The Flying Chance

By Gordon McCreagh

FREE eBooks

WHOEVER
WHENEVER
WHEREVER
YOU ARE

INSTANTLY DOWNLOAD THESE MASSIVE BOOK BUNDLES

CLICK ANY BELOW TO ENJOY NOW

3 AUDIOBOOK COLLECTIONS

Classic AudioBooks Vol 1 ▪ Classic AudioBooks Vol 2 ▪ Classic AudioBooks Kids

6 BOOK COLLECTIONS

Sci-Fi ▪ Romance ▪ Mystery ▪ Academic ▪ Classics ▪ Business

I.

The commandant of the Philadelphia navy-yard looked up from the sheaf of papers which bore the superscription of the Bureau of Naval Affairs, Washington, at the young man who stood at attention before his desk.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Rankin,” he said simply.

The brown, alert face showed no surprise. Ensign Rankin belonged to those men who cannot afford to be easily shaken from their balance, but his passionate argument was already on his lips.

“But why?” he cried. “Why? I passed in everything else. My sense of balance was perfect. My nerve reactions were A No. 1. My blood pressure, hearing, everything! Only those paltry two points I fell short in.”

Official dignity relaxed just a trifle before the bitterness of the young man’s disappointment.

“I’m sorry,” the commandant said again. “But this flying business is dangerous enough as it is without our adding to it by overlooking the slightest imperfection in the human machine. The service requires a full twenty in eyesight, and your test measures up only eighteen. Therefore you have been judged ‘unfit for aviation.’”

The hundred and sixty pounds of hard, lean athlete stiffened yet further with the fighting spirit.

“Then, with your permission, sir, I shall appeal for a waiver. Because I’ve flown all kinds of machines long before I ever got this commission.”

The commandant’s eyes were steely.

“It will do you no good to appeal to Washington for a waiver, Mr. Rankin. There have been a few cases, I admit—a very few, like Williams and Steffanson—but only after the men concerned have proved themselves to be expert beyond all question in spite of their physical shortcomings.

“These orders are final. You have already been transferred to line duty, and you will report to Lieutenant-Commander Evans for further instructions.”

Even the rawest and scrappiest ensign could make no mistake about that tone. Rankin sensed vaguely that the authority of the whole United States stood behind that incisive, unruffled voice.

He went, and reported.

“Ha, Rankin,” Lieutenant-Commander Evans greeted him. “I’ve already received orders about you. I’m sure we shall be pleased to have you with us. If you will call for me at the mess some time this afternoon I’ll take you on board and introduce you in the ward-room.”

Rankin murmured a conventional thanks. But he meant not a word of it. His mind was full of the injustice of his case. He was not interested in line duties; he had come into the service for aviation.

“I guess there’s nothing you can do till then,” Evans continued. “Only don’t get lost. Stick around the yard somewhere; because we’re under orders to hold ourselves in readiness to put out at a moment’s notice, and all leave has been cut short.”

“Very well, sir.”

“All right. See you around three o’clock then.”

Rankin’s was a war commission. That is to say, his rating in the naval militia had been accepted at its face value by the navy. He was therefore a full-blown ensign, just the same as any Annapolis graduate, much to the indignation of those same graduates, who had spent many toilsome years in qualifying for the same rank.

Militia commissions were always looked upon with disfavor by the Annapolis men. Rankin, for instance, had put in just two months with the naval militia of his State, and had been elected to a commission by his fellows on account of his happy popularity and his superior experience in flying.

The sacred traditions of the service, therefore, meant nothing to him. Stern discipline and unquestioning obedience were vague unpleasantnesses, half understood, and in theory only. To “stick around the yard,” then, for the rest of the day with nothing to do didn’t have any sense in it; furthermore, there was a girl who lived in West Philadelphia—and there was loads of time before three o’clock.

II.

Within the hour Rankin was ringing that familiar bell on the other side of the river. The girl kept him waiting, to stride nervously up and down the veranda. A wry grin twisted his firm, straight lips. She hadn't forgotten that little difference, then, and her ultimatum.

When she finally came out, after fully five minutes' delay, Rankin knew at once from the hard, set look about her usually dimpled mouth, and the steadiness of her gray eyes, that she had been schooling her determination, and that she still considered the barrier to exist. He knew well enough what it was, too, and his first rueful words were meant to remove it.

"Well, Eileen, I'm out of it at last."

"Out of what?" There was a half hope and a hint of willing surrender in her eager question.

"Out of aviation—for keeps."

"Oh, Jack! Did you really? I—I never thought—" The joyous exclamation stammered down to a more diffident, almost apologetic statement with a rising color. "I never really thought you'd ever give up so much, just for me."

Now there was a whole lot of plain human in Jack Rankin. He didn't ordinarily lie without necessity; but here was a sudden, irresistible temptation positively thrust at him to steal at least a little credit out of a situation which held nothing but the

bitterest disappointment for him. His hesitation was just for a fraction of a second, and then he prevaricated by inference.

