

[Illustration]

DIRECT METHODS

by Thomson Burtis

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A De Haviland airplane was spiraling down over the level expanse of Langham Field. As the slim young pilot in the front seat slowly throttled the big Liberty motor which had carried the ship from Washington, the passenger peered down interestedly. Twenty-two massive twin-motored bombers were lined up on the Eastern edge of the field, nose to nose in two lines. They looked like waiting monsters, slothful but terrible in their suggestion of power. The sinking sun sent shafts of light flashing from the metal, and as the dropping De Haviland gave the two flyers constantly changing angles of vision it seemed as though the ships were alive, so blinding was the play of light from glistening turn-buckles and the glass covers of the instruments on each motor.

The D. H. landed lightly, the pilot taking unusual care to avoid running into the lines of ships which cut off a quarter of the field. He taxied to the line. Before he had finished running the gas out of his motor his passenger was out of the back cockpit and had removed the flying coveralls he wore. He was in civilian clothes. He took a soft hat from the rear, put it on, lit a cigar and waited for the pilot.

When that gentleman had leaped out and lit a cigaret the civilian stretched out his hand.

"Thank you, lieutenant, that was fine. I enjoyed it greatly. Would you mind seeing to it that my suitcase is unstrapped and sent up to General O'Malley's office? Thank you. That is headquarters up there, is it not?"

"Yes, sir--General O'Malley's headquarters."

“See you later, I hope. Good-by.”

He walked briskly down the row of tremendous corrugated iron hangars. He

did not stop to inspect in detail the overgrown Handley Pages and Capronis and Martin bombers, although his brilliant dark eyes rested continuously on the line of ships. De Havillands and S. E. 5 scouts were constantly landing and taking off. Once he did stop in his tracks to watch five S. E.'s. take off in a V formation, scoot a mile north of the field, and then line up in single file. One by one they dived--dived until the sing of the wires could be heard on the field. As they came perilously near the ground they would suddenly straighten. At that instant an egg-shaped projectile left the ship and hurtled groundward. In a few seconds came the explosion.

“Small bombs,” the civilian told himself as he resumed his walk to brigade headquarters. “I wonder whether some of them could be used----”

A seven-passenger army car stopped beside him. He looked up quickly into the face of a portly man wearing the insignia of a lieutenant-colonel.

“Can I give you a ride, Mr. Graves?” inquired the colonel, getting out of the car.

“Thank you, but I’m just going up to headquarters. But you have the advantage of me sir.”

“I met you in Rome in 1918,” stated the colonel. “My name is Sax.”

“You have a better memory than I, colonel. But I was there. Glad to have seen you again. Good-by.”

He walked on, leaving the colonel to climb back into the car.

“Now that’s funny. I’d give a little piece of change to find out just what that fellow’s business is,” muttered the portly officer as he settled himself in the car.

Graves walked into the small, one-story frame building which had been dignified into Headquarters of the First Provisional Air Brigade, and walked over to the sergeant-major’s desk. Evidently he knew something about the army.

“Mr. Graves, to see the adjutant,” he stated.

He spoke with a certain preciseness in a modulated voice that instinctively gave one an impression of culture and refinement.

“Yes, sir.”

The sergeant-major disappeared into the adjutant’s office with unusual expedition, returning in a few seconds to say--

“All right, sir.”

The captain who arose as Mr. Graves walked into his office gave him a quick survey in which interest and appraisal were equally mingled. Graves had removed his hat, revealing thick, iron-gray hair which lent distinction and force to his appearance. He was a little above medium height, and the unobtrusive perfection of his clothing hid a pair of stalwart shoulders which a wrestler would have had no reason to be ashamed of.

“I have an appointment with General O’Malley, captain,” said Graves.

“Yes indeed. The general is ready to see you.”

The captain motioned toward the closed door which led from his office.

“Thank you.”

Graves walked over to the door, opened it, and closed it again behind him after entering the inner office. In both speech and action he appeared to be a very direct gentleman with a pronounced disinclination to waste either time or words.

“General O’Malley?”

“Yes. I’m glad to know you, Mr. Graves.”

As the two men shook hands there was a pause lasting several seconds. Eye to eye, they adjudged each other as strong men will when each knows that the other is worthy of his steel.

Graves knew that before him was perhaps the most brilliant and audacious of the younger officers of the army--the great chief of a hazardous service which even then was preparing to prove that its fledgeling wings would carry it far beyond where anyone save its officers believed it could go. As for the general, he had in his desk a letter from the Secretary of War--a brief note which stated succinctly that Mr. Graves would be treated with the utmost consideration, be cooperated with to the fullest extent, and that he carried with him authority the nature of which he personally would divulge.

O’Malley watched his visitor closely as he turned to find a chair. There was a change in his appearance when seen in profile which was almost startling. Full-face, his countenance was broad and strong, with the high forehead of a student and the slightly tightened lips of a firmly molded character. In profile Graves looked like a hawk--one saw that his nose jutted aggressively from his face, and that both forehead and chin subtly strengthened the impression. Even his body seemed thinner and taller.

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Graves deliberately flipped the ash from his cigar and then reset the weed in his wide, slightly drooping mouth. His brilliant eyes rested on the general's face.

“General, I have here some papers for your inspection, in order that you may become somewhat acquainted with my mission. Needless to say, not a soul aside from ourselves and persons whom I may find it necessary to tell must know even a detail of the matter.”

Very few men would have spoken as tersely and directly to O'Malley. The general, however, merely nodded.

“I surmised as much,” he said quietly.

Graves drew a thin, long envelope from his pocket and presented it to O'Malley. It did not take the general long to read the enclosure. It was signed by a very great and powerful government official, and left no doubt as to Mr. Graves' position.

The general reread the last sentence.

“--and is hereby empowered to use any methods he sees fit to accomplish his mission, which is one of the gravest importance to the welfare of the United States.”

“So-o-o,” said the general at length, laying down the document slowly. “And what is it you wish, Mr. Graves?”

“First let me find out whether I am correct on all points or not. You have gathered here, as I understand it, the veteran pilots of the Air Service to take part in the coming bombing tests. You likewise have concentrated here for the use of the Air Brigade the most up-to-date material the Air Service has.”

“Correct. Right here, Mr. Graves, is probably the best organization of its size the Air Service of any country has ever known. With those Martin bombers out there, manned by the pilots of this brigade, we are ready this minute to back up all our claims, and you know we made some!”

O’Malley joined in Graves’ spontaneous laugh over that last forceful statement. The general’s adventures in trying to put across some of the things he wished to do in the Air Service had been diversified, to say the least. He was a firebrand whom every one simply had to like or dislike--there was no middle ground.

The flyers of his service idolized him. Flyers, being on the whole of a type a little different from the general run, it follows that many good men would dislike and distrust O’Malley for the same things which his young men loved.

“Well, general, here is my mission in a nutshell. You know by the papers, if through no other means, of the series of tremendous mail robberies, totaling millions, which culminated in the half-million dollar haul near Cleveland two months ago.”

O’Malley nodded.

“Operatives of our service, after months of patient and very skilful work, have run down what we believe to be the greatest criminal organization of its kind the country ever saw. It is almost a certainty that every mail robbery of any size since 1919 has been engineered and carried to a successful completion by this organization.

“The group is so powerful and so wise that its ramifications are almost unbelievable. We don’t know all about them yet, but we do know that its organization includes agents all over the country for the safe disposal of securities and other valuables; that it includes brokers, business men, cracksmen, gunmen, government employees. The brains of the gang, the man to whom all credit for the conception and execution of these

tremendous crimes and the organization of the whole thing goes is Stanislaus Hayden.

“I won’t bore you with his history--suffice it to say that he is one of the most remarkable combinations of brilliancy, far-sightedness, and executive ability that I have ever known about. If he were anything but a mentally and morally warped specimen, he might have been another Morgan or Stinnes.

“Now here is the situation. Hayden is at present in West Virginia. He is living on the top of a mountain in Farran County, miles from the nearest town. With him are several underlings--I believe them to be some of the men who actually pull the robberies themselves. Just why they are living in seclusion up there I do not exactly know, but I presume that it is first of all a good hiding place, and secondly that it keeps Hayden away from the surveillance of the police. He has been mixed up in some monumental deals--or at least suspected so strongly that he is watched--but for two years he has fooled us completely on this new organization of his. What makes him unusually dangerous aside from his ability is the loyalty he inspires in those under him--rather a combination of loyalty and fear, I should say. Anyway, a few small potatoes whom we have nabbed quietly will tell nothing. Apparently they realize that he is a really great commander-in-chief, and trust him to help them.”

“But how did he----”

“How he got into West Virginia I do not know. A year ago he dropped from sight, and the operative who finally traced him down has no idea when he came into that part of the country. I believe that the gang planned to quit operations before long, and that for months Hayden has been a hermit simply making his pile with the idea of retiring on his money in the near future. He would not be safe in any city in the country to

carry on his operations.”

Graves talked as precisely as ever. Every word was clear-cut and incisive. His slim, long-fingered hands were motionless except as he carried his cigar to his lips. He paused a moment to get up and drop the stub into the ash receiver.

“As I said, Hayden is staying on the top of a mountain in Farran County with some henchmen. There is no question that all of them would fight to the death--you know what the Postmaster General announced recently about mail-robbers, do you not?”

