

The Free Press Short Story

THREE THOUSAND FEET UP

BARTON WALLACE

PLATT WARNER leaned against the wall of the hangar and wiped grease from his hands with a piece of cloth. Overhead he could hear the steady drone of an airplane engine.

When a slight change came in the steady drone he looked off and was swinging in a wide circle. A long-drawn "Ah" came from the crowd as a tiny figure moved farther out on the wing. Even Platt, although he had seen the same stunt a hundred times, felt a tightening in his throat muscles, and an empty hollow ache across his chest. These people were seeing only a parachute jump, but Platt had to watch the person who meant most to him risk his life there in the sky.

"Here he comes!" a voice cried.

The tiny figure, a black speck against the blue, had dropped from the wing of an airplane. Down—down—down, it came until Platt felt that his own pounding heart would burst from his chest in excitement. At last, a bit of white appeared. Almost at once the parachute billowed out, floated gracefully, and the mud descent was stopped.

The airplane made a smooth three-point landing, and Platt ran out to it. Boyd Adams, the pilot, pushed up his goggles and grinned.

"How did it look from here?" he asked.

"All right," Platt said slowly. He glanced up at the sky where the parachute was floating overhead. "I wish he would wear an extra chute, though."

Boyd Adams chuckled out of the ship to the ground. "You're supposed to wear an extra one for exhibitions," he agreed, "and he knows it as well as we do. But Fletcher Wells is the best jumper in the business to-day."

In the middle of the flying field was a white circle marked with lines. Fletcher Wells had descended far enough now that Platt could see his arms reaching up overhead to the shrouds, pulling on the downward course. Platt and the pilot ran out to the circle. They stood at the edge and waited. From above came Fletcher Wells' voice.

"Hello, boys, how's the weather down there?"

Platt smiled. You could not be angry with Fletcher Wells, not even when he took too many risks. He had something boyish about him despite his nearly forty years. The parachute dropped lower. The man over their heads gave a final pull on the shrouds and his feet touched the ground almost exactly in the centre of the circle.

While a deafening roar of applause went up from the crowd, Platt and Boyd were already at work spilling the air from the parachute before a sudden gust of wind could draw it across the ground. Platt felt the smooth, strong silk under his hands and gave an involuntary shiver. He could not explain his fear and dislike of the parachute.

Fletcher Wells slipped out of the harness and was bowing to the applauding crowd. He winked at Platt.

"Guess the old boy can still hit the bulls-eye, can't he?"

"Right in the centre," replied Platt. He and Boyd gathered up the parachute and carried it into the hangar where it was to be kept until Fletcher Wells had a chance to inspect it and fold it. No one else was allowed to fold the chutes. "I'm taking no chances on anyone putting it in the pack backwards," the older man always said.

Platt leaned against the wing of a big tri-motored cabin plane in one corner of the hangar. Boyd Adams was starting away when Fletcher Wells came rushing into the building waving a slip of yellow paper.

"Listen to this," he cried. "It just came. 'Anderson, the promoter,' will be at Burtonville to see your jump on Saturday. If he likes it he will book you for the big exhibition, 'Signed, Lessie.'"

"What does it mean?" demanded Boyd.

"It means that I can make enough money to stop this stuff and work on my new safety chute," Fletcher Wells exclaimed. "It means no more jumps in little towns where there aren't decent fields to land."

"Then we could get away from this sort of life," Platt added.

Fletcher Wells looked at the boy. "If I perfect my new chute I guess even you wouldn't be afraid to jump with it, would you?"

"I don't know," Platt answered slowly. "I don't seem to be very brave."

Fletcher Wells threw his arm over the boy's shoulders. "Forget it," he said. "You're the best grease monkey I ever had and if you don't want to jump, that's your affair."

Platt thrust his hands deep into the pockets of the coveralls. He owed Fletcher Wells a debt that he never could pay. He had been a halfstarved, homeless orphan when the parachute-jumper had befriended him. Fletcher Wells had been a father to him, nursing him through sickness, teaching him to be a mechanic. Fletcher Wells had wanted to make a parachute jumper of him; but he had always been afraid. He was not even a real mechanic, just a grease monkey.

