

VIRGINIA OF THE AIR LANES

CHAPTER I

WHEN MAIDENS FELL FROM THE SKY

FOR twenty shimmering miles the Gulf beach lay in the sun, a white straight-edge against blue. Mistily through the surf haze glimmered the tower of Sand Island light save when obscured by the smoke-plume of a fruiter standing in past Fort Morgan for Mobile. It was early forenoon. The yellow globe of the mooring-balloon at the fort shone in the sun like a dome of some audacious new architecture, flung high into the pulsating air. Two men, far down the coast toward Pensacola, caught the far-off splendor and noted, in the very act of casting off from it, a long, cigar-shaped aëronat—an immense, elongated bubble of quicksilver. It floated seaward, rounded to, stood a moment end on, librating like a balancing top.

"She's boun' fo' N'Yawlins, Ah reckon, suh."

The speaker was a typical Gulf fisherman, long-bearded, soft of speech, courteous as a diplo-