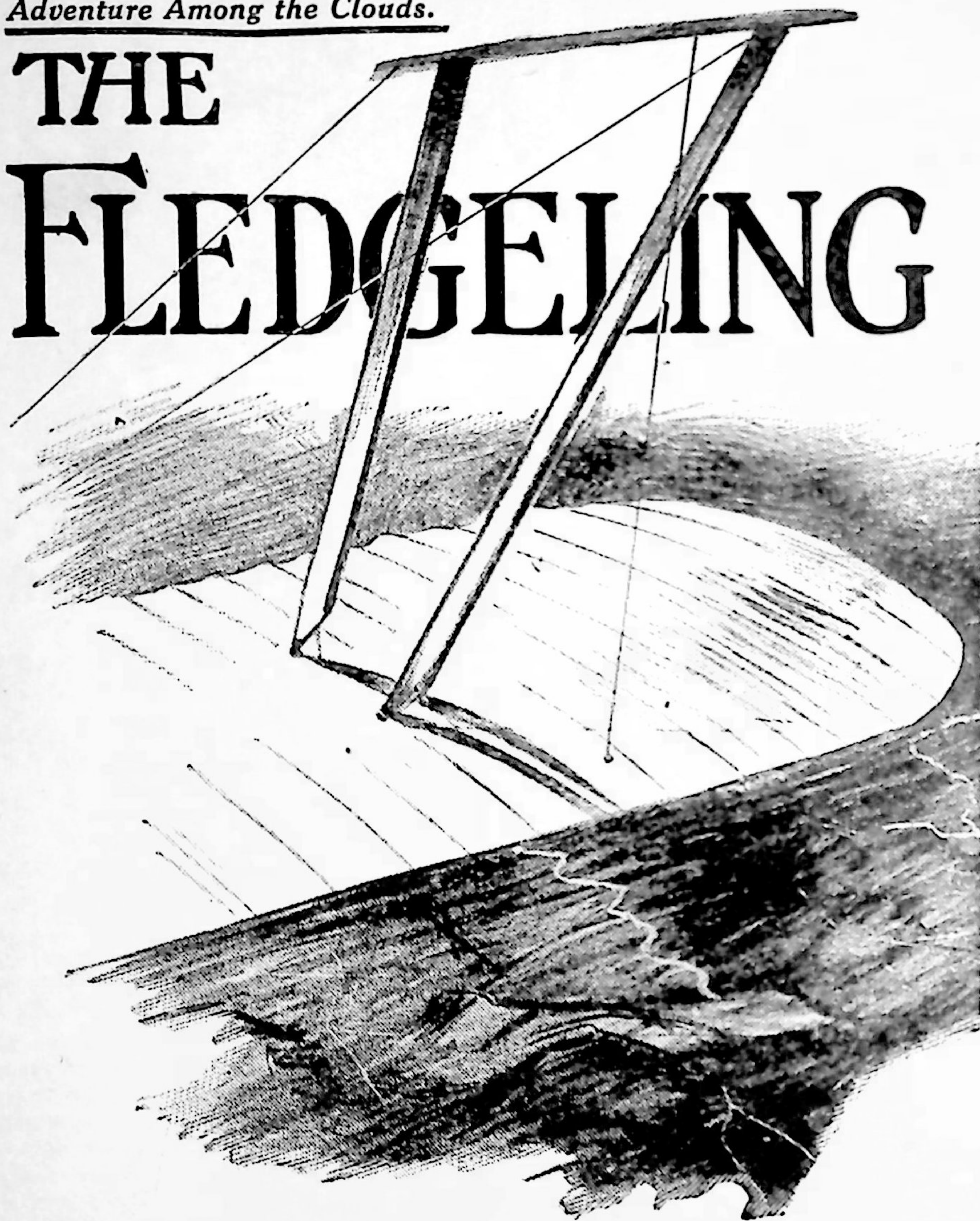


Adventure Among the Clouds.

THE FLEDGELING



A leap of three feet lies between the "Queen of the Air" and the crook plane, but there's a suicidal drop of thousands of feet to earth if the leap miscarries. But Jim Stone, the fledgeling of the MacInstone Aircraft Co., never hesitates! Here's a non-stop, quick-action yarn that will give you thrill upon thrill!



By
J. LAWN-NEWARK

**THE FIRST
CHAPTER**
Crook Cargo!

JIM STONE, the youngest pilot in the service of the MacInstone Aircraft Company, stood in the doorway of the pilots' quarters whilst he drew on his leather gauntlets. In front of him, surrounded by a crowd of scurrying mechanics, stood the giant air-liner "Queen of the Air." Its propellers were revolving slowly, while the passengers mounted the flight of steps that led into the roomy fuselage. Close behind stood a Post Office van from which officials were busily transferring the steel boxes that contained the mails into the great 'plane.

