

Death Drag, William Faulkner

Death Drag

THE AIRPLANE APPEARED over town with almost the abruptness of an apparition. It was travelling fast; almost before we knew it was there it was already at the top of a loop; still over the square, in violation of both city and government ordinance. It was not a good loop either, performed viciously and slovenly and at top speed, as though the pilot were either a very nervous man or in a hurry, or (and this queerly: there is in our town an ex-army aviator.

He was coming out of the post office when the airplane appeared going south; he watched the hurried and ungraceful loop and he made the comment) as though the pilot were trying to make the minimum of some specified manœuvre in order to save gasoline.

The airplane came over the loop with one wing down, as though about to make an Immelmann turn. Then it did a half roll, the loop three-quarters complete, and without any break in the whine of the full-throttled engine and still at top speed and with that apparition-like suddenness, it disappeared eastward toward our airport. When the first small boys reached the field, the airplane was on the ground, drawn up into a fence corner at the end of the field.

It was motionless and empty. There was no one in sight at all. Resting there, empty and dead, patched and shabby and painted awkwardly with a single thin coat of dead black, it gave again that illusion of ghostliness, as though it might have flown there and made that loop and landed by itself.

Our field is still in an embryonic state. Our town is built upon hills, and the field, once a cotton field, is composed of forty acres of ridge and gully, upon which, by means of grading and filling, we managed to build an X-shaped runway into the prevailing winds. The runways are long enough in themselves, but the field, like our town, is controlled by men who were of middle age when younger men first began to fly, and so the clearance is not always good.

On one side is a grove of trees which the owner will not permit to be felled; on another is the barnyard of a farm: sheds and houses, a long barn with a roof of rotting shingles, a big haycock. The airplane had come to rest in the fence corner near the barn. The small boys and a Negro or two and a white man, descended from a halted wagon in the road, were standing quietly about it when two men in helmets and lifted goggles emerged suddenly around the corner of the barn.

One was tall, in a dirty coverall. The other was quite short, in breeches and puttees and a soiled, brightly patterned overcoat which looked as if he had got wet in it and it had shrunk on him. He walked with a decided limp.

They had stopped at the corner of the barn. Without appearing to actually turn their heads, they seemed to take in at one glance the entire scene, quickly. The tall man spoke. “What town is this?”

One of the small boys told him the name of the town.

“Who lives here?” the tall man said.

“Who lives here?” the boy repeated.

“Who runs this field? Is it a private field?”

“Oh. It belongs to the town. They run it.”

“Do they all live here? The ones that run it?”

The white man, the Negroes, the small boys, all watched the tall man.

“What I mean, is there anybody in this town that flies, that owns a ship? Any strangers here that fly?”

“Yes,” the boy said. “There’s a man lives here that flew in the war, the English army.”

“Captain Warren was in the Royal Flying Corps,” a second boy said.

“That’s what I said,” the first boy said.

“You said the English army,” the second boy said.

The second man, the short one with the limp, spoke. He spoke to the tall man, quietly, in a dead voice, in the diction of Weber and Fields in vaudeville, making his wh’s into v’s and his th’s into d’s. “What does that mean?” he said.

“It’s all right,” the tall man said. He moved forward. “I think I know him.” The short man followed, limping, terrific, crablike. The tall man had a gaunt face beneath a two-days’ stubble. His eyeballs looked dirty, too, with a strained, glaring expression. He wore a dirty helmet of cheap, thin cloth, though it was January. His goggles were worn, but even we could tell that they were good ones.

But then everybody quit looking at him to look at the short man; later, when we older people saw him, we said among ourselves that he had the most tragic face we had ever seen; an expression of outraged and convinced and indomitable despair, like that of a man carrying through choice a bomb which, at a certain hour each day, may or may not explode.

He had a nose which would have been out of proportion to a man six feet tall. As shaped by his close helmet, the entire upper half of his head down to the end of his nose would have fitted a six-foot body. But below that, below a lateral line bisecting his head from the end of his nose to the back of his skull, his jaw, the rest of his face, was not two inches deep.

His jaw was a long, flat line clapping-to beneath his nose like the jaw of a shark, so that the tip of his nose and the tip of his jaw almost touched. His goggles were merely flat pieces of window-glass held in felt frames. His helmet was leather. Down the back of it, from the top to the hem, was a long savage tear, held together top and bottom by strips of adhesive tape almost black with dirt and grease.

