



BUCK KENT'S AIR PUSH

by **RAOUL WHITFIELD**

They took a desperate chance when they tried to push "Buck" Kent out of the sky.

TOSSING THE EMPTY FUEL CAN to the soft earth of the carnival field, Lou Parrish frowned at "Buck" Kent. Buck was smiling faintly. It was warm, very warm—and Christmas was only a week off. Freak weather they had been having, in the state adjoining Florida.

Lou wanted to wing on to the Everglade section, Buck knew that. He wanted to get away from Mississippi air.

The mechanic dropped to the ground and moved toward Buck. He spoke in an uneasy tone.

"The girl's not used to stunting from a plane, Buck. It was all right—our winging up there and rescuing her from the drifting balloon. We were the only ones

who could get to her. But this sticking around—it's bad business mixing up with women, anyway."

Buck turned his blue eyes toward the tanned face of his pal and grinned.

"Right, Lou! But this carnival is having tough luck. The girl's a fighter, and we ought to help her out. The balloon's gone—and a couple of good crowds will put the outfit back on its feet for Christmas. We'll let her work from the plane this afternoon and tonight. Great crowd out—the advertising has brought 'em through the gates."

Lou muttered something beneath his breath.

It was very evident to Buck Kent that his pal didn't think much of the girl working from the plane. But then, Lou kept away from the fair sex. As for Buck, had

it not been for the fact that the girl had told him of the trouble given her carnival by another entertainment outfit that was playing near by, he would have winged on toward Florida, after the rescue of the girl from the balloon that had broken loose during a sharp storm.

Buck nodded his head slowly.

"Another crowd like this, and the outfit'll be out of the red!" he muttered to himself. "Feel sort of like helping folks, around Christmas time."

A siren wailed above the tinny carnival music and the harking of the sideshow spielers. Already the crowd was breaking away from the midway, moving out toward the small field from which the Ryan-engined, two-place ship would take off. The ship was Buck Kent's—he was air adventuring, with Lou, across the continent. He liked it—adventuring.

"Spin the prop, Lou!" he ordered now. "Here comes Miss Dean!"

THE GIRL was moving toward the plane, clad in her flying togs. As she approached there was the rumble of the ship's engine through the exhausts. The ship was wheel-blocked. Lou snapped the switch, then spun the prop. The girl, slim and smiling, reached Buck's side. He gestured toward the plane.

"Better look that rope ladder over," he suggested. "You've never worked on a plane's dangler before, you know."

She nodded and moved toward the ladder in the rear cockpit. The siren wailed again—the midway was being rapidly deserted now. The girl's advertised work from the plane was the star attraction of the Mississippi carnival. It had pulled the crowd through the gates—and no one wanted to miss it.

Lou Parrish came over to Buck's side. He stood there, frowning, as the girl climbed down from the wing-step and moved toward them. She spoke to Buck.

"Looks all right. I'll work slowly—and I've got the Irving strapped on right. The ladder'll slant back, of course. It's"—she hesitated and smiled into Buck's blue eyes—"mighty fine of you to help us out this way. The little money we're paying you——"

Buck cut in. "Forget it," he said slowly. "I've a hunch this other carnival outfit has been deliberately playing close to your stands and taking away your crowds with that ship of theirs. We'll play their game—give 'em a little air push."

The girl smiled brightly. Buck nodded to Lou.

"Get the wheel blocks clear, Lou. We'll get off—and climb. All right, Miss Dean?"

The girl nodded her head. She moved toward the rear cockpit. Buck moved toward the front one.

Lou Parrish followed him. Fie spoke in a grim voice.

"With this crowd here it means the other outfit will have a dead lot," he muttered. "And the air boys won't like that. Watch yourself, up there, Buck." Buck grinned at Lou. "I always do that little thing, Lou," he stated cheerfully. "What do you figure these other air boys will do? Shoot us out of the sky?"

Lou swore softly as Buck climbed into the front cockpit. He bent down and jerked at the rope attached to the wheel blocks. And Buck didn't hear his muttered words.

"Bad luck—mixing up with a lady! These *other* gents can sky push, too!"

