



CLOUD TREASON

by FREDERICK C. DAVIS

*Nick Royce, sky-eatin' newsreel pilot, is back again!
And in tumbling skies he rides alone to bring traitor ships to showdown!*

NICK ROYCE BENT TO THE STICK. Running the DeHaviland at a thousand elevation, as slowly as we could fly and still hang in the air, he dived and swept me around in a big, smooth circle. Grabbing my chance, I ducked in the rear cubby, set my eye to the sight-finder of my camera, "shot" past the lowered left wing, and started grinding. We were part of that great sky-bustin', film-eatin' outfit called the Tip-Top World News Reel, and we were hot on the trail of another sizzling news break.

Below us, disaster! A coastwise steamer was tearing itself to pieces on a reef. Terrific gray swells rolled in from the open Atlantic and crashed against the cracked hulk. With each smashing blow of the water it lurched and battered down harder on the rocks. Bound for New York City, it had been driven off its course by sudden cyclonic winds during the night—driven to its doom.

The storm that had brought about its destruction had howled itself out; the sun was blazing now with ironic serenity; but the sea was still churning like mad. Wave after wave washed across the decks. Three lifeboats, torn from their moorings, were bobbing on the water. The passengers were still battened down in the saloon and lounge. Farther away, on the shore proper, a crew of coast-guards was waiting to launch boats, to carry them ashore, as soon as such a move ceased to be certain suicide. And did our ton-and-a-half D.H. wear pontoons? Yes, it did not! If anything went wrong, we'd drop right into Davy Jones' locker; which, as everyone knows, is no place for an aviator and a cameraman.

Royce, a genius at the controls, kept waltzing around that wreck, and I kept grinding in film. Great stuff! In New York and Boston, right at that minute, ten million people were waiting for definite news of that ship, of their friends and relatives on board. Nick Royce and me—well, we were doing our blamest to get that

news to them, fast as it was humanly possible, in motion pictures.

This little incident was proving to us all over again the great truth that news respects nobody. At any time of the day, from dawn to dusk, and maybe later, we news-reel hounds have got to be ready to hop! Nobody ever knows when a break is coming, but when it comes we've got to get into a plane and beat the cars to get the pictures. In order to make the exhibitors think as nicely of us as we want them to, we have to get the film through the baths and onto the Broadway screens faster than lubricated lightning.

This one had come while Nick and I—I being Art Buckley, super of the flying division of the reel, and leader of a hard life, if you ask me—this one had come while Nick and I were holding down the graveyard watch on the field. Somebody has to be there all the time, and it was our turn. We'd been listening to the radio we'd rigged up out of tin cans and old door-bells, and suddenly we'd heard the program stop. The announcer cut in to say that news had just been flashed of the *Eastern Star*, with three hundred and fifty passengers, aground on the most treacherous stretch of coast of Massachusetts. Hot news! Our meat!

GET the shots!

That motto, printed in glaring red capitals, is tacked all over the hangars and office shack on our field. Those words are branded into our brains, we've seen them so much. Every man-jack of our outfit is expected to get news for the Reel, and nothing else. Get into a plane! Zip her across the sky! Grind in the film! Don't waste a second! No excuses! Get the shots!

When dawn came creeping onto the tarmac, Nick had the engine of the D.H. warmed, I had my flicker machine mounted in the rear pit—and we were off!

There below us lay the wreck, the life-boats adrift, the coast-guards waiting to risk going out—and three hundred and fifty people imprisoned in a twisting, screeching monster of steel. The crystal eye of my old camera saw it all. I snatched out one cartridge, fed in another, made sure of my stop and, while Nick danced me all over the sky, kept grinding in. Pretty stuff; beautiful stuff!

What was that sound? Another motor!

I'd been so intent on my camera that I hadn't

heard it as soon as Nick Royce had. Looking up. I saw him gazing off the right wing, and turned the same way. There was another plane in the sky, sure enough: it was bright new, and across its side was a silver emblem and the words: Atlas News.

Seeing me gawking at the silver bird, Nick cut the gun and turned back.

"Where's that plane from, Art? Who's the Atlas News? Ever heard of 'em before?"

