

Part One:
THE CAPTURE OF AN AMERICAN HEIRESS

I. Dreamer and Banker

The discussion continued between the two men sitting face to face, bitter, rapid, jerky and emotional by turns. One of them, the banker Nasenberg, well-built and broad-shouldered, with graying hair, the appearance of a cunning fighter and small, intelligent grey eyes astride the prominent nose of a Silesian Jew, was sitting at his desk like a commandant defending a fortress. The other, the engineer Henri Rozal, tall and lithe, but with an energetic and doleful face, seemed to be the assailant. By contrast with Rozal's warm, sincere voice, Nasenberg's speech had weak and persuasive intonations or suddenly became harsh, as dry as the release of a guillotine.

"My dear chap, I can't. I've suffered heavy losses recently. I didn't have any luck in August and September 1913, and I need to repair the damage. This isn't the time to ask me for money."

"From you, that's not an answer. A temporary hitch, if that's what it is, doesn't affect your credit. Let me draw on your establishment for ninety days and I'm saved."

"Undoubtedly—but if you fail, who will pay?"

"Me!"

"My poor friend, you'll be no further forward in three months than you are today."

Henri Rozal stood up, his face lit up. "In three months, I will have made the results of my invention known to the world, and my patents will be worth millions!"

"Child!"

"I swear to you, Monsieur Nasenberg, that I have never been more certain of success. Don't consider me, I beg you, as a poor devil haunted by chimeras. I will be the first to realize the crossing of the Atlantic, from Paris to New York, in an airplane. Another few weeks of experiments and improvements..."

"And another few thousand francs, eh? I know. This has been going on for five years! Well, no, my lad, no! I have a great deal of sympathy for you, and I've proved it...but the shop is shut. For you, I don't have another sou."

"Then it will all be lost. The results I've obtained will be useless. Others will complete the work I've begun, and you'll regret not having brought off the coup yourself, Nasenberg."

For a moment, the banker looked at the engineer. With the piercing gaze of his shrewd little eyes he scrutinized the entirety of Rozal's person. He studied the masculine face and clean-cut profile of the seeker, the dreamer who was, to be sure, a man of action, with a broad forehead, a slightly pale complexion and a determined chin.

Rozal sensed the examination of which he was the object, and, knowing the person on whom he was dependent, maintained a proud and slightly disdainful attitude. Nothing about him was suggestive of the timid petitioner, frightened in advance by the idea of a refusal. He was not, any longer, a simplistic inventor soliciting millions from all the capitalists he met, who would be content, in the end, with a few hundred francs to sketch out his hobby-horse. No, he was a strong man who knew his strength, and when he made a claim on his sleeping partner's strong-box, he was not begging.

Having reflected, Nasenberg concluded: "No, I can't, any longer. I can't."

"Ah! You no longer have confidence in me?"

"Others would have had less. Listen, Rozal, my boy...let's look back over our history. Five years ago, having met you at a social occasion, among friends, I was very interested in your ideas about nascent aviation. It was the era in which, following the Wright brothers, the Farmans, the Blériots and the Delagranges were conducting timid trials.¹ One had the right, then, to express fantastic opinions about the conquest of the air; the enthusiasm created by the first successes authorized all imaginations.

¹ The claims of the Wright brothers, Wilbur (1867-1912) and Orville (1871-1948), were widely doubted in France until Wilbur carried out a series of highly successful demonstrations there in August 1908, by which time Henri Farman (1874-1958), Louis Blériot (1872-1936) and Léon Delagrange (1873-1910) had all become famous.

You gave me to understand that the progress of aviation would be rapid, miraculous, but that it would soon stop dead, checked by an essential difficulty: the engine.

“According to you, the problem of wings, of the maintenance of the aerial vessel, of its equilibrium, would be rapidly resolved, by studying the flight of birds and copying nature. It’s a long time since humans applied the benefit of their observations to navigation by sail. You would be able to solve the problem of discovering of a rational mechanism, flexible and durable, that would give your steel bird, flying in total security, a powerful directive force, as infallible as the heart and wings of an eagle.”

Rozal smiled and affirmed: “My theory will be a reality tomorrow. I’m sure of making the turbine rotate that will make presently-uncertain aircraft into terrible engines, conquerors of the elements, of all the winds, of the mysterious and formidable life of the air.”

