



# HERO STUFF

by **FREDERICK C. DAVIS**

*Between earth and sky he hung, helpless in the useless parachute—until Nick Royce, sky-eater, jumped into space, a grim smile on his lips as he prayed for an even break.*

**W**HEN GORD DUGAN'S nifty blue roadster came to a stop at the end of the row of hangars, we knew that things were due to pop. As chief editor of the weekly World News Reel, Dugan drove through his days as hard as a Liberty blasting at full throttle; and, we being the flying division of the reel, worked our heads off under him because we were his pet. Whenever Dugan appeared on our T on Long Island we prepared to *move!*

"On your toes, boys!" he barked, striding straight toward us as he sat on the steps of the office shack with another chap that I remember vaguely but couldn't quite place. "Today you've got something *real* to do!"

Which was our meat. Our airplanes, I believed, had toiled more to make the World News Reel the finest in the field than any other unit in it; and, as super of the air force, I—Art Buckley being my name—was proud of it. When we weren't flitting around, bobbing among the clouds, grinding in film for dear life, in order to bring the latest news in pictures to the movie fans, we were driving hard against time to get our shots into the projecting machines before the other reels did, or rushing to keep our equipment in shape so as to scoop our deadliest rival, the Compass people, whenever possible.

Night and day, no matter what we were doing, we had to be ready to tear away when the call came, and jump into our D.H.'s, and shoot the best that we could. Our celluloid newspaper was a hard master, and we were reporters like reporters were when it was real reporting! It was a life that a man with weak nerves couldn't live through!

It was strenuous enough anyway, but with Gord

Dugan pushing us—because Compass was pushing him—it was plenty tough!

“Boys,” said Dugan, “meet the famous J. Harold Shaw.”

J. Harold Shaw—that was the chap with Dugan! Now, although I spend my days and nights grinding film through a camera, and although I’m as active in the game as any man could be without busting right open, I don’t get to see many movies on the screen. I’m too busy making our own to go and look at other brands. Therefore I hadn’t recognized J. Harold Shaw at once as one of the most popular movie heroes of the day.

I shook hands with J. Harold, remembering that I had seen him in *Broken Fetters* some time ago with the wife, who thought he was simply grand. He was the most liked of the popular idols. His pictures sent thrills and chills up and down the prickly spines of a million girls. Right at that minute his likenesses were decorating the dresser-tops of adoring females from coast to coast. Many a dissatisfied wife thought of him as an ideal husband for herself. His face was certainly his fortune. Yes, sir, right then there wasn’t any more heroic hero in the whole flicker business than J. Harold, and there he was, in the flesh and not a picture, as the old-timers say, on our field.

“Gladta meetcha,” I said. “Meet our newest man, Mr. Shaw—Nick Royce.”

Royce and Shaw were two men entirely unlike. Shaw’s business in life was exploiting his personality; Royce seemed to spend most of his time in effacing his. Our new flyer was young and bashful, with clear brown eyes, towseled hair, long arms, and as thin as a strip of film. But behind that retiring disposition of his was packed enough courage to quail a tiger.

How Royce came into the movie game, and to our field, is a story in itself. He was a kid, trying his hardest to land a flying job after completing his instruction. He’d come to the field starving, and through a freak of circumstances, we mistook him for Rolf Flynn, the greatest stunt flyer in the world. Well, the short of it is that, in spite of the fact that he was a fledgling, he romped out with me in his plane, and came back with one of the best beats of the year—of a coast-wise steamer afire and sinking. A plucky lad he was, and in spite of the fact that Dugan had almost killed him with rough talk, he had been hired for our flying division.

Royce shook Shaw’s hand silently, smiling his welcome, and retired.

We introduced Shaw to the rest of the bunch—Rolf

Flynn himself, and Rex Dillon and Tom Thurber, pilots, and Jim White, the other film grinder besides myself.

Then Dugan got down to business. “Boys, we’re in the movies for fair this time! We’re going to help make a big super-super-special for Broadway!”

“It’s going to be the picture of the year,” said J. Harold modestly.

“It is!” boomed Dugan. “This is the straight of it, Art. The Tip-Top people are putting out a big airplane picture—and I mean *big*. It’s full of flying and dangerous stunt and heroism—Mr. Shaw supplying most of that. Well, the Tip-Top people have some of the shots made, but they’ve got to take some real action close-ups in the air, and they’ve decided that they need an experienced air cameraman for that Art, you’re nominated.”

