

The Free Press Short Story

WHITE WINGS

KEITH CLAYTON ALBER

RONNY CARLSON seemed to swagger as he strode over to the monoplane beside which Joan Davis stood.

"I'm wishing you luck to-day," he said shortly. "You'll need it. I'm flying to win that prize. Merely because you're the only girl in the outfit, don't think that I'm giving you more room than the rest."

"Thanks for your advice, Ronny," Joan gave a nod of her head. She turned the back of her leather coat on him while she inspected her monoplane without further notice of him.

A few minutes later, when a hand touched her shoulder, Joan turned with the thought that Ronny had not left. Instead, John Davis confronted her.

"I suppose Carlson was bragging about winning the race to be," he said.

"No, he merely wished me luck, Uncle John," Joan answered with a grin. "I wish you would stop heckling at Ronny. He's just a boy and bound to beat a little. He's pretty young, you know, to be a flier."

"Your insight is too broad," her uncle laughed, good-naturedly, placing a hand on a strut. "Always finding some good in a person whether there exists any or not. Ronny hasn't much to feel proud of. You've won your eagles and are next to the youngest woman with a flying license in the state."

"Sure," said Joan. "But I had the advantage of having my Uncle John Davis for an instructor."

"You're a tease." The man spoke lightly, then changed his tone to a serious one. "You know that Ronny hasn't kept his wings white and he isn't to be trusted in the air. You know some of the tricks he's pulled off. There was Smith, who was flying behind Ronny fifty miles south of Seattle. Smith's compass went haywire and he had to follow Ronny. Then I ask you, what does Ronny do? He misleads Smith off into a bank of clouds in the wrong direction. When Smith comes out of it, he's in unfamiliar territory, and Ronny out of sight."

"Yes, but how was Ronny to know that Smith had a broken compass? He thought as long as he was following him he would have a little fun with him. How was he to know that Smith would be forced to land in a farmer's cornfield for the night?"

"I give up," her uncle finally conceded. "But I'm warning you, watch out for him. He's dangerous to be flying against even though he may be only a boy. I've been in this game a good many years and I know the kind. If he was straightened out in time, he might turn out o.k. But I've seen others before him—and after they became older, they grew harder and nothing could change them. Aviation is something that brings out the worst in a person."

"And the best," added Joan. John Davis grunted as he walked about the monoplane, giving it and the motor a thorough scrutiny. He knew every inch of the machine and Joan deemed it a mark of honor that he would let her use his aeroplane for the race.

As he left her he returned to the officials of the air races. The three of them were talking earnestly at the starting mark. They were no doubt deciding upon the interval of time between the take-off of each ship. She knew there had been a controversy about it. They wished to keep the aeroplanes as far apart as possible when they crossed the Olympic Mountain Range. rivalry was keen among the classmates and chances were to be avoided.

In another half an hour, the student graduates would be whirling away from Bardell field and Seattle. Their course would take them across the straits of water of Puget Sound, over the mountains, down to the Pacific beyond Flattery Rocks. They would circle the light-ship stationed off there and come back. This was to be the first year of a fifth-coming annual contest. The Seattle flying school was sponsoring a race for those of its graduate students who had successfully passed the government examination to attain their private licenses. They had to furnish their own aeroplane. Most of them like Joan had been given the use of one belonging to a relative or friend, all except Ronny Carlson, who owned his own, a latest type of a fast whirlwind.

The prize offered was a scholarship in advanced aviation. The winner would also gain recognition from the press. The officials finished their deliberation over rules to order the aeroplanes wheeled into line. Joan drew fourth place and directly behind her was Ronny Carlson. The girl set her jaws firmly, trying to eradicate any outward sign of nervousness from her features.

The first aircraft taxied to the start, paused, then as the timekeeper signalled, it was off with a deafening thunder of exploding gas and pounding pistons. At five-minute intervals, a new contestant bounced clumsily up to the start, then gracefully, swiftly, took the air.

