

# The Aviator's Long Flight

What Induced Him to Surrender a Coveted Prize.

By CLARISSA MACKIE

Stoddard's long distance flight had extended far beyond his wildest dreams. He had sent his powerful machine from the aviation field to an altitude far above his competitors, and then, driven before the fury of a south-east wind, he had outdistanced them all. That was fifteen hours ago, and he was flying yet.

Above him was a dark blue sky pricked with stars; far below billowed gray clouds. Beneath the clouds lay an uncharted country into which he might drop at any instant, for almost from the beginning he had been unable to operate the lever that would permit him to descend. Even the steering gear had gone wrong in some way, and so he had been confined to that broad aerial highway which he had chosen for his course and which he could not leave until his fuel gave out or an accident happened to his engine.

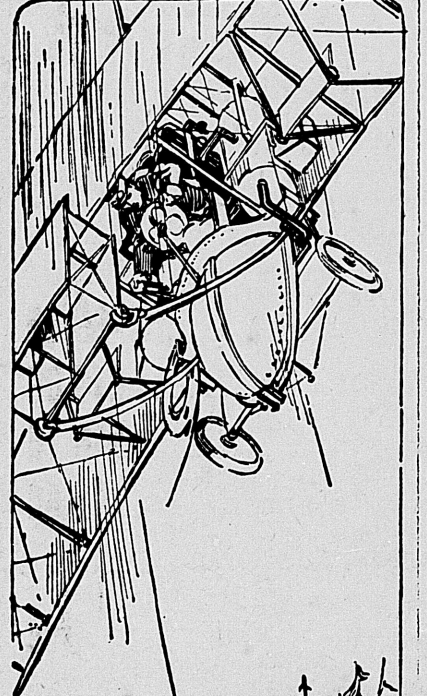
It was cold up here beyond the clouds and growing colder with each passing minute, but his heavy fur garments had been easily adjusted and afforded him abundant warmth. His supply of beef tablets and chocolate wafers satisfied his hunger, and there were bottles of water to allay his thirst.

He snapped on an electric pocket lamp and looked at the aerometer. He felt a thrill of pride at the record—600 miles on a straight flight, fifty miles better than Allison had ever done. If he could only descend now and wire back the news of his feat the trophy as well as the \$10,000 prize money would be his.

Hours passed, and then, as if in answer to this query of his tired brain, the machine slowed its mad speed, shivered, hung for one instant suspended in midair and then flopped like a broken winged bird down through the misty clouds. Stoddard clung to the steering wheel and braced himself for the shock that must come. He caught a glimpse of a rolling country, thickly wooded with firs and cedars, a large body of water sparkling in the first rays of the sun, and closed his eyes. Instinctively his hand clutched the scuffed lever, and to his wonder it sprang to action under his touch.

With eyes wide open now he touched one and another of the levers and pulled here and there until the machine responded with muffled breaths; then he sank steadily, heavily, earthward and at last brushed the dark green of a tree and swept down to a small open space cleared by some recent forest fire.

He tumbled out of his seat with cramped limbs and haggard eyes. His first impulse was to throw himself down on the scorched ground and sleep, but something almost under his foot sent him speeding in search of a hu-



THE MACHINE FLOPPED LIKE A BROKEN WINGED BIRD.

man habitation. A clay pipe still aglow with a very good brand of tobacco was evidence that its owner was not far away.

Wary as he was, Stoddard almost shouted for joy as he sped over the ground toward the nearest woods. Finding a settlement meant securing a messenger to ride to the nearest telegraph office and send to the waiting world the news of his winning flight. The trophy and \$10,000 would be a fortune indeed to him.

Once in the cool shadows of the woods he found a dimly defined trail winding in and out between huge tree trunks, bringing him at last to a cluster of little log cabins hidden in the forest growth until they seemed like a part of the forest itself. Built of roughly hewed tree trunks, each one concealed in its thicket of young spruce with a drift of smoke curling timidly from its chimney hole, the queer little

settlement excited Stoddard's wonder. It was not a lumbermen's camp nor the abode of furrers, and his halting shout was met by a baffling silence.

His investigation of the various houses left him bewildered. Deserted each one was, but it was as if the owner had suddenly fled in the face of some impending calamity. The one room abodes each showed a rudely constructed bunk recently occupied. Evidences of the occupants' tastes were not lacking and served to increase Stoddard's perplexity.

