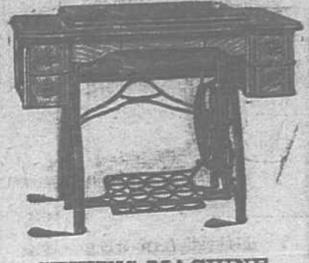


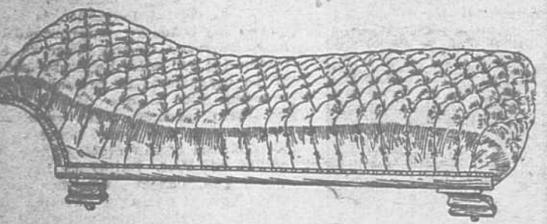
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The SKY PIRATE
 by GARRETT P. SERVISS.

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(Continued from yesterday.)
 "Get in line of that hummock."
 "This side of it?"
 "I reckon so, but it's hard to say."
 I had expected some such maneuver during the night, but I was not prepared for it now. The first thought that came to me was that Payton must have another hiding place here and that he had dropped into it.
 "We'll hold the course for that point," I said, "and not slacken speed."
 Glancing astern, I saw the Skylark sod run up a signal for her to hasten. I calculated that the "hummock" was twenty miles off. We should be there in about eight minutes.

CHAPTER XV.
A FIGHT NEAR THE CLOUDS.

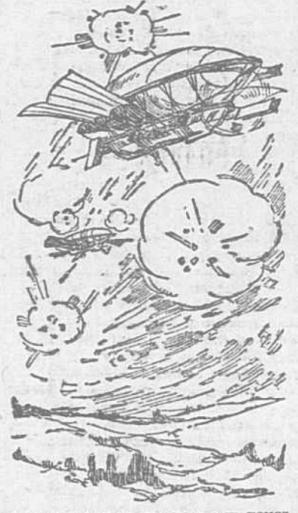
I AWOKE both the secretary and Mr. Grayman as soon as the new situation developed, and they came out on deck. Mr. Grantham immediately fell in with my opinion.
 "The rascal has another port there," he said. "I wish the other aerus would come up."
 "The Skylark," I replied, "will soon be here, but we cannot wait for her. Payton has either run out of power or he means to make a stand. We are so close upon him that he will have to make a stand anyhow or else try to escape under our guns, and if I know Ethan Haight's style of shooting the fellow won't run far."
 "But remember, sir, my daughter is aboard," broke in Grayman. "Her life must not be endangered."
 "Surely not," I replied. "Yet you see yourself that some risk must be taken. What I shall try to do is to disable the Chameleon. A shell into her motors or the breaking of one of her aeroplanes would do it."
 "But then she might be precipitated to the ground."
 "But she is not likely to be. She would flutter down, if she fell at all, like a wounded bird. Remember how the Eagle behaved last night and she was badly hit. Then, of course, Payton has parachutes, and he would save his prisoners in that way."
 "I'm not so sure of that," said the secretary. "He would probably think only of saving his own neck. But really, Grayman, the danger of a tumble is slight. In the battle above the English channel between the French and British aero squadrons during the last war thirty fliers were completely disabled, shot to pieces, as far as any further utility as fighting machines was concerned, but not one of them fell into the water. All succeeded in skimming to land on one side or the other."
 "If we can," said I, "we'll stop him before he can get ashore."
 "You think he is on this side of the hummock?" asked the secretary.
 "Ethan thinks so, but is not sure. We'll have to look closely now."
 While we were talking we had drawn up within a couple of miles of the hummock, which was a round hill covered with timber and rising to a height of perhaps 150 feet out of a broad, level plain, where there were few trees and vegetation of all kinds except grass was scanty. I now slowed up, for I didn't want to run into an ambush. Seeing nothing suspicious in the vicinity of the hill from our side, I concluded to circle it, keeping a good offing and a sharp outlook.

