

his throat. Ford had forgotten the gunner. For an instant his heart leaped into his mouth; but Welsh was staring oceanward, where another dim shape showed, topped by a cloud of smoke, a receding steamer.

"She's the Katahdin. Makin' for sea, the Katy is. Goin' to run out the blow," he said. "That puts it up to us, Skipper, to find that Manila steamboat afore she sinks some coaster."

Ford was not listening. The shock had paralyzed him. But he had never doubted his star from the moment he had chosen an evil one. Almost without elation he realized that he was looking down into the funnel tops of the Government transport, sunk to her superstructure. The bullion ship Manila!

But every second was a hazard of discovery by the sharp-eyed coastguard, keen on running down that "floating menace to navigation." A twist of the steering wheel threw the airship on her beam ends. Before Welsh could recover balance, the aeroplane made the abrupt half circuit, turning her back on the swamped ship, headed back to shore. The little gunner swung on Ford in spluttering wrath.

"W'at in thunder— Ye ain't goin' back, are ye?" he shouted. "Ye ain't goin' to quit scouting?"

Ford motioned to the black skyline in the east. "It'll hit us and smash us," he grated. "No aeroplane built can hold up in a gale—"

"Won't she float? Ain't she got pontoons?" Welsh raged. "Won't the boys get us? You goin' to chance that drifter ridin' out the storm—in the ship lane? Ye ain't no better'n a beachcomber! Ye ought to be fired, ye darn—coward!"

The gunner was crying mad; but Ford sat like a statue. Fire him, would they? Hoot him off the beach for a quitter? The department couldn't do it too soon. That would give him a free hand, and he would wire Billy Handy in New York as soon as he could get to the telegraph office across the bay. Once Billy's wrecking company got their hands on the Manila, the coastguard and the Government could go hang!

The aeroplane rounded up alongside the shed on the bluff. Welsh dropped from it and swung away without a word. The wind was rising to terrific volume; the wash of the surf already flooded the beach. Down at Ships Bottom station Ford glimpsed the storm flag flying—red with a black center—and the crew were running out the boat seeking higher ground. Besides the life savers, there were wild looking men wandering along the shore—

"Beachcombers—I suppose I'm in that class." He

The patrol came panting on his heels. "She's a big black liner with her bow smashed in. She's making for the Gridiron."

The next moment, in the glare of the storm lightning, they all saw her driving in on the rocks, bows down. On each side of the Gridiron the ocean flung shoreward, covering the beach man deep with a monstrous surf. It was no job for a lifeboat to try a rescue at sea, even if the big white motor could live in those racking rollers. The doomed liner was coming in too fast, as Casco saw, fetching in the gale with her.

His voice boomed out above the rend of wind and surf. "Tumble out the breeches buoy, Men! We'll meet her down shore. Lively now!"

"We ain't got a show on the beach," Welsh cried. "We got to shoot that steamboat from the flyin' machine bluff."

The broad wheeled sand wagon lay ready with breeches buoy and tackle aboard. Captain and crew sprang to the work of rescue, tailing on with roaring chorus, hauling the heavy wagon along the scant ridge of sand. Little Welsh, atop of it, calmly prepared for action, coiling ropes and loading the line gun. Before they had covered half the distance the black liner struck with a sound of rending wood and squealing iron on rock. Wind and current had her jammed tight in the Giants Fingers.

"A bully long shot she is too!" Welsh cried. "I dunno but we'll have to send the sky skipper out arter 'em."

A grim laugh followed. Ford, standing like a stone man beside the prone aeroplane, suddenly sobbed and sprang to help. A man put him ruddily aside. "We don't want no quitters buttin' in," he growled. Not one of the others noticed the aviator. Only Captain Casco shot a side glance at him as he strode apart, watching the stranded liner through his glasses.

With incredible speed the life savers unlimbered the wagon, planted a sand anchor on the ridge behind the aeroplane shed, and broke out the breeches buoy cable, looping it over the roof. Welsh knelt behind the line gun on the bluff.

"I reckon this is the fust time a breeches buoy's been shot to a sunk ship from a flyin' machine shed," the gunner said. "Wonder will the old shanty stand? All set, Cap!"

"Anchor planted! Hawser clear! Shot line coiled! Mortar pointed!" Casco capped the regulation chant. "Gun-ner, fire!"

The line went hurtling out. On the liner's slanting deck they saw the rush of wreckage and men clinging to

spray high in the air. They heard the strands of wire snapping under the strain. Then the cable parted, midway between ship and shore.

"She's took ground further out! Try it again!" said Casco's stern voice.

Again the gun exploded; the white lifeline hissed out of its coils in the box, wavering in the air like a thrashing serpent—only to fall short, with the shore end limp and trailing. "Too far!" a groan and curse went up which mingled with ominous groanings from the sea.

"Won't carry," Little Welsh cried. "An' that ship's breakin' up!" The little man sprang up beside the gun that had failed him, and stood peering into the send of the gale. "My God!" he cried passionately, "Nothin' but a flyin' machine kin get those fellows! They're gone!"

"Jump for the boat," Casco said quietly. "We'll never fetch 'em; but we'll go out trying. Duty's duty."

"It's my turn. I'm going," a voice answered him as quietly. Ford stepped forward.

