

L. RON HUBBARD



Trouble on His Wings

GALAXY
P R E S E N T S

Chapter One

JOHNNY BRICE lounged in the shade of the hangar, eyes half-shut, cigarette smoldering, forgotten in his fingers, thinking about absolutely nothing. He should have known better. Every time he had ever relaxed in his life, Fate had sent her legions scurrying and foraging for some trouble to get Johnny into; and this time was no exception.

Running footsteps turned the end of the hangar and Johnny, with a chill of premonition, glanced up to see Irish Donnegan, his pint-size coat holder and mechanic, come tearing up in a cloud of dust and sweat. Johnny deplored such activity on a warm day.

“Johnny!” cried Irish. “Look, Johnny! Gee gosh, —!”

“Hold the pose,” said Johnny with a sigh.

Irish panted, swallowed and then, eyes starting from their sockets at the effort, slowed his speech. “Johnny, the *Kalolo* burned this morning at sea! Twenty lives lost! Ship abandoned, passengers and crew taken off by the SS *Birmingham Alabama*. Thrilling sea rescue, women and children—drama!”

“You got to quit this excitement,” sighed Johnny. “It’ll get your cerebellum displaced and your liver cirrhosified!”

“The old man is wild. He found out some of the passengers had hand movie cameras and he bought all the film aboard

by radio. He's getting out a special release and he needs that film in three hours, and the rescue craft is still two hundred miles at sea. He says you gotta get an idea. He says you gotta get that film. And you know Felznick!"

Johnny took one last drag of his cigarette and threw the butt away. "An' he said that I could have a month off for gettin' those hurricane pictures. Irish, take my advice. Don't never get efficient in the newsreel business. Here I am, my bruises hardly healed and my pay unspent and we gotta go chasing after some film two hundred miles at sea. Am I a cameraman or an errand boy? Is this a job or a hard way to commit suicide?"

"We ain't got much time," panted Irish. "Gee, think of it, Johnny. The *Kalolo*, biggest round-the-world ship, burning to the waterline, boilers exploding, women screaming, men gettin' burned alive! Gosh, Johnny, I bet if we'd been there we coulda made an epic, huh? I bet we coulda got some swell shots."

"Yeah," said Johnny. "You sure can think of some of the damndest things."

"You got an idea yet? Old Felznick is on fire. Never heard him so excited. He said get right out there and check the rescued list."



Johnny



Irish

“Huh,” said Johnny with a start. “Wasn’t his wife comin’ back from Europe on that tub? What a guy! His wife may be burned up—and he thinks of special editions. Come on, fellah, I think maybe I’ve got us an idea, at that.”

They headed around the corner and zigzagged their way through the hangar to the amphibian. It was one of three company ships, squat and sleek and powerful, its wheels sticking out of the big fuselage like short lizard’s legs. On its side was the red-and-gold insignia of the outfit, a lens emblazoned with the words, “World News, ‘The Best First.’”

Johnny signed to a mechanic, who swiftly dollied the ship out on the tarmac with a small electric tractor. Irish eagerly slid into the rear cockpit and threw the starter switches. The big engine clanked and wheezed, and then with an angry roar blasted a dust-filled slipstream back into the hangar.

Meantime, Johnny was struggling into a parachute. When he had fastened the webbing about his legs and shoulders, he dragged a small hand camera out of the locker and draped it around his neck by a strap. Stuffing a rubber film protector into his overalls, he started toward the amphib.

His way was blocked by a man built of spheres, a man who looked like anything but the ace cameraman of “Mammoth Pictures, ‘All the News Always.’”

“Goin’ places?” said Bert Goddard innocently.

Johnny slowed down with great unconcern. “Hello, fellah. Say, I got a hot tip. There’s a big oil fire over in Jersey. Million-dollar blaze. Got to cover it right off. Ain’t you heard about it?”

Goddard grinned complacently. “You know, Johnny, little boys that tell lies never go to heaven. It’s something in the shipping lanes, says that amphib.”

“Why, Bert, you never heard me tell a lie in my life. Honest, it’s just an old old fire—”

“Goddard!” bellowed a teletype man from a nearby office. “The *Kalolo* burned at sea!”

“My pal,” said Goddard.

“Well, I tried anyhow,” said Johnny. “Besides, we bought all the amateur film aboard not half an hour ago.”

“How you goin’ to pick it up?”

“Guess,” said Johnny, adjusting his harness and surging past.

“Y’damned fool,” said Goddard. “Y’want to get yourself drowned?”

