



WINNER TAKE ALL

by FREDERICK C. DAVIS

Two flyers of the newsreel wage an air-feud in the clouds, and over the flame-belching tanks of the oil fields Nick Royce, sky-eater, plays his ace-in-the-hole.

NICK ROYCE, handling the stick in the front cockpit, tilted the DeHaviland's big nose earthward. After twelve hours in the air, after throttling up and down and across five states, we were gliding back to our T on Long Island. Now our job was almost done—which job was “shooting” the New England flood for the World News Reel.

We had begun to move the minute the first news had trickled through that rain and high water had broken loose all over Massachusetts and Vermont. Shortly after midnight, while Royce and I were holding the graveyard watch on the T, the voice of Gord Dugan had come rasping over the telephone. Mr. Gordon Dugan was our boss, chief editor of the reel, packing almost as many horsepower in his makeup as a Liberty—and whereas a motor sometimes stops, Dugan never did.

“At you, Buckley?” he rasped. I was super of the flying division of the reel. He barked out the news of the flood to me in a few crackling words. “Wait there. I’m coming over!”

Dugan usually raised Cain and drove us like vassals to scoop the Compass outfit, our fightingest rivals. With superior equipment and a bigger force, they had beaten us to the screens time and again. Every second was precious to us if we wanted to get our stuff booked on Broadway. Our work, you know, was precisely like that of an old-time high-pressure newspaper; we had to be ready to skip whenever the break came, no matter what we were doing—sleeping, celebrating an anniversary, what not—hop into our planes, and go out after the pictures, so that the world's current history might be served piping hot to the millions of movie fans that were waiting to eat it up. On this particular assignment we faced our same old battle—

with Old Man Tim and the Compass People. But here, we knew, was a glorious chance for us to prove ourselves.

"We're going to hop now, Royce!" I remarked. "Dugan's headed our way in that blue devil roadster of his right this minute!" And I told Royce the break.

Royce's face glowed. Royce was a born flyer, quiet, unassuming, with brown eyes and likable face, dangling arms, and thin as a strut. I've already told you the story of his coming to our field—how he breezed in, looking for a job, and how Dugan mistook him for Rolf Flynn, a noted stunt flyer that we'd hired for special work. The deception didn't last long, but Royce found his chance to get into a plane with me, and go out and romp back with pictures of a sinking coastwise steamer—a scoop on Compass! So, P. S., he got the job!

"I certainly hope I can pilot you through this flood area," he said to me quietly. "I want to show Dugan that he made no mistake when he hired me."

"Now, there is jealousy among flyers as among any other group. And ever since Royce had come to the reel, there had been plain antagonism between him and an old pilot of ours, Rex Dillon. I'd tried to talk Rex out of it, but they seemed to be foes by their very natures, and talking did no good. That night Dillon had hung around the shack with us—he just wanted company, for his wife and two kiddies had gone off somewhere, and it was lonely at home.

"Well, Royce," he spoke up, "don't hope too much. This flood looks like a job with real experience necessary. Maybe some day you'll get the big breaks—but not yet."

Then Dugan's roadster honked to a stop outside, and he came bursting in.

"Now listen, boys!" he rasped. "This is not just an ordinary break. In fact, it may make or ruin us. Everybody knows that the Tip-Top people are the biggest producers in the movie field. But what everybody doesn't know is that they are planning to add a news reel to their releases. They're going to buy up one of the present independents.

It has narrowed down to the Compass people and us. Tip-Top is holding off, looking us both over. The reel they finally buy will become the greatest in the world. And we've got to do our best to land that deal!

"We've simply got to perform. We've got to go out and get those flood pictures back before Compass does, and we've got to make 'em good. Now, hop to it!"

We hopped, believe me! The three of us rolled a

D.H. out into the cold dawn and struggled to warm her. While she putted and popped, I got my camera out of the locker and mounted it in the rear pit, tucking three or four extra cartridges into my blouse. We were all set. But just as Royce stepped toward the fore cubby, Rex Dillon pushed him out of the way and started to climb in.

