



*Pete seized his fellow convict and ran for the car*

## Flying Racketeers

*When airman Pete Hargrave saw a chance to strike back at the crooks who had grounded and disgraced him, he did not stop to count the risks*

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*Novelette—Complete*

### CHAPTER I.

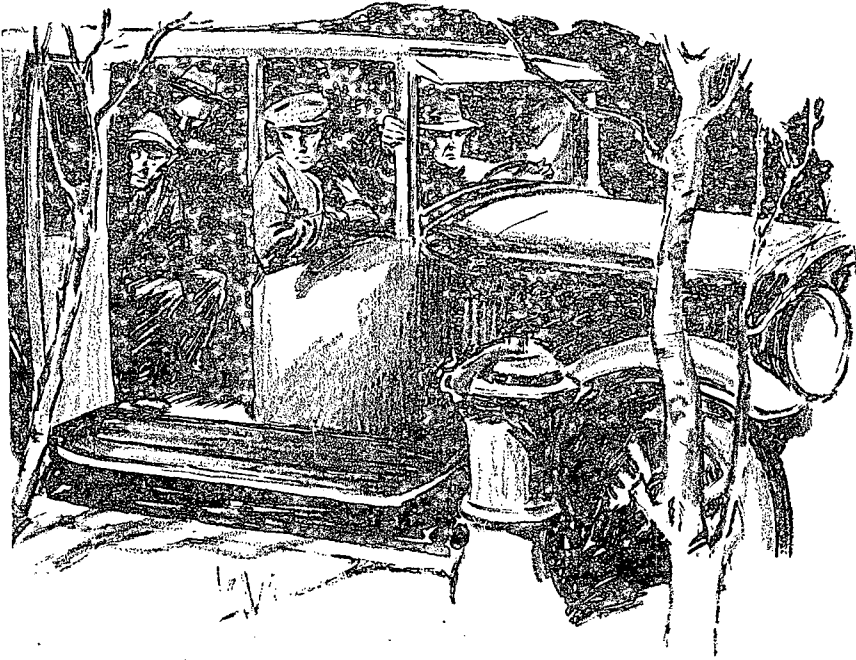
"WANTED—DANGER!"

**P**ETE HARGRAVE sat in Bryant Park until eleven o'clock, curiously watching the occupants of the other green benches. In his more prosperous days he had seen this shabby, hopeless gathering of down-and-outers, little dreaming that he might one day sit among them.

And now he was one of them, different only from the rest in that his vivid blue eyes were not dim and bloodshot from liquor or sickness or starvation

and his blue serge suit was still well brushed and creased. His sun-bronzed face was thinner than usual; so was his long, rangy body. But that was because he hadn't eaten much for three or four days.

For the dozenth time he glanced automatically at a street clock. Queer, how those hands could drag around the dial. He had set eleven o'clock as the earliest possible moment to walk across Forty-Second Street to the *Times* office. Once again he pulled a crumpled copy of the morning paper out of his pocket and glanced at the advertise-



ment he had paid for with all but a few coins of his entire fortune.

It was a good ad, he told himself, well worth the money it had cost. It was among the "personals," rather than among the "positions wanted." More likely to attract attention, he had decided.

Flyer wants tough job right now. War pilot, husky, 4,000 hours in air. Transport license. Can fly anything. Ready to go anywhere in world and to undertake any mission in air or on ground, no matter how distant or dangerous. Salary—whatever job is worth. Box 847, N. Y. Times.

"Nice, modest, little violet, I am," he muttered. A rueful smile illuminated the pinched, but good-humored features, accentuating the wide, generous mouth which contrasted oddly with the prominent, but somewhat combative chin below. He unfolded his well-knit body and rose. "And now," he murmured, as he turned westward through

the winding paths, "we'll see what Lady Luck has to say to a bird who could eat a brace of hard-boiled cats."

He hesitated for an instant at the entrance to the *Times* Building as if not quite daring to march straight in and test his luck. Then, squaring his shoulders with a sudden, decisive shrug, he pushed through the revolving door, strode across to the counter and asked if there was any mail for Box 847. His blue eyes lighted in anticipation as the clerk flipped four envelopes toward him. Only a few hours since the paper had been issued, but four answers already! Perhaps he wasn't such a bad ad-writer after all. He picked up the envelopes with eager fingers and carried them to a quiet corner.

The first answer was from an employment agency, offering, for a fee, to put him on their list of applicants for positions. He crumpled it and threw it at the wastebasket. The sec-

and was from an aviation enthusiast who would accompany him across the Atlantic, provided Pete would furnish both the money and the plane. The third offered him a position selling get-rich-quick stocks on commission. But the fourth, and last, brought a quick gleam of hope into Hargrave's eyes.

The neatly printed letterhead bore the dignified imprint of the Apex Insurance Company, 17 Nassau Street. He read the letter eagerly.

DEAR SIR:

We are contemplating engaging some one with aviation experience to enter upon an undertaking in which there is a considerable degree of risk. If you are interested, kindly call at your earliest convenience at this office and ask for the undersigned.

J. B. STURDY, Vice President.

Hargrave reached into his trousers pocket and withdrew a handful of small coins. He inspected them carefully. There was a total of fifty-two cents.

"Might as well be broke as the way I am," he decided. "A nickel for subway fare. Fifteen cents for cigarettes. That leaves thirty-two cents for a meal. I'll ride my hunch and shoot the works."

**F**ORTY minutes later, fortified by a thirty-cent breakfast and two cigarettes—the first since the day before—he entered the reception office of the Apex Insurance Company and asked the information clerk for Mr. Sturdy.

"Who's calling, please?" she asked, surveying his bronzed, smiling face.

"Tell him it's in regard to the advertisement in this morning's *Times*," he told her.

She whispered into the phone, then nodded.

"Mr. Sturdy says to go right in. Third door to the left."

Hargrave found a door marked "Mr. Sturdy. Private," and entered. He found himself in a large, silent office, thickly carpeted and panelled in dull walnut. At the other end of the room was a flat-topped desk, behind which sat a white-haired man whose jet-black eyes stared steadily at the flyer as he advanced across the carpet. Mr. Sturdy, without speaking or taking his bright eyes from Hargrave's face, jerked his head toward a chair beside the desk. His level gaze encompassed his visitor's sun-bleached hair, strong, straight nose and white, even teeth. He missed no details of Pete's wide shoulders, tapering like a well-trained boxer's, nor of the waist which, at this moment, was even slimmer than usual. Even Pete's old suit, carefully brushed and pressed, passed under Mr. Sturdy's minute inspection.

"Name, please?" snapped the executive.

"Peter Hargrave." Watching closely, he thought the other's eyes flickered in surprise. But Mr. Sturdy's face was impassive.

"Out of a job?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Pete drew a deep breath. Of course he knew this question was likely to come, but he had hoped against hope. There was no sense in lying about it. He had given his right name—the bird would discover sooner or later.

"I lost a transport plane with three passengers," he said evenly, looking his inquisitor straight in the eyes.

"And you are living?" queried the other. "Did you drop out in a parachute?"

"I did not," said Pete, whitening a bit beneath the tan. "When the three

engines all stopped at the same instant, I stuck with the ship until we hit the forest. We were over the Adirondacks, you see, and there wasn't a landing place in sight. We hit and I was thrown through the glass somehow. I woke up in a hospital."

"That was the Hudson Air Lines, Ltd., wasn't it?"

So the man had recognized that name? Pete was glad he had not attempted to dodge the issue.

"It was," he said laconically.

"And you were fired because you were drunk?" persisted the other, judicially.

"That's a damn lie!" snapped Pete, gripping the arms of his chair until his knuckles whitened.

"SEEMS to me," went on the executive, "I read in the papers something about you losing your head at the coroner's investigation and slugging a man named Hamilton, the operations manager."

"I'll say I did!" Pete burst out, his voice vibrating with rage. "And I'd have killed him, too, if they hadn't pulled me off. Red Hamilton was a liar, and he knew it. Wasn't it bad enough to have to remember killing three passengers—one of them a baby—without having Red Hamilton say it was caused by my being drunk? It was just an alibi for a rotten inspection system."

"When I signed out on that ship it had been okehed by the mechanical chief and by Red Hamilton himself. And at the trial they couldn't find the inspection chart! The ship was supposed to be in perfect condition. Three hours later the engines all conked at the same time. But you notice that the Department of Commerce inspectors didn't take my license away, and those birds

have hearts that pump ice water. That shows you they didn't believe I was drunk, in spite of the fact Red Hamilton swore I was!"

He drew a deep breath and pulled himself together. Then, remembering, he stared at the other in astonishment. "But how do you happen to know so much about those things?" he demanded. "You're in the insurance business."

"I'll explain later," the other replied. "Were you an ace in the war?"

"No. I got two Jerries. It took five to be an ace. Nowadays any one who's ever soloed calls himself an ace. It's all the bunk."

"You got two Germans, eh? I suppose," Mr. Sturdy added carelessly, "you got others that were not confirmed?"

"No. I only got two and they were both confirmed."

"Why haven't you tried to get another job?"

"I'm blacklisted by all the big transport operators. They aren't hiring pilots who lose big ships—and passengers. I've been to the small, independent fields, but the flying business is pretty thin just now. I've even tried to get a job as a mechanic, but there are five men on the waiting lists for every job. And so far I haven't been coward enough to change my name. Maybe I'll come to it, some day, but not until I've tried every other kind of a job in the world and am starving. And even before that, there's the Foreign Legion."