“Good!” I said. Knowing that the Tip-Top corporation was the big power of the celluloid world, I was eager to hear more.

“I can’t tell you the whole story of the picture now,” Dugan went on, “but we’ve got to make those air shots today. The picture is behind schedule now, due to a lot of mishaps. Now, what we’re going to get is this—”

Dugan lit a perfecto.

“Shaw is the hero, see—the aviator hero—”

“I might say,” Shaw interrupted, “that I’ve had some flying experience of my own. During the war.” And he smiled in a brotherly fashion.

“Much?” I asked, interested.

“Quite a bit,” he answered solemnly, as though he were the equal of any man in the game and needn’t talk about it any more than that.

“Now, Shaw is the flying hero,” Dugan went on, “and he is going over No-Man’s-Land, you see. His ship is hit and it goes into a tail-spin. Shaw jumps out with a chute, and lands among the barbed wire for the big fight of the films. Later he gets away with valuable information for his commanding officer that prevents a French town being wiped out, but all that is ready. The No-Man’s-Land stuff is done, and all they need now is the close-ups in the air, to knit the thing together and give it a wallop. See?”

“Easy,” I said.

“It won’t be so easy,” J. Harold answered me back. “This is going to be dangerous stuff. The tail spin my plane goes into has to look like it’s going to kill me. I’m going to be right in it, every minute. I don’t let any doubles work for me.”

Well, well, I thought.

“Now, one of the pilots will get in the front seat with Shaw and do the controlling,” Dugan went on. “Of course, somebody will have to be there to stop the spin and keep the plane from crashing—but that won’t be in the picture. And, as Shaw says, it’ll be dangerous.”

“I’m willing,” remarked Shaw, “to let somebody else handle the controls.” By this time you know that I’d taken a dislike to this vain and self-centered movie idol. Admirable fellow that he was on the screen, he was entirely too chesty in real life.

“The rest of the outfit is coming along in another car,” Dugan said. “As soon as they get there we’ll beg—well, here they are, now.”

Around the end of the hangars came two more autos, one containing a chap in a white shirt and puttees who was obviously the director and a direct descendant from some old Jerusalem families. The other car looked like a baker’s delivery truck, but it was a traveling dressing-room, all especially for J. Harold himself to pretty up in.

J. Harold went toward it, and Dugan drew me aside for a confidential spiel.

“Art, this is serious. Our co-operating with Tip-Top is important. We’re getting good jack for it, and besides that the publicity department of the works is going to blow itself hoarse for us. Besides—” here his whisper got lower “—I have it on good authority that Tip-Top is thinking about adding a news reel to its releases, and it’s looking for a good buy. Boy, if we are bought by Tip-Top, we’re made. It means a better job for all you fellows and more money. So, for the love of Heaven, do this job up brown. If you don’t I’ll crack your head!”

Royce was standing there, as quiet and self-possessed as he always was, and Dugan turned to him.

“Listen, young fella. I’m going to give you a chance. You can go up with J. Harold and pilot his plane for him—see if anybody can make a plane look like it’s flying wild, you can!” Royce blushed. Reflections on his flying ability were always hard on him. The only thing against the young chap was his youth and lack of experience—but he was getting more of it as fast as he could. I secretly thought the reason Dugan selected Royce was that, if anybody was going to be killed it might as well be the newest recruit! Which was hard on Royce, any way you took it!

“I’ll do it, Boss,” he said. “Depend on me.”

“But lemme warn you,” Dugan went on in a growl. “If you smash any more planes—by the Lord Harry, I’ll take it out of your hide!”

Royce had smashed a plane to splinters once, and Dugan hadn’t forgotten it.

“Nick! Ni-ck! *Ni-i-ick!*”

Somebody was calling Royce in a little squeal of delight. We all looked around. Another car, a taxi, had stopped beside the others, and a girl was rushing across the sand.

And she was a nice little girl. In her bushy coat, and with her soft gray eyes, she looked like an adorable kitten. She was running straight toward Royce, with arms out and ready for him, and her face was all alight with joy. Royce stood spellbound with sheer pleasure and surprise a moment. Then:

“Mollie!” he cried, and ran to meet her.

Right there was the most affecting and unaffected greeting between boy and girl that I ever saw. She didn’t care that anybody was looking. Into Royce’s arms she went, and kissed him full on the lips, again, and again, chattering happily over him, even ecstatically, and then kissing him again. And Royce was blushing like a house afire.

