

AFRICA FLIGHT

By VAL GIELGUD

He leaned back in his chair, exhausted, tormented, baffled by this problem of the emotions as he had never been by difficulty or danger. And seeing the infinite tenderness in her eyes, the beauty of her profile against the light, he felt behind her, the grasp of her attitude as she leaned with one elbow on the table, the sheen on her hair—even after that ghastly march—the sunlight caught it, it through the tattered awning, he felt he could bear neither to take the risk of telling her the truth and losing her at once, nor to lose her inevitably in the future when suspicion had poisoned the wells of happiness.

He threw his half-smoked cigarette away, and watching it smoulder on the ground below the veranda, had the overwhelming instinct that it was his own life which he was watching drift, a little unguarded, smoke, upwards against that fierce sun-drenched sky.

Then Carol gave a cry and pointed northwards. The little speck had appeared high up in the blue, accompanied by the growing hum of motors. Next instant the girl was out of her chair, running through the french windows towards her. Larrimore did not move. But his shoulders squared slightly as he sat in his chair, and a little gleam came back in his tired eyes. At least the problem was upon him now in the concrete. Some thing had to be done about it. He could cope with anything so long as it implied merely thinking, desperately and hopelessly in circles.

When the planes landed, he was standing three paces behind Carol. They knew exactly that the party was safe. Waving handkerchiefs from the leading plane's cockpit had told them so much. And in less than ten minutes of embracing, hand-shaking, saluting and expressions of pleasure by the Commandant occupied the time so exaggeratedly and completely that none of the newly rescued seemed to remember that three had gone before them, while only two stood there in the sunshine to welcome them back.

It was in fact Otto Flesch, who, standing rather apart from the others, asked in his precise guttural voice whether the joyous reunion was too much for Antony Sohern.

"Just lazy as usual," said Janet Manson. "Too lazy to come out in the sunshine and meet us."

"No," said Carol. "And to herself it seemed that her voice sounded curiously unreal."

"What do you mean, Janet?" asked her uncle. And her aunt peered at her sharply. Her ears were excellent, and she noticed an unusual quiver in the girl's voice.

But it was Larrimore who answered, and Janet Manson saw her niece's cheeks whiten, and her hands jerk, as he spoke.

"I'm sorry to have to spoil our reunion with bad news," said Larrimore deliberately. "But Sohern's not with us. He—he couldn't make it."

"There was a little horror-stricken silence. "Not make it?" cried out Janet Manson, sharply. "I don't understand."

And she looked at Carol. But again Larrimore answered: "Sohern's dead," he said quietly. "And we've him our lives—Carol and I."

"So incidentally do you all." "I don't understand," said Hubert Manson, fiddling with his spectacles.

"Tell us what happened, Larrimore. This is quite dreadful." "Yes—Mr. Larrimore," said Janet Manson. And there was that in her tone which brought Carol's attention, focussed with a fierce intensity upon Larrimore, upon her aunt.

"I shall have to write to his poor mother," added Hubert helplessly. Larrimore jerked up his chin.

"He died for his friends," he said. "As I'd feared, the water we carried with us wasn't enough to bring the three of us through. The only one Sohern felt in a way responsible for the fact that three of us, not two, had started. Anyway, we had a discussion—quite inconclusive—on what must be done. During the night that followed Sohern was on guard, I woke and couldn't see him. Then I did see him, moving away from the little oasis where we were camped that night. I followed him. I think he must have seen me. Anyway, before I could catch up with him—well, he had the pistols with him."

"You mean he killed himself?" "To let me take Carol on unhampered and with enough water—yes," said Larrimore, firmly.

"I was asleep," said Carol, hurriedly, very conscious of her aunt's eyes upon her. "I heard the shot—I was terrified."

"Magnificent!" murmured Hubert Manson. "A gallant fellow!" "A gallantry typical of your countrymen," said the French Commandant, his hand to his kept. "One of our planes shall make a search for his body. Meanwhile, if I might advise you, you should not stand here in the sun after your

trying experiences. And I must send a message so that cables may take the news of your safety to England."

He led the way towards the gate of the fort. But Carol was conscious of two things: that the barrier between sweet and bitter had now taken concrete shape and hardness; and that her aunt's brow was furrowed, and that her eyes were fixed steadily upon Larrimore's shoulder-blades, as he walked ahead, as though seeking to penetrate the inner secrets of his heart.

CHAPTER XXIV SIR GEORGE IS PUZZLED

A little more than two months later, and a trifle after five o'clock in the evening, Sir George Manson was walking up and down his office. His expression was—or would have been to any onlooker—discouraging, if not actually moody. Three times during the last half-hour he had pressed the buzzer to summon Cynthia Wright from the outer office. Three times she had not pressed, and returned to his gony pacing to and fro. He was thinking savagely. And yet, as he asked himself, pausing for a moment to stare out at the dusk falling over the river outside his windows, what the devil was there really for him to worry about?

It was true of course that the great—and perhaps unduly-boomed—flight of the "Star of the East" had ended in failure. But there had been certain compensating factors: an awkward tendency on the part of the Press or the public to inquire into the merits of the crashed machine—and as a result into the standard of general accomplishment of Associated Airways Limited—had been most satisfactorily distracted by other happenings, with an obvious more potent cause.

No one was likely to wish to read a dry-as-dust technical report, when there were to be had for the reading in the columns of every daily the account of Larrimore's heroic desert march in the company of the even more heroic—and good-looking—girl whom he was now announcing as about to marry. While even the glamour and headlines of that engagement had in turn paled beside the sacrifice of Antony Sohern, who had laid down his life for his friends. The lonely suicide in the desert had taken its place in the gallery of popular events beside the lonely figure of Captain Oates staggering out into the Antarctic blizzard.

