

THE BOY AVIATORS' WITH THE AIR RAIDERS

BY

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AUTHOR OF "THE BOY AVIATORS IN NICARAGUA"

ILLUSTRATED BY

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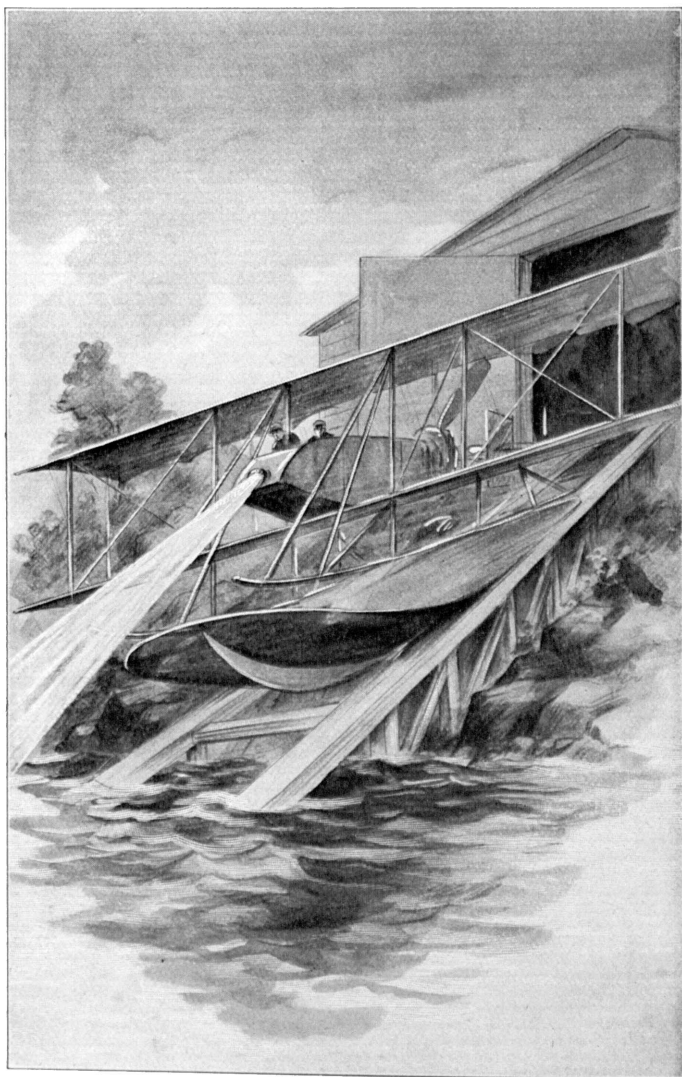
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John Henry Goldfrap (1879 - 1917)
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THE PLUNGING MONSTER GLIDED BY. — Page 24.

CHAPTER I.

NOT FAR FROM THE FIRING LINE.

"It seems queer not to have Harry along with us on this trip to the war zone of Europe!"

"Just what Pudge, here, was saying last night, Billy. But you know my brother Harry has been ordered by Doctor Perkins to keep quiet for two whole months."

"Frank, he was lucky to break only his arm and collar bone, when it might have been his neck, in that nasty fall. But why are you rubbing your eyes like that, I'd like to know, Pudge Perkins?"

"Pirates and parachutes, I'll tell you why, Billy. Every little while I get to thinking I must be dreaming. So I pinch myself, and dig my knuckles in my eyes to make sure. But it's the real thing, isn't it, boys?"

"If you mean that the three of us, here, representing the *Sea Eagle Company, Limited*, of Brig Island, in Casco Bay, Maine, makers of up-to-date seaplanes, have come over to look up a sample shipment of our manufactures, and find ourselves being pestered by the French and British Governments to take a contract from them, why it certainly is the real thing."

"It was lucky my father has that arrangement with the French Government to protect our property through thick and thin," continued the boy called Pudge, who, as his name would signify, was very rotund in build, with a rosy face, and a good-natured twinkle in his eyes.

"Yes, only for that they would have commandeered the boxed seaplane long ago, and by now dozens of fleets made on the same model would be pouncing on the German bases along the Belgian coast," remarked the boy whose name was Frank, and to whom the other two evidently looked up as though he might be their leader in the enterprise requiring skill and courage.

"But they've been mighty good to us since then," went on Pudge. "They have allowed us to have a substantial hangar

built after our own peculiar pattern within reach of the water here at Dunkirk, though we are not so many miles away from where the Allies are fighting the Kaiser's men who are in Belgian trenches."

"Yes," added Billy Barnes, who had once been a lively reporter, now a member of the aeroplane manufacturing company engaged in making the remarkable type of airships invented by Pudge's scientific father, Doctor Perkins, "and during these weeks we've been able to get our machine together, so that right now it's in prime condition for making a flight on the sea or in the air."

"Whisper that next time, Billy," cautioned Frank, casting a quick glance about him as the three boys continued to walk along the road leading out of Dunkirk, which in places even skirted the water's edge.

"Why, what's up, Frank?" exclaimed the talkative Billy. "Do you think these bushes and trees have ears?"

"No, but there might be some sharp German spy hanging around this place," replied the other earnestly. "You know they do say they're everywhere. I've heard British soldiers in Calais and Dunkirk tell of mysterious strangers who disappeared when approached as if they were made of smoke. This spy system the Kaiser's men have down to a fine point. It's hard to keep anything from being carried to German Headquarters these days."

"Still, there are a lot of things they haven't learned before they happened," declared Billy. "That first British army of some eighty thousand soldiers came over to France, and nobody knew a thing about it until they were on the firing line. But, Frank, do you reckon the Germans have been watching the three of us working here with our hangar and hydro-aeroplane?"

"I'm as sure of it as I am of my own name," declared the other firmly. "Why, the very fact that our hangar differed so much from ordinary ones, being so much larger for one thing, would make them suspect. Then there has been a heap of talk going on about this wonderful airship of ours,

which was carried, every word of it, to German Headquarters.”

“Batter and butterflies!” spluttered Pudge, who seemed addicted to strange exclamations, especially when excited, “we’ll certainly have to watch out, then, now that our wonderful *Sea Eagle* is in working order.”

“Yes,” said Billy Barnes earnestly, “it would be a tough joke on the company to have some clever thieves get away with it, just when we are ready to show the French Government that it is away above ordinary seaplanes.”

“There’s the hangar, boys,” remarked Frank, with a vein of relief in his voice, as though grave fears may have been giving him more or less uneasiness. “Stir your stumps, Pudge, and we’ll soon be under our own roof. I may have a suggestion to make after we’ve looked around a bit that I hope both of you will agree with.”

While the three chums are advancing on the strangely elevated building that had been erected to accommodate their seaplane, we may take advantage of the opportunity to glance backward a bit, in order to see who and what they were. We do this for the benefit of those readers who may not have had the good fortune to peruse previous volumes in this series.

Two bright, inventive brothers, New York boys, who had actually built an aëroplane which they named the *Golden Eagle*, had shipped it to Central America when given a chance to save a plantation owned by their father, and threatened by the revolutionists in Nicaragua. This they had managed to accomplish, through the assistance of a young reporter friend named Billy Barnes. In this book, which was called *The Boy Aviators in Nicaragua*, were also related the thrilling adventures that befell the young air pilots when their craft was carried out to sea in an electrical storm; and also how they were rescued by means of a wireless apparatus through which they communicated with a steamer.

In the second volume, *The Boy Aviators on Secret*

Service, the reader was taken to the mysterious Everglades region of Florida where the young inventors once more demonstrated their ability to grapple with emergencies. They proved that they were patriotic sons of Uncle Sam by discovering and putting out of commission a factory that was making dangerous explosives without the consent of the Washington Government.

It was a long jump from Florida to the depths of the Dark Continent, but the occasion arose necessitating their taking this trip to Africa. If you want to learn how theirs was virtually the first aëroplane to soar above the trackless heart of Africa, how they found the hidden hoard of priceless ivory secreted by slavers in the wonderful Moon Mountains, what strange things came about through their being hunted by the vindictive Arab slave trader, with many other interesting adventures, you can do so by procuring *The Boy Aviators in Africa*.

Through the coaxing of their warm chum, Billy Barnes, the boys were next induced to enter in a competitive race across the continent, and it can be easily understood that the pages of this book, *The Boy Aviators in Record Flight*, fairly teem with exciting incidents and thrilling adventures. Crossing the great Western cow country, they met with many difficulties from sand storms to treacherous cowboys and renegade Indians that threatened to end their game voyage. But the same indomitable spirit that had carried Frank and Harry through so many trials allowed them to meet with the glorious success they so richly deserved.

From one series of adventures like this it was easy for the wide-awake young air pilots to engage in others. A story of an old Spanish galleon caught in the grip of that mysterious Sargasso Sea, where the circling tides have held vessels amidst the floating grass for centuries, fascinated them, and they set out to explore the dismal region that has been the graveyard for countless ships. Of course, the lure lay in the fact that a vast treasure was said to be aboard this old galleon; and the hunt for it, together with the opposition caused by a rival expedition, makes

great reading for boys who have red blood in their veins. It is all set down in *The Boy Aviators' Treasure Quest*, which has been voted one of the best of the entire series.

The Boy Aviators' Polar Dash was possibly the most remarkable example of Young America's nerve ever written. How the brothers came to plan the trip to the Antarctic region, and what amazing things happened to them while carrying it out, you will certainly appreciate when you read the book. The object of the expedition was fairly covered, and they came back in safety; but only for the aëroplane the result could never have been attained, which proved how valuable an airship might be amidst the eternal ice of the frozen zones.

In the volume following this, the boys again found themselves caught in a swirl of exciting events. They had become engaged to Doctor Perkins, who was not only a scientific gentleman of note but particularly an aviator bent on startling the world through the agency of a monster seaplane which he had invented. He believed that a voyage across the ocean could easily be made in one of his safe aircraft, which combined many features not as yet in common use among the most advanced aviators. On Brig Island in Casco Bay, within sight of the Maine coast, they erected their factory, and manufactured various types of aëroplanes for the market. So far this wonderful seaplane had not been given to the world, for Doctor Perkins was shrewd enough to first get his patents in all foreign countries in order to protect his interests. In *The Boy Aviators' Flight for a Fortune* have been related a series of remarkable adventures that befell the young air pilots when trying out the first of these enormous hydro-aëroplanes, that would skim along the water or sail through the air with equal swiftness and safety.

One of these enormous seaplanes had been boxed in sections and shipped over to France, with the design of giving the Government officials an actual exhibition before they would agree to making a large contract with the firm.

Then the terrible world war had broken out, and for some

months it was not known just what had become of the precious machine.

Finally word was received that it was safe at Havre, under the protection of the French Government, which would adhere strictly to the letter of the written agreement which they had entered into with the American company.

An urgent request was sent across the sea for some competent aviators to come over and put the several parts together, so that an actual test could be made. The French Government, if the trial proved convincing, stood ready to make almost any kind of contract with the company. This would be either in the way of ordering a large number of seaplanes, providing they could be delivered without breaking the neutrality laws binding the United States, or else giving a royalty on each and every machine manufactured in France under the patents granted to the doctor.

This necessary but brief explanation puts the reader, who may not have previously known Frank and his chums, in possession of facts concerning their past. While Pudge Perkins, the doctor's son, was not an experienced aviator, he had picked up more or less general knowledge in the factory, and had come abroad with Frank and Billy, as he was accustomed to say, just to "keep them from dying of the blues, in case the French Government kept putting them off from week to week, or if anything else disagreeable happened."

Indeed, Pudge, with his abounding good nature, his love for fun, and great capacity for eating, might be looked upon as a pretty fine antidote for the dread disease known as the "blues." No one could long remain depressed in mind when *he* was around. Besides, Pudge was really smarter than he looked; appearances in his case were apt to be deceptive; for the boy had a fund of native sagacity back of his jolly ways.

Their hangar had been built in a rather lonely spot close to the water. This was done for several purposes, chief among which might be mentioned their desire to avoid

publicity.

The obliging French authorities had even placed a guard at the point where the road passed the open spot now enclosed with a high fence; and so effectual had this proved that up to now the Americans had really not been annoyed to any extent.

Frank, however, had known for some time that all their movements were being watched from different elevated stations in the way of hilltops, or the roofs of houses, by men who carried field glasses. He had many times caught the glint of the sun on the lens when a movement was made.

As long as it went no further than that Frank had not cared, because these suspected spies could see next to nothing. But of late serious fears had begun to annoy him. The seaplane was ready for its first trip, and in a condition where it might be stolen, if a band of daring men took it into their heads to make the attempt.

At one end of the hangar a long track with a gradual slope ran down to the water, so that the seaplane could be launched in that way if desired. A narrow stairway on the land side led up to the stout door which they always kept fastened with an odd padlock capable of resisting considerable pressure.

Each one of the three boys had a key for this lock, which they were very careful to keep fastened to a steel pocket chain. Pudge, having mounted the stair first, puffing from the exertion, was about to insert his key in the padlock when he was heard to utter an exclamation. The others saw him look closely, and then turn upon them with an expression of mingled alarm and consternation on his round face.

"As sure as you live, boys," the stout boy gasped, "that's a bit of wax sticking to our padlock! Someone's been taking an impression so as to have a duplicate key made!"

CHAPTER II. THE WORK OF GERMAN SPIES.

When that astonishing declaration made by Pudge told the other two boys the nature of his discovery, they also glanced at the suspicious atom of wax sticking to the brass padlock.

"Sure enough, Frank; that it is," gurgled Billy Barnes.

"There's no question about it," admitted Frank, as he took the fragment between his thumb and forefinger, and examined it.

"It wasn't here when we came around this morning, I'd take my affidavit to that," declared Billy.

"Dories and dingbats, not a bit of it!" exclaimed Pudge. "That padlock was as clean as a whistle, for I rubbed it with my sleeve to brighten it. There's been some one snooping around here since then; and I guess they must mean to come back again to-night to steal the seaplane!"

"Open up, and let's make sure things are all right still," demanded Frank. "We can settle on some sort of plan to upset their scheme by putting on a new lock, or something like that."

Pudge, with a trembling hand, managed to insert his key, and upon the door being opened the three boys hurried inside the curious elevated hangar. It had been built with a metal roof, though whether this would really prove bombproof in case of a German air raid, such as had occurred several times, was a question.

"Thank goodness! everything seems to be O. K., boys!" cried Billy, after he had taken a swift survey of the interior, including the monster seaplane built on so advanced a model that there was certainly nothing like it known to aviators.

Frank, too, breathed more freely, for he had not known what to expect.

"Yes," he went on to say earnestly, "and we ought to be

mighty thankful that we've managed to get along up to now without having our whole outfit wrecked by a bomb, set on fire by a German spy, or raided some night by a party of unknown persons who would have an interest in keeping the French Government from getting this sample seaplane."

"My idea is this," remarked Billy soberly. "They could have done the mischief at almost any time, but some one in authority thought it would be a brighter idea for them to wait until we had finished working on the plane, and then steal it, so that the Germans could copy our model for their army."

"Gatling guns and grasshoppers, but I think you must be right, Billy," exploded Pudge. "Haven't we known that they kept a steady watch on us while we worked away here, even if they couldn't see much? And many a time we disputed whether those chaps were German spies, or Frenchmen set on guard so as to make sure we didn't take a notion to fly away some day to the enemy."

Frank was looking unusually serious, and it could be plainly seen that he had a weight on his mind. The afternoon was near its close; and before long the shadows of a dark February night would be closing in around them.

"One thing sure, boys," he finally said, "we must not leave our seaplane unguarded another night."

"Do you think they mean to make away with it tonight, Frank?" demanded Billy.

"In some way they seem to know we've finished our work," came the reply. "It puzzles me to guess how they learned it, when we only this noon notified the French authorities in secret that we were ready for any sort of long-distance test they might wish to order."

"Must be a leak at Headquarters!" suggested Billy quickly.

"Tamales and terrapins, that would be a nice proposition, I should think!" ejaculated Pudge.

"Let's step out and look around a little," suggested Frank. "Perhaps we may find some trace of these unwelcome visitors who have managed to get up here to

our door in spite of the soldier standing guard by the gate of our stockade."

"They must have come from the water side, Frank," Pudge was heard to say as he followed the others down the stairway that led to the ground.

"Be careful how you step around," cautioned Frank. "Here, both of you plant a foot alongside mine, and in that way we'll have a set of prints to go by. Now notice just what they look like, and see if you can find any fresh marks that are different in some way from ours."

It was an easy task he had set them, for almost immediately Billy sang out to the effect that he had made a discovery, and hardly had he ceased speaking when Pudge announced that he, too, wanted Frank's opinion on a footprint that was much too large to have been made by any of them.

A further hunt revealed the fact that apparently three parties must have been at the foot of the steps leading up to their locked hangar. This important discovery was anything but pleasant to Frank Chester; it told him that a crisis was undoubtedly approaching their enterprise, which would seriously affect its success or failure.

What if, after all their earnest work, just when the wonderful seaplane had been made ready for a flight, those secret emissaries of the Germans managed to steal it away! Doubtless they had prepared for just such a stroke, and had an experienced air pilot hovering around so as to take charge of the hydro-aëroplane after it was successfully launched.

That would be the last the aëroplane boys would ever see of their valuable property. In time of war all devices are recognized as proper, and this theft of the American seaplane would be hailed as one of the most glorious feats of the German arms, as well as a serious blow at the air power of the Allies.

"There's only one thing to be done," said Frank, turning to the stout chum, "if you are game to tackle it, Pudge."

The fat boy winced but set his teeth hard together.

"Rifles and rattlesnakes, just try me, Frank, that's all!" he chortled, squaring his shoulders aggressively in a manner the others both knew meant that his fighting blood had been aroused.

"While Billy and I stay here to guard the machine, you must go back to town and get another kind of padlock, Pudge!" exclaimed Frank. "Pick out one that will hold as securely as this does. If we have to change it every day, we've got to make a sure thing of it."

"Was it that you said you meant to speak about after we got inside the hangar, Frank?" inquired Billy as Pudge prepared to start bravely away through the gathering shadows of evening.

"Well, it was something along the same lines," explained Frank; "in fact, I meant to suggest that one of us stay here nights until we had word from Headquarters that the hour had come to make our test, and prove that the *Sea Eagle* could stand up against a gale when common seaplanes would go to smash, or have to stay at their moorings."

"Mumps and mathematics, but I agree with you there, Frank!" cried Pudge. "And for one I'm in favor of camping out here right along. We could rig up a little stove, and cook our meals. It would be good fun at that, because then we'd have the real old-fashioned Yankee grub instead of this French fool stuff that never satisfies a healthy appetite."

The others looked at Pudge and exchanged nods. They knew his failing, and could sympathize with the poor fellow. Pudge was patriotic enough to prefer the American style of cooking, which always spelled abundance according to his way of thinking.

"I'm off, fellows," he now announced. "Look for me inside of an hour or so. Of course, it'll be about dark by then, but I know every stone on the road between here and town, I've traveled along the way so often. So long!"

With a genial wave of his hand, Pudge left them. The other pair looked after him with considerable solicitude;

there was only one Pudge after all, according to their opinion, and he had a happy faculty for wrapping himself in the affections of his mates.

"You don't think anything could happen to him going or coming, do you, Frank?" asked Billy Barnes, as they saw Pudge vanish through the partly open gate of the high stockade.

"Why, no; I hardly think so," replied the other slowly. "Perhaps I should have gone for the padlock myself. If I had thought twice, I would have done that."

"Too late—Pudge is on the way," remarked Billy. "Let's go up and take a peep around once more to see that everything is in apple-pie shape—each wire-stay keyed up to the right tune for efficiency, the motors ready to do business, the gas pump lubricated, and, in fact, our machine fit to toe the scratch as if there were a race on."

Once they were inside the hangar, Frank fastened the door with a bar that had been arranged for just such a purpose. Then, turning on a flood of light from an acetylene gas battery, they examined every part of the big seaplane. It had something of the appearance of a gigantic sleeping bat as it lay there motionless, but with all the attributes of tremendous power for skimming along on the surface of the water or soaring among the clouds.

"In perfect condition, as far as I can make out!" remarked Frank, after they had completed this careful survey.

"Yes," added the other, with a glow of excusable enthusiasm on his face, "and if there was any necessity for doing it we could be off with a minute's notice."

"I took pains to make sure that there was a clear and uninterrupted stretch of water in front of our hangar," said Frank. "No vessels are allowed to anchor on this side of the harbor, though there are many transports from Great Britain across the way that have brought men and war material and stores over."

"Oughtn't Pudge be about due by now, Frank? It's pitch dark outside, and I should think a full hour must have crept

by since he left us?"

"I was thinking of that myself, Billy. Still, we must remember that our chum is a bit slow on his legs, compared with the way you and I get over the ground. Besides, he may have been delayed at the store where he expects to get the new padlock."

"Yes, I hadn't thought of that," admitted Billy. "But we might use the 'phone we have installed, and find out if he's started back. It would make our minds a little more easy, you know."

"Just as you say, Billy. And suppose you call them up while I do something I want to alter here—nothing of consequence, of course, but the change would strike my eye better."

"All right, Frank." With which remark Billy turned to one end of the hangar close by, where a telephone apparatus could be seen attached to the wooden wall.

Frank went at his little task with his customary vim. It mattered nothing to him that the flight of the great seaplane would be neither hindered nor assisted by its consummation. He simply liked to see things shipshape at all times.

"What's the matter, Billy?" he called out presently, on hearing the other ring for the third time, and also muttering to himself as though annoyed.

"Why, Frank, I don't seem able to get Central," replied Billy, once more energetically working the handle of the apparatus.

Apparently Frank was enough interested to cross over so as to see for himself what was wrong. He sat down on the box Billy vacated and tried to get in touch with the operator at the central switchboard. After testing it in several ways, Frank replaced the receiver and looked up at his chum.

"Have they disconnected our wire at Central, do you think, Frank; or is the hello girl flirting with her beau, and not paying attention to business?" asked Billy.

“Neither,” answered the other soberly; “but I’m afraid somebody has cut our wire so as to keep us from calling for help if anything happens here to-night!”

CHAPTER III. SAVING THE GREAT SEAPLANE.

"Gee whillikins! that sounds like a serious proposition, Frank!" exclaimed Billy Barnes, when he heard the opinion of his companion.

"It looks as though we're up against something," admitted the other grimly. "They've evidently set out to capture this seaplane, and mean to do it, no matter at what cost."

"A compliment from the Kaiser to the ingenuity of Yankee inventors, I'd call it," said Billy; "but all the same I don't feel like throwing up my hands and letting them raid our shop here. It's a good thing we made that discovery, thanks to Pudge and his sharp eyes."

"Yes, and that you thought to use the wire, which showed us how somebody had been meddling so as to cut us off from the city," Frank remarked.

"What if they come in force, knowing we're here, Frank?"

"That door would not be able to stand much of an attack if they carried axes along with them, I'm afraid," Billy was told.

"My stars! do you think they'd be apt to do that sort of thing?" demanded the astonished assistant, as he looked around for some sort of weapon with which he might defend the passage of the doorway, should it come to a question of fighting.

"If they want this plane as badly as we think they do," said Frank, "there is little that desperate men might attempt that they would not try."

"And still there's no sign of poor Pudge!" ventured Billy, putting considerable emphasis on the adjective, as though he could almost imagine the happy-go-lucky Pudge lying on his back somewhere along the road, groaning in pain after having been struck down by a cowardly blow.

"I'm sorry to agree with you," Frank admitted slowly, "but

at the worst we'll hope they're only detaining our chum, and that he hasn't been hurt."

"How about my slipping out and trying to go for help, Frank? If they only knew at Headquarters about this, they would send a whole regiment of British Tommies on the run to patrol our works here. Say the word and I'm off."

Frank, however, shook his head as though the idea did not appeal to him.

"The chances are they would be on the lookout for something like that, Billy."

"And lay for me, you mean, don't you, Frank? Well, then, if it wasn't so cold I'd propose slipping down to the water and doing a little swimming stunt. Too bad we didn't think to have a boat of some kind with us."

"I was just thinking," ventured Frank, "that only on account of our being rushed for time we would have installed a wireless plant here, as we've often done before. Then we could send all the messages we wanted, and these spies wouldn't be able to bother with them."

"Yes, if we had only thought we'd run against a snag like this, Frank, we could have done that as easy as falling off a log. But it's too late now to bother. The question is, what can we do about it?"

"There's always one last resort that I know of, Billy."

"Glad to know it, but please inform me as to its nature, won't you, Frank? I would give half of my year's salary just to be able to snap my fingers in the faces of these smart secret agents of the envious Germans who want to steal our thunder."

Frank turned and pointed straight at the big seaplane.

"There's the answer, Billy!" he said shortly.

At first the other simply stared as though unable to grasp the meaning of Frank's words. Then a sudden gleam of gathering intelligence began to show itself in his eyes; he emphatically brought down his fist in the open palm of his other hand.

"Wow! that's sure the ticket, Frank!" he burst out with, his enthusiasm spreading until his face was one solid grin. "We've got a way of escape right in our grip, and I was so blind as not to see it. Run off in the plane, of course, and leave the smarties to bite their fingernails. Great head, Frank! These German spies may think themselves wide-awake, but they'll have to get up bright and early in the morning to catch two Yankee boys napping, believe me!"

"Listen, Billy!"

"Did you think you heard something then, Frank?"

"There's someone at the door yonder; I saw it move, but the bar kept it from giving way," Frank went on in a low tone. "Don't act as though you suspected anything out of the way. They may be watching us through some peep-holes that have been bored in the walls. It would be foolish for us to give our plan away."

"I understand what you are aiming at, Frank," remarked the other, trying hard to appear perfectly natural, immediately adding under his breath: "There, I saw the door quiver again. They must wonder why it refuses to give way. That bar is our salvation, because like as not there's a number of them out there who would flock in with all sorts of weapons, meaning to keep us quiet while their aviators examine the machine and get ready for a launching. Whee! then good-by to our bully *Sea Eagle* forever."

"That'll never happen as long as we can lift a hand to prevent it," said Frank.

"Say, you don't think that could be Pudge trying the door?" suggested Billy, as though struck by a sudden bright idea.

"Not very likely," came the reply; "but we can easily tell. If he hears me give our old signal, Pudge will answer on the dot. Listen and see if anything comes of it."

The whistle Frank emitted was of a peculiar character. It was immediately imitated from without, and so exactly that one might think it an echo. Frank shook his head on hearing this.

"Pudge isn't there," he said decisively. "If he was, as you very well know, Billy, he would have sent back the other call, entirely different from the one I gave."

"Then some fellow answered for Pudge, thinking we might open up, when they could rush the place and get possession—is that the way it stands, Frank?"

"As near as I can make out, it covers the ground," the young air pilot replied. "Now I'm going to put out this light. We don't really need it any longer, and if they are watching us through any peep-holes, it would give our plan away."

"We ought to know every part of this coop, Frank. As for the machine itself, I warrant you could find any stay or guy while it's pitch dark. Let it go. There, they are trying the door again. Seems as if they can't understand why it doesn't give way. If it keeps on shutting them out, sooner or later they'll try to batter it down. Oh! if I only had a gun here."

"I intended having one with the seaplane, but thought I wouldn't bother until we meant to start on a trip," explained Frank, keen regret in his voice.

"Seems to me it's always the unexpected that keeps cropping up with us," complained Billy. "I can look back to lots of times when things happened just as suddenly and without warning as this has."

"But they didn't down us, you want to remember," advised the other, in that confident way of his that always made his chums feel so much better.

"Now they're starting to pry at the doors, Frank, which means business. Hadn't we better be getting ready to make a start?"

"First of all I want you to stand by, and when I give the word fling both the large doors wide open," Frank told him. "After that, as I switch on the searchlight, so as to see what lies ahead, climb aboard to your regular place. And, Billy, please don't have any hitch in the program if you can help it!"

"Depend on me, Frank," said the other, slipping away in the darkness that now filled the interior of the big hangar.

Frank mounted to his seat. As no flight of consequence was intended, he did not bother donning the head shield he always carried with the machine, his gloves alone being deemed necessary for the occasion, though both of them had wisely secured their fleece-lined leather jackets. Just as Billy had said, Frank was so familiar with every lever and stay, as well as with the engine, that, with his eyes blindfolded, he could have manipulated the intricate working parts.

Quickly he adjusted things to his liking with a deftness that left nothing to be desired. The fact that those unseen parties on the other side of the door were becoming more insistent with every passing second did not seem to disturb Frank at all; for he knew very well they could not stop his departure now.

When, presently, he had finished his simple preparations and everything was ready for the grand finale, he gave the signal that Billy was expectantly awaiting.

“Open up, Billy!”

Immediately both wide doors flew back, for the boys had arranged things so that it required but a simple movement to accomplish this. Then Billy hustled toward the seaplane, which no longer stood there like a black shadow; for Frank had, with the pressure of his finger, caused the powerful searchlight placed in the bow of the remarkable craft to flood the space in front of the hangar down to and out on the water of the harbor.

Billy swung himself aboard almost in the twinkling of an eye. Then a lever was manipulated and with a rush the monster seaplane started. Even as it left the shelter of the building, Billy, hanging on with nervous hands, could see several figures in the dazzling flood of white light spring wildly aside so as to avoid being crushed by the oncoming giant seaplane as it tore down the inclined track leading to the water.

CHAPTER IV. THE ESCAPE.

Ahead of them lay that track of dazzling light. Every fragment of timber used in the construction of the inclined trestle upon which the seaplane was expected to reach the water was as plainly visible as at midday, with the sun shining above.

Billy fairly held his breath in fear lest the swift rush of the hydro-aëroplane should catch the two men on the slope unprepared, and hurl them into space. Just in the nick of time they threw themselves to one side, and the plunging monster glided by, so close that had he so willed, Billy could have thrust out a hand and touched one of the shrinking figures.

Then came a tremendous splash as they struck the water. Frank had made his calculations so carefully that there was not the slightest danger of a mishap. The boat was descending at such an angle that it instantly shot off the wheels that were underneath, and skimmed along the surface of the water like a great duck.

Billy drew his breath again, for it seemed as though they had actually run the gauntlet in safety. He heard the familiar throb of the reliable motors beginning to take up their sweet song, which told that Frank had started the machinery at the proper second, so that they did not lose any of the impetus gained in that rush down the slope.

From up in the quarter where they knew the hangar must be, came loud cries of anger. Those who had planned to capture the seaplane when it was in prime condition for a flight to the German lines had evidently met with a most aggravating disappointment.

Suddenly the brilliant light vanished, shutting them in a pall of darkness that was all the more dense because of their having been staring into that illuminated avenue ahead, along which the seaplane was rushing at fair speed.

"It's all clear in front, Billy," Frank hastened to say,

knowing that his companion must naturally think of the danger of a collision the first thing.

