



HALF-WAY TO HEAVEN

by FREDERICK C. DAVIS

"The shots are there. Get 'em!"—That was all he said—but it sent Nick Royce, kid flyer of the news-reel, lumbering into the mile-high clouds to face the rage of the elements and the treachery of a rival.

ZING!
Gord Dugan never heard the telephone bell. He was talking like a Liberty on full throttle, and the bell didn't stand any more chance than a nightingale in the testing room of a snare drum factory. He chopped back and forth across the office, smacked his hands together, chewed a Perfecto to tatters, and roared:

"Art, I can't tell you and the boys often enough that we're running into dangerous competition—and when I say dangerous, I mean *dangerous*. The Compass outfit is going to stop at nothing to beat us out of the news-reel game—absolutely nothing. They're not only business rivals of ours; they're deadly enemies. And the time isn't very far off when there's going to be a fight to a finish between us!"

Zing!

This tirade was directed principally at me, Art Buckley, super of the flying division of the weekly World News

Reel, and head crank-turner. Mr. Gordon Dugan, being Chief Editor of the reel, had more duties to perform than the Puritan fathers ever thought of, and he drove through the welter of work like a maniac. Not that Dugan could be blamed for that. He couldn't have slowed down and kept his scalp; the game went at terrific speed. Whenever Dugan left his office in Times Square and took time to come way out to our T on Long Island to roar at us, it was because the Compass outfit was driving him to it.

"Look what they've done to us already!" he thundered on. "Soon as we began scooping them, they began their dirty work. They've been low enough to tamper with our cameras and our planes. They put one of our best men in the hospital for a week. They've done their best to cripple us—and they mean to do it yet!"

Zing!

"Now, listen, boys," Dugan went on, calming a little and turning persuasive. "I've told you about the deal that Tip-Top is going to put through soon. They're

going to buy up one of the independent news reels and add it to their releases; and since they're the biggest makers and distributors in the flicker business, the reel they buy will become the greatest reel in the world. You know that they're weighing the Compass outfit and our own outfit in the balance right now. We've got to land that deal for ourselves—got to!

"It's not only because it'll put us on velvet the rest of our lives—it is because, if they *don't* buy us, we're done for! Yes, sir, done for. Once Tip-Top begins releasing their own news features, the rest of the tribe might as well fold up their cameras and silently steal away. Nobody could stand the competition. If we land with Tip-Top, it won't be long before every other reel is a has-been; but if we *don't* land with 'em, if Compass beats us out, we're through. If Compass beats us out, we're through—hear that? Through!"

Zing!

This time I reached for that phone. I listened a minute while Dugan barked at me: "Who's that?"

"Smythe." Which gentleman was Dugan's chief assistant, a news hound that could scent a break nine miles off. He was calling from the Times Square office, and his voice was husky with excitement. Something was in the air.

"Lemme have it!" Dugan said, after snatching the phone out of my hands and clamping the receiver to his ear. The last of his Perfecto disappeared as he listened, and I turned to look the boys over and see how they were reacting to Dugan's oration.

The whole flying department of the Reel was right there in that little shack. Jim White was the other cameraman besides myself; Tom Thurber and Rex Dillon were pilots, and Rolf Flynn, the noted stunter, was what might be called pilot extraordinary for us. They were all fidgeting. There was a young chap right beside me, however, whose face was as serious and sad as though he owned the whole outfit—whereas, as a matter of fact, he was our newest man.

Nick Royce is the boy that I've already been ground flying about. He always reminds me somewhat of Lindy; he was thin and sharp as a needle, tall and dangly, and boyish. How this young chap got into our Reel, and how he proved his flying ability as well as his wholesome courage, are all stories in themselves. Suffice it to say that, through sheer determination and cool daring, he had, in a few months, made himself one of the most valuable flyers on the squad. It went without saying that Nick Royce was always ready to do his best to keep the Reel on the screens.

Clash!

That was the receiver going back on the hook. Dugan turned away from the phone, sticking another Perfecto into his teeth and glaring at us.

"Art, here's a break. Smythe just got tipped off by Wilson, over on the *Moon*. You know the big Cordoy dam that was put across the Blue River couple years ago? Remember there was a contractor's scandal about it—cheating on the cement and such? Well, right now the dam's busting, three towns below it are pulling out, lock, stock and barrel, to escape the flood that is sure to come when the last of the dam goes. Thousands of homes left empty—thousands of families carrying their belongings to the hills!"

