



The SKY PIRATE

By Garrett P. Serviss  
Illustrated by Parker.

PROLOGUE.

The sea pirate has long been a fascinating figure of romance, but the march of progress has driven him into well deserved retirement, and he has now been replaced, in fiction at least, by the sky pirate, who is even more mysterious, more daring and more romantic than his predecessor. Read and there will unfold before you the extraordinary story of Captain Alfonso Payton and his airship, the Chameleon; of William Grayman, the richest man in the world; of his beautiful daughter, for whose ransom \$10,000,000 was demanded; of Lieutenant Allen of the revenue service, of wonders by wireless and of fierce battles above the clouds.

CHAPTER I.

AN AMAZING ABDUCTION.

THE extraordinary outbreak of piracy which followed with such astonishing promptness the general adoption of aerial navigation in the fourth decade of the twentieth century will no doubt be regarded by future historians as one of the greatest curiosities of human annals. It has already been the subject of much laborious research and of many learned disquisitions, while the public has eagerly devoured the "lives" of a dozen of those astounding marauders of the atmosphere, who descended from the sky, with the speed and ferocity of famished eagles. Whole towns were sometimes laid under contribution, the terror inspired by dropping bombs banishing all thought of effective resistance.

Of all the desperate adventurers of that period none was so fascinating in personality or had the romantic charm that characterized Captain Alfonso Payton, a Spanish American, whose real Christian name was probably that which he gave, but who had dropped the name of his family, which was said to be one of the oldest and proudest in Spain, dating back to the days of the conquistadores. Payton's exploits in his famous aero Chameleon commanded a great deal of attention at times in the newspapers, but his story has never been fully told, and the closing details, the most amazing of all, were withheld from public knowledge for reasons which will be apparent in what I am about to relate.

Payton, or "Captain Alfonso," as his reckless crew always called him, was one of the handsomest men that I have ever seen. He had a Spaniard's eyes and complexion, with the stature and vigor of a modern American, while his manners were those of an ideal prince. The charm of his personality was felt by everybody who came in contact with him. He was exceedingly well educated, especially in everything which makes a man attractive to women, and if he had chosen to lead an honest life he could unquestionably have married almost any heiress or any beautiful girl that he might have fancied, and he would have been an ornament to society.

But he was a born pirate. Brave and fearless, he was absolutely reckless of the opinions of mankind, rejoiced in his wickedness, sought only the gratification of his whims and pleasures, and yet he could commit an outrage on the liberty and personal rights of others with such winning gentleness, such delicate consideration for their feelings, that often the sting was not at the moment perceived.

Payton's methods were peculiar. He had chosen his line, and he stuck to it until the end. He never attacked treasure-laden liners, such as the early transatlantic liners of the International Aero express, which constituted the favorite prey of Morton, the other

great pirate of the period, but he made an exclusive specialty of kidnaping, and almost invariably he kidnaped women, whom he treated with the utmost delicacy and consideration consistent with sure capture and safe keeping. There were many instances familiar to newspaper readers of his magic personality so working upon his victims that he won their respect and even friendship.

Nevertheless he was without mercy in his exactions. The object of all his abductions was ransom. No tears, no entreaties, no consideration whatever, had the slightest effect upon him. Pay or stay was his word.

The exploit which finally brought Payton's career to an end was the most extraordinary and romantic in all the long list of his adventures and one which would never have been dreamed of by a man less recklessly daring. At that time the most talked about and the wealthiest of New York's billionaires was the late William Grayman. He had accumulated a stupendous fortune by means of a "corner in banks."

I was a young lieutenant in charge of a government aero engaged in the revenue service, and the one thing outside my regular occupation that especially interested me was the prog-



INSTEAD OF THE CAT A MAN STEPPED INSIDE.

ress of invention growing out of the old wireless telegraph.