“That’s understood: your faith remains intact. But, since I’ve lent you my financial assistance, what have you achieved? I know, better than anyone, what your brain is worth—but you lack practical sense. You see too much and too far. Why haven’t you imitated the first constructors?”

Disdainfully, Henri Rozal replied: “That’s not a result. Winning prizes, transforming oneself into a public attraction, exhibiting oneself at ‘shows’ like a fairground performer. What do you take me for?”

Nasenberg shrugged his shoulders. “Your pride helps you and harms you. I’m not talking about aviators hired by managers—but other engineers of great merit have immediately determined to settle upon a policy of practical appearance. I can cite three or four who have sold machines to the army for 800,000 francs within two years.”

“And afterwards?”

“Afterwards, of course, those men have made half a million profit! And it’s not over!”

“It soon will be. How can you not see that—you, a businessman? You can foresee and estimate the duration of vogues that falsify the real value of a business project. The army will manufacture for itself, in its own workshops, fuselages, wings, propellers—in a word, everything that constitutes an aircraft—just as the navy does with its ships. It will only have to buy the wood and canvas. If the State hasn’t started sooner, it’s because it’s waiting for the realization, by private industry, of a definitive type—*mine*. Then many constructors’ factories will go out of business.”

Once again the banker stared at the engineer. He did not reply immediately. Plucking an account-book from a filing-cabinet within arm’s reach, he consulted it, and made some calculations in pencil on a piece of paper. He frowned.

“Do you know how much money I’ve put at your disposal, in successive advances?”

“Certainly. I’ve borrowed 600,000 francs, which have been absorbed by my research. But the sale of the patents for the turbine-engine will bring in millions.”

“If the turbine ever spins!”

“It will spin! It will!”

The eyes of the two men met. Rozal’s radiated such conviction that Nasenberg, impressed, complained: “It’s crazy, all the same. I believe you’re clever, but you don’t produce anything! Admit that, in my place, anyone else would have sent you packing long ago. While I...”

“Haven’t done that because you’re protecting the money you’ve already invested. Then I can count on you this time? Twenty thousand, after 600,000—what’s that to you? A mere bagatelle!”

The banker stood up in his turn, but to indicate that his response was final. “Six hundred thousand! A trifle! The last 200,000 francs have, indeed, been poured out in installments of 10,000 and 20,000—there’s no reason why that will ever stop.”

Further arguments could not vanquish his adversary’s decision. “All the same!” Rozal burst out, abruptly. “Only one thing interests you—money! To make a profit straight away, no matter how, or to make yourself look good in Paris, you put on a show of easy investment for the sake of a red rosette—for you, a Boche, a naturalized Frenchman for only four years, have now been decorated as a Chevalier de la Légion d’honneur, and I haven’t. But when it requires a long and difficult haul, to bring a project to the point of making an industrial, economic and even humanitarian revolution, you won’t go on. Oh, I understand what you’re saying. If I’d wanted to construct a flying machine using and improving the known formulae; if my ambition had been to win valuable prizes; if, too, I had consented to become a merchant of wood and canvas for the Ministry of War, I would have had your collaboration to the end!”

“In spite of your impolite words, spoken in an irritation that I’m willing to forgive you, I will, indeed, offer you my collaboration to the end, if you carry out that program.”

“Well, no! I have better things to do. I want to fly in a machine of my own provenance, powered by a new force that I have discovered. I can ensure humankind the conquest of an element which has, alas, too often taken its revenge. Enough of falls, crashes and unexpected breakdowns! Consider the frightful balance-sheet, study the tragic list of those who have been punished for having been audacious, but not sufficiently scientific! Why? Because success still depends, almost entirely, on the skill of the aviator. A good acrobat succeeds in exploits with an apparatus that another could not prevent from crashing. Now, I want to give aviation an engine so light and powerful that airplanes will fly through the air like steel bolides, without fear of falling. My apparatus is constructed; the engine will soon be ready. And with my masterpiece finally realized, I shall fly over fields, mountains, valleys, seas and the ocean itself, in spite of all the atmosphere’s contrary winds, turbulence and tempests. I shall maneuver with ease in the most tormented skies, because I shall have in hand a God who, in my supple and docile craft, will make me the master of space.”

“And that God is...?”

“*The engine.* I told you, combined with the special apparatus I’ve designed, propelled by small helices, with short but very strong wings, curved in a particular fashion. When that bird takes off, it will go from Paris to New York like a steel arrow, retaining for twenty hours its initial impetus and fantastic speed: *the human arrow.*”

“Yes,” said the banker, mockingly, “but there isn’t, alas, a Paris-New York prize to win. It would need a billionaire to offer a million to the first conqueror of a direct aerial crossing of the Atlantic.”

