

Virginia of the Air Lanes

A ROMANCE OF FLYING

By Herbert Quick

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CHAPTER XV.

A RETREAT FROM BABYLON.

THE date when the Virginia left the dunes of the Alabama coast for her first long voyage is now historic. It placed man as a flying animal on an equality with the birds and bats and insects. The gas bag of the aerostat and the aeronefs of the first decade of the century went the way of the tentative and imperfect with the steam engine of Hero and the war gins of Archimedes, Callimachus and Demetrius. The new era is one of great flying engines beside which the Virginia was as a hummingbird to a hawk, but which are, every one, built on the Virginia's principles—the direct thrust of the blades and the balancing by the automatic distribution of power by means of light gyroscopes. The new hero was the miserable young man who looked like one with his death wound and maneuvered the new machine like a veteran—Theodore Carson. Every schoolboy knows these things.

But every one does not know of her difficulty in getting off. At least three times did Carson turn back to allow Craighead to converse in farewell with Mrs. Graybill and Mr. Waddy. Finally Craighead consented to be separated from the alluring Mrs. Graybill, and, passing over the bay with a wide westerly detour, the Virginia came in over Spring hill and alighted softly at the aeronef landing at Mobile. From a hundred sally ports—streets, alleys and wharfs—poured a throng of people attracted by the strange craft that had made port.

"Howdy, folks?" said Craighead. "Take a good look, for even when ye wist not we vanish. Out of the great deep we come, into the great deep we go. The elementals who send us are the pow'fulest spirits what there is. But a brief space have we to warn Mobile. Repent! Repent! Yet a few mo' days an' Mobile shall be done destroyed!"

"Dan Thomas," said Carson to an old negro with a whip in his hand. "Come here."

"Yes, Mistah Cahson," responded the negro.

"Fetch me at once one No. 2 can of A quality methanose, and get me a list of the aeronef clearings for the last two days."

"Yes, sub."

Thomas darted away.

"Pardon me," said a man who had a withered arm drawn up to his side in such a way as to give one the impression that he was holding his breath. "but are you going far so short hand ed?"

"Not far—in time," replied Theodore. "Only to Alaska," added Craighead. "We meet a Russian admiral in St. Michael at 3. If that nigger doesn't hurry he shall be late, general, and what will Admiral Phlaskovodka say then?"

The man lifted his sailor hat, bowed politely and stepped back, unveiling a face behind him which Carson knew—the foxy, suspicious face of Wizner, the inventor of the lost helicopter. Carson stooped as if for some casual purpose and laid hold on a spanner.

With the spanner in his hand he rose, and with an angry leap he stood in the midst of the crowd. Wizner had fled, but through the thinned crowd Theodore saw his wiry figure, with the arm that Virginia's bullet had reached hanging in a sling. Carson gave chase. Some one cried, "Ston him!" and an officer, seeing in Carson the only fugitive in sight, stopped him.

"Let me go!" cried Carson, struggling. "Come with me and arrest a man for attempt to murder."

A boy in a messenger cap interrupted the colloquy by calling "Mr. Cahson, Mr. Cahson!" as if "paging" a man in a hotel.

"I'm Carson," said Theodore. "What do you want?"

"Somebody on the wire for you at the telephone booth in the hotel," replied the messenger.

membered Captain Harrod's expression when Wizner had called him an old smuggling fool. He remembered a thousand mysterious things now made plain by the hypothesis of Harrod's having yielded to the coastwise temptation of smuggling. Wizner uttered into the instrument a sly, sinister, exasperating chuckle.

"Lost your tongue?" he taunted. "Well, arrest me. Any one can tell you where I am. But will the girl leave Silberberg to come and testify? The courtship's just getting good now. Too bad to disturb them?"

Carson hurried the receiver away and strode back to the Virginia. He found Thomas, the negro, with two men, hoisting the can of methanose aboard. Thomas gave him the list of aeronef clearings.

The sailings were not many—the Tern for Memphis, the Long Tom for St. Andrews Bay, and, yes, the Roc departing the morning before "for northern points."

