



FREE AIR IS RIGHT!

by **RAOUL WHITFIELD**

A balloon broken loose—a Mississippi tornado! Buck Kent and Lou Parrish find perilous action.

THE GRAY-PAINTED two-place ship roared through the sky, eastward. It was around two in the afternoon; "Buck" Kent had been at the controls since dawn, and he was growing tired.

The air was bad—bumpy and hot. The plane was winging above the green foliage of Mississippi.

Buck twisted in the cockpit and grinned back toward the rear seat. Lou Parrish pointed down over the side, to the westward. The Gulf of Mexico showed green-blue in the bright sunlight. Palms dotted the narrow strip of sand along the waters edge.

Lou leaned forward in the cockpit.

His lips moved. Buck cut the throttle speed down,

gliding mildly. He could hear his pal's voice above the rumble of the engine now.

"How about getting down—eats and a swim?" Lou grinned as he spoke.

Buck shook his head. He shouted back at his mechanic pal. It was so hot that neither of them were wearing the phone sets strapped over the leather of their helmets, which allowed low-tone conversation.

"The sand's too tricky, Lou!" He twisted his head to the northward, got an arm out in the prop wash, and pointed. "Something going on—down there!"

Both flyers stared down toward a square in the green foliage. The square was brown in color, and was a level stretch of earth. A field, fairly large, with crowds

of people on it. Tents were erected around the sides of the field; there were flags flying.

Lou Parrish leaned forward and moved an arm across the two feet of curving fuselage that separated the two cockpits. He touched Buck on the shoulder. The pilot glided the ship again, after a sharp bank—and this time toward the square of brown.

“Carnival!” Lou shouted above the whine of wind through the ship’s rigging. “Good place to eat!”

Buck nodded. Not only a good place to eat, he was thinking, but a good place to get fuel—and very likely a pretty fair landing spot.

He narrowed his blue eyes back of the goggle-glass, and stared down at the spot toward which the Ryan-engined ship was gliding.

THEY were almost over the field now, and gliding at an altitude of about four thousand feet. Buck could see the heads of people, tilted back. They were staring up at the plane. He smiled slightly, jerking his head around.

“Sit tight, Lou—we’ll give ‘em some stunts, before we ‘drop’ down!”

Lou grinned and nodded his head. Buck nosed the two-place ship over steeply. She roared straight down over the field. Then he pulled back on the stick, and the nose of the ship whipped upward.

Her wires and struts screamed in the fury of the wind. She was climbing straight up toward the clouds now—on her back—now over in a perfect loop.

He pulled her out of the loop almost instantly and went into a vertical sideslip. Wing to the clouds, wing to the earth, she slipped toward the field.

Kicking right rudder, giving her. right stick, he got her out of the slip, then zoomed her—and at the peak of the zoom, as she was going over on her back, Buck executed a perfect barrel roll. Then, dropping down in a series of tight spirals, he glided for the north end of the field.

The crowd was scattering now, clearing the field. A man riding a black horse, and wearing a huge sombrero, was galloping out from the side of the square. He was waving his arms wildly.

Buck grinned. He banked the plane around, circled the field. And at the south end, he saw a balloon.

He grunted. The bag was a big one, and from the altitude of five hundred feet he could see that it was only half inflated. The thing that surprised him was that the carnival was using a balloon. Planes had pretty well displaced such things as balloon ascents, and most

of the carnivals that went into the air were using the heavier-than-air vehicles.

He banked again and glided steeply. The wind was from the north. He would bank again at the south end of the field and land headed into the breeze. The brown color was close-clipped and dried grass. The spot was fine for a landing.

Moving the stick to the left, he gave the ship left rudder and banked sharply. Then he slipped the two-place ship several hundred feet, straightened her out, and glided for the landing.

His eyes made sure that the field was clear. Lower and lower the ship dropped. He pulled back on the stick. The nose came up. The tail-skid and wheels would strike the clipped grass in approximately the center of the square.

SHE struck—bounced slightly. A gust of wind, unexpected, kicked her a bit to the right. He kicked left rudder to compensate for the swing, as she struck for the second time. The field was very dry, the earth hard. It was a faster landing than Buck had expected to make.