“First of all,” Henri Rozal replied, “there’s the glory to be won. Then again, do you count as nothing what humankind will gain from that discovery? Just imagine that humans, before definitively conquering the air, will be masters of the Earth—the entire Earth—without any concern for frontiers and races. On the day when, in my powerful and rapid machines, and airborne squadron will have the power to travel from Paris to another capital city—Berlin, for example—in five or six hours, there and back, do you think that I wouldn’t be equal to the greatest benefactors? For people would no longer dare to make war, and universal fraternity between the different peoples would be born of the fear of having the sky fall upon them.”

“And me, the sleeping partner—where do I figure in the dream?”

“You’ll become a billionaire, for the engine created for aviation will dethrone its predecessors everywhere. Our factories will furnish power and life to everyone who works on the surface of the land, and on or beneath the sea, as well as in the atmosphere.”

“Well, I still refuse the 20,000 francs. You’re a dreamer, and you’ll only ever fly in the clouds in your dreams. Forgive me for clipping your wings...I mean, your funds...”

On that skeptical and cheerful declaration, the banker, with a gesture that admitted no reply, signaled the end of the conversation.

Henri Rozal paled slightly and clenched his fists. Slowly and gravely, he said: “Those 20,000 francs are not only necessary to continue the struggle; they’re indispensable, if I stop the enterprise, to pay my debts. They comprise, in part, what I owe my valiant collaborators...” At this point, Rozal’s voice trembled slightly. There was sincere emotion in his voice. “Out there, at Nanterre, in the banks of the Seine, a little colony—almost a family—is working wholeheartedly on the work I direct. They all share my faith, and that’s why I can expect more of them than a measured daily effort. They proved that by accepting, last month, only half their wages—but this month there’s no more. The cash-box is empty, and in ten days, if the situation doesn’t change, I’ll have to submit to the shame of confessing that I’ve abused them.”

Nasenberg looked hard at the engineer. “This is very serious, and you astonish me.”

“Oh, I was so sure of myself, of the realization of my idea! I’ve gone too far to stop...and the goal is there, in front of me! I can see it, touch it! And it makes me despair to think that perhaps I shall never arrive at it!”

Rozal had sat down in an armchair, seemingly utterly discouraged. Nasenberg considered him with a passionate but pitiless interest. The engineer would also suffer the difficulty and prejudice that he would cause his devoted and modest collaborators—but that anguish did not move the Franco-German banker. He was merely astonished by the ardent faith and stubborn courage of the inventor, and the determination with which, for four years, without allowing himself to be put off by continual

checks, he had continued the struggle. No one knew better than Nasenberg what heroism the engineer had sometimes shown.

On an experimental field in the plain of Picardy, far from curious and indiscreet witnesses, Rozal had attempted improbable feats to find a solution to the automatic equilibrium of aircraft. He had suffered serious accidents, which, instead of discouraging him, seemed to have exacerbated his desire to vanquish the mystery. Very rapidly, Rozal had realized that all the engines currently in use were too weak in proportion to their weight. Only speed, the sign of power, would give airplanes mastery over the winds—and it was for that reason that he had resolutely tackled the question of the engine, working in obscurity, while so many of his peers were crowning themselves with renown by lifting trophies sweetened by considerable amounts of money and various decorations.

That incredible tenacity, physical endurance and disdain for honors had astonished the banker. In spite of himself, forgetting what Rozal had cost him, he still admired it—but even so, seriously and logically, he could not help him any longer. What he had done already was by virtue of calculation. He had thought—with the flair of his Germanic name, which meant “mountainous nose”—that he had discovered a genius. Immediately, he had put at his disposal the useful lever of money. In acting thus, he thought he was launching someone, as he was accustomed to do, in order to harvest, subsequently, a profit on the money he had risked, which he thus considered an investment. Now, the man had not yet returned anything—and he had proved very costly.

Others, undoubtedly, had tried to deceive him—one had even turned him over! A pretended manufacturer of artificial diamonds had led a life of pleasure at his expense for more than a year, on the pretext of conducting experiments. On the other hand, Nasenberg had launched adventurers who had paid his investment back a hundredfold; among that number was Pierre Biscot, the director of the Casino at Juvisy-sur-Orge. In six years, the enterprise created by that daredevil had already brought in more than thirty million! And his own launch of the private beach and casino at Deauville had succeeded as well.

