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CHAPTER I.

WHEN MAIDENS FELL FROM THE SKY. OR twenty shimmering miles the gulf beach lay in the sun, a white straight edge against blue. Mistily through the surf haze glimmered the tower of Sand island light save when obscured by the smoke plume of a fruiter standing in past Fort Morgan for Mobile. It was early forenoon. The yellow globe of the mooring balloon at the fort shone in the sun like a dome of some audaclous new architecture flung high into the pulsating air. Two men far down the coast toward Pensacola caught the faroff splendor and noted in the very act of casting off from it a long, cigar shaped aeronat-an immense, elongated bubble of quicksilver. It floated seaward, rounded to, stood a moment end on, librating like a balancing top. "She's boun' fo' N'Yawlins, Ah reckon, suh."

The speaker was a typical gulf fisherman, long bearded, soft of speech, courteous as a diplomat, barefooted, weathered in garments and skin. Over his cheeks and nose were scattered broad brown blotches which had it not been for their size might have been called freckles. He rolled a cigarette, lighted it, turned his eyes on his more youthful companion, repeating, "She's sho' boun' fo' N'Yawlins."

In the mien of the younger man there was something of kinship to the elder, as there might be in a New England chemist or engineer something that is like his forty-second cousin fishing on the Newfoundland banks. The softness of speech was modified to a subtle firmness and a subdued decision. The slight, tall frame was arrowy and erect, as if the youth had imbibed from some winier air a latent self esteem expressed in the hint of inthe areas of mottled freckling, overlaying a pink glow. He wore a blue flannel shirt with a bright silk cravat. beach sand, and his well shaped hat the demonstration of a new flying mawas powdered with it. His trousers chine, and she had yielded. The inwere of cadet gray and were striped ventor, Wizner, a suspicious, foxy, down the side; seemingly they were a in the sand and had been studying a them made her feel creepy, and as he ashore and rolled up before the breeze, dragging its yard long tentacles. On his his thumbs were much in evidence the beam lay a steel square, a brace and bit, a roll of blueprints, some steel crooked thumbs and all, for no thumbs drills and a book of logarithms. The or voice could be so offensive as the speech of the old fisherman made unrelieved presence of Mr. Silherberg. him look up. He picked up a pair of the head of the Federated Metals conbinoculars from a cast-up crate and studied the distant airship.

"Mo' likely bound for Pensacola, captain," he said. "She's coming this way-a Condor with bow rudder."

ed like a great silver moon. The men admired her as they walked inshore through soft, trodden sand down to a lower level of yellowed palmettoes and scaled a steep dune slope thicketed with curious scrub oaks. Here was ing takes a great man. Your uncle hidden a cabin of rough boards with a wide veranda or gallery, on the columns of which were to be seen bleached barnacles, telling of the storm tossed voyage which had brought them hither. Abutting on the cabin by one end was a spacious shed without visible door or window. So thoroughly was the edifice concealed by the oak scrub and the low growing stunted spruce that one might have passed a dozen times within a stone's throw of it without seeing it, and even from the airships its drab roof powdered with blown sand was well nigh invisible. Under the gallery was perfect safety from observation from

As seen through the glass, the air

ship was swelled to impressive bulk now. Her rudder stood aslant, a stripe of brown against the silver foil of her blige. On the seaward side ran the darker line of a toy aeroplane-a matter of appearance more than useand slung beneath by a gossamer nacelle, steady as the deck of a liner, hung her roomy car, the engine room astern, the three great screws half invisible, like the vibrant wings of bees. She veered to the north and stood inland as if to cross the Little lagoon. that beautiful sait lake which for ten miles lies within sound of the gulf surf, but separated from it by a little wilderness of dunes, then by a majestic swooping movement she threw her whole vast sweep of broadside open to their gaze. The captain's dimmer eye now made out the woman and the two men on her deck, while Theodore Carson's, keen for such a sight and armed with the glass, observed that the woman wore a broad hat of vivid red, a scarf of the same color and-a woman would have told him-a pique gown.

"They bette' moor," said the fisherman. "They's a norther comin' out. What they doin' now, Miste' Theodo'?"

