



SKY ROOM

by RAOUL WHITFIELD

They crowded "Buck" Kent—and learned what it was to dare the anger of a master pilot.

THE RYAN-ENGINED SHIP hit the level stretch of the Crissville Field in a rough landing. She bounced, and "Buck" Kent fought her out of a second drop by giving the engine the gun. Then he cut, and let the plane drop gently. He was grinning as Lou Parrish's voice reached him from the rear cockpit:

"Getting old, Buck! That was a kiwi landing!"

The blue-eyed pilot chuckled. It had been a rotten landing, but Lou didn't know the reason why. Buck had tried an experiment—he had handled the stick with his left hand. A gust of wind had hit the ship just as she was about to cut dirt, and his left-hand reaction hadn't been quick enough.

He kicked left rudder, taxied the ship toward the dead line at one end of the field. It was a new field, and

to-day they were dedicating it. One Jeff Landers had called Buck on long distance and had offered a century note for Buck's personal appearance.

Landers wanted some stunts, and he knew that Buck and Lou had been getting publicity. Their smoke-checking of the New Orleans bank robbers, a few months ago, had been given a lot of newspaper space.

As the ship rolled toward the dead line, Buck looked the field over. It was noon, and they had been in the air for four hours, and had nearly cracked up at an emergency field two hundred miles out of Biloxi.

The fellow that had winged in behind them had cracked up, a chap named Buck Fraser, flying a Ryan-engined two-seater. That had been funny—the similarity in names and ships. Buck and Lou helped

him pull the tail assembly, of his crate down, and had come on to the Crissville Field. A hundred bucks was a hundred bucks. And the red-headed pilot always liked to look over new fields.

There was one steel hangar up ahead of them, and several canvas ones. Four ships were on the dead line, and a small crowd had gathered.

Buck killed the engine as he rolled the ship to the dead line. Buck and Lou climbed out of the plane as a suntanned mechanic ran up, followed by several other men. The mechanic grinned at him.

"Hello!" he greeted. "Glad you dropped down. Where from?"

Buck chuckled.

"Name's Buck Kent," he stated. "In from Biloxi—looking for a gent named Landers."

The mechanic grinned. By this time the other men had come up, and were standing in a semicircle around Buck and Lou. They were all grinning, but there was a peculiar expression in the eyes of several of them. The mechanic chuckled, looked at one individual who was tall and long armed. That man lighted a pipe, pulled on it.

"Sure, you're Buck Kent, and I'm Lindy!" he stated. "Glad to see you, pilot, but *Kent* winged in thirty minutes ago. There's his crate over there." He gestured along the dead line. "My name's Landers."

BUCK heard Lou Parrish draw in his breath sharply. He looked along the dead line. The ship toward which Landers had pointed was a two-place Waco, red in color. Buck grinned at Landers.

"Some one's kidding you," he replied cheerfully. "Kent flies a Ryan-engined crate."

The group took it big. They laughed. Lou Parrish stepped up close to Buck.

"This isn't a flying field—this is a day nursery!" he muttered. "Just a bunch of boys trying to get along."

Landers spoke again.

"You've been reading the papers, pilot," he said to Buck. "Kent usually flies a Ryan-engined crate. You got one that looks a lot like the pictures of his. But he cracked up on the way down, and had to borrow this red crate. He's over in town grabbing a bite to eat. What's your name?"

Lou Parrish took a step forward. He was getting sore.

"Say, listen—" he commenced, but Buck caught him by the arm. His eyes met Lou's. Then he was smiling.

"Cut it, Jake!" he said to Lou. "The game's up, they're wise to us. Kent's already here. My name's Jones—Eddie Jones, Landers. This is Jake King, my mechanic. Just thought we'd drop over. Maybe fly formation with you folks. Suppose you'll put on a sky parade."

Landers chuckled. They shook hands.

"Might have fooled me with that crate of yours, and that red hair," he informed Buck, "only Kent beat you in."

There were introductions. Once Buck's eyes met Lou's. He warned the mechanic in a glance to play the game. And Buck was doing some swift thinking. These men weren't kidding him. A red-headed pilot had flown in a Waco, and had passed himself off as Buck Kent. Why?

"Kent fly over alone?" Buck asked, after the introductions were over.

A pilot named Berry shook his head.