From around the corner of the barn there now appeared a third man, again with that abrupt immobility, as though he had materialized there out of thin air; though when they saw him he was already moving toward the group. He wore an overcoat above a neat civilian suit; he wore a cap. He was a little taller than the limping man, and broad, heavily built.

He was handsome in a dull, quiet way; from his face, a man of infrequent speech. When he came up the spectators saw that he, like the limping man, was also a Jew. That is, they knew at once that two of the strangers were of a different race from themselves, without being able to say what the difference was. The boy who had first spoken probably revealed by his next speech what they thought the difference was. He, as well as the other boys, was watching the man who limped.

“Were you in the war?” the boy said. “In the air war?”

The limping man did not answer. Both he and the tall man were watching the gate. The spectators looked also and saw a car enter the gate and come down the edge of the field toward them. Three men got out of the car and approached. Again the limping man spoke quietly to the tall man: “Is that one?”

“No,” the tall man said, without looking at the other. He watched the newcomers, looking from face to face. He spoke to the oldest of the three. “Morning,” he said. “You run this field?”

“No,” the newcomer said. “You want the secretary of the Fair Association. He’s in town.”

“Any charge to use it?”

“I don’t know. I reckon they’ll be glad to have you use it.”

“Go on and pay them,” the limping man said.

The three newcomers looked at the airplane with that blank, knowing, respectful air of groundlings. It reared on its muddy wheels, the propeller motionless, rigid, with a quality immobile and poised and dynamic. The nose was big with engine, the wings taut, the fuselage streaked with oil behind the rusting exhaust pipes. “Going to do some business here?” the oldest one said.

“Put you on a show,” the tall man said.

“What kind of show?”

“Anything you want. Wing-walking; death-drag.”

“What’s that? Death-drag?”

“Drop a man onto the top of a car and drag him off again. Bigger the crowd, the more you’ll get.”

“You will get your money’s worth,” the limping man said.

The boys still watched him. “Were you in the war?” the first boy said.

The third stranger had not spoken up to this time. He now said: “Let’s get on to town.”

“Right,” the tall man said. He said generally, in his flat, dead voice, the same voice which the three strangers all seemed to use, as though it were their common language: “Where can we get a taxi? Got one in town?”

“We’ll take you to town,” the men who had come up in the car said.

“We’ll pay,” the limping man said.

“Glad to do it,” the driver of the car said. “I won’t charge you anything. You want to go now?”

“Sure,” the tall man said. The three strangers got into the back seat, the other three in front. Three of the boys followed them to the car.

“Lemme hang on to town, Mr. Black?” one of the boys said.

“Hang on,” the driver said. The boys got onto the running boards. The car returned to town. The three in front could hear the three strangers talking in the back. They talked quietly, in low, dead voices, somehow quiet and urgent, discussing something among themselves, the tall man and the handsome one doing most of the talking. The three in front heard only one speech from the limping man: “I won’t take less . . .”

“Sure,” the tall man said. He leaned forward and raised his voice a little: “Where’ll I find this Jones, this secretary?”

The driver told him.

“Is the newspaper or the printing shop near there? I want some handbills.”

“I’ll show you,” the driver said. “I’ll help you get fixed up.”

“Fine,” the tall man said. “Come out this afternoon and I’ll give you a ride, if I have time.”

The car stopped at the newspaper office. “You can get your handbills here,” the driver said.

“Good,” the tall man said. “Is Jones’s office on this street?”

“I’ll take you there, too,” the driver said.

“You see about the editor,” the tall man said. “I can find Jones, I guess.” They got out of the car. “I’ll come back here,” the tall man said. He went on down the street, swiftly, in his dirty coverall and helmet. Two other men had joined the group before the newspaper office. They all entered, the limping man leading, followed by the three boys.

“I want some handbills,” the limping man said. “Like this one.” He took from his pocket a folded sheet of pink paper. He opened it; the editor, the boys, the five men, leaned to see it. The lettering was black and bold:

DEMON DUNCAN

DAREDEVIL OF THE AIR

DEATH DEFYING SHOW WILL BE GIVEN

UNDER THE AUSPICES OF . . . . . . . . . . . .

THIS P.M. AT TWO P.M.

COME ONE COME ALL AND SEE DEMON DUNCAN

DEFY DEATH IN DEATH DROP & DRAG OF DEATH

“I want them in one hour,” the limping man said.

“What you want in this blank space?” the editor said.

“What you got in this town?”