Used as he was to the scene, nevertheless, Jim watched it closely. One could never be too careful on a job such as his. One act of carelessness on someone's part might endanger the safety of human lives.

"Very nearly ready, Stone?" A voice

from behind startled him, and he turned suddenly to face the head of the company.

"Yes, sir," replied Jim. "We shall be off in a minute or two now. They are just putting in the last of the mails."

"That's right, then." Mr. MacInstone looked round him anxiously, and then lowered his voice. "I want to speak to you about these mails, Stone," he said.

Jim looked at him inquiringly.

"It's like this," began the older man. "I know you take every precaution, but I felt that——" He broke off suddenly, then went on quickly. "The fact of the matter is, the Post Office have informed me that this consignment of mails is of particular value—exceptional value, they say. They are from Hatton Garden. I thought you ought to know that their safety means a lot to the company."

"That's all right, sir. I never take an undue risk whilst in the air. If it will be any relief to you, I promise that I won't let them out of my sight until they are in the hands of the postal authorities the other end."

"I know I can trust you, Stone," said Mr. MacInstone, looking relieved. "I've given

you Tom O'Donnell as relief-pilot, and Manton as mechanic."

"That's good, sir," said Jim, for he liked both the young men the manager had mentioned. "It looks as if they're ready now, so I'll get off." Nodding his head he started to go, when his chief suddenly grasped him by the arm.

"You may think I'm a nervous fool, Stone," he said, "but I wish you'd slip this into your pocket." With that he turned on his heel and was gone.

Jim looked down at the object which the man had thrust into his hand—a small, yet businesslike-looking automatic reposed in his palm. He grinned as he slipped it into the pocket of his flying kit. By Jove, the old man had got "nerves" rather badly! He soon forgot the incident, however, as, after a quick look round, he climbed into the cockpit. Tom O'Donnell, a fair-haired young Irishman, was already there, whilst by his side was Manton, the mechanic, a young fellow whose one ambition in life was to obtain his pilot's certificate.

"Everything all right?" asked Jim as he slid into the pilot's seat, and gave the joystick a wag from side to side.

"O.K.," replied Tom.

Jim glanced through the window that looked into the passenger saloon. Everything seemed in order there. The occupants, five men and two women, were all sitting calmly reading their papers.

Opening the throttle, Jim accelerated the three powerful Rolls-Royce engines with a roar.

A wave of the hand, and the ground mechanics pulled clear the chocks from under the wheels, and the giant plane moved slowly forward. With a kick on the rudder-bar, Jim brought her round into the wind; still more throttle, and they were taxi-ing swiftly over the smooth turf, until, with a quick movement of the stick, she zoomed into the air. Their journey had begun.

There was an undeniable thrill in that first rise from the ground, and, in spite of the numberless times he had done it, Jim still felt the same exhilaration when it was achieved. Climbing higher and higher, until

the aerodrome below looked like a tiny mark on a great map, he set the course towards that glint on the horizon which was the English Channel.

For some time he was busy with the controls, whilst Tom and Manton were in communication with the now distant aerodrome through the medium of a short-wave wireless transmitter.

Suddenly Tom switched his 'phones into circuit with those which were part of Jim's flying helmet.

"The chief seemed very upset this morning, Jim," he said as he leaned back in his seat. "What was up?"

"The mails," said Jim laconically, for he knew that he could trust the young Irishman. "He says that they are a valuable consignment from Hatton Garden to Amsterdam. Stones, you know."

"Phew!" Tom pursed his lips. "That's it, is it? I wondered what it was. He came round to me before we started, and though he was obviously nervy, he didn't say anything about the stones. Just said how important our job was, and so on. As if we didn't know that already."

Jim glanced at the instruments before him, then he replied:

"I think this trip means a lot to him," he said, "because if we get this lot over safely, then they will probably send all their valuable stuff via the firm. You see, it's like this——" He broke off as he saw that Manton wished to speak to Tom.