"Are you in earnest about being willing to undertake a really dangerous mission?"

"Yes—provided it isn't anything like bootlegging, smuggling, or the like."

Mr. Sturdy tilted back in his swivel

chair and looked thoughtfully into a far corner of the room. He tapped a pencil against the edge of his polished walnut desk. Then, suddenly, he reached for his telephone, which was equipped with an odd box-like arrangement over the transmitter mouthpiece. He pressed his mouth close to it and talked. Pete could not even hear the murmur of his voice.

The executive hung up and once again went into a thoughtful silence. Three or four soundless minutes dragged by. An office boy entered and placed a file folder in front of him. He opened it, studied a sheaf of papers and then turned decisively toward the waiting flyer.

"Did you ever hear of racket insurance?" he asked abruptly.

"No."

"You know what rackets are?"

"Are you talking about the way the gangsters hold up businesses for 'protection' money?"

"Yes. They go to one industry after another, demanding so much a week or a month for so-called protection and if they aren't paid, they slug and burn and even kill. For years they have been milking Chicago to the tune of millions of dollars. Now they're in New York."

"Among the other forms of coverage we offer our clients," he continued, observing Pete sharply, "is a brand-new form of policy, which, for lack of a better name, we call 'racket insurance.' For a certain premium we insure business against the necessity of paying protection money to racketeers. It is not yet profitable this branch of our business, but due to the warfare we are waging on the tribute-levying gangsters, we have been able to cut our losses on other policies, such as liability, fire, accident, plate-glass, theft, etc.

"Before we became interested in racketeers and their ways, our losses on these other coverages were mounting in leaps and bounds. They are still mounting, by the way, but at a slower rate. There are about a dozen prominent racketeers serving time now, due to our efforts. We work with the police, with the Federal officers and, in addition, we have our own private force of detectives."

HE glanced down at the sheaf of papers before him. Pete watched him attentively, wondering what all this meant to him, a flyer out of a job.

"If you hadn't told me all about your unfortunate crash," Mr. Sturdy proceeded, "I should not have told you this. But we have information on all the big transport companies, since we cover many of them on liability and not a few on racket insurance. Did you ever hear that the Hudson Air Lines were paying tribute to racketeers?"

"No."

"We have heard that they were doing so. Therefore we were interested in your crash. It occurred to us at first that the stoppage of your engines was due to tampering, but—"

He paused as a sudden gleam came into Pete's eyes.

"—but we were able to find no such evidence, nor was the Department of Commerce. Not having insured the Hudson people, of course, we were not as free to investigate as we would have been had we covered them."

"If I thought," Pete burst out, hotly, "that any one had deliberately caused me to crash, I'd—"

"Please!" interrupted Mr. Sturdy, holding up his hand. "Hear me through, please. We'll get down to

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brass tacks. Within the past month the racketeers have been offering protection to the air line operators. Some of them have paid it. Hudson Air Lines have been paying it, according to our information. Others have not paid it because we are covering them on racket-insurance. But our clients have had, between them, four forced landings in the past five days. Fortunately, none of them have ended fatally.

"We have caused one of the leading graft solicitors to be arrested. He is in jail now. But he isn't a big-timer and we haven't been able to sweat out of him who he is working for. We're still trying to find the leader in his enterprise."

"Do you mean to tell me," demanded Pete, "that the racketeers have threatened to crash big transports unless the operators pay them graft?"

"Yes. They have not only threatened to do so, but they've actually tried. And unless we succeed in putting a stop to it, unless we're able to break up these gangs, there'll be a crash that will be even more horrible than yours. The police and the Federal men are working on it right now. So are our own private detectives. But it may be necessary to fight fire with fire—gun with gun—and that's why I'm talking to you.

"You are known to be out of a job. It is possible that you may be sore at the Hudson people for putting the blame on you. That's an ideal combination. It's possible that you can do more for us than any of our regular people. Do you want to try?"

"You mean I'm to try to break up that racket that's being worked on the transport operators?"

"Exactly. But it will be dangerous business. We won't be able to give you

much personal protection. But we'll steer you on the right track to begin with. After that you'll have to use your own ingenuity. If you get yourself into trouble, or into danger, we probably won't be able to help you very much. But the job's worth one hundred dollars a week and expenses and there will be a bonus of five thousand dollars if you find the way to stop this particular racket. How about it?"

"You're on," snapped Pete, briefly. "While you were talking, I got a sudden hunch about my own crash. I'd work for the price of three meals and a place to sleep."

"It won't be necessary. Now pay attention and I'll tell you how you're to start."

And the two went into a huddle that lasted until long after lunch time.

## CHAPTER II.

### A PLOT IS HATCHED.

THE cell door closed with a clang. Pete Hargrave turned on his heel, stared after the departing turnkey and shouted curses at the back of the heedless man.

"Ah, pipe down, punk!" snarled a voice from the rear of the cell.

Pete spun around and glared into the dimness of the cubicle. There, seated on one of the twin bunks, was a man whose figure was silhouetted blackly against the opposite wall.

"Who's going to make me pipe down?" Pete demanded grimly. "Unless you're a lot bigger than I think you are, I'm going to slug you on the nose."

"Ah, what 'll it get you?" retorted the other, carelessly. "Got a draft in your attic, sounding off like that? Sit down and let your head get well."

Muttering angrily beneath his

breath, Pete stumbled to the other cot and threw himself on it at full length. For some moments his cell mate watched him in silence. Finally:

"What you in for, punk?"

"Carrying concealed weapons. Sullivan Law," snapped Pete.

"How long'd they give you?"

"One year."

"Jeez, they soaked you, didn't they?"

"Some one double-crossed me," grated Pete. "And when I find out who did it, I'll bump him if it's the last thing I do."

"Well, you got plenty of time to think about it, buddy," the other consoled him. "What's your moniker?"

"Pete Hargrave."

"Seems like I heard that name somewheres," said the other, reflectively. "What's your racket?"

"I used to be a flyer," replied Pete. "Now I—well, never mind. My racket is my own business."

"A flyer—Pete Hargrave—" Pete could hear the other m u m b l i n g thoughtfully. It was clear that the combination meant something to his cell mate. At last, from the other, "My name's Slick Rosen. Ever hear it?"

"No," snapped Pete, and let it go at that. He closed his eyes and pretended to sleep, but lay there listening to the prison sounds that buzzed through the great stone building. The air was fetid, his cot hard. The four walls of his cell seemed to press in on him as if they were about to snap together like the sides of a trap. To a man whose eyes were focused to look at far horizons, the very closeness of those walls was a horror.

He heard Slick Rosen stirring about, but he paid no attention. Slick Rosen, the man who had collected "protec-

tion" money from one air line after another, threatening to cause crashes if the money was not paid regularly. Well, here he was, within a dozen feet of Pete's clenched hands. Pete wondered if he could stand it; whether, before many hours or days had passed, he wouldn't run amuck and clasp his two hands around Slick's neck and squeeze the truth out of him.

PETE opened his eyes and stared grimly up at the ceiling. Once again a vision had come to him of that soft-looking carpet of green forests and undulating hills. No landing place in sight. Just behind the partition were three passengers, a man, a woman and a baby. He could still hear the awful silence of his slow glide toward those tree-tops. Not a sound in the whole world except the whispering of the wind through wires and struts. He knew, again, the cold hand of fear clutching at his heart; fear for his passengers, not for himself. How carefully he had levelled out just over those tree-tops, trying to kill the forward speed of his big bus!

He had had one wild moment of hope. Perhaps the trees had cushioned the blow. And then the big ship had slewed a r o u n d, toppling trees like matchsticks. A huge tree trunk had leaped straight at him. And that was all. At the hospital they had told him he, alone, was alive. He didn't know he groaned, but he heard Slick Rosen's voice, sneering, insolent.

"Ah, pipe down, punk! If you want to play cry-baby, put on the muffler, will you?"

For an instant, Pete's nerves and muscles jerked with desire to throttle the man who would not hesitate to send other ships, other passengers, crashing down to earth. But he forced himself

to remain where he was. Killing this one rat wouldn't end the racket he represented. He was merely one cog in the wheel. It was the wheel itself that must be smashed. A single cog could be replaced—it had probably been replaced already. If he, Pete, were to lose control of himself now it would ruin everything, completely spoiling the plans that had been so carefully laid and, so far, so perfectly executed.

He wondered how many men in this grim gray building were in on his secret. The warden, certainly. He hoped there were no others. His commitment papers were in order; Mr. Sturdy had seen to that. He had arrived with a dozen other prisoners and had submitted with them to all the formalities of entering. But it had been the warden who had somehow seen to it that he had been placed in the same cell with Slick Rosen.

Now it was up to Pete. Cautiously he lifted his left foot as if to scratch his ankle. Yes, there in the heel was a loose plug. The warden had arranged that, too. Pete dared not remove the plug, dark as the cell seemed now. Slick Rosen's eyes would be accustomed to the dimness. And at any moment the night lights would be turned on. Pete rolled over on his face, composed himself and presently went to sleep.

