

The Free Press Short Story

THE SKY WRITER

By JOHN SCOTT DOUGLAS

His lean, bronzed face brightened as Lloyd England cut the gun of his speedy little biplane over the familiar adobe hacienda where he had spent his youth.

The little biplane struck the hard-packed prairie and roared toward the hacienda, its motor subsiding in snarling spasms. It ceased rolling a hundred yards from the big ranch house, and Lloyd jumped out a little, clean-cut youth.

An infectious smile quirked his lips as Lloyd saw his brother Horace standing in the doorway in riding habit. Horace was shorter than Lloyd, broad-shouldered, inclining toward weight, Horace, however, frowned. "What brings you back?" he asked inhospitably.

"To see you," declared Lloyd, cheerfully. "I'm on my way to Santa Fe to write a welcome sign in smoke over the city to greet visitors. I'm a sky-writer now, Horace."

The older brother's only comment was a grunt. The two walked in silence into an inner court surrounded by the various rooms of the house. Horace slumped into a wicker chair and regarded his brother's flying habit for several moments in disapproving silence. "I haven't heard from you in a long time," he said abruptly. "Nearly two years. Last I heard you were training to be an aviator. Worthless business!"

"I wrote regularly for a year," Lloyd reminded him. "But I never received any answers to my letters, so I stopped writing. I received my pilot's license, worked for an airport, saved my money and bought my own plane. Then I specialized in sky-writing."

Horace's dark eyes narrowed. "What's that?" "Writing on the sky with smoke," explained his brother, smiling. "Quite interesting work, and profitable. I receive from \$500 to \$1,000 for a job. Of course, a lot of that goes to pay for the chemicals which produce the smoke. I write welcome signs on the sky when an important visitor is coming to a city, or advertise for soap, milk, baking powder or other big companies. Every thing has to be written in reverse so it will look straight to the man on the ground. Capital letters are generally a mile high, and the dot on an 'i' is as big as a city block."

The rancher was not interested in the details of his brother's business. He said brusquely, "I'm glad it's profitable because I was afraid you'd come here for money."

Lloyd winced. "That's just what I did come for, Horace."

"Then you came to the wrong person." "The younger lad's brown face became earnest. "Listen here, Horace," said Lloyd quickly. "I left this place when Dad died because I couldn't stand to be reminded of the good times we'd had here together on this range. Moreover, I wasn't cut out to be a rancher. Dad left no will, and I left everything as it was, taking nothing. Half of it was mine by rights; all I'm asking for is a loan of \$200. My tank is half filled with smoke, but I need that much more for expenses to write that welcome sign over at Santa Fe. I get \$500 for the job; I can pay you back in two days. It seems only fair that you should lend me \$200 of my own money."

Fire seemed to burn in the depths of the other's dark eyes. "It seems fair to you, does it?" snapped Horace sarcastically. "What have you done to build up this range these last three years? Nothing! If I had done as you did, there wouldn't be any herd here now."

Lloyd kicked an imaginary speck of dust at his feet. "I grab all you say," he muttered humbly. "But what I asked for was a loan, Horace, not a gift."

Horace granted. "You made a failure of things when you had a chance here."

"I haven't made a failure of my work," interrupted Lloyd spiritedly. "I earned a plane and was doing well. Then I ran into a lot of hard luck. A hangar burned, and I lost my first plane. That ate up a good bit of my savings. I had a lot of trouble with my second plane and had to sell it at a loss. My third plane, the one I came here in, took most of my remaining capital. Barring other unforeseen circumstances, I should rebuild my fortunes again in a short time."

Horace laughed sardonically. "Come out here with me," he said, and led the way through the rear door of the patio. Lloyd looked down at the herd. The cattle were lean, gray with dust. They were not eating; there was nothing they could eat on the parched range. They were stirring around uneasily, eyes blood-shot. Lloyd had ridden range enough to know the signs. Anything at all, or perhaps nothing, would start a stampede which might result in the loss of the herd. His father had told him of one such stampede before he was born. A leading steer had started toward the cliff at the end of the mesa. Realizing too late where he was heading, he had been swept over the bluff by the blindly following herd. Not

half a dozen had survived that maddened stampede.

"No rain for two weeks," said Horace sharply. "You see what I stand to lose if the weather doesn't break."

"You have money in the bank, have you not?" asked Lloyd quietly.

"Yes," said Horace, "but it isn't your money."

