Hot Airmen

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Hot Airmen

By THOMSON BURTIS

Author of "Soldiers of the Storm," "X Marks the Lot," etc.

Contents

When it came to sabotage in a war between two rival air transport lines, Slim Evans and "The Duke" knew a few successful antidotes

CHAPTER I.

PACIFIC PILOTS, INC.

There is no doubt that somewhere back in remote ages, when men grew hair for their vests, a strain of the wild cuckoo got mixed into the old English blood of the Evanses. This adulteration is undoubtedly responsible for the fact that practically every time a clock ticks I talk out of turn, and thereby get snarled up in some kind of trouble. When asked to do something, I always say yes. Trouble follows invariably. In the particular case to which I am referring, several friends of mine were the boys on the uneasy seat. Then after I'd said "yes" to John Benton, and landed on the West Coast, I found a tack in my own seat.

As a result of the happenings of that crowded day, this particular first lieutenant in the Army Air Service no longer has restless moments when he wishes he was out in the world, fighting for his spot in the bread line. I have decided to stay curled up in the arms of my Uncle Samuel, peeking coyly through his sheltering beard and watching the rest of the world go buy.

Between breakfast and lunch of a certain misty morning, I saw a possible quarter of a million dollars, the reputations of two good guys, and the future of three men and a business all

endangered by likes and dislikes as unexplainable as the deep hatred between my stomach and the onions that sprout in the spring, tra la, the scallions that scent up the spring! As a result, the aforementioned Lieutenant John Evans, better known as Slim, has resolved to give up all wine, except champagne or possibly a quart or two of Chianti several times a week, all women under eighteen or over eighty, and all jokes concerning traveling salesmen; and otherwise to live a pure and upright life. (I gave up singing in my youth, by request.)

When I say that only a last minute understanding between two cookies, each of whom thought the other half-baked, averted tragedy, I don't mean that they were faced with losing their jobs, or that they narrowly escaped having a check returned. I mean that jail, for almost every crime except murder, along with the loss of every worldly possession but their used socks, was averted by a miracle. Let one say right now that any time Lieutenant Cuckoo X. Evans gets a sensible thought and accomplishes something he's set out to do, without gumming it up, it is a miracle.

It started, reading from left to right, at six-fifteen on a morning in August—which is a heathenish hour, and against God! Step up and join me and two ex-army flyers as we stand in the huge hangar belonging to Pacific Pilots, Incorporated, and gaze at the towering bulk of a Ward Tri-Motored monoplane. It looked so big, with its wing tips almost invisible in the murky half darkness of the hangar, that a two-ton Douglas mail ship alongside it reminded one of a model some kid had made.

"Well," rumbled big John Benton, president and founder of Pacific Pilots, Inc., "there she is. Take a look at your sixty thousand bucks, Bobby—and pray!"

His heavy, square face was decorated with a wistful grin. The big fellow was trying desperately to hide the fact that he was worried sick.

"Well, she looks capable of carrying your whole damn company in her cabin, with room enough for a drink for one and all," I stated.

Bobby Agnew drew in a deep breath. "Hell, if we don't beat out that damn Corey outfit and sell our company to International Airways, I'll have to leave my happy home!"

Agnew was a pot-bellied, be-spectacled, little peewee who, as a rising young merchant, was cleaning up in Los Angeles. The flame which had sent him into the Air Service ten years before still burned steadily except that the flame flickered whenever he thought of his wife and went out altogether when he was with her. I had discovered that while having dinner with them the evening before. It was her custom to train a very possessive and penetrating peeper upon Bobby's every action and thought. She was just an old-fashioned girl. Yeah!

Despite the solemnity which hung over that hangar thicker than the fog hung over the airdrome outside, I was forced to giggle.

"Every time I think of what will happen to you if she ever finds out that you are John's financial backer, I swallow a snicker," I announced.

"Hmm," grunted the scowling Benton. "Bobby and I used to laugh, too. Now, I'll be damned if I can!"

"I know," I said. "But everything will be all right. You two guys just forget that you haven't got another nickel in the world, then everything will be okay. In another two weeks you'll be throwing parties on the dough International Airways has paid you, and Bobby's wife will be reading a paper to the Women's Club about how smart her husband is."

"Haw!" hawed the hulking Benton. His stock of repartee consisted largely of "humpfs" and "haws" snorted, uttered, chuckled, or exclaimed in divers keys and with varying degrees of explosiveness. By pulling out different stops to fit the situation, he could express everything in the world with common "haws"—with the possible exception of the more difficult equations of the Einstein theory.

"To tell the truth," wailed Bobby as he wiped the sweat, although the morning was cold, from his partially bald head and his full moon face, "after the breaks we've been getting, I wouldn't be surprised if this baby never even got off the ground!"

Benton snorted and scratched his head, which was covered with coarse, curly black hair, like the mane of some old lion.

"That'd be a break for us!" he stated in his heavy bass voice. "It can't crack up if it never takes off."

"You make me laugh," I told him. "You grumble like a grizzly bear who's just found that her offspring is hitting the primrose path, just to hide the fact that you enjoy taking a chance in any form. You love this shooting the works, and you know it."

His moody eyes had been resting on the all-metal transport plane. Now they shifted to meet mine. They were big and black and turbulent looking, below heavy lids and black brows that were like a couple of mattresses.

"Do you think I'd be enjoying this," he said very slowly, "even if Bobby wasn't mixed up in it? I've had ten years of it, Slim."

The look in his eyes knocked me dead, and paralyzed my tongue. It was as though a sudden flash of light had given me a look into two dark pools of suffering.

"I know," I said awkwardly. "I was only kidding. After all, though, the good breaks have started already. Who'd have thought that Duke Duval would pop out of a clear sky and supply publicity, not to say tone—?"

"He hasn't really popped yet," growled John. "He gives me a pain!"

He went on to mention definitely just what section of his anatomy was suffering from this shooting misery; and as though his remarks were a signal calling out of the air which was his natural habitat the very unregenerate freak we were talking about, the far away drone of a motor came to our ears.

"That's him coming now," I stated. "And just because you've got a goofy complex about a fellow that doesn't affect the fact that he's one of the best—and best publicized—flyers in the world. Nor that his flying your new ship for its first trip has been and is and will be worth more in advertising than having the queen of Insania endorse a new toothpaste. He'll put your lousy airplane company on the map—"

"You're right," piped up Bobby in what had once been a whisky tenor, but which his wife had changed to a near-beer baritone.

"Why are ten reporters shivering out there right now?" I went on, warming to my work. "Because they and the public give several damns about your company and the fact that you're fighting like hell for a fortune, with your backs against the wall?—Not by a damn sight! It's because Rupert Duval is completing an all-night flight from St. Louis so that he can fly your new plane for you, that's why!"

"That's one of the troubles with him," stated John heavily. His under lip was stuck forward in a pout as he said this. "He's a grandstander—always has been and always will be. All-night flight and that sort of junk. Why didn't he come in here like an ordinary man, without making a stunt of it?"

"Because Duke Duval is Duke Duval, you thick-headed moose! And if you don't quit letting your likes keep you broke and your dislikes putting you in hock, I'm going to knock you on the head and run your mangy outfit myself."

You can see from these tender words that Benton and I were old and close friends.

"Come on, let's go out," Bobby piped. "You know, I'm feeling better just knowing Duke's here. That onion'll probably have us merged with International Airways by noon —-"

"With himself as president," I finished up for him. "And by night he'll have sold the works to A. Pierpont Brogan, and will be calling him Pierpy."

John produced and used one of the snorts from his collection headed "unwilling assent," and lagged behind for a second in order to take one more look at the big ship which represented so much—every dime, in fact, which he and Bobby had been able to get their paws on by any method short of grand larceny and murder, for one thing, and Benton's future, for another. The ship's broad wings were supposed to carry Pacific Pilots, Inc. into the high realms of profit and fame, and to turn the heart breaking failure of the last ten years of John's life into a success which would compensate him for one of the bitterest lifetimes I've ever known. In case you wonder why anyone, least of all Slim Evans, son of the wild cuckoo, should bother with a bird who seems to you nothing but an ill-natured, growling, temperamental hulk, you'll find out why.

We strolled out into the thinning morning mist, just in time to see a bright yellow monoplane hurl itself free of the ribbons of fog which wreathed it, and in a series of vertical sideslips, knife toward the ground. Duke Duval had broken a dozen speed records with that high-powered little single-seater, and the snarling drone of its motor sounded a song of reliability and power.

There was careless self-confidence and an easy assurance in the way that ship swooped out of the last slip, leveled off, fish-tailed, and landed. There was the devil-may-care recklessness of Duke Duval himself in the way he groundlooped, directly after it landed, and trundled to the line almost without using the motor at all. He was that kind of guy—even a shoestring looked different when he wore it.

Bobby acted as reception committee, while John and I stood in the background and gave the reporters a chance. I saw the lanky Duke perch himself on the side of the cockpit, cock one knee over the other, take a drink out of a bottle, pass it to the newspaper men, and light a cigarette. His aquiline face was like a smiling hawk's. Sitting there, he held court on the ship, which for the moment had become a throne. I'll swear I could feel his vitality even from where we stood. At the moment, the idea of Pacific Pilots' bankruptcy was unthinkable.

"Look at him!" growled John.—One never thought of calling Benton "Jack." He was too big and steady and dependable. Nor would it occur to one to call the Rock of

Gibraltar "Gibby." Well, alongside of John Benton, Gibraltar is just a shifting sand.

"What's the matter with him," I demanded, "outside of the fact that his ship could stand a new coat of paint and that he's got on an old shirt?"

"He's like a pig in clover—every move a picture."

"Well, what of it? He's got nerve enough to be, and he does exactly as he pleases, that's all.—The quicker you quit carrying the world on your shoulders, and start tending to Number One, the better off you'll be. You're not a martyr—you're a sucker."

"Haw!" he said, with the ghost of a grin.

"Hi, Slim! How the hell are you?" Duval was calling as he walked toward us with his long-legged, effortless stride. "Look at John! How many babies did old Thunderhead eat for breakfast?"

Benton emitted one of the snorts labeled "laugh." I laughed, too, as I stepped forward to shake hands. You had to laugh whenever Duke turned on one of those grins that couldn't be resisted any more than dynamite can resist a spark.

You might as well get acquainted with him, while he's shaking hands with Bobby Agnew and kidding the pants off old Thunderhead, which nickname he had bestowed upon

Benton when we were all instructors at Kelly Field, back in '17.

When I tote up his assets, you'll scarcely believe that his liabilities came close to neutralizing them. To the casual eye, at his birth the gods had given him everything, from a platinum spoon in his mouth to a brain that actually worked. Despite the fact that he had hair like corn silk and was the kind of blond a million women spend half their hours in beauty shops to be, his skin took a tan like a brunette's which made him so startlingly good looking that he was vulgarly conspicuous in any company. The orphaned son of a millionaire inventor, he had inherited one hundred thousand dollars when he was twenty-one and two hundred thousand when he was thirty. He also had a cool million waiting for him when he reached the age of forty-five. A born flyer, he'd won the Schneider Cup while in the service, and he had been sent by the army for a special course at M.I.T. There he wrote a thesis on aero-dynamics that's still a classic. He got the material for it by inventing about twenty-five instruments, attaching them to various freakish ships, and spending about three hundred hours in the air putting planes through stresses and strains that never had been heard of before. He invented more stunts than a defeated candidate could invent alibis. By the time he left the service to take a swell job flying for an oil company, the army considered him the best flyer in the world.

