



SHOWDOWN IN THE SKY

by FREDERICK C. DAVIS

“Get those shots and the reel’s made!” And Nick Royce, World News Reel flyer, hurtles his plane into the clouds to get them. But a man must play the air-game square—even when blazing skies bring strange showdown!

OUR BIG DEHAVILAND HOVERED over the water of Long Island Sound as gracefully as one of the million gulls that filled the sky. In the fore pit Nick Royce, pilot par excellence, rolled the ship slightly as we swooped, and behind him in the rear pit, I took advantage of the lowered wing; I glued my eye to the finder of my camera and steadily turned the crank. We were both part of that film-eatin’, sky-bustin’ outfit called the weekly World News Reel, and once more we were doing our stuff. Getting snappy news pictures to please the great, thrill-hunting American public.

On the water below little boats were bobbing along, cutting foam and spray, tilted so far on their sides that they seemed about to capsize at any instant. A dozen of them were flocking along the same course with sails bellying and decks flashing. They belonged to a number of yacht clubs of New London and thereabouts, and they were engaged in their annual race to determine

the association champion. Off to both sides lay smaller and larger craft crowded with spectators cheering and peering through binoculars. The racing boats were sweeping toward the finish buoy, and the two leaders were breaking water prow to prow.

Nick Royce handled the plane like a genius, giving me just the right angle, without any obstructions. As he kept the plane perfectly placed, I kept grinding, and caught a clear view of the boats dashing across the finish line; then, circling, I got a shot of them coming head on. I knew that that shot would knock ’em out of their seats when it got onto the screens of the Broadway movie temples. Grinning a satisfied grin, I leaned forward and tapped Royce’s shoulder. He understood from that that I was through, and that he could beat it back to our T on Long Island.

He banked-the ship and leveled off southward, gradually opening the throttle. Soon we skimmed over the shore-line and were dead-heading over land

again. In a few minutes we would reach our field, and in a few more my films would be passing through the baths, on their way to the big silver sheets. They would add, I hoped, one more bit of glory to the name of the World News.

We had prepared well for it. Nick had fuelled the ship up to the cap of the tank, and I'd specially inspected my camera and stored plenty of film in my blouse. We'd got to the field plenty early, too; but no sooner did we get there than the telephone rang. Grabbing it up, I heard the familiar voice of Smythe, the assistant editor of the reel. He was a high-powered little guy, and he was talking from the offices in Times Square. Usually he growled like a Liberty in the warming, but this morning his voice was low; almost whispering.

"What's up, Smythe?"

"That's you, Buckley, ey?" The office always asked for me first because I was super of the flying division. "Dugan hasn't shown up yet, has he?"

"Nope," I answered. "Is he on his way?"

"Sure! But don't wait for him. Go get that boat race, and you'll probably find him waiting for you when you get back."

Mr. Gordon Dugan was Smythe's boss. Boss of all of us, as a matter of fact; because he was editor-in-chief of the Reel. There is only one guy on this green globe like Gord Dugan. He was a fiery little man, always chewing on a perfecto and spitting out his words like so many bullets from a machinegun. Down at bottom a royal guy, he nevertheless drove us like slaves. The flying department was, you see, his pet; and he was depending most on us to make the Reel the greatest in the world. Whenever he appeared on the field we hopped around like a bunch of Mexican jumping-beans. Dugan could make us work our heads off for him and the Reel.

"Listen, Buckley," Smythe went on. "For the love of Heaven, get some good shots today, will you? Dugan's not coming over there alone. He's going to show the field to John Robertson. Understand? Robertson's coming with him."

"Gosh!" I said.

"Dugan's doing his best to impress Robertson; see? Robertson will be there with the Chief when you get back, probably. If you slip up with Robertson watching you, it'll sink us. Understand?"

"I get cha!"

"I wanted to tip you off," Smythe went on. "This boat race isn't so much in itself, but if you muff it, Robertson will think we're not so hot. Get the idea?"

Get it? The whole outfit had had just that idea in mind for months! Mr. John Robertson was one of the lords of the celluloid world. As President of the Tip-Top Corporation he controlled the making and distribution of most of the big features. There wasn't any outfit that would compete with his. He had all the biggest stars tied up in contracts, all the best directors putting out pictures for him, the best screen-writers in the game turning out stories for him, and as a result almost every picture that appeared with the Tip-Top emblem on it registered a box-office knockout. Anybody connected with Tip-Top, and in Tip-Top's favor, enjoyed the blessing of the movie king!

