

Algis Budrys - The Nuptial Flight of Warbirds



I would love to be a pilot. Someday, everything willing, I shall be. When my sister, who is French, tired of reading to me from Robinson Crusoe in an accent which rendered "parrot" as "pirate," and thus charmingly confused me, she read to me from Night Flight and the other aviation volumes of Sainte-Exupery. I think Only Angels Have Wings is the greatest junk motion picture ever made, with the possible exception of Star Wars. One of my favorite books is Richard Bach's Stranger to the Ground, which I found long before anyone had heard of Jonathan Livingston Seagull, and another is Nothing by Chance. When I was a lad on a chicken farm, I built, on a porch, a contraption with control surfaces connected to a working stick and rudder-bar. I sat in it for hours, aviating.

The aviation books in my attic, guest room, living room, cellar, and office would startle Martin Caidin by their number. There was no greater fan than I, once, of G8 and His Battle Aces, though I could not obtain very many copies, and my first fan letter to an editor went not to Planet Stories but to an air war pulp. I find the rarely seen opening sequence of Breaking the Sound Barrier is some of the most exciting black-and-white film footage ever shot. Once in a while, my friend Frank Stankovich, the chopper motorsickel fork king who also chromed the three-bearing crankshaft of my Rapier, used to take me for a ride in his Luscombe tail-dragger. But it didn't have a stick. And once I wrote scripts for industrial films. Another time, I worded for girlie magazines. And by the time I wrote this story, I had finished Michaelmas. But I remember--oh, I

remember--the Saturday my father would not let me go to the Beacon and see not only Episode Four of Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe but, also, ah, Dawn Patrol. Hello, Mr. Flynn. Happy landings. Happy landings, Frank.

The Nuptial Flight of Warbirds

THE WOMAN GASPED slightly as he began to see her. Dusty Haverman smiled comfortably, extending his lean arm in its brocaded scarlet sleeve, white lace frothing at his wrist. He tilted the decanter over the crystal stem glass shimmering in the stainless air of the afternoon, and rosy clarity swirled within the fragile bell. "You'll enjoy that," he said to her. "It doesn't ordinarily travel well."

She was very pale, with dark, made-up eyes and lips drawn a startling red. A lavender print scarf was bound around her neck-length smoke-black hair, and she wore a lavender voile dress with a full calf-length skirt and a bellboy collar. Below the collar, the front of the dress was open to the waist in a loose slit.

She sat straight in her chair. Her plum-colored nails gripped the ends of the decoratively carved wooden arms. The breeze, whispering over the coarse grass that grew in odd-shaped meadows between the lengths of sandy concrete, stirred her hair. She looked around her at the sideboard, the silver chafing dishes of hot hors d'oeuvres, the Fragonard and the large Boucher hung on ornate wooden racks, the distant structures and the marker lights thrusting up here and there from the edges of the grass. She watched Haverman carefully as he sank back into his own chair, crossed his knees, and raised his own glass. "To our close acquaintanceship," he was saying in his slightly husky voice, a distinguished-looking man with slightly waving silver hair worn a little long over the tops of the ears, and a thin-ish, carefully trimmed silver mustache hovering at the rim of the rose cordial. He wore a white silk ascot.

The woman, who had only a very few signs of latter twentyishness about the skin of her face and the carriage of her body, raised one sooty eyebrow. "Where are we?" she asked. "Who are you?"

Haverman smiled. "We are at the juncture of runways twenty-eight Left and forty-two Right at O'Hare International Airport. My name is Austin Gelvarry."

The woman looked around again, more quickly. Her silk-clad knee bumped the low mahogany table between them, and Haverman had to reach deftly to save her glass. She settled back slowly. "It certainly isn't Cannes," she agreed. She reached for the wine, keeping one hand spread-fingered over the front of her bosom as she leaned. Her eyes did not leave Haverman's face. "How did you do this?"

Gelvarry smiled. "How could I not do it, Miss Montez? Ah, ah, no, don't do that! Don't press so hard against your mouth. *Sip*, Miss Montez, please! Withdraw the glass a slight distance. Now draw the upper lip together just a suggestion, and *delicately* impress its undercurve upon the swell of the edging. *Sip*, Miss Montez. As if at a blossom, my dear. As if at a chalice." He smiled. "You will get to like me. I was in the Royal Flying Corps, you know."

Just at first light, the mechanics would have the early patrol craft lined up on the cinders beside the

scarred turf of the runway. They would waken Gelvarry with the sound of the propellers being pulled through. He would lie-up in his cot, his eyes very wide in the dim, listening to the *whup, whup, whup!*

The mechanics ran in three-man teams, one team for each of the three planes in the flight. One would be just letting go the lower tip of the wooden airscrew and jumping a little sideward to turn and double back. One would be doubling back, arms pumping for balance, head cocked to watch the third man, who would be just jumping into the air, arms out, hands slightly cupped to catch the tip of the upper blade as it started down.

They ran in perfect rhythm, and they would do this a dozen times before they attempted to start the aircraft. They said it was necessary to do this with the Trompe L'Oiel engine, which was a French design.

Sergeant-Major MacBanion had instituted this drill. If it were not performed precisely, the cylinder walls would not be evenly lubricated when the engines were started. The cylinder walls would score, and very likely seize-up a piston, and all you fine young gentlemen would be dropping your arses, beg pardon (with a wink) all over the perishing map of bleeding Belgium. Then he knocked the dottle out of his pipe, scratched the ribs of the little gray monkey he liked to carry, and turned his shaved neck to shout something to an Other Rank.

Sar'n-Major Mac's speaking voice was sharp and confident, and his manner assertive, in dealing with matters of management. In speaking to Gelvarry and the other flying personnel, however, he was more avuncular, and it seemed to Gelvarry that he saw more than he sometimes let on.

Gelvarry, who was hoping for assignment soon to the high squadron, reckoned that Sergeant-Major MacBanion might have more to do with that than his rank augured for. Nominally, he was only in charge of instruction for transitioning to high squadron aircraft, but since Major Harding never emerged from his hut, it was difficult to believe he was not dependent on Sergeant Major MacBanion for personnel recommendations.

Gelvarry swung his legs over the side of the cot, taking an involuntary breath of the Nissen hut's interior. Gelvarry's feet had frosted a bit on a long flight the previous week and were quite tender. He limped across the hut, arranging his clothes, and went over to the washstand.

Gelvarry felt there was no better high squadron candidate in the area at the present time. Barton Fisher of XIV Recon Wing had more flight time, but everyone knew Armed Chase flew harder, and Gelvarry had been in Armed Chase for the past year, now being definitely senior man at this aerodrome and senior flying personnel in the entire MC Armed Chase Wing. "I should like very much to apply for assignment to the high squadron, Sir," he rehearsed as he brushed his teeth. But since he had no idea what Major Harding looked like, the face in the mottled fragment of pier glass remained entirely his own.

He spat into the waste bucket and peered at the results. His gums were evidently still bleeding freely. Squinting into the mirror, he lathered his face cold and began shaving with a razor that had been most indifferently honed by Parkins, the batman Gelvarry shared with the remainder of his flight in the low squadron. Parkins had been reduced from Engine Artificer by Sar'n-Major Mac, and quite right. "Give 'im a drum of oil and a stolen typewriter," Gelvarry grumbled as he scraped at the gingery stubble on his pale cheeks. "He'll jump his bicycle and flog 'em in the village for a litre of Vouvray."

He rubbed his face with a damp gray towel full of threads and bent to stare out the end window. The weather was expectable; mist just rising, still snagged a little in the tops of the poplars; eastern sky giving

some promise of rose; and the windsock pointing mendaciously inward. By the time they'd completed their sweep, low on petrol and ready for luncheon and a heartfelt sigh, it would have shifted straight toward Hunland and God help the poor sod who attempted the feat of gliding home on an engine stopped by fuel shortage or, better yet, enemy action also involving injury to flying personnel. All up then, my lad, and into the *Lagerkorps* at the point of some *gefreiter's* bayonet, to spend the remainder of the war laying railroad lines or embanking canals, *Gott Mit Uns* and *Hoch der Fuehrer!* for the Thousand Year Empire, God grant it mischief.

In fact, Gelvarry thought, going out of the hut and running along the duckboards with his shoulders hunched and his hands in his pockets, the only good thing about the day to this point was that his headache was nowhere near as bad as it deserved to be. Perhaps there was truth in the rumor that Issue mess brandy had resumed being shipped from England. It had lately been purchased direct under plausible labels from blue-chinned peasant gentlemen who cut prices in deference to the bravery of their gallant allies.

"Get out of my way, you creature," he puffed to Islingden, John Peter, Flying Officer, otherwise third Duke of Landsdowne, who was standing on the boards with a folded *Gazette* under his arm, studying the sky. "If you're done in there, show some consideration." They danced around each other, arms out for balance, "Nigger Jack" Islingden clutching the *Gazette* like a baton, his large teeth flashing whitely against his olive-hued Landsdowne complexion, introduced via a Spanish countess by the first Duke, neither of them wishing to step off the slats into the spring mud, their boot toes clattering, until Gelvarry at last gained entrance to the officers' latrine.

The dampness rising from the ground was all through his bones. Gelvarry shivered without cease as he sprinted along the cinder track toward his SE-5, beating his arms across his chest. He paused just long enough to scribble a receipt for the aircraft and return the clipboard to the Chief Fitter, found the reinforced plate at the root of the lower plane, stepped up on it and dropped into the cockpit, his hands smearing the droplets of dew on the leather edging of the rim. He felt himself shaking thoroughly now, proceeding with the business of handsignalling the other two pilots--Landsdowne and a sergeant pilot named O'Sullivan--and ensuring they were ready. He signalled Chocks Out, and the ground personnel yanked sharply at the lines, clearing his wheels and dropping flat to let his lower planes pass over.

As soon as he jassed the throttle to smooth his plugs and build takeoff power, a cascade of water blew back into his face from the top of the mainplane, and he stopped shivering. He glanced left and right, raised his arm, flung his hand forward, and advanced the throttle. The trim little Bristol, responsive as a filly, leapt forward. For a few moments, she sprang and rebounded to every inequality of the turf, while her flying wires sang into harmony with the increasing vibration of the engine and airscrew. The droplets on the doped fabric turned instantly into streaks over the smoke-colored oil smears from the engine. Then there was suddenly the smooth buzzing under his feet of the wheels rotating freely on their axles, all weight off, and the SE-5 climbed spiritedly into the dawn, trailing a momentary train of spray that glistened for an instant in the sunlight above the mist. Soon enough, the remaining condensation turned white and opaque, forming little flowers where the panes of his windscreen were jointed into their frames. Gelvarry held the stick between his knees and smoothed his gloves tighter over his hands, which retained little trace of their former trembling.

