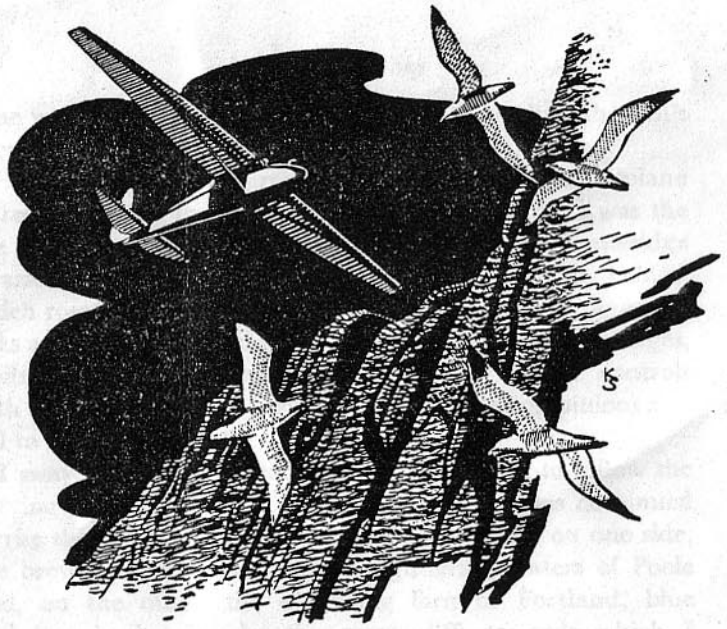

CHAPTER VIII

Soaring Sea Quest

On a day of boisterous wind in 1936, I took my newly completed sailplane Pegasus to the Dorset hills for her first flight. We assembled her quickly on a grassy path cut through heather and tall bracken. Her slender, translucent wings swayed to the wind off the sea as we tied her to the ground.

On other occasions when I had been the first to take an untried machine into the skies it had been different. With them it was as though time held me in suspense, freezing my mind to stillness. Speculation was subordinated while I waited with a sense almost of leisure and release for the moment with

which my destiny was inextricably bound. But not this time. Instead this was adventure and attainment. These were my wings, grown from my imagining, made with my hands, in emulation of the gulls that I had watched soaring above the cliff edge.

Once again I had discovered how difficult it was to translate dreams into reality. Compared with the aeroplanes that I flew, and at one time helped to design, the project of the sailplane had seemed a simple undertaking. Months had grown into years, however, since the first lines of manlifting wings, long and tapering like a gull's, appeared on my drawing board.

Slide-rule and sheets of figures, curves of lift and drag, tabled weights and moments, calculated stresses of wood and steel, presently confirmed that the miniature sailplane of my sketch would have adequate performance and strength. With a span of thirty-four feet and a mere ninety square feet of wing surface, my Pegasus was the smallest sailplane in the world. It had to be small because it was built in my bedroom. It had to be small for cheapness and easy transport. Because it was so small I would feel at one with this £30 fantasy of varnished spruce, thin plywood and doped linen.

I wriggled into the cramped cockpit, to which the leading edge of the wing acted as a roof. I strapped myself in, and felt for the miniature rudder-bar.

I tested the controls gently, feeling the response of their surfaces through the lightly rasping wires and levers. The elastic launching ropes were stretched, the machine poised for flight. Everything was very still, except the mounting wind, and in that instant, while everybody waited, my own identity merged with the mechanism of the sailplane.

'Release!' I shouted at last.

A stir of life throbbed through the wooden structure—or was it my own heart beating? For a moment Pegasus clung to the earth, and then surged forward, parting the air like an arrow, and lifted serenely on the breeze. The launching rope fell from the nose—and she was free, leaping the grey

stone wall that barred the pathway's end, revealing the hill's steep edge that bordered the sea.

