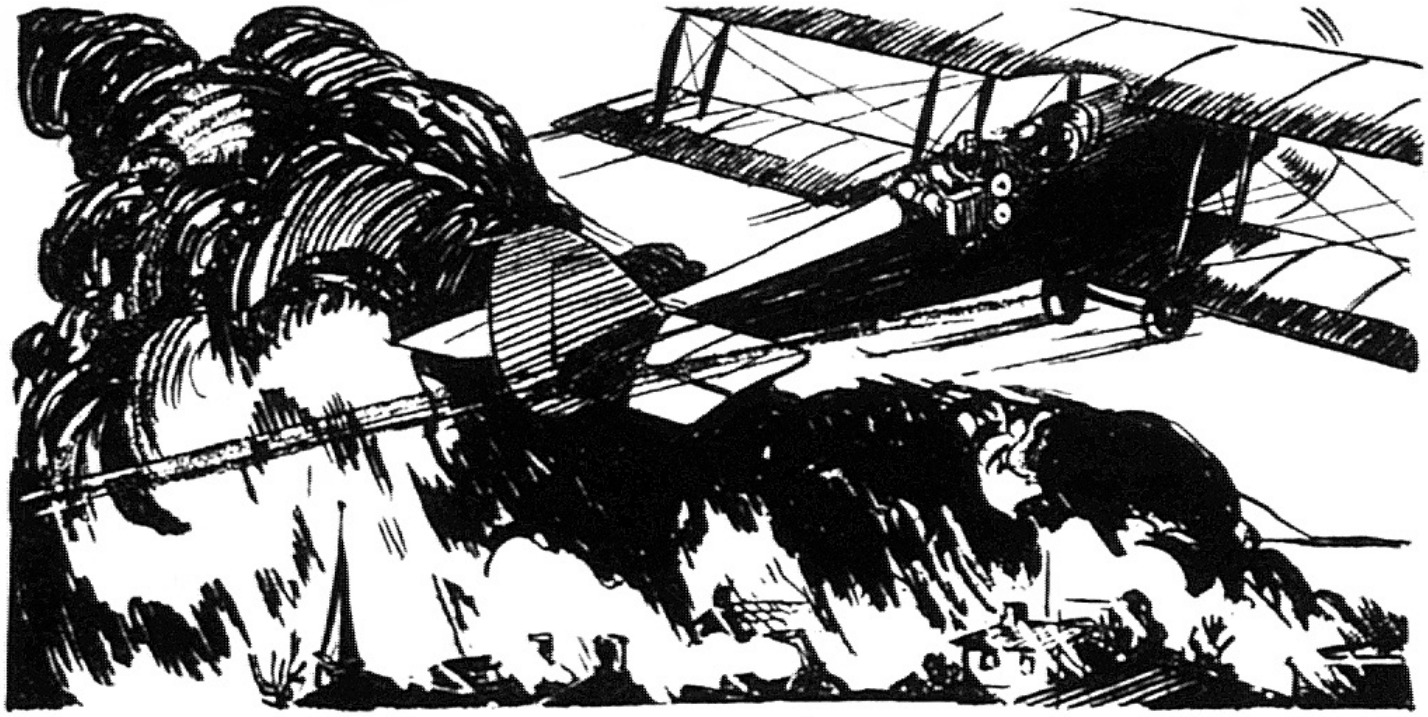

WINGED SHOWDOWN

by FREDERICK C. DAVIS

The Goddess of Chance sent them into the skies with clipped wings. But Nick Royce lived by one code—and he dared all in one last cloud-gamble to get the shots!

"START HOPPIN'!"

Those words, shot into the telephone at headquarters by Bob Smythe, super-pressure assistant editor of the great Tip-Top World News Reel, smacked into the ear of yours hastily, Art Buckley, chief of the flying division, and produced almost the same effect inside me as Mex spurs rolled on the belly of a bronc. When we start hoppin' in this game, we hop!

"This is the biggest thing that's come our way in months," Smythe rattled on, "and we can't afford to slip up on it. We've got to get those shots into the Thursday release—that's all!"

"Depend on us to get those pictures, Smythe," I promised him. "When Nick Royce and I get on the job, we always come through!"

"Well, then, this is a fine chance for you two birds to uphold your rep," Smythe went on. "Listen! Bartlett started for your field quite a while ago, soon as first word of the fire came in—left me to check up on it and phone you. He's got something on his mind, so wait for him—but once he's finished, don't let man or devil hold you back. Every doggoned second counts!"

Crash!—and Smythe was through talking. My ear still ringing, I turned back to the table. On the other side of it sat my buddy in the big game, Nick Royce, pilot par excellence.

