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Title: Linda Carlton's Ocean Flight

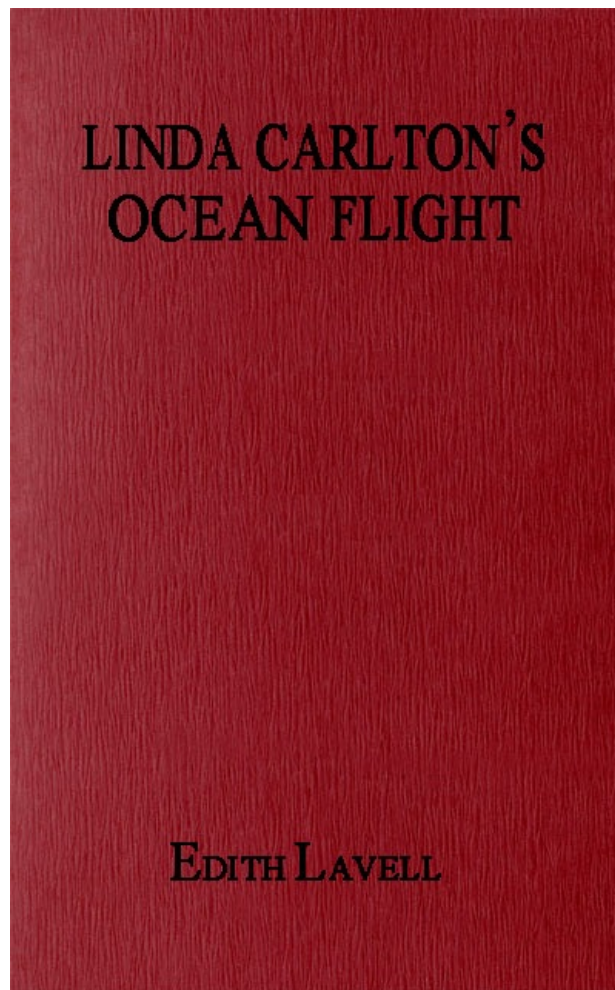
Author: Edith Lavell

Release date: March 13, 2015 [EBook #48478]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by David K. Park and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LINDA CARLTON'S OCEAN FLIGHT ***





Linda climbed into the plane without the slightest misgiving. (Page 271)

LINDA CARLTON'S OCEAN FLIGHT

By EDITH LAVELL



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COMPANY**

Akron, Ohio New York

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Linda Carlton's Ocean Flight

Made in the United States of America

In the Fog

"My girl, you are in perfect physical condition," announced pleasant-faced Dr. Ginsley, who had served as the Carlton family physician for years. "I can't picture anybody in more radiant health."

"I thought so," smiled Linda Carlton, the pretty aviatrix who had been flying her Arrow biplane for the last three months. "But Aunt Emily wanted to make sure, before I go any further with aviation."

"Yes, of course, she's right. And what are you planning now?"

"A thorough course at a good ground school, so that I can get a transport license—that ranks the highest, you know. I—I haven't decided on any particular school yet, because Aunt Emily still opposes the idea. She wants me to have a coming-out party instead, like the other girls in Spring City. So I'm waiting for Daddy to come home."

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"And if I'm a judge your daddy will let you go to the school," said the doctor admiringly. "I heard all about how you saved his life with your plane!"

"Oh, no!" protested Linda, modestly. "It was that wonderful surgeon—Dr. Lineaweaver—who did that. I was merely lucky enough to be able to get him in time."

The doctor chuckled.

"Well, luck or no luck, you made a long flight alone at night. I think it was marvelous. You can't tell me anything bad about the young people today. To my mind, they're finer and braver than they were in my day! And that's something from an old man...."

"Well, good-by, Linda, and good luck! I suppose you're not flying anywhere today?"

"Oh, no! It's too foggy."

She opened the door of the waiting-room that led to the porch, and it seemed immediately as if the fog rushed right into the house. It was damp and penetrating, and so dense that it hid the doctor's gate from view.

Linda stepped out on the porch, and almost bumped into a woman with a small child in her arms. The stranger seemed almost to appear from nowhere, out of the obscurity of the fog.

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"Oh, you must excuse me!" she cried, excitedly. "I'm that worried I can't see where I'm headed!"

"It was just as much my fault," replied Linda. "Or really, it wasn't either's," she added. "We'll blame it on the fog."

But the other did not seem to be listening, and looking closely at her, Linda saw how deeply distressed she was. Evidently she was very poor, for her worn blue serge dress hung about her ankles, as if it had been bought for someone else, and her brown straw hat looked about the style of 1900. But she evidently had no concern for her own appearance; she kept her gaze fastened on the doctor's face, and her eyes were filled with terror. Was it possible that the baby was dead—or dying? Linda paused and waited, wondering whether she might be of any help.

"Doctor!" gasped the woman, frantically. "My baby swallowed a pin! And I'm sure it's in her lungs now. She breathes so queer."

"When did this happen?" asked Dr. Ginsley, gently taking the child in his arms, and motioning Linda to come back into the house.

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"Last week." The woman started to cry, and sympathetically, hardly realizing what she was doing, Linda put her arm about her.

"But why did you wait all this time to come to a doctor?" inquired the elderly man, trying to soften his disapproval by a kindly tone.

"Because," stammered the other, between her sobs, "because my mother thought it would be all right. One of my brothers swallowed a tack when he was little, and nothing happened. And—we live out in the country, and we're so awful poor!"

"I'm afraid it's too late now," sighed the doctor. "I'll make an examination, of course, but if the pin is lodged in the child's lung, there is nothing I, or anybody else—except that surgeon in Philadelphia—could do. And he's too far away."

The tears rolled down the woman's face, and the tiny little girl—about two years old, Linda judged—seemed almost to realize the death sentence, for she opened her blue eyes and uttered a pitiful little moan. And, strangely enough, she reached out her tiny hand towards Linda.

"You precious baby!" exclaimed the tender-hearted girl, touching her hot little fingers. "You are so sweet!"

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It seemed almost as if the little girl tried to smile, and at this pathetic effort the distracted mother broke out into convulsive sobs, hiding her head on Linda's shoulder.

"She's my only girl!" she moaned. "I have three boys, but this baby has always been nearest to me.... My—my little bit of Heaven!"

Silently, sympathetically, the doctor laid the child down on his table in the office, and got out his instruments, while Linda drew the heart-broken mother to a chair near-by.

"It is as you feared," he said, finally. "There is nothing I can do."

"But—this doctor in Philadelphia—?" began the woman, seizing the one ray of hope he had mentioned. "Is the carfare there very much? Oh, sir, if you could only lend me some money to go, I'd work my fingers to the bone to pay you back!"

Dr. Ginsley shook his head sadly.

"I'd be glad to lend you the money, my good woman," he said, "but it wouldn't be a bit of use. The journey would take too long; the child can't live more than a few hours."

A shiver of horror crept over Linda as she saw the baby's pitiful breathing, and the mother's utter despair. Turning to the window she glanced out at the fog, thinking rapidly.... Should she offer to take them, when it was only a chance at best—a chance in more ways than one? A few hours, the doctor said, were all that the baby had to live.... Suppose Linda could get through the fog with her Arrow, would the trip be all in vain? Would she be risking her own life, to watch the child die in her mother's arms?... Yet something inside of her compelled her to offer her services; she would be less than human if she didn't try to do something.

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"I will take you and the baby in my plane, Mrs.—" she said.

"Beach," supplied the woman, unable to grasp what Linda meant.

"Oh, no! No, my dear!" protested Dr. Ginsley, immediately. "That would not be wise. It would mean risking two good lives to save one that is almost past hope.... No, you mustn't do that—in this fog."

"I—I don't know what you mean," faltered Mrs. Beach. "An airplane?"

"Yes, yes," explained Linda, hastily. "I am a pilot, and I have a plane of my own. I will take you and the baby to Philadelphia."

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"You mean that?" cried the woman, hysterically.

"Yes, of course I do. Come over to my house with me while I get ready."

"Linda, I don't approve of this," interrupted Dr. Ginsley. "This fog—your father—your aunt—I thought you had too much good sense to take foolish risks."

"Not when it is a case of life or death," answered the girl, quietly. "Come, Mrs. Beach! There isn't a moment to be lost."

She managed to smile at the doctor, who stood in the doorway, watching their departure, torn between his feeling of fear for Linda in the fog, and his admiration for her brave, generous spirit.

"Then good luck to you!" he called, as they went cautiously towards the gate.

"My husband is here in the buggy," said Mrs. Beach to Linda, as they reached the street. "I must stop and tell him."

"You are sure you are not afraid?"

"No! I believe in you, Miss! And, oh, I'd risk anything to save my little girl.... Besides, I've always wanted to go up in an airplane."

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After a word of explanation to the astonished man in the rickety old carriage, Mrs. Beach followed Linda across the street to the girl's lovely home. It was a charming colonial house, much too large for two people, as Miss Carlton, Linda's aunt, always said. For the girl's father was scarcely ever there, except for over-night visits.

Mrs. Beach, who under ordinary circumstances would have been impressed with its splendor, now hardly noticed the lovely house, or the beautiful room where she waited while Linda changed into her flyer's suit and helmet, and scribbled a hasty note to her aunt, who happened to be out shopping at the time. In an incredibly short interval she reappeared, her arms laden with woolen clothing—a scarf for the baby, a cap and coat for the mother.

While the gardener rolled the plane from its hangar, Linda fastened the parachutes on herself and her companion, and explained how to use them.

"You would have a hard time," she said, "with the baby." (She did not say impossible, though she believed that herself.)... "But perhaps we could strap her to you, with this extra belt, here, if an accident occurs.... But don't let's worry! Probably nothing will happen, but we must be prepared at all times."

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After a hasty examination of the gas, the compass, the oil gauge, and the other instruments, Linda started her engine, and listened to its even whir. Sound and steady as an ocean-liner, thank goodness! So she put Mrs. Beach into the companion cockpit beside herself, and with a heart beating faster than it had ever beaten, even on that occasion when she made her first solo flight at school, she took off into the thick grayness all about them.

As the plane left the ground, she carefully pointed it upward in a gradual ascent, hoping that perhaps she could get above the clouds. She must fly high—it would be dangerous crossing the Alleghenies. She hoped she could depend upon her instruments; they had never failed her yet.

Up, up they climbed, but always within the veil of gray that closed upon them so completely. No horizon was visible, it seemed as if they were floating inside a gray ball, with nothing to tell them where they were going. The child was asleep in her mother's arms, and Linda glanced questioningly at Mrs. Beach. But her expression was all maternal love; no fear of danger for herself seemed to have any part in her feelings.

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Everything about the experience seemed queer, so detached from the world, so unreal. A mysterious journey that was no part of everyday life. More than once Linda wondered whether they were not flying unevenly, perhaps upside down! Oh, if she only had a gyroscopic pilot, that marvelous little instrument that would assure an even keel!... She would ask her father to give her one for Christmas—if she lived till then! She smiled in a detached way; she thought of herself almost as another person, in a book or a play.

The plane was evidently dipping. Suddenly, with that sixth sense with which every good pilot is equipped, she felt a stall coming on. It was a sort of sinking sensation; then the ailerons on the end of the wings failed to function. She pushed the stick frantically from side to side—with no response! In that brief moment she glanced again at her companion, so absorbed in her child, and she knew that the mother would not mind going to her death if the baby could not live.

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But Linda meant to do everything in her power to save them all. She had been in difficulties before, and she knew how to overcome them, if it were humanly possible. Fortunately she was flying high, so she immediately pushed the nose of the Pursuit forward and dropped the plane three hundred feet to regain speed. And then, oh, what a gorgeous feeling of relief swept over her, as she succeeded in coming out of that stall! The plane was now flying evenly. Her gasp of thankfulness was audible, but the woman beside her did not even notice.

"Maybe I'm not glad Daddy bought me an open plane!" she thought, as she flew steadily onward. "If I couldn't feel the wind in my face.... Oh, you dear Arrow, you have never failed me!"

And then, miraculously, the fog lifted. Everything was clear in the sunlight; all her fears were gone—now she could make speed. Onward they went, over the mountains, and the rivers, through Pennsylvania, flying low enough to see the wonderful beauty of the early autumn in that lovely part of the country. At last they came to Philadelphia, and flew straight to the airport at the southern end of the city, and landed in safety.

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"The baby is—breathing!" she asked, as she watched the attendant who came forward to welcome them.

"Yes," replied Mrs. Beach, rapturously. "Oh, I think you must be an angel, Miss Carlton!"

"If we are only in time!" returned the girl. "We taxi from here."

"But I haven't much money——"

"I have. Come! There isn't a moment to be lost!"

Linda left her plane with the attendant, and helped Mrs. Beach with her baby into the waiting taxicab. In half an hour they were at the hospital.

"You—you will stay with me?" questioned the woman, trembling.

"Of course."

The great surgeon was kindness itself. Mrs. Beach, who had feared that he would be brusque, was delighted. A nurse took the baby immediately into the operating room.

Linda was intensely hungry; it was long past her lunch-time, but she said nothing of it, while they waited tensely in that outer room. She had not failed the poor woman yet, and she would not now, at her most difficult hour.

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At last the doctor appeared, his face beaming with smiles.

"Your baby is fine!" he announced. "And one of the sweetest little girls I have ever seen.... The nurse is putting her to bed now."

Mrs. Beach burst into tears of happiness, and rushed forward and clasped the surgeon's hand in rapture.

"Oh, I can never thank you enough!" she cried. Then, drying her eyes, she added, "And how much do I owe you, Doctor?"

The great man had been taking in the woman's appearance, her poor clothing, her work-hardened hands.

"Five dollars," he said, not making the mistake of saying "Nothing," for he realized that she would resent charity.

"The Lord be praised!" she exclaimed, reverently. "Two angels I have met today—you and Miss Carlton! Two utter strangers who do things like this for me!" She buried her head in Linda's arms and wept hysterically in her joy.

After the bill was paid, the doctor told them that they might stop in to see the baby. Following the nurse, they tiptoed down a corridor and into a children's ward, where they found the little tot in a white crib, breathing naturally, sleeping the dreamless sleep of childhood.

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"She had better stay here for a few days," advised the nurse. "You can find a cheap room a couple of doors away from the hospital." And she handed Mrs. Beach a card.

It was then, and only then, that the happy mother realized that she had not eaten since the night before.

"We'll get something to eat first," she said to Linda as they left the hospital together. "And then you will want to fly back home?"

"No," replied the girl. "I think I'll stay over night—to get a good rest, and fly by daylight. And

besides, you will not be so lonely."

So, after sending her aunt a telegram to that effect, Linda Carlton treated her grateful friend to the best meal she had ever eaten in her life.

CHAPTER II

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Kitty's Party

Linda and Mrs. Beach slept soundly that night, in the cheap but comfortable beds in the neat little room not far from the hospital. But both awakened early, the woman because she was longing to see her baby, the girl because she was anxious to fly back to Spring City.

"Do you think that you have enough money, Mrs. Beach?" asked the latter, as they left the house together, after paying the landlady. Linda had insisted upon taking the room for the week, in order that the child might remain at the hospital as long as was necessary. "Hadn't I better give you some for your ticket home, and for a telegram to your husband?"

"Thank you, Miss Carlton, you have done so much already! But if I could borrow a little?"

"Of course you can," replied the girl, realizing that the other would prefer that arrangement.

"I don't know how soon I can pay it back, but I'll try hard!" promised Mrs. Beach.

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"Your husband has a farm, hasn't he?" suggested Linda. "Why not drive in once a week with vegetables? My aunt would be glad to take them from you."

"The very thing!" agreed the woman, joyfully. It seemed as if all her cares had vanished as completely as the fog of the previous day.

After a hearty breakfast together, Linda said good-bye and went back to her plane at the airport. She found it in perfect condition, inspected and filled with gas, ready for her flight homeward. How she would enjoy it today! How good the clear sunlight would feel, how bracing the air that held the crispness of autumn! She was glad, too, to be alone, after yesterday's nerve-racking experience.

Nor was there any reason for hurry this time. She could land at Pittsburgh, or some other convenient half-way airport, and have a good lunch. And still arrive home long before dark.

It was just about four o'clock when she finally brought her plane down in the field behind her house at Spring City. Gathering her things together, she made her way slowly to the porch, singing as she went along. Her aunt—her father's sister who had taken care of her ever since her mother's death—was nervously waiting for her on the steps.

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"Linda!" she cried, as soon as the girl was within hearing distance. "Do hurry up and tell me what you have been doing!"

"Didn't you get my telegram, Aunt Emily?" she asked, kissing the older woman.

"Yes. But—alone in Philadelphia! I do hope you had a chaperon! You didn't go with any of the boys?" Miss Carlton was old-fashioned and strict; she had done everything in her power to bring up her niece in the most correct manner.

"No, no, Auntie!" She smiled affectionately. "I went with a woman named Mrs. Beach—to rush her baby to the hospital. And I stayed all night with her."

"Oh!" exclaimed Miss Carlton, in relief. "I should have been more worried than I was, except that I didn't find out that you had gone off in your plane until I got your telegram. And by that time the fog had lifted.... But come inside and have some tea and sandwiches, and tell me all about it."

Linda followed her into the house and briefly related her story, not mentioning the stall at all, for she made it a point never to worry her aunt unnecessarily, because the latter was so timid about airplanes that she had never even gone for a ride in the Pursuit.

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"Now I must call Dr. Ginsley," the girl concluded, as she finished the last sandwich on the plate.

"No, dear—I'll call him for you. You must go right upstairs and take a nap. Don't forget that Kitty's dinner is tonight, and Harry is coming for you at half-past seven."

Linda smiled; of all the boys she knew, she admired Harriman Smith most, although he was the poorest financially of her select social group at Spring City. He belonged to perhaps the finest type of young men in America today—the class who are working their own way through college. Handsome, clean-cut, ambitious, bound to make his mark in the world! And he was head over heels in love with pretty Linda Carlton. But, unlike Ralph Clavering, another of the girl's admirers, he did not often speak of his infatuation. It wasn't fair to a girl to talk love, he believed, until a man had something with which to back it up.

"What will you wear?" inquired Miss Carlton. "Your white chiffon?"

"No," answered Linda, thoughtfully. "I don't think that would be fair to Kitty. It's Kitty's big party, and of course she'll wear white—with her pearls, so I think all her friends ought to wear colors, to sort of set her off, like a queen.... I believe I'll wear my daffodil."

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"All right, just as you say. But do run along."

Never in her life had Linda attended such a gorgeous party as this *début* of Kitty Clavering. The Claverings were millionaires several times over, by far the richest people in Spring City, and they gave this function in a lavish style. The huge house shone with brilliant lights, the flowers reminded Linda of a flower show; the caterers had been brought from Chicago, and the music was by Paul Whiteman himself, with his famous jazz orchestra.

It was all so dazzling, so bewildering, that Linda felt as if she were lost in some tropical island, among strangers. It was some time before she recognized anybody she knew, and she clung tightly to Harry's arm. He pressed her hand gently; it was wonderful to have a chance to protect Linda Carlton, who usually was so fearless.

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"I wish we could find Lou," she remarked, mentioning her chum, her dearest friend who had gone through school with her, and graduated in the same class the preceding June. "Lou is so much more at home at this sort of thing than I am."

They were seated at a little table now—there were tables of every size in the dining-room and conservatory and library—and a waiter was serving them with the most delicious food.

Linda ate hers almost in awe, wondering whether this was the sort of thing her aunt was planning for her. The expense of it! Why, it would cost as much as a whole year's course at a ground school! And where would it get you in the end? It would only lead to more parties—more expense. Linda sighed.

"Why the sigh, Linda?" inquired Harry, sympathetically.

"I guess it wasn't very polite," replied the girl, flushing. "But I'm afraid my mind is on other things."

"Well, try to bring it back. Here comes our host—with another man. An army officer!"

"I'm not interested in army officers," she whispered, but when she saw from the stranger's insignia that he belonged to the Flying Corps, she changed her mind.

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"Hello, Linda," exclaimed Ralph Clavering, Kitty's brother who had taken a course with Linda at the Spring City Flying School a few months before. "Been looking all over for you. You too, Harry!... I want to introduce Lieutenant Hulbert, of the U. S. Air Service."

Ralph went on to explain what a marvelous little flyer Miss Carlton was, until Linda's eyelids fluttered in embarrassment, and she wished he would stop talking so that she could hear some of the Lieutenant's experiences. But the music had started, and Ralph was impatient to dance.

"We mustn't keep Lieutenant Hulbert," he explained. "He's to have Kit's first dance."

With a gracious bow the young officer withdrew, and Ralph turned to Harry.

"Do me a favor, Harry, old man?" he said.

"Did you call him Harriman?" asked Linda. "Why all the dignity?"

"No. 'Harry—old—man!'"

"So long as you don't call me 'the old Harry,'" laughed the other. "Well, what is it?"

"Lend me your girl friend for this dance. I have something very important to tell to Linda."

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"All right," agreed the other, pleasantly. "At least if you'll find me another girl."

"Sure I will," said Ralph, and in another minute he came back with Louise Haydock, Linda's chum.

Louise was just the opposite in type to Linda. Though not exactly pretty, she was extremely striking-looking; her hair was clipped close, after the manner of Kay Francis, the actress, and she always wore earrings and bright colored dresses. Tonight her dress was a new brilliant shade of green, with trimmings of silver, and silver slippers to match.

"Hello, darling!" she exclaimed, joyfully. "Who'd ever think I'd find you! It's almost as impossible to locate anybody here as on the beach at Atlantic City!"

"I know. And I've been dying to see you!" returned Linda.

"All your own fault. Where have you been these last two days?"

"Why——"

"Please have your visit later," interrupted Ralph, who still preserved much of the spoiled child in his make-up. "The dance is half over now."

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"All right," agreed Linda, with a wink, meaning, "See you later," to her chum.

Off they started; the floor was perfect, the music excellent, and for a minute or two they both gave themselves up to the joy of the dance. But time was precious; Ralph might not have another dance with Linda all evening. Besides, nobody cut in during the first dance—that was an unwritten rule with their crowd.

"Who is this Lieutenant?" asked Linda, as they happened to pass him dancing with Kitty.

"A fine fellow. The kind you girls fall for—uniform, and all that," replied Ralph, somewhat

enviously. "But don't you fall for him! He belongs to Kitty!"

"Kitty! But I thought she was practically engaged to Maurice Stetson?"

"That's all off. Stetson made one wisecrack too many, and it cracked Sis's dream of happiness. He isn't even here tonight."

"I can't say I'll miss him a whole lot."

"I always liked the fellow. But I'm rooming with another chap this year. You'll probably meet him at Thanksgiving."

"What's your big news, Ralph?" asked Linda, wondering whether it had anything to do with flying. "You must have had some reason for taking me away from Harry." [Pg 30]

"You're reason enough yourself, my angel," he replied. "You look divine tonight."

"Thanks, Ralph. But that's not quite fair to Harry, is it?"

"All's fair in love and war.... But lest you think too meanly of me, I did have another reason. One that will knock you cold: Kit is taking up flying!"

"Kitty! No! Never!"

Linda could not imagine anyone less likely to care for aviation than pretty, petite Kitty Clavering, who never had an idea in her head beyond her parties, her pearls, and her boy friends. Besides, she was so timid. Why, she was even nervous about taking her car into traffic, and almost always used the chauffeur.

"Of course there's a reason," explained Ralph.

"You mean Lieutenant Hulbert?"

"Naturally."

"But what has that to do with me, Ralph? I'm not supposed to teach her, or anything like that, am I?" Linda had often thought it would be a simple matter to teach Louise, who was naturally air-minded, but Kitty Clavering would be difficult. And she'd simply die if Kitty ever sat at the controls of her Arrow! [Pg 31]

"No, of course not. Dad has a big idea—you know how he longs to get me into business? Well, he jumped at the chance of launching Kit. She's to start a Flying Club. You know about them?"

"Yes. They're run something like Country Clubs, aren't they? Only flying is the sport, instead of golf and tennis."

"Exactly. Dad's financing it, and Kit is to take charge. Sell thousand dollar bonds, get members, arrange about instruction. And she's supposed to run it like a business, and pay interest to Dad."

"Well, of all things!" cried Linda. Nevertheless, the idea was delightful. Just as flying was ten times better than any other sport, so a flying club would be that much nicer than a country club.

"Of course I don't need to tell you that Lieutenant Hulbert is in on this," continued Ralph. "He and Kitty are working hand in hand. He's even hoping to be the instructor for a while, if he can get a short leave from the army."

"So that he can be near Kitty," concluded Linda. "But suppose Kitty drops him as she did Maurice, then what will happen to the poor people who have invested their money in the club?" [Pg 32]

"She can't drop it. There'll be a board of managers to see to that. Besides, Dad'll be back of it. Nobody need worry much, as long as he's behind it."

"That's true," admitted Linda.

"Of course I'll be at college, but I think I can persuade Dad into giving me a plane of my own, so that I can fly home every week-end. Doesn't it sound thrilling?"

"It surely does. We'll have to get together and talk the whole thing over soon."

"I'll tell the world! I'm going to get the bunch over here tomorrow afternoon. Can you come? It's my last day home."

The music had stopped, but Ralph showed no signs of letting Linda go back to her escort.

"And will you promise me tomorrow night, Linda?" he begged. "In case I don't get another dance with you tonight?"

"I don't know," she replied, thoughtfully. "I'm sort of expecting Daddy home this week-end, and I must see him."

"But you can see your father any time!"

"That's just what I can't do! Why Ralph, I see you lots oftener than Daddy. I haven't laid eyes on him since Field Day at Green Falls—three weeks ago!" [Pg 33]

"You may not see me for three weeks!"

"And then again, I may.... Here come Lou and Harry.... No, Ralph, I can't promise. If I come tomorrow afternoon, that's all I can say."

"Oh, all right," returned the young man sulkily. He never could get used to Linda's independence—when he—and everybody else—regarded himself as the biggest catch in Spring City. He'd invite Louise, for spite.

"Lou, will you go riding with me tomorrow night, and paint the town red, because it's my last night home?" he asked.

"O.K.," replied Louise enthusiastically. "But why be so stingy about yourself? Let's make it a crowd!" She turned to Linda.

"I prefer your society alone," interrupted Ralph, peevishly, and with a wink at her chum, Louise accepted his invitation to dance.

Linda and Harry started the next dance together, but scarcely had they gone around the floor when Lieutenant Hulbert cut in. Linda was both proud and delighted; he was an older man, probably twenty-four or five, and she found him most interesting. She made him talk about the army and about flying, and finally of the club. She was keenly disappointed when Joe Elliston cut in and took her away.

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She did not dance with the Lieutenant again, although she stayed until midnight. Then she told Harry she wanted to go home.

"But your aunt isn't even thinking of leaving so early, and she's as strict as they come. Besides, I hear that the breakfast we're going to get will put the supper to shame!" Harry was just as anxious as Ralph to have a good time before college opened.

"I know, Harry, and I don't want to be a poor sport. But I'm really awfully tired. I flew to Philadelphia yesterday, and back again today." She didn't say why; Linda Carlton was not a girl to boast of her good deeds. "Besides, tomorrow is a big day for me. If Daddy comes home, we have some momentous questions to talk over—which will decide my whole future."

"Flying?"

"Yes.... So, Harry, please take me home, and then you can easily come back again and stay for breakfast."

The young man did as he was requested, but he did not go back. Somehow, the party no longer interested him.

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So while her friends still danced far into the night, Linda Carlton slept soundly, that she might retain that radiant health upon which the doctor had complimented her the day before.

CHAPTER III

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The Flying Club

When Linda came down to breakfast the following morning, she found her father already at the table. He had a way of arriving early in the morning, for he preferred traveling in a sleeper.

"Daddy!" she cried, happily. "Just the person I want to see!"

"Well, that's nice," he said, kissing her affectionately. "I wouldn't want it otherwise. Now sit down and tell me all about your latest experiences while you eat your breakfast."

"No, first you must tell me how you are! Are you all well again after that terrible accident?"

"Much better, but not quite all well," he replied. "I have to stay away from horses, I guess, for the rest of my life. I'm selling the ranch."

"Daddy!" There was the deepest sympathy in her voice; she knew how her father loved his outdoor life, almost as much as she loved flying.

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"Well, it wasn't paying anyhow. But sit down, dear, and tell me about yourself. I know you were at a party last night—the servants told me, for I haven't seen your Aunt Emily yet."

"Everything's just fine with me," Linda told him, as she sat down beside him and took a bunch of grapes. "It isn't the past I want to talk about, Daddy—it's the future."

"Of course, of course," murmured her father. "It's always the future with you.... Well, what's on your mind now?"

"I want to go to a ground school. I want to be a commercial pilot—maybe even a 'transport pilot,' the highest of all, you know. And a licensed mechanic." She tried to keep her voice calm, but her blue eyes were shining with excitement.

"What for?" inquired her father, smiling at the idea of a girl with ambitions like these.

"So that I can earn my living in aviation. I want to go in for it seriously, Daddy. Not just play!"

"You're afraid I won't be able to support you, later on?" he asked, half teasingly.

"No, no—not that—"

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"Of course such an event is possible. In fact, Daughter, it was that very thing I especially want to talk about to you.... I have decided to go into business."

"Into business?" repeated Linda, in amazement.

"Yes. I want something to do, now that I am selling my ranch. Besides, I have lost a good deal of

money in stocks, and I think it's time I made some."

"But what?"

"Importing some very lovely lace-work, and selling it wholesale to the better stores all over the country. This needle-work is made in a convent in Canada, and has never been sold before. But I have been able to persuade the Mother Superior to sell it, because they really are dreadfully in need of money."

"But how did you happen on such a thing as this?" asked Linda, incredulously.

"Two years ago—the summer you went to camp with Louise in Maine, you remember—Emily and I visited you and went on into Canada. One day your aunt stopped at this convent—it's near Montreal—and one of the nuns took such a fancy to her that she gave her a handkerchief of this work. When we got home, your aunt sent a contribution for the convent, and really the letter of gratitude was touching."