Hovering kestrel-like, rocking and swaying, the sailplane soared higher on the wind, until the launching field was the size of a fallen leaf, and the great crescent hill of Kimmeridge dwarfed to a wide arched brow edging a tableland, behind which rose the Purbeck Hills. Turbulence flexed the wings in jerks and swept the machine up and down with sudden surges, whilst my feet and hands worked endlessly at the controls with the same instinct as a gull twisting and flexing pinions and tail to hold a level path.

I swayed the glider into the wind and began to follow the curving course of the hill to the west. As Pegasus continued to rise the view spread further until I could see, on one side, the brown moors surrounding the glittering waters of Poole and, on the other, the crouching form of Portland, blue and hazed, dwarfed by the great cliffs towards which I steered.

Air flowed round the cockpit with the swish of waves on a sandy shore. Although the minute size—the wing chord ranged from 1 foot 6 inches to a maximum of 3 feet 3 inches—gave the sailplane a very small inertia and made the control column and rudder bar unusually sensitive, I instantly became accustomed to the handling. Glider, fighter, bomber—the flying was the same, but the absence of mechanical power made the floating without visible reason seem a miracle. The lack of vibration, too, gave a sensation of natural bird-like flight that I was not to discover in an aeroplane until the advent of the jet engine.

Foot by foot the sailplane crept forward, steadily climbing. Presently it was over a thousand feet high. Directly beneath the polished, narrow, mahogany box in which I sat, the hill curved rapidly towards the sea, and it became easy to appreciate the steep rise and fall of the distant cliffs. Like a series of monsters they ranged westward, humped high in the sky. They were my stepping-stones, where the oblique wind would

be deflected upward and let me rise enough to jump the gaps between.

But even while assessing the chance of reaching Flowersbarrow, and leaping the Bindon, the sailplane began to drop. We had reached the point where the curving hill was dead across the wind, and we were flying in the downdraught of the lee. Within a minute half our height had gone. I threw a desperate glance towards Brandy Bay where great cliffs faced the wind, and promised safety. Could we reach it? The sailplane was dropping like a stone. I pushed the nose down to gain more speed against the strong headwind, but the sailplane merely dived at the hill and made little progress. Each tuft of grass grew clear, becoming a signal of danger.

The tussle ended almost as soon as it had begun. One moment Pegasus was scraping the hill; the next it had reached the cliffs and swept in front of the wall of Gad, well below the top, flying a bare 200 feet above the sea. Across the water gulls by the hundred rose in a cloud from every niche and pinnacle at the sudden silent arrival of the sailplane. Where they flew, could not my sailplane fly also? I turned closer in to the cliff, and as though lifted by a giant hand, the machine surged upward again.

Rising unsteadily on the turbulent wind, I edged Pegasus along the chasm of the cliff. The gulls scattered before my path, and a raven sped on hunched wings towards Worbarrow Bay. With undeviating flight he reached the far cliffs, and I grew assured.

There was time to examine microscopically the scarred and primitive cliff whilst we climbed past its face until the sailplane lifted above the grassy top and gained safety with a thousand feet of height. The panorama of cliff and hill spread out distantly below me again, and I was no longer simply a mortal crouched in a flimsy machine, but a bird in harmony with sky and water, rocks and turf-grown chalk.

Gad slid from sight, and Worbarrow Bay curved around the white-maned sea, with Tyneham's green valley peacefully

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Waves broke into flying foam upon the pebbles. Gulls soared in drifting groups upon the wind. I rose higher and higher above the white and shining coast.

At White Nothe, where the weathered chalk of the coast changed to lower walls of sand, I met the strongest current of the journey from the wind falling unimpeded upon the westward flank and rushing skywards with an even more furious impetus than that of the updraught at Bindon. Pegasus rose higher and higher until a thin mist unexpectedly dimmed the view; and then suddenly we were enveloped in thick white cloud.

In the small cramped cockpit the cloud was more claustrophobic than I had ever known. I had no compass for direction, no gyro-controlled artificial horizon to give balance, no turn indicator, not even a spirit cross-level—only an altimeter and airspeed indicator, and the draught on my face and my leaping senses, to guide an even keel. I sat, tense and breathless, trying not to move the controls.

