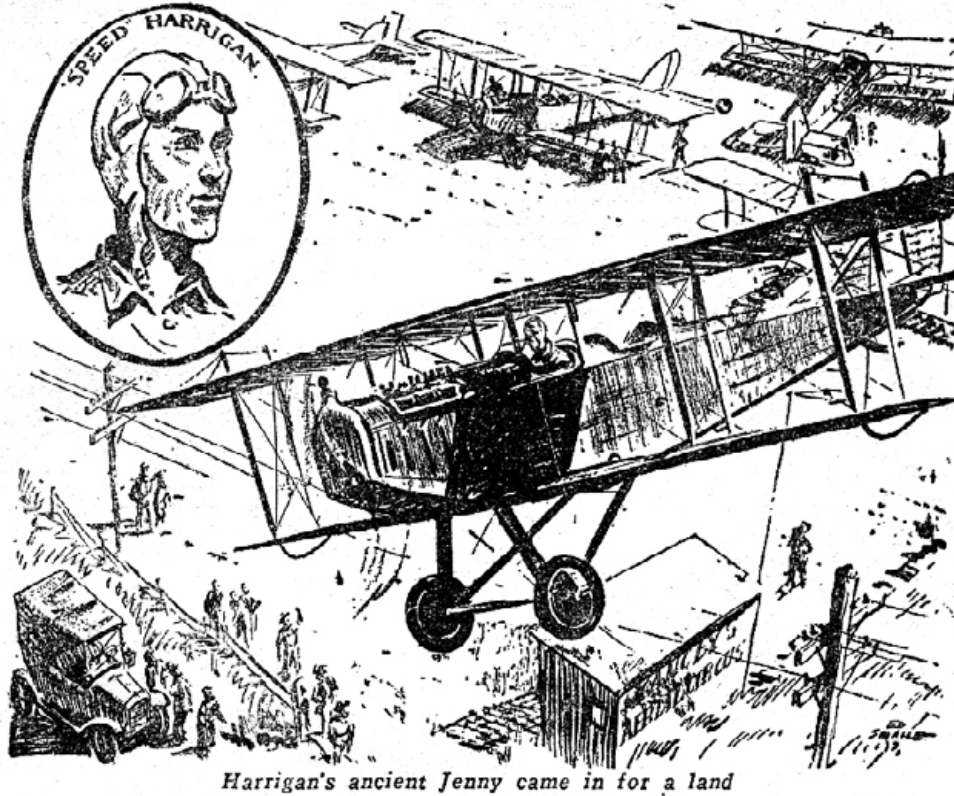


The Wings of Fate Whiz by a Barnstormer When He Becomes Entangled in the Biggest Mess of His Life!



Harrigan's ancient Jenny came in for a land

CIRCUS ACE

By JOHNSTON CARROLL

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IT WAS the year 1925 in prosperity-ridden America, and all things were possible—especially in these barnstorming days of aviation.

"Speed" Harrigan rolled his ancient Jenny over on its back and flew that way until the carburetor became gas-starved and the reconditioned OX5 began to sputter.

Pulling the stick back he dropped the nose, coasted through three or four turns of a power-off spin, and then pulled out level and fed hop to the engine.

This series of maneuvers had carried him about three-quarters of the way across the fairly level cow pasture below, which

for the last three days had been turned into a flying field by the members of Yancey's Aerial Circus.

Flying level for a couple of minutes, Harrigan stared down at the field and the fifty-seven (by actual count) spectators who had come out from the jerkwater town of Beachmont to find out what this aerial circus stuff was all about. They stood in small groups along the edge of the field, but there wasn't a single one of them within fifty yards of the small shack and the sign that read:

FLY WITH FAMOUS WAR ACES!

\$5.00 FOR 5 MINUTES
THE THRILL OF A LIFETIME!!

"And four of them have parted with their dough in all of three days!" Harrigan muttered harshly. "What the hell's the matter with the folk of this country? Don't they realize the airplane is here to stay?"

He stared at the distant horizon and considered the question. And then he answered it aloud.

"No, they don't! Maybe some day they will, but meantime you're a sap, Harrigan, to risk your neck for peanuts!"

To emphasize the remark he whirled his Jenny through a bit of hot stuff, then skidded down to a butterfly three-point landing and taxied over to the seven other ships that made up the "Thrill Chariots" of Yancey's Aerial Circus. One-half of the fifty-seven customers were already on their way back to town. Harrigan glanced at them and then hurried over to where Yancey sat, morose and sad-eyed, in the shadow of the ticket shack.