"We can overhaul the Tern," said Craighead, with a judicial air, "at, say, Jackson and take on our friends for Alaska. I do hope the president can join us at Omaha. Gentlemen," addressing the crowd, "here you see a new aeronef invented by me. By reaching Alaska before nightfall we win a million dollars. This is a sure thing, as the sun will not set there for three months. The bet is with a Brazilian who forgot about the days coming quarterly at Nome. But we shall be honorable and pay him the million on the nail if we fail to make it before sunset in Rio, the real locus. Tomorrow we shall win five hundred thousand from Rothschild by leaving Greenwich observatory at sunrise going west and returning at sunrise next day from the east, circling the world in twenty-four hours of continued sunrise. Wish us well, gentlemen! Good-by, honest peasantry, your country's pride, goodbye!"

The majestic rise of the Virginia, with no preliminary run, drew a round of applause. Craighead waved his cap, but Carson, paying no attention, laid the Virginia dead for New York. They flew high, and the constant picking up and dropping of railway trains and steamers and the swift succession of villages and towns spoke of the fierceness with which the Virginia was hurried against the leagues between Mobile and New York. They left Montgomery to port and Atlanta to starboard. Carson had assigned himself and Craighead their duties, and both were busy, Craighead at the tiller, with his eye on the compass, Carson looking at every working part, oiling, feeling for hot bearings, watching for the slightest quiver or jar, greedy of every mile. Finally they were speeding along over the great national Appalachian forest when he relieved Craighead.

In the little locker were found the elements from which Craighead prepared the luncheon of bacon, eggs and coffee, cooked on the methanose stove.

"We shall get into the upper Atlantic regions," said Carson, "just in time to hit the area of local storms to-night."

He looked from the tiller to the compass and hesitated about leaving it to eat. He had never tried letting the Virginia follow her nose with the tiller lashed.

"Of course," said he, "she'll fall off. But if she turns I can put her back on her course. I believe I'll try her."

Whereupon Craighead recited a poem:

"I go away this blessed day
To sail across the state, Matilda,
My airship starts for various parts
At twenty after eight, Matilda,
I do not know where we may go
Or whether near or far, Matilda,
For Captain Carson don't make a parson
Of any foremost far, Matilda,
That mystic man beneath my ban
Shall suffer, coute qu'il coute, Matilda,
What right has he to keep from me
The airy, scary route, Matilda?
Although, in sooth, I am a youth
Of common sailor lot, Matilda,
Am I a man on human plan
Devised, or am I not, Matilda?"

"And echo, if there were any place to echo from, would answer, 'Not Matilda!' Have some of the milk while the Virginia chases her tail above Mr. Pinchot's forest."

"She doesn't chase her tail much," replied Carson, "so far, at least."

She did not. The gyroscopes held her on an even keel, and the altimeter statoroscope delivered the verdict that the Virginia was following a course as level as a battleship's. Carson ate, watched the triumphant test and forgot to frown, and he little knew toward what danger he was hurling himself.

Peak after peak, village after village and occasionally a big smokeless town about the national power plants of the Leighton reservoirs came hurrying toward them, passed beneath like visions and fell behind.

"See that big stratus cloud?" asked Carson. "Shall we go over or under it?"

"Personally," replied Craighead, "I've been under a cloud long enough."

The stratus was an immense vapor sheet half a mile above the earth. Underneath were the gloom and dullness of cloudy weather, but above it the sun shone with a brightness augmented by the brilliancy reflected from the upper surface of the cloud as from a great glittering plain of snow. The sun was past the meridian and shining warm, but on the wing over that great expanse of pearl the air felt, not cold, but "caller," and they put on their topcoats. The shadow of the Virginia ran with her across the cloud like a black bat halloed in the unspeakable glory of a triple rainbow which ringed the scudding shadow about in concentric circles, so bright, so refrigent in dye, so glorious in their mingling lines, that the voyagers glancing from radiance to radiance

lowered their voices to the thrill of a beauty too intense for speech.

The immense engines were moving more regularly than clockwork, keeping the plodder of their makers that if supplied with fuel and oil they would run without a single stop until worn out—the perfection of the internal combustion engine, once so untrustworthy.

