in a jiffy he was among them.

"Quick! the fire extinguishers!" he cried, and Jimsy, readily understanding, secured the flame-killing apparatus from the biplane and from the _Red Dragon_.

He and Roy, aided by the officer, fought the flames vigorously, and, luckily, were able to subdue them, though if it had not been for the as yet unexplained arrival of Peggy and Jess it is doubtful if they could have coped with the blaze. When it was all out Peggy rushed into explanations.

"Something warned me that you were in danger," she exclaimed, "and I woke up Jess and we found this officer and came down here."

"What gift of second sight have you?" demanded Roy, gazing at the smoking, blackened pile that had threatened the destruction of the inflammable premises.

"I don't know. Womanly intuition, perhaps. Oh, Roy!"

The girl burst into a half-hysterical sob and threw her arms about her brother's neck.

"You arrived in the nick of time, sis," he said, gently disengaging himself from her clasp, "a little more and--"

He did not finish the sentence. There was no need for him to.

"Begorry, the ould place 'ud hev bin a pile of cinders in an hour's time," declared the policeman.

It was Jess's turn to give an hysterical little sob.

Roy turned to Jimsy.

"Did you see anything? The place is reeking with kerosene. It was a plot to destroy the aeroplanes and perhaps ourselves."

"|--|--"

Jimsy stammered. The words seemed to choke up in his throat. How was he to confess that he had failed in his trust--had slept while danger threatened?

"Well?"

Roy waited, plainly surprised. It was not like Jimsy to hesitate and stammer in this way.

At last it came out with a rush.

"I--I--you'll never forgive me, any of you--I was asleep."

"Asleep! Oh, Jimsy!"

There was a world of reproach in Jess's voice. But Peggy interrupted her.

"How was it, Jimsy?" she asked softly.

"I don't know. I give you my word I don't know."

Jimsy's voice held a world of self-reproach.

"I was reading," he went on, hurrying over the words as if anxious to get his confession over with, "that book of Grotz's on monoplane navigation. I felt sleepy and--and the next thing I knew I woke up to hear you pounding on the door and shouting."

"A good thing the young ladies found me," put in the policeman; "shure I was after laughing at them at first, but then, begorry, I decided to come along with them. It's glad I am that I did."

"Who can have done this?" asked Roy, who had not a word of reproach for his chum, although Jimsy had failed dismally in a position of trust.

"Begorry, they might have burned you alive!" cried the policeman indignantly.

"No question about that," rejoined Roy; "it was a diabolical plot. Who could have attempted such a thing?"

"Wait till I call up and have detectives sent down here," said Officer McCarthy. "I'm after thinking this is too deep for us to solve."

Nevertheless, each of that little group but the policeman had his or her own idea on the matter.

CHAPTER XI.

A MEAN REVENGE!

The result of the telephone call was a request to call at the Police Headquarters of the little town and give a detailed account of the affair.

"Gracious! I should think that the only way to get a clue would be to send a detective down here," exclaimed Peggy, on receipt of this information.

"We have our own ways of doing them things, miss," rejoined the policeman with dignity.

Then there being nothing for it but to obey instructions of the authorities, they all set out for the police station. They were half way there when Jimsy recollected that they had left the aeroplanes unguarded.

"'Twill make no difference at all at all," declared the policeman; "shure it's too late for anyone to be about."

"It wasn't too late for them to set that fire though," rejoined Roy in a low voice.

At police headquarters they were received by two sleepy-looking officials who questioned them at length and said they would be at the stable in the morning to hunt for clews.

"Why not go after them now, while the trail is hot?" inquired Jimsy.

"We have our own ways of doing these things, young man," was the reply, delivered with ponderous dignity.

"Well, we might as well go to bed and get a few hours' sleep anyhow," suggested Roy; "I can hardly keep my eyes open. How about you, Jimsy?"

"I--I--I've had some sleep already you know," rejoined Jimsy, reddening.

Thoroughly tired out from their long day and excitement, the party slept till late the next day. The first thing after breakfast plans for the continuance of the trip were discussed, and the day's program mapped out. This done, the girls and boys set out for the stable to look over the machines.

They found a pompous-looking policeman on guard in front of the place, ostentatiously pacing up and down. On identifying themselves they were at once admitted however. The man explained that he had only been on guard for an hour or two, and that during that time nothing worthy of mention had occurred.

While Jimsy was talking to him Roy and the others entered the stable. An instant later Roy, too excited to talk, came rushing out of the dis-used livery barn.

"What's up now, Roy?" demanded Jimsy, gazing at his chum, who for his part appeared to be too excited to get his words out.

"There's only three!" gasped Roy.

"Three what?" cried Jimsy.

"Three aeroplanes," returned Roy.

"Rubbish, you haven't got your eyes open yet."

"I'm right, I tell you; come in and count them if you don't believe me."

"Roy is right," cried Peggy, running up to the group; "the _Golden Butterfly_ has been stolen!"

"Stolen!" interjected Jimsy.

"That's right!" cried Jess; "those stupid police people left the barn

unguarded. Whoever tried to set it on fire must have returned and stolen the _Butterfly_."

They regarded each other blankly. Was this Sky Cruise that they had looked forward to with such eager anticipation to be nothing but a series of mishaps?

"It's awful!" gasped Peggy; "nothing but trouble since we started out."

"D'ye think it was stolen?" asked the policeman with startling intelligence.

"Well, it didn't fly of its own accord," was Peggy's rejoinder, delivered with blighting sarcasm.

The patrolman subsided.

"Maybe we can find it yet," suggested Jess.

"I'd like to know how," put in Jimsy disgustedly.

"Perhaps we can trace it. It must have been wheeled away."

"Ginger! That's so," cried Roy, snapping his fingers; "it would leave an odd track too, wouldn't it?"

"Well there's no harm in trying to trace it," admitted Jimsy, who appeared rather skeptical.

"Come on, then; get busy," urged Roy eagerly.

The next instant there came a cry from Peggy.

"I've struck the trail!" she cried.

"Where?"

The word came in chorus.

"Here! Look; you know the _Butterfly_ had peculiar kind of tires. See, it was wheeled up the street in that direction."

She pointed to where the village main thoroughfare ended in a country road.

"I'm not after takin' much stock in that," remarked the policeman.

"We won't bother you," rejoined Roy rather heatedly; "I guess we won't wait till your local Sherlock Holmes gets on the trail, we'll follow it ourselves."

"But who'll go?"

The question came from Jimsy.

"We can't all go, that's certain," exclaimed Bess.

"Tell you what we'll do, we'll count out," declared Jess, her eyes dancing.

"A good idea," hailed the others.

"Roy, you start it; but remember, not more than three can go."

"Why?" inquired Peggy point blank.

"Because we'll have to take the car, and someone must be left to look after Aunt Sally and the aeroplanes," spoke Roy, falling in with Jimsy's plans.

"Well, come on and count out," urged Jess.

"Yes, that's it. Let's see who will be it," cried the others.

"Very well, if I can remember the rhyme," responded Roy. "How does it go anyway?"

"Inte, minte," suggested Jimsy.

"Oh, yes! That's it," responded Roy. "I've got it now. Inte, minte, cute corn, apple seeds and briar thorn, briar thorn and limber lock, three geese in a flock, one flew east and one flew west, one flew into a cuckoo's nest, O-U-T out, with a ragged dish clout, out!" ending with Bess.

"Sorry for you, Bess!" cried the lad, "but you're the first victim to be offered up."

"Oh, well, it's too hot to go chasing all over dusty country roads," declared Bess bravely, although she would dearly have loved to go on the adventurous search for the missing aeroplane.

One after another they were counted out till only Roy, Peggy and Jimsy remained.

"Hurry up and let's get off," urged Jimsy as the "elimination trials," as they might be termed, were concluded.

"Very well. We'll get the car--it's in the garage at the hotel--and incidentally, we might get a lunch put up also. It may be a long chase."

The officer regarded them with frank amazement.

"My! but you city folks rush things," he exclaimed.

"I suppose they'll get busy on this case day after to-morrow," exclaimed Roy disgustedly, as they hastened away.

It was half an hour later that the big touring car, with Roy at the wheel, rolled out of the hotel yard. Jake had been told off to guard the livery stable and the aeroplanes while the rest remained with Miss Prescott, who was seriously agitated at the accumulation of troubles her party had met with since setting out.

"I declare," she said, "I wish I was back at home where I could get a decent cup of tea and be free of worries."

The trail of the aeroplane was not difficult to follow. It led down the village main street and thence along a country road till it came to a sort of cross roads. Here it branched off and followed a by-road for a mile or so. At a gate in a hedge all signs failed however, although it was plain that the machine had been wheeled through the gap and taken

across a field.

Beyond this field lay what appeared to be a wilderness of woods and bushes.

"Stumped!" exclaimed Roy, as he brought the auto to a stop.

CHAPTER XII.

THE FINDING OF THE "BUTTERFLY."

"Well, what next?" asked Jimsy.

"Make a search of those woods, I suppose," replied Roy; "there's nothing else to do."

"No, the trail has brought us here," replied Peggy energetically; "we must make a determined effort to find the _Butterfly_."

"Maybe they've damaged it so that we won't be able to do anything with it when we do get it," spoke Jimsy presently.

"Whom do you mean by they?" asked Roy.

"As if you didn't know. Is there any doubt in your mind that that fellow Cassell is at the bottom of all this?"

"Not very much, I'll admit," replied Roy; "I wonder if that accounts for the inactivity of the police."

"In just what way?"

"Well, the fellow's a local politician and has a lot of 'pull'."

"He _must_ have, to get away with anything like this," was Jimsy's indignant outburst.

"Well, don't let us waste time speculating," put in Peggy, in her brisk manner; "the thing to do now is to get back the _Golden Butterfly_."

"You're right, Peg," came from both boys.

By this time they were out of the car, which they left standing at the roadside while they examined the vicinity for tracks. But the grass in the field was fairly long and no traces remained. Yet, inasmuch as the tracks of the _Butterfly_ ended at the gap in the hedge, it was manifest that that was the point at which it had been wheeled off the road.

"What next?" asked Jimsy, as it became certain that there was little use in searching for a trail in the meadow.

"It's like looking for a needle in that proverbial haystack," struck in Peggy.

"In my opinion we need the patience of Job and the years of old Methuselah," opined Jimsy.

Roy alone was not discouraged.

"It can't be so very far off," he urged; "it stands to reason that they can't have come much further than this since midnight, supposing the machine to have been stolen about that hour."

The others agreed with him.

"We'll search all around here, including those woods," declared Peggy.

"Well, they can't have taken it very far into the woods," declared Jimsy; "the spread of its wings would prevent that."

"That's so," agreed Roy; "I think we are getting pretty 'warm' right now."

"All I am afraid of is that they may have damaged it," breathed Peggy anxiously.

"It would be in line with their other tactics," agreed Roy; "men who would try to burn down a stable with two boys in it, just to obtain revenge for a fancied insult or injury, are capable of anything."

Without further waste of time they crossed the meadow and came to the edge of the wood. At the outskirts of the woods the trees grew thinly and it was plain that it would have been possible to wheel an aeroplane into their shadow, despite the breadth of its wing-spread.

They passed under the outlying trees and presently emerged into a small, open space, in the midst of which was a hut. Just beyond this hut was a sight that caused them to shout aloud with joy. There, apparently unharmed, stood the missing aeroplane.

"Hurray!" shouted Roy, dashing forward.

The others were close on his heels. In their excitement they paid little or no attention to the surroundings. It might have been better for them had they done so. As they dashed across the clearing two male figures slipped off among the thicker trees that lay beyond the open space and the hut.

A brief examination showed them that the aeroplane was undamaged. There were a few scratches on it, but beyond that it appeared in perfect condition.

"We'll fly back," declared Jimsy to Peggy; "Roy can run the auto home."

"That's agreeable to me," responded Roy; "but suppose we examine the vicinity first. We might get a clew as to the rascals who are responsible for this."

"That's true," agreed Jimsy.

"Then suppose we start with the hut first."

They accepted this proposition eagerly. The hut was a substantial looking building with a padlock on the door. But the portal stood wide open, the padlock hanging in a hasp.

"What if anyone pounces on us?" asked Peggy in rather a scared tone.

"No fear of that," replied Roy, "the place is plainly unoccupied."

They entered the hut and found it to be as primitive inside as its exterior would indicate. A table and two rude chairs stood within. These, with the exception of a rusty cook stove in one corner, formed the sole furnishings. There was not even a window in the place.

"Nothing much to be found here," declared Roy after a cursory examination; "I guess this shack was put up by lumbermen or hunters. It doesn't seem to have been occupied for a long time."

"I guess the men who took the aeroplane must have been pretty familiar with the place though," opined Jimsy.

"No doubt of that," replied Roy, "but that doesn't give us any clew to their identity beyond bare suspicions."

"Yes, and suspicions aren't much good in law," chimed in Peggy, "they--Good gracious!"

The door closed suddenly with a bang. Before Jimsy could spring across the room to open it there came a sharp click.

"Somebody's padlocked it on the outside!" he cried.

"And we're prisoners!" gasped Peggy.

"Yes, and without any chance of getting out, either," declared Jimsy; "there's not even a window in the place."