Dugan was already talking in subtitles, visualizing the film on the screen!

"Wonderful stuff! And the dam hasn't gone yet. It has just cracked, and lost part of the spillway lip. The rest is due soon. We've got to get out there and get pictures of that dam when it goes. When the waters flood those towns, we've got to be there and get the stuff. And if we do—oh, man! It'll be a knock-out!"

"And if we don't—" Dugan's face grew long. "We're not going to talk about that. There's not a minute to lose. I want to say once more that matters are shaping up to make or break us—make or break us. And whichever we get—it's up to you boys!"

"Chief," I said, "we're off. Who's going to pilot me out to that dam?"

"Flynn, you take Art," Dugan ordered. "And keep your eyes peeled for a Compass plane. Don't let 'em hog the scenery. One of their ships is taking off about now—Smythe says they've been tipped off too. We've got to beat 'em. Boys, hop to it!"

We proceeded to hop. Rolf Flynn dived out of the office and ran toward the hangars. I turned to my locker and brought out my trusty old film-eatin' camera, and hustled outside with it. Our solitary greaseball was helping Flynn roll a big DeHaviland out of its shell, and while they chocked the wheels and let her roar in the warming process, I busied myself with mounting my machine in the rear cockpit. Then I hustled in and stored three rolls of fresh film in my blouse. As I stopped beside the plane and began to get into my parachute while Flynn, with Liberty idling, did likewise, we heard a little cry.

"Nick! Ni-icky!"

We looked around—and there was that little gray kitten of a girl named Mollie Sherwood, running across the sand, straight for Nick. Mollie was Nick's

girl, and no mental reservations. She had come all the way from the Middle West to see Nick Royce in honor of his landing his first flying job, and she had stayed on just to be near him. Adorable little bundle that she was, Nick was completely gone on her. Seeing her on the field made him shout for joy.

She went straight into his arms, and stayed there plenty long enough. Flynn and I, as we got the chutes on our backs, looked at each other and grinned.

"Gosh, Mollie!" said Nick. "I thought— isn't it time for your train?"

"Almost," she answered. "But, Nicky, I couldn't go 'way back there without seeing you again. It's such a long way. And it'll be so long before I see you again. I just had to come!"

And she kissed him again.

"Gosh, Mollie!" said Nick again. "I don't want you to go back at all. If I had enough money, you wouldn't go back. I wouldn't let you. We'd get an apartment here on Long Island and stay together forever. Hang it all—if I don't land a raise soon I'll take to bootlegging!"

"Nicky, darling," said the girl, "you know I'm ready to come to you whenever you're earning enough money. All you've got to say is 'Come,' and I'm on my way!"

"All I need is about a hundred dollars a month more!" Nicky declared solemnly. "I'll do my best to get it as soon as possible, Mollie. You wait—I'll be getting it pretty dam' soon."

"I know you will, Nicky!"

And so she kissed him again.

Rolf Flynn and me were busily trying to listen to something else, but we couldn't. This pair simply took our hearts away. With his parachute tight, Flynn looked at me quizzically, and grinned.

"Gosh, Art—I mean, Art, waiting to get married is no fun. I know. It's torture. There ought to be some way—"

Just then Gord Dugan came growling over and blurted at us:

"What the devil? Are you boys going out after news or mummies? Get going, you glue-boots!"

Right out of a clear sky, Flynn said, "Chief, please let Nick Royce take my place. No, don't explode. Listen. The boy needs more money. He wants to marry that girl. If they don't get married soon, they'll both die of it. There's no use killing a good flyer in such agony. You know that Nick Royce has done worlds for this film. It would be only just to raise him a hundred a month—that's what he needs. Sure, it's a lot of money, but once Tip-Top lands us, you'll forget it. Royce won't take a raise as charity, you know—but if you

send him out to get this dam busting business, and raise him for it, it'll mean the whole world to him."

Dugan glanced at Royce and the girl and grinned. Now, however tough Dugan is, he's fair. And no matter how he roars at us, he's quick to see his own advantage. He thought a minute.

"Flynn, I believe you're right. I haven't rewarded Nick as I should have, for what he's done for us. Get out of that 'chute while I talk to him. Nick! Nick Royce! Tear yourself away a minute and come 'ere, you young hawk!"

Royce came shuffling over.