"I want to see where we are," finally said Carson. "This is like an open ocean. I want to compare the map with the landscape."

Obedient to the tilted rudders, the Virginia pointed her prow downward. Her propeller blades hurried her swiftly forward and toward the earth, and she plunged into the cold stream of the stratus cloud into mist and white scarfs of icy fog and the snowy obscurity of an aerial blizzard. Craighead gasped at the chill and the blindness.

"Ring for a guide," said he. "I'm lost."

He was not lost for long, for the Virginia clove the fleecy hoodwink and emerged through its lower levels into the clear shadows of the ether air. They could feel the warmth radiated from the ground, balmy with earthy scents. Far to the northeast lay a shining river, widening at the limit of vision into a broad estuary, and just within sight could be discerned the clustered spires and towers of a city. Carson looked the landscape over and studied his map.

"Craighead," cried Carson, "we've made Richmond three hours quicker than I thought it possible. A stork or a Canada goose couldn't have covered the distance, and both sometimes go 200 miles an hour! Why?"

"Let us exit over you insufferable plumes!" cried Craighead. "Let's fly rings around 'em! Let's salt circles around the snobs!"

Craighead, scanning the southeast with his fieldglasses, had discovered at a distance of six or seven miles a huge silver aeronef steering northward. Theodore threw over the tiller and made for the airship. Craighead looked at him in wonder.

"That ship looks," said Carson, advancing the spark and crowding the engines, "like the Roc."

After a few moments on a straight course to intersect that of the aeronef Carson threw the Virginia up into the cloud. Soon they emerged on the shining upper levels of the cloud, which hid their approach to the other craft. One below the curtain and one above it, the airship of the future and the airship of the past flew on converging courses. They dropped below the cloud into the thinner vapor. They looked about—and saw nothing. And yet, above the purring of the machinery, came to their ears the tremor from powerful engines. Could the Condor have ascended into the cloud as they descended from it? Voices came closer and closer.

"My God, Carson!" shouted Craighead. "You're going foul of her. Look down!"

Just in time Carson looked from the depths of air below the great bubble of silver rose, swelling in her swift approach. A collision meant ruin. The propelling blades of the aeronef would cut the envelope of the gas holder like paper, and the two ships in a huge mass of tangled wreckage would fall to the earth in death and ruin, or the escaping gas from the aeronef, ignited from the exhaust of the Virginia's engines, might explode, hurling the fragments of both vessels far and wide. And Carson saw in the ruin the fair form of the Roc and crushed to earth from the Roc and crushed to formlessness below.

Quick as lightning Carson threw on full speed forward. The Virginia obeyed her machinery, and as she swooped to the aeronef's starboard the latter rose swiftly. The Virginia's stern rudder grazed the gas bag and was all but carried away; a cord of the suspension system of the airship snapped with a detonation that set the huge fabric in a tremble. There rose a cry from the deck of the hitherto unconscious monster as her people realized the fearful fact that here in these dizzy heights they were in collision with something. A man came running out of the cabin with a gun in his hand, as if with some wild notion of giving battle to the destroyer.

The Virginia was half a mile from the airship before the crew of the latter had time to assure themselves of her safety. The Virginia went astern as well as athwart the course of the other craft, and as she sheered to starboard the aeronef and the aeronef sped from each other at the sum of their two speeds, perhaps four miles a minute. The people on the latter must have thought the other gone forever when an astounding thing happened. The aeronef wheeled about and gave chase—nay, she gave chase so swiftly that she swelled visibly in her swift overhauling of the aeronef. In a time so short that it seemed like a breath the Virginia, on a level now with the other's deck, came in close astern, then sheered off and deliberately ran around the big Condor as she stood on her course at full speed. As she crossed the bows a cry went out from the great ship's engine room—a cry of mingled fear and astonishment. Why did this new craft so course about them? It was some new engine of aviation—that was sure. And with such incredible speed and such unheard-of mobility!

So as Carson came up on his second circumnavigation of the Condor there stood at the rail of the big airship two or three men with guns, who made threatening gestures and shouted to him to stand off or they would shoot.

"What ship is that?" cried Carson. "None of your business! You stand off or we'll shoot!"

