

HEADLINE FLYER



He flung himself to his knees, and his arms went around the girl

*Alice Parkhill, Daring Aviatrix, and Sam Cotton, at Ground Control,
Come to a Perfect Compromise, Somewhere Between Heaven and Earth!*

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WE WATCHED it from the window of Sam Cotton's office in the Administration Building.

Below us the silver plane's motor, warming up, droned steadily on the tarmac.

A group of newsreel men and other photographers waited with their cameras. There were several thousand spectators on the field, and the parking space behind the hangars was jammed with glistening cars.

"A regular carnival," Sam Cotton said bitterly, to himself rather than to me. "And what's it for? Just to get her name in headlines again. And free advertising for her father's planes."

His attitude didn't surprise me. He'd never approved of Alice Parkhill's reckless flying. In fact, he'd complained against it savagely. And I couldn't blame him—though the thing didn't concern me.

Sam was superintendent of the field—a big, sturdy, red-haired man. His own flying days were virtually ended, of course, though he hadn't yet passed his twenty-eighth year. Still, ever since his smash-up last summer, the doctors had declared him no longer fit to hold a pilot's license. It wasn't merely because he limped noticeably, they explained; it was the fact that his nerves weren't as steady as they should be.

HIS countenance, I saw, now held stubborn anger.

“What’s it to you?” I asked. “It’s her business. If she wants to break records, let her try.”

“I’m sick of seeing her risk her neck for nothing!” he snapped. “One of these days she’s bound to crash.”

He sounded so harsh about it that I couldn’t restrain a dry laugh. I had peculiar ideas of my own about Sam Cotton’s gruffness. I always suspected he was so sentimental on the inside that he felt ashamed of it, so he concealed that natural sensitivity under a mask of toughness. But it didn’t fool anybody. Not me, anyhow.

“You’re as nervous and scared as an old woman,” I said.

He paid no attention to me. Alice Parkhill was just moving through the gate to the tarmac.

A slim little figure in flying togs, she smiled vividly in response to the applause and yells. The crowd of reporters all but overwhelmed her. But four uniformed guards formed a wedge to break through the mass. And presently we saw her again, laughing gaily as she walked across the tarmac to her plane.

She was worth looking at, believe me. The puttees, the breeches, the khaki shirt, gave her a mannish swagger. In contrast to the severity of her clothes, her golden hair, rippling down to her shoulders, looked startlingly lovely and soft. She was swinging a helmet and goggles.

She posed for the photographers patiently, in every way they suggested. Then she adjusted the helmet. Alice didn’t tuck the golden hair into it. By letting it dangle down to her shoulders she managed an effect at once unique and astonishing. It was one of the things that made her picture in the papers so different from those of other women flyers.

Sam and I watched her in silence.

Ten minutes later she took off. The day was perfect for her attempt to smash a record; one of those glittering July mornings with no wind. She sped into the sky like an arrow.

Her Parkhill B-23 didn’t merely roar through the heavens. It screamed. It shrieked. It whined. A hundred mile triangular course had been set for the flight. But before starting off, Alice had agreed to circle the field several times for the benefit of the newsreel photographers. A blimp containing cameras hovered over the Administration Building,

and she flew rings around it.

She must have been making better than two hundred and eighty miles an hour when, of a sudden, she swooped down toward us at crazy speed.

It looked like a crash.

Sam Cotton caught his breath on a gasp. He leaned far out of the window, and a kind of horror seized his muscular face. His hands gripped the window ledge so hard that the knuckles stood out like white knobs.

But it turned out to be merely one of Alice Parkhill’s characteristic stunts.

A hundred and fifty feet above the cameras, she leveled off. The shriek of her motor and the howl of wind tearing past the fuselage filled the morning with fiendish clamor. As she zoomed up again into the blue heavens, Sam Cotton relaxed.

“**T**HE fool!” he gasped. “The crazy little fool. What’s she trying to do, anyhow?”