In fact Sir George had to admit—and would in fact have cheerfully admitted—that in publicity the expedition's failure had achieved more than could have been secured by the most spectacular and blazing of successes in the shape of record-breaking flights. . . . And yet he frowned, musingly, at the words and conscious only of a sense of the most profound disquiet.

He told himself that it was ridiculous. He reminded himself that what might have happened; that Carol, his brother, and Janet Manson might all have perished. He reminded himself that he had never cared for young Sohern in life, that he had actually been disquieted by his friendship with Carol. He assured himself that everything had in the ultimate worked out for the best. And somehow he could not manage to persuade himself to the truth of a word of it.

What was wrong? Carol had been subdued and apparently out of sorts since the expedition had got back from Africa. But she had had gone through dreadful experiences for a girl, both of the body and the spirit. Larrimore's sardonic independence seemed to have increased.

On the other hand, his inconvivial had sensibly diminished, and his devotion to Carol was obvious.

Sir George came reluctantly to the conclusion that it was his sister-in-law who was the nigger in the woodpile. Yet Janet Manson walked about nothing—at least nothing that a man could get hold of, though George Manson irritably, rolling an unlighted cigar between his fingers, so far as last he broke the outer lead and swore.

He turned as he did so, and saw Cynthia Wright in the doorway. That she must have overheard him did not improve George Manson's temper.

"Why didn't you knock?" he exploded. "I did," replied Miss Wright coldly.

"Well?" "You won't forget your dinner-party to-night, Sir George? You've to call at your manicurist's—and it's full dress."

"I know—I know." "And," continued Cynthia Wright remorselessly, "it's ten minutes to six already."

Sir George stared at her. At that moment, with his pointed eyes bulging, and his thick neck reddening, he presented an inevitable comparison with a gonadled bull. "Why have you bullied me so disgracefully about this wretched dinner-party ever since I decided to give it?" he demanded at last. Miss Wright's eyebrows shot up. But she said nothing.

"You have Cynthia, you know you have. You've disapproved of it from the beginning, haven't you?" The secretary shrugged her shoulders.

"I thought it was too soon after the—tragedy, and I told you so. I still think so. But that's just a personal opinion."

Sir George moved away irritably. "I considered all that aspect of it," he said with all the false emphasis of a man seeking to justify a bad case. "It's really no more than a family party. It's not as if I were giving it in a restaurant. The engagement has been announced for over a week. It's not fair to Carol not to celebrate it in some way."

"It's true," murmured Cynthia. "The news value of the story is beginning to get cold."

Sir George bridled. "That had never entered my head!" he snapped. "At least it wasn't the deciding factor at all."

"Quite so, Sir George," soothingly. "Besides, Cynthia, I'm worried

about Carol. The girl hasn't been herself since she came back. She seems to be brooding over poor Sohern's tragedy—I should never have allowed her to go on the trip!" "It's natural that she should be upset, surely? She had a bad time, and young Sohern was a great friend of hers."

"Of course," agreed Sir George a little absently. "Gallant fellow."

Miss Wright took her courage in both hands. "That's why I think his party is a mistake," she said hurriedly. "Don't you think his absence will be a little—emphatic?"

"The dead must bury their dead sometime!" said George Manson decisively. "She must face up to a new life, and the sooner the better."

To that sort of platitude Cynthia Wright had nothing to say. And Sir George, deprived of his

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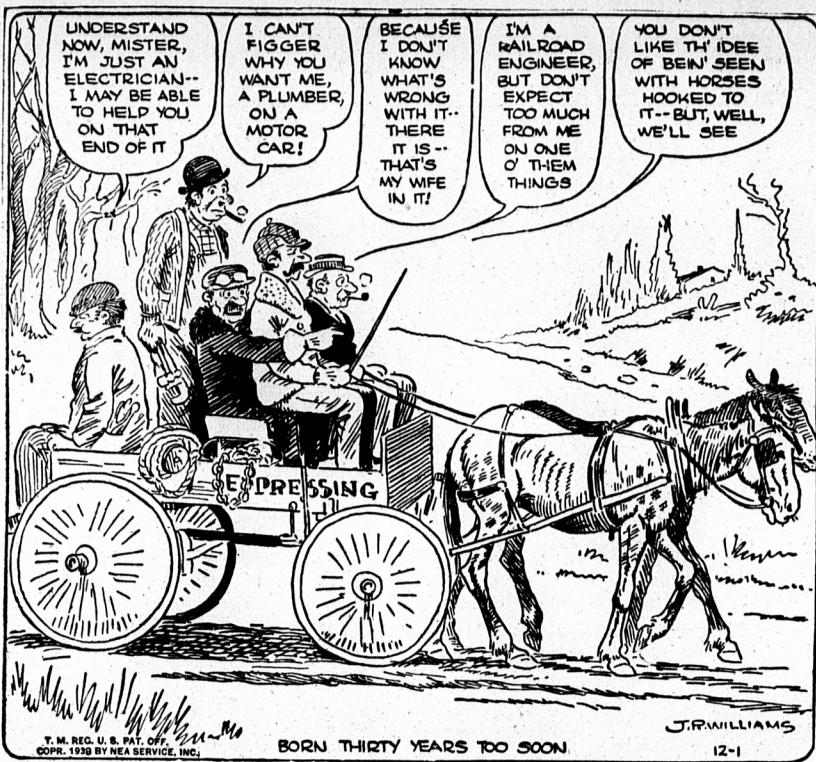
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