

Crash Scavengers

By George Armin Shaftel



Gravity Ghouls they were called. For when a plane crashed they were Johnny-on-the-spot to the wreckage. Now a mysterious call notified them of a crack-up before it happened.

I WAS sitting in the office of our junk yard, listening to my boss sell a two-buck propeller for twenty dollars when the phone rang. I grabbed up the receiver.

A thin, dead voice whispered into my ear: "At 6:30 this afternoon, an airplane will crash somewhere between Grapevine and Bakersfield. You can buy it for pennies."

While I was still blinking, the speaker hung up.

"Hey, wait! Hold on! I—"

But the line was dead.

"Bad news?" asked the boss, as soon

as his customer left.

“Yeah. Business!”

“Business is good news.”

“Not when it sneaks up and bites you!”

You see, Chris and I are in the airplane wreckage business. In aviation circles, Amerigo Colombo and I—William Bates—are known as the Gravity Ghouls. Whenever a plane crashes we reach the spot right on the tail of the ambulance and we buy the wreckage, which we haul away to our place of business, popularly known as Crash Castle.

It’s important to us to reach a washed-up ship while the pilot is still feeling disgusted with himself and aviation. When a guy has just wrapped his fine Speedair onto a batch of telephone wires, what he thinks of aviation would make a swell obituary for a dictator, and he’ll sell the junk a cheap.

“But never,” I groaned aloud, “did we ever get to a crash *before it happened!*” And I told the boss that phone message.

His dark eyes bugged out and he pinched his lower lip between two fingers, and thought out loud, “That’s fonny. Ver-r-ry fonny.”

He wasn’t imitating any radio comic. He was born in Sicily some for-r-ty year ago, by his say; and though he grew up in Brooklyn and fought for the U.S.A. in World War I, he still treats our language like it was hot mush. Like I said, his name is Amerigo Colombo; so of course he’s called Chris Columbus by all the hangar hounds.

“Willy,” he ordered, “you go buy that crash-up. If you pay more than forty bucks for it, I wring your neck!” he warned, tossing me a dozen ten-spots.

“So you believe it’ll come off on schedule?”

“No. It’s crazy, it’s impossible. But when you look a gift horse in the mouth, don’t sneeze! If that ship cracks up, you

buy it from the pilot while he’s still onsoonshus!”

“Unconscious,” I snarled.

“Thank you, Willy. Onsoonshus,” he corrected himself.

WE KEEP a plane at the airport across the street from our place. The airport officials didn’t like it when we opened a junk yard just over the boulevard from them. They said it was like putting a graveyard in front of an army recruiting office. But, hell, when you go fishing, you locate on a creek bank, don’t you?

Our plane is a job we assembled out of a hundred odds and ends, and some of the ends were pretty odd. But it flies, though it has so much torque that I sometimes think its Wasp motor is trying to get around to sting its Moth tail.

As I hurried across the ramp toward the hangars, I met Snips Cagle, who’s a pilot for the Air Patrol of the sheriff’s office.

“Well, well, how’s Washout Willy this bright and dismal day?”

That’s what the boys call me—Washout Willy—behind my back, mostly, because I always take a poke at the guy who calls me that to my face. I’m six feet one and red-headed; and though I only weigh 158, when I poke, I poke.

“Look, Snipe. I’m on the tail of something that smells so crooked—” He made an uncomplimentary remark, but I paid no heed.

“That I’d like a cop along,” I continued. “Take a ride with me, will you?”

And so, by six o’clock that afternoon, we were soaring high over Grapevine, beyond the range that fringes the southern end of the great interior valley of California. Below us, we could see the highway twisting out of the mountains down onto the flat lands, just a-crawl with

Hollywood sport models and Oklahoma jalopies. To the east, the snowy peaks of the Sierra Nevada were just edging with gold. Minutes passed, pulling 6:30 toward us.

But there was no airplane crashing to earth below us. There was no other plane visible in the air at all.

But it wasn't quite yet time. I watched the sky. Somehow, I had a hunch that the event was timed to happen on schedule.

Suddenly Cagle poked me in the side and pointed upward.

Overhead, then, I saw a fleet blunt bullet of a ship. We were going fast; but that other plane was passing us like a comet passing a Goodyear blimp. I yelled for Snipe to pour on some coal, for the speed ship was dwindling in size ahead of us.

