



THE FLYING FOOL

by DONALD E. KEYHOE

*Even the five surviving Devils of the Double Eagle were doomed to die,
and death-defying stunts showed them how a master pilot answers a taunting accusation!*

NOBODY WHO EVER GOT a good look at the Flying Fool would ever have forgotten him. That red hair and everlasting grin of his would stick in anybody's mind, especially if he met him the way I did. I had dropped in at old Fred Seastrom's airport, a little jump out of Philadelphia, and was talking things over when all of a sudden a ship went tearing over the office so close I thought the roof was going with it. Old Fred jumped up, red in the face and mad as a hornet, but whatever he was sputtering was drowned in the racket.

When the windows stopped rattling I looked out

and saw a Whirlwind Laird pulling a slow roll about a hundred feet off the ground.

"Holy smoke!" I said to Old Fred, who was making the air blue. "What's the idea?"

"That blankety-blank son of a sea-cook," he bellowed, or words to that effect. "I told him I'd fire him if he didn't quit raising hell around here."

I chased outdoors after him. The Laird was putting on a big show, with all the mechs and visitors craning their necks and staring, open-mouthed. Inside of thirty seconds I saw more trick flying than I'd ever seen in ten years, and that's saying something.

But it ended just as suddenly as it began. A small

cabin ship came drifting in with its pilot half asleep. If he wasn't asleep he must have been crazy, for down he came, right in front of the cuckoo in the Laird. The Laird was nosed down, ready for another zoom. The other ship dropped square in the way. Old Fred let out a whoop and I held my breath.

For a second it looked like one grand smash and a washout for both of them. But like a flash the Laird cut underneath—and only thirty feet above the ground. I could see the flippers come back in a jerk, but it was too late. The left wing hit first, sounded like a train cracking a flivver, and the next second the air was full of pieces of what had been a good airplane. The Laird did about three cartwheels and stopped in a cloud of dust.

WE ALL started running, though I for one didn't think it was much use. But we'd hardly begun to pull the pieces apart when out stuck a head covered with flaming red hair. Underneath the hair were a couple of blue eyes that were going to be both black and blue in no time at all, and still lower was a big grin, stuck on rather crooked—just then.

"Well—here we are," said this dizzy bird, pushing out of the wreck. "Things sure happened fast for—"

Just then he saw Old Fred, who was purple from holding in too long.

"You crazy blockheaded galoot!" roared Fred. "Didn't I tell you—I said I'd—you look at that ship! I'll—you, oh I'll have you arrested for this."

Somebody elbowed his way through the crowd. I looked around and saw it was Tom Harrison, the Commerce air inspector for the district.

"Well, Dick—you sure did it this time," he commented. "I'm afraid it'll mean your license—and maybe a fine. I warned you to lay off—"

The red-headed pilot wasn't grinning now.

"Yeah—I guess you're right," he said unhappily. "I—it's my first crackup, though. Won't that help some?"

Old Fred grabbed him by the arm and spun him around.

"You idiot—it's the first and the last on my field! You're fired—you hear? Get off my place."

The inspector looked a bit uncomfortable.

"As far as the crash goes, he saved you one ship," he told Seastrom. "I'm reporting him for stunting over the field, and breaking commerce regulations on right of way."

But Old Fred's malevolence was too far under way. "I'll fix you—Mr. Flying Fool!" he shouted. "Yes

that's what they all call you—and when I get through, everybody I know will be off you like poison. You'll be done for."

He jerked about and angrily headed for the office.

"Who is he?" I asked, when Old Fred had calmed down slightly.

"Name's Dick Burton," growled Old Fred. "Everybody calls him The Flying Fool. I was a lunatic to hire him. He draws crowds on Sundays—but now he's made up for all the good he ever did."

I SHOVED off soon afterward, but the incident stuck in my mind.

I heard later that The Flying Fool had been practically blacklisted on the east coast, and had disappeared.

Nothing was further from my mind than The Flying Fool, however, when I ended an inspection trip of our company's intermediate fields a year later, and dropped in at Castleton Field, about 80 miles from Los Angeles. Bill Castleton and I had barnstormed together, and I always killed a week or so at his place when I hit the west coast.

Bill was glad to see me, and he took me around his field, showing me all the new stuff he had. We were heading back for his office when a girl came along. She was a pretty trick, with dark hair and big brown eyes that looked as though they could make any man come a-running. I had to look twice before I recognized Myra, Bill's daughter.

