

# THE SMART SET

A MAGAZINE OF  
CLEVERNESS

Manuscripts, to receive prompt attention, should be addressed, "Editor of THE SMART SET."

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# THE SMART SET

SMART—Clever; witty; acute; quick; lively.—*Webster's Dictionary.*

## THE ASSAULT OF WINGS

By Charles G. D. Roberts

Ever since man began to fly, it has been a favorite speculation as to what would happen if an aviator were attacked in midair by a flock of giant birds. Mr. Roberts, as a widely known writer on animal life, is the man best fitted to write the story of such a battle; and the account he gives here is real and thrilling.

**I**N his high place in the unclouded blue, a thousand feet above the topmost pinnacle of Bald Face, the great white-headed eagle stared downward toward the far-off reek and roofs of the busy town by the sea. It was not often that his eyes troubled themselves to turn in that direction; for all his concern was with the inland lakes and water-courses which linked themselves tranquilly about the spreading bases of Old Bald Face, and he hated the acrid smoke clouds which rose from the chimneys of the town. But this morning his gaze—that miraculous vision which could scrutinize a rabbit or an ailing lamb at a distance when our best eyes would hardly discern an elephant—had been caught by an apparition which amazed and disconcerted him.

Flying in wide circles above a green field on the outskirts of the city was a gigantic bird, in form and stature quite unlike any other bird that the great eagle had ever seen. As it passed over a red brick cottage at one corner of the field, quite blotting it from view for an instant, he got an impression of its incredible size, and felt, with a pang of

angry dread, that his own stately dimensions would have seemed little better than a sparrow's beside it. Its vast white wings were square at the tip and of the same width from tip to base—an inexplicable innovation in wings—and he noted with apprehension that they flew without any motion at all.

He himself, soaring in the blue heights as he was, flew *almost* without motion of the wings, riding by subtle poise and balance on the thrust of the light aerial draught. But even now, the breeze failing, he had to recover his impetus by a rushing descent. He tipped his snowy head and shoulders forward, and the air hissed sharply in the tense web of the hinder edges of his wings as he swept down the viewless slopes of air, turning upward again after a swoop of a hundred yards or so—which was as nothing at that height. A slow stroke or two restored him to his former level, with impetus to spare for his splendid, effortless soaring. But meanwhile he had not taken his eyes for a moment from that portentous shape circling so mysteriously above the green field on the outskirts of the town. And he had not seen it

either swoop or mount, or once flap its flat-spread wings.

Moved from his accustomed arrogant indifference, the eagle flew over toward the town to get a better look at this disquieting phenomenon. On nearer approach he made out that the monstrous, square-winged bird was ridden by one of those man creatures whom he so hated and despised—ridden as he had seen, with wonder and scorn, that horses permitted themselves to be. The man sat in a hollow in the strange bird's back, between its wings, and seemed to master and guide it, even as he would master and guide a horse.

The eagle hated man, because man was the only creature that had ever given him, hitherto, the loathed sensation of fear. He despised man, because he saw the proud and cunning creature chained to earth, compelled to crawl upon earth's surface even as a sheep or a woodchuck. But now, if man were able to ride the dwellers of the air, there would be no escaping his tyranny.

The eagle had been conscious for some moments of a curious humming roar in his ears, the source of which was not at once obvious to him. Suddenly he realized that it was the noise of the blunt-winged monster's flight. The realization daunted him. How was it possible that such an awful sound should come from those unmoving wings? He was inclined to turn and fly back to the shelter of Old Bald Face. But after a moment's irresolution his stout heart rose to the magnitude of the peril. He flew onward, till soon he was directly over the field—but so high that to the spectators around the edges of the field he was a scarcely visible speck against the blue.

At this moment the aeroplane began to mount skyward. It scaled the air swiftly, in a steep spiral. The eagle was almost panic-stricken to observe that even now, when mounting so directly, it did not flap its wings, although there was no wind on which to rise. At the curious blunt beak of the monster he discerned a sort of circle of faint haze, a bluish blur; but this was something which did not seem to concern him, and

he made no effort to understand it. What did concern him was the fact that the monster, with its human rider, was apparently coming up after him. His courage and his curiosity gave way together, and he fled back in a panic to his ledge in the recesses of Old Bald Face.

