

# Bluebook

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*The short stories and novel herein are fiction and intended as such. They do not refer to real characters or actual events. If the name of any living person is used, it is a coincidence.*

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# FIVE SECONDS TO DEATH

BY CHARLES FLANAGAN

*Three pilots before him had tried—and disintegrated.*

*He didn't have to fly it. He'd already proved his courage,  
and now he had his wife, his home, and his future sons to think of.*

**M**IKE ROGERS limped out on the broad porch of his ranch house, zippering his jacket and instinctively appraising the morning shimmer of the California sky.

He thought: *A good day for flying.*

Then he grinned, remembering the phone call of a few minutes ago, and corrected himself: *No, a good day for staying on the ground. No more test-piloting for you, Mike, not after today. No more leaving Linda and taking off in some fighting-plane designer's dreamboat to see if his slide rule slipped. No more wondering if you'll step out of the cockpit after you land, before you land, or not at all. After today, after all the tough years of working toward it, you're going to be a full-time stock rancher, a sane and solid character who'll never get any higher than the back of a horse. As of that phone call, you've grounded yourself for good.*

He lazed to the edge of the porch, wincing a little as the misfit bones in his right ankle made their usual morning protest, hearing Linda sing one of her wordless songs while she cooked breakfast in the kitchen, listening to the calls of birds in the willow beyond the stable. He felt a warm glow of peace.

*Now I'm my own age, he thought. Now I'm 34, not a tired 70.*

He lit a cigarette, the corkscrew of smoke swirling up toward the stippling of gray in his dark temples. He leaned a tall shoulder against a pillar of the porch and looked contentedly out over his rolling acres of God's good earth.

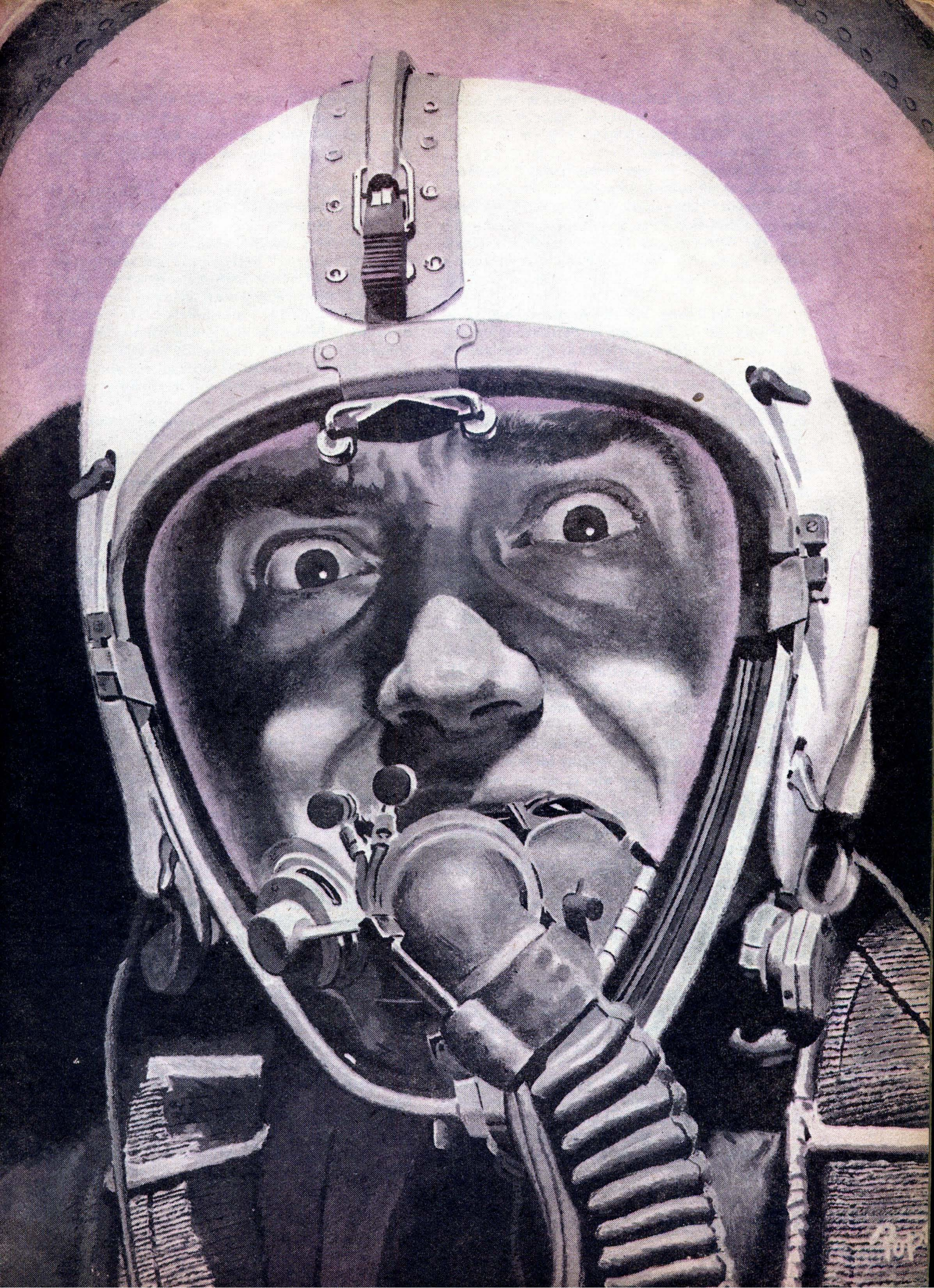
Below the house, in the corral, fat old Pablo had a saddle slung over the top rail, all of his brown roundness focused on the needle with which he mended a bit of torn stitching. Beyond the stable, in the pasture, the nine colts galloped bouncingly or grazed near their mothers; and a hundred yards up the hill from them, regal and aloof, Emir whisked his tail beside an oak.

