Langley - Part IV

Autobiography: Earhart dinner

If I am expected to speak I think what I say in regard to Mr. Langley should be something like this:-

If you would look the town over for a woman to speak at a dinner for our most distinguished aviator of all times you could not find one more ignorant of the art itself than I am. For a number of years now I have been suffering steady humiliations by my inability to talk with my grandnewphews from the time they were five or six on on any phase of aviation. They have a vocabulary which is literally Greek to me.

Nevertheless, there is something I would like to say and that is that this amazing and gallant flyer in whom we all rejoice - women particularly - is for me a dream come true. Not my dream, but a dream that I watched in its making over forty years ago.

I was living in Washington in the '90's which we speak of as "the gay '90's" or the "heart-breaking '90's", according to our point of view. And in my circle of friends was a most distinguished figure - Dr. Samuel Pierpont Langley - the man who first proved that mechanical flights were practical. In those days from 1893 on to 1896 Dr. Langley was experimenting down the Potomac with various phases of his problem. Confident in these experiments was Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, one of the most enthusiastic and untiring seekers of the undiscovered I have ever known. Dr. Langley was frequently at Dr. Bell's where I had a "running in" acquaintance, one of the treasured acquaintances which you can believe of my life.

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All of these experiments of Dr. Langley's in those days were carried on with the utmost secrecy for he was a taciturn man, very proud, very dignified, awesome to me. He knew nobody knew how the public that had heard rumors of his experiments thought him a little touched and wondered that the Government should keep him at the head of the great Smithsonian Institute, a man who had such a vagary of the mind as believing that one day people could fly, who was willing to give his days and nights to proving it.

When I first came into this picture he was working on the principle of his air runner, aerodrome, trying to find an engine light enough to be mounted on the wings he had devised. Little as I understood what it was all about I gathered from the chance talk I heard a succession of experiments to overcome a succession of problems. How was he to get an engine light enough to raise the wings? These wings were rigid. How was he to launch it? It was to go run on the air as I understood it as an engine on the rails.

All of these problems he had worked with, all of these problems he was experimenting with. And always there came back from the that I have refered to sober men, "The thing hadn't worked, it had fallen." But he always came back to it.

And then in May, there came a day when the little machine did run on air, ran until its little engine had exhausted its steam and fuel. It was an extraordinary little thing to look at, that first mechanical flying toy - about twelve to fifteen feet across I think, weighing about twenty five pounds. Its engine Langley had worked on for years and had gotten down

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to seven pounds I believe.

All of the latter experiments had come from not being able as I understood it, to the air which was their runway, so the thing had gone down.

Then on that May day I have heard Alexander Graham Bell tell about it - how suddenly when it was started it rose up to one hundred feet and flew in a big circle. And it did not fall but made the most beautiful landing. They could not believe their eyes, that little crowd that had been there so many times. And he tried it again, and again she flew, and this time she went over the land and over the tree tops, came back to the river and when her power was exhausted settled quietly onto the water.

It was done and Dr. Langley came back to say, "I shall not see it, but men will fly, will do business in the air. It may take years."

I think you can hardly know what that meant inside that little circle, that consciousness of a great discovery; that labor, thought, patience - that's what does a thing. And it is that that must be on top of a dream, a vision - nothing else.

He was an old man then - beyond sixty I think, sixty five perhaps. And as I said a very proud man. And when the story went out that the principles of mechanical flying had been established there were laughs and jeers.

But not the world of science, many doubters as there were. At that time I was contributing editor to McClures Magazine and one of the chief principals working in Washington and now and then doing editorial errands. S. S. McClure's principles in editing

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was that the magazine must always be on what he called the edge of the future. The possibility, however remote it might be, that a new big knowledge had been added to the world always fired his imagination and immediately he must have an article about it from the man himself. As I knew Dr. Langley I was commissioned to see if I could get him to do it. I think perhaps it was a little strain on his goodwill to have a young woman come to him and say, "Now we want the whole story of how you have done this thing, what it means, and we want it told in the simplest language so that I can understand it, and if I can understand it, all the world can understand it," which he probably knew knowing me was true.

And so he consented and I had the privilege of talking with him occasionally for that article, of reading it and saying once or twice because "I don't see quite what that means." And having the satisfaction of his making it clear enough for me to understand. And so a year after the Langley contraption first flew we had in McClures magazine the whole story. And as a reward for my persistent effort to see that the article came out to his satisfaction as well as to the demands of a popular journal to me the greatest treat which he gave any of his friends he took be to the Zoo after the crowds had gone, for the Washington Zoo, that wonderful Rock Creek Park is one of many monuments after Professor Langley. He had gotten the Bill through Congress, got an appropriation from year to year, superintended its buying and how he did enjoy the animals. The day that Professor took me to the Zoo, told me how it had all come about and what he hoped for, and then as a reward of merit had the keeper

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make the kangaroo jump and the hyena laugh - ~~well you know that is one of my great days.~~

Two of the subject-things I have in seen,

All of this I say because from that day I believed as Professor Langley did that flying was a certainty - commercial flying, that men would go up and down through the skies, around the world.

But I doubt if Professor Langley saw the beauty and the gallantry of what this young woman has done, the woman to whom you are paying honor has done. I hope he does see it from some distant point in the sky and watches her and will continue to watch her. And if he ever comes back to the world one thing I am sure he'll say, "Amelia Earhart come on to the Washington Zoo and let me make the kangaroo jump and the hyena laugh in your honor."

Had privilege of saying ~~this~~ at E. Times that L. first developed principles of mechanical flight - found this with sting of my ~~first~~ flight - A. E.'s arrival of my [illegible] - not acknowledgment but personality.

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