



SLOW-SPEED DEMON

by ROBERT J. HOGAN

Set an old orange crate of a ship up against a couple of low-winged speed demons in a cross-country air race—and they'd call you crazy. But some people say that a race is more a test of the pilot than of the ship, and maybe they're right. Here's a story of modern aviation to prove it.

VICIOUSLY Buck Rankin pulled his belt to the last notch, it was a frantic attempt to take up on a slack stomach that hadn't seen food for the last three meal times.

Buck knew he was starved, broke and in the depths of despair. But he could not know of the important part that same belt was to play in a fierce race—a race with death that Buck Rankin would make before the sun had gone down behind a far-off mountain range.

It was the morning of the crosscountry air races to Santa Monica.

Buck stood on the tarmac of the Mid-Western Air Terminal and stared dejectedly at the line of warming

race planes, looking especially at the two Kendall low-winged racers there near the center.

Buck stood like a man alone in a strange land, and felt like one. Except for possibly one person with whom he had tried to get in touch on his arrival, he probably didn't know a single human for five hundred miles about the airport well enough to borrow a nickel.

He started violently at a chuckling voice behind him. "What's gone haywire, Buck?" Someone was saying. "Havin' a fit?"

He whirled. Then, abruptly, his expression changed and his face took on a look of joyful recognition.

"Chuck Page! Gee, but I'm glad to see you, guy!"

Never wanted to see la friend so much in my life. I knew you were out here somewhere, and I tried to get hold of you when I got In town, but I couldn't locate you."

Chuck grinned. "Yeah, you wouldn't find me, probably. I moved to a cheaper place about a week ago. But for the love of Mike, when did you get in—how—and what for?"

Buck grinned easily now. "Got in about an hour ago. Broke, so I walked halfway to the field and caught a ride. I came out to fly one of those Kendall jobs in the race."

"But I heard only a few minutes ago that this new pilot from the coast—Tex Glover—is flying one of Kendall's jobs, and Kendall's flying the other. How come?"

Buck's grin faded. "That's what I was having the fit about all by myself when you came up just now," he told his friend. He felt Chuck propelling him toward the lunch room across the road as he talked. "I wrote Kendall about flying his job for him. Heard he was entering two jobs in the Santa Monica race, and thought I might get a chance with one of them. He wrote back and said he wouldn't make any promises until he'd seen me handle his job, but if I cared to come out on my own hook, he'd see what he could do."

"Well, what's gone haywire? Pop Kendall can't have anything against your flying, Buck. There isn't a better cross-country racing pilot in the country than you. You just haven't been getting the breaks. Take that last race, when you cracked up at Roosevelt Field. If you'd had a halfway-decent plane, instead of the orange crate that fly-by-night outfit wished on you, you'd have trimmed the field."

Buck nodded glumly. "Yeah, maybe. But I think that's one thing that queered me here. Kendall hinted at it when I talked to him a few minutes ago. Now I'm out here and he says he understood I had a lot more experience than he's since heard on good authority that I have. Won't even let me fly his job to show him I can handle it."

Chuck pushed him into a chair at a corner table of the lunch room, and sat down across from him.

"So Kendall heard all this stuff, did he—on good authority?"

Buck nodded.

Others entered the room. Buck watched the two newcomers with a quizzical expression. One was Kendall, but the big aircraft manufacturer and pilot didn't interest him now nearly as much as did another man beside him. This was a short, squat figure,

dressed in a dapper outfit, who seemed to talk almost continuously to Kendall. And, strangely enough, the great airman listened to him intently.

CHUCK HALF-TURNED in his chair and shot a glance backward, and motioned behind him with his thumb. "That's Tex Glover, the guy who's flying the other job."

"Yeah," quietly from Buck. "Quite a talker."

Chuck nodded. "And I got a good hunch that guy talks a wonderful flight." His voice lowered. "He's got Kendall buffaloed with that letter he brought with him from an old friend of Kendall's up in Washington. Heard he came with a recommendation that's a knockout and that's why Kendall falls for him so hot."

Buck shot him a questioning glance and Chuck understood.

