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A Spirited Novel—Complete

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Around the Clock

By LELAND JAMIESON

Illustrated by L. R. Gustavson

PAYNE, the dispatcher, hung up the telephone and leaned back in his chair, his dark eyes filled with mild concern and some amusement. He didn't blame Gary Wilson for not wanting to go out, a night like this. He could still hear Wilson swearing fluently, saying, "Oh, the hell with Jones!" not meaning it to be so tough as it sounded on the wire. "I've got a heavy date tonight—*the* girl."

And Payne had said: "Sorry, Gary. This seems to be the way it goes. I'll have your ship warmed up and waiting. Step on it."

So now Wilson was stepping on it, driving to the field. How like him, Payne thought, not to waste time with useless questions; how like him to accept the thing and take it on the chin and never say a word. Payne wished all pilots could be like that, human beings, quiet and sincere instead of blowing off their faces about how great they were, and raising Cain when something they didn't like happened. If this had been Hardy going out tonight, for instance—

Gary Wilson came into the office, his lean face pinched by cold. "Have any idea of what they want with me?" he asked, stripping off his gloves and rubbing cold hands briskly on his frigid ears.

"Jones wouldn't say. But he wants you down there—fast."

Wilson's leathery young face was grave. He was tall, lithe, yet with a quality of rigidity in both his face and stature. His voice was resonant, filled now with concern and curiosity. "Anything happen? Anybody get knocked off, I wonder? This weather—it looks a lot worse out here than it did in town; and unless it's something bad—"

"Couldn't get a word out of him. Said Stone needed you immediately."

"Odd," Wilson considered. "Funny. I don't get it." For a minute he stood staring out the window, listening to the ticking of hard, fine snow against the panes. A mechanic shouted through the bitter wind outside, and cursed. A J-5 rippled throatily to life, its exhaust a drifting, swinging sound against the gale. Wilson said restlessly: "Call Jones back. Doesn't he know everything is canceled?"

Payne put the call through. He went on with reports, glancing up occasionally to see Wilson standing expressionless before the door. The bell beneath his desk jarred their ears with sudden violence, and Wilson whirled and grabbed the instrument. "Jones? . . . Wilson. Why all the shooting?"

Jones' voice was heavy. "I'll explain when you get here. How long will you be?"

"If it isn't something pretty important, I'm not coming. We have a blizzard here."

"It's important. Stone wants you."

"Is he there? Let me speak to him."

Jones seemed to hesitate. "He can't speak to you. But you're to come. His orders. I can't tell you on the telephone—there may be other ears."

"Okay," Gary Wilson said, further questions pressing in his mind. Some quality in Jones' voice made him withhold them, and that same quality left him feeling peculiarly disturbed.

Thick dusk was filtering through the snow. Wilson struggled into a heavy leather flying-suit. He wrapped a muffler securely around his throat, pulled on his gloves and forced the office door against the biting blast. The Stearman was a blur in a mat of white that fell in slanting lines. Wilson battled the wind and reached it. He waited while the mechanic stepped shivering to the ground, and then swung a leather-covered leg into the cockpit, climbed in and slid down until only his head showed above the cowl. As he ran up the engine, the field lights winked on, yellow and red and ghostly green.

It was a hundred and seventy miles to Phillisboro. This snow extended south about halfway. Wilson deliberated for a moment before taking off, weighing

A deeply impressive story of the air-mail in winter, by the able pilot-writer who gave us "Treasure via Airplane" and "Lost Hurricane."

He came down to a level with Lookout Mountain. He knew there would be no light on these scrub-timbered knobs.

