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The Literary Digest for June 18, 1927

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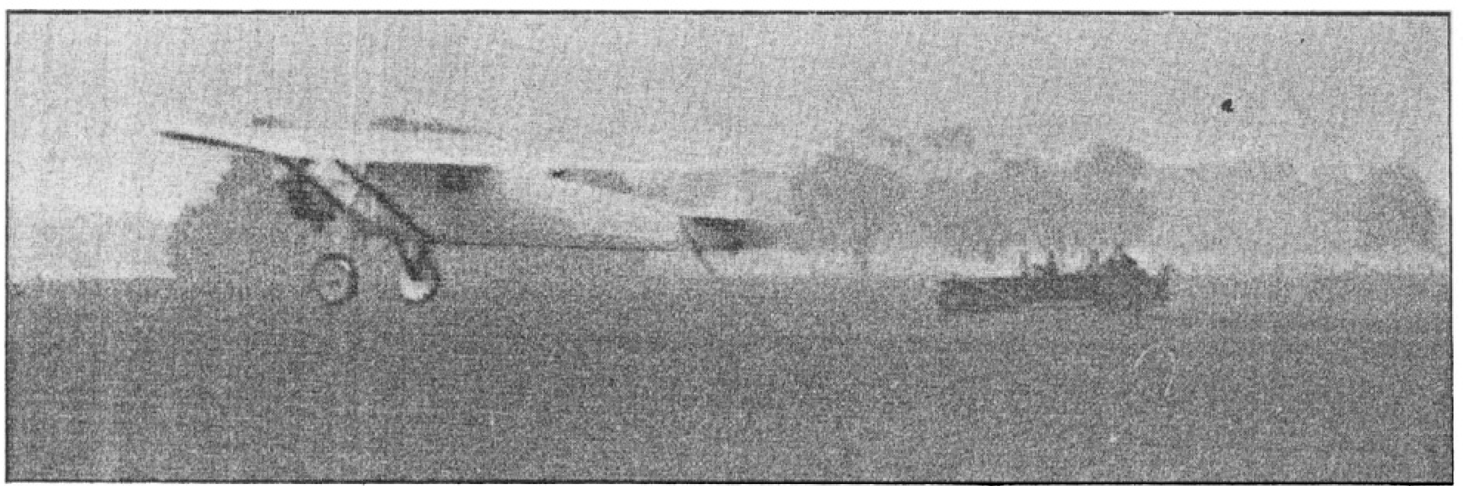
CHANCE WRITES THE LINDBERGH SAGA



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"THEN THE CLIMAX, THE GRAND SCENE. IT COMES LIKE A THUNDER-CLAP. THE MACHINE TAKES OFF"

"Disaster looms for a moment, but Lindbergh is finally in the air. The last act has begun."

TRUTH IS STRANGER THAN FICTION is an old writer's saw that the pen plodders know and the general reader doubts. But that truth and fiction may be one and the same thing comes to light in the story of Lindbergh's flight. No fiction writer could have contrived a story more perfect and right in its details. "Every experienced fiction writer and dramatist has marveled at the dramatic unrolling of the events leading up to this climax, as interest and suspense have been steadily driven up to higher levels." So writes W. D. Kennedy, editor of *The Writer* (Boston), a magazine that teaches the art that is practised by perhaps every fifth one among us. The writer here stops just short of claiming that the ultimate purpose of the Lindbergh flight was to teach fiction writers their business. What he does claim is that "never in modern history has it been so clearly revealed that accident or chance may write a connected story beyond the powers of the imagination of the greatest artist." The order and tempo of events, we are reminded, have wrung "every last drop of possible dramatic interest, intoxicating the imagination of the world as only once before in the memories of living men: in the World War." "The Lindbergh Saga stands alone as the supreme news story of modern times." Let us reconstruct it stage by stage:

"The story begins with the offering of a prize of twenty-five thousand dollars for a non-stop trip from New York to Paris. A desultory public interest develops in the plans of various individuals to make the attempt. The difficulties of the flight are suggested in the discussion of experts. Interest begins to rise slightly. Captain Fonck's plane is wrecked and burned at the take-off. Two men die. Two American aviators perish on the test flight in a plane which they were to use in an attempt to make the flight. Then two of the world's greatest aviators take off from Paris. They are lost. Up to this time the real hero has not made his entrance. We are not yet in the body of the story, but the situation is being driven home to the reader slowly, laboriously, painstakingly, and impressively. He is being made to see two things: first, the worth-whileness of the thing that is to be accomplished; and second, the difficulties which must be overcome to accomplish it.

"Why is the flight worth making? The winner will receive twenty-five thousand dollars, but that is only a symbol, as it were, of the real accomplishment of him who succeeds in making the flight. Before the public can be intensely interested, it must be persuaded that there is something far more than money involved. Yet the larger objective is almost indefinable. The *Journal des Debats* of Paris attempts it: 'What is the value of this flight,' may be asked by certain obstinate minds.