"Why," said Carson, studying the aeronat with the glass and clipping evolution of the incident far up there in the blue rendered every utterance obsolete before it was finished, "why, they have thrown off a package ofit's mechanism-of some sort-in operation, and- They're making a tow of it. They're reversing and rounding to take a seat in the little cane car of Aimlessiy she put her hand out, touch to. See them drift off: They're ex. the helicopter.

cited and all aback about something. [ It's some sort of helicopter, I believeand the girl's alone in it, captain! Alone, I say! Why did they- She's lost control-she's lost! It's shooting safe. over this way and coming down! It

will-it will- My God! My God!" The thing parted from the great aeronat was a little speck topped with a broader, mushroom shaped shimmer which Carson knew for the revolving blades of a helicopter, that insidious toy that promised so much for the conquest of the air. Then, as though released from the pull of gravity, it shot below, as a fly might speed from a floating bubble. The two spectators hearts frozen in fascinated apprehen-

They saw it rise skyward like a abyss that yawned between it and the earth; saw it struck by the far advanced loftler vanguard of the north wind predicted by the fisher captain; saw it hurled southward before the blast like I should fly:"

The Condor had a name. She was the Roc, owned by Mr. Finley Shayne, and her home port was Shayne's Hold, in the Catskills. Those who are familiar with the scope, power and spectacular success of Mr. Shayne's operations in aerostatic power stocks in the latter part of the first quarter of the present century will surmise that the Roc was the finest product of the art of aviational construction up to that the lever, threw in the clutch-and the

This fateful morning she had moored in the aerial barbor at Mobile, in her berth bard by the lift near the Bienville statue. Mrs. Shayne, a native Mobilian, pleaded indisposition. but went out to see some old houses cisiveness in speech. The boy also had dear to her youth. Mr. Shayne and their guest, Mr. Max Silberberg, bad insisted upon the presence of Virginia Suarez, Mrs. Shayne's niece, on a trip His shoes were scoured gray by the down the bay in the Roc to witness middle aged man, proved objectionable part of some obsolete uniform. He sat to Miss Suarez because his thumbs on a great square timber half buried turned back so far that the sight of blue green Portuguese man-of-war cast gesticulated freely while denouncing all devices for aerial navigation except

> Virginia wished Wizner at her side cern, controlling the copper, gold and silver output of a continent. She felt herself thrown at his head

by her aunt,

"So you think, Aunt Marie," she had The aeronat, drawing nearer, swell- said, "that Mr. Silberberg is one of the great ones of the earth?" "Most certainly," rejoined Mrs.

Shayne, "He is retaining and increasing the enormous wealth and power he inherited. To do what he is dowill tell you so."

Silberberg made the bay of court ship in the sun of opportunity. Virginia pondered on her aunt's standard of greatness.

"Where's Uncle Finley?" she asked "We are getting a long way south."

"Giving the belicopter a private examination," replied Silberberg. "It is a happiness to me that he is. But the inventor would go wild if he knew the sort of expert his precious machine is alone with."

"Wild!" repeated Virginia. "Listen even now."

Above the purr of the screws came the angry voice of the inventor in the engine room abusing the Roc's second engineer for some remark derogatory to helicopters. Already he was quite wild enough, Virginia thought.

"Why don't we try his machine?" she asked. "Must we go out over the gulf? Isn't the bay big enough?"

"Mr. Shayne wants to pick up a specialist at the fort," replied Silberberg. "the man who wrote up the Chinese war aerostats. He's here on some aeronautical business for the army."

The Roc circled to the west to avoid the inhibited passage over the batteries and stood east along the beach. Wizner abandoned his quarrel and came forward to make the test. He set the helicopter on the deck, where it stood unstendily on its slender bamboo legs, its painter hanging over the rail, its top crowned by the screw wings, sianted a little outboard for the launching.

"How will you get her off, Wizner?" asked Mr. Shayne.

"Easy enough," answered Wizner

tartly. "Maybe we'd better make a descent for you," suggested Silberberg. "It may be one of these terrestrial helicopters."

"I'll ask when I want you to go down," replied Wizner, glaring. "You will see whether it's a ground machine off his sentences as the astounding or not. May I take down a section of

"Certainly," answered Mr. Shayne. "But don't let the helicopter topple off. It might fall on a fisherman. What

are you doing, Virginia?" The girl had stepped forward as if

Heavens: See that thing shoot up! to imagine how you feel when you get out into space.

"I wish you would," said Wizner. Virginia, laughing at playing paper-

weight, entered the car, "Which is the clutch lever?" she

asked. "This," said the inventor, pointing. "I'm going to the engine room, When I come back I'll show you how it

works." Mr. Shayne went aft with Wizner in animated conversation, leaving Virskyward, leaving the silver airship far ginia in the throbbing car. The rail had been removed, and a little push would have been quite sufficient to drew their breaths sharply in, their shove the girl and the machine overboard into the empty air. The thrill of the vibration, the sense of risk or the intense gaze of Silberberg made boy's dart until they shuddered at the her face flush. He had never seen her so charming. She laid her hand on the clutch lever.

