



FLYERS OF FORTUNE

by BEN CONLON

Whispering death wings spread above a tropic sea—as flyers face destruction for the lure of sunken gold!

CHAPTER I OUT OF THE AIR

A LARGE WINDJAMMER with furled sails was being towed slowly down the harbor. A trim ocean liner, already through The Narrows on her outbound course, steamed at half speed. Off Coney Island, and rounding toward Norton Point, a tug was panting along.

There was an air of unhurried commerce about

New York's lower bay today—except for one solitary feature. That was the little monoplane roaring close to the Staten Island shore. It tore through the air at a speed of ninety-odd miles an hour, banked and turned over the water like a wheeling gull, occasionally looped and dived and zoomed. It was one way of having a good time. It was Webb Foster's way.

Far out over the bay now, the offshore wind was behind him, adding to his speed. He circled and flew over the liner, giving an answering wave to the crowd on the boat deck. Then he sped on toward Rockaway Inlet, where he made a steep bank, turned, and came roaring back toward the liner. Great fun, this!

Ahead of him, it seemed a couple of miles, Webb Foster could make out a seaplane, flying toward him at his own level. As it came on, it looked, except for the pontoons, like a much larger reflection of his own ship.

The seaplane circled to the south, and Webb Foster gave his ship all she had and divided his attention between the trembling hand of the tachometer and the air speed. He forgot the seaplane and the liner now. His whole world was encompassed in a span of less than thirty feet and a length of less than twenty—his new single-seater monoplane, with its powerful little Wright-Morehouse twin-cylinder motor.

Always, when in the air, Webb Foster felt endowed with new life. But to-day was something special. It was his first long flight in the little Petrel monoplane, and the air speed was touching ninety-five. Never mind the hours of office toil that it had taken to get the price; the nights of sacrifice to hold on to his savings. All that was past.

The clean air from the propeller blast blew away all troubles. It was cold, too, and the loitering breeze of the morning had freshened into a stiff wind. But the very sting of it was pleasure. The even firing of the motor's cylinders drowned out all inharmonies of life. Beauty appears in many guises. To Webb Foster, this was beauty.

For just an instant he looked down at the liner below him. And now, for the first time, his eyes left the instrument board for more than a minute. The passengers below were rushing over to the starboard rail. A glance in that direction showed the reason.

A couple of hundred yards from the liner, a little sailboat was scudding along over the white-capped waves. Its sail, which appeared much too big for the boat, was slatting viciously. The lone boatman was frantically trying to brail up his canvas in order to reef.

"If I piloted a plane the way that fellow sails a boat," was Webb Foster's thought to himself, "I'd be running the risk of——"

Then it happened.

The boat went over on its side. The amateur sailor, Webb could see, had been catapulted into the water.

In an instant the airman was over the capsized boat and circling. The liner now seemed a little farther away. And it was all too apparent that the boatman was as poor a swimmer as he was a sailor. He was floundering about, lashing the rough water into foam. And he was using very poor judgment. Instead of swimming back to his overturned boat and clinging to it until assistance came, he had turned from the boat and was striking out toward the liner. Webb throttled down and flew low.

"Go back!" he yelled. "Your own boat is nearer!"

But he was sure that his voice had been drowned out. The swimmer continued to kick and paddle toward the liner. He was making poor headway. Some one had tossed a life-preserver from the deck of the big ship, but the swimmer had well over a hundred yards to go to reach it. He'd never make it, thought Webb Foster. The airman looked toward the Staten Island shore line. The seaplane was heading in his direction, and probably would arrive on time to be of assistance; But even as Webb formed the opinion, the man's head sank beneath the surface.

THE big steamer was now circling to starboard, but Webb Foster knew how difficult it would be to maneuver the large vessel quickly and effectively. And not another boat, small or large, near enough to do any good. The seaplane was coming on, but the swimmer, who had kicked himself to the surface again, had one arm raised in a panicky gesture. He was motioning that he could not hold out.

A stab of pain went through Webb Foster's heart. Why didn't that seaplane pilot give her full gun and hurry up? That man down there would be a goner in a matter of seconds. It looked right now as if he were giving up the struggle.

For only an instant, Webb considered. He himself could save that man down there. He was an exceptionally good swimmer. Yes, he could set his plane on the water, and he could leave it, and save that man. But his little monoplane was a land plane. In saving that foolish person down there he would lose a trim monoplane that he had already grown to love. But Webb Foster knew that he was going to do it, nevertheless. The liner was too far away; that seaplane was too slow, or else its pilot had not seen what was happening. There was no middle course for Webb Foster. He could save his plane, or he could save a human life.

His choice was very clear to him as he nosed down toward the water. Yes, it was the only way. But his beautiful new ship! It was being destroyed by his own hand. It was like shooting a beautiful animal, a beautiful animal that was also a pet.

The seconds spent in descending seemed productive of hours of thought. Webb looked at his fuel gauge. His tank was all but full; he had been flying only a few minutes. If he only had one of those automatic dumpers to get rid of his gasoline! Empty, the plane might hobble about until salvaged—the seaplane might help him out.

But the seaplane had now turned shoreward. Oh, well, some time—maybe—he could save up and buy another ship! Meanwhile, he would have kept a crape away from somebody's door! Some mother, possibly, some wife or daughter or brother or pal would be spared anguish and grief—lucky day for that fool down there when Webb Foster bought a plane!

The sea makes decisions quickly. It might gobble up that unfortunate man down there any second. Already Webb could see that the man was now making no progress. And, as the monoplane struck the water, and Webb, who already had his safety belt unhooked, tore off his goggles, he could realize why the swimmer was making a poor job of it—there was an ugly-looking wound on his forehead. The boom must have hit the boatman as the sail gybed and the little craft went over.

AS THE spray leaped over the fuselage, Webb took a header from the cockpit. The icy water bit into every nerve of his body. Now he could hear the man's shouting and sputtering. He brought his strong overhand stroke into play, and reached the man just as he was sinking and the sputtering and shouting became an unintelligible gurgle.

The injured man reached out and clutched his would-be rescuer with a death grip. Webb's arms were pinned to his sides. Desperately he treaded water.

"Let go! Quick!" he shouted.

But the terrorized man wouldn't let go. Then Webb Foster had to do it. He wrenched his right arm free, balled his hand into a fist, and let the struggling man have it on the point of the jaw.

Possibly the sight over the panicky man's shoulder put a little unconscious spite into Webb Foster's blow—for the little monoplane's cockpit, half-filled with water, was sinking. The plane's small wingspread offered slight resistance. The man lapsed into unconsciousness. His grip loosened.

Now Webb got the man on his back, and took

him under the armpits. He looked about for the little sailboat, made it out some distance away, and then saw that the big liner had stopped just a few yards from him. Its propellers were in reverse, and were grinding the water into a turbulent lather. He could read the name on the stern: *Coamo*.

Another instant and a life preserver thrown from the upper deck splashed the water a yard or so away from him. A second life preserver followed immediately. A rope ladder was being lowered, and the ship was being swung around, disclosing the broadside line of portholes.

It was a matter of less than two minutes before rescuer and rescued were pulled aboard. A blue-uniformed ship's officer looked sullen and impatient, but passengers crowded about the two dripping figures with words of praise for the hero. The rescued man's body was shaking as with the ague, and his teeth were chattering. Then Webb Foster felt the dead weight of him in his arms. The man had fainted.

"Bring him below." It was the ship's doctor who gave the command, and two swarthy seamen picked up the dripping figure and followed the medical man forward.

Webb Foster was looking wistfully over the starboard rail. His monoplane had been pulled almost entirely beneath the surface by its engine; the cockpit was under water, and the tail was flirting up in the air as if in farewell.

A second later, where the gay little plane had been was only a heaving, white-capped expanse of cruel, slate-colored water. Webb Foster ought to have felt like a hero. But he really felt as if he had committed some act of vandalism, or double crossed a friend. His ship, his beautiful new little ship was gone! And it had touched ninety-five per hour, and—

"Great work, young man!" cried a voice close at hand, interrupting his thoughts. "Here. Come right back to my stateroom. You need some warm, dry clothes."

WEBB looked up at the speaker. He was a man possibly in the early fifties, very well dressed in a conservative, old-fashioned way. His suit was black, and cut without style. He wore stiff collars and cuffs. He looked like a banker—and later Webb Foster was to learn that this look was not deceiving.