"Confound the fellow!" exclaimed the secretary. "Where can he have gone? He must have a hole in the ground."
 "Perhaps he is among the timber on the hill," I said, and upon this thought I ordered the steersman to rise, at the same time turning inward. We had not risen more than fifty feet when Ethan Haight shouted:
 "There he goes!"
 "Where?" cried Mr. Grantham and I in a breath, running to Ethan's side as he stood by his gun in the bow.
 "Low down a'most a'tother side of the hummock," replied Ethan, pointing. "He's as green as a grasshopper, but I kin sight 'im."
 And Ethan began to manipulate his gun.

It was several seconds before I succeeded in catching sight of the Chameleon, which, verily, as Ethan had said, was as green as a grasshopper and as hard to spy against the verdure that covered the plain, for she was running almost in contact with the ground. If we had not edged round the hill toward the west so quickly he would probably have got clean away under the shelter of the hill.
 Payton's ruse was so simple and yet so perfectly executed that it made me redden with vexation. Why he had not tried a similar game during the night I could not imagine, unless he thought that he could easily distance us and gave up that idea after he found that the Osprey was hanging on after daylight. He had merely dropped down off the hither side of the wooded hill, a lone elevation in the midst of the plain, changed his color, crept round the base of the hill, keeping opposite to us, whom he could doubtless see through the treetops all the while, and when he found himself on the southern side and we on the northern had stolen away like a slinking fox.
 Now he was off for the south at the top of his speed. Already he was fully three miles away and gaining distance at every stroke.
 "For heaven's sake, Ethan," I shouted, "why don't you fire?"

"I know how to wing a duck, too," he returned. "If the rascal hadn't been so nifty long this morning one of his flippers 'd have 'dopped' in."
 "I wish you did hurt him, Ethan," I said. "I can't otherwise account for his lack of speed. Last night he gained on us; now we are gaining on him. Our speed is a trifle better than it was, but not enough to explain the difference."
 Ethan's eyes lighted as he exclaimed: "I know it, lieutenant! I know that shot wasn't altogether fur nuthin'."
 Payton now gradually increased his elevation until he almost reached the level of the lower clouds, and at the same time the Chameleon again underwent changes of color, turning first sky blue and afterward white, when it became difficult at times to find her against the dazzling cloud surfaces and pale sky.

I considered what the fellow would do now that we were unmistakably drawing up on him. But when we had got just within range and Ethan was drawing a bead in earnest Payton lost not a second in deciding what to do. He swung the Chameleon broadside to, and an ugly blue flash showed at each end of her simultaneously. We anxiously awaited the arrival of the projectiles, and at the same time Ethan fired.
 Unlike a ship, as a aero when she is broadside to presents a more difficult mark because then her aeroplanes are seen more or less edgewise.
 Both of the Chameleon's shots passed under us, but Ethan's was better pitched, and our glasses showed that the solid projectile had hit one of her "flippers," as he called them. He followed with another, which was effective near the same spot. A moment later both of the Chameleon's guns spit blue fire again; but, as before, they were aimed too low, and the shot went whistling a good 150 feet below us.
 "Why don't you swing round and give him both your guns, top?" asked the secretary.
 "Because," I replied, "I want to run him down. Now, Ethan, keep it up."
 Ethan's third shot hit the same aeroplane that had already been touched. If it had been a shell it might have demolished it, but the Chameleon's conduct showed that the damage was not yet serious enough to stop her or even hinder her action.
 However, she fired no more, but instead turned tail. Evidently Payton, finding that he was receiving more damage than he could inflict, meant to trust again to his heels.
 "That won't save him!" I exclaimed exultantly. "We've got him now. He's worse damaged than he was, and if he couldn't outfoot us then he's got no chance now."
 While I was speaking I noticed that the Chameleon had turned almost directly skyward. Beyond and above during the fight a huge white cloud had come sailing up. Payton made directly for this cloud, and hardly two minutes had elapsed when Ethan called out:
 "Gone into the cloud, by thunder, and disappeared!"
 It was exactly true. The Chameleon was instantly swallowed from our sight. We could see where she had entered the cloud by the commotion of the vapors.
 "Up and after him!" I shouted to the steersman.
 With all speed we darted at the cloud and entered it. I calculated that he would run straight through it and then make a turn on the other side, but I thought that we could get there in time to catch him at his antics. So we shot straight through the cloud.
 But Payton knew or divined what I didn't. Beyond this cloud lay two others, separated by a considerable interval, but on the same level. As we emerged on the other side of the first we came in sight of the others, one to the right, the other to the left. The Chameleon was nowhere to be seen. She had evidently crossed the narrow opening between the clouds.
 But which one? A sudden inspiration came to me.
 "Send a five second timed shell into each of those clouds while we hold our course," I said to Ethan.
 "These shells were so contrived that their fuses were started by the discharge of the gun. It was like shooting into a thicket at a suspected deer, and I regretted the order the moment it had left my lips, but it was too late for a countermand. Ethan's first mark was the right hand cloud. I had never seen a projectile fired into a cloud, and the effect surprised us all.
 As the projectile dove into the round, marble looking mass of vapor a minute hole seemed to open, and round this instantly played a raged mass of brief lightning flashes. Then the vapor a hundred yards on all sides was thrown into commotion, turning toward the streaming lines to follow the shell. This was well timed, for apparently it exploded in the very center of the cloud, which afterward appeared to be agitated by contending winds, while boiling rifts opened at various places. But the mass was too dense to give us a view through it.



