

Virginia of the Air Lanes

A ROMANCE OF FLYING

By Herbert Quick

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CHAPTER XIII.

DEVILFISH VERSUS BIRD.

WHEN the aeroplant was run out on her ways by the long shed in which she had been built there was a flutter of expectancy among those so deeply concerned in her flight.

"The first mate always sails with the ship, uncle," Virginia suggested.

"Would you really go on the trial trip?" he asked.

"Try me," said she. "I want to."

"You'd be worth a dozen of Captain Harrod's," replied Carson. "He hasn't the faintest idea of the principles of the Virginia, while you could fly her in a week."

"I could now," asserted Virginia. "The Virginia is a simple, manageable little thing, like her namesake."

"If she shows all her namesake's sweet traits," began Theodore.

"Then I'm to go?"

"Captain," cried Theodore, "here's a girl that wants to ship as first mate! Make sail, captain. We're going."

But Virginia seated herself beside Theodore, wearing a dress of soft white wool, a close fitting little cap on her head and carrying a jacket over her arm.

"Now, shall I keep the manometer readings? Oh, you haven't any! Well, then, the altimeter, statoroscope?" she suggested.

"It's self-registering," said Theodore. "Really there's nothing to do except in emergencies, and—"

"And there'll be no emergencies," she cried. "Throw in the clutch, admiral of the circumambient flame! You do the work, and I'll play lady! We're off!"

"Are you willing," said he, turning to her, "to forgive me for this and everything I may ever have done, whatever happens?"

"Whatever happens or doesn't happen, I forgive you," she cried. "Throw in the clutch before the gyroscopes stop and the Virginia gets brain-fag— or shall I?"

"Just for luck," said Theodore, "you throw it in."

She threw over the lever, and the wing sections started like 40,000 boys "buzzes." The big bird rose perpendicularly from the ways and fanned the ground no more. Theodore turned on a little more speed, but the rudders sport to bring her head to the light seaward wind, and as she mounted higher and higher he tried her control. He pushed over the lever that determined the thrust of the driving blades, and she shot in over the dunes like a wild thing until he headed her back for the gulf. Well inside the bar, so that an overturn might not mean a drowning, he circled about in a wide curve, which he gradually narrowed by a more extreme use of the helm until she was spinning round and round in an orbit, in which the tips of the inner wings were almost stationary and "treading" air like a pausing swimmer.

"That tests out the balancing device," shouted Theodore. "How's that?"

"Aye, aye, sir!" said Virginia. "That do sure test out the balancing device. And if you let her chase her tail like this much longer I'm going to be indisposed. Please whirl her the other way awhile, uncle."

Virginia walked forward. They were flying higher now, and she could see the pine woods far inland, with their square patches of plowed fields, their white houses behind the great green globes of the china trees. Far over the northwest soared a great aeronaut, silver white, as if covered with tin foil.

"I wonder if that isn't the Roe?" queried Virginia.

"If it is," said he, "and she comes about this place we'll show her what real aviation is."

Then they swept over and down the coast. They turned back and whirled out over the sea.

"Oh, look, look!" suddenly said Virginia. "There's some one in the water!"

Below floated the half collapsed and sinking de-vil of a submarine. Beside it lay a great blotch of darkness so symmetrical that Theodore was impressed with the sudden idea that it was a submarine rather than a patch of dark sand. A man on the derelict was struggling, shouting and waving a white cloth as if in distress. Theodore's eyes flashed. He reversed the thrust of the wing propellers, and in an instant they were fighting the air with all the power of the mighty engines. The passengers felt their bodies sway forward with the momentum as the Virginia slowed up, halted and moved astern, and as accurately as if he had had years of practice Carson brought her to over the struggling man and lowered her slowly, slowly, toward the swells which rose to meet her until the line thrown over by Carson dabbled in the water by the castaway's side.

"Can you climb up?" cried Theodore.

"I don't dare come much lower."

"For God's sake," called the man.

"Bring her down a foot or so! I'm too weak to climb."

"Cheer up!" called Theodore. "It's risky, but I'll try."

If he was to be saved there was no time to be lost. So thought Carson as he depressed the Virginia more and more. Wisner set his teeth in a fierce determination to put both man and ship out of the field at once. He was the sole custodian of the secret of her construction save for Carson. If he could drown her and master the secret of the glass globe he could rebuild her, make his terms with Shayne, be the greatest in his line. And he seized the nacelle with fierce energy, threaded a steel chain through an opening in the structure and dropped back into the water, holding the chain in his hand. It ran around the aluminum beam with a sharp, rasping, startling rattle.

"He's fallen in!" cried Virginia.

