

THE BOY AVIATORS ON SECRET SERVICE

OR

WORKING WITH WIRELESS

BY

CAPTAIN WILBUR LAWTON

AUTHOR OF "THE BOY AVIATORS IN NICARAGUA"

NEW YORK
HURST & COMPANY
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These have been left in their original state so as to maintain the historical accuracy of the text. This may also include inconsistencies in spelling of the same word in multiple locations within the text along with typesetting mistakes and oversights.

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John Henry Goldfrap (1879 - 1917)

He wrote many of the Hurst & Co. series.

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CHAPTER I. AN IMPORTANT COMMISSION.

"Come in!"

The gray-haired man who uttered these words gazed sharply up at the door of the private office of the Secretary of the Navy's Bureau, at Washington, D. C., as he spoke. He was evidently anticipating callers of more than usual importance judging from his expectant look. The old negro who had knocked opened the door and respectfully stood waiting.

"Well, Pinckney?"

"Dey have come, sah."

"Ah; good,—show them in at once."

The old negro bowed respectfully and withdrew. A few seconds later he reappeared and ushered in two bright looking youths of sixteen and fourteen with the announcement in a pompous tone of voice:

"Messrs. Frank and Harry Chester."

Frank, the elder of the two brothers, was a well set up youngster with crisp, wavy brown hair and steady gray eyes. Harry, his junior by two years, had the same cool eyes but with a merrier expression in them. He, like Frank, was a well-knit, broad-shouldered youth. Both boys were tanned to an almost mahogany tinge for they had only returned a few days before from Nicaragua, where they had passed through a series of strange adventures and perils in their air-ship, the *Golden Eagle*, perhaps, before her destruction in an electric storm, the best known craft of her kind in the world and one which they had built themselves from top plane to landing wheels.

The Secretary of the Navy, for such was the office held by the gray-haired man, looked at the two youths in front of him with some perplexity for a moment.

"You are the Boy Aviators we have all heard so much of?" he inquired at length with a note of frank incredulity in his voice.

"We are, sir," rejoined Frank, with just the ghost of a smile playing about his lips at the great man's evident astonishment

—and its equally evident cause.

"I beg your pardon," hastily spoke up the Secretary of the Navy, who had observed Frank's amusement; "but you seem —"

"I know what you were thinking, sir," interrupted Frank, "that we are very young to undertake such exacting service as Admiral Kimball outlined to us in Nicaragua."

"You have guessed just right, my boy," rejoined the other, with a hearty laugh at Frank's taking his thoughts and putting them into such exact words, "but your youth has evidently not interfered with your progress if all the reports I have heard of you are true. Sit down," he went on, "and we will talk over the proposal the Department has to make to you."

The boys set down their straw hats and seated themselves in two chairs facing the grizzled official. Both listened attentively as he began.

"When Admiral Kimball wrote to me about you, telling me that he had found in the two sons of Planter Chester of Nicaragua the very agents we wanted for a particularly dangerous and difficult mission," he said, "I at once sent for you to come here from New York to see for myself if his judgment was correct. I have not been disappointed—"

The boys colored with pleasure.

"My brief observation of you has confirmed to my mind his report and I am going to entrust to you the responsibility of this undertaking. Now," he went on impressively, "the government has been experimenting for some time in secret with Chapinite, a new explosive of terrific power, the invention — as its name makes apparent — of Lieut. Bob Chapin of the United States Navy. I say 'has been experimenting' advisedly. It is so no more.

"The formula of the explosive has disappeared from the archives of the department and, what is still more serious, Lieutenant Chapin himself is missing."

"The agents of the Secret Service force have worked in vain on the case without discovering much more than the one very important fact that the government of a far Eastern power has recently been experimenting with an explosive whose effects and manifestations make it almost undoubted that the stuff is Chapinite. By a tedious process of observation

and deduction the men have traced the shipments as far as the west Florida coast but there all clues have ended. Weeks of work have left us as much in the dark as ever as to the location of the source of supply of the far Eastern power. But that somewhere within the untracked wildernesses of the Everglades a plant has been set up in which Chapinite is being manufactured in large quantities is a practical certainty to my mind.

"It is useless for the secret service men to attempt to explore what is still an unmapped labyrinth of swamp and jungle and above all it would occupy time. What we have to do is to act quickly. I racked my brain for days until I happened to come across a paragraph in a newspaper calling attention to your wonderful flights in the *Golden Eagle*, and then followed Admiral Kimball's dispatch. It struck me at once that here indeed was a way of locating these men that might prove feasible—I say 'might' because if you boys accept the commission I do not want to absolutely impose the condition of success upon you. All that we shall expect of you is that you will do your best.

"Will you accept the assignment?"

The blunt question almost took the boys off their feet so to speak. They exchanged glances and then Frank said:

"As you perhaps know, sir, our first aeroplane, the *Golden Eagle*—"

"In which you rescued William Barnes, a news-paper correspondent, from a camp in which he was held prisoner," remarked the Secretary— "you see I have followed your doings closely."

"Exactly," went on Frank; "that first *Golden Eagle* Is at the bottom of the sea. She went down when we were driven off the land in a tropical electric storm and it was only the fact that she was equipped with wireless, with which we signaled a passing steamer, that saved us from sharing her fate.

"We 'might, however, construct a second one. In fact I have the designs partially drawn up. She would be a more powerful craft than the first and capable of even longer sustained flights."

"The very thing!" exclaimed his listener enthusiastically, "then you will accept the commission?"

"I have not yet said that we would," rejoined Frank, calmly. "As you have described the situation it looks rather like a wild-goose chase; however, I think that if my brother agrees that we might consent to try to do our best."

"Of course I agree, Frank," cried Harry enthusiastically. The very mention of anything that promised exciting adventures was sufficient to enlist Harry's ardent interest.

"Then it is as good as settled," concluded the Secretary. "The thing is now, how long will it take you to build this craft?"

"We shall require at least three weeks," replied Frank.

The Secretary almost groaned.

"It is a long time—or at least it seems so," he corrected, "when there is so much at stake."

"It would be quite impossible to construct a suitable aeroplane in a lesser period," rejoined Frank, with finality in his tones.

"Then I suppose we shall have to exercise patience," remarked the secretary. "You will of course need funds. How much shall you require do you suppose?"

"We cannot build a second *Golden Eagle* for less than ten thousand dollars to start with," was the quiet reply.

"Ten thousand dollars?" repeated the secretary, in tones of amazement.

"It does sound like a good deal of money," replied Frank, "but if you were more familiar with aeroplane construction you would see that it is not exorbitant. Everything that enters into the construction of an aircraft must be of the very best and strongest material. The engine alone is a heavy item of expense and besides must be of specially prepared metals and hand machined."

"I see," replied the secretary. "You know best. I will see that arrangements are made to provide you with everything you require. Where do you intend to build the ship?"

"There is a place at White Plains, some miles out from the town and back in the hills," replied Frank, "that is in every way suited for our purpose. It is off any main road and we can work there in quiet. We built the first *Golden Eagle* there and I don't think that outside of ourselves and our workmen half a dozen people knew about it."

"The very thing," replied the secretary. "Of course I need not impress upon you the importance of absolute secrecy in this matter. We have almost positive proof that our every movement is watched by agents of those who have stolen the plans, and who now have Lieutenant Chapin a prisoner—that is, if they have not made away with him, poor fellow. My own idea is, however, that he has been kidnapped and forced to take charge of the work, as without his direction it would be impossible, even with the aid of the formula, to manufacture the explosive. What I fear is, that after they have made a sufficient quantity to stock up the arsenals of the far Eastern power they will destroy their plant and end Lieutenant Chapin's life. You see the explosive is so powerful that even a small quantity would make the nation possessing it extremely formidable, therefore it is not likely that wherever they have set up their plant they are figuring on a permanent location."

"What is the last trace you have of the plotters?" asked Frank.

For answer the secretary pressed a bell that stood on his table at his elbow. When in response the bowing old negro appeared he said sharply:

"Send Flynn here."

Flynn turned out to be a thick-set, red-faced man with the neck of a bull and powerful physique. He was one of the most trusted men in the Secret Service Bureau.

"Flynn," said the secretary when the detective had introduced his huge bulk, "these young men are Frank and Harry Chester, the Boy Aviators, they are going to take up your work where you left it off."

"Only because we were up against a dead wall," protested the agent.

"Quite so—quite so; I meant no offence. I know that you did all it was humanly possible to accomplish. What I want you to do now is to outline to these young men the discoveries you made following the morning on which we found the safe opened and the plans gone,—to be followed a few hours later by the discovery that Lieutenant Chapin had also vanished."

"Well," said Flynn, "cutting out the minor details we discovered that the very same day a big white yacht had

cleared from New York without papers and had headed toward the south. We traced her up and found that she had been bought by a Mr. Brownjohn of Beaver Street. We looked him up and found he was a ship broker who had bought the craft on telegraphed instructions from Washington. We trailed up the telegram and found that it had been sent from the Hotel Willard by a Captain Mortimer Bellman, who, from what we can find out about him, was considerable of an adventurer and had at one time lived a good deal in the far East. In fact he had only recently come from there. At the Marine Basin at Ulmer Park, near Coney Island, we discovered that a nondescript sort of a crew had been hustled on board and that the yacht had sailed at night without papers a few hours after her purchase was completed.

"Ten days later the newspapers reported that a large yacht had gone ashore on one of the Ten Thousand Islands on the west coast of the Everglades, and the men we sent down there to investigate discovered that the derelict was the Mist, — the same yacht that Bellman had bought. What was most remarkable, however, was that the boat seemed to have been deliberately wrecked, for everything had been taken off her except her coal and ballast and all the boats were gone. There was no indication that she had been abandoned in a hurry and the reef on which she lay was such an obvious one that even at high water it was clearly visible. Now that the Mist's boats went into the Everglades we are reasonably sure. If they had gone anywhere else we should have got some trace of them by this time, but from that day to this we have not had a word or sign concerning them."

"We have heard, however, that the navy of the power we suspect has been conducting experiments with a new explosive and we have also learned that this same explosive is undoubtedly Chapinite. We have looked up Bellman's record and find that while he was stopping at the Willard he received several letters from the government in question and that he paid twenty thousand dollars for the Mist. Now a man isn't going to pay that much out for a boat and wreck her unless he does it purposely. Bellman didn't have that much money anyhow. There is only one conclusion, Bellman was simply the agent for some one else and that some one has got a lot of money to spend to secure the most powerful explosive ever discovered."

"There you have the case in a nutshell," remarked the secretary as Flynn concluded.

"There is only one thing that is not clear to me," objected Frank. "Why should they make the stuff in the Everglades. Why not manufacture it out and out in the country you have mentioned?"

"Such a course would have been too full of risks," replied the secretary, "we are at peace with that power and if the stolen formula had been discovered there it would have led to a serious international breach and possibly war. By manufacturing it here and shipping it secretly in small quantities the plotters secure safety from war to their own country."

"I see," nodded Frank. He pulled out his watch.

It was twelve o'clock. "There is a train to New York at one o'clock," he said.

"Won't you stop and have lunch with me?" asked the secretary.

"No, thank you," was the boys' reply; "you see we have a lot of work before us. Building an aeroplane in three weeks calls for some tall hustling."

CHAPTER II.

THE BOYS MEET AN OLD FRIEND, —AND AN ENEMY.

As the boys hurried from the office of the Secretary of the Navy they almost collided with a plump faced, spectacled young man in an aggressively loud suit of light summer clothes who was just rushing in.

"I say, look out where you are coming, can't you?" he was beginning when he broke off with a cry of delight.

The next minute the boys were wringing the hand of Billy Barnes the youthful newspaper reporter who had been with them in Nicaragua and whose life they had saved when he was a captive among the Nicaraguans. Boy fashion the three slapped each other on the back and went through a

continuous pump-handle performance at this unexpected meeting.

"What on earth are you doing here?" asked Harry when the first enthusiasm of the greetings had worn off.

"Working," replied Billy briefly. "I'm on the Washington Post."

"But I thought you were going to take a holiday after you had realized your money on the sale of your share of the rubies we found in the Toltec cave;" said Frank wonderingly.

"Well," rejoined Billy, "of course the money I got for my two rubies looked good and it feels pretty nifty to have a check-book in your inside pocket; but I guess I can't be happy unless I'm working. I bought my mother up the state a pretty little place in Brooklyn and tried to settle down to be a young gentleman of leisure but it wouldn't do. I wasn't happy. Every time I saw the fire-engines go by or read a good thrilling story in the paper I wanted to be back on the job, so I just got out and hustled about for one and here I am."

"But what are you doing at the office of the Secretary of the Navy," demanded the boys.

"Ah, that's just it," rejoined Billy mysteriously, "I'm on the track of the biggest story of my career and I think it's a scoop. Can you fellows keep a secret?"

"We can do better than that," laughed Frank, "we can tell you one. What would you say if we could tell you your errand here?"

"That you are pretty good mind-readers," retorted Billy promptly. "I can guess yours though. You are here to try to sell the government an air-ship."

"Wrong," shouted Frank triumphantly. "But you—William Barnes—" he went on, making a mysterious pass at the other boy's head, "you are here to find out about Lieutenant Chapin."

"How on earth did you know that?" gasped Billy, "you are right though. Do you know anything about it?" he inquired anxiously.

"Everything," replied Frank.

"Oh, come off, Frank," retorted Billy, "that's too much. How on earth can you—?"

"That matters not, my young reporter—we do," struck in Harry.

"Give me the story then, will you?" begged Billy.

"No, we can't do that," replied Frank in a graver tone.

"Oh, of course I wasn't trying to worm it out of you," said Billy abashed somewhat.

"We know that, Billy," said Harry kindly. The reporter looked at him gratefully.

"I just thought you might have something to give out," went on Billy. "I see that you are in the confidence of the naval department."

"No, Billy," continued Frank, "we can't give you anything for publication. But we can do better than that, we can tell you we are about to start on what may prove the most exciting trip we have ever undertaken."

"What do you mean?" questioned Billy seeing clearly by Frank's manner that something very unusual was in the wind.

"That we are going to try to find Lieutenant Chapin and the men who kidnapped him," replied Frank; "but come along, Billy, we've just an hour before train time and if you feel like having a bite of lunch come with us and we can talk it over as we go along."

The young reporter gladly assented and, linked arm in arm, the three boys passed out onto the sunny avenue which was glowing in the bright light of a late May day.

Frank rapidly detailed to Billy the gist of their conversation with the Secretary of the Navy, having first called up that official on the telephone and secured his permission to enlist Billy as a member of the expedition. For Frank had made up his mind that the reporter was to come along almost as soon as the boys encountered him.

The young journalist could hardly keep from giving a "whoop," which would have sadly startled the sedate lunchers at the Willard, as Frank talked. He resisted the temptation, however, and simply asked eagerly:

"When do you start?"

The boys told him. They could see the eager question framing itself on Billy's lips.

"Say, Frank, couldn't you take me along?"

Frank feigned an elaborate indifference.

"Well, I don't know," he replied, winking at Harry as Billy's face fell at this apparent refusal, "we might, of course, but really I think we shall have to go 'without a chronicler.' "

The boys might have kept the jest up but Billy's face grew so lugubrious that they had not the heart to keep him in suspense any longer

"If you would care to come we were sort of thinking of taking you," laughed Harry.

"If I would care to come?" gasped Billy, "Jimminy crickets! If I'd care to come! Say, just wait a minute while I go to 'phone my resignation."

"What an impetuous chap you are," laughed Frank, "we don't start for three weeks yet and here you are in a hurry to throw up your job to-day."

"Well," replied Billy somewhat abashed, "I was a bit previous. But it's so white of you chaps to take me along that I hardly know what I'm doing. How I'm to wait three weeks I don't know."

"How would you like to help us build the *Golden Eagle III* " asked Frank suddenly.

"Say, Frank," burst out Billy earnestly, "you are a trump. That was just the very thing I longed to do but I didn't have the nerve to ask you after you were so decent about taking me with you to Florida. I don't know how to thank you."

"It won't be all a picnic," laughed Frank. "We've got a lot of hard work ahead of us and we'll all have to pitch in and take a hand, share and share alike."

"You can count on me," exclaimed the reporter eagerly.

"I know we can," replied Frank, "or we would not have asked you to accompany us."

"What are your plans?" asked Billy eagerly.

"At present so far as I have thought them out," replied Frank, "we shall sail from New York for Miami about the middle of June. I think it will be best to go by steamer as we can keep a better watch on any suspicious fellow passengers in that way than if we went by train. The key on which the Mist was wrecked is on the opposite coast from there, I understand, and the men who kidnapped Chapin and stole

the plans must have entered the Everglades by one of the numerous small rivers that lead back from the coast at the Ten Thousand Island Archipelago.

"My idea, then, is to establish a permanent camp from which we can work, the location of course to depend entirely on circumstances, that may arise after we reach our destination. We are going into this thing practically blindfold you see, and so we shall have to leave the arrangement of a host of minor details till we arrive there."

"You mean to strike right back into the wilderness?" asked Billy.

"As soon as possible after our arrival at Miami," was the businesslike rejoinder. "Every minute of our time will be precious. Oh, there's heaps to be done," broke off Frank.

All the boys had to laugh heartily at the wave of the hands with which Frank accompanied his last words.

But their merriment was cut short by a sharp exclamation from Billy.

"I say, Frank," whispered the young reporter, "have you noticed that fellow at the next table?" He indicated a short dark sallow-faced man sitting at a table a few feet from them and to whom most of their conversation must have been audible.

"He's not a beauty," remarked Harry in the same low tone; "what about him, Billy?"

"Well," said the reporter seriously, "I may be wrong and I may not—and I rather think I'm not,—but if he hasn't been listening with all his ears to what we've been saying I'm very much mistaken."

Frank bit his lip with vexation. In their enthusiasm the youthful adventurers had been foolishly discussing their plans in tones which any one sitting near could have overheard without much difficulty. The boys realized this and also that if the man really turned out to have been an eavesdropper that they had involuntarily furnished him with much important information about their plans.

The object of their suspicion apparently saw that they had observed him, for as they resumed their talk in lowered tones he called for his bill and having paid it with a hand that flashed with diamonds, he left the dining-room.

"Have you seen him before?" asked Frank of Billy.

"I was trying to think," replied the reporter. "It seems to me that I have. I am almost certain of it in fact. But I can't think where."

"Try to think," said Frank, "it may be very important."

Billy cudged his brains for a few minutes and then snapped his fingers in triumph.

"I've got it," he exclaimed joyously. "I've seen him hanging around the Far Eastern embassy. I was up there the other day to report a reception and this fellow was wandering around as if he hadn't got a friend in the world."

"He might have had an object in that," said Frank gravely. "There is no doubt that he was listening to what we were talking about."

"And not much question that he heard every word of it," put in Harry.

"Well, it can't be helped," said Frank in an annoyed tone, "we shall have to be more cautious in the future. I see that the secretary was right, this place is swarming with spies."

"I should say it is," replied Billy, "Washington is more full of eavesdroppers and secret-service men of various kinds than any other city in the world."

If the boys had seen the bediamonded man hasten from the hotel direct to a Western Union telegraph office where he filed a long telegram, they would have been even more worried than they were. If in addition they had seen the contents of the message they would have been tempted, it is likely, to have abandoned the expedition or at least their present plans, for the message, which was addressed to "Mr. Job Scudder, Miami, To Be Called For," and signed Nego, gave about as complete an account of what they intended to do as even Billy Barnes with his trained ear for catching and marshaling facts could have framed. There was a very amiable smile on Mr. Nego's face as he left the telegraph office and drew on a pair of light chamois gloves that gave a finishing touch of fashion to his light gray spring clothes, whose every line bore evidence to the fact that they had come from one of the best tailors in Washington. He had done a good morning's work.

The boys of course had no means of knowing that, even

as they hurried to their train, the wires were rushing to Florida the news of their coming three weeks before they planned to start and even if they had been aware of it they could not then have stopped it. With Billy Barnes they dashed up to the Pennsylvania depot in a taxi-cab just as the big locomotive of the Congressional Limited was being backed up to the long train of vestibuled coaches. They had their return tickets so that there was no delay at the ticket window and they passed directly into the depot, and having found their chair car deposited themselves and their hand-baggage in it. Billy stayed chatting with them till the conductor cried "all aboard." As the reporter rose to leave he gave a very perceptible start. He had just time to cry to Frank:

"Look behind you," when the wheels began to revolve and Billy only avoided being carried off by making a dash for the door almost upsetting the colored porter in his haste.

As the train gathered speed Frank glanced round as if in search of somebody. He almost started, as had Billy, as his eyes encountered the direct gaze of the very black orbs of the man whom they were certain had overheard their conversation at lunch and who had signed the telegram "Nego."

CHAPTER III.

A TRAMP WITH FIELD-GLASSES.

The boys lost no time in explaining to their mother when they reached their home on Madison Avenue the nature of the enterprise in which they had enlisted their services. That she was unwilling at first for them to embark on what seemed such a dangerous commission goes without saying, but after a lot of persuasion she finally yielded and gave her consent and the delighted boys set out at once for White Plains where the large aerodrome in which they had constructed the *Golden Eagle I* was still standing. The place was equipped with every facility for the construction of air craft and so no time was lost in preliminaries and two days of hard work saw the vanadium steel framework of the *Golden Eagle* the Second practically complete.

The craft was to be a larger one than the *Golden Eagle I*, which had a wing-spread of fifty-six feet. The planes of her successor were seventy feet from tip to tip and equipped with flexible spring tips that played a very important part in assuring her stability in the air. Like the first *Golden Eagle* the boys had determined that the new ship, should carry wireless and the enthusiasm of Schultz and Le Blanc, their two assistants, was unbounded as Frank placed before them his working drawings and blue prints which bore on paper the craft which they expected to eclipse anything ever seen or heard of in the aerial world for speed and stability.

The old *Golden Eagle* had been equipped with a fifty horse-power double-opposed engine with jump spark ignition. The boys for the new craft had determined to invest in a one hundred horse-power machine of similar type and equipped with the same ignition apparatus. As in the other ship they planned to have the driving power furnished by twin screws but, whereas in the first ship the propellers had been of oiled silk on braced steel frames in the new *Golden Eagle* the screws were of laminated wood, razor sharp at the edges and with a high pitch.

Except for her increased size the *Golden Eagle II* did not differ in other respects from her predecessor. Her planes were covered with the same yellow-hued balloon silk that had given the first craft her name and the arrangement of pilot-house and navigating instruments was much the same. The boys, however, planned to give her a couple of low transoms running the length of each side of the pilot-house on which the occupants could sleep on cushions stuffed with a very light grade of vegetable wool. A light aluminum framework, which could be covered in with canvas in bad weather, or mosquito netting in the tropics, forming in the former case,—a weather-tight pilot-house with a mica window in front for the steersman, was another improved feature.

Billy Barnes was astonished when a few days later, having resigned his newspaper job, he was met at the White Plains station by Frank and Harry, and found, on his arrival at the aerodrome a framework which was rapidly beginning to assume very much the look of a real air-ship. The enthusiastic reporter crawled under it and round it and pulled it and poked it from every possible angle till old Schultz, angrily exclaimed:

"Ach, vas is dis boy crazy, hein?"

Billy was nearly crazy with joy he exclaimed and the old German's heart warmed toward him for the interest he displayed in the craft which Schultz regarded as being as much his own creation as anyone else's.

"Well, you certainly look like business here," exclaimed Billy as he gazed about him. What with the lathes, the worktables, the blue prints and plans, the shaded drop-lights and the small gasolene motor,— used to test propellers and run the machinery of the shop,—Frank and Harry were indeed as Billy said, "running a young factory."

"You picked out a private spot," exclaimed Billy, gazing out of the tall aerodrome doors at the low, wooded hills that surrounded them.

"Well," laughed Frank, "if we hadn't we'd have half the population of White Plains around here trying to get on to what we were doing and spreading all sorts of reports."

"Oh, by the way," asked Billy, "did you have any more manifestations from our dark-skinned friend on your way to New York?"

"No," replied Frank, "he sat in his chair and read the papers and apparently paid no more attention to us. I really begin to think that we may have been mistaken."

"I guess so," said Billy lightly; "maybe he was just some rubber-neck who was surprised to hear three boys talking so glibly about invading the Everglades in an airship,"

With that the subject was dropped, for Harry, who had just entered the workshop from the small barn outside, where he had been putting the horse up, carried Billy off to show him the "camp" as the boys laughingly called it. The eating and sleeping quarters were in a small portable house, a short distance from the main aerodrome. It was divided into a dining and a sleeping room. The latter neatly furnished with three cots—a third having been added to Frank and Harry's for Billy's use that very morning. On its wall hung a few pictures of noted aviators, a shelf of technical books on aviation and the usual odds and ends that every boy likes to have about him. The two mechanics took their meals in the house and slept in the aerodrome. The cooking was done by Le Blanc who, like most of his countrymen, was a first-rate

chef.

"Camp!" exclaimed the admiring Billy after he had been shown over the little domain, "I call it a mansion. Different from old Camp Plateau in Nicaragua, eh?"

"And you came very nearly been shaken out of even that; " put in Harry with a laugh.

"I should say so," rejoined the reporter. "B-r-r-r-r! it makes my teeth chatter now when I think of the rain of stones that came from the Toltec ravine. By the way," he broke off suddenly, "where is good old Ben Stubbs?"

The boys laughed knowingly and exchanged glances.

"Go ahead and tell him, Frank," urged Harry.

"Well," said Frank, "as you know, Billy, we gave Ben one of the rubies as his share of the loot of the One-eyed Quesals and as a partial recognition of his bravery in rescuing us from the White Serpents."

Billy nodded and waited eagerly for Frank to resume. Ben Stubbs, the hardy ex-sailor, prospector and adventurer, whom they had discovered marooned in an inaccessible valley in the Nicaraguan Cordilleras, was very dear to the hearts of all the boys.

"What do you suppose he did with the money after he had sold the ruby for twelve thousand dollars?" resumed Frank.

The reporter shook his head.

"I can't guess," he said; "bought a farm?"

"Not much," chorused the boys, "he invested part of the money in a tug-boat and has been doing well with it in New York harbor. We met him when we were in New York a couple of days ago and partially outlined our plans to him. Nothing would do but he must come along."

"We couldn't have a better camp-mate," cried Billy.

"I agree with you," said Frank. "So I told him we'd think it over."

"Well, is he to come?" demanded Billy.

"Don't be so impatient," reproved Frank. "Listen to this. I got it this morning."

He drew from his pocket a telegram and the boys all shouted with laughter as he read it aloud. It was characteristic

of their old comrade.

"Have sold the tug and will be in White Plains tomorrow. Ben Stubbs, (skipper retired)."

"Good for him," cried Billy, as the three boys made their way back from the living quarters to the aerodrome, "he's a trump."

"I don't know of anyone I would rather have along in an emergency and on such an expedition as this, his experience and resourcefulness will be invaluable to us," declared Frank.

The next morning Frank and Billy left the others busy at the aerodrome applying the waterproof compound to the *Golden Eagle I's* planes and started for town behind the venerable old steed that Billy had christened "Baalbec," because, he explained, "he was a remarkably fine ruin." The first train from New York pulled into the station just as they were driving into the town of White Plains and- a minute later the ears of both boys were saluted by a mighty hail of:

"Ahoy there, shipmates lay alongside and throw us a line."

The person from whom this unceremonious greeting proceeded was a short, sun-bronzed man of about fifty. He had an unusual air of confidence and ability and his mighty muscles fairly bulged under the tight-fitting, blue serge coat he wore. He carried an ancient looking carpet bag in which as he explained he had his "duds," meaning his garments. The greetings between the three were hearty and after Frank had made a few purchases up-town and Ben had laid in a good supply of strong tobacco they started for the aerodrome.

As they drove down the street a thick-set man, with a furtive sallow face, came out of a store and as he did so saw the boys. With the agility of an eel he instantly slipped into a side street. But not so quickly that Billy's sharp eyes had not spied him and recognized him.

"Bother that fellow," he said with some irritation, "he gets on my nerves. I wish to goodness he'd keep away from where I am."

Frank looked up.

"What on earth are you talking about, Billy?" he asked.

"Why that fellow we saw at the Willard, and again on the Congressional Limited,—or his double,—just sneaked down a side street," said Billy. "I am certain he saw us and was

anxious for us not to observe him."

"Meeting him a third time like this could hardly be a coincidence," mused Frank.

"Not much," struck in Billy, "that fellow means some mischief."

"I think myself that he will bear watching," replied Frank, as they emerged from the street into the open country.

"Pretty good for a week's work, eh?" remarked Harry with some pride as, after the joyous re-union with Ben Stubbs, they all stood regarding the air-skimmer which was growing like a living thing under their hands.

They all agreed enthusiastically and Frank even suggested that it might be possible, at the rate the work was progressing, to make the start in less time than he had at first thought feasible.

"Oh, by the way," said Harry suddenly, "rather a funny thing happened while you were gone, Frank!"

"Yes?" said the elder brother, "what was it?"

"Oh, nothing very exciting," replied Harry, "nothing more than a visit we had from a tramp."

"From a tramp?" asked Frank wonderingly.

"Yes, he came here to look for a job," he said.

"And you told him—?"

"That we hadn't any work, of course, and then, apparently, he went away. But Schultz, when he went over to the house for some tools he'd left there, found that instead of going very far the fellow was up in the wood back there and watching the place with a pair of field-glasses."

"Whew!" whistled Frank with a long face, "a tramp with field-glasses?—that's a novelty."

"I sent Schultz up to tell the man that he was trespassing on private property," went on Harry, "but as soon as he saw the old fellow coming the tramp made off. He, however, dropped this bit of paper."

Harry handed his brother a crumpled sheet marked with faint lines. Frank scrutinized the paper carefully and a frown spread on his face.

"This bit of paper, as you call it, Harry," he said, "is nothing

more nor less than a very creditable sketch map of the location of this aerodrome."

"By jove, so it is," exclaimed Harry, "how stupid of me not to have realized that. What does it all mean do you suppose?"

"It means," replied Frank, "that we will not leave the aerodrome unguarded for a minute day or night till we are ready to make our start for Florida."

CHAPTER IV. A PLOT DISCOVERED.

In accordance with Frank's resolution the three young members of the party and Ben Stubbs divided the night into four watches which were religiously kept, but rather to Frank's surprise nothing occurred to excite suspicion. The next morning Le Blanc, who had driven into town, returned shortly before noon with a letter from the Secretary of War which contained information of much interest to every member of the projected expedition.

"I have arranged with the Department," it read in part, "to have the torpedo destroyer *Tarantula* detailed to duty along the Florida coast and you can keep in touch with her by wireless. For this purpose, besides the apparatus attached to your air-ship, I have ordered a complete field outfit to be forwarded to you, —of the kind with which several western posts have been experimenting of late and which has proved entirely satisfactory.

"The instrumental part of the outfit—i. e., the keys, detector, condenser, tuning-coil, etc.. are permanently fastened into or carried in a steel-bound trunk, but little bigger than an ordinary steamer trunk, and weighing about one hundred and fifty pounds. Two storage batteries, both sufficient for ten hours of continuous sending, accompany the outfit, and come in wooden cases which form supports for the trunk when the outfit is in use.

"A mast of ten six-foot sections, which can be jointed together and set up in a few minutes, forms your aerial pole and each section is coppered so as to provide a continuous

conductor. In another box are packed the aerial wires, extra rope, wire-pegs, etc., as well as a waterproof tent to protect the outfit from the weather. Of course a charging station is a necessity and another case contains a small, but powerful gasoline motor and generator. Another attachment for use with the appliance is a combination Malay and box kite carrying a cord of phosphor bronze, wire-woven about a hemp center. There are eight hundred feet of this wire wound on a reel. If for any reason the work of setting up and attaching the pole and its aerials is considered to be too lengthy an occupation it is a simple matter to send up the kite, its wire rope-acting as an aerial in itself."

The boys grew enthusiastic over this description. The outfits seemed from the account to possess the merits of portability and efficiency and in the country into which they were going portability was a strong feature in itself. It was this very question that had caused Frank, when designing the new *Golden Eagle*, to so construct her that she could be taken apart and the various sections boxed in a very small capacity each box weighing lot more than fifty pounds with the exception of that containing the engine which weighed one hundred and fifty without the base.

That afternoon the boys worked like Trojans on the *Golden Eagle II* with the result that shortly before sundown they had progressed to a point where the air-ship was ready for the attachment of the engine. They were all surprised, and somewhat startled, when their solitude was invaded, just as they were thinking of knocking off work for the day, by a loud rap at the doors of the aerodrome. Frank opened the small flap cut in the big door and stepped out to see who the intruder might be.

He was greeted by a boy of about his own years; smartly—too smartly—dressed, and with a confident overbearing manner.

"Why, hello, Lathrop Beasley," exclaimed Frank, with all the cordiality he could muster at seeing who their visitor was,—and that was none too much, "what are you doing here?"

"I guess you're surprised to see me," rejoined the other.

"I certainly am," replied Frank.

"Why don't you ask me to come in," went on the other, "you're a hospitable sort of fellow—not."

"I beg your pardon, Lathrop," apologized Frank, "won't you come over to the house and sit down awhile?"

An unpleasant sort of smile broke on the other's face.

"Oh, so you're afraid to let me see your aeroplane are you? Well, I don't know that I care so much to anyway. Since you fellows left New York I have been made president of the Junior Aero Club and have designed a 'plane that can beat anything you ever saw into a cocked hat," he exclaimed.

Frank smiled. He was used to Lathrop's boasting ways and at the Agassiz High School which they had both attended had frequently seen the other humbled. Now when Lathrop said that he didn't care about seeing the *Golden Eagle II*, of course he was not telling the truth. He would have given a great deal to have even caught a glimpse of her. In fact, when that morning he had heard that the boys' aerodrome was once more occupied, he had determined to walk over from his home, which was a splendid mansion standing on a hill-top not far away, and take a look at her for himself. That Frank should have objected to showing him the craft was an obstacle that never entered his head.

"Oh, come, Frank," he went on, changing his tone, "let me take a look at her, I won't tell anyone about it. What are you so secretive for?"

"I myself should be glad to let you see the successor to the *Golden Eagle* that we are building," replied Frank, "but my employers might not like it."

Lathrop pricked up his ears at this. He was an ambitious boy and had designed several air-ships and planes but he had never been able to speak of his "employer." The word must mean that Frank was building the craft for some rich man. Although Lathrop had plenty of it the idea that Frank and Harry were making "money out of their enterprise roused him to a sullen sort of anger.

"Oh your employers mightn't like it," sneered Lathrop, "I tell you what it is, Frank, I don't believe you have any 'employers' as you call it, and that all this about a new air-ship is a bluff."

This was a move intended to irritate Frank and make him offer to show the air-ship as proof positive that he was really at work on such a craft, but if Lathrop had meant it in this way it was a failure. Frank was quite unruffled.

"You are welcome to believe what you like, Lathrop," he rejoined, "and now, as we are very busy, I shall have to ask you to excuse me. I've got too much work to do to stand talking here."