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"And they've actually agreed to sell this to you?"

"Yes. All they have. And they are making more. If I hadn't come along, they would have had to give up their convent."

"Of course it's expensive?"

"Yes, and there's nothing like it in America. Nobody in our country would ever have the patience to do it. Of course I have to pay a tax, besides, on every piece. But the stores are enthusiastic, they ordered all I had. Except—" he dug smilingly into his pocket—"except this handkerchief I saved for you."

Linda opened the small package eagerly, and disclosed the daintiest, loveliest thing of its kind that she had ever seen. Filmy net-work, made with infinite patience, probably as the nuns had learned from their sisters in France. It was exquisite.

"Oh, Daddy, I adore it!" she cried.

"Rather a queer present for a girl who wants to be a licensed mechanic," he remarked, whimsically.

"But I love things like this, too!" she hastily assured him. "And I can appreciate its value. Why, all my friends will be green with envy!"

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"Then they can easily buy them in New York," he said. "If you show it to your rich friends, you'll help my business...."

"Now, another thing, Daughter, while we're on this subject. As I told you, I've lost some money, and my expenses are pretty heavy. So I'm just taking a precaution, in case I should fail in this business, of putting thirty thousand dollars in bonds aside in your name. Just so you won't be penniless."

"That's awfully sweet of you, Daddy! But can you afford it?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Then—then—instead of a trust fund could I have the money for two purposes?" she asked excitedly. "To pay for my course at a ground school, and—and—" She stopped and flushed; her heart beat so fast with excitement that the words choked her. She was almost afraid to tell her father, for fear of his refusal. It was her most cherished dream, her secret which she had confided only to Louise, her greatest ambition!

"And what, Daughter?"

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"Can't you guess, Daddy?"

"No. I never know what you're up to. A new plane? One of those new-fangled autogiros?"

"No—that is, not exactly.... Oh, Daddy, don't think I'm crazy. But if I do well at school, next spring I should like to have a special plane—and—and—" She took a deep breath before she finally blurted out her desire. "And fly the Atlantic! Without a man!" she said.

"All alone?"

"No. With Louise. It's never been done by two girls alone. Amelia Earhart did it, but she took a man as co-pilot. But look at Amy Johnson!"

"Where is Amy Johnson?" he asked, glancing at the door.

"*The* Amy Johnson! Daddy, you must know about her! Don't tease me! She flew alone from England to Australia."

"Yes, of course. I remember now. But don't expect me to recall all the aviatrices, and their stunts. I usually skip the flying news."

"But you won't soon!"

"Not if my little girl is going to do public stunts like that! But, seriously, dear, I don't know what to say. It seems too hazardous. Think how many planes have dropped into the ocean, never to be heard of again."

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"But planes are being made safer every minute!"

"True. Still, I don't know—I wouldn't like to decide a question like that off-hand. I'll have to think about it."

"But you are willing for me to go to the ground school?"

"Yes. And you can have the money in your own name, invested in bonds that can easily be sold. I know I can trust you not to try the flight without my permission. You'll promise that?"

"Certainly," she agreed. "And by the way, Daddy, don't tell anybody of my plans about the ocean flight—not even Aunt Emily!"

During this whole conversation Linda had not even touched the fruit that was on her plate, and she realized all of a sudden that her aunt might appear at any minute, and would instantly jump to the conclusion that she was sick, so she resolutely began to make up for lost time. She was just finishing her bacon and eggs when Miss Carlton came downstairs.

"Linda!" she exclaimed immediately. "What happened to you last night?"

"I got Harry to bring me home early. I was tired."

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"No wonder, after that awful trip to Philadelphia." Miss Carlton turned to her brother. "Did Linda tell you about it?"

"No, we haven't had time yet. But she must tell me all about it after breakfast."

"It wasn't much," remarked Linda, evasively. She was thinking of Louise now, wondering whether she had succeeded in persuading her parents to let her go to the aviation school too, for the chums wanted to be together.

The first chance she had, she called her on the telephone, and learned that Louise too had been successful. They arranged to go to Kitty's together that afternoon.

They reached the Clavering home about four o'clock, and found the others already there, gathered together in the charming library, about a cheerful open fire. Kitty, her pale face lighted up with unusual color and excitement, was seated on the davenport between Lieutenant Hulbert and an older girl, whose homeliness was increased by the stiff, masculine attire which she wore. The hostess introduced her as Miss Hulbert, the lieutenant's older sister.

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All the old crowd were there. Sara Wheeler, Sue Emery, Dot Crowley, Jim Valier, Harriman Smith, Joe Elliston, Ralph and Kitty, and half a dozen others whom Louise and Linda did not know so well. Everybody seemed to be talking at once.

"Now do quiet down!" commanded Kitty, bringing down her little fist upon Lieutenant Hulbert's knee. "We must get to work! We're awfully lucky, girls and boys, to have Miss Hulbert here. She's been flying for three years, and has won two big derbies, and organized flying clubs, and—and ___"

"Been in the movies," added the young woman herself, with a smile. "Only that really wasn't worth while," she said, condescendingly. "It's not nearly so wonderful after you have been in, as it looks to the outsider!"

There was something about her manner which made Linda feel very small, very inexperienced, very young. But naturally, she thought, the girl had a right to be proud, with all those records!

"Mr. Clavering is very kindly donating the land—two hundred acres north of Spring City, isn't it, Kitty?" she continued, turning to the girl beside her. "And my brother will write to the Government for a charter. Then we will ask each of you to put in a thousand dollars—or more, if you can afford it—and we will buy a plane or two, and put up a hangar and a rough sort of clubhouse."

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"And will you belong to the club?" asked Kitty, as if it were too great an honor to be expected, as if she were asking Amelia Earhart, or Laura Ingals, or Amy Johnson. "Oh, it will be so wonderful to have your name, Bess!"

"I guess I could work it in," replied the other. "Though I'm usually pretty busy with my own flying. I happen to be out of a job now, but don't forget I'm a working girl!"

"Of course. But just having your name would mean so much to us! If you'd only consent to be president!"

Louise coughed irritably; this wasn't her idea of a business meeting. She had taken an instant dislike to Miss Hulbert, with her conceited manner.

"I'm afraid I couldn't do that," replied the latter. "I might accept a minor office, like secretary or treasurer, just so that you could have *one* experienced flyer on your list. But hardly president—I haven't time."

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"*One*, indeed!" repeated Louise, scornfully. "I want to tell you, Miss Hulbert, that Miss Carlton is a wonderful aviatrix!"

"Oh, is that so?" smiled the older girl, as one might smile at a child. "I'm sorry, I'd forgotten Kitty did mention that one of you, besides her brother, had been flying a couple of months."

Linda blushed and Louise opened her mouth to make an angry retort, but Kitty spoke first.

"Two months seems a lot to us, but of course it's nothing to anybody like Miss Hulbert, who has handled all sorts of planes for the last three years. And has actually had instruction from men high up in the Flying Corps!... Now, suppose we elect officers—two boys and two girls."

"I nominate Kitty Clavering for president," said Miss Hulbert, with an affectionate smile.

"And I move the nominations be closed," said the lieutenant. "It was Kitty's idea to have the club,

and Kitty's father is making it possible, so I think Kitty is the only person for president."

Everybody seemed to agree with him; the election was unanimous.

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Joe Elliston was then made vice-president, and Ralph secretary.

The latter, who had been waiting for a chance to nominate Linda for an office, spoke up at last, when it was time to choose a treasurer. But she declined.

"I'm afraid I can't stand, Ralph," she said. "You see, Lou and I decided definitely this morning to go away to school."

Miss Hulbert raised her eyebrows.

"But aren't you the young lady who's supposed to be so interested in aviation?" she asked, cuttingly. "If you really cared, I should think you'd give up finishing-school, or college, or whatever it is, for a chance like this. You get a great deal of experience from a flying club."

"Linda has had plenty of experience!" interrupted Louise, sharply.

"Really? And you got your license when, Miss Carlton?"

"In July," murmured Linda, in embarrassment. "But I am going to a ground school, Miss Hulbert, to qualify as a mechanic."

"How interesting! But really, Miss Carlton, let me tell you, it's a waste of time. There's no more reason for a girl to learn the engine of an airplane, than for her to know the engine of an automobile. You can't often fix things up in the air anyway."

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Linda shrugged her shoulders; she had no desire to get into an argument. But neither had she any intention of giving up her cherished ambition. Ted Mackay, that wonderful young pilot who had taken her for her very first flight, and who had later rescued Louise and herself from the wilderness, was firm in the belief that this was the next step for her to take.

"Then I nominate Miss Hulbert," said Kitty, immediately. "Now don't forget, Bess, you said you'd consider it!" She looked imploringly at the older girl; it was plain to be seen that she admired her tremendously.

Without further discussion the nomination was made unanimous.

Jim Valier suddenly stood up and stretched. He was so tall and thin that he had been nicknamed "String Bean," and everybody said he was the laziest member of the crowd.

"I'm all tired out with this hard work," he announced. "Let the president do the rest— appointing committees, and what not. Now Kitty, when do we eat?"

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Everybody roared. Intimate as they all were with Kitty Clavering, Jim was the only one who would have asked such a question.

"We ate everything they had in the house last night at the party," snapped Dot Crowley.

"Where are your manners, Jim?"

Laughingly, Kitty rang the bell and the usual refreshments appeared. While they were eating, Linda and Louise had drifted off to a corner of the room, away from Bess Hulbert, whom they both disliked, and Linda was showing her handkerchief to several of the girls and telling where her father had gotten it. Turning about to put her tea-cup on the tray, she saw Bess beside her, listening intently to her explanation.

"May I see it?" she asked, rather abruptly.

"Certainly," replied Linda, surprised that a girl like Miss Hulbert would care for such a dainty thing.

"You said outside of Montreal, didn't you?" she inquired. "I believe I know the convent you mean. 'Our Lady of Mercy,' isn't it?"

"Yes, I believe it is," answered Linda. "Why?"

"Oh, nothing. Only I've been there—I know Canada pretty well."

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"Fortunately you don't have to go to Canada to get one. My father is buying them for the finer stores all over the country. You can get them almost anywhere—in any of the big cities."

Miss Hulbert raised her eyebrows.

"Quite an idea," she remarked. "Nobody ever would think of making money from nuns!"

It was an insult, of course, to her father, and Linda would have replied, but just at that moment Lieutenant Hulbert clapped his hands for silence.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he shouted. "May I say something?"

"If we can go on eating while we listen," said Jim.

"You've had enough, String Bean!" put in Dot. "Go on, Lieutenant Hulbert. All the important people are listening."

"I have an exciting piece of news," explained the young officer. "A wealthy woman by the name of Mrs. Rodman Hallowell has just offered a prize of twenty-five thousand dollars to the first girl, or girls, who fly from New York to Paris, without a man's accompanying them. You know, of course, that this has never been done. Maybe such an undertaking is beyond this club, but anyway it's something to keep in mind. You can never tell how fast you'll progress, once you start flying."

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"Oh, Bess!" cried Kitty. "Why don't you do it?"

"I would," replied the girl, coolly, as if she were sure of her ability, "if I had a suitable plane. But there's no use attempting it in the poor old boat I fly."

"Everybody says nobody but Sis could make it go," put in Lieutenant Hulbert, proudly. "It's one the Army gave up."

"I understand its temperament," explained his sister. "It's a Jenny—but somehow I manage her. And I never went to a ground school, either," she added, to Linda.

"Maybe the club could finance you," suggested Kitty. "Think of the honor it would mean to us!"

"That's awfully sweet of you, Kitty dear. But we'll talk about it later. Nobody will be trying for the prize over the winter, and by spring we'll see how our finances are."

Linda sat perfectly still, drinking in every word. Oh, if she could only win that prize! She and Louise! But how could they hope to, against such an experienced flyer as Miss Hulbert? What a bitter pill it would be to swallow, to watch her money going towards helping a girl like that to win! If it were even Dot, or Kitty—any one of her real friends!

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Scarcely knowing what she was doing, she said good-by to her hostess, and followed Louise out of the house.

CHAPTER IV

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The Ground School

"I certainly don't care for that woman!" announced Louise emphatically, as she got into Linda's roadster.

"Miss Hulbert?" inquired her chum.

"Yes. You might think she were the one and only queen of the air! And it's all so silly. Imagine Lindbergh or Amelia Earhart talking like that!"

"Still, she has a lot of experience on all of us," admitted Linda. "But I don't believe what she says about ground schools. Why, Ted Mackay—"

"Have you heard from him lately, Linda?"

"About a week ago. He wants us to go to a school in St. Louis, where he says they give a most thorough course."

"Sure it isn't because that will be near Kansas City—where he is?" teased Louise.

"Oh no, I wouldn't believe that of Ted. He is seriously interested in my career—yours too, for I told him that you might go with me."

"Might!" repeated Louise, settling back in her seat to enjoy the ride, for it was a lovely day, and there was no top over the car. "Nobody could stop me now—after this afternoon! We're going to beat Bess Hulbert to it, and get that prize!"

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"Lou, if we only could! You know how I've talked of flying the ocean before. Are you still game?"

"Absolutely! But we wouldn't dare take a chance in your Pursuit, would we?"

"No, of course not. What I'd like to get is a Model J Bellanca—it's made especially for that purpose. Take off early next May—the very day Lindy flew, if the weather happens to be right."

"Where would we ever get the money for such a plane?" asked Louise, incredulously. "It would cost thousands of dollars."

"Yes, I know. I talked to Daddy this morning, and if he decides to let me try it, he won't mind the money. But don't breathe a word of this to anybody! I wouldn't want Miss Hulbert to hear of it; she'd only make all manner of fun of us."

"Suppose she should get that prize," remarked Louise. "Can you imagine her in Paris, Linda? Representing American Girlhood! Why, it might start a war with the French!"

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"Now, Lou, you're exaggerating too much. She isn't as disagreeable as all that."

"She is. She's even worse. But of course I won't say a word about our plan, except to mother and dad. And maybe I won't work hard at school, to get my own license!"

"That's the spirit!" approved Linda, as she stopped the car at her chum's house.

"Linda! Look how low that plane's flying!" exclaimed the other, as the girls got out of the car. "And look at the way she's tilting!"

"The pilot must be crazy! Why, that's only a few hundred feet up. Come on, Lou, something is likely to happen! Let's get into the house."

Instinctively Linda pushed Louise towards the porch, but with a quick glance about, she saw her chum's brother in the next yard, playing with a group of children. Unmindful of her own danger, and the velvet dress she was wearing under her lovely fall coat, she dashed over the hedge and

dragged the children into the house.

Nothing happened, however; when she came outside she noticed that the plane was climbing again. With a sigh of relief she went back to Louise.

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"That was our friend Miss Hulbert," announced the latter, scornfully. "Doing some stunts for our benefit."

"No! Not really?"

"Absolutely. She waved to me!"

"She certainly doesn't show much judgment. Besides, it's unlawful."

"Let's sue her!"

"Now, Lou! You are positively vindictive. And all because she made fun of my flying." But Linda gave her chum a hug; it was so comforting to feel her entire loyalty.

"All right, then let's forget her.... Can you stay for dinner, Linda?"

"No thank you, Lou—I'm afraid not. Daddy's home, and he may leave any minute. You know I told you he's in business now in New York."

"Yes, it seems funny, doesn't it? I never could imagine your father in business. What do you suppose made him do that?"

"Restlessness, I think, and the fact that he can't ride any more. Besides, he told me the ranch doesn't pay, so I guess he has to try something else."

"Well, if you will have airplanes, and expensive courses——" teased Louise.

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"Oh, but just wait! We'll be ten-thousand-dollar-a-year women when we finish our education, Lou. It's going to be a good investment."

"I certainly hope so.... Well, so long. I'll call you up tomorrow and we'll go shopping for our overalls."

Linda drove off, and arrived just in time for dinner. Her aunt, it seemed, had been impatiently awaiting her return, for she had learned from Linda's father that he had given his consent to the ground school course.

"I simply can't understand you, Linda," she said when they were at the table. "When you could be having the time of your life this winter! With all the gayety here—and even this new flying club. Why you should want to go off to a school where you will have to mess up your hands with grease and machinery, and practically live in overalls, is beyond me."

"I know, Aunt Emily—I guess I do seem queer. But to me it's just the *only* thing to do. There's something inside me that makes me feel as if nothing else is so important—for me." Her eyes shone with ardor.

Mr. Carlton watched her admiringly.

"There isn't anything so great in this world," he said slowly, "as a splendid enthusiasm—a purpose in life. If I were a fairy god-mother, and could give a child only one gift, it would be that. Emily, we should bow down before it in admiration, and thank Heaven that Linda is so different from most of the young people today—still in their teens and bored with life."

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"Oh, thank you, Daddy!" cried the girl. How wonderful it was to be understood!

"But imagine having her away from home all winter!" moaned Miss Carlton. "Or do you think I should close this house and go and board in St. Louis?"

"No, Emily, that won't be necessary," replied Mr. Carlton. "It would be a shame to take you away from your friends. Besides, Linda will have her Arrow. I see no reason why she shouldn't fly home every week-end, if she isn't too tired, or too busy."

"Yes, that will be lots nicer," agreed Linda. "Because then we'll have real Thanksgiving and Christmas just the same as ever. Can you picture those holidays in a boarding-house?"

Miss Carlton looked relieved, but she still disliked the whole idea. She raised another objection.

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"Think of Linda alone in a big city like St. Louis," she said. "She's too young——"

"I'm eighteen now," Linda hastened to remind her. "I couldn't try to qualify for a transport license if I weren't. Besides, I won't be alone, and I won't be in a big city. The school is quite far out of St. Louis, and Louise expects to go with me."

"Well, that is better, I must say," admitted her aunt, rather grudgingly.

"And you could go out with the girls, Emily," suggested her brother, "and see that they are established in some nice home, with a motherly woman who will look after them. I think the Y. W. C. A.'s keep lists like that, of eminently respectable people, who need to take boarders."

"That is a good idea."

"Then it's all settled?" asked Linda, excitedly. "When can I start?"

"Next week, I guess," replied her father. "If that is convenient to you, Emily."

So, with no further opposition, Linda set herself to the pleasant task of getting ready. The next day she accompanied her father to the bank where he deposited the bonds in a safety-deposit box in her name, and opened an account for her. One of these thousand-dollar bonds she reluctantly

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turned over to Kitty, for although she liked the idea of a flying club for Spring City, she wondered whether she weren't helping to finance her rival on that trip from New York to Paris. But with Harry Smith on the finance committee, she felt somehow safe. He would not willingly allow the club to spend its money for such purposes.

By the tenth of October, everything was in readiness, for Ted Mackay had secured application blanks and mailed them to the girls, and promised to be on hand when they arrived at the school. So, with their suit-cases stuffed with overalls and flyers' suits, they stepped into the Arrow and took off.

The day was so lovely and the country so beautiful that more than once Linda regretted the fact that her aunt had insisted upon going by train. It would have been such a wonderful chance to show her how safe, yet how fascinating air travel could be. Without the faintest disturbance they flew straight to the school where Ted Mackay had also made arrangements for them to keep the Arrow.

He was the first person they saw when Linda brought the plane down. He was standing there near a hangar, his helmet off, his red hair shining in the sunlight, and grinning at them delightedly. Beside him was an older man, probably one of the instructors.

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As soon as the girls got out of the cockpit, he was beside them, introducing his companion to them.

"This is Mr. Eckers," he said. "He is crazy to meet two girls who want to be mechanics. He never heard of one before."

"Yet we're quite human," laughed Louise. "Almost normal, I think."

"Well, you see," explained Eckers, "we have several young ladies here who are studying to be pilots—even commercial and transport pilots—but we never had a mechanic of your sex before. But that's no reason why you shouldn't succeed."

"I'm not so good myself," remarked Louise. "And I may not take that course after all, because I'm not even any kind of pilot yet. But I'd like to see a man who knows more about the inside of his car than Miss Carlton does. She takes it apart as easily as most girls make fudge."

"Oh, Lou——" protested Linda, blushing, but Ted changed the subject by asking them about their trip.

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After a few preliminaries, such as going into the office and meeting the secretary and a couple of the other instructors, and signing up for their doctor's examination, the girls bade Ted good-by, and took a taxi for the station where they were to meet Miss Carlton.

It was amusing to find that the train was late, whereas they had bettered their own schedule in the airplane. It arrived at last, however, and Miss Carlton hurried anxiously forward, as usual expecting that something had probably happened to her niece. She was relieved to find both girls well and happy.

"We might as well all go to a hotel tonight," she suggested, "and have a good dinner, and take in a picture afterwards. There can't be any rush about your finding your boarding-house, is there?"

"Only that we begin work tomorrow," replied Linda. "We must be there at nine o'clock for our examinations."

"My, but you are in a hurry!" the older woman remarked. "When I was a girl, fun always came first."

"But it is all going to be fun, Aunt Emily!"

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"Still, we might as well have the dinner, and take in an early show," put in Louise. "Miss Carlton would rather stay over night, anyway, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, of course. And suppose I look up the boarding-house tomorrow, while you're at school. You'd trust to my judgment?"

"Oh, Auntie, we'd be delighted!" cried Linda, giving her hand a squeeze. "If you don't mind, it would save us a lot of time!"

The evening, therefore, was spent just as Miss Carlton desired, dining at the best hotel in St. Louis, going afterwards to the most expensive theater in a taxi. But the girls got to bed early, and left a call for seven o'clock the following morning.

The school was so much bigger, so much more organized than the little one at Spring City that Linda felt lost at first. After their examinations they made out a roster with one of the instructors, and here they decided to part.

Louise felt that after all, she wasn't particularly fitted to become a mechanic, and she would rather spend her time actually flying, so that perhaps by the end of the term she might win a limited commercial license. Linda, who had always kept an air-log with the Pursuit—a record of her flights and the number of hours in the air—would not need much more time to complete her two hundred hours solo flying that was part of a transport pilot's requirements. And while Louise was taking only the general course about airplanes, Linda would study plane structure and rigging, control systems, motors, and everything that had to do with the repair of aircraft. It was a big program; the thought of it was breathtaking. But, as Linda's instructor informed her, she would go step by step, advancing each day a little.

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After that the days flew by all too quickly. The girls liked the house where Miss Carlton had

established them, a neat little cottage that was owned by a widow, who lived alone with her two children, and it was near enough to the school for them to walk to and from it each day. They would rise early, eat a hearty breakfast and take their lunch with them, remaining away all day. After supper they were usually too tired to go anywhere; they would sit around the open fireplace in the living-room with the family, Louise reading a novel, Linda continually poring over some book about aviation. Once or twice Ted Mackay flew over to see them, and took them to dinner and to a show, usually bringing one of his friends with him. But they were too much absorbed to be lonely.

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Before they scarcely realized it, the Thanksgiving holiday was upon them, and, leaving their overalls and their flyers' suits at St. Louis, they took off in the Arrow for their first visit back to Spring City.

CHAPTER V

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Thanksgiving

In the six weeks that had passed since Linda and Louise left for the ground school, a great deal had happened at Spring City. Kitty and Ralph Clavinger drove over to see Linda the afternoon that she arrived—the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, to tell her all the news.

"Are you a pilot yet, Kitty?" asked Linda, as soon as she had kissed the girl and shaken hands with her brother.

"No, not yet. So far only some of the boys have passed the exam—and Dot Crowley. Dot can do anything, you know. But I'm getting along fine."

"Lou has her private pilot's license," announced Linda proudly. "But do sit down and tell me all about the club."

"There's to be a dance there tomorrow night," replied Kitty, sinking into a chair. "That's the first thing I have to tell you."

"And before the phone has a chance to ring, I want you to promise to go with me," urged Ralph.

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"Why, certainly," agreed Linda. Everything was delightful—and oh, it was so good to be home! "Thanks a lot, Ralph.... But tell me, Kitty, is the club-house all done?"

"Yes. We have seventy-six members, and the most adorable club-house. Oh, nothing pretentious, like the Country Club, but we like it a lot. And we have one plane—a Gypsy Moth. Lieutenant Hulbert flies over twice a week to give the lessons."

"Did seventy-six people actually buy thousand-dollar bonds?" inquired Linda, incredulously. She couldn't believe there was all that wealth in Spring City, and the surrounding country.

"No. Only about twenty. We couldn't keep to that rule. The people who bought the bonds are on the Board of Directors. We let members in for their dues—a hundred dollars a year."

"And do I have to fork out another hundred?" asked Linda, wearily. She had been spending so much money already; she couldn't begin to live on the interest from her father's gift. Of course she expected to use the principal for her course, but she didn't want it to vanish for trifles.

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"I'm afraid you'll have to," said Kitty.

"Well, I'll think it over," replied Linda, slowly. It was amazing, in the few weeks that she had had charge of her own money, what a business woman she had become. "I may not join this year. My expenses are pretty heavy."

"Why, Linda!" Kitty laid her hand affectionately upon her friend's arm. "Forgive me if I seem to pry—but—but—your father isn't having money troubles, is he!"

"Oh, no. It's only that I am running my own expenses now, and I don't want to waste money on things that won't do me any good. While I'm away from home it seems sort of foolish to belong to that club, when I have my own Arrow to fly. Especially now that you have enough members, and really don't need me.... I'd rather sell my bond."

"I don't know whether you could sell it now," said Kitty. "Though of course I'll ask Bess—Bess Hulbert, our treasurer, you remember—when she flies back this afternoon. She has our Moth up at Lake Michigan now."

Linda raised her eyebrows. So this was the way the club was run—for Miss Hulbert's convenience!

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"Doesn't she have her own plane any more?" she demanded.

"No. She smashed it. It wasn't any good anyhow. And she might as well use the Moth, because the club members only need it two days a week."

That arrangement didn't seem fair to Linda, for the licensed pilots—Dot and Joe and Harry and Ralph—could fly now whenever they wanted.

Noticing that Linda was not at all pleased with the way things were going, Ralph immediately

made her an offer.

"I'll be glad to buy your bond, Linda," he said, "if nobody else wants it. No reason why you should hang on to it if it's no use to you."

"That's awfully kind, Ralph. I'll think it over, and let you know tomorrow night at the dance."

At this moment Miss Carlton entered, smiling genially because Linda was home with her again, and because these nice, socially prominent young people were calling upon her niece immediately. She greeted Ralph and Kitty cordially, and rang the bell for tea.

Nothing more was said of the club during the call, but as soon as the guests had left, Miss Carlton questioned her niece about their earlier conversation. [Pg 70]

"I couldn't help hearing you, dear, and I couldn't imagine what made you suggest a thing like dropping out of that flying club. Why, it's the only thing about flying that I ever heartily approved of."

"I don't like the way the whole thing is run, Aunt Emily. It's too much Hulbert. Did you know, by the way, that Louise refused to buy a bond?"

"No, I didn't. But maybe her father didn't have the money at the time."

"It wasn't that. She never even asked him! She said it was all too unbusinesslike—bossed just like politics! She hates Bess Hulbert."

"Louise always did have strong likes and dislikes.... Of course, I don't know anything about the Hulberts, but I do know the Claverings, and anybody that they like must be all right. Besides, your money is safe with Mr. Clavering in back of the club. And you don't need it now for anything."

Linda smiled to herself; she still had said nothing to her aunt of her dream of flying across the Atlantic. The older woman could not possibly know how important every dollar would be to her next spring. [Pg 71]

But Bess Hulbert was not so unsuspecting. She had returned from her trip while Kitty and Ralph were at Carlton's, and waited in the girl's bedroom for the former to return. While Kitty dressed for dinner, she told her about her call.

The very moment that Bess heard that Linda wanted to sell her bond, she jumped to the conclusion that the other girl was determined to try for that twenty-five thousand dollar prize. Nor was the idea at all pleasant to her. Much as she might belittle Linda's aviation ability in public, she was secretly afraid of her as a rival. The very fact that she took almost a year of her life to study at a ground school, that she meant to qualify as a commercial—perhaps even a transport—pilot, neither of which Bess was, showed how seriously Linda must be going into aviation.

No, Bess did not doubt that Linda was saving her money for this purpose, if she needed that thousand dollars. Fortunate girl, to be able to raise the money thus easily! At the moment, Bess saw no way for her to buy a plane herself, and compete. The club refused to finance her—unless Mr. Clavering would personally back her up. But, worse the luck, that gentleman didn't seem to care for her at all! Probably he was afraid Kitty would marry her brother; in Mr. Clavering's eyes, no poor young man was worthy of the beautiful heiress. [Pg 72]

While these thoughts raced through her mind, she had been listening with only half attention to Kitty's prattle about the dance. Suddenly she interrupted.

"I think I'd better go back to the hotel, Kit," she said. "I couldn't stay to dinner in this costume."

"You could wear one of my dresses," suggested her hostess.

Bess laughed. "Too small, I'm afraid. It's awfully sweet of you to ask me to stay, but I really need some rest—after that trip."

"But Bess!" protested Kitty. "Some of the crowd are coming over tonight—"

"I'll see them tomorrow, at the dance—maybe. Tell them I thank them for the Moth, and that I filled her with gas, and paid for her inspection." She started towards the door.

"Will you come here and go to the dance with us?"

"Maybe.... I'll let you know tomorrow.... So long, dear!" [Pg 73]

She closed the door, and ran down the steps, knowing that she had not the slightest intention of going to that dance. If Ralph Clavering had asked her, instead of Kitty, that would have been a different matter. But he had invited Linda Carlton! It seemed as if that snip of a girl was going to take everything she, Bess Hulbert, wanted. It was ridiculous! She hated Linda. She even went so far as to wonder whether that were her real name. It would be just like a romantic kid like that to persuade her father to change her Christian name in imitation of a hero like Lindbergh.

Bess hurried back to her hotel, conscious now of the fact that she must do some serious thinking, and that she must do it quickly. She just had to raise some money—or rather, a lot of money! She could never save enough from any foolish little job she might take now. No, she would have to make some, as business men do! If she didn't hurry, Linda Carlton would soon have captured that prize.

