



FLYING FIRE

by **FREDERICK C. DAVIS**

It was his job! But when the fallen eagles called, Nick Royce, flyer, placed the unwritten law of the air above the demands of reel rivalry!

THINGS HAVE CERTAINLY SLOWED down in this news-reel game," I said, and just then *zing!* went the telephone. As I picked it up, I had a hunch that I would soon eat those words! When the voice of Bert Smythe came rasping over the wire, I was sure of it. Smythe was the super-pressure assistant editor of our weekly World News Reel.

"Buckley!" he grated. "Buckley, lemme talk with Dugan, and make it snappy!"

"Dugan's not here," I answered. "Want to leave a message?"

"What? He's not there yet? Why, he started over first thing this morning. When he shows up, Buckley, have him call me—quick!"

"O.K., Smythe. Anything breaking?"

"You bet!" Smythe barked back. "Buckley, you're due to get into the air as fast as you can make it. I phoned you yesterday that the big balloon race was postponed. Well, the weather has suddenly cleared up enough to let it come off as scheduled. This is a big thing—in the papers all over the country. There'll be one of our men on the ground to help fill out the stuff you get, but the air shots will be the only ones worth looking at. Get going, Buckley! And be sure that Dugan calls me—quick!"

Clash! and Smythe was through talking.

In the office with me just then were Nick Royce, his brother Bill Royce, and Jim White. The Royce boys were pilots, and Jim White was the other cameraman besides myself. Nick Royce—he's the boy to keep an eye on. I've already spun several yarns about that young fellow. He was tall and thin, like Lindy, quiet as a bashful girl, but what he couldn't do with an airplane just wasn't possible. When I turned around with news of the break, he looked as he always does when a break comes—ready to do his all-mighty best for the Reel.

"Nick, get a plane out. We've got the balloon job back again—a flit over to the other end of Pennsylvania. The take-off is scheduled for two o'clock, and we'll have to hump it to get there."

Nick Royce was out of the office before I was through talking. His brother Bill followed him, to help warm the motor of one of the DeHavilands. Meanwhile I rustled my camera out of the locker and started threading a cartridge of film through it.

"This is a promising break, Jim," I remarked to White. "In these days of three-hundred-mile-an-hour airplanes, the great American public has just about forgotten there's such a thing as balloons. It's hot news, too, this race."

Our Reel, you know, was a celluloid newspaper, only it was more than a newspaper. When the dailies became standardized they lost their romance, but the news-reel has got plenty of that! Especially the flying division! Instead of a reporter with a note pad, we send out an airplane carrying a man with a camera and a pilot. There is plenty of danger in the proceedings, and plenty of speed. And when a rival concern is racing you to the laboratories, when the first stuff through gets the booking on Broadway—it makes us hop!

In front of the hangars, Nick and Bill Royce had dragged out a plane. Its motor coughed and choked as Nick labored to get the engine warm. With my camera threaded, I hurried out as the motor began to roar. The propeller kicked up a backwash of sand as I legged into the rear pit and mounted my camera there. While Royce slid the throttle open little by little I looked up and saw a blue roadster ease to a stop beside the last hangar. Gord Dugan hopped out of it and began striding toward us.

I jumped down, grabbed his arm, and pulled him inside, away from the thundering motor, where we could talk.

"We're going out to get the balloon race, Dugan," I explained. "The weather's cleared, and it's going to be held as scheduled. We'll have to fly like blazes to get the start of it. Smythe just phoned—he wants you to call him—quick!"

Mr. Gordan Dugan had a habit of doing everything just like that—quick. He was editor-in-chief of the Reel, and his job involved enough work to run three men ragged. Dugan had his heart all wrapped up with World News film; his passion was to make our Reel the greatest in the world. It was small wonder that he roared and raved when things went wrong. The competition that he was forced to fight would have

driven another man crazy. He drove us like slaves because he deeply believed that on us, the flying division, depended the Reel's whole salvation. Dugan was a hard man—good and hard—but good *because* he was hard.

Dugan nervously stuck a perfecto into his teeth as he put through the call to the office in Times Square. Getting Smythe on the wire, he listened while his eyes gleamed. His grip on the phone tightened until his knuckles went white. He bit into his cigar again and again. Then he put down the phone with a clash.

"Blast Compass!" he exploded.