Webb followed him down to B deck, and through the door of G suite. The latter was a large corner stateroom, containing a double bed and two cots. An attractive tiled bathroom could be seen through the doorway at the right of the entrance.

"First," said his host, "I'll lay out a suit and some underclothes for you. The suit may look old-fashioned, but it will be warm, and snow is predicted. A good hot bath will fix you up. Just make free with the place, as if it belonged to you. My name is Charlton. I'll go up and take a turn about the deck and see that other fellow, and drop down here later."

Webb could hear the churning of the ship's engines. "But where will they let me off?" he asked. "At the Ambrose Lightship, or—"

"Listen!" Charlton said, and sat down upon the bed. "You did a mighty fine thing to-day. I saw it all. I had been watching you for over a quarter of an hour. I'm interested in airplanes, and I can see you are a damn good flyer. Now, you saved a life, and lost a plane into the bargain. You deserve reward. Why not let that reward be a trip to the tropics? This ship is bound for San Juan, Porto Rico."

"It sounds good," said Webb, grinning. "I'm not sure," he added with a wider grin, "whether it's a dollar and a half or a dollar sixty that I have in my pockets. I may even have as much as two dollars."

"Never mind that," was the elderly man's rejoinder. "I have plenty of money with me. I can fix up your passage with the purser. Fortunately there won't be much red tape, for no passports are required from the States to Porto Rico. And this isn't charity, either, young man. I have a real selfish interest—a real business proposition to talk over with you. I'm old enough, and rich enough, to pick my friends. I like your style. You'll get a good salary, and a new airplane into the bargain. I think Providence may have had something to do with throwing you into my hands to-day."

"You mean you're offering me a job—flying?"

"That's it. Wait just a second." Some one had knocked upon the stateroom door. A ship's officer was disclosed when Charlton opened the door.

"As to transferring this ocean waif to some other vessel, Mr. Charlton," he said, smiling broadly, "I think perhaps that—"

"I think perhaps that it will be unnecessary," cut in Charlton. "This man is coming to San Juan with me."

"But I'm not sure, Mr. Charlton, that there is any additional stateroom accommodation aboard," said the ship's officer.

"I'll attend to that!" snapped Charlton, with the air of a man who drove through his own decisions. "I have two empty beds here. I'm not a leper, am I? I took this suite to be alone, but I'm not quarantined, am I? Of *course* there's additional stateroom accommodations,

right in this suite. Here! I'll go with you now to the captain or the purser, or whoever can fix this up. See you in a few minutes, Foster."

The door closed after Charlton and the ship's officer, but within a few seconds Charlton burst back into the room.

"By the way, Foster," he asked, "are you married or single?"

"Single, sir. Why?"

"Good! It came to me that you might be married. That would never do. This jaunt may be the most pleasant experience of your whole life. But I ought to tell you that it could, under certain conditions, be the most dangerous. Now is the time to back out, if you care to do so."

"I think I'll stick with it, sir," was Webb's decision.

Charlton showed his pleasure, and once more burst out through the door after the ship's officer. Webb Foster started to strip off his wet clothes. He looked out through the porthole. A few snowflakes were falling.

"Good *night!*" he exclaimed. "My little ship in a watery grave, and me on the way to the tropics! Well, I went into the air for adventure. And this adventure sure came to me right out of the air!"

CHAPTER II THROUGH TROPIC SKIES

THE COAMO WAS PLOWING ALONG through a snowstorm when Webb Foster, dressed in the most dignified suit he had ever worn, came out of G suite, and walked aft along B deck.

The heavy flakes draped the vessel like a bridal veil. Webb turned up the collar of the staid Oxford-gray overcoat that Charlton had laid out for him, and gave himself up to the thrill of what was before him as he watched the smoke pouring from the ship's funnel and weaving a dark pattern into the storm.

Four days, and he would be in a land of perpetual summer. It was still hard to realize. Going south, hired out as a pilot! Could Charlton, by any chance, be one of those Central American revolutionists he had read about? Webb thought over the matter as the flakes of snow whipped about the after deck.

No, that benign Anglo-Saxon countenance of

Charlton had no revolution behind it. Charlton was assuredly a man of peace. But what was the idea? It might be a good thing to talk with Charlton and find out a few particulars.

Webb strolled forward, and came across the elderly man in a corner of the glass-enclosed part of the forward deck, but Charlton had his back toward him, and was talking with a man in sailor's clothes.

The face of the sailor looked somehow familiar. But that was ridiculous! Webb was not aware that he knew any sailors. Then it came to him—the man in the rough seaman's clothing was the man he had rescued from the Lower Bay. He wore a neat plaster over the bruise on his forehead. To escape the man's wordy thanks, Webb turned into one of the salons. He heard music, and traced the melody to the social hall.

In the snug warmth of the social hall, his body tingled from the needles of the cold shower with which he had finished off back in G suite. Webb removed his overcoat and placed it with his cap on the chair in which he seated himself. Across the social hall he was conscious of some one's gaze in his direction. He looked up to see that it was a girl, who lowered her head quickly, but not quickly enough to hide a smile.

The cause of the smile was only too evident to Webb—the girl had been looking at the odd suit he was wearing; the staid black suit which draped well enough over his wide shoulders, but had to be tucked in and belted over the lean waist. Webb smiled a little himself, for he had noted that the girl's laugh was kindly—it had been all amusement and no disdain.

The ship's orchestra struck up a snappy foxtrot, and now Webb was surprised to see the young lady leave her seat and walk straight toward him. Maybe she was going to ask him to dance. Did girls do such things aboard ships? All sorts of strange things were happening to-day!

Once more Webb looked down at his sober suit, which made him feel like a deacon. It was no suit to foxtrot in—but he'd go through with it. He bowed to the girl, who was now in front of him, and in another half second had guided the girl into the mazes of the dance.

The girl's intense surprise showed in her face.

"Do men do these things aboard ships?" she asked. "Do they kidnap girls into dancing without asking them? But then I suppose a hero always does the unexpected."

Webb smiled. "But I had an idea that you expected me to dance with you," he apologized. "I saw you get up and walk right toward me."

The girl laughed musically. "The reason I did that," she explained, "was that I recognized one of my dad's suits on you, and I was going to tell you that he has another suit in his trunk that would be more appropriate for a younger man."

RUNNING into Charlton's delightful daughter in this unusual way, Webb Foster made the most of it. He danced with Betty Charlton until the luncheon gong sounded, and then Joshua Charlton took possession of him and invited him to lunch with him in his stateroom, so that they might talk in private.

Somehow Webb expected that talk to expose everything about the man's odd invitation to take the West Indian trip. But, as it happened, Joshua Charlton's information only whetted the younger man's appetite for adventure more than it satisfied his curiosity.

"Well! Well!" exclaimed Charlton as the room steward retired. "To-day is quite a day, Foster. You know that fellow you rescued from the bay? Eli Hammond, his name is. He came up to me on the forward deck, and recognized me. He's the son of an old friend of mine. We got talking, and it seems Hammond speaks Spanish fluently. He seemed valuable to me, so I invited him along on my expedition. That's what I need right now—a few young men who are honest and able. I had planned to man my expedition through my Porto Rico agent; but I'd rather have a couple of Americans in the party, anyhow."

Webb made ready to hear details of the "expedition" referred to, but Charlton was reticent about them. Webb learned that Charlton, a retired banker, had engaged a pilot for his expedition hack in New York, but at the last minute, after he had made arrangements for the San Juan trip, he had found the man unreliable and had dismissed him. He also learned that Charlton had been in the West Indies a number of times, and owned an estate near Barranquitas, in the interior of Porto Rico.

The more he talked with—or rather listened to—Charlton, the more he trusted him. And yet, why was Charlton so mysterious about his expedition? Why was he so reticent of details? And why was a man of his age, and, on top of that, a banker, engaged upon a West Indian mission that he had said might be fraught with danger?

Charlton was definite at least in one peice of information: He had ordered a large amphibian plane for use on his expedition. The amphibian was having some slight changes made to its cabin, and would be down by a company pilot from the Sikorsky plant at College Point, N.Y., to San Juan, Porto Rico, arriving

there possibly before the *Coamo* did. And in one other particular Charlton was definite—while he could not go into details now, he said, he promised that everything about the expedition was legal and aboveboard. Webb began to develop a sincere liking for the man.