"Listen to 'em growl!" chuckled Billy, who had evidently been greatly amused as well as interested in the remarkable dash of the *Sea Eagle*. "But, after all, that was what I'd call a close shave, Frank. Didn't you hear the door being smashed in as we started?"

"I thought I did," replied the other, "but I knew that nothing up there could give us any trouble. The only chance of our being wrecked was for those on the inclined plane to place some obstruction on the track that would throw the wheels of our carriage off, and dump us in a heap below."

"They didn't want to wreck the seaplane, which was what saved us from that smashup," ventured Billy, and then quickly adding: "Hello! shut her off, did you, Frank?"

The musical hum of the twin motors and the whir of the revolving propellers had suddenly ceased, though the boat still continued to move along the top of the little waves coming in from the Channel.

"Yes, we have gone far enough for the present," replied the pilot.

They sat there for a little while, listening to the various sounds that reached their ears from the shore. Not far away the lights of Dunkirk could be seen, though these were by no means as brilliant as they might have been before the war broke out. This was on account of the fact that at any hour a raid from German *aéroplanes* might be expected in and around the encampment of the British troops.

"This is about the queerest situation we've ever found ourselves in, Frank," ventured Billy presently, as he felt the boat moving up and down gently on the bosom of the sea. "It's an experience we'll never forget. I'm wondering what the next move on the program is going to be? How can we get ashore tonight in this terrible darkness?"

"We may make up our minds not to try it," Frank told him quietly, as though he had some sort of plan in his mind, hatched on the spur of the moment.

"What's the idea, Frank?" asked Billy eagerly. "No matter how you figure it I'm game to stand by you."

"I'd never question that, Billy," declared the other warmly. "You've proved your grit many a time in the past. But here's the way the case stands. We could make an ascent from the water if we wanted, but on such a pitch-dark night that would mean trouble about coming down again. So what's to hinder our staying here until morning—lying on the water like a duck?"

"If the wind doesn't come up with the change in the tide, we could do it as easy as anything," assented Billy. "She rides like a duck, and could stand a lot more rough water than we're getting now. Frank, let's call it a go."

"We will find it pretty cold, of course, you understand, Billy?"

"Shucks! haven't we got on our leather jackets that are lined with fleece that have given us solid comfort many a time when we were six thousand feet and more up in the cold air? Why, Frank, we can strap ourselves to our seats, you know, and one of us can get a few winks of sleep while the other watches, ready to switch on the searchlight if anything threatens."

"It's plain to be seen that you're set on trying a night of it," said Frank, no doubt well pleased to have it so. "I'm worrying more about Pudge than of myself. Wish we knew he was all right."

"The same here," said Billy. "Frank, we must keep listening all through the night to catch his signal, if ever he makes it. You know we've got that code for communicating by means of fish horns. If Pudge gets to the hangar and finds that we're not around, the first thing he'll think will be that the seaplane has been stolen."

"Unless," Frank hastily interrupted, "he happened to be near enough to hear something of the row, when he ought to be able to guess what really happened. In that case I expect that later on, when he thinks the coast may be clear, Pudge will try to communicate with us. As you say, we must

keep on the alert. If you hear a sound that comes stealing from far away on the shore and resembles the bawl of a bull, answer it. Pudge will be in a stew about us, of course."

They sat there for some time listening, and exchanging occasional remarks. Then, at Billy's suggestion, they made use of the stout straps that were attached to each seat, intended to enable the navigators of the air to reduce to a minimum the risk of falling from a dizzy height.

"Take your choice, Frank, first watch or second," was the next proposition advanced by the one-time reporter. "I'm used to be up at all hours of the night—*that* was my busy time on the paper. So turn in, and I'll take charge of the deck."

"It'll only be a cat nap then, Billy," said the other, settling himself as comfortably as the conditions allowed, which was not saying much. "See that bright star over there in the west; it will drop behind the horizon in about an hour or so. Shake me then if I happen to be asleep."

"All right, Frank. And if anything crops up in the meantime that bothers me, I'm going to disturb you in a hurry."

"I hope you will, Billy; we can't afford to take any chances, understand, for the sake of a little sleep. Listen for signs of Pudge. It would relieve me a whole lot if I knew that he was safe."

After that Billy sat there and kept watch. The buoyant craft that had been so cleverly constructed so as to be equally at home on the water or in the air, rode the lazy billows that came rolling in from the Channel. The only sounds Billy could hear close by were the constant lapping of the waves against the side of the craft; though further off, toward the city, there was a half subdued murmur, such as might accompany the gathering of thousands of men in camp.

The lights had almost wholly vanished by this time, showing the strict discipline that was in vogue in these stirring times. Frequently had daring German aviators

appeared above Dunkirk to drop their bombs in the endeavor to damage the congested stores of the British troops, or strike a note of terror among the inhabitants of the Channel city.

Billy every little while twisted his head around and looked in different directions. But thick darkness lay about the floating seaplane, utterly concealing the shore as well as all vessels that lay further along in the harbor.

Possibly half an hour had passed in this way when Billy felt a sudden thrill. He started up, straining his hearing, as though to catch the repetition of some sound he believed he had heard.

Then, leaning over, he shook Frank.

"It's Pudge signaling, Frank, or else I'm away off my base. Listen!" was what he told the other, in excited tones.

A minute later and they both caught the far-away sound of what seemed to be the winding blast of an Alpine hunter's horn.

"Yes, it's Pudge, all right, and he wants to hear from us if we're within reach of the sound of his signal. Answer him, Billy!"

Already Billy had taken the horn from its fastenings, and no sooner had Frank given the order than he applied it to his lips. The sound that went forth, coming as it did from the blackness of the sea beyond, must have astonished any sailor on board the various steamers in the harbor.

Once, twice, three times did Billy give the peculiar note that Pudge knew so well. It must tell the absent chum that they were safe, and in the language of their secret code ask how things were going with him.

"There, he's given us back the message word for word!" cried Billy, as they caught the faint but positive reply from the unseen shore, perhaps at the deserted hangar. "Frank, he's all right! That takes a big load off our minds."

"Yes, now I can rest easy!" declared the other. "As that star isn't close to the sea as yet, Billy, if you don't mind, I

think I'll try for a few more winks of sleep. Pudge will go back to town and stay at our lodgings until we turn up, or send him a message. Everything is working finely."

"For us," added Billy, chuckling. "But think how mad those spies must be over losing the prize they thought was sure to fall into their hands. Why, I wouldn't be surprised if they discounted the capture of our seaplane, and over in Belgium were ready to start to work making copies of the same as soon as the sample could be delivered."

Billy appeared to be highly amused, for he chuckled to himself for several minutes while picturing the disappointment of the baffled plotters. Then once more he settled down to his task of serving as "officer of the watch."

As the minutes crept on, Billy began to observe the gradual approach of the star to the vague region where sea and heavens merged in one. In fact, Billy was yawning quite frequently now. He found himself fairly comfortable, thanks to the warmth of that leather fleece-lined jacket, and the hood which he had drawn partly over his head. Still, it was not very delightful, sitting there on the water; and perhaps the boy's thoughts frequently turned toward the bed he was missing.

"I wonder which way we're drifting now?" he suddenly asked himself; he immediately set to work trying to answer his question by observing the direction of the tide, as well as by the light current of air.

When next he thought to turn his head so as to glance backward, Billy received a bit of a shock. A sort of thin haze had settled down on the water by now, but through this he had discovered two moving lights. They looked very queer as seen in that foggy atmosphere; but Billy was smart enough to know what they stood for.

He immediately awoke Frank, whispering the astonishing news in his ear.

CHAPTER V. A NIGHT ON THE CHANNEL.

"They're looking for us, and they've got lanterns, Frank!" was what the one on guard said in a low tone as he pulled his chum's sleeve.

Frank was wide-awake instantly, and one quick glance showed him the approaching peril.

"Yes, you're right about it, Billy," he observed cautiously, and if there was a little quiver to his voice that was no more than might be expected under the exciting conditions by which they were surrounded.

"How queer the lights look swinging along close to the water, and in that fog, too. They are heading out this way, I'm afraid, Frank."

"It seems so, Billy."

"Hadn't we better get under way, then?" continued the nervous one.

"No hurry," Frank told him. "They may happen to swing around one way or the other and miss us. We'll wait and find out. You know we can get moving with a second's warning. Now let's watch and see what happens."

Billy could be heard sighing every now and then. Doubtless, as he sat there with his head turned halfway around, observing the creeping movements of those two strange lights through the fog that hugged the surface of the water, he was thinking it the most exciting moment of his whole career.

Then a new idea seemed to have lodged in his brain, for again he whispered to his companion.

"There may be more than those two boats, Frank!"

"Possible but not probable," Frank replied.

"What if, when we started off with a rush, one happened to get in the way?" pursued Billy.

"I'd be sorry for the men in that boat, that's all, Billy!" was

the laconic reply he received, and apparently it satisfied the other, for he did not pursue the subject any further.

Meanwhile it became apparent that the searching boats were gradually drawing nearer the floating seaplane. Unless they changed their course very soon those in the hostile craft would be likely to make a discovery that must fill them with delight.

"Are we headed right for a start, Frank?" asked Billy, a minute later.

Frank himself had been considering that very thing. The influence of the tide seemed to have swung the seaplane around a little more than he liked; but then this could be easily remedied, for they were prepared for such a possibility when on the water.

There was a little paddle within reach of Frank's hand; all he had to do was to pull a couple of cords, and it was in his possession.

Softly he worked it through the water. Frank had spent many happy hours in a canoe when on his outing trips, and knew how to wield a paddle like an expert. He had even taken lessons from one of those old-time guides accustomed, in years gone by, to using a birch bark canoe in stealing up on deer when jacklight hunting was not banned by the law.

Consequently he now used his paddle without making the slightest noise; and under its magic influence the clumsy craft gradually veered until he had its spoon-shaped bow heading just where he wanted it. Then he handed the paddle to Billy to replace as best he might.

They could by this time vaguely make out the nearer boat, and also the indistinct figures of two men. One of these was rowing, while the other held up the lantern.

Of course, there was nothing to tell Frank who they might be. Perhaps, in these stirring times, the waters of the harbor had to be patrolled by guards on the watch for submarines or other perils. These protectors of shipping may have heard or seen enough that was suspicious to

warrant a search of the adjacent waters.

He was more inclined to believe, however, that the German spies, rendered furious by the escape of the coveted American seaplane had, as a last resort, started out to scour the water nearby in hopes of locating it.

“Frank!” whispered Billy again, “I think he glimpses the seaplane through the fog!”

The actions of the man holding the lantern indicated this, for he was plainly much excited, turning to his companion at the oars as though urging him to make more haste.

“Then it’s high time we were off!” said Frank.

Again did Billy hold his breath as the possibility of the motors failing them in this great emergency flashed through his mind. But he need not have allowed himself this mental anxiety, for no such calamity befell them.

A shrill whistle was heard, evidently a signal to those in the second boat to inform them that the object of their search had been discovered. Then came the cheery whirr of the motors, accompanied by the churn of the busy propellers, and like a giant, double-winged dragonfly, the seaplane started along the surface of the water, followed by another burst of angry shouts.

“Duck! they may be going to shoot!” exclaimed Frank, suiting his actions to his own words.

That was just what did happen, for a volley of shots sounded, and had the motors not been making so much noise the boys might have heard the whistle of the passing leaden messengers.

There was no harm done, for, unable to longer see the speeding seaplane, those who used their weapons with such reckless abandon had to fire at random. Skimming the water like an aquatic bird, with a gradual but rapid increase to their speed, the seaplane soon began to rise.

Billy realized from that that Frank meant to make an ascension, possibly deeming it wise to get away from such a dangerous neighborhood as quickly as possible. And, as

they anticipated, the reliable *Sea Eagle* was doing her prettiest when called upon to show her fine points.

Once free from the sea, they rose until Frank felt sure of his position. He had switched on the electric searchlight, and the storage battery was of sufficient power to send the ray of white light far ahead. It could be turned to any quarter of the compass.

"Well, here we are off on our trial trip sooner than we expected," said Billy, meaning to draw the other out, for he was consumed by curiosity to know what was coming next.

"Two narrow squeaks on one night ought to be enough, don't you think, Billy?" asked the pilot, as he started out into that avenue of light, and then glanced at the handy compass so as to fix their course on his mind.

"Well, we've been pretty lucky so far," admitted the other. "It wouldn't pay to keep up that sort of racket. They say, you know, that the pitcher may go to the well just once too often. It might be three times and out for us."

"And neither of us feels like accommodating those anxious German secret agents whose one business in Dunkirk is to steal our thunder, do we, Billy?"

"Not much," replied the other boy with decided emphasis. "I'd sooner see the airship smashed to pieces than know it had fallen into the hands of the Kaiser's men."

"Hold on, Billy! You know we're supposed to be neutral in this fighting business. We've got some mighty good friends who are of German blood, and we think a whole lot of them, too."

"Oh! I'm not saying a word against Germans; they're as fine a people as any in all the world; but, Frank, what we've met with in Northern France and in the little of Belgium we saw that day Major Nixon took us out in his motor car, somehow set me against the invaders. Anyway, we've been treated splendidly by the French here, and our business has been with them."

"That's understood, Billy, and I agree with you in all you say. But let's talk now about our chances of dropping down

again to the water.”

“Oh! then you don’t mean to stay up here, Frank? Will it be safe to descend, do you think?” asked Billy, a new sense of anxiety gripping him.

“So far as the plane is concerned we can do almost anything with it,” Frank assured him. “Our light will tell us whether the sea is too rough for alighting. We’re heading downward as it is right now. Steady, Billy, and keep on the watch.”

Having taken his course, Frank knew that they must be out on the channel some miles from the harbor. On nine nights out of ten he would have hesitated about attempting such a risky proceeding as he now had in view; but the calmness that prevailed encouraged him to take the chances of a descent in the darkness.

“I can see the water all right, Frank!” exclaimed Billy a minute later, as the wonderful air and water craft continued to head downward, though with but a gradual descent.

“It looks good to me,” ventured the pilot, with confidence in his tone.

Presently they were so close to the surface of the water that both of the boys could see that it was fairly quiet. The long rollers were steadily moving toward the southeast, as though the night air influenced them, but then Frank had before now dropped down on the sea when it was much more boisterous.

“Here goes!” he remarked, as he deflected the rudder just a trifle more, and immediately they struck the water.

The *Sea Eagle*, being especially constructed for this sort of work, and having a spoon bow that would not allow her to dip deeply, started along on the surface, with the motors working at almost their lightest speed. Then Frank cut off all power.

“We did it handsomely, Frank!” exulted Billy Barnes, feeling quite relieved now that the seaplane had proven fit and right for the business it had been built to demonstrate.

"And here we are floating again," said Frank, "but this time so far away from the harbor of Dunkirk that there's no longer any danger from spies. Billy, since that star has dipped behind the horizon, suppose you take your little twenty winks of sleep."

"You think it's perfectly safe to lie here the rest of the night, do you, Frank?"

"Why not, when we can get away if the wind should come up, and the sea prove too rough for us? Make your mind easy on that score, Billy."

"But how about steamers crossing from the other side of the channel?" asked Billy. "I think I heard that they generally take the night to make the trip these times, so as to keep the German aviators from learning how many transports loaded with troops come over. Besides, they avoid danger from submarines, and bombs dropped from Zeppelins that way."

"Oh! the chances of our being run down are so small that we needn't bother about them," Frank assured the nervous chum. "I promise you that if I see a moving light, or hear the propeller of a steamer, I'll wake you up, and we can stand by, ready to go aloft in case the worst threatens."

That seemed to appease Billy, for he gave a satisfied grunt and proceeded to settle himself for a nap.

"This is being 'rocked in the cradle of the deep,' all right," he remarked, as the floating seaplane rose and fell on the swell. Frank made no reply, so that presently Billy relapsed into silence, his regular breathing telling the other he was sound asleep.

So the long night crept on. The boys managed to catch more or less sleep, for nothing arose to alarm them. Naturally, their position was far from a comfortable one, and therefore Frank, who happened to be on duty at the time, felt pleased more than words could tell when he eventually glimpsed a light in the eastern sky that proclaimed the coming of dawn.

CHAPTER VI. UNDER SHRAPNEL FIRE.

"Have we anything to eat along with us, Frank?"

"Why, hello! are you awake, Billy? I was just thinking of calling you, or sending a bell hop up to pound on your door. It's morning, you see."

"Yes, I noticed that light over there in the east, and was thinking how the poor fellows in the trenches must feel when they see it creeping on, knowing as they do that it means another day of hard work and fighting. But how about my question, Frank? Did we think to fetch that pouch of ship-biscuit along with us?"

"Yes, it's tied just back of you," the other informed him with a laugh. "But I'm surprised to hear you so keen for a bite, Billy. If it had been Pudge, now, I wouldn't have thought so much about it, because he's always ready for six meals a day."

"I don't know what ails me," acknowledged the other, as he reached for the little waterproof bag in which Frank always tried to keep a pound or so of hardtack, with some cheese as well, to provide for any emergency like the present, "it may be this sea air, or perhaps it's due to the excitement we've gone through; but I'm as hungry as a wolf in winter."

"Perhaps I may take your appetite away then," suggested Frank, with a chuckle.

"In what way?" demanded Billy, with a round ship biscuit halfway to his mouth.

"Oh! by making a stunning proposition I've been considering while I sat here, that's all."

"Gee! it takes you to think up things, Frank. Now, as for me, I've been badgering my poor brains about how we would astonish the people of Dunkirk when we came sailing into the harbor and made for our hangar. There'd be as much excitement as if a dozen of those little Taube

aëroplanes of the Germans had hove in sight, just as they did on that day of the last air raid. Now tell me what the game is, please, Frank."

"Suppose, then, we weren't in such a big hurry to go back to our moorings?" said the other. "Suppose, that having broken away, we took that trial spin we've always been promising ourselves when things were ready!"

Billy became so excited that he actually forgot to eat.

"Wow! that's a brilliant scheme, Frank, let me tell you!" he exclaimed. "Say, for a wonder, all the conditions favor aëroplane work. The wind that has kept up during the last three days seems to have blown itself out, and we're likely to have a quiet spell. They'll be on the watch for another raid of those Taubes from up Antwerp way on such a calm day as this. Frank, shall we try it?"

"Wait for another half hour," replied the other. "By then it will be broad daylight, and we can see what the signs promise. If things look good we'll start up and take a run to the northeast."

"Over the trenches, do you mean, and perhaps far into Belgium?" cried Billy, to whom the prospect of seeing something of the terrible fighting that was daily taking place in the lowlands along the canal appealed with irresistible force; for the old reporter spirit had never been killed when he gave up newspaper work for aëroplane building.

"We'll see how the land lies," was all Frank would say. Billy knew very well the other was bound to be just as keenly interested in the warlike scenes below them as he could be, hence he was willing to check his impatience, leaving everything to Frank.

Both of them munched away on the ship-biscuit and cheese. It was pretty dry fare, but then there was a bottle of water at hand if they felt choking at any time.

The half hour passed and they could see from the growing light in the eastern sky that the sun would soon be making its appearance. Around them there was nothing but an endless succession of rollers, upon which the buoyant

seaplane rose and fell with a continual gurgling sound.

"If this low-hanging fog would only lift," remarked Billy, as he put away the hardtack bags, "we could tell just where we were. As it is, there's no such thing as seeing land, which must be over there to the east."

"The sea fog is rising and will disappear as soon as the breeze comes," Frank observed sagaciously. "By then we want to be several thousand feet up, and taking a look through the glasses at the picture we'll have spread out below us."

"Let's start now," suggested Billy. "I'm wild to see what the country up across the border of Belgium looks like. To think of us being able to glimpse all the German defenses as we go sailing over so smoothly."

Frank laughed.

"You are counting your chickens again before they're hatched, Billy, an old failing of yours. It may not be the smooth sailing you think. Remember that the Germans are always ready-primed with their wonderful anti-aëroplane guns for hostile raiders. We may have a dozen Taubes, too, buzzing after us, or find ourselves chased into the clouds by a big Zeppelin."

If Frank thought to alarm Billy by saying this, he immediately saw that he had failed to shake the other's nerve.

"Gee! that would make it interesting, for a fact!" the other exclaimed, his face beaming with eagerness. "Frank, you can take my word for it, no Taube, or Zeppelin either, for that matter, can catch up with our good old *Sea Eagle*, once you crack on all of her two thousand revolutions a minute with both motors. They haven't got a thing over on this side of the big pond that is in the same class with Doctor Perkins's invention."

"I think you're pretty near right there, Billy," said the pilot, as he proceeded to press the button that would start things humming.

Immediately they were beginning to move along on the

surface, the peculiar spoon-shaped bow preventing the water from coming aboard. Faster went the huge seaplane as Frank gave increased power, until when he tilted the ascending rudder they left the water just as a frightened duck does after attaining sufficient momentum.

"Hurrah!" exclaimed the delighted Billy, as soon as he realized, from the change in motion, that they no longer rested on the water, but were cleaving the air.

Mounting in spirals, as usual, the two boys soon began to have a splendid view, not only of the sea, but of the nearby land as well.

"Oh! look, Frank, over there in the west; those must be the famous white chalk cliffs of Dover across the channel we see. To think that we are looking down at France, and even Belgium, and on England at the same time."

"That's about where the Kaiser is aiming to throw those monster shells from his big forty-two centimeter guns, after he has captured Calais, you know," remarked Frank.

"I guess that dream's been smashed by now, and there's nothing in it," Billy was saying. "Not that the Germans didn't try mighty hard to get there, and tens of thousands of their brave fellows gave up their lives to carry out a whim of the commander, which might not have amounted to much, after all. Oh! Frank, with the glass here I can see our hangar as easy as anything."

"That's good, Billy. I was just going to ask you to look and see if those disappointed spies had done anything to it. I'm glad to hear you say it's still there in good shape. I expect we'll have more or less need of that shed from time to time."

"Well, we don't mean to spend many nights paddling around on the sea," affirmed Billy, now beginning to turn his glass upon the country they were approaching, and which lay to the north of Dunkirk.

Frank had changed their course so that they were now over the land. They could easily see the camps of the British troops, though they were so far above them that

moving companies looked like marching ants. The tents could not be concealed, and there were besides numerous low sheds, which doubtless sheltered supplies of every description, needed by the army fighting in the trenches further north.

As Frank drew more upon the motors that were keeping up a noisy chorus, the huge seaplane rushed through the air and gave them a change of landscape every little while.

The sun was in plain sight, although just beginning to touch things below with golden fingers. Covering land and water, they could see over a radius that must have been far more than fifty miles.

Billy kept uttering exclamations, intended to express the rapture that filled his breast. In all his experience he had never gazed upon anything to compare with what he now saw spread out below him as though upon a monster checkerboard. African wilds, Western deserts and Polar regions of eternal ice were all dwarfed in interest by this spectacle.

Again and again did he call the attention of his chum to certain features of the wonderful picture that especially appealed to him. Now it was the snakelike movements of what appeared to be a new army heading toward the front, accompanied by a long line of big guns that were drawn by traction engines. Then the irregular line of what he made out to be the opposing trenches riveted his attention. He was thrilled when he actually saw a rush made by an attacking party of Germans, to be met with volleys that must have sadly decimated their ranks, for as Billy gazed with bated breath he saw the remnant of the gallant band reel back and vanish amidst their own trenches.

"Am I awake, Frank, or asleep and dreaming all this?" Billy exclaimed, as he handed the glasses to his chum.

This Frank could readily do because they were running along as smoothly as velvet, and long habit had made him perfectly at home in handling the working parts of the seaplane.

"I wonder what they think of us?" wondered Billy. "You may be sure that every field glass and pair of binoculars they own is leveled at us right now. They must think the French or the British have sprung one on them, to beat out their old Zeppelins at the raiding business! Oh! wouldn't I give something to be close enough to the commanding general to see the look on his face."

Frank was looking for something else just then. Although they were flying at such a great height, he fancied that the present security would hardly last. The Germans were only waiting until they had gone on a certain distance; then probably a dozen of their hustling little Taube machines would spring upward and chase after the singular stranger like a swarm of hornets, seeking to cut off escape, and hoping by some lucky shot to bring it down.

The barograph was in plain sight from where Frank sat, and perhaps the quick glance he gave at its readings just then had some connection with this expectation of coming trouble.

Billy interpreted it otherwise. He was afraid Frank, thinking they had gone far enough, was sweeping around to start back toward the British trench line.

"Just a little further, Frank," pleaded Billy. "There's a big move on over yonder, seems like, where that army is coming along; and I'd like to see enough to interest our good friend Major Nixon when we get back."

"I don't know whether I'll let you say a single word, Billy," the air pilot told him, as he relinquished the glasses to the eager one. "That wouldn't be acting neutral, you know. Besides, there are plenty of the Allies' machines able to fly, and those airmen like Graham-White ought to be able to pick up news of any big movement."

They could see patches of snow in places, and much water in others where the low country had been inundated by the Belgians. This was done in hopes of hastening the retreat of the invaders, who despite all had stuck to their trenches and the unfinished canal for months, as though

rooted there.

All at once there sounded a loud crash not far below the young air pilots, and a puff of white smoke told where a shrapnel shell had burst.

“Frank, they’re firing at us!” exclaimed Billy, who had made an involuntary ducking movement with his head as the sharp discharge burst upon his ears.

Even as he spoke another, and still a third crash told that the Germans had determined the time was at hand to try their anti-aëroplane guns on the strange seaplane that was soaring above the camps.

CHAPTER VII.

THE "SEA EAGLE" ON PARADE.

"That means we'll have to climb higher, so that their guns can't reach!" Frank immediately decided.

It was indeed getting rather warm around them, Billy thought. The shrapnel puffs seemed to be above, below, and on every side, and it was a wonder that neither of them received a wound.

"Only for the speed we're hitting up, the story might be a whole lot different, according to my notion, Frank. They have a hard job to get our range, you see."

"Yes, most of it bursts back of us, showing a faulty figuring," the pilot explained, as he started a corkscrew movement of the seaplane calculated to cause the aircraft to bore upward in spirals.

The guns, far below, kept up a merry chorus. Billy could hear the faint noise made by the continuous discharges, and the puffs of smoke that seemed to rise in a score of places at the same time told him how eagerly the German gunners were trying to strike that elevated mark.

Now the shrapnel ceased to worry Billy, for he saw that none of it seemed to be bursting around them as before. The limits or range of the anti-aircraft guns had apparently been reached.

"We're safe from the iron rain up at this height, Frank. What does the barometer say?" he asked, with that spirit of curiosity that had made him a good reporter in the old days.

"That's too bad," replied Frank, as he bent forward to look.

"Don't tell me that the only fragment of a shell that's struck home ruined our fine barometer!" cried Billy.

"Just what happened," he was told. "At any rate, it's knocked to flinders; and I think I must have had a pretty close shave. But we can buy a new one when we get back to Dunkirk. As near as I can give a rough guess we must be

between three and four thousand feet high.”

“I should say it was a lot more than that,” Billy declared. “But so long as they can’t reach us any longer, why dispute over a few thousand feet?”

He thereupon once more started to make use of the glasses, and had hardly settled them to his eyes than he gave a startled cry.

“Frank, they’re coming up like a swarm of angry bees!” Billy exclaimed.

“Do you mean Taube aéroplanes, Billy?”

“Yes, I can see as many as six right now in different directions, and others are going to follow, if looks count for anything. The word must have been given to attack us.”

“I’m not worrying any,” Frank told him calmly. “In fact, I don’t believe they’ll try to tackle such a strange hybrid aircraft. They can see how differently constructed the *Sea Eagle* is from all other hydro-aéroplanes, and expect that we must mount at least one quick-firing gun.”

“Then what are they climbing for, Frank? I can hear the buzz of their propellers right now, and let me tell you it sounds like ‘strictly business’ to me!”

“They are meaning to get close enough to let the pilots see what kind of a queer contrivance it is that’s hanging over their camps,” Frank continued in a reassuring manner. “When we choose to turn tail and clear out, there isn’t one in the lot that can tag on after us.”

“I know that, Frank, thanks to those wonderful motors, and the clever construction of Dr. Perkins’ model. But now here’s new trouble looming up ahead.”

“I can see what you mean, Billy. Yes, that is a Zeppelin moving along down there, one of the older type, I should say, without having used the glasses.”

“But surely it will make for us, Frank. A real Zeppelin wouldn’t think of sheering off from any sort of aéroplane.”

“Watch and see what happens,” Billy was told, as Frank changed their course so as to head straight for the great

dirigible that was floating in space halfway between their present altitude and the earth that lay thousands of feet below.

The firing had stopped. Probably the German gunners, having realized the utter futility of trying to reach the *Sea Eagle* while it remained at such a dizzy height, were now watching to see what was about to take place. Many of them may have pinned great faith in the ability of their aircraft to out-maneuver any similar fliers manipulated by the pilots of the Allies. They may even have expected to see a stern chase, with their air fleet in hot pursuit of this remarkable stranger.

If this were really the case, those same observers were doomed to meet with a bitter disappointment.

"Well, what does it look like now?" Frank asked presently, while his companion continued to keep the glasses glued to his eyes as though fairly fascinated by all he saw.

"The Zeppelin has put on full steam, I should say, Frank," admitted Billy.

"Coming to attack us?" chuckled the other, though the motors were humming at such a lively rate that Billy barely caught the words.

"Gee whillikins, I should say not!" he cried exultantly. "Why, they're on the run, Frank, and going like hot cakes. I bet you that Zeppelin never made faster time since the day it was launched. They act as though they thought we wanted to get above them so as to bombard the big dirigible with bombs."

"And that's just what they do fear," said Frank positively. "That's the greatest weakness of those big dirigibles, they offer such a wide surface for being hit. While an ordinary shell might pass straight through, and only tear one of the many compartments, let a bomb be dropped from above, and explode on the gas bag, and the chances are the Zeppelin would go to the scrap-heap."

"They're dropping down in a hurry!" declared Billy.

"There, I can see a great big shed off yonder, and it must be this that the dirigible is aiming to reach. We could, however, bombard the shed as easily, and destroy it together with its contents. Frank, it makes me think of an ostrich trying to hide its head in a little patch of grass or weeds, and because it can't see anything, believes itself completely hidden."

"Well, as we haven't even a gun along with us the Zeppelin is pretty safe from our attack," remarked Frank. "We've proved one thing by coming out to-day."

"I guess you mean that we've given the Germans something to puzzle their wits over, eh, Frank? They know now that no matter what big yarns have been told about the new Yankee seaplane they tried to steal, it's all true, every single word of it."

Billy seemed to be quite merry over it. The fact that the dangerous Zeppelin had fled in such wild haste, shunning an encounter, while the vicious little Taube aëroplanes darted about like angry hornets, yet always kept a respectable distance away from the majestic soaring *Sea Eagle* was enough to make anyone feel satisfied.