Thin as a strut, sharp as a needle, nerveless as a cucumber, that lad was a born birdman. I'd flown with him on scores of assignments; I'd seen him grow from a fledgling into the ablest man on the field; and time and again I'd seen him prove true and square. His eyes already had that eager, dare-all look of the news-getter in them—a look that always came into them when a break happened along and challenged us.

"Fire!" I told him. "Big baby! A town along the Boston Post Road, the other side of Stamford—blaze broke out in a boarding house, and now the whole

town is going. It's another Chicago fire on a small scale, and we've got to go get it!"

"I'll get the plane hot—" Nick started to say, but I was staring at the table-top as though it had just called me a dirty name.

"Look—look at that, will you? Wouldn't something break just when I had my camera all to pieces?"

That machine of mine was scattered over the table in a condition that was almost indecent. Sprockets, screws, nuts were messed around as though an explosion had hit it. I'd grabbed a chance, while there was nothing doing, to give my machine a thorough cleaning, lens and all; and I hadn't got a fair start toward putting it back together again when the phone had zinged and Smythe had started poking us into action. There it lay in fragments—the only camera on the field!

Which is an illustration of the great truth that news respects nobody. News happens when, where and how it wants to. Usually in the most inconvenient manner! In the news-reel game we've got to be about ten times faster than any reporter on a daily paper ever had to be. The reporter might stroll around hours after something has happened and get the stuff for next morning's issue; but if the news-reel is going to be any good at all, the cameraman has got to be there on the spot while the thing is happening. Otherwise the shots are a flop. So, whenever the break comes, we've got to race time through the sky—and get the shots!

GET the shots!—that, ladies and gentlemen, is the battle-cry of the news-getting film-eaters. Those words, printed in big red letters, are tacked up all over our hangars. They've been burned into our brains. They've become the dominating thought in our lives. No matter what happens, no matter what difficulties arise, no matter anything—get the shots!

I didn't stand a chance of getting the shots of that fire until I put that camera all together again!

"All right, Nick—go get your plane hot." I settled down, grabbed up a screw-driver, and feverishly began fitting things together. "I'll have this machine whole by the time Bartlett gets here—I hope!"

"Bartlett coming?" Nick asked as he pushed through the door. "Old Man Trouble sure must be ridin' him these days!"

As I tightened taps and fitted a sprocket a motor began to cough and bark outside—Nick's DeHaviland in the warming. And as I drove in the last bolt the door pushed open and in came Bert Bartlett.

"On your toes, Art!" was his greeting—as it usually was. "Get goin', boy! We're not goin' to let Atlas beat us out this time!"

"We're ready to go now, Boss!" I came back as I threaded a cartridge of film through the sprockets and closed up the case. "If you've got anything to say before we take off—follow me!"

Bartlett was chief editor of the reel, a man who worked under terrific pressure. Compared with him, Smythe was a candidate for an old ladies' home. Bartlett's job was that of serving up to the great American thrill-eating public one thousand feet of piping hot news events every week—that's all! There was a reason why Bartlett drove through his days at explosive heat.

I trotted out with my camera. The D.H. was nosed into the breeze, and Nick Royce was in the fore pit feeling over the controls. I legged into the rear pit and started mounting my camera on its fixed support. Royce let the motor idle, and Bartlett, hanging to the cowling, talked at us.

"Boys, a few months ago Tip-Top was by all odds the biggest news-reel in the world, and we had the sky all to ourselves—and we were fools enough to believe that matters would stay so. Now that rhe Atlas reel is being put out by the Super-Art people, we know that there's no rest for anybody in this game. That blamed Atlas outfit won't let me sleep o' nights any more—because they're out to fight us to the limit and back us off the map!"

Which we knew, and knew well! Super-Art, our deadliest rival in the field of feature pictures, had launched the Atlas News Reel as its latest attack. The two biggest corporations in the celluloid world were teeth to teeth in a grim, earnest battle to a finish.

"Now they're offering their stuff to independent exhibitors at cut rates," Bartlett hurried on. "Yesterday a Middle West chain of twenty houses ditched us and wrote a contract with Super-Art—because their stuff costs less. That's been going on for weeks now—we're losing theatres every day. We can't stand it much longer—we can't meet that competition and live!"

Tip-Top feeling the pinch! One of the great powers of the flicker field realizing that it was in danger of collapsing into nothing! No wonder Bartlett had come out to read us his personal riot act!

"There's only one way we can battle that kind of business," Bartlett went on. "We're not going to cut our prices one penny—but we are going to make our stuff so good that theatre managers will buy it regardless of

its price. That's a whoppin' big order, boys—but we've got to deliver!