This oil job involved making freak flights all over the world for publicity purposes, and he'd done about everything from sideslipping across the Sahara Desert to hedge-hopping the Alps. A cocky, swashbuckling, irresistible cookie was

Mr. Rupert Duval—and he was as theatrical looking as his name sounds, and the only one of his kind.

"Well, what the hell are you doing here?" he asked me as we started for Benton's office.

"I got leave and ferried the tri-motor out from Detroit for John," I told him. "What are you doing here? I thought you were set for life—?"

"The job got so it involved squiring the oil president's wife around," he grinned. "She's fifty-five and fat, so I quit."

"It's nice to be rich!" Agnew said.

"Rich, hell!" grinned the Duke. "I haven't got a dime to my name, and no way of getting one, except by paying one hundred per cent interest to loan sharks for borrowing against the next bucket of cash that comes down from the old man's estate. There are just seven dollars in my bankroll, boys; and this job looks like a million to me!"

Somehow, it didn't seem at all remarkable that at the age of thirty-five he had spent three hundred thousand dollars, in addition to a salary of at least twenty-five grand a year for the past few years. That's what I mean by his weaknesses neutralizing his amazing strong points. The woman scarcely lived who was too wealthy, too beautiful, and too popular to all for him; and by the same token, the woman scarcely lived who was so poor and unattractive that eventually she wouldn't tell him to go to hell. Discontent was a disease with him, and neither anything nor anybody meant a thing when

the curse was upon him. He left a trail of smoke behind him from coast to coast when he broke out on a drunk, and he was a gambling fool. I honestly believe that many a week he had spent twenty thousand dollars, in the process of knocking over enough bottles of whisky to drown some demon that gnawed at him.

"So this is the *sanctum sanctorum*," he said, as we entered Benton's office.

Benton, who hadn't said a word, sank into his chair like a mountain crumbling. Duval perched himself casually on the edge of the desk, his grin shining down at the square-faced Benton:

"Now listen here, old Thunderhead," he said lightly. "I know you're sore as hell because you've got to give me a job for your own sake, and that you disapprove of every hair on my head and every corn on my foot—or you think you do, anyway!"

Benton grunted non-committally, his heavy-lidded eyes gazing at the sunny Duke as though John was thinking "there is such a person and he's right here with me, but I don't believe it!"

"Nevertheless and notwithstanding," Duval went on spaciously, "I'm here to do what I can for my old instructor. What man, when the world says that John Benton is nothing but a disappointed bull rhinoceros, always stands up for old

Thunderhead and says at the risk of his life: 'Don't be too harsh. He's good to his mother; and once, in the year 1918, when he was drunk, I myself heard him say a kind word to a little child'?—That child is sitting right here on the desk at this moment!"

On he raved, gibing at the huge, glowering Benton who snorted, hawed, grunted and finally grinned in spite of himself as Duval's ceaseless flow of words washed down his resistance.

Then Duval changed his line of thought, as well as his appearance, and you would swear his whole personality, with one twist of the wrist. His smile disappeared as though a light had been turned off. He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, and his jaw seemed a little squares and his eyes sharper as he said crisply:

"What's the lay, John?—Walt Fowler said you were up against it. That's the reason I wired."

"Before you shoot the works," I interposed, "there's some bozo hanging around the outside office, John."

"It's Jennings," snapped Agnew. "He's always hanging around where he isn't wanted, trying to get an earful. When he isn't doing that, he's trying to run the works."

Benton grunted. "That's unfair," he said. "He's flying that picture director to Salt Lake City at seven-thirty, anyway."

"Is he one of your pilots?" Duval asked casually, as though his mind was on something else.

"Yes," piped Agnew. He looked like a perspiring kewpie. "He was a mechanic, and it seems his older brother once loaned John five bucks twenty years ago, or something like that. Anyway, John has done everything for him from teaching him to fly and giving him a job to loaning him money to buy a house. And in return for it, this Jennings thinks he ought to be running this company, and he sticks his oar in where he isn't wanted."

"John's still up to his old tricks, you see, Duke," I said. "Let's see—how many people was he supporting on the pay of a second lieutenant at Kelly Field? Five in his family, that cadet that got crippled when he and John had a wreck—"

"Shut up!" roared Benton. "Jennings is all right. He just tries too hard."

"Tries too hard, hell!" snapped Agnew. "He's always around giving orders that he's got no right or authority to give; and as far as I'm concerned, the less he knows about this company, the better. Before we begin to talk, get rid of him. Will you please, John?"

Benton nodded, called Jennings in.

The fox-faced, bold-eyed little fellow walked in with considerable alacrity and not a little eagerness. You could see that he figured he belonged with the throne gang.

"Go out and give your ship a good last look over, Pete," Benton said, as though he hated it. "We can't have anything

more happen around here—"

"Why?" snapped Jennings, with a slight effect of talking out of the corners of his mouth. "Hell, the ship's all right.—What've we got mechanics for? Don't be such an old woman, Johnny—"

Suddenly Agnew was on his feet. His fat face was red and his eyes blazing with a fire that nearly melted his eyeglasses.

"Damn it, you've got your orders!" he yelled, in what would have been a roar if his voice had not been pitched so high. Whatever an opera tenor or a canary bird does when he yells with rage is what Agnew did then.

Jennings's head snapped back. His thin mouth widened and his black eyes snapped balefully. He was too surprised, too scared—or both—to talk. So he just sneered.

"Now get the hell out of here and attend to your business!" Agnew rushed on.

Jennings looked at the uncomfortable Benton for a moment. Benton averted his eyes, and jerked his thumb at the door.

"Go ahead, Pete," he said. "We're all just a little overwrought this morning."

"Overwrought, hell!" snapped the be-spectacled bantam rooster. "The quicker orders are orders around this place, the better chance we all have to get some place."

Jennings, sneering copiously to right and left, marched out.

"Sorry," wheezed Agnew, subsiding into a chair. "But that guy makes me sore. John, here, is so damn soft-hearted that if I didn't watch him the staff of this place would be a pension list, and he'd be flying the mail free, so that poor people would get their mail quicker and it wouldn't cost them anything extra."

"Haw!" observed Benton.

Then all of a sudden he grinned his first grin that morning. It was a wide gesture, which turned his heavy face into a mass of wrinkles, from eyes to chin; and it was as warm as only a plodding, sincere, whole-souled ox of a man like John Benton could have made it.

"Hard-boiled Bobby Agnew!" he rumbled. "The iron-fisted executive, the terror of shirkers, the wolf of the business world—"

"Oh, shut up!" piped Agnew, with a grin. Then he leaned forward, his eyes snapping. "Let's get down to business," he said crisply. "Don't let John fool you, Duke. You dropped out of the sky like a large chunk of manna to us poor Israelites. Our backs are to the wall, and the next few days will tell the tale."

"All right—shoot!" Duval said levelly. He was still perched casually on the edge of the desk.

Agnew looked at Benton, but Benton was staring at the wall, in a study that was more than brown—it was black.

"Well," Agnew said, "Pacific Pilots, Incorporated, after six years is bankrupt to-day. Every nickel that Benton and I could borrow has gone. Our condition is the result of the damnedest run of tough luck—if it is only luck!—that any business was ever called upon to face."

"Crack-ups, forced landings and that stuff?" Duval asked quietly.

"Right," said Agnew. "And even a safe forced landing costs a fortune when it's in the middle of the Mojave Desert."

"You seem to infer that it may not be just hard luck," Duval suggested.

The difference between the rangy, square-jawed, level-eyed man who sat on the desk now and the devil-may-care kidder of five minutes ago was uncanny. He generated confidence in the rest of us like a dynamo does electricity. You had the idea that he knew what it was all about, and was three jumps ahead of everything you said.

"There are many grounds, but no proof for our thinking that some one—and that some one could only be the rival airplane company here—has been seeing to it that our ships go wrong," Agnew told him. "It doesn't seem possible that so much bad luck could happen without assistance, but there's no use of going into that now. One thing is certain. The other

company has seen to it that scarcely a newspaper comes out that doesn't carry either a story in it that harms us, or propaganda against us in the editorial columns. You know—stuff about not taking a chance with a company that isn't efficiently run, and comparing the reliability records of the other company and ourselves. That sort of stuff. This other outfit, the Corey Air Transport, manufactures the Corey Airplane too. They're a local industry, and heavy advertisers. They have plenty of influence. Without going into detail, they've practically run us into the ground by propaganda—plus our hard luck. And, Duke, we've had the best ships, mechanics, and pilots that money could buy. Even Jennings is a good flyer. No ships or motors were ever inspected more thoroughly than ours; but our record is lousy."

Duval just nodded.

"So we decided to shoot the works," Agnew went on. "Our credit was nil, because the Corey outfit spread the news that we were practically bankrupt. The public thought of us as a struggling, second-rate outfit rapidly going to the wall. So, we've hocked everything we've got, and bought this Ward Tri-Motor for two reasons. We think we can make money out of it flying cargoes to Salt Lake City every day. Over the Mojave Desert, it saves a day and a half on the train. Second, it is to show the world that we've got money—that we're progressive—and to rehabilitate Pacific Pilots in the eyes of the public."

Again Duval nodded. He was taking it all in, like a sponge does water. Outside, the Liberty motor in the ship that Jennings was to fly was drumming along on the warm-up.

"Now, the situation is this," Agnew continued, glancing at the motionless, brooding Benton. "You probably know that International Airways are extending their line to the coast. They've got a man in Los Angeles right now, who is going to buy out either Corey or ourselves and add terminal and mail contracts to their own. Whichever company is absorbed is on easy street; its executives will become part of the continental chain, and organization and everything else is swell. We're the more desirable buy—in everything but reputation. When I say that, I mean Benton's reputation as an executive, and the company's reputation for reliability. Our airdrome is more conveniently located, and a lot of other things are in our favor, including our mail contracts. But our reputation pretty nearly damns us. We believe, though, that if nothing else goes wrong, we can put over the deal."

"I see," Duval said thoughtfully. "If you can be absorbed, you get your money back with a good profit, and John's future in the flying game is assured and all that. If things go wrong, you're broke; you and your company are flops, your dough is sunk, and you're through."

"In fact," I put in, "it's worse than that. Bobby's wife will fry him in oil!"

Suddenly Benton lumbered to his feet. "Let's go outside," he said abruptly.

I knew that he just had to move, to keep from flying to pieces. When a solid rock like John shimmies on its foundations, the trouble is neither a tremor nor a Frisco fire. It's an earthquake.

CHAPTER II.

PUT UP JOB.

As we walked out through the hangar, past the big ship, Benton passed on ahead, as though he wanted to be alone. The Douglas was taking off. The passenger was Donald Grayson, one of the more famous Hollywood directors. He was so anxious to get to Reno he just felt he couldn't wait.

"If we can only click now, we've got a chance, see?" Agnew was saying to Duke. "On the strength of your piloting the first trip, we've got a lot of publicity already, and a first cargo that includes everybody from the mayor to May Sully, the picture star. And if you could stick around for at least a month as a pilot, the whole world would have to admit that Pacific Pilots are an up and coming concern."

Suddenly Benton whirled on us. His face was set, his dark eyes turbulent.

"For Lord's sake, quit begging!" he exploded hotly. "We're not asking for charity! If Duval stays, we'll pay him his salary, and he won't stay unless he figures that it's to his own advantage!"

