



Volume 82
Number 12

Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office at Springfield, Ohio, under the Act of March 3, 1879, and at the Post Office Department, Ottawa, Canada, by P. F. Collier & Son Company, Springfield, Ohio.

Collier's

THE NATIONAL WEEKLY

September 22, 1928

Published weekly at Springfield, Ohio. Executive and Editorial Offices at 250 Park Avenue, New York, N. Y. Copyright, 1928, by P. F. Collier & Son Company, in the United States, Canada and Great Britain.



\$2 a year United States and Canada
\$4 a year foreign countries



T. D. Skidmore

"I'd stab him," she confided, "if it was the wrong man"

Master of Sinister House

By E. Phillips
Oppenheim

Major Owston enters the service of Martin Hews and embarks upon a career of strange adventure

Table of Contents

appears on page 53



IN a fit of utter dejection, I stopped in the middle of the long cinder path and looked miserably around me. It was, perhaps without exception, the ugliest landscape upon which I had ever gazed—a flat and swampy region, ignored, apparently, by the agriculturist and scorned by even the most optimistic of builders. There were evidences here and there of calamitous speculative enterprise such as a deserted brick yard or a one-story factory.

For the most part, however, the land was a wilderness, with here and there an isolated and squalid-looking cottage. The fields, the grass of which seemed to lack any shade of color or breath of vitality, were separated by dikes in which black, unwholesome water stood stagnant. A few cows seemed oppressed by ruminating gloom. There were no trees, no birds save occasional flocks of inflying sea gulls, great patches of sedgy, irreclaimable land, stretching to the river banks.

In the far distance, upon the other side of the unseen waterway, were factory chimneys, gaunt and stark.

There came upon me, as I lingered there, a strong

inclination to go back. Then my hand stole into my trouser pocket, the coins jingled through my fingers—ninepence-halfpenny—and an oblong piece of cardboard, my return third-class ticket to London.

I remembered that this completed the total of my worldly possessions, and off I started again down that hideous cinder track, facing what had seemed to me, from the first moment it loomed up before me, the grimmest, the ugliest, the most fearsome building I had ever seen or conceived. As I neared this architectural abortion an unpleasant conviction stole in upon me. I stopped the only human being I had seen since I left the station—a road mender, plodding slowly through the mud.

"Can you tell me what that building or institution is?" I asked.

"That be Breezeley Mansion, sir."

With that he had had enough of me and went on his way, and I, struggling with my fit of nervous aversion, pushed on until I stood almost under the shadow of this monstrosity of brick and stone. There was no lodge, no wall to protect it from the road,

no garden. There it stood, a great building which age seemed to have rendered only more hideous, straight-fronted, with rows of uninviting windows, and at the two ends round towers with huge windows. It was big enough for a prison or any asylum and unpleasant enough for either. That it should be the dwelling place of any sane man seemed to me incredible, and yet in my pocket reposed a letter addressed to "Martin Hews, Esq., Breezeley Mansion," and that letter, together with ninepence-halfpenny, was my last resource against starvation.

I trod the granite avenue, pressed the electric bell, and received my first shock. The door opened even before my finger had released the knob. A butler, who would not have disgraced a Grosvenor Square mansion, opened it, and leaned forward with an air of benevolent inquiry.

"I have come down from London to see Mr. Hews," I exclaimed. "I have a letter of introduction to him."

The man stared at me reassuringly.

"That is quite all right, sir. Will you come this way?"

He led me across a hall which, in those confused moments, seemed to me like the anteroom of a palace, motioned me to enter a small, automatic elevator, followed me in and closed the gates. We shot up some three stories, after which he again took charge of me, ushered me down a corridor where my feet fell soundlessly upon the thickly piled carpet, and at its farther end touched the knob of a bell. We heard its gentle tinkling in the room, and almost immediately, without any visible agency, the door of an apartment almost as spacious as a museum swung open.

"The gentleman you were expecting, sir," the butler announced, leading the way toward a distant corner—and forthwith took his leave.