THE longest week that Pete had ever known had finally dragged to a close. Now, sitting on the edge of his cot and looking across at Slick Rosen, Pete was conscious that his pulses were hammering with excitement. Within the next half hour he would know whether or not he had been a convincing prisoner, whether or not this horrible week had been wasted.

Slick Rosen, under-sized, under-

nourished rat from the sewers of Delancey Street, was sitting opposite him, so close that their knees nearly touched. The man's furtive little brown eyes could never remain still. They flicked across at Pete's lean-chiselled face, then fluttered away uneasily. His lips, full and rounded like those of his Hebrew forbears, were loose and flaccid, but oddly twisted into a perpetual sneer, as if Slick looked upon the world and found it full of suckers waiting to be fleeced. His greasy black hair was wet and carefully plastered back. Pete wondered whether it was because of his hair or his character that he had acquired the nickname "Slick."

"What is it you was going to tell me after supper, punk?" whispered Slick, with a furtive glance at the steel mesh screen in the panel of the cell door.

"I'm going to crush out," replied Pete, stealthily.

"How?" demanded Slick, with a wise sneer. "Going to start a riot? Them things never get you anywheres. Just get a lot of guys killed and bread and water for a month."

"Nix," said Pete. He reached over, pulled the loose plug from the heel of his shoe and withdrew a coiled saw blade of spring steel, which he cautiously showed the other. "With the way this bites, I can saw my way out of that window in three nights. There's a clear drop to the street below the window. I'll make it, easy. I had to show you because you're in this coop with me. You can join me or not, just as you please."

"And how you going to lam away after you crush out?" demanded Slick. "You can't get more'n to the next corner with that suit of grays on."

"I don't care," said Pete, earnestly.



"I can't stand it here and I'm going to beat it if they fill me full of slugs the minute my feet hit the street! Want to come along?"

"Wait a minute," snapped Slick. "Let me think."

He was silent for several long minutes. Then he looked up brightly at Pete.

"Maybe I can get word to the mob outside," he whispered. "They could have a car out there waiting for us and a change of clothes, too. Listen, buddy, to-morrow's visitors day." Pete knew that. It was why his announcement had been made at this crucial moment. Slick went on, eagerly: "You sure your saw will cut those bars in three nights?"

"In two, if we took shifts working," Pete assured him.

"Make it three. I'll have a car outside this window at, say, two in the morning, on the third night from now. And we'll work like the devil from now till then. We'll start at 'lights out' and one of us watch for the guards while the other works, hey?"

Pete nodded, trying to keep the eagerness out of his eyes.

"Got any money?" he asked.

Slick's eyes became masked.

"Not a thin dime," he replied.

"Have you?"

"No, but I'll have some an hour after I'm out of here."

"How'll you get it?" challenged Slick.

"I'll grab some bird by the neck and take it away from him," replied Pete, grimly.

"Listen, guy," said Slick, huskily. "If you get us both out of here, maybe I can put you in line for some easy dough."

"How?"

"You were a flyer, hey?" Pete

nodded. "Well, I know a big shot who is interested in this flying racket. Maybe he could use a guy like you."

PETE forced his voice to seem indifferent. "I don't know whether I'm going to want a regular job or not," he said.

"This ain't punching a time clock, kid," Slick assured him. "This Big Shot I mean lays heavy jack right on the line, see, and you work a little and then you got plenty of time and money to play with. You let me talk to him if we crush out. Maybe I can get you a house and lot on Easy Money Street. Can you handle a Tommy gun?"

"Never tried," said Pete. "But with a Lewis gun I can shoot the eye out of a mosquito at a thousand yards."

"Jeez, it was a lucky break we were both tossed in the same can," Slick affirmed. "You got just what the Big Shot needs. He could stand in the middle of Times Square and throw a cobblestone and it would hit a muscle man or a torpedo or a pay-off man who'd give his right eye to hook up with the Big Feller. But what you got he can use, see; I know it."

"Well, he's got to have plenty of what I need, too," retorted Pete, "because there's too much jack in solo work these days to throw in with a mob if you aren't sure there's more money in it. What's the name of this Big Shot of yours? Do I know him?"

"If you know anything about mobs, you know it," said Slick significantly. "But I ain't spreading any names on the blotter. That's why I've lived this long and made the jack I have."

"He might be Pussyfoot Johnson himself for all I care," yawned Pete, "but I'm not much excited. If he was as hot as you say, you wouldn't be sitting here in the cooler."

"Listen, guy," said Slick earnestly, "the Big Feller gives me a yard a week while I'm here. Yes, sir, one hundred big, heavy, iron men. And in a little while, when people have forgotten what I'm juggled for, he drops an even five grand in the right place and I'm out, see? Never mind how, but I'm out. If you and me crushes together, I save him five gees; and he's happy, see?"

"How'll you get word to him to have the car out there?"

"A guy comes here every visiting day to see if I need anything. That's all there is to it. I need a car, see, and it 'll be there."

"Why didn't he slip you a saw?"

"Can't get close enough together. And the guards are watching. Nothing doing. You're a pretty wise punk to bring one in. And now, in a minute, lights will be out. Let's hop to it."

They moved Slick's cot beneath the window. While his cellmate stood at the door watching the corridor for an approaching guard, Pete greased his hacksaw with a bit of soap, climbed upon the cot and began to work on the steel bars.

The whole thing was running like clockwork, yet Pete was conscious of no sense of elation. Mr. Sturdy had thought it entirely possible that, once Pete had secured the confidence of his fellow prisoner, Slick would tell him everything he knew. Then, at one swoop, the entire conspiracy against the air line operators might be broken up. Perhaps the entire system of racketeering might receive a death blow as a result of a few incautious sentences. The warden, however, had been right. He had prophesied that Slick would not dare to talk. It would be necessary, the warden reluctantly suggested, to stage an actual escape in order

to penetrate into the secrets of the mob that was levying upon business. And in the meantime, precious time had slipped past. To be sure, no more outrages had occurred to air transports, but at any time—to-night, even—one of the big ships might crash to her doom.

At the end of an hour Pete lowered his aching arm.

"Come on, Slick," he said, forcing a note of friendliness into his voice, "we've got a lot of steel to cut. It's your turn."

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### CHAPTER III.

#### A PRISON BREAK.

THREE nights later. Through the steel mesh of the cell door came the sound of men snoring, of men mumbling and groaning in their sleep, of men turning restlessly on their hard cots. It was as near as that titanic beehive of human misery ever came to complete silence.

Pete, swiftly knotting the ends of the blankets into one long rope, was conscious that his nerves and muscles were quivering like those of a race horse before the barrier. Slick, now stripping his cot of its blanket, had accomplished his part in the conspiracy perfectly. He had succeeded in getting out word to his friends; he had worked like a fiend on the sawing of those steel bars in the window. Pete hoped that he himself had done as well.

The previous afternoon, just after lunch, he had feigned sudden illness. The prison surgeon had not been impressed, but, when the routine sick report had reached the warden's office, the latter official had instantly recognized that Pete wished to see him. Twenty minutes later Pete had stood

before the warden and had whispered his plans for the get-away.

"You'll have to watch yourself," the warden had warned him. "I simply can't take all the guards on the wall into my confidence. It would get back into the prison as sure as the sun rises and sets. Within twenty-four hours the grapevine would carry it outside, and you'd be put on the spot. But I had you put in the only cell block in the place where it might be possible for you to make a break.

"It is the oldest one here, and, as you know, backs right onto the street, forming part of the wall itself. There will be no other wall for you to climb.

"When you drop out of the window you'll be on the sidewalk. It has always been a weak point, that wall, and I'm mighty careful what prisoners I put in that building. As soon as we get the appropriation we're going to tear it down and build another inside the enclosure."

He had lighted a cigarette and stared thoughtfully at the grim young man in the prison uniform.

"Tell you what I can do, Hargrave," he had said at last. "There are two guards who would be able to shoot you as you drop into the street. One is in the watch tower at the easterly end of the wall, the other at the westerly end. I can trust the man on the east tower. I'll have to tell him what is planned. He'll have to shoot at you, but he won't hit you. I'm not sure enough of the other man, and I hardly dare transfer him just for that one night. It would be too raw. But I can telephone him from my office at the moment your car is timed to arrive. I can hold him in conversation for a minute or two. But it's a chance. You are good and likely to get a slug

through you. Are you willing to take the chance?"

"Listen, warden," Pete had said grimly. "If I knew I had one chance out of ten, I'd take it. Do you realize I might be able to discover who it was made me crash and kill those three passengers? The very possibility of that would make me try to scale any wall you've got in broad daylight! You don't know what it is, warden, not to be able to sleep, thinking of those passengers, especially the baby. He was the cutest little feller—and he laughed at me when I winked back at him from the cockpit! Twenty minutes later he was dead—and I'm going to find out who caused it. I did everything I could, but—"

His voice had trailed off miserably. He had unclenched his hands with an effort of will.

"I know," nodded the warden kindly. "It's only to avoid such things that I've consented to this escape. And I'll confess to you that I don't like it, even now. But orders came to me straight from Albany, and I don't suppose I could have bucked it if I had tried. But it's your hide you're risking. I'm warning you and I've warned Albany. All the same, son, I wish you luck and I hope you find out who caused you to crash. Now go back to your cell and tell Rosen that I bawled you out for complaining about a mere belly-ache."

NOW it was two minutes before two. Five minutes ago a car had purred past the prison wall and had twice honked its horn as it had turned the corner below the east watch tower.