Mike put his fingers to his lips and whistled. The white Arabian tossed his head, gazing across the valley at the tile-roofed ranch house. Then, as if recognizing the sound as a greeting and not as a summons, he turned to charge up the slope.

His hoofbeats, Mike thought, were like the thrum of unsynchronized engines on a bomber, the ripple of his muscles beautiful as the flutter of parachute silk; and he chuckled at himself, realizing that although he was now only a rancher, he would always think in terms of the air.

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Illustrated by MILLER POPE



Pablo flashed his white teeth at the porch. "You ride him before breakfast, Señor Miguel?"

"No, Pablo. I've got to go in to the field. I'll take him out tomorrow."

"Is better. Trainer come today. *Mañana*, maybe he don't sunfish no more."

"Maybe," Mike said. But as he watched Emir top the hill and become a white statue against the blue sky, he momentarily forgot even the phone call in wondering how any trainer could cure a horse that got spells of thinking himself a whirling dervish.

That sunfishing was the Arabian's one fault. Ride him all day, keeping a tight hand on the reins, and he'd obey as perfectly as the best stallion in the San Fernando Valley. But slack off, just once, and he'd put his head down and begin whirling; and his spms, always to the right, would grow faster and more forceful until he'd thrown you from the saddle as a sling throws a stone. Lick that sunfishing, and he could take blue ribbons at any show in Southern California. But until he'd been broken of it—

The kitchen screen door twanged into Mike's thoughts, and Linda said: "Dear, will you help me with this tray?"

He hurried toward her, hiding his limp. Their fingers touched when he took the breakfast tray; as he always did, he felt a tingle.

"Who was on the phone just now?" she said.

"A man," Mike said, deciding to tease her.

"Any particular man?"

"One of your old sweethearts," Mike said. He followed her to the table at the end of the porch.

