

It was quite dark. They reached the place where the infantry were dug-in. Ration details had arrived and they could smell the hot coffee and slum. They strode among the eating men, who never raised their eyes. At the nar-

row-gauge railway an engineer said: "Listen, I ain't gonna carry them nails any longer."

"Better keep 'em," said the corporal wearily. "Maybe the infantry will need another bridge before morning."



The Air Bum

AN UNFINISHED OFFICE ADVENTURE

BY OLGA EDITH GUNKLE

My office is the dullest place looking at it from the outside. The carpet is a sickly brown—the walls are lined with oldish books—the tailored stenographer sits near the door and guards it well.

To persons who come asking charity, the voyage down the carpet between the books and the stenographer is a modern Scylla-and-Charybdis experience that leaves them in a properly shaken frame of mind by the time they reach the haven of my desk.

To-day there came—down past the musty volumes on "The Family" and "Child Care"—a curly-haired giant in brown denim overalls. My stenographer gave him a chair and inwardly classified him as "young — H. M. (homeless man) — jobless — wants meal-ticket." She really was almost correct.

I hung up the telephone-receiver and turned toward "the case." There he sat—a big, bronzed, sturdy fellow—and frightened—well, he was so scared that I know the insides of his palms were

wet with that clammy fear sweat we all have at times.

Occasionally—but only occasionally—I try to look imposing for certain reasons, but most of the time my profession demands that I appear sympathetic in order to get the most possible information from my clients. To-day was one of the days when I knew I didn't look awesome, and yet there the lad sat too frightened to speak.

I smiled my very own smile—not the kind I make myself use—and waited. His nostrils twitched rapidly—he twisted his cap and blurted out:

"I'm a hm—f—." His voice was so low I didn't hear.

"I beg your pardon, but what did you say?"

He moistened his lips nervously. "I'm a stunt flyer."

"I don't quite understand?" I queried politely.

He looked incredulous. "Why, a stunt flyer does tricks on a plane—hangs from a rope ladder—jumps from one plane to another. Does parachute

leaps—all that sort of thing, you know.”

“Oh—oh, yes, I see.” I really was quite flabbergasted—this timid soul who turned and twisted his cap uneasily—a stunt flyer!

“Thought maybe I could give a benefit performance and give three-fourths of the proceeds to your welfare work.”

I looked so puzzled he gathered courage and went on: “You could sell the tickets, that would get the crowd. I’d do the tricks. All we need is a plane and a pilot and we could get that easy.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said, and I really was, “but my board doesn’t allow us to have benefits of any kind.”

“I—well—I’ve put on benefits for welfare organizations in other cities, so I thought—” He looked so crestfallen that I hastily suggested:

“You might see some of the theatres or the newspapers. They might be able to use a stunt flyer for publicity purposes. I’ll give you the names of a few persons that might be interested.”

As I ransacked the telephone-book and my card index for possible names, I questioned him: “How did you happen to start this stunt-flying business?”

“Oh, I worked for an airplane firm in Chicago and I was up in their planes a lot of the time. One day I got up nerve enough to try a few tricks when we were flying and I’ve been at it ever since.”

Quite brief and to the point—“got up nerve enough”—and some way I knew he was telling the truth—this timid youth, who moistened his lips continually, who dreaded talking to a woman—had nerve!

“How did you get this far west?” I wrote another name.

“Guess you might call me an ‘air bum’ in some ways. I’ve gone from one

place to the next by air—just sort of picked up rides, you see, with fellows delivering planes to other cities or fellows that owned their own. But I’ve been with the air-circus people for the last couple of years—made over fifty stunt flights for them last year.”

“Aren’t you with them now?”

“No, I quit ’em a month ago. My pal and I were doing an act together, one of us on each side of the plane. He lost his grip on the rope ladder and fell 1,000 feet. It’s awful to lose some one you care about like that. I lost my nerve and quit, but I’ve got it back now—but I need some flying to do. You see the circus people have always had an advance-agent who booked us up and I don’t know how to go about it very well. A garage man told me to come here. I kinda thought that a man run this place.” He smiled apologetically.

“Why don’t you try some safe business—like auto mechanic, or——”

“I’m scared to death of autos. Just hate to ride in the things. Almost makes corns on my feet ramming on the brakes. Streets don’t seem big enough after you’ve been in the air. I’m always afraid when I’m in a car anyway, they seem to go so fast.”

Think of it. A car going fast after an airplane! He was like that, though, a youngster of strange contradictions. Scared of an auto, yet at home in the clouds, afraid to death of a woman, yet daring death every time he made a stunt flight.