Nor was he overskilful about it. He was just wise enough to hold his peace and to squeeze her outstretched hand with a world of meaning. Her surrender was instant and complete. With radiant eyes in which there was just a hint of tears, she led him to the comfortable hammock, plethoric with pillows, which swung in the veranda breeze.

“I know it’s an awfully big thing to have asked you, Jack,” she comforted him with the half regretful confidence of a big-hearted girl who has just forced a sacrifice from her lover. “But you understand now how I felt about it, don’t you, dear? I just couldn’t marry you as long as you stayed in that horrible business.

“I could never sleep without seeing that awful grand stand and that field where poor Bob— Oh, I can’t bear to think about it. And with Jim sticking to it yet; he’s so obstinate. One in the family is bad enough. I just couldn’t bear it, Jack.”

Rankin just patted the round curve of her shoulder and still said nothing. Bob was one of the many who had paid the toll to the greatest of all games; Jim was the other brother. Rankin understood how the girl felt, and the scrupulous conscience which besets every decent young man when he is in love smote him.

Almost he confessed. But when a beautiful, tearful girl jumps to a conclusion and makes a self-sacrificing hero out of one, how shall a man who is ordinarily human disillusion her? Jack

Rankin stifled the still, small voice and postponed the telling to a vague, more propitious future. Sufficient to the day the evil thereof. He would have trouble enough explaining his absence from the navy-yard, should his commanding officer by any chance look for him before his return. In the mean while, there were matters of infinitely greater importance.

Given a beautiful girl, a hammock, and the impending prospect of an indefinite separation, three o'clock in the afternoon arrives all too soon. When Ensign Rankin came to the officers' mess, hurrying to make up for lost time, and trying to carry off an air of innocence as if he had been looking for his chief for quite a while, a couple of juniors looked furtively at him.

His guilty conscience was quick to catch the glance, and he knew that his nemesis had overtaken him. But of the full virulence of its malice he had no inkling as yet.

"Seen anything of my skipper?" he asked with an assumption of ease.

"No," said one of them shortly.

"Not for hours and hours," added the other with equally ominous brevity.

"Hours and hours?"

"Yes. He was looking for you. Making knots all round the yard."

"Why so anxious?"

"Commandant's looking for you now." Rankin hid his anxiety by threatening to slay the last speaker.

“But why? Why? Let me in on the mystery, won’t you?”

“Leggo, you deserting ruffian! Why? *Because your ship put out from her berth under telegraphic orders at just about five bells this afternoon.* That’s why. Now you’d better go hide till you can think up a good excuse.”

Smash! The bomb had fallen! No wonder the whole navy-yard had been looking for him. Missing ship was a serious enough thing in itself; and when it had happened in the face of direct orders it became a matter for the outraged attention of the commandant himself, with prospects of Court martial looming dark in the immediate background.

Even Rankin sensed that he had offended beyond his realization. With the instinct of quick thinking which is so essential to the man who takes his life up into the shifting air currents, his mind flashed to the wireless plant. Perhaps he would be able to communicate with his commanding officer and rejoin at the first port of call. He made the radio station in just two jumps. The operator saluted him quite hastily.

“Yes, sir. Crowded with official business just now, sir; but I’ll be able to put your message through in about fifteen minutes. Where can I send the answer, sir? I guess I’ll have no trouble pickin’ up your ship.”

“His ship” again. The words jarred with an indefinable sensation. It conveyed an impression of irrevocable divorce from his ambition—aviation. Everybody seemed to regard him already as a part of the line organization. And, what was more,

there was a distinct air of congratulation about it; as though it let him into an honorable and super-select fraternity.

He murmured an abstract instruction to send the reply to the quarters of Junior Lieutenant Mason, and went there to wait for it, dodging furtively behind the various yard buildings to avoid a possible message from the commandant before he should be able to produce the news of his rejoining as a measure of mitigation.

Fifteen minutes drifted on to thirty. But Rankin hardly noticed. His mind was occupied with that queer idea about "his ship." He saw the thing in vague pictures. Himself, in charge of a gun-crew directing practice; himself, officer of the deck; himself, again, a brother officer in the comfortable relaxation of the ward-room with some of the first gentlemen of the world. Always himself holding down some position of trust as a member of a great and proud organization—a United States fighting-ship!

The thing obsessed him. There was an illusive stirring of his emotions, a vague thrill about it all. But, hang it all, what had he to do with ships at all? His ambition was to be a flier.

Into his abstraction broke two men engaged in speech.

"Operator reports very sorry, sir, but he can't get in touch with your ship, sir. Somethin' must be wrong with her wireless for the present; or mebbe it's static in the air. All messages are bad just now. He'll try again in a half an hour or so."