> "I could move this lever a little," said she, "and thy away. I feel as if "I shall not let you," said he. "I

shall hold you!"

"Mr. Silberberg!" The rebuke was evoked by his putting his arm about her. One white, jeweled hand was slipped behind her. the other laid on her arm, the oily perfumed curis stooping until the red lips approached hers. Perfectly aware of what she was doing, but quite reckless of consequences, Virginia pushed wings started. The pull of the vivided mechanism drawing him out to death made Silberberg's very fingers tingle with terror, and he let go girl and car and leaped backward. Under the lift of the wings the car dragged to the edge, slipped off with a grating sound



THREE PELL OUT OF THE CAR A MASS OF BED HAT AND CHIMSON SCARF.

and swung there in midair, the painter dangling almost within reach 300 fathoms in the air, supported only by the spinning belices driven by an engine that one man only knew how to manage, and he as far removed from it potentially as if he had been in Mars!

The girl's hand trembled so that she could not hold to anything, no matter how she tried. At last-it was over in a moment-more by accident than design, she moved something. With appalling velocity the thing shot upward: the aeronal fell away toward the earth; the fisherman's house far beneath was whisked down to the littleness of a toy. The air struck her face, blowing downward more and more chill. Overhead the screws hummed implatably, the only sound she heard.

She studied the machinery, trying to apply her picked up knowledge of engines. Here was the thing with which to stop it, she felt sure of that, but to stop it suddenly was mere suicide, a swift fall to death.

She was growing calmer now. It would surely slow down of itself, she reasoned, and if it did not-well, she had escaped from Silberberg anyhow. And then the north wind struck. The puff smote her cheek. The helicopter yielded to it and swept southward like a feather before a fan. She was blowing out to sea. She reached out to stop the engine, but the vision passed through her mind of falling-

falling like the stick of a rocket, being dashed to pieces on the earth. Then a voice seemed to speak in her ear from the chill solitude, senseless words, as of one stammering, like the phantasms of voices neard in the delirium of fever, finally growing distinct and repeating over and over a command, "Retard the spark!" it said.

"Retard the spark!" The Roc was far below and to the north now. The gulf breakers foamed nearer and nearer and still rang in her ears the ghostly command. "Retard the spark!" She tried to remember about engines, but this one was so different!

"Let me sit in it," said she, "I want ed a little sliding thing and paused. Virginia flightliy, "for your heroic be-She moved the sliding thing and havior-heroic, romantic, mediaeval thought the buzz of the helices less behavior!" strenuous. The roar of the breakers "I beg of you not to mention it. "It will hold her still. It's perfectly swelled in her ears like the crescendo madam," urged Mr. Carson, with inin a great parabola that might carry you back to your room?" her into the sea or might dash her | The girl assented, and she was soon upon the driftwood and wreckage of asleep. the beach.

Suddenly the machine careened, and peeped in to see if his guest were she thought she had struck, to be dash- awake, served the broth to the captain ed broken on the ground, lost. She had not seen Theodore Carson on that highest dune, but he had grasped the painter as it dragged over him, and it was he who had thrown the flying machine from its level swoop, even as it jerked him down the dune, with Captain Harrod clinging to his legs, dragging them almost to the water's edge. The car swung horribly, and finally, spilled from it by its careening, there fell out of it a mass of red hat, crimson scarf, pique and silken fallals. The belicopter tore loose and fled out to sea before the gale.

CHAPTER II.

A ROSPITABLE BANDIT.

HEODORE CARSON stared for a moment in amazement at the prostrate girl, then took her tenderly in his arms, carrying ber toward the hidden cabin. At the steepest spot Captain Harrod overtook him. But the young man paid no heed to offers of aid, wading steadily on to the door, which the captain unlocked and opened, standing aside for Carson and his interesting burden. Theodore took her into the large single room and laid her softly on a clean looking bed.

"She is dead!" said Theodore in a hushed voice.

"Is her heart beatin'?" the captain inquired.

"I don't know!" cried Carson. Carson laid his ear lightly to the white blouse. Some fluttering he seemed to feel, but he could not be certain. Harrod brought water in a watering pot, which he seemed to have planned to use as upon a lily or rose. "Do it beat?" he asked.

"I can't tell," said Carson, "nor whether it's my pulse or hers that beats. Oh, I wish-what do they generaily do, captain?"

