

Graft in the Air

By Francis and Katharine Drake

ILLUSTRATED BY CLAYTON D. KNIGHT

Johnny Hoyt and Ann Carter learn the meaning of inside politics. A drama of commercial aviation with its tensest moments on the ground

DETRACTORS of Boss Regan were given to drawing parallels with rattlesnakes, insofar as ophidian etiquette prescribed a warning just before a strike. Regan, so they claimed, had this big-hearted habit, too. The prudent heeded. Only the crack-brained few like Johnny Hoyt lowered their heads and charged, berserk, toward the palisades of Shepton politics.

At that, the air was pretty new for rackets and the muscling technique hadn't filtered through to transport pilots.

Johnny liked the feel of Shepton from the first. It was an air-minded—say, an air-future—feel, from which capricious springboard Johnny took a long, deep breath and bounced. He quit the transport line, withdrew his savings, and a few months later launched Phaeton Airways Inc., President, Chief Pilot, Head Mechanic—John L. Hoyt.

It was an expert little outfit. Com-

pleted, there was little inside Johnny's pockets save the lining.

A few months clicked away before Matt Regan dropped into Johnny's office for an informal chat. In next to no time, Johnny found the subject of "protection" pushing a scaly fin across the conversation and the atmosphere grew rancid with an odor of corruption.

"Thus," Regan summed up, in his fine rostrum manner, "an association with influential interests is not unconnected with success in our fair city. It is, as one might say, almost the essence of survival. If you get me?"

A wiser man, knowing his *Reptilia*, might have marked time cautiously.

Not Johnny Hoyt. He had red hair and a low boiling point. He favored Regan with a hard, blue stare.

"Sure," Johnny said, "I get you. Isn't that your hat?"

Regan cocked his head a little. The lower section of his vest began to quiver seismically and his round light eyes were varnished with amusement.

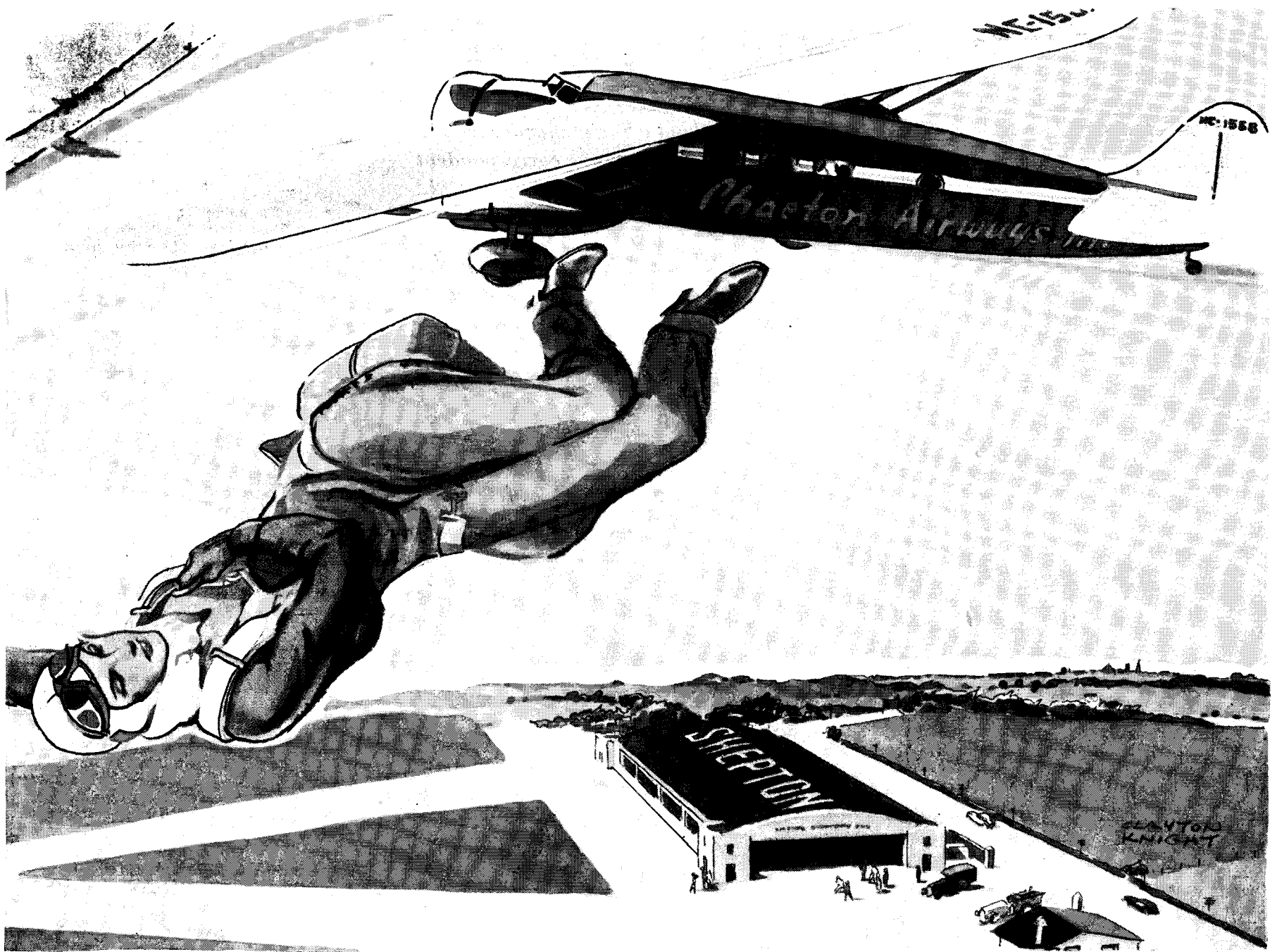
"Ho, ho!" Regan laughed. "... Excuse me . . . ho, ho, ho!" And he walked out.

