

England! England, her patchwork fields glowing green and amber in the golden light of a summer afternoon, ringed by the azure sea that has kept this precious island safe from invasion for nearly nine centuries! Even now, did any of her happy citizens but know it, an evil mind is plotting to tighten the yoke of tyranny around her hard-won tranquility and independence. But for now, let us examine a strip of land along the balmy south coast, where a cluster of upturned faces raptly watches a thrilling spectacle in the air.

The tractor biplane was a splash of scarlet in the cloudless sky. Climbing in a spiral, it dwindled to a bead of blood before plummeting back towards the earth like a lead bullet. The onlookers gasped and ducked, some covering their faces with their paws, not daring even to look. At the last moment, however, the nose of the little aircraft pulled up, its wheels brushing the tall grass as it flew parallel to the ground. The pilot and his passenger waved to the crowd, beaming under their goggles and leather helmets.

“Another flawless performance from decorated war hero Rooi Randall, the basenji dog,” crackled the loudspeaker. “And now you can see his glamorous passenger, South African diamond heiress Felicity Blake, preparing for the second half of the display.”

In one smooth, feline movement, the passenger grabbed an overhead strut and swung herself up so her feet were balanced on the rim of the cockpit. The pilot held his craft steady as she sprang from her perch to the upper plane and stood poised in the centre of the wing. While the crowd held its breath, the trim creature raised her arms and pointed the toes of her left leg behind her in a graceful arabesque, balancing stock still. Then, both feet leaving the wing altogether, she described a somersault and landed back on the spot she had vacated, arms held out and back. Randall, the pilot, rocked the wings from side to side, then began to climb and dip in an undulating movement. Throughout, his precarious passenger maintained her posture. When Randall levelled at last, she leaned back until her paws touched the wing behind her and her body made an arch.

“And now,” came the voice from the loudspeaker, “a manoeuvre never before attempted. Rooi Randall will loop the loop with Miss Blake standing on the top wing. There are no straps, ladies and gentlemen, no safety harness, just claws and sheer, raw bravery. Remember, the wind speed relative to the

plane is a terrific fifty miles an hour, and the chilling effect of the movement means that our gallant friends are experiencing temperatures close to freezing point on this glorious day.”

The wing-walker drew herself up into a sitting position, then to her feet. Her stumpy tail whipped in the wind, in time to the white streamers that fluttered from the wings. The red plane climbed steeply, seemed to pause at the top of its loop, rushed downwards again, its passenger as stiff and still as a figure cut from wood and pasted in place. It circled the field, losing speed along with height, until the smiling faces of pilot and passenger were discernible from below. One final, triumphant circuit and the wheels touched down. As the plane bumped along the grass, Miss Felicity Blake removed her leather helmet and waved it, revealing the tufted ears of a caracal lynx. Voices bayed and cheered, and a small fox cub broke from the crowd to dash alongside the plane and present the caracal with a bouquet of white roses.

Pilot and wing-walker dismounted and faced the audience, their clasped paws held high.

“Pretty good show, I thought,” Felicity murmured to her companion. “Your barrel roll could have been tidier.”

“Nice roses. Should I be jealous?” The basenji bowed low.

“Not this time. The envelope’s attractive, but the letter’s the important part.” She showed him the ribbon which tied the woody stems together. It was perforated with a pattern of tiny holes.

The red dog cocked his head. “I’m no expert in the language of flowers, but that means we should be leaving.”

“Well, who’s the pilot around here?”

One final bow, a surge of applause, and Randall scrambled back into the cockpit. The more agile Felicity leaped up behind him and buckled the strap of her helmet. They were airborne momentarily, then the wheels touched down again. Randall opened the throttle to its maximum and the little plane soared skyward, banking to the north and London.