"I admit that at first I was kind of shaky about defying the whole lot, but I've changed my mind some, Frank," he called out a minute later. "Yes, the shoe is on the other foot now. They're afraid of us! Makes a fellow puff out with pride. There's only one thing I feel sorry about."

"What might that be?" asked the other.

"If only Harry could have been along to enjoy this wonderful triumph with us, or Dr. Perkins either. It would have completed our victory. But from here I can see that army on the move as plain as anything. They're meaning to make one of their terrible drives somewhere along the Yser Canal, perhaps when that air raid comes off that we heard so much quiet talk about."

"Well, that raid may be held up a while," Frank told him. "They must believe that French or British pilots are aboard the *Sea Eagle* right now; and for all they know there are

half a dozen just such big aircraft waiting to engage their fleet if it hove in sight of Dunkirk or Calais."

"Every time we make a sweep around you can see the nearest Taube scuttle off in a big hurry," ventured Billy. "Why, Frank, some of those machines are carrying a quick-firer with them, but they've had orders not to take risks. What would you do if they actually started to close in on us?"

Frank laughed as though that did not worry him very much.

"Why, there are several things we could do, Billy. In the first place we can go higher with the *Sea Eagle* than any of those flimsy Taubes would dare to venture, though I'd hate to risk it in this bitter cold air."

"Yes, that's true, Frank, and like you I hope we will not have to climb any further. It isn't so bad in the summer, but excuse me from doing it now. We would need two more coats on top of the ones we've got, and another hood to keep our ears from being frozen stiff. What's the other idea?"

"A straight run-away," explained Frank. "If I really saw that any of them meant business, I could crack on all speed until we were making the entire two thousand revolutions per minute. That would leave them far behind."

"I should think so," admitted Billy, who had the greatest possible faith in the ability of the seaplane, as well as the cleverness of its young pilot. "Once we got to going our prettiest and they would look as if they might be standing still. Who's afraid? Set 'em up in the other alley!"

"I think I'll show them something to start them guessing," Frank was saying a minute later. "They haven't yet seen what she can do under forced pressure."

"Let her out to the limit then," pleaded the passenger, who could never experience too much excitement.

So Frank began to turn on full speed, and the wonderful creation of Dr. Perkins' inventive brain was soon swooping along in a manner calculated to make some of those who

were staring through glasses far below gasp with astonishment bordering on awe.

After all, Frank Chester was a boy, and must have felt a natural pride in being able to thus surprise the whole of the Kaiser's army with his amazing new aircraft. He knew that tens of thousands of eyes must be riveted upon them at that particular moment, from the officers at Headquarters to the mud-spattered and half frozen men concealed in the irregular trenches.

"See the Taubes giving us all the room they can, Frank!" cried Billy.

"Evidently they're not hankering after an engagement with the *Sea Eagle*, Billy."

"They make me think of a flock of wild ducks on a lake when an eagle poises on fluttering wings above them, picking out his dinner," Billy went on to say. "They scatter and dive and act half crazy; but nearly every time the eagle gets what he's after.

"Well, all we want is a clear road back over the way we came," the pilot pursued. "Fact is, we're not near so dangerous as we look. All we could do just now would be to ram a Zeppelin, and go down with it."

"But they don't know that, Frank, which is lucky for us!" declared his chum.

No doubt, Billy, in common with most other boys, must have learned at school the familiar saying that "pride always goes before a fall." He had just been doing considerable boasting, and his heart was even then swelling with the conviction that he and his chum were virtually snapping their fingers at the whole of the Kaiser's scattered army with every enlisted man craning his neck in wonder.

Then came the sudden shock, all the more terrifying because so utterly unexpected. It seemed to Billy that his very breath was taken away. The joyous buzz of the motors that had amounted to almost a shriek ceased as if by magic; and the *Sea Eagle*, shooting forward a bit under the

impetus of her great speed, quickly began to volplane toward the earth, thousands of feet below!

CHAPTER VIII. A SAFE RETURN.

Who could blame Billy if he turned ashy pale at that critical second. He could not believe that this was any scheme of Frank's for showing off what the great seaplane was capable of, though on previous occasions he had known such a thing to happen.

The one terrible conviction that flashed through his mind was that something had happened to stop their motors at this great altitude; and that the *Sea Eagle* was now, with ever increasing velocity, heading downward to earth.

If they managed, through any degree of dexterity to escape death, there must always be more or less chance of the machine being wrecked; and even though that catastrophe were avoided, it was sure to fall into the hands of the Germans. Then good-by to their hopes of keeping its construction a secret.

But Frank had been busy meanwhile. He was not the one to be caught napping by any sudden happening. Their present predicament had been accurately discounted by the clever mind that had invented many parts of the strange seaplane.

No sooner did Frank realize that the motive power had ceased than, with a quick snap of the hand, he had turned a valve that was within easy reach.

This allowed pure hydrogen gas from one of the cylinders to rush into the buoyancy devices, which might be called the crowning triumph along the line of insurance against accidents connected with Dr. Perkins' invention.

As if by magic, the upper wings of the aircraft began to swell until they had all the appearance of puffed-out mattresses. How the eyes of those who were watching down below must have grown round with wonder as they realized that here was something altogether new. It was also a hitherto unheard-of device intended to diminish the terrible risk of a fall ever present with those who go up in

aircraft.

The swift volplaning had immediately begun to grow less pronounced, and Billy, feeling that after all they were not going to drop to the ground, drew in his first breath since the accident had come about.

Frank was already busily engaged in examining the stalled motors. So reliable had the same brand always proven in connection with the *Sea Eagle* type of hydro-aëroplane, that Frank could not remember ever having such an accident occur.

They were now floating aimlessly in space, not having any means of moving save as the wind might chance to cause the seaplane to drift, much after the manner of an old-time balloon.

"Can you make the repairs, Frank, or do we have to hang out the white flag of surrender?" called Billy, in an agony of fear lest their wonderful tryout cruise be fated to come to such an ignoble finish.

"There's nothing terrible the matter," came the reassuring reply from the pilot, still working with feverish haste at the motors. "I think I can get things working again in a hurry."

"Oh! you make me happy by saying that, Frank," Billy told him. "I was beginning to think I could see the inside of a German dungeon, or a firing squad standing me up against a blank wall. I hope it doesn't take long, Frank. There, they start their plagued old anti-aircraft guns again!"

Indeed, the first heavy crash of breaking shrapnel not far from the stationary seaplane proved that Billy's remark bore the stamp of truth. They had rushed down with such impetus that before the buoyancy devices could accomplish the purposes for which they were intended, the seaplane had once more dropped within range of the elevated guns below.

Now having a stationary target to aim at instead of one that was making something like sixty, seventy, or perhaps fully five score miles an hour, the experienced gunners

were very apt to send their shells dangerously close, so that at any second, fragments from one, as it burst, might do terrible damage to either the seaplane's motors or her daring young pilots.

Oh! if Frank could only hurry and repair the motors, Billy was saying over and over again to himself as he clung there and tried to keep count of the numerous sudden puffs of gray or white smoke, indicating the breaking of the shrapnel shells around them.

What if one of them, better aimed than the rest, should shatter those buoyant wings that were their sole means of remaining afloat in the upper air! A rush, an agonized sensation of the earth coming up to meet them, and that would be their last realization of what life meant.

Billy would never forget that frightful agony of that minute as long as he lived. A minute—why, it seemed to the shivering boy as though he must have lived almost a whole year while that furious bombardment kept up; Frank coolly tinkered with the motors.

Then Billy heard his chum calling to him; never had words sounded one-half so sweet.

"Got it fixed. Be out of this in a jiffy!" the other shouted, for there was so much racket around them that words spoken in an ordinary tone could never have been heard.

Then Billy forgot about the crackling shrapnel and the circling Taubes. He had caught the familiar whirl of the propellers as the motors started once more upon their work. It was a very soothing sound to Billy's wrought up nerves.

Immediately the *Sea Eagle* began to speed forward. Frank's first act was to set the suction pump to work emptying the great wings of gas, and sending it back to the reservoir intended for storage purposes. This was done because they could never hope to attain any great amount of speed otherwise.

When they were falling, the boys had heard what seemed to be a concerted roar from thousands of lusty throats below. This they knew had indicated the sudden

delight of the watching and deeply interested soldiers in the aerial mishap that appeared to have overtaken the wonderful Yankee invention.

These shouts kept up more or less while the anti-aircraft guns were furiously bombarding the nearly stationary seaplane; but as soon as the latter started off again, as though in disdain at their futile efforts, the noise ceased like magic.

Frank first of all mounted higher, until none of the bursting bombs came anywhere near them. Then, feeling perfectly safe from this danger, he set his course toward the southwest.

"Heading home, are you, Frank?" asked Billy, not at all disappointed, for their trial spin certainly had contained enough thrills and dangers to satisfy even such a greedy lover of adventure as the one-time reporter.

"Yes, we've done all we set out to attempt, and a good deal more into the bargain," replied Frank, casting a cautious look to the right and left, not meaning to be taken off his guard by any venturesome German pilot aboard a Taube machine, who might risk all in a last attempt to cripple this amazing seaplane that outclassed anything they possessed.

"You've finished pumping the gas back again into the reservoir, haven't you, Frank? Do you think there was much loss?"

"Not a bit more than two per cent., for we've tested that before," he was informed.

"They've given up the pursuit," Billy observed presently, showing that all this while he had been keeping an eye on those swift flying little Taube machines that had continued to dart hither and thither, like angry hornets, yet not daring to make an attack.

Since there was no longer any visible sign of danger, the boys were able to once more observe the checkerboard picture that lay far below them. Accustomed to being up among the clouds, they knew just how to gauge distances, and in this way could get the relative value of things. A

novice would have found his calculations along these lines sadly at variance with the facts.

"For one," said Billy, his voice showing signs of trembling, "I won't be sorry to hug up to a stove when we get to our hangar once more. This air is bitter up here, and seems to go right through you. We're in for a decent spell of weather, it strikes me, Frank."

"Yes, it ought to last another day or so," the other replied, as though its condition was of importance.

Indeed, when the wind blew the pilots were kept from making their daily reconnoissance. During storms and snow, or even rain, it was useless to take the risks of venturing aloft, because the view would be so limited, with the earth shrouded in fog or snow squalls, that it would not pay to ascend.

So it was that hundreds of daring aviators would welcome this spell of quiet weather as an opportunity that could not be allowed to slip past without being taken advantage of.

"We've passed over the trenches along the canal," announced Billy, still handling the glasses, and as usual telling the busy pilot what he saw. "Now I can hear the British shouting hoarsely and they seem to be waving all sorts of things up at us. Do you think they know we are supposed to be trying out this seaplane which was really contracted for by the French Government before the war broke out?"

"They have guessed that we must be friendly to their cause, because they saw something of what went on back there when we struck that mine field," Frank explained without the least hesitation.

He had been dropping lower the while, partly because the air was so keen and cutting so many thousands of feet up and also on account of the fact that they had nothing more to fear from hostile demonstrations.

"There's the road to Dunkirk and Calais that the Kaiser said his men would tramp along in time to be in town at

Christmas,” laughed Billy, pointing his gloved hand downward to where could be seen various detachments of marching troops, with scores of huge motor vans taking supplies out along the fighting line for the men who held the trenches, and the bridge-heads across the river.

“The British, with reinforcements coming up every day, seem to be holding all the ground around here,” Frank was saying. “Can you see Dunkirk yet, Billy?”

“Oh! yes, easily enough. It isn’t such a great distance away from where the fighting is taking place. They’ve heard the roar of the big forty-two centimeter German guns at Dunkirk more than once this winter.”

Still lower they dropped, until at less than a thousand feet they sailed along, now over the water, with the Channel on their right, and the disputed shore of France to the left.

“Will you alight on the water, and then head straight for our hangar, Frank?”

“That is the easiest way to do it,” came the answer, as though Frank had every detail mapped out in his head.

“I warrant you Pudge is standing somewhere, and watching us come along, with his heart beating furiously, ready to fairly hug us after we get ashore.”

Billy grinned as he thus pictured the delight of their fat chum on hearing how magnificently the gallant *Sea Eagle* had disported in the air high above the German Headquarters, and what a spasm of alarm their coming had sent to the hearts of the various air pilots belonging to the invaders.

With the grace of a monster swan, the seaplane circled around several times and then alighted on the bosom of the water, as softly as floating thistle down. Equally at home in the air or on the water, the strange hybrid craft immediately commenced to move along in the direction of the wooden inclined plane leading by a gradual rise from the water into the elevated hangar.

So ended the amazing and satisfactory trial trip of the *Sea Eagle*.

CHAPTER IX. THRILLING NEWS.

"Mumps and mathematics, but I'm glad to see you boys get back safe again!"

Of course that was Pudge, otherwise Ulysses Perkins, expressing his gratitude at the return of the gallant *Sea Eagle* and the two bold air navigators.

Pudge was close by on the shore when the seaplane ran in to the foot of the wooden trestle, upon which the big seaplane was drawn on the wheeled carriage, built for that purpose, until it was once more safely housed in the hangar.

"Don't ask a single question, Pudge!" called Billy, "until we've got her up the inclined plane, and snugly sheltered from the public view. I guess there must be a thousand people outside trying to see what the *Sea Eagle* looks like. They must have watched us coming on down the coast, and had a bad case of fright at first, thinking it meant another spell of bomb dropping."

"Yes, lend us a hand, Pudge," added Frank, "and help get the machine settled evenly on the little carriage. You know we have it so arranged that she can be hauled up by means of this cable, and by her own motors. I'll stay aboard to guide things, and you two follow after we're safely in the hangar, not before."

Billy knew he meant a rope might possibly break, and it would be dangerous for anyone to be caught upon the trestle by the descending seaplane. Indeed, Billy had a pretty vivid recollection of the narrow escape of the two spies who had barely jumped aside at the time of their downward rush.

Everything went off without the slightest hitch, and the first act of Pudge, after climbing the ascent in company with Billy, was to hastily look over the returned air traveler from the spoon-shaped bow to the opposite extremity.

"Seems to be without a scratch, Frank!" he exclaimed in

undeniable glee.

"Why, did you think we had been in some sort of smash-up?" demanded Billy.

"Well, no, not quite so bad as that," admitted Pudge; "but I knew some of those German spies must have tried pretty hard to capture the craft, and if that failed I reckoned they'd wanted to do something to put her out of commission. Now, please, sit down here and tell me everything."

"Ours is a long story, Pudge," said Frank, "as you can judge for yourself when I tell you we've been far up over the fighting lines in Belgium, found ourselves bombarded by shrapnel, and threatened by half a dozen Taube flying machines, as well as a Zeppelin!"

"Gosh! all of that?" gasped Pudge.

"Yes," added Billy, shaking his forefinger at the stout chum, "and before we relate the whole story in detail you've got to tell us what happened last night that made you fail to come back when we expected you."

"Oh! I wanted to, all right," spluttered Pudge, as though he felt that somehow his bravery or his honor might be involved in the explanation demanded; "but, say, there were three of them, all big husky men, at that, and they caught me unawares just by that turn of the road. It was getting kind of dusk, too, and I never dreamed of trouble till one clapped a hand over my mouth, and the others held me while they tied a bandage around my face. Whee! I was near smothered at first."

"They were Germans, Pudge?" questioned Billy, interested in the fact that Pudge had also had his share of adventure.

"I heard them talking in German, which made it look that way," replied the other soberly.

"They didn't hurt you very much, did they?" asked Billy, looking more closely at their jolly comrade.

"More my feelings than anything else," replied Pudge, shrugging his fat shoulders disconsolately. "They just kept

me there while they waited to catch some sort of signal. I listened, too, and heard some shouting, but that cloth kept me from making out what it meant. Afterward they set me free, and disappeared. I didn't know what to make of it when I got to the hangar here and found the *Sea Eagle* gone."

"You even felt afraid they had grabbed our seaplane, didn't you?" asked Billy.

"Well, it gave me a bad scare at first," Pudge admitted, with charming frankness.

"But you got over that later on, eh, Pudge?"

"I did when I heard you calling me from away out somewhere in the dark," explained the other. "Were you on the water at that time, Frank, because I figured you must be, with that old fog horn sound coming stealing in to me out of that bank of gloom?"

"Yes, that's where we were, Pudge," Frank told him. "Now, since you've explained all about your own doings, we'll satisfy your curiosity by telling you the particulars of the trial trip of our sample seaplane. Billy, you can do the talking, if you feel equal to it, while we start a fire here, and warm up with some coffee."

A fire was soon sending out a fair amount of heat, and the coffee pot placed upon the top of the little sheet-iron stove gave promise of good cheer to come. The aviator boys had enjoyed this social cup many times while working on the assembling of the various parts of the seaplane, so that they had all the necessary accompaniments close by to be used after the coffee had boiled.

Meanwhile Billy had been thrilling Pudge with a recital of all he and Frank had gone through since the fat chum left on his errand. He pictured the dash down the trestle when the determined German secret agents were trying to break in at the doors, so as to seize and run off with the wonderful machine. From that he went on to the adventure in the fog and darkness of the night while they lay on the water of the harbor, and the searching parties came upon them.

Then followed the early morning flight, what amazing things they had seen when passing over the trenches, the fierce bombardment to which they were subjected, the maneuvers of the hostile aircraft, the accident to the motors, and finally their triumphant return to the hangar.

Pudge drew a long breath when the story reached its conclusion.

"And to think that I wasn't along with you when all those things happened; it's enough to make anyone weep," he said, looking so downcast that Frank felt it only right he should try and cheer the poor fellow up.

"Never mind, Pudge," he told him, "you were doing your duty just as much as any of us. The fact that we made that grand trip over the firing lines doesn't mean we have any more reason to crow than you do. You can always say that you once had the great luck to be actually taken prisoner by the Germans."

"Oh! they treated me all right, only that they kept me a prisoner and wouldn't parole me on my honor not to betray them. Then, that cloth they tied around my face must have been something they picked up, for it seemed like an old rag. But thank goodness it's all over with now."

"Yes," said Billy lightly, "no use ever borrowing trouble about things that are dead and gone. You know they say the mill will never run again with the water that is past. But there's someone at the door, Frank."

"I imagine it must be our friend, Major Nixon," said Frank. "He's heard that we've been away on some sort of trial spin to test things, and has dropped around to learn how we made out."

"He's going to be surprised a whole lot when he hears all we've got to tell," said Billy, with a chuckle, as he started over to unfasten the door, upon the panel of which those knocks had been sounded.

It proved that Frank was a good prophet, for the visitor was the red-faced British officer connected with the aviation squad at Dunkirk. His manner betrayed the fact that he had

come either to fetch some important news or else to be told something along those lines.

Once again did Billy have to start in. Fortunately, he was a pretty fair story-teller, and enthusiasm with his subject did more or less to help him. The Major was duly thrilled with the graphic account of all the stirring events that had come to Frank and Billy since the afternoon.

Being a man of considerable experience in aviation, though no longer allowed to make an ascent, on account of being subject to dizzy spells, the after effects from a severe accident, Major Nixon at least could enjoy hearing about the exploits of others.

Billy, too, was blunt, and not at all inclined to make himself and chum out to be any sort of heroes. He told the story in a most matter-of-fact way, though reading between the lines the officer was able to picture things about as they happened.

"I'm pleased to hear your grand account of this great seaplane," he told them when Billy at last told of their safe return to the waiting hangar. "My word, if only we British had fifty like it, I believe we would be in condition to end the war before three months had passed. No Zeppelin would dare enter into the same class. What magnificent craft they would be for protecting the home coast from such bombardments as happened not so very long ago."

"Well," said Frank, thinking to strike while the iron was hot, "we're going to ask that from now on our hangar be guarded against any sort of attack. This seaplane, after certain formalities have been complied with, really will belong to the French Government; so it's surely up to you to defend the property of your ally from a raid."

"Your point is well taken, Frank," the officer told him. "Every hour of the day and night I will see to it that a company of armed guards is stationed around your property, with instructions to defend it against any force of thieves, desperate spies or any other invaders. They will rue the hour they attempt to capture or injure your

wonderful seaplane.”

Major Nixon always made it a point to walk around the big air rover, and carefully note its various strong points as developed through the patents of its inventor, Dr. Perkins, U. S. A. He was the only one who had thus far been given the privilege of seeing the odd machine at close quarters; because the boys had the utmost confidence in his honor as a soldier and a gentleman.

It seemed to Billy that the Major spent an unusually long time looking things over on this occasion. Perhaps he wished to verify the statements, to which he had just listened, concerning the stability of the seaplane and its condition for hard service.

When he joined them again, Billy also noticed that there was a most peculiar expression on the other's red face, of which he could make nothing at the time, although it all came to him afterward.

“Is the seaplane in condition for another trip that might cover several times the distance you did in this trial spin?” he asked.

Billy thought this to be merely a casual question, such as anyone might ask after hearing the story just finished; but Frank, able to see further, believed there might be a meaning behind it.

“All I would have to do would be to replace the liquid fuel that we have used, and after oiling the bearings in a few places, I give you my word, Major Nixon, I would be willing to take the chances of going to Paris and back in the *Sea Eagle* with as many as two or more companions on the journey.”

Upon hearing that the other smiled as though the answer pleased him. There were numerous attributes connected with Frank Chester calculated to appeal to a man of his observation; and considering the fact that he was an Englishman, usually cold and reserved toward outsiders, the Major had become warmly attached to the boy aviators and their fortunes.

“And now, if you’ll bend your heads toward me, because sometimes the very walls have ears, they say,” he remarked impressively, “I’ll tell you a great secret.”

Realizing that this was no joke, Frank, Billy and even Pudge leaned forward, after which Major Nixon went on to say in a cautious tone hardly more than a whisper:

“It was learned that our friends, the enemy, intended sending out another one of their exasperating raids with half a dozen Taubes. They would drop a few bombs on Dunkirk and Calais and call that a great feat. Now more than *thirty seaplanes*, guided by some of the most daring of British aviators, plan a gigantic raid on the German sea bases in Belgium to-night, *and you can accompany them if you will!*”

CHAPTER X. THE AËROPLANE BOYS IN LUCK.

Thrilled by the nature of the communication made by the British officer, Frank, Billy and Pudge stood there staring at one another.

Of course it was not so very difficult for Frank to understand just why this invitation to accompany the raiding party of British aviators had come to them. Back of it all was the French Government, he felt certain. Before going into the business of making heavy investments connected with the new American seaplane patents it was only natural they should desire to witness an efficient test of the machine's superiority over any aëroplanes they already possessed.

The contemplated raid would afford such a test. Competent critics, those other experienced birdmen, would be near to gauge the capacity of the *Sea Eagle*. In other words, the French Government did not want to "buy a pig in the poke." Unless the hybrid sea and aircraft could meet the requirements laid down, they would not dare risk squandering great amounts of money in those hard times to duplicate her model.

Frank was greatly pleased. It seemed as though he and his chums had received a magnificent compliment in being honored with such an invitation.

"Of course, Major Nixon, you have been authorized to see us, and extend this courtesy?" he asked, as a starter.

"I can show you my credentials in that line, Frank," the genial officer replied, without the least hesitation or embarrassment, which he accordingly proceeded to do, thus relieving the other's mind in the beginning.

"Everything is shipshape, sir," said Frank. "Now let us talk about the conditions under which we are to be allowed to accompany the expedition"

"Please keep your voice lowered as much as you can while I instruct you," begged Major Nixon.

"You are thinking of those German spies who are said to be everywhere?" ventured Frank, who had heard much talk along these lines ever since arriving at Dunkirk.

Indeed, the stories that passed current concerning spies were astonishing. Most of them Frank did not believe in at all, for he knew they were founded on the fears of the people. At the same time the secret agents of the Kaiser were certainly vigilant as well as bold, and if one had to err at all it were better to be on the safe side.

"In times past I haven't taken much stock in the wild stories that have been going around," said the soldier, smiling; "but we certainly know there are spies in Dunkirk at this very hour. In fact, you boys have had pretty strong evidence that your operations while here have been watched day by day."

"Yes," remarked Billy, "and after what happened last night we are ready to believe almost anything, sir. I remember reading that sometimes the walls have ears, and I guess it may be so."

"Under such conditions then it is best that we get our heads close together and talk in very low tones," said the officer. "There are guards posted all around the stockade now, and yet in spite of that precaution some of those German spies are smart enough to play the game."

"Anchors and aëroplanes, but this is exciting enough to please even a fellow built like you are, Billy!" muttered Pudge, who was mopping his red forehead with his handkerchief, though the others did not consider it any too warm there in the hangar of the great seaplane.

"I am unable to tell you at this minute the exact hour when the start will be made," Major Nixon whispered. "Much depends on the state of the weather, and the arrival of the fleet of aëroplanes from across the Channel, for most of them will come from England, you understand."

"Conditions being favorable, then," observed Frank, "you believe that by another morning the start of the raiding party will take place?"

"Yes, undoubtedly," came the answer. "We wish to take advantage of the unusually good weather conditions. Then, besides, we have learned through certain sources of information that the Germans on their own hook are planning an extensive dash with their aëroplanes and dirigibles on the coast cities on the Channel. It is in hopes of balking that, as well as accomplishing other results that more than thirty seaplanes will make this stupendous raid on their submarine bases at Ostend, Zeebrugge and Blankenberghe."

"Sandwiches and sauerkraut!" Pudge was heard to gasp, as though his breath were almost taken away by the magnitude of this assertion; for he had never as yet seen as many as thirty aëroplanes assembled together, and certainly not in action.

"Is that the only motive of the raid, Major Nixon?" Frank asked, for he invariably made it a point to acquire all the information possible.

"Well," continued the soldier, "to be perfectly frank with you, there are a number of other objects which such a sudden attack is likely to influence. It is aimed to destroy the railway station at Ostend so as to greatly hinder the movement of troop trains and those carrying ammunition and supplies. Then, at Bruges, other damage may be done."

"But isn't there still another big object in it?" insisted Frank.

"I suppose you are referring to the great submarine blockade of the coasts of Great Britain which Germany proposes to inaugurate next week?" said Major Nixon. "Yes, although I have not been so informed, I can guess readily enough that by means of this raid it is hoped to extensively damage their submarine base at Zeebrugge, and injure the movement in the beginning."

"In other words," said Frank, "Great Britain means to throw down the gage of battle, and warn Germany she can make just as dashing raids as anyone. No one nation is

mistress of the air in this world war—as yet.”

Major Nixon smiled as he heard those last two words, and saw the quick look of pride which the young aviator threw toward the monster seaplane that was housed in that hangar.

“It’s plain that you have the utmost confidence in the ability of your machine to wrest that supremacy from the Germans, if once France secures the right to manufacture a fleet of *Sea Eagles*,” he remarked, as he laid a hand upon the shoulder of Frank Chester, of whom the bluff soldier had become quite fond in the short time they had known each other.

“Then it is understood, Major, that we keep ourselves in readiness to start out so as to be on the move at dawn, for I don’t imagine such a great fleet of *aéroplanes* would wish to make a start in the darkness of night.”

“No, there is no necessity of such a thing,” came the quick reply. “In fact, one of the objects of this raid is publicity. We do not aim to creep up and damage the enemy in the dark. We want him to see the astonishing sight of such a mass of darting seaplanes descending on his coast towns like a flock of eagles, and destroying military property, not citizens’ private homes, mind you.”

“I think,” said Frank, “I can speak for my friends here as well as myself, Major, when I promise to be ready for the signal. How will we know when to start out, for we shall all sleep here to-night?”

“There is only one condition which you will be asked to meet,” said the other.

“Then tell us what it is, sir.”

“The French Government will expect to have a representative aboard the *Sea Eagle* during the flight, not to interfere in the slightest degree with your mastery of the seaplane, but simply to take notes concerning her behavior under every sort of condition.”

“We certainly agree to that condition, Major Nixon,” said Frank heartily. “In fact, I should have asked that one be sent

out with us. It is a part of our policy to fully satisfy the authorities we've been dealing with for nearly a year, now, that everything we claim, and much more, is possible with our advanced model of a hydro-aëroplane."

"Very good, and I am pleased to know it," said the officer. "I shall have to go back to town, now, but I will advise the local representative of the Government that you accept the conditions. By early dawn there will appear here a skillful aviator with written credentials, and I hope his ultimate report will be all you boys hoped it to be. My word! I only wish I were going with you, but other duties must claim my attention."

He shook each one of them warmly by the hand.

"The best of luck, Frank," were his last words at parting. "I trust that you may have an experience calculated to dwarf anything that has ever come your way."

Frank, as he contemplated what a thrilling adventure lay before them, fancied that this wish on the part of Major Nixon was in a fair way of coming true. It certainly would be difficult to imagine a more exciting experience than taking part in an aerial raid, where more than thirty seaplanes started out to bombard strongly fortified coast defenses of the enemy, each raider subjected to a continual fire from every known species of anti-aircraft gun known to modern warfare.

After the soldier had left them, the three Boy Aviators sat around and talked in low tones. They had barred the door, and so far as they could see there was not the slightest chance that any eavesdropper could get close enough to overhear what they said. Nevertheless, the caution of Major Nixon had its effect upon them and there was no loud conversation except when ordinary matters were touched upon.

Frank always liked to "potter" around and give little touches of improvement to some part of the seaplane in which he had such a deep interest. No one knew its good and bad qualities as well as Frank; even its inventor had

not studied these points as carefully as the young aviator.

So it happened that from time to time the boy made numerous little improvements that he figured would cause the motors to work more smoothly, or strengthen some part of the framework that showed signs of weakness.

Half a dozen times Frank left his two chums, sitting there killing time, to attend to something connected with the plane. He had carefully examined to find what had caused the accident that gave them such a thrill when thousands of feet above the earth.

"The same thing will never occur again, that I'm as sure of as I am of my own name," he told Billy, when the other asked him about it.

Several hours had passed since the soldier had left them. Pudge, having taken a stroll outside, came back to report that there were at least a dozen British "Tommies" standing guard around the enclosure in which the hangar had been erected.

"It's a good thing, too," said Pudge, "because a crowd has come out from town to hang around here in hopes we'll make a flight to-day. Oilskins and onions, but I should think there must be a hundred people if there's one. But those Tommies are ready to use their bayonets on the first fellow who tried to climb up and peep over the stockade."

"There are two guards, I noticed, down by the end of the trestle, where it strikes the water," observed Billy, who had been moving around.

Frank was doing some little job under the seaplane, and at this moment came sauntering toward his two mates. Billy, happening to glance up at the other's face was surprised to see that Frank looked excited; at least his eyes sparkled strangely, and there was a grimness in the way he had set his jaws.

Billy, always inclined to be explosive, might have burst out with a question only that he received a quick and expressive look from Frank, accompanied by the placing of a finger on his lips. Then, as Frank dropped into a chair

beside them, Billy leaned over to whisper:

“What’s up now, Frank, that you’re looking so mysterious?”