Compass, or the Compass News Weekly, you must know, was our bitterest rival in the game. We had never known the day when we weren't battling Compass, trying to beat them to the screen with our shots, trying to make our releases better and fresher than theirs. The Compass outfit was bigger, somewhat older, and quite a lot richer than we were. It had wiped out two smaller reels that had ventured to buck it. Now it was concentrating all its fighting ability on us.

"Blast Compass!"

"What's wrong now, Chief? Some more of their dirty work?"

Dugan took a new bite into the cigar, "Buckley, I want you to understand, and everybody on this field to understand, that matters have come to a final showdown between Compass and us. We're facing a tougher situation than we've ever known before. We're in serious danger of going out of existence altogether!"

"Chief—you mean that Compass is getting the best of us in the Tip-Top deal?"

"They are, Buckley, they are—!"

For months' Dugan had been whipping us into a frenzy of action in order to prove to the big-Tip-Top corporation that we were the best independent reel in existence. The Tip-Top people had decided to add a news-reel to their releases and, instead of organizing a reel of their own, they had decided to buy up one of the independents in the game. They had looked us all over, and we knew that their choice had boiled down to a toss-up between us and Compass.

Whichever reel landed the big deal was sure to become the greatest and best-known news-reel in the world. There wasn't any doubt of that! The reel would go, along with the super-features, into every Tip-Top theatre on the globe. And, on the other hand, the outfit that failed to land the deal would simply pass out of existence. Competition would be impossible; there would be too few openings for the independents; they

wouldn't be able to earn their bread and butter—rather, they couldn't keep themselves in film!

That was what we were facing. Oblivion or the greatest prosperity! Dugan had been driving himself and us into a set of nervous breakdowns, trying to win.

"Lord, Dugan!" I protested. "How can Tip-Top consider doing business with such a bunch of crooks as the Compass outfit? They've bribed our men, and tampered with our planes, and ruined our cameras, and made underhanded plays right and left. Besides that we've scooped them plenty!"

"That's the deuce of it. We've played the game square, and we get no credit for it. The Tip-Top people are getting ready to close the deal with Compass any day now. Tip-Top favors them because they've got newer equipment and more of it"

Just then Nick Royce pushed open the door, wide-eyed and impatient. "Art, the plane's ready to go!"

"Stay here, Art," Dugan ordered me. "Nick, tell Jim White to handle the camera on this job. You're piloting, are you? Listen, young fella. You'll probably find a Compass plane in the air when you're over the take-off field. For the love of Heaven, don't let 'em pull any more dirty tricks! Get the stuff, the best stuff you can, and get back here fast! It's one of the last chances we've got to beat Compass out. Now, move!"

"Yes, sir!" blurted Royce, and hastened away. We could hear him calling White, and then saw him climbing into the fore cubby, while White followed into the rear one. Royce jazzed the motor a few times, then let it idle, and his brother Bill kicked away the blocks. Through the window we could see the DeHaviland begin to trundle away as the motor gradually roared up. It lifted gently. Royce did not waste time circling. He gathered altitude as he deadheaded west; and in a few moments the plane was a mere speck in the sky.

"I can depend on that boy," Dugan said.

"You can. Chief, Tip-Top hasn't actually closed the deal with Compass, has it?"

"No, not yet. We've still got a chance to do our stuff—but a mighty little chance. I spent all of last evening talking with Robertson—he's president of the Tip-Top outfit, you know. He's a fine man—he's worked himself up through the industry, knows all the jobs from electrician to processing the film—but he can't be talked into a thing. He didn't say so, but I know that he'd rather buy Compass' equipment than our good name. I talked with him until past midnight—and accomplished exactly nothing.

"Smythe just phoned to tell me that Robertson was going over to the Compass field today to look over the works. He'd been tipped off. Robertson's probably over there now. That's the first significant step. A few more moves, and Compass will have the deal all sewed up."

"Dugan, we've done our best. Nick will bring back some good shots of the balloon race. It will be hot stuff, and if we get it into the theatres first, Tip-Top will have to admit that we're better and faster than Compass, with all their new equipment."

"I know, Art. Yes, you've done your bit. We've just played in hard luck. The balloon race will help us out a lot if we beat Compass to Broadway with our shots. But on the other hand, if we muff it, with Tip-Top watching us so closely, we're finished—through!"

"But hang it! Until Compass has those papers actually signed, Art, we're going to keep on fighting. And man, how we can fight!"

