

The Double-Walled Secret

The Girl and the Mystery

By Edwin Baird

Kelcey was 2,000 feet in the air, miles from any known habitation, and flying fast, when something went wrong with his engine. He sensed it immediately. Annoyed at the interruption to his cross-country flight, he volplaned earthward, his gleaming monoplane describing a wide, graceful spiral.

He glanced below, expecting to see nothing more unusual than Wisconsin pasture. But he saw something quite different, something that made him work precipitately with his steering apparatus. Then an air-pocket caught him and he dropped through the vacuum, straight as a rock, to earth—and lost consciousness.

When Kelcey's eyes unclouded he was lying under his upturned monoplane and his left arm was badly injured! Every fibre of his body ached with pain, but by sheer power of will he kept his wits.

"A lovely mess!" he muttered; and he was thinking, oddly enough, of that strange thing he had seen a moment ago—or was it an hour? He was rather hazy about the time. He tried to raise himself on his right elbow, but a spasm of pain sent him, gasping, back to earth.

Then he heard footsteps coming toward him, and in another minute the airplane was being lifted. Presently a girl's voice:

"He must be dead. I'm sure he was killed."

This, somehow, enraged him. "Easy there!" he said angrily. "Don't try to lift it. Turn it over."

To his consternation and surprise, the monoplane was lowered upon him again and in such fashion that he was very neatly trapped. There was a brief silence; and then he heard the girl say something in a low voice and, although he spoke and understood several languages well, the tongue she used was quite strange to him. A masculine voice answered, apparently in the same tongue—and half a minute later young Kelcey could see the blue summer sky again.

He looked first at his deliverers—for there were three of them—and he surmised at a glance that they were the men he had seen when the air-pocket caught him. They were tremendous black fellows, obviously natives of Africa, and were dressed in some white stuff that accentuated their blackness and enormous height.

Then he looked at the girl. Her face had a certain piquancy that was charming. In his first hasty survey, however, Kelcey perceived only that she had pretty brown hair and expressive blue eyes. They expressed coolness, if not downright displeasure, as they rested on him.

"Are you much hurt?" she asked, nervously biting her lip.

"If you will send for a doctor—"

"There is none within miles," she said, "and we have no telephone." Her troubled eyes rested on him a moment longer travelling along his lithe suffering body. Then she spoke to the huge Africans and waved them away.

Turning his head Kelcey saw, looming large above him, a strange, long, high wall—or such at first glance it appeared to be. But he knew that twenty feet beyond lay a second wall of like dimension. Seen from his airship, the thing had looked like a double wall fully twenty-five feet in height and some 200 feet in length, closed at the top and ends with a heavy grating. The windowless structure was absolutely unlike anything he had ever seen before—it seemed unreal, uncanny, somber.

"I almost hit it," he remarked, indicating the strange structure with a nod.

"It would have gone hard with you if you had," said the girl, leaning over and looking keenly into his eyes. "What is your name?"

"Tom Kelcey."

"Are you a professional aviator?"

He shook his head. "Only an amateur. It's a sort of hobby."

"I suppose you are from Chicago?"

"Yes."

"And wealthy?" she added.

He nodded. She had made no move to ease his position or minister to his hurts, and he was surprised at this and irritated by the antagonism in her voice.

"You chose an unfavorable spot, Mr. Kelcey,"

said she, "in which to have an accident."

"No I have divined."

He fancied the rich color in her cheeks deepened slightly. She was no ordinary girl, that was plain. Her speech, her apparel, everything about her, bespoke refinement and education.

"My father—" she began, then stopped. "It will be dangerous for you to stay here," she went on. "Are you very badly hurt?"

"How do I know?" he rasped, beginning to lose patience. "My arm's broken, I think, and I may be hurt inside."

She turned and looked off across the flat ground—knee deep with grass—and he, following her gaze, saw the three Africans leave a squat, grayish house, forty rods distant, and come in his direction bearing between them a canvas cot.

The girl turned back to him. Her troubled expression was more pronounced.

"Mr. Kelcey," said she, "at the risk of being more disagreeable than I have already been, I must remind you that your presence here is very distaste-

mockery of a human image. It stood less than four feet in height and was humpbacked. Pausing behind the girl's chair, it glared at Kelcey and bared two rows of crooked, yellowish stumps of teeth, and the grimace seemed so filled with evil intent that the young man felt a shuddering revulsion.

"The bandages, Miss Stryker," said the unsightly thing, and the girl, dropping the strips of cloth in her lap, asked quickly:

"Has he returned?"

"Yes, Miss."