The retribution which dogs the steps of the wrong-doer! Before Rankin could commiserate himself on his ill-luck the other man

saluted and spoke up. His belt and side arms proclaimed him an orderly at a glance.

“Commandant’s compliments, sir, and he’d like to see you immediately.”

It had come! The inevitable! Ensign Rankin had to face his fate without a single extenuating circumstance in hand! He strode to the interview with something less of carelessness than had been his habit. For some reason the fact of having missed his ship troubled him more than he had ever thought possible.

In the commandant’s office he waited for some minutes in silence. That stern, self-possessed autocrat let him stand unheeded. He was nervously agitated over the papers which he held, official radio forms. He bit his pencil, frowning. At last he scribbled a message on a pad, fired it at an orderly, and looked up sharply at the delinquent officer. His tone was snappily brusk.

“H-m. Just arrived, I suppose. Well, my message was meant to reach you hours ago. Sorry. Can’t attend to your case just now. Urgent matters come to hand. You will consider yourself confined to the officers’ mess till I can find time to send for you again.”

III.

Rankin tiptoed out, thankful as any schoolboy that his sentence should at least have been postponed. On his way to the mess he was determined to look in for a last chance about his message to "his ship." He was thinking of it in those terms himself now; though his anxiety to get in touch with her was quite beyond his own analysis.

In the little sending-room, heavy with ozone, there was an atmosphere of frenzied haste. The operator was working frantically at his sender and straining to listen for the answering whispers which came only in intermittent dashes or in blurred nothings. The man continued sitting at his instrument and shot broken sentences at the officer between the spasms of staccato raspings from his key.

"Sorry, sir—nothing yet—tried five minutes ago—try her again later. Urgent code stuff comin' in—awful jumble. Static is somethin' fierce, 'count o' this storm brewing."

In the intervals of hurried speech he worked his key with his right hand and scribbled simultaneously with his left. He tore the form from his pad and thrust it at his messenger.

"Commandant! Jump to it! Yes, sir; somebody's all excited up somewhere; coding like mad. Trying to give a bearing, but I can't get it. There she goes again! If you'll wait a bit, sir, I'll try your ship again soon's I'm clear."

Rankin waited, feeling vaguely uneasy about the breakdown of his ship's wireless. The key crackled on, harsh, powerful, suggestive of imminent mystery somewhere. Rankin's elementary study of the international Morse presently recognized the recurring dash-dot, dash-dot as "repeat." Suddenly the operator sprang to his feet and stood to rigid attention.

Rankin wheeled, and saw—the commandant! With him was the officer of the watch.

Once again he was caught. A little thing this time; but still it was dallying with the thin edge of obedience. Rankin was surprised to find himself feeling his guilt.

But the commandant noticed him no more than he did the stiff-standing messenger. That great man's usually impassive face was flushed with uneasiness. The sheaf of decoded messages was clutched into a crumpled ball in his hand.

It must surely be something of the most extreme urgency, thought Rankin, which would bring the lord of all the navy-yard universe hurrying to the radio station in person. The commandant's whole attention, in fact, was directed fiercely at the operator.

"Get me that bearing!" he shot at him. "I must have that bearing! Seventy-two west, you say; is that correct? But the latitude, man; what's the latitude?"

"Correct as I can catch it, sir. Receiver's somethin' awful to-day; but seventy-two's what I make it out. An' I just got latitude thirty-three, twenty."

The information seemed to upset the great man entirely.

“Great Heaven! Just what I thought. She’s steaming right into it! Call the destroyer Woodruff immediately and stand by to send this; my code number, precedence of everything!”

The operator’s face went blank at the thought.

“Destroyer Woodruff? Sorry, sir. Can’t pick her up. Been trying for an hour. Wireless must be out of commission.”

“You can’t pick— My God! Dead in her course, too!” The flush of excitement on the commandant’s stern face had paled. “Call again, man! Keep on calling, and don’t stop!”

The tenseness was broken by the flashing crackle which streamed again from the sender. The commandant waited, tapping his foot in his agitation. Into his ferment Rankin with all his inexperience of official propriety intruded.

“Pardon me, sir. May I ask what is the trouble?”

“Eh, what!” The commandant looked at him blankly for a moment. Then indignation added to his nervous irritation. “What the— Your curiosity is out of place, *Ensign* Rankin.”

“Pardon me. *My ship, sir.*” Rankin said it with a feeling of pride, as though it conferred a right upon him.

“Your—ah, yes. And you missed her! Well, sir, *your ship is steaming into a whole fleet of submarines*! That’s the trouble. Five of them; or maybe ten, or a hundred, as far as we can make out from these confounded code flashes.”

“Whe-e-ew!” The wireless operator whistled his startled amazement before he remembered that he was merely a machine who heard nothing and knew nothing of what passed in that little electric-charged room, a highly sensitized automaton, bound by many oaths to eternal dumbness; then he hid his confusion under the crisp hissing of his key.