"Now, listen," Bartlett went on, grimly. "In this game you and I don't count, personally. We're here to make Tip-Top World News the greatest in the world—that's all. If you and I can't make it so, somebody else can. No man is worth a hoot to this reel unless he can deliver—deliver every time! I'm forced to say it, boys—if you can't produce one hundred per cent, you can't stay here. Get that straight!"

This Bartlett wasn't asking for much—only absolute perfection!

"If we can't bring home the bacon every time—out we go! Understand that?"

"Leave it to us, Boss," I came back, gulping. "We'll do our dangedest for you!"

"Go to it! You haven't got a minute to waste—not a minute!"

LIKE an eager bird the big DeHaviland rolled forward and swooped off the tarmac. The ship sang sweetly into the sky until it reached a thousand feet—and suddenly the engine stopped!

Somewhere up the coast was a town in flames. It was our job to fly out there, get the pictures, and rush them back red-hot to the laboratory and the Broadway screens. Bartlett had just told us in no uncertain terms how necessary that was. And we'd no sooner left the ground than the motor suddenly, completely quit!

I groaned; Nick groaned; and down below Bartlett yelled.

Nick Royce fought with the controls. It was no use. The motor wouldn't revive. There was nothing to do but glide for a landing. Nick banked the plane around, began chuting for the field—where one Bert Bartlett was jumping on his hat!

When the plane taxied to a stop in front of the hangars, Bartlett was so mad he couldn't talk.

Taking advantage of that good luck, Nick jumped out and ducked into the nacelle. Then he ducked out again and unscrewed the cap of the gas-tank. He looked and listened into it and came away with a gasp:

"Dry!"

Nick and the field greaseball, who had come out of the hangars where he was working on our other ship, dived for the wheeled gas-pump and tugged it over to the ship. Nick shot the nozzle into the tank hole while the greasemonkey ground. And by that time Bartlett had recovered his speech.

"A fine bunch of news hounds I've got on this field—fine!" he snorted.

"What do you think this news-reel is, anyhow—a quarterly review?"

The fuel gushed into the tank while Nick and the greaseball pumped on.

"I'd better swap these planes for a couple of pair of roller skates!" Bartlett raved on. "At least, skates wouldn't need gas to run on—"

"Gosh, Boss!" Nick broke in. "Thought the tank was full. That gas gauge is stuck! Nobody's fault. See for yourself. We'll get those shots all right, Boss."

Bartlett stuck his head into the pit, saw that the gas indicator was actually sticking, and cooled off. As the greaseball struggled away with the pump. Nick screwed the gas cap back on and Bartlett and I wheeled the plane into the breeze. Then came the business of sucking the cylinders full of mixture, contacting, pulling the prop. Then, with the motor roaring, we hopped the cowling again and sat tight.

Once more the plane drove into the wind, speeded across the tarmac, hurtled upward—and went.

Nick brought the big ship into the sky at a steep angle, with the Liberty working hard. Our field floated away. After a few minutes of flying, the water of Long Island Sound slid into view. Nick banked and tore the plane through the sky farther northward. And even so far away we could see the black smoke rolling up from the flaming town on the horizon.

Smythe and Bartlett had both said that we hadn't a minute to lose—and they weren't kidding. Today was Thursday, and the assembly-room of the lab was putting together this week's reel, which was due to leave the works before evening. In order to get this fire into the reel we had to get the shots back by noon at the latest. If we missed that deadline the stuff would go into next week's reel—stale—and altogether not so good for our reputations! And right now noon wasn't very far away!

As we thundered closer the smoke rolled thicker, and the town came into view. It was one of those little towns on the edge of the New York suburb district which fast motorists on the Boston Post Road never know they pass through when they do. It was a sizable little community, though, and the flames had spread to endanger almost the whole of it, judging from our position as we got to it.

It would be great stuff! Great streams of black and white smoke billowing up from the earth, rolling across the sky; gigantic towers of flames springing

up; fire covering the ground. On the streets and roads people fleeing from the destruction; thoroughfares blocked with cars. Fire trucks from surrounding towns massed in the thickest danger, squirting the streams of their toy hoses into the mammoth furnace. Great!

"Oh, Lord," I prayed, "don't let anything else happen to keep us from getting these shots back—"

And just then the motor stopped roaring again!

This time it kept idling—there was still plenty of gas, of course—but Nick Royce had cut the gun. The big plane mushed out while Royce rose in the pit and stared over the cowling toward the nacelle. He settled back and looked at me with an expression which was nothing else but sick.

"'S matter?" I yowled. "Nick, blame it, we've got to fly over there and get those pictures, or Bartlett'll skin us alive!"