The extreme summit of Bald Face was a level plateau of granite some dozen acres in extent, with a needlelike pinnacle of splintered granite at its eastern or seaward end. The broad southeastern face of the summit was of naked granite, whitened by the storm and frost of ages—whence the name of Old Bald Face. But between this bleak, wind-harried front and the rich plain country by the sea were many lesser pinnacles and ridges, with deep ravines between, all clothed with dark spruce woods and tangled undergrowth. Around to full south, and west and north, lay an infertile region, thin-soiled and rocky, producing little timber but hemlock and stunted paper birch, and therefore not worth the attention of either the lumberman or the squatter. The whole of this district was interlaced with watercourses and sown with lakes having their ultimate outlet in the tidal estuary which washed the wharves of the town.

If the land in this region skirting Bald Face was barren, its waters were not. They swarmed with fish—lake trout, whitefish and huge suckers, as well as the ordinary brook trout. They supplied hunting ground, therefore, for not only a number of fishhawks, but also for no less than three pairs of the fishhawks' dreaded tyrants, the white-headed eagles. These three pairs of eagles had their nests in the uppermost and most inaccessible ledges of Bald Face. And the wild country below was divided among them into six ranges, each great bird having his or her own hunting ground, upon which not even their own mates could poach with impunity.

The nests of the three royal pairs were all within a distance of perhaps a half-mile of each other, but each was austere-ly secluded and jealously hidden from its neighbors. Each pair regarded its neighbors with a coldly tolerant aversion

and kept an aloof but vigilant watch upon them, as possible poachers.

When the first eagle, smitten with fear by the vision of the swiftly mounting aeroplane, fled back to his eyrie to warn his fierce-eyed mate of this portentous monster of the air, his perturbation was detected by the female of the next pair, who chanced to be homing at that moment with a fish for her hungry nestlings. Fear seems to travel by some uncomprehended but very efficient wireless; and fear in the lords of the air was a thing too unusual to be ignored. Hastily depositing her burden, the newcomer flapped upward and around to the east, till she, too, caught sight of the mounting monoplane. It was far off, indeed, but already so high above earth that to her eyes it stood out dark and sinister against the pale expanse of sea beyond the town. She flapped over for a nearer view, flew close enough to hear the mysterious roar of the motor and to detect the man creature riding the monster's neck, and fled back to her nestlings with rage and terror at her heart. No longer could she feel secure on the dizziest and remotest ledges of the peaks; no longer were even the soundless deeps of sky inaccessible to man! Within an hour every eagle of Bald Face knew of this dreadful invasion of their hitherto impregnable domain. It was the time of year when their nestlings were most helpless. And that is the time of year when the white-headed eagles will face all odds with an incomparable ferocity of valor, at the hint of menace to their skyey homes.

The airman at the town of X— was one Rob MacCreedy, who had recently been making a name for himself at the aviation grounds some hundred miles down the coast. He had come up to X— primarily to turn a needed penny by exhibition flights and passenger carrying, over the spacious and level fields behind the town. But his secondary object was to experiment with the dangerous eddies and wind holes that were likely to be met with above the profound ravines of Bald Face and its buttressing hills. His purpose was to go to Europe and win fame by some sen-

sational flights over the Alps or the Pyrenees; and having a very practical Canadian ambition to survive for the enjoyment of the fame he planned to win, he was determined to prepare himself effectively for the perils that would confront him.

But MacCreedy had another object in view, which he did not talk about lest matter-of-fact folk should call him childish. He wanted to see what there was on top of Old Bald Face. That gaunt gray summit was regarded as practically unscalable. It had indeed been scaled, men said, some thirty or forty years ago, after desperate effort and altogether hair-raising adventure, by a greatly daring trapper, who had barely survived to tell of his exploit. Since then—the men of X— not being wholehearted or skilled mountain climbers—all such attempts had ended in failure. Among the legends which had gathered about the austere summit there was none to suggest that gold might be found thereon, else the cloudy sanctuary had doubtless been violated without unnecessary delay. But the traditions handed down from the adventure of that old trapper were as stimulating to MacCreedy's imagination as any myth of quartz vein or nugget could have been. They told of a remarkable level plateau, like a table for the gods, with a little lake of black crystal set in the center of it, ice cold and of unfathomable depth. It was, in effect, according to tradition, bottomless!