"Good Lord, look at that!" I bawled.

For all of a sudden that plane slipped off on one wing, wavered and yawed and plummeted into a spin, the heavy motor pulling it into a fast, narrow spiral.

"Look out! Grab your stick! For Pete's sake, level out," I was shouting then, pounding on the dash with my fist.

But of course the pilot in that other ship couldn't hear me. Down, down, that plane spun . . . and struck smack into the side of a low butte. Dust and debris ballooned up in a big splash. I groaned.

Snipe Cagle headed his ship for the crash like a prowl car chasing to a holdup. He looked at me, his lean face suspicious.

"You sure called the turn on this crack-up. For two cents, I'd say it was murder!"

"Sure, and I did it with my little hatchet," I snapped.

"I ain't accusin' you. *Yet!*"

Into his radio, he barked a report to the sheriff's office.

We landed on pasture land, near the wreck. The pilot was dead. A man I knew, too—from the rotogravures.

"Jimmy DeCoursey," Cagle muttered. "So his luck ran out at last."

"His ship?" I said.

"No. Belongs to Jackie Ainslee. DeCoursey's been workin' as test pilot for her."

"Oh."

NOT being deaf, dumb or blind, I'd heard of Jackie Ainslee. She had a press agent and was hailed as the Glamour Gal Fireball of Aviation. A speed pilot with nerve and looks. The hangar tongue-waggers claimed she could put a fly swatter out of each window of a battle tank and fly it over Pike's Peak; that she could put on a bathing suit and make the latest oomph girl look like something swept under a carpet. She was having Ole Ericssen build her a ship for the Cross-Continent Air Derby.

"Well," I said, "she'll never race this ship."

We looked over the wreckage like customs agents going through luggage. And we found the gas tank empty. It was as simple as that!

"So Jimmy DeCoursey, who's had wings break off, motors fall out, gas tanks explode, and walked a way from them all—dies because he ran out of gas. Epitaph," I muttered.

"But somebody *knew* he'd run out of gas," Snipe Cagle snarled at me. "You claim somebody tipped you off on the phone that this crash was going to happen?"

"Yeah. Don't you believe it?"

"No, I don't be—"

I hit him this time. Hard. When he lifted himself off the ground, he apologized.

An ambulance and newspaper nosies arrived from Bakersfield, brought by Cagle's radio report. A Lockheed cabin job circled overhead, then sat down. From

it came Jackie Ainslee herself, and Ole Ericssen, the plane builder, and another man I guessed was Jackie's press agent and manager.

She was a tall girl, this Jackie Ainslee, who looked twenty-five but was probably older. She had shining dark hair and big gray eyes and a skin like gardenia petals flushed with rose, and a figure that—Well, when she walks through a crowd, I bet people stop talking and pulses race and bald-headed guys look at their dumpy wives and something tragic comes to their faces.

"How's Jimmy?" she demanded. "Any hope for—"

I shook my head. "No, miss. There's nothing to be done."

"I want to see him!"

I told you she had guts. She walked over to the wreckage. The two men with her kept right at her elbows. But she didn't faint.

Me, I looked at Ole Ericssen, the stocky lad who'd designed the "projectile ship." There was real heartache on his rugged young face. A racing ship takes a lot of dough and headaches to get into shape. Now *his* big daydream lay here in a pile of junk.

"Willy," he said to me, "we sunk sixty grand into the kite. You can have it, free for nothing."

"Huh-uh," I refused. "No charity. Pay you twenty bucks."

"You nuts?" Lew Brazzle snapped at me. He's Jackie's press agent and manager. "Even if it's junk, there's two-three grand of salvageable stuff in—"

"Two hundred," I said. "Take it or leave it."

"Take it, you grave robber!"

My first impulse was to lose a fist down Brazzle's throat. I checked it. After all, he's got his troubles.

WHEN I hauled the plane wreckage into Crash Castle, I found my boss painting a sign. Chris was dressed in his usual vest, white pants, leather *huaraches*, and nothing else.

This sign he was painting said:

NO STEALING ALLOWED

This place is lousy with burglar alarms anyway I stole the stuff first

Sure

my prices are too high

but your flying is too low or you wouldn't be here

You expect to be gypped and should I fool you?