AT FIVE THOUSAND FEET, Buck Kent banked the ship mildly and stared over the side. They were winging almost directly over the field rented by the carnival. He could see the packed humans below, their faces turned up toward the sky. Twisting his head, he flashed the girl in the rear cockpit a smile. She nodded.

With his left hand he cut down the air speed of the plane. Turning his head again, he saw that Joan Dean had dropped the rope ladder over the side of the fuselage. It was slanting back toward the tail-skid, but clearing that object by several feet.

Buck shook his head slowly. He had wanted to rig the ladder so that it would drop off the trailing edge of a wing's lower surface, but there had hardly been time. The action of it, in the wind, would be more severe, this way. He twisted his head again and saw the girl getting over the side of the fuselage, starting to work her way down the ladder's rungs.

He cut down the air speed of the plane until there was just enough to give him action on the controls. The girl was not used to working from a ship in motion; he wondered how the rip of the wind must feel to her. Staring over the side of the fuselage, he caught a glimpse of her upturned face. She was halfway down the wind-slanted ladder—and smiling at him.

He grinned back. He was forced to bank the plane slightly—to come around so as to keep over the fair grounds. As the plane banked and headed back over the field, he saw that the girl had reached the lowest rung, from which dangled the trapeze on which she was to work. And he saw something else, too.

Coming toward the field, flying less than a

thousand feet above the earth, was another plane. She was a two-place ship, and even as Buck stared at her he saw the nose come up. She was climbing toward them—and she came from the direction of the field occupied by the rival carnival!

Buck Kent's face held a sober expression. The girl had told him of the efforts made by the rival carnival to put them out of business. It had been a hard fight for her to carry on. But now, with Buck and Lou aiding the carnival, the other outfit was suffering.

Buck was sure that the plane zooming up toward the ship was from the other carnival.

He glanced down at the trapeze on the end of the rope ladder. The girl was swinging from it by her hands. Her slender body made a graceful arc through the sky. She was fearless, he knew that. And there was the 'chute attached to her body, but she had never made a 'chute drop—and the drag would be dangerous for her. She lacked the weight or the experience to handle a dragging 'chute, if something happened—"

Buck Kent muttered to himself as he watched the other plane climb steadily.

"May be just coming up—to look us over!"

But he didn't really figure it that way. He banked the ship around again, keeping it over the carnival field. The girl was hanging head downward now. From the pockets of her tight-fitting flying togs she had taken a handful of fair-sized cards. She was scattering them into the air—prize-winning numbers, free admissions for the night's show.

Buck twisted his head. The other two-seater had reached the altitude of his plane now. It was banking around to the southward—nosing toward them. He could see the helmeted head of a figure standing in the rear cockpit.

He stared down over the side again. The girl was tossing the cards out as she hung head downward from the trapeze. As he watched, he saw her swing up to the bar, to a sitting position. And then a shape was roaring close to the Ryan-engined plane—the man in the rear cockpit had an arm out in the prop wash. He was pointing down toward the earth.

Buck Kent banked away from the other plane. He looked over the side. The girl was pointing up toward the other ship—Buck nodded his head. He got the plane out of the bank, and leveled off again. The other ship had banked, too, and now it was cutting in on an angle, roaring toward Buck's plane again.

Buck got an arm out in the prop wash, and waved

the ship off. Once again he saw the man in the rear cockpit point toward the earth. He was signaling the stunt ship down, telling Buck to get her out of the air.

RAGE struck at the pilot, but he calmed himself instantly. He shook his helmeted head, and stared down toward the girl. She was swinging down from the trapeze again, doing her stuff. Joan Dean was certainly not afraid. Her air stunts had been advertised and she was going through with them!

The other ship banked away now, and for a few seconds, Buck, watching the ship narrowly, thought the plane was heading back toward the other carnival field. Then, suddenly, the ship came around in a vertical bank. She roared straight toward the Ryan-engined plane, then dove sharply. Buck swore.

He saw the girl swing up and grip the rope ladder cross strands above the trapeze. The two-seater was diving straight at her!