THE day was brisk and faintly burnished by the late November sun. Johnny's spirits, as he prepared to swing his transport over Shepton for a

landing, were as unshadowed as the sky. Behind him, all the seats were sold and the compartment marked "Express Freight" brimmed to the *longérons*. Johnny cut the gun.

The next instant, he grabbed the throttle, pushed it wide again and raised the nose. Snarling resentfully, the ship responded. Johnny glared down at the gay vermilion sports job that had cut in underneath and botched his landing.

"Fool!" yelled Johnny. He eased the flippers, dropped one wing, began another circle. Even at a distance, in the ill-mannered aircraft, he recognized at once the property of Douglas Brewer, son of old Brewer who owned the Shepton Clarion. The same practiced and indignant eye informed him simultaneously that it was not Brewer's hand prevailing at the stick. Only one hand, so far as Johnny knew, a frivolous thing with ketchup-colored nails, could visit such abuse upon a ship and never even



The tail escaped her by a whisper. Over and over went her body. Then the chute opened

be aware of it. That hand was Miss Ann Carter's, and Miss Ann Carter was the other half of Phaeton Airways Inc.

Johnny looked down now and moaned. "Jumping Judas," Johnny said, "a fishtail!"

Through his propeller ring he could see the red ship driven epileptically, first right, then left; then, like a tired horse with uncoordinating knees, it sank untidily to the ground, coasted down the runway and pulled up. Johnny breathed gustily.

The aggregate of Johnny's sentiments toward Miss Carter was divisible, like Gaul, into three parts. As secretary of Phaeton Airways, as well as treasurer and ticket agent, Ann glowed, it seemed to him, with shrewdness and resource. As a mere member of her sex, he realized that she produced eccentric action in his pulse. But as a pilot, as an exponent of the simplest flying routine, Johnny had one word for her and that was "punk." Something he couldn't fathom, some dizzy sort of reflex, unseated reason every time Miss Carter got her hand around a stick.

JOHNNY swung around a second time, then landed smugly. When he reached the office, young Brewer was slanting back at ease in Johnny's chair while, on the desk, Miss Carter sat swinging

one leg like a precise and lovely pendulum. Her green suede coat was open, her helmet stuck askew over a mop of bright brown curls.

"Johnny!" said Miss Carter. "Am I glad you're here!"

"Huh!" Johnny said. He nodded to the reporter. "Better hire some baling wire and a junk truck, Brewer. That crate of yours won't stand the gaff much longer. Not with Little Light-heart chasing fleas."

Brewer grinned. Miss Carter's eyes opened. They were disturbing, smoky-looking eyes, with long, straight lashes.

"That was a fishtail, Johnny! What's the matter with my flying?"

"Nothing," Johnny said. "It's lovely. But the next time you cut in on my landing, I'll—"

"Half-time," Brewer called, "I'm in a hurry."

"You look it," Johnny said. "What's on your mind?"

"Plenty." Brewer pushed his hat back on his ears. "I was just telling Ann. Hoyt, my hot-headed birdman, it's good and sour . . . looks like you stubbed your toe."

"Swell!" Ungraciously, he added: "Spill it!"

"I just got the tip-off. Listen—the town's decided to reroute the Public Service high line. Civic improvements—three new miles of reroute. That's just the theme song, with the words by

Brother Regan. Now—guess what the city fathers had to go and pick on for the spot—the ideal site, mark ye—to dump a string of high-line towers and a nest of wires?"

Johnny spun around, his mouth open.

