

The Air Pilot

By Randall Parrish

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SYNOPSIS. In the smoking room of the Cedric, Hadley, an amateur aviator, tells of the mysterious disappearance of the Dessaud monoplane advertised to appear at the Chicago Aviation Meet. It seems that Phillip Dessaud, a French army officer, had made a new discovery in balancing and a silent engine, which the secret agents of other nations were after. He registered at the Congress Hotel, was assigned to Room 154 and that was the last heard of him. After Hadley ceased speaking one of the gentlemen offered his card and said: Messieurs, I am Phillip Dessaud, and smiling tells the story: He reached Chicago in the afternoon, drove with the French Consul to the Aviation Grounds, found everything in perfect condition, went back to the Congress Hotel, and while sitting in his room the phone suddenly rang and a lady's voice says, "Is that you, Phillip?" He protested he did not know Mademoiselle. She replied, "Are you not Phillip Dessaud, suite 154?"—Yes. Then meet me in front of the Art Building at dusk." As darkness fell he left the hotel, eager to learn what was to befall him at the rendezvous. He went down Michigan avenue to the Art Building, where he soon recognized the Lady of the Violets. She showed no sign of recognition, and when spoken to she replied, "You are not Phillip Houser." "You called me Phillip—I am Phillip Dessaud." After discussing their mistake, she told him she was Helen Probyn, a working girl, or reporter. They go off to some cafe, and when seated at the table she tells her story: I am a special writer on the Press and since meeting you, am sure there is some conspiracy against your Government. Yesterday a man came to the office and I took in the card of Johann Brandt to Mr. Schmitt, the editor. They were together for half an hour and when he left the editor called me in and assigned me on the case. When there I saw a draft on Berlin Bank to Emil Schmitt, for one thousand dollars.



I heard an oath and the sound of a blow.

HE told me about your machine, where the hangar was, and how it was guarded. He gave me the number of your suite at the hotel, and knew all about the orders of the Consul. It was plain that ordinary newspaper methods of approach would be vain, and he suggested and outlined the plan I followed in making your acquaintance. To me, at the time, it was merely a professional matter, Monsieur—I was sent out by the Press to gain information of interest to its readers. You understand?"

"Perfectly," and I held out my hand to her across the table. "However, your tale is of interest."

Her face lighted up, and there was greater confidence in the tone of her voice.

"I am glad you can say that, and show you mean it," she said eagerly, and her fingers clasped mine just for an instant. "I—I was actually afraid you might think me a sneak, a spy. I am not, but did my part innocently. Yet, Monsieur, I began to doubt the fairness of this assignment the moment I came out of that office. There were three things so peculiar as to at-

tract my attention—the German draft, the fact that I was not told to write a line for the paper regarding my discoveries, and that all I was required to do was to form your acquaintance, and then induce you to accompany me to a designated place."

"There was to be no interview, no questioning?"

"Not by me. My understanding was Schmitt proposed attending to that himself. All he expected of me was to induce you to appear where he was. I was to be the stool-pigeon; that was what made me rebellious and suspicious of the whole affair. It was only womanly curiosity which led me to go this far, and newspaper instinct, perhaps. I wanted to uncover the story, and incidentally, discover what sort of man you are."

"And now, Mademoiselle?"

She was the one to extend her hand frankly.

"Now I am on your side," she said gravely. "That is if you will accept of such an ally. You need not hesitate," she added swiftly, "because I am a woman, for I can be of assistance, I know. You are a stranger here, while I am acquainted with every street and alley."

I gazed into her face, unconsciously noting its youthful enthusiasm, and then about the room crowded with guests. I could hardly comprehend the seriousness of the situation, yet my mind was busy with details. There was no reason why I should not accept her statement, or share in her suspicions. I had been warned before I left France, and was fully aware of the precautions taken at our military aviation meets to prevent discoveries by English and German agents. Beyond doubt I had been followed across the water, and the importance of the quest was evidenced by Brandt's being detailed to this service. He was a trusted agent of his government, with high rank in the secret service, and it was not likely he was alone. Indeed, I already had proof of their careful espionage in the fact that they knew all my plans, and had arranged this trap. What should I do now I was forewarned? Should I ignore the conspiracy, or boldly confront the conspirators? It was the soldier in me that responded, for I was never a diplomat.

"This was not the place, then, where you were to take me?"

"No, Monsieur; that was the Cafe Francois."

"A French restaurant?" in surprise.

"In name, and pretense, only. Schmitt probably believed you would be more easily induced to go there. The place is not of high repute, and is conducted by an Italian with a French chef. I have never been there, but am told the other employees are a motley set. What do you think is best to do?"

"You are willing to trust yourself with me?"

"Absolutely," and her eyes met mine. "I know a man when I meet one."

"Then," and I smiled genially, "we will visit the Cafe Francois."

May I be permitted to smoke, Mademoiselle?"

CHAPTER V

AT THE CAFE FRANCOIS

We walked, as the distance was not great, and neither of us had any desire to attract attention, both realizing that the result of our adventure might prove unpleasant. Indeed I rather regretted my decision, but lacked courage to confess as much while my companion remained silent. I do not know the streets traversed, but as I remember we proceeded for a block away from the lake front, and then turned south. The lady spoke but once of her own volition, and made very brief replies to my efforts at being entertaining. It was after we had walked south some distance, and pedestrians had become fewer, that she asked suddenly: