

THE VANISHING ACE

by ANDREW A. GAFFREY

They all thought Tilton Mills was a dumb-Dora when it came to flying even though he wrote the script he was playing in. Loop Murry was doing the stunting, and damning the leading man below—but when Loop's machine crashed in a burst of flame Tilton Mills turned out to be more than just actor-playwright!

I'M NOT FLYING FOR LOVE," Loop Murry said; "and the sooner you people know it, the better . . . Ten? Not enough! Make it fifteen and you've bought something."

"But we want only one loop," Director Stanton bargained. "Ten bucks's a fortune for one loop."

"One loop, but where does that loop end? Your script says that I must finish the loop lower than that line of trees. Stanton, there are loops and there are loops, you know, but this is going to be the loop—if flown. Who ever thought of this thing, anyhow? What's The Vanishing Ace?"

"Our new leading man, Tilton Mills. He wrote this story you know." Stanton fingered the wrinkled script that Tilton had written, and added: "Mr. Mills doesn't know air but he got his idea from—"

"You don't need to tell me what he doesn't know!" "Loop" cut in; "he's like the rest of these punk writers and directors. They take he-man lines like railroading, steel and air, mix well with pink tea, shake weakly but not good, and serve when hot with flash advertising. This yarn of Mills's is parlor stuff. The aviation thing is only a background. Background is right! That's where this he-man Tilton will be while I'm flying this low-turned loop, in the background. I suppose he'll be taking a shot-in-the-arm to keep up his nerve while I'm earning the princely te—I mean, fifteen."

"You were right the first time," Director Stanton corrected. "Ten is the top."

"When the bottom's about a thousand feet above those trees," Loop Murry agreed. "But this ground stuff calls for big jack . . . Fifteen."

"Where's your argument, Loop?" Stanton dickered. "You and Pola spend all your spare time flying through and under these trees for nothing, for fun."

"But that's different." Loop and Pola White, said-to-be-coming young star, were quite thick. Had been,

off and on, for weeks. Murry had been saying it with loops, spins, etc.

"Different nothing!" Stanton barked. "Thought you weren't flying for love."

WHILE one of the smallest cogs on the billion dollar wheel stuck on a five dollar snag, the machinery of the great art stood idle. Stanton's two cameramen, with hand-winders in position, waited. They had their caps on back-side-to and when Hollywood reverses the visor—well, something's going to be shot, and now! A dozen wage-drawing extras also gold-bricked in the shade of Clover Field's hangars, and the early morning sun—the most important member of any movie cast—was at its best, right then, over that section of west Los Angeles.

All these urges—the impatient cameramen, the seven bucks-per-day extras and the sun that moves and weakens—were on Loop's side; Stanton caused Wall Street to tighten up when he arrived at his great decision: "All right, Murry. Fifteen is the holdup, but remember—make it low and good."

"Good?" Murry questioned in repeating. "Stanton, when I'm working on a flying job you never need a whip. This loop'll be flown so low, tight and fast that Tilton Mills, if he's on the field, will have a nervous breakdown through proxy. Will he be here?"

"He's due now." Director Stanton consulted his wrist-watch. "Mr. Mills is a little late; he went around to the Christie to pick up his new leading lady. The casting office picked Pola White for the lead last night."

"Pola playing opposite this cake-eater Tilton Mills?" Loop asked. He clouded up, stared.

"Is your plane ready?" Stanton inquired. "Going to use your own ship?"

"No. I'm going to borrow a single-seater scout. I'll get it serviced. Be with you in ten minutes."

“Just a minute,” Stanton said. “In the story so far, we’ve used your old two-plane . . . Can’t change planes now.”

“Well, art for Art A. Fishel’s sake!” Murry exploded. “Since when have you directors become technically right? Say, Stanton, I’ve never yet seen a hi-powered production with planes in it but that the hero took-off in one type of plane, did his air-work in a second style ship, and landed in a third. What are you trying to do—spoil the public? If they’ve been so thick all these years, why flatter them now? A plane’s a plane . . . Anyway, I need a fast ship for this stunt. It’ll cramp Mills’ style if I crash. Be sure and have smelling salts on hand. For all the phony movie money in Hollywood, I wouldn’t take one small wave out of Tilton’s ‘permanent.’”