And where we came in was this: Tip-Top was getting ready to add to its releases a news-reel. For months it had been considering all the independents in the field. Robertson was handling the matter himself, and he had decided that he could do better by buying up one of the existing reels than by organizing an entirely new one of his own. After long parleying, he had narrowed the choice down to the Compass News Reel, and the World News; ours. And ever since we learned that, Compass and us had been at each others' throats.

We'd done our best to get into our reel the most spectacular news events that happened, and largely we had succeeded; but the fact that weighed most against us was that Compass had newer and better equipment than we did, and more of it. Robertson was leaning very definitely toward Compass.

With us it was a life or death matter, and nothing else. Whichever reel that Tip-Top bought out would immediately become the best-known, biggest and best in the world. It would go into all the Tip-Top theatres, a world-wide chain. The other reels would sooner or later pass out of the picture simply because they couldn't meet such competition. If we could land that deal with Tip-Top, you see, we'd become what we'd been fighting to become for years, leader in the field. If we didn't, it was good-bye for us!

Therefore Smythe's anxiety that we perform our best for Robertson!

Life or death; that was what the weekly World News Reel was facing. And the sentence would be pronounced on us within a few hours!

THINKING all this over as Nick Royce piloted me back to the home field, I told myself that John Robertson couldn't find anything to kick about in the scenes of the boat-race that I'd shot! Every other reel

had been content to get the race either from motor-boats, or with telephoto lenses from the shore. We'd had the air all to ourselves and, thanks to Nick Royce's handling of the ship, we were taking home plenty of footage that nobody else in the field would be able to equal! Thought I; bring on the big Robertson!

The DeHaviland began to ease down. Royce had begun closing the throttle; and now he banked. Our field was right below: the familiar trio of hangars, with the little office shack beside them, and an area of smooth sand stretching away in front. The T indicated our approach, and Royce took it. He settled the ship downward gently.

As he swooped I saw, over by the last hangar, the blue roadster that was Gord Dugan's. And the sound of our motor brought Dugan out of the office, alongside a taller and thinner man who was walking with a cane, due to one leg that was still weak from a fracture. Nick Royce handled the plane, with those two looking on, in a way that was art and nothing else. Three points touched the sand as gently as though we were a feather, and the plane taxied to a smooth halt not far from the hangars. Royce jumped out and I followed.

Dugan swung toward us, chewing on his eternal perfecto, eyes gleaming.

"Got the stuff, Art?"

"Boss, here it is," and I handed him the cartridge that I'd taken from my camera on the way home. "The stuff is beautiful—beautiful!"

Dugan glowed. He whirled around to Jim White, our other crank-turner, who had followed him, and thrust the reels into Jim's hand.

"Beat it to the lab with these, White," Dugan said. "Tell 'em to call me as soon as they're in the fixer!"

White pattered away. Royce and I began walking toward the office. John Robertson nodded to us like old friends, and Dugan, following us, contentedly lit his cigar and puffed:

"You see, Mr. Robertson, we always bring home the bacon. Buckley tells me that he's got some excellent stuff. There's a pair, Mr. Robertson, that no news reel could do without if it really wanted to get the best stuff obtainable—Buckley and Nick Royce. Hunt this whole world over, and you couldn't find two other men that can get the shots like those boys can!"

Robertson smiled. "Dugan," he said, "I believe that, but—ah—let's go inside the office there, and have a little talk."

"Certainly!" Dugan chirped.

He glanced at us with eyes afire. We looked at him

with a grin. The zero hour was at hand! Robertson looked like he was ready to talk business! The very air tingled with electricity. For months we'd been slaving to land that deal with Tip-Top—and here was the very man who would sign the papers, who would by a word make us the greatest news-reel in the world! And he had said, simply as anything, "Let's go inside and have a little talk!"

We all went inside and settled at the table. The strain was terrific. It was *terrific*. This man was the jury that was going to pronounce our sentence on us, and every second was torture. He rubbed his leg a little, during the silence, and looked sidewise at Dugan.