"Oh, I've grown up," she said, laughing. "Say, Daddy—will you please tell Lou Tracey to mind his own business, and stop interfering with my lessons."

Castleton grinned.

"You sure stir up trouble every time you come home," he rejoined. "Last time it was Sam Irwin—now it's Dick. Of all the quick changes of mind—"

Myra blushed slightly.

"It's not personal," she declared emphatically. "I just want Dick left alone so I can get through my instruction."

"I'll fix it," said her father. "Now run along."

She made a face at him and walked toward a two-place ship on the line. A pilot loafing nearby hurried over to her.

"How about it, Myra?" he began. "Are you going to try a real pilot this time, or—"

Castleton strode toward the plane.

"Listen here, Lou! I'm running this joint—get that? I assigned Dick for Myra, and that's that. Savvy?"

LOU TRACY was a good-looking bird—the kind I don't like. One of those lanky sheiks with a little mustache and a way of sneering and smiling all at once that made you feel like socking him on general principles.

"Oh, all right," he said with a nasty smile. "Let little Safety First teach her. A lot of good she'll get out of it. How's she going to learn anything from a guy that's scared to pull even a steep bank?"

"He's not afraid," retorted Myra suddenly, and then reddened. She climbed into the rear seat and beckoned across to the pilots' bench. "Come on, Dick—I'm ready." Tracy shrugged his shoulders and walked away. Castleton chewed on his cigar for a second.

"Like a couple of strange dogs—those two fellows," he said to me. "Funny, though—they're a lot different from what you'd think to look at 'em. Tracy pulls a lot of tricks—and I'd say offhand he hadn't any guts. But this kid Burton looks like a daredevil, and acts like an old maid."

"Burton!" I said. "What—" Castleton stared at me.

"Know him? Here he is now." If I'd had any false teeth I'd have lost them right then. It was The Flying Fool all right, but even his grin had changed.

"I—ah—no, it must've been somebody else," I mumbled.

The Flying Fool looked at me, but he didn't know me. Castleton introduced us, and with a mere nod to acknowledge the introduction he piled into the ship and took off.

"Where'd you pick him up?" I asked Bill.

"Drifted in here and asked for a job," he said. "I told him I had too many wild peelots on my payroll already. I said I was looking for a kind I'd heard about and hadn't seen—a guy who knew how to fly and was still cautious. He says I'm the guy."

I watched Burton's take-off. He climbed slow and easy, and never made a turn till he'd reached 400 feet.

"Queer egg," said Bill. "The boys ride him about being so careful, but I don't mind. I need one careful bird in this outfit to take up the old ladies and timid fellows on their first hop. And he's a good, steady pilot. I'm glad Myra sticks to him."

It was all I could do to keep from busting out at that. The Flying Fool a steady, cautious pilot! If Old Fred could only hear that one. I decided I was going to see a little fun while I stayed there, but I never dreamed it would end the way it did.

As I was wandering around the field that afternoon I heard Tracy growling to another pilot.

"Some day when the old man's away I'm going to catch that chicken-hearted bozo in the air and chase his tail off."

"Better lay off, Lou," drawled the other. "You know what they say about red hair. Maybe the kid's got something under that topknot."

"Applesauce," scoffed Tracy. "You'd have to drag him into a scrap. Wait and see."

I HUNG around for three or four days without seeing anything unusual, except that I found Myra was rather strong for Burton. Things were just easing along when one day Tracy came dashing in, all excited.

"Get an earful of this, you birds," he yelled. "The United Artcraft Film outfit is going to shoot an air picture close to here, over at Dunlap's Farm. There's a big stretch of open field and they're going to plant it with fake fronts and a lot of war backgrounds."

"Well, little Eva, why all the rumpus?" demanded one of the gang. "Just 'cause you're going to see nice pitty picture bein' made?"

"Shut up, you wisecracker," snarled Tracy. "They're short of pilots. Somebody jumped their bid and got half their men. And the director—fellow named Townsend—can use five of us in the combat scenes. I've already signed up."

"Oh, is that so?" said Bill, who had just come in. "Well, I'll have something to say about that."

"He's willing to pay you double our salaries to let us loose two hours a day," said Tracy. "That's besides what he pays us."

Bill finally agreed, and from the first of the next week there was action every minute. The picture company moved on location and spread out all over the place. They had a plane-crasher who was to wreck five ships at spots that Townsend decided on—and only one of these crashes was easy. That was a nose-over. The rest were stiff, including crashing into a house the property men had built, taking out one corner of the house and ripping off the wing, and ending upside down in front of the cameras. However, that was for this fellow Grady to worry about—all Tracy and his gang had to do was combat in faked-up war ships.