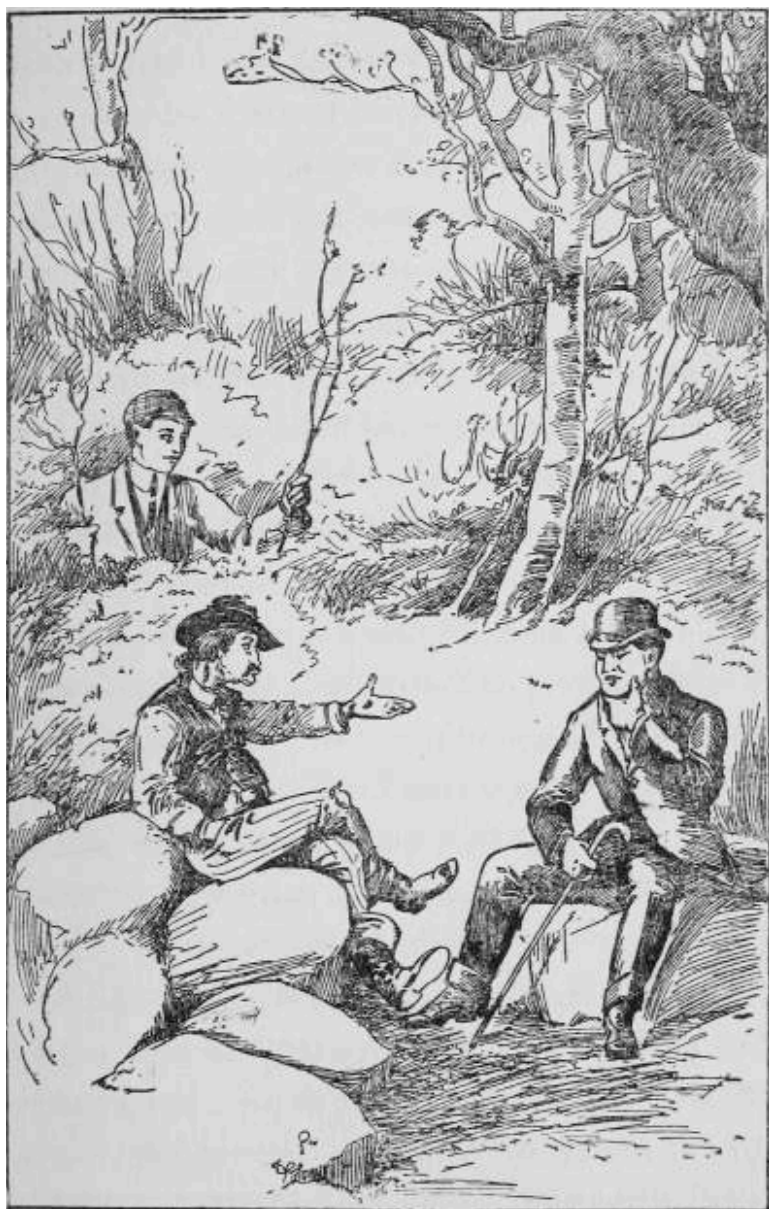
"That's just like you, Frank Chester," burst out the other boy angrily, his temper quite gone now that he saw that there was to be no opportunity of his seeing the air-ship.

"Maybe you'll be sorry that you wouldn't show me the ship—and before very long too."

As Frank, not caring to listen to more of this sort of talk, re-entered the aerodrome the Beasley boy, almost beside himself with anger, shouted after him.

"I'll remember this, Frank Chester, so look out." He strode angrily off through the woods making a short cut for home. Lathrop was not a bad boy at heart, but he was an intensely jealous one, and the idea that the Boy Aviators were constructing an airship that they refused to let him see irritated him almost past bearing. When he shouted at Frank his last words they were dictated by his anger, more than by any real intention of carrying out any plan of revenge for the fancied slight; but, as he strode along through the woods, he suddenly heard voices that, after a few minutes of listening, convinced him that he was not the only person in the world who even momentarily wished harm to the Chester boys.

"We'll wreck the aerodrome to-night;" were the words,—coming from within a clump of bushes that grew to one side of the trail,—that attracted his attention. The boy halted in his tracks as they were uttered and then crept cautiously through the undergrowth till he reached a spot from which he could both see and hear without being seen. The man who had uttered the threat that had brought him to a standstill was a person bearing every evidence of being of the genus—tramp, that is so far as his clothes went. But his white hands and carefully kept nails showed that he had assumed the rags he wore as a disguise. His companion was a man of very different appearance. He was in fact the natty person whom the boys had seen at the Hotel Willard, and who had since been on their track, as Frank had guessed when Billy had spied his escaping figure in White Plains the day before. With



Lathrop discovers the plot.

a beating heart the concealed boy listened as the two plotters

went on,

"Do you think they have the machine finished yet?" asked the better dressed of the two.

"Confound them, they were too sharp to let me go to work for them or I might have had the plans of it by this time," rejoined the other. "I think, though," he resumed, "that it must be so far advanced that if we can wreck it now we will delay their departure for Florida till we have been able to destroy the plant and escape."

"I owe them a debt of gratitude for the loud way they talked at the Hotel Willard," said the other. "Thank goodness we are now in possession of their plans at any event. Don't you think we might head them off without destroying the aerodrome? It's risky, and means jail for us if we are caught."

The other gave a short laugh.

"No, we'll hit them a body blow," he said. "If I could blow them up along with their air-ship I'd gladly do it. I'd like to treat them as we mean to do with that white-livered Lieutenant when we get through with his services."

"Are they going to kill him?" demanded the other with something like awe in his tones.

"No," replied the man in the tramp's rags, "not unless he gives too much trouble. They are going to put him to work in the sulphur mines of Ojahyama and let him slave for his living."

Even from where he was the concealed boy could see the other shudder.

"It is a terrible place," he said.

"It is the best place for men of his caliber," retorted the other.

"Perhaps it would be as happy a fate for him as being compelled to slave for Foyashi."

"I hear that he would not have anything to do with their schemes and defied them to kill him before he would aid them to manufacture his explosive until he was influenced by Foyashi," said the first speaker.

"I guess you're right," replied the other worthy, "but he's passive enough now, I fancy."

They both laughed and arose to go. As for Lathrop he lay

almost paralyzed with fear. Of course much of what he had heard had been meaningless to him, but he did understand that a plan was on foot to blow up the boys' aerodrome, destroy their ship and possibly injure themselves. As the men's footsteps died out, as they walked off down the path through the woods, the boy, who a minute before had been seriously pondering some sort of harm to Frank and Harry felt conscience-stricken.

What he had just heard had changed him from a possible enemy into a fellow-schoolmate and he determined to warn the boys of their peril. With this end in view he was hurrying down the path, retracing his steps towards the aerodrome, when he was seized roughly from behind and whirled about. The man who had seized him was the one who had assumed the costume of a tramp. His eyes blazed with rage. He had hurried back to get his knife,—which had dropped from his pocket as he sat talking,—a few seconds after Lathrop had left his place of concealment. As luck would have it, in pushing through the bushes he had discovered the depression in the grass where the boy had lain. A brief investigation showed him that it had been recently occupied and that whoever had crouched there must have heard every word they said. Calling his comrade the two had set out at full speed in pursuit of Lathrop.

As his captor gripped the boy in a hold that clutched like a vice, Lathrop realized that he had fallen into bad hands.

CHAPTER V.

TWO RASCALS GET A SHOCK.

The boy was startled but his presence of mind did not desert him. Lathrop, although, as has been said, a hectoring, dictatorial sort of youth possessed plenty of courage of a certain kind, and was no coward. He therefore exclaimed angrily:

"Take your hand off me. What do you want?"

At the same moment he gave an adroit twist, an old football trick, and in a shake had freed himself from the other's detaining hand.

"You needn't crow quite so loudly, my young rooster," exclaimed the man in the tramp's dress, "I merely wanted to ask you a few questions."

"Well," demanded the boy.

"What were you doing up there in the woods while we were talking?"

Lathrop didn't know whether or not the men were armed, so that he decided that it would be folly to tell them the facts; he therefore took refuge in strategy.

"What do you mean?" he asked with an expression of blank amazement.

"Oh, come," said the other, but there was a note of indecision in his tones, that showed that he was not as sure of his ground as he had been, "you don't mean to say that you weren't lying hidden while we were talking up yonder and heard every word?"

"As I told you," replied Lathrop, "I don't know what you are talking about. I am on my way home through these woods and you have stopped me in this unceremonious fashion. If there was a constable within call I would have you arrested."

"Oh, come on. Bill," struck in the nattily dressed one of the pair, who had hitherto remained silent, "the kid doesn't know anything—that's evident, and we are wasting time here."

"I'm not sure of that," retorted the tramp-like man, still unconvinced, "if I thought," he added with a vicious leer, "that he overheard us, I—"

The sentence was not completed far the reason that at the moment a lusty voice was heard coming up the path from the aerodrome singing at the pitch of its lungs:

"Three times round went the gallant ship;
Three times round spun she,
Three times round spun the gallant ship
Then down to the bottom of the sea,—the sea,—the sea.
Then down to the bottom of the sea."

As the singer came upon the scene in front of him he broke off abruptly and the two men who had intercepted Lathrop took to their heels.

"Hullo, there, my hearty," cried Ben Stubbs, for he was the vocalist, as his eyes took in the situation, "what's all this?"

His voice held a sharp note of interrogation, for he had immediately recognized one of the two men who had made off as the fellow who had sneaked up the by-street in White Plains the day before.

"Who are you?" demanded the boy suspiciously, not certain whether in the newcomer he had a friend or a fresh source of danger.

"Me? oh, I'm Ben Stubbs, formerly skipper of the tug Mary and Ann, but now one of the crew of the *Golden Eagle II*, sky clipper. And you, my young midddy, I recognize as the chap who was down at the aerodrome a short while ago, and got all het up because Frank Chester wouldn't let you see the air-ship—now the question is what were you doing with those two fellows, who are as bad a looking pair of cruisers as I ever laid eyes on?"

Lathrop saw at once that unless he told the truth he would be a fair object of suspicion, and at any rate he had made up his mind to warn the boys of the danger that threatened. He therefore in a straightforward way told of the afternoon's happenings.

"You come along with me," exclaimed Ben, as the boy finished his narrative, "we've got no time to lose."

They hurried down the path to the aerodrome and Lathrop repeated his story to the boys.

"Well, forewarned is forearmed," remarked Frank, "and thank you, Lathrop, for doing the square thing."

"Oh, that's all right, Frank," Lathrop replied awkwardly, recollecting his fiery threats of a short time before. To tell the truth, Lathrop was thoroughly ashamed of himself, and declining the boys' hearty invitation to supper, hurried home to the house on the hill.

He had learned a lesson he never forgot.

"Now," said Frank, as soon as he had gone, "we'll give these fallows a surprise if they come around here to-night that will stick in their minds for a good many years."

Under his directions everyone got busy for the rest of the afternoon driving wooden posts at six foot intervals all round the aerodrome. When the posts were all in position a copper wire of medium thickness was strung from one post top to another and the ends connected with the dynamo ultimately

destined to supply the *Golden Eagle I's* searchlight and wireless equipment. By the time Ben Stubbs, who had quite ousted Le Blanc as cook, announced by a clarion summons, beaten on a tin wash-pan, with a big ladle, that a supper, consisting of his famous baked beans, chops, spinach and coffee was ready—not to forget Ben's masterpiece, a huge strawberry pie,—Frank pronounced his preparations also complete.

After supper everybody sat around the stove in the portable house, for the nights were still chilly, till about ten o'clock. They had all made as much noise as possible early in the evening with the ultimate motive of accentuating the quietness later on.

Frank and Harry stood at the door of the portable house as Schultz and Le Blanc started for the aerodrome and shouted out "good-night" till the echoes rang back from the hills. Then one by one the lights in the two houses went out and all was quiet. That is, all seemed so to two watchers concealed in a thick mass of brush up on the hill, but in reality no sooner had the houses been plunged in darkness than the boys and Ben Stubbs had crept quietly into the aerodrome and sat down to wait for the crisis they felt sure was coming.

Harry and Billy each carried a long thin package that might have contained anything from dynamite to a pistol. Ben Stubbs, with a grim expression on his rugged face, grasped a stout club he had cut that afternoon. It was pitchy dark in the aerodrome and as they waited, in the absolute silence Frank had enjoined, the watchers could hear one another breathing. Upstairs only the rhythmic snores of Schultz and Le Blanc, who were not in the secret, disturbed the silence.

Frank sat with his hand on the switch that would shoot a current of 500 volts through the copper wires surrounding the aerodrome when he connected it. A hole, bored earlier in the afternoon in the wooden wall of the aerodrome gave the boy a command of the view outside in the direction of the woods. So dark was it, however, that even his keen eyes could detect little in the black murk. He saw they would have to judge of their enemies' whereabouts solely by sound.

They must have sat there in the darkness for an hour or more, with no sound being borne to their ears but the unmelodious snoring of the two mechanics in the loft when,

suddenly, and without any further warning there came a sharp "crack" from up on the hillside as a branch snapped under a heavy foot.

"Here they come," whispered Frank to the boys, whom he knew were there; but couldn't see any more than if they were in the antipodes.

"Get outside now, you fellows, and when I give the word, let go! "

Silently as cats Billy Barnes, Harry and Ben Stubbs slipped off their shoes and tiptoed out through the door of the aerodrome, which had been left open to allow for the noiseless exit. Frank was left alone in the barn-like aerodrome save for the two sleepers upstairs. The tension in the silence grew painful. When would the persons who had crackled the broken branch on the hillside recover their courage enough to make a further advance?

All at once, close at hand, Frank heard a loud whisper of:

"Well, they are all asleep, evidently."

"Yes," replied another hoarse whisper, "that kid you suspected evidently didn't hear anything."

"Confound it, it's dark as a pit," came from the first speaker.

"It might be lighter," replied the other, "but the blacker it is the better for us."

"Hark at those fellows snoring," was the next thing Frank heard. The remark was accompanied by a smothered laugh.

"Yes, they are sound asleep as run-down tops," was the reply.

Frank inwardly blessed the stalwart lungs of Schultz and Le Blanc. All unconsciously the sleepers were helping on their plans.

"Do you think that's the boys snoring? " asked one of the two men who were cautiously creeping nearer to the aerodrome.

"I hope so," was the response, "I'd like to see them go skywards with their infernal air-ship."

"Scudder will have reason to thank us for a good night's work," was the next remark of the prowlers.

There was silence for a few seconds and then a jangling

sound. One of the men who had the destruction of the *Golden Eagle II* at heart had collided with Frank's wire fence.

"Confound it, what's that?" angrily hissed his companion.

"A wire fence," replied the other.

"Well, it will take more than that to stop us," was the angry answer, "come on, grab the top wire and over we go."

"Now!" shouted Frank, as he threw in the switch and 500 volts coursed through the copper wire both men were grasping.

At the same instant Billy and Harry outside pressed the electric buttons that ignited the Coston navy signal lights they both carried and the whole scene was illuminated in a white glare as light as noonday. And what a scene it was!

On the ground by the fence sprawled the marauders yelling till the air rang with their cries of mingled pain and amazement at the surprise of the powerful shock that had knocked them off their feet.

Above them stood the stout figure of Ben Stubbs belaboring them impartially with the heavy club he had cut for that special purpose.

"Take that, you lubbers, you longshore loafers!" he shouted as his blows fell with the rapidity of a drumstick on the two prostrate carcasses.

The two men, however, had laid their plans better than the boys knew. They were prepared for a surprise, but not one of the kind they had run into.

Without a second's warning there was a sudden flash from the hill behind them, followed by a sharp report. Ben Stubbs threw up his hands and rolled over with a yell more of surprise than of anything else.

"Put out those lights!" shouted Frank, realizing that in the white glare the group outside presented fine targets for the hidden marksman on the hill, whoever he might be.

The boys instantly shoved their glaring torch tips into the ground. Even as they did so they could hear rapidly retreating footsteps.

"Don't let them get away," shouted Harry wildly.

Frank, who by this time had switched off the current, and was outside, seized him with a detaining grasp.

"No good, Harry," he exclaimed. "It would be taking needless chances. Now, let's look to Ben."

"Only a hen-peck," hailed that redoubtable ex-mariner, coming up, "just nicked my starboard ear, but I thought for a minute they had done me."

"That was no fault of theirs," answered Billy, "they—"

He was interrupted by a series of guttural shouts and piercing shrieks.

"Ach Himmel—donnerblitzen vass iss!"

"Sacre nom de nom! Qu'est-ce que cela! To the aid. Monsieur Chest-e-erre! "

The cries came from the aerodrome and were uttered by the awakened Schultz and Le Blanc, the latter of whom was almost in hysterics. Frank laughingly quieted them and explained what had happened.

"Ve vos only eggcited on your aggount," remarked Schultz bravely when he learned that all danger was over.

"Comment, vee fight lek ze tiger-r-r n' c'est pas?" demanded Le Blanc, flourishing a pillow fiercely, "A pitee I deed not see zee ras-cals."

CHAPTER VI.

THE START FOR THE 'GLADES.

The incident related in the last chapter determined Frank to abandon his half-arrived at intention to enter the Everglades from the Atlantic side. The appearance of the dark man in Washington—he was now certain their plans had been overheard—the episode of the tramp and the attempt to blow up the aerodrome all combined to convince him that his original scheme of invasion of the little known wastes of Southern Florida was as an open book to the men who had only too evidently their destruction at heart.

A hasty trip to Washington resulted, and a consultation with the Secretary of the Navy. The result was that arrangements were made whereby the boys' expedition was to gather at Miami as openly as possible, and then under

cover of night run down Biscayne Bay and eventually double Cape Sable by the inland passage. Then they were to beat up through the Ten Thousand Island Archipelago to the mouth of either Shark or Harney River and thence into the trackless wastes of unmapped swamp and saw-grass known as the Everglades.

The *Tarantula* was to cruise off and on around the coast and in case of dire need was to be signaled by wireless. These details completed, Frank and Harry returned to New York and a week later, the *Golden Eagle II* being completed, and loaded in small cases marked "Glass, Fragile," and other misleading labels, the Boy Aviators bade farewell to their mother and friends and started by the Southern Limited for Miami. With them they carried in ordinary trunks their mess and camp kit outfits, rifles and medical supplies as well as two of the Government's field wireless outfits. The rest of the party was to follow a week later in a private car with all the other baggage, including the boxed sections of the *Golden Eagle II*. The canoes and boats for the trips were to be purchased at Miami or along the coast in the vicinity, as the boys deemed fit. In the meantime the *Tarantula* had been dispatched from Hampton Roads for Southern waters under sealed orders. Not till her commander opened his instructions at sea did he know the real nature of his errand.

At this point it may not be amiss to give a brief description of the little known country to which the boys were bound. Everyone has heard of the Everglades, few have any accurate idea of them beyond a sort of hazy conception of a vast tract of morass, overgrown with giant forests and rank growth of all kinds. Nothing could be further from the truth.

It is without doubt the peculiar, even extraordinary, character of this great stretch of country that has caused its geography to remain obscure. Even recent maps are extremely inaccurate. It seems remarkable in these days of African and Polar discovery that here in our own country is a vast waste, 130 miles long and 70 wide, that is as little known to the white man as the heart of the Sahara. The Everglades are bounded on the north by Lake Okeechobee, on the east by a belt of scrub pine-land about six miles wide facing the Atlantic, on the south by the great mangrove swamps facing the Bay of Florida and the Gulf of Mexico, and on the west by the Big Cypress Swamp which runs right up to the

uninhabited region verging on the west coast of the peninsula.

The prevailing idea that the Everglades are unhealthy is about as far as it is possible to get from the truth. So far as the few expeditions that have penetrated the great mystery have reported, the water is fine and the air healthful. The saw-grass, the Seminoles and the snakes—rattlers and cotton-mouth mocassins—are the worst enemies the explorer ordinarily encounters, with an occasional panther.

Over the watery wastes of the Everglades which are not tree grown, but on the contrary great expanses of saw-grass grown prairie, the Seminole poles his cypress dug-out defying the government which wishes to place him on a reservation but has no means of "smoking him out" of the impassable wilds he has chosen for his refuge. The Seminoles also haunt the Big Cypress Swamp and observe numerous tribal rites and legends of which we know little. They are dignified, trustworthy people—but the bad treatment they have received from the government has made them the implacable foe of the white man for whom their word is the same as "liar"—such has been their impression of civilization.

The boys had familiarized themselves with the nature of the country by a close study of all the available works on the subject—which were not many. The government had placed the latest maps and charts of the region at their disposal. Even these, however, showed them little. In fact the parting words of the Secretary of the Navy to them were:

"Boys, you'll have to blaze your own trail." Of course in selecting an equipment for such a region the boys had made lightness the prime essential.

They knew that on much of the journey in search for a spot for a permanent camp they would have to pole over shoal water, in some places not more than two feet deep. An overloaded canoe might therefore cause a lot of trouble and delay. Like true old campaigners they had prepared elaborate lists and then gone through them again and again till nothing appeared on them but the barest necessities.

Ben Stubbs had put in several days making a number of light but strong chests twenty-two inches by thirteen and nine inches deep. These contained, among other necessities, an aluminum cooking outfit weighing nine pounds. There were

two pots, a frying pan and four plates nesting into each other. And then there was a coffee pot in which was stowed away four cups (nested) pepper and salt castors, knives, spoons and forks, the frying-pan and coffee-pot had detachable handles for lifting on and off the camp-fire with ease and comfort, no matter how the wind might be blowing the flames about.

The grocery chest contained flour, sugar, salt, cornmeal, pepper, sliced bacon, beef extracts, soup-tablets (three varieties), root-beer, lemonade and sarsaparilla tablets, oatmeal and evaporated fruits of various kinds. These were all put in glass jars with screw tops and rubber gaskets so that even in case of an upset the contents would remain dry. There was also a blue-flame double burner kerosene stove of the marine type, lanterns, and a supply of candles and matches in waterproof jars. The medical outfit consisted of some antiseptics, pills, several tablets of permanganate of potassium for the same purpose and a hypodermic outfit, bandages and lotions.

Each boy carried an automatic rifle for big game or defense, the kind chosen being a weapon carrying 49-50 nickeled steel cartridges. This gun was heavy enough for alligators; or the more savage crocodile, pumas, leopards, gray wolves or any human enemy. They also purchased two three-barreled guns having two parallel barrels, twelve gauge, for shotted shells, and another rifled barrel underneath of .35-55 caliber. Two 16-gauge shot-guns for duck and small game were also stowed away in the "armory" chest. In addition each boy had his magazine revolver of .38 caliber, and a six-inch bladed hunting-knife with a heavy back so that it might even be used for chopping.

Shovels, axes, picks, etc., were back with the heavy baggage to be brought on by Ben Stubbs and Billy. Frank, of course, carried his nautical instruments. A sextant, a compass, two tested watches of the finest split second make and an artificial horizon.

Their clothes were stout hunting boots, khaki trousers and nor folk jackets of the same material and flannel shirts with campaign hats. Each carried a change of underwear and socks in his toilet bag which also held two towels, toothbrush, cake of soap and brush and comb.

For transportation into the Everglades the boys soon managed with little difficulty to secure canoes and a lighter draught "cruiser," similar to a Barnegat duck-boat. The flotilla was to be taken down the coast by an auxiliary sloop also chartered at Miami.

On the appointed day the boys were at the railroad station of the Florida East Coast railroad to meet the arrivals from New York, and warm were the greetings as Billy Barnes and Stubbs stepped from the private car which had been attached for them when they left the north. The car was sidetracked at Miami and the train kept on its way to Key West along the wonderful chain of cement bridges constructed over the numberless keys that run out from the "leg" of Florida. The boys and Ben were busily engaged getting the various bales and crates in some sort of order for transfer to the trucks by which they were to be taken to the flotilla of canoes when they were startled at being hailed by a voice that sounded familiar.

The boys hastened to the door of one end of the car and were amazed to see standing on the steps, looking rather embarrassed and doubtful, Lathrop Beasley. He wore a well cut suit of white serge and a straw hat with a light blue ribbon. In addition he sported snowy canvas shoes, topped off with light purple socks and a pale pink tie. Altogether he looked as if he had just stepped from a clothing ad. Even in their astonishment at seeing him there the boys could not help laughing at the contrast they presented to him.

In their rough working garb, and all begrimed with dust as they were from handling the kit in the car, two more unrepresentable youths from a sartorial standpoint, could not well be imagined. The three boys gazed at each other in silence for a few seconds and then Lathrop said rather shamefacedly:

"Hello, fellows."

"Well, Lathrop, what on earth are you doing here?" naturally demanded Frank.

"I guess I came on a wild impulse," began Lathrop, and then stopped.

"Well?" questioned Harry.

"When I heard of your trip, from hanging around the

aerodrome after you left—oh, it wasn't Ben Stubbs or Barnes that told me, they were close as clams,"—he hurried on, "but when old Schultz told me that you were going to cross the Everglades I thought that maybe you'd need an extra hand so I got permission from my folks and here I am.

"If you want to say the word I'll go back," he concluded rather lamely but with a longing look in his face that told of his eager desire to be allowed to join the expedition.

"Well, you certainly have an impetuous way of doing things," commented Frank. "Did you come on this train?"

"Yes," replied the boy. "I've just been up to the hotel and engaged rooms and tidied up a bit and then hurried right down here."

Frank and Harry exchanged glances of amusement, the cause of which Lathrop was at a loss to fathom.

"Well," began Frank, after a brief whispered conversation with his brother. "you are here now and I suppose you'll have to stay. We can find some work I dare say for you to do and there are a lot of ways you can be useful."

"I'll start right in at anything you tell me," began the boy eagerly. "It's mighty good of you "

"Not much you won't. Not in that fancy rig," burst out Harry, "if you are coming with us you'd better go up to the village store and get an outfit as much like ours as possible and forget you ever patronized a tailor.

Lathrop gladly agreed and hurried off to get himself a working outfit. As he hastened down the tracks, Frank turned to Harry with a grin.

"Well, we have gone and done it now," he said.

"But we really have use for another hand, and I think that we can make something out of Lathrop, besides we owe him a debt of gratitude for helping us out at White Plains. If it hadn't been for him we might have lost the *Golden Eagle II* and all our work."

"That's so," assented Harry. "I guess he will work out all right. But those fancy duds he had on "

And the boy burst out laughing at the recollection.

By sundown most of the "duffle" in the car had been transferred to trucks and carted down to the wharf, where the

boys, with considerable pride, exhibited to Ben Stubbs, Billy, and the newly overalled Lathrop, the light draught thirty-foot sloop, with an auxiliary five-horse engine, the four canoes and the light draught "sneak-box," they had secured for their transportation round the Cape and into the Thousand Island Archipelago. The canoes were of the " Ontario " type, fitted with narrow decks round the edges and canvas covered. The sneak-box was of the spoon-bowed variety familiar to duckers in Barnegat Bay. It drew only a few inches of water and afforded a lot of space in its sixteen feet of length for the stowage of the heavier baggage. It rejoiced in the name of Squeegee.

Ben Stubbs was delighted with the "fleet" as he called it, and declared that the sloop was a "witch." After a dinner at the quiet boarding house at which the boys had been stopping the adventurers that night finished the stowage of their impedimenta aboard the sloop and piled the canoes on the top of the canvas enclosed "summer cabin." The "sneak-box" was towed astern.

The owner of the sloop, a coal-black negro called Pork Chops—the boys could never discover that he had any other name—was to take them round the cape as far as the Thousand Island Archipelago where they were to be left. From there on their course would lie up the Shark River into the heart of the little known Everglades.

Of course the wharf loungers were full of curiosity as the work of transferring the boys' belongings and outfit to the sloop proceeded, but Frank and Harry had allowed it to become widely circulated that they were a hunting party bound for some of the keys to the east of Cape Sable, and "Pork Chops" also was of this belief, so that the boys were pretty sure that none but the members of their own immediate party knew of the real goal of their journey.

By midnight everything was in readiness and the tide served for start. With her big mainsail flapping lazily in the breath of wind that was stirring Pork Chops' sloop, which held the poetic name of *Carrier Dove* dropped down Biscayne Bay with her "kicker" going and dawn found her well on her journey south with a spanking breeze out of the northeast to fill her canvas. As she skimmed along over the sparkling blue of the tropical waters in whose crystalline depths hosts of fish

of all kinds could be easily seen and on the surface of which floated great masses of yellow gulf weed, the boys rejoiced that their momentous expedition had started so auspiciously. As for Lathrop he acted like a boy out of his head with joy at his unexpected good fortune. Ben Stubbs and the inky Pork Chops relieved each other at the wheel, and Frank and Harry, at the table in the stuffy little cabin, worked at plans and lists trying to devise ways of still further cutting down their outfit without impairing its usefulness. Billy Barnes, with a knowing air, scrutinized the sails and from time to time admonished Ben Stubbs to "keep her up a bit," to which suggestion Ben with an air of ineffable contempt replied:

"I never knowed they taught navigation on a newspaper but it's a good school for nerve."

CHAPTER VII. A NIGHT ATTACK.

Most of that day they dropped leisurely down Hawk Channel and at night anchored off a small key covered with a luxuriant tropical growth and topped by the feathery crowns of a group of stately royal palms. It was early afternoon when they let go the anchor and the boys lost no time in getting into the Squeegie and rowing ashore. They carried with them the *Carrier Dove's* water keg which held ten gallons and which had been discovered by them to be half empty the first time they went forward for a drink. What water there was in it was so stale as to be almost undrinkable. Pork Chops was summarily gent for and arraigned on the "quarter deck."

"I done declar I clean forgit all about deh watah," he gasped, as Frank read him a lecture on his carelessness. Indeed everything about the *Carrier Dove* bore witness to Pork Chops' shiftless ways. Her rigging was spliced in innumerable places and her halyards badly frayed so that they wedged in the blocks sometimes. Her paint was peeled off her sides in large flakes and altogether she was quite as disreputable a proposition as her owner; but in her, Pork Chops had navigated the waters about Miami for many years and was accounted a skilful mariner.

The boys uttered a cry of delight as the Squeegee's nose grated on a beach of white sand and they sprang out. The key was a veritable fairyland. Lime, lemon and guava trees grew almost down to the water's edge and further back were several wild banana plants with their yellow fruit hanging temptingly for the boys to pluck. And pluck it they did and declared they had never known what real bananas were like before,—which is hardly surprising as the fruit is picked for the northern market long before it is ripe and shipped in a green state.

After they had fairly gorged themselves on fruit, they set out to look for a spring. They were not long in finding it and Billy Barnes, dipper in hand, started in to fill the keg. He had ladled out a few dipper-fuls when he started back with a yell. The others, who had been roaming about in the vicinity, hurried back and found the reporter gazing petrified at a huge cotton mouth moccassin. Frank, who had one of the sixteen gauge guns with him, quickly despatched the creature, which was about three feet long.

"Ugh, what a monster," exclaimed Lathrop, as he gazed at the ugly, dirty-brown colored body.

"He is a pretty sizeable reptile and that's a fact," remarked Frank, "But what would you say to a serpent twenty feet long?"

The others looked at him incredulously.

"Twenty feet long—Oh come, Frank," laughed Billy. "That sounds like the fish that got away."

"Lieutenant Willoughby, who explored the Everglades in 1897, reports that he heard from Indians and believed himself that in the southern portions of the Everglades there are snakes bigger than any known species," replied Frank, "his guide killed a reptile marked with longitudinal stripes,—but otherwise like a rattlesnake,—which measured nine feet from tip to tip."

"Well, I don't want to be around when any such creatures as that are about," said Lathrop.

"I'm with you there," cried Billy, "snake stories are all right in print but I don't want to figure in any of them,"

"Come on, boys,—volunteers to get supper," cried Frank, after the group had strolled back to the boat-landing,—all

hands taking turn at packing the water keg.

"Supper?" cried the others.

"Yes," replied Frank, "we can row the keg off to the *Carrier Dove*, get some duffle ashore and camp here in the jungle for a night. There's no use trying to navigate this coast in the dark. Who says—yes?"

Of course they all did,—hailing his suggestion with acclamation,—and, after Frank and Harry had rowed off to the sloop, Lathrop and Billy Barnes set about getting in a supply of firewood and laying a fire between two green logs set parallel, in a manner that did credit to Bill's training as a woodsman in Nicaragua.

Frank and Harry were too tender-hearted to resist Ben Stubbs' pleadings to be made one of the party— moreover he promised to cook them what he called a bush supper if allowed to come ashore, so that when the boys shoved off in the placid water on their return trip to the Island Ben made one of the Squeegee's load.

As soon as they got ashore Ben approvingly commended Billy's camp-fire arrangements, at which the reporter glowed with pleasure. Somehow in the wilderness a small tribute to a boy's handiness will send him into the seventh heaven of gratified pride. Under Ben Stubbs' orders the party had soon secured several bunches of oysters from the mangroves,— which were laden with the bivalves where they dipped into the water at low tide,—as well as half a dozen turtles, small fellows which Ben declared made as good eating as the terrapin of the northern restaurant and banquet. To crown the feast, Frank, who had been scouting about with one of the shot-guns, brought down a couple of small duck.

The oysters Ben roasted in their shells, laying them when finished on plantain leaves on previously heated rocks. The turtles he prepared by scalding them and then, after cutting down the center of the lower shell, the meat was easily got at. Salted and peppered inside and out and the meat removed from the shell after a half-an-hour's boiling with onions and the young campers had a meal fit for a president, who, as Billy observed, "is a heap more particular than a king."

The ducks were incased by Ben in a sort of matrix of clay —feathers and all,—having first been cleaned. Thus enclosed they were placed in the glowing embers and more hot coals

raked over on top of them. When in half an hour Ben drew out the hard-baked clay casings and cracked them free with a hatchet,—which automatically skinned the birds and plucked them at the same time,—the boys were ready to acclaim him a very prince of chefs. The meal was eaten with pilot bread and washed down with lemonade made from spring water and lemonade tablets. For dessert they had bananas and wild oranges. Many times after that when they were plunged in hardships and difficulties the boys talked over that first meal on the lone Florida Key.

After supper there was no washing up to do; big plantain leaves having served as plates and hunting-knives as table utensils. The little party sat round the big camp-fire and sang songs and talked and laughed till Pork Chops out on the *Carrier Dove* muttered to himself as he tried to sleep.

“Dem white boys done bein' as clean crazy as loons,—yas, sah.”

However, at last even the boys' spirits began to flag and they tucked themselves up in their blankets, and lulled by the croaking and snoring of a big tree lizard in a near-by custard apple-tree, sank into dreams which were more or less tintured by the happenings of the last few days.

Frank, more wakeful than the others, lay awake perhaps half an hour after Ben Stubbs' nasal performances had begun to rival those of the tree-lizard; who was himself no mean performer. The boy-leader's brain was busy turning over their momentous expedition. In a few days now they would be in the Archipelago and the plunge into the unknown would have to be taken. As he gazed about him at the sleeping party—Harry and Billy, light and careless, Lathrop, apparently made of far better metal than Frank had believed, and at old grizzled Ben Stubbs sleeping, like most woodsmen, as soundly as an infant, he felt a sensation of heavy responsibility steal over him.