"Nick, I want you, instead of Flynn, to take Art over to that dam. I'm going to depend on you to get it. Understand, it's big, but I want to give you the chance you deserve. If you want to make good with me, now is your time. If you bring back some good shots of that dam, I'll raise you twenty-five a week and give you a contract, see? But if you flub the assignment, Nick—you're through. Understand?"

"Gosh, Chief!" gasped Nick, pale as a cloud. "That's a tough proposition—but I'll do it!"

This Dugan is a wise old bird. He wasn't being any matrimonial agency for the fun of it. He didn't look a thing like Dan Cupid. His job was to get pictures of news events, and he didn't forget it for a minute. He was so desperate that he was willing to take any chance to beat out Compass. If any man on his force couldn't deliver—good-bye to that man! That was the tone of the proposition Nick Royce was facing!

Flynn could have got the shots easily, but it would have been routine to him. As Dugan put the matter up to Royce, it became of world-shaking importance to the boy; it gave him a chance to keep his girl. By making the assignment a life-or-death matter for the kid, Dugan was making himself that much surer of getting the shots. Dugan wasn't passing up any tricks in this game!

Nick turned to the girl, and she rushed to meet him. He breathlessly announced the news, and received in return a lavish number of kisses.

"Forget that train! Stay right here!" he gasped. "We're going to get married tomorrow!"

She gave him a big hug.

Nick slipped into the 'chute, jazzed the motor; and just as he signalled the blocks to be chocked, the girl called to him and he looked back. She put one foot on the step and reached up. A thin trickle of gold dangled from her fingers—a chain and locket. She had taken it off her neck. Now she put it around Nick Royce's. It hung against the leather of his jacket, looking dainty and sort of foolish, but somehow sweet.

"Take it along for luck, Nicky!"

It was just her way of helping him.

"Gosh, Mollie!" said Nick. "Ain't it pretty! I sure think the world of that! And it's going to do the trick!"

Then *zow!* Nick jammed on the gas, and that Liberty went crazy. We drove down the T like a whilwind. Gliding off, we spiralled steeply. We sailed up with all the joy and abandon of a wild bird let out of a cage.

Every time Nick Royce looked down and saw the little gray figure that was Mollie he waved, and she waved back. Then he looked again at that pretty little locket of hers and *zow!* the old D.H. almost stretched herself loose from her tail as we skimmed off westward.

Now Nick's face, as I caught glimpses of it, was as solemn as a monk's. Remember, the first time he ever took me up, he was then flying his head off to get a job. Now he was flying wild to keep it—but flying also for something tremendously more important. He was flying for his girl! Which is to say, he was flying to win a whole world of happiness, and he meant to get her if he died in the attempt!

The airspeed indicator, when I peeked at it, was registering over two hundred miles an hour. The Liberty's power was at its highest, and we were leaving a wake of oil fumes behind us like the smoke of an ocean liner. We unreeled miles as though they were city blocks. We simply squandered distance that day. Nick Royce kept his eyes glued to the dial; except when, now and then, he glanced down at that locket.

That dainty little thing had a worth, to him, far above gold and rubies. It was a symbol of Mollie's trust in him. It spoke of her love. Again and again his eyes strayed to it as we flew.

A river began to uncurl below us, and we knew it was the Blue. It ran along a deep wrinkle in the earth, twisted around hills, and began cutting deep. Also, it began to widen into a lake, artificially formed by reason of the dam that lay below. We skimmed straight across it; and the farther end of that dab of water looked like it had been trimmed off with a scissors; and that was the dam.

When the lake had come into sight, I'd begun turning my crank. Getting that crank around itself is a reflection with me, like breathing. I grab the handle, and my arm turns it automatically, twice a second. I made sure of my stop, and shot downward. Nick, understanding what I was doing, swung wide and let me get a splendid panoramic. Then we zipped higher, banked vertically, and began coming along in line with the spillway. And I kept grinding.

It was plain as day that the dam was doomed. One great chunk had already fallen away, like a decayed tooth, and lay below, with water spilling over it from the wedge-shaped hole it had left. Water was pouring out of it, and the sides of the wound enlarged now and then as additional lumps broke away. Besides that, other cracks were leaking, and the whole dam was bulging outward. At any time that store of water would burst loose, go roaring down the valley and deluge it with destruction and death.

Zippering across the spillway, I got magnificent shots of it. Nick Royce banked again, and came back, this time more slowly. I swear some of the spray got on the lens, and I had to wipe it! Back we came again, like a shuttle, but this time swerving out for a flat shot. Wonderful! I signalled to Nick, and we steamed on.