I noticed that Myra's last lessons were few and far between. She was over on the lot, like everybody else most of the time. Even the boys who weren't working in the picture spent most of their spare time hanging around, for the place was full of keen looking bimbos, and most of them were pretty friendly.

UP TILL Wednesday noon, Tracy hadn't picked out the rest of his team. Tracy seemed to have made quite a hit with them. I was sticking around, kidding a cute little dame made up like a French mama, when I saw Dick Burton heave in sight. He walked over to Townsend, and said something. Townsend motioned toward Tracy, who was talking to Myra and one of the stars, a dizzy looking blonde. The Flying Fool waited a bit, and then came over like a man getting ready to dive into a tank of ice-water.

"Tracy—I'd like a chance on that team," he said quietly.

I guess everybody stared, all except the blonde, who didn't know about him. Tracy's jaw dropped, and then he got that sarcastic, sneering grin on his face.

"I'm afraid it would be a little too rough for you," he said, putting his voice up a bit high. "You might get hurt."

I saw The Flying Fool stiffen, but his face didn't change any. "Never mind about that," he said evenly. "I'd like a tryout. This is different from field flying—the regulations don't apply here."

Myra was staring at Burton as though she wasn't sure she heard right.

"But Dick, you haven't practiced any with the boys," she said, like a mother explaining something to a small boy. "You see, they have practised these stunts and fights for a long time."

He turned a dull red then, for he could see what she was thinking. But he stuck there, just the same.

"How about it?" he insisted, gazing straight at Tracy.

"Nothing doing," said Tracy, flatly. "This isn't any old maid's sewing circle. You've got to fly to make this grade."

Dick's face flamed like his hair, and he started in toward Tracy, but Myra stopped him. And then she made one big mistake.

"He's right, Dick," she said emphatically. "You'll have to practice before you can join them."

The Flying Fool just stood there and stared at her. She seemed to realize what she'd said then, for she reached out her hand, but just then the blonde cut in, and the director yelled over for everybody to get off the field except the pilots. Tracy gave Burton another nasty grin and climbed into his ship.

The Flying Fool stumbled back to where some chairs had been placed and flopped down in one of them. Myra hesitated, and while she was waiting, the blonde sat down next to Burton.

"Don't take it so hard," she said consolingly. "I wouldn't pay any attention to that smark aleck if I were you. Anybody can see he's a big false alarm."

The Flying Fool sat up and looked at her like a man in a dream. It was the first kind word that had fallen his way for a while. He didn't notice Myra's eyes narrow—nor the blonde smile back at Myra in the way one woman can at another, and mean something a lot different.

"You're awfully kind," he said. "You see, they don't know. I can fly acrobatics all right. I just haven't been doing it lately—well, because they got me in trouble once."

The blonde and I were the only ones close enough to hear this. Suddenly the planes went into action and from then on no one could hear anything. Tracy and his four pilots pulled up and started into combat with seven of the company's pilots. It was a good show, though I thought they could have mixed it a little closer once or twice. Townsend thought so too.

"Not so hot," he muttered to Bill, who was learning a lot about movies from a good-looking script girl. "Guess it'll have to do, though. Now for that crackup."

They'd already pulled two of the crashes. This fellow Grady was a marvel, getting up and walking away from the worst looking wrecks I ever laid eyes on. I kind of got used to it, and wasn't expecting trouble. This time he was to hit at full gun, nose-down, in the middle of the field, which would throw the wreck upside down against a fake-tree.

Grady came shooting in like a bullet, and everybody held his breath. Closer and closer he came, and then he shot the nose down into the ground. The ship hit with a terrible roar and the sound made me almost sick. I couldn't see how any man could live through that. Townsend kept yelling for everybody to stay clear till the dust settled, so they could get all the action. Then we all made a break for the crash. And this time Grady didn't move.

The rescue crew cut the longerons holding him in and had him on a stretcher in no time. He wasn't gone, but he wouldn't be crashing any ships for the next week, that was certain. They rushed him away in the ambulance that was kept waiting every time he did a crash—and that show was over.

After the excitement died down, and Tracy had landed with the rest of the pilots, Townsend announced that on account of the delay in filming the next two crashes, which would be the final ones, because they'd have to get another stunt man from

Hollywood, they would retake the air stuff and try to mix it up better.