THEY WENT AT IT, HAMMER AND TONGUE.

coming more and more clearly imprinted on my mind. I began to feel a personal interest in her rescue and a corresponding detestation of Alfonso Payton. I imagined her looking to us—looking to me—to save her, and I vowed that I would do it. Love at first sight has become a commonplace, but if I had stopped to analyze my feelings I might have concluded that my case was one of love without sight.
 We were actually gaining on the chaser.
 The Osprey for some time had been making 130.8 miles, a little better than her best during the night. I estimated that the Chameleon had dropped to not over 129. At this rate she should overhaul her in the course of five hours. In two hours we should be within effective range, and an hour later we ought to be near enough to enable Ethan to knock her aeroplanes to splinters.
 The gunner was already fuming with impatience and continually consulting with his range finder, changing the elevation of his gun and drawing imaginary beads.
 "I'll bet a Connecticut cigar," he said as I passed him on my rounds, "that when I get another chance I'll put a shot into him that'll stop 'im."
 "I'll give you word when to begin firing," I said. "Don't hull him, for you might injure or kill the prisoners, but aim for the aeroplanes."
 "I know how to wing a duck, too,"

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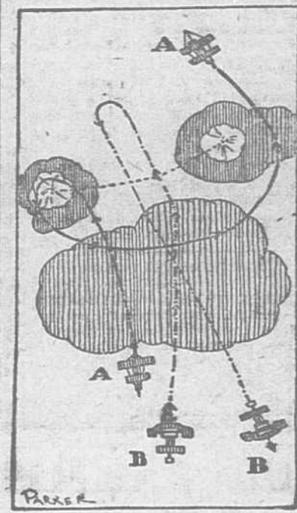
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in the second the clouds had penetrated the other clouds and appeared within it. But the phenomenon was never repeated.
 Meanwhile we held straight on our course between the two clouds, because I expected to find the Chameleon on the other side of one or the other of them. In this I was disappointed. When we ran out into the clear space on the further side there was not an aero in sight.

CHAPTER XVI.
THE CHAMELEON'S DODES.

MY amazement and disappointment for a moment unnerved me. I glanced up and down on all sides, but not a thing was visible except the clouds, the blue sky and the green earth. I stopped the motors, and for a few minutes we hung there, debating what to do. For the first time in his life perhaps, for he was not a profane man, the secretary muttered "D—"
 "Lieutenant," said Ethan at last, "I know what he's done—he's turned inside the cloud!"
 The truth at once flashed upon us. There was no doubt about it—he had tricked us again!
 "Curse him!" I exclaimed. "He shall never get away. Reverse the course and then full speed ahead."
 It was at least a year since I had seen the picture of Helen Grayman in the Sunday paper, but now her face rose before me as clearly as if she had stood there—those large, beautiful eyes; that open, frank, winning countenance. I felt that it was my chance, and I forgot everything except that I must save her.