“It was plenty,” nodded O’Malley.

“There are several facets to the situation. In the first place, that little nucleus of men is well supplied with artillery and ammunition ranging from machine-guns down. In the second place, their dwelling place is so strategically advantageous that it might take a hundred men dead and wounded before they could be captured. The only road leading to the hunting cabin where Hayden has his headquarters is narrow and winding, like all those mountain roads, and by reason of a three or four hundred foot precipice and some other details of the country a dozen men could hold the place for a considerable time against ten times their number.

“But most important, we want Hayden alive, and _the fact that we have him must be unknown_. As I said, we know vaguely, without many details, that he heads this vast organization. But we have come to a stone wall in our efforts to find who the biggest culprits under him are, or all the ramifications of the conspiracy. We believe that Hayden is the only living man--at least the only one we can get our hands on--who can tell

all. And the moment he was killed or it was known that he was captured, every criminal under him would be gone. The organization would probably disappear in a night. My mission is to capture him, alive, and with nobody but the men with him in that cabin knowing it. We will see to it that they do not spread the news, because every escape they have will be guarded, and they will be in a state of siege up there without any method of sending news to the outside world. Their immediate capture is unimportant, but we can take no chances of an attack for fear of killing Hayden. If we get him, we can make him talk, I believe. We will use almost any measures.”

“You have quite a contract, I should say,” remarked the general, tapping on his desk with a penholder. “I thought I might have a glimmering of what you wanted from us, but what you say about getting him alive changes things.”

“No, I don’t want any bombs dropped on him,” returned Graves with a smile. It was a singularly warm and winning smile, lightening the subtle hardness of his face. The sardonic hint around his mouth disappeared, and his eyes seemed to reflect the smile in their depths.

“Now as to what I do want,” he went on after a moment. He seemed to be incapable of detouring for more than the smallest of intervals from the business at hand. “It would be impossible for any of our operatives to get close enough to the place to capture Hayden without publicity, or without fighting for their lives, except in the manner I have in mind. Before I describe to you my proposed method of getting Hayden, I want my men. Then I need only discuss the matter once.”

“Just as you choose.”

“I want two pilots and a Martin bomber, equipped with extra gas and oil and heavy machine-gun equipment--all she’ll handle, in case we need

them. These two pilots--the ideal ones for my purpose--would be A. 1. flyers, first. That is probably the easiest of my requirements."

"You can't throw a stone out of this window without hitting a real pilot," stated the general. "We have the finest personnel in the world."

"I am inclined to believe you are right, general. Now secondly, it would be advisable that they be older men--none of your brilliant kids. Nobody must know that Hayden is captured--before a breath of it gets out we must make him talk, and then come down on his men all over the country

in one swoop that will be the biggest coup in the history of the Department of Justice, so far as straight criminality goes. For this and other reasons, these fellows must be men of the utmost discretion."

"I can readily see your point," agreed O'Malley, lighting a cigaret.

"Next, I want men who have knocked around quite a bit--resourceful, able

to handle themselves in any kind of a shindig whatsoever, and not afraid of ---- or high water. Rather the soldier of fortune type, you know--I think you get my idea. They will be asked to volunteer to do this thing with me, as a sporting proposition and as a duty to the United States. Although this method of capturing Hayden is rather forced on me by circumstances, I believe that you can fix me up with men whom I can depend on."

The irrepressible O'Malley's mouth widened into a grin as Graves finished.

"You are paying the Air Service a great compliment, Graves," he said.

Graves relaxed briefly.

"You've got an outfit, I know," he admitted. "I wouldn't trust the accomplishing one of the biggest things I've ever worked on to strangers if I didn't believe it."

Then he started hammering away again. The general got the impression of

resistless tenacity about him--the feeling that until his job was done the aristocratic, meticulous Mr. Graves could never be swerved for an instant from his progress toward the goal he was endeavoring to reach.

“Can you produce two such men--and if so, how quickly, general?”

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O'Malley did not answer for fully two minutes. He placed two immaculately booted and spurred feet on his desk, sunk into his chair, and thoughtfully smoked. Then he reached for the bell on his desk.

The adjutant entered and saluted.

“Get me Lieutenants Broughton and Hinkley, Evans. Tell them to report to

me at once. Use every effort to get them, regardless of whether they are on the post or not.”

“Yes, sir.”

Captain Evans saluted stiffly and went out.

“I think these two men fit your description best, Graves. I'll admit I'm curious to know just what you want with them. Broughton is an old first-sergeant out of the artillery. Got his commission in the artillery and transferred to the Air Service. A ---- good big-ship pilot, too. Hinkley is a long, lean, sardonic bird who has the coldest nerve I ever saw and gives not three hoots in hallelujah for anything or anybody. Both of them flew on Border patrol for two years--Broughton out of Nogales and Hinkley--an observer until recently--at Marfa. Broughton is a nut about guns, and one of the best pistol shots I ever saw. Can draw and throw a gun and fan it and all that. I'm a fair shot myself, but he is wonderful. How good Hinkley is on that stuff I don't know, but I do know he's been a captain in the army of Brazil, and a sailor from the

Horn to Bering Sea. Both of them around thirty, I think.”

“They sound available,” granted Graves.

He relapsed into silence. After a moment or two he took out another cigar, offered it to the general, who refused, and finally lit it himself. His gaze rested for a moment on the line of great bombers which he could partially see through the open window.

“Bombing today?” he inquired.

“Just practise. Those ships out there are all loaded with thousand-pounders--we practise tomorrow on the hulk of an old battleship out in Chesapeake Bay. The first test is only two weeks away.”

“Going to make the grade?” inquired Graves easily.

He seemed to have suddenly shed his former terse directness. And that he was talking to the famous General O’Malley, chief of Air Service, did not seem to cut any figure with him at all.

“Are we going to make the grade?” repeated the general, his eyes flashing. He hit the desk a resounding blow with his fist. “We’ll sink anything they put up in ten minutes. Fellows like these two you’re going to meet now and the rest of the men who fly those ships out there are going up and show the world----”

A knock on the door interrupted him.

“Come in!” he shouted.

Captain Evans obeyed.

“Broughton and Hinkley are on their way, sir,” he reported.

“Good. Send ’em in as soon as they get here. Now, Graves, let me tell you----” and the general was off on the passion of his life, which was flying in general and his flyers in particular.

Graves deftly inserted the proper question at the proper time, and before long the dynamic general had blueprints and specifications and maps out to strengthen his arguments further.

He was in the midst of describing what a two-thousand-pound bomb would do to a battleship, Times Square, a dock, or anything else it hit when Captain Evans entered again.

“Evans, you bother me to death. What the----”

“Lieutenants Broughton and Hinkley are here, sir,” returned the adjutant, standing at attention. Captain Evans was very correct.

“Oh yes. Send ’em in. From now on, Graves, it’s your funeral. Come in, boys. Mr. Graves, may I present Mr. Broughton and Mr. Hinkley. Sit down.

All right, fire away, Graves.”

II.

“You gentlemen are here, upon General O’Malley’s recommendation, in order to let me give you an opportunity to volunteer for a special mission upon the success of which depends to a considerable extent the lives of many hundred people. Even more important, it has considerable bearing on the future welfare of this country. Least important--in itself, without considering the ramifications resulting from it--it means the capture of a very important and dangerous criminal.”

Graves’ remarkable eyes flitted from one flyer to the other as he studied the effect of his words. Broughton was a thickset, tanned young man possessed of a certain reserve which involuntarily commanded the respect of Graves. He was blond-haired and blue-eyed, and his gaze was

as steady as it was noncommittal. Tall, lath-like, Hinkley had an air of careless recklessness about him, helped along by the pronouncedly sardonic cast of his face. Like Broughton, he preserved silence.

“With General O’Malley’s permission, I will go over some of the ground I have already covered with him for the benefit of you gentlemen,” Graves went on after a moment.

He proceeded to tell the airmen of Hayden, his importance and the difficulty of capturing him without great publicity and loss of life.

“The only dope we have on the exact layout of his headquarters was obtained through field-glasses by operatives who climbed adjoining mountains and studied the place from all sides. He lives on the very peak of a mountain, without another cabin within miles. But one rough road, winding around the mountain side on a very steep grade, leads to it. For several miles before it reaches the summit of the mountain the cliff drops away sheer from one side of the road, and on the other rises with almost equal steepness. There are so many sheer ravines, and so forth, that it would be almost impossible to get even two hundred men up by any other way than the road; that is, providing they carried machine-guns and other supplies which would be necessary if they stood any chance of capturing Hayden. He has several guards, sufficiently armed, who have every strategic point guarded. Hayden is absolutely without hope, if his presence in this country is known. Capture means ---- for him, and he is almost as sure of it as I am. Being a man of force and brilliancy, although he is crazy, and possessed of a weird magnetism which induces real fanaticism among his followers, the few men up there will undoubtedly fight for him to the death. My job--in which I would like to have you gentlemen help me--is to capture him without publicity or loss of life.”

“If there’s a chance we may be working for you on this picnic, it might not be discourteous for us to ask who you are?”

It was Hinkley speaking. He was lounging lazily in his chair, one long leg drooping over the other. Graves smiled.