"Had that guy Parrish with him," he replied. "They stick together."

Lou Parrish grunted. Buck was grinning. The fellow who was passing himself as Buck Kent was not so dumb. But who was he, and what was the game?

BUCK didn't know any of the men at the field. He wouldn't be likely to know any of them. This was a section of the State over which he'd never flown. The field was small, and not very important.

"Great guy, this Kent!" Lou was speaking, and there was a grim tone to his voice. "But they say Parrish is the brains of the two."

Buck stared at Lou. One of the pilots spoke up.

"He don't look it!" he stated.

"And you should have seen this guy Kent slip his crate into the field. Sweet, it was!"

The men chuckled. Landers slapped Buck on the back.

"That rotten set-down of yours wasn't a Kent landing, Jones. Not by a darn sight!"

He grinned. Lou Parrish was chuckling now. Buck nodded his head.

"I was landing with my left hand on the stick," he told them.

Lou laughed heartily and the others joined in. Landers spoke again in an amused tone.

"Have to tell Kent about this," he said. "It'll give him a kick."

Buck nodded. "I was just kidding, Landers," he stated. "Heard you'd asked Kent to come down, but I figured he might be too busy."

The pilot called Berry swore softly.

“Not Kent!” he answered. “That guy likes to fly—and to collect coin for it.”

“Maybe he’s Scotch,” Lou suggested, grinning at Buck.

Landers frowned.

“He’s a business man,” he muttered. “I offered him a hundred bucks, but now he wants one fifty. Says he’ll give the crowd a real show, at that.”

Several of the men were moving away. Landers moved after them.

“Got to see how things are coming—crowd’ll be along pretty quick. Come on down and get some sandwiches.”

“You fellows go ahead,” Buck replied, “we’ll be down in a little while. I want to get some stuff out of the crate.”

Landers and the others moved toward the stand erected half way down the field. Buck moved around the fuselage of the Ryan-engined ship. Lou followed him. He was grinning, but Buck Kent was not.

“Something funny, Lou. But we’ll bluff it. Give this gent who’s doubling for me sky room. He may go into a spin, and get himself all tangled up in the wreckage.”

Lou smiled grimly. “What’s his idea of grabbing the hundred bucks Landers has offered?”

Buck Kent narrowed his blue eyes. He shook his head.

“Funny!” he muttered. “Big risk to take for that amount of money. And what made him think we wouldn’t wing down here?”

Lou grunted. “Second time you’ve had trouble proving who you are,” he reminded Buck. “Across the line McCleary figured you were that redhead, Brett.”

“I’m not trying to *prove* I’m Kent, not this time, Lou,” replied Buck. “There’re a lot of red-headed guys in this world—and most of ’em have nerve. You call me Eddie, and I’ll tag you Jake. Let this bird do the leading. We’re giving him sky room!”

“Might give him too much sky room, Buck,” Lou insisted.

“Can’t afford to scare him off,” Buck answered. “He’s after something besides the coin we were to get, Lou. We’ll give him the air first—but we’ll watch him.”

Lou nodded. “Might just be one of these funny guys having a good time,” he suggested.

Buck smiled with narrowed eyes.

“Sure,” he agreed. “He might be, and then again, he might not be. You and me, we’re going to find out!”

PILOT BERRY came up to Buck while he was eating a sandwich at a small stand erected near the field. Lou was working on the plane.

“Might enter that crate of yours in the free-for-all race,” he suggested. “Fifty dollars is the first prize.”

“Might,” Buck told him. “Wonder if Kent’s ship is entered.”

Berry shook his head. “Asked him about it, but he says he’d rather not race a borrowed plane.”

“He’s stunting her, though,” Buck mused. “How’d he crack up?”

“Didn’t get all the dope,” Berry stated. “Happened at the emergency field near Bonning—some one ’phoned the local paper about it. Casey, he’s the editor, is out to see the opening of the field. He said the way he got it, he didn’t think Kent would be here at all,”

Buck tried to keep his face expressionless. He understood now. The pilot of the plane that had come into the emergency field after he had set down his ship—he had been mistaken for Buck Kent. He had been flying a Ryan-engined plane, and the prop had been badly damaged in the nose over. Some one had bawled up the names; and a pilot was taking advantage of an accident he thought had occurred to Kent’s ship. But why? For a small sum of money such as one hundred iron men?