Up around Paschendaele they were dodging nimbly among some clouds when Gelvarry suddenly plucked his Very pistol from its metal clip in the cockpit and fired a green flare. Nigger and O'Sullivan jerked their courses around into exact conformity with his as they, too, now saw the *staffel* of Albatros

falling upon them. They pointed their noses up at a steep angle toward the *Boche*, giving the engines more throttle to prevent stalling, and briefly testing the firing linkages of their twin Vickers guns. Tracer bullets left little spirals of white smoke in the air beyond Gelvarry's engine, to be sucked up immediately as he nibbled in behind them. He glanced at Landsdowne and Paddy, raising one thumb. They clenched their fists and shook them, once, twice, toward the foe who, mottled with garish camouflage, dropped down with flame winking at the muzzles of the Spandau *maschिंगewehren* behind the gleaming arcs of their propellers.

Gelvarry felt they were firing too soon. Nevertheless, there was an abrupt drumming upon his left upper plane, and then a ripping. He saw a wire suddenly vibrate its middle portion into invisibility as a slug glanced from it. There was no damage of consequence. He held his course and refrained from firing, only thinking of how the entire aircraft had quivered to the drumming, and of how when the fabric split it was as if something swift and hot had seared across the backs of his hands. It was Gelvarry's professional opinion that such moments must be fully met and studied within the mind, so that they lose their power of surprise.

There were eight Albatros in the diving formation, he saw, and therefore there might be as many as four more stooging about in the clouds waiting to follow down stragglers.

The stench of overheated castor oil came back from his engine and coated his lips and tongue. He pushed his goggles up onto his forehead, hunched his face down into the full lee of the windscreen, and now, when it might count, began firing purposeful short bursts.

The Albatros is a difficult aircraft to attack headon because it has a metal propeller fairing and an in-line engine, so that many possible hits are deflected and the target area is not large. On the other hand, the Albatros is not really a good diver, having a tendency to shed its wings at steeper angles. Gelvarry had long ago reasoned out that even an apparently sound Albatros mainplane is under considerable stress in a dive, and so he fired a little above the engine, hoping to damage the struts or even the main spar, but noting that as an inevitable consequence there might also be direct or deflected hits on the windscreen. He did not wish to be known as a deliberate shooter of pilots, but there it was.

The *staffel* passed through the flight of SE-5s with seven survivors, one of which, however, was turning for home with smoke issuing from its oil cooler. The three British aircraft, necessarily throttling back to save their engines, began to mush out of their climbing attitude. Three Albatros which had been waiting their turn now launched a horizontal attack.

His head swivelling while he half-stood in the cockpit, searching, Gelvarry saw the three fresh Albatros emerge from the clouds. Below him, six of the original assault were looping up to rejoin. On his right, Paddy's aircraft displayed miscellaneous splinters and punctures of the empennage, and was trailing a few streamers of fabric, but appeared to be structurally sound. O'Sullivan, however, was beating at the breechblock of one of his guns with a wooden mallet, one hand wrapped around an interplane strut to hold him forward over the windscreen, the other busy with its hammering as it tried to pop out the overexpanded shell casing. His aircraft was wallowing as he inadvertently nudged the stick back and forth with his legs.

On the left, Nigger was nosedown, his airscrew windmilling, ropy smoke and pink fire blowing back over the cockpit. For a moment, the SE-5's ailerons quickly flapped into a new configuration, and the rudder and elevators came over as Landsdowne tried to sideslip the burning. But they were, in any case, at 7000 feet and at this height there was really no point to the maneuver. Landsdowne stood up in the cockpit as the aircraft came level again, saluted Gelvarry, and jumped, his collar and helmet thickly

trailing soot.

"So long, Nig," Gelvarry murmured. He glanced up. A mile above them, the silvery flash of sunlight upon the *Ticonderoga's* flanks dazzled the eye; nevertheless, he thought he could make out the attendant cloud of dark midges who were the high squadron. He looked to his right and saw that O'Sullivan was being hit repeatedly in the torso by gunfire, white phosphorus tracer spirals emerging from the plucked leather of his coat.

Gelvarry took in a deep breath. He pushed his aircraft into a falling right bank, kicked right rudder, and passed between two of the oncoming Nazis. He converted the bank into a shallow diving roll, and so went down through the climbing group of Albatros at an angle which made it useless for either side to fire. He had also placed all his enemies in such a relationship to him that they would have had to turn and dive at suicidal inclinations in order to overtake him as he darted homeward.

He flew above the remains of villages that looked like old bones awash in brown soup, and over the lines that were like a river on the moon, its margins festooned with wire to prevent careless Selenites from stumbling in. A high squadron aircraft dropped down and flew beside him for a while, as he had heard they sometimes did lately.

He glanced over at the glossy stagger-wing biplane, its color black except for the white-lettered unit markings, a red- and-white horizontally striped rudder panel, and the American cocardes with the five-pointed white star and orange ball in the center. The pilot was looking at him. He wore a pale yellow helmet, goggles that flashed in the sun, and a very clean white scarf. He raised a hand and waved reservedly, as one might across a tier of boxes at the concert hall. Then he pulled back on his stick and the black aircraft climbed away precipitously, so swiftly that Gelvarry half-expected a crackling of displaced air, but instead heard, very faintly over his own engine, the smooth roar of the other's exhaust. He found that his own right hand was still elevated, and took it down.

He came in over the poplars, and found that he was going to land cross-wind. Ground personnel raised their heads as if they had been grazing at the margins of the runway. He put it down anyhow, swung it about, and taxied toward the hangar, blipping the engine to keep the cylinder heads from sooting up, and finally cut his switch near where Sergeant-Major MacBanion was standing waiting with the little gray monkey perched on his right shoulder. As the engine stopped, the cold once again settled into Gelvarry's bones.

"All right, Sir?" Sar'n-Major Mac asked, looking up at him. The monkey, too, raised its little Capuchin face, the small lobstery eyes peering from under the brim of a miniature *kepi*.

Gelvarry put his hands on the cockpit rim, placed his heels carefully on the transverse brace below the rudder bar, and pushed himself back and up. Then he was able to slip down the side of the fuselage. He stood slapping his hands against his biceps.

Sergeant-Major MacBanion put a hand gently on his shoulder. "And the remainder of the flight, Sir?"

Gelvarry shrugged. He pulled off his helmet and goggles and stuffed them into a pocket of his coat. He stamped his feet, despite the heat. Then as the cold began to leave him, he merely stood running his hands up and down his arms, and hunching his back.

"Never mind, Sir," Sar'n-Major Mac said softly. "I've come to tell you we've had an urgent message. You're posted to high squadron immediately, Sir."

Gelvarry found himself weeping silently.

"Follow me to Major Harding's hut, please, Sir," Sergeant Major MacBanion said quietly and gravely. "Don't concern yourself about the aircraft--we'll see to it."

"Thank you," Gelvarry whispered. He walked behind the spare, erect figure to the Major's hut, watching the monkey gently waving the swagger stick. Then he waited outside, rubbing his hands over his cheeks, feeling the moisture trapped between his palm and the oil film on his skin. He hated the coating in his nostrils and on the roof of his mouth, and habitually scraped it off his lips between his teeth.

Sergeant-Major MacBanion came out of the dark hut, shut the door positively, said, "That's all right, then, Sir," turned his face slightly and shouted: "Private Parkins on the double if you please!"

Parkins came running up with a thud of boots on damp cinders and saluted energetically. "Yes, Sar'n-Major?"

"Parkins, I want you to list three reserve flying personnel with appropriate aircraft for this afternoon's sweep. Make it the three senior men. What flying personnel will that leave at this station during the afternoon hours?"

"Two, Sar'n-Major, in addition to this officer." Parkins nodded slightly toward Gelvarry without taking his eyes off Sergeant-Major MacBanion's steady gaze.

"Don't concern yourself with this officer, Parkins; Chaplain and I'll be taking care of him."

Parkins brought out the sapient manner he had been withholding. "Right, Sar'n-Major. I'll just have Major Harding send them other two officers over to Wing in the Rolls to sign for some engine spares, and that'll clear the premises nicely. I'll take the time to sort through this officer's kit for shipping home, then, as well, shall I?"

"I think not, Parkins," Sergeant-Major MacBanion said meaningly, and Parkins could be seen to bob his Adam's apple. "That is Major Harding's duty. That's what commanding officers are for." The thick, neatly clipped brows drew into a speculating frown. "You're slipping very badly, aren't you, Parkins? I wonder what a rummage through your duffel might turn up; I can't say I care for the smell of your breath."

"Hit's mouthwash, Sar'n-Major!" Parkins exclaimed. "A bit of a soother for me sore bicuspid, like!"

"I'll give you sore, Private Parkins; I surely will," Sergeant Major Mac declared. "Pull yourself together long enough to attend to your own tasks. You're to telephone Wing for three replacement flying personnel to join here tonight, correct? And there's the lorry and the working party to organize; I want this officer's aircraft crashed *and* burning, no doubt about it, *in* No Man's Land, *before* teatime, and *if* that's all quite sufficiently clear to you, my man, you *will* see to it forthwith!"

Parkins saluted, about-faced, and trotted off, sweating. The Sergeant-Major smiled thinly after him, then turned to Gelvarry. "This way, then, please, Sir," he said, and stepped onto the footpath worn through the scrub beside Major Harding's hut.

Following him, Gelvarry was startled to note the neatly cultivated domestic vegetable plot behind the rusty corrugated sheet iron of the Major's dwelling. There were seed packets up on little stakes at the ends of rows, and string stretched in a zigzag web for runnerbeans. Lettuce and carrots were poking up tentatively along one side, and most of the rows were showing early evidence of shooting. A spade with an officer's cap dangling over the handle was thrust into a dirt-encrusted pile of industrial furnace clinkers that had apparently been extracted from the soil.

"Padre!" Sergeant-Major MacBanion called ahead. "Here's an officer to see you!"

