

DICK FRANCIS

The Grand Master
of Crime Fiction



"A POSITIVE
GENIUS." — *Time*

"THE BEST THRILLER
WRITER GOING."
— *The Atlantic Monthly*

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RAT RACE

By Dick Francis

INTRODUCTION.

I learned to fly in the Royal Air Force during the Second World War, and in the course of the 1940s flew Spitfire fighters and later Wellington and Lancaster bombers, amassing hundreds of hours in the air. On the thrifty novelist's premiss of not wasting any of life's experiences I decided to base one of my stories on flying (but not in wartime), the result being a book called Flying Finish.

My wife, Mary, helping me with earlier research for that book, undertook to go up for three flights in a light aircraft to find out about up-to-date civilian air regulations, which of course hadn't been in existence during the War. To our mutual surprise, Mary at once developed an enormous enthusiasm and aptitude at the controls, and in time became a qualified pilot herself. From this almost accidental beginning she went on to take an Instrument Rating - approximately a master's degree in flying - and was commissioned to write a flying teaching book for absolute beginners which became recommended reading in British Airways pilot training schools.

We bought three light aircraft, two of them to lease to a flying training school and one, a fast little sports-car equivalent, for Mary to fly personally. People like jockeys, trainers and owners began asking her to fly them to the races, and eventually as a result we set up a small professional air-taxi and charter operation, employing six experienced British Airways pilots in their spare time - not Mary herself - to fly our paying passengers round the British Isles and Europe. Mary arranged the flights, smoothed their way and ran the records and business side.

Rat Race is about taxi flying. (Never waste experiences!) While I wrote the book, our own taxi business filled our days so that I was constantly surrounded by the raw materials of the story. Aircraft became the book's central characters, air procedures its structural bones. One might even say that page by page and hour by hour I lived and breathed the same basic concerns as my chief character, pilot Matt Shore.

As Rat Race is fiction, Matt Shore's more dangerous problems did not arise, I'm glad to say, in the seven years of our own air-taxi firm's life. We sold the successful little business finally to one of our chief customers and it is operating still, though changed and expanded, concentrating more on Euro-businessmen as passengers and less on the racing scene.

CHAPTER ONE.

I picked four of them up at White Waltham in the new Cherokee Six 300 that never got a chance to grow old.

The pale-blue upholstery still had a new leather smell and there wasn't a scratch on the glossy white fuselage.

A nice little aeroplane, while it lasted.

They had ordered me for noon but they were already in the bar when I landed at eleven-forty. Three double whiskies and a lemonade.

Identification was easy: several chairs round a small table were draped with four lightweight raincoats, three binocular cases, two copies of the Sporting Life and one very small racing saddle. The four passengers were standing nearby in the sort of spread-about group indicative of people thrown together by business rather than natural friendship. They were not talking to each other, though it looked as though they had been. One, a large man, had a face full of anger. The smallest, evidently a jockey, was flushed and rigid. The two others, an elderly man and a middle-aged woman, were steadfastly staring at nothing in particular in the way that meant a lot of furious activity was going on inside their heads.

I walked towards the four of them across the large lounge reception room and spoke to an indeterminate spot in mid-air.

"Major Tyderman?"

The elderly man, who said "Yes?", had been made a major a good long time ago. Nearer seventy than sixty; but still with a tough little body, wiry little moustache, sharp little eyes. He had thin salt-and-pepper hair brushed sideways across a balding crown and he carried his head stiffly, with his chin tucked back into his neck.

Tense: very tense. And wary, looking at the world with suspicion.

He wore a lightweight speckled fawn suit vaguely reminiscent in cut of his military origins, and unlike the others had not parked his binoculars but wore them with the strap diagonally across his chest and the case facing forwards on his stomach, like a sporran. Club badges of metal and coloured cardboard hung in thick clusters at each side.

"Your aeroplane is here, Major," I said. "I'm Matt Shore... I'm flying you."

He glanced over my shoulder, looking for someone else.

"Where's Larry?" he asked abruptly.

"He left," I said. "He got a job in Turkey."

The Major's gaze came back from the search with a click. "You're new," he said accusingly.

"Yes," I agreed.

"I hope you know the way."

He meant it seriously. I said politely, "I'll do my best." The second of the passengers, the woman on the Major's left, said flatly, "The last time I flew to the races, the pilot got lost."

I looked at her, giving her my best approximation to a confidence-boosting smile. The weather's good enough today not to have any fear of it."

It wasn't true. There were cu-nims forecast for the June afternoon. And anyone can get lost any time if enough goes wrong. The woman gave me a disillusioned stare and I stopped wasting my confidence builder. She didn't need it. She had all the confidence in the world.

She was fifty and fragile looking, with greying hair cut in a straight-across fringe and a jaw-length bob. There were two mild brown eyes under heavy dark eyebrows and a mouth that looked gentle; yet she held herself and behaved with the easy authority of a much higher command than the Major's. She was the only one of the group not outwardly ruffled.

The Major had been looking at his watch. "You're early," he said. "We've got time for the other haft." He turned to the barman and ordered refills, and as an afterthought said to me, "Something for you?"

I shook my head. "No, thank you."

The woman said indifferently, "No alcohol for eight hours before a flight. Isn't that the rule?"

"More or less," I agreed.

The third passenger, the large angry looking man, morosely watched the barman push the measure up twice on the Johnnie Walker. "Eight hours.

Good God," he said. He looked as if eight hours seldom passed for him without topping up. The bulbous nose, the purple thread veins on his cheeks, the swelling paunch, they had all cost a lot in Excise duty.

The atmosphere I had walked into slowly subsided.

The jockey sipped his low calorie lemonade, and the bright pink flush faded from his cheek bones and came out in fainter mottles on his neck.

He seemed about twenty-one or two, reddish haired, 'with a naturally small frame and a moist looking skin. Few weight problems, I thought. No dehydration. Fortunate for him.

The Major and his large friend drank rapidly, muttered unintelligibly, and removed themselves to the Gents. The woman eyed the jockey and said in a voice which sounded more friendly than her comment, "Are you out of your mind, Kenny Bayst? If you go on antagonizing Major Tyderman you'll be looking for another job."

Kenny Bayst flicked his eyes to me and away again, compressing his rosebud mouth. He put the half-finished lemonade on the table and picked up one of the raincoats and the racing saddle.

"Which plane?" he said to me. "I'll stow my gear."

He had a strong Australian accent with a resentful bite to it. The woman watched him with what would have passed for a smile but for the frost in her eyes.

"The baggage door is locked," I said. "I'll come over with you." To the woman I said, "Can I carry your coat?"

"Thank you." She indicated the coat which was obviously hers, a shiny rust-coloured affair with copper buttons.

I picked it up, and also the businesslike binoculars lying on top, and followed Kenny Bayst out of the door.

After ten fuming paces he said explosively, "It's too damn easy to blame the man on top."

"They always blame the pilot," I said mildly. Fact of life."

"Huh?" he said. "Oh yeah. Too right. They do."

We reached the end of the path and started across the grass. He was still oozing grudge. I wasn't much interested.

"For the record," I said, "What are the names of my other passengers?"

Besides the Major, that is."

He turned his head in surprise. "Don't you know her? Our Annie Villars?"

Looks like someone's cosy old granny and has a tongue that would flay a kangaroo.

Everyone knows our little Annie." His tone was sour and disillusioned.

"I don't know much about racing," I said.

"Oh? Well, she's a trainer, then. A damned good trainer, I'll say that for her, I wouldn't stay with her else.

Not with that tongue of hers. I'll tell you, sport, she can roust her stable lads out of the gallops in words a sergeant-major never thought of- But sweet as milk with the owners. Has them eating out of her little hand."

"The horses, too?"

"Uh? Oh, yeah. The horses love her. She can ride like a jock, too, when she's a mind to. Not that she does it much now. She must be getting on a bit. Still, she knows what she's at, true enough. She knows what a horse can do and what it can't, and that's most of the battle in this game."

His voice held resentment and admiration in roughly equal amounts.

I said, "What is the name of the other man? The big one."

This time it was pure resentment: no admiration. He spat the name out syllable by deliberate syllable, curling his lips away from his teeth.

"Mister Eric Goldenberg."

Having got rid of the name he shut his mouth tight and was clearly taking his employer's remarks to heart.

We reached the aircraft and stowed the coats and his saddle in the baggage space behind the rear seats.

"We're going to Newbury first, aren't we?" he asked.

"To pick up Colin Ross?"

"Yes."