She rattled silver and china onto the tablecloth. "Now, Mike—"

Linda broke off, holding his filled plate across the table, her eyes suddenly reading his face. "Mike, was it *the* man? The one who came out yesterday to look at the colts?"

Mike grinned. "Seems as though."

"For Heaven's sake, Mike, don't just sit there! What did he say?"

"He's made up his mind," Mike said. "He'll take all nine of them."

He saw her swallow. "At your price?"

"That's right. A thousand apiece."

"Oh, darling, *darling!*"

HE heard the plate thump down before him, but he could not see it; Linda had darted across the table, and her arms were around his neck, and the sudden moisture on the cheek he was kissing was her tears of relief.

"Oh, darling, darling," she was still saying. "Now you can keep your promise. We can finish paying up for the ranch and you can quit!"

"Honey," Mike said, "that's exactly what I'm going to do. I'm turning in my resignation this morning."

"I love you. I really do." Linda sat back in her chair, dabbing at her gray eyes with the corner of a napkin. She gave him a wet smile. "Only, why didn't you tell me right away, you big lug?"

"You know me," Mike said. "With you, I always like to buzz the field before I make a landing."

"You certainly do." Their eyes and their thoughts met across the table, and he saw her red-den. "Getting back to Topic B," she said quickly, "are you sure Continental's going to let you quit?"

"Will Brown will put up plenty of arguments," Mike said, "but I'll tune him out. It would be different if he had a new plane coming up soon. Naturally, I wouldn't leave until I'd made the first flight. But that Airserpent job is at least six months away from take-off, so Will will have plenty of time to pick a new chief."

Linda shuddered. "Airserpent. What an ugly name!"

"They say it'll be a sweet ship, if it flies."

"If it does?"

"You don't stick your neck out on those supersonic jobs, honey," Mike told her. "Plenty of things can happen when you try to push a ship through the sonic barrier and fly faster than sound. All I know is that they've been working on the Airserpent in a locked hangar for a year. According to the field scuttlebutt, she's designed to do nine hundred miles an hour, with a service ceiling of 80 thousand feet."

"That's more than 15 miles, straight up!"

"Straight down, too," Mike said.

"Anyway, I'm glad you won't be testing it."

*Maybe I'm glad too*, Mike thought. Bailing out at 30 thousand three years ago, in a reciprocating-engine deal, had hurled him against a tail fin and smashed his ankle. Bailing out at 80 thousand in a jet job doing 900 or better—well, it just wouldn't be worth the trouble.

He picked up his fork, his eyes again going automatically to the sky. He felt Linda watching him. He brought his eyes down.

"I wonder if you really are going to quit flying," she said.

"Sure for certain," Mike said. "After today, honey, that stuff up there is just blueness buttered

with sunshine. From here on in, I've got both feet on good old Mama Dirt."

But as he bent to his food, he sensed once more the pull of the sky.

**A**N hour later, in his office at Continental Aircraft, Mike wrote out his resignation. *To take effect immediately*, it read; and he was signing it when his phone rang.

Will Brown's big voice boomed through the receiver. "Mike, can you come in right away, kid? Got something I want to chin with you about."

"Sure. I want to see you, too, Will."

He stood, folding the resignation and putting it in his jacket pocket. His gaze flicked across the row of framed photographs on the wall, the faces of the three men who had preceded him in this office and this job.

Lean, dark-eyed Tom Adams had been Continental's chief test-pilot back when oxygen was first used for high-altitude flying. He had made the initial test of a new system: it was the chief's job to try the new things first. He had reached 25 thousand feet when the tricky regulator valve froze; and when he tore the mask off . . .

The valve had been redesigned, and boyish-faced Ray Harris had moved into the chief's office. Continental built a new fighter whose controls persisted in blanking out during dives. Harris spent days diving from 30 thousand feet, trying to find the cause. He located it, radioed a jubilant report to the ground engineers; and then, perhaps as sort of a victory celebration, made one more dive. . . .