Father Collins thrust his head around the fly of his dwelling tent, which was situated beyond the shrubs screening Major Harding's hut from this far end of the aerodrome. He was a round-faced man of kindly appearance whom Gelvarry had occasionally seen in the mess, fussing with the Sparklets machine and otherwise making himself useful and approved of. He came and moved a little distance toward them along the path, and then waited for them to come up. He put out his hand to shake Gelvarry's. "Always here to be of help," he said.

Sergeant-Major MacBanion cleared his throat. "This'll be a high squadron posting, Padre."

Father Collins nodded a little crossly. "One gathers these things, Sergeant-Major MacBanion. Well, young fellah, let's get to it, then, shall we?" His expression softened and he studied Gelvarry's face carefully. "No need prolonging matters, then, is there? Not a decision to be taken lightly, but, once made, to be followed expeditiously, eh?" He put an arm around Gelvarry's shoulders. Gelvarry found himself grateful for the animal warmth; the cold had been at his ribs again. He went along up the path with Father Collins and Sar'n-Major Mac, and when they reached the little overgrown rise where Father Collins's tent was situated, he stopped. He found he was looking down at a revettment where the transition aircraft was kept.

He walked around and around, a slight smile on his lips, ducking under the planes and squeezing by the end of the rudder where it was nearly right up against the rear embankment. He ran his fingertips lightly over the impeccably doped fabric and admired the workmanship of the rudder and elevator hinges, the delicately shaped brass standoffs that gave extra purchase to the control cables. Everything was new; the smell of the aircraft had the tang of a fitter's storage locker.

He stopped and faced it from outside the revettment. The slim black aircraft pointed its rounded nose well up over his head; it was much larger than he'd expected from seeing one in the air; he'd thought perhaps the pilot was slightly built.

It rested gracefully upon its two fully spatted tires, with a teardrop-shaped auxiliary fuel tank nestled up between the fully faired landing gear struts. Its rest position on its tailskid set it on an angle such that the purposefully sturdy wings grasped muscularly at the air. A glycol radiator slung at the point of the cowling's jaw promised to sieve with jubilation through the stream hurled backward by the three-bladed metal airscrew.

There were very few wires; the struts appeared to be quite thin frontally, but were faired back for lateral strength. It would, yes it would, burgeon upward through the air with every ounce of power available from that promising engine hidden behind the lovingly shaped panels, and it would stoop like a bird of prey. It would not creak or whip in the air; its fuselage panels would not drum and ripple; the dope of its upper surfaces would not star and flake off under the compression of warping wings in a battle maneuver,

and one would not find, after twenty or thirty hours, that the planes and the stabilizer had been permanently shaken out of alignment with each other.

This aircraft had the same markings as the one that had flown down briefly, except for the actual numerals. In addition to the national cocardes, it also bore a unit insignia--a long-barreled flintlock rifle crossed upon a powderhorn.

Gelvarry felt a prickling pass along the short hairs of his forearms as he thought of flying under that banner. A great-great-uncle was reputed in his family to have been among that company vanished in search of Providence Plantations, as others had done in attempting to find Oglethorpe's Colony or the fabled inland cities of Virginia Dare's children. North America was a continent of endless forest and dark rumor. And yet something, it seemed--some seed possessed of patience--had been germinating *Ticonderogas* and aircraft construction works all the while, and within reach of Mr. Churchill's remarkable winnow.

"This is the Curtis P6E 'Hawk,'" Sar'n-Major Mac said at his elbow. "This model is the ultimate development of what will be considered the most versatile armed chase single-place biplane ever designed. The original airframe will be introduced in the mid-1920s. As you see it here, it is fitted with United States Army Air Corps-specified inline liquid-cooled four-stroke engine developing 450 horsepower, and two fixed quick-firing thirty-calibre machineguns geared to shoot through the airscrew. The U.S. Navy version, known as the 'Goshawk,' will use the Wright 'Whirlwind' radial air-cooled engine. Both basic versions are very highly thought of, will remain in service in the U.S. until the mid-1930s, and a few 'Hawk' versions will be used by the Republican air forces in the Spanish Civil War, should that occur."

Father Collins had been up at the cockpit, leaning in to polish the instrument glass with a soft white cloth. He came down now, pausing to wipe the step let into the fuselage and the place on the wing root where he had rested his other foot.

"All quite ready now," he said, carefully folding the cloth and putting it away in his open-mouthed black leather case. He rested his hand on Gelvarry's shoulder. "We've kept her in prime condition for you, lad. No one's ever flown her before; Sar'n-Major and I just ticked her over now and then, kept her clean and taut; the usual drill."

Gelvarry was nodding. As the moment drew near, he found himself breathing with greater difficulty. Tears were gathering in his eyes. He turned his face away awkwardly.

"Now, as for the hooking on," Sergeant-Major MacBanion was saying briskly, "I'm certain you'll manage that part of it quite well, Sir." He was pointing up at the trapeze hook fixed to the center of the mainplane like the hanger of a Christmas tree ball, and Gelvarry perforce had to look at him attentively.

"Pity there's no way to rehearse the necessary maneuver, Sir," Sar'n-Major Mac went on, "but they say it comes to one. Only a matter of matching courses and speeds, after all, and then just easing up in there."

Gelvarry nodded. He still could not speak.

"Well, Sir," the Sergeant-Major concluded. "Care to try a few circuits and bumps around the old place before taking her to your new posting? Get the feel of her? Some prefer that. Many just climb right in and go off. What'll it be, Sir?"

Gelvarry found himself profoundly disturbed. Something was rising in his chest. Father Collins looked at him narrowly and raised his free hand toward MacBanion. "Perhaps we're rushing our fences, Sergeant-Major. Just verify the cockpit appurtenances there and give us a moment meanwhile, will you?" He turned Gelvarry away fGelvarry found himself profoundly disturbed. Something was rising in his chest. Father Collins looked at him narrowly and raised his free hand toward MacBanion. "Perhaps we're rushing our fences, Sergeant-Major. Just verify the cockpit appurtenances there and give us a moment meanwhile, will you?" He turned Gelvarry away from the aircraft and sauntered beside him casually, his arm around Gelvarry's shoulders again.

"Troubles you, does it?"

Gelvarry glanced at him.

"But there was no doubt in your mind when you spoke to MacBanion about this, was there?"

Gelvarry blinked, then shook his head slowly.

"It's good sense, you know. You'd be leaving us the other way, shortly, if it weren't for this. Bound to." He dug in his pocket for his pipe and blew through it sharply to clear the stem. "Sergeant-Major's been discussing it for weeks. Thin as a charity widow, he's been calling you, and twice as pale, except for the Hennessey roses in your cheeks, beggin' all flyin' officers' pardon, Sir. He's been wanting to do something about it."

Gelvarry gave a high, short laugh.

Father Collins chuckled tolerantly. "Ah, no, no, Lad, hoping we'd make the choice for you is not the same. We always wait 'til the man requests it. Have to, eh? Suppose a man were posted on *our* say-so; liable to resent it, wouldn't he be, don't you think? Might kick up a fuss. Word of high squadron might reach Home. And we can't have that, now, can we?"

Gelvarry shook his head, walking along with his lips between his teeth, his lustrous eyes on his aimless feet.

"Mothers' marches on Whitehall, questions in Parliament--If they're alive, put 'em back on duty or bring 'em home to the shellshock ward--that sort of thing. Be an unholy row, wouldn't you think? And so much grief renewed among the loved ones, to say nothing of the confusion; it would be cruel. Or what would they say at the Admiralty if officers and gentlemen began discussing another Mr. Churchill, he cruising about the skies like the Angels of Mons, furthermore? For that matter, I imagine *their* Mr. Churchill would have quite a bit to say about it, and none of it pleasant to the tender ear, eh?"

Gelvarry smiled as well as he was able. He had never laid eyes on or heard the young Mr. Churchill; he imagined him a plump, shrill, prematurely balding fellow in loosely tailored clothing, gesturing with a pair of spectacles.

Father Collins gently turned Gelvarry back toward the aircraft. "We'll miss you, too, you know," he said quietly. "But we must move along now. It's best if other flying personnel can't be certain who's in high squadron and who's left us in the old stager's way, don't you agree? Gives everyone a bit of something to look forward to as the string shortens. MacBanion's a genius at clearing the field, but time *is* passing. Don't worry, Boy--Major Harding does a lovely job of seeing to it nothing's sent home as shouldn't be, and of course I'll be conveying the tidings by my own hand." They were back beside the P6E.

Sergeant-Major MacBanion was standing stiffly attentive, the monkey in the crook of his arm with one small hand curled around the butt of the swagger stick.

"I believe I'll try taking her straight out, Sergeant-Major," Gelvarry said.

"Right, Sir. That's the way! Just a few things to remember about the controls, Sir, and you'll find she goes along quite nicely."

"And thank you very much, Father. I appreciate your concern."

"Nonsense, my boy. Only natural. Just keep it in mind we're all still hitting the Bavarian Corporal where he hurts; high or low makes little difference. Bit more comfortable up where you'll be, I shouldn't wonder, but I'm sure you've earned it. Tenfold. Easily tenfold."

"Let my family down as easily as you can, will you, Father?" Gelvarry said.

"Ah, yes, yes, of course."

Gelvarry climbed up into the cockpit. He sat getting the feel of how it fit him. He waggled the stick and nudged the rudder--there were pedals for his feet, rather than a pivoted bar, but the principle was the same.

Sar'n-Major Mac got up on the lower plane root and leaned into the cockpit over him. "Here's your magneto switch, and that's your throttle, of course; some of these instruments you can just ignore--can't imagine why a real aviator'd want them, tell the truth--and this is a wireless telegraphy device, but you don't need *that*--can you imagine, from the way the seat's designed when Padre and I take 'em out of the shipping crate, I'd say you were intended to be sitting on a parachute, of all things; get yourself mistaken for a ruddy civilian, next thing--but this, here's, your supercharger cut-in."

"Supercharger?"

"Oh, right, right, yes, Sir, no telling how high you might find *Ticonderoga*; things could be a bit thin. And in that vein, Sir, you'll note this metal bottle with petcock and flexible tubing. That's your oxygen supply; simply place the end of the tube in your mouth, open the petcock as required, and suck on it from time to time at altitudes above 12,000 feet, or lower if feeling a bit winded. Got all that, Sir?"

"Yes, thank you, Sar'n-Major."

