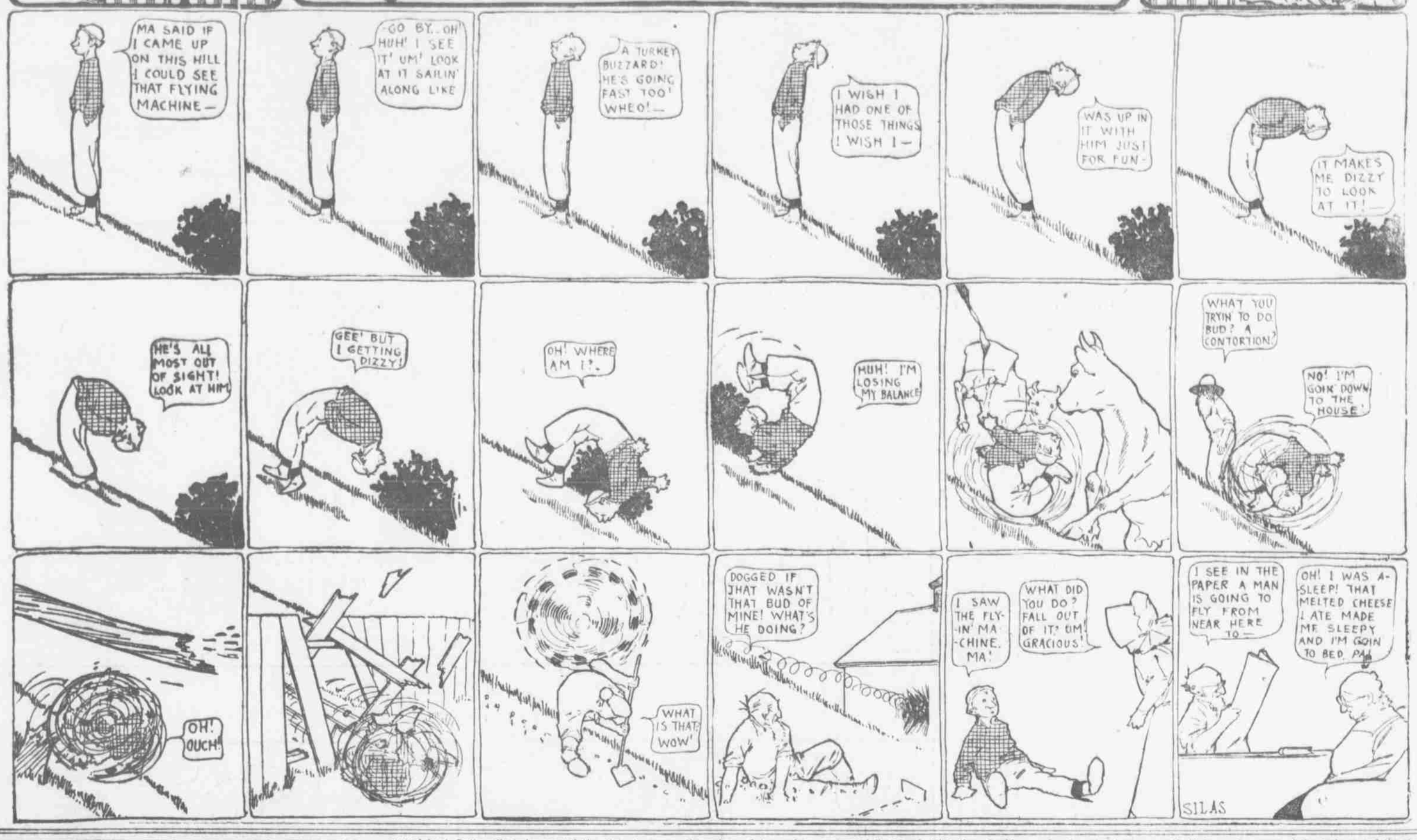
DREAM OF THE RAREBIT FIEND.



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CHAPTER XV—Continued.