"Well this is worse and more of it," cried Roy. "Who can have done that?"

"The same people that stole the _Golden Butterfly," _ declared Peggy. "Hark!"

Outside they heard rapidly retreating footsteps, followed by a harsh laugh.

"Let us out!" shouted Roy.

"You can stay there till judgment day, for all I care," came back a hoarse, rasping voice; "you kids were too fresh, and now you're getting what's coming to you."

CHAPTER XIII.

PRISONERS IN THE HUT.

It was almost pitch dark within the hut. Only from a crack under the door could any light enter. For an instant after the taunting of the voices of the men who had locked them in reached their ears, the trio of youthful prisoners remained silent.

Peggy it was who spoke first.

"Well, what's to be done now?" she demanded.

"We've got to get out of here," responded Jimsy, with embarrassing candor.

"That's plain enough," struck in Roy; "but how do you propose to do it?"

"I don't know; let's look about. Maybe there's a chimney or something."

"There's no opening larger than that one where the stove pipe goes through. I've noticed that already," responded Roy.

"Phew! This is a fix for fair."

"I should say so; but kicking about it won't help us at all. Let's make a thorough investigation."

In the darkness they groped about, but could discover nothing that appeared to hold out a promise of escape. The two boys shook the door violently; but it was firm on its hinges.

Next Roy proposed to cut a way through it with his pocket knife.

"We'd be starved to death by the time you cut through that stuff," declared Jimsy.

In proof of this he kicked the door, and the resulting sound showed that it was built of solid wood without any thin panels which might be cut through.

"What next?"

Peggy asked the question as the two perspiring lads stood perplexed without speaking or moving.

"Jiggered if I know," spoke Jimsy; "can't you or Roy think of anything?"

"We might try to batter the door down with that table," suggested Roy.

"It's worth trying. We've got to get out of here somehow."

The two boys picked up the heavy, roughly made table and commenced a violent assault on the door. But although they dented it heavily, and sent some splinters flying, the portal held its own. At length they desisted from pure weariness. The situation looked hopeless.

"It looks pretty bad," spoke Jimsy.

"It does indeed," agreed Roy. "Peggy, I wish we hadn't brought you along."

"And why, pray, Roy Prescott?"

"Oh, because--because, well, this isn't the sort of thing for a girl."

"Well, I guess if my brother can stand it I can," rejoined the girl, pluckily and in a firm voice.

"Well, there's no use minimizing the fix we're in," declared Roy. "This is a lonesome bit of country. It may be a week before anyone will come around. We've just got to get out, that's all there is to it."

"I wish you'd solve the problem then," sighed Jimsy; "it's too much for me."

"I'll make another search of the premises, maybe we can stumble across something that may aid us. At any rate, it will give us something to do and keep our minds off the predicament we are in."

Roy struck a match, of which he had a plentiful supply in his pockets. As the yellow flame sputtered up in the semi-gloom it showed every corner of the small hut. But it did not reveal anything that promised a chance to gain their liberty.

All at once, just as the light was sputtering out, Peggy gave a cry. Her eye had been caught by a glistening metal object in one corner of the hut.

"What is it?" asked Roy.

"A gun--a shot-gun standing in that corner over there."

"Huh!" sniffed Jimsy, "a lot of good that does us."

"On the contrary," declared Peggy stoutly, "if it's loaded it may serve to get us free."

"I'm from Missouri," declared Jimsy enigmatically.

"What's your idea, sis?" asked Roy, who knew that Peggy's ideas were usually worth following up.

"I remember reading only a short time ago of a man trapped much as we are who escaped by blowing off the lock of his prison with a gun he carried," replied Peggy; "maybe it would work in our case."

"Maybe it would if--" rejoined Roy.

"If what?"

"If the gun was loaded, which is most unlikely."

"Well, try it and see," urged Peggy.

"Yes, do," echoed Jimsy; "Peggy's plan sounds like a good idea. Maybe some hunter left it here and the shells are still in it."

"No harm in finding out anyway," declared Roy.

He struck another match and picked up the gun. It was an antique looking weapon badly-rusted. But on opening the breech he uttered a cry of joy.

"Good luck!" he exclaimed, "two shells,--one in each barrel."

"Well, put it to the test," urged Jimsy.

"All right. If this fails, though, I don't know what we'll do."

"Don't worry about that now. Try it."

"I'm going to. Don't get peevish."

Roy crossed the room to the door. Raising the gun to his shoulder he

placed the muzzle about opposite to where he thought the padlock must be located.

"Look out for a big noise, sis," he warned.

Peggy gave a little scream and raised her hands to her ears. She disliked firearms.

"Ready?" sang out Jimsy.

"All ready," came the reply.

"Then fire!"

Simultaneously with Jimsy's order came a deafening report. In that confined space it sounded as if a huge cannon had been fired. Roy staggered back under the "kick" of the heavy charge.

"Once more," he announced.

Again a sonorous report sounded, but this time a section of the door was blown right out of the framework. The daylight streamed in through it.

"Now then for the test," cried Roy. "Come on, Jimsy."

The two boys placed their shoulders to the door. With a suddenness that was startling, it burst open, and they faced freedom. The lock had been fairly driven from its hold by the twice repeated charge of shot.

The young aviators were free once more. But it remained to be seen if the men who wished them harm had wrought their vengeance on the _Golden Butterfly_.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHAT'S TO BE DONE WITH THE WREN?

The _Golden Butterfly_, as an examination proved, had not been damaged during their imprisonment in the hut. Evidently, the men who had slammed the door and padlocked it had made off at top speed as soon as they had completed what they hoped would be a source of sore trouble to the young aviators.

"And now we'll fly back as agreed," declared Peggy merrily.

Her spirits, almost down to zero in the hut, had recovered themselves marvellously in the fresh open air. She was radiant.

"I declare that the stay in the hut has done you good," declared Jimsy, looking at her admiringly.

"Maybe it has--by contrast," returned Peggy.

"Like a sea trip," put in Roy. "I've heard that people who suffer from sea sickness are so much relieved when they get ashore that they imagine their good spirits are due to a change in their condition."

"Well, that applies to me," returned Peggy; "I didn't think we'd get out of that hut so easily. How do you suppose that gun came to be there?"

"The hunters who use the hut must have left it there," rejoined Roy; "I wonder if they'll ever know how useful it was to us."

"More likely they'll be mad when they find that the lock is blown off the door," laughed Jimsy.

"Well, so-long, folks, I'm going to start back in the auto," declared Roy.

"We'll beat you into town," challenged Jimsy.

"More than likely, if the _Golden Butterfly_ is doing her best," was the rejoinder.

Ten minutes later the two machines were racing back to Meadville at almost top speed. Of course the speedy _Golden Butterfly_ won, but then a vehicle of the air does not have to contend with the obstacles that a land conveyance does.

They found Miss Prescott almost on the verge of hysterics. A garbled version of the events of the night had been brought to her and this, coupled with the long absence of the three young folks, had made her extremely nervous.

"I declare, it seems as if you just can't keep out of trouble," she said.

"Well, it actually does seem so, I admit," confessed Peggy; "but we promise to be very good for the rest of the trip."

"And never trouble trouble till trouble troubles us," chanted Jimsy airily.

"That's all very well, but you keep me continually in suspense as to what you'll do next," almost wailed Miss Prescott. "We set out for a quiet trip and encounter nothing but troubles--"

"Adventures, Aunt Sally," laughingly corrected Roy; "what is life without adventures?"

"Well, I'm sure I don't know what young people are coming to," sighed Miss Prescott with resignation. "There's another thing, what are we to do with this little Wren?"

"We can't leave her here, that's certain," declared Peggy with vehemence.

"No, indeed," echoed Jess and Bess, who were of the council.

"Then what are we to do with her?"

"Just tote her along, I suppose," rejoined Peggy; "poor little thing, she doesn't take up much room; besides, Jess thinks she's an heiress."

They all laughed.

"You must have had an overdose of Laura Jean Libby," declared Roy.

"Roy Prescott, you behave yourself," cried Jess, flushing up; "besides, she has a strawberry mark on her left arm."

"My gracious, then she surely is a missing heiress," exclaimed Jimsy teasingly; "all well-regulated missing heiresses have strawberry marks and almost always on their left arm."

It was at this juncture that a knock came at the door. A bell boy stood outside.

"A gentleman to see you, sir," he said, handing Roy a card.

On it was printed: "Mr. James Kennedy, Detective, Meadville Police Station."

"Goodness, a real detective!" exclaimed Jess excitedly; "let's see him."

"You won't be much impressed I'm afraid," rejoined Roy with a smile at his recollection of the Meadville sleuths.

"Why, doesn't he wear glasses, have a hawk-like nose and smoke a pipe?" inquired Bess.

"And hunt up missing heiresses?" teasingly struck in Jimsy.

"No, he's a very different sort of person. But hush! he's coming now."

A heavy tread sounded in the hall and Mr. James Kennedy, Detective of the Meadville Police Force, stood before them. As Jimsy had said, he was not impressive as to outward appearance, although his fat, heavy face, and rather vacant eyes, might have concealed a giant intellect.

"I've investigated the case of the attempted burning of the stable last night," he began.

"Yes," exclaimed Roy eagerly. "Have you any suspicions as to who did it?"

The man shook his head.

"As yet we have no clews," he declared, "and I don't think we'll get any."

"That's too bad," replied Roy, "but let me tell you something that may help you."

The lad launched into a description of their adventures of the morning.

"That hut belongs to Luke Higgins, a respectable man who is out West at present," said the detective when Roy had finished. "He uses it as a sort of hunting box in the rabbit shooting season. He couldn't have had anything to do with it."

"I'd like to know his address so that I could write and thank him for leaving that gun there," declared Peggy warmly.

The detective shook his head solemnly.

"I reckon you young folks had better stop skee-daddling round the country this way," he said with heavy conviction; "you'll only get into more trouble. Flying ain't natural no more than crowing hens is."

With this he picked up his hat, and, after assuring them that he would find a clew within a short time, he departed, leaving behind him a company in which amusement mingled with indignation. In fact, so angry was Roy over the stupidity or ignorance of the Meadville police, that he himself set out on a hunt to detect the authors of the outrages upon the young aviators.

The sole result of his inquiry however was to establish the fact that both Cassells had left town, closing their house and announcing that they would be gone for some time.

As there was nothing further to be gained by remaining in Meadville, the entire party, after lunch, set out once more, a big crowd witnessing the departure of the aerial tourists.

They flew fast, and as the roads were excellent the auto had no difficulty in keeping up with them. On through the afternoon they soared along, sometimes swooping low above an alluring bit of scenery and again heading their machines skyward in pure exuberance of spirits. Their troubles at Meadville forgotten, they flew their machines like sportive birds; never had any of them experienced more fully the joy of flight, the sense of freedom that comes from traveling untrammelled into the ether.

They had passed above a small village and were flying low, those in the auto waving to them, when Peggy, in the _Golden Butterfly_, gave a sudden exclamation.

"Oh, look," she shouted, "a flock of sheep, and right in the path of the auto."

At that moment all of them saw the sheep, a large flock, headed by a belligerent looking ram with immense horns. Jake, who was driving the car, slowed up as he approached the flock. The woolly herd, huddled together helplessly, made no effort to get out of the road. Behind them a man and a boy shouted and yelled vigorously, but with no more effect than to bunch the animals more squarely in the path of the advancing car.

All at once, just as the car was slowed down to almost a walking pace, a big ram separated himself from the flock and actually rushed for the front seat of the car.

Jake uttered a yell as the woolly creature gave him a hard butt, knocking him out of his seat. But this wasn't all.

By some strange freak the animal had landed in the car in a sitting posture. Now the young aviators roared with laughter to behold the creature seated in Jake's forcibly vacated place. Its hoofs rested on the driving wheel.

Forward plunged the car, its queer driver with his feet wedged in the spokes of the steering wheel. Aloft the flock of young aviators roared with laughter at the sight. It was the oddest experience they had yet had--this spectacle of a grave-looking, long-horned ram driving an auto, while Jake prudently kept out of reach of those horns. As for Miss Prescott and The Wren, they cowered back in the tonneau in keen alarm.

"Oh!" cried Peggy suddenly, "there comes a runabout; that ram will surely collide with it!"

A runabout coming in the opposite direction dashed round a corner of the country road at this juncture. The driver was a young girl, but she was veiled and her features could not be seen under the thick face covering.

Apparently the ram saw the other car coming, for the animal actually appeared to make a halfway intelligent effort to steer the car out of the road.

For her part the girl in the runabout swerved her car from side to side in a struggle to avoid a collision, which appeared inevitable.

"Stop it!" shrieked Bess; "she'll be killed."

CHAPTER XV.

A RAMBUNCTIOUS RAM.

The ram evidently saw the other car coming; it tried to leap out but its hoofs were jammed in the spokes of the steering wheel. Before Jake could pick himself up from the floor of the front part of the car there came a loud shriek from the runabout. It was echoed by Miss Prescott and The Wren.

Crash!

The two cars came together with a fearful jolt.

The eyes of the young aviators aloft were fixed on the scene. They saw the large car strike the runabout and crumple its engine hood. Peggy gave a scream.

