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SHORT TALL TALES

Inspired by S. J. Perelman

FLIGHT 999

With my gun in plain sight, I undulated along the aisle to the cockpit, secure in the knowledge that the seams of my nylons were knife-straight.

I knew without looking that rows of faces were turned toward me, but no one moved or cried out. I had closed and locked the cockpit door behind me before the copilot sensed my presence, and when he did look round it was into the muzzle of my Baby Browning. I considered shooting him but he was too good-looking, so I said, "Take over!" and shot the pilot.

This may seem cold-blooded, but I happened to know that the latter was an escaped prisoner with the death sentence hanging over him anyway. He had in fact murdered the real pilot, and told his second-in-command that there had been a "change." Since it was the rush hour this was left unquestioned, and the big silver bird took off with *moi* disguised as a stewardess.

Next I revealed my true identity to the handsome copilot.

"What! Airabella the great aviatrix?" he cried. "Allow me to embrace you!" I accepted. The kiss lasted a good five minutes and when it terminated the plane was in a spiral dive.

Instantly I threw the pilot's lifeless body to the floor and commandeered the still lukewarm seat. In one liquid movement I turned the ship into a slow roll, transitioning seamlessly to an Immelman to right it. To further reassure the passengers I executed a loop and a Falling Leaf (my favorite). At this point the engines stalled, due no doubt to careless loading of the baggage.

The copilot opened his mouth to remonstrate but I popped in a sugared almond. "She's all yours, sonny," I warbled. "I'll deal with the passengers."

I opened the door to the cabin. Imagine my surprise when I found it empty. The escape hatches flapped wide; not a soul to be seen. There would be questions—many questions—and I would not know the answers. Or would I? Suddenly it all became crystal clear: they had used their parachutes! By this time they would have reached the ground relatively intact and be happily continuing on their way via locally available transportation.

This minor detail taken care of, I contemplated the ramifications of the current situation. Here I was with four dead engines on my hands, in the middle of nowhere, and night falling as fast as we were. Retracing my steps to the cockpit I took down the map from its holder. Intuition told me we were flying a course of 120 degrees, magnetic variation 4 degrees south, speed 203 knots, a beam wind of 15 knots and an easterly drift of .07 degrees. The point was, where *were* we?

Disgustedly I tossed the map onto the knobby knees of my copilot and demanded an explanation. Without taking his far-sighted blue eyes from the artificial horizon, he replied that on our port side at ten o'clock the village of Ini Ndaba (What's the Matter) could be discerned. "The Congo!" I breathed. My extensive travels having acquainted me with virtually every known language, it took me but a few split-seconds to anticipate the dialect peculiar to this region.

I shall have to admit that, plucky adventurer though I was, the darkness terrified me; flying in it, even more so. Stiffening my short, aristocratic upper lip and gracefully avoiding the corpse, I reoccupied the pilot's seat and strapped myself in tightly. Drawing on my tiny pigskin gloves I pried the copilot's paralyzed hands from the dual controls, gently raised the nose of the great bird to level its near-vertical dive, then lowered the landing gear and flaps.

Nothing relieved the pitch blackness of the sky except for the Southern Cross winking a good-luck message. While it may have appeared that I had forgotten to turn on the landing lights, in retrospect I was showing admirable forethought in preserving the battery for emergency communication. Trusting my instinct I brought the nose up a tad more and cut the throttle. Not a bump nor a sound from the wheels—a perfect landing!

Apparently my blue-eyed companion did not share my opinion. As we pulled ourselves from the wreckage I heard him muttering epithets which I cannot, for the sake of propriety, repeat. In his delirium he fancied that I, the great Airabella, had stalled the craft at some considerable distance above the ground, and that repairs were out of the question.

Anticipating that the ungrateful wretch might go so far as to report me to the authorities, I availed myself of a suitable remnant of metal and sliced a path through the impenetrable jungle to the banks of the Congo River. Here I found a tribe of natives proficient in Talking Drums who promptly conveyed the message, "*Ito, Ito, Ito! Bakakuwa ulundu! Lomata utikala kundu!*"—which in certain areas means, "Wake up, people down-river, we have manioc!" In this particular locality, however, it might have carried a subtler shade of meaning, so I felt it prudent to appropriate a dugout canoe and seek the nearest missionary outpost.

I have no plans to return to so-called civilization.

This account, scratched on a banana leaf (probably with a porcupine quill), was recovered intact from the gullet of a nineteen-foot crocodile recently shot by a Great White Hunter near Hamba Checha (Go Quickly), Congo.

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