"You may think that I haven't known what was going on between you and Compass all these months," he said. "But I do know, Dugan. I know that you've both been working your best to make your reels as near perfect as possible. And I know, Dugan, that throughout the whole business, you have always played fair and square."

Dugan blushed; actually blushed! "You're right about that, Mr. Robertson. I've told the boys over and over again that I'd rather not get the stuff than to turn crooked."

Robertson nodded. "I know, too, that Compass has indulged in—ah—some shady tactics. They've fought you a little—too strenuously. They have done things that I—ah—couldn't allow to happen in any outfit of mine."

And believe me, they had! Compass had played us one dirty trick after another. They'd hired a man to tamper with our planes. They'd fought us in the air. In fact, once they had fired on Jim White, and ruined a camera with the bullet! They hadn't stopped at anything to beat us out. Thank Heaven that Robertson knew it, and was a white man!

"I must say, Dugan, that you've handled your outfit superbly," Robertson went on. "In fact, I have only the highest admiration for you and your outfit. The World News is a credit to the industry."

Dugan beamed again. "Mr. Robertson, after what you've just said, I can't help telling you that we'll all consider it the greatest honor in the world to become part of the Tip-Top organization. We have done our best during the past months, and we'll keep on performing just the same for you, sir!"

Robertson looked suddenly solemn,—too solemn. He gazed at all of us, and then at the floor. "Well—ah—you understand, Dugan, that my personal feelings can't enter very largely into a business deal as important as this one is. I must consider what is best for the corporation. Of course, after I close the deal,

the news-reel will be reorganized somewhat. I mean to say, Dugan, that—well—hang it, I'm going to stop beating around the bush!

"LISTEN! I like you, I like your men and your spirit, but—other things count. I mean equipment, prestige. The world at large knows nothing about Compass' crookedness—and of course, after I start releasing my own news-reel there won't be anything like that any more. You see, Dugan, equipment counts a lot with me. I'm sorry that I have to tell you, but it has to come some time—and so I must say that I still very strongly favor Compass, Dugan."

Dugan sat chilled. His face grew white, then very red. He forgot to chew on his perfect. "Robertson—what do you mean? You aren't telling me that in spite of all this—you're going to buy out Compass!"

Robertson did not answer.

"Good Lord!" Dugan barked. He couldn't hold himself in. "Good Lord! That's how it's going to end, is it? For months we've done our best. For months we've played absolutely on the square! And it hasn't done us a blamed bit of good! You're going to buy out Compass in spite of it. In spite of it you're going to buy out a dirty, crooked outfit!"

Robertson frowned. "You forget, Dugan, that there will be no more shady work done after—"

"What the devil does that matter?" Dugan rasped. "We—we—" Then, with a great effort, he pulled himself together, and grew calm. He realized that roaring at Robertson wouldn't do any good. "Look here, Robertson. To a big corporation like Tip-Top, the matter of a little equipment can't make such a big difference. You know that we're as capable as anybody in the world of bringing in for you the best news shots. I know my men, and my men know me. There's Buckley and Nick Royce—you can't afford to keep them out of your reel. Robertson, let me ask you to reconsider. I'm sure that we can reach terms that will make the deal a good one for you and,—"

Robertson waved one hand. He took his cane and stood up. "Dugan, I came out here at your invitation, because it would give me a chance to tell you that my mind is made up."

Dugan gulped. "You know—you know that it will be only a question of time until we go out of business—if you buy Compass?"

Dugan had put his whole life into building up our Reel! He had worked at it day and night, like a maniac. We all had. And now—

"Why, why," Robertson gulped—"I hope you'll be able to make the grade from now on, Dugan. Of course, as a business rival, I'll try to make a better reel than you do, but—"

"Mr. Robertson," Dugan broke in, standing up, "I'd rather fight with you than against you!"

Robertson pursed his lips. "Dugan, listen. I'm sorry, man, but, matters can't be changed now. I've already signed the papers with Compass."

"What!"

"I say," Robertson repeated calmly, "I've already signed the papers with Compass. Compass is now mine. It will become the Tip-Top News Reel. I completed the deal yesterday."

Dugan stared. He looked ready to drop. He gazed around, as though wondering if we had heard the same words, and when he saw that we had, he staggered a little. But in a moment that dizziness was gone from him. His hand gripped the back of the chair and grew bloodless white. His teeth clamped down into his perfect.