AS LOOP turned to leave, a purple car with four spotlights, three promiscuously scattered fish-horns, crowds of extra wheels and shoes, dynamited from the highway and dusted to a conspicuous stop just behind the cameras. Tilton and Pola White, cooped in behind the tonneau’s sun parlor, had arrived.

“Loop” Murry hesitated for a moment and walked toward the chariot of dawn. Pola saw him coming. The “Peddlers and Agents” was plainly on the door; Murry started for the scout’s hangar.

“Gone nigger-rich again,” “Bugs” Tedder—standing at my side—mused bitterly. “Every time that dizzy blonde gets a little boost in the world she throws ‘Loop’ to the collectors. For a plugged nickel I’d sock that bird Mills—the blowed-up stiff. Where in hell do they get these half-baked leading dudes?”

It was natural for young “Bugs” to lean Murry’s way. Loop Murry and his so-called flying circus had been Bugs Tedder’s first loves. He worshipped Loop. Why shouldn’t he? Didn’t Loop teach Bugs the fine art of thrill: parachute jumping, plane-to-plane changing, wingwalking, etc., and didn’t “Loop” take him on all his wild trips? Why, Loop Murry was his best friend. And to think of this Pershing Square boy driving in with Pola.

“Guess I’ll give Loop a hand with his plane,” Bugs decided. “I’m going away from here before I take a poke at that green-sward stepper.”

Now almost everybody has seen the extras and second-raters work before the cameras. But I for one have never seen the leads get out and do their stuff. The stars, of course, will come out to location, but, once there, they just sink a little deeper into the tonneau’s leather and, bored to death, seem to be waiting for noon or five o’clock.

That’s what Pola and Tilton Mills were doing now.

Pola, with the reputation of Hollywood at stake, was smoking cigarettes end-to-end. She was just giving the Southland a hard name, because, on their way into Santa Monica, many cars of Iowans, seeing cameras, had stopped. Pola, the gorgeous sun-kist egotist, ignored the admiring gaze of her crowding public. That’s bad: when one loses one’s public, one might well be dead. One can live too long.

Tilton Mills, with Bugs’ detracting tongue stilled, certainly didn’t look so bad. He was about twenty-five or six:—The threshold. Good to look at, sandy hair, and a beach-burnt skin. Of course, in keeping with the laws of Hollywood and the articles of a contract, the kid was dressed in at least fifteen shades of six clashing colors. But he didn’t appear dressed. The clothes belonged to him, not Mills to the clothes. Lazing there in the back seat, he fooled with a flip gang of flying-field kids who crowded the running boards. The more daring of that gang reached over and yanked Tilton’s gay necktie from out his loud vest. Laughing, he tucked it back. Several times they repeated that exchange. There was nothing of the lavender and soprano in Mills.

“Mace,” Director Stanton told me when I asked as to his new leading man’s disposition, “this kid is the rarest thing in Hollywood—He’s a good winner. Mills is wide awake to the fact that his stay, at best, will be short. He accepts Hollywood as the promised land, and asks no questions. He’s as he as hell.”

IN A great cloud of dust Murry was taxing his sputtering scout toward the cameras for final instructions. The throttled motor sounded like a wheat header in good grain; the Iowans pricked up their ears, forgot Pola, and crowded toward the plane. I went out with Stanton when the latter walked slowly to Murry’s cockpit.

“Come down from about five thousand feet as though you’ve been shot and the plane is out of control,” Stanton instructed. “Then, at about a thousand, start your dive for the line of trees,”—Stanton pointed to the double lane of seventy-foot eucalyptus trees which runs east and west along the north side of Clover Field—“make your loop, and then, still behind the trees, keep out of sight. Are you all set?”

“I am if you have Tilton all propped up for a thrill,” Murry said cuttingly. “How’s his mighty nerve today?”

Stanton let that go. As he eased his throttle ahead, Loop shot a parting, hurt glance toward the purple car. At the same time, Bugs held tight to Loop’s right lower wing and, with motor roaring, whirled the plane

around. For a minute, when the cloud of dust and dirt went back and smothered the purple car, Bugs kept it there. The dirty trick was lost on the average observer. Loop throttled when he realized what Bugs had done. The cloud cleared; Mills came out smiling. But Pola White was not so white, nor was she smiling. It was a kiddish stunt.