He was lying, therefore, when he told Rozal that he had no money. He had simply resolved to give up on him, for lack of any result. The engineer’s confession, however, touched him. What—out of the 600,000 francs that he had placed in the worthy fellow’s hands, the aviator had kept nothing for himself? He was, then, a pure poet, or prodigiously stupid.

Nasenberg reflected. No, Henri Rozal was a fighter, who would not surrender while he still had the means to do battle. That was why he had gone so far—to the brink of bankruptcy.

It’s impossible for such energy not to produce results, the banker thought. If he hasn’t worked marvels yet, it’s because the objective remains too distant, inaccessible. Perhaps, one day, Rozal will be famous. Perhaps he’ll end tragically, in an obscure crash in some desolate field. No one knows the future. The poor devil’s interesting, at any rate—but personally, I’m cutting my losses. What if he got money from somewhere else, though...?

Suddenly, the banker fixed his eyes upon the engineer and muttered: “Why not him...?”

What bizarre thought-processes were going on in his head? Associations of ideas, no doubt, were coming together or sorting themselves out, confusedly at first, then with clarity. Now he was looking at Rozal with extreme attention—but it was not the gaze of a little while before, seeming to scrutinize the brain, the enigma of the future that the young man bore within him. It was the stare of a horse-trader watching a stallion walk.

Annoyed by this physical examination, Rozal said: “Are you thinking of selling me?”

Bizarrely, Nasenberg smiled. “Perhaps, my dear friend,” he said.

The banker advanced toward him affectionately, and explained, in a low voice. “I have the best of intentions toward you, and I’ll give you proof of it. I want to save you, but there’s only one means: to marry you.”

“Get away!”

“What? You refuse?”

“Energetically. I’d be a poor husband. What would an unfortunate little wife, whom I would have to abandon all the time to devote myself to my research, do with me? Can you see me, in the course of a trial, falling out of the clouds before her frightened eyes?”

Everything depends on the woman you marry. There are some who would be very proud to share your quest, to wear the halo of your celebrity, and—this is the reality that it’s necessary to bring about—to offer you the means of continuing and conclusively accomplishing what you have begun.”

“Have you then to hand, ready and waiting, a young woman animated by those intentions? A widow? A divorcee?”

“No—but I can find you one.”

“All business is good business, I suppose, if it makes a profit,” said Rozal, with a contemptuous smile.

“You can dispense with the gibes, my boy,” Nasenberg replied, a trifle vexed. “They ceased to have any effect on me a long time ago. Let’s speak frankly. You’re on the rocks. Bankruptcy is lying in wait for you. Before long, you’ll be sunk. I try to save you, and you reward me by hurling a nasty remark at me that isn’t even funny.”

“What are your conditions?”

“Five per cent of the dowry.”

“It must be a big one.”

“Big enough, my lad. Thirty million!”

In spite of his self-composure, Rozal started. “Eh?” he said. “You just told me that you didn’t have anyone in mind.”

“I wanted to see you take the bait. What would you say to an American lady, the daughter of Mr. Edgar Mackay, the machine-tool king? I’m not just offering you thirty million, but a pretty girl into the bargain!”

Henri Rozal got to his feet. “You’ve just pronounced the word that raises an obstacle to our project,” he said. “I’m not a man to strike bargains.”

“Come on! I’ve got to know you, since you’ve been causing me anxiety, and I’ve paid to know what you’re worth. Yes, you’re an extraordinary type—a sincere man! But what disgrace would there be, for you, in marrying the daughter of a man who has made himself famous on the proceeds of inventions of the same kind as yours? Because you’re poor? Well, do you think your genius counts for nothing? Edgar Mackay, it you don’t know, started from nothing. His daughter’s dowry is the consequence of his work, and his discoveries...and you were talking to me yourself, a little while ago, about selling your patents for millions. Well, if you weren’t bluffing, prove it—by having confidence in yourself, in your future, which will bring you closer to Miss Mackay.”

Shaken by these seductive arguments, and depressed in any case by his situation, Rozal weakened. “But I’ve never seen this young woman! And what makes you think, anyway, that she’d want me?”

“Obviously, I can’t promise anything. Nevertheless, I know her; a lad like you can’t leave her indifferent. Above worldly conventions, and the fascination with nobility that has long seduced her compatriots, she rates the individual value of an intelligent and exceedingly ambitious man more highly. Would you like me to proceed?”