"Very good! Well, then Sir, Padre'll be wanting another brief word with you, and then anytime after that we'll just get her started, shall we? I understand the Navy type has a crank thing called an inertia starter, but the old familiar way's for us. After that, I'd suggest a little taxiing for the feel of the controls and throttle, and then just head her into the wind, full throttle, and pleasure serving with you, Sir, if I do say so. You'll find she favors her nose a little, so keep throttle open a bit until you bring her nearer to level; I imagine she stalls something ferocious. But there'll be no trouble; never had any trouble yet. Just head west and look about; you'll see your new post up there somewhere. Can't really miss it, after all--large enough. Anything else, Sir?"

"No. No, thank you, Ma--Sergeant-Major MacBanion."

MacBanion's right eyebrow had been rising. It dropped back into place. He patted Gelvarry manfully

atop the shoulder. "That's the way, Sir. Have a good trip, and think of us grubbing away down here, once in a while, will you?" He jumped from the lower plane and Father Collins came up, holding the bag. "Might be a longish flight, Son," he said. "You've had nothing to eat or drink since midnight, I believe. So you'll be wanting some of this." He opened the bag and handed Gelvarry a small flask and a piece of bread. "And there's windburn at those altitudes." He put ointment on Gelvarry's forehead and eyelids. "Have a safe flight," he said.

Gelvarry nodded. "Thank you again." When Father Collins jumped down, Gelvarry ducked his head below the level of the cockpit coaming and wiped his face. He put his arm straight up in the air and rotated his hand. Sergeant-Major MacBanion and he began the starting procedure.

The aircraft handled very well. He did a long figure eight over the aerodrome at low altitude after he'd gotten the feel of it. The ground personnel of course were busy at their various tasks. An unfamiliar figure learning with one foot on a garden spade waved up casually from behind Major Harding's hut. The monkey was perched on a new pineboard crate Father Collins and Sergeant Major MacBanion were manhandling down into the revetment from the back of an open lorry. As Gelvarry flew over, the little creature scrambled up to the apex of the tilting box, grinned at him, and raised its kept.

Past the field, Gelvarry did a creditable Immelmann turn, gained altitude, settled himself a little more comfortably on the cushion made from a gunneysack stuffed with rags, and flew toward the afternoon sun, looking upward.

The aircraft *was* a joy, he gradually realized. He probed tentatively at the pedals and stick, at first, hardly recognizing he was doing so because he was under the impression his mind was full of confusions and sorrows. But as he held steadily west, his back and his arse heavy in the seat, his mind began to develop a certain wire-hard incised detachment which he recognized from his evenings with the brandy. In fact, as he gained more and more altitude, and began to rock the wings jauntily and even to give it a little rudder so that he set up a slight fishtail, he could almost hear the messroom piano, as it was every day after nightfall, all snug around the stove, grinning at each other if they could, and roaring out: "Warbirds, Warbirds, ripping through the air/Warbirds, Warbirds, fighting everywhere/Any age, any place, any foreign clime/Warbirds of Time!"

Catching himself, Haverman slipped the oxygen tube into his mouth and opened the valve on the bottle. As the dry gas slid palpably into his mouth and down his throat, the squadron theme faded from the forefront of his mind, and he began to fly the aircraft rather than play with it. He reached out, his bared wrist numbly exposed for a moment between glove and cuff, and cut in the supercharger. There was a thump up forward of the firewall, and the engine note steadied. There was a faint, somewhat reassuring new whine in its note.

He began to feel quite himself again, encased within the indurate fuselage, his dark wings spread stiffly over the crystal-clear air below, the gleaming fabric inviolate as it hissed almost hotly through the wind of its passage. He took another pull on the oxygen. He gazed over the side of the cockpit. Down there, little aircraft were dodging and tumbling, their mainplanes reflecting sunlight in a sort of passionate Morse. He knew that message, and he drew his head back inside the cockpit. He resumed searching the deepened blue of the sky above him. And in a little bit, he saw a silver glint northwest of the sun. He turned slightly to aim straight for it, and flew steadily.

After a while, Gelvarry noticed that his throat was being dessicated by the steady flow of the oxygen. He shut the valve and spat out the tube. Pulling the Padre's chased silver flask from the bosom of his tunic, he drank from it. He also ate the cold dry bread. He did not feel particularly sustained by the snack, but the flask was quite nice as a present.

As he went, the distant speck took on breadth as well as length, and then details, size, and a gradual dulling down as the silvered cloth covering began to reveal some panels fresher than others, and the effect of varying hands at the brushwork of the doping. It now looked much as it did on those occasions when it hovered above the aerodrome and Mr. Churchill came down in his wicker car at the end of a cable, as he had done in addressing the squadron several times during Gelvarry's posting.

Ticonderoga in flight upon the same levels as the tropopausal winds, however, was even larger, somehow, and the light fell altogether differently upon it, now that he looked at it again. Boring purposefully onward, its great airscrews turning invisibly but for cyclic reflections, it filled the very world with a monster throbbing that Gelvarry could not hear as sound over the catlike snarlings of his own engine, but to which every surface of his aircraft, and in fact of his mouth and of the faceted goggles over his eyes, vibrated as if being struck by driving wet snow.

Ticonderoga suspended a dozen double-banked radial engines in teardrop pods abaft its main gondola; they seemed to float just below its belly like subsidiary craft of its own kind. Gelvarry, who had seen one or two Zeppelin warcraft, was struck by the major differences--*Ticonderoga's* smoothly tapered rather than bluntly rounded tail and bow; its almost fishlike control surfaces, with ventral and dorsal vertical stabilizers, and matching symmetrical horizontal planes, rather than the kitelike box-sections of the Fuehrer's designs; the many glassed compartments and blisters along the hull, and the smoothly faired main and after gondolas, rather than a single rope-slung control car. But the main thing was the size, of course. He resumed taking oxygen.

As he drew nearer, tucking himself into its shadow as if under a great living cloud, *Ticonderoga* began blinking a red light at him from a ventral turret just abaft the great open bay in its belly amidships. Then three aircraft launched from that yawning hangar, dropping one, two, three like a stick of bombs but immediately gaining flying speed and wheeling into formation around him. He saw their unit numbers were in sequence with his. He waved, and their three pilots waved back.

Gelvarry watched them, fascinated. They flew with mesmerizing precision, carving smooth arcs in the air as if on wires, showing no reaction at all to the turbulence back along *Ticonderoga's* hull. They circled him effortlessly; they in fact created the effect of fuming about him while really flying flat spirals along the dirigible's flight path. Gelvarry waved again to show his appreciation of their skis, barely remembering to breathe. His gauntleted hands touched lightly at his own stick and throttle, not so much to make changes as to remind himself that he was flying, too.

One of the P6Es had a commander's broad bright stripe belting its fuselage. As soon as it was clear Gelvarry understood enough to hold while they maneuvered, the flight leader could be seen bringing his wireless microphone to his lips and speaking to *Ticonderoga*. The landing trapeze came lowering steadily down out of the bay, and hung motionless, a horizontal bar streaming along across the line of flight at the end of its complicated looking latching tether.

The leader looked across at Gelvarry, light shining on his goggles, and pointed to one of the other

Hawks, which immediately moved out of formation and approached the trapeze. Gelvarry nodded so the leader could see it; they were teaching him. Then he watched the landing aircraft intently.

The hook rising out of the center of the mainplane was designed very much like a standard snap-hook. Once it had been pushed hard against the trapeze bar, it would open to hook around it, and then would snap shut. The trick, Gelvarry thought as he watched his squadronmate sway from side to side, was to center the hook on the bar at exactly the right height. Otherwise, the P6E's nose would be forced to one side or the other of the ideal flight line, and there might be embarrassing consequences.

But the pilot brought it off nicely, apparently unconcerned about tipping his airscrew into the tether or slashing his main-plane fabric with the trapeze. He sideslipped once to bring himself into perfect alignment, and put the hook around the bar with a slight throttle-blip that put one little puff of blue smoke out the end of his exhaust pipe. Then he cut throttle, the trapeze folded around the hook to make assurance doubly sure and he was drawn up into the hangar bay, *allez-ooop!* in one almost continuous movement.

In a moment, the trapeze came down again, and the second pilot did essentially the same thing. The other half of the trick was not to create significant differences between the forward speeds of the dirigible and the aircraft along their identical flight lines, and Gelvarry lightly touched his throttle again, without moving it just yet. But when he glanced across at the leader, he was being gestured forward and up, and the trapeze was once more waiting. The leader drifted down and to the side, where he could watch.

Gelvarry took in a good breath from the bottle and came up into the turbulence, well back of the trapeze but at about the right height. He took another breath, and his mind crisped. He touched the throttle with delicate purposefulness, and came inching up on the bar, which was rocking rhythmically from side to side until he put his knees to either side of the stick and rocked his body from side to side. Thus rocking the ailerons to compensate, thus revealing that the bar had been quite steady all along, and that he was now reasonably steady with it. He was coming in an inch or two off center. He gulped again at the tube. What can happen? he thought dispassionately, and twitched the throttle between thumb and forefinger, a left-handed pinball player's move. With a clash and a bang, the hook snapped over and the trapeze folded. He closed throttle and cut the magneto instantaneously, *slip-slap*, and he was already inside the shadow of the hangar, swaying sickeningly at the end of the tether, but already being swung over toward the landing stage, with a whine of gears from the tether crane, whose spidery latticework arm overhead blended into the shadowy, endlessly repeated lattice girders that formed frame after identical frame, a gaunt cathedral whose groins and mullions retreated into diminishing distances fore and aft, housing the great bulks of the helium bags, interlaced by crew catwalks and ladders, spotted here and there by worklights but illuminated in the main by the featureless old-ivory glow through the translucent hull material.

Suddenly there was no sound immediately upon his ears, except for the pinging of his exhaust pipes and cylinder heads. The great roaring of passage pierced into the air was gone. What was left instead was a distant buzz, and the sighing rush of air rubbing over the great fabric.

The P6E's tailskid, and then its tires, touched down on the landing stage. A covered man wearing a hood over his mouth and a bottle on his back stepped up on the lower plane, then reached to the mainplane and disengaged the hook from the trapeze, which was swung away instantly. Other aircraft handlers stood looking impatiently at Gelvarry, who lifted himself up out of the cockpit and down to the jouncy perforated-aluminum deck. Down past his feet, he could see the structures of the lower hull, and the countryside idling backward below the open bay before the leader's Hawk nosed blackly forward toward the trapeze.

