

CHAPTER FIVE



THE NEWSBOY OPENED HIS HAND and Annie dropped in a penny. She took the early edition of the *St. Louis Republic* under her arm and found a comfortable seat inside the lobby at the Hotel Beers. The light shone bright and hopeful, the daily chatter of the usually bustling lobby still hours away.

Annie opened the paper and studied the picture covering the front page—giant balloons surrounded by a whimsical crowd. She grinned and scanned the headlines. “Great Balloon Race; And Spectators,” the paper declared. The story named the race a great success. *Wasn’t it though*, she thought in warm agreement. Watching the balloons lift off one by one into the pale October sky had been a marvelous affair. Observing the crowd had given her a secret pleasure. Her brilliant son would soon be flying before the eyes of thousands, before this very who’s who of St. Louis society listed in the *St. Louis Republic*: “Mr. and Mrs. Albert Bond Lambert, the latter in blue with a large hat, sat near Mr. and Mrs. Otto Mersman, who was in black,” read one description. “Mrs. May Walker, in a white broadcloth suit, was with H. Sturgeon.”

What would the press write about her, she wondered?

The list of names ran the length of the paper under the headline, “Prominent Ladies, Elegantly Gowned, See the Balloons Rise.” Annie scanned every name, wondering if any might sound familiar. It was a nice touch at any rate, she thought, flipping the page, even if the list didn’t include her.

By sunrise that morning, the paper reported, each of the nine balloons was sailing high over Iowa; a few were climbing for a swift-

er current, pushing them north toward Lake Michigan. Speculation over the whereabouts of the balloons and who might win the race ran high.

Annie found what she was looking for on page eight. She folded the paper and smiled. "Next is *Skycycle* Flight by Dixon Boy," the headline declared.

Annie returned to her room and found Cromwell staring out the window. "Listen to this," she said, beginning to read. "Great interest attaches to the ascension to be made today by Cromwell Dixon. Besides his youth and the skill with which he constructed his machine, his actions are watched closely by older aeronauts."

Cromwell grinned and stepped to his mother's side. He peered over her shoulder and placed his fingers at his chin, looking like a man deep in thought. "Cromwell's invention is a small air bag, cigar-shaped, with a capacity of 5,000 cubic feet, with a swinging frame to which a bicycle frame is attached. The operator sits on the bicycle and by rapid pedaling gives the necessary motion."

"That's me," Cromwell said, his voice cracking. "That's me in that story!"

"That's wonderful, dear" Annie replied. She set the paper aside to clip the article later that day. It would fit nicely in the scrapbook she was keeping to track her son's rise to aeronautical fame. "You'll dazzle them all just like you always do," she told him, smiling.

"You bet I will, Momma," Cromwell said.

CROMWELL ENTERED THE TENT AT FULL STRIDE at the Aero Grounds to inspect his *Skycycle* for flight. Old Harris Colver was there chewing on his pipe, ready to help if needed. "Not just yet," Cromwell told him. "I can do this now."

Elsewhere around the grounds, men prepared larger airships for flight. Stuffy cigar and sweet tobacco smoke drifted from the tents, accompanied by the clanging of metal on metal, the cursing of mechanics busting knuckles on stubborn bolts, and the hushed conversations taking place behind canvas walls. The din served as a pre-flight orchestra, its hurried tune calming some and rousing others.

Israel Ludlow, a New York lawyer and clerk of the field the day before, worked among the throng of aeronauts and their mechanics.

He fiddled with his own device, a glider described by the newspapers as a kite-shaped contraption. One of the foremost inventors in the country, Ludlow developed the glider to demonstrate how wings created lift to achieve heavier-than-air flight. He had crashed in a smaller glider a year before in St. Augustine, Florida, and nearly died—an accident that left him badly injured and limping for life.

The *St. Louis Republic* described Ludlow's glider as a "large kite-shaped contraption, the sides, or wings, arranged to meet the air at such an angle as to make it buoyant." Another reporter wrote that the glider was designed "to be lifted from the ground and propelled by the pressure of planes, or external surfaces, of some light material against the air."

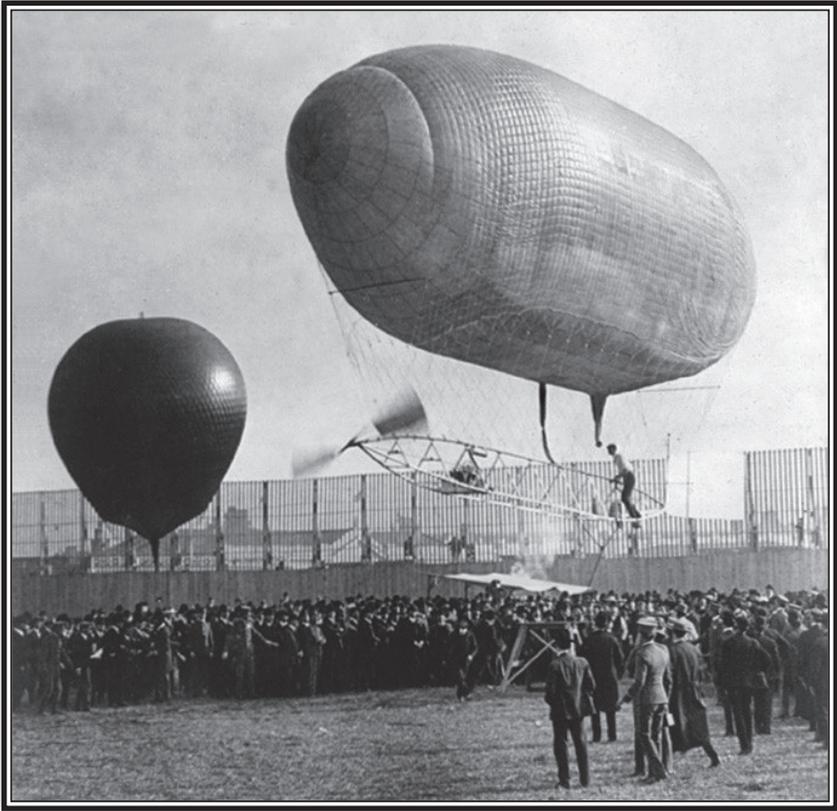
Ludlow's craft had no engine. Instead, a long rope connected it to an automobile, which, when driven at a high rate of speed, pulled the glider to create the necessary lift. The device was intended as an exhibition on aerodynamics, a concept not widely understood by the public in 1907. The glider demonstrated the principles of lift and how air moves over the wings—how the resulting air pressure is greater below the wing than above it, which works to keep the aircraft aloft.

Ludlow's machine was nothing short of a crowd-pleaser. Spectators gathered tightly around the pilot and his craft, hoping for a closer look. Ludlow stood poised as whispers rose from the crowd. Cromwell, who joined the throng, stood in silent admiration, watching as reporters pulled Ludlow aside for an interview.

The boy drew his cap low across his brow. He looked right, then left, and followed the reporters into the crowd before pausing to savor Ludlow's every word.

"I predict that in the near future, aeroplanes, or a combination of aeroplanes and automobiles, will be a common sight in the air," Ludlow said, scanning the crowd. He looked at Cromwell, but the boy quickly dropped his gaze. "I believe sufficient power can be used to drive the kites through the air at will, carrying a passenger or passengers, and also a frame with wheels attached, to be used in starting a flight and landing."

SOME OF THE MEN PRESENT THAT DAY in St. Louis would play a part in advancing flight, including Lincoln Beachey, who would soon rise to aeronautical fame (and die in an aeroplane crash in San Francisco in 1914). Several years later, when aeroplanes began



The first California Arrow built by Captain Thomas Scott Baldwin was flown by Augustus Roy Knabenshue in 1904. Knabenshue also piloted Baldwin's second dirigible, the New California Arrow in 1907. Baldwin had originally planned to fly the airships, but he gained too much weight to do so.

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replacing dirigibles and balloons at exhibitions, Beachey would emerge as a well-known pilot, tackling stunts that others feared to try. But for now, the California man and son of a Civil War veteran would simply fly his airship, which he inflated the night before

and continued adjusting that morning.

Cromwell also spotted Captain Thomas Scott Baldwin working the crowd. A stout man of good reputation, who had achieved a measure of success with his early airships, Baldwin worked through the early-morning hours inflating his two dirigibles, including the *New California Arrow*.

Baldwin planned to fly the *New California Arrow* himself. The ship represented a breakthrough in airship design. Baldwin had equipped the dirigible with “twin screws,” a novel departure in propulsion that he believed could add longevity to the airframe and power to the ship. The two propellers, Baldwin explained, were positioned just 16 inches apart, but rotated in opposite directions while working in unison. They required no additional power to operate.

“With one screw running constantly in one direction, there’s a tendency to weaken the frame, or bend it to one side,” Baldwin explained. “You see, with two screws running in opposite directions, the tendency to pull to one side is offset by the screw pulling to the other side. This way, there’s balance.”

Baldwin placed his second ship, the *Twentieth Century*, in the hands of Glenn Hammond Curtiss, an inventor from Hammondsport, New York. A slender man who made his name building and racing motorcycles, Curtiss, more than any other man present that week in St. Louis, would have a profound impact on American aviation in the coming years, designing lightweight, powerful engines and advancing aeroplane design.

ON OCTOBER 22, 1907, morning gave way to afternoon as the aeronauts prepared their airships for flight. They filled the giant envelopes with hydrogen and tested their motors. A crowd of 20,000 settled into the bleachers set about the field. As the start drew near, the fans passed the time waving colorful flags, anticipating the day’s first exhibition flight.

Cromwell paced anxiously just beyond the view of the crowd. *This is it*, he thought, amazed the moment had finally come, his chance to fly in front of thousands of people. The ground crew tugged the *Sky-cycle* into position at the center of the field. A booming voice then announced Cromwell’s name, and the crowd responded with applause.

Cromwell raised an arm. He waved stiffly and swallowed hard, then entered the arena with his eyes on his shoes, his hands at his sides, rarely looking from under the brim of his cap. He prayed he wouldn't disappoint the crowd.

Seeing the young aeronaut for the first time left many to wonder, as so many had before, how a boy so small could be so skilled in the art of mechanics, how a mere child could have acquired a knowledge of flight in so short a time. Cynics laughed as they noted his willowy frame and timid demeanor.

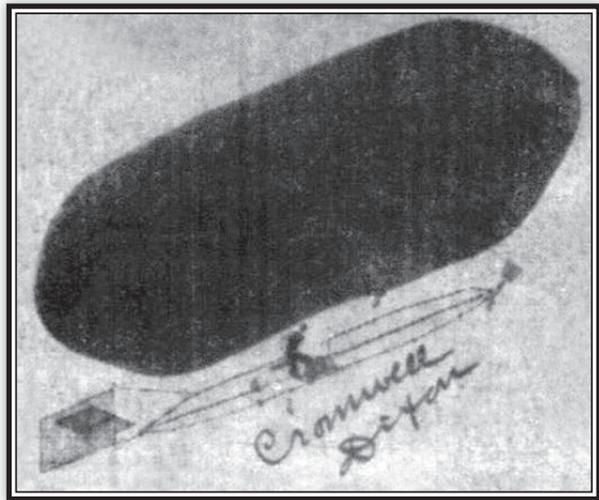
But while he was merely fifteen, his name was well known and his ability reached beyond his years. The quiet jeers—if any would admit to them—were born of envy.

Leo Stevens placed an encouraging hand on Cromwell's shoulder. "The wind might be more than your little ship can handle today," he warned. "Are you sure you want to fly? Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

"Ain't I already here?" Cromwell grumbled. He paused to adjust his cap and take a deep

breath, collecting his senses. When Cromwell turned, he saw the reporter from the *Ohio State Journal* smiling back at him, his notepad in hand.