Deadheading down the valley, he cut the gun and called back to me.

"See any signs of a Compass plane. Art?"

"Not yet. Keep going, Nick, but not too far. We've got to get that dam when it breaks, or Dugan will scalp us both. Now, get over those tree towns down there, and then take me back over the hills. We've got to get plenty of shots of refugees. Then we've got to get back at that dam. Maybe we can risk a landing, and wait—but we'll see about that later."

"Are you getting good stuff?" Nick asked anxiously.

"Nothing to endanger the wedding bells!" I sang back. "I can hear 'em ringing now!"

Nick grinned as the Liberty roared again, and we steamed down the last of the valley. On both sides of a little trickle of water, enlarging now, were towns. We swept low, and I covered the places with my camera. Since nothing was happening there yet, we plowed on. The old ark sang a pretty song as we followed a highway into the hills.

There automobiles were jamming the roads, all going one way, and buggies, and plenty of people afoot, lugging bundles of bedding. Furniture was left by the way, thrown off cars in desperation. Live stock was being herded by frantic farmers. A bus-load of children had broken down, and other cars were stopping to load on a few here and there. On the hilltops were clusters of frightened refugees, desperate and waiting, some rushing about searching for loved ones. They looked up at us pitifully, as though we might be some sort of god that could make the dam hold. All we could do was fly and grind out film.

As we banked toward the towns, I saw a surge of water coming down the valley. We swooped low over

the towns again, caught the first rise of the water over the river banks, and stuck until a stream was flowing through the streets. Then we zipped up the course of the stream, fast as we could go, while I fed in a fresh cartridge and hoped to Heaven that the dam would hold until we got there.

I was grinding again when we steamed close, and as another great break came in the walls. The torrential rush of water, due to heavy rains upcountry, was too much for the defective structure. Each break made matters worse. We circled it while I ground away for dear life, and caught views of two boulders as they dropped off. We glided and cut the gun for a conference.

"Stay right here, Nick!" I shouted. "That dam is going to break any minute now!"

"I'm staying!" he called back. "What's that plane coming down over the lake? Is it a Compass ship?"

It was! Lettered on the side of it was that hated name. We had beaten them to the hunting grounds—but now they were crowding in on the finest stuff! Nick knew enough to keep them out of our shots. With the motor blasting again, we drove on, back and forth. The Compass plane glided close, then went on. Two helmeted heads looked toward us, the camera looking like a machine gun ready to drop us. When the Compass plane was a mile away—

Boom!

The dam broke. With a roar that shook the heavens, thousands of tons of concrete dropped into the valley, and billions of gallons of water, like shouting liquid demons let out of hell, splashed down over. The rush was terrific. The spray rose like the mist of Niagara. The waters tore and milled. And I ground and ground with my lungs shut and my eyes popping!

We dived low over the boiling torrent, and then drove down the valley on its tail. The water piled into every crevice, leaped up the banks, rushed like a mad mob through the streets of the towns. We followed it through the main thoroughfares, along the roads. We caught shots of autos abandoned in its wake, cows struggling out of it. We shot it as it rose around the hills, making islands of them. We kept grinding and shuttling back and forth until my arm was ready to twist off.

At last I tapped Royce's shoulder.

"Marvelous work, Nick. We've got to stop. I've not got an inch of film left."

"And I'm cocking on the emergency gas tank right now," Nick said. "Us for the nearest field!"

As we banked back, taking it easy, we saw that the waters were already beginning to abate. There was plenty of outlet for it, and the deluge would last only a few hours. But it was plenty bad while it lasted—and while it lasted, we had shot it! I told myself right then and there that there *is* a Santy Claus.

As we zipped lower, we saw the Compass plane again. It was whipping here and there. It seemed to have gone crazy in its attempts to get everything. We let it alone.

We were running on almost the last squirt of gas when we found a flying field farther east, and cut down to it. I don't know yet what field it was. 'T wasn't mattering right then. We sailed down. I went about the business of registering and looking us over while Nick supervised the servicing of the ship. And as it was being filled, down came the Compass plane, and trundled to a stop right beside us.

The two men jumped out. The pilot went about gassing the ship, and the cameraman, slipping off his goggles and helmet, came over to give us a collection of dirty looks.

