



VINTAGE

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# HAMMOND INNES

AIR BRIDGE

VINTAGE CLASSICS

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## About the Book

The Soviets have cut off food and fuel supplies to West Berlin in a final attempt to force a stranglehold over the city. The Allied response is the Berlin airlift: thousands of flights carrying supplies - a lifeline to the people of Berlin.

A chance for heroism perhaps, but not for Neil Fraser or Bill Saeton. One is an ex-RAF pilot on the run from the law, the other will stop at nothing to build the perfect aircraft engine. In an abandoned hangar in the British countryside, tensions rise to boiling point.

## About the Author

Ralph Hammond Innes was born in Horsham, Sussex, on 15 July 1913 and educated at Cranbrook School, Kent. He left school aged eighteen, and worked successively in publishing, teaching and journalism. In 1936, in need of money in order to marry, he wrote a supernatural thriller, *The Doppelganger*, which was published in 1937 as part of a two-year, four book deal. In 1939 Innes moved to a different publisher, and began to write compulsively, continuing to publish throughout his service in the Royal Artillery during the Second World War.

Innes travelled widely to research his novels and always wrote from personal experience - his 1940s novels *The Blue Ice* and *The White South* were informed by time spent working on a whaling ship in the Antarctic, while *The Lonely Skier* came out of a post-war skiing course in the Dolomites. He was a keen and accomplished sailor, which passion inspired his 1956 bestseller *The Wreck of the Mary Deare*. The equally successful 1959 film adaptation of this novel enabled Innes to buy a large yacht, the *Mary Deare*, in which he sailed around the world for the next fifteen years, accompanied by his wife and fellow author Dorothy Lang.

Innes wrote over thirty novels, as well as several works of non-fiction and travel journalism. His thrilling stories of spies, counterfeiters, black markets and shipwreck earned him both literary acclaim and an international following, and in 1978 he was awarded a CBE. Hammond Innes died at his home in Suffolk on 10th June 1998.

Also by Hammond Innes

*Attack Alarm*  
*Atlantic Fury*  
*Campbell's Kingdom*  
*Dead and Alive*  
*Delta Connection*  
*Golden Soak*  
*High Stand*  
*Isvik*  
*Killer Mine*  
*Levkas Man*  
*Maddon's Rock*  
*Medusa*  
*North Star*  
*Solomons Seal*  
*Target Antarctica*  
*The Angry Mountain*  
*The Big Footprints*  
*The Black Tide*  
*The Blue Ice*  
*The Doomed Oasis*  
*The Land God Gave to Cain*  
*The Last Voyage*  
*The Lonely Skier*  
*The Strange Land*  
*The Strode Venturer*  
*The Trojan Horse*  
*The White South*  
*The Wreck of the Mary Deare*  
*Wreckers Must Breathe*

***For Daphne and Bill***

HAMMOND INNES

# **Air Bridge**

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London

## *Note on the Text*

IN THE SECTIONS of this book dealing with the Berlin Airlift I am indebted to the Royal Air Force, who flew me into blockaded Berlin and who gave me every facility for studying the lift, both on the ground and in the air. I should like to take this opportunity of expressing my appreciation of the Air Ministry's willingness to assist me and of the friendly co-operation I received from lift personnel at Wunstorf and Gatow at a time when they were very overworked.

It is inevitable, in a story of this nature, that the types of aircraft and the titles of air-force personnel should be those that operated at the time and at the bases concerned. I wish to make it clear, therefore, that the story is not founded on anything that actually occurred and, in particular, that the characters in the story who hold official positions are entirely fictional.

# I

IT WAS DARK and I was very tired. My head ached and my mind was confused. The road ran uphill between steep banks and there were trees with gaunt branches spread against the pale glimmer of the Milky Way. At last I reached the level and the high banks gave place to hedges. Through a gap I caught a glimpse of an orange moon lying on its back on the far side of a ploughed field. Nothing stirred. All life seemed frost-bound in the cold of night. I stood for a moment, exhausted, my knees trembling weakly and the sweat drying like cold steel against my skin. A little wind ran chill fingers through the bare spikes of the quick-thorn and I went on then, driven by the shivers that ran through my body. It was the reaction after the crash. I had to find somewhere to lie up—a barn, anything, so long as it was warm. And then I had to get out of the country. I was meeting the wind now and, even as I walked, it chilled the sweat on my body. My steps no longer rang firm. The sound of them became a shuffle that was lost every now and then in the lashing of the trees in a small copse.

The country round was quite flat now—a familiar flatness. The sharp edges of a large rectangular building stood for a moment black against the moon. It was there for an instant, gaunt and recognisable, and then it was lost behind the high earth mounds of a dispersal point. I stopped, my body suddenly rigid. The dispersal point and that distant glimpse of a hangar confirmed what I had already sensed almost automatically. The flatness that stretched before me was an aerodrome.