"Shoot if you dare!" cried Carson. "Don't you see that I can go above



"YOU'RE GOING FOUL OF HER. LOOK DOWN!"

where you can shoot and rip your gas bag in perfect safety? Come, now, answer my question."

"This is the Daedalus of Spokane," was the reply. "What devilish thing is that?"

"The Virginia of—of Carson's Landing, in Alabama," replied Theodore.

"Whose aeronef is that?" asked the man who seemed in command.

"It's mine," said Theodore. "I built her."

"Well," said the man on the other deck, "you've got the world by the tail, and if you need money apply to Calvin J. Fry of Spokane. Hold on, please!"

her speed, left the hustling Calvin J. Fry gesticulating far out of hearing.

"That, to originate a locution," said Craighead, "ought to hold them for a brief period. Looks as if they were back pedaling."

"I will find them," said Carson, evidently meaning something else, "if they have hidden her in the farthest cave of that thundercloud."

CHAPTER XVI.

A RACE WITH THE ELEMENTS.

PAST Richmond, they left the domed capitol at Washington far to port, passed between Baltimore and Dover and directly over Philadelphia, where Carson made a wide circle above the vast aerial harbor, scanning the berths for a huge silver aeronef of the Condor type, but finding none. It was growing dusk, and the west and northwest were ramparted with towering thunder heads, quivering with lightning, toward which Carson hurried the Virginia like a bullet. The town studied suburban region of New Jersey swept under them as if drawn by swift mechanism, and the harbor of New York lay beneath, alive with shipping. The lights were already burning, and the far spread Babylon of the modern world hung like a fairy dream from the foreground to the farther rim of the concave cup of the earth. Carson was amazed and stunned. He had never seen New York, and his ideas were all inadequate to the actualities before him. The streets flashed into sight as the Virginia passed into positions permitting a view of the bottom of one metropolitan canyon after another. The boy was afraid.

The huge city roaring up at them like a ravening beast struck him with terror.

"Why dost circle about like a sand hill crane?" said Craighead. "Why don't you light?"

"Like the sand hill crane," replied Carson, "I'm afraid. Where can we alight?"

"Gad," said Craighead, "I never thought of that! New York has always reached out for me so lovingly that the idea of there being any difficulty in getting into her embrace never entered my brain. We are a little shy of knowledge of how to get in from above, aren't we?"

"What are the harbor rules?" asked Carson.

"Hanged if I know," replied Craighead.

It was quite dark now, save for the moon, which, nearly full, was climbing the eastern sky, still clear. To the northwest towered the pearly clouds palpitant with lightning. Craighead expected Theodore to turn the Virginia to some far New Jersey village and was astonished when he entered upon a swift flight up the Hudson, which lay shining in the moonlight, laced with the wakes of boats. Far ahead, on both sides, quivered the lightning of the storm, and from afar came the rumbling of thunder. Carson seemed to be seeking night in the heart of a thunderstorm. Craighead seized his arm and tried to glean something of his mood from a scrutiny of his face.

"I'm going to the Catskills," said Theodore. "Before I sleep I'm going to find Shayne's Hold!"

Carson crossed the Hudson in a slow drizzle at Kingston and stood northward toward heavy dense masses of towering clouds screening the high peaks of the Catskills—and Shayne's Hold.

"Why not burdle the tempest, cat-tiff?" cried Craighead.

"Those highest towers," replied Carson, pointing to the thunder heads now again snowy in the moonlight, "are thirty, forty, fifty thousand feet high."

"Well, what do we care?" protested Craighead.

"There's an opening yonder in the

rain," said Carson. "If it doesn't close up we may slip through to the back of the storm again."

As if the wings of the advancing army had extended its lines until they pulled apart in the center, the rain opened.

"We must go lower," said Carson, "and pass under. The rain is closing in, but I reckon we can slip through pretty dry."

The oncoming black arch, lighted to whiteness when the lightning blazed, swelled fearfully as they approached, its rainless gap narrowing momentarily. It was a race with the elements. The penalty if they lost was, to be sure, nothing more than a drenching, but it was none the less exciting for that. The curtains of water, drawn aside as if to let the travelers through, swung together as they approached.

