

*Maiden*  
**FLIGHT**

*a novel*

**HARRY HASKELL**



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First edition  
Published by Academy Chicago Publishers  
An imprint of Chicago Review Press Incorporated  
814 North Franklin Street  
Chicago, Illinois 60610

ISBN 978-1-61373-637-1

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Haskell, Harry, author.

Title: Maiden flight : a novel / Harry Haskell.

Description: Chicago, Illinois : Chicago Review Press, 2016. | Description based on print version record and CIP data provided by publisher; resource not viewed.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016021905 (print) | LCCN 2016010850 (ebook) | ISBN 9781613736395 (adobe pdf) | ISBN 9781613736401 (epub) |

ISBN 9781613736388

(kindle) | ISBN 9781613736371 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Haskell, Katharine Wright, 1874–1929—Fiction. | Haskell, Henry Joseph, 1874–1952—Fiction. | Wright, Orville, 1871–1948—Fiction. | Dayton (Ohio)—Fiction. | Kansas City (Mo.)—Fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Historical. | GSAFD: Biographical fiction. | Historical fiction. | Love stories.

Classification: LCC PS3608.A78997 (print) | LCC PS3608.A78997 M35 2016 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016021905>

Cover design: Andrew Brozyna, AJB Design, Inc.

Cover images: (front cover) Close-up view of airplane, including the pilot and passenger seats, Library of Congress LC-DIG-ppprs-00691; (back cover) Katharine and Orville Wright, with unidentified companions, at Tempelhof Field, Berlin, 1909, Courtesy of Special Collections and Archives, Wright State University.

Typesetting: Nord Compo

Interior images: (p. 1) Katharine Wright, ca. 1925, (p. 85) Harry Haskell at Hawthorne Hill, and (p. 161) Orville Wright, November 1926, Courtesy of Special Collections and Archives, Wright State University.

Printed in the United States of America

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For Lucy Linnea Haskell,  
Katharine's "kindred spirit"



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## *Prologue*

It's an old, familiar tale: a woman of a certain age, secure in a stable, emotionally undemanding relationship with a man she admires, is suddenly swept off her feet by a grand passion. Racked with doubt and remorse, she first denies her feelings, then tries to reason them away. Only after months of procrastination and soul searching does she accept the unavoidable necessity of choosing between love and duty.

The story is familiar, but the woman at the center of this book was far from ordinary. Katharine Wright was the younger sister of Wilbur and Orville Wright, the inventors of the airplane. Smart, vivacious, confident, and down to earth, she made friends wherever she went. Katharine's outgoing personality made her an indispensable asset to her world-famous brothers, who were widely perceived as aloof and socially awkward, especially where women were concerned.

Katharine was remarkable in other ways as well. Born in 1874, she struggled to balance the conventional strictures of Victorian domesticity against the emerging feminist sensibility of the modern

era. Both as the “Wright sister” and as the second female trustee of Oberlin College, she embodied, in a very public and prominent way, the worldly, independent, and self-fulfilled New Woman of the early twentieth century.

To be sure, none of this would matter greatly if Katharine had not also been an exceptionally gifted, sensitive, intellectually curious, and articulate woman, equally alive to the complexity of her own emotions and to the forces of change, both social and technological, that were inexorably transforming the insular, family-centered world of her youth. An international celebrity in her own right, she slipped easily into her appointed role as her brothers’ ambassador, charming captains of science and industry and crowned heads of Europe with her unaffected midwestern ways.

Katharine spent the first five decades of her life as a caregiver, dutifully filling the shoes of her mother, who died when Katharine was fifteen; serving as nurse, companion, and secretary to her affectionate but domineering father; and enthusiastically propelling her older brothers along the path to fame and fortune. After Wilbur died in 1912, she and Orville lived together in a relationship so easy and intimate that strangers often mistook them for husband and wife.