During the next five or ten minutes, while Loop climbed to reach the desired altitude necessary for the long, falling, out-of-control shot, we—Stanton, Bugs and several hangers-on about the field—gathered in a knot and swapped idle, flying talk. It was then that Mills quit his car and Pola to lead Bugs to one side.

“I know that the dust cloud was not an accident,” the leading man was saying to Bugs in his slow, even drawl. “And, for the life of me, I can’t figure why you should have done it. It isn’t that I care, I’ve eaten my share of flying-field dust, but it was rather rough on Miss White. Don’t you think that an apology—to Miss White—is in order?”

“Apologize to that—” Bugs gargled the rest as I clapped a hand across his mouth and drew him to me.

“Finding you on a flying-field,” Mills said quietly, “I supposed that you were a man.”

“Man enough for you,” Bugs hissed. “Any time you want to take off your Little Lord Fontelroy’s say so!”

FOR a long time, suppressing a well-curbed anger that slowly edged toward amusement, Tilton Mills stood there studying arrogant youth. Youth that was ready to go. Now, as a rule, Bugs Tedder was a likely devil, but his over-weaned worship of Murry had reached fanaticism. It was high time for somebody to take him down the line.

Hell, no. This Mills had no idea of doing so. You could tell by watching his half-smile that he hoped to find an easy way out, but Bugs spiked that hope. There are one or two things that you can call a man, and once said, all the diplomacy on earth is as nothing. It’s a condition and a situation that has always existed. When it ceases to exist . . . Well perhaps then, man will have ceased to be virile and whether he calls or is called will not matter. But the race was not to reach its tumbledown in Mills.

“When you call me that,” he said, “you leave me no choice. Let’s you and I go up there beyond the trees. We’ll come back friends; if you’re game enough to follow air—then you must be big enough to learn that you’re wrong when you are wrong. I’m strong for air . . . And for those of the air.”

The leading man, leaving his coat and vest as he passed the car, strolled toward the trees.

“Mace,” Bugs said before he followed, “I’ve sure gone and tied onto a game one. I know when I’m outclassed. So I’ll apologize to Pola now, and, when Mills washes me out, I’ll bow low to him . . . He’ll come back with a servant.”

At that moment, a mile high and a few miles west of the field, Loop came into his fall. Then, thirty seconds later, he went into the loopdive. The motor howled. Cameras cranked. As a man, all froze and watched. All save “Bugs” and Mills. Close, but not together, they were nearing the trees, just off the official area of Clover Field.

Murry made his loop, ended below the concealing row of trees, and continued east beyond the sight of the cameras’ range. That loop was all that Murry had promised. Airmen shook thrill-accustomed heads and said, “Damn fool! Fifteen bucks!”

Then, as so often happens, the cameramen said just one word and the “N.G.” signs were held before the cameras, and Stanton waved Loop that the stunt hadn’t been caught in a satisfactory manner. And by the way Loop pulled back into his climb, you’d know that he was mad. But it’s got to be done and done again; the cameras must be sure.

While Loop went back for altitude, I walked to a place where I could see some of the promised action among the roadside trees. There was a shielding undergrowth, toward highway traffic, at the spot which Mills had designated.

THE belligerents had reached that spot. Mills was removing all his upper clothing. Bugs, to relinquish any advantage of heavy flying boots over low shoes, was removing his knee-high gear. They were alone. None had followed them on their quarter mile stroll to rendezvous. As they made preparations in the distant undergrowth, the thing struck me as all wrong. Young Tedder had seen the error of his haste; Mills really had no grievance. Moreover, Mills’s face was his meal ticket. And “Bugs” might manage to slug it. Why should either of those kids be leveled through a mauling! I’d try to stop it.

With that in view I started for the trees when, back at altitude, Loop came into position, flew a few tight turns in warning, and started down on his second try. Over my shoulder, I watched his aimless, directionless falling spin, and knew that he was flying that insane maneuver with power only partly reduced and hands and feet off the controls. The plane, on its own. For

a moment, before closing, “Bugs” and Mills stood there also watching the air-work. Those moments of suspended action were what I wanted. Mental fires cool rapidly when diversions interfere with the stoking. Their joint attentions were now upon Loop’s handiwork. Not for the thrill. But, in the coming moments of the loop, they were with him.