"Whoop!" cried Craighead. "The Virginia wins!"

As he spoke they passed under the rain cloud.

Carson was thinking of Shayne's Hold and conjecturing as to its whereabouts. If he read his chart correctly the lights seen afar to the northeast indicated that they had left the Kaaterskill behind and were nearing Blank Head mountains, though he confessed to himself that the crags revealed by the lightning might be the Hunter peaks or even the summits of Slide mountain. All he really knew was that he was above the Catskills and that unless he could outmaneuver the elements they faced an encounter with rain, wind and great possibilities in the way of lightning. The domes of thundercloud a few miles to their right seemed almost low enough to be overpassed, so he set the levers for an ascent, and the Virginia rose like an osprey chased by an eagle.

"I'm trying your suggestion," said Carson. "I'm scaling the front of that shower."

Even Craighead's voice was hushed in awe. Like the fairy domes of some city of oriental fable rose the cloud castles, their summits white in the moonlight, their folds dark like a dove's wing. Suddenly the lightning blazed out in the heart of the black base on which the city of enchantment was reared, and instantly the whole vast fabric grew white and palpitant and terrible, while the blue sky beyond and above it turned black velvet by contrast. The lightning ceased, and there hung the billowy cloud, silver white and drab on a base of darkness, as before. The air had grown chill as with frost, and still the clouds were far above them. The bite of the propellers on the air seemed to fail, for the cloud masses no longer appeared to fall as when the aeronef was rising.

"We can't make it," said Carson. "Don't try!" exclaimed Craighead. "It's offerrony!"

Changing a lever or so, Carson drove straight toward the bosom of the cloud.

Carson sat with his hand on his levers, pale as if dead; Craighead clutched a hand rail, his eyes turned aloft as if in invocation. A more note flash and darkness returned, but not so densely. The space before them grew softly light, and in a moment they swam into the moonlight. Through an immeasurable chamber of cloud darted the aeronef into a second smother of rain and mist and out on a lower level into the calm space behind the storm. From this region of shadow they emerged into the moonlight again and began their search for signs of human habitation. Finally, just as Theodore was at the point of retreat, both at once saw what neither doubted was Shayne's Hold.

The hold was on the triple peak of one of the ruggedest and highest masses of the Catskills, rising steep as a wall, hundreds of feet in the air, to three summits, in the midst of which stood the mansion. The huge buildings had been built, the animals had been introduced, the last luxury had been supplied, and Shayne's Hold had been sealed up. Down from the mountain flowed three streams, up which had run the precipitous roads to the top, and when the time came for closing the hold to those who had no way of navigating the air Mr. Shayne had built across them immense dams, using materials blasted from the mountain sides at such places as to render them quite unscalable. The steepened precipices thus carried across the ravines in masonry made a lofty wall entirely around the mountain.

Every effect that could be produced by lights, white and colored, the electrician-artists had worked out for the illumination of this enchanted palace hung on cliffs. Overlooking the region, as its owner overlooked his fellows, the hold was a place of mystery, holding no neighborhood with the people below. It was a real Laputa, an island in the air, and those only could reach it who could fly.

About the peak ran a labyrinth of bridge paths and carriage roads, all outlined from above by winding lines of lights, like the route of an army of bewildered glowworms. Hidden by a spur of cliff was the immense airship garage.

The lightning had disabled its lighting system for the most part, and the hold had gone dark. Carson had made two or three reconnaissances over the very spot, but had not suspected its presence, for the sky was clouded and the luster of the pools too feeble to reach his eyes, so that the sudden outflash of the myriad lights when the currents were restored came to both men with astonishing unexpectedness.

The hold had blossomed suddenly in fire. The lakes edged with lights glimmered like mirrors; the clustered arc lights delimited the high mesa like a map; the winding labyrinth of incandescent netted the peaks like glowing Lilliputian threads about the requi-

rent Gulliver, and to the midst stood a great rosy roamed mansion, its wings in shade, its central court agleam, the radiant heart of an elaborate splendor. Carson drew in his breath sharply.

"My God!" said he. "Who could ever think of such a thing?"