Even to a low-powered aeroplane that sixty-feet depth of cloud would be no more than a single second's mist—and merely a steamy discoloration scarcely observed in the passage of a sonic fighter—but to me the long seconds of slow climb were filled with imminence of danger and the emptiness of suspense. The world of love and beauty, of green life and sunlight, the world that was my gift of time, was obliterated as though it had never been. There was only the drab, suffocating whiteness to fill the waiting.

As though sprung from my longing, a soft radiance appeared. The light grew firm, the cloud thinned. My senses re-orientated themselves. Tugging free of the last silvered vapours Pegasus burst into the startling brilliance of unimpeded sky. Higher still we rose until the cloud, that had been vast enough to imprison me, was a thin, white floor so narrow that it hid only the tall cliffs of the Nothe and the immediate vicinity of sea.

The needle of the altimeter slowed and stopped at 2,700 feet. The green pip of the variometer dropped to zero, and the red

indicated a steady descent of a foot a second. With time in plenty, and height in hand, I scanned the panorama of coast and hill assessing the best course. A few scattered clouds promised thermal lift, but I feared their dank imprisonment, and looked for a route to my left where cliffs stretched gently towards Portland Bill. The white wings of gulls sailing along the shore promised well.

By following that route, where the wind blew against the cliffs, I should be able to jump the low isthmus of Portland, and reach a better line of windward hills, backing the Chesil beach, and offering an easy flight to Devon.

A mile passed in comparative safety, but we were dropping gently and in the next mile lost 500 feet. The descent seemed logical enough, the cliffs lay lower, so the ceiling of the up-currents must be less. At first I had no qualms as we dropped slowly in our struggle towards the distant blue of Weymouth.

But soon Pegasus was sinking faster, at the rate of five feet a second. The altimeter dropped to 1,500 feet and then to 1,000. I considered turning back and racing downwind to the safety of White Nothe. It was within three minutes' reach, but in the urgency of the moment that seemed too far away. I held my course.

Hardly was my mind made up before I realized I had erred —and then it was too late. The bumpy cliff top was so close it almost touched my skid. A weak up-current held me for an uneasy mile, and I comforted myself with the thought that if the cliff wind failed, I should have a few seconds in which to turn for the fields on top. Yet the contingency felt too unreal to be disturbing, although the wind under my tail would mean touching down at 60 m.p.h. and a certain crash in the confined space available.

A gully gave a brief glimpse of an inn set near the beach, and a road winding through a rough valley where a field might offer safe landing—then it had gone and the cliffs held my attention. Pegasus was uncomfortably low.

A mile ahead taller cliffs promised safety, but the variometer

was showing descent at two feet a second. In one minute more my sinking path would join the ground. With instinct stronger than thought, I banked steeply round, ruddering in a tight circle across the sea, turning back for the hidden gap of Osmington half a mile behind. Our speed increased with the following wind and I searched anxiously for the narrow gap.

In thirty racing seconds we reached the tiny gully, and I banked steeply into the gap, the cliffs looming high above. Gusts buffeted me from both sides. I had to fight to keep control until the valley opened.

On an easy curve the sailplane canted into the wind over a rough, sloping field beset with grass tussocks and brambles.

It was too late to change. An errant gust shook the wings as I levelled off, skimming a foot above the field. The skid bumped on a molehill, hidden in the grass, and Pegasus rose a little, flying free ten paces, before touching down again, slithering roughly to a stop and settling on one wing.

I took off my helmet, and sat unmoving in the cramped cockpit. In this sheltered place the wind sang a gentle note. A grasshopper chirped. Subdued on the breeze came the dull roar and thud of distant breakers.

It had taken us ninety minutes to fly twelve miles of coast, but I was already forgetful of this conquest that I had planned so long to make. My heart was filled with a vague consciousness that somewhere I had nearly seen the lifted veil: that I, who adored and desired, was an integral part of the natural universe, like the wind and the tide and the warmth of the sun.