Mr. Grayman, who had long been a widower, had an only child, Miss Helen Grayman, who was one of the most beautiful girls in the richest social circle of New York and was doted on by her father. She was about eighteen years of age, and it was the common report that several European counts and dukes and one prince sought her hand. But it was also averred that she had refused them all.

This made Miss Grayman popular with thousands who had never met her. I recall that my interest in Miss Grayman was first pleasantly awakened by seeing her portrait in a Sunday Journal over the title of "An American Girl Who Is True to America."

One evening late in June, 1910, Miss Grayman had retired to her room on the third story of her father's splendid mansion in Fifth avenue and was about to begin her toilet for the night with the aid of her maid, Susan Jackson, when a peculiar noise at one of the windows facing Central park attracted their attention. Miss Grayman had a favorite cat, which sometimes signified its desire to enter her room by tapping on the door, and she directed Susan to open the lattice. The girl threw the window wide open, expecting, like her mistress, to see the cat leap in.

But instead of the cat a man stepped inside.

He was instantly followed by a companion. Before the affrighted girls could utter the scream that was upon their lips they were seized and gagged, though with all possible gentleness, and then were swiftly carried out of the window and upon the deck of an aero which floated against the wall of the house. The leader darted back into the room, saying, "Put out the light."

He was gone only a minute. As soon as he emerged, leaving the room in darkness, the aero glided over the trees of the park. The hour was not very late; but, although the avenue and the park in places were brilliantly lighted, no passerby seems to have noticed the presence of the aero.

Neither of the men who had entered the room wore a mask or made any attempt at personal concealment. In fact, the leader immediately impressed Miss Grayman with his remarkably handsome and refined face, as well as his inoperative politeness and gentility.

In a few minutes the aero had risen to a considerable elevation, revealing the fiery lines of the streets below, and then it flitted out into the darkness over the Hudson. The handkerchiefs that had been bound over the captives' mouths were now removed, and they were led into a beautiful little cabin,

brilliantly illuminated with colored electric lights, near the center of the deck.

Both sank into chairs, and Captain Payton—for of course it was he—took a seat opposite to them. He smiled in so friendly and reassuring a manner that it was impossible for Miss Grayman to be afraid of him. The idea of a criminal attempt upon her liberty never entered her thoughts. She imagined that it was a huge practical joke perpetrated by some of her intimate friends, and she tried to think who among them would be most likely to venture upon such an exploit.

"I must beg a thousand pardons for carrying you off in this way, Miss Grayman," Payton said, "and I wish at once to offer my absolute assurance that no possible harm to you is intended. I have been in a manner compelled to act as I have done for reasons which you will shortly understand. Since I know your charitable disposition and your sympathy with the unfortunate, I feel sure that I can count upon your heartfelt support in an enterprise which has been undertaken in order to afford a great and a fully deserved gratification to certain persons who have not been treated by the world with even handed justice. For the carrying out of this enterprise your co-operation and presence have been thought essential."

This extraordinary speech was delivered in a manner as condescending and gracious and with a smile so winning that Miss Grayman was far from detecting the irony that lurked in it. She now became more than ever convinced that this was really a ruse of some of her friends to engage her in a romantic adventure, although she could not imagine why they should have chosen so singular a method of enlisting her. But it had the charm of great novelty, and youth, inexperience and high spirits united to give her a delightful thrill of undefined interest in the escapade. She felt quite at her ease and was prepared to enjoy some most pleasant surprises. She answered, therefore, with no little gaiety of manner:

"Mr. — of course I do not know your name, you know?"

"Brown," Payton replied promptly and with an even more engaging smile than that which had before illumined his countenance, "Commodore Frederick Brown of the Washington Aero Yacht club."