"X," went on Brewer, pointing a dramatic finger at the road that flanked the field, "marks the spot. Eighty-foot high-line towers right across the way. Not on *your* land, Hoyt. . . . Regan wouldn't be that crude. No, sir. He'd just kill your field. Like trying to breathe with someone stepping on your windpipe. . . . That's all!"

"ALL?" yelled Johnny. "You're quite sure that's all?" He paced excitedly around the office. I might have known, he thought. Somewhere in his mind he could hear Regan's laugh. . . . "Ho, ho, ho! . . . Excuse me, Hoyt, but those steel towers will chop eight hundred feet of usefulness out of your airport. . . . Ho, ho, ho!"

"You couldn't land an autogiro," he heard Miss Carter saying. "Johnny, I just called up—"

"Where'd you get this?" Johnny barked.

"City Hall," said Brewer. "It's still in the pan but it'll break inside a week. Thought I'd just tip you off," he added spaciouly, "so you could vaseline the skids and buy a cushion."

"Much obliged," said Johnny. He sat

down. "What's Regan's pay-off? Or is this nice, clean winter sport?"

"Sport?" Brewer laughed. "That's good! Brother Regan likes his sport professional. Cash basis." He watched Johnny's corrugated brows. "Well, if you need a diagram—teacher must draw one. . . . It's like this. . . . Regan and his tribe buy up this land along Tenth Avenue. It's going cheap. Why? Because it hasn't had a bidder in a year, not since that Chicago packing outfit turned it down. Then Regan has the city plan a new high line on Tenth, right out here. Do I make myself quartz-like?"

Johnny nodded.

"Well, follow the bouncing ball . . . along comes good old public service and has to have the land. 'Sure,' says our wily statesman, 'help yourselves!' He quotes a rental that climbs into the stratosphere and rings a gong. How does he get it? Why, my chicks, because he tips the power company off to raise its rates. He guarantees to push the motion through City Hall. So everybody's happy. Except the taxpayers, and lesser fry like you. He just picks you off on the way. Why? Maybe he doesn't like the color of your hair. I don't myself."

Johnny could fill that last blank for himself. But he was less attentive now to cause than to effect. Bankruptcy

(Continued on page 22)

The Magic Egg

*Here is a story about a Soviet murder trial—
graphically told by a famous correspondent
who has been stationed in Russia since 1922*

By Walter Duranty

MAXWELL BLACK regarded his nephew severely. "I disapprove," he said, "of all these Russian ideas. They are . . . ah . . . subversive and fundamentally wrong. Equality, for instance, is admirable as an ideal, but in practice . . . preposterous. At your age, Jim, I know Ideals have . . . ah . . . weight, but we older men must deal with realities, with . . . ah . . . life as it is, not as it ought to be. I do not wish to boast, but it was attention to facts, not fancies, during the last four years that has enabled me to show you this interesting curio, Professor Dwight. There it is, exactly as I told you, almost a perfect oval, except for the slight pointing at this end; in fact, as I said, a golden egg."

"Doesn't want to boast," thought Jim Black angrily; "the old boy's as proud as a peacock. Just because he was cautious and thought things were too high six years ago and sold out and bought Liberty Bonds, does he think that makes him a successful banker? And traveling round the world and collecting 'interesting curios' . . . and people think he's a financial wizard and all, but he can't fool me. He's just a golden egg himself, a pompous golden egg."

"Weigh it in your hand, Professor," his uncle continued. "Surely it is too light to be solid, yet the most careful examination has failed to reveal any . . . ah . . . aperture."

The professor took the curio, a shining yellow oval, exactly the size and shape of a hen's egg but overlaid with tiny plates like the scales of a fish, upon which a bewildering maze of lines had been engraved, and fumbled excitedly for his glasses.

He fitted them on his nose and held the egg up to the lamp above the dinner table. "Good heavens!" he cried, turning to his host. "You said you got it in Shanghai . . . Shanghai . . . that's impossible."

Maxwell Black was ruffled. "It came into my possession," he said, "precisely as I told you. I was walking along the Bund in Shanghai when this man accosted me . . . a native . . . although not

very Chinese in appearance . . . rougher-looking . . . and . . . ah . . . more hairy. He just said, 'Fifty dolla,' and pressed it into my hand. He seemed in a state of urgency, and . . . ah . . . nervous tension, which somehow communicated itself to me. I acted with unaccustomed precipitation, gave the man fifty dollars, and he turned and ran, yes, sir, ran as if the devil were after him. Curiously enough, I had no fear that I'd been swindled, and when tests were applied I was not surprised to find it was indeed gold. I—"

"And that's all you know," the professor interrupted. "You didn't inquire, you haven't—?"