Was the expedition well advised? It might all end in nothing or even in disaster. These thoughts flitted through Frank's brain as he lay awake and pondered the situation. Of one thing he was determined, as soon as the wireless could be put in operation and a permanent camp established in the 'glades he would establish communication with the *Tarantula*. That at least would put them in touch with

powerful allies whatever foes and evil influences they might encounter in the great fastnesses they were about to penetrate. Satisfied with this last resolve Frank fell asleep; but his was a troubled slumber. It seemed to him but a few minutes after he had dropped off that he awakened with a start:

The fire had died low and there was only a dull red glow to indicate where its cheerful blaze had been. As his eyes opened, however, Frank had a queer sensation that his awakening had been directly caused by some outside action that had affected him. In a second he sensed what it was.

There was a hand poking about under his pillow where he had tucked his revolver!

At the same instant there came a loud agonized hail from over the moonlit water where the *Carrier Dove* swung at anchor.

It was Pork Chops' voice, and Frank sprang to his feet as he heard it, reckless of injury from the unseen intruder. He need not have been under any apprehension, however, for whoever the prowler was he had vanished. At the same moment Pork Chops' yells awakened the others and Ben Stubbs roared out with stentorian lungs:

"Ahoy, there aboard the sloop—What's up?"

For reply came a wail from Pork Chops, which was stifled as suddenly as if a hand had been placed on his throat:

"Help! murder! Deys—"

Then all was silent.

Like a flash the boys and Ben piled into the Squeegee and Ben manned the oars. As they fairly flew over the water under his powerful strokes a long, low dark body,—almost reptilian in its swift movement,—glided from the opposite side of the *Carrier Dove*. At the same instant the sharp staccato sound of an engine exhaust came to the boys' ears and a strong odor of gasolene.

"A motor-boat," shouted Frank, as the low body, gathering speed momentarily, tore off across the moonlit water and vanished in the dark shadows off the end of the island.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MEN OF THE ISLAND.

Once on board the *Carrier Dove* the mystery was deepened. There was not a trace of Pork Chops, though his blankets lay apparently just as they had been thrown aside when he leaped up at the invasion of the motor-boat intruders. Frank lit a lantern and naturally the first thing the boys hastened to investigate was whether any harm had come to the cases containing the frame of *The Golden Eagle II*. To their unspeakable relief everything was intact, nor did any of the boxes show traces of having been tampered with.

"The whole thing seems inexplicable," mused Harry.

"Not at all," replied Frank, "I suppose that they figured we were asleep ashore and sneaked up in their motor-boat to rifle our possessions."

"Yes, but why did they carry off Pork Chops?" protested Billy; "for unless they threw him overboard, they must have taken him,—unless he's been carried off by mosquitoes."

"They would naturally have carried him off as I figure it," rejoined Frank, "not wishing to have him meet us and describe the appearance of our visitors,"

"That sounds good horse sense," put in Ben Stubbs. "And in my opinion them chaps in the motor-boat was the same limpets as stuck around the aerodrome in White Plains," he continued sagely.

"I don't think there's much doubt of that, Ben," replied Frank, "the thing is how did they get here?"

"Wall, the rate we've been coming it would have been mighty easy for them in a light draught motor-boat to have kept track of us from near inshore if they had a good glass," rejoined Ben.

"But how 'did they trace us to Miami?" puzzled Harry.

"Easy enough," replied Billy, "I've done it dozens of times—traced people I mean. I guess they just looked up the baggage man and found where our stuff was checked to."

"Of course I ought to have guessed that," exclaimed Frank. "It's really too mortifying," he concluded in a vexed tone.

"Consarn 'em," muttered Ben, embracing his rifle longingly, "I'd like to get 'em quartered off this sight. I'd drop a precious bad pair of birds in a couple of shots."

"No use thinking of that now," rejoined Frank, briskly shaking off his annoyance over what couldn't be helped, "the thing to do at present is to finish our night's sleep and set a watch. We don't want those fellows coming back and blowing the boat up."

It was agreed that Ben Stubbs was to sit up and take the watch, and that hardy veteran himself had no small share in influencing the verdict. He felt that he as the oldest of the party and the more experienced should have the responsibility in case real trouble was to come. The boys were not long, even after the exciting interruption to their slumbers, in sinking to sleep again on the transoms in the summer cabin of the *Carrier Dove*. As for Ben he sat up on the after deck with his rifle between his knees till the moon went down and the stars began to wane. And all the time he never took his eyes off the shore where the dyings camp-fire still spread a reddish glow against the blackness of the thick jungle tangle.

He might have been watching an hour when he gave a sudden start.

"Well that's queer too," he remarked to himself, as he fixed his eyes with stern intensity on the little glow of light thrown out by the embers. A dark figure had cautiously crossed the illumination, standing silhouetted for a moment against it. Suddenly a loud "hoo-hoo " like the hoot of an owl sounded from the shore. The same moment in the old adventurer's reckless heart was borne a resolve which bore fruit when at dawn, as the rim of a glorious sun poked itself over the sparkling blue expanse of waters, and showed them vacant, he drew in the Squeegie's painter and slipped lightly into her. He sculled ashore and approaching the camp crouched almost on his hands and knees. He examined the ground closely for a few minutes, as if in keen search of something. After a few minutes of this concentrated scrutiny he suddenly straightened up and strode off unhesitatingly into the jungle. But as he parted the creepers before him he gripped his rifle in the crotch of his arm with his finger on the trigger. He was not going to be taken by surprise.

The green mystery of the forest had not long closed on Ben's stalwart form when the boys awoke as the sunlight streamed through the canvas-curtains of the Carrier's Dove's "main saloon". Rubbing their eyes sleepily they hastened out on deck. For a few seconds the glory of the tropic dawn engrossed their attention to the exclusion of all else. Then with a cry of alarm Lathrop shouted:

"The Squeegee's gone!"

"Gone?" echoed the others.

For answer Lathrop pointed to the stern. It was true, no Squeegee swung there at her painter. It was only a fraction of time before the absence of Ben Stubbs was also discovered. For a minute a dark thought crossed Frank's mind,—but he dismissed it as unworthy, and was glad he did, for suddenly Billy shouted:

"Why, there's the Squeegee ashore."

They all looked and there, sure enough, lay their sneak-box where Ben, a short time before, had deserted her.

"He must have gone ashore hunting," cried Harry.

Frank shook his head.

"He had some graver reason than that for going," he said.

"Well, let's swim ashore and find out what has become of him," cried Lathrop, and indeed the turquoise water into whose depths one could see, did look tempting enough for an early morning plunge.

"It would be our last swim, Lathrop," remarked Frank, pointing as he spoke to a wicked-looking triangular black fin that cruised by.

"See that leg o' mutton?" he continued, "well, that's hitched onto the back of a man-eating shark and they don't encourage early morning bathing except for their larder's benefit."

As he spoke the monster glided close to the side of the *Carrier Dove*, perhaps in search of ship scraps, for which sharks will sometimes follow ships for days to satisfy their insatiable appetites. With an ill-concealed shudder Lathrop watched the great shadowy body flit by the sloop's side, with a wicked little piglike eye cocked knowingly up, as much as to say:

“Any breakfast ready yet?”

“I like those fellows less than the snakes,” exclaimed Lathrop.

When the laugh at his expense had subsided Frank suggested that they get into canoes at once and go ashore to discover what had become of Ben. The proposal was greeted as a good one and in short time the light craft were overboard and the boys padding with all their might for the shore. Lathrop kept his eyes steadily ahead all the way, nor did he once look at the transparent water about them which, as the sun got higher, began to swarm with black fins and queer ill-shaped monsters of the deep,—jew-fish, rays, and huge sun-fish,—which seen through the water looked like so many ill-shaped dragons. On shore the boys hastened at once to their camp-fire of the night before. Its ashes were strewn abroad but in the gray dust, Frank, with an exclamation of surprise, made out the numerous indentations of a queer-shaped flat foot—it was the same mark that had made Ben set off through the jungle. But the boys, less expert than he, could not track their way by looking out for bent ferns or broken bits of undergrowth.

A council of war was held. There were some of the leavings of the feast of the night before in the cooking-pots, and on these and some coffee brought ashore in the small emergency box fitted into each canoe, they made a satisfactory breakfast, after which, as the result of their confab, it was decided to attempt to circumnavigate the island in the canoes. By this means they thought they were pretty sure of finding Ben as the fact that the spot of land being uncharted argued against its being of any considerable size.

In fifteen minutes the canoes were underway and rapidly skirting the island. On the smooth water they made swift progress and in little more than an hour had rounded the southerly point and were working their way up the other coast. The island had turned out to be even smaller than they thought. They were opposite a pretty little bay in which, instead of the everlasting mangroves, an inviting little strip of pure white sand, fringed by a green palm grove, sloped down to the water, when suddenly their ears were saluted by a shot from the woods.

"Ben Stubbs!" was their simultaneous thought and the canoes were at once headed for the shore.

Having landed, the boys with loud shouts of "Ahoy, Ben!" dashed up through the woods which, to their astonishment, were threaded at this point by a path— a crude track certainly, but still a path. They did not give much time to the consideration of their surroundings however, their minds being bent on finding Ben. Suddenly out of the brush right ahead there sounded the "hoo-hoo" of an owl. Now even Lathrop was enough of a naturalist to know that owls do not hoot in the broad daylight, so they all stopped and exchanged wondering glances.

"Well, that's a new one," remarked Billy sententiously.

"Who ever heard of an owl that knocked about in the sunlight before?" added Lathrop.

"Even in this enchanted land," concluded Harry.

Frank put all further speculation to rout by exclaiming, as the hoot was repeated from a further recess of the forest, and yet again in the still further distance:

"That is not an owl's hoot, boys. It's a signal given by some human being."

No wonder the boys looked startled. After the adventure of the previous night they had good reason to distrust any human being they might encounter on the island. Whoever the inhabitants were they certainly had no good will toward the young adventurers, so much at least was patently evident.

"Well, come on, boys," cried Frank at last, "There's no use stopping here," he added, as the "hoo-hoo" sounded uncannily from right behind them, "our escape to the boats is cut off."

With grave looks they followed their young leader down the blind trail that led to they knew not what. Suddenly, and without an instant's warning, a number of wild-looking, unkempt men and youths sprang out of the dense growth as if they had sprouted from the earth. They all carried ancient Winchesters and one or two even had an old-fashioned flint-lock. Their clothes were ragged to a degree. As ragged in fact as their hair and beards. With their thin, peaked noses, sunken cheeks, and wild, hawk-like eyes they were sinister looking specimens.

"What d'ye want y'ar, strangers?" demanded one in a high nasal voice.

"We came ashore on a hunting trip," rejoined Frank.

At this all the crackers set up a loud roar of laughter.

"You 'uns are hunting big game, we reckon," remarked a gangling youth in tattered blue homespun.

There was an angry murmur. Things looked just about as bad as they could when suddenly an unexpected diversion occurred. A wild-looking young woman, whose movements, despite her miserable rags, were as graceful as those of a wild fawn, dashed through the jungle and appeared in the middle of the group which hemmed the boys in.

"Josh, you're a fool. Jed, you're another, and you too, Amelech, and Will. Why for don't you alls bring they 'uns into camp?"

The men all looked sheepish.

"Yer see—," began one.

The girl stamped her foot impatiently.

"You alls ain't none of yer got no more sense than so many loons," she cried angrily. "Don't you 'uns see that they 'uns is Black Bart's friends?"

The men looked incredulous, but nevertheless their attitude changed.

"Wall, bein' that's the case, come ahead, strangers,"* said the tall man who had first spoken and, with their wild escort clustering about them, the wondering boys followed him down the dim trail.

Of who Black Bart might be or where they were going they had not the slightest idea, but that Black Bart's influence was so far favorable to them there seemed no reason to doubt.

CHAPTER IX.

A MESSAGE FROM THE UNKNOWN.

After a few minutes' travel they emerged without warning into a spherical clearing, perhaps sixty feet in circumference. All about it stood palmetta thatched huts in which crouched

timid-looking women and children. The place was enclosed by a solid wall of trees and closely growing vines. Great gray beards of Spanish moss waved from the trees above them. It was a spot that would have been impossible to find unless one had the key to the forest labyrinth. It was evidently the men's home.

In one portion of the clearing was a singular apparatus that attracted the attention of the boys at once, puzzled though they were over their position, and whether they were in the hands of friends or enemies. This object was a huge iron kettle that was placed over a blazing fire of fat pine-knots. This fire was being fed by a youth who might have been the brother of one of the men who stopped them in the forest. A cover, evidently fashioned from some kind of wood, covered the iron pot and from this lid a pipe of metal led to a rude trough. From the end of the pipe was constantly dripping a colorless liquid which was carefully gathered into a small tin by the man stationed at the trough, and from time to time, he and others in the clearing took a sip from the tin. Overcome by curiosity Harry asked a lanky youth, who slouched by just then, what the affair might be.

"Don't ask no questions, stranger, and you won't git told no lies," was the impudent reply that made Harry hanker—as he whispered to Billy—to "land the perambulating clothes-horse one on the jaw."

But the mystery was soon to be cleared up and in a surprising way. While the boys were still wondering what sort of a place and into what sort of company they could have fallen, a figure came striding toward them that they at once recognized with a thrill of delight at seeing a familiar face.

The newcomer was Ben Stubbs.

He looked rather sheepish as the boys hailed him with loud shouts of delight and seemed embarrassed when Frank asked him what he was doing in this queer settlement.

"Wall, boys," he said at length, "I declar' to goodness I don* know but what you'll think I'm a piratical sort of craft, but—but the fact is that these folks around this yere camp are old shipmates of mine in a manner of speaking, an' so you needn't be a bit afeard. Yer as safe as if you were in your own bunks."

As may be imagined this did not at all clear up the clouds

of mystery that Ben Stubbs' sudden appearance had aroused in the boys' minds.

"Yes, but who are these people?" demanded Frank.

"How did you get here?" chimed in Harry.

"And who may Black Bart be?" was Billy's contribution.

"And what is that funny pot with a pipe on the top of it over there?" concluded Lathrop.

"One at a time, mates,—one at a time or you'll swamp me," cried Ben, getting back a little of his easy-going manner; "wall, now, first of all, I am Black Bart."

"What?" was the amazed chorus.

"Sure," was the reply, "but I've reformed now, shipmates, so don't be afeard; but the boys here still call me by the old name."

"Well, go on, Black Bart," said Frank, smiling at the idea of good-natured Ben's ever having owned such a ferocious name.

"Wall," drawled Ben, "I got here in the Squeegee after I had seen from the *Carrier Dove* a man snooping around our fire and heard the old 'Hoo-hoo' cry—the owl hail, you know."

The boys nodded.

"We heard it in the jungle before we were surrounded," said Frank.

"That gave me a queer idea—the hearing of the old cry did"—went on Ben—"that there might be some of my friends hereabout. I had reason to know they were in this part of the country, for after they were driven out of Tennessee by the government a lot of them came down here into the 'glades."

"Driven out by the government?" echoed Frank.

"Sure," was the easy reply, "and now to answer your last question—that thing my young shipmate Lathrop calls a 'funny pot' is a whisky still and these folks you see around us are moonshiners. There's a price on the head of most every one of them," concluded Ben.

The boys looked their questions. Their amazement prevented them speaking.

"Yes," continued Ben in a low voice, "most of the older ones has dropped a 'revenue' at one time or another. Poor

devils, if you'd ever seen the way they were hounded you maybe wouldn't blame 'em so much."

"Were you ever a moonshiner, Ben?" asked Lathrop in an awed tone.

Ben winked with a wink that spoke volumes.

"Say a friend of the moonshiners, younker, and you'll be near it," he replied. "I used to keep a kind of traveling store to help the boys out."

From which the boys gathered that at one period of his adventurous career the versatile Ben had been a "runner" of moonshine whisky—as the man is called who, at great risks, carries the poisonous stuff into the outer world from the secret mountain stills where it is made. The coincidence of Ben meeting his old friends on the island was after all not so remarkable as it seemed. Since the government has run most of the moonshiners out of the Tennessee and North Carolina mountains hundreds of them have taken refuge in the keys and among the 'glades where their product finds a ready market among the Seminoles—who gladly destroy themselves with "whyome" as they call the product of the illicit stills.

The boys soon found out that it was one of the moonshiners who had tried to get Frank's revolver from under his pillow while he slept—not with intent to do him any harm but because the sight of the weapon earlier in the evening while they had been singing round the camp-fire—watched as it now appeared by a hundred keen eyes—had excited his desire to own it. The mystery of the motor-boat that kidnapped poor Pork Chops, however, was in no wise cleared up, and as the boys and Ben sat down to a meal of yellow corn pone, broiled wild hog, pompano, fried plantain and a sort of orange preserve, to which they did ample justice, the subject occupied most of their thoughts and conversation. As they ate the moonshiners shyly watched them with their wild, hunted eyes. They refused to sit down to eat with the party of adventurers, but flitted about evidencing much interest at the boys' table manners and their plain embarrassment at having no other table utensils but their fingers.

The meal concluded, Ben lit his pipe and gave himself up to after-dinner contemplation. The boys wandered about the camp unchecked. The moonshiners seemed even disposed

to be friendly, in an offish sort of way, after Ben's endorsement of the boys. One of them approached them with a pannikin full of the colorless stuff from the still. He explained that they distilled it from fields of cane they had in another part of the island.

The very smell of the stuff sickened the boys, who waved it away as politely as they could. Their refusal did not ruffle the moonshiner, who drained the pannikin off himself with evident relish although the portion he had poured out had been intended to suffice the entire quartette of boys. "Black Bart," too, had a little fallen off in the estimation of the moonshiners because he also refused to touch their product. They shook their heads over his negative reply to an invitation to drink as men who regret the downfall of a once upright man.

While the boys were wandering about the camp their attention was attracted to a bottle suspended to a pole outside the hut of one of the moonshiners. It was swathed in ribbons and bits of bright tin and seemed to be regarded as some sort of a costly ornament. This was partly explained by the fact that the wife of the owner of the hut was an Indian woman and was the person who had ornamented the bottle for "big medicine." But a closer scrutiny revealed to the boys a rolled piece of paper inside it on which there was some faint writing. As it seemed to be in English their curiosity was therefore considerably aroused.

They questioned the woman closely about it. At first they could get no satisfactory replies. At length, however, after Frank had given her a bright silver dollar—she refused a paper one—the squaw became more talkative.

"Um-him come from o-tee (islands) long time go." She pointed to the westward.

"The islands round Cape Sable?" asked Frank.

She seemed to understand, for she nodded.

"My man find him—he float," she grunted.

"Boys, this bottle was found afloat. This may be a message from some poor fellow who is cast away on the Ten Thousand Islands," exclaimed Frank.

The others looked skeptical

"Most of these bottle messages are fakes anyhow," said Billy, with an air of finality. But Frank was not satisfied. He

questioned the woman at greater length. After a long, patient interrogation he found that her husband, who was absent from the camp, had been delivering a consignment of moonshine to a camp of Seminoles in the wildest part of the 'glades and had found the bottle off the mouth of the Shark River. It had a tiny bit of red flannel tied round its neck as if to attract attention to it. This decided Frank. No joker would have gone to that trouble.

He secured the bottle from the squaw for what seemed to him in his eagerness a ridiculously small amount, while she in her turn thought the young Hot-ka-tee (white man) must be crazy to give so much for it, although to be sure, she esteemed it a valuable possession.

With a heavy stone Frank cracked the neck off his purchase and eagerly shook out the note it contained. What he expected to find even he scarcely knew, but the bottle and its hidden message had appealed strongly to the boy's nature,—in which there was a strong dash of imaginative mingled with the practical sense that had enabled him to carry so many adventures to a successful issue.

The paper was crumpled up and it took a good deal of smoothing out before Frank could read the few faintly pencilled lines that were on its surface. After much puzzling, however, he made out:

“Th - y a - - - - tak - - g m - ,” then there was a long blank that exposure had obliterated. The next legible words were: “to the 'glades. - - - - stole - - - - ret of - - - - ite. Send help.

C - - - - - p - - - n, U. S. N.

For a few seconds the full significance of the words did not penetrate Frank's brain. The gaps puzzled him and he did not pay much attention to the general significance of the screech. Suddenly, however, the full meaning of his find fairly leaped at him from the page.

The letter had been written by the missing Lieutenant Chapin.

There could be no doubt of it. Reconstructed the letter read:

“They are taking me into the 'glades. They stole the secret of Chapinite. Send help. Chapin, U. S. N.

Wildly excited over his discovery Frank's shout brought his

companions round him in a minute. Hastily he explained his find. The sensation it created may be imagined. Here was the first definite news of the missing man discovered by an extraordinary chance in the camp of a band of outcast moonshiners.

"Where was this yere communication found?" demanded Ben.

Frank explained where and when the squaw had told him the moonshiner discovered the bottle. Ben knitted his brows for a minute and then spoke with decision.

"They took him into the 'glades up one of the west-shore rivers," he exclaimed at length. "The tides on this coast would never have drifted the bottle round there. It must have come down the river, maybe from the interior of the 'glades themselves, or maybe he threw it overboard from the *Mist* when she was wrecked."

At this moment there came a startling interruption. About a dozen of the wild-looking moonshiners appeared, dragging into the clearing a rumpled heap of humanity whom the boys at once recognized as the man they had caught eavesdropping in Washington, and who had, as they believed, followed them to Miami after failing to destroy the *Golden Eagle* at White Plains.

The captive—who is known to our readers from his signing of the message from Washington to Florida as Nego—recognized in a flash that he was face to face with the Boy Aviators.

For a fragment of time the group stood as though carved from stone.

CHAPTER X. THE CAPTIVE'S WARNING.

The captive was the first to break the picture. With a violent wrench he freed himself of the arms of his captors, while the boys gazed in dumb amazement at the unexpected encounter.

"What's this here buccaneer bein' a' doing of now?"

demanded Ben, after a few seconds.

"We 'uns caught him trying to scuttle you 'uns canoes," explained one of the crackers, "and we calculate to have him decorating a tree-bough by sundown on our own account. We don't like live strangers round here."

The face of the man we know as Nego grew as yellow as parchment. There was little doubt from the expressions of the moonshiners' faces that they were quite capable of carrying out their threat. In fact a murmur of approval greeted the cold-blooded proposal. One man—a little short fellow with a tangle of black whiskers that reached to his waist—even pointed to a custard apple-tree that grew at the edge of the clearing and remarked casually:

"He'd look uncommon well decorating that thar tree I'm thinking,"

After the boys had made insistent demands to be given the details of Nego's capture they were finally informed that a group of the moonshiners, who had been off wild-hog hunting, had been much surprised to see the motor-boat manoeuvring off the point on the far side of which the boys had beached the canoes. They stealthily watched the two men who were in the craft from the screen provided by the mangroves. One of them—the man they had captured,—continually scanned the shore with a pair of field-glasses.

"They must have known we had left the sloop and come in pursuit of us," exclaimed Frank and Harry in one breath as the narrator reached this point of his story.

After rounding the point it appeared that the watchers, who had been sneaking along through the undergrowth, saw Nego order the boat's head pointed for the shore and when she was fairly close in, get into a small dinghy that towed astern and come ashore at the spot where the canoes were lying. He carried a small axe and was about to raise it and destroy the craft when the crackers, with a startling yell, burst out of the woods and made him a captive. The other man must have seen his comrade's plight, for he instantly headed the motor-boat about and giving her full speed vanished round the projection on the coast of the island.

The boys' faces paled as a common thought flashed across their minds. "What if the two men had visited the sloop and scuttled her or destroyed the *Golden Eagle II*?"

Harry was the first to voice their fears. Frank's answer, however, gave the adventurers a gleam of hope.

"That occurred to me, Harry," he replied, "but, on thinking it over, I think it is more likely that they planned to destroy the canoes before attacking the *Carrier Dove*, as with the small craft stove in they would be able to work without fear of our paddling back and surprising them."

They agreed that this was a reasonable theory and turned their attention to the captive who stood defiantly with folded arms and a sneering expression on his dark face. He looked very different from the well-dressed man who had first attracted their attention in the dining-room at the Hotel Willard, but he was unmistakably the same despite the fact that now his chin was covered with a heavy stubble and he wore rough clothes and a dark blue flannel shirt.

"Who are you?" demanded Frank finally.

The dark man raised his eyebrows and as he did so the boys noticed at once the cause of his peculiar expression. The man's eyes were almost almond-shaped, dark and malevolent looking—the eyes of an Oriental. Combined with his dark yellow skin they stamped him at once as an unmistakable subject of the ruler of the far Eastern power the agents of which the Secretary of the Navy was certain, had kidnapped Lieutenant Chapin and stolen the formula of his explosive. When he spoke it was in a rasping voice that matched well his general appearance of sinister energy.

"What if I should refuse to tell you?" he grated.

"In that case you would be very foolish," rejoined Frank, "you are now in the power of these men, over whom we have some influence. If you will give us some information we will in return try to intervene for you, notwithstanding the fact that you have tried to blow up our aerodrome and now we find you here attempting to scuttle our canoes. What have you done with the colored man you took from the sloop last night?" he demanded suddenly.

"To that I shall simply reply that he is in good hands," was the rejoinder.

"Not if he's got anything to do with you, he ain't, my fine fellow," put in Ben indignantly. The man looked at him with cold contempt.

"You may do with me what you will," he said proudly, "I shall not sue Americans for my liberty or even my life."

The boys were amazed at the cool audacity of the man. With death staring him in the face, surrounded by the cruel faces of men who would have no hesitancy in killing him, he showed no more trace of emotion than if he were still sitting eavesdropping in the Willard dining-room.

"We 'uns will find a way to make him talk," broke in one of the moonshiners, a big, powerful fellow. "Here, Shaddock, heat up the gun-barrels."

The boys looked puzzled, but Ben realized at once the horrible thing the man contemplated. They meant to brand the prisoner with the red-hot gun-barrels.

"Avast there," he cried, "none of that in this yere ship. Fair play and all above board. If you want to string up this fellow to the yard-arm I don't know, if it wasn't for my friends here, that I'd say 'no,' but we ain't going to have no branding."

"Who are you to be giving orders?" demanded the man who had made the suggestion angrily and leaning forward on his rifle, "I reckon we 'uns ain't asking for your advice or figgering on taking it either."

Several of the younger men muttered, "That's right—who's he to come here 'a ordering us about."

"I wouldn't put it past yer that you're turned a revenue," went on the first speaker following up his advantage. At this an angry cry went up. The boys and Ben perceived that matters would soon reach a crisis if something were not done. Ben, however, knew how to handle these people better than his young companions imagined.

With two quick steps he was alongside the troublemaker and seizing him in an iron grasp put his face close to his and fairly hissed in his ear:

"Look a here, 'Red' Mavell, one more word like that and you're as good as dead—understand?"

The other apparently did for he sullenly muttered:

"Ain't no use a gettin' het up. You know the way we do these things an' if you don't like 'em you don't have to stay and watch."

During this scene Nego had stood as impassively as if carved out of wood. Indeed with his parchmentslike skin and

dark, slit eyes he did resemble an Oriental ivory image almost as much as a human being.

It was of course evident to him that escape was impossible. Rugged, wild-eyed moonshiners stood all about him and the women even had come out of the huts, with their timid children peeping from behind their skirts, to be onlookers at the unwonted scene. The captive retained his posture of proud defiance in the face of this. His bearing was even insolent in fact.

"Look here, mates," went on Ben, turning suddenly to the boys, "we don't want to have any hand in killing this here reptile—much reason as we've got to—and we don't want him to be tortured, and I'll be keelhauled if we want to keep him," he glanced ferociously at the captive, "the only thing to do is to turn him loose."

The captive's face lost its impassivity for a moment. So completely had Ben's determined manner cowed the more ruffianly moonshiners that even they did not demur.

"But there's a string hitched to the offer," went on Ben, "if we do let yer go you've got to make tracks in that thar motor-boat of yours for the north and swear to follow us no further. And tell us what you've done with that thar poor coon."

"Yes, that is our proposal," said Frank, "if we get you out of the hands of these people you will have to pledge us your word to trail us no further and to leave this part of the country at once—will you do that?"

"If we were only north we'd have you in jail by this time," put in Billy angrily.

The man was silent for a moment with his eyes downcast, then he looked up but with some of the expression of sullen cunning obliterated from his dark face at least temporarily. It was plain the Americans' generosity had affected him.

"I do promise—yes," he said quietly. "My companion was to wait for me in the motor-boat till I signaled to liim that I was going to put off again. If you will let me go I promise to go straight on board and never trouble you again."

"But they said your companion put about and drove the boat round the point when he saw your capture," objected Harry.

The other smiled.

"Simply a measure of prudence," he said. "I can easily signal him with this," he drew from his pocket a small whistle, of the shrill kind known to seafaring men as the "bos'n's pipe."

"But," he went on in a grave tone, "I want to do something to repay you for your kindness which I confess I do not understand—you Americans are a queer people."

"Blame lucky for you we are," snorted Ben, who didn't much like the cool way the captive took his good fortune.

"Do not fear for your negro. He is safe. We put him ashore this morning, and by this time he must be at your camp. We only carried him off in an attempt to prevent his giving the alarm. But," and his voice sank to a whisper, "give this attempt up. Do not go into the Everglades."

Frank gazed at him in astonishment. The tone he used was full of import.

"Grave danger threatens you there," the other went on, "more than danger—death itself and in a terrible form. As for me I have pledged you my word. I am your country's enemy, but I know brave and generous men when I see them; you have no more to fear from me—"

"Well, you haven't done us much harm anyway," Frank could not refrain from saying, "though I'll admit you have tried," he added.

"I have but been the agent for others more powerful, more unscrupulous and more to be feared than I," the other replied, "even now your coming is being looked for."

"Then you did spy on us in Washington," cried Frank.

"I did, and telegraphed my report to my superiors," replied the man, "it was my duty. We soldiers of the Samurai know no word but duty when we are assigned to a task."

"Then you are an officer?" asked Frank.

"I am in the Onaki regiment. I fought through the Russian war and was afterward given the honor to assist in the enterprise which you are about to try to frustrate."

"I don't see much honor in what you and your countrymen have done," rejoined Frank warmly; "it looks to me like plain everyday stealing and worse."

"Perhaps," replied the other with a slight shrug. "Our points of view are different. Now," he said abruptly, "I must be going."

We must be well on our way north by dark for the inland channels are very intricate to navigate in and our boat draws a good deal of water.

"Recollect what I have said and be warned," he repeated impressively.

As he spoke there came a low growl of thunder in the distance and a heavy splotch of rain fell on the back of Frank's hand. They all looked up astonished. So engrossed had they been by the remarkable scene that had just transpired that they had not noticed that for some time the sky had been growing blacker and that one of the sudden storms, peculiar to the tropics, had been advancing towards them with all the rapidity that marks the advent of a "Black Squall," as they are sometimes called. The sky had in a few minutes become overcast completely with an ominous slate-colored pall. A hush as if of expectancy had fallen on the jungle about them.

"You are likely to get a ducking if you don't git aboard before this yere squall breaks," growled Ben. as his seaman's eye noted the signs of bad weather. The Oriental swept the overcast sky with a quick glance. He nodded.

"Good-bye and thank you," he said, and the next minute, guided by one of the moonshiners, he vanished down the trail leading to the shore. The moonshiners turned to the adventurers with sardonic looks as he disappeared.

"You 'uns might better have let us hang him," said one of them, "he'll work you a pesky lot of mischief yet."

"I don't believe he will trouble us any more," rejoined Frank, who had been impressed by the man's earnest manner and evident gratitude. How soon and how literally his words were to be fulfilled he little imagined.

CHAPTER XI. THE BLACK SQUALL.

The boys were so engrossed in discussing the sudden conversion of their late enemy to a friend—or at least to no longer a source of menace—that it was not till a good ten

minutes later that Frank suddenly exclaimed:

"The canoes!"

The spot where they had drawn them up was near the margin of the sea and the heavy waves that the approaching storm would stir up would be sure to swamp them if they were not moved from their present position.

"Come on, boys, we've got to hurry," shouted Ben, and followed by the young adventurers he dashed off down the trail that the others had traversed a few minutes previously. They reached the shore just in time to hear three shrill blasts from the released captive's whistle. He was in his small boat about a hundred yards off shore and looking anxiously about. He had good reason to. The thunder-growls were coming nearer, and far to the south, across the dark cloud curtains, great jagged flashes of lightning were ripping and tearing. The sea, too, was beginning to rise with that peculiar moaning sound that precedes a mighty disturbance of its waters. The rain fell in torrents that whitened the surface of the sea.

The work of getting the canoes hauled into a safe place was soon performed, more especially as they had the aid of several of the moonshiners who had accompanied them to the beach to see the last of the man they would have cheerfully hanged a few minutes before. The small craft were hardly snugly stowed when round the point through the downpour, glided the motor-boat. She was low and long and painted dull black and must have been equipped with powerful engines for she shot through the water like a snake. The man in the dinghy soon clambered on board and turned to wave farewell to the soaking group of watchers on the beach.

"Geel! I'd give a hundred dollars for an umbrella," remarked Billy.

"I hope that's his good-bye and not au revoir," remarked Lathrop. "I think you let him off much too easy, Frank," he added.

"So do I," put in Lathrop, "he really deserved some punishment."

"What were we to do?" asked Frank. "Anyhow if he doesn't keep his word we know his measure now and can look out for him and see he doesn't get off so easy next time. Besides, if we had left him here these moonshiners would

have been sure to have killed him. Ben Stubbs told me they don't hesitate to make away with any stranger "

"Who hasn't got a letter of introduction," Billy finished for him.

"Well, it's a good thing we had a sponsor, or we might have been ornamenting the foliage."

As the boy spoke there was a sudden shout from Ben of:

"Holy skysails, look at that!"

The boys' eyes followed the direction in which he excitedly pointed.

To the southward, before the advancing curtain of lightning torn storm-clouds rolled a great wall of green water, ridged on the top with a line of flaky-white foam. It was tearing along toward them at the rate of an express train.

Fascinated by the spectacle of the mighty wave the boys stood watching it for a moment in awed wonder. Its great volume was outlined against the background of cloud as it reared its foamy crest above the dark level swells like a watery parapet.

As they gazed the same thought struck them simultaneously and a cry of horror broke from the lips of every member of the group.

The motor-boat!

It was directly in the path of the advancing mountain of water.

The two men on board the boat, who had been busied in attaching the dinghy's painter to the stem cleats, looked up almost at the same moment as those ashore realized their peril. The boys saw them hastily rush to their posts; one forward to the wheel in the bow, the other bending over the engines which had been stopped when the dinghy had been picked up. They were evidently panic-stricken. The noise of their terrified, confused shouts was borne shoreward on the wind.

"Can we do nothing?" asked Harry, horrified at the vision of the two doomed men struggling aimlessly to escape the deadly peril that was bearing down on them.