For a second there was an astonished silence at this volcanic eruption. Then Duval found his tongue, which he

rarely if ever lost.

"Why don't you bite yourself and get hydrophobia?" he inquired. "That'd put you out of your misery."

"Good idea!" I snorted. "John, this rough diamond stuff don't go in a modern setting. And as long as you're getting so damn nasty, it's only fair to remind you that it's mostly Bobby Agnew's dough you're playing with. Listen here. You quit letting your dumb, bull-headed, thick-skulled likes and dislikes interfere with the business of this company—or I'll be damned if I won't kick the tar out of you myself!"

Benton just stood there, his head lowered as though he was a bull about to charge, his black eyes glowing redly, his seamed face working. Then, all of a sudden, he seemed to crumple.

"Sorry," he mumbled, and turned as though to hide his face from us.

"He hasn't eaten or slept right for months," Agnew whispered, and I took off on a kangaroo-like hop which landed me alongside John.

"Sorry, old-timer, but you had it coming to you. For God's sake, quit letting Duval be a—an obsession—"

"I know I'm crazy," he growled gruffly, but I suspected there were tears in his eyes. "But I'm not so crazy that I don't know he's a grandstander without any—er—stability or anything. It makes me sore to have him swagger in here, as

though he thought he was the savior of the company, and have to beg him to help out—"

"That's not it!" I protested. "It's a grand arrangement all around. He's broke—"

"Well, if that isn't nerve!"

This was a rude interruption from Mr. John Benton as simultaneously our eyes caught a Tri-Motor Corey transport which was trundling into the line. It had landed without our being aware of it.

My own peepers protruded gently as I watched a short, roly-poly pilot descend from the enemy's ship and waddle toward us with his short, fat legs wide apart and his round, battered face made even rounder and fatter by the fact that his hair had been shaved off close to his head since the last time I had seen him.

"Do you happen to know that bozo?" I asked quickly.

He was bound for us—a cocky grin on his face and his slit-like eyes crinkled merrily.

"Sure, that's Tubby McFane, test pilot for Corey," Benton grunted. "Got some stock in the company too, I believe. Why?"

"Because," I whispered raucously, "when I was in Detroit he or his twin brother seemed to be working for the Ward

Company."

Benton shook his head. "No, he was just visiting," he said. "He's been away for a couple of weeks picking up some dope, probably."

"Hi there," McFane piped in a throaty wheeze. "I was making a test flight, so I thought I'd drop in and see the big doings. Hello, Evans."

"You didn't tell me you belonged out here," I remarked.

I had just barely met him around the Ward field in Detroit.

"Nobody asked me," he grinned.

His face and body gave the impression of being made of so much rock, despite the fact that to the casual eye he looked fat. His face, for instance, was a full moon, but he didn't have a sign of a double chin. What there was of his neck was like a wrestler's, but it was so short that his head seemed to be set directly on his huge shoulders.

"From what I hear of what Corey's been doing to this outfit, I'd probably never have started flying the Tri-Motor out here if I'd known who you were," I told him.

He grinned his hard, bright grin. "Nothing like that," he wheezed airily. "Hell, we've got this outfit licked to a standstill. A Tri-Motor ain't gonna save it!"

He was as impudently cocky as a bedraggled sparrow, and he actually looked somewhat like a beefy specimen of that

well-known bird. His breeches and boots were soaked with oil; his khaki shirt had cost about a dollar and a half ten years before, and had gone through so many washings that it was ragged. With the bristles on his bullet head to top off the ensemble, he seemed to be a unique—not to say extraordinary—stockholder in nothing more valuable than a pot of hobo mulligan.

"You came over to lend tone to the affair, I presume," I said. "Do you let Corey men stick around, John?"

"I reckon they've done all they can," Benton stated.

"Oh, hell no!" McFane said with a wave of one stumpy arm. "We haven't even begun yet. You may linger for a moment, Benton old socks, but we'll get you at the finish—"

"Good God!" The curse was jarred loose from me. At the far end of the field, the Douglas was wobbling perilously—stalled in a steep climb.

A well-rounded oath which was like the boom of a big gun shot from between Benton's bloodless lips. An instant later the nose of the Douglas snapped down. A half turn in a slow spin, the ship outlined against the background of the Sierras, and it plunged from sight behind a low hill. As John and I leaped toward his battered old car, there came the crackling, ripping sound of the wreck.

Some of the reporters were still around, working on Duke's bottle. Along with Agnew and Duval, they all hit the

back seat of the car at once. I never said a word—I couldn't —as John sent it careening over the field. His heavy shoulders were hunched over the wheel, and his face was a pallid, pain-lined mask as he stared wordlessly ahead of me. I took one look back at the line. McFane was standing there, hands on hips, his astonished face beaming with simple pleasure and delight.

The chattering newspapermen made the picture all too clear in my mind. Grayson was front page stuff all over the country if he was badly hurt, or killed. It looked as though that wreck was the period ending the last sentence to be written about Pacific Pilots, Incorporated.

On foot we streamed over the low rolling hill, with me in the lead. I'm six feet six inches tall, and one foot of that is neck. The rest is legs. When I start making speed on my natural stilts, I progress in a series of kangaroo-like leaps and bounds that cover ground ungracefully, but fast.

One look was enough. A heap of debris, mercifully not on fire, and two motionless bodies. Grayson was still in the rear cockpit; Jennings half out of the front one. The tail of the Douglas was thrust in the air, as though the ship was trying to show us what was wrong with it.

As I galloped down the slope with my heart in my mouth, my popping optics took in something that made my hair curl and my mouth get dry. Both small cabane struts, one on each elevator, to which the control wires were attached, had been torn loose from their moorings.

I made a whirling dervish look like a statue as I ran forward, and at the same time turned sideways to yell my information to the others. I traveled down that hill like a cross between a crab and a kangaroo, with gestures. I was excited. Maybe, right here, the mystery of Pacific Pilots would be cracked, for here was sabotage unashamed.

Behind me, led by Duke Duval, came the bunch, like wolves baying on a trail.

I was sublimely oblivious to both the unconscious movie director and the wounded pilot. I hove anchor alongside the tail surfaces. Not so John Benton. He was lifting the two unconscious men from their cockpits as Duval, Agnew and I, backed by the newspapermen, looked at these struts.

"See!" I yelped. "The nuts attached to the bolts that held these in place were removed! There wasn't a way in the world to control the diving and climbing angles of the ship—and the nuts didn't come off by themselves!"

"Right!" Duval exploded. "And by God, the only people in the world who'd have any interest in doing this are Corey Air Transport!"

"No, no!"

It was a roar from Benton, overwhelming the questions which came like machine gun fire from the reporters.

He had the bodies on the ground, and we all turned our attention to them. Up to that moment, Grayson had never been the object of so little attention in his life.

"Dead?" barked Duval.

"No," Benton snapped back at him, his barrel-like chest heaving and his face a study in bewildered misery. "Listen, boys! We can't accuse Corey of this.—We've got no proof." He whirled on the newspapermen. "Not a word about the Corey outfit, understand?"

He was the kind of goof who'd stop the Twentieth Century to keep from running over a grasshopper.

By this time, casual onlookers around the airdrome, and a delegation of mechanics, were puffing over the top of the hill.

"There's something about this that smells to high heaven," I told the assembled congregation swiftly. "A blind man would have noticed it if all these bolts had no nuts on them before the ship took off, so the nuts must have been there before she took off."

"But the threads on the bolts are all right," a newspaperman pointed out. "If the nuts were not screwed down at least a little distance, anybody could have seen that something was wrong; and if they were screwed down, even a couple of threads, there's no way in the world that they could all come loose at once."

"Just to make sure," piped another one, "let's see if we can find any nuts around here."

About half the news hawks started searching around and backtracking on the trail of the Douglas, while the rest of us finally deigned to pay some attention to the two unconscious passengers.

Jennings had a very nasty gash over his temple, and it was bleeding with enthusiasm. It looked as though the shock had snapped his head against the projecting compass on the instrument board. Grayson was just knocked cold, with no observable injury except a rising lump on the brow, which hid his allegedly massive brain.

Jennings was the first to come to. His eyelids flickered, and he looked from one to the other of us.

"Am I hurt bad?" he asked weakly.

"All okay except that nasty head," Benton told him. He was feeling as badly as though the two men had been crippled for life.

"What happened?" I asked.

Jennings tried to sit up, and then fell back as though he didn't have a bit of strength in him. It struck me that he was putting it on a little, although that was a very gory blow on the head he'd got.

"We were climbing," he said hesitatingly. "Then all of a sudden the controls wouldn't work. The nose dropped, and

when I pulled back on the stick nothing happened. So we just hit, and that's all I know."

We told him what had happened to the ship, and he started cursing like a madman. Just then Grayson came to—talking. He damned everything and everybody, from the Wright Brothers to anybody who might be simple enough to fly in the year 2000. Finally, just as Grayson had decided to sue the Benton and Agnew Company for assault, battery, conspiracy, and being accessories before, during, and after the fact, we started for the hangars. Grayson certainly did want to get to Reno. I couldn't decide whether he had a girl that was being divorced that morning and who might marry somebody else if he didn't meet her at the court house, or whether he couldn't wait to be rid of his wife.

We were all pretty silent as we tramped across the field. The crowd was already gathering on the line to watch the big bugs take off on the Tri-Motor's first official flight; and the sight of them streaming across the field to get a look at the wreck, or milling excitedly on the line, did not improve my disposition any. I was making an earnest effort to think, which always gets me into trouble. I went to extremes, and the labor of my mountainous cerebrations finally brought forth the following mouse:

"Not a nut in sight, at least of the variety used in connection with bolts. It's just barely possible that the nuts were removed before the ship started. If that was so, it would mean two things. The mechanic in charge would be a

murderous crook and also a lunatic. There are four million separate and distinct ways to put a ship on the fritz, any or all of which are more effective than the one that was used. Furthermore, it is practically impossible that it wasn't noticed. Any man who thought he could get away with it would be a lunatic. It just doesn't make sense."

"I'll swear everything was all right when I took off," Jennings said in his rasping voice. "Hell, if they'd stripped the threads so that the nuts would snap off or something like that, you could understand it."

"The whole thing just couldn't happen—and yet it has," Benton said slowly.

"Serves me right," blared Grayson nastily. "The whole West Coast knows what this outfit is, and I had to be a sucker as usual and take a chance with 'em!"

I could fairly feel Benton wince when he said that, but there wasn't a single word anybody could say.

The next hour was more or less of a scrambled mess, and Benton stalked through it like a man walking in his sleep. There were detectives, cops and newspapermen, and a growing mob of people, who were licking their lips over their good luck in escaping. If Jennings and Grayson had been killed, it would have been a perfect day for the crowd. Last but not least, there were the celebrities themselves. A million rumors, more or less, were flying through the air, and

almost everybody, from the president of the Corey Air Transport Company to the man that cleaned out the spittoons in their offices, came hustling over to the airdrome with a lawyer in tow. McFane swaggered around, shedding sweetness and light, and chuckling to himself. His gall was so colossal that I almost liked him.

Duval, who had said scarcely a word, and Benton and Agnew and myself, all swarmed over the big Tri-Motor, peeking owlishly at every wire and stalking the last cotterpin to its lair.

Down on the ground, Barney Hutchison, a gangling picture press agent who was handling publicity for the occasion, just out of friendship, was threatening, cajoling, pleading and kidding a bunch of upset picture flappers and worried politicians into going through with the flight they'd lost all stomach for.