The ship had been changed as Harris had directed in his last report. Big Ben Smith, the new chief, took it up, dived it, and survived. He survived, in fact, to test Continental's first jet fighter, to fly it a hundred hours without trouble. Then, during a routine take-off, a fuel line broke in the cockpit. . . .

The line was rerouted, and when Mike took over Big Ben's job, there was only a remote chance of his dying in a spray of blazing fuel. And now. . .

Mike lifted his hand in a half-salute at the row of faces. *So long, guys! I'm getting out while I've got nothing worse than a game leg.*

He went down the long hallway to the door that said, WILL BROWN, ENGINEERING TEST FLIGHT.

Brown's desk was cluttered with coffee cups and overflowing ashtrays, and his round, normally cheerful face was gray with weariness.

"Sit down, kid," he said. "I've just finished an all-night hassle with some of the top boys in the Air Force." He stood, pushing a folder across the desk. "Take a look at this, will you, Mike, while I try to wake myself up?"

Mike reached for the resignation in his pocket. "What I wanted to see you about, Will—"

He stopped, realizing Brown could not hear him. The engineer was at the washbasin in a cor-

ner of the office, noisily splashing cold water in his face.

Mike shoved the letter back. He sat down and picked up the folder, recognizing the form as Continental's engineering report on planes under construction. He glanced over its neat paragraphs, his mind still on his resignation:

*Air temperatures will vary from Minus 150 F. to Minus 200 F. . . .*

*Until ejection seat is developed for this ship, pilot cannot bail out at flying speeds. . . .*

*At 80,000 feet, atmospheric pressure will be. . . .*

Mike blinked, the words finally registering on him. He brought his eyes back to the top of the page. He read: TOP SECRET—AEROPHYSICAL DATA, *Airserpent*.

He closed the folder. He put it carefully on Brown's desk.

The engineer came back, scrubbing a grin into his face with a towel. He nodded at the report. "How you like, kid?"

"Nice job of typing," Mike said. He tried to keep his tone casual. "When do you get her off the paper and into the air?"

"Tomorrow," Brown said.

Mike felt the tendons at the back of his knees begin to tighten. "I've heard talk it would be at least six months before she'd fly."

"Yeah," Brown said. "Like I told the Air Force guys last night, the ship's finished, but we're running into grief on the wind-tunnel tests. We need anyway half a year more to iron the bugs out before we take her up. But they'd flown out from Washington especially to rush the Airserpent along, and after they told me the reason for their rush, I said we'd be plenty cooperative."

He dried his hands carefully on the towel.

**M**IKE, when you were a kid, was there some brat down in the next block who loved to bop you with a stick and then run home to his big brother before you could hit him back?"

"Sometimes I caught him," Mike said.

"You can't catch this one," Brown said. "Not yet, anyway. He's developed a bomber that can fly faster and higher than any pursuit ship we've got. He can come over at an altitude we can't touch, drop the bomb, and be back home before the dust settles."

"I see," Mike said.

"So we got us a rûsh job, kid. We've got to get the Airserpent up, and try to find out what's wrong with her under actual flying conditions. If we're lucky as hell, we locate the trouble and save ourselves six months. If we're not so lucky—" He shrugged and tossed the towel at the basin.

Mike watched it hurtle through the air. It struck the edge of the bowl, clung there an instant, then dropped into a shapeless mound on the floor.

He took a deep breath. "What's the trouble with the ship?"

"God knows," Brown said. "Come out to the hangar and take a guess."

THE AIRSERPENT stood in the yellow haze of the big hangar, its nose hoisted high while mechanics made a final adjustment of its landing gear; and Mike thought of a picture he had once seen of a snake captured by a spider. At any moment, he thought, the long, ugly body might break loose from the radiating web of cables and ladders, might crush and kill the knots of men around it.

"How you like?" Brown said.

Mike shook his head. He left Brown beside the door and limped around the ship, studying the swept-back wings and the gaping double airducts, like a cobra's hood, that had given the ship its name. He put a hand on the fuselage. The metal was dead cold, the cold of a snake.