Saturday morning found the little group in Burtonville. The exhibition was to start at two o'clock in the afternoon with speed races, then formation flying would follow, and a parachute jump by Fletcher Wells would conclude the program. Platt was giving the ship a final inspection when he heard some one shout. He looked up to see Boyd Adams running across the field.

"It's a long-distance call for the boss," explained the pilot. "Where is he?"

"In the hangar folding his chute," replied Platt.

Fletcher Wells hurried across to the office when he came out a serious look was on his face as he walked slowly over to the place where Platt and Boyd waited.

"Is the plane all set?" asked Mr. Wells. Platt nodded. "I just finished going over it."

"I have to go to Pittsburgh right away. It's about my patent. When I look it out it was contested, and I had six months to answer. I thought my attorney was taking care of it, but he has been sick. If I don't get my papers and make the necessary adjustments so they can be filed to-day, I'm likely to lose the whole thing. My new chute depends on it."

"What about your jump this afternoon?" asked Platt.

Fletcher Wells glanced at the watch on his wrist. "The trip takes two hours each way and it will require an hour or so to do the work. I should be back here by four. If I don't make it, stall them off for a while."

"But," protested Boyd, "this is the day Anderson will be here to see you jump."

"I know it," Fletcher Wells said, "and I wouldn't go if it weren't absolutely necessary. We'll get back in time."

Boyd slipped into his flying suit and Fletcher Wells pulled on a leather coat and goggles. Platt slipped back on the propeller whirled. He saw a hand wave as the ship picked up speed and taxied across the field.

The morning passed slowly; but when the races started Platt, with his eyes alternating between the distant horizon and his watch, felt that he had never seen time go so rapidly. The minutes ticked by, closer and closer to four o'clock, and still no sign of Boyd Adams, and Fletcher Wells could be seen. The races were ended, airplanes were forming in the overhead sky, and an assistant was marking the circle in the centre of the field. A man came out of the office.

"Platt Warner wanted on the telephone."

Cold fingers of fear clutched at the boy's heart. Had Boyd and Fletcher cracked up somewhere? Platt ran into the office and picked up the telephone receiver. In the silence that followed his "hello," he heard his heart thumping dully. The unmistakable voice of Fletcher Wells came over the wire.

"Listen, Platt, we won't be able to get there. You'll have to tell the manager that I can't make it."

"What's the matter? The engine did not knock on you, did it?" asked Platt.

"No, I'm out in the country. There's a mail plane forced down here. The pilot is a friend of mine and I've got to help him out. If he waits for a regular mechanic he won't get his mail through."

Platt stared at the ticket window. Fletcher Wells was giving up the chance he had always wanted.

"What'll I tell Anderson?" demanded Platt.

"Tell him I'm sorry, but this fellow is a friend of mine."

A friend of mine! That was the meaning of friendship to Fletcher Wells. Platt walked from the office and across to the hangar.

He began running under the high arched roof of the hangar. In the corner was Fletcher Wells' parachute folded in the pack. It was lying on the table where the jumper had tossed it when he went to answer the call from Pittsburgh. Over the chair was a flying suit with "Fletcher Wells" printed on the back. Platt put it on over his coveralls, and then pulled on the parachute harness. He snatched the three buckles, one over each thigh, and the other at his waist. He slid the lift straps over his shoulders as he had seen Fletcher Wells do.

From a locker Platt took a helmet, goggles, and a pair of rubber-soled shoes. He knew that these were necessary to avoid scratching the canvas on the wing of the airplane. He was slipping them on when he saw another parachute pack on the locker floor. He drew it out. It was the twenty-two-foot emergency parachute that was supposed to be worn for all exhibition jumps. Platt fastened it to the harness. The pack was over his stomach with the ring on the top.

Walking awkwardly, he made his way to the door of the hangar. The propeller of a bi-plane was turning over, the pilot was still in the cockpit. It was a single-engine plane that did not matter. "What's the matter with the pack on my back he would not fit in the cockpit anyway. He pushed the goggles down over his eyes.

"My ship hasn't come back yet," said Platt gruffly. "Will you take me up?"

The pilot looked around. "What do

you want?" he began, then he smiled. "Fletcher Wells'll be honored."

Platt scrambled up onto the wing of the airplane, close to the cockpit. He took a firm grasp of the struts with both hands. The pilot, he saw, was wearing a service parachute, the kind you sat on, Platt smiled. "Now if I just had one of those too," he thought, "I'd be all set."