I was just one jump ahead of the booby hatch. I knew as sure as I was six and a half feet tall, that the whole dumb, unbelievable, ruinous near tragedy had some simpler explanation. I was going nuts because I almost had my mental finger on it a thousand times, only to discover that it had popped away from me like a drop of mercury when you plant your thumb on it.

"The hell of it is," I wailed to Duval, "if we could clean it up it would clear the whole air, as far as the company and Benton are concerned. Explain this, and the public would think everything was explained."

Duval nodded, his gray eyes cloudy with abstracted thought. We were sitting in the control cabin, having just finished a close examination of the several dozen gadgets therein. The instrument board of a Tri-Motor has indicators enough to furnish the engine room of the Leviathan.

More to give my mind a rest than anything else, I said casually:

"It was damn nice of you to fly all the way out here to do this for John."

He shook his head. "The pleasure is mine," he said sardonically. Then, more seriously, "You know, it's a funny thing how old friends gradually turn out to be best. The longer I live and the more I bat around as sort of a—a big shot, in a way, the bigger the old gang that raised hell at Kelly and around Nancy and Paris get. Sort of a nest of regulars that you know are regulars in the midst of a gang of phonies or fair weather bootlickers. If I got in a spot, it would be one of the old mob that I hadn't seen for five years I'd go to for help. And I'd go to Siberia on roller skates if one of 'em called on me."

I nodded. I knew just what he meant.

"And don't mind old John," I told him. "You know him. Half of what's the matter with him is that he's so grateful to you that he's sore at asking anybody to do so big a favor for him."

Duval grinned sunnily. "There isn't anything about me he approves of," he chuckled, "and he can't understand how I get away with it, or why he likes me underneath, or anything else. That makes him sore."

"He'd do a lot better for himself if he imitated you a little more, and you might amount to something if you absorbed some of his steadiness," I remarked. "John's a long-suffering sucker, and you're a damned fool."

Duval grinned, as though dismissing the subject, and hailed an early civilian who was walking past the ship; walking flat-footedly to show he was a detective. The Duke and I were sitting in the lofty control cabin, having just finished an exhaustive investigation of the gadgets therein. Duval raised the window and said:

"Did you find out anything, yet? Any of the nuts found, for instance?"

The detective spat. "No," he said. "I'd think the whole thing was a put up job if two men wasn't nearly killed."

"Did you get anywhere with the Corey people?"

The three hundred pound sleuth spat again.

"Nothing except getting damn near killed by old man Corey himself," he grinned. "If a guilty conscience is its own accuser, he's guilty as hell!"

Barney Hutchison emerged from the crowd. A lot of motion picture cameras and microphones had been set up,

and he flung his feet fluently to right and left as he walked in our direction.

"Come on, Duval. These punks are going through with it!" he yelped. "Comb your hair and prepare to look at the little birdie."

I climbed out too and took as inconspicuous a place as possible in the rear of the mob. I didn't want to be questioned. However, on account of my height, looking for me is like seeking Cleopatra's needle in a haystack.

So it was that a gray-haired man, all decked out in a cutaway coat, hove to alongside me. I was watching Benton, his face like a death's head, trying to smile and indulge in casual badinage with Duke Duval for the benefit of the cameras. Bobby Agnew, his fat face woebegone, completed the trio in the first shot. He looked as though he was listening to some pointed accusation from his wife. These men had been ruined in the last few minutes; and as I watched them perform for a publicity shot which they probably would never need, I was not in any mood calculated to make me greet my new neighbor effusively.

"Lieutenant Evans, I believe," stated the distinguished looking duck.

"The same," I said.

"You will find it to your interest to appear at my office this afternoon," he said, and handed me a card. "As attorney for the Corey Air Transport Company, I am taking immediate

steps either to rectify the damage done to my clients by certain unfounded and reckless statements accusing my clients of a murderous conspiracy. These statements are false, and my clients desire satisfaction from the men who have uttered them—of which men you are one. You will find it, as I said, to your interest not to ignore the appointment for three o'clock at my office."

He bowed crisply and stalked away.

I wandered around like a crane with the croup after that, not paying any attention to anything or anybody. I was in a cross between a daze and a trance. The newspapermen were getting stewed at a buffet in the hangar, and I found out later that the cameramen had taken pictures of everything around the place.

I came to when the three radial motors of the Ward started to sing. With Duke Duval at the controls, it taxied out on the field before a crowd of at least two thousand eager people. Now, if Pacific Pilots, Inc., would only supply a real triple-X, all-star crack-up in the Tri-Motor, all would be well and the goose hanging high. And I'll be damned if I didn't have a feeling they might get what they came for. I was in a highly unsettled mental condition. That Douglas wreck had me spinning like a top, emitting plaintive cries for help at every spin.

I guess I took a subconscious photograph of the scene while I was watching the Ward trundle along the ground. It

had a cargo of Hollywood frails whose boy friends were important executives, and also three of the largest and loudest political windbags on the coast. Also, four half-stewed newspapermen. On the line a D.H., with a camera mounted in it, was warming up. A battered Jenny which belonged to Jennings also had its motor running. I saw Grayson, the director, squeezing another publicity yarn out of his wreck, to which a reporter was paying no attention. Jennings, a theatrical looking bandage around his bean, was trying to date up some picture dame's maid. Bewhiskered and red-eyed old Corey still spitting forth fire from his nostrils, and Benton and Agnew were watching the ship as though it was carrying their last hope of heaven away. The detectives looked wise underneath their snap-brimmed hats, stood around and smoked cigars.

There was a half-hearted cheer as the big, shining all-metal ship took the air. It had majesty, that aerial railroad train; and if it and its kind foreshadowed the end of the days when a man would have saucy little scouts which he could hang on his back in the sky in, what of it? Flyers would be chauffeurs, ships just another way of getting around.

Then my heart skipped a beat. Four hundred feet high over the eastern edge of the field, with nothing but a vacant lot ahead which was covered with heaps of debris, there came a false note in the roaring diapason of power which rolled and thundered from the three motors.

I just stood there as the Tri-Motor went into a bank and came back toward the field. Only two motors were functioning—one of them had died. I swore—and then my

lips froze and my tongue got numb and my heart skipped two beats. A second motor had cut out...

Then my ticker ceased beating altogether. The third motor had popped, sputtered once or twice, and died.

CHAPTER III.

CONFESSIONS.

The Ward was half around in its bank. There was not altitude enough to permit Duke to complete the circle and spiral down into the field. He straightened her, and down she glided toward the rough terrain straight ahead—ten tons of ship, and two tons of celebrity flesh, bound for as sure a wreck as ever faced an unfortunate airman.

I got control of myself to find, to my intense surprise, that I was half way to the scene of the coming disaster. Back of me were shouts and screams and mad confusion. And behind me, thudding footsteps.

I saw the Ward land perfectly on a little level patch. It rolled a few feet. A man could tell that Duke Duval was handling it, for one wheel swung around an ash heap, missing it by inches. For an anguished five seconds I thought he would do the impossible. But it really was impossible. Ahead of him was a low knoll of ashes and assorted rubbish.

The lordly ship climbed up one side, and slid down the other on its snoot. Struts and spars gave way with a rending, tearing sound.

There it rested, like a king with his head in a barrel of glue; and from it poured screams and shrieks and curses. When I was a hundred yards away they started popping out of it like so many kittens poured from a bag. I knew that no one could be badly hurt, unless some dame whose husband carried accident insurance had kicked him in the face.

I slowed down to get myself together; and newspapermen and detectives streamed past me like light past a snail, then the mob. If I had possessed a mirror I'd have taken a careful look at myself to see whether I was wearing a false mustache, and I did do considerable self-examination before I decided definitely that I was awake.

No conceivable combination of causes could explain the failure of three motors at one and the same time—except deliberate sabotage. And not for an hour or a minute had the ship that had carried me without a murmur from Detroit to Los Angeles been left unguarded and alone.

I saw Benton and Agnew in the center of a seething mob. Actresses were polishing up their hysterics, politicians were giving their lungs a work-out, and one newspaperman was trying to control his stomach. I lingered. I didn't want to hit the center of the crowd yet. I was stupefied.

By the time I was shouldering through the crowd, about seventeen cops, in and out of uniform, were acting sore

because they didn't have any excuse to use their clubs. Duke Duval, his forehead cut by flying glass, was the center of a group which included three detectives and Benton and Agnew.

The cameras had already arrived by boat and by train. The accident would be spread across the front pages of every afternoon paper in America within an hour. The unhurt but rumpled actresses were already throwing fits all over the garbage heaps. Between their press agents, the damage suits and the fan magazines, their narrow escapes from death would be news long after Pacific Pilots, Inc., was a thing of the past.

I was ten feet from the group which centered around the Duke, when I heard Benton cry, as though it was wrenched from him:

"Good God, man, think what you're saying!"

"I'm not crazy!" snarled Duval. "That's the whole thing, officer. Now where do we go?"

"Step aside, please!" yapped a cameraman, and while three or four men carrying microphones at the ends of wires raced up to Duval, the cameramen themselves were peeking through their rangefinders. When the world comes to an end, Hollywood cameramen will have a picture of it.

"Just tell your story!" one commanded.

That was as good a way to get it as any, and as the crowd fell silent under the commands of the news cameramen, I didn't attempt to join the white-faced owners of the company. Everybody listened tensely, while a group of dicks mumbled wisely to themselves, just to show that ordinary rules didn't apply to them.

Duval, the blood clotted on his forehead, but handsome as the devil, with the California sun—you've heard of California's special sun?—glinting in his tumbled blond hair, swung his helmet and goggles and said clearly:

"It is important that the public realize that this unfortunate accident should not be considered a blot upon the safety of flying, as such. Neither is it chargeable to any carelessness or oversight on the part of anybody, except myself."

He paused briefly. A premonition of what was to come swept over me.

"The truth of the matter is this: Pacific Pilots, Incorporated, bought this most modern and safe of ships to give the public better service and hired me, at great trouble and expense to themselves, because of my long experience as a flyer. In order to get here to fly it, I was forced to fly most of the night. Frankly, I took many—too many—drinks in order to keep up.

"I thought they had not affected me. After we had taken off, one motor sputtered and seemed about to die. I started to turn back into the field for a landing, which I could have made easily and safely. In my befogged condition, it

suddenly seemed to me that there was some danger attached to trying to get back into the airdrome; and so I landed straight ahead, on rough terrain, and the ship nosed up.

"It was simply an error in judgment on my part, due to my sleepless condition and the fact that I had had too much to drink. I am the sole culprit—the Ward plane and the mechanics of Pacific Pilots are blameless."

Well, gents, I just stood there and gasped. I stared at the composed Duval, whose snooty countenance was decorated with a sardonic smile. He saw me, and there was the suspicion of a wink as he turned to the detectives. Then I leaped ahead as though somebody'd jabbed a needle into me. Here was the climax of the yarn—Rupert Duval, wined and dined and decorated for his flying achievements all over the world, flying a priceless cargo while drunk.

The crowd was buzzing and chattering and suggesting everything from lynching to another drink for the poor boy. What faced him was jail for a long, long time. He was now surrounded by detectives, and Benton and Agnew were charging up from the other side, when I stretched out a long and sinewy arm and spun him around.

"Listen, you star-spangled jackass. Those motors cut out!" I said swift and low, but the dicks could hear. "Don't try to fool me. And if you're drunk, I'm dying of dandruff!"