He returned to Brown, feeling an icy tingle along his spine as he turned his back on the ship.

"No like," he said. "There's something wrong with her. I can feel it."

"Give your instinct an A," Brown said. "Every time we put a model of her in the wind tunnel, she operates like a charm till she hits the speed of sound. Then she goes into a flat spin, and the model tears itself apart."

"It could be the compressibility characteristics of the tunnel," Mike said.

"Hell, kid, the engineers have been fighting about that for a year. One faction went ahead and built the ship while the others were still arguing. Up until now, I've refused to let anybody fly her until the model behaved right. But now—"

"Yes," Mike said. "Now we've got to find out. All right, Will. I'll take her up tomorrow."

"No," Brown said. "Not you."

"What?"

"You're too valuable to Continental, kid. I want you to assign somebody else."

"Look," Mike said. "It's the chief test-pilot's job to make first flights."

"Oh, to hell with that Sir Galahad tradition you test guys have got!" Brown poked a thick finger at Mike's chest. "Listen, kid. This job doesn't need your judgment and experience. The Airserpent will carry a radio unit that broadcasts all the instrument readings, so I can watch every step of her performance from the ground. All she needs is a pilot with enough guts to edge her up to sonic speed and enough talent to pull her out if she starts spinning."

"If she'll pull out," Mike said.

"Any of your regular test pilots could handle it. Bob Larson, for instance."

"Yes," Mike said slowly. "Bob's a good man."

He saw Brown watching him, waiting for him to speak. "Well, kid, how's about telling Bob?"

Mike took a breath. "Okay. He's it."

"Good, Mike." Brown grinned. "She'll be ready to roll out by noon. Bob can start the brake and taxi tests today, and take her up tomorrow morning. I'd like to have you with me on the ground radio, in case he needs any advice."

Mike looked at the long, ugly ship. "Right," he said; and he felt as if the word came from someone else.

"Oh, say, kid. Didn't you say you had something you wanted to talk to me about?"

Mike slid his hand into his jacket pocket. It touched the crisp paper of his resignation. *No. Will is going to need me tomorrow. I can turn it in after the ship's been flown.*

"It can wait," he said. "I've got to find Bob."

The sky seemed to draw him as he went out the hangar door. . . .

It was dusk when he drove through the gateway of the ranch. The day had drained him. He had spent the morning going over the aerophysical report with Bob Larson, and the afternoon helping him check and recheck the Airserpent's ground tests, but it was not the thought and labor that had wearied him.

The fatigue was deeper than that: it was the weight of something in his mind, something as formless as the wisps of night mist now edging down from the range of hills between the ranch and the sea, something that was no more than an *if*.

HE tried to put it out of his thoughts as he braked the car beside the corral. Pablo leaned on the rail, a *cigarillo* glowing against the roundness of his face, and behind him Emir stamped in the warm shadows.

"Trainer come, Pablo?"

"Si." The Mexican lifted his shoulders and let them fall. "He's work with this horse all afternoon. Then he's give him up."

"Couldn't cure the sunfishing, eh?"

"He's say nobody ever cure. He's say, this horse he's maybe worth more as this ranch if he's cure. But this way—"

"I know," Mike said. "Just a good stud horse."

Pablo spread his hands philosophically. "*Pero*, is not too bad, maybe. He's give the world something, eh?"

Mike did not answer. He went on up to the house, feeling the surge of its emptiness as he opened the door. He found Linda's note on the living-room table:

*Dear: With all the news this morning, I forgot to tell you I'd made a date with Mrs. Wagner to come over this afternoon and take me in to town. Don't wait up—we might stay and see a movie after I've finished my business. You'll find dinner in the oven—and it's you I'm lovin'!*

He grinned at her row of X's, wondering what her business in town might be. Shopping, probably. It had been a long time since Linda had bought any new clothes. Well, she could have them now, if . . .