"You must Art Buckley," he said. "And you must be Dave Canning," I answered back, the gent of that name being Compass' chief film-eater. He admitted the charge with a grunt, and eyed me a little sidewise for a minute.

"Got some good stuff?"

"None better. From what I saw, you boys were just a bit late," I remarked. "Too bad. The Compass reel would be fairly decent if only it got a little more news stuff into it."

"Yeah?" drawled Canning, with an ugly glint in his eyes. "Remember this, Buckley—Compass is taking second place to nobody. We're going to beat you into a froth on this deal."

With that he turned and climbed back into the plane and the pilot likewise. Having had more gas in the tank than we, they got an earlier take-off. They climbed into the sky steeply, and then crabbed off in the general direction of New York. It was some minutes later when Nick capped the gas tank and signalled to me. As I legged in, holding my precious cartridges of exposed film close, I said:

"Tromp on her, Nick. We've waltzed circles around Compass this time, but we've got to beat them on time likewise. If we do, Dugan will give everybody in the outfit double salary"

The Liberty thundered again, we trundled away, zipped up, climbed without Circling, and began to deadhead back.

And I began to feel happy. In my time I have brought home some good news shots, but never anything as good as this dam burst. Having been right on hand when the big break came, having got a whole and graphic story of it,

I congratulated myself on having pulled in the biggest news stuff that ever went through a camera.

And Nick Royce. That boy wasn't very gloomy right then, either. We'd got the stuff. And he was going to get his raise and his girl. S' help me! He steamed back toward Long Island like a streak of light.

We drove across fields; and as we did so, we caught sight of a plane down against the green. We stared, and saw it was the Compass plane. Looking closer, we saw that it was setting cockeyed—one of the trucks in a gully, and the whole ship tilted. And, as we slowed down, we saw that a man was lying on the grass, face up, stretched out, motionless. Another man, seeing us, was running back and forth, waving his arms.

Nick circled curiously, and drove a bit lower. Sure enough, the plane was woozy, the man on the ground looked dead, and the other one was about crazy, trying to get us to come down.

"Something is sure wrong there," Nick called back to me, cutting the gun. "They must have had a forced landing, and hit that hole. Somebody looks hurt bad. Art, what'll we do?"

We had films to deliver, and it was our business to deliver 'em; and yet we couldn't let it be said of us that we passed up other flyers in distress, and refused to give aid.

"We'd better go down there!" I answered. "They're crippled, and we'll beat 'em with the shots anyway. Maybe we can send 'em help from the next field we pass."

Nick Royce accordingly left the D.H. mush out into a glide, and he circled the field, looking for a landing. Having decided that the ground on the other side of the cut was smooth, he stepped down to it. With the juice off we coasted down, bounced once or twice, then jolted to a stop not far away. We both jumped out and ran toward the other plane.

Jumping the furrow in the ground, we came closer. The chap that was stretched put had ugly red all over his forehead. The other one was waiting for us, And as we shouted, "What happened?" he only stared.

"Is he dead?"

We stared at the man on the ground; but as we did so, he moved. The other one, Clanning, stepped closer—and pointed a gigantic automatic into our faces.

"Wait a minute!" he said.

We stopped short. The man on the ground got up, looking live enough to want to kill again. I suspected that that stuff on his forehead was only sediment from the pink gas, rubbed off the carbureter. He wasn't hurt at all. Instinctively, I glanced past him at the other ship, a Curtiss, and saw that it wasn't apparently injured in the slightest.

"What in hell is this?" I demanded.

"Thanks for dropping in," remarked Clanning with an ugly grin. "Did you bring your reels along? If so, just hand 'em over!"

Everything was clear in one big, bright, dazzling flash. This was a trick—trick! Its purpose, of course, was only to get us out of the sky and within reach. Clanning wanted our films for the Compass outfit—and that deadly automatic of his looked like he intended to get them!

"Hand 'em over, Buckley!" Clanning snapped. "I mean business! If you don't want a bullet in your guts, hand those reels over!"

Beside me Nick Royce was as pale as death. He whispered to me: "Don't give 'em up, Art. I'll fight 'em!"

A bit too determined, Nick Royce was. A fight would have ended with two ballets, one in him and one in me. I knew that from the killer's light in Clanning's eyes. The gun kept straight at me.

"Get those reels out of Buckley's jacket, Sam," Clanning bade the other. "Try to fight, either of you, and you're goners. Nobody'll hear any shots way out here—and nobody'll be able to pin the killings on us!"