I **ADVANCED** a few steps farther, and stood staring like the clumsiest of rustics. Before me, seated at a large rosewood writing table, upon which were several telephone receivers, a row of ivory push-bells, and various other unusual-looking instruments, was the man whom I had come to visit. My first impression of him was that he was seated, but at that moment I could not be sure of anything definite as regards his posture. He was inclosed in what seemed to be an amazing sort of bath chair, the front of which was hidden in the knee hole of the desk so that only the upper part of his body was visible.

The effect he produced upon me, during those first few minutes, remains to this day an indescribable thing. One would have expected, from an afflicted person, a certain delicacy of expression and outline, the pallor which is nearly always associated with every sort of suffering.

The man before me was of an entirely different type. His face was inclined to be round in shape. He had color upon his cheeks which at first seemed to me as though it must be unnatural. His brown eyes were curiously prominent, almost beady. He had carefully



"I wonder," he speculated, "whether I really lose much through not having legs"

trimmed, bushy eyebrows of a lighter shade, and a mass of brown hair, arranged with such absolute perfection that from the first I suspected it to be a wig. His mouth was by far his most attractive feature. It had a delicacy of its own, and a sensitiveness almost childish.

He was dressed with meticulous care, in dark clothes, his folded satin tie of deep purple, fastened by a pin with a quaint foreign stone. When I tried afterward to reconstruct in my mind his personality, from among a haze of tangled impressions, I could think of nothing but the curving mouth and prominent eyes which seemed never to leave my face.

"You are Major Owston?" he asked, looking across at me.

"That is my name, sir," I answered.

"What sort of employment do you want?"

"Any sort in the world which will keep me from starvation."

He scrutinized me thoughtfully, raised his hand and pointed to a chair. I sat down, and would have moved it a little nearer to his desk, but found, to my amazement, that it was screwed to the floor and that underneath the seat was a maze of wire and tubes. I found also that it faced the great window through which the light was streaming in.

"You will forgive the peculiarity of the chair," my host begged. "I have visitors of many sorts, and I like sometimes to know exactly how far they are away from me. It would perhaps amuse you—"

He broke off, and touched one of a line of ivory knobs on the right-hand side of his desk. I felt a sudden tingling in my arms and legs. If the room had been on fire, I could not have moved

from my place. He chuckled softly, touched another knob, and everything was again normal. He rubbed his hands together with positively childish delight.

"One of my little devices," he explained, with a curious touch of vanity in his tone. "I am a helpless person, you see, and I must defend myself. . . . So you want any sort of employment, Henry Owston? Are there any limitations to that somewhat daring statement?"

"None that I can think of."

"You are not overscrupulous, then?"

"Not in a general way. I don't want to get into trouble. I have been in prison once. That was quite enough for me."

"Ah, I remember," he murmured, nodding his head reflectively. "It was at Marseilles, was it not? That affair with a French artillery officer. You have a violent temper, I imagine."

I looked at him in astonishment. Not even Leonard Joyce, my friend who had given me the letter of introduction, knew of that episode in my life to which Martin Hews had alluded.

"If I have," I told him, after a moment's deliberation, "it is very seldom roused, and there is generally sufficient provocation."

HE EYED me appraisingly.

"You are how tall, Major Owston?" I was a little surprised, but I answered him at once.

"Six feet three and a half, sir."

"Magnificently developed around the shoulders," he went on, moving his head a little sidewise. "A trifle underfed, I should say, by the look of you. I have need of strong men, Major Owston, both for my own protection and to carry on my business."

"I am not a weakling," I assured him.

"Apparently not," he assented. "Let me see. Shall I tell you a little more about yourself? In the inter-varsity sports, eighteen years ago, you won all the prizes which were worth taking. Later you have thrown the hammer as only the Americans can throw it. You were in the semifinals of the amateur boxing championship twelve years ago. There was a rumor that it was a gesture of chivalry which prevented your winning. You were supposed to be good enough for county cricket, even for Yorkshire, but the war came, and you developed into a keen soldier. You did a little more than average well—twice mentioned, I believe, and the D. S. O."

