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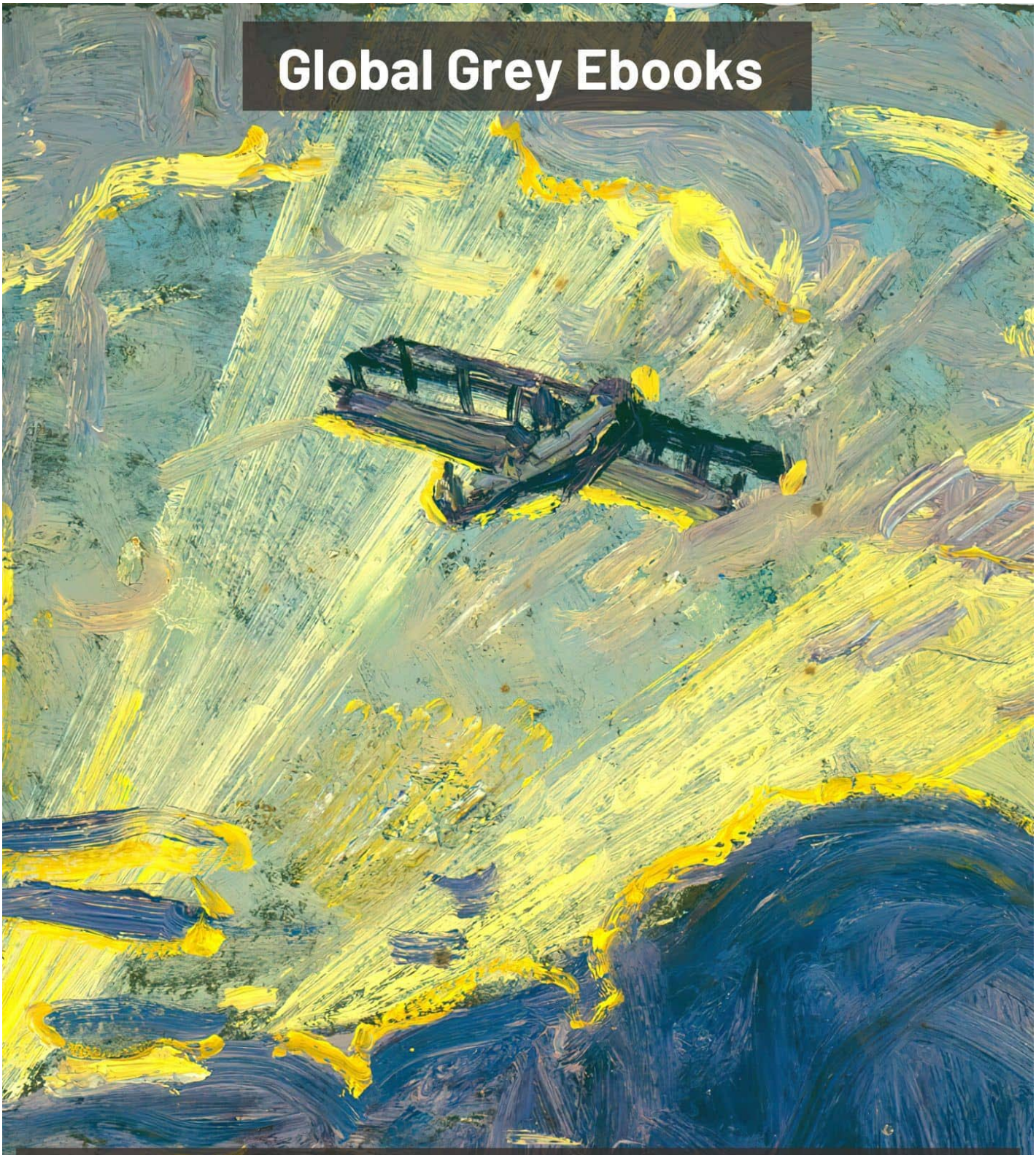

THE FLYING GIRL

L. FRANK BAUM

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Foreword

The author wishes to acknowledge her indebtedness to Mr. Glenn H. Curtiss and Mr. Wilbur Wright for courtesies extended during the preparation of this manuscript. These skillful and clever aviators, pioneers to whom the Art of Flying owes a colossal debt, do not laugh at any suggestion concerning the future of the aëroplane, for they recognize the fact that the discoveries and inventions of the next year may surpass all that have gone before. The world is agog with wonder at what has been accomplished; even now it is anticipating the time when vehicles of the air will be more numerous than are automobiles to-day.

The American youth has been no more interested in the development of the science of aviation than the American girl; she is in evidence at every meet where aëroplanes congregate, and already recognizes her competence to operate successfully any aircraft that a man can manage. So the story of Orissa Kane's feats has little exaggeration except in actual accomplishment, and it is possible 12her ventures may be emulated even before this book is out of press. There are twenty women aviators in Europe; in America are thousands of girls ambitious to become aviators.

An apology may be due those gentlemen who performed so many brilliant feats at the 1911 meet at Dominguez, for having thrust them somewhat into the shade to allow the story to exalt its heroine; but they will understand the exigencies that required this seeming discourtesy and will, the author is sure, generously pardon her.

I. Orissa

“May I go now, Mr. Burthon?” asked Orissa.

He looked up from his desk, stared a moment and nodded. It is doubtful if he saw the girl, for his eyes had an introspective expression.

Orissa went to a cabinet wardrobe and took down her coat and hat. Turning around to put them on she moved a chair, which squeaked on the polished floor. The sound made Mr. Burthon shudder, and aroused him as her speech had not done.

“Why, Miss Kane!” he exclaimed, regarding her with surprise, “it is only four o’clock.”

“I know, sir,” said Orissa uneasily, “but the mail is ready and all the deeds and transfers have been made out for you to sign. I—I wanted an extra hour, to-night, so I worked during lunch time.”

“Oh; very well,” he said, stiffly. “But I do not approve this irregularity, Miss Kane, and you may as well understand it. I engage your services by the week, and expect you to keep regular hours.”

“I won’t go, then,” she replied, turning to hang up her coat.

“Yes, you will. For this afternoon I excuse you,” he said, turning again to his papers.

Orissa did not wish to offend her employer. Indeed, she could not afford to. This was her first position, and because she was young and girlish in appearance she had found it difficult to secure a place. Perhaps it was because she had applied to Mr. Burthon during one of his fits of abstraction that she obtained the position at all; but she was competent to do her work and performed it so much better than any “secretary” the real estate agent had before had that he would have been as loth to lose her as she was to be dismissed. But Orissa did not know that, and hesitated what to do.

“Run along, Miss Kane,” said her employer, impatiently; “I insist upon it—for to-night.”

So, being very anxious to get home early, the girl accepted the permission and left the office, feeling however a little guilty for having abridged her time there.

She had a long ride before her. Leaving the office at four o’clock meant reaching home forty minutes later; so she hurried across the street and boarded a car marked “Beverly.” Los Angeles is a big city, because it is spread from the Pacific Ocean to the mountains—an extreme distance of more than thirty miles. Yet it is of larger extent than that would indicate, as country villages for many miles in every direction are really suburbs of the metropolis of Southern California and the inhabitants ride daily into the city for business or shopping.

It was toward one of these outlying districts that Orissa Kane was now bound. They have rapid transit in the Southwest, and the car, headed toward the north but ultimately destined to reach the sea by way of several villages, fairly flew along the tracks. It was August and a glaring sun held possession of a cloudless sky; but the ocean breeze, which always arrives punctually the middle of the afternoon, rendered the air balmy and invigorating.

It was seldom that this young girl appeared anywhere in public without attracting the attention of any who chanced to glance into her sweet face. Its contour was almost perfect and the coloring exquisite. In addition she had a slender form which she carried with

exceeding grace and a modest, winning demeanor that was more demure and unconscious than shy.

Such a charming personality should have been clothed in handsome raiment; but, alas, poor Orissa's gown was the simplest of cheap lawns, and of the ready-made variety the department stores sell in their basements. It was not unbecoming, nor was the coarse straw hat with its yard of cotton-back ribbon; yet the case was stated to-day very succinctly by a middle-aged gentleman who sat with his wife in the car seat just behind Orissa:

"If that girl was our daughter," said he, "I'd dress her nicely if it took half my income to do it. Great Cæsar! hasn't she anyone to love her, or care for her? She seems to me like a beautiful piece of bric-a-brac; something to set on a pedestal and deck with jewels and laces, for all to admire."

"Pshaw!" returned the lady; "a girl like that will be admired, whatever she wears."

Orissa had plenty of love, bestowed by those nearest and dearest to her, but circumstances had reduced the family fortunes to a minimum and the girl was herself to blame for a share of the poverty the Kanes now endured.

The car let her off at a wayside station between two villages. It was in a depression that might properly be termed a valley, though of small extent, and as the car rushed on and left her standing beside a group of tall palms it at first appeared there were no houses at all in the neighborhood.

But that was not so; a well defined path led into a thicket of evergreens and then wound through a large orange orchard. Beyond this was a vine covered bungalow of the type so universal in California; artistic to view but quite inexpensive in construction.

High hedges of privet surrounded the place, but above this, in the space back of the house, rose the canvas covered top of a huge shed—something so unusual and inappropriate in a place of this character that it would have caused a stranger to pause and gape with astonishment.

Orissa, however, merely glanced at the tent-like structure as she hurried along the path. She turned in at the open door of the bungalow, tossed hat and jacket into a chair and then went to where a sweet-faced woman sat in a morris chair knitting. In a moment you would guess she was Orissa's mother, for although the features were worn and thin there was a striking resemblance between them and those of the fresh young girl stooping to kiss her. Mrs. Kane's eyes were the same turquoise blue as her daughter's; but, although bright and wide open they lacked any expression, for they saw nothing at all in our big, beautiful world.

"Aren't you early, dear?" she asked.

"A whole hour," said Orissa. "But I promised Steve I'd try to get home at this time, for he wants me to help him. Can I do anything for you first, mamma?"

"No," was the reply; "I am quite comfortable. Run along, if Steve wants you." Then she added, in a playful tone: "Will there be any supper to-night?"

"Oh, yes, indeed! I'll break away in good season, never fear. Last night I got into the crush of the 'rush hour,' and the car was detained, so both Steve and I forgot all about supper. I'll run and change my dress now."

"I'm afraid the boy is working too hard," said Mrs. Kane, sighing. "The days are not half long enough for him, and he keeps in his workshop, or hangar, or whatever you call it, half the night."

“True,” returned Orissa, with a laugh; “but it is not work for Steve, you know; it’s play. He’s like a child with a new toy.”

“I hope it will not prove a toy, in the end,” remarked Mrs. Kane, gravely. “So much depends upon his success.”

“Don’t worry, dear,” said the girl, brightly. “Steve is making our fortune, I’m sure.”

But as she discarded the lawn for a dark gingham in her little chamber, Orissa’s face was more serious than her words and she wondered—as she had wondered hundreds of times—whether her brother’s great venture would bring them ruin or fortune.

II. A Disciple Of Aviation

The Kanes had come to California some three years previous because of Mr. Kane's impaired health. He had been the manager of an important manufacturing company in the East, on a large salary for many years, and his family had lived royally and his children been given the best education that money could procure. Orissa attended a famous girls' school and Stephen went to college. But suddenly the father's health broke and his physicians offered no hope for his life unless he at once migrated to a sunny clime where he might be always in the open air. He came to California and invested all his savings—not a great deal—in the orange ranch. Three months later he died, leaving his blind wife and two children without any financial resources except what might be gleaned from the ranch. Fortunately the boy, Stephen, had just finished his engineering course at Cornell and was equipped—theoretically, at least—to begin a career with one of the best paying professions known to modern times. Mechanical to his finger tips, Stephen Kane had eagerly absorbed every bit of information placed before him and had been graduated so well that a fine position was offered him in New York, with opportunity for rapid advancement.

Mr. Kane's death prevented the young man from accepting this desirable offer. He was obliged to go to Los Angeles to care for his mother and sister. It was a difficult situation for an inexperienced boy to face, but he attacked the problem with the same manly courage that had enabled him to conquer Euclid and Calculus at school, and in the end arranged his father's affairs fairly well.

The oranges from the ranch would give them a net income of about two thousand dollars a year, which was far from meaning poverty, although much less than the family expenditures had previously been. There were other fruits on the place, an ample vegetable garden and a flock of chickens, so the Kanes believed they would live very comfortably on their income. In addition to this, Steve could earn a salary as a mechanical engineer, or at least he believed he could.

He found, however, after many unsuccessful attempts, that his professional field was amply covered by experienced men, and as a temporary makeshift he was finally driven to accept a position in an automobile repair shop.

"It's an awful comedown, Ris," he said to Orissa, his confidant, "but I can't afford to loaf any longer, you know, and the pay is almost as much as a young engineer gets to start with. So I'll tackle it and keep my eye open for something better."

While Stephen was employed in this repair shop a famous aviator named Willard came to town with his aëroplane and met with an accident that badly disabled his machine. Although aviators have marked Southern California as their chosen field from the beginning, because one may fly there all winter, there was not a place in the city where a specialty was made of repairing airships. Naturally Mr. Willard sought an automobile repair shop as the one place most liable to supply his needs.

The manager shook his head.

"We know nothing about biplanes," he confessed.

"Pardon me, sir," said Stephen Kane, who was present, "I know something about airships, and I am sure I can repair Mr. Willard's, if you will take the job."

The aviator turned to him gratefully.

“Thank you,” he said; “I’ll put my machine in your hands. What experience have you had with biplanes of this type?”

“None at all,” was the answer; “but I am sure you will not find an experienced airship man in this city. I’ve studied the devices, though, ever since Montgomery made his first flights, and as we have all the requisite tools and machinery here I am sure, with your assistance and direction, I can readily put your machine into perfect condition.”

He did, performing the work excellently. Before long another biplane needed repairs, and Stephen was recommended by Mr. Willard. Later a Curtiss machine came under Steve’s hands, and then an Antoinette monoplane. The manager raised the young fellow’s salary, proud that he had a man competent to repair these new-fangled inventions which were creating such a stir throughout the country.

Stephen Kane might have continued to follow the calling of an expert aëroplane doctor with marked success, had he been an ordinary young mechanic. But the air castles he had built at college were not all dissipated, as yet, and aside from possessing decided talent as a workman Steve had an inventive genius that promised great things for his future. By the time he had taken a half dozen different aëroplanes apart and repaired them he had a thorough knowledge of their construction and requirements, and the best of them seemed to him wholly inadequate for the purpose for which they were planned.

“The fact is, Ris,” he said to Orissa one evening, after he had been poring over a book on air currents, “the airships of to-day are all experimental, and chock full of mistakes. No two are anywhere near alike, and each man thinks he has the only correct mechanism.”

“But they fly,” answered the girl, who was keenly interested in the subject of aviation and had twice been down to the shop to examine the aëroplanes Steve was repairing.

“So they do; they fly, after a fashion,” admitted the young man, “which fully proves the thing can be accomplished. But present machines are all too complicated, and the planes seem to have been shaped by guesswork, rather than common sense. They fuss with motors and propellers and ignore the sustaining mechanism, which is the most vital principle of all. Some day we shall see the sky full of successful aviators, and flying will be as common as automobiling now is; but when that time comes we shall laugh at the crude devices they brag of to-day.”

“That may be true,” returned the girl, thoughtfully; “but isn’t it true of every great invention, that the first models are imperfect?”

“Quite true,” said he. “I can make a better biplane than any I have seen, but I admit that had I not had the advantage of seeing any I might have blundered as all the rest seem to have done.”

“Why don’t you make one, Steve?” asked Orissa impulsively. “If aviation is going to become general the man who builds the best aëroplane will make his fortune.”

Steve flushed and rose to tramp up and down the room before he answered. Then he stopped before his sister and said in low, intense accents:

“I long to make one, Orissa! The idea has taken possession of my thoughts until it has almost driven me crazy. I can make a machine that will fly better and be more safe and practical than either the Wright or Curtiss machines. But the thing is impossible. I—I haven’t the money.”

Orissa sat staring at the rug for a long time. Finally she asked:

“How much money would it take, Steve?”

He hesitated.

“I don’t know. I’ve never figured it out. What’s the use?”

“There is use in everything,” declared his sister, calmly. “Get to work and figure. Find out how much you need, and then we’ll see if we can manage it.”

He gazed at her as if bewildered. Then he turned and left the room without a word.

A few evenings later he handed her an estimate.

“I think it could be done for three thousand dollars,” he remarked. “Which means, of course, it can’t be done at all.”

Orissa took the paper without replying and pondered over it for several days. She was only seventeen, but had inherited her father’s clear, business-grasping mind, and would have been an essentially practical girl had not her youth and inexperience lent her some illusions that time would dissipate.

Stephen posed as the “head of the family;” but Orissa really directed its finances, poor Mrs. Kane being so helpless that her children never depended upon her for counsel but on the contrary kept all business matters from her, lest she worry over them. The one maid employed in the bungalow served Mrs. Kane almost exclusively, while Orissa always had devoted much time to her mother, who had been stricken blind at the time of her daughter’s birth.

One evening, when brother and sister were in the garden together, the girl said:

“I believe I have discovered a plan that will permit you to build your airship. What is it to be, Steve; a biplane or a monoplane?”

“Let me hear your plan,” was the eager reply.

“Well, I’ve been to see Mr. Wentworth, and he will advance us fifteen hundred on our orange crop, by discounting the price ten per cent. He came and looked at the trees and said they were safe to pay us at least twenty-three hundred dollars next February.”

“But—Orissa!—how could we live, with our income cut down that way—to a mere seven or eight hundred dollars?”

“I’m going to work,” she said quietly. “I’m tired of doing nothing but dig around the garden and cook. Mamma doesn’t need me, at least during the day, so I’m going into business.”

Steve smiled.

“*You* work, Orissa? What on earth could you do?”

“I’ll find something to do. And my salary, added to yours, will make up for the loss of the orange money. We must economize, of course; but when we’ve such a big deal on hand—one that will make our fortune—we can put up with a few temporary discomforts.”

“But fifteen hundred won’t build the thing, that is certain,” he said, with a sigh. “I’ve got to construct an entirely new motor—engine and all—and some original propellers and elevators, and the patterns and castings for these will be rather expensive.”

“Well, by the time the fifteen hundred are gone,” she replied, “you will know exactly how much more money is needed, and we will mortgage the place for that amount.”

“Rubbish!” cried Stephen, impatiently. “I won’t listen an instant to such a wild plan. Suppose I fail?”

“Oh, if you’re going to fail we won’t undertake it,” said his sister. “You claimed you could make a better airship than the Curtiss or the Wright—either one of which is worth a fortune—and I believed you. If you were only joking, Steve, we won’t talk of it any more.”

“I wasn’t joking; or bragging, either; you know that, Orissa. I’m pretty sure of my idea; but it’s untried. I’ve bought all the books on aviation I can find and I’ve been reading of Professor Montgomery’s discovery of the laws of air currents and his theories concerning them. They’re only primers, dear, for the science of aviation is as yet unwritten. That is why I cannot speak with perfect assurance; but the more I look into the thing the more positive I am that I’ve hit upon the right idea of aërial navigation.”

“What is your idea?” she asked.

“To simplify the construction of the craft. The present devices are all too complicated and keep the aviator too busy while he’s in the air.”

“In other words, he’s all up in the air while he’s up in the air,” she remarked.

“Precisely. Most of his time is required to maintain a lateral balance, so as not to tip over or lose control. I’m to have a simpler construction, an automatic balance, and a plane only large enough to support the machinery and the aviator.”

“If you can manage that,” said Orissa, “we’re not taking any chances.”

He sat with furrowed brow, thinking deeply. Finally he said in a decisive way:

“Nothing is certain until it is accomplished. I won’t take the risk of making you and mother paupers. Please don’t speak of the thing again, Ris.”

Orissa didn’t; but Steve did, about a month later. A great aviation meet had been arranged at Dominguez Field, near Los Angeles and only a few miles from their own home. The event, which was destined to be an epoch in the history of aviation, brought many famous aviators to the city with their machines, among them a Frenchman named Paulhan, with whom Stephen soon became acquainted. An examination of Paulhan’s machine, a Farman of the latest type, which had already performed marvels, served to convince the boy that his own ideas were not only practical but destined soon to be discovered and applied by someone else if he himself failed to take advantage of the time and opportunity to utilize them. With that argument to calm any misgivings that he might perhaps fail, coupled with an eagerness to build his invention that drove him to forsake caution, Steve went to Orissa one day and said:

“All right, dear; I’m going to undertake the thing. Can you still get Mr. Wentworth to advance the money?”

“I think so,” she replied.

“Then get it, and I’ll start work at once. The drawings are already complete,” and he showed them to her, neatly traced in comprehensive detail.

Most girls would have been bewildered by the technicalities and passed the drawings with a glance; but Orissa understood how important to them all this venture was destined to be, so she sat down and studied the designs minutely, making her brother explain anything she found the least puzzling. By this time the girl had made herself familiar with the latest modern improvements in aëroplanes and had personally examined several of the best devices, so she was able to catch the true value of Stephen’s idea and immediately became as enthusiastic as he was.

The money was raised and placed by Stephen in a bank where he could draw upon it as he needed it. Mrs. Kane concurred mildly in the plans when they were explained to her, being

accustomed to lean upon Orissa and Stephen and to accept their judgment without protest. Aviation was all Greek to the poor woman and she did not bother her head trying to understand why people wanted to fly, or how they might accomplish their desire.

III. The Kane Aircraft

Stephen set up his workshop at home, devoting his evenings to the new aëroplane. Progress was necessarily slow, as four or five hours out of each twenty-four were all he could devote to his enterprise.

The boy was still employed in this manner when the Aviation Meet was held at Dominguez Field and Paulhan accomplished the wonderful flights that made him world famous. Of course, Orissa and Stephen were present and did not miss a single event. On the grand stand beside them sat a young fellow Stephen had often met at the automobile shop, a chauffeur named Arch Hoxsey. It was the first time Hoxsey had ever seen an aëroplane, and neither he nor Stephen could guess that within one year this novice would become the greatest aviator in all the world. These are days when, comet-like, a heretofore unknown aviator appears, accomplishes marvels and disappears, eclipsed by some new master of the art of flying. It is the same way with aëroplanes; the leading one to-day is within a brief period destined to be surpassed by a greatly improved machine.

The enthusiasm of the Kanes rose to fever heat in witnessing this exhibition, at the time the most remarkable ever held in the annals of aviation. Afterward they counseled together very seriously and agreed that it would be better for Steve to resign his position at the shop and devote his whole time to his aëroplane, in which he had now more confidence than ever.

He applied for patents on his various devices and the complete machine, being fearful that someone else might adopt his ideas before he could finish his first aëroplane; yet at the same time he observed the utmost secrecy as to the work on which he was engaged and admitted no person except Orissa to the garden, where he had set up his hangar and shop.

The girl had been for some time persistently seeking employment, for now that Steve had ceased to be a breadwinner it was more important than ever for her to earn money. By good fortune she was engaged by Mr. Burthon as his secretary the very week following her brother's retirement.

Steve's expenses were growing greater, however, and Orissa began figuring on "ways and means." Their life in this retired place was so simple that she believed her mother could do without the maid and questioned her on the subject. Mrs. Kane declared she preferred to be alone, if Orissa felt she could prepare the breakfasts and dinners unaided. Luncheons at home were very plain affairs and Steve readily agreed to come into the house at noon and get a bite for himself and his mother. So the maid was dismissed and a considerable expense eliminated.

During the summer construction of the airship progressed more rapidly and, after the motors were completed and tested and found to be nearly perfect, Steve began to model the planes and perfect his automatic balance.

It was hard work sometimes for Orissa to sit in the office and keep her mind on her work when she knew her brother was completing or testing some important detail of the aëroplane, but she held herself in rigid restraint and succeeded in giving satisfaction to her employer.

On the August afternoon on which our story opens Stephen Kane was to begin the final assembling of the parts of his machine, after which he could test it in real flight. He needed Orissa's assistance to help him handle some of the huge ribbed planes, and so she had promised to come home early.

It was not long before she entered the hangar, arrayed in her old gingham, which allowed her to move freely. The two became so interested that Mrs. Kane almost missed her dinner in spite of the girl's promise; but Orissa did manage to tear herself away from the fascinating task long enough to prepare the meal and serve it. Steve came in and tried to eat, for he was at a point where he could do nothing without his sister's help; but neither of them was able to swallow more than a morsel, and as quickly as possible hurried back to their work.

Mrs. Kane, although totally blind, knew her way about the house perfectly and was able to take care of herself in nearly all ways; so when bedtime came she abandoned her monotonous knitting, played a few pieces on the pianoforte—one of her few amusements—and then calmly retired for the night. She never worried over the "children," believing they were competent to care for themselves.

It was long past midnight before Steve got to a point where he could continue without Orissa. "In about three days more," he said, as they washed up and prepared to adjourn to the house, "I will be able to make my first flight. Shall we wait till Sunday, Ris, or will you take a day off?"

"Oh, not Sunday," she replied. However eager her brother might be she had never yet allowed him to work a moment on a Sunday, and Steve deferred to her wishes in this regard. "We're pretty busy at the office and Mr. Burthon was inclined to be a little cranky to-day; but I'll manage it somehow, just as soon as you are ready."

"What sort of a fellow is Burthon?" asked her brother, somewhat curiously.

"Why, he stands well in the business world, I'm told, and is very successful in handling large tracts of real estate," she replied. "Also, he seems a gentleman by birth and breeding, yet a queerer man I never met. His chief peculiarity is in being very absent-minded, but he does other odd things. Yesterday he refused to sell a piece of land to a customer because he did not like him, and he told the man so with rude frankness. One day I discovered he had cheated another man out of six hundred dollars. I called his attention to what I described as a 'mistake,' and he said he robbed the man on purpose, because he had been snobbish and overbearing. He gave the six hundred dollars to a poor woman to build her a house with, saying to me that he had once committed a serious crime for which this was in part penance, and soon after he platted a lot of swamp land down near San Pedro and advertised it as 'desirable residence property.' Really, Steve, I can't quite make out Mr. Burthon."