"Good luck, kid," the reporter said. "The boss sent me down. I wouldn't miss this for the world."



Cromwell Dixon and his airship at the 1909 Aviation Meet, Latonia Racetrack, Cincinnati, Ohio.

WILBUR AND ORVILLE WRIGHT PAPERS, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

"I'm going to show them how I do it," Cromwell said, his confidence returning, his posture straightening. "Just wait and see."

Long before he climbed upon the bicycle fixed to the frame of his ship, Cromwell had earned the crowd's affection. He placed his feet on the pedals and reached for the handlebars. The tractor blade, which worked as his propeller, gleamed in the afternoon sun. He tested the rudder trailing out behind him. He had painted it nicely with the Stars and Stripes, hoping to impress the crowd.

You've done this before, Cromwell told himself. He breathed deeply and nodded, signaling to the ground crew to release his balloon to the heavens. The *Skycycle* lurched and twittered, slowly rising above the crowd. Annie watched anxiously from the infield. Her heart raced and the feathers in her bonnet quivered in the wind.

The crowd gazed up as well, cheering and pointing as the boy began pedaling. The propeller turned slowly, the blades glinting, rotating like a windmill on a sun-parched farm. The ship moved sluggishly through the air, advancing with uninspired grace. Cromwell, positioned midway down the vessel's frame, pedaled furiously. The ship inched forward, its progress slow and tedious.

"The principle behind Cromwell's machine is all right," nodded Julius Thomas, a New York aeronaut who, along with his wife, watched the boy take flight. "It's a wonderful thing for a mere lad to accomplish."

Cheers drove Cromwell higher, then higher still. His fear of failure added weight to the ship, yet he slid his fingers from the handlebars and waved to the crowd. *That'll show them*, he mused, pressing on, working the rudder's lines like a puppeteer.

The faces below grew smaller, the voices fainter. When Cromwell was several hundred feet above the ground, he cranked the rudder hard and drove the ship across the stiffening breeze. The vessel made its melancholy turn, shuddering as it came about to face the wind.

As Cromwell dazzled the crowd, he grew more brazen, the gasps from the grandstands filling him with courage. Reporters on the ground clamored for a story. One of them asked Captain Thomas Scott Baldwin what he made of Cromwell's flight. The elder aeronaut folded his arms and grinned. He considered the reporter's question with a long moment of pause.

"I think that boy deserves great credit for what he's accomplished in aerial navigation," Baldwin finally said. "He practically has accomplished this flight unaided and alone, and some recognition should be shown him for his work."

The breeze picked up and the reporter grabbed his hat. The feathers in Annie's hat began to flutter. Cromwell continued pedaling, but his progress slowed. He cranked the rudder but the ship veered defiantly in the opposite direction. The faster he pedaled, the faster he drifted off course, sailing away slowly, as if fighting some unseen force determined to have its way.

Baldwin raised an eyebrow, well aware of the effects that a breeze, however slight, could have on an underpowered airship. Annie touched her fingers to her cheeks and held her breath. The *Skycycle* was indeed drifting away, and the reporters watched and whispered, wondering if their stories were about to take a sudden turn.

"Is he coming back?" someone asked, watching the ship drift away from the grounds.

"I don't know," someone else answered.

"It's just part of the act," waved a third. "Kids these days have to make a show of everything!"

The crowd stirred as Cromwell drifted out of bounds. He drifted over Forest Park and the surrounding streets. He drifted over houses, trolley cars, and carriages. Though he pedaled gallantly—furiously in fact—nothing reversed his course.

Alarm rang through the crowd.

"He's doomed!" someone shouted.

In the stands, the questions flew: Was this part of the exhibition? Or a true misfortune? Telephones at the *St. Louis Republic* rang off the hook. What is happening to that dear boy! Callers wanted information. Was he in danger? How would they get him down?

Annie gasped, keeping a close eye on the unfolding situation. The airship grew smaller and smaller until, it was merely a speck against the sky—a black dot drifting aimlessly away.