There was nothing Buck could do. He could not maneuver the plane with Miss Dean on the rope ladder. His eyes became slits back of the goggle glass as he saw the other ship nose straight toward the trailing end of the ladder and its precious burden.

He saw the ladder sway in the rush of wind from the other ship. The rival plane went down in a straight plunge, then suddenly zoomed out of it. She came around in a vertical bank going into another zoom. She was being maneuvered for another dive at the girl on the ladder!

Buck cut the engine of the two-seater, got her in a mild dive and shouted down at the girl.

"Cut the stunts—climb up!"

He saw her nod her head. Her hands reached up for the cross strands. Then the other plane dove again—screaming downward toward the dangling rope ladder. And this time an upper wing came close to ripping the trapeze bar on which the girl's feet rested!

Buck Kent got a clenched fist out in the prop wash. It was impossible to distinguish the features of either of the men in the other plane. He moved the throttle forward slightly, pulled the nose of the ship up. The girl was climbing the ladder—but she was coming up slowly. Her face, turned up toward Buck, was white and set.

"Steady!" Buck shouted down with all his might. "It's all right!"

He knew what it was to be in the path of a sky-roaring ship, to see the blur of the whirling propeller, to hear the shrill of wind through flying wires and the

roar of the exhausts. Once, in a 'chute drop another plane had dived down close to him and had circled around him. He had almost been able to reach out and touch it. And for weeks afterward he had known the fear of being in the path of a diving ship.

The girl was nearing the fuselage now. Buck stared out toward the other plane. Once again she was coming up, banking out of a zoom. And this time she was roaring, not at the rope ladder, but straight at the plane!

Buck twisted his head. The girl was reaching out for a grip on the fuselage side. But the ladder trailed below. There could be no quick maneuvering—not with the ladder out. He would have to hold the plane steady.

The other ship roared straight at the Ryan-engined plane. She was within fifty feet of it when her pilot pulled back on the stick, and zoomed. A bad spot in the air—and there would have been a crash. Buck Kent, his face set grimly, held the plane on level keel.

He thought he saw the man in the rear cockpit grin at him but goggles and helmet made the face a blurred mask. Then the other plane went zooming out of sight.

Buck turned his head. The girl was inside the cockpit; she was hauling up the rope ladder slowly. He got the ship in a glide and cut the engine. She dropped down toward the carnival field. They had been advertised for fifteen minutes of stunts. They had been up less than ten.

"Can't get away—with that! Trying to push us—out of—the sky!" he muttered to himself.

Turning his head toward the southward, he saw that the other plane was gliding back toward the field occupied by the rival carnival. He smiled grimly. An idea had stabbed into his head—it was either a very good one or a very bad one. But it was, in any case, worth trying.

HE CIRCLED over the carnival field, and watched the guards getting the crowd back to the sides of it. Then he set the ship down in a pretty three-point landing, taxiing toward the spot he used as a dead line. He saw Lou Parrish running out toward the ship, smiling grimly. Lou was to play a big part in the action of the idea that had come to Buck.

Buck cut the throttle and the ship rolled to the dead line. He snapped the switch—the prop ceased to whirl. Over the side, he helped the girl down from the rear cockpit. Her lips moved faintly.

"It was—so close! That whirling prop——"

She broke off. Buck held her steadily. Lou Parrish, his face twisted, reached their side. His voice was harsh.

"Let's wing over to their field, Buck! They can't pull that stuff. Why, from the ground it looked as though they were trying to cut the girl——"

Joan Dean shuddered. Buck shook his head slowly.

"No good, Lou. They're on their home ground, over there. I've got a better idea."

The girl spoke. "We'll have a big crowd to-night—I've got to go through with——"

Buck Kent spoke grimly, interrupting her.

"We'll put on a show to-night, Miss Dean! We'll put on one that'll——"

He broke off as one of the carnival members, coming through the crowd gathering near the plane, moved toward the girl. In his hand he held a small parachute, and attached to it was a folded and weighted piece of paper.

"Dropped from that other plane, Miss Dean," the man stated. "It's addressed to you."

The girl took the paper, tore it loose from the wire that bound it and stared down at the scrawled handwriting. Buck stared down at it, too.