Said Nick tersely: "Oil line broke!"

MORE rotten luck—another link in the chain that was keeping us from getting those shots! Nobody could be blamed for that broken oil line—except the sky devil that weaves spells against flying men—but it was one of the worst things that could have happened to us. I pictured a motor with bearings burned out and cylinders scored—and groaned with the thought that we were through right then and there!

With the flaming town in sight! As Nick brought the D.H. around in a circle the wind cleared the smoke away and showed us the whole blamed layout—so near and yet so far—all waiting to be made into a bang-up sequence. In another five minutes we would have been there, getting the shots—and now all we could do was hunt for a field to land in!

The same wind that showed us the town showed us something else—a plane in the sky. As it darted through the cleared air its silver sides flashed in the sun. There it was, plain as the very daylight, *Atlas News!*

Atlas was on hand and getting the shots! The cameraman in the rear pit was sighting through his box and shooting for all he was worth. He was pulling in a million dollars' worth of stuff—beating us completely out—and there we were, heading for a weed patch!

"It's no use now," I told myself. "We're licked. We're sunk!"

Nick neatly lowered the plane onto the abandoned field. It rumbled and jerked as it taxied to a stop, and before it quit shaking Nick jumped out of the pit, bared the motor and stuck his head into it. While he diagnosed the seriousness of the case I kept looking into the sky—at the rolling black smoke and at the silver plane getting our stuff.

"She's O.K., Art," Nick said, ducking out again. "It was a small leak, and I caught it right away. I can patch the line with tape well enough to last us this trip. All we need is to put back the oil we lost—"

"Good gosh!" I blatted. "That's all, is it? We've got to spend a lot of time finding a service station and carrying oil to this boat, have we? Good gosh! We might as well be a wash-out! By the time we do that it'll be so late—"

"Look under the seat in my pit," Nick said quietly, "while I tape this line."

I looked, and my faith in Santa Claus came back. Under there was a flat gallon can of oil! Nick Royce, the wise young fellow, explained that he always carried extra oil with him in the plane, as well as half a dozen other things that might be necessary in an emergency. While he taped that line I gurgled that oil into the sump—and again looked into the sky.

"Come on, Nick! We've still got a chance! We might have to fly the wings off this plane to make it back to the lab in time—but we've got a chance!"

ONCE more! Contact! The roar of the motor! The rushing backwash! Nick at the stick, driving the plane off. Me, squatting at my camera, hand already resting on the crank. The big DeHaviland swooped upward—and once more we were fighting our eternal battle with space and time!

As our plane droned upward, the silver ship of the Atlas outfit swung out of the smoke and bored toward us. It picked up speed as it zoomed past—all through with its job and on its way back to the Super-Art lab! They had the jump on us this time—a big jump. As that plane skidded over us the pilot enthusiastically thumbed his nose in our direction—which gesture expressed the feeling between us admirably. As the silver plane thundered off we bored into the fire.

I glued my eye to the finder of my machine and began grinding. My arm automatically turned the crank of that camera on and on as Nick Royce swept me around in a slow circle, avoiding the smoke, giving me just the right angles. A genius at the stick, that boy! The motor roared and the camera hummed—and at last Tip-Top was getting its shots!

So far as the fire itself went, it was as good now as it had been hours before—in fact, better! The

flames were gutting that town. Cars were choking the roads in all directions, people were flocking to the surrounding hills. Fire trucks were thundering in now and then, even yet, and in the midst of the inferno little shapes that were men were playing little streams into the edges of the fire area. All this my lens saw and registered as I steadily ground that crank.

At last:

"Back to the field, Nick!" I yelled, tapping Royce's shoulder. "We've got the stuff! Go it!"

And Nick Royce went it! How he rode that ship! He swung it in the direction of our field on Long Island, and simply jammed the throttle as wide open as it would jam. He let the plane strive for its limit. It shivered and trembled as it stretched itself out. The whistle of the wires rose into a scream; the struts shook; the noise of the motor filled heaven and earth. The ship seemed about to tear itself to pieces.

Every inch of the way I prayed that nothing else might happen to force us down. One more mishap and we were absolutely, definitely licked.

The field slid out of the horizon—welcome sight!—and Nick Royce drove down to it. Bartlett was pacing beside the office shack watching us. Nick circled once, feeling the wind, and then bore in. He touched three points neatly—and we were back again, without anything else having busted!

As the D.H. taxied to a stop Bartlett dog-trotted to meet us.

"Did you get the shots?"

"Did we get 'em? We never fail! Boss, here they are! Grab 'em!"

Bartlett grabbed 'em. While he held the cartridge tightly he started edging away.