"Afterward you had the usual bad luck of a man who had not settled upon his profession definitely when the war broke out. You left your regiment, and tried soldiering in Morocco with the Spaniards. Then, of course, there was that French affair—rather unfortunate. Anything I have forgotten, Major Owston?"

I was speechless. I could think of no living person who could have told me as much as this stranger had done. He watched my surprise with that same smile of absolutely childish gratification.

"Ah, well," he went on, "if I take you into my employ, you will realize that it is my business

sometimes to know everything. Directly Joyce mentioned your name, I began to set inquiries on foot. By the by, did he prepare you for the fact that I was an invalid?"

"He gave me to understand," I admitted diffidently, "that you were—that you had lost the use of your legs."

He frowned as though, for some reason, my answer annoyed him.

"I never had any legs," he explained abruptly. "I am a human freak, Major Owston. I was born without legs. You can see very nearly all there is of me. That is why I sit in the most amazing motor chair that has ever been designed. My own invention, Major—entirely my own invention."

I muttered a word of sympathy, which he acknowledged gravely.

"I wonder," he speculated, "whether I really lose much through not having legs. You shall judge. Sit still. I will give you an exhibition."

There followed the most extraordinary performance I had ever seen. With the touch of a finger upon the steering wheel of his chair, an engine began to throb, and he glided from behind the desk in a graceful backward curve. He came to a standstill, and then suddenly seemed to flash away from before my eyes. He was across at the other side of the room before I could realize that he had moved, threading his course among chairs and tables, skirting the edge of various articles, running backward with only a careless turn of the head over his shoulder, never losing that curiously conceited smile, and glancing more than once quickly across at me as though for my approbation.

Finally he passed me like a streak, and before I could thoroughly collect myself he was seated again opposite to

me behind the table. The motor ceased to throb. His eyes sought mine triumphantly. He was evidently wrapped in deep enjoyment of my stupefaction.

"Have you ever seen anything like that?" he demanded.

"Never in my life," I assured him, as soon as I could find words. "I can't even now understand how such delicate steering can ever be learned. It's miraculous!"

His smile was like the smile of a child whose dolls have been praised, or a mother whose infant has been flattered.

"Go over there," he ordered. "Follow the road back to London. Tell me if you see anything."

"I see the road until it disappears," I reported. "It is empty."

He glanced at an electric clock upon the table, and frowned. Then he lifted from its stand one of the telephone receivers by which he was surrounded, and spoke into it so softly that I failed to hear a word he said. Again he turned toward me.

"Your eyes appear to be strong. Look again. Watch."

There ensued a brief silence—a silence of perhaps three minutes—during which no sign of human life appeared upon the miserable plain across which I looked. At last, at the far end of the road there was a speck.

"There is a vehicle—a motor car—coming," I announced.

"Describe it to me."

I WAITED until it came nearer. It was being driven at a great speed.

"It is a very big car—I should say a Rolls-Royce. It is being driven apparently by a chauffeur. There is another man inside, and I think a girl."

My new employer—already I felt that I was in his service—nodded shortly.

"Come here," he directed. "Turn around. Look at that wall."

He pointed to a strip of oak paneling, not far from the door, and before my eyes, without any visible agency, it parted and slid gently open. Afterward I knew that he had touched a button under his desk.

"Go in there," he ordered. "By means of the instrument standing on a bracket upon your right-hand side you can listen to all that is said; adjust the receivers to your ears. There is a look-out hole there too. If I should strike the desk with the flat of my hand twice, I need help. The door will open by means of a button underneath the bracket. I run my risks as does every man who has enemies, but never yet, poor cripple though I am, have I had to call for help. Tonight, however, it may be different."

I found my temporary refuge larger than I had expected, with some sort of ventilation from overhead, and lit by an electric bulb which flashed out with the closing of the door. I fitted the receiver to my head, and established myself in a not uncomfortable chair before the spy hole.