“What we got?”

“What auspices? American Legion? Rotary Club? Chamber of Commerce?”

“We got all of them.”

“I’ll tell you which one in a minute, then,” the limping man said. “When my partner gets back.”

“You have to have a guarantee before you put on the show, do you?” the editor said.

“Why, sure. Do you think I should put on a daredevil without auspices? Do you think I should for a nickel maybe jump off the airplane?”

“Who’s going to jump?” one of the later comers said; he was a taxi-driver.

The limping man looked at him. “Don’t you worry about that,” he said. “Your business is just to pay the money. We will do all the jumping you want, if you pay enough.”

“I just asked which one of you all was the jumper.”

“Do I ask you whether you pay me in silver or in green-backs?” the limping man said. “Do I ask you?”

“No,” the taxi-driver said.

“About these bills,” the editor said. “You said you wanted them in an hour.”

“Can’t you begin on them, and leave that part out until my partner comes back?”

“Suppose he don’t come before they are finished?”

“Well, that won’t be my fault, will it?”

“All right,” the editor said. “Just so you pay for them.”

“You mean, I should pay without a auspices on the hand-bill?”

“I ain’t in this business for fun,” the editor said.

“We’ll wait,” the limping man said.

They waited.

“Were you a flyer in the war, Mister?” the boy said.

The limping man turned upon the boy his long, misshapen, tragic face. “The war? Why should I fly in a war?”

“I thought maybe because of your leg. Captain Warren limps, and he flew in the war. I reckon you just do it for fun?”

“For fun? What for fun? Fly? Gruss Gott. I hate it, I wish the man what invented them was here; I would put him into that machine yonder and I would print on his back, Do not do it, one thousand times.”

“Why do you do it, then?” the man who had entered with the taxi-driver said.

“Because of that Republican Coolidge. I was in business, and that Coolidge ruined business; ruined it. That’s why. For fun? Gruss Gott.”

They looked at the limping man. “I suppose you have a license?” the second late-comer said.

The limping man looked at him. “A license?”

“Don’t you have to have a license to fly?”

“Oh; a license. For the airplane to fly; sure, I understand. Sure. We got one. You want to see it?”

“You’re supposed to show it to anybody that wants to see it, aren’t you?”

“Why, sure. You want to see it?”

“Where is it?”

“Where should it be? It’s nailed to the airplane, where the government put it. Did you thought maybe it was nailed to me? Did you thought maybe I had a engine on me and maybe wings? It’s on the airplane. Call a taxi and go to the airplane and look at it.”

“I run a taxi,” the driver said.

“Well, run it. Take this gentleman out to the field where he can look at the license on the airplane.”

“It’ll be a quarter,” the driver said. But the limping man was not looking at the driver. He was leaning against the counter. They watched him take a stick of gum from his pocket and peel it. They watched him put the gum into his mouth. “I said it’ll be a quarter, Mister,” the driver said.

“Was you talking to me?” the limping man said.

“I thought you wanted a taxi out to the airport.”

“Me? What for? What do I want to go out to the airport for? I just come from there. I ain’t the one that wants to see that license. I have already seen it. I was there when the government nailed it onto the airplane.”

II

Captain Warren, the ex-army flyer, was coming out of the store, where he met the tall man in the dirty coverall. Captain Warren told about it in the barber shop that night, when the airplane was gone.

“I hadn’t seen him in fourteen years, not since I left England for the front in ‘17. ‘So it was you that rolled out of that loop with two passengers and a twenty model Hisso smokepot?’ I said.

“‘Who else saw me?’ he said. So he told me about it, standing there, looking over his shoulder every now and then. He was sick; a man stopped behind him to let a couple of ladies pass, and Jock whirled like he might have shot the man if he’d had a gun, and while we were in the café some one slammed a door at the back and I thought he would come out of his monkey suit. ‘It’s a little nervous trouble I’ve got,’ he told me. ‘I’m all right.’

I had tried to get him to come out home with me for dinner, but he wouldn’t. He said that he had to kind of jump himself and eat before he knew it, sort of. We had started down the street and we were passing the restaurant when he said: ‘I’m going to eat,’ and he turned and ducked in like a rabbit and sat down with his back to the wall and told Vernon to bring him the quickest thing he had.

He drank three glasses of water and then Vernon brought him a milk bottle full and he drank most of that before the dinner came up from the kitchen. When he took off his helmet, I saw that his hair was pretty near white, and he is younger than I am. Or he was, up there when we were in Canada training. Then he told me what the name of his nervous trouble was. It was named Ginsfarb. The little one; the one that jumped off the ladder.”