"They's some paht o' they frock that always has to be unrove, ain't they?' inquired the captain anxiously.

"Captain," said Carson, the perspiration standing on his brow, "I'm going out on the gallery for air. You do may die!"

"Put some watah on huh face, suh," said the captain, in judicious avoidance of extreme measures. "Ah don't reckon this hyah's a case fo' vi'lent o' onconse'vative remedies. I'll oncork that ha'tsho'n bottle!"

Carson pressed a wet towel to the girl's face. The captain held a bottle labeled "ammonia" to her nostrils. She gasped, drew a quivering sigh and opened her eyes. The older man was looking at her in a fatherly way, and the young one was sponging her forehead, his face near hers. She sat up suddenly.

"You have had a fall madam," said Carson, "and are shaken up a little. But you are safe and among friends." "Oh, thank you," she said, in a tone of the most correct formality. "It's ever so kind of you, sir. I-I-I- Ob, I thought I was lost! I thought I-Oh! Oh! Oh! O-0-0-h!"

Suddenly, from the polite common places of speech, she broke into hysterical screaming. Captain Harrod poured a stiff glass of red liquid from a bottle, diluted it and took it to the shuddering girl, who looked pathetically up into his face for a moment, swallowed it obediently and coughed as if strangled by it.

"And now." said Mr. Carson, "we will leave you. If you will excuse us. Please feel at ease. You are quite safe, and the cabin is yours. We are in all ways at yo' service. The captain here is my friend, and we belong to a race that sees a sister in every helpless lady. I think you will desire to sleep, and I hope you may awake refreshed, after which we shall place ourselves mo' definitely under your command."

She looked at him questioningly, The softness of his voice, his little inconsistent lapses into dialect as he uttered the old fashioned chivairic sentiments, won her trust.

"Ah'd lie down, ma'am," suggested the captain, "ontil that medicine gits a chance to wuk. Goodby, ma'am."

Virginia lay back and closed gines."

eyes, but the potion brought no droweyes, but the potion brought no knew her eyes would shine if she opened them with a brilliancy quite fascinating to the young man with the little black mustache. The fact that she thought of this startled her. Was gale.' she growing flighty with fever? Why this abnormal bilarity of spirits, in the exaltation of which all anxiety depart-

She rose and walked out unsteadily upon the veranda and saw Mr. Carson and the captain sitting idly just beyond earshot of the cabin. They came

to her respectfully. "I came out to thank you, sir." said

of some tremendous, uprushing music, finite solicitude. "But may I not inand she realized that she was falling sist upon your allowing me to escort

Theodore made broth of one quail,



SHE ROSE AND WALKED OUT UNSTRADILY

and made more. The sun wore to the west, the last quail was cooked, the captain was providently gorged with alternate courses of bird and broth. when Virginia, very stately and very reserved, opened the door and walked out upon the gallery. Carson shrank back into the kitchen and shoved the captain into the breach.

"How do you do, ma'am?" he inquired solicitously. "Ah sho' hope yo' bette' aftah yo' sleep.'

"Much better, thank you." she re-

"We have some pahtridge broth, a baked yam, and a planked green what has to be done, captain-or she trout from the lake back hyah, and ome coffee. Sit down, ma'am, and Ah'll suhve it."

The little table was spread on the gallery, its top made of the head of a derelict cask, its legs of barnacled sections of a boom. Virginia's head ached in dreadful similitude to the traditional feeling of the morning after. but the coffee fragrance was pleasant.

"You are too good." said she, accepting the chair. "I shall be glad to eat

a little. Where is your-your friend?" "He's som'eres about," replied the captain. "Ah really don't know, ma'am. Won't you please take yo' coffee?" The coffee was black and strong. The broth was a temptation, and she sipped with increasing appetite. But-

tered yam and planked trout brought the meal to a triumphant end. Yet where was she, and how should she depart? Where was the Roe? Who were these men? The guns, the brass instruments that looked as if they pertained to navigation, the big windowless shed, all suggested things nautical, bold and nefarious. The kindness and courtesy of the rough looking fellows reassured her as to her personal safety. Yet if they were smugglers or freebooters how could they safely return her to the civilization of coast guards and constables? It was dellclously romantic-but how creepy!

She turned to Captain Harrod with an expression so agitated that he was somewhat startled. "I wish you would say to the lieu-

tenant," said she, "that I must see him at once if possible." The fisherman analyzed this speech

for perhaps a minute in absolute silence, then he said, "Yes, ma'am," and instantly produced Carson, who, so far as Virginia could judge, had been within the captain's sight when she had been assured that his whereabouts were unknown.