“No,” Henri Rozal replied, grimly.

Nasenberg was amazed. *This one*, he thought, *isn’t like the others*. But he clung to his idea, and knew how to find a sensitive spot.

“Have you considered,” he said, “that you don’t have the right to refuse? You evoked, just now, the situation of your devoted collaborators, whose anticipated wages you don’t have enough in your cash-box to pay. What will you do at the end of the month? What will become of the workshop in Nanterre? What will become of all those that your unexpected ruination will precipitate into difficulty or poverty? Finally, what will become of your projects, your work, of all that you have already accomplished, and will no longer be good for anything?”

For a few minutes, Henri Rozal maintained an intimate combat. Abruptly, he came to a decision. “It’s not respectable, and I didn’t foresee such a pact. However, you’re correct. I don’t have the right to refuse. Five per cent of thirty million makes a million and a half for you. I’ll pay you that, of course, out of the profits of my invention.”

“You can pay me out of whatever you wish. The essential thing is that I get it, six months after your marriage.”

“And what if I refused to enter into your plan?”

“I’d permit myself to say two things to you: firstly, that you’d be less intelligent than I think, for no one but a fool wouldn’t accept such an offer enthusiastically; secondly, that you wouldn’t have do anything but rely on me.”

Rozal reflected briefly, and sighed. “I’m not free; I belong to my work.”

With an evident satisfaction, Nasenberg hastened to prepare the contract by which Henri Rozal promised to pay him, six months after his marriage to Miss Nelly Mackay, a commission of five per cent on the dowry that the young woman would bring him.

While the document was being drawn up, Henri Rozal forgot that the proposition had shocked him a little while before. Already, he was getting used to the idea of the compromise. It was necessary to admit that people occupied themselves honestly, in return for agreed remunerations, in directing others toward realizations that they could not bring to a conclusion themselves. It appeared less ugly that Nasenberg should indulge in such commerce once he had begun to draw up the agreement by which Rozal and he were linked.

Then again, truly, he had worked long enough in miserable deprivation, suffering the anguish of checks. The bad days appeared to him in miserable procession, and also the spectacle of his workers, his foremen, his humble family of laborers intent, like him, on capturing his chimera! Already, he could see himself in a beautiful modern factory, vast and admirable, fitted out with large rooms, the profiles of massive and elegant machine-tools in silhouette; the glare of polished steel and the gleam of nickel burst forth in his dream. He would sacrifice all the money necessary to attain that end.

Nasenberg had finished writing. "Would you care to sign?" he said, holding out a pen. "You no longer look like a man being led to sacrifice? Oh, I knew that you were an intelligent fellow. If I can make a success of it, then, you'll be content?"

"Yes, because the marriage will be, for me, the lever with which I shall overturn the old theories and bring forth the miraculous invention out of chaos."

Having signed the document, Rozal stood up. As he was about to leave, the banker called him back.

"What about your 20,000 for the end of the month? Do you think you're already a millionaire? Wait—I'll give you a check. The 600,000 francs that I've already given you, and the 30,000 more I'll dispense, if necessary, for the success of this marriage, will, of course, be added on to my commission, because I don't want to hear any more talk of airplanes and engines. I like you better as the handsome and intelligent lad you are, as a suitor for the hand of a rich American lady. I'm more confident of getting my expenses back. I'll arrange an introduction soon. I'll telephone you, my boy."

Rozal shrugged his shoulders, disdainfully took the check for which he had been pleading desperately a little while before, and stuffed it into his pocket like a rag—was he already getting used to his role as a plutocrat?—and, after shaking the hand that Nasenberg held out to him, he went out.

Left alone, the banker rubbed his hands together.

"Very good, very good!" he said, aloud, walking back and forth agitatedly.

This was the third champion that he had launched in Miss Mackay's direction. First: the Duc de Créqui; second, a young and brilliant député, Maurice Lamentin, who, already an undersecretary to the Merchant Maine, was cut from the cloth of a future President of the Council; now, a wonderful engineer, an aviator of genius.

If Miss Mackay doesn't choose one of that trio, he thought, she's very difficult to satisfy. As for me, I have no preference; I'm sure of getting my commission in any event, since all three of them have signed agreements with me...

Nasenberg lit a cigar, and launched large clouds of blue smoke toward the ceiling of his office, with a satisfied expression.