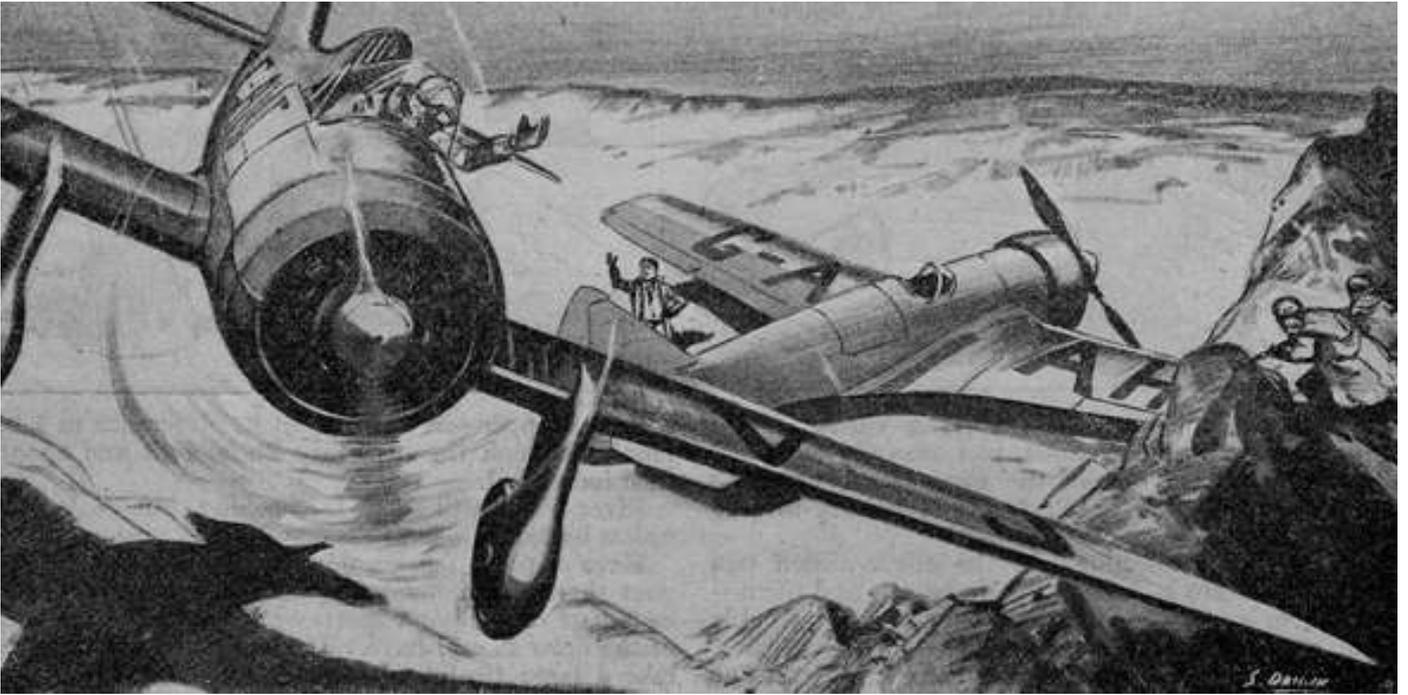


The Dare Devil Pilot



Erroll Collins

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Jerry Maddox had flying in his blood;
but his free and easy methods were
the despair of his employers - until
plague struck the desert...

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At six o'clock on a scorching morning, Bob Curtis, junior pilot of Scarab Airways, strolled out of the main hanger on to the baking-hot tarmac. Although the sun had barely risen, the desert dunes, rolling away in shifting billows to the barren red hills beyond, were already swimming and swaying in a blistering, tawny glare. Even the listless palm trees, planted at the edge of the Marnak Wells aerodrome, seemed to wilt and shrivel, as the burning, sand-laden wind, whose every breath sent dust – devils skimming sporadically over the surface of the flying – ground, ruffled their ragged fronds.

But Bob's eyes shone brightly beneath his solar topee. He did not heed the rivers of perspiration that were trickling down his sunburned face and on to his neck and he just grinned as the propeller slipstream from the neat streamlined monoplane upon the tarmac sent the sand flying, filling his ears and mouth with grit. For the Whitney "Scarab" was his favourite machine, and the fact that she was being revved up meant a job for somebody. Perhaps for him! One that would take him away for a few hours from the bakehouse of Marnak Wells.