"Don't ask me any more, Nick," I answered gaspingly. "First I thought it must be one of the little independents—but none of 'em make enough money to buy planes like that one! They look like they're ready to do big business in the game!"

And I'd been feeling happy because we'd had the sky all to ourselves—for months, literally! The name of our outfit, as I've already said, is the Tip-Top World News Reel. Nick and I had been in the game when we were an independent, the World News; and during those not-so-good old days, we had to fight a competitor besides get the shots for ourselves. That competitor disappeared when the big Tip-Top corporation, biggest in the flicker business, bought us both out, and melted us together into a new organization. After that, months of nice, serene, smooth, fast news-getting had been so many months of joy. And now an unknown plane, but certainly a new competitor, had appeared in the very sky above us!

"Better take me around again, Nick," I suggested. "Something's happening down below now, and soon as I've shot it, we can head back to the home field. I want the dirt on that Atlas outfit, whatever it is!"

The motor roared up again, and Nick smoothed out in the air. Down on the beating shore, the coast-guards were attempting to push a boat out toward the reefed steamship. It was a brave and desperate effort—another thrill that Tip-Top just had to have in its celluloid record of the disaster. I trained my lens down, as Nick circled low as he dared, and began grinding again.

Then, suddenly, I went blind. Something dazzling bright struck my eyes, knocked all vision out of them. For a minute I didn't know what had happened. When I was able to look around again, I saw something—a white spot of brilliancy, flash across the wings. It shot along the fuselage, hovered around my camera, and then stuck to the

lens. Looking over at the other plane, I saw what it was, and my blood went hot.

The cameraman in the Atlas ship was reflecting the sun into my lens with a mirror—spoiling the shots! The devil! He wasn't trying to take pictures of his own yet—he was trying to ruin mine—and succeeding!

"Get away from him, Nick!" I roared.

Nick swooped away, banked swiftly. For a moment the beam of light was gone. Blinking, I began to shoot downward again, and then—*flick!*—the blamed spot got into my eyes again, and into the lens, and played hep with the pictures! The other plane was following, with that mirror, and following close!

What was happening down below? I couldn't see at first. Dodging the spotlight, I finally managed to find out that the coast-guards' boat had gone back, after fighting the waves a few minutes, and almost capsizing. I hadn't shot half of it—due to that infernal mirror!

Again Nick tried to get away from the other plane and the mirror—but it was too late now. The opportunity and my film were both gone. Mad as a wet hornet, I reached forward, tapped Nick's shoulder, and yelped:

"Hit for home!"

Nick ruddered the plane southward, and he settled to the trip back to our T on Long Island. As we left the scene of the wreck, the Atlas plane quit flashing the light on us, and the two palookas in it began to go about the business of getting some pictures of their own. I was so mad I couldn't even cuss. They had ruined for me the best shots of the day!

We didn't know then who the Atlas outfit was, or where its home field was, or how it had come into being; but we did know one thing for certain; it was out to fight us by fair means or foul.

NICK ROYCE glided down to the field. I grabbed my reels and hopped out. The door of the office shack had opened, and three men had come out.

"Art, did you get the shots?"

This was Gord Dugan, asking his favorite question. Before Tip-Top absorbed us, Gord had been chief editor of the World News, a man who roared through a day like a plane through the sky, a slave-driver that made you love him. Since the amalgamation, though, he had been promoted to a higher office, as manager of distribution, and he

no longer had any direct connection with us; but he simply couldn't stay away from the old field.

"Get 'em? I did! But listen, Dugan! Somebody's slipped one over on us! Would you mind telling me who and what the Atlas News is—and how they can get away with ruining my shots by flashing a mirror into my lens?"

Dugan looked sick, gnawed into his perfecto, and glared around at Bert Bartlett. Bartlett was a new man on the field, a wiry, hard-headed chap as full of grim determination as Dugan. He was filling Dugan's shoes as chief editor of the Tip-Top World News—and hopping around in them aplenty! Bartlett glared back.

"So they're at it already, are they?" Bartlett almost snarled. "Dang 'em. They've certainly put over a slick one, those Super-Art-Film people."