“Give them a good picture,” I said.

“She almost killed herself!”

Looking down over the mob, I could see that they all felt as did Sam Cotton. The crowds were milling, chattering excitedly. Even the newsreel men were shaking their heads at one another. No doubt they appreciated the close-up Alice Parkhill had given them, but they realized they’d almost been decapitated by her generosity.

Finally she flew eastward as far as the racetrack, where she turned. That was the signal to indicate that when she passed the pylon again, her attempt for a record would officially start.

She must have been making better than three hundred miles an hour when she tore past that pylon.

The scream of her motor was so hellish that the crowds on the field gaped up in a kind of paralysis. I’ve never seen anything move as fast as that plane. It seemed to take Alice less than a second to cross the entire flying field. Then she was a silver speck in the skies—a distant spark—and after that she vanished altogether.

Twenty-five minutes later Sam Cotton and I, still hanging out of the window like gargoyles, saw her come down to a neat landing. The mobs would certainly have surged across the field if the special police hadn’t kept them back. The only ones who were permitted to dash over the tarmac were the photographers and the reporters.

Sam and I watched her leap out of the plane, snatch off her helmet, and prepare to meet the cameras.

Then he muttered an oath and went back to his desk. He sat there in his shirtsleeves, glowering, pretending to read a sheaf of papers. Once or twice I tried to speak to him, but he appeared not to hear. So, presently, I left him and went into my own adjoining office.

Frankly, I'd have preferred to join the noisy crowds down on the fields. I felt like a boy missing a parade. But I knew that if I went out to add my idolatry to that of the mob, Sam Cotton would call me back in derision. Being in a discreet mood—and in his employ—I settled at my desk.

Within fifteen minutes, however, Alice Parkhill herself entered his office.

When I heard her, I turned with a start to stare through the open door.

From my position I couldn't see Sam Cotton. But I could see Alice as she sank into a chair and crossed her legs. She reached to his desk, helped herself to a cigarette and lit it. Her lovely young face was flushed. Her eyes were abnormally brilliant. But her voice was ruefully disappointed when she reported:

"I missed it, Sam."

"Too bad," he said grimly.

"Missed the record by just four miles," she sighed, shaking her head so that the golden hair swished from shoulder to shoulder. "Dad'll be terribly disappointed. He expected great things of this new plane."

"Don't you ever get tired of risking your life?" Sam asked impatiently.

Alice Parkhill leaned back, blew a stream of smoke at the ceiling and laughed. You'd have imagined that she'd just come away from a cocktail party instead of from a flight that had come within four miles an hour of breaking a world's record.

"Sam," she said, "you don't seem to understand. I get a lot of fun out of this."

"The only thing you get out of it," he said scornfully, "is another chance to see your picture in the paper. 'Alice Parkhill Fails in Effort to Smash World's Record.' Every paper will carry it tonight. And tomorrow you can go into a movie house and see yourself grin from the screen. That's the only thing you get out of this."

IT struck me that Sam Cotton was displaying a considerable amount of nerve in using that acid tone toward a young lady who had become an American celebrity—and who was, moreover, the daughter of J.B. Parkhill. Another thing that puzzled me was the fact that she didn't resent it. She seemed, rather, to enjoy Sam's outbursts. It actually amused her, I'd have sworn, to goad him into these explosions.

"Your father," he was saying now in a tone almost savage, "ought to get a good poke in the nose for allowing you to go on like this. One of these days the same thing's going to happen to you that's happened to a lot of other smart boys and girls. You're going to crack."

"That's a funny way to talk," she countered, "for a man who was a test pilot, risking his neck every time he took a ship off the field."

"All right, look at me," Sam Cotton bitterly retorted. "A bum leg. Rotten nerves. Grounded. Good for nothing but a desk job. Anything to cheer about in that?"