Then I suddenly received an unexpected shock. Exactly opposite to the opening through which I had entered there flashed, through a chink in the wall, a thin line of light. Noiselessly the panels rolled back, and a woman stood framed in the aperture—a woman whom I judged at first, notwithstanding the youthfulness of her figure, to be elderly. Then, as she lowered her head a little, I saw that what I had taken

for gray hair was in reality a very beautiful shade of ash-colored blond, fine as silk and glimmering almost to gold as she stooped to enter the closet and stood for a moment under the electric bulb. She held up her finger, and I checked my first exclamation of surprise.

"LISTEN, please, to what I have to say, and answer me in as low a tone as possible," she begged.

"But who are you?"

"I will explain directly. Put on your earphones again, and listen for the opening of the door. Your mission, which I suppose is to guard Martin Hews, does not commence until then."

I obeyed her, almost unconsciously. Her voice, soft and pleasant though it was, had in it some curiously compelling quality.

"You are poor," she continued. "You came down here on a desperate chance. You may not know it, but you have failed. Martin Hews has decided not to employ you. The car is already ordered to take you back to the station."

"How do you know that?" I demanded.

"It's my business. I am Martin Hews' niece. I know most of the secrets even of this house."

"Well," I sighed, "I hope you are making a mistake. Unless you have been listening—"

"I have been listening," she interrupted, "and I know my uncle."

"He was pretty well my last chance," I confided gloomily.

"Then you have lost it. You are, I think you said, in straitened means. You can earn this if you care to."

She handed me a folded slip of paper. I opened it out and found that it was a twenty-pound Bank of England note.

"You can earn this twenty pounds," she whispered, "by leaving your place here and catching the train for London, which starts in twenty minutes. I will show you the way to where the car is

waiting. All that you will have to do is to deliver a letter in Berkeley Square and never come near this house again."

We looked at one another for a few seconds in silence.

"If your uncle will not engage me," I said, "that is my misfortune. I have accepted the task of watching here until his visitor has gone, and I must carry it out."

"Take my advice," she begged. "Don't waste your time. You owe nothing to Martin Hews. Soon he will dismiss you with a cynical word of farewell. There is not a soul in this house who does not hate him. Those of us who live here and obey his orders do it because we must. As yet you are free. Take my offer, and hurry away."

"I will not," I decided, turning my

back upon her, and peering through my spy hole. . . . "There is someone coming into the room. Please go away."

Apparently she was convinced of my obduracy, and, in a measure, reconciled to it, for I heard the door roll smoothly back, and the click of its fastening. I had no time to indulge in speculations as to this strange happening, for it was obvious that the expected visitors had arrived. I heard the opening of the door and the butler's sonorous voice. I saw Martin Hews' eyebrows go up, saw him lean a little forward in his strange chair.

Then the other two figures came into view—a fair, sturdily built man, commonplace enough in appearance, but with a bulldog type of features and keen blue eyes. (Continued on page 48)

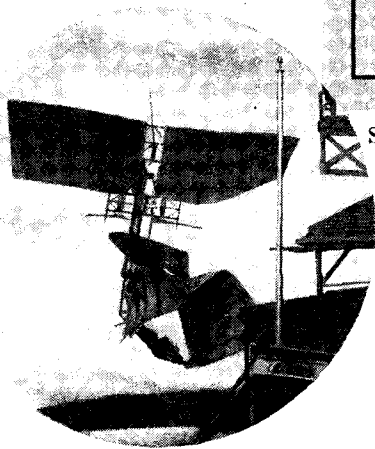


"You are, I think you said, in straitened means. You can earn this if you care to"

Bring Home the Wright Plane

By William G. Shepherd

Here's the story, never before told, of why Orville Wright sent the Kittyhawk airplane, father of all airplanes, to a museum in Great Britain. Congress, as well as the press of America, will take up the fight to bring this plane home. John J. McSwain, South Carolina congressman, has opened the congressional battle



The Langley plane crashing in its final attempt at flight, nine days before the Wrights really flew on December 17, 1903

THERE'S a celluloid skylight about the size of a pillowcase in the roof of the cabin of the Spirit of St. Louis.