"Super-Art-Film!" I blatted. "Boss, do you mean to say that Super-Art is behind this new Atlas caboodle?"

"Gimme those films," Bartlett growled, grabbing them out of my hands. He turned around to the third man, at his elbow, and shoved them at him. "Here, Jenner!" Jenner was a cotton-headed pilot that had come into Tip-Top from our old rival, the Compass News. "Jump into that flivver and get these films to the lab as fast as you can. Stop everything else. These things have got to get onto Broadway in time for the first afternoon show—or somebody'll pay for it with their jobs!"

"Gosh, Boss," I put in. "One of those reels is all to the good, but the other is ruined. I tell you, that Atlas plane flashed a mirror into my lens and ruined the best shots I tried to get!"

"Art, come with me—and you too, Nick."

Dugan trudged into the office shack, Bartlett right behind him. I followed. Dugan began to talk.

"This is almost as much a surprise to us as it is to you, Art," he said, looking around for Royce, who hadn't yet come in. I thought Nick was still out, feeling over the motor, as he liked to do. "We didn't know anything about it until late last night. For months, ever since Tip-Top began releasing the new Reel, Super-Art has been quietly organizing a reel of their own—and now it's going full blast. Slick! Devilish slick! None of us dreamed it was happening—until the first release of the reel appeared on the screens last night. I've got to admit, the reel was good—and believe me, man, they intend to fight!"

Fight? Super-Art fight Tip-Top? Why, the battle had been going on for years, and this was only a new phase of it. Super-Art was the one producing corporation in the celluloid game that could buck Tip-Top proper. Between them they had corailed the world's best directors, writers and stars; and they were always scrapping for new ones. They fought with advertising, they fought with propaganda, they fought with talent, they fought with any means that came to hand. Super-Art fight Tip-Top? Yes, sir!

"The worst of it is," Bartlett went on, "we weren't smart enough to figure out their move before hand. They've got the jump on us, and a big jump. They control more theatres from coast to coast than we do. We've been losing contracts with individual exhibitors rapidly, and they've been gaining them. More than that, our camera'men in the field, free-lancers mostly, have been turning over some of their best stuff to Atlas on the promise of bigger money, and saying nothing to us about it. They've been fighting us for months, and winning, and we didn't even know it!"

"Where's Nick?" Dugan asked suddenly. "I asked him to come in here and hear this sob-story too."

"They used a mirror on you, you say, Art," Bartlett went on, his lips thinning. "Dirty work, eh? That's the sort of thing we've got to expect from them, is it? They ruined our shots today! Blame 'em! That means only one thing. Art—we've got to buckle down and play the game square and hard. And no matter how they fight us, we've got to keep on getting the shots!"

"I got cha, Boss!" I came back. This was like the good old days, sure enough! Get the shots, and the devil take the hindermost! Why not? We were in a game that demanded the utmost in speed. A few seconds might spell the difference between great triumph and utter failure—for the films that got to Broadway first, in the case of the big breaks, got the booking and the glory. "I got cha! But say, can't we go over to their field, wherever it is. and make 'em leave off the dirty work?"

Bartlett laughed bitterly. "Do you still believe in Santa Claus, Art? If we tried that, we'd get a big horse laugh for our pains. I tell you, all we can do is grin and bear it—and fight."

"Say, where's Nick?" Dugan asked again, looking around. "That boy needs to hear all about this deal, and—h'lo, Nick. Where you been?"

Nick Royce, boyish, tall, blue eyed, pushed open the door as Dugan spoke. At Dugan's question he flushed a little, and grinned.

"Busy," he answered. "Dugan, I guess I've sized up this new bend in the game. We've got to fight Super-Art and Atlas to get the shots. You know you can depend on me, Dugan."

"I know it, Nick," Dugan answered. These two liked each other, and I knew Nick was sorry that Dugan wasn't bossing the field any longer. "And right now I've got to get back to the office. Let me know how the steamer shots come through, Bartlett."

"So long, Dugan."

DUGAN grabbed the door-knob. Halfway out the door he stopped in his tracks, stared ahead, bit into his perfect, and growled like a wild animal. The tinny rattling that came from outside told us that a flivver was stopping. Dugan ran out, and then came hurrying back, meeting us at the door with Jenner, the other pilot, beside him.

One look at that flivver was enough. It was a wreck. How it had ever managed to get back to the field under its own power is a thing that only one man in Detroit knows anything about. One whole side of it was a washout. The fender was ripped off, the hood was knocked cock-eyed, the windshield was smashed back, and the door could be taken off and used as a washboard without any further processing at all. All it needed to be put back into shape was a new body, a new chassis and a new lease on life!

Jenner came limping in. On his forehead was a nasty red mark that looked as though he had bumped something hard. He sank into a chair and felt of his knee.

"I'm all right, I'm all right," he said quickly. "I tell you, I'm all right. Just jolted, that's all. When the other car hit me I was knocked clean out of that flivver onto the side of the road—otherwise I'd be hash now!"

Dugan was thinking fast. "Listen, Nick!" he blurted at Royce. "You've got to get Art's reels to the lab, quick! We've wasted time here. Fly in as far as you can, and then grab a taxi. Jenner, turn the films over to Nick, and he'll—"

"Boss," blurted Jenner, "the films're gone!"

"Gone!" we all barked.

"Certainly! Oh, I see! You think I had just a

plain accident. No, sir. If I'd been able, I'd have taken the films right along to the lab—but the films're gone. The big guys got out of the car and ran over to me, and—"

"Wait a minute, Jenner," Bartlett cut in. "Begin at the beginning, and don't leave out any details."

"All right," Jenner answered sourly. "I was hitting it up for the lab along the road, see? I was perhaps halfway there, and looking out for cops behind me. Around the bend came a big sedan—an old one, weighing about four tons. It was going slow, and it started to come over on my side of the road, right at me. I honked and tried to dodge it, but it came right on. *Crash!*

"It *tried* to hit me, see? And it sure did. First thing I knew, I was lying on the road, and two big guys were fishing in my coat pockets for the reels of film. They got 'em while I was half conked out, got back into the car, and beat it. That's all I know about it—except I'm lucky I'm alive."

"Atlas!" Dugan barked.

"Atlas!" Bartlett snarled.

"Atlas!" I yowled.

"The dirty crooks!" Bartlett went on. "They're certainly out to lick us! They ruin one half of the films in the sky, and then get 'em all, to make sure we don't beat 'em to the screen. The—dirty—bums!"

Dugan was chawing on his perfecto and stomping back and forth across the office. "All right, all right. Let's quit callin' 'em names and get busy on the job. We've lost our films. They'll probably beat us to the screen this time. But we're not licked yet!"

"How come?" I gulped.

"Easy!" Bartlett had got the same idea. "That steamship's still out there. Things haven't changed much. We can still get some shots of it Atlas thinks we're licked, so they'll take their time getting their own stuff through the baths. If we move fast, we can get some new shots of the ship—and we stand a good chance of breaking even on the deal!"

"Do it over again, eh?" I said. "I got cha! No sooner said than done! Nick, get that plane of ours hot again, and well hop sooner 'n you can say—"

Nick Royce had turned and was running across the tarmac already. Nick wasn't a boy to chatter very much, but he was there on the action. While he was hurrying out to the D. H., I turned to the lockers in the corner for more film.

"Good work, Bartlett," Dugan said quickly. "I'm

depending on you boys to get the stuff. I know you can do it. I'll see that you get all possible co-operation from the lab and my department. Right now I'm heading back to the office—and I'll be waiting for your new stuff to come in."

"Depend on me, Dugan!" Bartlett answered.

Dugan ducked out the door. Just then the roar of the D.H.'s motor burst out—Nick Royce had made contact and turned her over. Dugan's blue roadster skimmed across a corner of the field, and he was gone. I'd found the film in the locker, and was striding toward the door.

"Jenner, you'd better go home and get rested up a bit. Come around in the morning as usual," Bartlett said.

"Oh, I'm all right," Jenner protested again, but he rose, and began shambling toward his wreck of a flivver.