"You are," said the young man, avoiding any reference to her recovery. "doubtless wondering where your companions may be and thinking it strange that they have not returned?"

"It is strange." said she. "Some-

They all but blew out to sea. They simply had to fight their way off toward Pensacola, where they must have made harbor. It was almost half a

"And so-they went-and left me?" "They really couldn't help it," urged the young man. "It shows the sort of man Silberberg

is," she cried hotly. "And now perhaps you will be so good as to help me to some conveyance to Mobile?" "I have a boat on the lake," said Carson, "half a mile inland. There is a channel to Palmetto Beach. The poat and crew are at your service." "I should prefer to walk, if you please," said she.

"Unless you have a day or two to spend in the journey I should not rec-

ommend the attempt." "I know some people," said she, "at the Yupon Hedge inn at Palmette Beach. Can you"-

"If we go at once," he replied, "you may be there for dinner."

"I am ready," said she, rising. "Let as go, please, immediately."

Captain Harrod led the way easterly alongshore to a spot where the shrub grew well down toward the beaten beach. They walked back between clumps of dark green rosemary, over a low place in the dunes, down to the dry, hard bottom of a former pool. They emerged upon a little irregular hillock and looked forth upon a strange tarn of inky water, its black waves crested with foam, like white plumes on funeral crape. The shores of this sinister lake were densely wooded by sullen ranks of pines and cypresses. Virginia gasped at sight of the somber mere. It seemed such an eery spot in which to be cast away with these strange men who lived behind closed doors and walked the sands as to leave no footprints!

"Haul out the launch, captain." Why was the trim, speedy looking launch so completely hidden in the tall cane? The puldoos puddling in the reeds made sounds like prowling ac-

Miss Suarez swept haughtily to hee place in the boat. Carson, with his eye steadfastly fixed on his engine, quickly shoved off.

"Evenin' to yeh," said the captain, still with one foot in the water, like a

"Good evening." responded the young

Virginia said nothing. Carson, stealng a look at her, saw the flush dying out upon her face and a smile taking its place—a dimpling, spasmodic smile, accompanied by little quick dilations of the nostrils, as if Miss Suares was desirous of indulging in a laugh, but saw no citable reason for so doing. She waved her handkerchief at the captain.

"Do you see," said Carson, pointing to the receding shore, "that the little hill at the landing is just a mass of

"Why, so it is, I believe," she exclaimed. "How came so many there?" 'It's a prehistoric kitchen midden." said this most extraordinary young pirate. "So many people lived there that they literally made a bill of the shells of the mollusks they are."

"Indeed!" ejaculated Virginia, and after a long pause she added, "How

odd!" Mentally her speech was, "How odd that this young outcast should know about archaeology, or is it paleontol-

It was easy to study him because he looked so religiously away from ber. He was rather interesting.

He threw over the tiller to round into a little reedy cove, but instead of running ashore he entered a narrow creek, which he followed through such amazing tortuosities that the sun. low in the west, was now on the right, now on the left, sometimes astern and again dead ahead.

Their talk was verging upon the personal and therefore to be discouraged. How keenly observing he must be to detect in her cosmopolitan English the old home accent! She had supposed berself to be quite rid of it. She was quite recovered from her alarm and looked bewitching as they emerged from the narrows and shot out into the lagoon, the blue waves of which had subsided into round rolling short swells.

"Goodby," cried Virginia, looking back into the enchanted marsh. "Goodby! This is the world again!"

Carson was looking the other way with less persistence now. There was something mysterious in the charm of this girl's manner. Her goodby to the narrows seemed a subtle rapprochement to him. They were in the world, and therefore, figuratively, she let him come closer.

The lights of the hotels and villas along the north shore swept by them in a panorama of fairy illuminations. "We have been very impersonal," said be. "May I introduce myself?

My name is"-"Oh. please don't!" she exclaimed. Forgive me, but I'd rather not know."

"It is mo' interesting," said he, with a slow smile, "not to know, I shall always think of you as"-

"As the girl from Mars," she suggested. "I came tumbling down to you in a heap out of the sky."

"Isn't there an asteroid named Psyche?" he inquired. "I'm going to assume that there is and name you

after that." "A purely telescopic star"-"Because of its distance only. Psyche."

The boat quietly passed out across the woven threads of light that webbed the water from a thousand points about Strong's bayou and gently came to at the dock of the Yupon Hedge

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