He gave me a sardonic look. "Well, you must have heard of Colin Ross."

"I guess," I agreed, 'that I have."

It would have been difficult not to, since the champion jockey was twice as popular as the Prime Minister and earned six times as much. His face appeared on half the billboards in Britain encouraging the populace to drink more milk and there was even a picture strip about him in a children's comic. Everyone, but every one, had heard of Colin Ross.

Kenny Bayst climbed in through the rear end door " and sat in one of the two rear seats. I took a quick look round the outside of the aircraft, even though I'd done a thorough preflight check on

it not an hour ago, before I left base. It was my first week, my fourth day, my third flight for Der-rydown Sky Taxis, and after the way Fate had clobbered me in the past, I was taking no chances.

There were no nuts loose, no rivets missing on the sharp-nosed little six-seater. There were eight quarts of oil where there should have been eight quarts of oil, there were no dead birds dog-ging up the air intakes to the engine, there were no punctures in the tyres, no cracks in the green or red glass over the navigation lights, no chips in the propeller blades, no loose radio aerials. The pale-blue cowling over the engine was securely clipped down, and the matching pale-blue cow lings over the struts and wheels of the fixed undercarriage were as solid as rocks.

By the time I'd finished the other three passengers were coming across the grass. Goldenberg was doing the talking with steam still coming out of his ears, while the Major nodded agreement in unhappy little jerks and Annie Villars looked as if she wasn't listening. When they arrived wit-hin earshot Goldenberg was saying '... can't lay the horse unless we're sure he'll pull it... ' But he stopped with a snap when the Major gestured sharply in my direction. He need hardly have bot-hered.

I had no curiosity about their affairs.

On the principle that in a light aircraft it is better to have the centre of gravity as far forward as possible, I asked Goldenberg to sit in front in the fight-hand seat beside me, and put the Major and Annie Villars in the centre two seats, and left Kenny in the last two, with the empty one re-ady for Colin Ross. The four rear seats were reached by the port side door, but Goldenberg had to climb in by stepping up on the low wing on the starboard side and lowering into his seat thro-ugh the forward door. He waited while I got in before him and moved over to my side, then squ-eezed his bulk in through the door and settled heavily into his seat.

They were all old hands at air taxis: they had their safety belts fastened before I did mine, and when I. looked round to cheek that they were ready to go, the Major was already deep in the Sporting Life. Kenny Bayst was cleaning his nails with fierce little jabrelieving his frustration by hurting himself. I got clearance from the tower and lifted the little aeroplane away for the twenty-mile hop across Berkshire.

Taxi flying was a lot different from the airlines, and finding racecourses looked more difficult to me than being radar vectored into Heathrow. I'd never before flown a racecourse trip, and I'd asked my predecessor Larry about it that morning when he'd come into the office to collect his cards.

"Newbury's a cinch," he said offhandedly. "Just point its nose at that vast runway the Yanks built at Green-ham Common. You can practically see it from Scotland.

The racecourse is just north of it, and the landing strip is parallel with the white rails of the fi-nishing straight.

You can't miss it. Good long strip. No problems. As for Haydock, it's just where the M6 mo-torway crosses the East Lancs road. Piece of cake."

He took himself off to Turkey, stopping on one foot at the doorway for some parting advice. "You'll have to practise short landings before you go to Bath; and avoid Yarmouth in a heatwa-ve. It's all yours now, mate, and the best of British luck."

It was true that you could see Greenham Common from a long way off, but on a fine day it would anyway have been difficult to lose the way from White Waltham to Newbury; the main railway line to Exeter ran more or less straight from one to the other. My passengers had flown into Newbury before, and the Major helpfully told me to look out for the electric cables strung across the approach. We landed respectably on the newly mown grass and taxied along the strip towards the grandstand end, braking to a stop just before the boundary fence.

Colin Ross wasn't there.

I shut down the engine, and in the sudlen silence Annie Villars remarked, "He's bound to be late. He said he was riding work for Bob Smith, and Bob's never on time getting his horses out."

The other three nodded vaguely but they were still not on ordinarily chatty terms with each o-ther, and after about five minutes of heavy silence I asked Goldenberg to let me out to stretch my legs. He grunted and mumbled at having to climb out on to the wing to let me past him and I gat-

hered I was breaking Derrydown's number one rule: never annoy the customers, you're going to need them again.

Once I was out of their company, however, they did start talking. I walked round to the front of the aircraft and leant against the leading edge of the wing; and looked up at the scattered clouds in the blue-grey sky and thought unprofitably about this and that. Behind me their voices rose acrimoniously, and when they opened the door wide to get some air, scraps of what they were saying floated across.

'... simply asking for a dope test." Annie Villars.

'... if you can't ride a losing race better than last time.., find someone else." Goldenberg.

'... very difficult position... ' Major Tyderman.

A short sharp snap from Kenny, and Annie Villars' exasperated exclamation. "Bayst!" '... not paying you more than last time." The Major, very emphatically.

Indistinct protest from Kenny, and a violently dear reaction from Goldenberg: "Bugger your licence."

Kenny my lad, I thought remotely, if you don't watch out you'll end up like me, still with a licence but with not much else.

A Ford-of-all-work rolled down the road past the grandstands, came through the gate in the boundary fence, and bounced over the tuff towards the aircraft. It stopped about twenty feet away, and two men c 'lirnbbed out. The larger, who had been driving, went round to the back and pulled out a brown canvas and leather overnightgrip. The smaller one walked on over the ': grass. I took my weight off the wing and stood up. He stopped a few paces away, waiting for the larger man to catch up. He was dressed in faded blue jeans and a whitish cotton sweater with navy-blue edgings.

Black canvas shoes on his narrow feet. He had nondescript brownish hair over an exceptionally broad forehead, a short straight nose, and a delicate feminine looking chin. All his bones were fine and his waist and hips would have been the despair of Victorian maidens. Yet there was something unmistakably masculine about him: and more than that, he was mature. He looked at me with the small still smile behind the eyes which is the hallmark of those who know what life is really about.

His soul was old. He was twenty-six.

"Good moming," I said.

He held out his hand, and I shook it. His clasp was cool, firm, and brie "No Larry?" he inquired.

"He's left. I'm Matt Shore."

"Fine," he said noncommittally. He didn't introduce himself. He knew there was no need. I wondered what it was like to be in that position.

It hadn't affected Colin Ross. He had none of the 'i am' aura which often clings around the notably successful, and from the extreme understatement of his clothes I gathered that he avoided it consciously.

"We're late, I'm afraid," he said. "Have to bend the throttle."

"Do my best... ' The larger man arrived with the grip, and I stowed it in the forward luggage locker between the engine wall and the forward bulkhead of the cabin. By the time the baggage door was securely fastened Colin Ross had found his empty seat and strapped himself into it.

Goldenberg with heavy grunts moved out again so that I could get back to my left-hand place. The larger man, who was apparently the dilatory trainer Bob Smith, said his hellos and goodbyes to the passengers, and stood watching afterwards while I started the engine and taxied back to the other end of the strip to turn into wind for take-off. The flight north was uneventful: I went up the easy way under the Amber One airway, navigating on the radio beacons at Daventry, Lichfield and Oldham. Manchester control routed us right round the north of their zone so that I had to drop down southwards towards Haydock racecourse, and there it was, just as Larry had said, near the interchange of the two giant roads. We touched down on the grass strip indicated in the

centre of the course, and I taxied on and parked where the Major told me to, near the rails of the track itself, a mere hundred yards from the grandstand.

The passengers disembarked themselves and their belongings and Colin Ross looked at his watch. A faint smile hovered and was gone. He made no comment. He said merely, "Are you coming in to the races?"

I shook my head. "Think I'll stay over here."

"I'll arrange with the man on the gate to let you into the paddock, if you change your mind."

"Thanks," I said in surprise. "Thanks very much."

He nodded briefly and set off without waiting for the others, ducking under the white-painted rails and trudging across the track.

"Pilots' perks," Kenny said, taking his raincoat from my hand and putting his arm forward for the saddle.

"You want to take advantage."

"Maybe I will," I said, but I didn't mean to. Horse racing began and ended with the Derby as far as I was concerned, and also I was a non-gambler by nature.

Annie Villars said in her deceptively gentle voice,

"You do understand that we're all going on to Newmarket after the races, and not back to Newbury?"

"Yes," I assured her. "That's what I was told."

"Good."

"If we don't go to jail," Kenny said under his breath.

Goldenberg looked at me sharply to see if I'd heard that, and I gave no sign of it. Whatever they were about, it was as little my concern as who killed Cock Robin.