I raced to the D.H. and legged into the rear pit Bartlett came right after me. Just as he got there, Nick Royce jumped out of the fore cubby, and began hurrying toward the shack again. Bartlett turned around and watched him go. Then he stepped closer to me, frowning like a storm-cloud, and started talking in a low voice.

"Art, what do you think about this deal?"

"Huh?"

"See anything funny about it?"

"What do you mean, Boss?"

"I mean this," Bartlett explained. "How did it happen that the Atlas plane got into the sky at just the same time we did this morning? How did it happen that Atlas knew Jenner was coming with the films in that flivver of his? Both those things weren't coincidences. It looks to me as though somebody tipped Atlas off—both times."

I PLUMB forgot my camera and stared. "By gosh! I hadn't thought of that! Come to think of it, it is funny the Atlas plane met us over the wreck—because we were there mighty early. And just as you say—how could anybody else know that Jenner was coming in that flivver? Whoever bumped him must've known what car to look for."

"Exactly. Somebody tipped off Atlas both times. Somebody on this field!"

"Wait a minute. Boss." I came back. "Who could it be? Only Nick and me knew we were taking-off this morning when we did—you weren't even here yet. Only the four of us knew that Jenner was

going off in that flivver when he did. You can't get around that!"

"Yes, I can get around that," Jenner answered, in a still lower voice. "Listen. Did you notice that Nick Royce wasn't around for a minute or two, when we started talking in the office? He didn't show up until we were through. Where was he then—answer me that?"

"Boss," I came back, "if you think Royce would do a thing like that, you're dead wrong. I know that boy too well."

"Yeah?" Bartlett drawled. "Well, I don't. And I happen to know something else. Yesterday I went across the road, to that garage right over there, to get a flat fixed. While I was in there. Mike, the guy that runs it. asked me. 'Is your phone out of order over there?' I told him it wasn't, so far as I knew, and asked him why he wondered. He said, 'Why, Nick Royce has been over here half a dozen times a day using ours.' Get that?"

I gulped.

"While we were talking in the shack, right after you came back, I happened to be standing close to the window." Bartlett went on. "I could see across the road. And, Art, I saw Nick Royce go over to that garage, and come back a few minutes later. Now what do you think of that?"

"You've got me. Boss," I admitted, "but Nick Royce wouldn't—"

"Wait a minute." Bartlett interrupted again. "Think back to early this morning, when you took off for the wreck. Do you happen to remember if Royce did any telephoning then?"

I began to get sick around my belt buckle. "I wish you hadn't asked me that, Boss," I answered. "I've got to admit—Nick kept us waiting a few minutes this morning. I stayed in the plane while he went back to the office. I saw him through the doorway. He was telephoning, but—"

"Ah!" Bartlett sighed. "I thought so! Then that's the explanation. Nick Royce has been bought out by Atlas, and he's tipping 'em off to our moves every time—"

"Boss, hold on!" I snapped back. "I admit, it looks bad for Nick—but that's because you don't know Nick. You're new to this field, and you haven't seen Nick grow up in the game, as I have. Dugan, why Dugan would bank his roll on Nick in any scrape. Nick's as honest as the day is long; he couldn't do a crooked thing if he tried to. He's

risked his life fifty times for the Reel, and he's brought home the bacon oftener than any other man in the game. Nick Royce double-cross us? Never!"

"You forget a few things," Bartlett came back—and I knew I hadn't made an impression on him. Nick Royce was so young, looked so tender and boyish, that he couldn't believe Nick was as courageous and daring as only Nick could be. "Nick played square for Dugan—because Dugan gave him a chance in the game. That was when the outfit was a small independent. Dugan isn't bossing Nick any more. This isn't a little gang any longer—it's a big corporation. Nick may think that he doesn't owe me the loyalty he owed Dugan, and so—"

"Listen, Boss," I came back. "Nick wouldn't sell out. He wouldn't do it—for the sake of his wife, if for nobody else. Ever see her—that little kitten of a girl he married? He means the world to her, and she worships him. Even if he *wanted* to sell out, which he never would, just thinking of her would keep him from it."

There's no sentiment in Bartlett, not an atom. "Let's come back to facts. Somebody tipped off Atlas that Jenner was coming with the films in that flivver. Jenner was on the way; that eliminates him. You were with us all the time; that eliminates you. Only Nick was missing—and he went to telephone. Now, Art, explain that!"