“I’ve just made a discovery, that’s all,” came the same sort of careful reply. “Fact is, after all our precautions we’ve been outwitted, for there’s a spy hidden in the hangar right now!”

CHAPTER XI.

THE MAN IN THE LOCKER.

"Are you joking, Frank?" asked Billy, though he should have known his comrade better than to believe Frank would try to play any silly trick for the sake of giving them a thrill.

Pudge opened his mouth, but for a wonder even one of his queer favorite expressions failed to drop from his lips. In fact, Pudge was rendered temporarily speechless by the astounding nature of Frank's communication.

"Not at all, Billy," said the other, trying to act as though he might be telling them something of small importance. "I watched while I was sheltered under the plane, and twice I saw it shake a little as though some one might be holding the door ajar so as to hear better."

"Door!" echoed Billy helplessly, as though more puzzled than ever.

"The door of the empty locker we thought we might need for storing things away, but which has never been used," Frank explained.

"Gee whillikins! now I understand what you mean, Frank," said Billy. "There is plenty of room in that locker to hold a man curled up."

"Popguns and pyramids, but how could he ever get there when we've been sitting around all morning?" asked Pudge, in a hoarse whisper.

"Only in one way," Frank told him. "Before they left here last night they must have fixed him there in the locker, believing we'd be back again sooner or later, when some information of value might be picked up."

"Oh! my stars, Frank," Billy ejaculated huskily. "What if, after all, he's heard enough talk here to guess about that big raid?"

Frank looked very serious.

"It's true that we've been pretty careful," he said, "and most of the time just whispered while we talked about it; but all the same a man with the ears of a spy might have

picked up enough to arouse suspicions, and once that's done the rest would come easy."

"What can we do about it, Frank?" asked Billy.

"Our good friend, the Major, has extended the invitation to us so that in a way I feel we're responsible for the secret being kept," Frank went on to say, as though he might be revolving certain conditions in his mind before deciding.

On hearing him say that Billy began to work the muscles of his right arm, at the same time opening and closing his fingers, as though eager to clutch something.

"I agree with you, Frank," he hastened to say. "The great secret has been placed in our keeping, and for one I would feel pretty small if it leaked out through any fault of ours. We've got to cage that spy as sure as you live."

"Punkins and partridges, that's right!" muttered Pudge, who, while not as a rule pugnaciously inclined, could nevertheless assume what he was pleased to call his "fighting face" when occasion arose.

"I'm glad to find both of you are of the same mind," Frank said. "The only question is to decide what our plan of campaign shall be."

"P'r'aps some of those Tommies in khaki would be only too glad of a chance to step in and collar the spy?" suggested Pudge.

"But there are three of us here," objected Billy, "and I don't see why we should want to call on the soldiers for such a little thing. After we've grabbed Mr. Spy and have got him tied up it will be time enough to figure on handing him over to the authorities."

"That's what's worrying me," admitted Frank.

"About handing him over, do you mean?" Billy demanded.

"Well, you know what the fate of a spy always is," the other said. "We are supposed to be neutral in this war business. No matter whether our sympathy lies with Belgium, Germany, or France, we've got to try and treat

them as much alike as we can. Our company has been negotiating with the French Government for a long time, now, over this contract, and so, of course, we have to favor them if anybody; but boys, not one of us would like to feel that we were the cause of a spy being shot or hanged."

"Oh well, we could kick him off the place after we got him out, Frank," suggested Pudge so aggressively that Billy chuckled, and started to smooth the fat chum down the back, just as one might a pugnacious rooster who was boiling with a desire to plunge into carnage.

"That sounds all right," Frank told him; "but you forget the one important thing. He has some knowledge of this raid, and if we let him go it may mean a great disaster to the fleet of seaplanes taking part in the dash up the coast."

"Whew! looks like we might be what my father would say was between the upper and the nether millstones," remarked Billy.

"Gatling guns and grasshoppers," Pudge added, "my father would go further than that, I guess, and say we were between the devil and the deep sea. But Frank, you're the one to decide that question. What shall we do?"

"There is a way," Frank announced, "by which we could settle it so the man wouldn't fall into the hands of the military authorities, who would execute him, and at the same time he could be kept from betraying what he may have learned."

"Glad to hear it," said Pudge; "because I don't want to know I've been instrumental in standing a poor fellow up before a file, and getting him filled with cold lead. Tell us about it, please, Frank."

"After we've captured the man we'll get word to the civil authorities, saying we've caught a thief in our hangar, and asking them to keep him safe for two or three days. I'll go and see the Major myself, and get him to promise that the man will be treated only as a thief and not as a spy."

"You've guessed the answer, Frank," announced Pudge, with the enthusiasm he always showed when the leader of

the aviator boys blazed a trail out of some wilderness in which they had lost themselves.

"Then the sooner we get busy the better," hinted Billy, again working that good right arm of his as though it might be rapidly getting beyond his restraint.

"We have no firearms, though," suggested Pudge.

"There's no need of any," Frank told him. "I'll hold this wrench in a way that'll make it seem like a six-shooter. The rest of you can help pile on the man when we drag him out of the locker, either feet or head first, it doesn't matter which."

"Just give me a chance to sit on him, that's all!" threatened Pudge, at which Billy could be heard to chuckle, as though he pitied anyone who went through that far from enviable experience; perhaps Billy knew from his own associations with Pudge what such an operation meant.

"Now, here's the way we'll fix it," began Frank. "I'll step over again to the other side of the hangar to work at the motors of the *Sea Eagle*. Pretty soon you'll hear me calling to you both to come around and see what a clever little arrangement I've fixed up."

"Which will, in other words, mean the fun is about to begin?" commented Billy.

"When you join me," continued Frank, "we'll jabber for a minute, during which I'll say we might as well go to town and get something decent to eat at noon. That will be apt to put him off his guard. Then we'll all tiptoe over to the locker, and at a signal throw the door open. As soon as you glimpse him, take hold, and start to pulling like a house afire. That will keep him from trying to fight back or use his weapon, for I guess he'll have a gun of some kind. Understand it all, boys?"

"Go on, Frank. Please don't wait any longer than you have to," pleaded Billy.

So Frank, a minute or two later, called to them to come and see what a splendid little change he had made in the gear of the deflecting rudder of the big seaplane.

It was a thrilling moment for the three boys when they

began to move in the direction of the locker where Frank believed a spy had taken refuge many hours previously. As he had suggested, they walked on their tiptoes, each fastening his eager gaze upon the door which they expected to presently pull suddenly open.

When they had taken up their positions according to Frank's plan, he gave the expected signal.

"Now, everybody!"

The locker door was dragged open in spite of the fact that something seemed to be clinging desperately to it from the inside. No sooner had this been accomplished than the boys, stooping, seized hold of the doubled-up figure they could see in the cavity under the bench, and started to drag with might and main.

Although the man in hiding made a powerful effort to resist the pressure brought to bear upon him, he was hardly in a position to do much.

They dragged him out, squirming like a rat taken by the tail, and trying to hold on to every object, however small, as a drowning man will catch at a straw. No sooner was he in full view than Pudge dropped down on his back with all his force.

A dismal groan announced that the breath had been pretty well driven from the spy's lungs; and before he could recover his wits enough to try and produce any weapon Frank clapped the end of his wrench against his temple while he called out in very commanding tones:

"Don't try to draw a gun or you are a dead man! I've got you covered, and will pull the trigger if you so much as move a hand!"

Having in this manner caused the prisoner to behave, Frank hastily searched his pockets and confiscated a stubby little revolver which he found there. Then he told Billy to tie the man's wrists together, placing them behind his back, with a stout piece of tarred rope that lay within convenient reaching distance.

"Now he's helpless, and we can let him get to his feet if we want," said Billy; but Frank thought otherwise.



“Don’t try to draw a gun or you are a dead man!”

“It’s better to be on the safe side,” he observed. “So use the balance of the rope around his ankles, Billy. I want to leave you two here while I go to town and make arrangements through Major Nixon to have the man held simply as a thief and not as a spy. I’d like to know he

couldn't get away."

They found that he was rather a small man, with a cunning face. He did not look very much like a German, and possibly had been picked out for his hazardous pursuit on that very account.

To their surprise he addressed them in the best of English.

"I am an American citizen, you must know, and I have the papers to prove it. My name is Hans Larsen and I came from Sweden many years ago."

"Oh! is that so?" remarked Frank, who had lately read that many Germans across the sea had been able to secure the naturalization papers belonging to others in order to cross to Sweden or Italy without being taken prisoner by the English naval men, and Frank rightly guessed the spy had fortified himself in that way so as to have some means for escaping death in case of capture.

"Then what were you doing hidden in that locker?" demanded Billy.

"I have no money, and I was hungry," said the man. "I came here to pick up something I could sell for a few sous, and get some bread. Then I heard voices and afraid to be seen I crawled under there. Let me go and I shall never bother you again."

Billy laughed in his face.

"They say a lame excuse is better than none," he remarked, "but when Frank pulled that fierce-looking gun out of your pocket I saw a bright coin fall to the floor. Here it is, and a gold coin in the bargain. An English sovereign at that. I wonder why anyone should go hungry long in Dunkirk these days with all that money in his pocket? Don't try to trick us, my man. We know why you were hidden in that locker, and you don't need to be told what a spy can expect when caught in the act."

The man shut his teeth hard together, and gave a little groan, but said nothing. He evidently expected that the fate he may have dared so often had at last found him out.

CHAPTER XII.

FRANK MAKES A BARGAIN.

"What's the next thing on the program, Frank?" asked Billy.

"I must go to town and see Major Nixon," came the prompt reply.

"You mean so as to hand this prisoner over to his charge, don't you?"

"I want to get in touch with the civil authorities, and make certain arrangements looking to his detention for several days," explained Frank.

The spy started and looked eagerly at the speaker. His dry lips moved as though he were trying to voice the sudden hope that had flashed through his brain; but no sound followed. Still it could be seen that his despair was not as complete as before.

"But Frank," interrupted Pudge, "perhaps it won't be necessary for you to skip out and leave."

"Tell me what you mean, Pudge?" Frank asked him.

"Use the telephone, and talk with the Major. Yes, it was knocked out of commission by those smarties, but while you were away this morning, having nothing else to do, I amused myself hunting for the break in the wire, which I found and easily spliced."

"Does it work all right now, Pudge?" questioned Billy, grinning at the thought of the other doing all that climbing, because action of this sort was hardly the forte of their stout chum.

"As good as ever, for I tested it," he was told.

Frank, however, shook his head in the negative.

"I think I had better go personally and see the Major," he told them.

"How's that, Frank?" remarked Billy quickly. "Do you suspect that in some way those men may have tapped our

wire?"

"Well, I wouldn't put it past them," came the reply. "Spies have to be up to all sorts of clever dodges, and that would be just in line with their work."

Billy gave a whistle to indicate the state of his mixed feelings.

"Gee whillikins, to think that we haven't whispered a single sentence along that wire but what some outsider was drinking it in! Frank, I guess you're right, and that in a particular case like this it's best to deal at first hand with Major Nixon."

"I'm sure of that, boys," the leader told them in his quiet, convincing way.

"And I suppose that you want us to stick by the hangar while you're away; is that the game, Frank?" Pudge wanted to know.

"Yes, and be mighty careful how you take your eyes off the prisoner for even a minute," Frank directed. "I'm going to look all around the place before I leave, so as to make sure there isn't another spy hidden away in some corner. As soon as I step out, fasten the door and keep it so. I may call you up over the wire, and if I do you'll know my voice. Besides, to make absolutely sure I'll give you our old signal. That's about all."

He bustled around for several minutes, and thoroughly explored the whole interior of the hangar. When Frank had finished his task he was absolutely sure that no intruder larger than a mouse could have escaped his search.

Once outside he made for the gate, where he found a couple of rosy-cheeked British khaki-clad Tommies on guard, with whom he exchanged pleasant greetings.

"Don't let a single soul get past here until I come back again," he told them. "I'm going to see Major Nixon, who is a personal friend of mine, and my business with him is very important. We've caught a—well, a thief in the hangar, and I want him to take charge of the rascal. If you hear any row in there while I'm gone have some of your men go up to the

door; but keep the gate guarded meanwhile.”

The two soldiers promised that they would attend strictly to business. They knew something of what these young American boys were doing over in France, and that their presence had to do with the closing of certain arrangements with the French Government that had been under way before the breaking out of the war.

Frank walked off.

He was feeling very well satisfied with the way things were coming out. It was true there might be some cause for uneasiness in connection with the determined efforts of the spies to either steal or ruin the machine; but Frank believed he and his chums, assisted by the Allies, could keep it from being destroyed through a bomb placed under the hangar by a secret agent of the Kaiser.

One could not go very far in the neighborhood of Dunkirk in those stirring days without being visibly reminded that it was a time of war. Soldiers in detachments were moving this way or that; tents could be seen in the fields; artillery was passing along the heavy roads bound for the front, where the British army in the low country along the Yser Canal must be getting ready for that long-heralded drive that was to usher in the new policy of aggression in the early Spring.

Everywhere he looked Frank could see signs of this feverish life. How different things were across the ocean in his own beloved land; and how thankful he was that peace lay upon the great country of which he was a son.

He knew where he was likely to find Major Nixon, for he had been to see him at his quarters before now. As he walked quickly along with a springy step, Frank was laying out his plan of campaign. It was like him to prepare for possibilities, because he was determined that, as far as he could prevent it, he and his chums would not take sides in this terrible struggle for supremacy, any more than could be prevented.

Coming to the building in which the British had their

Headquarters he was stopped by a sentry who demanded his business.

"I must see Major Nixon on very important business," Frank told him. "I hope he is in his quarters, for I wish to send my card with a line on it to him."

Of course all that the sentry could do was to summon a noncommissioned officer, to whom Frank repeated his request. It happened that the sergeant had seen Frank walking arm in arm with the Major, and hence knew that they were friends.

"He is very busy just now, and gave word that he was not to be disturbed except on most important business," the sergeant informed him.

"This is a matter," the boy told him impressively, "that concerns grave issues connected with the plans of your leaders, and I hope you will see that the Major gets my card."

"I will carry it to him myself," announced the sergeant, which he accordingly did, and soon came back nodding his head.

The few urgent words written on the card had the desired effect, for the sergeant immediately asked Frank to follow him.

"Major Nixon told me to say that he would see you, sir," was the message he gave the boy.

Presently Frank entered the soldier's room. He found the Major impatiently awaiting his coming, and with an extended hand in the bargain.

"My word! but you've given me a beastly shock by what you write," he was saying as he shook hands. "Plans threatened with disaster—must see you at once! Now be good enough to tell me what it all means, for I'm shivering with dread. If anything happened to upset all those splendidly arranged plans for the raid, we'd be broken-hearted, you know."

"Before I say a single word, Major Nixon, I want you to

give me your promise to agree to a certain stipulation I shall make. It simply concerns a man's life; and will not interfere the least bit with your ideas of military rules."

"That's a singular request to make, Frank, but I think I know you well enough to feel sure you will not bind me to anything that would touch upon my honor. I promise you then that you shall have your way; for I imagine you want to have the disposal of this unknown man in your own hands."

"That is just what I want, Major," returned the other quickly. "And now listen while I tell you of a remarkable thing that happened after you left us this morning."

"At your hangar, do you mean?" asked the soldier, looking startled.

"Yes."

"I hope you don't intend to tell me any of our men have proven false to their trust and betrayed you, Frank; because I happen to know that the aviator corps expects great things of that invention of Dr. Perkins', should it eventually become the property of the French Government."

"There has been no traitor in the camp, Major," the other hastened to assure him. "But nevertheless we have learned that all the while you were there talking to us, and while we have been discussing the intended raid in low tones among ourselves, there was a spy concealed in the hangar who must have heard more or less of what was said, despite our precautions."

The soldier jumped to his feet. He looked almost frightened as he stared into the face of Frank Chester.

"You are sure of what you say, are you, Frank?" he asked with an effort.

"Oh! there isn't the slightest doubt about it," came the reply.

Then Major Nixon began to breathe easier. He saw that Frank was smiling, and his common sense told him the boy would not be likely to show such freedom from anxiety if things were as bad as he had at first feared.

"Frank, tell me the rest without delay. I know you've got good news back of this astonishing disclosure. Where is that spy now?"

"In the hangar still," replied Frank.

"Did you take him prisoner?" demanded the Major eagerly.

"Yes, and I'll tell you how it was done, sir. We had quite a little circus for a short time, believe me."

Major Nixon listened, and as he heard how Pudge sat down upon the surprised eavesdropper whom they had dragged from the locker, he even smiled, for that terrible fear had by now left his soul.

"My word! what great luck that you caught him before he could send any sort of signal to his companions!" he exclaimed. "And we must see to it that he does not have a chance to even wink an eye toward anyone. It would have ruined everything if he had slipped away. I am a thousand times obliged to you, Frank, for being so much on the alert. It would have ruined my own career if the break had been traced back and placed on my shoulders. We will see to it that this spy gets all that is coming to him."

"Oh! but you forget your promise, Major Nixon!" remarked the boy coolly.

The soldier looked at him and frowned.

"But Frank, a spy is a dangerous sort of reptile, no matter on which side he is working," he objected. "These Germans have the most complete system of secret espionage ever known. It is hard to keep anything from their knowledge. This man knew the risk when he hid there in your hangar. He should pay the penalty of his venture. He can expect nothing less than death."

"Wait, Major Nixon; please remember that he is *my* prisoner, not yours. If I had spoken the word he could have been set free. You gave me your solemn promise that I should have the say of his fate if I handed him over to the authorities."

The soldier pondered these words for a minute before continuing.

"Tell me just what you've got in your mind, my boy," he said, "and I feel certain that I can agree to it, because I know how sensible you are."

"Then listen, sir," said Frank impressively. "We three are Americans, and while we may sympathize with the Allies in this struggle at the same time we do not hate the German people, but feel the warmest friendship for them. We would not care to remember that we had turned over this spy to the military authorities to be shot. It would grieve us more than I can tell you, sir."

"But you have a plan, Frank, of course?" ventured the other.

"Yes."

"Which, it is to be hoped, will protect our great secret?"

"Here is what I want you to agree to, sir," Frank told him. "We will turn this man over to the civil authorities of Dunkirk to be considered solely in the light of a sneak thief who meant to steal something from our hangar and dispose of it so as to buy food. He has papers to show that he is by birth a Swede, but an American citizen by adoption."

"Ah! yes, but those have undoubtedly been stolen, and are being used for a purpose anyone can understand," declared the soldier.

"Yes, that is what we believed, sir," said Frank. "At the same time if he were shot it might raise an unpleasant tension between my Government and the Allies. As I look at it, the main thing you want to do is to so arrange it that this spy can in no manner communicate with any of his fellows. Am I right there, Major?"

"Yes, yes; that is the principal thing we must consider now, Frank."

"All right, that can be done just as well if he is shut up as a thief, and at the end of three days, after the raid is a thing of the past, allowed to take his departure from Dunkirk with

a warning that if caught again he will pay the penalty with his life.”

Again the soldier pondered. He did not like to let the spy off so easily, for like most bluff fighting men, Major Nixon felt an aversion for those clever secret agents who could block the plans of generals through securing information in advance.

Finally he gave a sigh and smiled at Frank.

“My word! but you know how to handle matters, Frank,” he observed. “Of course I can see just how you and your fine chums must feel about this thing; and on the whole I do not blame you. Yes, I give you my promise again that it will be done as you say. We will take the man to a place of security where he cannot find a chance to communicate with his kind in any possible way. He will be known simply as a suspected thief on the records. And after the raid is over with, I myself will see that he is led to the outskirts of the town, and let go with a warning. Is that sufficient, Frank?”

“Yes, sir, for I know your word is as good as your bond,” Frank told him. “I feel I have done my duty without being instrumental in sacrificing a life.”

CHAPTER XIII. NOT CAUGHT NAPPING.

Frank was perfectly satisfied with the promise given him by Major Nixon. He knew the bluff British soldier would keep his word to the letter. While the man who had been caught hiding in the hangar of the young American aviators would be taken to a place of security and kept carefully guarded, in order to prevent his knowledge concerning the contemplated aerial raid from leaking out, at the same time his life would not pay the penalty of his capture.

After some more conversation covering the matter Frank, knowing the other to be very busy, took his leave.

"A last word of warning, my boy," said the soldier, after shaking hands. "Keep on the alert wherever you go in Dunkirk. While the place itself is loyal, and is thronged now with soldiers of every type, at the same time we know there are many secret sympathizers with the other side here trying to learn the plans of our generals, so that they can communicate them to the Kaiser's leaders."

"But why should I be picked out for trouble?" asked Frank.

"Because they know that you are here to complete a deal entered into with the French Government in connection with your wonderful seaplane before this war was dreamed of. They would be willing to do something to prevent you from standing between their plans and the securing or destroying of the machine in the hangar."

"I had not thought of it in that light," said Frank, disturbed more or less.

"Pardon me for saying it," continued the Major, "but they understand that if you could only be made to disappear your companions would be much easier to hoodwink, and their plans looking toward destroying the *Sea Eagle* would be crowned with success. You will be doubly careful, Frank, I hope."

The boy promised this. Even though he might not be

willing to admit that these secret agents of the Kaiser would dream of attempting any violence, at the same time he saw the soldier was really concerned about him.

So they parted with mutual good wishes.

Frank found himself again on the streets of the French seacoast city. Dunkirk was a far different place in these strenuous war times from the other days, when peace lay upon the land, and men went about their customary vocations of fishing, trading, and disposing of the products of the rich soil.

Now everywhere he looked Frank could see soldiers, and then more soldiers. They thronged the principal streets, and passed in and out of the shops buying things that appealed to their fancy. There were all manner of strange foreign troops to be met with—Gurkhas from far-away India; Canadians who resembled the Rough Riders of our own Spanish War times; Colonials from Australia or New Zealand; and many others who interested the boy very much.

Then, with the warning of Major Nixon still ringing in his ears, Frank suddenly became aware of the fact that he himself was an object of interest, though there was nothing about his make-up calculated to attract attention in all that strange collection of men from the four quarters of the globe.

Several times, on glancing hastily about him, he had noticed a certain man dressed like a citizen apparently staring into the window of a store. Frank began to believe the man was following him, and so he made a test to prove it.

"I like that, now," he said to himself, with a chuckle when again he found that he had not shaken the unknown off his track by slipping into a certain side street, for the man was standing there on the curb as he turned, and calmly brushing his sleeve as though utterly unconcerned.

"I wonder if they would dare try to stop me on the way to the hangar," Frank was asking himself, though he

immediately added: "that's hardly likely, for there's really no time when I'm out of sight of soldiers on the road, because they're going and coming constantly. I could even fall in behind a regiment if I wanted, and have plenty of company all the way to the gates of our compound."

Just then he found himself attracted by the actions of a couple ahead of him, a man of middle age and a woman. Apparently she had been seized with some sort of vertigo, for the man was acting as though dreadfully alarmed. He had thrown an arm about her, and was looking around in an appealing way.

It happened that Frank was about the only person nearby, and it was only natural for him to hasten forward.

"Oh! please help me support my wife, young sir!" exclaimed the citizen as Frank arrived. "She is fainting, and just when we had reached our home here. Would you mind supporting her on the other side, and assisting me to get her to the door?"

An appeal like that could not be easily resisted, especially by one so ready to help others as Frank Chester had always been in the past.

Somehow it did not appear to strike him as singular that the citizen should be so fluent in his English when he was supposed to be a Frenchman. All Frank thought of then was that the man was in difficulties, and it would be next to nothing for him to lend the other a helping hand.

So he took hold on the other side of the woman who was acting as though swooning. Frank could not but notice that she appeared anything but fragile.

The door of the modest looking house was close by, and between them he and the distracted husband managed to half lead, half drag, the fainting woman up to it. The man immediately opened the door with one hand.

"Please assist me a little further, and I will be so thankful!" he pleaded.

Frank might have actually entered the house, only for a little thing that he had noticed. As they approached the door

he had seen the man cast a quick glance upward toward the second story. The latticed blinds were shut, but as Frank used his eyes to advantage he believed he saw someone's face back of the screen.

Like a flash it struck him that the man must have made some sort of quick signal to the party who was hidden up there. Frank became cautious in that second, remembering the warning given him by Major Nixon.

These spies were up to all manner of trickery in order to carry out their well-laid plans, and might not this pretended swooning of the woman be only a bait intended to coax him into a trap?

Frank immediately released his hold of the woman, and he noticed that she did not appear to be in danger of falling after he had withdrawn his support, which in itself was a suspicious sign.

"Oh! I hope you will help me just a little further!" exclaimed the man. "Inside is a chair, and if we could place her in that it is all I could ask of you. Thank you a thousand times for what you have done already; but do not leave me just yet."

It seemed hard to refuse, but Frank steeled his heart. He was positive by now he had been made a victim to a deep-laid plot, and if he but stepped within that open door something unpleasant was sure to happen to him.

"You will have to excuse me, but I can go no further," he said hastily.

The man said something half under his breath. Frank saw that the woman was apparently suddenly regaining her senses, for she had thrown out a hand, and seemed to be trying to clutch hold of his sleeve.

The boy had no difficulty in avoiding the contact, however, thanks to his suspicions. He dodged back, and then with a smile turned and walked quickly away. When he glanced over his shoulder a minute later the couple had vanished, evidently going into the house, which Frank could imagine must be a nest of spies.

"That was a pretty close call for me," he was saying to himself as he walked on; "and I can imagine there'll be a hurried exodus from that building inside of a few minutes if I cared to hang around and watch. They'll be afraid that I may tell on them, and have the soldiers surround the place. But it isn't my business as a neutral to have German spies arrested and shot."

Frank sauntered on. He had a few errands to attend to, some small supplies to purchase connected with the seaplane, for new wants were constantly cropping up in that line.

The little adventure caused his blood to warm up, but Frank had been through so much in his past that he had by this time come to take such things as a matter of course, and accept them philosophically.

"If that was intended for a stall," he said to himself presently, "it shows how desperate they're getting about our disposing of the *Sea Eagle* to the French Government. Why, you'd think orders had gone out in Berlin to prevent the transfer by hook or by crook. Certain it is these people are risking their lives in the effort. But they will have to get up pretty early in the morning to best us, that's all I can say, even if it does sound like boasting."

Though remaining watchful, he was soon busy with his errands. No one brushed elbows with him in the stores but that Frank used his eyes to take note. Those who could arrange such an ingenious scheme as that swooning lady and the call upon him for assistance might be equal to other games of like character.

He managed to accomplish his several duties without any further cause for alarm, and was once more on the streets observing all that happened. A constantly increasing push of eager observers toward a certain point told Frank there must be something of an unusual interest taking place there, and consumed by the same curiosity he joined the throng, for he had heard someone say the ambulances with the wounded had just come in from the front.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PERIL IN THE SKY.

Day after day the wounded from the front were being received in Dunkirk, Calais and other places along the coast. They were usually taken further on as soon as their immediate wants could be attended to.

In many cases the stricken soldiers would be carried by train to the large Red Cross hospitals in and around Paris. Then besides this, on many a night a steamer would start from Dunkirk across the Channel bearing hundreds of British back to their own shores, where they could receive the best of care among their people. These voyages were made when possible in the gloom of night, and at full speed, in order to avoid the risk of having the vessel torpedoed by lurking German submarines, ready to deliver crushing blows to her enemy's ships.

Frank stood in the crowd and watched the transfer of the poor fellows to the temporary hospital. They were mostly British soldiers who had received their injuries while trying to hold the trenches against some fierce drive on the part of Bavarians or Prussians.

As he saw one after another swathed figure borne on stretchers from the ambulance motors into the hospital, Frank felt a sense of pity for all these who were suffering on account of this terrible war, no matter on which side they chanced to be.

He finally turned away, not caring to see any more such pitiful sights. He marveled at the brave front displayed by even the most dreadfully wounded men, who tried to greet the crowd and smiled through the mud that plastered their faces.

Remembering what he and Billy had discovered in connection with the gathering of a new army back of the German trenches, Frank expected that in a few days there was bound to be a greater stream of wounded pouring into Dunkirk than ever before, because a desperate attack was

doubtless contemplated.

When he learned from Major Nixon that some of the Allies' aviators had brought in the news concerning that gathering host of gray-clad soldiers, Frank realized that he could speak of it without reservation, since it would not be giving information as to the enemy's contemplated plans.

Remembering one more errand which needed his attention, Frank, after leaving the vicinity of the Red Cross hospital, had immediately started to look after it. He was through with it and actually starting for the hangar when once again he became aware of the fact that a sudden confusion had broken out. People were shouting in an excited manner, as though a mad dog had broken loose and was coming down the main street of Dunkirk.

There was no difficulty in learning what was the matter. That wild cry of alarm was becoming very familiar to the ears of the worried citizens of Dunkirk these stormy days.

"The Germans are coming! The Germans are coming!"

In French and in English this shout was being carried along, constantly added to by scores of voices. People rushed pell-mell this way and that, many dodging down into cellars, as though seeking safety from some terror that was likely to descend on the coast city like a cyclone.

Those who were not yet running had their necks craned, and their eyes turned upward toward the northeast. Frank stepped over to where he could see better, and then he also "rubbered," as Billy would have called it.

On numerous occasions the German aviators had conducted an organized raid on Dunkirk, dropping dozens of terrible bombs in what seemed like an indiscriminate fashion. Possibly these were in the main intended to damage the camps or accumulated stores of the British legions; but if so the aim of the men in the Taubes was singularly bad, for the majority of the bombs had thus far either exploded in the open streets, or shattered private houses.

Many innocent persons, including women and children,

had suffered from these explosives, and it was not singular then that whenever the cry was raised that the "Germans were coming," meaning a raiding flock of aëroplanes, there would ensue a mad panic in the streets of the French city.

"There are several moving things over there away up in the heavens," Frank told himself as he gazed in more or less excitement. "Even without a glass I'm almost ready to say they can't be Taubes."

He stood there watching and waiting until the soaring objects drew closer, when their true identity could be discovered.

Frank, being an aviator himself, quickly detected certain things that the common observer might never have discovered; and which told him the half dozen specks in the sky that February morning were birds and not aëroplanes.

"Some gulls flying high," he murmured as he watched. "Yes, there they circle around, which aviators bent on bombarding the city and then running off in a hurry would never think of doing."

He told those near him that there was nothing to fear, as the suspected Taubes were only harmless birds. The cheering word was passed along from mouth to mouth, and some of those who only a few minutes before were looking very peaked and white commenced to laugh, trying to make out that they knew all along the advancing specks were only birds.

By degrees even the shivering inmates of the cellars learned that it was a false alarm, and ventured to appear again.