As he listened to the steady, rhythmic purring of the well-tuned radial engine, another machine of the same type came taxiing around the corner of one of the hangars, and careered madly across the 'drome to the "T" of the take-off. As it zigzagged by, the pilot, a tall, raw-boned youth with a mop of fiery red hair, leaned out of the cockpit and waved a brawny hand.

"So long, Bob", he shouted, his freckled face one broad, good-natured grin. "Cheerio, Jerry!" Bob laughed back, and stood watching as the machine, reaching the edge of the 'drome, took the air in a steep climb, so steep that the junior pilot held his breath, thinking it must stall. But no! At the critical moment the plane flattened out and skimmed over the arid hills like a bird.

"Wonder where the old madman's off to?" murmured Bob, when the machine was a mere black speck in the glaring blue. "Well, I hope he doesn't land himself in the soup this time – the likeable ass!"

"Bob!" A clear, pleasant voice, with an authoritative ring, made the young pilot switch round, to discover tall, keen – faced Whitney Stone, veteran, pilot, designer, with Bob's own father, of the famous "Scarab" and "Mantis" engines, and head of the Marnak Wells airport, emerging from the radio station. "'Morning, Whitney!" Bob greeted his friend and employer. "What's the news?"

Whitney Stone paused. "Pretty bad," he replied quietly. "Had an S O S through this morning that plague has broken out at Wadi Azrek. The military have been called out, and are rounding up the panic stricken people into camps and disinfecting them! They're nomads, of course, and would spread the disease like wildfire. So we've to rush cylinders of serum to the Wadi 'drome. Did you see Jerry Maddox take off in the 'Mantis'?"

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"Good heavens! You're not trusting old Jerry with a job like that?" The impulsive words rose to the tip of Bob's tongue. It was only by an effort that he refrained from blurting them out. As it was, he staggered back a pace. Bob liked Jerry Maddox – and indeed, Mad Jerry, to give him his nickname, was a general favourite with both the white and brown staff at Marmik Wells. But he had a genius for running his red head into trouble, and nobody could deny that he was the most irresponsible youth who had ever flown a plane. Why he had ever been allowed to do so was a mystery.

Not that Jerry was a ham-fisted pilot. On the contrary, many experienced flyers envied him his magic touch on the controls. But the fact remained that no matter what job was given to Jerry he always bungled it, not through incompetence, but through sheer, gross carelessness. Of course, he always bitterly regretted his lapses, but his sorrow did not deter him from being just as mad headed the next time.

Everybody knew why he had been Fired from the Cairo 'drome. How, on being entrusted with a case of special engine parts for urgent shipment for England, he had deliberately swung off his course, gate-crashed into another airport, where the annual staff dinner and dance was in progress, and turned up smiling the next morning at his correct destination, only to find that the boat had sailed three hours ago. The resultant row had nearly blown the roof off the main hangar. Moreover, it had cost Jerry his job.

Then, at Damascus, in a spirit of devilry, he had stunted over the desert, scattering, by a roaring nose-dive, a sedate troop of Bedouins on camels, sending them flying for their lives. One or two of the younger tribesmen had blazed away with rifles, and Jerry, with a leaking oil-pipe and a red gash across his cheek, had just managed to land his plane on the flying-ground a split second before the engine seized up. He was grinning as he clambered from the cockpit, but the infuriated business man who was paying for his services failed to see the joke. Valuable papers had been aboard, and a wrecked plane might easily have meant a wrecked company. So once more Jerry had been sent packing, this time to Marnak Wells.

Whitney Stone eyed Bob keenly. "You're wondering, I can see," he remarked, with a slow smile, "why I've put Jerry on this job." An inkling of the truth came to Bob as Whitney spoke. "Weren't you his father's observer during the war, sir?" he asked quietly. The other nodded. "Yes," he replied quietly. "I knew Ralph Maddox, Bob, as well as I knew your own father. A very gallant gentleman, who, although mortally wounded, landed his machine safely behind our lines, and dragged his badly smashed observer out of the rear cockpit before the whole contraption burst into flames,. That's why I've either got to make Jerry buck up soon, or fire him.

