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The Last Tycoon

Written by F. Scott Fitzgerald

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The Last Tycoon

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Chapter I

Though I haven't ever been on the screen I was brought up in pictures. Rudolph Valentino came to my fifth birthday party – or so I was told. I put this down only to indicate that even before the age of reason I was in a position to watch the wheels go round.

I was going to write my memoirs once, *The Producer's Daughter*, but at eighteen you never quite get around to anything like that. It's just as well – it would have been as flat as an old column of Lolly Parsons's. My father was in the picture business as another man might be in cotton or steel, and I took it tranquilly. At the worst I accepted Hollywood with the resignation of a ghost assigned to a haunted house. I knew what you were supposed to think about it, but I was obstinately unhorrified.

This is easy to say, but harder to make people understand. When I was at Bennington some of the English teachers who pretended an indifference to Hollywood or its products really *hated* it. Hated it way down deep as a threat to their existence. Even before that, when I was in a convent, a sweet little nun asked me to get her a script of a screenplay so she could "teach her class about movie-writing", as she had taught them about the essay and the short story. I got the script for her, and I suppose she puzzled over it and puzzled over it, but it was never mentioned in class, and she gave it back to me with an air of offended surprise and not a single comment. That's what I half-expect to happen to this story.

You can take Hollywood for granted like I did, or you can dismiss it with the contempt we reserve for what we don't understand. It can be understood too, but only dimly and in flashes. Not half a dozen men have ever been able to keep the whole equation of pictures in their heads. And perhaps the closest a woman can come to the set-up is to try and understand one of those men.

The world from an aeroplane I knew. Father always had us travel back and forth that way from school and college. After my sister died when I was a junior, I travelled to and fro alone, and the journey always made me think of her, made me somewhat solemn and subdued. Sometimes there were picture people I knew on board the plane, and occasionally there was an attractive college boy – but not often during the Depression. I seldom really fell asleep during the trip, what with thoughts of Eleanor and the sense of that sharp rip between coast and coast – at least not till we had left those lonely little airports in Tennessee.

This trip was so rough that the passengers divided early into those who turned in right away and those who didn't want to turn in at all. There were two of these latter right across from me, and I was pretty sure from their fragmentary conversation that they were from Hollywood – one of them because he looked like it: a middle-aged Jew, who alternately talked with nervous excitement or else crouched, as if ready to spring, in a harrowing silence; the other a pale, plain, stocky man of thirty, whom I was sure I had seen before. He had been to the house or something. But it might have been when I was a little girl, and so I wasn't offended that he didn't recognize me.

The stewardess – she was tall, handsome and flashing dark, a type that they seemed to run to – asked me if she could make up my berth.

"…and, dear, do you want an aspirin?" She perched on the side of the seat and rocked precariously to and fro with the June hurricane. "…or nembutal?"

"No."

"I've been so busy with everyone else that I've had no time to ask you." She sat down beside me and buckled us both in. "Do you want some gum?"

This reminded me to get rid of the piece that had been boring me for hours. I wrapped it in a piece of magazine and put it into the automatic ash-holder.