"He seems to have good and bad points, from what you say," observed her brother, "and I judge the two qualities are about evenly mixed. Is he nice to you, Ris?"

"He is always polite and respectful, but most of the time he doesn't know I'm in existence. When he gets one of his absorbed fits his eyes look right through me, as if I wasn't there."

"Perhaps he is thinking out some big schemes. Is he a rich man?"

"He is said to be quite wealthy. But he is an old bachelor, and the girl across the hall says he lives at a club, goes to the theater every night and drinks more than is good for him. I hardly believe that last, Steve, for Mr. Burthon doesn't look a bit like a drinking man."

"Perhaps he's a morphine fiend. That would make him absent-minded, you know."

"No; when he's aroused his head is clear as a bell and he drives a shrewd bargain. Do you know, Steve, I'm inclined to think that speech of his was in earnest, although he laughed harshly at the time, and that—that—"

"That what?"

“That at some time or other he has committed some crime that worries him.”

IV. Mr. Burthon Is Confidential

Orissa was tired next day and she blundered several times in copying deeds and attending to the routine of the private office, where she alone was closeted with the proprietor. But Mr. Burthon would not have noticed had she set fire to the place, so intent was he upon a bundle of papers he had brought in with him and to which he devoted his exclusive attention.

The girl left him at his desk when she went to lunch and found him there, still occupied with the papers, when she returned. Several people wanted to see him personally, but he told Orissa to state he was engaged and could admit no one. She gave the message to the young man in charge of the outer office, where several clerks were employed, and they knew better than to allow anyone to invade Mr. Burthon's private sanctum.

At about three o'clock, while she was busy at her desk, the secretary heard her name spoken and looked up. From his chair Mr. Burthon was eyeing her observantly. His gaze was clear and intelligent; the abstracted mood had passed.

"Come here, please, Miss Kane," he said.

She brought her writing pad and sat down beside his desk, as she did when he dictated his letters; but he shook his head.

"We'll not mind the mail to-day," he said. "I want to talk with you; to advise with you. Queerly enough, Miss Kane, there isn't a soul on earth in whom I can confide when occasion arises. In other words, I haven't an intimate friend I can trust, or one who is sincerely interested in me."

That embarrassed Orissa a little. Since she had been working at the office this was the first time he had addressed a remark to her not connected with the business. Indeed, the man was now regarding her much as he would a curiosity, as if he had just discovered her. She was amazed to hear him speak so confidentially and made no reply because she had nothing to say.

After a pause he continued:

"You haven't much business experience, my child, but you have a keen intellect and decided opinions." Orissa wondered how he knew that. "Therefore I am going to ask your advice in a matter where business is blended with sentiment. Will you be good enough to give me your candid opinion?"

"If you wish me to, sir," she said, after some hesitation.

"Thank you, Miss Kane. The case is this: With four others I purchased some time ago a gold mine in Arizona known as the 'Queen of Hearts.' It cost me about all I am worth—some two hundred thousand dollars."

Orissa gasped. It seemed an enormous sum. But he continued, speaking calmly and clearly:

"I thought at the time the mine was surely worth a million. I went to see it and found the ore exceedingly rich. The others, who purchased the Queen of Hearts with me, were equally deceived, for just recently we have discovered that the rich vein was either very narrow or was placed there by those we purchased from, with the intention of defrauding us. In either case, please understand that the mine is not worth a cotton hat. We are a stock company, and our stock is listed on the exchange and commands a high premium, for no one except the owners knows the truth about it. The general idea is that the mine is still producing largely—

and it is—for, to protect ourselves until we can unload it on to others, we have secretly purchased rich ore elsewhere, dumped it into the mine, and then taken it out again."

He paused, drumming absently on the desk with his fingers, and Orissa asked:

"What is the object of that deception, sir?"

"To maintain the public delusion until we can sell out. And now I come to the point of my story, Miss Kane. Gold mines, even as rich as the Queen of Hearts is reputed to be, are not easy to sell. I have exhausted all my resources in keeping up this deception and the time has come when I must sell or become bankrupt. The other stockholders have smaller interests and are wealthier men, but each one is striving hard to secure a customer. I have found one."

He looked up and smiled at her; then he frowned.

"The man is my brother-in-law," he added.

Orissa was getting nervous, but waited for him to continue.

"This brother-in-law is a man I detest. He married my only sister and did not treat her well. He is a notorious gambler and confidence man, although perhaps he would not admit that is his profession. At all events he had the assurance to sneer at me and abuse my sister, and I was powerless at the time to interfere. Fortunately the poor woman died several years ago. Since then I have not seen much of Cumberford, for he lives in the East. He came out here last month on some small business matter and has gone crazy over the Queen of Hearts mine. He hunted me up and asked if I'd sell part of my stock. I told him I would sell all or none. So he has been getting his money together and has raised two hundred and fifty thousand dollars—the sum I demanded."

Orissa was looking at him wonderingly. The story seemed incredible. Perhaps Mr. Burthon saw the dismay and reproach in her eyes, for he asked:

"What do you think of this deal, Miss Kane? Am I not fortunate?"

"But—would you *really* sell a worthless property to this man—your own brother-in-law—and—and steal a fortune from him?" she inquired.

The man flushed and shifted uneasily in his seat.

"He abused my sister," he said, as if defending himself.

"The property is worthless," she persisted.

"He can hustle around and sell it again, as I am doing."

"Suppose he fails? Suppose he refuses to do such a wicked thing?"

Mr. Burthon stared at her a moment. Then he laughed harshly.

"Cumberford would delight in such a 'wicked' game," he replied. "And, if he failed to sell, the scoundrel would be ruined, for I believe this two hundred and fifty thousand is about all he's worth."

"It's dreadful!" exclaimed the girl, really shocked.

"It is done every day in a business way," he rejoined.

"Then why did you ask my advice?" demanded the girl, quickly. Before answering he waited to drum on the desk with his fingers again.

"Because," said he, speaking slowly, "I dislike this man so passionately that I have wondered if the hatred blinds my judgment. He may be dangerous, too, yet I think he is too much of a

fool to be able to injure me in retaliation. I don't know him very well. I've not seen him before for years." He paused, taking note of the horror spreading over the girl's face. Then he smiled and added in a gentler voice: "Perhaps my chief reason, however, for seeking your advice is that I find I have still a conscience. Yes, yes; a troublesome conscience. I have been suppressing it for years, yet like Banquo's ghost it will not down. My business judgment determines me to unload this worthless stock and save myself from the loss of my entire fortune. I must do it. It is like a man taking unawares a counterfeit coin, and then, discovering it is spurious, passing it on to some innocent victim. You might do that yourself, Miss Kane."

"I do not believe I would."

"Well, most people would, and think it no crime. In this case I'm merely passing a counterfeit, that I received innocently, on to another innocent. If the fact is ever known my business friends will applaud me. But that obstinate conscience of mine keeps asking the question: 'Is it safe?' It asserts that I am filled with glee because I am selling to a man I hate—a man who has indirectly injured me. I am to get revenge as well as save my money. Safe? Of course it's safe. Yet my—er—conscience—the still small voice—keeps digging at me to be careful. It doesn't seem to like the idea of dealing with Cumberford, and has been annoying me for several days. So I thought I would put the case to a young, pure-minded girl who has a clear head and is honest. I imagined you would tell me to go ahead. Then I could afford to laugh at cautious Mr. Conscience."

"No," said Orissa, gravely, "the conscience is right. But you misunderstand its warning. It doesn't mean that the act is not safe from a worldly point of view, but from a moral standpoint. You could not respect yourself, Mr. Burthon, if you did this thing."

He sighed and turned to his papers. Orissa hesitated. Then, impulsively, she asked:

"You won't do it, sir; will you?"

"Yes, Miss Kane; I think I shall."

His tone had changed. It was now hard and cold.

"Mr. Cumberford will call here to-morrow morning at nine, to consummate the deal," he continued. "See that we are not disturbed, Miss Kane."

"But, sir—"

He turned upon her almost fiercely, but at sight of her distressed, downcast face a kindlier look came to his eyes.

"Remember that the alternative would be ruin," he said gently. "I would be obliged to give up my business—these offices—and begin life anew. You would lose your position, and—"

"Oh, I won't mind that!" she exclaimed.

"Don't you care for it, then?"

"Yes; for I need the money I earn. But to do right will not ruin either of us, sir."

"Perhaps not; but I'm not going to do right—as you see it. I shall follow my business judgment."

Orissa was indignant.

"I shall save you from yourself, then," she cried, standing before him like an accusing angel. "I warn you now, Mr. Burthon, that when Mr. Cumberford calls I shall tell him the truth about your mine, and then he will not buy it."

He looked at her curiously, reflectively, for a long time, as if he beheld for the first time some rare and admirable thing. The man was not angered. He seemed not even annoyed by her threat. But after that period of disconcerting study he turned again to his desk.

“Thank you, Miss Kane. That is all.”

She went back to her post, trembling nervously from the excitement of the interview, and tried to put her mind on her work. Mr. Burthon was wholly unemotional and seemed to have forgotten her presence. But, a half hour later, when he thrust the papers into his pocket, locked his desk and took his hat to go, he paused beside his secretary, gazed earnestly into her face a moment and then abruptly turned away.

“Good night, Miss Kane,” he said, and his voice seemed to dwell tenderly on her name.

V. Between Man And Man - And A Girl

That night Orissa confided the whole story to Steve. Her brother listened thoughtfully and then inquired:

“Will you really warn Mr. Cumberford, Ris?”

“I—I ought to,” she faltered.

“Then do,” he returned. “To my notion Burthon is playing a mean trick on the fellow, and no good business man would either applaud or respect him for it. Your employer is shifty, Orissa; I’m sure of it; if I were you I’d put a stop to his game no matter what came of it.”

“Very well, Steve; I’ll do it. But I don’t believe Mr. Burthon means to be a bad man. His plea about his conscience proves that. But—but—”

“It’s worse for a man to realize he’s doing wrong, and then do it, than if he were too hardened to have any conscience at all,” asserted Steve oracularly.

“And if I let him do this wrong act I would be as guilty as he,” she added.

“That’s true, Ris. You’ll lose your job, sure enough, but there will be another somewhere just as good.”

So, when Mr. Burthon’s secretary went to the office next morning she was keyed up to do the most heroic deed that had ever come to her hand. Whatever the consequences might be, the girl was determined to waylay Mr. Cumberford when he arrived and tell him the truth about the Queen of Hearts.

But he did not come to the office at nine o’clock. Neither had Mr. Burthon arrived at that time. Orissa, her heart beating with trepidation but strong in resolve, watched the clock nearing the hour, passing it, and steadily ticking on in the silence of the office. The outer room was busy this morning, and in the broker’s absence his secretary was called upon to perform many minor tasks; but her mind was more upon the clock than upon her work.

Ten o’clock came. Eleven. At half past eleven the door swung open and Mr. Burthon ushered in a strange gentleman whom Orissa at once decided was Mr. Cumberford. He was extremely tall and thin and stooped somewhat as he walked. He had a long, grizzled mustache, wore gold-rimmed eyeglasses and carried a gold-headed cane. From his patent leather shoes to his chamois gloves he was as neat and sleek as if about to attend a reception.

Observing the presence of a young lady the stranger at once removed his hat, showing his head to be perfectly bald.

“Sit down, Cumberford,” said Mr. Burthon, carelessly.

As he obeyed, Orissa, her face flaming red, advanced to a position before him and exclaimed in a pleading voice:

“Oh, sir, do not buy Mr. Burthon’s mine, I beg of you!”

The man stared at her with faded gray eyes which were enlarged by the lenses of his spectacles. Mr. Burthon smiled, seemed interested, and watched the scene with evident amusement.

“Why not, my child?” asked Mr. Cumberford.

“Because it is worthless—absolutely worthless!” she declared.

He turned to the other man.

“Eh, Burthon?” he muttered, inquiringly.

“Miss Kane believes she is speaking the truth,” said the broker jauntily.

“Oh, she does. And you, Burthon?”

“I? Why, I’m of the same opinion.”

Mr. Cumberford took out his handkerchief, removed his glasses and polished the lenses with a thoughtful air. Orissa was trembling with nervousness.

“Don’t buy the Queen of Hearts, sir; it would ruin you,” she repeated earnestly.

He breathed upon the glasses and wiped them carefully.

“You interest me,” he remarked. “But, the fact is, I—er—I’ve bought it.”

“Already!”

“At nine o’clock, according to agreement. Burthon sent word he’d come to my hotel instead of meeting me at his office, as first planned.”

“Oh, I see!” cried Orissa, much disappointed. “He knew I would prevent the crime.”

“Crime, miss?”

“Is it not a crime to rob you of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars?”

“It would be, of course. I should dislike to lose so much money.”

“You have lost it!” declared the girl. “That mine has no gold in it at all—except what has been bought elsewhere and placed in it to deceive a purchaser.”

Mr. Cumberford replaced his glasses, adjusting them carefully upon his nose. Then he stared at Orissa again.

“You’re an honest young woman,” he said calmly. “I’m much obliged. You interest me. But—ahem!—Burthon has my money, you see.”

Mr. Burthon’s expression had changed. He was now regarding his brother-in-law with a curious and puzzled gaze.

“You’re not angry, Cumberford?” he asked.

“No, Burthon.”

“You’re not even annoyed, I take it?” This with something of a sneer.

“No, Burthon.”

Both Orissa and her employer were amazed. Looking from one to another, Mr. Cumberford’s waxen features relaxed into a smile.

“I’ve placed my Queen of Hearts stock in a safety deposit vault,” he remarked blandly.

“I have deposited your money in my bank,” retorted Mr. Burthon, triumphantly.

“Excellent!” said the other. “The thing interests me—indeed it does. You couldn’t purchase that stock from me at this moment, Burthon, for twice the sum I paid you.”

“No? And why not?”

“I’ll tell you. I had not intended to refer to the matter just yet, but this young woman’s exposé of your attempted trickery induces me to explain matters. You have always taken me for a fool, Burthon.”

“I’ve tried to place a proper value on your intellect, Cumberford.”

“You have little talent in that line, believe me. Before I came out here I had heard such glowing reports of the Queen of Hearts that I stopped off in Arizona to see the wonderful mine. The manager was very polite and showed me about, but somehow I got a notion that all was not square and aboveboard. I’ve always been interested in mines; they fascinate me; and if this mine was as rich as reported I wanted some of the stock. But I imagined things looked a little queer, so I sent a confidential agent—fellow named Brewster, who has been with me for years—to hire out as a miner and keep his eyes open. He soon discovered the truth—that the mine was being ‘salted’ or fed with outside gold ore in precisely the way this girl has stated.”

He turned to Orissa with a profound bow, then looked toward Burthon again. “The thing interested me. I wondered why, and wired my man to stay on a little longer, till I had time to think it over. I—er—think very slowly. Very. In a few days Brewster telegraphed me the startling intelligence that the mine had actually struck a new lead, with ore far richer than the first showing, although that had made the Queen of Hearts famous. My man had been sent to the telegraph office with messages from the manager to Mr. Burthon and the four other stockholders; but poor Brewster’s memory is bad, and he forgot to send a telegram to anyone but me. Of course the great strike—er—interested me. I instructed Brewster over the telegraph wire. At a cost of five thousand dollars we bribed the manager to keep the valuable strike secret for ten days. He’s an honest man, and I shall retain him in the office. The ten days expire to-night. Meantime, I’ve purchased the stock.”

Mr. Burthon sprang to his feet, white with anger.

“You scoundrel!” he shouted.

“Don’t get excited, Burthon. This is a mere business incident, between man and man—and a girl.” Another bow toward Orissa. “You tried to rob me, sir, and sneered when you thought you had succeeded. I haven’t robbed you, for I paid your price; but I’ve made a very neat investment. My stock is worth a million at this moment. Interesting, isn’t it?”

Mr. Burthon recovered himself with an effort and sat down again.

“Very well,” he said a little thickly. “As you say, it’s all in the way of business. Good day, Cumberford.”

The other man arose and faced Orissa, who stood by wholly bewildered by this unexpected development.

“Thank you again, my child. Your name? Orissa Kane. I’ll remember it. You tried to do me a kindness. Interesting—very!”

Without another glance at Mr. Burthon he put on his hat, walked out and closed the door softly behind him.

Orissa looked up and found the broker’s eyes regarding her intently.

“I—I’m sorry, sir,” she stammered; “but I had to do it, to satisfy my conscience. I suppose I am dismissed?”

“No, indeed, Miss Kane,” he returned in kindly tones. “An honest secretary is too rare an acquisition to be dismissed without just cause. Having told you what I did, I could expect you to act in no other way.”

“And, after all, sir,” she said, brightening at the thought, “you did not rob him! Yet you saved your fortune.”

He made a slight grimace, and then laughed frankly.

“Had I taken your advice,” he rejoined, “I should now be worth a million.”

VI. A Bucking Biplane

Stephen Kane had scarcely slept a wink for three nights. When Orissa came home Thursday evening he met her at the car with the news that his aëroplane was complete.

“I’ve been adjusting it and testing the working parts all the afternoon,” he said, his voice tense with effort to restrain his excitement, “and I’m ready for the trial whenever you say.”

“All right, Steve,” she replied briskly; “it begins to be daylight at about half past four, this time of year; shall we make the trial at that hour to-morrow morning?”

“I couldn’t wait *longer* than that,” he admitted, pressing her arm as they walked along. “My idea is to take it into old Marston’s pasture.”

“Isn’t the bull there?” she inquired.

“Not now. Marston has kept the bull shut up the past few days. And it’s the best place for the trial, for there’s lots of room.”

“Let’s take a look at it, Steve!” she said, hastening her steps.

In the big, canvas covered shed reposed the aëroplane, its spreading white sails filling the place almost to the very edges. It was neither a monoplane nor a biplane, according to accepted ideas of such machines, but was what Steve called “a story-and-a-half flyer.”

“That is, I hope it’s a flyer,” he amended, while Orissa stared with admiring eyes, although she already knew every stick and stitch by heart.

“Of course it’s a flyer!” she exclaimed. “I wouldn’t be afraid to mount to the moon in that airship.”

“All that witches need is a broomstick,” he said playfully. “But perhaps you’re not that sort of a witch, little sister.”

“What shall we call it, Steve?” she asked, seriously. “Of course it’s a biplane, because there are really two planes, one being above the other; but it is not in the same class with other biplanes. We must have a distinctive name for it.”

“I’ve thought of calling it the ‘Kane Aircraft,’” he answered. “How does that strike you?”

“It has an original sound,” Orissa said. “Oh, Steve! couldn’t we try it to-night? It’s moonlight.”

He shook his head quickly, smiling at her enthusiasm.

“I’m afraid not. You’re tired, and have the dinner to get and the day’s dishes to wash and put away. As for me, I’m so dead for sleep I can hardly keep my eyes open. I must rest, so as to have a clear head for to-morrow’s flight.”

“Shall we say anything to mother about it?”

“Why need we? It would only worry the dear woman unnecessarily. Whether I succeed or fail in this trial, it will be time enough to break the news to her afterward.”

Orissa agreed with this. Mrs. Kane knew the airship was nearing completion but was not especially interested in the venture. It seemed wonderful to her that mankind had at last learned how to fly, and still more wonderful that her own son was inventing and building an improved appliance for this purpose; but so many marvelous things had happened since she

became blind that her mind was to an extent inured to astonishment and she had learned to accept with calm complacency anything she could not comprehend.

Brother and sister at last tore themselves away from the fascinating creation and returned to the house, where Steve, thoroughly exhausted, fell asleep in his chair while Orissa was preparing dinner. He went to bed almost immediately after he had eaten and his sister also retired when her mother did, which was at an early hour.

But Orissa could not sleep. She lay and dreamed of the great triumph before them; of the plaudits of enraptured spectators; of Stephen's name on every tongue in the civilized world; and, not least by any means, of the money that would come to them. No longer would the Kanes have to worry over debts and duebills; the good things of the world would be theirs, all won by her brother's cleverness.

If she slept at all before the gray dawn stole into the sky the girl was not aware of it. By half past four she had smoking hot coffee ready for Steve and herself and after hastily drinking it they rushed to the hangar.

Steve was bright and alert this morning and declared he had "slept like a log." He slid the curtains away from the front of the shed and solemnly the boy and girl wheeled the big aëroplane out into the garden. By careful manipulation they steered it between the trees and away to the fence of Marston's pasture, which adjoined their own premises at the rear. To get it past the fence had been Steve's problem, and he had arranged to take out a section of the fencing big enough to admit his machine. This was now but a few minutes' work, and presently the aëroplane was on the smooth turf of the pasture.

They were all alone. There were no near neighbors, and it was early for any to be astir.

"One of the most important improvements I have made is my starting device," said Steve, as he began a last careful examination of his aircraft. "All others have a lot of trouble in getting started. The Wright people erect a tower and windlass, and nearly every other machine uses a track."

"I know," replied Orissa. "I have seen several men holding the thing back until the motors got well started and the propellers were whirling at full speed."

"That always struck me as a crude arrangement," observed her brother. "Now, in this machine I start the motor whirling an eccentric of the same resisting power as the propeller, yet it doesn't affect the stability of the aëroplane. When I'm ready to start I throw in a clutch that instantly transfers the power from the eccentric to the propeller—and away I go like a rocket."

As he spoke he kissed his sister and climbed to the seat.

"Are you afraid, Steve?" she whispered, her beautiful face flushed and her eyes bright with excitement.

"Afraid! Of my own machine? Of course not."

"Don't go very high, dear."

"We'll see. I want to give it a thorough test. All right, Ris; I'm off!"

The motors whirred, steadily accelerating speed while the aëroplane trembled as if eager to dart away. Steve threw in the clutch; the machine leaped forward and ran on its wheels across the pasture like a deer, but did not rise.

He managed to stop at the opposite fence and when Orissa came running up, panting, her brother sat in his place staring stupidly ahead.

“What’s wrong, Steve?”

He rubbed his head and woke up.

“The forward elevator, I guess. But I’m sure I had it adjusted properly.”

He got down and examined the rudder, giving it another upward tilt.

“Now I’ll try again,” he said cheerfully.

They turned the aircraft around and he made another start. This time Orissa was really terrified, for the thing acted just like a bucking broncho. It rose to a height of six feet, dove to the ground, rose again to plunge its nose into the turf and performed such absurd, unexpected antics that Steve had to cling on for dear life. When he finally managed to bring it to a halt the rudder was smashed and two ribs of the lower plane splintered.

They looked at the invention with dismay, both silent for a time.

“Of course,” said Steve, struggling to restrain his disappointment, “we couldn’t expect it to be perfect at the first trial.”

“No,” agreed Orissa, faintly.

“But it ought to fly, you know.”

“Being a flying machine, it ought to,” she said. “Can you mend it, Steve?”

“To be sure; but it will take me a little time. To-morrow morning we will try again.”

With grave faces they wheeled it back into the garden and the boy replaced the fence. Then back to the hangar, where Steve put the Kane Aircraft in its old place and drew the curtains—much as one does at a funeral.

“I’m sure to discover what’s wrong,” he told Orissa, regaining courage as they walked toward the house. “And, if I’ve made a blunder, this is the time to rectify it. To-morrow it will be sure to fly. Have faith in me, Ris.”

“I have,” she replied simply. “I’ll go in and get breakfast now.”

VII. Something Wrong

All that day Orissa was in a state of great depression. Even Mr. Burthon noticed her woebegone face and inquired if she were ill. The girl had staked everything on Steve's success and until now had not permitted a doubt to creep into her mind. But the behavior of the aircraft was certainly not reassuring and for the first time she faced the problem of what would happen if it proved a failure. They would be ruined financially; the place would have to be sold; worst of all, her brother's chagrin and disappointment might destroy his youthful ambition and leave him a wreck.

Somehow the girl managed to accomplish her work that day and at evening, weary and despondent, returned to her home. When she left the car her step was slow and dragging until Steve came running to meet her. His face was beaming as he exclaimed:

"I've found the trouble, Ris! It was all my stupidity. I put a pin in the front elevator while I was working at it, and forgot to take it out again. No wonder it wouldn't rise—it just couldn't!"

Orissa felt as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

"Are you sure it will work now?" she asked breathlessly.

"It's bound to work. I've planned all right; that I know; and having built the aircraft to do certain things it can't fail to do them. Provided," he added, more soberly, "I haven't overlooked something else."

"Are the repairs completed, Steve?"

"All is in apple-pie order for to-morrow morning's test."

It was a dreadfully long evening for them both, but after going to bed Orissa was so tired and relieved in spirit that she fell into a deep sleep that lasted until Steve knocked at her door at early dawn.

"Saturday morning," he remarked, as together they went out to the hangar. "Do you suppose yesterday being Friday had anything to do with our hard luck?"

"No; it was only that forgotten pin," she declared.

Again they wheeled the aircraft out to Marston's pasture, and once more the girl's heart beat high with hope and excitement.

Steve took a final look at every part, although he had already inspected his work with great care. Then he sprang into the seat and said:

"All right, little sister. Wish me luck!"

The motor whirred—faster and faster—the clutch gripped the propeller, and away darted the aircraft. It rolled half way across the pasture, then lifted and began mounting into the air. Orissa stood with her hands clasped over her bosom, straining her eyes to watch every detail of the flight.

Straight away soared the aircraft, swift as a bird, until it was a mere speck in the gray sky. The girl could not see the turn, for the circle made was scarcely noticeable at that distance, but suddenly she was aware that Steve was returning. The speck became larger, the sails visible. The young aviator passed over the pasture at a height of a hundred feet from the

ground, circled over their own garden and then began to descend. As he did so the aircraft assumed a rocking motion, side to side, which increased so dangerously that Orissa screamed without knowing that she did so.

Down came the aëroplane, reaching the earth on a side tilt that crushed the light planes into kindling wood and a mass of crumpled canvas. Steve rolled out, stretched his length upon the ground, and lay still.

The sun was just beginning to rise over the orange grove. The deathly silence that succeeded the wreck of the aircraft was only broken by the irregular, spasmodic whirr of the motors, which were still going. Orissa, white and cold, crept in among the debris and shut down the engines. Then, slowly and reluctantly, she approached the motionless form of her brother.