To MacCreedy's eager and boyish imagination this lofty plateau and this mysterious uninvestigated lake were irresistible. He was determined to know more about them both. And as the top of Bald Face, for all its inaccessibility, was less than five thousand feet above sea level, his monoplane seemed to offer him an easy way to it.

The third day after MacCreedy's arrival at X— was windless, and without a cloud in the blue. The air almost sparkled with its clarity, and there was an unspringlike tang in it which made MacCreedy's nerves tingle for adventure. After he had given the crowd their money's worth in swift mountings

and breath-taking volplanes, he started off, at a height of some two thousand feet, toward the mountain, standing pallid and grim against the intense blue. He mounted swiftly as he went; and the spectators stared after him doubtfully till they grasped his purpose.

"He's going to visit the top of Old Bald Face," went the murmur around the crowded edges of the field. And a feeling that he might bring back some interesting information made them content to wait, without grumbling, for his return.

Since their first sight of the giant-winged monster soaring and humming over X—, the eagles of Bald Face had not dared to venture far from home in their foragings. Their nerves were raw with angry anxiety for their nests. MacCreedy, as he came within a mile or two of the mountain, took note of an eagle not far ahead, circling at a higher level than himself.

"The old bird thinks he can fly some," mused MacCreedy, "but I bet I'm going to give him the surprise of his life!"

A few moments more and he was himself surprised, as the solitary sentinel was joined by another, and another, and another; till presently there were six of the great birds flapping and whirling between him and Bald Face, about at the level of the edge of the plateau.

"Seem to be as interested in aeroplanes as any of us humans!" thought MacCreedy, and gave his planes a lift that should carry him over the plateau at a height of not much over a hundred feet. He would make a hasty observation first, then circle around and effect a landing if the surface looked smooth enough for him to attempt it without too much risk. He was surprised somewhat by the attitude of the eagles, who were now circling nearer and seemed to be more angry than curious or terrified at his approach. Then his attention was abruptly withdrawn from their threatening evolutions. It was all required, and that urgently, by the aeroplane.

Having arrived over the deeply cleft and ridged outworks of Bald Face, the

aeroplanes had plunged into a viewless turmoil of air currents and vortices. It dropped, with startling suddenness, into a "pocket" and felt as if a vacuum had opened beneath it. MacCreedy saw a vicious granite ridge, whiskered with fir trees, lurch up at him insanely from a thousand feet below. He was almost upon it before his planes bit upon solid air again and glided off from the peril, slanting upward rockingly over a gaping abyss. Yelping with triumph, the eagles had swooped down after him; but he could not hear their cries, of course, through the roar of the Gnome; and of eagles, at that moment, he was thinking not at all.

Realizing the imminence of his danger from these vortices, MacCreedy changed his course and swept back again as fast as he could toward the open, his machine careering wickedly in the eddies and upthrusts of air. He decided that he must get far above this area of disturbance, and then spiral down directly over the plateau, when, as he calculated, the currents would be less tumultuous.

The eagles, imagining that the loud monster had been put to flight by their threats, came following in its wake, determined to see it safely off their premises and give it no time to recover from what they conceived to be its panic. But they were far too sagacious to attack and force a more than doubtful conflict. They were filled with awe of this gigantic being which flew with rigid wings and such appalling roar, yet allowed itself to be ridden by the man between its shoulders. They were perplexed, too, by the fierce wind which streamed out behind its level wings. Their amazement was heightened by the fact that their own long and powerful wings, which were able to overtake so easily the flight of the agile fishhawk, were forced to beat furiously in order to keep up with this incomprehensible stranger who was apparently making no effort at all.