"Linda Carlton!" she kept repeating, scornfully. "Pampered daughter of a rich man! It isn't fair! All she has to do is ask her 'Daddy' for thousands of dollars, and he comes across!" [Pg 74]

"Why haven't I a 'Daddy' like that?" Her eyes narrowed with bitterness. "Well, I suppose I can't help that, but, by heck, I'll be the 'Daddy' myself! Nothing to prevent my going into business too!"

A smile crept over her face, as she saw what looked like a solution to her problem, and she settled down into her chair in her hotel bedroom to work over maps and plans.

Meanwhile Linda entertained no such deep or unpleasant thoughts. It was so nice to be home, that she made up her mind that she wasn't going to worry about a single thing while she was there. Her aunt had bought her some charming new dresses, for the game, for the Thanksgiving dance, for a luncheon Dot Crowley was giving in her honor on Saturday. The whole holiday promised to be so enjoyable, so relaxing after the hard days at school, where she had to concentrate every second upon what she was doing, that she just reveled in the careless freedom of the coming four days. She had learned the secret that many grown people have yet to discover; that good times are sweeter after hard work, just as a delicious dinner tastes far better to the athlete than to the afternoon bridge player.

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To add to it all, Mr. Carlton arrived from New York on Thanksgiving day, in plenty of time for dinner. Linda could hardly contain her joy.

"Daddy, are you as happy in your new work as I am in mine?" she asked him, when they were seated at the table, and he was carving the turkey.

"Nobody could be as happy as you are, Linda!" he replied, smiling at his daughter's radiant face. "But I like mine. It's something entirely new to me—and rather fascinating. Besides, it's going well; the stores have practically bought out my supply, and we have to send our agent to Canada for more, in order to fill our Christmas orders."

After dinner he opened his suit-case and took out a lovely bureau-scarf, different from anything Linda had ever seen, so fine that it seemed as if a silkworm, rather than a human being, must have made it. This he presented to Linda, at the same time giving his sister a tea-table cloth of the same exquisite work.

"Oh, I adore it!" cried Linda, delightedly, thinking of her little room in St. Louis, and how the scarf would add to its daintiness. "How the girls will envy me!"

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"Will you start a trousseau with it?" asked her aunt, hopefully.

"No, Aunt Emily. I may never get married, and I want to enjoy it now. Things like this help when you're away from home."

Her father pinched her ear, teasingly.

"And why not get married?" he inquired.

"The same old reason: I'm too busy."

He laughed. "And to think," he remarked, "how worried I was last summer about that Mackay boy!"

"Ted's all right," was Linda's comment. "But I never did want to marry him—only to have him teach me to fly! He never cared for me that way either—I just happened to be the first girl he had ever met who was interested seriously in aviation.... No, if he cares for anybody, it's Lou."

"Louise!" repeated Miss Carlton, in amazement. Yet she was relieved; she liked red-headed Ted, but he was not socially prominent, and she longed to have Linda make what the world terms "a good match."

"Yes. Oh, nothing is settled, or anything. But whenever Ted flies over to see us, he brings a boy friend for me."

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"And you're going to the dance tonight with Ralph Clavering," was Miss Carlton's satisfied comment.

"Yes, but there's nothing to that, either, Aunt Emily!" protested Linda. And, changing the subject she began to tell her father all about the ground school, and talked of nothing else until it was time to dress for the dance.

Ralph came for Linda about nine o'clock, and, dressed in one of her pretty new gowns, she stepped into his machine.

"What a glorious night it is, Ralph!" she exclaimed, gazing up at the stars. "It's lovely enough to fly."

The young man frowned as he put his foot on the self-starter.

"I did think of it, Linda. Thought how pleased you'd be if I could take you for a ride in the Moth. But as usual—Bess Hulbert got it first!"

"You mean she has the Club's plane again?" demanded his companion. "She only brought it back yesterday."

"I know. It's positively sickening the way she grabs it. Yet her brother is a decent sort. If it weren't for him, I'd have raised a row before this."

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"Where is she going now?"

"Canada, I believe. On the trail of some job. Well, I hope she gets it. Then maybe we won't see her for a while."

"Or the Moth either, I fear!" added Linda. Then noticing that Ralph was extremely irritated about the whole thing, she resolved to make him forget it and have a good time.

The dance was an enjoyable affair—all the more so because it lacked the formality of the Country Club functions. Only the members were present, and the crude roughness of the club-house, with its plastered walls, its long wooden window-seats, its huge fireplace, made everybody feel free and easy. Moreover Linda and Louise found themselves honored guests; everybody made a fuss over them, as if already they had proved themselves heroines. The men were insistent that neither of them dance more than once about the room without an interruption, and the other girls applauded their popularity without the slightest trace of envy. By the end of the evening even Ralph was supremely happy.

The functions that followed during the next three days—the luncheon of Dot's, the dinner-party of Louise's mother, the out-door picnic around a camp fire—were increasingly enjoyable, so that when Sunday came at last, Linda and Louise stepped into the Arrow with a feeling of regret that they must say good-by to all these good friends until Christmas. [Pg 79]

CHAPTER VI

[Pg 80]

Bad News

The next four weeks at the school opened an entirely new chapter in Linda Carlton's life. Cold weather flying! Figuring on drops in temperature, high winds, sleet and snow! Using instruments as she had never used them before. Practicing landing her plane in small spaces, marked off by the instructor. Learning to repair simple injuries like cuts in the wings and installing new propellers. Never had anything been so fascinating; sometimes, late in the afternoons after regular school hours, she would stay on with Eckers, watching him inspect a motor, or going up in the air with him on a test flight, till she would forget all about supper. By the time the holidays had arrived, he told her he would be willing to have her do some testing herself.

Usually as she sat there, watching him intently, and now and then performing some simple service, she would be absolutely quiet. But sometimes she talked of the future, of her hope of securing a good job in aviation, of her dream of flying the Atlantic. [Pg 81]

Home, social life—even family life—at Spring City seemed far away from her now. It was with a start that she suddenly realized it was December twentieth, the first day of vacation, when she and Louise were expected home. And they had not even bought a Christmas card!

Only once in those four weeks had she met with the slightest accident. It happened early in the month, one afternoon when, flying a school plane, a sudden shower, a veritable cloudburst, came up, and one of her cylinders cut out. She happened to be rather low—only a few hundred feet above the ground—so it was necessary for her to land. Cutting the throttle, she came down into a soft muddy swamp. The wheels touched the oozy ground, the plane ran a few feet and nosed over. But nothing serious happened; the propeller was badly cracked, and both Linda and the plane covered with mud, but she stepped out laughing. Minor accidents like that are all in the day's work!

As each succeeding day had passed, she was gaining confidence in her ability to cope with any sort of accident. And now, flying home to Spring City in the clear morning sunlight seemed only like so much play. She suggested that she turn the controls over to Louise, to add to the latter's flying hours. [Pg 82]

They came down in the field behind Linda's house, but Louise refused to stop to go inside with her chum.

"I can run home across the back field by the time you'd have the car out of the garage," she said. "Glad I didn't bring a suit-case—I've nothing to carry but this hand-bag.... So you go on in to your aunt. She's probably waiting breathlessly to see how many broken limbs you have!"

Linda laughed: it was true that Miss Carlton expected an injury every time anyone rode in an airplane. So she hurried into the house through the back door, and skipped into the library where she knew her Aunt Emily would be waiting.

But she came upon a surprise. Her father was standing beside the table, nervously fingering a magazine. Linda knew in a glance that something was wrong; he smiled at her in a queer manner as he kissed her, and Miss Carlton's expression was like a person's at a funeral. What were they both trying to hide? [Pg 83]

She looked questioningly at her aunt.

"We can't keep anything from you, can we, Linda?" remarked the latter.

"Please tell me what is wrong, Aunt Emily!"

"Nothing so dreadful. Only—business. I'll let your father tell you while I go to look after the dinner.... You're all right, dear? No accidents?"

"Just fine!" replied Linda, her eyes still sparkling from the fun of flying in that cold, clear weather.

Miss Carlton left the room, and her brother began almost immediately, without even sitting down.

"I guess I never should have tried going into a new business at my age," he remarked, almost bitterly. "It looked like a good thing, though—a novel thing. But conditions arose that I could never have foreseen. I'm—I'm going to be bankrupt, Linda, I'm afraid—unless something happens in the next month."

"Bankrupt!" repeated his daughter, in amazement. "But Daddy, why?"

"I'm afraid you wouldn't understand, dear—or rather, it's no use burdening you with unnecessary worries. Your Aunt Emily is willing for me to sell this house, to raise some money. I'm only too thankful that you won't have to give up your school—that that's all paid for, and I put the money aside for you."

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"But Daddy, you can have that back again—or most of it! So long as the course is paid for in advance, I'll have very few expenses till the end of the term. Only my board—I don't even need clothes."

She had spoken impulsively, but she knew as she said this, that it meant death to her hopes of flying the Atlantic. Yet she did not hesitate; her father's happiness was worth all the prizes and fame in the world.

"And how would you live, after you finish at the school?" he asked. "It's awfully generous of you, dear, but I don't see how I could take it."

"I'm going to get a job—flying. I intended to, anyhow, once I have a commercial pilot's license. Oh, Daddy, please!"

"Well, maybe I will, if I can't see my way clear any other way. But of course it will be only a loan. That is, if the business can be saved." He had forgotten her dream of flying the Atlantic, and she did not remind him.

"I wish you would tell me just what happened," she urged. "I'm sure I can understand."

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"Of course I will," he agreed, realizing her genuine sympathy and interest. "Though there is a mystery about it that even I can't understand."

"I sold all my first order to the stores in New York and Philadelphia and Chicago, as I told you at Thanksgiving, and I had a lot more orders. I even took on new salesmen for other cities, and I sent my agent up to Canada, to the convent, to rush me a new supply. I even wrote ahead to ask the Mother Superior to employ some poor women in the village, and teach them the needle-work—at my expense."

"Yesterday the blow came. My agent wired that all the work had been sold to someone else—someone who paid more than I did!"

"But how could they, Daddy?" demanded Linda. "Didn't they promise you?"

"Well, not exactly. You see I didn't know how well the thing would take, so I didn't have any actual contract. Besides, the Mother Superior probably never noticed the agent—or she may have been led to believe he was one of my men. Anyway, she sold everything. And here is the queer part of the story:

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"The stores which bought from me became impatient when I didn't refill their orders, and bought from this other man *at a lower price!* He paid more for the lace-work, and sells it for less!"

It was certainly baffling; Linda tried hard to see it from every angle.

"Had you marked the goods too high, Daddy?" she asked. "I mean so high that this other man could afford to sell for less, and still make money?"

"No, I hadn't. I was taking a very small profit, because I was afraid to make the work too expensive, for fear it wouldn't sell. And there's a big tax to pay, besides, for bringing it into the United States from Canada. No, every way I figure it out, this man must be losing money."

Suddenly he sighed, and dropped into a chair, as if he were thoroughly beaten.

"So you see, dear, there's nothing I can do," he concluded. "It would be folly for me to go on, because even if the convent would sell to me again, I would have to pay this new high price—and lose more money. The best thing I can do is pay my debts—sublet my offices, if I can, for unfortunately I took a long term lease—and get out. And be thankful I haven't lost more!"

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"But Daddy, aren't you going to even try to solve the mystery?" asked Linda, her eyes blazing with anger. "Somebody is just planning to kick you out, taking a loss for a few months, so as to get the business! It can't last. Why not take my money and go on—at a loss—for a while?"

"But I couldn't hold out as long as he could. He probably has a lot more capital than I have, and could afford to play a losing game for a long while, until he had wiped me out, and gotten hold of the trade for himself. He's probably begun already to build up a trade all over the country, while so far I've only handled some of eastern cities—as far as Chicago. No, Daughter, I'm afraid I've made a mistake—I'm not the sort of fellow for cut-throat competition, as they all practice in business today."

"Hold on for a little while longer, Daddy, and—investigate!" she urged.

"And use up all your money?"

"Yes. Why not?"

He placed his hand upon hers, and stroked it gently. Then he suddenly remembered her proposed flight over the ocean, and stopped: [Pg 88]

"But Linda, isn't it your greatest hope to fly the Atlantic?" he asked.

She choked a little, but she answered resolutely.

"I think I'll give that up. There are other women flyers so much better and so much more experienced than I am, that they'll be sure to do it next spring."

He could not know how valiantly she was giving up her greatest aspiration.

"Well, if that's the case," he said, "perhaps I will borrow some of your money, and try to go on. But we will sell this house anyway, and take an apartment. Your Aunt Emily says it's too big for her now.... But stop thinking about my troubles, dear, and go find out about your engagements for the holidays. There's a pile of mail on your desk waiting for you."

Linda dashed off, in the pretense of being interested in her mail, but in reality to get control of herself, to steel herself to the great sacrifice she had just made. She mustn't let her father see how terribly disappointed she was! She mustn't tell him how they had praised her work at the school, how she ranked far above most of the young men who were studying! She must get hold of Louise, and stop her from talking. [Pg 89]

Oh, the pain of going back to school, and telling her instructor—Mr. Eckers, who was so much interested in her project that he kept it constantly in mind, the better to prepare her for every emergency that might arise when the time came for the momentous trip! The tears came to her eyes, but she fought them back. There was no good in sacrifice, if one had to be a martyr about it. No; she must pretend to be perfectly satisfied over the affair.

She lay on her bed, her head buried in her pillow, fighting for control of herself. The unopened invitations lay in a tumbled pile beside her.

But it suddenly dawned upon her that her aunt might come in at any moment. She mustn't let her guess anything!

Then, like a refuge in a storm, she again thought of Louise. She would go to her right away. With her chum there would be no need of acting. And though Louise would be almost as disappointed as Linda was herself, yet the sympathy would help.

So she hurried and changed from her flying suit into a street dress, and hiding her invitations under her pillow so that her aunt wouldn't wonder at her lack of interest, she skipped lightly down the stairs, and, calling good-by to her aunt, ran out to the garage for her little car. [Pg 90]

She found her chum lying luxuriously on her bed, sipping tea and reading her mail. Impulsively Linda threw her arms about her, and started to cry. It was such a relief to weep!

"Darling!" cried Louise, in genuine alarm. "What is the matter? Is your father sick—or hurt?"

"No, no," sobbed Linda. "Oh, Lou—it's good to cry!"

"Good to cry!" repeated the other girl in utter amazement. Less than an hour ago she had left her in the best of spirits. Besides, it was a rare thing to see Linda in tears.

"Yes. I can't cry at home. Listen...."

And she told the story of her father's failure.

"So it means giving up our flight—for the prize!" she concluded.

"And let Bess Hulbert win!" added Louise, bitterly. "Not without a struggle, you can make sure of that!"

"But what can we do, Lou?" [Pg 91]

"I don't know.... Oh, if Dad only had a lot of money! But I'm sure everything he has is tied up in his business.... Linda, why aren't we rich like Kitty Clavering?"

"Yes, why aren't we? I never cared much before. I always thought we had enough to be happy."

"So we did. Till something like this comes along.... We might ask the Flying Club to back us."

Linda only smiled.

"If they can back anybody, it will be Miss Hulbert. But they can't, unless Mr. Clavering does it personally."

"Well, we'll just have to think up some plan. Maybe the school——"

"No, that's no hope, because every flyer there wants backing for something, some race, or some enterprise. No, that's out."

"Just the same, we're not giving up yet!" announced Louise, with determination. "Your father may pull out, or somebody may stop us on the street and take such a fancy to one of us——"

"Lou, you've been reading dime novels!" teased Linda. "There are too many good flyers today—good women flyers, too—for anybody to do that now." [Pg 92]

"True. But there must be something—some way——"

"If we could only help Daddy in some way," mused Linda. "Find out who the man is who is trying to kill his business, and persuade him to take Daddy into partnership."

"Now you're on the track, Linda!" cried the other girl, enthusiastically. "We'll do that very thing! Hunt the mystery! Why, Linda, we've got over two weeks, and a plane and two cars! Who'd want more?"

"Wonderful! And we don't want to go to all these parties and dances anyhow, feeling the way we do!"

"Righto!"

The girls hugged each other in their ecstasy, and swayed back and forth happily. Then Louise grabbed her invitations, and began to make a list.

"We'll go over our mail and decline everything that comes after Christmas day," she said, in a business-like manner.

"And tomorrow morning we'll go to the stores and buy some of this stuff, and get the name of the dealer." [Pg 93]

"Then fly to Montreal in his pursuit, if necessary!"

"In our 'Pursuit,'" corrected Linda.

CHAPTER VII

[Pg 94]

On the Trail

Although Linda and Louise were both greatly excited about their plan, they decided to keep it a secret. Once they disclosed it, they would probably meet with all sorts of opposition; Mr. Carlton would consider it foolish, his sister and Mrs. Haydock, dangerous.

So Linda went home and opened her invitations, accepting those that were scheduled for before Christmas, and took an active interest in her aunt's preparations for the great day. There was a small afternoon bridge at Sue's which she could attend, and a moonlight skating party which Dot had planned for December twenty-third, and of course she could go to the big Christmas Eve dance at the Country Club with Ralph Clavering.

Nor was her father's misfortune mentioned again after her first afternoon at home. Mr. Carlton had apparently made his decisions, and wanted his daughter and his sister to forget his troubles in their enjoyment of the holidays. Everything went on as it had at all other Christmas seasons; even the Arrow remained unmolested in its hangar, and Louise and Linda drove their cars. [Pg 95]

It was on one of their shopping tours that they were able to take the first step in carrying out their enterprise. On the twenty-third of December they motored to Columbus and visited the city's largest department store.

Going straight to the linen counter, Louise asked to see a handkerchief like the one Linda was carrying, which she showed to the saleswoman.

"Seven dollars!" she repeated, as she examined it. "I'd have to put it in my trousseau at that rate. And then suppose I never got married!"

"You will," returned Linda, calmly. "But even if you don't, you're sure to be a bridesmaid some time. You could carry it then."

"Your bridesmaid?"

"If I ever need one. Or rather, my maid-of-honor."

The saleswoman coughed irritably; she wanted to hurry the purchase.

"It's the last one we have, Miss," she said. "So if you like it, you had better take it." [Pg 96]

Her words recalled to Louise the purpose of their visit.

"The last one? They're hard to get, then?" she inquired.

"Yes. They are made by French women, I believe—in a convent."

Louise suppressed a smile by raising her eyebrows.

"Imported?"

"I think so. We get them through a New York firm."

"What is the name of the firm?" asked Linda, innocently.

"That I don't know. But if you care to wait, I'll ask the buyer."

"Yes," agreed Louise. "I'll take the handkerchief if you find out the name of the firm."

The saleswoman looked rather puzzled at their interest in the name, but she thought they wanted to make sure their purchase was not an imitation, and she hurried off to comply with the request. In a couple of minutes she returned with the information.

"The name is Carwein," she said, as she handed Louise her package. "J. W. Carwein & Co., Importers, New York City." [Pg 97]

Linda carefully made note of the fact in her tiny shopping book.

"So our first stop is New York," remarked Louise, as they left the store and went to the garage where they had parked her roadster. "Of course we fly?"

"Naturally. We haven't time for any slower conveyance. Besides, we may need the Arrow for further investigation."

"O. K. But Linda, have you considered snow and sleet? Remember, so far we have had very little experience in cold weather."

"I realize all that. But I've been studying conditions about winter flying, you know, and I have a lot of theory. Of course theory isn't practice, as our friend Miss Hulbert would remind us."

"By the way, where is she? She just seems to have dropped out of existence."

"Probably she has the Club's Moth somewhere, visiting her friends!" replied Linda. "I can't say I miss her. Still, it is funny her brother isn't around. He seemed so devoted to Kitty."

"Maybe he asked Kitty to marry him, and she refused." [Pg 98]

"I don't think so. Kitty was so crazy about him at Thanksgiving."

"Well, you never can tell. But that isn't going to worry me," said the other, laughing. "But here is an idea worth taxing your brain with, Linda!"

"Yes."

"I think somebody ought to know just what we're doing, and where we're going, so long as we don't want to give our parents the exact information. It ought to be somebody who could fly to our rescue, if necessary.... I am thinking of Ted Mackay."

Linda nodded, approvingly. Ted was so capable, so dependable, and she knew he would risk his life if need be in an emergency to save them.

"You really think it's necessary?" she asked.

"Maybe not necessary, but prudent. Can't you map out our route to New York tonight, and send him a special-delivery letter? Then we can wire him from New York, if we decide to go on to Canada."

"Yes, that's a fine idea, Lou. Provided, of course, we get Aunt Emily's permission. Daddy leaves Christmas night, and after that I'm under her thumb." [Pg 99]

"I'm going to spring it on my family after Christmas dinner," Louise informed her. "Everybody's in such a good humor then, that they probably won't refuse. Besides, we needn't mention Canada. Just say a flying trip."

"I guess I'll do the same thing. And by the way, Lou, let's wire Nancy Bancroft. You know she made us promise to stay with her whenever we flew to New York."

"An excellent plan!" approved her chum, for she liked the girl—a fellow student at the ground school. How much easier it would be to win the older people's permission if they could visit a friend!

Linda, however, did not wish to tell her father about the flight, for fear he might suspect what she was up to, and forbid her. Accordingly, she waited until almost eleven o'clock on Christmas night to ask her aunt's permission. They were together in the library, Linda idly gazing at the brightly lighted tree, Miss Carlton looking over the pile of cards on the table.

"Here's one from Beatrice Evanston," observed the latter. "Did you send her one, Linda?" [Pg 100]

"I don't believe I did," replied the girl absently. She tapped her fingers nervously. It was difficult to begin.

"Aunt Emily!" she finally blurted out, "Lou and I are planning to go to New York tomorrow, if you are willing."

"Why of course," replied the other, to her niece's surprise. "But that's a long trip, and if it's shopping, you can do almost as well in Columbus. Or is it a house-party?"

"Neither. Though we are going to stay all night with a girl from school who lives there. But—we're flying."

"Flying? Oh, Linda, please don't! We're in for a snowstorm, I'm perfectly sure. I do wish you would put that plane away for the winter!"

"I can't do that, Aunt Emily. A real pilot has to fly in all kinds of weather. I really need the experience, and the Pursuit is in fine shape."

Suddenly her aunt put down the cards she was fingering and frowned.

"You can't, dear! You'd miss the Evanstons' ball, Beatrice's coming-out party. Why, it's the biggest thing in Spring City—after Kitty's!"

"But I had already declined that invitation," Linda stated coolly. [Pg 101]

"You didn't? Oh, Linda, you wouldn't!"

"But I did. The day I got home. Louise and I both did. We wanted to reserve this whole week—

between Christmas and New Year's—for ourselves, so we turned down everything."

Miss Carlton looked absolutely aghast.

"I never heard of anything so queer!" she exclaimed. "When you and Louise see each other every day in the year!"

"But this is different. This is a lark together.... Oh, Auntie, please understand! We loved this last week with you and Daddy and our friends, but this is important to us now. You won't be hurt?"

She came over and sat on the arm of her aunt's chair, her eyes full of pleading.

"Oh, all right, dear," agreed the older woman with resignation. "I suppose it's about as useless to try to keep you out of the air as it would be to keep Lindbergh.... I wish your mother hadn't named you Linda!"

Linda laughed, but she knew that she had won, and, even at this late hour she felt that she must call her chum to tell her the good news.

With sandwiches and hot coffee in their lunch box, and clothing enough to last them for a week, the girls took off the following morning. The air was crisp and cold, but it did not snow. Snug in their leather coats and helmets, they felt ready for any weather. The engine was running smoothly; it was a joy to fly, especially now that they could take turns at the controls. [Pg 102]

In her pocket Linda carried a map which Ted Mackay had sent to her in reply to her letter, so that she found it easy to follow the course he had indicated. Without the slightest deviation, they arrived at their destination late that afternoon.

Leaving the plane to be housed and inspected, the girls made their way across New York to a hotel in the center of the city, where they sent wires to Ted and Miss Carlton and Mrs. Haydock, and changed into street clothing. Then they looked up the firm of Carwein in the telephone book.

"But what shall we say to him?" asked Linda.

"I don't know," admitted Louise.

Impulsively as they had rushed into this plan, they realized that they hadn't an idea how to proceed. [Pg 103]

"Suppose he won't see us!" remarked Louise.

"He probably won't. If we tell the secretary it is private business, she'll think we want to sell him life insurance, or something."

In that strange hotel room, as they sat looking blankly at each other, they knew that they had not thought far enough. Suddenly they were both tired and hungry.

"Let's don't do a thing this afternoon," suggested Louise. "Just call up Nancy Bancroft, and say we'll be out there right away. She's expecting us for dinner, anyhow."

Linda looked immensely relieved.

They found the girl's home without any difficulty, and were welcomed like old friends. Nancy was one of a large family, and the house fairly buzzed with gayety. There were three other guests besides themselves at dinner, and afterwards a dozen more came in for games and for dancing. It was informal and charming; both Linda and Louise would have liked nothing better than to accept Mrs. Bancroft's invitation to stay until school opened. But that would have meant relinquishing their plan, and this they would not do. [Pg 104]

In an interval between dances, Louise drew her chum into the sitting-room where Mr. and Mrs. Bancroft were quietly reading, and asked the former to give them some help on a mystery they were trying to solve.

"Do you happen to know a man named J. W. Carwein—an importer and wholesale dealer in fine linens?" she inquired.

"Why, yes, I know the firm," replied Mr. Bancroft. "I don't know him personally. Why?"

"Well, we want to make an investigation—on the quiet, if possible," explained Louise. "We'd like to find out where and how he's getting hold of a certain kind of very fine lace-work. He's practically smashed Linda's father's business, and we're trying to discover how he did it."

"From his reputation, I don't believe Carwein goes in for underhand dealing like that. If he is, he probably has had one put over on him. He sells only the most expensive things, and his firm has always had a good name. He'd probably tell you right out where he buys the goods."

"But how could we see him?" asked Linda. "Girls can't walk right into an office and demand to see the president!" [Pg 105]

Mr. Bancroft smiled.

"It's been done," he said. "But I don't think it's necessary. I believe you can get the information you want from his secretary. It isn't likely he'd have anything to hide."

Just as simple as that! The girls could hardly believe it was possible, yet next morning, when they put the advice into effect, they found it good.

The secretary informed them that the goods were not imported, that they were made right here in New York state. An agent by the name of Hofstatter had come into the firm's offices and sold them, assuring Mr. Carwein that they were made by a group of French women in the extreme northern part, near the town of Plattsburg. He said he was a traveling man, and that he would

return in three months' time for more orders.

When Louise had repeated this conversation to Linda, they sat looking at each other in despair.

"I'm afraid our trip's been in vain," moaned Louise. "Somebody is imitating the work— somebody right here in New York. Of course they can afford to sell it cheaper than your father—with no tax to pay!"

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Linda's eyes narrowed. She was not convinced.

"There's something fishy about the whole thing!" she said. "Because if this man Hofstatter didn't buy from the Convent, who did? They had nothing left to sell to Daddy!"

"Maybe he lied to Carwein!" exclaimed Louise. "Anybody can see that my handkerchief is exactly like yours."

"Yes! I think this man Hofstatter has smuggled the stuff into the country, avoiding the tax. That's what I believe!"

Louise jumped up energetically. "Now our job is to trap Hofstatter!"

"You mean to try to find him in Plattsburg?"

"I don't believe he's there—Or any lace-makers, either. We might stop and find out—and then go on to Montreal—to the Convent—and try to catch him, or find out something about him there."

"He probably won't be back for a good while, if he has just bought out the supply," remarked Linda, gloomily.

"True," admitted Louise. "But let's fly to Plattsburg anyhow, and investigate. We've gotten along O.K. here in New York. If we can only do as well there!"

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"Well, it's only December twenty-seventh. We have plenty of time before school starts again."

"Now to send Ted a night-letter!" Louise reminded her chum. "New York to Plattsburg—Plattsburg to Montreal—Montreal to the Convent, with the time figured as closely as possible, and a telegram to him each night if we are safe."

"Righto! We'll stay all night at Plattsburg tonight. And we ought to be at the Convent tomorrow—December twenty-eighth."

CHAPTER VIII

[Pg 108]

Eavesdropping

When Linda and Louise came downstairs in their flying suits, ready to start for Plattsburg, they saw it was snowing. Mrs. Bancroft, entering the living-room with a thermos bottle of coffee, immediately assumed that they would stay with her for another day.

"You girls have never flown in a snowstorm, have you?" she asked.

"No, but we have to begin sometime, Mrs. Bancroft," replied Linda, cheerfully. She was anxious to be off; the flight promised to be a wonderful adventure.

"I don't see any reason why you should ever have to fly in bad weather," remarked the older woman. "There are so many beautiful days."

"But when we are commercial pilots, we'll have to," Linda explained. "So we might as well get used to it."

"You don't mean that you expect to take a regular paid position in aviation after you graduate, do you?" she demanded, in amazement.

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"Yes. Rather!"

"You young girls certainly are marvelous! I suppose you'll put the idea into Nancy's head too.... Well, if there's no use urging you to stay, I think you had better make your start. You don't want to risk flying after dark."

"Linda's even done that," boasted Louise.

Hearing the taxi, which was to take them to the airport, they bade a hasty farewell and departed.

"You're not afraid, are you, Linda?" inquired Louise, as they sped across New York City.

"Not a bit! Only I wish we had as good directions for finding Plattsburg as Ted gave us to follow coming here. It makes it so much easier."

"Maybe we'll find a letter or a wire at the airport," surmised Louise.

What they found, however, was far better than either. Standing beside the Arrow, which had been pushed out in readiness for the flight, was Ted Mackay himself, grinning as usual.

"How do you happen to be here, Ted?" cried Louise, as she jumped out of the taxi.

"I was as far east as Washington yesterday," the young man told her. "And I thought it would be nice to see you."

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"Better than nice," laughed Linda. "Most helpful!"

"Come into the hangar where it's warm," advised Ted, "and we'll figure everything out."

As soon as they were within the shelter of the big building, he reached into his pocket and brought out a map.