“Here, perhaps, is enough to satisfy you,” he returned, handing Hinkley the document which had been laying on the desk since O’Malley had laid it down.

“I don’t know just who he is myself,” confided O’Malley as Hinkley glanced over the signed note. “But I have a feeling that I’d give a month’s pay to be in on what he is going to do.”

Broughton smiled at his irrepressible chief.

“That remains to be seen, general,” he said gently--the first word he had spoken since entering the office.

“Mysterious, but impressive, Jim,” laughed the irreverent Hinkley as he passed the sheet of paper over to Broughton.

The flyer read it slowly, and handed it back to Graves without comment.

“My scheme is this,” said Graves, leaning back once more and setting the

cigar in one corner of his mouth. “That’s wild country--no place to land. The only cleared spot for twenty miles--or in other words near enough to Hayden to suit my needs--is right around his cabin. It is small and rough and on a grade so steep that according to my information

it would make a man puff to climb it. I want you gentlemen to fly me over there in a Martin bomber, which I understand is about the safest of ships in a crackup. This ship will be equipped with extra gas and oil tanks to insure large cruising radius. No ship with ordinary gas capacity could safely make the hop, I understand; in any event would not

have fuel enough for any reconnaissance.

“In the ship there will also be provisions, machine guns, Colts and plenty of ammunition. I want you gentlemen to fool around with the motor when we are over Hayden’s headquarters, make a supposed forced landing, and endeavor to crack up the ship without hurting any of us. I will be in the uniform of a colonel. You will also be in full uniform.

“Naturally we will crack up in Hayden’s front yard. It is the only cleared spot, as I said. He will not like our presence, nor will any of his henchman be very enthusiastic. But we’ll be ‘in,’ and it’s a ---- sight easier to get out than it would be to get in.

“What we do from then on is on the knees of the gods, so to speak. Some way or other we must invent a way to get Hayden and get him out of there. It’s a man’s-size job, all right, but we’ve got to figure on a little luck and then taking advantage of it.

“You men are recommended as flyers, and also as men who’ve had some diversified experience. This is not flattery, it is a statement of facts. I expect that you can handle yourselves in any company, and that you’ll be able to come to bat in a pinch when we get up there.

“It’s a hard contract, and you will get nothing out of it except a document in the secret archives of the War Department which may sometimes help you. Now first, what do you think of the plan insofar as it concerns the flying end of things, and secondly, do you want to declare yourselves in on it?”

Graves had been talking as clearly and without excitement as always, and now he waited with equal calmness for a reply. General O’Malley was sunk deep in his swivel-chair, watching the younger men with a half-smile on

his face. In his heart was a growing respect for the equable Mr. Graves.

“How much flying have you done, Graves?” he inquired impulsively.

“I made my second flight today, coming down from Washington. What do you say, gentlemen?”

“Can’t get you off the track a minute,” said O’Malley genially. “I’ll subside.”

There was silence for a moment. Hinkley smoked a cigaret, blowing rings

at the ceiling with an air of complete indifference. Broughton was gazing steadily at Graves, his scrutiny untroubled by the fact that Graves noticed it. The stocky, slightly stolid-looking pilot was the first to speak.

“A deal of that kind is ticklish business without those in it knowing their helpers a ---- sight better than we know each other, sir, but one thing and another about it sort of sells the proposition to me. Count me in, I guess.”

“Suits me,” declared Hinkley. “When do we go?”

“The first minute that the ship is ready. From Washington I got this dope--tell me if I’m wrong. A Martin lasts around five hours in the air if you take a chance and win on the oil staying with you. Fifty extra gallons of gas in each motor, and approximately fifty per cent. more oil than usual, will assure us of seven hours in the air if we need it. It may take time to find our man.”

Broughton nodded.

“When can the extra tanks be installed, general? Major Jenks of the Engineering Division said that it was a comparatively simple job. As I understand it there is plenty of room in a Martin, and of course to any

ship that can lift your two thousand pounders the extra weight will be a bagatelle.”

“For a landsman you’re pretty wise,” the general complimented him.
“I’ll
have the exact estimate in about ten minutes.”

He pressed the bell and instructed Evans to have the engineer officer of the field report at his office immediately. Then the four men plunged into a discussion of guns, food, and other details. Graves had exact figures at his finger tips. Not a detail was brought up which he did not settle as smoothly and quickly as he talked. There was something ruthlessly direct about him--an air of resistless efficiency that was queerly at variance with his appearance, which inclined rather more toward being that of a student than a man of physical achievement.

Mutual respect grew in the minds of the flyers and of Graves. He was no amateur at reading character and estimating men, and he found the airmen
to his liking.

The engineer officer, ordered to use every facility at his command to expedite the changing of the Martin, said that on the morning of the second day the ship would be ready for test. At noon it should be ready to go.

“Good,” said Graves. “I guess we’ve covered everything, gentlemen. Hinkley and Broughton will attend to gathering the equipment, general, providing you furnish them proper authority. I will be back about nine a.m., day after tomorrow. I guess there is no need for me to emphasize the need for absolute secrecy--you all realize that. If any of you want to reach me, you can call the Monticello Hotel in Norfolk and ask for Room 220. Don’t ask for Graves.

“Thank you for your help--I’ll see you day after tomorrow. Good-by until
then.”

With a smile and slight bow, he left.

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“Now I wonder just who in ---- he is?” inquired Hinkley as the two flyers started to walk toward the bachelor quarters.

“Search me, but he’s turning up two thousand a minute, looks like. I figure I might not mind having him behind me in a scrap of any nature whatsoever.”

“He’s probably some big agent of the secret service. There’s a lot of those eggs that pull off big stuff and nobody ever knows it. Take that Zimmerman note, for instance, during the war. At least, that’s what my ex-pilot Dumpy Scarth says.”

“Dumpy ought to know,” grinned Broughton. “What do you think of our coming _soirée_?”

“If I thought, I’d probably never go!”

III.

“I wish I was back in Texas. This muggy heat makes me sweat like ----.”

“Any amount of heat that can wring moisture out of your skin and bones deserves respect, Larry,” returned Broughton, shifting his body a trifle so that he could lie more comfortably.

The two men were lying in the shade of an S. E. 5 wing on the line in front of the Engineering Department hangars.

“Where’s Covington now? By the time he gets through testing that Martin
it’ll have flown twice as far as we’re going to fly it and be all ready to get out of whack again,” remarked Hinkley, rolling a stem of grass around in between his lips.

“It’ll be right when we get it though. Did he say it was fully equipped?”

Hinkley nodded.

“Even our suitcases are in, and artillery enough to equip all the armies of the allies. That’s the ship now, isn’t it?”

Both men watched the Martin which was gliding majestically over the hangars on the Western edge of the field. It was wide and squat-looking, the one motor on each wing with the nose of the observers cockpit between giving it the impression of a monster with a face. Over seventy feet of wing-spread, two Liberty motors, weighing nearly five tons with a full load--it seemed so massive that the idea of flying it would have been ridiculous to a landsman who had never seen one in the air. There was none of the lightness and trimness usually associated with airplanes.

It squatted easily on the ground, the high landing gear thrusting the nose ten feet in the air as it landed. It came taxiing slowly toward the waiting pilots.

“Ready to go, I see.”

Broughton sat up and Hinkley turned at the sound of Graves’ voice. He was already in coveralls. The open neck showed the stiff-standing collar of an army uniform with officers’ insignia on it.

“Yes, sir. And you?”

“Right now. Is there anything more to be done to the ship?”

“Not unless Covington has discovered something in this flight,” replied Broughton. “A little more gas and oil to make up for what Covey has just used and we’ll be set.”

Conversation became impossible as the ship rumbled up to the line.

Using

first one motor and then the other, depending on which way he wanted to turn, Covington brought the bomber squarely up to the waiting-blocks. The attentive ears of the flyers listened closely to the sweet idling of both motors while Covington waited in the cockpit for the gas in the carburetors to be used up before cutting his switches.

“Listens well,” stated Hinkley.

Broughton nodded.

“While they’re filling it with gas let’s make sure we understand everything,” said Graves. “This will probably be our last opportunity to talk.”

“Let’s see what Covey says first,” suggested Broughton.

The test pilot, a chunky young man with nearly three thousand hours in the air on over sixty types of ships, assured them briefly that everything was in apple-pie condition. And when Covington said a ship was right, few men in the Air Service made even a casual inspection to verify it.

“We’ll have her filled in five minutes or so. Where in ---- are you bound, anyway?” he inquired curiously. “You’ve had us flying around here as busy as “Lamb” Jackson getting ready for a flight.”

This irreverent reference to an officer who flew semi-occasionally to the accompaniment of enough rushing around on the part of mechanics to get the whole brigade in the air caused Broughton to grin widely.

“We’re carrying Colonel Graves here to Dayton, and want to be prepared for a forced landing. There’s a little unrest among the miners, over in

West Virginia, you know.”

“There’ll be more if all that artillery gets into action,” returned Covington. “Well, good luck. I’ve got to take up this ---- Caproni and find out----”

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A sickening crash made the heads of all four men jerk around it as though pulled by one string. On the extreme western edge of the field a mass of smoke with licking flames showing through hid a De Haviland, upside down.

“Hit those trees with a wing and came down upside down,” came the quiet voice of Graves. His face was white to the lips.