For barely an instant she betrayed a sudden agitation, but she said evenly enough: "You may go, Toto." When the ugly being had departed she ran swiftly to the door and turned the key in the lock, then returned to Kelcey.

"My father is here," she said, almost in a whisper, "and when he finds you—"

"What about my arm?" cut in Kelcey, thoroughly exasperated now. "I don't like to appear peevish, but—"

"Your arm will be attended to. That's of secondary importance, however. At this moment your life is endangered."

"My life?"

"Not so loud," she cautioned whisperingly, "he may hear. When he comes in—and he will be here any moment now—say nothing about your identity. Tell him you are an escaped convict. Imply that you were flying to safety in a stolen airplane. If you can talk like an anarchist or misanthrope, all the better. I know how fanciful all this sounds to you, but remember it's of the utmost importance. Your life depends on your doing as I say."

Before he could frame a response in his mind he heard a quick, heavy footfall on the stairs outside, and she sped to the door and opened it.

CHAPTER II.

"Ah, father!" he heard the girl say, and a deep voice answered. Then the door closed and he could hear them talking just outside in lower tones.

It seemed to Kelcey that an age had passed—an age of suspense, pain, uncertainty and bewilderment—before the door opened to admit a tall, broad, white-haired man of indeterminate age. His ruddy skin and

unclouded eye denoted a life lived largely out-of-doors, yet the lines in his face were plainly put there by suffering or hard toil, or both. As he came briskly into the room he removed his coat and then, sitting beside the leather couch, he rolled up his shirt-sleeves and fell to work on Kelcey's broken arm without speaking a word. His daughter stood behind him holding splints and bandages. His sinewy fingers moved with precision and skill, and presently Kelcey's arm was set as neatly as any surgeon could have done it. The man signed to his daughter to leave, and when she had gone he spoke to Kelcey for the first time. "What pen did you break from?"

"Joliet," came the prompt answer.

"When?"

"Last night. I had friends outside. They got these clothes for me."

"And the airplane?"

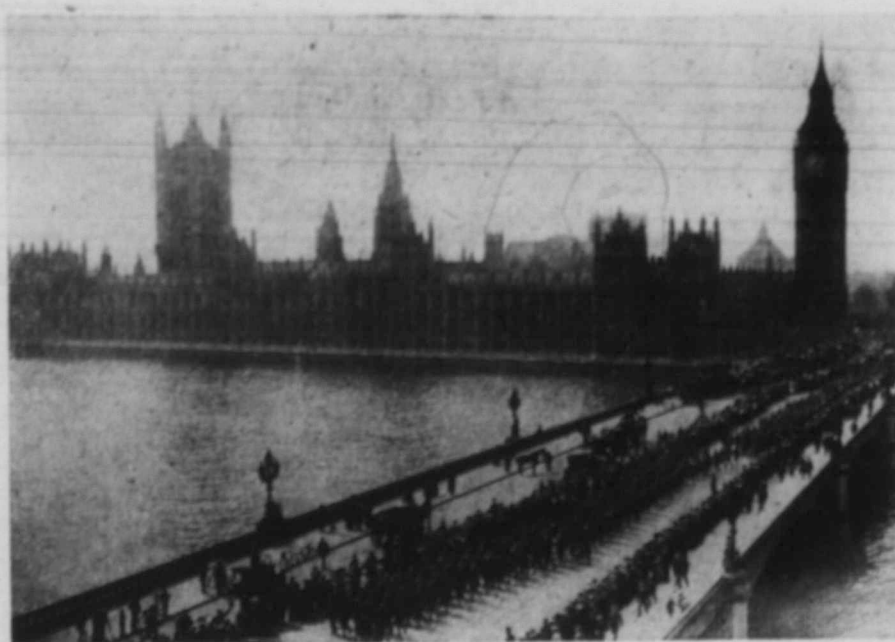
"They got that, too. I was an aviator before I was sent up." Kelcey winced inwardly at the untruths, and felt thoroughly ashamed of himself. Was life worth purchasing at such a price?

The white-haired man frowned and said: "I believe you're lying. You don't talk or look like a jail-bird. However, I'll soon know." He arose. "In any case," he flung over his shoulder as he started from the room, "you don't leave this house. Understand that. If you're telling the truth you won't want to leave."

Kelcey lay staring at the frescoed ceiling, his mind busy with the things that had happened since that 2,000-foot drop. All of his thoughts converged at one point and that point puzzled him; his imagination, though fertile, could fathom no reason for the strange behavior of these people, into whose home ill luck had brought him.

He tried to rise, but a rush of blood to his head

Continued on Page 40



American Troops Crossing Westminster Bridge, London. British Houses of Parliament in the Background.