That was the signal. Slick's friends were ready. The bars had been cut in three nights of the hardest kind of

labor. Everything was ready for the effort which might lead to—where?

Working feverishly, Pete tied the blanket-rope to the frame of the cot and jerked at the severed bars.

"Come on, Slick, make it snappy," he whispered. "Help me bend these bars so we can get through. There. Want to go first?"

"What time is it?" Slick's voice was shaking with excitement.

"One minute of two."

"You—you go first," begged Slick.

"And see if it's safe, eh?" snapped Pete, disgustedly. "All right, let's go."

As he wriggled out through the V-shaped space between the twisted bars he heard the muffled exhaust of a high-powered car in the street below. With a convulsive motion of his rangy body he eased himself over the jagged ends of the bars and began to lower himself down the rope of knotted blankets.

There would be a bad fall at the bottom. The window was on the third floor. The rope extended less than halfway to the brick sidewalk below. But it was good to be out in the cool, clean air of the outer world.

Down, one hand after another. The sound of the purring car grew louder. Now Pete could see it, moving slowly along the street outside the wall, apparently gauging its speed to arrive at the appointed spot upon the exact instant of two o'clock.

Now the blanket-rope was jerking. Slick's feet and legs appeared out of the window above. Pete had reached the end of the last blanket. A twenty-foot drop yawned beneath his feet. The black car was stopping at the curb.

A bright stream of crimson licked out from the watch tower at the easterly end of the wall. The quiet night was ripped apart by the sound of ma-

chine gun fire, echoing and reëchoing from wall to wall.

"Easy, boy, easy!" Petè muttered to himself, staring down to measure the length of his fall. "That's from the east tower. He's not aiming at us."

He let go. The brick pavement leaped up at him. But his muscles were young and springy. He rolled over and over; leaped to his feet and ran, crouching, toward the car. A black tube was projecting from the rear curtains, slanting upward toward the east watch tower. It spat out a blue-tipped tongue of flame. Out of the corner of his eye Pete saw that a blinking spear-point of crimson was darting from the westerly watch-tower, too.

Something snapped past his head. He had heard that sound before, in those red days of war when men lived from minute to minute. For an instant it all came back to him, that feeling that he would live until he stopped a bullet marked with his name. It seemed as if an ox-driver were cracking a whip about his head; he was running, but wasn't getting anywhere.

The rear door of the black touring car swung open. A hand reached out and jerked Pete inside.

He was on his hands and knees, crawling over somebody's legs to reach the seat. There were two men in the tonneau, two more in the front seat. The world was reverberating to the staccato hammering of machine guns.

"Jeez, Slick's down!" croaked one of the men within that black tent of top and curtains.

PETE didn't know that he had turned, but he found himself back on the sidewalk, racing across the dozen steps which separated Slick's limp figure from the idling car. He

hadn't stopped to consider; Slick wasn't a gangster; he was a soldier lying out in the vomiting inferno of Norman's Land. Those were Jerry bullets ripping through the darkness.

Once, before being ordered to flying school at Avord, Pete had lain helpless in the wire; he had never forgotten the blinding pain, the killing hopelessness. Before he had remembered that Slick was a dirty rat from the sewers of the underworld he had picked the man up and was shambling across the sidewalk and plunging into the patch of blackness that marked the rear tonneau.

The car lurched ahead with a screaming of rubber against concrete. The tattoo of machine gun fire was blotted out in the unleashed roar of the wide-open engine. The four men huddled in the rear were tossed into a heap as the car ricocheted around a corner. Then, like dice in a box, they were thrown into the opposite corner. There was the thunder of the engine, the murmur of men swearing under their breaths and the weak, painful hic-coughing of Slick, who presently became very still.

The car had settled down to a steady pace, her engine humming smoothly. Over the motionless heads of the two gunmen in the front seat Pete could see an endless ribbon of white concrete swiftly unrolling under the incandescent blaze of the twin searchlights.

Slick, as limp as a bundle of old rags, had slipped from the seat and now lay sprawled in the black pool of the floor. Pete had tried to hold him upright, but the man on the other side had given him no assistance. Now, as the car cut a slice of white light through the darkness of open country, the man on Pete's left snapped a curt word of command to the driver. The car coasted to a stop beside the road.

"This Slick, here," growled the man. "He's dead as a mackerel. Can't go back to town with him in here."

He clicked the door handle and clambered out of the car. Then, with no more compunction than if he were removing a sack of concrete, he reached into the car, seized Slick's legs and dragged him out. That was all. He reentered the tonneau, sat down and wiped his hands with a handkerchief. The car swam ahead and resumed its swift, steady run through the night.

Pete's hands twitched in the darkness, twitched with an eagerness to grab one of those snub-nosed machine guns and turn it loose on the four gunmen there in the car.

HE gritted his teeth and forced himself to remain calm, immobile, in the dark box of a tonneau. These men, he guessed shrewdly, were like Slick. They weren't the principals; they were just tools. And it was the principals that Pete was after. The little fellows could come later.

"What's your moniker?" snapped the man who had dragged Slick out of the car.

"Pete Hargrave," replied the flyer, briefly.

"What's your racket?"

"Are you the Big Shot?" demanded Pete, insolently. "I'm telling my business to him."

"Oh yeah?" snarled the other. "Gimme any your lip and I'll smoke you off, see?"

"Is that what the Big Shot told you to do?" Pete gritted out. "Because if it is, you can stop the car. Give me a gun and five seconds. Then I'll shoot it out with the lot of you."



There was an instant of startled silence. Pete, every nerve and muscle taut for instant action, held his breath. He saw the dim gray oval of a man's face turned toward him from the front seat.

"Aw, shut up, Lefty!" cracked the man in the front seat. "Give the guy his clothes and mutton your yap."

One of the men in the rear unwrapped a large paper bundle which Pete had seen on the floor. He tossed a shirt, collar, necktie and a suit of clothes into the flyer's lap.

"Peel off your uniform," he ordered. "Get into these clothes."

Just as the car rolled into the northerly outskirts of the Bronx, Pete completed his dressing. His suit of dark blue serge was tight across the back and shoulders, short at wrists and ankles, but it would do.

He sat back in silence, staring moodily ahead through that segment of windshield which was visible between the heads and shoulders of the two men in the front seat. The driver turned south after crossing the Harlem River. The upper reaches of Seventh Avenue were almost deserted except for little clumps of men and women standing about the entrances of uptown night clubs. Fifth Avenue, a mirror-like tape of freshly-washed asphalt, slipped under the humming wheels of the black car.

Pete marked familiar buildings and when the driver swung into a side street, he knew that they were in the upper Forties. Almost to Broadway they sped, then came to a lurching stop in front of a smallish hotel, one of the scores which line the streets immediately adjacent to the theatrical district.

"C'mon," said the spokesman—he who had dumped Slick's body into the ditch. "Don't talk; just follow me."

Without looking back he marched into the lobby. Instinctively Pete's eyes ranged the front of the building. No fire-escape broke the windowed expanse of the narrow eight-story structure. Tall business buildings towered over the hotel to right and to left. In an emergency, Pete decided, he'd have to bolt to the rear. That was where the fire-escape would be.

Without a sound of gears the car slid away with its three silent men. Pete walked after his guide. A sleepy desk clerk glanced incuriously after him as he and the man called Lefty strode through the deserted lobby.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### COMMANDED TO MURDER.

NOW, under the pinkish light from the overhead dome, Pete had his first opportunity to look at his companion. Lefty was undersized, almost boyish-looking in his pin-checked, too cleverly cut suit of Oxford gray. His eyes, beneath heavy, drooping lids, were nearly colorless, yet when his glance met Pete's, the flyer was startled at the cold, merciless impact of those pale green eyes. Lefty's lips were thin, almost bloodless. They jerked just a little at the left corner.

With something of an effort Pete wrenched his glance away from those whose pale gaze was probing through and through him. Here, he told himself, was a man who could delight in the act of murder as another might enjoy a game of golf or a stunt hop in a fast plane. If he and Lefty should ever tangle, Pete decided, there would be no Marquis of Queensbury rules. His scalp tingled as the conviction suddenly swept over him that some day

he would clash with this killer. In some curious way it seemed inevitable.

The elevator came to a stop at the eighth floor. Lefty stepped out and marched down a carpeted hallway. He knocked a strange, uneven tattoo on a door, then, after an instant's pause, turned the handle. Pete followed him into the room and found himself in a typical hotel "sitting room," furnished with conventional hotel furniture.

Four hard-faced young men had been playing penny ante at the center table, but now the cards were motionless in their hands. A curious air of rigid expectancy was in their faces as the two men entered. Their eyes were focused on Pete.

"Boss in?" asked Lefty.

The tense watchfulness vanished from the faces of the card players. Their eyes drifted back to their cards.

"Uh-huh," some one grunted.

A card slapped against the table.

Lefty led the way to a door on the opposite side, knocked and entered. This was another "sitting room," an exact duplicate of the first, even to the furniture. Two suites had apparently been thrown together to make a single large apartment.

Through a half-opened door on the other side of the center table Pete could see a corner of a bedroom. A short, paunchy man, clad in pyjamas and a lounging robe of flowered blue silk, strolled into the room.

"Lo, Lefty," he said.