Major Tyderman pushed at his moustache with a hand rigid with nervous energy and said, "Last race at four-thirty. Need a drink after that.

Ready to start back at, say, five-fifteen. That all right with you?"

"Perfectly, Major," I nodded.

"Right," he said. "Good." His gaze was flicking from one to another of his travelling companions, assessing and suspicious. His eyes narrowed fiercely at Kenny Bayst, opened and narrowed again rapidly on Goldenberg, relaxed on Annie Villars and went cold on the vanishing back of Colin Ross. The thoughts behind the outward physical reactions were unguessable, and when he finally looked back at me he didn't really see me, he was busy with the activity inside his head.

"Five-fifteen," he repeated vaguely. "Good."

Kenny said to me, "Don't waste your money in the three-thirty, sport"; and Goldenberg raised his fist with a face going purple with anger and nearly hit him.

Annie Villars' voice rapped into him, the steel sticking through the cream with a vengeance, the top-brass quality transcendent and withering.

"Control your temper, you stupid man." Goldenberg's mouth literally dropped open, to reveal a bottom row of unappetising brown stained teeth. His raised fist lowered slowly, and he looked altogether foolish.

"As for you," she said to Kenny, "I told you to keep your tongue still, and that was your last chance."

"Are you sacking me?" he asked.

"I'll decide that at the end of the afternoon."

Kenny showed no anxiety about keeping his job, and I realized that in fact what he had been doing was trying to provoke them into getting rid of him. He'd got himself into nutcrackers and while they squeezed he couldn't get out.

I became mildly curious to see what would happen in the three-thirty. It would help to pass the afternoon.

They straggled off towards the stands, Kenny in front, the Major and Goldenberg together, with Annie Villars several paces behind. The Major kept stopping and looking back and waiting for her, but every time just as she reached him he turned and went off again in front, so that as a

piece of courtesy, the whole thing was wasted. He reminded me vividly of an aunt who had taken me for childhood walks in just that way. I remembered quite clearly that it had been infuriating.

I sighed, shut the baggage doors and tidied up the aeroplane. Annie Villars had been smoking thin brown cigars. Goldenberg had been eating indigestion tablets, each from a square wrapper. The Major had left his Sporting Life in a tumbled heap on the floor.

While I was fiddling around with the debris, two more aeroplanes flew in a four-seat high-winged Cessna and a six-seat twin-engined Aztec.

I watched their touchdowns with an uncritical eye, though I wouldn't have given the Aztec pilot a gold medal for his double bounce. Several small men disgorged themselves and made a dart like a flock of star lings across the track towards the paddock. They were followed by three or four larger and slower-moving people slung around with binoculars and what I later learned to be bags for carrying sets of racing colours.

Finally out of each aircraft popped the most leisurely of all the inmates, a man dressed very much as I was, in dark trousers, white shirt, neat dark tie.

They strolled towards each other and lit cigarettes.

After a while, not wanting to seem unsociable, I wandered across to join them. They turned and watched me come, but with no welcome in unsmiling faces.

"Hello," I said moderately. "Nice day."

"Perhaps," said one.

"You think so." said the other.

They offered me fish-eyed stares but no cigarette. I had grown hardened to that sort of thing. I turned half away from them and read the names of the firms they flew for, which were painted on the tails of their aircraft.

It was the same name on both. Polyplane Services.

How dreary of them, I thought, to be so antagonistic.

I gave them the benefit of a very small doubt and made one more approach.

"Have you come far." They didn't answer. Just gave me the stares, like two cod.

I laughed at them as if I thought their behaviour pathetic, which in fact I did, and turned on my heel to go back to my own territory. When I'd gone ten steps one of them called after me, "Where's Larry Gedge.*"

He didn't sound as if he liked Larry any better than me.

I decided not to hear: if they really wanted to know, they could come and ask nicely. It was their turn to cross the grass.

They didn't bother. I wasn't particularly sorry. I had long ago learned that pilots were not all one great happy brotherhood. Pilots could be as bloodyminded to each other as any group on earth.

I climbed back into my seat in the Cherokee and sorted out my maps and flight plans for the return journey. I had four hours to do it in and it took me ten ' minutes. After that I debated whether to go over to the stands and find some lunch, and decided I wasn't hungry. After that I yawned. It was a habit.

I had been depressed for so long that it had become a permanent state of mind. Expectations might lift the edge of the cloud every time one took a new job, but life never turned out to be as good as the hopes. This was my sixth job since I'd gone to learn flying with stars in my eyes, my fourth since the stars had faded for good.

I had thought that taxi flying might be interesting, and after crop spraying, which I'd been doing last, anything would be; and perhaps it would indeed be interesting, but if I'd thought it might be free of gripe and bad temper I'd been kidding myself. For here it all was, as usual. Squabbling passengers and belligerent competitors and no discernible joy anywhere.

There was a small buffet on the side of the fuselage and the jar and sound of someone stepping up on to the wing. The slightly open door was pushed wide with a crash, and into its space appeared a girl, bending at the waist and knees and neck so that she could look inside and across at me.

She was slim and dark haired and she was wearing large square sunglasses. Also she had a blue linen dress and long white boots. She looked great. The afternoon instantly improved.

"You lousy bloody skunk," she said.

It really was one of those days.

CHAPTER TWO.

"Wow," she said. "Wrong man." She took off the sunglasses and folded them away in the white handbag which hung from her shoulder by a thick red, white and blue cord.

"Think nothing of it."

"Where's Larry?"

"Gone to Turkey."

"Gone?" she said blankly. "Do you mean literally gone already, or planning to go, or what?"

I looked at my watch. "Took off from Heathrow twenty minutes ago, I believe."

"Damn," she said forcibly. "Bloody damn."

She straightened up so that all I could see of her was from the waist down. A pleasant enough view for any poor aviator. The legs looked about twenty-three years old and there was nothing wrong with them.

She bent down again. Nothing wrong with the rest of her, either.

"When will he be back?"

"He had a three-year contract."

"Oh, hell." She stared at me in dismay for a few seconds, then said,

"Can I come in there and talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure," I agreed, and moved my maps and stuff off Goldenberg's seat. She stepped down into the cockpit and slid expertly into place. By no means her first entrance into a light aircraft. I wondered about Larry.

Lucky Larry.

"I suppose he didn't give you... a parcel... or anything.., to give me, did he?" she said gloomily.

"Nothing, I'm afraid."

"He's an absolute beast then... er, is he a friend of yours?"

"I've met him twice, that's all."

"He's pinched my hundred quid," she said bitterly.

"He pinched?... ' "He bloody has. Not to mention my handbag and keys and everything." She stopped and compressed her mouth in anger. Then she added, "I left my handbag in this aeroplane three weeks ago, when we flew to Doncaster.

And Larry has been saying ever since that he'll bring it on the next trip to the races and give it to Colin to give to me, and for three solid weeks he's kept on forgetting it. I suppose he knew he was going to Turkey and he thought if he could put it off long enough he would never have to give my bag back."

"Colin... Colin Ross?" I asked. She nodded abstractedly.

"Is he your husband?"

She looked startled, then laughed. "Good Lord, no.

He's my brother. I saw him just now in the paddock and I said, "Has he brought my handbag?" and he shook his head and started to say something, but I belted off over here in a fury without stopping to listen, and I suppose he was going to tell me it wasn't Larry who had come in the plane... Oh damn it, I hate being robbed. Colin would have lent him a hundred quid if he was that desperate. He didn't have to pinch it."

"It was a lot of money to have in a handbag," I suggested.

"Colin had just given it to me, you see. In the plane.

Some owner had handed him a terrific present in readies, and he gave me a hundred of it to pay a bill with, which was really sweet of him, and I can hardly expect him to give me another

hundred just because I was silly enough to leave the first one lying about... ' Her voice tailed off in depression.

"The bill," she added wryly, 'is for flying lessons."

I looked at her with interest. "How far have you got?"

"Oh, I've got my licence," she said. "These were instrument flying lessons. And radio navigation, and all that jazz. I've done about ninety-five hours, altogether.

Spread over about four years, though, sad to say."

That put her in the experienced-beginner class and the dangerous time bracket. After eighty hours flying, pilots are inclined to think they know enough. After a hundred hours, they are sure they don't. Between the two, the accident rate is at its peak.

She asked me several questions about the aeroplane, and I answered them.

Then she said, "Well, there's no point in sitting here all afternoon," and began to lever herself out on to the wing. "Aren't you coming over to the races?"

"No," I shook my head.