“What was the trouble?” we asked. “What were they afraid of?”

“They were afraid of inspectors,” Warren said. “They had no licenses at all.”

“There was one on the airplane.”

“Yes. But it did not belong to that airplane. That one had been grounded by an inspector when Ginsfarb bought it. The license was for another airplane that had been wrecked, and some one had helped Ginsfarb compound another felony by selling the license to him. Jock had lost his license about two years ago when he crashed a big plane full of Fourth-of-July holidayers.

Two of the engines quit, and he had to land. The airplane smashed up some and broke a gas line, but even then they would have been all right if a passenger hadn’t got scared (it was about dusk) and struck a match. Jock was not so much to blame, but the passengers all burned to death, and the government is strict.

So he couldn’t get a license, and he couldn’t make Ginsfarb even pay to take out a parachute rigger’s license. So they had no license at all; if they were ever caught, they’d all go to the penitentiary.”

“No wonder his hair was white,” some one said.

“That wasn’t what turned it white,” Warren said. “I’ll tell you about that. So they’d go to little towns like this one, fast, find out if there was anybody that might catch them, and if there wasn’t, they’d put on the show and then clear out and go to another town, staying away from the cities. They’d come in and get handbills printed while Jock and the other one would try to get underwritten by some local organization.

They wouldn’t let Ginsfarb do this part, because he’d stick out for his price too long and they’d be afraid to risk it. So the other two would do this, get what they could, and if they could not get what Ginsfarb told them to, they’d take what they could and then try to keep Ginsfarb fooled until it was too late. Well, this time Ginsfarb kicked up. I guess they had done it too much on him.

“So I met Jock on the street. He looked bad; I offered him a drink, but he said he couldn’t even smoke any more. All he could do was drink water; he said he usually drank about a gallon during the night, getting up for it.

“‘You look like you might have to jump yourself to sleep, too,’ I said.

“‘No, I sleep fine. The trouble is, the nights aren’t long enough. I’d like to live at the North Pole from September to April, and at the South Pole from April to September. That would just suit me.’

“‘You aren’t going to last long enough to get there,’ I said.

“‘I guess so. It’s a good engine. I see to that.’

“‘I mean, you’ll be in jail.’

“Then he said: ‘Do you think so? Do you guess I could?’

“We went on to the café. He told me about the racket, and showed me one of those Demon Duncan handbills. ‘Demon Duncan?’ I said.

“‘Why not? Who would pay to see a man named Ginsfarb jump from a ship?’

“‘I’d pay to see that before I’d pay to see a man named Duncan do it,’ I said.

“He hadn’t thought of that. Then he began to drink water, and he told me that Ginsfarb had wanted a hundred dollars for the stunt, but that he and the other fellow only got sixty.

“‘What are you going to do about it?’ I said.

“‘Try to keep him fooled and get this thing over and get to hell away from here,’ he said.

“‘Which one is Ginsfarb?’ I said. ‘The little one that looks like a shark?’

“Then he began to drink water. He emptied my glass too at one shot and tapped it on the table. Vernon brought him another glass. ‘You must be thirsty,’ Vernon said.

“‘Have you got a pitcher of it?’ Jock said.

“‘I could fill you a milk bottle.’

“‘Let’s have it,’ Jock said. ‘And give me another glass while I’m waiting.’ Then he told me about Ginsfarb, why his hair had turned gray.

“‘How long have you been doing this?’ I said.

“‘Ever since the 26th of August.’

“‘This is just January,’ I said.

“‘What about it?’

“‘The 26th of August is not six months past.’”

He looked at me. Vernon brought the bottle of water. Jock poured a glass and drank it. He began to shake, sitting there, shaking and sweating, trying to fill the glass again. Then he told me about it, talking fast, filling the glass and drinking.

“Jake (the other one’s name is Jake something; the good-looking one) drives the car, the rented car. Ginsfarb swaps onto the car from the ladder. Jock said he would have to fly the ship into position over a Ford or a Chevrolet running on three cylinders, trying to keep Ginsfarb from jumping from twenty or thirty feet away in order to save gasoline in the ship and in the rented car. Ginsfarb goes out on the bottom wing with his ladder, fastens the ladder onto a strut, hooks himself into the other end of the ladder, and drops off; everybody on the ground thinks that he has done what they all came to see: fallen off and killed himself.