"Wait a minute, Rex," I cautioned him. "Royce is here with me tonight. I think he's due to go."

"Him?" Dillon asked scornfully. "Why, he's only a rookie. You need a trained man on this job."

And he put one leg into the pit. "Dillon!" Gord Dugan barked the name. "Dillon, get out of that plane! Get out, I say!" I'm going to let Royce pilot the ship this time."

Dillon climbed down, his face a furious red. "Dugan, that's darn foolishness. You just said this is the biggest chance we ever had to make ourselves. You can't let that kid go up—you can't trust him—"

"Royce has earned his chance!" Dugan remarked with a calm that was unnatural and menacing. "He's going to take that stick, and I'll know he'll bring the stuff back. Royce, take her away!" Dillon stomped back, mad to the marrow; and Nick Royce, grinning and appreciative, climbed into the pit. He thundered the motor a minute, and then we trundled down the field, took off, and deadheaded north.

We serviced at Concord, New Hampshire, and then began our real job. Royce zigzagged over the flooded area, and I ground away. We dipped low over the boiling water, caught shots of floating houses, a glimpse of a bridge leaving its pillars, and some little human interest shots of hens perched in tree-tops. We kept at it until my last cartridge was fed through; and then we turned back, knowing blamed well that we'd out-shot the Compass people by a wide margin.

We skimmed back as fast as we could, chawing sandwiches on the way. Then it was that Nick Royce tilted the big D.H. downward, and we saw our hangars float up through the propeller, and we knew we were home again. I was half out of the pit by the time the ship stopped beside the huts. Dugan came running toward us.

"Did you get 'em?"

I was grinning from ear to ear as I handed him the stack of cartridges.

"Dugan, I never shot anything better!"

Dugan grabbed the rolls and began hoofing it toward his roadster without waiting for another word. Not very far away on Long Island was one of our laboratories.

Dugan was bound for it, eager to follow the strips through the developer and fixer. Royce and I watched him purr away in the roadster, and still we grinned.

"Nick, there goes the best stuff this old reel ever had, believe me—bar none!"

I fondly believed it then, but I was wrong. Dead wrong. Those shots were not the best we ever took. Far from it! In fact—well, wait!

ROYCE and I waddled into the office shack. Jim White, our other cameraman, was there with Rex Dillon, as well as Tom Thurber, another pilot, and we told our story to them a dozen times. Scooped the Compass outfit, did we? Well, I guess! Backward and forward! We were drunk with the joy of it.

Well, it got later, and I began to wonder why Dugan wasn't phoning us. He was a hard master, but when we did well he never held back on the glad hand. Soon Thurber and White, off duty for the night, went away. Tonight it was Rex Dillon's and Rolf Flynn's turn, but Flynn hadn't shown up yet. During our little spiels, Dillon hadn't said much.

"So with little Nicky at the stick, you beat the whole world?" he asked me sneeringly. "Why, what did we ever do before Nick Royce came crashing into this reel, anyway?"

Royce sighed. "Lay off, can't you, Dillon? I don't want any trouble with you, but I'm warning you that you'd better lay off!"

"Yeah?" Dillon drawled. "Kid, listen. I think you've got by so far on a series of lucky flukes, and nothing-else. You have never done any real flying in your life. You're a rank amateur in a plane—with an ungodly amount of luck!" Now, if there's anything that will get Royce's goat, and get it proper, it's an insult to his flying ability. He got up out of his chair and walked over to Dillon.

"Dillon, if you ever say that to me again, I'll fight. I can equal anything you can do in a plane—understand that?"

"Kid, you're a fool. I'm a better pilot now than you'll ever be. Get that? I'm a better pilot than you'll ever be. Just say that over and over again to yourself as a cure for swell-head, 'Dillon is a better pilot than I'll ever be.' For the time is coming, kid, when I'm going to ride you down and prove it!"