To be alone at such a time and place was dreadful. A few steps from Steve she halted; then turned and fled toward the garden in sudden panic. Away from the horrid scene her courage and presence of mind speedily returned. She caught up a bucket of water that stood in the shed and lugged it back to the pasture.

Was Steve dead? She leaned over him, dreading to place her hand upon his heart, gazing piteously into his set, unresponsive face.

Pat—pat—patter!

A rush across the springing turf.

What was it?

Orissa straightened up, yelled like an Indian and made a run for the fence that did full credit to her athletic training.

For Marston's big bull was coming—a huge, tawny creature with a temper that would shame tobasco. He swerved as if to follow the fleeing girl, but then the draggled planes of the aircraft defied him and he changed his mind to charge this new and unknown enemy—perhaps with the same disposition that Don Quixote attacked the windmill.

Orissa shrieked again, for the enormous beast bounded directly over Steve's prostrate body and with bowed head and tail straight as a pointer dog's rushed at the aëroplane. The sails shivered, collapsed, rolled in billows like the waves of the ocean, and amid them the struggling bull went down, tangled himself in the wires and became a helpless prisoner.

The girl, who was sobbing hysterically, heard herself laugh aloud and was inexpressibly shocked. The bull bellowed with rage but was so wound around with guy-wires that this was the extent of his power. Turning her eyes from the beast to Steve she gave a shout of joy, for her brother was sitting up and rubbing his leg with one hand and his head with the other, while he stared bewildered at the wreck of his aëroplane, from which the head of the bull protruded.

Orissa ran up, wringing her hands, and asked:

"Are you much hurt, dear?"

"I—I've gone crazy!" he answered, despairingly. "Seems as if the aircraft was transformed into the mummy of a—a—brute beast! Don't laugh, Ris. Wh—what's wrong with me—with my eyes? Tell me!"

She threw herself down upon the grass and laughed until she cried, Steve's reproachful glances having no particle of effect in restraining her. When at last she could control herself she sat up and wiped her eyes, saying:

“Forgive me, dear, it’s—it’s so funny! But,” suddenly grave and anxious, “are you badly hurt? Is anything—broken?”

“Nothing but my heart,” he replied dolefully.

“Oh; that!” she said, relieved.

“Just look at that mess!” he wailed, pointing to the aircraft. “What has happened to it?”

“The bull,” she answered. “But don’t be discouraged, dear; the thing flew beautifully.”

“The bull?”

“No; the aircraft. But as for the bull, I’m bound to say he did his best. How in the world shall we get him out of there, Steve?”

“I—I think I’m dazed, Ris,” he murmured, feeling his head again. “Can’t you help me to—understand?”

So she told him the whole story, Stephen sighing and shaking his head as he glared at the bull and the bull glared at him. Afterward the boy made an effort to rise, and Orissa leaned down and assisted him. When he got to his feet she held him until he grew stronger and could stand alone.

“I’m so grateful you were not killed,” his sister whispered. “Nothing else matters since you have so miraculously escaped.”

“Killed?” said Steve; “why, it was only a tumble, Ris. But the bull is a more serious complication. I suppose the aircraft was badly damaged, from what you say, before the bull got it; but now it’s a hopeless mess.”

“Oh, no,” she returned, encouragingly. “If he hasn’t smashed the motor we won’t mind the rest of the damage. Do you think we can untangle him?”

They approached the animal, who by this time was fully subdued and whined apologetically to be released. Steve got his nippers and cut wire after wire until suddenly the animal staggered to his feet, gave a terrified bellow and dashed down the field with a dozen yards of plane cloth wound around his neck.

“Good riddance!” cried Orissa. “I don’t think he’ll ever bother us again.”

Steve was examining the wreck. He tested the motors and found that neither the fall nor the bull had damaged them in the least. But there was breakage enough, aside from this, to make him groan disconsolately.

“The flight was wonderful,” commented his sister, watching his face anxiously. “Nothing could work more perfectly than the Kane Aircraft did until—until—the final descent. What caused the rocking, Steve?”

“A fault of the lateral balance. My automatic device refused to work, and before I knew it I had lost control.”

She stood gazing thoughtfully down at the wreck. Her brother had really invented a flying machine, of that there was no doubt. She had seen it fly—seen it soar miles through the air—and knew that a certain degree of success had been obtained. There was something wrong, to be sure; there usually is with new inventions; but wrongs can be righted.

“I’ve succeeded in a lot of things,” her brother was saying, reflectively. “The engines, the propeller and elevator are all good, and decided improvements on the old kinds. The starting

device works beautifully and will soon be applied to every airship made. Only the automatic balance failed me, and I believe I know how to remedy that fault."

"Do you suppose the machine can be rebuilt?" she asked.

"Assuredly. And the automatic balance perfected. The trouble is, Orissa, it will take a lot more money to do it, and we've already spent the last cent we could raise. It's hard luck. Here is a certain fortune within our grasp, if we could perfect the thing, and our only stumbling block is the lack of a few dollars."

Having reviewed in her mind all the circumstances of Steve's successful flight the girl knew that he spoke truly. Comparing the aircraft with other machines she had seen and studied at the aviation meet she believed her brother's invention was many strides in advance of them all.

"The question of securing the money is something we must seriously consider," she said. "In some way it will be raised, of course. But just now our chief problem is how to get this ruin back to the hangar."

"That will be my job," declared Steve, his courage returning. "There are few very big pieces left to remove, and by taking things apart I shall be able to get it all into the shed. The day's doings are over, Ris. Get breakfast and then go to your work. After I've stored this rubbish I'll take a run into town myself, and look for a job. The aviation jig is up—for the present, at least."

"Don't do anything hurriedly, Steve," protested the girl. "Work on the aircraft for a day or two, just as if we had money to go ahead with. That will give me time to think. To-night, when I come home, we will talk of this again."

VIII. Mr. Burthon's Proposition

Saturday was a busy day at the office. They did not close early, but rather later than on other days, and Orissa found plenty of work to occupy her. But always there remained in her thoughts the problem of how to obtain money for Steve, and she racked her brain to find some practical solution.

Mr. Burthon was in a mellow mood to-day. Since the sale of his mining stock he had been less abstracted and moody than before, and during the afternoon, having just handed Orissa several deeds of land to copy, he noticed her pale, drawn face and said:

"You look tired, Miss Kane."

She gave him one of her sweet, bright smiles in payment for the kindly tone.

"I *am* tired," she returned. "For two mornings I have been up at four o'clock."

"Anyone ill at home?" he asked quickly.

"No, sir."

Suddenly it occurred to her that he might assist in unraveling the problem. She turned to him and said:

"Can you spare me a few minutes, Mr. Burthon? I—I want to ask your advice."

He glanced at her curiously and sat down in a chair facing her.

"Tell me all about it," he said encouragingly. "Not long ago it was I asking for advice, and you were good enough to favor me. Now it is logically your turn."

"My brother," said she, "has invented an airship."

He gave a little start of surprise and an eager look spread over his face. Then he smiled at her tolerantly.

"All the world has gone crazy over aviation," he remarked. "I, myself, witnessed the flights at Dominguez Field and became strongly impressed with the desire to fly. I suppose your brother contracted the fever, too, and has made a model he thinks will float in the air."

"Oh, it is not a model," she gravely replied. "Stephen is an expert mechanic and has worked on many of the most famous aëroplanes in the country. He has recently built a complete airship of his own, and this morning I watched him make a very successful flight in it."

"Indeed?" he exclaimed, the eager look returning. "There is money in a good airship, Miss Kane. This is the psychological moment to forge ahead in aviation, which will soon become the world's popular mode of transit. It is easy to build an airship; yes. Perhaps I could build one myself. But where many will try, many will fail."

"And some will succeed," she added, smiling.

He examined her expressive face with interest.

"Please tell me all about it," said he.

So Orissa gave him the history of the aircraft, from its conception to the final triumph and wreckage and its conquest by the bull. Incidentally she told how they had mortgaged their home and the orange crop to get the needed money, and finally explained the condition they were now in—success within their grasp, but no means of taking advantage of it.

Mr. Burthon was very attentive throughout, his eyes fixed upon Orissa's lovely face and watching its shades of anxiety and exaltation as the story progressed. While she enthusiastically described Steve's aircraft, her eyes sparkling and a soft flush mantling her cheeks, the man scarcely heard what she said, so intent was he in admiring her. He did not permit his fair secretary to notice his mood, however, and the girl was too earnestly engaged to heed her employer's intent gaze. At the conclusion of her story she asked:

"Tell me, sir, is there any way in which we can raise the money required?"

Mr. Burthon roused himself and the hard business expression settled upon his features again.

"I think so," he returned, slowly. "What your brother needs is a backer—what is called an 'angel,' you know—who will furnish the necessary funds for the perfection of the invention and to place it upon the market and properly exhibit it."

"Would anyone do that?" she inquired.

"For a consideration, yes. Such a party would demand an interest in the invention, and a share of the profits."

"How much, sir?"

"Perhaps a half interest."

She considered this statement.

"That is too much to give away, Mr. Burthon. The aircraft is already built and tested. It is a proved success, and the best aëroplane in all the world. Why should we give a half interest in return for a little money?"

He hesitated; then replied coldly:

"Because the invention is useless without the means to publicly demonstrate it, and establish it on a paying basis. At present your airship is without the slightest commercial value. Once exploited, the half interest you retain would make your fortune."

Her brow wrinkled with a puzzled look.

"I'll talk to Steve about it," she said. "But, if he consents, where could I find such an—an 'angel'?"

"In me," he answered coolly. "If, on investigation, I find your brother's airship to be one half as practical as you represent it, and doubtless believe it to be, I will deposit ten thousand dollars in the bank to exploit it—in return for a half interest—and agree to furnish more money whenever it is required."

"Thank you, sir," said Orissa, doubtfully. "I—I'll talk with my brother."

"Very well," he replied. "But beware of confiding in strangers. I am your friend, and will guard your interests faithfully. Talk with your brother, but with no one else."

Orissa did talk with Steve, that very evening, and the boy frowned at the suggestion just as his sister had done.

"I know that is the way business men do things," he said, "and it's a good deal like robbery. Burthon sees that we must have money, and he's driving a shrewd bargain. Besides that, I'm not sure he's honest."

"I don't see how he could defraud us, though," mused Orissa. "There are two things for us to consider. One is, whether we can raise the money in any other way; and then, whether a half

interest in a business with plenty of money behind it would not pay better than the whole thing, with a constant struggle to make both ends meet."

"Perhaps it might," he replied, hesitatingly. "But I've done all this alone, so far, and I hate to let anyone else reap the benefit of my ideas. I suppose if I had not proved the thing, but merely begun work on it, Burthon wouldn't have invested a dollar in it."

"I suppose not," she agreed. "But think it over, dear. We have all day to-morrow to talk of it and consider what is best to be done. Then, when I go to the office Monday morning, I can tell Mr. Burthon our decision."

They talked considerably more on this subject after dinner, and worried over it during a sleepless night. After breakfast on Sunday morning they went quietly to church, Mrs. Kane accompanying them, as was her custom. But Orissa had hard work to keep her mind on the service and Steve found the attempt impossible. The return home, including a long car ride, was passed in silence, and then Orissa had to busy herself over the dinner.

It was the middle of the afternoon before brother and sister found time to meet in the hangar, which was now strewn with parts of the aircraft. Steve looked around him gloomily and then seated himself beside Orissa upon a bench.

"I suppose we must settle this thing," he said; "and there's no doubt we must have money, or we shall face ruin. The thing has cost too much for us to withdraw from it without a heavy loss that would mean privation and suffering for you and mother. If we go to anyone but Burthon we may not get as good an offer as he makes, for men with money are eager to take advantage of a poor fellow in need. I can't blame Burthon much. I don't suppose there's a rich man living who wouldn't hold us up in the same selfish way. And so—"

He paused, shrugging his shoulders.

"So you think we'd better accept Mr. Burthon's proposition and give him a half interest?" she asked.

"Beg pardon," said a cold voice; "am I intruding?"

IX. The Other Fellow

Stephen and Orissa both sprang to their feet, startled by the interruption. A tall man, having a stoop to his shoulders, had parted the entrance curtains and stood looking at them. He wore blue goggles, an automobile cap and duster, and heavy shoes; but Orissa recognized him at once.

“Mr. Cumberford!” she exclaimed.

“Dear me!” said the man; “it’s the young lady from Burthon’s office—and my friend.” He laughed, lightly, as if amused by the recollection; then added: “I’ve run out of gasoline and my car is stranded a quarter of a mile off. Think you could furnish me enough of the elusive fluid to run me into town?”

Steve walked silently to his gasoline tank. He was excessively annoyed to have a stranger spy upon his workshop and resolved to get rid of the man in short order. Orissa also was silent, fearing Mr. Cumberford might linger if she entered into conversation with him. The spot was so retired that until now no one but themselves had ever entered the hangar, and the secret had been well kept.

“Here’s a two-gallon can,” said Stephen, surlily. “Will that do you?”

Mr. Cumberford nodded, set the can upon the ground and walked over to the bench, where he calmly seated himself beside the girl.

“What are you up to, here?” he asked.

“Our own especial business,” retorted Steve. “You will pardon me, sir, if I ask you to take your gasoline and go. This is private property.”

“I see,” said Cumberford. “I’m intruding. Never mind that. Let’s talk a bit; I’m in no hurry.”

“We are very much occupied, sir,” urged Orissa, earnestly.

“No doubt,” said the man. “I overheard a remark as I entered. You were wondering whether to accept Burthon’s offer and give him a half interest. Eh? That interests me; I’m Burthon’s brother-in-law.”

He glanced around him, then calmly took a cigarette from his pocket and offered one to Steve.

“I can’t allow smoking here, sir; there’s too much gasoline about,” said the boy, almost rudely.

“True. I forgot.” He put the case in his pocket. “You’re building some sort of a—er—er—flying machine, I see. That interests me. I’m a crank on aviation. Is this the thing Burthon wants a half interest in?”

Steve scowled. When Cumberford turned to Orissa she slightly nodded, embarrassed how to escape this impertinent questioning.

“I thought so. Then you’ve really got something?”

Steve laughed. His annoyance was passing. The man had already seen whatever there was to see, for his eyes had been busy from the moment he entered. And Steve remembered that this was the person who had outwitted Mr. Burthon in the mine deal.

“I have something that will fly, if that is what you mean,” he replied.

“Yes; that is what I mean. Tried the thing yet?”

“Oh, yes,” said Orissa eagerly. “It flew splendidly yesterday morning, but—but Steve had an accident with his aëroplane, and a bull demolished what was left of it.”

“Ah; that interests me; it really does,” said Cumberford. He looked at Stephen more attentively. “Your brother, Miss Kane?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you need money?”

“To rebuild the machine, and perfect it; yes, sir.”

“And Burthon will furnish the money, for a half interest?”

“Yes, sir,” repeated the girl, uneasy at his tone.

“Too much,” asserted Mr. Cumberford, positively. “Burthon’s a rascal, too. You know that, Miss Kane. Tried to rob me; and you tried to prevent him. I haven’t forgotten that; it was a kindness. I’ve had to fight a cold, hard, selfish world, and fight it alone. I’ve won; but it has made me as cold, as hard and selfish as the others. You’re different, Miss Kane; the world hasn’t spoiled you yet. I can’t recollect when anyone ever took the trouble to do me a kindness before. So I, your direct opposite, admire you for your originality. I’m a scoundrel and you’re a—an honest girl.”

There wasn’t a particle of emotion in his voice, but somehow both Orissa and Stephen knew he was in earnest. It was difficult to say anything fitting in reply, and after a brief pause the man continued:

“I can see that your airship is at present something of a wreck. How much money do you need?”

“I ought to have at least a thousand dollars,” answered Steve, reflectively glancing around the shop. Cumberford’s eyes followed his.

“Will two thousand do it?”

“Of course, sir.”

“I’ll lend you three,” said the man. “I don’t want a half interest. I won’t rob you.”

Both boy and girl stared at him in amazement.

“What security do you require?” asked Stephen, suspiciously.

“Eh? None at all. The thing interests me. If you make a lot of money, I’ll let you pay me back some day. That’s fair. If you fail, you’ll have worries enough without having to repay me. But I attach two conditions to my offer. One is that you have nothing to do with Burthon. The other is that I have permission to come here and watch your work; to advise with you at times; to help you map out your future career and to attend all the flying exhibitions in which you take part. Agree to that, and I’ll back you through thick and thin, because I’m interested in aviation and—because your sister was good to me.”

“I’ll do it, sir!” cried Steve, excitedly.

“Oh, thank you! Thank you, Mr. Cumberford,” added Orissa, in joyful tones.

“It’s a bargain,” said Cumberford, smiling at them both. He took out a fountain pen and wrote a check on a Los Angeles bank for three thousand dollars in favor of Stephen Kane. But he handed it to Orissa.

“Now then,” said he, “tell me something about it.”

X. A Fresh Start

When Orissa appeared at the office Monday morning she went quietly about her work, feeling very happy indeed. The astonishing generosity of Mr. Cumberford had relieved all her worries and brought sunshine into her heart.

Mr. Burthon came at his usual time and on taking his place at the desk looked inquiringly at Orissa, but said nothing. Neither did she mention the subject of the aircraft. Her employer, watching her stealthily from behind his desk, could not fail to note the joy in her face and was undoubtedly puzzled to account for it—unless, indeed, she and her brother had decided to accept his proposition. He had an idea that they would accept; that they must accept; it was the only way they could carry on their experiment. But he waited for her to refer to the subject.

Orissa managed to escape that night while a customer was engaging Mr. Burthon's attention. She disliked, for some unexplained reason, to tell him they had decided not to take him for a partner. Arriving home she found Steve busily at work rebuilding his airship, and it pleased her to hear his cheery whistle as she approached the hangar. The young fellow was in capital spirits.

"You see, Ris," said he, "with all this money to use I shall be able to make an entirely new automatic balance. I've come to the conclusion the first one doesn't work smoothly enough to be entirely satisfactory. I shall also provide a store of extra ribs and such parts as are liable to get damaged, so that the repair work will be a matter of hours instead of days. How lucky it was Mr. Cumberford ran out of gasoline yesterday."

"He's a queer man," replied Orissa, thoughtfully. "I can't make up my mind yet whether I like him or not."

"I like his money, anyhow," laughed Steve; "and we didn't have to give him a half interest to get it, either. I imagine the man was really touched by your endeavor to save him from what you thought was a bad bargain, and certainly his magnanimous act could have been prompted by nothing but kindness."

"It saved our half interest, at least," she said, evasively. "Has he been here to-day, Steve?"

"Haven't seen even his shadow," was the reply. "I don't imagine he'll bother us much, although he has reserved the right to look around all he wants to. He must be a busy man, with all his wealth."

The next morning, however, after Orissa had gone to her work, Mr. Cumberford's car spun up the lane and he came into the hangar, nodded to Steve and sat down quietly on the bench.

For a time he silently watched the young man shave a Cyprus rib into shape; then got up and carefully examined the motor, which was in good order. Steve knew, when first Mr. Cumberford began asking questions, that he understood machinery, and the man was quick to perceive the value of young Kane's improvements.

"It interests me," he drawled, after starting the engines and watching them work. "As a boy I longed to be a mechanic. Got sidetracked, though, and became a speculator. Needs almost as much ingenuity to succeed in that as in mechanics. Pays better, but ruins one's self-respect. Stick to mechanics, Kane."

"I will," promised Steve, laughing.

“This new profession,” continued Cumberford, “will throw you in with a lot of ‘queer’ people—same sort that used to follow the races and now bet on automobile contests. Keep your sister away from them.”

“I’ll try to,” returned Steve, more soberly. “But Orissa is crazy over aviation, and she’ll have to go everywhere that I do.”

“That’s all right; I like the idea. But don’t introduce her to every fellow you are forced to associate with. Girls are queer, and your sister is—beautiful. I’ve a daughter myself.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Steve, not knowing just how to take this remark.

“My daughter is not—beautiful. No. And she’s a demon. I’ll bring her here to see you and your sister, some day.”

“Thank you,” said Steve, turning red. Certainly this new acquaintance was odd and unaccountable in some ways. Steve wondered why he should bring a “demon” to the hangar, and why he described his own daughter in such uncomplimentary language.

Mr. Cumberford smoked a cigarette thoughtfully.

“Your sister,” he said, “interests me. She’s a good girl. Must have a good mother.”

“The best in the world,” asserted Steve, proudly.

“My daughter,” resumed Cumberford, “takes after her mother. Girls usually do. Her mother was—well, she was Burthon’s sister. Catch the idea? It was all my fault, and Sybil—that’s my daughter—blames me for her parentage. With apparent justice. Not a joke, Kane. Don’t laugh.”

“I’m not laughing, sir.”

“Speaking of Burthon reminds me of something. I don’t like the idea of your sister working there—in his office.”

“He has always treated her very nicely, I believe,” said Steve, “and Orissa feels she must earn some money.”

“Not necessary. You’ve a fortune in your airship. Take the girl away from Burthon. Keep her at home.”

Steve did not reply to this, but he decided it was not a bad suggestion.

“How old is she?” inquired Cumberford, presently.

“Just seventeen.”

“Too young to work in an office. Finished her education?”

“All we are able to give her, sir.”

“H-m-m. Take my advice. Burthon’s unreliable. I know him. Gorilla inside, man outside. I—I married a Burthon.”

These brief sentences were spoken between puffs of his cigarette. Sometimes there would be a very definite pause between them, while the man smoked and reflected upon his subject. Steve continued his work and answered when required to do so.

Cumberford stayed at the hangar until nearly noon, watching the boy work, bearing a hand now and then when a plane rib was awkward to handle alone, always interested in everything pertaining to the aëroplane. He made Steve explain the changes he proposed to apply to the lateral balance and offered one or two rather clever suggestions, showing his grasp of the

subject. But he did not refer to Orissa again and finally slipped away without saying good-bye.

Steve thought him queerer than during their first interview, but liked him better.

XI. Orissa Resigns

Meantime Orissa was having a hard time at the office endeavoring to avoid a personal conversation with Mr. Burthon. When he came in at nine o'clock he smiled upon her and asked:

"Anything to tell me, Miss Kane?"

She shook her head, flushing a little, and he went to his desk without another word. He seemed abstracted and moody during the forenoon—a return of his old puzzling manner—and Orissa regretted she had not been brave enough to tell him of their decision to reject his offer when he gave her the opportunity.

Nothing more passed between them until after luncheon, but when she reëntered the office Mr. Burthon, who had not gone out, suddenly roused himself and said:

"Come here, please, Miss Kane."

She obeyed, meekly seating herself in the chair beside his desk.

The man looked at her a long time; not impudently, with direct gaze, but rather speculatively and with an expression that seemed to penetrate far beyond her and to consider many things beside her fair face. Finally he asked:

"What conclusion have you reached in regard to your financial matters, of which we spoke Saturday?"

"I've talked with my brother, sir, and he dislikes to give up a half interest in his invention."

"Did you tell him I would furnish all the money that might be required?"

"Yes, sir."

"And he refused?"

"This aëroplane is very dear to my brother, Mr. Burthon. He cannot bear to transfer a part ownership to another, who would have the right to dictate its future."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed the broker, impatiently; "the boy's a fool. There's scarcely an inventor in the world who hasn't had to sacrifice an interest in his creation in order to raise money."

"Stephen won't do it," declared Orissa, positively, for she resented the speech.

Mr. Burthon fell silent, drumming on the desk with his fingers, as he always did when in deep thought. Orissa started to rise, thinking the interview closed.

"Wait a moment, please," he said. "How old are you, Miss Kane?—your name is Orissa, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. I am seventeen."

"So young! Why, you ought to be in school, instead of at work."

She made no reply. He watched her awhile, as she sat before him with bent head, and then continued, in the kindly tone he so often used when addressing her:

"Miss Kane—Orissa—I will give your brother all the money he needs, and he may retain the entire interest in his airship. The payment may come from you alone."

She started and became alert at once, raising her head to look at him inquiringly.

“In other words,” he added, “I’m not especially interested in your brother or his invention; but I am greatly interested in you.”

“Mr. Burthon, I—”

“Listen to me, Orissa, and let me explain. I’m a lonely man, for I have never married—or cared to. You are the only member of the fair sex who has ever attracted me except my sister, whom I regarded with warm affection. When she married that scoundrel Cumberford we became separated forever, and in a few years she died. Since then I have thought of nothing but business. I am now thirty-eight years of age, and in my prime. I have amassed a fortune—something more than a quarter of a million, as you know—and have no one to leave it to when I pass away. I should like to leave it to you, Orissa.”

“To me, sir!” she exclaimed, amazed.

“Yes. Your presence here in the office has transformed the place from a barren den to a cozy, homelike apartment. I like to see your sweet face near me, gravely bending over your work. Your personality has charmed me; your lack of affectation, your sincerity and honesty, have won my admiration. I cannot say to you, as a younger man would, that I love you, for I will not take an unfair advantage of one who is as yet a child. But you will become a woman soon, and I want to make you a splendid woman—and a happy one. This is my proposition: place yourself in my hands unreservedly, and let me direct your future. I will send you to a famous finishing school in the East and supply you with a liberal allowance. In two years you will return to me, old enough to become my wife.”

“Oh, Mr. Burthon!”

“Meantime I’ll finance your brother’s airship proposition until it either fails or finally succeeds.”

Orissa was greatly distressed. She felt at the moment like giving way to a flood of tears, for she realized that this absurd, astonishing proposal would deprive her of her position. He saw her agitation and felt intuitively she would not consider his offer. So he said, with grim insistence:

“You may answer me with one word, my child; yes or no.”

“Oh, Mr. Burthon, it is impossible! I have a home, a mother and brother, and—I—I could not think of such a thing.”

“Not to save those relatives from disaster—from misery—from ruin, perhaps?”

The implied threat hardened her heart, which had begun to pity the man.

“Not even to save them from death!” she replied firmly.

“Am I so distasteful to you, then? Is my money of so little account?”