A swift motor car, which had followed MacCreedy's flight at top speed across the plain, had halted at the point where the highway passed nearest to the broken and impassable region surrounding the

mountain. Its occupants, watching MacCreedy's movements through their field glasses, and noting the great birds crowding behind him, thought at first that the eagles had put him to flight and forced him to give up his venture. They were undeceived, however, when they saw him turn—at such a height that even to their powerful glasses the pursuing eagles were no more than specks—and soar back till he was directly over the summit.

At the height which he had now gained the air was icy cold but still as a dream. The world below looked like a vast, shallow bowl, the sides concaving upward around him to the horizon. Two-thirds of this horizon rim were of dark green woods threaded with the gleaming silver of watercourses. The remaining third was of sea, which looked as if it overhung the town of X—and was withheld only by a miracle from flowing in and filling the bowl. Directly beneath him, two to three thousand feet down, the mighty summit of Old Bald Face looked insignificant. It lay outspread quite flat and shelterless in the sun, its secrets clean revealed—and there, sure enough, at its center, was the pool of tradition, gleaming upward glassy still. At the same time he saw, though without much interest, the eagles. They were very far below him now, hardly above the level of the plateau, flying in occasionally over its edges, but for the most part circling out above the surrounding gulfs. In a casual way MacCreedy inferred that they must have nests in the ledges of the precipices.

In a somewhat narrow spiral he now began his descent—gradually, and under power, that he might be in full readiness to grapple with the treacherous gusts which came leaping up at him from under the brink of the plateau. He was surprised to see that as he descended the eagles rose hurriedly to meet him. But at first he paid no attention to them, being intent upon the search for a good landing place, and upon the mystery of that sky-inhabiting pool. A minute or two more, however, and it was no longer possible for him to ignore the approaching birds, who were rising at him with

unmistakable manifestations of rage. For the first time it occurred to him that they might be thinking he had come to rob their nests. "Plucky beggars!" he said to himself admiringly. "To think of showing fight to a grown-up aeroplane!"

The next moment, as he noted the spread of those flapping wings, the shining, snowy, outstretched heads and necks, the firm and formidable half-opened beaks, a sweat of apprehension broke out all over him. What if one of the misguided birds should foul his propeller, or come blundering aboard and snap a stay or a control wire? The idea of being dashed to pieces in that skyey solitude was somehow more daunting to his spirit than the prospect which he faced indifferently every day, that of being hurled down upon familiar earth.

For a few seconds MacCreedy was tempted to drive his planes heavenward again and withdraw from the situation, to return another day with a passenger and a shotgun for his defense. Then he grew angry and obstinate. He had come to explore the summit of Bald Face; and he was not going to be balked by a flock of birds. He was low enough now to satisfy himself that the plateau afforded a good landing, so he dipped his descent to a steeper angle, making haste to get through the suspense.

Immediately the eagles were all about him. To his relief they seemed afraid to fly directly in front of him, as if apprehending that this monstrous bird of his might carry some terrible weapon on its blunt-faced beak. Mounting swiftly, they passed the descending aeroplane on either side, and then gathered in above it, swooping and yelping. Through the roar of his motor MacCreedy caught the strident shrillness of their cries. He felt that at any moment one might pluck up courage to pounce upon the plane or upon his head. He wondered if his leather cap would be stout enough to resist the clutch of those edged talons which he saw opening and shutting viciously above him. He wished himself safely landed.

He was low enough now to choose his

landing place. He was just about to shut off the engine for the final glide, when one of the female eagles, growing desperate, swooped and struck the right wing of the plane, not far from its tip. The extended talons went right through the cloth, tearing a long gash, and before the bird could recover herself she was caught by one of the strong wires that braced the wing. The aeroplane rocked under her struggles, but in the next moment she was thrown clear, so badly crumpled that she fell topsy-turvy through the air for some little distance before she could pull her wits together and right herself. Then, disheveled and cowed, she flew off to one side, with no more stomach left for another assault.

MacCreedy had brought his plane to a level keel, the better to withstand the attack. Now he laughed grimly, and resumed his descent. Almost in the same instant he realized that an immense eagle was swooping straight at his head. He ducked—the only way to save his face. The grasping claws sunk deep into his shoulders. With a yell he straightened himself backward violently. His assailant, unable for a moment to free his claws from the tough tweed of the jacket, and swept backward by the rush of the plane, plunged down among the supporting stays, where he struggled and flapped wildly to extricate himself.