Keyed up by twelve hard hours at the stick, Royce drew back his fist. If it had ever hit Dillon, he'd have gone flat—but just at that moment the door opened and a cold voice crackled out:

"Cut it out! Cut it out, you puppies!" This was Mr. Gordon Dugan. He was mad clear through, yet he was dazed, almost knocked out by something. He almost missed a chair when he sat down. He kept looking at me as though he was haunted, and said nothing.

"Dugan, what's the matter?" I demanded, half sick with apprehension. "Weren't the shots—good?"

Dugan blatted: "No!"

"What! They weren't good? Why not? My stop was right. I know my shutter was right. Why, there couldn't've been a hitch anywhere, Dugan!"

"The shots were no good," Dugan said. "Not a foot, not an inch of the stuff can be shown. Hopeless, all of it! It's no use. Compass has got their stuff on the way to the theaters by now. Compass stuff will be on Broadway, up and down, today, and we won't even be thought of. Tip-Top—we're getting licked—the best chance we ever had—lost!"

Dugan fished into his pocket and brought out a yard of celluloid. I looked through it. There was nothing on that strip but meaningless blurs. I couldn't identify a thing. The more I looked, the less I saw.

"Lord, Dugan!" I blurted. "Something certainly must have happened to my lens!"

I fumbled in my locker, where I'd put my camera, and brought it out. Dugan watched me dazedly as I unscrewed the front section of the lens. I shook it, and it rattled in its frame.

"Part of this lens is missing!"

I unscrewed the frame, and saw. A high-speed lens is not simply one piece of glass. It is made of perhaps six or eight lenses, cemented together and locked together in frames. One of the elements of mine was gone, throwing the whole arrangement off focus. It was as bad as no lens at all—worse, for until the film was through and developed, I couldn't suspect that something was wrong!

"Dugan, I'm got!" I managed to say. "How did that lens get that way? Somebody has tampered with it!" Dugan's eyes gleamed. He shot out: "Compass!"

"What?"

"I mean that there's only one way that the lens could have got jimmed, Buckley—somebody in the pay of the Compass people did it. By gad, they're out after us for fair! Dirty work! Who—what—Art, who could have got at that machine?"

We chattered and argued and suspected and advanced theories until we were all dizzy, and when we got through we hadn't arrived anywhere. The camera had stayed in my locker, unlocked to be sure, but no stranger could have got near it without being seen.

Dillon spoke: "Boss, there's no good in stalling. Somebody on this very field has been bought by the Compass people. One of your own men must have jimmed that lens."

Dugan was almost apoplectic. "By God! Let me get my hands on that man!"

"I think he's within reach," Dillon said quietly.

We all looked around, not quite understanding. What did Dillon mean? Not me! Not—Royce? Yes! Dillon was staring straight at Royce, and Royce was cloudy white, too astounded to move.

"Take it easy, Rex," I cautioned. "The kid didn't do it—you know that. Somebody from outside—"

"He did it, Boss!" Dillon raced on. "Who else could have done it? Who is the man on the field that you know the least about? There he is!"

Royce jerked forward, but I held him back.

"Dillon, you're crazy!" Dugan snapped. "The kid may be new to the game, and we may not know much about him, but he's as honest as the day is light!"

"Yeah?" Dillon sneered. "He came here from nowhere—for what purpose—sent by what outfit? You don't know! I tell you, he's in the pay of the Compass outfit, and he has done his level best to let them get the edge on you, Dugan. He's played you for a fool!"

Dugan finished that encounter briskly. "Dillon, you've said enough! Get out of this office! I'll look into this business myself, without your help. Get out!"

Dillon got out. The air of the office lost a lot of heat with him. And Royce had said not a single word. Dugan looked at him, then slowly took his shoulders. Royce's eyes did not drop before Dugan's. There wasn't a flicker of fear in them. He waited calmly for Dugan to speak.

"Kid, did you do it?"

Royce answered simply, "No, sir."

Dugan let his hands fall, and sighed. "I believe you, Royce. I believe you."

WE WERE sitting there, glum and silent, with the clock ticking away, when I noticed that it was well into the night again.

"H'lo!" I said. "This is Flynn's night on the watch, and he hasn't shown up yet."