WHILE we talked Nick Royce flew.

He was handling the controls of his DeHaviland with a full realization of what he was about. It was of the utmost importance that he bring back to Dugan the best shots possible of the balloon race. And Nick Royce was determined to do his best to get them.

Jim White, in the rear pit, had set the stop of his machine, had fixed the focus, and had settled down to wait until the take-off field came into view. Jim's job was, of course, to turn the crank of that camera, and it was a very delicate job, too; but chiefly success depended on the pilot. It was Royce's job to get Jim to the scene and back, and to so handle the plane that Jim could get unobscured views—and that was a matter even more delicate.

Our T was on Long Island. Nick sent the DeHaviland climbing close to the ceiling as he flew across the Sound. The suburban towns of New York, fitting together like the squares of a checkerboard, slid past the plane. The wind was on the D.H.'s tail, and a little rough, but it was assisting its westward flight. The start of the balloon race was a town far into Pennsylvania, and the trip was not an easy one. Nick Royce eased the throttle open until it could open no farther.

The plane shivered; the wires whistled; the struts chattered; and the motor kept up a steady roar. The Hudson slid past very soon. The low, swampy regions of New Jersey didn't last long. In a short time Nick Royce was driving the plane across Pennsylvania. The ground became more rugged; it rose to meet the plane,

and Nick climbed higher. The territory below had, in a short while, lost its settled aspect. Once the cities were past in the eastern part of the state, the growing hills and the wooded slopes seemed surprisingly remote from civilization.

The foothills of the Alleghanies chop the ground into a great roughness, and the timber of the unsettled region grows thick. Except for cleared areas on each horizon, areas which were towns, the wildness was unbroken. The hills were lonely, standing as they had stood thousands of years previous. Wild life abounded in them. Railroad tracks wound into them and out again, tracing the only marks that man had left, visible from the sky. Here and there the tower of a forester's outlook stuck up from the timber. The rest was untouched.

For a surprisingly long time this topography continued. Then once more the ground flattened, towns became more numerous, and the work of men became general on the landscape.

Nick Royce flew by compass. He had selected the direct route to the take-off field of the balloon race. He judged that he should reach it in time for the start.

Several flying fields passed under the D.H. Royce's destination lay farther on, but only a few minutes' flying now.

He heard a drumming discord creep into the note of his motor's exhausts, and curiously looked around. Behind him he saw another plane, flying in the same direction. It was coming at a speed very close to its limit. It was a faster, more powerful ship than Royce's DeHaviland, and it crept up, closing the distance between them gradually. As it neared, Royce was able to read the large letters painted on its fuselage: Compass News.

Royce was powerless to match the Compass plane's speed, but he believed there was no necessity for doing so. He watched the plane slide up on them, reach a position very close to them. The cameraman in its rear pit waved, and Jim White returned the gesture. Then the plane began to skim ahead, slowly increasing its lead. Royce ignored it, kept his gaze on the dash, and found that he could reach the balloon take-off field in plenty of time.

The field, in fact, was almost visible now. Below, automobiles were crawling along the roads in file, all headed for that distant point. Other airplanes, members of a flying circus, were buzzing around the sky. The field swam closer. Cars were parked in great numbers all around it; a crowd like a colony of ants

was moving toward the gates of the flying field. On the field a dozen balloons were anchored, great, fat, black-balls, rolling in the wind, tugging at their cables. As the field began to slide under his left wing, Royce banked to the right Jim White turned his lens downward, and began grinding in his film.

Royce circled the field several times, allowing Jim to get some good footage of the balloons and the crowds, and then levelled off. Then he shuttled back and forth, waiting during the inevitable delay, for the balloons to cut loose. As he weaved he watched the Compass Plane. It was floating only a few hundred yards away when Royce heard its motor cough, spin again a moment, and then die.

The Compass plane mushed out into a glide. Its pilot bent to his dials. His motor would not catch again. The plane continued to dive, and the pilot circled, preparing to ease down to the field. A large space behind the hangars offered him a safe landing. The plane settled slowly, landed neatly, and trundled to a stop. The pilot hopped out and began fussing around the nacelle, in a frantic hurry. The engine trouble that had developed had come at a most inopportune time, for a moment later the first balloon of the group tugged loose and began reaching for the skies.