It was a lucky hit, though made entirely at random. It happened that Miss Grayman had many close friends in Washington, and now she could no longer entertain the least doubt of the correctness of her original surmise. This Commodore Brown evidently belonged to the best circle of society at the capital and had been selected by her friends to act as intermediary in their plot. The extravagance of the notion of having her carried off without the least warning or preparation at such an hour and by a stranger did not occur to her excited imagination. It seemed all as delightful as a fairy tale, and she tingled with the desire to witness the denouement, which could not fail to be most entertaining. With girlish eagerness she asked, with a knowing look:

"Where have they told you to take me?"

Payton was the shrewdest of the shrewd. He saw in a second the trend of Miss Grayman's thoughts and the advantage which it would give him. So, assuming an appearance of some confusion at being so quickly found out, he answered:

"Oh, you know I mustn't tell you that. It would spoil all the fun. You'll understand everything when we get there."

And then he broke out with a laugh so joyous, hearty and insinuating that the girl laughed with him, while Susan stretched her mouth in a broad grin over the unexpected hilarity.

"We've got quite a run before us," Payton resumed in a more serious manner, "and I think if you will permit the suggestion, that it would be well for you to turn in, as we navigators say. I have a little cabin which, I hope, that you will find comfortable, and, with your permission, I will show you to it."

He led the way, courteously opened a door amidships, touched a knob to turn on the electric light within the apartment and as soon as the girls had entered bowed low with formal politeness, saying as he turned on his heel:

"I wish you pleasant dreams. Good night!"

The little room in which they found themselves might have been regarded as elegant anywhere. It was lavishly furnished, but with good taste, and contained two small beds.

"Good Lord, Miss Helen!" Susan exclaimed as soon as they were alone. "What will your father say?"

The remark struck to Miss Grayman's heart. It was the first time she had thought of her father and of his distress when he should discover her absence. But her eager mind was full of resources.

"No doubt papa knows all about it," she replied. "It is my friends who are doing this, you know, and of course they must have taken him secretly into their confidence; otherwise they never would have ventured so far. And what a handsome man Commodore Brown is, and so agreeable!"

It required no more than the suggestion of her fancy to persuade the romantic girl that her father was aware of the ruse and had given his consent to it. This thought increased her confidence so much that, with the utmost self-possession, she prepared to retire and was soon sleeping peacefully as if she had been in her own chamber, the imperceptible motion of the aero being totally free from the disturbing effects of the rolling and pitching of a marine craft. But Susan, with less peace of mind,

lay awake thinking and wondering for hours.

CHAPTER II.

AFTER AN ALL NIGHT FLIGHT.

WHEN Miss Grayman and her maid awoke the Chameleon was running high in the cool blue morning air, and the rays of the just risen sun were streaming across the tops of seemingly boundless forests spread far below them. They were, indeed, at so great an elevation that the hills and valleys, covered by the green mantle of the trees, resembled the swells and troughs of immense waves. Here and there a bare rocky mass rose out of the sea of vegetation like an island.

Miss Grayman had never been on an aero before. Her father always preferred the old fashioned railroads and steamships, and she seldom made even a short journey without him. As she glanced over the edge of the deck, which seemed frightfully close, and her eyes ranged down the clear atmospheric depths, beholding the earth so



"WE ARE JUST A MILE AND A HALF ABOVE SEA LEVEL."

far beneath, she became giddy and clung convulsively to her companion. But Susan was no less affected than her mistress by the unaccustomed experience and could lend her neither support nor courage. They were about precipitately to retire into their room when the cheery voice of Commodore

Brown was heard as he approached, smiling and bowing gallantly.

"Good morning, Miss Grayman," he said. "You are out rather earlier than I expected, and I must apologize for not having had your coffee prepared sooner. It will be sent to your room at once. As soon as you have finished your breakfast if you will come out on deck again I can promise that you will no longer experience distress from our elevation. I fancy that you are not accustomed to these heights."

"It is my first aerial trip," she replied.

"I am charmed to have had the opportunity of offering a new pleasure to Miss Grayman," he responded, "for a pleasure I know you will find it to be."