The ship was rolling now. She was blind, directly ahead, and Buck was staring to the right of the whirling prop. He heard a hoarse shout from Lou.

“Look out, Buck! A kid—running out!”

Buck Kent turned his head and saw the boy. He was running directly into the path of the rolling plane, chasing a dog. There was just one thing to do—and Buck Kent did it.

He kicked right rudder. The plane swung to the right. The crowd scattered, on that side of the field. Buck shoved the throttle forward, muttering a little prayer.

The engine roared. The ship picked up speed. He pulled back on the stick—and zoomed off the earth, over the heads of the crowd. The engine had not failed him!

He half turned his head; there was a twisted smile on Lou’s face. He looked pretty white.

“Close, Buck!” he muttered. “Darned close!”

His lips framed the words against the roar of the Ryan engine. Buck nodded and banked around again. He stared over the side. The boy had the dog in his arms. He was running toward the side of the field over which the two-place ship had zoomed. Buck smiled grimly, glided around into the wind, and made a second landing.

It was a slow one this time, and the plane rolled to a halt, almost in the center of the field.

He cut the throttle immediately; the whirling propeller ceased to turn. Both he and Lou climbed down.

People were coming out to inspect the ship; the man on the black horse rode out ahead of them. Buck and Lou were jerking off their helmets and goggles, as he pulled up beside the plane and slipped out of the saddle.

He was a big man, with a hard expression in his eyes. He had a deep voice, and he spoke sharply.

"What's the idea—comin' down this way? You nearly ran down that kid. This here's a private field. I'm hirin' it—an' you're gettin' off it, right away!"

BUCK KENT stared at the big man. He was tired; the heat and the strain of the long trip had told on him. He fought to control himself.

"Took plenty of time coming in," he stated quietly. "Didn't figure on the boy running out. Guess he thought his dog was going to get hit. I got off again—no one's hurt. We've had a long trip, and we need fuel——"

"You won't get it here!" the big man interrupted grimly. "An' I'm not worrying about your trip. This is a private strip of land——"

His voice trailed off. Buck Kent looked at Lou Parrish. The mechanic's eyes were narrowed. He had a quick temper, and it wasn't the place for such a thing. Buck shook his head at Lou. "Steady, Lou!" he warned. "It's the heat bothering him——"

He broke off. A crowd had gathered around the ship; through it came the slim figure of a girl. She was dressed in knickers, wore a trim, khaki shirt and held a leather helmet in one diand. Ller face was flushed, and there was scorn in her eyes. She halted beside the big man, and looked first at Lou, then at Buck.

"Who piloted this plane down?" she snapped angrily.

Buck spoke in a steady tone. There was a slight smile on his face.

"I'm the guilty one," he stated. "We need gas and oil—we've had a long flight——"

The girl stopped him with an impatient gesture.

"I wouldn't be surprised if Longford sent you over here—to spoil my ascension!" she cut in.

Buck Kent shook his head.

"Never heard of the gent," he stated. "We've been flying out west, Lou and myself. Heading for Florida on a sort of sight-seeing tour. Saw the field, and dropped down."

The girl smiled coldly. "But not until you'd looped and done some other stunts. You've spoiled my balloon stuff!"

Buck frowned. "I'm sorry," he said simply. "Just thought I'd give the crowd a thrill. I didn't know anything about the balloon——"

The girl's eyes were flashing. She interrupted him again.

"You didn't see the bag being inflated? Or perhaps you just thought it was for show!"

Buck grinned. "Didn't think very much about it!" he said slowly. "Seemed sort of funny for a balloon to——"

The girl stamped her foot and turned toward the big man.

"Longford sent him over!" she cried. "He's trying to spoil the big act, Jake! They ought to be——"

She stopped; her eyes swept over Buck and Lou. The big man jerked his sombrero over one side of his head.

"You gents can have sixty seconds to take that tin can off this field!" he snapped. "If you ain't gone by that time——"

LOU PARRISH dropped a hand toward his left thigh. Buck shook his head toward the mechanic.

"Easy, Lou!" he warned. "These folks have rented the field. Some one named Longford has been trying to cut in on their business—and we just happened to drop down at the wrong lime. No use flaring up."

Buck turned toward the girl. She had brown eyes and hair, and a sun-browned face. There was an ironical smile playing about her lips.