Rankin echoed his whistle. But his was a personal interest. There was a danger; and he thought somehow that he ought to be there to share it. “His ship” had taken a definite meaning in his mind. In the strained silence which followed, broken only by the intermittent crackling calls into the void, he pictured her rushing into the peril, all unwarned and unsuspecting. Vaguely the commandant’s voice came to him, talking to the operator seemingly out of the distance.

“It is imperative to communicate. We *must* get in touch.”

It woke him out of his abstraction with a start. A wild idea had begun to take shape in his brain. Thoughtless of all pros and cons, he grasped at it with enthusiasm. Eagerly he burst out:

“How about an aeroplane, sir?”

“Ha, an aeroplane!” With the exclamation the commandant’s face cleared, and for a moment he contemplated the idea as an inspiration of Providence. Then he shook his head.

“Impossible! Why, man, the Woodruff is two hundred miles on her way to Havana by now!”

“I could make that easily, sir; I’ve flown more than that before now.”

“And if you should miss her?”

“With a hydro, sir, I could come down alongside and be picked up.”

“Nonsense, boy!” the commandant snapped testily at his thoughtless enthusiasm. “I don’t mean that. Think, man, think. In any case, with a sea running like to-day’s, you’d be smashed to splinters long before you could ever be picked up. But what I mean is, suppose you should miss her entirely?

“From what I know of those things, your course is a matter of guesswork, anyway, and you have to keep checking up by landmarks all the time. Out at sea you’d lose yourself in ten minutes. And when you’ve missed her, how are you coming back? Two hundred out and two hundred back, to say nothing if another hundred or so lost in overhauling her and scouting around. Why, man, there’s not a machine in the service capable of making that. Certainly not without special preparation. No, sir; the chance is too desperate for me to order any man out on a thing like that.”

Rankin’s enthusiasm, fell with a cruel slump, and all the happy eagerness died out of his face. All these things he had overlooked in the first flush of his inspiration; and they were all true, too.

The older man, keen old veteran, with practised anticipation of all possible eventualities, had put his finger with unerring accuracy on each of the weak spots. Nor did he magnify their weakness at all. The thing was desperate, a forlorn hope.

Rankin turned them dully over in his mind, looking for a possible saving clause, but not a one could he find. The eagerness then died from his face. But slowly its place began to be taken by a cold determination.

"I—I'd like to volunteer, sir, anyhow—to convey a warning to my ship."

"Hey, what? What's that? You'd like to volunteer?" The snappy irritation in the commandant's voice was tempered with a sudden human understanding. He looked with fierce appraisal into the pale, hard-set face. The drama had crystallized down to just the two of them, two strong men looking into each other's wide eyes with a single vital question-mark between them.

The rest of the scene and the men in it were forgotten as far as these two were concerned. But the others stood in strained, expectant positions as though they had been frozen. The signaler ceased from his incessant crackle to hang on the commandant's words. Twenty seconds—thirty—a full minute; and only the broken, noisy breathing of somebody was heard. Then the commandant shook his head slowly, regretfully.

"Impossible, boy! I can't do it! No, we must find some other way. Besides"—there was a world of kindliness in the tone—"you see—I'm sorry—but you've been officially declared 'unfit for aviation.' I couldn't let you go, even if I could contemplate your plan for a second. No, no, my boy, I'm sorry."

He walked slowly to the door. There he turned suddenly, and the voice was snappily terse again.

“Signaler! What have you stopped for? Keep calling, and don’t stop for anything under any circumstances. If your wrist gives out, get a relay; and let me know immediately as soon as you connect. Immediately, by cycle orderly—Mr. Tracy, will you see to that? And my compliments to the senior officers of the yard to confer with me in my office immediately, please.”

The officer of the watch saluted. The commandant strode from the room. And in the immediately following swift bustle Rankin was the only man with nothing on his hands.

But his soul was full of bitter disappointment and heart-burning. “Unfit!” The reminder was a cruel stab into his enthusiasm, however kindly it had been put. He stood inertly, wrestling with bitter indecision for whole minutes, and then a queer expression, half smile half grimness, stole slowly over his face and he crept out of the room.

His next movements certainly looked like desertion, urged by desperation and tinged with madness. For, once out of the radio-room, he raced about the yard like one demented. To the sacred precincts of the instrument-room he rushed, and, making some wild explanation to the man in charge, he removed therefrom several of the neat leather cases of queer shapes. Another swift foray procured him a chart. In like manner he *borrowed* a car from the long, neatly parked line of officers’ private conveyances. Whose it was he didn’t know, and he didn’t care; only he took the one which seemed to give promise of the greatest speed.

Within five minutes of the commandant’s decision he was disobeying for the second time that day his orders to confine

himself to the yard. Disobeying with speed and violence, for he was shooting down the long concrete road which led to the main gate like a dark-red shell.