“I regret that I have only one life to give to my company,” said Johnny above the clatter and clank of the engine, as he climbed in.

“I’m going to get some air shots, anyhow,” said Goddard.

“Take your pick,” said Johnny, grasping the controls.

He let off the brakes and the amphib wallowed ahead, wings flashing in the Long Island sunlight. He kicked her around into the wind and lanced down the concrete track and into the air.

Irish pulled his hood shut and clamped the radiophones to

his ears, listening attentively. Finally he tapped Johnny on the shoulder. "Course ninety-three degrees, there's a thirty-mile tailwind at two thousand."

"Gotcha," said Johnny, banking into the course.

Far behind them, the smoky towers of Manhattan gradually sank down under the horizon. Below and ahead, a steel-plated sea with a crisscross pattern of waves, small and distinct from this height, tried to appear innocent after a roaring night of it.

Calmly Johnny scrutinized each ship in the lanes below, checking off freighters and tugs, as he tried to locate the SS *Birmingham Alabama*. At long last he saw a pillar of greasy smoke on the far horizon and knew that the rescue ship must be almost directly below. Then he saw it, a child's toy on a mirror. He shook the stick and Irish took over.

"Here's the automatic," said Johnny, handing back the small camera. "After you drop me, take a turn around the *Kalolo* out there and get some air shots of it. Then come back and put her close to the rescue ship. When you see me dive overboard, put her down and by God, I'll break your neck if you make me swim more than a hundred yards."

"You goin' to jump?" said the startled Irish, getting white and tongue-tied.

"Sure."

"But . . . but gee whiz, Johnny, maybe the chute'll sink you. I thought we'd land and let that rescue ship pick you off—"

"That captain wouldn't stop for us," shouted Johnny above the engine's drone. "He'll have to pick me up if I'm in the water. It's my only chance of getting aboard. They'll send out a boat—I hope."

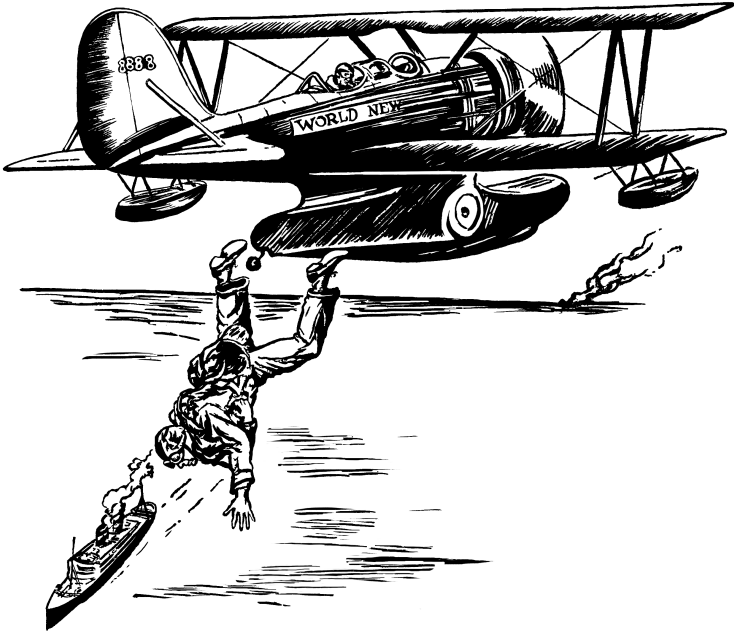
Irish was speechless, forgetting that he had the stick in his hands until the amphib started to come up into a stall. He leveled out hurriedly and, with fascination, watched Johnny stuff a checkbook into the rubber container and then push back the hood to stand up into the blast of air.

Johnny, taking cautious holds, worked his way out on the wing, a hundred-and-eighty-mile-an-hour wind making his overalls thunder against him. He glanced back at Irish, who nodded. Johnny tightened up on his nerve. He always hated a jump, hated the wind in his nose, blowing upward until it felt like he'd lose the top of his head. Sea and sky were too much of a shade to be detailed. He hurtled down through a blue void, only occasionally catching sight of the rescue ship below. He felt for his heart to see if it was still beating, that being the best method of locating a rip cord, never held at the beginning of a drop, lest it pull and foul on the ship.

The smooth sensation against the seat of his pants told him that the chute was pleasantly sliding forth. For a moment of chill he wondered who had packed it, whether it would crack open. Water split a free-falling body into chunks. Abruptly mighty hands grabbed him and tried to tear him apart, and then swung him in a long, dizzy arc, with the great white umbrella tipping slowly high above. He caught his breath, cursing the wind in his nose.