"Listen, John Robertson! You've got Compass—you've turned your back on us. So be it! All my life, Robertson, I've fought to make this news-reel *big*—and I won't stop now. I've fought Compass, and by the Lord, I'll fight you! I know it's a losing fight. I know you'll break me! But all the same I'll fight you. Do you hear that; I'll fight you!"

Robertson moved to the door, frowning.

"Crowd me out of the theatres!" Dugan roared. "Buck me any way you like! Robertson, night and day from now on I'm fighting you! Never forget that—night and day from now on I'm fighting you!"

Zing!

That was the telephone in the corner, but Dugan didn't hear it. Nobody made a move toward it. Robertson took the door-knob and opened the door.

"And I'll keep on fighting you," Dugan rasped, "until I win or I break!"

Robertson moved out the door. As he closed it, he spoke softly. All he said was:

"Good day, Dugan."

But in those three quiet words was as much promise of a fight as in all Dugan's thunder.

FOR a minute nobody knew what to do. Dugan stood staring at the door. Nick Royce looked through the window and saw the movie magnate limping across the tarmac. I just stood and wobbled a little.

Sunk! We were sunk! It was all very well for Dugan

to shout about fighting—but we all knew that fighting Tip-Top was useless. We had as much chance as a canoe against a battleship, as a canary bird against an eagle. There were millions behind Robertson, and only a little working capital behind us. Our income came only from the theaters that rented our reel week after week, some of them Tip-Top theatres; and now those would be taken away from us. We had fought for existence only because we dreamed of hooking up with the big corporation and now, with that bubble burst, there was nothing left. Sunk? Yes, we were sunk!

Dugan looked sick. It was painful to look at him. He realized the futility of fighting Tip-Top—realized it better than anybody else, but still he was full of fight. Dugan had meant what he said. He was going to battle until he broke. That fire never left his eyes. But he was almost a broken man already.

Nick Royce tugged at my sleeve. “Come on, Art,” he said. “We’d better put the plane in the hangar.”

I nodded, and we went toward the door. Halfway out I stopped and looked back. Dugan was watching us with an expression of doom around his eyes. I couldn’t stand that.

“Chief,” I said, “don’t worry about us! We’re sticking with you! Even if we all go broke, Chief, we’re going to stick by you!”

“Thanks, boys,” said Dugan, and that was all.

Zing!

The telephone rang again after I’d closed the door, and assuming that Dugan would answer it, I didn’t go back. We went to the plane, tailed it around and started wheeling it into the hangar. Neither one of us said anything; there wasn’t anything to say. As we pushed the plane to the open door, I looked up, and saw John Robertson still on the field, beside the third hangar.

He watched us a moment, then started over. He didn’t pay any attention to me. He stopped by that incomparable young chap Nick Royce, and spoke softly again:

“Royce, you know where my office is, over in New York, don’t you? I’d like to have you come over and see me there.”

Royce looked uncomfortable. “Well, Mr. Robertson—would you mind telling me what for?”

“A matter of business.”

“Well, if it’s business, couldn’t we just as well talk about it right now?”

Robertson grinned crookedly. “Well—yes. If you’ll come with me, just so we get off this field before we start.”

Nick Royce hesitated, but at last followed the movie king over to the corner of the field. I watched them go with some misgivings. Something was in the air. With things as desperate as they were, I didn’t make any bones about what I did next. I went over to the hangars, out of sight of them both, and then skirted along until I could get into the third hangar. Royce and Robertson were outside talking, and I could hear them, as I’d hoped to be able to do. I wouldn’t do a thing like that ordinarily, but this wasn’t ordinarily.

I thought I heard the telephone bell ring again, but I wasn’t sure, and right then Robertson started talking.

“Royce,” he said, “I’ve been watching you a long time. I remember your work. Besides, I recall how you pulled me out of a bad scrape when I got this broken leg. I appreciate that very much.”

Robertson was referring to a time, some weeks past, when Royce had seen a Compass plane go crash, and had gone down to give what help he could. Robertson had been in that plane, through odd circumstances. Nick Royce had brought Robertson back for medical help and had sacrificed his films doing it. Which is a story in itself, as those of you know who have been following Nick Royce’s adventures.