I couldn't!

"And also, explain where Nick is right this minute—and what he's doing."

Nick was still gone.

"Art, come with me!" Bartlett commanded.

Still sicker, I hopped out and followed Bartlett. We crossed the tarmac toward the office, passing Jenner on the way, who was looking over his wrecked lizzie. At the door of the office shack we stopped a minute.

Inside Nick was talking. And Nick was alone in there! Alone with the telephone!

Bartlett pushed open the door. Nick was just putting the receiver back. He looked up, a bit frightened, and began to blush.

"Ready to take off, Nick?" Bartlett demanded.

"Sure."

"Had to stop to phone?"

"Yes, sir," Nick answered.

"Mind tellin' me who you called?"

"Why—yes, I do mind." Bartlett's eyes flashed at Nick; and Nick looked down, fiddling with the wedding-ring he wears. I could just gawp and listen.

"Calling home, I suppose," Bartlett sneered. "Wanted to have a little talk with the wife before hopping off, eh?"

Nick frowned. "I wasn't calling home, Boss," he answered. "But don't ask me any more questions about it, because I won't answer 'em!"

Bartlett looked at me triumphantly. All I could do was keep on gawping. This was all past me. I couldn't figure it out. Nick had always been so straight and square, but now—! Good gosh!

"All right, Nick," Bartlett snapped. He was looking through the window, at Jenner, still on the field. "I've changed my mind. Jenner can take Art back to the shipwreck. You—you can go home!"

Nick blinked. "All right, Boss, if you say so,"—and he said no more.

Good gosh! Was this Nick Royce? He wasn't even trying to defend himself! He looked guilty, too—actually looked guilty. Good gosh!

Zong!—the telephone.

"Get goin', Art!" Bartlett barked.

"Jenner'll take you up in a minute!"

BARTLETT ducked out the door. Nick looked around and started to go. Now, Nick and I were the best of friends. We'd buddied together ever since he came hunting a job on this very field. Right now was his chance to tell me the straight of this whole nasty business; but he didn't say a word, not a word. He went out.

I started to follow him, but *zong!* the telephone rang again. I grabbed it and yelled hello.

"At you, Buckley?" came a voice. "This is Dugan. I've just got tipped off, by Wilson over on the *Moon*, that the coast guard is getting into action on the wreck. Get there fast, or you'll miss it; and if you get it, we'll have Atlas beat forty ways and back!"

"I'm startin' now!" I shouted back, and went running out the door.

Bartlett was standing with Jenner by the lizzie. They started running toward the D.H. with me, and I told them the new break. Jenner, in spite of his bad knee and bumped head, was going to pilot me on the trip. Game guy, I thought! The prop was turning over, the engine idling, as Jenner climbed

into the fore cubby and settled to the controls. I clambered in behind my machine as the prop roared up, and the trucks hopped the blocks.

"Get the shots!" Bartlett yelled at us as we trundled away.

As the ship sped along, I gave one last look around, hunting for Nick Royce. He was worrying me considerable! He was nowhere on the field, though, and I decided he'd gone home. Blame it all!

Jenner took the plane off, and we roared up. We climbed at a rather steep angle, and Jenner looked back at me, as though wondering if something was wrong. We kept climbing, and then leveled, and deadheaded toward the north with throttle open wide.

The plane wasn't handling just right, I thought; but, being a crank-turner and not a stick-pusher, I decided I didn't know anything about it anyhow, and let it go.

The old D.H. tore across the sky line like a thoroughbred down the home stretch. I kept looking around. The sky was clear, no other plane was in sight. Thank Jehoshaphat! This time we were really having the sky all to ourselves, with no Atlas plane to jam the works. I set my stop, fed through a cartridge, and made ready to shoot some rare stuff.

At last the coastline grew rocky below us, and the wreck came into view. The water had stilled somewhat, and boats of the coast guard were already putting out. We swept along, until we reached a point above the steamer; then Jenner began to circle. The big ship wobbled and logged, but then steadied; and I began turning the crank.