Covington rushed into the hangar, bound for a telephone. Before he reached it there came two explosions in rapid succession. Then a blackened figure, crawling over the ground away from the burning ship.

Neither flyer had spoken. They watched fire engines and ambulances rush across the field, and saw that horrible figure disappear behind a wall of men. Came a third explosion.

“Bombs,” said Hinkley.

“Two cadets from the 18th Squadron,” yelled Covington from the hangar door.

“Tough luck,” said Broughton, his tanned face somber.

Graves, still white, looked at the flyers curiously. In his eyes there was suddenly sympathy, and understanding, but no trace of fear.

“I suppose there is no chance for either of them?” he asked.

“Not a bit.”

“Words are rather futile, aren’t they? But if you don’t mind, let’s make sure we understand each other now so that there will be no question of our procedure, insofar as we can lay it out ahead of time.”

Mechanics had resumed their work after the brief flurry caused by the accident, and several of them swarmed over the Martin, supplying it with gas and oil in each motor. There was very little to be said by Graves, except to emphasize previous instructions.

“I am banking on their respect for the United States Army--something which no class of people ever loses. I hope it will be fear and respect mingled, and that not even Hayden, suspicious as he will be, will dare fool with army officers. You both have shoulder holsters as well as your belts?”

Both men nodded.

“That’s all then, I guess.”

“And the ship is ready,” said Hinkley.

“I left my helmet over in the hangar. I’ll be right out,” said Graves.

He started for the hangar with long, unhurried strides.

“Larry, I’m growing to believe that this man Graves has got something on the ball,” Broughton remarked slowly as they walked toward the ship. “In addition, he’s got nerve.”

That was a lot for Broughton to say on short acquaintance, and Hinkley knew it.

“I wouldn’t trust any man in the world in a knockdown fight as far as I could throw this Martin, Jim, without seeing him there first,” the tail pilot said. “But I feel a lot easier in my mind!”

IV.

Graves climbed in the observer’s cockpit, which is the extreme nose of the ship. Directly behind him, seated side by side and separated from him only by the instrument board, were Broughton and Hinkley.

Broughton

was behind the wheel. On the scarf-mount around the observer’s cockpit a

double Lewis machine-gun was mounted. Several feet back of the front cockpits, where a mechanic ordinarily rode, another twin Lewis was mounted on a similar scarf-mount.

Broughton turned on the gas levers, retarded the two spark throttles, and with his hand on the switches of the right-hand motor waited for the mechanics to finish swinging the propeller.

“Clear!” shouted one of them.

Jim clicked on the switches and pressed the starter. The propeller turned lazily, the motor droning slightly as an automobile motor does when the starter is working. In a few seconds she caught. Similar procedure with the left-hand motor, and shortly both Libertys were idling gently.

Broughton’s eyes roved over the complicated instrument board before him.

Two tachometers, two air-pressure gages, two for temperature, air-speed meter, two sets of switches, starting buttons, double spark, double throttle, and on the sides of the cockpit shutter levers, gas levers, landing lights and parachute flare releases--it was a staggering maze to

the uninitiated, but the two airmen read them automatically. From time to time they turned to watch more instruments set on the sides of the motors; oil-pressure gages, and additional air-pressure and temperature instruments, to say nothing of gages to tell how much gas and oil they had.

Finally the pilot's hand dropped to the two throttles set side by side on his right hand. Little by little he inched them ahead until both motors were turning nine hundred. He left them there a moment, watching the temperatures until one read sixty and the other sixty-five. He cut the throttle of the left-hand motor back to idling speed, and then slowly opened the right one until the tachometer showed twelve hundred and fifty. He let it run briefly on each switch alone, listening to the unbroken drum of the cylinders. He went through the same routine with the left motor before he allowed both motors to idle while mechanics pulled the heavy blocks.

The ship was headed toward the hangars. When the block was pulled the right-hand motor roared wide open. Without moving forward three feet the great ship turned in its tracks, to the left. After it was turned it bumped slowly out for the take-off.

You can almost tell a Martin pilot by his taxiing. The least discrepancy in the speed of either motor will make the ship veer. There is a constant and delicate use of the throttles to hold it to a straight course, without getting excessive speed. The two big rudders, both attached to one rudder bar, have little effect on the ground.

With a tremendous roar the Martin sprang into life. Jim set himself against the wheel with all his strength to get the tail up. As soon as that effort was over the Martin became suddenly easy to handle. It took the air in but a trifle longer run than a De Haviland. Neither flyer had his goggles over his eyes. Being seated ahead of the propellers, that terrific airblast which swirls back from an airplane stick was not in

evidence. The propellers whirled around with their tips less than a foot from the heads of the airmen.

As soon as he had cleared the last obstacle and had started to circle the field Jim synchronized the motors until both were turning exactly fourteen-fifty. He studied gages and adjusted shutters to hold the temperature steady.

One circle of the field proved that the Martin was all that Covington said it was. It handled with paradoxical ease--a baby could have spun the wheel or worked the rudders. Only a slight logginess when compared with smaller ships would make a pilot notice what a big ship he was flying.

Jim was still new enough on Martins to get a kick out of seeing what he was tooling through the air. The wings stretched solidly to either side, totalling over seventy feet. Struts, upright and cross, were like the limbs of some great tree. Four feet to either side of the cockpit, resting on the lower wing amid a maze of struts and braces, the Libertys sang their drumming tune.

Broughton swung up the James River and passed between Petersburg and

Richmond. The smiling Virginia country was level and cleared, and there

was nothing to weigh on the flyers' minds except what might happen at the end of the flight. Both of them let their thoughts dwell on what lay ahead. Perhaps Graves' mind was running in the same channel, but he was

apparently devoting all his faculties to enjoying the flight. In a Martin the country is spread out before you--you can watch it as comfortably as from some mountain peak.

* * * * *

They were flying slightly north-west, and passed Richmond a few miles to

the south. The terrain commenced to become rough and patchy. Fields were small and clumps of trees studded the ground thickly. Miles ahead the Appalachian Range loomed majestically. The altimeter showed six thousand feet, but the Martin would not miss some of those peaks by a very large margin.

Both Hinkley and Broughton paid increasing attention to the instruments as the foothills slipped behind, their low green tops rolling away to the foot of the range. Finally Hinkley held up his wrist-watch and pointed. It was time for his trick at the wheel. Both men loosened their belts. Hinkley stood up, took the wheel, and waited for Broughton to slip into the left-hand seat.

It was not a performance to be essayed by a nervous person. The ship skidded perilously during the moment when neither man had his feet on the rudder bar.

Hinkley took up the duty of flying while Broughton began studying his map. Their course would take them past Lexington, which would be an easy landmark because of the fact that the campus of the Virginia Military Institute could be easily picked up. From that time on careful observation would be necessary, for few landmarks are available at all, and these few unreliable, when one is well over the Appalachians.

Lexington slipped by, and the Martin thundered along above a smiling valley. Hinkley watched the compass like a hawk, striving to hold exactly to the course they had calculated. Soon they were over the main range of mountains--for the next hour their only hope lay in those two mighty Libertys.

It was a scene of breath-taking majesty to look down on the far-rolling range, the mountain tops of which were less than a thousand feet below. The bottoms of the ravines, however, were far down, the infrequent

houses as tiny as doll dwellings. The altimeter showed six thousand feet.

Broughton's map showed that a small river, winding its way north and south, should come in sight very soon. By following that river northward until a railroad that twisted and turned on itself, crossed it, they would be twenty miles due east of Farran County. When they reached Farran County they would have to depend on observation to pick the right place, for only an approximate location was indicated on the map as Hayden's headquarters.

As they reached the crossing of the river and the railroad Broughton leaned over and tapped the motionless Graves on the shoulder. Graves turned, and Broughton pointed to the map and then below, indicating the crossing. Graves nodded.

As Hinkley turned due west and they roared toward their goal Graves studied the faces of his assistants once more. Hinkley's thin face was more hawklike than ever below the tight-fitting helmet and the goggles. The aerial headgear gave him a Mephistophelian appearance. There was a sort of perverse recklessness graven there, and not a trace of weakness. Broughton, clear-eyed and untroubled, seemed to typify quiet capability. Graves turned again to the primeval grandeur below with a contented smile.

In a moment Broughton and Hinkley changed seats again. It was more difficult this time, for the scrambled currents of the mountains were beginning to toss the great bomber around as if it were the lightest and least stable of scout planes. Masses of cloud above them made the air more bumpy, as always. The transfer was accomplished quickly, however, and then all three men began their difficult search for Hayden's cabin.

It was almost impossible that they should not be on the course--at least near enough to be able to see the cabin. Graves took out a pair of field glasses, and ceaselessly searched the ground below. One factor made the quest a trifle easier. Not a single mountain did they see which showed any sign of either clearing or habitation, so that there was no question, as yet, of making a choice.

It was a strip of country now where five-hundred feet cliffs and sheer ravines rivaled the majesty of the mountains. Save for the tremendous trees, in place of the scrubby mesquite, it reminded Broughton of the mountains around El Paso. To the border flyers country like that was no novelty. They checked up the maze of instruments frequently, but aside from that showed no signs of undue excitement.