Once more Nick Royce shifted the ship so that Jim White could shoot the scene. The big black ball, bulging through its network, its basket swinging in the wind, darted upward, while White followed it with his lens. Royce drove in its direction; and, shooting the balloon with comparatively closeness, White was able to get the second take-off from the field. Royce shuttled back and was directly overhead when the third balloon jumped free. Then White signalled for Royce to go far to the rear. Turned back again, White shot a scene of four balloons in the air, while a fifth and sixth rose to join them. Finally, after a wait, White ground in the last of his footage on the entire twelve balloons drifting into the western sky against rolling clouds.

And meanwhile the Compass plane was on the ground! The cameraman, in desperation, had turned his lens upward, and was getting what shots he could from his stationary position. At last, when all twelve balloons had taken to the air, the motor trouble was apparently repaired, for the pilot hopped again into the cockpit and the propeller whirled when a mechanic tugged it. With reckless impatience the Compass Plane took off the field and began chasing the twelve drifting balloons through the sky. As the

big balloons became small blots on the clouds, it came boring back.

The shots the Compass outfit had got did not compare with Jim White's in excellence, but they were perfectly usable. And, if those shots got to the Broadway theatres first, they would be booked for fancy prices while ours, coming later, would, in spite of the fact that they were better, have to go into our regular next week's release!

The gas in the DeHaviland was low, and Nick stepped down to the field. Close behind him came the Compass plane again. The engine was dead; the motor trouble had developed again. From the structure of the ship, it was apparent to Nick Royce that it was carrying a large supply of gasoline, and if it had not been for this engine trouble, they could have taken a head start on us and returned to New York far ahead. As it was, Nick Royce managed to get the DeHaviland gassed, and was ready to take off before the Compass pilot had finished tinkering with the engine.

As Nick climbed into the cockpit, with the motor idling, he grinned widely at Jim.

"Old-timer, we've got shots a hundred times better than Compass this time!"

"You said it, Nick! Lord, if we can only get back to the lab before they do! Step on it, boy, and keep that throttle open wide!"

Gently Nick gave the motor gas. It trundled across the field. It swooped off highly. Nick took his altitude, banked, and headed eastward, climbing a little. The Compass pilot, as Nick looked back, was stiff fussing with the motor. The cameraman, on the other hand, was sitting in the pit and taking the whole thing with philosophical resignation. It was all in the game!

In a short time the field swam into the distance, and the balloons disappeared into the sky. Nick drove the D.H. hard. With the throttle open wide, the motor labored loud enough to be heard all over the state. He bent to his controls, kept his eyes glued on the dials, and waged a fight with Father Time and the Compass outfit.

For, as the hills began reaching up for us again, and the timber began to grow on the slopes like whiskers on the face of the earth, there came into the air that droning sound which meant that another plane was following. Royce stared back. The plane that was crawling out of the distance was the same he had left on the field—the Compass plane! It was flying madly. The race had Long Island as its finish-mark; and the Compass plane could out-fly the DeHaviland with

ease. Even as Nick watched it, it crept up, closer and closer; and in a few moments it was bobbing alongside.

Then the Compass plane edged ahead. Nick had the motor of the DeHaviland laboring at its utmost—but to no avail. It was hopeless to try to fly faster than the newer Compass ship. It gradually took a greater lead and increased it; and Royce could only trail it. He strove his utmost to buck the head wind as the Compass plane was bucking it—but it was futile. There was nothing to do but keep flying, and watch the Compass plane romp home with the bacon.

Suddenly the plane in the foreground wabbled badly. It nosed down, came up again, and then began to glide in a most peculiar fashion. Meanwhile it lost its speed, and lost it rapidly. Nick Royce saw it settling, and he knew that trouble had again seized the ship.

Below still lay the mountainous hills, the timbered slopes, and there wasn't a town within many miles. Even the railroad left the land unmarked here. The Compass plane was being forced to make a landing—where a landing seemed impossible! The timber was thick. Not one space big enough to put a ship in was visible. And when the plane reached the treetops it meant a crash—perhaps death for the two men inside. Even a jump was dangerous; it meant either suspension in the trees, with parachute caught and no one to offer help, or a fall through the branches and, at best, broken bones. Old Man Trouble was certainly riding the tail of that Compass plane!

The sun glistened on wires that dangled under it as it glided ever downward—control wires, broken off by the terrific force of the wind at the speed the ship had dared reach.