“I can always tell people are nice,” the stewardess said approvingly, “if they wrap their gum in paper before they put it in there.”
We sat for a while in the half-light of the swaying car. It was vaguely like a swanky restaurant at that twilight time between meals. We were all lingering – and not quite on purpose. Even the stewardess, I think, had to keep reminding herself why she was there.
She and I talked about a young actress I knew, whom she had flown West with two years before. It was in the very lowest time of the Depression, and the young actress kept staring out the window in such an intent way that the stewardess was afraid she was contemplating a leap. It appeared though that she was not afraid of poverty, but only of revolution.
“I know what mother and *I* are going to do,” she confided to the stewardess. “We’re coming out to the Yellowstone and we’re just going to live simply till it all blows over. Then we’ll come back. They don’t kill artists – you know?”
The proposition pleased me. It conjured up a pretty picture of the actress and her mother being fed by kind Tory bears who brought them honey, and by gentle fawns who fetched extra milk from the does and then lingered near to make pillows for their heads at night. In turn I told the stewardess about the lawyer and the director who told their plans to Father one night in those brave days. If the bonus army conquered Washington, the lawyer had a boat hidden in the Sacramento River, and he was going to row upstream for a few months and then come back, “because they always needed lawyers after a revolution to straighten out the legal side”.
The director had tended more towards defeatism. He had an old suit, shirt and shoes in waiting – he never did say whether they were his own or whether he got them from the prop department – and he was going to Disappear into the Crowd. I remember Father saying: “But they’ll look at your hands! They’ll know you haven’t done manual work for years. And they’ll ask for your union card.” And I remember how the director’s face fell, and how gloomy he was while he ate his dessert, and how funny and puny they sounded to me.
“Is your father an actor, Miss Brady?” asked the stewardess. “I’ve certainly heard the name.”
At the name Brady, both the men across the aisle looked up. Sideways – that Hollywood look that always seems thrown over one shoulder. Then the young, pale, stocky man unbuttoned his safety strap and stood in the aisle beside us.
“Are you Cecilia *Bra*dy?” he demanded accusingly, as if I’d been holding out on him. “I *thought* I recognized you. I’m Wylie White.”
He could have omitted this – for at the same moment a new voice said, “Watch your step, Wylie!” and another man brushed by him in the aisle and went forward in the direction of the cockpit. Wylie White started and, a little too late, called after him defiantly:
“I only take orders from the pilot.”
I recognized the kind of pleasantry that goes on between the powers in Hollywood and their satellites.
The stewardess reproved him:
“Not so loud, please – some of the passengers are asleep.”
I saw now that the other man across the aisle, the middle-aged Jew, was on his feet also, staring with shameless economic lechery, after the man who had just gone by. Or rather at the back of the man, who gestured sideways with his hand in a sort of farewell, as he went out of my sight.
I asked the stewardess: “Is he the ass*i*stant pilot?”

She was unbuckling our belt, about to abandon me to Wylie White.
"No. That's Mr Smith. He has the private compartment, the "bridal suite" – only he has it alone. The assistant pilot is always in uniform." She stood up: "I want to find out if we're going to be grounded in Nashville."
Wylie White was aghast.
"Why?"
"It's a storm coming up in the Mississippi Valley."
"Does that mean we'll have to stay here all *night*?"
"If this keeps up!"
A sudden dip indicated that it would. It tipped Wylie White into the seat opposite me, shunted the stewardess precipitately down in the direction of the cockpit, and plunked the Jewish man into a sitting position. After the studied, unruffled exclamations of distaste that befitted the air-minded, we settled down. There was an introduction.
"Miss Brady – Mr Schwartz," said Wylie White. "He's a great friend of your father's too."
Mr Schwartz nodded so vehemently that I could almost hear him saying: "It's true. As God is my judge, it's true!"
He might have said this right out loud at one time in his life – but he was obviously a man to whom something had happened. Meeting him was like encountering a friend who has been in a fist fight or collision and got flattened. You stare at your friend and say: "What happened to you?" And he answers something unintelligible through broken teeth and swollen lips. He can't even tell you about it.
Mr Schwartz was physically unmarked; the exaggerated Persian nose and oblique eyeshadow were as congenital as the tip-tilted Irish redness around my father's nostrils.
"Nashville!" cried Wylie White. "That means we go to a hotel. We don't get to the coast till tomorrow night – if then. My God! I was born in Nashville."
"I should think you'd like to see it again."
"Never – I've kept away for fifteen years. I hope I'll *never* see it again."
But he would – for the plane was unmistakably going down, down, down, like Alice in the rabbit hole. Cupping my hand against the window I saw the blur of the city far away on the left. The green sign "Fasten your belts – No smoking" had been on since we first rode into the storm.
"Did you hear what he said?" said Schwartz from one of his fiery silences across the aisle.
"Hear what?" asked Wylie.
"Hear what he's calling himself," said Schwartz. "Mr *Smith*!"
"Why not?" asked Wylie.
"Oh, nothing," said Schwartz quickly. "I just thought it was funny. Smith." I never heard a laugh with less mirth in it: "Smith!"
I suppose there has been nothing like the airports since the days of the stage stops – nothing quite as lonely, as sombre-silent. The old red-brick depots were built right into the towns they marked – people didn't get off at those isolated stations unless they lived there. But airports lead you way back in history like oases, like the stops on the great trade routes. The sight of air travellers strolling in ones and twos into midnight airports will draw a small crowd any night up to two. The young people look at the planes, the older ones look at the passengers with a watchful incredulity. In the big transcontinental planes we were the coastal rich, who casually alighted from our cloud in mid-America. High adventure might be among us, disguised as a movie star. But mostly it wasn't. And I always wished fervently that we looked more