In one hut there were three volumes of Victor Hugo, battered and dog eared. In another was a handsome brass smoking set and on the wall the framed pictures of a woman and two children. Some showed like photographs of family groups or a set of ivory chessmen and board, a suit of once handsome clothes, now worn and shiny; a set of silver toilet articles carefully laid out on a stump, some tattered newspapers of ancient date and a pearl handled revolver.

There was nothing to betray the occupation of the settlers, and Stoddard was fairly puzzled as he foraged in what seemed the mess house and ate up the breakfast which had been in course of preparation. A coffee pot had been boiling on a small oil stove, and over an open fire there was sizzling a pan of ham. He rescued it just in time. But where were the occupants of the eight huts, and why had they fled?

Stoddard was impatient of delay. He wanted to send a messenger off at once with his announcement to the world. He called lustily, but there was no response. Then all at once he saw them staring fearfully at him from a thicket of spruce—eight white faces, with scared and furtive eyes.

"Hello!" he called, coming forward. "Can't you help a fellow out?"

The white faces turned toward each other and conferred together. At last one came forward, and Stoddard saw a tall, lean figure clad in rough clothes. The face was drawn and haggard and covered with a grizzled beard, and the eyes sought his with distrust in their gray depths.

"What do you want?" asked the man gruffly.

Stoddard explained in a few words, but the other shook his head decidedly. "I'm afraid we can't help you out," he said slowly. "I'll go back and consult the others." As he walked away Stoddard remembered with a little leap of the pulse where he had seen the man before. It had been under very different circumstances. Then, looking at the others keenly, he recognized three from photographs he had seen in the papers, and the identity of the remainder could be easily guessed. The first was the absconding cashier of the Blankford National bank, another was the man wanted in the Henly murder case, another was a city treasurer who had played the game and lost, and there was another bank man, a weasel faced individual, who had once snubbed Stoddard from the pinnacle of his glittering superiority.

They came forward now, with Gates, the cashier of the Blankford bank, as spokesman. "We have decided that we would rather not be mixed up in it," he hesitated. "You see, it's 200 miles to the nearest settlement, and the telegraph station is ten miles beyond that. Somebody'd have to walk the distance."

Stoddard pondered. "How do you get your supplies?" he asked bluntly.

Gates turned to his companions with questioning eyes. They nodded sullenly, but the weasel faced man put forth a delicate white hand. His light, prominent eyes rolled at the stranger.

"Tell him we prefer not to say," he said in a curious, repressed tone.

Stoddard repeated his experience and his reasons for communicating with the outside world. The eight fugitives from justice eagerly absorbed the news as details fell from the aviator's lips. They questioned him concerning political affairs, and from their conversation he learned that the latest comer had been there five years. He pleaded with them, expostulated, offered them money and then drew it back as they laughed at him in mirthless mockery.

"I shall have to fly back again the 200 miles to the telegraph station. It will clip my record 200 miles, and I'll lose on my flight, after all. I could use that money, gentlemen," he said regretfully.

"Money!" sneered Gates, with sudden fury in his even tones. "Man, what is money compared to freedom? What is money compared to the respect of your fellow men—the companionship of those you love?" He broke down and turned away.

The others closed fiercely around the aviator, and their eyes propounded the same questions and others that were unanswerable.

"I'm sorry," said Stoddard simply. "Will you come and look at the machine? There may be something among my supplies you could use."

They trooped after him in a sullen silence that was broken at last by Gates, who had recovered his composure. "I saw you coming," he said briefly.

"Then this is your pipe?" returned Stoddard as he took it from his pocket.

The other nodded and proceeded to fill the bowl afresh. Once in the open space, the fugitives relaxed the vigilance of their ever watchful eyes and gave themselves over to the enjoyment of the wonderful piece of mechanism before them. Some of them had never even seen a flying machine, and they listened greedily while Stoddard explained the working of the planes, and of them, who had owned an automobile in his ante-Canadian days, was able to point out to the aviator the fault with his levers, and it was corrected. Then he opened his stores and

offered them what he had in the way of tobacco, but they had been holding another conference, and Gates refused to accept the proffered luxury.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Stoddard," he said firmly, "but I think you will have to remain with us. If you go back and tell where you descended this region will be visited by reporters. They will have pictures of your landing place at any price. We must protect ourselves or be hounded further into the wilderness. You have stumbled upon us by accident, and you will have to remain." "This is our own particular little hell, and we're very exclusive," added one of the others grimly.