He could see almost everywhere within the dirigible. Here and there, there were housed structures behind solid dural sheets or stretched canvas screens. Machinery--winches, generators, pumps--and stores of various kinds might interrupt a line of sight to some extent, but not significantly. Even the helium bags were not totally opaque. (Nor rigid, either; he could see them breathing, pale, and creased at the tops and bottoms, and he could hear their casings and their tethers creaking). He felt he could shout from one end of *Ticonderoga* to the other; might also spring into the air toward that stanchion, swing to that brace, go hand over hand along the rail of that catwalk, scramble up that ladder, swing by that cable to that inspection platform, slip down that catenary, rebound from the side of that bag, land lightly over there on the other side of the bay and present himself, grinning, to his fellow pilots standing there watching him now, all standing at ease, their booted feet spread exactly the same distance part, their hands clasped behind their backs, their cavalry breeches identically spotless, their dark tunics and Sam Browne belts all in a row above beltlines all at essentially the same height, their helmets on and their goggles down over their eyes.

He licked his lips. He glanced up guiltily toward the catwalk higher up in the structure, where a row of naked gray monkeys the size of large children was standing, paws along the railing, motionless, studying things. Gelvarry glanced aside.

The flight leader's plane was swung in and then rolled back to join the dozen others lashed down along the hangar deck. The man had jumped down out of the cockpit; he strode toward Gelvarry now. As he approached, Gelvarry saw his features were nondescript.

"You're to report to Mr. Churchill's cabin for a conference at once," he said to Gelvarry. He pointed. "Follow that walkway. You'll find a hatch forward of the main helium cells, there. It opens on the midships gondola. Mr. Churchill is waiting."

Gelvarry stopped himself in midsalute. "Aren't you going to take me there?"

The flight leader shook his head. "No. I can't stand the place. Full of the monkeys."

"Ah."

"Good luck," the officer said. "We shan't be seeing more of each other, I'm afraid. Pity. I'd been looking forward to serving with you."

Gelvarry shrugged uncomfortably. "So it goes," he said for lack of something precise to say, and turned away.

He followed directions toward the gondola. As he moved along, the monkeys flowed limb-over-limb above him among the higher levels of the structural bracing, keeping pace. As they traveled, they conducted incidental business, chartering, gesticulating, knotting up momentarily in clumps of two and three individuals in the grip of passion or anger that left one or two scurrying away cowed or indignant, the level of their cries rising or falling. The whole group, however, maintained the general movement with Gelvarry.

He was fairly certain he remembered what they were, and he did what he could to ignore them.

He came to the gondola hatch, which was an engine-turned duraluminum panel opening on a ladder leading down into a long, windowed corridor lined with crank-operated chest-high machines, at each of which crouched and cranked a monkey somewhat smaller than Gelvarry. As he set foot on the ladder, several of the larger monkeys from the hull spaces suddenly shoved past him, all bristles and smell, forcing their way into the corridor. They were met with immediate, shrieking violence from the nearest machine monkeys, and Gelvarry swung himself partway off the ladder, his eyes wide, maintaining his purchase with one boot toe and one gloved hand while he peered back over his shoulder at the screams and wrestlings within the confined space.

Bloodied intruder monkeys with their pelts torn began to flee back toward safety past him, voiceless and panting, their expressions desperate. The attempted invasion was becoming a fiasco at the deft hands of the machine monkeys, who fought with ear-ripping indignation, uttering howls of outrage while viciously handling the much more naive newcomers. Out of the corner of his eye, Gelvarry saw exactly one of the intruders--who had shrewdly chosen a graying and instinctively diffident machine monkey several positions away from the hatch--pay no heed to the tumult and close its teeth undramatically and inflexibly in its target's throat. In a moment, the object of the maneuver was a limp and yielding bundle on the deck. While all its fellows streamed up past Gelvarry and took, dripping, to the safety of the hull braces, the one victorious new monkey bent over the dispossessed machine and began fuming the crank. No attention was paid to it as things within the gondola corridor resumed to normal.

Gelvarry closed and secured the hatch while monkeys returned to their machines. The wounded ones ignored their hurts cleverly. Neither neighbor of the successful invader paid any overt attention to matters as they now stood, but Gelvarry noticed that as they bobbed and weaved at their machines, with the new monkey between them and with the dead cranker supine at his feet, they unobtrusively extended their limbs and tails to nudge lightly at the body, until they had almost inadvertently kicked it out of sight behind the machines.

Each of the machines displayed a three-dimensional scene within a small circular platform atop the device. Aircraft could be seen moving in combat among miniature clouds over distant background landscapes. Doped wings glistened in the sunlight, turning, fuming, reflecting flashes: Dot dot dot. Dash dash dash. Dot. Dot. Dot. Gelvarry brushed forward between the busy animals and moved toward the farther hatch at the other end of the corridor. Atop the nearest machine, he saw a Fokker *dreidekker* painted red, whipping through three fast barrel rolls before resuming level flight above the floundering remains of a broken Nieuport. Dot dot dot dash.

The monkey at that machine frowned and cranked the handle backwards. The Baron's triplane suddenly reversed its actions. Dash dot dot dot. The Nieuport reassembled. Stork insignia could be seen painted on its fuselage. The crank turned forward again. The swastika-marked red wings corkscrewed into their victory roll again above the disintegrating Frenchman.

The monkey at the machine was crooning and bouncing on the balls of its feet, rubbing its free hand over its lips. It moved several knobs at the front of the viewing machine, and the angle changed, so that the point of view was directly from the cockpit of the Fokker, and pieces of the Nieuport flew past the wing struts to either side. The monkey jabbed its neighbors with its elbows and nodded toward the action. It searched the face on either side for reaction. One of them, fuming away from a scene of Messerschmitt 262 tactical jet fighters rocketing a column of red-starred T-34 tanks on the ice of Lake Ladoga, glanced over impatiently and pushed back at the Fokker monkey's shoulder, resuming its attention to its own concerns. But the other neighboring monkey was kinder. Despite the fact that its flight of three Boeing P-26s was closing fast on a terrified Kawanishi flying boat over the Golden Gate Bridge, it paused long enough to glance at the Baron's victory, pat its neighbor reassuringly on the back, and utter a chirp of

approbation. Pleased, the first monkey was immediately rapt in rerunning the new version of the scene. The kind monkey stole a glance over again, shrugged, and resumed cranking its own machine.

Gelvarry continued pushing between the monkeys to either side. The flooring was solid, but springy underfoot. The ceiling was convex, and wider than the floor, so that the duraluminum walls tapered inward. They were pierced for skylights above the long banks of machines, but *Ticonderoga* was apparently passing through clouds. There were rapid alterations of light at the ports, but only slight suggestions of any detail. Over the spasmodic grinding of the cranks, and the constant slight vocalizations of the monkeys, the sound of air washing over the walls and floor could be made out if one paused and listened ruminatively.

Gelvarry reached Mr. Churchill's compartment door. He knocked, and the reassuring voice replied: "Come!" He quickly entered and closed the sheetmetal panel securely behind him.

The compartment was large for his expectations. Its deck was parqueted and dressed in oriental carpets. Armchairs and taborets were placed here and there, with many low reading lumps, and opaque drapes swayed over the portholes. Mr. Churchill sat heavily in a Turkish upholstered chair at the other end of the room, facing him, wearing his pinstriped blue suit with the heavy watchchain across the rounded vest. He gripped a freshly lighted Uppman cigar between his knuckles. The famous face was drawn up into its wet baby scowl, and Gelvarry at once felt the impact of the man's presence.

"Ah," Mr. Churchill said. "None too soon. Come and sit by me. We have only a moment or two, and then they shall all be here." His mouth quirked sideward. "Rabble," he growled. "Counterjumpers."

Gelvarry moved forward toward the chair facing the Prime Minister. "Am I a unique case, Sir?" he said, sitting down with a trace of uneasiness. "I was told high squadron posting was voluntary only."

Mr. Churchill raised his eyebrows and turned to the taboret beside him. He punched a bronze pushbell screwed to the top. "Unique? Of course you're unique, man! You're the principal, after all." A doorway somewhere behind him opened, and a young woman with soot-black hair and bee-stung lips entered wearing a French maid's costume. She brought a silver tray on which rested two crystal tumblers and a bottle of the familiar Hennessey *Rx Official*. "Very good! Very good!" Mr. Churchill said, pouring. "Mr. Dunstan Haverman, I'm introducing Giselle Montez," he said, giving her name the Gallic pronunciation. "It is very possible that you shall--" He shrugged. "meet again." Gelvarry tried not to appear much out of countenance as Miss Montez brought the salver and stood gracefully silent, her eyes downcast, while he took his tumbler. "Charmed" he said softly.

"Thank you," she murmured, turned, and retreated through her doorway. She had left the bottle with Mr. Churchill.

Gelvarry sipped. Mr. Churchill raised his glass. "Here's to reality."

Haverman shuddered. "No," he said, drinking more deeply anyway, "I was beginning to depend on it too much. Sam, what's going wrong?"

Sam grunted as the amber liquid hit his own esophagus. He was normally a self-contained, always pleasant-spoken individual--the typical golf or tennis pro at the best club in the county--who in Haverman's long experience of him had once frowned when a drunk at a business luncheon had pawed a

waitress. And then calmly tipped a glass of icewater into the man's lap, costing himself a thirty-nine-week deal.

"Sam?" Haverman peered through the Hennessey effect at his grimacing old acquaintance.

"Take a look." The leaner, longer-legged, short-haired man sitting in the chrome-and-leather captain's chair turned toward the har-edged cabinet standing beside him. The pushbell atop it seemed incongruous. Sam flipped up a panel and punched a number on the keyboard behind it. He closed the panel and nodded toward a cleared area of the panelled, indirectly lighted room. Haverman immediately recognized it as a holo focus, of course, even before he remembered what an inlaid circle in the flooring signified. It was a large one half again the size of normally sold commercial receivers--as befitted the offices of a major industry figure.

Laurent Michaelmas appeared; urbane, dark-suited, scarlet flower in his lapel. "Good day," he said. "I have the news." He paused, one eyebrow cocked, hands slightly spread, waiting for feedback.