Theodore looked over the side. A small double chain ran down from the airship, its ends moving about in a most mystifying manner in the sea. And as he looked in astonishment the

dark blotch of sand rose to the surface and defined itself as the rounded top of the Stickleback, on the black hull of which sat Wisner blowing brine from his mouth, his head shivering with water. The manhole opened. Wisner snapped the chain into a ring, slipped into the submarine and reappeared with something small and flat in his hand.

"I'll fix you, you d—d whelp!" he yelled. "Take that!"

He aimed at Carson, fired, and the bullet sang away into the sky. Theodore seized Virginia in his arms and drew her down into the bottom of the car, where they lay panting in each other's arms, panic-stricken.

"I must put the ship out of rafter!" cried Carson, leaping to the lever.

She rose like a feather for just a moment, and then she swung about like a kite with its string fouled, anchored by some devilish contrivance. Carson stepped to the side again and looked over. The Virginia hung some thirty yards above the water, and straining backward and downward ran the steel chain looped through her works and fastened by both ends to the submarine. The harsh, raucous laugh of Wisner rose with horrid significance from the Stickleback's manhole, which was again above water and open.

"Don't be in a hurry," he shouted. "Stick around with us awhile. We're going out where it's deep. Come in, the water's fine! Got your bathing suits? When she draws short telephone down. Don't yell, for there won't be no one hear you. There won't be no one hear either of you again in this world except just you two. By-by! See you in Davy Jones'—d—n you!"

And with this, as if pulled down from below, the man vanished into the dark interior, the manhole closed, and the chain, like a line taken by some titanic fish, started out to sea. The airship had been captured by the submarine! The mechanical devilfish was not running very deep; her round deck rose awash sometimes, but with the manholes closed, and with no sign save the erection of her periscope that she was more than an inert mass of steel she swam on.

Still seated where Theodore had placed her, Virginia looked at him in questioning terror. He was white and horrified. At this moment he was depressing her in her flight so as to get all possible slack in the chain, so that by a sudden upward rush he might break the tether. Once, twice, thrice he did this, but the chain held.

"What is it, Theodore? What is it?" said she.

"I don't know," said he, "but I think it's the end!"

Carson was not looking at her. He was looking upward, like a man seeking for some sort of inspiration. She stood looking out over the great desolate sea and back to the receding shore, on which she saw a group of forms—the forms of their friends. Nothing could seem more helpless. They were chained to their fate—a dark fend of a machine that was taking them out to sea, to depths profound enough to drown them—it might be an hour; it might be the next moment.

Carson stood over her with a pistol in his hand.

"Virginia, can you shoot?"

"I shall have to ask you to protect me," said he, "while I try to cut that chain. They can see with their periscope what I'm doing, and when it is necessary they will come up into the open and fire. By pulling out to sea I can get her at an angle that will force them into the open to shoot. When the manhole opens shoot into it. If you should hit one of them don't let it trouble you."

"I shall take the pliers and a file," said he. "I don't think the pliers will cut it. I may be too weak to climb back. I don't know that I can do it anyhow. You must take us back to land if I cut her free."

"Never fear. I know every lever," said she. "There's another thing. We've come out with only a little gas. If we go much farther we haven't enough to get ashore with. I think I could soar her in with the aeroplane set of the blades. I think we had better fly low going back and not waste fuel. Keep her gliding about a hundred feet from the water, but if you want the aeroplane set this is the way to fix it."

With a swift movement he showed her the way to manage the mechanism. He lashed a pair of pliers about his neck with a lanyard, thrust a couple of files into his pockets, took off his boots, his coat and waistcoat and stepped to the side.

"You may get ashore," said he, "while I may not. If so goodby, and God bless you, dearest!"

She threw her arms about his neck and kissed him over and over again. He felt her warm tears on his lips.

"Don't cry!" said he. "Clear your eyes and shoot straight. Goodby!"

She stepped to the rail and looked fixedly at the black shadow like a gigantic fish that represented the submarine. Carson had disappeared over the side in a terrifying hand under hand descent until he reached the trusswork of the nacelle. The black shadow grew more distinct, the round deck broke water, and as the manhole opened Wisner appeared and aimed at Carson coolly as at a target. Too hastily Virginia fired. The bullet struck the edge of the deck with a vicious spat. Wisner's pistol spoke; his bullet, striking metal, flew singing away, and the girl replied with the third shot of this strange duel. She braced herself against the rail, aimed conscientiously at the middle of the mark presented by the villain below and fired—fired with the curious certainty the marksman feels when he is making a good shot. Wisner had just lifted his arm to fire again, but his hand fell as if struck down by a giant's blow. He dropped back into the darkness like a shot woodchuck, the manhole closed, and the submarine went on toward deep water as grimly as before.