"Nothing," responded Frank, as agitated as the younger boy; "if their boat cannot weather that wave nothing can save

them."

The sea in the immediate vicinity of the island began to heave in heavy shouldering swells as the Black Squall advanced and the wave grew nearer and even more menacing as its distance from them decreased. It was apparent that far back as even the canoes were hauled, they would have to be hauled further inland if they were to escape damage. This work was at once set about and the canoes dragged fully a hundred yards from the beach.

"The wave will be all bust up by the mangroves and they'll not get much more than a wetting up here," remarked Ben.

This work done, Frank suggested that they climb into the branches of a wide-spreading guava tree so as to be out of harm's way and also be able to watch the motor-boat's fight for life.

"We might see a chance to help the poor fellows," he said.

The moonshiners, with impassive faces, followed the adventurers' example and soon all of them were roosting in the trees. Hardly had they settled when the mighty wave towered within a few hundred yards of the black motor-boat.

The occupants seemed to have lost their heads completely at the imminence of the danger and were not even attempting to do anything to relieve the situation. The man who owed his life to the boys stood erect in the stern and with his arms folded gazed at the advancing doom. The other was groveling in terror on the boat's thwarts. Suddenly they saw the man in the stern spring to the engine and crank the machine desperately. The boat began to move rapidly through the swells, tossing their heads in spray over her sharp bow.

"She's going to race it," amazedly exclaimed Harry.

"There's not a chance," cried Frank, as the boat gathered speed and fled like some frightened creature before the pursuing peril. She fairly leaped through the water like a live thing. With parted lips and throbbing pulses the boys watched the beginning of the unequal struggle. Gamely as the helmsman guided the flying craft over the swells the great wave gained on him. The man who had been groveling in the boat in sheer terror was now on his feet. He hung onto the stern coaming and gazed back as if fascinated with awe at the pursuing Nemesis. The man in the bow never turned his

head; he gazed straight forward.

Suddenly a cry that even the boys could hear broke from the lips of the man in the stern.

"The engine's stopped!" cried Frank.

Even as the words left his lips the giant comber caught the boat's stern. It raised her up and up till she seemed fairly to stand erect on her bow, stern in air. For an imperceptible segment of time she remained so.

The next second she was blotted out of existence in a mighty vortex of water.

Before the cry of horror at the swift tragedy that had been enacted before them had died from the boys' lips the wave broke on the shore.

With a crash like the explosion of a powder magazine it smashed itself on the beach and a mighty inrush of water followed. The spray of its landing flew as high as the tree-tops.

"A good thing we're up here," cried Billy, as the water came swirling through the jungle beneath them.

"A good thing we hauled the canoes up, you mean," said Frank, as he anxiously watched the frail craft—as far inland as they lay—picked up like feathers and dashed about by the inroad of the sea. To his relief, however, they survived their buffeting undamaged, thanks to their extra strong construction.

The water rushed back down the sloping shore of the island as swiftly as it had advanced. A few minutes later they were able to descend and hurry to the beach. There was no danger of a second monster wave Ben assured them.

They suddenly realized though that they were dripping wet through from the torrential downpour that had accompanied the storm, but their anxiety to see if any trace of the motor-boat or her occupants reappeared prevailed over their discomfort. They stood on the beach scouring the sea with burning eyes., but it was empty of life. They remained silently gazing before them for several minutes—it was Ben who broke the silence:

"What about the *Carrier Dove*? Has the wave struck her?" were the words that brought them all out of their reverie with an anxious start.

CHAPTER XII.

PORK CHOPS PROVES HIS METAL.

It was impossible to consider rounding the island in the canoes in the sea that was running; but this difficulty was got over by Ben, who impressed a guide from the moonshiners' settlement to guide them around to the spot where they had camped, and off which the *Carrier Dove* was moored. Arrangements were also made to have the canoes carried across the island later by three strapping young crackers, who were glad of the chance to earn a little money by proffering their services.

These arrangements completed the start across the island was made, and after about three hours traveling the boys reached the spot where they had camped. They hurried anxiously to the beach.

It was evident that the storm had not struck this side of the island with anything like the violence with which it had broken on the other shore. This raised the boys' hopes for a few moments but they were destined to be as quickly dashed.

No *Carrier Dove* rode at anchor.

In fact the usually placid sea, still heaving under the influence of the squall which had now passed away, was as devoid of life as a desert as far as their eyes could reach.

It was a bitter moment.

Neither Frank nor Harry dared trust their voices to speak. They swallowed hard while their eyes brimmed at this wretched ending of their hopes.

With the *Carrier Dove* gone—and more than that with the *Golden Eagle II*, at the bottom of the sea, it would be useless to keep on. They would have to turn back and admit they had ignominiously failed.

As for Ben Stubbs, he removed his hat, scratched his head and remarked:

“Well, I'll be double-darned, horn-swaggled—”

That was all, but there was a wealth of meaning in his tone.

Lathrop and Billy stood to one side, both realized what the Boy Aviators must be suffering at the sudden dashing to the

earth of their high hopes. A cruder disappointment could not in fact be imagined' The work of their brains and the fruit of long experiment and research had been swallowed by the same hungry sea that had destroyed two of their enemies.

Practical Ben Stubbs broke the silence.

"Here you get along home and tell 'em to send us some grub," he ordered the lanky young moonshiner who had escorted them. "I reckon we'll camp out to-night."

When the man had hurried off, Ben set to work getting a fire. When he had it in a bright blaze he shouted:

"All hands to the fire to get dry; no use of dying of rumatiz even if the sloop is gone."

The boys, despondent as they were, saw the wisdom of his words and crowded about the blaze. They stripped to their underwear and hung their garments on a sort of long stick laid across two forked ones stuck in the ground about six feet apart in front of the fire.

"Now, that's ship-shape," he remarked when a row of wet clothes were hung on his handiwork to dry in the warmth, "next thing to do is to consider the situation, as the young man said when they offered him a good job as hangman."

Ben's flow of spirits had an effect on all the boys, who sat dejectedly around the fire in their wet underclothes. To tell the truth the old adventurer was far from feeling as cheerful as he tried to appear, but like all men who have faced real hardships he knew the value of making the best of a situation.

"Well," said Frank with a melancholy smile. "What do you make of it, Ben?"

"What did that there poor fellow that's drowned say to you he done with Pork Chops?" was the irrelevant reply.

"Oh, he said that they had put him ashore early to-day," replied Frank. "I don't see what that's got to do with it."

"Might have a good deal," replied Ben. "I wonder where that black lubber is. He'll have fifty-seven varieties of fits when he finds his boat's gone— worse'n the skipper's cat that lost all his nine lives at once when the shop's rats gave out."

"He can easily replace that rickety old sloop," said Harry irritably; "to restore what we have lost will take months of work and more money than we can get."

"If we can even get back to New York from this moonshining island we'll be lucky," grumbled Lathrop.

"Oh, don't rub it in," muttered Billy.

It was very plain that all the young adventurers were overwrought. More for the sake of creating a diversion than anything else, Ben said:

"Wonder what's become of that floating pumpkin-seed the Squeegee?"

"Washed away, I suppose," said Frank in an uninterested tone. The loss of the ungraceful Squeegee didn't interest him much at that moment.

"She'd have been washed inshore by the waves," mused Ben, "if she'd been driven anywhere; besides I hitched her to that tree yonder down by the beach. Hullo, that's funny," he broke off suddenly and rapidly walked toward the tree to which the Squeegee's painter had been hitched. He examined the surface. There was no bit of rope hanging to it as he knew would have been the case if the painter had been snapped.

"Someone untied that rope," said Ben to himself in a tone of deep conviction.

Hastening up the beach to where the boys were grouped Ben confided his discovery to them.

"Who do you suppose took it?" asked Frank.

"Some no-good moonshiner, I suppose," snorted Ben indignantly. "Keelhaul those fellows, they're a natural born pest, the whole boiling of them."

"Do you think they could have weathered the squall in her?" asked Billy.

Ben laughed incredulously. "No, sir," he replied. "I doubt he'd last out a squall as long in that craft as it would take a sailor to eat a piece of plum-duff. Whoever took that boat is at the bottom of the sea by now and the Squeegee along with him."

It was dusk when the young moonshiner returned loaded with provisions for which the boys against his protest insisted on paying. There was a big piece of roast venison, sour-dough bread, roast land crab, a plethoric pot of beans and a plentiful supply of cassava cakes—even coffee had not been

forgotten. Everybody cheered up a little at the sight of the food. It is wonderful what heart a good meal, even in prospect, can put into a healthy boy, and our young adventurers were no exception to the rule. Declining their invitation to stay and share the meal the young moonshiner plunged off hurriedly into the home trail.

In fifteen minutes Ben had the coffee ready and the cassava cakes heated on hot stones. After a hearty meal, of which indeed they stood in need, the party donned their clothes,—which were now thoroughly dry,—and earnestly discussed their prospects. Only Ben, who sat apart, took no hand in the conversation. Only once, however, he irrelevantly remarked:

“Keelhaul that Pork Chops, where is he?”

That the boys did not sleep their usual peaceful slumbers that night may be imagined. For hours they tossed and turned under their blankets and watched the fire die down and fade first to a ruddy glow and then to blackness.

It might have been an hour after midnight when the moon rose and shimmered over the sea, now perfectly smooth. Had their minds been at ease the boys would have been enraptured with the beauty of the tropic night. As it was, however, the coming of the moon and the illumination of the sea merely served Frank as an opportunity further to scan the scene for any trace of the *Carrier Dove*.

Casting off his blanket he hastened to the strip of beach on which the smooth swells were breaking with a milder thunder than usual. With his night-glasses he swept the midnight sea from horizon to horizon. There was no result. Thoroughly dejected he cast himself at the foot of a huge palmetto and gazed intently out to sea riveting his mind on the present situation of himself and the little band of which the Boy Aviators were the leaders.

Suddenly the current of his gloomy thoughts was broken in on by an occurrence which brought him to his feet with a bound.

A low lying group of brilliant stars just above the horizon had been blotted out. Something had passed between the boy and the stars. That something could only be a sail, and a sail meant at least rescue from the island.

With a bound Frank, glasses in hand, was knee-deep in the surf.

It was a sail!

With trembling hands he brought the glasses to a better focus. Intently he gazed till his eyes burned in his head.

The craft was a sloop!

Hardly daring to admit to his mind the wild hope that had suddenly arisen, Frank watched the strange sail as it grew nearer. Before the gentle breeze the craft advanced slowly to within a hundred yards of shore and then a dark figure bounded along her decks and there was a loud rattle from her cable as the anchor was let go and she swung into the wind with flapping mainsail. Another moment and her canvas was lowered with a run and she lay at anchor.

With his heart in his mouth Frank hailed:

"*Carrier Dove*, ahoy!"

"Dat you, Marse Frank—bress de Lawd—bress de Lawd!" came back across the water in Pork Chops' rasping voice; but had it been the golden tones of an opera singer that answered his hail the sound could not have been sweeter to Frank's ear at that moment than Pork Chops' frog-like croak of welcome.

The *Golden Eagle II* was safe!

Before the echo of the *Carrier Dove*'s noisy arrival had died out in the woods, the young adventurers, hand-in-hand, were dancing in a wild circle round the bewildered Ben Stubbs, yelling like Comanches.

"Hurray! Hurray! Hurray!"

CHAPTER XIII. THE FRONT DOOR OF THE 'GLADES.

There was little more sleep for the boys that night and when at daybreak half-a-dozen of the moonshiners appeared with the canoe it may be imagined that the boys lost little time in getting aboard the *Carrier Dove* where their inky navigator was so delighted to see them that he danced a sort of double

shuffle of joy from one end of his disreputable craft to the other.

The story of how the *Carrier Dove* had come to weather the storm was soon told. After the two men, who had not harmed him, had set him ashore from the motor-boat at the other end of the island the black, with the instinct of locality common to his race, had easily made his way to the camp. To his amazement it was deserted and he was filled with fear that some disaster had happened to the boys and Ben. He had not much time for speculation however, for hardly had he looked about him when the rapid approach of the black squall that had caused such havoc on the other side of the island made him bestir himself to get his beloved *Carrier Dove* to a safer place than her present anchorage. He therefore jumped into the Squeegee and rowed out to his craft. He had just time to set her sails and up anchor when the squall struck down in all its fury. Pork Chops told his story with a wealth of gesture and dramatic effect and the boys could hardly refrain from bursting into roars of laughter as he described "de mon'surrious wabe what had rised up out of the sea like yeast bread an' et up de po' li'l Squeegee."

"How high was the wave, Pork Chops?" asked Frank.

"'Bout as high as de highes' mountain you ever see, Marse Frank, and dat am a solemn gospel fact," averred Pork Chops. "He ris' so high above de ol' Carrier Dohe's mas' dat it 'peared lak I could'n see no sky."

"Oh, come. Pork Chops," laughed Harry, "you'll have to take a little off the top of that wave."

"Won' tak off not a single solingtary inch, Marse Harry," indignantly replied the skipper of the sloop. "I wish ah may nevah see Miami again ef dat dar wabe weren't jus' as I done describe him to you."

"Well, it was pretty big and that's a fact," said Billy Barnes with a wink at the others, "but you must have magnifying eyes to see it as big as you describe it."

"Hol' on dar a minute, Marse Barnes," earnestly said the old negro, "ah don' know jus' what you mean by dat dar magnaminous eye, but tell me didn' you all see dat dar wabe from de udder side ob de island?"

"Certainly," said Lathrop, "what's that got to do with it?"

"Wall, it mus' jus' naturally have growed by de time it got round here; das all ah got to say," triumphantly concluded the old darky.

Continuing his narrative Pork Chops told how the little sloop had driven through the water "faster than de fastest express you eber seen." He didn't forget either to pay himself a high tribute to his own skill as a mariner.

"Reckon dat ol' man Noah didn't have nothin' on Cap'n Pok Chops when it come to sailin' roun' wid skill and duxturity," he remarked.

"Well," commented Frank, "we don't want to spoil you by too much praise. Pork Chops, but that certainly was an A No. 1 feat of yours, and I never heard a more welcome sound than that croak of yours when you dropped anchor."

After despatching huge quantities of fried bacon and coffee, cooked on the battered sea stove the *Carrier Dove's* cabin boasted, and which Pork Chops proudly referred to as "de galley," the adventurers up anchored and with their little engine chugging merrily away stood on toward the south. The canoes in a long tandem-like line were towed astern, as there was every prospect of smooth water for the rest of the day.

As the *Carrier Dove* bore past the southern end of the island a canoe shot round the point. In it were two figures. One was the moonshiner who had been so anxious to despatch the unfortunate Nego, the other was a younger man whom the boys recollected to have seen in the camp the day before. They waved and shouted something that the boys could not catch but, as they evidently had some important object in paddling out, the young commander ordered the engine stopped and the *Carrier Dove* lay to, rising and falling on the long swells over which the canoe rode as gracefully as a sea-bird.

A few moments later the canoe ran alongside and the elder of the two men addressing Frank said:

"Wall, the bodies of them two came ashore this morning and on the one you wouldn't let us string up we found this."

He fumbled in his homespun shirt a minute and then produced a tiny carved figure of green jade. It was the image of a squatting Buddha and evidently of great antiquity.

"Was this all you found?" said Frank, examining the quaint

figure with interest.

"Sure," replied the other unblushingly, "ain't it worth something to you 'uns for we 'uns to hev fetched it to you?"

Frank knew that the man lied when he said that the little jade god had been the only thing found on the dead man but he did not deem it worth while to contradict. He had little doubt that the dead man's watch and diamond rings were at that moment in the possession of the individual who had addressed him, or some other of the moonshiners. He, however, took the hint conveyed in the man's last words and handed him over a bill. The fellow took it without a word and shoved off.

"You 'uns may get out of the 'glades alive but I don't believe it," were his parting words.

"He's got what you might call a nice sweet disposition that feller," remarked Ben, as the canoe was rapidly paddled away and the adventurers got under way once more, "he'd make a good shipmate, he would, with that sunny nature of hisn."

Frank examined the little jade god with close attention while the others leaned over his shoulders. The figure was not much more than two inches high and of beautiful workmanship. It was evidently of great antiquity and seemed to have been venerated as a charm by successive generations, for it was worn quite smooth in parts as if from constant rubbing against the clothing of the person wearing it.

At the top of the head there was a small opening, round the edges of which were inscribed characters that were meaningless to the boys.

"What do you suppose is the significance of it?" asked Harry.

"It is evidently some sort of an amulet," responded Frank.

"I've seen 'em in China and Japan," put in Ben Stubbs, "whistling gods they call 'em there. Lend it here a minute."

Frank handed it to him and Ben put his lips to the orifice at the top of the figure's head. He blew hard in it and the figure gave out a clear, penetrating note that evidently traveled a long distance, for the two moonshiners stood up in their now distant canoe and gazed back in astonishment at the sound.

"Them Chinas and Japs set a high value on these," commented Ben, "some of 'em would give their lives for one."

"Well, we'll keep it as a souvenir," remarked Frank, slipping it in his pocket. "It will be amusing to have it to recall some of our adventures when we get back to New York."

That afternoon a good brisk breeze from the northwest sprang up and the *Carrier Dove* with her canvas spread bowled along at a good ten knots before it, heeling over till the foam creamed at her lee scuppers. It was exhilarating sailing. After a long series of alternate calms and favoring breezes the adventurers' craft finally rounded Cape Sable and shortly afterwards entered the maze of channels, islands, sand-bars and treacherous shoals that make up the Ten Thousand Island Archipelago.

The young adventurers had finished the first stage of their daring enterprise. By far the most difficult part lay before them. As Frank put it they had arrived "at the front door of the Everglades," what lay beyond was only conjecture.

According to the prearranged plan they were to cruise about at the edge of the archipelago till the *Tarantula* hove in sight and they could make final arrangements for wireless codes and signals and also complete the plan of rescuing Lieutenant Chapin and getting the formula out of the hands of those who had it. After two days of waiting, which sadly irritated the boys, who were keenly impatient to begin their task, one morning the placid waters of the gulf were furrowed by the sharp bow of the *Tarantula* and the *Carrier Dove* sailed out to meet her.

On board the destroyer the boys were greeted by a very youthful looking lieutenant, whose name was Selby. He explained that his orders were to keep in constant touch with the expedition, so far as was possible, by wireless and that if they were missing without sending any word for more than a week he was to take a squad of men and penetrate the Everglades in search of them.

He was very anxious for the boys to take several picked men of his crew along with them in their bold dash. But Frank and Harry, after a brief consultation, agreed that the force they had at present formed a good working unit and there was no need of shortening their supplies and overloading the canoes by taking any more. After a dinner aboard the hospitable *Tarantula* the boys dropped over the side into the *Carrier Dove*, which had lain sociably alongside the grim war-

vessel while they were aboard, and with warm words of farewell from Lieutenant Selby and a cheer from the crew, among whom word of what was on foot had spread in some mysterious way, they started for the maze of islets and channels beyond which lay the mouth of the Shark River. They anchored that night off a small island covered with a dense undergrowth that promised snakes and that there was at least one variety of reptile ready to receive them was evidenced when, as the *Carrier Dove's* anchor rattled down into about twelve feet of water, a huge body slipped off the bank and slid into the water with a sullen splash.

"An alligator!" cried the boys.

"No, sah," rejoined Pork Chops, "dat dar ain't no 'gator, dat's a crockindile and where dey are dere's mischief."

"Are they more dangerous than alligators?" asked Frank.

"More dangerouser!" scornfully replied Pork Chops. "Ah should jes' say dey is. 'Gators—huh! they am big cowards, but crockindile he'll fight yer till his teef drap out—yes, sah, they's bad critters is crockindiles."

"I'd like to get that fellow's skin though," said Frank.

The old darky scratched his head.

"Wall, sah," he said; "I ain't saying that dat's impossible. 'Spose we try to git him by jacklight."

"By jacklight?" exclaimed Lathrop wonderingly.

"I've read about that," replied Frank, "it is supposed to be the most effective way of trapping these saurians. Now as there isn't much to do before tomorrow, after we have unloaded our duffle and got it stowed in the canoes, we might as well have a little pot-hunt after supper."

The boys enthusiastically agreed and the work of getting the duffle off the *Carrier Dove* and into the canoes for transportation into the Everglades went ahead with a will. By supper time the canoes which were to be occupied by Frank and Harry were completely loaded and there only remained the stowing of the few additional sections of the *Golden Eagle II* in the craft that were to be paddled and poled by Billy Barnes, Lathrop and Ben.

Supper over, old Pork Chops rigged a lantern up in the bow of one of the canoes and fitted a strip of canvas over it.

"No use letting Mister Crokindile know what we're going to do till we git ready," he remarked as he hooded the light.

As only one of the canoes could be used, the others being loaded down, it was agreed that Frank and Harry should occupy it with old Pork Chops and the others would watch the fun from the deck of the *Carrier Dove*. The spot where the *Carrier Dove* lay was a sort of natural basin enclosed by the thickly grown islands all about. Pork Chops paddled almost noiselessly into about the center of the enclosed pool and then stopped. Then came a dead silence for more than half an hour broken only by the occasional night-cry of some bird or creature of the jungle and the sharp clicks of the adventurers' rifles as they got them ready for action.

Suddenly the quiet was broken by a roar like that of an enraged bull.

"Heah he comes foh shuh," commented Pork Chops with his hand on the hood of his lantern.

CHAPTER XIV. CLOSE QUARTERS WITH 'GATORS.

The roar that had startled them was, as Pork Chops explained to the boys in a low undertone, the mating cry of the huge crocodile which was now probably on its way to the den in which they had surprised it earlier in the day.

"Are you all ready?" whispered Harry to Frank, as both boys distinctly heard the rushing noise made by the huge creature as it leisurely swam through the still water.

Frank grasped his rifle. Harry already had his leveled, ready for use as soon as Pork Chops' jack lantern illuminated the quarry. They had not long to wait.

"Now, den, sah," cried Pork Chops as he raised the hood of the lantern and a ray of light shot out across the water. As if fascinated by the sudden illumination a great cruel head armed with rows of saber-like teeth suddenly flashed into view.

"Let him have it," shouted Frank as both he and Harry fired.

There was a repetition of the roar as their bullets bored home but mingled with it was a loud shout from the *Carrier Dove*, that for the moment put all thoughts of the success or failure of their shots out of the boys' heads. The cry came from Billy and it was sufficiently alarming considering that the water fairly swarmed with alligators and the more vicious crocodiles.

"Lathrop's overboard!"

A thrill of horror shot through both boys as they heard the words. At Frank's swift command the old negro switched the canoe round as if she been on a pivot and the next minute the ray of the jack lantern was sweeping the water in the direction of the *Carrier Dove*. Lathrop, carried away by excitement as the boys' rifles had been discharged, had leaned far over the side of the sloop, hanging on by a frayed lanyard. This had parted under his weight and he was now struggling in the water.

Billy Barnes and Ben Stubbs had thrown him ropes but the bewildered boy, half stunned by the shock of his sudden immersion, could not see them. He swam blindly about in the fetid water trying to grasp the side of the sloop. It was so dark, however, that partially dazed as he was he did not seem able to find it. When the ray of the jack lantern fell on his white dripping face he had about given up hope.

"Hold on, Lathrop," shouted Frank as, urged by Pork Chops' powerful strokes, the canoe shot toward the struggling boy. In their excitement all the occupants of the frail craft had quite forgotten about the big bull crocodile they had wounded. They were reminded of his presence in a startling fashion.

Without the slightest warning the canoe seemed to be propelled into the air as the powerful tail of the wounded saurian struck it, and the next minute its occupants were struggling in the water in as bad a fix as Lathrop. Both boys were powerful swimmers but both realized that all their skill would not avail to save them in the fix in which they found themselves. As for Pork Chops his terror was pitiable.

"Oh Lawd! oh Lawd! I didn't mean no harm when I stole ole Aunt Liza's white pullet," here he was half-choked by water. "Oh Lawd, git me out ob dis widout been all chawed up by crokekindiles an' I won't never steal folks' fowls agin, Lawd. O-o-o-o-oh!"

He broke off with a yell of real terror. Frank swimming toward the *Carrier Dove* felt a huge body brush by him in the water and frantically stroked toward his goal. Harry was safe, he could hear him breathing as he swam. But poor Pork Chops! The unfortunate black had given himself up for lost when there was a sudden blinding flash of light from the sloop and at the same minute two rifles cracked. The amazed boys, struggling in the water to gain the sloop, saw in the sudden white glare the reptile's black head with monstrous opened jaws suddenly checked in its rush on the apparently doomed Pork Chops as Billy Barnes and Ben pumped the lead out of the rifles into the wounded crocodile's mate as fast as they could work them.

The huge body swung clean out of the water in its death agony and fell back with a mighty splash. Great clouds of awakened herons flew from the islets round about and the whole forest rang with the cries of aroused birds.

Ben Stubbs had had the presence of mind to seize and ignite one of the signal flares and it was by its powerful light that they had saved the lives of Pork Chops and possibly of the boys. With the illumination afforded by the glare it didn't take long for the boys to get aboard the *Carrier Dove* where Lathrop in a very shamefaced way related how he came to tumble overboard.

"It's all the fault of your rotten rigging," he said indignantly, looking at the dripping Pork Chops who was still so scared that he could hardly speak. The insult to his *Carrier Dove*, however, fired him with a righteous wrath.

"What you all mean, Marse Lathrop, by saying dose unkindnesses 'bout dis yar ship of mine?" he sputtered indignantly. "I'd have you to understan' dat she's jes' as fine a craf as der is on dis yer Flahda coas', yes, sah."

"I beg your pardon," laughed Lathrop, who now that the danger was over had quite recovered his usual flow of spirits, "I didn't mean to insult you. However," he went on more gravely, "if it hadn't been for Billy and Ben here I doubt if any of us would have been alive now to even hurt your feelings."

Of course a great handshaking between the boys and their rescuers took place, and as for Pork Chops he swore that he would not leave the boys whom he hailed as his "sabyers."

The original plan had been that he was to sail the *Carrier*

Dove back to Miami as soon as the boys started into the 'glades, but he absolutely refused to hear of this now.

"No, sah, you saved mah wuthless life, an' ah means ter stick ter yer jes' as long as mah laigs ul carry me," he declared.

From this determination he could not be swayed and when they turned in that night it had been arranged that the old black was to accompany them, occupying a part of Lathrop's canoe, and that the *Carrier Dove* was to remain at anchor where she was;—at all events for a time. In that little frequented maze of keys and mangrove-grown shoals there was small likelihood of anybody finding her.

The next morning all hands were astir early. It was a wonderful scene into the midst of which they had penetrated. Through the confused huddle of keys and islets silver-clear channels threaded their way. In them thousands of fish—silvery tarpon, vampire-like devil-fish, big and little sharks, rushed and sported, eating and being eaten in turns. It was fascinating to watch the active submarine life going on about them.

As for the birds, when the sun arose there were great clouds of them sailing across the sky or regarding the adventurers' preparations for abandoning the *Carrier Dove* with the greatest interest. Big snowy herons, green herons, rose-colored herons, blue herons, long-legged herons like soldiers on yellow stilts, stood about, sentinel-like on the oyster bars on which they found their daily food. Ducks, coots and cormorants floated about on the placid waters almost as tame as the domestic varieties.

Overhead the sky was almost darkened at times by huge flocks of snowy ibises, their beautiful plumage flashing in the sun as they rose and fell in undulating waves. Gannets, gulls and ospreys hovered about the great fishing grounds of the archipelago and high up in the sky, mere specks against the brilliant blue, sailed on serene pinions the men-of-war hawks and frigate-birds that haunt the Everglades in vast numbers.

Immediately after breakfast the *Carrier Dove's* hatch and cabin were locked and the start was made. Frank and Harry in their canoes led the way. Billy Barnes followed, his craft containing the wireless apparatus. The procession was taken up by Ben Stubbs while last of all came Lathrop and old Pork

Chops, in whose canoe was loaded the commissariat. Frank and Harry had most of the sections of the *Golden Eagle II* in their craft, as they wished to keep them under their immediate eye.

All the boys felt a solemn feeling of responsibility—almost of loneliness—creep over them as, after Frank had taken and carefully noted with sextant and horizon the exact bearing of the *Carrier Dove's* anchorage, so that they could easily find her again, the start into the unknown began.

"Here's to the success of the Chester Relief Expedition!" shouted Billy Barnes as after everything had been checked up and found complete the little band dipped their paddles into the water.

The others started to cheer but a sharp order from Frank checked them.

"From now on," he ordered, "everybody must keep as quiet as possible. We do not know but that eyes and ears unknown to us are even now taking note of our every action."

And so in silence, save for the steady dip-dip of their paddles the Chester Relief Expedition glided through the wilderness of mangrove keys and blind channels always due east toward the heart of the Everglades.

CHAPTER XV. AN ISLAND MYSTERY.

It was an exhilarating sensation, this of being afloat on their own keels and gliding easily among sights so strange and new. On every yellow sand-spit alligators lay sunning themselves and slid into the water with lazy splashes as the expedition shot round points onto them. Sometimes they didn't even trouble to do this but lay blinking at the canoes as much as to say:

"Hurry up by, and let us get to sleep again."

"What if they should take it into their heads to attack us?" asked Lathrop of Pork Chops. The boy's face paled as sometimes the old black, with deliberate defiance as it seemed, steered so close to the alligator bars that the boy

could have put out a hand and touched the backs of the monsters.

"Don' you give ye'self no fuss 'bout dem 'gators 'tacking us, Marse Lathrop," the old man reassured him, "why, ef I het one ob dem varmints a slap wid dis yar paddle he'd skedaddle so quick yo couldn' see his trail for hurry—yes, sah."

The first night's halt was made at a beautiful little island overgrown thickly with palmetto, bay, water-oak, wild-fig, mastic and other timber. Through the amber water that surrounded it fish of a dozen varieties glided through the brilliantly colored water-grasses, that waved in as great luxuriance as the land-growth. While Pork Chops built a fire and busied himself with getting supper Frank and Harry sat apart and discussed their plans. They intended to select the first available place for the setting up of the *Golden Eagle II*, and then do a little scouting by aeroplane. Frank knew from report that scattered through the wilderness of the Everglades there are numerous hammocks or small hills, in some cases quite considerable mounds, that would make ideal sites for a central camp. It was not much use speculating on any further method of procedure, however, till they were actually in the Everglades.

While the boys had been busying themselves in this way Ben Stubbs had taken a rifle and strolled off into the jungle in search of one of the wild turkeys whose loud "Keouk-keouks" had apprised him that the bronze beauties were plentiful in the brush. Lathrop and Billy Barnes went fishing with improvised hooks and lines made of stout thread from their toilet-bags.

The two anglers were shouting with delight over a huge reddish colored fish that Lathrop had hooked and drawn to shore, after a struggle in which it seemed that his line must part or he go overboard, when Ben Stubbs returned from his hunting expedition. He carried with him a fine big gobbler that must have weighed fully twenty pounds. While they were all gathered about the beautiful bird admiring the rich, coppery gloss of its feathers, Lathrop, who had been busy disentangling his line from a low-growing bush, gave a sudden yell.

"What's the matter?" shouted Frank.

The boy came running toward him. His face was white and he held out his right hand for their inspection. On the thumb were two tiny bluish punctures.

There was no need to ask questions. The boy had got a snake bite. The question was,—had a poisonous reptile bitten him?

Lathrop, what with terror and pain from the fever that was coursing through his veins like molten lead, was too terror-stricken to answer Frank's questions intelligibly. He finally described, however, a snake which they did not doubt was a rattler,—a diamond back,—one of the most deadly pests of the Everglades.

"The medicine chest quick, Harry," ordered Frank.

The younger boy darted to the canoes and soon returned with the outfit labelled "For Snake Bites." With quick dexterity Frank had rolled up Lathrop's sleeve while Harry was getting the remedies, and with a short stick had twisted a handkerchief above the bite so tightly that it was almost buried in the skin. This was to prevent the poison spreading up the arm.

Then, while Lathrop winced with the pain but endured it bravely, Frank slashed two deep cuts in his forearm which bled freely. From the snake-bite outfit Frank rapidly selected some dark-red tablets of permanganate of potassium and rapidly dissolved them in water. By this time Lathrop was in agony. His heart felt as if it was being gripped in a red-hot vise and he had great difficulty in breathing. A strange drowsiness crept over him. Nothing seemed to matter if he could only sleep and forget the pain.

"Leave me alone," he panted to Frank. "I guess I'd rather die."

The young leader recognized the seriousness of these symptoms and worked with feverish haste. He fitted a needle onto a hypodermic syringe and seizing a fold of the stricken boy's skin between his thumb and forefinger he ran the needle almost up to its end in Lathrop's arm—after having filled the squirt with the permanganate solution. Then, wrapped in blankets, the boy was laid down, while Frank and Harry watched anxiously at his side. After an hour they breathed more freely as Lathrop opened a pair of languid eyes and announced that the pain about his heart had

moderated. The next morning he was still so weak, however, that to move him was manifestly impossible.

The boys were in a quandary. They could not leave him and yet time was precious. They must press on. An unexpected solution to the problem was found when Frank and Harry, after spending half a day exploring the little key, announced that they had found a deserted plantation house on the northerly end of it, and that better than that even, there was a quite considerable clearing about the abandoned house that would make an excellent "take off" for the *Golden Eagle II*. It was decided that night to go to work at once to put the aeroplane together right there and abandon the canoe expedition.

The house that Frank and Harry had found had evidently been long deserted. It was built of clay daubed over plaited branches of the mastic tree and roofed with palmetto leaves. Its door, a queer contrivance of twisted branches and palmetto leaves hung from broken hinges formed by loops of pliable twigs, bent round large crooked sticks set into the frame. All about it stretched a clearing in which apparently the former proprietor had carried on some sort of farming operations. But its condition showed that like the house it had been unused for many years.

"Who do you suppose could have built it?" asked Harry as the boys gazed about them at the dismal scene of desolation and abandonment.

"Some fellow anxious to keep out of the way I should imagine," put in Ben Stubbs, who was already busy with a mattock clearing up a space of ground on which to begin operations,—for this conversation took place the morning following the boys' discovery of the hut and the clearing.

"Or maybe a sailor who was marooned here," put in Billy Barnes.

"Ah, that's more like it," commented Ben. "Now I come to think of it, pirates used to be thick in among these yere islands and depend upon it that this place was put up by one of them poor fellows as they had put ashore for some fancied offence or other."

As if to confirm this theory it was not much later that Billy, poking about the clearing, found way off in one corner, under a huge cabbage-palm, a board stuck at one end of a low

mound, evidently a grave.

Billy's shout at once brought the others clustering about him, and after Ben's knife had scraped away the mould and dirt with which the years had coated the head-board they read:

"Jem Bristol,—a sailor of the Walrus. Died May 21, 1775. Berried Here by His Ship matz."

Underneath in smaller letters was cut the inscription:

"He was maruned here for five years been found by us as he was diing. The krew of the Murmade."

"Poor fellow," exclaimed Billy, "marooned here for five years, what a fate!"