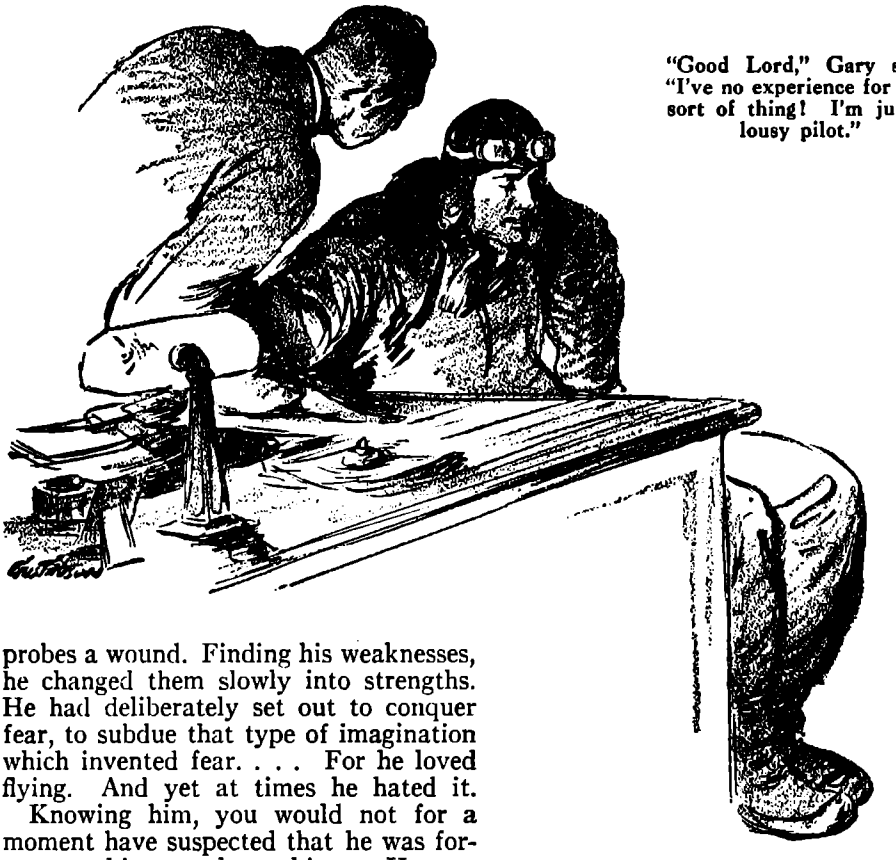
hazard against skill and confidence. He would be blind as long as the snow fell, flying at a thousand feet. The temperature was down to nine. In 1929 there were no radio-beams to guide a pilot on this route. Beacons and dead reckoning were his only aids.

But he had instruments, and knew how to fly by them. That ability, in 1929, was rare. He took off north into the gale, turned slowly west and then south, climbing steadily. At five hundred feet, on a south-southeast course, he leveled out and tried to check his position by lights upon the ground. It was not quite dark yet; the earth was in that half-light which is more difficult than darkness. The horizon was wiped out by snow.

Sitting there "on his instruments" with the cockpit lights turned up until he might have read a newspaper, he could see his face reflected in the dials. He stared at it, subconsciously watching and reacting to the flicking of the turn-indicator, wondering what had happened that he should be called thus, suddenly.

Gary Wilson was still a young man—twenty-eight; yet years of flying had made of him a veteran. To himself he seemed extremely old, for he could remember only the high points of his life before he started flying. It seemed, now, that he had been flying, or had wanted to be, all his life. At twenty-one he had already seen quick, violent death strike down a dozen times at his contemporaries; there had been one since then almost every month or so. And each time it happened, he had aged; each time it had happened, he found one more illusion about flying gone. The years had molded him, and left him master of himself; and yet sometimes he could not guard his thoughts, and memories flooded back and left him with a mist upon his eyes and a nameless melancholy in his heart.

NOW, at twenty-eight, he was old, and he knew the game for what it was—a constant gamble with his life. Sometimes he wondered—with a small, sharp pang of fear he tried to hide even from himself—how long he could go on. He had seen too many others go, to think himself immune forever. But he had changed as much as possible to meet his task; eight years of it had left him introspective, calculating. He had probed himself as impersonally as a surgeon



"Good Lord," Gary said, "I've no experience for this sort of thing! I'm just a lousy pilot."

probes a wound. Finding his weaknesses, he changed them slowly into strengths. He had deliberately set out to conquer fear, to subdue that type of imagination which invented fear. . . . For he loved flying. And yet at times he hated it.

Knowing him, you would not for a moment have suspected that he was forever working at these things. He was filled with an impulsive friendliness. But that was on the ground. In the air—the instant he stepped into a cockpit—a stark transformation left him hard. He knew, as every pilot does, that in the air none could help him but himself. . . .

Now, he burst out of the snow a few miles north of Nashville, found himself, and ten minutes later picked up the beacon on the hangar roof at Phillisboro. When he had landed and taxied to the gas pit, a man came through the darkness from the office leanto. He recognized Jones, the small, blunt-featured treasurer of Mid-state Airlines.

"Quick trip," Jones said.

"Cold," Wilson returned, walking awkwardly, impeded by his parachute against his thighs, toward the yellow light that spilled through the office windows. "Who started all the shooting, anyway?"

"The shooting's yet to come. Nathan Stone was flying a glider today, and crashed."

"Crashed?" Shock sharpened Wilson's face. "Crashed? He's—dead?"

"No. Concussion. But he had no business in that glider, and I don't want this to reach the New York office. This line must go on as if nothing had happened. We're going into night schedules tomorrow night, you know. Stone once told me if anything happened to him, to get hold of you—you could run the line. That's why I called."

As Gary Wilson followed him into the hangar office, he pondered this. He was the senior pilot on the line, and he would naturally take Stone's place in operations; but taking charge did not seem to him so instantly necessary that he should have to fight a snowstorm to get here.

"What's the rest of it?" he asked, sitting down upon a desk.

"Ringer-Ellery," said Jones, pacing nervously about, snapping out the words. "They've got the Old Man on the spot. You know this line isn't ready for night flying, and Stone knew it. He's been trying for six weeks to get new equipment and better facilities—trying to keep you pilots out of danger. He was about to get it through, and Haynes Ringer sneaked down here and flew over the line—sent word to the New York office that he'd take Mid-state and put it on night operations with the present equipment. He might do it, if he's lucky.

But Stone wouldn't trust just to luck. Ringer's report has put him in bad with the home office."

He produced a telegram which, addressed to Nathan Stone, put the ultimatum bluntly:

NIGHT MAIL OPERATIONS ONLY HOPE OF MAKING MID-STATE PAY STOP REPORT FROM HAYNES RINGER INDICATES YOU INCOMPETENT SINCE AFTER INSPECTING YOUR LINE HE REPORTS HE CAN START NIGHT OPERATIONS NOW WITH PRESENT EQUIPMENT STOP IF YOU CANNOT DO SO AS ORDERED REQUEST YOUR IMMEDIATE RESIGNATION.
BURCH.

"It sums up," Jones hastened on, "that Ringer-Ellery is trying to swallow us. They have a chance of doing it, since they terminate in Chicago too. Stone has worked two years to get this outfit running. If we don't put through this night schedule for him, he's out. But this is more than that—it's more than loyalty. It means our own jobs, too. We're fighting for the line, and for ourselves. The load was on Stone until this afternoon. Now it's on you. I've got to send Burch an answer. You've always seemed to know exactly what to do. Can you put this thing across?" His voice, rising, ended like a whip.

He reminded Wilson, pacing back and forth, of a human dynamo. There was distraction in his eyes. He was almost helpless in this crisis, for he knew little of the flying of a schedule; his job was on the ground, and this battle would be fought out in the air.

Gary Wilson was disturbed at the prospect facing him. For eight years he had made a study of himself, to be more capable in the air, less liable to fatal error. He realized now that in this task he must apply to other pilots the same rules he had formulated for himself —he had no others; and he knew what might be safe enough for him might kill some other man. His own confidence in himself would not give confidence to Wallace, Hart or Nicholson; his knowledge would not help them after they had taken off in blinding snow.

"Good Lord," Gary said, his grave face reflecting awe, "I've had no experience for this kind of thing! I'm just a lousy pilot."

"All of us will help you," Jones declared.

"You can't do anything. There isn't a pilot on this line who ever flew at night in really dirty weather. I supposed the Old Man was going to postpone night flying until this snowstorm had—"

"He tried, but you see how far it got him! If we fail in this, we'll be a part of Ringer-Ellery inside thirty days!"

"True. But what if I step in here and kill some pilots trying to shove them through tomorrow night—trying to urge them, when I should hold them on the ground? That would make it worse for Stone—for everybody."

"You've got to do it," Jones snapped. "Anything can happen if the breaks go against you. What shall I tell Burch?"

Wilson seemed to think aloud: "This storm is just beginning. By tomorrow night it will cover the whole line."

"I know, I know," Jones persisted, increasingly impatient. "But Stone picked you as the man to take his place. He would have put it through; now he's depending on you. He got in trouble fighting for the pilots. Now then—are the pilots going to fight for him, or let him down?"

GARY WILSON did not understand himself. Decisions were habit with him—quick estimation of a problem in the air, quick arrival at a course of action. Now he was nervous, baffled. He thought of the pilots on their first runs tomorrow night. None of them had had much night flying. All of them were overanxious, or overconfident. Their safety was now his sole responsibility—and he had had no more experience than they had.