"Oh, sure. The guy can fly, if you call flying getting off the ground and landing again. He's good enough to get by with his line and that letter of recommendation to back him up."

"How long's he been here?"

"Last night, I understand," Chuck told him.

"Funny thing," Buck confided. "You say he came from the Pacific Coast somewhere?"

"Yeah. Around Seattle, I think. Says he's an old war-time ace."

Buck continued to study Tex Glover across the room as he sat by Kendall at another table.

"I've seen that guy Glover somewhere," he said at length. "Wonder if he was ever in the East, around New York."

Chuck grinned. "Listen, fella, I'll tell you something, but first you've got to promise me something. What I'm going to tell you is going to make you mighty sore. Hold your temper. It won't do you any good to go busting this guy Glover—not yet. Personally, I don't like the guy."

"Okay," agreed Buck. "Shoot."

"I think you're right about this guy Glover. Seeing him before, I mean," Chuck confided. "Because I overheard him telling Kendall he'd seen you pull some boners at Roosevelt. They were alone in the office, and I heard it over the transom. He went on to say that you were barred from racing in the East because you were too reckless."

"Huh?" Buck's muscles tightened into hard knots. His face grew crimson as he rose slowly with a menacing gleam in his keen eyes.

"Hey, wait," pleaded Chuck. "You promised you'd wait."

He pushed Buck back into his chair. Buck's teeth clenched angrily, as a look of hate shot from his eyes at the dapper little figure who sat talking to Kendall.

"Listen," Chuck was begging. "I've got more to tell you. I can't afford to take a chance on Kendall's getting sore at me. He'd know that I overheard their conversation and told you, if you took a sock at Glover. And I can't afford that—not right now."

Buck remained straight and staring.

"I've been working on a ship—a fast, streamlined racer," Chuck went on. "I'm trying to get Kendall to buy the design from me. She's done, and I had hoped to enter her in the race, but she's got me scared. Something about her that doesn't act right. I'm working on her now, and as soon as the race is over I'll get hold of Kendall and—"

Buck had hardly heard his words. He glared fiercely at Tex Glover across the room, and his lips tightened in a hard straight line.

"I'd give anything in the world to know where I've seen that guy," he snarled, half to himself. "And I'd give my right leg to beat both him and Kendall in this race."

Suddenly Buck sat up with a start. Something of Chuck's last words had clicked in his brain, and his hand clutched Chuck's arm excitedly.

"Hey, this plane of yours! Tell me what you said about it again. I missed it."

"What's the matter—you gone nuts?" Chuck asked him.

"No, but I've got an idea. Tell me about this job of yours. You said you were afraid of it."

Chuck repeated his words about the fast, light racer he had worked on. Yes, he was afraid of it. It acted queerly.

Buck's face flamed with eager excitement as he listened.

"Look, Chuck. No kidding. We're entering this new box kite of yours in the race right now, this morning."

Chuck shook his head sadly. "No, Buck. You're all wet. I wouldn't ask you to fly something I was afraid of. I've got to figure out what's wrong with her, and then I'll fix it. Besides, I only hoped to enter in the race to make a showing. She's got an old Hisso motor in her, because I couldn't afford to buy a modern one. She wouldn't stand a chance in this race against ships with Wasps like those new Kendalls. Hasn't got it in her. And last, but not least, Buck, friends don't grow in bushes, kid. I wouldn't lose you for the world."

Buck shrugged lightly at the last words. Then a slow grin of anticipation spread over his face.

"Yeah, but think of your side of it. Twenty-five thousand dollars is the first prize for this race. That much dough doesn't grow on bushes, either. I'd give my right leg to trim this guy Glover in this race. A cross-country air race is more of a test of the pilot and the motor than it is of, speed, sometimes. And I've got a good hunch that guy Glover hasn't got the goods."

Buck pushed back his chair with finality, in spite of Chuck's objections. "You finance the trip, and I'll fly her," he said. "If I win any money, it's yours, Chuck. Come on, let's have a look at her, anyway."

Still objecting, Chuck led the way to the hangar where the new homemade racing plane was stored. Buck inspected it minutely, admiring the streamline effect of the construction. Suddenly he bent down and picked up the tail.