“Hell of a life,” Johnny told a sea gull.

He slipped the chute, to get more directly in the path of the SS *Birmingham Alabama*, which now began to have planks in its deck, and lettering on its lifeboats and a cloud of smoke pluming back from it. People were staring up at him in wonder.



He hurtled down through a blue void, only occasionally catching sight of the rescue ship below.

Johnny put his hands on his harness buckles so he could dive out before the chute collapsed over him. The sea, which had looked so smooth, was now a series of mountain ridges and green valleys.

“Hope it isn’t cold,” shuddered Johnny.

It was. He went into the depths, to be jerked back to the surface like a torpedo. His chute was towing him, and he fought for the release of his buckles. Before he had them, the silk was soggy and collapsing. As soon as he was free he worked to keep on the surface, wondering urgently if the SS *Birmingham Alabama* still had a few sea traditions kicking about in an old locker after one big rescue the night before. Would they put out a boat?

Tossed to the crest and let down like a roller coaster into the trough, he could not see what was happening, save for the growing bulk of the steamer. Was it going to run him down? For the matchstick thing it had appeared from the air, it certainly was increased in size. Johnny hadn’t ever seen anything so big.

He was growing tired, and the chill was eating through him like knives. Wouldn’t the fools ever get busy? Were they going to let a guy drown?

Suddenly a boat hook fixed on his collar, choking him. He was towed to the gunwale of the lifeboat and sailors snatched him over the edge, to drop him in the bottom, like a floundering cod.

“Okay,” said the mate, standing at the tiller. “Prepare to give way. Give way all together! Stroke!”

Johnny sighed with relief and watched the brawny sailors

heave-ho on their oars, sending the lifeboat on its crazy, tipsy journey back to the side of the drifting steamer. Johnny grinned a little to himself. It wasn't everybody that could stop a ship like that.

Tackles were hooked into the boat fore and aft, and blocks creaked as they were lifted up the palisade of rusty steel toward the boat deck. The davits swung, first one, then the other, and the lifeboat was over the side and back into its cradle.

A thunderously scowling man wearing tarnished braid, fastened upon Johnny. "What's the idea? I thought your ship was coming down, but it's flown off by itself! Is this some new kind of a ———, ———, ———, ——— stunt?"

"Johnny Brice, of World News. Get your picture in all the theaters, Captain—"

"News! Why, you young—"

"Ah, ah!" warned Johnny. "Ladies present, Captain." And he slid out of the irate mariner's grasp and through the crowd.

As he went, a young lady suddenly backed out of the crowd and appeared to be on her way into a passage. The movement attracted Johnny's eye and the girl looked as though she was unhappy to be noticed. Johnny decided that it might be shock from the wreck. She was too beautiful to be swimming around in the ocean and scorched by flame.

"World News," said Johnny. "We bought some pictures by radio. Whoever's got 'em, trot 'em out." He spoke to the crowd but he noted that the girl was more uneasy than before, though reluctant to retreat. Her wide blue eyes were almost frightened, strange in their intensity upon him.

Several passengers ran to get their salvaged films. There

were plenty of rolls, thanks to the penchant of tourists for movie cameras.

“Sight unseen,” said Johnny. “Five hundred dollars a roll.”

A little fat man wearing nothing much more than a blanket, but gripping his precious film, stared at Johnny with disbelief. “You won’t even have to see if it shows in the pictures?”

“Somebody was bound to get some,” said Johnny. “Come on, the rest of you. Shell out.” He took his checkbook in hand and started to write.

Ten minutes later he had spent three thousand dollars of company money and had a questionable batch of film rolled up in his rubber bag.

“You’re a fool,” snapped the captain, still peeved. “You could have bought all this when we docked. You won’t get it there any sooner.”

“Oh, won’t I?” grinned Johnny. “Collect from the company for the delay. World News pays for its exclusives.”

The amphib was hovering in the sky and Johnny turned to the passengers. Again he noticed that the girl shrank back, though her appearance and not her conduct made the bigger impression upon him. In this mob of out-of-shape men and variously misbuilt tourist women, all in blankets or borrowed sailor clothes, the girl was the only one whose poise was not shattered by exterior appearance.

Johnny moved over to the rail, taking the captain with him. “Have you got a Mrs. Felznick aboard? A sort of lumpy old dame, I think. She’d have her hands full of jewels if she drowned, unless she let go.”