That’s what he calls his death-drop. Then he swaps from the ladder onto the top of the car, and the ship comes back and he catches the ladder and is dragged off again. That’s his death-drag.

“Well, up till the day when Jock’s hair began to turn white, Ginsfarb, as a matter of economy, would do it all at once; he would get into position above the car and drop off on his ladder and then make contact with the car, and sometimes Jock said the ship would not be in the air three minutes. Well, on this day the rented car was a bum or something; anyway, Jock had to circle the field four or five times while the car was getting into position, and Ginsfarb, seeing his money being blown out the exhaust pipes, finally refused to wait for Jock’s signal and dropped off anyway.

It was all right, only the distance between the ship and the car was not as long as the rope ladder. So Ginsfarb hit on the car, and Jock had just enough soup to zoom and drag Ginsfarb, still on the ladder, over a high-power electric line, and he held the ship in that climb for twenty minutes while Ginsfarb climbed back up the ladder with his leg broken. He held the ship in a climb with his knees, with the throttle wide open and the engine revving about eleven hundred, while he reached back and opened that cupboard behind the cockpit and dragged out a suitcase and propped the stick so he could get out on the wing and drag Ginsfarb back into the ship. He got Ginsfarb in the ship and on the ground again and Ginsfarb says: ‘How far did we go?’ and Jock told him they had flown with full throttle for thirty minutes and Ginsfarb says: ‘Will you ruin me yet?’”

III

The rest of this is composite. It is what we (groundlings, dwellers in and backbone of a small town interchangeable with and duplicate of ten thousand little dead clottings of human life about the land) saw, refined and clarified by the expert, the man who had himself seen his own lonely and scudding shadow upon the face of the puny and remote earth.

The three strangers arrived at the field, in the rented car. When they got out of the car, they were arguing in tense, dead voices, the pilot and the handsome man against the man who limped. Captain Warren said they were arguing about the money.

“I want to see it,” Ginsfarb said. They stood close; the handsome man took something from his pocket.

“There. There it is. See?” he said.

“Let me count it myself,” Ginsfarb said.

“Come on, come on,” the pilot hissed, in his dead, tense voice. “We tell you we got the money! Do you want an inspector to walk in and take the money and the ship too and put us in jail? Look at all these people waiting.”

“You fooled me before,” Ginsfarb said.

“All right,” the pilot said. “Give it to him. Give him his ship too. And he can pay for the car when he gets back to town. We can get a ride in; there’s a train out of here in fifteen minutes.”

“You fooled me once before,” Ginsfarb said.

“But we’re not fooling you now. Come on. Look at all these people.”

They moved toward the airplane, Ginsfarb limping terrifically, his back stubborn, his face tragic, outraged, cold. There was a good crowd: country people in overalls; the men a general dark clump against which the bright dresses of the women, the young girls, showed. The small boys and several men were already surrounding the airplane. We watched the limping man begin to take objects from the body of it: a parachute, a rope ladder. The handsome man went to the propeller. The pilot got into the back seat.

“Off!” he said, sudden and sharp. “Stand back, folks. We’re going to wring the old bird’s neck.”

They tried three times to crank the engine.

“I got a mule, Mister,” a countryman said. “How much’ll you pay for a tow?”

The three strangers did not laugh. The limping man was busy attaching the rope ladder to one wing.

“You can’t tell me,” a countrywoman said. “Even he ain’t that big a fool.”

The engine started then. It seemed to lift bodily from the ground a small boy who stood behind it and blow him aside like a leaf. We watched it turn and trundle down the field.

“You can’t tell me that thing’s flying,” the countrywoman said. “I reckon the Lord give me eyes. I can see it ain’t flying. You folks have been fooled.”

“Wait,” another voice said. “He’s got to turn into the wind.”

“Ain’t there as much wind right there or right here as there is down yonder?” the woman said. But it did fly. It turned back toward us; the noise became deafening. When it came broadside on to us, it did not seem to be going fast, yet we could see daylight beneath the wheels and the earth.

But it was not going fast; it appeared rather to hang gently just above the earth until we saw that, beyond and beneath it, trees and earth in panorama were fleeing backward at dizzy speed, and then it tilted and shot skyward with a noise like a circular saw going into a white oak log. “There ain’t nobody in it!” the countrywoman said. “You can’t tell me!”