"Shut up!" he snapped in my ear. "Of course they did—and of course I'm not.'"

The detectives, in all the excitement, let me drag him a few feet away, just as Agnew and Benton arrived all in a lather.

"Now nobody say a word!" Duval snapped. "If I take the blame for a while it may save the company some criticism. If none of the passengers could see that I was drunk, John and Bobby here can't be blamed if they didn't know it either. Arrange to get me bail, Bobby. And you, John, for the love of God snap into it and find out what was wrong with that ship! Get wise to yourself!—Quit taking punches and pass out a few."

"Come on, boys, we've got to get going," said a dick who acted as though he wasn't sure whether he was drunk or sober himself.

"I'm going, too," Benton roared. "Bobby and I'll fix up bail some way. You take charge here, Slim, until I get back."

And off they went hustling to the District Attorney's office as though that gentleman might die before they got there.

It's happened many times in my life that when my back is to the wall and there doesn't seem to be a single way out, I have suddenly thought of a dozen things to do, and have done them. Necessity can generate more stratagems, and

more nerve to carry them out, than a man would believe he possessed under normal circumstances.

Right at that second, as my bloodshot eye fell upon Jennings, a few spare parts in my mind clicked into place, and for the first time I got my teeth into a real idea. All the thinking I had been doing in the last hour had finally put forth a fruit. And I was positive that I had hit on the only explanation possible for the wreck of the D.H. A second later I was looming over the half defiant, half frightened Jennings.

"Get over to the office right away!—You and me are going to have a talk!" I snarled.

Jennings started to say something flip, but I must have had a baleful look in my eye.

"Don't open your mouth!" I snapped at him, "unless you want a detective to tap you on the shoulder right now. I know all about that wreck of yours; and while you're hustling over to the office, you'd better start praying that I don't change my mind about giving you a chance to save yourself. Come on, get going out of this mob!"

Well, he got going without a word; and it seemed to me that the speed with which he put one foot before another, together with the hunch of his shoulders, were all the confession I needed.

I don't exactly remember the next minute or so, except that I was frolicking about answering a dozen questions a minute, and arranging that the Ward be guarded and that no one be

allowed to touch it for any reason whatsoever. I didn't have an idea about what had happened to it then, but I did know that somewhere there was an explanation for three motors cutting out at once, and that the man responsible under the circumstances would make an ordinary murderer, satisfied with one victim at a time, seem like one of the better Samaritans.

At the back of my mind I was constantly chewing over the sudden idea that had sprouted in my mind about Jennings and the D.H.

Anyway, after a minute or so of somewhat violent activity, I left the gibbering crowd and started splitting the breezes across the field toward the office. Jennings, who was proceeding in the same direction like an antelope trying to outfoot a bullet, was close to the line when I started. I hadn't set eyes on McFane, but the transport was still on the line. And who did I see coming toward me but the be-whiskered Corey and his frock-coated lawyer. Victory was in their eyes, and the lawyer took occasion to throw a little greeting to me.

"What are you accusing us of now?" he inquired.

I changed the direction of my charge and swerved toward them. Every once in so often—and this was one of the times—I get wound up so tight that it's impossible to keep me from sounding the alarm. Try to keep this cuckoo inside his clock when he feels the hour has come to sound off. So, regardless of consequences, I exploded as follows:

"I'll tell you what we're accusing you of! Sabotage for one thing—and we'll have the proof within an hour. What we've got proof of already is deliberate propaganda, in the newspapers of this town and by word of mouth, to destroy this business. And we're taking action on it to-day. If you don't believe it, get Barney Hutchison—he's around here somewhere—to tell you what friendly reporters have told him.—And you listen to me, Corey! You'll need a better mouthpiece than you've got, or than anybody else ever had. You're being charged with conspiracy and every other thing that the best lawyer in this town can figure out."

Excited people, streaming in both directions, had stopped to listen. I shot past them so fast that the breeze waved Corey's whiskers. The lawyer's jaw dropped so far the glasses almost fell off his nose, and two reporters almost split themselves in two as one leg itched to take after us and the other one stayed planted to get a statement out of Corey. It would not be more than two minutes before that whole crowd knew about my outburst, and I didn't give a damn.

Again I took off across the field. Practically nobody was left on the line, and I was doing so much heavy thinking that I wasn't noticing anything. None of my thoughts were about the Ward—they were all about Jennings and the DeHaviland. If I put my fingers on that, I was sure that the explanation of the Ward could be extracted from, beaten out of, or otherwise obtained from, Jennings.

Then, as I steamed along in a fog, at several knots an hour, a motor roared into life. I looked stupidly at the line, to see Jennings's battered old ship taxiing swiftly out on the field. I wasn't twenty-five yards from it.

"He knows I'm wise to him!" I yelped aloud, and as I yelped I leaped.

The most important thing in the whole world right then was a confession from him. His running away was that confession in itself, but I needed it in detail.

As I streaked toward the line, I had no conscious plan except to get into the air. Mexico was only a hundred miles away, and Jennings lacking nerve to stand the gaff, would almost certainly be planning to disappear over the border.

There was not a soul on the line. Everybody was at the wreck. But I knew that the motor of that camera ship was warmed up. I didn't know what I'd do when I got into the air, but I aimed to get there.

Jennings was trundling swiftly across the ground, taxiing to the end of the field, so that he would have the full length of it in order to take off against the wind. His ship was so low-powered that he didn't dare take a chance on anything but the full field. What did he care if he was overtaken in the air? There weren't any ships with guns on them. I knew that as well as he did. But I had the wild idea that something could be done.

A mechanic was running to meet me as I reached the ship and leaped into the cockpit. Jennings had reached the end of the field and was about to turn for the take-off.

"Crank it!" I yelled. "Contact!"

The grease monkey swung the propeller, and it started on the first try as I shoved the self starter at the same time. I advanced the motor as Jennings was turning for the take-off. The D.H. began to move. Slimuel X. Evans, the Terror of the West Coast, was off to the rescue—the Son of the Wild Cuckoo was about to swoop. Lord, it must have been funny!

The ship was moving ahead, directly out from the hangars, and Jennings had started his take-off across the field at right angles to my course. I roared straight across the field and for the point where the course of the two ships would intersect. If Jennings got away, it would be the end of the hopes of John and Bobby—to say nothing of what Bobby's spouse would say!

I don't think Jennings knew what was in my mind, but I did—for once. The D.H., its wheels still on the ground and its nose down, was like an animal charging. It was thirty feet from the slower Jenny when the smaller ship got its wheels off the ground. As it angled upward, I shifted the bellowing D.H.'s course slightly, swinging her toward the Jenny. Like a tiger leaping at a sheep with a twelve-cylinder snarl, the D.H. left the ground.

Ten feet above the ground, the propeller and radiator tore into the Jenny's tail surfaces. I thought the world had blown

up when the propeller shattered. The two ships skidded through the air. When they hit the ground it was like the sudden eruption of a volcano, and St. Peter must have had his mouth open to say "No." To my intense surprise, I remained alive. In a daze, I realized that the crowd was leaving the line and rushing toward the wreck.

But I had work to do before they arrived. I uncoiled myself and pulled Jennings out of the other plane. We had a short but extremely pertinent conversation. I think he really thought I'd kill him with the monkey wrench that was in my hand.

Just then the motors of the Corey transport started to roar.

"Now, you yellow-bellied punk, you are going to talk or I'll brain you!" I barked at him before the sweating crowd got there. "We know you jimmed up the controls of your ship after the wreck, and you're coming over to the office with me and sign a complete confession right now!—Come on, get going!"

He was a shivering, shaking wreck, prepared to admit that he was Al Capone in disguise or that he'd shot McKinley when a boy. The mob arrived, with their tongues hanging out. They had rushed to so many places on the field that they were like a pack of hounds that had just come across a rabbit convention. It was a job for an All-American football team to get through them, and of course everybody there connected the recent slight collision and the expressions on our pans, with the unique happenings of the morning. But I refused comment.

Back at the hangar, I put two mechanics on the door of the office and turned to confront my cowering captive.

"All right," I said. "This morning you did some punk flying. I say punk flying because I don't think you've got nerve enough deliberately to wreck a ship. Grayson was knocked out, but you weren't. You beat it around to the back of the ship, jimmed up those controls to make it look like the wreck was an accident, and then beat it back to your cockpit and pretended to be knocked out. Now, why the hell did you do it?"

"I wanted to—alibi my bum—flying," he stammered.

"The hell you say!" I snarled. "That may be part of the reason. Who's paying you for hurting this company? Admit that it's Corey Transport, you louse!"

"They offered to a long while ago, and I never did anything," he raved, half crying.

"Oh, yeah?—Who's the man who made you the proposition?" I demanded, shaking him until his toe nails snapped.

"Tubby McFane," he said chokingly.

At that moment I heard the transport taking off, and I knew that the tough Tubby was on his way from there.

"Just what was the proposition?" I asked him, casually whistling the wrench I still had in my hand past his nose.

"A long time ago he hinted that if I could find a chance to do anything to the ships, I'd get paid well for it," he stammered. He was so weak I hated him.

"Why didn't you come to the man who's been keeping you, you double-crossing rat, and tell him?"

"Because I hate Agnew's nerve! He's always picking on me!" flared this priceless specimen of a flyer. "Besides, it wasn't very definite; and you couldn't prove anything on McFane, the way he put it up—"

"I see!"

I asked him a few more questions as I galloped up and down the office, and the net information I extracted was that a few months before McFane had made some vague passes at Jennings and had hinted—really nothing more than that—at the fact that he, Tubby McFane, stockholder in Corey Transport, would be highly pleased at any bad luck that overtook Pacific Pilots, Inc., and might pay a reward for same. Then I devoted five minutes of threats, cajolery and cross examination of divers sorts to the proposition of the Ward wreck.

Jennings shouted, wept, mumbled, and sobbed his denial that he knew anything at all about it, and I was compelled to believe him.

"All right," I said finally. "You sit down at that typewriter there and write out a full confession of the D.H. wreck, and word for word, as far as you can remember, about what McFane said to you. There's just one chance in a thousand that you may escape going to jail for this. We won't decide that until the boys get back. Now get busy!"

Busy he got, pecking laboriously at the keys as I resumed my canter up and down the office. I hadn't got as much out of him as I'd expected, but it was something.

All of a sudden my thoughts veered to the Ward. Three motors cutting out simultaneously presented a problem so amazing that it should be comparatively simple because the explanations could be so few. Their separate ignition systems could not have gone hell, west and crooked all at once. They were, however, all fed from the same gas tank. So up and down I plodded, trying to think; and at the end of my cogitations I left Jennings under the guardianship of two mechanics and a puzzled flatfoot while I went out into the open and gave the chief mechanic some orders, after looking over some parts of the ship.

I got back to the office and the moaning Jennings just in time to see him sign his confession, and just a minute or two before Messrs. Duval, Benton and Agnew arrived in a cloudburst of conversation.

"Well, that's quick work!" I said as they charged in.

"Twenty thousand dollars bail, but the boys got it," grinned Duval.

"Which was lucky," snorted Benton, "or I'd be tearing down the jail this minute!"

I looked at the big fellow quickly, and then at Duval. Duval winked ever so slightly. No words were necessary to explain how Benton felt, but they were spoken nevertheless. Benton said what he had to say with dogged determination, as though it was a necessity to put himself on record.