Our bashful little flyer was in love—and, seeing the girl, I couldn’t blame him!

He led her up to us, and introduced her to us, forgetting our names completely.

“Mollie is—we’re—she’s my—”

“I’m going to marry him!” Mollie declared radiantly.

“As soon as I save enough money,” Royce added, in a soft tone.

She was as proud of him as though he was Lindbergh himself; but when she turned and saw J. Harold Shaw smiling at her, I could almost see her heart miss a beat. Here was a real, living hero right in front of her, that she had seen many times on the screen, and her fan’s admiration for him came right up into her eyes.

“Oh!” she said with a little gasp.

This young lady had come all the way from the Middle West, where Royce came from, just to greet him on the event of his first flying job and, mad about Royce as she was, seeing J. Harold in the flesh gave her a thrill all its own. Girls are like that—fickle girls!

Shaw smiled his sweetest smile at her; and I could feel Royce’s temperature going down below zero.

“You’ve a remarkably appealing face. Miss Sherwood,” said Shaw. “It would screen very well. Have you ever thought of going into pictures?” What girl hasn’t? And now Mollie was glowing all over, imagining herself as J. Harold’s movie sweetheart—and trouble had already begun to brew!

Royce looked at Shaw freezingly. “Seems to me I’ve heard of you, Mr. Shaw. You’ve had flying experience, you say—quite a bit? Well, my big brother went into the army air service during the war, and once he told me about a guy trying to make the service—and becoming a movie hero afterward. Seems my brother said you never saw Kelly Field—couldn’t make the grade—flubbed out!”

Shaw stiffened. “That’s a lie,” he said. “That’s a damned lie!”

“I’m a liar, am I!”

Royce and Shaw started for each other at the same time. It hadn’t taken them long to get on fighting terms. Ten minutes after they’d first seen each other they were rushing in for a brisk set-to—and it would have been a snappy little battle, if we hadn’t stopped it.

Dugan rushed in, and that putteed director began dancing around like mad, but that didn’t keep Royce and Shaw from trying to murder each other with looks.

“Stop it!” yowled Markwitz, the little director; and if Dugan was hard on the teeth, this bird was far tougher. “Shaw, get into your flyin’ clothes and get to work!”

Shaw went off toward his traveling dressing room again, Royce calmed down, and we all got busy with our business. We rolled a D.H. out of the shed and warmed her up, and I rustled my camera out of the locker and mounted it in the rear pit. The other D.H. was to be in the scene, and this one was for Shaw and Royce. Jim White set up his camera near the office, to get some angle shots.

Then Shaw came trotting back, looking like a new shoe in shiny flying clothes, and we all occupied ourselves with the business of putting on parachutes.

Markwitz barked out more orders. Dugan ranted.

Over at one side the little grey kitten of a girl was watching everything with big eyes—and looking from Royce to Shaw and back again.

“Contact!”

Royce barked the word from the fore pit of his D.H., and the motor roared up. J. Harold looked at Royce distastefully, as though he objected to flying with the man, but at a push from Markwitz, crawled in beside Royce. Then the propeller roared up, and the plane taxied down the stalk of the T and took off neatly.

Right behind it was my plane, and Rolf Flynn himself was piloting. While the air was still churning from the first propeller, we trundled off.”

Royce circled for altitude and we followed on the screw. As we leveled off, I could see only one head in the cockpit of the other D.H., and that head Shaw’s. It

looked like Shaw was piloting the plane, and that was the point. I swung around my box and began grinding in. The light was good, but beginning to fade, and I thought the shots would look great, with the horizon swimming past below.

I ground on. The D.H. that Royce was driving suddenly nosed down and began to spin. Immediately Flynn began circling it at a steep angle of descent. I kept my lens on it constantly, but not without an uppish feeling in my stomach, due to the terrific speed. The whole world was cockeyed during those moments. And Royce’s plane spun down—without anything happening.

Within a hundred feet of the ground Royce jerked the plane out of the spin, zoomed it up, circled, and made a good two-point on the T. We followed. I had ground in a long sequence of the tail-spin, but Shaw hadn’t jumped, and the shot was useless for the big feature.

We got out of our pits at about the same time. Markwitz ran screeching toward Shaw.

“Why didn’t you jump? Why didn’t you jump?”