"I used to think it quite a trick," said Craighead, "for the birds to find their way north in spring; but, pshaw! I can do it in the night. A continent is as simple as a quarter section. The goose isn't as much wiser than I as I always thought. If Mr. Bryant had come with us, he'd never have written 'To a Water Fowl.' There'd have been no mystery in the goose's 'certain flight' up here where he can see things."

"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 top coats. Fields of cirro-cumulus clouds five miles above the vaporous plain were duplicated on it by their own mottled shadows, like great clusters of foliage silhouetted on an illimitable ground of wool. The shadow of the Virginia ran with her across the cloud, like a black bat, haloed in the unspeakable glory of a triple rainbow which ringed the scudding shadow about in concentric circles, so bright, so refulgent 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 pledge 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. Craighead, past the first surprise of the beauty of the cloudscape, looked down at the three rainbows which trailed behind them now like rings of lambent fire, and criticised the outlook.

"This is, to coin a phrase," said he, "rotten, rotten! Where are those right angles that make up the peculiar allurement of the American landscape? Where are the straight lines that constitute real beauty? And not a patent medicine or breakfast food sign as far as we can see—rotten! When we own these lanes, we must have improvements. Instead of those disgusting rings of color, we must lay everything off in rectangular blocks, and put up signs advertising nice, airy lots—magnificent view—in Status addition to Nimbusville. We must establish the Strato-Cumulus club house at the Sign of the Hail-Fellow-Well-Met—devoted to high jinks—for the accommodation of exalted personages, including, of course, the Air-Apparent of the Raining Dynasty. We must open the Alto-Stratus opera house—there being, I believe, no Soprano clouds—and the Cumulo-Nimbus Electric Company's Thunder Plant; hey, Gin'ral?"

"I'm glad," said Carson, "to get above profits. Thank Heaven, clouds can't be commercialized."

"Can't eh?" sneered Craighead. "You have made good with this machine, I'll have to admit; but you lack financial resourcefulness. I've got to dig out the by-products of the company myself. One of them has just occurred to me. We'll lease sites for captive balloons all along our lanes of licensed air navigation, and sell the right to throw ads for Johnson's Gum Drops and Mother Hubbard's Obesity Regulator on the shining levels of the cloud floor. It can be done by a simple mechanism—if it isn't invented, I'll invent it in an odd moment. And we'll sell exclusive rights to throw colored pictures of Killarney and Senator Clark's house, and moving pictures of the great Sage Brush Hen House Robbery on the thunder clouds in alternation with praises of Peterson's Planetry Paint and Bugworth's Insecticide. Why, hang you, witless youth, let me out, while I work these things up, right now!"

"I'll go down, and show you where you'll drop," said Carson; "but I can't stop."

"Going down? Floor below?" asked Craighead. "Wherefore, O brave skipper?"

"I want to see where we are," 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 hurled her swiftly forward and toward the earth, and she plunged into the cold stream of the stratus cloud, into mist and white scarfs of lacy 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 nether air. They could feel the warmth radiated from the ground, balmy with earthy scents. The landscape was utterly changed. Far off to the west was the blue line of the highlands, its peaks lost in haze. Below were farms planted in corn and wheat and tobacco, from which came up the lowing of cattle, the crowing of cocks, and, more distinct of all, the barking of dogs. 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.

"I wonder if it's possible," said he, "that that's Richmond?"

"If so," answered Craighead, "let me adopt Mr. Greeley's war cry, 'On to Richmond!' But, to coin an expression, what's the matter with its being Philadelphia? It's so peaceful under its atmosphere of Quaker drab. But if not the City of Brotherly Graft, let's have it Richmond."

"But it must be the James," cried Carson. "Craighead, 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 they sometimes go 200 miles an hour! Why—"

"Let us exult over yon insufferable plutes," cried Craighead. "Let's fly rings around 'em! Let's sail circles around the snobs!"