"When do you want to start out?" asked the pilot.

"Three thousand feet," replied Platt. "Swing back and forth across the field."

The propeller roared and a gust of wind struck Platt, effectively stopping any further attempt at conversation. They rolled across the field, turned and came down the paved runway, picking up speed. The tail lifted and Platt saw the ground drop away beneath him.

"All right," he heard the pilot shout.

Platt nodded. He looked about on empty space. Ahead of him he could see a pin point of white, the circle. He could not jump. His whole spirit rebelled; but he had to help a friend! His hands loosened on the struts. He turned and dove into space. He saw the airplane give a lurch upward as his weight left it, and then he was falling. He was spinning like a top, over and over. He could see nothing but grayness. He wondered frantically if he would lose consciousness before he could pull the cord.

The groping fingers of his right hand found the ring over his head. He pulled across his chest from left to right as he had been taught by Fletcher Wells. Nothing happened! He was still falling, spinning in all that grayness. His mind raced frantically. Perhaps he had not pulled hard enough. He tried again, tugging with all his strength.

He fell and fell; then he remembered the little emergency parachute over his stomach. His fingers found the ring. He pulled out. Something white rose past his face, lines untangled before him.

He looked down and was astonished to see the ground so near. He must have fallen a long distance before this small parachute opened. He was still descending rapidly; more rapidly than he could remember ever having seen Fletcher Wells come down. What was wrong now? He stared up at the parachute. It was spread to its limit. No split was in the silk. That was all right, but it did not seem very big. He remembered then that the emergency parachute was only twenty-two feet. It let you down fast.

He looked at the ground rushing up to meet him. Suppose he broke an ankle. Well, he would have to chance that. To his right he could see the circle. He tried to pull on the shrouds to direct his course, but could not see that he was making any headway. A light gust of wind made him swing like a pendulum. Suddenly he realized that he was going to hit the ground. He tried to relax to break the fall. His feet struck something solid and his knees buckled. He attempted to keep his balance, but the parachute was pulling him. His arm tangled in the shrouds and he was jerked across rough ground. His shoulder dragged through something white. It was the lime circle. He gave a desperate tug, shoved his toes into the ground and hung on. His head hit with a thump, and everything turned black.

The first thing that Platt Warner be-

PROGRESS IN FOREST FIRE RESEARCH

While statistics for the past twenty years show there has been a general trend increase of ten per cent. in the annual number of forest fires in Canada, they also show there has been a trend decrease of more than fifty per cent. in the size of the average fire, according to the Department of Mines and Resources, Ottawa. Carelessness and increased travel through the forested regions in recent years have been largely responsible for the greater number of fires, while the reduction in the size of the fire has been brought about by the steadily increasing efficiency of the protective agencies. Modern methods of prevention and detection together with effective fire-fighting equipment have prevented many forest fires from reaching destructive proportions.

Progress in forest fire research is reported for 1938. Projects carried out at forest experiment stations in Canada during the year included the gathering of information for the compilation of fire-hazard tables, investigation work to develop improved methods of detecting and fighting forest fires, and the testing of new kinds of fire-fighting equipment.

New fire-hazard tables for computing the daily hazard were published for the major forest types in Eastern Canada, with the exception of spruce-balsam forests. Work on the spruce-balsam forests was carried out at experiment stations in Quebec and New Brunswick, where numerous large-scale fires were set on specially prepared areas to study the behaviour of fire under different weather conditions. Many tests and a study of past fire records, much valuable information has been obtained, which will assist in the compilation of fire-hazard tables for our spruce-balsam forests.

A study is being made also of the practical application of fire-hazard measurement and prediction to forest administration, and plans are being drawn up for one region which will indicate the administrative action required at each degree of hazard.

In co-operation with the National Research Council of Canada preliminary plans have been made for research projects on the penetration of smoke haze at lookout towers. Many had fires which start during periods of low visibility are not detected by the lookout system until they have attained large size, and it is hoped that the projected studies will indicate means whereby the visibility at lookout towers may be improved during smoky periods.

Many other minor projects with a view to the general improvement of fire protection were carried out at the various forest experiment stations with gratifying results.

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