"Come on, big boy," he chuckled. "We've only got about an hour before the race starts. Let's get her warmed up and see how she acts."

FOR FIFTEEN MINUTES they labored with the old Hisso, struggling to get an explosion from the cylinders. They whirled the prop until they were nearly exhausted.

Buck was at the prop again. They'd been taking turns. A crowd had gathered—laughing, kidding pilots who poked fun at the crudely constructed plane with the old engine. Buck swung viciously and with all his might.

A thrill coursed through him. She caught, kicked back, turned the other way and began to run smoothly.

He called to Chuck in the cockpit above the roar of the warming motor. "There won't be time for a test hop, Chuck. I'm going down to enter her in the race before it's too late. Get her warm."

Chuck tried to stop him, but Buck was racing down the tarmac towards the judges' office. He came running in breathlessly.

"Another plane entering the race," he barked. "Chuck Page is entering his job, the Page special. I'm flying her for him. My name's Buck Rankin."

He saw the look of surprise on the judge's face turn to grinning disbelief.

"You mean you're going to fly that I mouse-trap, with that old lunger of a motor?"

"Never mind what she's got," Buck snapped back at him. "She's going to Santa Monica, or as near to there as she'll fly me. Get it down in your book. I'm ready to shove off when you say so."

He heard the roar of laughter from the office as he

dived from the room and ran down the tarmac. Other pilots chuckled as he passed and said things about a guy who wanted to commit suicide. Buck trotted closer to the two Kendalls and shot a venomous glance at Tex Glover as he was climbing into his cockpit. There was a sneering look on Glover's face. The news had spread rapidly about the new entry.

Chuck was still objecting, but Buck would not be pushed aside.

"I'm not asking much," he insisted. "About twenty bucks for me and the gas and oil on the trip and a full tank of gas here. Hurry and call the gas wagon over. We'll be taking off in ten minutes."

Chuck climbed from the cockpit and Buck took his place. He checked the instruments anxiously, watched the oil temperature and pressure gauges, saw the old Hisso humming smoothly now and wondered what had kept them from starting it easily. He wondered about a lot of things ahead of him on the race as he went over the course between the Mid-Western Airport and Santa Monica.

Gas was poured into the tank. The motor idled easily now. Chuck poked his hand over the edge of the cockpit. There was frantic hope in his eyes and sincerity in his voice.

"For the love of Mike, be careful, Buck! Don't take any chances with yourself, I mean. I wish I had a chute for you, but there isn't a spare one in the place."

Buck grinned back at him. "I flew six years before they even invented chutes, fella," he told him. "And don't forget, you may win a bunch of dough out of this race. Don't worry about me. We make one stop at Albuquerque for lunch. I'll gas up there and see if I can tune this steam engine a little, while we wait for the start."

"Good luck to you, Buck, and—be careful."

Buck grinned back at him. "Don't worry. And I'll win for you, if it's possible in this crate, Chuck. I'm out to trim that guy Tex Glover if it's the last thing I do, fella."

BUCK SAW the starter's flag flash before Tex Glover's plane. Kendall was already in the air with his racer. Others had gone, and more would follow. Buck's muscles tightened into hard, determined knots as he saw Tex Glover take the air and roar out to the west.

Buck sat hunched over his stick, waiting for his signal. He was last to enter, last to go. He got the flash, battered the gun open. Pushed the stick forward and felt the scream of the wind as the home-made racer shot over the ground.

She took the air like a rocket, hurled through space at a thrilling clip and snarled at the tails of the last ships to leave. Buck thrilled at the feel of the air again, hanging low in his seat as the ship howled on to the west.

He caught up with the plane which had taken off before him and laughed in the pilot's face as he passed without effort. That was one of the birds who had laughed when he announced that he was entering in the race with Chuck's home-made job.

The speed of the little ship appalled him. It hurled through space like a comet. In his long experience flying race planes, he'd never flown anything as fast as this job that Chuck had built—certainly nothing with a small amount of power the Hisso in his lap possessed.