THE days aboard passed swiftly. Eli Hammond, the man rescued from the bay, was given the third bed in G suite. The man was gentlemanly, and yet Webb found it hard to cotton to him. Webb was suspicious, too, of such a coincidence as the stranger being “the son of an old friend of mine,” as Charlton had said.

Could Hammond be some drone playing upon the sympathies of a kind and impressionable man in order to get a soft vacation? Webb’s whole cruise seemed to be developing into one big unanswered question. Often as he gazed into the waters that were gradually changing from slate gray to a clear tropic blue, he gave way to his reflections. The experience itself was delightful so far. Sailing south on a summer sea! But for what?

Webb’s first definite hint came when, on Monday morning, the *Coamo* sailed proudly into San Juan harbor. From the upper deck, Joshua Charlton pointed out the beauties of the scenery.

“One could find adventure down this way on some uninhabited island, Foster?” he said. “Supposing I told you that this expedition of mine was a treasure hunt. Would you like to hear that? Mind, I’m not saying it is.”

“Sounds good, Mr. Charlton. But of course, I don’t suppose there’s any such thing in the West Indies these days.”

“Oh, don’t you, though?” challenged Charlton, and there was a twinkle in his eye. He pointed over the rail. “See that island there? That’s uninhabited. It was formerly used as a leper colony. And Mona Island, between here and San Domingo, is practically uninhabited. So why not a few more?”

Ramon Lado, Charlton’s Porto Rican agent, met the Charlton party at the wharf, and motored them to the Hotel Condado. Webb thrilled to the tropic beauties about the hotel built on the edge of the sea, but his real thrill did not come until after luncheon, when Charlton, his eyes twinkling again, led the party on a short stroll toward Santurce Bay.

Resting on the water, close to a little pier, was a huge amphibian plane.

Webb Foster forgot even the bountiful tropic vegetation about him in his interest in the giant plane. His aviator’s eye noted its graceful hull and pontoons, the slight dihedral of its lower wing, its two powerful

Wasp engines hung below the upper wing, and other features. Vincente Lado, the son of Charlton’s Porto Rican agent, was in the pilot’s seat, and as soon as the various members of the party were aboard, he taxied the amphibian along the smooth waters of Santurce Bay and maneuvered it into the air.

He circled the ship over the grounds of the hotel, over the Condado golf course with its smooth green and palm-bordered fairways; over the tiled roofs of San Juan, and then nosed southwest. His destination was Barranquitas, near where the Charlton estate was located.

He flew rather low, and Webb Foster’s dreaming gaze was fixed upon winding mountain roads, along which rolled native ox carts and American motors. The scene below was a queer mixture of Spanish mellowness and American bustle.

For miles, tobacco fields, some of them covered with snowy white cloths, looked like great green-and-white checkerboards. A little church with a careening cross came into view, and Charlton pointed to the east of it. Webb could see a large, square, Spanish house surrounded by a smooth sward, and, to the rear, a colorful tropical garden—the Charlton estate.

MOST of that afternoon Webb spent with young Lado in looking over the giant plane. Lado, who spoke good English, pointed out its special cargo space, which had been added to by taking out some of the cabin seats. He told of its ceiling of twenty thousand feet and its speed of a hundred and twenty-five miles an hour. But all this was insufficient for Webb Foster. He wanted to go up in it again, and pilot it himself.

Accordingly, Lado took off again, and this time Webb was in the pilot’s compartment. Lado held the wheel for a few minutes, but soon swung it over to the American.

For an hour Webb guided the huge but graceful plane through the tropic skies, banked and turned, bucked the strong northeast trade winds or sailed before them, flew over the big tower of the broadcasting station at Cayey, and felt that the world was his.

After the flight, Charlton sought him out. The swift tropic night had fallen, but Webb still lingered in the lighted hangar, looking over the plane that he was to pilot on the as-yet-unexplained expedition.

“Do you mind coming up to my room a minute, Foster?” asked Charlton, and Webb left Lado and Hammond, who were also enthusiastic over the big plane, and followed the ex-banker into the screened house and up the stairway.

"I just wanted to see you for a little conference," said Charlton, as he led the way along a matted corridor. "We can talk things over more privately up here, and—"

Charlton did not finish. As he swung open the door of his room, a loud thud sounded outside on the ground, and a swish of wind carried the noise of rustling papers blowing in the air and on the floor. Charlton snapped on the lights.

On a desk lay his black portfolio—open. Large sheets of paper, which had evidently been spread across the desk, were now scurrying about the floor in a draft created by an open window and the open door, which now banged shut.

From Charlton's gasp of astonishment Webb sensed something of what had happened. In two leaps he was at the window. In a flash his eye caught the form of a man disappearing into the gloom, while on the ground below the window lay the ladder that had fallen and caused the loud thud. Webb snatched an automatic from Charlton's dresser and dashed out of the room, down the stairway, and through the rear door.

He could hear the sneak thief racing through the garden, and could see that he was making for a thick jungle of trees to the north of the garden. A shot failed to stop the man, who in a moment was swallowed up in the darkness of the jungle. But Webb Foster followed along grimly. He prowled through the pitch-black tangle of bushes and trees, and was about to give up the fruitless search when, on the far side of the jungle, he heard the roar of an airplane engine.

CHAPTER III AT BIPLANE ISLAND

THE SNEAK THIEF, whoever he was, must have had a plane waiting a discreet distance from the Charlton house. But Webb could hardly see his hand before his face. He could tell that the plane was getting into the air, but he could not see it.

But now he was racing back toward the Charlton house, and in five minutes was in the air at the wheel of the big amphibian. The noise of the fugitive plane had disappeared to the north—its pitot evidently nosing toward San Juan.

Another five minutes, at better than a hundred-mile-an-hour clip, and in the moonlit spaces of the upper air, Webb could make out a hazy outline some distance ahead. It was a low-wing monoplane. He'd follow that plane and—

Suddenly, however, the amphibian's engines sputtered—roared—sputtered, and then died. Out of gas! And yet the fuel gauge showed the tanks half full.

With his mind full of wonder, and feeling more concern for the safety of the expensive plane than for himself, Webb picked out a sheen of water about half a mile ahead. It was a small lagoon, but it would serve the purpose.

He glided the big plane down to the surface of the water. The landing wheels at each side of the boatlike hull served as a brake, and brought him to a stop before the plane's nose reached the marshy stretch of mangrove roots at the other end of the small lagoon. And Webb was reminded of another occasion, just a few days before, when he had brought a land plane down on the waters of New York's Lower Bay. That seemed years ago, for plenty had happened since then.

WHEN finally gasoline had been carried to the ship from the Charlton estate and the amphibian was once more in its hangar, Webb Foster felt glum and dismal, but Charlton was loud in his praise of him.

"Foster," he said, when the two were back in Charlton's room, "your presence of mind wasn't wasted, anyhow. You say it was a low-wing monoplane. Well, that tells me something. I guess it's up to me to give you a few particulars that I didn't let you know about on board the *Coamo*. I told you then that there might be danger in the job, and now you can see that trickery is already in the air. The man you were chasing was more than a thief—he was a spy. He was after a map that I had locked in my portfolio, and the portfolio, in turn, was locked in my desk. He almost got away with the map, but not quite, thanks to our unexpected arrival. I have several important maps and charts in my possession—for, as you may have already guessed, our expedition is to be a treasure hunt."

He smiled at Webb's evident approval, and added: "But it's one of the strangest treasure hunts you've ever heard about, I guess. When we get to the island—for it's on an island—I'll tell you all about how I learned of the treasure. But my party will not know all the particulars until after we hop off. The greatest secrecy is necessary. This morning, through Lado, my agent, I learned what I had already half suspected. The pilot I told you about—

the one I thought unreliable and dismissed in New York—beat me to San Juan by two days, and he has a plane here. And it's a low-wing monoplane! That's why your discovery of to-night is most important. It shows me where to center my suspicion."

"But the monkeying with the gas tanks. What about that?"

"The spy must have had an accomplice who attended to that while all of us were busy chasing him. To-night's experience has decided me to get away as soon as possible. We'll leave for the island within three days. I have enough employees to pack the plane by that time with the supplies we'll need. My steam yacht, now anchored at Ponce, will be ready to sail the day after we hop off. You see, this expedition hasn't been a quick whim—preparations have been going forward for months." Charlton continued to talk for an hour. Webb left the room marveling at the banker's efficient methods. This was going to be genuine adventure, modern adventure, with all the glory and atmosphere of olden times, but with the newest argosy of uncharted seas—the airplane. Only one regret was in Webb's mind as he got ready for sleep. Charlton and the party would be gone for some time. And Betty Charlton would remain in Porto Rico.