"And I suppose this happens several times every day," Frank mused as he watched the arteries of traffic once more begin to flow naturally. "While little damage that amounts to anything has been done by the bombs, the coming of the Germans is looked forward to with dread. I suppose if a flier happened to be brought down with a well directed shot from a gun it would give the people more pleasure than anything they could wish for."

It struck him that possibly the other boys might have heard something of all this excitement and would be worried about him. So Frank stepped into a store he knew of and proceeded to get the hangar on the wire. There was some little difficulty at first, as though a good many people were trying to communicate with their homes for some purpose or other. Finally a voice called in good English:

“Hello! that you, Frank?”

“Yes, that’s who it is, Billy. I only called you up thinking you might have heard all the shouting, and wonder what it was.”

“Oh! some of the guards here guessed it, and we’ve been watching the gulls through our field glass. But how about the other business, Frank; is it all fixed?”

“I’m coming back right away,” Frank told him. “Soon after I join you, there will be something doing. I’ll tell you the rest when I get there; but everything is going on O. K. So-long, Billy. Keep watching, for they’re ready to try everything under the sun to gain their end. I’ve got a new story for you when I come.”

Frank by this action had not only accomplished his purpose of relieving the minds of his chums, but at the same time he had made sure that things were unchanged at the hangar.

Determined not to take any risks that could be avoided, Frank waited until he saw a battery of field-pieces moving along the road that led close by the gate of the hangar. Perhaps the guns had come over from England on the previous night, and being badly needed at the front, were starting forth.

This was the opportunity he wanted. By keeping alongside the guns and caissons he could defy any hidden danger. If there were spies waiting to waylay him in some rather lonely spot, just as they had Pudge on the preceding night, the presence of those young khaki-clad warriors seated on the gun carriages and ammunition carts would foil them.

There was no trouble. Possibly Frank might not have been held up even though he chose to take the walk without any protection; but when in doubt it was always his policy to "play safe."

When he again found himself in the hangar, the others were eager to hear what he had promised to tell them.

"You've been having another scrape of some sort, like as not," ventured Billy, pretending to look morose, as though he begrudged his comrade that privilege while he and Pudge were only sitting there killing time.

Frank thereupon related how he had been drawn into rendering assistance when the said-to-be wife of an apparent citizen of Dunkirk, who spoke excellent English without a French accent, appeared to faint close to the door of her own home.

The other boys were thrilled by what seemed like a narrow escape on the part of their comrade.

"Ganders and gridirons, Frank!" exploded Pudge after listening with distended eyes to the account given by the returned chum. "That was a narrow squeak for you, as sure as anything."

"Yes," added Billy, "they had it all laid out to trap you. If you'd dared to step inside that open door I reckon you'd have been tapped over the head, and when you came to again it would be to find yourself in some old damp and moldy cellar. I give you credit for tumbling to their smart game, Frank."

"Bayous and bullfrogs, they certainly do want to get hold of this bully machine of ours the worst kind, and that's a fact!" spluttered Pudge.

"But tell us about the Major, and what he agreed to do?" asked Billy.

"It's all fixed just as we figured it," replied Frank. "I want this man here to understand what has been done, so come over to where you've got him."

The prisoner had been watching them eagerly. He must

have guessed that Frank had been gone to settle about his fate, and, if ever a man looked nervous, he did, as the three boys advanced toward him.

"Listen to something I want you to hear," said Frank. "We know what you are, and that if you were given in charge as a spy you'd likely be shot by to-morrow morning. But we are American boys, and not at all inclined to have the blood of a German honestly serving his Fatherland on our hands. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"Yes, go on," muttered the man, brightening up, though still anxious.

"I have arranged it with the authorities that you will only be looked on as a petty thief. You will be held in close confinement for a few days until it is certain that any information you may have picked up while here in this building will be useless. Then they will take you out of the city and set you free, with a warning never to be seen here again if you value your life."

Now the man's face lighted up in a smile.

"That is much better," he said, after drawing a long breath of relief. "We thought you were on the side of the Allies, because you meant to turn *it* over to the French Government."

"You must remember," said Frank impressively, "that this machine had been over here, boxed but not assembled, for months before the war opened. My company had a contract with the French people, who insisted on representatives being sent across to demonstrate the new flier; otherwise they threatened to seize it, and make duplicates without our receiving any remuneration—the necessities of war. That is why we have come, and are even now trying to carry out the terms of that agreement. You can tell your people that only for this our company would not dream of making *aéroplanes* for one side or the other. They could not be shipped out of the United States, anyway."

"I understand your position," said the man; "and while it explains many things it does not change our design to

prevent the enemy from profiting by your improved type of machine. If by any means it can be stolen or destroyed we believe we are only doing our duty by the Fatherland in risking our lives to attempt it."

"Well, here comes the patrol to take you to the city prison; and, remember, you are to insist that you entered our hangar to steal, not to spy on us," Frank told him.

CHAPTER XV. ON GUARD.

"You will restore to me my papers, I hope?" remarked the man.

"If you mean the naturalization papers that stamp you as one Hans Larsen, formerly of Sweden," replied Frank, "I am going to put them in your inside pocket. But they will be taken by the officials, and I doubt if you ever see them again. They must know they are either stolen, bought, or forged, and that you only carry them to give trouble in case you are arrested."

He was as good as his word, for he had taken the papers to show the Major in case any proof were desired after his story had been told.

Then came the file of British soldiers, direct from Major Nixon. They brought a note from the officer to Frank and his chums, desiring that the prisoner be turned over, and also stating that the word he had given Frank would be religiously kept.

The spy walked away in the midst of his guards, who had orders not to let him communicate with anyone on the way. In order to make more positive of this, they had a covered wagon close by, in which he was to be conveyed to the jail.

"I'm glad we're free from him," said Billy, after they had watched the party leaving the stockade.

"You don't think there would be any attempt made at trying to rescue him while they're on the way?"

"Sugar and sandwiches, but I should hope not!" exclaimed Pudge.

Frank did not seem to be worrying about such a remote possibility.

"No, I don't think they're numerous enough to risk an encounter with a dozen armed Tommies looking for trouble, just as Pudge here would look for his breakfast," he

observed.

"Now we've got the place all to ourselves," said Billy. "There's such a thing as being overcrowded, as the backwoodsman remarked when he heard that another family had started a clearing three miles away from his shack. But I'd like to have been down in Dunkirk when they sighted those gulls coming sailing along, ever so high up in the air."

"Dories and dingbats, but I warrant you there was some excitement to the square inch," Pudge insinuated.

Frank laughed as he stretched himself out on a bench to rest.

"You missed a grand sight," he told them.

"Lots of people scared, I take it?"

"Well, they were fairly crazy," he was told. "If a menagerie of wild animals had broken loose and come to town it could hardly have created more of a panic than when that cry sounded through the streets: 'The Germans are coming!' Men, women and children all ran this way and that. Some dodged down into cellars, while others crawled under front door-stoops, as though that would save them in case a bomb burst close by. It was a panic, all right, and I never saw anything like it in all my experience."

"They must have felt silly after they found out what it really was?" Billy went on to say.

"Oh, not so very much," he was told by the one who had been on the spot, and was in a position to relate things at first hand. "You see a good many started to make out they knew the dots must be birds, and said they had just been carrying on in that excited way for a lark."

"To be sure," declared Billy, "that's the way lots of people always try to crawl through a little hole when caught with the goods on. Some of the others, I reckon, laughed it off, and admitted that they didn't care to be blown up; that they got plenty of that sort of thing at home, as it was. But, Frank, how about our own program?"

"You mean about staying here and being ready to start off when we get the word—is that it, Billy?"

"Yes; shall we stick it out here the rest of the day?"

"I think," said Frank, "none of us have any need to leave the place again until we start the motors and open up on the second trial spin, this time with some of the best British aviators along to observe how the *Sea Eagle* carries herself."

"Do you think there will be a representative of the French Government aboard to take notes along the way?" asked Billy.

"That's my understanding of the case," he was told.

"Well, it ought to settle the matter of our business, Frank."

"Just what it must," came the reply. "We'll give an exhibition of all the *Sea Eagle* is capable of doing in a way to make those other seaplanes look sick. Then we'll expect to have the deal closed. That's my understanding of the bargain."

"But, Frank, whatever are we going to do for eats between now and to-morrow, when we come back from the raid up the coast?" asked Pudge, with a despairing expression on his fat face that would make anyone believe he had lost his last friend; or else just heard the news that he was to be hanged in three hours.

"I've fixed all that," the other told him, "and right now I think I see the wagon coming with a lot of good stuff, such as can still be had in Dunkirk if you've got the francs to buy it with."

Pudge was comforted by hearing such glorious news. He immediately took up his position outside the door from where he could keep an eye on the road close to the stockade gates.

"What are you doing out there, Pudge?" called Billy.

"Sandwiches and sauerkraut, but you wouldn't want to run the risk of having that grocery wagon miss the place

and drive past, would you, Billy?" demanded the sentinel; and the others let him alone, knowing full well that Pudge would not allow any accident of that sort to come about as long as his voice held good.

It turned out that Frank had bought a whole assortment of things to eat; indeed, Billy declared he believed they could stand a siege of a whole week with that lot of foodstuffs to fall back on.

"Three days, anyhow," assented Pudge, who evidently had a different viewpoint from Billy when it came to sizing up the lasting qualities of edibles.

With the aid of the little stove they prepared a lunch, and really enjoyed it immensely. Pudge seemed to be reminiscent, for he brought up numerous half forgotten times of the past when in company with Harry Chester they had enjoyed many a similar repast, cooked under strange conditions it might be, but never to be wholly forgotten by those who took part in the feast.

Then the afternoon came and it was a long one to the three chums shut up for the most part in the hangar. The fire was kept up in the stove, because there was a tang to the February air so close to the Channel.

Frank went carefully over every part of the seaplane to make certain it was in the best shape possible for the long journey they had before them under conditions that no one could possibly foresee. He did not mean to neglect the slightest thing that could add to their comfort and safety.

Pudge had managed to make himself a pretty cozy nest with a couple of blankets, and he put in part of the afternoon "making up for lost sleep," he told them. It was a standard joke with them that the fat chum was always far behind in his customary allotment of sleep; somehow or other he never did seem able to fully catch up.

Billy and Frank often stepped outside and took an observation. This not only included the weather but the conditions existing on the harbor, where there were boats of various descriptions to be seen, for the most part unloading

war material sent from Great Britain in spite of Germany's submarine warfare.

"This has been a pretty good day for aërial work, Frank," suggested Billy. "What about the prospects for to-morrow?"

"I think we can count on it holding about as it is for another twenty-four hours," came the answer, "and then a change is about due. It's still cold enough to snow, and I expect we'll meet a lot of snow squalls when we're making that trip up the Belgian coast."

"Do you really believe there'll be that many seaplanes in the bunch—thirty or more, the Major told us?"

"They have planned to make this raid a record breaker, it looks like," said Frank, "and will try to get out every machine they have a pilot for. It's going to be a feather in our caps to be able to say we accompanied them, no matter what amount of damage they manage to inflict on the submarine bases, or railway stations and gas or oil tanks of the German army."

"Well, I think we're in great luck to get the chance to go along, Frank; though, of course, we don't mean to throw a single bomb, or do the least thing to harm the Kaiser's army. As I look at it the main purpose of our being allowed to accompany the squad of raiders is to let them see what cards we're holding in this invention of Dr. Perkins. The French Government officials want to be shown, just as if they were from Missouri."

"They'll see a few things calculated to make them open their eyes, unless I miss my guess," said Frank, with quiet confidence; for he knew what the *Sea Eagle* type of hydro-aëroplane was capable of doing when properly handled, and only longed for the opportunity of showing those British aviators, some of them well-known air pilots, the crowning triumph of Yankee ingenuity.

"It's getting on toward evening now, with the sun near setting time," remarked Billy, as though he felt that a load was taken from his shoulders with the passing of that almost interminable day.

"There's a steamship coming in," Frank said. "It's taking all sorts of chances of being torpedoed, even if the Germans have said they are holding back until the eighteenth to start the reign of terror."

"Do you really think the submarine blockade is going to work?" asked Billy.

"Honestly I don't see how it can," Frank replied. "They have only a certain number of the latest undersea vessels capable of staying away from a base for a week. These can't be everywhere, and are liable to be sunk by torpedo boats. I've no doubt the Germans will punch holes in a good many small steamers; but as a rule the big ones can run away from them. I guess it's a whole lot of a bluff, between you and me."

"Will Great Britain dare them to do their worst, do you think, Frank?"

"Yes, even knowing that they threaten to sink merchant vessels and their crews of noncombatants without giving warning. Somehow or other it does seem to me that Germany is doing everything possible to make outsiders distrust her. But I suppose we can't look at things the same way they must from inside, especially since England threatens to *starve* Germany into submission."

"There's the sun going to set," remarked Billy.

They stood and watched it go down, and the gray of evening begin to creep across the cold sea. So that night in February closed in. Like a grim phantom the steamer came stealing into the harbor, with few lights showing.

"Let's go in where it's warm and comfortable," said Billy. "Frank, since we have plenty of stuff along with us why not make an allowance of coffee for the men who are standing guard over our plant here. A mug of hot coffee would take the chill out of their bones, I'm thinking."

"A good idea, Billy, and thank you for suggesting it. We'll find what Pudge says, and carry it out. With the lantern we can make the rounds, and see that no sentry is omitted."

With such sentiments spurring them on, the boys

entered the hangar and found that Pudge was already deep in the pleasing duty of getting supper ready. Hardly had they mentioned the subject of treating the guards to a cup of hot coffee than he announced that he was heartily in accord with the scheme.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE COMING OF THE DAWN.

"Just in time to help me out in planning a bill of fare for supper, too," Pudge told them. "There are some tinned meats here, but I'd prefer something good and warm."

That difficulty was soon swept aside, for the others nominated several dishes they chanced to be exceedingly fond of, and Pudge found he was going to have his hands full preparing them with such limited accommodations.

However, willing hands make light work, and both Frank and Billy were ready to give him all the assistance required; so that in the end they had quite a feast spread upon the little drop-table that took up no space at all when not required for use.

It was a peculiar supper-setting, with only that one lantern to give them light. Of course they could have used the acetylene lamps, but their supply of carbide was rather low, and there could be no certainty about obtaining a further amount, so Frank thought it best to husband what they had.

The weird appearance of the big seaplane added more or less to the strangeness of their surroundings. Still, by this time, all of the boys had become so accustomed to seeing its bat-like wings, and the boat body with the spoon-shaped bow that they would have missed it had the hangar been empty.

Over the meal they chatted in low tones, discussing many things connected with their mission across the sea. Little was said concerning the contemplated dash laid out for the following morning, because in the first place they knew none of the particulars; and then again the raid was the Allies' secret, not theirs.

The unexpected presence of that concealed spy had given them a rude jolt. They appeared to be living in an atmosphere of espionage; and somehow it seemed as though hostile eyes and ears might be close by, even

though unseen.

When finally they were through, it was remembered that they had decided to give the chilled guards a treat; so Pudge brewed a copious amount of strong coffee that was of a rich dark color, and had the "odor of ambrosia," as Billy called it.

"Since you've done so much, Pudge," remarked Frank, "you're going to be the one to go along with me on the rounds. So get that big tin cup, and we'll carry the can of condensed Swiss milk with us. We might as well give them the coffee just as they fancy it, either black or with the fixings."

Pudge beamed on his chum. Evidently he had not expected to be favored with an invitation like this; for as a rule he was apt to be left behind on account of his well-known clumsiness.

Frank, however, was wise enough to carry the steaming pot of coffee himself, as an insurance against spilling. If Pudge did happen to trip over some unseen obstruction and measure his length he could hardly do worse than spill the thick condensed milk, or dent the big tin cup.

So they started forth, and coming to the gate first of all surprised the two khaki-clad Tommies there. How eagerly they in turn quaffed the contents of that common tin cup can be imagined, for the night air was growing cold, and a dismal prospect stared them in the face.

Frank carried the lantern in one hand; it was in the dark of the moon, and he meant that none of the guards should make a mistake and fire upon them for unwelcome prowlers.

News of their coming was sent on ahead, each sentinel calling out to the next one; and in this way the boys made the complete rounds, neglecting none.

When they finally returned to the building it was with an empty pot, and the satisfaction of knowing they had done something to cheer up the brave fellows who were protecting their property.

Frank himself went the rounds of the hangar once more to make sure that everything was as it should be. There was a sense of responsibility resting on him that the others did not feel in the same degree, for Billy was one of those care-free individuals, and as for Pudge, did you ever know of a fat, good-natured boy worrying?

"I hope we don't have any trouble between now and dawn," Billy was heard to say as they began to get things ready for sleeping, each having a blanket, as well as some cushions with which to form a rude bed.

"Yes, because to-morrow ought to be a big day for the *Sea Eagle Company, Limited*," added Pudge, swelling a little with pride as he pronounced that name. "In fact, it promises to eclipse anything we've ever stacked up against before in all our travels."

"It was all very fine," commented Billy, "to knock around the Moon Mountains in Africa, meeting up with wild beasts and wilder men; it was thrilling to be away down there in the frozen regions of the Antarctic; but let me tell you all those happenings rolled into one couldn't equal a trip over the fighting lines of two great armies in a death grapple along the trenches."

"I'm not going to get one wink of sleep this whole night, thinking about it," asserted Pudge, shaking his head in a sad fashion; but somehow his threat did not seem to give either of his chums the slightest degree of anxiety, for they knew what an enormous propensity Pudge had for sleep.

It may have been about ten o'clock when they all lay down and tried to lose themselves in slumber. The lantern had been extinguished, but Frank had things fixed so that if any sudden necessity arose he could press a button that was close by his hand and illuminate the interior of the hangar with the searchlight connected with the seaplane.

Just as they expected, Pudge was breathing stertorously before seven minutes had crept by, proving his dismal foreboding to have been an empty threat. Billy was the next one to drop off; and finally Frank, too, lost track of things

after he had tried various expedients in the hope of forgetting himself.

They were aroused by a sudden loud noise that sounded like an explosion. All of them sat upright as though brought in contact with a galvanic battery; but Frank desisted even when his hand was in the act of reaching for the button connected with the light.

If that had been a bursting bomb dropped by some hovering German Taube, for him to betray the exact position of the hangar by starting up the brilliant electric searchlight would be the height of folly.

"What could that have been, Frank?" Pudge was asking in trembling tones; for as it afterward turned out he had been having a weird dream, and his first thought on being so rudely aroused was that the top of a volcano he was exploring had been blown off by an eruption, sending him a mile high.

"The Germans have made a night raid, and are trying to smash the *Sea Eagle*, after seeing what she could do to their machines and dirigibles!" declared Billy, as if his mind had already been made up.

"Do you think so too, Frank; and are we apt to be blown up any second now by a better aimed bomb than that first one?" Pudge demanded, evidently trying hard to control himself, and show that he could face danger with an undaunted front.

Frank had had time to think. He realized that several things conflicted with such an explanation of the mysterious explosion. Voices, too, outside could be heard, and it was evident that the guards were calling to one another.

"On second thought," Frank ventured to say, "I don't believe that could have been a bomb. It didn't make near enough noise, though perhaps we thought it pretty loud on being waked up so suddenly."

"Then what could it have been, Frank?" demanded Billy.

"I've got an idea one of the guards may have fired at some prowler," replied the other; "in a minute or so I'll take

the lantern and go out to see.”

He insisted on going alone, and the other two remained back of the barred door awaiting his report. Frank was gone about twenty minutes when his signal was heard on the other side of the door. Upon being admitted he at once eased their fears.

“After all, it was the discharge of a gun, just as we guessed,” he observed. “One of the guards believed he saw a shadowy figure creeping along. He challenged, and on hearing the bushes shake as the unknown started away, the sentry shot.”

“Perhaps, after all, it was a false alarm?” suggested Billy.

“No, it was a prowler, all right,” said Frank, “for the sergeant and myself went out to where he told us he had aimed, and we found not only footprints in the dirt, but specks of blood as well, showing that the soldier had winged the spy.”

“Tamales and terrapins, but that is thrilling news, Frank!” exclaimed Pudge. “Did you try to follow the trail, and see if the poor fellow was lying around anywhere?”

“It made for the road, and we lost it there,” said Frank. “I reckon it was not a very severe wound, for while the man evidently limped he did not lose much blood. Not wanting to be away from the hangar any longer than we could help, the sergeant and myself came back.”

“One good thing,” remarked Billy, “those chaps will have learned that we are on the job, all right. They’ll be careful how they come sneaking around here again, or try to blow up our plant. What time is it now?”

“Just two o’clock,” announced Pudge, referring to his nickel watch by the light of the lantern which had not as yet been extinguished.

“Between four and five hours more to put in before day comes ‘a-peeping over the hills,’” half sang Billy, as he started to arrange his rude bed again, for in the haste of their turning out, things had been thrown aside rather recklessly.

There was no further alarm that night. Apparently, those who would have given much to have wrecked the hangar with its contents, so as to prevent its being taken over by the French military authorities, feared to again approach the guarded stockade.

Billy, after all, was the first to discover signs of dawn through the window which was secured with the heavy wire mesh. He immediately aroused the others and they proceeded to get the coffee on the stove.

Just when they would receive the signal was uncertain; so that it was considered the part of wisdom to be prepared in advance.

"I wonder where we'll take the next meal," Pudge remarked, as they sat there at the table and satisfied their appetites with what had been prepared.

Billy was about to make some sort of grim joke on the possibility of their not ever needing another "feed," but on second thought he desisted. It was not a subject to be made fun of, he concluded, because the danger of an accident was always in evidence when far up among the clouds.

"We'll make up a snack to take along with us," said wise Frank. "It may come in handy, you know."

"Pumpkins and partridges, but it does take you to think up things, Frank!" cried Pudge, beaming on his comrade, for that proposal was right in his line of weakness.

"There's someone at the door, Frank!" announced Billy.

The day was coming on, as Frank could see when he partly opened the door. He discovered a stranger standing there, a swarthy looking, slender man, who was apparently a Frenchman, if appearances went for anything.

"Pardon, but have I the pleasure of addressing M'sieu Frank Chester?" he asked.

"That is my name," replied the boy. "Have you come from Major Nixon?"

"I have a letter here from that gentleman," said the other.

“It is to prove that my identity is correct. For I am to accompany you on this interesting trip, to discover what strong points your seaplane develops. My name, young M’sieu, is Armand Le Grande.”

Frank was thrilled when he heard the name, for he knew that Major Nixon had been wise enough to send one of the most famous of all French aviators to accompany the *Sea Eagle* on its dangerous mission.

CHAPTER XVII. NEWS BY WIRELESS.

Frank immediately opened wide the door and bade the other welcome. He even held out his hand, and made the French aviator feel that they were delighted to know he was to be with them.

"First of all be pleased to read what Major Nixon has written here," said M. Le Grande, after being introduced to the other boys, who were surveying him with natural curiosity, because they, too, recognized his well-known name.

Frank quickly read the contents of the note. It was to the point, for the British officer was a man of comparatively few words.

"My Dear Frank:

With this I introduce my friend Monsieur Armand Le Grande. You know what he has done in your line. He will be your passenger on the trial trip. Remember, you are the sole commander, as M. Le Grande is there simply to take notes, and advise, if you care to ask his valued opinion at any time. The best of luck to you all, and may this day be one never to be forgotten, both here and in the tight little island across the Channel. When we receive word by wireless, I shall let you know over the phone.

Yours sincerely,

John Nixon, Major."

Since Frank knew the handwriting well he could not have any doubt concerning the authenticity of the letter. It happened that he had also seen pictures of the noted French birdman, and they corresponded with the features of the man who had come to them.

If Frank, therefore, had in the beginning entertained the slightest suspicion, it was by now wholly allayed. Sitting there while the newcomer enjoyed a cup of black coffee, they talked in low tones of the contemplated voyage.

It was wonderful to see how calmly they discussed the tremendous possibilities of the great raid by aëroplanes on the enemy's works. Ten years back, had anyone ventured to affirm that in so short a time scouts would be sailing through the upper currents at the rate of two miles a minute, and even "looping the loop" in a desire to prove their mastery over air, he would have been set down as visionary and a dreamer.

Frank went to the double doors opening on the trestle that ran down to the water and took an observation.

"There is some haze on the sea," he announced, "but it is rising, and I think we are going to have a fair day for the trip."

They had made all preparations, so that when the summons came there should be no occasion for unnecessary delay. Knowing that they would find it bitterly cold far up among the clouds while moving at high speed, all of them were careful to don the warmest clothing possible. As they wandered about the interior of the hangar they resembled mummies to some degree; but appearances count for little with the venturesome men who risk their lives while emulating the birds.

All at once there was a quick angry buzz.

"The 'phone, Frank!" cried Billy.

Frank darted over and clapped the French receiver to his ear.

"Hello!" he called.

"Who is it?" asked a voice he recognized as belonging to the Major.

"Frank Chester; is that you, Major Nixon?"

"Yes, has he arrived, Frank?"

"If you mean M'sieu Le Grande, yes. He's here with us, waiting for the time to come when we make the start."

"Well, it is here. I have called you up to tell you, Frank."

"Have you received a message by wireless from across

the Channel, sir?"

"We have," replied the Major. "It told us that the fleet had started from Dover cliffs, and would be across in less than half an hour, if all went well."

"Good news! You make us happy when you say that. Shall we get out at once and be ready to join them when they show up?"

"Lose no time, for they may be here sooner than expected; and again the best of luck go with you, Frank, my boy. May you and your chums return in safety, and your passenger bring back a glowing report. That's all; now get busy!"

Frank swung around. His young face fairly glowed with animation and expectation.

"How about it, Frank?" asked Billy, as nervous as ever.

"They're on the wing and heading this way. Everybody get aboard while I fling open the doors and fix it to start!"

There was no confusion because they all knew exactly what was expected of them, and everyone had his place arranged.

Frank swung aboard as the big seaplane began to move. In another second they had passed beyond the doors and commenced to descend the trestle leading to the surface of the bay.

The seaplane took the water with the grace of a swan. There was something of a splash when the connection was made, but that odd bow so like a spoon had been built especially to spurn the water, and so the craft skimmed along just as a flat stone hurled by a boy's hand will skip over the surface until its momentum has been exhausted.

"There's something of a crowd over there watching us, Frank!" announced Billy, as he pointed to the shore, at some little distance away.

"Could they have known about what we expected to do," remarked Pudge, "or is it just the idle crowd that was chased away yesterday by the guard, come to see what's

on the program for to-day?"

"The chances are some of those spies are among the lot," Billy said at a hazard.

"If they are they'll be kicking themselves soon because they can't get word to their friends up the coast," Pudge continued, looking as though he considered that he might be going to have the time of his life, as no doubt he was.

Frank did not start up. There was no necessity for doing it, since he had no desire to show off before the Dunkirk people, and it was the part of wisdom to conserve all his resources for the strain that awaited them.

He had his field glasses in his hand, and with these he now began to scan the heavens toward the west, veering a little to the northwest. The others waited anxiously to hear what he might discover.

"Nothing in sight from here," announced Frank; "but then that was to be expected. We are low down on the water, and there are more or less streaks of haze in the air to interfere with a good view."

"It's too soon to look for them, anyway," added Pudge.

"How long do they expect to be on the journey across the Channel, Frank?" Billy inquired.

"From what Major Nixon said, I should guess from twenty minutes to half an hour," Frank explained. "It all depends on what air currents they strike, and whether they meet with any accidents on the way."

"There's our friend the sergeant waving to us from the shore," announced Billy. "He doesn't know what's going on, but he wants you to understand he wishes you all kinds of good luck."

"Oh!" suddenly cried Pudge, "what's that over there, Frank! Focus your glass on it and tell me! I hope it isn't one of those sassy little Taube machines come to bother us just when we want to be let alone."

"No fear," he was told by Frank as soon as he caught the far distant object that had caused this outbreak on the part

of the fat boy. "That's only a gull circling around in the sunlight."

"Hadh't we better be up so we can join the fleet without wasting any time?" asked Billy

"No need," Frank assured him. "I understand that they mean to swing in here, and then make a fresh start straight away up the shore."

"But why should they come in here at all, when they could just as well have headed straight from Dover to Antwerp and Zeebrugge?" demanded Billy, who with that reporter instinct of his always wanted to know the why and wherefore of everything.

"There are several reasons, I believe," Frank went on to say. "For thirty seaplanes to cross the Channel with its variable winds is a big feat, and it was to make sure all was well with each member of the fleet that they laid out to start fresh from here. Then, I fancy, several other machines are waiting here to join them, so as to make the raid as big as possible, and strike a note of alarm along the naval bases of the coast."

"Now I understand better," admitted the other, always willing to listen to any explanation given by Frank, for whose opinion he entertained considerable respect.

The minutes dragged. Even Pudge manifested unusual impatience, and kept craning his fat neck in the endeavor to scan the sky toward the west, as though in hopes of making a pleasing discovery ahead of Frank with his glasses.

"There goes one man up in his biplane!" remarked Billy, who had happened to turn his head and glance back toward the city, attracted possibly by a distant humming sound that was strangely familiar.

"And a second following him in a monoplane," added Pudge. "I suppose now those fellows will join the squad that's meaning to do some damage to interior points like Bruges."

Both the boys looked toward Frank appealingly, as though they hoped he would think best to follow suit, but he

did not make the slightest move. Instead, he held the field glasses again to his eyes as he swept the heavens far to the west for signs of the coming squadron of navy aëroplanes and seaplanes that had left the cliffs of England, sailing high to avoid the fog that lay upon the Channel there.

"It must surely be twenty minutes from the time they started by now," urged Billy presently.

"Just that to a fraction," announced Pudge, looking to see.

"They may have met with contrary winds up there and be delayed," urged Frank. "Because it seems so quiet down here is no sign that the conditions are the same a mile high. Be patient! I expect to soon have some good news for you."

"I surely hope nothing has happened to break up the tea party, once it's got off on the trip," grumbled Billy.

Pudge said nothing more, but sat there watching Frank. He knew they would learn of the coming in sight of the fleet first of all from the one who carried the magnifiers; and hence he kept his eyes on the face of his chum.

When Frank lowered the glasses Pudge gave a soft wheeze, as though he had been fairly holding his breath meanwhile; then as soon as the other started to look again Pudge resumed his former occupation of watching for signs.

Even the longest night must have its end, and this absorbed vigil on the part of the fat boy was not without receiving its reward.

When Frank, on the next occasion, not only hastily lowered the glasses but passed them along to Billy, Pudge knew the crisis had arrived at last.

"There they come!" cried Billy, as soon as he had clapped the smaller end of the field glasses to his eyes. "Oh! what a raft of them I can see! Must be a hundred in that bunch, Frank, anyway, all of fifty if there's one!"

But Frank knew how Billy was prone to exaggerate,

without meaning to deceive.