Royce smiled a vinegar smile. “Why didn’t he jump? Why, the great hero was afraid to jump. He was the color of pea soup when he should have jumped.”

Shaw was white with fury. “I refuse to go up with that upstart again! I refuse to do it! How can I work with a fool making gibes at me every minute? I refuse to do anything until he’s kicked out!”

Markwitz whirled on Dugan. “You hear that? We’ve got to have another pilot. Give us another pilot.”

Dugan growled. “Royce, damn your skin! This picture is behind schedule now, and you’re holding it up longer! I’d like to break your neck! Get away from that plane! Rex Dillon! Where’s Rex Dillon?”

Shouting for the other pilot, Dugan ran toward the office. Just at that minute Dillon came out.

“Get in that plane with Shaw, Dillon, and do these scenes.”

“Well, Boss, your office just called. There’s a break. Forest fire upstate. Big fire. It’s our meat. Somebody’s got to go and shoot it!”

Dugan met the emergency in a flash. “Flynn! Flynn, take up that other plane and head for that forest fire. Dillon’s got the dope! Go with him, White, and make it snappy!”

Flynn and White raced toward the third plane, still in the hangar.

“Dillon,” Dugan raced on, “get into Shaw’s plane—”

“Excuse me, Boss,” said Dillon. “You’re calling for a nose dive, and nose dives are one thing that gets me.

Tail spins are worse. The only one I ever got into put me in the hospital for eight months. Excuse me for being nervous. With a wife and two little kids needing my Saturday checks, I'd better stay out of that plane!"

Dugan argued, but Dillon was firm. Dugan fumed, but Dillon wouldn't change his mind. If Dillon hadn't been such a fine all around man, he'd have been fired on the spot—but now Dugan was up against it. Tom Thurber, our only other pilot, had one arm in a splint as a result of a propeller's slipping and hitting it. There was nothing to do but let Dillon take me up. and send Royce back up with Shaw.

"Damn you, Royce!" Dugan ranted at the young chap as he stood by quietly and smiled a little smile. "For the love of Heaven, let Shaw alone! You take him up again and keep your mouth shut, and we'll try—"

We looked around. Shaw was not in sight. He just wasn't around. I noticed, too, that the little grey girl was gone from where she had been standing beside the hangar.

And right then they both came down the little steps of Shaw's perambulating dressing-room! Shaw was smiling an oily triumph, and the girl was clutching a picture of him that he had just autographed for her. He gave her a lot of unnecessary help in getting down the ladder—and Royce ripped out a cold curse.

Straight across the sand Royce strode, before any one could stop him. He jerked Shaw away from the girl and blazed at him:

"You damned snake! Mollie's my girl, and you've got to let her alone!" Shaw, the giant movie hero, winner of a hundred scraps on the screen, measured Royce's length with his eyes and declared loudly:

"Kid, I'm going to beat some civility into your hard head!"

In a second they were squared away. Shaw reached out and poked Royce on the chin, and Royce swung back with a body punch that wrung a grunt from the hero. The girl backed away, looking frightened clear through but, I thought, not exactly displeased at being fought over. Then Shaw reached out again and Royce found Shaw's eye, and Shaw staggered backward.

Shaw was a livid white with fury. His eye, as a result of the last poke, was bleeding. His handsome face was cut! And so, accordingly, his ultra-sensitive vanity was injured worse! He glowered at Shaw and said in an ice-cold tone:

"For that I'm going to kill you."

They sailed together again, but by that time we all had recovered and were clawing in to keep them apart.

After a minute we separated them. Dugan was almost apoplectic. Markwitz was off the ground most of the time. Royce was calm and eager to go on with the fight. The girl rather liked it. And Shaw took a little mirror from his pocket and looked at his swollen and cut eye. That redoubled his wrath, and he plowed forward again. It took two of us to stop him.

"I'll kill you!" he rasped. "I'll kill you!"

Well, that fight broke up the day. It was over for a time. It would be necessary to do it all over again tomorrow. Royce had certainly gummed up the works of the biggest film producing company in the world, and also of the nation's favorite hero! Royce went back, saying nothing; but for a while all I could do was remember and shiver at the steely way Shaw had said:

"I'll kill you!"

SOMEBODY has got to be at our field office every hour of the day and night, and that night it was Royce's and my turn. Royce was still on the payroll, though not by a very wide margin, and we were all half amused and half anxious about the business.