Lloyd stared with pain-filled eyes at the blazing, cobalt-blue sky overhead. He was going to fall through with his contract at Santa Fe unless he could get money in advance for his chemicals, which he doubted. Suddenly he caught sight of black clouds at the horizon. "Clouds move swiftly up here," he said to Horace. "It's going to rain before dinner time. I guess I'd better be going."

"If I can just hold the herd until then," said Horace. "But anything can start them off when they get this way. If you want my help, Lloyd, you can get it in just one way, I'll hire you as a herd rider at regular wages."

"His brother smiled faintly, shaking his head. "I'll have to try down to Santa Fe to let them know I can't make good. It's the least I can do. And, whether you think so or not, Horace, I'm more valuable as a sky-writer than I would be as a cattleman. I love the skies."

Lloyd gripped his brother's limp hand for a moment, and then turned back to the patio, passing through the front door to his biplane. He felt singularly depressed in spirit as he revved up his motor.

With a single wave to the grin figure in the doorway, he pushed forward on his stick, and the little biplane raced down the rough field. Three hundred yards ahead of the herd, he drew back ward on his stick, and the ship buzzed up into the blue.

He looked down with regret in his eyes upon the hacienda which had once been his home. He saw the vaqueros sitting on their horses here and there among the depressed cattle. He saw the bright glimmer as one of the men removed his watch from his pocket to learn the hour.

Then, one of the steers, bellowing loudly that Lloyd could hear it even above the thunder of his motor, started to charge in blind, reckless abandon toward that far-away bluff. Lloyd guessed the reason. That cowboy removing his watch had been the cause. The flash of silver had frightened the animal.

The big steer ran headlong against another. There was a swirl of dust. The whole herd began to move like lava across the flat mesa.

The vaqueros drove in from the sides, trying to curb the mad riot. They might as well have attempted to stop a hurricane.

The stampede had begun so suddenly that Lloyd failed to realize he was flying an aeroplane for several moments. A grim sort of satisfaction then settled over his heart. There was a certain justice for him in this sight. "But what good will it do me to see Horace lose his cattle?" he thought suddenly. "My brother is not himself today. How could he be with this worry? I can be fair to him."

How? Lloyd possessed but one weapon to fight this maddened herd—the chemical smoke his aeroplane carried. If that was gone, however, he was worse off than he had been when he had come to see Horace.

The herd was pounding toward the precipice. The vaqueros had managed to extricate themselves, and had fallen behind. Lloyd watched, deliberating.

He opened his throttle wide, pushed his stick slightly forward, and went roaring down at 135 miles an hour. Straight at the lead steer, Lloyd flew.

Down—down—down went the aeroplane. The big steer veered left, and the herd blindly followed. "Now," thought Lloyd.

It was close to the ground. A backward pull on his stick brought the biplane out of its dive, quivering. If the last part of the strategy would but gain his ends. He pressed the smoke-trigger on his joystick. A fuming rope of smoke, thirty feet in thickness, belched out behind the rudder of his ship.

The trail of cottonlike smoke spread behind the aeroplane as it passed the lead steer, which stopped short, snorting. The herd pushed on. Lloyd knew he would have to work even more quickly now.

Around the side of the herd he flew, cottoning the mesa with the smoke he had intended to use at Santa Fe. When he had reached the end of the herd, and was banking to go around, he glanced back quickly. The lead animal was circling back.

The thirty-foot rope of smoke—built a white wall around the end of the herd. Lloyd banked again, flying toward the initial spurt of white to connect the fourth side.

He spiraled for altitude to watch the results of the lowest sky-writing he had ever done. The lead steer had just connected with the end of the circle. They thundered around in that mad circle like a cat chasing its tail.

The black clouds in the north were growing more ominous. Lloyd could not continue to Santa Fe that afternoon until after the rain; so he landed again beside the hacienda.

A strangely changed Horace came striding toward the biplane as it landed, his face working. "Lloyd," he said brokenly, "you've saved my herd. I think this weather has made me a little crazy, too. If you'll come inside, I'll give you a check right now for your share of this ranch."

"But," exclaimed Lloyd, incredulously. "I only asked for a loan of \$200, Horace."

Horace laughed, for the first time in days. "And I insist that you get not a cent less than half of what Father left," he said resolutely. "Dad would have wanted it that way. And I'm not going to let you prove yourself a bigger man than I am, Lloyd."

NATIONAL RESEARCH IN CANADA

Serving the people of Canada in the study and solution of national problems involved in the application of science to industry, and with a view always to the betterment of living conditions in the Dominion, the National Research Council has made notable progress in many directions during 1936. Commercial applications of the laboratory results obtained from time to time continue to demonstrate the practical value of the work and show that the funds being spent on research on a national basis yield profitable returns.