ANYBODY CAUGHT SWIPING
BURGLAR ALARMS WILL BE
PRUSECOTTED

"Prosecuted," I corrected. "Here's your junk, Chris."

"What you pay for it?"

"Two hundred."

Volcanoes merely erupt. Chris Columbus makes a volcano explosion look like slow motion in cream puffs. Do I want him to die a pauper? My head, is it stuffed with antipasto? The gold fillings from his teeth am I stealing? I'm fired. Feenished!

"Chris," I butted in, "I know something about Jimmy DeCourcey you don't know."

"Jimmy DeCourcey was test pilot for Associated Aircraft."

"And a damn good one, too."

"Yeah, but he some time ago crack up a special bomber they were making for France. By time the company get that ship on assembly line, they discover that over in Europe the ship is already dropping bombs. So they tie can to DeCourcey."

"Why? They figured he cracked up that ship so's to get its specifications into the hands of some European crook?"

Chris shrugged. "They never prove it. Six months ago Jackie Ainslee hire him to test-fly her new racing job."

"And now he's cracked that up."

"Say, that boy have har-r-rd luck."

"Plenty hard. This time he didn't walk away."

Chris *tch-tched*. But sympathy didn't purge him of the profit motive.

He said: "Willy, you're unfired. We fix up this engine and sell it for six-seven hundred bucks easy. Those gas tanks—hundred apiece. Instruments, *planty* money. You sort out the pieces while I go hang up my sign."

He waddled off. Me, I dove into the plane wreckage—and *bang!* came up with trouble. I held a piece of pipe in my hand, and a grisly chill spiderlegged up my backbone. I grabbed the phone.

"Cagle," I bawled, when I finally got the Air Patrol cop on the wire, "a job for you! Rush over to Jackie Ainslee's hangar and find out exactly who has been alone with her racing plane just before this last flight."

"And why," Cagle whipped back, "should I turn roving reporter for Washout Willy?"

"Because this accident was *murder!* Jimmy DeCoursey crashed because somebody arranged for him to crash!"

As I hung up, I turned and saw Chris gawking at me.

"Jimmy DeCoursey was keeled, Willy?"

"Sure as cyanide! Look. See here? It's a pipe that's been soldered to the exhaust manifold, running back under the fire wall into the cockpit. See? Jimmy DeCoursey breathed exhaust gas and keeled over senseless. This ship is fitted with a robot pilot, being intended for cross-continent hops. So the ship just droned ahead until the gas gave out, and crashed!

"Probably the killer figured that this

pipe he put in would be jarred off its connection and twisted all to hell in the crash, so nobody would ever know what had happened. I've phoned Lieut. Cagle to find out who's had a chance to pull this murderin' skullduggery!"

I was looking at Chris, starry-eyed, waiting to be patted on the back for being such a bright boy. But Chris clouded up like a day set for a Sunday school picnic—and erupted.

"You beeg fool!" he bellowed, raising his hands up to high heaven. "You keel me with your dumbness."

"What's eating you?" I demanded.

"Don't you see? Two—t'ree t'ousand dollars profit we have in our hands practically. Now the police not allow us to sell this wreck. We got hold it for material evidence. We can't sell it! Why you think I am in business? It is just a vaccination with me, you think?"

"Avocation."

"Thank you—and get to hell out of here 'fore I break my heart!"

I GET. To the Jackie Ainslee hangar at the far end of Glendale Field. Snipe Cagle was already there, questioning Jackie Ainslee and two men, in the empty hangar.

"Why, yes," stocky young Ole Ericssen was saying, "Just before its last flight, I worked all night on the plane, putting it in shape. Slept right in here until noon today, when Jackie and Mr. Brazzle came."

"You, Mr. Brazzle?" the Air Patrol cop prompted.

"This afternoon," Brazzle answered, "I came down here to the hangar for a minute, and talked to Jackie. Then I went to Wrigley Field, and watched the Angels play Hollywood. I sat between Joe Eames of the *Express*, and Neil Wade of the *Examiner*. Ask them. They drove me back

here. When I arrived, DeCoursey had already taken off on his flight.”

“So you weren’t alone in here with the plane at all,” I said.

“How about you, Miss Ainslee?” Cagle asked.

She looked at us, and my pulse skipped a beat. You couldn’t be in the same room without getting a rise in temperature.

“I went to the hospital with my sister Norine—her boy Ned, had a mastoid operation. After it was over, I came straight to the field, here, in a taxi.”