Mollie had stayed with us, that evening, until she had chattered herself out, and got sleepy, and then she went back to Manhattan and a hotel, while Royce and I kept up our drowsy vigil. We didn't know if anything would break, but we'd put in many a night there together, and tonight as usual we played cards—but Royce wasn't talking.

After a while we tossed aside the pasteboards, and began reading the newspapers all over again.

Royce rose out of a perfect silence, past midnight, and said: "Listen!"

I listened—at nothing.

"Didn't you hear it?"

"Nope."

"Sounded to me like somebody fooling around outside—near the hangars."

"Let's take a look."

With flashlights we went outside. We couldn't hear anything more, except the purr of a motor's exhaust somewhere back up the road, but we flashed our lights around the hangar doors. They were not locked, and one of the doors was swinging. We looked inside. There was the plane which Royce always used.

Royce went in suspiciously, flashing his light, and I followed. I could see nothing unusual around, and Royce was saying nothing.

"Come on," I said. "What could be going on out here, anyway?"

“Wait.”

Royce was up and looking into the fore cockpit of the plane. His face grew deeper-lined. He looked at me and back into the pit.

“Art,” he said, “my parachute is on the seat.”

“Well?”

“I left it on the bottom.”

“Sure?”

“Pretty sure.”

“Well, what of it? Does it look like it has been tampered with?”

“Nope,” he admitted.

“Do you want to open it up and see?”

He looked a bit sheepish, knowing that I was kidding him, and came back down again.

“Let it go,” he said.

We went out, closing the doors this time, and re-entered the office shack. In the light of the green-shaded globes we sat quite a while before we went toward the two cots in the corner. Royce was no longer reading the papers. He stared at the floor and blinked.

“Thinkin’, Royce?” I asked him.

“I’m thinkin’ plenty!” he said.

The next morning was brisk and clear, an ideal day for photography. Early enough Dugan’s car appeared beside the hangars, with Markwitz and Shaw in another, with the perambulating dressing room behind it. The expression on these men’s faces said that if anybody interfered with the progress of the picture today, there’d be the devil to pay.

Dugan looked uncommonly glum. I suspected that he had been doing his damndest to find another pilot to take Shaw up, in order to get Royce from throwing his own personal monkey-wrenches into the machinery, but plainly Dugan hadn’t been able to do it. So he strode over to Royce with his jaw sticking out.

“Listen, kid! Listen hard! This is your last chance. Do your stuff, and do it damn’ well, or you’re going packing off this field to stay!”

Royce looked over Dugan’s shoulder, and there was that cuddly little kitten of a Mollie coming happily toward him; and he sighed a deep sigh.

“All right, Boss.”

He had a minute with Mollie, and then we were busy getting ready again.

I mounted my machine in the rear pit of our plane, adjusted the stop after feeding a cartridge through, and was ready. Rex Dillon had appeared and the ship was now warm.

J. Harold Shaw was in his shining leather suit again,

ready for action. He sent poisonous glances at Royce out of an eye that was noticeably swollen, but from which all traces of black and blue had been removed by the expert use of grease paint and powder. Markwitz was roaring out orders, and after Royce had his plane warmed up, we were ready for action again—but there was a hitch.

“Wait a minute!” said J. Harold. “How can I make the jump without a parachute?”

“Royce!” yelled Dugan. “Where is Shaw’s parachute?”

“Right where mine is,” Royce answered easily. “Come and get it, Shaw.”

Royce led the movie hero into the hangar. There, propped against one wall, were the two bundles that were the parachutes. Royce had taken them both out of the plane and sat them there. They looked exactly alike; and Royce pointed to them.

“There you are, Shaw. Take your choice.”

J. Harold flashed an acid glance at Royce; and Royce half-smiled.

“One’s yours and one’s mine—whichever one you want,” Royce added.

Shaw fidgeted, and swore softly; and then, without further hesitation, he grabbed up one of the twin bundles and began getting it onto him. Royce did the same with the other, and when they were finished, Shaw stood glowering at Royce, and Royce smiled wisely back.

I saw that incident, and scratched my head.

“Get in that plane!” Markwitz bellowed.

They came running.

“Shaw!” Markwitz yowled. “This time you’re going to jump—understand? This time you’re going to jump!”

Royce laughed outright when Shaw’s face lost all its color, and climbed into the fore pit.

“Funny business here,” I thought.