You especially notice this window as you look at the machine hanging in the Smithsonian National Museum in Washington. It lends to the tiny cabin a mystic beauty, for its now marred panes admit a soft cathedral-like light.

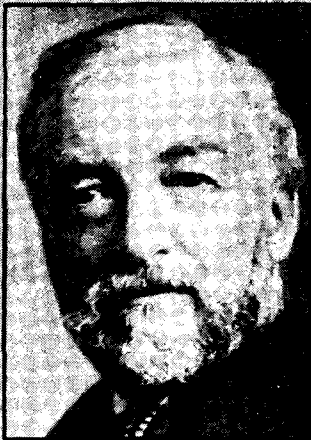
The museum crowds have tripled in size since the Spirit of St. Louis was placed there. Every person stops dead still for a few moments and stands silent and awestruck as, with head bent back, he gazes up into that softly lighted cell and sees where Lindbergh fought it out alone.

It is one of the finest sights in any museum in the world. But there is one exception.

In the South Kensington Museum in London, not many months ago, the crowned head of the British Empire stepped into a great long room and passed down an aisle between hundreds of the most eminent and distinguished men and women in the realm. They also would stop as do the good people in the American crowds beneath the plane of Lindbergh, and gaze, contemplative and silent, at two white wings.

What is inspiring about these two wings with their wires, woodwork and gadgets? Here are some things you might have told the king: "The cotton cloth on the wings, Your Majesty, is good, high-grade stuff, made in a mill in the United States. Pride of the West muslin—that's its trade name.

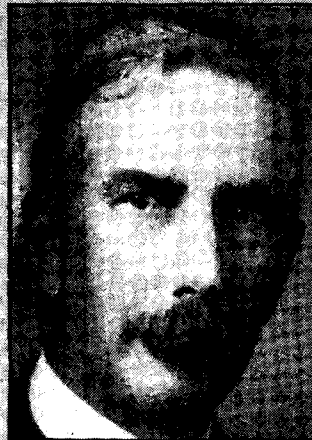
"A quarter of a century and more ago two young men in Dayton, Ohio, one of



Samuel Pierpont Langley



Charles Doolittle Walcott



Charles Greeley Abbot

The Langley-Wright controversy rests among these three succeeding secretaries of the Smithsonian Institution. Langley made a plane that crashed. Walcott insisted after Langley's death that the original plane was capable of flight. Abbot says he'll receive the Wrights' original plane in the institution if Orville Wright will say that the Smithsonian has been honest in its Langley claims. Wright refuses

our good small towns, went over to the Rike company's store and bought about 125 yards of this cloth to put on these wings.

"Inside those wings, Your Majesty, there's a frame of good, strong second-growth ash. That's American too. These same two young men bought this ash down at S. N. Brown's place in Dayton. S. N. Brown used to make the framework for buggy and wagon covers. He had an apparatus for steaming and bending ash ribs. See where those two ash skids are bent? Well, S. N. Brown bent those for these two young men from Dayton; a special job.

"Everything in this flying machine, Your Majesty, was picked up around Dayton, Ohio, by these two young men, as they put this apparatus together in their bicycle shop."

Those are things you might have told the King of England that he could not be expected to know.

But the king and all the world DO know that this strange assemblage of materials is the first ship without sustaining gas that the ocean of the air ever supported safely. In this ship man at last conquered the secrets of the aerial currents. This is the Kittyhawk machine of Wilbur and Orville Wright. no wonder the crowds have multiplied at the old museum in London.

An Incredible Injustice

While Americans stand daily, men, women and children, silent and wondering, viewing in Washington the Spirit of St. Louis, these British crowds gaze up at the white lower wing upon which Orville Wright stretched himself that bitterly raw morning of December 17th, twenty-five years ago, and, with the aid of a small motor and propellers, threw himself and the Wright machine out into the ocean of our atmosphere and found that it carried him.