“Listen, Royce,” Robertson went on.

“I want you with me. I need a good pilot like you. What are you getting now, with this outfit?”

Royce told him. “Only,” he added, “I don’t think I’d leave.”

“I’ll give you twenty-five a week more than you’re getting here, young man.”

“I couldn’t do it, Mr. Robertson,” Royce protested. “It wouldn’t be square to Dugan.”

Robertson cleared his throat. “Royce, I want you. I make no bones about that. To put it flatly, I’ll go my limit at once. Come with me, and I’ll give you double what Dugan’s paying you now.”

Well, now, Nick Royce, like anybody else, knows that money is nothing to sniff at. He was recently married, and he could certainly make good use of a raise in salary. Also, he’d be a damn’ sight surer of a permanent job with Tip-Top than he would be with World News, as things were panning out. But did Nick Royce take that chance? Not that boy!

“Thanks, Mr. Robertson,” he said, “but you see Gord Dugan gave me my first job. He gave me a chance when nobody else would do it. He trained me, and I guess I owe everything I’ve got to him. I just couldn’t turn against him now. So I’m sorry, but I’ve got to turn down your offer.”

Robertson was a little stunned. He didn't speak for a minute. "Son, is that final?"

"That's final," Nick said.

That was just like Nick Royce. A squarer, cleaner boy never lived. In more than one way he had demonstrated his cool courage and his sense of fair play. In my opinion, he had done enough for the reel to more than repay Dugan for the opportunity he got—but Royce was sticking. He wouldn't turn down a friend in a tight place. Royce not only was turning down the big offer; I knew that he'd never breathe a word about it to anybody. That, too, is just like Nick Royce.

"Buckley!"

My name boomed out from the direction of the office, in Dugan's voice. I slipped away from the hangar and started on a lope toward the shack. Dugan was coming toward me, hair ruffled and face haggard but determined.

"Where's Royce?" he demanded first thing.

"Around somewhere, Chief," I answered fast.

"What's up?"

"Smythe just phoned from the office," Dugan rasped. "There's a break. You've got to get into the air right away and get some more shots. Royce, where's Royce? *Royce!*"

Royce came around the corner of the hangar in a hurry. He was as calm as though nothing at all had happened. Coming to a stop beside me, he listened for orders.

"Listen, boys!" Dugan said. "Smythe just got tipped off from the *Moon*. There's a big fire broken out up-state, in one of the forests. Started from a camp-fire or something, and it's sweeping like hell for a couple of towns around there. The towns are fighting the fire to save themselves. We've got to get pictures of that if we never do anything else!"

We started for the hangar.

Dugan rapidly told us the location of the fire as we rumbled the DeHaviland away from the hangar again, and again tailed it around.

"Compass is sure to have a plane up there!" Dugan went on. "They'll get the stuff, too. Only now it's Tip-Top we're fighting instead of Compass. Buckley, Royce, listen to me, you two! I'm banking on you. The pair of you are the best men I've got, and if ever we get the edge on Tip-Top it will be because you two men delivered the goods. This news-reel outfit of ours is in your hands right now, boys. For the love of heaven, get that fire stuff and rush it back!"

Royce had already hopped into the cockpit. He made contact. The motor was still warm, of course, and the prop needed only a push to get started. The voice of the motor groaned and went into a mighty roar, and then lowered again. I hustled into the office and out again with several fresh reels of film, hopped into the rear pit where my camera was still mounted, and started threading through.

Dugan watched silently a moment. Then he came closer and added a parting word.

"This is our first chance to scoop Tip-Top," he said. "If we do it this time we've got a running start on them—a chance to live. Boys, good luck!"

He waved. Nick Royce opened the throttle. I settled back in my pit. The plane gathered speed, with the engine thundering, and very soon we reached flying speed. The plane lifted smoothly, and Nick Royce drove it straight into the sky at ever-increasing speed.

We had often gone out together to bring home film for the World News, but we had never before tackled anything half so important as this!

ROYCE bent to his dials and kept the ship roaring through the sky. There was nothing for me to do until we reached the scene of the blaze. Long before we got within photographing distance of it, however, I could see a faint, rolling black cloud on the horizon. As we streaked closer the smoke appeared to grow in volume, dense, inky, polluting the sky. And the very skyline seemed to be afire.