Sam raised his voice slightly above normal conversational level. "Just give us the broadcast industry top story, please," he said, and the Michaelmas projection flicked almost imperceptibly into a slightly new stance, then bowed and said:

"The top broadcast story is also still the top general story, sir. Now here it is:" He relaxed and stepped aside so that he was at the exact edge of the circle, visually related to the room floor level, while the remainder of the holo sphere went to an angled overhead view of Lower Manhattan.

"Well, today is October 25, 2005, in New York City, where the impact of the latest FCC ruling is still being assessed by programming departments for all major media." The scene-camera point of view became a circling pan around Wall Street Alley, picking up the corporate logos atop the various buildings: RCA, CBS, ABC, GTV, Blair, Neilsen. In a nice touch, the POV zoomed smoothly on an upper-storey window, showing what appeared to be a conference room with three or four gesticulating figures somewhat visible through the sun-repelling glass. It was excellent piloting, too--the camera copter was being handled smoothly enough in the notorious off-bay crosscurrents so that the holo scanner's limited compensatory circuits were able to take all the jiggle and drift out of the shot. Here was a flyer, Haverman thought, who wouldn't be a disgrace at the trapeze. Then he winced and took another nibble at the Hennessey.

"While viewers reaped an unexpected bonanza," Michaelmas said, and the background cut to an interior of a typical dwelling and a young man and woman watching Laurent Michaelmas with expressions of pleasant surprise, "industry spokesmen publicly lauded the FCC's Reception Release Order." The cut this time was to a pleasant-looking fellow in a casual suit, leaning against a holo cabinet. He smiled and said: "Folks, it's got to be the greatest thing since free tickets to the circus." He patted the cabinet. "Imagine! F" "While viewers reaped an unexpected bonanza," Michaelmas said, and the background cut to an interior of a typical dwelling and a young man and woman watching Laurent Michaelmas with expressions of pleasant surprise, "industry spokesmen publicly lauded the FCC's Reception Release Order." The cut this time was to a pleasant-looking fellow in a casual suit, leaning against a holo cabinet. He smiled and said: "Folks, it's got to be the greatest thing since free tickets to the circus." He patted the cabinet. "Imagine! From now on, you can receive *every* and *any* channel right where you are, no matter *what* type of receiver you own! Yes, it's true--for only a few pennies, we'll bring you and install one of the new Rutledge-Karmann adapter units, with the best coherer circuit possible, that'll transform any receiver into an *all-channel* receiver! Now, how about that? Remember, the government says we have to use top-quality components, and we have to sell to you at *our cost*! So--" He grinned boyishly. "Even if we

wanted to screw you, we can't."

"Others, however," Michaelmas said, "were not so sanguine. Even in public."

The holo went to Fingers Smart in the elevator lobby of what was recognizably the New York FCC building. He was striding out red-faced, followed by several figures Haverman could recognize as GTV attorneys and GTV's favorite consulting lawyer. "When interviewed, GTV Board Chairman Ancel B. Smart had this to say at 1:15 P.M. today:"

Now it was a two-shot of Smart being faced by an interested, smiling Laurent Michaelmas, while the lawyers milled around and tried to get a word in edgewise. Nobody ever effectively got between that friendly-uncle manner of Michaelmas's and whoever he was after.

"That's exactly right, Larry," Smart was saying. "We built the holovision industry the way it is because the FCC wanted it that way then. Now it wants it another way, and that's it. Public interest. Well, damn it, we're part of the public, too!" Smart's other industry nickname was Notso.

"Are you going to continue fighting the ruling?"

A belated widening of Smart's eyes now occurred. "Who says we're fighting it? We were here getting clarification of a few minor points. You know GTV operates in the public interest."

Sam chuckled, unamused, while Haverman peered and thought. GTV controlled eighty-seven entertainment channels that operated twenty-four hours a day. There were six GTV-owned channels leased to religious and political lobbies. There was also, of course, GTV's ten percent share of the public network subsidy. Paid off in programs given to PTV from the summer Student Creative internship plan.

That was how the dice had fallen when the Congress legislated cheap 3-D TV. The existing broadcast companies were trapped in their old established images with heavy emphasis on sports or news, women's daytime, musical variety, feature documentary anthologies, and the like. That had left an obvious vacuum which GTV had filled promptly.

AD-channel receivers at an affordable price had been out of the question. As usual, Congress had been straining technology to its practical limits, and compromises had had to be made in the end. A good half of the receivers sold, Haverman remembered, were entertainment only. Now, apparently, because of something very cheap called the Harmonn-Cutlass or something, he wouldn't have to remember it any longer.

"Oh!" he said, raising his eyes to Sam's nod.

Michaelmas cocked his head at Smart. "Just one or two more questions, please. Are you saying you haven't already cut your ratings guarantees to your advertisers? I believe your loss this quarter has just been projected at nearly twenty percent of last year's profits."

Smart glanced aside to his legal staff. But he was impaled on Michaelmas's smile. He tried one of his own; it worked beautifully at the annual entertainment programming awards dinner. "Come on, Larry--you know I'm no bean-counter. GTV's going to continue to offer the same top drawer--"

"Well, one would assume that," Michaelmas said urbanely. "You have most of the season's product still on the shelf, unshown. No one would expect you to just dump a capital investment of that scope. What is

your plan for after that? Or don't you expect to be the responsible executive six months from now?"

"Ouch!" Haverman said.

"I don't think I have to answer that here," Smart said quickly. He frowned at Michaelmas as he moved to step around him. "Come to think of it, you're in competition with us now, aren't you?" He actually laid a hand on Michaelmas's arm and pushed him a little aside, or would have, if Michaelmas didn't have a dancer's grace. "No further comment," Smart said, and strode off.

Michaelmas turned toward the point of view, while the background faded out behind him and left him free-standing. He shrugged expressively. "These little tiffs sometimes occur within the fellowship of broadcasting," he said with a smile. "But most observers would agree that competition is always in the public interest." There was the faintest of flicks to a stock tape; computer editing was instantaneous in real time, smooth, and due to become smoother. Even now, only an eye expecting it could detect it. "And that's how it is today," flick, "in broadcasting," flick, "and in the top story at this hour." He bowed and was gone.

Haverman rolled his eyes. "What happened?" he said. "I thought Hans Smart had a lock on Congress."

Sam grinned crookedly and grimly. "He's dead, poor chap. His liver gave out two weeks ago, and there went Notso's brains."

"Physiology got to the wrong brother."

"Yeah. It wouldn't have been as bad as it was, but three days before he went, NBC sprang a prime-time documentary. It was about this new little engineering company in Palo Alto that could pick up all channels on your \$87.50 Sony portable. He wasn't cold in the ground before a dozen senators were on the all-channel bandwagon. The House delegation from California began lobbying as a bloc, New York City, and then Nassau and Dutchess counties jumped in, and the next you know Calart-Hummer or whatever it is, is the law of the fund. Hans Smart could handle legislators with the best of 'em, but I don't think it was the booze chat killed him; it was that friggin' feature."

Sam grinned more genuinely. "It was a beaut. NBC sent out engraved invitations, on paper, messenger-delivered to every member of Congress and anybody else they figured could swing a little. About six months ago, they had bought excerpt rights to about a dozen old *Warbirds* things. Newsfeature use only; you know how that goes, I guess. Well, it all turned up in that show. Michaelmas walking around narrating over it. Only they scaled it down behind him, so he was just stepping around over the battlefields and the planes were buzzing around him while he just smiled and talked. King damned Kong in a pinstripe suit. You wouldn't have believed it. Show it to you sometime; everybody in the business must have made a copy of it. Scare hell out of you. Even if you weren't personally involved, I mean."

Haverman sucked a little more Hennessey carefully between his lips and across the edges of his tongue. "What's been happening to the *Warbirds* ratings, Sam?"

Ticonderoga Studios produced other things besides *Warbirds*, but *Warbirds* was what it was known for in the industry, and *Warbirds* was GTV's top-rated show. GTV's contract was what kept Ticonderoga flying.

"Well, Dusty, we're having to be ingenious." Sam looked down at the stick between his fingers, then broke it open and inhaled in a controlled manner. "These things are pretty good," he remarked. Haverman settled himself carefully in his chair. "Isn't this thing bound to settle out? I mean, it's a new toy. Notso may flail around for a while--"

Sam nodded, but not encouragingly. "He's gone. He knows it. But he's telling himself he can make it unhappen if he just yells and shits loud enough. Flailing around isn't the phrase you need. But he's gone. I've got some GTV stock; want it?"

"It'll work its way back up again, Sam," Haverman said carefully. "Especially if Smart gets kicked out by the Board and they hire a new president." Haverman suddenly sat up straighter. "Hey, Sam, why couldn't that be you?"

"I've thought about that."

"Right! It's perfect for them--a top gun from outside, but not too far outside. An experienced new broom. The PR is made for it, friend!"

"I don't want it."

Haverman looked at him watchfully. "Oh?"

Sam shook his head. "Too soon. I'm staying right where I am and building a record. Some other poor son of a bitch can have the next couple of years to get ulcerated in."

Haverman pursed his lips thoughtfully. "It's going to be that bad." He had one hundred percent respect for Sam's judgment. "I guess I'm being a little slow. If our audience could switch away to other channels, can't their people switch to GTV?"

"All of them can and some of them will. But they're hardcore generalists; they'll take a little of us, and a little of CBS, and a little of NBC, and a little of Funkbeobachter, and a little Shimbun, and some ABC, and God knows what else when the new relay sets go in. No, these are the kind of people that're used to a little of everything, no matter what network they're from. Any of 'em that hankered for a little side action from GTV or anyplace else could afford additional sets long ago. But our viewers, you know--" He held his hand out, palm up, and slowly turned it over.

Haverman said reluctantly: "That's not how we talk at the awards dinners."

"I don't see any chicken and peas around here right now," Sam said. "There's no way I would have pulled you out of your milieu if I didn't think we were in trouble."

"We can counterprogram," Haverman said emphatically. "We've got the skills and me facilities."

"Yes, I have."

"O.K. We can do news and sports stuff like the other people. That's the way it's going to go anyhow--back to the way it was in flat-V time, when everybody had a little of everything."

"Yeah, but not now," Sam said. "Later. Meanwhile, how do we get the National League to break its

contract with ABC? Where do you think CBS's legal department would be if we started talking option-breakers to Mandy Carolina? Two years from now, Michaelmas's contract is up for renewal at NBC. There's talk he's thinking of going completely freelance. *That'll* start a trend. Give me enough bucks, and I'd build you the top-rated action news show. *Then*. Then, Dusty," he said gently. "Not now. And now is when Fingers Smart and old Sam the Ticonderoga are fighting for their lives, you know?" He inhaled deeply on the stick and threw the exhausted pieces to the floor.