The Compass plane passed over the crest of a hill; and below, fortunately, lay a clearing. It offered more or less safety in the matter of a landing. The plane nosed around to it as best it could with controls wrecked. It was dropping rapidly; the plane was certain to be injured.

Nick Royce had eased his throttle back and was waiting. He watched the ship glide for the clearing. Cutting off the ignition, he called back to Jim White:

"Jim, those boys are going to get into serious trouble. There's no need of hurrying now. They're going to be glad of some help."

The Compass plane was nosing down steeply. Its trucks hit the ground and bounced. The tail flopped down, struck and wrenches loose. At the same time the wheels hit a hole in the ground and stopped, torn partly off. The tail of the ship went up and pointed

into the skies. One wing crumpled. The propeller went into splinters with an explosion. For a moment the plane kept its position; then it settled slightly. And at last the cameraman tumbled out of the rear pit and lay motionless on the ground.

"The pilot's badly hurt!" Nick called back. "Jim, we're going down there and do what we can to help them out!" That was like Nick Royce. The Compass outfit was a deadly enemy of ours, but this crew was in plenty of trouble, and he couldn't pass them up.

Nick Royce glided for the clearing with engine off. The Compass plane was well to one side of it, and there was enough space left for the DeHaviland. He circled the clearing once, looking it over. Then he mushed out into a glide again, and cut low over the adjoining trees. The plane edged into the clearing nicely, and then—

Crash! Whee-e-ee!

The fuselage of the plane cracked, it seemed to go to pieces, and the propeller completely disappeared. The D.H. was only a few feet above the ground at the time. It jerked, wrenched, and dropped on one wing, crushing it beyond all repair. The plane lay there, almost as much of a wreck as the Compass one. Instantly Nick Royce switched off the screaming motor and jumped out of the pit. He wasn't even scratched.

"Jim—are you hurt?"

Jim White had been knocked down into the pit. He scrambled up, looking shaky, and as white as the clouds.

"N-no. Are you? What did we hit, anyway?"

Nick Royce was already investigating. Wrapped around the fore parts of the plane was a black wire—a telephone wire. At the edge of the clearing, hidden below the branches of the trees, was a short pole, torn from its base now and leaning over. Opposite it was another.

"Wire," Nick Royce said. "Couldn't tell it was here from the air—ground's too black. It probably leads up to some forest observation tower. Hang it all! We'll never get out of here in either of these planes!"

There's no use crying over spilt milk or even cracked-up planes, and both Nick and Jim knew it. They left the old D.H. where it was and ran to the Compass plane. It was even a worse wreck. The cameraman was still lying where he had fallen. He was groaning and writhing, but there was no blood on his outfit, and he looked to be unhurt.

"What's wrong?" Nick inquired, bending over him.
"Leg!"

The cameraman, who was a stranger to both Nick and Jim, certainly had a badly broken leg. It was cracked above the knee. It was swelling rapidly. The man needed immediate attention, but nothing serious would happen if he didn't get it. Nick and Jim turned from him and looked into the fore pit of the plane. The pilot was doubled up there, held by his safety-strap, and he was covered with blood. Gently Nick and Jim lifted him out, and stretched him at full length on the ground.

The pilot was scarcely breathing. The motor had driven back into his chest, crushing it badly, and then had fallen away again. Nick Royce could hear only a faint heart-beat. It was plain as day that if this man didn't get medical help soon, he would die.

"Jim, did you see any towns close to here?" Nick asked quickly.

"Not one. That doesn't matter. There must be a cabin or a house or a road somewhere around here. I'll go find it. Nick, you stay here and do what you can for these boys while I'm scouting for help."

Jim White didn't have much choice in the directions he might take. One seemed as likely to bring results as the other. Thinking that he remembered a town being located to the north, he started in that direction, leaving Nick in the clearing. In a little while Jim was out of sight.

Nick hurried around the clearing, hunting for a spring. Among the pines, a short distance away, he found a crack in the granite that was dripping water, soaked his handkerchief in it, hurried back, squeezed water into the pilot's mouth, and then cleaned his face. The heart-action of the poor chap didn't pick up any at all. Nick hoped that Jim would be able to find a doctor without too much loss of time. A few hours might mean the difference between the pilot's living and dying.