"This is your best course," he said. "I've indicated a lot of landings, in case you need them—for it will be impossible to see the ground if this snow keeps on, so you must watch your mileage. Perhaps, though, you'll fly into clearer weather as you go north."

"Look out for Lake Champlain, then you'll know you're right. It's probably frozen over now."

He handed Linda the map, together with his Washington address, where he said he would be stationed for several days, and where he would expect their telegrams.

"One tonight from Plattsburg," he reminded them. "One tomorrow from Montreal—after you get back from that Convent. You better stay over a day at Montreal and have your plane inspected. Even at that, you ought to get back to Spring City the day before New Year's."

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"And then we can go to the dance!" exclaimed Louise. "That will delight your Aunt Emily, Linda!"

But Linda was not thinking about social events. Her mind was entirely occupied with her plane and her flight.

"This map is marvelous, Ted," she said, after she had examined it closely. "And how about the Pursuit? Did you give her the once-over yourself? Of course I know the airport made the inspection."

"I did, too. She's absolutely O.K. You have nothing to worry about, except the weather. I want you to make me just one promise, Linda."

"Yes?"

"You won't fly any longer than you have to through sleet and hail. If ice forms on your wings and propeller, you'll have a tough job. Even the old, experienced pilots—Army men—hate it, and avoid it whenever they can. If it starts, make a landing as soon as possible.... Yes, one other thing: When you get to Montreal, make careful inquiries about the location of this Convent—about the land around it, I mean. They can tell you all about it at the airport, and if there isn't a good big space, don't attempt to go there in the Pursuit. Take a taxi or a train."

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"Well, I never had so many instructions in all my life!" laughed Linda. "But I'm going to take them all seriously, Ted, and follow them to the letter."

"We think you're an old peach, Ted!" put in Louise. "We'd never be able to get along without you!"

He smiled and held out his hand. "Good-by," he said. "And good luck!"

The girls taxied along the snow-covered ground and rose into the air, where the gentle, silent flakes of snow were falling all about them. The atmosphere gave them the queerest sensation; they seemed to float suspended in the sky. It was like fairyland, a region apart from the world, and they gazed at it in awe. Then Linda climbed higher, until they were well over the cloud line, and the sun shone and the sky was a deep blue.

On and on they flew, now and then shifting controls—first Linda and then Louise, taking turns sipping their coffee in their intervals of rest. Neither cared to eat. It would be more fun to be terribly hungry and order a grand hot dinner at Plattsburg.

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The landing was difficult, for it was hard to see when they flew lower. But Ted's directions had been so accurate that they found the desired airport, and came down gracefully. Giving their instructions to the attendant, the girls left the plane and taxied to the largest hotel.

"Do you think we ought to change our clothing before we order dinner?" asked Louise. "I'm simply starved."

"So am I. No, don't let's bother. We're dry enough, when we take off these leather coats. Let's see what we can get to eat!"

Since it was neither lunch nor supper time, the clerk seemed somewhat doubtful, but the good-natured headwaiter, smiling at their aviation costumes, said he would see to it at once. He put them into a little alcove just off the lobby, behind some big plants, where they would not be stared at, and served them a delicious hot dinner, cooked especially for them.

How good it tasted! It seemed as if nothing had ever been so satisfying. They enjoyed every mouthful. Indeed, the warmth of the atmosphere and the food made them feel so deeply contented that they did not even talk. A radio was playing in the reception room, and the hum of voices in the lobby seemed distant and soothing.

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But presently, as they were eating a lovely concoction that was called by a French name, and apparently was a sort of glorified fruit pudding, they heard two voices close to them, near and distinct, yet low. They could not see the speakers, but the voices were somehow familiar, and it was not long before they identified them.

"I think you ought to take that Moth back, Sis," insisted the man's voice. "That club may be wanting to use it."

"Calm yourself," returned the girl, haughtily. "You don't suppose any of those spoiled babies would fly in this kind of weather, do you? Besides, I have important business on!"

"Business?"

"Sure. I'm making money, Bob! Get that under your skin. I've got to have it—and I'm getting it."

"So you can fly over the ocean—after that prize?"

"Certainly."

There was silence for a moment, and Louise and Linda looked at each other breathlessly, hardly daring to move lest they reveal their presence. So this was where Miss Hulbert was—on business! They waited, hoping to hear more. [Pg 115]

"Tell me more about your job," urged Lieutenant Hulbert, voicing Linda's and Louise's wish.

"Can't. It isn't a job.... It's business—and it's a secret.... Oh, not so easy, either. I may be killed, or put in prison. But I've got to have money! And you won't get it for me!"

"How can I, Bess?" demanded the young man, irritably. "I can't work any harder than I'm doing now."

"You know well enough what you could do!"

"You mean marry Kitty Clavering?"

"Now you're talking!"

"Well, I won't!"

"Don't you like her? She's not bad—really quite cute-looking, I think. Now if I asked you to propose to either of those two awful girls that think they know all about flying—you know the ones I mean, one of 'em named after Lindbergh—that would be something else again. But I should think any man could stand a harmless little thing like Kitty Clavering, for the sake of all those millions."

It was all Linda and Louise could do to keep from bursting out laughing at Miss Hulbert's description of themselves. But they restrained their desire, for the sake of the fun of hearing more. [Pg 116]

"That's just it!" the unhappy young officer was protesting. "I'm in love with Kitty—too much so to ask her to marry me when I have nothing to offer her."

"You fool!" exclaimed his sister, in utmost contempt.

"Oh, I'll probably ask her, in the end. I won't be able to help myself. I've been staying away from her—sending that other fellow to give the lessons while I was away—but it doesn't help. I'm all the crazier about her.... But get this, Sis—if I ask her, it will be to live on my pay, until I can make more!"

"Then," announced Miss Hulbert, "I have nothing more to say. But mark this, Bob, and remember it, if I come to any accident or disgrace: remember, it is you who shoved me into it!"

"That's utter rot!" he stormed, forgetting to keep his voice low. "Nobody has to get into disgrace, unless they do disgraceful things!"

"Sh!" warned Bess. "You needn't broadcast your feelings and opinions to the world. No use making anybody suspect me, before it's necessary.... Well, so long! If you ever change your mind, you can wire me at the Flying Club, or at my New York apartment. I shan't be here after tonight." [Pg 117]

In another minute they were gone, and Louise and Linda sat staring at each other in silence, too amazed even to speak.

"Poor boy!" were the first words which Linda finally uttered. "To have a sister like that!"

"I'm thinking more about 'poor us'," answered Louise. "From her conversation, I take it that Bess Hulbert is rapidly raising money. Money to fly the Atlantic!"

"So it sounds."

"I'd like to know how she's doing it," mused Louise.

"She said it might bring disgrace," replied Linda, thoughtfully.... "Funny she should be here—in Plattsburg.... Lou, do you suppose she could be 'Mr. Hofstatter'—or rather, Mr. Hofstatter's employer?"

"That's an idea, Linda!" cried Louise, her eyes flashing with excitement. "Only it seems too impossible. How could she have gotten word of your father's business?" [Pg 118]

Linda was silent for a moment.

"Through me," she announced, finally. "Remember the day I showed my handkerchief to the girls, and explained all about where Daddy was getting them? Remember how interested she was—and even knew the name of the Convent?"

"That's right! I do! And she made some nasty remark about making money from nuns!"

"So she did. I was furious.... And the very next day Ralph told me she had gone to Canada in the Moth, in search of a job!"

"It's true! It's true!" exclaimed Louise, jumping up from the table. "No use to hunt Hofstatter now—he's only a pawn in her game—if we are correct in our guess. We must go right to the Convent!"

"Tonight?" asked Linda, doubtfully.

"No, of course not. Tomorrow. And it's clearing up, Linda. Oh, we're the luckiest girls in the world!"

CHAPTER IX

[Pg 119]

Followed

Linda and Louise went up to their room at the hotel naturally supposing that their presence was unknown to Bess Hulbert.

It happened, however, that she was to hear about them at the desk.

When Bess left her brother in the lobby, she went straight to the clerk and asked for her key. It was a fine day, promising a fine night; she decided to leave for New York as soon as she had packed her bag. But the information caused her to change her mind.

"Do you happen to know the young lady flyers, Miss Smith?" inquired the clerk, for Bess had registered as "Anna Smith" at the hotel.

"What young ladies?" she asked, carelessly.

"Two girls who just flew in from New York. Mighty attractive ones, too!" He examined the register. "Linda Carlton and Louise Haydock."

"Hm!" mumbled Bess, wonderingly. What could have brought them up here to Plattsburg?

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"I've heard of them," she replied. "How long are they staying?"

"Just over night. Going over to Montreal in the morning, I believe."

Bess was silent a moment, thinking rapidly.

"I guess I'll stay here over night, after all," she concluded. "Night flying isn't so good, if you don't have to do it."

"Wise young lady!" observed the clerk. "If you want to meet these girls, they're still out there in the dining-room, eating. I know flyers always like to get together—for 'ground flying,' as Lindbergh calls it."

"I don't care much about meeting those particular girls," replied Bess, scornfully. "They're only beginners—I dare say this is their first real flight. Yet the way they talk you'd think they had been pilots for years.... No, thank you. I guess I'll go up now, and take a rest. Will you have my dinner sent up to my room?"

She disappeared into the elevator, and when Linda and Louise came out of the alcove, they thought she had gone back to New York. When they stopped at the desk the clerk made no mention of "Miss Smith" because she had spoken so contemptuously of these young girls.

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"What's your idea of a way to spend our time here?" asked Louise, as they unpacked their bags. "It's only five o'clock; we can't go to bed yet."

"Let's look for 'Hofstatters' in the phone book," suggested Linda. "Just for fun, because we probably shan't learn anything, but it wouldn't do any harm."

"O.K. with me. I'm glad his name isn't Smith or Jones, then it wouldn't be so easy."

Louise opened the telephone book on the small table beside the bed, and searched diligently.

"I've found three," she announced a minute later. "Amos, Charles, and Mary. But what shall we say when we call?"

"Say we come from the firm of J. W. Carwein, New York City—it'll be the truth, because we have just come from there—and we want to know when he will have another box of lace-work to sell."

"Great!" approved Louise, smiling at the joke. "And if we should happen to locate the man, what shall we do? Make an appointment?"

"Of course! He would have to tell us exactly where he got the goods, and if he isn't telling the truth and is smuggling them in from Canada, we can have him arrested.... But we'll never meet luck like that!"

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"I speak for Amos," said Louise. "I like the name. Besides, nobody with a name like that from the Bible could be crooked."

"And Mary ought to be out of it," remarked Linda. "Though of course she might have a son or a brother."

They took a few minutes to write down exactly what they would say, and began calling the numbers. But without success—that is, until they came to Mary. Amos Hofstatter grew angry, believing it was another wrong number, and shrieked that he had never heard of anybody named Carwein. Charles Hofstatter, identifying Louise's voice as that of a young girl, tried to make a date with her, but she scornfully replied, "Act your age!" and hung up with a bang.

Linda took the telephone to give the last call, the number listed for Mary Hofstatter.

A rather feeble voice answered.

"Who? What did you say?" the woman, evidently elderly, asked.

Linda repeated her message.

"You want my son?" she guessed. "You are Miss Smith?"

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"No," replied Linda, firmly. "But we are from Carwein and Co., linen importers, and we want to see him."

"Oh—I—don't know where he is," stammered the other, nervously. "Miss Smith knows. Anna Smith. Ask her."

"But where is Anna Smith?" persisted Linda.

"I don't know anything about it at all!" protested the woman. "Good-by!"

Linda turned excitedly to Louise. "We're on the right track," she said. "But imagine locating an Anna Smith, North America!" She shook her head hopelessly.

"It wouldn't do much good anyway," remarked her chum. "This Hofstatter is probably some weak fellow, who will do anything for money. Our best plan is to strike out for the Convent."

"What do you say if we cut out the stop at Montreal altogether?" asked Linda, studying her map. "This Convent is between Montreal and Quebec, and I don't see why we shouldn't fly straight to it. We'll save a lot of time."

"Time is precious," agreed Louise. "But remember what Ted said, about inquiring at the Montreal airport for a landing place."

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"I know, but we can't always do what Ted says. We're not beginners now, Lou. And I'm sure there will be a good place—the country is so open."

"O.K. with me. If tomorrow is a clear day, as it looks as if it is going to be, we can fly low enough to watch the ground pretty closely."

"Then it's settled," concluded Linda. "Give me ten minutes with this map, and I'll be finished. Then we can go to the movies, and buy a paper so that we'll have the weather prediction for tomorrow."

The next four hours passed pleasantly for the girls, and they stopped at a drug-store on their return from the early show at the theater, to buy a sandwich and some hot chocolate, which was all the supper they wanted. By ten o'clock their lights were out and they were fast asleep.

Soon after breakfast the following day, which was bright and sunshiny, Linda and Louise returned to the airport and took off into the bright blue sky. Everything seemed favorable; they had no idea that only a few hundred yards behind them a plane was following them, a plane whose pilot had no love for Linda Carlton or Louise Haydock.

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"You didn't bring any coffee, did you?" asked Louise, as they sped on over the frozen country, glimpsing the St. Lawrence as they passed.

"No," returned her companion. "Only some sweet chocolate, matches and about three cans of baked beans, which I always carry. I've read a lot about making fire without matches, but if we ever have another experience like that one last summer, and come down in a lonely spot, I want matches. And something to keep us from starving."

Even in the companion cockpit, which was one of the nicest features of the Arrow Pursuit, conversation was rather difficult, and the girls only talked occasionally. Sometimes they would press each other's fingers just as a joyous signal of their pleasure in flying together.

It was Linda who first noticed the plane behind her.

"See what kind it is, Lou—if you can," she advised.

"Can't very well," replied the other, attempting to lean out and peer through her glasses. But it was too far away to identify.

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"Hope it's not a thief or anybody like that," remarked Linda, recalling the other time a plane had followed them, in order that the pilot might steal Kitty Clavering's necklace.

"Don't worry!" returned Louise. "We haven't anything like pearls with us today!"

"You have your earrings! And besides, we must have a couple of hundred dollars between us."

But the plane had disappeared again, and the girls gave their attention to the country beneath them, flying low enough to watch the children on their sleds, and the skaters on the frozen lakes. The winter sports looked so inviting that both Linda and Louise wished they could stop and join in.

"Maybe we can do that tonight," exclaimed Louise. "If we get back to Montreal safely."

"Aunt Emily wouldn't approve," Linda reminded her.

"Your Aunt Emily doesn't approve of any of this! But anyway, it's all in a good cause."

"And we've gotten along fine so far...."

For some miles farther they watched the ice-covered lakes and the snow-covered ground, and the thick trees that dotted the landscape. The vastness of the woods was a little terrifying; Linda shivered when she thought what it would be like to be lost in them, at this time of the year. Their

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supplies might last them a day—after that they would certainly perish.... She pulled herself sharply from such gruesome thoughts; a pilot was always in a certain amount of danger, and had no right to brood upon it. Prepare for the unexpected, yes—and then forget it!

It was still early in the afternoon when they sighted the Convent. Large and picturesque, like those of the old world, as typical of French Canada as most of Quebec. Linda gave a cry of Joy.

"I'll have to circle awhile," she shouted to Louise, "till I can find a spot without trees for a landing. But I am sure there must be one—away from these hills."

Soon she was rewarded, for there proved to be a very good place—flat, even ground, covered with only a coating of snow.

Both girls were a little timid about the reception they might get. Were these nuns, living their quiet lives, used to airplanes, or would they resent the noise, breaking in upon their meditations and work? Trembling a little, but remembering their fondness for her Aunt Emily, Linda brought out her handkerchief which they had made, in readiness to show it to them as proof of her identity. Then she and Louise started towards the Convent, which was the distance of perhaps two city blocks away.

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Before they had gone a half of the distance, they saw children running towards them from over the hill, children probably from the village beyond. The girl stopped, smiling.

"Candy! Candy!" cried the youngsters, and Linda went back to the plane and dug out their supply of chocolate and handed it over to them.

"It was sort of nice to see those kids," remarked Louise, as they again started towards the Convent. "Somehow they make it seem more alive. Oh, Linda, I do hope we don't interrupt the nuns at a service!"

But she need not have worried, for as soon as the girls entered the building they saw a group in a big room, engaged with their needles. What an opportune time to come!

"You do the talking, Lou!" urged Linda. "You always know what to say better than I do."

One of the sisters came forward and smiled.

"Welcome!" she said in French. "Come over to the fire and warm yourselves."

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Fortunately, both girls had studied this language, and understood what she said. Gratefully they walked over to the old-fashioned stone fireplace, where a frugal fire of fagots was burning, and a kettle, hanging on a crane, was singing and bubbling.

"Merci, beaucoup!" replied Louise, to let the good woman know that she understood her, and appreciated her offer.

"Has anything happened?" asked the sister, still in French.

"Happened? Why?" returned Louise.

"You were here yesterday, and bought everything that we had made. The Mother Superior told us."

"But we weren't here yesterday!" protested Louise.

"Yes. In an airplane."

Linda and Louise looked at each other knowingly. It must have been Bess Hulbert—in the Moth! That would explain her presence in Plattsburg. They were sure of it now.

"That was somebody else," explained Linda. "Did you see her?"

"No, we did not see her. The Mother Superior saw her. Instead of sending a man, she said Mr. Carlton thought we would prefer a lady. And she paid more—and gave the little village children candy. Oh, she is good! We are starting a little school for the village children."

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What Louise wanted to say was "She is an impostor!" but she could not think of the French word for "impostor," and besides, what was the use of telling all this to these simple-hearted sisters? Instead, she asked for the Mother Superior.

"She is away, visiting a sick friend, in Quebec. She will not be back until tomorrow."

Louise sighed; there was nothing they could do now. But they had found out what they wanted; it was Bess Hulbert who was smuggling the goods into the country, and stealing Mr. Carlton's business. It would be an easy thing now to catch her and have her arrested.

"We must go now," said Louise. "Before it gets dark."

"Oh, but have something to eat!" urged the sister. "Some tea and biscuits."

Seeing that these good women might be hurt if they refused, the girls accepted the invitation and sat down to the simple meal. It was plain, but good, and they discovered that they were very hungry, for they had not eaten since breakfast.

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"Now let us show you over the Convent," offered another, and while they accompanied several of the nuns about the old, meticulously neat rooms, they heard the roar of a plane, making a landing not far away. Immediately Linda glanced out of the window, to see whether her Arrow was safe, and she saw another plane landing quite near. But before the girls left the Convent, the latter had disappeared.

"Now back to Montreal for the night—and then hot foot after Bess Hulbert!" cried Linda, as she

started the motor. "If we accuse her of being a smuggler, and she promises to stop, and leave Daddy alone, we won't have to have her arrested."

"But first," qualified Louise, "we must catch Bess Hulbert!"

CHAPTER X

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The Arrow in Flames

Although no definite results had yet been accomplished, Linda and Louise felt when they left the little French Convent in Canada that they were on the way to victory. All that was necessary now was to get in touch with Linda's father, who, through his lawyer and detectives, would bring Bess Hulbert to justice.

The facts as they saw them were surprisingly clear and simple, and could not fail to convince the police.

First of all, the firm of J. W. Carwein had declared that they had bought the goods in the belief that they were made in the United States.

Secondly, the firm had been deceived. The goods were not made in this country, but in Canada, as the girls had just proved by their visit to the Convent.

Thirdly, they had been bought by a girl in an airplane, who represented herself as an agent of Mr. Carlton.

The only missing link in the chain was the actual proof that the girl in the airplane was Bess Hulbert.

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Yet all the evidence pointed that way: her visit to Plattsburg, her taking the Moth to Canada, her conversation with her brother, at the hotel, in which she referred to her business as dangerous and liable to end in disgrace, and finally her interest in Linda's handkerchief a month or so previous.

Surely no one would doubt such evidence as this! But if the police refused to arrest Miss Hulbert, it would be easy enough to send a picture to the Convent for identification. That would prove everything conclusively.

So both girls felt certain, as they stepped into the Arrow, that they had been successful, that they were about to save Mr. Carlton's business. And this fact meant joy to themselves. Now they could plan again on their flight across the Atlantic; now it would surely be safe to put in the order for the Bellanca which Linda had set her heart upon having.

"Let's don't bother to go back by way of Montreal," said Linda, exultantly, as she started the motor and taxied along the frozen field. "Let's head straight for Spring City!"

"But do you know the way?" inquired Louise, as the plane rose into the air.

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"Yes, I guess so. I have a map—oh, not the kind Ted makes, but good enough. We'll fly across country, and stop when we get tired."

"But it's getting dark, Linda," objected her companion.

"We can't help that, Lou! It would be getting dark anyway, even if we were headed for Montreal."

"But this is strange country. So many woods, too. A forced landing would be terrible, Linda."

"Who said anything about a forced landing?" laughed the other girl. She felt thrilled and exhilarated; the cold, fresh air against her cheeks whipped them to a lovely color, and her eyes were shining. She was in the mood for adventure tonight. But when she realized that her chum was dubious, she decided to go easy. Perhaps Louise was tired.

"Lou dear," she shouted, "if you're nervous, we'll go to Montreal, and put up for the night. Say the word—but say it quickly!"

"No! No! I'm for the quickest way home. And I have a lot of confidence in you, Linda."

"You better have, if you mean to cross the ocean with me. We'll have to get used to night flying, Lou, if we hope to succeed!"

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"I know," agreed the other, as she settled down into her seat to try to keep warm.

Darkness came on, but the sky was cloudless, and the stars shone out brilliantly. Linda kept her eye on her chart, but although she did not tell Louise, she was not sure where they were. Had they crossed into New York state—were they flying in the northern part, or were they still in Canada? Her goal was Syracuse; she hoped to reach it before midnight.

The trees were still thick everywhere, and they were flying about fifteen hundred feet high. All of a sudden, without any warning, the engine missed and sputtered, and stopped dead!

Louise, who for the last five minutes had been peacefully dozing, awoke with a start at the abrupt cessation of noise. Just as a Pullman traveler will sleep while a train is moving, and wake up at a station, so the silence affected Louise. It was positively uncanny.

"What's the matter, Linda?" she whispered, hoarsely.

"Out of gas," replied the pilot, grimly.

"Then—then—" She clutched her companion's arm, desperately—"Then we jump?"

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Before Linda could reply, the motor took hold again.

"No! Not yet!" she shouted, above the welcome noise. "I have turned on the reserve supply—it's good for about twenty minutes. We'll try to land."

She circled about and came lower, but the prospect was disastrous. Nothing but woods! Trees everywhere! She remembered bitterly the occasion when her father had presented her with the Arrow, as a graduation gift, and had remarked shrewdly that she would get to hate trees. How right he was!

But she must not lose track of the time—the precious twenty minutes that might be all that were left to her in this world. Louise, with the glasses, was peering down towards the ground. But there were no lights, no towns, no signs of civilization anywhere. Nothing but trees.

When only eight minutes remained, Linda decided in desperation to climb again. If they were to use their parachutes successfully, they must attain a comfortable height.

The ascent only served to make Louise more panic-stricken. She grabbed Linda's arm, and held it to it like a death-clasp.

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"Where are you going, Linda?" she shrieked. "Are you crazy?"

Linda shook her head. It was surprising how calm she felt.

"Get ready to release your parachute," she commanded. "When we get high enough, we are going to jump. Have you your flashlight handy?"

"Yes. All right, Linda." Her voice shook with emotion.

"It'll be all right, Lou dear! I've jumped before—it isn't bad. And you've been taught just what to do."

At four thousand feet up in the air, Linda gave her the signal, and Louise stepped out over the right side of the plane.

Then Linda turned the nose of the Arrow up, and stepped off herself, falling about a hundred feet, head downward, before she pulled the rip-cord which opened the parachute, and jerked her into an upright position. Off to one side of them, the plane was falling rapidly, in a series of spirals; for a moment Linda had the tense fear that it might strike her companion or herself. Holding out her flashlight, and watching the ground below, she floated gently away from the plane, landing finally in a clearing perhaps fifty yards away from Louise.

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"Lou, are you safe?" she shouted, gasping.

"O.K.!" was the laughing reply, that brought a warm surge of relief to her heart.

With the aid of their flash-lights the girls disentangled themselves from their cords, and ran towards each other. Suddenly they stopped; a blaze of light flashed in the sky, and they saw the beloved Arrow in flames!

"Oh, poor Linda!" cried Louise, rushing to her chum in sympathy. "What rotten luck!"

Tears came into the young aviatrix's eyes, and she hugged her chum tightly in her grief. It was as if she had lost a very dear friend. For a breathless moment they watched the blazing plane, fearful lest it would drop on them, or set the woods on fire. But gradually the light died, and what was left of the Arrow dropped to the ground at least a mile away.

"I guess we're lucky at that," Linda finally said, shivering.

"I was sure we'd be killed," Louise admitted. "It seems so much worse to have an accident at night—so much more terrifying."

They stood still for a moment and looked about them. A light covering of snow was on the ground, and on the leafless branches of the trees. In every direction the woods stretched out in desolation. The girls had not the faintest idea where they were.

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"Oh, I'm so cold!" complained Louise. "If only we had a fire!"

"My matches!" remarked Linda, regretfully. "My matches that I packed so carefully! A whole box.... Well, next time I'll see that they are in my pocket. Lucky we have our flash-lights—and no sprained ankles. Come on, Lou, we must walk, or we'll freeze to death."

"But where are we going?"

"Anywhere—to keep warm with the exercise, and maybe happen on some hut or house. We daren't sleep tonight, Lou! Oh, if, we only had those blankets!"

"And those baked beans!"

"Shucks!" exclaimed Linda. "Why didn't I think to throw some stuff out before we left the plane! All the mail carriers do. If they have to jump, they drop their mail bags first."

"Too late now to think of that. But wasn't it lucky we had something to eat at the Convent?"

"It surely was. I wish we had eaten twice as much."

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With their arms tightly linked together, the girls were pressing forward now at an even pace, as if

they had cheerfully made up their minds to walk all night long. Sometimes they would step into thick piles of dried leaves, but otherwise the ground was hard, except for an inch or so of snow. Often they encountered ice, and their feet grew numb with the cold.

Louise, who had not wanted Linda to take the unknown course, had said nothing about the cause of the accident, for fear of hurting her chum's feelings. But Linda's mind had been busily working on the explanation ever since the tank went dry.

"Lou," she said finally, as they walked on through the darkness, "I think I have the explanation."

"What explanation? How to get out of these woods?"

"No, no. Of the reason why our gas ran out. I should have had enough to get to Syracuse. But do you remember hearing a plane land near to ours, while we were in the Convent?"

"Yes, of course. We both saw it."

"Well, do you know what I believe? I think that was Bess Hulbert, in the Flying Club's Moth—and it was she who was following us all the way to the Convent." [Pg 141]

"Linda!" cried Louise, in amazement. "But how could she ever know we were here? Not that I'd put it past her—but how could she possibly find out, or guess what we were up to?"

"I don't know, except that she may have seen us—or our names on the hotel register at Plattsburg. People who are committing crimes are always on the watch, you know, expecting to be caught."

"How could she ever dump out our gas, in so short a time?"

"She didn't. She put a little hole in the gas tank, probably, so that the gas would leak out slowly. That would be a much meaner thing to do than to cut a strut, or injure the propeller, because either of those things would keep us from going up in the air without discovering it, and we wouldn't learn our danger from a leak without flying a while. Besides, whatever happened would happen when we were some distance away—so that she couldn't possibly be blamed! And it would be too late to do anything."

"The sneak!" denounced Louise, feeling almost hot for a second in her anger. "You're right, Linda—I'm sure you are! But really, it was intended murder!" [Pg 142]

"Probable murder—if we couldn't make a landing or jump. But she thinks we are so inexperienced that we couldn't do either.... Yes, I really believe Miss Hulbert thinks we're dead now!"

"And won't she get fooled!" exulted Louise. "Once we get back to civilization, we'll do plenty to her!"

"If we get back to civilization," said Linda, with the first note of despair creeping into her voice. Their feet were so cold, they began to ache dreadfully, and the woods were as dense and as hopeless as when they first began to walk. They slackened their pace, until Louise's feet fairly seemed to drag. She stopped abruptly.

"I just can't go on, Linda," she sighed. "My feet hurt so terribly!"

"I know," answered her companion, sympathetically. "We might take off our shoes and rub them with snow. But if we once stop, we'll never be able to start again—and then we'll surely freeze."

It was a gruesome alternative; they looked at each other in dismay. [Pg 143]

"Let's go very slowly, and hang on to each other," urged Linda. "The night can't last forever, and the sunshine will bring warmth."

"It's the longest night I ever knew," said Louise, drearily. "But morning will be worse, because we'll be that much hungrier."

Linda pressed her hand; there was no use trying to cheer the other girl with hopes, that she was in no mood to believe. So they went on doggedly.

For perhaps half an hour they continued in silence; then once again Louise stopped abruptly, her hand rigid in Linda's. There were footsteps behind them!

"A bear!" she whispered, in fright.

Pulling her cautiously aside, Linda broke off a stick from a tree, and turned about to face the enemy. There was no use trying to run—why they could hardly hobble. And in the darkness, what hope was there of finding a tree to climb?

To her intense amazement, she saw nothing, and she dared not turn on her flashlight. Tensely she waited, until a shot rang out in the woods and broke the stillness of the night. A gun at least meant a human hand, and both girls immediately let out a piteous cry of "Help!" [Pg 144]

"Yo—ho!" came the welcome, answering reply!

CHAPTER XI

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Prisoners

When the shot of the gun rang through the woods, the startled girls heard scampering feet behind them, and knew that the animal, whatever it was, had been frightened away. Again they had had a marvelous escape, for they might have been wounded by the unseen hunter's gun. What irony it would have been, to jump from an airplane in parachutes, only to be killed by a human hand!

Desperately they clung to each other, satisfied now by the answering call that there would be more shots until they were located. Rescue was surely at hand; the question now arose: what sort of human being had them at his mercy?