The ram, jolted out of its seat by the force of the collision, fell out to one side, allowing Jake to resume control of the wheel. But the runabout! It was ditched, its unfortunate occupant being pitched headlong into a ditch at the side of the road.

Down swept the aeroplanes, and there was a wild rush to the rescue. Peggy, Jess and Bess ran to the side of the injured occupant of the strange runabout. The boys divided themselves, attending to everything.

"Roy! Roy! hurry, she's unconscious!"

The cry came from Peggy as she rushed to the side of the young motorist.

Roy was not far off, and, at his sister's cry, he hastened to her side. Peggy had the girl's head in her lap.

"Get water!" she cried.

But Jimsy was already on hand with a collapsible aluminum cup full of water from a near by spring.

"Oh, the poor dear," sighed Peggy, "to think that our fun should have--"

The strange girl opened her eyes.

"Who are you?" she exclaimed. "Where is my machine?"

"Never mind for a minute," spoke Peggy, seeing that Jimsy and Jake were trying to drag the machine out of the ditch, "we'll fix it, never fear."

"Oh, my head!" groaned the girl.

"That pesky ram," exploded Roy angrily; "let me help you up into the road, you'll be more comfortable."

"Oh, thank you, I can stand," came faintly from the injured girl.
"I--am--much better now. What happened?"

"Why a sort of volunteer driver was experimenting with our car, and I guess he made a mistake in driving," smilingly explained Roy.

"Oh, that ram!" cried the girl half hysterically. "I thought I had a nightmare at first."

"I don't blame you," smiled Peggy, "seeing a ram driving a motor car is apt to give one such ideas."

"Are you really better?" asked Jess sympathetically as she came up.

"Peggy, get my smelling salts out of the traveling bag!" cried Miss Prescott anxiously.

The accident had disturbed her sadly. The only unperturbed one in the party was Jake. He took things with philosophical calm.

"Knew more trouble was comin'," said he, and contented himself by dismissing the situation with that.

"I've got good news for you," said Jimsy, coming up; "your car isn't hurt a bit."

"Oh, good!" cried the girl, clasping her hands and flushing. Her veil was raised now and they saw that she was very blonde, very pretty and just now very pale.

"My, what a rambunctious ram!" punned Roy; "he ramified all over, didn't he?"

"Gracious, for a time I thought I was seeing things!" gasped the girl, who was seated on a tufted hummock of grass at the side of the road.

"And then you felt them," laughed Jimsy. "That's the way such things run."

They all laughed. Soon after, Roy, Jimsy and Jake dragged the small runabout out of the ditch. In the meantime Peggy had introduced herself and Jess to the young girl. The latter's name was Lavinia Nesbitt. She lived not far from the scene of the accident, and had been taking a jaunt in her machine.

The runabout had been rescued, and the whole party introduced and talking merrily when Jess set up a cry.

"Goodness! here comes that ram again!"

Down the road, with the two sheep drivers at its heels, the beast was

indeed coming. It advanced at a hard gallop, with head lowered and formidable horns ready for a charge, into the midst of the group.

"Look out for him!" yelled the sheep herders.

They needed no second injunction. All skipped adroitly out of the path of the oncoming beast, which was rushing on like a whirlwind. Jimsy proved equal to the emergency. From his aeroplane he took the rope which had already done good service in rescuing the Golden Butterfly from the pond. He formed it into a loop--the lariat of the Western plains.

"Now we've got him!" he exclaimed; "that is, if we are careful. But watch out!"

"No danger of that," responded Peggy, from the vantage of the tonneau of the car; "but how are you going to rope him?"

"Watch!"

Jimsy began swinging his loop in ever widening circles. The ram was now within a few feet of him.

"Oh, the Dart!" shrieked Bess; "he'll go right through it!"

Indeed it did appear as if the maddened animal would. But just as there are many slips between cup and lip so there are many slips between the ram and the aeroplane.

Just as it appeared that he would plow his way right through the delicate fabric, Jimsy hurled his loop. It settled round the animal's horns. Planting his heels in the ground Jimsy held tight to the rope. The next minute he "snubbed" it tight and the ram lost its feet and rolled over and over in the dust.

Jake and Roy rushed in and completed the job of tying the creature.

"Goodness, Jimsy, you're a regular broncho buster!" cried Peggy admiringly.

"Oh, I learned to do some tricks with a rope with the horse hunters out in Nevada," was the response.

But careless as his manner was, Jimsy's eyes glowed with triumph. It was plainly to be seen that he was delighted with his success. Just then the two sheep drivers came running up.

The girls looked rather alarmed. Suppose they should blame them for trying to kidnap the ram.

"I'll do the talking," declared Roy; "if you said anything, Jimsy, there might be a row."

"All right," laughed Jimsy, regarding his "roped and tied captive."
"I suppose you are an expert on dealing with ram owners."

"Well, I'm on to their mental ramifications," laughed Roy.

The sheep driver, an elderly man, accompanied by a youth, came up to them now. He touched his hat civilly as he approached.

"Good afternoon. No one hurt, I hope," he said.

The girls looked greatly relieved. After all, the man was not rude or angry as they had feared.

"Oh, no, thank you," cried Jess, before Roy or Jimsy could open their mouths. "I hope he isn't though."

"Hurt!" exclaimed the ram's owner, "why you couldn't hurt him with a steam hammer. Why, day 'afore yesterday the blame thing went for my wife. Hoofs and horns--yes, sir! Most knocked her down, he did. I'll fix him."

"What's his name?" asked Bess.

"Hannibal," said the man, without the flicker of a facial muscle.

"I should think Cannonball would be a better name for him," struck in Jimsy, with that funny, serious face he always assumed when 'joshing'.

"Yes, sir, I guess it _would_ be more appropriate at that," assented the man.

He looked at the disabled machine.

"Busted?" he asked with apparent concern.

"To some extent," rejoined Roy, "only, except for that engine hood being dented there doesn't appear to be much the matter with it."

"Glad to pay if there be," said the sheep driver. "I'm going ter git rid of ther pesky critter. He's cost me a lot in damage suits already."

"Why don't you put him on the stage as the boxing ram, or something like that?" inquired Jimsy.

"Might be a good scheme," said the man, as if considering the proposal seriously.

"Mary had a little ram--" laughed Jimsy; who was thereupon told not to be "horrid."

"Why don't you box the nasty thing's ears for riding in our car?" asked Roy of Peggy.

"I'd like to do something, the saucy thing," declared Peggy with vehemence.

"Tell you what! Let's buy him."

The suggestion came from Jimsy.

"Yes, and have his skin made up into an auto robe," suggested Roy.

"If you boys aren't ridiculous," cried Peggy; "I want to forget the incident, and so I'm sure does Lavinia," the name of the girl who had been spilled out of her machine.

"You may be sure I do," she declared with emphasis. "I was never so scared in my life."

"Want to buy him?" asked the man, grasping at a chance of selling an

animal that had already placed him in some embarrassing positions.

"How much do you want?" asked Roy, more as a joke than anything else.

"Three dollars," said the man.

"There you are, girls! Who'll bid? Who'll bid? This fine young ram going at a sacrifice."

Jimsey imitated an auctioneer, raising his voice to a sharp pitch.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN INVITATION TO RACE.

It is almost needless to say that the purchase was not consummated. The girls raised a chorus of protest. The "nasty thing" was the mildest of the epithets they applied to the beast.

"Well, I don't know. I thought we might have his skin done into a robe. We could give it as a prize to the girl that makes the best record on this motor flight," suggested Jimsey.

"I wish you'd take him up a thousand feet and drop him," declared the unfortunate ram's owner.

"Poor thing! he only acted according to his nature," defended Peggy; "let him loose and he'll go back to the flock."

"Not him," declared his owner; "he'd only raise more Cain. Better let him be."

But the girls raised a chorus of protest. It was a shame to leave the poor thing tied up, and they insisted that he be let loose.

"All right, if you kin stand it I kin," grinned the man.

He and the boy bent over the captive ram and cast him loose. The beast struggled to his feet, and for an instant stood glaring about him out of his yellowish eyes that gleamed like agates. But it was only for an instant that he remained thus.

Suddenly he lowered his head and without more preliminaries dashed right at the _Golden Butterfly_.

"Gracious, he's a game old sport!" yelled Jimsey; "Hasn't had enough of it yet, eh?"

Right at the _Butterfly_ the ram rushed. Reaching it, with one bound he was in the chassis.

"Now we'll get him," whispered the owner of the ram. "I told you if he was let go he'd start cutting up rough."

"Well, you surely proved a good prophet," laughed Jimsey.

"Now we've got to catch him," said the man.

"How?" whispered Jimsy.

"Someone must lasso him as you did before. Easy now. Don't scare him or he might do damage."

The ram was seated in the aeroplane for all the world as if he was a scientific investigator of some sort. He paid no attention whatever to those who were creeping up on him, Jimsy with his rope in his hand, the loop trailing behind him all ready for action.

"This is more fun than a deer hunt!" declared Roy.

"Than a bull fight, you mean," retorted Jimsy; "this creature gives the best imitation of a wild bull I ever saw."

They all laughed. The ram certainly had given a realistic interpretation of a savage Andalusian fighter.

"Now then," whispered the sheep driver as they drew near. Jimsy's rope swirled and settled about the ram's horns. But the startled beast was due to give them another surprise. Hardly had Jimsy's rope fallen about it when with a snort it leaped clean in the air and out of the aeroplane. It tore like an express train straight at Jimsy.

Before the boy could get out of its path "Biff!" the impact had come. Jimsy arose into the atmosphere and described a distinct parabola. He landed with a bump in a clump of bushes, while Mr. Ram rushed off down the road to join his flock.

"Haw! haw! haw!" roared the sheep man; "ain't hurt, be you?"

"No; but I've a good mind to sue you for damages," rejoined Jimsy, picking himself out of the clump of brush; "you've no right to drive an animal like that around the country without labeling him 'Dynamite. Dangerous'."

"Guess I will, too," said the man, who appeared to think well of the suggestion; "he sure will get me in a pile of trouble one of these days."

He raised his hat and strode off, followed by the boy. In the distance the ram was capering about among the other sheep. Jimsy brushed the dust off himself and then looked about him.

"Anybody laughing?" he demanded suspiciously.

They all shook their heads, the girls biting their lips to avoid smiling.

"All right then, I suggest that we get out of here right away; a tiger's liable to come striding out of those woods next."

"Yes; we'd better be getting along; Millbrook, our next stop, is several miles off," said Peggy, consulting the map.

No further time was lost in resuming their rapid flight. In the distance, as the flock of aeroplanes arose, the sheep man waved his hat and shouted his adieus.

Millbrook was reached that evening just at dusk. It proved to be a

fair-sized town, and the aeroplanes excited as much curiosity there as they had in Meadville--more so, in fact, for, from some flaring posters, it appeared that an aeroplane exhibition and race had been arranged for the next day by a traveling company of aviators. That evening, at the hotel, a deputation of citizens waited on the boys and asked them if they would not prolong their stay and take part in the air sports. The mayor, whose name was Jasper Hanks, mentioned a prize of five hundred dollars for an endurance flight as a special inducement.

The lads said they would think things over and report in the morning. Their real object in delaying their decision was, of course, to consult the girls about appearing. Peggy, Jess and Bess went into raptures over the idea, and Miss Prescott's consent was readily obtained.

"I'll be glad to rest for a day after all our exciting times," she declared, "and I mean to add to Wren's outfit too."

"Oh, how good you are to me," sighed the odd little figure, nestling close to her benefactress.

"Tush! tush, my dear! I'm going to make a wonderful girl out of you," beamed the kindly lady.

Descending to the office to buy some postcards, the boys found, lounging about the desk, a stoutish man with a rather dissipated face, puffy under the eyes and heavy about the jaws. A bright red necktie and patent-leather boots with cloth tops accentuated the decidedly "noisy" impression he conveyed.

As the boys came down he eyed them sharply. Then he addressed them.

"My name's Lish Kelly," he said. "I'm manager of the United Aviators' Exhibition Company. We're showing out at the City Park tomorrow. I understand that you kids have been asked to butt in."

"We've been asked to participate, if that's what you mean," rejoined Roy rather sharply. The fellow's manner was offensive and overbearing.

"Well, see here, you stay out," rejoined the man, shaking a fat forefinger on which glistened a diamond ring of such proportions as to make it dubious if it boasted a genuine stone.

"You stay out of it," he repeated.

Roy and Jimsy were almost dumfounded. The man's tone was one of actual command.

"Why? Why should we stay out of it?" demanded Roy.

"The mayor of the town has asked us to take part," came from Jimsy; "what have you got to do with it?"

"It's this way," said the man in rather a less overbearing way than he had hitherto adopted; "we're going about the country giving flights. The city gives us the park in this town and we get so much of the receipts. But we rely on winning the prizes, see. Now if you kids butt in, why you might win some of them and that knocks my profit out. Get me?"

"I understand you, if that's what you mean," rejoined Roy; "but I still fail to see why we should not compete if we want to."

The man placed his hand on the boy's shoulder impressively.

"'Cos if you do it'll make trouble for you, sonny."