"Good work, boys! I'm going to take these films right to the lab myself. They'll get into this week's release all right. Good work!

"Now listen! Tomorrow is the big trans-state air derby, and we've got to put out a special on it. Big stuff! Be sure that your equipment is in first-class shape—because we've got to get that air race tomorrow. See you later!"

Bartlett jumped into his car, pushed it into action, and purred off the field.

TWO weary sky hooters trudged toward the office shack for a rest. I lugged my camera along. Inside, we flopped down at the table.

"Well, Art," Nick said, "we busted through that time, but we—what's the matter?"

Staring at the table-top, I picked up a little thing no bigger than a half-dollar. It was a lens, mounted in a frame. In one frenzied minute I'd split my machine open and was staring inside.

"Good, merciful gosh!" I busted out. "Sweet, almighty so help me! This is the rear element of my lens! It should have been in this camera! I found it here on the table just now! I must have overlooked it while I was rushing to put this camera back together. W-w-wait till Bartlett sees those films!"

"What—?"

"They'll be nothing but blurs—that's all! With this element missing, the lens wouldn't focus! It's all my jug-headed fault. We didn't bring home any pictures, Nick—all we brought home was a mess of spoiled film. And right now; Bartlett himself is putting them into the lab!"

"Gosh!" said Nick.

What was that Bartlett had said? "We've got to make our films so good that exhibitors will buy them in preference to Super-Art's cheaper ones." What's that I'd said? "Did we get the shots? We never fail!" Ow!

We stared at the little piece of glass that had ruined our shots, and we stared at each other; then we sat back and waited for Bartlett to phone—waited for Bartlett to pronounce those two sweet words that would end everything:

"You're fired!"

WE SPENT the rest of the day wondering where two disgraced skyhooters might find new jobs, for I had a family of three, and Nick had a new wife and a newer baby depending on his pay check. Bartlett didn't phone, and didn't show up. Probably he kept us out of his sight in order to avoid committing a very bloody double murder!

Next morning brought closer the hour at which the much-advertised trans-state air derby was to fly. Since nobody had appeared on our field to take over our work, Nick and I half-hopefully labored at our respective machines until we had them in perfect condition. After checking each other over a dozen times we felt that, with the air of a kind providence, we might manage to get and deliver a few odd shots—if we ever got the chance again.

A motor purred onto the field, and we sat limp in our chairs in the office shack waiting for Bartlett to come in and pronounce his verdict on us.

A thundercloud is a pale, baby pink compared with Bartlett's expression when he came in and looked us

over. He paced back and forth several times to pull himself together before he began:

"All right, boys. We can't stand many more lickings such as the one we took yesterday. Atlas' shots of that fire are plastered up and down the coast, and all along Broadway, like a million dollars. And where are we? We aren't! The less said about us, the better!

"There's no use crying over spoiled film. All right. But understand this, you two—that's not going to happen again. The next time you fail to deliver you go off this field to stay. Get that? Or, if you're afraid to buck that game, you'd better draw your pay and go right now!"

"Listen, Boss!" I came back, getting red around the collar. "The tough breaks we had yesterday were the worst I ever saw. Maybe they were all our fault—but let that go. Nick Royce is no quitter, and neither am I. We can deliver the goods in this game, and we're going to. We're sticking, Bartlett!"

"All right," Bartlett came back. "Then all you've got to do is get in that plane and bring me back some bang-up shots of the air derby. That race is on the front page of every newspaper in the state, and we've got to get it big. We're going to make a special of it, see? It will go out tonight to be spliced onto the reel we released yesterday. We've got to get that race and feature it—we've got to get it to Broadway before Atlas gets theirs there—we've got to grab this chance to redeem ourselves. *Start hoppin'!*"

We started hoppin', and you can believe that! Nick's motor was already hot; my camera was already mounted in the rear pit; we were ready to fly out and fight like demons to prove we had the stuff in us to stand the gaff. In less than a minute the plane was roaring, and we were in the pits, ready for the take-off.

"I'm waiting here for you!" Bartlett barked at us as the motor idled down. "Get those shots—and get back here as fast as you can fly!" Then the inevitable : "Every second counts!"

Whoom!

And we were off on a flight that had many aspects of a life-or-death matter!

The field from which the derby was to start was only a short distance away, on Long Island. We flitted to it fast.

The air race was fostered by a state organization for the promotion of noncommercial aviation, and for days it had been getting front-page space. Planes of a dozen flying clubs were entered, and the rivalry was sharp enough to cut you. There was talk of dark-horses (or perhaps I should say dark-planes) entering at the last moment, and interest was mounting fast. It was a grand free-for-all race open to anybody with a plane and a pilot's license—with five thousand dollars waiting for the winner!