"'Firstly, noble gestures, even seemingly without utility, must always be honored because they are equivalent to works of high art, making for man the finest qualities and aspirations of the race. Lindbergh's feat, in a certain sense, is comparable to a great monument or a great book. It is a masterpiece, deserving admiration. And besides, from the view-point of athletics or sport, it is a magnificent record.'

"The worth-whileness of the objective, since it is in the higher realms of imagination, can not be absolutely defined. That gives it its great power over the imagination. Six men have died in futile attempts to accomplish it. We are convinced of the nobility of the objective even tho—perhaps because—it transcends any literal, commonplace view of the comparative values of life and death.

"Not only is the nobility of the objective brought home to us in the preliminary exposition to the real story, but the forces antagonistic to accomplishment are forcefully portrayed as vast and menacing. They are clearly illustrated in the fate of Nungesser and Coli. Difficulties of the take-off, the hazards of weather, possible mechanical weakness of the plane, and that greatest of all dangers, arising from human frailty, sleep. Any one who has read the newspapers has now a perfect background for a complete understanding of the action which is to follow.

"Now the minor characters of the drama are shown. A spirit of rivalry develops. Two planes are ready for the hop, one commanded by a man who has been much in the public eye for his flight over the North Pole. Then the hero enters. It is a superb entrance. No one could have planned it better because it could not have been a more complete surprize. He literally drops from the skies, unheralded and unknown, after spanning the continent in two long jumps. The real story begins. But he does not take flight at once—weather interferes. It raises a hindrance to the action. This delay, for curious reasons, heightens rather than lowers the suspense. If he had hopped off the next day, the interest in the outcome would not have been one-tenth as keen. If he had waited too long, it would have flagged. Higher and higher it mounts as the search for the lost Frenchmen emphasizes the power of the opposing forces. During the delay, swiftly, definitely, the hero is characterized. We see his mother, a school-teacher in Detroit. We hear of his past exploits. Four times he has had to jump with a parachute from burning planes. He finds a kitten asleep in his cockpit and adopts it as a mascot, but he will not take it with him because he fears it may freeze to death. We see his picture and we like his face. His little actions reveal him as silent, modest, independent, and brave. In bold contrast to squabbling and wrangling in a rival camp, he works quietly and alone, saying little as he prepares his plane. There is a beautiful restraint in the action which saves it from melodrama and makes it purely heroic. His mother comes to say good-by, and departs quietly, refusing to kiss him for the newspaper photographers. In all this action building up to the climax, I am reminded of a line from Thoreau, 'The little that is said is eked out by implication of the much that was done.' The truth is so superbly artistic that even the merest dub of a newspaper reporter can't spoil it. The moving hand of fact is writing surely and gracefully.

"Then the climax, the grand scene. It comes, like the entrance of the hero, a thunder-clap of surprize. Altho we have had reason to expect it, we have not been quite sure. With swift decision he climbs into the cockpit. The machine takes off. Disaster looms for a moment, but he is finally in the air. The last act has begun. The fine, bold figure of Byrd stands there, frustrated in an attempt to convoy him part way. His mother

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goes on with her work of teaching chemistry. Her children anxiously refrain from mentioning the flight in her hearing. Squabbling goes on among the rivals. The weather clears—but we remember that he has had only two hours of sleep during the night before.

"Bulletins begin to come in. In a few short days an unknown lad has become the hero of the world. His name is on the lips of more people than any under the sun. His face etched in more minds than any living human. The narrative question of the story, 'Will he make it?' is on everybody's lips, from President to beggar."

The "real story" has already been told. "No matter what happens next," says the schoolmaster of fiction, the story is a truly great one. And that, he tells us, "is where so many young writers go wrong":

"If you draw from this only the lesson that people like to read about transocean flights for a prize, you have failed to grasp the significance of one of the finest examples of narrative technique that you will ever read. Be honest with yourself. Would you have written the story this way? Would you have dared write with such restraint? Would you have shown so carefully the thing to be accomplished and the opposing forces to accomplishment so clearly and artistically? Would you have made your readers cry aloud for the answer to the narrative question as the world was crying on May 21? Or would you have started your story with the take-off and assumed that the reader would be interested in what happened thereafter just because you were writing the story? When you have proved to yourself why so many people were asking themselves so intensely, 'Will he make it?' when Lindbergh took the air, you have learned the first lesson of narrative technique.