Stiff with anger, I stood by. The fiend called Sam stepped up and pulled the reels out of my jacket! Then he tossed them into the pit of the Curtiss two-seater; and Clanning issued further orders. S' help me if he didn't force Nick Royce and me to help roll that plane out of the cut, and tail her around. Then, with the engine idling, the guy called Sam went over and ducked into the fore cockpit of our D.H. When he rose up he was carrying with him—the stick!

He had loosened it from its socket by drawing the pin that held it.

"Just so you won't trail us," said Clanning—and tossed the stick into the Curtiss.

They piled into the plane. That gun kept steadily at us as the motor roared. Then the Curtiss jolted and wrenched across the field, bounced off, and spiralled up. In a minute it was steaming across the sky—with our precious films, while we helplessly watched it go.

"Hang you!" Nick Royce roared at them.

I was too flabbergasted to do anything, but Royce didn't waste a minute. In a flash he realized what this meant. If we came without films, it meant the loss of his dearest opportunity—failure in the eyes of Dugan—failure in the eyes of Miss Mollie Sherwood! And with that in mind, Nick Royce was fighting mad.

"We're not beat yet!"

He scrambled across the ground and into a thicket of saplings. For a moment it looked like he was fighting the whole bunch of little trees; and then he came romping back with a vanquished one in his hand. He broke it off as he ran to the approximate length of the missing stick, and almost leaped into the fore cubby.

"Contact!" he yelled at me.

I spun the prop. The motor roared. I jumped in beside my camera. Then the gas shot on—and we trundled away. All at once, the plane lifted. By inserting that length of sapling in the stick socket, Nick Royce was able to manipulate the controls! And we were in the air again—but for what particular purpose I didn't at first realize. As the plane drove on at the very limit of its power, I knew that Nick Royce was trailing the Curtiss.

The wires shrieked; the struts chattered; the motor thundered. In front of us the Curtiss was deadheading. We drove after it madly. The Liberty blasted out a terrific roar. The Curtiss swam closer. The old De Haviland was outriding it. In a moment we were slowing, dragging alongside it.

Then began a few minutes of antics such as few landsmen ever witness. The Curtiss dived; Nick followed. It zoomed; Nick rode its tail. It banked; Nick swerved around to meet it when it levelled. He streamed on; Nick tagged it. It was only a few moments before the Curtiss pilot realized that we could fly rings around him, whatever he did. Then he let up, and we kept him just off the port wing.

The planes bobbed along side by side. Dave Clanning whipped out his automatic, pulled the trigger three times, and sent three slugs parading across the sky, right between Nick Royce and me. That was meant to scare us, and it did scare me, but Nick wasn't scaring any that afternoon. He kept steadily beside them, prepared to ride them down. And now the Curtiss gave itself up to speeding straight ahead, bound for their home field. And Nick and I both realized that, once they reached it, we would be outnumbered and licked—unable to prove a thing

against Canning, and, if we kicked up a fuss, liable to see the inside of a jail.

Nick signalled to me. "Get into the fore pit with me," his gesture said. This involved my legging up into the back-blast. The wind tore at me like a fiend trying to throw me off the plane; and when I finally wedged myself into the front cubby beside Royce, the air was drained from my lungs, my heart was clogging my throat, and all I could do was listen as Nick shouted in my ear:

"Art, we're going to get our films back! I'm going down there and get 'em. Take the controls!"

Now I've spent years around a flying field, and I've acquired a flying sense. I've also absorbed the knack of handling a plane. Some of the boys on the Reel had given me some instruction in controlling, and I'd even waltzed a plane around enough to be able to say I'd had a couple of hours to my credit. But I'm no registered pilot, and I wasn't then. Therefore, when Nick Royce asked me to take the controls of that D.H., I considered that he was requesting quite a lot!

Being as grimly determined as Royce was to get those reels back, I obeyed orders. I wriggled down and set my feet and hands. Royce was wadded beside me, and kept the plane going under his own fingers and feet for a time. He shot the plane upward, and placed it so that one wing was directly over the spine of the Curtiss.

The two planes were weaving close. A bump would have crashed them together, perhaps locked them and sent them falling to the earth—death-traps. But it was my business now to keep the planes very close and still not touching, according to the orders Royce bellowed in my ear. Then he wrenched himself up and threw one leg over the pit.