"We're losing the crowd and tomorrow's eats, Yan," Harrigan said.

The prematurely gray-haired owner, promoter and ballyhoo artist of Yancey's Aerial Circus shrugged and snorted softly.

"You're telling me?" he grunted. "I'm not only clearing nothing at this business. I'm losing my shirt in the bargain. Speed, I got to cut down the expenses. That specialty of yours just eats up dough."

Yancey dropped his eyes to the ground and hesitated.

"I'd sure like to keep you, Speed," he said in a low voice. "But Parks and Tracey have been doing the stunting, and they've been with me longer than you, you know. I feel like a louse, Speed, but—but I've got to let you go, fellow. Ah, hell—you'll find work in Hollywood!"

"Pilots are a dime a dozen in Hollywood, unless you're on the 'in',"

Harrigan said. "And I'm not."

"Maybe I could fix it," Yancey said. "Trumble, vice-president of Superba Pictures, is a friend of mine. Speed, start west tonight, and I'll write Trumble a letter that'll send him down to the air field at Los Angeles to wait for you. And that's a promise!"

Harrigan started to say something and then let it go. At heart Yancey meant well but he had a terrific gift of gab and was always willing to write you a letter of introduction to his old pal, the King of England or the president of the First National Bank.

Harrigan smiled tolerantly. "Maybe that is an idea, Yan," he said. "And no hard feelings, either. It was swell working for you—and I understand."

A SCORCHING sun blazed piteously down on the state of Kansas, and the ground deflected the heat back up again until Speed Harrigan could almost feel the waves bounce off his wings some four thousand feet in the air. For three days now he had been making his aerial way westward by a series of short hops and all kinds of engine trouble in between times. Plenty of miles to go, twenty bucks left out of his pay and savings, and—

And not a drop of gas in the tank! For at that moment the needle kissed the zero mark on the gauge and the OX hung up and quit cold. However, it wasn't any surprise to Harrigan. He'd been watching the gauge and praying that he'd get close enough to the town on his map marked Plainfield. And his prayer was almost answered. There ahead of him and below was the town. His glide would take him to within a couple of miles of it, and he'd walked more than two miles many a time in a hot sun.

Five minutes later Speed Harrigan eased down into a field flanked on three sides by woods. Legging out, he debated

the idea of lugging his bag along with him, decided it would not be much of a loss even if his couple of extra shirts and toothbrush were swiped by some wandering tramp. So he left them behind and hiked into town.

At the one and only gas station he ordered gasoline and a truck to lug the fuel drums out to the plane, but when he handed the little gray-haired attendant the twenty-dollar bill, the man shook his head and jerked a thumb down the street.

"Get that changed at the hotel, Mister," he said. "I'll be here waiting."

"Think it's counterfeit, Pop?" Harrigan grinned.

"It ain't if the hotel'll change it," the other said pointedly.

Harrigan walked the three blocks to the hotel, went up to the desk clerk and handed him the bill.

"Your gas station man, here, is suspicious," he said. "Break this into change for me, please."

The clerk examined the bill, nodded and turned to the safe in back of him. He fiddled with the dial and finally hauled open the heavy door. And—

"Hold it! Lift out that black bag and bring it here, or you get blasted!"

The tense, hissing voice came from directly behind Harrigan. Impulsively he started to turn, but a hard blunt object rammed the small of his back. He didn't have to be written a letter, so he relaxed and stood perfectly still.

The clerk had turned his head and was staring past Harrigan with pale blue eyes that bugged out of their sockets. Then slowly he reached into the safe and lifted out a small but apparently heavy black bag and came over to the counter.

Harrigan saw that the clerk still clutched the twenty-dollar bill in his other hand, and a wild impulse to reach out and grab the double sawbuck seized hold of the

pilot.

However, before he could act the unseen gentleman in back of him reached around and snatched up both the black bag and Harrigan's earthly cash.

"Okay," snapped the voice. "Just stand still and everything will be fine!"

Harrigan remained motionless until he heard the light patter of running footsteps. Then the urge to do something was too great to resist. He whirled about to catch a dark-haired, heavy-set figure racing out the lobby door. His last twenty bucks in the world! And with that stark realization burning through his brain, Harrigan let out a howl and went pounding across the lobby floor toward the entrance.

BUT when he was within three or four steps of it something crashed into him from the right, and crashed in hard. He had the blurred vision of angry eyes and outstretched arms and then he went flying in a heap.