The third man, the handsome one in the cap, had got into the rented car. We all knew it: a battered thing which the owner would rent to any one who would make a deposit of ten dollars. He drove to the end of the field, faced down the runway, and stopped. We looked back at the airplane. It was high, coming back toward us; some one cried suddenly, his voice puny and thin: “There! Out on the wing! See?”

“It ain’t!” the countrywoman said. “I don’t believe it!”

“You saw them get in it,” some one said.

“I don’t believe it!” the woman said.

Then we sighed; we said, “Aaahhhhhhh”; beneath the wing of the airplane there was a falling dot. We knew it was a man. Some way we knew that that lonely, puny, falling shape was that of a living man like ourselves. It fell. It seemed to fall for years, yet when it checked suddenly up without visible rope or cord, it was less far from the airplane than was the end of the delicate pen-slash of the profiled wing.

“It ain’t a man!” the woman shrieked.

“You know better,” the man said. “You saw him get in it.”

“I don’t care!” the woman cried. “It ain’t a man! You take me right home this minute!”

The rest is hard to tell. Not because we saw so little; we saw everything that happened, but because we had so little in experience to postulate it with. We saw that battered rented car moving down the field, going faster, jouncing in the broken January mud, then the sound of the airplane blotted it, reduced it to immobility; we saw the dangling ladder and the shark-faced man swinging on it beneath the death-colored airplane.

The end of the ladder raked right across the top of the car, from end to end, with the limping man on the ladder and the capped head of the handsome man leaning out of the car. And the end of the field was coming nearer, and the airplane was travelling faster than the car, passing it. And nothing happened. “Listen!” some one cried. “They are talking to one another!”

Captain Warren told us what they were talking about, the two Jews yelling back and forth at one another: the shark-faced man on the dangling ladder that looked like a cobweb, the other one in the car; the fence, the end of the field, coming closer.

“Come on!” the man in the car shouted.

“What did they pay?”

“Jump!”

“If they didn’t pay that hundred, I won’t do it.”

Then the airplane zoomed, roaring, the dangling figure on the gossamer ladder swinging beneath it. It circled the field twice while the man got the car into position again. Again the car started down the field; again the airplane came down with its wild, circular-saw drone which died into a splutter as the ladder and the clinging man swung up to the car from behind; again we heard the two puny voices shrieking at one another with a quality at once ludicrous and horrible: the one coming out of the very air itself, shrieking about something sweated out of the earth and without value anywhere else:

“How much did you say?”

“Jump!”

“What? How much did they pay?”

“Nothing! Jump!”

“Nothing?” the man on the ladder wailed in a fading, outraged shriek. “Nothing?” Again the airplane was dragging the ladder irrevocably past the car, approaching the end of the field, the fences, the long barn with its rotting roof. Suddenly we saw Captain Warren beside us; he was using words we had never heard him use.

“He’s got the stick between his knees,” Captain Warren said. “Exalted suzerain of mankind; saccharine and sacred symbol of eternal rest.” We had forgot about the pilot, the man still in the airplane. We saw the airplane, tilted upward, the pilot standing upright in the back seat, leaning over the side and shaking both hands at the man on the ladder.

We could hear him yelling now as again the man on the ladder was dragged over the car and past it, shrieking:

“I won’t do it! I won’t do it!” He was still shrieking when the airplane zoomed; we saw him, a diminishing and shrieking spot against the sky above the long roof of the barn: “I won’t do it!

I won’t do it!” Before, when the speck left the airplane, falling, to be snubbed up by the ladder, we knew that it was a living man; again, when the speck left the ladder, falling, we knew that it was a living man, and we knew that there was no ladder to snub him up now. We saw him falling against the cold, empty January sky until the silhouette of the barn absorbed him; even from here, his attitude froglike, outraged, implacable. From somewhere in the crowd a woman screamed, though the sound was blotted out by the sound of the airplane. It reared skyward with its wild, tearing noise, the empty ladder swept backward beneath it. The sound of the engine was like a groan, a groan of relief and despair.

IV

Captain Warren told us in the barber shop on that Saturday night.

“Did he really jump off, onto that barn?” we asked him.

“Yes. He jumped. He wasn’t thinking about being killed, or even hurt. That’s why he wasn’t hurt. He was too mad, too in a hurry to receive justice. He couldn’t wait to fly back down. Providence knew that he was too busy and that he deserved justice, so Providence put that barn there with the rotting roof.