"I am saying to you publicly what I have already said to Bobby and the Duke," he said slowly. "I'm nothing but a damn fool, disliking people for no reason; and any time the Duke wants me to lie down and be a doormat for him, you'll find me on the floor."

"Don't be silly," scoffed Duval. "It isn't going to be half as tough as I thought and when the truth comes out, look what a big shot I'll be! Big hero—and it hasn't cost me a nickel, or even a day in jail."

"But you didn't know that when you said your piece, and it may not be true," Benton insisted.

"Well, you boys can conduct a mutual admiration society at some more propitious time," I told them. "Cock a snook at this confession, lads, while the rat who wrote it is right here to fill in any gaps."

Outside, an angry mob was still seething around, and a few dicks and cops were getting sore because they knew

something was going on that they weren't in on. Nobody gave them a tumble, however, as they peered through the glass window of the door while Duval read the confession aloud. Jennings was slumped on a chair in a corner, gazing blankly at the wall, with his jaw quivering every once in a while.

"I knew it!" exploded the peppery Agnew. "I knew he was a louse and I'll be damned if I don't—"

He began to tell Jennings what he thought of him; and whenever he ran out of breath, Duke Duval put in a well chosen cuss-word.

Suddenly Benton lumbered to his feet.

"That's enough!" he blared as he walked toward the shaking Jennings. "The kid did wrong and he's thoughtless, but he isn't as bad as all that—"

The big lummox was patting Jennings on the shoulder by that time, as though to comfort him; and that was the last straw. Jennings broke down and cried as I've never heard anybody cry before or since. Not a word was said, and those sobs seemed to shake the walls of the room. It was damned uncomfortable, and all of a sudden the shoe was on the other foot and I felt like a louse.

"Now come on, pull yourself together," Benton said awkwardly, while the rest of us looked at each other and

wandered around, and Duval stood in front of the glass in the door so nobody could see.

"All I can say is this," choked Jennings. "If there's anything I can do to make up for it, I will. I'd cut off my right arm—"

"Now, there's an idea!" I interjected facetiously, glad of any opportunity to break the tension. And suddenly ideas seemed to come to me. "Here's what I've done." I told them the steps I'd taken about the Ward, and went on, "Now look —McFane was in Detroit. Unquestionably that doesn't mean a damn thing, because the ship worked all right for me all the way across the country. Corey Transport has definitely been responsible for most or all of the things that have been running you people into the ground, and so making you no buy for the big company. We've got to get the goods on them. At present, we've got nothing tangible enough on McFane; and it may be that by using Jennings as a stool pigeon, we can."

"There's another thing," Bobby Agnew said. It was as though every one had taken a new lease on life. "Ordinarily, I might say that Tubby McFane, being a rough, tough customer and a stockholder in Corey, might have been running around doing things or trying to do things that old man Corey didn't know anything about and wouldn't approve of. But the more I think of the old reprobate's attitude this morning, the more I believe that he knows all about all this funny business. But it isn't natural for a company like that to use the sort of methods they're using unless they're desperate. I believe I can find out down town what their financial

situation is. So, while you fellows are figuring things out, I'm going down town and throw myself on the mercy of a couple of people and see what I can discover."

"Better drop in and ask your wife's advice," I suggested.

He popped out the door.

"I believe there may be a lot in what he says," Duval said, walking up and down restlessly. "They may be more desperate to merge than we are, John; and what they've been doing is simply applying racketeering methods that have been used against all kinds of businesses in New York and Chicago."

"And look," I burst forth, because I couldn't keep still, "they think they've got you now, and maybe they have. If we should discover sabotage on the Ward, the pendulum might swing our way. But they can't know how completely we are at their mercy. What sort of an egg is this big company man who's snooping around, John?"

"Nice fellow," Benton admitted grudgingly.

"All right, I'll come back to him later," I said, the words fairly tumbling out of my mouth. "But the main thing is this. As I said, we can't be completely counted out, from Corey's point of view, until Corey actually closes the deal with International Airways. Suppose Jennings should go over and see McFane—McFane saw me take off to get him—and pretend to be terribly sore at us, saying we accused him of

fixing the Ward and everything else. He could be in a regular fury. This is one time when the use of what's called an *agent provocateur* is justified. Let him deliberately offer to blow up our hangars, or something like that, and we'll see just how far these eggs are prepared to go—"

"Here comes a Corey Transport," Duval interrupted me as he gazed out the window.

I hadn't noticed the drone of the motors. When I'm talking I'm always greatly interested in what is being said.

In our wrought up condition, the arrival of the transport seemed extremely significant to us all; and when a minute later we saw Tubby McFane climb out of the ship and start for the office, it became even more so.

"Listen," I said to the rejuvenated Jennings. "You start acting your part right now, just to lay a foundation."

"You know, we're all forgetting," Benton said heavily, "that we really haven't got a thing except a vague conversation of months ago to go on, and some newspaper propaganda which probably isn't illegal. They couldn't have had anything to do with the Ward—"

"Oh, nertz!" I interrupted rudely. "You're fighting for your life, and if there's any way to get these babies, it's got to be used.—As it stands, now, you're licked cold. So do what I say, for heaven's sake!"

There was no argument against that.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TAKE-OFF.

When Mr. Tubby McFane swaggered cockily into the office, he closed the door behind him and came to a halt. There was a grin of amazement on his lips and a hard, bright glint in his eyes as he listened to the conversation—which his entrance did not interrupt.

What he heard was me calling Jennings every name both sacred and profane that's ever been invented for uncomplimentary purposes. I was assisted heartily by Benton. And did Jennings snap back at us? That fox-faced little weakling should have been an actor.

"Now get the hell out of this office and off this field, or I'll tear you apart to see what makes you tick!" Benton roared in conclusion. "If there was one way we could prove it, I'd have you arrested now. But by heaven, I'll see to it that you never get another job in the airplane business in this country! You've ruined us, but you've ruined yourself, too; and I hope to God the day will come when I can get even with you!"

"Oh, yeah?" snarled Jennings, as he made for the door. "Think you're pretty wise, don't you? Well, you've got nothing on me; and I'll tell you this: I wish I had taken a chance and blown up your damned airport, instead of taking

your lip for months and months, and taking the rap for your own dumbness. Have me arrested! What do I care? You've got nothing on me. Blacklist me if you want to.—And I'll pay you back for this, if it takes the rest of my life to do it!"

He flung out of the office while McFane, his battered face beaming with devilish humor, whistled in pleased surprise.

"What's it all about?" he inquired finally.

"Oh, that louse jammed up his own DeHaviland this morning, and we think he dropped something in the gas of the Ward, just to get even for some run-ins he had with Agnew and Benton here," I told him. "There's no good in having the little punk arrested. We haven't got any real proof, and throwing him in jail wouldn't help us out any anyway."

"Right you are!" McFane said blithely. "In fact, it would hurt to have the public know that one of your own men was double-crossing you, even if it was true. This is going to make it tough for you to back up the stories the papers are carrying about your accusations of us, boys."

"Oh I don't know," Benton growled. "The amount of propaganda you birds have been putting out against us comes pretty close to the libel line, you know."

"But not close enough," McFane stated. He was very chipper indeed as he lit a cigarette and perched his barrel-like body on the edge of the desk. "As a matter of fact, you birds are licked seven ways from the jack. All those wild yowls

you let out about us trying to ruin you this morning has got your neck in the noose, and it'll cost you plenty before you get through. Whatever the reason for all the things that have happened to-day, and before, you're sunk as far as the public's concerned. And I know that if you're not bankrupt now, it won't be long before you are!"

He squinted humorously at Duval. "I'm afraid your grandstand play came too late, Frank Merriwell," he grinned. "I like your nerve, though."

"Don't mention it!" Duval said airily. "By the way, to what do we owe the honor of your presence?"

"I got a proposition for you boys," McFane stated.

That bedraggled, hard-boiled chunk of a man was certainly one for the book. He was as blithe and airy as though he'd just dropped in for a social chat.

"Yes?—What kind of proposition?" grunted Benton. His heavy jaw was thrust forward and his turbulent eyes were narrowed.

"Of course," McFane said carelessly, "we've both been competing for the last couple of months for the chance to merge with International. I say we—I mean my boss, Corey, and you, Benton. You and your whole airport have got a lousy reputation, but you happen to have better mail contracts, and a little better location. I'll go a little further. I'll admit that International doesn't particularly like Corey's ships and would a little rather have your equipment than ours. But

that doesn't alter the fact that right now we're a cinch to be bought by International, and you haven't got a chance and you know it! If they were going to buy you out, they'd wait until you were bankrupt and buy the whole outfit at a receiver's sale."

"How come you're so sure we're bankrupt?" inquired Duval.

He was the one to ask that question, because McFane had had his eyes on the famous Duval most of the time when he was talking. It was as though Benton had automatically become a minor factor in the matter and Duval instead of the company he represented was the man whom McFane was trying to sell something. You would have to see the Duke to believe it, I guess. I think he must have felt that he swung a lot of weight, because I noticed he said "we" as though his connection with Pacific Pilots was very important, and I'll swear to that. His very presence gave Benton and me more courage—one instinctively felt that with Duke Duval around miracles could and would happen at the slightest provocation.

"Oh, Corey's got ways of getting information," McFane said blithely. "But I'll tell you. There's one way everything can be worked out pretty and to the advantage of one and all. That's for Corey to buy out you guys. That'll make everything sweet and pretty, and so I'm here to offer you seventy-five thousand dollars cash for Pacific Pilots, Inc., airport, mail contracts, equipment and ill will."

The way he grinned when he said that "ill will" was enough to make my fists clench, and then to make me relax and grin in spite of myself. He had the nerve of all the devils in hell.

"What are you doing—kidding?" exploded Benton. "Why that's not half the value of our ships alone, to say nothing of a better located airport, mail contracts—"

"Be that as it may," McFane said blithely, "that's the offer, and not a penny more. It's seventy-five thousand plunked in your laps—"

"Why that wouldn't come close to paying our debts," snapped Duval. "It's ridiculous.—However, we're not licked yet, Mr. McFane."

McFane shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, yes, you are, even if you could stagger along a little longer. You're going to have more suits against you than any rich corporation in the country could pay! And another thing—" He slid off the desk and planted himself on widespread trunk-like legs, as though steadying himself for an onslaught. The flesh seemed to gather a bit around his eyes and harden until it was stretched tightly over cheek bones and jaw. "I've got nothing to do with it," he said levelly. "I got a little stock—yes—but I'm just a 'peelot.' Let me tell you this: just a tip between flyers, for your own good. Old man Corey started in this game as a parachute jumper at fairs, a long while ago. He's an old bird with whiskers, but he's knocked around all his life, and he's lived as tough a life as any gangster or thug you ever saw. He was a hobo and an outdoor showman and everything else.

When it comes right down to cases, that old foxy grandpa is likely to forget lawyers and the fact that he's a business man —and all the rest of it, understand?"

"Not exactly," Duval said alertly.

I felt something coming, and I was as tense as a cat at a rat hole.

"Now this is off the record, as I said," McFane reminded us, "and I may be all wrong. I don't really know any more than you do, but I am telling you that old man Corey is sore. He's so sore he can't do anything but walk up and down his office and curse, and there's more than one way to skin a cat. As one flyer to another, I'd strongly advise you to give in, because you can't tell what's going to happen if you don't."

