

AT TEN THOUSAND FEET

By Alexander S. Briscoe

Illustrated by Curt Gfroerer.



THE baregraph indicator wavered back and forth across the dial face as the L-3, snoring along at the 10,000-foot level, lifted and dipped with the gusts of the thirty-mile-an-hour gale. Carney, in the pilot-house, kept a wary eye on the fluttering streamers on the forward skids, the position of which tell the aviator whether he is on an even keel, while his ears were cocked for a false note in the drumming symphony of the deep-lunged motors.

Burroughs sat watching the aerometer. He was captain of the New York-Liverpool mail because of his reputation of always flying on time. There were those in the mail service who hinted that Burroughs' reputation had been built because of the nerve and skill of the men at the steering posts of his craft, but that hardly was a question at this particular time.

When an aeroplane is bucking a thirty-mile blow with its propellers turning at the maximum its progress is a simple matter of arithmetic. In a calm the L-3 would have been doing 150 miles an hour. Thirty from that figure leaves 120, and Burroughs mentally calculated the number of hours he would be behind schedule when the flier docked at Liverpool.

Then came a startled shout from Carney, who, from his seat in the driver's saddle, had caught sight of the twin red streamers across the upper planes of the Ford liner Condor, New York to Cherbourg.

Those red streaks to an airman were what the "S. O. S." is to a wireless operator; what an ensign, union down, is to a sailor; and Carney signaled for low speed.

Evidently it was engine trouble which had caused the Condor to fly the distress signal. The passenger flier was 2,000 feet below the L-3 and was making heavy weather of the gale. Four of her propellers were motionless, and the one still revolving gave her barely enough power to keep afloat. As it was, the lower biplane was making no headway. In fact, she was sliding backward, pitching and swooping like a hawk.

Carney sized up the other craft's plight and delivered an expert opinion.

"Her second and third engines are out," he said. "She's got barely power enough to maintain steerageway in this blow and is being forced back. She can't drop down and ride it out in that sea," and he indicated the white combers almost two miles below. "The waves would swamp her in a minute."

"There's nothing we can do," came from Burroughs, whose mind was still on the problem of carrying the mail on schedule.

Carney looked at his captain in astonishment as the steering post wove back and forth under his capable hands, for the L-3 at low speed was as hard to handle in the heavy winds as the distressed Condor.



Then Burroughs fairly hurled himself upon the other, his weapon coming down.

grunted. "Nothing's the matter with our power plant."

"We're not a life-saving crew!" The captain's tone was sharp. "It's not our business, nor our funeral. We're carrying the mail, see? Do you understand?"

"Meaning you would go ahead and leave those people?"

"I said it was not our lookout." The voice of the aeroplane commander held the strident quality of a man who is ordering an inhuman thing. "Go ahead full speed and we'll signal the first steamer we pass."

"And leave the Condor to fight it out with one engine in a wind like this?"

"Yes!" Burroughs bellowed. "Give her full speed!"

Carney settled himself in the saddle and spoke into the engine-room tube. A moment later Blake, the other driver of the L-3, crawled out of the narrow tunnel which housed the flier's three big Gnomes.

"Think we could pass a line to her?" Carney jerked his head toward the disabled aeroplane.

Blake spat reflectively. "It would be a nasty bit of work," he said; "but there's a chance. She's up against it, and she can't land in that sea."

"It's up to us," Carney declared. "Tie a wrench on a coil of rope and send the 'Monkey' out behind to drop it."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," Burroughs exploded. "It's suicide. Give her all she's got and we'll get out of here."

Carney ignored him, as did Blake after a quick side glance. The Condor, her lone propeller fanning the blast in seeming impotence, had sagged to the 7,000-foot level, and the L-3 had dropped with her. Here the gale was fiercer, and the two aircraft pitched and bucked like ships in a heavy sea.

There was a brief conference between the aviators, and Blake dived rabbitlike into the engine tunnel. After a short interval appeared Acker, the assistant engineer, an undersized youth whose remarkable agility and the tenacious strength of his hands had gained him his nickname.

Acker listened a minute to Carney's instructions. His face remained stolid; there was no flicker of interest in his pale eyes; no change of expression indicated his appreciation of the danger of the feat he was about to attempt; but he nodded that he understood what he was to do and made his way to the fuelage.

Between the aeroplane's car and the rudder and elevating planes at the rear stretched sixty feet of open steel framework, cunningly braced like the trusses of a bridge. It was planned to attach the line to the main framework at a point about twenty feet from the car, so as to preserve the center of gravity when the other machine was taken in tow. With a coil of line looped over one arm, the Monkey swung himself into the framework. Working as coolly as a lineman on top of a pole, he made the rope fast. Carefully arranging his coil of rope, he locked his wiry legs in the rods and sat ready to drop the weighted end of the line.

In the pilot-house Burroughs raged futilely. Carney did not even look at him as he signaled for "full speed." The big biplane vibrated with horse-power as the engines tuned up to their maximum; then the aviator, with a slow pull at the steering post, turned to the right.

As she caught the blast under her left planes she heeled sharply, but Carney steadied her and swung her around.

Past the laboring Condor the L-3 fled like a swallow and rounded into the wind several miles astern. Then, at half speed, Carney worked her forward, dipping to a level a few feet above the passenger liner.

On board the other craft the meaning of Carney's evolution had been divined. A man had climbed to the top of her car, ready to catch and make fast the line.

Slowly the L-3 came up, her sluggish

(Continued on Page 12)