And just then the door swung open, and Dillon popped in, eyes stark.

"Lord!" he gasped. "Flynn! He's out there, lyin' like he was dead! Come on and—"

It was uncanny! We were up and pushing through the door in a split second. Dillon led us through the

darkness. One of the hangars was standing open, with light spewing through its doors; and in front of it a man was lying face down on the packed sand. It was Flynn, unconscious, his face glistening red.

Dillon chattered on. "When you chased me out of the office, I went down the stalk of the T, just walking around. I heard a commotion down here, and looked back to see two men fighting. I came running as fast as I could. One of 'em heard me and beat it, leaving Flynn like this."

We lifted Flynn and carried him into the office, put him on one of the cots. He had been dealt a nasty blow, probably with the monkey-wrench that Dugan had picked up beside him. Dugan jumped at the phone, called a doctor fast as he could talk, and came back, chewing on a perfecto, Dillon meanwhile rattling on with his story.

"Flynn must have met up with this guy somehow, must have come across him a few minutes ago. It was—Flynn's watch with me tonight, wasn't it? Well, suppose that Flynn was coming to the office, and saw somebody fooling around in the hangar—a stranger. Then, the stranger being up to dirty work, there was this fight, and Flynn got knocked out."

"Did you see the other man?" Dugan snapped.

"Sure, but I didn't see his face. I—where's Royce?"

Royce was not in the office. We had no sooner noticed his absence, however, than he came in, breathless.

"Somebody's been working on one of the planes. The feed-pipe is pinched, almost closed. It'd stall a plane in the air. We'll have to get a new pipe before we can use that ship!"

"You found it out easy!" Dillon said with a leer.

"Cut it out!" Dugan barked.

Flynn was our chief concern at that moment. He was a man whose name was lending prestige to the reel, one of our most valuable assets. Only the fact that he was slightly ill had kept Dugan from sending him, instead of Royce, to cover the flood. And now, when we'd been hoping he could fly again soon, this bolt from the blue had laid him low! It was staggering.

The doctor bustled in, looked Flynn over, said his condition was not serious, and injected something to bring him around.

"There'll have to be three or four stitches taken in his scalp," the medic said. "Otherwise he's all right. I'll call for an ambulance and get him into a hospital. Considering his physical condition, he'll have to stay there for three or four days at least."

In a little while Flynn was able to talk. He said, answering Dugan's questions, that he had been coming across the sand, and had seen some one at work on one of the planes, handling a flashlight. Getting no answer to a call, he had gone to investigate, and had been hit. He did not recall a fight, though he supposed he must have struggled. All of which told us exactly nothing.

The ambulance came for Flynn. Dugan watched it roll away, and spat out the last of his cigar.

"Dillon, keep the place watched. I'll stick with you and, damn it, I'll be back tomorrow night to watch with White and Thurber. Royce, and you, too, Buckley—you need sleep. Go get it! I can't think of a thing we can do—except wait for more trouble!"

ROYCE and I shuffled out, and walked silently across the bar of the T.

"Art, you don't think I'm in on this rotten business, do you?" the kid asked.

"No, Nick, I don't. I believe in you as much as Dugan does."

"Thanks!" he answered. "We can't stand by and let this sort of thing go on. It's White's and Thurber's watch tomorrow night, but I couldn't stay away from the field. Could you? Well, listen. Suppose we stage a little watch of our own? We can sneak into one of the hangars and stay there, without anybody's knowing it. Maybe it'll do some good. Are you with me?"

That jimmed lens had almost broken my heart. "It's a good idea, Nick," I answered. "Whoever is sneaking around here, we've got to collar him. Meet me back here, at the third hangar, at ten o'clock tomorrow night."

"Ten sharp," said Royce; and we parted in the darkness.

At ten o'clock the next night I was back at that spot, nervous as a cat, but deadly grim. A shadow drifted from beside the hangar and came near. It was Royce. Together we moved toward the third hangar. Farther on, the field office was lighted. Inside, I knew, were White and Thurber and Dugan. They would be watching, but I had an idea that a secret watching party might not do any harm. With my key I unlocked the third hangar, and Royce and I eased in.