He said, deliberating: "If you'd get me the Old Man's order-file, so I could see what preparations he has made— I'll have to work tonight—check the weather service, field lighting, flare equipment, instruments, personnel—double-check it after him. I'll have a hundred things to do. But the job begins in the morning. We've got to fly our day runs just the same, then double up and fly again tomorrow night. We've got to fly around the clock."

"Right!" Jones nodded several times. "How do you feel about it?"

Wilson met his eyes. "Scared," he said tersely. "Scared to death."

"That's needless. Nothing to be scared about, except failure. Just impress the pilots that they must get through on this first run." He smiled reassuringly. "Just put them through."

Wilson's eyes grew hard. "Wouldn't you be scared, if you could kill a man

by making a mistake? If you didn't know enough about your job to keep from making one—or half a dozen? And if you had to go on and make decisions, right or wrong?" He paused, studying Jones' round face in grim appraisal. "Maybe you wouldn't be. But I am."

"What shall I tell Burch?" Jones insisted.

"You're forcing my hand. If you've got to tell him something, tell him we'll put things through tomorrow night." His voice was soft, musing when he added: "If we get away with this, it will go down in the history book!"

He fortified himself against his fear of making errors, with a tense belief that he could handle operations better than Jones would have done, and got out of his flying-clothes and into a heavy overcoat. Then, with the stack of file-folders before him on the desk, he set in at his work.

There was little system in those days. Everything was embryonic. The market crash had come that fall, but aviation executives still thought in high-pressure, gigantic terms: promotion, mergers, new lines, stock-sales. The stock-sales had become by then a little slow.

Mid-state Airlines was but one of the dozen lines which had mushroomed from the dreams of one group of financiers. It reached from Atlanta to Chicago and St. Louis, over the hump of the Smokies above Chattanooga, down the valleys of Tennessee, and then on up through Kentucky to the plains country, and Chicago. It was still raw and new, even after two hectic years of operation. Its pilots had been recruited from the ranks of that traditional old-day crowd, the barnstormers. Things have changed vastly since then, but in 1929 aviation was a seething caldron of clattering publicity, of cut-throat politics, of fatal crashes, of ignorance and waste. Mid-state was an angel by comparison with some other lines; and Mid-state was extremely bad.

AS Wilson thumbed through the files, the story of Stone's bitter struggle with the New York holding company grew clearer. He could see the trend of gradual consolidation, the poaching efforts of other subsidiaries of that holding company. He saw that the Old Man was a dreamer, an idealist, but a fighter too, wanting the best of everything for the men who flew his line.

And a slow fury was ignited deep in Wilson, mingled with an increased respect and loyalty for Stone. When a man had fought for you, you couldn't let him down. Life meant nothing to that New York crowd. Money was the only thing. Disregard the pilots' lives; haul the mail at night, and thereby increase the loads and swell the revenue.

The night wore on. There were too many things to do, to think of sleep. Wilson, in the thin gray snow-filled dawn, trudged to the restaurant, gulped hot coffee, and went back to the job. He checked the run-assignments. Newton was to come east from St. Louis with the night run at ten-thirty. Wallace was due south from Chicago at nine-twenty-five. Wilson smoked a cigarette in indecision. Neither of those men was apt at blind flying; they had been scheduled because their day-run terminations had chanced to put them in position. Hart and Nicholson were better qualified for night-weather flying.

BUT it was an unnerving responsibility to make the change. Suppose he switched these men, and some one crashed? The other man might have got away with it. Yet he knew the men intimately, understood their strengths, their weaknesses, their processes of thought. Any of them would go out; that was their job: but some of them should not be permitted to go out.

And suddenly Wilson understood the difference between the man sitting in a cockpit and the other one who sat before an operations desk. The first one lived as long as he was right in his decisions on the job, and he went on through the years gathering confidence, exuding it in everything. His first bad mistake was frequently his last. But the man on the ground could not build up a fortifying confidence; he lived to view mistakes, and sometimes he saw others die when he had made them. He learned to be deliberate, to progress slowly—in some matters almost fearfully—as Gary Wilson was progressing now. He had become a man tied to the ground, and his entire viewpoint had been changed.

