

# A Day to Remember

by Glennette Tilley Turner



**Cast:**

- Narrator
- Phyllis
- Aunt Susie
- Claude
- Announcer
- First Spectator
- Second Spectator

**Narrator:** Imagine that you're at Checkerboard Airfield near Maywood, Illinois, on October 15, 1922. You are about to witness a breathtaking air show put on by none other than Bessie Coleman, the first African-American woman pilot in the world. Publicity in the *Chicago Defender* newspaper has drawn a huge, enthusiastic crowd. There are at least 2,000 people in the bleachers. This is during the early days of aviation and the spectators are eager not only to see an air show, but to see a young Chicago woman at the controls.

**Phyllis** (*to her aunt*): Aunt Susie, I can't see everything from here. Can I go stand in front of the crowd?

**Aunt Susie** (*pointing to an opening in the crowd*): Yes, but stand right there by the fence so you won't get lost in the crowd.

**Narrator:** Phyllis makes her way to the front row of spectators. She finds herself standing next to Claude, a boy who's about her age. He's been watching Bessie Coleman check over her plane. She is wearing a leather helmet and goggles. Her military style uniform has a wide leather belt and a strap over one shoulder.

**Claude** (*pointing to Bessie Coleman as he speaks to Phyllis*): Look, there's Bessie Coleman. I can't believe I'm going to get to see her fly. She used to manicure people's fingernails at a shop around the corner from where I live.

**Phyllis:** Really? I don't know that much about her.

**Claude:** How could you be from around Chicago and not know much about Bessie Coleman?

### Session 3

**Phyllis:** I'm not from here. I live in Springfield, and I just came up here to visit my aunt.

**Claude:** Oh, I see. Well, I sell the *Defender* newspaper. Every week it runs pictures and stories about Bessie Coleman.

**Phyllis:** You know about Bessie Coleman, but did you know that a military man from Springfield is going up in the plane with her?

**Claude:** No, I didn't know anybody was going to fly with her. Who is the man?

**Phyllis:** His name is Colonel Otis B. Duncan. I know him from . . .

**Claude:** You know him?

**Phyllis:** Yes, I see him every Sunday at the Culture Club.

**Claude:** The Culture Club? What's that?

**Phyllis:** It's a neighborhood meeting. Students from the Springfield schools get together to read our best school papers. Colonel Duncan is one of the grownups who comes to hear us and encourage us.

**Announcer:** Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls. You are about to see a spectacular event. Chicago's own Bessie Coleman will demonstrate her remarkable flying skills. She has just recently returned to the United States after receiving her international pilot's license in France. To my knowledge, she is the first American, male or female of any race, to do so. Please greet Miss Bessie Coleman!

**Narrator:** With that, Bessie Coleman waves at the crowd and gets into her airplane. She adjusts her goggles and the announcer continues . . .

**Announcer:** Joining Miss Coleman today is Colonel Otis B. Duncan, Commander of the 8th Regiment of the Illinois National Guard.

**Narrator:** A tall, dark, and handsome Army officer strides over to the plane. Bessie Coleman smiles and shakes Colonel Duncan's hand. He gets into the plane and fastens his seat belt. Bessie starts the plane's engine. The propeller begins to whirl and pretty soon the plane is taxiing<sup>1</sup> down the runway. The crowd is spellbound.

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<sup>1</sup>**taxiing:** driving an airplane at low speed on the ground

Go On 

**Claude:** Wow! Look at that plane go!

**Phyllis:** It's speeding up . . . the wheels are lifting off the ground!

**First Spectator:** They're flying so high!

**Second Spectator:** Where'd they go?

**Claude** (*pointing*): Here they come from way over there.

**Narrator:** The crowd cheers as the plane makes a pass overhead.

**Claude:** Bessie Coleman is making that plane do a loop!

**Phyllis:** Look, she's going into a second loop!

**Claude:** She made a figure 8 in the sky!

**Phyllis:** I bet it's in honor of the 8th Illinois Regiment.

**Narrator:** Everyone in the crowd cheers and claps as Bessie makes a perfect landing.

**Announcer:** Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls. You have just seen Miss Bessie Coleman demonstrate her splendid flying skills. She says there is a great future in aviation and that she plans to open a flying school where she can train anyone who wants to learn to fly. But you don't have to wait until then. Miss Coleman is giving airplane rides today—for just \$1.00 per person. If you want to take an airplane ride, step right over here.