A lifelong bachelor whose shyness bordered on the pathological, Orville came to depend on his spinster sister’s tireless support and fiercely protective loyalty. The diamond ring that he gave Katharine when she graduated from Oberlin in 1898 symbolized an emotional bond that transcended the usual closeness between brother and sister. Their quasi-marital union was reinforced by the tragedy of Wilbur’s premature death. For years afterward, it seemed unthinkable to them both that it would ever be sundered.



Enter Harry Haskell, an old college friend of Katharine's from Kansas City and one of a handful of newspapermen whom she and Orville admitted into their inner circle. Over the years, he had become a trusted ally in Orville's battles to defend the Wright patents and the brothers' reputation as the fathers of human flight. When Harry's wife succumbed to cancer, Katharine instinctively offered consolation and understanding, and before either of them fully realized what was happening, their budding friendship had blossomed into romance.

So it was that two not-so-proper Victorians, both in their early fifties, both the products of strict religious upbringings, and both generously endowed with what Katharine was fond of calling "human nature," found themselves head over heels in love and conducting a clandestine affair under Orville's unsuspecting nose—indeed, under the very roof of his imposing, double-porticoed mansion in Dayton, Ohio.

Imagine, if you will, hearing Katharine, Harry, and Orville recount their experiences in their own words. This is what I have tried to do in the pages ahead, by weaving their three first-person "memoirs" (as explained in my author's note) into a single richly textured narrative. As the title suggests, *Maiden Flight* is first and foremost Katharine's book—the story of a bright, brave, passionate woman who followed her heart and suffered the unhappy consequences. She, Orville, and Harry are as alive to me as if I knew them in the flesh. It is my hope that this book will help bring them to life for others.

*It is the end of February 1929. Katharine and Orville Wright have been estranged for more than two years. Not a word has passed*

*between them since she became Harry Haskell's wife in November 1926 and moved from Dayton to Kansas City. Family and friends have tried to mend the breach, to no avail. Harry blames himself for tearing Katharine away from her old interests and associations so late in life. For her part, Katharine is struggling to conceal her grief from Harry, even as she fears that her brother's stony silence has cast a pall over their marriage. Orville, meanwhile, has taken refuge in denial. Unable to forgive his sister for deserting him, he has steeled himself to forget her.*

*Of the millions of people around the world to whom the Wright family name is synonymous with the miracle of human flight, only a small coterie of intimates are privy to the tragic rift between sister and brother. The final act of their domestic drama is about to begin. On this bleak midwinter day, the three protagonists are cocooned in reverie, each reliving the two eventful decades since fate brought them together. It all started, Katharine recalls, in early 1909 . . .*

# *Devotion*





## *Katharine*

What I remember best about that winter in Pau is the bitter cold. If you ask me, all that talk of “sunny southern France” is a delusion and a snare. Orv and I practically froze in our beds! Will had sworn up and down that the Gassion was the best hotel in town, but I never was so uncomfortable in my whole life, not even in the icy grip of an Ohio winter—and that is no picnic, I assure you! Luckily, I came prepared for the worst. When Will took me up in the flying machine for the first time, I was all trussed up like a turkey, with my overcoat bound snug around my ankles and a long scarf looped over my hat to keep it tethered down.

Sure enough, as soon as we got up in the air, my chills and aches vanished in a trice. It was one thing to listen to the boys talk about airplanes—back home in Dayton I used to complain that we didn’t hear anything *but* “flying machine” from morning till night—and something else again to go up in one myself. All those years I had stood on the ground watching Will and Orv make their

practice flights over Huffman Prairie and fancied how it would feel to “do the bird act,” as Orv put it. Now at last I knew, and I was so proud of them I could have burst wide open.

It was Orv who was grounded that day for a change. Only a few weeks had passed since he had his terrific smashup at Fort Myer while he was demonstrating the Wright flyer for the US Army. I’ll never forget how his chin trembled and tears filled his eyes when I came into the hospital room and saw how badly he had been hurt. Dear, brave Little Brother! Wild horses couldn’t have kept me from rushing to his bedside in Virginia. Then Will’s letter arrived, inviting—no, *summoning*—us to come join him in France. That was just what the doctor ordered. Orv was still hobbling around on crutches, but Will needed our help getting the machines ready for the exhibition races in the spring, and we had never let him down yet.