The cameraman was lying in agony. Nick turned to him. The leg was crooked. He ripped off the leg of the trousers that covered it, and saw that it was swelling and turning green. He began gently to straighten the leg; and the cameraman promptly fainted, which was an assistance to Nick. Nick roughly joined the break. Then, with his knife, he cut branches off the saplings, covered them with strips of cloth cut from the trousers, and with others tied the things like splints around the legs. Nick made another trip to the spring and, with the cold handkerchief, revived the cameraman. After a few minutes he was resting more easily.

The pilot's condition had changed slightly for the worse. The heart-beat was slower; the breathing was shallower. Nick was powerless to do more. He could only wait until help came. And he wanted like the very devil to keep that Compass pilot alive.

Time had passed quickly. The sun had sank. Evening had moved out of the darkness of the timber and was filling the clearing. The sky became the color of slate, and slowly blackened. A pressing silence came with the growing darkness.

In a very few minutes, the clearing was filled with utter blackness. Nick Royce tore linen and struts from the wrecks of the two planes, and with them built a small fire. The flickering flames gave out a light that was feeble in the vast open blackness of the sky. Royce brought water to the man with the broken leg, and listened anxiously to the heart-action of the pilot. It was even fainter now. He broke more struts into the fire, and waited.

A crashing came through the trees, and he jumped up. Some one was coming. He hoped it was Jim White with a doctor. The sound grew closer. Then a man came hurrying into the clearing. As he reached the fire, Nick Royce saw that it was Jim White; and Jim White stopped in his tracks, staring.

"Good Lord—it's you, Nick!"

"Did you get help?"

"Help? I saw this fire—thought I could get help here! I must have been traveling in a circle—got lost and just wandered back—something!"

"Don't you know that these men have got to have help, Jim?" Nick demanded. "We haven't any time to waste."

"I know it, but—I tell you, there isn't any end to these woods. They're a jungle."

"We've both got to try to find a doctor somewhere," Nick insisted. "Jim, come on!"

They both started out of the clearing, but they hadn't gone ten feet into the trees before they stopped. The darkness was blacker than ink. They couldn't move without feeling their way with their hands and feet. They might have wandered all night aimlessly. But the chief thing that stopped them was the sound of an airplane overhead.

They ran back into the clearing. The sky was as black as the ground. They could see nothing; they could only hear the motor. The plane was flying high; it was coming from the east. It was passing now almost directly overhead.

"Signal 'em!"

Royce tore linen off the planes and heaped it on the coals of the fire. The dope on it caused it to smoulder and not flame. Together Nick and Jim broke up struts and blew the coals to white heat, as they dropped the splinters on. By the time the first few flames were licking upward, the airplane was gone far into the western sky.

Nick and Jim came back to the injured man. The pilot was sinking fast. He needed help. They decided that the most they could do would be to stay with him. They kept by his side while the fire died down and became coals again. The blackness closed in, thicker than before.

And then, from the west, came the drone of an airplane flying again in the direction of the clearing.

ON OUR T on Long Island I was left alone with Bill Royce when Dugan got back into his blue roadster and went purring toward town. We were a mournful pair. That Compass was beating us out was too much to bear. And we began to get worried about Nick and Jim when dark came. They should have returned long before then, even allowing some time for a delay en route. And after a while we were fidgeting and paring the office like two tigers in a cage.

"Bill, I don't like this," I said. "I've got a feeling in my bones that something's happened to 'em. It won't do any harm to take a plane and go hunt 'em up. If they're safe, no harm done."

If they're not, we'll be damn' glad we went!"

That put us into action. We dragged a D.H. out and warmed it. Bill climbed in, took the controls, and got set. I crawled in behind. We trundled away down the dark field, and lifted nicely. Bill circled the ship once, and then we began deadheading west.

Except for the spotty lights of the cities, the whole world was a black void; and once we got past the big towns on the other side of the Hudson, we felt as though we were flying from one world to another. Lights disappeared from the darkness below us. We had nothing by which we could tell how far we were going, and in what direction, except the dials on the dash. We kept at it until we saw a landing-field with beacon flashing below, and we stepped down to it.

Had anybody seen a World News plane?

We took off again, and kept going west. We kept going until we thought we might hit Chicago at any minute. Then we saw another field with a beacon blinking, and waltzed down to the sand.

Had anybody seen a World News plane?

Well, yes, they had. It had been there taking some pictures of the balloon race, but it had flown off right afterward, and hadn't been seen since.

"That settles it!" Bill Royce said. "Something's happened to Nick and Jim."