Cagle and I looked at each other—and at Ole Ericssen.

Cagle said, “Then, Ericssen, you’re the only person who was alone with your plane just before it went up and crashed.”

“Well, y-yes, but—”

“You’re under arrest. Come along.”

“But what for?” Jackie Ainslee cried out.

And I said: “For the murder of Jimmy DeCoursey.”

“You’re crazy!” Ericssen shouted. “Jimmy was my friend!

“Save it for the jury,” Cagle snapped, and reached for him.

But Ericssen hit him first. The stocky plane builder was no cream puff. He moved so fast he caught us flat-footed. Once upon a time he must’ve done some carnival ‘rassing—for he dived at Cagle, butted him head first in the plexus and knocked him crashing back against me, and we both tumbled back over a sawhorse. And Ericssen did a dive right out an open window.

We bounced to our feet, Cagle pulling a police special from holster. We lunged for the window, saw Ericssen rounding the front corner of the building. We followed.

But by the time we got there, he was pulling away from the curb in a Ford roadster, darting into traffic like an eel into

a school of porpoises. We hadn’t a hope to catch him.

“I’ll have to broadcast a man-wanted for ‘im,” Cagle panted. “Meantime,” he warned me, “you keep the wreckage of DeCoursey’s plane intact for the police!”

So-o. I started back to Crash Castle, my brain buzzing.

Ole Ericssen had murdered Jimmy DeCoursey. But who—*who* had tipped me off over the phone that DeCoursey’s plane was going to crash at 6 :30 on the dot? And *why?* . . .

Reaching Crash Castle, I turned into the driveway and drove into the dark shed. I stepped out of my roadster. Ahead of me was our crash truck, with the wreckage from the plane still piled on it.

“Hey, Chris!” I yelled.

Something like a towsack full of oats was slumped against the front wheel of the truck. My heart suddenly choking me, I bent over it. Yeah, it’s Chris. Slumped senseless. I ran into the office, grabbed a bottle of whisky, and started back—and crashed headlong over something in the dark. Probably a foot stuck out.

I tried to whirl as I fell, to see, but something hit me at the back of the head that felt like London Bridge falling down on me, and I took a blackout. . . .

When I came to, it was Chris who was pouring whisky down my throat.

“What happened?” I gasped.

“Somebody,” he said, “hit me with a blackjack. I go by-by. When I wake up, I find you lying like dead here. But,” he sighed, “you ain’t really much more dead than usual, so I waste good whisky on you.”

He wasted some on himself, while I sat up and shook my head, which felt as if somebody had concentrated an earthquake into toothache size and inserted it behind my ear.

“B-but who? Why?” I spluttered.

“What—”

I was staring at the truck load of wrecked airplane. And all of a sudden I see the answer: The big engine of that plane was gone. Vanished. And with it was gone the evidence that somebody deliberately rigged a setup to murder Jimmy DeCoursey by piping exhaust gas into his plane cockpit!

“Chris! The engine’s gone. Stolen!” I choked.

He looked. Then he looked at me, and he was too staggered even to fire me. Losing material evidence in a murder case can be considered a damn serious crime.

CHRIS waddled back to our combination kitchen-living room and took out his barber-pole striped silk shirt and put it on, that’s how he dresses up. Meanwhile, I told him everything, alibis and all.

“DeCoursey’s plane was in a locked and guarded hangar. Ole Ericssen is the only guy who might’ve welded on that pipe to carry engine exhaust gas into the covered cockpit. It looks like Mrs. Ericssen’s tow-headed boy is due to take off from the hot seat.”

“But why he crash ship he just build?”

“To kill DeCoursey. Jealousy, maybe? A guy can’t work around Jackie Ainslee and stay normal. And the chitchat birdies’ve all been linking Jackie and Jimmy. You know, handsome test pilot and glamour gal of the stratosphere.”

“Sap stuff,” Chris sighed. “Willy, you know where Jackie’s press agent live?”

“Holly Manor. But Brazzle’s not at home—”

“That’s why we go visit him. What, kind of guy is Brazzle?”

So, while we drove to Holly Manor I told Chris that Lew Brazzle was a big, flabby, gray-haired bird who looks hard and tough but has the brains to act smooth

and save his ammunition for showdowns.

