

steep that in order to reach the cruiser's vicinity Porter realized he must attain a tremendous height. All these things passed through Porter's mind as he drove his machine in towering curves upward and upward.

Would he be permitted to reach the necessary height? The barometer recorded eighteen hundred feet. The Lieutenant tapped his arm. Still he climbed upward. The cruiser was nearing. It must be a matter of minutes. The Lieutenant exchanged a glance with the artificer, whose hand rested on the switch; then he turned to Porter, and indicated "downward" emphatically.

The moment had come; praying that the artificer would hesitate, and give him a few more seconds of power, he turned the machine towards the cruiser . . . almost simultaneously the engines ceased their din.

Porter realized that he was not high enough; to reach the cruiser he must have more power; half a minute of it at the very least. He turned toward the artificer.

"Power, you fool, power!" The soldier's hand trembled on the switch, but his eyes were focussed upon his superior officer with the tense, expressionless glare of military discipline. Every second decreased the chance of reaching the cruiser. The Lieutenant, fully aware of the danger, stubbornly reiterated "return; return," pointing backwards as a man might order his hound to heel. Porter saw that he would not be allowed to reach the cruiser; for an instant his mind reeled with anger and chagrin. Then lucidity came to him once more.

WITH difficulty he swung his machine about—it was rapidly becoming unmanageable in this desperate "vol plane." The Lieutenant signed to his subordinate. The engines began to fire. But Porter, as soon as he heard them, cut off the ignition himself, and cursed over his shoulder at the livid artificer:

"No; damn you, not now." The air screamed upward, and roared upon the straining wings. Porter fixed his attention upon the trailing telephone cable below him, but calculation was unnecessary, for the fog veil had become so thin that he could see the boat itself.

Nine hundred feet . . . Eight hundred. A straining wire parted with an agonized cry that cut Porter like a physical pain. The Lieutenant was on his feet, struggling frantically with his receivers. Five hundred feet . . . so furious had become the descent that the dial hands could be seen to move.

With almost superhuman strength Porter managed to keep the runaway machine in hand until he saw that the telephone cable below him was hanging vertical, like a plumb-line.

Then, deliberately, he pulled over the plane lever.

The freed wings, already giving way under stress of air, shot to the upright position, shearing their sluggish gear-mechanism and wrecking each other as they crashed together.

Then, as a hawk pounces upon its prey, so dropped this broken machine upon the defenceless craft beneath, but to be overwhelmed together with its victim in the moment of triumph.

Thus perished Porter and his proud invention, years before it could be foretold by any man that before air-machines should be brought to perfection they might be engaged in a great war. It is certain that Porter knew before his time what must be the ultimate value of such an aerial craft in scouting, at least for naval purposes. But he was never able to drive this belief into the craniums of the Admiralty. Porter was as a man born out of due season who died before his time. Other men less brilliant were to profit by his invention. But when the thing that fights in the air gets into a grapple with the thing that fights under the water—extremes meet. And they also met in Porter.



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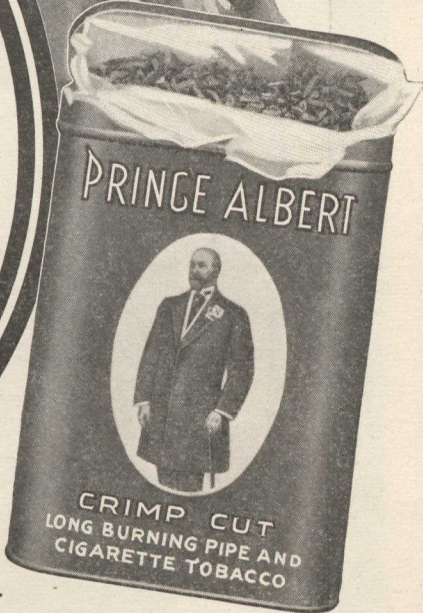
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