Berry was staring beyond Buck now, smiling.

“Here’s Kent now,” he stated. “He’s a good guy.”

He waved a hand. Buck turned slowly. He saw a red-headed individual coming up. Beside him was a shorter man. He was heavier than the redheaded one. Buck had kept his helmet on, as he wanted to cover up his own mop of red hair. Sky room—that was what he wanted to give this pilot, if he could get away with it.

“Kent, meet Eddie Jones!” Berry introduced them. “Jones tried to kid us into believing he was you, but he didn’t get away with it. Not even though he is flying a crate powered with a Ryan.”

Buck chuckled sheepishly. He thought his eyes caught a flicker of fear, of nervousness in the other pilot’s eyes. Then the red-headed one was speaking.

“Yeah, Landers was telling me that,” he stated. “Shouldn’t try to pull that stuff, Jones.”

Buck grinned foolishly. “Sorry, Kent, but I was just sort of kidding myself. Made a rotten landing—just a joke.”

The other pilot nodded. He smiled a little. His voice was flat, and his eyes were a grayish green, and he was about Buck’s build. He looked around the edge of the field.

"Looks as if we're going to have a good crowd, eh, Parrish?" he muttered. His eyes were on the half-closed ones of the short man at his side. That fellow nodded his head. Buck smiled.

"You've been getting a lot of publicity, Kent," he told the one who was taking his name. "Guess some of 'em came out to see you. Nice stunt you pulled back at New Orleans."

BUCK couldn't keep the smile from his face—he was praising himself.

His eyes were on those of the redheaded one. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't like crooks, Jones," he stated. "Glad to smoke 'em out."

Buck nodded. The man had colossal nerve. His short pal spoke up now.

"Better see Landers about a crate, Han—Kent," he mumbled.

Buck saw the gleam in the red-headed ones eyes. His pal had almost made a bad mistake. He had almost tagged his pilot by the right name.

"That's right," he agreed, smiling at Buck. "My ship's only a borrowed one, you know, and she doesn't handle so well. Figure on borrowing another for my stuff close to the ground. Guess Landers won't mind."

"Tickle him, probably," Berry assured him. "I've got a Buing Special you can have, Kent."

"Thanks, I'll look her over. We might work our leap-frog stunt, Parrish." The red-headed one was grinning. "New one," he explained. "Parrish rides one ship, I fly the other. Take turns zooming and diving over each other. Looks big from below."

Buck felt his nerves' tighten up. Two ships in the air. The short one being addressed as Parrish was speaking.

"All right, but we've got to have clear air for that, Kent."

The one called Kent nodded. "There's Landers—"

He broke off, moved away from the sandwich stand, followed by his mechanic. Berry grinned at Buck.

"Guess he won't crack up my crate, Jones," he told Buck. "He don't set 'em down the way you do."

It was ironic the way Berry complimented him by kidding him. Buck tilted a bottle of pop and grinned. But he was thinking fast. The crook who was posing as himself had made a sweet landing. The red ship either was his, or he was very familiar with her. He wanted her in the air, with his pal flying. He'd wing up a borrowed plane.

Buck Kent smiled grimly. "Leap frog!" he muttered. "Nice game, that."

"It'll be worth watching, all right!" Berry chuckled.

"It sure will be worth—*watching!*" Buck agreed, and this time he meant what he said.

IT WAS almost five-thirty. The parade in the sky—formation flight—had opened the ceremonies. There had been some 'chute hops, and some mild stunting. Many passengers had been taken up for rides. And now the crowd was waiting for the big event, the final event of the afternoon. Kent and Parrish were to go up in two planes, and play leap frog in the sky.

Buck Kent and Lou stood beside their Ryan-engined plane, waiting. All the other ships were out of the air. The red-headed pilot who was posing as Buck had borrowed Berry's Arrow Special, and its engine was being warmed up now. Down at one end of the field, headed into the wind, was the red-painted Waco, with the short, thick-set man who was playing Lou Parrish at the controls.

Lou spoke grimly. "That newspaper man says that it's all over the county that Buck Kent nosed over back on the emergency field. This red-headed baby worked fast. But what's he after? Did Landers pay him? He's got to come, down—let his pal pick him up."