"Oh come on," she said. "Do."

The sun was shining and she was very pretty. I smiled and said "OK," and followed her out on to the grass. It is profitless now to speculate on the different course things would have taken if I'd stayed where I was.

I collected my jacket from the rear baggage compartment and locked all the doors and set off with her across the track. The man on the gate duly let me into the paddock and Colin Ross' sister showed no sign of abandoning me once we were inside. Instead she diagnosed my almost total ignorance and seemed pleased to be able to start dispelling it.

"You see that brown horse over there," she said, steering me towards the parade ring rafts, "That one walking round the far end, number sixteen, that's Colin's mount in this race. It's come out a bit light but it looks well in its coat."

"It does?"

She looked at me in amusement. "Definitely."

"Shall I back it, then?"

"It's all a joke to you."

"No," I protested.

"Oh yes indeed," she nodded. "You're looking at this race meeting in the way I'd look at a lot of spiritualists.

Disbelieving and a bit superior."

"Ouch."

"But what you're actually seeing is a large export industry in the process of marketing its wares."

"I'll remember that."

"And if the industry takes place out of doors on a nice fine sunny day with everyone enjoying themselves, well, so much the better."

"Put that way," I agreed, 'it's a lot more jolly than a car factory."

"You will get involved," she said with certainty.

"No' I was equally definite.

She shook her head. "You will, you know, if you do much racecourse taxi work. It'll bust through that cool shell of yours and make you feel something, for a change."

I blinked. "Do you always talk like that to total strangers?"

"No," she said slowly. "I don't."

The bright little jockeys flooded into the parade ring and scattered to small earnest owner-trainer groups where there were a lot of serious conversations and much nodding of heads. On the instructions of Colin Ross' sister I tried moderately hard to take it all seriously. Not with much success.

Colin Ross' sister... "Do you have a name?" I asked.

"Often."

"Thanks."

She laughed. "It's Nancy. What's yours?"

"Matt Shore."

"Hm. A flat matt name. Very suitable."

The jockeys were thrown up like confetti and landed in their saddles, and their spindly shining long-legged transportation skittered its way out on to the track.

Two-year-olds, Nancy said.

She walked me back towards the stands and proposed to smuggle me into the "Owners and Trainers'.

The large official at the bottom of the flight of steps beamed at her until his eyes disappeared and he failed to inspect me for the right bit of cardboard.

It seemed that nearly everyone on the small rooftop stand knew Nancy, and obvious that they agreed with the beaming official's assessment. She introduced me to several people whose interest collapsed like a soufflé in a draught when they found I didn't understand their opening bids "He's a pilot," Nancy explained apologetically. "He flew Colin here today."

"Ah," they said. Ah."

Two of my other passengers were there. Annie Vil-lars was watching the horses canter past with an intent eye and a pursed mouth: the field-marshal element was showing strongly, the feminine camouflage in abeyance.

Major Tyderman, planted firmly with his legs apart and his chin tucked well back into his neck, was scribbling notes into his racecard. When he looked up he saw us, and made his way purposefully across.

"I say," he said to me, having forgotten my name.

"Did I leave my Sporting Life over in the plane, do you know?"

"Yes, you did, Major."

"Blast," he said. "I made some notes on it... Must get it, you know.

Have to go across after this race."

"Would you like me to fetch it?" I asked.

"Well, that's very good of you, my dear chap. But... ' no... couldn't ask it. Walk will do me good."

"The aircraft's locked, Major," I said. "You'll need the keys." I took them out of my pocket and gave them to him.

"Right." He nodded stiffly. "Good."

The race started away off down the track and was all over long before I sorted out the colours of Colin Ross.

In the event, it wasn't difficult. He had won.

"How's Midge?" Annie Villars said to Nancy, restoring her giant race glasses to their case.

"Oh, much better, thank you. Getting on splendidly."

"I'm so glad. She's had a bad time, poor girl."

Nancy nodded and smiled, and everyone trooped down the stairs to the ground.

"Well now," Nancy said. "How about some coffee?

And something to munch, perhaps?"

"You must have others you'd prefer to be with I-you won't get into trouble, you know, on my own."

Her lips twitched. "Today I need a bodyguard. I elected you for the job.

Desert me if you like, but if you want to please, stick."

"Not difficult," I said.

"Great. Coffee, then."

It was iced coffee, rather good. Halfway through the turkey sandwiches the reason why Nancy wanted me with her drifted up to the small table where we sat and slobbered all over her. She fended off what looked to me like a random assembly of long hair, beard, beads, fringes and a

garment like a tablecloth with a hole in it, and yelled to me through the undergrowth, "Buddy, your job starts right now."

I stood up, reached out two hands, caught hold of an assortment of wool and hair, and pulled firmly backwards.

The result resolved itself into a youngish man sitting down with surprise much more suddenly than he'd intended.

"Nancy," he said in an aggrieved voice.

"This is Chanter," she said to me. "He's never grown out of the hippie thing, as you can see."

"I'm an artist," he said. He had an embroidered band across his forehead and round his head: like the horses' bridles, I thought fleetingly. All the hair was clean and there were shaven parts on his jaw just to prove that it wasn't from pure laziness that he let everything grow.

On closer inspection I was sure that it was indeed a dark-green chenille tablecloth, with a central hole for his head. Underneath that he wore low-slung buckskin trousers fringed from hip to ankle, and a creeiy crpy dim mauve shirt curved to fit his concave stomach. Various necklaces and pendants on silver chains hung round his neck. Under all the splendour he had dirty bare feet.

"I went to art school with him," Nancy said resignedly.

"That was in London. Now he's at Liverpool, just down the road. Any time I come racing up here, he tums up too."

"Uh," Chanter said profoundly.

"Do you get grants for ever?" I asked: not sneeringly;

I simply wanted to know.

He was not offended. "Look, man, like, up here I'm the fuzz."

I nearly laughed. Nancy said, "You know what he means, then?"

"He teaches," I said.

"Yeah, man, that's what I said." He took one of the turkey sandwiches.

His fingers were greenish with black streaks. Paint.

"You keep your impure thoughts off this little bird," he said to me, spitting out bits of bread. "She's strictly my territory. But strictly, man."

"Zat so?"

"Zat definitely, but definitely..., is... so, man."

"How come?"

He gave me a look which was as off beat as his appearance.

I've still got the salt to put on this little bird's tail," he said.

"Shan't be satisfied till it's there... ' Nancy was looking at him with an expression which meant that she didn't know whether to laugh at him or be afraid of him. She couldn't decide whether he was Chanter the amorous buffoon or Chanter the frustrated sex maniac. Nor could I. I understood her needing help when he was around.

"He only wants me because I won't," she said.

"The challenge bit," I nodded. "Affront to male pride, and all that."

"Practically every other girl has," she said.

"That makes it worse."

Chanter looked at me broodingly. "You're a drag, man. I mean, cubic."

"To each his scene," I said ironically.

He took the last of the sandwiches, turned his back studiously towards me and said to Nancy, "Let's you and me lose this dross, huh?"

"Let's you and me do nothing of the sort, Chanter. If you want to tag along, Matt comes in the deal."

He scowled at the floor and then suddenly stood up so that all the fringes and beads danced and jingled.

"Come on, then. Let's get a look at the horses. Life's a-wasting."

"He really can draw," Nancy said as we followed the tablecloth out into the sunshine.

"I wouldn't doubt it. I'll bet half of what he does is caricature, though, with a strong element of cruelty."

"How d'you know?" she said, startled.

"He just seems like that."

He pad 'ed along beside us in his I?are feet and was a sufficiently unusual sight on a racecourse to attract a barrage of stares ranging from amusement to apoplexy.

He didn't seem to notice. Nancy looked as if she were long used to it.

We came to a halt against the parade ring rails where Chanter rested his elbows and exercised his voice.

"Horses," he said. "I'm not for the Stubbs and Mun-nings thing. When I see a racehorse I see a machine, and that's what I paint, a horse-shaped machine with pistons thumping away and muscle fibres like connecting rods and a crack in the crank case with the oil dripping away drop by drop into the body cavity... ' He broke off abruptly but with the same breath finished. "How's your sister?"

"She's much better," Nancy said, not seeming to see any great change of subject. "She's really quite well now."

"Good," he said, and went straight on with his lecture.

"And then I draw some distant bulging stands with hats ltying off and everyone cheering and all the time the machine is bursting its gut... I see components, I see what's happening to the bits..., the stresses... I see colours in components too..., nothing on earth is a whole..., nothing is ever what it seems... everything is components." He stopped abruptly, thinking about what he'd said.

After a suitably appreciative pause, I asked, "Do you ever sell your paintings?"

"Sell them?" He gave me a scornful, superior stare.

"No, I don't. Money is disgusting."

"It's more disgusting when you haven't got it," Nancy said.

"You're a renegade, girl," he said fiercely.

"Love on a crust," she said, 'is fine when you're twenty, but pretty squalid when you're sixty."

"I don't intend to be sixty. Sixty is strictly for grandfathers.

Not my scene at all."

We turned away from the rails and came face to face with Major Tyderman, who was carrying his Sporting Life and holding out the aircraft's keys. His gaze swept over Chanter and he controlled himself admirably. Not a twitch.

"I locked up again," he said, handing me the bunch.

"Thanks, Major."

He nodded, glanced once more at Chanter, and retreated in good order.

Even for Nancy's sake the official wouldn't let Chanter up the steps to the Owners and Trainers. We watched at grass level with Chanter muttering 'stinking bourgeois' at regular intervals.

Colin Ross finished second. The crowd booed and tore up a lot of tickets. Nancy looked as though she were long used to that, too.

Between the next two races we sat on the grass while Chanter gave us the uninterrupted benefit of his views on the evils of money, racialism, war, religion and marriage.

It was regulation stuff; nothing new. I didn't say I thought so. During the discourse he twice without warning stretched over and put his hand on Nancy's breast.

Each time without surprise she picked it off again by the wrist and threw it back at him. Neither of them seemed to think it needed comment.

After the next race (Colin was third) Chanter remarked that his throat was dry, and Nancy and I obediently followed him off to the Tattersalls bar for lubrication. Coca-Colas for three, splashed out of the bottles by an overworked barmaid. Chanter busily juggled the three glasses so that it was I who paid, which figured.

The bar was only half full but a great deal of space and attention was being taken up by one man, a large tough-looking individual with a penetrating Australian accent. He had an obviously new white plaster cast on his leg and a pair of crutches which he hadn't mastered.

His loud laugh rose above the general buzz as he constantly apologised for knocking into people.

"Haven't got the hang of these props yet... "

Chanter regarded him, as he did most things, with some disfavour.

The large Australian went on explaining his state to two receptive acquaintances.

"Mind you, can't say I'm sorry I broke my ankle. Best investment I ever made." The laugh rang out infectiously and most people in the bar began to grin. Not Chanter, of course.

"See, I only paid my premium the week before, and then I fell down these steps and I got a thousand quid for it. Now that ain't whistling, that ain't, eh? A thousand bleeding quid for falling down a flight of steps."

He laughed again hugely, enjoying the joke. "Come on mates," he said,

"Drink up, and let's go and invest some of this manna from Heaven on my good friend Kenny Bayst."

I jumped a fraction and looked at my watch. Coming up to three-thirty.

Kenny Bayst dearly hadn't told his good friend not to speculate.

Absolutely none of my business. Telling him myself would be the worst favour I could do for Kenny Bayst.

The large Australian swung himself out of the bar, followed by the two mates. Chanter's curiosity overcame his disinclination to show himself at a loss.

"Who," he said crossly, 'is going to give that schmo a thousand quid for breaking his ankle?"

Nancy smiled. "It's a new insurance fund, specially for people who go racing. Accident insurance. I don't really know. I've heard one or two people mention it lately."

"Insurance is immoral," Chanter said dogmatically, sliding round behind her and laying his hand flat on her stomach. Nancy picked it off and stepped away. As a 'odyguard, I didn't seem to be doing much good.

Nancy said she particularly wanted to see this race properly, and left Chanter looking moody at the bottom of the staircase. Without asking her I followed her up the steps: a period alone with Chanter held no attractions.

Kenny Bayst, according to my slantways look at Nancy's racecard, was riding a horse called Rudiments: number seven, owned by the Duke of Wessex, trained by Miss. Villars, carrying olive green with silver crossbelts and cap. I watched the horse canter down past the stands on the olive-green grass and reflected that the Duke of Wessex had chosen colours which were as easy to distinguish as coal on a black night.

I said to Nancy, "What did Rudiments do in his last race?"

"Hm?" she said absentmindedly, all her attention on the rose-pink and white shape of her brother. "Did you say Rudiments?"

"That's right. I brought Kenny Bayst and Annie Villars here, as well."

"Oh. I see." She looked down at her racecard. "Last time out..., it won.

Tune before that, it won. Tune before that, it came fourth."

"It's good, then?"

"Fairly, I suppose." She wrinkled her nose at me. "I told you you'd get involved."

I shook my head. "Just curious."

"Same thing."

"Is it favourite?"

"No, Colin is. But... you can see over there, on that big board..., see?... Rudiments is second favourite on the Tote at about three to one."

"Well... " I said. "What does it mean, to lay a horse?"

"It means to stand a bet. It's what bookmakers do.

What the Tote does, really, come to that."

"Can people do it who aren't bookmakers?"

"Oh sure. They do. Say the bookmakers are offering three to one, and you yourself don't think the horse will win, you could say to your friends, I'll lay you four to one; so they'd bet with you because you were offering more. Also, no betting tax. Private wager, you see."

"And if the horse wins, you pay out?"

"You sure do." ii see," I said. And I did. Eric Goldenberg had laid Rudiments the last time it had run because Kenny Bayst had agreed to lose, and then he'd gone and won. Their tempers were still on the dicky side as a result: and they had been arguing today about whether or not to try again.

"Colin thinks he'll win this," Nancy said. "I do hope SO."

Bonanza for Bayst, I thought.

It was a seven furlong race, it seemed. The horses accelerated from standing to 30 mph in times which would have left a Porsche gasping.

When they swung away round the far bend Rudiments was as far as I was concerned invisible, and until the last hundred yards I didn't see him once. Then all of a sudden there he was, boxed in in a bunch on the rails and unable to get past Colin Ross directly in front.

Kenny didn't find his opening. He finished the race in third place, still pinned in by Colin in front and a dappled grey alongside. I couldn't begin to tell whether or not he had done it on purpose.

"Wasn't that great?" Nancy exclaimed to the world in general, and a woman on the far side of her agreed that it was, and asked after the health of her sister Midge.

"Oh, she's fine, thanks," Nancy said. She turned to me and there was less joy in her eyes than in her voice.

"Come over here," she said. "You can see them unsaddling the winner."

The Owners and Trainers turned out to be on the roof of the weighing room. We leaned over the rails at the front and watched Colin and Kenny unbuckle the saddle girths, loop the saddles over their arms, pat their steaming horses, and disappear into the weighing room.

The group in the winner's enclosure were busy slapping backs and unburdening to the Press. The group in the third enclosure wore small tight smiles and faraway eyes. I still couldn't tell if they were ecstatic and hiding it, or livid and ditto.

The horses were led away and the groups dispersed.

In their place appeared Chanter, staring up and waving his arm.

"Come on down," he shouted.

"No inhibitions, that's his trouble," Nancy said. "If we don't go down, he'll just go on shouting."

He did. An official strode up manfully to ask him to belt up and buzz off; but it was like ripples trying to push over Bass Rock.

"Come on down, Nancy." Fortissimo.

She pushed herself away from the rails and took enough steps to be out of his sight.

"Stay with me," she said. It was more than half a question.

"If you want it."

"You've seen what he's like. And he's been mild, today. Mild. Thanks to you."

"I've done absolutely nothing."

"You're here."

"Why do you come to Haydock, if he always bothers you too much?"

"Because I'm bloody well not letting him frighten me away."

"He loves you," I said.

"No. Can't you tell the difference, for God's sake?"

"Yes," I said.

She looked startled, then shook her head. "He loves Chanter, full stop."

She took three more steps towards the stairs, then stopped again.

"Why is it that I talk to you as if I'd known you for years?"

To a certain extent I knew, but I smiled and shook my head. No one cares to say straight out that it's because one is as negative as wallpaper.

Chanter's plaintive voice floated up the steps. "Nancy, come on down..."

' She took another step, and then stopped again. "Will you do me another favour? I'm staying up here a few more days with an aunt, but I bought a present for Midge this morning and I've given it to Colin to take home.

But he's got a memory like a string vest for everything except horses, so would you cheek with him that he hasn't left it in the changing room, before you take off?"

"Sure," I said. "Your sister... I gather she's been ill." She looked away up at the sun-filled sky and down again and straight at me, and in a shattering moment of awareness I saw the pain and the cracks behind the bright public facade.