The four months I spent in Europe with the boys in 1909 were a fairy tale from start to finish. My very own first flight lasted about seven minutes—but it might have been a lifetime for all I knew. The whole thing was like a dream that words can hardly begin to describe. All I could think to write to Pop the next day was, “Them *is* fine!” Pau sure is a beautiful place when the weather is nice. Will and I could make out the snowcapped peaks of the Pyrenees glimmering in the distance as we swooped and soared above the farm fields. Never in all my thirty-four years on earth had I seen such a heart-stopping sight. And not until I fell in love, many years later, would I feel like such a giddy young thing again.

“*Omnia vincit amor*,” the Roman poet says—“Love conquers all.” The ancients knew a thing or two when they gave the god of love his wings, the better to sweep us mortals off our feet! As nervy

as I was up there in Will's flying machine that day at Pau, I knew in my heart of hearts that he would bring me back down to earth safe and sound. I always had perfect confidence in Will and Orv, ever since we were little children. Come to think of it, I always felt perfectly safe with Harry too.

We met up with him in Washington in the summer of '09, not long after we got back from Europe. The reporters were all hounding the boys for interviews, and it was my thankless job to keep them at bay. Ha ha! When Harry sent up his card, though, I insisted on making an exception. I had watched him come up in the world since our college days, from editor of the *Oberlin Review* to Washington correspondent of the *Kansas City Star*. There always was something special about Harry. His mind soaked up everything like a sponge, and his character was as solid as a rock. Even at Oberlin, I recognized the strength and dependability that came out so strongly when there was a call for them. It pleased me to see that he had become exactly the kind of man I thought he would.

Even so, when he presented himself that day at our hotel room, I had to pinch myself to make sure I was awake. He looked as if he had stepped straight out of his college yearbook photograph. To think that he was not only a husband and father but also a member in good standing of the Washington press corps. I felt easy with Harry on the spot, but Will and Orv could be as prickly as porcupines. Newspapermen had a way of setting them on edge. One of the national magazines had just published a story claiming that since neither of the boys had a college education, sister Kate had had to step in and help with the mathematical calculations for the flying machine.

It was sheer bosh and nonsense, of course, and no one who knew me would have credited it for a moment. I got good marks in math in school, but when it comes to higher mathematics, I have no head for figures—not one speck! Those reporters were simply determined to make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear. Why, the *American Magazine* even offered me seven hundred and fifty dollars—half of my teacher’s salary at the high school—for a series of articles to be called “The Sister’s Story.” I had a good mind to take the money and run—until I woke up and came to my senses. Not that it kept me from ribbing the boys about it, mind you. It did no harm to let them know they weren’t the only pebbles on the beach!

All that bunk about my mathematical ability got under Orv’s skin, right enough. He may not be a natural-born scholar, as Will was, or have a bona fide college degree, like me. But he is no slouch at engineering, trigonometry, geometry, and other subjects that make my head swim. I could see how het up he was over those tall tales the newspapermen had been spinning. So the minute Harry stepped through the door, I popped right up out of my chair and exclaimed, “We read that piece in *Hampton’s* on the train last night, and I told the boys there was at least one person outside the family who would know it wasn’t so!”

## *Harry*

It seems just yesterday that the Wrights invited me up to their rooms in the old Raleigh Hotel. It was 1909, as I recall, the end of June. The *Star* had sent me to Washington six months earlier, and already I was beginning to feel like an old hand on the capital beat. I must have interviewed dozens of important people for



the paper, but the Wright brothers were in a class by themselves. Orville's crash at Fort Myer and the death of Lieutenant Selfridge had been front-page news around the world. And Wilbur's daring demonstration flights in Europe had made him an international hero. *L'homme oiseau*, the French dubbed him—"the bird man."