"Who'll make it?" flashed back Roy indignantly.

"I will, son, and I'm some trouble maker when I start anything along them lines, take it from me."

He turned on his heel, stuck his cigar at a more acute angle in the side of his mouth, and strode off, leaving the two boys dumfounded.

"Well, what do you make of that?" demanded Roy, as soon as his astonishment had subsided a trifle.

"Just this, that Mr. Lish Kelly thinks he can run this thing to suit himself."

"What will we do about it?"

"For my part I wanted to compete before. I desire to more than ever now."

"Same here."

"Maybe he was only bluffing after all."

"Maybe; but just the same I wouldn't trust him not to try to do us some harm. As he says, his main profits come from winning the prizes offered by the different communities."

"Humph! well, so far as that goes, I don't see why that need keep us out of it."

"Nor I; but we've had troubles enough, and I don't want willingly to run into any more."

"Nor I. Well, let's sleep on it. We'll decide in the morning."

"That's a good idea."

The two lads went up to bed and slept as only healthy lads can. The next morning dawned bright and clear. There was hardly any wind. It was real "flying" weather. The aeroplanes had been sheltered in a big shed belonging to the hotel. Before breakfast the boys went out and looked them over. All were in good shape.

As they were coming out of the shed they were hailed by no less a personage than Mayor Hanks.

"Well," said he, "are you going to fly?"

"We think of doing so," said Roy, hesitating a little. He wanted to speak of the conduct of Lish Kelly, but on second thought he decided not to; the man might merely have had a fit of bad temper on him. His threats might have been only empty ones.

"If you're going to fly I have got some entry blanks with me," said the mayor. "I wish you'd sign 'em."

He drew out a bunch of blue papers with blanks for describing the name

of the machine, its power, driver and other details.

This decided the boys.

"All right, we'll enter all our machines," said Roy; "let us go into the writing room and we'll sign the entry blanks."

"Good for you," cried the mayor delightedly; "you'll be a big drawing card, especially the young ladies. I never heard of gals flyin', although, come to think of it, why shouldn't they?"

In the writing room they concluded the business. When it was done all the machines had been entered in every contest, including an altitude one.

"We start at ten sharp, so be there," admonished the mayor as he departed, highly pleased at having secured quite a flock of young aviators at no cost at all.

It was as his figure vanished, that Lish Kelly crossed the writing room. He had been sitting in a telephone booth, and leaving the door a crack open had heard every word that had passed.

He greeted the boys with an angry scowl.

"So you ain't going to stay out?" he said gruffly, as he passed. "All right; look out for squalls!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TWISTED SPARK PLUG.

"Gracious, are we in for more trouble?"

Jimsey looked blankly at Roy; but the latter only laughed at his chum's serious face.

Somehow, viewed in the bright light of early day, Lish Kelly's threats did not appear nearly as formidable as they had over night.

"Nonsense; what harm can he do us anyhow? We're going to go into this race, and we're going to win too. Just watch us."

"Going to tell the girls anything about Kelly and his remarks?"

"No; what good would that do? It would only scare them."

"That's so, too; but just the same I didn't like the look of Kelly's face when he came through."

"He looked to me like a bulldog that had swallowed a baby's boot and didn't like the taste of the blacking on it," laughed Roy.

At this juncture the girls came into the room. All were radiant and smiling in anticipation of the day's sport.

"Well, we've been and gone and done it," announced Roy.

"Done what?" demanded Peggy.

"Signed the paperrr-r-r-s," was the rejoinder, rendered with great dramatic effect.

He waved the duplicate entry blanks above his head.

"Let's see them," begged Jess.

"All right. Look what I've let us in for!"

"Why--why--good gracious, Roy, you've got us down for everything," gasped Peggy.

"That's right, all the way across from soup to nuts," struck in the slangy Jimsy.

They all laughed. The color rose in the girls' faces.

"If only we can win some of them," cried Jess.

"Well, the machines are all in fine shape. If we don't win it will be because the other fellows have better machines."

"Where are the aviation grounds?" inquired Bess.

"At the City Park, about a mile out of town to the south. We can get to it by looking down at the trolley tracks," said Roy, who had consulted the mayor on this point.

"Then you are going to fly out there?" asked Miss Prescott, who was also by this time a party to the conference.

"Of course; and, by the way, we ought to be getting out there pretty soon; I want to be looking over the grounds and selecting the best places for landing and so on," said Roy.

"Well, please don't get into any more scrapes," sighed Miss Prescott; "what with gipsies, firebugs and rams, our trip has been quite exciting enough for me."

The boys exchanged glances. If the man Kelly tried to carry out his threats things might be more exciting yet, they thought. But both kept their knowledge to themselves.

It was arranged that Miss Prescott should motor out to the City Park. Soon thereafter the young aviators placed finishing touches on their machines, and while a curious crowd gathered they took to the air.

"Looks just like a flock of pigeons," said a man in the crowd, as they climbed skyward quite closely bunched.

"It sure does," agreed his companion, "but them things is prettier than any flock of pigeons I ever see."

And this opinion was echoed by many of the throng. At any rate everyone who saw the aeroplanes start made up his or her mind to pay a visit to the park and see some more extended flights, so that Mayor Hanks' prediction was verified.

As the young aviators hovered above City Park for a short space of time, and then dropped earthward, a veritable sensation was created. From a row of "hangars" mechanics and aviators came running. One or two aviators who were aloft practicing "stunts," dropped swiftly to earth. Lish Kelly's troupe was a large one, consisting of five men and one woman flyer, the wife of Carlos Le Roy, a Cuban aviator.

Outside the grounds several of the frugal individuals who desired to see the flights without paying admission also watched as the quintette of strange aeroplanes dropped to earth.

One by one the graceful craft of the air settled to the ground, and the young aviators alighted. Members of the Arrangement Committee hastened to their sides, shaking hands warmly and thanking them for their interest in the coming contests.

The Kelly aviators gazed curiously, some of them resentfully, at the newcomers. They had all the professional's antipathy and jealousy of amateur performers. As the Arrangement Committee bustled off after telling our friends to make themselves perfectly at home, Pepita Le Roy came up to them. She was a handsome woman, in a foreign way, with large, dark eyes and an abundance of raven black hair. She was rather flashily dressed and walked with a sort of swagger that in a vague way reminded Peggy of "Carmen."

"So you are zee girl aviators," she remarked, as she came up.

"Yes; I guess that's what they call us," rejoined Peggy; "we enjoy flying and have done a lot of it."

"So! I have read your names in zee papers."

"Oh, those awful papers!" cried Jess, who hated publicity; "they are always printing things about us."

"What! You do not like it?"

"Oh, no! You see, we only fly for fun. Not as a business and--"

Peggy stopped short. She felt she had committed a grave breach of tactfulness. It was not the thing, she felt, to boast to a professional woman flyer of their standing as amateurs.

Nor was the Cuban woman slow to take umbrage at what she considered an insult. Her eyes flashed indignantly as she regarded the fair-haired, slender girl before her.

"So you fly only for fun," she said vehemently; "very well, you have all zee fun you want before to-day is ovaire."

Without another word she walked off, with the swinging walk of her race.

The girls looked at each other with a sort of amused dismay.

"Goodness, Peggy; you should be more careful," cried Bess; "you've hurt her feelings dreadfully."

"I'm sure I didn't mean to," declared Peggy remorsefully. "I--I had no idea that she would flare up like that."

"Well, after all, it doesn't matter much," soothed Jess, pouring oil on

the troubled waters, so to speak. "I'm glad the boys didn't hear it though."

"So am I. See, they're busy on Roy's machine," exclaimed Bess.

"Yes; the lower left wing is rather warped," explained Peggy; "they are fixing it."

"Wonder who that man is who is monkeying with the _Red Dragon_?" said Peggy, the next instant. "I mean that horrid looking man in the check suit."

"I don't know. See, he has a monkey wrench in his hand, too," exclaimed Bess.

Almost simultaneously the boys looked round from their work on the biplane and saw the man. It was Lish Kelly. He was bending over the engine and doing something to it with his wrench.

"Hey! What are you doing there?" yelled Roy.

"Just looking at your machine. No harm in that, is there?" demanded Kelly, with a red face.

"None at all, except that we don't want our machines touched. How comes it you have that monkey wrench in your hands if you weren't tampering with the machinery?"

Jimsey spoke in a voice that fairly bubbled over with indignation.

"Don't get sore, kid; I wouldn't harm your old mowing machine. There isn't one of mine but could beat it the fastest day it ever flew."

As he spoke Kelly slouched off. They saw him go up to a group of his aviators and begin talking earnestly to them. Once or twice he motioned with his head in their direction.

"So he _does_ mean mischief, after all," said Roy; "let's take a good look at the _Dragon's_ engine. He may have injured it, although I don't think he'd have had time to hurt it seriously."

They strolled over to the _Dragon_, with the girls trailing behind.

"Oh!" cried Peggy, as they came up, "look at that spark plug."

"What's the matter with it?" demanded Jimsey,

"Look, it's all bent and twisted out of shape."

"Jove, sis, so it is. Your eyes are as sharp as they are pretty!" cried Roy.

"No compliments, please. Oh, that horrid man!"

"Who is he?" asked Jess. "You appeared to know him."

"Yes, we had some conversation with him this morning," laughed Roy; "but to return to the spark plug; it's a good thing we carry extra ones."

"But we don't!" cried Jimsey, in a dismayed tone.

"What! you had a supply in a locker on your machine."

Jimsey looked confused.

"I've got to make a confession," he said.

"You didn't bring them!" cried Peggy.

"No, the fact is I--I forgot."

Jimsey looked miserably from one to the other. Here was a quandary indeed. It might prove hard to get such a commodity as a spark plug in Millbrook.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN SEARCH OF A NEW PLUG.

It was while they were still discussing the situation that the automobile with Jake at the wheel and Miss Prescott and The Wren in the tonneau, drove into the grounds. What a difference there was in the child since her benefactors had fitted her out! She looked like a dainty, ethereal little princess instead of the ragged little waif that had been rescued from the gipsy camp.

But the minds of our young friends were now intent on different matters. Time pressed. The altitude flight, in which Jimsey had planned to take part, was to be the first thing on the program. If anything was to be done about reequipping the _Dragon_ it must be done quickly.

"Tell you what," said Roy suddenly, "we'll get into the car and drive back to town. It won't take long and maybe we can dig up an extra one some place."

"If we don't I'm out of it for keeps," groaned Jimsey; "oh, that Kelly. I'd like to punch his head."

He doubled up his fists aggressively; but, after all, what chance had he to prove that Kelly had actually damaged the plug. If confronted the man would have probably denied all knowledge of it. Nobody had actually seen him do it, so that positive proof was out of the question. No, they must repair the damage as best they could.

But Roy determined to have the machines closely guarded. The situation was explained to Miss Prescott, and while she and her small protegee took seats in the grand stand Jake was detailed to guard the aeroplanes. This done, the boys got into the machine and prepared to start for town. But the girls interfered.

"Aren't you going to take us along, you impolite youths!" cried Bess.

"Oh, certainly, your company is always charming," returned Jimsey, with a low bow.

"Of course it is, but you wouldn't have asked us to come if we had not invited ourselves," declared Peggy vehemently.

"How can you say so? Our lives would be a dry desert without the girl aviators to liven things up," declared Jimsy.

"Jimsy Bancroft, if you are going to get poetical you'll leave this car," cried Jess.

"That's just it," declared Jimsy, "girls can cry their eyes out over romantic heroes, but when a regular fellow starts to get 'mushy' they go up in the air."

Amidst the chorus of protestations aroused by this ungallant speech Roy started the car. Swiftly it sped out of the grounds; but not so swiftly that the keen eyes of Lish Kelly did not see it.

He called Herman Le Roy, the Cuban aviator, to him.

"Le Roy, you are not in the altitude contest," he said, "hop in my car with me and we'll follow those kids. They're up to something."

The Cuban looked at him and smiled, showing two rows of white teeth under his small, dapperly curled mustache.

"I think, Senor Kelly, you have been up to something yourself."

"Well, you know what I told you. We want that five-hundred-dollar prize, Carlos, and by the looks of things if we don't do something those kids are likely to get it."

"They have fine machines," agreed the other.

"Yes; and they are equipped with a balancing device that makes them much more reliable than ours."

"A balancing device!" exclaimed the Cuban, as the two men got into the car, a small yellow runabout of racy appearance.

"That's what I said, and it's a good one, too. I read an account of it in an aviation paper; but the description was too sketchy for me to see how the thing was worked."

"Those boys must be wonders."

"I'm afraid they are. That's why we've got to be careful of them. But I've got a plan to fix them, the whole lot of them."

"What is it?"

"I'll tell you as we go along."

As the car rolled past the group of aeroplanes with Jake faithfully standing guard over them, Kelly hailed him in a suave voice.

"Any idea where the young folks have gone?"

Jake, who had no idea that Kelly had a sinister motive in asking the question, replied readily enough.

"Yes, they've gone into Millbrook to get another spark plug. Something happened to one of the plugs of that red machine yonder."

"All right. Thanks."

Kelly drove on.

"Do you know what happened to that plug, Carlos?" he asked, as they reached the open road and bowled forward at a good speed.