Smarting with pain and wrath, and with his heart in his mouth lest the stays should snap and the planes collapse, MacCreedy cut off the power and slid sharply downward. The eagle behind him got free and flapped off, much daunted by the encounter. The remaining four birds hung immediately over the swiftly dropping plane, but hesitated to attack after the rough experience of their fellows.

MacCreedy touched ground at somewhat higher speed than he had calculated upon, and found the level stone, swept by the storms of ages, so smooth that his wheels ran along it much too easily. Thus he found himself confronted by a new peril. Could he check himself before reaching the brink? He steered a long curve around the edge of the shining pool, gathered his legs under him so that

he might jump clear if necessary—and came to a stop with his vacillating propeller almost peering over the abyss. Just before him was a drop of a cool thousand feet. He sprang out, hauled the machine back a dozen yards or so, and drew the longest breath of relief that had been forced from his lungs since his first ventures in aeroplaning.

Then he snatched the heaviest wrench from his tool kit, and turned in a rage to settle accounts with his tormentors.

But the eagles were now in a less militant frame of mind. Two of their number had had more than enough, and were already flapping back dejectedly toward their nests. The others seemed to realize that the monster, now that its rider had dismounted, was merely another of the man creature's tools; such as a boat or a canoe, inanimate and harmless except when its dreaded master chose to animate it. Moreover, now that MacCreedy was out of the machine, erect upon his feet, glaring up at them with masterful eyes, and shouting at them in those human tones which all the wild kindreds find so disconcerting, they were much more afraid of him than before. Their anger began to die away into a more nervous dread and aversion. It seemed to occur to them that perhaps, after all, the man was not after their nests. He was nowhere near them. They yelped indignantly at him and flew off to perch on their eyries and brood over the problem.

MacCreedy watched them go, and dropped his weapon back into the kit. Then he went over his precious machine minutely, to assure himself that it had sustained no damage except that slit in one wing, which was not enough to give serious trouble. Then, with a rush of exultation, he ran over to examine the mysterious pool. He found it beautiful enough, in its crystal clear austerity; but, alas, its utter clearness was all that was needed to shatter its chief mystery. It was deep, indeed; but it was certainly not bottomless, for he could discern its bottom, from one shore or the other, in every part. He contented himself, however, with the thought that there was mystery enough for the most exacting in the

mere existence of this deep and brimming tarn on the crest of a granite peak. As far as he could judge from his reading, which was extensive, this smooth flat granite top of Bald Face, with its little pinnacle at one end, and its deep transparent tarn in the center, was unlike any other known summit in the world. He was contented with his explorations, and ready now to return and tell about them.

But if content with his explorations, he was far from content on the score of his adventure with the eagles. He felt that it had been rather more of a close call than it appeared; and there was nothing he desired less than an immediate repetition of it. What he dreaded was that the starting of the motor might revive the fears of the great birds in regard to their nests, and bring them once more swooping upon him. He traversed the circuit of the plateau, peering downward anxiously, and at last managed roughly to locate the three nests. They were all on the south and southeast faces of the summit. Well, he decided that he would get off as directly and swiftly as possible, and by way of

the northwest front—and by this self-effacing attitude, he trusted to convince the touchy birds that he had no wish to trespass upon their domesticity.

He allowed himself all too brief a run, and the plane got into the air but a few feet before reaching the brink. So narrow a margin was it, indeed, that he caught his breath with a gasp before she lifted. It looked as if he were going to dive into space. But he rose instead—and as he sailed out triumphantly across the abyss the eagles came flapping up over the rim of the plateau behind. They saw that he was departing, so they sank again to their eyries, and congratulated themselves on having driven him away. A few minutes later, at an unprovocative height, he swept around and headed for home. As he came into view once more to the anxious watchers in the automobile, who had been worried over his long disappearance, the car turned and raced back over the plain to X—, ambitious to arrive before him and herald his triumph. The fact that that triumph was not altogether an unqualified one remained a secret between MacCreedy and the eagles.