With cold dignity Orissa rose from her chair. He saw the look on her face and became a little alarmed.

“Please forget all I have said,” he added, hastily. “I—I am not myself to-day. You may get the mail ready, Miss Kane, and I will sign the letters before I go.”

She went to the wardrobe and took down her things. He sat silently watching her as she put them on, a slight frown upon his face. The girl hesitated a moment, then walked straight to his desk and said:

“Of course I cannot stay here a moment after what you have said. But I think you—you meant to be good to me—in your way. Good-bye, Mr. Burthon.”

“Good-bye, Miss Kane.”

His voice was cold and hard. She did not look at him again, but walked out of the office and quietly left the building, so she did not see that the frown had deepened to a scowl, nor hear him mutter:

“Both lost—the girl and the aëroplane! But I’ll have them yet, for the Kanes are too simple to oppose me successfully.”

At three o’clock Orissa surprised Steve by coming into the hangar in her working dress.

“Why, what’s the matter, Ris?” he demanded.

“I’ve left Mr. Burthon,” she said quietly.

“What’s up?”

Orissa thought it unwise to tell her brother all that had transpired.

“He was angry because we refused to give him a half interest in the aircraft,” she explained. “So I simply quit and came home.”

Steve sat down and stared at her a moment. He had been thinking of Mr. Cumberford’s warning ever since that strange individual had gone away, and Orissa’s “resignation” afforded him distinct relief.

“I’m glad of it, Ris,” he said, earnestly. “There’s no necessity for you to work now, for we have plenty of money to see us through. Besides, I need you here to assist me.”

“Really, Steve?”

“It’s a fact. I don’t like to employ outside assistance at this stage of the game; it might be fatal. But you are nearly as well posted on aëroplanes as I am, Orissa, and you’re clever enough to be of real help to me. I don’t need brute strength, you know.”

“Why, I’m terribly strong!” she said with a gay laugh, baring her round arm and bending her elbow to show how the muscle bunched up. “I can lift as much as you can, Steve, if it is necessary.”

“It won’t be necessary,” replied her brother, delighted to find how easily she adopted his suggestion. “Just grab the end of that bow and hold it steady while I shave a point to it. That’s it. Don’t you see how awkward it is for me to handle these things alone?”

She nodded.

“You’re right, Steve. I’ll stay at home and help you finish the aircraft,” said she.

XII. The Spying Of Tot Tyler

Mr. Burthon was like many other men accustomed to modern business methods: he believed there was always an indirect way to accomplish whatever he desired. Also, like many others who have little or no use for such a contrivance, he owned a motor car. His chauffeur was a little, wizen featured man named Totham Tyler, familiarly called “Tot” by his chums, a chauffeur who knew automobiles backward and forward and might have progressed beyond his present station had he not been recognized as so “tricky” that no one had any confidence in him.

About two weeks after Orissa had left the office Mr. Burthon said to his man one morning:

“Tyler, would you like to do a little detective work?”

“Anything to oblige, sir,” answered Totham, pricking up his ears.

“Have you ever met a fellow around town named Kane?”

“Steve Kane, sir? Oh, yes. He used to be foreman of Cunningham’s repair shop. Quit there some time ago, I believe. Clever fellow, sir, this Kane.”

“Yes; he has invented a new sort of aëroplane.”

Tyler whistled, reflectively. All motor car people have a penchant for flying. As Mr. Cumberford would have said: it “interests them.”

“Kane is keeping the matter a secret,” continued Mr. Burthon, “and I’m curious to know what he’s up to. Find out, Tyler, and let me know.”

“Very good, sir. Where is he working?”

“At home. He lives out Beverly way. Take a Beverly car and get off at Sandringham avenue. Walk north up the lane to the first bungalow.”

“Ever been there, sir?”

“No; but Kane’s sister has described the place to me. When you get there, try to hire out as an assistant, but in any case keep your eyes open and observe everything in sight. I’ll pay you extra for this work, according to the value of the information you obtain.”

“I understand, sir,” answered Tyler, wrinkling his leathery face into a shrewd smile; “I know how to work a game of that sort, believe me.”

In pursuance of this mission the little chauffeur came to the Kane residence that very afternoon. As he approached the bungalow he heard the sound of pounding upon metal coming from the canvas covered hangar; otherwise the country lay peacefully sunning itself. An automobile stood in the lane. On the front porch a woman sat knitting, but raised her head at the sound of footsteps. Tyler touched his cap, but there was no response. Looking at her closely he saw the woman was blind, so he passed her stealthily and tiptoed up the narrow path toward the hangar. The top canvas had been drawn back on wires to admit the air, but the entrance was closed by curtains. Tyler listened to the hammering a moment, and summoning his native audacity to his aid boldly parted the curtains and entered.

“Hello, Kane!” he called; then paused and took in the scene before him at a glance.

Stephen was at the bench pounding into shape an aluminum propeller-blade; a tall man with a drooping mustache stood near, watching him. A young girl was busily sewing strips of

canvas. On its rack lay a huge flying machine—its planes spread, the motors in place, the running gear complete—seemingly almost ready for action.

But Tyler was not the only one with eyes. Kane paused with uplifted hammer and regarded the intruder with a frown of annoyance; Orissa stared in startled surprise; the tall man's spectacles glittered maliciously.

"Burthon's chauffeur!" he muttered; "I remember him." Swiftly his long arm shot out, seized Tyler's shoulder and whirled him around. The square toe of a heavy shoe caught the little man unprepared and sent him flying through the entrance, where he sprawled full length upon the ground.

In an instant he was up, snarling with rage. The curtains were closed and before them stood his assailant calmly lighting a cigarette.

"Mr. Cumberford, sir," gasped Tyler, "you shall smart for this! It's actionable, sir. It's—it's—assault 'n' battery; that's what it is!"

"Want any more?" asked the man coolly.

"Not to-day, thank you. This'll cost you plenty."

"Then go back to Burthon and tell him we know his game. You're trespassing, sir. I could wring your neck—perhaps I will—and the law would uphold me. If you want to escape alive, make tracks."

Totham Tyler took the hint. He walked away with as much dignity as he could muster, considering his anatomy had so recently been jarred; but he did not take the car home. Oh, no. There was much more to discover inside that hangar. He would wait until night, and then take his time to explore the place fully.

With this end in view the chauffeur secreted himself in the outskirts of the orange grove, creeping underneath a tree with thick branches that nearly touched the ground. He could pick ripe fruit from where he lay, and was well content to rest himself until night came.

An hour later Mr. Cumberford whirled by in his motor car, headed for the city. Tyler shook his fist at his enemy and swore effectively to relieve his feelings. Then he sank into a doze.

The approaching chug of an engine aroused him. He found it was nearly dark, so he must have slept for some hours. Here was Cumberford, back with his car and speeding up the lane so swiftly that Tot could only see a cage-like affair occupying the rear section of the automobile.

The chauffeur wondered what this could be, puzzling his brain for a solution of the problem. Even while considering the matter Cumberford passed him again, smoking his eternal cigarette and running the car more deliberately, now, toward the city.

"All right," mumbled the chauffeur; "he's out of the way for the night, anyhow. But he left the cage somewhere. What the blazes could he have had in it?"

He ate a few more oranges for his supper, smoked his pipe, snoozed again and awoke to find it was nearly midnight.

"Good!" said he; "now's my time. I don't mind a bit of a wait if I get the goods in the end; and here's where I get 'em. It takes a pretty good man to outwit Tot Tyler. They'll agree to that, by'm'by."

He crept down the lane and kept on the south side of the hedge until he came opposite the hangar, thus avoiding the house and grounds. The canvas top of the shed showed white in the

moonlight, not twenty feet from where he stood, and the chauffeur was pressing aside the thick hedge to find an opening when a deep bay, followed by a growl, smote his ears. He paused, his head thrust half through the foliage, his blood chilled with terror as there bounded from the hangar a huge bloodhound, its eyes glaring red in the dim light, its teeth bared menacingly.

Tot thought he was "done for," as he afterward told Mr. Burthon, when with a jerk the great beast stopped—a yard from the hedge—and the clank of a chain showed it could come no farther.

Tyler caught his breath, broke from the hedge and sprinted down the lane at his best gait, followed by a succession of angry bays from the hound.

"Confound Cumberford!" he muttered. "The brute was in that cage, and he went to town to get it, so's to keep me out of the hangar. That's two I owe this guy, an' I'll get even with him in time, sure's fate."

There was no car at this hour, so the discomfited chauffeur had to trudge seven miles to the city, where he arrived at early dawn.

The man was not in an amiable frame of mind when he brought Mr. Burthon's automobile to the club, where his master lived, at nine o'clock. As he drove the broker to the office he related his news.

"Cumberford!" cried Mr. Burthon. "Are you sure it was Cumberford?"

"Yes, sir; I remember him well. Took him to your office and the bank, you know, the time you had some deal with him; and he tried to tell me how to run the car. Me! I spotted him right away for a fresh guy from the East, an' now he's kicked me out of Kane's hangar an' set a dog on me. Oh, yes; I know Cumberford."

"So do I," said Burthon, grimly.

Tyler caught the tone.

"I'll do him yet, sir. Leave it to me. I couldn't get much of a pointer on Kane's aëroplane; hadn't time, you know; but it looked like a rosebud an' I guess he's got something good. I'm going to find out. I'll take out a dose for the dog that'll put him to sleep in a wink, and then I'll go all over the thing careful."

"Never mind the airship," said Mr. Burthon. "I've found out what I wanted to know."

"What! you have, sir?" exclaimed the chauffeur, amazed.

"Yes," was the quiet reply. "That is, if you're positive the man at the Kanes was Cumberford."

"Sure? Why, I'd stake my life on it, sir."

"Then I'll follow the clue in my own way," said Mr. Burthon, alighting from the car.

The discovery made by Tyler necessitated a change in the proposed campaign. The broker entered his office, sat down at his desk and fell into one of his fits of deep abstraction. The new "secretary," noting this, chewed her gum reflectively a moment and then began to read a novel, keeping the volume concealed behind her desk.

"If Cumberford was in the hangar," Mr. Burthon mused, "he has undertaken to back Kane's aëroplane, and I'm too late to get hold of the machine in the way I planned. I suppose the fool offered better terms than I did, to blind those simple children, and so the Kanes turned me down. Never mind. Cumberford has beaten me on two deals, but the third trick shall be mine.

I must get hold of the designs of Kane's aëroplane in some way; perhaps I may find them at the patent office. Then I'll regulate things so the boy's invention will prove a failure. The result ought to satisfy me: it would cause Cumberford serious loss, ruin young Kane, and—bring Orissa to me for assistance. But Tyler can't manage the job; I must have a man more clever than he is, and direct the intrigue in person."

The secretary read and chewed most of the day. When she quit "work" at five o'clock, Mr. Burthon was still thinking.

XIII. Sybil Is Critical

Steve was now progressing finely with the work on the Kane Aircraft and believed he would be able to overcome all the imperfections that had disclosed themselves during the first trial. Mr. Cumberford came to the hangar nearly every day, now, and Steve and Orissa began to wonder how he found time to attend to other business—provided he had any. On the day of Tyler's visit he had announced it was his last trip to see the Kanes, as he had been summoned to Chicago to attend a directors' meeting and from there would go on to New York. But having discovered that Burthon was intent upon some secret intrigue, which could bode no good to his protégés—the Kanes—he promptly changed his mind and informed Steve on a subsequent visit that he had arranged affairs at home and was now free to spend the entire winter in Southern California.

"My daughter likes it here," he added, "and kicks up fewer rows than she does at home; so that's a strong point in favor of this location. Aviation interests me. I've joined the Aëro Club out here and subscribed for the big meet to be held in January, at Dominguez Field. That's when we are to show the world the Kane invention, my lad, and I think it will be an eye opener to most of the crowd present."

"How does your mine, the Queen of Hearts, get along?" asked Orissa.

"It continues to pay big—even better than I had hoped. Burthon must be pretty sore over that deal by this time. Speaking of my sainted brother-in-law, I've just made a discovery. He owns the mortgage on your place."

"Why, we got the money from the Security Bank!" exclaimed Orissa.

"I know. I went there. Thought I'd take up the mortgage myself, but found Burthon had bought it. Now, the question is, why?"

Neither brother nor sister could imagine; but Cumberford knew.

"He hopes you won't be able to meet it, and then he'll foreclose and turn you out," he said. "But you're not the principal game he's after; he's shooting me over your heads. Burthon is miffed because I let you have the money, but believes I haven't any financial or personal interest in you beyond that. If he can prevent your aircraft from flying he'll make me lose my money and also ruin you two youngsters. That's doubtless his game. That's why he sent his man here to spy upon you."

"But that is absurd! Burthon can't prevent our success," declared Steve. "Even if some minor parts go wrong, the aircraft will fly as strongly and as well as anything now in existence."

"Don't be too sure," cautioned Mr. Cumberford. "You and your machine may be all right, but that's no reason why Burthon can't push failure at you, or even prevent you from flying. We must watch him."

"I do not believe the man hates us," observed Orissa, thoughtfully. "Mr. Burthon is a little queer and—and unscrupulous, at times; but I don't consider him a bad man, by any means."

"I know him better than you do, and he hates me desperately," replied Cumberford.

"He says that—that you abused his sister," doubtfully remarked the girl.

"Well, I did," said Cumberford, calmly. "I pounded her two or three times. Once I choked her until it's a wonder she ever revived."

“Oh, how dreadful!” exclaimed Orissa, shrinking back.

“Isn’t it?” he agreed, lighting a cigarette. “Only a brute would lift his hand against a woman. But Burthon’s sister—my wife—had a fiendish temper, and her tantrums aroused all the evil in my nature—there’s plenty there, I assure you. It was the time I choked her that Burthon had me arrested for cruelty. She had put poison in my coffee and I took the fluid into court with me. Burthon said I was lying and I asked him to drink the coffee to establish his sister’s innocence. But he wouldn’t. Pity, wasn’t it? The judge begged my pardon and said I ought to have choked her a moment longer. But no; I’m glad I didn’t, for she died naturally in the end. My dear daughter, whom I sincerely love, is like her lamented mother, except that I can trust her not to poison me.”

“Doesn’t she love you in return?” asked Orissa.

“Sybil? Why, she’s tremendously fond of me. My daughter,” and his voice grew suddenly tender, “has been for years—is now—the only person I live for. We’re chums, we two. The poor child can’t help her inherited tendencies, you know, and I rather enjoy the fact that she keeps me guessing what she’s going to do next. It—er—interests me, so to speak. I like Sybil.”

Sybil interested Orissa, too. Her father’s reports of her were so startlingly condemnatory, and his affection for her so evident, that Orissa’s curiosity was aroused concerning her. Mr. Cumberford, in spite of his peculiarities and deprecating remarks concerning himself had won the friendship of both Stephen and Orissa by this time; for whatever he might be to others he had certainly proved himself a friend in need to them. It was evident he liked the Kanes and sought their companionship, for the aircraft could scarcely account for his constant attendance at the hangar.

“I would like to meet your daughter,” said the girl, thoughtfully.

“Would you, really?” he asked, eagerly. “Well, I’m sure it wouldn’t hurt Sybil to know you. I’ll bring her out here to-morrow, if she’ll come. Never can tell what she will do or won’t do, you know. Interesting, isn’t it?”

“Quite so,” she concurred, laughing at his whimsical tone.

Because of this conversation the Kanes awaited Mr. Cumberford’s arrival next day with keen curiosity. Steve advanced the opinion that the girl wouldn’t come, but Orissa thought she would. And she did. When the motor car stopped in front of the bungalow there was a girl in the back seat and Orissa ran down the path to welcome her.

A pale, composed face looked out from beneath a big black hat with immense black plumes. A black lace waist with black silk bolero and skirt furnished a somber costume scarcely suited to so young a girl, for Sybil Cumberford could not have been much older than Orissa, if any. Her father was right when he claimed that Sybil was not beautiful. She had high, prominent cheek bones, a square chin and a nose with a decided uplift to the point. But her brown hair was profuse and exquisitely silky; her dark eyes large, well opened and far seeing; her slight form carried with unconscious grace.

Orissa’s critical glance took in these points at once, and intuitively she decided that Sybil Cumberford was not unattractive and ought to win friends. That she had a strong personality was evident; also the girl whom her father had affectionately called a “demon” was quiet, reserved and undemonstrative—at least during this first interview.

She acknowledged the introduction to Orissa with a rather haughty bow, alighting from the car without noticing Miss Kane’s outstretched hand.

“Which way is the aëroplane, Daddy?” she asked, speaking not flippantly, but in low, quiet tones.

“I’ll lead the way; you girls may follow,” he said.

As they went up the path Orissa, anxious to be sociable and to put the stranger at her ease, said brightly:

“Don’t you think the ride out here is beautiful?”

“Yes,” responded Sybil.

“The orange groves are so attractive, just now,” continued Orissa.

There was no response.

“I hope you enjoyed it, so you will be tempted to come again,” resumed the little hostess.

Miss Cumberford said nothing. Her father, a step in advance, remarked over his shoulder: “My daughter seldom wastes words. If you wish her to speak you must address to her a direct question; then she will answer it or not, as she pleases. It’s her way, and you’ll have to overlook it.”

Orissa flushed and glanced sidewise to get a peep at Sybil’s face, that she might note how the girl received this personal criticism. But the features were as unemotional as wax and the dark, mysterious eyes were directed toward the hangar, the roof of which now showed plainly. It was hard to continue a conversation under such adverse conditions and Orissa did not try. In silence they traversed the short distance to the shed, where Steve met them, a little abashed at receiving a young lady in his workshop.

But Mr. Cumberford’s daughter never turned her eyes upon him. She gave a graceful little nod when presented to the inventor, but ignored him to stare at the aircraft, which riveted her attention at once.

“This, Sybil,” said her father, enthusiastically, “is the famous aëroplane to be known in history as the Kane Aircraft. It’s as far ahead of the ordinary biplane as a sewing machine is ahead of a needle and thimble. It will do things, you know. So it—er—interests me.”

It seemed to interest her, also. Examining the details of construction with considerable minuteness she began asking questions that rather puzzled Mr. Cumberford, who retreated in favor of Steve. The inventor explained, and as all his heart and soul were in the aëroplane he explained so simply and comprehensively that Sybil’s dark eyes suddenly flashed upon his face, and clung there until the young fellow paused, hesitated, and broke down embarrassed.

Orissa, smiling at Steve’s shyness, picked up the subject and dilated upon it at length, for the girl had every detail at her tongue’s end and understood the mechanism fully as well as her brother did. The visitor listened to her with interest, and when she had no more questions to ask stood in absorbed meditation before the aëroplane, as if in a dream, and wholly disregarded the others present.

XIV. The Flying Fever

Mr. Cumberford said frankly to Steve and Orissa:

“Don’t expect too much of Sybil, or you’ll be disappointed. She’s peculiar, and the things that interest her are often those the world cares nothing for. Anything odd or unusual is sure to strike her fancy; that’s why she’s so enraptured with the aircraft.”

The word enraptured did not seem, to Steve, to describe Sybil’s attitude at all; but Orissa, watching the girl’s face, decided it was especially appropriate. They left her standing before the machine and went on with their work, while Mr. Cumberford ignored his daughter and smoked cigarettes while he watched, as usual, every movement of the young mechanic.

“Saw Burthon this morning,” he remarked, presently.

“Did he say anything?” asked Steve.

“No. Just smiled. That shows he’s up to something. Wonder what it is.”

Steve shook his head.

“I don’t see how that man can possibly injure me,” he said, musingly. “I’ve gone straight ahead, in an honest fashion, and minded my own business. As for the machine, that’s honest, too, and all my improvements are patented.”

“They’re what?”

“Patented, sir; registered in the patent office at Washington.”

“Oho!”

Steve looked at him, surprised.

“Well, sir?”

“You’re an irresponsible idiot, Stephen Kane.”

“Because I patented my inventions?”

“Yes, sir; for placing full descriptions and drawings of them before the public until you’ve startled the aviation world and are ready to advertise what you’ve done.”

Steve stared, a perception of Cumberford’s meaning gradually coming to him.

“Why, as for that,” he said a little uneasily, “no one ever takes the trouble to read up new patents, there are so many of them. And, after all, it’s a protection.”

“Is it? I can put another brace in that new elevator of yours and get a patent on it as an improvement. The brace won’t help it any, but it will give me the right to use it. I’m not positive I couldn’t prevent you from using yours, if I got mine publicly exhibited and on the market first.”

Steve was bewildered, and Orissa looked very grave. But Mr. Cumberford lighted another cigarette and added:

“Nevertheless, I wouldn’t worry. As you say, the patent office is a rubbish heap which few people ever care to examine. Is everything covered by patent?”

“Everything but the new automatic balance. I haven’t had time to send that on.”

“Then don’t.”

“The old one is patented, but it proved a failure and nearly killed me. The one I am now completing is entirely different.”

“Good. Don’t patent it until after the aviation meet. It’s your strongest point. Keep that one surprise, at least, up your sleeve.”

As Steve was considering this advice Sybil Cumberford came softly to her father’s side and said:

“Daddy, I want to fly.”

“To flee or to flew?” he asked, banteringly, at the same time looking at her intently.

“To fly in the air.”

Mr. Cumberford sighed.

“Kane, what will a duplicate of your aircraft cost?”

“I can’t say exactly, sir,” replied the boy, smiling.

“Shall we order one, Sybil?”

She stood staring straight ahead, with that impenetrable, mysterious look in her dark eyes which was so typical of the girl. Cumberford threw away his cigarette and coughed.

“We’ll consider that proposition some time, Steve,” he continued, rather hastily. “Meantime, perhaps my daughter could make a trial flight in your machine.”

“Perhaps,” said Steve, doubtfully.

“Will it carry two?”

“It would support the weight of two easily,” replied the young man; “but I would be obliged to rig up a second seat.”

“Do so, please,” requested Miss Cumberford, in her even, subdued voice. “When will it be ready?”

“The aircraft will be complete in about ten days from now; but before I attempt to carry a passenger I must give it a thorough personal test,” said Steve, with decision. “You may watch my flights, Miss Cumberford, if you wish, and after I’ve proved the thing to be correct and safe I’ll do what I can to favor you—if you’re not afraid, and still want to make the trial.”

“Thank you,” she said, and turned away.

“I’ll go myself, some time,” observed Mr. Cumberford, after a pause. “Flying interests me.”

Orissa was much amused. She had not known many girls of her own age, but such as she had met were all commonplace creatures compared with this strange girl, who at present seemed unable to tear herself away from the airship. Sybil did not convey the impression of being ill-bred or forward, however unconventional she might be; yet it seemed to Orissa that she constantly held herself firmly repressed, yet alert and watchful, much like a tiger crouched ready to spring upon an unsuspecting prey. In spite of this uncanny attribute, Orissa found herself powerfully drawn toward the peculiar girl, and resolved to make an attempt to win her confidence and friendship.

With this thought in mind she joined Sybil, who was again examining the aëroplane with rapt attention. While she stood at her side the girl asked, without glancing up:

“Have you ever made a flight?”

“No,” replied Orissa.

“Why not?”

“I haven’t had an opportunity.”

“Don’t you like it?”

“I imagine I would enjoy a trip through the air,” answered Orissa; “that is, after I became accustomed to being suspended in such a thin element.”

“You seem to understand your brother’s invention perfectly.”

“Oh, I do, in its construction and use. You see, I’ve been with Steve from the beginning; also I’ve examined several other modern aëroplanes and watched the flights at Dominguez Field. Naturally I’m enthusiastic over aviation, but I haven’t yet considered the idea of personally attempting a flight. To manage a machine in the air requires a quick eye, a clear brain and a lot of confidence and courage.”

“Is it so dangerous?” asked Miss Cumberford quietly.

“Not if you have the qualities I mention and a bit of experience or training to help you in emergencies. I’m sure an aëroplane is as safe as a steam car, and a little safer than an automobile; but a certain amount of skill is required to manage even those.”

The girl’s lips curled scornfully, as if she impugned this statement; but she remained silent for a while before continuing her catechism. Then she asked:

“Do you mean to try flying?”

“Perhaps so, some day,” said Orissa, smiling; “when aëroplanes have become so common that my fears are dissipated. But, really, I haven’t given the matter a thought. That is Steve’s business, just now. All I’m trying to do is help him get ready.”

“You believe his device to be practical?”

“It’s the best I have ever seen, and I’ve examined all the famous aëroplanes.”

“What has my father to do with this invention?”

Orissa was surprised.

“Hasn’t he told you?” she asked.

“Only that it ‘interests him;’ but many things do that.”

“We needed money to complete the aircraft, and Mr. Cumberford kindly let us have it,” explained the girl.

“What did he demand in return?”

“Nothing but our promise to repay him in case we succeed.”

Sybil shot a swift glance toward her father.

“Look out for him,” she murmured. “He’s a dangerous man—in business deals.”

“But this isn’t business,” protested Orissa, earnestly; “indeed, his act was wholly irregular from a business standpoint. As a matter of fact, Mr. Cumberford has been very generous and unselfish in his attitude toward us. We like your father, Miss Cumberford, and—we trust him.”

The girl stood silent a moment; then she slowly turned her face to Orissa with a rare and lovely smile which quite redeemed its plainness. From that moment she lost her reserve, toward Orissa at least, and it was evident the praise of her father had fully won her heart.

Day by day, thereafter, Sybil came with Mr. Cumberford to the hangar, until the important time arrived when Steve was to test the reconstructed aircraft. By Cumberford's advice the trial was made in the early morning, and in order to be present both father and daughter accepted the hospitality of the Kanes for the previous night, Sybil sharing Orissa's bed while Steve gave up his room to Mr. Cumberford and stretched himself upon a bench in the hangar.

Mrs. Kane knew that her son was to make an attempt to fly at daybreak, but was quite undisturbed. The description of the Kane Aircraft, which Orissa had minutely given her, seemed to inspire her with full confidence, and if she had a thought of danger she never mentioned it to anyone. The Cumberfords were very nice to Mrs. Kane, while she, in return, accepted their friendship unreservedly. Orissa knew her mother to be an excellent judge of character, for while her affliction prevented her from reading a face her ear was trained to catch every inflection of a voice, and by that she judged with rare accuracy. Once she said to her daughter: "Mr. Cumberford is a man with a fine nature who has in some way become embittered; perhaps through unpleasant experiences. He does not know his real self, and mistrusts it; for which reason his actions may at times be eccentric, or even erratic. But under good influences he will be found reliable and a safe friend. His daughter, on the contrary, knows her own character perfectly and abhors it. As circumstances direct she will become very bad or very good, for she has a strong, imperious nature and may only be influenced through her affections. I think it is good for her to have you for a friend."

This verdict coincided well with Orissa's own observations and she accepted it as veritable. Yet Sybil was a constant enigma to her and seldom could she understand the impulses that dominated her. The girl was mysterious in many ways. She saw everything and everyone without looking directly at them; she found hidden meanings in the most simple and innocent phrases; always she seemed suspecting an underlying motive in each careless action, and Orissa was often uneasy at Sybil's implied suggestion that she was not sincere. The girl would be cold and silent for days together; then suddenly become animated and voluble—a mood that suited her much better than the first. Steve said to his sister: "You may always expect the unexpected of Sybil." Which proved he had also been studying this peculiar girl.

XV. A Final Test

It was the morning of the tenth of December that the eager little group assembled at dawn on Marston's pasture to witness the test of the Kane Aircraft.

Steve was so occupied with his final adjustments and anxiety lest he should overlook some important point, that he never thought of danger. He would not have remembered even his goggles had not Orissa handed them to him and told him to put them on.

This was the first time Mr. Cumberford had witnessed a performance of the aëroplane, yet he was much less excited than his daughter, who could not withdraw her gaze from the device and was nervously attentive to every move that the young aviator made. Orissa, confident of the result, was most composed of all.

When all was ready Steve took his seat, started the motors, and when they had acquired full speed threw in the clutch. The aëroplane ran less than fifty feet on its wheels before it began to rise, when it steadily soared into the air and mounted to an elevation of several hundred feet. By this time the aviator, who had kept a straight course, was half a dozen miles from the starting point; but now he made a wide circle and, returning, passed over Marston's pasture at the same high altitude.

The speed of the aircraft was marvelous. Mr. Cumberford declared it was making a mile a minute, which estimate was probably correct. After circling for a while Steve descended to a hundred feet in a straight dive, holding the device in perfect control and maintaining at all times an exact balance. At a hundred feet he tested the rudders thoroughly, proving he could alter his course at will, make sharp turns and circle in a remarkably small space. Then, having been in the air twenty-seven minutes by the watch, he descended to the ground, rolled a hundred feet on his running gear and came to a halt a few paces away from the silent, fascinated group of watchers.

Not a hitch had occurred. The Kane Aircraft was as perfect a creation as its inventor had planned it to be.

Orissa gave Steve a kiss when he alighted, but said not a word. Sybil impulsively seized the aviator's hands and pressed them until he flushed red. Mr. Cumberford lighted a fresh cigarette, nodded approvingly and said:

"All right, Steve. It—interests me."

"It almost seemed alive," remarked Steve, with pardonable exuberance. "Why, I believe it would fly bottom-side-up, if I asked it to!"

"Any changes necessary?" inquired Mr. Cumberford.

"Only one or two, and those unimportant. The steering-wheel is too loose and needs tightening. The left guy-wires are a bit too taut and need to be relieved. Half an hour's tinkering and the aircraft will be as perfect as I know how to make it."

As they were wheeling it back to the hangar, Sybil asked:

"Weren't you frightened, Mr. Kane, when you were so high above the earth?"

"Oh, no; it is far safer a mile up than it is fifty or a hundred feet. There are no dangerous air currents to contend with and the machine glides more smoothly the more air it has underneath it. When I am near the earth I sometimes get a little nervous, but never when I'm far up."

“But suppose you should fall from that distance?”

“Fall? Oh, but you can’t fall very easily with this sort of a biplane. At any angle it’s a kind of a parachute, you know, for the hinged ends automatically spread themselves against the air pressure. And as for a tumble, you know that a fall of fifty feet would kill one as surely as a fall of several hundred feet. If a fellow can manage to stick to his aëroplane he’s pretty safe.”

“It seems such a frail thing,” observed Sybil, musingly.

“Just wooden ribs and canvas,” laughed Steve; “but anything stronger would be unnecessary, and therefore foolish.”

“Now, then,” said Mr. Cumberford, when the aircraft rested once more upon its rack, “I’ve something to tell you, Kane. I’ve known it for several days, but refrained from speaking until you had made your trial.”

There was an ominous suggestion in the words. Steve turned and looked at him questioningly.

“Any bad news, sir?”

“Time will determine if it’s bad or good. Anyhow, it’s news. Burthon is building an aircraft.”

“An aëroplane?”

“I said an aircraft.”

“But that word designates only my own machine.”

“Burthon is building your machine.”

Steve stared at him, doubtful if he heard aright. Orissa stood motionless, growing white and red by turns. Sybil’s lips curled in a sneer as she said:

“My clever uncle! What a resourceful man he is.”

“I—I don’t believe I understand,” stammered Steve.

“It’s simple enough,” replied Cumberford. “Burthon sent to Washington for copies of your plans and specifications, has built a hangar and workshop over South Pasadena way, and employed a clever mechanic from Cleveland to superintend the construction—already well under way.”

“How do you know this, sir?” inquired Steve, breathless.

“The clever mechanic from Cleveland is my own man, who has been my confidential agent for years.”

“And you permit him to do this work!” cried the young man, indignantly.

“To be sure. If Brewster loses the job, some one will get it who is *not* my agent. It is the only way I can keep accurate account of what Burthon is up to.”

They were all silent for a time while they considered this startling information. By and by Cumberford said:

“Burthon has joined the Aëro Club, has donated a handsome cup for the best endurance flight during the coming meet at Dominguez, and in some way has made himself so popular with the officials that he has been appointed a member of the committee on arrangements. I dropped in at the Club yesterday, for I’m a member, and made this discovery. My scheming brother-in-law has some dusky, deep laid plan, and is carrying it out with particular attention to detail.”

“Do you think it concerns us, sir?” asked Orissa, anxiously.

“Yes. It isn’t extraordinary that Burthon should take a fancy to aviation. He is full of fads and fancies, and such a thing is liable to interest him. It interests me. But the meat in the nut is the fact that he is building a copy of the Kane Aircraft, merely adding a few details which he will declare are improvements.”

“Can’t we issue an injunction and stop him?” asked Steve.

“I’ve seen a lawyer about that. We can’t prove infringement at this stage of the game and it would be folly to attempt it. Burthon’s plan is to exhibit his machine first, then keep yours off the field during the meet and afterward claim that you are infringing upon his rights. He has organized a stock company, keeping most of the stock himself, has entered his device in all the aviation tournaments throughout the country, and is issuing a circular offering the machines for sale. I have a hand proof, fresh from the printer, of this circular.”

“Who will be his aviator?” asked Steve, with puckered brows.

“His former chauffeur, Mr. Totham Tyler, is one. He is now looking for another, also.”

Steve drew a long breath.

“What can we do?” he asked in a bewildered tone.

“Checkmate him,” was the composed reply.

“How, sir?”

“Well, we know pretty well all Burthon’s plans. He doesn’t suspect we know a thing; believes he will be able to keep his secret until his aëroplane is ready and he can announce it in the newspapers and create a sensation. He has concocted a very pretty trick. Until this date no one has ever heard of the Kane Aircraft. After the Burthon Improved Biplane is exploited and its praise on every tongue, you won’t be able to get even a hearing with your invention, much less a chance to fly it.”

Steve sat down and covered his face with his hands. His attitude was one of despair.

“When will Mr. Burthon’s machine be finished?” asked Orissa, thoughtfully.

“He expects to make the first trial a week from to-morrow. He has kept a force of expert men at work, and they haven’t attempted to make the Kane engines, but are using a type that has worked successfully in many biplanes. So his machine has grown into existence very quickly.”

“A week from to-morrow,” repeated Orissa, softly. “And Steve is ready to-day.”

Steve looked up quickly. Sybil laughed at him.

“You silly boy,” said she. “Can’t you understand what Daddy means by a checkmate?”

Steve turned to Mr. Cumberford, who was lighting a fresh cigarette.

“If you will place the matter in my hands,” said that gentleman, “I will proceed to put a spoke in Burthon’s wheel, so to speak. Heretofore, Steve, I have been a mere onlooker, a—an interested friend, I may say. At this juncture you’d better make me your manager.”

“Would you accept the position?” asked the boy.

“Yes; there isn’t much else to interest me just now, and—I hate Burthon.”

“Poor uncle!” sighed Sybil.

“On what terms will you undertake this, sir?” Steve inquired, with anxiety.

“Why, I may have to spend a lot of money; probably will; and my time’s valuable; when I’m not here I’m moping at the Alexandria Hotel; so I propose you give me ten per cent of your profits for the first three years.”

“That is absurd, sir,” declared Steve. “There will be little profit at first, and ten per cent of it wouldn’t amount to anything.”

Mr. Cumberford smiled—a grim smile that was one of his peculiarities.

“It’ll do, Steve. I’ll make it pay me well, see if I don’t. But you may add to the demand, if you like, by promising to present my daughter the fourth complete Kane Aircraft your factory turns out.”

“The first!” cried Steve.

“No, the fourth. We want the first three to go where they’ll advertise us. Is it a bargain, Mr. Kane?”

Steve grasped his hand.

“Of course, sir,” he replied gratefully. “I’m not sure we can defeat Mr. Burthon’s conspiracy, but I know you will do all that is possible. And thank you, sir,” he added, again pressing the elder man’s hand.

Orissa took Mr. Cumberford’s hand next. She did not express her gratitude in words, but the man understood her and to hide his embarrassment began to search for his cigarette case. As for Sybil, she regarded the scene with an amused smile, and there was a queer look in her dark eyes.

“Now,” said Orissa, “let us go in to breakfast. You must all be nearly famished.”

“Yes; let us eat, so that I can get back to town,” agreed Mr. Cumberford, cheerfully. “The campaign begins this very morning, and it may take a few people by surprise. Remember, Steve, you’re to stand ready to carry out any plans your manager makes.”

“I understand, sir.”

XVI. The Opening Gun

Sybil rode with her father into town. On the way she said:

“You puzzle me. One would imagine you are playing fair with the Kanes.”

“Mere imagination,” he returned, gruffly.

“Yes,” she agreed; “your nature is to plot and intrigue. The deeper, the more stealthy and unsuspected the plot, the more characteristic is it of my subtle parent.”

“True,” he said.

“But here is a condition that puzzles me, as I have remarked. I understand how you won the confidence of the Kanes by posing as generous and unselfish. That was quite like you. But to-day you had them in your power. You might have demanded anything—everything—yet you accepted a mere ten per cent. Now I’m really wondering what your game is.”

It was evident he did not relish his daughter’s criticism, for his usually placid brow bore a heavy frown. Still, he answered lightly:

“You’re stirring too deep; you’re roiling the pot. Why don’t you look on the surface?”

“Oh! how stupid of me,” she said in a relieved voice.

“To be a diverse scoundrel,” announced her father, “is the acme of diabolic art. From complication to simplicity is but a step, yet requires audacity. Most rascals fail to realize that an honest act, by way of contrast, affords more satisfaction than persistent chicanery will produce. We must have variety in our pleasures in order to get the most from them.”

“To be sure,” said Sybil.

“Meantime, you are forgetting your Uncle Burthon.”

They rode in silence for a time. Then the girl nestled a little closer to her father’s side and murmured:

“I’m mighty glad, Daddy. I like the Kanes.”

“So do I,” he responded.

“And isn’t Stephen’s aëroplane marvelous?”

“I consider it,” said he, “the cleverest and most important invention of the age.”

By eight o’clock a skillful photographer was on his way to Stephen Kane’s hangar to get pictures of the aircraft, while Mr. Cumberford sat in the office of a noted advertising expert and bargained for an amount of publicity that fairly made the man’s head swim. The city editors of all the morning papers were next interviewed and interested in the Cumberford campaign, so that half a dozen reporters who were noted for their brilliant descriptive writing attended a luncheon given by Mr. Cumberford at the Aëro Club and listened to his glowing accounts of the Kane Aircraft and the wonderful flight made by its inventor that very morning.

For fear Mr. Burthon might drop into the Club during this session, the cautious “manager” of the aircraft had taken the precaution to have Brewster telephone him to come to the South Pasadena workshop, and to keep him there by some pretext till late in the day. This was done.

Mr. Burthon spent the entire afternoon with his imitation aircraft, returning to Los Angeles for a late dinner at his club. Then, being very tired, he went early to bed.

At breakfast next morning he picked up a newspaper, started as his eye fell upon the lurid headlines, and nearly fainted with chagrin and anger.

Upon the first page was a large picture of the Kane Aircraft, with a vignette of its inventor in an upper corner and columns of description and enthusiastic comment regarding his creation, which was heralded as a distinct forward stride in practical aviation. Stephen's remarkable flight was referred to and promise made of an exhibition soon to be held at Dominguez Field where the public would be given an opportunity to see the aircraft in action.

Mr. Burthon, as soon as he could recover himself, read every word carefully. Then he smoked his cigar and thought it over. Half an hour later he was making the rounds of the evening papers, but found he was unable to "kill" the articles prepared to exploit the Kane Aircraft. The morning papers having devoted so much space to the subject, the afternoon papers could not possibly ignore it, and finding he was helpless in this attempt he followed another tack.

Entering the office of the secretary of the Aëro Club he said:

"I believe our contract with the owners of Dominguez Field provides that the Aëro Club may have the use of the grounds whenever it so desires, regardless of any other engagements by outsiders."

"Certainly," replied the secretary. "I remember you yourself insisted upon that condition, as chairman of the committee on arrangements."

"Please notify the manager that we require Dominguez Field, for Club purposes, every day for the next two weeks."

"But—Mr. Burthon! Think of the expense."

"I shall personally pay all charges."

"Very well."

The secretary telephoned, and was informed that the Field had been engaged that morning for the coming Saturday by a Mr. Cumberford, an Aëro Club member. But Mr. Burthon insisted on the rights of the Club, as an organization, and the manager agreed to cancel Cumberford's engagement.

From there Mr. Burthon went to the managers of the Motordrome, the baseball parks and Luna, engaging every open date for two weeks to come. Then having practically tied up every available place where the Kane Aircraft might be publicly exhibited, he sighed contentedly and went to his South Pasadena workshop to hasten the completion of his own aëroplane.

Mr. Cumberford was annoyed when he received notice that he could not have Dominguez Field for any day previous to the aviation meet. He was further annoyed by the discovery that Burthon had engaged every public amusement park in the vicinity of Los Angeles. But he was not the man to despair in such an emergency; the contest between him and his hated brother-in-law merely sharpened his wits and rendered him more alert.

He found a broad vacant field on the Santa Monica car line; arranged with the street railway company to carry the people there for a five cent fare, and tied up his deals with contracts so that Burthon would be unable to interfere. Then he ordered a large grand stand to

be built and instead of fencing in the grounds determined to make the exhibition absolutely free to all who cared to attend.

These arrangements completed, Mr. Cumberford announced in glaring advertisements the date of the exhibition, and decided he had won the game.

Mr. Burthon tried to enjoin the exhibition, claiming that Stephen Kane's aircraft was an infringement on his own device; but Stephen personally appeared before the judge and convinced him there was nothing in the assertion. Of course Mr. Cumberford saw that the newspapers had full accounts of these proceedings, and so public interest was keyed up to the highest pitch when Saturday arrived. The cars on that day were taxed to their fullest capacity to carry the crowds to Kane Park, as the new aviation field was called.

A large and attractive hangar had been constructed on the field, and Stephen, on the morning of the exhibition, flew his aëroplane from Marston's pasture to Kane Park, alighting successfully just before the hangar. Orissa, Sybil and Mr. Cumberford were there to receive him, and after placing the aircraft safely in the new hangar they all motored to town for breakfast at the Alexandria.

It was no longer possible for Steve to take entire personal charge of his invention, so Mr. Cumberford, having made a careful search, was finally able to secure two men, who until that time had been strangers to one another, as assistants. These men were skilled mechanics and recommended as honest and reliable—which perhaps they were under ordinary circumstances. Their names were Wilson and Reed. As they had already been two days in Stephen's workshop and were now thoroughly conversant with their duties, these two men were left at the hangar in charge of the aëroplane, with instructions to watch it carefully and allow no one to enter or to examine it.

Steve needed rest, for he had worked night and day preparing for this important public test. The exhibition was to be held at two o'clock, so he reluctantly acceded to Mr. Cumberford's request that he lie down in a quiet room at the hotel and sleep until he was called to lunch.

XVII. A Curious Accident

Orissa had not been at all nervous over the event at Kane Park until the hour when she entered the field and noted the tremendous throng assembled to witness her brother's much heralded flight. The band was playing vigorously and many gay banners waved over the grand stand and the big hangar wherein the aircraft was hidden. Then, indeed, she began to realize the importance of the occasion, and her heart throbbed with pride to think that Steve was the hero all awaited and that his name would be famous from this time forth.

This was the 17th of December, and on January first the great International Aviation Meet was to be held at Los Angeles, with such famous aviators present as the Wright Brothers, Glenn Curtiss, Hubert Latham, Arch Hoxsey, their old friend Willard, Parmalee, Ely, Brookins, Radley and many others. Mr. Cumberford had entered Stephen Kane for this important meet and the young man was booked to take part in the endurance and speed tests and to make an attempt to break the world's record for altitude—all in his own flyer, the Kane Aircraft. So swift a transition from obscurity to popularity—or at least to the attention of the civilized world—was enough to turn the head of anyone; but as yet Steve seemed all unaware of his own importance.

Disregarding the crowds, which were eagerly seeking a glimpse of the young aviator but did not know him, he quietly made his way to the hangar and was admitted by Wilson, who guarded the doorway from an insistent group demanding a peep at the aëroplane.

Steve took off his coat, made a thorough inspection of all the working parts, and then put on his close-fitting cap and goggles, buttoned a sweater over his chest and nodded to his men to throw back the entrance curtains.

Two policemen cleared the way and as the aviator drew back his lever the aircraft rolled out of the hangar into full view of the multitude. A shout went up; handkerchiefs were waved and the band played frantically. On its big wheels, which were almost large enough for a motor car, the aëroplane sped across the field, turned, passed the grand stand, and with accelerating speed dashed away to the farther end of the field.

A murmur arose, in which surprise and disappointment were intermingled. One fat gentleman, who had been patiently waiting for two hours, exclaimed: "Why, it's only a sort of automobile, with crossed airplanes set over it! I thought they claimed the thing could fly." Those who knew something of aviation, however, were the ones astonished at Steve's preliminary performance. They realized the advantage of being able to drive an aëroplane on its own wheels, as an automobile goes, in case of emergencies, and moreover the "crossed planes"—a distinct innovation in construction—gave them considerable food for thought. Usually the two surfaces, or floats, of a biplane are exactly parallel, one above the other; but in Steve's machine the upper plane ran fore and aft, while the lower one extended sidewise. At a glance it was possible to see the advantage of this arrangement as a duplex balance, which, with the swinging wing-ends, comprised the safety device that the inventor believed made his aëroplane superior to any other.

From the far end of the field Steve swung around and started back, straight for the grand stand. He had nearly reached it when he threw in the clutch that started the propellers and at the same time slightly elevated the front rudder. Up, like a bird taking wing, rose the aircraft, soaring above the grand stand and then describing a series of circles over the field. Gradually

it ascended, as if the aviator was ascending an aërial spiral staircase, until he had mounted so far among the clouds that only a grayish speck was discernible.

The spectators held their breaths in anxious suspense. The speck grew larger. Swooping down at a sharp angle the aircraft came suddenly into view and within a hundred feet of the ground resumed its normal position and began to circle around the field again.

Now a mighty cheer went up, and Orissa, who had been pressing Sybil's hand with a grip that made her wince, found herself sobbing with joy. Her brother's former flights had been almost as successful as this; but only now, with the plaudits of a multitude ringing in her ears, did she realize the wonderful thing he had accomplished.

But on a sudden the shout was stilled. A startled, frightened moan ran through the assemblage. Women screamed, men paled and more than one onlooker turned sick and faint.

For the Kane Aircraft, while gracefully gliding along, in full view of all, was seen to suddenly collapse and crumple like a pricked toy balloon. Aëroplane and aviator fell together in a shapeless mass toward the earth, and the sight was enough to dismay the stoutest heart.

But Steve's salvation lay in his altitude at the time of the accident. Fifty feet from the earth the automatic planes asserted their surfaces against the air and arrested, to an appreciable extent, the plunge. Had it been a hundred feet instead of fifty the young man might have escaped without injury, but the damaged machine had acquired so great a momentum that it landed with a shock that unseated young Kane and threw him underneath the weight of the motor and gasoline tank.

A dozen ready hands promptly released him from the wreck, but when they tried to lift him to his feet he could not stand. His leg was broken.

XVIII. The One To Blame

Mr. Cumberford locked the doors of the hangar and refused to admit anyone but his own daughter. Even Reed and Wilson, having assisted to drag the wreck to its shed, were ordered peremptorily to keep out. Wilson obeyed without protest, but Reed was angry and said it was his duty to put the aircraft into shape again. Cumberford listened to him quietly; listened to his declaration that he had had nothing to do with the construction of the aëroplane and therefore could in no way be held responsible for the accident; and after the man had had his say his employer asked him to come to his hotel in the evening to consider what should be done. He also made an appointment with Wilson. Then he shut himself up in the hangar with Sybil.

Orissa had gone with Steve in the ambulance to the hospital, where she remained by his side until the leg was set and the young man felt fairly comfortable. The injury was not very painful, but Steve was in great mental distress because his accident would prevent his taking part in the aviation meet. All their carefully made plans for the successful promotion of the Kane Aircraft were rendered futile by this sudden reverse of fortune, and the youthful inventor constantly bewailed the fact that Burthon would now have a clear field and his own career be ignominiously ended.

Orissa had little to say in reply, for her own heart was aching and she saw no way to comfort her brother. When he was settled in his little white room, with a skillful nurse in attendance, the girl went home to break the sad news to their blind mother.

Meantime Mr. Cumberford was busy at the hangar. In spite of his usual nonchalance and obtuse manner—both carefully assumed—the man had a thorough understanding of mechanics and by this time knew every detail of young Kane's aëroplane quite intimately. Also, he was a shrewd and logical reasoner, and well knew the accident had been due to some cause other than faulty parts or inherent weakness of the aircraft. So he took off his coat, rolled up his shirt sleeves and began a careful examination of the wreck.

It was Sybil, however, who stood staring at the aëroplane, always fascinating to her, who first discovered the cause of Steve's catastrophe.

"See here, Daddy," she exclaimed; "this guy-wire has been cut half through, in some way, and others are broken entirely."

Mr. Cumberford came to her side and inspected the guy-wire. The girl was right. It was certainly odd that several strands of the slender but strong woven-wire cable had parted. Her father took a small magnifying glass from his pocket and examined the cut with care.

"It has been filed," he announced.

Sybil nodded, but she seemed absent-minded and to have lost interest in the discovery.

"From the first I suspected the guy-wires," she said. "When the aircraft collapsed I knew the wires had parted, and then—I thought of my clever uncle."

Mr. Cumberford rolled down his sleeves and put on his coat.

"Three of the wires gave way," he observed, "and it's a wonder young Kane wasn't killed. Come, 'Bil; we'll go back to the hotel."

They found the field deserted, their motor car being the last on the grounds. During the ride into town Sybil remarked:

“This affair will cause you serious loss, Daddy.”

“Why?”

“Steve can’t exhibit his device at the meet, and Uncle Burthon will be on hand to win all the laurels.”

“Don’t worry over that,” he said grimly. “We’ve ten days in which to outwit Burthon, and if I can’t manage to do it in that time I deserve to lose my money.”

Wilson came to the hotel promptly at eight o’clock for his interview with Mr. Cumberford. Said that gentleman:

“Tell me all that happened at the hangar after we left you and Reed there this morning.”

The man seemed reluctant at first, but finally decided to tell the truth. He appeared to be an honest young fellow, but knew quite well that his testimony would injure his fellow assistant.

“It was quite early, sir, when an automobile came into the field and a gentleman asked to see the aircraft. Mr. Reed was at the door, at the time, and I heard him reply that no one could be admitted. Then the gentleman said something to him in a low voice and Reed, after a little hesitation, turned to me and told me to guard the door. I did so, and the two walked away together. I saw them in close conversation for quite a while, and then Reed came back to the hangar and said: ‘The gentleman is having trouble with his motor car, Wilson, and one of his engines is working badly. You understand such things; go and see if you can help him, while I guard the door.’

“I thought that was queer, sir, for Reed is as good a mechanic as I am; but I took a wrench and walked over to the automobile, which was not a hundred yards distant. A little dried-up chauffeur was in the driver’s seat. The gentleman asked me to test the engines, which I did, and found there was nothing wrong with them at all. I hadn’t been a bit suspicious until then, but this set me thinking and I hurried back to the hangar. I hadn’t been away ten minutes, and I found Reed standing in the doorway quietly smoking his pipe. Everything about the aircraft seemed all right, so I said nothing to Reed except that his friend was a ringer and up to some trick. He answered that the man was no friend of his; that he had never seen him before and was not likely to see him again. That is all, sir. I didn’t leave the hangar again until Mr. Kane returned and took charge of it.”

Mr. Cumberford had listened intently.

“Do you know the name of the man with the automobile?” he asked.

“No, sir.”

“Describe him, please.”

Wilson described Burthon with fair accuracy.

“Thank you. You may go now, but I want you on hand to-morrow morning to assist in getting the machine back to Kane’s old hangar.”

“Very well, sir.”

Reed came a half hour after Wilson had left. His attitude was swaggering and defiant. Mr. Cumberford said to him:

“Reed, your action in filing the guy-wires is a crime that will be classed as attempted manslaughter. You are liable to imprisonment for life.”