At the Holly Manor, we walked in the front door behind a tenant and up to Brazzle’s apartment. It’s swank, this hive; but old, with old-fashioned locks, so a passkey took us inside.

Chris started frisking the joint.

“What you looking for?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s a help!” I grumbled.

First thing I discovered, looking around, was that a dame lived here. You know, dozens of pairs of shoes and slippers. Wardrobe full of dresses and slips and negligees.

“Look for jewelry,” Chris said, “wit’ initials.”

“Hey! I’ll kill for you, but I won’t steal for you.”

But when I found a swell man’s wrist watch, with Brazzle’s initials on the back, I was tempted. I held it up.

“Put it,” said Chris, “behind cushion on sofa.”

No sooner do I do that when we hear a key in the door. Chris and I just had time to make a dive for the bedroom and squeeze out onto a little balcony porch and shut the French windows behind us, when Lew Brazzle entered.

He wasn’t alone. A dame was with him.

Me, I looked around for escape. No chance. From this balcony it’s a sheer drop three stories to a concrete alley.

Through the Venetian blinds we saw Brazzle take off his coat and mix himself a Scotch and soda. The dame came into the bedroom and my eyes be popped. It was Jackie Ainslee. She gathered up some feminine stuff and disappeared. When she returned she was clad in a negligee. Presently she slid into bed and went to sleep while, in the other room, Brazzle gloomed into his highball.

Knuckles rapped softly on the

apartment door.

Lew Brazzle slipped a gun into his coat pocket, put on the coat. He opened the door a mite. A toe jammed quickly into the opening and a gun muzzle poked through ominously, forcing Brazzle to back away. Then the gun entered, followed by stocky, tow-headed Ole Ericssen.

“Ole, you damn fool, you should be in Mexico by now.”

“I’m not running away. I didn’t kill DeCourcey.” Judging from Ericssen’s voice, he was so wound up he was due to fly into a million pieces any second. “Somebody framed me. Lew, I need help. You got pull—maybe you can arrange a fix. You ain’t going to let me hang!”

“Sure, sure. Take it easy, Ole.”

Jackie, in the next room, was awakened. She jumped up, slipping into a negligee, and walked into the front room.

Ericssen saw her. His jaw dropped and his eyes bugged out.

She walked over to Brazzle and slipped her arm through his.

“Jackie,” Ericssen gasped. “I didn’t know—”

“We’ve kept it secret. Lew and I are married.”

“B-but, everybody thought you and Jimmy DeCourcey—”

“Press-agent stuff. You know what I’m working for, Ole. Enough newspaper buildup to get me a big salary in pictures. As a glamour girl I’d have a far better chance than as a woman married almost eight years. You know that. Now be sensible. Put that gun away. Let’s talk things over and decide—”

Ericssen blurted, like he was half stunned: “You married, when everybody thought you and Jimmy—” All of a sudden he was shouting. “That’s it! Damn you, Lew, you got jealous. Jimmy was getting too close to Jackie! So you killed

him and framed *me* for the job! I’ll blow your damn guts out!”

“Killing me will hang you for sure.”

“I’ll be just as dead if I hang for something I didn’t do!”

A shot crashed out in there. Jackie choked back a scream.

And us out on the balcony—Chris shoved me into Jackie’s bedroom, into the hallway, into the kitchen, toward the back door. His idea was for us to be long-gone practically instantaneously.

As we went, I heard: “Sorry, Jackie. I had to do it.”

And it was Brazzle talking, *not* Ole Ericssen! Evidently Brazzle had shot through his pocket.

“Get a doctor, Lew! Maybe—”

“No. He’s dead. Now take it easy. He’s a fugitive, wanted for murder, and he busted in on us with a gun. The police won’t hold me for it. I’m going to call ‘em up and tell them about it.”

I didn’t hear more because Chris hauled me out the back door. We reached the alley and made tracks for my roadster.

“So,” I said to Chris, “Lew Brazzle paired Jackie and Jimmy in his publicity—and first thing he knew, he believed his own ballyhoo, got jealous, murdered Jimmy, and framed Ericssen! Right?”

“Wrong. Drive home, Willy, and call up your reporter frands.”

HALF an hour later, my reporter friends arrived at Crash Castle. Chris started serving his admittedly lousy wine.