THE thought was still with him three mornings later when he bade Betty good by. Dawn had not yet come. The get-away would be made in the darkness, and Webb had his instructions to fly high and over a circuitous route in leaving the island of Porto Rico.

The amphibian's main tanks in the center section of the upper wing were filled to capacity, and additional tanks of riveted duralumin, part of the ship's special equipment, were also full. The capacity of three hundred gallons had been increased by a hundred more. The fuel gauge, that had been tampered with three nights before, had been fixed by young Lado, an expert mechanic. The regular baggage compartments were stuffed with tent material, firearms, a professional diver's suit, provisions and other equipment, as were the specially equipped cargo spaces.

Eli Hammond was the first of the party to enter the cabin by the steps from the hatchway in its top. Charlton sat on the seat opposite him, while young Lado, relief pilot, and Webb, were in the pilot's compartment. A diver named Avery was also aboard. The dawn light would soon be gilding the ridges to the east, and the two Wasp engines were throbbing to go.

Webb clasped the satiny little hand that Betty

reached out to him in farewell. He felt that he had known the girl for months. Leaving her behind was the only dismal feature of the trip. As the plane took off, Betty threw a kiss. It might have been for her father—and, Webb reflected as he maneuvered the big ship southwest, a part of it might have been for him.

The amphibian was over Ponce, on the southern coast of the island, before dawn broke, and as the early morning light tinged the skies, the blue waters of the Carribean were far beneath.

Webb nosed the plane to ten thousand feet, and tried to forget the wistful face of Betty Charlton as he referred now and then to the chart on his map board.

The night before he had gone over various maps and charts with his employer. Charlton had explained why an airplane was necessary for the trip. The island, which had a long Spanish name and which Webb promptly christened "Biplane Island," on account of its shape, was surrounded by knifelike reefs which made the region a graveyard of ships in the old days before mariners had been warned away by new maps and charts. There was an inlet on one side of the island, but entrance to this was through a narrow, shallow channel which had been sand-choked in parts by the action of turbulent waters.

Layers of mountainous rock, spreading out on each side of the island like the upper wing of a biplane, made the island almost impossible to land upon, except with a plane, which could fly to the more level ground in the interior. Charlton's yacht would anchor a mile offshore and supplies would be brought to the island by air.

It was all very romantic, Webb thought, as the giant plane thundered through the dawn skies. And Charlton was no man to go off on a wild-goose chase. If he said there was treasure on Biplane Island, that settled it. But gold had been battled for, and bled for, before this. The attempted theft of the map might mean that Charlton's enemies had more information about his treasure quest than he had imagined. And that meant danger.

Danger! Somehow Webb Foster thrilled to the word and what it represented. Treachery—matching wits—probably battle—possibly bloodshed!

So far as the flight itself was concerned, Webb saw little danger in that. The Sikorsky's two Wasp engines were running sweetly, and the wheel control answered the pilot's every whim. The air was smooth; the sea below was like glass. In case of a forced landing, the ship would ride the waves safely; indeed, even in reasonably rough weather, the hull, divided as it

was into six watertight compartments, would ride the waves easily. Either one of the two splendidly functioning motors would be sufficient to carry the party on its way. No, the danger would come, if at all, when they reached the island.

Below, on the blue Caribbean waters, occasional ships could be seen. These became fewer and fewer as the southern coast of Porto Rico was left far behind. When, however, Webb's keen vision made out a plume of smoke or the topsails of a windjammer ahead of him, he flew almost to the ceiling of his ship, and more than once temporarily changed his course. Charlton had said that even a harmless-looking vessel might house a possible spy on the alert to trace the plane's route.

This problem of flying off the course soon became unnecessary, however, for toward noon a fog commenced to drape the waters. Usually a pilot's greatest enemy, the fog this time assumed the guise of a friend. That is, for a time. But soon after twelve, noon, Webb could see a worried expression upon Charlton's face. The banker was figuring on pieces of paper and looking anxiously at the maps. He kept glancing at the Waltham clock on the instrument board and then at his watch. He was not surprised when Charlton motioned him to bring the ship to the water below, and instructed him to stop the engines.

"I THINK we may be a little off our course," said Charlton after they had alighted on the water. "The fog seems to be clearing, and, we may as well wait. We shouldn't be more than fifty or sixty miles northeast of Alhaja Island. We may as well use Alhaja Island as a check point as keep flying by instrument.

Webb cut the switch, and the two powerful Wasp radials ceased their deep-toned roar. Presently the propellers came to a standstill and the beautiful amphibian plane floated idly on the smooth ocean swell. The only sound was the gentle lapping of water on the boatlike hull.

The lunch hamper was brought out, the sandwiches and coffee, hot from a large thermos flask, enjoyed, and then Charlton and Webb fell to refiguring the charts. The fog was clearing, although it still hung like a filmy curtain over the water. But they had no more than started their checking up when Webb raised his head sharply, and strained forward. He was listening to something that seemed vaguely familiar.

"Anybody hear anything?" he asked. "Sounds like the distant drone of an airplane engine!"

Charlton rose in his seat. Lado, too, and Eli Hammond, and Avery, the diver, cupped their hands

behind their ears and listened. Webb tried to peer through the mist, but he could see nothing.

"I thought I heard something," said Lado. "It might be just imagination, though."

"How about you, Hammond?" asked Webb. The distant drone was still fainter in his ears.

"Must be imagination," declared Hammond stoutly. "I didn't hear a thing."

Charlton, his ears still buzzing from the roar of the amphibian's powerful motors, had heard nothing. And Avery, the diver, shrugged his shoulders.

"When a fellow's worked under pressure as long as I have," he said, "the old ears don't function so well. No, I can't say I heard anything."

But Webb Foster decided, as he took the wheel and once more put the Sikorsky into the air and on its course, that Eli Hammond might bear watching. His statement that he "didn't hear a thing" had been entirely too deliberate. The sound had been very faint; but Webb had been almost sure that his keenly trained ears had not deceived him; he felt certain of that sound even though it had grown more and more faint. Supposing it had been an airplane! Even then it could have been some perfectly legitimate pilot, an airmail pilot, perhaps, winging his way north. Air-mail pilots were flying some unusual courses these days, up from Panama or Honduras or Central American ports, carrying mail in hours or days that formerly required weeks.

Alhaja Island, the check point that Charlton had mentioned, hove into sight shortly after one o'clock, and with the island astern, Webb ruddered east. The fog had cleared, and now the sea below the amphibian was free of vessels of any sort. They were flying well off any regular lanes of vessels, and occasionally picking up groups of islets of rocky, volcanic formation, which checked up with Charlton's maps.

The treachery of the waters about Biplane Island was revealed as Webb guided the ship steadily southeast. Charlton, an authority on the West Indies, had previously talked of this wonderland of islands, from Cuba, hundreds of miles long, to barren little islets on which a human being might hardly find accommodation. Webb could occasionally see the rotting hull of a ship wrecked on some hidden reef or the bleak strand of a small island below.

The sea became increasingly studded with reefs and rocks and tiny atolls and islets, and at a little after three o'clock the first visible hint of Biplane Island came with a grayish smudge in the distance, which gradually became clearer in outline and disclosed a high, rocky

formation that sloped down to the sea on either side. In the distance, it well merited the title that Webb had bestowed upon it.

As the Sikorsky roared nearer, the likeness to a biplane became less pronounced. On one side of the island, a row of groogroo palms lent a tropic touch, and, circling the island, Webb could make out a tangle of wilderness toward the island's center. This surrounded a small lagoon.

Nosing low, to see that the blue water hid no treacherous reefs or rocks, Webb circled once more, then throttled his engine and landed.

He lowered his landing wheels and taxied the amphibian up to the shingle beach which sloped down into the lagoon. He was the first man out of the plane. A treasure island! And only a week before he had been living a humdrum existence in New York, broken only by occasional flights in his little monoplane!

AN HOUR'S reconnaissance, both by plane and afoot, disclosed two good landing places in addition to the lagoon. One of these was on the eastern tip of the island, and the second on a level plateau toward the southwest. It was on the plateau that camp was finally pitched, and, with tents set up and most of the essentials unpacked from the ship and stored in one of the tents, Webb set out for a further exploration of the island, which was about fifteen miles in length and of varying width on account of its panelike shape.