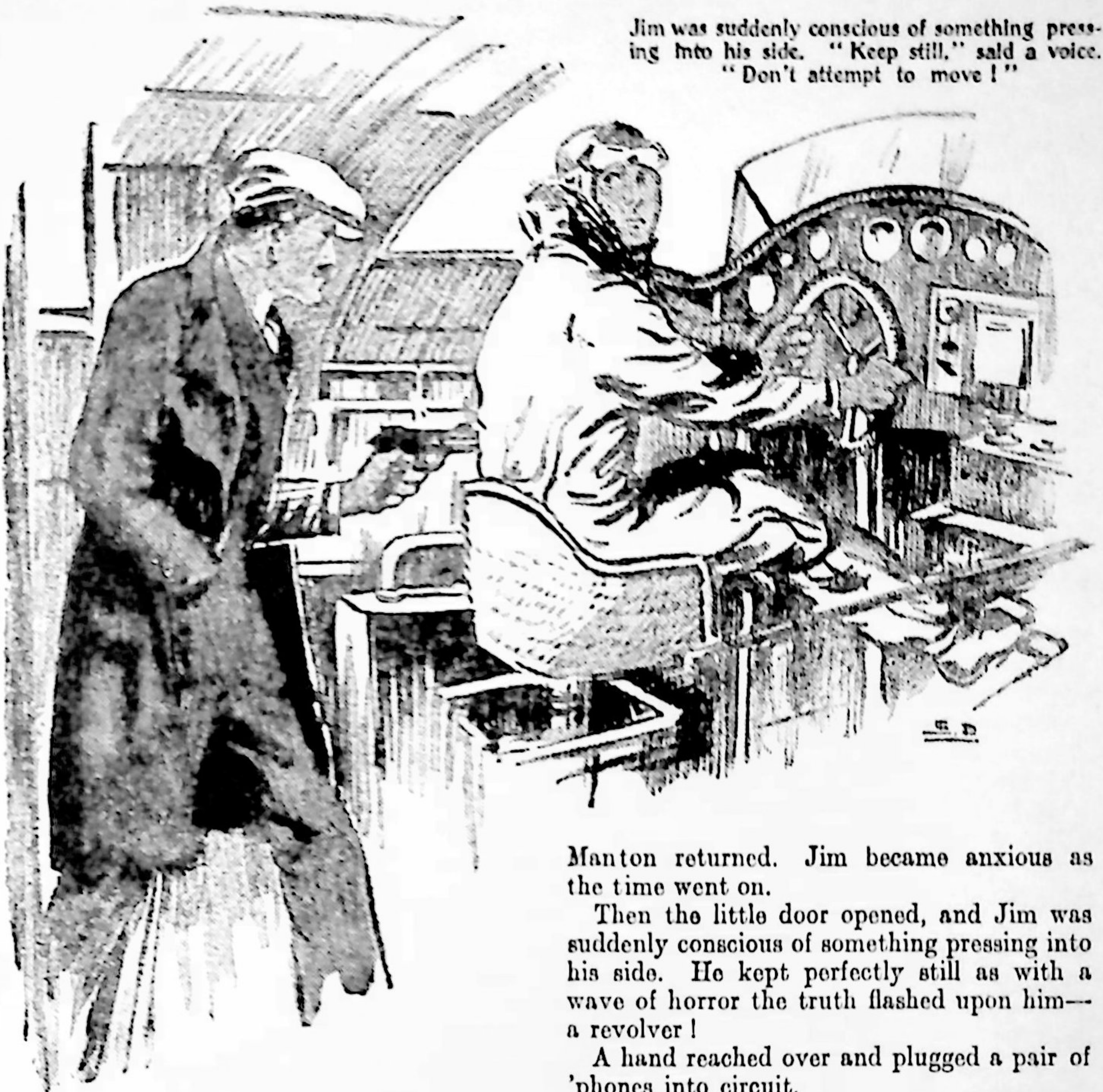
Nodding, the young relief-pilot switched his 'phones through to those of the mechanic, and for a moment or two they spoke. Then Tom turned and peered through the small window into the passenger saloon.

What was up? Jim never took his eyes off his instruments, for whatever it was, the controls were more important.

Tom, switching through, spoke quickly:

"There's someone ill in the saloon," he said anxiously, nodding over his shoulder. "One of the women. It looks as if she is in some sort of a fit, and the fellows are having a bit of a job with her. Will you be all right if Manton and I go through to see what can be done?"

Jim was suddenly conscious of something pressing into his side. "Keep still," said a voice. "Don't attempt to move!"



"Yes, go on. Everything's O.K. here."

"Right-ho. I shan't be a moment."

He and Manton unlocked the communicating door and squeezed through, shutting it behind them.

Jim glanced at the map. Whatever the trouble, there was no question of turning back, for they had gone too far for that. Already below them were the tumbling waters of the Channel, whilst ahead of them a haze showed where the French coast lay. No, it would be quicker to go on.

The minutes passed, and neither Tom nor

Manton returned. Jim became anxious as the time went on.

Then the little door opened, and Jim was suddenly conscious of something pressing into his side. He kept perfectly still as with a wave of horror the truth flashed upon him—a revolver!