"*'Keep out of the sky to-night. If you don't—you'll get worse than you just did!'*" she read in a low voice.

Buck Kent took the note from her, and smiled grimly at Lou.

"As I said before, Lou"—he said in a low tone, "we'll put on a show to-night! Sky-writing first. And then we'll——"

He checked himself, grinned at the girl. When he spoke again, his voice was low and hard.

"Don't worry, Miss Dean. These fellows won't bother you after to-night. They're trying to push you out of the sky. And they're doing it in their own way. It's a rotten way. But we can fight 'em in the same style."

The girl looked at Buck with puzzled eyes.

"I'll be all right, up there," she said slowly.

Buck shook his head. "*You* won't be up there, Miss Dean," he replied. "But Lou will—dolloped up like you!"

Lou Parrish stared, then grinned. The girl's eyes were wide.

"You can come out and take your bows," Buck said slowly. "But Lou here will climb inside the ship. We'll get up above and when the boys come over to try the dive scare——"

He grinned at Lou, and Lou smiled back. But the girl seemed worried. She spoke in a low voice.

"But they're desperate. And there might be a crash."

Buck Kent nodded. "There *might* be," he agreed grimly. "But one thing's sure—they won't *push* us out of the sky!"

THERE were cheers and handclaps as the girl moved along the red-flared side of the carnival field that evening. A rocket trailed up into the sky. The carnival had drawn a big crowd and the guards were having trouble in keeping people away from the Ryan-engined ship. At the far end of the field a siren wailed, two rockets shot up into the sky.

Buck Kent turned away from the sulphur-smoke apparatus attached to the ship for the sky-writing. The night was clear; there was no moon. He spoke quietly to the boss of the crew of men working around the plane.

"Get the flares extinguished near the ship and then have the boys crowd around. Lou's inside the cockpit." The boss of the men nodded and turned away. The girl moved up close to Buck Kent. She was smiling, but her eyes held a worried expression. Buck grinned at her.

"The boys will crowd around you in a few minutes now and then you slip into that big coat Joe Burnham is holding. After we take off you can slip away because the crowd'll be watching the ship."

Joan Dean nodded. "I'm afraid," she said simply, "they didn't have any crowd over at the other carnival this afternoon so they'll be desperate tonight."

Buck smiled. "So will we," he said calmly. "Here's Joe—and the boys are crowding in——"

The red of the flares fairly close to the ship died suddenly. The crew men crowded close and the girl slipped into the big coat Joe was holding. She gripped Buck's right hand firmly.

"Luck!" she whispered. "And remember this is our last stand here. Don't take too big a chance."

"You've got stands in *other* places," Buck reminded. "We'll fix them so they won't bother you after to-night!"

Then the girl was moving around the tail assembly of the ship, and Buck was calling out sharply.

"Light some flares—and turn the beam on the field. All right, Miss Dean!"

He watched Lou Parrish rise in the rear cockpit of the two-place ship. Lou was bundled in flying overalls, helmeted and goggled. He waved a hand gracefully toward the crowd, as Buck climbed into the front cockpit. The ground-crew men pulled the blocks away from the wheels at his signal. Flares cast a red glow

over the ship; Lou was bending down now, pretending to be adjusting something inside of the cockpit. A large searchlight streamed out on the field for the take-off.

Buck twisted his head and shouted at Lou.

"We're off, Stunt Lady! Blow 'em some kisses!"

He advanced the throttle. The ship rolled out from the dead line. Lou Parrish was standing in the rear cockpit, blowing kisses toward the cheering crowd, as the ship, gaining speed, roared into the wind.

Buck let her pick up plenty of ground speed, then took her off in a graceful half zoom. He banked fifty feet off the field, tilting the wings sharply for a left turn, then he straightened the ship out, climbing steadily. Twisting his head, he stared back at Lou Parrish.

Lou grinned at him and blew him a kiss. Buck swore softly. There would be a show for those below, to-night. But it might be a different sort of show than they expected. There had been talk about the other plane after the matinee performance, but the crowd had been divided in their opinion. Many had thought the diving of the second ship a part of the air act—others knew better.