But his eyes, deep-set and of a blue-gray that was like chilled steel, were examining Pete. They seemed to be weighing, measuring and classifying the flyer, making their appraisals instantly and telegraphing their findings to a brain that was even colder than the chilled-steel eyes.

There was something of power, of ruthlessness, of cold calculation in the man's face that was even more disturbing than the expression of his underling, Lefty, who was merely a killer.

This Big Shot, Pete guessed, did not cause murder for fun, as Lefty might. To the leader, murder was an incident, a convenience, something to be neither feared nor enjoyed.

Yet he was a bit of a dandy, this Big Shot. Even now, at nearly four in the morning, he looked as if he had just left the barber's chair. His pink face was thrice-shaven, the gloss of his smooth face dulled by a barely perceptible trace of powder. His sparse brown hair was well pomaded and carefully brushed back over a bald spot on his crown. His pudgy fingers were manicured. He smelled faintly of *lilac vegetal*.

"Slick," announced Lefty, "got a stomachful of slugs from the machine guns on the wall. We had to dump him in a ditch just north of Mount Vernon."

THE gray-blue eyes swiveled away from Pete, but if the Big Shot was regretful at the sudden demise of one of his lieutenants, he made no sign. He screwed a cigarette into a long blue holder and produced a bright flame from a patent lighter. He inhaled deeply, squinting at Pete through the drifting smoke.

"You're Peter Hargrave?" he demanded abruptly.

"Yes."

"I know about you. You got a rotten deal out of the Hudson Air Lines, didn't you?"

"I'll say I did!" replied Pete, his eyes flaming hot.

"Broke?"

"Flat."

"Want to work for me?" asked the Big Shot.

"Doing what?"

"Obeying orders," snapped the other abruptly. "Flying, mostly."

"I'll fly for you," retorted Pete calmly, "but it depends on what your orders are whether I'll obey them or not."

"So?" murmured the Big Shot carelessly. He polished the glittering finger nails of one hand against the palm of the other and made no effort to suppress a yawn. Then, very softly:

"Listen, punk, you may be too dumb to know it, but you're on a hot spot right now. Every bull in the city will be itching to put the finger on you. All we got to do is to boot you out into the street and you got as much chance to do a fade-out as an elephant has of disappearing on Broadway. We—"

The telephone on his desk buzzed. The Big Shot broke off, picked up the transmitter and listened.

"Yeah," the other two heard him say. "All right, Mose . . . Larry won't lay the dough on the line, hey? . . . Yeah . . . All right, stop his milk trucks on the Hackensack meadows. Pour a little kerosene into every milk can . . . Yeah . . . Muscle the drivers, but not too much this time . . . Yeah, then come back to town . . . I got a job for you with the window washers. Pick up a few bricks out there in the country and bring 'em in . . . Yeah . . . 'By."

He dropped the receiver on the hook, then turned back to Pete.

"Listen, punk," he said. "When anybody owes us something, we collect, see? We picked you up outside the can and took you away on the lam and—"

"Fair enough," interrupted Pete, amiably, "but don't forget I helped

Slick to crush out; you didn't. The fact that he was killed wasn't my fault. An even break; I got him out, you took us away."

"Ah the devil!" growled the man Lefty. "Boss, this guy is fresh. You ain't going to be able to handle him. Give him the air."

The Big Shot screwed another cigarette into his holder and lighted it with thoughtful deliberation. Pete's eyes shifted from his face to the scowling Lefty, waiting tensely for something to happen. Had he overplayed his hand? Well, if anything started he'd have one chance in a hundred. But it was worth the chance.

Somehow he must make an impression on this Big Shot; he must get to the bottom of this racketeering business, and quickly, before any more transports were forced down. And he couldn't do that, he had decided, unless the Big Shot took a real interest in him. It wouldn't do at all just to be "one of the mob."

"Yeah," said the Big Shot, evenly, looking down at the smoking tip of his cigarette. "He is fresh, Lefty, but he's got nerve, too, and nerve is what we need in this racket. And now, kid," he said, suddenly turning his chilled steel eyes directly at Pete, "you got to make a choice. Work for me and there's three yards, three hundred bucks, a week in it for you and we keep you out of the bulls' hands."

"Turn me down and what are you? You're a bum who can't fly for anybody because you get drunk on the job; you're a con who crushed out of the pen; and what's more," his face suddenly became a mask of malevolence, hard, implacable, infinitely cunning, "you're a murderer. You killed your own buddy, Slick, and I'll send a dozen witnesses to the prosecuting attorney

to swear they saw you turn your heat on him. They'll be good witnesses, too, who never been picked up for anything at all."

PETE'S fingers itched to clasp themselves around that pinkly-shaven throat, but he held his peace. This was what he wanted. They'd double-cross him, would they? Deliberately he assumed an expression of anxiety.

"It looks as if you had me," he said. "Now what do you want me to do?"

He glanced up in time to see a triumphant look pass from the Big Shot to Lefty.

"I knew you'd see it right," said the gang leader. "No sense committing suicide. Sit down." He pointed to an overstuffed chair on the other side of the table. "Here's the dope, kid. I know you want to take a crack at the Hudson Air Lines, because they did you dirt."

"How do you know they did?" demanded Pete.

"Because they fired you for being drunk. They said you crashed that plane because you were crooked. But I know you weren't, because I know what happened to that plane. You were telling the straight goods when you said the motors quit on you. I know, because I paid for fixing them so they would quit, see?"

"Sit down!" snapped Lefty.

Pete, who scarcely knew that he had surged forward in his chair, set his teeth and forced his tense muscles to relax. Something flat and black slid back into Lefty's shoulder holster.

"Listen, kid," continued the Big Shot, who had not moved a muscle, "I got too much jack on the table to fool any more with these airplane fellers, see? There's forty-fifty planes a day

leave out of the airports around New York. I made the transport fellers a proposition, and a reasonable one, too.

"Five bucks a day a plane; that was all. Not much for each line to pay, but it runs into about a grand and a half a week, and that's good dough. I got some of the operators feeding the kitty, but some of 'em are holding out on me and this here Hudson Air Lines is one of them, see? They got an Operations Manager named Hamilton, who thinks he's hard and he told Slick Rosen, who was my collector, to go to the deuce."

There was something funny about that, thought Pete, as the Big Shot paused to light another cigarette. The insurance man, Mr. Sturdy, had said that the Hudson people were paying protection money to the racketeers. And why hadn't Hamilton blamed the racketeers for the crash instead of trumping up the charge of drunkenness against the pilot? Pete resolved to find some way to telephone to Mr. Sturdy and to have the insurance company's private detectives check up on this loose end.

"So what we got to do," went on the gangster, "is to show the air line companies they got to kick in, before some of those who are already paying us quit on us and make us start all over again."

"How are you going to do it?" said Pete, wondering how he could speak so calmly.

"By giving them another damn good wreck!" snapped the Big Shot, his eyes glittering frostily. "So far we just been playing with them. This time we do a job they won't forget. By this time to-morrow night they'll be fighting for places in the line to pay us off."

"What are you going to do?" demanded the flyer.

"We've found out," said the Big Shot, "that to-morrow's Montreal plane is sold out. There's an Elks convention at Montreal and every seat in their morning plane was engaged a week ago. When that plane gets up in the deserted country over the Adirondacks it's going into a crash that won't leave no piece bigger than what a baby can walk away with!"

**T**O-MORROW morning; that would probably be *this* morning!

Pete felt cold beads of perspiration gather on his face. He must find some way to get out of here and to warn the Hudson people not to send that plane away! It did not occur to him that this man would fail to carry out his threat. It was perfectly obvious that the Big Shot regarded the lives of the passengers and crew of that big transport as worthy of no consideration at all. They were simply helpless pawns in a game whose stakes were the only things of importance. When hundreds of gangsters were killed in internecine warfare each year, a score of passengers were incidental; that was all.

"How are you going to do it?" asked Pete, trying to make his voice sound casual.

"We're going to take two planes up there," said the Big Shot. "I got the planes in my private airport up in the Westchester hills. You and Lefty are going to be in one; me and Joey Kusak, my private pilot, in the other. You, being a war pilot, are going to have the pleasure of turning the trick so's you can get revenge on the guys who did you dirt.

"Me, I'm going to be on hand watching you work, to see how good you are and to see that the job is handled right. Lefty, here, is going to

be sitting right behind you in the rear seat to see that you don't get cold feet. We trust you, all right, all right, but this is your first job with us and I made my success by not taking chances. Lefty is going to have a parachute on; you ain't. So if you try to slip us the double-ex, he can blow your brains all over upper New York State and then jump overboard, leaving me to finish the job, see?"

Pete stared at him through unbelieving eyes. Mr. Sturdy had prepared Pete for many things, but not for this. Here, so close to Times Square that a single shout from the window would bring a traffic policeman to the scene, a mass murder was being planned that would rival the St. Valentine's Day massacre! And he, Pete Hargrave, ex-war pilot, ex-transport pilot, a man who believed that the air was a clean place for decent men, was being invited—no, commanded—to take part!

If that man they called the Big Shot hadn't been sitting there squinting at him with eyes that were as cold and dead as those of a buzzard, Pete might have believed that he was losing his mind, or, perhaps, waking up from some hag-ridden nightmare that was fantastic as it was impossible. This was the sort of thing that one read about in the newspapers; that always happened to somebody else, never to one's own self!