If I could get a plane! Damn it—I'd done it before. And it had been far more difficult then. I could remember the fir trees and the feel of the sand, almost silver in the moonlight, and the dark shadows of men against the hangar lights. The picture was so vivid in my mind that the same surge of excitement took hold of me now, tensing my nerves, giving me strength. I turned quickly and slid into the woods.

It was less cold in the woods or else the sudden urgency of hope gave me warmth as well as energy. It was darker, too. I might have lost my sense of direction, but always there was Jupiter, like a candle flickering amongst the branches, to show me the way the road had run. The trees clutched at me, whipping across my face, and in a moment I felt the warm trickle of blood from the cut on my forehead. The thick, salt warmth of it reached my tongue as I licked at the corner of my mouth. But it didn't hurt. In fact, I barely noticed it. I was intent upon one thing, and one thing only—a plane.

I came out of the wood on the very edge of the perimeter track, a fifty yard wide ribbon of tarmac, rutted and hillocked by the frosts and marked with the dead stalks of summer's weeds. Left and right it seemed to stretch to the horizon, and across the track was the airfield, a bleak, open hilltop, black under the moon, for the grass was gone and it was all plough. The curve of that hilltop was smooth and even like the curvature of the earth's surface, a section of a globe hung against the stars. The only relief to that impression of void was away to the left where the black edge of a hangar seemed to be shouldering the moon up the sky.

I stood there for a moment, conscious again of the wind cutting through my clothing as the sense of emptiness drained the excitement out of me. The story of the ploughed-up grassland, the dead weed stalks and the frost-broken tarmac was evident in the dead atmosphere of the

place. The airfield was deserted. It was one of the great bomber stations that had died with the end of the war. It was easy to see it as it had been, full of activity with the roar of planes coming in from a raid—big, graceful shapes, in silhouette against the flarepath, settling clumsily on to the runway. This sort of place had been my life for six and a half years. Now the planes only existed as ghosts in my mind. All about me was empty desolation, a slow disintegration moving inevitably back to the land from which it had sprung up.

With a feeling of hopelessness I started along the perimeter track towards the hangars. They would be just derelict shells, but at least they would give me shelter for the night. I felt suddenly sick and very tired—a little scared, too. The desolation of that airfield ate into me, bringing with it an awareness of my own loneliness.

The perimeter track seemed unending, growing wider and more desolate at every stumbling step as the wind thrust into my stomach till it chilled and stiffened my spine. Dizziness overtook me. It was the crash, of course, and the awful crack I'd got on the head. And then a flicker of hope came to steady me. The hangars now loomed black against the moon, big rectangular skeletons slowly crumbling away. But at the far end of the concrete apron there was one that looked whole and solid. The line of windows along its side was intact and reflected a glimmer of starlight.

I quickened my pace. It was just possible that some private owner, a local farmer or landowner, kept his plane up here on this deserted aerodrome. That was the hope that sent me hurrying across the apron to the deep shadows of the hangars. And as I slid from one hangar to the next I prayed to God that there would be petrol in the tanks.

I was a fool perhaps to build my hopes on such slender foundations as the fact that one hangar was intact. But when you're desperate you clutch at anything. Before I'd even reached the hangar I was already mentally in the

cockpit of some tiny aircraft winging my way through the night towards France. I knew exactly how the coast would look as it slid beneath me and how the Channel would be gently corrugated at right angles to my line of flight as the waves reflected the slanting rays of the moon. I could see myself checking in at the little hotel in Montmartre where I'd stayed several times before and then after a rest, going to Badouin's office. Badouin would fix it all for me. Everything would be all right as soon as I'd seen Badouin.

I reached the hangar and stood for a moment in the shadow of its bulk. I was panting. But I no longer felt sick or dizzy. I was trembling slightly, but that was just nerves. I had plenty of energy. Nothing could stop me now. I slid round the corner of the building and along the face of the huge sliding doors.

My luck was in, for the little wicket door in the centre yielded to the touch of my hand, revealing a dark void full of vague shadows. I stepped inside and closed the door. It was still and very cold with that queer musty smell of damp on concrete. Some glimmer of moonlight seemed to penetrate into the rear of the hangar, for the shadows resolved themselves into the nose and wings of a large four-engined plane. It was facing me head-on and it seemed enormous in the gloom of the hangar.

The incredible luck of it! I ducked under the port wing and moved along the fuselage, running my hand along the cold metal of it, searching for the door.

"So. His work is not to be remembered."

I stopped with a jerk. It was a girl's voice that had spoken.

A man answered her: "I'm sorry. War is a dirty business."

"But the war is finished."

"Yes, but you lost it, remember."

"And because Germany loses a war, my father must suffer? My father has suffered enough, I think."