Craighead, scanning the southeast with his field glasses, had discovered at a distance of six or seven miles, a huge silver aeronat steering northward and to its passengers he referred with many gestures. Carson trained his binoculars on her and grew tense as a greyhound at sight of a distant wolf. The aeronat was of the Condor type and of the largest size, with bow rudders, and along her side ran the line of a vestigial aeroplane. Still at the same unheard-of speed, Theodore threw over the tiller and made for the airship. Craighead looked at him in wonder.

"Why so obedient, O Knight of the Congealed Countenance—all so suddenly?"

"That ship looks," said Carson, advancing the spark and crowding the engines until the wind of flight swept the aeronef like a gale, "like the Roc!"

After a few minutes on a straight course to intersect that of the aeronat, Carson threw the Virginia up into the cloud. As the earth was blotted from sight he compared the direction of the aeronat with the points of the compass, making a mental calculation as to distance and the speed of the two ships, and in another moment they emerged on the shining upper levels of the cloud, which, like a shimmering screen between the Virginia and the other craft, hid their approach to each other. One below the curtain and one above it, the airship of the future and the airship of the past flew on converging courses. Carson held his watch as it ticked off the time for the five or six miles of distance, set the rudders for a downward dip, plunged through the cloud for the third time, and darted downward out of the vapor like a swift into a chimney.

They looked about—and saw nothing. The aeronat was invisible. And yet, above the purring of the machinery, came to their ears the tremor from powerful engines, the whirring of screws close at hand. Could the Condor have ascended into the cloud as they descended from it? It was possible, but the sounds were approaching, not receding; and voices now mingled with the sounds of machinery—voices coming closer and closer.

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

Just in time Carson looked. From the clear depths of air below, the great bubble of silver arose, swelling in her swift approach. A collision meant ruin for the aeronat, and probably destruction to the Virginia. The propelling blades of the aeronef would cut the envelop 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 aeronat, 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 Virginia Suares hurled to earth and crushed to formlessness below.

There had been no time to check their downward career; salvation lay solely in a swift dart to evade the rising peril. Quick as lightning Carson threw on full speed forward. The Virginia obeyed her machinery—and as she swooped to the aeronat's starboard, the latter arose 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; and as the Virginia came in sight past the immense bilge, they saw white visages turned upward to them, as might appear the doomed traveler's face when assailed by the roc of Arab fable; and as they sheered off, 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 invisible destroyer which had swept down upon them from the fleecy heights of the cloud.

The Virginia was half a mile from the airship before the crew of the latter had time to assure themselves of her safety. The great aeronat had not changed her course, but was still cracking on at the height of her speed toward Richmond—like a whale at which a swordfish had made a vicious slash and missed. The Virginia went astern as well as athwart the course of the other craft, and as she sheered to starboard, the aeronef and aeronat 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 astonishing 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 aeronat. 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 run around the big Condor as she stood on her course at full speed. As a falcon might describe circles about the head of a hawker, the Virginia went about the Condor. As she crossed the bows a cry went out from the great ship's engine room—a cry of mingled fear and astonishment—astonishment that any aerial craft dared lay herself across a speeding Condor's bows, fear of a collision, and the dread which comes to those who see themselves in the power of another. 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, what more profitable trade could open to her than the aerial hunt and spoiling of the "dirigibles," with their passenger lists of millionaires?

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 damn business!" was the reply. "You stand off or we'll shoot!"

"Shoot, if you dare!" cried Carson. "Don't you see that I can go above where you can't shoot and rip your gas-bag in perfect safety? Come now, answer my question. Why, confound it, if I wanted to do you any harm, don't you see you're in my power? Don't be silly."

Something in the boy's tone reassured the aeronat.

"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.

"You will pardon us for our abrupt descent to your level," said Craighead suavely. "Ordinarily, the Virginia prefers a higher plane. We were strictly in nubibus a moment ago, and on materializing we found ourselves descending on you like a duck on a June bug. We busted one of your suspension cords—for which we are sorry; but the gods bump into things when they come down from Olympus."

"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 to swing it, just apply to Calvin J. Fry of Spokane—if you've got clear title to the mechanism."