The man grew pale, but recovering himself replied:

“I didn’t file the wires. You can’t prove it.”

“I’m going to try, anyway,” declared Cumberford. “That is, unless you confess the truth, in which case I’ll prosecute Burthon instead of you.”

Reed stared at him but, stubbornly made no reply.

“How much did he pay you for the work?” continued Cumberford.

No answer.

Mr. Cumberford touched a bell and a detective entered.

“Officer, I accuse this man of an attempt to murder Stephen Kane,” said he. “You overheard the recent interview in this room and understand the case perfectly and the evidence on which I base my charge. You will arrest Mr. Reed, if you please.”

The officer took the man in charge. Reed was nervous and evidently terrified, but maintained a stubborn silence.

“Confession may save you,” suggested Cumberford; but Reed was pursuing some plan previously determined on, and would not speak. So the officer led him away.

Next morning the wrecked aëroplane was transferred to the workshop in the Kane garden, where Wilson, under the supervision of Orissa and Mr. Cumberford, began taking it apart that they might estimate the damage it had sustained. Orissa’s face bore a serious but determined expression and she directed the work as intelligently as Steve could have done. Cumberford, who had brought a pair of overalls, worked beside Wilson and in a few hours they were able to tell exactly what repairs were necessary.

“The motors are not much injured,” announced Orissa, “and that is indeed fortunate. We need one new propeller blade, five bows and struts for the lower plane, new wing ends and guy-wires and almost a complete new running gear. It isn’t so very bad, sir. With the extra parts we have on hand I believe the aircraft can be put in perfect condition before the meet.”

“Good!” exclaimed Mr. Cumberford. “Then our greatest need is to secure a competent aviator.”

“To operate Stephen’s machine?”

“Of course. He’s out of commission, poor lad; but the machine must fly, nevertheless.”

Orissa’s blue eyes regarded him gravely. She had been considering this proposition ever since the accident.

“Our first task,” said she, “is to get my brother’s invention thoroughly repaired.”

“But the question of the aviator is fully as important,” persisted her friend. “Wilson,” turning to the mechanic, “do you think you could operate the aircraft?”

“Me, sir?” replied the man, with a startled look; “I—I’m afraid not. I understand it, of course; but I’ve had no experience.”

“No one but Stephen Kane can claim to have had experience with this device,” said Mr. Cumberford; “so someone must operate it who is, as yet, wholly inexperienced.”

“Can’t you find an aviator who has used other machines, sir?” asked Wilson. “The city is full of them just now.”

“I’ll try,” was the answer.

Mr. Cumberford did try. After engaging another mechanic to assist Wilson he interviewed every aviator he could find in Los Angeles. But all with the slightest experience in aërial navigation were engaged by the various aëroplane manufacturers to operate their devices, or had foreign machines of their own which were entered for competition. He was referred to several ambitious and fearless men who would willingly undertake to fly the Kane invention, but he feared to trust them with so important a duty.

Returning one day in a rather discouraged mood to Orissa, who was busy directing her men, he said:

"I have always, until now, been able to find a man for any purpose I required; but the art of flying is in its infancy and the few bold spirits who have entered the game are all tied up and unavailable. It looks very much as if we were going to have a winning aëroplane with no one to develop its possibilities."

Orissa was tightening a turnbuckle. She looked up and said with a smile:

"The aviator is already provided, sir."

"What! You have found him?" exclaimed Mr. Cumberford.

"I ought to have said 'aviatress,' I suppose," laughed the girl.

"My daughter? Nonsense."

"Oh, Sybil would undertake it, if I'd let her," replied Orissa. "But I dare not trust anyone but—myself. There is too much at stake."

"You!"

"Just Orissa Kane. I've been to the hospital this morning and talked with Steve, and he quite approves my idea."

Mr. Cumberford looked at the slight, delicate form with an expression of wonder. The girl seemed so dainty, so beautiful, so very feminine and youthful, that her suggestion to risk her life in an airship was positively absurd.

"You've a fine nerve, my child," he remarked, with a sigh, "and I've no doubt you would undertake the thing if I'd give my consent. But of course I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"You're not fit."

"In what way?"

"Why, er—strength, and—and experience. Girls don't fly, my dear; they simply encourage the men to risk their necks."

"Boo! there's no danger," asserted Orissa, scornfully. "One is as safe in the Kane Aircraft as in a trundle-bed."

"Yet Steve—"

"Oh, one may be murdered in bed, you know, as well as in an aëroplane. Had those guy-wires not been tampered with an accident to my brother would have been impossible. Have you stopped to consider, sir, that even when the planes separated and crumpled under the air pressure Steve's device asserted its ability to float, and dropped gently to the ground? Steve managed to get hurt because he fell under the weight of the motors; that was all. Really, sir, I can't imagine anything safer than the aircraft. And as for brawn and muscle, you know very

well that little strength is required in an aviator. Skill is called for; a clear head and a quick eye; and these qualities I possess."

"H-m. You think you can manage the thing?"

"I know it—absolutely. I've talked over with Steve every detail from the very beginning, and have personally tested all the working parts time and again, except in actual flight."

"And you're not afraid?"

"Not in the least."

"You won't faint when you find yourself among the clouds?"

"Not a faint, sir. It isn't in me."

Mr. Cumberford fell silent and solemn. He began to seriously consider the proposition.

XIX. Planning The Campaign

That evening the secretary of the Aëro Club telephoned Mr. Cumberford to ask if he wished to withdraw his entry from contest in the coming aviation meet.

“By no means,” was the reply.

“But you state that Kane is to be the aviator, and we are informed that Kane has a broken leg.”

“Leave the entry as it stands: ‘Kane, Aviator,’” said Cumberford, positively.

“Very well, sir,” returned the secretary, evidently puzzled.

But his friend Burthon, who had suggested his telephoning, was highly pleased when he learned Mr. Cumberford’s decision.

“All right,” he observed, with satisfaction; “we’ll leave the Kane Aircraft on the programme, for everyone is talking of the wonderful device and the announcement of its competition will be the greatest drawing card we have. But the entry of ‘Kane, Aviator’ will disqualify anyone but Kane from operating the aircraft, and I happen to know his leg is in a plaster cast and he cannot use it for months to come.”

“Won’t it hurt us to disqualify the Kane Aircraft and have it withdrawn at the last moment?” inquired the secretary, doubtfully.

“No; for I’m going to spring on the crowd the biggest surprise of the century—Burthon’s Biplane.”

“Are you sure of its success, sir?”

“Absolutely. Kane copied his machine from mine, as I have before explained to you, and in addition to all the good points he has exhibited I have the advantage of a perfect automatic balance. If Kane’s device had been equipped with it he wouldn’t have fallen the other day.”

Perhaps Mr. Burthon was sincere in saying this. He had had no opportunity to examine Stephen’s latest creation at close quarters, but on the day of the trial at Kane Park he had observed the fact that Stephen had abandoned the automatic balance he had first patented, and now had recourse to crossed planes. Both Burthon and his mechanics considered the original device the best and most practical, and they depended upon it for the biggest advertisement of Burthon’s Improved Biplane, having of course no hint that Stephen had tested it and found it sadly lacking.

On the 26th the Burthon flyer was ready for trial, and Tot Tyler, after several attempts, got it into the air and made a short flight that filled the heart of Mr. Burthon with elation.

“Curtiss and the Wrights will do better than that, though,” observed the ex-chauffeur, “to say nothing of those daredevils Latham and Hoxsey. I’ll improve after a few more trials, but I can’t promise ever to do better than the other fellows do.”

“That isn’t to be expected,” returned Burthon. “I’m not backing you to excel the performances of the old aviators; that isn’t my point. The improvements and novelties we have to show will take the wind out of the sails of all other aëroplanes and result in a flood of orders. Comparing machine for machine, we’re years in advance of the Wrights and Curtiss—and centuries ahead of those foreign devices.”

“Perhaps,” admitted Tot. “But Kane’s aëroplane is practically the same as your own, and it is still on the programme.”

“It won’t fly, though,” declared Burthon, with a laugh. “Don’t worry about anything but your own work, Tyler. Leave all the rest to me.”

The man knew his employer was playing a hazardous game and that he had stolen outright the Kane Aircraft, and while the knowledge did not add to Tot Tyler’s nerve or assurance he was gleeful over the prospect of “doing” his enemy, Cumberford. The little fellow was bold enough—even to the point of bravery—and fully as unprincipled as his employer. His hatred of Cumberford was so acrid that he would have gone to any length, even without pay, to defeat his plans, and Burthon found him an eager and willing tool. Nevertheless, the little man scented danger ahead of them and had an idea that trouble was brewing from some unknown source.

By this time Burthon had begun a campaign of widespread publicity, and in spite of the long list of famous aviators in the city the newspapers were filled with pictures of the Burthon device and accounts of the marvelous flights of Totham Tyler. Nothing more was heard of the Kane Aircraft, but the public had not forgotten it and many were puzzled that two local aëroplane makers should be exhibiting identically the same improvements, each claiming to have originated them. As for the visiting aviators, they were interested, but held their peace. The performances at the coming competition would tell the story of supremacy, and whatever good points were displayed by the local inventors could doubtless be adapted to their own craft. They waited, therefore, for proof of the glowing claims made in the newspapers. Many promising inventions have turned out to be failures.

The public was, to an extent, in the same doubting mood. Kane’s magnificent public flight had ended with an accident, while Tyler’s preliminary exhibitions were in no way remarkable as compared with records already established. The meet would tell the story.

Meantime Orissa completed her repairs. On the day that Steve came home from the hospital in an ambulance she wheeled him in an invalid chair to the hangar and allowed the boy to inspect a perfect aircraft. The young man suffered no pain, and although he was physically helpless his eye and brain were as keen as ever. Being wheeled around the device, so that he could observe it from all sides and at all angles, he made a thorough examination of his sister’s work and declared it excellent.

“Think you can manage it, Ris?” he asked, referring to her proposed venture.

“I am sure I can,” she promptly replied. “You must understand—all of you,” turning to confront Mr. Cumberford and Sybil, who were present, “that I am not undertaking this flight from choice. Had Steve been able to exhibit his own aëroplane I might never have tried to fly alone; but it seems to me that our fortune, my brother’s future career, and our friend Mr. Cumberford’s investment, all hinge upon our making a good showing at Dominguez Field. No one but me is competent to properly exhibit the aircraft, to show all its good points and prove what it is capable of doing. Therefore I have undertaken to save our reputation and our money, and I am sure that my decision is proper and right.”

“I agree with you,” said Steve, eagerly. “You’re a brave little girl, Ris.”

“I have but one request to make, Mr. Cumberford,” she added.

“What is it, Orissa?” he inquired.

“Do not advertise me as ‘The Girl Aviator,’ or by any other such name. I prefer people should remain ignorant of the fact that a girl is operating the Kane Aircraft. Can’t you keep quiet about it?”

“I can, and will,” he asserted. “Indeed, my dear, I much prefer that course. It will be all the more interesting when—when—the discovery is made.”

“I do not wish to become a celebrity,” she said, seriously. “One in the family is enough,” glancing proudly at Steve, “and I’m afraid nice people would think me unmaidenly and bold to become a public aviator. I’m not at all freakish—indeed, I’m not!—and only stern necessity induces me to face this ordeal.”

“My dear,” said Mr. Cumberford, looking at her admiringly, “your feelings shall be considered in every possible way. But you must not imagine you are the first female aviator. In Europe—especially in France—a score of women have made successful flights, and not one is considered unwomanly or has forfeited any claim to the world’s respect and applause.”

“The most successful aviators of the future,” remarked Stephen, thoughtfully, “are bound to be women. As a rule they are lighter than men, more supple and active, quick of perception and less liable to lose their heads in emergencies. The operation of an aëroplane is, it seems to me, especially fitted to women.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Sybil, with a whimsical glance at the speaker, “I have discovered my future vocation. I shall aviate parties of atmospheric tourists. When the passenger airships are introduced I’ll become the original sky motoress, and so win fame and fortune.”

Steve laughed, but shook his head.

“The airship of the future will not be a passenger affair,” he predicted, “but an individual machine for personal use. They’ll be cheaper than automobiles, and more useful, for they can go direct to their destination in a straight ‘air-line.’ Men will use them to go to business, women to visit town on shopping expeditions or to take an airing for pleasure; but I’m sure they will be built for but one person.”

“Then I’ll have one and become a free lance in the sky, roaming where I will,” declared Sybil.

This unconventional girl had developed a decided fancy for the inventor, and while in his presence it was noticed that she became less reserved and mysterious than at other times. Steve liked Sybil, too, although she was so strong a contrast to his own beautiful sister. When she cared to be agreeable Miss Cumberford proved interesting and was, Steve thought, “good company.” Orissa observed that Sybil invariably presented the best side of her character to Steve. While he was in the hospital the girl visited him daily, and now that he had come home again she passed most of her time at the hangar.

Mr. Cumberford was greatly annoyed to learn that the Kane headquarters at Dominguez Field had been given a location in the rear of all the others, where it would be practically unnoticed. Of course this slight was attributed to Burthon’s influence with the committee of arrangements, of which he was a member. Burthon’s own hangar, on the contrary, had a very prominent position. From his man Brewster, as well as from others, Mr. Cumberford also learned that Burthon had hinted he would prevent the Kane Aircraft from taking any part in the contests.

All these things worried the Kane party, whose anxieties would have been sufficient had they not been forced to encounter the petty malice of Burthon. Sybil, silently listening to all that was said, assumed a more mysterious air than usual, and on the day previous to the opening

of the great aviation meet she informed her father that she would not accompany him to Dominguez, where he was bound to attend to all final preparations. The decision surprised him, but being accustomed to his daughter's sudden whims he made no reply and left her in their rooms at the hotel.

XX. Uncle And Niece

When her father had gone Sybil addressed a note to Mr. Burthon which read:

“I will call upon you, at your club, for a private interview at twelve o’clock precisely. As all your future depends upon this meeting you will not fail to keep the appointment.”

She signed this message with the initials “S. C.” and Mr. Burthon, receiving it as he was about to start for Dominguez in his motor car, for the messenger had had a lively chase over town to catch him, read and reread the epistle carefully, was thoughtful a moment, and then ordered his man to drive him to the club.

“‘S. C.,’” he mused; “who on earth can it be? A woman’s handwriting, of course, crude and unformed. When women intrigue there is usually a reason for it. Better find out what’s in the wind, even at the loss of a little valuable time. That’s the safest plan.”

He reached his club at exactly twelve o’clock and heard a woman inquiring for him of the doorkeeper. He met her, bowed, and without a word led her to his own private sitting room, on the third floor. The woman—or was it a girl?—was, he observed, heavily veiled, but as soon as they were alone she removed the veil and looked at him steadfastly from a pair of dark, luminous eyes.

Mr. Burthon shifted uneasily in his chair. He had never seen the girl before, yet there was something singularly familiar in her features.

“Be good enough to tell me who you are,” he said in the gentle tone he invariably employed toward women. “I have granted this interview at your request, but I am very busy to-day and have little time to spare you.”

“I am your niece,” she replied, slowly and deliberately.

“Oh!” he exclaimed; then paused to observe her curiously. “So, you are my sister Marian’s daughter.”

“Exactly.”

“I knew she had a child, for often she wrote me about it; but her early death and my estrangement with your father prevented me from seeing you, until now. Your mother, my dear, was a—a noble woman.”

“You are not telling the truth,” said Sybil, quietly. “She was quite the contrary.”

He started and flushed. Then he replied, somewhat confused by the girl’s scornful regard:

“At least, I loved her. She was my only sister.”

“And your accomplice.”

“Eh?” He stared, aghast. Then, quickly recovering himself, he remarked:

“You were rather too young, when she died, to judge your mother’s character correctly.”

“It is true; but I remember her with abhorrence.”

“Your father, on the other hand,” observed Mr. Burthon, his face hardening, “might well deserve your hatred and aversion. He is a scoundrel.”

“I have heard him say so,” replied Sybil, smiling, “but I do not believe it. In any event his iniquity could not equal that of the Burthons.”

“We are complimentary,” said her uncle, returning the smile with seeming amusement. “But I regret to say I have no time to further converse with you to-day. Will you call again, if you have anything especial to say to me?”

“No,” replied Sybil. “You must listen to me to-day.”

“To-morrow—”

“To-morrow,” she interrupted, “you may be in prison. It is not easy to interview criminals in jail, is it?”

He looked at her now with more than curiosity; his gaze was searching, half fearful, inquiring.

“You speak foolishly,” said he.

“Yet you understand me perfectly,” she returned.

“I confess that I do not,” he coldly persisted.

“Then I must explain,” said she. “When my mother died I was but eight years of age. But I was old for my years, and on her deathbed your sister placed in my hands a sealed envelope, directing me to guard it carefully and secretly, and not to open it until I was eighteen years of age—and not then unless I had in some way incurred the enmity and persecution of my uncle, George Burthon. She said it was her *confession*.”

He sat perfectly still, as if turned to stone, his eyes fixed full upon the girl’s face. With an effort he said, in a soft voice:

“Have I persecuted you?”

“Indirectly; yes.”

“But you cannot be eighteen yet!”

“No,” she admitted; “I am only seventeen.”

He breathed a sigh of relief.

“Then—”

“But I am half a Burthon,” Sybil continued, “and therefore have little respect for the wishes of others—especially when they interfere with my own desires. I kept the letter my mother gave me, but had no interest in opening it until the other day.”

“And you read it then?”

“Two or three times—perhaps half a dozen—with great care.”

“Where is that letter now?”

“Where you cannot find it, clever as you are. I may say I have great respect for your cleverness, my dear uncle, since reading the letter. How paltry the story of Dr. Jekyl and Mr. Hyde seems after knowing you!”

He moved uneasily in his seat; but the man was on the defensive now, and eyed his accuser steadily.

“You seem much like your mother,” he suggested, reflectively.

“But you are wrong; I am more like my father.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“What matter, my child? You have a rare inheritance, on either side.”

They sat in silence a moment. Then he said:

“You have not yet confided to me your errand.”

“True. I have a request to make which I am sure you will comply with. You must stop annoying the Kanes.”

He smiled at her.

“You have marked them for your own prey—you and your precious father?”

“Yes. Your persecution must cease, and at once.”

He seemed thoughtful.

“I have an end in view,” said he; “an important end.”

“I know; you want to force Orissa to marry you. But that is absurd. She is scarcely half your age, and—she despises you.”

He flushed at this.

“Nevertheless—”

“I won’t have it!” cried Sybil, sternly. “And, another thing: you must withdraw your aëroplane from the aviation meet to-morrow.”

“Must?”

“I used the word advisedly. I have the power to compel you to obey me, and I intend to use it.”

He sat watching her with his eyes slightly narrowed. Sybil was absolutely composed.

“Your mother, my dear,” he presently remarked, “was a—charming woman, but inclined to be visionary and imaginative. I have no idea what she wrote in that letter, but if it is anything that asperses my character, my integrity or fairness, it is not true, and can only be accounted for by the fact that the poor creature was driven insane by your father, and did not know what she was doing.”

“Oh, indeed!” the girl retorted. “Is it not true, then, that you were convicted in Baltimore, twenty years ago, of a dastardly murder and robbery, and sentenced by the court to life imprisonment? Is it not true that my mother at that time contrived your escape and secreted you so cleverly that the officers of the law could never find you?”

“It is not true,” he declared, speaking with apparent effort.

“The letter states that you were arrested and convicted under the name of Harcliffe; that when active search for you was finally abandoned you went with my mother to Chicago, and there began a new life under your right name of Burthon; that there your sister met and married my father, although you opposed the match bitterly, fearing she would betray your secret to her husband. But she never did.”

“It is not true,” he repeated. “The whole story is but a tissue of lies.”

“Then,” said Sybil, “I will telegraph to the police of Baltimore that the escaped prisoner, Harcliffe, whom they have been seeking these twenty years, is here in Los Angeles, and ask them to send at once someone to identify him. You need not be afraid, for the story is false. They will come, I will point you out to them, and they will declare you are not the man. Then I will believe you—not before.”

He sat a long time, his head upon his hand, looking at her reflectively. At the same time her dark eyes were fixed upon him with equal intentness.

By and by she laughed aloud, but there was no mirth in the sound.

“Not that, dear uncle,” she said, as if he had spoken. “Am I not my mother’s daughter, and my clever uncle’s own niece? You cannot quiet me by murder, for in that case my revenge is fully provided for. I know you, and I did not venture upon this disagreeable errand unprepared. There is a plain clothes man at the street door, who, if I do not emerge from this club in—” she looked at her watch—“in fifteen minutes, will summon assistance, guard every exit, and then search your rooms for my body. The doorkeeper has my name and knows that I am here. Therefore, to injure me now would be to thrust your head into the hangman’s noose. Afterward you will be very considerate of my welfare, for from this day any harm that befalls me will lead to your prompt arrest and the disclosure of your secret.”

He threw out his hands with a despairing, helpless gesture.

“What a demon you are!” he cried.

“I believe I am,” said Sybil, slowly. “I hate myself for being obliged to act in this dramatic fashion—to threaten and bully like a coward—but being blessed with so unscrupulous an uncle I cannot accomplish my purpose in a more dignified way.”

“State your demands, then,” said he.

“I have stated them.”

“To withdraw my aëroplane from the aviation meet would mean my ruin. I have sold my real estate and brokerage business and invested my money in aviation; I positively cannot withdraw now.”

“You must. To whine of ruin is absurd. I know that my father paid you a quarter of a million for your mine. You also obtained, without doubt, a good sum for your business. So far you cannot have invested more than a few thousand dollars in your attempt to steal Stephen Kane’s invention. My advice, sir, is to get away from here as soon as you can. Go to London or Paris, where there is more interest in aviation than here, and make a business of flying, if you will. But the Kane device is fully protected by foreign patents, and any infringement will be promptly prosecuted.”

“You are merciless,” he complained.

“You will find me so.”

“I am a member of the Aëro Club. I cannot, without arousing suspicion, withdraw my aëroplane from the meet.”

“If you do not I will telegraph to Baltimore.”

The threat seemed to crush him and still any further remonstrances.

“Very well,” he returned; “if you have finished your errand please leave me. I must—consider—my—position.”

She rose, cast one scornful glance at him and walked out of the room, leaving him seated with bowed head, dejected and utterly defeated.

XXI. Mr. H. Chesterton Radley-Todd

There lived in Los Angeles at that time one of those unaccountable individuals whom nature, in fashioning, endows with such contradictory qualities that their fellow creatures are unable to judge them correctly.

He was a young man, fresh from college, whose name was engraved upon his cards as H. Chesterton Radley-Todd, but whom his new acquaintances promptly dubbed "Chesty Todd." Having finished his collegiate course he had been at a loss what to do next, so he drifted to the Pacific coast and presently connected himself with the Los Angeles *Tribune* as literary critic, society reporter and general penistic roustabout.

Mr. Radley-Todd had a round, baby face; expressionless and therefore innocent blue eyes that bulged a little; charmingly perfect teeth; an awkward demeanor; a stumbling, hesitating mode of speech and the intellectual acumen of a Disraeli. He was six feet and three inches tall and dressed like a dandy. People estimated him as a mollycoddle at first acquaintance; wondered presently if he possessed hidden talents, and finally gave him up as a problem not worth solving. No one believed in his ability, even when he demonstrated it; because, as they truly said, he "did not look as if he amounted to shucks."

That such a callow youth, predoomed to adverse judgment, should be able to secure a position on a daily paper seemed remarkable. But the *Tribune* loves to employ green and budding "talent," which can be had at a nominal salary. The managing editor shrewdly contends that these young fellows work with an enthusiasm and perseverance unknown to older and more experienced journalists, because they have a notion that the world is their oyster and a newspaper job the knife that opens it. When they discover their mistake they are dismissed and other ambitious ones take their places. Mr. H. Chesterton Radley-Todd was at present enjoying this fleeting prominence, and occasionally the editor would read his copy with genuine amazement and wonder from what source he had stolen its brilliance and power.

So, when the great aviation meet approached and every man, woman and child in Southern California was eager for details concerning it and demanded pages of description of the various participating aëroplanes and aviators, in advance of their exhibition, and when Tom Dunbar, the *Tribune's* expert on aviation, was suddenly stricken with pneumonia, "Chesty" Todd was assigned to this important department.

"Dig for every scrap of information that can possibly be unearthed," said the editor to him. "Spread it out as much as you can, for the dear public wants a cyclone of aërial gossip and will devour every word of it. When there isn't any broth don't fear to manufacture some; any 'mistake' in the preliminaries will be forgotten as soon as the big meet is in full swing."

Chesty nodded; stumbled against a chair on his way out; stepped on the toe of the private stenographer and slammed the door to muffle her scream. Then he made his way to Dominguez Field; strolled among the hangars with his hands in his pockets and imbibed unimportant information by the column.

Two things, however, really interested the reporter. One was the popular interest in the Kane Aircraft, which was now in its hangar and invited inspection. Wilson and Brewster, the latter now openly in the employ of Mr. Cumberford, guarded the local aëroplane and explained its unique features to an eager throng. For, although the Kane hangar was in a retired location—"around the corner," in fact—a bigger crowd besieged it, on this last day preceding the

official opening of the meet, than visited the older and better known devices. Stephen Kane's remarkable flight at Kane Park, which was followed by his peculiar accident, was of course responsible for much of the interest manifested in his machine; and this interest was shared by the experienced aviators present, who silently examined the novel improvements of the young inventor and forbore to discuss them or their alleged merits.

"What do you think of it?" Chesty Todd asked an aviator of national prominence.

"Looks good," was the evasive reply. "Cumberford, who is managing the Kane campaign, has been trying hard to get a man to fly it, but so far without success. Pity the thing can't be exhibited. Young Kane, who was entered as the aviator, broke his leg and is now out of it."

The reporter made a mental note of this; he would find out the plans of the Kane party and make a two column story of their hope or despair.

Later in the afternoon another thing puzzled him. Burthon, the direct competitor of Kane, suddenly and without explanation withdrew his aëroplane from the meet and actually took it from the field, closing his hangar. The officials and others interested were amazed, and the action aroused considerable comment.

