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Chapter 12 - The Black Flier

The girl was almost crushed by terror and disappointment. To have been thus close to safety and then to have all hope snatched away by a cruel stroke of fate seemed unendurable. The man was disappointed, too, but more was he angry. He noted the remnants of the uniforms upon the blacks and immediately he demanded to know where were their officers.

"They cannot understand you," said the girl and so in the bastard tongue that is the medium of communication between the Germans and the blacks of their colony, she repeated the white man's question.

Usanga grinned. "You know where they are, white woman," he replied. "They are dead, and if this white man does not do as I tell him, he, too, will be dead."

"What do you want of him?" asked the girl.

"I want him to teach me how to fly like a bird," replied Usanga.

Bertha Kircher looked her astonishment, but repeated the demand to the lieutenant.

The Englishman meditated for a moment. "He wants to learn to fly, does he?" he repeated. "Ask him if he will give us our freedom if I teach him to fly."

The girl put the question to Usanga, who, degraded, cunning, and entirely unprincipled, was always perfectly willing to promise anything whether he had any intentions of fulfilling his promises or not, and so immediately assented to the proposition.

"Let the white man teach me to fly," he said, "and I will take you back close to the settlements of your people, but in return for this I shall keep the great bird," and he waved a black hand in the direction of the aeroplane.

When Bertha Kircher had repeated Usanga's proposition to the aviator, the latter shrugged his shoulders and with a wry face finally agreed. "I fancy there is no other way out of it," he said. "In any event the plane is lost to the British government. If I refuse the black scoundrel's request, there is no doubt but what he will make short work of me with the result that the machine will lie here until it rots. If I accept his offer it will at least be the means of assuring your safe return to civilization and that" he added, "is worth more to me than all the planes in the British Air Service."

The girl cast a quick glance at him. These were the first words he had addressed to her that might indicate that his sentiments toward her were more than those of a companion in distress. She regretted that he had spoken as he had and he, too, regretted it almost instantly as he saw the shadow cross her face and realized that he had unwittingly added to the difficulties of her already almost unbearable situation.

"Forgive me," he said quickly. "Please forget what that remark implied. I promise you that I will not offend again, if it does offend you, until after we are both safely out of this mess."

She smiled and thanked him, but the thing had been said and could never be unsaid, and Bertha Kircher knew even more surely than as though he had fallen upon his knees and protested undying devotion that the young English officer loved her.

Usanga was for taking his first lesson in aviation immediately. The Englishman attempted to dissuade him, but immediately the black became threatening and abusive, since, like all those who are ignorant, he was suspicious that the intentions of others were always ulterior unless they perfectly coincided with his wishes.

"All right, old top," muttered the Englishman, "I will give you the lesson of your life," and then turning to the girl: "Persuade him to let you accompany us. I shall be afraid to leave you here with these devilish scoundrels." But when she put the suggestion to Usanga the black immediately suspected some plan to thwart him -- possibly to carry him against his will back to the German masters he had traitorously deserted, and glowering at her savagely, he obstinately refused to entertain the suggestion.

"The white woman will remain here with my people," he said. "They will not harm her unless you fail to bring me back safely."

"Tell him," said the Englishman, "that if you are not standing in plain sight in this meadow when I return, I will not land, but will carry Usanga back to the British camp and have him hanged."

Usanga promised that the girl would be in evidence upon their return, and took immediate steps to impress upon his warriors that under penalty of death they must not harm her. Then, followed by the other members of his party, he crossed the clearing toward the plane with the Englishman. Once seated within what he already considered his new possession, the black's courage began to wane and when the motor was started and the great propeller commenced to whir, he screamed to the Englishman to stop the thing and permit him to alight, but the aviator could neither hear nor understand the black above the noise of the propeller and exhaust. By this time the plane was moving along the ground and even then Usanga was upon the verge of leaping out, and would have done so had he been able to unfasten the strap from about his waist. Then the plane rose from the ground and in a moment soared gracefully in a wide circle until it topped the trees. The black sergeant was in a veritable collapse of terror. He saw the earth dropping rapidly from beneath him. He saw the trees and river and at a distance the little clearing with the thatched huts of Numabo's village. He tried hard not to think of the results of a sudden fall to the rapidly receding ground below. He attempted to concentrate his mind upon the twenty-four wives which this great bird most assuredly would permit him to command. Higher and higher rose the plane, swinging in a wide circle above the forest, river, and meadowland and presently, much to his surprise, Usanga discovered that his terror was rapidly waning, so that it was not long before there was forced upon him a consciousness of utter security, and then it was that he began to take notice of the manner in which the white man guided and manipulated the plane.