The wrecked ship had settled lower on the rocks. It was steady now. Some passengers were moving across the deck. Officers were pacing the bridge. Hundreds of yards of bad water separated the wreck from the mainland. The coast-guard was launching a boat.

In it men in rubber coats and hats were bending to the oars, fighting the swells. The little shell of a boat teetered, bobbed, tilted end to end as the rolls came in from the open ocean. As Jenner swept me low, I glued my lens to that boat and kept the crank turning. The men in it plied at the oars like slaves, fighting inch by inch toward the big crippled steamer.

And then it happened.

The boat capsized. Two breakers, parted by the hull of the steamer, rolling at an angle, caught the boat at the same time. It turned over in an instant, as though Neptune's diabolical hand had reached up and pushed it. Men were thrown off the seats, oars were scattered; the boat settled bottomside up. The men scrambled in the water, fighting the rush and flow of it, struggling out of their coats, toward the boat. They were halfway between shore and steamer—and death was waiting for them right then!

And my lens caught it all! Glory be! I got the whole thing on my film! It was something that no other reel in the world could touch. Nobody but Tip-Top could have that shot. It was priceless!

Another boat started pushing out from the water's edge, making a desperate attempt to rescue the first. The men at the oars bent and heaved, while the sea fought them. They reached the upturned boat after a game fight, and groped for the struggling men. One after another they picked the men from the water; and then they turned back. After minutes of torturous work, they beached again.

I didn't know until later that two men had died in the water below us.

Jenner kept circling. I kept turning my crank. I shot the wreck from all angles, getting the same shots that we had lost that morning. The light was better now, therefore I knew that if we ever got to the screen with my stuff, it would outshine Atlas's forward and back. I kept grinding, yes sir, until my last inch of film was gone.

I tapped Jenner's shoulder; he nodded, whipped the ship around awkwardly, and started back for our T on Long Island. With a sigh I rested.

We sped. The motor roared. The prop was a mere ghost of a blur. The exhaust thundered through the sky. We climbed steadily. The coastline unreeled under us. The upper tip of Long Island came into view. It slid along smoothly. Then, at last, I spotted our T. We were still flying level, and I was hunching out of the backwash. I wondered why Jenner didn't fly lower.

He was bending in the cockpit, working at something. The ship kept flying level. I could see the stick in my cubby—dual controls—jerking a bit. The nose of the D.H. dropped, and we began to roar downward. Jenner kept working at something in the pit. At last he raised, looked back and yelled:

"Pull the stick!"

I grabbed the stick and pulled—but it wouldn't budge, and nothing happened. Jenner saw that. He turned back, and again struggled with his. Then he cut the gun, after an agonized minute, and yelled again:

"Art, the stick's froze!"

Stick froze! I'm not a pilot, but I knew that meant a crash. Something had happened to prevent Jenner's maneuvering the D.H. For a minute we kept nosing down faster; then Jenner jammed on the gas again, the nose of the plane rose a bit. We both turned back, grabbed our sticks, and pushed and pulled—and nothing happened.

The ton-and-a-half plane was hurtling downward at terrific speed—hurtling to destruction.

Jenner yelled again. "Jump, Art! Don't wait! Jump right now!"

Nobody in that plane waited! Jenner was even then getting into his chute. There was another crammed beside the seat in my compartment. I reached for it, while the earth whizzed up at us. I wriggled into the harness, while Jenner rose in his seat, ready to go.

He jumped. He leaped far out, and turned over twice. Five long seconds passed; then his pilot chute flicked out, and the big silk umbrella poomed after it. He began settling slower—and the plane was plunging down faster every minute.

I was white and sick. It was the first time I ever had to leave a plane in midair. I was almost out of my head. All I could do was imitate Jenner's leap. I hung to the cowlings a minute, expecting to die—and then jumped. The hardest thing I ever did was to wait five seconds before pulling the rip-cord. Then, zip! I pulled it. *Flack!* the pilot chute came out. *Boom!* the big one followed. Swinging like a pendulum I began floating earthward.

Thousands of feet below lay our T. Jenner was hanging in the air not far away and we both, it seemed, were dropping toward our field. The plane was spiralling, roaring toward earth like a demon gone mad.