I was watching Alice Parkhill through the door, and I saw a sudden twinge of pain in her lovely young face. Remorse for hurting him, maybe. Or sympathy, perhaps. For the first time her mocking smile vanished. She straightened soberly, tossed the cigarette into a tray.

But after a silence, some of her former bantering manner returned. It was as if she refused to be serious with him.

"I'm glad," she said, "you're not my father. Or my husband, for that matter. I can imagine what your wife's going to be like—when you get one."

She paused but Sam didn't speak. So she continued:

"Cooped up at home, safe, secure, avoiding all risk, all adventure—"

"You bet!" harshly agreed Sam Cotton. "When I marry, I don't want to feel that every time the phone rings it's somebody telling me my wife's broken her head."

I sat up with a jerk. It's a queer thing that I never guessed it before. But suddenly, as I stared at Alice Parkhill, the truth crashed into my mind.

He was in love with her!

Of course he was. That explained his angry tension, his worry, his nervousness, every time she hopped off the field. There'd been other spectacular stunt flyers, men and women, on our tarmac. And this wasn't the first time flights had been preceded

by publicity. But I'd never observed Sam as infuriated by anybody as he was by Alice Parkhill.

I saw it clearly now. The big red-headed fool was crazy about the girl—terrified every time she risked her life. But being Sam Cotton, he concealed his terror under the usual gruffness.

And as for Alice—

Exactly how she felt toward him, I couldn't yet guess. It occurred to me that she dropped into his office very often. *Too* often. Today, for example—why had she come here directly after her flight? Why hadn't she hopped into her roadster and gone home?

Was it because she *enjoyed* mocking Sam Cotton? Was it because she'd wanted to hear his denunciation of her recklessness? Or was it because she wanted to hear him say he loved her and suffered agonies of hell whenever she risked her life?

She rose, carelessly twirling the helmet by its strap. The smile she fixed on him was again full of mockery.

"So," she taunted, "you'd never dream of marrying a girl like *me*, would you, Sam?"

He didn't answer.

"*Would you?*" she repeated.

"No!"

Alice Parkhill continued letting her helmet whirl about her hand. She regarded him thoughtfully, amusedly. After a time she dropped a brief spurt of laughter. If she had intended it as raillery, it failed.

"And all this time," she said demurely as she started toward the door, "I had such nice ideas about you, Sam—such romantic little notions—"

"For God's sake," he rasped, "get out of here and let me work, can't you? Go down and give the photographers a break!"

NATURALLY, every newspaper in New York carried Alice Parkhill's picture on its front page that evening. She'd failed to shatter the record, but she'd come so close to it that the papers cheered the effort. I read all the stories carefully; and toward the bottom of every one I found a statement that alarmed me. Alice was to try again.

The papers quoted her as saying:

"There are one or two adjustments I want to take up with the designer of the plane. I think that with a few minor changes she'll be able to increase her speed by at least ten miles an hour. At any rate, I'm going to give her the chance of showing what

she can do. I'll make another attempt within a couple of weeks."

While I read this to Sam Cotton, he glowered at his desk and snorted something unintelligible.

Every day for a week Alice came to the field with her father, a big, jolly, grey-haired man. They always vanished into the hangar that housed the silver plane.

Then one morning she entered Sam's office—a much more deliciously feminine figure in a trim grey sports suit than she'd been in flying togs. A saucily slanted hat imprisoned most of her rippling golden hair and hid her right eye.

"Sam, Dad's outside with the designer of the plane," she announced. "We're going to make a few changes. It won't take more than four or five days. Next Saturday I'm going to take another crack at the women's record. I have an idea I can hit close to four hundred an hour."

"Again, eh?" he muttered.

Alice said, "I want you to make arrangements. Plenty of special police to hold back the mob. You might tell the newsreel men it'll be Saturday morning at eleven."