"Let's get in the ship," he suggested softly. "It'll be more comfortable there, and we can keep out of sight."

Inside the hangar it was dark as pitch. We felt our way to the ship and climbed over the cowling. Settling into the seats, we began a long wait.

How long we sat there I'm not sure. It was utterly silent, except for the sounds of our own breathing. Once twice we heard heels crunch through the sand outside the hangar doors, and the sound of voices. There was Dugan's crisp syllables and then Tom Thurber's softer tones. They passed on, and kept waiting.

Again heels crunched across the sand, but this time more carefully. Royce quit breathing to listen. I sat tense. This time there were no voices, and the footfalls did not move on. Then:

Click!

The lock came open! Whoever it was, he had a key that fitted! Then the hangar doors began to open—very slowly—very softly. The glow of the moon came in through the narrow opening, and the form of a man came through. I ducked down behind the cowling, knowing that Royce had done the same. Carefully, step by step, the prowler came closer—and a light flashed!

Next came the clinking of tools, and then a gentle rasping. The prowler was filling something—probably one of the control wires. Vilest trick of all! I grew hot with anger, and raised over the cowling.

With back toward me, at the tail of the D.H., a black form was bending, silhouetted by the light of the flash. Yes, he was filing a control wire! Hang him!

I waited no longer. Rising silently, I reached back and tapped Royce's knee as a signal, and he rose with me. Then in a mad scramble we were over and out of the plane.

The other man jerked around. His light fell and tumbled against the wall, leaving the place almost dark. I saw him moving for a pocket of his—and a gun!—and leaped on him. Royce was right beside me. The two of us bore him down; he squirmed and kicked like a maniac, but we pinned him.

Nick yelled: "Dugan! White! Thurber! Dugan!"

A door slammed, voices babbled, and heels pounded across the sand. The man beneath me fought more wildly. I struggled to keep him down, and gasped:

"Royce, get that light!"

Royce scrambled for it, and swung it around just as the doors swung wider and the trio from the office rushed in. The scene explained itself. I kept my prisoner flat on the ground while I stared at the face lighted by the torch—stared as we all stared, scarcely believing that the man we had caught was—

—Rex Dillon!

AFTER the first shock, it was like a funeral. Rex Dillon! A friend of all of us, an old-timer with the reel!

When Dugan found his voice he thundered : “Why, hang you, Dillon!”

Dillon quit struggling and got up. “Wait a minute, Dugan,” he said in a thin voice. “Let me say something.”

“Say something! You snake! You—the last man I thought would go back on me—! Dillon, you’re going to pay for this!”

“Let me talk, will you?” Dillon demanded torturously. “I know I’ve done a rotten piece of work. All the things you think about me are true—the lens and Flynn—but God! I never realized what I was doing until right this minute!” He was trembling from head to foot. “Lord, if I could undo it, Dugan, I would!”

“You’re right you would. But you can’t. I’d enjoy throttling you, you—why—!”

Dugan was almost out of his head. I signaled the others to keep an eye on Dillon, and grabbed Dugan away, leading him back to the office. He kept ranting, and I waited for him to subside. At last I was able to tell him:

“Chief, Dillon certainly hasn’t done anything to be proud of. But at least, it’s all over now.”

“You’re right—it is!”

“Listen, Chief. Somehow, I feel sorry for Rex. I believe what he said—that he didn’t realize what he was doing. Why, how could he? Think of it! He’s got a wife and two kids at home. Compass must have got at him with a big money offer—hypnotized him. Chief, I’ll bet my soul, now that it’s all over, you haven’t got a more loyal man in the outfit than Dillon right now.”

Dugan only sputtered.

“Chief, let me explain. Give Dillon a new chance now, and he’ll stick with you till his dying day. Why? Because he’ll do his best to make up for what he’s done. He’ll never try anything tricky again—he couldn’t get away with it. He’ll be straight as a ruler, Chief!”