“Frands, I tell you about this Jimmy DeCourcey murder. The cops say his plane ran out of gas and crashed. Willy, here, say that somebody welded a pipe to the engine exhaust and piped exhaust into the covered cockpit, and that made DeCourcey unscoonshus and the ship fly till gas run out and it crash. But me,” Chris said, laying his corncob finger alongside

his pudgy nose, "I say deefrunt."

"How deefrunt?" prompted one of the newshounds.

"Jimmy DeCoursey, on that last flight in the racing plane—*he have a passenger along!*"

"The hell he did!" I gasped.

"Who was it?"

"Why didn't the exhaust gas kill the passenger too?"

"Because," said Chris, "it didn't kill DeCoursey."

"What did?"

"That other passenger. How? With a smack on the head with the fire extinguisher. Then other passenger bail out with parachute. Plane fly on till run out of gas, and crash up."

"This other passenger—who was he?"

"My frands," said Chris, spreading his hands, "I'm just making guess. But in DeCoursey's junked-up plane I find a piece of jewelry. It have initials on back. I give it to the police. They trace it. When they find the owner, you have name of the killer."

The reporters left with their story. I opened up on Chris with a hundred questions, but all he'd say was: "Willy, you got a gun? There's a good chance somebody try and kill us tomorrow."

The papers, next morning, were full of the case. I was reading 'em when the phone pealed. I scooped it up.

And my skin crawled when a thin, dead voice I'd heard once before said: "Let me talk to Chris." I tossed Chris the phone.

Standing close, I heard: "*Chris, for some of the wreckage of Jackie Ainslee's plane, I'll pay you three grand.*"

Chris was pale around the gills; but he was never deaf when money talked, and seldom dumb. He barked: "Five grand."

"*Okay. Five grand, if you play square. Five bullets if you don't.*" And *bang!* the receiver was hung up.

I let out a yawp like a panther with his tail in a crack.

"Now ain't that just ducky, you s dump fat swab! For five grand you'll sell that junk—*only you ain't got it!* That guy'll come in here and fill you so full of holes you'll look like a wind tunnel! You're too damn smart to live!"

Disgusted, I stumped out of the office and went to work in the rear of the shed, in our Flying Coffin Department, where we store freak ships that once flew but shouldn't have. . . .

Some time later, hearing voices out front, I got curious and sauntered to our entrance driveway.

By the office door, facing Chris, was Lew Brazzle. In person:

"I want," he was saying, "to buy the motor and some odds and ends of that ship we sold you for junk."

Chris rubbed his hands and nodded and said: "Sure, sure! You know the price, maybe? Just five thousand."

Brazzle's fleshy face turned hot and red. "Okay. Load the stuff onto my station wagon."

"Sure!" Chris said, then bawled: "Willy!"

"Right here," I snapped, glaring at him.

"Willy, look behind the cabin of that big freight plane in the Never-Went-Up Department. You'll find motor and instruments of Jimmy DeCoursey's ship is loaded on dolly."

"But that stuff was stolen!" I gasped.

"Sure. But I stole it," Chris admitted, "so the cops wouldn't lock it up."

"You m-mean, you *pretended* you'd been knocked out by the thief, and then sapped *me*—"

“Was a plesure,” he assured me. “Now go get it, Willy.”

I WENT. I wanted to cram a Douglas bi-motor down his throat, but what’s a friendship without some regrets? I wheeled the dolly-load of engine back, and used the overhead block and tackle to heft the stuff onto the back of Brazzle’s station wagon.

He took out a checkbook and started inking a check.

“One thing more,” he said, studying the check, “you found a piece of jewelry in the plane. I want that, too.”

“No,” said Chris. “Didn’t find any. I just tell my newspaper frands I did, to make you come running to buy this junk.”

Brazzle started, mouth open and eyes popping, turning pale and then red. “Why, you dirty—” He choked back some hot language. “Okay. Here’s your lousy money.”

Chris frowned, eyeing the check like it was contagious or something. “No can take check. I can’t read without my glasses and I no got glasses. Cash money. I count ‘em by the pictures.”

“Okay,” Brazzle said slowly, and reached into his pocket and hauled out a .38 automatic.

But I wasn’t born with a silver spoon in front of each eye.

In half the time it would take a camera shutter to drop, I reached him, my fist slammed him under the ear, and he hit the concrete so hard he bounced. But he was tough. He bounced right up and smashed me in the plexus. Wow! My muscles were suddenly just so much sawdust and I doubled up.