"Why?" Buck asked quietly.

Lou Parrish blinked.

"He's flying Berry's ship," he stated. Suddenly his eyes widened. "Say—" he muttered, "you don't mean he'd wing off with that crate?"

"Just that!" Buck replied. "Landers has paid him the one fifty. Berry just told me that. He's set back the time for this sky stuff twice. Why? Because he wants it to be dark within an hour or so after he gets into the air. Again—why? Because these babies are going west, young man. Get that? West—and then south, maybe."

Lou Parrish was staring at Buck.

"Across the line—into Mexico!" he stammered. "But the revolution's about over."

"A revolution is *never* over—down in Mexico." Buck replied with a grin. "These babies are pulling a steal, a ship steal. Maybe they picked up that red-painted plane, too. There's only one thing that beats me, puzzles me. That red-headed gent is awful sure of himself. What makes him so sure that even if we did crack up we wouldn't get here, 'phone here? He could have pulled the stunt earlier in the afternoon, but he's waiting. That takes nerve."

A siren wailed at one end of the field. Through a megaphone Landers was announcing to the crowded

stands that Buck Kent and Lou Parrish were about to get into the air.

"The devil they are!" Lou cried grimly. "You aren't going to let 'em get away with this, Buck! They're getting our coin, and Berry's ship. They may have grabbed that other—"

"Steady!" Buck called to his pal. "Wind up the inertia starter, kick the engine over, but keep her throttled down. We're still giving them sky room, Lou."

LOU PARRISH grunted a reply, and moved toward the handle of the inertia starter.

The pilot who claimed he was Buck Kent was taxiing out Berry's Arrow Special now. He handled the ship well, got her around near the red-winged Waco, and into the wind. It was growing dusky, the sun was very low in the west.

Buck leaning against a wing tip of the Ryan-engined ship, heard the engine rumble, felt the wind sweep of the prop. He called to Lou.

"Keep her throttled down—don't rev her up!"

The tail assemblies of the two ships on the field were turned toward the whirling prop of the Ryan-engined crate. Buck's ship was headed into the wind, too! She was ready for instant movement.

He held his breath, wondering if the red-headed one would twist in the cockpit, and look back. If the man who had borrowed Berry's ship should see the prop turning—

Both planes were rolling forward now. There was a murmur from the crowd. This was to be the big exhibition of the afternoon.

It was then that Buck Kent got into action. He jumped toward the front cockpit of the two-place ship.

"Get aboard, Lou!" he snapped, above the rumble of the engine. "Get into your 'chute harness!"

Then he was inside the cockpit, slipping into the harness of his Russell lobetype 'chute. He could see the two planes taking off, climbing. Figures were running toward their ship—he saw Berry coming from one side, Landers' from the other. The field boss was waving his arms wildly. Buck twisted his head, and grinned.

Lou shouted at him:

"Landers—running up!"

Buck nodded. From the pocket of his flying jacket he drew a small, folded slip of newspaper. Landers came running up, breathing hard.

"Don't take-off, Jones!" He swore harshly. "You heard—what Kent said. No other ships—in the sky!"

Buck held out the folded bit of paper. His eyes were

narrowed back of the goggle glass he had pulled over them.

"What Kent said—hell!" he snapped. "I'm Buck Kent! Read that clipping, look at the picture! Parrish is riding back of me. Those birds up in the air are crooks! We gave them sky room. Now we're going to give 'em—ground room!"

He got a flash of Landers' staring eyes. Berry was beside him, staring, too. Buck reached for the throttle with his left hand.

"They've got your crate, Berry! They're heading for Mexico, but they won't make it!"

Landers had the clipping opened. He was staring at it. The clipping had a good photo at the top of both Buck and Lou. Landers couldn't help swearing fiercely. Berry was staring up at the sky.

"They aren't banking around!" he shouted. "They're heading westward, flying low!"

Buck jerked his head in the direction Berry was pointing.

"Get the other planes up—follow me!" he shouted. "They won't get far!"

HE SHOVED the throttle forward. The two-place ship rolled over the field surface, into the wind. The tail assembly came up, as Buck moved the stick forward. But he held the ship on the ground. She was roaring wide open now.

He pulled the stick straight back against the material of his flying jacket. The nose of the Ryan-engined ship came up. She zoomed straight up into the sky!