"I can't start another league to compete with what ABC can show my people. There aren't that many big jocks in the world. And I can't find another talk show hostess; only God can make a mouth. I can't get Michaelmas, I can't get Walter Enright. I *can* get the guy who's sick of being Skip Jacobson's Sunday-night backup, and so what. What I've got is actors. I can get actors. I can get enough actors to fill eighty times twenty-four hours of programming every week, if I have to." Sam sighed. "I can make actors. So can anybody else; it's no secret how you do almost two thousand different shows a week, thirty-nine weeks a year. So you know what I've got left?" Sam leaned forward.

"Me," Sam said. "I've got me, and what's in me here." He tapped his head and patted his crotch. "And we're gonna find out how many years it's good for."

The silence had persisted palpably. "And me, Sam," Haverman said finally.

"Uh-huh," Sam said. He poured another shot into Haverman's glass. "Here," he said, and sipped his own to knock off the stick effect. "Have a snort. Now, listen. You're my guy, and don't forget it. You were one of the first people to sign on with me, and you've been the principal of *Warbirds* ever since almost the beginning."

Haverman nodded emphatically. There had been a Rex something or other. But that was long ago. "I have a following," he said confirmingly, as if that was what he thought mattered to Sam about him. And of course it was one of the things that did matter. It must. Sam was not a creative for his health.

"That's right," Sam said gently. "And I'm going to protect you, and you're going to help me."

"I'm not going back into *Warbirds*."

"Something like *Warbirds*. Something recognizably like it, and you're going to have the same character name."

Haverman cocked his head. "But there are going to be changes."

"Oh, yes. Got to have those, so it can be new and different. But not too many, really--got to save something so they can identify with the familiar. It'll have airplanes and things."

"Ah," Haverman said warily.

"A new show. All your own. Name over the title. We're going to promo hell out of it--'Haverman Moves!' Maybe 'Dusty Moves!' I don't know. Hell with it. Think of something better. Not the point. We'll get every one of the *Warbirds* audience, and with that kind of promo, we'll get plenty of new lookers. Once they've looked, we'll have 'em. Guarantee it."

"Well, certainly, if it's one of your ideas--"

"Hell, yes, it's one of mine. More important, it's the one whose time has come. What the hell--eighty-odd channels of our own for a looker to choose from, and God knows how many more coming from all kinds of places. It's got to happen; I can hit the FCC with First Amendment and Right of Free Choice at the same time. It'll be years before they beat me. And you know something, Duster?" he said in a suddenly calm voice, "I don't think they're ever going to beat me. I think we really can make it stick."

"Oh?" Haverman felt the skin prickle sharply at the backs of his hands. He had never seen Sam like this; only heard of such moments, when the conviction of having thought and done exactly right transformed his good friend's face. The triumphant force of having created a truth came blazing from his eyes. And when he said "I think we can make it stick," his voice reharmonized itself so that though it never rose in volume, it might have been played by solo viola. Haverman could only say again: "Oh."

Sam was grinning. Grinning. "It's beautiful, Duster," he said. "Once we've beaten the test case, we can do another thing--open up a whole channel to the genre. Maybe more than one. And you shoot the whole thing on one set, with a couple of pieces of furniture and just a handful of props, and a holoprojected background. There's no long shot, and damned little tracking, so you do it with two cameras. One, if you're willing to settle. But I wouldn't. Or at least I'd want a damn good optical reflector to back me up. A whole new show, and then a whole channel full of new shows, for a third--maybe a fourth--of what anything else costs."

"And I'm going to do the first one," Haverman said. "Smart'll go for it. He has to. What kind of show is it, exactly, Sam?"

When Sam explained it to him further, he sat shaking his head. "Oh, no, Sam, no, I'm not sure I could do that."

But Sam said: "Sure you can."

Haverman sat uncertainly through the beginning of the conference. First the door to the office corridor was opened, and the senior technical staff came in; Hal, the most senior, carried a model of an aircraft carrier and a model of a silvery biplane, both of which he set down on Sam's white table. Sam turned them over in his hands, and nodded and winked at Hal, who smiled and sat down in the nearest of the informally grouped chairs. Dusty sat back along the wall, in a comfortable alcove next to Miss Montez's door, waiting.

Sam looked around at his people. "Everybody ready? O.K., let's give the great man a call," he said, and apparently punched up Ancel Smart's phone number, because Smart, after a little work with a secretary, appeared in the holo circle. He sat in a chair with his own people around him, and said heavily: "Shoot."

"Right," Sam said. "Anse, you know Hal and the rest of the boys, here. Now, we're proposing as follows--"

And it continued from there, with Smart nodding from time to time, or interposing a question, and changing his POV to watch whoever on the Ticonderoga staff was giving him the data. Then he'd turn back to Sam. Occasionally, one of Smart's people would address Sam. But it was Smart and Sam one-on-one, as it ought to be, Dusty saw, beginning to feel better as his friend clearly established

dominance over the meeting Smart was inclined to cough and play with his chin. Sam sat slim and upright, his hands, spread-fingered, molding premises in the air above the white tabletop where the models waited. Dusty begun to feel better as Sam grew.

"All right, I promise you this new show'll grab 'em and won't let go. I've taken a closer look at the tentative figures we discussed earlier, and I'll stand behind 'em." Sam named an in-the-can cost half of what it might have been. "And no concept fee, absolutely nothing in front. I get it back on reruns; we go to full rate on those, but, what the hell, if we ever *see* reruns, you're golden and you don't care, right? O.K., so that's Part One of what Ticonderoga's prepared to do. What do you do, Anse?"

Smart nodded. "Like I said. If it packages up the way you described, GTV'll help with the Feds. We've still got an office in Washington, after all, and my brother left a well-trained staff."

"Specifically, you're agreeing to hold Ticonderoga harmless in the event of criminal penalties or monetary losses caused by legal or regulatory action. Is that correct?"

One of Smart's legal staff suddenly leaned forward and began to whisper urgency in his ear. Smart waved him off impatiently. "That's right. I haven't changed my mind."

"On the record, and on behalf of GTV?" Sam pointed toward his own lawyer, who held up a sealed recorder.

"If we buy the program at all, GTV defends," Smart confirmed.

"O.K.," Sam said. "Now I'm gonna tell you who's in it."

"Ah."

"According to the formula we discussed," Sam said, turning to his holo box, talking aside, "we're going for a total ego-spectrum across four archetypical blocs. Now, each bloc embodies several potent identification features. We go young woman, young but experienced man, older and ego-stable woman, fully sophisticated man at the top end of middle age. We go soft, why, tight, sinewy; dark, reddish, blondy, silver. Sometimes we vary a little; there's room to do it; you get different overlaps, but you still cover it all the way across your maximized consumer ideals. We anchor at each end with an identifiable regular, but we can vary in the middle. Right so far?"

Smart nodded. "Acceptable." His and Sam's lawyers nodded.

"All right." Sam was still turned toward the control cabinet and speaking along his shoulder at Smart. He began to slowly raise one arm toward the top of the box. It was a good move; Haverman could see the tension building in Smart, and the distraction that was mirrored in the flickering of his eyes. More and more, Haverman felt the welling of admiration for Sam, and the comfort of being one of his people.

"Now, you buy the concept of guest celebrities?"

"As long as they fit the formula."

"As long as they fit the formula defined above," Sam corroborated. "Are you worried about our being able to create authenticity?"

"With your makeup and research departments? Never. You guarantee audience believability, and I'll take

your word for it right now."

"So guaranteed. Done." Sam nodded. "All right, we work from now on the assumption that the celebrity pair on each show will cover the two middle blocs, and Ticonderoga has discretion there as long as the portrayals remain convincing. To whom? Do you want to designate an audience-reaction service, Ancel?" His hand was poised above the holo controls now.

Smart shrugged. "We've been using TeleWinner all along. Let's give 'em this, too. Split the cost, right?" He chuckled. "What the hell, you know the reason GTV buys *Warbirds* is because I'm hooked on it. I'm my own symbol-bloc survey; they just make it official."

Sam smiled faintly. Audience size was what made it official.

"And, what the hell," Smart said, "you're keeping the alternate time tracks premise for the new show, aren't you? So if somebody says Rocky Marciano wasn't lefthanded or Sonja Henie didn't rollerskate, well, hell that was *then* but this is *elsewhen*, right? But it has to *look* right; that we've got to have."

"Absolutely." Even if there'd been no other public source of visual data, there was GTV's own Channel 29, steadily programming out reprocessed old movie and newsreel footage for all the Deser warbabies who'd just missed it. The reprocessing was done by TStudiolab, Inc., one of Sam's subsidiaries.

"Okay, so we've got all that out of the way," Smart said. "Now let's see the goods."

"Of course." Sam smiled. His hand moved unexpectedly, and rang the little pushbell. "Let me introduce our talented newcomer. The next big word in viewer households, known to you and me as the young bloc archetype and all that implies, but professionally known as Giselle Montez--"

On her cue, Miss Montez came through her door in a high squadron pilot's uniform, the leather of her boots and Sam Browne belt glistening. She swept off her aluminized goggles and her helmet with one deft swirl of the hand that released her cloud of hair, and stood holding them on her hip, while her other hand rested its fingertips at the first button in the vee of her tunic. Ancel Smart leaned forward sharply in his chair. His mouth formed a loose o.

"Thank you, Miss Montez," Sam said, and she about-faced and walked out quickly; the door closed behind her with one darting flip of her fingertips. "And at the other end of the spectrum, the fine silver of sophisticated experience." Sam touched the cabinet controls. A sketch materialized in the air, facing Smart. It was a deceptively loose artist's rendering, life size, of a whipcordy-slim man with delicate limbs and waving, glossy white hair struck with contrasting pewter-colored low-lights. The expression of the aristocratic face suggested certain things.

Smart nodded reservedly. "Yes. All right. Looks all right. Who's going to play it? Something familiar about him. Who was your artist using for a model? Dusty Haverman?" Smart grinned.

Sam did not. He simply kept looking steadily at Smart, whose eyes first narrowed, then enlarged. "You're kidding! You're--How do we do *Warbirds* without him?--Jesus--" He slapped his thigh. "Perfect! It's perfect! It's a stroke, Sam, a fuckin' stroke!"