"Your father is dead." The brutal words were said in a hard, matter-of-fact voice.

A silence followed. Peering over the tailplane I could see the outline of two figures against the steady glow of a pressure lamp. The man was short, thick-set and powerful-looking and as he moved towards the girl he unmasked the lamp so that its dim light showed me the litter of a workbench running the width of the hangar and the dark shadow of a belt-driven machine lathe.

I turned quickly. The lamplight was glowing on the metal of the plane and as I slid along the fuselage towards the door I saw that it was a Tudor and its inboard engine was missing.

If I had gained the door unnoticed I should not now be setting down what must surely be the most extraordinary story of the Berlin Airlift. But my foot caught against some scrap metal and with the sudden clang of sheet tin I froze.

“Who’s that?” It was the man’s voice and it had the drive of a man accustomed to absolute authority. “So you’ve got friends here, have you?” The beam of a torch swept the plane and then spotlighted me with its dazzling light. “Who are you? What do you want?”

I just stood there, blinking in the glare, incapable of movement, panic lifting my heart into my mouth.

The torch moved suddenly. There was a click by the wall and the sound of an engine starting up outside. Then lights, glowed and brightened.

The man was facing me across the tail of the plane now and he had a gun in his hand. He wasn’t tall, but he was immensely broad across the shoulders. He was thick through like a bull and he held his head slightly forward as though about to charge. I hardly noticed the girl.

“Well, who are you?” the man repeated and began to move in on me. He came slowly and inevitably like a man sure of his ability to handle a situation.

I broke and ran. I wasn’t going to be caught like this, trapped in a hangar, accused of attempting to steal an aircraft as well as a car. If once I could get to the shelter of

the woods I'd still have a chance. I ducked under the wings with the sound of his feet pounding on the concrete behind me. As I wrenched open the door of the hangar he shouted at me in German: "*Halt! Halt, Du verrückter!*" That damned language with its memory of endless, unbearable days of prison and the nagging fear of the escape gave me a last burst of energy.

I shot through the door and in a moment I was out on the perimeter track racing for the dark line of the woods. I crossed the concrete of the runway-end, my breath a wild hammering in my throat. My mind had become confused so that I seemed to be running again from the tunnel mouth to the dark anonymity of the fir woods. At any moment I expected to hear the deep bay of the dogs and my skin crawled between my shoulder blades just as it had done that night in Germany so long ago, cringing in anticipation of the shattering impact of a bullet. The concrete was broken and matted with weeds. Then I was on plough with the clay clinging to my shoes and the sound of my flight deadened in the sticky earth.

I stumbled and clawed my way to the woods. I heard my pursuer crash into the undergrowth close behind me. Branches whipped across my face. I barely noticed them. I found a path and then lost it again in a tangle of briar that tore at my clothes. I fought my way through it to find that he'd skirted the brambles and was level with me. I started to double back, but the undergrowth was too thick. I turned and faced him then.

I didn't stop to think. I went straight for him. God knows what I intended to do. I think I meant to kill him. He had shouted at me in German and my mind had slipped back to that earlier time when I had been nearly hunted down. His fist struck my arm with numbing force and I closed with him, my fingers searching for his windpipe. I felt the knobbly point of his Adam's apple against the ball of my thumb, heard him choke as I squeezed. Then his knee came up and

I screamed in agony. My hands lost their grip and as I doubled up I saw him draw his fist back. I knew what was coming and was powerless to stop it. His fist seemed huge in a shaft of moonlight and then it shattered into a thousand fragments as it broke against my jaw.

What followed is very confused in my mind. I have a vague memory of being half-led, half-carried over ground that seemed to rise and fall in waves. Then I was lying on a camp bed in an office full of bright lights. I was being interrogated, first in German, then in English. There was only one person there—the man who had hit me. I didn't see any sign of the girl. He sat in a chair, leaning over me so that his big, solid head seemed hung in space, always on the verge of falling on me and crushing me. I tried to move, but my hands and feet were bound. The light was above me and to the left. It was very bright and hurt my eyes. My jaw ached and my head throbbed and the interrogation went on and on through periods of black-out. I remember coming round once with a cry of pain as the searing burn of disinfectant entered the wound on my forehead. After that I slept.

When I woke it was daylight. I lay staring at the ceiling and wondering why it was plain, untreated concrete. The walls were bare brick. In the opposite corner the mortar had crumbled away and there was a long, jagged crack stuffed with newspaper. Slowly the events of the night before came back to me—the airfield, the hangar, the struggle in the woods.

I sat up with a jerk that sent a stab of pain shooting through my head. My jaw was painful and slightly swollen, the cut on my forehead was covered with lint secured by adhesive tape. There was a patch of dried blood on the grey Army blanket that had been pulled over me. I swung my legs out of bed and then sat there for quite a while staring at the unfamiliar room and fingering my jaw.