We floated closer, well over it. Now we could see the flames licking up over an astonishingly wide area. A mere spark of a forgotten camp-fire had kindled this mighty blaze. It was like a great burning sore in the wooded land below us, and it would leave a scar that would be visible for a score of years on the face of the earth. The smoke poured up in ever-increasing volume, and the flames seemed to be literally racing across the trees, adding acres to the burning area with every minute.

First we circled it widely. The smoke put a haze into the air, which decreased the photographic visibility a great deal, but that couldn't be helped. I swung my camera around, made sure of my stop and focus, and began turning the crank. While Nick Royce completed the big circle I ground in the film. The smoke poured into the sky and the flames leaped sometimes as high as our plane; and we kept on the job.

Below men were making valiant efforts to stop the flood of fire. As Nick circled I saw them rushing

through the still green forest, along the roads and the trails, on horses, in cars and in rattleboards, carrying spades. Others, having already reached a point which was close to the fire, were feverishly digging a trench to stop the advance of the ground blaze. As the new volunteers came earth began to pile up, and in one section the flames had been effectively stopped. In others, however, the thickness of the woods made the trench ineffective, and there scores of woodsmen were frantically chopping down trees to effect a clearing across which the fire could not jump.

Not only were many square miles of timber being destroyed by the fire; on the very edge of the wooded areas were two towns, small, composed almost exclusively of wooden buildings, but housing a few thousand souls whose homes and lives were endangered by the on-sweeping conflagration. Already the roads were full of autos and wagons carrying furniture and bedding and food supplies as fast as they could go away from the center of the flaming area. It was a struggle for life as primitive as ever man faced—against fire, the oldest friend and foe of the race.

Nick Royce swooped low, leaving the flames far over his wings, and I succeeded in shooting several telling scenes of the refugees. Again and again we weaved back and forth in front of the advancing front of fire, while I ground in film. I caught fleeting glimpses of the men at work with axes and spades below. Then Nick Royce circled widely, and we began to cross the part which had first caught fire, but which now was a hollow, black scar in the earth.

In an incredibly short time the woods below had been reduced to ashes. Stark skeletons of trees remained, charred and black. The ground was heaped with partly burned limbs and fallen trunks. One stream, trickling through, had in one place been dried completely, and in another its shallow water was steaming. No life could possibly remain amid this destruction.

Nick Royce kept to his controls, and handled them with a skill that was amazing. He sensed my desires and needs in regard to shots, and manipulated the plane perfectly to give them to me. He drove close behind the rolling surf of flame, and I ground in film constantly. One of my cartridges gone, I quickly fed through another and kept at it.

And meanwhile I knew that we were getting scenes that would hearten Dugan as nothing else could. In the first place, the fire had jumped into being so fast that ground-workers could not reach the scene as quickly

with their cameras as we could in the air. In the second place, the ground-men couldn't get shots nearly as effective as ours. And in the third place, we could get our films back to the laboratory more quickly by reason of the speed of our plane. We were winning this trick—and as yet we had the whole sky to ourselves!

Even at this minute, I knew, newsboys on the streets of New York were shouting the news of this fire. The region below was popular as a resort. Many families had left the city and were occupying cabins along the streams. Their lives were endangered; and back in the city their friends would cry for word of them. They would want to know the real extent of the damage, as only photography could tell them. All this meant that if we got our stuff back fast, we would get onto the Broadway screens, at fancy prices, and at the very beginning of the war between Tip-Top and us we would register a mighty victory!

Our plane suddenly bored into a cloud of black smoke and then out again. And above the noise of our motor and the noise of the fire below we heard another sound; another motor. Then, flashing its silver sides in the sun, the other plane swooped out of the sky, bearing on its sides the words: *Compass Weekly*. Our old enemy was on hand again!

The Compass plane climbed over us, paying no attention, while the cameraman in the rear pit ground on steadily. Nick Royce was again circling, hunting for any spots that were flaming more than the others, and in a moment he reached forward and cut off the ignition. The motor hushed off, but the fire below crackled and roared, and somewhere behind a bank of smoke the Compass plane was humming. Royce called back:

"Art, we can get some spectacular shots if we move in some. Are you game for me to cut low over the trees, and get the stuff close-up?"