"Okay, now I'll tell you something," roared Benton, getting to his feet so fast he tipped his chair over. He looked at Duval, as though for his approval. "You go back and tell your plug-ugly of a boss that we're not giving in and that we're fighting to the last ditch. Don't tell me what methods he's capable of. He's showed enough already and—"

"Now listen," snapped McFane, "don't go off at half cock. What I said may be all wrong. I was trying to be a friend, but as long as you think you're so smart, I won't argue with you any more."

He swaggered to the door and turned for one last farewell shot. "It takes smarter men than you guys, I guess, to know

when you're licked. Hot air isn't going to help you now, nor Duke Duval either!" And off he went.

"Listen, boys," Duval said swiftly, as I shut the door. "There's more to this than meets the eye. If they were so sure of their position, they never would have offered seventy-five thousand bucks—or five thousand, for that matter. There's some reason we don't know about that makes them offer that dough, dousing all suits and trying to stop everything. It isn't natural for people who are sitting as pretty as they would seem to be to do that. Which means that for some reason they're not sitting so pretty as they look and claim to be."

"And furthermore," I pointed out, "Mr. McFane being very careful to protect himself, nevertheless was threatening us in no uncertain terms with a little low-and-lofty sabotage like setting fire to your hangars or something of that sort, John."

"Maybe Bobby will have some dope on that," Benton said. "But by gosh, I'll say this. If I end up without a job or a dollar, I'm going to get that Corey outfit, and get 'em good!"

"Great!" I crowed. "The old philanthropist is coming to himself!"

"And he's quit taking punches and has now begun to hand out a few," Duval said, repeating what he had told me that afternoon.

"I hope Jennings can act as well the rest of the day as he did just now," I said soulfully. "There, boys, may be our ace

in the hole!"

Well, for the next two hours we sort of milled around and talked everything over by and large and up and down. The papers came out with headlines about Duval's drunken piloting, and likewise the broad accusations I had made so publicly against the Corey outfit. We had to stay marooned in the office to keep away from swarms of curious people who were around watching mechanics get the Ward right side up and cleaning away the wreckage of the collision between Jennings and myself.

It was around three o'clock, and we were munching badly heeded sandwiches when the phone rang for the fifty-ninth time. This time, however, it was not a reporter. It was the chief mechanic's voice.

"I've got the chemist's report, sir!" he told me, his voice shaking with excitement. "That gas is all clogged up. Looks like some one painted the inside of the tank with metallic paint. It did no harm at first, but after a while it began to dissolve, and it ruined the gas. It stood up while you were flying across the country. When we look at the inside of the tank I am sure we'll find out that I'm right!"

"Okay," I yelped, and hung up.

I told the others about it, and Duval interjected, "Let's drain the tank and make sure, and then call Detroit. I'll bet a thousand to one this is the first time it's ever happened on a

Ward. They're certainly not painting the inside of their tanks unless they've tested out the paint first. It may be, lads, that you'll find a connection between Tubby McFane's being in Detroit and this new paint—"

"And it may be," bellowed Benton, "that the Ward Company will feel so responsible for the damage done us that we can make a deal!"

Just as this was permeating my consciousness, the phone rang again and I picked it up. It was Bobby Agnew on the wire, yowling for Benton. Benton listened and grunted, hawed and snorted monosyllabic interruptions to the steady flow of conversation from the other end. He hung up and faced us, his black eyes glowing, and his fingers making his mane of coarse black hair look more like a tangled thicket than ever.

"Bobby's just succeeded in making a banker friend of his persuade a banker friend of his to tell business secrets!" he rumbled. "The Corey Company, according to all the dope, is going to be in a hell of a jam themselves two weeks from now, when notes come due. Six ships that they built were turned back by some company in Florida as not being up to specifications. They've been losing money hand over fist, and this banker has the impression that there's something phony about their stock selling. That is, they sold an issue of stock on financial statements that weren't exactly okay. That's just hearsay. The whole point is that unless this bank bird Corey does business with is all wrong, they haven't got any more money than we have—which is none at all!"

"Great!" yelped Duval. "That means they're in splendid condition to do something even more open against us than they've been doing in the past. As long as there's the slightest chance that International might lean toward our side, they won't be comfortable; and they won't waste any time wiping us out, either!"

"Come on, let's see about that tank," I suggested. "We can always talk."

Well, it didn't take long to discover that the chief mechanic was absolutely right. A metallic paint had been applied to the interior of the big single gas tank that supplied all three motors, and was now almost completely eaten away. As a result the gas had become incombustible. The paint had stood up for many hours—long enough for me to get across the country—but finally the gas had worked on it, just in time for those motors to go bad at the worst possible time.

Benton turned to the Duke. His face worked a little bit.

"You know how glad I am, Duke," he said, as he thrust out his hand.

"You can't possibly know how glad I am," the Duke grinned, but I could fairly see the weight fall off his shoulders. I had almost forgotten that he was under twenty thousand dollars bail. What the penalty would have been for flying while drunk, and so endangering the lives of a dozen

or more people, I don't know; but it wouldn't have been a ticket to the theater.

I took a long breath. "We haven't got much to do from now on," I said, "so let's start. The first thing is a telephone call to Detroit. Great city, Detroit; but I doubt whether Tubby was there just to take in the sights."

That hunch grew stronger when word came from a highly excited gentleman in Detroit that McFane had been given practically the run of the airplane division, to study the construction of the ships on the excuse that Corey was thinking of placing an order for four of them for a new route to Seattle. Furthermore, there had been no change in their treatment of the inside of the tanks, and such a thing had never happened before. By unanimous consent, the Duke was elected to do the talking. For two reasons: his name meant as much to the whole flying business as that of any man in the game, and he possessed a tongue that tossed off words in a highly salubrious manner and possessed the nerve to use it. He sat there at the desk, radiating whole-souled enjoyment in the situation; and he had the officials in Detroit running around like waltzing mice, in less than two minutes. Before he'd got through, he had had words with old man Ward himself; and the fullest co-operation in investigating what had happened to the tank before the plane left Detroit. A definite adjustment of the financial damage done to Pacific Pilots was promised before he hung up. The Ward outfit would take full responsibility, if the facts were found to be as stated.

"We're on our way!" he yelped as he turned from the phone, "and we're going to get somewhere, John."

And happily enough, because it was the Duke who said it, even John believed it.

The aforementioned hunch became a practical certainty when Agnew arrived from town with the additional information that McFane was an extremely heavy stockholder in Corey, although just how he had got his hands on the money, or had otherwise been enabled to get control of so much stock, was shrouded in mystery.

I imagine it would have been quite a treat to have been a fly on the wall of that office, listening to the four of us discussing everything backwards and forwards, while we waited for something to happen. We tried to get in touch with Munson, the International man, but it was no good. If he proved to be a good egg, my scheme was to take him in on everything and get a little co-operation from him if possible; but he could not be found anywhere. We positively refused to make any statement to the press, and so the matter of the gas and Duval's innocence was unknown to the general public. Which was lucky for us.

It was seven o'clock at night when it came my turn to answer the phone. On the other end was none other than Jennings.

"I don't know just what to make of it, lieutenant," he jabbered excitedly, "but I went over and asked for a job. I said I'd do anything to get even with you people. I talked to old man Corey—McFane wasn't there—and he made me a funny proposition."

"Well, what was it?" I barked at him. You could have cut the silence in that office with a knife.

"He offered me two hundred dollars to disappear completely from California, beat it away secretly without letting anybody know anything about it."

"When?" I snapped.

"To-night."

"Did you take it?"

"Yes. I didn't know what else to do. He made it absolutely plain that I must not let anybody I knew see me or know anything about my disappearance. He said he'd give me an old Ford out there at the airport, and I could drive by out-of-the-way routes to Mexico. He used the excuse that if I was around, you people might try to prove that there was some connection between me and them—you know, charge that I was working for Corey when I did what I did this morning. I didn't dare come out to the field, for fear I might be seen and they'd get wise."

"All right, hold the phone," I snapped and relayed the news to the others.

"You know what I think?" Duval said eagerly. "They're going to pull something this very night, and if Jennings disappears, what happens will be laid to him. They'll say he wanted to get revenge on us. Then their man won't have a thing to worry about. If something happens to us, the police will go for Jennings the first thing. He's nowhere around—he's disappeared—open and shut case. Corey isn't concerned.—It's just the revenge of an old employee. Their line will be to pretend they know nothing about it."

In a minute we had come to a conclusion.

"Take the Ford, beat it away, and lay low in some town fifteen or twenty miles from here," I ordered Jennings over the phone. "Call us when you get set, so we'll know where you are.—You say you couldn't get any information about what they've got up their sleeve?"

"No, sir."

"All right, get under way; and don't forget to call the airport.—Don't go to a hotel. Go to some little rooming house or private home.".

When I hung up the phone, one of the finest talking quartets that ever got together started talking a mile a minute. When things finally got quieted down a little, Bobby Agnew, who had a brain like a steel trap, summed up the result of all our hysterical whoops.

"They've got their backs to the wall, and they're going to make a move to-night and try to blame it on Jennings, according to the way we figure," he said. "If we're right, the only move they could make would be to try to destroy our equipment in some way. If we're right about their reasons for wanting Jennings to disappear, there can't be many men concerned in it. But one of these broke gypsy flyers who hangs around Hollywood starving to death and smuggling aliens across the border would be their meat. He'd be the kind who's willing to break his neck in the pictures for twenty-five bucks. One flyer with a couple of bombs could fly over here, blow up the hangars, and beat it on into Mexico; and undoubtedly there are a hundred men around this town who'd do it for five hundred bucks. Then Corey would buy out what was left at a receiver's sale, and could hold up International for plenty. Everybody in the world would believe that Jennings was the flyer who did it."

There was silence for a second. I tried to find some flaw in the reasoning, but I couldn't. I don't suppose there's any other town in America where aerial pineappling, instead of the Chicago or ground brand, would be logical. But Agnew had not exaggerated about the number of funny eggs—airmen, cowboys, and what not—who were milling around Hollywood absolutely broke. I knew for a fact that the percentage of so-called picture flyers who picked up spare coin by flying an occasional Chink from Tia Juana and dropping him in some field around Los Angeles was as high as the percentage of fusel oil in bootleg liquor.

"Okay then," Agnew said. "I've got some weight around this town, and I might as well start to swing it."

I don't know why—probably it was because the continuous nervous strain of that day had got us all to a point where we believed in Santa Claus and thought in terms of Deadwood Dick—but we went about making our arrangements with sublime confidence that everything would happen as we were laying it out. Agnew went down town and personally saw the chief of police and the chief of detectives. Every flying field within twenty miles of Los Angeles was being watched within an hour. Dicks were lurking around both the Corey field and our own, and the word was broadcast to report instantly any ship in the air. Two cops who could handle machine guns with ease and efficiency were at our airport, with chutes strapped on them, ready to go. Duval and Benton, who had suddenly got to be such friends that alongside of 'em Damon and Pythias would have seemed like a civil war, had an amusing argument as to which one was to fly the cops if it became necessary. It was funny to listen to them, each being careful not to say anything that the other might take amiss. They were eager to agree on everything—an aye for an aye and a toot for a toot, as it were. It had been agreed that two of us were to stay at the airport as a kind of left line of defense against anything that might happen; and that in the air one ship, with two machine gunners aboard, would be sufficient to handle any reasonable opposition.

Benton won when he said doggedly, "I'm the one most responsible for the company being in the shape it's in, and I'm the only one who hasn't done anything to help pull it out!"