The layout spread below us: the big field, fringed with cars, almost covered with planes, all entries in the race, and crowded with people. One slice of the landing-space was roped off for just such planes as ours—photographers' ships, and one equipped with a shortwave sending station for broadcasting the race stage by stage. Besides this, other ships were buzzing through the sky—one of them a silver ship, bearing the words, *Atlas Weekly!*

Nick began waltzing the D.H. around, and I began grinding in some shots of the field. A few turns of the crank, and we had enough of that. I signalled to Nick that we'd better land and wait for the race to begin—in order to save gas—and he immediately slid down the air for the tarmac. We taxied to a neat stop, turned back into the wind, and climbed out.

"Hot ziggety!" I bust out. "Nick, this is going to be grand stuff for us. We can't afford to miss any of it. Look at 'em lined up there!"

THE planes were nosed into the wind, one behind the other, waiting for the starting gun. Props were turning here and there, on the neat little ships; pilots were scurrying about; starting officials were huddling among themselves. The field hummed with the sound of the motors and of the crowd. The race was due to start in a very few minutes.

"Soon as that first ship wheels the mark, we'll go back up, Nick," I said. "Bartlett's got somebody else here for the ground shots. Remember the Boss's orders—'Get the shots, and come back fast as you can fly.'"

"Say, Art," Nick said, "look at that first ship—that white one. It's a bird! That ship can fly, it can. That one stands as good a chance as any of winning this race—yes, sir! Say, Art—look at the pilot—in the white suit—isn't that pilot a girl?"

That pilot was a girl, yes, sir. She had her helmet off, and her golden hair was fluffing in the breeze of the prop. And across the fuselage of that ship was painted in shining black letters, *The Heavenly Blond!*

"Say, Nick! *'The Heavenly Blond'*—isn't that the name of a big movie that's due on Broadway in a week or so? Sure it is! I've seen some advance publicity on it—a big airplane picture—starring Floss Fortune—

and put out by Super-Art! Nick, I'm beginning to smell something rotten here!"

The girl pilot, in her white flying suit, was posing right and left while the graflexes clicked like machine-guns.

"Look!" Dick shot out. "Art, you're right! You're right about that Super-Art flying picture. That girl in that suit is Floss Fortune herself! She's entered in this race—and named her plane after her latest picture!"

There wasn't any doubt of it! There was the plane, with that title painted on it! There was the girl, with a face that was known to a hundred million movie fans from coast to coast! At that very minute she was causing a sensation in the crowd.

"Good, merciful gosh!" I blatted. "Nick, this is the brassiest publicity stunt I've ever seen pulled. Super-Art's done it cleverly enough to get around the rules somehow. If Flossie owns that plane, the officials can't keep her out; and they can't make her change the name of that ship—and she's a qualified pilot, too, as everybody knows who reads Super-Arts publicity stuff. They'll get a million dollars worth of advertising out of this stunt—blast 'em!"

"Gosh!" said Nick.

"And look—she's lined up for first take-off! A swell chance we've got of getting pictures of this race, Nick! What're we goin' to do? Put shots into our reel that will be nothing but advertising matter for our deadliest competitors? Or leave the race out of the reel entirely—one of the big news events of the month? Sweet lulu!"

Every minute was bringing that race closer to starting!

"I'm stumped, Nick!" I admitted. "Stand by our plane, old-timer, until I get Bartlett on the phone. Before we get into this mess any farther, I'm going to get his instructions!"

I scurried across the field, spent precious minutes finding a telephone booth in the locker-room, then put a call through to our own T. After an eternity Bartlett's voice answered.

Talking faster than I ever talked before in my life, I told him the layout. And what he remarked in return would have landed him in jail if the operator had ever heard it.

"Atlas thinks they're licking us, do they?" he rasped when he'd cooled off. "Not yet, Art—not yet. If this stunt of theirs fails—if Flossie Fortune fails to reach the finish field—their publicity will actually be a detriment to 'em. It'll turn the girl into a joke—spoil her picture. Pray the Lord something happens to her, Art. Get those shots—and pray!"

"I gotcha! The big light dawned on me.

"And if she fails to make the goal," Bartlett shot back, "we'll show those pictures—and kid the life out of her, her picture, and everything about her! Now—go after it!"

Hard-hearted that, but we had to do it! I ducked out of the booth as the roar of motors rose higher. As I trotted back to our plane, Nick was climbing into the fore pit and reaching for the stick—for the big trans-state air derby was under way!