Yet, knowing Newton, Wallace, Hart and Nicholson, knowing and realizing painfully how far this act might go, he at last wrote out the telegram to bring about the changes in assignment. He sent it, and worried over it for the remainder of the day.

The day wore on. He worked at high speed, dictating orders, shouting orders, telephoning a dozen points upon the line

to check on final preparations. He called Hart and Nicholson, and said to each of them: "We want to put these schedules through tonight, for the Old Man. He's in a jam, and he got there fighting for us. But for God's sake, take it easy. I'm going to leave it up to you whether you come out, or cancel. If you come out and pile up, there'll be the devil to pay. Don't stretch things. Don't start unless you can come through. If you come out and get caught, don't try to save the ship or mail—you bail out and save your own neck, see. But give it hell."

The day mail went through, fighting the snow and poor visibility. It came over the hump from Atlanta and disappeared in a white welter toward Chicago. It came from Chicago and skimmed the trees and plunged into the mat of driving flakes in the direction of Atlanta. Presently reports came in that all planes were safely on the ground. The day was done. But night had not yet started.

Gary Wilson, only then, took off for Atlanta, to be in position to come out at midnight with the northbound. As he flew through the white, horizontal streaks he thought about the vastness of this growing industry. People made long speeches about the romance of the mail, the glamour of a pilot's life. But there was no glamour. It was hard, heart-pinching work, with death always waiting somewhere beyond a patch of fog, or somewhere behind a mountain. There was no romance. Nothing but a deadly schedule. Come in from a run, rest a day to still your nerves from that bad scare you got when taking off through frozen mud, and get ready for another ride tomorrow night. You cashed your checks, big checks, that somehow dwindled in your hands and left you with nothing in the end. Save it for old age? Why? Hell, who ever heard of a veteran on the night mail living to old age?

WHAT held him? What was the invisible, magnetic power that made men become pilots and then go on year after year, while fatalities slowly and inexorably thinned their ranks? It must be an appetite for pulse-quickening hazards, inborn perhaps, certainly ingrained and fostered through the years. Youngsters quit sometimes; the older ones stayed, and stayed, and finally—

He put such thoughts from his mind. Imagination can be a pilot's greatest enemy. In Atlanta he went to his hotel and crawled into bed. He'd done everything that could be done in one short day. He fell asleep from sheer exhaustion, dreamed, and then the telephone was ringing in his ear at half-past ten. Wearily he put on his clothes and went to eat before driving to the field.

THE airport was a silent place, a row of hangars lighted by yellow floods upon the eaves, with inky darkness indefinite beyond, where the ground came to a crown in the center of the landing-area. Snow was an inch deep now, dry and crunching underfoot. The surface wind had died, and the flakes filtered out of black nothingness above. Wilson stood for a moment on the office steps and tried to fathom the impenetrable sky. With a feeling of smallness, of loneliness, with a tight hard fear for the other men who should now be plunging through this storm, he opened the door and passed into the warmth of the dispatcher's office.

"Ships moving?" he inquired.

"Hello," said the dispatcher. "Bad luck. Nick rolled one in the snow." Gary Wilson picked up the yellow tape, while a numb, premonitory fear shot through his mind. The message had been sent from Danville, Illinois.

LOST IN SNOWSTORM FOUND FIELD HERE POPPED FLARE NOSED OVER LANDING TRAINING MAIL DETAILS LATER.

NICHOLSON.

Hot rage brought blood to Wilson's face. This was what happened when you overstepped the bounds of reason for the brass-hats in New York. Nick might have been killed—they all might be killed, a night like this. It hadn't worked, and it never would work. You couldn't take green day-flying pilots and turn them loose on a new night run in weather. It made him cold, thinking about Nicholson up there hunting for that field, and finally landing, going over. He said to the dispatcher:

"What about Hart? Out of St. Louis yet? I'm going to stop him!"

"No message has come through."

"Send one—send him this one—" The telephone jangled. The dispatcher lifted the receiver, listened, spoke a word and handed it to him.

"Gary?" The voice in the instrument sounded frozen. "Gary, this is Nick, in Danville."

"Nick? Good Lord! Are you all right? Sorry you piled up, but that's all right. You—"

The field! The beacon winked once, and then the boundary lights were under him as he slid down.

"I'm all right. But look. Ship didn't get a scratch. Went over straight and easy. I've got men here now, and we can put her on her wheels in fifteen minutes, and I can come on through. Got a gale behind me—I'll make up time. I won't get lost again—I've learned a lot of things tonight! What say?"