"Good gosh!" I yelled suddenly.

"My shots!"

They were still in the plane, still in the camera! Because of the terrific backwash, I'd wanted to wait until landing to unload the machine. During those fast, sick, terrorized moments before Jenner jumped, I'd been concerned only with getting the

stick to move. I admit it—I lost my head. And my shots were still in that ship—including some of the best shots I'd ever made, and the present salvation of the Reel. They were going toward the earth and annihilation, faster every second.

Sick and weak, I watched the plane. And as I watched it I couldn't believe my eyes. Because that plane was coming out of its dive. Slowly, gracefully and surely, it sliced out of that dive, and began to ease toward level. After a minute it was level and deadheading—and it kept level a long time. Then, suddenly, it zoomed—began to climb. Actually, it climbed! It went far above us!

JENNER was watching it too. I couldn't tear my eyes from it. The blamed plane was bewitched!

The plane was flying all by itself—and doing pretty well!

It took more altitude, flew around a while, and then began to glide down. It behaved exactly as though a kindly angel had hopped off a nearby cloud and taken over the controls! Then it began to get ready to land! That empty plane went right about its business of making a landing!

Then I hit ground. I looked around, dazed, and got up. Jenner was standing not far away, getting out of his harness. I shed mine also. We had landed a hundred yards from our field. Both of us stared up, watching that freak plane in the sky. It was heading for the earth again—straight for the field. We began to run toward it.

We watched it circle. Bartlett ran out of the office and rattled out fifty or so questions, but we couldn't answer. The plane mushed out, and started at us. It struck the sand lightly, and trundled in.

There was a man in the fore pit! Even before the plane came to a full stop he jumped out. I swear to gosh, it was none other than young Nick Royce!

Right then I understood why the D.H. had handled so queerly when Jenner was at the controls—why it had behaved as though its tail were too heavy!

Nick ran toward us. Before Jenner he drew up and pushed out one hand. In it were two little wooden wedges.

"You crook!" he yelled. "Jenner, you crook! You pushed these wedges into the base of the stick to make Art think it was froze! You wanted that plane to crash—you wanted Art to lose his shots! You—Atlas—crook!"

Jenner turned green. His face proved him guilty. He started to run; but Nick Royce was quicker. He blocked Jenner's path and—*crack!*—planted his fist on Jenner's chin. Like a stuck bull Jenner dropped.

"What's up?" Bartlett yelled. "What's up?"

"You heard me!" Nick Royce snapped back.

"Listen! You almost accused me of tipping off Atlas. Under the circumstances, I couldn't tell you I suspected Jenner was the man. Why did I? Simple! His story about a sedan crashing into his flivver is a lie. If it had really happened, the left side of his car would be smashed, wouldn't it? Well, look at that flivver! It's the right side that's smashed! That means Jenner deliberately drove into a wall or something, and faked the accident—to keep our shots from getting to the screen ahead of Atlas's!"

Bartlett stared at the limp Jenner and growled.

"I played a hunch, that's all. With Jenner piloting, Art, I expected something else to happen. I slipped back into the tail of that D.H., knowing it wouldn't be any loss if nothing happened—and thinking maybe I could be of some help if something did. And, boy it did! Now lemme go!"

Nick pushed past Bartlett into the office. I turned and ran to the D.H. In the rear cubby, thank my stars, I found one reel of film, the reel I'd dropped. Feverishly I fished the other one out of the camera. While I answered Bartlett's questions, I pushed them into his hands.

"Get 'em into the lab quick!" I said. "They've got Atlas's shots beat a hundred miles. Move!"

"Whoops!"

That yell came from inside the office. We stared in. Nick Royce was in there, and he was hugging the telephone as though it were a long lost brother. Then he dropped it, and came striding out, grins all over his face.

"Whoops!"

"Why all the whoops. Nick?" I demanded dizzily. "What's eatin' you?"

"Now you boys can kid me all you want!" Nick chattered. "Let loose all the kidding you want—I don't care now. Mollie—why, bless her heart! *Whoops!* Art, Boss—I've just called the hospital again and—*it's a boy!*"