As keen as I was to meet the world's most famous aviators, the prospect of renewing my friendship with their charming sister was an even bigger draw. A few weeks earlier I had stood in the crowd in the East Room of the White House watching President Taft give Wilbur and Orville their gold medals from the Aero Club of America. I was near enough to touch Katharine, almost, but they whisked her away, and I couldn't even speak to her. She was wearing a high-necked white gown, a large plumed hat, and the old-fashioned pince-nez eyeglasses that I remembered so well. The dark, silky hair that she was so proud of in college had turned snow-white. She used to pull it back in a tight bun, schoolmarm style. Somehow it seemed only natural that she had taken up teaching as a career.

Katharine and I were both raised in religious households—my parents were Congregationalist missionaries in the Near East, her father a bishop in the Church of the United Brethren—and our families shared a generally progressive outlook on issues like woman suffrage and coeducation. As a youngster, I was disposed to look on girls as a demoralizing influence in the classroom, but Katharine taught me the error of my ways. She was different from the other Oberlin girls—quick, alert, intelligent, easy to talk to, and a good listener. She was always bragging about her two older brothers—"the boys," she called them—who had a bicycle shop

back home in Dayton. There was no doubt in her mind that they would amount to something someday.

We met in the fall of 1894, my junior year. Katharine was a freshman living at Mrs. Morrison's boardinghouse, where I took my meals. In those days, all incoming students were required to take a course known as Math Review. Each pupil was given a tablet that carried problems in algebra and geometry at the top of each page. They were supposed to work these problems three times a week and turn them in to the professor. Now, Katharine was an able scholar of languages, history, philosophy, and the natural sciences. But she had no feeling whatsoever for mathematics. She soon discovered that it was a favorite subject of mine, and before long I was detained after breakfast three times a week to give aid and advice. So much for the old canard about Katharine supplying math help to her older brothers!

The more we saw of each other at Oberlin, the more I grew to admire Katharine's sharp wit and strength of character. But any deeper feelings that might have grown up between us had no chance to develop, as my college girlfriend, Isabel Cummings, and I had decided to get married as soon as I was able to support her by my writing. As it turned out, Katharine was already spoken for at the time herself, though her engagement was a closely held secret. To the best of my knowledge, not even her own family was in on it. Long afterward she told me her fiancé's name and how she had finally broken it off with him when she discovered she wasn't really in love. After graduating in '96, I settled down in Kansas City, Katharine returned to Dayton two years later, and that was that—or so I thought.

Then Wilbur and Orville made their historic flight at Kitty Hawk. Incredible as it seems today, some of the best minds in the country simply ignored one of the great inventions of all time. There was a common saying that man would fly only when the law of gravity was repealed. Eminent scientists had demonstrated the absurdity of the whole idea. On the eve of the first flight, a noted American astronomer even published an article proving that human flight in a heavier-than-air machine was mathematically impossible. I was no expert, but from what Katharine had told me I found it impossible to believe that her brothers had fabricated the story out of whole cloth. As a family, the Wrights are proud, not to say clannish, but I never knew them to stretch the truth or go in for what Katharine calls “personal advertising.”

The brief AP dispatch, datelined December 18, 1903, stirred up a nest of happy memories. When I read about the successful flight at Kitty Hawk on the front page of the *Star*, my first thought was of how proud Katharine must be to see Wilbur and Orville make good. At Oberlin she had spoken about the boys so often, and with such warmth and affection, that I almost felt I knew them. The popular image of the two stiff-necked “mechanics” from the Buckeye State just didn’t add up in my mind. Katharine always had been so sociable and vivacious, the kind of woman who lit up a room with her presence. It wasn’t easy to picture *her* as Wilbur and Orville’s kid sister.

When I finally caught up with the three of them in Washington, I realized that my fellow newspapermen were all wet. The Wright brothers had earned the reputation of being “fierce” with reporters, but as far as I was concerned they couldn’t have been more approachable and down to earth, Orville in particular. With

his neatly trimmed mustache, starched white collar, and well-tailored three-piece suit, he might have passed for a bank manager or a small-town businessman. Not in my wildest dreams would I have taken him for what he actually was: a scientific supergenius with one of the most brilliant inventive and imaginative minds in human history.