It was quite a small room and had obviously been used as an office. There was a cheap desk with a portable typewriter in its case, an old swivel chair, a steel filing cabinet and an untidy litter of books and papers. The books, I saw at a glance, were all technical manuals—engineering, mechanics, aviation. They were thick with dust. The floor was of bare boards and a rusty stove stood against one wall, the chimney running out through a roughly-patched hole in the ceiling. The windows were barred and looked out on to a pile of rubble and a vista of broken brick foundations, half-covered with dead sorrel stalks. There was an air of disintegration about the place. My gaze focused and held on the bars of the windows. They were solid iron bars set in cement. I turned quickly to the door with a feeling of being trapped. It was locked. I tried to find my shoes, but they had been removed. Panic seized hold of me then and I stood quite still in the middle of the room in my stockinged feet and fought it down.

I got control of myself at last, but I was overcome with a feeling of sickness and lay down on the bed. After a time the sickness passed and my brain became active again. I was in a hell of a spot! Oh, I was being quite honest with myself then. I knew I'd tried to kill a man. I could remember the feel of his windpipe against my thumb. The question was, did he know that I'd meant to kill him?

I looked slowly round the room. The iron bars, the locked door, the removal of my shoes—he knew all right.

My hand groped automatically for my cigarette-case. My jacket hung over the back of a chair and as I felt for the case, my fingers touched the inside breast pocket. It was empty. My wallet was gone.

I found the case and lit a cigarette. And then I leaned back. That wallet had contained something more important than money—it had contained my pilot's certificate and my false identity. Hell! He'd only to read the papers ... I dragged at my cigarette, trying to think through the throbbing ache

of my head. I had to get out of here. But how? How? My eyes roved desperately over the room. Then I glanced at my watch. It was eight-fifteen. Probably the papers had arrived already. In any case he would have phoned the police.

A door slammed somewhere beyond the brickwork of the walls. I sat up, listening for the sound of footsteps. All I could hear was the beating of my heart and the buzzing of a fly trapped in a web at the corner of the window. Nobody came. Time passed slowly. Occasionally I heard the sound of movement somewhere in the depths of the building. At eight thirty-five a car drew up at the back. There was the slam of a door and then the sound of voices. Five minutes later the car drove off.

I couldn't stand it any more. The feeling of impotence was getting on my nerves. In a sudden mood of anger I got up and beat on the panels of the door. Footsteps approached, a heavy, solid tread, boots ringing metallic on concrete. Then a voice asked, "Are you awake?"

"Of course I'm awake," I replied angrily. "Do you mind opening the door?"

There was a moment's pause and then the voice said, "That depends. I'm a bit cautious after last night. You damn nearly throttled me."

I didn't say anything and a moment later the key turned in the lock and he opened the door. It was the same man all right—short and broad and very solid. He had thick dark hair slightly grizzled at the temples and a wide jaw that seemed to compress his lips into a thin, determined line. He was dressed in oil-stiff overalls and the silk scarf round his neck didn't entirely hide the livid marks left by my fingers.

"I'm sorry—about last night," I murmured.

He didn't come in, but stood there in the gap of the doorway, his legs slightly straddled, staring at me. He had hard, slate-grey eyes. "Forget it." His voice was more friendly than his eyes. "Have you had a look at yourself in a mirror? Afraid I made a bit of a mess of your jaw."

There was an awkward silence. Somehow I couldn't bring myself to ask him when the police would arrive. "I'd like to get cleaned up," I said.

He nodded. "Down the passage." He stood aside to let me pass. But though he didn't seem angry, I noticed he took good care to keep well out of my reach.

Outside I found myself in a brick passageway filled with sunlight. An open doorway showed the woods crowding right up to the side of the building and through the lacework of the trees I caught a glimpse of the flat, bare expanse of the airfield. It all looked very quiet and peaceful. Through that door lay freedom and as though he read my thoughts, he said, "I shouldn't try wandering about outside, Fraser. The police are searching this area."

"The police?" I swung round, staring at him, trying to understand the sense behind his words.

"They've found the car. You'd crashed it about half-way down Baydon Hill." He glanced up at my forehead. "I did the best I could with the cut. You've probably scarred yourself for life, but I don't think any dirt has got into it."

I didn't understand his attitude. "When are the police coming for me?" I asked.

"We'll discuss that later," he said. "Better get cleaned up first. The lavatory is at the end there."

Feeling dull and rather dazed I went on down the passage. I could hear him following behind me. Then his footsteps stopped. "I've left my shaving kit out for you. If there's anything you want, shout." And then he added, "I'm just knocking up some breakfast. How many eggs would you like—two?"

"If you can spare them," I mumbled. I was too astonished at the calmness of his attitude to say anything else.