"Buck Kent will stunt for 'em!" the pilot muttered, as the sky drone of the powerful engine became high pitched under the pull of weight. "Not much, but some!"

She was almost in a stall when Buck nosed her out of it. He kicked down on the right rudder pedal, gave her right stick. The beat of the engine was steady. Nosing downward, he roared the ship straight toward the crowded stand. She came down with full engine, wind screaming through her flying wires and struts. Then he pulled back on the stick again.

"Loop!" he shouted at Lou. "Off—the ground!"

Upward she zoomed, but this time he did not level her out. Instead, he let the nose go up, and back. She was upside down now, three hundred feet off the ground. And Buck Kent changed his mind. The crowd had paid for a thrill—and the crooks were winging out on them.

He held the ship over on her back. Upside down he winged the plane in level flight above the crowded stand! And the Ryan-engined ship didn't lose altitude. For five seconds he held her upside down, then he dropped the nose slightly. But he was too low to come out of it in a dive. There was no need to run unnecessary risks.

Buck kicked the right rudder pedal and worked the stick in a skillful piece of timing. This time the roaring ship lost fifty feet of altitude, but she rolled out of it. They were flying right side up now—and headed westward.

Buck shook off the slight dizziness he felt. His keen eyes picked up two specks in the sky far ahead. The ship stealers were flying wide open.

Lou was shouting at him above the drum of the engine.

"Call your shots, Buck! Darn near—lost me."

Buck grinned.

"No time for more right now!" he shouted back.

"We're going—west!"

RED HENDY relaxed in the cockpit of the Arrow Special. Smiling grimly he twisted his head to the northward, waving a hand toward Charly Fox, who was flying the red-painted Waco. Hendy chuckled hoarsely.

"Dumb bunch, back there!" he muttered beneath the drum of the Buing's power plant. "Lucky for us, we didn't see that fellow Kent. Luck, being put wise to his crack up, too. We'll be across the line before they get things untangled!"

He chuckled again. One hundred and fifty dollars in his pocket, and two ships in the air. The Waco had been repainted after their steal of it, a week ago, just outside of Mobile. Two ships, and there would be a market for them across the line. Charly and he could pick up more money over there—and then South America.

Red swore softly. The tanks of both ships were full up. He'd seen to that early in the afternoon. It would be dark in an hour or in less time. He glanced toward the other ship, stiffened in the cockpit. Charly Fox had winged in closer, had an arm out in the prop wash—was pointing behind.

Hendy turned his head. Eastward was a ship, and not so far behind. And back of the ship were more specks in the sky. He counted three of them. Pursuit!

He smiled grimly. He had seen one ship take off, zooming off the field. Stunting. It had puzzled him,

but the ship had kept on stunting. Jones' plane, he guessed. The fellow who had bluffed he was Kent.

Fear gripped Red Hendy. He wasn't dumb, and he remembered several things. One of them was that the one who had called himself Jones had not taken off his helmet. Another was that he had come down in a rough landing. Tricks? Tricks to trap Charly Fox and himself?

He swore harshly, stared behind again. The ship was gaining, gaining steadily. Hendy fought to control the panic he felt. But the next second he was calmer. What could the pilot of the plane behind do, even if he did wing his ship up on even terms? Ram him in the sky? Take pot shots at him?

HE GRINNED. Even if the pilot were Buck Kent, he was sky chasing two planes. The chances were that his crate wasn't loaded with fuel. It would soon be dark. He would signal Charly to bank away, and separate by a mile or so. He twisted his head.

His eyes widened back of the goggles. His body was tense. He swore fiercely. Charly's ship was going down in a mild glide. The exhaust trail of smoke, thin and broken, streaked out behind.

"Yellow!" Red muttered. "Quitting!"

He jerked his head around. The ship behind was gaining steadily. She was less than a half mile behind now, and flying at a higher altitude than Red was winging his plane.

"It'll be dark soon. If I can climb, make the clouds—"

They were high, drifting around ten thousand. The ceiling of the Buing would be about fifteen. Hendy pulled back on the stick. The engine spluttered! He shoved the stick forward again and furiously worked the throttle. But the engine was missing badly now. He was forced to nose her down to keep flying speed.