Until dusk he reveled in the tropic splendors new to his northern eyes. In parts of the island, hundreds of cherry-colored land crabs scurried for their holes at his approach. Wild guava bushes, the creeping pest of the West Indies, choked his passage at times through groves of sapadilla and mangoes. Darkness had set in by the time he reached the open beach on the west side of the island and started to walk south toward the camp.

He crouched back of a large ceiba tree as, walking northward along the beach, he could make out the figure of a man. The man was Eli Hammond, who, as he walked, looked back anxiously toward the camp in a manner peculiarly furtive.

Eli Hammond might just be out for a stroll of exploration, like himself. Or, on the other hand, Hammond, whom he had never quite trusted, might be out for some entirely different purpose.

Webb continued to crouch low as Hammond walked along. Hammond was whistling, but now and then he ceased his melody to tune his whistle into the sound of a bird's call. The bird's call was repeated

and repeated. It seemed too deliberate to be anything but a signal. Was he signaling for him, Webb Foster? Webb doubted it, somehow. He decided to remain in concealment. A moment later he was mentally patting himself on the back for his caution. For there was an answering whistle. It came from the deep wilderness to the right.

Could Eli Hammond have arranged some secret rendezvous for himself and one of the men of the party? Could young Lado, or Avery, the diver, be in league with him in some trickery? But the next moment the answering whistle sounded nearer, and Webb Foster threw himself prone on the ground.

"Hammond?"

It was a voice pitched low in caution. It was the voice of neither young Lado nor Avery, the diver. Some one else, and naturally some one who was an enemy of the Charlton party, was on Biplane Island!

CHAPTER IV SUNKEN TREASURE

THIS, THEN, WAS THE ANSWER to the mysterious noise heard through the fog earlier in the day, when the distant sound of a droning propeller had come faintly down to the Sikorsky resting on the quiet waters! Now Webb was certain it was a plane that he had heard. And no wonder that Eli Hammond had affected to believe that the noise was "imagination." What was more, that plane had already landed on Biplane Island, discharged one or more passengers, and was probably on a return trip for more men or more supplies, or both.

All of Webb's suspicions were now verified. Eli Hammond was a crook, ungrateful to the man who had saved his life and the man who had befriended him—a low-down traitor, willing to betray his benefactors.

Now Webb began noiselessly tracking Hammond into the depth of the jungle. Hammond must have known that the plane had landed some one to watch for the Sikorsky and spy upon the Charlton party. Evidently Hammond had been ordered to wander out casually at nightfall, whistle, according to some prearranged signal, and confer with Charlton's enemy.

The foliage overhead broke up the moonlight into small strips, but shadowy patches of ground were

plentiful. Hammond, once in the jungle, walked along with a sense of self-assurance. Webb trailed him over the carpet of the forest, through masses of purple convolvulus and fragrant frangipani and along toward a spring which trickled musically over ferns and baletiers.

The answer to Hammond's whistle had been coming nearer, and now two mysterious forms came out of the jungle gloom to a patch of moonlight. Webb saw Hammond join the two figures, then all three sat down beside the spring. But the sound of the trickling water and the rustle of noisy acacia leaves overhead drowned out the gist of their talk. And that talk was most important to overhear.

Webb circled widely and quietly, skirting the trees southward, then snaked along on his stomach directly to the rear of the unsuspecting conspirators. Just how much of importance he had failed to hear he did not know; but the first thing he did hear threw much light on the strange experiences of the past several days.

"So you tell Wilke not to be getting too careless," Hammond was saying. Webb recalled that Wilke was the name of the pilot whom Charlton had discharged in New York. "I might have drowned there in New York Bay. He kept too far away with that seaplane."

"But that was for caution," put in a strange voice. "He wasn't supposed to come to the rescue except as a last resort. When he saw that monoplane near you, he took it as a bit of luck. Well, things turned out all the better, as it happened. Old Charlton don't suspect a thing, does he?"

A wave of anger surged through Webb Foster. That overturning of the sailboat in New York Bay had been a trick, then! Instead of taking passage in the normal way and running the risk of Charlton's suspicion of sociable strangers, Wilke and Hammond and their gang had doped out a better way to get their spy in the banker's party.

Webb strained his ears to catch every word of the low-pitched conversation.

"In his next trip," came a new voice, "he'll bring three more men. He only brought us two this time, 'cause he carried along a small boat. We got the boat bunked away here in the woods. Y'see, he'll fly right up to his ceilin' when he comes close to the island, and make a dead-stick landin' outside the reef. It'll be after midnight, and them birds up in the camp won't hear him. But we'll know, and we'll row out the boat and bring in our three pals. A small boat can make it through them rocks and reefs. Oh, don't worry, boy!

Wilke's got a head on him, all right! He's got the right idea—he'll just let these boobhs go through with the thing an' find the gold. He won't pull any rough stuff till then! But, then! Oh, baby!"

And at Hammond's next words, Webb Foster had fairly to hold himself with great effort to keep from dashing out then and there and throttling the smooth spy.

"Well, it can't come any too soon for me!" was Hammond's comment. "When the split-up comes, I hope Wilke sees all that I've done. I kept these boobhs busy to give Gomez a free field to get in and trace the map. All I want is my rightful share. And then, with old Charlton out of the way, I'm going to make a play for that daughter of his. She's some baby!"

Webb could hear his heart pounding violently against his ribs. The map traced through Hammond's treachery! "With old Charlton out of the way, I'm going to make a play for that daughter of his!" It was stark, brutal murder they were planning!

He had heard enough. He began easing himself back through a thicket of vines and bushes. At a discreet distance he rose to his feet, broke through to the beach, and ran every inch of the way back to camp.

CHARLTON'S face was pale in the firelight as he listened to the tale of arch treachery. Avery, the diver, had retired for the night, and young Lado, Webb and the banker talked in low tones.

"I'll never regret meeting you, Foster," said Charlton warmly. "And now, what do you suggest?"

"Hang this man Hammond to a tree!" cut in young Lado, his Latin eyes blazing.

"No," said Webb quietly, "He can still be a valuable man to us. From what I overheard, those would-be murderers won't attempt anything until the gold is located. We want to put up an innocent front to Hammond, and see if I can't overhear more of their plans. For all we know, they might have spies among the yacht's crew. We might as well know just what we're up against."

This plan was finally approved by Charlton. "And now," said the banker, "I can get a chance to tell you two fellows what I didn't want to disclose before. You see, if this were an ordinary treasure hunt, I suppose those other fellows would have as much right trying to get the gold as we have. But this is something else again. You will recall when the Deutschland, the merchant submarine, came to America with a cargo from Germany. But what you don't know is that Germany sent over another

merchant submarine—the Potsdam—shortly before the United States entered the war.

“The mission was attended with all secrecy. My bank in New York handled the details of a heavy gold shipment to Germany. The submarine took a circuitous route back to Bremen, for obvious reasons. It struck one of the many reefs about this island, and foundered. Only two of the entire ship’s company escaped—and one of these promptly murdered the other. As we know, men will murder for gold.

“The most efficient methods failed to capture the slayer. But after many years, he made a voluntary surrender when he believed the trap was closing about him and he couldn’t realize his dream of salvaging the sunken gold for himself. By a method too lengthy to explain now, he got in touch with me at my bank. He surrendered, and was willing to give the approximate location of the wreck on condition that his family in Germany received a life annuity. Under the circumstances, this was promised. He paid for his crime, and then I started to organize this expedition.”

“But weren’t you taking unnecessary chances doing it this way?” cut in Webb. “Couldn’t you have made the expedition public and thoroughly protected?”

Charlton smiled. “That is a logical question,” he replied. “But you see, there is a diplomatic measure involved. Our bank arranged the loan as the institution of a then neutral country, but when the United States entered the World War, we were rather regretful of that loan. And right now any publicity would do harm to our bank, for now we are on the edge of some mammoth deals with governments still antagonistic to Germany. That’s why our treasure hunt is a free-lance venture and highly secret, and why I wouldn’t call in the law and court publicity except as a very last resort.”

Several definite plans had been formed by the trio before Hammond came in sight along the beach, whistling loudly and unsuspectingly.

“Quite an island here, Mr. Charlton,” he observed casually. “I’ve been exploring it.”

A cheerful sort of murderer was this Hammond, thought Webb Foster.