The two chiefs had been told everything although the cops were not certain what it was all about. If any ship tried to leave an airport they would see to it that it would never leave the ground. But we were taking no chances on its coming from some hideaway spot.

It was midnight when that happened—and it did happen. The phone rang, and a ship was reported above Hermura. Instantly, Benton and the cops leaped into action and the motor of a Douglas roared into life. They had kept it warmed up, and the airport had been guarded against all visitors in order to prevent, if possible, our preparations from becoming known. That other ship, if it was on the way to do us damage, almost certainly would not be armed. Forcing it down—saving the pilot alive if possible—should be fairly simple.

As the Douglas roared upward in the rays of the big landing light, I rubbed my hands gleefully.

"Well, Duke," I said, "I've got a hunch that it's no wild goose chase. If I'm right, Sherlock Holmes has got nothing on us!"

Agnew had gone into town, digging away on more information about the Corey outfit, and trying to raise some money for his own company.

"I've got the same feeling," chirped Duval. "What I'm thinking is that, if we are right, how we're going to cash in on

it!"

"For one thing," I said, "the reputation of this place will be okay after everything comes out. It'll be bought out by International for sure, and financing through the temporary troubles should not be hard. Maybe old man Ward will help out. He ought to."

"Oh, sure," Duval agreed. "We'll be all right. But I've just been trying to figure exactly how we ought to work it."

"You're counting your chickens before you've got any eggs," I reminded him. "We're still taking a lot for granted."

We fell silent, both of us walking around restlessly. The Duke would have given plenty to be in action. The drone of the Douglas's motor had receded until it was barely audible.

Then suddenly I cocked an ear and inclined it northward. A new sound had reached me. There was another ship in the air, and no ship could have got that close from Hermura so fast. The next second, vaguely visible in a sky made bright by the lights of Los Angeles, there bulked a Corey transport.

"It's ten to one that the second our ship took the air, the Corey outfit figured the jig was up and that we were wise," the transfigured Duval yelled. "I'll bet anything that's Corey and McFane, and maybe one or two others, beating it while the beating's good!"

"You're right!" I yelped.

As we ran toward the line, for no particular reason, my brain was working faster than my legs—and they were working fast enough. Striving to put myself in the place of Corey and McFane, I realized that I would probably have figured that only some unusual circumstance could be the reason for one of our ships taking off from our airport at midnight. And under the circumstances, if I had had a ship on the way to bomb the port, I knew that I most certainly would have figured that the chances were strong that my scheme had been discovered, and would have taken off for Mexico.—If I was wrong, no harm would be done. If I was right, I would have saved myself from arrest.

The Duke was yelling orders all the while, but I didn't know what he was saying. One thing I did know, however. We were going to get up in the air and find out whether we were right or not.

Assistants came running with parachutes as the motor of the waiting Douglas caught and mechanics warmed it up with dangerous speed.

"That transport means that we're right all along the line," yelled the Duke as I buckled on the 'chute.

As I think back on it, I don't remember calling for the 'chutes at all; and neither does the Duke, but they say one of us did. But I'll swear that I, personally, had absolutely no plan except to get close to the transport and make sure who was in it. Duval says he didn't have any more of a plan than I did.

A moment later we were taking off.

CHAPTER V.

BREAKS.

The transport's course was about three miles west of the airdrome. It wasn't making over a hundred miles an hour—a Corey couldn't make more than a hundred and ten, and the Douglas could make a hundred and forty, wide open. We overhauled that big ship so fast that it seemed to be hanging stationary in the sky, and when we got close to it I saw seated side by side, Tubby McFane at the controls and old man Corey peeking out from behind his whiskers. Duval, who was doing the flying in the front cockpit, turned. He grinned beatifically.

Tubby McFane waved at us. I guess the mold was broken after he was manufactured. I don't know that I've ever met any one who gradually impressed me as being such a thoroughly bad boy. Neither scruples nor the fear of God was in him.

I don't know whether it was that insolent wave of McFane's that caused the Duke to make up his mind, or whether, as is more likely, that smiling hellion before me would have done what he did anyway. I do know that two things caused me to yell my consent to the scheme that the

Duke, cutting the motor so that he could make himself heard, yelled into my gently waving ear. I think if it had been any other flyer in the world except Duval who was going to do the flying, I'd have said no. I like to be at the stick when my neck's in danger. I might not have said yes even to the Duke if it hadn't been that I had a score to settle with Tubby McFane. Not only is Lieutenant Slimuel X. Evans far from famous for his good sense, but as the Duke shoved the throttle ahead again, your Uncle Slimuel was feeling crazy enough to participate in anything.

Four thousand feet high, with the great sea of light that was Los Angeles to our right, and the Rockies to our left, the two men we were most anxious to get were within a hundred feet of us, flying toward Mexico and safety. They had on parachutes, too, evidently planning on a long and dangerous flight over the jungles of Mexico.

The Duke opened the Liberty motor wide. It shot upward like a grasshopper trying to make a record. A hundred feet above the huge transport, he throttled until the two planes were flying at the same speed.

The Corey's broad, stubby fuselage and huge wings spread out below us invitingly. I took a glance at the ground below. There were open fields, all of them small. Then, bit by bit, Duval throttled the motor as we began a dive. I must have had my second wind, after that long and exhausting day.

I didn't seem to have a nerve in my body, and the thought of failure was not in my mind at all. I can't imagine to this day why I wasn't scared to death. I guess I'd had so many

shocks that I was numb. As for the Duke—he was flying through what was for him the Seventh Heaven.

Anyway, we came down toward the transport in a shallow dive. They couldn't possibly see us from their enclosed cockpit. I have never seen better flying in my life. Pardon me for whooping in a wild-eyed manner, but after that first and last flight of mine with the Duke, I would be willing to bet that he could land the DO-X on a dime. I also wouldn't care to fly with him in it, for fear he would insist on doing the same, if it came into his mind.

Finally we were hovering ten feet above the transport. Duval cut the motor entirely, and the big ship slid away in front of us. Then he nosed down further, and gave it one last burst. He jerked back on the stick. We were going at almost exactly the same speed as the Corey. The Douglas hovered; and just as the big ship was starting to ease ahead, we clumped down on its back on wheels and tail skid, in a perfect three pointer! I felt our wheels crunch through the linen and wood of the front part of the big ship.

At that second, my belt unfastened and my right hand on the rip cord ring at my side, I left that vicinity with the uncontrollable gasp of fear which I always give vent to when I jump into space wearing on my back a pack which is supposed to open. It always has worked—and yet some time it might not!

For some reason or other, I didn't turn over and over as I usually do and I had a dimmed, blurred impression of what happened. I saw Duval jump just as the transport staggered drunkenly, and it must have been that the startled McFane pulled back on the wheel. Anyway, the Douglas sort of slid back down the fuselage, toward the tail of the big ship. As I pulled the rip cord ring of my 'chute and bent double with the shock as the big umbrella bellied open, the roar of the transport's motors ceased abruptly. The tearing crash as our ship tumbled off the tail came like a thunderclap.

Swinging in terrifying arcs below my 'chute, which was a hundred feet below Duval's, I saw Corey and McFane bail out of their crippled ship as its nose settled for the last dive to earth.

"Smoked 'em out!" Duval yelled, a wild laugh in his voice. "I'll be with you in a second!"

For a minute I couldn't imagine what he meant. Then I saw him hauling on his shroud lines until he had one side of his 'chute down and was dropping almost twice as fast as I was. When he got about even with me, and not more than a hundred feet to one side of me, he released it. We dropped side by side, five hundred feet below McFane and Corey!

"I don't like to shout!" he called to me. "Boy, wasn't that a darb? I knew there was some reason why I left that oil company flat!"

"Now that we've got those bozos, what are we going to do with them?" I inquired. "Suppose they've got guns?"

"Probably they have," the Duke answered complacently. "We'll have time to get to the place where they'll land, and we'll be waiting for them there."

They were several hundred feet to one side of us, and fully five hundred feet higher, as I said. Just at that moment the Douglas hit the ground and blew up with the loudest report I had ever heard—until fifteen seconds later, when the transport plowed into the ground. The explosion of the big ship I'm sure must have knocked the earth slightly off its course. The gas tank blew up, and for a few seconds the countryside was so light that I wouldn't have been surprised if a few hens got confused and laid their morning eggs. Then the two wrecks subsided into a bonfire, which assisted me no little in deciding which way to slip my 'chute for a landing.

We couldn't tell whether the two above us were armed or not, because Tubby had on overalls and the old man a fur-lined flying suit.

"Hell, they can't escape!" I yelled to Duval. "They've got not a Chinaman's chance of getting away now!"

And they hadn't. Only an occasional house dotted the landscape in our vicinity, and one of us could get to a phone with reasonable speed and have an airplane or so out keeping tabs on them before they could even get to an automobile. So I personally decided to be thankful if I landed safely, and I concluded I'd take no chances prowling through the darkness after those two cookies. Mr. Tubby McFane was a very sour

pickle under any conditions; and under those immediately obtaining, he doubtless would prefer to be caught dead rather than alive.

However, we got a break. We both landed in an open field, and a minute or so later, we watched McFane end up with his 'chute caught in the branches, himself hanging limply, with his feet only a few inches from the ground.

"I'll get him!—You take the old man!" yelled Duval. He was closest to Tubby.

The old man landed in the open, while I made for him like a kangaroo in a hurry. He was dragged until his 'chute caught on a fence, and even then he didn't get up. He tried to, but he couldn't. When I got to him I found that he had a broken leg.

"Well, Mr. Corey," I said as I unsnapped his 'chute, "I guess this big business battle is about over, don't you think?"

He just glared at me out of his little red-rimmed eyes. A tough old customer he was behind his Santa Claus foliage!

The Duke was staggering toward us, carrying the unconscious McFane. By the time a car with an excited man and woman in it had steamed up the road only a hundred yards or so away, and as we were getting the cripples to a farmer's house, I could see that two ships were landing on the Pacific Pilots' airdrome, where only one had taken off.

"See that?" inquired Duval, waving toward the airdrome. He was radiant. It was moments such as had just passed which made life worth while, as far as he was concerned.

"I hope so," I stated in a heartfelt manner. The reaction was setting in on me hard. "In the days when I was young and salty," I went on, "a little excitement went very nicely. But right now a rocking chair is my idea of a thrill!"

"I'll bet we can all have one on top of the world now," stated the Duke as he climbed into the car. "I've got a leaping, crawling hunch that the roundup's complete!"

And so it proved to be. An hour later, our prisoners on their way to town in a police ambulance, we arrived at the airdrome to discover that there were two powerful, home-made bombs on the Corey ship which John had rounded up while we were gone. The "peelot" thereof spouted what he knew. He had dealt exclusively with Tubby McFane.

McFane and Corey refused to say a cockeyed word, but they didn't need to; and if you don't think that the newspapers had a holiday, you're crazy.

Benton and Duval were suddenly the biggest men in town, though of course the Duke was the bigger of the two.

Bobby Agnew likewise became a big shot. When I left, two days later, the deal with International was all set, including the services of Benton as general manager for the western division for International Airways. Duval was chief pilot.

Me? Oh, I'm living the quiet and genteel life of a Border Patrolman at McMullen, Texas. I gallop a DeHaviland up

and down the Rio Grande, and the boys out in Los Angeles who are fighting for gold and glory—and picture actresses—have my blessing.

THE END.

[The end of *Hot Airmen* by Thomson Burtis]