"You see, Jerry's like his father, true and fine; but the lad's got no sense of responsibility. A job like this, with the idea that he's got thousands of lives on his hands, should be the making of him. But I haven't trusted him with the real serum. I daren't risk it. That's a job for you." Bob turned a puzzled face upon his employer.

"But I don't quite understand, sir," he replied. "D' you mean to say that the stuff isn't aboard Jerry's plane?"

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"I do. Those cylinders he's got in his cabin contain nothing but cold, clear water. A cargo, by the way, that will be very valuable at Wadi Azrek, because the water there is as turgid as its name. The real serum is already in the cabin of the 'Scarab', which is being revved up for you now."

Bob was silent. He was thinking over his employer's startling plan. Perhaps he did not altogether agree with it, but he appreciated the fine motive behind it, and saw its wisdom. It gave him a thrill of pride to think that he was being trusted by Whitney Stone.

"When do I start?" he asked eagerly.

"Now! The 'Scarab', as you know, has a rather higher cruising-speed than the 'Mantis,' and you should reach the 'drome just in time to land right on Jerry's tail. But not a word to him, mind, about my test. And a word of warning to you, Bob. Keep your eyes peeled for Abu Hassan. His tribe raided a British outpost last week."

Five minutes later, Bob, seated at the controls of the white-winged "Scarab", Hashed up his hand as a signal. Waiting mechanics whipped away the chocks from under the landing-wheel tyres, and with a last cheery wave the young pilot sent his machine taxiing forward. Whipping back the control – stick as he reached the fringe of the 'drome, he sent the "Scarab" zooming over the low ridge of rocky hills, and the next moment was speeding over the desert in the direction of Wadi Azrek.

At first, the fleet little monoplane cruised along smoothly enough, but flying columns of sand still whirled in their mad dervish – dance over the desert and on climbing to avoid a grit-laden engine, Bob encountered bad air-pockets. The hot, thin atmosphere, evaporating as the sun gained full strength, was bubbling and boiling all around him like a cauldron. Invisible hands struck against his fuselage, bumping and buffering the plane like a ship at sea, until the joystick wriggled about in Bob's Fingers like a water- diviner's wand, and he had his work cut out to keep the "Scarab" on an even keel. For miles and miles all that met his eye was a general desolation of dunes, out banks and sand. Several times he feared for the safety of his precious cargo. Suppose, by ill chance, he smashed it, and pestilence swept the land. The thought made Bob shiver violently, in spite of the perspiration that drenched his body. But no! The cylinders, with their jelly-like contents, were of good, thick glass, carefully packed in cotton-wool. The idea that he himself was venturing into the plague – stricken area troubled him but little. Wasn't it his job, and hadn't he been inoculated?

Nor was he greatly perturbed at the thought of sighting that desert raider, that sworn foe of the British – Abu Hassan, although the outcrops of barren red rock, protruding through the sand, warned him that he was now flying over the arch-bandit's grim, waterless country.

His eyes, however, scanned the blinding sky for Jerry, of whose "Mantis" he had not yet caught a glimpse.

"I believe the old madman's going to turn up trumps." Murmured Bob to himself.

"Whitney Stone's one of the few people he really likes and respects. No, he wouldn't let Whitney down."

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Suddenly he broke off and leaned over the side of the cockpit, staring. Down in the sun-baked valley below him—a gloomy rock-bound hollow, without a shrub or a blade of grass—he could pick out the outlines of a trim white monoplane. The “Mantis”! She had made a forced landing! And squatting on a boulder some distance away, pensively smoking a cigarette was Jerry Maddox himself.

There was no mistaking his red head, nor the whoop of greeting he gave as, jumping up from the rock as the droning of the “Scarab” engine sounded overhead, he made excited signals to the pilot to land.

The subdued roar of Bob’s engine reverberated among the frowning crags as he cruised cautiously over the oven-like valley in wide, sweeping circles.

“What’s the trouble?” he yelled, in a voice blown to tatters by the slipstream. Bob knew he could not land.