Chesty Todd scented a story. He secured an automobile and followed Burthon and Tot Tyler at a distance, until they placed the aëroplane in the old workshop at South Pasadena. He crept up to the shed unobserved and found half a dozen men busily putting the parts together again and preparing the device for use. Why, since it had been withdrawn from the aviation meet?

Todd and Burthon walked out and went to a near by restaurant, where the reporter found them seated in a corner engaged in earnest conversation. Chesty made signs to the waiter that he was deaf and dumb, secured a seat at a table within hearing distance of Burthon and his chauffeur, and overheard enough to give him a clew to their latest conspiracy. Then he went away, regained his automobile and drove straight to the Alexandria Hotel.

Mr. Cumberford had insisted on the Kanes taking rooms at the hotel during the meet, and all three were now established there, Mrs. Kane having decided to go each day to Dominguez, where Stephen and Sybil could tell her of the events as they occurred. In a way the blind woman would thus be able to participate and avoid the anxiety and suspense of remaining at the bungalow while her daughter undertook the hazardous feat of operating Stephen's aëroplane. The Cumberford automobile was placed at the disposal of mother and son, and the young inventor could watch the flight of his machine while propped among the cushions, Sybil being at his side to attend him and his mother.

The party had just finished dinner and assembled in the Cumberford sitting room when Chesty Todd's card was brought in. It was marked "Tribune" and Mr. Cumberford decided to go down to the office and see the reporter, as it was not his purpose to snub the press at this critical juncture. However, the young man discouraged him at first sight. His appearance was, as usual, against him.

"Will the Kane Aircraft take part in the contests?" he inquired.

"Certainly," replied Mr. Cumberford.

"You have secured a man to—er—run the thing?"

"We have secured an operator."

Chesty stared at him, his comprehensive mind alert. Why did Cumberford turn his reply to evade the "man" proposition? Could a woman operate an aëroplane? Perhaps none but an inexperienced youth would have dreamed of the possibility.

“Has Stephen Kane any family?” he cautiously asked.

“A mother and sister. He is unmarried.”

“How old is the sister?”

“Seventeen.”

“Oh!” The age seemed to eliminate her. “And the mother?”

It was Cumberford’s turn to stare.

“The mother is blind,” he said.

Mr. Radley-Todd’s thoughts took another turn.

“Have you a family, sir?”

“I have a daughter, an only child. Mrs. Cumberford is not living.”

“And your daughter’s age, sir?”

“Seventeen. She is the same age as Orissa Kane.”

“Are the young ladies—er—interested in airships?”

Mr. Cumberford did not like these questions. He knew that a reporter is akin to a detective, and began to fear the youth was on the track of their secret. So he answered rather stiffly:

“Fairly so. Everyone seems interested in aviation these days. It interests me.”

Chesty saw he would not confess; so he tried another tack.

“Mr. Burthon is your brother-in-law, I believe.”

Mr. Cumberford nodded.

“You are—eh—enemies?”

“Mr. Radley-Todd, or whatever your name is,” angrily glancing at the card, “I do not object to being interviewed on the subject of the Kane Aircraft, or the coming aviation meet. But your questions are becoming personal and are wide of the mark. You will please confine yourself to legitimate topics.”

The young man rose and bowed.

“Excuse me,” he said in his halting way; “a reporter is often forced to appear impertinent when he does not intend to be so. At present I am—er—face to face with a curious—er—complication. I have discovered—eh—unintentionally—that your er, er—aviator will be in great danger to-morrow. If it’s a man, I don’t care. I don’t like you, Mr. Cumberford, and I wouldn’t lift a finger to save the Kane Aircraft from going to pot. Why should I—eh? It’s nothing to me. But if one of those girls—your daughter or Kane’s sister, is to fly the thing, I feel it my—er—duty to say: look out!”

He started to go, but Cumberford grabbed his arm.

“What do you mean?” he demanded sternly.

“Is it a girl?”

“You won’t betray us? You won’t publish it?”

“Not at present.”

“Orissa Kane will operate the aircraft.”

Chesty looked at his boots reflectively.

“Don’t let her undertake it, sir,” he said. “If you can’t find a man, follow Burthon’s example and withdraw your—eh—airship from the meet. Better withdraw it, anyhow—that’s the best move—if you don’t wish to court disaster.”

“Explain yourself, sir!”

“I won’t. I’m not going to spoil a good story for my paper—and a scoop in the bargain—to satisfy your curiosity. But Miss Kane—May I see her a moment?”

Mr. Cumberford reflected.

“If you warn her of danger you will take away her nerve. She’s the only person on earth competent to operate the Kane Aircraft, and to withdraw the aëroplane would mean the ruin of her brother’s fortune and ambitions.”

“I don’t know her brother; I don’t care a fig for him. If I see the girl I shall warn her,” said the reporter.

“Then you shall not see her.”

“Very good. But you will tell her to look out?”

“What for?”

“For danger.”

“When?”

“At all times; especially during her flight.”

“There is always danger of accident, of course.”

“This won’t be an accident—if it happens,” said Chesty Todd, decidedly.

“But who would wish to injure Orissa?” asked Cumberford, wonderingly.

“Think it over,” said the reporter. “If you’ve one deadly enemy—a person who will stick at nothing, being desperate—that’s the man.”

With this he coolly walked away, leaving Mr. Cumberford considerably disturbed. But he thought it over and decided to say nothing to Orissa. The warning might refer to Burthon, who was the only person they might expect trouble from, although to Cumberford’s astonishment Burthon had quit the field at the last moment and abandoned the contest. Knowing nothing of Sybil’s interview with her uncle, that action seemed to indicate, to Cumberford’s mind, that Burthon had weakened.

Under no circumstances would he have permitted Orissa to face an unknown danger, but it occurred to him, after thinking over the interview, that Mr. H. Chesterton Radley-Todd was a fair example of a fool.

XXII. The Flying Girl

The morning of the first day of the long heralded aviation meet dawned bright and sunny, as only a Southern California January morning can. By seven o'clock vast throngs were hurrying southward to Dominguez—a broad plain midway between Los Angeles and the ocean—where much important aviation history has been made.

By nine o'clock the grand stand was packed and "automobile row" occupied by hundreds of motor cars, filled with ladies in gay apparel, their escorts and imperturbable chauffeurs. The crowd was beginning to circle the vast field, too, and nearly every face bore an excited, eager expression.

The events scheduled might well arouse the interest of a people just awakened to the possibilities of aërial navigation. Important prizes had been offered by wealthy men and corporations for the most daring flights of the meet. Ten thousand dollars would go to the aviator showing the most skillful and adroit handling of an aëroplane; five thousand for the longest flight; another five thousand for an endurance test and a like sum to the one attaining the greatest height. In addition to these generous purses, two thousand dollars would be given for the best starting and alighting device exhibited and two thousand for the best safety device. For speed several huge purses were donated, and altogether the aviators present would compete for more than fifty thousand dollars in gold, besides various medals and cups and the priceless prestige gained by excelling in a competition where the most successful and famed airships and aviators of the world congregated.

Therefore, it is little wonder public interest was excited and every aviator determined to do his best. Many thronged the hangars, asking innumerable questions of the good-natured attendants, who recognized the popular ignorance of modern flying devices and were tolerant and communicative to a degree.

The morning events were of minor importance, although several clever exhibitions of flying were given. But at two o'clock the competition for skillful handling of an aëroplane in midair was scheduled, and at that time the appetite of each spectator was whetted for the great spectacle.

The day seemed ideal for aviation; the sky was flecked with fleecy clouds and scarcely a breath of air could be felt at the earth's surface.

Now came the first appearance of the Kane Aircraft. It had not been brought from the hangar during the forenoon and, in watching such celebrated aëroplanes as the Bleriot, Farman, Antoinette, Curtiss and Wright, manned by the greatest living aëronauts, those assembled had almost forgotten that a local inventor was to enter the lists with them. The secretary of the Aëro Club and others interested had expected Mr. Burthon to protest against allowing the Kane device to be operated, on the ground that Kane was entered to operate it and was unable to do so; but for some unaccountable reason Burthon remained silent, not even appearing at the field, and Mr. Cumberford's explanation that the "Kane" in this instance meant the young man's sister, satisfied the officials perfectly. Naturally they were surprised and even startled at the idea of a girl taking part in the great aviation meet, but hailed the innovation with keenest interest.

Suddenly, while the field was clear and half a dozen aëroplanes hovered in the air above it, the Kane Aircraft rolled into the open space, circled before the grand stand and then, gracefully and without effort, mounted into the air.

Those who had witnessed Stephen's prior performance were not astonished at this unassisted rise from earth to air, but all were delighted by the grace and beauty of the ascent and a roar of applause burst spontaneously from the crowd. The peculiar construction of the aircraft so diverted attention from its aviator that few marked the slender form of Orissa, or knew that a girl was making this daring flight.

There were some, however, whose eyes were eagerly rivetted on the indistinct figure of the flying girl and utterly disregarded the machine. Stephen, comfortably propped among the cushions of the motor car with his mother seated behind him and Sybil opposite, divided his attention between his sister and his creation. Mr. Cumberford, knowing what the machine would do, watched Orissa through a powerful glass and decided from the first that she was cool and capable. Chesty Todd also watched the girlish figure, with a more intense interest than he had ever before displayed during his brief and uneventful lifetime.

The reporter had been worried lest Mr. Cumberford neglect to warn the girlish operator of the Kane Aircraft of danger; so he pushed through the crowd about the hangar and just as Orissa passed the doorway, seated in her aëroplane, he said in a low voice: "Look out—for a collision!"

She started and cast an inquiring look at him, but there was no time to reply. The machine had been drawn by the assistants to a clear space and she must devote her attention to her work. As she threw in the lever Mr. Cumberford, who stood beside the aircraft, hurriedly whispered: "Be careful, Orissa—look out for danger!" Then she was off, facing the thousands on the field, with nerve and brain resolutely bent upon the task she had undertaken.

It was no indifferent thing this brave girl attempted. Until now her acquaintance with an aëroplane had been wholly theoretical; it was her first flight; yet so thoroughly did she understand every part of her air vehicle—what it was for and how to use it—that she had implicit confidence in herself and in her machine. Naturally level-headed, alert and quick to think and to act, Orissa was no more afraid of soaring in the air than of riding in an automobile. Aside from her desire to operate the aircraft so skillfully that her brother's invention would be fully appreciated she was determined to attempt the winning of the ten thousand dollar prize, which would establish the Kane fortunes on a secure basis. Enough for one untried, seventeen-year-old girl to think of, was it not? And small wonder that she absolutely forgot the impressive warnings she had received.

The air is a mighty thoroughfare, free and untrammeled. The little group of aëroplanes operating over Dominguez—darting here and there, up and down—had little chance of colliding, for there was space enough and to spare. Orissa knew all about air currents and their peculiarities and she also knew that her greatest safety lay in high altitudes. With a feeling of rapturous exhilaration she began to realize her control of the craft and her dominance of the air. A masterful desire crept over her to accomplish great deeds in aviation.

Those who were watching from below—judges, friends and spectators—saw her steadily mounting, higher and higher, until she seemed to fade out of sight like the figure in a moving picture, with nothing but a little iron-and-wood skeleton and the chugging of a tiny engine to ward off death. Then she came into sight again, a little smudge of grayish white against the shifting clouds. To see her up there, a mere speck dodging among the storm clouds, reminded the observers, as nothing in aviation has ever done before, of the awful audacity of man in building these mechanical birds. As they watched they found themselves hoping—as a child might—that in some way the brave little speck would manage to escape those gigantic sky monsters. Then one seized the aircraft, and just as the sun caught and flung back to earth a

flash from one of the busy propeller-blades a huge cloud swallowed up machine and aviator and they vanished like mist.

It was odd how the terror of the spectators increased at this sudden disappearance; they knew that somewhere in that awesome, infinite firmament a frail thing made by the hand of man was battling with nature's most mysterious forces for supremacy. And man won. In less than a minute there was another flash of sunlight and the little gray speck emerged saucily from behind the cloud and made a dive for another.

Then the speck in the sky began to grow larger, and Orissa attempted an amazing dive earthward that caused the throng to fall silent, motionless, gazing with bated breaths and startled eyes at the thrilling scene. It was a long swoop out of space and into being; a series of dives half a mile long and each nearly straight down.

The girl glided earthward until the aircraft nearly touched the ground; then she adroitly tilted it up again and tore away around the course in great circles, while the spectators, roused to life, thundered their applause.

Her control of the aëroplane was really wonderful. Again, encouraged by her success, she shot up into the air, rising to the height of half a mile and then performing the hazardous evolution known to aviators as the "spiral dip." She began by circling widely, at an even elevation, and then dipping the nose of the aircraft and narrowing the circles as she plunged swiftly downward with constantly accelerating speed. It was a bewildering and hair-raising performance, and no one but Walter Brookins had ever before undertaken it.

A dozen feet from the ground Orissa reined in her Pegasus and glided over the group of hangars on her inclined ascent—the third she had made without alighting. There were other aëroplanes doing interesting "stunts," and each aviator seemed to be exercising his ingenuity to excel all others, yet the eyes of the crowd followed the Kane Aircraft with an absorbed fascination that relegated other contestants to the rear.

XXIII. A Battle In The Air

“What is she doing now?” asked Mrs. Kane, anxiously.

“Soaring in the air about half a mile high and a half mile to the northward,” replied Steve.

“And performing wonders,” added Sybil, with enthusiasm. “I had no idea the aircraft could be controlled so perfectly.”

“Nor I,” admitted the young inventor, modestly. “It really seems like a thing of life under her management, and I am sure I could not have exhibited its good points half as well as little Ris is doing.”

“Are any other aëroplanes flying?” Mrs. Kane inquired.

“Oh, yes,” said Sybil. “There are several in the air, doing really marvelous things; but all seem to keep away from Orissa and are more to the south of us. There’s one, though!” she added suddenly. “Isn’t that an aëroplane coming from the far north, Steve?”

He looked carefully through the field glasses he held.

“Why—yes! It surely is an aëroplane. But how did it get over there?” he exclaimed. “I’ve been watching the other contestants, and they’re all near by. Who can it be?”

Sybil had glasses, too, and she focussed them on the approaching airship.

“It looks very much like Uncle Burthon’s imitation of the aircraft,” she murmured.

“By Jove! That’s what it is!” cried Steve. “How dare he fly it, after it has been withdrawn?”

“Uncle Burthon will dare anything,” she retorted, coldly. “But he is making the mistake of his life to-day—if that is really his aëroplane.”

“Why, he’s driving straight toward Orissa,” said Steve, indignantly. “What is the fellow trying to do—bump the aircraft?”

Sybil laid a warning hand on his arm and glanced into the blind woman’s startled face.

“Orissa is all right,” she announced in calm tones.

But Orissa did not seem all right to Steve, who was growing excessively nervous; nor even to Sybil, whose face was stern and set as she watched the maneuvers of the two craft through her powerful glasses.

“It’s Tyler,” she said softly, meaning that the little chauffeur was operating Burthon’s device. Steve nodded, and thereafter they were silent.

Swift as a dart the Burthon aëroplane approached Orissa, who was deliberately circling this way and that as she glided through the air. She saw it coming, but at first paid little heed, thinking Tyler intended to pass by. But he altered his course to keep his machine headed directly for her and in gravely examining the approaching craft the girl noticed two slender steel blades projecting from his front elevator, like extended sword blades. They were slightly upcurved at the points, and while Orissa marveled to see such things attached to an aëroplane the thought occurred to her that if those blades struck her planes they would rend the cloth to shreds and destroy their sustaining surfaces. In that case one result was inevitable—a sudden drop to earth, and death.

Even as this thought crossed her mind the Burthon aëroplane came driving toward her at full speed. Filled with dismay she could only stare helplessly until the thing was so near that she could distinctly see the scowling face and glaring eyes of Tyler, intent on mischief. Then, without realizing her action, she caused the aircraft to duck, and the other swept over her so closely that Tyler's running gear almost scraped her planes.

Orissa's machine rolled alarmingly a moment, but she quickly regained control and then looked to see where Tyler was. He had turned and again was swooping toward her, at a slight downward angle. Orissa ascended to escape him, now realizing the man's wicked determination to destroy the aircraft, and Tyler, displaying unexpected skill, altered his course to follow her.

The girl, thoroughly alarmed, now turned to flee, scarcely realizing what she did. Tyler followed like some huge bird of prey and, curiously enough, gained upon the Kane Aircraft. The two sets of engines were chugging away steadily, all the propellers revolving like clockwork, while the two rival aëroplanes answered obediently the slightest movements of their rudders.

Finding a straight flight would not permit her to escape her enemy, the girl swerved and began circling widely. After her came Tyler, the wicked looking blades that protruded from his elevator gleaming menacingly in the sunlight, his features distorted by hate and murderously determined.

In the circles Orissa seemed able to keep her distance, but the poor child was so bewildered by this pitiless attack that her head was in a whirl and only by instinct could she handle the levers and wheel to guide her flight.

Tyler now observed several aëroplanes approaching at full speed, and realized he must end the chase quickly or be driven from his prey and prevented from carrying out his diabolical design. He made a quick turn to head off Orissa's circle and the dreadful blades almost touched her lower plane as she dodged them. Tyler swept round again, but in his eagerness forgot his balance. Perhaps the man relied too much on the automatic device that had once brought Stephen to grief; anyway his aëroplane developed a side motion that nearly shook him from his seat. He tried in vain to restore the balance. The jar caused the motors to slip; the engines stopped dead; with a rending sound the huge planes collapsed and the wreck of Burthon's biplane began to sink downward. Tyler was pitched headlong from his seat, but caught a rail and clung to it desperately as with ever increasing speed the fall to earth continued.

Orissa had witnessed the accident and with the sudden transition from danger to safety the girl's wits returned and she regained her coolness. As she saw Tyler falling to his death, a quick conception of the situation inspired her to action. The Kane Aircraft suddenly tipped and began one of those tremendous dives through space which it had accomplished earlier in the day. Orissa's aëroplane was absolutely under control, even at this thrilling moment, while the wreck to which Tyler clung was somewhat restrained in its fall by the mass of fluttering canvas and splintered bows. Although the weight of its engines and tanks dragged it swiftly down, Orissa's aircraft dove much more rapidly. Five hundred feet above the earth she overtook Tyler, guided her aëroplane dangerously close to the man, and cried out to him to seize it. He may not have heard or understood her, but an instinct of self-preservation such as leads a drowning man to grasp at a straw induced him to clutch her footrail, and at the same moment Orissa turned the machine, so as not to become entangled in the wreck, and began a more gradual descent, the little chauffeur dangling from her footrail while, alert and masterful, the girl controlled her overladen craft.

Down, down they came, and thirty thousand pair of startled, wondering eyes followed them as if entranced. Orissa had not looked to see where she would land, for until this moment she had been so thoroughly occupied with the chase and the rescue of her enemy that she never once glanced toward the ground. But the hand of fate was guiding our brave young aviator. Her aircraft, maintaining a safe angle, settled directly upon Dominguez Field, where Tyler released his hold and rolled unconscious upon the ground. Orissa's machine sped forward on its running gear and came to a stop just before the crowded grand stand.

No one who witnessed that exciting event will ever forget the mad shouts that rent the air when the Kane Aircraft, safe from its battle in the clouds, came to rest just in front of the gasping throng that had watched it with a fascination akin to horror. A hundred eager onlookers surrounded the machine, plucked the aviator from her seat and held her aloft for all to see, while the discovery that a young girl was the heroine of the terrible adventure caused them to marvel anew.

The applause redoubled; men shouted until they were hoarse; women wept, laughed hysterically and waved their handkerchiefs; everyone stood up to applaud; thousands crowded the field about Orissa, who by this time was herself softly crying, until Stephen, white as a ghost, directed his man to run the motor car through the crowd to his sister's side and assist her aboard.

Mr. Cumberford took no part in this ovation. He was rushing about the field, flinging everyone out of his way with mad excitement and asking continually: "Where is he? Where is Tyler? What has become of him?"

No one heeded him for a time, as every eye was on Orissa, every individual striving to get near her, to touch her—as if she had been a goddess whose hand could confer untold blessings and remedy the ills of the world. But after a while Cumberford found a man who deigned to give him the desired information.

"The fellow who was rescued?" he said. "Oh, he fainted dead away the minute he touched solid ground."

"And what became of him?" demanded Cumberford.

"Why, the crowd wanted to mob him, it seemed, and I guess that faint was the only thing that saved him from being torn to pieces."

"Well—well! What then?"

"Then a tall young fellow grabbed him up, chucked him into an automobile and got away with him."

"Where?"

"How the blazes do *I* know, stranger? I only saw them get away, that's all."

This information was later confirmed by several others, but Orissa's manager was unable to learn who had taken Tyler away or where they had gone. Cumberford was in an ugly mood, his heart throbbing with a fierce desire for vengeance. Tyler had escaped him for the moment but he vowed he would never rest until both Burthon and his chauffeur were behind the bars.

He was still pursuing his futile inquiries when Brewster approached him and said his daughter, with Stephen, Orissa and their mother, awaited him at the hangar, which was besieged by an excited throng. Directing the man to look after the aircraft and get it safely housed, he hurried away and managed to squeeze through the mass of humanity surrounding the hangar and gain admittance.

Within he found Orissa the center of a group of aviators who were earnestly congratulating the girl on her escape and flooding her with compliments and praise for her skillful handling of the aëroplane. They were noble fellows, these professional aviators, and unselfish enough to be honestly enthusiastic over Miss Kane's performances. The girl's beauty and modesty won them at once, and adding these charming qualities to her cleverness and bravery, to-day fully proven, it is not difficult to understand why Orissa Kane from this moment became a prime favorite with every disciple of aviation.

Just now, however, Orissa was embarrassed and a little distressed by all this laudation, following the spirited ovation tendered her by the public at large, so her nerves were beginning to fail her when by good fortune Mr. Cumberford appeared. He saw at once her condition and without stopping to add a word of praise or congratulation managed to hurry her out of the back entrance, past the surging crowd that was even here in evidence, and into their automobile. The others of the party followed with less difficulty and soon they were all headed for town and speeding swiftly along the roadway.

XXIV. The Criminal

As soon as Sybil reached her room at the hotel she wrote a line to her uncle, Mr. Burthon, which said: “I have wired to Baltimore.” Summoning a messenger she instructed him to search for Mr. Burthon until he found him and then place the message in his hands. She delayed sending the telegram just then, but was so angry and indignant that she was fully resolved to do so during the evening.

Meantime Orissa, who to an extent had recovered from her excitement, was being petted by the family party in the sitting room that had been reserved for them. Poor Mrs. Kane, having hugged and kissed her child and wept over her terrible danger and miraculous escape, now held the girl’s hand fast in her own and could not bear to let it go. Stephen was full of eager praise and, ignoring for the time the final incident of the flight, led Orissa to talk of her aërial exhibition and the admirable behavior of the aircraft, together with its perfect adjustment and obedience under all conditions.

“You’ve won the prize, dear,” he asserted confidently. “No one else did half as much or did it as well, to say nothing of your skillful dodging of that scoundrel Tyler. But I can’t let you make another flight, little sister. You are too precious to us all for us to let you risk your life in this way. The aircraft will have to stand by its record for that one flight—at least for this meet.”

“Oh, no,” protested Orissa; “I’ll go again to-morrow, Steve. I want to. The sensation is glorious, and I’m sure that monster, Tyler—or his master, Burthon—will be unable to get another aëroplane to chase me. I shall be perfectly safe, for your aircraft was from first to last like a thing with life and intelligence. I understand it, and it understands me.”

“I wonder if Burthon really sent Tyler on that murderous errand,” said Steve, thoughtfully.

“Of course he did!” declared Mr. Cumberford, entering the room in time to hear the remark. “Here’s a letter for you, Orissa, just left at the office, and I’m pretty sure it’s Burthon’s handwriting.”

Orissa took the letter, opened it, and read aloud:

“*Do not, I beg of you, my dear Orissa, accuse me of inciting that fool Tyler’s mad attack upon your aëroplane. The man stole the machine from its hangar and, crazed by my withdrawal from the meet, which deprived him of the chance of becoming famous, and inspired by anger toward Cumberford, who had at one time maliciously assaulted him and whom he thought responsible for my withdrawal, he made a desperate attempt to wreck your aëroplane without knowing who was operating it. As soon as I found my machine gone I hurried to Dominguez and arrived in time to see the terrible result of Tyler’s madness and your noble rescue of him. I am leaving the city to-night and may never see your sweet face again, but I do not wish you to misjudge me and have, therefore, made this explanation, which is honest and sincere. I trust you will remember me only as a true and loyal friend who would willingly sacrifice his unhappy life to save you from harm. Now and always faithfully yours*,

“George Burthon.”

During the reading Sybil had entered and quietly seated herself, listening with lip scornfully curled to her uncle’s protestations of innocence. For a moment after Orissa finished the letter all were silent. Then said Orissa, gently:

“I’m so glad Mr. Burthon had no hand in it!”

“Bah!” sneered Cumberford; “Burthon is a liar. I don’t believe a word of his lame excuse.”

“Nor I,” added Stephen, gravely. “Tyler is a hired assassin, that’s all. I think Burthon is frightened, and wishes to throw us off the track and put the blame on his tool, before running away.”

“I hope that is a lie, too—about his running away,” said Mr. Cumberford. “If Burthon escapes scot-free I shall be greatly disappointed. But the fellow is so tricky that if he says he is going you may rest assured he means to stay.”

“I think not, Daddy,” remarked Sybil, in her cold, even tones. “My uncle is in earnest this time and I doubt if you ever see or hear of George Burthon again.”

A knock at the door startled the little group. Mr. Cumberford stepped forward and opened it to find a tall, blue-eyed young man standing in the hall. He recognized Mr. Radley-Todd—the *Tribune* reporter—at once, and said stiffly:

“You are intruding, sir. I left word at the office that Miss Kane and I would see the newspaper men at eight o’clock, but not before.”

He started to close the door, but Chesty Todd inserted one long leg into the opening, smiling pleasantly as he said:

“This isn’t a newspaper errand; let me in.”