Joan was so excited when her turn came that everything passed into her memory in a blur. Automatically, she opened the throttle, shot skyward with a delicate skilled hand on the control stick. Unflatteringly, she picked out a landmark among the high Olympics and steered for it.

The smoky atmosphere of Seattle was put to the rear while she was still gaining altitude. A myriad of tiny boats paddled about below her like so many water bugs; even the ships looked only like scale models from her height.

Over water, the air was practically devoid of bumps, allowing Joan to keep an easy keel. It grew clearer and the sun shone down with added force, reflecting yellow glints on the water below. After forty minutes, she checked up on her altitude, it was six thousand feet. She could hardly realize she was racing, the earth below moved slowly, evenly, though her speed was over a hundred and sixty miles an hour.

More bumps continued to meet the monoplane as Joan left Puget Sound. In the rear and winged thunderously over green foothills. With every passing second, the white-capped peaks of the Olympics were rushing toward her. A side wind veered the aeroplane slightly to the south. She had singled out a mass ahead had passed through the gap and dropped out of sight only a minute in the lead.

From the corner of her eye she saw an object moving almost even with her. It was Ronny with his whirlwind. He must have gained rapidly on her to come up so soon. A sinking sensation tugged at her heart. Funny he did not gain on her so fast now. As she glanced from time to time at her competitor's machine, she saw that he gained on her at a slower pace until he moved no faster than she. He must go on or let her. The pair of them could not go through the narrow rift that broke the crooked, snow-and-ice glazed mountain spine that was directly ahead.

The tugging sensation favored to Joan's stomach. The jagged rise of the slope was rushing up madly, it shrieked its own disaster in the heart of the girl. Why did not Ronny go on? All at once the reason came to her. In the higher altitude, Ronny's heavier ship lost speed. The thin air not offering enough lifting power for his compact motor. A little more speed was yet in Joan's ship. It was lighter and stood the altitude much better. The throbbing vibration of her ship increased. She eased back on the stick, gaining altitude over the ship but letting Ronny gain distance on her. The roar of both motors echoed deafeningly in her ears as they passed into and through the gap. The wheels of her aeroplane were scarcely above the top of Ronny's, and a bare ten feet separated him for an instant from the edges below. They had made the gap with very little to spare.

The slope on the far side dropped away as abruptly as it had risen. The Pacific Ocean's green-blue in the far distant view met Joan's eyes. She also saw Ronny start to speed away from her, his heavier craft having the advantage again in descent. Ronny turned and waved a hand at her. Through the vision-blurring disc her eyes drew in Ronny's arm stiffly, and then draw in Ronny's staccato pace as that same arm pointed to the side of his ship. He was trying to convey some message to her. She leaned far out of the cockpit on either side. Her wheels seemed to

be still on, what else could there be wrong? Thinking it might be one of Ronny's tricks, she ignored him. He quit motioning, gave his ship more gas and moved ahead. He did not go far ahead though. As they cut down over the barren snow fields, Ronny kept an even pace just ahead.

They cut down quickly on two ships ahead. Joan felt a rise in her pulse. She was gaining on the others as well as Ronny. She was unmindful now of that which was below her. The snow gave way to bare rocks, these to grove trees that swept away from the mountains in three directions. Unnoticed, the sea and Flattery Rocks bulging out of the surf waters, passed beneath her. She only saw the light ship ahead. With Ronny barely keeping before her, she rounded the awaying masts and headed back. The two ahead of the whirlwind were flying on a par, and a quarter of a mile in advance of them, a lone mechanical cage held the lead.

A break in the roaring came to her and she was puzzled until she saw Ronny's whirlwind drifting backward above her. He must have cut the gun. As she advanced beneath him, the roar of his ship came back to her along with the drumming of her own. Angered, she tried to slip to one side and to the other to get out from beneath him. She speeded up, he speeded up. She slowed up, and he slowed up. They passed over Flattery Rocks at an altitude of not more than sixty feet. Ronny was forcing her down, seemingly toward a thin strip of beach ahead which ran between surf and a high bluff. She had seen the place before and knew that this strip of beach was bare only during low tide.