Buck Kent searched the sky. There was no sign of the other plane. He thought of the dropped note and smiled with tight-pressed lips. It might have been bluff, but more likely it was not. The rival air artists were trying to frighten the girl. It took a clear head and a cool nerve to perform such stunts as Joan Dean performed in the sky, and they knew that.

THE ROAR of the Ryan engine was a steady one. The earth below was a dark blur of color. There was no trouble in finding the line of the horizon, the merging of earth and sky, for level flight. Buck was climbing the ship now, far above the carnival field.

At five thousand feet he leveled off, twisted his head and searched the sky again. There was no trace of the other ship. No shape in the sky, no glow of exhaust red betraying it. He jerked his head, shouted at Lou.

"Cut loose the smoke, Lou!"

He stared back past the tail-assembly and downward. The sulphur smoke was streaming out back of the ship, working with the exhaust from the engine. It was not bright in color, but held a dull glow that could be seen from the ground.

Then he pulled back on the stick and started to write out the word "welcome" in huge sky letters. He had to stunt the ship to do it. Zooms, dives and barrels—with a loop for the letter "O." Roaring down

ahead of the tail of the last letter, he got the ship in level flight again.

"Shut her off!" he shouted to Lou.

The smoke ceased to stream out back of the plane. Buck banked around and stared at the quarter-mile letters he had written in the sky. The word was ragged, but he guessed that the crowd below could distinguish it.

He cut the throttle and dove the plane. Twisting his head, he shouted above the shrill of the wind through the wires, "I'll level off at a thousand! Out on a wing, Lou!"

Getting the controls in neutral, Buck glided the ship toward the field. At a thousand feet, he leveled off, and jerked his head. Lou Parrish was swinging a leg over the side of the fuselage, getting a foot out on the upper surface of the lower wing. Buck grinned at him.

Lou gripped a strut with his right hand, waved down toward the crowd with his left. The lights of the carnival flashed below and to the right of the plane. Lou was working his way out toward the end of the wing-tip now. Buck could see the Irving 'chute pack strapped over his flying overalls and wind ripping at it.

He pulled back on the stick, climbing the plane mildly. They had gotten off five minutes behind schedule and they had been in the air more than ten minutes. Still there was no sign of the rival flyers. Had the note been a bluff, after all?

BUCK banked around and leveled off; Lou was out near the wing-tip. Buck's eyes searched the sky. Off to the southward a small stream of red was trailing, close to the ground! The other ship was coming on!

The pilot cut the throttle and shouted at Lou as he got the plane in a slight glide.

"She's coming, Lou! Come on in!"

He saw Lou Parrish stare toward the south, then start to work his way toward the fuselage of the two-seater. There was only one stunt Lou could have done and it would have gone over fairly well. But now—there were more important things to be done!

Lou worked his way in as fast as he could, with safety. Buck climbed the ship. The other plane was getting altitude and was almost over the carnival field already. Buck smiled grimly.

Lou Parrish was still on the wing-tip; he had a grip on the fuselage when Buck banked the ship around, extinguishing the wing lights. The shape of the other ship flashed close to them as the Ryan-engined plane came around. Buck got a glimpse of two heads, both

turned toward Lou's figure. The other flyers would think that the girl had not heeded their warning—and that was what he wanted them to think.

He banked around again. The Ryan-engined plane had three thousand feet of altitude now. Twisting his head, Buck saw that Lou was swinging inside of the rear cockpit. Staring to the front again he saw the other plane rushing through the night air, straight at his plane!

Lou's voice came to Buck—dulled by the roar of the engine as the ship went down in a plunge toward the field below.

"Look out, Buck! They're flying fools!"

Buck Kent nodded his head. He got the two-seater out of the dive and zoomed her. A shape flashed down out of the sky missing their right wing-tip by fifteen or twenty feet. As the drone of the plane became higher pitched under the climb strain, Buck stared over the side and saw that the other ship had banked away and was roaring out over the ground covered by the carnival tents and side shows. Buck pulled the plane over on a level keel banking around in the same direction.