He wondered what Chuck had meant about being scared of her. He'd said something about a left turn. An hour passed, then two. Five planes had seemed to slow before him since the start, then had faded in the distance as Buck crept up on them, leaving them behind. He was in the clear now. Kendall's two planes were out there somewhere ahead. He wondered how far.

His teeth clenched as he hurled on. Texas landscape drifted beneath him now. Two more hours and he'd be coming down at Albuquerque for a rest and a lunch.

He dropped his nose so that he was almost flat on the ground, roaring close to the level fields and open country to get the most speed possible.

The thought of Chuck's words throbbed in his brain. He wished he dared take the time to test the maneuverability of the ship and see just what was wrong. But he must keep going. No telling about this Hisso. They were good in their day, and this one had seen plenty of days in the air. His eyes stared ahead hopefully for a moment. Then he sat up in his cockpit with a jerk.

His keen eyes had caught something there in the distance—two tiny specks that raced along even with each other. He could see them clearly in the bright air now. The two Kendall racers!

His pulse began beating wildly. He'd hoped to win by a chance—a chance that fogs and storms and the many other things that rose in these cross-country air races would give him to show superior piloting. But never in his wildest dreams had he hoped that he could actually catch up with those Kendalls, unless something of this sort did happen. But no fog, no storm had arisen to stop them, and still he had caught

them—or would catch them if nothing happened to stop the headlong lunge of Chuck's home-made comet.

Every nerve in his body was alert, tingling with the thrill that he felt as he hurled on. Before him, the specks became full-sized airplanes—low-winged devils that seemed to struggle for a burst of speed, as the home-made crate stormed up at them.

He saw one of the pilots, the smaller one, turn in his cockpit and stare blankly at the demon that seemed about to pass. He saw, too, the white mask of fear rise in that face.

And Kendall himself, sitting higher in the cockpit, turned and stared backward for a second, then whirled and ducked low in his cockpit to cut down all possible wind resistance.

BUCK'S FACE was wrinkled in a delighted grin of triumph as he thundered up even. He turned as he passed and looked each pilot full in the face.

Then, like a flash, the grin faded from his face. Something had gone wrong! The Hiss before him had suddenly sputtered. It caught again. Buck sat rigid, hardly daring to breathe, and waited in terrible suspense for what might come.

Sput-sput! Again he heard the sound. It sent a chill of fearful apprehension down his spine. He had been winning hands down, and now it looked as if he were doomed to defeat, after all.

Again the Hiss sputtered, this time for a longer period. It picked up quickly and as quickly gasped again, like a dying man choking for air.

Instinctively Buck searched the earth below. He was almost flat on the ground. He climbed slightly for more time. The Hiss was going dead. The ground below was level and seemed smooth. Lucky, that. The Hiss gasped for the last time, choked up and died with the prop straight across.

Buck picked a spot. As suddenly as an expert might lay a rug, Buck brought the racer down to the ground. His heart sank like a rock as he heard the thunder of the two Kendalls die in the distance.

He had an idea what had caused the trouble. It was simple, if that was it, but time was precious. He wanted to keep even and ahead of those Kendalls, even though they'd started six minutes before he had. So Tex Glover said he was too reckless! They'd stopped him racing in the East because of that, had they? He didn't have much experience as a pilot, eh?

With flashing movements, his hands worked with

the gas line. It sounded like water in gas. He heard the roar of a motor overhead, and saw a plane flash past, with the pilot waving over the edge of his cockpit.

The sight and the realization that he had lost valuable time drove him to work even more swiftly. He had the line disconnected. Gas and gluck and rusty water spewed out on the ground.

Two more ships roared by just above and snarled into the west. Frantically Buck worked with the carburetor drains, then put things back in place again. Two more planes roared over, one close behind the other. Now he was last in the race again.

His heart fell with a thud. Poor old Chuck! The poor guy had put about everything he had into this crate. Even his gas tank was some old empty he'd been able to pick up for a song. It was hard to get those things completely cleaned out when they lay about for a long time.

He had the parts together now, and replaced the cowling with trembling fingers. He raced to the cockpit—then to the prop. With all his might he spun the big wood propeller. Again he dived to the cockpit and flipped on the switch. Back to the prop now. Again it spun—silently, with a sickening, sucking sound that was far from the explosion noise that he craved so eagerly.