"Good!" said Theodore. "But watch the manhole just the same. I shall have to file the chain. The pliers won't do."

Suddenly she heard Carson calling.

"They've gone to," said he. "I think they're going to try drowning us here. Don't lose control of yourself! Remember this is a fight, and we aren't whipped yet. Do you hear?"

"Yes," said she. "But it's so awful—so awful! If you were only up here where you could— Tell me what to do! Tell me what to do!"

"Do you see how the chain shortens?" asked Carson. "She's going down. If the water's deep enough she can drown as unless we can overcome her gravity. Turn the index so as to show a dead down thrust of the blades and then full power on the last speed. It will take fuel, but it's the only way. Hurry!"

The airship sank, sank, nearer and nearer to the water. But without waiting to learn how the girl was carrying out his orders Carson again attacked the chain, and the shrill "screek" of the file greeted Virginia's ears as she turned the indicator and threw on the power. As they had never done before the great engines purred, the wing blades trod the air with a terrific roar, but with remorseless suction-like force the submarine drew her down closer, closer to the water, and she seemed lost. The sinking was slower now, but nevertheless more and more of the chain disappeared in the sea every moment. Virginia looked and despaired. The waves were so terrifyingly near, death in their cold depths seemed so unthinkable horrible. She bowed her face in her hands. The "screek, screek, screek" of the file kept on with the regularity of a machine. Carson was at work. He might be drowned. But when he went under he would go fighting. He was a man!

She stepped to the side and called to him.

"I think," said she, "that we are doomed. Is there anything I can do?"

"You might advance the spark," said he. "Not much, just the least trifle. Yes, I reckon they've got us."

She sprang to the machinery and did this last thing ordered by her commander—did it with unshaking hands as a soldier might take up the weapon of his comrade killed at his post. By the faintest trifle she advanced the spark and went to the side to see the effect. They were lower now, and the trusswork in which Carson hung must be in or near the crest of the swells, but the "screek" of the file went on, not so strong perhaps, but steadily still, the pean of the unconquerable spirit of the man clinging to the trusswork beneath her. It was grand. It was immense. Her spirit rose to the occasion, rose to the prosaic "screek, screek" of a file in a hand that was dabbled in the waves at every lifting swell of the stolid ocean that rolled on just the same where its prey dangled within the lapping of its tongue and

out yonder where perhaps no man had been since creation's morn.

"Theodore!"

The file stopped for a minute. "Keep her as she is," said he. "We're got the submarine stopped. I've got the chain about filed through, but I'm a little tired. Keep her as she is for just a little while."

CHAPTER XIV.

LIFE OR DEATH?

A GAIN the file began its work. The immediate danger was over, but both the man below and the girl in the car knew that the terrific consumption of gas in the engines made the seconds too precious for use in conversation. A minute's supply of gas, ten seconds' supply, one second's supply, might save their lives in the home stretch, when the chain should be filed through and they should take their flight toward land, to make triumphant landing after this deadly peril or to sink in the waves from which they were now fighting to save themselves. The roar of the machinery filled the air with tempest; the wind from the wing blades driven down on the water set it boiling like a whirlpool: one moment the straining submarine drew them down by a link or two of the chain; the next the struggling airship lifted the submarine up an inch or so from her dark lair in the depths. At last, at the very height of the fierce struggle, the airship shot upward with the jingle of dropping chains, a worn file fell into the foam of a white capped wave, and the girl leaped to the levers in obedience to the voice of Carson telling her to make haste, for God's sake, and set the wings for a forward flight, to cut the speed down one-third and to steer straight for shore.

She obeyed. They had risen to a height of perhaps 200 feet before her inexperienced hands could change the propellers, and Carson told her to keep the height. She asked if she might not use a little higher speed, but he said no—economy in gas was in the moderate speed. "Keep her as she is," said he.

"Can you come up?" she asked.

"Have you the strength?"

She asked this two or three times and got no reply. Suddenly she screamed with the fear that he had fainted, and as if aroused from a stupor he asked her to advance the spark a little and when she had done so to retard it again.

"Are you in danger?" she asked.

"Can you hang on?"

"I'm all right," said he, "only my hands. Can you see shore? Is it far?"

The shore was rising fast, she told him. It was not so very far now, but the gas was almost gone. Could she do anything? Was there nothing to be done to eke it out so as to bring them a little closer before they fell into the sea? Could he do anything if he were in the car?

"Keep her as she is," said he. "When we get close enough so she can glide in I'll lighten her."

"How lighter her?" she asked.