A hand reached over and plugged a pair of 'phones into circuit.

"Keep still," said a voice. "Don't attempt to move until I tell you."

THE SECOND CHAPTER

The Malls!

JIM made no reply. His brain was working quickly. What could he do? To leave the controls meant death for them all, besides the loss of the plane and the mails. No, there was nothing for it but to obey. Obviously the whole thing was a put-up job, and Tom and Manton were already out of it altogether.

Suddenly the door opened again to admit another man. Then the holder of the revolver spoke :

"Now rise slowly and change places with this pilot."

As he obeyed, Jim could see out of the corner of his eyes that the man who took his place was dressed in flying kit.

Hardly had he released the controls than there was a sharp click, and he felt the cold steel of a pair of handcuffs on his wrists.

Now the firm pressure of the revolver in his ribs guided him towards the door. He squeezed through, followed by his guide. In the saloon a heavy-featured man of foreign appearance came towards him. As the man with the revolver turned to close the door behind him, Jim took his opportunity. Swinging his manacled hands together, he hit the approaching foreigner a blow on the jaw that sent him crashing to the cabin floor. In a flash he had his back to the wall, fighting the rest of the gang, except the women, who cowed back out of harm's way.

But the odds were too many for him, and with a crashing blow from the butt of a revolver one of his assailants sent him in a heap to the floor. For a while everything went black, and Jim was conscious of nothing except a confused sound of conversation, and that of someone tying his legs together.

Though it seemed hours it must really have been only a few minutes before consciousness again returned to him. His head throbbed painfully, but he realised that, but for the fact that he was wearing a thick leather helmet, the blow would probably have laid him up for many weeks. As his brain gradually cleared, he was able to understand what was being said.

At the present moment the crooks were gazing anxiously out of the windows that ran along the sides of the saloon.

"I hope Hugo won't lose his way." It was one of the women who spoke, and her voice sounded alarmed.

"Don't you bother about that!" Jim recognised the speaker as the man who had first entered the pilot's cockpit. "Hugo knows this part of France like the palm of his hand. He won't make any mistake!"

"We ought to be nearly there by now, though, Stein," hazarded one of the other men.

"I tell you it's all right!" rapped out Stein, who was obviously the leader. "If everything goes as well as it's gone so far we shall be in Venice before to-morrow morning. They won't find a trace of us!"

"What are you going to do with this plane?"

"Leave her at the aerodrome, with these poor fools in her. The police won't find them for hours, and by that time we shall be clear."

"They may not get you in your plane," remarked the man who had spoken before, "but what about us?"

There was a murmur of assent from his companions. Stein turned on them angrily.

"What else do you think we can do, then? If you're so frightened of your feeble skins, now that the time has come, I suppose you want to back out of our plans."

"Why don't we get rid of these three men and then fly straight to Venice in this plane? Why change?"

Stein laughed jeeringly.

"You're a brainy lot. What a mess you would be in if you hadn't a leader with a little sense!" He swung round and faced them all angrily. "What do you think the Italian police would have to say when we cheerfully land there in a stolen air liner? I suppose you think they'll give us a civic welcome?" He laughed. "They'll give us that all right, but it will be in prison—"

He broke off suddenly and peered from the window.

"Hallo, we're coming down!"

"Yes," one of the women spoke excitedly. "There's the farm. Hugo has got us there all right."

Jim, lying bound on the floor, closed his eyes. He didn't want them to know that he had regained consciousness and heard all their conversation. Listening carefully, he heard the pilot cut out the engines, and then felt a slight bump as the landing-wheels touched the ground—a splendid landing. Whoever the crook was piloting the machine, there was no doubt about the fact that he knew his job. In a few moments the bumping stopped, and

the plane came to a standstill. Opening the door, Stein stepped out, followed by his confederates. Jim endeavoured to slip his hands from the gripping pressure of the handcuffs, but without result.

"Are you all right, Jim?" The sound of Tom's whispered voice startled the young airman.

"Quite, thanks," he replied. "If only I could get these confounded handcuffs off I'd make these blighters look up!"

"I can't move mine." Tom sounded annoyed and angry. "I'm sorry we walked into that trap so easily, old man. It was my fault for not being ready for them. You see," he went on, "the moment Manton and I stepped through the saloon door we received a knock on the head that laid us out at once. Poor old Manton is still unconscious."

"Do you think he's badly hurt?" asked Jim anxiously.

"No, I don't think so—only stunned."

"Well, we've got to get out of this somehow." Jim rolled over and faced his companion. "If I edge closer, do you think you could get my feet undone? If the chance comes and we both have our feet free we can make a bolt for it."