"Sure I'm game!" I answered. "If we come out alive, that stuff will register like a million dollars!"

NICK wasted no time. He snapped the ignition back on and immediately dived. The center of the flames was on our left, and the wind was pulling the fire directly toward us. Sometimes the smoke rolled over us, stinging our eyes and throats, and it was hot. The great furnace below us was sending out a terrific heat. In spite of this, Nick Royce drove down, even closer than we had been before; and I settled to my camera, hoping that the film wouldn't catch fire before we got out again!

Nick Royce cut dangerously close. The flames licked high above us as we edged in. The smoke rolled over us, cutting off the light, sending snatches of night over us. Nick Royce didn't falter once; I kept grinding automatically, scarcely able to see. The heat was blinding and suffocating; the smoke seemed to make my lungs raw down to their very depths. Then at last, until it seemed we were in the very center of the inferno, Nick Royce pulled us out

We struggled to get out of the heat. It endangered our fuel-tank and my films. Also, it had got us groggy. Our plane wobbled badly as we pulled out. The shifting, rushing air currents were difficult to navigate. We were still plowing through a black smoke cloud, unable to see anything or hear anything, though the fire was hundreds of yards behind us.

Then suddenly we pulled into comparative sunshine and coolness. My eyebrows and hair, as I afterward found, were burned where they were exposed. The fabric on one wing was actually smoking. Lucky for us we didn't catch on fire ourselves! The sudden light and the torture of the heat had dazed us both; and before we knew it, we found ourselves rushing head on into a collision with the other plane!

The Compass ship had been circling at a safe distance. We were flying blindly for the moment. Nick looked up to see the nose of his ship pushing straight for the other plane—and the other plane was striving to escape. The muddled air and the surprising appearance of our plane from the smoke made escape almost impossible.

There we were heading for a crash, with the flames and smoke sweeping toward us!

It was impossible to avoid a brush. The planes came together after one moment of dangerous wobbling. We could only stare at each other, from plane to plane. The wings overlapped and almost locked in a crazy, angled position. By the sheerest miracle neither propeller touched, and kept on whirling intact. But as the ships parted I knew that harm had been done.

Nick Royce struggled with our plane as it fluttered toward the tree-tops—to a certain smash-up! We seemed to be dropping like a shot. Royce fought with the controls. As the foliage raked close, he dragged the ship to a level and then, it seemed by the sheer strength of his will, brought it into a climb. The motor roared on evenly, and we began to move away from the danger.

Now we looked at the other plane. One of its wings was sagging sadly. The whole ship was slowly,

in spite of all the pilot could do, turning on its side, preparatory to nosing down and tail-spinning. Only one glance was needed to tell that that plane was doomed. The controls were apparently wrecked. Even as we realized it, the plane, which had been fighting for altitude, began to streak downward.

For an instant the pilot grappled with it; and then gave it up. The cameraman was already rising in the pit and climbing over the cowling. This was no place to jump, the clearings were few, but jump they must! First the cameraman leaped off into space; then the pilot. One—two—three! *Poom! Poom!* Their parachutes flicked open, and they began to settle down.

Luckily, a clearing lay almost below them. By handling the shroud-lines carefully they could reach it. At any rate, they were out of serious danger now.

Their plane, instead of going into a tail spin, kept its wings tilted and began to spiral down. It was driving for the edge of the flames. In a moment it streaked into the burning tree-tops and disappeared. A second later a great burst of flaming fragments spewed into the sky from the exploding gas-tank—and then the plane was gone.

Looking back, I saw the pilot and the cameraman safely drifting into an opening, spilling their chutes to guide themselves and managing to get themselves to a perfect landing.

Nick Royce had seen all this out of the corners of his eyes. He had been circling for altitude steadily. After the first uncertain wobbings, the plane behaved as though it were uninjured. Royce circled high above the fire and then leveled off, southward. For long minutes he kept going levelly and steadily. Even when the fire receded far into the background he craned back, peering, with a strange, grim light in his eyes that I did not understand.

At last Long Island began to move below us again. It looked good! I felt that I had been roasted alive and it seemed incredible that the world was cool and quiet elsewhere. Those—few minutes we had spent above the fire were the longest I ever lived. I couldn't get back to the field too soon to suit me!