"I've told you the truth—we never heard of any Longford. If you'll let us have some gas——"

She laughed, and it wasn't exactly a pleasant laugh. Buck shrugged his shoulders. The girl spoke grimly.

"I don't believe you—and please take your plane off the field right away! You nearly hit a boy, making the landing. We don't want you here."

Buck Kent pulled his leather helmet over his curly, red hair. His lean face was expressionless. He turned toward Lou.

"Let's take off, and pick a field somewhere near here, Lou. We won't charge these folks anything for the stunts. We'd better get down and stake the ship out—looks like a bit of a blow over to the eastward."

Buck's eyes had noted the sudden darkening of the sky, on the eastern horizon. And the wind was dropping; the air was sultry, heavy.

The girl started to say something, then changed her mind. The big man swore half beneath his breath. Buck climbed into the front cockpit of the plane. The gas was pretty low—but there was some left in the tank.

Lou Parrish climbed into the rear cockpit and jerked the helmet over his head. His gray eyes held an angry expression; he muttered at the big man, who had cupped his hands and was addressing the gathered crowd.

“Please clear the way for this plane to take off—the pilot has no right on this field! He is not connected with the show. The balloon ascension will take place as usual, in one half hour—thirty minutes! ‘Dearie’ Daring will perform on the trapeze—besides tossing the lucky numbers from the prize bag!”

The crowd scattered. Buck Kent twisted his head.

“Thanks for your hospitality!” he called toward the big man and the girl. “I don’t suppose you mind my using the air around here—reckon that’s free!”

The big man smiled grimly. He said nothing. It was the girl who spoke.

“Free air is right!” she stated cheerfully. “Take it, please!”

BUCK grinned. He pressed the self-starter button; the engine roared. Actually, Buck was pretty sore. But he kept control of himself. They had been kicked off the field after they had done a few stunts for the crowd. They had risked the plane and their lives in zooming out for the running boy—and then had been accused of trying to hurt the carnival business.

Now, with very little gas, and a storm brewing, he shoved the throttle forward. The ship rolled over the clipped grass. Buck swore softly to himself as he lifted the ship into the air. The sky looked bad. To the east it was an angry black—and the color was spreading westward.

He stared ahead. Perhaps a mile northward of the carnival field was a smaller field. At one end was a pole; atop the pole was a sock, showing the wind direction. A landing field, or an abandoned flying field.

It was not probable that the girl had failed to see the field. She had probably made several balloon ascensions. Very likely the big man had known of it, too. Yet neither of them had told Buck of its existence.

He smiled grimly and roared the ship toward it. Circling twice, he came down in a mild glide, making a perfect landing. He and Lou climbed over the side. They grinned at each other.

“Nice gent—that big bird!” Lou muttered, his gray eyes twinkling. “He sure knew this field was here.”

Buck nodded. He pointed toward the darkening sky and shook his head.

“Looks like we’re going to have bad weather, Lou. This is tricky country at this time of the year. If that girl’s going to do any balloon stuff she’d better hurry it up!”

The mechanic nodded. “Good-looker—she was!” he muttered. “Plenty of fight, though. Dearie Daring, the big gent called her. Bet her real name’s Mary Jones, or something like that!”

Buck smiled. He stood motionless, staring toward the eastern sky. The black color was spreading; it had a peculiar formation. There was a dark splotch, low to the ground. The faint wailing of a siren reached his ears.

“They’re rushing her act!” Lou muttered. “Getting it in before the rain comes.”

Buck nodded. He stood near the tail assembly of the two-place ship, staring toward the sky above the carnival field.

He felt sort of sorry for the girl and the big man. Evidently they were having trouble with some other carnival—and with planes competing with the balloon ascent. The girl hadn’t been such a bad sort; plainly she hadn’t believed him when he’d said Longford was unknown to him.

He turned toward Lou Parrish.

“Let’s stake the crate down, Lou,” he said, “before that black stuff gets over this way. It’s moving mighty fast, and we——”

He stopped. Lou had cried out. He was pointing over toward the carnival field.

From the line of trees to the north of the field a balloon was rising. It gained altitude slowly, and from below it trailed a slanting, black line. Lou grunted.

“Not even a free balloon!” he cried.

“She’s got a cable on her. No wonder they didn’t want us using the air around the carnival! The crowd won’t get much of a kick from a tied-down——”

He broke off as a sudden gust of wind eddied dust up from the field on which the Ryan-engined plane had been set down.

Buck Kent shook his head slowly. There was a strange feeling in the air. It was terribly hot, sultry. The black clouds in the eastward had spread half across the sky now.

The cabled balloon was slanting at an angle from the ground mooring. Perhaps a thousand feet above the ground, it was no longer ascending. A trapeze hung

below the basket. Now they could see a slender form swaying down toward the trapeze.

"She's got nerve!" Buck muttered. "Got to hand it to her, Lou—even if she did give us the air!"

The mechanic nodded. Buck watched the figure in the distant sky. He could guess that she was descending a rope ladder. The outline of the trapeze was suddenly blotted out by the black clouds in the background.

The balloon, painted a bright red color, stood out clearly. The girl was attired in white; she had evidently slipped a tight flying costume—overalls—over her knickers and khaki shirt. She was hanging from the trapeze now.

"Doesn't look as though she works with a chute!" Buck muttered. "Wind's blowing a bit. I sure wish she'd get through and get down!"

A STRONG gust of wind, sucked toward the coming storm, swept the field. Lou swore softly. The cable on the balloon was slanting more than ever. They could see its black color at the ground end.

Buck turned toward the plane, his body stiffened.

On the outer circle of the storm clouds, extending downward toward the earth, was a black, funnel-shaped cloud! It was moving rapidly toward a spot not far south of the carnival field. A tornado cloud!

There was a sudden cry from Lou. He was pointing up toward the balloon. It was swaying fiercely from side to side. The girl was climbing the rope ladder, which was slanted out from the red-colored back. A flurry of white papers trailed down through the air, against the background of black. The papers containing the lucky numbers! But they'd never drop on the carnival field—not now!

"She's a game one!" Buck muttered grimly. "Why don't they haul that bag down? The wind's getting——"

He groaned. The girl had almost mounted the rope ladder to the basket. Her white costume allowed them to see her clearly, even at the distance. The balloon was swinging from side to side. But now it was moving downward. They were hauling it in!

And then, suddenly, it was leaping up toward the black clouds! It was swaying, with the girl climbing into the basket. It was moving toward the funnel-shaped cloud several miles beyond it.

From the basket trailed the broken cable. The strain had been too much. The balloon was free—with wind sucking it and the girl toward the very vortex of the tornado!

For a brief second Buck Kent stood rigid, staring. And then he snapped out of it.

"Lou!" he muttered fiercely. "Something's gone wrong up there. The girl's fainted—or the air valve won't work! That balloon's a goner! We've got to get up there!"

Lou Parrish stared at Buck. "What can we do?" he muttered. "She's being sucked right into that——"

"Come on!" Buck snapped out the words. "Get aboard! We may not do anything—but we're going to try!"

THE PLANE almost turned over in a ground loop, getting off the field. Buck Kent was using all the skill he possessed, and handling the ship with both hands on the stick.

The Ryan rotary was roaring in full voice as he banked her mildly, two hundred feet above the earth,

The air was as bad as he had ever felt it; the action on the ship very severe. She pitched and fell off on a wing again and again. The wind seemed to come in gusts, sucked toward the rapidly moving tornado cloud.

Buck Kent shook his head as the two-place ship roared toward the balloon that had broken free. He was reasonably certain that the girl possessed no parachute, or she would have jumped by this time. It was likely that the chute interfered with her trapeze work. The balloon was rising steadily, and moving at high speed toward the storm. The earth, in the trail of the funnel-shaped cloud, was a black-gray blur of wind and rain. Buck Kent nosed the plane upward, and fought to keep the ship in control.

At two thousand feet they were over the carnival grounds, and gaining on the red bag. Below, tents were being blown about, the crowd was rapidly scattering.

Lou's voice sounded above the roar of the engine and the shrill of wind. "What do—we try?" Buck twisted his head. His lips were close to the helmeted head of Lou Parrish, who was leaning forward across the curving fuselage. He shouted with all his strength.