"It's easy," said he, "from down here. Keep her as she is!"

The dunes lifted white in the sun, shimmering in the heat, swelling as the Virginia darted nearer and nearer to shore. The horror-stricken people on the beach saw her coming, like an albatross before a gale. The girl on the deck prayed fervently for the miraculous renewing of the little cruse of oil from which was made the gas that kept them up, and the man underneath hung on grimly, awaiting the cessation of stroke, which would prove that the mixture which was the breath of life of the great engines was exhausted at last. Once, twice, thrice, came the halting in the machinery that was the death rattle of the motors.

"Virginia!" said he.

"Yes," she replied.

"Fix the gliding mechanism. The gas is done."

"Yes, Theodore."

"Turn her nose down a little. With momentum enough she'll make it from here. And when she gets within those breakers, if she is less than twenty-five feet high, tilt her up again a little. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I'll do it. Anything more, Theodore?"

"No; only remember what you said about forgiving me if I'd let you come with me. Remember, turn her prow

up a little when she nears shore. You'll make it, dear; you'll make it!"

Mrs. Graybill, standing on the shore, noted with the rest the new motion of the airship when the engines were stopped and wondered why it behaved so queerly.

And then Mrs. Graybill screamed. She had seen the man under the car deliberately let go his hold and drop into the water. The lightened car tilted slightly upward now as Virginia obeyed orders, soared slowly upward, rising a little as her momentum brought the great gliding surfaces against the air, and then, clearing the foam of the surf, she softly settled on the sand with her stern rudder, like the tail of a great dead bird, washed by the hungry waves which she had as by a miracle escaped. And rowing in from the offing where he had gone in his fishing boat in the wild and improbable belief that he might help his master came Captain Harrod with a white faced young man lying in the bottom of the boat whose fingers dripped blood from the remorseless work of the file.

"Allow me to suggest," observed Craighhead as the gentlemen of the party at Harrod's camp sat in lounging attitude on various articles used as chairs, mostly jetsam and flotsam of the gulf, "that in perfecting the first really practicable flying machine we have set in motion social and economic reactions that will go on and on far beyond the ken of those who, unlike myself, have not made a specialty of them. As that submarine dragged the Virginia out to sea yesterday we all thought it was the last of Carson, M. A., didn't we?"

Mr. Carson picked at his bandaged fingers, embarrassed.

"I didn't see much hope of escape," said he.

Breakfast was served. Mr. Waddy was upon tenterhooks until the Virginia had been explained to him, so a trip was arranged for Waddy, Craighhead and Carson. They would fly down to Fort Morgan, thence to Palmetto Beach, get their mail and be back for dinner.

Mr. Waddy shied from the sea, but once in air he became intoxicated with enthusiasm. If this machine, said he, was so good that the Aerostatic Power people thought it good business to hire Wisner to drown it and its inventor—he could not otherwise explain the horrible affair of yesterday—it was good enough to be backed with all the Waddy money in all the eight banks.

The Virginia had alighted on the parade ground at Fort Morgan. The bamboo braces fell outward, and she lay on an even keel. The aeronauts invariably halted at the mooring balloon and received passes, but Mr. Waddy's declaration of fealty was so absorbing and the speed of the Virginia so unwonted to her pilot that the fort had been spread beneath him like a map before he was aware of it. To alight might mean arrest, inquiry and discharge after explanations to the commandant, Colonel Krimnitz, of whose severity Carson felt no real fear. But if he tried to go away after running the guard he might be fired on as a spy making off with complete photographs. Altogether it was safest to alight, thought Carson, and he settled on the parade ground, greatly to the agitation of an awkward squad drilling under a sergeant, whose belated commands were cut short off by the whirl of the reversal of the Virginia's wing blades. He turned and saw the huge dragon fly with its bow rudder pointed at him like a great mandible.

The drill sergeant's expression carried conviction to the sergeant of the guard, where his description of a devil of a bird thing that you couldn't see at all till it struck the ground might not have been credited. The guard turned out and moved on the parade ground. The guard encountered a great silver winged insect with a snug car amidstships, her four braces sticking in the Bermuda grass like very short legs.

The guard halted at five paces, and the sergeant advanced, obtaining his first good look at Mr. Craighhead, maintaining the attitude of military caricature with a steadiness perfectly statuesque. The sergeant, a little man with a red mustache turned up a la kaiser, looked at him for half a minute and uttered a mysterious exclamation.

Craighhead remained motionless, his hand to his cap. The sergeant amazedly returned the salute. Craighhead relaxed his tense muscles, dropped his hand to his side and winked with the utmost sobriety of expression.

"Podner," said he, "have yeh got any eatin' tobacker?"