There it was again, the question that had haunted him all day, the problem that could not be solved because it was not even stated. If *what?*

The thing hung over him while he ate; it was with him afterward, while he sat on the porch and watched the purple shadows turn into ink on gold as the moon came up. This ranch, he thought, was the one thing Linda and he had wanted ever since they had found each other. Now it was theirs. Tomorrow, after the Airserpent had been flown and he had given his resignation to Will Brown, it would be theirs forever—if. If *what?*

A man couldn't answer a question when the question itself was only a feeling inside him, a feeling like flying blind through fog. He went to bed to let sleep erase it from his mind.

But it was still there, hours later, and he was still awake, when a car surged up the drive and stopped. The music of Linda's voice said: "Good night, Mrs. Wagner. Thanks for taking me to the doctor."

*Doctor?*

"Good night, dear," the other woman said. "I hope it's going to be a boy."

Mike blinked his eyes open, staring at the moonswept room while Linda's footsteps crossed the yard and the screen door twanged. The sudden realization was like a shout of joy within him. He opened his lips; and then, on the verge of calling to Linda, the formless question confronted him again: *If—*

He closed his eyes as the faint eddy of Linda's perfume came into the room. "Mike?" she said softly.

He did not move. He wanted to talk, to tell her of his happiness; but if they talked of that, later she would ask about his resignation. And the resignation, he now felt, was somehow part of the *if*, the unstated problem.

**T**HERE WAS movement, the rush of silk, the snap of fasteners; then Linda was in her bed beside his, and almost at once her breathing was the rhythm of sleep.

Mike opened his eyes again and wondered how it would seem to be a father. "*I hope it's going to be a boy,*" the woman had said. Yes, a boy would be good. When a man had a son to teach, to pass on the things he himself had learned, he could feel that his life had purpose. As Pablo had said of the horse, he could give the world something.

*Purpose. Passing things on. Giving the world something . . .*

The fog within him suddenly cleared.

*It's like being a test pilot,* he thought. *A man*

*leads the way; he makes things safer and better for those who follow him. Like Tom Adams, and Ray Harris, and Big Ben Smith. They died, but in their dying they extended the limits of flight, they saved the lives of thousands of other pilots. . . .*

He saw the question that had shadowed him. He saw the only possible answer. He saw the two things that he must do.

He arose and dressed quietly, not even zippering his jacket lest the noise arouse Linda. He got his riding boots from the closet. Then he bent over Linda and breathed a kiss toward the tumbled gold of her hair. Boots in hand, he went softly out to the stable.

In the tack-room, moving softly lest he awaken Pablo in his bunk next door, he clamped a pair of spurs to the boot heels. Then he took a saddle and bridle to the corral.

Emir came toward him in the moonlight, his hoofs soft on the yellow dust. He stood still while Mike saddled him; with the bit in his mouth he began to prance. Mike led him to the gate and held the reins firmly while he pushed it open toward the pasture. Then, thankful that his good ankle was the left one, he swung into the saddle.

He patted the stallion's quivering neck muscles, pulling the reins tight. "All right, Emir. Let's go."

The horse moved through the gate and into the field. Out of earshot of the house, Mike stopped him. Then, a fraction of an inch at a time, he slackened the reins.

Emir whistled. He lowered his head. He began to whirl in a tight circle to the right. Mike felt himself slump forward, half out of the saddle.

Fighting the momentum of the swing, he pulled himself upright. And then, without thinking, as

if the impulse came from somewhere outside him, he raked his right spur up and down the corded muscles of Emir's shoulder, an action which should have made him turn all the faster to the right.

The stallion stopped abruptly. He lifted his head. He stood still.

Mike heard the blood pounding in his ears. He pulled on the reins, then slackened them again. Once more the white Arabian began whirling to the right. Again Mike dug with his right spur. Again the animal stopped.

Mike held his breath. He let the reins go one more time. The horse's head dropped an inch. It hesitated. It lifted. He stood motionless.