"Has been. Will be," she said. "She's got leukaemia."

After a pause she swallowed and added the unbearable bit.

"She's my identical twin."

CHAPTER THREE.

After the fifth race Chanter gloomily announced that about fifty plastic students were waiting for him to pat their egos and that although he despised the system he was likely to find eating a problem if he actually got the sack. His farewell to Nancy Consisted in wiping his hands all over her, front and back, and giving her an open-mouthed kiss which owing to her split-second evasive action landed on her ear.

He glared at me as if it were my fault. Nancy not relenting, he scowled at her and muttered something about salt, and then twirled around on his bare heel so that the tablecloth and all the hair and fringes and beads swung out with centrifugal force, and strode away at high speed towards the exit.

"The soles of his feet are like leather," she said. "Disgusting." But from the hint of indulgence in her face I gathered that Chanter's cause wasn't entirely lost.

She said she was thirsty again and could do with a Coke, and since she seemed to want me still to tag along, I tagged. This time, without Chanter, we went to the members' bar in the Club enclosure, the small downstairs one that was open to the main entrance hall.

The man in the plaster cast was there again. Different audience. Same story. His big cheerful booming voice filled the little bar and echoed round the whole hall outside.

"You can't hear yourself think," Nancy said.

In a huddle in a far comer were Major Tyderman and Eric Goldenberg, sitting at a small table with what looked like treble whiskies in front of them. Their heads were bent towards each other, dose, almost touching, so that they could each hear what the other was saying amid the din, yet not be overheard. Relations between them didn't seem to be at their most cordial. There was a great deal of rigidity in their down-bent faces, and no friendliness in the small flicking glances they occasionally gave each other.

"The Sporting Life man," Nancy said, following my gaze.

"Yes. The big one is a passenger too."

"They don't look madly happy."

"They weren't madly happy coming up here, either."

"Owners of chronic losers?"

"No - well, I don't think so. They came up because of that horse Rudiments which Kenny Bayst rode for Annie Villars, but they aren't down in the racecard as its owners."

She flicked back through her card. "Rudiments. Duke of Wessex. Well, neither of those two is him, poor old booby."

"Who, the Duke?"

"Yes," she said, "Actually I suppose he isn't all that old, but he's dreadfully dim. Big important looking man with a big important looking rank, and as sweet as they come, really, but there's nothing but cotton wool upstairs."

"You know him well?"

"I've met him often."

"Subtle difference."

"Yes."

The two men scraped back their chairs and began to make their way out of the bar. The man in the plaster cast caught sight of them and his big smile grew even bigger.

"Say, if it isn't Eric Goldenberg, of all people. Come over here, me old sport, come and have a drink."

Goldenberg looked less than enthusiastic at the invitation and the Major sidled away quickly to avoid being included, giving the Australian a glance full of the dislike of the military for the flamboyant.

The man in the cast put one arm clumsily round Goldenberg's shoulder, the crutch swinging out widely and knocking against Nancy.

"Say," he said. "Sorry, lady. I haven't got the hang of these things yet."

"That's all right," she said, and Goldenberg said something to him that I couldn't hear, and before we knew where we were we had been encompassed into the Australian's circle and he was busy ordering drinks all round.

Close to, he was a strange-looking man because his face and hair were almost colourless. The skin was whitish, the scalp, half bald, was fringed by silky hair that had been fair and was turning white, the eyelashes and eyebrows made no contrast, and the lips of the smiling mouth were creamy pale. He looked like a man made up to take the part of a large cheerful ghost. His name, it appeared, was Acey Jones.

"Aw, come on," he said to me in disgust. "Coke is for milksops, not men." Even his eyes were pale: a light indeterminate bluey grey.

"Just lay off him, Ace," Goldenberg said. "He's flying me home. A drunken pilot I can do without."

"A pilot, eh?" The big voice broadcast the information to about fifty people who weren't in the least interested. "One of the fly boys? Most pilots I know are a bunch of proper tearaways. Live hard, love hard, drink hard. Real characters, those guys." He said it with an expansive smile which hid the implied slight. "C'mon now, sport, live dangerously.

Don't disillusion all these people."

"Beer, then, please," I said.

Nancy was equally scornful, but for opposite reasons.

"Why did you climb down?"

"Antagonizing people when you don't have to is like casting your garbage on the waters. One day it may come floating back, smelling worse."

She laughed. "Chanter would say that was immoral.

Stands must be made on principles."

"I won't drink more than half of the beer. Will that do?"

"You're impossible."

Acey Jones handed me the glass and watched me take a mouthful and went on a bit about hell-raising and beating up the skies and generally living the life of a high-powered gypsy. He made it sound very attractive and his audience smiled and nodded their heads and none of them seemed to know that the picture was fifty years out of date, and that the best thing a pilot can be is careful: sober, meticulous, receptive, and careful. There are old pilots and foolish pilots, but no old foolish pilots.

Me, I was old, young, wise, foolish, thirty-four. Also depressed, divorced and broke.

After aviation, Acey Jones switched back to insurance and told Goldenberg and Nancy and me and the fifty other people about getting a thousand pounds for breaking his ankle, and we had to listen to it all again, reacting with the best we could do in surprised appreciation.

"No, look, no kidding, sport," he said to Goldenberg with his first sign of seriousness. "You want to get your~ serf signed up with this outfit.

Best fiver I've ever spent... ' Several of the fifty onlookers edged nearer to listen, and Nancy and I filtered towards the outside of the group. I put down the tasted beer on an inconspicuous table out in the hall while Nancy dispatched the bottom half of her Coke, and from there we drifted out into the air.

The sun was still shining, but the small round white clouds were expanding into bigger round clouds with dark-grey centres. I looked at my watch. Four-twenty.

Still nearly an hour until the time the Major wanted to leave. The longer we stayed the bumpier the ride was likely to be, because the afternoon forecast for scattered thunderstorms looked accurate.

"Cu-nims forming," Nancy said, watching them.

"Nasty."

We went and watched her brother get up on his mount for the last race and then we went up on the Owners and Trainers and watched him win it, and that was about that. She said goodbye to me near the bottom of the steps, outside the weighing room.

.. ' She had smooth gilded skin and greyish-brown eyes.

Straight dark eyebrows. Not much lipstick. No scent.

Very much the opposite of my blonde, painted, and departed wife.

"I expect," she said, 'that we'll meet again, because I sometimes fly with Colin, if there's a spare seat."

"Do you ever take him yourself?"

"Good Lord no." She laughed. "He wouldn't trust me to get him there on time. And anyway, there are too many days when the weather is beyond what I can do.

Maybe one day, though... ' She held out her hand and I shook it. A grip very like her brother's, and just as brie "See you, then," she said.

"I hope so."

She nodded with a faint smile and went away. I watched her neat blue and white back view and stifled a sudden unexpected inclination to run after her and give her a Chanter type farewell.

When I walked across the track towards the aeroplane I met Kenny Bayst coning back from it with his raincoat over his arm. His skin was blotched pink again with fury, clashing with his carrot hair.

"I'm not coming back with you," he said tightly. "You tell Miss. Annie effing Villars that I'm not coming back with you. There's no bloody pleasing her. Last time I nearly got the push for winning and this time I nearly got the push for not winning. You'd think that both times I'd had the slightest choice in the matter. I'll tell you straight, sport, I'm not coming back in your bloody little aeroplane having them gripe gripe gripe at me all the way back."

"All right," I said. I didn't blame him.

"I've just been over to fetch my raincoat. I'll go home by train.., or get a lift."

"Raincoat... but the aircraft is locked."

"No it isn't. I just got my raincoat out of the back.

Now you tell them I've had enough, right?" I nodded, and while he hurried off I walked on towards the aeroplane puzzled and a bit annoyed.

Major Tyderman had said he had locked up again after he had fetched his Sporting Life, but apparently he hadn't.

He hadn't. Both the doors on the port side were unlocked, the passenger door and the baggage locker. I wasn't too pleased because Derrydowns had told me explicitly never to leave the aircraft open as they'd had damage done by small boys on several occasions: but all looked well and there were no signs of sticky fingers.

I did all the external checks again and glanced over the flight plan for the return. If we had to avoid too many thunderclouds it might take a little longer to reach Newmarket, but unless there was one settled and active over the landing field there should be no problem.

The passengers of the two Polyplane aircraft assembled by ones and twos, shovelled themselves inside, shut the doors, and were trundled down to the far end of the course. One after the other the two aeroplanes raced back over the grass and lifted away, wheeling like black darts against the blue, grey and white patchwork of the sky.