Crack! The starter's gun! The white plane, the *Heavenly Blond,* swept down the field. In the fore pit Flossie Fortune began doing her stuff as a pilot. Behind her sat a male observer. The plane streaked down the tarmac like a gull.

And down the tarmac went Nick Royce and yours cordially! Our plane zipped along almost nose-to-nose with the *Heavenly Blond!* Remembering orders, I swung my machine around, centered the plane as it swooped in my finder, and began turning that crank. We climbed above the little white ship and I ground on.

Down on the field another plane was leaving. Then another—and another—and another. One by one they lifted, like toys strung on a string and being pulled through the sky. Nick had our Liberty screaming at its limit and we were able to keep a-wing of the white plane. I swung my camera around and ground in a shot of the whole line of entries parading through the sky. We kept on streaming as fast as we could, while I kept my crank turning, and—got the shots!

Then, for more miles, we simply roared along with them, watching. I didn't look for the Atlas news-reel plane—it didn't matter much now. The racing ships shifted through the air gently, though thundering as fast as they could go. For some reason, the *Heavenly Blond* was still climbing, while the others were flying level now, and gradually gaining on the daring Flossie Fortune.

What the deuce was the matter with the girl? Didn't she want to win the race? She kept climbing—which meant that she was wasting power getting altitude, when she should have been putting every horsepower into getting straight on toward the finish field upstate. The white plane kept climbing—and one by one the other entries skidded ahead of her.

Nick Royce kept his eagle eye on that plane, and began to crab toward it.

"Let's go home, Nick!" I yelled at him. "I've got the shots. Remember Bartlett said—"

"Something wrong here!" Nick shouted back into the wash, pointing to the white plane. "Something wrong!"

Nick kept crabbing to it. We were able to climb above the white plane, and look down. In the fore pit Miss Fortune was pulling and pushing at the stick—and it didn't seem to respond. In the rear pit her male companion, evidently no pilot at all, was leveling a portable movie camera at her head and pressing the button—which looked like all the help he could give her. Meanwhile the white ship kept climbing steadily at the same angle, gradually losing speed—and heading into danger.

Danger! That became clear in a second. As we stared down into the girl pilot's pit, we could see her fighting with the stick. It wasn't budging. Frozen! Not alone was she losing the lead in the race—she was heading for certain destruction!

For, with the stick fixed, that plane would keep climbing until it hit the ceiling. Once in too rare air, it would begin to nose down—with a tail-spin as the next development. Being unresponsive to the stick, it couldn't be pulled out of that. Then the certain result of this publicity stunt would be a crash—and two deaths. The girl didn't stand a ghost of a chance!

Nick Royce eased on the gun. "Be ready to take the controls back there, Art!" he yelled. "That girl needs help—and I'm going to give it to her!"

Then the throttle went open again, and I had no chance to protest. Nick Royce brought the D.H. hovering closer to the white ship. He drew ahead slightly, and the two planes began to draw closer together. The girl kept looking up at us frantically, and trying to loosen that immovable stick. She knew that, somehow, we were trying to help her. Game little kid that she was, she kept her head, and understood when Nick signalled her to keep the ship steady.

Inch by inch Nick eased toward the ship, dropping one wing so that it lapped over the wing of the other plane. He adjusted the throttle so that the speeds of the two ships were the same. The air was smooth, and the planes were free of rocking and pitching, but there was danger of an air-hole at any second—which would send the two ships crashing together—and run up the total of deaths to four!

Nick raised one hand above his head—a signal for me to take the stick in my cubby. I took it.

NOW, I'm a crank-turner by nature, but not a pilot. There was a time when I didn't know how to fly a crate; but there was once a time, too, when I found myself left alone in a plane in midair—the pilot having jumped—and faced with the necessity of bringing that plane down whole, or dying. That time I managed to get down to earth again, by way of a hospital; and after that I began to take flying lessons! so, when Nick turned the stick over to me, the hand of a reluctant but tolerably competent pilot closed over it.

Without hesitating an instant, Nick got free of his strap and stood up in the pit. As calmly as though he were getting out of a chair at a dinner-table, he rose and got out on the wing. Instantly I compensated for his outward position, and realized what Nick was going to do. He was going to change to that other ship!

"Come back here, you idiot!" I yelled at him. "This is no flying circus we're workin' for!"

He moved out two struts.

"If you can't loosen up that stick, you'll crash along with the two of 'em!" I yelled.

By that time Nick was on the very tip of the wing. He was cool as the high winds. He sat on his haunches at the very edge of space while the earth rocked about eight thousand feet below him. With one hand he held on to the last strut, and with the other he reached out—toward the other ship!