"Right, we'll try!"

Jim was edging closer when a warning hiss from his chum stopped him. A shadow darkened the door, and in walked Stein and two companions. Jim again feigned unconsciousness.

"Pick 'em up!" ordered Stein.

The two men obeyed. One by one the three young airmen were carried from the plane, across the grass and into a shed. When they had thrown Manton—who was the last—upon the floor, Stein motioned the two men to precede him from the room. He closed the door carefully behind him, and Jim, as he lay there on the floor, clearly heard the sound of a bolt being shot home, and the noise of footsteps retreating into the distance.

"Well, that's that!" he remarked when all was quiet. "Now, let's see what we can do about getting free."

With an effort he managed to get into a sitting position, Tom following his example; and for the first time the two airmen were able

to take stock of their surroundings. The shed had obviously been used for some time as a storehouse for lumber. The light from one small window enabled them to see a pile of empty petrol tins, whilst in one corner a broken table surmounted a pile of miscellaneous oddments. Cobwebs hung in festoons everywhere, whilst the stone floor was covered thickly with dust.

"A cheerful-looking spot," remarked Tom, glancing round him.

"Cheerful people, our hosts," grinned Jim, wriggling his way nearer to his friend. "We had better see if we can do anything with these ropes."

Then for a few minutes they worked upon each other's bonds in silence.

"I think Manton is coming round," said Tom suddenly.

A faint groan from the mechanic proved that what he had said was true. At that moment the rope binding Jim's legs parted, so that he was able to get upon his knees, which was a better position in which to deal with those which still bound Tom. However, these, too, soon gave way, and in a very short time the young men were able to walk across the room and peer out through the small window.

"By Jove!" remarked Tom. "It's an aerodrome. Look at those hangars over there!"

Jim nodded.

"Yes, I guessed something of the sort. What they have done is to turn a small farm into a private aerodrome. A jolly useful sort of place for them. You see, they could land here in an aeroplane without any questions being asked. By the way, I can't see anything of our 'bus, can you?"

Tom, who had been craning his neck so that he might be able to see to the limit which the window would allow, replied eagerly:

"Yes, I can just see the nose. She seems to have been pulled up somewhere at the side of this shed."

"I'm going to see what I can do for Manton," returned Jim.

Crossing the room and kneeling beside the mechanic, he set to work unfastening the bonds that tied his legs. The task was a

difficult one, for the handcuffs which were on Jim's wrists made it hard to move his hands. However, the job was soon done, and as he unfastened the last knot, the mechanic opened his eyes.

"Feeling better now?" asked the young pilot.

"Yes, thanks—I——" A puzzled frown came over the man's face. "Where are we?"

Jim hastened to explain their position to the slowly recovering mechanic.

"The trouble is," he concluded, "to get out of this place. Otherwise we shall be left here, and the mails will have gone. Hang it!" He rose angrily to his feet. "If only we could get these confounded handcuffs undone we should be better able to get out."

Manton stood up with an effort. His legs were still very shaky, but the effects of the cruel blow were swiftly passing away.

"That's easily done," he said.

Jim looked at him in surprise.

"How?" he asked.

Without replying Manton felt in the pocket of his overalls and produced a strong file. The young pilot grasped it eagerly.

"Splendid! The very thing! Now we shall be able——"

"Come and look here!" Tom's excited voice broke in suddenly. "They're shifting the mails."

In a flash Jim was at the window, whilst the mechanic followed more slowly. Together they peered out of the window. It was fast growing dark, but through the gloom they could see that out of one of the hangars several men were wheeling a smart little two-seater biplane. Once in the open, the propeller was set revolving.

"What's the game?" asked Jim.

"Wait a moment," replied Tom. "There's a fellow just gone towards the 'Queen' with a small truck. I have a suspicion that he's going to——"

At that moment the man returned to view pulling a rubber-tyred truck behind him. Upon it were a number of large tin boxes.

"The mails!" cried Tom.

THE THIRD CHAPTER

Neck or Nothing!

SILENTLY the three watchers saw the men start to transfer them into the back seat of the waiting aeroplane.

"There's not a second to lose." Jim turned to his fellow-pilot. "You first, Tom," he said. "We'll have these handcuffs off in no time."

Feverishly he worked upon the chain that held the two cuffs together. There was no time to get them off at the wrists. If they could move their hands about freely the fact that each wore metal bracelets was of no importance. After frenzied working, for Jim had to hold the file in both hands because of his own manacles, there was a sharp snap and Tom was free.

"Now give it to me," said the young Irishman, "and whilst I do the same for you, Jim, perhaps Manton will have a squint out of the window to tell us what is happening."