I had finished a list of names for him, but I still kept my pencil on it. I was rather reluctant to let the blue-eyed youth go. He was such a contrast to the battered and bescarred bits of human wreckage who came asking meal-tickets and lodgings. He made me think of limitless expanses of sky—fly-

ing clouds—wind-swept spaces—youth indomitable.

“Ever see any one hurt except your pal?”

“Lots of them. One guy stumbled and fell and got the top of his head chopped by the propeller. An’ then one kid—aw, you don’t like to hear about it, do you? But you see you don’t mind it quite so bad after a while, except when it’s your pal.”

“Ever get hurt yourself?”

“Once in a while.”

“Badly?”

“Last time I got hurt something went wrong with the plane and they had to land before I could climb back up the rope. I got dragged. Was unconscious for three days.”

“My gracious, I’m glad I don’t have to watch anything like that. I’d hate to see any one hurt.”

“Oh, you’d get used to it,” he gravely remarked.

“Don’t the crowds that watch you make you nervous?”

“No, ma’am. You never even think of them. You see it’s like fighting a hundred-mile gale up there, with the wind blowing and the plane moving along. You’ve got to spend all your time hanging on, and it sure takes every muscle in your body.” As he spoke he gripped in imagination a wiry bit of rope and I saw the muscles in his hands and neck tense and swell. His whole body was fighting the hundred-mile gale. The musty volumes faded away and I was one of the spectators staring upward with bated breath, while far up in the air a tiny figure swayed and twisted and clung to a bit of flying rope; only I was one of the spectators who knew just how young and strong and sturdy he was, with his curly hair and gallant blue eyes. And

I was fearful—horribly fearful—lest he too lose his grip and come crashing, crashing, downward. It would be such a pity! Something fine and splendid would be gone from out the world.

“Where was your home before you took to flying?”

“Iowa.”

Now I had him placed. I could see him stalking along behind the plough, through long, upturned furrows of fragrant, moist earth, his steady eyes looking upward and upward and dreaming of daring things. No wonder our city streets scared him after the vast stretches of earth and sky.

“Have you been working since you came here?”

“No. I’ve only been here two weeks. I’ve been out at the air-field every day and have gone up with the different fellows. I haven’t told any of them that I do stunt flying. But I’m getting anxious to start again. There’s nothing like flying after you’ve once had a taste of it.”

He had on only a thin suit under the denim overalls. I wondered if he had any money—any place to go—enough to eat. Yet I, a hardened case-worker, used to asking any question in the world, hesitated to ask him—hesitated to do anything to hurt that fine pride in his eyes, that youthful confidence that shone in his bearing.

I handed him the list of possible names and addresses and said: “Better go here first. This is the most hopeful. Try this next and then this one.” I was very businesslike now. I’d spent more time than I usually spent on any one, on this twenty-year-old lad.

He rose, and stood straight and sturdy. “Thank you so much. I’ll try them all.”

He started for the door down the

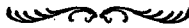
long lines of books on "Child Care" and "The Family." I relented of my businesslike tone and called after him: "Hope you have all kinds of good luck."

He smiled back over his shoulder, an embarrassed smile, gave me the strangest, almost collie-dog, look, flushed a deep red, and stammered: "Thanks."

As he shut the door the stenographer remarked in a softer voice than usual: "I don't believe he's used to having people be as nice to him as you were. Did you see the look he gave you when he went out?"

"Yes, I saw—better bring in the next

case." When the next fellow shuffled in I began automatically: "Name, please? Present address?" Then I sat up horrified—I hadn't even asked the stunt flyer his name, let alone his present address. I continued automatically filling out our case-record sheet, feeling all the while very cramped and cooped up in my dull office, with the faded carpet and the book-lined shelves, and wondering rather uneasily what would finally happen to my stunt flyer, my "air bum" with the blue eyes and curly hair, who was ill at ease with autos and women, but at home in a plane in the clouds.



He Hoes

BY ROBERT P. TRISTRAM COFFIN

He hoes against the glooming west
Until his beard is full of dew.
The crows are home; but never yet
Has twilight found this farmer
through.

His son is mated with a wife
Coarse and common as the weeds.
His hopes have fallen on a soil
Less fertile than his thrifty seeds.

Eighty years have bent his bones
And brought his chin down on his
breast;
But still his arms swing at a work
So rhythmical it is a rest.

Sharp words and dirt are everywhere
In his house that once was clean.
His granddaughters run with the
men
And have a wormy fruit to glean.

He cuts the weeds away from corn
With a calm and ageless hate;
He does not care to go indoors
Until the hour has grown late.

He loves to be alone and see
His shadow lengthen without end
Until it lies across the world,
Across the house he could not
tend.

God willing, death will find him there
Clean and shining as his hoe,
Standing on his two stiff feet,
And not a weed in any row.