"I suppose that the Walrus was some sort of a pirate ship?" asked Harry.

"Yes, I think I remember reading somewhere that Captain Flint, a famous sea-rover, called his ship by that name," chimed in Frank.

"Wall, them fellers from the Mermaid, however they got here, done what they could for the fellow," commented Ben Stubbs.

"Just the same hey only found him when it was loo late to do anything for him but bury him," commented Frank.

It was a good morning's work transporting the packing cases containing the sections of the air-ship across the island and when it was completed all hands were glad to sit down and partake of a lunch of reef oysters, pilot bread, fried bacon washed down with tablet lemonade prepared by Pork Chops. Lathrop was so far recovered as to be able to drink some oyster broth and after he had taken the nourishment he declared that he felt strong enough to be moved.

The boys had reached the decision that it would be a good plan to transport the entire camp to the clearing and occupy the dead sailor's house as a more comfortable permanent camp than they could erect themselves. The rest of the day was devoted to putting this idea into execution and carrying Lathrop, in a sort of stretcher made out of one of the canoe-tents End two long branches across the island. The canoes were then poled round the island to a little bay with a shelving

beach that cut into the land opposite the new camp which by unanimous consent had been christened Walrus Camp. The little craft were dragged up to a point above tide-water, for the waters about the island were still tidal. That evening, when the lamp was lit and the mouldering house of the maroon neatly swept out and the boys' possessions all put in place, the young-adventurers declared it was as comfortable a dwelling as one could find.

As for Pork Chops, he was fairly delighted with the place.

"Dis am as framjous as any palace I ever did done see," he exclaimed, rubbing his hands in satisfaction.

"What palaces have you ever seen?" asked Frank quizzingly of the old man.

Pork Chops, with a look of great superiority, replied:

"Ah's seen palaces an' palaces. Moren' you could shak' a stick at," he replied indignantly.

The exact location of Pork Chops' palaces and the eagerly demanded definition of the mysterious word "framjous" was indefinitely postponed by a startling occurrence at this juncture.

Ben Stubbs, who had been sitting by the door almost keeled over. Lathrop in his enfeebled condition set up a startled cry. Even Frank and Harry turned a shade paler. As for Billy his eyes almost popped out of his head. With a loud cry of "Fo' de Lawd's sake, spookses!" Pork Chops leaped from beside his stove, upsetting his pots with a loud crash. What had occurred was in fact sufficiently startling considering their lonely surroundings.

Somebody had knocked at the door.

Frank was the first to recover his senses. Revolver in hand he dashed across the floor and flung the door wide open. Eagerly his eyes searched the night but without result.

There was nobody to be seen!

CHAPTER XVI. THE BOYS MAKE AN ACQUISITION.

Headed by Ben Stubbs with the lantern the young adventurers rushed after Frank into the open, determined to ascertain if possible the meaning of the strange and startling interruption to their peaceful evening. It was in vain, however, that they searched for any indication of the presence of a human being. In the blackness it was indeed impossible to make more than a cursory examination of the surroundings of the hut.

At daybreak, however, after a restless night, Frank, who had risen as soon as the first gray of dawn made things dimly visible, uttered a cry of surprise from outside the hut. Hastily flinging off their coverings and slipping into their clothes the others ran out.

"Look here," exclaimed Frank, "what do you make of this?"

He held up a small bottle in which was a bit of red flannel, a chicken feather, some rusty nails and several dried grasshoppers.

"I found it put right to one side of the door sill," he explained. "How we missed finding it last night I don't know."

"What can it mean?" chorused the other boys peering eagerly at the strange object.

"Looks as if some mischievous kid had put it there," suggested Billy Barnes.

"I don't think there are likely to be any 'mischievous kids,' as you call them, about here, Billy," said Frank with a smile.

"Well, I give it up," said Harry; "I never was much good at reading riddles."

"Just let me look at it a moment, shipmate," put in Ben Stubbs quietly. "I kinder think I have an inkling of what it means."

He took the bottle and examined it carefully. Then he nodded his head sagely.

"It's some kind 'er voodoo for certain shu," exclaimed Pork Chops. "I wouldn't touch dat lilly bottle fo' all de money in dis yer worl'."

"What did you say it was, Pork Chops, you inky pirate?"

asked Ben, turning on him.

"Lan' sakes, don' snap me up dat er way, Marse Stubbs," gasped the old negro, "I only said I wouldn' touch dat bottle. It's voodoo fo' shu'."

"Right you are, my boy," cried Ben, "only it's not voodoo; but it's something very like it. 'It's obeah.'"

"Obeah!" exclaimed Frank, "what on earth is that, Ben?"

"Why, it's a form of witchcraft used by the ignorant negroes of the West Indies and Bahama islands," explained Ben. "It's meant as a warning to any one on whose doorstep it is placed. In this case, as I take it, it means, 'Don't come no further.'"

"Well," laughed Frank, "it will take more than a bottle of dried bugs and old chicken feathers to make us turn back, and anyway, how comes a West Indian negro here? If it was a Seminole now—"

"That's a puzzle to me too," remarked Ben. "Then Seminoles don't use nothing like this that ever I heard of.—What's that?" he broke off suddenly.

The cause of the interruption was a great fluttering of wings from the edge of the clearing and several herons flapped heavily out of the woods.

"There's someone in there," cried Frank.

"Right you are, my boy, and I propose that we put an end to this mystery business and find out who it is. Volunteers for the job."

Of course everyone was anxious to penetrate the mysterious cause of the birds' flight, which they felt had something to do with the placing of the bottle and the tapping on the door, and a few minutes later, heavily armed and ready for any surprise that might be sprung on them, the little party sallied across the clearing and into the dark mass of forest.

They had gone perhaps a quarter of a mile or so, and Ben Stubbs had remarked that they must have pretty well reached the limits of the island, when there was a great crashing of the dense undergrowth immediately in front of them and a human figure, bent almost double, was seen darting through the brush with the rapidity of a scared rabbit.

"Stop, or we'll fire," cried Frank.

But the figure kept on running. Frank was in a quandary. Of course he had not meant to carry out his intention and the fact that the man kept on running put him in an awkward position. They could not kill the man; yet if they did not fire he would escape from them and it was most essential they should capture and question him if it could be done.

Ben Stubbs raised his rifle and leveled it. Frank caught his arm and dragged it down.

"None of that," he said sharply, "if we can't get him without shooting him we'll have to let him get away."

Ben laughed.

"Don't git excited, shipmate," he remarked coolly, "I was only going ter give him a scare. Once more Ben raised his rifle and just as the fugitive was vanishing from view sent a bullet whistling over his head that nicked off several twigs and sent them scattering in a shower on his neck. With a loud screech of terror the fleeing figure flopped down and groveled on the ground.

"I'se a British subjec'." he yelled, "don't do me no harm, massa, I'm a subjec' of the King."

"Get up, you black rascal," roared Ben, for by this time they had come up to the groveling figure and saw that he was even blacker than the redoubtable Pork Chops, who had run back to camp at top speed as soon as they had sighted the fugitive.

"Get up," he went on, "we are United Statesers, and the king won't do you no good now. Who are you and what do you want around our camp?"

Tremblingly the negro got to his feet. He was a strange figure. A palpable negro he yet wore the garb of a Seminole Indian. His shirt, with its tail flapping outside a pair of buckskin trousers, bright-colored turban, and buckskin moccasins were the customary clothes of the tribe.

"Well," said Frank, as this nondescript figure stood facing them, beads of perspiration streaming down its face, "what have you got to say for yourself?"

"Snooping around and putting bottles of dessicated bugs on our front stoop," indignantly cried Billy Barnes.

"I didn't mean no harm, massa, didn't really mean no harm at all. Me berry good ole man. Bahama nigger I am."

"Well, what are you doing here, then?" demanded Ben.

"Don' shoot me, massa, an' I tell you eberyting," sputtered the captive, terrified at Ben's ferocious expression. Put in more intelligible language than the Bahama negro used his story was this:

Suspected unjustly some years before of having killed the captain of a sponging vessel of which he was one of the crew he had fled into the Everglades to avoid lynching. He had fallen into the hands of a tribe of Seminoles, off on an otter hunt, when he was almost famished and had been treated by them with kindness. In fact so well pleased had he been with his surroundings that he had taken a wife from the tribe and was now one of them.

Several days before the outposts had brought news of the approach of the adventurers into the interior and the Seminoles had at once made preparations to turn them back. The Bahaman, whose name, by the way, he confided was "Quatty," was singled out as being the best spy they could send inasmuch as he could speak English and would understand the conversation of the strangers. He had landed on the island the afternoon before and when he saw that one of the party was a black conceived the idea of working "obeah" on him. He knew that if the darky was a West Indian, which he suspected, he would really interpret the ominous nature of the sign.

"But why are you so anxious to keep us out?" asked Harry, "we mean no harm to you."

"Wall, dem ign'nant sabages," grandiloquently stated Quatty, "has obtained de idea dat you is in some way connected wid some white men what came down in the 'glades tree months ago or so."

The boys started eagerly.

"Some white men that came into the 'glades?" repeated Frank.

"Yes, massa," said Quatty, "dot's de bery meaning I intend to convey."

"Where are these white men?" demanded Frank and Harry in the same breath.

"Long way from here, far in de 'glades. Dem sabiges is werry much scairt of dem," went on Quatty, "one time dey go near dere camp and some man he throw something make

noise like de worl' he comin' to an en' and blow big hole in de groun'."

"It must be the men we are after," exclaimed Frank tensely.

"And the stuff they threw was Chapinite," added Harry.

"Are they still here?" was Frank's next question. He was keenly afraid of receiving a negative answer, and his voice almost trembled as he spoke.

"Yes, sah, dey's still here shu nuff," rejoined Quatty. "We never go near dem since dat day, but all de time we see smoke and at night dere is red flames go up from de island where dey camp. We tink dey debbils for sho'."

The boys were almost wild with excitement. Even Ben Stubbs' face lit up at this unexpected good fortune. It meant that instead of wasting days seeking the abductors of Lieutenant Chapin and the stealers of the formula they would be able, if this Bahama negro could guide them, to go direct to the spot after they had laid a plan of campaign.

"Could you guide us to this place, Quatty?" asked Frank.

"Wid de greates' of ease," replied the negro, quite proud of the impression he had produced, "but what fo' yo wan' to go dere?"

Without telling him too many details of their mission Frank outlined their errand to him and, as it might be important to secure the co-operation of the Seminoles, he told Quatty to reassure them as to the object of the intrusion of the adventurers. After Quatty had been given something substantial for his trouble, from Frank's bill-roll, he dived into the forest with the promise to return that afternoon with the chief of the tribe. He was positive, he told the boys, that the tribe would have no objection to their presence in the Everglades if they really meant to drive out the men who, as Quatty put it, he and the tribe believed to be "debbils."

The rest of the morning was spent in getting the field wireless and its lofty pole in position and joining the framework of the *Golden Eagle II*. With such energy did the boys work that dinner-time was forgotten and by afternoon things had reached a stage where the ship was ready for her golden wing coverings to be laced on. The work of placing the engine and truing it up would have to be left to the next day, for even Frank was not sanguine enough to believe that they could accomplish that difficult task by night or he would have

ordered work to go on without a let up.

True to his promise shortly before sundown Quatty reappeared at Walrus Camp with a tall dignified-looking Seminole dressed in the same manner as himself. The Indian could not talk English but Quatty acted as interpreter and the conversation went on swimmingly. The chief, whose name sounded like O-shi-ho-wi, agreed not to molest the boys if they pledged their words not to annoy the tribe or try to spy into their customs. This the boys readily agreed to and the chief then produced a pipe. After gravely taking a whiff he handed it to Ben Stubbs whom he regarded approvingly and Ben in turn, after a puff or two, handed it to the boys.

Lathrop looked at it in disgust.

"I can't smoke it," he said.

"Go on," said Ben, "just a whiff will do. The Injuns think that if you've smoked a pipe with them you won't break any promise you have made. If you won't you'll insult them."

"Well, if that's the case, all right," said Lathrop, and, with a wry face, he took a pull at the pipe and then suffered a violent fit of coughing. The others in their turn took a whiff. The only ones who appeared to have any relish for it, however, were Ben Stubbs and Pork Chops, the latter of whom said patronizingly to Quatty:

"Ah've got some good terbaccer in de hause, nigger, if yo' wan' to smoke somethin' better dan dese yar shavings."

"Ah consider dat berry good terbaccer, tank you, sah," replied Quatty with dignity, "and ah'll tank you ter keep any cricketscisms to yo'sef."

With a stately gesture the chief signified that negotiations were at an end as soon as the pipe-smoking had been concluded. He examined the framework of the *Golden Eagle II* with much interest.

"Huh-man-bird," was his comment, "canoe better. Not so far to fall."

There still remained one bit of business to be done and both Frank and Harry anticipated some little trouble over it—this was the retention of Quatty as their guide to the 'glade islet on which the abductors had set up their plant. The chief consented to his being retained, but Quatty himself was more doubtful. The promise of a canoe, however, as well as a good

round sum of money decided him. He would go. But he wanted to know how the boys meant to get into the interior of the 'glades. From where they were at the moment it would take many days of threading intricate water lanes, he explained, to arrive at their destination.

With a half smile at the explosion he knew was about due Frank replied:

"Yes, but we don't mean to go by canoe. We shall travel by air."

The negro turned an actual gray with perturbation.

"No, sah," he exclaimed, "no, sah. Yo won' go froo no air wid me. Ah'm too fond of mah life to go skeedaddlin' round in de clouds in dat contraption."

All the persuasions the boys could think of were of no avail. Quatty obstinately refused to reconsider his determination not to go up in the air-ship. Finally a happy thought struck Frank.

"Get one of the rifles," he whispered to Harry.

The boy hastened into the hut and reappeared with a fine automatic. His own in fact.

"Now, Quatty," commanded Frank, "watch."

He raised the rifle to his shoulder and pressing the trigger, fired the whole magazine. He reloaded it and handed it to the amazed negro.

"Now you try it," he said.

A grin of huge delight spread over the black's face as the automatic weapon shot out its rain of lead. As for the chief he stood stock still, but a look of amazement spread over even his stolid countenance at the exhibition.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked Frank.

"Dat's de mostest wonderfulest gun I eber seed," confessed the darky.

"It will be yours if you guide us to the island where the 'debbils' are," said Frank.

The old darky sighed.

"Ah get de money an' de canoe as well?" he said at last.

"Of course," said Frank.

"Den, massa, I'se you man, fo' I nebber could resist a

good gun, and," he added, as though he found consolation in the thought, "ef I break my neck yo breaks yohs too."

CHAPTER XVII. THE EVERGLADES IN AN AEROPLANE.

"Hurray, we are in communication with the *Tarantula*."

It was Frank who spoke. Seated at the field wireless apparatus, with the metallic headpiece about his ears, he rapidly noted down the reply to the message he had flashed out some time previously. The message was signed:

"Selby," and read:

"Am standing by, off the coast. Communication perfect. Will keep in touch constantly."

Frank's message had been a brief outline of his plans, which were to sail in the *Golden Eagle II* that afternoon if feasible, and ascertain the exact location of the camp of the formula stealers, and leave the rest of the plan of procedure to such circumstances as might arise.

Feverishly working, the boys and their aides got the *Golden Eagle II* in shape for flight by noon of that day. Thanks to the specially prepared engine-bed that the boys had had constructed, there was little to do except to bolt the driving machinery in place, after which but little adjustment was necessary to true it up with the shafts. While Harry and Lathrop took up positions at the propellers and the rest of the party hung onto the winged ship with might and main, Frank carefully adjusted the engine, having timed it down to its lowest number of revolutions.

"Now," he cried when all was ready.

The boys gave the propellers a twist. To their delight the engine worked as smoothly as a sewing machine. The power was then cut off and the work of stocking up the lockers beneath the transoms in the pilot-house begun. It was Frank's intention that if it became necessary to settle down anywhere for any length of time to use the pilot-house as a camping place. This would save the necessity of a tent and as every ounce of weight counts in an aeroplane this was an important

consideration. The canvas screens—of the lightest grade of duck carefully waterproofed—which have been previously mentioned were provided for this very purpose as were also mosquito net curtains for fine weather.

Frank's navigating instruments found their place in a pocket handy to the steersman's hand. The compass of course being adjusted in a balanced socket that kept it always visible to the helmsman. The operating keys of the *Golden Eagle* IFs wireless apparatus were in the rear of the chassis and in the space beneath its stand was coiled the five hundred feet of rope through which ran a strand of phosphor bronze wire which was to be used for grounding the current. Alongside the reserve gasoline found its place.

The searchlight, swinging easily on a pivot, was also of course a part of the helmsman's equipment, and handy to him was slung his revolver in a big loose holster. The rifles and ammunition and the stock of provisions carried went in the lockers, as well as a waterproof sod-cloth to place beneath the chassis if camping on wet ground, and a small blue-flame oil-stove made of aluminum. The few cooking utensils carried were also of aluminum and nested. The last thing to go aboard was a folding canvas boat of which more later.

All these preparations concluded, the boys partook of the last dinner they were to eat in company for perhaps several days. Over the meal, which Pork Chops had made quite an elaborate one in celebration of the occasion, final plans were discussed. Lathrop was to have charge of the wireless apparatus and at all hours of the day or night either he, Ben Stubbs or Billy Barnes was to be on duty beside it on the watch for calls. The boys would also, it was agreed, watch their apparatus constantly. Frank's ingenuity had provided each machine with an appliance, not unlike the ordinary telephone bell, which commenced ringing loudly as soon as any other instrument within range got "in tune." This was a patentable improvement, as an ordinary wireless machine has no such convenient attachment and only apprises its operator of a call by a faint click hardly audible to the unpracticed ear.

After lunch the boys went over every rod and wire of the aeroplane and found her to be in first class shape. While these preparations were going on Quatty had been eyeing the

craft with the liveliest indications of fear.

"Ah'd jes' as soon ride on de back ob a fish eagle," he said apprehensively.

"Why, Quatty, you're not going to back out now, are you?" asked Frank with a smile at the negro's trepidation.

"Lord, no, Massa Frank, ah said ah'd go wid yo' an' I will, but ef it wasn' fo' dat rifle I wouldn' go not fo' nuffin'. Say," he added suddenly, "could ye jes' wait a while till I paddle home an' say goo'-bye to my wife?"

"No, we can't," laughed Frank, ruthlessly cutting short the black's hope of even a moment's reprieve from going aloft in the object of his terror.

"Are we all ready, Harry?" he asked the next minute.

The younger boy nodded.

"Hold on a minute," cried Frank suddenly, "there is one thing we've forgotten."

He ran back into the hut and reappeared with a small object he had fished out of his toilet-bag.

It was a silken American flag. The boys attached it to a small pair of halyards at the stern of the chassis and ran it up.

"Come on in with you, Quatty," cried Harry, when this was completed.

Speechless with terror the negro hobbled up to the machine and hesitatingly clambered into the chassis. He sat quivering like a jelly on the floor of the pilothouse as the boys followed him.

"What are you squatting on the floor for?" asked Harry, laughing, "don't you want to see the scenery?"

"Ah can see all ah wan' right yar," was the terrified darky's reply.

With a final handclasp the boys followed the negro into the chassis and Harry took up his place at the engines and Frank got into the steerman's narrow seat. Lathrop and Billy Barnes were at the propellers ready to give them the twist that would start the machinery.

"Let her go," cried Frank with a backward glance. Harry bent low over the carburettor and carefully adjusted it and the lubricating system.

The next minute, with a roar like that of a dozen Gatling guns, the engine started up. Volumes of blue smoke poured from the exhaust which also shot out jets of ruddy flame. To anyone not used to the racket of a powerful engine suddenly turned up to its full power it was actually terrifying. Quatty writhed in a paroxysm of terror on the quivering floor of the pilot-house as the whole fabric of the aeroplane shook as if it had been convulsed by an earthquake.

Like a big ungainly bird it ran rapidly over the ground for a few dozen yards and then as it gathered speed under its rapidly revolving propellers, Frank threw in the top speed clutch and jerked back the lever ' that controlled the rising planes. Like a perfectly trained animal the big air-craft obeyed and rose as gracefully as a butterfly into the air. For fully ten minutes, till they were clear of the tree-tops, Frank kept her rising—the terrified Quatty rolling about on the inclined floor of the pilot-house like a rubber ball. Then as she soared safely above all obstructions he threw her onto an even keel and headed her due east.

Far below them Harry, leaning over the stern, could see the small clearing in which stood the dead sailor's habitation and the rapidly diminishing figures of Lathrop, Billy, Ben, and Pork Chops waving a frantic adieu. The darky had in his hand a frying-pan which he flourished and was evidently shouting, for he had his hand at his lips, but of course anything he might have said was at that height inaudible.

Once on an even keel Frank threw in the mufflers and throttled the engine down a little so that the uproar that had so terrified Quatty was diminished. Occasionally as she struck some contrary air-current the aeroplane would give a dip that terrified the negro into fresh convulsions, but otherwise the really alarming sensation that accompanies the rising into the upper air of an aeroplane had ceased and they were driving ahead calmly enough, though not fast, for there was a stiff northeast wind blowing.

"Well, Quatty, what do you think of it as far as you've gone?" jestingly asked Harry as, having adjusted his engines to suit him he sat wiping his hands on a bit of greasy waste.

"Ah's jes' as soon ride on a buckin' broncho as on dis yar contraption," rejoined Quatty, who had by this time scrambled to his hands and knees, "it's eben worsen dan I thought."

A diplomatic idea entered Harry's head. They would have to get Quatty over his scare before he would be of any use to them and this necessity gave rise to Harry's inspiration.

"Well, I think you are a very brave man, Quatty," he said solemnly; "that Pork Chops is such a coward that he wouldn't dare to do what you've done."



The Boy Aviators set out in the *Golden Eagle II*

"Is dat so, Massa Harry, fo' a fac'?" asked Quatty eagerly.

"Yes indeed," went on Harry seriously, "he's such a coward that he would have fainted if we had even suggested coming up with us to him."

"Well, I'se a berry brave nigger and dat's a fac'," proudly said Quatty rising to the bait, "them no 'count southern niggers ain't got no real courage nohow."

So well did Harry's diplomatic admiration work that before they had been afloat in the upper air for half an hour more Quatty was seated on one of the transoms holding onto a strap provided for the purpose and piloting Frank as the ship forged steadily along into the wind, her engine running without a skip or a start.

It was a marvelous panorama that lay spread out far below them. Their bird's-eye view showed them immediately beneath the floating craft the myriad green-clad islands of the archipelago threaded by bands of sparkling blue water. Soaring in the air about them, but at a respectful distance, and doubtless marveling at the invader of their realm, were kitty-hawks and fish-eagles and sometimes even the rare Everglade kite. If it had not been for the speed they were going nothing would have pleased Harry better than to get out a rifle and try a little target practice at the myriad bird-life that soared beneath and around them.

But it was not so much the immediate scene, beautiful as it was, that gripped the attention of the voyagers. Far in front of them lay a broad, dark band of trees that they knew marked the mainland and was the thick belt of cypress trees that gives its name to the Big Cypress Swamp. Beyond this again lay a scene that made their hearts beat high. It was a vast, an apparently illimitable stretch of brown prairie, looking from that distance very much like our western plains viewed from a mountain top. In the golden glow of the afternoon it shimmered and shone hazily like a magic land. Here and there patches of dark cloud-like blue dotted it and these the boys knew were the islands that are scattered at more or less frequent intervals among the watery wastes of the 'glades and on one of which, with a catch of the hearty they realized lay the object of their long quest.

CHAPTER XVIII. A NIGHT ALARM.

Quatty, quite recovered now from his first terror, and almost aggressive in his newly-found courage, sat by Frank's side directing him as well as he could for, as he explained, he would not be able to get his bearings till they had passed the cypress belt and were above the Everglades themselves. Every now and again, however, he would give the young captain a steering direction.

"A bit mo' eas' by sout'," or "Hold a bit to de sout' sout' eas', massa."

"What are we making, Frank, do you estimate?" inquired Harry, as the ship rushed through the air.

"About ten miles," rejoined the other, "the wind is dead against us."

"Not as fast as a subway express, but doing pretty well," was Harry's comment.

The young engineer was, however, most of the time as engrossed with his engines as was Frank with the steering apparatus. From time to time he ran his hand carefully over them to see if the condenser was doing its cooling work properly. The lubricating gear also received his careful attention. A heated bearing would have meant a serious accident if not disaster and Harry was too old an aeronaut despite his youthful years not to pay the closest attention to one of the most important features of a gasolene engine.

"It seems to me that we had better make camp for the night in the cypress belt if possible and make an early start over the 'glades themselves to-morrow," said Frank, as the dark line of trees grew gradually nearer and the boys saw that they formed a thick belt in some places several miles across.

"Yes, if we find a landing-place," rejoined Harry.

"How about that, Quatty?" questioned Frank, "are there any smooth spots clear' of trees in the swamp?"

"Oh, berry plenty, massa," replied the negro. "I fin' you nice lilly campin' place we get near dem."

Like a big hawk about to pounce the *Golden Eagle II* was hovering about an hour before sundown above the tops of the

dark cypresses in search of a suitable spot to swoop down. After Frank had manoeuvred her in widening circles through the air for perhaps half an hour they at last were above a large clearing a mile or more in diameter and which was quite clear of trees.

"Injun make um long time ago, maybe three, four thousand years," explained Quatty in answer to the boys' questions.

"Three or four hundred, more likely," laughed Frank.

"Or three or four," added Harry.

"Berry well, massas," said Quatty, highly offended, "I 'spose ah don' know nuffin' but what an ig'nant sabage knows."

To make a landing Frank swung the aeroplane in a long descending arc till he was a few feet above the tops of the outermost of the trees that fringed the clearing then he raised the planes slightly and the *Golden Eagle II* glided to the earth in a long, slow sweep. The engines had of course been cut out as the descent began and she settled as easily as a bird alighting.

With mosquito netting brought for the purpose the sides of the pilot-house were at once enclosed, for although it was still daylight, the tiny pests that make life miserable on the edges of the 'glades had begun to appear in armies. Strange to say, in the 'glades themselves there are hardly any mosquitoes, but on its borders they swarm in great numbers.

Quatty built a smudge of green wood and leaves before he set about getting supper and in this way the worst of the visitation was alleviated.

The boys watched with some interest while Quatty built his fire. He had lived so long with the Seminoles that he built it in the way the Indians have adopted from time immemorial. First he made a big ring of dry sticks and twigs, the largest on the outside and the small dry ones in the center. He lighted it in the center with his old flint and steel and then having made a rack out of a stick of green wood, placed across two forked upright ones, he rushed the larger timbers from the outside to the center, as occasion required.

After a hearty meal of stewed preserved meat made into a delectable stew with dessicated vegetables and canned corn, followed by stewed evaporated fruit washed down by boiling

tea, the boys and Quatty retired to the mosquito-barred pilot-house of the *Golden Eagle II* where Quatty lighted his pipe "jes' ter plague dem mosquitoes outside," he explained, and the boys talked over future plans. After a short time, however, weariness after the energetic day they had put in completely overcame them and they stretched out on the transoms. In a few minutes sleep closed their eyes and the only sound that disturbed the deep silence in the cypress belt was the loud snoring of Quatty and the rhythmical croaking of the frogs and tree lizards in the swamp.

Toward midnight Frank could not judge how long he had been asleep, it seemed to him five minutes, as a matter of fact it was as many hours, when he was awakened with a start to hear a stealthy tread a few feet away from the aeroplane.

"Who's there?" he shouted.

The minute his voice rang out the footsteps retreated as stealthily as they had approached.

In this lonely untraveled spot who could it be?

The boy awakened his brother and Quatty and cautioning them to silence whispered them his alarming intelligence. Each boy grabbed his rifle and prepared to defend the *Golden Eagle II* with all their power. As for that arrant coward Quatty, all his recent bravado quite gone, he could only tremble and whimper in terror.

"What do you suppose it is, Frank?" whispered Harry.

"I wish I knew," replied the other.

"Do you think it's Indians?" was Harry's next question.

"It might be," replied Frank, "but I'm afraid that it's worse than that."

"What do you mean?" inquired Harry in the same low tone of voice.

"That the men we are in pursuit of have got some inkling of our purpose and are even now lurking about here to wreck the aeroplane and perhaps kill us."

The prospect was certainly an alarming one. If Frank's idea was correct they were powerless. It was unlikely that their enemies would be less than half a dozen and perhaps more. Brave as they were the two boys realized that they

could do little against such overwhelming numbers and Quatty was worse than useless.

"Here he comes again," cried Frank in a tense whisper as after several minutes of silence the boys sat gripping their rifles.

Sure enough the slow, heavy tread was again advancing. It was too dark in the shadows of the mighty cypress trees to see anything and the boys could only judge of the enemy's whereabouts by the sound. After advancing quite close to the aeroplane the steps ceased and the boys could distinctly hear a low, steady breathing.

"I can't stand this any longer," whispered Frank. "I'm going to fire."

Aiming directly at the sound Frank pulled the trigger. As the report crashed among the trees a roar of pain filled the air and a crashing sound as if a body had fallen was heard.

"What on earth is it?" gasped Harry, as the roar was followed by whines and yells of pain and a sound as if a big carcass was lashing about on the ground.

It was Quatty who solved the mystery.

"Why, dat's a panfer," he cried, "ah knowed all along 'twern't nuffin' but dat."

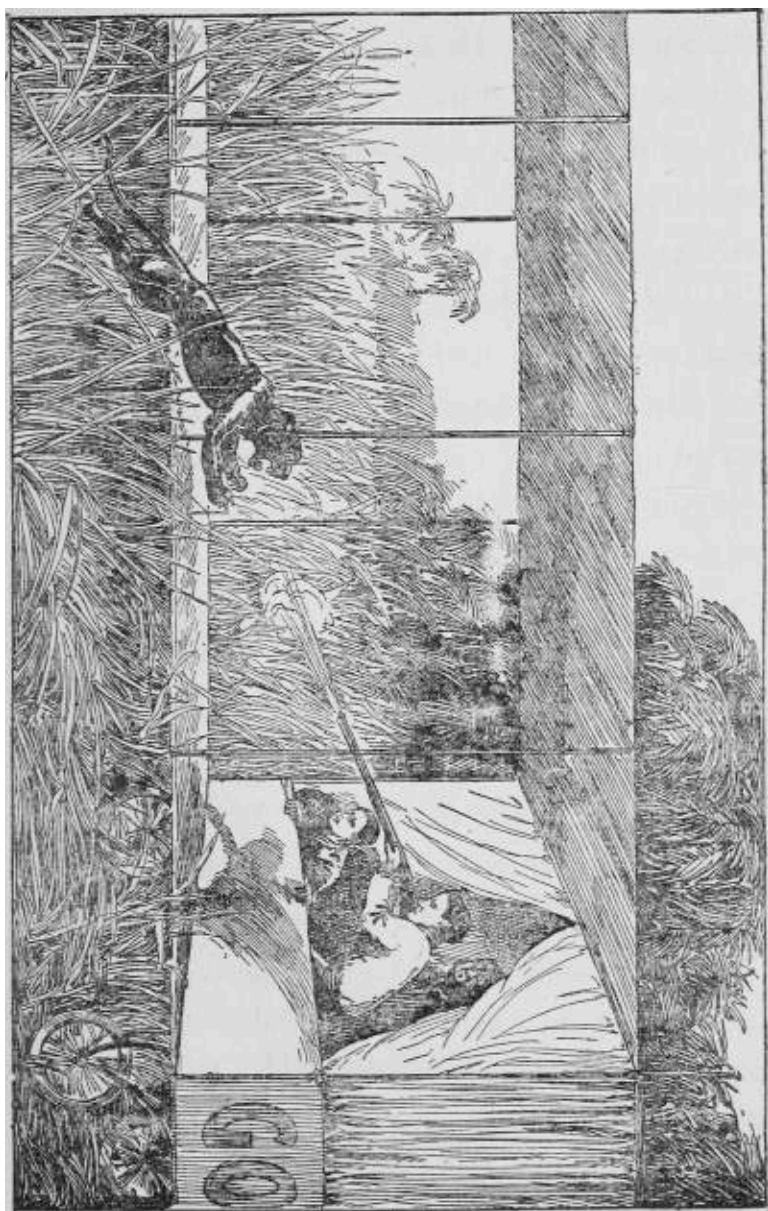
"Get the lantern," ordered Frank, curtly, "and we'll see what it is."

"Yes, massa," sputtered the negro awed by the boy's sharp tone. He lit the lamp in silence and the boys sallied out. It was as Quatty had said. On the ground near their camp-fire lay the animal iftill writhing. Frank put it out of its agony with a shot through the head and then the boys bent over their prize, examining admiringly its tawny skin aīTI great shapely head.

"See, massa, Quatty was right. Nuffin' to get scared of. Nuffin' but an ole panfer."

"Did you think it was 'nuffin' but a panfer' ten minutes ago?" asked Frank.

"Wall, no, massa," replied the darky, somewhat abashed; "but ah 'spected it right along. Yes, sah, ah mus' say ah 'spected 'twan't nuffin' but dat."



By this time the sky to the east across the Everglades was beginning to grow gray and as none of the party felt any more inclination to sleep, Quatty was set to work to skin the panther; after which Frank and Harry sauntered into the woods with the shot-guns. So good was their success that they managed to bag three brace of doves which broiled with strip of bacon formed a very agreeable addition to the oat meal, pilot-bread and coffee on which they had intended making their morning meal.

Even before they had despatched their breakfast the sun had risen and illuminated the vast brown levels of the 'glades, which now lay directly before them. The sky was specked with kites and vultures attracted by the carcass of the panther.

"Dey won't even leab' any pickins ob him," said Quatty, motioning up at the soaring carrion birds, "'specs dey finks we pretty good folks to gib dem brakfus' as well as ourselves."

Breakfast despatched and the engine fed with fresh lubricant and the gasolene and condenser tanks filled with additional fuel and water the young adventurers were ready to take up what they felt was to be the most important stage of their journey thus far.

The machine was hauled back from the part of the glade where it had alighted to the extreme far side so as to give it all the room possible to rise in. There being no one to turn the propellers the boys utilized their self-starting apparatus.

This consisted of a handle attached to a cogged wheel which operated a chain which in turn revolved another cogged wheel connected to both shafts. This of course acted in exactly the same way as if some one had twisted the propellers, but it required more elbow grease. After a couple of revolutions the engine started up and with a quick all-seeing glance fore and aft Frank threw in the clutch. The *Golden Eagle II* started as easily as she had the day before and took the air after about fifty yards' run.

A serious accident, however, was narrowly averted as she cleared the tree-tops. Quatty, arrogant in the fact that he no longer feared the riding in an aeroplane, was standing carelessly on the inclined floor as the craft rose. A sudden jerk as she bucked an uprising current almost threw him from his feet and he made a grab for the first thing he could catch hold of, which was a starboard rudder wire. Under the tug of the

stumbling negro's hand the rudder was of course pulled over and the ship gave a dizzy swoop.