But he couldn't look at the Big Shot and at Lefty without slowly realizing that this thing was a fact; that in a few hours he would be refusing to commit this mass murder and would be calmly and expeditiously shot to death.

Even that wouldn't matter if, in the meantime, he could find some way to prevent the crashing of the transport, some way to send this whole mob of underworld rats to the flaming hell



they had been cheating for so long. But he couldn't accomplish that by running amuck until felled by the spitting fire from Lefty's automatic. Now was the time for brains, not action. Action could come later when he had figured a way out of the mess.

The Big Shot had risen from his chair and was now pouring a moderate drink from a cut-glass carafe. He swallowed the liquor in a single gulp, not bothering to offer any to the two who watched him.

"Lefty," he said, "show the bird a bed. He ain't got long to sleep, anyway. And," he added with a wolfish smile, "you better get one of the torpedoes to sit up with him for fear of his walking in his sleep. If he gets to walking, or making a fuss, in his sleep, have them do anything necessary to quiet him down. You understand?"

Lefty's heavy-lidded eyes met those of his leader in a glance of complete understanding.

"Leave it to us, boss," he cracked. "We'll see he's quiet."

## CHAPTER V.

### INTO THE SKIES.

**L**ONG, oblique rays of morning sunlight slanted down on the private airport as the big black car lurched through the gate in the barbed-wire fence. The dark-faced young man who swung open the gate stared closely at the occupants of the car, nodded and removed his right hand from a bulging pocket.

Pete Hargrave, sitting in the tonneau between the Big Shot and Lefty, glanced at the small hangar before whose open door two swift-looking monoplanes stood with their engines slowly ticking over. On each side of

the field the rolling hills of northern Westchester County swept away in neat, orderly formation, making a well-concealed pocket for this airport far from the concrete highways which radiated fan-wise, north and east, out of New York.

"Nice little place, huh?" smiled the Big Shot, surveying the scene.

"Yes, except that you'll need good flyers to take ships off," nodded Pete. "There'll be a lot of bumps off those hills."

"I got good flyers," the gang leader assured him. "You and Joey Kusak. And while I think of it," he added, with a sudden harshness in his voice, "the plane you're going to fly is in good shape, so don't make any mistakes by not being able to take off, or anything like that."

Pete said nothing. With every revolution of the motor car's wheels hope of preventing this massacre seemed to drift farther into the background. Of course he wasn't going to help to bring down that transport. At the last moment he'd dive straight into the ground, if need be, carrying Lefty with him down to Hades. But that wouldn't be enough.

The Big Shot would be in the air, too, ready to shoot the transport down if he, Pete, failed. And if, perchance, the Big Shot wasn't able to bring this Montreal ship down in a crash, he would simply wait and cause some other disaster, to-morrow, or the next day or the day after that. And if Pete were dead, who would stop a swift succession of tragedies? Certainly not the police; the Big Shot appeared to have covered his trail too well. Slick was dead and Mr. Sturdy obviously had not known which of the several important racketeers was preying on the transport operators.

There had not been a single moment since leaving the Big Shot at four in the morning when Pete could have escaped to warn Mr. Sturdy, or even Red Henderson, of the impending disaster. They had not even permitted him to be alone while he slept. One of the grim-eyed card players had been detailed to sit at the foot of his bed, armed and watchful, while another sat in a chair just outside the door.

And when he had awakened from the sleep of utter exhaustion, his two vigilant guards had not left his side for a single instant, even while he had breakfasted with the Big Shot and Lefty. It had occurred to him to cut loose and try to snatch the gun out of the pocket of one of his guards and to take the one-in-a-thousand chance of killing them both and thus getting away.

He wasn't afraid to die, but he hadn't dared risk it, remembering that, for the present, he, alone stood between the Big Shot and the deaths of all those who were flying to Montreal that morning in the big air liner.

**A**BRUPTLY the car came to a stop beside the nearer of the two idling planes. A saturnine young man dressed in flying clothes, came to the side of the car. His eyes were weak and shifty, his forehead unpleasantly low. He had a habit of moistening his lips with his tongue as he spoke.

"Ships ready, Joey?" snapped the Big Shot.

"Yes, Mr. Rocco," replied the pilot.

Mr. Rocco! That, Pete knew instantly, would be Luigi—"Louie"—Rocco who, in eighteen months, had machine-gunned his way to the very pinnacle of gangdom. An almost legendary figure, this Rocco, whose name

was in the newspapers in connection with every gang slaying, but whose money and power had spun a spiderweb of political wires that had, so far, effectively protected him from prosecution.

His name was almost as well known as that of the President; his wealth almost equal to that of the motor car millionaires. He had once been a beer-runner for a Chicago gangster, but, having ambition, he had turned a Thompson gun on his employer and cut him into small bits. Having once learned the potency of a Tommy gun as a tool for progress, he had swiftly shot his way straight to the top of his profession in the Middle West and had then moved to New York where, in the course of a year, he had paid for the burials of all his rivals.

"This 'll be your bus," snapped Rocco, motioning with his thumb toward the nearer monoplane. "Lefty, get the Tommy guns and come on."

Had it not been for the terrible mission he was engaged upon, Pete's hands would have longed to grab the joy stick of the sleek little plane and to zoom her into the air. She was of the latest type, motor cowl, wheel pants—Rocco had apparently spared no expense to obtain the best ships possible for his work.

"Now listen, kid," snapped the Big Shot, coming to a stop just beside the tapering wing. "Don't try any monkey business with me on this trip. I don't think you're that much of a damn fool, but I been surprised before now. Just start anything funny and you'll get your conk blown off. Play the game right and I'll let you into the swellest home on Easy Money Street.

"Listen; a few weeks ago I gave this flying racket a big laugh, see? Now I don't even smile at it. It's the soft-

est business there ever was. If it can do all I think it can, I'm buying twenty-thirty more planes, see? We'll fly booze and dope in from Canada and Mexico and Cuba. We'll fly out over the water and knock the devil out of the punks who are running hootch in in sea-skiffs.

"Why, with this flying stuff we can make millions, see, and if you play the darn thing right with me I'll make you my chief pilot and pay you more jack than you ever saw in your life. Joey, here, is a good kid, but he's a dope and I can't trust him to take responsibility. That's why you're in soft. But I got to see how you behave in action to know whether you got the goods or not, see?"

He took a parachute pack out of Lefty's hands and began to climb into the harness. Lefty and the other pilot, Joey, were already buckling on the thigh and shoulder straps of their own parachutes.

"Next time you hop," said Rocco, evenly, "you get one of these 'chutes, see? But this time we ain't taking any chances with you. Give me my Tommy gun, Lefty." He took the clumsy two-handled weapon from the hands of his chief gunman and began to walk toward the second ship.

Then, turning back for a last word: "Head straight up the Hudson, Hargrave. That's the way the Montreal plane flies. We'll be half an hour ahead of her. When Lefty gives you the order, circle around and wait for her. Then, when she comes, dive close past her and give Lefty plenty of chance to put the slug on her. And if you don't keep close to me, or if you happen to have a forced landing, see, it will be just too bad. Remember, Lefty's got a Tommy gun and a 'chute and he's got orders to use them

both first and ask questions later. S'long."

TWO silent mechanics stood by to pull the wheel chocks. Pete, feeling as if an icy hand were clenched about his heart, obeyed Lefty's curt motion to climb into the forward cockpit. The gunman, encumbered by his back-type parachute pack, climbed awkwardly into the rear cockpit and accepted the ugly little machine rifle passed up to him by a third mechanic. Pete's hand reached for the throttle, but Lefty reached forward and tapped him on the shoulder. Pete turned around and glanced back. Lefty's heavy-lidded eyes were bright with malevolence.

"Kid," he said, "I don't like you. You're too fresh. There ain't nothing I'd like better than to put this gun against your backbone and let you have the whole clip. Jumping out in the 'chute's no worse than diving off'n a high springboard. So if you want to live, rat, just mind your step."

The other plane roared full-out and trundled away over the short grass. Pete made no reply to the gunman's threat; he just turned forward and slapped the throttle. Rocco's plane was already off. Good ships, these. What a pity, Pete reflected, that they were being put to such use! These flying gangsters were fouling the whole sky.

Once, aerial enemies had been chivalrous foes. Pete remembered the sharp stab of regret he had felt when those two Jerry planes had begun to spin down to the ground. They were enemies, but good eggs, those Jerries. Now it was different. He could knock down one of those gangster planes and laugh while it ripped down to eternity!

The sharp, spine-jarring hammering of tires against ground suddenly ceased. Pete held the little ship level for an instant, gathering flying speed, then pulled hard back and took a deep breath of relief as she screamed straight up in a vertical zoom. A good little ship, yes. A wonderful ship! Again he leveled out, glancing around the blue-green bowl of sky and earth for Rocco's plane. There it was, just to the left, straightening out over the hilltops to head northward. Viciously Pete kicked his rudder pedal and swung his stick to the right. This was the last lap, and he had thought of no certain way to prevent catastrophe.

## CHAPTER VI.

### A STRANGE DUEL.

**A**T eight thousand feet, two silvery monoplanes droned through a cloudless sky, swinging in long, slow circles, back and forth, around and around. Beneath them, and to every side, forests stretched from horizon to horizon like a vast, billowing carpet. The bright green tree tops swept from valley to hilltop in long, undulating waves, incredibly soft-looking, unbroken except for tiny flashes of rivers and lakes that resembled bits of mirrored glass flung heedlessly from a giant's hand.