]Then the field moved below us, the familiar hangars and the T. Nick Royce flew straight across it. To my surprise, he made no move to circle or land on it. Was it possible that he didn't see it? I reached forward and pushed his shoulder, but he gestured me away impatiently. He knew what he was doing. His destination this time was not our field.

Several miles farther on, another moved into view.

This time Royce dived toward it, circled, bisected the sand, and then began to stall in. I sat in utter amazement. On this field was a row of hangars, across the tops of which were lettered the two words, *Compass Weekly*. This was the field of our deadly rival—and Royce was landing on it!

He brought the ship to an easy stop. He jumped out and whirled around at me.

“Art, give me your films!”

“What the devil, Nick?” I asked. “What’d you come down here for? What—”

“Give me those films!”

Royce said it in a way that made me give him those films. He meant to have them, and he got them. He took them out of my hands, turned, and began, walking across the field toward the little shack that served as the *Compass-TipTop* office. I jumped out and followed him.

Just before Royce reached the door it opened, and the chap that came out was carrying a cane. Right. He was Mr. John Robertson!

Royce came to an erect halt and in two sentences told Robertson that the *Compass* plane had been wrecked, but that the pilots were safe.

“It was my fault,” he went on crisply. “I shouldn’t have attempted to go as close as I did to the fire. When I came away I was blinded by the smoke and the heat. I couldn’t see the *Compass* plane in time to keep from bumping it. You understand, I’m not trying to sidestep my responsibility, Mr. Robertson. I admit it was my fault.”

Robertson blinked. Royce was coldly grim.

“The *Compass* films burned up with the ship.” he went on steadily. “If I hadn’t bumped, you’d probably have them by now. You can buy another plane, but you can’t buy more shots of that fire. Here, sir.”

He pushed into Robertson’s hands my film cartridges! Robertson took them and blinked again.

“Those are the films we got. They are to replace the ones that burned up.”

“Royce,” Robertson asked sharply, “does Dugan know you’re doing this?”

“No, sir,” Royce answered. “But I’ll answer to him.”

“Well, I’m blasted,” said the greatest movie magnate in the world. “I’m blasted.”

A FEW minutes later we were back on the home field. Royce broke the news to Dugan simply and clearly. He didn’t attempt to justify himself. He believed that the facts of the case were enough for that.

Dugan glared at him; sputtered; choked; and then he roared.

“You gave ’em our films! You gave ’em our films! Those films that were the biggest chance we’ll ever have to stop *Tip-Top* and save our own lives, and you gave ’em—”

“Chief, the crash was my fault,” Royce answered. “I ruined the other films, and I took the only way I had of making up for it.”

“Merciful Lord! I gave you your first chance to make good in this game, Royce—and you repay me with a stunt like this. You’ve ruined us!”

“Boss, I’ll take the consequences.”

“You sure will!”

“He played square, Dugan.”

This was a new voice. Dugan jerked around. The door had quietly opened. Standing there was Mr. John Robertson, cool and calm as always. He had hurried over from the other field in his car. Dugan glowered at him.

“Don’t roar at me, man!” he cautioned the Chief. “And don’t roar again at Royce. He’s the squarest chap I ever saw. What’s more, he’s got nerve enough to be so square; and that’s real nerve! That young man’s worth a million dollars to any man he works for. You’re lucky to have him. I tried to hire him away from you, this noon, for double his present salary, but he wouldn’t come. He intends to stick to you, Dugan. Square clear through, that boy.”

Dugan gulped.

Robertson began again. “Dugan, I want Royce. I’ll pay any price for him. Once I get him, he’ll stick by me through thick and thin. So, Dugan, I’ve decided to come to terms with you. If you’ll give me Royce, and Buckley, too, and if you’ll come along yourself to manage the combine, I’ll buy the *World News Reel* today; at your own figure.”

Dugan clamped down on his perfecto.

“Mr. Robertson,” he said, “sit down!”

An hour later Dugan came out of the office to the spot where Royce and I had been chinning. As he looked from one to another of us his eyes twinkled, and he sighed.

“We’re sold to *Tip-Top*,” he said. “We all stay with the outfit for life. The new reel will be called the *Tip-Top World News*.”

Dugan extended his hand toward Royce, and Royce’s came firmly to meet it.

“Thanks to what you did, my boy. I wish I had a son like you!”