"Sure," Sam said.

The back of the meeting was broken. It was all a big long happy glide thereafter. Sar'n-Major Mac

would come to the fore as the real manager of low squadron, and Private Parkins would play up raffishly. Major Harding's part would be padded a little, and Father Collins would listen to his troubles as he thrashed about trying to assert himself and spoil MacBanion's schemes. At its own expense, as an additional contribution to the relief of the crisis, Ticonderoga Studios would go back into the existing unshown episodes and re-edit to the new slant, so the Gelvarry character would be free to Go West, grow up, and change shows immediately. Sam had some experimental footage, it seemed, which might fit some of that.

In return, GTV would guarantee renewal next year. About next year--Sam's latest idea was to move on to dirigible-launched P6E's against Fiat CR32 biplanes; he held up the glittering model of the 220-mph Italian fighter, which had not gone out of use until 1938. They would be launched from the *Graf Zeppelin*, which had been Nazi Germany's sole aircraft carrier. Named for the man who pioneered practical lighter-than-air flight.

Smart considered the possibilities and the twists. "Cute," he admitted. "I like it." He shook his head. "I don't know where you get your ideas, Sam. Christ. Planes that sound like cars comin' off a ship that sounds like a dirigible, and what do they run up against? Damn! Yeah--let me see some footage pretty soon, will you?"

Sam had some, it seemed, which would fit some of that. They'd be able to show a rough cut in about a week.

"How about the new show? How soon can I have that?"

Well, it took a little while to get the actors into the milieu. Smart could understand that.

Yes, he could. But--

Oh, they'd push it. Tell you what; how about a progress report in ten days?

Well, if that meant they were close to delivery on the pilot episode.

Right. The *pilot* episode.

Everybody suddenly laughed, and Sam promised to send the little models over to Smart's office right away, for the shelves over the bar.

Smart punched off, and everybody in Sam's conference room began to grin and make enthusiastic quips. They were a high-morale outfit. It almost reminded Haverman of--Well, it should, shouldn't it? Art mirrors life.

Haverman got up from his inconspicuous seat and went over to Sam. "I thought it went very well."

Hal raised an eyebrow. "Well, hello!" he said.

Sam smiled reassuringly. "You heard the man, Duster," he said. "GTV's buying it, and they'll protect us. So it's all right." His eyes said: *I told you I'd take care of you.*

"I'm sure of that," Haverman said with conviction. "It's a Ticonderoga production," and everyone within earshot smiled.

"Why don't we get started?" Sam said and, putting an arm around his shoulders, walked with him out through the door to the technical spaces, which in this area were half-partitioned workrooms and offices grouped-up to either side of the long central aisle that run back toward the sound stages. Overhead were the whitewashed skylights and the zigzag trusses of the broad, arching roof, and to either side of them were the sounds of word-processing machines and footage splicers. They walked along to a side aisle, and there Sam had to leave him, after opening and holding open for him the heavy wood-grained door marked ACTORS AND MEDICAL PERSONNEL ONLY.

A bright-looking young medical person leafed through his printout. "Dusty Haverman," he said wonderingly. "I never knew you'd been an accounting student."

"Isn't Doctor Virag going to do me? Doctor Virag and I know each other very well," he said, sitting stiffly in his chair.

The medical person did his best to smile disarmingly. "Doctor Virag is no longer with us, I'm afraid. Time passes, you know. I'm Doctor Harcourt; I think you'll find me competent. Sam personally asked me to take you."

"Oh. Well, I didn't mean to imply--"

"That's all right, Mr. Haverman. Now, if you'll just relax, Miss Tauchnitz will begin removing that hairpiece and so forth." Harcourt's fingers danced over keys, and he peered at the screen beside his chair. "Let me just refresh myself on this--yes, well, I think you may find it a relief to wear your own hair, for one thing; we'll just bleach it up a little bit. And we'll tan you. That'll be better than that tarty pinky-cheeks tinting, don't you think? Other than that, there's just a tiny bit of incising to do...a touch of a lift to one eyebrow, and that'll have the desired effect, I'm sure. Oh, yes, the cosmetology here is minimal, minimal. Which is just as well, since we do have a rather thick book of response-adjustments to perform, but, then, none of us is perfect for our role in life, really. Or is it 'are perfect'? Would you happen to know which it is, Miss Tauchnitz?"

When they had that done, they walked him down the corridors, past the rows of costume mannequins, and to the processing room, which was hung in soft black non-reflecting fabric, and where they had symphonic control of the lighting. They put him in the chair with the trick armrests and the neck brace.

"This is wine, Mr. Haverman," and he peered aside at the rollaway table with the clear decanter of rosy clarity, and the goblet. As long as he moved his arm smoothly and no more quickly than was gracious he could reach out and take it, and sip. "That's right. Have some more," the pleasant voice behind him said, and when he had had some more, they showed him a holo of Miss Montez and stimulated an electrode.

"Ah! Ah-ah-ah!"

"A little more wine, Mr. Haverman." And again the Montez and the incredible sensation beside which all past experience paled.

To see her come fully lighted out of the featureless soft warm darkness, and to feel what he could feel

when she did that, he had only to reach out and take more wine. There was no thought in him of a spastic attempt to pluck something from his skull.

"Shouldn't you be feeding me oysters or Vitamin E? Perhaps some Tiger's Milk?" he jested once after they had stopped the wine and given him some Hennessy to refresh him. The pleasant voice murmured a throaty chuckle behind him.

When there was no further response to his gambit, he said: "Ah, well, I've really always been a steak and potatoes man, actually," and carelessly reached around to circle his hand into the unknown space behind him, but the pleasant voice said: "More wine, Mr. Gelvarry," and an unnoticeable hand put the goblet into his fingers. "Good enough," Gelvarry said. "Ah! Yes, yes, good enough, I say."

They showed him a slim, freckled woman with prominent front teeth, dressed in a calf-length skirt and a cardigan sweater over a cotton blouse. She wore soft leather street boots over dark lisle stockings, and moved like something wary in a strange part of the forest. They wiped, and went to a reprocessed, tinted, computer-animated photo of the famous person this was supposed to represent, and when he sipped the wine, they gave him the pleasure effect. Soon enough in the process he found it difficult to distinguish between the photo and the actress in her costume, no matter how the costume changed per reveal, for they always had a fresh photo after each wipe-and-switch, and the costume had clearly been cued by something in the photo, as much as chiffon can be patterned to remind one of gingham. In truth, in a while, he could not distinguish at all, and he found that although after a while they didn't wipe the actress, he had to concentrate very hard to make her out behind the features he now saw for her. So they gave him more wine, and the idea of concentrating was, to his relief, lost.

They did roughly the same thing with the identity of the purposeful young man with the angelic eyes.

And it was done.

"It's good, Sam," Haverman said, sitting in the office with the Hennessy.

"Sure," Sam said.

"I feel it. I feel absolutely certain." He ran a hand along the silvery waves at the side of his head, and touched one finger to his pencil mustache. His hand was lean and browned by the suns of expensive resorts. A chased gold ring set with a ruby glittered on his little finger. "The way you can make me see the guests, instead of the actors playing them--"

"Yeah, well, they aren't actually playing them, you know. We've got this computer tied into the cameras, and when those people move around, the image data gets put through and modified by this fancy program I had the fellows work up. It's pretty good; probably get better. As long as the players don't do anything grossly out of character, the computer can edit the image to fit the model character. That's what goes on the air."

"But how do I see it, playing with them?"

"Well, you can't, Duster, "Well, you can't, Duster, that's why we do that hocus-pocus in the dark room. One of the hocus-pocuses." Sam patted him lightly at the neck. "Saves you having to act, you know, old Duster." He was sitting beside him on the couch, and leaned forward to cap the Hennessy.

"I think I could act it," Haverman said very softly.

Sam sighed. "Well, perhaps you could. But you see, this way it all goes smoothly and very naturally, don't you see? No lines to remember, no breaks for lunch--But those are all technical details, Dus, and there's absolutely no need for you to learn them."

"Still and all," Haverman said. "Still and all." Sam was uncapping the wine now. "I think you're very inventive," Haverman hastened. "That was always true of you. Do you know what I think? I think your next computer program will make it completely unnecessary to have anyone walking around for the cameras to focus on. Sam, that's true, isn't it? That's what you'd really, really like, isn't it?"

"Why, that's not true at all," Sam almost said; Haverman strained to hear him say that, and it seemed to him he was saying it, just outside the range of human hearing. He peered, and he craned his neck. But Sam was saying: "It's almost studio time, Dus. Have some wine," in his pleasant voice.

Haverman sighed. "Oh, all right, if that's the best you can do."

"My name is Austin Gelvarry," he repeated to Miss Montez, who was probably staring over his shoulder at the glistening, intricately decorated brass bed. "I have the power to call up whatever pleases me." He sipped from his glass, as she was doing. A nice light was developing in her eyes.

"I--seem to remember something different--"

"Have some more wine. It does no harm. It's strong drink that is raging," Gelvarry said, preoccupied, watching the little monkey plucking fruit from the bowl on the sideboard. The monkey caught his eye and winked.

"Listen," Miss Montez said, "It's just you can't find a secretary job anywhere anymore," but she was sipping.

Gelvarry smiled. Beyond her a Lockheed Electra was just touching down, crabbing a little in the wind as one might very well expect of so small an aircraft, even if it were an all-metal cabin twin. She settled in nicely, with just a spurt of blue smoke at the tires, and began to run out. He watched the pilot swing the Electra around deftly, and begin taxiing toward them.

"Do I please you, Austin?" Miss Montez said over the rim of her glass, looking at him through her lashes. She seemed quite nicely settled in now.

"Ah," Gelvarry said. "Ah." The Electra came to a halt and the cabin door popped open. A slim figure jumped down and waved, and began running toward them. "Here's Amelia!" Gelvarry exclaimed gladly.

A Ryan high-wing monoplane, lacking the reflection of sun on windscreen glass, came over low, light glittering at its engine-turned cowling. A figure waved down from a side window, and then the *Spirit of St. Louis* banked away to line up upwind, flaring out for its landing, its prominent wheels seeming to reach down for the ground against the red outline of the evening sun. Gelvarry and Miss Montez both half-rose with pleasure. "And here's Lucky Lindy now!"

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TomorrowSF Vol. 11.6 November 12,1998