THROUGH all the tumult and the fighting the aviator had stood aside, shamed, tortured, waiting, after that first repulse. Whatever the life crew thought or guessed, he knew, from the very first alarm of the wireless operator, that the wrecked liner had struck the Manila, the swamped transport that he had left floundering in the darkness—when a wireless word to the Katahdin would have put her out of power of mischief. Hoping against hope, he had watched the men at work, thrilling when they laid a path to safety, groaning when they failed. In place of the wealth, health, and happiness he bargained for, he was a pariah, with murder on his soul.

Welsh's wailing cry vitalized his brain with sudden inspiration, that and Casco's solemn words. "If you don't mind giving me a hand?" Ford said. "If you'll toss over that dead line, the thin one, I'll make a try at it. Can't do more than fail."

"You mean you'll carry the line out to her? In face o' that?" Casco swept his great arm seaward. "It'll hit again in a minute, that blow! She's only breathing, y' know."

"All the more reason to hustle." Ford dragged the nose of the aeroplane round and swung into the seat. Already the motor was whirring.

"Ye said that darn thing won't turn round in a wind. How d'ye expect to get back?" Welsh demanded incredulously.

Ford smiled. It was droll, this man who had shamed him trying to deter him from death. "Curse it! pass up the line! Do you want all those people to drown?" he snarled in sudden scorn.

For a second there was no sound but the droning motor. Then Casco strode forward with the lifeline. "I kind o' suspicioned it was in ye," the big Captain said. "If the blow don't drop ye, the line'll carry ye down. So long, Maty!" he put out his huge hand.

Ford touched it with a reckless laugh. "Duty's duty, Cap'n! Watch the line!"

WITH the brief interlude, the momentary "breathing spell" had already passed. An ominous rumble came from the sea, and a man's voice shrilled high from somewhere, shouting warnings.

"Let her go!" Ford snapped. "Don't let the line hitch!" He heard the unseen man shout again; but the rush of the gale set him gasping. "Smash and be hanged!" he gritted.

Launched into the flying scud,—into eternity, for all he knew,—he put on all the power, hoping to offset the weight of the line he carried. The squall caught him in all its fury right over the Gridiron, struck like a solid blast, and passed. After the first upward dash, the aeroplane slowed, slithering down to the sea. But the push of the wind lifted the planes far above the rocks. Beneath him he saw the dark shape of the ship, a flare streaming from her foretop.

The aeroplane, dragged at by the full length of rope, swooped over the liner amidships. Ford jerked at the line that Casco had looped over the steering wheel. A single tug sufficed to drop the leaded end, and he braced himself to meet the sudden upward rush. "I started you for Davy Jones—there's a passport for earth again!" he shouted, and whirled out to sea.

He dared not turn now; but a terrible weight was lifted from him. He did not much care now if he never got back. He felt drowsy. In the darkness he could not judge his distance from the waves—from the—heavens!

A raucous screaming roused him, and another ominous sound that chilled his blood. The power was giving out! In the rush of events he had not thought to replenish his tanks, and now— Well, now, listening to the dying motor, he knew it was all up. "I ran out the shoestring, all right; but the last race landed me!" He laughed, a reckless laugh that broke into panic gurgling.

A HUGE red eye blinked out of the east; then fiendish yells filled the air. He had a vague sense of crashing into some yielding, blinding, squalling thing. Then the aeroplane struck, with the clanging of a boiler shop at sea,—a slanting blow that slithered the airship a dozen yards ahead, and sent him sprawling, half in and

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A Slanting Blow that Slithered the Airship a Dozen Yards Ahead.

remembered Welsh's bitter taunt, the uncharted derelict lurking in the path of ships, and a shiver ran through him. "Just the same, I'm fighting for more than my life—the girl— Hang their beach law!"

He turned to enter the shed to get his few belongings; he had no intention of returning to the hangar again. It was growing dark; out beyond the Gridiron reef the sea was inky.

"Didn't come in any too soon, as it was—"

SUDDENLY he stopped, frozen in his tracks. Out of the blackness in the east a thin arc of red shot up, then another. Rockets! From Ships Bottom came the hurried voices of men and the thumping of boat gear. Ford saw the wireless operator running down from his station, a hundred yards away.

"She's the Rio liner Brazil!" he shouted. "Hit something off shore! Down by the head and washing in, she is! Passengers aboard!"

stanchions, while others swarmed up the ship's shrouds.

"They got it, Jem!" Welsh cried. "It's up to you now, Cap!"

The second doubled line spun out, with block and tackle attached; then the wire hawser moved seaward. As quickly as strong arms could haul it, it reeled off the spindle, until it lay taut across the roof of the shed, twanging like a big steel bowstring, over surf and intervening reef, a sure path of rescue, from the anchor to the liner's foretop.

The lifeline laid, a sudden silence fell. Then a hoarse cry. "The wind's gone down—the back wash'll push her out! She'll snap our line!"

With impish malice, the gale seemed to stop for a breathing spell. The wind dropped to fitful gusts. Relieved of its pressure, the banked-up sea water rolled back from the beach. They saw the receding flood strike the ship, lift her, and force her from the reef. The buoy cable sprang upward, projecting a long fringe of