Craighead was silent.

But he must see Virginia. Utterly estranged as they were, this night voyage had a reason—the hope of seeing her, of asking her forgiveness, of bringing her to see that when she dropped from the sky to his feet he had loved her; that when she had come to live with that uncle of whom she had heard so little and had found the last Carson in him the temptation was so masked in duty that it was too strong for him. And had he ever once in that delicious, perilous time of acting Uncle Theodore inexcessively presumed on the relationship or failed in goodness? True, he had let her stay as his niece, but had not his father always thought himself of the same blood? Virginia must allow some weight to this tradition. She must see that, while too remotely related to be objectionable in a nearer, dearer way, he was too probably of kin to have turned her away. And he would land in Shayne's Hold if it were the last act of his life.

With the ancient instinct of the surreptitious lover he made for the angle between two dark wings of the great house. Glimmers of light from two windows were their sole sign of occupancy, the center of human concourse being about that core of light in the court. The wings seemed like low adjuncts for conservatories or billiard rooms, and the angle between, with its light mottlings, looked like a flower sprinkled lawn on which Carson felt confident of placing the Virginia gently and with no disturbance. With a slow soaring motion the aeronef came into the angle like a steamer into her slip—and found, instead of a lawn, a graveled roof cluttered with tables and chairs as if for the serving of refreshments. Among these the Virginia nosed in, dumped some chairs into the court and settled down amid crackling furniture and crashing pottery.

The Roc had reached Shayne's Hold just in time to escape the storm, and the wearied Virginia had retired, sick of the harping of her aunt upon the disgrace of her sojourn with "Uncle Theodore," weary of telling how innocent it had been. With a book close to

the light she was composing her mind to sleep, when into the dreamy quietude came a purring that was so unmistakably the voice of the aeronef that Virginia rose, with her hand to her heart, in an amazement not all unpleasant, wondering where her namesake might alight and what Shayne's hired constabulary might do with Theodore, when from the roof came a scraping, chairs and tables went over the parapet with a crash, and the voices of Craighead and Carson came in at the window, low, hurried and agitated.

Virginia turned out the dim light. "Well," said she, in answer to her maid's tap, "what is it, Fanny?"

"I heard an awful noise," said Fanny. "It seemed to come from 'ere, miss."

"Some things fell into the court," replied Virginia. "Please tell the servants and say that things must not be piled upon the parapet. That's all, Fanny."

Virginia walked to the window. There lay the dear little airship that she and Theodore had planned campaigns for and conquered the world with. Theodore was passing the other way now, peering into every bearing and gearing for signs of damage.

"It's a miracle," said Theodore at last, "but she's all right and ready to rise at a touch."

"Thank God!" said Virginia. "Did you find a way down?" asked Carson of Craighead, all unconscious of the nearness of what he sought.

"Only the old way by which I came off the back stop of the emporium," replied Craighead, who had been skirting along the edge of the parapet. "It's a matter of specific gravity. As to getting back, unless you brought your specific levity with you I really don't see, old chap, how it's going to be managed."

"Once down I can force my way up," said Theodore, raising his voice in his intensity. "Do you think I'll go back without seeing her? No! You stay here, and—"

"Mr. Craighead!"

The voice came from the darkness of the house, cool and calm.

"Present!" answered Craighead. "But don't shoot! I'm a starving man, in charge of a maniac!"

"Please come here," said the voice. "Virginia!" cried Carson.

"Please tell your friend," said the voice, "that if he presumes to address any person except yourself this window will be closed!"

Craighead approached the glimmer of white drapery, and Virginia gave him her hand, which he gallantly kissed.

"You may tell your friend," said Miss Suarez, "that his coming here is a foolhardy thing and quite uncalled for. No one here either can see him or would if she could."

"You hear, old man?" queried Craighead. "The imprisoned damsel saith it's all a mistake. She don't want no knight. This balcony business lacks appeal, being hackneyed and overworked. It's no go, colonel—except for you."

"You may tell him," went on Virginia, "that his movements have been reported and the Aerostatic Power company is about taking legal steps—I don't know what to contest with him—I don't know what!"

"That's in my department," replied

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