Ronny had done some rather queer stunts already in this race, but this was out of reason. Why would he want to force her down? He should know by this time that he had far the speedier ship of the two and she could hardly expect a chance to win. It was ignoble and he must know that he could be seen by the remaining ship behind them. Still he was forcing her down so that her machine could not pass over the sheer bluff, but would be forced to land on the beach.

Joan eased down toward the beach, giving a little more speed to the engine. Her ship was flying at an angle to land. Ronny lessened his speed to drop behind. Joan took the advantage and opened her throttle, rushing straight towards the bluffs. Her ship swooped up. Ronny was taken off guard and her monoplane was pushed up before him, yards ahead. By the time that Joan had banked toward Seattle, the ultimate goal, she had gained altitude enough to clear the bluffs. She was in time to see Ronny put his ship down on the beach.

After Joan had passed over him, her conscience rankled deeply within her. Perhaps it had not been his fault at all. He had landed his ship. His engine had stopped once. Something must be really wrong with it. The last ship had passed her up and the others were miles ahead. She had no chance of winning the race. She banked her ship.

heading once more for the ocean. Over the bluff she circled twice. Each time dismay and sympathy overwhelmed her increasingly. High slippery rocks terminated the beach where they swept out to sea and met the combers. Ronny and his whirlwind were imprisoned by the rising tide on the narrow stretch of sand. In three hours the machine would be completely clogged. She looked out toward the light ship. To her added discomfort she could hardly see it because of the intervening Flattery Rocks. It would have been impossible for those on the boat to see Ronny's predicament and send a rescue boat.

Thoughts tugged at her decision, but she made up her mind and stubbornly set about her task. Easing up the throttle, she roared down until her wing tips passed along the side of the bluff. The wheels touched only an instant before the tall skid. It was a well-manoeuvred landing.

Joan unbuckled her safety belt and climbed out to meet Ronny. "Too bad," she spoke curtly to him, hiding her feelings. She decided to try him out first as she added, "You had your nerve trying to make me land with you just to get my help. You might have wrecked us both."

"I guess you don't know what it's all about yet," and for the first time she saw him laugh. "You don't know how happy I am that you came back." "I should imagine you would be," Joan's voice turned harsh with irony. "You cheated me out of all chances to win the race."

"Your chances were lost anyway," Joan turned cold. What did he mean? "Well?" she asked questioningly. "When I passed beneath you up at the gap in the Olympics I saw the bottom of your fuselage spotted and streaked. Gas dripped down, was caught in the stream of my propeller, and thrown in my face. There was no mistaking it."

"I see now why you made all those queer motions at me."

"You've been such a square sport I couldn't see you go down in that mountainous country if I had been flying in six races. It would be a crack-up at the least. Washout your plane, maybe yourself. When your first tank would be empty and you would have turned on the emergency tank, empty as well."

"You really tried to make me land?" "Yes."

"Why did you land here then and expect me to come back?" "Because I've got your nature pretty well figured out. It's an honor to have one like you. I put my thoughts together and landed as if my aeroplane was out of commission. It worked. You took pity on my plight and came back."

Ronny Carlson turned on his heel and strode back toward his own ship. "Where are you going?" asked Joan. "I've got a few tools in my kit. I'm going to fix your tank, divide up my gas with you, and we'll be off here before the tide comes in and catches us."

The girl sat down to steady herself.

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Suppose it were your loved one being made ready for the climax of this grim struggle with Death. Anxiously you await the outcome—hoping against hope—praying that these men in white will not fail. Your heart is in their hands, but all their skill, and all their specialized knowledge would be powerless should those operating room lights go out at a critical moment.

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