Manton took up his post and peered out into the darkness.

"They're putting the last in now," he said anxiously, "and a big fellow is putting on a flying helmet."

"That's Stein," remarked Jim; and as he spoke, the link in his handcuffs gave with a crack.

"I'll see what I can do with this door," he snapped. "You get to work on Manton."

A quick glance out of the window gave Jim an even greater urge for speed. Stein was climbing into the cockpit of the machine. Turning his attention to the door, he saw that it was no use trying to open it without something to use as a battering-ram. It was bolted firmly from outside. A swift glance among the pile of litter, and his attention was attracted by the broken-down table. It had been scrapped owing to the loss of a limb, and to Jim it was only a moment's work to deprive it of yet another. Armed with this, he set to work. Blow after blow fell crashing upon the panels. Real need lent strength, whilst, luckily, the noise of the accelerating aeroplane engine drowned the thunder of the blows. One after the other they fell until the panel cracked. Then yet



Swinging his manacled hands together, Jim hit the foreigner a blow on the jaw that sent him crashing to the floor.

another blow, and it was in fragments. Slipping his arm through the broken woodwork, Jim reached the bolt and shot it back. He turned to his companions, as Manton's hands came free.

"Now," he said, "follow me like the dickens!" Flinging open the door, the three airmen rushed out into the open. There a

disappointing sight met their eyes. The biplane, its engine roaring, was taxi-ing across the grass, and even as they watched, the wheels lifted and it was in the air.

Tom and the mechanic came to a standstill in despair, but Jim, who had been doing some fast thinking, urged them on.

"To the air liner!" he shouted. "It's our only chance!"

Hard at his heels they realised at once what he meant. Before them stood the abandoned machine. The only members of the gang to be seen were standing in a little group watching their fast disappearing leader. If the airmen could only get there in time—

Running all out, Tom kept his eye on the figures in the distance. Every yard they covered before discovery added to their chances.

It was not until they were within a few yards of the plane that one of the gang, suddenly catching sight of the three runners, shouted a warning to his companions. Immediately they started in an endeavour to frustrate the escaping trio.

Jim clambered up into the cockpit as the other two sprang towards the props. Now it was a matter of seconds. With a roar the huge Rolls-Royce engines started revolving. Manton was in, and Tom was close behind him when the first of the gang reached the plane.

Turning round by the open door of the fuselage, Tom faced the crook. The plane began to move slowly. Their chance hung for a moment in the balance, and Tom, realising this, took a risk. With a swift, hard blow from the shoulder, he sent the crook spinning to the ground. Then, running beside the moving plane, he clambered aboard, aided by Manton's eager hands. The moment he was safe Manton raised his hand to show Jim that everything was O.K., and a few seconds later the huge machine once again took the air.

From the cockpit the three men peered into the darkness ahead. Would they be able to pick up any sign of their quarry? What but a short time ago had only been semi-darkness was now pitch black, and they could not see very far in front of them.

Following the direction in which Stein's plane had disappeared, Jim crammed on all speed.

"I can't see anything of him," said Tom. They had all coupled their 'phones up so that they could speak with ease.

"No!" Jim's attention was fixed upon the quivering instruments before him. "It's as black as ink!"

"It won't be like that long," volunteered the mechanic; "the moon will rise soon."

"If something doesn't happen," said Jim, "we're done. We can't keep flying on through the darkness like this. The chances are that he has changed his course."

"It's all right!" Tom pointed ahead excitedly. "I can see the glow of his engine exhaust."

As they watched ahead of them, the flame of the burning exhaust gases could faintly be seen.

A puzzled frown appeared upon Tom's face.

"What's the next move?" he asked.

"Keep him in view until the moon rises, and then——" Jim broke off and hesitated. "Well, I think I have a plan which will settle him."

"What's that?" asked Tom curiously.

With a faint smile, the young airman replied:

"The moon hasn't risen yet," he said.

Time passed and still they soared on through the darkness, following that illusive glimmer that shone out every now and then.

If Stein out there, crouched down over his controls, knew of those on his track, he gave no sign, for he kept on his course in an undeviating line. None of the three pursuers spoke again until over the horizon the bright rim of the moon showed, throwing a cold silver light over the sky. Now they were able to see ahead of them the dark wings and fuselage of the biplane. Jim looked at his companions inquiringly.

"At last," he said, "we can get to work. Change places with me, Tom, will you?"

"But I say! What's the idea?" Tom hesitated, but Jim turned to him quickly.

"Come on," he said. "We haven't a moment to lose. It's the only thing we can do to stop the chap escaping, and I'm going to do it."