Pulling out of it, he wriggled along the wing. I compensated. Out farther went Nick Royce, with the earth floating thousands of feet below him. And Royce was preparing to change from one plane to the other.

The men below, not being able to see Royce, did not suspect what was happening. Since we could ride them down, anyway they tried, they were simply flying along and ignoring us, gloating in the fact that possession of those films was nine points of the law, and when they got down they could report us for breaking flying rules.

Out of the wing Royce pushed one leg off; then pulled it back. He came to his knees, looking bothered. Holding onto the struts first with one hand and then the other, he began to shake off his parachute. He'd

decided it was too cumbersome to carry along—its weight might make him miss his step. True, in such a case it would have saved him, but Royce was determined to get into that other plane. With the chute off, he dropped it far behind—and then began to slip off the wing again.

He signalled me to drop. I pushed on that length of sapling. Down we slid. Royce grabbed the strut in both hands and began dangling. Thousands of feet below him the world was bobbing. The Curtiss edged away from him—and only air was below Royce! Then the other plane came back, as I weaved closer—and Nick Royce dropped off.

He spread flat on the upper wing, and stuck there like a postage stamp. I zoomed. Slowing up, I looked down. Nick Royce wriggled toward center. Then he swung down, and dropped into the rear pit of the Curtiss, like an angel off a cloud—except that he hadn't an angel's sweetness at that minute!

Pow!

Royce sent out a fist that caught the side of Clanning's head. Clanning fought back, stupefied with surprise. And there they were, locked in each other's arms, teetering this way and that, thousands of feet up.

Nick's next blow almost knocked Clanning out of the pit. His strength was that of a madman. Again he wrestled with Clanning. Far over the cowlings they bent. Then Nick's fist shot out, and pushed Clanning over.

Clanning turned head over heels as he fell. Twice he turned. Staring over the cowlings, Nick watched him zip toward earth and death. Then Clanning's hand moved. He pulled the rip-cord. *Flip!* the little pilot chute came out, and then *Pop!* the big one bloomed like a flower in the air. And then Clanning went floating down, no longer in danger, but out of the game!

In desperation Sam, the pilot, jumped up, leaving his controls, and grabbed Nick. The automatic was flashing again. Nick dodged Sam Pilot's fist and answered with another. Then Nick grabbed the automatic, and wrenched it away.

The ship had nosed down. As I saw Sam Pilot turning again to the controls, the Curtiss was screwing downward, straight downward, at a terrific speed. Below, and not far below now, was the earth, for the plane had been losing altitude rapidly during the ruckus. The plane was headed straight for the woods when it began to ease out of the spin. It swooped low—lower—then finally curved to somewhat of a level—but too late!

The undercarriage scraped the trees. Audible even

above the thunder of both motors was the snap and crackle of the departing trucks. The Curtiss for a moment looked as though it was going to dive into the branches, but it wobbled, struggled, and then flew up again. But it rose without its trucks.

Its landing gear was left in the tree-tops!

Nick Royce and Sam Pilot knew what had happened. And it was a serious matter. Wheels are rather necessary to land a plane on. Without them there is apt to be some unpleasantness in the way of crumpled wings, splintered propeller, an explosion of the gas tank; and both men in the plane are apt to die with a twelve-cylinder motor crushing the life out of them. Only for a moment did Nick Royce hesitate; then he used the automatic to force Sam Pilot out of the pit.

Royce settled down to the controls, and Sam clambered back. He demonstrated that he didn't like the situation by getting out of it. He poised on the cowlings, then jumped far out. And ten counts down he pulled the rip-cord of his chute, and *Flip! Pop!* he also was floating downward to safety and a good supper.

Nick Royce was left controlling a plane that was not a bad ship in the air; but when it touched the earth, as it would be forced to do sooner or later—*crash!*

Now, personally, I was having my own troubles. As I have said, I'd plucked me a little flying experience in my time. And I was grabbing myself plenty more these few minutes. But I wish to state that not once in my life had I made a landing. I had always turned the ship over to my instructor when the ground got close. The very sight of the earth rising up to hit me in the face gave me a muscle-tightening fright. Yet, here I was in my own plane, facing the problem of getting it to earth. If the truth be known, I was mortally sure that Nick Royce could land his truckless plane in fewer pieces than I could land mine!

Both Nick and I flew as sanely as possible for a few minutes, getting our wind. Just to be neighborly, I crabbed over in his direction. Looking down on Nick, I saw him staring around, acting puzzled, and seeming to have a little trouble. But I forgot that when he reached down, picked up those three reels of mine and, one by one, stuffed them into his pockets.