"If only I'd had him do that last crash first," he said to Bill and me. "That's the tough one. Two stunt men turned me down on it. I had to agree to \$3000 for Grady as it was. The fourth crackup is easy—just a flopper after landing with a wheel off. But if Grady isn't in shape for that dive into the house we may lose a month on that shot!"

He swore to himself and turned away. I started back home with Bill. Myra was staring at Dick, who was explaining the art of flying to the blonde star. When Dick turned away from the blonde, Myra coolly shifted her gaze and looked up into Tracy's eyes, deliberately and quite effectively.

"I thought you were wonderful, Lou," she murmured. "Tell me how you can do those marvelous stunts—that last one, especially."

She didn't glance back at Dick, but she didn't have to. She must have known that he would be staring at her, his heart in his eyes, and his eyes showing the misery she was causing. I felt sorry for him, and when Bill was gone I went over to the kid.

"It's all right, Dick," I said. "You're better than that sap. You know it—and I know it. I saw you crack up the Laird out at Fred Seastrom's airport."

Dick's eyes widened with surprise. "It was white of you to keep still," he muttered gratefully. "I've had such a dog's life getting started again. Seastrom fixed me, all right—the way he said he would. That's why I've been so careful here. I don't want to take a single chance. If I lose my license this time it'll be for good—and this flying game's all I know."

He stopped suddenly as Townsend passed by.

"Excuse me," he said hurriedly and ran after the director. I waited for a minute, but he walked away with Townsend, so I joined the rest of the field crowd and went home.

THE NEXT MORNING I arrived at the field a little late. The gang was there, but I noticed that several of the movie crowd were missing, including the blonde and her leading man. I heard Tracy's sneering laugh, followed by a loud guffaw. I turned and saw Dick, one eye partly closed and a long jagged scratch on his cheek. I went over and found one of the pilots reading from the morning paper.

"*The disturbance at the Kit-Kat-Klub was caused by a pilot from the local airport, whose name was not learned. According to reports, the pilot was attacked by*

the escort of a young lady to whom the flyer insisted on paying close attention. The lady and her escort—it is stated—are members of a movie troupe now on location at Dunlap's Farm.'"

Tracy roared at this as he adjusted his helmet. Dick looked somewhat bewildered, I thought. But before he could say anything Myra stepped to the side of the pilot reading the paper. Silently, she read the lines and then her eyes rested on Dick's bruised countenance. Anger and scorn blazed from her eyes. The group of pilots sensed what was coming, and all but Tracy departed hastily for their ships. He stood off to one side, listening.

"So—you are a liar, too! Then it was nothing but a lie that you were ill last night when you called me. And to think I was sorry, and worried about you—while you were out making a public display of yourself over that woman!"

"But, Myra—I—" protested Dick.

"I don't want to listen to any more lies—or anything else, from you! I should have believed Lou Tracy—and known that you are no good, that you're as yellow as he said you are!"

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Tracy move suddenly toward his plane. He climbed in and his mechanic pulled the chocks. But Dick did not see him. He was gazing, white-faced, into Myra's angry eyes.

"You—you believe that!" he said dully.

Her head went up, but her lips were trembling.

"Yes," she managed to say, "yes—I do!"

Something seemed to take hold of Dick Burton. It was as though some invisible hand had touched him, and brought to life something long dormant. He straightened and looked straight into Myra's agonized face, then slowly, with something terrible in his eyes, looked across the field for Lou Tracy. But Tracy's ship was already in the air, climbing steeply for the rest of his team. Only one plane remained on the ground, its engine idling, while the pilot had a last word with Townsend.

Whirling around, Dick ran like a madman toward this ship. Shoving the astonished pilot out of the way, he leaped into the cockpit and snarled a command at the mechanic. The chocks fell away, and the ship raced down the field.

"Well, what in the—" exclaimed Townsend, and broke off amazedly.

"Stop him, somebody!" cried Myra. "Oh, it's all my fault—he'll be killed."

"Don't worry about Dick," I said grimly. "It's Tracy you'd better worry about—"

Townsend shouted with delight.

"A real scrap! Wow! Harry, get into that extra ship and shoot every foot you can get of this. Beat it!"

The camera ship streaked across the ground to join the three already grinding above. Every eye was now on that zooming ship which Dick hurled after Tracy.

"He's cut him off," exclaimed Bill Castleton. "Good Lord—look at that!"