interesting than we did – just as I often have at premieres, when the fans look at you with scornful reproach because you're not a star.
On the ground Wylie and I were suddenly friends, because he held out his arm to steady me when I got out of the plane. From then on, he made a dead set for me – and I didn't mind. From the moment we walked into the airport it had become plain that if we were stranded here we were stranded here together. (It wasn't like the time I lost my boy – the time my boy played the piano with that girl Reina in a little New England farmhouse near Bennington, and I realized at last I wasn't wanted. Guy Lombardo was on the air playing 'Top Hat' and 'Cheek to Cheek', and she taught him the melodies. The keys falling like leaves and her hands splayed over his as she showed him a black chord. I was a freshman then.)
When we went into the airport Mr Schwartz was along with us too, but he seemed in a sort of dream. All the time we were trying to get accurate information at the desk, he kept staring at the door that led out to the landing field, as if he were afraid the plane would leave without him. Then I excused myself for a few minutes and something happened that I didn't see, but when I came back he and White were standing close together, White talking and Schwartz looking twice as much as if a great truck had just backed up over him. He didn't stare at the door to the landing field any more. I heard the end of Wylie White's remark…
"…I told you to shut up. It serves you right."
"I only said…"
He broke off as I came up and asked if there was any news. It was then half-past two in the morning.
"A little," said Wylie White. "They don't think we'll be able to start for three hours anyhow, so some of the softies are going to a hotel. But I'd like to take you out to the Hermitage, home of Andrew Jackson."
"How could we see it in the dark?" demanded Schwartz.
"Hell, it'll be sunrise in two hours."
"You two go," said Schwartz.
"All right – you take the bus to the hotel. It's still waiting – *he*'s in there." Wylie's voice had a taunt in it. "Maybe it'd be a good thing."
"No, I'll go along with you," said Schwartz hastily.
We took a taxi in the sudden country dark outside, and he seemed to cheer up. He patted my kneecap encouragingly.
"I should go along," he said, "I should be chaperone. Once upon a time when I was in the big money, I had a daughter – a beautiful daughter."
He spoke as if she had been sold to creditors as a tangible asset.
"You'll have another," Wylie assured him. "You'll get it all back. Another turn of the wheel and you'll be where Cecilia's papa is, won't he, Cecilia?"
"Where is this Hermitage?" asked Schwartz presently. "Far away at the end of nowhere? We will miss the plane?"
"Skip it," said Wylie. "We ought to've brought the stewardess along for you. Didn't you admire the stewardess? *I* thought she was pretty cute."
We drove for a long time over a bright level countryside, just a road and a tree and a shack and a tree, and then suddenly along a winding twist of woodland. I could feel even in the darkness that the trees of the woodland were green – that it was all different from the dusty olive tint of California. Somewhere we passed a Negro driving three cows ahead of him, and they mooed as he scattered them to the side of the road. They were real cows, with warm, fresh, silky flanks, and the Negro grew gradually real out of the darkness, with his big brown eyes staring at us close to the