Holding her hat with one hand, the billows of her dress in the other, Annie raced to find Leo Stevens. He pointed her toward a nearby motorcar. "Thank you," Annie nodded in a rush, running to the car where a woman, identified as Mrs. Ball, stood waiting.

The two women raced away, Mrs. Ball driving and Annie tracking her son's every move. The wind whipped through the open window. Annie removed her bonnet and craned her head to keep Cromwell in sight. She shouted directions in anxious bursts. "Keep going straight," she waved. "Wait! There he goes! Turn right! Oh my! He's drifting toward the river!"

Sailing over Sportsman's Park, Cromwell slowed the *Skycycle* enough to catch his breath. In the park below, a group of policemen and mailmen were playing ball. When the airship appeared overhead, the game stopped and the players looked up, surprised to see the boy and his strange machine. What was he doing? Fiddling with something? He was leaning dangerously over the handlebars.

Cromwell knew the problem. He peered over the handlebars to examine the situation. The malfunction was a simple one, although correcting it so far off the ground was risky. The chain on his bicycle had slipped from the sprocket, bringing the propeller to a stop.

"What's that boy thinking?" Annie whispered, as Cromwell wrapped his legs about the framework and locked his ankles—an acrobat on the high trapeze. He reached for the chain and took it between his slender fingers. Reaching for the sprockets—stretching for all he was worth—he looped the chain over the cogs. The teeth caught and the chain pulled tight. *That's the way.* The gears began to turn and the tractor blades rotated once again about the shaft.

Cromwell sat back upon the seat and began pedaling again, as if nothing unusual had happened. He pedaled and sang the "Star Spangled Banner," which had stuck with him from the day before, back when he was working in the tent with Harris Colver. "Oh say can you see, by the dawn's early light..." The song helped him pass the time as he considered his next move. "What so proudly we hailed, by the twilight's last gleaming...."

FORTY-FIVE MINUTES LATER, Cromwell, still drifting, reached the west bank of the Mississippi River, 11 miles from the Aero Grounds.

The view was splendid, although the temperature was dropping fast. Up so high, the city looked larger, the houses packed tightly together, the trees showing their fall colors—gold and red with a hint of orange.

Cromwell shivered. The distant shore looked far away, the river dangerously wide, deep, and cold. His legs burned from pedaling, but the wind was too strong to overcome. Nightfall wasn't far away and the sun crept slowly toward the horizon, taking its warmth and comfort with it.

Cromwell pulled his cap down tight upon his head and looked down at his mother, who was still peering from the window of the automobile. He could see the little black car racing down the narrow country roads. When he looked across the river, he wondered where and when he might land. The wind was giving him fits, but he knew enough to recognize that he'd have to ride it out.

His mother wasn't pleased—that much was clear. Far below, at the river's edge, she leapt from the automobile and waved her hat. She jumped up and down in the dirt, calling for his attention. "Can you hear me?" she tried.

Cromwell giggled at first. But his mother's desperation unnerved him. He had no choice but to fly across the river, and he wondered how she would cross to retrieve him.

"Bye Momma!" he called down, waving. "Catch me if you can!"

Annie placed her hands upon her hips. She watched the vessel drift over the river, the little propeller churning slowly, Cromwell's feet pumping the pedals up and down. The river looked wide, the *Skycycle* too small to cross the water safely.

Annie dashed for the map inside the car. "I'll have to go and get him," she told Mrs. Ball while spreading the map across the hood. The little town of Venice sat on the river's distant shore—a half hour's crossing by ferry. "He's a good pilot. He'll make it just fine. But he'll need a ride."

"There's a boat just down the road," Mrs. Ball said, herself alarmed. "Get in. I'll take you there!"

Annie handed the boatman his fee, and they drove onto the ferry. The dark, muddy water lapped against the ship and the distant shore drew close.

When the boat bumped against the far shore, Annie found Cromwell sitting on a delivery wagon beside the dock, grinning coyly, his airship rolled and ready for transport.

The boy jumped to his feet. "What took you so long, Momma?"