"I've got a pretty good guess. It was not altogether an accident, eh?"

"An accident, well, it was, in a sense. I happened to be near that machine with a monkey wrench and in some way was careless enough to let it put that plug out of business."

Both men laughed heartily, as if Kelly's rascally act had been the most amusing thing in the world.

"You are a genius," declared Le Roy.

"Well, I reckon I know a thing or two," was the modest response; "besides, I need that money."

"But what is your plan?"

"I'll tell you as we go along. Drive fast, but don't keep so close to that other car that they can get sight of us."

"Not much fear of that. They had a long start of us and are out of sight now."

"So much the better. It doesn't interfere with my plans a bit, provided they take the same road back."

"What do you mean to do?"

"Are you good with a shovel?" was the cryptic reply.

"I don't understand you, I must say."

"You will later on. We'll drive up to that farmhouse yonder."

"Yes, and what then?"

"We'll borrow two shovels."

"Two shovels!"

"That's what I said."

"But what on earth have two shovels to do with stopping a bunch of kids from entering in an aeroplane race?"

"Carlos, your brain is dull to-day."

"It would take a wizard to understand what you intend to do."

"Well, you will see later on. Drive in this gate. That's it, and now for the shovels."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE TRAP.

For more than half an hour eager inquiries were made in Millbrook for a spark plug such as they wanted. But all their search was to no avail. But suddenly, just as they were about to give up in despair, a man, of whom they had made inquiries, recalled that not far out of town there was a small garage.

"We'll try there," determined Jimsy.

Finding out the road, they speeded to the place. It did not look very promising, a small, badly fitted up auto station, run by an elderly man with red-rimmed, watery eyes, looking out from behind a pair of horn spectacles that somehow gave him the odd look of a frog.

"Got any spark plugs?" asked Jimsy, as the machine came to a halt.

"Yes, all kinds," said the man, in a wheezy, asthmatic voice that sounded like the exhaust of a dying-down engine.

"Good!" cried Jimsy, hopping out of the car.

"That is, we will have all kinds next week," went on the man; "I've ordered 'em."

"Goodness, then you haven't any right now?"

"I've got a few. Possibly you might find what you want among them."

"I'll try, anyway," declared Jimsy.

The man led the way into a dingy sort of shed. On a shelf in a dusty corner was a box.

"You can hunt through that," said the man wearily; "if you find what you want wake me up."

"Wake you up?"

"Yes, I always take a sleep at this time of day. You woke me up when you came in. Now I'm going to doze off again."

So saying he sank into a chair, closed his eyes and presently was snoring.

"Dead to the world!" gasped Jimsy; "well, that's the quickest thing in the sleep line I ever saw!"

As it was no use to waste further time the boy began rummaging in the box. It contained all sorts of odds and ends, among them several plugs.

"I'll bet there isn't one here that will fit my engine!" grumbled Jimsy; "I don't--what! Yes! By Jiminy! Eureka! Hurray, I've found one!"

The man woke up with a start.

"What's the matter?" he demanded drowsily.

"Nothing! That is, everything!" cried Jimsy. "I've found just what I

want."

"All right. Leave the money on that shelf there. It's a dollar."

So saying, off he went to sleep again, while Jimsy, overjoyed, hastily peeled a dollar from his "roll" and departed. The last sound he heard was the steady snoring of the garage man.

"Well, there's one fellow that money can't keep awake, even if it does talk," said Jimsy laughingly to himself as, with a cry of triumph, he rejoined the party, waving the plug like a banner or an emblem of victory.

No time was lost in starting the auto up again and they whirled back through Millbrook in a cloud of dust. Passing through the village they retraced their way along the road by which they had come.

"Just half an hour before that altitude flight," remarked Jimsy to Roy, who was driving, as they sped through the town.

"Fine; we'll make it all right," was the rejoinder. Roy turned on more power and the auto shot ahead like some scared wild thing.

"We'll only hit the high spots this trip," declared Roy, as the machine plunged and rolled along at top speed.

All at once, as they turned a corner, they received a sudden check. Right ahead of them a man was driving some cows. Roy jammed down the emergency brake, causing them all to hold on for dear life to avoid being pitched out by the sudden change of speed.

"Wow! what a jolt!" exclaimed Jimsy; "it sure did----"

The sentence was never completed. The auto gave a pitch sideways and then plunged into a pit that had been dug across the road and covered with leaves and dust placed on a framework of branches. Down into this pit crashed the machine with a sickening jolt. The girls screamed aloud in fear. It appeared as if the machine would be a total wreck.

But that was not the worst of it. In the sudden fall into the pit Roy had been pitched out and now lay quite still at the roadside. Jimsy had saved himself from being thrown by clutching tight hold of the seat.

He stopped the engine and then clambering out of the car hastened to Roy's side. To his delight, just as he reached him, Roy sat up, and although his face was drawn with pain he declared that his injuries consisted of nothing more serious than a sprained ankle.

"But look at the machine!" cried Jimsy; "it's smashed, I'm sure of it."

The pit which had been dug across the road was about three feet deep and the front wheels of the auto rested in it. The hind wheels had not entered, as the excavation was not a wide one.

Both boys hastened to examine the car. To their satisfaction they found that not much damage had been done beyond a slight wrenching of the steering gear. This was due to the fact that they had been going at reduced speed.

"Gracious! Suppose we had been coming along at the same pace we'd been hitting up right along," exclaimed Jimsy.

"We wouldn't be here now," declared Roy; "we'd be in the next county or thereabouts."

"Yes, we'd have kept right on going," agreed Jimsy; "talk about flying! But, say, who can have done this?"

"Not much doubt in my mind it's the work of that outfit of Kelly's. He told us to look out for trouble, and he appears to be making it for us."

"The precious rascal; he might have broken all our necks."

"That's true, if we'd been hitting up high speed."

"How are we going to get out of this?"

Peggy asked the question just as the man who had been driving the cattle came running up.

"What's the trouble?" he asked, gazing at the odd scene.

"You can see for yourself," rejoined Roy; "some rascals dug a trench across the road so as to wreck our machine if possible."

"Humph! So I see," was the rejoinder; "how be you goin' ter git out of thar?"

"That's a problem. If we could get a team of horses----" The man interrupted Roy, who was acting as spokesman.

"Tell you what, two of my cattle back thar are plow oxen. I'll go back to ther farm, git their yokes on 'em and yank you out of here. That is pervidin' you pay me, uv course."

"Don't worry about that. We're willing to pay anything in reason."

"All right, then, I'll hook up Jeb and Jewel."

The man walked back toward his cattle, which were contentedly browsing at the side of the road. Clucking in an odd manner, he drove two of them out of the herd and started back toward a farmhouse which was not far distant. In a wonderfully short time he was back with his oxen in harness.

"Gee, Jeb! Haw, Jewel!" he cried, as he came up. The oxen swung round and the heavy chain attached to their yoke was hitched to the front axle of the car.

"Now for it!" cried Roy, when this had been done.

"Git ap!" shouted the man.

The slow but powerful oxen strained their muscular backs. The chain tightened and the next moment the car, from which Peggy and Jess and Bess had alighted, rose from the pit. Then the hind wheels dropped into it with a bump, but the shock absorbers prevented serious damage. With the oxen straining and pulling it was finally hauled into the road and they were ready to resume the trip.

Roy rewarded their helper with a substantial bill, and they were all warm in their thanks.

"'Twasn't nuthin'," declared the man, "an' now I guess I'll go to ther house and have my hired man fill in this road. Things is come to a fine pass when such things kin happen."

As the rescued party sped on toward the aviation field they fully agreed with the rustic's opinion. Had it not been for sheer luck they would have suffered extremely serious consequences as the result of a rascal's device. But as it was Kelly's plot against them appeared to have failed.

CHAPTER XX.

AN ATTACK IN THE AIR.

"B-o-o-m!"

The sound of a gun crashed out as the auto sped through the gates of the aviation field and rapidly skimmed across to where the aeroplanes had been parked.

"Just in time!" cried Peggy; "that's the five-minute warning gun."

By this time the grandstand was well filled and a band was playing lively airs. At the starting line three of the Kelly aeroplanes were gathered ready for the signal for the start of the altitude flight. The instant the car came to a standstill Jimsy was out and in a jiffy had the new spark plug adjusted. There was no time to test it, but he felt pretty confident that it would work all right.

"All ready!" shouted the official in charge of the starting arrangements.

"Ready!" rejoined Jimsy heartily, as he adjusted his leather helmet and Jake and Roy started the engine.

Kelly, whose back had been turned while he talked to some of his troupe, faced round at the sound of the boy's voice.

"What, you here!" he choked out, his face purple.

"Yes; do you know any reason why I shouldn't be?" asked Jimsy, with meaning emphasis.

Under the lad's direct gaze Kelly's eyes fell. He couldn't face the lad, but turned away.

"There, if that isn't proof of his guilt I'd like to know what is," declared Jimsy to Roy.

"But the rascal covered up his tracks so cleverly that we can't prove anything on him," muttered Roy disgustedly.

At the same instant the starting bomb boomed out. The crowd yelled, and the drummer of the band pounded his instrument furiously. Above the uproar sounded the sharp, crackerlike report of the motors. As more power was applied they roared like batteries of Gatling guns.

Into the air shot one of them, a black biplane. It was followed by the others, two monoplanes and a triplane. Jimsy ascended last, but as this was not a race, but a cloud-climbing contest, he was in no hurry. He was anxious to see what the other air craft could do.

Up they climbed, ascending the aerial stairway, while the crowd below stared up, at the risk of stiff necks in the immediate future.

Jimsy chose spiraling as his method of rising. But the others went upward in curious zigzags. This was because their machines were not equipped with the stability device, and they could not attempt the same tactics. Before long Jimsy was high above the others. From below he appeared a mere dot in the blue. But still he flew on.

Once he glanced at his barograph. It showed he had ascended 5,000 feet. It was higher than the boy had ever been before, but he kept perseveringly on.

It was cold up there in the regions of the upper air, and Jimsy found himself wishing he had put on a sweater.

"It's too long a drop to go down and get one," he remarked to himself, with grim humor.

Beneath him he could see the other aeroplanes; but the black one was the only one that appeared to be a serious rival. The rest did not seem to be trying very hard to reach a superlative height. The black machine, however, was steadily rising. After a while Jimsy could see the face of its occupant. It was the Cuban, Le Roy.

"Now, what's he trying to do, I wonder?" thought Jimsy, as the black biplane rose to the same level as himself and appeared to be going through some odd maneuvering.

"That's mighty funny," mused the boy, watching his rival; "I can't make out what he's up to."

Indeed the black biplane was behaving queerly. Now it would swoop toward Jimsy and then would dart, only to return. Suddenly it came driving straight at him.

It was then that Jimsy suddenly realized what his rival was trying to do. To use a slangy but expressive phrase, Le Roy, the veteran aviator, was trying to rattle the boy.

"So that's his game, is it," thought Jimsy; "well, I'll give him a surprise."

Manipulating his spark and gas levers the boy gave his graceful red craft full power. The Dragon shot sharply upward, crossing Le Roy's machine about twenty feet above its upper plane. Jimsy laughed aloud at the astonished expression on the man's face as he skimmed above him.

"I reckon he'll think that I do know something about driving an aeroplane, after all," he chuckled as he rose till his barograph recorded 6,000 feet.

Beneath him he could see Le Roy starting to descend. Something appeared to be wrong with the black biplane's motor. It acted sluggishly.

"Well, as he's going down I guess I will, too," said Jimsy to himself;

"6,000 feet is by no means a record, but it's high enough for me."

Suddenly he was plunged into what appeared to be a wet and chilly fog. In reality it was a cloud that had drifted in on him. It grew suddenly cold with an almost frosty chill. The moisture of the cloud drenched him to the skin. The lad shivered and his teeth chattered, but he kept pluckily to his task.

Before long he emerged into the sunlight once more. The crowd which had thrilled when the young aviator vanished into the vapor set up a yell when he reappeared. But at the height he was Jimsy, of course, did not hear it.

But as he dropped lower the shouts and cheers became plainly audible. The lad waved his hand in acknowledgment. Then, as he neared the ground, he put his machine through a series of graceful evolutions that set the crowd wild.

"The altitude flight is won by Number Four," announced the officials after they had examined the barograph; "with a height of 6,000 feet. Number Four is Mr. James Bancroft."

"Gee; that sounds real dignified," laughed Jimsy; "it's a treat to be treated with becoming dignity once in a while."

The next flight was a race six times round the course. This was won by one of the Kelly flyers. Then came an endurance contest which Roy captured handily and some exhibition flying in which Bess did some clever work and was delighted to find herself a winner.

It was soon after this that the gun was fired as a note of warning that the big race was about to begin.

Peggy's _Golden Butterfly_ and Roy's entry, the _Red Dragon_, borrowed for this race because the biplane was too heavy and clumsy for such fast work, were wheeled to the starting line. Already three of Kelly's machines were there, among them being that of Senora Le Roy, or, as she was billed, the Cuban Skylark, the Only Woman Flyer in the World. It appeared now that she had small claim to the title. The crowd set up a cheer for her as she took her seat in a neat-looking monoplane of the Bleriot type.