Miss Grayman colored slightly and glanced at Payton with a smile which she would not have bestowed upon him if she had guessed his real character or the seriousness of her own situation. She was on the point of referring again to the supposed plot of her friends when an unmistakable Frenchwoman with a white cap on her head appeared, bearing a steaming urn. At Payton's order she placed it on a table in Miss Grayman's room.

"Go," said Payton, "and take your coffee while it is hot. Afterward we will look over the landscape, which I dare say is the most extensive you have ever seen."

Miss Grayman and Susan entered their apartment, and Payton turned away.

"I'm sure I shall like it," said Miss Grayman as they sipped their coffee. "How easy the motion is! It's much pleasanter than a ship. I don't know why papa would never take an aero, but he'll have to do it hereafter, for I shall insist. I know I shall not be the least bit afraid or dizzy when we go out again. It was the surprise that upset me at first—seeing things so awfully far down, you know."

Payton was waiting for them when they emerged.

"Oh," he exclaimed, "isn't this glorious? Look at the view!"

It was indeed a most splendid prospect that was spread beneath them. The sun had risen higher, and flocks of beautiful clouds were casting picturesque shadows that flitted across the rolling green surface of the earth.

"Why, the aero is all dressed in white!" cried Miss Grayman, catching sight of the white fluffy material that played in the wind created by their rapid motion.

"Why shouldn't she wear gala dress when she carries such a passenger and goes on such an errand?" responded Payton, with a bow.

Whatever of impertinence there might have been in his words was softened into a graceful and acceptable compliment by his voice and manner, and Miss Grayman blushed and smiled in return.

great a height is indeed a revelation. It is entirely unlike the view from a mountain. And then it glides away under us so fast. It seems as if it were flying and we standing still! But, look," she exclaimed, clasping her hands, "we are actually among the clouds!"

"Where shall we meet our friends?" she asked quickly.

"You certainly wouldn't wish me to betray a confidence," he replied, smiling. "I should like to answer, but for the present my lips are sealed."

"Oh, then tell me, please, how high up are we? Susan says a hundred miles, but I say not more than ten."

Payton laughed heartily.

"Well," he said, "you are nearer the truth than Susan, although your estimate, too, is a trifle extravagant. Let me see," he consulted an indicator on the outer wall of the cabin. "We are just a mile and a half above sea level and about three-quarters of a mile above the highest peaks that you see down there."

"Then I guessed truly that we were going over mountains?"

"To be sure we are. But it is not quite an unbroken wilderness. You see that little town in the valley yonder, don't you?"

"Is that a town?" asked Miss Grayman, with surprise. "I thought it was a heap of rocks."

"No, it is a town, though not a large one. But you can see smoke rising from some of the chimneys."

"What is the name of the town?"

"I mustn't tell you that just now, you know."

"Oh, yes; I forgot that you are pledged to secrecy. But I suppose I am at liberty to guess, and I guess that these are the Catskills."

"Perhaps," said Payton, with another smile. "Really, Miss Grayman," he added in a serious tone, "if I had foreseen how unpleasant it would be to decline to answer your perfectly reasonable questions I should have hesitated to accept this mission."

The girl actually rebuked herself for letting her curiosity increase the embarrassment of a gentleman who she felt must keenly regret his rather equivocal position.

"You know the Mitchells in Washington, I suppose?" she asked.

Payton saw that if this question were followed by a cross examination he would be trapped; accordingly he shut off that line of inquiry at once.

"Oh, Miss Grayman," he said, "of course I know almost everybody worth knowing in Washington, but really, you see, if we begin to discuss these things we shall inevitably trench upon forbidden ground—frowned, you understand, only for the moment. Afterward, in a little while, everything will be clear and we can talk freely. In the meantime let me beg of you not to lose the enjoyment of this glorious cruise in the pure morning air."

"It is wonderfully beautiful," replied Miss Grayman, "and to me the appearance of the earth seen from so

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