**Claude** (*reaching into his pocket*): I hope I've saved enough money from selling papers to go for a ride.

**Phyllis:** I think I have enough money for a ride, but I have to go ask my aunt if I can take a ride.

**Claude:** I've got to ask, too. My dad is up in the bleachers with some of his friends.

**Phyllis:** Meet you back here in a few minutes if our folks say OK.

**Claude:** By the way, what's your name? Mine's Claude.

**Phyllis:** My name is Phyllis. Whether our folks say yes or not, this has been a day I'll always remember!

**Claude:** Me, too!

“Gertrude Ederle,” from *How She Played the Game*, by Cynthia L. Cooper, is one of a series of dramatic monologues spoken by women sports stars of the past. Their individual stories are dramatized by one actress, who plays all of the roles.

Gertrude Ederle was the first woman to swim the English Channel, breaking the records of the five men who swam across the Channel before she did. After her highly publicized swim in 1926, Ederle, an unassuming young woman, seemed to disappear from the public spotlight. In the monologue, we see her forty years later, when her life has evolved in a different direction.



## Gertrude Ederle

*[Actress takes on the character of GERTRUDE EDERLE, who, in 1926, became the first woman to swim the English Channel. It is 1969 now, and she is 62. GERTRUDE EDERLE is a matronly woman and hardly seems athletic. She is pleasant and is a bit shy. Everything about her seems straightforward, reflecting perhaps her parents' New York-*

*German heritage. She is extremely hard of hearing. In an outfit that indicates swimming—goggles, noseplugs—EDERLE carries a scrapbook, taken from a locker. SHE looks up as if seeing someone. When SHE first starts speaking, SHE shouts.]*

HEY! I REMEMBERED THE SCRAPBOOK FOR THE CHILDREN. WHAT?

Go On 

## Test 2

[As if someone has pointed to her ear, the actress quickly puts in a hearing aid.]

I don't mean to blast you out. I take off this silly hearing aid before the swimming class with the deaf children.

[Finishes adjusting hearing aid.]

I'm always afraid of scaring folks off when they find out I'm practically deaf. I told my fiancé back—oh, 40 years ago—back in 1929—I said, “Now that all this channel swimming's made me deaf, sweetheart, I bet you don't want to marry me.” Course I was just joking. And he looked at me and moved his lips very slowly, so I could read what he was saying. “I do believe that's the case, Trudy,” he said. And you know, I never saw the man again.

[SHE laughs at this.]

Now, then. Here's the photographs. My Olympic medals. Letters.

[A letter falls out.]

Oh, yes, I remember this one.

[SHE half recites the letter. Sound on tape.]

“What a bully<sup>1</sup> accomplishment to be the first woman to swim the English

<sup>1</sup>**bully:** excellent, splendid

Channel! And to beat the records of the five men before you by over two hours! Gertrude Ederle, believe me, I write with my best wishes for your speedy recovery and hope you will not have any regrets.”

Ach! Regrets? Can you imagine?

[SHE laughs.] Do I have regrets?

[EDERLE pulls off her hearing aid, puts on a red swimming cap. SHE speaks dreamily, as if stepping into a completely different world.] I wore a red bathing cap. And a black swimsuit, with a silk flag of the United States right on it. It was the same suit I wore at the Olympics in 1924.

[It is the day of the Channel swim. EDERLE talks to William Burgess, who is her trainer.] “Before I start off, I want to thank you for serving as my trainer on the Channel swim, Mr. Burgess. Having somebody who's made the swim gives me courage.”