Pete Hargrave, anxiously glancing at the dragging hands of the panel clock, felt as a condemned murderer must feel as he sits in the death chair and waits for the executioner to throw the switch. Eleven o'clock. The big transport was due at any moment. It was a perfect day for flying; she would be on time to the last tick of the second hand.

Seventy-five yards off his right

wing tip, Rocco's plane cruised slowly along, the two helmeted heads in her cockpits turned toward the southern rim of the corrugated horizon. Twice, now, Pete had eased his own ship over toward the companion plane, desperately planning to lock wings with her and chance everything that the transport might be saved.

But once Joe Kusak had swerved hastily away; on the second attempt Lefty, in the rear cockpit, had jabbed the muzzle hard into Pete's back and motioned for him to keep at a safe distance.

He was the first to sight her. A tiny silvery dot against the green of the forests, she was flying far, far below the two ships who were awaiting her. Straight across that hill to the southward she droned her way, turning neither to right nor to left in her arrow-straight course toward Montreal, concerned only with her exact schedule, fearing nothing but the ordinary hazards of aerial navigation. Instantly, giving no sign that he had seen the oncoming transport, Pete banked over and turned to the eastward as if in search for her in that direction.

But Rocco's pilot had seen her, too. His arm was pointing straight southward toward that flashing silver dot. A hard, round something jarred against Pete's spine. He looked back. Lefty was scowling malignantly. The jerk of his thumb toward the low-flying transport left no doubt as to his meaning.

Pete shook his head in refusal. Lefty's forefinger whitened at the knuckle as he began to squeeze the trigger of the squat little Thompson gun. Rocco's plane pivoted forward on its axis and went hurtling down toward the transport. With sudden in-

spiration Pete grinned and nodded. He turned around to face forward.

He drew a long, deep breath and threw all his weight on the stick, shoving it as far forward as it would go. With a swoop that caught at the pit of his stomach the little ship nosed over and plummeted downward like a falling projectile. Down she roared, her engine screaming full-out, while Pete held the stick jammed against the crash pad on the instrument board.

Wind shrieked through wires and struts. The plunging plane vibrated in every inch of her structure as her terrific speed increased. The pointer on the air speed meter crawled across the dial, indicating 180 miles an hour, then 200, then 210. Would she stand it? Pete doubted it, but it didn't much matter.

The hub-shaped cylinders of the husky radial engine pointed directly toward that soft spread of velvety forest below. Now, still answering that thrust-forward stick, her bow began to swing under, curving around into the second quarter of an outside loop. Pete's body was sagging against his safety belt as the mighty pull of centrifugal motion began to add its weight to the forces of gravity.

The wide-webbed fabric of the safety belt was cutting into his thighs. If those steel loops should break he'd go hurtling out into space like a stone from a slingshot. The vibration was terrific. It didn't seem possible that the ship could hold together under a strain she had not been built to withstand.

**S**TILL holding the stick down with his left hand, Pete braced his right hand against the padded cowlings in front of him and pushed himself around in his seat. Now they were up-

side down, the hammering engine trying to lift them up over the outer edge of the reversed loop. Queer, his body should be so reluctant to move against the pressure! He could scarcely turn his head and shoulders to face the enemy in the rear seat. There!

Lefty, his reddened face frozen in convulsive horror, was hanging there in the rear cockpit, one hand clutching the cowlings, the other gripping the stock of the Thompson gun. His whole body sagged down until his shoulders and chest showed above the cowlings. His mouth was open; his screams were blanked out in the thundering roar from the engine. The muzzle of the Thompson gun was just above the scoop-shaped windscreen of the rear cockpit.

With all the strength of his healthy body Pete pushed himself against his own back rest, reached out and snatched the muzzle. Lefty's hand came loose. The centrifugal force of the outside loop tore the deadly weapon out of Pete's grip. It went whirling off into the empty air, cartwheeling as it described its long, graceful parabola toward the ground.

Now the plane was climbing in a long, upside-down curve toward the top of her loop. Pete turned swiftly in his seat, stamped on the rudder pedal, and rolled the plane over into an awkward, sideslipping Immelmann. Then she was diving again, diving right-side up, thundering down toward two ships 2,500 feet below.

Pete's eyes glinted as he saw that the transport was still in the air. Somehow she had avoided that first deadly plunge of Rocco's ship. She was flying at right angles to her former course; Rocco's monoplane was below her, zooming up to return to the attack.



Pete crouched deep beneath his cowl- ing as his little plane streaked down at Rocco's. He knew Lefty had an auto- matic in his shoulder holster. He, Pete, must live until he had finished Rocco. Then to the deuce with every- thing! Down he roared like an eagle dropping for the kill. The transport plane mushroomed in size with amaz- ing speed.

Pete caught an instant's glimpse of two white faces turned up at him from the pilot's cockpit. He saw her skid around out of his way as if her crew feared that he, too, was an enemy.

He jerked at his stick as Rocco's ship flashed up on her other side. He saw Rocco, sitting in the rear cockpit, squinting down the black length of his Thompson gun. A blinking stream of crimson flickered out toward the trans- port. And then Pete's ship hurtled straight into a thin gray line of sul- phurous tracer smoke as she slammed down between the gun and its huge, helpless target.

The joystick swung under Pete's steady hand as he banked around to charge straight at Rocco. Something crashed against his head. He slumped in his seat while the whole world spun around in great sickening circles.

Instinctively he reversed controls and rolled the ship over on her back. His brain cleared, leaving only a dull ache. He looked around. Lefty, hang- ing head down, was clutching the cowl- ing with both hands. His automatic was hooked by the trigger guard on one finger, useless until he removed that hand from the cowl- ing.

Where was Rocco? There, over to the right. From his upside down posi- tion Pete could see the monoplane's underbelly; could see Rocco and the pilot peering over the cowling. The transport was a mile away, now, rac-

ing for safety to the eastward. Well, that was that.

He had saved her for the moment, now he must finish the job. He, Pete Hargrave, branded as a drunk, as an escaped convict, must save a ship of the same company that had disgraced him! His mind seemed fuzzy. It was hard to think. But it wasn't so hard to act. He knew what he must do; his hands and feet acted automatically.

**H**IS ship half-rolled, shrieking up and over in a breath-taking, curv- ing dive. Rocco's pilot saw what was coming. He nosed over in a sud- den paroxysm of fear while Rocco held his machine gun by its two handles and held his finger hard on the trigger. Pete's ship ripped through that delicate cobweb of tracer smoke, plunging straight toward the top wing of the lower plane. Pete's hand was light on the stick, his feet steady on the pedals. His jaw muscles stood out like knotted cords under the bronze of his cheeks.

The propeller of his ship bit into that smooth wing of Rocco's plane. The engine smashed down through the fabric. The two ships seemed to be- come one mass of crumpled fabric, splintered struts and snake-like wires.

In an instant the roaring of the two engines and the rending crash of the collision had died out into silence. There was no sound in the whole world but the grating rubbing of linen against linen, metal against metal. And, far away in the distance, the faint throb- bing of the transport's engine.

Pete heard himself laughing hysteri- cally. The blamed planes weren't falling. Defying all laws of gravita- tion, they were just hanging there in the air as if suspended by a titanic and invisible sky hook. And in that mass of wreckage, almost near enough for

him to touch, were two of the deadliest figures in gangdom. He, Pete Hargrave, had done it. Done it for a company which had caused him to be black-listed.

No, he hadn't; he'd done it for a yellow-headed baby, who had laughed at him from a cabin. And he found himself laughing at that, too. Then, quite slowly, the little tent of tattered fabric in which he was sitting began to sag. Instantly his pilot's instinct snapped him back to sanity. His laughter was extinguished like an electric light cut off at the switch.

He thumbed the safety belt and pushed himself up in his cockpit. His head thumped against a crumpled bit of wing. He bent his head, braced his broad shoulders against the wreckage which had closed him in like the cover of a box and pushed. Then his head and shoulders were out in the open air.

The horizon was slowly wheeling around, swinging past at an ever-increasing speed. The wreck was beginning to spin. He became aware that some one was screaming in a high-pitched voice whose shrill overtones were cutting into his eardrums like a probing needle. The sound was coming from beneath a fluttering piece of wreckage right beside him.

He glanced down toward the ground. It was coming up at him with the speed of an express train. Yet, somehow, he did not feel hurried. Well, why should he feel hurried? There was nothing to do but to wait until the crash came that would end everything. But all the while his strong hands were tearing at that flapping linen that covered the man who was still screaming so shrilly. The torn wing-covering came loose in his hands. There was Lefty, his mouth absurdly open, his face the color of old paper.

And he was still screaming. His automatic had disappeared. He'd have no use for it now.

It was difficult to stay aboard the wreck. She was spinning so that it was almost impossible to remain upright. Pete, yanking at Lefty's shoulders, wondered how he was able to stay aboard at all. It was because his leg was caught between two crisscrossed struts; that was why. He couldn't get out if he wanted to.

Now he had dragged Lefty up out of the shattered rear cockpit; was holding him erect. The man was crazy, beating at Pete's face and shoulders with hands that slapped instead of punched.