"Hey!" That one word managed to burst from Speed Harrigan's lips before the hotel fell down on top of him. In a whirling red mist he tried to wriggle away, but a great weight held him pinned fast to the floor. And then without warning everything blew up in his face and he went sailing off into a limitless black void.

When he again opened his eyes it was to find half a dozen town constables sitting on top of him, while another man with a sheriff's badge pinned to his vest was poking a stubby forefinger in his face and shouting questions at the top of his voice.

"Where'd your partner go? Where are you to meet him? Come on, talk, or maybe we'll string you up!"

"Partner, hell!" Harrigan panted. "I just arrived in this screwy town a half hour ago. Left my plane in a field on the outskirts, see? I'm an airplane pilot, if that means anything to you, and I'm bound for the

Coast. And if you want to know why I'm in this hotel, I came here to get a twenty-dollar bill changed."

The sheriff exploded with a bull-like roar.

"That's really a hot one! And of course you didn't know that bag in the hotel safe contained five thousand bucks. I'll bet your partner is waiting for you in the plane, too!"

Harrigan glared at the lawman, but the sheriff gestured red-faced to his minions.

"Stick him in the cooler, boys!" he ordered. "Maybe that'll refresh his memory."

So that was that. A half hour later, still trying to tell himself it was all a crazy dream, Harrigan jerked his hands from his head when the cell door clanged and a tall, ferret-faced man strolled in behind the beefy sheriff.

"I'm Barlow, the prosecutor in this county," the tall man purred softly. "Now if you'll just co-operate with the law, my good-man, I'm sure everything can be adjusted satisfactorily and you'll get off with a light sentence."

"So kind of you," Harrigan snorted. "But don't bother to put it in writing. By the way—did you find my 'partner' in the plane?"

The sheriff reddened angrily. "None of your lip, you city slicker!" he roared. "He's probably hiding in those woods."

"If he was, *you'd* never catch him!" Harrigan chuckled harshly.

The sheriff advanced with threatening fists. "Why, you young smart aleck, I'll—"

Speed Harrigan brought up his own dukes and stood his ground.

"Now get this, lame brain, and get it straight!" the angry stunt pilot almost shouted. "Take that fat carcass of yours and trot it down to the gas station. Yeah, there's only one in this burg. Ask the old guy there if an aviator didn't order twelve bucks

worth of gas and oil from him an hour ago."

Harrigan smacked his fist in his palm. "And then ask him if he didn't send me over to the hotel for change—because he couldn't change my twenty-dollar bill!"

Almost comical was the sudden reaction. The red-faced sheriff got slowly white, and the ferret-faced prosecutor began to lick his lips and look for a hole to crawl into.

"Go on, investigate!" Harrigan stormed. "Meanwhile, I'll be sitting here in this crummy cell, figuring out how much I'm going to sue you numbskulls, the town and the county—for false arrest and persecution!"

And with that Speed Harrigan sat down on the cot, crossed his legs and lit up a cigarette with coldly steady fingers.

PROSECUTOR BARLOW recovered first. "Er—uh—now Mr. Harrigan," he stammered nervously, "can't we—er—adjust this—uh—most regrettable error amicably? Supposing we fill your gas tank at the county's expense, give you the twenty dollars you—er—so unfortunately lost, and just forget the whole thing, eh?"

Harrigan's voice was harsh, but his eyes were beginning to twinkle, now that the tables were suddenly and unexpectedly turned.

"Okay," he snorted gruffly. "But I still don't sign any releases or waivers, get me?"

"That," said Prosecutor Barlow, mopping his brow, "will be quite satisfactory, young man. We're perfectly willing to—er—rely on your good-will, and hope you can forget this unfortunate incident."

Speed Harrigan rose, brushed past the sweating sheriff and gave Prosecutor Barlow a mean eye.

"Don't be too sure about that,

Hawkshaw," he grunted. "The Harrigans are a touchy race, suh."

And with an inward grin Speed Harrigan strolled calmly out of the town lockup, Barlow and the sheriff treading forlornly at his heels.

THE sun was down close to the western lip of the world when Speed Harrigan decided that the OX5 was warmed up enough for a take-off. His tank was full and the truck had gone back to town.

He climbed down from the pit then and kicked the stones away from in front of each wheel. Then he started back toward the pit—and stopped cold.

A heavy-set man had suddenly materialized out of the bordering woods. In one hand he held a very businesslike gun and in the other a small black bag. Instinctively Harrigan squared his jaw and clenched his fists. And the gun darted forward a couple of inches.