The other plane was diving over the side shows at a low altitude and down from the ship trailed material that flamed as it fell!

Buck Kent swore grimly. The girl had said the men in the ship were desperate and she was right! There was nothing more they could do in the air so now they were dropping flaming material over the side—trying to set fire to the carnival tents!

The Ryan-engined ship was diving on the other plane now. Buck's eyes, back of the goggle-glass, were narrowed to little slits. The action of the afternoon would have been hard to prosecute, in court. But now there was enough evidence. If they could down the other ship.

The rival plane was zooming. Two more pieces of flaming material trailed down through the night sky. Buck held the Ryan-engined ship in a dive straight at the other plane. Closer and closer the two ships roared.

He could see the gleam of the other ship's engine hood now. The ship was less than five hundred feet above the earth, and at the peak of her zoom. She would have to fall off on a wing.

Buck Kent kicked the left rudder pedal, jerked the stick to the left and the ship roared over the rival plane, as she fell out of the zoom. Buck brought the Ryan-engined plane around in a vertical bank. He saw the other plane dive toward earth—gain speed. Then she was on even keel—she nosed upward.

Buck smiled grimly. Once again he dove his ship straight downward at the other plane. He could see the head of the pilot in the slant of his dive. The man in the rear cockpit was crouched. The rival ship was now less than three hundred feet above the earth.

The exhaust trail of the other plane suddenly died. It showed again—then was obliterated. The rival plane went over in a slip, as Buck zoomed out of the dive.

Buck held his breath as he stared down at the slipping plane. She was almost directly over the field. And it looked like a crash!

Fifty feet above the blur of earth she got out of the slip. Her nose came up, but there was no red trail from her exhausts. She was gliding now—gliding for the field in a fast landing attempt. The engine had failed.

BUCK nosed the Ryan-engined plane down, gliding for the field. He saw the searchlight on the carnival truck suddenly go into action. People were running across the field. As the plane came down, Buck wiped the goggle-glass clear of a splattering of oil. He stared ahead and downward, and heard Lou's hoarse shout, above the shrill of wind through the gliding ship's rigging.

"There she goes, Buck—it's a crash!" He saw a shape strike the earth in a fast landing, across the beam of the searchlight. The rival plane struck with her tail up, bounced high, come down again, losing flying speed, but she was still rolling too fast. A wing dropped, scraped earth. The crowd was scattered in her path.

Buck landed the Ryan-engined plane in an almost perfect three-point set-down. Then, as she rolled to a halt, off to the left he could see the tail assembly of the other ship, pointing toward the sky. The plane had been forced down on the field and she had nosed up!

Buck snapped his safety belt loose, slipped over the side of the cockpit. Lou Parrish was at his side.

"Get out of that suit!" Buck snapped, "Remember—the girl was with me!" Lou was slipping out of the suit as the girl came up. She was excited, her eyes were shining brightly.

"The boys have got them!" she cried. "One of them tried to get away, but he didn't——"

Buck grinned at her, as Lou Parrish slipped around the plane and headed in a wide circle for the scene of the other ship's crash. Then his face sobered.

"Nothing caught fire from the stuff they dropped, eh?"

The girl shook her head. "It didn't hit the canvas," she stated. "The crowd stamped the flaming material out."

"We'll go over and talk with these air crowders," he said slowly. "They're smashed up. Hate to send 'em to jail for Christmas——"

The girl nodded her head. Her eyes met Buck's squarely.

"Buck, you forced them down!" He shook his head. "The engine failed—and did that little thing," he corrected. "But they won't bother you, not after tonight. They wanted sky combat and we gave 'em some. I think we'd better just turn 'em loose."

Joan Dean smiled at Buck as they moved toward the wrecked ship.

"It's going to be a happy Christmas for our carnival, after all," she said slowly. "Buck—if you hadn't been with us——"

He smiled cheerfully, interrupting her.

"But we *were* with you," he said. "And we just handed those gents what they tried to hand us—a little air push!"

Look for a big novelette about Buck and Lou in the next number of AIR TRAILS. They go into the steaming Everglades of Florida and have one of their biggest adventures.