They remained motionless, waiting for their fate, as the footsteps came nearer. At last they were able to distinguish the shaggy outline of a man in a fur coat.

"Who's there?" he called.

Both girls breathed a sigh of relief, as they heard the words in English. Surely they were safe now! [Pg 146]

"Two girls—from a wrecked airplane.... Lost," replied Linda.

"Oh, can you give us shelter, please?" begged Louise.

The stranger came towards them, and they looked into the face of a middle-aged man, rough and hard, but civilized.

"Yes. You can come into my lodge.... This is a cold night to be lost in these northern woods."

"Dreadful!" shivered Louise. "We thought we were done for."

"What happened to your plane?"

"We sprung a leak in our gas tank. We had to jump, and it went up in flames."

"Too bad," muttered the man.

Nothing more was said for a few minutes, and the girls walked painfully on, guided by their companion. At last they came to a small cabin, with an oil lamp lighted inside. It looked like Heaven to Linda and Louise.

"I'll give you some food, and let you have the place for the night," offered the man, generously. "I was going off anyhow."

"Oh, no!" protested Linda. "We mustn't drive you out in the cold!" And, seeing that the cabin had two rooms—a living-room and a kitchen, she immediately added, "We can easily sleep in the kitchen." [Pg 147]

"No, I expect to be out all night anyway." He went out into the kitchen and made them some hot coffee, and fried bacon and produced crackers and a can of beans.

"Nothing in my life ever tasted half so good!" cried Louise, gratefully, as she ate ravenously, while her host stood there a moment watching both of the girls.

"Now tell me," he said, "what you two young ladies were doing flying a plane up here on the border in the dead of winter?"

"We've been to Canada," explained Linda, "to visit a Convent where some nuns make this lovely lace-work." She took her handkerchief out of her pocket, and showed it to the man, though she realized it would not be possible for him to appreciate it. "My father buys this, and sells it again."

"Oh, ho!" exclaimed the man, significantly, opening his eyes and his mouth wide, knowingly. "I see."

"What do you see?" asked Louise, sharply.

"Nothing—nothing," he muttered. "I must be off—I have to get in touch with a man I know tonight—across the woods." His tone changed abruptly. "I don't want you girls to stir from here till I get back! You understand?" [Pg 148]

"You mean you want us to go on eating all night?" remarked Louise, ignoring the seriousness of his tone. The coffee had made her feel good; she wanted to laugh and joke.

"No. I mean you're not to leave the cabin, till I get back in the morning."

"We won't!" Linda assured him. "Nothing could induce us to, in all this cold. We'd never find our way, and besides, we want to pay for our lodging. Can you—could you find a way to get us to a train tomorrow?"

"I'll take care of you," he replied, with a queer smile, but neither Linda nor Louise noticed. They were too tired now for anything but sleep.

As soon as he was gone, they decided to turn in. There was only one narrow cot in the cabin, but there were three blankets, and they knew they would not mind sleeping in close quarters. It was so good to be warm, and fed, alive!

Linda was the first to awaken the following morning, and for a moment, as she looked about her at the unfamiliar surroundings, she could not recall where she was. The strange little hut, with the big stone fireplace, where now only ashes remained of last night's fire, the crude couch on which she and Louise were huddled so close together, the trophies about the unfinished walls. And outside the icy windows, a desolate country, covered with snow. [Pg 149]

"Hurry up, Lou!" she cried, waking her companion. "Let's get washed up before that man comes

back! Funny, we never thought to ask him his name!"

"We were too tired," replied the other girl, rubbing her eyes. "Honestly I never was so nearly dead in my life."

"It was because we saw no hope of resting. Just going on and on—or freezing. How do your feet feel this morning?"

"Terrible!" Louise leaned over and examined them. "They're dreadfully swollen. I'll never be able to walk, and how can we get to civilization if we don't?"

"Maybe our friend will dig up some horses. Or an airplane. If there is any place to land."

"An airplane!" repeated Louise, as she laboriously, started to pull on her stockings. "Linda, do you feel very terrible about losing the Arrow?"

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"Of course I'm dreadfully sorry, but I think I should be ungrateful if I thought too much about that—after our lucky escape. Besides, I feel pretty certain I'll get another one now. If Daddy can pull out of his business troubles, we can order that Bellanca."

The girls finished their dressing and set the room to rights, so that everything would be comfortable and neat when their host returned. Then they started a fire in the fireplace with some kindling and logs that were in readiness, and proceeded to the kitchen, to clear up their supper dishes, and to cook some breakfast. Fortunately there was plenty of food, and they enjoyed their hot meal. But they were not so ravenous as they had been the night before.

"I wish that man would hurry," remarked Linda, as she put the clean dishes away. "I'd like to get somewhere to wire Ted. When he didn't get a telegram last night, he probably thought something had happened to us, and maybe he'll send out a searching party today."

"That's true," agreed Louise. "Good old Ted!... But what about your Aunt Emily? Do you think she will worry?"

"Not yet. Because she didn't expect us to wire every night. She probably thinks we're visiting some friends in Plattsburg."

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They went back to the living-room, and settled themselves comfortably before the open fire, enjoying the warmth and cheer of the blaze. Linda's wrist-watch, which was still going in spite of its fall through the air, proclaimed it to be ten o'clock when a knock finally sounded at the door.

She sprang up and unfastened the bolt. It was their rescuer, with another man, also in a fur coat. Two horses stood outside, covered with blankets.

"How are you today?" asked the owner of the cabin, genially.

"Just fine!" replied Linda, gayly. "Thanks to your hospitality!"

"Meet Sergeant Bradshaw," said the man rather brusquely, as he and his companion stepped inside and closed the door. "Your names—?"

"Linda Carlton and Louise Haydock," replied the former.

"Well, Sergeant," explained their host, turning to the other man, "these are the young ladies.... But, as I told you, they've lost their plane now, so they'll probably tell you they are ready to reform."

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"Reform?" repeated Louise, thinking that the man was teasing them. But he was not smiling; and his companion was regarding them with a most scornful expression.

"They'll reform all right," sneered the latter. "Under lock and key!"

For the first time a shiver of fear crept over Linda. Was their rescuer bad, after all? Did he mean to kidnap her and her chum?

"What do you mean?" demanded Louise, in a tone of challenge.

"What I say!" thundered the sergeant, displaying his badge. "I arrest you two young ladies as smugglers! I am going to take you both to jail!"

"Smugglers?" repeated Linda, aghast.

"Yes. You know all about it. Don't look innocent! We've had wind for over a month of the fact that a plane was taking something from Canada to Plattsburg, but we just found out last week what it was—_French lace_! And a girl has been flying it!"

Instantly both Linda and Louise understood what had happened. They were being arrested for Bess Hulbert's crime!

"But neither of us is the girl you're after—the girl that's guilty!" protested Louise. "That girl flew a gray Moth!"

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"Yeah? And how do we know your plane wasn't a gray Moth? How are you going to prove that? And didn't you admit you'd just come from that Convent, and didn't you show my friend Marshall here, some of the goods?"

"But those are our own things!" cried Louise. "Bought in Columbus, Ohio!"

"Oh, yeah? Well, I don't happen to believe that.... What I do know, is you didn't stop at the border for the regular search, did you?"

"We didn't know you had to.... We didn't even know the border when we came to it," remarked Linda, bitterly.

"No? Well, you can tell that to the judge!" replied the sergeant, with a smirk. "I guess you don't even know yet whether you're in the U.S. or not?"

"No, as a matter of fact, we don't."

"Innocent little things!" he sneered, sarcastically. "Rats! What's the use of wasting time? Come on!"

"Won't you even listen to our story?" begged Linda.

"You can save it for the judge! We've got a couple of horses out here, and we're each taking one of you along. Get your coats on—and hustle!" [Pg 154]

Meekly Linda did as she was told, biting her lips to keep back the tears, but Louise was furiously angry.

"You just wait!" she sputtered. "You'll make a public apology for this, when our fathers hear about it."

"Listen to the little spit-fire!" drawled the sergeant, in a nasty tone. Then, turning to the other man, "Listen, Marshall, I don't think we better try to take these two girls on our horses—especially this little cat here." He pointed rudely at Louise. "She might scratch! And it's none too easy traveling in this kind of weather.... Their trial won't come up for a month or so, anyway, so we might as well lock 'em in here as anywhere till we see fit to get 'em. You don't need the cabin, do you?"

"No, I can go over with Hendries."

"Well, the windows are barred. Besides, if they tried to escape, they would only get lost, and freeze or starve to death. Suppose we leave 'em here to think over their crime, and maybe after a few days or so, they'll be more ready to confess."

"But we have to wire our folks!" cried Linda, in dismay. [Pg 155]

"You ought to have thought of that before you tried your tricks. If it's your father you're working for, he knows what to expect. Smuggling's serious business, young woman!"

"But we didn't—"

"So I've heard you say before, but lady, that don't get you anywheres with me.... Marshall, you go and get wood and see that there's enough oil and water and food to last about four days. I'll stay here and watch 'em till you get back."

Linda and Louise did not believe anyone could be so cruel, so inhuman as this man—not even willing to listen to their story. But he was so entirely convinced of their guilt, that he probably thought he was justified. After all, the punishment wouldn't have been too severe if he had caught the right person—Bess Hulbert. But how unfair it was for them!

"Won't you please send my father a telegram?" begged Linda, with tears in her eyes.

"Are you ready to confess?" countered the sergeant.

"We can't confess what we haven't done!" she protested.

"Then your father will have to wait. He'll know in about four days, when we bring a plane to take you away." [Pg 156]

"Oh!" gasped Linda, realizing the horrible anxiety this decision would cause so many people dear to herself and Louise. Dropping down on the couch, she buried her head in her hands, and did not look up again until the men had gone, and locked and barred the door from the outside. Then she broke into uncontrollable weeping, and Louise, clasping her arms about her, cried too.

"There is only one redeeming thing about it," said Louise, after a moment. "We're together."

"If we weren't," sobbed Linda, "I think we should lose our minds!"

But already Louise was looking about, trying to figure out some means of escape.

"The thing that makes me maddest," she remarked, "is the delay in catching Bess Hulbert. She'll probably make a get-away before we can notify your father."

"I don't think so," answered Linda, sitting up and resolutely drying her eyes. "Don't forget, Bess thinks we probably went up in flames with the Arrow. And when nothing is heard of us for five days, she'll be positive.... No, my bet is that she'll go right on with her smuggling and stealing Daddy's business." [Pg 157]

Her companion admitted that she was right. And all they could do was sit here and wait for those horrible men to return!

It was a problem of course, how to amuse themselves, for there was no radio, or music of any kind, and there were no books on the shelves. When they had gotten over their first despair, they tried putting their wits together and manufacturing some sort of occupation. And they thought of various things, of giving each other exercises, and playing guessing games, making up new recipes for the ingredients that were in the kitchen store-closet.

But, try as they did to be cheerful, the hours dragged, and four days stretched out as interminably before them.

Waiting for News

As Linda had surmised, her aunt did not expect her to wire every night, unless something happened, so when December twenty-ninth passed without any message, the latter naturally supposed that the girls were still at Plattsburg with friends. Heretofore, the older woman had known all of her niece's companions, but since Linda had gone away to school, her circle had naturally widened. Miss Carlton frowned when she recalled that she had neglected to ask the names of the girls Linda and Louise intended to visit.

When she heard nothing from them again on the morning of the thirtieth, she grew anxious and called Mrs. Haydock on the telephone.

"I don't want to alarm you, Miss Carlton," answered Louise's mother, "but I am afraid something has happened."

"Why? What makes you think so? Because we haven't heard from them since the twenty-seventh?" [Pg 159]

"Not only that," replied Mrs. Haydock. "But I put in a long distance call for Ted Mackay—Louise said they would keep him informed of their whereabouts, in case they had any difficulties—and I got the message that he had gone to Canada in search of two missing flyers!"

"Canada!" repeated Miss Carlton, aghast. "That couldn't be our girls! They were going to New York."

"So I understood. But they may have gone on to Canada.... Well, let us hope that Ted flew up to search for someone else. All we can do is wait."

"Oh, those dreadful airplanes!" wailed Miss Carlton, hysterically. "I wish they had never been invented.... Well, I'll call my brother," she concluded, for she had no idea what to do.

That, of course, was the difficulty everybody met—every one of Linda Carlton's and Louise Haydock's friends at Spring City, when the news got around that the girls were lost. Nobody knew where they were; nobody had any way of helping find them.

Anxiety for them spread over the little town where they were so popular. Particularly at the Flying Club, where their most intimate friends were gathered that afternoon to play bridge or to dance, as the mood seized them. A skating party which had been planned by Dot Crowley and Jim Valier had to be canceled on account of a heavy snow the night before. Even now the storm was still raging, reminding them all the more of their two friends with the open Arrow. [Pg 160]

Dot Crowley, however, resolutely decided to be hopeful, to make an effort to dispel the gloom that threatened to engulf them all.

"No use weeping till we hear that something has happened," she said, as she turned on the radio. "I'd stake a good-sized bet on Linda and Lou! Haven't they always come through with flying colors?"

"If they're still flying colors, or anything else, they're all right," remarked Jim Valier, lazily stretching his legs out toward the blazing fire. But, lazy though he always appeared, he was ready to help Dot in her valiant effort to be cheerful.

"They'll be home yet—in time for the New Year's Eve party!" she asserted, with conviction. "I'm not going to lose faith."

"I'm not either," added Kitty Clavering, who was usually so timid, but who had a deep admiration for Linda Carlton. "I think Linda is one of the cleverest girls I ever met." [Pg 161]

Everybody agreed with her, and somehow they all suddenly felt optimistic. The bridge tables were brought out, the couples began to play and dance in the intervals when they were "dummies." Everybody seemed happy again—everybody except Ralph Clavering. Off in a corner he was smoking a cigarette in doleful silence.

Dot, who still felt the responsibility for the atmosphere of the party, went over to cheer him up.

"What's the matter, Ralph?" she asked half teasingly, half sympathetically.

"Nothing," he muttered, with a frown that plainly said, "let me alone!"

"I know, though," persisted Dot, seating herself beside him. "You haven't any partner for the New Year's Eve dance!"

"Well, I'm not asking you," he replied, rudely.

"You know it wouldn't be any use!" retorted Dot, her chin in the air. "I'm going with Jim."

"O.K. with me." He continued to smoke in silence.

"Well, buck up!" she advised, patting his shoulder. "Linda may fly home any minute." [Pg 162]

"Here comes a plane now!" cried Kitty, jumping up and rushing to the window. "Why, it's our own Moth!"

Everybody dashed to the window, to see Bess Hulbert make her landing, and three or four of the boys slipped into their overcoats to go out and help her put it into the hangar. But Ralph sat

stolidly gazing into the fire.

Five minutes later, Miss Hulbert, her cheeks glowing and her eyes flashing with excitement, came into the room.

"Welcome to our famous flyer!" cried Kitty, turning off the radio.

"What's weather to her!" laughed Joe Elliston, admiringly.

"All in the day's work," replied Miss Hulbert.

"Tell us where you've been," urged Kitty.

"Up to the Great Lakes," replied the aviatrix, vaguely. "I bought my own gas and oil, but I feel I owe the Club ten dollars for the use of the plane.... I—I'll pay myself!"

They all smiled, for Bess Hulbert was still treasurer of the club.

"Don't be silly!" protested Kitty. "You're a member of the club."

"But I was using the plane for business—not for pleasure."

"Just what is your business, Miss Hulbert?" inquired Ralph.

The girl colored; she did not like his tone. It was a bitter blow to her pride that this rich young man had never fallen for her charms.

"Fish!" she replied mockingly. "Poor fish!"

Everybody laughed, not knowing whether she was serious or not, and this time the joke seemed to be on Ralph.

"You didn't see Linda or Louise—in the course of your trip, did you?" asked Dot Crowley.

"Linda—Louise—?" Miss Hulbert was stalling for time.

"Yes. The two girls who fly in an Arrow Pursuit. They've been missing for two days and Miss Carlton and Mrs. Haydock are almost crazy. We're all worried too, only we try not to be."

"Too bad," murmured Miss Hulbert. "But they really shouldn't be flying in this sort of weather. They haven't had the experience."

"How else would they get it?" demanded Ralph, brusquely.

"Short trips," answered Bess. "It's foolish people like them who do harm to aviation. Make the public think it's so dangerous."

"How do you know they went on a long trip?" questioned Kitty, innocently.

"Oh—er—I don't. I only supposed they did."

"Yes, we're all afraid of that. They were last heard of from Plattsburg—the twenty-seventh."

"And this is the thirtieth," remarked Bess, absently. "I wonder if that wreck that was reported in the early afternoon papers could have been their plane."

"What wreck?" demanded everybody at once.

"The charred wreck of a plane was found by an aviator named Ted Mackay. Up on the border, between New York state and Canada."

"Ted Mackay!" repeated Dot. "That's Linda's friend—the one who rescued her before."

"Well, he didn't rescue her today," asserted Bess. "There were no bodies in the plane. But then it was almost completely destroyed."

At this gruesome remark, Kitty immediately burst out crying, and even Dot Crowley could find no reason to be hopeful any longer, and wiped the tears from her eyes. Oh, it was dreadful to think of their two lovely friends as dead! Worse still, for them to meet death in such a horrible way!

"It may not have been their plane," Bess reminded her companions, although in her heart she felt sure that it was. "Or, even if it is, they might still be alive, if they had the nerve to use their parachutes."

"They had plenty of nerve!" responded Dot. "But even if they jumped, it isn't likely they'd still be alive in this terrible weather."

"If they were, we should probably have heard from them," said Ralph, glumly.

Nobody spoke for some time; resuming of the games was out of the question now. Finally, to break the silence, and to have something to do, Kitty rang the bell for the club matron to serve tea and sandwiches.

Over the tea-cups a low murmur of conversation finally arose, but it was all in a gloomy undertone. Nothing could have been more depressing than the atmosphere in that room—until the door was suddenly flung open by a small boy—Louise Haydock's brother.

"Whoopee! Whoopee!" he shouted, throwing his hat straight into Ralph Clavering's tea-cup. "The girls are alive and safe!"

"Linda? Louise?" cried everybody at once. In the excitement all eyes were upon the boy; nobody noticed that Bess Hulbert's face went ghastly white.

"Yeah! Ted Mackay wired just now. He found them on the Canadian border, locked up in a cabin!"

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"Locked up? Kidnapped?" demanded Ralph.

"No. Locked up by law. They have to go to jail."

"Jail?"

"It's some joke!" exclaimed Jim Valier.

"No. Honest!" protested the boy. "They're being held for some crime they didn't commit. Smuggling, or something!"

"Oh, they probably brought a bottle of Canadian wine into the United States," laughed Ralph. "They'll just have a little fine to pay——"

"But Linda doesn't drink—or Lou either!" asserted Dot. "I know they wouldn't think of such a thing."

"Well, so long as they're safe, it'll be an easy matter for them to get free," said Ralph, more relieved than anyone realized. "Why, they may be back in time for the New Year's Eve dance!"

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"Not a chance," answered the boy, with a vehement shake of his head.... "Don't forget the Arrow is a thing of the past—they've got to come home by train. Besides, they can't start till Dad and Mr. Carlton get up there to bail 'em out!"

"I wish they had the Moth," sighed Kitty. "If it were only decent weather, Bess could go get them."

Miss Hulbert was horrified at such a suggestion, but she managed to cover her consternation with a smile.

As soon as the excitement died down the party began to break up. But Bess Hulbert continued to sit before the fire, thinking deeply, trying to decide what to do.

So the law had gotten wind of the fact that smuggling was going on, by a girl in an airplane! And had arrested Linda Carlton and Louise Haydock, thinking them guilty. She smiled in a nasty, superior way. What a joke it was on those two upstarts! But her mouth grew grim again; it was only a question of time now, before the officers discovered the right person, before she too was brought to justice. And she wouldn't get off so easily as these two others.... No, there was only one thing for her to do—and that was to leave the country, before anybody thought of accusing her of this crime, or of the more serious one of damaging Linda's plane....

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Lucky thing, she thought, that she had already made some money out of the business! But how she wished she had more!

Kitty Clavering, who was the only person still left at the club, came over and put her arm around Bess, attempting to pull her to her feet.

"What's the matter, Bess?" she asked, noticing that the other girl did not respond to her embrace.

"Lots of things, Kitty," replied Bess, soberly. "I've had some pretty bad news today.... Of course I didn't say anything about it in front of the others, especially when I found you all so worried about your young friends."

"Well, we don't have to worry about them any more! So I can give all my thoughts to you.... Come on home with me, and tell me about it!" urged the younger girl. She did not add that she wanted to hear about Lieutenant Hulbert, whom she had not seen for over a month.

"Oh, all right," agreed Bess, without any enthusiasm. "For a little while.... But I must get back to my hotel. I'll have to go to New York tonight."

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Kitty did not question her any further until they were alone in her pretty boudoir, Bess relaxing on the chaise longue, Kitty in the flowered chintz chair.

"Now tell me, my dear," repeated Kitty, sympathetically.

"Well," Bess began slowly, "it's about business. I was joking this afternoon, of course, but the fact is I've been going into something pretty deep—and—and—I'm going to lose. Fail, in other words.... And the worst of it is—I'll have to go to England to get some money, if I can. My brother and I are English, you know."

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" cried Kitty. To the rich young heiress, poverty seemed terrible. And Bess had mentioned her brother—was it possible he had lost money too? Was that the reason he was staying away from her? She put the question to her friend.

"Yes," lied Bess, for she knew that this would draw more sympathy from Kitty, and the latter might even offer to lend her some money. "Yes, I was investing Bob's money, and lost that too."

"How terrible!" Kitty got up and went over beside the older girl. "If I could only help you, dear— financially, I mean."

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Bess's eyelids narrowed. This was just what she was hoping for!

"That's good of you, Kit—but I really couldn't accept it!"

"But as a loan? Oh, please! I'd love to!"

"Well—" Bess paused, as if she would need a great deal of persuasion. "My idea would be to borrow enough to order a big plane, and fly the Atlantic and win that twenty-five thousand dollars. Then I could pay you and my brother both back at once."

"And bring glory to our Flying Club!"

"Yes, of course.... But Kitty, have you any idea what a good plane costs? I'm afraid you couldn't raise so much money, could you?"

"About how much?" asked Kitty, vaguely. She was thinking of Bob Hulbert now, wondering whether she couldn't write and tell him she understood why he was staying away from her, and urging him to come back.

"Well, novices like your two friends would probably expect to pay about twenty thousand dollars for their plane.... But I wouldn't have to have that kind. Because, even if I did win the prize, it would hardly pay me.... No, I wouldn't pay more than eight or ten thousand for mine.... But you could never raise that much, could you, Kit?"

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The girl shook her head.

"I'm afraid not.... Only by getting a loan on my pearl necklace. Do you suppose that could be done, Bess?"

"Of course it could. But not here in Spring City. We'd have to go to New York."

"I can't go to New York. I'm dated up for a dance tonight."

"I think I could manage it myself," said Bess. "If you care to trust me, and will give me a note authorizing the loan."

"I'll be only too glad to," agreed Kitty, and she produced the necklace and immediately sat down to the desk to write the letter.

So, three hours later, Bess Hulbert stepped into the Pullman for New York, carrying not only the precious pearls, but all of the Flying Club's money as well, which she had pretended to forget to hand over to Kitty.

"And now," she said triumphantly to herself, "let the United States courts try to catch me if they can!"

CHAPTER XIII

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Freedom

Ted Mackay did not sleep well on the night of the twenty-eighth of December. It was one o'clock before he gave up expecting a telegram and finally went to bed. Even then he tossed restlessly.

Something, he thought, had surely happened to Linda Carlton and Louise Haydock. Had they merely been forced down in some lonely spot where there was no means of telegraphing, or had they met with some more serious accident? He was up and dressed at dawn on the twenty-ninth, wiring his firm for leave of absence to go in search of the lost flyers.

He decided not to telephone Miss Carlton or Mrs. Haydock yet; no need to worry them until it was absolutely necessary. Accordingly, he took off early in the morning of December twenty-ninth for Montreal, in his cabin mono-plane, equipped with skis for the snow.

The snow began to fall steadily that afternoon, and continued on through the night. But though Ted reached Montreal before dark, there was no news of two girls at any of the airports. If they had arrived, their plane would have been housed in some hangar in the city or near about it.

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The snow was falling so fast and thick that Ted realized that night flying would be foolish. Forcing himself to go to bed, he left a call at the hotel desk for four o'clock the following day.

His first stop, at dawn on December thirtieth, was the French Convent. There at least he got some information: the girls had been there, safe and unharmed, two days previous. But where were they now?

Air travel was difficult in the snowstorm, but he shuddered to think of them alone in the woods, if something had gone wrong with their Arrow. How much food were they carrying, and what about blankets? How long could they endure the cold?

Fortunately his plane was built for low flying, and he went carefully, just clearing the tree-tops, looking everywhere for a wrecked plane. About noon he was rewarded. Off on a hill, in a bank of snow, he found the blackened remains of the gallant little Pursuit. But, thank Heaven, no signs of human bodies in the wreckage!

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He spent perhaps half an hour searching and calling his lost friends, but when he received no response, he decided that the best thing for him to do was to go back to the nearest town and report the wreck by wire, and send out an S.O.S. for searching parties. It was this account that Bess Hulbert read in the early afternoon papers and announced to the Flying Club members.

Ted lost no time in sending the communication, and returning to the scene of the disaster, resolving to circle the district again and again, watching for signals. There was still hope that the girls were alive.

About two o'clock he sighted the little cabin in the woods and hunted for a spot to land. This might mean protection for Linda and Louise, from the terrible storm. How he hoped that they had found it, and were now warm and safe inside!

Five minutes later he left his plane and walked excitedly to the hut. But because of the snow his approach was noiseless, and the girls, who happened to be cooking in the little kitchen at the time, had no idea that rescue was at hand.

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Ted lifted his fist and banged on the heavy door.

"Who can it be?" gasped Louise, dropping the tin cup she was holding, and spilling flour all over the floor. "If it were that sergeant, he'd open the door. We can't possibly."

"Of course not," replied Linda. "But let's go see who it is. Those bars won't keep us from looking out."

Breathlessly they dashed to the living-room window, and tapped against the glass, for they could not see the door in their position.

Bliss, oh, bliss! A moment later they recognized the dear familiar form of Ted Mackay!

"Unbar the door!" shouted Louise, giving a leap into the air. "We're locked in!"

Ted's mouth opened in amazement, but he heard what they said, and instantly went over and did what he was told. Then he stepped inside, and, wet and covered with snow as he was, both girls flung their arms around him and cried in rapture.

"Angel!" exclaimed Louise.

"Messenger from Heaven!" added Linda.

They released him, and made him take off his coat, and come to the fire to get warm.

It took an hour to tell all the details of their hazardous adventure, which had ended in this most surprising way, with imprisonment, and while they talked, they ate the hot-cakes and the coffee which Linda and Louise were making when Ted arrived. Then the latter glanced at his watch and said they had better be starting.

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"Ought we to wash these dishes?" inquired Linda, when they finished, and went for their coats and leggings and helmets.

"I should say not!" thundered Louise, with a vengeance. "I'd like to smash and dirty everything in the old cabin!"

"Don't forget it saved our lives," Linda reminded her, laughingly.

But they did not wait. Time was precious now; they wanted to take off before it was any darker, or the snow grew too deep. Opening the door, they stepped outside just as two men on horseback drew up to the cabin. Marshall and the sergeant had returned.

"What's this?" demanded the latter, in a gruff, insulting tone. "Making a get-away, are you?" He glanced suspiciously at Ted. "Maybe you don't know these young women are under arrest!"

"Are they?" retorted Ted. "Well, so are you, for that matter! For not reporting that wreck two days ago! Don't you know it's a government regulation that wrecked planes must be reported as soon as possible?"

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The man shuffled nervously, kicking the snow against his horse.

"Well, I'm reportin' it," he asserted, defiantly.

"Today? You bet you'll report it today! It's two days too late, though!"

"They're smugglers," he sneered, scornfully. "Smugglers is enemies to the country, and don't deserve no consideration!"

"We'll see about that!" replied Ted masterfully, as he glowered at the girls' accuser. Linda and Louise stood quietly by, watching him in admiration. How grand it was to have a friend like this!

"You girls come along with me," snarled the officer. "I'm takin' you to the Court House."

"I'll take them to the Court House," amended Ted. "In my plane. You needn't be afraid I won't show up! I have plenty I want to report myself."

Sullenly the man agreed to the offer, for he still had no desire to take that young spit-fire, as he called Louise, on his horse. Waiting only to see the plane take off into the air, he galloped away with his friend, Marshall.

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Linda and Louise felt so gay and happy that they shouted and sang during the entire flight. It was close quarters in the little cabin plane, but who cared? They were free—or soon would be free—once more!

Though Ted smiled at their joviality, he felt more like praying. He was so grateful, so relieved that they were alive and safe, that he was filled with a solemn sense of thanksgiving. For he realized what a terrible fate they had escaped in jumping from that empty plane.

They landed at the little town where the sergeant had directed them, and Ted wired immediately to Mrs. Haydock and to Mr. Carlton, and to Linda's aunt. Then they went to the Court House, arriving before the men on horseback.

There, at last, the girls were allowed to tell their story, which a kindly judge listened to in righteous anger. And when Linda and Louise produced all their evidence, by going into detail about Mr. Carlton's business, and their own reason for the flight, they had no difficulty in convincing him of their innocence. Things would not go easily with this fellow, who had locked them up without hearing their version, or reporting them immediately to the authorities. The

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judge said he would see that the man was punished, when he finally arrived.

"Do we need bail or anything?" asked Linda, who knew nothing about courts or legal matters. "We have wired to our Dads, and they'll probably be right up here, as fast as a train can bring them."

"No, that is not necessary," smiled the judge. "Because I am convinced of your innocence.... You better wire your fathers not to come—it will only delay your return.... But before you go, I should like to hear more of the real criminal, this woman who, you say, has been smuggling. Tell me her name, and give me a description of her."