“Dillon’s packing off this field as fast as he can go!” Dugan stated.

“Chief, wait. What can a flyer do that has lost his job? You know Dillon can’t do anything but fly. Kicked out of here, where could he go? Compass wouldn’t incriminate themselves by taking him. Nobody else would want him. And he’s got to have a job. The best place in the world for him is right here. Let him stay, and Dillon will be so grateful it’ll be pathetic. Chief, will you do it?”

“I will not!” Dugan blurted.

Just then the door opened, and Nick Royce came in. He knew what I was trying to do. There is nothing small about Nick Royce. He forgot Dillon’s antagonism

and stepped up and pleaded for a flyer who was in danger of that cursed classification—black-winged.

“Mr. Dugan, I’m no friend of Dillon’s, but just let him stay here, and he’ll sure be your slave. Give him a chance to make good. Why, he’s outside right now, crying like a kid because of what he’s done. Just shake his hand, and tell him his job is still his, and you won’t have any man on the field that you could trust more than Dillon.”

“Rot!” Dugan barked.

Then Dillon came in. He was miserable, sick to his very soul. I knew we were right about him—but Dugan looked as hard as granite.

“Chief,” Dugan said, “I can’t explain it. When Compass offered me the five hundred, it got me. I’ve got a lot of expense at home—house to pay for—another baby coming in March—and the money went to my head. I took it but now I’m going to give every bloody cent of it back. I’ll do anything to square myself, Chief. Put me on the witness stand, and I’ll sew Compass up so tight they’ll never get out. I’ll do anything—”

“Dillon,” Gord Dugan said levelly, “you’re a traitor—a traitor. You know I could jail you for what you’ve done. But I’m not going to do that. Because the boys want me to, I’m going to let you off easy. I’m simply firing you. And that’s the most I’ll do. Now, hang you, get off this field, and stay off!” Dillon backed away. He knew that talk was useless. He was broken. Like a whipped dog he went toward the door—a man that was through! But when his eyes lighted on Royce his whole manner changed. Nothing had happened to lessen his hate for Royce—far from it! His mind flashed back to his capture in the hangar, and Royce’s part in it.

“Hang you, kid!” he blurted. “You did this to me—!”

He reached out with clenched fist and caught Royce on the chin. Royce staggered back from the terrific blow—but he made no move to answer it. When Dillon slammed out the door and tramped off into the darkness, Royce’s chin was bleeding.

It was later that I found Royce outside the office, staring at the starred sky. “What’s on your mind, kid?”

“It gets me, Art—gets me.”

“Dillon?”

“Yes. I don’t hate him like he hates me, but—gosh! Grounded! He’s grounded! Hang it all, I’m a flyer myself, and I know how it feels. Before I got a job here I knew how it felt—your whole heart and soul in flying, and being unable to fly. There are some things

worse than death—a lot worse— and that’s one of ’em—being a flyer that can’t fly?”

With a raw, ugly cut on his chin, Royce was thinking like that about the man that bad put it there!

DUGAN stayed at the office shack, talking with me. Now that Dillon was gone, we needed a pilot to take his place. We were discussing possibilities when the phone jangled.

Dugan barked a hello into it and grated, “Yeah, Smythe!” Smythe, Dugan’s first assistant, a man who could scent news nine miles off, was in constant touch with the wires. A moment later Dugan clanked the receiver back.

“Buckley, here’s another break! Not much, but a good spectacular one. Oil wells on fire in Pennsylvania—not one, but a whole field of ’em. Sprouting like fireworks, Smythe says. You’d better stay here till we get this pilot business ironed out. Let Jim White go shoot it, and tell Royce to take him.”

I pattered out, getting Royce and White and a greaseball into action, and explaining the break. While White mounted his camera in the rear pit, Royce warmed the engine of the D.H. It was just about to take off when, at the door of the shack, I stopped to watch it.

Royce was climbing back into the pit when another leather jacketed figure slipped from between two hangars and stopped him. It was Dillon—Rex Dillon, back on the field! Fascinated, I just watched. Dillon had a firm grip on Royce’s arm and was talking rapidly.