But when Peggy's dapper figure, smartly attired in her aviation costume, appeared a still louder shout went up.

Kelly scowled blackly. He stepped up to his flyers.

"You've got to win this race or get fired," he snarled.

CHAPTER XXI.

PEGGY'S SPLENDID RACE.

"They're off!"

"Hurrah!"

"There they go!"

These and hundreds of other cries and exclamations followed the report of the starting gun. The Cuban woman flyer was off first, then came two other of the professional flyers, while Roy and Peggy got away last.

The race was to be sixty miles out to a small body of water called Lake Loon and return. A trolley line ran past the aviation grounds and out to the lake. For the guidance of the flyers a car with a huge American flag flying from it blazed a trail below them, as it were.

Roy's craft gained a slight lead on the _Golden Butterfly_ and two of the Kelly flyers were soon passed by both the boy and his sister. But the professional woman flyer still maintained her lead. Second came another of Lish Kelly's aviators in a blue machine. This was Ben Speedwell, who enjoyed quite a reputation as a skillful and daring air driver.

The flyers had all struck a level about 1,500 feet in the air. There was a light head wind, but not enough to deter any of the powerfully engined craft. Glancing back for an instant Roy saw one of the contesting aviators dropping to earth. His companion soon followed.

"Overheated engines probably," thought the boy; "I must be careful the same thing doesn't happen to me going at this pace."

Suddenly another aeroplane loomed up beside him. It was the _Golden Butterfly_.

"Good for you, sis!" cried Roy, as Peggy, waving her hand, roared past. In another minute she had shot past Speedwell, but the leader, the woman flyer, was still some distance ahead, and appeared to steadily maintain the lead she had.

At last Lake Loon came into view. It was a more or less shallow body of water with a small island in the middle of it. As they neared it Speedwell and Roy were flying almost abreast, with Speedwell just a shade in the lead.

Suddenly Speedwell made a spurt and shot ahead of the _Dragon_. At a distance of half a mile from Roy, who was now last, Speedwell was above the lake.

Peggy and the woman flyer had already turned and were on their way back, with the latter still in the lead. Roy was watching Speedwell intently.

He saw the man bank his machine to take the curve in order to round the lake. An appalling climax followed.

"He's turned too sharp. He'll never make it," exclaimed Roy, holding his breath.

The aeroplane swayed madly. Then began a fierce fight on Speedwell's part to settle it on an even keel. But skillful as he was he could not master the overbalanced machine.

"He is lost!" breathed Roy, every nerve athrill.

And then the next minute:

"Cracky! He's got it. No, he's falling again--ah!"

There was a note of horror in the exclamation. The aeroplane in front of Roy dived wildly, then fairly somersaulted. The strain was too great. A wing parted.

"It's the end of him!" exclaimed Roy, in a whisper.

Down shot the broken aeroplane with the velocity of lightning. It just dodged the trees on the little island and then it plunged into the lake, first spilling Speedwell out. Then down on top of him came the smother of canvas, wood and wires.

"He'll be suffocated if I don't go to his rescue," murmured Roy; "it will put me out of the race, but I must save him."

There was a clear spot on the island, and toward this the boy dived. In the meantime men were putting out from shore in a small boat. But the boy knew that they could not reach the unfortunate Speedwell in time to save his life.

Roy made a clever landing on the island and then lost no time in wading out to the half floating, half submerged wreckage. In the midst of it lay Speedwell. Roy dragged him ashore. The man's face was purple, his limbs limp and lifeless and he choked gaspingly. Another minute in the water would have been his last, as Roy realized.

He did what he could for the man, rolling him on his face to get out the water he had swallowed. By this time the boat from the shore landed on the island. The two men got out.

"Is he alive?" they asked of Roy.

"Yes, and he'll get better, too, I guess. Lucky he fell in the water. No limbs are broken."

"Well, you're a pretty decent sort of fellow to get out of the race to help an injured man," said one of the men.

"Well, I'll leave him to you now," rejoined Roy; "is there a hospital near here?"

"There's one 'bout a mile away. We can phone for an ambulance."

"Good! Well, good-bye."

With a whirr and a buzz the boy was gone, and speedily became a speck in the sky.

In the meantime the aviation field was in an uproar. Dashing toward it had come the two leading aeroplanes. From dots in the sky no bigger than shoe buttons they speedily became manifest as two aeroplanes aquiver with speed. Blue smoke poured from their exhausts. Evidently the two aviators were straining their craft to the utmost.

"It's that Cuban woman and the young girl flyer!" yelled a man who had a pair of field glasses.

The uproar redoubled. The two aeroplanes were almost side by side as they rushed onward. Which would win the \$500 race?

It was a struggle that had begun some miles back. After leaving the lake

Peggy, who had held some speed in reserve while her opponent had keyed her machine to its top pitch, had gradually gained on her. But still there was a gap between the two aeroplanes.

On the return trip no car blazed the way. The speed was too great for that. For this reason smudges, or smoky fires, had been lighted to guide the flyers. At a place where it was necessary to make a slight turn Peggy made the gain that brought her almost alongside her competitor. In making the turn the monoplane flown by the Cuban aviatrix could not negotiate it at as sharp an angle as Peggy's machine, owing to its not being equipped with an equalizing, or stability device.

Now it was that Peggy tensioned up the _Golden Butterfly_ to its full power. The engine fairly roared as the propeller blurred round. The whole fabric trembled under the strain. It seemed as if nothing made by man could stand the pressure.

But the _Golden Butterfly_ had been built by one of the foremost young aviators in the country, and it was sound and true in every part. Peggy felt no fear of anything giving out under the strain.

And now the aviation park appeared in the distance. Peggy headed straight for it, hoping devoutly that her motor would not heat up and jam under the terrific speed it was being forced to.

The Cuban woman glanced round anxiously. It was a bad move for her. Like a flash the _Golden Butterfly_ shot by the other machine as the latter wobbled badly.

Peggy's delight was mixed with apprehension. The motor was beginning to smoke. Plainly it was heating up.

"Will it last five minutes longer?"

That was the thought in Peggy's mind. The _Golden Butterfly_ was hardly an airship any longer. It was a thunderbolt--a flying arrow. Before Peggy's eyes there was nothing now but the tall red and white "pylon" that marked the winning post. Could she make it ahead of her rival? Close behind her she could hear the roar of the other motor, but she did not dare to look round for fear of losing ground.

Swiftly she mentally selected the spot where she would land, and then down shot the _Golden Butterfly_ like a pouncing fish hawk. The speed of the descent fairly took Peggy's breath away. Her cap had come off and her golden hair streamed out in the breeze wildly.

There was a blur of flying trees, then came the grandstand, a mere smudge of color, a sea of dimly seen faces and a roar that was like that of a hundred waterfalls.

Down shot the _Golden Butterfly_ just inside the "pylon." It ran for about a hundred yards and was then brought to a stop.

Peggy Prescott had won the great race.

CHAPTER XXII.

PEGGY'S GENEROSITY.

"Oh, Peggy, it's the proudest moment of my life!" cried Jimsy, as a shouting, excited crowd surrounded the aeroplane in which Peggy still sat, feeling dazed and a little dizzy.

"Oh, you wonderful girl!" cried out Bess, half laughing and half crying; "gracious, what an exciting finish. I thought I'd go wild when it looked as if you weren't going to win."

They helped her from the aeroplane while policemen pushed the crowd back. Somebody brought a tray with steaming hot tea and crackers on it. But Peggy could not eat. She felt faint and dreamy.

"Brace up!" urged Jimsy.

"I'll be all right in a minute. It's the strain of those last few minutes. I never thought I'd win."

"And I never doubted it," declared Jess stoutly.

"I wonder where Roy is?" asked Peggy anxiously, as they entered a box in the grandstand where they could be secluded from the shoving, curious, staring crowd.

"Don't know; but he's all right, depend upon it," said Jimsy cheerfully; "hello, what's that coming now?"

"It's a homing aeroplane."

Then, a minute later:

"It's Roy. Look at him come. I didn't think the _Red Dragon_ could go as fast."

Roy it was, sure enough. He was coming at a pace that might have landed him as winner of the race if he had not been delayed by his errand of mercy.

Ten minutes later he had joined them. First he explained what had happened to the judges of the course. Kelly, crest-fallen and wretched-looking, thanked him half heartedly for what he had done and said that he would care for Speedwell till he got better, which, by the way, was a promise that he did not perform.

A sudden stir in the crowd caused the little party in the box to look up.

A man was hastily chalking up some legend on the big black bulletin board. It ran thus:

Long-distance Race for \$500 prize.

Start of Flight--11:01:2.

Finish of Flight--12:02:0.

Maximum Height--1,500 feet.

Wind Velocity--10 miles from southeast.

Winner--_Golden Butterfly_.

Winning Aviator--Miss Margaret Prescott.

What a cheer went up then. It seemed as if the roof would be raised off the grandstand by it.

"It's like a dream!" sighed Peggy, "just like a dream."

"Now, don't get fainty, Peggy, or Miss Margaret Prescott," admonished Jess; "as Jimsy says, 'brace up,' the best is yet to come."

A man came up to where they were sitting. In his hand he had a slip of pink paper.

Roy reached out for it, but the man said that he had instructions to hand it only to Peggy.

"It's the check for the prize-winning money," he explained.

Peggy took it and sat gazing at it for a minute.

"Oh, Peggy, what are you going to do with it?" asked Bess. "Buy some dresses or hats or----"

"None of those things," said Peggy; "I made up my mind before I went into the race as to what I would do with the money if I won."

"And what's that?" asked Miss Prescott.

"Why, it must go toward The Wren's education," rejoined the girl.

"Oh, Peggy, you darling!" cried Jess, flinging her arms round her chum, in full view of the grandstand and the crowd below.

As for The Wren, she gazed up at the girl with wide-open brown eyes.

"You are too good to me--too good," she said simply; but there was a plaintive quiver in her voice.

Mr. James Parker sat on the porch of his home, in the foothills of the Big Smokies, gazing out over the landscape. Seemingly he was watching for something.

"He done watch de sky lak he 'spected de bottom drap clean out uv it pretty soon," said Uncle Jupe, his factotum, to his wife Mandy.

"Gwan, you fool nigger, don' you know dat dem flying boys an' gals is to be hayr ter-day?"

"Oh, dat's jes a joke, dat is," rejoined Uncle Jupe; "how's they all goin' ter fly ah'd lak to know."

"I don' know, but dat's what Marse Parker says."

"Den he's been grocersly imposed upon by somebody. Ain't likely dat ef de Lawd had meant us ter fly he'd have give us wings, wouldn't he?"

"Go 'long, now, Don' flossyfyin' roun' hyar. You git out an' hoe dat cohn. Look libely, now. You git it done fo' dinner or dere'll be trouble."

Uncle Jupe shuffled out of the kitchen, but in a minute he came rushing back.

"Wha' de matter?" demanded his wife, noticing his wildly staring eyes and open mouth; "you gone fool crazy?"

"M-m-m-m-mandy, it's true! It's true!" gasped Uncle Jupe.

"Wha's true,--dat you all's crazy?"

"Yes--no, it's 'bout dem flyin' things. Dey's comin'. Come and look wid your own eyes."

Mandy shuffled out. There, sure enough, coming toward them, was a flock of what at first sight appeared to be immense birds. But it was the young sky cruisers nearing their destination.

On the porch Mr. Parker stood up and waved his newspaper. Ten minutes later the aeroplanes came to earth in the smooth front lawn, while Uncle Jupe restrained a strong inclination to run away.

"Dey ain't canny, dem things," he declared; "ef de Lord had wanted us to fly he'd have given us wings, I guess."

"Yes, sir, he'd sure have given us wings des de same as angels hev," he repeated musingly.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE MOONSHINERS AND THE AEROPLANE.

"This is a beautiful country, sis."

"Yes, indeed," agreed Peggy warmly.

The two were flying high above the romantic scenery of the Big Smoke Mountains of North Carolina in the _Golden Butterfly_. Beneath them lay a wild-looking expanse of country,--peaks, deep canons and cliffs heavily wooded and here and there bare patches cropping out.

"Let's drop down on one of those patches and do some exploring," suggested Peggy.

"All right," agreed Roy, nothing loath. The _Golden Butterfly_ was headed downward.

In a few minutes they landed on a smooth spot surrounded by trees. Leaving the aeroplane, they struck off on a path through the woods.

"Wonder if we can't find some huckleberries hereabouts," suggested Roy.

"Oh, yes, lots. Wouldn't it be dandy to take home a bucketful by aeroplane!"

"There's a little hut off yonder, maybe we could get a bucket or something there."

"Let's see if there are any berries first," said the practical Peggy.

From out of the hut shuffled an old woman. She was a wrinkled and hideous old hag, brown as a seasoned meerschaum pipe and in her mouth

was a reeking corn cob.

Her feet were bare, and altogether she was a most repulsive old crone. She saw Roy and Peggy almost as soon as they saw her. For an instant she stood looking at them and then raised her voice in a sort of shrill shriek.

Instantly from the woods around several men appeared--wild-looking, bearded fellows, each of whom carried a rifle.