"Her name is Bess Hulbert," replied Louise. "But we're pretty sure she goes under an assumed name—possibly 'Anna Smith'." She was thinking of Linda's conversation in Plattsburg over the telephone, with Hofstatter's mother. "And probably by this time she has changed it again."

"I don't think you'll have to worry about her any more," added Linda. "The minute she hears we are safe, she'll know her game is up, and give up the underhand business." [Pg 180]

"Just the same, she ought to be caught and punished!" cried Louise, vindictively. She had said nothing about their belief of the cause of their leaking tank, for after all they had no proof, and this judge could do nothing. But for that reason more than any, Louise wanted her punished.

Promising the judge that they would try to get hold of Miss Hulbert's picture, the girls shook hands with him and left, accompanied by Ted Mackay, who was grinning harder than usual now. Everything was so right!

Dusk had set in already, though the storm had passed, and a beautiful sunset was fading from the sky, promising a clear day for the flyers tomorrow.

"I think we had better rest tonight," said Ted, as he followed the girls into a taxicab. "You girls can stay at the hotel—there is only one, for this is a small place—and I'll get a room over near the airport. I want to spend some time checking up on my plane, and I think I'll try to get somebody to help me. It's a long flight back to Spring City."

"Oh!" cried Linda, rapturously. "Won't it be marvelous to be home? I'm glad we have a couple of days before we have to go back to school!" [Pg 181]

"Sure you don't mind flying?" asked Ted. "You're not nervous, after your narrow escape?"

"We've forgotten that," replied Louise. "Forgotten everything except that we are eligible for the Caterpillar Club now."

"Linda has been for a long time—since her first flight up," Ted reminded them.

The machine stopped at the hotel, and Ted helped the girls to get out.

"You'll come back and have dinner with us, won't you, Ted?" asked Louise anxiously.

"O.K.—if you want me," he promised. "Only I mustn't stay afterwards, or go to the movies with you. I've got to work on that plane."

The girls found their hotel warm and comfortable, though naturally not luxurious like those in the large cities. But after their two days in that cramped little hut, it seemed like a veritable palace. Bathing in a real bathtub was a joy that they had sadly missed, and the dinner seemed like a banquet to them, after doing their own cooking with such a limited supply of food.

But best of all were their conversations with their families that evening, which, as Louise said, were worth all the money in the world to her. Long distance charges meant nothing, compared to the bliss of hearing her mother's voice over that wire. And Linda felt the same way about her Aunt Emily and her father, who, by this time, was at home. [Pg 182]

Finally they brought their conversations to a reluctant end, promising to be home the next night—in time for the New Year's Eve dance!

CHAPTER XIV

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The New Year's Eve Party

The sun was setting over the snow-covered horizon when Ted Mackay landed his mono-plane at Spring City on the last afternoon of the old year. A trifle stiff from their long ride, but still happy and carefree, the girls stepped out on the field.

At the arrival of the plane several of the men employed at the airport rushed out and greeted Linda Carlton, for they knew her well, from flying her Pursuit over Spring City, and coming there for supplies and inspection. Of course they had read her story in the newspapers.

"But you won't be flying for a while now, will you Miss Carlton?" remarked one of the men, regretfully.

"I shan't be flying the Pursuit," answered Linda. "But we have planes at school. I am taking a course at a ground school in St. Louis this year."

"What kind of course, Miss Carlton?"

"I am in line for two licenses—a commercial pilot's and a mechanic's."

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"Mechanic's!" repeated the man, in consternation. "Are you in earnest?"

"Certainly," smiled Linda, for she was quite used to people exclaiming over her chosen study. "Will you give me a job here when I finish?"

"I'll say we will! If you'd take it. But you won't. You'll have bigger offers than this."

"Come along, Linda!" urged Louise, pulling her chum by the arm. "Aren't you cold?"

"No, but I'm dying to see my family," she replied, and followed Louise to the taxi which Ted had engaged.

In contrast to her homecoming before Christmas, when her father and her aunt were plunged in gloom, Linda found them almost hysterical in their joy. Never had her father seemed so wrought up, so emotional. He kissed her again and again. Tears streamed down her aunt's cheeks.

"Darling child!" she cried, "we thought we should never see you again! Oh, your father and I have never had two such dreadful days as yesterday and the day before!"

"But they're over now," returned Linda. "And the only sad part of it all is that I have no plane."

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"Which is all for the best," was Miss Carlton's comment.

"I wish that I could buy you another," lamented her father.

It was then that Linda told her story, giving her reasons for the trip, and the events that led up to her suspicions about Bess Hulbert. Only one part she omitted—and that was her own desire to buy a Bellanca and fly the Atlantic. It would be a very poor time to tell her aunt of any such a wish.

Mr. Carlton listened in amazement; he was sure his daughter was correct in all her surmises.

"We can easily put an end to Miss Hulbert's smuggling now," he said. "With the help of the United States officers.... Why, Linda, you have saved my business!"

"I hope we have, Daddy. But don't forget the credit goes to Louise too. I never could have done anything without her to help me."

"That's all perfectly lovely," put in Miss Carlton. "But the person I'm most grateful to is Ted Mackay. No knowing what might have happened if he hadn't rescued you when he did. And think of the hours of torturing suspense he saved us all here at home!"

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"Yes, that's right," agreed her brother, who now thoroughly approved of the young man. "I'd like to thank him myself. Where is he, Linda?"

"He went home with Lou. She invited him before I even thought of it. But she asked us all to come over to their house to dinner. How about it, Aunt Emily?"

"I'd be delighted. At least, if you'd rather go there than to the New Year's Eve dance at the Country Club."

"I'd rather go to both," announced Linda, gayly. "Lou and Ted expect to take that in too, for I heard her saying she'd dig out a costume for him. Could you find something for me, Auntie?"

"Of course I could," replied the older woman, smiling happily. It was just like old times again, she thought—with dinner parties and costume dances to take one's attention.

"I'll go up in the attic right away," she decided. "What sort of thing would you prefer?"

"Anything different from this dirty old flyer's suit. I hate the sight of it, after living in it at that miserable cabin. Why, I haven't had anything else since we left Plattsburg! I'm going to burn it tonight!"

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Again Miss Carlton smiled; this was the Linda she liked best, the dainty girl who looked charming in fluffy, feminine gowns.

"I'm going to hurry and get my bath before anybody comes," added the girl. "And get into a dinner dress."

She left just in time, for no sooner had she reached the top of the stairs than she heard Ralph Clavering's voice in the hall.

"Linda! Linda!" he shouted, for her father had told him that she had just gone upstairs to dress.

"Hello, Ralph!" she called back. "I'm dying to see you, but I'm not presentable. Can you wait about twenty minutes?"

"I don't want to," he answered impatiently. "But I must, if you say so. Will you go to the dance with me tonight?"

"O.K.," she replied, joyfully. "I was 'waiting-for-a-partner,' just as we used to sing in that game we played when we were kids. Ted and Lou are going together, and I was left over!"

"As if Linda Carlton would ever be left over!" he muttered to himself, in amusement.

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When she came downstairs, fifteen minutes later, arrayed in pink chiffon, he longed so to take her in his arms that it actually hurt to restrain himself. It was so good to see her again—alive and unharmed—more beautiful than ever! He wished she were not so capable, so bent upon having a career. A girl who looked so adorable had no right to possess the keen mind of a man.

But both Mr. Carlton and his sister were in the room, and Ralph had to content himself with

shaking hands with Linda.

The time was short, however; even as she began to answer his questions, the phone bell rang. Congratulations were pouring in; telegrams and flowers arrived, and finally Ralph gave up hoping to talk to her.

"I'll come for you about ten o'clock," he managed to whisper into her ear while she sat at the telephone. Ever so lightly, without her even realizing it, he touched her hair with his lips.

It was with difficulty that she broke away at last, and went with her father and her aunt to Louise's in the big car that the chauffeur drove. Thanks to Linda, her aunt Emily would not have to give it up as she had expected.

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That dinner party was the noisiest, jolliest affair Linda had ever attended. No holiday occasion had ever aroused such unrestrained merry-making. Even Ted Mackay, who usually was shy among strangers, felt perfectly at home. Louise's small brother insisted upon sitting next to him at dinner, and regarded him as a favored hero—in the class with Byrd and Lindbergh.

"Ted and I have gone into a conspiracy," announced Louise. "We're going to track down Bess Hulbert tonight, and make her confess everything!"

"At the party?" asked Linda, in amazement.

"Surest thing! It'll only add to the excitement."

"You'll never catch that baby!" remarked her brother, significantly.

"Go carefully," warned Mr. Haydock. "After all, there is a chance that she isn't guilty."

"A pretty slim chance!" laughed his daughter. "Anyway, it will be fun to spot her among all those rigs and false-faces."

"I thought you were going to say rigs and wigs, Sis!"

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"All right, any way you like, Tim. Only I guess we better stop fooling and get dressed. It may take a good while to wiggle into our costumes. Especially yours, Big Boy," she added, to Ted. For he was to wear an old suit of her father's, which was sure to be rather small for him.

The girls, who had been used to these sorts of affairs, found the dance just like all the other parties. Lights, splendid costumes, gayety, color, and music; but to Ted Mackay it was strange and exciting. But he danced well, and his manners were just as good as those of the other boys—if anything he was more courteous than many of them. To his surprise he found that he was being fêted along with Linda and Louise, who were singled out and congratulated every few minutes, not only by friends, but by mere acquaintances as well, who had read about them in the papers and felt proud to know them.

But although Ted was carried away by the fun and the excitement, Louise did not forget the fact that she had a self-appointed duty to perform, to corner Bess Hulbert, and ply her with questions.

She thought she had identified her in a Dutch girl's costume, but she found when they all unmasked for supper that she was mistaken.

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"Where's that Hulbert woman?" she asked Kitty Clavering, irritably. Louise just had to be frank; if she felt no respect for a person she made no effort to conceal her opinion.

Kitty flushed. She never could understand why her friends did not care for Bess Hulbert as she did. The young woman was getting to be very unpopular at the Flying Club, and Ralph positively detested her.

"Bess?" she stammered. "She's gone abroad."

"Abroad!" repeated Louise, aghast, wondering whether she and Linda could have been mistaken all along. "When did she go?"

"She's sailing today. She left here for New York yesterday."

"What for?" demanded Louise, bluntly. But already she had guessed the reason. They had not been mistaken at all: Bess Hulbert was fleeing from justice!

"She's English, you know," Kitty explained. "Her family—except her brother—are all in England."

"Has she given up the idea of competing for that prize?"

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"I don't think so. Not if she can get a boat, as she calls it."

"Have her people money?"

"How do I know?" retorted Kitty, in exasperation at this cross-examination. She never had got on well with Louise Haydock; she couldn't understand how such a sweet girl as Linda Carlton could want her as a best friend.

She turned abruptly away, for at that moment Lieutenant Hulbert entered the room, and made straight for Kitty. From that moment on, she had neither eyes nor ears for anyone else.

Louise was thankful to have Ted appear to claim her for another dance, and she told him immediately of Bess Hulbert's sudden departure.

"Just what we might have expected," said Ted. "Well, that is proof enough that she is guilty. Are you going on with the chase?"

"How can I—now? But if she ever dares to set foot in the United States again, and compete for that prize, I'll certainly do everything I can to expose her guilt."

"Don't forget, if you need me, I'm always right there!" Ted reminded her.

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"I'll never forget it," Louise replied, wishing that she didn't like him so much. After all, he was Linda's find—and if her chum cared for him—and wanted him—

But Linda Carlton did not look at this moment as if she wanted anyone or anything more than she had. One partner after another would snatch her away when she had danced only half-way around the ballroom. Ralph Clavering was the most persistent pursuer of them all; he never allowed her a single dance without cutting in at least twice.

At first Linda took this as a joke, but when it happened for seven dances in succession, she grew a trifle weary, and asked him to stop it.

"If you will give me two whole dances alone—sitting them out in the balcony," he agreed. "Then I'll be satisfied."

"Why two?" she countered.

"Because I have so much to say to you!"

"Oh, all right," she said, and together they pushed through the crowd, up the stairs to the balcony to a spot where a long bench was hidden behind some palms.

She looked at him questioningly.

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"Linda darling, haven't you guessed what it is all about?" he demanded, bending over so close to her that his face almost touched hers. "I love you! I've always loved you! I want you to give up this fool air school, and marry me. Elope with me! Tonight!"

Linda drew back, in amazement.

"Why, Ralph, you're talking of something impossible!" she said, hurt at the very idea. "Imagine your father—my Aunt Emily—if we eloped!... I never did think elopements were romantic—only selfish, when you consider the folks at home. Besides, you have college to finish—"

"I could chuck it!" he interrupted, putting his arm about her slender shoulders, and drawing her closer to him. "Please! I'll buy you a new plane—"

"Now Ralph!" she laughed, and rose quickly to her feet. "Don't try to bribe me. No—positively no!"

"But you do like me?"

"Yes. Heaps."

"Not love?"

"I don't care for any man in that way," she declared.

"Are you sure you don't love Ted Mackay?" Jealousy was always a part of Ralph's nature.

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"Oh, no! I have always admired him for his ability. But I don't love him.... No, I'm only in love with aviation."

He was standing too, looking disappointed, but not heart-broken.

"I may ask you again?" he pleaded.

"When you graduate from college, yes."

"Two and a half years to wait!" he sighed, despondently.

"If I'm not lost in the ocean in the meanwhile," she added, lightly.

"Linda, that reminds me—" He pulled her down to the bench again. "I know you're counting on trying for that prize—oh, don't deny it, for I saw the excitement in your eyes that day Bob Hulbert made the announcement—but I don't think you can hope to win, even if you do get hold of another plane.... I'm afraid that Hulbert woman is going to beat you to it."

"Why, Ralph?" asked Linda, seeing that it was useless to deny her desire.

"Because I believe she's planning to fly soon."

"What with?"

"She's gone to England to have a special plane made.... I'll tell you a secret, if you promise not to breathe it to Kitty that I told you: Sis lent her her pearls, so that Miss Hulbert could raise a loan for the price of the plane."

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"Oh, no!" cried Linda, shocked for Kitty's sake, as well as for her own and Louise's.

"Yes, she did. I saw Miss Hulbert take away a box yesterday, and I questioned Kitty. So she told me why."

"Then," concluded Linda, dolefully, "I guess that settles it!"

"So you might as well give up aviation and marry me!"

"Forget it, Ralph!" Then, deliberately assuming a light-hearted manner again, she added, "Come on back and dance.... But remember—no more cutting in!"

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CHAPTER XV

Plans for the Ocean Flight

The last day of the Christmas vacation—New Year's—passed very quickly for Linda Carlton. The dance had continued until almost dawn, and for once she stayed to the end. For there was no flight in store for her on the morrow, or the day after. She could be as sleepy as she wanted to.

Accordingly, her aunt did not wake her until noon, and only then because her father was taking a late afternoon train back to New York.

"I want to go for a walk with you this afternoon, Daughter," he said, while she ate her combined breakfast and luncheon. "I would like to have a talk with you."

"Yes, Daddy," replied Linda, trembling inside, lest he intended to tell her that he would forbid the ocean flight.

"Can you spare the time—say about three o'clock—from your social engagements?"

"I haven't any social engagements," she replied. "Lou and I didn't accept anything for after Christmas Day." [Pg 198]

"But I heard your aunt tell Mrs. Clavering this morning on the telephone that she'd see that you went to Kitty's dinner party."

Linda yawned. She had enjoyed the dance the night before, but it was enough to last her for a while.

"Is Lou going?" she inquired.

"I couldn't tell you that, my dear. You can call her up."

"All right. But in any case that wouldn't interfere with our walk, Daddy. I'll be ready at three."

Unlike most of her girl friends, whose days were spent in constant social activities, Linda was always punctual about her engagements. As the clock struck three, she appeared in the living-room. Dressed in her gray squirrel coat and matching beret and cloth boots, she presented a beautiful picture of up-to-date winter fashions. Linking her arm affectionately in her father's, she accompanied him out into the crisp, clear air, and started towards the outskirts of the town.

"Wouldn't you rather be sledding, my dear?" he asked, gazing at her in admiration. [Pg 199]

"No, indeed!" she hastened to reply. "I'd much rather be with you.... Anyway, I suppose there will be a sledding-party after dinner tonight. Kitty told us to bring our sweaters and riding-breeches."

"Very well.... Have you guessed what I wanted to talk to you about?"

"Yes, I think I have—Daddy," she faltered.

"You have?" he repeated, smiling. "Well, first of all I want to tell you that I am exceedingly proud of your courage and pluck up there on the border, and in Canada, and that I think you have proved your ability to take care of yourself in a plane."

"Daddy!" she exclaimed, in surprise. "I was afraid you and Aunt Emily would say I could never fly again! After all the anxiety I caused you."

"That is what your aunt would like to say—but I feel differently. What happened was due to no fault or carelessness of yours, no lack of skill on your part. A less able pilot would have been killed, I am sure."

"It's awfully sweet of you to say that!"

"Well, I mean it. I'm convinced now that you have a right to go on with aviation. And I am willing for you to order your plane for the ocean flight." [Pg 200]

A thrill of emotion ran through Linda, so intense that she could not speak. Claspings his arm tightly with both her hands, she told him in the only way she could of her great gratitude.

Then she remembered his business.

"You won't need the money, Daddy?" she asked, after a moment.

"No—not now that I feel sure that your trip saved me, and that this unfair competition will cease. But just to make sure, I'll go to Canada tomorrow, and visit the Convent myself. I'll wire you results."

"I think," she said slowly, with tears dimming her blue eyes, "that you are the most wonderful father a girl ever had."

He patted her hand gently, not knowing how to reply, and they walked on for some time in silence.

It was not until the short winter afternoon was coming to a close, and they had turned their steps towards home that he mentioned his sister.

"I don't want you to say anything at all of this to your aunt, Linda," he cautioned her. "She might play on your unselfishness, and make you give it up. It is a risk, of course—I understand that, and I know just how she feels. But we all have to take risks in life; it would be dull indeed if we didn't. So I think I had better handle the thing myself—tell her sometime when I happen to come home" [Pg 201]

when you aren't there. I can win her around to it, I know."

"That would be wonderful, Daddy!" cried the girl, in relief. It had been worrying her for a long time whenever she thought of securing her aunt's consent. She even believed that she might weaken herself, if the older woman used tears and pleading. For Linda could never forget what a loving foster-mother her Aunt Emily had always been.

"By the way, have you picked out your plane?" her father inquired.

"Yes, indeed! It's a Bellanca—they call it Model J 300. Just built for ocean flights! Oh, Daddy, it has everything to make it perfect! A capacity for carrying one hundred and five additional gallons of gasoline, besides the regular supply in the tanks of one hundred and eighty gallons! And a Wright three-hundred-horsepower engine, and a tachometer, and a magnetic compass——"

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"There, that's enough, Daughter!" he interrupted, smiling. "I'm afraid I don't know what all those terms mean. If you're satisfied that it's the best you can buy——"

"Oh, I am! I'm crazy about it. I'm going to put in my order the minute I get your telegram."

"And if anything should happen, so that you had to come down in the water, would it float?" he asked, with an imperceptible shudder. In spite of his bravery, the thought of Linda over that deep, wide ocean at night made his flesh creep.

"Yes, Daddy. The tanks permit the plane to float. You can be sure it will have every modern invention, every safety device there is today. It will cost about twenty-two thousand dollars!"

"That's right, Daughter," he approved. "If you're going at all, you must do the thing with the utmost care. Don't try to save money. A few hundred dollars might mean the difference between disaster and success."

"I know," she answered, solemnly.

As they were approaching the house, they began to talk of other things, as if by silent agreement. Airplanes and ocean flights were apparently forgotten, for the moment they were inside, Linda's Aunt Emily was urging her to get ready for the party. Unfortunately, Louise was not going. Like Linda, she had been invited at first, but once she refused, she was not popular enough with Kitty to be asked again. So Linda could not talk of her trip with anyone; she would have to wait until the following day, when Louise accompanied her back to the ground school.

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It seemed strange indeed, to get up early the next morning and take a train back to St. Louis. Both the girls regretted the loss of the Pursuit, and realized how they were going to miss it, but they resolutely decided to be good sports and to try to joke about it.

"Don't forget we have to buy tickets," Linda reminded her chum. "Don't go to the window and ask for high-test gasoline!"

"Won't a train seem slow?" returned Louise. "Oh, well, we won't have to care about the weather, that's one good thing! Besides, we can sleep."

"As if you ever made a flight without at least one good nap!" teased the other.

But in spite of their assumed gayety, it seemed like a tiresome, endless journey, with a change of cars and a wait at the station. It was afternoon before they finally arrived at their destination.

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Both girls had decided to say nothing about their holiday adventure, but when they reached the school, they found themselves being treated as heroines. Everybody had read all about them in the papers, and knew that they had jumped from parachutes and that they had lost the Pursuit.

"But you'll soon be graduating from here, and making all kinds of money," one of the instructors told Linda hopefully. "And then you will be able to buy another plane of your own."

(Sooner than you think, Linda said to herself, for no one but Mr. Eckers at the school knew of her proposed trans-Atlantic flight.)

Both girls plunged headlong into the work, forgetting everything but the studies that were before them. Only, Linda could not forget to watch eagerly for the telegram that would mean her father's final consent.

It arrived three days later, saying that all his business troubles had vanished, and that he had sold enough of her bonds for her to write a check for her Bellanca.

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Wild with joy, she dashed across the flying field to the hangar where Louise happened to be taking some notes from Eckers.

"Everything's O.K.!" she cried, as she burst open the door. "We can fly to Paris, Lou!"

Her chum jumped up and the girls hugged each other in ecstasy, much to the amusement of the elderly instructor.

"So you're ordering a Bellanca long-distance mono-plane?" he asked.

"Yes. Tonight! Oh, Mr. Eckers, from its pictures, from its description, it's absolutely marvelous. And as safe as an ocean-liner!"

"Safer!" amended Louise, "Ocean-liners sometimes sink. But never a Bellanca!"

"We're going to be awfully careful and thorough about our preparations, Mr. Eckers," Linda explained, as she detached herself from Louise's arms, and sat down on the edge of his desk. "Just like Lindbergh!"

"Well, I hope you have Lindbergh's success," was the instructor's fervent wish. "But tell me, Miss

Carlton, have you heard of any others who are planning to try for this prize?"

"Only one so far. She's in England now, having her plane built there, I believe."

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Louise gritted her teeth at the mention of Bess Hulbert, but she said nothing.

"Then you'll simply have to beat her!" cried the man, enthusiastically. "It must be an American plane that wins. And American girls!"

"Of course some of our best aviatrixes may compete," put in Louise.

"You mean women like Amelia Earhart?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Somehow I don't think she will," said Mr. Eckers. "Miss Earhart is too good a sport to take honors from a younger, less experienced flyer. She doesn't go out for sensational glory. She doesn't have to. She has already won her place."

"But of course some of the younger girls may."

"Yes. But you girls have a better chance than anybody, I think. Better prepared. Besides, the difficulty is going to be getting a suitable plane. It would be fool-hardy for anybody to take a chance in a plane that wasn't super-tested, and super-equipped. And few parents are going to give their consent, even if they can provide the money.... I believe your greatest opponent is this English girl."

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"Well, we're going to beat her!" announced Louise, defiantly, and she did not add that she meant to take harsh measures if that young woman put in an appearance in the United States.

"When do you expect to go?" questioned Eckers.

"The twentieth of May, if the weather is right," replied Linda. "I believe in luck, and that was Lindy's lucky day."

"And Linda Carlton's!" added Louise, as the girls went off to send their order.

CHAPTER XVI

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The Autogiro

Linda Carlton had always been a girl of a single purpose. It was this characteristic that set her apart from Louise Haydock, from her other girl friends—in fact, from practically all of her sex. In this she was more like a man, with a man's mind.

She never could see the advisability of mixing pleasure with work; when she was determined to accomplish or to learn something, nothing could distract her. Now while she was bending all her energy to the winning of her mechanic's license and the thorough preparation for her trans-Atlantic flight she grew impatient with even her chum for desiring to lead a social life.

One cold night in February, when she was desperately trying to concentrate on a treatise on airplane engines, Louise annoyed her exceedingly by moving restlessly about the bedroom and interrupting her every few minutes with remarks and questions.

"I do wish you'd be more sociable, Linda!" she exclaimed, taking a dance dress out of the closet, and surveying it mournfully.

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"I'm sorry, Lou—I'm busy," replied her companion, without looking up.

"Well, just give me five minutes. Then I'll leave you alone."

"All right," agreed Linda, trying to be patient.

"Gaze on this dress, please. Don't you think it's an absolute wash-out?"

"I never heard of anybody's washing chiffon," remarked Linda, facetiously. "Why not try having it cleaned?"

"Don't be smart! You're wasting your precious time.... But seriously, Linda, could I or couldn't I wear it Saturday night to that dance Ted and his boy friend are taking us to?"

"I suppose you could. But why not send home for another?"

"There isn't time. Besides, I'd love something new.... Here's my idea, Linda. Let's take tomorrow off—entirely off—and go on a shopping bat. I'm positively sick for one!"

"For the love of Pete!" cried Linda, in exasperation. "You don't know what you're asking, Lou. Tomorrow they're going to bring an autogiro to the school, and Mr. Eckers said there was some chance of my being allowed to fly it!"

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"Autogiro?" repeated Louise. "What's that?"

"You know, Lou! Get your mind off pink chiffon, and you'll remember. It's that new plane Cierva, the Spaniard, invented—with a windmill sort of thing on top—that can land and take off in a very small space. I'm just crazy to examine one and fly it myself."

Her companion assumed an air of resignation.

"Very well. If you want to go to that dance at the Aviation Club looking like something the cat dragged in, you can! But I'm not. I'm going to get me some raiment."

"I don't want to go to the dance at all."

"What?"

"You heard me, Lou."

"Have you written that to Ted?"

"No. I didn't say positively last week that I'd go. And I haven't time to waste on social correspondence. It's all I can do to get off my weekly letters to Daddy and Aunt Emily. You tell him."

"But Linda, Ted's boy friend won't have any girl!"

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"You can manage 'em both. I've seen you take care of six or seven on Sunday nights at home."

"That was different."

"Well settle it to suit yourself. Only, remember, I'm not going. I'll be at the school all day Saturday and I'm not going to rush back to a beauty shop to get my hands and fingernails into shape for a dance. I'm staying home!"

Speechless, Louise stood gazing at her chum in utter incomprehension. She was past understanding.

Thinking the conversation ended, Linda returned to her pamphlet. But her room-mate had not finished.

"Linda, I want to ask you something—while we're on the subject of Ted Mackay, and these nice parties he is always planning for us. How much do you care for him?"

"Not a rap!" Of course that was not exactly the truth, for Linda did like the big fellow immensely. But lately she had grown very tired of his regular week-end visits.

"Linda Carlton! You ought to be ashamed of yourself to say a thing like that! After all Ted's done for you."

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"Well, I guess I was exaggerating. But I'm fed up with him, Lou. I'm not going out with him any more for a while. And that's that!"

"Do you mind if I do?"

"Certainly not. Go all you please, if you won't try to drag me in!"

Louise sat down, and fingered her dress nervously. There was one more question she just had to ask.

"Linda, will you tell me the truth about this: Would you mind if I—I—cared a whole lot about Ted?"

At last Linda was interested. She closed her booklet, and turned about to face the other girl. Seeing how serious, how ardent, yet how confused Louise was, she smiled warmly.

"I think it's lovely, Lou!" she assured her. "If you really care for Ted—because I've known for months that he's head over heels in love with you. Nothing but the real thing could pull him away from his work." Her tone was that of a person much older. "I say, 'Bless you, my children!'"

Louise was at her side now, kissing her ecstatically.

"I was so desperately afraid you'd mind, Linda!"

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Linda laughed at the mistake. It really was funny. Louise—usually so cocksure of herself in everything—was so modest that she couldn't see Ted's very evident admiration.

"You're a goose, Lou, but a dear, foolish goose!" Her brow suddenly darkened. "Does this mean you won't fly with me to Paris?"

"Oh, no! 'Course I'll go. I'm sure Ted wouldn't want me not to."

"I'm not so sure myself," muttered Linda, remembering how Ralph Clavering had tried to get her to give up the flight. Men were funny when they were in love, she thought; it did not occur to her that girls were funny too.

Louise seemed perfectly satisfied, and did not open her mouth again that evening until Linda put her work away and suggested that they go downstairs and ask for cookies and milk, which their kind landlady always provided for them.

But Louise did not give up her decision about the shopping trip, and the next day Linda went to the ground school alone, to forget everything else in her admiration of the autogiro which had arrived.

It was a queer little boat, the motor in its nose, and an ordinary propeller, just like an airplane. Its wings, however, were stubby, and the strangest part of it was the windmill-like arrangement, or rotary wing, mounted right on the top.

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Everybody at the school was gathered about it, eagerly examining it, when Linda appeared, and she lost no time in joining the group. Mr. Eckers was explaining its parts to the students.

"It really is remarkable," he was saying, "the way it can rise vertically right over a given place. It can hover over a spot while it is climbing upward, and can land with almost no forward motion. For this reason a huge landing field is not necessary. I believe it is the plane for the city dweller."

"Everyone can keep an autogiro in his back yard," remarked one of the students. "And make his landing on a postage stamp! Believe—me—I'm going to have one! And I don't mean maybe."

Mr. Eckers continued his explanation, telling them that the autogiro could fly very low, only a few feet from the ground, and then he went on to compare it with the helicopter, another new-fashioned invention somewhat similar.