We took to the black sky again and headed east. We passed the one field we had gone down to see before, and kept heading into the hills. It was as black as though we were flying over the depths of the earth.

As we flew I saw a faint glimmer of red below, a mere spark, and tapped Bill's shoulder. He snapped off the ignition.

"Is that a fire down there?" I asked. "Might it be Nick and Jim?"

"Probably not," Bill answered. "It must be some camp in the hills."

The motor roared on again.

And right then the most uncanny thing happened that I have ever seen. I was staring down at the ground doubtfully. All at once a tongue of fire leaped right out of the ground. It began to move, to dart away, leaving a trail of flame behind it. It ran straight on, doubled back, went at right angles, then shot up and down again, and right there, shining up at us out of the ground, was a flaming letter H!

The moving point of fire didn't stop. It moved on with lightning speed. The letter E came out of the darkness; then L, then P. For a minute the word flamed there, HELP! and then it began to die out!

Bill had already banked. He swooped low. The embers of the flaming word were still red. As he glided down he cut off the motor. Faintly a call came up to us.

"Stall in over the fire! Stall—in—over—the—fire!"

It was the voice of Nick Royce.

IT WAS some hours later that we reached our T on Long Island. The six of us overloaded the D.H. sadly, but we made the trip without a hitch, thanks to Bill's piloting. We got the two injured men into the office shack at once, and before we did anything else we got two doctors out there to help them. The two cots in the office came in mighty handy. The doctors were inside, working over the two, when what should come into view, in the lights in front of the hangars, but the well-known blue roadster of Gord Dugan.

He jumped out and raced at us like a mad bulldog!

"What's a matter with you babies—standing around here chinnin'! The lab is still waiting for the shots of the balloon race. Where are they?"

I dragged Dugan to one side. Quietly I explained to him what had happened. That calmed him a little.

"Well, I guess you couldn't have passed up two men in trouble. But—Jim, where are the shots of the balloon take-off? Did you get good ones?"

"Swell," answered Jim. "But they don't happen to be in existence any more."

"What?"

"Wait, Chief." I grabbed Dugan again. "You don't understand. Those films will never be shown—but they were used to good purpose. They were the means of our finding Nick and Jim, and bringing that pair of Compass men back. One of 'em would have died if the doctor hadn't got to him when he did—and those films saved his life."

"How?" Dugan demanded.

I explained our search for Jim and Nick—the darkness, and how close we had come to passing them without seeing them. "Nick used that film as a signal. He trailed it over the ground to form the word 'help,' and then he touched a match to it. It flared up; we answered the signal. So, Dugan, those films are gone forever—but they saved a man's life—thanks to Nick."

Dugan chewed angrily on his perfecto. "So that's it, hey? The Compass films were right there, too, weren't they, Nick? Why did you burn ours? Why didn't you burn theirs?"

"Chief," said Nick, "that wouldn't've been square." And that was enough for him.

"Mebbe not!" Dugan barked. "But it would have let us keep our films—and we'd be a hell of a lot closer to landing that Tip-Top deal if we had 'em!"

Too disgusted to talk any more, Dugan pushed into the office. The two physicians were just finishing their work. The pilot with the bashed-in chest was resting easily and was going to recover. The guy with the broken leg was almost cheerful over his getting back to civilization. Dugan saw him and stopped in his tracks.

"Well, I'm swiggled!"

"Hello, Dugan," said the man with the broken leg. "Nice outfit you've got here."

"Will you please inform we what in blazes you're doing in this mess?"

"Certainly. I went over to the Compass field today to look it over. When the chance came, I thought it would be like old times to spend the day turning a camera again. I was having the time of my life until the crash! I must say, Dugan, that you've got some square men working for you. I know that you and Compass are deadly enemies, but your men didn't hesitate to

try to help out the Compass plane when the controls broke. Dugan, I certainly like that spirit."

Dugan no longer growled. He spoke softly. He beamed. He sat beside the cot and chuckled. He laughed. He had a thoroughly enjoyable time until the doctor chased him out. He joined us, grinning all over his face.

"Evening, Nick," he said cheerfully. "Have a cigar?"

Nick, being a man who never smokes, accepted the cigar with gratitude.

"You did blamed well today, Nick. Very well! Things are certainly looking up!"

Seeing us blinking at him, he explained.

"That chap in there with the broken leg is John Robertson, president of the Tip-Top Corporation. Boy, ain't it a wonderful night!"