"Oh, I'm all right for eggs. Girl brings them from the farm each day with the milk." A door opened on the sound of sizzling fat and then closed. I turned to find myself alone in the passage. Freedom beckoned through the sunlit doorway

at the end. But it was hopeless. He wouldn't have left me alone like that if he hadn't known it was hopeless. I turned quickly and padded down the corridor in my stockinged feet.

The lavatory was small with an open window looking out on to a tangle of briar. It was a reminder of service quarters with its cracked basin, broken utility seat and initials and other pencil scratchings still visible on the crumbling plaster. Shaving kit had been left out for me and a towel. Hung on a nail on the window frame was a cracked mirror. I stared at myself in its pock-marked surface. I wasn't a particularly pleasant sight. Apart from the black stubble that I'd met every day for at least fifteen years, the side of my jaw was puffed and swollen, producing a queer variation of colour from red to dark purple and culminating in an ugly split of dried blood. My eyes were sunk back in dark sockets of exhaustion, the whites bloodshot and wild-looking, and to cap it all was a broad strip of adhesive tape running right across the right side of my forehead.

"You bloody fool," I said aloud. It was like talking to a stranger, except that the lips of the face in the glass moved in echo of my words. I almost laughed at the thought that I'd wanted to try and escape into the outside world looking like that.

I looked better after I'd shaved—but not much better. I'd had to leave the stubble round the swollen side of my jaw and it gave me a queer, lop-sided appearance. The cold water had freshened me up a bit, but the dark shadows round my eyes remained and there was still the adhesive tape across my forehead. "Breakfast's ready."

I turned to find him standing in the doorway. He nodded for me to go ahead and at the same time stepped slightly back. "You're taking no chances," I said. The bitterness in my voice was for myself, not for him.

"Last door on the right," he said as though I hadn't spoken.

Inside was a trestle table, the sort we'd had in forward bases. Two plates heaped with bacon and eggs and fried bread steamed slowly and there was a pot of tea. "By the way, my name's Saeton. Bill Saeton."

"I gather—you know my name." My voice trembled slightly. He was standing just inside the door, solid and immovable like a rock, his eyes fixed on my face. The personality of the man seemed to grow in the silence, dominating me and filling the room.

"Yes, I think I know all about you," he said slowly. "Sit down."

His voice was remote, impersonal. I didn't want to sit down. I wanted my shoes and my wallet. I wanted to get out of there. But I sat down all the same. There was something compelling about the way he stood there, staring at me. "Can I have my wallet, please?"

"Later," was all he said. He sat down opposite me, his back to the window and poured the tea. I drank thirstily and then lit a cigarette.

"I thought you said you could manage two eggs."

"I'm not hungry," I answered, drawing the smoke deep down into my lungs. It soothed me, easing the tension of my nerves. "When are they coming for me?" I asked. I had control of my voice now.

He frowned. "Who?" he asked, his mouth crammed full.

"The police," I said impatiently. "You've phoned them, haven't you?"

"Not yet." He pointed his fork at my plate. "For God's sake relax and get some breakfast inside you."

I stared at him. "You mean they don't know I'm here?" I didn't believe him. Nobody would calmly sit down to eat his breakfast with a man who'd tried to throttle him the night before unless he knew the authorities were on their way. Then I remembered the car and the way he'd advised me not to wander about outside. "The police were here about half an hour ago, weren't they?" I asked him.

For answer he reached over to a side table and tossed me the morning paper. I glanced down at it. The story was there in bold headlines that ran half-across the front page: PALESTINE FLIGHT FOILED—Police Prevent Another Plane Leaving Country Illegally—Mystery of “Mr. Callahan.” It was all there in the opening paragraph of leaded type—the whole wretched story.

I pushed the paper away and said, “Why didn’t you hand me over?” I spoke without looking up. I had a peculiar sense of being trapped.

“We’ll talk about that later,” he said again.

He spoke as though he were talking to a child and suddenly anger came to bolster my courage. What was he doing living alone up here on this deserted aerodrome tinkering about with a Tudor in the dead of night? Why hadn’t he rung the police? He was playing some sort of a cat-and-mouse game with me and I wanted to get it over. If it had to come, let it come now, right away. “I want you to call the police,” I said.

“Don’t be a fool! Get some breakfast inside you. You’ll feel better then.”

But I’d got to my feet. “I want to give myself up.” My voice trembled. It was part anger, part fear. There was something wrong with this place. I didn’t like it. I didn’t like the uncertainty of it. I wanted to get it over.

“Sit down!” He, too, had risen and his hand was on my shoulder, pressing me down. “Nervous reaction, that’s all.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my nerves.” I shook his hand off and then I was looking into his eyes and somehow I found myself back in my seat, staring at my plate.

“That’s better.”

“What are you keeping me here for?” I murmured. “What are you doing up here?”