There was a prolonged silence, filled with the singing of the snow-stung wires. Wilson's mind leaped the gap of five hundred frigid miles, and saw the picture. An airplane on its back in a foot of snow. Men panting, fighting in the wind and dark to right it, hauling the tail up and over. They might do it, or they might wreck the plane when the wind got beneath a wing. And that wasn't the most important possibility, of course. If he let Nick take off again —and that time Nick got lost and didn't find a field—

But the spirit, the fight, in big Nick's voice moved him to a strange emotion, a strange affection for the other man and for the job they had set out to do. In unhappy indecision Wilson sat drawing lines upon a note-pad. Nick's life might be in his hands right now! Well, so might his own, when he in turn took off tonight, or tomorrow night—any night in bad weather. He realized Nick had made his decision for himself; he could have stayed on the ground. His voice oddly stifled, Wilson said:

"Take it easy, son. I'm pulling for you." And after he had said it, he felt like a potential murderer.

"Check. I'll make it. See you."

Soberly Wilson put the receiver on its hook. It was almost time for him to go, and he was going. He sent the dispatcher to warm the engine of his plane, and sat smoking a cigarette, wondering about Hart, in St. Louis. Maybe Hart had canceled, wisely. The teletype machine clicked once, and the bell twanged tentatively three times. Wilson punched a key, and the message rolled out beneath the steady thudding of the type-bars:

Hart was out for Evansville on time.

When Mid-state mail was at last ready, Gary Wilson shook off his worry for the other men who were pounding through this night. Massive, bulky in his leather clothes, he padded out across the snow-blanketed apron, climbed in and revved his engine up with tense finality; he taxied out and turned back into the wind.

In the air the snow was a thick mat

like fog around him, smothering the earth and streaming past his navigation lights. It was thicker now than at any other time since this prolonged storm had started. The wind was swinging slowly to the east. It changed the Stearman's drift, and changed the compass course.

He missed the first beacon, and spent five worried minutes finding it; and then, a new drift calculation made, swung back upon his path. He couldn't see a thing even from five hundred feet, except the quick winks of the beacons when he reached them.

SLOW going, tonight! It was thirty minutes before he saw the T-shaped boundary lights of the Adairsville field as through a dull white screen. He missed the next three beacons, and knew he must be somewhere in the pass near Dalton, with a slanting range on one side, and hills upon the other. He was afraid to risk a milling, circling search to find the light. To see it, he must stay low; if he stayed low, he'd smash a mountain-side. The beacon might be but a mile away, but it was probably much farther. He was lost.

But he drove this certain knowledge from his thoughts, and climbed until he was above the highest range in the vicinity, knowing he would never find himself up here. He plunged on toward where he thought Chattanooga should be. The cold had eaten into him in the beginning, but now his blood was racing in a dull excitement. He was sweating underneath his heavy clothes. "Bad," he muttered. "Should have checked each beacon and not come on until I found it. Hit something if I don't watch out!"

He knew he wouldn't be able to find his way back. He couldn't go down, here, for mountains reared their heads on every hand. He flew on, holding his compass accurately upon its course.

But he had to come down. He had to find Chattanooga, not to land there, because the field was not yet lighted, but to check his position and thus avoid smashing a mountain later on. Fear was eating into him as minutes passed; it numbed him, made breathing difficult. He checked his time and throttled back a little. He might hit that mountain at any instant now! His head was bursting with the pounding of his heart. He came down to a level with the top of Lookout Mountain, sat there, mushing down, his head hanging from the cockpit to see a light if there should be one. But he knew there would be none, on these bleak, scrub-timbered knobs. He was afraid to go much lower.

Then a light did leap from the snow. It hurled itself at him. He reacted without thought, slapped the throttle forward, hauled hard on the stick, kicked almost full right rudder. The light was past, fifty feet beyond his wing. In a fleeting glance he saw the outline of a group of buildings, recognized them with the pain of sharp relief, pulled on up once more into the safety of his former altitude. He was over Lookout Mountain; Chattanooga, smothered in the snow, lay five miles to the northeast two thousand feet below.