Senior Lieutenant Tracy, the officer of the watch, became aware of the thing hurtling down upon him, and he jumped angrily aside. What fool was breaking yard regulations like that? He recognized Rankin as he whizzed past, and remembered the commandant's order. He called wildly after him, but Rankin never swerved an inch. Bent low over the wheel, he fired himself at the gate. Officers' cars, of course, were never questioned. The gate opened with profane promptness, and Rankin whirled out of his prison. Ten minutes later he was roaring down the road which pointed like a long, straight tape line to Atlantic City.

IV.

At Atlantic City, on the beach, opposite to the newest ten-million-dollar hotel, stood a huge tent of unusual shape, guyed down and double guyed with wire cable for security. Its occupant and owner was viewing with critical satisfaction the beautiful, wide-winged flying-boat which balanced so gracefully on its truck, stretching from one far canvas wall right across to the other, when he was suddenly overwhelmed by a breathless young man in a dusty uniform who demanded fiercely:

"Jim, I want you to *give* me your bus right away."

This Jim was another of those men whose nerves do not start at sudden and unexpected happenings.

"Sure," he said without hesitation. "Want to go joy riding?" And he held out his hand.

"No, no, you don't understand," the other panted. "I want you to give it to me—to wreck!"

Jim's voice became serious, though the slow smile never left his face. He seated himself methodically on a tool-box.

"Button off the power, Jack; come to earth and tell us all about it," he said quietly.

Jack told him, in fierce sentences and few.

“So, you see, Jim, it’s make or break,” he concluded, “and we’ve got no time to lose. Come on!”

Jim sat solid on his tool-box.

“Wait a minute, Jack,” he said soberly. “This is a big thing you’re asking me. There’s ten thousand dollars gone into this outfit, and it’s all I’ve got in the world; it’s my last stake. Half of it’s not mine, anyhow. I had to get backing, and it’s not nearly paid off.

“This passenger work isn’t the gold-mine any more that it used to be; I can’t charge these summer sports more than fifteen dollars a jump; upkeep is something fierce; and I’m still in the hole for about three thousand bucks. I figured to clear by the end of the season.”

“But don’t you see, Jim,” Rankin appealed piteously, “it’s the only way! And she’s running right into deadly danger! My ship! A United States fighting-ship, Jim. And—and—” His voice trailed away searching hopelessly for something to say, some conclusive argument that would accomplish his purpose.

Jim sat motionless. His face had the torn, introspective expression of Rodin’s “Thinker.” Presently his voice came in a ruminative monotone through lips that scarcely opened:

“And Uncle Sam needs his ships mighty bad just now, eh?” Then suddenly: “Hell!” he shouted, and jumped to his feet. “Damn our old uncle, anyway! Stick your head out of the flap and holler for my mechanics.”

Rankin jumped at him with both hands outstretched.

“Jim! I knew you’d do it! You’re white all through!”

“Aw, hell,” muttered Jim again with gruff discomfort, pushing him off. “Get busy and fill up that gas-tank to the last drop you can make her hold, while I get into my helmet and togs.”

“Your togs! What d’you want your gear for?”

Jim’s jaw was thrust out with belligerence.

“If Uncle Sam needs you on this job,” he said doggedly, “he needs me, too. This is a two-man stunt. Shut up now, and beat it.”

The next few minutes were a whirlwind of strenuous effort, punctuated with snapped question and fired-back answer and swift directions to the sweating mechanics. Under their practised handling the machine was ready for its great task in record time.

“I swiped a Sperry synchronized driftset and compass from the yard, Jim,” panted Rankin.

“You did!” shouted Jim, and his face lit. “That’s the first slim chance I see, then, of our picking up your darned ship. Mighty like hunting the needle in the haystack anyway. How far’s she out?”

“Commandant said two hundred miles.”

“Good stuff! If any bus in the country can do it, mine will. She makes just over the hundred per hour, and she’s fitted with every mechanical improvement there is.”

There was a note of regretful farewell in the tone. He had been very proud of his machine; and she certainly was the acme of American aeronautic skill.

Stagger, she had, and *dihedral*, and *retreat*, mystic technicalities of wing construction which came very near to realizing the dreamer's goal of automatic stability. Control wires had a safety factor of eight. There was a dashboard before each of the dual control yokes dotted with a maze of glass-dialed instruments.

The two seats were tandem, with telephonic communication so that the occupants could converse above the roar of the engine. Nothing, in fact, which might contribute to speed and safety and accuracy had been omitted. And now—she was going out into the approaching night beyond her capacity of return, like a swimmer who swims out to sea beyond the limit of his strength. No wonder that the owner swore at his old Uncle Sam even while he made his gift.

On the beach, where the great machine floated like some graceful, swift storm petrel, Jim suddenly pushed Rankin to the rear seat.

