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Middle Grades

Lady in the Sky

Katherine Stinson: First woman pilot to do a loop-the-loop, set endurance and speed records, carry U.S. mail by plane, and raise millions for the Red Cross through exhibition flights. . . .

by Barbara Tutt

Characters

KATHERINE STINSON

MARJORIE STINSON, *Katherine's younger sister*

ALICE, 10

TOMMY, 13

FRED, 13

} *neighborhood children*

MR. CLARK, *postman*

MRS. BELL, *neighbor*

LUCY

JANE

NEIGHBORS, *extras*

OFFSTAGE VOICE

SCENE 1

TIME: *Spring morning, 1917.*

SETTING: *The front porch of the Stinson home in San Antonio, Texas. Four chairs, benches, flower pots, etc., are arranged around stage. Exit right leads to house; exit left to street.*

AT RISE: *KATHERINE STINSON, whistling happily, stands center, ripping sheet into small rags and putting them into pail near her feet. TOMMY, FRED, and ALICE enter left; TOMMY carries baseball glove; FRED has a bat; ALICE carries doll.*

TOMMY: 'Morning, Miss Stinson. What are you doing?

KATHERINE: Making rags for cleaning. And please, Tommy, call me

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Katherine Stinson, born in 1891, was one of the most popular and accomplished pilots of aviation's early history. She began flying in 1912 and became the fourth woman in the United States to earn her pilot's license.

Katherine. (*She continues whistling.*)

FRED: You sure sound happy for someone who has chores to do.

KATHERINE: These rags are for cleaning my airplane, Fred. That's a chore I happen to like.

ALICE (*Astonished*): Your airplane?

KATHERINE: That's right, Alice. You saw me last week at the air show, didn't you?

ALICE (*In disbelief*): That was you up in the sky?

KATHERINE: Yes, that was me.

TOMMY (*To ALICE*): Miss Stinson isn't just a plain old neighbor, you know. She's the greatest pilot in the world.

ALICE: That plane was up so high, twirling around—I didn't think any real person would be brave enough to be up there. Besides, the pilot looked so small, like a little doll. (*TOMMY and FRED look disgusted.*)

KATHERINE: Well, I've been called the Flying Schoolgirl before, but never the Flying Doll! (*She takes rag, hands it to ALICE.*) Speaking of dolls, Alice, maybe yours would like a new shawl.

ALICE: Thanks. (*Puts it on doll; admiringly*) You look lovely, Isabella.

FRED (*To KATHERINE*): Why do you have to clean your airplane, Miss Stin—I mean, Katherine? Couldn't you have somebody else do it for you?

KATHERINE: I could, Fred, but they wouldn't be as careful as I am. A clean plane is a safe plane, and when I'm up there doing loop-the-loops, I want to know my plane is safe! That's why I do

all the mechanical work, too. In fact, I can take my plane apart and put it back together again.

ALICE (*Amazed*): You can?

KATHERINE: Sure. When I do a show in New York, or some other place far from Texas, I take the plane apart and load the pieces on a train. Then I put it all back together again when I get where I'm going.

TOMMY: Why don't you just fly to New York?

KATHERINE: My plane can't carry enough fuel to go that far, Tommy. But someday, I'll have one that will.

TOMMY: I wish I could do all those flying stunts—especially sky-writing at night, with fireworks on the wings.

FRED: Yes! I'd love to do that!

ALICE (*Jumping up*): Me, too!

TOMMY: You couldn't do that, Alice. You're just a girl.

KATHERINE (*Amused*): And what do you think I am, Tommy? A creature from the blue lagoon?

TOMMY (*Embarrassed*): Oh, I didn't mean—

KATHERINE (*Smiling*): Come on. Let's go clean my plane. If you want to, you can help—all of you.

FRED: Sure!

TOMMY: You bet! (*ALICE smiles and nods enthusiastically. KATHERINE picks up her pail and starts left, with children following. Suddenly MR. CLARK's voice is heard offstage.*)

MR. CLARK (*Calling*): Howdy, Miss Katherine! (*Enters left*) Might as well get your mail before you rush off.

KATHERINE: Hello, Mr. Clark. What do you have for me?

MR. CLARK: Well, now, you've got a mighty interesting-looking letter today. (*Hands KATHERINE an envelope; she puts down her pail, takes it*) It's got me awfully curious. The return address says United States Army. Don't tell me a pretty young gal like you is figuring on joining the army! Ha, ha!

KATHERINE: Why not? Now that we're helping the Allies in the war, I want to do my part. They need pilots for reconnaissance missions. I can fly. It's as simple as that. (*Others are surprised.*)

FRED: But what if they shoot at you?

KATHERINE: I'll just have to be careful.

MR. CLARK: If that doesn't beat all. You sure are a strange one, Miss Katherine, if you don't mind my saying so. (*Shifts mail bag on shoulder*) Well, I've got to finish my route. (*He starts left, shaking his head.*) Women in the army. They'll never believe this back at the post office.

KATHERINE (*Ripping letter open eagerly*): I've been waiting so long for this! (*Scans it silently as others cluster around her. Her face falls as she reaches end of letter.*)

FRED (*Eagerly*): When do you start, Katherine?

ALICE: Will you wear a uniform?

TOMMY: Can we give you a big going-away party?

KATHERINE (*Quietly*): No, Tommy. There won't be a party.

ALICE: Why not, Miss Katherine?

KATHERINE: The Army won't take me.

TOMMY: Why not?

KATHERINE (*Bitterly*): Because I'm just a girl! (*Curtain*)

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SCENE 2

TIME: *The next afternoon.*

SETTING: *Same.*

AT RISE: *LUCY, MARJORIE, and JANE sit, knitting. Next to each sits paper bag which holds finished knitting. JANE glances right, sighing loudly.*

JANE (*Annoyed*): Katherine is late. Mrs. Bell will be here any minute to collect the knitting we've done for the Red Cross War Relief. (*Sighs again*) Where *is* that sister of yours, Marjorie?

MARJORIE: She'll be out soon, Jane. Don't be hard on her. She's been feeling pretty low since the Army rejected her.

LUCY: Poor Katherine.

JANE: Oh, Lucy, not you, too!

LUCY: "Me, too," what?

JANE: Miss Flying Ace has you all brainwashed! Trying to join the Army is the silliest idea she's had yet.

MARJORIE (*Gently*): What's bothering you, Jane? You and Katherine used to be best friends. (*JANE looks down silently. KATHERINE enters right, carrying yarn, knitting needles, and*