His special mission forbade it, and in any case, his machine, like the “Mantis”, in spite of its cargo-cabin, was only a single-seater. But Jerry’s plight demanded that his fellow pilot should at least drop a few spare parts to him by parachute. Fortunately, the “Scarab” and “Mantis” components were mostly interchangeable, and Jerry might find something among them that would help him escape from the veritable death—trap in which misfortune or engine failure had landed him. For not even an old lunatic like Jerry Maddox would attempt to come down in Abu Hassan’s country, unless forced. Jerry’s face, however, as he cupped his hands around his mouth to yell back, was one broad, mischievous grin; then suddenly, his eyes dilated wildly, and Bob, to his horror, saw him pointing frantically to a high ridge of rock, on the top of which something stirred.

“Abu Hassan!”, Jerry’s warning shout, uttered with all the strength of his powerful lungs, came up to Bob as a mere whisper—a whisper that was drowned in the “Scarab’s” angry roar as the engine, its throttle flung wide open at his touch, burst into shattering activity. The junior pilot’s quick eyes had already seen the gaudy headshaws and glinting rifle-barrels that had appeared like magic upon the ridge, and swift as a flash Bob took the only course open to him.

It was a caddish thing to do, he told himself, white-lipped, as he tore upwards past the ledge in a soaring zoom, to run away from one’s chum like this, but he’d got to win through to Wadi Azrek. Countless lives depended on his safe arrival. His task done, he’d come rushing back at top speed, with help. Luckily, those yelling, bearded devils on the ridge had spotted neither Jerry nor his bus.

But arrow-swift as Bob was, he was not quick enough to dodge the ragged burst of rifle-fire that Abu Hassan’s bandits sent after him, shots spattered around him like a shower of molten lead. His dashboard instruments flew in splinters as if riven by an invisible axe. A strip of fabric fluttered from his starboard plane as a bullet tore through it, and to crown matters Bob suddenly felt a hot, stabbing pain in his thigh. Blood trickled down his leg and came soaking through his shorts, and a wave of sick giddiness swept over him, which the slipstream from his propeller, blowing back in his face like a burning wind, did nothing to

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dispel. Steep rocks and the valley's sandy floor came rushing up at him sideways — then a blank; and the next Bob remembered was bumping, dizzy, breathless, and all but unconscious, over the dusty ground.

Somehow, the touch of the earth beneath his landing-wheels steadied him. Bewildered, he pushed up his goggles. Yes, there was no doubt about it. He had safely landed the "Scarab" about half a mile from the ridge, down which his would-be assassins were scrambling like ants in hot pursuit. In a half — fainting state he must have switched off the engine automatically and glided down to comparative safety. Red frowning hills hemmed him in, but a good firm sandy runway lay before him, and by exercising a bit of skill he knew he could clear the rocks without stalling.

Giving his machine a burst of the throttle, Bob taxied forward, but before the plane could leave the ground there was a terrific jarring crash. In his haste, he had failed to notice a sharp needle of rock protruding through the sand, and his strong, steel-bladed propeller, smashing against it with full force, buckled like tin.

Then a dozen rough, grimy hands seized him and dragged him out of the cockpit. Harsh, growling voices sounded in his ears, questioning him fiercely. He was surrounded by bearded, pock — marked faces, hook-nosed, swarthy, bestial; felt a hand strike him; saw the flash of a blue steel blade, then :

"Stand back, you beauties! or I'll blow you all to Gehenna," roared a powerful voice.

"Jerry!" gasped Bob. In the excitement of the last few minutes he had totally forgotten the "madman", but here was Jerry, red-haired and ferocious, a thick glass globe, hacked from the case in his cabin, gripped tightly in his brawny freckled hands.

The effect upon the Bedouins was electrical. With mingled howls and execrations they swept back as the angry giant advanced, the flashing crystal "bomb" poised threateningly above his head.

"Quick, Bob, run for it," he ordered, and whirled aloft the "explosive", as if to hurl it into the raiders' midst.

The action was his undoing. The cylinder, unfortunately, was leaking. It slipped through Jerry's hands. He made a frantic effort to catch it, failed, and the globe, smashing on to the rocky ground, shattered into a thousand splinters.

Wild-eyed, terrified, the desert dwellers scattered, but on seeing nothing but pure, harmless water trickling into the thirsty sand, back they came like a swarm of vultures.