In the National Research Laboratories at Ottawa the investigations under way have for their main object the promotion of the process of absorption whereby industry and commerce may be improved and expanded through the adoption of the latest and best methods. The laboratories, employing about 190 persons, including scientific, clerical and shop staffs, are organized in five main divisions: agricultural and biology; chemistry; physics and electrical engineering; mechanical engineering including aeronautics; and research information, with which is associated a national scientific library service.

Through its associate committees the Council has continued as in previous years to receive the advice and active support of some hundreds of research workers and technologists in government departments, the universities, and industries. Scholarships are granted annually by the National Research Council and in 1936 thirty students, selected from thirteen Canadian universities, benefitted under this scheme.

HOUSE PLANTS PREFER CERTAIN WINDOWS

In the management of house plants, the location of windows is a matter of some importance. For most house plants as a rule, windows facing south are preferable to the ones with a western outlook, because during the short winter days the western windows will receive little sun and what they do receive is too horizontal to be of much service. On the other hand, for shade-loving plants, like palms and ferns, windows facing east are most suitable.

Dwelling house air is usually dry, particularly during the winter months and creates a condition especially inviting to the red spider, which plays havoc with foliage. Dryness in the air may be decreased by evaporating water in the room and by spraying foliage on bright days. Thick leaved plants may be sponged with water containing whale oil soap. Ventilation on pleasant days is beneficial to house plants.

In choosing plants for the house, their fitness for this purpose may be determined largely from structure and general appearance. Plants with thick leaves with a small glossy surface are but little affected by a dry temperature, while plants with small thin leaves dry up quickly. Deciduous plants which show bare stems in winter are the least decorative.

At night plants do best in a temperature ten or fifteen degrees lower than they need during the day. Most species used as house plants require no more than fifty-five degrees Fahrenheit at night, and they will not suffer if the thermometer falls to forty although such a temperature maintained for some time would check growth. Frozen plants should be thawed out slowly. They should be moved from the direct rays of the sun and kept at a temperature of from thirty-five to forty degrees until thawed. If cold water is used for thawing, the temperature must not rise above forty degrees. Water at fifty or sixty degrees will probably harm plants more than by permitting them to thaw themselves out.

A gracious, genial presence, a charming personality, a refined, fascinating manner are welcome where mere beauty is denied and where mere wealth is turned away. They will make a better impression than the best education or the highest attainments. An attractive personality, even without great ability, often advances one when great talent and special training will not.

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SLATS' DIARY OLIVER N. WARREN

Sunday: Well, I more day of bliss has went by with Sunday in the school term. Jane was present in the evening, but a going back to school is unpleasant in the stream.

Monday: Aunt Emmy has informed me that I have been neglected her to mention in my items of lately. Well, the trouble is been that she are quit taken until they ain't hardly envious news about her. Scarsley a tall.

Tuesday: Elsie got sick of ennuity or sum thing & had the Dr. & Jake at her old she stick out her tongue for the Dr. & she sed yes & made faces to. Her she don't like the Dr. no how.

Wednesday: We attended a splendid accounts at the hall last nite & all at once the mecm turned white & looked scart. Good grahies sed Ma do you reckon he that he seen a spirit or a goat or sum thing. No sed Pa. Just sum thing he et.

Thursday: Bisters cum over to are house in the evening to help me get his rithmatic & Aunt Emmy up & sed she wanders what goes on at that new break show. Bisters repidde & sed nothing—evry thing cum off. But Aunt Emmy reamed to dum to get the idea.

Friday: Mister Gillem got the new & had the Dr. put his throde & the Dr. charged him 3 \$\$. When Mister Gillem klick & the Dr. at why Mr. Gillem—& was he mad—sed beca I painted yore hold garrog for only 4 \$\$. I think Mr. Gillem had a klick if you ast me.

Saturday: Jane enulted me. I called on her & tuk sum challekete. Sweets for the sweet, you know, I sed to her. Thanks sed she & went you have sum of them nuts. I think she saw the con neckchen.

THE SCOTCH OF IT

As McAndrew and his lass were entering the picture house, the girl said: "Here's my one and threepence, John."

WANTED A PRESENT

An illusionist performing in a Northern town put a woman into a box from which there was no apparent outlet, and shut the lid. When he opened it again there was nothing inside but a couple of rabbits.

After the performance a Scotchman went to the illusionist and asked him if he could perform the same trick if his (the Scotchman's) wife were to go into the box.

"It's no that I want rid o' the wife," he explained, "but wee Wullie wants two rabbits for her birthday!"

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