Chris, he no like that. He landed on Brazzle like he was eleven men and all berserk. They went down. Brazzle rammed a knee into Chris’s middle. But nine thousand miles of spaghetti shock-

absorbed that widowmaking jar, and Chris got hold of Brazzle’s hair and banged his skull against the concrete. A second time, and a third, and Brazzle was out.

Chris started untangling himself then, and I dazedly started to sit up, when suddenly I realized that somebody had walked into our driveway. It was a girl, and she was bending to pick up that .38 automatic Brazzle had dropped, and she was pointing it at us.

Yeah, it was Jackie Ainslee, and her gray eyes had the look in ‘em that must come there when she’s wrapping her racing ship around a pylon.

“I want,” she said, “that piece of jewelry you found in the wreckage of my plane.”

Chris looked at her. “Miss Ainslee, I give you the motor and instruments of your ship for five grand. Cash. ‘S a bargain!”

“I’ll give you a bullet, you greasy rat!”

“Five thousand cash money,” he said. “That gun, she’s empty. So t’row it down. If you pull trigger, I slap you. Also, I no sell you this junk.”

He started toward her. For Chris will die for a principle—plus interest. He stalked right up to her. Her eyes were wild. Me, I gathered every ounce of strength I had, tensing for a jump. Another instant, and she’d put a slug into that ivory dome of his!

Abruptly she dropped the gun. She opened her pocket book and snatched out a sheaf of yellow-backed currency and thrust it into Chris’s hands.

“There’s your money, damn you!”

“Thank you *so* moch. There’s the junk, on Mr. Brazzle’s wagon-and in two shakes, Mr. Brazzle be there, too. Help me, Willy.”

We heaved Brazzle into the station wagon.

“But my—that jewelry you found in

the plane cockpit, with initials on it," Jackie demanded, her mouth twitching, she was so worked up. "I want that. Not this junk!"

"Junk, Miss? That one swell motor! A little fixing—"

"I want that bracelet, you fat fool!"

"Oh-h-h. That bracelet." Chris frowned, then brightened up. "Tell you what. Me and Willy here, we visit your apartment last night. We put that bracelet and Mr. Brazzle's wrist watch behind a cushion on the sofa. Is there now, I betcha! You go home and see and call me up, yes?"

If looks could cut out your heart, Chris's pump then and there would've plopped on the concrete.

JACKIE AINSLEE can face a fact when its spits in her eye, though. She jumped into the station wagon, started the motor, and roared out of there. . . .

Chris flaunted that five grand in my face.

"Look, Willy! We sell that junk after all!"

"Yeah, sure, swell. But now we do five years in San Quentin for hiding material evidence wanted by the D.A.!"

"Why, Willy, I wouldn't do nothin' like that," Chris protested. And he drew me by the arm to our front gate.

"Look." I look. I see that Jackie Ainslee has been stopped. If there ain't a dozen cops swarming onto that station wagon I'm a Goodyear blimp. I gasp. And Chris explains.

"I promised Snipe Cagle that I'd deliver the wrecked plane to him this afternoon—the plane with Jimmy DeCourcey's murderer, all complete in one package. And there it is."

"Whassat?" I gasped. "Jimmy DeCourcey's murderer?"

"Yep. Call the newspaper boys while I draw some wine."

So a half-hour later Chris is explaining, with gestures.

"Y'see, my frands, only three people could get to Jimmy DeCourcey's plane to fix a pipe to funnel exhaust gas into the cockpit. They were Ole Ericssen, Lew Brazzle, and Jackie Ainslee. But Brazzle and Jackie, they have alibis."

"So Ericssen did it?"

"No!" Chris laid a finger alongside his nose. "Now, consider Jackie Ainslee's alibi. She say she spend afternoon at hospital with her sister, whose boy having mastoid operation. But that's a lie. Sister back up that lie, though, it you ask her, probably. How I know it's a lie?"

"Because that afternoon there was trem-tremors, they call' em. Little earthquake. Light circuits and pipes broke in some buildings. Operations cancelled. I know, I call up and find out. Now! Why don't Jackie know there was earthquake? Me, I say she didn't know because she wasn't on ground when earthquake come. She was up in air. Up in airplane, no? Sure, it just a guess—but a good guess, no? Too bad for her she too busy today to read papers."