"What you alls want hyar?" demanded one who seemed to be the leader.

"We were just taking a walk," explained Roy.

"Wa'al, we all don't like strangers particlar."

"So it would seem," rejoined Roy, with a bold voice, although his heart was beating rather fast.

"How'd you alls get hyar?" was the next question from the inquisitor.

"We flew here," rejoined Roy truthfully.

But the man's face grew black with wrath.

"Don' you alls lie to me; it ain't healthy," he said.

"I'm not in the habit of doing so."

"But you said you flew hyar."

"Well, we did."

"See hyar, young stranger, you jes' tell me the truth 'bout how you came or by the eternal I'll make it hot fer you."

"I can only show you that I'm speaking nothing but the truth," rejoined the boy; "if you'll come with me I'll show you what we flew here in."

The man glanced at him suspiciously. It was plain that he feared a trap of some sort. His eyes were wild and shifty as a wolf's.

"Ain't you frum the guv-ment?" he asked.

"I don't know just what you mean."

"I reckon that's jus' more dum' lyin'."

"Thank you."

"Don' get sassy, young feller, it won't do you no good. But I'll come with you. Come on, boys, we'll take a look at this flyin' thing. I reckon that even if it is a trap there's enough of us to take care of a pack of them."

"That's right, Jeb," agreed the men.

Some of them, who had been hanging back in the bushes, now came forward. They were all as wild-looking as their leader, Jeb. The old woman mumbled and talked to herself as they strode off behind Roy and Peggy.

It was one of the strangest adventures of their lives and neither one of them could hit on any explanation of the hillmen's conduct.

It did not take long to reach the aeroplane, and Roy turned triumphantly to Jeb.

"Well," he said, "what do you think now?"

"Wa'al, it ain't flyin', is it?"

"Of course not, but I can make it."

"You kin?"

"Certainly."

"Flap its wings and all that like a burd?"

"No, it doesn't flap its wings."

"Then how kin it fly?" propounded Jeb.

A murmur of approval ran through the throng. Jeb's logic appealed to their primitive intellects.

"Nothing can't fly that don't flap its wings," said one of them.

"But if it didn't fly, how in tarnation did it git here?" asked an old man with a grizzled beard and blackened stumps of teeth projecting from shrunken gums.

This appeared to be a poser for even Jeb. He had nothing to say.

"If you like I'll give you a ride in it," proffered Roy to Jeb.

"All right; only no monkey tricks now."

"What do you mean?"

"Wa'al, in course I know it won't fly, but if it does you'll hev to let me out."

With this sage remark Jeb stepped gingerly into the chassis of the aeroplane. He sat down where he was told and Roy took the wheel. Jeb's companions gazed on in awed silence.

"Look out, Jeb," cried one.

"Don't hit the sky," yelled another.

"Bring me back a star," howled the facetious old man.

"Me a bit of the moon," called another.

Jeb said nothing to this raillery. Instead, he looked uneasily about him and held his rifle, which he had insisted on bringing with him, between his knees.

"All right?" asked Roy, looking back at him.

"As right as I ever will be," rejoined Jeb, with a rather sickly grin.

"You must hold tight," warned Peggy.

"I'm doing that," said Jeb.

And then with the same sickly grin:

"Say, miss, does it really fly?"

"Of course it does. As that old man said, how could it have got here if it didn't."

"I guess I'd better go home and git my coat," said Jeb, trying to climb out.

His demeanor had completely changed since he had climbed into the chassis. Something in its well-cushioned seats and the sight of the powerful engine and propeller seemed to have changed his mind about the capabilities of the _Golden Butterfly_.

But it was too late. With a roar the engine started. Instantly the little plateau was deserted. The mountaineers were all behind trees.

Jeb rushed for the side of the car.

"Sit down!" screeched Peggy, really fearing he would fall over.

But if Jeb's intention had been to climb out it was foiled.

[Illustration: "Take me back to earth er I'll shoot," said a voice in his ear.]

"Wow!" he yelled, and again, "Wow-ow-ow! Lemme out."

"Too late now," shouted Roy.

The aeroplane shot upward, carrying as a passenger a man temporarily crazy from fright.

Suddenly Roy felt the muzzle of a rifle press against the back of his neck.

"Take me back to earth er I'll shoot," said a voice in his ear.

Roy obeyed, and so ended Jeb's first aeroplane ride. It may be added that it was also his last.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MR. PARKER'S STORY.

"It was a gang of moonshiners that you stumbled across," said Mr. Parker, when they told him of their adventure; "you were fortunate to escape as you did."

"I guess we have that aeroplane ride we gave to Jeb to thank for that," laughed Roy.

"It wasn't so laughable, though, when he pressed that rifle to your neck," declared Peggy.

"No, indeed. That was a mighty uncomfortable feeling, I can tell you."

"It reminds me of an experience I had with moonshiners once," said Mr. Parker. "Would you care to hear about it?"

Of course they would. They were sitting on the porch in the twilight after dinner. It was a happy group and they had been exploding with laughter over Roy's account of Jeb's ride.

"It was a good many years ago, when I was in the employ of the government," said Mr. Parker, "that what I am going to tell you about happened. I was a young fellow then, and a good bit of a dare-devil, so I was sent at the head of a body of men to rout out moonshiners.

"As you may know from your experience this morning, it is mighty dangerous to be suspected of being in the employ of the government, and so we posed as drummers and peddlers, scattering through the mountains.

"Each of us worked alone so as not to attract attention. Our job was merely to locate the illicit stills and then militia would be sent to raid and destroy them, and the vile stuff they concoct.

"I had been on the job about a week when I came one night to a desolate-looking little shack on a high mountainside. It did not look inviting, but I had to have shelter for the night, so I stepped to the door and knocked. A rather comely looking woman replied to my summons.

"'I'm a peddler,' I explained, 'could I get something to eat and a room here for the night?'

"She looked at me twice before answering.

"'What you tradin' in?' she asked, with a trace of suspicion.

"I judged from her manner that there was an illicit still in the neighborhood and that was what made her so suspicious.

"'Oh, laces, ribbons and so forth,' I replied.

"I showed her some samples.

"'I'll give you breakfast, supper and a bed fer that bit of red ribbon,' she said.

"'I'll throw in this bit of blue,' said I gallantly.

"And so the bargain was struck. It was a small place, but neat and tidy. Two children were playing about and in a corner sat a man trying to read a month-old newspaper.

"Pop, this feller traded in these bits of ribbon fer bed and two meals,' she said, proudly exhibiting her goods and evidently thinking she had made an excellent bargain. I could see the gleam of triumph in her eye.

"'Humph!' grunted the man, 'much good those are.'

"Then he turned to me.

"Peddler?' he asked.

"Yes,' said I.

"What you tradin' in?"

"Oh, silks, laces and so forth,' rejoined I, repeating my formula.

"Humph!"

"He looked at me, narrowing his eyes.

"You don't look much like a peddler," said he.

"No, I've seen better days,' I said, with a sigh.

"But I could see that he was still suspicious.

"Where'd you come from?' was his next question.

"South,' said I.

"Where you going?"

"North.'

"Ain't much on conversation, be yer?' he asked.

"No, I'm not considered a very talkative fellow,' I rejoined.

"We lapsed into silence. The man smoked. I just sat and thought the situation over. At last supper was announced. It was eaten almost in silence. The man discouraged all his wife's efforts at conversation. He was sullen and nervous.

"More than ever did I begin to suspect that there was a still in the immediate neighborhood. Soon after supper I pleaded fatigue and was shown up a flight of stairs, or rather a ladder, to a sort of attic. There was a husk mattress there, and a pile of rather dirty-looking blankets. But in those hills you learn to put up with what you can get. I was glad to have found shelter at all.

"But tired as I was for some reason I couldn't sleep. I felt a sort of vague uneasiness. I heard the man get up and go out and then later on I heard several voices downstairs.

"There were broad chinks in the floor, and through these I could look down. The men--there were four of them--were talking in low voices, but now and then I could catch a word. All of a sudden I heard one say something about government spy.

"That gave me a shock, I can tell you. I knew then they were talking about me. My predicament was a bad one if they suspected me. I began to look about me for a way to get out. While doing this I occasionally looked down below.

"The last time I looked I got a shock that made my hair stand. The fellows were moving about the room. From one corner one of them got a formidable-looking knife.

"Scared to death, I redoubled my efforts to find a way out. At last at one end of the room I found a chimney, one of those big stone affairs as big as all outdoors. I decided to try this.

"I found that it was rough inside, and I had not much difficulty in clambering up it. I was near the top when I heard a voice from the room below say:

"Then we uns 'ull kill him right now.'

"Yep, he's lived long enough. He's no good.'

"My heart jumped into my mouth. I redoubled my efforts and emerged from the top of the chimney. Reaching it, I lowered myself to the roof as gently as possible.

"The eaves came down low to the ground and I had not much difficulty in making my escape noiselessly."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE WREN DISAPPEARS.

"But as I reached the ground a startling thing happened. I missed my footing and found myself rolling down a steepish bank. At the bottom I fetched up against an odd-looking little hut almost overgrown with bushes. It was bright moonlight and the door was open.

"Inside was a fire, and by its light I could see that the place was empty of human life, but that a collection of objects already familiar to me almost filled it.

"It was an illicit still!

"Clearly enough, also, it was operated by my hosts up above.

"I listened for sounds of pursuit, but heard none. Possibly they had not yet crept into my room to perform their horrible resolve.

"Suddenly the silence was broken by appalling yells and screams. My hair bristled for an instant and then I burst into a laugh.

"It was a pig that I heard. At the same instant it dawned on me that it was the pig that they had been discussing dispatching and not me at all. You can imagine the revulsion of my feelings. But I felt sore at the scare they had given me, so I decided to do some work for the government and even up scores at the same time.

"Entering the shack, I scattered the coals of the fire right and left. Then I came away. No, I did not go back to the cabin. It would, as your friend Jeb said, not have been healthy for me.

"Instead I set off running at top speed through the woods. Before long I saw a glow on the sky behind me, and knew that flames were devouring the vile stuff that moonshiners make.

"I left my pack behind me, however, and I hope that compensated them for

the loss of their still. I'm sure the woman, at any rate, would value its contents more highly."

They all burst into a laugh at the conclusion of Mr. Parker's odd story. They were still laughing when Mandy rushed out on the porch.

"Miss Wren done be gone!" she shouted.

"Gone!" they all echoed, in dismayed tones.

"Yes. I done go to her room to see de poo' lamb is com'foble, and she not there. I done find dis writin', too."

"Let me look at it," demanded Mr. Parker.

"It mighty hard to read. It sure is a scan-lous bit of writin'."

With this comment the colored woman handed over to her master a bit of dirty wrapping paper.

On it was scrawled in almost illegible characters:

"U wont git hur agin.--The Romanys."

"The Romanys!" exclaimed Peggy.

"Yes; that's the gipsy word for themselves," said Mr. Parker. "I'm afraid that the same band that had her before has stolen her again."

"What are we to do?" wailed Bess.

"Hush!" said Jess; "let Mr. Parker decide what is best."

They stood about with dismayed faces.

Miss Prescott was weeping softly. Peggy could hardly keep back her tears. The little brown Wren had become very dear to all of them. It was a hard blow indeed to lose her like this.

"But how could they know that she was here?" objected Jimsy.

"Why, that silly newspaper report that went out when you arrived here about your adventures on the way and the romantic rescue of Wren. If they had come across that it would have given them a clew."

"They were traveling south then, Wren said, and that was two weeks ago. They would have had ample time to reach this vicinity."

"That is so," rejoined Mr. Parker solemnly; "I'll make telephonic inquiries at once. They may have been seen in the vicinity."

"While you are doing that we'll examine the room. They may have left a clew there," said Roy.

Roy and Jimsy darted upstairs on this errand. On looking round the place it was clear enough how the abductors had gotten in. Outside the window was an extension roof. It would have been very easy for an active man such as gipsies usually are to have clambered in and out again without detection.

Taking a lantern they examined the ground outside. On a flower bed below

the roof was the imprint of a man's feet.

"Notice anything peculiar about it?" asked Jimsy, for Roy was bending earnestly over the prints.

"Yes, I'd know that foot print again anywhere," he said; "see, one side of the man's boot was broken, the one of the right foot. His toes show here on the ground."

"That might be a good clew if it was daylight; but right now--"

Jimsy sighed. It was manifestly impossible to do any tracking of the man with the broken boot in the darkness.

"We'll have to wait till daylight."

"Yes, bother it all. They may be miles away by that time."

"I doubt it. I wouldn't wonder if they hide right around here. There are lots of good places, and they know that the hue and cry will be so hot that they would be caught if they traveled."

"That's so. Maybe we can find them, after all."

"Let's hope so. Well, we can do no more good here. Let's go in."

Peggy met them at the door. She seemed wildly excited over something.

"The mail rider's just been here," she exclaimed, "and listen to this letter. It's from a woman living near New York. She just got back from Europe and in an old newspaper she read an account of our sky cruise.