Harry at the engine was thrown right across the pilot-house and Frank thought for a minute that they had gone. With a swift glance he saw what had happened. Reaching back he caught the luckless Quatty a blow under the jaw that laid him flat and effectually loosened his hold on the tiller-wire. Swift as thought the young captain skilfully righted her but not before her port wing-tip had grazed the topmost foliage of one of the loftier cypresses.

When they were once more safe Frank spoke:

"In future, Quatty," he said, "you will lie flat on the floor when we are going up."

CHAPTER XIX. ON THE MOUND-BUILDERS' ISLAND.

His high spirits considerably dashed by his misadventure, Quatty sat soberly enough on the transom till Frank ordered him forward to give the young captain sailing directions. They were now racing through the air above the Everglades themselves. Everywhere below them spread the yellowish brown expanse of saw-grass and water-course with here and there a clump of cabbage-palms marking an occasional dry spot. Far on the horizon, like a blue cloud, rested the nearest of the islets on one of which lay their goal. Beyond it like other cloud fragments, lay dim in the distance other patches of elevated land.

Save for the bird-life they could see about them there was no signs of animate existence beneath the aeroplane. Not even a canoe threaded any of the numerous water-courses that spread like a net over the 'glades. A more doleful scene could hardly be imagined.

"How did these men ever find their way to the interior?" wondered Frank.

"Dey must have had a guide, massa," replied Quatty promptly, "nobody dat don' know de 'glades can find him way in dem."

"Where could they get such a guide?" questioned Frank.

"Plenty ob dem," replied Quatty, "plenty ob Injuns take 'em whereber dey want."

"But you said your tribe was opposed to them?" objected Harry.

"Don' know nuffin' 'bout 'suppose to dem,' Massa Harry; but dere ubber tribes in de 'glades dan ours. Some ob dem don' lak us neider."

"Then you think they secured guides from some other tribe?" asked Frank.

"Mus' ab," rejoined Quatty, "none of my fren's would guide dem."

The nearest island rapidly assumed shape and resolved itself into a charming bower of tropical vegetation rising at its highest point about forty or fifty feet above the monotonous level of the 'glades. As it grew nearer the boys were astonished to see that its summit was bare of trees and formed a plateau of some area which was flat as the top of a table. It was as if some giant had lopped off the top of it with a huge knife.

"That's very extraordinary," said Frank, as they gazed at it, "one would almost say that it had been formed artificially."

The air-ship circled about the islet under Frank's skilled control while the youthful aerial navigators scanned it with eager eyes. They could now plainly perceive that in the center of the flat top a sort of altar, about seven feet long by four feet high, had been erected.

"A sacrificial altar of some ancient tribe," cried Harry.

"I'm not so sure," replied Frank as the *Golden Eagle II* heeling over, circled slowly about the object of their mystification. "What do you know about this, Quatty?" he asked.

"Quatty thinks him used by Injuns to make smoke signals," said the old negro scanning the altar narrowly. "When an Injun he wants to signal he builds a fire on dere and den makes de smoke rise or fade away by covering it wid a green branch," he further explained.

"That is undoubtedly the correct explanation," said Frank, "of course there was an ancient race of mound-builders in

Florida and this may be one of their mounds, but I have never read that they had any sacrificial rites. As Quatty says, the Seminoles must have used this old mound-builders' hill, which the aborigines may have utilized as a fort, or as a convenient place for signaling from."

He headed the aeroplane on her course again after this explanation and the adventurers had proceeded perhaps a mile through the air when Quatty who, with his hand shading his eyes, had been searching the horizon, suddenly cried:

"Hol' on der, Massa Frank."

"What's the matter?" asked the boy.

"See dar. Ef dat ain't smoke 'way off dere call me an ignerent sabage!"

He pointed to a small islet a couple of points to the southward of the course on which they were heading. The boys' gaze followed his pointing finger. Their eyes, not so keen as the wilderness dweller's, however, could perceive nothing but a small blue eminence of land not in any way different from several other similar ones dotted along the horizon.

"Don' you see smoke ober dere?" asked Quatty, wonderingly.

"No," cried both boys.

"Lordy, lordy, you eyes are dim as bats' fo' sho'." cried the negro shaking his head.

Frank reached into the pocket in which the glasses were kept. With their powerful lenses he swept the horizon. He confirmed the correctness of Quatty's eyesight the next minute.

From the nebulous mass,—which seen through the glasses proved to be an islet very like the one over which they had just passed—a column of smoke was certainly rising.

"It may be Indians," said Harry, after he too had taken a long look.

"Injuns," snorted old Quatty, "dems no Injuns, Dat ain't de color ob Injuns' smoke. Ah knows whar ah is now ah do—dat's de place where dose men you come all dis way ter look foh makes de debbil stuff dat blows de holes in de ground.

A hasty consultation between the boys followed. At the distance they then were from the islet it was unlikely that their presence in the air had been noted. It would be useless to keep on in broad daylight as their usefulness might end as soon as the plotters discovered their presence and knew their plant had been discovered. On all accounts it seemed best to camp on the mound-builders' island for the night and wireless to Camp Walrus their views.

Accordingly the aeroplane was put about and a short time after was resting on the summit of the mound-builders' hill. The boys were far from satisfied with the location but there was no other available landing-place and they decided to run the risk of being sighted before dark.

The wireless apparatus was at once put in order for the transmission of messages and Frank started to call Camp Walrus. Again and again the spark leaped crackling across the gap,—transmitting the call of C-W, C-W, C-W,—before an answer came.

Everything, it seemed, was going on well at the camp and they had heard that morning from the *Tarantula*. The destroyer was cruising about the archipelago awaiting news of the success or failure of the boys' expedition and Frank, as he was doubtful of being able to "pick up" the vessel at the distance inland they then were, asked Lathrop to transmit to Lieutenant Selby the news that they had discovered the hiding-place of the plotters and would inform him of their next move when they made it. The instrument was then cut out and the usual preparations for making camp gone about, with Quatty's assistance.

This done the boys, guns in hand, started to explore the mound on which they found themselves. A steep path, apparently well trodden once but now overgrown with creepers and weeds, led to its base. There was nothing else remarkable about it, except, as has been said, its bald summit. It swarmed with game, however, and several doves, quail and rabbits fell to the boys' guns during the afternoon. Quatty cooked the game deliciously in an oven of his own invention. He first dug a hole which he lined with stones, heated almost red hot in a fire previously prepared. This done he lined it again with green stuff and covered the whole with leaves and branches. Then he covered in the entire oven with

more leaves and tapped them off with earth at the top to enable it to retain the heat.

"Now we leab ole Muvver Erf to do our cookin'," he remarked when he had completed these preparations.

The next task to occupy the boys' attention was the setting up of the canvas boat. The craft was a large pea-pod shaped pocket of the strongest grade of brown duck, which was stretched into boat form by steel spreaders and held rigidly in shape by locking clamps. It was a boat eminently fitted to navigate the Everglades, where there are no sharp rocks or rapid waters to be encountered, though hardly suited for more strenuous work. It was about twenty feet in length and capable of carrying five hundred pounds. The boys carried the compact bundle in which it was packed to the water's edge and put it together there. When afloat on the water it looked not unlike a big, brown pumpkin seed.

"Now where's de poles?" asked Quatty, looking about him.

"Poles? What for? We've got paddles for it," said Harry.

"Paddles not much good in de 'glades, Massa Harry," replied Quatty, "we need poles to git ober de groun'."

After some hunting among the dense undergrowth Quatty finally found two straight sticks of tough second growth timber, about fifteen feet long, that satisfied him. He cut these off with his heavy sailor's knife with the remark:

"Soon we hab two berry good canoe poles."

He whittled both sticks to a sharp point at one end and then cut two triangular bits of wood from another tree which he affixed with vine lashings to the poles about six inches from the bottom. The contrivance was exactly like the steps that are affixed to stilts but there were two of them.

"What are you putting those on for?" asked the boys.

"Plenty ob mud in de 'glades sometimes," replied Quatty, "dese lilly steps keeps de poles from diggin' in too deep."

"Well, Quatty, you are a genius," exclaimed Frank.

"Oh dese not my invention, Massa Frank," modestly confessed Quatty. "Seminoles use him many, many years befo' Quatty come here."

The boys had decided on a daring plan. It was nothing less than, as soon as the night fell, to pole and paddle their

way through the water-courses till they reached a spot near the camp of the kidnapers of Lieutenant Chapin and there reconnoiter and, if possible, overhear enough to give them a clue to the lieutenant's whereabouts. Their first object being of course to rescue him. The recovery of the formula of his invention was—though important in the extreme—a secondary consideration.

After a hasty supper everything about the camp was put in order and with their revolvers freshly oiled and plenty of ammunition in their pockets the adventurers descended by the mound-builders' path to where they had moored the canvas boat. Quatty accompanied them. He put on a great assumption of bravery but inwardly he was quaking till his teeth chattered. Still he decided in his own mind he would rather a thousand times accompany the boys—however dangerous their errand—than spend the night alone in a spot which he firmly believed was haunted by the ghosts of the ancient tribesmen who had erected it.

The last thing Frank did before leaving was to call up Camp Walrus on the wireless. He bade his young friends and companions there a hearty "good-bye" and received their aerial "good-luck."

As the night noises of the jungle began to arise, and the evening chill of the 'glades crept over the lower levels like a cold pall, the boys shoved off and under Quatty's guidance began to pole toward the southeast.

CHAPTER XX.

CAPTAIN BELLMAN'S ISLAND.

Silently, as some craft propelled by spirits, they glided along between the high walls of saw-grass that grew up on each side of the stream they were navigating. Quatty stood in the stern manipulating the pole with the skill of a very Seminole, and sending the light craft through the water at a surprising rate of speed. His elevated position gave him a chance to peer over the tops of the lower clumps of saw-grass and judge—by their glitter under the starlight—which leads were the best to follow.

It was pitchy dark, with the exception of the dim starlight, and to the boys it seemed that they were passing through an endless tunnel. They threaded in and out of creeks till it seemed that they must be progressing in a circle. But Quatty, whatever his other faults might be, knew the Everglades as a city dweller knows his own streets, and by the darker landmarks of various hammocks and islets he steered the craft as unerringly as a cab-driver who wishes to drive in a certain direction.

Occasionally as they brushed against a sunken log, or shoal of rank-smelling mud, there would be a heavy flop in the water or a rustling sound in the dry grass.

"Whatever is that, Quatty?" asked Harry after the sound had been several times repeated.

"Moccasins. Dey bite you, you die plenty quick," responded Quatty.

Harry, who had been trailing his hand in the water, quickly drew it in, not without a shudder. He had seen cotton-mouth moccasins before and had a lively recollection of the fat, dirty colored reptiles and their deadly fangs.

Once, as they were crossing quite a broad sheet of water that suddenly opened out about them, something bumped up under the boat with such violence that Quatty was almost upset from his position astern.

"Good gracious, was that an earthquake?" exclaimed Harry much alarmed.

"Gator," grunted Quatty, "ah'd jes like to stop an' git his ugly hide fo' dat."

"There'll be no shooting to-night, let's hope," was Frank's reply.

They poled along in silence after this. The boys were completely bewildered and had no more idea of where they were going than if they had been blindfolded. But Quatty never stopped poling and fell to his work with such an air of certainty that the boys were compelled to conclude that he knew what he was about.

Suddenly the negro uttered a sharp grunt.

"What is it?" asked Frank instantly,

"Look ober dere, massa, an' tell me wad you see," said

Quatty, pointing dead ahead.

At the risk of upsetting the boat and himself Frank stood up and saw reflected on the sky, not more than a mile ahead, a deep-red glow.

"Fire," he exclaimed.

"Yes, an' it's de furnaces dem debbils has built dere fo' make dere blow up stuff, drat 'em," was Quatty's response.

They were then at last within sighting distance of the mysterious forces that had succeeded in filching the formula of the United States' most deadly explosive and kidnapping one of the bravest and most popular young officers in the Navy.

"Pole ahead, till I tell you to stop," commanded Frank, resuming his seat.

"W-w-w-what," stuttered Quatty, "yo' goin' on, Marse Frank?"

"Certainly," was the quiet reply.

"B-b-b-but we may git shot or blowed up wid de debbil powder," protested the frightened black.

"You will certainly get shot if you don't obey commands," was Frank's stern rejoinder, "pole ahead!"

Something in the young leader's voice decided Quatty that it was best to obey and with chattering teeth he started the canoe moving nearer and nearer to the red glow. As they approached its source the light it cast grew brighter and the boys were enabled to see each other's faces.

"Stop," commanded Frank suddenly.

Quatty breathed a sigh of relief. Perhaps now they were going to go back. But no,—after a few seconds' reconnoitering Frank gave the order to go ahead and the trembling Quatty, with his eyes on the boy's gleaming revolver, obeyed. Frank stood up in the boat when he took his brief survey without much fear of being seen by the men on the island, as in the bright light shed by the furnaces with which they were manufacturing the explosive they would hardly be able to penetrate the surrounding blackness.

What he had seen was this: A large barn-like building erected against the side of a hill surrounded by smaller huts and out in the open, removed at some distance from the other

buildings, a large, retort-shaped blast furnace, from the mouth of which was pouring a column of copper-colored flame and a great efflorescence of sparks. It was this furnace doubtless that had caused the column of smoke they had seen during the day.

In the bright light cast by the flaming mouth of the retort he could see dark figures scurrying around, some of them with wheelbarrows which they pushed up an inclined plane leading to the side of the retort. From their barrows they constantly dumped something into the furnace. What it could be of course Frank had no means of knowing, but he guessed that it was some substance used in the manufacture of Chapinite. The whole scene reminded Frank of one of the foundries in the iron district, seen from a car window at night.

With the aid of the night-glasses he could make out details more plainly. The workmen were being urged to even greater activity by a tall man who was evidently in authority. From time to time this man raised a whip he held in his hand and brought its lash down viciously on the back of some unfortunate worker with a crack that was audible even at the distance the boys were.

"Oh Lawd, dat look like Hades for sho!" groaned Quatty as his eyes almost popped out of his head at the weird scene. "Dem not men, Massa Frank, dems all debbils."

"Pole her along a bit!" ordered Frank, not paying any attention to this outburst. He was bent on getting near enough to ascertain, if possible, if the unfortunate Lieutenant Chapin was one of the crew of laborers.

With frequent orders to stop from Frank which were obeyed by Quatty with alacrity and commands to proceed once more, which did not meet with the same eager response, the boat drew nearer and nearer to the blazing retort and the frenzied workers. As they were still in between high banks of saw-grass the boys had no fear of being seen unless of course some canoe from the island happened to come down the stream they were threading. As it was a narrow twisting, little runnel, however, with barely a foot of water under their keel, this did not seem likely.

All at once, however, they emerged without warning into a broad smooth-flowing channel worthy of the name of a river. The boys saw at once that this was indeed a main-traveled

water-course and most probably the one used by the men on the island in getting to and from the coast.

"Get back where we were as quick as you can," sharply ordered Frank as they glided out onto its broad current.

With a dexterous twist Quatty—quite as much alarmed as the boys at the prospect of discovery by the workers on the island—shot the boat back into the narrow grass-walled creek they had been traversing. It was well they had done so, for hardly had they gained the welcome shelter of the tall saw-grass when they heard the rapid "dip-dip" of paddles coming toward them down the main channel.

"Keep perfectly quiet," ordered Frank, and scarcely breathing the boys listened with straining ears to catch the conversation the men in the approaching craft were carrying on.

"Hurry there, you miserable Indian, or I'll fill you full of lead," were the first words they heard in a harsh, rough voice. The command was evidently addressed to the Indian paddler for they heard the reply:

"All right. Me hurry all I can," and a quicker dip of the paddle.

"You're a rough fellow, my dear Scudder," another voice commented, "are you never in a softer mood?"

"Not me, Foyashi," came the reply, "and if you'd been working for Captain Mortimer Bellman as long as I have you wouldn't be either. He learned his lesson in your government I suppose."

"Captain Bellman is a remarkable man," went on the other speaker, whose accent was distinctly foreign and mincing.

"Remarkable? You may lay your head on that," replied the other; "nobody but a remarkable man would have got Chapin to visit him in his hotel and there drug him and get from him the keys of the safe where the formula was kept."

"How did he induce him to visit him?" asked Foyashi.

"Why, they were classmates at Annapolis before Bellman was kicked out of the navy for conduct unbecoming an officer. Chapin 's a good-hearted chap and when Bellman turned up in Washington one day and sent him a message that he was ill and in trouble Chapin came to the hotel like a bird dog when you whistle it to heel. But you deserve a lot of credit for

your part of the business, Foyashi," he went on. "How did you get the lieutenant under your control. He swore he'd die before he told us the method of making Chapinite when we first got him aboard the Mist."

"Ha, ha!" laughed the man, addressed as Foyashi, "to the Jiu Jitsu expert many nerves are common knowledge that you foolish Americans do not know anything about. A little pressure on the nerve I had selected while the lieutenant slept; and I had dulled his brain till he did as we directed."

"Wonderful," exclaimed Scudder admiringly, "I wish I knew the trick."

"I hope I may never find it necessary to practice on you," was the reply of the other, uttered in a tone of 'Voice that made Harry feel, as he said afterward, as if he had touched the back of a moccasin.

"What are your plans?" continued Scudder, who was evidently an inferior in command to Foyashi and the man spoken of as Captain Bellman, "here you start me off in the dark in a canoe with enough Chapinite to blow half the Everglades sky high and you don't even tell me where we are taking it."

"You know as well as I do," replied the other, "that we are bound for the coast and that we are going to put the last consignment aboard the submarine to-night at the mouth of the Jew-Fish river. What follows to-morrow will be simply the tapping of the furnace taken to-night and we will work that up into Chapinite in the government's yards at home."

"Then we are through here," commented Scudder,

"Practically, yes. We shall meet the cruiser in the South Atlantic next week and then sail for home."

"The cruiser!" exclaimed Scudder, "ain't you afraid of the United States government being suspicious?"

"My dear friend," replied the other, "the wisdom of the Oriental has been left out of your composition. The cruiser, as I call her, has been converted into the likeness of a peaceful passenger ship."

"Where do you coal her?" demanded Scudder a certain admiration in his tones.

The boys were unable to catch the reply. Indeed they could not have heard as much of the conversation as they did

had not the small creek fortunately run parallel with the larger water-course for some distance. By dint of shoving along the banks with their hands the boys had managed to keep a short distance in the rear of the other canoe. Her speed, however, prohibited their keeping up with her and they were compelled to satisfy themselves with what they had already heard, which, however, was of sufficient importance to cause them to order Quatty to pole back at top speed to the mound-builders' island.

It was evident from the conversation they had been lucky enough to overhear that the stealers of the formula, headed by Captain Mortimer Bellman, were to leave the 'glades the next day. That the plotters had a submarine and that it lay at the mouth of the Jew-Fish river. Furthermore a cruiser, belonging to the power whose agents the men were, was waiting to pick them up and carry them back to their own country and that Lieutenant Chapin had been subjected to a cruel operation in order to force him to submit to a betrayal of his country.

It was a time to act quickly. There was in fact not a moment to spare.

They arrived at the camp on the mound-builders' island shortly before dawn. A hasty survey with a lantern indicated, to their great satisfaction, that nothing had been disturbed and that everything was as they had left it. From the height of the summit nothing was visible now of the red glow of the blast furnace, which indicated to the boys that the plotters had concluded their work and that the blast had been extinguished forever. Satisfactory as their night's work had been in one respect, however, it had been a dire failure in another and so the boys could not help admitting to each other.

They had learned a pretty good outline of the plans of Captain Bellman and Foyashi, but they had not gained a single bit of information about Lieutenant Chapin that would aid them in any way in rescuing him from what was likely to prove imminent death.

CHAPTER XXI. A BOLD DASH.

Frank's first action was to bend over the wireless apparatus and send flashing and crackling across the air a message to Camp Walrus to be relayed in haste to the *Tarantula*. The members of the young adventurers' party left at the camp were to remain, there, ordered Frank, till the *Golden Eagle II* returned. Lathrop was instructed to inform the *Tarantula* of the whereabouts of the submarine so that Lieutenant Selby might head her off in case the boys were unsuccessful in the quest for the missing naval officer which Frank felt bound to prosecute, even at the risk of letting the formula of the explosive get out of the country.

"Will do as instructed. Gee! but you are all right," was Lathrop's admiring response, which made both boys smile in spite of themselves and their heavy hearts.

"What do you propose to do now?" asked Harry, as Frank cut out the circuit from the wireless and turned away from the instrument.

"Go back there as soon as we have had breakfast and make another try," was the young leader's instant response.

"Go back?" echoed Harry in amazement.

"We must," said Frank earnestly, "a man's life may depend on how quickly we act."

"But do you think there is any likelihood of our succeeding in getting near enough to their camp to aid Lieutenant Chapin materially," persisted the younger brother.

"I don't know, yet, but I have an idea that by landing on the other side of the island we might come up overland behind the settlement we saw last night and gain some idea of what has become of Lieutenant Chapin."

"By George, Frank, you are a wonder," said Harry, admiringly. "You are right," he went on, "there is a chance and we'll take it."

"I knew you'd say so, old fellow," responded Frank, warmly grasping his brother's hand, "and now for breakfast. It may be the last we'll get for some time."

Both boys fell to with hearty appetites on wild guava,

avocado pears, broiled doves and two cups a piece of Quatty's coffee, which he made with the skill of a French chef.

"I feel ready to tackle a regiment," declared Harry as the last morsels disappeared.

So far Quatty had had no idea of the plan on foot and when he did hear it he set up a series of loud lamentations that could be heard a mile. It was all in vain, however. Remorselessly Frank ordered him down to the boat with his pole. Had either of the boys been expert in the handling of a boat with this oar of the 'glades they would not have compelled the badly-scared black to accompany them, but it is an art which is only acquired by long practice and it was absolutely necessary that they have the benefit of his expertness. In the event, that even were the worst to happen, and they were to be themselves captured, it was not likely that any harm would come to Quatty; so neither of their consciences hurt them much as Quatty shoved off and they once more glided down the narrow water-course they had threaded the night before.

By daylight their progress was more rapid than it had been in the darkness of the previous night, and it was not long before they gained the point at which the narrow stream they were threading branched into the broad main water-course. Of course it was not a feasible idea to follow this and after some searching they managed to find a tiny, shallow runnel that proceeded through the saw-grass in the direction they wished to go but was small enough not to render it probable that it was a main traveled stream. To their great disappointment, however, this canoe path came to an end altogether after they had reached a point about opposite the trees that abutted on the plotters' settlement at the easterly end of their collection of huts. It continued on through the saw-grass, however, in the form of a muddy Indian trail and the boys, after a short consultation, decided to leave the boat behind in Quatty's charge and take to the trail.

Rifles in hand and revolvers on their hips, they struggled bravely along through the mud, that sometimes came up to their knees and sometimes only to their ankles. It was killing work, for as the sun worked higher the heat grew almost intolerable. Innumerable varieties of small stinging insects too settled about them in swarms and added to their discomfort.

From time to time, in addition, a fat cotton-mouth would wiggle across the trail or occasionally open its mouth in a loud hiss, showing the white fangs that give it its name. Frank killed one of these reptiles with the butt of his rifle. The others they had to avoid as best they could. Of course they did not dare to discharge one of their weapons. To have done so would have brought the whole settlement about their ears.

Frank consulted his pocket compass from time to time, having taken the general bearing of the island from the boat before they started. The compass was the only means they had of knowing if they were following a correct course, as the saw-grass was so high on either side of the narrow trail that to see over it was an impossible feat.

"Phew!" whispered Harry, as they floundered along through the wet, steamy earth, "I've been in warm places but this is certainly the hottest of them all."

"We cannot have much further to go," replied Frank, encouragingly, "as far as I could judge when we left the boat the island was about two miles away."

"I feel as if we'd traveled ten at least," gasped poor Harry. "Hark! "

His exclamation was called forth by a rustling in the tall grass directly ahead of them.

"Get ready for trouble," whispered Frank.

Both boys got out their revolvers, as being handier weapons at close quarters than the rifles. The trail took an abrupt turn just beyond the point at which they stood, so that it was impossible to see who or what it was that was approaching.

The rustling grew steadily nearer and both boys, while their hearts beat thickly, determined that if the persons coming down the path were foemen, to sell their lives dearly.

The next minute they had a great surprise.

Round the curve in the trail swung two of the beautiful small Everglade deer. It was a question which was the most astonished, the boys or the deer, at the encounter. For a fraction of a second the deer stood gazing with their big, liquid eyes, at the boys and the boys stared back at the deer. Then, as the boys broke into a smothered laugh at their needless anxiety, the two animals swung round and galloped back the

way they had come.

"Well, we are getting as nervous as a pair of kittens," laughed Frank.

"They made as much noise as a regiment," replied Harry, echoing the other's merriment, "I always understood that the deer was a quiet retiring animal. Now I know different."

"At all events our encounter with them proves one valuable piece of information," said Frank.

"What?" demanded his brother.

"That what we had supposed was an island must in reality be joined to this trail by solid land."

"How do you make that out?"

"Well, those deer wouldn't go into the saw-grass, the stuff cuts like a knife. Therefore they didn't get to the trail that way."

"Well?"

"And their coats were not wet. I notice, therefore, they had not swum any creek to get here. All of which goes to show to my mind that if we follow this trail we will get dry-shod to the island."

"Dry-shod?" echoed Harry, pointing to his muddied legs.

"I mean that we shall not, as I began to fear, have to swim any creeks or wade runnels to gain it."

It was as Frank had assumed. A few minutes more tramping through the sticky black ooze brought them to a point where the trail widened, and they could see beyond the tops of the cabbage palms that fringed the edge of the island.

"We are here at last," whispered Frank, "now we shall have to go very carefully till we find out the lay of the land. There's no use walking into a trap for the lack of a little caution,"

Slowly the boys crept on down the short section of trail now remaining. Frank carefully noted the comparatively dry ground—where the marks of the deers' hoofs still showed—that there were no human tracks visible and this was in itself a good sign as it showed that the trail was a little used one.

They emerged at length into a thickly-grown cabbage palm patch, through which, to their great delight, flowed a tiny stream, from one of the clear springs that abound on the islands of the Everglades. Lying flat on their faces the boys

fairly sucked up the cool, clear water and let it trickle gratefully down their parched throats.

Greatly refreshed by their draught, they looked about them. The little grove in which they stood was surrounded by dense undergrowth. At first there seemed to be no path through the tangle, but after a lengthy search the boys discovered a narrow trail, evidently a continuation of the one they had just left. It led, as Frank's compass showed, in the general direction of the settlement.

"We've come so far we've got to go ahead now," were Frank's words, as the two young adventurers plunged into the dense brush down the narrow trail.

CHAPTER XXII. BEN STUBBS DISAPPEARS.

Left behind at Camp Walrus, Billy Barnes, Lathrop, and Ben Stubbs watched the *Golden Eagle II* until she became a bird-like speck against the intense blue of the Florida sky.

"Good luck to them," cried Billy, a wish that was echoed by all the "stay-at-homes," as Lathrop had dubbed them.

"Come on, Lathrop," said Billy, the second morning after the aeroplane faded from view, "let's get the guns and go for a hunt. I'm sure I heard a wild turkey in the brush yonder a while ago, and Ben can mount guard over the wireless while we are gone."

"Do you think that will be all right?" questioned Lathrop dubiously, "you know I'm the only one in the camp that can operate the instrument and I think I ought to keep within reach of it."

"You're right," rejoined Billy. "It will be better for Ben and I to go."

Ben agreed with alacrity, the old prospector was never better pleased than when there was an opportunity to hunt, and he hastened to oil up his gun and fill his cartridge belt.

"Hold on a minute," said Ben, as he and Billy Barnes started out, "I'm too old a woodsman to go into the woods without agreeing on a signal if anything happens. We'll use

the old hunter's warning. If we need you, Lathrop, or you need us, we are to fire first one shot then a pause and then two shots in rapid succession and keep it up till we get an answer. We'll be back to dinner."

"All right," replied Lathrop, "though I don't see just what trouble you can get into here, and as for me, I am all right I guess—so long."

Left alone Lathrop took his fountain-pen and— though he had no idea when he could post it—began the composition of a long letter home. He was so engrossed with this employment that he did not notice the hour, and it was not till Pork Chops summoned him to lunch that he recalled with a start that the two hunters were still away. However, he assured himself it was probable that they had found good hunting in some distant part of the island and that they had not, like himself, realized how late it was getting.

This done he walked uneasily up and down, waiting impatiently for the return of the hunters. He was really anxious and could no longer disguise from himself the fact that something of a serious nature must have happened to keep them out away so long. His mind ran the gamut of every accident, from snake-bite to accidental shooting, but he was as far from guessing the real truth as he was from being at ease in his mind.

"Bang!" A long pause—then again, "Bang— Bang."

It was the alarm signal agreed upon by Ben Stubbs before the hunters left camp.

The reports came from some distance in the forest, and Lathrop, hastily getting his gun and half crazy with anxiety, answered it as soon as he could slip in the cartridges.

What could have happened?

Firing frequently and being answered at closer intervals all the time, Lathrop advanced into the jungle and had not proceeded very far when he encountered a strange figure.

It was Billy Barnes, but a white-faced Billy, his clothes torn by creepers and his face scratched and cut by his wanderings in the jungle. A very different figure from the usual trig one cut by the young reporter.

Oh, Billy, what has happened?" gasped Lathrop, shocked at his companion's woe-begone appearance.

The reporter's reply was sufficiently alarming.

"Ben Stubbs has disappeared! "

"Disappeared?" echoed the amazed Lathrop.

"Yes, as utterly as if the earth had opened and swallowed him," was the reply, in a strained, tired voice. "I've hunted for him all the afternoon and I have not been able to find a trace of him. I got almost cut to ribbons in the sharp-leaved briars or whatever you call them."

He ruefully regarded his torn hands and ragged clothing.

"You are sure he is not merely hunting in another part of the island."

"Certain," was the dispiriting reply, "you see it happened like this—we had shot a couple of turkeys when Ben suggested our separating and getting a bigger bag in that way than we would by hunting together. We were to rejoin each other at the end of half an hour, the signal being two shots. At the end of half an hour I fired two shots but there was no answer. I tried again, and there was still no reply but the echo of my shots. I was scared then, I tell you, and fired the danger signal. Still there was no answer.

"Well, then, I was rattled. I plunged about in the woods till I got all ripped up as you see and shouted for Ben till I thought my throat would crack, but I didn't get a trace or a sign of him. Then I recovered my wits a bit and got out my compass. I headed for camp, and when I judged I was near enough for you to hear me, I fired the danger signal— you answered it, and here I am."

"Oh, Billy, what are we going to do?" exclaimed the younger boy.

"Make the best of it till we are certain Ben is lost, and then communicate with the *Tarantula* and Frank and Harry," said the practical Billy. "Cheer up, we don't know yet that any actual harm has befallen him, it's the mystery of the thing that worries me."

"I must send a wireless to Frank and Harry at once," cried Lathrop.

"You will do no such thing, young fellow," rejoined Billy. " In the first place they have got troubles enough of their own right now; and, in the second, a man is never lost till you've sent out a general alarm for him, and he is still missing."

"A general alarm?" repeated Lathrop, puzzled.

"Yes, that's reporter's slang for advertising for a missing man. Well, we can't advertise here unless the herons and mocassins get out a gazette, but we can take the canoes tomorrow and make a thorough circuit of the island."

Greatly comforted by Billy's assumed light-heartedness, Lathrop tramped back to camp by his side in a more cheerful frame of mind. As a matter of fact, Billy was feeling what he himself would have described as "pretty blue," but he was sensible enough to know that the best way to face the emergencies of life is to look at them from the best possible aspect and not give up hope till every way out of difficulty has been tried.

In the meantime what had happened was this, and it was sufficiently alarming. Ben, after he parted from Billy, had followed a fascinating "Ke-ouk ke-ouk" through the brush till he found himself near the margin of the creek that flowed round the island. He had reached the brink and was looking inquiringly about him to ascertain what might have become of the big gobbler when he felt a rope thrown over his head from behind, and the next minute the big ex-sailor, great as was his strength, was struggling in the arms of a dozen men. Who his captors were he was unable to see, for as the rope had tightened, his great arms were pinioned close to his side, forcing at the same time his gun from his grip, and a thick blanket had been thrown over his head. Blinded and half suffocated, Ben felt himself picked up and hustled through the wood. He tried to shout but the blanket effectually muffled his voice.

After a few minutes of this rapid traveling Ben felt himself thrown into what he instinctively realized was a canoe and then being paddled rapidly over the water. In what direction they were proceeding he had of course no means of knowing, but from the few words his captors had exchanged he knew he was in the hands of the Seminoles. Of the object of his abduction he could not even hazard a guess.

After about an hour of traveling Ben, through his smothering blanket, heard the loud barking of dogs and crying of children, and knew that they must be near a settlement of some kind. He was not left in doubt. The canoe's keel grated on the beach the next minute and he was dragged out and

propelled toward the center of the sound. He felt dogs come sniffing about his legs and kicked out viciously. He grinned under his blanket as he heard one limp away with ear-piercing howls.

"There's one trouble disposed of," thought Ben to himself, "what's coming now. I wonder?"

He was not kept long in suspense. He was suddenly halted and the cloth jerked off his head. His wrists, however, were not unbound. It was now dark, and in the sudden glare of firelight that confronted him, Ben's eyes refused their duty for a minute or so. As he grew accustomed to the light, however, and looked about him he saw that he stood in the center of a ring of palmetto-thatched huts which were crowded with women and children, all heavily laden with beads—in fact these were about all the clothing the children wore—while all about him were grouped grave-faced men with bright-colored turbans on their heads, one of Whom he at once recognized as the chief who had visited them with Quatty the previous afternoon and promised them freedom from annoyance while they were in the limits of the 'glades.

"This is a dern fine way you keep your promises," roared the captive Ben indignantly, while the women snickered and the men regarded him with stolid curiosity, "you cigar-store Injuns you, if I had my hands free I'd hammer you into lobscouse. I'd show you the kind of a buck sailorman I am. I thought you promised us you wouldn't disturb us and here you clap my head in a mainsail and furl me in it till I can't use my deadlights to see day from night. Keelhaul you, if I had you aboard a ship I'd masthead the lot of you till you fell overboard."

There was not a word in reply and the chief stood with folded arms, as immobile as if Ben had not spoken a word.

"Oh, you're all going to play deaf, are you," bellowed the enraged ex-sailorman, "well, it won't go down with me, my hearties. I know you can hear,— oh, if only I had my hands free I'd put some life into you—you—you row of tenpins."

Here Ben stopped, because he was completely out of breath with his volcanic outburst. While he was getting ready for a fresh eruption, to his surprise one of the younger men stepped forward from the solemn circle and in excellent English, considering the place and by whom it was spoken,

said:

"You all through big talk, white man?"