Mike drew the cold, clear air of dawn into his lungs. He clucked his tongue. Emir leaped obediently forward. Together, horse and master, they moved swiftly up the moonlit hill.

**W**ILL BROWN, waiting on the apron of the hangar beside the Airserpent, let his mouth fall open as Mike limped up to the ship in his flying suit. "Where in hell's Bob Larson?"

"Waiting in my office," Mike said. "He'll take over after I make the first flight."

"Damn it, kid, I told you to assign somebody—"

"I assigned myself," Mike told him quietly. "I'm still chief test-pilot, Will."

The engineer parted his lips in the beginning of an angry protest. He closed them, looking at Mike's face. He sighed and shook his head. "Okay, kid. Maybe you Sir Galahad guys have got a reason nobody knows anything about."

"We have," Mike said. He climbed the ladder into the cockpit, feeling the ugly coldness of the ship close around him.

The mechanics rolled the ship onto the runway and swung it toward the far end of the field. Mike put on his oxygen mask and turned the control valve to *Full Open*. He checked the rudder and aileron controls. He slid the canopy closed, feeling as if he could reach out through it and touch the tips of the ship's swept-back wings. He swallowed. He pushed the buttons that fired the jets.

The driving flames of the ship flared into life with the roar of a thousand blowtorches. The ship moved forward, Mike testing the brakes as he taxied to the end of the runway. He parked there, checking the fuel, brake and pressure pumps and scanning the instruments. The Mach gauge caught his eye; he had not noticed before that the instrument which registered, not miles per hour, but speed as compared with that of sound, was calibrated to twice sonic speed.

*The engineers expect a lot of this ship, he thought. Well, they'll soon find out if it's got it.*

He adjusted the flame mixture and flipped the fuel pumps to *High*. He called the tower for take-off clearance.

The plane leaped from the ground when he fired the JATO bottles three-quarters of the way down the runway, their assisting jets adding impetus to those in the fuselage. He made a wide circle and came back across the field in level flight.

The ship handled beautifully at this relatively low speed and altitude, but what it might do higher and faster was still unknown. He took it up to 10,000 feet and stalled the plane to get his landing speed. It would be about 130 miles, he estimated. *If he landed. If . . .*

He put the plane in a bank, looking northward toward the mountains next to the sea. He saw the small red dot of the ranch-house roof, the puckered pocket of his valley. Linda was there, perhaps still asleep. He pulled his eyes back to the cockpit. He eased the throttles forward.

Almost without slowing its forward speed, the rate of climb went up to 5,000 feet a minute. The hands of the altimeter began chasing each other around the dial. The outside temperature gauge dropped to 130 below zero. He glanced over his shoulder; trails of vapor were billowing from the wingtips, making a long plume of frozen crystals behind him.

A miniature snowfall began to drift lazily through the cockpit, and his eyes went back to the Mach gauge. When he began the test, that would be the one to watch: his speed in relation to sound. He eased back on the throttles when the altimeter showed 75,000, and leveled out at 80,000.

Brown's voice came into his radio headphones. "All right, kid. Take it easy, now."

Mike did not answer. He had ceased to be a human being, he felt; he was a machine, a part of

the Airserpent. All of his knowledge, all of his years of experience were fastened to its instruments and controls. Slowly he opened the throttles, watching the Mach gauge.

The needle crept past seven, eight, nine. . . . Ten would be the speed of sound.

The nose of the ship began a gentle rise and fall. The right rudder pressed against his foot. He looked at the gyro compass: the ship was mak-



ing a sharp, skidding turn to the right, the same flat spin its model had shown in the wind tunnel.

He eased back on the throttles. The Mach gauge sank back to nine. The Airserpent resumed straight flight.

He heard Brown's voice in his headphones. The engineer was talking with the other men around the recording instruments on the ground. "God help us! We're no closer to it than we were a year ago!"