Tom could see that Jim was quite determined, so he did as he was asked without another word. When he was relieved the young pilot beckoned to Manton, and disappeared into the saloon. A minute or two passed. Tom still kept the same distance behind the crook's plane. Then a noise in his rear informed him that once again the

young pilot was beside him. Glancing round he was shocked, for he realised in a flash what was the plan Jim had in mind, for upon his back there was strapped—a parachute!

Seeing his look of consternation, Jim grinned.

"It's all right, Tom," he said. "Don't get the wind up. It's the only way we can get Stein—and I'm going to get him."

"But you can't!"

"Oh, yes, I can! I'm going to climb out on your wing, and when

we draw level I'm going over on to his, and then"—he produced the automatic which the manager had given him—

"and then we'll see what Stein has to say."

Jim leaped from the side of the machine as it dived to destruction, and then the parachute unwrapped from his shoulders.

"You can't. It's too risky!"

"Nonsense, Tom. You know there's no other way to stop him escaping with the mails. For one thing we haven't enough gas to follow him to his destination."

Tom glanced quickly at one of the illumined dials.

"Phew!" he whistled, and his face went white. "You're right, we can't last with that amount for another hour."

"No, I didn't think you'd realised that," said Jim. "Now the great thing is that you have got to bring the 'Queen' up as close as ever you dare without actually touching, for that would mean probably death to us all."

Setting his teeth grimly, Tom nodded.

"Right," he said. "I'll do my best."

Jim gripped his shoulder with his hand.

"Thanks, old man; I know you will. You're the only fellow I'd trust for the job!"

Then feeling that he was becoming too serious, he laughed.

"Come on, speed up; the sooner we get Stein now the better."

With that Jim left the young pilot and climbed over the side of the fuselage on to the lower wing.

Manton stood beside Tom.

"I'll watch," he said, "and tell you when you're level."

THE FOURTH CHAPTER

The Crash !

INCH by inch, foot by foot, Jim wormed his way along the plane. The force of the wind was terrific, but he managed to keep his feet by clinging to the struts. Past the engine, with its roaring blades, and now out on to the last stretch that led to the wing-tip. In the meantime Tom was accelerating the engine, and gradually they were creeping up behind the fugitive. Every minute he was finding it more difficult to control the air-liner, for the weight of his friend was causing it to trend towards a side-slip. This inclination he had to keep correcting by the use of the control column.

Out on the wing-tip, Jim, clinging for dear life, raised his arm. Now he was ready. All that remained was to come alongside. The tail of Stein's machine came level.

"A little more," said Manton quietly. His face was set and drawn with nervous excitement. "Another ten feet."

At that moment, whether it was that Stein realised their intention for the first time, or whether he had purposely kept a little speed back in reserve, he accelerated, and his plane forged ahead. Again the air-liner was only level with his rudder. Veering slightly he endeavoured to put them off their course.

But Tom was ready for him. "Ten feet," said Manton again. Then: "Six !"

Jim had risen from his crouching position, and was holding with one hand, ready to grip the other's plane in a second.

"Two feet." They were level! But Stein's under plane was slightly lower than that of the "Queen." Taking the opportunity he tried to turn side-

ways, but in doing so his wing rose, and for a fraction of a second the planes of the two machines were level.

With a quick movement that was hardly perceptible to the watchers, Jim was across. He had spanned three feet of space which was thousands of feet deep.

"Right!" Manton's voice was harsh. With a movement of the rudder and stick Tom sent the plane sideways and upwards, and Jim, out there in the darkness, saw the shape of the air-liner gradually move away.

Crawling slowly, he started towards the fuselage and that dim dark shape which was the figure of Stein. As it was a single-propeller machine there were no engines on the wings, and he was able to make quicker progress, until he was half-way to the fuselage. Then Stein endeavoured to combat him. Taking his life in his hands—for with Jim on his wing the machine was unstable—he started stunting. He tried everything he dared to send the young airman hurtling to his death. Up and up he went, then swooped down at a terrific speed. Checking this he zoomed upwards again, the stay wires shrieking their protest. One minute the wings would be right down at an angle, then they would be tilted upwards to the sky, but still Jim clung on regardless, at the same time taking every opportunity to creep nearer to the cockpit.

Six feet from his quarry he released one hand and drew his revolver. Things were coming to a climax, and Stein knew it, as he peered through his misted goggles at the set face of the young airman.

Now it was a battle of wits.

If Jim fired at that point-blank range he would kill Stein without a doubt, but——. It was upon that "but" that the crook gambled—and lost!

Releasing the joy-stick with one hand, he felt in the locker at his side. Now with a gun in his possession it was a duel in the air, and Stein, familiar with revolvers, had the advantage.