Which of the two clouds had the Chameleon used as a cover? I determined to run back straight through the two and straight through the third, larger cloud, which we had already traversed, hoping to find Payton escaping in that direction.
 I felt my face burn and turned away. This practical minded Yankee evidently had his romantic side, too, and had penetrated a secret of which I did not dare to think myself.
 I do not believe that the Chameleon was now making more than a hundred and thirty-five at the most, and in a couple of hours we had her almost within range. As we drew nearer Payton evidently saw that the game was up and that his only course was to fight.



(A A show the position of the Chameleon, first when we saw her enter the cloud and, second, after her escape. The long closed line, curving around and through the clouds, indicates the path that she followed. B B show the positions of the Osprey at the beginning and the end of this strange battle, and the dotted line indicates the course that she pursued. Short dotted lines, leading to each of the smaller clouds, show our shell fire, and it is evident that we narrowly missed the Chameleon, which must have been close to the point where the second shell exploded.)

In order to make clear the situation as it had now developed I must ask the reader's attention to the diagram above.
 By the time that we had got out into the open beyond the two small clouds Payton had completed his turn and re-entered the large cloud. Keeping to the left as soon as he was within it, he ran nearly its whole length and finally emerged, only to dodge behind the other small cloud.
 He was evidently a master of strategy.
 Here he ran the only serious risk of discovery during the entire maneuver, for if we had returned more promptly we might have been just in time to catch sight of him as he passed the opening between the clouds.
 But we were too late, and while the Osprey was dashing headlong on her return through the large cloud the Chameleon rounded the small one and was off at full speed in exactly the opposite direction. No sooner was the air clear of vapor than we looked about with all eyes and were met by the same disappointment. The Chameleon was not there!
 "Perhaps one of your shells found him," suggested Mr. Grantham, "and broke him up so that he has dropped to the ground unperceived."
 It was a startling possibility, and I gave orders to drop down within 100 feet of the ground. Running back we began to use the utmost circumspection in examining the surface beneath us. It was mostly level and covered with irregular growths of trees and brush, with interspaces of grassy land. We may have spent half an hour in this search when the penetrating eyes of Ethan Haight discovered a new surprise for us.
 "Lieutenant, lieutenant!" he called out. "There he is again!"
 I glanced hastily at Ethan. He was pointing south-southwest, his hand raised above the level of his eyes. I looked, and we all looked, but could see nothing. Still Ethan insisted:
 "Just sign the cloud with a bead on it. It's him as sure as preaching!"
 In a few moments I had the object located, a moving speck against the cloud, and set out instantly in pursuit. I could recall well enough the relative situation and dimensions of the

secretly to the secretary, who had been forewarned with appropriate instructions, so that his movements of entering and leaving the clouds and of crossing the interspaces would be as to keep him always concealed from us behind a curtain of vapor. He must have forecast with absolute accuracy our final dart backward, which simply superadded our speed to his in riding the distance between us.
 "It was a bitter-sweet for me, but I swallowed it and fixed my mind with redoubled resolution upon the rescue of Helen Grayman."
 Mr. Grantham noticed my chagrin and kindly said:
 "No matter, Allan. He's yours yet; caused you to waste half an hour by my useless suggestion. Now go ahead, and I promise to be guilty of no more stupid interference."
 "It's not your fault at all, Mr. Grantham," I replied warmly. "I should have done what I did if you had not spoken."
 The secretary gave me a pressure of the hand, and I felt greatly encouraged, for I knew I should have his support however the thing turned out. So I visited Jim and invited him to renewed efforts.
 "Get her up to a hundred and forty," I said. "We're another and a last chance."
 "I'll do it or bust her," he grimly replied.

We did go at an astonishing speed, and no long time elapsed before our gun was so great that I told Ethan to be ready.
 "Shells this time," I said. "We'll not begin to fight until we are within easy range, and I want you to peep him without mercy. Only," I added, "aim for the aeroplanes and save the hull. The Chameleon carries the richest girl in the world, and we've got her father aboard here."
 "I'm not a-goin' to tech a hair o' her head, lieutenant," replied Ethan, with a thoughtful, knowing grin. "I've been to the show in my day, an' I know all about Romeo as his Joolster."
 I felt my face burn and turned away. This practical minded Yankee evidently had his romantic side, too, and had penetrated a secret of which I did not dare to think myself.

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