Hinkley peered steadily northward for a moment, and then shook Graves by the shoulder. He pointed to a towering peak, on which a cleared spot stood out sharply. Before Graves could train his glasses on it a fleecy cloud blocked his vision. Broughton banked sharply and skirted the cloud.

Once again the view was clear, and for fully thirty seconds Graves scrutinized the clearing. Then he motioned Broughton to fly that way.

It was five or six miles away. Four minutes was sufficient to bring them almost over it. Once again the field-glasses came into play. Both flyers could see a large timber cabin built a little below the crest of the clearing, close to the trees. The clearing was on the eastern slope, including the top and perhaps twenty yards of the western slope. There did not appear to be ten yards of level earth--the mountain literally came to a blunt point.

Graves slowly inserted his glasses in his case, and then turned to the flyers. He nodded briefly, and pointed down.

Jim retarded the spark on the left hand motor, and motioned Hinkley to turn off the gas line. To do more good, he changed the altitude

adjustment completely. The object of all this was to lean down the gas mixture in the carburetor.

Shortly, as the gas had practically run out the motor began to pop back with loud reports. Hinkley turned the gas on again, and then Broughton began to click the switches on and off rapidly. It sounded as though there was a badly missing motor out there on the left wing.

He motioned Hinkley to follow his lead, in order to give himself a good opportunity to size up the landing situation. He was spiraling down slowly, with Hinkley seeing to it that the left motor was cutting out almost completely.

* * * * *

The long way of the clearing was uphill. The lower Broughton came, the steeper it looked. It appeared to be perhaps two hundred yards long, narrowing to nearly a point at the peak. The best way to crack up would undoubtedly be to run up the hill, over the top, and ram the trees with what little speed was left. There would undoubtedly be stumps or ditches which would crack them up before that, but the trees made it a sure thing.

A few men could be seen now, standing around the cabin. Graves studied them carefully, his glasses out once more. Broughton and Hinkley were inspecting that clearing, with no time for humans. Jim handled his great ship in that slow spiral automatically, jockeying the wheel incessantly as the air currents became worse.

Six hundred feet above the mountain top, he came to a decision. He could land without cracking up.

Hinkley worked the switches more rapidly, and Jim helped out by rapid thrusts forward and back with both throttle and spark levers. Popping, spitting, missing--no one who had ever heard a motor could believe that

the ungodly racket meant anything but a badly disabled engine.

Broughton spun the wheel rapidly, and turned westward, curving around until he was headed for the lower corner of the clearing. His line of flight would carry him diagonally from this corner to a point a few feet below the peak.

He stalled the Martin as completely as possible. The air-speed meter showed sixty-five miles an hour. The great weight of the ship caused it to drop almost as fast as it glided forward.

The rim of trees formed a barrier nearly sixty feet high. The tail-skid ripped through them. Jim fought the ship with one hand while he turned both throttles full on for a moment to stop that mush downward which was the result of lack of speed.

As he pulled them back Hinkley cut all four switches. Then Jim banked to the right, so that his wheels would hit the ground together. He judged it rightly. For a second he thought the ship was going to turn over on the right, or downhill wing. It seemed to hover on the verge of it. The pilot snapped on the right-motor switches and the propeller, turning from the force of the air-stream, caught. The motor sprang into life as Jim thrust the throttle full on. It swung the right wing in time, and he cut it as the ship's nose was turned up hill, both wheels on the same level. His observation as to the smoothness of the clearing had been correct. The slightest depression--even a rut--would have overturned the ship.

Before any one could say anything Jim felt the ship settle backward. It took a thousand revolutions on the right hand motor to stop it, but the propeller bit the air in time to prevent the tail-skid breaking.

"Work the left-hand switches while I taxi up!" yelled Jim into the pleased Hinkley's ear.

Graves, his face white but his smile firm, settled back in his seat as Jim pressed the starter on the left hand motor. It caught.

Several men came running over the brow of the hill as Jim turned up the left hand motor to equal the right. The thousand revolutions on the right hand motor had not been sufficient to move and thus swing the ship, but just enough to hold it steady. It started slowly. As soon as it had a little momentum Hinkley cut the switches, and at the same time Jim jerked the throttle back. A loud report, and a brief miss was the reward of their efforts. Graves looked back approvingly, and then turned to watch the group of men nearing the plane.

The ship almost stopped, and had started to swing, before the grinning flyers caught the left hand motor again. Its progress up the slope was spasmodic, and it would not have been a surety to the most expert of observers that the left hand motor was not suffering from a plugged gas line or an intermittent short circuit in the ignition. With the walking men close alongside, Jim brought the Martin to the top of the hill. There was just barely clearance enough for the wings.

As soon as the wheels were slightly over the top, enough so that the Bomber could not roll backwards, he turned off the gas. Soon the motors began to spit and miss, and then the propellers stopped. Broughton snapped off the switches.

“Now for the fun,” remarked Larry Hinkley.

V.

It was a miscellaneous collection of men who stood around the ship. Three of them were very well dressed and looked like business men. Others, mostly in flannel shirts, were slim, hard-faced, youngish fellows. Several were foreigners. The rougher-looking element paid most attention to the great ship, but it was a noticeable fact that all of them spent more time appraising the flyers than they did in satisfying their curiosity regarding the bomber.

“How do you do, gentlemen, and just where are we?” inquired Graves calmly as he removed his coveralls.

There was a few seconds pause as everybody took in his uniform. It was garnished with several rows of ribbons across the front of the blouse, the flyers noticed.

“This is in Farran County--nearest town Elm Hill,” returned a burly, hard-faced man who was wearing a coat over his flannel shirt, and loosely tied necktie. He was somewhat older than any one else there except the three men who were dressed so meticulously.

“How far is Elm Hill from here?”

It was Broughton who asked that question.

“Twenty miles. What’s the matter--have trouble?”

It was the hard-faced man again, and he glanced from face to face quickly as he asked the question. Two of the other men had walked to the end of a wing, inspecting the ship. The eyes of the others were constantly flitting from the ship to its passengers, and they listened closely.

“Yes. This ---- engine here went flooey on us. We’re lucky to get down alive,” replied Hinkley.

Both flyers were trying to pick Hayden out of the dozen men who surrounded them, but somehow none of them seemed exactly to fit their mental pictures of the noted criminal. Several of the crowd were conversing in low voices.

“Where were you going?” inquired one of the well-dressed men on the edge of the circle. He was small, wore glasses, and his thin face had a fox-like look about it that gave him a subtly untrustworthy appearance.

“Inasmuch as it seems necessary to throw ourselves on your hospitality for a while, it may be well to introduce ourselves,” Graves said quietly. In some uncanny way his dignity and competence seemed to radiate from him, increased by the prestige of his uniform. Both the airmen felt its influence.

“I am Colonel Graves, of the United States Army Air Service. These are Lieutenants Broughton and Hinkley. We are flying from Langham Field, Virginia, to Dayton, Ohio, on important army business. I trust that we will not trespass on your hospitality too long, but I fear we will have to dismantle the ship and send it home by rail. We can’t take off out of this field. We are lucky to have had such an experienced pilot as Lieutenant Broughton to land us. We did not expect to find so many people in this deserted place.”

A portly, fleshy-faced man with small eyes set in rolls of fat shoved his way forward. He had been talking to the fox-faced little man.

“Just a little fishing party up here,” he said with an attempt of heartiness. He was dressed in a rich-looking brown suit, and a huge sparkler gleamed from his elaborate silk cravat. He was smoking a big cigar.

He darted a warning look from his small eyes as two younger, roughly dressed men in the background allowed their heretofore guarded voices to become a bit too loud. One man caught the look, and ceased abruptly.

“It certainly is a good country for it,” replied Graves pleasantly. “I trust we will not impose on you too much----”

“Not at all, not at all,” the stout man assured him, but the looks of the others belied his words.

Groups had drawn off a little way and were conversing in undertones. All

the men seemed to have poker faces--there was no hint of expression in

them, although both flyers, as they removed their coveralls, caught disquieting as well as disquieted looks thrown their way. Graves continued to converse with the fat man. The tough-looking customer who

had originally joined the conversation stood by himself, meditatively chewing a blade of grass. His huge right hand, which had been in his coat pocket at the start, was lifted to his jutting, prize-fighter's chin, while his expressionless gray eyes dwelt steadily on the airmen.

“Quite some ship, eh? It's a big reskel!” The dialect of a New York east-side Jew came familiarly to the flyers' ears. It was a small, hook-nosed, black-haired man, whose shirt, tie and putteed legs all gave an impression of personal nicety even here in the wilderness. His face was somewhat pasty, and his lips very thin. He did not look over twenty-five.

“It sure is,” Hinkley assured him, throwing both pairs of coveralls into the cockpit of the ship.

Neither of the flyers wore a blouse, but were arrayed in O. D. shirts, breeches and boots. Both wore a sagging belt and holster, with the butt of a Colt .45 protruding from each container. Their garb and general appearance fitted the wildness of their surroundings perfectly. Graves had his automatic out of sight, in his pocket. The sight of the guns the flyers wore caused additional low-voiced conversation on the part of the onlookers.

The hard-faced American turned and started for the cabin without a word.

Hinkley and Broughton walked over toward Graves.