Then the motors roared up, and we were ready for the big scenes. First Royce’s plane taxied away, with Shaw beside our new pilot—he had been induced, after much haggling and explanation to take the seat beside the man who had humiliated him—and it circled steeply. There they were, Royce and Shaw, mortal enemies if there ever were any, side by side now, and thousands of feet up!

Dillon trundled the plane away, pulled the stick, and glided us up after the first plane. We climbed toward the ceiling at a sharp angle, and soon levelled off at the same altitude as Royce, flying around at a roaring speed.

Below us, like toys, the hangars floated; and in

front of them were the puppets that, on earth, were the roaring Dugan and the blustering Markwitz. And beside them, a little dot of grey, was the girl, with eyes on the plane carrying Royce and Shaw. Thousands of feet separated us from Mother Earth; and the stunt that Royce was about to attempt was no cinch.

Only Shaw's helmet was visible over the cowling of the other plane now; Royce had ducked down out of sight; and I began grinding.

The two planes weaved close, sometimes almost brushing, while I shot Shaw in the cockpit. His well-known profile against the sky left no doubt that he was piloting that plane a good many thousands up! He looked pretty scared to me, and I wondered if Royce was nagging him again. Shaw looked down at the ground, and drew back quickly.

Our plane drew away again, ready for the big scene, the tail-spin. Suddenly Royce's plane nosed down, and headed for the ground. Its tail stuck straight up toward the sun, and its propeller whined downward with the help of the powerful pull of gravity. It twisted and fluttered, looking for all the world as though it were entirely out of control and certainly due for a terrific crash.

Now, tail-spins are duck soup for some men—lucky ones. With big, heavy planes, they are danger itself. A ton and a half hurtling straight downward at a dizzy speed is not easy to deflect by merely pulling on a few wires. The pilot pushes the stick forward—he does not pull it backward, to raise its nose, as one would think—but he places the stick in such a position as would keep it nosing straight down. The plane itself must come out of the dive. It levels off, if the pilot is lucky, almost of its own wish. And sometimes it doesn't wish. Sometimes it doesn't come out of the tail-spin. Sometimes it drops to the earth like a thing bent on killing itself—and unless the pilot abandons it at a safe height with a parachute, there is one less pilot flying. Death itself is hovering around a tail-spinning plane.

And Royce's plane was tail-spinning now wildly. My heart almost frozen, I ground in the pictures of it as it dashed downward at an incredible rate.

"Why doesn't Shaw jump?" I groaned.

Every passing second made the stunt all the more dangerous!

And then a form came leaping out of the cockpit. Royce was still invisible behind the fuselage. It was Shaw who had jumped. He sailed out of the plane like a cork out of a toy gun, and began hurtling downward.

Too soon he pulled the rip-cord of his chute. The pilot flipped out and filled, and the rest of the chute came snapping out of the case—but luckily the spinning plane did not touch him. The fabric of the chute bellied out—and then collapsed again!

Right before my eyes and my lens, Shaw's parachute flabbed together.

For an instant I was stunned. I couldn't imagine what had happened. Once in a thousand times something happens to a chute and it doesn't work. Was this the thousandth time? I felt my brain convulsing with horror.

And then I saw, realized, that some of the shroud lines of the chute had broken. At the jerk of Shaw's body, some of the cords had snapped. One whole side of the chute had lost its supports for the man. As a result, the fabric fluttered shut, and went trailing down after the man like a flag. It hadn't the least consequential power of holding Shaw up now!

Shaw was dropping like a plummet. The field below was rushing up on him. The instant he struck the ground he would be surely dead, every bone in his body broken, crushed to pulp. So would end the movie hero!

In that instant I had an intuitive understanding of the whole thing. I remember Shaw's steely "I'll kill you!" to Royce, and I knew then that the man had meant it. I remembered Royce's hearing something suspicious in the hangars the previous night. His parachute had been touched, he thought. I recalled his odd behavior in taking both chutes out of the plane and giving Shaw a choice of them. Speeding a hundred miles through the air, with death about to claim a man before my eyes, I realized what had happened.

Shaw had actually come back to the field that night, murder in his heart, and had crept into the hangar. He must have unfolded Royce's chute and cut the strings partway through. His brief training at Brooks Field during the war would have given him the knowledge of how to put the chute back into the bag and make it look as though nothing had happened to it. Yet, when Royce came to use it, it would have failed him in the air and dashed him to death on the ground. Not today, perhaps—but sometime, surely!