Slowly Sam Cotton pushed himself out of his swivel chair. Sometimes you didn't notice his limp at all. He was so big, so powerful and so dogged, with that red hair dangling over his forehead, that you couldn't suspect any weakness in so magnificent a figure. He went around the desk until he stood in front of Alice Parkhill. Towering over her, he frowned down into her eyes.

"Listen," he whispered. "Why don't you cut it out?"

"Are we going to start that all over again?"

"One of these days," he drove on thickly, "your plane is going to fall apart in the air. You ask too much of your crates. You force them beyond all reason. Stunt flyers invariably get it in the neck. I know. I used to be one. I don't want to see it happen to you."

THERE was a moment's hush. Then she challenged:

"What difference does it make to you?"

He seized her elbows. She looked up at him defiantly. Somehow both of them forgot my presence near the filing cabinet. Here, I thought with a surge of excitement, was Sam's chance. She'd deliberately given him the opportunity. If he didn't tell her *now* that he loved her, he never

would.

Maybe I should have slipped out of the office. Instead I stood staring—hoping desperately—and completely ignored. He was silent so long that she tried again, her voice strangely strained.

“Why shouldn’t I do it?”

He gulped hard, and I could see his Adam’s apple rise and fall in his throat. Why he didn’t blurt out that he was crazy about her, I couldn’t understand—until I thought things over. He’d been grounded. No more official flying for him. With that limp incapacitating his body, he must have felt like a human wreck. Being sensitive about it, perhaps he didn’t want to offer a thing like that to Alice Parkhill.

And then there was the other matter, of course—the minor fact that he earned five thousand a year while she was the daughter of a fortune.

Anyhow, he released her elbows and said in that old, harsh way of his: “I’m trying to save you from a crack-up, that’s all.”

“Oh—” Her voice was unrecognizably small, empty, disappointed. Something seemed to collapse in her.

“Why don’t you wear a ‘chute when you go up?” he demanded.

“Parachutes,” she replied limply, “annoy me. I hate them worse than corsets. I’ve never worn one and I never will.”

“But if you ever have to bail out—”

“It’ll be just too bad, won’t it?” she laughed dryly. “At any rate, you’ll be able to say you warned me.”

And then she left.

Never before had I seen Sam Cotton as nervous as he became during the next few days. He was so short-tempered that I spoke to him as little as possible. Flyers who came in departed in amazement, unable to understand his anger.

In one of the hangars men were constantly working on Alice Parkhill’s plane. Exactly what they were doing to it, I didn’t know. It happened that I was too busy for a time to go over and watch them.

The newspapers, I noticed, were already celebrating the fact that on the following Saturday, at eleven o’clock in the morning, Alice was to make another attempt for the women’s speed record. But one editorial protested, to my surprise, in almost the same language Sam had used. Why was the girl making these efforts? What could she

hope to gain from them—except death? The editorial censured her father for permitting the stunts. It even derided the newsreels for commemorating them.

But the preparations on the plane steadily continued.

Occasionally Alice herself drove her roadster into the field. At such times she spent an hour or two in the hangar. She didn’t, however, visit Sam Cotton again.

By Friday, Sam was so tense that I myself became jittery in his presence.

“God knows what they’ve been doing to that plane,” he muttered raspily. “They’ll probably shave her lines down so smooth that she’ll snap in the wind.”

“Listen,” I argued. “The designer of the crate and Old Man Parkhill himself have been supervising the work. I don’t think there’s anything to worry about.”

“Why don’t they let a test pilot take the thing up?” he flung back. “Why do they let Alice take all these crazy risks herself?”

“What’s it to you?” I said maliciously.

Sam stared at me a moment in hard, baleful silence. The line of his lips grew taut. I knew I’d hurt him, but he turned back to his desk.

That evening I worked late. It was dark when I left the Administration Building. The flying field lay deserted in moonlight—though by eleven o’clock tomorrow morning it would be thronged with mobs watching Alice Parkhill make her new attack on the women’s speed record.