It's fine for the European crowds that they have the first chance of any public in the world to see this relic. It's man's answer to one of the most taunting challenges that nature has ever made

to the human brain. Americans have a right to be proud that it's theirs. But—NO AMERICAN, WHO KNOWS THE TRUTH, CAN BE PROUD THAT THIS MACHINE IS TODAY IN LONDON INSTEAD OF IN WASHINGTON.

It hangs in Europe as evidence of an incredible injustice which has been done to the Wright brothers. It went over in crates marked with special labels, "In His Britannic Majesty's Service." It was sent to London by Orville Wright. It will not come back again until this injustice is remedied. But when it is remedied the machine *will* come back. And, what's more—

There isn't a man, woman or school child in America who cannot help to bring this Wright machine home.

All we have to do is to know the facts concerning a secret scandal which has been in existence during fully eighteen of the twenty-five years since the first airplane flew. Let this become a public instead of a hidden scandal and this white Kittyhawk machine will come home, drawn by the very power of public opinion.

Certain powerful scientists have been trying to cheat the Wright brothers out of their credit. That's the story in a nutshell, for all Americans to know.

John Jackson McSwain, congressman from South Carolina, is the first Washington official to start an action to bring this machine home.

All of this scandal will be brought out into the open soon. We shall probably see its finish before the opening of the new year; perhaps by December, for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the first flight. The President of the United States, in line with a joint resolution by Congressman McSwain presented to Congress, is to be asked to name a commission of five fair and impartial American citizens to consider the story and make a report. The House has already passed the resolution; the Senate will undoubtedly do so.

The story that this commission will hear will, in part, relate the rôles which have been played in this affair by a

dynasty of three succeeding secretaries of the Smithsonian Institution. All three of these secretaries were, of course, professional scientists. Among the three of them, during the past twenty-five years, the question has been: WERE THE WRIGHT BROTHERS ONLY TWO LUCKY YOUNG MEN IN OVERALLS WHO STUMBLED ON SUCCESS BY RISKING THEIR ROUGH NECKS, OR DID THEY REACH SUCCESS BY BEING SCIENTISTS?

The answer that the fine old Smithsonian Institution has been forced by at least one of its secretaries to give and as it stands today on distorted Smithsonian records is in effect: "THEY DIDN'T SUCCEED IN THE RÔLE OF SCIENTISTS; THEY WERE MERELY TWO LUCKY, BRAVE YOUNG MECHANICS."

The first of these secretaries was Samuel Pierpont Langley,

who served from 1887 to 1906. His part in the Wright machine scandal was unwitting. Also his part in aviation was heartbreaking; it broke HIS heart, his friends say, and brought on his death. He was a proud man; an arbiter in the scientific world in America. He was as brave as the Wright brothers. They risked their necks; Langley risked his reputation as a scientist by insisting that man could fly. He lent his great name and example to an art that was in disrepute.

Langley's example gave heart and courage to all experimenters the world over, including the Wright brothers, who were being called "the crazy Wrights."

Langley's Tragedy

Any Presidential commission must decide that Langley died without claiming for his flightless airplane one iota of credit more than was his due. His very silence in after years showed that he knew the machine he built was incapable of flight. The pity is that too much was claimed for him. But that's getting ahead of the story.

Samuel P. Langley worked for many years in the Smithsonian laboratory checking up on an apparatus which would now be considered extremely crude: the mathematical tables of certain European experimenters like Duchemin and others showing "the relation of speed and angle of inclination to the lifting power of surfaces moving through the air." Men couldn't fly without knowing that.

He published his tables of figures; they were open to all men. But these tables were useless because they concerned planes that could not fly; and his figures only corroborated the erroneous figures of the European calculators.

There has never been a great discovery in the world that has not produced its tragedies. Gentlemen of the Presidential commission will learn that Langley's tragedy was that he chose to follow men who had gone the wrong way. And he died knowing this.