Annie Villars came first of my lot. Alone, composed, polite; giving nothing away. She handed me her coat and binoculars and I stored them for her. She thanked me. The deceptive mild brown eyes held a certain blankness and every few seconds a spasmodic tightening belied the gentle set of her mouth. A formidable lady, I thought. What was more, she herself knew it. She was so conscious of the strength and range of her power that she deliberately manufactured the disarming exterior in order not exactly to hide it, but to make it palatable. Made a nice change, I thought ironically, from all those who put up a big tough front to disguise their inner lack.

"Kenny Bayst asked me to tell you that he has got a lift home to Newmarket and won't be coming back by air," I said.

A tiny flash of fire in the brown eyes. The gentle voice, completely controlled, said "I'm not surprised." She climbed into the aeroplane and strapped herself into her seat and sat there in silence, looking out over the emptying racecourse with eyes that weren't concentrating on the grass and the trees.

Tyderman and Goldenberg returned together, still deep in discussion. The Major's side mostly consisted of decisive nods, but it was pouring out of Goldenberg.

Also he was past worrying about what I overheard.

"I would be surprised if the little shit hasn't been double crossing us all the time and collecting from some bookmaker or other even more than he got from us.

Making fools of us, that's what he's been doing. I'll murder the little sod. I told him so, too."

"What did he say?" the Major asked.

"Said I wouldn't get the chance. Cocky little bastard." They thrust their gear angrily into the baggage compartment and stood talking by the rear door in voices rumbling like the distant thunder.

Colin Ross came last, slight and inconspicuous, still wearing the faded jeans and the now crumpled sweat shirt.

I went a few steps to meet him. "Your sister Nancy asked me to check with you whether you had remembered to bring the present for Midge."

"Oh damn... ' More than irritation in his voice there was weariness. He had ridden six hard races, won three of them. He looked as if a toddler could knock him down.

"I'll get it for you, if you like."

"Would you?" He hesitated, then with a tired flap of his wrist said,

"Well, I'd be grateful. Go into the weighing room and ask for my valet, Ginger Mundy. The parcel's on the shelf over my peg. He'll get it for you."

I nodded and went back across the track. The parcel, easily found, proved to be a little smaller than a shoe box and was wrapped in pink and gold paper with a pink bow. I took it over to the aeroplane and Colin put it on Kenny Bayst's empty seat.

The Major had already strapped himself in and was drumming with his fingers on his binocular case, which was as usual slung around him. His body was still stiff with tension. I wondered if he ever relaxed.

Goldenberg waited without a smile while I clambered across into my seat, and followed me in and clipped shut the door in gloomy silence. I sighed, started the engine, and taxied down to the far end of the course.

Ready for take-off I turned round to my passengers and tried a bright smile.

"All set?" I got three grudging nods for my pains. Colin Ross was asleep. I took the hilarious party off the ground without enthusiasm, skirted the Manchester zone, and pointed the nose in the general direction of Newmarket.

Once up in the sky it was all too clear that the air had become highly unstable. At lower levels, rising pockets of heat from the built-up areas bumped the aeroplane about like a iuppet, and to enormous heights great heaps of cumulo-nimbus cloud were boiling up all round the horizon.

Airsick-making weather. I looked round to see if an issue of waterproof bags was going to be required.

Needn't have bothered. Colin was still asleep and the other three had too much on their minds to worry about a few lurches. I told Annie Villars where the bags were to be found if wanted, and she seemed to think I had insulted her.

Although by four thousand feet the worst of the bumps were below us, the flight was a bit like a bending race as I tracked left and right to avoid the dark towering cloud masses. Mostly we stayed in the sunshine: occasionally raced through the small clouds which were dotted among the big ones. I wanted to avoid even the medium-sized harmless ones, as these sometimes hid a dangerous whopper just behind, and at a hundred and fifty miles an hour there was little chance to dodge. Inside every well grown cumulo-nimbus there were vertical rushing air currents which could lift and drop even an airliner like a yoyo. Also one could meet hailstones and freezing rain. Nobody's idea of a jolly playground. So it was a good idea to avoid the black churning brutes, but it was a rougher ride than one should aim for with passengers.

Everyone knows the horrible skin-prickling heart-thudding feeling when the normal suddenly goes wrong.

Fear, it's called. The best place to feel it is not with a jerk at four thousand feet in a battlefield of cu-nims.

I was used to far worse weather; to bad, beastly, even lethal weather.

It wasn't the state of the sky which distracted me, which set the fierce little adrenalin-packed alarm bell ringing like crazy.

There was something wrong with the aeroplane.

Nothing much. I couldn't even tell what it was. But something. Something ...

My instinct for safety was highly developed. Overdeveloped, many had said, when it had got me into trouble. Bloody coward, was how they'd put it.

You couldn't ignore it, though. When the instinct switched to danger you couldn't risk ignoring it, not with passengers on board. What you could do when you were alone was a different matter, but civil commercial pilots seldom got a chance to fly alone.

Nothing wrong with the instruments. Nothing wrong with the engine.

Something wrong with the flying controls.

When I swerved gently to avoid yet another lurking cu-nim the nose of the aircraft dropped and I had a shade of difficulty pulling it up again. Once level nothing seemed wrong. All the gauges seemed right.

Only the instinct remained. Instinct and the memory of a slightly sluggish response.

The next time I made a turn, the same thing happened.

The nose wanted to drop, and it needed more pressure than it should have done to hold it level. At the third turn, it was worse.

I looked down at the map on my knees. We were twenty minutes out of Haydock... south of Matlock approaching Nottingham. Another eighty nautical miles to Newmarket.

It was the hinged part of the tailplane which raised or lowered the aircraft's nose. The elevators, they were called. They were linked by wires to the control column in such a way that when you pushed the control column forward the tail went up and tipped the nose down. And vice versa.

The wires ran through rings and over pulleys, between the cabin floor and the outer skin of the fuselage. There wasn't supposed to be any friction.

Friction was what I could feel.

I thought perhaps one of the wires had somehow come off one of the pulleys during the bumpy ride. I'd never heard of it happening before, but that didn't mean it couldn't. Or perhaps a whole pulley had come adrift, or had broken in half... If something was rolling around loose it could affect the controls fairly seriously.

I turned to the cheerful company.

"I'm very sorry, but there will be a short delay on the journey. We're going to land for a while at the East Midlands Airport, near Nottingham, while I get a quick precautionary check done to the aircraft."

I met opposition.

Goldenberg said belligerently, "I can't see anything wrong." His eyes swept over the gauges, noticing all the needles pointing to the green safety segments on all the engine instruments. "It all looks the same as it always does."

"Are you sure it's necessary?" Annie Villars said. "I particularly want to get back to see my horses at even-Ing stables."

The Major said "Damn it all!" fiercely and frowned heavily and looked more tense than ever.

They woke up Colin Ross.

"The pilot wants to land here and make what he calls a precautionary check. We want to go straight on. We don't want to waste time. There isn't anything wrong with the plane, as far as we can see... ' Colin Ross' voice came across, clear and decisive. "If he says we're going down, we're going down. He's the boss."

I looked round at them. Except for Colin they were all more moody and gloomy than ever. Colin unexpectedly gave me a flicker of a wink. I grinned as much to myself as to him, called up East Midlands on the radio, announced our intention to land, and asked them to arrange for a mechanic to be available for a check.

On the way down I regretted it. The friction seemed no worse: if anything it was better. Even in the turbulent air near the ground I had no great trouble in moving the elevators. I'd made a fool of myself and the passengers would be furious and Derrydowns would be scathing about the unnecessary expense, and at any time at all I would be looking for my seventh job.

It was a normal landing. I parked where directed on the apron and suggested everyone got out and went into the airport for a drink, as the check would take half an hour, and maybe more.

They were by then increasingly annoyed. Up in the air they must have had a lingering doubt that I was right about landing. Safe on the ground, they were becoming sure it was unnecessary.

I walked some of the way across the tarmac with them towards the airport passengers' doors, then peeled off to go to the control office for the routine report after landing, and to ask for the mechanic to come for a look-see as soon as possible. I would fetch them from the bar, I said, once the check was done.

"Hurry it up," Goldenberg said rudely.

"Most annoying. Most annoying indeed." The Major.

"I was away last night., particularly wanted to get back this evening.

Might as well go by road, no point in paying for speed if you don't get it... ' Annie Villars' irritation overcoming the velvet glove.