### *Orville*

*The* Wright brothers, they call us—as if Will and I were the only male pups in the litter! Do those fool reporters never bother to get their facts straight? There were *four* of us boys, not counting the twin who died in infancy, may he rest in peace. Reuch and Lorin were the original Wright brothers. They left home a good while before Will and I opened our first bicycle shop over on West Third Street. Reuch and I were a full ten years apart, and so unlike each other in temper and outlook that you'd never guess we had the same blood in our veins. He married young and struck out for Kansas City, where he and Lulu brought their four children into the world.

Reuch was a restless man, a loner, and about as stubborn as a Missouri mule. More than once Will and I tried to help him out when he was hard up, but it was no use. As Kate said, a person couldn't do anything to please Reuch; he was just naturally suspicious of everything and everybody. Lorin and he were as different as night and day. Easygoing and easy to please, that's Lorin for you—not that he can't be as ornery as the next fellow when it suits him. Runs in the family, you might say. Lorin tried his luck out west for a spell too. After Mother passed away, he came back to

Dayton and settled down with Netta to raise a family in the old neighborhood, down the way from the house we grew up in on Hawthorn Street.

And then there was Kate—Sterchens, we called her, or Swes for short. She was the baby, born August 19, 1874, three years to the day after me. There was always a special bond between us. As children we shared birthdays, toys, playmates—pretty near everything, in fact. It was Kate who held the family together after Mother died; maybe that's why I always seemed to feel like a little boy around her. When I had the accident at Fort Myer, she dropped everything and camped out beside my hospital bed for seven weeks, like my guardian angel. I said to her, "Sterchens, you watch and don't let them hurt my leg!" I didn't trust those army doctors within an inch of my life. Kate had always looked after us at home when we were ill, and I knew I could depend on her. As Mr. Chanute said, she was devotion itself in those days.

Growing up, Will and I knew all of Kate's schoolmates, and our friends were her friends too. She and I threw some swell house parties in the old days. How Father used to fret and fume when he caught on we'd been playing bridge behind his back. In his book, card games, dancing, and such were Satan's work. Once the Wright Company got off the ground, there never seemed to be enough time for such diversions. Will and I were on the move pretty much nonstop. Wherever we happened to be, though, we could always count on Kate to keep us up on the news from home. One Halloween she wrote about how she and her friends had dressed up in sheets and pillowcases and told one another's fortunes in verse. I can still recite hers, word for word:

You'll early leave this earthly sphere,  
But not by death! O! No!  
You'll guide an airship without fear,  
Win fame and a rich beau.

Oh, Swes, Swes, how could you do it? How could you run off and leave me to rattle around this big, empty house alone? We were so happy together, just the two of us, happy and settled and fixed for life. The idea of you falling in love never seriously crossed my mind. I didn't think of you as appealing to other men, not in that way. In hindsight, I should have read the handwriting on the wall the minute you introduced us to Harry that day in Washington. The way you sprang up to greet him—it was like you were a schoolgirl again, all flustered and excited and beaming with pride.

### *Katharine*

I was proud to have Will and Orv meet Harry and know that he was a friend of mine. They liked him right away. They liked most of my friends, if it comes to that—newspapermen excepted! And who can blame them? The way the papers mangled the story of the first flight was simply scandalous. When Lorin hand-carried Orv's telegram from Kitty Hawk to the city editor of the *Dayton Journal*, all Mr. High-and-Mighty had to say was, "Fifty-seven seconds, huh? If it'd been fifty-seven *minutes* it might have been a news item." I wanted to scream! Harry wasn't like that at all. He didn't come on gangbusters or set himself up on a pedestal. The boys knew instinctively that they could trust him. And seeing how quickly Will and Orv took to Harry made me like him all the more.