His heart slowed to its normal pulse, but Gary Wilson was left shuddering at the realization of how close that had been. A hundred feet more, and he might have been too low to see the light in time. He turned toward Phillisboro, navigating carefully. He must cross Suck Creek Mountain, and the narrow Sequatchie Valley, then go on for fifteen minutes. The last ordeal would come in mushing down in the broad plateau of the Barrens, looking for the lonely field at Manchester. He must find it, in order to find Phillisboro; Phillisboro was pocketed in a bowl-like declivity among the hills.

A ridge of mountains lay across his course, and he must be sure of clearing them before starting down to find the Barrens. That scare at Chattanooga had somehow robbed him of his nerve. He was afraid to take this second chance. He couldn't go on trusting to his luck forever—sometime it wouldn't save him. He was shivering now, his teeth chattering. The minutes crawled around the clock. Certainly he must be past the ridge, but he went on five minutes longer, to be sure. . . . Then he was sure, but coming down took every nerve throughout his body and frayed it raw.

HE gunned the engine, to keep it warm so it would run in this freezing air. And the third time he gunned it his heart leaped and seemed to flutter and then stand completely still.

The engine missed. It coughed, and missed again. It ran irregularly, coughing at three-second intervals. When Wilson slammed the throttle open he found that the power plant had dropped five hundred revvs, and would not now sustain him in the air.

Instantly he knew what was the matter, but he was helpless: ice in the carburetor. With air so cold up here in the clouds, air filled with tiny particles of ice which were the clouds, the carburetor heater could not raise the intake temperature. The intake stove was choking gradually with ice, and soon the engine would revv down entirely.

Of course, he could jump. He could get down with his parachute, and perhaps land in a pine tree on a mountainside or on the flats, and hang there and freeze to death before he could get to the ground. But he had mail in the pit in front of him; and he had at least a large part of the future of old Stone and Midstate Airlines in his hands. Nicholson had piled up in the snow, but hadn't stopped. Hart was pounding through. If he jumped now, it would make their efforts useless, wasted risk. So he did not jump. He decided quickly, knowing what might follow if his decision should be wrong. And then, with effort, he forced imagination back and tried to crowd out fear.

The navigation-lights stopped glowing when he dropped below the clouds, but the snow still streaked back in horizontal lines so thick that no beacons on the ground could penetrate it. The altimeter crawled downward as Wilson gradually perforce descended. The engine coughed and barked and coughed again, running at wide-open throttle with a continued shivering vibration. He came down until he had five hundred feet above the level flats that formed the Barrens, until the mountains behind and to the sides of him were a thousand feet above him now. If his navigation proved imperfect—

LOOKING down, straining his eyes, with occasional quick glances at his instruments, he held his course. The engine ran spasmodically. He was much too low to jump now; the decision that might save his life was long behind him. The Stearman came nearer maintaining its meager altitude as it neared the earth, flying through denser, more sustaining air. But it still lost altitude, and it was touch and go. He must find himself within the next five minutes and get into the field, or he would smash into the trees. A flare was useless in the snow.

Then, with the altimeter showing a scant three hundred feet, a sprinkling of lights swept through his field of vision. There was only one town big enough to have that many lights, up here on this barren, desolate expanse of country. Wilson, with the lights behind him, swung sharply and headed northeast toward the field at Manchester.

The field! The beacon winked once, and then the boundary lights were under him as he slid down on the snow with both landing-beams cutting sharp cones through the darkness and the fleeing flakes. He hit the frozen ground in snow six inches deep. The Stearman bounced and swerved—stopped less than a hundred feet from the ghostly beacon tower.

Wilson climbed stiffly to the ground. His emotions were garbled—relief and thankfulness mingled with determination to go on. He took a screw-driver and scraped away the ice from the carburetor-intake throat, and then set hurriedly to work to start the engine, his mind upon the hazard of the take-off from this field.

COLD almost immediately when it stopped, the engine would not start. The oil on the cylinder-walls had congealed, and Wilson could not spin the starter fast enough.

He stood there by the wing, sunk in the realization of defeat. He had done the best he could, but it had not been enough. A sense of futility descended on him as he thought of Nathan Stone, of all the men and women who indirectly or directly would be affected by his failure. The wind whispered past his head, filled with cutting particles of ice. The beacon on the tall steel tower emitted its rhythmic *"click, click-clack; click, click-clack"* as the gears revolved it. For miles on every side the Barrens reached away, to the hills around Beech Grove upon the west, and the rounding knobs of the Smokies on the east. It was unutterably lonely standing there. Yet this spot was only thirty miles from Phillisboro.