When he had finished his remarks, he offered to take the students in turn for rides, and they all pressed eagerly forward. All except Linda Carlton, for she was too shy to make her wishes known. Besides, she felt that she did not have to tell Mr. Eckers; he would know how interested she was. [Pg 215]

But the time was too short, and the students too many. Closing hour arrived, and Linda had not had her flight. Stopping in at the instructor's office at five o'clock, she told him wistfully that she had missed out.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Miss Carlton!" he exclaimed, in genuine regret. "But those boys acted just like children, pushing in the way they did. Never you mind, though, you'll get your turn tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" she repeated. "I thought the autogiro was to be sent to Birmingham, Alabama!"

"So it is. But after a little practice with it, I'm going to let you take it."

"Me?"

"Yes, you! Because you are such a good flyer, and because you are a mechanic besides. There's another job at the end of the trip—taking another plane—not an autogiro—to Nashville, Tennessee. All your expenses will be paid, and there will be twenty-five dollars in it for you. Would you like to do it?" [Pg 216]

"Would I?" cried Linda, her eyes shining with happiness. "I'd just love it."

"Then you can make your plans."

"Could I—take Miss Haydock with me?" she asked, timidly.

"Why, of course. That will make it all the better. I think we can even pay her hotel expenses, though of course she won't make any money. It is because you are a mechanic as well as a flyer that you are in a position to earn the money."

"Because I am a mechanic!" she repeated softly to herself. Her wish was really coming true.

"Be on hand at eight o'clock tomorrow, if the day is clear," the instructor concluded. "And don't wait for that girl friend of yours, if she is late. She cut classes today—isn't sick, is she?"

"No," laughed Linda. "Playing hookey, I'm afraid."

"Just a typical girl," muttered the man. "We have 'em all the time here—society dames, flying as a fad, school-girls, for the excitement of the thing, married women who are tired of housekeeping.... There isn't one in a thousand who takes it seriously, as you do, Miss Carlton." [Pg 217]

"Thank you, Mr. Eckers," replied Linda, blushing at his praise.... "How long shall I be gone—on this trip, I mean?"

"You ought to be able to get to Birmingham before dark tomorrow. Then you can rest tomorrow night, and start to Nashville Saturday—if the weather is O.K. But don't try to fly too fast with this other plane, and don't attempt it till the weather is perfect. The plane's in good condition, but it's an old one, and I wouldn't want anything to happen to you. If you have to stay at Birmingham a week on account of fog, or something, it will be O.K. with me, and your expenses will be paid. You take a train back from Nashville."

"I'll get my map and directions tomorrow?"

"Yes. I'll have them here for you, all ready."

Linda went back to her boarding-house in an exalted frame of mind, singing as she entered her room. She found her chum equally gay, sitting on the bed amidst a pile of packages.

"Have a good time, Lou?" she asked, merrily.

"And how!" [Pg 218]

"So did I! And I've got the best news yet. We fly an autogiro to Birmingham tomorrow."

"Who do?"

"You and I, Lou! Our expenses are to be paid, and we get twenty-five dollars besides!" Linda did not add that it was she who was earning the money, for she had already made up her mind to share it with her chum.

Louise shook her head.

"Not this baby!" she said. "Tomorrow's Friday, Linda. I might not get back in time for the dance Saturday night. No, my dear, I'm not taking any chances."

"Do you really mean that, Lou? Give up a wonderful trip like this, just to go to an old dance? You could wire Ted."

"But I don't want to, Linda. Why, my heart'd break if I couldn't wear these new clothes I just bought.... Gaze on them! How about this cerise taffeta? Would you ever think any trimming could be so clever? It's made of feathers, you see—and look how the slippers match!"

Linda stood perfectly still, gazing at the finery without seeing it.

"You really won't go, Lou?" she repeated. "Even if I rush the trip?"

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"Oh no, Linda, I couldn't possibly disappoint Ted."

Seeing that it was useless to try to persuade her, Linda rushed downstairs and called Nancy Bancroft on the telephone, inviting her instead, and this time she was gratified with an acceptance.

CHAPTER XVII

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Enemies

The day of Linda Carlton's flight to Birmingham, Alabama, was warm and spring-like. It was only a false spring, to be sure, the kind that sometimes comes suddenly in February, making everyone long to be out of doors. How lucky for her, she thought. If it would only last a couple of days!

Nancy Bancroft was already at the school when Linda arrived, alert and eager for the trip. She had just received her private pilot's license a few days previous, but she did not expect to attempt to guide the autogiro. Nevertheless, she would be company for the more experienced aviatrix.

Half an hour's instruction was all that Mr. Eckers considered necessary, and before nine o'clock the girls took off for the South. Linda couldn't help singing for joy. The autogiro was so much fun!

"Dad's going to buy me a plane," Nancy informed her companion. "As soon as I get home next week."

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"Next week?" repeated Linda.

"Yes. I'm leaving the school as soon as we get back. I have my license, you know—that's what I wanted."

Linda was silent, thinking of Mr. Eckers' remark about girls the day before. Yes, he must be right, their ambition usually ended with the government's permission to fly.

"I'll miss you dreadfully, Nance!" was all she said.

"You must fly to New York often," urged the other.

The country over which the girls were flying was beautiful and the air delightful. As they went farther south, they recognized real evidences of spring in the foliage. The little plane hummed gayly on, with never a disturbance in its sturdy motor. Linda was exceedingly happy.

Noon-time came, and they ate their sandwiches and drank the coffee which Linda's kind-hearted landlady had insisted upon providing, but they did not stop. Everything was going so wonderfully that they hated to break the spell. At this rate they ought to reach Birmingham long before dark.

It was about two o'clock that they met with a strange adventure. Flying along at an even rate, high enough to span the woods that loomed ahead of them, there suddenly appeared, out of nowhere it seemed, what the girls thought to be a formation of airplanes.

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"Go carefully!" warned Nancy. "Don't forget that awful accident a while ago, when several planes were flying in formation!"

Linda curved to the side, but the planes seemed to be flying straight at her.

"They haven't any sense at all!" she cried, in exasperation, now seriously fearing disaster.

On they rushed, till a cold fear gripped Linda's heart. Try as she might, she couldn't get out of their way! It was all like a dreadful dream, when something menacing rushes inevitably towards you, yet you are powerless to stop. Then, in a flash, Linda perceived what the formation was.

Eagles! Great, huge, ominous birds, traveling through the air with the speed of machines. Involuntarily, she reached for her gun.

"No use!" shouted Nancy, in terror. "Too many of them!"

Realizing the truth of Nancy's words, Linda did the only thing possible: swiftly, almost recklessly, she landed on the ground, expecting to be dashed upward again, or the plane turned over, pinning her and her companion beneath. But miraculously, nothing disastrous happened; the autogiro had come down vertically and stopped. That, then, was the wonder of this marvelous little machine! Had it been any other kind of plane, the girls would surely have been injured—and possibly killed!

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They had landed in a small clearing between the trees. Shutting off her engine, Linda turned, gasping, to her friend.

"Would you ever believe, a thing like that if you read it?" she demanded.

"The landing—or the birds?" inquired Nancy, still breathless with excitement.

"I really meant the birds, for I knew that the autogiro was wonderful. I've seen them land and take off before, though of course I never tried anything like this."

"Well, I did read about big birds bothering pilots one time—in a newspaper, I guess. But I didn't think much about it."

They waited quietly for a while until they felt calm again. The birds had flown on immediately; there was nothing to prevent their taking up their journey again. Ordinarily Linda would have been apprehensive of a take-off in so small a space, but after her landing, she felt confident. The autogiro rose instantly, almost vertically, and they were on their course again. [Pg 224]

"I'm going to get Dad to buy me an autogiro!" Nancy announced. "This has decided me."

"Me too!" agreed Linda.

"But you'll have a big Bellanca!" Nancy said. "Lou told me you put in the order."

"I may not have, after we try that ocean trip," returned the other girl. "We may be ship-wrecked and picked up by some boat——"

"So long as you are picked up, it'll be O.K.... Oh, Linda, I think you are just marvelous!"

"Thanks, Nance. But I don't deserve the praise yet. Wait till I earn it."

Only a short distance stretched between them and Birmingham now, and Linda covered it in record time. Safe and sound she brought the autogiro down on the airport before four o'clock in the afternoon. Turning it over to the authorities, and giving her instructions about the other plane, which was to be ready the following day, Linda summoned a taxi and asked to be driven to the best hotel. [Pg 225]

The rest of the day was their own, and the girls enjoyed it thoroughly, eating a luxurious dinner, and attending a show afterward. On their way home from the theater, Nancy asked more questions about Linda's proposed trans-Atlantic flight, and the latter told her everything—even to the story of the enemy whom she and Louise most feared: Bess Hulbert.

"But I don't see why you should worry about her," said Nancy. "She wouldn't dare come back to the United States again."

"I'm not so sure of that. Now that some time has passed, she'll think everyone's forgotten about her crimes."

"I hope not," replied Nancy, optimistically.

Little did the girls think, as they discussed Bess Hulbert, that evening, that they would run into her the following day, just as Linda was fearing might happen at some time or another.

It all happened suddenly, at the field of the airplane construction company in Nashville, Tennessee, where Linda had delivered the second plane without any mishap.

She had just received the president's signature on the delivery card, and was about to summon a taxi, when the man made a generous suggestion. [Pg 226]

"If you girls can wait till tomorrow," he told them, "I can have you taken north by plane. We are making a delivery at Springfield, Illinois, and St. Louis isn't much out of the way."

"That will be fine!" exclaimed Linda, gratefully. "Because we both have grown to hate trains. They crawl so."

"Worms instead of birds," remarked Nancy, thinking of the dangerous mistake they had made the previous day.

"Besides," added Linda, "we will get there so much more quickly, even though we had thought something of taking a sleeper."

"O.K. Then I will introduce you to your pilot, and you can make your arrangements." He turned to a mechanic who was standing by. "Joe, get Miss Mason to come over here." Then, to the girls he explained, "Your pilot happens to be a young lady—one of our saleswomen."

Nancy and Linda both smiled rather proudly. It was nice to find that women were everywhere taking their places in aviation.

The false name was misleading; Linda had not a suspicion that "Miss Mason" was Bess Hulbert, although she remembered later that the girl had masqueraded in Plattsburg as "Anna Smith." But the moment the girl came toward them, Linda recognized her, and had the satisfaction at least of seeing her turn deathly pale. [Pg 227]

Noticing Linda's gasp of astonishment, Nancy turned to her questioningly.

"It's Bess Hulbert!" she whispered, hoarsely.

"What's that?" demanded the president of the corporation.

"Nothing," answered Linda. "Only—Mr. Harris—we—we've changed our minds about flying back to St. Louis. We'll go by train."

"But why?" demanded the man, as Miss Hulbert came nearer. "Pardon me, but is it something personal? You know Miss Mason, perhaps?"

"To Miss Carlton's sorrow!" was Nancy's quick and bitter retort. "I think you had better hear all about the kind of woman you have in your employ!"

"No! No!" protested Bess Hulbert, who was now near enough to hear the slur, and who appeared

desperately frightened. "Give me a chance to talk to Miss Carlton alone. I don't know this other person!" [Pg 228]

At a loss to know what to say, the man looked helplessly at Linda.

"No. Perhaps we had better go," decided Linda.

"Please give me a chance!" begged Bess. "Ten minutes—alone." She looked imploringly at Mr. Harris, who nodded immediately, and started towards the building.

Bess reached for Linda's arm, and clung to it desperately, as a beggar might appeal for alms.

"I know what you think of me," she said. "But I'm so sorry, so frightfully sorry! Won't you have mercy on me—let bygones be bygones, if I give you my word of honor I've reformed?"

Receiving no reply, she continued excitedly: "It's true that I tried to snatch your father's business, but oh, I was desperate! If you could know what it is to be poor—to have an ambition to fly, and not be able to fulfill it! Oh, Miss Carlton, you ought to understand what the longing is! Suppose you didn't have a father to buy you a plane! Remember, I had to fly an old Jenny from the Army, while you piloted an Arrow Sport!" [Pg 229]

"But you wrecked my Arrow," Linda reminded her.

"Yes. In a fit of jealousy. I'm sorry. Oh, please believe that I am truly sorry now! And if you let me go ahead without showing me up, and if I can win that prize for the flight to Paris, I'll buy you a new plane. Honest I will! I'll give you a written promise!"

"But why should I make it possible for you to win the prize, when Miss Haydock and I want to win it ourselves?" countered Linda.

"To be sporting! Oh, won't you please! You see, I now owe Kitty Clavering ten thousand dollars, and I can never repay her unless I win. I've got a job here, but it would take me years to save that much.... If you throw me into prison, I'll never get out of debt. It will ruin my life."

"Didn't you try to ruin Linda's life?" put in Nancy.

"No—only the plane. I didn't mean to kill you, Miss Carlton! I'm not so bad as that! I'd never do anything like that again—I've learned my lesson, living these months in a constant dread of arrest and disgrace.... Maybe you haven't heard that my brother is engaged to Kitty Clavering," she added, changing the subject. "But he could never marry her if I brought a terrible disgrace on the family!" [Pg 230]

In the face of these arguments and entreaties, Linda was silent. Never in her life had she been confronted with such a momentous decision.

"When do you plan to fly across the ocean?" she asked, stalling for time.

"April. Early in the month, I hope."

"With another girl?"

"No. Alone."

"No mechanic—no navigator with you?"

"No. I'm relying a lot on luck."

"That's a bad idea. You better get somebody to help you."

Bess Hulbert's eyes lighted up with joy.

"You are going to let me go?" she cried, snatching Linda's hand in relief. "Oh, you angel!"

"I'm not sure yet," replied Linda. "I'll have to talk it over with Lou—Miss Haydock. After all, she has a right to some say in the matter.... But meanwhile, my friend and I do not care to go by plane with you to St. Louis."

"You won't trust me! Even now, when you have my confession—when I tell you I've reformed?" [Pg 231]

"Sorry," replied Linda, coldly. "But a burnt child dreads the fire. So I don't feel like risking it.... Now, if we decide to let you off, it is just as you said, because of the sport of the thing—to give you a chance to compete for the big honor. But Miss Haydock and I could never really trust you again."

Bess Hulbert sighed; she was slowly but surely learning that dishonesty did not pay.

"You are going to tell Mr. Harris?" she asked.

"No, I guess not," replied Linda. "That wouldn't do us any good.... We want to get to a hotel now, and look up our trains, and change our clothing. Can you get us a taxi?"

"Certainly," replied Bess, meekly. How different she was from the haughty girl they had met at the Flying Club in the fall! "And when shall I hear definitely from you?"

"If we decide to take any steps against you, we'll inform the officials this week, and you'll hear from them. But I wouldn't run away this time—you have an even chance of getting free, if you stick to the job. And, if you hear nothing before the tenth of March, say, you can go ahead with your plans." [Pg 232]

"Thank you! Thank you!" cried the older girl, rushing off to do as she was told.

The taxi appeared in a few minutes, and when Nancy and Linda were finally alone, the former regarded her friend with wonder and admiration.

"You're actually going to let her go, aren't you, Linda!" she asked.

"What do you think?" asked the other.

Nancy shrugged her shoulders. "You're doing the big thing, of course, but I don't believe in your place I could do it. I'd want my revenge.... Anyhow, I don't really think she'll win that prize."

"What makes you say that?"

"Not enough preparation. Not a good enough plane—she's spending less than ten thousand dollars, apparently.... And, well, it just wouldn't be right."

Linda laughed, but she knew that Nancy was absolutely loyal to her.

CHAPTER XVIII

[Pg 233]

Rivals

When Linda got back to the boarding-house on Sunday afternoon, she dashed eagerly up to her room to tell the news to Louise. But her chum was not there.

"Where is Lou?" she called to the landlady.

"Out with Mr. Mackay," replied the woman, smiling.

There was nothing to do but wait, so Linda tried to busy herself with her studies. But for once she could not get her mind off the subject of Bess Hulbert, and concentrate.

About five o'clock Louise finally arrived. She looked radiantly happy.

"I've got something thrilling to tell you, Linda!" she exclaimed, giving the other girl a hug.

"And I have something not so thrilling to tell you!" returned Linda.

"Well, out with it! Let's get the bad news over first!" Louise took off her hat and coat and settled down in the arm-chair beside the window. Her eyes took on a dreamy expression.

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"I met Bess Hulbert!" Linda announced, expecting Louise to jump into the air at the startling fact. But she did no such thing; she took the information with the utmost calm.

"Well, of all things," she remarked. "Where?"

"At an airplane company in Nashville, Tennessee. And Lou, she confessed everything."

"Might as well," muttered her room-mate. "We knew it all anyway."

"She put up a touching plea for forgiveness. Why, she even promised to pay me for the Pursuit, if I didn't turn her over to the authorities."

"And what did you say?"

"That I couldn't decide, without talking to you.... Now, what do you think?"

"I think that she ought to be put into prison, of course!" replied Louise. "But it's up to you, Linda. I'll be too busy for the next few months to be bothered prosecuting criminals.... You see, I'm engaged to Ted!"

"Engaged!" Though Linda had expected this to happen, she had no idea it would come so soon. Somehow, she thought Louise would not settle anything definitely until after the flight to Paris.

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"Yes, that's my thrilling news! Aren't you pleased, Linda?"

"Of course I am, darling! I think it's wonderful.... I was just being selfish—wondering whether it would interfere with our flight."

"No indeed it won't! I told Ted I wouldn't consider giving that up. We're not going to be married until June."

"Then I'll have you three months more!" cried Linda, joyfully. "Whoopee! Long enough to finish our course here. After that we probably should have been separated anyway, because you know I expect to take a job."

"You have to be my maid-of-honor," Louise informed her. "That will be a job for you."

"The kind of job Aunt Emily would approve of. I'll be tickled to death, of course, Lou."

"I'm going home at Easter," continued the other girl, "and Ted is coming too. We'll make all our plans then. You expect to go home for the holidays too, don't you? We have a week."

"I thought something of going over to New Castle, to see how my Bellanca is coming along. Then I'd go back to Spring City for the rest of the time." She did not add that she had been hoping Louise would go with her; such a suggestion was out of the question now.

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"Suppose Bess Hulbert beats us, and our trip has to be canceled," remarked Louise. "Aren't you taking an awful chance letting her off?"

"Yes, but I'd hate myself if I prosecuted her just because I was afraid of her as a rival. In fact, that's the very reason I'm inclined to let her off—because of the sporting side of the thing. If she

weren't planning to compete for this prize, I'm sure I'd have her held for smuggling, anyway, for it would be a difficult matter to prove that she did something to injure my plane."

"You're a queer girl, Linda," observed her companion. "You can be so much more impersonal than most of our sex. I admire you for it."

Study was out of the question for that evening, because Louise just had to talk, and this time Linda humored her, listening in amusement to the girl's praises of Ted Mackay, and her rosy dreams of the future.

In the days that followed Louise tried to settle down to work, but she discovered it to be impossible. Her mind was completely absorbed with her trousseau, her wedding, the little house she and Ted meant to buy and furnish. The only thing about flying that interested her at all was the trans-Atlantic trip; for this she had not lost her enthusiasm. [Pg 237]

April arrived, bringing the Easter vacation, for the holiday fell late that year. The girls parted, to meet again at Spring City a day or two later.

Linda considered herself exceptionally fortunate to make the trip to New Castle by air. One of the students who owned a plane happened to be flying east for the week's vacation, and offered to take her with him. The weather was delightful, and her visit wholly satisfactory. The Bellanca would be ready for her by the first week of May.

She boarded a train back to Spring City, and arrived only a day after Louise. But that one day had been sufficient to spread the news of the latter's engagement all over the little town, and in spite of the fact that social affairs had slowed down for Lent, she was being entertained by everyone.

Linda went directly home and found her Aunt Emily anxiously waiting for her.

"There's a tea at the Flying Club, dear," Miss Carlton told her, almost before she had removed her hat and coat. "And Kitty has phoned twice for you." [Pg 238]

"Then I'll have to go right away, I suppose," laughed Linda. "You do love to get me into society, don't you, Aunt Emily?"

"Somebody has to keep up that end of it," replied the older woman. "But first, before you go, I want to talk to you.... About that flight to Paris."

Linda stood perfectly still, unable to keep from trembling. In these three months that had passed since Christmas, neither had ever mentioned the subject, although the girl knew that her father had performed his mission as he promised her on New Year's day. Now, at this late date, was her aunt going to put forth objections? She waited tensely for the latter to continue.

"I gave your father my word that I wouldn't do anything to keep you from going," said Miss Carlton, "and you must admit that I have kept to it. But circumstances have changed. I think I have a right, and a duty, to speak now."

"Why—now?" stammered Linda. "What has changed?" She was unable to follow her aunt's reasoning.

"Because of Louise's engagement—of course. It wouldn't be fair to Ted Mackay for her to take a risk like that. You must think of him, Linda." [Pg 239]

Linda fingered her coat nervously, wondering whether she was being selfish.

"But Ted is willing for Lou to go," she objected. "And she's crazy about it herself."

"Because she cares so much for you, my dear—not because she cares for the flight itself. If you weren't going, you know she'd never think of attempting it alone."

Linda smiled; how could she tell her aunt, without appearing conceited, that Louise was not capable of such a feat?

"Lou hasn't had enough experience, Aunt Emily," she finally said.

"But she has been at school as long as you have. And she accompanied you on most of your flights last summer.... No, dear—she doesn't care the way you do. And I don't want you to be selfish."

"All right, Aunt Emily, I'll talk it over with her," agreed Linda, as she went up to her bedroom to change into an afternoon dress for the tea.

All her joyousness at seeing the almost-completed Bellanca had suddenly vanished at her aunt's warning; she felt blue again, just as she had that day before Christmas when she offered to turn her money over to her father. In a way things were worse now, for she could not go to her chum for sympathy, as on the previous occasion. That would be taking an unfair advantage, literally forcing Louise to accompany her. [Pg 240]

She dressed quickly and drove to the Flying Club in her sports roadster, anxious to get away from her own unhappy thoughts.

Kitty Clavering, in a flowered chiffon, and sporting a lovely diamond on her left hand, came to greet her immediately, and in the congratulations and the gayety that followed, Linda forgot her troubles for the time being.

Louise, who was the center of attraction, was completely surrounded by her friends, and it was some minutes before Linda had a chance to speak to her.

"Have you a date for tonight, Lou?" she asked. "Has Ted come yet?"

"No—to both questions," replied Louise. "I promised the family I'd stay home, for some aunts and

cousins are coming. Now that I've caught my man, they want to look me over," she added flippantly. "And Ted won't be here till tomorrow. Why? What's on?"

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"I—I'd like to have a talk with you about our flight," said Linda. "I was going to ask you to come over to our house and stay all night."

"That's O.K. with me. Only you'll have to come to our house instead."

The conversation was interrupted by Ralph Clavering, who had spied Linda for the first time. He took her hand impulsively, and held it so long that she was forced to pull it away.

"Where have you been?" he demanded, irritably. "I've been home from college for four days, just waiting for you!"

"I stopped at New Castle to see my Bellanca," Linda explained, smiling at his impatience. In spite of everything she did and said to the contrary, he always acted as if he owned her.

"Linda! You're not really counting on that ocean trip?" he demanded, making no effort to hide his disapproval.

(Why, oh why, she wondered, is everybody against me?)

"I am, though," she answered.

"Louise won't go with you now, will she?"

"She fully expected to, when I said good-bye to her at school. Of course her family may have changed their minds about letting her."

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"I shouldn't think Mackay would permit such a thing!" asserted Ralph, masterfully.

"Pull yourself together, Ralph!" teased Linda. "This isn't Queen Victoria's time—when men say what women can or can't do!"

"Well, if she were my wife—or my fiancée——"

"Which she isn't! Come on, Ralph, let's dance. So you'll get over your grouch."

"It isn't a grouch. It's genuine worry.... Listen, Linda: if you're bound to fly to Paris, take me along with you, instead of Louise. Then at least we could die together."

"Don't be so morbid!" cried Linda. "Nobody's going to die. Besides, I couldn't take you. The whole point of the thing would be lost. The prize goes to the _girl_ or _girls_ who fly without a man's help."

"You could explain that I wasn't a help, only a hindrance," he suggested. "That I don't know half so much about piloting a plane as you do, and nothing at all about navigating it."

"No good, Ralph. Come on, let's dance, as I suggested before. And talk about something else. How you're going to entertain me tomorrow night, for instance."

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The young man's mood changed instantly, and the rest of the afternoon passed pleasantly. Indeed, it was with difficulty that Linda broke away at six o'clock, in order to have time to dash home to tell her aunt of her plans, and to put some clothing into her over-night bag.

Louise's family were just ready to sit down to dinner when Linda arrived, and as the former had explained, there was an assortment of relatives. But both girls went out of their way to be agreeable, and when they went up to Louise's room a little after ten, they left only the most pleasant impressions.

"Now tell me about the Bellanca," urged Louise, thinking this was Linda's reason for wanting to see her alone.

"Oh, it's marvelous, of course. More wonderful than its pictures." But her tone lacked enthusiasm.

"What's the matter, Linda?" inquired the other girl. "What has gone wrong?"

"Nothing.... Only, Aunt Emily thinks I'm selfish to keep you to your promise. She wants me to urge you to give up the flight."

"Don't you just love it the way other people always want to run your life?" remarked Louise. "With all due respect to your Aunt Emily, you can tell her from me, that I'm going! That's all there is to it. If I were married, it would be different. But I'm not!"

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"Oh, Lou, you really want to?" cried Linda, hugging her joyfully. "I'm not being selfish—and dragging you with me?"

"Absolutely not. We've set the date, and we're going!"

So Linda Carlton went happily to sleep that night, believing that everything was settled. Little did she think that on the following day two momentous events were to take place that would entirely disrupt her plans.

It all happened at the breakfast table, with the abruptness of an electric storm. Mr. Haydock spied the news first, in the paper which lay at his place. His mouth fell open and he stared at the sheet in dismay.

"Mabel and Joyce Lightcap take off in tri-motored Ford for Paris!" he read aloud to Linda and Louise.

"What?" gasped his daughter, jumping up from her chair and staring at the headlines over his

shoulder.

"In quest of the twenty-five-thousand-dollar prize offered by Mrs. Rodman Hollowell to the first girls who successfully fly from New York to Paris without a man," he continued. [Pg 245]

Linda sat listening, speechless.

Louise went on reading where her father had stopped.

"The Misses Lightcap, who are sisters, twenty-two and twenty-three years of age, had kept their plans secret until last night, when they arrived at Roosevelt Field in the tri-motored plane. They left at dawn this morning. Weather reports are favorable, and the radio will announce their progress throughout the course of the day and night..."

Louise dropped back into her chair, not daring to show Linda any sympathy, lest her chum burst out crying. She was probably the only person who realized what that flight meant to Linda Carlton.

"Of course they may not get there," observed Mr. Haydock, soothingly. "You girls may still get your chance."

"Perhaps it's all for the best," observed his wife, unable to conceal her feeling of relief at the knowledge that now Louise probably would not go.

Still Linda said nothing. Silently she ate her grapefruit and drank her coffee. But she believed she would choke if she tried to swallow any toast. [Pg 246]

At last the ordeal was over, and she and Louise rose from the table, about to go into the living-room with the newspaper, when a telegram arrived for the latter, containing another startling piece of news, this time from Ted Mackay.

"Transferred to Wichita, Kansas," Louise read aloud. "Beginning May first. Can't we be married now?... Arriving Spring City tonight."

Louise dropped into a chair and burst out laughing. What a relief from the tension!

"Might as well do it!" she cried. "Now that these girls have stolen the honors!"

"You really would like to be married next week?" inquired her mother.

"Yes, if Ted is going so far away. Of course I'll wait to see if these Lightcap women really arrive, but we ought to hear tonight..." She led Linda up to their bedroom.

"I really didn't want to go back to school anyway," she explained, when the girls were alone. "I've learned all I wanted to."

"You mean you'll always have Ted, in case things go wrong with your plane?" asked Linda. It was the first time she had spoken since she had heard the breath taking news. [Pg 247]

"That's about it. I could never hope to learn as much as he knows. Besides, I don't want to. Just have a license to fly—that's my ambition."

Linda began to put her things into the over-night bag, mechanically, as if she hardly knew what she was doing.

"I think I had better go home now, Lou, because you'll have a million things to do if you want to get married next week. You had better get right to work."

"I will, though I guess mother'll take charge of most everything," she replied, her mind already occupied with the plans for her trousseau and her wedding. The flight to Paris was forgotten.

"I can't have engraved invitations," she muttered, half to herself. "I'll have to telephone everybody. But I guess Miss Bonner can rush my wedding-dress through, she's always so obliging ___"

Linda kissed her good-by, and went downstairs. In another minute she was alone in her roadster. [Pg 248]

Alone! Yes, that was the word. Completely alone! Bitterly she thought that there was no one in all the world who would not be thankful that her dream was shattered. Everybody—her aunt, Ralph Clavering, Ted Mackay, her father—yes, and Louise herself—every single person would heave a sigh of relief at the change in the plans.

She entered the house noiselessly, unwilling to see her aunt yet, for fear the latter would gloat over the news. But soon a desire for information of the flyers got the better of her; she must hear the news. After all, she had to admire their spirit; she must not sulk over her own disappointment like a spoiled child. She went into the library and turned on the radio.

Except for her meals, she never left the instrument that day, listening to the reports as they came over the wireless. First the plane was sighted off Newfoundland; then a ship identified it half-way across the ocean. At supper time the bulletin came through that the plane had been seen off the Irish coast, and the newspapers went wild with joy. What a triumph for the feminine sex! Even Amelia Earhart took a man with her! This was new; this was history—great as the moment when the suffrage movement had been won! [Pg 249]

By evening Linda had succeeded in controlling her own feelings, and was able to rejoice with the rest of the world. She even left the radio and went to a dance with Ralph Clavering, and was somehow able to enjoy herself, although she felt like a different person.

The next morning the newspapers blazed forth the story that Mabel and Joyce Lightcap had landed safe and sound in Paris, and would receive their prize that night at a royal reception in

CHAPTER XIX

[Pg 250]

The Hoax Discovered

It was Harriman Smith who brought Linda the news that the Lightcap flight was a fraud.