Bob and Jerry were overwhelmed before they could put up a fight. The former found himself the centre of a sweating, struggling throng. He hit out savagely at the nearest bristly face, something struck him on the head, and the black waters of unconsciousness surged over him.

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When, stiff and miserable, he opened his burning eyes, night had fallen. He was, he discovered, lying trussed in the corner of a hot, foul – smelling cave that had once housed a family of jackals. His head and limbs throbbed abominably. A vigorous testing of his bonds told him that, without a knife, he had no hopes of getting free.

“Hallo, Bob!” said a weak but cheery voice from the other corner. Bob turned his head wearily, to discover Jerry Maddox, similarly trussed.

“Thanks, Jerry,” he murmured, with a faint smile.

“Jolly pluck of you to butt in like that. Sorry it’s landed you in a mess.” Jerry’s face looked pale and strained. All the flippancy had gone from his tone.

“Listen, old fellow,” he said quietly. “I’ve got to get this off my chest. I’m to blame for the fix we’re both in. You thought this afternoon I’d made a forced landing.” “Well, you did, didn’t you?”

“No! There’s nothing wrong with the ‘Mantis’. I landed because of a tomfool bet that I’d come down in the middle of Abu’s country, smoke a fag there, and take off again without being nobbled. That’s why I signalled you to land. I wanted you as witness. Well,” with a bitter laugh, “I reckon I’ve lost my money.”

Then he broke off aghast, and sat staring in awed silence at the grim – lipped, steely – eyed lad, tensed in the opposite corner, who was addressing him in a voice sharp with hatred. And indeed, at that moment, Bob hated Jerry Maddox more than any man alive.

“You cur!” he blazed, his face pale beneath its tan. “I’m glad you see yourself clearly for once, as a red-headed buffoon who hasn’t the guts to do a man’s job. No wonder nobody trusts you. Whitney Stone didn’t trust you this morning when he put cylinders filled with water in your plane. The real serum’s aboard my ‘Scarab’, and thanks to you, she can’t take the air. She’s got a busted ‘prop’, though I can hardly blame my own ham-fistedness on to you. Anyway, we’ll never reach Wadi Azrek in time now, and those unfortunate people will die off like flies. And – gosh! I was the biggest fool. I might have known you were up to your usual monkey tricks. My first real job, and I’ve – I’ve mucked it!” Bob’s voice choked in a high, hysterical sob.

He did not look again at Jerry, who sat there like a man frozen into stone. He did not even notice the hunched hook-nosed figure who, gripping a sharp curved knife, crept grinning into the cave towards him. Jerry did, and his bound legs shot out like a catapult, taking the Arab in the ribs with such force that his unwashed body hurtled across the cavern, the head hitting the wall with a crack that knocked him unconscious.

His blade carved a flashing arc in the air, and then dropped quivering, point downwards, in the ground at Jerry’s feet.

Five minutes later, after leaving a bound, gagged and turning Bedouin in their late prison, the two airmen, chafing their cramped limbs, limped out of the cave. “That was the man

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you socked, come to get a bit of his own back," whispered Jerry, as they crept forward cautiously over the sand. "Wonder where his pals are?"

Bob pointed silently to an acrid smoky fire that flickered in a hollow below the shadowy purple dunes, from which harsh growling voices wafted up on the keen night air. Jerry gripped his companion's shoulder. "Bob, old son," he whispered, "you're right, I'm not fit to trust with a job like this. Game leg or no, it's you who'll have to finish rushing that stuff to Wadi Azrek." Bob wheeled on him. "D' you think I'm worrying about a little tin-pot scratch?" he flamed, in an undertone. "I'm worrying about transferring the serum half a mile past that camp to your bus before the moon rises. We can't taxi the "Mantis" across and change cargoes here, because of the row it'll make. And Jerry, she's your bus, so it's only right you should fly her to Wadi Azrek. Piloting that plane's the one thing you're not a dud at."

Maddox looked at Bob keenly. "And what are you going to do?" he demanded bluntly. "Stay here, and be sliced up?" Bob flushed awkwardly. "Don't be an ass!" he retorted. "I'd take off from here like a shot, but my prop's dished and I've no spare."