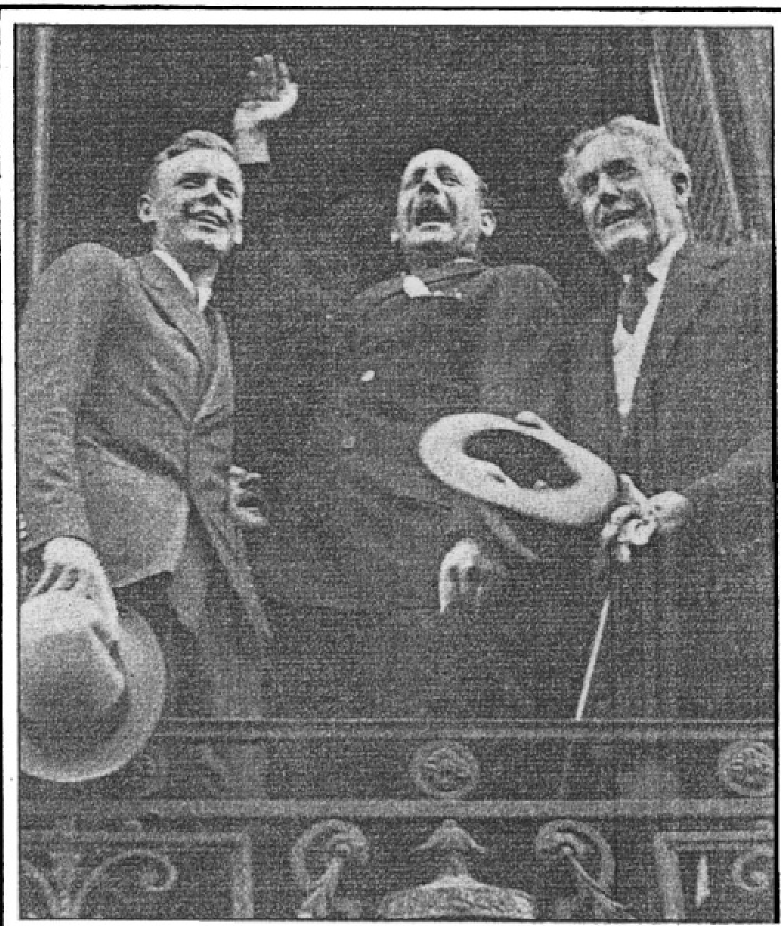
"Lindbergh's flight is a perfect example, too, of what most writers need to learn: hold your suspense, make them wait. If it were a matter of a few hours, the public wouldn't have been so intensely interested. But, for two long days, sketchy bulletins kept our suspense alive and drove it steadily to higher levels. Then the wild panorama of the happy ending."

For, finally, and curiously enough, this story has a "happy ending"—something disdained by the "arty" writer. Make 'em weep, not laugh; that's more artistic. But is it?

"Hundreds who read this are failing to reach the public to which their talents recommend them simply because they hold to this as a sincere belief. To them, I say this: I would not for worlds destroy your artistic standards. But won't you recall and analyze your feelings when you heard that Lindbergh had landed. Did you laugh? Or was there a stinging sensation in your eyes? Would you have been any closer to tears if you had read that he had fallen in flames over the English Channel? No! A thousand times, no! It is in the story itself that artistry lies, not in the ending, and most of all in the part of the story that was written long before Paris rose in her emotional might to acclaim the hero."

THE POETIC AIR DELUGE

THE MAIL HAS BROUGHT US LINDBERGH poems, too. Newspapers begin to complain of too much. It stands to reason that all can not be printed, yet no one wishes to discourage the writing of this verse, for as the New York *World* observes, it's the only way to release the emotions aroused. France as well as America was so moved. We reprinted the Rostand verse that was composed on the field of Le Bourget. Songs that had welled up from the moment were sold on the streets of Paris. It may be cold comfort for the poet to tell him, as the New York *Times* does, that "the more stirred he is by the thrilling event, the less likely he is to write tolerably about it." The writers must realize that the newspapers have a problem in reading and selecting, as *The Times* reveals at the very outset of the emotional wave:



"A LAD HAS BECOME HERO OF THE WORLD"

"His name is on the lips of more people than any under the sun." Lindbergh on the balcony of the French Aero Club, Paris, with P. E. Flandrin, President of the Club, and Ambassador Herrick.

"Well over two hundred poets and rimesters have been moved by Lindbergh's spectacular feat to send their 'prose run mad' to *The Times*. There is a unanimity in their tributes. Some of them compared his valor to that of Columbus, and others stuck to the Lochinvar theme. 'Best' and 'West' proved a useful rime. The patriotic note was sounded in a number of the verses, with 'dare and do' and 'red, white and blue' playing a prominent part. The fact that he flew alone made the strongest impression on his sonneteers, who insisted that he was not really alone, for the thoughts and prayers of thousands went with him. Most of the lyrists dedicated their work to the hero, but a few preferred to honor his mother."

The World also makes confession:

"Since Lindbergh flew to Paris we have received approximately two and one-half bushels of poems commemorating the feat, ranging all the way from sonnets to free verse. So, one judges, have others who offer space to contributors. *The Times* devotes several paragraphs to its harvest; so does Mr. Franklin P. Adams in the Conning Tower, and publishes a number of specimens. And despite the fact that this outpouring seems to be regarded somewhat humorously, it seems to us that the authors of it have the right idea. What, after all, can be said in prose about this flight? Precisely nothing. The moment you try to argue some concrete proposition in regard to it, or deduce a moral, or sound a warning, you become flat, stale and unprofitable, as most of our commentators, communicators and felicitators found out to their sorrow. In a rational way there is absolutely nothing to say about it: the occasion is not for syllogization but for rhapsody; and for rhapsody the only conceivable medium is poetry. So we urge all citizens to sharpen their pencils and do their best; if they have a turn for music, let them write tunes to their lyrics too and sing them to ukulele accompaniment.

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