After half an hour of skillful maneuvering, the Englishman rose rapidly to a considerable altitude, and then, suddenly, without warning, he looped and flew with the plane inverted for a few seconds.

"I said I'd beggar the lesson of his life," he murmured as he heard, even above the whir of the propeller, the shriek of the terrified Negro. A moment later Smith-Oldwick had righted the machine and was dropping rapidly toward the earth. He circled slowly a few times above the meadow until he had assured himself that Bertha Kircher was there and apparently unharmed, then he dropped gently to the ground so that the machine came to a stop a short distance from where the girl and the warriors awaited them.

It was a trembling and ashen-hued Usanga who tumbled out of the fuselage, for his nerves were still on edge as a result of the harrowing experience of the loop, yet with terra firma once more under foot, he quickly regained his composure. Strutting about with great show and braggadocio, he strove to impress his followers with the mere nothingness of so trivial a feat as flying birdlike thousands of yards above the jungle, though it was long until he had thoroughly convinced himself by the force of autosuggestion that he had enjoyed every instant of the flight and was already far advanced in the art of aviation.

So jealous was the black of his new-found toy that he would not return to the village of Numabo, but insisted on making camp close beside the plane, lest in some inconceivable fashion it should be stolen from him. For two days they camped there, and constantly during daylight hours Usanga compelled the Englishman to instruct him in the art of flying.

Smith-Oldwick, in recalling the long months of arduous training he had undergone himself before he had been considered sufficiently adept to be considered a finished flier, smiled at the conceit of the ignorant African who was already demanding that he be permitted to make a flight alone.

"If it was not for losing the machine," the Englishman explained to the girl, "I'd let the boulder take it up and break his fool neck as he would do inside of two minutes."

However, he finally persuaded Usanga to bide his time for a few more days of instruction, but in the suspicious mind of the Negro there was a growing conviction that the white man's advice was prompted by some ulterior motive; that it was in the hope of escaping with the machine himself by night that he refused to admit that Usanga was entirely capable of handling it alone and therefore in no further need of help or instruction, and so in the mind of the black there formed a determination to outwit the white man. The lure of the twenty-four seductive wives proved in itself a sufficient incentive and there, too, was added his desire for the white girl whom he had long since determined to possess.

It was with these thoughts in mind that Usanga lay down to sleep in the evening of the second day. Constantly, however, the thought of Naratu and her temper arose to take the keen edge from his pleasant imaginings. If he could but rid himself of her! The thought having taken form persisted, but always it was more than outweighed by the fact that the black sergeant was actually afraid of his woman, so much afraid of her in fact that he would not have dared to attempt to put her out of the way unless he could do so secretly while she slept. However, as one plan after another was conjured by the strength of his desires, he at last hit upon one which came to him almost with the force of a blow and brought him sitting upright among his sleeping companions.

When morning dawned Usanga could scarce wait for an opportunity to put his scheme into execution, and the moment that he had eaten, he called several of his warriors aside and talked with them for some moments.

The Englishman, who usually kept an eye upon his black captor, saw now that the latter was explaining something in detail to his warriors, and from his gestures and his manner it was apparent that he was persuading them to some new plan as well as giving them instructions as to what they were to do. Several times, too, he saw the eyes of the Negroes turned upon him and once they flashed simultaneously toward the white girl.

Everything about the occurrence, which in itself seemed trivial enough, aroused in the mind of the Englishman a well-defined apprehension that something was afoot that boded ill for him and for the girl. He could not free himself of the idea and so he kept a still closer watch over the black although, as he was forced to admit to himself, he was quite powerless to avert any fate that lay in store for them. Even the spear that he had had when captured had been taken away from him, so that now he was unarmed and absolutely at the mercy of the black sergeant and his followers.