"Get that—rope ladder—over the side! It's up—to her! You help—her."

He jerked his head to the front again. It was the only chance. He would try to get the plane close enough to the free balloon so that the girl could grasp the rope of the trailing ladder.

The air was steadily becoming worse. But the plane was within a quarter mile of the drifting balloon now. The bag did not seem to be fully inflated. Buck guessed that things had been rushed, to get in the advertised

flight. It was a good thing that it had not been filled with air—a few thousand more feet altitude, and it would be drifting through clouds.

Buck could see the girl now. She was standing inside the basket, her arms gripping the shrouds going up to the bag.

The balloon was swaying badly. It was drifting directly in the path of the funnel-shaped cloud less than a mile away now. The wind was sucking it in.

THE TWO-PLACE SHIP roared up toward the bag, and leveled off as Buck shoved the stick forward. The left wing dropped sickeningly in a bad pocket, but he got the ship on even keel again. He waved toward the girl.

She released her left-hand grip on the shroud line at that side and waved back. Her face was very pale—but there was a smile on it. She was game. Buck jerked his head toward the rear cockpit. Lou was lowering the rope ladder—a strong one that Buck had always carried since his flying days in an air circus.

The gusts of wind were slanting it back from the side of the fuselage; there was danger of it becoming tangled in the tail assembly.

The plane was banking around the balloon now. Buck pulled back on the stick, gained altitude, then leveled off again. His goggles were suddenly misted. The wind was blowing spray from the rain. Within a few minutes there would be the rain. In it there would be little chance of rescue.

He groaned and stared downward as the ship circled above the balloon. It was not possible to make smooth banks, because of the bad air—and the red bag was moving steadily toward the Storm cloud. Lightning flashed; the roar of thunder sounded above the beat of the Ryan engine.

Buck tried to maneuver the ship above the drifting balloon. He caught a glimpse of the girl. She was gripping a shroud line with her left hand. Her right was free to clutch at the trailing rope ladder.

The balloon swayed from side to side in the grasp of the wind, which was becoming stronger all the time.

Twice the plane roared near the balloon, above it and to one side. But neither time did the trailing rope ladder come close enough for the girl to reach out and grasp it. And then, suddenly, Buck Kent remembered—they had only a little gas left. If the prop were to go dead, now—

He gripped the stick and banked again. He would have to take a chance, get lower, and trail the rope ladder closer to the basket of the balloon. If it caught

in the shroud lines or the webbing of the bag, both plane and balloon would be finished.

But there was no other way of saving the girl. And, every second, they were getting nearer the vortex of the storm. The whole sky was black now—and the spit of rain on his goggle glass had become more than that. It was a heavy spray, now.

BUCK KENT smiled grimly. The plane banked at an angle of better than sixty degrees above the bag. The rope ladder was trailing downward, perhaps forty feet below the undergear of the ship. But it was fifty feet from the basket of the balloon.

His eyes picked up the figure of the girl. She was shaking her head and pointing down toward the earth. Telling him to leave her, to glide for safety!

He banked vertically and saw the trailing ladder swing toward the basket. The girl reached out with one hand. He saw her release her grip on the shroud line, with the other. The nose of the plane started to drop.

Buck Kent fought the plane out of the slip. He got her back on even keel. Lou's voice sounded in his ears. "She's—on the ladder! She—made it!"

Buck Kent held the plane against the sucking wind. The engine was wide open, the roar was steady. He stared down over the side of the fuselage.

The girl was clinging to a lower cross rope of the ladder. She was trying to pull herself upward, to get her feet on a crosspicce!

The ship was moving slowly against the gusts of wind. It was raining now. The beat of it struck sharply against the doped surfaces of the wing fabric. Lightning flashed brightly in the sky. Buck was heading the ship back toward the carnival field, fighting to keep even keel, to give the girl every chance that existed.

And then, abruptly, there was a break in the steady beat of the engine. It roared again—spluttered—roared once more.

Buck Kent's heart was pounding. He reached for the throttle—to cut down the speed and save gas. The engine spluttered again—and then died completely! The last of the gas had been used!

HE NOSED the ship forward against the gusts of wind drawn toward the tornado. He was forced to glide sharply, in order to hold air speed—to get sufficient pressure on the controls of the ship. Lou's voice sounded above the shrill of wind through the struts and wires.