“We’ll talk about it after breakfast.”

“I want to talk about it now.”

“After breakfast,” he repeated.

I started to insist, but he had picked up the paper and ignored me. A feeling of impotence swept over me. Almost automatically I picked up the knife and fork. And as soon as I'd started to eat I realised I was hungry—damnably hungry. I hadn't had anything since midday yesterday. A silence stretched over the table. I thought of the trial and the prison sentence that must inevitably follow. I might get a year, possibly more after resisting arrest, hitting a police officer and stealing a car. The memory of those eighteen months in Stalag-Luft I came flooding back into my mind. Surely to God I'd had enough of prison life! Anything rather than be shut up again. I looked across at Saeton. The sunlight was very bright and though I screwed up my eyes, I couldn't see his expression. His head was bent over the newspaper. The quiet impassive way he sat there, right opposite me, gave me a momentary sense of confidence in him and as I ate a little flicker of hope slowly grew inside me.

“When you've finished we'll go up to the hangar.” He lit a cigarette and turned to the inside of the paper. He didn't look up as he spoke.

I hurried through the rest of the meal, and as soon as I'd finished he got up. “Put your jacket on,” he said. “I'll get your shoes.”

The air struck quite warm for November as we went out into the sunlight but there was a dank autumnal smell of rotting vegetation. A berberis gleamed red against the gold of the trees and there were some rose bushes half-covered with the dead stalks of bindweed. It had been a little garden, but now the wild had moved in.

We crossed the garden and entered a path leading through the woods. It was cold and damp amongst the trees though the trunks of the silver birch saplings were dappled with sunlight. The wood thinned and we came out on the edge of the airfield. The sky was crystal clear, bright blue with patches of cumulus. The sun shone white on the exposed chalk of a dispersal point. Far away, beyond the

vast curve of the airfield, a line of hills showed the rounded brown of downland grass. The place was derelict with disuse—the concrete of the runways cracked and sprouting weeds, the buildings that dotted the woods half-demolished into rubble, the field itself all ploughed up for crops. Only the hangar, fifty yards away to our left, seemed solid and real.

“What’s the name of this airfield?” I asked Saeton.

“Membury.”

“What are you doing living up here on your own?”

He didn’t answer and we continued in silence. We turned the corner of the hangar and walked to the centre of the main doors. Saeton took out a bunch of keys and unlocked the wicket door that I’d pushed open the previous night. Inside, the musty smell of concrete and the damp chill was familiar. Both the inboard engines of the plane were missing. It had a sort of toothless grin. Saeton pressed his hand against the door till the lock clicked and then led the way to the back of the hangar where the work bench stretched along the wall. “Sit down,” he said, indicating a stool. He drew up another with his foot and sat down facing me. “Now then——” He took my wallet from his pocket and spread the contents on the oil-black wood of the bench. “Your name is Neil Leyden Fraser and you’re a pilot. Correct?”

I nodded.

He picked up my passport. “Born at Stirling in 1915, height five-eleven, eyes brown, hair brown. Picture quite flattering compared with what you look like at the moment.” He flicked through the pages. “Back and forth from the Continent quite a bit.” He looked up at me quickly. “Have you taken many planes out of the country?”

I hesitated. But there was no point in denying the thing. “Three,” I said.

“I see.” His eyes didn’t move from my face. “And why exactly did you engage in this somewhat risky business?”

“Look,” I said, “if you want to get me under cross-examination hand me over to the police. Why haven’t you done so already? Do you mind answering me that?”

“No. I’m quite prepared to tell you why—in a moment. But until I have the answer to the question I’ve just asked I can’t finally make up my mind whether to hand you over or not.” He leaned forward then and tapped my knee. “Better tell me the whole thing. I’m the one person, outside of the organisers of your little racket, who knows that you’re the pilot calling himself ‘Callahan.’ Am I right?”

There was nothing I could say. I just nodded.

“All right then. Either I can give you up or I can stay quiet. That places me in the position of judge. Now, why did you get mixed up in this business?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Why the hell does anyone get mixed up in something illegal? I didn’t know it was illegal. It wasn’t at first anyway. I was just engaged to pilot a director of a British firm of exporters. His business took him all over Western Europe and the Mediterranean. He was a Jew. Then they asked me to ferry a plane out. They said it was being exported to a country where the British weren’t very popular and suggested that for the trip I used a name that was more international. I agreed and on arrival in Paris I was given papers showing my name as ‘Callahan.’”

“It was a French plane?”

“Yes. I took it to Haifa.”

“But why did you get mixed up with these people in the first place?”