“Let M. Le Grande take a look, Billy,” he suggested, which aroused the other to a remembrance of the fact that they had as their guest a most famous aviator who should be treated with every consideration.

Pudge did not ask to look. He was too busy watching Frank, who had made as if to turn on the power and start things going. For, after skimming over the surface of the water, the big seaplane would mount up like a bird on the wing.

CHAPTER XVIII. OFF WITH THE AIR RAIDERS.

"Zip! we're off!" cried Billy, as he heard the familiar whir of the motors, and felt the forward push of the sea and air craft.

Pudge was not so accustomed to being aboard one of the *Sea Eagles* when starting out on a cruise. His father, knowing the customary clumsiness of Pudge, had preferred as a rule that the fat boy stay upon the solid ground while his more agile chums attempted the aerial stunts.

But Pudge complained so much that Frank had thought it best to let him accompany them on this wonderful journey. It was likely to eclipse anything they had ever experienced before, and must ever remain as a memory worth while.

The speed increasing, they were soon rushing over the surface of the harbor at a furious rate. Then, as Frank slanted the ascending rudder, they left the water to course upward at a low angle, which, however, could be increased as they circled the harbor.

Loud cheers came to their ears from the shore, where that crowd had been standing. They were echoed, too, from several other points, showing that all Dunkirk must be on the alert this morning, as though it might be in the air that wonderful things were about to transpire.

"Are those cheers for us, do you think, Frank, or because they've discovered the fleet coming along?" Billy asked, although he had already waved his hand toward the shore.

"It's hard to tell," Frank replied. "Though they must have glimpsed the bunch heading this way, and guessed what it all means. I don't see any person running to hide in a cellar, as they do when the Taubes are around."

Mounting higher, they waited for the arrival of the fleet. It was a sight never before witnessed. The air was fairly filled with buzzing seaplanes of various patterns, jockeying for position much as is seen on the race course before the signal to start is given by the firing of a pistol.

"Listen to all the racket, will you?" cried Pudge, and indeed the noise of so many motors and whirling propellers did sound strangely.

"It's like a young Niagara, that's what I'd call it!" declared Billy. "Why, sometimes you can't hear yourself think for the Bedlam that's broken loose. Say, tell me what the Germans up the coast will think has struck them when this flock descends on Zeebrugge, and batters away at the docks and the submarine bases."

"They're all under the charge of a central seaplane, too," added Frank. "For, if you notice, the signals are always sent from that one just passing us now."

One of the muffled figures in the other aircraft waved a hand at them. Something was said at the same time, which Frank took for granted must be a question as to whether they expected to accompany the raiders.

He nodded his head in the affirmative, at the same time displaying a little red, white and blue flag he carried, and which must have considerably astonished the pilot of the British seaplane, evidently the chief controller.

"I did that so he might know we didn't expect to drop any bombs, or have a part in the raid itself," Frank explained, turning to his companions.

"They're all worked up over seeing such a whopping big seaplane here," remarked Pudge, with a touch of the old pride in his voice. "They're having the surprise of their lives right now, let me tell you. I'm glad they know that it's a Yankee machine."

"But, Frank, as we understand it, all these bomb-droppers don't intend to go to one place, do they?" asked Billy, as he watched the whirring machines flit past like so many big dragon flies.

"No," came the ready answer. "When up the coast a piece, there'll be a division starting inland to damage the railway station and try to get at the supplies the Germans have gathered at Bruges, as well as some other points."

"Well, what about us then?" asked Billy.

"Yes," added Pudge, also deeply interested; "do we go on with the seaplanes and keep tabs of what they do up around Ostend and Zeebrugge, or else switch off and go over the land the same as you and Billy did yesterday?"

"I've fixed all that with M. Le Grande here," Frank told them. "He expressed the wish that we might see fit to keep with the main body along the shore, because it is expected the most spectacular feats will be attempted there."

"Gee! I was hoping you'd say that, Frank!" Billy exploded.

"Suits me to a dot, too!" Pudge followed by saying.

"I hope they are going to start right away," added Billy.

"There's a message being sent up by heliograph," explained Frank. "Of course, we can't read the flashes, but it's meant for the man in the leading plane. I expect it will tell him everything is all right for the start."

He proved a true prophet, for immediately afterward some signal was given that caused the entire assemblage of *aéroplanes* to cease their evolutions and head in a long double string up the coast.

The boys, despite the clattering of propellers and the humming of many striving motors, could catch the distant wild cheers that the assembled people of Dunkirk sent after them. It was a benison of good wishes, and a hope that the object of the great raid might be fully accomplished.

Frank kept somewhat above most of the aircraft. He had several objects in doing this, chief of which was the design to show that he was in a class by himself, and not to be included in those who had come forth to fight. Besides, it allowed them to observe all that was going on below; as well as being in a position to show the pilots of the fleet a few little things connected with the strange looking *Sea Eagle* that would cause them to feel more or less astonishment, and envy as well.

"Will you show them something, Frank, now that we have the chance?" asked Pudge.

"It will have to be before we get to the first place they expect to bombard, then," Frank replied, meaning, of course, that once the work of the fleet began there would be no time for any of them to manifest any interest in the evolutions of the American built aircraft.

When Frank had moved a lever that called for all speed, and the motors were working at the astonishing rate of almost two thousand revolutions a minute, it seemed as though they had left the rest of the fleet far in the lurch. Green flames spouted from the exhausts, for Frank had opened the muffler in order to get every ounce of speed out of the motors.

They could see the pilots of the other seaplanes looking up at them in mingled wonder and admiration, for, like the jockeys of race horses, it is the ambition of every aviator to possess the fastest going machine on the market.

Having secured a free section of space to himself, Frank proceeded to put the wonderful *Sea Eagle* through her paces. He showed what could be done in various ways, and while possibly most of those other craft were capable of accomplishing similar tricks, the fact was made patent that the superior size of the American made hydro-aëroplane did not act as a bar to the ability of the *Sea Eagle* to maneuver in a dexterous fashion while going at that tremendous rate of speed.

"Now we'll have to stop, and mount a little higher," Frank remarked, having circled around and found himself once more back of the leaders in the procession.

"There go several aëroplanes off to the right!" announced Billy. "I reckon that's the detachment told off to tackle Bruges and other interior places."

"We're coming to Ostend!" Frank told them, pointing down to where the city of the celebrated bathing beach could be seen, with the houses and hotels close to the famous sandy stretch of shore.

There were boats in the harbor, and they must be German owned or they could not have come there. Billy,

using the glasses, could see that the most tremendous excitement had seized upon every one in sight. People were rushing in every direction, soldiers as well as civilians; the rays of the sun glinted on cannon that were being hastily changed, so as to point upward.

"There goes the first anti-aircraft gun!" called Billy, as a faint boom reached their ears from far below.

"Watch what the fleet pilots do!" Frank told them.

Apparently the plan had been well worked out, and every pilot knew exactly what was expected of him. Maps of the region had been carefully studied in order that the position of each vulnerable point of attack might be known.

If there was a railway depot which the Germans used every hour of the day, and the loss of which would cripple their transportation facilities, that was picked out to be an object of attack. Here was a mole alongside of which possibly submarines tied up, and its destruction would deprive the enemy of a valuable station. Further on a large shed marked the spot where great stores had been gathered, and if a bomb could only be exploded in the midst, it was going to mean that there would later be a shortage of provisions. An oil tank, an ammunition magazine, a forty-two centimeter gun, such as battered the forts at Liège to pieces, all such were fair objects of attack wherever they could be found. The one order that had been given to every pilot was to avoid destroying the property of civilians as far as possible.

As Frank and his chums looked down from their higher level they saw a sight such as had never before been witnessed by human eyes. The air was filled with a flock of circling, dodging aëroplanes, with puffs of white smoke breaking above, below, and in some cases amidst them, as the guns on the ground were fired again and again in hopes of bringing one or more of the venturesome craft down.

Various explosions far beneath proclaimed that the bombardment from the sky was in full blast. Most of their ammunition, however, would doubtless be kept for the more

important base at Zeebrugge, where raiding submarines were wont to start forth on their daring excursions through the waters of the Channel, seeking to destroy British and French merchant vessels or ships of war.

Already the leading seaplanes had passed over the watering place known as Ostend and which before the war had been a famous summer resort. Doubtless their departure would be watched with mingled feelings by the thousands of German soldiers who had been interested observers of this wonderful sight in the heavens. They would also doubtless wonder what was going to happen when the aerial fleet returned, as it surely must, to its base at Dunkirk.

"How about Antwerp?" asked Billy. "Think they'll take a turn up there, and drop a few reminders on the railway station, or some of the forts they say the Germans have been building up again?"

"I hardly think so," Frank replied. "This is a raid on sea coast places, as I understand it. They want to strike at the submarine bases so as to upset the plans of the Germans for next week, when the blockade of the coasts of Great Britain and Northern France goes into effect. They'll do some damage at Bruges and Blankenberghe I expect, just as we shied a few at Ostend; but the main thing will happen when we get to Zeebrugge."

"I think that must be the place just ahead of us right now, Frank!" called out Billy, who was again using the glasses, bent on seeing everything that occurred; for he realized that they were highly favored by fortune in being given a chance to witness such strange sights.

"Yes, that is Zeebrugge," Frank admitted. "Now we'll see something worth while, if no snow squall comes along to shut out our view!"

"Pirates and parachutes," cried Pudge, "but I hope that doesn't happen to us."

CHAPTER XIX.

HOW ZEEBRUGGE WAS BOMBARDED.

On their way up the coast there had been several occasions when, for a brief space of time, as a cloud was encountered, the onrushing fleet of seaplanes was swathed in a flurry of blinding snow. That was why Frank expressed the wish nothing of the kind might occur while the bombardment of the Belgian town on the edge of the Channel was in progress.

Zeebrugge is at the terminus of a canal, and had no sooner fallen into the hands of the Kaiser's forces than they realized it would make an admirable place from which to start their submarine vessels against the shipping accustomed to using the English Channel.

The submarines were sent there in sections and assembled in shipyards arranged for that purpose. In fact, as the war progressed, Zeebrugge was rapidly becoming a very important center of military and naval industry.

As Frank well knew, Antwerp might have served the purposes of the Germans much better, but to reach the sea, vessels would have to cross a section of Holland, and the pugnacious little Dutch country had declared she would resist such invasion of her rights to the last man and vessel. As the Hollanders have always been good fighters, with an army of half a million men to back them, Germany had wisely chosen to make use of Zeebrugge.

Billy reported that the same excitement existed as at Ostend. Everywhere there were men seen running, and pointing upward toward the flock of aerial war craft.

"And I don't blame them a bit for being scared," he went on to say. "Two or three aéroplanes at a time are bad enough, but thirty in a bunch—holy smoke! it would frighten any American community half out of their wits, I'm thinking."

"There goes the first shot at us!" announced Pudge, and it was strange how he, unconsciously perhaps, seemed to include the *Sea Eagle* in the list of invading aircraft, though

they did not mean to lift a hand against the defenders of Zeebrugge.

"It fell far short," observed Billy. "They're so worked up they hardly know what they are doing. This time I reckon the seaplanes mean to keep above the reach of the shrapnel."

"In which they show their good sense," Pudge replied. "It only takes a little hit to bring an aëroplane down to the ground; and if a pilot and his helper ever dropped from this distance it means good-by."

Except when one of the shrapnel shells broke below them, the air was clear enough for the boys to see everything that went on. Billy soon began to complain, as usual.

"Say, it's ten times worse than a three-ringed circus," he declared. "You can't, with so many pilots dropping bombs while they circle around, possibly watch more than a small part of what's happening down there."

"Keep an eye on that mole along the edge of the water," advised Frank. "That is where the submarines stay when they're in port, and it's being pounded pretty lively, you notice."

"But why waste so much ammunition on an empty dock?" asked Billy.

"It's of importance that they destroy it," Frank explained. "I've got an idea they expect there may be several submerged boats alongside the mole. Perhaps, when the Germans had word from Ostend that the terrible air fleet was headed this way they guessed that the main object of the raid was to destroy their undersea boats; so they would be apt to sink them of their own accord, and in the natural way."

They hovered over the spot, making short circles so they could witness all that occurred. M. Le Grande had produced binoculars from some part of his person, and was keeping them glued to his eyes constantly.

No doubt, in time to come, the boy aviators would often

picture that wonderful scene in their minds when lying in their peaceful beds at home. With the buzzing of the flying seaplanes that darted to and fro, the sharp bursting of the shrapnel in furious volleys, and the heavier sound of the guns themselves far beneath, it certainly was an event never to be forgotten by those fortunate enough to be able to experience it at first hand.

Now one of them would call the attention of his comrades to some special feature of the battle scene that had caught his eye; and hardly would they rivet their gaze upon this before something else quite as thrilling called for notice.

They could even tell when the bombs, which the aviators were dropping, burst or failed in their intended mission. Long practice had made the airmen fairly accurate, though many of their missiles would be wasted, of course, and others go wide of the mark.

The sea wall was battered out of shape under the hurricane of bombs sent at it. Further on cars and motors were smashed when another well directed shot burst in their midst, causing a wild stampede on the part of a company of gray-coated Bavarians. These men had been firing several of the guns that could be elevated at an angle of almost fifty degrees, and were made especially with the idea of bringing down aircraft.

Several of the hostile airmen seemed to have marked out an oil tank as the target of their aim. It was a small thing to strike at such a distance, and a number of shots had gone wild. As though provoked at such a waste of precious ammunition, one of the most venturesome of the pilots suddenly swooped downward.

"Oh! watch him!" cried Pudge. "Now there's going to be something doing worth seeing. I take off my hat to that chap for daring!"

He stopped talking then, for he had to actually hold his breath with admiration and fear while watching the evolutions of the bold voyager of the air.

The birdman swung this way and that with an eccentric movement that effectually balked the designs of the gunners to burst a shrapnel shell close to him. His altitude changed constantly, so they were unable to regulate the fuses of their shells to meet the conditions.

It looked as though he were simply defying them to do their worst, or begging a Taube of the enemy to risk rising to engage in a duel with him.

"Why, he's right over their heads now, for you can hear all sorts of rifles going off in volleys," said Billy. "Let's hope he keeps out of their range."

"Dories and dingbats, but doesn't it beat anything you ever heard tell of?" Pudge was heard to say as he leaned over and watched the exciting picture; though he afterward declared it made him dizzy to see so many seaplanes speeding this way and that like angry bees when the hive is being robbed.

"Watch!" called Frank, who guessed from the signs that the bold pilot must by this time have reached a point where he was ready to have his assistant make the next cast.

Yes, they could see that he was leaning over now and apparently balancing some object in his hand. The seaplane grew somewhat steadier in its motion, as though they were willing to take additional chances in order to obtain stability.

"There it goes!" shouted Billy, after which they all stared, and listened to ascertain what the result of the cast would be.

There came an upheaval, accompanied by a billow of flame and dense black smoke that rose in a cloud. The aviator had succeeded at great peril to himself in dropping his bomb directly on the tank, with the result that a large quantity of precious gasoline or oil was lost to the enemy.

Even as high up as the *Sea Eagle* chanced to be at the time, those who were seated in the car could feel the wave of air concussion. The seaplane from which the fatal bomb had been dropped was seen to rock and plunge very much

as a ship would in a gale at sea; but the navigator who controlled the levers knew his business, and managed to keep from turning turtle, a fate that all aviators view with unpleasant sensations.

Having accomplished his part of the raid, and earned the commendation of his superiors, the gallant airman began to climb the spiral staircase again, seeking a safer altitude. If all the others could do one-half as well as he had this raid would not soon be forgotten by the defenders of Zeebrugge.

"Not a single Taube have we seen since starting out!" said Pudge.

"Well, can you blame them for keeping under cover?" demanded Billy. "What could they do against thirty big seaplanes such as we've got with us? A rain of bombs would be the portion of any German pilot rash enough to put up a fight. He'd be courting sure death if he as much as showed his head."

In the beginning of the war the Germans were far superior to either the British or the French with their aircraft. Their Taubes and Zeppelins caused much alarm in many a French and Belgian city as they flew over and dropped destructive bombs in the endeavor to terrorize the enemy.

That time, however, had gone by, and the assembling of this fleet of big British seaplanes was a plain notice to the Kaiser that the day of his supremacy of the air had passed into other hands, and that henceforth his aviators were to find themselves outclassed for daring and skill.

Around and around the hostile planes circled, each spitting out from time to time a fresh supply of deadly missiles that rained destruction on the military works below. Of course, it would presently come to an end. Then the wonderful fleet, having exhausted their supply of ammunition, would take up the return journey, leaving to the defenders of Zeebrugge the unpleasant task of counting up their great losses, and trying to conceal much of the truth, as all sides invariably do under similar conditions.

Frank was anticipating seeing some signal flying from the chief seaplane, a sort of "cease firing" order. It was just at this time that Billy discovered another exciting event being enacted, and called the attention of his companions to the fact.

"I've been watching that chap trying to hit that magazine for some time," he called out. "He seems to be in hard luck, and now he's going down like the other one did to tackle the thing at closer quarters. I only hope he gets through as well as the first one did."

"Yes, there hasn't been a single accident worth mentioning so far," declared Pudge. "I'd hate to see him dropped like a stone. Rafts and rattlesnakes, but listen to the row they're keeping up. They just seem to know what he's trying to do. Look at them running away from that magazine like rats deserting a sinking ship."

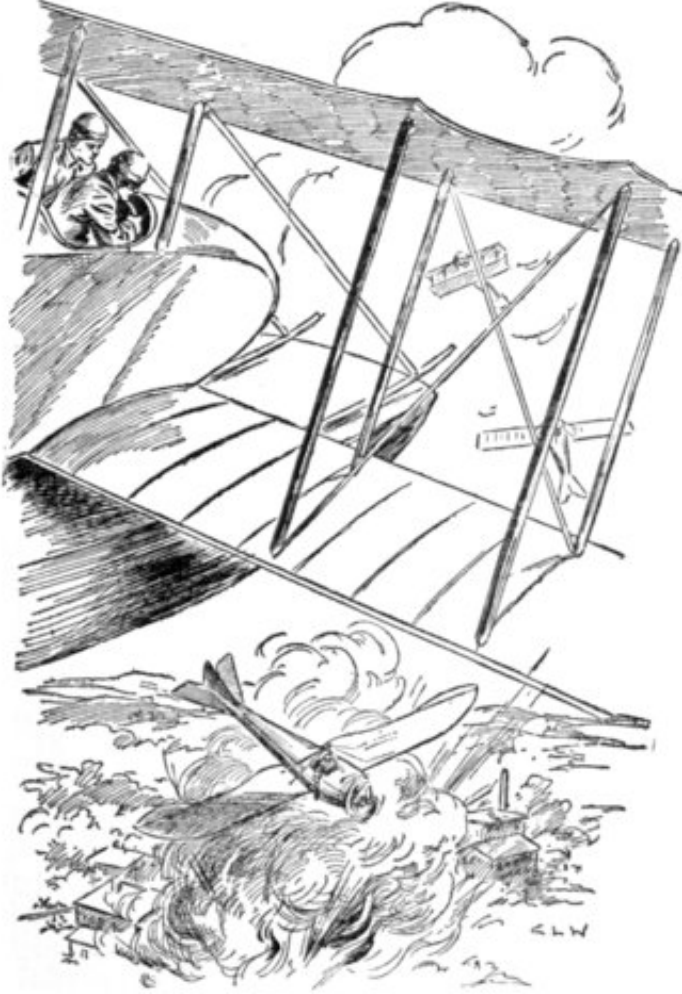
Swooping down, the Allies' aviator was seen to head almost directly over the object of his particular attention. Calmly he measured the distance with his practiced eye, while the pilot slowed the seaplane down to a moderate speed.

They were in a perfect storm of bursting shrapnel, and at times the smoke fairly concealed the moving machine. Once Pudge gave a low cry of dismay, for he thought he had seen the seaplane plunging earthward a wreck, when there would be no question about the fate of its venturesome occupants.

Then he took fresh heart as a puff of air blew the white and gray smoke aside, and it was discovered that the aëroplane was still afloat.

"Oh! why doesn't he do it?" cried Pudge. "It seems as if my heart would climb up in my throat, I'm that worried. Throw now! There, he's going to do it, boys, don't you see? I wonder if that shot will be any better—"

Pudge did not finish his sentence, for just then there was a frightful roaring sound. The magazine was seen to fly to a million pieces, while up rose a vast cloud of smoke. The



The magazine was seen to fly to a million pieces, while up rose a vast cloud of smoke.

atmosphere was made to fairly quake under the tremendous concussion, so that Pudge clutched hold of Billy, who was alongside, as though he actually feared they

would be overturned and hurled into space.

Frank's heart also seemed to stand still, but it was not on account of any fear for himself. When through the rising billow of black smoke he saw that the daring author of this last blow at the invader's army was apparently uninjured, Frank breathed freely again.

CHAPTER XX. CAUGHT IN A SNOW SQUALL.

"Oh! they did it after all!" Pudge cried out as they saw the reckless British birdmen in the seaplane start to run the gantlet of gunfire preparatory to rising once more to a safe height.

That was about the feeling of relief that seized upon them all. The deed had been so wonderfully daring that Frank and his two chums would have cheered its successful culmination no matter whether a Frenchman, a Britisher or a German had piloted the aircraft that carried it out—it was the *men* they applauded, not their nationality.

"How long is this terrible bombardment going to keep up, do you think, Frank?" asked Billy, for it seemed to him he had been gazing on the astounding picture for an hour, so many things had followed fast on each other's heels.

"I expect that was the crowning stroke," replied Frank, making himself heard only with some difficulty, owing to the clamor all around them from bursting shrapnel, accompanied by the duller sounds coming up from the distant earth.

"Then the aviators are getting low in their stock of ammunition," affirmed the observant Billy, "because I can see lots of things they'd still like to smash."

"Most of them have already stopped throwing bombs," Pudge declared. "That looks as if they'd reached the end of their resources."

"Yes," added Frank, "there goes a signal from the chief, and it must mean the time has come to start on the return journey."

Even the seaplane that had undertaken the perilous task of dropping down so as to make a sure job of blowing up the magazine had by now managed to climb to the level of the other fliers. A general movement was noticed, heading toward the south, and which must have been observed with great satisfaction by the sadly harassed defenders of

Zeebrugge, who could now proceed to count up damages.

"It's been a wonderful trip for us," remarked Billy, as they again soared above the fleet, and kept up "without half trying," as he himself would have said.

"The greatest thing about it, according to my mind!" Pudge declared, "is that not a single plane was brought down with all that firing. Why, even up where we were I heard a queer singing noise several times, that must have been made by parts of the bursting shrapnel shells. They're filled chock full of bullets and all that sort of thing, I understand. How about that, Frank?"

"Yes," the pilot told him, "as far as I know what is called shrapnel to-day is pretty much the same as grape and canister used to be in the time of our Civil War. It scatters in every direction, but is driven now by a much more powerful explosive than in the old days when gunpowder alone was used."

"Now that you mention it, Pudge," said Billy, "I heard some of those whining noises myself. It must have been our swift movements that kept us from being struck; and that's what makes it so hard for ground guns to fetch an aëroplane down."

"Yes," Frank continued, "anyone who has tried to stop a duck speeding past at the rate of seventy miles an hour knows what small chances he has to wing the quacker. It takes nice judgment and a quick eye to do it."

"So our excursion with the air raiders is all over, is it?" Billy asked, with a tinge of regret in his tone; for being engaged in the building of aëroplanes he naturally took the keenest interest in seeing such a fleet of the aircraft in action.

"I was thinking of making a proposition to M. Le Grande here," ventured Frank, without, however, taking his attention from his levers.

The experienced French aviator had been observing everything that occurred with almost breathless interest. He had clapped his hands enthusiastically and cried "bravo!

bravo!" when the bold British birdmen made that death dip, and succeeded in blowing up the magazine, taking terrible risks of perishing themselves when the air waves caused their machine to dance madly.

At hearing Frank say this he showed a keen interest in the possibility of something new developing that had not been on the program.

"I should be pleased to hear what it is, young m'sieu," he now hastened to say.

"Since the raid is over with," Frank commenced, "and the fleet bound for Dunkirk and Calais, where we understand the tired pilots will rest a few days before returning across the Channel, how would you like to have me take you out over the battle lines as we saw them yesterday?"

Pudge showed uncommon interest immediately. He had heard so much about the astonishing sights witnessed on that occasion by his two chums that it would always be a source of bitter regret to him should he have no opportunity to see the war picture for himself.

The Frenchman did not let a second go by, such was his eagerness to accept the proposition advanced by Frank.

"That is charming of you, I must say, young m'sieu," he declared enthusiastically. "If you would be so kind it would place me under heavy obligations. To see how your wonderful *Sea Eagle* can act under new and novel conditions would complete my day, the most memorable of all my experiences, and they have been many, I assure you, messieurs."

"Then there is really no need of our going down the coast any further," Frank explained. "We might as well make a sharp turn to the east here, and say good-by to our gallant companions."

As they did this, the action was noted by many of the speeding airmen; and while they could only guess at the object of the change, this did not interfere with their calling out and waving to the boys.

Looking back, Billy and Pudge could see the flock growing smaller in the distance as they scurried along like a covey of partridges. Well had they done their duty for the homeland on that day, and their hearts were beating proudly as they could see, in imagination, their names on the Roll of Honor for Britain's sons.

Then Billy and Pudge tried to forget all about the late raid, for they knew they would have plenty of excitement to the square inch with what lay before them.

Just below where they broke away from the fleet of birdmen lay Ostend, basking in the February sunshine. It may have been fairly comfortable down there, but it was pretty cold half a mile up in the air, and the boys had reason to be thankful for their warm clothing and head hoods.

Attention was now called to the land over which they had commenced to fly, leaving the coast line behind. The Frenchman and Pudge in particular were observing everything with undisguised eagerness. While the experienced aviator had doubtless taken many a trip himself over just such a landscape, the conditions had never been just the same as they were now. As for Pudge, this was his baptism of fire in a seaplane, and as far as he had gone he rather liked it.

The great checkerboard lay below them. A hundred different phases of the landscape engaged their attention. They could see villages, towns, railway lines, and even fortifications that may have been erected by the German invaders in order to defend some monster gun that was aimed seaward, so as to give trouble to men-o'-war passing along the Belgian coast.

Billy and Pudge kept up a running fire of comment. Dozens of things were constantly attracting attention which had to be pointed out. Frank was not trying to make any great speed since there was no need of haste.

When they felt that they had gone far enough, and the spirit moved them, he changed the course, and they once more struck for Dunkirk on the French coast.

"No Taubes in sight yet, I notice?" Billy cried out gleefully; for he remembered how those German aëroplanes had risen like a swarm of angry hornets on the occasion of their previous visit.

"The news of the great raid must have been wired all over the country before now," Frank explained. "Orders may have been given to keep all their Zeppelins and other aircraft housed until the danger is over."

"Can you blame them?" laughed Billy. "They heard that as many as fifty seaplanes—for things are always stretched, you know, in the telling—were chasing up and down their coast, smashing everything to pieces. They therefore would wait and then raid the Allies' quarters with a vengeance."

"Yes," added Pudge, "and right now I warrant you many a pair of field glasses is turned up this way, and all sorts of guesses are made about what sort of queer craft is whizzing over them. If your Government gets this seaplane, Mister Le Grande, and makes a bunch of them from the sample, you'll give the enemy cold feet right away."

"It is a wonderful machine, I am ready to declare; superb, beyond anything that I had ever dreamed could be made. I have only praise, I assure you," was what the Frenchman told them in his explosive way.

"I guess that settles the business then," remarked Pudge to Billy, meaning that the report made by the aviator must convince the French Government it was greatly to their interest to conclude the bargain with the *Sea Eagle Company, Ltd.*, as originally entered into, for the delivery of this sample seaplane, and the privilege of making as many others, on royalty, as they chose within a given time.

This would be the only way of settling the matter, since no machines could be shipped from America without a breach of neutrality, as the Government at Washington had recently declared.

The sea had now been left far behind, and Frank was veering their course somewhat toward the southeast, as

though he meant to cover a different field from the first land journey.

Billy noticed this, and asked questions in order to settle matters in his own mind.

"I reckon now, Frank," he began, "you've got some plan up your sleeve to make a wide circuit and see something of what's going on down along the border of France? How about it?"

"We're covering a strip of Belgium right now," said the pilot, "and you can see the unfinished canal used by the Kaiser's troops as trenches, besides all sorts of other sights where the water has flooded the lowlands when the dikes were cut in the fall by the Belgians. Now we might like to take a peep at Lille, and see what is going on in a different kind of country—where there are hills and valleys."

"That would be fine!" exclaimed Pudge, thinking only of the wonderful pictures that would be spread out beneath them as they sailed over just below the occasional fleecy clouds.

"Of course it would be more dangerous work," Frank hastened to tell them.

"You mean we would be shot at by batteries on the hilltops, don't you, Frank?" Billy questioned.

"Partly that," he was told, "and also from the treacherous cross-currents of air we would be apt to strike in such a hilly country. You never know when you may hit an air pocket, a vacuum in which danger lies for the *aéroplane* that is loafing, since it is apt to drop like a plummet. But we'll have to risk all those things. If we come through all right, we'll consider that we were well rewarded."

"Here's another of those nasty snow squalls heading this way, Frank!" burst out Pudge. "That makes the sixth we've struck. Say, let me tell you this one looks like business, too, it spreads out so wide."

"Isn't there any way to avoid it, Frank—by climbing up higher, for instance?" demanded Billy, as he drew his hood closer around his cheeks, and made ready to "take his

medicine,” as he called it.

“Too late to try that now,” Frank told him. “All we can do is to hold tight, and keep pressing straight along. We’ll hope it isn’t so very big a cloud. Steady now, everybody!”

“Do your prettiest, old *Sea Eagle*,” Pudge was heard to call out as the beginning of the snow squall struck them. Ten seconds later they were shrouded as in a white pall by the scurrying flakes, urged on by a wind that made the seaplane rock and dance in alarming manner.

CHAPTER XXI. A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

It quickly became apparent that the squalls they had previously met were playful little things compared with this one. It buffeted the big seaplane about as though determined to wind up its successful career then and there; and only for the complete mastery which Frank showed over the flier, some terrible accident must surely have ensued.

M. Le Grande was plainly nervous. He realized that in this sort of a wild storm an ordinary *aéroplane* would not have a ghost of a show. He was also at first inclined to doubt the capacity of the American boy aviator for meeting the strain of the situation.

As he watched Frank manage, however, this doubt took wings. He even began to take note of the astonishing stability of the *Sea Eagle*, and decide in his own mind that its like had never before been constructed.

Meanwhile Billy and Pudge were virtually "on needles and pins." They had all kinds of confidence in Frank, and faith in the big plane as well; but that wind did shake things up terribly, and there could be no telling how much worse the conditions ahead of them might prove to be.