"Well, I have!" Bob stared at Jerry incredulously, but the red-haired pilot eyed him calmly.

"It's true," he insisted. "I'm a hot-headed ass, but I never fly anywhere without a spare prop. It's aboard my 'Mantis', and I'm going straight over to get it for you."

"No, Jerry; I'll do it. It's my job!" "You won't! That leg of yours won't let you, especially if you meet any prowling Arabs. But you can cover me with this revolver. I pinched it off the unsavoury bloke we knocked out in the cave, who no doubt pinched it from the original owner. Ready?" Bob nodded, but his heart was in his mouth as Jerry, crawling inch by inch across the sands, made his way slowly past the flickering blaze towards the outer dark.

Now and again he caught glimpses of a bobbing head shawl, as its wearer gesticulated and argued in savage growling Arabic. And the few words of the language he understood made Bob feel more relieved than ever that Jerry had an extra prop and that both pilots would be able to escape, for the Bedouins were discussing with relish how the prisoners should die. The stench of the camel-dung fire, however, and the greasy, flea-ridden garments of a people who wash only when they swim, set his nostrils a-tingle, and he was in deadly fear that the moon would rise suddenly and betray their escape to the watchers.

To kill time, he tore a strip from his shirt and bandaged his leg. A necessary operation, for desert sand is very septic, and a few grains in a raw wound can cause a painful rash. Already his thigh was throbbing and aching as if torturers were stabbing it with a red-hot needle.

As the minutes dragged by, and still Jerry did not return, Bob grew seriously alarmed. In fact, he was just about to risk it, and go in search of his chum, when the red-haired pilot, footsore and dusty, emerged around a corner of a dune, trailing the spare propeller behind him with the aid of a rope.

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Fixing the component to Bob's plane was a difficult operation in the dark, but with the aid of bolts and a spanner, the strong steel blade was finally in place.

"All set?" asked Jerry with a grin, as the junior pilot climbed into the cockpit.

Bob smiled. "Fine, thanks to you," he answered happily, "and Jerry, I take back what I said to-night." Jerry gave a wry smile. "Don't mensh!" he replied slangily. "I'm a chump, but I hope I can take a wiggling. I'll probably get a worse one, if possible, from Whitney, when I land the old 'Mantis' tomorrow at Marnak Wells. I say, Bob, I'd like that gun." "Going to pop of a few Bedouins?" grinned Bob, willingly handing the weapon over.

"No; but I want to give you a signal as I take off." Some minutes later, Bob Curtis, seated at the controls of his machine—"Scarab" had a quietly running engine that needed little revving—sent her taxiing forward, as a shot crashed and echoed among the crags. The yells of the infuriated tribesmen, as they rushed out to investigate, troubled him not at all, for already the little machine was skimming over the hills. "Good old Jerry I" chuckled the junior pilot. "He's given 'em the slip properly. That chap deserves a putty medal."

But as the scimitar-shaped moon cut a bright circle of light in the sky, he looked in vain for the "Mantis", winging in the direction of Marnak Wells. Neither did he encounter Jerry three days later, when, released from quarantine, and with his mission successfully accomplished, he limped into Whitney Stone's office.

Whitney strode forward to greet him, seizing his hand in a grip that made him wince. "Congratulations, Bob!" he boomed. "In spite of your mishap, you were first of all the other 'dromes with the goods. We owe it to you that the plague's well in hand, and looks like being stamped out."

Bob glanced eagerly around the office. "Where's Jerry, sir?" he asked. "He's in this, too, you know. I'd never have reached Wadi Azrek at all if it hadn't been for him."

Whitney came over, and laid a firm, fatherly hand on the young airman's shoulder. "Bob," he said quietly, "I've got bad news. They brought Jerry in yesterday." Bob stared at the speaker aghast. Despite the blazing heat of the day, a chill horror gripped him.

"It was Abu Hassan's men." Whitney's voice sounded very far away. "Jerry got five of them with his revolver before one of their bullets got him. That machine of his—"

"But, sir," Bob heard himself jerking out. "He could have got away. There was nothing wrong with the 'Mantis'"

His friend nodded.

"No," he replied slowly, "there was nothing wrong with the 'Mantis', except that she couldn't take to the air. She had no propeller!"

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