He wasn’t even thinking about hitting the barn; if he’d tried to, let go of his belief in a cosmic balance to bother about landing, he would have missed the barn and killed himself.”

It didn’t hurt him at all, save for a long scratch on his face that bled a lot, and his overcoat was torn completely down the back, as though the tear down the back of the helmet had run on down the overcoat. He came out of the barn running before we got to it. He hobbled right among us, with his bloody face, his arms waving, his coat dangling from either shoulder.

“Where is that secretary?” he said.

“What secretary?”

“That American Legion secretary.” He went on, limping fast, toward where a crowd stood about three women who had fainted. “You said you would pay a hundred dollars to see me swap to that car. We pay rent on the car and all, and now you would—”

“You got sixty dollars,” some one said.

The man looked at him. “Sixty? I said one hundred. Then you would let me believe it was one hundred and it was just sixty; you would see me risk my life for sixty dollars. . . .” The airplane was down; none of us were aware of it until the pilot sprang suddenly upon the man who limped. He jerked the man around and knocked him down before we could grasp the pilot. We held the pilot, struggling, crying, the tears streaking his dirty, unshaven face. Captain Warren was suddenly there, holding the pilot.

“Stop it!” he said. “Stop it!”

The pilot ceased. He stared at Captain Warren, then he slumped and sat on the ground in his thin, dirty garment, with his unshaven face, dirty, gaunt, with his sick eyes, crying. “Go away,” Captain Warren said. “Let him alone for a minute.”

We went away, back to the other man, the one who limped. They had lifted him and he drew the two halves of his overcoat forward and looked at them. Then he said: “I want some chewing gum.”

Some one gave him a stick. Another offered him a cigarette. “Thanks,” he said. “I don’t burn up no money. I ain’t got enough of it yet.” He put the gum into his mouth. “You would take advantage of me. If you thought I would risk my life for sixty dollars, you fool yourself.”

“Give him the rest of it,” some one said. “Here’s my share.”

The limping man did not look around. “Make it up to a hundred, and I will swap to the car like on the handbill,” he said.

Somewhere a woman screamed behind him. She began to laugh and to cry at the same time. “Don’t . . .” she said, laughing and crying at the same time. “Don’t let . . .” until they led her away. Still the limping man had not moved. He wiped his face on his cuff and he was looking at his bloody sleeve when Captain Warren came up.

“How much is he short?” Warren said. They told Warren. He took out some money and gave it to the limping man.

“You want I should swap to the car?” he said.

“No,” Warren said. “You get that crate out of here quick as you can.”

“Well, that’s your business,” the limping man said. “I got witnesses I offered to swap.” He moved; we made way and watched him, in his severed and dangling overcoat, approach the airplane. It was on the runway, the engine running. The third man was already in the front seat. We watched the limping man crawl terrifically in beside him. They sat there, looking forward.

The pilot began to get up. Warren was standing beside him. “Ground it,” Warren said. “You are coming home with me.”

“I guess we’d better get on,” the pilot said. He did not look at Warren. Then he put out his hand. “Well . . .” he said.

Warren did not take his hand. “You come on home with me,” he said.

“Who’d take care of that bastard?”

“Who wants to?”

“I’ll get him right, some day. Where I can beat hell out of him.”

“Jock,” Warren said.

“No,” the other said.

“Have you got an overcoat?”

“Sure I have.”

“You’re a liar.” Warren began to pull off his overcoat.

“No,” the other said; “I don’t need it.” He went on toward the machine. “See you some time,” he said over his shoulder. We watched him get in, heard an airplane come to life, come alive. It passed us, already off the ground. The pilot jerked his hand once, stiffly; the two heads in the front seat did not turn nor move. Then it was gone, the sound was gone.

Warren turned. “What about that car they rented?” he said.

“He give me a quarter to take it back to town,” a boy said.

“Can you drive it?”

“Yes, sir. I drove it out here. I showed him where to rent it.”

“The one that jumped?”

“Yes, sir.” The boy looked a little aside. “Only I’m a little scared to take it back. I don’t reckon you could come with me.”

“Why, scared?” Warren said.

“That fellow never paid nothing down on it, like Mr. Harris wanted. He told Mr. Harris he might not use it, but if he did use it in his show, he would pay Mr. Harris twenty dollars for it instead of ten like Mr. Harris wanted. He told me to take it back and tell Mr. Harris he never used the car. And I don’t know if Mr. Harris will like it. He might get mad.”

The end