“Royce, I heard your instructions. Hang it, kid—I’m not out of this game yet! I’m going to show Dugan that I’m still worth something to him. I’m asking you to let me go out and get that oil well stuff myself!”

“Let go of me!” Royce barked. “Hang it, Dillon, I sympathize with you, but Dugan told me to go get that fire, and it’s my business to get it. I’ve never muffed a job he’s given me yet, and I don’t intend to begin now!”

Dillon stood his ground. “Royce, I’m desperate. I’ve got to get my job back. If I do a good piece of work on this, Dugan may take me back.” It means the world to me, kid—”

Royce spat. “I’ve got orders, and it’s my business to carry them through. As things stand, I take this plane out and get the oil well stuff. But I’m sorry about this mess, Dillon—and if Dugan says you can take the plane instead of me, I’ll turn it over to you. I’ll ask him myself.”

Royce was thoroughly sincere in that. He came hurrying toward the shack and, seeing me, stopped.

“Art, you’re super here. Dillon wants to take over my assignment. It’s O.K. with me, if you—”

The engine of the D.H. popped right then, and Royce whirled to find Dillon already in the cock-pit. With an oath he whirled, leaped up, and buried his claws into Dillon’s jacket.

“Hang you, Dillon! I’ll try to do my best for you, if you’ll play square! But while Dugan is expecting me to get that stuff, I intend to get it. Once he says you can go, I’ll step aside!”

“You fool!” Dillon rasped. “Dugan would never agree to it. I’m going anyway!”

With a yank that had his full power behind it, Royce pulled Dillon out of that cockpit. There was a scramble, and then they came up, half crouching at each other, fists clenched. *Crack!* Dillon’s fist shot into Royce’s face, and Royce staggered. Then Royce sailed in, with both fists working like pistons. They fell to the ground, rolled, sprang up, and rushed at each other again. Then Dillon’s flailing fist caught Royce under the chin, and Royce tottered backward and fell, and lay squirming.

Dillon leaped into the fore pit. Jim White, in the rear one, had been watching spellbound, as had I. When Royce staggered to his feet again the big Liberty blasted up, and the D.H. trundled away. Then the plane rolled into the sky, roaring like a wrathful monster.

“Buckley!”

Dugan again! Hearing the angry voices, he had come out. Now he simply thundered.

“Hang Dillon! He’s no pilot of mine, and whatever he brings in goes into the fire! Buckley, get going! Move! Royce, get that other plane out! Listen, you two! We’ve got to have that fire for the reel, and you’ve got to get it. If you don’t, by all the gods, I’ll—I’ll—*move?*”

We moved! In less time than it takes to tell it, almost, we had another of our DeHavilands out and warming. I was bundling my spare camera out of the locker, making sure it was O.K., and mounting it in the cockpit while Royce was settling in the control seat. Then at our signal the blocks went skidding, and we trundled away, zipped across the sand, lifted nicely—and were off!

Royce drove toward the sky with the throttle full on, the Liberty roaring, the struts shaking, the wires screaming. He was mad clear through. Dillon had turned him one trick too many this time! He knew

that it was up to him to get the shots that Dugan expected—to get them better than Dillon did. Dillon's action was a challenge that Royce was grimly accepting!

The plane drove on at terrific speed. In the sky before us was a small dot, Dillon's plane. We were streaming straight across the state of New York, and Royce put the Liberty to its limit. Slowly he drew up on the other plane. Then we were at its very tail, and then alongside it; and then we were pressing slowly ahead. Royce was driving the ship like a mad-man! And then, leading Dillon, he cut the gun long enough to call back at me:

"You heard Dillon boast that he's a better flyer than I am! Now watch me prove he's a liar!"

A show-down in the clouds!

The oil-field soon loomed close. Great bellows of smoke were pouring into the sky from a thousand flaming wells. The poles of flame reached high, spewing the entire countryside with soot and fiery rain. Royce cannily kept clear of the smoke so I could shoot properly; but then he began diving into it, sweeping close to this unheaving fire and that—so close that the heat smarted my face. Then closer—even closer—until I feared that my film would burst into flame!