"All through," sputtered the amazed Ben, "yes, I'm through, that is for the present. And now, as you seem to be the only one of this collection of dummies that has any glimmering of sense, will you please tell me why I am fetched here like a ship's cat going aboard a strange craft, all tied up in a bag? "

"No savee—ship's cat," replied the Seminole quietly; "plentee—savee, white man tell heap lie—all time."

"Calling me a liar, now are you, you mahogany-colored lobster," yelled Ben, "I'd like to get one good punch at you, my matey."

"All white men liars," blandly went on the Indian, steal our land—all time break word to us—um no good."

"Well?" demanded Ben.

"Well," went on the spokesman of the tribe, "you stay here lilly while—we no hurt you. When you fren's go then you go, too. They no hurt us we no hurt you."

"Oh, is that so?" replied Ben, "werry good of you, I'm sure."

"You eat plenty sofkee—plenty fowl—plenty tobac. Good time plenty, how?"

Now Ben had been in tight places in his adventurous career and he was by no means disposed to offend the Seminoles by seeming over anxious to get away, at least for the present, for he knew that if he did so any chance that his wrist gyves would be removed would be lost, so he acquiesced gracefully to all the Indian had said.

"All right, old odds-and-ends," he said, "I'll act as hostage as long as you feed me well and give me plenty to smoke. Now, take off these."

As soon as his reply had been translated to the chief, and that dignitary had agreed, the ropes that bound Ben's wrists were cut and he was at comparative liberty.

"Sofkee?" questioned the young Indian who had conducted the negotiations, indicating a huge pot simmering on the fire. And then for the first time Ben tasted that delectable standby dish of the Seminoles, which is composed of birds, rabbits, turtles, fish, corn, potatoes, sweet and white, peppers, beans and anything else that comes to hand. There

is a big kettle of it kept handy in every Seminole village and anyone who happens along is at liberty to help himself. There is only one drawback to the dish from fastidious folks' point of view, and that is that every one helps him or herself from the same big wooden spoon. But Ben was not fastidious and he made a hearty meal of the savory compound, and then after a pipe or two of tobacco, appeared to compose himself to sleep on a pile of skins laid on the floor of the palmetto-thatched hut assigned to him.

He simulated slumber till midnight when, as no one appeared to be watching, he rose and tiptoed out of the camp and down to the water's edge where the canoes were moored. He was about to launch one when a tall figure stepped out of the gloom of the trees and pointed a rifle straight at him.

"Huh—white man go back—or Injun shoot," said the figure. Ben, as has been said, was a wise man—he went back.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE BOY AVIATORS TRAPPED.

The trail on which Frank and Harry found themselves wound irregularly through dense groves of wild fig, orange, custard apple and palmetto trees, through which from time to time they could catch glimpses of the dark, monotonous brown sea of the Everglades stretching away into the remote distance. They plodded along it not speaking a word, through undergrowth that at times brushed their arms, crackling in an annoying fashion to anyone who wanted his advance to be unheralded. The growth was as dry as tinder and Frank could not help thinking to himself that a fire once started among it would rage through the forest as if it had been soaked with kerosene.

Suddenly, and without a moment's warning, Frank tripped and fell flat on his face, his rifle shooting out of his hands and falling with a loud crash on the hard-baked ground. This was bad enough in itself but there was a worse shock in store for the boys.

A moment's glance sufficed to show them that a wire had been stretched across the trail at this point and that, as Frank's foot struck it and he tripped, a loud, clanging alarm-bell began to sound and by the loudness of its uproarious clangor, it could not be more than a few paces from where they then were.

"Quick, Harry! Run for your life!" said Frank, in a low, tense voice, scrambling to his feet.

"We have struck an alarm wire and in a minute we shall have a dozen men on our track."

Stumbling along the rough path the boys began to make the best speed they could over its uneven surface. But the tough journey they had made through the muddy trail among the saw-grass, and the fact that they had not eaten for some hours and were feeling somewhat faint, made a fast speed impossible.

They had not gone more than a few hundred yards when Harry gave a gasp and pressed his hand to his side.

"What is it, Harry?" asked Frank, through his parched lips.

"Keep on, Frank," gasped the younger boy, "you can make it if you hurry. I'm tuckered out."

"Come, make an effort, you've got to," said Frank sternly, realizing that now was no time to sympathize with his younger brother, although he hated to use the sharp tone he thought it expedient to assume.

The younger boy rose to his feet. Pluckily he staggered on a few steps but sank to the ground again, overcome with the pain of the sharp "stitch" in his side.

"Go on, Frank," he whispered in a faint voice, "you go on. I'll get through somehow," he added bravely, with a pitiful effort at a confident smile.

"As if I'd leave you," said Frank, indignantly, "can't you run another foot, old boy? "

"No, I really can't, Frank," gasped Harry, "I couldn't move if I was to be killed the next minute."

"Then I'll have to carry you," decided Frank, "I've done it when you were a little fellow, and I guess I can manage it now. Put your arms round my neck—so. Now then."

With his added burden Frank struggled gamely on, though

every step was telling heavily on him.

If they could only reach the little glade of cabbage palms, there was a pile of rocks there, he recollected, behind which they could hide. Speed meant everything, and pressing his lips together determinedly, Frank swore to himself that he would make the rocks or die.

And somehow by a supreme effort of will, he made them. Though how he managed that last sickening effort of half dragging and half carrying his inanimate burden across the little grove he never recollected.

But he made it and, having scrambled up the rough crevices in the pile of stone in which he hoped to find a safe asylum, he dragged his half-fainting brother into position beside him.

And now he could hear far back in the brush loud shouts and orders coming thick and fast. What a fool he had been not to realize that men engaged on such a hazardous enterprise as were the bogus manufacturers of Chapinite would have more cunning than to leave their retreat unguarded by alarm appliances. If only he had watched the trail more carefully.

But it was too late for vain regrets now; they would have to trust to luck to avoid detection for, judging by the noise and the number of different voices, the search for the invaders was to be a hot one. The young leader tried grittily to choke back the great, panting gasps in which his breath came after his exertions. But he might as well have attempted to stop a cataract, as to check his sobbing respiration. To him his deep breaths sounded as loud as the reports of minute guns.

And now a fresh peril made itself manifest. A deep baying sound arose far up the trail, which Frank recognized, with a violent throb of the heart, as the sound of bloodhounds, giving tongue on the scent. Their discovery was inevitable.

"Can you handle your revolver, Harry?" he asked of his younger brother, who was now somewhat recovered, thanks to the shade and the rest he had had.

"Yes, Frank," whispered Harry, hoarsely, and then the next minute, noticing Frank's troubled face, as the baying grew louder and nearer, "you needn't tell me, old fellow, what that means—it's bloodhounds."

Frank nodded gravely.

"I'm afraid our chances of seeing the *Golden Eagle II* and our comrades are about nil," he said.

The other boy did not reply. He was listening to the sounds of the dogs baying and the savage human shouts that grew momentarily nearer.

"Don't use the revolvers unless you have to," whispered Frank, whose wind was now returning,— "but the first dog that comes over the top of the rock— knife him."

Harry nodded and drew his heavy hunting-knife from its case. Frank did the same.

"Now we are ready for all comers," said Harry, with a wan smile, gripping the horn handle of his blade with a determined grip.

They had not long to wait. From their nest in the rocks they saw the first dog, a huge, bristly-haired Cuban bloodhound, with heavy hackles and bloodshot eyes, come bounding into the clearing, sniffing the ground and from time to time throwing his head into the air with a loud ringing bay that chilled the blood.

The animal was followed by half a dozen others of his own breed. Without a moment's hesitation they made straight across the glade and for the rocks. The first one scrambled up with difficulty, and as his dripping fangs showed over the top of the rampart of rock, Frank's arm shot out and he fell back with a choking growl—dead.

The next of the savage beasts fell before Harry's knife, a great gaping wound in its throat; but after that the boys were no match for the four huge beasts that fell on them at once. Frank felt the teeth of one brute grip him through his stout khaki clothes while he had his hands on the throat of another, choking its life out. Harry had plunged his knife into another and was turning desperately on its mate when there was a sudden interruption of the impending tragedy.

A sharp, clear whistle rang through the clearing and the survivors of the brutes that had attacked the boys limped dispiritedly away from them and shuffled in the direction from which the summons had proceeded. From their eyrie in the rocks the boys saw two dozen or more small yellow men, in white duck jackets and trousers, with yellow straw slippers on

their feet, rush into the glen followed by a tall man in a sort of undress naval uniform. He it was who had given the whistle. He gave an evil laugh as he saw the wounded, exhausted animals come shuffling toward him, their tails between their legs.

"They are in the rocks yonder, boys. Surround them! he ordered in a sharp, harsh voice. "They shall pay dearly for each of my beauties they have killed."

One of the little brown men, who wore a red band about his arm and seemed to be a leader among them, shouted some sharp orders to his fellow countrymen and they spread about the rocks in a circle. The first impulse of the boys had been to run for it but they realized, even as the thought entered their minds, that it would be useless in their exhausted condition to try to make their escape. Each of their opponents was armed and while they also carried weapons, still they could only have stood off an attack for a few minutes.

With a shout the little brown men rushed at the Boy Aviators as they stood side by side, but they hesitated and fell back as Frank and his brother aimed their revolvers.

"I do not want to take human life," cried Frank, "but the first one of you that lays a hand on us I'll shoot him."

"Very fine talk," sneered the big white man, striding up, "but there are twelve of us here."

"Yes," replied Frank, undaunted, and tapping the magazine of his revolver, "and there are twice twelve here and they all come out at once."

The big man paused a minute and bit his lip. For a minute he seemed about to give orders to his followers to fire on the boys and shoot them down where they stood. He evidently thought better of his intention later, however, for he said, with a change of voice from his original harsh, rasping tone.

"There are several things I want to talk to you about, Frank Chester—you see I know you and your brother Harry—will you give up your weapons and agree to accompany me to my camp if on my part I give my word not to harm you?"

Frank realized in that instant that the man who faced him was Captain Mortimer Bellman, the renegade American officer, and he also weighed and recognized the value of a

pledge from such a man; but they were in position where there was nothing to be gained by fighting and in which much benefit might accrue to them from temporizing—so:

"Yes," he said, "we will go with you."

CHAPTER XXIV. A STARTLING MEETING.

The legion of little brown men at once fell in found the two boys, whose clean cut young figures powered above their squat forms, and after they had surrendered their weapons—not without a momentary qualm of regret on Frank's part—the march to the camp began.

Bellman said little as they made their way along the trail, but strode along with his hands clasped behind his back as though in deep thought. He was a huge man, with a singularly brutal face bronzed by the suns of a dozen countries over which he had been a wanderer, and a heavy drooping mustache which hid a cruel mouth. His eyes were steely gray and as keen as a hawk's. Such was the man into whose power the Boy Aviators had fallen and even they did not realize the extent to which such a man will go to gain an end—and that he had an end in view his action in sparing their lives fully convinced them.

At last they emerged—after passing once more over the luckless wire—on the settlement under the hill that Frank had noted the night before from the boat. There was every evidence of abandonment about it, however, even now, although it had been so recently the scene of activity.

"If you had come to-morrow I should not have had the pleasure of receiving you," said Bellman, with a sardonic grin, waving his hand to indicate the preparations for the abandonment of the settlement.

The blast furnace had been almost completely demolished and a gang of men, compatriots of the small brown men who formed the boys' escort, were busily engaged in completing the work of destruction with crowbars and picks. Several of the small houses which Frank had seen from the boat had

also vanished and the rest were portable contrivances. They were being rapidly taken to pieces and carried up the hill into the woods, where doubtless they were to be destroyed, for the smoke of a big fire was beginning to rise from there.

In the side of the hill back of the blast furnace, a great ragged hole had been torn like a small quarry, and a runway from this to the shattered blast-furnace indicated that some earth found in the hillside was reduced in the crucible to a condition in which it formed an ingredient of Chapinite. The large building was evidently a sort of bunk-house for the workmen and packing-house for the product that Captain Bellman and his men had been making there, for from its wide door a perpetual stream of dwarfed brown men were carrying packing cases carefully wrapped in straw to a small fleet of canoes that lay moored alongside a primitive wharf.

All these things the boys' eyes took in as they were led across the bare earth to the barrack-like building; but of the man to search for whom they had come to the Everglades they could see no sign.

Bellman's first care was for his wounded dogs, after which he ordered his men to bring the boys into a long, low ceiled room, apparently from its heat right under the roof of the bunk-house. Straw mats laid all along the walls also indicated that it was used as a sleeping attic by the Orientals employed on the island.

There was a small table in the room with a rickety chair by it, and Bellman took up a seat at it.

"We need not occupy much time," were his first words, as the boys stood facing him, surrounded by their impassive-faced guards. "I and my men are leaving the Everglades forever to-night. We wish to be secure against anybody following us. Where is this air-ship of yours and where are the canoes in which you brought it here?"

"Why do you wish to know?" demanded Frank.

"I naturally wish to make myself secure from pursuit by destroying them," was the cool reply, "if you don't wish to tell me I shall find them."

Frank knew that this last was an empty boast as to search the Everglades for their canoes or for their air-ship either would be a work occupying much more time than Bellman

could afford to spare.

"Under no circumstances will I give you any such information," said Frank.

"I admire your pluck but deplore your lack of common sense," rejoined Bellman with a sneer.

"We don't care any more for your admiration than we do for your sympathy," replied Frank, proudly.

Bellman's dark face flushed angrily.

"This is the way you treat my intended kindness," he thundered, striking the table with his clenched fist till its crazy legs wobbled under it.

"Well, I shall try another method. If you had answered me I would have sent some Seminoles here to pick you up, once I was safe at sea, but as it is now I shall leave you here to rot."

Little as Frank believed Bellman's tentative promise that he would send relief to them if they afforded him the opportunity to raid their camp and destroy their canoes and the *Golden Eagle II*, yet both boys realized not without dismay that there was a good deal of deadly earnest in the last words he had spoken,

"Leave them there to rot."

Involuntarily both boys shuddered.

Bellman's malevolent eye saw this and interpreted it at once as a sign of weakening.

"Ah," he said viciously, "I touched you there, eh?"

"I don't know what you mean by that," said Frank, "but if you intend to convey that we are afraid of you, we are not."

"Or of any cad that has been kicked out of the United States' Navy, and has turned against his country," added Harry.

"You young whelp," shouted Bellman, beside himself at the sneer, "you have tried to checkmate me at every turn, but you'll find out I am more than your match."

"You come here to find Lieutenant Chapin, the dog who was instrumental in my disgrace. Well, I'll introduce you to him."

He gave a sharp order in the same tongue his followers used and the next minute the boys were seized. With a good,

left-hand punch to the jaw Frank knocked one of the amazed little brown men half across the room and the next minute Harry had served another the same way. But it was no good. The opposing force was too many for them and ignominiously handcuffed they were at length led down several steep flights of stairs into what they knew, by its musty smell, must be an underground chamber.

The darkness of the place was made visible, so to speak, by a smoky oil-torch, like those used in the stoke-hold of a steamer, that hung in one corner. It was miserably damp and several subterranean streams fed by the mountain above trickled across the floor. In one corner the boys noticed, as their eyes grew accustomed to the light, was a curious contrivance formed of two long bars of heavy wood with holes pierced in them at regular intervals.

Two heavy posts stood at each end of this contrivance, to which were attached heavy padlocks and hasps. With a quick thrill of horror the boys realized that they faced that instrument of confinement of blue-law days—the stocks.

After another sharp order from Bellman their captors carried them to the appliance and raising the heavy upper block of wood thrust the boys' legs into the semicircular openings cut in the lower section for that purpose. Similar holes were cut in the upper bar and when it was lowered and padlocked down the unfortunate person confined there could in no way release himself till somebody unlocked the padlocks.

"Now," said Bellman, when this work was completed to his satisfaction, and the boys were securely fastened in their prison, "I am going to introduce you to the man you have been looking for. Serang," he ordered, turning to the little brown man with the red stripe on his arm, "Sahib Chapin bring."

The man nodded obediently and left the fetid chamber. The boys wondered that he did not take any companion with him, but when he returned, leading a stumbling, helpless figure, they understood that even a small man of his caliber was able now to handle the once strapping Lieutenant Chapin. For that in the figure before them, for all his unshaven cheeks and blinking eyes, like those of a bat, they had the man they had come all the way in search of, his

uniform, now bagging in unsightly fashion about his shrunken form left them no room to doubt. The miserable scarecrow figure that gazed apologetically about it, was the inventor of Chapinite, and once the most popular man in the United States Navy.

The boys' cheeks burned with indignation at the sight, and if they might have had any weak inclination to save their lives by yielding to Bellman's demand that they reveal the whereabouts of the *Golden Eagle II*, the sight of the miserable wreck before them would at once have decided them. They would stick by the unfortunate officer come what might and if possible, avenge the indignities he had suffered.

"Put him in alongside them, serang," ordered Bellman, as Chapin gazed about in a dazed manner, evidently realizing little of what was transpiring and in a few minutes Lieutenant Chapin, Frank Chester and his brother Harry, were trussed up in a row absolutely helpless. It was a bitter thought that here they were within hand's reach of the man they had come so far and endured so much to succor, and now they were as helpless to aid him as he seemed to be to care for himself.

"I wish you a pleasant afternoon," said Bellman, as, signing to the serang, he and his myrmidons left the subterranean chamber.

As soon as their footsteps had died out Frank determined to make an effort to arouse the dormant faculties of Lieutenant Chapin.

"Lieutenant," he said, "we are your friends. Can you understand us?"

To his amazement a light of brighter intelligence shone in the captive officer's face and he answered with what was absolute briskness compared to his former listless manner:

"Of course I can; but who are you?"

Rapidly Frank sketched out to him the events that had brought them there and all they had hoped to accomplish. Then in a saddened voice he had related the failure of their hopes and aspirations.

The lieutenant thanked them warmly for their loyalty, but urged them to save their lives if possible by acceding to Bellman's demands. For himself, he said, he expected no better fate than to be left there to die,

"My life has been a living death at any rate," he said, "since I came to this terrible place. Yours are the first kindly faces I have seen» I have lived as if in a dream." He pressed his hand to his forehead. "It seems that I must do what they told me. I have even, as you know, aided in the betrayal of my government by aiding these men in preparing my invention. For the last two days, though, my mind has been getting clearer. I have realized what is going on about me. I can judge things in their true proportions."

"But—pardon me for the question—" said Frank, "but when you—"

"I know," interrupted the lieutenant, "you are going to say that when I came in here, I seemed stupefied. I was acting a part. I did not want Bellman to think that I had recovered my senses. I cannot understand it myself. Until yesterday everything was like a dream, now I can think once more like a rational man."

Frank detailed to him the conversation that they had overheard in the boat the night before and the boast that Foyashi had made that he had placed the captive under his control.

"Ah, that is it," exclaimed the lieutenant eagerly, "since Foyashi has gone I have felt this new life of my brain, but hark—there's somebody coming."

His ears, sharpened by his long captivity, were keener than the boys' for it was not till the serang with the red band on his arm entered the place that they heard any indication of the arrival of the newcomer. He came straight up to the boys and informed them that it was the order of his master that he should search them. His manner was not insolent or rough, it was simply the manner of the lay figure who does as he is told and asked no questions. Indignant but helpless Harry submitted to the search. He begged the man to let him keep his mother's picture which he carried in a case in his inside pocket, but the man refused with a mechanical shake of the head.

"No, my orders. Tuan he say take everything," he muttered.

Then came Frank's turn. As with Harry one by one his most treasured possessions were stripped from him by the immobile faced, yellow man. But suddenly something

happened that had been entirely unlocked for. Frank had entirely forgotten the squatting Buddha, which he had placed in his pocket the day the moonshiner had sold it to him, and had not given it a thought since.

Now, however, the serang's searching hand found it in the boy's pocket and the effect on him was electrical.

He fell on his knees reverentially before the absurd looking piece of jade and beat his head on the damp floor and then gazed at Frank in awe.

"How came you by this, master?" he asked.

Frank saw that the possession of the thing had made a strong effect on the man and that to deceive him as to the fact in the case, might have a beneficial bearing on their position, so he simply shook his head and as Harry would have said, "looked wise."

"Him great Buddha of Lhasa," moaned the serang, bobbing up and down before it. "You great man. Me worship you if you give him me for keep."

"Why don't you steal it from us; we can't prevent you?" Harry could not help saying.

"No can steal. If steal heap curse all time. Plentysoon die," was the response, "but if give then great blessing—plenty blessing all time."

A sudden idea struck Frank.

"You are leaving here to-night in canoes for the coast?" he asked.

"Yes," was the reply, "we leave here never no more to come back."

"If I give you that Buddha will you unlock these stocks and these handcuffs before you go?" he asked.

The man thought a minute.

"If you don't I will make the Buddha curse you," pursued Frank. This seemed to decide the yellow man.

"All litee," he said, "before I go I lettee you out but no let Bellman know; he kill me."

"We won't let him know," said Frank with emphasis, "but how do we know that you will keep your word?"

"If I don't then Buddha curse me and I die," said the man

simply as he left the dungeon. The boys felt that they had secured a pledge of freedom by the merest chance that was better than all the promises that could be made from now till Doomsday.

CHAPTER XXV. QUATTY AS A SCOUT.

Acting on Billy's suggestion Lathrop did not, as we know, wireless any news of the disappearance of Ben Stubbs to the Boy Aviators. He in fact agreed, after some pondering of the situation, with the reporter's opinion that it was needless to worry them when they already had their hands full. The night after Ben Stubbs' mysterious vanishment was passed in no very agreeable way by the young dwellers at Camp Walrus and as for Pork Chops his wails when he learned of it rang to heaven and back again.

"Ah jes' knowed dat dis yer trip was hoodooed fum de moment dat Marse Frank got dat lil' green mummery from dat moonshine man," he said gloomily, and made dire and dismal prophecies till Billy, seeing that Lathrop was very nearly breaking down under the strain, packed the skipper of the *Carrier Dove* off to bed. Billy and Lathrop spent most of the night hours—except when they fell into troubled dozes from time to time—seated beside the silent wireless instrument, hoping against hope that news of some kind might be received from the boys. Ben's self-reliance and adaptability had made itself so manifest on the expedition that, as Billy said, it seemed impossible to believe that any really serious mishap had befallen him.

Again and again as they sat by the fire the boys went over and over the puzzling affair. Lathrop repeated his story to Billy a dozen times and each time the young reporter asked for a repetition hoping that some point that would shed a light on the mystery might have been omitted by the other. But Lathrop's recitals of the incident varied not at all and Billy was fain to give it up at last.

"I've worked on a lot of queer disappearance cases," he remarked sententiously, "but this has them all beaten by ten

blocks and the City Hall."

And when Billy dropped off into a troubled nap he had a vivid dream that his city editor had presented him with a big crocodile, stuffed in a lifelike manner and equipped with silver teeth and claws of enormous size. The young reporter was in the midst of an elaborate speech of thanks when he awoke and found that the first gray heralding of dawn was broad in the east and that the great multitude of herons and fish-eating birds that roosted among the islands was already beginning its pilgrimage to the feeding grounds on the oyster bars of the Archipelago. Dawn in the Everglades is a beautiful and impressive sight but Billy at that time had no eyes for it. His sole thought was to find Ben Stubbs. He therefore aroused Lathrop and the two boys, after routing out Pork Chops and making him cook them a quick breakfast and put them up a light lunch, started for the canoes, determined to circumnavigate the island in search of their missing comrade. Carefully they explored every inch of the soft muddy beach and in due time arrived at the spot where several feet, intermingled in an inextricable pattern, marked the spot where the Seminoles had blindfolded and kidnapped Ben.

Billy, with a reporter's trained instinct, was on his hands and knees in a minute and came amazingly near reconstructing the scene of Ben's capture.

"Ben was seized by several men—Indians I should say. He made a brief resistance but was overpowered and dragged some distance and then carried. He was then hurled into an Indian canoe, which was followed by two others, and taken to some Indian village; where or why, I don't know," he declared.

"Well, Mr. Sherlock Holmes," said Lathrop, laughing, in spite of his heavy heart, at Billy's surprising enthusiasm, which led him to construct what seemed to the other boy at best a fanciful theory, "like Dr. Watson I can understand part of your reasoning, namely that he was seized by Indians for I can see the marks of their moccasins, I can also understand—knowing Ben as I do—that he struggled;" he chuckled again as he pictured the wiry, steel-muscled Ben laying out his captors, "but for the rest please explain."

"It's simple enough, my dear Watson," said Billy in the manner of the celebrated sleuth of fiction, "Ben's boots had hob-nails—very well, I can see that after stamping round a lot,

hob-nails were dragged by moccasins—see the little lines they made in the sand ? Then the lines stop but there are no more hobnails, clearly then he was carried."

"Yes, but the two canoes that followed the one they put him in?" asked Lathrop. "How do you know that there were two others?"

"Ridiculously simple," replied Billy, "here is the mark made by the keel of one canoe; beyond that, my dear Watson, if you will use your eyes, you will see two other keel marks—hence three canoes."

"Well, I am a dummy," exclaimed Lathrop, considerably vexed that he had not puzzled the problem out for himself, "but I don't see how that puts us any further—in fact it makes it more inexplicable for the Indians, through that rascal Quatty, promised us that they would not molest the camp and yet, if your theory is the right one, they have carried off one of the most valuable members of our party."

"Hum," said Billy and scratched his head, "there's one thing, however," he said consolingly, "they can't mean him any real harm or else they would probably have killed him right here."

"Maybe they are cannibals and mean to eat him," suggested Lathrop.

"He'd be a pretty tough morsel," laughed Billy, "but don't worry about that, Lathrop, the Seminoles are not cannibals and from all I hear are pretty good sort of people, as Indians go. I have got a sort of an inkling that we shall hear from Ben before very long in some way or another."

"I hope so," said Lathrop and then—there being nothing else to do—they paddled back to the camp. It was then past noon and after waiting for some word from the boys for an hour or more their two comrades determined to call them up and acquaint them with what had happened.

Patently Lathrop operated the *Golden Eagle's* call for half-an-hour or more.

"What's the matter?" asked Billy, seeing a troubled look on the boy's face.

"I don't understand it," responded the other boy, "I can't raise them."

"Keep on trying," urged Billy.

But it was no good, there was no answer from the *Golden Eagle* for a reason that our readers know. At the time that Lathrop was shooting his urgent summons into space the boys were lying in the stocks on Captain Bellman's island.

Thoroughly alarmed Lathrop sent out the navy call and after a short time got into communication with the *Tarantula*.

Lieutenant Selby himself responded, after the operator had told him of Lathrop's grave news. For an hour he and Lathrop talked across space and it was finally agreed that the *Tarantula* was to send a detachment of men to the island with a machine-gun and other provisions and that if the boys did not shortly reappear a relief expedition would be started into the interior after them.

"What is your latitude and longitude?" spelled out the *Tarantula's* wireless, when the arrangements had been completed. At Lathrop's request Billy hurried into the hut and fetched out Frank's log-book in which, in his neat writing, the position of the island was jotted down:

"Latitude 25° 29' 30" N," he read out, "Longitude 80. 56. 45. W."

As the young reporter read off Frank's entries Lathrop rattled them out on the wireless and when they had been repeated through the air, to make certain they were correct, he cut out the instrument.

"It's queer that if Frank's information was correct that there is no sign of the submarine at the mouth of Jew-Fish River," remarked Lathrop.

Billy agreed with him.

"How far is the river mouth from here?" he asked. Lathrop fetched the map and weighting down the corners with stones till it lay flat on the ground, both boys studied it intently. Lathrop announced, after a few minutes' figuring with dividers and compass, that the river—at the mouth of which the submarine of the Far Eastern power was supposed to be,—was not more than ten miles from the island on which they were then encamped.

"If only the boys were here we could make it in the canoes in a short time," sighed Billy, "but what are we to do ? we don't know a thing about navigation and we could never find it without Frank."

"That's so," agreed Lathrop. "Oh," he burst out suddenly, "I wish we'd never seen the Everglades. If only we could get safe on board the *Tarantula* I believe I'd stay there till she sailed for home."

"And leave the boys here," exclaimed Billy, "not much you wouldn't—not if you are the kind of boy I take you for. Cheer up, Lathrop, we'll pull out all right. I was with Frank and Harry in Nicaragua in places that you'd think three boys could never have escaped from, but we got through all right and we'll get through this—try that old sparker of yours again."

Lathrop once more adjusted his operator's harness and sent wave after wave humming through the air in search of the *Golden Eagle II's* answering vibrations, but no reply came and at last he gave up in sheer weariness.

"It's more than fifteen hours since we have heard from them," he said in despair, "and Frank promised not to remain out of communication with us for long, unless something very serious had occurred. What can be the matter?"

"Perhaps her apparatus is out of order," suggested Billy, "and they are not getting your calls."

"With an expert like Frank looking after it—not likely," replied the other boy. "I wish I could consider it probable."

Pork Chops had gone down to the canoe anchorage to fish earlier in the afternoon. To his simple mind it was necessary for him to provide his young masters with as good food as possible even though the world were to come to an end; so, seated on a branch overhanging the clear water, he had angled with good luck all the afternoon. At it grew dusk he muttered to him-self:

"Dis yar trip ain't nuffin' but foolishness no how. Ah jes' wish ah'd stayed hum at Miami, but Po'k Chops, you fool niggah, you don' nevah know when youse is well off—no, sah."

Shaking his head with deep conviction the darky rolled up his tackle and thrusting a long creeper through the gills of his fish he prepared to return to camp. As he rose to his feet, however, he perceived something coming toward him down the channel which caused him to throw up his hands with a yell, letting all his fish drop back into the water and screaming:

"Ghoses!" at the top of his voice, the terrified black raced for the friendly presence of Lathrop and Billy.

The boys' first impression on seeing Pork Chops' crazy antics was the wild anticipation that the boys had returned. Their hopes were dashed the next second, however, by the loud wails of their retainer:

"Oh, lawd, Marse Lath'op, oh, lawdy, Mr. Billy. Ah seen a brack ghoses' coming down de creek. Fo' de Lawd's sake, sah, don' go; he put de hant on you," he cried in an agonized wail as Lathrop and Billy started for the canoe anchorage to see what had caused the demoralization of Pork Chops. For a minute they were almost as startled as he as their eyes encountered a figure sufficiently alarming to scare a stronger-minded individual than Pork Chops.

Staggering up from the anchorage was a figure in pitiful rags with big, poppy white eyes staring glassily out of a face as black as ink. The figure's hands were cut and bleeding and it wore, tied about its head, a strip of calico torn from its shirt which lay open, exposing a chest as black as its face. It was several seconds before both the boys recognized this object clearly, and exclaimed in a simultaneous gasp:

"Quatty!"

Quatty it was; but a very different Quatty from the usual debonair black answering to that name. It was more like a ghost of Quatty. It was not till he had been restored with coffee and food that the unfortunate negro was able to render a clear account of himself.

His news was sufficiently disquieting.

"Ah sat der in de lilly canvas boat foh more'n hour," he said, after he had detailed the rest of the boys' adventures since leaving the camp, "an' waited fo' dem to come back. Ah tho'ght fum de fus' it was a bobbery kin' of fing to do, but Marse Frank and Marse Harry—"

"That will do, Quatty," said Billy checking the garrulous black, "keep to your story."

"Wall, sah," continued Quatty, "I laid dere in de boat waitin',—it might have been up'ards of an hour—as I said—when I hears de most confounded debbil racket of dogs yelping an' shoutin' as ever I did hear—yes, sah. Wall, thinks I, I can creep through the saw-grass a bit an' see what it is,

an' I does;—den I sees Marse Frank and Harry and a lot of fellers that looked like Chinaman only smaller, an' a big man who seemed to be boss. Dey had dem two poor boys prisoners an' fum de looks ob dem I knew I couldn't hev done no good dere, so I jes' gets in de boat and paddles and poles back yar and I declare I was mos' tuckered when dat misbul, ignant savage yander, Po'k Chops, seen me an' was no mo' of a gen'l'man dan to run fo' he life like I been a duppy."

Of course the first part of his narrative, which is already familiar to our readers, had put the boys in possession of the facts about the *Golden Eagle II* and the reason they got no answer to their calls. After wirelessing Lieutenant Selby the momentous news the boys held a long consultation, while Pork Chops and Quatty sat on opposite sides of the camp-fire and glowered at each other.

The upshot of their discussion was that it was their duty to set out immediately and if possible recover the air-ship and rescue the boys. It was a plan full of risks, but where the lives of their comrades were at stake neither boy felt inclined to hold back. As Quatty's strength had by now quite returned, with the quick recuperative powers of the out-door negro, and he was quite sure he could guide them to the mound-builders' island, as well by night as by day, they agreed to start at once.

The canoes were hastily loaded with duffle and as, with Lathrop and Billy in one and Quatty leading in the other, they made their way along the dark channels, Lathrop was blessing the days back in old New York when he had determined to learn to run an aeroplane.

CHAPTER XXVI.

LATHROP AS AN AIR PILOT.

"Dere she is, massa."

Quatty's dark figure standing up in the canoe was outlined against the deep ultramarine blue of the night sky as he pointed to an indistinct blur on the horizon.

"She" both the boys instantly realized with a thrill was the

mound-builders' island on which the *Golden Eagle II* had been left. They had been paddling hard all night and sometimes poling where the maze of streams they followed shallowed to a mere puddle. With the sudden nearing of their goal a new fear was borne in upon them.

Would the aeroplane be there? Or had the same mysterious forces that held the Boy Aviators captive wrecked their ship, too?

Silently—after the first flush of the excitement at Quatty's having guided them right through a wilderness that it seemed impossible to traverse except at random—the boys paddled on. Their minds were both busy with the same question. What would they find when they got there? Perhaps after all their errand would prove to be in vain.

Lathrop was the first to voice the apprehension they both felt.

"Suppose the *Golden Eagle II* is gone?" he asked in a low voice.

"Then we will hunt up the *Tarantula*, get a detachment of bluejackets and clean out the Everglades before we'll give up the search," was the determined reply of the young reporter. Billy was rising to the emergency.

The sun had already risen when the outlines of the distant island became visible in detail and Billy, after a long and careful scrutiny through the glasses, declared he could see something that might or might not be the *Golden Eagle II* perched on its summit. This was cheering news and put new strength into the paddlers' flagging arms. From that time on till they reached the island and found that all was well the boys did not speak a word, but put all their strength into the work of urging the boats through the water. It was aggravating work too, for at times they would be only half a mile from the island and then they would find that they were compelled to follow another watery path that took them a couple of miles away from their destination. At last, however, the keels of the little flotilla grated on the island and Billy and Lathrop ran up the well-worn trail leading to the summit.

Their joy at finding the air-ship intact may be imagined. It was better luck than they had dared to hope for. Speed was the main thing now and while they might have reached the island of the formula stealers by boat the journey there and

back to the coast again by water would have been a tedious one and might indeed, by its very length, have defeated their purpose.

Lathrop's first care was to examine the gasoline supply. He found to his satisfaction that the tank was more than half full and he immediately dumped into it the contents of the two five-gallon cans of reserve supply that the boys had brought along and which were stored under the transom.