"She's climbing. Hold her off the ground, Buck."

Buck Kent groaned. There was no chance of holding

her off the ground, now. With the fury of the wind against the ship there was little chance of even stretching the glide. If she fell off on a wing, or went into a spin—with the girl on the rope ladder trailing behind—there would be no chance. And if the girl failed to get aboard the plane before the ship struck earth——

There was a grim expression in Buck's eyes. He stared over the side, behind the gliding ship, wiping his goggles clear of the rain.

Through a blur of gray he saw the girl, slowly working her way up the slanting rope ladder. Lou was hanging over the side of the fuselage, arms extended downward. The plane was taking the bumps badly.

The carnival field was within gliding distance. There was a chance of making it. The field from which they had taken off—it was too far away. They were down within a thousand feet of the earth now; and the girl was fifteen feet from the fuselage of the plane.

But she was fighting her way upward. Lightning flashed—there was a sharp crack in the sky back of the ship. Buck jerked his head.

A great ball of fire hung momentarily in the sky. The big red bag had been hit, had exploded!

THE PLANE'S left wing dropped sharply. Buck was forced to nose downward at a greater angle, to sacrifice their length of stay in the air. He wiped his goggle glass clear of the film of water, and stared downward and back.

The girl was within ten feet of the fuselage now—and Lou's hands were ready to help her. Wind ripped at her white costume. The slant of the ladder made her climb a desperate one.

The earth was five hundred feet below, a dark blur in the rain. But Buck could see the carnival field. They would make it—unless a gust of wind twisted the ship out of his control. Lower and lower they dropped.

A white fence flashed below. The ground was sending up a rougher air. Buck was forced to nose over until the ship was almost in a plunge downward. They glided over the white fence, fifty feet above the earth. Buck took one final look around, down. Lou's hands were reaching for the wrists of the girl on the ladder!

The ship dropped suddenly. For a split second Buck thought it was the finish—and then she had air speed again. He pulled back on the stick. The nose came up. A blur of earth showed—directly beneath the plane.

He pulled the nose up higher and held the ship off the earth. She was losing flying speed now and sinking down!

He twisted his head. The girl was being lifted over the side of the fuselage! The ship struck, bounced high. He nosed her down, then pulled back on the stick again. Once more—she struck.

This time the ground roll was less than ten feet. Buck snapped the safety-belt buckle and shouted back to Lou.

"Over the side—stake her down!"

The wind was ripping at the plane as he slipped to the earth. He saw the girl drop down, sink to the wet grass. Figures were running out through the rain.

Buck ran toward a wing-tip. There was a grim smile on his rain-soaked face. They had done more than try—they had succeeded!

THE GIRL stood beside the big man in the sombrero. She was pale, but her voice was steady enough.

"That was a wonderful thing—you did!" Her eyes were on Buck's blue ones. "After we'd made you—fly off—telling you——"

Her voice trembled. The big man put an arm around her shoulder. He spoke slowly.

"Reckon we were just fools, pilot. Just fools—worrying about business. Why, even if that bag's air valve had worked, Joan would have had a bad time of it. Too much strain on that cable."

He smiled faintly at Buck and Lou. The sun was coming out, but the carnival was pretty much a wreck. Things would have been a lot worse had the tornado come closer than it had. "I'm mighty sorry, Kent," the big man said slowly. "Like to do something to show you that I wasn't acting natural—a little bit ago."

Buck grinned. He glanced toward the glistening-winged ship, then at the girl.

"Maybe we can stick around a few days—sort of help you pep up business," he stated. "That is, if——"

He stopped. The girl was smiling at him. She looked at the big man.

"Jake would love to have you stick!" she stated slowly. "Everything'll be free, too."

"Including the air?" Buck asked grimly.

And the girl nodded her head. She extended a hand. Buck gripped it firmly.

"I gave you the air—and you took it, to save me," she said quietly. "I'm sorry—and I'm glad."

Buck smiled with his blue eyes.

"You're a game girl," he said slowly. "We'll stick around and try to beat this fellow Longford, whoever he is. Maybe we can give him some of this——" he chuckled and released the girl's slim hand—free air."