"She is certain that The Wren is her daughter and gives a description of her that tallies in every particular. She said that Wren was caught out in a heavy thunderstorm and sought refuge in a gipsy camp, as she learned afterward from a farmer who had seen her. She hunted high and low but has never since had word of the child. Her right name is Sylvia Harvey. Mrs. James Harvey is her mother, and she's rushing here as fast as a train will carry her."

"If it is really Sylvia Harvey then her mother has found her only to lose her again," sighed Jess.

"Don't say that," said Mr. Parker, coming into the room at that moment, "we'll leave no stone unturned to find her."

"Did you have any success with the telephone?"

"No; nobody has seen a band of people answering to the descriptions you gave of The Wren's abductors."

"Then we can do nothing more?"

The question came from Roy.

"Not to-night. It would be useless. I have notified all the police around and a general alarm will be sent out at once. And now I order every one to bed. We've hard work in front of us tomorrow."

CHAPTER XXVI.

CAPTURED BY GIPSIES.

About noon the next day Roy and Jimsy found themselves at the edge of a wild-looking section of country. They were standing at the entrance to a glen densely wooded with dark, forbidding-looking trees, and walled by precipitous and rugged rocks.

"Looks as if the trail ends here," said Jimsy disconsolately.

"It sure does. We can't----Gee, Whillikens!"

"What on earth is up now?"

"It's the broken-toed boot. Look here on the muddy bank of this little stream."

"By hooky, it is! We've struck the trail instead of ending it."

"What will we do; go back for reenforcements?"

"Not just yet. We'll reconnoiter a bit. See, the fellow went up this bank and--look there, Jimsy--there's a little footprint beside. He was dragging the child along."

With beating hearts the two boys entered the forbidding-looking glen. It was almost dark under the trees, which made the aspect of the place even more gloomy and desolate looking.

"This is a nice, cheerful sort of place," said Jimsy, in a low tone, as they walked along, following the bank of the stream, for the brush was too thick to admit of their walking anywhere else, which is what had driven the broken-booted man to leave a tell-tale trail behind him.

"I rather wish I had a gun," said Jimsy.

"We won't get close enough to them to need it," rejoined Roy; "we'll just spy out their hiding place and then go back for reenforcements."

"That's the best idea. I don't much fancy a hand-to-hand encounter with a band of such desperate ruffians as those gipsies have shown themselves to be."

"Don't be scared. We won't have any trouble if we're careful."

"I'm not scared; but if we did get in a tussle with them they could easily overpower us and then we'd have done more harm than good for they'd take fright and move right off."

"That's my idea. We'll be as cautious as mousing cats."

"Better stop talking, then. I never heard a mousing cat mi-ouw."

Cautiously they crept on. The trail still held good. At last they reached the head of the glen where a spring showed the source of the brook.

"What next?" whispered Jimsy.

"Let's see if we can find which way that fellow went. The ground is spongy all around here and--ah! this way! See it?"

Jimsey nodded. They struck off to the right, clambering over rocks till they reached the summit of a small hill. A tall dead tree stood there and Jimsey volunteered to climb it in order to spy out the surrounding country for traces of the gipsys. But on his return to the ground he was compelled to admit that they had gained nothing.

"I thought I might see some smoke that would give me a clew to their whereabouts," he explained.

"Not much chance of their being as foolish as that. I guess they know searching parties are out all over by this time, and they are too foxy to light fires."

"I might have thought of that," admitted Jimsey; "it would be about the last thing they would do. What will we do now?"

"I hardly know. Hello! there's an odd-looking place. Right over there. See that deep canon? That one with the fallen tree across it?"

"Yes, I do now. Let's look over there."

"All right. You're on."

The two boys struck off in the direction of Roy's discovery. It was indeed an odd freak of nature. Some convulsion of the earth had detached quite a section of land from the surrounding country. It was, in fact, an island in the midst of the woods with only the fallen tree for a bridge.

"Let's cross it and examine the place," suggested Roy, with all a boy's curiosity.

Together they crossed the old tree, which had evidently fallen there by accident, although, in reality, it formed a perfect bridge. The "island" was thickly wooded and they pushed forward across it, not without some difficulty.

Suddenly they came upon a sight that made them halt dead in their tracks.

A man holding a rifle was sitting on a fallen log. The instant he saw them he raised his weapon.

"Don't come no further," he said.

"Why not?" demanded Roy indignantly.

"See that sign?" said the man.

He pointed to a rudely painted sign on a tree at his back.

"Dangir. No Trespasin."

That was what it said in bold letters that sprawled across its surface in an untidy fashion. The execution of the thing was as bad as its spelling.

"I guess a pretty sick man painted that sign," grinned Jimsy.

"What do you mean?" was the surly reply.

"Why, I should judge he was having an awful bad spell at the time," was the boy's rejoinder.

The man scowled at him fiercely.

"No joking round here," he growled; "now, then, if you know what's good for you two kids will vamoose."

"What's the danger if we keep on?" asked Roy.

"Why, they're trying a new kind of explosive back there. It might go off the wrong way, your way, for instance, and hurt you," was the reply.

"Seems a funny sort of place to try out explosives," said Roy.

"Seems a queer sort of place for you two kids to come. Who are you, anyhow?"

"Oh, we are camping down below and we just came out for a stroll."

"Well, stroll some other place, then. Git away from round here."

"We certainly will," flashed back Roy; "come on, Jimsy."

As there seemed nothing else to do Jimsy agreed. They turned away and began retracing their steps, no wiser as to the whereabouts of the man with the broken boot than they had been when they set out.

Just as they turned to go, however, another man came out of the woods behind the man with the rifle. When he saw the boys he gave an abrupt start.

"Where did those boys come from?" he demanded.

"I don't know. Said they was two kids out campin' and takin' a stroll."

"Taking a stroll, eh?" said the other ferociously; "they were taking a stroll looking for that Wren."

"How do you know?"

"Because they are the same two kids who stole her from us just as we were going to demand a ransom for her."

"That was before I joined the band. No wonder I didn't know them; if I had----"

He scowled vindictively.

"Well, we can't let 'em get away. Here, give me that rifle," demanded the newcomer.

The other handed it to him. The next instant a report rang out and a bullet whizzed over the boys' heads.

"Come back here," shouted the man who had fired the shot; "I want to see you."

The boys hesitated for a minute.

"The next shot 'ull come lower if you don't," warned the man; "come on, no nonsense."

As there seemed to be nothing else to do the boys obeyed. As they drew closer they recognized the fellow.

"Oh, you know me, eh?" he snarled; "well, you'll know me better before we get through. Follow me, now. Pedro, you take the rifle and fall in behind. If they try to escape shoot them down."

Here was a fine situation. They had found the gipsies' camp with a vengeance, but for all the good it was going to do The Wren, unless they could get her away, they might as well not have come. These gloomy reflections sifted through their minds as they paced along, the man with the rifle occasionally prodding them with it just to make them "step lively," as he phrased it.

At length they came to a sort of large open place shaped like a basin, and placed in the middle of this natural island. In this basin were set up several squalid tents, about which the gipsies were squatting.

They set up a yell of surprise as the two boys were brought in.

"Where under the sun did you find them, Beppo?" exclaimed the same woman who had so cruelly ill-treated The Wren the time the boys rescued her.

"Oh, they were just taking a stroll, and happened to stroll in here," said Beppo viciously.

"I guess they won't have a chance to bother us again. They're going to make quite a stay here."

The gipsies set up a taunting laugh. Suddenly, from one of the tents, a tiny figure darted.

"Oh, I knew you'd come! I knew you'd come," it cried.

It was the poor little Wren. She had been stripped of her nice clothes and put into some filthy rags, her face was stained with crying and there was a bruise on her forehead.

With a curse Beppo seized the child by one arm, swung her round and dealt her a savage box on the ear.

"Get back where you belong!" he roared.

The next instant Beppo had measured his length on the ground and beneath one of his eyes a beautiful plum-colored swelling was developing. As has been said, Roy could hit a powerful blow.

CHAPTER XXVII.

DELIVERANCE.

The next minute all was wild confusion. The boys found themselves on the ground, being scratched and bitten and kicked by men and women alike. They did not have a chance against this horde of half savage wanderers. At length beaten and bruised they were tied with ropes and thrown into one of the tents and a man set to guard it.

All day they lay there without anything to eat or drink and no one to come near them except that occasionally a tangled head would be thrust in to hurl some taunt at them.

Darkness fell and they still lay there, suffering terrible pain from their wounds and bonds.

"This is the uttermost limit," declared Roy, in a low tone; "we're in the worst fix we ever got into this time."

"We certainly are. What a bit of bad luck that the rascal Beppo came up when he did! That other gipsy had no idea who we were."

"Well, I had the satisfaction of giving Master Beppo a good black eye," muttered Roy.

"Yes; that was a peach. It did me good to see it land."

"It landed all right. Ouch, my back feels as if it was broken."

"My wrists and ankles are awfully sore. I wonder if they mean to let us loose or give us anything to eat."

"Well, we won't last long at this rate. I guess they mean to be as cruel as they can to us in return for that punch I gave Beppo."

"I wouldn't have spoken to you again if you hadn't."

"I don't blame you."

It grew dark. Outside they heard the murmur of voices for a time and then all became quiet. Just before silence fell and snores became audible they heard the man on duty as their guard call for some coffee to keep by his side during the night.

"I'll send that brat of a Wren to you with it directly," they heard Beppo's wife reply; "the little beast, it'll do her good to work."

Then came the sound of a slap and a sob.

The boys' blood boiled.

"Oh, what wouldn't I give to have Master Beppo in a twenty-four-foot ring," breathed Roy.

"I think he'd look well decorating a tree," grated out Jimsy viciously.

The night wore on, but the boys did not sleep. Their tight bonds and worry over their situation prevented this.

All at once Roy's attention was attracted by somebody raising the flap at the back of the tent. Next something crawled in. At first he thought it was a large dog.

But then came a whisper:

"It's me, Wren."

"What are you doing here?"

"Hush, I've come to get you free. You'll take me with you, won't you?"

"Of course; what a question to ask! But how can you free us?"

"I've got a knife here. I'll cut those ropes in a minute."

"But the guard outside?"

"I've fixed him. Was it very wrong of me? While Mother Beppo wasn't looking I put some of the stuff in that coffee I brought him."

[Illustration: "I'd do anything for you." said the child, as she rapidly cut the ropes.]

"Well, upon my word, Wren! What sort of stuff?" gasped Jimsy.

"Oh, some sort of brown stuff. I've seen Mother Beppo smoke it. It makes her oh so sleepy. So I gave some to him and he's sound asleep now."

"Must have been opium," declared Roy. "Wren, do you know that you are a very bad young lady?"

"I'd do anything for you. You're so good and kind to me," said the child, as she rapidly cut the ropes.

For a time the boys, after being freed, just lay there, unable to move. But after a while circulation set in and they began to move their limbs. In half an hour the trio crept out of the tent and, crossing the "island," traversed the trunk bridge.

"Wait a minute," said Roy, when they reached the other side.

"What are you going to do?"

"Make that whole outfit prisoners till the officers of the law can get up here."

He took a broken branch as a lever and with Jimsy's assistance toppled the log down into the canon.

"Now I guess they'll stay put for a while," he said.

And they did. That was why, when a posse came up to capture the band, they carried materials for building a bridge across the canon. It may as well be said here that the band received heavy sentences, it being proved at their trial that they had made a practice of kidnapping children and then trying to collect ransoms for them.

There was a happy scene next day at the Parker home when Mrs. Harvey, a sweet-faced woman of middle age, arrived. After one look at Wren she swayed and then, recovering herself, called out in the voice that only a mother knows:

"Sylvia!"

"Mother!" screamed the child, and rushed into her open arms.

The tide of memory, driven to low ebb by ill-treatment and hardship, had rushed back with full force. The Wren, the gipsy waif, was once more Sylvia Harvey. A doctor said later that such cases were frequent following a severe shock. It was then that they recalled how the child had almost recollected some of her past life during the thunderstorm.

The happiness of little Wren and her mother in their reunion was shared by all of the party who had been instrumental in effecting it, for every one of them, including Jake, had become attached to the quiet little girl and rejoiced in her good fortune.

When Mrs. Harvey and Sylvia departed for the railway station the following day behind a pair of Mr. Parker's steady horses they were accompanied by the four aeroplanes, which hovered over them like so many sturdy guardian angels.

And when the train bore them away they watched the returning aerial escort until there was nothing visible but four tiny dots against the blue heaven.

"Oh, mother," exclaimed Wren, "they look no bigger than butterflies now!"

And the Girl Aviators, flying every moment higher and farther on the powerful wings of the _Golden Butterfly_ and the delicate plane of the dainty _Dart_, looked back at the train crawling like a humble insect in the valley below and gloried in their untrammelled flight. As they followed Roy and Jimsy in an irregular procession through the air, their thoughts flew ahead, outdistancing the biplane and the _Red Dragon_ and speeding confidently toward the happy realizations of the future.

Miss Prescott, watching from the home of Mr. Parker for their return, also dreamed dreams and saw visions, and in them her "dear children" were fulfilling the bright prophecies of the present. She saw them stronger because of adversity, braver because of success, and ennobled by all their experiences; and she deemed herself happy in her capacity of chaperon to the Girl Aviators.

The End.

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