THE FLYING FOOL had come back with a vengeance. Swerving between Tracy and his team, he drove in savagely, forcing him to a quick defense. As Dick's ship plunged onto the other's tail I began to fear that he had lost his mind. Tracy dived madly, with Dick not thirty feet behind him. Pulling out sharply, Tracy tried to Immelmann away, but Dick followed through, kicking his wing in till it almost overlapped that of his enemy. Slipping desperately, Tracy tried to dart away to the right. Dick dived straight across in front of him, and Tracy fell off, floundering into a spin.

Out of the spin, Tracy seemed to regain some of his spirit. Zooming into a split, he drove for Dick's tail. But the Flying Fool was not there. From a power dive he had shot into a vertical S, now pulling out to whip across Tracy's wing, deliberately dragging his tail-skid onto the tip. Tracy dipped that wing as in utter fright. The Flying Fool came back relentlessly to his tail, forcing him down.

"Great! Marvelous!" shouted Townsend, slapping his thigh. "Oh—boy—if we only get all of it. Now if he only cracks him again—"

But Tracy was through with this mad battle. Driven down by the flashing ship above, he flopped onto the field in a dizzy landing, almost ground-looping into the cameras. After him came Dick, his struts whistling from a fast slip. His wheels settled for a hot landing and his ship rolled beyond the gaping crowd. He vaulted from the cockpit, leaving the engine idling, and ran straight to where Tracy sat sullenly in his plane.

"Get out of there, you rat!" Tracy whitened, but did not move.

Dick leaped onto the wing, oblivious to the cameras that had been swung, still grinding, to cover this unexpected development. Seizing Tracy by the collar, he half pulled, half yanked him to the ground. Then, jumping down, he sent a hard fist smashing into Tracy's face. Blood spurted from Tracy's nose and he reeled back.

"Yellow—am I!" cried Dick. "You lying groundhog!"

Dick swung around and his bitter eyes rested on Myra.

"Ask your brave advisor here about that newspaper item. He may know something about the author," he snapped.

Pushing his way through the throng, he strode over to Townsend.

"Get your cameras ready for that crash," he said curtly. "Where's that belt?"

TOWNSEND'S MOUTH opened and shut but no words came. An assistant suddenly appeared with a peculiar-looking harness. Dick thrust it under his arm and walked to his ship. Without looking back, he snapped the harness about him, climbed into the cockpit and took off.

"Where is he going?" cried Myra anxiously. "What did he mean?"

"Mean?" repeated Townsend with a beaming smile. "Why, he's going to make that last crash. He did the other one yesterday—that's where he got that black eye. Grady is out for two months. I told Burton I'd pay him the same, and—"

"Oh, Dick—Dick—" Myra moaned.

"Clear the field," ordered Townsend, once more the brisk director. "Ambulance, pull of range there. First-aid crew, keep back till I give you the order to go. All set, cameras!"

A deathly silence fell as Dick turned the nose of his ship into the wind, then down at the field in which stood the house he was to crash. Every eye was on that descending ship, in which a man was deliberately taking his life in his hands. In a few seconds it would be over. Either he would be lifted from the wreckage, a lifeless thing—or his reckless daring would bring success.

At 100 miles an hour the ship leveled off and hurtled toward the house that had been built for this fateful moment. Above the roar of the engine and the screech of wires came a woman's scream.

Then the ship leaped out, passed us in a flash, and struck with a terrific crash. Wreckage, splintered wings, and bits of fabric seemed blasted as by some explosion. The side of the house vanished as if by magic, and a great cloud of smoke spread above the twisting ruins. Through that cloud the tail of the ship lifted slowly, and fell away on the other side.

Townsend's shout sent a score of men into action, with fire extinguishers, stretcher, axes and first-aid

equipment. But even before they moved Myra was running frantically across the field. She plunged into the billowing smoke before anyone could restrain her, and for a second was hidden from sight.

Then a most astonishing thing happened. From out of that mass of twisted wood, metal and cloth appeared a red head, and a bruised and battered face showed. Slowly a crooked grin spread across that face.

“Well—here we are,” said the Flying Fool. “And say—things happened a lot faster this time—”

Myra was down at his side, sobbing.

“Dick—Dick—are you hurt, dear? Oh, I cannot forgive myself for treating you so. I really knew you were brave—but I—I was jealous—”

He smiled at her and now all the old spirit of the Flying Fool was back in his blue eyes. Townsend looked on dazedly.

“Would you mind telling me,” he asked at last, “just what your thoughts were when you hit, if you had any?”

The Flying Fool grinned. “I’ll tell you the truth. I was just thinking how nicely that \$3000 would fit in as a wedding present.”

Myra’s eyes shone. She laughed happily. Townsend stared across at me.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he said.