"Don't be dumb, pal!" the heavy-set man growled. "This thing's got slugs in it. Don't make me use it, see?"

"What do you want?" Harrigan grated.

"Can't you guess?" the other grinned harshly. "I want an airplane ride, pal. The hick cops are watching all the roads, so I'll just fly away with you and fool them, see? Move back a bit, pal!"

The gun waved Harrigan back a few steps and the pilot had to obey. Piglike eyes alive for the slightest break by Harrigan, the heavy-set man edged over to the front cockpit, tossed the black bag in and then climbed in himself and kneeled on the seat cushion, so that he was facing the rear cockpit.

"Okay, get in," he said, "and away we go. I'll let you know later where we land."

"Okay!" Harrigan grated, climbed in and reached for the throttle. "But you better hold on to that gun!"

"With just one hand!" the crook

sneered above the roar of the OX5.

Harrigan took off then. He flattened out at thirty feet and looked ahead. The woods were rushing toward him seventy yards ahead. As though he had completely forgotten the existence of the crook, Speed Harrigan casually glanced down over the side. His heart was hammering against his ribs and the blood was surging through his body. Then he looked front, fixed his gaze on the crook's gun for the barest fraction of a second and then hurled himself against the right side of the fuselage. And as he did so he kicked rudder and swept the stick over.

Above the roar of his engine Harrigan heard the wild yell from the robber. Then the gun cracked and certain death whined by close to his face. In the next instant he kicked the ship into a side slip and snapped off the ignition. He wasn't sure whether the crook fired again. Harrigan went limp in the seat, unsnapped his safety belt—and then the ship hit.

A roar of sound beat against Speed Harrigan's ears. A couple of invisible fists were driven deep into his belly. Something else gave him a smart tap on the head. And then after considerable ripping of fabric and the crackle of snapping struts and longerons, the plane rolled to a stop, a complete heap of wreckage. The instant it halted Harrigan tore and ripped his way out of the wreck. Then he turned and looked at the front cockpit.

The bandit was out cold. Blood streamed from a cut on the side of his face. The engine had been driven back so that it held both his legs pinned fast. The way they were crooked under the rest of his body told Harrigan that they were probably broken. The man, however, still clutched futilely at his gun. Speed Harrigan relieved him of it, heaved a tired sigh and then stepped back.

"Now if there's a reward for this guy's

capture, I've done the right thing," he grunted.

AT THAT moment the whine of motor cars spun Harrigan around. Half a dozen were racing toward him across the field. He saw the sheriff, the prosecutor, and some cops in the lead car. Then they braked to a halt and a small crowd collected about him. Harrigan handed the gun to the sheriff.

"The money is in the wreck there with him," he said. "And is there any reward?"

"No," the sheriff said embarrassedly and stared wide-eyed at the twisted heap. "But there should be after what you've done. Jeepers, it's a wonder your neck ain't broken! We heard the crash 'way back in town. Forced you with this gun, eh? Well—"

"Wait a minute! I'll pay a reward!" A tall, good-looking, well-dressed man pushed his way through the crowd.

"I'm Trumble of Superba Pictures," he announced, "and—"

"Trumble of Superba?" Harrigan shouted. "Say, do you know Jack Yancey of Yancey's Aerial Circus?"

"Eh?" the movie man echoed and frowned. "No, I'm afraid I don't. But about your plane. I saw you crash, and know you did it on purpose. That took a lot of nerve, feller. I'm making an air picture now and—

well, I'll pay a pilot good money to fake a couple of crashes. I'll—Now what in hell are you laughing at?"

"This cockeyed world, I guess," Harrigan said and put out his hand. "You've hired yourself a pilot, Mr. Trumble—the best in the business for your kind of work. You see, that was my specialty in Yancey's Aerial Circus. I crashed old ships to give the customers a big thrill, but it cost too much to fix them up again. So Yancey had to let me go."

"Then you mean—" Trumble said and looked in amazement at the wreck.

"Sure," Speed Harrigan grinned. "I knew how to protect my neck, but he didn't! The cinchest crash I ever pulled off! But I'll give you some pips just the same, and that's a promise!"

And then Speed Harrigan gasped. "Say—how come you're in this section of the country, Mr. Trumble? You don't mean to say"—his eyes got big and round—"that you're on location here? And that five thousand bucks! Why—"

Trumble laughed heartily. "Sure, Mike," he chuckled. "And if Superba Pictures didn't leave it in the hotel safe, too. Buck up, my lad, and follow me back to town."

He winked slyly. "I've just scheduled a conference—at the hotel bar."