Lieutenant Harold Percy Smith-Oldwick did not have long to wait before discovering something of Usanga's plan, for almost immediately after the sergeant finished giving his instructions, a number of warriors approached the Englishman, while three went directly to the girl.

Without a word of explanation the warriors seized the young officer and threw him to the ground upon his face. For a moment he struggled to free himself and succeeded in landing a few heavy blows among his assailants, but he was too greatly outnumbered to hope to more than delay them in the accomplishment of their object which he soon discovered was to bind him securely hand and foot. When they had finally secured him to their satisfaction, they rolled him over on his side and then it was he saw Bertha Kircher had been similarly trussed.

Smith-Oldwick lay in such a position that he could see nearly the entire expanse of meadow and the aeroplane a short distance away. Usanga was talking to the girl who was shaking her head in vehement negatives.

"What is he saying?" called the Englishman.

"He is going to take me away in the plane," the girl called back. "He is going to take me farther inland to another country where he says that he will be king and I am to be one of his wives," and then to the Englishman's surprise she turned a smiling face toward him, "but there is no danger," she continued, "for we shall both be dead within a few minutes -- just give him time enough to get the machine under way, and if he can rise a hundred feet from the ground I shall never need fear him more."

"God!" cried the man. "Is there no way that you can dissuade him? Promise him anything. Anything that you want. I have money, more money than that poor fool could imagine there was in the whole world. With it he can buy anything that money will purchase, fine clothes and food and women, all the women he wants. Tell him this and tell him that if he will spare you I give him my word that I will fetch it all to him."

The girl shook her head. "It is useless," she said. "He would not understand and if he did understand, he would not trust you. The blacks are so unprincipled themselves that they can imagine no such thing as principle or honor in others, and especially do these blacks distrust an Englishman whom the Germans have taught them to believe are the most treacherous and degraded of people. No, it is better thus. I am sorry that you cannot go with us, for if he goes high enough my death will be much easier than that which probably awaits you."

Usanga had been continually interrupting their brief conversation in an attempt to compel the girl to translate it to him, for he feared that they were concocting some plan to thwart him, and to quiet and appease him, she told him that the Englishman was merely bidding her farewell and wishing her good luck. Suddenly she turned to the black. "Will you do something for me?" she asked. "If I go willingly with you?"

"What is it you want?" he inquired.

"Tell your men to free the white man after we are gone. He can never catch us. That is all I ask of you. If you will grant him his freedom and his life, I will go willingly with you."

"You will go with me anyway," growled Usanga. "It is nothing to me whether you go willingly or not. I am going to be a great king and you will do whatever I tell you to do."

He had in mind that he would start properly with this woman. There should be no repetition of his harrowing experience with Naratu. This wife and the twenty-four others should be carefully selected and well trained. Hereafter Usanga would be master in his own house.

Bertha Kircher saw that it was useless to appeal to the brute and so she held her peace though she was filled with sorrow in contemplating the fate that awaited the young officer, scarce more than a boy, who had impulsively revealed his love for her.

At Usanga's order one of the blacks lifted her from the ground and carried her to the machine, and after Usanga had clambered aboard, they lifted her up and he reached down and drew her into the fuselage where he removed the thongs from her wrists and strapped her into her seat and then took his own directly ahead of her.

The girl turned her eyes toward the Englishman. She was very pale but her lips smiled bravely.

"Good-bye!" she cried.

"Good-bye, and God bless you!" he called back -- his voice the least bit husky -- and then: "The thing I wanted to say -- may I say it now, we are so very near the end?"

Her lips moved but whether they voiced consent or refusal he did not know, for the words were drowned in the whirl of the propeller.

The black had learned his lesson sufficiently well so that the motor was started without bungling and the machine was soon under way across the meadowland. A groan escaped the lips of the distracted Englishman as he watched the woman he loved being carried to almost certain death. He saw the plane tilt and the machine rise from the ground. It was a good take-off -- as good as Lieutenant Harold Percy Smith-Oldwick could make himself but he realized that it was only so by chance. At any instant the machine might plunge to earth and even if, by some miracle of chance, the black could succeed in rising above the tree tops and make a successful flight, there was not one chance in one hundred thousand that he could ever land again without killing his fair captive and himself.

But what was that? His heart stood still.