FLYING over the reefs and shoals adjacent to Biplane Island next day, Webb Foster determined upon one thing—to keep Eli Hammond in the cabin with him when he went aloft. When Hammond was in the air, he could execute no treachery on the ground.

Webb circled the odd-shaped island several times. Sometimes he flew high, and sometimes just skimmed

the treacherous and reef-studded waters. Lado and Hammond, and Charlton, when he flew with the party, and Avery, the diver, made notes as Webb soared above the coast or swooped low whenever any large, dark object loomed below the sunlit surface.

The plane was proving as useful as Charlton had hoped. Somewhere about Biplane Island was a reef with a fortune in gold shouldering against it. But how far it was from the coast, none could tell. It might be a hundred yards out, in one of the shallow basins, or it might be ten miles out, in reasonably deep water. It might lie off on one end of the island, or it might lie off the opposite end, or off neither.

Webb combed every foot of the water for the submerged hulk as a fish hawk might comb it for finny food. Ten years and more before, other American pilots had scouted for German submarines filled with torpedoes; now Webb Foster was doing the same thing for a submarine filled with gold.

The second day brought no definite results, but the third day’s aerial scouting proved promising. The search had narrowed to the waters off the southwest tip of the island, where the rocky, winglike formation sloped down into the sea.

Four miles west of this point, surrounded by restless, creaming water, was a visible reef. It was Charlton’s theory that this reef submerged as it continued shoreward, but connected in some way with the rocky southwestern coast of the island. This submerged reef, he believed, might have wrecked the U-boat. Additional proff of the treachery of the waters of this section was found in considerable wreckage which had been washed ashore. It was the rotting hulk of a schooner, its timbers battered and splintered by the sea’s fury. A keel of oak that once had been so strongly rabbeted into the schooner’s planking was now little more than driftwood.

That the schooner had struck some reef off this point was apparent; that the reef was submerged was likely. But the submarine, down no one knew how many fathoms, would rest where it sank. Only keen eyes from a low-flying airplane on a sunny day might find it. And Webb flew ceaselessly and untiringly over this territory, ranging a wide circle, which he gradually narrowed.

Close to three in the afternoon, lying in shoal water a quarter mile west of the coast, could be discerned a long, narrow object that might be only a submerged reef, or might, on the other hand, be the foundered submarine. The airplane had located the possibility. Now it was up to Avery, the diver, to investigate it.

From the wreckage on the coast a strong raft was fashioned, Hammond, the traitor, working as busily as the others. The raft was floated, and then towed by the plane to a point near the long object showing darkly in the shoal water.

"You can get your diving togs on, Avery," suggested Charlton. "Webb, you go up again, and circle right over the spot. It will save us a lot of bother in trailing weights and grapnels below the water."

AVERY'S first descent was made during the final hour of daylight. He had donned his suit of manganese bronze, which had the tensile strength of steel. The following day the yacht would arrive with more practical suits for longer work beneath the surface, and considerable above-surface equipment.

But Avery's suit required no equipment of the latter sort, no surface tank or air feeding. The helmet and breastplate were in one piece, attached to the body part of the apparatus with a bayonet lock, and the arms and legs were of hard, rolled, interlocked, flexible tubing, in order to allow below-surface freedom for the diver. A caustic-soda apparatus was arranged inside of the armor. By means of this, the carbonic acid formed by the diver's breathing was purified and could be breathed over again. Several tests had shown the suit safe for a minimum of fifteen minutes below the surface.

"All ready, Avery," called Webb as the diver made the final adjustments. Avery was lowered with a loop in the helmet of the armor fastened to a cable, held by the three men on the raft.

Charlton's face was beaming as Avery remained down for several minutes and indicated by his tugs on the cable that he was all right and evidently making a thorough examination of what was below. His delay below the surface augured well for the success of the expedition. It looked as if the treasure had been found.

But as Avery finally came to the surface and crawled out on the raft and had his helmet removed, he shook his head determinedly.

"We're on the wrong track," he announced. "It's just a coral reef. Look, these are pieces of the crumbling coral that I broke off."

He handed two or three fragments of the coral to Charlton. Then Avery turned casually toward Hammond.

"Yes, just coral, Hammond," he said. "Here's a piece of it."

Webb saw him hand a piece of coral to Eli Hammond.

The latter held the fragment ostentatiously, but Webb could see that he was palming something else in his right hand. Webb affected to turn away. Out of the tail of his eye he saw Hammond's right hand go into his pocket. It came out with a packet of cigarettes and a match.

But had Hammond palmed a piece of gold? And was Avery, too, a traitor?

CHAPTER V THE SPY'S TRAIL

WEBB FOSTER CREPT SOFTLY through the inky jungle. He looked at his watch. It was close to one o'clock in the morning. He was supposed to be sleeping soundly, but shortly after midnight a peep into Hammond's tent had shown the traitor missing.

It was the work of only a few moments to dress quickly and trail Hammond toward the rendezvous near the spring.

Halfway through the wilderness, Webb stopped to listen. Yes, that was the sound of a throttled airplane motor. Wilke must be landing off the other end of the island with his three additional men. There was an interval of silence, and then the sound of the motor again. It grew fainter and fainter. Wilke, the spying pilot, was winging away from the island.

Webb took a chance on being seen by Hammond. Hammond's two accomplices, he assumed, would be out in the small boat to welcome their three new fellow conspirators. Hammond might even be with them, Webb broke through to the beach, ran as fast as he could to within a quarter mile of the spring, then doubled back into the jungle again, and made the rest of the distance slowly and quietly.

He could hear voices, and catch the scent of tobacco. The conspirators were back near their spring rendezvous. Five minutes of careful wriggling along the ground brought Webb within earshot, and, peeping through a cluster of vines, he could see six smudgy forms. If he was caught this time, there would be six enemies to fight.

"Here! Light a match!" came Hammond's voice. "I can prove what I say. It's real gold. Avery said it was a cinch to find—the whole side of the U-boat was

ripped wide open by the reef—as clean as a can opener could do it. Charlton hasn't the slightest suspicion, but there's no use of our waiting any longer. We know where the gold is now. And say! Look how it shines!"

In the flare of a match, Webb could see all six men huddled about, looking at the piece of gold. Avery, the diver, then, had been brought over to their side.

"But Wilke said to take no chances!" came another booming voice. "Of course, there ain't one chance in a thousand that the yacht'll escape. But the yacht might get the chance to send out an SOS. If that happens, we don't want to be caught here with a murder on our hands. No, when Wilke gets back, and we know we ain't got nothin' to fear from the yacht, that's time enough to give these boobs the works."

"He's sure about the yacht?" asked Hammond anxiously.

"Aw, leave it to Wilke. He had the yacht piked off 'fore he started here from Alhaja Island. It was sixty miles north of Alhaja then. Wilke'll be back there in two hours, easy. The other plane'll have the dynamite aboard. All Wilke's got to do is load his up. By that time the yacht'll be off Alhaja Island, or mighty near it.

"And say! You're takin' a chance right now, Hammond, by not bein' at the camp. How do you know this Foster guy mightn't take it into his head to fly out to meet the yacht? He could make it in less'n two hours. Say! The best thing you can do is beat it back and fix up that crate of theirs so it can't fly no more than a rabbit!"

A moment later Webb saw Hammond leave the party and cut through the jungle toward the beach.

NOW commenced the most peculiar kind of a race that Webb Foster had ever engaged in. Behind him were five men who could—and would—murder him if, by hurrying, he made one suspicious sound. Ahead of him was Hammond, who, should he turn and see him, would shout at the top of his lungs and bring the five men to his aid.

Webb must beat the traitor back to the amphibian plane—but he must not be discovered too near the spring—if the Sikorsky was going to be of any use in assisting the threatened yacht. Wholesale murder! That was what the Hammond-Wilke party was willing to descend to, for gold.

A half hour of nervous trailing through the jungle, and then Webb bore to the right, and ran with all speed along the beach toward the camp. A few paces ahead of him he could see Hammond's hastening form.

Webb cut into the jungle again, circled stumblingly through vines and underbrush, once more emerged on the beach, and now could see Hammond a hundred yards or so to his rear. The pilot panted along the final uphill mile, and burst into the tent of Charlton. Between gasps he poured out his story.

"So get the guns ready!" he concluded. "Wilke's base is at Alhaja Island. He's got nearly an hour's start on us. If he beats us to the yacht by so much as a minute, that yacht is doomed!"

The amphibian was packed with three rifles and a sawed-off shotgun, and each of the three men pocketed an automatic. The engines were not started, however, until Hammond, walking leisurely up the hill, found himself a captive.

"Bind him up!" yelled Webb to the blazing-eyed Lado. "He's coming along! If we go to our death, he's going with us!"

The cowering Hammond was bound tightly and thrown into one of the cabin seats. Then the calm night air was split by the roar of the two powerful Wasp engines, and three minutes later the huge amphibian was in the air, nosing north.

Still panting and perspiring from his exertions of the past hour, Webb kept the plane on her course, flying at five thousand feet. But as the amphibian roared through the black night, low cloud formations began interfering with his vision ahead.

He dropped a thousand feet, leveled out, and then snapped off all lights. The luminous dial of the tachometer told him that he was coaxing every last inch of speed from his ship. On the flight down he had held the ship to a little more than a hundred miles an hour. That had been a pleasure jaunt to an island of treasure. This was a race against time—and, for all he knew, a race to his own funeral. For that strange voice back by the spring had said that there would be two ships in Wilke's bombing party.

Blackness below, flecked with occasional white where shoal water snarled over a reef. Blackness above, and once in a while a dim star winking down through a hole in the clouds. Blackness, the color of death in the cabin, broken only by the luminous tachometer and the radium-tinted dial of Webb's wrist watch.

It was one thirty. In the air a half hour, and sixty-odd miles on his way. A few minutes later and the plane was out of the cloud-shrouded territory and beneath a patch of tropic blue sky powdered with stars. The ocean below had changed from a funereal black to a mass of star-lighted blue, and, just to port, a black hulk loomed.

For one instant Webb turned on his powerful searchlight and swung the beam downward. He was well on his course—the beam disclosed the coral islet that had been the graveyard of a schooner. He had flown over this islet on the way down. And he was now less than an hour from Alhaja Island. Would he be in time to save the yacht? Had Wilke already reached Alhaja Island, organized his party, and made off toward the yacht?

It was hard to believe what he knew to be true—that this night men should be planning to drop quick death on a harmless party of seamen. But facts were facts. It was no harder to believe, after all, than the thousands of other cases where men had killed ruthlessly—for gold. Gold! A fortune in gold lay far astern, off Biplane Island. But gold would be of little value to him forevermore if he failed to bring down the enemy planes. Here in the air tonight it was steel, not gold, which would govern his destiny.

In clouds again; clouds which dropping two thousand feet could not shake off. Then a ceiling of stars again, and Webb's keen vision, unobstructed by the haze of the prop's rotation, picked out the circling beam of the lonely lighthouse on Alhaja Island. Webb went to twelve thousand feet and swung wide of the island. He went into more clouds, and then put the wheel forward and swooped down into clear air.

His heart pounded violently. Off of his port wing, a few hundred feet below his own level, he could make out the wing lights of a pair of airplanes. A few miles north of the island there was a glow through the thin mist—the lights of the yacht! He could beat the two enemy planes to the yacht. But then what?

He knew that the enemy planes had no knowledge of his nearness. His every light was doused. The two enemy planes flew in close formation, their lights on, doubtless, to avoid any chance of collision, at this, their moment of triumph.

After all, they had no reason to hide their lights—the only one to see them in these uncharted waters would be a lonely lighthouse keeper, who could never guess the reason for their presence. And the men on the yacht would hardly take them for potential murderers. When they found out differently, it would be too late. Dead men told no tales.

Now Webb felt a tap on his shoulder, and heard Charlton's voice:

"Fly as low as possible over the yacht. I've written them a note, telling them briefly what's what and ordering them to douse their lights. Lado, Sr., is

aboard, and he knows my handwriting. I've wrapped the hammer in the note, and I've got a second note ready in case I miss the deck with the first."

NOW the lighted outline of the yacht could be plainly seen. Webb flew toward the vessel, circled it, and dropped low. He saw the note-wrapped hammer drop from the cabin, and a moment later the doused lights of the yacht told him that Charlton had made a direct hit.

And now Webb had banked and turned back toward the two lighted planes. He pulled back the wheel and climbed. Lado and Charlton had their rifles at their shoulders. And then, as if one hand had snapped the button, the lights on both enemy planes went out!

What did it mean? Did it mean that the two enemy pilots were simply taking a precautionary measure in flying over the yacht? Or did it mean that they had seen the amphibian outlined in the mast lights of the yacht as Webb circled over the vessel?

The answer came in half a minute—emphatically. It came in a burst of bullets from the leading enemy plane, which, Webb could see, was a low-wing monoplane. Probably Wilke himself was in that plane.

The monoplane went into a steep zoom as there was a burst from the rifles of Lado and Charlton—evidently a harmless burst, for the monoplane looped all the way around and was now farthest from the yacht. It was one of the best shots at the monoplane that could be hoped for. What was the matter? Were Charlton and young Lado poor shots? Webb knew that Charlton had been a big-game hunter. Probably Lado was the poor shot, and could be used to better advantage at the wheel.

A second later Webb had swung the wheel over to Lado, and had taken the young Porto Rican's rifle. The enemy monoplane was shrouded in the darkness for a moment or so, but then Webb could make out its shadowy form ranging toward his right wing. Racing toward the yacht was the ghostly outline of a seaplane. The seaplane was running away from the air fight. For what purpose?

Webb Foster was only too certain that he knew! One charge of dynamite, dropped by the seaplane on the yacht's deck, and then both enemy planes could turn upon the amphibian and blast it from the skies. He saw the seaplane circle about the vessel and swing low. Lado also must have guessed the seaplane's intention, for he had already ruddered toward the yacht, and was streaking after the seaplane.

A crimson stream of rifle fire from the shadowy

monoplane to the right rattled into the amphibian, and Webb's rifle was knocked out of his hands. It had been a close call, but in an instant he had snatched up the shotgun, and, knowing that seconds counted, was aiming it at the seaplane, now directly over the yacht.

As he pulled the trigger, he saw a dark missile drop from the seaplane's cabin. Dynamite! And if it hit the yacht—

There was a deafening roar, a pall of smoke, and the amphibian fairly quivered and rocked in the air like a small boat on a stormy sea.

CHAPTER VI SPY KILL

FOR ONE TERRIBLE INSTANT, as his head buzzed and his ears rang and the amphibian continued to rock with the thunder of the explosion, Webb Foster believed that he had failed in his mission. He believed that the yacht had been destroyed by the seaplane's missile, and honest men murdered *en masse*. But only for an instant.

He saw Charlton on his feet, gesticulating wildly—and joyously. What had happened was clear enough now, for, peering below into the darkness, Webb could still see the black hulk of the unlighted yacht, its funnels belching smoke. The yacht was still there! And the seaplane—he peered into the gloom over the yacht, hardly daring to believe his eyes—the seaplane had vanished—utterly.

Bits of wood and wing fabric were floating in the air like a snowstorm. Webb's shotgun charge had made a perfect hit. One or more of the bullets in that shotgun charge had detonated the bomb or dynamite carried by the seaplane, and had blown the seaplane and its murderous crew to pieces. One enemy plane out of the way, anyhow. Webb felt a surge of optimism. It was one against one now—and yet he had hardly even chances yet. For the remaining enemy ship—the low-wing monoplane—was a highly maneuverable little craft as compared to his giant amphibian; furthermore, it carried dynamite as well as firearms. If it once climbed above the amphibian and made a direct hit with the dynamite that it carried—then Webb Foster and his two companions would nevermore be concerned with treasure quests or any earthly projects.

Now Webb could see the monoplane ruddering speedily away from the yacht. Possibly its pilot thought that the bullet that had done for the seaplane had come from that quarter. Thank Heaven for that, anyhow, thought Webb.

He dropped his shotgun, crawled back into the pilot's compartment, and motioned Lado to swing the wheel over to him. Once more in charge of the controls, he gunned the amphibian directly between the yacht and the monoplane. The latter, he could see, had banked and turned, and now was streaking toward him again, twisting and zooming and diving like a snipe over a marshland.

From its cockpit came another burst of lead that shattered the amphibian's instrument board. A scream sounded back of Webb. He could not as much as look back, however, at the moment. The little monoplane was outmaneuvering him; it had rolled clean over him, sending down a charge of death as it went, and now was all but over the yacht. Webb saw a dark missile fall from its cockpit, and land, it seemed, squarely on the vessel's deck.