"What's the matter?" asked Rankin hurriedly. "Aren't you going to fly her?"

"Nope," said Jim with determination. "'S your job. You're a better flier anyway. Me for the instruments. I've been boning up a lot on this new dope about wave crest length and wind ratio and bomb dropping and all. Kinder hoped to get a commission myself—once; but—hell! Hop in and make your

tests. If I'm in on this funeral I'm going to phone good-by to the girl."

Then for the first time did Rankin remember his girl, and her trust, and his promise, and what it meant between him and her.

He hesitated a moment; he, too, would have liked to telephone. For he was very human and just then some mysterious providence or other which looks after those who strive with a great purpose flashed to him a vague realization of his own weakness. Telephoning, the voice on the wire, with its note of appeal from the purely personal view point of the woman who waited, might undermine that high resolve. He set his teeth and climbed into the seat ready for action.

With lips hard pinched, he tested his controls to see that everything was running smoothly. He tested the Christensen self-starter. With an explosive whir the propeller caught up the ignition. He ran the engine at idling speed, watching his oil pressure and water gages for free feeding. Everything ran with the smoothness of a fine watch.

Jim came running.

"Give her the gun!" he shouted, hurling himself into his seat.

Rankin pulled back the throttle lever. With a roar the propeller took up its speed; the tachometer dial jumped to fifteen thousand revolutions; and the beautiful great bird glided out from the shore, trusting to fate to attain its purpose.

Rankin pulled tentatively on the elevator control. The machine answered beautifully; lifted at once to its planing angle and skimmed the surface. Rankin hauled back, on the control.

“How does she climb?” he asked into the telephone mouthpiece which rose from his chest.

“’Bout six hundred,” came the muffled reply from the observer’s seat in front. “Let her go.”

V.

The great adventure had commenced. Half an hour had sped since one impetuous fanatic had charged into the tent and persuaded the other to race out with him and offer up possibly their lives and certainly the machine in their wild quest of service to their so much berated Uncle Sam. Only half an hour! But in view of the ship that was rushing inexorably on into it knew not what, a priceless thirty minutes.

The machine hurtled ahead into the dark cloud bank, dipping and swaying and yawing like an instruction flight. Rankin was "feeling out " the little individual peculiarities of the machine which was new to him.

Presently he settled down to a long steady climb up to his traveling level which he proposed, to make about five thousand feet in order to hold as wide a range of vision from the height as the heavy atmosphere would permit of. His face was very grim and stern; he was making no mistakes about the percentage of chances which were out against him.

"What d'you need for setting your course?" he spoke shortly into the mouthpiece.

"Where's your ship?"

"Can't say; don't know her speed. Commandant said two hundred, and she's made maybe forty or fifty since."

“How in blazes are we going to find the blasted tub then?” Jim was feeling subconsciously the loss of ten thousand dollars.

“Say she’s making twenty, and we approximate a hundred, we ought to overhaul her in about three hours at the outside. Lay off her course on the chart from Philly to Havana; get on to it and take a high level after her.”

For ten minutes there was silence while Jim scribbled frantically with his pencil and the great machine roared and throbbed all round them. Finally:

“Huh,” came a grunt. “’Bout thirty miles out, and then south by east and keep guessing for luck.”

Rankin watched his clock for eight more minutes with infinite care, for when one is hurtling through the air at a hundred miles an hour delay means more than a little difference. Then he banked sharply over and swung round.

“Ought to be on her tail now,” he muttered. “Now figure drift and give me my variation.”

Technical sounding-stuff, but easy of explanation. Just as a boatman rowing across a tide rip has to point the nose of his boat several degrees into the current in order to hold a straight course for the desired landing, so an aeroplane rushing through a cross wind must “crab” sometimes.

Easy of explanation; but for an aeroplane flying over water with no landmarks to guide, a considerable calculation. And time! Every minute of time counted so vitally! To arrive at a correct conclusion many factors had to be taken into

consideration, the least error in the smallest of which would mean many miles of difference.

The main factors, of course, were actual speed through the air and wind speed. The first was easy; an instrument gave it. But wind speed? On the ground, stationary, an instrument could give that too; but at five thousand feet in the air it had to be calculated. To do that one had to know the approximate length between the crests of the waves; and to approximate that, one had to know the exact height.

Suddenly an explosive snarl came from in front.

“Curse it! In the hurry I forgot to adjust my altimeter to sea level.”

Without a word Rankin pushed the control over into a steep dive. Within a few feet of the surface he “flattened,” and on receiving a confirmatory grunt he lifted the machine into another long climb.

Presently:

“Wave length twenty feet—gives velocity fifteen decimal four. Fierce for a landing.”

“Pitot tube gives a clear hundred and four miles per. Work it out.”

Came a whole series of grunts; and presently the movable lubber line on the dial of the Sperry, which was synchronized with the drift indicator in the observer’s hand in the front seat, began to swing round.