car, as Wylie gave him a quarter. He said "*Thank* you – thank you," and stood there, and the cows mooed again into the night as we drove off.
I thought of the first sheep I ever remember seeing – hundreds of them, and how our car drove suddenly into them on the back lot of the old Laemmle studio. They were unhappy about being in pictures, but the men in the car with us kept saying:
"Swell!"
"Is that what you wanted, Dick?"
"Isn't that swell?" And the man named Dick kept standing up in the car as if he were Cortez or Balboa, looking over that grey fleecy undulation. If I ever knew what picture they were in, I have long forgotten.
We had driven an hour. We crossed a brook over an old rattly iron bridge laid with planks. Now there were roosters crowing and blue-green shadows stirring every time we passed a farmhouse.
"I told you it'd be morning soon," said Wylie. "I was born near here – the son of impoverished southern paupers. The family mansion is now used as an outhouse. We had four servants – my father, my mother and my two sisters. I refused to join the guild, and so I went to Memphis to start my career, which has now reached a dead end." He put his arm around me: "Cecilia, will you marry me, so I can share the Brady fortune?"
He was disarming enough, so I let my head lie on his shoulder.
"What do you do, Cecilia. Go to school?"
"I go to Bennington. I'm a junior."
"Oh, I beg your pardon. I should have known, but I never had the advantage of college training. But a *ju*nior – why I read in *Esquire* that juniors have nothing to learn, Cecilia."
"Why do people think that college girls—"
"Don't apologize – knowledge is power."
"You'd know from the way you talk that we were on our way to Hollywood," I said. "It's always years and years behind the times."
He pretended to be shocked.
"You mean girls in the East have no private lives?"
"That's the point. They *have* got private lives. You're bothering me, let go."
"I can't. It might wake Schwartz, and I think this is the first sleep he's had for weeks. Listen, Cecilia: I once had an affair with the wife of a producer. A very short affair. When it was over she said to me in no uncertain terms, she said: 'Don't you ever tell about this or I'll have you thrown out of Hollywood. My husband's a much more important man than you!'"
I liked him again now, and presently the taxi turned down a long lane fragrant with honeysuckle and narcissus, and stopped beside the great grey hulk of the Andrew Jackson house. The driver turned around to tell us something about it, but Wylie shushed him, pointing at Schwartz, and we tiptoed out of the car.
"You can't get into the Mansion now," the taxi man told us politely.
Wylie and I went and sat against the wide pillars of the steps.
"What about Mr Schwartz?" I asked. "Who is he?"
"To hell with Schwartz. He was the head of some combine once – First National? Paramount? United Artists? Now he's down and out. But he'll be back. You can't flunk out of pictures unless you're a dope or a drunk."
"You don't like Hollywood," I suggested.
"Yes I do. Sure I do. Say! This isn't anything to talk about on the steps of Andrew Jackson's house – at dawn."