Beside us now was Dillon's plane. He darted close, trying to out-manoeuvre Royce—and Royce was grimly trying to out-fly him. Not only was this a grim contest in handling a plane—it was a battle to get scenes of those wells. And I had already ground in some pippins—scenes I never dreamed could be got of such a thing.

We were almost in and out of the flames, like imps in the sky, getting shots that were little short of miraculous. I could picture the movie audiences squirming in their seats, feeling the heat, wondering how in the world we could get such pictures and live to deliver them. I was wondering that very thing myself. I expected to be burnt to a cinder at any moment! And meanwhile Royce's plane and Dillon's were weaving crazily close.

"Go back!" I shrieked at Royce. My hands were blistered, my lashes gone, and one of my goggles was cracked. "Go back!"

Dillon had already turned. He banked vertically, and took the straight sky trail toward our T. Dillon was even more desperate than Royce. Having got a head start, he stomped on the gas and let the plane stream at full throttle.

And Royce drove his ship as hard, a flying maniac for the moment—but this time he could not catch up with Dillon. One of our wings had suffered a hole, and we felt—the loss of lifting surface. Dillon led us all the way back. Then, too, oddly enough, I felt that Royce was going slower and slower as a man does when moving and thinking at the same time. And when, at last, the field swam below us, Dillon stepped down first.

Royce taxied up behind him. Dillon had clambered out, and was hurrying up to Dugan, with two cartridges of film that he had got from White.

"You've got ours?" Royce asked.

"I have—and they're lulus!"

Dillon met Dugan. "Take 'em! Take 'em. Chief! They're wonderful stuff. They're proof that I'm still worth something in this game!"

Royce stared. He glanced at me, and his eyes were human again. That he was a better aviator than Dillon was not a debatable subject any longer. No matter how good shots Dillon had brought home, Royce had piloted for better. But now Royce was his old self again—boyish, with an under standing like a woman's—and thinking about black wings!

"Gosh, Art! I guess I've been crazy for a little while!"

"You flew like it!"

"Dillon—Dillon was only trying to keep his job—that was all!"

"He fought for it, Royce—but you've beat him out of it!"

Royce looked like a wounded animal. Dillon had fought admirably—and for a moment Royce was in agony. Then his eyes gleamed.

"Art, hanged if I'll do it! It would be a dirtier trick than Dillon ever pulled in his life. Give me those cartridges!" He snatched them away, before I could stop him, and flung them aside. A little creek trickles along beside the field—and splash into it went my precious shots! I yelped and jumped toward them, but Royce blocked me.

"Wait, Art! They're half ruined now! I'm taking full responsibility. And if you don't back me up, I'll give you the worst licking you ever had in your life!"

I believed it!

Dugan growled up to us. "Give me your shots. Hand 'em over. We've got to rush!"

"We haven't got anything," said Royce.

"What?"

"Don't blame Art. It's my fault. I couldn't get him close enough. I guess I was a bit yellow. Dillon got better shots than we did."

Royce's lie was ridiculous. Yellow? Why, he was crammed with cool courage. Afraid of fire? How could he explain that hole burned in the wing? Our shots no good? Well, good or bad, where were they? Royce stood by his flimsy story as though it was the gospel truth and dared any man to doubt it!

"What the devil?" Dugan demanded, though he knew very well what the devil. "What's the reason Dillon got better stuff than you did?"

"Well," said Nick Royce calmly, "the reason is that Dillon is a better flyer than I am."

Dugan waited for no more. He grabbed the film from Dillon's hands. He ran to his roadster, and purred away at a mad speed toward the distant lab. And Dillon sobbed.

Nick Royce was silent. I could think of nothing except the thing he had said to me some hours before—a thing he had said and believed:

"There's one thing worse than death for a flyer—that's being unable to fly!"

A flyer to the center of his heart, Royce knew that. And—well, there's a good reason why I think the whole wide world of young Nick Royce!