"THAT'S virtually all," said his host. "I left Shanghai the same evening, and put the egg in my suitcase and forgot all about it. After my return to New York I showed it to one of the assistant curators of the Metropolitan Museum, who thought it might be Tibetan in origin, but had little else to impart. And it was not until Lampson here mentioned that you were visiting his place in the country to rest and compile your account of your last expedition to Tibet that I thought of it again and decided to ask you—"

"Of course it's Tibetan, man, snapped the guest, 'but do you know what it is? Why, this is *The Missing Egg*. . . . There were two, you know, laid by the Dove in Paradise . . . the Panchen Lama is supposed to have taken this one with him when he fled to China. The other is still in Lhasa. My friend, the Dalai Lama, showed it to me . . . even opened it and told me the secret, though of

course he wouldn't let me touch it . . . there are *some* limits.

"Yes, yes, it is identical . . . now, let me see. . . I follow the line, then press this scale . . . and this . . . yes, there's the curve again . . . and here . . . and here . . . and . . . it opens. You see . . . the scales cover and disguise the point of juncture . . . and here inside is the pip, the miraculous pip from Eve's apple." From one of the halves of the egg with trembling hands he shook out onto the tablecloth a dark object which did in truth resemble an apple pip, magnified tenfold in size.

For nearly an hour the professor held forth about Tibet, its mysteries and customs. The pip, he said, was dark jade of great antiquity and was reputed to give the egg magical qualities. He replaced it carefully in its golden case. He did not know precisely what the magic was, the subject was too sacred. The Dalai Lama had said this and the Panchen Lama had done that, and so on in an endless monologue, which ended in stupefying Mr. Black and his nephew and the fourth guest, Black's partner, Miles Lampson.

AS THE professor paused at last to drink a glass of wine, the young man created a hurried diversion. "That's all most interesting," he said, "amazing in fact . . . and I envy you, Professor, to have spent so much time in that marvelous country. But," he continued firmly, as the professor showed signs of answering, "that does not affect what I was saying before, that the Russians are right in trying to abolish class distinctions in their new society."

For once Maxwell Black leaped eagerly to an argument about the Bolshevism he detested. "It's all so absurd," he said. "If you destroy initiative, what is left?"

"The collective farms will supply a different initiative," his nephew said. "Kulak individualism was antisocial."

"Nonsense," snapped his uncle, "you can't run a farm like a factory."

"But Russia isn't America, Uncle Max," Jim countered. "The kulaks tried to hold back the clock of progress and got what they deserved."

The banker pointed the small end of the golden egg, which he had picked up from the table, right at his nephew as though it were a gun. "I tell you," he said, "no one can ever treat American farmers like that; they wouldn't stand for it. In fact, it seems to me these kulaks were a poor, spineless lot to allow—"

"They had no choice. Besides, public opinion was against them."

"I don't believe a word of it . . . to lie down meekly under such tyranny . . . no American would stand it. I wish I were a Russian kulak—"

SUDDENLY he was caught in a whirl and swirl of flashes and darkness, swift as lightning, terrible as thunder. Then the butt of a rifle struck him sharply between the shoulders as a voice bellowed, "Get on there, damn you."

He lurched against a telegraph pole and fell headlong into the dry ditch beyond. A hard hand jerked him to his feet, and he stood there aghast. Instead of his New York dining-room with its shaded lights he found himself on a rutted track winding through weed-choked grain fields. Beside him were two men, shoulders hunched forward as they slouched along. One had long, matted gray hair hanging below the collar of his black cassock. He wore a round black hat on his head and his face was bearded and damp with sweat. The other was a tall youth dressed in dirty patched calico. His blue eyes above beardless cheeks had the dumb misery of a steer that is being led to the slaughter.

A tall soldier in khaki, with rifle and long thin bayonet under his left arm, shook Black savagely, then thrust him forward. "Get on, you damned kulak," he shouted as he lowered the point of his bayonet, "unless you want a taste of this between the ribs."

In an instant of horror Black knew what had happened. The golden egg was magical indeed, and the wish he had lightly uttered had been fulfilled. He had become a Russian kulak. The very language of the soldier was familiar . . . and worst of all, the egg itself had fallen from his hand when he lay sprawling in the ditch.

From the first he knew he was not dreaming. The pain in his back was real where the rifle butt had struck him, and the harsh rub of the canvas breeches on his naked flesh and the thick dark beard beneath a chin that had always been clean-shaven, and pungent dust that rose like smoke and made him sneeze. Yet there was no doubt of his own identity; his mind and memory were those of Maxwell Black. But his body had changed; the hard, lean form and swelling muscles of a Russian farmer had replaced the round paunch and heavy figure of an American banker of fifty. "I must see about that when I get back," he thought . . . "always meant to take more exercise. I'm hungry, damn it, and a highball would taste



Black interrupted him without a qualm. "Did you give me the right or not?" he asked the judge