THE ground was close now. It wouldn't be long. Pete's eyes focussed themselves on the crossed webbing of Lefty's parachute harness. There might be a chance. He'd better do something, anyway. A puff of hot smoke enveloped him, made him choke and gasp for air. A crimson streak of flame raced up along the oil-soaked fabric, licking up at his leg—the leg that was tangled in the wreckage.

That wouldn't do. Fire was the only thing in the world he was really afraid of. He'd seen too many buddies go down in flames. Funny, how time was stretching out. Had it been instants, or hours, since the two planes had crashed? His brain was now utterly clear. There seemed to be plenty of time to think things out.

Well, there was one remote chance—or there would be, if that darned fool Lefty would stand still and stop squalling. With exact savagery Pete put all the strength of his arm, shoulder and back muscles into a terrific uppercut to Lefty's chin. The man sagged limply. Pete ran his own left arm up

under the cross belts of Lefty's 'chute harness and hooked his fingers hard around the webbing. Not much time now. The trees were reaching up for the falling wreckage.

With his right hand Pete reached for the release ring over Lefty's heart. He jerked the ring and wrapped his right arm around Lefty's waist.

There was a report like a pistol shot. A blur of white silk snapped out from Lefty's parachute pack. Pete strained every muscle to hold on. His ears were filled with the staccato rustling of fabric.

There was a jerk which threatened to tear his muscles to pieces. A white-hot streak of agony rippled through his pinioned left leg, running up his side and clear into his brain. He felt himself being whirled into space, conscious of nothing but the strain on his two arms and the blinding pain in his leg. Now he was swaying back and forth, swinging like a gargantuan pendulum. He and the unconscious Lefty were clear of the mangled planes which were spinning down like a fantastic top, leaving a long corkscrew of acrid black smoke behind them.

It wasn't hard to hold on now. His left arm was wrapped in those tight belts, his right arm securely wrapped around the other's body. But he felt very sick. He wondered if his leg was still in that spinning wreck down there. There was no feeling below the waist except sheer agony. He twisted his head and looked down. No, his leg was still attached to his body, but oddly twisted.

There was a reverberating crash as the trees opened up, enveloped the falling wreckage and closed again, leaving only a drifting column of fire-shot smoke to mark the spot where the two ships had landed.

Now the trees were rushing up toward Pete. He tried to cross his ankles so he wouldn't straddle a limb. A soft twig of greenery brushed upward across his face. A heavy branch scraped up along his body. He felt Lefty slip away from him; felt himself plunging downward, bouncing from limb to limb. And then all the lights in the world went out.

HE tried to brush away a shaft of light that was blazing down into his eyes. Ether. It was in his nostrils; it was in his throat. He knew what it was because he had once awakened in a hospital in France. He set his mind to snapping out of the formless dreams that were whirling through his head. The way to do that was to open his eyes. He opened them.

"How do you feel?" That was a familiar voice, but he couldn't remember where he'd heard it.

"Like the deuce," he said thickly. "Go away!"

The ensuing silence was good. It would have been easy to slip down into those dreams again, but Pete kept his eyes open and fought against the mists in his brain. Slowly he began to remember. That white parallelogram he was looking at was a ceiling. There, to the right, was a window through which the sun was blazing. He turned his eyes away from the glare and looked straight into a pair of bright black eyes beneath a shock of white hair. After a while he remembered where he had seen that face. It was difficult, because it hadn't been smiling then.

"Hello, Mr. Sturdy," he said at last. "I fell through a laundry mangle. If they'll starch and iron me, I'll be all right!"

Those black eyes were kind. Pete

hadn't realized that Mr. Sturdy could look so nice and friendly. He had seemed hard-boiled.

"Is this a hospital?" Pete asked.

"Yes. You're at Lake Placid. You've been unconscious since noon and it's almost sunset now. I came up here by plane as soon as word came through to New York. A game warden saw the fight and your fall."

"Did they take my leg off?" asked Pete, anxiously.

"You're too tough to lose a leg," said Mr. Sturdy reassuringly. "You were delirious when they got you here and when you were coming out of the ether, too. You said a lot of things, the doctors told me, that match up with other things I've known or suspected. You talked about Louie Rocco. Is he one of the birds whose bones were found in the burned wreck?"

"Yes," nodded Pete. "He and a fellow called Lefty were running the racket against the transport."

"We identified Lefty Burke," said the executive, slowly. "His neck was broken by the branch of a tree. But who was the other man in the plane, Rocco's pilot?"

Pete nodded weakly.

"It's a good thing for the world Rocco was killed," said Mr. Sturdy. "We might have had a job convicting him. He was rich, powerful and unscrupulous. He might have beaten us somehow and gone free to continue his rotten career. But now he's out for good. It was a fine job, old man. Now listen, Pete; you're going to get your bonus of five thousand dollars for breaking up that racket, and you're going to get your salary until you are able to work again. Mr. Blackwood, president of the Hudson Air Lines, is flying up here at this minute to see you.

I've just been talking to him on the phone. And—"

PETE held up his hand. Something had been whirling through his mind that needed an answer.

"Mr. Sturdy, did you find out whether the Hudson people had been paying Rocco his protection money or not?"

The insurance man smiled grimly.

"Yes, we've learned about that, too. Mr. Blackwood said they had been giving the money every week to their operations manager, Red Hamilton, who was conducting the negotiations with Slick Rosen, Rocco's collector. But we've just learned, through what you said in your delirium, that Red Hamilton hadn't been paying it to Rosen. He'd been pocketing it, planning to run away with it when he had made a nice little pile.

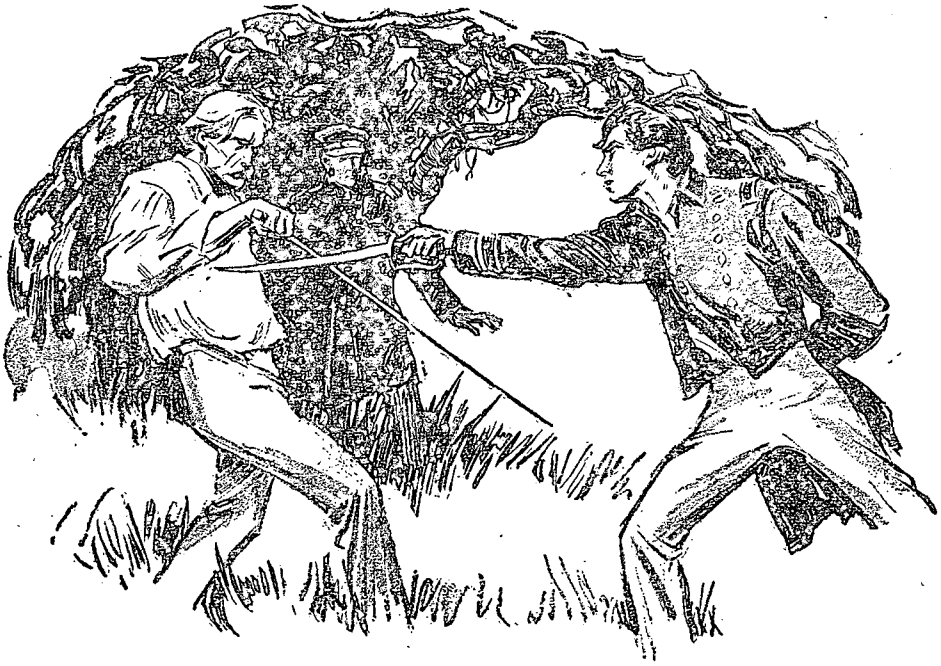
"That's why he blamed you for the wreck, Pete. He didn't dare blame the gangsters, or they'd have learned he was double-crossing them and would have bumped him off. So he said you were drunk. Right at this minute he's at the police station, where they're probably sweating a confession out of him. And Mr. Blackwood, president of the company, is flying up here to offer you Hamilton's job."

He stopped and looked down at Pete, who smiled up at him.

"Well," said Pete, "it'll be good handling a big bus again. A heap better than sitting in Bryant Park." His eyelids drooped with weariness. With an effort, he lifted them and winked up at the older man.

"It sure pays to advertise!" Pete said distinctly. Then with a sigh of relief, he closed his eyes and went peacefully to sleep.

THE END.



*Codd realized that the don was playing with him*

## Swordsmen of Florida

*It was a noble prize that Captain Zebulon Codd had captured in the swaggering buccaneer who called himself Black Hugh, yet the Navy captain was soon to regret that he had not hung the schemer on that little isle in the Gulf of Mexico*

**By CHARLES MINNIGERODE MAIGNE**

*Author of "For Country," etc.*

### LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

CAPTAIN ZEBULON CODD, of the United States Navy, sails his schooner, the *Cormorant*, into the tiny harbor of the islet of San Cristobal Cayo, off the coast of Florida, in search of pirates. Seconded by his boatswain, Mullins, and followed by his men, he is about to attack a band of duelling Spaniards. Fascinated by the swordsmanship of one of them, he tumbles out of his hiding place, into the midst of the group.

He discovers they are not pirates, but the owners of the islet: the elderly Don Luis Ambrosio de la Cordoba y Guerra; his son, Don Luis Segundon; and his daughter, Maraquita. Don Luis, while a loyal Spaniard, offers the hospitality of his *hacienda* to Codd and his men.

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