

# VIRGINIA OF THE AIR LANES

A Romance Of Flying

By HERBERT QUICK

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CHAPTER XVI

A RACE WITH THE ELEMENTS.

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

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

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

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

"What are the harbor rules?" asked Carson.

"Hanged if I know," replied Craighead.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"There's an opening yonder in the rain," said Carson. "If it doesn't close up we may slip through to the back of the storm again."

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

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

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

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

As he spoke they passed under the rain cloud.

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

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

Even Craighead's voice was hushed in awe. Like the fairy domes of some city of orient, the clouds of the mountain, their summits white in the moonlight, their folds dark like a dove's wing. Suddenly the lightning blazed out in the heart of the black haze on which the city of enchantment

was reared, and instantly the whole vast fabric grew white and palpitant and terrible, while the blue sky beyond and above it turned black velvet by contrast. The lightning ceased, and there hung the billowy cloud, silver white and drab on a base of darkness, as before. The air had grown chill as with frost, and still the clouds were far above them. The bite of the propellers on the air seemed to fall, for the cloud masses no longer appeared to fall as when the aeromat was rising.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The hold had blossomed suddenly in fire. The lakes edged with lights glimmered like mirrors; the clustered arc lights delimited the high mesa like a map; the winding labyrinth of incandescents netted the peaks like glowing Lilliputian threads about the recumbent Gulliver, and in the midst stood a great roomy colonnaded mansion, its wings in shade, its central court agleam, the radiant heart of an elaborate splendor. Carson drew in his breath sharply.

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

Craighead was silent.

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

With the ancient instinct of the sur-reptitious lever he made for the angle between two dark wings of the great house. Glimmers of light from two windows were their sole sign of occupancy, the center of human concourse being about that core of light in the court. The wings seemed like low adjuncts for conservatories or billiard rooms, and the angle between, with its light mottling, looked like a flower sprinkled lawn on which Carson felt confident of placing the Virginia gently and with no disturbance. With a slow soaring motion the aeromat came into the angle like a steamer into her

slip—and found, instead of a lawn, a graveled roof cluttered with tables and chairs as if for the serving of refreshments. Among these the Virginia nosed in, dumped some chairs into the court and settled down amid crackling furniture and crashing pottery.

The Roc had escaped Shayne's Hold just in time to escape the storm, and the wearied Virginia had retired, sick of the harping of her aunt upon the disgrace of her sojourn with "Uncle Theodore," weary of telling how innocent it had been. With a book close to the light she was composing her mind to sleep, when into the dreamy quietude came a purring that was so unmistakably the voice of the aeromat that Virginia rose, with her hand to her heart, in an amazement not all unpleasant, wondering where her namesake might alight and what Shayne's hired constabulary might do with Theodore, when from the roof came a scolding, chairs and tables went over the parapet with a crash, and the voices of Craighead and Carson came in at the window, low, hurried and agitated.

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

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

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

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

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

"Thank God!" said Virginia.

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

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

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

"Mr. Craighead!"

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

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

"Please come here," said the voice.

"Virginia!" cried Carson.

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

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

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

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

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

"That's in my department," replied Craighead. "And tell your friend that we shall be with him in the courts."

A murmur of voices arose from the court, and lights flashed out, illuminating the roof.

"I can't go," said Carson. "I must speak. I was wrong not to tell you of your mistake, but I loved you from the moment I picked you up from the sand and carried you into the cabin. I couldn't say you had no place to go. I wanted you, and I didn't think of anything that—that could remind me of—of your reputation!"

"Mr. Craighead, tell your friend," went on Virginia, and her voice now faltered, "that I shall consider what he says and that I shall cease to be angry by ceasing to remember him. And now go!"

"We are here for no bad purpose," said Theodore firmly, "and we shall not do it."

"Foolish boy!" cried Virginia. "They will confine you at their pleasure through officers that can act legally and study the airship and steal your creation. Go, I beg of you—go!"

There were a knocking at the door and loud voices demanding admission. Virginia extended her hands imploringly as she spoke, and Theodore seized them.

"I will go," said he, "when you tell me when I may seek you and make my explanations. I have the right, Virginia!"

"Oh, oh!" she cried. "You are cruel! You are putting the blame of your ruin on me! Go, go!"

"When may I see you again?"

"When you have won your fight for the Virginia," answered she, "when the fruits of your genius are saved to you—you will go to it once—or when you are completely ruined, maybe!"

"Hurry, old man!" cried Craighead. "They're putting up ladders."

Shayne's voice was heard outside the door, giving orders that it be broken in, and some person hurried himself against it unavailingly. A flat cap appeared above the roof, and as the man under it mounted the ladder, carrying a pistol, Craighead seized an overturned chair and, screwing its legs into the breast and face of the scaler as he fired a shot, dumped him neatly into the arms of three or four servants in the court, after which he examined the chair leg, shouting, "No meat on it; I shall starve!" and threw the chair down after the man. Leaping into the air, he shouted to Carson to come or he would have to walk.

The discharge of the pistol admonished Theodore of the seriousness of his situation and emphasized Virginia's pleading. He clasped her in his arms. She feebly pushed him off, but yielded to overpowering force.

"I shall come again—for your love," said he.

"I promise nothing," she whispered, "except to consider—Oh, Theodore, go! Please, for my sake, go!"

Her face was upturned in pleading, and he kissed her mouth, once, twice, and as her door crashed in he gently released her, leaped into the car with Craighead and threw on the clutches. The aeromat, rising, soared above the great house and sped off into the night amid the whizzing of bullets and the crackling of firearms.

(To Be Continued.)

**Dead in Mine a Year.**  
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**Wanted**—Let your wants be known. Carl's Employment Agency, Phone 950.

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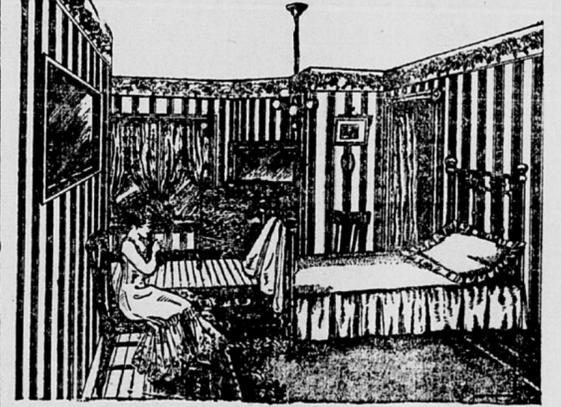
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