Crack! His gun shot flame before Jim even realised that his enemy was armed. It would have spelt death for him but for the hand of Fate. At that moment the machine



S. DRIGIN

hit an air-pocket—the dread of all pilots. Whistling, the bullet sped past his head and buried itself into a strut.

Back in the air-liner Manton let out a gasp.

"He's in a spin!"

Stein, controlling with one hand, had not been quick enough to steady the machine. Down she roared in a spin of death!

"He's lost control!" Tom and the mechanic peered helplessly into the darkness. The machine was turning and twisting as Stein endeavoured to regain control. But all in vain.

"Where's Jim?" The question came in an agonised whisper from Manton. "Why doesn't he jump?"

Seconds passed which seemed hours. Then Tom spoke:

"He must be trapped amongst the wires. If he doesn't get out in a minute it will be too late——"

"Look!" Manton let out a yell as he pointed eagerly downwards. From the side of the machine hurtling to destruction a human figure had leaped, and as they watched, a parachute unwrapped from its shoulders.

"Phew!" Tom wiped his perspiring brow. "That was a near thing!"

How near a thing it had been was obvious in another few seconds. The nose-diving machine, rushing through the air at a terrific speed, was suddenly brought to a dead stop by the earth.

There was a thud, which was so loud that even the two airmen in the machine above heard it through the noise of their engine. Then there rose a lurid flame from the debris which lit up the sky with gradually increasing brightness. Silhouetted like a dark shadow against the glow could be seen the shape of the descending airman trailing below the dark form of the parachute.

Tom O'Donnell lay back in the long grass and revelled in the sunshine. After the hectic excitement of the night the peaceful country-

side was very restful. Some distance away a little group of peasants, standing around a blackened pile of wreckage, marked the spot where all that remained of Stein's machine lay. It was lucky for the pilot that the "Queen" had landed in time to extricate both he and the mails from that blazing mass, before any great damage had been done to either. Stein himself now lay in a hospital not many miles distant, whilst the mails were once again in the roomy fuselage of the air-liner.

Tom roused himself, and gazed towards the field where the plane stood. Those men were a long time filling her up with petrol, despite the fact that Jim was supervising their efforts. A short time passed, then his chum was beside him.

"Come on, Tom, that's all right!"

They strode gaily towards the "Queen."

"We've filled her up, and now we're ready to start again," he continued. "When I was on the 'phone to the chief this morning he told us to get to Paris as soon as we could. He didn't expect we should be ready quite so soon, so this will be another surprise for him."

"I expect he was excited," hazarded Tom, with a grin.

"Excited wasn't the word for it. He was speechless."

The two young men were now close to the fuselage of the aeroplane. Manton appeared at the door.

"Everything all right?" asked Jim as he climbed into the cockpit, followed by Tom.

"O.K.," replied Manton.

The motors accelerated, and the plane moved forward. Running lightly over the turf it lifted gracefully into the air. Once again the "Queen of the Air" rode triumphant, with young Jim, the fledgeling, at the controls!

Later, when Stein came out of hospital, he went to prison for a spell, and on information he gave the rest of the gang was finally apprehended and sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment.

THE END

BUNTER the SKATER!

by DICK PENFOLD.



AT Greyfriars, when the fields were white,
Ice-skating gave us keen delight ;
And weird and wondrous was the sight
Of Bunter, rolling rapidly.

His " borrowed " pair of skates were odd.
Belonging each to Bull and Todd,
Who, rushing breathless through the quad,
Were bawling " BUNTER ! " rabidly.

But Bunter, as he sped along,
With all the merry Greyfriars throng,
Burst into loud and tuneless song,
His fat face beaming happily !

" The champion skater I shall prove,
The shining star of the Remove.
You clumsy asses must improve ! "
Said Billy Bunter snappily.

With breathless snort and gasping wheeze,
His muffler streaming in the breeze ;
Like a stout ship in heavy seas
Went Bunter, rolling rapidly.

But thin ice can't accommodate
A human bulk of Bunter's weight ;
And so, beneath each borrowed skate,
The ice was cracking rapidly !

Then Bunter's gladness turned to gloom,
The ice rent like the crack of doom,
Exposing a wide, watery tomb
Where Bunter sank unhappily !

" Help ! Save me ! " came the bubbling
cry.
" I dud—dud—don't yet want to die !
I've not begun to live, that's why ! "
Gasped Bunter, sinking rapidly.

We laid a ladder on the ice,
And saved the porpoise in a trice ;
And now, in blankets warm and nice,
We're rolling Bunter rapidly !