As before, at slightly more than the thousand foot level, Loop brought his plane under control again, shot full-motor to it, and—from half a mile back—came down in his roaring loop-dive. From where I was now walking toward “Bugs” and Mills—we three and the oncoming plane were on the north, off-field side of the long lane of east and west trees:—you could look up over the nose of Loop’s diving ship and into the cockpit where, crouched and tense, he flew his dive,, crowded his motor, and watched the coming ground. His wing-tips fluttered and bowed back. Every strut and wire howled its hellish drone. And the unmuffled rotary motor screeched like a mighty circular-saw in rough, knotty going. Then Loop reached a point just even with the tree tops, concaved his line-of-flight, and shot straight up for the loop. Two hundred feet higher than the trees, for breathless, stretched seconds, the plane hung on its back . . . Inverted, it settled a little . . . Then, slowly, Loop redressed, and headed into the recovering dive. Those, who knew air, breathed again.

The moment that Loop came fully under control and headed east behind the trees, I figured that his part was over, and turned to resume my peace-making journey toward—

Bugs and Mills, as though gone mad, were trying to wave Loop away, and, as they did so, pointed south. At the time, from where I stood within a few hundred feet of them, I could not get their drift; could not guess what had gone wrong.

THE long east and west lane of trees—behind which Loop was now flying to avoid being caught again by the cameras—deadheaded and formed the stock of a “T”-formation with another line of eucalyptus trees which followed the east boundary of Clover Field, north and south. It was at the confluence of those long, shady files that the leading man and “Bugs” were now in agitated action.

It takes seconds to tell it; at the time . . . There was a crash and a flash—that’s all. No time for thought. Even less for action. It had to happen. It’s aviation. It’s hell.

I remember that, with an agonized voice, Mills cried, “A bloody D.H.!” And, even then with the whole

world crashing above us, it struck me as funny that a non-airman, as we supposed the leading man to be, should be able to recognize the flying outline of the English type plane he sighted—D.H.

Also, his voice, the twang and use of “bloody”, set him apart as English. Perhaps I didn’t notice it then, but I have often recalled it since. And the English know their air. And they knew how deadly was the D.H. when they sold the rights to that antiquated plane to our Air Service. “A bloody D.H.!” Bloody, is right.

Following that north and south line of trees, flying low and even blowing the upper boughs with the wind from his propeller, an Army pilot, from San Diego, came dynamiting north. The visiting pilot was too low to see anything that might be behind the east and west lane, too interested in another plane taking-off to notice when “Loop” went down for his stunt.

When Mills and Bugs first saw the danger both planes were within a few hundred yards of the intersection. When he reached that point—they knew—that Loop must zoom and clear the north and south bar of the “T”.

Loop Murry did zoom.

The Army pilot and his mechanic, gazing intently west, never had a moment’s warning. Nor half a chance to act.

The second that Loop pulled up in his one-hundred-thirty-mile-per-hour zoom, the heavy Army D.H. shot its nose across the east and west trees. There was a splintering crash, a fluttering of broken wings, a burst of flame, and, upside-down, Loop’s burning wreckage hurtled downward.

HE HAD crashed against the heavy ship’s landing gear. His seven hundred pound scout had crumbled. Unscathed, the other plane flew north.

As that crash came burning through eighty feet to earth, an airman—any airman—would have said, “Stand back—He’s done.” I know, I froze. Never thought of giving help.

But not so Tilton Mills! Before the tail-surface had settled to the ground, bare to the waist, the leading man “who didn’t know air” had rushed in, thrown his weight against the top side of the fuselage—from which Loop hung head down, and heaved. With a deftness that must have known safety-belts, Mills reached a hand into Murry’s lap, unsnapped the buckle, and heaved again. Limply, the unconscious Loop fell to the ground. With a running dive, Bugs scooped him up, and got Loop in the clear. His clothes were hardly burned. The fire was all afront. But Mills. He was in bad.