Bless the boy! He'd got 'em back! Now if we could only get to earth without murdering ourselves!

Nick waved at me, cut the gun, and, taking the hint, I did likewise.

"Listen, Nick!" I shouted. "Let that plane go to smash. I'll throw you my parachute. Grab it when it comes by, and jump!"

He shouted back at me, but I cut the gun back on, and began getting out of my chute. Clamping the controls when I eased over the Curtiss, I held the chute over the side of the plane, and signalled for Nick to come closer. He eased up, and when the plane was directly under me, I let the bundle drop.

Down it shot. Nick reached out for it, and it shot through his hands. *Through!* I stared at it foolishly as it streaked toward earth. It struck, bounced, and that was all. Our last chute was gone! The smashes—and the morgue—were closer to us than ever before!

Nick again cut the gun, and I did, too.

“Keep her steady, Art!” Nick yelled up at me. “I’m coming back.”

“What?” I screeched.

“I’m coming back to that plane!”

“You fool! You’ll kill yourself! You’ll fall and get those films all bloody! You’ll do no such thing, you lunatic!”

“Art,” Nick shouts back, “can you land that plane without smashing it?”

“Of course!” I retorted.

“All right—I’m coming back to that ship. Hold her steady!”

And up came Royce in that Curtiss. In my personal opinion, Royce’s coming back to the DeHaviland was the maddest thing I’d ever heard of. It was inviting death once too often. One plane change a day should be enough for any man, even Nick Royce. Of course, if Royce did get back, and did take the controls again, it meant that I could go on living, which otherwise was very doubtful—but still, the idea was plain crazy. Yet Royce came on.

He eased behind me, and then directly over and to the left of me. He was able to ease closer this time because of the missing trucks. He set the controls so that the Curtiss flew along self-stabilized, and then made compensation for his future position on the wing. Those little arrangements made, he began crawling rapidly out on the wing.

Fascinated, I couldn’t tear my eyes off him. The planes weaved close. The Curtiss was tipping. Nick Royce groped out toward the farthest struts of the D.H.—groped—and missed! For one instant he was teetering on the end of that dropping wing—death waiting for him below. And then I weaved the plane close again; he grabbed out; and swung on.

Holy Word!

I jerked the plane up, to allow for Nick’s weight out so far. He clambered in. He settled beside me, grabbed the stick, and set his feet on the controls.

The Curtiss was turning around, wing over wing, and beginning to spin. Down it went in big spirals, heading for a corn field. Then it struck, and disappeared in an explosion of orange flame.

I looked at Royce, sick as a dog; and Royce, doggone him, was grinning, happy as a lark. Which, almost, he was!

WHEN we trundled to a stop on our field, I staggered out. Royce put the three reels in my hand and remarked calmly:

“Here’s the shots, Art!”

I ran toward the crowd that was coming, and turned back, beside Dugan, as they hurried on. I talked as fast as a machine gun. Dugan chewed savagely on his Perfecto as I told the story. He doubted my sanity, but I kept on. And then a wail broke out.

“Ni-icky!”

Mollie had stopped in her tracks. Royce was all collapsed in the fore pit.

“Get that boy out of there, Flynn!” I yelled. “He’s gone and conked out!” Flynn dug in to get Nick, and Nick, in a manner entirely unbecoming to an unconscious man, raised up and pushed him in the face.

“Leggo me!” he said.

Then he saw Mollie and jumped out. She wrapped her arms around him. Dugan strode up, thundering.

“Nick, hang you, do you realize that you took fearful chances? You might have fallen. What was the sense of trying to get back into the D.H.? Even in that other plane you had a better chance of living. Why?”

“Aw, Art would have got smashed up, prob’ly,” Nick Royce answered. “But the real reason is—why, when I was getting out of the D.H. the first time the chain broke on the locket that Mollie gave me. It dropped down in the pit. When I was handling the Curtiss I missed it. I knew that if Art smashed, I’d never find it again—”

He dangled the little thread of gold on his fingers.

“So I had to come back, wouldn’t ’ve lost it for the world!”

So Mollie kissed him.

Now, can you bend all that?

About a week later Nick Royce came back from his honeymoon, and I asked him:

“Well, Nick, how’s the wife?”

And he said: “Go-osh!”