

# 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 discovered a silent engine which the German secret agents were after. He registered at the Congress Hotel, was assigned to room 1-54 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 but largely out of curiosity consented to meet her in front of the Art Building at dusk. She pretended she had expected to meet Philip Houser. As the lady appeared to be in distress and hungry, Dessaud insisted that they go to a restaurant. There she confessed to him that she was Helen Probyn, a reporter, and had been assigned to interview him, the managing editor having outlined the plan she had followed; that after an interview of Schmitt with one Johann Brandt she had seen a draft on a Berlin bank to Schmitt for \$1,000; and that from the peculiar nature of the assignment she was sure a scheme was being laid to get the secret of the silent monoplane.

In the face of this warning, Dessaud went with the girl to an underworld cafe, where she had been directed to take him. Schmitt, Brandt and others with them managed to meet Dessaud, they chatted a while over their wine, and as Dessaud and the whole party were leaving a fake fight was staged in which Dessaud was knocked into insensibility. He was thrown into a taxi, taken to some hotel where on regaining consciousness he hears Brandt and Franzen discussing the incident.

**P**ROBABLY at the Press office by this time, unless he has had trouble with the woman. She made some fuss, didn't she?"

"I didn't wait to see. I was busy helping you lug the fellow to the cab. Why should she? She was in on the deal?"

"Only partly; I wanted Schmitt to get hold of the right kind, and slip her some coin, but I guess he didn't want to spare any. He said she didn't need to know; he'd make her believe it was a newspaper job, and she'd fall for it easy enough. I guess she did too, but that strongarm work was pretty raw, and she didn't look to me the sort to stand quiet. Did you notice her particularly?"

"Only that she was a mighty pretty girl, and her eyes were always laughing."

"There was more to them than that, Fritz, a damn sight more, and there was character in her face. It will take a smarter man than Schmitt to make a fool out of her. If, by any chance, she has taken a fancy to this Frenchman, she's likely to make trouble. Go on now, and call Schmitt up, and hurry back; then we'll stir up Monsieur."

I could perceive the fellow's shadow as he passed across the outer room, and then heard the click of a closing door. Brandt remained silent, except for the soft rustling of some papers, and I slipped quietly out of bed. There was light enough to enable me to find my discarded clothes lying across a chair, and I donned these garments hastily, pausing only to assure myself the pockets had been emptied, only leaving me my money. It occurred to me suddenly that this had been the original purpose of the attack—a desire to secure my papers. Brandt would naturally imagine that I would have on my person some memoranda of my invention; if not a detailed sketch. That would be all he would require. Likely enough he merely expected to rob me of these papers, leave me in the cab, and escape. But he discovered nothing, not so much as a scrap, and was so driven to other extremes. Yet this very disappointment might lead to desperate measures, and—the cold chills ran over me as I realized the truth—no one would ever know into whose hands I had fallen. Even should I utterly disappear no friend of mine would ever be able to guess how it had occurred. Few of them knew just where I was staying. Miss Probyn alone possessed sufficient knowledge to pull aside the curtains, but was she friend or foe? Probably neither; merely one drawn unknowingly into the affair, and glad enough now to slip quietly out of sight, when she realized its seriousness. My only hope of escape lay then in my own efforts.

I glided across to the nearest window, which was open, and looked out. Below was a sheer expanse of wall, revealing, perhaps, three stories down, a dingy glass dome through which light shone dimly. This would enclose the hotel lobby, but escape that way was clearly impossible, the slight coping along the wall barely two inches wide. I sought in vain for some weapon, but found none; very well, if I must fight my way out with naked hands, it would be better to have only one antagonist than two. Brandt was a giant of a man, and, no doubt, knew the game, but I would have more chance with him alone than I would if he had the assistance of the mechanic. I started forward, only to crouch down just inside the door. I was already too late—Franzen had returned.

"Well!" growled the chief, in no pleasant humor,

"you took your time."

"I couldn't get a booth, and the line was working badly."

"Cut that and get to the business; what did Schmitt say?"

"He let the girl go home; said she was hysterical, and he was afraid to have her around the office. Sent her off in a cab."

"Where does she live?"

"I never asked."

"Oh, hell! Do you call that a head you have got on your shoulders? It's too late now; we'll have to risk her. Did you see Eisenbarth anywhere about?"