What it was that prompted me to turn to her hangar, I scarcely knew. Simple curiosity, perhaps; a desire to see what changes had been made in the silver plane. At any rate, I crossed the tarmac, pushed open a little door in the side of the hangar, and stepped inside.

Alice Parkhill was there.

She was just emerging from the cockpit. At the sight of me, she started violently. There was something so guilty in her manner, so confused, that I actually felt embarrassed. I pulled off my hat and awkwardly said:

“Hello—”

“Why, Pete,” she stammered. And then, with a rush, her poise returned. She leaped nimbly to the concrete floor, smiling. “Come to see what they’ve done?”

I nodded.

For a few minutes she explained the changes in the Parkhill B-23. Frankly, I couldn't see them. She had to call them to my attention. It was a beautiful plane—small, compact, built for speed. All its lines strained forward.

"Tomorrow," she said confidently, "I think I can make it."

I wished her luck—and thought of Sam.

Why on earth couldn't he forget his sensitivity about himself long enough to tell this girl what she so obviously longed to hear?

AT eleven in the morning the field was jammed. There were more photographers than ever. Alice Parkhill took off promptly and proceeded to circle the field.

Sam and I, standing outside the Administration Building, watched her. His upturned face, I saw, was strained, every bone jutting out of it grimly.

She climbed higher and higher until it seemed, as she spiraled upward, that she must have attained a height of some four thousand feet.

"What's she going that high for?" muttered Sam, frowning.

"Trying to find a wind that'll help her," I suggested.

"She certainly isn't giving the cameramen a break this time," he said curtly.

"Maybe," I said, "she's more interested in smashing the record than in having her picture taken."

High above us she appeared at last to have leveled off. She started toward the racetrack, where she would turn and gather speed in her dash toward the first pylon.

We watched intently. So did everybody else on the field. Though there were thousands of people standing there, nobody seemed to be speaking. It was as if everybody understood the danger to which the girl was submitting herself by shooting her plane through the skies at almost four hundred miles an hour. If something snapped up there—

"Look!" gasped Sam. Good God, what—"

As the words broke from him, he seized my arm in a grip that all but broke my wrist. We were both gaping upward. I myself couldn't manage a sound.

Because at that instant the silver plane, far to the south of the flying field suddenly turned its nose downward!

It was falling. It was racing straight for the earth in a nose dive that brought screams from the crowd

on the field.

A stunt?

No, I couldn't believe it. Even Alice Parkhill wouldn't attempt to thrill newspapermen with a trick like that. Besides, she was far beyond the scope of cameras. She was coming down, down, at a terrific speed. Falling like a rock—

For half a second I jerked my eyes to Sam Cotton's face.

Never before had I seen it so white. His eyes, wide and staring, were full of terror. His lips fell open. His grip on my arm became unbearable.

"Pete," he began hoarsely, "she—she's—"

He couldn't finish. Before I quite realized what he was doing, Sam Cotton lurched in the direction of his car. Mechanically I stumbled after him. But my eyes were still fastened on the distant falling plane.

And then the crowd shrieked louder than ever—a single explosive outcry of hysterical fear.

For far up there, some twenty-five hundred feet above the earth, something dropped out of the plane!

Even at a distance we could guess what the dark speck was. Alice Parkhill. She'd either leaped or fallen from the cockpit. I stopped, paralyzed. Sam Cotton, his hands on the door of the roadster, stood rigid, too. His face was lifted in an expression of stark agony.

Far up there in the blue skies the little speck fell as fast as the plane. It dropped a hundred feet. Two hundred feet. It plunged down faster and faster.

MY heart pounded crazily. I could not breathe. There was Alice Parkhill, who disdained a 'chute, falling twenty-five hundred feet to—

And then, miraculously, a white mushroom billowed out over that hurtling speck. As the parachute opened, she swung under it like a pendulum.

The silver plane continued its downward plunge. I snapped my eyes down from the parachute just in time to see the plane crash on the distant racetrack.

Then I looked up again.

The wind had caught Alice Parkhill and the 'chute. It was sweeping them back in the direction of the flying field. She was coming down slowly, beautifully. I completely forgot Sam Cotton until I heard the roar of his roadster. Then, recovering my wits, I sprang to its running board.

We raced off across the field toward the descending 'chute. Our ambulance, too, started over the grass. But we were far ahead of it.

A few minutes later we saw Alice Parkhill touch ground at a far corner of the field.

She was sitting up, unbuckling the belt of the parachute, when we reached her. Her face was colorless, but she looked up with a forced, frozen smile.

Sam Cotton, utterly white of countenance, leaped out of the car. He flung himself to his knees beside her. His arms went around the girl.

"Alice!" he gasped hoarsely. "For God's sake, Alice, what—what—"

"I'm all right," she panted.

They stared at each other, and then Sam Cotton's lips suddenly crushed hers. He kissed her fiercely, savagely. He held her slim body against himself so furiously, so possessively, that I feared he'd crack her bones.

She seemed to be enjoying it, for there was new luster in her eyes and a smile on her lips when he finally broke away from her. In truth, she pulled him down again, roughly.

I STOOD beside the roadster, gaping.

When the ambulance drew up, I waved the physician away. This was too good to be spoiled. There they were, both on the ground, chattering to one another as if they were a million miles from any other human being.

"Alice," he said huskily, "if you knew how I felt when—when I saw you fall out of that plane. If you only knew how crazy I've been about you—how—"

He couldn't say it. But he went on trying until I realized the crowds were drawing perilously near in their mad dash across the field. That was when I grabbed Sam Cotton's shoulders and pulled him away from her.

"Steady," I whispered. "You don't want the newsreel men to get a shot of *this*, do you?"

He helped Alice to her feet. Several seconds passed before he thought of asking her, "How'd you come to be wearing a 'chute? I thought you—"

"Dad insisted on my carrying one in the cockpit," she said breathlessly. "As soon as I began to feel the plane acting unreasonably, I had an idea something might happen, so I strapped myself into the thing. Just in time, too. I'd hardly buckled it

when the plane began her dive. Something snapped."

That was when the crowd arrived.

THAT evening the newspapers made two astonishing announcements. The first was the fact that Miss Alice Parkhill was to marry Samuel Cotton, manager of our flying field. The second was that Miss Alice Parkhill had decided to do no more stunt flying.

The reporters quoted her as saying:

"I think that for a time I'll leave record smashing to others. In fact, my husband and I will go on a wedding trip in a plane that can't make more than two hundred miles an hour."

As I read all that, I had a sudden strange but inescapable suspicion.

I knew Alice must have loved Sam Cotton a long time. She must have guessed, as I did, that he was too conscious of his infirmity ever to speak of love to her—unless she prodded him into it. Then I realized she'd been prodding him time after time during her visits in the Administration Building; but he'd stubbornly refused to rise to the bait.

So now it seemed to me she had chosen a singularly dramatic method of making Sam Cotton aware of his love. They do say, don't they, that a man doesn't realize how much he wants a thing until he's threatened with its loss? It occurred to me that Alice must have known how Sam would feel when he saw her hurtle out of her plane. Certainly an accident of that sort, she must have guessed, would break down all the barriers of his reticence.

Of course, it was a crazy notion—that she had *deliberately* let her plane crash and had *deliberately* leaped from it.

Crazy, sure.

But then, I recalled, she'd been in the hangar alone the night before the flight. There had been something guilty and abashed about her when I surprised her climbing out of the cockpit. What had she been doing there?

Hiding the parachute?

I'd reached this point in my reflections when Alice and Sam entered the office together.

They were grinning. His arm was around her.

"Wish us luck, Pete," she commanded.

So I shook their hands and drove the impossible suspicion out of my mind.