None of them could see three feet in any direction. Blinded by the swiftly driven snow pellets, that stung as they came in contact with their faces, they were compelled to bow their heads to the blast, and pity Frank who was forced to stand it without flinching.

Fortunately it did not last very long. Human endurance would have been exhausted had it continued indefinitely, for Frank was becoming more or less weak under the strain, when he heard the experienced French aviator shout in his ear:

"Courage, it is passing by! I can see the sunlight beyond. Courage, my brave boy! You have done magnificently, superbly! I take off my hat to you!"

Yes, they could all see now that the snow was growing

lighter, showing the border of the cloud must have been reached. Frank had urged the seaplane on in a headlong rush with the idea of ending the agony sooner, and it was well he had shown such sagacity.

They emerged from the cloud which was soon left far astern. Frank cut down the speed to one-half, for the air was fearfully cold, and all of them seemed to be very nearly frozen.

Once in the bright sunshine again, though there was very little of warmth to it, those who could do so began to slap their arms violently to and fro in the effort to induce circulation. The French air voyager even relieved Frank from his arduous duties as well as possible, so that he could get some life in his stiffened fingers.

M. Le Grande was fairly bubbling over with praise, not only for the splendid way in which Frank had managed his craft, but in regard to the seaplane itself. Never, he told them, had he seen such a supremely satisfactory test made to prove the stability of a flier; and in every particular had the *Sea Eagle* proven itself worthy of the highest praise.

"Ah! M'sieu!" he went on to say warmly, "with a fleet of such wonderful craft, patterned after this type, we French could soon end the war alone and unaided, by striking terror to the heart of Berlin. I am pleased beyond measure with all I have experienced. The man whose mind conceived this wonder of the air is indeed a wizard."

"Good for you!" cried Pudge, who naturally was delighted to hear his father spoken of so highly.

Once again they began to take an interest in what they could see far below them. New and varied sights were constantly cropping up as they journeyed on. The character of the country was gradually changing, too, for the dreary stretches of water that marked the inundated lowlands of Belgium near the coast began to merge into dry land. This was high enough to have shed the rains that had been falling during the better part of the winter now drawing to a close.

As before, Pudge and Billy commenced calling each

other's attention to different things that caught their eyes. These were all of an intensely interesting nature and extremely varied.

In numerous instances they were fired at. The faint report of volleys came to their ears as soldiers, in the hope of doing some damage, started shooting, though it must be an extraordinary rifle that could push a leaden missile that far up into the air.

Now and then some anti-aircraft gun perched on an elevation would take a shot at them, but the white puff of shrapnel smoke invariably appeared far below, and told that there was no danger from this source at present.

"It may be a different thing," said Frank, when they started discussing this failure of the shots to reach their altitude, "when we strike a rough country, for from the summit of a high hill one of those guns could give us trouble."

"Well, we must climb out of the danger zone then, that's all," concluded Billy, as though not worrying himself in the least about such a possibility.

They were now approaching the fighting line that stretched across the country in a zigzag fashion. Everywhere the Germans had dug themselves in as though it was their full intention to grimly hold on to what they had seized, and only allow the Allies to take it after the most desperate resistance.

Eagerly the French aviator was using his binoculars. No doubt he was making a mental map of many things they saw, and would not hesitate to use his knowledge afterward, if he thought it might benefit his side.

Frank winced a little as he thought of that, for he did not wish to be unfair any more than conditions imposed on him. He salved his conscience by telling himself that there was nothing they were observing but what any daring aviator of the Allies might not ascertain for himself by a flight across that section of the disputed territory of France.

"If I saw a German Taube man in trouble right now,"

Frank was saying to himself, "I'd be just as quick to go to his rescue as though it were a Frenchman or a British pilot; and that's what we mean by calling ourselves neutral. I warrant you that ninety-nine out of every hundred adults in the United States, who know about this war, have a leaning toward one side or the other, according from where their ancestors came. But we all wish it was over, and Peace had come again to these countries of Europe."

There had really been little to proclaim the fact from radical changes in the villages below them, but Frank believed they must have left the Belgian border behind, and were now sailing over Northern France.

On mentioning this to M. Le Grande, he was immediately assured by the French aviator that such was indeed the case, and that though German fortifications still dotted the landscape below, it was the sacred soil of La Belle France.

"Soon will they have to pack up their baggage and set out for the Rhine country, when, in the Spring, the great offensive begins," the patriotic Frenchman declared, as though the sight of those enemies encamped on the soil of his beloved land filled his heart with anguish.

It seemed as though there was more or less action going on all along the lines of trenches. As those who sped along high above the earth watched, they saw bodies of men shoot forward, to meet with a deadly fire from all manner of concealed guns. Perhaps they would be thrust back whence they sprang; or if the impetus of their advance were sufficient to carry them to the trenches of the enemy, there would ensue a hand-to-hand grapple that was terribly fascinating.

Pudge had to actually pinch himself several times in order to make sure he was awake, and not dreaming.

"To think that I'd ever have this wonderful chance to see what modern warfare is like!" he exclaimed in an awe-struck tone. "There's the whole picture spread out below as if it might be painted especially for our benefit. Oh! what was that?"

A terrible explosion had apparently taken place. A section of the German trenches must have been blown up with a mine, for in the midst of the smoke they could see the khaki-clad British soldiers rushing pell-mell to occupy the breach before the Kaiser's forces could recover from the shock, and hurry additional forces up to hold the particular spot.

Such things as that were happening here and there along a line hundreds of miles in extent. It was appalling to the boys to think of such a thing, having so recently come from across the sea, where their native land was basking under the sun of peace, with not an enemy to fear.

The country became more rugged as they pushed on. Still there was no sign of any hostile aëroplane rising to engage or trouble them. In fact, all that day up to now they could not remember having once set eyes on a Taube or a Zeppelin in the air. It certainly looked as though for once they must have had strict orders to keep in hiding until the storm had blown itself out.

"I can see what looks like a city away off yonder," announced Billy, who was handling the glasses again.

"It is poor Lille, so long held possession of by the barbarians," said the native aviator, with sadness in his tones; and the boys did not wonder at it when later on they learned to their surprise that M. Le Grande himself had been born and passed most of his life in that city of Northern France.

No doubt, if he could have had his way, he would have enjoyed nothing better than the chance to hurl down such a rain of bombs upon the invaders as must have hastened them back to their own country.

"Will you pass over Lille, Frank?" asked Billy, and there was that in his voice to tell how pleased he would be should his chum give a favorable answer.

"It would be something to say we had done it," Pudge hastened to remark, showing the trend of his thoughts.

"Yes, we might as well take a look in, and see what the

Germans are doing there,” Frank announced. “After which, with a swing around, we can set sail for the fighting line, pass over to ground which the British are holding, and then start for the coast at Dunkirk, and so complete the roundabout cruise.”

The seaplane passenger was staring at his native city through his glasses, muttering to himself in French. They could easily give a guess that these were far from blessings he was calling down on the heads of the Germans, who held on to everything they ran across so obstinately.

They were again made a target for numerous guns, but as Frank had risen to a somewhat higher level, they did not believe there was any chance of a stray missile doing any damage.

So they passed over Lille, and left the sorely stricken city behind them. M. Le Grande twisted himself halfway around, the better to see the last of the place where his heart lay.

It was just at this minute that Frank was heard to utter a cry, and manifest considerable consternation.

“What’s happened?” cried Billy, as quick as a flash; Pudge turned pale and glued his eyes on Frank’s face, which was to him a barometer.

“There’s a slackening up in the feed as though the pipe might be clogged!” exclaimed Frank, in considerable apprehension. “Billy, take a look and see about the amount of petrol we’ve got in the tank!”

Billy knew how to go about this; indeed, it was a part of his regular business.

He had hardly started to carry out Frank’s instructions before he shouted:

“Gee whiz! Frank, it’s just about plumb empty! We must have been hit, and the tank’s sprung a leak!”

“Ganders and gridirons!” cried Pudge in sheer dismay. “Whatever will happen to us now, if we’re forced to land in the midst of the whole German army! Whee! I see our finish!”

CHAPTER XXII. THE NARROW ESCAPE.

"It has been a leak, for even now it is dripping down!" exclaimed the French aviator, pointing his finger at the bottom of the petrol tank.

Pudge and Billy held their breath. Everything would depend on Frank, who must know what was best to do. They might plane downward, and manage to make some sort of a landing, but that would mean capture by the enemy. The presence of the French aviator would bring the wrath of the Germans down on the heads of the boys, and as a result they would be made prisoners of war.

Not only that must follow, but the precious seaplane would fall into the hands of the Kaiser's men. Such a possibility could never be endured. M. Le Grande would be ready to try something desperate before such a catastrophe could be countenanced.

Frank had to do some pretty swift thinking. Fortunately he was not the one to lose his head in the presence of unexpected danger.

"We must make a furious attempt to get across the fighting line, which is some miles away from here at La Basse!" he exclaimed. "When we descend, it will be in the rear of the British forces, where we can be safe!"

"Let her go, Frank!" said Billy excitedly.

"Yes, for all she's worth!" added poor Pudge, as well as he could, for his trembling lips made any sort of utterance difficult.

Frank had not waited for this to turn on all power. At the time of the discovery, with regard to the loss of their precious liquid fuel, the seaplane had been headed just right, so all that appeared necessary was increased motion.

The motors responded to the call upon their reserve powers. Again, with muffler cut-out wide open, and the green fire issuing from the exhausts amidst a roaring

sound, they rushed through space.

What speed they were making none of them thought to notice by glancing at the aerial speed meter, but it must have been something like ninety miles an hour at the very least, possibly much more.

Here was another supreme test which the French aviator must be sure and take note of. He did not show any particular signs of alarm, though he was plainly excited.

Everyone was gazing ahead, their only aim being that they speedily arrive at the line where the gray-clad Germans were standing off the khaki-clothed soldiers of King George.

Such was the state of their nerves, that seconds seemed to drag like minutes. Billy was trying the best he could to focus his glasses so as to announce the glad tidings that they were rapidly nearing their goal; but he found it hard work because of the shaking of the seaplane under the forced pressure.

"It's there just ahead of us, Frank!" he finally shouted. "Keep her going only a little while longer, and we'll be all right!"

"Hurrah!" cried Pudge, rather feebly it must be confessed, for the wind fairly took his breath away.

Frank had not only kept straight on but at the same time he was commencing to head downward. There was a strong possibility that at any second the motors might refuse to work, being deprived of their feed, and in consequence the big seaplane would have to start earthward by the method popularly known as volplaning.

When reduced to that method of landing, Frank wanted to be as well down as he could with safety allow the seaplane to drop. What little danger they risked of being struck by some shot sent by the astonished Germans was not worth while considering. The great speed they were making would in itself serve to protect them from this threatening evil.

It was a critical moment for the aeroplane boys, and one

that none of them would be likely to forget soon. They could notice that the rattle of the exhaust was growing more and more deadened. That told them the end was very near and then the last feeble effort of the motors would end in a total collapse.

"A pint of gasoline would see us through with flying colors!" exclaimed Billy.

"Just to think of it," cried Pudge dismally, as though the thought of falling into the hands of the Germans and being treated as a prisoner of war filled his heart with dismay.

"On! on! keep her going, young m'sieu!" almost shrieked the Frenchman, as he half stood up in his great excitement, and turned his gaze from Frank to the prospect before them.

Frank had changed his plan of action. He no longer pushed the motors to their utmost. The muffler, too, now shut off those spiteful looking greenish flames, and the rattle was silenced.

In truth, Frank, in the belief that if they could only keep afloat, their momentum would be sufficient to carry the seaplane across the line of trenches, was trying to conserve every atom of power. He asked nothing more than this, and would be willing to take his chances of making a fairly successful landing, though a craft of that description was never intended to start or finish a voyage save on the water.

Pudge became more alarmed, now that the shrill clatter of the exhaust had been silenced, for unlike Billy he had not grasped just why this had come about.

"Oh! will we make it, Frank?" he cried in an agony of fear.

"I think so," the pilot told him steadily.

"But she's swaying right now as if ready to give up the ghost and drop!" Pudge complained in a strained voice. "That rattle has stopped. Why is that, Frank?"

"I did it so as to keep what energy we've got as long as we can," he was told.

"We're doing nobly, young m'sieu!" called out M. Le Grande.

"Yes, there are the trenches just ahead of us!" added Billy. "Listen to the rattle of rifles, will you? And I can hear cheers too, hearty English cheers. See them jumping up in plain sight and waving to us, boys! A little further, Frank, and you can volplane if it's necessary, because we'll have crossed the line and be in safety."

But the puttering of the motors told that they had arrived at the last stage of labor. A gas engine cannot run without fuel of some sort, and the vapor now being fed was of an inferior quality, so that the energy became less and less.

They were at this critical time almost directly over the German trenches, and so close that they could see the soldiers pointing up at them, even without the use of field glasses or binoculars.

"Oh! did you hear that bullet hum past then?" ejaculated Pudge, who had ducked his head in an involuntary way as though he would avoid contact with the random lead, just as some nervous people start with each flash of lightning.

Other missiles were also winging along through space, showing that the seaplane, in its mad race for a safe landing, must have already descended a considerable distance under Frank's manipulation.

Strange what queer thoughts will flash into the mind when under such a stress as this. Frank afterward laughed to remember how he was determining then and there, that if ever he had occasion to make another aerial voyage above hostile armies, where he might be subject to a bombardment, one of the things he meant to see about before starting was that he carried a bullet-proof petrol reservoir along with him.

Suddenly the motors ceased working, as the supply of gas came to an abrupt end. They were by now over the British trenches, where the men were shouting all kinds of hoarse salutes, though compelled to again hastily seek shelter in their pits, as the Germans had opened fire on them.

Frank had but one way open to him in order to reach the ground. This was to volplane swiftly, as he had many a time done after shutting off all power, and when a certain distance from the earth, by suddenly working his planes, cause the aircraft to assume a horizontal position instead of a vertical one, after which would come the straight drop.

Just what sort of a jar must accompany the landing would depend, in a great measure, on the distance they were up at the time, and the skill shown by the pilot in managing these things.

It is always deemed a spectacular method of descending from an upper level, and not as dangerous as it may appear to those who are unfamiliar with the working of aircraft. Frank had practiced it many a time, and in an ordinary *aéroplane*, with its rubber-tired wheels to run along the ground, would have thought nothing of it. When he had to land with a seaplane, never meant for such a purpose, it was a "horse of another color," and might be considered a very ticklish job.

The ground seemed to be rushing up to meet them as they fell. Pudge shrank back as though he could already feel the terrible shock of the contact, should they continue to make that swift downward progress.

But Frank was ready to change the planes, and in this manner alter the conditions. They would act as a stay, and bring their headlong rush earthward to an end. After that it would simply be a dead weight drop, and perhaps not so hard as to smash anything about the seaplane beyond repairing.

Before Pudge had time to take another full breath it was all over. They had swept down beyond a low hill, on top of which stood one of the windmills so often seen in Holland, Belgium and Northern France, with its broad arms standing motionless, and the tower showing signs of having been struck by more than one solid shot during some tempestuous battle for the rise.

With slackening speed, the seaplane followed the

descent, and then came to almost a full stop at its base. After that it dropped straight to the ground.

The shock proved to be rather severe, and Pudge was even jolted from his seat, falling in a heap close by. Frank jumped out and was immediately followed by Billy and the French air pilot, all of them perhaps considerably shaken, but apparently none the worse for the rough experience.

Frank first of all sprang over to where Pudge was wallowing. The fat boy sat up just as Frank reached his side.

"I hope you're not hurt much, Pudge?" cried the pilot of the *Sea Eagle*, as he hurriedly bent over to assist his chum to gain his feet.

Pudge started to feel himself all over. He ran his hands along his fat sides, and then down each leg; after which he proceeded to announce the result.

"Nope, don't seem to have any serious contusions or broken bones that I've been able to find. Guess I'm all whole, Frank, as I hope the rest of you are. But how about the poor old *Sea Eagle*; is she smashed beyond repair, do you think, Frank?"

"I haven't taken a look at her so far," the other told him. "What little damage may have been done can be easily repaired, once we get her taken by wagon to our hangar at Dunkirk."

"Good enough!" cried Pudge. "I was worrying more over the seaplane than about myself, I do declare. When we can get in touch with the commander at this section of the British forces, we might be able to commandeer some sort of wagon on which the machine can be packed, after we've taken it to pieces, and transported it to town. Our good friend, M'sieu Le Grande can tell them the plane now belongs to the French Government, and that a heap depends on its being taken to Dunkirk."

As they reached the spot where the big seaplane lay like a wounded bird, it was to see the Frenchman and Billy come crawling out from under the wings.



“We’re being fired on.... Try and find shelter if you can, Billy!”

“What’s the extent of the damage?” asked Frank immediately.

Before Billy could start explaining, there was a sharp

sound heard, and Frank actually felt the wind of a bullet whizzing past his cheek.

“Duck down everybody!” he exclaimed, suiting his actions to the words, and pulling Pudge after him. “We’re being fired on by somebody concealed in that old windmill base over there. Try and find shelter if you can, Billy!”

CHAPTER XXIII. THE WINDMILL FORT.

While Frank was calling out after this manner everybody was making haste to show as little of their person as possible. As there was not much shelter of any kind available, the only way this could be accomplished was to flatten out on the ground.

By some species of good luck it happened that there was a dip to the earth at the base of the low elevation on which the windmill had been built. Frank afterward called it a "swale." It ran away from the spot in a zigzag fashion, and perhaps if one were agile and clever, he might even manage to wriggle along this dip without exposing much of his person to those in the tower.

The four of them thus wallowed, and tried to exchange remarks.

"There goes another shot," said Billy, as a report came to their ears. "I hope nobody's been hit so far. How about that?"

"No damage here," replied Frank immediately.

"I am pleased to say the same, young m'sieu," added the Frenchman.

"Well, so far I haven't felt a wound, but I'm expecting something dreadful to happen any minute now," Pudge called out ruefully.

"Why, what's the matter with you, Pudge?" demanded Billy.

"Only this, that I loom up so much more than anybody else, and there's lots of chances of them seeing me, that's all. But then a fellow can only die once, and perhaps I won't know what hits me, which is some comfort."

"Hug the ground for all you're worth then," the other told him.

"I am, till I can hardly breathe," replied Pudge. "How long are we going to stay here do you think, Frank?"

"Not a great while, if we know it," came the answer, which proved that Frank, as usual, was already figuring on

some masterly move.

"But think of the nerve of the Germans occupying that windmill right back of the British lines, would you?" exclaimed Billy, as though that fact interested him more than anything else.

"Well, you can expect nearly anything in this desperate fighting," Frank told him. "Only the other day I was reading about a case where they had made a fort out of an old windmill that had a concrete foundation and walls. The Allies tried ever so many times to dislodge the German sharpshooters, but couldn't. Then the airmen took a hand, but failed to drop a bomb where it would do the business."

"How did they manage it in the end, Frank?" asked Billy, always eager to hear the explanation of any puzzle.

"After they had lost a lot of men in direct assaults, the Allies dug a tunnel up under the windmill, laid a mine, and exploded it," Frank continued.

"And that did the business, did it?" questioned Pudge, also deeply interested for personal reasons.

"It shattered things, and killed every German in the place," said Frank. "Do you know they found more than a dozen quick-firing guns there? They had made it a regular fort, even though they knew not a single man of them could ever escape in the end."

"But how can we dig a tunnel without the tools?" demanded Pudge, almost pathetically, "and what have we got to blow them up with, I want to know?"

Billy laughed derisively.

"We couldn't if we would, Pudge," he remarked, "and we wouldn't if we could. We came over here on business for the *Sea Eagle Company, Limited*, and not to take a hand in shortening the supply of the Kaiser's brave soldiers."

"Then what are we meaning to do about it?" the fat boy kept on asking. "I want to know, because to tell you the truth, I'm not feeling very comfortable right now."

"Frank, have you thought up that scheme yet?" asked

Billy, just as indifferently as though it might be the regular program for Frank to figure out a method of escaping from each and every ill that beset them.

"I think there's a way to do it," Frank responded. "This swale we're lying in, as near as I can tell, keeps right along in a crooked fashion, but always bearing in a direction that will take us away from the windmill."

"Oh! that's the game, then, is it?" cried Billy. "You lead off, and we follow after you like a trailing snake? Well, I'm pretty good on the crawl, and when it's necessary I can wriggle to beat the band."

"Yes," sang out Pudge with a groan, "but how about me? I'm not built to make a good wriggler, and you know it, fellows. It's going to be awful tough on a fellow whose body is so thick that it looms up above the sheltering bank some of the time. I'll be fairly riddled with shot, sooner or later. Please tell me how I'm going to manage it, won't you?"

"There's only one thing for you to do, Pudge," Billy jeered.

"What's that?" asked the unhappy Pudge.

"Hug tight where you are, and we'll promise to come back sooner or later and rescue you, after we've got a bunch of those Tommies to help us out."

Apparently the "last resort" idea did not wholly appeal to Pudge, for he quickly went on to say:

"Guess I'll do the best I can at hunching along after you. Some places I might manage to roll, you see. But I certainly do hope they won't open fire on me with one of those machine guns that run off a dozen shots a second."

Frank was already on the move. He may have been sorely puzzled to account for this strange and unprovoked attack on them by the unknown party or parties concealed inside the base of the old windmill; but he also knew that the only thing for them to do was to get away from the danger zone.

A third shot was heard just about that time, and Pudge gave a groan, which naturally alarmed the other boys.

"Don't tell me you've been hit, Pudge?" called Billy, whose heart was in the right place, even if he did occasionally joke his stout chum when a rollicking humor seized him.

"No, not that I'm aware of," came the answer, "but every time I hear that gun go off it gives me a fierce start. This thing is even worse than falling in an aëroplane, and expecting to get smashed when you strike the ground."

"But we're getting along, remember," said Frank, meaning to encourage the other.

"And these bends on the dip help to hide us from those Germans back there in the bargain," added Billy, wishing to contribute his mite of consolation.

The French aviator said nothing, though he too must have realized that they were all in more or less danger should they expose themselves too rashly. No doubt, those enemies concealed back of the walls of the windmill base were watching eagerly to catch signs of their presence, and ready to send a storm of deadly missiles that way at the least invitation.

Despite his size, Pudge was really making a good job out of it. He could do things when he made up his mind to try hard.

They could hear him puffing dreadfully, and making a noise that Billy likened to the blowing of a porpoise as it wallowed in the billows.

"Every foot counts with us, remember, Pudge," said Billy, who was just ahead of the fat boy, turning his head to speak, for it was hardly wise to call out any longer and thus tell the enemy where to fire.

"Mine feel like they were made of lead and I can hardly drag 'em along after me," the other replied, mistaking the meaning of Billy's words.

"There goes still another shot; I wonder what they can be shooting at?"

Hearing Billy make this remark, Frank saw fit to answer

him.

"I think they must believe we're still hiding somewhere about the seaplane, which is partly visible from the rise; and every now and then they take a snap shot to let us know they're on the job."

At hearing that Pudge seemed to feel much easier in his mind, for there was a joyful strain to his voice when he next spoke in a husky whisper to Billy.

"That lets me out, Billy, and I'll be able to hunch along better after this. But let me tell you I'll be mighty glad when it's all over with. I'm scraping my knees something awful, and I'll be lame for days after this."

"Well, why complain when you know there are some things a whole lot worse than having scraped knees?" he was told. Apparently this caused Pudge to look at things in a different light, for he closed up.

It continued in this fashion for quite some time, until Frank began to believe they had gone well beyond the danger zone. When he raised his head he could not discover the windmill at all, which was ample proof that there was no longer anything to fear from that quarter.

He was just about to say something along those lines to the others, when he made an unpleasant discovery.

"What are you stopping here for, Frank?" asked Billy, as he and the French aviator came crawling up alongside the leader, and he chanced to observe that Frank was acting rather strangely.

"Because it seems that our further progress is going to be blocked," replied Frank.

"You're staring hard at that bunch of trees ahead where we were hoping to get on our feet again. What's wrong over yonder?" demanded Billy.

"Only that I've seen signs to tell me there are men hiding in among those trees, who have seen us coming, and are waiting to trap us," Frank told him.

CHAPTER XXIV. FRIENDS IN NEED.

"Oh! something is always cropping up to nip our plans in the bud, it seems like," Pudge groaned, on hearing Frank make that unpleasant statement.

"Are you sure they're Germans, Frank?" demanded Billy.

"I couldn't tell from the glimpses I had of them," answered the other; "only they have guns, and are in uniform."

"Of course, I had to go and leave the field glasses hanging in the case with the seaplane," Billy declared. "M'sieu, would you mind letting me look through those binoculars you have along with you?"

Of course, the obliging Frenchman immediately complied with this request, and as Billy focused the glasses on the trees ahead the others held their breath while waiting to hear the verdict.

"There, I can see figures, all right," said the observer, "and they're watching this way in the bargain. Frank, it's all right, I tell you!"

"Then they're British soldiers?" asked the other, with a note of relief in his voice.

"Just what they are," replied Billy. "They must have seen the plane falling back here, and have come to find out whether anyone was hurt. Then those shots over at the old windmill made them hold up, and right now they don't know what to think. Hadn't you better signal them, Frank?"

"Right away, Billy."

Accordingly Frank elevated his handkerchief, and waved it until he received a reassuring signal from someone amidst the trees. After that the little party rose and advanced, Frank advising them to hold up their hands so as to convince the soldiers they had no possible hostile intent.

It was with a feeling of great relief that they found themselves face to face with a British captain, who

surveyed them curiously.

"You came down in that big aéroplane with the boat underneath it?" was the first thing he asked.

"Yes, and we count ourselves pretty lucky not to have dropped inside the German lines in the bargain," Frank told him. "You see, sir, we are three American boys. My name is Frank Chester, this is Billy Barnes, a newspaper reporter, and Pudge Perkins is the third member of our party. As for this gentleman, you must surely have heard of the well-known French aviator, M. Armand Le Grande."

"And I am Captain Charles Marsden, of the Sussex Regiment," replied the officer, cordially shaking hands. "Most assuredly, I have often heard of M. Le Grande, and once saw him play a daring trick on three German Taube pilots. But what manner of strange craft was it passed over our lines, and where have you come from?"

"First of all," said Frank, "I had better explain what brought the three of us over here in France when we had better be safe at home in America. The father of Pudge here is an aviator and an inventor. He has constructed a wonderful seaplane designed to save human life in case of accidents at sea. A sample was sent over to the French Government at their request before the war broke out, but had never been taken from the cases. So, on their invitation, we came across to assemble the parts, and prove the great value of the new type of machine."

"All this is very interesting to me, my young friend," ventured the officer; "so please go on with your explanations."

"We have a contract whereby the French Government can acquire this great seaplane for cash, and pay a royalty for every one up to fifty that they construct themselves from the sample. That is as far as our neutrality will allow us to go. And M. Le Grande was selected to accompany us on a trial flight to learn in what way our *Sea Eagle* was superior to the ordinary planes in common use."

"Oh! then you have just been making that flight,"

remarked the officer, "and by mistake managed to cross the lines, so that you came near falling into the hands of the enemy?"

Frank smiled, and even Pudge gave a disdainful snort.

"Well, although you have not heard the news yet, Captain Marsden, this has been a glorious day for your countrymen," Frank told him. "This morning some thirty-four seaplanes started up the coast, nearly every one of them manned by British aviators, and made a most desperate raid on the submarine bases around Zeebrugge, as well as bombarded railway stations, destroyed oil tanks, and even exploded a magazine, giving the enemy a grand scare, and doing much damage."

How the officer's rosy face broadened in a smile when he heard that! The way in which the Kaiser had spoken of them in the beginning of the war as "that contemptible little British army," would never be forgotten or forgiven; and everyone who wore the king's khaki was resolved in his mind to do all in his power to make the Emperor change his opinion before quitting time.

"But how do you know about this grand event?" he demanded.

"We accompanied the raiders, and witnessed pretty much all that was done," Frank told him. "After the fleet of aircraft had turned homeward again we started across country to take a look at Lille, and see what you people were up to over in this region. We also meant that M'sieu should have the worth of his money and learn all the big airship could do."

"Wonderful, and you so young at that!" exclaimed the soldier; "but then I understand American boys are equal to such things. But what happened to send you down as though you were a bird with a crippled wing?"

"A stray shot must have punctured our petrol tank and allowed the fuel to drain out, for we suddenly discovered we had none. Only through great luck were we able to push ahead, and escape falling back of the German lines."

"That would have been a misfortune in several ways, I take it," said the officer.

"Just after we fell, and were trying to see if any of us had been hurt, we were fired on from the old windmill base, and it was only by crawling along a depression that we finally managed to escape."

"So that was where those shots came from?" cried Captain Marsden. "We wondered if they had any connection with the dropping of the aëroplane. What do you wish us to do for you, boys?"

"Excuse me," Frank remarked, "but hearing you say you belonged to a Sussex regiment made me remember that a very good friend of ours, in Dunkirk just at present, Major Nixon, also came from that part of England."

"What, Tom Nixon!" exclaimed the soldier, his face lighting up again; "one of my best friends, and with whom I've followed the hounds dozens of times after the fox. If you are comrades of his, I would esteem it a privilege to help you out in any way possible."

"The chief concern we have," Frank told him, "is that we must manage in some way to get our machine, after we've taken it to pieces, transported back to the hangar at Dunkirk."

"But suppose we could supply you with sufficient petrol to take you there; would that help you out, or is the machine wrecked too badly?"

"It is injured somewhat," Frank continued, "though we might manage to repair that part of it; but unfortunately it is next to impossible for a seaplane to rise anywhere but from the water. That is on account of the boat part of the structure, you understand, sir. Could you manage to secure us a motor truck to transport ourselves and the machine across country by road? It would be doing the French Government one of the greatest favors possible; ask M'sieu here if that is not so."

"Indeed, there could not be a greater favor," the Frenchman declared warmly. "I have seen to-day that which

may help to bring this terrible war to a much speedier close if only we can put fifty of those wonderful American machines in the field."

"Say no more, for I shall see to it that the motor truck is placed at your service," said the captain heartily.

"But how about the windmill, Captain?" asked Frank, "and the Germans who occupy it as a fort; will you attack them and capture the place? It commands the spot where the stranded seaplane lies, and I'm afraid we can do but little unless the danger is laid."

"We will go back the way you came," decided the soldier. "I will have my men accompany us, and when we reach a convenient place a rush should take the mill."

"I'll go along with you then, Captain," assented Frank.

"Same here," added Billy; but Pudge shook his head sadly, and reaching down felt tenderly of his knees, as he remarked:

"You'll have to excuse me this time, fellows; I must beg off. After it's all over give me a whoop, and I'll *walk* to where you are. Crawling doesn't seem to be my special forte, I'm sorry to say."