“I *like* Hollywood,” I persisted.
“It’s all right. It’s a mining town in lotus land. Who said that? I did. It’s a good place for toughies, but I went there from Savannah, Georgia. I went to a garden party the first day. My host shook hands and left me. It was all there – that swimming pool, green moss at two dollars an inch, beautiful felines having drinks and fun…
“…And nobody spoke to me. Not a soul. I spoke to half a dozen people, but they didn’t answer. That continued for an hour, two hours – then I got up from where I was sitting and ran out at a dog trot like a crazy man. I didn’t feel I had any rightful identity until I got back to the hotel and the clerk handed me a letter addressed to me in my name.”
Naturally I hadn’t ever had such an experience, but looking back on parties I’d been to, I realized that such things could happen. We don’t go for strangers in Hollywood unless they wear a sign saying that their axe has been thoroughly ground elsewhere, and that in any case it’s not going to fall on our necks – in other words, unless they’re a celebrity. And they’d better look out even then.
“You should have risen above it,” I said smugly. “It’s not a slam at *you* when people are rude – it’s a slam at the people they’ve met before.”
“Such a pretty girl – to say such wise things.”
There was an eager to-do in the eastern sky, and Wylie could see me plain – thin with good features and lots of style, and the kicking fetus of a mind. I wonder what I looked like in that dawn, five years ago. A little rumpled and pale, I suppose, but at that age, when one has the young illusion that most adventures are good, I needed only a bath and a change to go on for hours.
Wylie stared at me with really flattering appreciation – and then suddenly we were not alone. Mr Schwartz wandered apologetically into the pretty scene.
“I fell upon a large metal handle,” he said, touching the corner of his eye.
Wylie jumped up.
“Just in time, Mr Schwartz,” he said. “The tour is just starting. Home of Old Hickory – America’s tenth president. The victor of New Orleans, opponent of the National Bank, and inventor of the Spoils System.”
Schwartz looked towards me as towards a jury.
“There’s a writer for you,” he said. “Knows everything and at the same time he knows nothing.”
“What’s that?” said Wylie, indignant.
It was my first inkling that he was a writer. And while I like writers – because if you ask a writer anything, you usually get an answer – still it belittled him in my eyes. Writers aren’t people exactly. Or, if they’re any good, they’re a whole *lot* of people trying so hard to be one person. It’s like actors, who try so pathetically not to look in mirrors, who lean *back*wards trying – only to see their faces in the reflecting chandeliers.
“Ain’t writers like that, Cecilia?” demanded Schwartz. “I have no words for them. I only know it’s true.”
Wylie looked at him with slowly gathering indignation. “I’ve heard that before,” he said. “Look, Manny, I’m a more practical man than you any day! I’ve sat in an office and listened to some mystic stalk up and down for hours spouting tripe that’d land him on a nut farm anywhere outside of California – and then at the end tell me how *practical* he was, and I was a dreamer – and would I kindly go away and make sense out of what he’d said.”
Mr Schwartz’s face fell into its more disintegrated alignments. One eye looked upwards through the tall elms. He raised his hand and bit without interest at the

cuticle on his second finger. There was a bird flying about the chimney of the house, and his glance followed it. It perched on the chimney pot like a raven, and Mr Schwartz's eyes remained fixed upon it as he said: "We can't get in, and it's time for you two to go back to the plane."

It was still not quite dawn. The Hermitage looked like a nice big white box, but a little lonely and vacated still after a hundred years. We walked back to the car. Only after we had gotten in and Mr Schwartz had surprisingly shut the taxi door on us did we realize he didn't intend to come along.

"I'm not going to the Coast – I decided that when I woke up. So I'll stay here, and afterwards the driver could come back for me."

"Going back East?" said Wylie with surprise. "Just because—"

"I have decided," said Schwartz, faintly smiling. "Once I used to be a regular man of decision – you'd be surprised." He felt in his pocket, as the taxi driver warmed up the engine. "Will you give this note to Mr Smith?"

"Shall I come in two hours?" the driver asked Schwartz.

"Yes… sure. I shall be glad to entertain myself looking around."

I kept thinking of him all the way back to the airport – trying to fit him into that early hour and into that landscape. He had come a long way from some ghetto to present himself at that raw shrine. Manny Schwartz and Andrew Jackson – it was hard to say them in the same sentence. It was doubtful if he knew who Andrew Jackson was as he wandered around, but perhaps he figured that if people had preserved his house Andrew Jackson must have been someone who was large and merciful, able to understand. At both ends of life man needed nourishment: a breast – a shrine. Something to lay himself beside when no one wanted him further, and shoot a bullet into his head.

Of course we did not know this for twenty hours. When we got to the airport we told the purser that Mr Schwartz was not continuing, and then forgot about him. The storm had wandered away into eastern Tennessee and broken against the mountains, and we were taking off in less than an hour. Sleepy-eyed travellers appeared from the hotel, and I dozed a few minutes on one of those iron maidens they use for couches. Slowly the idea of a perilous journey was recreated out of the debris of our failure: a new stewardess, tall, handsome, flashing dark, exactly like the other except she wore seersucker instead of French red and blue, went briskly past us with a suitcase. Wylie sat beside me as we waited.