Minutes seemed to flash past with even greater speed than had the other ships in the race as they roared overhead. Buck was working like a madman, talking to himself. He felt ready to drop. Back and forth, from cockpit to prop, and back again.

And as he worked, precious minutes swept past—minutes he could not hope to make up now before he reached Albuquerque, minutes that drew his desperate hope of beating Tex Glover further and further away and hurled into the discard the opportunity of winning the prize of twenty-five thousand dollars for his friend Chuck.

Viciously he whirled at the prop. If it didn't catch this time, he'd have to give up for a while and rest. He was about done in.

All his strength went into that last pull. The great wooden club spun with a hissing sound; then with a wheeze, a cough and a sputter, it turned. It turned once more as a cylinder caught, and ran stubbornly at first and then smoothly.

BUCK'S RUBBERY LEGS carried him to the cockpit and lifted him over the cowling. He managed to batter the gun open, felt the ship gather motion under him and eased back on the stick as the speed increased.

Again he was in the air. Hungrily he hunched low in the cockpit, watching the compass. Gradually his strength came back. But he was still last in the race. The fastest plane in the race, and he was coming in last on the only stop scheduled.

Another hour of harrowing suspense passed. He couldn't see a single ship ahead of him. Even now, before he reached Albuquerque, he could see the sneering grin Tex Glover would have waiting for him when he landed. But perhaps it wasn't any more than fair for Glover to have his day. Buck had had his moment when he'd passed Kendall and Glover earlier.

He saw the town of Albuquerque before him now. There was the field. He lunged down at it, saw a flagman waiting for him, flashing the flag as he thundered over. The time-keeper would be there, too, checking him in last at Albuquerque.

For the moment he forgot Chuck's words about his fear of the ship and disregarded his warning, in his eagerness to get on the ground and have a look at the engine and the mag.

Buck pulled up in a chandelle to the left, turned to make a return over the field and held his turn for a moment. Suddenly a chill went down his spine. He was trying to straighten out of the turn. Something was haywire. He couldn't seem to get out of that left bank.

He remembered Chuck's words now, and kicked viciously at the rudder, holding the stick over to the right with all his might. He felt it give a little, felt the bank lessen.

He was too close to the ground now to try much. Still, he was desperate. It was his only hope. He kicked opposite rudder with all the strength he had, then gunned the engine wide to take effect on the tiny rudder, and yanked over on the stick again.

His heart leaped wildly as he felt the plane come level, sluggishly. She was giving him an argument all the way, but she was coming! Trees flashed at him just below. But he was in time. He stormed back at the airport and brought the ship down with plenty of speed. He landed with hardly a jar and breathed his first long, easy intake of air for the past few minutes.

He saw Kendall and Tex Glover coming toward him and heard Glover cackle as he spoke.

"You started last, Rankin, and you came in away behind that."

Buck's muscles tensed. He heard Kendall speaking in kinder tones.

"That was tough luck, your motor cutting out on you back there," he said. "You have a mighty fast

plane." He was looking over Chuck's homemade racer shrewdly. "Tell me—what caused that trouble you had just now in that left turn? I noticed that you just made it. Something faulty with the ship, I suppose?"

Buck shook his head vigorously. "Oh, the ship's perfect. I was just giving the crowd a thrill, Kendall. That was all." He left them then, and walked to the judges' office.

"I'm late, I know," he opened. "Had motor trouble and had to set down. How late am I—I mean behind the winner of this first lap?"

The judge went over his records. "About forty minutes, I should say," he replied. "The two Kendall jobs are leading the race so far. Of course the next lap will tell. Some storm trouble over toward California. We're waiting to hear now. Probably have some dope on it by the time you're ready to take off."

Buck nodded, smiling a little to himself as he walked back to his plane. He worked on the mag, cleaned the points and adjusted them, then smiled again as he saw the condition of the magneto. After all, Chuck Page was a mighty fine designer.

He finished working on the engine, and whirled the prop just for fun. She caught the first time. That was better. If he'd only taken the time to clean and adjust everything back at his forced landing field!