[SHE starts rubbing on jellies, speaking as if a routine chant.] “Olive oil, first. Lanolin, second. Then, the special blend of petrolatum and lard.”<sup>2</sup>

“But I got something to say, Mr. Burgess. You know, I tried last year

<sup>2</sup>**olive oil/lanolin/petrolatum/lard:** water repellents to protect the swimmer's skin from the cold water

Go On 

## Test 2

and the people in the boat pulled me out before I got across."

"Yes sir, I know it's bad weather conditions and there's powerful currents . . . and jellyfish . . . and that the water temperature is only 57 degrees."

"I know it took you nineteen tries before you made it yourself. But Mr. Burgess . . . my father's a fruit merchant. I couldn't afford coming over on the steamer, or training, or paying for the escort boat. I had to take on a commercial sponsor. You know, that means I won't be able to go to the Olympics again. That's a lot to give up, Mr. Burgess. That's how much I want to swim the Channel."

"I know the people in the boat think they're looking out for the swimmer. But, Mr. Burgess, you're not a member of the Women's Swimming Association we have in New York City. You saw the Victrola<sup>3</sup> they installed in the boat? With my favorites— 'Yes. We Have No Bananas'—and 'Let Me Call You Sweetheart'? They want me to make it!"

"There. I think I'm all greased up."

<sup>3</sup>**Victrola:** a wind-up record player

*[Starts shaking out limbs, making final adjustments.]*

"The point is, Mr. Burgess, you're going to be in the boat with the reporters and photographers and I want you to know I am not coming out until I walk on the beach in England. Don't try to pull me out. The Women's Swimming Association is counting on me."

*[Re-creating the motion of the swim.]*

Once you're in the ocean everything else disappears. All of a sudden, there's nothing but what's inside yourself. The water washes over you. The waves crash from the right and the left and from the front and the back. Some of them are 18 feet high, seem like they're going to swallow you. And all you can hear is the roar of the water, in every direction, until it feels like it's in you and not that you're in it. You know then that you're all alone with the ocean . . . just you and it.

Three miles to go. I hear a call over the rush of the water from the boat. Mr. Burgess.

"You've got to give up."

Go On 



## Test 2

I can hardly believe what he is saying. I let his words roll off me like the waves and I throw myself into the water for more of it.

At 9:40 P.M., on August 6, 1926, I walk out of the ocean in Kingsdown, England, with the English Channel swim record.

[*SHE laughs.*] They were so sure I wouldn't make it that they had already printed an editorial. "In contests on physical skill, speed, and endurance, women must forever remain the weaker sex." Ach!

[*EDERLE laughs, shakes her head, steps back out, puts on her hearing aid. SHE picks up the scrapbook again.*]

Oh, there were hard times afterwards. The nervous breakdown. The slip . . . my back was in a cast for four and a half years. And I suppose it's true, Gertrude Ederle is not exactly a household name.

[*Looks at letter.*]

But do I regret it?

Have you ever heard that song . . . "Let Me Call You Sweetheart"?

[*SHE hums, sings it a bit.*]

You see, I came back home, and I was the sweetheart of all of New York City. They had the biggest ticker tape parade<sup>4</sup> ever for me . . . Gertrude Ederle, the daughter of a common German immigrant. Two million people filling the streets, flooding it until it looks like the ocean, and cheering for me until it sounds like the roar of the waves. They were throwing confetti from the buildings, and I rode down the street in a brand new car and held my arms out to them. Oh, I suppose it's true they have forgotten me now . . . all those people. But, you see . . . I shall never forget them.

Ach. I have to go and start the lessons. You see, once I teach the deaf children how to swim like champions in the ocean . . . they shall not forget me.

[*SHE folds the letter in half, snaps the book shut, takes off her hearing aid, humming and singing slightly.*]

"Let Me Call You Sweetheart . . ."

—End of GERTRUDE EDERLE—

<sup>4</sup>**ticker tape parade:** a New York tradition for visiting celebrities, in which office workers shower the parade with bits of paper

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