

Racing an Airship

by J.W. Duffield

It was a hot, oppressive day when Bert set out from Ralston. But he had had a restful sleep, and felt in fine trim for anything. He had eaten a hearty breakfast, and this no doubt added to his feeling of buoyancy and satisfaction with life in general. In addition, his mount was acting beautifully, purring along with the deep-throated exhaust that tells its own story of fine adjustments and perfect carburetion.

The country through which he traveled was very flat, and for mile after mile he glided easily along, encountering no obstructions worthy of the name. The road was smooth, and, contrary to the general run of roads in this section, comparatively free from sand and dust. The fresh, invigorating air added to his feeling of exhilaration, and he was tempted to "open 'er up" and do a little speeding.

He had about decided to do so, when suddenly he became conscious of hearing some noise not proceeding from his machine.

At first he thought it must be an automobile coming up back of him, but, as he glanced over his shoulder, he could see no sign of one, although the road stretched out for miles without a break.

Instantly his mind grasped the significance of the sound.

"It must be an aeroplane," he thought, and, glancing upward, was not much surprised to see one outlined against the clear blue of the sky.

"Well, well," thought Bert, "this is an unexpected pleasure. I didn't know there was an aeroplane within two hundred miles of here."

The aeroplane, which proved to be of the biplane type, was evidently descending. At first, Bert had stopped to get a good look at it, but then, feeling that he had no time to lose, had remounted and resumed his journey.

But as he went along, he knew that the 'plane was still descending because of the increasing noise of its exhaust. In the same way he could tell that the machine was overtaking him, but at first the thought of trying to beat it never entered his head. Even in all his varied and exciting adventures he had never had a brush with such an adversary.

In an incredibly short time, however, the aeroplane was directly over his head, and he glanced upward. As he did so, the aviator leaned forward slightly, and waved his gloved hand. Bert waved in reply, and then the airman made a gesture which Bert interpreted, and rightly, as being a challenge.

Needless to say, our hero was not one to decline such an invitation, and accordingly he opened his throttle a little. Instantly his exhaust changed from its deep grumble to a harsh bark, and his machine leaped forward.

In answer to this, the aviator fed more gas to *his* motor, and his graceful machine soared forward in advance of Bert and the "Blue Streak."

“Oho!” thought Bert, “this will never do,” and he gave his powerful machine more throttle, at the same time advancing the spark to the limit. That last fraction of an inch of spark sent his machine surging ahead like some wild thing let loose, and he leaned far down to escape the terrific resistance caused by the wind. The road streamed away behind him, and he had a thrill of exultation as he felt his machine leap forward in response to the slightest touch of the throttle.

His adversary in the air was not to be easily outdistanced, however, and he kept up with Bert, refusing to be shaken off.

Bert felt that now was the time to take the lead, if possible, and accordingly he opened the throttle almost to the limit, although he still held something in reserve.

The powerful motor responded nobly, and the machine skimmed over the sun-baked road at a terrific pace. The bird-man did his best to squeeze a little more speed out of his whirling motor, but was unable to cope with the rushing, roaring little speck down below him. At last he was forced to a realization of this, and abruptly cut down his speed.

Bert continued his headlong flight for a short time, but finding that the aeroplane did not pass him, concluded that it must have fallen behind. Accordingly, he slackened his own speed, but very gradually, for he was too wise to risk disaster by slowing down too suddenly.

Soon his speed had abated sufficiently to allow the use of the brakes, and he brought his machine to a standstill. Lifting it onto its stand, he pushed his goggles up on his forehead, and looked around for his late rival.

He made out the aeroplane at no great distance, and could see that it was making preparations to land. When the aviator reached a point almost over Bert’s head, he shut off his engine entirely, and, describing a great spiral, landed gently on the ground not a hundred yards from where Bert and the “Blue Streak” were standing.

Bert immediately ran toward him, and the aviator stepped stiffly from his seat and held out his hand.

“You’ve got a mighty fast machine there, comrade,” he said, with a grin, as Bert shook hands with him. “I thought my ’plane was pretty good, but I guess your motor bike is better.”

“Well, it isn’t so bad, perhaps,” replied Bert, unable no matter how hard he tried, to keep a little note of pride out of his voice. “I manage to get a little action out of it once in a while.”

“I should say you did,” agreed his late rival, “but what are you doing way out here a thousand miles from nowhere, more or less?”

“I might ask the same question of you,” replied Bert, with a smile, “but as you beat me to it, I’ll answer yours first.”

Bert then proceeded to outline briefly the contest in which he was engaged, but, before he had gone far, his companion interrupted him.

“Oh, I know all about that!” he exclaimed. “And so you’re one of the chaps in the

transcontinental race, are you? Well, you haven't got so much further to go, considering the distance you've covered already."

"No, I guess the worst of it is over," agreed Bert, "although I've been told that there are some very bad roads ahead of me."

"You're right, there are," replied the aviator, "and that's where I have an advantage over you. I don't have to worry over road conditions."

Bert saw that he was a little chagrined over his defeat, and so forebore to argue the merits of motorcycle versus airship.

"Just the same," he thought to himself, "I'm a whole lot more likely to get where I want to go than he is."

Then he and his new-found companion fell into a discussion regarding various types of motors, and inspected each other's machines with interest. By the time this was over it was high noon, and Bert proposed that they eat lunch together.

The aviator agreed heartily to this, and accordingly they unpacked their lunches and, sitting in the shade of one of the aeroplane wings, made a hearty meal.

When the last crumb had been disposed of, they shook hands with expressions of mutual regard, and the aviator was very cordial in wishing Bert all kinds of success in the contest. Then they said good-bye, and resumed their respective journeys. Bert watched the airship ascend in great spirals, until it was a mere speck in the distance, winging rapidly eastward.

Before starting, Bert looked over his machine carefully, in order to assure himself that nothing had been loosened by the vibration caused by the high speed. Everything seemed in perfect shape, and in less time than it takes to tell he was "eating up space" in a fashion that promised to land him speedily at his destination.

But before he had gone many miles, he found the road, which up to now had been exceptionally good, becoming more and more sandy, and he was forced to go slowly and pick his way very carefully. As the sand grew deeper his machine evinced a very decided tendency to skid, and he was forced to exert all his strength to keep the front wheel pointed straight ahead.

Soon he shifted to low gear, and crawled forward at a pace little faster than a brisk walk. He now had reason, as indeed he had a score of times so far, to bless the foresight that had led him to purchase a two-speed machine. Without this, he felt that the accomplishment of his task would be well-nigh hopeless.

The heat became more and more oppressive, and the alkali dust on his face smarted and blistered. At intervals he would dismount, take a drink from his canteen, and give his motor a chance to cool off.

Then he would start on again, resolved to reach the next town before nightfall. What with the many interruptions and the slow pace, however, darkness overtook him while yet he was more than ten miles from his destination.

Dismounting, he lighted his lamp, and once more took up the forward flight. The air, from being excessively hot, now became quite the opposite, and he felt chilled to the bone. He kept doggedly on, nevertheless, and at last his perseverance was rewarded by his catching a glimpse of the lights of the town for which he was bound. At the same time the road became much better, and he covered the intervening mile or two at good speed.

The town was not a large one, but it could afford a square meal and a good bed, and that was all that Bert asked for. He had a hard time to tear himself away from the other guests, who were very much interested in his adventures, and plied him with innumerable questions.

At last he managed to say good-night, and fifteen minutes afterward was sunk in the deep, dreamless sleep of utter but healthy exhaustion.

Source:

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