"That's all right, Pudge, stay here until we give you the signal that the coast is clear," Billy told him.

Orders being given to the soldiers, the entire lot started toward where the dip began. A few minutes later they were making their way along on hands and knees, and appearing to the observant Pudge very much like a trailing snake.

There was not a single shot fired at them as they crept on, and in the end they found themselves at the spot where the big seaplane lay.

As they could go forward no further in that way, orders were given for a charge, and the two boys, still crouching there, were thrilled to see the dozen men in khaki start across the open ground on the run, each one dodging as he saw best in order to take as little chances of being hit as possible.

"Why, look at that, Frank!" cried Billy. "Not a single shot has been fired at them! What do you think the Germans are up to? Are they waiting to mow them down in a heap? Hey, isn't that a white flag waving from the old mill? Why, honest, now, I do believe they mean to throw up the sponge, and surrender. Let's start forward ourselves, Frank."

"Wait and see," cautioned the other. "After the soldiers have gone inside will be time enough for us to hurry up."

"Well, there they go right now, Frank!" cried the other. "Please come on, for I'm dying to know what it all means. It isn't like Germans to give up that way without a hard fight."

When they arrived at the windmill the mystery was soon explained. The terrible garrison consisted of just a single old man, and he was not a German at all, but a French peasant who had lost all he possessed when the Kaiser's army went through this part of France earlier in the war. His mind had given way under the strain, and filled with the idea that his old mill was a fort he had stationed himself in it with his gun, ready to repel the invaders of the sacred French soil.

When the strange seaplane fell he had conceived the idea that it was some sort of monster which he ought to slay, and so he had taken several pot-shots at the great drab wings which he could just see from his lookout.

Luckily, however, the old peasant, crazy though he might be, knew British soldiers' uniforms, for the Tommies had been very good to him during the month they were in the neighborhood pushing the enemy back. So he had put up that white flag as soon as he recognized the khaki uniforms of those who were advancing on the run.

"Shucks!" Billy was heard to say. "That's the way things sometimes drop from the sublime to the ridiculous. Here we were picturing a squad of desperate Prussians cooped up in this windmill base ready to sell their lives dearly, and it proves to be a silly old peasant who is out of his mind."

"Well, it's a tragedy, just the same," Frank told him. "Think of what this Jean Bart has suffered, seeing all his

possessions destroyed, and perhaps his entire family wiped out. The Captain tells me there was some trouble with the natives here when the German army went through, and some reckless shooting. But now we can get busy on the seaplane. Call our chum Pudge, will you, Billy?"

The work of taking the seaplane to pieces was going to take them some little time. Meanwhile Captain Marsden, who left several of his men at the spot with orders to assist where it was possible, went back to headquarters to state the case and see what could be done toward getting them a motor truck.

As these vehicles were carrying loads to the front, and usually went back empty, save when they took some of the wounded to the hospitals, it did not prove a very difficult thing to commandeer such a van, once permission had been obtained from the general.

Along about three in the afternoon of that February day, they saw a big motor truck coming. It seemed capable of passing over the fields as well as the road, for at the time the ground was pretty well frozen.

Everything seemed favorable, and the work of loading the seaplane was commenced with a vim. Before they got off, Captain Marsden again made his appearance, accompanied by a higher officer, who turned out to be the general in charge of that part of the British line, though the boys were not told his name.

He had been so deeply impressed with the remarkable story told by the captain that he had taken the trouble to come out there himself to meet the bold American boys who had that day witnessed the aërial bombardment of the German naval bases along the Belgian coast.

While the loading was being finished, at his urgent request, Frank entered into a brief description of what they had seen the fleet of seaplanes accomplish. His stirring account must have greatly pleased and heartened the general, for he insisted on shaking hands with Frank on leaving, an honor few dignified British officers would be

likely to bestow upon boys from another land.

"I hope we're going to ride along with the machine, Frank?" remarked Pudge, when the last knot had been tied in the ropes that held the packed seaplane on the van.

"I don't know what you're meaning to do, Pudge," Billy told him. "I've got my seat all picked out."

"Better get up, for we're going to start," warned Frank; and so Pudge found a place where he would not be in danger of rolling off. Frank followed suit, Le Grande also got aboard, and then the big motor truck started for the nearest road.

Captain Marsden, having waved them a farewell, was heard shouting after them:

"Give my best regards to Tom Nixon, and tell him we'll follow the hounds again after this little unpleasantness is over. Good-by, and good luck to you!"

CHAPTER XXV.

THE DESPERATE GAME OF TAG.

Riding on that motor truck over some of the very roads in that section of France where hot battles had only recently been fought, that was another new experience for the Boy Aviators. In many places the driver of the van pointed out to them interesting features of the landscape, relating to M. Le Grande the fierce struggle that had perhaps taken place where that barbed wire entanglement was seen, and then showing where innumerable little mounds of earth marked the last resting place of those brave men who had laid down their lives for their country.

They overtook several vans containing wounded soldiers, who seemed very cheerful, and were actually singing in chorus, as British Tommies have a habit of doing. An ambulance squad was also encountered going to the front for a fresh load, taking nurses and doctors wearing the Red Cross on their sleeves to where they would find plenty of work.

Pudge took a great interest in the hospital corps.

"They're the real heroes and heroines of this war, as sure as anything," he remarked, sagely, as he waved his hand toward the party, and received an answering signal from one of the buxom looking English lassies.

There were times when for a short distance they had the road apparently to themselves. Then again it would be crowded with all manner of vehicles, and marching troops heading toward the front, returning wounded, and artillery being dragged laboriously along, either with sturdy horses or powerful traction engines.

The boys were feeling fairly decent, for the sun had a little warmth in it, and there was even a hint of coming Spring in the breath of the lowlands.

Without the slightest warning there came a terrible crash that seemed to make the earth tremble. Pudge came within an ace of tumbling off the crowded van, and was only saved

by Billy clutching hold of him.

"Oh! a German shell must have burst!" shrilled the excited Billy.

"But we are too far away from the fighting line for that," said Frank.

A passing shadow made him look hastily upward. As he did so a cry of wonder and dismay burst from his lips, which of course caused everyone to follow his example, even to the chauffeur of the war van.

"An aëroplane!" shouted Pudge.

"Yes, and a German Taube at that, don't you see?" cried Billy.

"That must have been a bomb thrown at us, and there over on the right is where it made a gap in the field," said Frank.

The chauffeur looked somewhat alarmed. He even increased the speed of the big van, though it was too cumbersome a vehicle to move at all swiftly, its main hold being vast power and carrying ability.

The aëroplane was at some distance above them, and moving in a circle like a great hawk which it so much resembled.

"Frank, he's turning to come up behind us again, don't you see?" exclaimed Pudge, gripping the arm of the one to whom this remark was addressed.

"Sure thing," added Billy, trying to look calm, though he was trembling all over with the nervous strain and the excitement of the thing; "he's meaning to try again and see if this time he can't make a better crack at us, I suspect."

"But why pick out this van when there are lots of the same type moving along the road, going and coming, that's what I'd like to know?" begged the bewildered Pudge.

"Huh! guess you forget what we're carrying with us, don't you, Pudge?" demanded Billy, with a sense of importance in his voice and manner.

"The *Sea Eagle* plane!" burst out the fat chum.

"Haven't the Germans been trying right along to either get possession of our sample machine, or failing that smash it into splinters, so the Allies can't profit by the same?" asked Billy.

"Yes, yes, it must be as you say, Billy," admitted Pudge; "but see there, he's swept around now, and seems to be lowering with that big circle. Frank, will he get us yet, do you think?"

"Not if we are smarter than he is," replied the other, as with wrinkled brow he watched the evolutions of the daring flier.

"They learned that we'd met with that accident," Billy went on to say hurriedly, "and as soon as they could get one of their fliers busy it was started out to look for the van carrying our seaplane. That chap up there alongside the pilot has glasses, and spied us out easy enough."

"There, he's heading after us again, Frank!" shrilled Pudge, shivering as he stared, although it must have been only with a great effort that the fat boy was able to twist around as he did; "what can we do to upset his calculations?"

"If one of those terrible bombs ever hits us, good-night!" muttered Billy, as he too kept tabs of the now approaching Taube.

Frank was saying something to the chauffeur, evidently making certain arrangements with him so that when he touched the man's arm he would suddenly shut off power, and bring the van to a full stop.

They could easily see the two who were in the Taube, the pilot paying attention to his part of the business, while his companion leaned eagerly forward, intently watching so as to hurl the bomb at the right second.

Frank judged rightly that the man would make allowances for the speed of the motor van along the road, when he sent the explosive. That was where their real chance to outwit the enemy lay.

Keenly he watched this second man, forgetting about the

pilot, who really had little to do with the hurling of the bomb.

"There, he's raising his hand, Frank!" cried Pudge.

"And I can see what he's gripping, too!" added Billy vociferously.

"Keep still!" ordered Frank, who did not wish them to be making any sort of racket while the crisis was so close at hand, since it might interfere with what he meant to do, and that was of vital importance to them all.

Frank could judge for himself about when the man was apt to throw his deadly missile. Their own speed was only a certain per cent slower than that of the hostile aéroplane above.

Just when he discerned a movement of the man's whole body and knew he was in the act of speeding the explosive, Frank gripped the arm of the waiting chauffeur.

Instantly the expectant driver shut off all power and applied the brake. It was just as though he had suddenly found himself about to plunge through the open draw of a bridge into a deep river.

Even as the big clumsy van came to a halt in the road there was a fearful crash not thirty feet ahead of them, accompanied by a puff of smoke.

The boys had dropped back as flat as they could at Frank's suggestion, and fortunately no one seemed to have been injured by the flying missiles and stones.

Immediately the chauffeur once more started forward, though of course he had to drive carefully.

"Oh! see the fierce hole it dug in the road-bed!" burst forth Billy, and they all stared hard at this positive evidence of the dreadful result of the explosion.

By judicious care the chauffeur managed to get around the obstruction without having one of his wheels sink into the gap. Of course the first squad of men passing along that way would fill in the hole; but the boys were certainly not bothering their heads over that at present.

They could see that the two daring aviators who seemed

so bent on accomplishing the utter annihilation of the wonderful American invention, were not disheartened so far by their several failures.

"They don't mean to give it up at that, Frank, believe me!" said Billy.

"Oh! they're a stubborn lot, those Germans," admitted Pudge, "and never know when to stop, once they've set their minds on a thing."

"Third time may be the charm, you know," croaked Billy, hoarse from the excitement under which he was undoubtedly laboring for all he appeared so cool. "Don't I wish I had my trusty gun along right now. Mebbe I wouldn't make those chaps sit up and take notice, and quit their fooling."

"They're dropping still lower, Frank!" said Pudge.

"I see they are," answered the other, soberly.

"Here's a stick that might look like a gun from up above," said the artful Billy; "I'm going to lie down and keep waving it like I was taking aim. It can't do any harm that I see, and may make them keep off some, hey, Frank?"

"Do as you please, Billy," he was told.

Truth to tell Frank was hard put to it just then to know what their plan of campaign ought to be. The next time the Germans hurled one of their bombs the man in the speeding Taube would be apt to discount that sudden stoppage of the van, and try to drop his explosive so that it might strike them as their momentum ceased.

"Slow up somewhat," he told the chauffeur. "And this time when I grip your arm put on every ounce of speed you can give. We'll change our tactics."

"Bully for you, Frank; a change of base is always a good thing!" said Billy, already lying down and starting to move his pretended gun around.

Once again the aëroplane was directly behind them. It was evidently a part of the scheme of their foes to follow after them, trying to keep in the same general course, so that the man who hurled the bomb would only have to

consider the proper second to let it go.

They had also come down still lower, so that every movement could be seen distinctly.

Undoubtedly none of those boys would ever forget the grim appearance of those airmen bending forward to peer down at the fleeting motor truck on that road in Northern France. There was a peculiar grimness connected with their looks, toggled out as they were in their customary air cruising clothes, and with goggles shielding their eyes that gave them a strange look.

Once again did Frank decide properly when the man was in the act of hurling the bomb. His fingers closed upon the arm of the van driver, who immediately started the cumbersome vehicle to moving forward as fast as the engine was capable of sending it.

A third crash made the air quiver, and brought out a shout from the irrepressible Billy.

"Too slow that time, Hans!" he whooped, as he continued to wave his make-believe gun; "knocked another hole in the poor old road, that's what. At that rate they'll have it all torn up between here and Dunkirk."

"Will they give it up now, do you think, Frank?" wheezed Pudge, who had made it a point to actually hold his breath on each occasion just as though that was going to be of any benefit to him.

"Don't flatter yourself that way, Pudge," Billy hastened to say, taking it upon himself to answer; "they'll never quit as long as there's a single shot in the locker, believe me. We've just got to keep on dodging the same the best we know how."

"Next time they may come so low down that they just can't miss," complained the fat chum, disconsolately.

"Huh! don't you believe that, because they might have seen me taking aim with my gun here, and airmen don't like to be peppered at close range. Chances are they'll swoop down and let fly, but no hovering over us for them."

Frank was busy trying to figure out what would be the next move on the part of those grim pursuers, who seemed so determined to accomplish the utter destruction of the wonderful seaplane that placed in the hands of the French was bound to be of material advantage to the cause they had at heart.

In doing this Frank tried to put himself in the place of the other. He figured out just what sort of a feint he would make in order to draw the fire of the van driver. Whether the vehicle stopped, or shot forward, he could then change his pace, and hurl the bomb.

So Frank again gave his instructions to the chauffeur.

"This time I think he'll just pretend to throw, so as to make us show our hand," was what he said. "Then when he believes he sees our intentions he'll let it go. So first make out to stop; but when you feel me grip your arm a *second* time, speed up for all you're worth. Understand all that, do you?"

The man said he did. Monsieur Le Grande too, openly declared he believed Frank had solved the intentions of the man above, basing his opinion on what he himself would have done under similar conditions.

"There they come!" announced the watchful Billy.

Pudge grunted, and tried to squeeze himself into as small a compass as possible. He evidently feared that he filled entirely too much space when deadly missiles were flying around in every direction, and that if anyone were injured it was bound to fall to him.

Billy and M'sieu watched the approach of the hostile aëroplane. It chased steadily after them keeping along the road which unfortunately at this point happened to be very straight, whereas more curves and bends would have been to the advantage of those who were being bombarded from the skies.

All this was very thrilling, but none of the three Aëroplane Boys fancied the strange experience. They realized that should they care to abandon the van they would not receive

any injury; for the Germans were undoubtedly only trying to destroy the seaplane.

Nevertheless even Pudge would hardly have voted to forsake the *Sea Eagle* at this stage of the game. They had a certain affection for the big air traveler; and besides, their duty to the Company demanded that they stick to their task, which was to get the plane back into its hangar safe and sound, if such a thing were at all possible.

As the Taube came rapidly upon them they watched eagerly to see what would happen. Again the man who did the throwing of the bombs was seen to partly raise his arm, showing that he had another of those explosives ready for hurling.

Just at the critical second, as it seemed, Frank gave the chauffeur the signal to stop short. He already saw that the man above had made a swift motion with his upraised arm. It was very familiar as a trick to the American boys; how often had they seen the first baseman of the opposing team make the same feint when all the while he was holding the ball concealed, hoping to catch the runner off his base.

When however he saw the bomb-thrower make a duplicate movement he knew that this time it was coming.

So the second grip on the chauffeur's arm told him to instantly start forward again at full speed. So sudden was the change made that the van gave a furious spurt such as would have possibly thrown the boys out only that they had prepared themselves against it.

For the third time Frank had hoodwinked the Germans in the Taube. This bomb also fell back of them quite as much as fifty feet. It struck on one side of the roadbed, but might have done more or less injury to the machinery of the big van, and compelled a stop that must have spelled new trouble for the boys, caused to abandon their charge because of the recklessness of staying further.

"Oh! I hope that exhausts all their ammunition," was the prayer poor Pudge was heard to utter, when this last stunning report announced that once more they had

escaped by a close shave from a terrible fate.

"Don't hug that fond delusion to your heart, Pudge," Billy told him, jeeringly; "they'd be more apt to start out with fifty such bombs along than just three or four. I'm hoping we'll come up on some marching regiment of British going to the front, or even a field battery that could make the old Taube climb up half a mile or so in the air. We wouldn't need to worry then, because they never could hit such a tiny mark away down here."

Frank was thinking somewhat on similar lines. So long as there was nothing to prevent the Germans from making those swift swoops down toward them the peril must continue to hang heavy over their devoted heads.

He realized that it was always possible for the aviators to come so close to them that there would not be one chance in ten of a miss being made. Perhaps after all it might be fear of the gun which Billy was making out to wave that would save them in the end. Frank had on more than one occasion in the past known even smaller things than that to accomplish important feats.

If the danger continued he was inclined to exercise his authority and compel his chums to dismount so as to fall behind. In that way they would be out of the danger zone, while he stayed aboard with the chauffeur to try and baffle the plans of the enemy above.

And now once more the peril hovered over them. How Billy yearned to have a gun in his hands, and with what joy would he have started using it, in the hope of at least causing the Germans to climb to safer heights?

Frank had altered his plan of campaign again. He intended to keep them guessing as long as possible. This time he arranged with the chauffeur to start the car speeding, and then at the second signal to suddenly apply the brake and bring it to a standstill.

When the man above saw them starting off wildly he evidently judged that was meant to be their game, and so he sent the small but terrible bomb through space.

Frank knew when it left his hand, and at that same second he gripped the chauffeur, so that the car was instantly brought under control. The bomb struck ahead of them, alongside the road, and tore another hole in the ground.

Billy gave a shout as though in that way he might get rid of some of the pent-up emotion that was well nigh choking him.

"Never touched us!" he called out exultantly. "Better go back home and take a few more lessons. American boys are too swift for you fellows!"

"Don't crow too soon, Billy," advised Frank, who although naturally relieved for the moment, knew only too well that this new check would be apt to urge the determined Taube men to further exertions.

He himself was casting an anxious look along the road ahead, for Frank knew full well that their best chance for escaping the net that was being laid for their feet lay in the coming of friends who carried arms that must make the aviators give the hunt over as wasted time.

As before the birdmen made a circuit. They undoubtedly intended coming back again to try once more to drop a missile on the elusive van, and accomplish the mission on which they had been sent out.

Frank hardly knew what system of tactics to employ this time. He had tried them all, and would have to repeat. The best part of it was that the man above could not read his mind, and therefore would not be able to gauge his scheme in time to reap any benefit from it.

Then again it was likely that occasionally one of the bombs might be badly aimed, and fall over in the adjoining field. Frank was far from ready to give up. He would keep everlastingly at it, as long as the van driver could get his machine to obey his will, and there was a solitary chance for them to escape the destructive effects of those numerous explosions.

"This time I'll call in your ear what I want you to do," was

what Frank told the pilot at the wheel. "But no matter whether it's stop short, or rush ahead, do it as quick as a flash. Be ready now, for they're almost up to the throwing point."

As the birdmen were going the same way as the van it was necessary that they get almost overhead before undertaking to make a throw. The missile would then be given a forward movement calculated to cause it to reach a certain point aimed at.

Frank had practiced this same thing himself many a time, first from a moving railway train, and latterly from a swiftly driven aëroplane. Thus he was in a position to know something about it.

Billy continued to make the best use he could of his mock gun. He labored under the fond delusion that he was thus doing his part in keeping the fliers at a respectable distance, which amounted to something after all.

As for Pudge, he could only lie there on his face unable to look up—it was so terrible to see that man-made bird in the air above them, just for all the world like a hawk he had watched hovering over the water ere making a swift descent and plucking a fish out of the lake with its talons.

While he lay there on his stomach waiting in dread Pudge felt the car give several erratic movements. He could not at first decide whether it was stopping or making a sudden dash, but he did hear the crash announcing the next explosion.

Realizing that he was still in the land of the living, and as far as he could tell unharmed, Pudge raised his head and twisted his fat neck around.

He saw the Taube machine speeding on ahead; the van was apparently unharmed by the last shot, for it too continued along its way with a merry chug-chug-chug that sounded as sweet as any music he had ever heard in the ear of Pudge Perkins.

"What happened, Frank?" he asked eagerly.

"A number of things," he was told; "first we dodged him,

and coaxed a throw. Then in his haste he made a bad shot and wasted another of his precious bombs, for it only tore a wound in the pasture land back there a bit."

"That makes four times he's whacked away at us, don't you know, Frank!" exclaimed Pudge, as though he considered each separate escape little short of a miracle.

"It's the last time in the bargain," announced Billy, "because there comes a troop of mounted soldiers around the bend over yonder, and you'll hear the crack of guns if you listen a bit. There! what did I tell you? See how they start right away to try and get the Germans in the Taube. The Britishers know that make of aëroplane as far as they can see it. A Taube and a German are one and the same thing with them."

"Whee! I warrant you the lead is singing around their ears like a swarm of angry wasps right now," ventured Pudge, now condescending to actually sit up again, for it began to appear that their peril was a thing of the past.

"Well, I don't really know that I want to see those daring fellows come down in a rush," admitted Frank, whose sportsmanlike spirit could find much to admire in a foeman, as well as in a friend.

"They're ascending in spirals now," remarked Billy, "and edging away at the same time. Guess they've had all they wanted of the game, and for the time we're safe from interference. Go it you terriers, or English bulldogs, rather; keep them up so high that they'll see the folly of trying to hit so small an object as our van here."

Acting on Frank's suggestion the chauffeur had come to a dead halt with his machine. If they kept on and lost the support of the soldiers on the road the crafty birdmen might again chase after them, to renew the unequal contest by hovering above and bombarding them with those dangerous missiles until one finally struck.

Presently, having mounted to a height where they need not fear the bullets from the guns of the British soldiers the airmen once more circled around and a bomb was dropped.

It exploded not fifty feet away from where the loaded van stood. There was somewhat of a scattering on the part of the soldiers. No one looked anything but annoyed because of this happening; but this sprang wholly from the fact that they could do so little against the aerial enemy.

Just then, however, Billy cried out that "as sure as two and two make four" he had discovered help in the offing. Some floating objects in the air increased rapidly in size, and quickly took on the attributes of other aeroplanes.

"Oh! more Taubes coming!" shrieked Pudge as he glimpsed the several dots that were heading their way.

M'sieu therefore proceeded to enlighten them as to the last difference between the machines used almost universally by the Allies and those which the Germans believed answered their demands best of all.

"They are the Allies!" he told Frank, with ill concealed satisfaction; and after that even Pudge could sit contentedly and watch how quickly the Germans started full tilt toward their own lines.

The two fresh arrivals pursued the other craft in hot haste, and there could be heard faint reports from up aloft as though they were trying to wing the fugitive Taube. When last seen pursuers and pursued were still making fast time toward the north.

Of course Frank begged the chauffeur to put on all possible speed so as to get as near Dunkirk as he could before any further trouble might arise to endanger the safety of the precious seaplane.

Whether the audacious air-pilots in the Taube really escaped or were brought down by their swift pursuers the aeroplane boys never knew. They felt it quite satisfactory to know that apparently their route to the French town on the water was again free from waylaying trouble. Besides, Frank was of the opinion that they had left the bad part of their journey behind them. He was assured of this fact by M'sieu, the French pilot who had been in their company through the whole of this adventurous day.

CHAPTER XXVI. HEADED TOWARD HOME.

Once they struck better roads their progress was much faster. Indeed, it was not long after the close of that short February day when they managed to arrive at Dunkirk. The boys did not rest until every part of the seaplane had once more been stored in the hangar, which they found just as they had left it, a cordon of soldiers still guarding it.

Tired after that most exciting day, the boys prepared supper. Frank asked M'sieu to join them, but the French aviator explained that he had his report to make out, so that the Government might complete the bargain on the next day.

"I shall never forget you, my brave boys," he assured them in parting. "I have seen many experienced pilots handle their craft, but on my honor I assure you never before have I found one so young display such rare ability. After once seeing that you were the master of your airship never once did I fear for my life, or feel that it would better things if I took the wheel. I wish you every luck in the world; and it is with deep regret that I say *au revoir*."

"Just to think," remarked Pudge, as later on they sat around and partook of the supper that had been prepared, "all that's happened since we left here this A. M."

"It's been a red-letter day in our experience, for a fact," admitted Frank.

"A glorious try-out," said Billy, "and the *Sea Eagle* sure behaved herself in a way to make us proud of our Company. Only for that unfortunate puncture in the gas tank, we'd have come through without a single hitch."

"And even that turned out to be not so serious a thing, after all," said Frank, "though I admit it gave us a little concern at the time. But it had its compensations, after all, one of which was our meeting with that fine chap, Captain Marsden."

"Yes," said Pudge proudly, "and I'm glad to announce

that my knees are not so badly scraped as I thought they were. I think I deserve a whole lot of praise for making that long creep so well. It wasn't much to you fellows, but a different proposition to one of my shape."

"We'll give you all the credit going, Pudge," said Billy magnanimously. "But, Frank, we ought to get the plane rigged up again the first thing in the morning, oughtn't we?"

"Not thinking of another flight over the battlefields, are you?" asked the fat chum, looking concerned again.

"No, we're through taking all those risks," Frank told him. "But you're right about that, Billy. They may want us to deliver the plane over to them tomorrow, and it ought to be in apple-pie condition. I hope to close the contract, and then we can go back home."

"Leaving the one sample machine," demanded Billy, "and allowing the French Government to manufacture a certain number of others, paying our company a royalty on every seaplane built along the lines of our patents?"

"That about covers the case," Frank agreed. "Of course, once we receive our pay, and hand the seaplane over, we have no further interest in what happens to it, although I'd hate to learn it had met with an accident."

"You think, then, do you, Frank, that the German spies will keep on trying to steal or destroy the *Sea Eagle*?" asked Billy.

"If they get the chance they certainly will," the other replied. "They know now that all the wonderful things they heard about it are true, and that a fleet of aircraft built on those same lines would make back-numbers of their Zeppelins and Taubes. But, as I said before, let the French Government do the worrying after the deal is closed."

"But if this machine were blown to smithereens, Frank, our Company would stand to lose those royalties?" Pudge suggested.

"All of which is true enough, Pudge," Frank told him, "but that's something we can't remedy, so we'll have to trust to sheer luck."

They passed a quiet night, and morning found them busily engaged in getting the dismantled seaplane together again. The injuries which it had suffered in making that descent, thanks to Frank's skillful piloting, had not proven serious, and so by the time noon came they were ready to have it looked over by the aviators who might be sent to the hangar by the officials of the Government.

The glowing report handed in by M. Le Grande must have hurried matters up considerably, for a little later on several gentlemen made their appearance. They looked over the big seaplane carefully, and then had Frank and his chums sign several papers, one of which was a contract on royalty covering fifty machines which the Government might wish to construct within a year's time.

Then Frank was given a certified check from the Government, and the transaction was considered closed.

The boys took away the small bundles they had already packed, and both hangar and seaplane became from that hour the property of the French Government.

Going to a hotel, Frank and his chums made all arrangements looking to crossing over to London on the next day. From there they expected to go to Liverpool, and take passage on the first steamer sailing for New York, regardless of the danger from German submarines lurking in the Irish Sea.

At the time they left the hangar the British soldiers were marching away, their place being taken by French officers, who were perhaps secret service men, or detectives. It looked as though every possible precaution were being taken to safeguard the wonderful seaplane of which so much was expected.

As they had planned, the three boys got away on the following day, and reached London in safety. No sign was seen of any hostile undersea vessel during the short trip across to English shores.

In London they found that they would have several days on their hands before they could sail from Liverpool, so they

concluded to spend the interval watching the sights in the great British metropolis in war times, so different from the old life known to all travelers.

It was on the second morning after arriving there that Billy, who had gone down to get a paper, while his chums were finishing dressing, came bursting into their room again with his face white, and a printed sheet held in his trembling hand.

"What ails you?" demanded Pudge, in a shivery way. "I hope now Germany hasn't declared war on the poor old United States over night?"

"Frank, they got her after all!" gasped Billy.

"Do you mean the *Sea Eagle*?" cried the other in dismay.

"Yes," continued the excited Billy, "here's an account of how in the middle of the night a sudden shock was felt in Dunkirk. People thought it must be those Taubes back again bombarding the town, and lots of them hurried down into their cyclone cellars. But it was found that an aëroplane hangar just outside the place had been blown to pieces with a bomb that had either been placed underneath or dropped from some airship."

"All gone?" asked Frank.

"Blown to pieces, and they tell that it is feared several French guards lost their lives in the bargain. They don't say much about it, except that the hangar contained a new seaplane the Government had just purchased from an American firm owning the patents, and that as it was utterly destroyed, the loss would be complete."

"Whew!" cried Pudge. "Say, I'm glad it was out of our hands when this happened."

"For a good many reasons, too," added Frank. "We might have gone up with the hangar and the *Sea Eagle* if we'd been there."

"No, sir, I don't believe it would have happened as long as Frank Chester was on deck," said Billy stoutly. "But, Frank, they'll have to fight this war through now without the

help of fifty *Sea Eagles*, won't they?"

"Just what must happen," replied Frank, "because Dr. Perkins will never consent to pursuing the matter any further. He would not dream of supplying patterns to the Allies after this. I'm sorry, and yet at the same time I must say I feel a bit glad."

"Well, let me tell you," said Pudge, "it's a good thing for the Germans."

"Yes," Frank went on to say reflectively, "and it will make us feel that after all we hadn't any business to help one side more than the other. But it would have been mighty interesting reading for us later on to learn what great stunts M'sieu Le Grande and forty-nine of his valiant French comrades were accomplishing with the wonderful seaplanes that out-classed anything the Germans could match against them."

"Well, anyhow," said Pudge, "after this war is over I can see a rushing business for the *Sea Eagle Company, Limited*, in France, Germany and the United Kingdom."

"Unless before that happens we've disposed of our patents to the United States Government," remarked Frank. "This would be the most patriotic thing to do. But even if some of our plans failed to come to a fruitful end, we've certainly had the time of our lives over on this side of the sea, and the sights we've seen will never be forgotten."

While Frank and his two chums linger in London, waiting for the announcement of the sailing day of the steamer that is to take them home, we will have to say good-by, and leave them there. Such venturesome lads are certain to undertake still further enterprises as time passes, and we can only hope that it may be our pleasant duty to chronicle these happenings for the benefit of the boy readers who have faithfully followed them through scenes of danger and stress in the past, as recorded in previous volumes in this Series.

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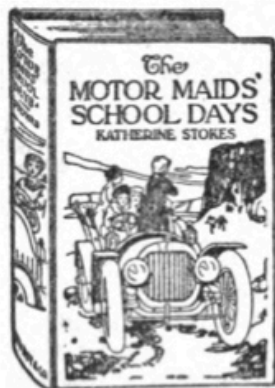
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