Rankin followed it with a sigh of thankfulness and a prayer for luck and settled down to a long steady grind of keeping her nose down to it. No easy matter in a high gusty wind; and a few points deviation meant so many priceless minutes lost at this critical time.

Two hours passed; and as the work became mechanical, Rankin's thoughts turned inevitably to the girl. What would she say? How would she regard his fall from his promise? How could he ever make her see the thing as it was?

"Ha, ha!" He barked a short laugh. Fool! Very possibly there never would be any occasion for an explanation. He glued his eyes down to the lubber line and followed it as it shifted from one side to the other as the observer recalculated and checked up his figures from time to time.

But his thoughts kept coming back to torture him. The girl; always the girl. The imminent chance of coming down somewhere in the ocean, helpless, with gas all expended, and being battered to a wreck in a minute found no place in his mind. Suddenly the grumbling voice came across and woke him to action.

"Smoke on the port bow; three points."

Rankin's heart jumped up into his mouth and he peered through his windshield. Then he shot the machine down for the thin smudge across the horizon like a swooping eagle.

Five minutes; ten minutes. He could see Jim leaning out from his seat with the Zeiss prism glasses to his eyes. Jim waved an arm wildly to the right and ducked back into his hole.

“Blasted United Fruit boat.”

Grimly, without a word again, Rankin swung back and climbed on his course. After many minutes he spoke tersely, without emotion.

“Jim. Suppose we find her—and the waves smash us before she can pick us up. Better write a note; make a package. Maybe we can drop it.”

“Huh! If we find her we’ve been doing some flying, lemme tell you.”

But Rankin knew in the silence that Jim was scribbling furiously.

Dusk began to come. Rankin unconsciously began to strain his eyes over his wind-shield as though he had to rely on himself alone. Suddenly:

“Smoke! Way over starboard!”

Instantly Rankin dived for it with a quickening of the pulse. Testily the voice came.

“Hey! Not that, you goat. Farther over. Heavy stuff; looks like a mile of cloud bank.” In a few more minutes: “Yes, that’s the one—lower; can’t make her out; she’s smothered.”

After a strained period again, in snappy intervals, but in a passionless monotone:

“Two master—some speeder—but she’s steaming up and down and around and cutting all sorts of fancy patterns—dive to it son! Destroyer, making knots!”

Rankin dove. All he said was:

“Get your package ready.”

But in his heart was an exultant thankfulness that he had arrived in time to warn “his ship.” In a few more minutes he was able to distinguish her himself, smothering herself in foam and black columns of smoke as she smashed her sharp nose into the high-running waves. He could make out the short stumpy signaling masts, the torpedo tubes, the quick, rapid-firing guns, and—

Suddenly there was more smoke! Not from the low, raking funnels, but from the starboard quarters! Then a sharp puff! And then another! And then a spitting stream! At the same instant came Jim’s voice, vibrant and tense; and Rankin could feel through the micrometer that even that passionless man was excited at last.

“They’ve got her, by God!”

Rankin gripped the wheel and leaned forward as though he could by sheer muscular effort impart a yet greater speed to the hurtling machine. Then again the wire-drawn voice:

“Jack, it’s God’s luck! Under my—under your seat there’s another kind of package. Been doing some hand-bomb practise on a raft, and there’s two or three left! Was going out again to-morrow. Can you reach? Can you steer her?”

Rankin’s heart leaped with a wild exhilaration of sudden battle. “Steer her with my feet,” he hissed back, and he groped below the seat.

“To the right!” came a yell which jarred his ear-drums.

Rankin peered over the edge of the fuselage. At first he saw nothing but surging whitecaps; and then, cutting through them at a long slant from one gray patch of water to another, he discerned a thin streak which left ripples behind it like the fin of a shark.

Without any definite idea of what he was to do he swooped down for it like a giant fish hawk. Then he saw that all round it there kept rising an erratic shower of fountains of high-flung spray which repeated themselves half a mile farther on, and then repeated again, and again at lessening intervals.

But the phenomenon conveyed nothing to him, and he continued to rush on into the danger zone and noticed only that the ship had turned almost like a rabbit and was charging down on the same object at the same time.

“To the left!” came another ear-splitting yell.

Rankin snatched a hurried glance from the shark to look over his shoulder. There, within three hundred yards of him a long gray whale was emerging. There, was something he could see, something he could aim at. Instantly he banked over so that one wide wing-tip skimmed the wave crests, and hurled himself at it. Almost before he had regained his equilibrium he was above. His arm flashed over the side and heaved a conical black object clear of the wing, and then he was over.

There was a giant splash, and:

“Missed her!” yelled Jim, hopping in his seat to face backward.

Rankin spat a terrible oath through his grim set teeth and wheeled over again on a sixty degree slant. As he came round he could see that the whale was hurriedly submerging again. The next second he snatched another black shape from its resting place between his knees and flung it out, well forward. It passed from his view immediately.