"Did you give the note to Mr Smith?" I asked, half-asleep.

"Yeah."

"Who is Mr Smith? I suspect he spoilt Mr Schwartz's trip."

"It was Schwartz's fault."

"I'm prejudiced against steamrollers," I said. "My father tries to be a steamroller around the house, and I tell him to save it for the studio."

I wondered if I was being fair; words are the palest counters at that time in the morning. "Still, he steamrollered me into Bennington and I've always been grateful for that."

"There would be quite a crash," Wylie said, "if Steamroller Brady met Steamroller Smith."

"Is Mr Smith a competitor of Father's?"

"Not exactly. I should say no. But if he was a competitor I know where my money would be."

"On Father?"

"I'm afraid not."

It was too early in the morning for family patriotism. The pilot was at the desk with the purser and he shook his head as they regarded a prospective passenger who had put two nickels in the electric phonograph and lay alcoholically on a bench fighting off sleep. The first song he had chosen, 'Lost', thundered through the room, followed, after a slight interval, by his other choice, 'Gone', which was equally dogmatic and final. The pilot shook his head emphatically and walked over to the passenger.
"Afraid we're not going to be able to carry you this time, old man."
"Wha'?"
The drunk sat up, awful-looking, yet discernibly attractive, and I was sorry for him in spite of his passionately ill-chosen music.
"Go back to the hotel and get some sleep. There'll be another plane tonight."
"Only going up in ee *air*."
"Not this time, old man."
In his disappointment the drunk fell off the bench – and above the phonograph, a loudspeaker summoned us respectable people outside. In the corridor of the plane I ran into Monroe Stahr and fell all over him, or wanted to. There was a man any girl would go for, with or without encouragement. I was emphatically with*out* it, but he liked me and sat down opposite till the plane took off.
"Let's all ask for our money back," he suggested. His dark eyes took me in, and I wondered what they would look like if he fell in love. They were kind, aloof and, though they often reasoned with you gently, somewhat superior. It was no fault of theirs if they saw so much. He darted in and out of the role of "one of the boys" with dexterity – but on the whole I should say he wasn't one of them. But he knew how to shut up, how to draw into the background, how to listen. From where he stood (and though he was not a tall man, it always seemed high up) he watched the multitudinous practicalities of his world like a proud young shepherd to whom night and day had never mattered. He was born sleepless, without a talent for rest or the desire for it.
We sat in unembarrassed silence – I had known him since he became Father's partner a dozen years ago, when I was seven and Stahr was twenty-two. Wylie was across the aisle and I didn't know whether or not to introduce them, but Stahr kept turning his ring so abstractedly that he made me feel young and invisible, and I didn't care. I never dared look quite away from him or quite *at* him, unless I had something important to say – and I knew he affected many other people in the same manner.
"I'll *give* you this ring, Cecilia."
"I beg your pardon. I didn't realize that I was—"
"I've got half a dozen like it."
He handed it to me, a gold nugget with the letter S in bold relief. I had been thinking how oddly its bulk contrasted with his fingers, which were delicate and slender like the rest of his body, and like his slender face with the arched eyebrows and the dark curly hair. He looked spiritual at times, but he was a fighter – somebody out of his past knew him when he was one of a gang of kids in the Bronx, and gave me a description of how he walked always at the head of his gang, this rather frail boy, occasionally throwing a command backwards out of the corner of his mouth.
Stahr folded my hand over the ring, stood up and addressed Wylie.
"Come up to the bridal suite," he said. "See you later, Cecilia."
Before they went out of hearing, I heard Wylie's question: "Did you open Schwartz's note?" And Stahr:
"Not yet."
I must be slow, for only then did I realize that Stahr was Mr Smith.

Afterwards Wylie told me what was in the note. Written by the headlights of the taxi, it was almost illegible.