A mechanic from the office stepped up to him and handed him a telegram. He tore it open anxiously. Read it and grinned. Read it again.

*"Think I know what's wrong with left turns.
Too small rudder and ailerons. Might help if you
increase warp on left wing. Best of luck.*

—Chuck."

Buck Rankin grinned to himself, and walked back to the ship. He worked with the wires and cables, making the suggested adjustments. They looked better to him now. Later, larger ailerons and rudder should solve the trouble.

SHIPS WERE WARMING for the start of the next and last lap of the race—the most perilous part of the trip. Mountains, bad country, and the judge had hinted at a storm. Buck grinned to himself as he whirled his prop and heard the Hisso catch once more.

He saw the smug look of confidence on Tex Glover's face as he walked past on his way to his Kendall plane. Now was the test. He'd beat Glover, if it was the last thing he did.

Ships roared into the air at one minute intervals, at

the signals of the Starter's flag. Buck taxied down the field and waited his turn, tense and eager to be off—to go hurtling toward the backs of those others, to thrill as he passed Kendall and Glover again. There wasn't much chance of his having trouble with his engine now. Everything looked okay.

Glover and then Kendall roared down the field, lifted and droned west toward the finishing point. Buck watched them go.

Suddenly a running figure, coming across the field, attracted his attention. He was waving his arms frantically, shouting something to the starter with his flag, and waving the planes back to the ground. He and the starter broke into a run down to the line of waiting planes. Four of them, including Buck's racer, still remained on the ground.

"A storm! A terrible storm over in the mountains, along the Colorado River between Arizona and California!" the man shouted in Buck's helmeted ear. "We just got news of it. Looks bad. Moving east. Not much hope of getting through."

Buck stiffened in his cockpit. "Does that mean I'm ordered to stay on the ground?" he shot back.

The man shook his head. "You can go if you want to commit suicide. Wish we could have gotten word to the others."

Buck nodded shortly with a grim expression on his face. "I'll go," he snapped shortly. "Tell the starter to give the signal when he's ready."

Buck watched the other planes. After all, it didn't matter much whether they went or not. He'd passed them all before.

The starter was waving his flag, motioning to him to start. The other three were backing out. Good judgment on their part.

Buck's hand battered the gun. He heard the sound of the Hisso, and roared west, leaving Albuquerque behind.

FOR THE NEXT TWO HOURS very little happened. Buck flew alone. A lot of time had elapsed between the last plane's leaving and his take-off. Gradually he crept up on the tail of the plane ahead of him.

As he passed, he made great, sweeping gestures with his arms, giving the storm signal. The pilot could see for himself now. Storm clouds were gathering to the west.

Buck lunged on. He looked back once and saw that the pilot had turned back. Wise boy. He almost wished he could turn back himself. There was nothing funny about one of these western storms.

He was climbing now, climbing for two dots that stood silhouetted against the blackness of the storm ahead. Those would be the two Kendalls. He could make them out, even at that distance, by their low wings. They were going through.

Even now, as he roared toward them, the wind was whipping about him, bouncing the little racer wildly about, like a fluff of down in a swirling breeze. Buck's fingers tightened his safety belt to keep him rigid in the cockpit. He knew storms—he'd been through many.

He saw the faces of the two pilots of the Kendalls as they turned and stared back at him now. They were working with their controls to keep their ships from looping completely. He wanted to grin at Glover as he passed close. There was no need to tell them there was a storm ahead now. They were in it—all three of them—fighting their individual battles with the elements.

Suddenly mist enveloped all three and hid each from the view of the others. Buck remembered that Glover was the closer to him. He veered to the left to make sure not to hit him in the smothering fog that enveloped them.

They shot out into the clear again, together now. There was no sign of Kendall. He might be anywhere. Buck turned and grinned at Glover for a moment, then stopped suddenly as he saw the expression on Glover's face. There was stark fear there, and pleading. Glover was motioning to him, and seemed to be trying to get him to slow up, so that he could keep up with him.

Buck hesitated for an instant. Perhaps it was a trick. He worked frantically with his controls to keep from being battered about by the terrible gusts of wind, and stared at Glover's face again as he flew closer. There was no doubt of the sincerity in those pleading eyes.