Webb waited for the explosion, and then his heart leaped hopefully. For there was no explosion, except a burst of rifle fire from the yacht's deck, which caused the monoplane's pilot to zoom his ship, and then wing over to avoid a second burst.

But why hadn't that homb exploded? Webb could have sworn that it had hit the yacht's deck. For just a fraction of a second, as he sailed the amphibian over the yacht, he snapped on his searchlight and shot a bright finger of light down on the vessel.

Good men on that yacht! In the bow there were several seamen with rifles to their shoulders; in the waist of the ship were four other men, holding the corners of an outspread tarpaulin in the air. No fools, and no cowards, those seamen! The searchlight's flash had shown how once more they had staved off disaster—they had caught the monoplane's deadly missile in the tarpaulin and kept it from exploding. Then, just before Webb snapped off the searchlight, he saw one of the seamen gingerly pick something from the center of the tarpaulin, and heave it overside into the black water.

The monoplane, then, had failed in its purpose of bombing the yacht, but it was still very much in the fight. It banked and turned, maneuvered back toward the vessel, and let fall another weight of dynamite.

A white splash, a scant yard from the ship's rail, told Webb that the charge of death had missed—probably

because of a burst of shotgun fire from Charlton, who had fired as the monoplane winged within range. The burst had caused the monoplane's pilot to careen out of range and doubtless had affected the bomber's aim.

AS WEBB maneuvered away from the yacht, he almost crashed the swift monoplane which had once more turned back into the fight. Another crimson stream of rifle fire poured from its cockpit straight into the amphibian, and Webb felt a burning pain in his right arm. He gunned his plane in a wide circle, and gritted his teeth on account of the pain. But in his heart was a feeling of impending triumph. He felt certain now that the monoplane had unloaded its entire supply of bombs—for now the monoplane was centering its attack upon the Sikorsky, and was paying no more attention to the yacht.

Lado, seeing that he had been wounded, motioned Webb to swing the wheel over to him, and Webb did so. Now, for the first time since the scream in the amphibian's cabin, he had a chance to look back, and what he saw was little or no surprise. Hammond was silently crumpled on the cabin floor. Webb's face was grim. The traitor had been caught in his own trap. A bullet from the monoplane had killed him.

But this was no time for Webb to ponder over a traitor's reward. The monoplane was crowding in now, showing a definite tendency to crash deliberately. And that monoplane pilot—Webb had to admit it—was an expert. And the swift monoplane was much easier to maneuver than the heavy amphibian.

Webb was thinking quickly. His wounded arm was throbbing painfully, and the monoplane was darting about him like an angry hornet. It was no use trying to outstunt this darting sky demon. But the amphibian, he believed could outspeed it. Once more he motioned for the wheel, and as it was swung over to him, gunned his ship toward the south. The yacht was safe from the bombs now, and its crew could fight rifle fire with rifle fire. The chances were that the monoplane would give chase to the amphibian—which was just what the monoplane did. It looked very much as though the amphibian was picking the easiest way out of a bad predicament. It looked as though the amphibian, built for passenger flights and not for battle, was discreetly running away from the fiery little monoplane, with its steel-shell fuselage and superior maneuverability. And that was how Webb Foster wanted it to look. But Webb Foster had not flown nearly two hundred miles that night to find a battle—and then to lose it.

The monoplane's pilot was making a desperate effort to cut off the amphibian's apparent retreat. It flew down slantingly at full gun, and bullets from its rear cockpit whistled over the amphibian—a few hailing against struts and wires. But now the big plane was putting space between itself and its deadly pursuer. Webb's gaze was concentrated on a patch of filmy cloud, seemingly a couple of miles away and about five thousand feet above him. If he could make the shelter of this cloud—well, he had a real plan in his mind.

The monoplane was roaring along in his wake, but the amphibian was already pulling well away from it. Webb yelled instructions to Lado. The young Porto Rican and Charlton were to reload the rifles and the shotgun, and to have them ready for a surprise coup.

Webb saw his companions working feverishly at the firearms. A moment later he shot directly into the cloud, and found it as dark as the inside of a coal mine.

Once within the cloud's protecting blackness, Webb flew full gun through it, but when he emerged at the south end of the cloud, he did not continue straight on. That was what the monoplane's pilot would expect him to do; therefore, that was the thing not to do.

The cloud still veiled Webb, although he was out of it. It continued to veil him as he banked and turned, and then zoomed his ship to a point almost parallel with the top rim of the cloud. His keen eyes were boring into the darkness below. When his pursuer raced through the cloud, he would believe that the amphibian had winged straight on. That would be his pursuer's mistake, thought Webb, as his lips tightened.

He continued to circle about the south end of the cloud till he saw the monoplane's propeller boring through into the clear air. Then Webb dived his ship. The whirling prop of the unsuspecting monoplane was so close that Webb had to jerk back into a sharp zoom to avoid being crashed. As he pulled back the wheel, he heard the reports of his companion's firearms.

Charlton, with the sawed-off shotgun, had taken careful aim at the monoplane's propeller. And as the monoplane lurched, Webb knew that his employer had made a perfect hit. For the monoplane was careening over and falling with a shattered prop. The pursued had turned into the pursuer, and had made use of the element of surprise.

WEBB shot his wheel forward, and nosed into the wake of the falling monoplane. He could see the pilot in the front cockpit desperately fighting at the controls

to level out his ship; then, this attempt evidently proving futile, he could see the pilot stepping out on the cowl. He saw a body hurl itself out into space—then the silken arch of a parachute mushroomed out as the monoplane fell like a plummet. The pilot was taking a last chance with his 'chute-pack and letting his rifleman in the rear cockpit make the best of it.

Webb turned on his searchlight. The figure in the parachute was floating down—down to the white water that foamed and lashed about the rocky coast of Alhaja Island. It was the end of a persistent enemy—a vicious, but not uncourageous man. That the monoplane's pilot had been the villainous Wilke himself, Webb felt certain.

Webb snapped on the lights of the amphibian. Charlton was dancing on the cabin floor and patting him on the back, but once more Webb took the wheel and looked at the altimeter. The amphibian was up two thousand feet. He turned its nose north and trained its searchlight in that direction. The long white shaft of light picked out the yacht, still steaming south, and a couple of moments later Webb was over the vessel, had circled it, and was bringing the amphibian down to the water about a hundred yards away from it. As he taxied toward the boat, there was a hail from the deck. It was the voice of the senior Lado.

"Is it all right? Did you get them all?" came the voice.

"You bet we got 'em all!" was Charlton's reply.

"I'll have the skipper heave to," came Lado's voice again, and they could hear the Porto Rican agent yelling instructions to the skipper to halt the vessel.

And when they had taxied to the side of the now lighted yacht, the elder Lado came down a rope ladder and into the plane.

"I don't believe I ever want to go through anything like *that* again!" said the Porto Rican fervently. "And, under the circumstances, Mr. Charlton, I hope you'll

forgive me. We had a stowaway on the yacht. A good one, too. We didn't discover her till this noon—when it was too late to turn back."

"Her?" repeated Charlton.

"Me, dad!" came a voice from the deck. "I just had to come—but I never thought it would be as exciting as this."

Joshua Charlton sank back weakly to the seat of his wicker chair.

"Betty!" he yelled. "My heavens! Betty! Of all the—"

He broke off abruptly. He seemed totally incapable of further speech for the moment.

But Webb Foster was climbing out of the plane's cabin through the hatchway in the top and was making for the rope ladder. He had just been the victor in a thrilling air fight against heavy odds. The evening had been a decided success. And the one remaining element to make it a perfect success, in his opinion, was the presence of Betty Charlton.

The gold, he knew, would be easy to get now. With Hammond dead, and Wilke, the leader also gone, it would be a simple job to overpower the other conspirators left on the island. Yes, the hundreds of bars of gold in the sunken submarine would soon be stowed away in the hold of the yacht; but there was something else that Webb was far more interested in.

It was this golden-haired girl whose life he had saved in those thrilling but terrible moments of air conflict. Webb Foster felt in his heart that he and Betty Charlton had been destined to meet ever since that moment, days before, when he had plunged his little monoplane into the chill waters of New York harbor.

And later, under soft tropic skies, he learned that she felt the same way about it. He was a flyer of fortune, indeed, for the air lanes of adventure had brought him treasure of two different kinds.