Linda had not turned on the radio that morning, when the newspaper flashed forth the story of Mabel and Joyce Lightcap's successful arrival in Paris. While they were over the ocean, Linda had followed their progress with the keenest interest, but now that they were being fêted, it was more than she could bear to listen to the accounts of the celebration.

She was just finishing her coffee when Harry burst in. Good old Harry, whom she hadn't seen since Thanksgiving! Here, she thought, was a friend indeed, who would not rejoice with the others merely because she was safe, even though she had to forfeit her greatest ambition. Deep in her heart she knew that he realized her disappointment and sympathized.

"You can still win, Linda!" he cried exultantly, pulling her from her chair by grasping both her hands. "The Lightcaps are a fake!"

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"A fake?" she repeated, in a daze.

"Yes. Joyce happens to be a man! Masquerading as a girl! And he's been discovered, of course."

Wild with excitement, Linda clutched the boy's hands to steady herself. It was all so impossible, so unbelievable!

"Tell me everything!" she demanded. "Are you sure, Harry?"

"Positive. So would you be, if you'd turned on your radio, instead of saturating yourself with that sentimental newspaper! Everybody knows it now. Needless to say, they are not getting the prize."

Linda felt almost weak as she listened, and she dropped back into her chair to hear the details.

"It seems that this Joyce Lightcap is an experienced pilot—a mechanic, too—and he got the idea of winning that twenty-five thousand. So for months he and Mabel—she's his wife—have been living in seclusion, while he allowed his hair to grow and practiced acting the part of a girl. Joyce is a girl's name too, you know, as well as a man's, so his license was O.K. Then, when the big moment came, Mabel got backers to buy the Ford tri-motor plane, and they took off for Paris."

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"But how did they discover him?" asked Linda.

"By the simplest method of all. Somebody noticed his beard!"

The answer was so ridiculous that Linda let out a peal of laughter.

"You see," explained Harry, "Joyce relied on paint and powder to cover his cheeks and chin during the flight. From what I understand, Mabel's a wonderful talker, but she can't fly very well, and her husband didn't dare take the opportunity to shave. And some smart Johnnie, who kept shouting that no two girls could possibly fly the Atlantic, found himself challenged. He sneaked up near enough to the pair to rub his hands on their faces. Then, of course their game was up."

Linda sat silent for a moment, thinking the situation over. At first it appeared impossible, like the plot out of a fantastical musical comedy, but when she remembered how anxious Ralph Clavering had been to go with her, it did not seem so strange. Why, Ralph might have suggested the very thing himself if he had thought of it!

"What made you think of coming to tell me, Harry?" she inquired, after a moment.

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"I wasn't coming to tell you, but to rejoice with you!" he amended. "Linda, dear, you have never been out of my thoughts for a minute these last two days." He paused and looked shyly away from her. "Will you believe it, when I tell you that my heart just bled for you?"

"Harry!" she exclaimed hoarsely. "You really cared—for my sake?"

"More than I can tell you!"

"And I imagined I hadn't a friend," she murmured. "A real friend, I mean, who thought more of my feelings than of my physical safety.... Oh, Harry, I'll never forget this!"

There was a deep silence for a moment, a silence filled with understanding and sympathy. Then Linda heard her aunt's voice, calling her from the library.

"Can you come in here a minute, dear?" she said. "I want you to look at your new dress."

"Certainly," responded her niece, and as Linda rose from her chair she felt as if she were walking on air. The whole world had changed for her in that ten minutes since Harriman Smith's arrival.

The young people entered the library together.

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"Why, good morning Harry," said Miss Carlton, cordially. "I didn't know that Linda had company."

"It is a queer time to call, I'll admit," replied Harry. "And I guess I even forgot to apologize. But I do now."

"You're excused," smiled the older woman. "At least if you'll be patient while I talk clothes for a moment.... You see, dear," she explained to Linda, "this dress has just come—I ordered it a couple of weeks ago for you when I was shopping in Columbus—and I think it will do nicely for the wedding. Louise's mother just told me that you will be the only attendant—it's too short notice to worry about bridesmaids—and that practically any color you select will do. So I want you to look at this."

Taking off the lid of the box, she held up a filmy chiffon dress of the palest apple-blossom. Simply made, with a petaled skirt and a wide pink satin bow at the waist, its delicacy spoke eloquently of spring-time, of weddings, of romance. Yet Linda hardly saw it.

"Lovely, Aunt Emily, lovely," she murmured mechanically. "You always have the most perfect taste." [Pg 255]

Satisfied with her niece's approval, and unaware of the far-away look in the girl's eyes, Miss Carlton turned again to her desk, bidding the young people go off and amuse themselves.

"You didn't tell her, Linda!" exclaimed Harry, as they went out to the garage for the sports roadster.

"No. She—wouldn't be interested, Harry! Aunt Emily's a dear, but she has no time for airplanes. And she thinks ocean flights are absolutely insane."

"But oughtn't you to let her know immediately that the wedding will be postponed? That Louise will go with you now, as she promised?"

Linda was silent; she had forgotten how changed her chum's plans were. It would hardly be fair at this late date to ask her to put the wedding aside. Why, even the cake was ordered!

"No, Harry, I can't do it now. I'm—I'm not going to take Louise."

They had reached the garage, and Linda stooped over to unlock her car. As she did this, she made her decision; it was so simple that she was surprised that she had not thought of it before. [Pg 256]

"Harry," she said softly, "I'm going to Paris _alone_."

Expecting the usual protest, she went on to adjust the spark and the throttle in readiness to start the motor. But no protest came.

"Bully for you, Linda!" he cried, throwing his hat into the air, in his enthusiasm. "Those were the words I was hoping to hear!"

She raised her head swiftly, and grasped his hand so tightly that it hurt. Here, she repeated to herself, was a real friend!

She backed the car out of the garage and they drove to Columbus, where they had lunch in a charming tea-room and attended a matinée afterwards. Because Harriman Smith was working his way through college, his visits back to Spring City were necessarily limited; the unusual treat was doubly delightful to them both on that account. When they returned late in the afternoon, the news of the Lightcap hoax was on everyone's tongue. And naturally, all of Linda's and Louise's friends were asking what these girls would do now.

The question confronted Louise herself most seriously, and three times that day she called Linda on the telephone, only to be told by the maid that she was out. Finally, about five o'clock she drove over to the Carltons, and announced her intention of staying until her chum returned. [Pg 257]

Linda and Harry came in gayly about half-past five.

"You quitter!" cried Louise. "Where have you been?"

"Joy-riding," laughed the other girl. Then she added seriously, "Don't say anything, Lou! Don't offer to change your plans, and put off your wedding, because I've decided to fly solo!"

"Solo!" repeated Louise, in an awed whisper. But it was easy to detect the relief in her tone.

"Yes. Grab all the honors for myself! Just like Bess Hulbert. Pure selfishness on my part."

Her chum understood her real reason, however, and hugged her tightly in her joy.

"You are an angel, Linda! But I know you're capable of doing it, and I'm going to let you. And oh, I'll pray so hard for you to win! No girl ever deserved the honor half so much!"

As easily as that it was all settled, and Miss Carlton had to agree, once her brother gave his admiring consent. One concession, however, Linda made to her Aunt Emily and to Louise: she would come back from school the following week to be maid-of-honor at the wedding, just as she had promised. With this agreement Linda returned by train to St. Louis a day or so later. [Pg 258]

The first person she met at the ground school was Mr. Eckers, her friendly instructor. He was grinning broadly.

"Well, Miss Carlton, we've been having some excitement, eh, what?" he remarked, as he shook hands with her.

"I should say so," agreed Linda. "I thought my plans were all smashed to pieces."

"Funniest thing I ever heard of. But so fool-hardy. As if a man could carry off a thing like that!"

"Well, it has been done before you know," Linda reminded him. "Look at that famous Frenchman—Deon de Beaumont—who masqueraded as a woman for so long, and fooled everybody."

"True," admitted Mr. Eckers, who besides being an expert pilot, was a well-educated man. "And

wasn't it funny the way the King punished him!"

"I'm afraid I've forgotten that."

"Why, he was forced to continue playing the part of a woman for the rest of his life.... We might suggest the idea to Mrs. Rodman Hallowell."

Linda laughed merrily. "Really, though," she said, "I blame the girl more than her husband. It seems to me that she has brought dishonor on all of our sex. Just when we women are working so hard to establish our place in aviation by honest methods. Look at Ruth Nichols, breaking Lindbergh's coast-to-coast record, and Mrs. Keith Miller with her valiant solo flights, and Amelia Earhart and Myrtle Brown holding those responsible positions in big airplane companies—and dozens of us working day after day for commercial and transport licenses! Then for a girl like this Mabel Lightcap, who can scarcely pilot a plane, to try to grab the biggest honors of all! Oh, I tell you, Mr. Eckers, a thing like that hurts!"

"But she didn't succeed, my dear child. Don't forget that. Somebody who really is worthy will, I am sure of that." And he gave her an admiring smile.

Alone though she was that week, the days passed rapidly, for there was so much to do. Like Lindbergh, the keynote of her flight was preparation, and in this effort, the school, under Mr. Eckers' guidance, gave her plenty of help. Everything about the flight, down to the last detail, was being planned in advance.

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So busy was she, that she hated to take the time to go to Spring City for Louise's wedding, yet never for a moment was there any thought of breaking her promise. After all, the trip would not consume much time, for she decided to use a commercial air line, thus cutting the hours in half.

Nor had she any regrets. The wedding was the loveliest, yet at the same time, the simplest, that she had ever attended; it would remain in her memory as long as she lived. Held at Louise's home, with only her intimate friends present, the whole affair was both informal and delightful. Ted Mackay's radiant happiness, too, was something worth traveling miles to witness.

It was natural that Linda shed tears when the time came for parting with her chum. Great distances would separate them for long weeks ahead, there would be lonely hours over the vast black ocean for the young aviatrix when she would long for Louise as she had never wanted anyone before. Yet surely, she reminded herself with a smile through her tears, great happiness lay ahead for them both.

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She tried to make light of her farewell to her Aunt Emily, for she did not believe that she would see her again before the take-off for Paris. The Bellanca might arrive any day now, and Linda was not going to wait for the date she and Louise had previously set. After a period of test flying, the only thing that would keep her back would be the weather. As soon as the reports were favorable, she would be ready to go.

The sooner the better, she thought, as she returned to the school the following morning. But one look at Mr. Eckers' face told her that something had happened—that she was too late!

Putting his hand on her shoulder, the man spoke with difficulty. It was almost as if Linda Carlton were his own daughter, so keenly did her disappointments affect him. "My dear," he said gently, "Bess Hulbert took off from New York this morning at dawn for Paris."

CHAPTER XX

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Linda Takes Off

It was Linda's custom to read the daily report of the flying weather, and as soon as she heard the news of Bess Hulbert's take-off, she rushed into the office to find out the conditions. It was a lovely day, seeming to promise hours of sunshine and starlight ahead. But the barometer was dropping, and the forecast read, "Storm over the Atlantic tonight."

"Storm over the Atlantic!" Linda repeated with a shudder. Although she had disliked Bess Hulbert intensely, she had never hated her with the same violence that Louise had felt, and in the past few weeks, she had almost come to the point where she was willing to forgive her. It was not in Linda Carlton's nature to wish any such vengeance as the report might indicate, even to an enemy.

Yet she would not have been human if she had not hoped that something would happen to keep her rival from winning the honors she herself had been working so hard to secure. Something should happen, of course—but nothing too tragic!

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All day long she went about her work in grim silence, steeling herself to meet disappointment if Bess were finally victorious. The sun continued to shine, and the radio brought frequent reports of the lone flyer, sighted by ships out on the Atlantic Ocean.

Dusk set in, and then darkness, and the clouds began to gather. Until ten o'clock that night Linda heard that the other girl was still making progress. Then she turned off the radio and fell sound asleep, thoroughly tired out from work and from suspense.

It was shortly after midnight that she was suddenly awakened by a loud clap of thunder,

announcing one of those freak storms that sometimes come late in April. The wind was blowing, and the rain pouring down in torrents. A shiver of horror ran through the girl as she peered out of the window into the thick blackness beyond.

"Poor Bess!" she muttered. "All alone, too! Where can she be now?"

The thought came to her that perhaps she was mistaken, and her rival was already safely beyond the storm area, at this moment pressing on towards Paris. She smiled grimly; how foolish Louise would think her to waste sympathy on a girl who was really a criminal!

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With this thought she returned to bed, and fell asleep again, to dream herself in an airplane, dashed into icy waters at the hand of the storm. She awakened immediately; it was dawn and she decided to get up, in order to hear the news of Bess Hulbert.

The moment the newspaper arrived, she opened it eagerly. "No trace of lone girl flyer!" were the flaming headlines that met her eyes. The paper went on to state that Bess Hulbert—a young girl of twenty-two (she can still lie, thought Linda, knowing that Bess was at least twenty-five) had not been sighted since ten o'clock the preceding evening, when the storm broke.

Linda shook her head wearily, and looked out of the window. It was still raining, with a steadiness that gave no promise of clearing in the near future. How dismal and disheartening everything was, though Louise would have reminded her that she had only cause for rejoicing.

As soon as she reached the ground school, she went straight to Mr. Eckers' office. The latter had known all along that Bess Hulbert was a competitor for the prize, but he had no idea that she had been an enemy of Linda and Louise.

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"Looks like two down, Miss Carlton," he remarked lightly, as she entered.

"Two down?" repeated Linda. "Miss Hulbert went alone."

"I meant two defeats. The Lightcaps first, and then Miss Hulbert."

"Oh, I see. But she may get there yet. There wasn't any time limit, Mr. Eckers, you know."

"No, but there's a limit to the gasoline she could carry. That little boat Miss Hulbert was flying has nothing like the capacity of your Bellanca.... No, I'm sure that storm marked the end of her flight, although I sincerely hope that it isn't the end of Miss Hulbert. She may have been picked up by some vessel."

"Yes, I hope so," agreed Linda. "But wasn't it hard luck for her?"

"It was only to be expected," replied the man gravely. "She must have known that she was taking an awful chance. If it had been you who had wanted to go at this particular time, I would have done all in my power to keep you home, Miss Carlton—even in a Bellanca Model J!"

"I wouldn't have taken the chance myself, with that weather report," she assured him.

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"I'm sure of that. I can't understand any sensible pilot's doing it. She must have been in an awful hurry to beat you!"

Linda was silent, thinking what chances Bess Hulbert had taken, in the short time since she had known her. Flying low that day she had met her, perilously near to house-tops and children; stealing Linda's father's business by a lie to the Convent sisters; smuggling goods into the country; putting a leak in the gas tank of the Arrow Pursuit! Then, most dangerous of all to herself, daring a solo flight in a small plane, that was bought with borrowed money—and in the face of adverse weather predictions! Yet, Linda mused grimly, when people read the newspapers' account of Miss Hulbert's disaster, they would shake their heads and remark how unsafe flying was! How cruel and unfair it was to the progress of aviation!

All day long Linda worked inside of the hangar, for the storm continued, and now and then she listened in on the radio for reports of the missing aviatrix. By night people were giving up hope of ever seeing Bess Hulbert again, and the evening papers spoke darkly of "One more flyer gone to her watery grave."

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There was a telegram for Linda from her aunt when she reached home, urging her to take warning at the terrible outcome of Miss Hulbert's attempt, and to give up her flight.

Linda drew down the corners of her mouth as she read the message.

"Of course Aunt Emily can't understand the difference between Bess Hulbert's flight and mine," she said to herself, hopelessly. "I never could convince her, if I tried a thousand years, because she thinks flying is all haphazard, dependent on luck."

Nevertheless she sent a long night-letter to her aunt and another to her father, pointing out the difference and giving her reasons for wishing to continue with her plans.

A week passed before the storm abated and the sun shone brightly again, but Bess Hulbert was never heard from. Perhaps the only person who sincerely mourned her loss was Kitty Clavering, who still believed in the girl's goodness. Even Lieutenant Hulbert had constantly lived in fear of his sister's tendency towards dishonor and disgrace, and was almost relieved that she could not sin any more.

Linda worked steadily on, making her preparations as before, studying her charts, watching the weather reports, and waiting for her plane to be delivered. The first day of May the Bellanca arrived, flown by Myrtle Brown herself!

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Linda was overjoyed both by the marvelous mono-plane and at seeing this charming aviatrix, so

capable and so well-known to everyone in the air service. Moreover, her wishes for good luck and success to Linda in her ocean flight were so sincere and so real that Linda felt tremendously encouraged. It was something to have Myrtle Brown believe in her.

The Bellanca was indeed a wonderful plane. With its height of eight feet and a half and its wing span of fifty feet, it looked like a huge bird, strong and fearless, ready to conquer the air and the ocean. Linda gazed at it rapturously for some minutes without speaking. Then she began to examine it in detail.

How much more everything meant to her than when she had been presented with her Pursuit! She looked at the metal propeller, the navigation lights, the front and rear tanks for gasoline, and inspected the powerful Wright J 6 three hundred h.p. nine-cylinder engine, which had been so carefully selected and super-tested during assembly at the Wright Aeronautical Corporation's plant. This indeed, was a marvel of modern science, Linda thought, proud to be the possessor. And the lubrication system, with its rocker-arm bearing from the cockpit!

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But perhaps best of all were the instruments—instruments which had been vastly improved since Lindbergh's flight in 1927, which were going to inspire Linda with the deepest sense of confidence as she journeyed alone over the ocean. The tachometer, or revolution counter, which would tell her that her engine was running smoothly; the oil-pressure gauge, the altimeter measuring the height at which she was flying, the earth inductor compass, which would keep her true to her course—and many others, including even a clock that would tick off the hours of her lonely flight. It was all perfect, she thought, and the next two days of test-flying proved that she was right. And there would be no doubt about its ability to complete the trip, for its range was guaranteed to be five thousand miles in forty-two hours, thus assuring her ample time to get to Paris.

On the morning of May third, Linda said good-bye to Mr. Eckers and to her other friends at the school, and, with a promise of secrecy from them, took off for New York. Without the slightest mishap she landed the Bellanca at Curtis Field for another inspection, and went to her hotel. But she was not going to call her father or her aunt on the telephone, or even send them a wire; the longer they were unaware of her starting, the shorter time for them to worry. It would be easier for her too, without any touching farewells. Better to keep emotion entirely out of the whole proposition!

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The weather forecast was favorable for the following day, promising clear weather and a warm temperature, and she was anxious to be off. Accordingly, she awakened at dawn, and after eating a hearty breakfast, taxied over to Roosevelt Field, where she had given instructions for her Bellanca to be wheeled. There it stood in the brightening daylight—beautiful and powerful, ready to do its part in the epoch-making event. A number of pilots had gathered to speed Linda on her way, and she smiled at them cordially.

"Everything all right?" she asked the chief inspector.

"O.K. The boat looks as if she was anxious to be off!"

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"So am I!" agreed Linda, tucking her chicken sandwiches and her thermos bottles of coffee into the cockpit. "Please start her up!"

She climbed into the plane without the slightest misgiving lest this would be her last contact with solid earth in this world. There was no assumed bravery on her part, for she felt sure that she was going to reach Paris the following day.

The engine hummed smoothly, as she taxied the plane along the ground. Then it nosed upward into the air, and she was off, waving good-bye to her companions as she flew from their sight. Linda Carlton had started for Paris!

Along the coast she continued to Cape Cod, then across Nova Scotia. The sun shone brightly and the engine took on speed. She passed over ice, and through some clouds, but she did not feel the cold, for her heart was singing with joy. Everything was going so beautifully!

As long as daylight lasted, Linda thoroughly enjoyed the flight, but as darkness came on, a sickening sensation of loneliness overwhelmed her. Below—yet not far below, for she was flying low enough to utilize the cushion of air near the water's surface—stretched the vast black ocean. Not a ship in sight; she was absolutely, utterly alone! For the first time since her take-off, she thought of Bess Hulbert, and the fate she had met, and a shiver went through her, making her suddenly cold.... Her friends were so far away.... This seemed like another world....

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Desperately trying to shake off this pall that was possessing her, she reached for the coffee, and tried to drink. But she could not swallow; the hot liquid seemed to choke her.

Recalling a childhood habit which she had formed during illnesses, she began to repeat hymns and poems to herself. But curiously enough, the lines that came to her most vividly were the gruesome words of the Ancient Mariner:

"Alone, alone, all, all alone,
Alone on a wide, wide, sea—
And never a soul took pity on
My soul in agony——"

For half an hour perhaps, even while she was busy watching her instruments and piloting the plane, the verse kept repeating itself over and over in her mind, holding her powerfully in its grip, until her desolation became agony. Then she happened to look to one side, and she suddenly saw a star, reminding her of a friendly universe and watchful all-seeing God, and her fear

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vanished miraculously, as quickly and mysteriously as it had come.

Heaving a sigh of relief, knowing that she had conquered, and that she need not dread such an oppression again, she reached for her coffee, and this time drank it with immense enjoyment. She ate a sandwich too, and the meal tasted like a feast. In a few minutes she was singing again.

Since the engine and the weather were so perfect, sleep was the only enemy which now arose to contend with her. Bravely she fought it off, keeping herself awake by whistling and even talking to herself.

When her little clock registered one A.M. (by New York time), dawn began to appear; the temperature rose, and finally the sun came out. Then all of Linda's drowsiness abruptly vanished; there was so much to see as she flew along. Remembering the mirages she had often read about, she was amazed to see how real they looked, when they appeared now and then, making her almost positive that she had reached some island, and was off her course, until she verified herself by the chart and the compass. [Pg 274]

Presently she sighted some ships and tried to wave to them, but she did not get a reply. It did not occur to her that the boats were eagerly keeping a watch for her plane; ready to report by their radios the news of the valiant young flyer to the waiting world!

Hours later she sighted some smaller boats—fishing boats—and she knew that she must be near to the Irish coast. Over southern Ireland she flew, along the coast of England, following as closely as she could the course which Lindbergh had taken. When at last she recognized the English Channel, her heart leaped with joy. The long journey was almost ended!

Three o'clock it was by New York time, but nine by Paris time when, tired but smiling, she brought the Bellanca safely down at Le Bourget, beating Lindbergh's time by a little more than an hour.

The first solo flight made by a woman across the Atlantic was accomplished!

CHAPTER XXI

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Conclusion

Linda Carlton was almost half-way across the ocean when her Aunt Emily learned that she had started. The older woman had been away from home all that day, visiting relatives in the country, peacefully enjoying the lovely spring weather, and little thinking that her beloved niece was having the greatest adventure of her life. Miss Carlton returned after supper to find her brother waiting for her with the awe-inspiring news.

Smiling with an effort, he held up the newspaper to her startled eyes.

"BEAUTIFUL YOUNG GIRL TAKES OFF IN SOLO FLIGHT FROM NEW YORK FOR PARIS," she read in glaring print. Underneath were her niece's name and age, and a brief account of her record thus far in aviation: the date of her winning her private pilot's license, her membership in the "Caterpillar Club," her course at the ground school in St. Louis.

"You mustn't faint, Emily," said Mr. Carlton. "It isn't done by women now-a-days, you know." [Pg 276]

His sister laughed, which was exactly what he wanted her to do. These older people must be as brave as Linda herself.

"Linda's going to get there all right!" he assured her triumphantly. "You wait and see!"

And, in spite of Bess Hulbert's recent disaster, everybody else who knew her said the same thing about Linda Carlton. When that young lady started out to accomplish anything, she usually put it through.

Yet when the news came over the radio that she had actually arrived in Paris, strangers and friends alike went wild with delight. At last here was a triumph for the feminine sex that could not be disputed. A girl of eighteen had flown alone, in less than a day and a half, across the Atlantic to France! All the world was ready to pay her homage, the kind they had paid to Lindbergh a few years before.

Unlike Lindbergh, however, Linda Carlton was not greeted upon her arrival at Le Bourget by any great crowd. Perhaps the people had been disgusted by the Lightcaps' deception, or perhaps the reporting stations had lost trace of the Bellanca among so many airplanes over the Channel.... So, without any ostentation, the lone pilot taxied along the field, and shut off her motor, just as if she were an ordinary flyer, visiting from England. [Pg 277]

The regular officials of the field came out to welcome her, according to the usual custom. Stiff from her long flight, Linda asked them to help her get out of the cockpit.

"A long trip?" asked one of the men in English, for he did not think Linda was a French girl.

"Yes," she replied, smiling. "New York."

"What?" cried the man excitedly. "You are Linda Carlton?" His arms actually shook as he lifted her out of the plane.

"C'est la Bellanca!" exclaimed another official, who had been examining the plane. To Linda's amazement and amusement, he suddenly kissed her on both cheeks.

"Oh, but we are ashamed!" apologized the man who spoke English, whose name was Georges Renier. "No committee to greet you! No band!"

"I'm thankful," returned Linda, as her feet touched solid earth, and she swayed against Renier, catching hold of his arm to steady herself. "I am so tired! Please, please, don't plan any celebration tonight—just send a cable to my father! If I could go to sleep..."

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"Of course you can! These men here will take care of everything, while I take you to my wife. And we won't tell anybody where you are till tomorrow."

"That is so good of you!" murmured Linda, deeply grateful.

In less than fifteen minutes, everything had been arranged, and she found herself in a charming little apartment with Renier's wife taking care of her, providing her with a simple supper, even helping her to get ready for bed. She was a young woman, perhaps half a dozen years older than Linda herself, and was tremendously flattered by the visit, although Linda thought the gratitude should be all on her side. Like her husband, Madame Renier spoke English fluently—an asset to Linda, whose French was decidedly rusty.

"Shall I lend you some clothes!" asked her hostess, not noticing a little bag which her husband had deposited in the living-room. "I am a little shorter and stouter, but perhaps I can get my friend next door to lend us..."

"No, no!" replied Linda. "Thank you, but I have my bag right here. You see the Bellanca was built to carry two persons, at one hundred and seventy pounds each—" (both girls laughed at the idea of Linda's weighing so much)—"and so as I came alone, I could easily bring baggage without overloading the plane."

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"Then you really expected to get here!"

Linda nodded. "I had such confidence in my Bellanca," she explained. "I really believe that almost any pilot, granted good weather, could fly the ocean in my Bellanca.... No, the only thing I was afraid of was that some other girl would beat me!"

"But you have beaten every other woman in the world!" cried the French girl, in admiration.

"Not beaten—except as far as the prize is concerned," amended Linda. "Only pointed the way, I hope."

A few minutes later she was fast asleep in the pretty rose-covered bed in Madame Renier's guest room, while the news of her safe arrival was flashed around the world. When she awoke at noon the following day, she was famous.

No longer could Linda Carlton belong to Jeanne Renier or to herself; she was a public figure now, to be fêted and honored everywhere. Already a luncheon was scheduled for her at the American Embassy, where all the important officials of Paris would be on hand to pay tribute to her daring feat.

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In a simple but charming dress of a soft dull blue, and a close-fitting hat of the same color, she clung to Jeanne Renier's arm as the Ambassador escorted her to the seat of honor at the luncheon. Desperately trying to overcome her shyness, she tried to smile at everybody in the room, but her eyelids fluttered over her blue eyes, and she clasped her friend's hand under the table. The food, the speeches in her eulogy, the vast banquet hall, were all impressive, but it was only when some little French girls were allowed to come in and present Linda with flowers that she really smiled naturally. Impulsively she threw her arms around them all, while the tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Oh, I do thank you—all!" she exclaimed, and that was all the speech she could make.

But Linda Carlton's modesty won her more friends than any eloquent oration of fine-sounding words. France took her to its heart, just as it had taken Lindbergh, and the world rejoiced that here was a girl as worthy as the boy who had flown several years before.

After that luncheon, engagements followed each other in rapid succession; a reception by the city of Paris, another given by the President of France, a third by the foremost flyers of the country. She was presented with the Cross of the Legion of Honor, and later, at a dinner given by Mrs. Rodman Hollowell in her Paris home, Linda received her check for twenty-five thousand dollars.

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Linda's mail was by this time so large that she had to engage two secretaries to sort and answer the important letters, and to turn down the fabulous offers which came every day, to lure her into the movies.

The news that made the girl happiest, however, was her father's reply to her cablegram. "Sailing immediately," it said. "Wait for me in Paris."

He was coming on a fast boat, she knew. Her Daddy! Five days at the most to wait—possibly only four now! Five days that would pass quickly.

In spite of all her public acclaim, Linda refused to stay anywhere but with Madame Renier, although the Ambassador's wife had extended her a cordial invitation, and the most luxurious hotels in Paris offered her suites without any charge. But with her new friend she was happiest; Jeanne was in a way taking Louise's place, filling the gap that her chum's marriage had created.

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One offer, however, that came to Linda pleased her tremendously, although it was not in the

nature of a contract. A well-known flyer wanted to buy her Bellanca, at the price Linda had paid for it, and she was only too delighted to accept his proposition. For months she had been wondering what she would do with the plane when the flight was over, for she did not want to keep such an expensive one for everyday use. Besides, ever since her trip to Birmingham for the school, she had been craving an autogiro. So she asked Georges Renier to take care of the transaction for her, and she added twenty-two thousand dollars to her prize money.

Her father's boat arrived at last, and she flew with her friends to meet him at the dock. How wonderful it was to see him again! The moment Linda spied him among the crowd of arrivals she broke away from Jeanne Renier and leaped into his arms in rapture. The self-reliant young woman who had flown the Atlantic alone was a child again in her father's arms.

Transcriber's notes

Spelling and grammar errors were corrected

Page 15: [believed that herself.) ... "But perhaps we could] was changed to believed that herself.)... "But perhaps we could

Page 166: ["Locked up? Kidnaped?" demanded Ralph] was changed to "Locked up? Kidnapped?" demanded Ralph

Page 190: [used to these sort of affairs, found the] was changed to used to these sorts of affairs, found the

Page 233: [About five oclock Louise finally arrived.] was changed to About five o'clock Louise finally arrived.

'O. K.' was changed to the majority 'O.K.' for consistency.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LINDA CARLTON'S OCEAN FLIGHT ***

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