Buck's hand instinctively crept to the gun and pulled it back slightly. The two planes bucked and rolled wildly, close together. Buck wished that this guy Glover would fly at a more respectful distance. There was no sign of Kendall now and his plane—no sign of any other planes but those two.

They shot out into the open for an instant. Buck yanked hard on the stick. An ugly-looking mountain loomed before him. He saw Glover follow every movement in desperation. Wheels tore through tree tops, and he climbed frantically. Glover was coming with him, following his lead.

Mist enveloped him again. He lost Glover for a

fraction of a second and found him again. Lightning crashed. The roar of thunder came to him, even above the drone of his own motor. They were being booted about in the storm like corks on a choppy sea.

Again the visibility cleared. He could see below for a moment. The mountains had been passed, and level country lay before them. Then fog enveloped them once more. Glover hugged him close in those intervals of mist. He saw his face now, white as a ghost's. The kid was scared stiff. In spite of himself, Buck felt sorry for him. He seemed totally lost.

Anxiously Buck tried to check his course and lunge on. The compass could only be read vaguely. He glanced at Glover again. A gigantic gust of wind seemed to grip them and swirl them about. Buck gasped with horror for an instant. Glover was going—going down in a wild, spinning dive! He saw the frantic fear on the kid's face as he clutched the stick and held it back in his lap, his fright completely overpowering him.

Out in the clear they shot for that moment. Buck did not wait for more. He stuck the nose of his racer down and howled until the wires screamed with the tension and the ship groaned from the strain.

Desperately he tried to shout directions to the spinning Tex Glover as he held himself into the spin, frozen to the stick with horror. Down, down the two hurled, the one out of control, the other in a desperate dive.

BUCK SAW GLOVER crash in a clump of trees at the edge of a large field, and pulled out just in time to escape annihilation himself. Then, without the slightest hesitation, he came into the rough field to land. The country was open, but he couldn't see a house for miles. If Glover lived, then what? Buck hated him for what he'd done, but he couldn't leave him to die. After all, he was human—a fellow airman.

The wind was still wicked. Buck kicked his racer about angrily as he, tried to set down in the field. It was a fight all the way. He felt the wheels touch. They rolled. Buck leaped from the cockpit and raced toward the woods, where the wreckage of the plane dangled close to the ground. Something awful and bloody hung half out of the cockpit. Glover—Tex Glover, the man he hated. But Buck pulled him out, listening to his heart. It was still pumping. He was cut and bruised and bleeding badly in half a dozen places.

Buck struggled with the problem as he carried Tex Glover to his plane and stared about for something

with which to fasten him to the wing. The racer was single-place. He'd have to tie him to the outside.

Suddenly he thought of his belt—the same belt he'd taken up to the last notch that morning. He had it off in a flash, and was strapping Glover's limp body to the wing of the racer, to the brace wires. He tugged at it to make sure it would hold. The belt was strong.

Buck leaped to the cockpit, and the racer bounded over the rough field. He might not get off, but he'd have the satisfaction of knowing he had done the best he could—for another human being.

The plane dashed across the ground. It was sluggish getting off. Trees loomed before him. The storm made the take-off a terrible hazard. Swirling wind whipped the tiny plane here and there, threatening to set it on the ground just at the tree boundary.

Buck clutched the cowling with his free hand, and was about to cut the switch—the last act before a crash. Then suddenly, another gust picked the plane high in the air and sent it sailing over the tree tops.

If Buck had been offered a million dollars to tell of his struggle through that storm for the next hour, he couldn't have done it. He only knew that his body was battered and bruised and sore. It had been the most terrible battle he had ever made with the elements.

Three times, before he reached the Santa Monica airport, he was tempted to set down in some field and wait. Only the fact that he had a badly injured and perhaps dying man strapped to his wing forced him to go on. Every moment during that long hour, it seemed as though he were done. Time after time his landing gear dragged through tree tops, in spite of his fight to keep altitude. He seemed utterly helpless—and could only hope to keep going—out of the storm.