"Thank you," said Theodore. "I thought you might be an acquaintance. I think we'll leave you, now."

"But wait," said Mr. Fry. "Let me handle your foreign rights. I can get next. I know the Japanese foreign minister; and China's looking for something like that. Hold on—Hatton, will you let a mechanical devil's-darning-needle like that leave the Daedalus behind as if anchored? Hold on, please—"

But the Virginia, gently increasing 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 thunder cloud."

"Highly improbable, deown't ye kneow," suggested Craighead, "that they should select such a demnition insanitary place for the young person. Doubtless we'll run across 'em in New York. By the way—dinner! I have the honor to report that the ship is without grub, and is starving!"

"I shall not stop," said Theodore, "this side of New York."

"Very well, sir," said Craighead. "I still have my boot heels. Doubtless I shall do very well with them. I suppose you see that we are butting into weather, dead ahead and on both bows?"

"Certainly. It's the area of local storms."

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 aeronat 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 hurled the Virginia like a bullet. The town-studded 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. The castellated marge of the city stood, incredibly lofty, clear to the water's edge, reared so high in air as to challenge the airship itself in altitude. 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—flashed into view as long lines of arc-lights and gorgeous electric signs—a perfectly unimaginable tangle and jungle of lights of all colors; and then the soaring craft would pass on, the streets would be snuffed out by the tall buildings—the illuminated roofs and the towering cliffs of lighted windows becoming a great plain of glimmering constellations. The boy was afraid—the huge city, roaring up at them like a ravening beast struck him with terror. It was so unreal, so sinister, so like a gorgeous nightmare of feverish human achievement, that it seemed unthinkable that it could hold for him aught but danger and struggle, and, perhaps, defeat.

"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. "The ground has always seemed adequate as a way in before. Can't you follow the crowd?"

"There's not an airship to be seen," said Carson. "They've been driven in by the night and the weather. Is it safe to drop into any harbor we may happen to find?"

"What else are we to do?" cried Craighead. "It's coming on to storm; and I'm hungry; and there's the Great White Way beckoning! We must land."

"No," replied Carson, "I'm afraid. And I think it better by all means to go out to the country, and come into New York by day. And that's what I'm going to do."

It was quite dark now, save for the moon, which, nearly full, was climbing the eastern sky, still clear. The land to the south and east would escape the storm for hours. To the northwest towered the pearly clouds palpitant with lightning. Craighead, complainingly assenting to his companion's plan of retreat from Manhattan until day, expected Theodore to turn the Virginia from foul weather 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 thunder storm. Craighead seized his arm and tried to glean something of his mood from a scrutiny of his face.

"I know how impolite it is to ask about such aberrations," said he, "from experience. But may I inquire why you seem determined to enter upon an unseemly frolic with the Storm King? No, by James, you've passed the Storm King, and you've headed for the Catskills—the confoundedest place for thunder and lightning in these parts. What about you?"

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

CHAPTER XVI.

SHAYNE'S HOLD.

With a complaining, mutinous crew, and a captain sullenly silent, the Virginia fared north along the Hudson with her cargo of dreams and fears. Theodore, at the tiller, between glances at the compass and the chart, watched the silver ribbon of the river broadening into the placid lake of Tappan Zee, contracting to a thread between Peekskill and West Point, and lost altogether in a sheet of rain that roared down across Poughkeepsie.

"I never supposed," remarked Craighead, as they passed far east of West Point to escape the thunder storm, "that I'd ever be able to look so scornfully down on this cradle of our nation's heroism and flub-dub, which lost its chiefest jewel when it expelled me. Proud nest of warriors with indrawn stomachs, I scorn ye! If I knew where ye were, within a league or so, I'd shake off the dust of my feet against ye. I laugh in your upturned face—ha ha!"

Carson was still silent, as he avoided the local shower that drenched the decks of the night boats, gained its rear, crossed the Hudson in a slow drizzle at Kingston and stood northwest toward heavy dense masses of towering clouds, vivid with incessant lightning, screening the high peaks of the Catskills—and Shayne's Hold.