In sheer desperation, thinking that I'd get so jumpy as to jerk on the stick and so perhaps crash the two rushing planes together, I clamped it between my knees. Steady and smooth, the two planes swooped on, weaved slowly together, apart, together. And then, finding both of my hands free, I did the only thing a born cameraman could possibly do—I grabbed my machine, swung the lens straight on Nick, and started to grind!

Nick poised on toe-tips, waiting for the gap between the two planes to close. Inch by inch they came together. He hung out farther—farther. The girl stared up, fascinated with horror. Nick hung, poised on the instant of dropping—then the two planes swung apart suddenly. The girl screamed; Nick dragged himself back. Lucky I had that stick between my knees!

And I kept grinding!

Again the two planes inched together, slowly, evenly. One moment I thought they were about to brush—but I didn't dare touch the stick. Nick reached out again—and then, without warning he dropped!

He dropped onto the wing of that rushing white

plane and sprawled flat, gripping the entering edge. He bellied back, fast as he could go, and dropped into the pit. As the two planes swung apart, he rested a minute, catching his breath. Besides the relief of having that over with, I felt a wild kind of joy—because I'd got every move of Nick's on my film!

Nick proceeded to crawl over that rushing white ship like a sailor over the ropes of a schooner, while three pairs of eyes widened at him. He ducked in the fore pit, ducked up, climbed over into the rear pit. There he made that helpless camerman get out of the seat, and he ducked down again. Next he came up with a little black satchel in his hands. Without any ceremony he tossed it overboard.

And I saw then that the ship was leveling—the stick was free!

I didn't know then, but learned later, that that satchel contained clothes and make-up for Flossie Fortune to pretty up in for the celebrations, once she hit the finish field! And that little case, stored in the tail of the ship, had got wedged in between the control wires and the fuselage—and that was the story of the frozen stick!

Nick climbed back to the fore pit of the *Heavenly Blond,* settled down beside the famous movie star, and put his own hands and feet to the controls.

Now that it was all over, I began to get dizzy. The plane change—I had it all in my camera! A Tip-Top man saving a Super-Art star from death! Wow! Wheee! That was worth a million dollars to us! It had the race itself beaten to a frazzle! And Nick Royce had done it all without even thinking of that!

"Go down!" I yelled into space, at him. I wanted him to land and transfer back to our ship so that we could hoot back to the home field. "Go down!"

For answer that white plane began to scream through the sky at such a wild speed that there was nothing I could do but let it go!

HOURS later on our field. Bartlett and I in the office shack—Nick still missing. My films had gone to the lab and were through the baths; the chief finisher had phoned to say they looked great, and they were waiting only for titles before going out on special release. I'd told Bartlett, of course, all about the occurence; and he was still pacing back and forth in the office, chuckling.

"Nick certainly took the juice out of Super-Art's publicity stunt," he said for the twentieth time. "He certainly did! What a lad—what a lad!"

Just then the motor of a plane was drumming over the field. We poked our head out and stared. For there, above that field, was a flashing white plane, neatly lettered the *Heavenly Blond!*

The *Heavenly Blond,* Super-Art ship, circled and neatly came down on the Tip-Top field. And out of the fore pit of that plane came the lone pilot—Nick Royce!

Quietly, easily, Nick Royce strode toward us, while I gulped and even Bartlett blinked.

"Where you been?" Bartlett shot at him.

"Sorry if I'm late, Boss," Nick answered. "I guess Art's told you about it. I haven't got much to say. Once I got in that plane, Boss, of course, it would have been dirty of me to have ruined Miss Fortune's chances—and I kept right on going until we pulled into the finish field."

"What!" barked Bartlett. "You—"

"I hope you won't mind, Boss," Nick went on. "I'm willing to take the consequences—but she—we—I—won that race."

"What!"

"I say," Nick repeated, not knowing quite what was going to happen, "I won that race!"

Bartlett whooped. He roared. He howled. He leaned against the doorsill and laughed; he sat down and laughed; he got up and doubled up and laughed; then he leaned on the table and laughed some more; and then he buried his head in the pillows on the cot and kept on laughing.

"Think of it!" he choked. "A TipTop man save the life of a Super-Art star—and then flies a Super-Art ship to win the race! Wow! Where's SuperArt's publicity stunt now? Good gosh! If anybody has ever been fried to a turn, they have! Oh, mama! Nick—Nick, my boy—you're worth a million dollars to me! Wait until this gets into the papers and onto the screen! You're worth a million dollars, son—and not a cent less!"

Nick grinned.

"Why'd you do it, Nick? How did you do it?"

"Gosh, Boss!" Nick said. "I just followed orders. You said for us to get back here as fast as we could fly—and, all things considered, I did!"