"I'll trouble you gentlemen for your passes," returned the sergeant.

"Unfortunately," replied Mr. Craighhead, "we omitted to obtain passes. Say no more, Mr. Sergeant. We are all soldiers. This is Connie Theodore Cabson, M. A., and this Mr. Waddy, who served in his youth in the typhoid uprising at Chickamauga in the Spanish-American war. Show your button, Mr. Waddy, as an S. A. W. V. You see, sergeant, that you are quite safe against our capturing Fort Morgan."

"Here's Captain Bolger now. Tell him about it."

Captain Bolger was a choleric gentleman with whiskers like General Sherman's, much thinned by the increase in the area of the face since the establishment of the foliage. He advanced rapidly, with a hippity-hopping gait, as if catching step with an imaginary companion very careless of the march.

"What's this, sergeant?" he spluttered. "This is quite irregular, sergeant—irregular. The parade ground! A d—d thing with wings and V type engines! And no passes? Some one will swent for this. Highly irregular!"

"Pardon me," said Theodore. "My

name is Carson. I miscalculated my speed. I know Colonel Krimnitz, and if—"

"Colonel Krimnitz, sir," said Captain Bolger, "is temporarily on leave. I am the officer of the day, sir. You will produce a pass for your confounded aeroplane or I shall order you—"

"I feel sure," said Mr. Carson, "that Colonel Krimnitz"—

"Colonel Krimnitz be hanged!" retorted Captain Bolger. "You can't come the Krimnitz game, sir, while he is on leave. Sergeant!"

"Captain!" said the sergeant, saluting.

"See what that thing is in the fellow's hand," pointing to Mr. Waddy's camera. "Take it, and if it's a bomb explode it at sea. If it's a camera turn it over to me instantly and confine these men. My compliments to Major Flathers, and say to him that I have confined three men who ran the guard in an airship, with bombs or cameras, as the case may be; that I have the airship under guard and await his instructions at headquarters."

And Captain Bolger hippity-hopped to headquarters, followed by a soldier with a camera. The three interlopers went into the guardhouse, while Captain Bolger's message went to Major Flathers, commandant in the absence of Colonel Krimnitz.

"I won't stand it!" Mr. Waddy shouted. "I want to wire John H. Gunn! I want to wire Washington, I tell you—John H. Gunn, speaker of the house! He'll make somebody chew hay for this!"

Mr. Craighhead began humming "It's Twenty Miles to Vassar," evidently a West Point ditty, paced the guardhouse, turning corners with military precision or stood accurately with certain fingers on certain seams of his trousers as precise as a tin soldier. The atmosphere had permeated his system, and when a corporal's guard called for them his stride might have been offered as a model.

Access to Major Flathers' desk was opened for them by orderlies described by Mr. Waddy as state's prison looking fellows, armed to the teeth. The major was thin, solemn, bilious looking, as if he had had liver from looking in the tropics; haughty, as if the liver had overflowed his temper.

"Who are you?" said Major Flathers.

"Who are we?" cried Mr. Waddy. "Who are we? American citizens, civil Citizens and taxpayers before you was ever born, sir! Wire John H. Gunn at Washington that Cyrus Waddy's shut up in jail, an' you'll find out 'You'll'!"

"It would seem an economy of time, Mr. Waddy," said the major, after quelling him with a yellow glower, "not to trouble Mr. Gunn or the president, who might find it inconvenient to attend for purposes of identification. What can you say, sir?"

This query was directed at Craighhead.

"Most high and illustrious one," said he, "the world is wide, its population some sixteen hundred millions. Of this considerable force we are but three. You ask us, O serenely, to set ourselves apart from the others by brands and marks. How can the thing be proved? It is a hard saying, and yet didst ever see that serrated nose? Give me a pen, and let me mark it 'Exhibit A.'"

The major arose with pronounced

absence of haste, adjusted a pair of rimless glasses to his precipitous beak by a clasp of special construction, examined Craighhead's nose critically and impersonally, as if looking at a specimen in a case, slowly removed the glasses and deliberately resealed himself.

"I have observed such a nose in but one case," said he, "but its introduction in evidence does not establish its identity with the only snout of similar symmetry recorded. 'Exhibit A' will be considered for what it is worth— as evidence. Proceed."

"I will now render a song, which I beg this honorable body to receive as 'Exhibit B.'"

Though this declaration made a distinct sensation among the officers and orderlies, and though the sergeant, who was a shorthand reporter, broke three pencils in his agitation, Major Flathers never let down by even one degree the saturnine dignity of his presence. Craighhead sang with a fine independence of tune, but with an air and style of tone emission which



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