Colin Ross said, "If your horse coughs, don't race it." The others looked at him sharply. I said, "Thanks' gratefully, and bore off at a tangent to the left. I saw them out of the side of my vision, looking briefly back towards the aircraft and then walking unenthusiastically towards the big glass doors.

There was a crack behind me like a snapping branch, and a monstrous boom, and a roaring gust of air.

I'd heard that sequence before. I spun round, appalled.

Where there had stood a smart little blue and white Cherokee there was an exploding ball of fire.

CHAPTER FOUR.

The bomb had taken a fraction of a second to detonate.

The public impact lasted three days. The investigations dragged on for weeks.

Predictably, the dailies went to town on "Colin Ross Escapes Death by One Minute' and 'Champion Jockey wins Race against Tune'. Annie Villars, looking particularly sweet and rail, said in a television news interview that we had all been fantastically lucky. Major Tyder-man was quoted as saying, "Fortunately there was something wrong with the plane, and we landed for a cheek.

Otherwise... ' And Colin Ross had apparently finished his sentence for him; "Otherwise we would all have been raining down on Nottingham in little bits."

That was after they had recovered, of course. When I reached them at a run near the airport doors their eyes were stretched wide and their faces were stiff with shock.

Annie Villars' mouth had dropped open and she was shaking from head to foot. I put my hand on her arm.

She looked at me blankly and then made a small mewling sound and crumpled against me in a thoroughly un-Napoleonic faint. I caught her on the way down and lifted her up in my arms to save her falling on the shower-soaked tarmac. She weighed even less than she looked.

"God," said Goldenberg automatically. "God." His mind and tongue seemed to be stuck on the single word.

The Major's mouth was trembling and he was losing the battle to keep it still with his teeth. Sweat stood out in fine drops on his forehead and he was breathing in short shocked gasps.

Holding Annie Villars I stood beside them and watched the death throes of the aeroplane. The first explosion had blown it apart and almost immediately the fuel tanks had ignited and finished the job. The wreckage lay strewn in burning twisted pieces over a radius of wet tarmac, the parts looking too small ever to have formed the whole.

Rivers of burning petrol ran among them, and great curling orange and yellow flames roared round the largest piece, which looked like the front part of the cabin.

My seat. My hot, hot seat.

Trouble followed me around like the rats of Hamelin.

Colin Ross looked as shocked as the others but his nerves were of sterner stuff pounds "Was that.., a bomb?"

"Nothing but," I said flippantly.

He looked at me sharply. "It's not funny."

"It's not tragic, either," I said. "We're still here."

A lot of the stiffness left his face and body. The beginnings of a smile appeared. "So we are," he said.

Someone in the control tower had pressed the panic button. Fire engines screamed up and foam poured out of the giant hoses on to the pathetic scraps. The equipment was designed to deal with jumbos. It took about ten seconds to reduce the Cherokee sized flames to black memories.

Three or four airport cars buzzed around like gnats and one filled with agitated officials dashed in our direction.

"Are you the people who came in that aircraft?"

The first of the question. By no means the last. I knew what I was in for. I had been taken apart before.

"Which is the pilot? Will you come with us, then, and your passengers can go to the manager's office... Is the lady injured?"

"Fainted," I said.

"Oh... ' he hesitated. "Can someone else take her?" He looked at the others. Goldenberg, large and flabby; the Major, elderly; Colin, frail.

His eyes passed over Colin and then went back, widening, the incredulity fighting against recognition.

"Excuse me... are you?... '

"Ross," said Colin flatly. "Yes."

They rolled out the red carpet, after that. They produced smelling salts and a ground hostess for Annie Villars, stiff brandies for the Major and Goldenberg, autograph books for Colin Ross. The manager himself took charge of them. And someone excitedly rang up the national press.

The Board of Trade investigators were friendly and polite. As usual. And persistent, scrupulous, and ruthless.

As usual.

"Why did you land at East Midlands?"

Friction.,

"Had you any idea there was a bomb on board?"

No.

"Had you made a thorough pre-flight investigation? Yes.

"And no bomb?"

No.

Did I know that I was nevertheless responsible for the safety of the aircraft and could technically be held responsible for having initiated a flight with a bomb on Yes.

We looked at each other. It was an odd rule. Very few people who took off with a bomb on board lived to be held responsible. The Board of Trade smiled, to show they knew it was silly to think anyone would take off with a bomb, knowing it was there.

"Did you lock the aircraft whenever you left it?"

I did.

"And did it remain locked?"

The knife was in. I told them about the Major. They already knew.

"He says he is sure that he relocked the doors," they said. "But even so wasn't it your responsibility to look after the safety of the aircraft, not hist Quite so.

"Wouldn't it have been prudent of you to accompany him to fetch the paper?"

No comment.

"The safety of the aircraft is the responsibility of the captain."

Whichever way you turned, it came back to that.

This was my second interview with the Board of Trade. The first, the day after the explosion, had been friendly and sympathetic, a fact-finding mission during which the word responsibility had not cropped up once.

It had hovered delicately in the wings. Inevitably it would be brought on later and pinned to someone's chest.

"During the past three days we have interviewed all your passengers, and none of them has any idea who would have wanted to kill them, or why. We now feel we must go more carefully into the matter of opportunity, so we do hope you don't mind answering what may be a lot of questions. Then we can piece together a statement for you, and we would be glad if you would sign it... "Do all I can," I said. Dig my own grave. Again.

"They all agreed that the bomb must have been in the gift wrapped parcel which you yourself carried on board."

Nice.

"And that the intended victim was Colin Ross." I sucked my teeth.

"You don't think so?"

"I honestly have no idea Who it was intended for," I said. "But I don't think the bomb was in the parcel."

"Why not?"

"His sister bought it, that morning."

"We know." He was a tall man, with inward looking eyes as if they were consulting a computer in his head, feeding in every answer he was given and waiting for the circuits to click out a conclusion. There was no aggression anywhere in his manner, no vengeance in his motivation. A

fact-finder, a cause-seeker: like a truffle hound. He knew the scent of truth. Nothing would entice him away.

"And it sat on a shell in the changing room all afternoon," I said. "And no one is allowed into the changing room except jockeys and valets."

"We understand that that is so," He smiled. "Could the parcel have been the bomb? Weightwise?"

"I suppose so."

"Miss. Nancy Ross says it contained a large fancy bottle of bath oil."

"No pieces in the wreckage?" I asked.

"Not a thing." The tall man's nose wrinkled. "I've seldom seen a more thorough disintegration."

We were sitting in what was called the crew room in the Derrydowns office on the old RAF airfield near Buckingham. Such money as Derrydowns spent on appearances began in the manager's office and ended in the passengers' waiting lounge across the hall. The crew room looked as if the paint and the walls were coming up to their silver wedding. The linoleum had long passed the age of consent. Three of the four cheap armchairs looked as if they had still to reach puberty but the springs in the fourth were so badly broken that it was more comfortable to sit on the floor.

Much of the wall space was taken up by maps and weather charts and various Notices to Airmen, several of them out of date. There was a duty roster upon which my name appeared with the utmost regularity and a notice typed in red capitals to the effect that anyone who failed to take the aircraft's documents with him on a charter flight would get the sack. I had duly taken all the Cherokee's records and maintenance certificates with me, as the Air Navigation Order insisted. Now they were burned to a crisp. I hoped someone somewhere saw some sense in it.

The tall man looked carefully round the dingy room.

The other, shorter, broader, silent, sat with his green bitten HB poised over his spiral bound notebook.

"Mr. Shore, I understand you hold an Airline Transport Pilot's Licence. And a Flight Navigator's certificate."

He had been looking me up. I knew he would have.

I said flatly, "Yes."

"This taxi work is hardly..., well..., what you were intended for."

I shrugged.

"The highest possible qualifications... ' He shook his head. "You were trained by BOAC and flew for them for nine years. First Officer. In line for Captain. And then you left."

"Yes." And they never took you back. Policy decision.

Never.

He delicately consulted his notes. "And then you flew as Captain for a private British-airline until, it went into liquidation? And after that for a South American airline, who, I believe, dismissed you. And then all last year a spot of gun running, and this spring some crop spraying.

And now this."

They never let go. I wondered who had compiled the list.

"It wasn't guns. Food and medical supplies in, refugees and wounded out."

He smiled faintly. "To some remote African airstrip on dark nights?

Being shot at?"

I looked at him.

He spread out his hands, "Yes, I know. All legal and respectable, and not our business, of course." He cleared his throat... "Weren't you the..., er... the subject... of an investigation about four years ago?

While you were flying for British Interport?"

I took in a slow breath. "Yes."

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