"He is in the lobby, watching the elevators."

"What did he have to say?"

"It's all quiet out there. Kelly goes on guard

who spoke, dragging Brandt off me, and forcing him to loosen his grip on my throat, as it seemed to me just in time.

"Here now! What's all this mean? Do you think you are in a bar-room? Let loose!"

For the life of me I could not speak, my swollen tongue fairly choking me, but Brandt grasped the situation in an instant.

"It's all right," he said, handing out a card.

"I am Captain Brandt, and this is one of my party," indicating me. "Crazy drunk, you understand, and we're trying to keep him in the room until we can sober him up, that's all. You are the hotel officer?"

"Yes, sir," more politely. "Need any help handling the fellow?"

"No; he'll be quiet enough now; there's two of us here, only he took us by surprise that time. Sorry to have made such a row."

He slipped a bill into the officer's hand, and lifted me back into a chair. I made a desperate effort to speak, to declare myself, but the words would not articulate; I could only pant painfully for breath. I saw the detective eyeing me, his hand on the knob of the door.

"All right, Captain," he said finally. "He looks quiet enough now; just call me if you need any help. What's your friend's name?"

"Von Eisel—Baron Von Eisel; he's not registered here."

"Oh, I see; well good night, sir."

"Good night, officer."

The door closed, and Brandt walked over and locked it. Then he came back, smiling broadly, and whirled me around in the chair so I would face the light. At the same moment Franzen made his appearance, both hands pressed against his eye. The woe-begone look of the fellow made me smile, even as I gasped for breath. Brandt turned his head to see what had amused me, and burst out laughing.

"We've learned something tonight, hey, Fritz!" he said gayly. "That there is one Frenchman who knows how to use his fists. Where did you master that art, Monsieur?"

I shook my head, but straightened up in the chair, feeling a slight return of strength, and with it a new desire to meet the issues squarely. At least I meant to know exactly what Brandt's purpose was, and how he proposed achieving it. Yet I had no wish to assume the initiative. Fortunately there was no necessity for my doing so, as Brandt was anxious to disarm me of suspicion. Almost with his first smooth utterance I grasped his intention, and determined to permit myself to be persuaded.

"Go bathe your eye, Franzen, while I have a talk with Monsieur," he said shortly. "There is some misunderstanding, I think," and he turned again to me, smoothing his ruffled cuffs. "What did all this attempt at violence mean?"

"It rather occurs to me that I am the proper one to ask that question," I returned, finding my voice with difficulty still. "I was struck unconscious, and then held prisoner here."

"Oh, that's it!" he gave vent to a short laugh. "Well, perhaps your mistake is natural enough. However the truth is you were struck accidentally in a street fracas, and were brought here out of kindness."

"Then, I presume, I am at liberty to depart?"

"Oh—well; certainly, as soon as you are capable of looking after yourself alone."

"Probably you retain my personal property on expense account?"



"I can offer you \$20,000 in American gold."

all right at midnight, but the two Frenchmen sleep in the hangar. One of them drank heavily, but the other wouldn't touch the stuff."

"Just as I sized it up, Fritz," the chief's tone evidencing better humor. "They told me in Berlin that De Vigne couldn't be touched, but his assistant drank like a fish. Oh, well, one man ought not to be very hard to handle; I'm equal to that myself," and he struck the table with his fist, thrusting back a chair as he arose to his feet. "Come on, let's go in, and stir up Monsieur; we've got to get action in the next few hours."

There was nothing left me to do but fight. I straightened up, desperate and ready. Which ever came first was the man. I hoped it might be Brandt, but in this I was disappointed. It was into Franzen's face I sent my clinched fist, hurling the fellow headlong across the room. The next instant I was at his chief, taking him sufficiently by surprise to get in two short-arm jolts before he gripped me. He had the strength of a gorilla, and, although I fought like a fiend to break away, his vice-like fingers forced a passage to my throat, and I was borne back choking for breath, with his huge body holding me prone. We fell in the narrow hallway, still struggling madly. The outside door opened, scraping my head as it swung, and two men leaped in. Through the mist drakening my vision I saw one wore the uniform of a bell-boy. It was the other, a stocky fellow with stubby mustache,