Every one but the fat man started to walk around the ship, examining it with interest. Broughton started to walk toward the lower edge of the clearing. He had an idea that he wanted to verify by pacing off the distance and examining the rim of trees on the lower end.

Graves was talking casually to the fat man, describing the flight, when a loud exclamation and a sudden burst of conversation caused him to turn. The machine guns had been noted for the first time.

“You fly well armed,” said the tall, stooping Jew nastily. Every one else was silent, awaiting Graves’ reply.

“The ship is from Langham Field, where all the planes are equipped for bombing and other tests against battle-ships,” was the easy reply.

Hinkley, who had been wondering whether Graves would think of that excuse, smiled admiringly.

“Doesn’t miss many bets,” he told himself. The fat man’s careful geniality was suddenly gone. While the knot of men who were now clustered close to the rear cockpit of the ship engaged in further low-voiced conversation his little eyes roved from nose to tail of the ship, coming back to rest on Graves’ untroubled face.

The man who had gone to the cabin came back over the hill. Another man

was with him--a powerfully built fellow who towered over his companion.

Every one became suddenly silent, as they came nearer. Hinkley knew instinctively that this was Hayden.

* * * * *

His deeply lined, somewhat fleshy countenance could have served as a model for the face of a fallen angel. The wide, cruel mouth, high forehead and square jaw all indicated strength, and yet suffering and dissipation were graven there. His eyes, as he approached the ship, were in direct contrast to the rest of his face. They were large and bright--the eyes of a dreamer, and they almost succeeded in counteracting the cruel force of his face. Hinkley had a glimpse of the man’s magnetism in those eyes.

“How do you do, colonel?” he said quietly.

His voice was deep and rich. He removed the slouch hat he wore, revealing thick black hair sprinkled with gray. It strengthened the impression that he had Slav blood in him, for his complexion was dark and his eyes liquid black.

“We dropped in on you unwillingly, but we are fortunate to find people here. My name is Graves.”

“I am glad to know you.”

He did not offer his hand, Hinkley noted. He stood quietly, looking at the ship. Broughton came back at this juncture, his eyes taking in the massive figure of the newcomer with slow appraisal.

There is an unconscious respect and curiosity engendered in even the most unemotional person by any man who is noted--or notorious. A great criminal, a great artist, a champion chess-player, the survivor of a widely heralded accident--anything unusual draws its meed of attention. Hayden, without the benefit of his reputation, was an arresting man. With it, he repaid study.

“I am very sorry, colonel, but we have but little food here--scarcely enough for our party. I will have some one guide you down to Elm Hill, where you will be more comfortable,” Hayden said at length.

“We have a little food in the ship. It’s getting late, and we’ll just sleep out here under the wings,” returned Graves quietly.

Suddenly a devil peered forth from Hayden’s eyes. The softness was gone, and savagery was there instead.

Graves looked into that queerly demoniac face without emotion. Apparently he did not feel the sudden tenseness that had every one in

its grip. All felt the battle of wills going on there--that there was something underneath which did not appear on the surface.

"I think I'll turn the ship around and head it into the wind," came Broughton's quiet voice.

It broke the tension. Graves turned to Broughton and Hinkley.

"I think it would be best. We'll give you a hand on the wing--it's a narrow place to turn in," he remarked casually.

Hinkley primed both motors from underneath, and Broughton got into the cockpit. As soon as the motors were running Hinkley and Graves set themselves against the left wing. With the right motor full on they succeeded in turning the ship until it was headed down the slope, pointing toward one corner.

"If you don't turn 'em into the wind the controls are liable to get flapping," Hinkley explained to all and sundry. "With a smaller ship, wind sometimes turns 'em over, getting under the wing, too."

Larry was wondering whether Broughton was planning to try a take-off. It looked like suicide to him, but Broughton was the doctor, Hinkley shrugged his shoulders at his thoughts, and then looked goodnaturedly at the lowering faces about him. He was enjoying himself.

Without another word Hayden walked toward the cabin. The others followed slowly.

"I'll be back in a moment," announced the fat man. "If there's anything you need----"

"Nothing, thank you," returned Graves.

“We are as welcome as rain at a picnic,” remarked Hinkley after the man had got out of earshot.

“Just about,” agreed Graves as Broughton returned. “To tell you the truth, I expected that we would get away with things a lot better than we seem to be doing. Those three well dressed men are undoubtedly some

of the higher-ups in Hayden’s organization--the man that went after him is Somers. He is the only one I know. Somers served ten years in jail for killing a man when he was a radical leader. It was a strike affair. His specialty used to be salted mines and that sort of stuff--he’s a rough customer who can take care of himself. I’m surprized to see him all dressed up out here--if he’s working the city end of Hayden’s scheme he’s rather out of his element. We believe he’s the actual leader on the robberies themselves. That little Jew, Meyer, is the only other man known to me personally. He’s a New York gangster--good with a gun.”

“How do things look to you?” inquired Broughton.

“The whole bunch is too ---- suspicious,”

Graves returned unemotionally. “Part of this gang are simply down here for a visit, I imagine, to consult with Hayden. He isn’t taking a chance on getting within miles of a big city policeman. I imagine that most of the men who do the actual robbing are here, too, hiding out until the next one is pulled. Probably the prosperous-looking men are the birds who help get rid of the securities Hayden gets hold of.”

There was silence for a moment. Graves paced up and down slowly, his head bent in thought.

“I’m going up to the cabin on the excuse of getting some water to see what I can see. We’ve got to work fast, I can see that. Hayden is audacious and brilliant, and suspicion is enough for this gang to work on.”

“The old boy seems to amount to something, all right,” was Hinkley’s tribute.

“He is a wonderful man. If he did not have that perverted twist in him, he might be almost anything. I would suggest that one of you fool around

with this supposedly missing motor, and the other one walk around and find out as much as possible about the guard system. We’ve got to be planning how we are going to get out of here. If you can do it without suspicion, you might see what they have along that lane there.”

* * * * *

Graves started for the cabin as he finished speaking. Hinkley strolled carelessly over toward the lane which led away from the cabin into the woods. Broughton climbed up on the motor with a wrench in his hand and commenced tinkering with the valves.

The cabin door was open, and Graves could hear a conversation in which many low-pitched voices took part. He walked in calmly. All conversation ceased as he entered.

“Could we borrow a pail of some kind and get some drinking water?” he asked, taking in his surroundings with a single lightning-like look around.

There were eight bunks, built double-decker, against the four walls of the cabin. Each was occupied now by a cigaret-smoking man. Hayden stood in a doorway which apparently led into a small lean-to at the rear. Somers was sitting on a rude stool. There was one small table, littered with candle grease and cigaret butts. There was only one window, close to the ceiling. A sort of half-darkness made it difficult to make out the features of the men lying on the bunks.

He waited fully a half minute before receiving an answer. Then the fat man got to his feet.

“I’ll get you one,” he said.

He had darted a quick look at Hayden, Graves noticed, before saying anything.

He saw nothing but suspicion in the faces of the men about him. He surmised that few of them lived there, but were there for a meeting with their chief. Perhaps that might account for their attitude of extreme suspicion, which did not seem justified under the circumstances. Then there was always the possibility that some one of them might know him.

“How long do you think it will be before you get the plane out, Colonel?”

It was Hayden’s deep, rich voice.

“Several days, I imagine,” returned Graves, watching his man narrowly.

“I should think that unless your headquarters were notified where you were----”

It was a half question.

“We will wire from Elm Hill tomorrow. If we do not, they will have forty planes out looking for us,” Graves explained.

He caught several meaning looks passing between various of the men at his last statement.

“I should think it would be a very difficult job to locate a plane that was really wrecked in these hills. Of course in your case you’re in a clearing and it would be easy.”

Hayden's voice was smooth and his words almost pleasant, but there was nothing in his eyes now to give the lie to his face. He was the personification of power and ruthlessness.

Graves' sixth sense, developed by years of contact with the world of crime and intrigue, warned him now. His mind probed behind Hayden's apparently casual words, and what the government man thought he found made him look at Hayden with new amazement. He thought back over the things he knew of the man before him.

For years he had been a thorn in the side of enforcers of the law all over Europe and America. A dozen times big coups--jewel robberies, bank robberies, huge swindling schemes--had been laid at his door, but never yet had he been caught dead to rights because of his genius for organization and leadership. There was a South American revolution which star chamber gossip of the secret service said that Hayden had conceived, promoted, and finally cleared a hundred thousand dollars on. When supposedly he had left the country, police and secret service alike had drawn long breaths of relief.

There was bigness and sweep about Hayden, and Graves knew that what he suspected of the man's plans concerning himself and the two flyers was by no means too audacious for Hayden to contemplate. He would order it with no compunction, and it would be a mere trifle for those men lying around the room to execute.

These thoughts raced through his head as he relighted his cigar.

“Traveling by plane is queer business,” he remarked casually as he threw the match out the door. “We often have trouble with people, strange as it may seem. Moonshiners through this state, Tennessee and Kentucky always think we’re after them if we have a forced landing anywhere near by. Miners and hill-billys and their sort always figure army men and an airplane are there for some purpose. Consequently we always go on a trip well prepared with food, and heavily armed.”

He watched the effect of his words on his listeners. He was disappointed. His explanation of the artillery the Martin carried, besides what he had said about the ship being from Langham Field, apparently had no effect in lightening the heavy suspicion that he could feel in the very air about him.

“Well, if you’ll be good enough to give me the pail and show me where the water is I’ll go back to the food,” he said.

The fat man led him outside and around the corner to a small tent which sheltered a stove. A plank table with benches was beside it.

A young Italian who appeared to be the cook gave them a pail.

“The spring is right down the path. You can’t miss it,” said the guide.

His small eyes did not meet Graves’ regard for more than a second.

The government man got the water and went back to the Martin. He found Hinkley already there.

“Find out anything?” he asked as he set down the pail.

“There’s a tent and three men on the top of a steep cliff right above the road. They all seem to be foreigners. And you ought to see the cliff on the lower side of the road. Anybody that stepped off that would have time enough to say his prayers and make a will before he hit bottom.

Those three men could hold that road against an army if they had a machine-gun. I came near getting shot myself. They said they were camping.”

“It sure looks like a musical comedy war,” remarked Broughton, sitting cross-legged on the motor.

“There may not be so much comic opera stuff about it, at that,” stated Graves, removing the cigar from his mouth. “It’s bad.”

He told them briefly of his experience, and then went on:

“The size of the matter is, gentlemen, that those men are up to big things. They’re so big and Hayden is in such a predicament that in my opinion he will take no chances. It was only the luck of having an operative over here who happened to be very familiar with Hayden that caused us to know he was here. In view of the questions he asked me about the difficulty of finding a wrecked plane in these mountains, plus what he is, I believe he plans to kill us, burn the plane, and then bury the motors or something. I expect that if I am right it will happen tonight.”

His words were as calm and precise as though he were discussing the weather. He replaced the cigar in his mouth and puffed it slowly.

“Somehow or other I can’t believe they would go that far on suspicion,” said Hinkley. “They----”

“Are playing for big stakes, lieutenant,” Graves cut in. “And you cannot figure them as normal. Somers has killed men--he was in jail ten years. Hayden would sanction anything necessary for the success of his project. What are our three lives to them, compared to the prizes they are playing for, or the results of their being run down?”

“Lots of people will have seen our ship passing over,” suggested Broughton. “They may figure that the army will just say another wreck and let it go, but an investigation might be embarrassing.”

“They could kill us in such a way that it would look like a wreck,” said Graves. Burn our bodies with the plane, or something like that;”

Both airmen nodded.

“Well, what are you going to do about it?” Hinkley inquired.

“If you’ll pardon me, Mr. Graves, I have a scheme that might work,” announced Broughton. “It’s no better than a fifty-fifty shot, but I believe that you’re right, the more I think of it, and in that case I believe our chances of ever getting Hayden and getting out of here are about as good as the old snowball in ----. I’ve got a crazy idea we could take off here.”

Hinkley was not greatly surprized, but Graves was.

“You really think so?” he inquired with the nearest approach to eagerness that the flyers had ever seen him show.

Broughton nodded.

“On account of the slope, only half a load of gas and oil now, and the fact that even if we stall completely getting over those trees that the mountainside is so steep we can nose down and get up speed. What do you think, Larry?”

“Just about fifty-fifty,” was Hinkley’s reply. “Of course I don’t know a great deal about Martin bombers--I’m a pursuit man and Jim here is the big-ship expert. It’ll be a hair-raiser, with everything to lose and pretty nearly everything to gain. Inasmuch as these yeggs are so suspicious, I don’t believe we’d have a Chinaman’s chance to get Hayden and get out of here----”

“Except by strategy they won’t understand,” Broughton cut in. “You see, Mr. Graves, I figure it this way. If you tell them we’re going, they’ll

lose some of their suspicion. Probably half the reason for killing us would be to prevent our telling anybody about their funny rendezvous up here, plus the plausible reason for our death if anybody gets nosing around. The ship gives them that----”

“And any of them who are afraid of the police through their past reputations could disappear while some unknown tells the army all about the wreck,” Graves suggested.

“Exactly,” agreed Broughton. “They’ll lose their suspicion, and will think that we see nothing unusual in this place. When the motors start they’ll all be out for the take-off. By some hook or crook we ought to be able to get Hayden near enough the ship and a little away from the others so that we can knock him on the head, chuck him in the back cockpit, and give the old ship the gun.”

“If they’re all too near, one of us can get in the back, fiddle with the machine gun, and then suddenly announce that we’ll mow down the crowd unless Hayden gives himself up,” said Hinkley amiably.

* * * * *

Graves was almost excited at the hopeful vista suggested by the flyers. His pace was a little faster than usual as he covered a path twenty feet long over and over again. A fresh, unlighted cigar was clamped in the extreme corner of his well-chiseled mouth.

“Of course I am in your hands as far as flying is concerned,” he said as though talking to himself. “I don’t know how many of them will be armed, but the chances are that in the excitement the shooting will not be very accurate.”

Every one was silent for a moment. Then Broughton made another suggestion.

“They will be back of us, sir, and if we can get in the front cockpit fast the bomb compartment, which is as high as our heads, will protect us from shots while we are taking off. They’ll ricochet off the steel runway, I believe, at the angle of fire they’ll shoot at. Besides, they’ll hold their fire at first for fear of hitting Hayden.”

Graves threw his untasted cigar away.

“We’ll do it,” he said calmly. “There are men with field-glasses over on that mountain there keeping watch. If we fail, all hope of getting Hayden alive and without publicity will be gone, but no man up here will get out. All the routes are blocked, if they only knew it. It will mean a lot of men killed capturing this party, and our swoop on Hayden’s gang all over the country will be incomplete, but we’ll have done our best.”

“Let’s get the motor started then, right away,” said Broughton. “It’s getting dark already.”

The western sky was red as fire still, but the sun itself had dipped behind the mountains and the valleys were filling with purple shadow.

The motors were started without trouble. The roar of them brought every one out of the shack. Luck was with the flyers, for only three men came close to the ship--Hayden, Somers, and little Meyer. All the rest of the men stayed near the shack, fifty yards away from the Martin. The machine-gun holdup appeared to be unnecessary. The three men stopped about ten yards away.

Graves walked up to them.

“We have the ship fixed, and have decided to try a take-off,” he said.

The comfort this brought to the three agitators was obvious. Graves looked around and beckoned to Hinkley, who strolled up casually. Broughton was idling the motors, now, and preparing to climb out.

Graves went a few steps to meet the flyer.

“Get close to Meyer and disarm him when I give the signal. Tell Broughton to do the same to Somers--knock him on the head if necessary.

I’ll get Hayden, and then the three of us can heave him in the back cockpit and get in before that gang up there can get their guns. I don’t believe any of them carry revolvers.”

Hinkley grinned delightedly.

“Fast work, partner,” he breathed.

The three were standing quietly, talking in low tones, when Hinkley and Broughton came up.

“Well, good-by,” said Graves, extending his hand to Hayden. Broughton and Hinkley watched him closely.

His fist shot up like a flash of light, carrying all his weight with it. The big man fell like an ox. At the same time the two flyers leaped in, revolvers in hand, and crashed the butts down on the heads of their respective victims. It was such a complete surprize that the ruse was funny in its effectiveness.

Somers and Meyer were disarmed in a trice. Before the astonished henchmen of Hayden had recovered from their surprize and covered half the distance between the cabin and the ship the three government men had heaved the unconscious Hayden into the rear cockpit and were scrambling forward over the bomb compartment.

Without waiting for belts to be adjusted Broughton jammed on both throttles. Bullets sang close to them; the gang had held their fire at first for fear of hitting Hayden, and now the bomb compartment shielded the flyers completely. Their heads did not show above it.

By the time the marksmen had realized this and had veered to go around the wing the ship was in motion. For a few seconds two men wrenched at the rudders in a mad effort to disable the plane, but the sturdy controls held. Then the Martin was moving so fast that the men had to let go.

For twenty-five yards Broughton ruddered the ship straight down the slope. It was extremely steep there, and the heavy ship picked up speed amazingly. Then Jim swung it slightly to the left, to get the benefit of the extra yards that would give him.

The trees rushed nearer with terrible swiftness. There came a quivering bounce, and then, with a feeling of infinite relief, he felt the ship leave the ground. He pulled the wheel back as far as it would go.

The Martin made it. There was not an inch of margin, for the elevators and rudders swished through the trees and the nose of the ship dropped in a stall. For two hundred feet Broughton had all he could do to keep it from dragging in the trees on that nearly sheer mountain side. Then it picked up speed, and with both Libertys still running wide open turned eastward through the thickening shadow, streams of fire from the exhausts trailing behind like banners of triumph.

VI.

The peak they had left was a trifle higher than any of the others, so it was unnecessary for Broughton to waste time getting altitude. The Martin drove steadily eastward over the murky world below.

Probably no ship is ever so helpless as when flying over country like that at night, but the successful culmination of their adventure was such a tonic to the airmen that the chance of a forced landing seemed only a minor thing, scarcely to be considered.

In a few minutes Graves turned and passed a note back to Hinkley. The tall flyer read it with difficulty in the darkness, and then passed it to Broughton, steadying the wheel to give the pilot an opportunity to read it:

Although the ammunition and guns in the back are packed where I do not believe Hayden can get at them, I believe it would be wise for me to climb back there in order to take no chances with him. He is desperate, and might try to take us all to ---- with him.