“Why the hell do you imagine?” I demanded angrily. “You know what it was like after the war. There were hundreds of pilots looking around for jobs. I finished as a Wing Co. I went and saw my old employers, a shipbuilding yard on the Clyde. They offered me a £2 rise—£6 10s. a week. I threw their offer back in their faces and walked out. I was just about on my uppers when this flying job was offered to me. I

jumped at it. So would you. So would any pilot who hasn't been in the air for nearly a year."

He nodded his head slowly. "I thought it'd be something like that. Are you married?"

"No."

"Engaged?"

"No."

"Any close relatives who might start making inquiries if Neil Fraser disappeared for a while?"

"I don't think so," I answered. "My mother's dead. My father remarried and I'm a bit out of touch with him. Why?"

"What about friends?"

"They just expect me when they see me. What exactly are you driving at?"

He turned to the bench and stared for a while at the contents of my wallet as though trying to make up his mind. At length he picked up one of the dog-eared and faded photographs I kept in the case. "This is what interested me," he said slowly. "In fact, it's the reason I didn't ring the police last night and denied that I'd seen anything of you when they came this morning. Picture of you with Waaf girl-friend. On the back it's got—*September, 1940: Self and June outside our old home after taking a post-blitz cure.*" He held it out to me and for the first time since I'd met him there was a twinkle in his eyes. "You look pretty tipsy, the pair of you."

"Yes," I said. "We were tight. The whole place collapsed with us in it. We were lucky to get out alive."

"So I guessed. It was the ruins that interested me. Your old home was a maintenance hangar, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Kenley Aerodrome. A low-flying daylight raid—it pretty well blew the place to bits. Why?"

"I figured that if you could describe a maintenance hangar as your home in 1940 you probably knew something about aero-engines and engineering?"

I didn't say anything and after staring at me for a moment he said impatiently, "Well, do you know anything about aero-engines or don't you?"

"Yes," I said.

"Practical—or just theory? Given specifications and tools can you build an engine?"

"What are you getting at?" I asked. "What do you——"

"Just answer my questions. Can you operate a lathe, do milling, grinding and boring, screw cutting and drilling?"

"Yes." And then I added, "I don't know very much about jets. But I'm pretty sound on all types of piston engines."

"I see. And you're a pilot?"

"Yes."

"When did you become a pilot?"

"In 1945, after I escaped from Germany."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I wanted a change. In 1944 I was posted to bombers as flight engineer. I started learning to fly. Then we were shot down. I escaped early in 1945 and remembered enough about flying to pinch a Jerry plane and crash-land at an airfield back home. Shortly after that I got my wings."

He nodded vaguely as though he hadn't been listening. He had turned slightly on his stool and was staring sombrely at the gleaming fuselage of the Tudor. His eyes caught a shaft of sunlight from the high windows and seemed to gleam with some inner fire. Then he turned back to me. "You're in a spot, aren't you." It wasn't said unpleasantly—more a statement of fact. "But I'll make you a proposition. See that engine over there?" I turned. It stood against the wall and was chocked up on wooden blocks. "That's finished—complete. It's hand-built, mostly right here in this hangar. Well, that's one of them. But there's got to be another before I can get this crate into the air." He nodded towards the Tudor. "It's due to fly on the Berlin Airlift on 25th January—fuel freighting. We've got the tanks installed. Everything's ready. All we need is a second engine. We've started on it

already. But I'm pressed for time. That first one took us six months. And now Carter, who's been working on it with me, is getting impatient. I'm a pilot, not an engineer. If he walks out on me, which is what he threatens to do, I'll have to pack up—unless I've got somebody else to carry on." He looked at me, eyes narrowed slightly. "Well, what about it? Can you build another engine like that, if necessary on your own?"

"I don't know," I said. "I haven't examined it and I don't know what equipment you've got." My eyes roved quickly along the bench, noting the lathes, the racks of taps, boxes of dies, the turning tools, the jigs and the welding equipment. "I should think I could," I added.

"Good." He got up as though it were settled and went over to the completed engine. He stood there staring at it, and then he turned away from it with a quick, impatient movement of his shoulders as though throwing off something that was constantly at the back of his mind. "You won't get any pay. Free board and lodging, beer, cigarettes, anything that is absolutely necessary. You'll work up here until the thing's complete. After that ... well, we'll see. If things work out the way they should, then you won't lack a permanent job if you want it."

"You seem to be taking my acceptance rather for granted," I said.

"Of course I am," he said, swinging round on me. "You've no alternative."

"Look—just what's your racket?" I demanded. "I'm in enough trouble without getting deeper——"

"There's no racket," he cut in angrily. "I run a company called Saeton Aircraft Ltd., and I rent these premises from the Air Ministry. It's all perfectly legal."

"Then why pick on a lonely spot like this? And last night—you were scared of something. And you shouted at me in German. Why in German? And who was the girl?"

He came towards me then, his head thrust forward, his thick neck hard with the tautness of the muscles. "Take my advice, Fraser—accept my offer and don't ask questions." His jaw was so tight that the words came through his teeth.