Mr. Cumberford let him in, throwing wide the door, for there was an earnest ring in the young fellow’s voice that could not be denied.

After Chesty Todd had entered, stumbling over the rug and bowing low to the ladies, another form shuffled silently through the doorway in his wake—a little, dried-up, withered man with tousled hair, his cap under his arm, a woebegone and hopeless expression on his leathery face.

“Tyler!” cried a surprised chorus.

The ex-chauffeur did not acknowledge the greeting. Chesty, extending one arm toward the man as if he were exhibiting a trained animal, said sternly:

“Down on your knees!”

Tyler bumped his kneecaps upon the floor in an attitude of meek humiliation.

“Now, then!”

“M-m-m—pardon,” gurgled the little chauffeur, not with contrition but rather as an enforced plea for mercy.

Chesty kicked his shins.

“Get up,” he commanded.

Tyler slowly rose, surveyed the group stealthily from beneath his brows and then dropped his eyes again, standing with bowed shoulders before them and nervously twirling his cap in his hands.

“Here,” announced Chesty, pointing impressively to the culprit, “stands the murderous ruffian known to infamy as Totham Tyler. He is at your mercy, prepared to endure any amount of torture or to die ignominiously at the hands of those he has wronged.”

All but Mrs. Kane were staring in amazement first at Tyler, then at his captor. Said Stephen to the latter, curiously:

“You are a detective, I suppose!”

“Merely as a side line,” was the cheerful rejoinder. “Primarily I’m a newspaper reporter, and whenever I strike for a higher salary they tell me I’m a mighty poor journalist. Let me introduce myself. My name is Havely Chesterton Radley-Todd, quite a burden to carry but it all belongs to me. This is my first experience as an imitator of the late lamented Sherlock Holmes, and I may point with pride to the fact that I’ve unraveled the supposed plot to murder Miss Orissa Kane.”

Tyler growled incoherently.

“True,” said Chesty, looking at the man thoughtfully; “the plot was not to murder Miss Kane, but Mr. Cumberford, whom his loving brother-in-law supposed would operate the Kane aeroplane. Incidentally it was planned to so wreck the aircraft—is that what you call it?—that it would be out of commission during the rest of the meet.”

“Why?” asked Stephen.

“To satisfy his petty malice. If Burthon couldn’t fly he didn’t want you to fly, and he hoped to obtain revenge for being driven into exile.”

There was a murmur of surprise at this.

“Who drove Burthon into exile?” asked Cumberford.

“I did,” said Sybil, indifferently.

“Have you seen him, then?” demanded her father.

“Oh, yes; but my uncle is unreliable. Before he obeyed my command to leave this country forever he decided on a final coup, which has fortunately failed.”

“Burthon,” announced Chesty Todd, “boarded an east-bound train an hour ago. I tried to head him off, but he was too slick and escaped me. That is the reason I am now here. I want you to listen to Totham Tyler’s story and then decide whether to wire ahead and have Burthon arrested or let the matter drop. It is really up to you, as the interested parties. So far the police have not had a hand in the game.”

“Please sit down, Mr. Todd,” requested Orissa, shyly. In the tall youth she had recognized the man who had tried to warn her on Dominguez Field, and was grateful to him.

Chesty bowed and sat down. Then he turned to his prisoner and said:

“Fire away, Tyler. Tell the whole story—the truth and nothing but the truth so help you.”

Tyler opened his mouth with effort, mumbled and gurgled a moment and then looked at his captor appealingly.

“Oh; very well. The criminal, ladies and gentlemen, seems to have lost, in this crisis, the power of expressing himself. So I shall relate to you the story, just as I extracted it—by slow and difficult processes—from the prisoner in my room, a short time ago. If I make any mistakes he will correct me.”

Tyler seemed much relieved.

“This creature,” began Chesty, “has previous to this eventful day been known to mankind as a good chauffeur and a bad citizen. He was employed by Burthon as an unscrupulous tool, his chief recommendation being a deadly hatred of Mr. Cumberford, who at one time indelicately

applied the toe of his boot to a tender part of Mr. Tyler's anatomy. Burthon also hated Cumberford, for robbing him of a million or so in a mine deal, and for other things of which I am not informed—or Tyler, either. Cumberford owns a controlling interest in the Kane Aircraft, and—"

"That's wrong," interrupted Stephen.

"I imagine Mr. Tyler's story is wrong in many ways," returned Mr. Radley-Todd, composedly. "I am merely relating it as I heard it."

"Go on, sir."

"Cumberford had also maligned Mr. Burthon to Miss Orissa Kane, a young lady for whom Burthon entertained a fatherly interest and a—er—hum—a platonic affection. Is that right, Tyler?"

Tyler growled.

"Therefore Burthon decided to get even with Cumberford, and Tyler agreed to help him. The first plan was to steal the design of Stephen Kane's airship and by cleverly heading him off in some aëro-political manner put the firm of Cumberford & Kane out of business. This scheme was approaching successful fruition when a saucy, impudent schoolgirl—Tyler's description, not mine—appeared on the scene and spiked Mr. Burthon's guns. Burthon explained to Tyler that in bygone days he had saved his sister, Cumberford's wife, from going to prison for a crime Cumberford had urged her to commit, but in doing this he had been obliged to defy the law, and the officers are unfortunately still on the generous man's trail. Cumberford's daughter, knowing the situation, threatened to have Burthon arrested—to betray him to the bloodhounds of the cruel law—unless he withdrew his machine from the aviation meet and made tracks for pastures new."

The Kanes were now regarding Sybil with amazement and her father with suspicion if not distrust. The girl stared back at them haughtily; Cumberford shrugged his shoulders and stroked his drooping, grizzled mustache. Chesty Todd, observing this pantomime, laughed pleasantly.

"Tyler's story—told to me—of Burthon's story—told to Tyler," he observed, his eyes twinkling. "There's pitch somewhere, and I've not been favorably impressed by Mr. Burthon during my slight acquaintance with him. I make it a rule," speaking more slowly, "to judge people by their actions; by what they do, rather than by what people say of them. Judging Burthon by his actions I should have little confidence in what he says."

"You are quite right," declared Stephen, eagerly. "I'll guarantee, if necessary, that Burthon lied about both Mr. Cumberford and his daughter. No man ever had a truer friend than Mr. Cumberford has been to me."

Cumberford scowled; Sybil gave Steve one of her rare smiles.

"Anyhow," continued the narrator, "Tyler was in despair because the aëroplane he was booked to operate was withdrawn from the meet. Burthon told him if they wanted revenge they must act quickly. Their sources of information—erroneous, as the event proved—led them to believe their enemy Cumberford would fly the rival aëroplane, and Tyler needed little urging to induce him to undertake to wreck it. Burthon paid him a thousand dollars in advance, to make the attempt, and promised him four thousand more if he succeeded."

"Five more," growled Tyler.

“I stand corrected; but it won’t matter. Tyler made the attempt, as you know. He had no idea Miss Kane was in the airship he was trying to demolish until the last moment, when by a clever turn he intercepted her aëroplane and was on the point of running it down. Just then, to his horror and dismay, he saw the girl plainly and made a desperate effort to check the speed of his machine—to avoid running her down. That was the cause of his mishap, he claims, and his desire to save Miss Kane nearly cost him his life. While he was descending a mile or so through the air, clinging to the footrail, he fiercely repented his wicked act, so that by the time he struck the ground he was a reformed criminal, and, for the first time since he cut his eye teeth, an honest man. So he says, and he expects us to believe it.

“I happened to be near the spot where Tyler rolled and picked him up unconscious—dazed by his repentance, I suppose. The mob wanted to disjoint him and remove his skin, which was not a bad idea; but I decided he could be of more use to Miss Kane alive—for the present, at least—because he might untangle some threads of the mystery. So I threw him into my car, got him to my room at Mrs. Skipp’s boarding house, restored him to consciousness, applied the thumbscrews, got his deposition, lugged him here to you, and now—please have the kindness to take him off my hands, for I’m tired of him.”

Orissa laughed, a little nervously. They were all regarding Chesty with unfeigned admiration and Tyler with pronounced aversion.

Mrs. Kane was the first to speak. Said the blind woman, softly:

“Orissa, you alone can judge this man. You alone can tell whether from the beginning he knew you were in the aëroplane or whether his claim is true that he discovered your identity at the last moment—and tried to save you. If he speaks truly, if he repented at the moment and risked his life to save you, it will have a great influence upon his fate. Speak, my child; you two were together in the air a mile above the earth, a mile from any other human being. Does the man speak truly?”

Orissa paled; suddenly she grew grave and a frightened look crept into her clear eyes.

XXV. The Real Heroine

Chesty Todd had spoken so lightly, in a serio-comic vein, and had so belittled the “reformed villain” and contemptuously made him appear pitiful and weak, that he had somewhat disarmed his hearers and led them to forget the seriousness of the contemplated crime. But Mrs. Kane, listening intently to the story, found no humor in the situation, and the blind woman’s gentle remark promptly recalled to every mind the full horror of the dastardly attempt.

She was quite right in declaring that Orissa alone could approve or condemn Tyler’s statement. If he spoke truly he was entitled to a degree of mercy at their hands; if, knowing that a girl was operating the Kane Aircraft, he had still persisted in his frantic attempt to wreck it and send her to her death, then no punishment could be too great for such a cowardly deed.

This was instantly appreciated by all present. Even Tyler, seeing that his fate hinged on Orissa’s evidence, ventured to raise his head and cast at her an imploring glance. Chesty Todd dropped his flippant air and earnestly watched the girl’s face; the others with equal interest awaited her decisive statement.

As for Orissa, the gravity of the situation awed her. Recalling the dreadful moments when she battled in the air for her life she saw before her the scowling, vicious face of her enemy and remembered how his eyes had glared wickedly into her own time and again as he attacked her aëroplane, determined to destroy it at all hazards. There was no question in her mind as to the truth of Tyler’s claim; she knew he had recognized her and still persisted in his purpose. She knew the accident to his machine was caused by his own carelessness and its faulty construction, and not by any desire of his to arrest its speed. Tyler had deliberately lied in order to condone his cowardly act, and she experienced a feeling of indignation that he should resort to such an infamous falsehood, knowing as he must that her evidence would render it impotent.

Orissa contemplated her erstwhile assailant with reflective deliberation. She noted his miserable appearance, his abject manner, the moods of alternate despair and hope that crossed his withered features. An enemy so contemptible and mean was scarcely worthy of her vengeance. It seemed dreadful that such a despicable creature had been made in man’s image. Could he possess a soul, she wondered? Could such an one own a conscience, or have any perception, however dim, of the brutal inhumanity of his offense? Being in man’s image he must have such things. Perhaps in his nature was still some element of good, dormant and unrecognized as yet, which might develop in time and redeem him. To send him to prison, she reflected, would not be likely to correct the perversity of such a nature, while generous treatment and the forbearance of those he had wronged might tend to awaken in him remorse and a desire to retrieve his past. Without knowing it the girl was arguing on the side of the world’s most expert criminologists, who hold that to destroy an offender cannot benefit society so much as to redeem him.

Whether Tyler’s ultimate redemption was probable or not, Orissa did not care to assume the responsibility of crushing him in order to avenge the shameful attempt, made in a moment of frenzy, to destroy her life. While those assembled hung breathless upon her words she said with assumed composure:

“The man knows better than I whether he speaks the truth. Could one be so utterly vile as to try to murder a girl who had never injured him? I think not. It is more reasonable to suppose that in his excitement he forgot himself—his manhood and his sense of justice—and only at the last moment realized what he was doing. I believe,” she added, simply, “I shall give him the credit of the doubt and accept his statement.”

Tyler stared at her as if he could scarcely believe his senses, while an expression of joy slowly spread over his haggard face. Radley-Todd gave Orissa a quiet smile of comprehension and approval. Cumberford said, musingly: “Ah; this interests me; indeed it does.” But Stephen exclaimed, in an impatient tone:

“That does not clear Tyler of his attempt to murder Mr. Cumberford and destroy the aircraft. He admits that such was his design and that Burthon paid him to do it. He is not less a criminal because Orissa happened to be in the aëroplane. Therefore it is Mr. Cumberford’s duty to prosecute this scoundrel and put him in prison.”

Tyler cast a frightened look at the speaker and began to tremble again. Said Chesty Todd, leaning back in his chair with his hands thrust into his pockets:

“That’s the idea. The prisoner belongs to Mr. Cumberford.”

Cumberford sat in his characteristic attitude, stooping forward and thoughtfully stroking his grizzled mustache.

“Did I hurt you very much when I kicked you, Tyler?” he meekly asked.

“No, sir!” protested the man, eagerly.

“Would you have thought of such a revenge had not Burthon suggested it, and paid you to carry it out?”

“No, sir!”

“M—m. Would you like to murder me now?”

“No, sir!”

“What will you do if I set you at liberty?”

“Clear out, sir,” said Tyler earnestly.

“Ah; that interests me,” declared Mr. Cumberford.

“It doesn’t interest me, though,” Stephen said angrily. “The brute tried to wreck my aircraft.”

“But he failed,” suggested Mr. Cumberford. “The aircraft is still in apple-pie order.”

“My son,” said the boy’s mother, in her gentle voice, “can you afford to be less generous than Mr. Cumberford and—your sister?”

Stephen flushed. Then he glanced toward Sybil and found the girl eyeing him curiously, expectantly.

“Oh, well,” he said, with reluctance, “let him go. Such a fiend, at large, is a menace to society. That is why I wished to make an example of him. If aëroplanes are to be attacked in mid-air, after this, the dangers of aviation will be redoubled.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” carelessly remarked Todd. “This fellow is too abject a coward to continue a career of crime along those lines. He’s had his lesson, and he’ll remember it. I don’t say he’ll turn honest, for I imagine it isn’t in him; but he’ll be mighty careful hereafter how he conducts himself.”

“I—I’ll never step foot in an aëroplane again!” growled Tyler, hoarsely but with great earnestness.

“Suppose you meet Burthon again?” suggested Steve, distrustfully.

“If I do,” said the man, scowling and clinching his fists, “I—I’ll strangle him!”

“A nice, reformed character, I must say,” observed Steve, with fine contempt.

“But he interests me—he interests me greatly,” asserted Cumberford. “Let him go, Steve.”

Radley-Todd looked round the circle of faces with an amused smile, which grew tender as his eye rested upon the placid features of Mrs. Kane. The boy loved to study human nature; it had possessed a fascination for him ever since he could remember, and here was a fertile field for observation. Reading accurately the desire of those assembled to be rid of the abhorrent creature he had brought before them, the young man slowly rose and opened the door.

“Tyler,” said he, “you’ve saved your skin. Not by your whining falsehoods and misrepresentations, but because these people are too noble to be revenged upon one so ignoble and degraded. But I’m not built that way myself. I’m longing to kick you till you can’t stand, and there’s a mighty power to my hamstrings, I assure you. I refrain just now, because ladies are present, but if I ever set eyes on your carcass again you’ll think Cumberford’s kick was a mere love-pat. Get out!”

Tyler cringed, turned without a word and shuffled through the doorway.

Orissa came forward and took the young fellow’s hand in her own, impulsively.

“Thank you, Mr. Todd!” she said.

He held the hand a moment and looked admiringly into her upturned face.

“It is I who should give thanks, and I do,” he answered reverently. “I thank God to-day, as I have had occasion to do before, for his noblest creation—the American girl.”

“Good!” cried Cumberford, with approval. “That interests me.”

XXVI. Of Course

Orissa did fly the next day, as she had declared she would. The morning papers were full of her achievement, with columns of enthusiastic praise for her beauty, her daring, her modesty and skill. The attempt of a rival aëroplane to interfere with her flight and her clever rescue of her enemy when he came to grief made a popular heroine of the girl, yet no one seemed to know the true history of the astonishing affair. The *Tribune* had glowing accounts of the day's events from the pen of Mr. H. Chesterton Radley-Todd, but this astute correspondent refrained from making "a scoop," as he might have done had he bared his knowledge of the conspiracy that ended with Orissa Kane's aërial adventure.

One of the other papers suspected Burthon of being the instigator of the wicked plot to wreck Miss Kane's airship and, discovering the fact that he had fled from the city, openly accused him. Tyler could not be found, either, for the little ex-chauffeur had wisely "skipped the town" and his former haunts knew him no more.

The judges awarded the Kane Aircraft the ten thousand dollar prize, and singularly enough not a word of protest came from the competing aviators. Those who had attended the meet the day before, and thousands who read of Orissa Kane in the newspapers, eagerly assembled at Dominguez to witness her further exhibitions on the next day. It was estimated that fully fifty thousand people were in attendance, and when the Kane Aircraft appeared, decked with gay banners and ribbons, and made a short flight above the field, the girl aviator met with a reception such as has never before been equaled in the annals of aviation.

Later in the day Orissa took part in the contest for speed and although she did not win this event the girl aëronaut managed her biplane so gracefully and pressed the leader in the race so closely that she was accorded the admiring plaudits of the spectators.

Steve was a little disappointed in the result, but Mr. Cumberford reminded him that his employment of crossed planes was sure to sacrifice an element of speed for the sake of safety, and assured him it was not at all necessary for his invention to excel in swiftness to win universal approval.

In other events that followed during the progress of the meet Orissa captured several of the prizes, with the final result that the Kanes were eighteen thousand dollars richer than they had been before. Crowds constantly thronged the Kane hangar, inspecting the wonderful machine and questioning the attendants as to its construction and management, while so many orders for the aircraft were booked that Mr. Cumberford assured Stephen they would be justified in at once building a factory to supply the demand.

Throughout the meet Orissa Kane remained the popular favorite and the wonderful performances of the young girl were discussed in every place where two or more people congregated. Had Stephen been able to operate his own machine he would not have won a tithe of the enthusiastic praise accorded "The Flying Girl," and this was so evident that Orissa was instantly recognized as the most important member of the firm.

Naturally she was overjoyed by her success, yet she never once lost her humble and unassuming manner or considered the applause in the light of a personal eulogy. Devoting herself seriously and with care to every detail of her work she strove to exhibit Steve's aircraft in a manner to prove its excellence, and considered that her important aim.

There was nothing reckless about Orissa's flights; her success, then and afterward, may be attributed to her coolness of head, a thorough understanding of her machine and a full appreciation of her own ability to handle it. The flattery and adulation she received did not destroy her self-poise or cause one flutter of her heart, but when anyone praised the merits of the Kane Aircraft, she flushed with pleasure and pride. For Orissa firmly believed she basked in the reflected glory of her brother's inventive genius, and considered herself no more than a showman employed to exhibit his marvelous creation.

"You see," she said to Chesty Todd, who stood beside her in the hangar on the last day of the meet while she watched Mr. Cumberford and his assistants preparing the aircraft for its final flight, "Stephen has a thorough education in aëronautics and knows the caprices and requirements of the atmosphere as well as a gardener knows his earth. The machine is adjusted to all those variations and demands, and that is why it accomplishes with ease much that other aëroplanes find difficult. A child might operate the Kane Aircraft, and I feel perfectly at ease in my seat, no matter how high I am or how conflicting the air currents; for Steve's machine will do exactly what it is built to do."

"The machine is good," observed Chesty, "but your sublime self-confidence is better. You're a conceited young lady—not over your own skill, but over that of your brother."

She laughed.

"Haven't I a right to be?" she asked. "Hasn't Steve proved his ability to the world?"

The boy nodded, a bit absently. He was thinking how good it was to find a girl not wrapped up in herself, but unselfish enough to admire others at her own expense. A pretty girl, too, Chesty concluded with a sigh, as he watched her prepare to start. What a pity he had lived all of twenty-one years and had not known Orissa Kane before!

By some sleight-of-hand, perhaps characteristic of the fellow, Chesty had attached himself to the "Kane-Cumberford Combination," as he called it, like a barnacle. At first both Steve and Cumberford frowned upon his claim to intimacy, but the boy was so frankly attracted to their camp, "where," said he, "I can always find people of my own kind," that they soon became resigned to the situation and accepted his presence as a matter of course.

Sybil treated this new acquaintance with the same calm indifference she displayed toward all but her father and, latterly, Stephen Kane. Chesty found in her the most puzzling character he had ever met, but liked her and studied the girl's vagaries from behind a bulwark of levity and badinage. Perhaps the reporter's most loyal friend at this time was Mrs. Kane, who had promptly endorsed the young man as a desirable acquisition to their little circle. In return Chesty was devoted to the afflicted woman and loved to pay her those little attentions she required because of her helplessness.

Mr. Cumberford celebrated the closing day of the meet by giving a little dinner to the Kanes in his private rooms at the hotel that evening, and Chesty Todd was included in the party. Stephen attended in a wheeled chair and was placed at one end of the table, while Orissa occupied the other. The central decoration was a floral model of the Kane Aircraft, and before Orissa's plate was laid a crown of laurel which her friends tried to make her wear. But the girl positively refused, declaring that Stephen ought to wear the crown, while she was entitled to no more credit than a paid aviator might be.

The next morning's developments, however, proved that she had been too modest in this assertion. A telegram arrived from the directors of the San Francisco Aviation Club asking Orissa Kane's price to attend their forthcoming meet and exhibit her aëroplane. Accounts of her daring and successful flights had been wired to newspapers all over the world and public

interest in the girl aviator was so aroused that managers of aerial exhibitions throughout the country realized she would be the greatest "drawing card" they could secure.

Mr. Cumberford, as manager for Orissa as well as for Stephen and the aircraft, telegraphed his terms, demanding so large a sum that the Kanes declared it would never be considered. To their amazement the offer was promptly accepted, and while they were yet bewildered by this evidence of popularity, a representative of the New Orleans Aëro Club called at the hotel to secure Miss Kane for their forthcoming meet. Mr. Cumberford received him cordially, but said:

"Unfortunately, sir, your dates conflict with those of the San Francisco meet, where Miss Kane has already contracted to appear."

"Is there no way of securing her release?" asked the man, deeply chagrined at being too late. "Our people will be glad to pay any price to get her."

"No," replied Mr. Cumberford; "we stand by our contracts, whatever they may be. But possibly we shall be able to send you a duplicate of the Kane Aircraft, with a competent aviator to operate it."

The man's face fell.

"We will, of course, be glad to have you enter the Kane machine, on the same terms other aëroplanes are entered; but we will pay no bonus unless 'The Flying Girl' is herself present to exhibit it. To be quite frank with you, the people are wild to see Orissa Kane, whose exploits are on every tongue just now, but all aëroplanes look alike to them, as you can readily understand."

When the emissary had departed, keenly disappointed, Mr. Cumberford turned to Orissa and Stephen, who had both been present at the interview, and said:

"You see, Orissa should have worn the laurel crown, after all. 'The Flying Girl' has caught the popular fancy and I predict our little heroine will be in great demand wherever aviation is exploited. As a matter of truth and justice I will admit that she could not have acquired fame so readily without Steve's superb invention to back her. In coming years your principal source of income will be derived from the Kane Aircraft; but just now, while aviation is in its infancy, Orissa will be able to earn a great deal of money by giving exhibitions at aviation meets. If she undertakes it there is, we all know, much hard work ahead of her, coupled with a certain degree of danger." He turned to the girl. "It will be for you to decide, my dear."

Orissa did not hesitate in her reply.

"I will do all in my power to exhibit Steve's machine properly, until he is well enough to operate it himself," she said. "Then he will become the popular hero in my place, and I'll retire to the background, where I belong."

Even Steve smiled at this prediction.

"I'll never be able to run the thing as you can, Ris," he replied, "and you mustn't overlook the fact that your being a girl gives you as great an advantage over me, as an aeronaut, as over all other aviators. I think Mr. Cumberford is right in saying that the advertising and prestige you have already received will enable you to win a fortune for us—provided you are willing to assume the risk and exertion, and if mother will consent."

"I love the moil and toil of it, as well as the pleasure," exclaimed the girl. "It will be joy and bliss to me to fly the aircraft on every possible occasion, and if you'll leave me to manage mother I'll guarantee to secure her consent."

At this juncture Chesty Todd came in. His face was solemn and dejected.

“What’s up?” asked Steve.

“Lost my job, that’s all,” said Chesty. “Our editor thinks I didn’t run down that Burthon affair as well as the other fellows did and that I neglected some of the famous aviators to gush over Miss Kane. That’s his excuse, anyhow; but my private opinion, publicly expressed, is that I was predoomed to be fired, whatever I did.”

“Why so?” inquired Orissa.

“I’m getting too good. They’re afraid if they kept me on I’d demand more wages.”

There was a shout of laughter at this.

“Of course I didn’t expect sympathy,” observed Chesty, dolefully. “I see starvation ahead of me, and as there’s a good deal of Mr. Radley-Todd to starve it’s bound to be a tedious and trying experience.”

“This interests me,” remarked Mr. Cumberford, musingly.

“Me, also,” said Chesty.

Cumberford related the engagement made that morning for Miss Kane’s San Francisco exhibition and the demand of the New Orleans representative.

“The promoters of every aviation meet, hereafter, will want to secure Orissa,” he added, “and so we are about to organize a campaign to advertise ‘The Flying Girl’ and the Kane Aircraft throughout the United States. Possibly we may take her to Europe—”

“Oh!” exclaimed Orissa, excitedly. “Don’t you think the people of Mars would like me to visit them?”

“I see,” said Chesty, nodding. “You need a press agent.”

“It might not be a bad idea,” admitted Mr. Cumberford.

“I’m engaged from this moment,” declared the young man. “I’ve had my breakfast, thank you, but I shall require three square meals a day from this time on. Any further emolument I leave to you. As for promoting Miss Kane, you’ll find me thoroughly capable and willing—provided the young lady proves flighty and goes up in the air occasionally, as young ladies are prone to do. This may be a soar subject to discuss just now, so I’ll end my aëroplaintive lay.”

“If you put that bosh in the papers you’ll ruin us,” said Steve.

“Trust me,” returned Chesty, earnestly. “I’ll stick to the most dignified facts, merely relating that Miss Kane is to make an ascension for the purpose of picking air currants to make jam of.”

“All right,” announced Mr. Cumberford; “you’re engaged.”

THE END

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