It would be an easy matter for Graves to get from his cockpit into the flyer's compartment, and from there back to the rear cockpit. The roof of the bomb compartment provided a four-foot runway which is not a difficult matter for an experienced airman to negotiate. Nevertheless, climbing around a ship under the best of conditions is no parlor sport.

It was a tribute to Graves' nerve that Broughton looked at Hinkley and then nodded at Graves. The secret agent promptly unbuckled his belt and crawled beneath the instrument board into their cockpit.

With the aid of wire and struts he inched himself over the flyers' heads, and started crawling along the runway. Broughton throttled as low as he dared to kill speed. The air was smooth as glass, as it always is at night, which made Graves' attempt easier.

Finally Hinkley turned to Broughton and nodded with a wide grin. Broughton relaxed from the strain of keeping the ship absolutely level, and looked around. No one could be seen in the rear cockpit. Then Graves' head appeared, and the firm mouth was smiling beneath the big goggles. He nodded cheerfully. Apparently everything was all right. Hayden's head had come into contact with something when they had heaved him in, Broughton surmised, and he was probably as unconscious as a sack

of meal.

They were now a speck in the starry sky above the mountains. In every direction nothing but the black voids of the valleys and the shadowed sides of towering mountains met the eye. Both flyers had seen awe-inspiring sights in the air, but there were few which could compare with the panorama spread out below them now. There was mystery and greatness there--widely scattered pin points of light from the wilderness, with an occasional far-off cluster that represented a town--all contributing to a grandeur and beauty which was more impressive because less seen than suggested.

* * * * *

Suddenly Hinkley's long fingers gripped Broughton's arm. He pointed to the right hand motor. For a moment Broughton could not fathom his meaning. Then his heart sunk as he realized what had happened.

A tiny spray of water was spurting from the radiator. Perhaps one of the bullets had hit it and weakened it, or more likely it was only a failure in the material. In any event, it meant that within a few minutes all the water would be gone, and even before that happened the motor would be useless.

The pilot strove to pierce the gloom below to discover any sign of a landing place. There was none. Parachute flares would do no good down there--one can land in the trees blindly with as much chance for life as in the daytime.

While Broughton was still trying to pick up some clearing, which would show lighter than the woods, Hinkley loosened his belt. He leaned over to yell into Broughton's ear:

"I think I can hold it for a while!"

He threw his leg over the side of the cockpit, leaning far backward to avoid the propeller which was whirling within inches of him. Finally he decided not to risk it, and climbed back. He went back on the bomb compartment and crawled down on the wing from there. Little by little he made his way forward to the leading edge of the wing. Once again even the throwing of an arm for a few inches would mean being mangled by the propeller.

He held to the struts and made his way to the motor. The design of the radiator helped his scheme. On a Martin it is a square contrivance set up above the motor, and well toward the rear of it. On most planes the radiator is in front of the motor, with the propeller turning two inches in front of it.

Hinkley fought the wind viciously while he extracted a half dollar from his pocket and wrapped it in his handkerchief. It took precious time to accomplish it on his perilous perch, and all the while the water was getting lower. Already Broughton had opened the motor shutters wide to hold the temperature down.

Finally Hinkley placed the wrapped coin against the leak. He pressed hard against it with his hand. He could feel the handkerchief soaking, but he knew that the motor would last many precious minutes more because he had reduced the leak by over half. He set himself as comfortably as he could. One foot was less than an inch from the edge of the wing. His right arm was crooked around a strut. His left held the temporary barrier against the radiator. In this position he fought the propeller blast.

The heat of the water made him change hands frequently. Once he nearly fell into the propeller doing it, for both hands had to be free for a second at one time in order that the coin be always pressed against the

leak.

Then he had to change fingers, for his thumbs were both scalded. One by one he used the tip of each finger, and one by one they scalded. His thin lips were set into a line that was like a livid cut in his face, but the makeshift plug was always there. He did not even glance at the ground six thousand feet below. He wondered whether Broughton knew what

he was suffering, and would land at the first opportunity.

Broughton did, but for a half hour he could find no place. Then the great ship cleared the last peak. Over beyond the foothills plowed fields gleamed dully in contrast to the black spots of trees.

The left hand motor was eighty-five Centigrade, flying throttled to a thousand revolutions and with the shutters wide open. It was difficult to handle the ship with the right motor turning up so much more. Broughton came to a decision. To take a chance was the only way.

He cut the right hand motor until it “revved” up a thousand, and started a shallow dive. In a moment the Martin was diving through the gloom at a hundred miles an hour. It was only three thousand when they cleared the foothills. The country was still ragged, but it was level.

Broughton pulled his left parachute flare. A sense of ineffable relief filled him as he saw a fiery ball drop earthward. Those flares didn’t work as invariably as they might.

The eyes of the three airmen, stranded there in the darkness, followed that ball of fire with unwinking eyes. Suddenly it burst, and a brilliant flare swung downward on a small parachute. The earth was lighted up fairly well in a circle of at least a mile’s radius.

Broughton cut his motors still further. He beckoned to Hinkley. Hinkley knew the desperate need for haste--that flare would not last long and the other one, hung to the right hand wing-tip, might not work. He

worked his way rapidly back to the cockpit, careless of his raw fingertips as he grasped wires and struts to help him along. The flare was within three hundred feet of the ground, and the Martin a thousand, when he reached the seat and strapped his belt.

There was just one possible field. It was a cornfield, apparently, about seventy-five yards long. There was a fence at both ends. Next to one fence was a road. On the far side of the other was a very small clump of woods.

The flare was growing dim and perilously near the ground as the Martin, with all switches cut, skimmed the fence and settled. The corn was nearly as high as the bottom wing. The bomber no more than hit the ground before darkness came as suddenly as though a light had been turned off in a room.

The ship wavered, and there was a rending crunch from the landing gear. Then a crash as the ship nosed up slowly and the front shell of the observers cockpit folded back until it loosened the instrument board.

“Hooray!”

It was Hinkley shouting.

“Jim, I _never_ was so glad to get on the ground in my life!”

Broughton made a wry face. He was suddenly weak from the strain.

For a moment the two sat there motionless, not even bothering to unloosen their belts. Then Hinkley turned to look at Graves. That gentleman was unloosening his belt.

“We thought you might want to smoke a cigaret, so we landed,” said Hinkley.

Graves held up the frazzled butt of a cigar.

“I chewed it up from the time you got out there on the wing,” he replied. “We came pretty near trading a Martin for a pair of honest-to----- wings, didn’t we?”

“Or coal-shovels,” grinned Hinkley.

“How’s Hayden?”

“Came to once and I put him out again and tied him up,” replied Graves calmly. “Let’s flag this car coming down the road and see where we are. I’d like to get the first train I can get to.”

“We’re not far from either Lexington or Richmond. I saw the lights of a big town a few miles north,” said Broughton as all three men climbed out.

They lifted Hayden out of the back seat. His head was bandaged, and he was still unconscious.

“I bandaged him up--he was bleeding pretty badly,” remarked Graves, lighting a new cigar with a steady hand. “Let’s get over to the road--there’s a regular parade of autos coming.”

A string of headlights extending so far that some were mere points of light were coming down the road. The noise of a Martin, plus the parachute flare, had aroused the whole country.

Broughton lingered behind to use an electric-flashlight on the ship. The ground was soft, and there was a ditch they had hit, besides. That was the reason for the nose-over. It was better so, he reflected. They would have run into the fence and then the trees at the further end of the field, and some one would probably have been hurt.

Within fifteen minutes there were a hundred marveling people around. The flyers hired a guard for the ship, and then accepted the invitation of a man who drove a luxurious touring car to spend the night at his home.

Hayden, whose identity was not revealed, spent the night in the town jail of Ellis, Virginia, guarded by the tireless Graves in addition to the regular warden, and accompanied that gentleman to Washington by train early the next morning. He was handcuffed, and rode in a baggage car to avoid publicity.

As he was leaving Graves shook hands with the flyers in a matter-of-fact way.

“You’ll hear from me,” he stated. “Perhaps I may see you again before long. Good-by.”

* * * * *

Hinkley and Broughton had to wait for a crew to come from Langham Field

to dismantle the Martin and ship it home. The day after their return to the field the newspapers blossomed forth with across-the-page headlines telling of the round-up of a stupendous conspiracy which had been responsible for the series of great robberies that had been astounding the country.

The story of Hayden’s capture was not a part of the press reports, and Hayden himself was not too prominent in them. They saw Graves’ fine hand

in that. They could readily realize that any revelation of their identity would be more dangerous than the glory involved would warrant, even were they desirous of nibbling at the fruits of fame.

A few days thereafter there came a letter to each of them. The contents were alike. There were two copies of a letter signed by that same great government official whose name had appeared on Graves’ letter of authority. The letter was addressed to the Secretary of War. As they read those letters Hinkley’s smile was as mocking as ever and Broughton’s face as stoical, but each of them still has his copy, carefully locked up and preserved as though the most precious of

possessions. As Hinkley once confided to Broughton while slightly under the influence of the demon rum--

“I don’t think a bit more of that letter than I do my right eye!”

[Transcriber’s Note: This story appeared in the December 7, 1923 issue of The Popular Magazine.]