With the second heave against the fuselage, as he stood the plane on its nose, Mills's belt caught on something, a broken strut or shattered longeron, perhaps, but no pause . . . Then he threw the wreckage from him . . . And went with it. For a split second, before young Tedder got to Mills, the orange castor-flames enveloped him, then, staggering blindly under the leading man's bulk, Bugs walked out of that inferno, butted against a tree, weaved for a few seconds, and went down.

That sequence of man-sized action had been all so dazzlingly rapid, so unhesitatingly, fearlessly dispatched that it made one's head swim. It beat and defeated the speed of flame. Between the first crash and the moment when Bugs collapsed under and against the roadside tree not a full minute of time had elapsed. Not a word was spoken. Nor, on their part, a single thought of self. Two men had certainly met and settled their differences on that spot; and there was no difference.

The first tremendous impulse of Tilton Mills had, before the fire came aft, taken Loop out of danger. Hardly singed. Then the unselfish plunge of the always-fearless darer devil Tedder had borne the leading man to safety. But, not as fortunate as Loop, Mills's naked torso—during those flashing moments of flame—had been hard hit. There was no beating it. The incoming crowd fell back. Women fainted. Hard hands in the game of flight looked on in awe. Stanton acted. Pola cried. The Army ambulance ended the scene. The burning pile sent its whirling column of gray-black smoke skyward, and those who didn't before, now knew something about air. The game is so horrible in, and with, possibilities.

"IT LOOKS though you had a bit of a crash." The tweed-clad newcomer paused on the threshold of the first aid room in Clover Field's Army Reserve building, where Captain Moulton, the flight surgeon, worked over Tilton Mills. "And Lord love us! if it isn't Tutter Mills-Manning back on the white table again. The blighter! He'll get in mischief yet, mind what I say." The speaker, Major Jenner, England's air attache to the U.S.A., came in a little closer and, coolly, watched the work.

It was the major, and not a mechanic, who was gazing southward from the rear cockpit of the D.H. when that ship came in from San Diego. Lieutenant Loud, the Army flyer, had landed with only a slightly damaged landing gear.

"The lieutenant ferried me up to see my old friend Mills-Manning go his paces in this new picture of his.

The Vanishing Ace, I believe he calls it. And when I get here, what do I find but the young cub napping." Tilton Mills—or Mills-Manning—under an opiate, heard nothing.

"The Vanishing Ace," Major Jenner went on to explain, "is a page out of this boy's life. One day, back in early '17, somewhere north of Verdun, Captain Mills-Manning was jumped by three Hun planes. From fifteen thousand feet, the boy flew an intriguing fall. Then, getting into clouds when within a few thousand feet of the ground, he came out of the spin to find a double-lined tree-covered highroad leading west. His Sopwith scout had a wing-spread of twenty-seven feet. He made a boy's sporting choice, cut down the road—under the trees—and west. At places, along the two kilometers which he covered, those trees only allowed a clearance of twenty nine feet. It was remarkable. In the history of flying, it has never been equaled. But the Mills-Manning men, in all the hard places of the world, have been that,—remarkable.

"The boy is like his brothers." Major Jenner had stopped to make sure that the opiate was still holding. "He is above commercializing patriotism. Were I not in a position to put my hand on each of England's flying men, Tilton Mills the American moving picture actor, would be just that; left to his own ways, Captain Mills-Manning, V.C. —thirty-three enemy planes in his bag—would cease to exist. What he did today, he has done before. I could tell you more, but he would not accord. Perhaps I've said enough . . . Or too much."

Pola was still crying—a little.

"Bugs" Tedder, with a few burns, smoked many cigarettes and stared fixedly at the ceiling above the cot on which he reposed. Said nothing but—"How's the kid?" And said it often.

"Loop," with one slinged arm, said, "I'm a fool for luck. Once more, I go ahead on borrowed time, and today I have gathered much wisdom . . . How's this Mills boy coming?"

Captain Moulton, opening the door from the first aid room, announced: "Not as bad as it looked. Some nasty body burns. Face's going to be O.K. He's coming to now—talking a little, and wild. Keeps saying, 'No use of quarreling, old chap; we can settle this without a set-to!'"

"Damned right we can!" Tedder moaned, and turned to the wall.

And Pola cried less and . . . not so prominently.