"No, it's a good guess," I said. "Go on."

"Me, I figure like this: Jimmy DeCourcey was knocked onsoonshus in his plane. Exhaust gas no do it. But maybe somebody hit him with fire extinguisher, and jump from plane with parachute? Possible! But how prove somebody was passenger in plane with DeCourcey?"

"So-o-o-o, me and Willy—we go to Brazzle's apartment. We hide jewelry. I say in newspapers that piece of jewelry found in wreckage of plane prove there was a passenger with DeCourcey! So what happens? So Jackie and Brazzle come and

try buy that piece of jewelry for five grand. Don't that prove something?"

"Sure does."

"But why," asked the Express man, "should Jackie want to kill Jimmy DeCoursey?"

"Maybe in trial the police find out for sure. But I make some guesses. Year ago, Jackie Ainslee crack up racing plane in Dayton race. She have lots of reputation but no cash money. Broke like anyting. But six months ago, she having Ole Ericssen build her grand racing plane. The 'projectile ship.' You hear about?"

"Yeah. Go on!"

"Now where she get money? Planty dough needed! I tell you. Jackie and her husband work on Jimmy DeCoursey. He then test pilot for Associated Aircraft. He testing bomber being built for France. He crack up in mountains. I ask you—couldn't he crack up ship 'way back in mountains where take two days find it? In place where men waiting with cameras and tape measures to take pictures and measure pieces?"

"They work one day, maybe two days, finding all about secret bomber. Then they skedaddle. And rescue party, they find DeCoursey campin' all alone by wrecked ship. Nobody blame him. Tough luck, that's all. But, pretty soon, over in Europe, other countries making that bomber!"

"And pretty soon, over in Glendale, Jackie Ainslee is building a new ship for herself! Two and two make money in the bank, no?"

"But," I objected, "you still don't say why Jackie should've wanted to kill Jimmy DeCoursey."

"Jackie paid DeCoursey a share of the money she got. But he started blackmailing her, after he lose his job. Finally Jackie and her husband deciding that DeCoursey has to be killed."

"But if they killed DeCoursey, why in

blazes," I demanded, "did they call us up and tell us that DeCoursey was going to crash?"

"HERE'S how I figure that," Chris said, "and if you listen sympat'etic, you agree maybe. Brazzle, he love Jackie. I mean honest'. He try keep her out of as much dirt as possible. So he arrange kill DeCoursey. I figure she not know until, say, just before DeCoursey's flight. She ask Brazzle, she say: 'So what you goin' do 'bout DeCoursey, huh? And he explain, then, how he fix pipe from exhaust to cockpit."

"Now," and Chris paused dramatically, finger alongside his nose, "Jackie, she blow up. Remember, she is good pilot, but Brazzle just a hangar louse. She scrim: 'Dumb fool you! Now you have got us in Dutch! In first place, when DeCoursey flying, he smell exhaust gas and he open cockpit and no get gassed onsoonshus. He land, he look at engine, he find pipe and then he raise hell wit' us!"

"And in second place, if your trick *does* work and makes 'im crash up, then the inspectors get wise! Them inspectors is good. They look at wreck and can tell if pilot drunk two beers at Sweeney's wedding last Toosday! Sure's hell they find that pipe leading gas into cockpit, and they scream murder ! You fix things, you dumb fool! You fix get us fried in hot squat!' . . . And Brazzle, he look seeck and he say: 'So what we do?' So she scrim: 'I got handle things now! You do what I say, dope!"

"So she tell him it's goin' to be plain it was murder—so they need a fall guy. Ole Ericssen is natural for fall guy. So Brazzle call us up and give tip plane goin' crash. And to make sure plane do crash, she flies along with DeCoursey to bump him over head with fire extinguisher."

He finished. We kind of stood there,

absorbing it.

“But joke is,” Chris summed up, “if they no try put blame for murder on other guy, no murder be done and they no get ruined. ‘Cause that pipe Brazzle weld on exhaust—he do bad job. He amachoor. Pipe melt, and close up, so no gas can come t’rough. Trick no work.”

He shrugged. “If they no try blame other man for murder, they never be caught. Is case what you call, retroobition?”

“Retribution!” I snapped.

“Thank you, Willy,” Chris corrected himself. “Retroobition.”