Diabolical deed! Now I appreciated to the last word that scene in the hangar, when Royce had given Shaw his choice of the chutes! Royce hadn't stooped to examine his. He was taking even chances with Shaw. And Shaw knew it! He had to go on with it—a toss-up for death!

And Shaw had lost the gamble!

“There he was, zipping straight down, the useless chute flicking after him, the idol of millions. Now, a freely falling body goes downward sixteen feet the first second, thirty-two feet the second second, and every second after that it goes twice as far than the second before. In an incredibly short time it is gathering an incredible speed, falling with a tremendous force. Every split second makes matters worse. But—

Though a freely falling body goes at a terrific rate, a plane driven by a motor can always go faster.

I saw Royce bob up in the cockpit of the twisting plane, and see the whole thing. Instantly the plane steadied, and wrenched out of the spin, but it kept nosing downward. Royce clamped on the gas, and the roar of his engine reached above even that of my own plane. Downward he drove that ship of his with all the power in its four hundred horsepower motor—and it went! Every passing second brought both the plane and the falling man closer to earth—but Royce speeded on, straight down.

Now Royce’s plane was close beside Shaw. Though both were traveling at a terrific rate, they did not move much in relation to each other. There was danger that Royce’s prop would slash Shaw—but only for an instant. Royce was jiggling around in the cockpit—and then he jumped.

Royce jumped!

Straight out into the air, leaving his plane on its way to hell, he leaped, his arms spread wide. His mark was a rather large one—the man, the trailing strings of the chute, the flapping cloth itself. One brief instant he groped, missing the strings—and then his fingers clutched the fabric of the chute. With maddened desperation he clung to it—and now both men were hurtling, head over heels, downward.

Royce pulled the ripcord of his own chute. *Flick!*—the pilot came out! With a report like a gun, the big span of cloth followed. Would the chute made for one man hold both of them? Would the fabric rip and send them both down as fast and faster than before? Would the shroud bear the strain? Royce could do nothing but hold on to Shaw’s useless contrivance with both hands, and wait.

The chute held.

Though with the heavy weight of both men upon it, it settled very fast, the chute held! And now Royce and Shaw were floating downward more slowly—with life still within their prayers.

Royce’s D.H. had hit the ground. It crackled into a mess of stuff, and at the same instant its gasoline

tank exploded with a terrific roar, scattering burning fragments to the four winds, and digging into the ground to make a deep crater.

Now Shaw touched the ground, and lay still; and now Royce hit it, and tumbled, and made a desperate and successful pull to spill his chute out. It collapsed—and they lay together, still and sick.

BEDLAM was loose on the field. I made no attempt to do anything but feel it. People swarmed around me—then I was attending to business. Markwitz, inhuman that he was, came racing toward me.

“Did you get it? Did you get pictures of it? Did you—?”

Inhuman that I was, I had got it. My grinding arm operates as an automatic reflex in me now. Though I was staring spellbound, I had kept turning the crank, and had shot the entire thing—even to the chute hitting the ground.

“I got every second of it!” I said.

“My God!” Markwitz was almost having a stroke. “My God, it was wonderful! Marvelous! It’s a million times better than what we wanted! My God! I’m going to rewrite the whole story to get another man in it—the man who saves Shaw! Oh, God, it was beautiful!”

I saw Royce now, moving weakly, and Dugan was upon him, shaking his hand. Dugan was saying nothing, and that was the highest tribute he could pay to anybody.

Royce didn’t know what to do. He knew that he’d have to tell the straight of that doctored chute, before long, and it wouldn’t be a nice job. He must have been thinking about that as Shaw himself, white to the gills, came sheepishly toward him.

“Kid,” he said, “damn it—thank you!”

“Don’t mention it,” said Royce.

Shaw put out his hand, and Royce took it.

“Shaw,” said Royce calmly, “in one second I’m going to hit you.”

*Pow!* His fist drove out and caught Shaw on the chin. Shaw flopped backward and lay still—. Hero of a thousand film fights, mightiest of the screen’s valiant men, he-man without a peer, he went down with a much deserved and long-overdue crack on the chin such as he had never had before!

Mollie saw Royce knock out the mighty man, and impulsively she flung her arms around him.

“Nicky! You’re my hero!”

Royce was more matter-of-fact about it.

“Gosh, Mollie,” he said, “I hate that guy!”