DEAR MONROE, You are the best of them all I have always admired your mentality so when you turn against me I know it's no use! I must be no good and am not going to continue the journey let me warn you once again look out! I know.

Your friend
MANNY

Stahr read it twice, and raised his hand to the morning stubble on his chin.
"He's a nervous wreck," he said. "There's nothing to be done – absolutely nothing. I'm sorry I was short with him – but I don't like a man to approach me telling me it's for *my* sake."
"Maybe it was," said Wylie.
"It's poor technique."
"I'd fall for it," said Wylie. "I'm vain as a woman. If anybody pretends to be interested in me, I'll ask for more. I like advice."
Stahr shook his head distastefully. Wylie kept on ribbing him – he was one of those to whom this privilege was permitted.
"You fall for some kinds of flattery," he said. "This 'little Napoleon stuff'."
"It makes me sick," said Stahr, "but it's not as bad as some man trying to help you."
"If you don't like advice, why do you pay *me*?"
"That's a question of merchandise," said Stahr. "I'm a merchant. I want to buy what's in your mind."
"You're no merchant," said Wylie. "I knew a lot of them when I was a publicity man, and I agree with Charles Francis Adams."
"What did he say?"
"He knew them all – Gould, Vanderbilt, Carnegie, Astor – and he said there wasn't one he'd care to meet again in the hereafter. Well – they haven't improved since then, and that's why I say you're no merchant."
"Adams was probably a sourbelly," said Stahr. "He wanted to be head man himself, but he didn't have the judgement or else the character."
"He had brains," said Wylie rather tartly.
"It takes more than brains. You writers and artists poop out and get all mixed up, and somebody has to come in and straighten you out." He shrugged his shoulders. "You seem to take things so personally, hating people and worshipping them – always thinking people are so important – especially yourselves. You just ask to be kicked around. I like people and I like them to like me, but I wear my heart where God put it – on the inside."
He broke off.
"What did I say to Schwartz in the airport? Do you remember – exactly?"
"You said, 'Whatever you're after, the answer is No!'" Stahr was silent.
"He was sunk," said Wylie, "but I laughed him out of it. We took Billy Brady's daughter for a ride."
Stahr rang for the stewardess.
"That pilot," he said, "would he mind if I sat up in front with him a while?"
"That's against the rules, Mr Smith."
"Ask him to step in here a minute when he's free."

Stahr sat up front all afternoon. While we slid off the endless desert and over the tablelands, dyed with many colours like the white sands we dyed with colours when I was a child. Then in the late afternoon, the peaks themselves – the Mountains of the Frozen Saw – slid under our propellers and we were close to home.

When I wasn't dozing I was thinking that I wanted to marry Stahr, that I wanted to make him love me. Oh, the conceit! What on earth did I have to offer? But I didn't think like that then. I had the pride of young women, which draws its strength from such sublime thoughts as: "I'm as good as *she* is." For my purposes I was just as beautiful as the great beauties who must have inevitably thrown themselves at his head. My little spurt of intellectual interest was of course making me fit to be a brilliant ornament of any salon.

I know now it was absurd. Though Stahr's education was founded on nothing more than a night-school course in stenography, he had a long time ago run ahead through trackless wastes of perception into fields where very few men were able to follow him. But in my reckless conceit I matched my grey eyes against his brown ones for guile, my young golf-and-tennis heartbeats against his, which must be slowing a little after years of overwork. And I planned and I contrived and I plotted – any women can tell you – but it never came to anything, as you will see. I still like to think that if he'd been a poor boy and nearer my age I could have managed it, but of course the real truth was that I had nothing to offer that he didn't have; some of my more romantic ideas actually stemmed from pictures – *42nd Street*, for example, had a great influence on me. It's more than possible that some of the pictures which Stahr himself conceived had shaped me into what I was.

So it was rather hopeless. Emotionally, at least, people can't live by taking in each other's washing.

But at that time it was different: Father might help, the stewardess might help. She might go up in the cockpit and say to Stahr: "If I ever saw love, it's in that girl's eyes."