He tried to climb above it. A down-draft of air struck the ship and carried it along, threatening to bash it in ruins on the ground. But somehow Buck went on, driven by the figure of that unconscious man strapped to his wing with his own belt—the only union between the ship and Glover's hundred and fifty pounds.

He saw the stares of startled surprise on the faces of the attendants at the airport when he got down somehow. He heard them saying something to him, shouting at him, cheering. They were saying that he'd won, that none of the rest had come through. All were down somewhere or lost.

But Buck only heard them vaguely as he worked with the limp form of Glover. He'd called for an ambulance when he first landed. Now a doctor was

helping, making a hasty examination of Glover as he lay on the stretcher.

He looked up and nodded. "He'll pull through, I think. He's been badly cut up. A wonder he didn't bleed to death. Tying him out in the slipstream of the propeller probably saved his life. Dried the blood and stopped the flow."

Buck sat down on his wing a little dizzily. Some one was handing him a piece of leather. He managed to grin at the bloody thing, then put it around his waist and pulled it up. He looked into the air as he heard the sound of a throbbing motor. The storm was letting up in Santa Monica. He saw a Kendall low-wing swing over the port and land. Kendall climbed from the cockpit, looking weak and dizzy.

SOMEONE told Kendall that his pilot had been brought in on the wing. Buck nodded as he asked him about it. Yep. The other ship spun in during the storm. He'd gone down and got Tex Glover. That was all. Kendall beamed at him.

"Rankin," he smiled, "I've given you a raw deal. I took too much for granted from Glover about you. He came to me with the highest of recommendations from a friend of mine out here on the coast. Brought a letter from him. But all that's past now, Rankin. I'll give you a steady job flying my ships any time you want to begin."

Buck straightened with a start, grinning joyously at the big aircraft manufacturer.

"Gee, that's great, Kendall! I'll sure be—"

Suddenly Kendall cut him short with an exclamation. He was staring across the tarmac at a middle-aged man trotting toward them. Buck saw them shaking hands, and heard Kendall's booming voice.

"Why, Fenton, I didn't expect to see you here. How—"

"I just happened to be down this way and thought I'd come to see you win this race, Ken."

"You're too late," Kendall answered. "This young man won the race. I guess he and I are the only ones to finish so far. Rankin, here, is going to take the place of the pilot you sent me."

Buck saw Fenton stare hard at Kendall. "The pilot I sent you?" he repeated. "I didn't send any pilot."

Kendall was fumbling in his pocket for a letter. He brought it out and handed it to Fenton. Fenton stared at it and shook his head.

"Something's wrong here," he ventured. "That's a good imitation of my signature, but it isn't mine."

Suddenly Buck straightened with a jerk. "Say," he burst out, "I knew I'd seen that guy Glover before. Now I know where. He was a greaseball out at Roosevelt Field. Always talked a big flight with the spectators. I didn't recognize him in his trick outfit. Probably afraid I'd queer him if I got a job flying with you, too, Kendall. That's why he said those things about me. As I remember now, he went to some flying school away from Roosevelt!"

Kendall nodded. "But that's all past, Rankin. You'll have a fine job with me from now on. Let's hope this fellow Glover doesn't die from his foolishness."

Buck started for the office abruptly.

"Gee," he exclaimed, "I almost forgot to send a telegram to Chuck. He'll want to know I won."

"I'll go with you," offered Kendall. "I've got some word to send to Page myself. I'm going to buy the design of his plane, if he'll sell it to me."

It was an hour later when Kendall tore open an answering telegram from Chuck Page. There was one for Buck, too. Buck's was short. He read it in puzzlement—passed it to Kendall.

*"Explaining everything in telegram to Kendall.
Read his.*

Chuck."

Kendall's face fell a little, but he managed to smile as he passed his longer telegram to Buck. He read:

*"Sorry but design of plane not for sale. Rankin
and I will start a company of our own with the prize
money.*

Charles Page."

Kendall turned to Buck with a disappointed look. "I suppose that means that you won't fly for me, then, Rankin. Can't say that I blame you. Page I has a mighty fine plane there."

Buck beamed back at him. "Well, after all, Kendall," he answered, "I didn't give you any more encouragement than you gave me at the start."