I had got to my feet now. "Are you sure you haven't pinched this plane?" I asked. Damn it! He wasn't going to get me in a worse mess.

For a moment I thought he was going to strike me. But instead he turned away with a little laugh. "No. No, I didn't pinch it." He rounded on me and added violently, "Nor this engine, nor these tools, all this equipment. There's three years of my life in this hangar—three years of sweating my guts out, improvising, struggling, trying to make fools see that if only ..." He stopped suddenly. Then in a voice into which he had forced mildness he said, "You've nothing to worry about, Fraser. It's all perfectly legal. And once this plane is in the air and—" He was interrupted by someone banging on the hangar door. He hesitated and then glanced at me. "That could be the police. Which is it to be—complete the second engine for me or do I hand you over? You'll be quite safe up here in a day or so," he added.

The banging on the door seemed to merge with the hammering of my heart. The possibility of arrest, which had gradually receded, now became real and instant. But I had already succumbed to the flicker of hope that had grown up inside me. "I'll stay," I said.

He nodded as though there had never been any doubt of it. "Better nip into the fuselage. You can hide in the toilet at the rear. They won't think of looking for you there."

I did as he suggested and climbed into the fuselage. In the dark belly of the plane I could just make out the shape of three large elliptical tanks up forward. I heard the click of the door being opened and the sound of voices. The door slammed to and for a moment I thought they'd left the hangar. But then their footsteps were echoing on the concrete as they came down towards the bench. There was

the drone of a man's voice, low and urgent. Then Saeton cut him short: "All right. Throw in your hand if you want to. But we'll talk about it back at the quarters, not here." His voice was hard and angry.

"For God's sake, Bill, be reasonable. I'm not throwing in my hand. But we can't go on. You know that as well as I do." They had stopped close beside the fuselage. The man was breathing heavily as though he were out of breath. He had a slight cockney accent and his voice was almost pleading. "Can't you understand—I'm broke. I haven't a bean."

"Well, nor have I," Saeton said harshly. "But I don't whine about it. In three months from now——"

"It's been two years already," the other put in mildly.

"Do you think I don't know how long it's been?" Saeton's voice softened. "Listen, Tubby, in three months we'll be on top of the world. Think of it, man—only three months. Surely to God you can pull in your belt and stick it as long as that after all we've been through together?"

The other grunted. "But you're not married, are you, chum?"

"So your wife's been getting at you. That's it, is it? I ought to have known it. Well, if you think your wife's going to stop me from getting that plane into the air ..." Saeton had been lashing himself into a fury, but he stopped suddenly. "Let's go back to the quarters. We can't talk here."

"No," the other said obstinately. "I'll say what I've got to say here."

"We're going back to quarters," Saeton said gently. "We'll talk about it over a cup of tea."

"No," the other repeated, still in the same obstinate tone. "We'll talk it over here and now if you don't mind. I'm not going to have you rowing Diana for something that isn't her ——"

"Diana!" Saeton's voice was suddenly harsh. "You haven't brought her back——"

"She's down at the quarters now," the other said stolidly.

“At the quarters! You bloody fool! This is no place for a woman. They can’t keep their mouths shut and——”

“Diana won’t talk. Besides, she’s nowhere else to go.”

“I thought she was sharing a flat with a friend in London.”

“Damn it, man,” the other shouted, “can’t you understand what I’m trying to tell you? We’re broke. I’m overdrawn by twenty quid and the bank has warned me I’ve got to settle my overdraft within three months.”

“What about your wife? Didn’t she have a job?”

“She got fed up and chucked it.”

“And you’re supposed to throw up all you’ve worked for just because she’s bored. That’s typical of a woman. If you can take it, why can’t she? Doesn’t she understand——”

“It’s no good kicking at Diana,” the other cut in. “She’s not to blame. She’s stuck it pretty well if you ask me. Now it’s come to this—either I find a job that’ll bring us in some money so that we can live together like normal human beings or else——”

“I see.”

“You don’t see at all,” the other snapped, his voice rising on a note of anger. “All you can think of is the engines. You’re so crazy about them you don’t behave like a human being at all. Well, I’m not made that way. I’m married and I want a home. I’m not busting up my marriage because of your engines.”

“I’m not asking you to go to bed with them, am I?” Saeton snarled. “Well, all right. If you’re so in love with your matrimonial pleasures that you can’t see the future that’s within your grasp——”

“I think you’d better withdraw that remark.” The man’s voice was low and obstinate.

“Oh God!” Saeton exploded. “All right, I withdraw it. But for Christ’s sake, Tubby, stop to think what you’re doing.”

It seemed to me it was about time I showed myself. I slammed the toilet door and stumped across the steel-sheeted floor of the plane. From the open door of the