"I'm distinctly for this trip now!" cried Craighead. "Talk about excitement! Why, when before did man that is born of woman make a night flight into the whither, dodging thunder storms by the way? What is more elevating than to cast contempt into the teeth of the elements by dancing up into the very front of a cloud-burst, and getting away by superior foot work? The watery kingdom whose ambitious head spits in the face of Heaven—why it's modest and retiring compared with us! The armies of the tempest encamp against us, they compass us about, they vaunt their strength even as a gladiator, they speak in thunder across the leagues, saying, 'Let the left wing advance yonder, and the right wing hold the hills, while the center rushes in with the trampling charge of its wind and downpour—and we shall get these mortals, good and plenty!' And then we outflank them on the east and give them the contumelious ha-ha, and hang on their rear threatening their communications with Medicine Hat and Kamloops, by James! And if they do surround us, we'll rise into the inane—as has frequently been my habit anyhow—and we'll soar over the topmost domes of their encampment of destruction and dampness and statical electricity, and we'll drop down outside the lines—dry within and without. This is sport for a king or a hippogriff. On, on, say I, and yet again, on!"

"That's all right as pure fancy," replied Carson, "but if we ever get hemmed in among these storms, we'll not get out by going over them."

"Why not?" asked Craighead. "I'll not hear that there are limits to the achievements of this flying exclamation point, for the prospect upon which I am mentally engaged must speak of the pleasures of tornado baiting, and the following of the spoor of the typhoon and the sirocco. Why not hurdle the tempest, caitiff?"

"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. "It wouldn't hurt any more to fall that far, than from where we are. Come, better logic, sirrah!"

"The upper strata," said Carson, "are snow and ice and frost."

"Better to feel a frost," said Craighead, "than to be one, Sir Dagonet. Come, thou'rt unhorsed!"

"And the atmosphere up there," went on Carson, "is too rare for the Virginia's foothold; or for breath. Before we got above those domes, the engines would be put to it to keep her at a standstill."

"Then, sir," said Craighead, "you have enlisted the great, safe, sane and conservative Craighead in a wildcat promotion of a machine in which, in surmounting an ordinary thunder head, we shall be successively stalled, frozen to death, and suffocated! Am I right, Colonel Carson?"

Carson was questioning the altimeter statoscope as to whether or not their altitude would carry them over the peaks which must now be fast rising beneath them. Far to the north glowed the lights of some great hotel like a swarm of stationary firefliies. Beneath was darkness and mystery, though once he heard a dog's bark—the last sound lost in aerial traveling. Craighead waited as if for a reply.

"By your silence," said he, "you confess. Let me out. I am hurt to the heart. To have fooled away so much time on such a dinky thing! Let me out! I would fain walk back to Sherry's."

The simile of an advancing army quite obviously described the approaching storm. Like a vast arch the clouds marched on, covering the mountains far to right and left, the black nimbus on which they were based sweeping the earth with a trailing veil of rain. By abandoning the Catskills, the aeronef might have evaded the struggle, but her commander seemed to have no notion of retreat. Though terrified by the lights and towers and multitudinous life of New York, he drove his craft unshrinkingly into the teeth of thunder and lightning and wind and rain.

"Put on your oilskins," said he to Craighead.

"It's humiliating," said Craighead, "but I reckon I must."

"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 where Carson pointed. At that moment the whole heaven was black, save where the moon, now riding high, touched the cloud summits with silver; but in an instant a sudden discharge of looped and linked lightning lit up the whole northwest, and Craighead saw through to the rear of the rain as through a window, the base of which was the hills, its upper limit a straight horizontal line of black nimbus, its sides misty and indefinite with encroaching downpour.

"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 momently. 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. The edges of the cloud curled under, rolled by the contending currents, the lightning became almost incessant.

"Whoop!" cried Craighead. "The Virginia wins! I guess I'll stay in this deal for a while after all! Chief Hole-in-the Cloud, I renew my fealty!"

(To Be Continued.)