Mike looked back at the Mach gauge. *Give her one more try. Maybe you still can lick it.*

**H**E pushed the throttles open again. The needle eased toward 10, crossed it. Now the ship was flying fast as sound; and again it was snapping into its fast flat turn to the right.

Mike pushed on the left rudder, first gently, then with every ounce his muscles could give. His body slammed against the side of the cockpit. The turn became faster. He felt himself beginning to black out.

Fighting tons of momentum, he yanked the throttles off, dumped the dive flaps, and fought to keep the plane from spinning as it slowed down. His heart felt as if a mallet were pounding the inside of his ribs. He opened his clenched lips and sucked in deep draughts of pure oxygen; and as his brain cleared, he heard Brown's voice:

"All right, kid. Stop being a damn fool. Bring her down!"

Mike pressed the transmitter against his throat. "Okay, Will. Coming down."

He looked regretfully at the Mach gauge. There was the needle; there were the unattainable numbers on the dial. It might take years to bring them together. Well, he'd done everything a man could. He was still alive. Now he could turn in his resignation.

He banked, looking down at the earth 15 miles away. The cities and towns were geometric squares of green and gray; the ocean was a vast, shining sheet of polished metal, curving with the earth. And just this side of it, in the green wrinkle of hills, was the ranch.

In 30 minutes he would be on the ground. An hour more, and he would be home. After that, forever, there would be nothing more than Linda and the ranch, and maybe Mike the Second.

*How clear it is, he thought. And how close!*

He swallowed, suddenly thinking how close and how clear the things he saw would look through the sights of a bomber cruising leisurely beyond the sonic barrier and picking out its target with the confident knowledge that it could run away from anything America could send up. A ship like that Will Brown had hinted at, a ship that could fly higher and faster than anything on earth. . . .

He made up his mind. He looked again to-

ward the small spot on the earth where Linda was. *I'm sorry, honey. This has to be.*

He raised the dive flaps and pushed the throttles wide open. He was slammed against the back of the seat, then to the side of the cockpit as again the Airserpent snapped into its fast, flat, right turn. There was no use pushing on the left rudder to correct it. His only hope was that the ground engineers might find a clue to help them before the plane tore itself apart.

On the third whipping turn, he was unable to hold his body upright. He slumped forward as he had done at dawn on Emir's back. And then, as automatically as he had spurred Emir in the direction toward which he was turning, he shoved his foot on the Airserpent's right rudder. The plane began to buck and vibrate wildly. There was a roaring scream in his ears. This, he knew, was how the others had gone. This for five seconds . . . then disintegration. He was five seconds from death.

It was then that it happened. The plane wavered. Its turn began to decrease. Mike's ankle started to throb, but he pushed with all of his weight; and slowly, as if reluctant, the Airserpent began a gradual turn to the left. The abnormal air-flow through the sonic barrier had, of course, reversed the controls while the ship passed through it.

He forced his body upright and equalized the pressure on the rudder pedals. His vision cleared. He looked at the Mach gauge. The needle had moved past 14. It was still climbing. The plane, silent, smooth and effortless as a glider, was flying almost a half faster than the speed of sound.

Mike eased back on the throttles. He let the speed drop, jockeying the rudder until the Mach gauge dropped under 10. He lowered the dive flaps and started down.

**I**T was then that he became aware of the jubilant shouting of the ground engineers in his headphones. "Kid," Brown's voice was booming, "You've done it! Come on down! You can have anything you want!"

Mike snapped off the radio.

*What do I want? What does any man want? Does he want peace, security, just for himself and his own little slice of the earth? Or does he want it for all the people he can give it to? Doesn't he want to give the world something, something only he can give?*

Mike opened his flying suit and slid a hand in to the pocket of his jacket. He brought out the resignation. Forcing the canopy back a crack, he slid the paper through; it flashed away in the slipstream.

*Linda will understand, he thought.*

He flew the ship down toward God's green earth, but for a long time he watched the sky.

—BY CHARLES FLANAGAN