For an hour or more the boy went over the machine carefully, striving to master to the minutest detail its working parts. Lathrop was an aviator and next to the boys, perhaps was as skilled a navigator of aerial craft as the old school in New York had turned out, but he was a little dubious about his ability to run the *Golden Eagle II*. However, it had to be done and after giving Billy careful instructions about keeping the oil cups filled and seeing to it that the condenser was in constant working order, Lathrop decided that things were about ready for his experimental flight in the Chester boys' big aeroplane.

"And to think that in White Plains I'd have given my head to see it and here I am going to run her," he could not help saying to himself as he stepped back and gave a final look over the craft.

Under Lathrop's direction the aeroplane was wheeled back to the furthest boundary of the top of the mound as he did not want to take chances on not securing a good running start, Lathrop knew that aeroplanes are like horses, they will go well for the man who is used to them under almost any condition; but when a new hand takes control accidents are likely to happen unless the greatest care is used. As he well realized he knew nothing of the habits of the *Golden Eagle II*, which was a far bigger aeroplane than he had ever run or in fact ever seen.

The boy's heart beat a little faster as he clambered into the pilot section of the chassis and adjured Billy for the last time to look well to the engine.

"That's all right," Billy anxiously assured him, "I'm as good an engineer as Harry himself, or will be," he added.

"Don't holler till you're out of the wood," said Lathrop, "and obey orders."

It is curious how circumstances will alter cases. Billy

Barnes, by virtue of his greater age and knowledge of the world was easily Lathrop's leader, ordinarily. Now, however, when Billy was about to enter upon a duty of which he knew nothing and the other boy a whole lot, their positions were readjusted and it was Lathrop who became the leading spirit.

Quatty, it had been agreed, was to be left behind, and was to make his way back to the coast with the canoes as soon as possible and apprise the *Tarantula* people of what had occurred. He silently watched the boys' preparations with interest from a safe distance.

"Now, then, crank her up," shouted Lathrop, as he threw in the spark on the control wheel and waited patiently for results as Billy turned and sweated at the self-starting apparatus.

"What's the matter?" he demanded, as there was no answering explosion from the engine.

"I don't know," stammered Billy wiping his brow, "there doesn't seem to be anything doing, does there?"

"What can be the matter?" exclaimed Lathrop, throwing out the switch and coming aft.

He examined the spark plugs in turn and found that they were sparking in perfect order. Next came an inspection of the carburettor—that, too, was in good trim. Evidently the reason for the failure to start was not there. Lathrop was puzzled, he had never known an engine to behave in such a mystifying way before. He went over it again part by part, carefully, and cranked it and rocked it till his arms were ready to drop off.

Suddenly an idea struck him—not so much for the reasonableness of it, but because he had examined about every other likely cause of failure to start.

"Well, Billy, you are a wonder," he exclaimed in a vexed tone, when to his surprise he found that what he tried in desperation proved correct.

What's the trouble?" asked Billy cheerfully.

"Why you only forgot to open the gasolene valve, that's all."

For the first and last time in his life the reporter was fairly taken back.

"Well, Lathrop, I will admit that I am a first-class, blown-in-

the-bottle chump," he exclaimed contritely. The next cranking proved successful and after the engines had settled down to a quiet easy purr, Lathrop with a warning cry of:

"Hold tight, I'm going to throw in the clutch!" started the big aeroplane on its flight of rescue.

With a swift, wobbling motion that threw Billy from side to side of the car the *Golden Eagle II*, under the direction of her unskilled pilot, skidded across the top of the mound-builders' island while Quatty waved his arm in farewell.

Unaccustomed as he was to the *Golden Eagle II*, Lathrop made his first mistake when he tried to raise her after too short a run. To his despair and amazement she refused to rise when he raised his upward planes. They were traveling over the ground at a rapid speed, now with the two big propellers threshing the air at a rate of 1200 revolutions a minute; the roar of the exhaust was like the discharge of a score of gatling guns.

Lathrop set his teeth desperately and jerked the planes at an even acuter angle in his effort to get her to rise. They were only a few yards from the edge of the mound now and if she refused to rise by the time they reached it they would be inevitably dashed down to death in the ruins of the big sky-skimmer. With that desperate determination that comes in the face of crucial emergency, Lathrop threw in another speed on the engine and they attained a velocity of 1500 revolutions a minute.

"I'll make her rise or bust," he said grimly to himself.

But the end he feared did not come; under the added impetus of her increased speed and the acute angle at which the boy had set the rising planes the *Golden Eagle II* shot into the air, as abruptly as a sky-rocket, as she reached the edge of the mound. The result for an instant, however, threatened to be almost as serious as if she had gone over the edge without rising.

In his excitement Lathrop had set the rising planes at such an abrupt angle that when the ship shot up she reared like a horse, hurling Billy Barnes back among the engines and almost overboard and causing Lathrop to let go of his steering wheel for the fragment of a second to grasp a stanchion. At the same instant the aeroplane, left unguided for a second, gave a sickening plunge sideways, like a wounded hawk.

Lathrop in his agitation seized the wheel and gave it a twist that brought her round, it is true, but as her starboard propeller was working in direct opposition to the curve he wished her to describe, he almost twisted her rudder off and made her careen at just as alarming an angle in the opposite direction.

To Billy it looked as if they were gone but Lathrop, who was fast learning the peculiarities of the craft, he had under his control, managed by a skillful manipulation to right her and the next minute with her propellers beating the air at top speed the big craft dashed forward as steadily as an ocean liner. It had been a narrow escape, though, and taught Lathrop something about navigating a twin screw air-ship. In a craft of this kind, in a maneuver executed to port, the course of the ship is bound to receive a backward pull from the starboard propeller and vice versa. It is necessary for the operator, then to swing in an easy curve to avoid pulling his steering gear out by the roots and being dashed to death.

"That's only the overture," cried Lathrop, exhilarated by the rapid motion as they rushed toward the island, "wait for the big show."

CHAPTER XXVII.

HEMMED IN BY FLAMES.

In the meantime in the noisome dungeon in which they lay, Frank and Harry Chester, and the officer they had struggled so bravely for, had given up all hope of ever seeing the light of day again. As nearly as they could calculate it was twelve hours or more since Bellman had thrust his head into their place of confinement and shouted that he would give them a last chance if they would tell him where the *Golden Eagle II* lay and where their companions were encamped. The boys, though faint from lack of food and almost dead with thirst, refused and Bellman with a savage curse had slammed the door.

For a time they had heard tramping about overhead as if there were last hasty preparations being made for the departure and then all grew silent as a grave. At that time,

however, their fears were not so much that they were to be left behind to be starved in this black hole, as they had implicit faith in the man to whom Frank had given the Buddha. Time and again Harry, whose voice was growing momentarily fainter, had murmured to Frank:

“You don't think he will fail us, Frank?” and Frank, although his own faith was beginning to diminish as the hours went by, had always responded reassuringly. He pointed out cheerfully—or as cheerfully as he could—that to the Oriental mind an oath made in the manner in which the red-banded serang had made it was sacred and to be obeyed at all hazards. Anything might have happened to delay the man's coming, he argued, and there was no doubt that he would appear in due course and redeem his promise. Frank's thoughts belied his cheerful words, however. There were a dozen things beside the breaking of his oath that might have caused the serang to be unable to liberate as he had promised. As the time passed by the conviction steadily grew in Frank's mind that they had been deserted and that the three miserable occupants of the dungeon were at that moment the only living things on the island.

As for the lieutenant he was sunk in a sort of coma in which it is doubtful, if he felt anxiety or any other emotion. He seemed stupefied by his sufferings after his first returning dawn of reason.

Suddenly, and when the boys' hopes had reached their lowest ebb they were startled by the sound of footsteps walking above them. They shouted at the top of their voices and the footsteps ceased. Then they began again. Who could it be?

For a moment the idea of a rescue party flashed across Frank's mind but he dismissed it as improbable. Nobody could have heard of their flight or located their place of captivity unless—Quatty!

Could it have been possible that the negro had conveyed word to their comrades of their plight. Frank hastily communicated his idea to Harry, but Harry dismissed it as improbable. Frank, too, agreed that Quatty was far more likely to have saved himself than to have bothered about them. How unjust they were to the black we know.

But there were certainly footsteps upstairs. The boys

shouted and shouted. Friend or foe it made little difference to them. They were famished and even their foes would surely not be so inhuman as to refuse them food. Even the lieutenant aroused himself and set up a poor, feeble cry.

Hark, what is that they are shouting upstairs?

“Frank! Frank! Harry, where are you?”

A second's listening convinced the boys they were not dreaming. Whoever was upstairs was shouting their names. They set up redoubled shouts and shortly after they heard hands fumbling at the lock of the prison door. A few seconds later the lock having refused to yield, the door came flying inward, burst from its hinges by a tree-trunk cut and used as a battering ram by Lathrop and Billy.

The scene after the boys were reunited and Lieutenant Chapin had been introduced may be imagined. There surely was never a more joyful reunion nor in more strange surroundings.

Billy described how after their flight from the mound-builders' island they had decided, after careful reconnoitering, that the island was deserted. How this had come about of course they did not know, and were at first in despair as they concluded that the boys and the lieutenant must have been taken to the coast and carried off to slavery in the Far East. At the actual baseness of Captain Bellman's mind they had not guessed till they found the prisoners.

They had agreed, however, to land and explore the island in the hope that they might find some clue to their comrades, and with that intention had descended to the large open space where the reducing operations had been carried on. In course of time they had arrived at the door of the big bunk-house and here had made a startling discovery.

Stretched across the door of the place was a dead body.

“And what do you think, Frank?” exclaimed Lathrop, “on examining it in one hand we found tightly clutched a key and—here's the extraordinary part—in one of the pockets of the loose blouse he wore we discovered a little green Buddha exactly like the one the moonshiner sold you.”

“Poor serang,” sighed Frank, “he did then try to keep his word.”

His words demanded an explanation and the boy rapidly

told the rescuers of the dead man's oath to release them.

"If you had taken that key, Lathrop," he concluded, "you could have opened the door easily without battering it down. Poor fellow—Bellman must have caught him coming back here and guessing for what purpose, he killed him."

"The first thing to do is get you out of these stocks," said Billy after he had detailed how, on hearing the boys' shouts, they had traced them to the cellar in which they lay.

"Why not try the key," suggested Billy, "it looked a pretty big affair to me to fit the lock we found on that door."

"That's a good idea," assented Lathrop. He was up the stairs and back in a very short time and carried with him the key that had been found in the dead man's hand. It fitted the stocks perfectly and furnished a further proof that the serang had actually been on his way to keep his promise when he was killed.

A twist of it in the heavy padlock and the unfortunate prisoners were at liberty with the exception of their handcuffs. With a cold chisel and hammer Lathrop struck these off. A few minutes later the boys had been helped out of the dungeon into what had been the blacksmith shop of Bellman's gang. With the exception of a great stiffness and soreness, occasioned by their confinement, the prisoners were soon as well as ever, and after a hearty meal from the provision lockers of the *Golden Eagle II*, and a long account from Lieutenant Chapin, who was rapidly recovering, of his adventures, the boys were ready to start.

So interested had they been in talking, however, and so rapidly had the time flown that they had not looked about them or taken any note of anything but each other. Now, however, when they looked up they noticed a peculiar haze in the air and at the same time became aware of a choking sort of feeling that made their eyes sting and their nostrils itch.

"What is it?" asked Harry as they all noticed these symptoms.

Frank and Lieutenant Chapin were both on their feet and had exchanged grave glances. From where they had been seated they had not commanded a view of the 'glades. Now, however, as the little party hastily emerged they saw before them a sight that chilled the blood of the boldest of them. For

as far as they could see, and sweeping down on them at terrible speed, was a wall of flames.

The Everglades were on fire!

With a quick gasp Frank recollected the dried brush he had noticed on the trail the day he and Harry left the boat. He realized that if the flames reached the island with such tinder to feed on they would sweep it from end to end. The *Golden Eagle II* would be destroyed and they doomed to a slow death from starvation.

"What about the other side of the island? Perhaps there is some way out there," suggested the Lieutenant.

Frank shook his head.

"By the time we get there the flames would be roaring up the hillside here," he said, "there is only one thing to do. Run for it."

"Run for it?"

"Fly for it rather. In an hour's time this island will be a black charred ash-heap," was Frank's reply.

"But, Frank," was Harry's exclamation, "the *Golden Eagle II* will only carry four, and then she is overburdened, and there are five of us here! "

"She's got to carry us," said Frank grimly, "or we'll be burned to crisps, or starved if we escape death by fire."

"What are you going to do?"

"Lighten her," was the quiet reply, "dump overboard every ounce of weight we can spare."

Feverishly the little party went about the work. First the transoms were ruthlessly ripped out and thrown aside. Then came the provisions and other equipment, and lastly even the navigating instruments.

"That's lightened her about 150 pounds," pronounced Frank. "We'll try her with that and if it doesn't work we'll have to tear out the wireless and let that go too."

By this time the advance guard of the flames was marching in a long ruthless line perilously close already to the island. The dry saw-grass blazed like tinder and the party on the island could distinctly hear the hungry roar of the flames as they advanced. The conflagration leaped the narrow water-courses as it came to them like a steeplechaser and

the numerous runnels offered no more check to it than if they had not been there.

Even the broad water-course, used by Bellman and his men to get to and from the coast, did not check the progress of the flames. There was a fair wind blowing out of the northwest and before it red-hot brands were whisked across the stream and ignited the dry wastes on the other side.

"If we don't hurry," exclaimed Frank, as his eye took in this, "we shall be hemmed in."

This was a new peril. With the flames only on one side they might have hoped to escape but if the blaze ringed the island in there would be grave danger in trying to cross it in their overburdened air-ship. For one thing the strange cross-currents created by a fire are alone enough to throw an aeroplane onto dangerous angles and Frank, as he gazed at the height to which the flames were leaping, added to this menace the fear that the overladen ship would not be able to rise high enough to clear them. What that meant there was no need for him to tell the others—he did not dare to entertain such a thought himself.

With all the speed they made the flames were swifter and by the time they had all scrambled into the chassis the island was surrounded by roaring flames and the hungry fire was beginning to attack the dried brush on its sides.

"Can we make it?" gasped Lathrop as he gazed at the terrifying spectacle.

"We've got to make it," snapped Frank as Harry started the engine.

The atmosphere was by this time so obscured by choking smoke that it was as thick and dark as a fog. Water streamed from the boys' eyes and noses and they speedily found that every breath they took seared their lungs as though a red-hot iron had been plunged into them.

Even if they could weather the flames, could they get through such smoke alive?

With a prayer on his lips Frank started the *Golden Eagle II* into the awful smothering pall. He could not see a foot in front of him and, indeed, in a second his eyes were blinded by the acrid reek.

"We've got to do it, we've got to do it," he kept saying to

himself through clenched teeth as he drove the aeroplane full into the inferno. It was as dark as night and as hot as a furnace mouth.

Caught in the currents generated by the heat the aeroplane swayed and zigzagged drunkenly. Frank, his eyes closed and drawing every breath with agony, clutched the wheel till the varnish came off on his hands. He could smell the scorching paint of *The Golden Eagle II* as the awful heat blistered it.

It flashed across his mind that the cloth covering the planes might catch and then? Somehow nothing seemed to matter much then to the dazed, half-suffocated boy, only one clear idea presented itself repeating over and over with trip-hammer regularity:

"Keep going ahead."

But were they going ahead? Frank did not know. So badly was the craft handicapped by her weight and in such a whirl of heat-engendered air currents was she caught that it was difficult for Frank, blinded as he was, to tell.

Suddenly she gave a swoop down.

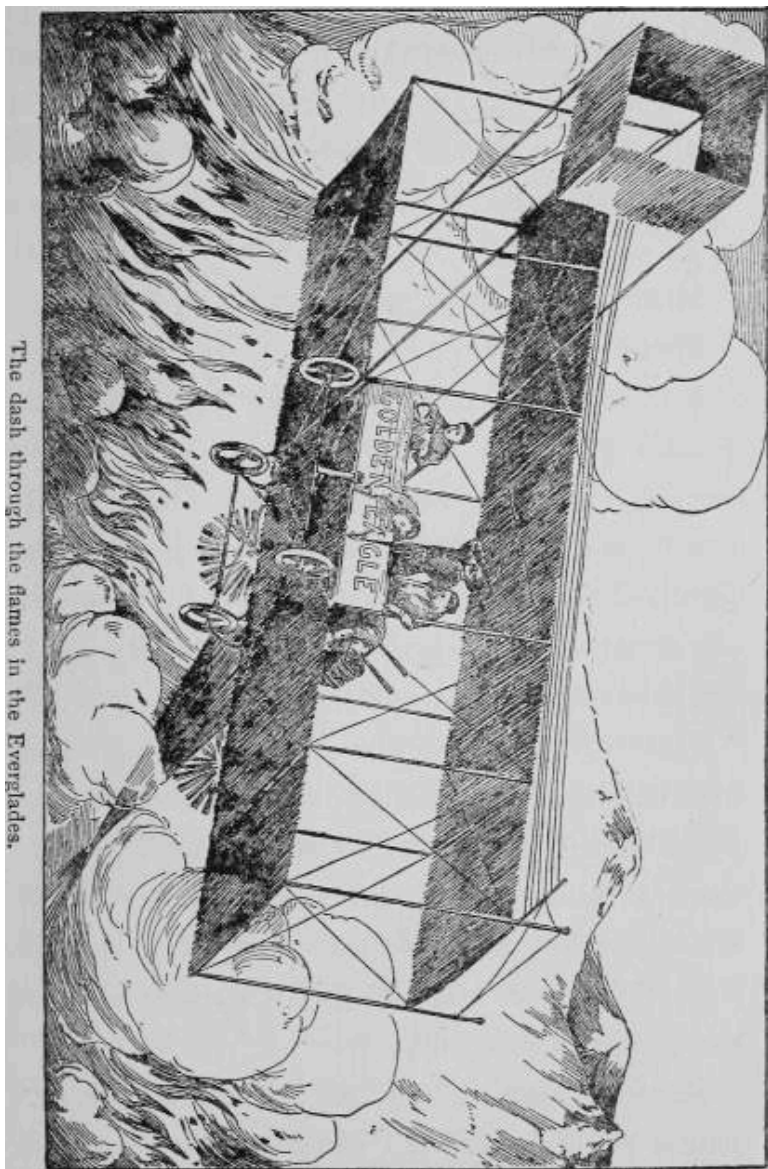
Was it the end?

No, she righted herself, more by instinct on Frank's part than anything. The blinded, choked, helmsman jerked up her rising planes. But the next minute she repeated the blundering stagger downward and Frank realized, even in his dazed state, that she would never rise again if she wasn't lightened.

The wireless! That would have to go.

With a cracked voice that sounded like a ghost of his usual hearty tones, Frank shouted back the command. But there was no response. Temporarily he checked the aeroplane's downward tendency but he knew that the next time she would drop into the flames in spite of him and shrivel up with her passengers like a handful of flax.

Blinded by smoke, with cracked lips and swollen tongue Frank realized that something must have happened to the others. With one hand on the steering wheel, he reached back and seized the wireless-box by its base. It weighed 165 pounds and if he could get it free it meant their salvation.



The dash through the flames in the Everglades.

He tugged with all the strength in his arms. The case moved slightly on its base. Frank knew the screws that held it in place did not reach very deep, but with one hand he could not manage to tear it loose.

Then he did a daring thing. Setting the rising planes at their full upward tendency he left the wheel locked by its spring gear and reeled with outstretched hands toward the apparatus. Once he tugged,—twice he tugged.

The box was coming loose but the aeroplane was sagging, he could feel it. It was getting hotter, too.

With bursting brain and blistered hands he heaved at the box till the blood ran from under his nails.

Would it never come?

With an effort that seemed to crack his shoulders, Frank gave a mighty heft. The box ripped loose with a suddenness that sent him staggering back; but the next minute he recovered his balance and heaved it overboard into the roaring vortex beneath them.

Then, with the instinct born of necessity, he groped his way to the wheel and as he set the *Golden Eagle II* on a rising course he realized that she was responding and they were saved.

Ten minutes later they emerged into the blessed air that, though still smoke-filled, above the fire-swept flats was still breathable. With blackened face and singed hair and eyebrows, Frank felt the difference, although his eyes were still closed and giving him agony. He inhaled it in great breaths of delight, saturating his lungs in its comparative freshness. Finally, when he could open his eyes, he looked back for the others.

They lay on the floor senseless, smoke-blackened, without motion.

But the *Golden Eagle II* under Frank's guidance had passed the ordeal of flame and as she skimmed through the cooler air the unconscious members of the party, one by one recovered and grasped the hand of the boy who had saved them.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE BLACK AEROPLANE.

The *Tarantula*, black, grim and business-like, lay at anchor off the mouth of the Jew-Fish River, her long, lean form rising and falling on the heavy swells and a curl of black smoke lazily issuing from each of her four black funnels, the foremost one of which was striped with four yellow bands.

Forward her crew lay about and loafed or fished, while aft Lieutenant Selby and the ensigns assigned to the command with him, paced the deck, looking from time to time into the wireless room to ascertain if any news had been heard from the boys. The answer each time was in the negative and hourly the naval officer's apprehension grew. What could be the matter? If everything had gone well he should certainly have heard from them by now.

Of the submarine, also, nothing had been seen and this fact encouraged the young officer to believe that she was still up the river somewhere. A bright lookout had been kept day and night since Frank's wireless announcing the discovery of Captain Bellman's destination, but nothing had been seen of the expected craft. That she had utilized her diving apparatus and passed unnoticed in that way was unlikely as the water in which the *Tarantula* lay, was shoal even for her and the soundings that the lieutenant had had made the day before showed that it would have been impossible for the submarine to have passed out in any other way but the main channel. So with steam up the *Tarantula* swung at her anchor and waited like a patient cat, watching an opportunity to pounce on a mouse. The idea of entering the river in boats and scouting for the submarine had entered the lieutenant's head, but after consideration he had abandoned it. To reveal his presence to Bellman might spoil everything and as it was if the submarine was in the river, she was securely bottled up.

The hours slowly passed on and still no word came. Evening set in and the wireless was still silent.

"If those young rascals haven't shown up by tomorrow morning, Bagsby, I shall be sorely tempted to head an expedition myself and go in search of them," declared Selby —on whom the strain of the long wait was wearing—to one of

his ensigns.

"Air-ship! dead off our bow, sir!" suddenly hailed the lookout forward; who, like everybody else, had been keeping a watch all day for some signs of the boys' craft.

"By Jove, so it is!" exclaimed the lieutenant bringing his glasses to bear.

High in the evening sky above the tangle of islands an aircraft was winging its way toward them. At first sight a mere speck, she grew rapidly larger as she neared the shore.

"But what can have happened to her?" exclaimed the lieutenant as the first vague blot of the ship resolved through his glasses into definite lines, "here, take a look, Bagsby."

He handed the glasses to his subordinate, who laid them aside in a few minutes with the exclamation.

"Why, she's as black as a coal, sir!"

"What's that dangling at her stern, Bagsby?" asked Lieutenant Selby the next minute.

"Why, it looks like an American flag, sir," responded the ensign, "but it's almost as black as the rest of her and—just look at that, sir—the men in her all black, too!"

Hardly able to control his excitement the lieutenant took the glasses from his subordinate, though by this time the air-vessel was so close that the five persons aboard her were visible to the naked eye. They were waving furiously and shouting at the tops of their voices, though these sounded, to tell the truth, a bit feeble.

"*Tarantula*, ahoy!" came a hail from the aeroplane, as she swung in a graceful circle about the destroyer.

"Ahoy there," hailed the lieutenant through a megaphone, "who are you?"

"The *Golden Eagle II*, Captain Frank Chester," came back from the aeroplane as she swung by, "with Lieutenant Bob Chapin, aboard."

The cheer that went up then roused the herons that were just settling down to bed and sent them and a hundred other varieties of Everglade birds swirling in wild affright up around the tree-tops. As for Selby he clapped Bagsby on the back till the young ensign sustained a violent fit of coughing.

"It's Chapin and he's safe; hurray!" he shouted. "Those

boys have done the trick! "

"Send a boat ashore for us," shouted the leader of the adventurers from the smoke-blackened 'plane, as she swung by once more, "we've got a lot to tell you."

"I should think so," commented the lieutenant to himself, as he ordered a boat lowered and seated himself in the stern sheets. While this was being done the boys had landed on a long sandy bar, which made an ideal grounding place. It didn't take long, you may be sure, to get them into the boat and row them aboard the *Tarantula* where, after soap and towel had removed their sooty disguise, they made a meal that tasted to them infinitely more delicious than any of the more elaborate repasts any of them had ever eaten in New York. As for Lieutenant Chapin, to be once more aboard one of Uncle Sam's ships and in the hands of friends, affected him to such a degree that after dinner he begged to be excused and paced in solitude up and down the deck for an hour or more, while Frank told and retold the story of their adventures.

While the lieutenant was gratefully recalling the boys' exploit, he was awakened from his reverie by the splash of a paddle and looking up saw a canoe drawing near in which were seated three people. It was too dark of course for him to make out more than the outlines of their figures.

"Boat ahoy! What boat's that?" hailed the lookout sharply.

"Well, we ain't got no name but an Injun one and I disremember that," came back the reply, "but tell me have you got two young chaps, named Chester, aboard?"

"Who is that?" hailed the lieutenant.

"My name's Ben Stubbs. Who the dickens are you?" was the bluff reply.

"Lieutenant Chapin," was the calm reply.

The result was astonishing.

"Well, I'll be double horn-swoggled," shouted the same bluff voice that had framed the question and the next minute there was a splash and loud sputtering sounds of indignation.

"Man overboard!" cried the *Tarantula's* lookout.

"You black landlubbers! Upsetting me overboard and trying to drown me, eh? Ef I had you at a rope's end I'd make you walk fancy," came over the water in tones running the gamut

of indignation.

By this time the boys and the others were on deck and as they heard and amazedly recognized the sputtering voice there came from them a delighted hail of:

"Ben Stubbs!"

"Come aboard!"

"Sure I will if this consarned contraption of a canoe we're in will hold me an' my voice, but every time I speak it tips over," was the indignant reply.

But there were no more accidents and a few seconds later the boys and the dripping Ben were wringing hands and slapping backs till the tears came to the rugged old adventurer's eyes.

"Keelhaul me if I ain't glad to see you," shouted Ben, "and the lootinant, too. I knowed they'd git yer ef they set out to," roared Ben, "and by the great horn-spoon, they have."

While this was going on the two other occupants of the boat—who were none other than Quatty and Pork Chops—had clambered on deck and stood shyly by. They, too, came in for their share of greetings and congratulations.

Then Ben, of course, had to relate his adventures with the Seminoles, winding up with the account of how he came to leave the Indian village.

It seemed that a wandering party of Seminoles had come across Quatty, wearily paddling toward the coast from the mound-builders' island, and as he was almost exhausted had taken him in their canoes and poled him at top speed to the island. Arrived there Quatty was roused to great indignation, as well as surprise when he discovered that Ben was a captive and demanded his immediate release. By virtue of Quatty's power over the tribesmen, Ben had immediately been set free and he and Quatty canoed to Camp Walrus. Here they found Pork Chops, half crazy from fright and as he would not hear of being left alone any longer they agreed to take him with them to the *Tarantula*, whither Ben had decided to go as soon as he found the camp deserted. The rest the boys knew.

The relation of Ben's narrative, and of course that of the boys which had to be retold to the newcomer, consumed so much time that they were all startled when eight bells

(midnight) rang out.

The echo had hardly died away when a black form was seen rushing through the water from the mouth of the river.

It was sighted simultaneously by almost all on deck and recognized at once for what it was.

Captain Bellman's submarine!

CHAPTER XXIX. THE LAST OF BELLMAN'S CREW.

"Up anchor, quick!" shouted Lieutenant Selby, springing into the conning tower. The shrill whistle of the bos'un's pipe sounded at the same moment and in a second the ship that had been so still and inert was a maelstrom of activity. The anchor was broken out and long before it was landed home at the catheads the *Tarantula*, a long line of white foam streaking aft from each side of her sharp bow, was steering through the water in pursuit of the flying submarine.

Lieutenant Selby's first action after they were under way had been to order the searchlight played on the chase and kept on her. Fortunately the phosphorescent glow left on the water by the submarine, as she dashed away, made her course as plain as day and the man operating the searchlight had no difficulty in finding her.

As the light played about her the watchers on the *Tarantula*, made out two forms standing on her railed-in back.

"Bellman!" exclaimed Frank as his eyes fell on the taller of the two.

"Foyashi, the scoundrel," was Lieutenant Chapin's recognition of the shorter one.

"We'll get 'em if we blow the *Tarantula* up," exclaimed Lieutenant Selby tensely, as he shouted down to the engineer, "more steam, Mac."

The pace was terrific, moreover it was dangerous navigation, but everyone aboard well knew that they would have to catch the submarine before she got out of the waters

where she did not dare to dive, and there was not a man aboard that was not willing, in the heat of the chase, to take the chance of running aground.

Lieutenant Selby himself had taken the wheel from the man who had held it when the chase began and like greyhound and hare the destroyer and the submarine raced along.

"Try them with the bow gun," suggested Lieutenant Chapin to his associate.

"A good idea, old man," was the reply, and old Bob Adams' a seamy-faced veteran, was called aft and promised unlimited tobacco and spending money if he could hit the submarine and "wing" her. Old Adams was a man of few words and didn't change his usual habit of silence, as the gun was made ready for him. It was a Hotchkiss rapid-fire capable of piercing steel-armor at half-a-mile and the submarine's broad glistening back offered a good mark.

"Are you ready, Adams?" asked the lieutenant, as after a lot of squinting and adjustment the old man stood with the firing cord in his hand.

"Bin ready, tew minuts," was the reply.

"Go ahead then."

The Hotchkiss spat viciously, but the water spurted up a good ten feet of the mark.

The shot had missed.

Old Adams didn't change a muscle of his face, though he knew every eye on ship but that of the helmsman was on him. He spat over the side, ruminatively, and then pointed the gun, once more.

By this time Bellman and his companion had seen there was mischief behind and had ducked through the slide of their craft and screwed it down. The lieutenant rightly interpreted this as a signal that in a few minutes the submarine would dive. If once she did so the chances against their getting her again would be remote in the extreme.

"Get her this time, Adams," he beseeched.

"I'll do my best, sir;" said the old salt as the gun cracked once more.

This time a cheer went up. The submarine had been hit.

"Again! Let her have it!" yelled Lieutenant Selby, carried away by excitement.

Again and again the Hotchkiss viciously cracked and spat fire and every time brought the *Tarantula* nearer to the crippled diver. It was evident that the submarine could not last much longer. Already her speed was a mere crawl. One of Adams' projectiles must have penetrated to her engine-room or else,—as was more likely,—her crew had mutinied.

Suddenly the slide on her back opened and through it poured a crowd of the little brown men who had been employed at Bellman's Island. They cried, they screamed appeals of aid to the pursuing ship, which had of course ceased firing as human figures appeared.

"They want us to take 'em aboard, sir." said old Adams, who had served in the far East and understood their appeals. "They say they are sinking and that their engineer is killed."

"Lower the boats," ordered Selby, "we'll get them off. I won't see men drown if I can help it."

A coatless man suddenly appeared among the searchlight illumined crowd on the back of the submarine. It was Bellman, By his side was Foyashi, also coat-less and desperate.

"Back, you yellow dogs. Get back below!" yelled Bellman, flourishing a revolver.

A beseeching cry went up.

"We'll go to the bottom together," shouted Bellman, apparently beside himself. The next instant his revolver cracked and two of the little brown men fell across the steel plates. What happened then was like a nightmare to the boys who stood watching in horrified amazement. The whole swarming crowd of panic-stricken men seized Bellman and Foyashi and paying no attention to their despairing cries hurled them overboard.

In vain the wretches tried to clasp the sides of the wounded submarine and haul themselves back on deck. They were knocked off each time by their crazed followers. Before the boats from the *Tarantula* could reach them they both had disappeared. In the submarine's engine-room Job Scudder, too, lay dead—killed beside his engines at Adams' first successful shot.

The *Tarantula* anchored there for the night and the boats

rowed about seeking for the lost men but their bodies did not reappear and doubtless the swift current swept them out to sea. Early the next day the boys and the officers rowed over to the submarine, whose crew was now installed on board the *Tarantula* and searched her thoroughly. She had settled in shallow water and access to her was easy through the top plate.

Their diligence was rewarded by the discovery in a steel bound chest, that evidently had belonged to Bellman, of the long missing formula of Chapinite. They found, too, unmistakable proofs that the government which the authorities had suspected all along had really been the man's employer. How he drifted into their service, was, of course, only surmise. The submarine was laden with four gross of straw-wrapped boxes containing enough of the explosive to have blown up the navies of the world, if mixed with the right quantity of gunpowder. At Lieutenant Selbys suggestion the boxes were weighted and sunk to the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico the next day where they still lie. It was too dangerous a cargo to carry in the form the daring Bellman had packed it.

As for Pork Chops and Quatty, before the *Tarantula* sailed their hearts were made glad by presents of rifles, revolvers and ammunition and permission to take possession of the canoes and all the duffle the boys had left at Camp Walrus. Pork Chops had been so fascinated by Quatty's tales of life among the Seminoles that he had decided to cast in his lot with him and, on condition that Quatty gave him a proper introduction to the tribe, to go shares on the *Carrier Dove* with him after they fetched her from her anchorage.

Ben Stubbs and the boys, in the *Tarantula's* launch, early the next day went back to the sand-spit where the *Golden Eagle II* had been beached and dismantled her, as soon as the inspection of the submarine was completed. Packed in sections she was placed aboard the destroyer together with the field wireless which was fetched from Camp Walrus, by Lathrop and the negroes.

That evening just as the group of herons, to which the boys had grown so accustomed, were circling above their roosting-places, the *Tarantula* with a long blast of her siren, swung out of the channel into the shimmering gold of the Gulf. Behind them lay the black outlines of the half-

submerged submarine. Forward on deck, squatted the little brown men who were to be set ashore at the first convenient port, as they all had plenty of money to get back to their own country.

The *Tarantula's* destination was Hampton Roads, from where the boys and Lieutenant Chapin were to hurry to Washington and relate the whole story. As for Billy Barnes, he was already busy writing out what he called

"The biggest beat of the ages, the recovery of Lieutenant Chapin and the Loss of the Mysterious Submarine."

"It's good for a whole front page," he declared, "with pictures of all of us and by William Barnes at the top."

"What are you thinking of, Frank, old boy?" asked Harry as the destroyer plunged steadily forward through the night,—homeward bound.

Frank laughed, although his thoughts had been .rave.

"That we have earned a holiday," he said, "let's go on a hunting trip, some place."

"Where?" inquired Harry.

"Oh, anywhere—what's the matter with Africa?"

"Great! hunting by aeroplane!" exclaimed Harry, "and we'll take the bunch along. Hurray! for the BOY AVIATORS IN AFRICA; or, ON AN AERIAL IVORY TRAIL."

THE END.