He saw Jim's arms go up with an exultant yell; and the same instant a terrific blast of hot air from behind him kicked the tail of the machine up with a resistless suddenness which drove its nose down at a steep angle for the water. At that height there was no possibility of regaining control. In a second there was a tearing, foaming smash, and Rankin was hurled forward onto the wheel with the force of his own suddenly arrested momentum!

VI.

Here was one test of the born aviator. Presence of mind. Rankin did not hold wildly on to everything within reach to save himself from falling; his first instinct was to fling himself clear from the entangling brace wires. Though he was under water and half smothered, he kept in mind the most open way out, and within the half minute he struggled out onto the limp wreckage of what had once been a lower wing plane. Jim was already crawling up onto an upper surface.

"Hell!" was his greeting. "Guess I'll earn no more toward that three thousand out of her. Come on up, the view is fine. This side isn't smashed up so terribly, and there's air enough in the camber spaces to keep her afloat for a long while yet."

Rankin climbed up and joined him on his sagging raft, careful not to put his foot through the fabric. The whale was gone utterly! So were all the shark fins. At least, they could see none from their rocking perch. The dominant thought that had impelled him for so long was still uppermost in Rankin's mind.

"Good stuff!" he kept muttering. "Great! Now's her time to get away. Why don't she turn and make a blue streak?"

Their own plight remained in the background of his mind, to be taken out and dealt with after other more important matters had been settled.

But the United States Destroyer Woodruff was showing no desire to get away. Instead, she rushed back and forth and up

and down like a questing terrier and every now and then she barked viciously as one gun crew or another fired at anything which appeared to them to have the remotest chance of being a shark's fin.

For a full half hour she hunted, and then at slower speed she steamed for the soggy, slowly sinking raft. With navy smartness a boat hit the water long before the ship had lost her way, and in a few more minutes the two fanatics, nearly normal now, stood on the heaving deck which rolled thirty degrees each way and felt to them as solid as a city sidewalk.

At the gangway a petty officer saluted them.

"Cap'n's compliments, sir. Waiting for you in his cabin, sir."

Rankin was surprised. He had looked for surprise from the other side, but they seemed to have been expecting him.

Lieutenant Commander Evans stood in his holy of holies, the captain's cabin. Ensign Rankin was quite normal by this time. That is to say, he did not know exactly what navy etiquette demanded for the occasion. He drew himself up stiffly, dripping sea water all over the carpet, and saluted.

"Report on board for duty, sir."

His commander gasped at the amazing young man. For the first time in all his navy experience he did not know himself exactly what such an occasion demanded. For a few minutes he said nothing; then, with a dry smile:

"H-m, yes; we heard all about you. Managed to pick up a wireless; but I'm hanged if we ever expected to see you." He

broke into a grim laugh. “Yes, we were surprised enough; but you must have looked like the premeditated malice of the devil to those submersibles. It was great work my boy, great. We’ll be sorry to lose you now.”

“Lose me?” wondered Rankin.

“Well,” Commander Evans spoke with slow deliberation. “I suppose you’ll be reassigned to aviation after this. It’s not every day that one saves a United States destroyer, you know.”

Rankin’s heart jumped and he felt his color rising; and since it is not seemly for an aviator to display emotion he saluted hastily and turned to go. The deliberate voice stopped him.

“Better put in a claim for that machine. Since she’s been in active service I guess the navy’ll take her over.”

“Thank you, sir.” Again Rankin turned with his hand on the door-knob lest his face should betray the double exultation in his soul.

Once again that exasperating recall.

“Oh, by the way; there was another wireless; private, for you; a most insistent person.”

Rankin wheeled in a flash. There is a limit to emotional suppression. His commanding officer was holding out a long envelope to him. Rankin took it with a haste which amounted almost to a rudeness and tore it open with fingers that trembled unmanfully. The first thing he looked for was the signature—Eileen! It loomed as big as a theater advertisement.

“Bully for both of you,” it read. “I know you’ll succeed.”

Rankin waved it wildly over his head and whooped like a hysterical Indian. It was a shameful display of emotion for an aviator, and a most improper action for an ensign in his commander’s private cabin. But Lieutenant Commander Evans only smiled.

END

FREE eBooks

WHOEVER
WHENEVER
WHEREVER
YOU ARE

INSTANTLY DOWNLOAD THESE MASSIVE BOOK BUNDLES

CLICK ANY BELOW TO ENJOY NOW

3 AUDIOBOOK COLLECTIONS

Classic AudioBooks Vol 1 ▪ Classic AudioBooks Vol 2 ▪ Classic AudioBooks Kids

6 BOOK COLLECTIONS

Sci-Fi ▪ Romance ▪ Mystery ▪ Academic ▪ Classics ▪ Business