Stoddard was silent. He could not, with safety to the fugitives, announce his descent within a hundred miles of their hiding place. Their retreat was



"WHAT DO YOU WANT?" ASKED THE MAN GRUFFLY.

in a remote region, situated on an arm of the Hudson bay. The flying machine had ferreted them out. If he clipped a hundred miles off his flight record he would lose out on the trophy and the prize money. On the other side was the pitiable group of white faced men with their hunted, desperate eyes.

"If I report from the next telegraph station?" he asked.

"It's 200 miles."

"What is the name of the place?"

"Flume station. But can we depend upon your promise?" asked Gates doubtfully, and the others murmured dissatisfaction.

For answer Stoddard detached the aerometer from the machine and showed them the record. It registered 800 miles, a record breaking flight for the young aviator. Deliberately he manipulated the recorder until he had set it back 400 miles. "When I reach Flume station it will register 200 more, making me 600," he said as he replaced the instrument.

"What's to prevent your setting it ahead again?" demanded the weasel faced man suspiciously.

"Nothing but the action of the planes can effect that," returned Stoddard gravely, and for their satisfaction he brought out from a locker a book of directions for adjusting the speedometer. They read it eagerly as if their tired eyes were glad to look upon a printed page even of dry technicalities and gave it back to him.

"Your success will mean we shall be hounded farther into the wilderness," said Gates in an agitated tone.

"Shut up, you old fool," squealed the weasel faced man angrily. Then he turned to Stoddard with a sickly smile writhing his features. "We're a party of—or—naturalists," he explained lamely.

Stoddard was silent for a long while. Then he turned away his head that he might not see the shame in their faces. "I might as well tell you that I can guess the situation. I recognize some of you, gentlemen, but I shall forget all about this as soon as I leave."

Gates broke the hush that followed these words. "You know there are rewards out for some, and they are of tempting size." But Stoddard shook his head.

"I'm not a cad," he said briefly.

One by one eight hands went out to meet his extended palm, and last of all the reluctant hand of the weasel faced man. It was like contact with a cold, dead fish. The young aviator hesitated an instant before he started the machine down the incline that was to give him impetus for his flight.

"Gentlemen," he said slowly, "it's none of my business, but why don't you come back, work it out and live afterward?"

"Perhaps we will," said a voice timidly, and then they stood back as he left them. When he hung above their wondering eyes he leaned over and waved his handkerchief before starting southward. He heard a faint cheer.

One brief backward glance showed the glitter of the bay, the dark confers of the forest in which the fugitives made their home. Then Stoddard saw something strange, a spectacle that always came before his eyes when he thought of these men.

The dark forest that housed them had been visited by fire at some period, and the course of devastation had followed the lines of a cross. Now it stood out a dark smitten evidence against the green of the forest, even as their sins laid a cross upon their souls.

Stoddard, his face set to the south, going back a loser in a flight that had promised him great awards, was not thinking of what he had lost. He was still thinking of the significance of the dark cross.



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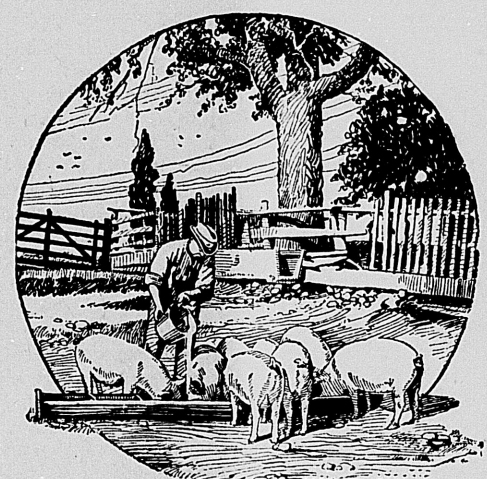
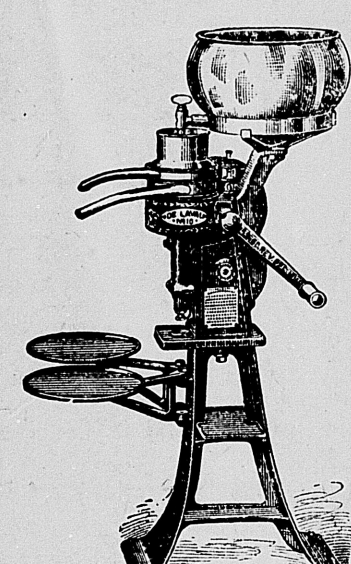
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