That realization prompted him to one last effort. He left the Stearman, and trudged off through the steady snowfall toward the road that bordered on this field. Reaching it, he turned down it, and went a half mile, his flashlight a probing finger in the night. A dog challenged him when he came to the field caretaker's house. He pacified it with a word of confidence, and went up to the porch and knocked.

The caretaker, at last aroused, admitted him. He knew something of mail operations, and he accepted the necessity of taking the mail load on

to Phillisboro. They drove back to the field, transferred the pouches, and then rode in silence, tracing out the snow-smoothed road as it wound down from the Barrens through the hills. Thirty minutes later they were turning off into the Phillisboro field.

"Down at Manchester," Wilson told the worried dispatcher. "I brought the mail. Get out another ship."

"Crack up?" The dispatcher lit a cigarette with hands that still were trembling. "God, this waiting for a pilot when he's overdue—"

"Ice in the carburetor." Wilson sat down to read the tape, wondering acutely how Hart and Nicholson were making it. The dispatcher called back from the door: "Coffee in the thermos if you want it."

Nicholson was out of Terre Haute two hours late, but picking up his schedule. "What a night's work he's put in!" Wilson muttered. Hart was in Evansville, waiting to go north with the mail Wilson had brought in. The ships were running late, but the mail was getting through!

He got into the air again. He bucked and fought the northeast wind for almost two full hours, and landed in Evansville at daylight with both cheeks almost frozen. The temperature was down to three. The snow had stopped, leaving heavy, leaden skies. Hart took the mail and roared on north.

GARY WILSON knew he should go into town, to get some sleep for his southbound trip that night. But there was the report of this night's work to make, so the brass-hats in New York could see that Mid-state was running an air line the way the brass-hats thought it should be run. He couldn't make that report until all the ships were through, and down.

Nicholson had been asleep, and the dispatcher woke him to go on with the St. Louis mail. Wilson heard them talking, laughing, in the pilot's room; and then Nicholson, massive in his flying suit, lumbered through the door, and Wilson cried:

"Hi, guy! I see you got away with it. Swell stuff. You'll make the grade."

The big man nodded, grinned sleepily. "I hear you had a close one too."

Wilson yawned. "For a while I thought it was the trees, but I got into the field. It's never bad, if you guess right, and get away with it."

Nicholson waved his great gloved hand and forced the door against the wind and went outside. A minute passed, and the J-5 stopped idling and roared. It moved unseen across the field, down wind, rolling back in bursts of changing sound against the gale. Then it turned, swung sharply to a roar, and rose and faded quickly on the upper air.

Wilson settled down to wait, sipping bitter coffee. Time passed. Hart went in and out of Terre Haute. Nicholson landed in St. Louis. Van Noy was safely in Atlanta—eleven minutes early!

WILSON grabbed the telephone to make a short report to Jones. They had done it—they had shoved it through! A warm exultance swept up through his veins like wine, a strange wild happiness. Jones answered him, alarmed at being roused so early.

"What's happened? I hope—"

"Tell that guy Burch we put it through! We'll show him how to run—"

The other telephone on Payne's desk rang, and the dispatcher answered it. He halted Wilson. "Newspaper just got word Ringer-Ellery lost a man. Spun in flying blind in snow, apparently."

"Who?" Wilson's voice was like a rasp. The bright light of enthusiasm vanished from his eyes.

"Samuels."

Absently Wilson put the receiver on the hook. He sat there, musing. "Samuels, eh? I knew him—nice kid. . . . Old-timer at this game." He sank back in his chair. A melancholy seemed to close about him like a shroud, and he stared out across the snow-smoothed field. Finally he looked up, his blue eyes guarded, distant. "Funny. . . . You sit on the ground, admit it's dangerous. Then you get in a cockpit in the air, and kid yourself that you can go on beating it forever."

He moved to the door and stood studying the sky. A subtle change came over him, the swift accumulation of time's passing showing in his eyes. "Samuels, eh? I remember him quite well." He shook his head, and his voice trailed off to silent, somber pensiveness. Five minutes passed. He seemed suddenly to remember that he was standing there, that he must get to bed, to go back with the mail tonight. He shrugged his shoulders into his overcoat, passed without a word out into the bitter morning wind. Head down, he disappeared around the hangar corner toward his car.