Red Hendy knew then that they had been trapped. He stared to the left, but no landing field was in sight. To the right, however, an eighth of a mile away, was an open field. He nosed the ship toward it. Twisting his head, he saw that the ship behind was very close now, and nosing down, too.

Hendy reached into the pocket of his coat, and made certain his automatic was ready for instant use. He'd put up a fight, anyway. He was sky trapped, he knew that. But there was still a chance of getting away on the ground.

The Arrow was down low now. Hendy cut the spluttering engine, and leveled off. The plane was almost down when he noticed that the earth was soft

and soggy. He pulled back on the stick, stalled her. But even before she struck he knew that she was due for a ground loop. Fear caught him at the last second.

The plane struck heavily. Her tail assembly came up. Red Hendy groaned, released his grip on the stick, threw his arms before his face, as the plane nosed over and the prop dug into the soft ground—the left wing crumpled.

His body was flung sideways in the cockpit. His head battered against the fuselage curve. Hendy tried to fight off the blackness that swept over him, but failed. Everything went black—he lost consciousness!

BUCK KENT dropped the Ryan-engined plane low over the soggy field on which the Arrow Special had crashed. He shook his head grimly, as he saw the body of the man who had taken his name hanging limp in the cockpit of the wrecked plane.

Lou shouted to him:

“Get two thousand! I’ll jump for it!”

Buck shook his head. “Not worth it!” he replied. “We’ll stick up here, mark the spot out. They’ll ’phone from the field—”

He broke off. His eyes spotted a road cutting through the marshy ground. It was an eighth of a mile away, and difficult to see in the dusk. He roared the ship toward it. Buck Kent nodded his head, and dived the plane.

“Use your right hand this time!” Lou shouted grimly.

Buck used it. The landing was perfect, there was barely a jolt. No wind on the road and no traffic. The left wing came close to scraping a rise that suddenly appeared at one side, but didn’t scrape it. Lou was half out of the ship before she had rolled to a halt.

“If he’s conscious don’t be afraid of his gun!”

Buck called down to Lou from the front cockpit. “I unloaded it. Took it out of his coat while he was talking with Landers. Did that at the same time I watered the gas in his crate.”

Lou Parrish stared at Buck. “You watered the gas?” he muttered.

Buck grinned.

“Told you they wouldn’t get far, Lou!” he reminded. “Go get him! I’ll be along soon!”

RED HENDY frowned up at Buck Kent. His head was bandaged, and there was a small cut on the right side of his face. But the air crook wasn’t seriously hurt.

“Hello, Buck Kent!” Buck greeted him. “See you’ve got the steel-cuff craze. You and your pal. We’ve got him, too, you know.”

Hendy swore softly. But he didn’t speak. Buck smiled at him, a sort of grim smile.

“Sort of like your nerve,” he stated. “Got the wrong dope on my crash, though. That was another guy. You ran right into the gent you were impersonating, pilot. You were introduced to him. And you were so sure of yourself that when you were faking interviews in front of the stand, with the whole gang listening, I used a length of rubber hose on your gas—watered the fuel in yours and your pal’s crates.”

They were back at the new field. Landers was searching the man who had tried to impersonate Buck Kent. He straightened up, counted out some bills, and handed them to Buck.

“Hundred and fifty,” he stated. “And I’m sorry we didn’t spot you right, Kent. Guess that was a lefthanded landing of yours. You saved us from losing a crate, and we got the one they grabbed in Mobile. This bird’s pal has been talking, trying to save his neck.”

Buck handed back half the money. He grinned at Landers.

“Berry’ll need some of this to fix up his Buing,” he stated, “though she isn’t damaged badly. Could have prevented those birds from getting off, could have proved who I was, you know. But then these crooks might have bluffed out of it, said they was kidding. Had to find out what their game was.”

“You did,” Landers replied simply. “And those sky stunts you pulled—they got the crowd, Kent. Two women fainted!”

Red Hendy groaned. Buck Kent looked down at him. The crook was propped up against a fuel can awaiting the arrival of a deputy from Crissville.

“You can try that new game of leap frog in jail. Your pal will be along to play it with you,” Buck said cheerfully. “And if you run into any sky boys in the Big House, tell ’em I played fair with you.”

Buck went on slowly. He winked at Lou. “And you can’t say you didn’t have considerable sky room!”