The pilot might help: "Man, are you blind? Why don't you go back there?"

Wylie White might help – instead of standing in the aisle looking at me doubtfully, wondering whether I was awake or asleep.

"Sit down," I said. "What's new? Where are we?"

"Up in the air."

"Oh, so that's it. Sit down." I tried to show a cheerful interest: "What are you writing?"

"Heaven help me, I am writing about a boy scout – *the* boy scout."

"Is it Stahr's idea?"

"I don't know – he told me to look into it. He may have ten writers working ahead of me or behind me, a system which he so thoughtfully invented. So you're in love with him?"

"I should say not," I said indignantly. "I've known him all my life."

"Desperate, eh? Well, I'll arrange it if you'll use all your influence to advance me. I want a unit of my own."

I closed my eyes and drifted off. When I woke up, the stewardess was putting a blanket over me.

"Almost there," she said.

Out the window I could see by the sunset that we were in a greener land.

"I just heard something funny," she volunteered, "up in the cockpit – that Mr Smith – or Mr Stahr – I never remember seeing his name—"

"It's never on any pictures," I said.

“Oh. Well, he’s been asking the pilots a lot about flying – I mean, he’s interested? You *know*?”
“I know.”
“I mean one of them told me he bet he could teach Mr Stahr solo flying in ten minutes. He has such a fine mentality, that’s what he said.”
I was getting impatient.
“Well, what was so funny?”
“Well, finally one of the pilots asked Mr Smith if he liked his business, and Mr Smith said, “Sure. Sure I like it. It’s nice being the only sound nut in a hatful of cracked ones.”’
The stewardess doubled up with laughter – and I could have spit at her.
“I mean calling all those people a hatful of nuts. I mean *cracked* nuts.” Her laughter stopped with unexpected suddenness, and her face was grave as she stood up. “Well, I’ve got to finish my chart.”
“Goodbye.”
Obviously Stahr had put the pilots right up on the throne with him and let them rule with him for a while. Years later I travelled with one of those same pilots and he told me one thing Stahr had said.
He was looking down at the mountains.
“Suppose you were a railroad man,” he said. “You have to send a train through there somewhere. Well, you get your surveyors’ reports, and you find there’s three or four or half a dozen gaps, and not one is better than the other. You’ve got to decide – on what basis? You can’t test the best way – except by doing it. So you just do it.”
The pilot thought he had missed something.
“How do you mean?”
“You choose some one way for no reason at all – because that mountain’s pink or the blueprint is a better blue. You see?”
The pilot considered that this was very valuable advice. But he doubted if he’d ever be in a position to apply it.
“What I wanted to know,” he told me ruefully, “is how he ever got to be Mr Stahr.”
I’m afraid Stahr could never have answered that one, for the embryo is not equipped with a memory. But I could answer a little. He had flown up very high to see, on strong wings, when he was young. And while he was up there he had looked on all the kingdoms, with the kind of eyes that can stare straight into the sun. Beating his wings tenaciously – finally frantically – and keeping on beating them, he had stayed up there longer than most of us, and then, remembering all he had seen from his great height of how things were, he had settled gradually to earth.
The motors were off, and all our five senses began to readjust themselves for landing. I could see a line of lights for the Long Beach Naval Station ahead and to the left, and on the right a twinkling blur for Santa Monica. The California moon was out, huge and orange over the Pacific. However I happened to feel about these things – and they were home, after all – I know that Stahr must have felt much more. These were the things I had first opened my eyes on, like the sheep on the back lot of the old Laemmle studio; but this was where Stahr had come to earth after that extraordinary illuminating flight where he saw which way we were going, and how we looked doing it, and how much of it mattered. You could say that this was where an accidental wind blew him, but I don’t think so. I would rather think that in a “long shot” he saw a new way of measuring our jerky hopes and graceful rogueries and awkward sorrows, and that he came here from choice to be with us to the end. Like the plane coming down into the Glendale airport, into the warm darkness.